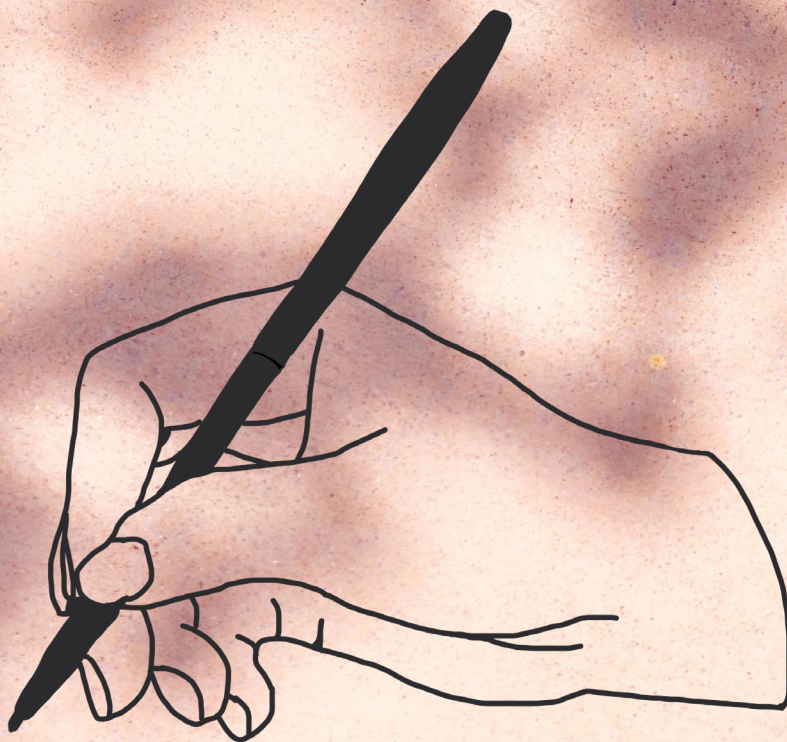


# Wordplay



# Acknowledgments

This collection of *Wordplay* is dedicated to and made possible by our incredible writers. Thank you to everyone who submitted their pieces of poetry, prose, and essays for this Fall 2021 Collection. I would like to thank you all for your creativity, strength, and perseverance throughout the semester. These pieces are accomplishments to be very proud of.

I would like to thank all the Writing Center consultants who dedicated their time to assisting our writers in honing their craft. I am always impressed by my peer consultants for their care, attentiveness, and expertise.

Thank you to Megan Kraege, our TLC Office Manager, for your uplifting presence and kind spirit. You keep every day in the TLC running like clockwork, and I know we are all grateful for your stability.

I would like to thank Emily Wisinski, our Writing Center Director. Your support is unwavering and steadfast, and the Writing Center can weather anything with you at our helm. Thank you for maintaining the incredible opportunity to learn, teach, and grow in the treasured resource that is the Writing Center – for writers, consultants, and students alike.

Edited by: Kala Buttke

Cover design: Kala Buttke

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# Poetry



# Devin C'ne

“Devin brought a wide variety of work in this semester, and it was great seeing her strength in her writing abilities in different contexts. Every session was enjoyable as we spent time looking at her work and having great conversations. We always seemed to end up having a few laughs every session and it was great to see what work she brought in each week because I could count on enjoying it. We spent several sessions working on a fiction piece with a set of very fascinating characters, a few essays we still managed to have fun working through, and some excellent poems. Devin has the ability to excel at a wide variety of writing styles and types and it was wonderful working with her all semester and seeing that.”

- Emily Stanislawski

## Confines of the Mind

Slowly waking up,  
Head turning to the window  
The sun shining through

Wincing at the light  
Eyes briefly closing once more,  
Shielded from the warmth

Looking at the clock  
Already the afternoon,  
The energy gone

I wanted to leave  
The confines of the bed  
But the sheets trapped me

The prison of bed  
Never let me live or love  
Made me stay alone

The funny thing though,

The bed was not the prison  
My mind was at fault

The bed was the excuse

The mind was the enemy

The body was what the mind held captive

The mind only spoke in short sentences  
Unable to construe long thoughts,  
It was too much work  
Too much energy.  
The times the mind rambled were when it was starting to overthink.  
Like now,  
Lying in bed, criticizing oneself for sleeping in late  
Feeling guilty for not being able to leave the heavy sheets.  
The mind just wanted a break.

The body's hand grabbed  
The sleeping drugs next to bed,  
Making eyes heavy

Back to simple thoughts,  
The mind blocking out the sun,  
Sinking in the bed

The captive allowed  
The excuses embrace,  
The mind winning  
The endless fight.

## Fruitless Love

Looking at the old pictures that were held in my two hands,  
The eyes scanned memories of someone I longed to forget.  
The heart filled with feelings my mind struggled to understand,  
However, the mind soon stilled, thoughts calm, unable to fret.  
The heart before had been warm, blinded by love at all times,  
Now the brain knew, the love shared was precious, but was no more.  
The love ended, turned cold and ugly, betrayed by the worst crime  
Of a lover making a promise not kept anymore.  
The picture showed great love once shared, but since had disappeared,  
So why did I still feel unloved and unable to cope?  
The brain knew I deserved more, but the heart refused to hear,  
The picture was the anchor, stopping the heart from new hope.  
I tore the picture I held, now extinct, like the love shown.  
Now that the past was finally destroyed, the heart could grow.



Mrs. Parks

The woman refused to move.

She was comfortable, why should she?

The seat she sat on in the bus gave her a wonderful view of the world around her.

A world that hated her for a reason she could not control, but still a beautiful world nonetheless.

The woman refused to move.

The seats at the back of the bus felt like cardboard.

Stiff, tight, and uncomfortable,

Far away from the heart of the bus where *true* members of society got to sit.

The woman refused to move.

The men and women staring at her did not make her uncomfortable.

In fact, she grew in strength, knowing this decision she was making would most likely be in a newspaper soon.

She didn't want attention, all she wanted was change.

The woman refused to move.

The yelling and screaming were only getting more persistent now; a bunch of *people* trying to put her in her place, while her people stayed silent in both fear and admiration for what she was doing.

She wasn't tired, she was hungry—

Hungry for justice and change.

The woman moved.

But not by her own accord.

The Montgomery police removed her from the bus against her own wishes, placing her in a cell with a fine to be paid.

A fine she was charged with for standing up against the system which actively oppressed her.

The woman moved forward.

She became a figure head for her community, standing up for equality and respect.

Her name would go down in history as one of the most pivotal influences for change in America,

And she would always be admired and known as...

The woman who refused to move.

# Rebecca Geiyer

“I am so proud of the work Rebecca has put into her writing this semester! It is amazing how she filled each new poem with grace, intensity, wonder, and creativity. Whether she shared a lovely memory from a vacation or described a longing to find oneself in a coffee shop, I was captivated by every piece. I'm sure these poems will be as enjoyable to read as they were to work on with her. Rebecca's love for writing is inspiring, and I can only hope that she never puts her pen down!”

- Bridget Kauzlaric

## Lonely is the Night

On those nights when you'd strum the chords,  
The notes rang through the house  
Straight through my door.  
Your voice seeped in,  
Wrapped around me and tugged.  
I had no choice but to pull up a chair.

I'd marvel at the sight of you with that guitar.  
The metallic gray of it glistened like a murky pond in moonlight.  
Whatever song you chose became my religion.  
I listened,  
And I believed.  
I believed in you and your moonlight guitar,

But you don't play it like you used to.  
The notes haven't found my bedroom door in years.  
It stays closed while I'm away,  
But my ears are open with hopes of a new song.

The house is empty, but the counters are full.  
Brown bottles.  
Murky but no moonlight.  
No moonlight.  
No new songs to believe in.  
What do I believe in?

## Glimpses

As I break away from the religion that was your songs,  
I catch glimpses of the moonlight guitar in the stars  
When I am walking through this new city without you.  
Cool breezes often run through my body  
Like the notes once did through my door.

I sit around a small table packed with new faces.  
I listen to their stories, and I try to believe.  
I even tell some of my own.  
My place at the table becomes more permanent,  
And those faces slowly grow more familiar.

We dance around trying to forget about our worries.  
Every once in a while, I slip in some of your songs.  
The ones I used to praise so highly.  
I stop to wonder if you ever play them while I'm gone.  
I catch another glimpse of moonlight, and I am soothed.

I believe in these glimpses of moonlight.  
I cherish them  
Because they are small pieces that fill in the gaps  
And connect me to who I once was.

# Will Gustafson

“It has been an honor both getting to know and work with Will this semester in English 257, and our weekly sessions were something I always looked forward to. Will came into this course already a *very* strong writer, so my job was to simply enjoy reading all that he writes and provide a different perspective. Not only is Will extremely talented in writing stories, but he is also a talented poet! Each session, I am continuously impressed by his level of thought, creativity, and dedication to details in both his poetry and story writing. I am so happy to have been able to meet with him every week, analyzing and discussing these masterpieces that deserve to be seen by everyone. He is truly a gifted writer and knows how to captivate the audience, making them never want to put the story down. I am very fortunate to have worked with Will this semester and I am confident that he will continue to be a successful writer in the future.”

- Hayley Bird

## Lead is Lighter

A pen is permanent.

A scar carved into the paper.

Mistakes must either be concealed,  
or the project abandoned.

-----

But I needn't worry.

Graphite is more lenient.

And my trusty eraser  
cures all wounds.

inevitable

as leaves cascade over a setting sun  
a sudden cold wind howls past  
covering my window in fading frost  
as winter's messenger crows  
the trees flash a bright warning

my limbs go numb  
my blood freezes  
my heart stops

But then the sun rises again.

## Artificial Rain's Melody

I like to sing in the shower.

My audience,

a variety of bottles,

does not judge.

For I do not know all the words.

The curtain closes on my personal stage.

Sometimes I wish my demons were charming,

with outstretched hands to shake my own.

Dressed smartly in a suit and tie.

A pen and paper prepared

to make a deal.

But they're silent.

Slinking shadows.

Outside the corner of my mind

they wait.

I never recognize them

until they leave.



## Today Tastes Like Laughter

My heart burns.

I can't keep the smile off my face.

A soft breeze

Sweetens the dying sun.

A loon on the lake

Glares at me suspiciously

With glittering red eyes.

It won't last.

Perfection never does.

But why not enjoy yourself?

Just think

You might've spent the day inside.

## Mirror

There's a dragon in my mirror.

His fangs are long and his claws are sharp.

His blood-caked muzzle is disfigured with scars.

His enormous figure engulfs the room.

But the worst thing about him, I think

are his eyes.

They are hollow

and empty

and oh so hungry.

I think he means to eat me up.

# Cal Henkens

“I’ve had very few poets over the years that have affected me as Cal has. There’s a certain force from a truly realized economy of words that makes the tangled matters of the heart and mind, that most of us have trouble processing, so clear and felt. It’s moving in a genuine, humanly and oftentimes poignant way; it’s real. Such things become inspiring even: in part to our work and conversations here, I worked on a few of my own pieces which have been gathering dust for quite some time. Know, Cal, that this is perhaps the highest praise I could give. I know you’ll keep going forward with your work as you should. But if whenever there comes a time of doubt – and there always is in creation – remember my words here and know your worth.”

- Jared Burkart

I am sorry

we shouted till we were  
horse-throat exhausted—  
ran out of ways to say  
-fuck you-

that night- gripping a pillow, I tried to  
mimic your shape-  
thinking of pink moments—  
moments too late.

your scent has faded from my clothes.  
your color has gone away.  
the words that hurt the worst—  
are ones we never say.

Spending your fire

Is this as good as it gets?

Just taking the edge off-

Burning the house the candle is in-

Wondering when things'll be warm again-

I love my friends, guitar, and thinking-

Don't feel like doing any of it

Right now—

## Summer cycle

shimmer seeping through eyelids-  
mellow heat glazing pine-  
jelly head and slug bones  
from night's strawberry wine.

campfire still smoldering-  
cigar guts cross dewey yard-  
and a sticky, glass booze bottle  
broken to ambery shards.

a glossy, cracked reflection-  
cloudy countenance blinking back-  
a bottle for breakfast- the shatter ripens—  
hazel-hazey-black—

# Claire Neuberger

“Claire Neuberger is a talented and witty poet who isn't afraid to experiment with new genres, styles, and topics. Claire had never written poetry before this semester, but you wouldn't know it from the quality of her work! Claire is naturally clever with her words, making each poem unique, thought-provoking, and exciting. She is incredibly driven to improve her work and is always eager to try new things. I have had so much fun working with Claire this semester, and I am ecstatic that she has chosen to share her work in *Wordplay*. Enjoy!”

- Sara Kalkhoff

## My First Halloween

“Hey mom can I go?”  
she doesn't say no  
so I go with the flow  
we put on a show.

With our outfits homemade  
you might be afraid  
the sun starts to fade  
it's the ultimate trade.

The streets are a maze  
but we are unphased  
because there's a phrase  
that will always amaze.

We all get in line  
our moment to shine  
when the doorbell chimes  
it's finally time.

A fantastic way to greet  
my voice is upbeat  
TREAT-OR-TRICK!  
oh butterfingers- I slipped up again.

dirty plate

you leave me here  
in the sink all on my lonesome  
you don't even put in the extra effort  
to rinse off those last few bites leftover  
from the meal that you couldn't even finish  
it was your biggest mistake and you know it  
because those last few bites were detrimental  
to your future and unavoidable plans with me  
where I only require one small thing of you  
a simple bath to take back some dignity  
and now all I have to say is to you is  
you really did both you and I  
extremely dirty.

Guess the title.

Where can you find me  
meet for iced coffee  
gee, let's foresee...  
foresee my decree  
my decree to be free  
free to hop in the sea...  
see my one guarantee  
guarantee there's a we  
we who stomp on your plea  
plea the turtles won't be  
be gone through debris  
debris just like me...

Who am I? I'll give you a hint- I suck.



# Dylan Potter

“It was nice getting to know Dylan over the course of the semester. He is so creative and continuously pushed himself to become a better writer. Through these pieces, I hope you can see how thoughtful he is as a writer and how descriptive and creative his writing is. I am grateful to have been a part of Dylan’s writing journey. Never stop writing!”

- Morgan Witt

## A Winter Night

All I can hear is my breath, the crunch of snow beneath my boots, and the silence. The comforting silence. The antagonizing silence. The silence that haunts, the silence that cares. It listens more carefully than the best of friends, and yet offers a colder response than the worst of enemies. Perhaps the silence wouldn’t be so prominent if I could hear the wind brush through the tree branches, gently rock the barren branches of winter willows. Or if the sleeping warblers wouldn’t mind whistling a tune, up to the stars, that would surely make the silence less imposing.

I suppose there are many other sounds I’d rather not hear: The honking of vehicles, the chattering of voices, any sound of distress, or even a second pair of footsteps. All of which are less desirable to the current noise, or lack thereof. I pause for a second, perhaps a minute. Or several. Unlike the other seasons, winter offers little to no noise during the night. No crickets, frogs, buzzing insects, or the more annoying mammals such as people. Silence becomes its own entity.

Inhale. The cold air feels refreshing, such as a cup of water on a summer day (consumed or splashed upon yourself). It wakes you up of course, and then quite rudely grabs your attention away from whatever you may be thinking about. You’re never more in the present than when the winter air fills your lungs. Exhale. A cloud of vapor escapes as the hot breath becomes cold. Contraction, interaction, and condensation. A beautiful thermal reaction, taken for granted by adults. At least children appreciate it more, taking long drags off of their imaginary pipes and cigarettes, releasing their contents back into the world with vigor and excitement.

I close my eyes and tell myself it’s a beautiful summer night. I take a second to consider this self-given proposition, decide the guy doesn’t know what he’s saying, and inhale again. The slight sting of cold air on my nose reminds me again that it’s not summer, almost as if I were dumb for pondering it. I shift my weight, for no reason other than to hear the snow groan under the newly weighted leg. The crunch of snow is easy to forget when you’re shoveling, shivering, or walking on a nice ocean beach. But there is something satisfying to it, in the same way a new cardboard box always smells the same, raindrops always pool and then streak down the window the exact moment you look, and freshly cut grass always feels slightly damp. It’s not exactly pleasurable, but it is certainly satisfying.

Exhale. My eyes are still closed, so I imagine the vapor forms a perfect visual of varying shapes. When I open them, I see that I happened to have missed my talented breath, and unfortunately cannot describe it to any eager listeners. I offer a slight laugh and a smile to the silence, to show I don’t take myself too seriously, and that we can get along easily. The silence wasn’t paying attention; too busy looking at the stars perhaps. I shift my weight back, the compacted snow decided not to produce a sound. I take a step forward and it surrenders. Feeling

guilty, I murmur a quick apology and begin my walk again.

A soft reflection of the moonlight shines off of the surface of the snow. Really, the ice deserves credit: it was the one melted in the sun and refrozen on the surface, but regardless, it creates that same nighttime glow. A horror story would describe it as creepy, but it's not so bad once you get to know it. The cold air has worked its way through my coat and into my core, quickly changing from a refreshing friend to an unwelcome chill. Betrayed, I head for the house; hot tea and warm blankets await. Perhaps I'll come back tomorrow.

## Cut the Ropes

You have a greater chance of hanging yourself than of being hanged.  
So why worry about other's thoughts?  
So why stay in the comfort of the known?  
So why not risk and venture into what truly grabs at you?  
Leave comfort and addiction to consumers.  
Ignore the cradle that calms you and gently lulls you in.  
The soft and sweet and numb that tell you the outside world is too much.  
Climb out of your pocket and stand in the wind.  
Better yet, stand in the wind with thunder and rain,  
Feel dirt pelt against your face as the uncontrolled storm reigns the world around you.  
Never again to let the prisons of convenience strip away the feeling of life.  
Be angry, not sedated. Be joyful, not sedated.  
Be sad, be bashful, be humiliated, be exhausted, be excited,  
For you are alive and human and deserve to feel as such, not sedated.  
The bonds of a luminous screen, of warm veins and swirling idleness,  
Are tighter than they seem.  
They constrict tighter and swallow your desire to escape.  
Let grit loosen the shackles.  
Let cold air and hot sweat,  
Let tears and sobs and shouts and gasps loosen your binds.  
A pounding heart and lungs at their limit.  
Free from your chains, that spark will return. The sky glows brighter.  
Leaves and foliage, so green you can taste it. Feeding the soul.  
You have a better chance of hanging yourself than being hanged.  
Lose the ropes that choke your spirit.

# Madelyn Schleicher

“Madelyn was wonderful to work with. Everything she writes is written from the heart. I admire her desire to spread positivity and empathy through her writing. Her poetry always invoked such deep and introspective conversations. I look forward to seeing how her creativity and passion will guide her future work.”

- Maggie Broeren

Just think about this.

That girl in the back of your science class,  
Yeah, her parents are getting divorced.

Timmy, from the circle table in the library,  
Well, he sits there for lunch because otherwise he gets called a fag.

That “nerd” in your math class,  
His father committed suicide when he was 10.

Maria, that “big” girl in homeroom,  
Starves herself to look like everyone else.

That one boy who watches and never says anything during class,  
Been raped since he was 4 by his own uncle.

Jack, lead QB on the football field,  
His parents have never been to a single game.

That girl you heard throwing up in the bathroom yesterday,  
Yeah she does that because she thinks it is going to make herself skinny.

Cole, little guy lot of hair,  
Drank himself to death this morning.

That guy who is 3 lockers down and always smiles at you before 4th period,  
30 cuts, inner thigh, left leg.

Poppy from gym class who never wears shorts,  
Just leggings because she has names carved into her legs.

The girl in 7th period who never wears a bra to class,  
Her and her parents live in motel 6.

Jimmy across the street,  
Sells drugs because his parents need the money.

And that girl crying in the 4th stall during lunch,

Never heard the phrase “I love you”.

Yeah,

These people walk around you everyday.

They breathe the same air and carry their own baggage on their shoulders.

I bet damn well you have big bags too.

Not their fault they can not hold them like you do.

## Empty

I gave you everything and what do I get?

What do I get ?

Well it was clear that My everything was not enough for you so stop saying you loved me.

If you love someone you don't walk out like that.

You don't go on dates,

Introduce them to your entire family,

Make future plans,

And drive 2 hours at 1 am with the windows down blasting 772 Love

You don't let your fingertips write your love story's death sentence

You absolutely do not get to not have answers.

I will ask you the questions, but I will then question the love.

I will question my worth for you.

I will let your opinions take control of my brain for many many hours.

And then I will demand an answer a reason the truth

And when you tell me you will leave

You will leave again like you did the first time but this time you have to stay away

Because you lied to me you were lying the whole time

And now your lies rebuild my love.

# Taylor Schmidt

“It has been wonderful getting to know Taylor throughout the semester. Taylor has been a strong writer from the beginning, and seeing her creativity come alive in her pieces was fun to be a part of. As much as I felt that I helped her, she equally taught me so much about writing! It was such a pleasure helping Taylor work through her story details and see her pieces develop. I am very fortunate to have worked with Taylor this semester and am proud to have been a part of her journey as a writer.”

- Morgan Witt

## Stilted Steps and Hollow Bones

Panic

Panic

Panic

Panic

That stoppers the blood and chills the heart

Oh, such sweet, saccharine tones

Made by your appropriated breaths

Rabbit quick, shaky-ribbed

Love, you make me breathless

---

You know your name.

It is fact,

A combination of symbols

that encompasses all that you are.

It's just one of those things.

The sky is blue.

You need to breathe to live.

Your name is [redacted],

and your body is not your own.

Oh, you live in it.

Cram food into it to keep it running,

clean out the pipes with water,  
pump the bellows of your lungs.  
Your job is to keep it running,  
keep it safe,  
but it doesn't belong to you.  
It's not yours.  
It hasn't belonged to you for a long time,  
since that time you would rather  
shove to the back of your mind  
than think about for a second.  
You keep it moving, but it isn't yours.

It's all you can do sometimes,  
to keep it functional.  
You have tried to reclaim it,  
to polish scratched  
and rusted chrome until it shone,  
to embrace intelligence  
and sexuality  
and reliability,  
but you could never truly take it back.  
It was never yours to begin with.  
You will only ever be reliable  
like a rusted shovel is reliable.  
You will only ever have  
the illusion of strength,  
of usefulness.  
In the end, you will  
snap  
as soon as someone tries



to make the first cut into the soil.  
Look as useful as you like,  
but remember that you are only gold-plated.  
Remember your true worth.

You have always understood,  
even before that day,  
the true meaning of your name.

Not the linguistic meaning,  
but who you would become.

You knew that you would  
destroy far more easily  
than you could build.

You knew your hands  
trembled where they  
should have been steady.

You always felt guilty about that,  
but never remorseful.

I wonder what they would all think  
if they knew just how little humanity  
was left beneath that shiny, gilded shell.

I wonder how the mortals  
would react to your indifference  
to your mortality.

It takes two coins to cross the River Styx,  
but none to throw yourself into the water.

Remember that.

It's another of those things that you just know.

You may have lost your autonomy,  
but never surrender your dignity.

---

Carry it through, my love,  
Carry it through.  
Your claim is no less true,  
No less legitimate than any other.  
The fetters of your soul,  
Unborn, unforged in the fires  
Of your own creation  
Have no bearing here.  
Pick up your pieces,  
Ground to dust though they may be.  
Take the pain,  
Take the self-loathing,  
Take their sharp words  
And sharper reprimands.  
Take their attempts  
To strip away your substance,  
To overwrite your history,  
And put it all on a high shelf,  
Locked in a box  
That you will open  
Once you are free of this place.  
Take the pain  
On splinted wings  
And carry it through,  
Away.

---

Pride goeth before the fall,  
So I suppose we never will.  
Her honeyed breaths

Have never graced my lips.

I have never known the touch  
Of her soft-palmed deceptions  
Or well-intentioned assurances  
On my skin.

The only pride I have  
Has been that I've felt for you,  
The avatar of her worship  
Inhabiting my frame

You, who I would paint over with gold,  
Place among the stars,  
Polish like a gem  
Until you shone just as brightly

Though, and I suspect this is news to you,  
For you have as much time with pride as I,  
It would take very little  
For you to match their radiance

I suppose I know enough of pride to fall,  
Though the fall,  
Like stars from the heavens,  
Is as sweet as any stability

I suppose I've always been falling,  
Forward, downward, onward,  
Held by those hands as I plummeted

Into love with you.

—

It's a little bit like mourning,  
The way the morning dew  
Settles  
Over green and dying grass  
With the same care,  
A crocheted shawl over trembling shoulders  
And empty hands that used to have  
A second set to hold.  
The crackling of branches  
And frost beneath booted soles  
Is no worse a requiem  
Than key-stroked threnodies  
Or the tolls croaked by ancient bells.  
A chorus of the bereft,  
Or of songbirds,  
Screaming, screeching,  
Weeping and wailing against the injustice  
Or against the encroaching beams of the sun  
In their hides-holes and high-up perches,  
Safe from the reaches  
Of all but the blazing rays  
Of light,  
Or of grief.  
Closed eyes are never enough  
To hide from it.  
Though mourning  
Is for the living,  
There is little comfort in it.

The songbirds must bury  
Their heads in their wings  
Until the rays stop burning,  
And they have gathered  
Enough strength  
To greet the day  
Or the truth.

---

I think mostly I'm just tired  
There are strong cords tied to my spine,  
My hands,  
The base of my skull,  
Pulling me down,  
Back,  
Deeper,  
Closer to the floor.  
Further into bed.  
There are magnets on my eyelids,  
Drawing them closed,  
Unable to even type,  
To keep my hands steady.  
Then, the pain hits.  
There is the physical pain,  
The kind that sears through flesh,  
The creaking of joints,  
Tender bruises blooming on clear skin  
Like smudges from where  
Birds  
Flew into  
Windows,

Abruptly knocked off course,  
Struck with the full force of reality  
And left to fly away  
Dazed,  
Confused,  
Mourning the sky they saw  
Reflected in the pane.  
There is the tension  
In fingers  
Begging to be cracked  
And toes  
To be balanced on.  
There is also the less physical pain.  
Not mental, because I still feel it  
In the yawning emptiness beneath my skin,  
The shudders and flinches and spasms,  
The worn aching.  
The desire to be touched,  
To be held,  
Is a nearly corporeal thing,  
So strong that I feel  
The pressure on my head,  
On my arms,  
In the shape of hands that are not there,  
And drape weighted blankets across my aching flesh  
And pretend they are bodies.  
I am not alone in this.  
I remember,  
Early on,  
When it was still sinking in that this was

Not a nightmare,  
But a tragedy,  
I was flooded with images of people  
Holding their own faces in trembling palms  
And bursting into tears.  
That hunger is so deep  
That the facsimile of human interaction  
Is enough to make us weep from relief.  
The burdens we bear are heavy;  
We are all so tired of carrying them alone.  
We have become like Atlas.  
Unfortunately for us,  
However,  
There are no enterprising heroes coming along  
to carry the load for a while.

---

Sitting beside you in a silence which is  
Open, not oppressive.  
A breath caught is  
A breath released,  
Something newly born,  
Captured,  
Secreted away into another bone-barred cage.  
Each moment passed is  
A warm pressure that buoys me higher,  
An updraft beneath tattered wings,  
A current beneath ragged fins,  
A gentle hand tugging me to the surface.  
Once more unto the breach,

My friend.  
Let us try again,  
see where this  
Construct of mismatched parts will end.  
See how far this simulacrum  
can stumble on splintered limbs,  
Powered by a heart that beats in increments.  
I have limped this far,  
Rested my hollow bones on your worn-out box spring,  
Sat with you and existed merely, barely.  
Shared thoughts so our minds  
Fired on the same impulses  
through the same chains of neurons.  
Shared breath, the same ash in both our lungs.  
Been, the two of us, just being,  
Cracked hand in cracked hand,  
Chapped lip on chapped lip,  
Battered heart on battered heart.  
We sit here, silence caressing us  
like sun-warmed waters,  
Sitting with each other's pain,  
Not intervening or consoling,  
But acknowledging and uplifting  
Simply by existing  
And breathing the same air,  
Thinking the same thoughts,  
Feeling the same warmth  
As your arm brushes against mine.  
Sorrows pierce our hulls like icebergs,  
But each won't let the other sink



Beneath the waves because  
Bonds hold fast when  
There is no expectation  
Of failure.

---

We do not often think of Daedalus these days.  
Our contemplation tends to fixate more on Icarus.  
Icarus, whose father strapped  
wings of wax and feather  
to a son who dared to dream.  
Icarus, who was so desperate  
to prove himself, so terrified  
of failure and in awe of the light  
that he flew towards it.  
Icarus, who dreamt of flight  
but was given only  
the exhilaration-turned-terror of a fall.  
Burn marks on an already scarred back.  
I wonder if Daedalus chortled  
when he saw his boy-prodigy-creation  
plummet through the air.  
I wonder if the heat of the sun  
was within him all along  
and spilled out with  
each venomous cackle,  
if Icarus dared to fly so close  
because he was fleeing an even hotter flame.  
I wonder if Icarus slept  
with whispers of his inadequacies  
ringing in his ears like church bells,

chiming out the deaths of his dreams,  
the hours spent in agony.  
I wonder if Icarus flinched  
when he was compared to his father,  
the great inventor,  
the mad scientist.  
Daedalus is well known  
for murdering family members  
who shone a bit too brightly.  
He was exiled for it.  
Icarus was never supposed to fly too high,  
nor sink too low.  
Too high, and he was competition.  
Too low, and he was a waste of effort.  
Worthless.  
Icarus didn't care about  
what happened to him  
after he took flight because  
finally,  
finally  
he was free.  
He had a chance.  
I wonder if,  
compared to Dedalus's scorching vitriol,  
the burning of the sun on his face,  
the burning of his wings  
felt like a cool balm.  
A welcome relief.  
Some dreams are too strong  
to be held back by others' expectations.

Some needs are too strong  
not to take a risk for,  
even if all you are held aloft on  
is wax and feathers.  
Icarus did not step calmly into the sky.  
He leapt, trusting his wings to carry him  
up,  
Up,  
Up,  
away from the tower,  
the prison,  
his father.  
He leapt into the sky because  
it was a chance to prove that  
even wax wings can carry you far.  
Even if all you are is wax and feathers  
you can still reach the sun.  
You can still amount to something,  
even when everything and  
everyone around you  
seeks to rip you down.  
The thing that everyone seems to forget  
is that before Icarus fell,  
he tasted flight.  
He felt the wind beneath him,  
the warm sun kissing his face.  
Before the wax began to melt,  
Icarus soared.  
I think, for him, the fall may have felt worth it.  
After being so close

to something so bright,  
so warm.  
After feeling the security of the drafts  
taking him higher, /higher/  
They say that Icarus's tale is a warning.  
Don't be cocky.  
Don't be complacent.  
They say that Arrogance is what killed Icarus,  
That his hubris was his downfall.  
Icarus was far from arrogant.  
He knew what would happen  
if he flew too close to the sun.  
His father had warned-threatened-beat him  
to ensure that he would not forget.  
Icarus had a full understanding  
of what he meant to do,  
and he still chose to do it.  
Not out of a sense of entitlement.  
Not because he thought he was better.  
There are some things in life  
that you cannot give up on,  
because doing so would break your soul.  
The body cannot live  
when the soul has died.  
Icarus needed to fly-flee like he needed food,  
water,  
oxygen.  
If he had not tried,  
there would have been nothing left to save.  
Nothing left to mend-bury-cast into the sea.

There are some things in life  
that are worth burning for.  
Icarus was not stupid,  
arrogant,  
or any of the other labels leveled at him.  
Icarus was desperate.  
His tale is not of hubris,  
but of conviction.  
Icarus tells us that just because something seems  
impossible  
does not mean we should not try anyway.  
We may not succeed.  
We may burn up in the process,  
but aren't some things worth burning for?

---

# Maggie Weiland

“Maggie is a very talented individual. She has a love for poetry and every one of her pieces has impressed me deeply. Maggie has a unique strength in writing in-depth poems that are always remarkably illustrated. She has come a long way with her work and I am super proud of the progress we have made this semester. It has been an amazing experience to have worked with her.”

- Pachia Moua

## A Home to Hold

How easy it is to furnish my mind with you.

I tried for weeks to evict you

Set your seducing suitcase smile and bewitching bag of beliefs on the curb

Pushed you to the slums of my memory,

Only to see you stroll across the street, never perturbed.

You never signed yourself away

To be etched in on the backs of my eyelids

Nor did I make known the bareness and lack --

Nor did you decide to disburse considerations or delights.

I wonder if you live there simply in spite of me.

Your winsome features suit a long-held vacancy

That I cling to without regard for weary tenants living under browbeaten bridges

But, as I drive you out for our sakes

Is it really your place

Or have you simply found an asylum more hospitable than your own?

## Metamorphosis Years

I crashed into doors, shoving, jostling to see a crack of light,  
My spine split, grotesque, misaligned, and pressed painfully against flayed skin,  
My heart pitched, dipped to toes and leapt to unspeakable height,  
Pale, my tongue tasted acrid, of tangy tears, and fermented fears, and tin.

I suppose you believe I beheld a singular moment when all these torments broke loose,  
Maybe I was repentant of my transgression of youth.  
But, to see a soul as black and white secures a doubled noose,  
One of a cacophonous child never ending, and one of those who omit the truth.

Now, I careen like an apologetic wrecking ball, fragmenting fixtures I had once ducked below,  
Not ramrod straight, but sculpted, folded, woven, carved to the silhouette I idealize,  
Calcified but concrete, a pulse bangs erratic underneath taut skin aglow,  
My tongue wraps around itself, savoring its own words as they arise.

To despise oneself is to condemn a stranger yet unknown,  
Childhood synonymous with innocence, possession of my own heart, the capstone.

A jury of all your peers

Sweat and condensation collide

Slipping down a forehead pressed flat against cool granite

The grains lift and lump in the stone, pressing incessantly into her frontal lobe.

“Quiet.” she whispers, *please, quiet.*

The only offending voice left, her own.

Like Eve and the original sin,

Was her only crime listening to a strange, supple voice against deserted ears?

The degree of the charge determined by an unseen judge and jury,

Those who have never touched the tree or the fruit or the jagged granite wall or imploring lips...

A croon filled, drowned, every sense,

Answering every question unprompted,

Engulfing a mild craving with enough to satiate a famine.

Just requesting an unknown promise of

Those who have never yet pressed the soles of their palms into biting stone

Begging *why*,

In a plea for silence



## Shapeshifting

Within the walls of a drooping facade,  
I pace and meander across mutilated claims  
As you furnish a home, based ultimately on fraud,  
Yet I wait for you, eager, tapping at doorframes

Maybe your clandestine approach was best.  
But, my faith would retreat if it knew the prevalence of your secondary breath.  
Sometimes I wonder if your integrity could manifest  
If only your compliant nature, you could put to death.

Would our voices remain melded in laughter  
Or could our minds still savor each other, separately?  
Because your heart and soul built their foundations forever after  
In raising stairs of your spine, yourself the amenity.

Who would you be?

Your voices shifts from ear to approving ear,  
Yet somehow, I grapple achingly with the concept of you as insincere.

## Dancing Down

A nerve scrapped raw

Exposed

Laid open like a laceration

Undulating waves pulse at a decibel unheard by eardrums too long blown out

Illusions melt like plastic under the scrutiny of the bass

Pale tendrils arms and flashes of kaleidoscope hair

Whip around an anarchic tomb.

A glare of light hits blind eyes,

As different lashes flutter

Like the first breath forced into lungs held too long underwater

I'm astonished as faces warp like clocks,

Spinning backwards.

Numbers twist in knots like dream work.

Leaving them unreadable, indecipherable, and foreign to crystal clear pupils.

Acquiring an acrid taste leeching into my mouth,

I move towards the door.

Where was I before?

## A False Muse

On occasion, I dream of you.  
Doused in opulence, smiling, successful,  
With open irises illustrated in the exact shade of mahogany  
That gleams on a stage behind the proscenium arch

I imagine how dapper you would look  
Sketched in a million minuscule moments within the frame  
Veiled by lightened brushstrokes of my hair  
Covering my own eyes

As you would twirl me around  
The forlorn drip of the kitchen sink,  
The sole representative of reality,  
As we waltz through the dining room

Swinging past wooden chairs  
Gliding over plush rugs and across my mind's canvas  
Your performing laughter, musical, like the life I cast  
And carved of an arduous medium

Together  
Alone

But that was never really you,  
Only a sordid portrait  
Painted from the memory  
Of a girl whose hope upstaged you

The gleam in her blinded eyes  
Outshining any dim spotlight that you could hope to occupy  
As you sit above it all in rafters and attics and naive hearts  
Rotting, tarnished, from your own elusive lines

Inked ideas designing every missed moment  
As you twitch and shift beneath an artist's gaze  
That makes you all you could never be  
A costumed knight drift across pupils blown wide like unfurling roses

If the audience is unaware of where they sit,  
Is it an act or a lie?  
But perhaps even your kind smile and assured mind cannot tell  
What facets fall flat or what an artist can do for its muse

Anna of Cleves would be aghast

## B. Winter

“It is not too often that I get privilege of working with such an individual as well-versed in classical poetry as B. Winter. In fact, he’s rather unprecedented. His ability to use this knowledge in such a practiced way takes him into another realm even. I think this point almost goes without saying – one need only read his following works to gain a sense of his roots. B. Winter carries with him the years of study and understanding needed to truly capture that eternal classical essence and use it with such precision to form his art. There’s an almost timeless feeling to his approach, mirroring too the timelessness of human nature in the works. B. Winter, I wish you the best in your writing endeavors – keep with it. Your capacity is remarkable and there’s much I know you’ll achieve in your time.”

- Jared Burkart

### Innocence Fleeting

Let the Children play  
Stop breaking Butterflies  
Leave them to Blue Skies  
Years pass and cruel Thoughts bend  
Death was no Horror to Them  
No Mark left by Man  
Should mar their Young land  
For the Unsung to be Unheard  
Is alike forgone chirping’s Bird  
No old Adult shall ever Know  
Children’s Purity like White snow  
Shan’t they reprimand Youth for Instinct  
To their Metamorphosis succinct  
Drunkards Leer at Sober thought Bearings  
In order to Beset with more Uncaring  
The blessed Hare runs through Bare  
Haplessly trapped by Evil’s snare  
Because some Devil sprints amok  
Beneath Innocence’s ticking Clock  
A Mask’d Man shows his True Face

A pure Mind Elucidates  
Here they do not Cherish the Youth Grace  
Embedding offspring a Rat Race  
Mankind would rather take the Stars  
At the Cost of short Wiseness Far  
All Witness a sad Sight to see  
When a worm'd Apple falls from the Tree  
Jaded run at an Unrelenting Pace  
To befall white Childe with knowledge Unlace  
Each newborn good Soul treated Careless  
The Boy inside the Man perishes  
And now, all of it is gone  
And now, all of it is gone  
And now, the kid's day, finally done.

## Ode to Night

“Look, look, look!” it oft is to shout.  
With an incessant blaring gaud,  
Begging, taking our applause.  
The sun, bright and unfair bleary  
Drives my attention too weary.  
It is the one I cherish most  
That occupies my mind, a mild host.

The night does not shout.  
With an evening, swooning grace,  
Sighing, passing without a trace.  
The moon, pale and cloud placated,  
Caught my eye to a heart related.  
A humble idyll that does not boast-  
Cool thoughts for a tranquil serous.

My want, so much more elegant.  
Evenfall draws outlines around,  
Forward, backward, up and down.  
Lights go dim, hoary details fade  
For a scenery worth thousand-times paid.  
A thousand pins pricking the blue  
Going softly, trancing with nightingale’s tune.

She stands opposed, never affront, to the Otherside.

The night does not pry or try.  
Softly conducted with each shadow,  
Reigning maestro of each darkened meadow.  
And though much else shuts their eyes,  
I know it to be far better than a gold-saucer'd tide,  
For nothing compares to my Eternal Blue Sky.



## Essence Gone

How may I fathom the fathoms?  
Weighing tight in the warm bosom,  
Skin, pricking wherefore the bold  
From that bitter December cold.

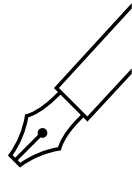
One hundred leagues of rolling lands.  
Beckoning lark, wholly demands--  
Refuge, reprieve, respite, come hold  
From that bitter December cold.

Sad fellow, where do you head?  
Here? Yet there is no rest, no bed.  
Only the ice, as once foretold  
From that bitter December cold.

You can't live the good dream, said I  
But he thought it was all a lie,  
So forth he ventured, sad and old  
From that bitter December cold.

Some many years later, I saw  
A decrepit Corpse in a lull  
To life, the soul was already sold  
From my bitter December cold.

# Prose



# Ellie Atkinson

“Ellie is a wonderful learner. She has such a strong interest and passion in novellas, and the story she submitted is the one we have been working on throughout the semester. Ellie is very talented and her ability to write is phenomenal. She takes any given suggestion or idea and brings it to life. Ellie has surprised me many times with the adjustments on her story and I am so glad to have worked along side her this semester.”

- Pachia Moua

Content Warnings: Explicit, Alcohol Use, Sexual Assault

## In the Heart of the Country

I walk into the bar and take a seat on a stool. A younger bartender is standing behind the bar, drying pint glasses with a white towel. His disheveled hair matches his muscular, rugged bartender aesthetic.

“Shot of whiskey please,” I say and take my purse off my shoulder, setting it next to me on the bar top. The guy looks at me, stunned. I meet his eyes and he obliges, grabbing a shot glass from under the bar top and a bottle of whiskey from the back wall. He pours the shot and I throw my head back, allowing the liquor to fly down my throat. I slam the glass down, a little harder than necessary. I push the tiny glass towards the bartender. “Another.”

The guy looks at me, questioning, but gives in. I throw my head back again. After I set the glass down, I loosen my shoulders. e warm, fuzzy feeling of the alcohol beginning to spread. I give the bartender the go-ahead three more times before he cuts me off.

“You’re going to drown your liver at this rate,” he comments.

I pout. “I’m paying you so you can't deny me alcohol.”

“Actually, I can. You just had five shots in the span of two minutes.”

“I’m not drunk,” I point out.

“I never said you were. You just need to slow down.” There's a slight smile on his face.

“So why are you denying me alcohol?”

“Because if you keep drinking at this pace, you’ll be blackout drunk in a matter of minutes.”

“What if that's what I want?”

“The night’s still young.”

I groan and roll my eyes. I lean my head on my hand and tap my fingers against the bar top with my other hand, utterly bored. He fills a pint glass with ice water before placing it on a coaster in front of me. My eyes meet his, but he doesn't say anything. I know that he wants me to drink the water instead of alcohol.

“There’s no reason to get drunk so fast.”

Although his back is turned, I know he’s referring to me, but I ignore him. He’s definitely picking up the fact that I obviously came here to ease some type of pain. I decide to change the subject. “It's pretty dead tonight.”

“It's not even nine o'clock,” he dryly responds.

I look around the bar and there are a few tables that have guests, but other than that, it's empty.

“Is this a popular spot?”

“Most bars are on a Friday night.”

“True.”

“I'm assuming you're not from around here then.”

I shake my head. “I don't live anywhere near here, actually. I just needed to clear my mind and here I am.” I'm typically confident, but the alcohol makes my confidence intensify and all filters fade. I wish I could control the things that come out of my mouth when liquid courage is involved.

The drink commander leans his elbows on the bar and comes to my eye level. “Is everything okay?”

“It's just peachy.”

He chuckles at my sarcasm. “Just needed to feel a little something tonight?”

“You're so smart. How did you know?”

“It's not like I do this for a living or anything.”

“Touché.”

“If you don't mind me asking, why is whiskey your drink of choice?”

“It's strong.”

“Touché.”

“So you just do this for fun?”

“My family owns this bar.”

“Oh so you *don't* do this for fun. You're actually forced to work here.”

“More or less, but I like it.”

“What would you be doing if you weren't a bartender?”

He straightens, pondering the question. “A farrier.”

“I'm sorry what?”

He chuckles again, probably disappointed with how unintelligent I am. “They take care of horse's hooves.”

“Oh you mean a horse-hoof-trimmer-guy.”

“If that's what you want to call it.”

“If you couldn't tell I'm not from the country.”

“Really? Never would've guessed.”

I laugh. “The sass I get from you.”

“Really? Do you know what *I* have to put up with?”

I laugh. “You probably get some crazy people that come in.”

“You can only imagine.”

The drink slayer is about to say something, but a group of college students come through the door and beeline to the alcohol hotspot, spitting out drink orders. I quietly sit there and sip my water, unsatisfied with the opposite feeling it has compared to the whiskey.

After completing the drink orders, the bartender tidies his workspace. “If you weren't sitting here what would you be doing?”

I guffaw. “If I had it my way, I would be watching Christmas movies with my ex-boyfriend right now.” I roll my eyes at the mention of the guy.

“It's October.”

“That's the part of my story you choose to focus on?”

“It stuck out,” he deadpans then runs his hand through his messy hair.

I roll my eyes in a sarcastic manner.

I look at the clock and notice the time, it's getting closer to nine, which means the bar is about to get busy. Speaking of, the door opens and another group comes in. I take in the newcomers and one guy in particular makes eye contact with me. It's like time stops and the scene around us fades away. He brushes his hand through his blonde hair while his eyes scale my appearance. A small smile spreads across his face, which I involuntarily replicate. He licks his

lips, blinks, then reconnects his eyes with my own. I look away, so I'm facing the bar once again, as they get closer to the bar. I hear them order various types of drinks and I distract myself by sipping my water.

"Hey," a male voice interrupts my thoughts. I turn to see the curly haired blonde. He sits on the stool next to me with a dark beer bottle.

I give him a smile.

"Why are you here so early?" Up close, he's much more attractive, but a little younger than I would typically go for. His dark eyes gleam in the bar's soft light, captivating me.

"Oh...you know, just living life."

His lips tug up into a smile, aware of my sarcasm. "I'm Kendall."

"Nice to meet you," I answer, purposely not introducing myself.

"It's good to meet you too, *girl with no name*." His eyes flick over to his friends who have made their way over to a corner booth. "I'll see you around." Kendall winks and I bite my lower lip.

"I'll look forward to it, Kendall."

He leaves me alone and joins his friends. I straighten and glance at the bar monitor who is tidying his area. His face is serious and there's definitely something on his mind. I want to know what's with the sudden mood change.

"Another drink, Mr. Bartender!"

He still for a moment then hesitates to speak, as if he's critically choosing his words. "He comes here every weekend and always takes a new girl home."

"I'm not going to be one of his statistics."

"I saw the way he was looking at you. He will make it his mission to get you in bed."

"I'm not going to let it go *that* far."

He gives me a pointed look. "Right because you're completely sober."

"I'm tipsy and want some fun, is that so bad?"

"No, but-"

"You want to know a fun fact? Bartenders are basically therapists, just for an eighth of the salary. And in case you were wondering, you suck as a therapist."

"You're very sassy when you're drunk."

"Who says I'm not sassy when I'm sober?"

“Touché.”

I push my shot glass towards him, silently giving him the hint that I still want the shot that he purposely forgot to fill.

“I’m not telling you what to do, but I’m advising you to just be careful.”

He unscrews the top of the whiskey bottle and angles it to the glass.

I roll my eyes. “Thanks *dad*.”

He stops, his face dropping. “No more for you.” He puts the cap back on the whiskey bottle and places it back in its proper place.

“Oh, come on. It’s just a joke. I’m fully capable of making my own decisions.”

He shakes his head. “You’re only getting water for the next couple hours.” He walks away to help a few newcomers sitting around the bartop.

I frown, disappointed with the spicy water supervisor. My fuzzy state of mind is going to disappear, but I don’t want it to. It’s comforting. I sip my water and another guy sits next to me, ordering two tequila shots.

He winks at me. The guy is about forty, greying hair, and glasses. He’s too old for my type, but he’s buying me alcohol so I’m not going to complain right now.

I smile flirtatiously and decide to kill two birds with one stone. The cocktail master gives the man two shots of tequila. The man slides one of the shots towards me. He angles his own towards mine.

“Cheers.”

We clink the mini glasses then down the liquid.

I clink my drink to his before downing it. I wrinkle my face. I never really liked tequila, which is weird because dark liquors are stronger than light and I obviously like whiskey.

“Are you here alone?”

“Uh, no.” Although there may be intoxicants running through my body, I’m not completely stupid...for the most part.

The guy is about to say something before his eyes leave mine. “Excuse me, sweetheart.” The man leaves and I’m left sitting there embarrassed. I look back to the corner, where Kendall is sitting with his friends. I want to talk to him, but I don’t want to take away his time with the friends he came here with. I turn away and continue sitting at the bar, wanting a connection.



I pick at my fries that the pseudo therapist has given me, although I didn't order anything but alcohol. The longer the food sits in front of me, the more I eat and I didn't even realize I was hungry. There's a band playing on the stage with drunk people dancing freely in front of them, but the bar is still a constant flow of drink orders. The solo barkeep never rests, but he's made sure to keep an eye on me, even without speaking. He's minimally interacted with me since Kendall left, but I'm not bored due to the never-ending stream of guys hitting on me. I've had way too much to drink and I don't regret it, it makes my life slightly easier. The stress of my events before coming to the bar are blurred. Right now, I don't have any care in the world and it's freeing.

"How are you doing?" The alcohol mixologist leans his arms on the counter so we're face to face.

I shrug. "Living the dream. Another drink?"

"This is your last one for the night. You need to sober up before you even think of driving home."

"Yes, sir." I salute him and he chuckles. He pours me one last shot then leaves. As I'm about to take it, a male body comes behind me and encloses me in. I look over my shoulder to see Kendall. His eyes are dark and I can smell the beer from his breath.

"Hi," I giggle.

"Hey. How's it going?" He unbarricades me and sits next to me, placing his hand heavily on my knee.

"It's better *now*." I wink at him. God, it's like I've never flirted in my life. If I were sober, I would kick myself straight in the face for being so annoying.

"The bar is going to close soon."

"Good thing I got my last shot."

"Whiskey shot."

The liquid courage mediator makes eye contact with Kendall, acknowledging his request, but ignores it and continues talking to a customer for a few moments.

"This bar is so slow." Kendall scoffs.

I stay quiet.

The liquor banker excuses himself from the customer then goes to the cash register before coming over to Kendall and me. "It's my bar, dumbass. Shut the hell up." He slides my credit



card back to me and I put it back in my purse. The bartender starts to walk away, but Kendall calls out again.

“Where's my drink?”

“You're not getting it.”

Kendall rolls his eyes. “This place is shit.”

“And yet you keep coming back every weekend.”

Kendall's face almost drops, but he recovers quickly. “Let's get out of here.”

“Where are we going to go?”

He shrugs as a devious smirk spreads across his lips. He leans towards me and I can feel his breath against my ear. Shivers run down my spine and I giggle.

“To the moon.”

He pulls away and winks as I give him a questioning look, but his devious grin hasn't left. My heart skips a beat. He grabs my hand and starts pulling me away from the bar. I quickly grab my purse and as I do look back at the bartender, but he's occupied by taking a rack of dirty glasses to the kitchen. Then I notice the shot that I didn't take. Kendall leads me out of the bar into the cold, late September air.

Instead of finding one of our vehicles, Kendall stops and pushes me against the brick exterior of the building and attacks my lips with his. His hands are on both sides of my face while mine go to his chest. I pull on his white t-shirt to have him even closer to me. Our lips move in sync with each kiss becoming more fervent and fast. I taste the beer from his earlier drinking and he can definitely taste the whiskey from my own.

Kendall slides his hands down from my face to my neck to my breasts to my hips. He pulls me against him. I gasp in between kisses and move my hands up his chest to weave through his hair. Our lips tangle and fight for dominance and are sloppy from our intoxication. I breathe deeply as his lips travel from my lips to my neck. I gently pull on his hair as the ends of my shirt tug up and his hands roam freely around my body. His palms stretch over my now bare midriff. I gasp again as he starts sucking on my earlobe. His fingers play with the waistband of my jeans. I smile, thinking that he's teasing me. Then he slips a hand in, down to my core. I gasp, suddenly sober. I swallow and become very aware of everything around me.

He notices my sudden rigidity and attempts to soothe my mood. “Doesn't that feel good?”

I yelp and my throat tightens. As much as I wish I could continue with Kendall, I feel absolutely violated. I wish I wanted to continue, but I just want to fall and never be seen again.

“Shh...”

I swallow and take a deep breath, trying to gain confidence. I’m far from feeling safe. “No.” My voice is weak and barely above a whisper. Kendall doesn’t move his lips from my neck or hand from my pants. I put my hands on his chest and try to push, but his bulky body doesn’t budge. I close my eyes, feeling the hot tears forming.

“Stop,” I whimper again. I open my eyes as he covers my mouth with his hand and looks straight into my eyes, not speaking. His eyes are hooded and unreadable. Fear spikes again and I swallow.

I feel my lung capacity shrinking.

I can barely breathe.

I close my eyes again and try to calm down. I try and focus on anything I can. There are a few cars that speed by on the country road. I hear a door slam in the distance.

I perk up, hoping I can manage to see someone coming to the entrance, but there’s no movement.

I listen again to everything, but there's nothing.

My heart sinks knowing that nobody is around to alleviate the situation. The wind blows and I suddenly feel alone. I pray that someone will see me, but I know the chances are slim.

Abruptly, I feel Kendall’s body tear away from my own. The cold air hits against my lips as Kendall’s hand leaves.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Someone snarls.

I open my eyes, recognizing the person’s voice. Even in the dim light, I can see the rage in the bartender’s eyes. He’s holding Kendall tightly by the shirt, only a few inches away.

“Fuck off man, I was just giving her what she asked for.”

“Really? It didn’t look that way.”

“Whatever. I don't think you're her boyfriend.”

“Does it matter?”

“Fuck off.”

In the yellow light, the intoxication monitor's face tightens. He releases Kendall for a moment before he punches Kendall in the face. Kendall stumbles back and hits the brick wall. He stills before rage fills his features and throws a punch back.

The shot giver runs his tongue over his top teeth. "The cops are on their way."

Kendall scoffs. "Not like you have anything on me."

As I'm watching these two only ten yards away from me, I try to focus on my breathing. My knees are weak and I slide down the wall to the concrete. I place my head on my knees and close my eyes to distract myself. The ringing in my ears overpowers the yelling voices. My body begins to feel numb, but I can't tell if it's just from the alcohol running through my blood or if I'm just shaken up.

"Hey," the guy says. He touches my arm and I flip my head up, startled. It's only the whiskey superintendent. He puts his hands up in defense. "I'm not going to hurt you. He's gone." The drink-mixer-turned-fighter's eyes to focus on me. As I read into them, they soften. I blink, trying to clear my vision.

"Can I take you somewhere safe?"

I give him a crooked look, conscious of any possible ulterior motives. "I can drive you home or I can take you to my house. I know you said you live an hour from here, my house is less than twenty minutes. You just went through hell and are in no shape to drive. I want to make sure you're safe."

I look away from the bartender, biting my lip.

"Hey, I'm not like him. I promise I won't touch you."

I meet his gaze again. His words and actions truly strike me as genuine, but after what just happened, my trust is a little broken.

After a long silent moment, I hesitantly nod. I just want to get out of here.

"I have to close the bar, do you want to wait in my truck or come in with me?"

"Truck," I whisper. He nods and stands. I slowly get up, using the wall for stability. I take a deep breath before looking over at the helping guy. After a moment, he leads me to the back of the bar where more cars are parked. He presses a button and headlights light the path to a silver vehicle. After he opens the passenger door for me, I examine the interior. It's pristine, with no random junk lying around, like a vehicle usually has. I don't think there's even a speck of dirt or a piece of garbage.

“I’ll turn the heat on and if you want the lights on.”

I nod and step up into the black leather passenger seat. The door closes after me and in a few moments, the guy is on the opposite side of the cab, turning the engine and lights on.

Before he hops out, he looks at me. “I’ll be right back.”

I nod slowly. He leaves and closes the door after him. I pick at my nails, trying to distract myself, but it doesn’t work. I turn on the radio and flick through a few channels before I find a station that’s decent. A few songs on the radio pass as I wait for the driver. I’m startled when the door opens and he hops in. He turns off the lights as he pulls out of the parking lot and gets onto the country road. He doesn’t speak for the entire drive, which is equally awkward and relaxing. Part of me wants him to say something, but there’s another part of me that just wants to wallow in self pity. The tears fall at a constant pace and don’t seem to be letting up anytime soon. I hide the sobs by biting my lower lip. I look out the window so the guy next to me doesn’t have to see my vulnerability. I sniffle and feel his eyes on me. I try to focus on the radio playing, but as I listen to the heartbroken lyrics, I can only think about my situation.

The chauffeur pulls into a driveway and we stop in front of a two-story house. He kills the engine and unlocks the truck. I stare at the pale yellow home that’s lit up by a few porch lights.

“You’ll have your own space and I promise I’m not going to try anything.”

I look at my hands in my lap. My fingers lightly bleed around the nail bed because I picked them too much. I swallow, but don’t respond to his statement.

“I’ll show you in.” He gets out and I slowly do the same. I follow him into the house and as soon as he turns on the lights, a litter of golden retriever puppies run out from a hidden spot. They scatter around their owner’s feet before some of them come and hesitantly sniff mine. I’m taken back from the sudden commotion for a moment before I crouch down and pet them.

“Is this how you get girls in your bed?” I meet his gaze as I stand, picking up one of the tiny puppies. I feel an authentic smile spread on my face. The puppy licks my face and I immediately feel the love and comfort from him or her. It makes my heart squeeze. I pet the soft fur and snuggle the tiny animal close.

“I’m not like him. This is me just being a normal human being. The dogs are just a perk.”

I roll my eyes, but there’s a light smile at his sarcasm.

“I’ll show you the spare bedroom.”

I set the puppy down and follow him up the stairs. I turn to look at the puppies who are gazing longingly up at me. Another small smile appears. I focus my attention on the stairs before I fall. The guy opens a door to a clean spare bedroom.

“There's a bathroom attached where you can take a long, hot shower. Everything you need is in there. I'll leave some spare clothes on the bed for you. If you need anything, I'll be downstairs.” He gives me a smile and I nod. He leaves the room and closes the door behind him. I go into the bathroom, desperate for a hot shower to attempt to ease the pain. I look in the mirror, examining myself. I don't even recognize the reflection. It's the shell of a girl who I used to know, but there's a disconnect. My mascara is smudged. My hair is messy and unflattering. My face is completely drained, highlighting how sad and tired I am. Tears slip once again and I feel ashamed of what happened tonight.

I could have prevented the situation, if I didn't drink so much. I thought my buzz was wearing off and my filters were coming back. I guess I was more drunk than I thought. I came into the bar to clear my head from a breakup, but then got involved with a guy. I was supposed to have a relaxed night while being a little tipsy and I only got the latter.

I get undressed and turn on the shower. I stand under the hot water, letting my muscles relax, but it doesn't bother helping my emotions. If anything, it makes it easier to cry. I sit on the floor, my knees weak. The soothing sound begins to ease the hammer banging on the inside of my brain. I hug my knees and hang my head as I continue to sob. My tears mix with the streaming water. My heart hurts and I know I should actually wash my body, but I don't even have the energy to do so. I want to sit in this hot shower until I die.

A knock at the door startles me.

“Camile?” A deep voice begins on the other side of the door.

“Hm?” I whimper. I do my best to pull myself together emotionally.

“I just wanted to check on you. You've been in here for almost an hour. I was getting worried.”

I don't respond.

“I brought you some clothes.”

I don't respond again.

There's another knock at the door, but he keeps it closed. “Camile? Do you need help?”

“No.”

“I’m here if you need me. I left some clothes on the bed for you.”

I’m so deep in my thoughts that I don’t register his words. I continue to sit still in the tub, not wanting to move.

Another knock at the door startles me before it opens. “Camile?”

“Hm?” I blink my eyes, confused for a moment as my mind is foggy. I see a male shadow through the shower curtain.

“You’ve been in here for over an hour.”

I sit up from my previous fetal position. I rub my eyes and pull myself up with the handle bar on the wall. My knees are stiff and are going through the motions out of habit. My body is heavy and my mind is sleepy. I turned the cold water off.

“Here’s a towel.” The tenant snakes his hand through the edge of the shower curtain, holding a dark green towel. I take it and dry myself lazily. I wrap it around myself before slowly opening the shower curtain. I meet the acquaintance’s eyes for a split second then look away. Worry is written blatantly across his face and it makes me feel guilty. I feel as if I’m intruding on his life.

I step over the tub’s ridge, but as my foot touches the cold tile, I feel myself starting to fall. The homeowner quickly catches me, holding my hips. My hands instinctively go to his biceps. My heart skips a beat and a chill pricks my skin. I’m not sure if it’s from the misstep, the foreigner’s hands, my hands on him, the cold air, or the fact that my towel fell. I quickly regain my balance before I snatch the towel and cover myself, pretending nothing happened.

A few moments of silence pass. I look from the floor to his face as I hold onto the towel for dear life.

“You’re cold,” he points out.

I stay silent.

“I brought you clothes,” he says and leaves the bathroom for a split second. He comes back in with a pile of clothes. “They’re all clean. I brought a variety. I didn’t know what you typically sleep in and I wanted you to be comfortable.” He sets the pile on the counter and scratches the back of his neck, trying to think of something to say.

The golden-retriever-lover remembers something and opens a cabinet. He sets a new toothbrush and toothpaste tube on the counter. “Are you hungry?”

I shake my head.

“I’ll let you get ready for bed.” He leaves the bathroom and closes the door behind him. Before I file through the folded clothes, I wrap the towel around wet hair to create a turban. The caregiver brought me sweatpants, boxers, a t-shirt, tall socks, and a sweatshirt. I’m absolutely freezing and put them all on. I now feel warm and cozy.

I look at myself in the mirror. I still feel broken, but I look much better. I brush my teeth before exiting the bathroom. I turn on the lamp that’s on the bedside table then climb into bed. I just lay there for a few minutes, staring at the ceiling.

There’s a knock at the door.

“Come in.”

The babysitter comes in, holding a large blanket. “I brought you another blanket. This is the softest one I have.” He smiles softly and comes to the side of the bed. “Is it okay if I cover you up?”

I nod and he carefully lays the fabric over me. Part of it touches my cheek and I agree, it’s extremely soft, similar to the golden retriever’s fur.

“Do you need anything?”

I shake my head.

“I’m right across the hall if you need anything; don’t hesitate to ask.”

My eyes flick to his and I nod, acknowledging his concern.

“I promise things will get better, Camile. What he did to you isn’t your fault. He’s just a sorry excuse for a human, let alone a man.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and blink away the tears as I nod at his affirmation. “I’ll let you be.” He gives me a sad smile. “I’m right across the hall if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

He nods and turns to leave when I stop him.

“How do you know my name?”

He turns around. “It was on your credit card you gave me for your tab.”

I nod.

“I’m Quinn.”

No one speaks for a moment.

“I figured you would want to know.”

I force a smile then he quietly leaves the room and I slowly doze off. I do my best to think of anything, but tonight's events. It's nearly impossible, but my brain and body are so exhausted that slipping into an alternate reality is easier than I thought.

"Camile!" The man taunts as he runs after me. I run as fast as my legs can carry me. I round the corner to my room and slam the door behind me. I don't want to waste any time locking it and he would break the lock anyways. I slide under my bed. I try to slow my breathing so I'm quiet, but it makes the burning in my lungs worsen.

"Where are you, little girl?"

*Please don't find me. Just leave me alone.*

The man is quiet for a moment, but I can hear him walking around the room. He stops and I feel something around my legs. I kick and scream as hard as I can, but it fails. He pulls me from under the bed and I feel the burn from the carpet across my arms. I continue kicking and screaming at him.

I shoot up and I feel like I was transported to a different dimension. I'm in a dark bedroom, alone. There's no man pulling me. I'm in a bed, not on the floor.

My breathing is labored and feel like I just ran a marathon in milliseconds. Instead of the pounding in my head from earlier, there's a pounding in my chest. I feel something tickle my cheek and as I touch my cheek, I acknowledge that there are tears running down my face. The door to my temporary bedroom opens and a guy runs in. He sees me sitting up and slows his pace. "Camile." He comes to my side and flips the lamp's switch on. "Hey, shh. You're okay. It's just a dream."

I look over at Quinn, who's standing to my right. He moves hair away from my face. His eyes speak the truth, he's concerned. I look at his bare, muscular chest for a second before closing my eyes and slowing my breaths.

"Can I put your hair up?"

I stare at him with confusion written all over my face.

"You're dripping in sweat."

I hand him the hair tie from my wrist and turn so my back is facing him. Quinn starts threading his fingers through my hair. I expect him to throw a shitty ponytail on the top of my head but does a simple braid from the nape of my neck. I feel him step away and I turn to my original position.



“You’re safe, I promise.”

I let the words sink and attempt to relieve my anxiety. Quinn goes into the bathroom then comes back with a washcloth and gently presses the cold cloth to my forehead. I close my eyes, my breathing and heart rate coming back to a normal pace and my temperature beginning to decrease.

“Do you want some water? Or a snack?”

“Water.”

“I’ll be right back.”

He places the washcloth on the bed and leaves the room. I take off the borrowed socks, sweatshirt, and sweatpants, already feeling ten degrees cooler after the extra clothes are gone. I look at the clock on my phone and it's almost five in the morning. I’ve only been sleeping for less than two hours.

Quinn comes back a few minutes later with a glass of water. “Here.”

I take the water from him and down half of it then set it on the nightstand.

“How are you feeling?”

“A little better,” I lay back and stare at the ceiling. “I’m sorry if I woke you up.”

“It’s not a problem, Camile.” Quinn goes into the bathroom to return the washcloth then sits against the wall, about ten feet away from me. Minutes of peaceful silence pass, but the slightly awkward tension is thick.

“I’m scared to close my eyes,” I whisper, and my voice cracks.

“You’re perfectly safe.”

I look over at him. “I’m afraid that when I close my eyes, I’m not going to have any control.”

He gives me a questioning look and I don’t really want to explain myself any further so I look back at the ceiling. I already feel too vulnerable. From getting assaulted to the nightmare, I feel naked.

“I can sleep in here tonight, if that makes you feel better.”

It catches me off guard and I snap my head in his direction.

He puts his hands up in surrender. “I’ll sleep on the floor. I just thought I would offer, if you didn’t want to be completely alone. It's entirely up to you.”

I don’t respond, but continue to stare at him in shock.

“Or I can bring in a puppy or two.”

I blink then nod after a few silent moments.

He leaves the room, fulfilling my request. I pull the covers over my body and wait for my furry friend.

“This is Doggy One.”

I give him a questioning look as I take the small animal.

“My niece named every single puppy ‘Doggy.’”

“You don't name them?”

“I didn't want to get too attached if I were to give them away.”

I smile as the small animals snuggle against my chest. As I admire the little ball of fur, I notice Quinn come back into the room. I was too enthralled with the furball to notice he disappeared for a moment. Quinn has a pillow and a blanket. He makes himself a little bed against the wall, about ten feet away from me, and lays down.

I look back at the little creature and it's already fast asleep, making me just as exhausted.

There's several minutes of silence, except for the yawns that Quinn and I both share.

I can tell that Quinn doesn't really know what to say. He definitely feels inclined to say something, but is unsure as to what.

I decide to spare his thoughts. “Can you sing?” I look over at him for a second before returning my attention back to my newest friend.

Quinn's taken back from my question and answers hesitantly. “Uh, yeah.”

“I don't care if you're good. It just helps me sleep. It was something my dad did when I was little.”

He nods. Silence settles as Quinn thinks of a song. He starts and I listen intently to the unfamiliar lyrics before he repeats the song and I fall into a comfortable sleep.

## Devin C'ne

“Devin brought a wide variety of work in this semester, and it was great seeing her strength in her writing abilities in different contexts. Every session was enjoyable as we spent time looking at her work and having great conversations. We always seemed to end up having a few laughs every session and it was great to see what work she brought in each week because I could count on enjoying it. We spent several sessions working on a fiction piece with a set of very fascinating characters, a few essays we still managed to have fun working through, and some excellent poems. Devin has the ability to excel at a wide variety of writing styles and types and it was wonderful working with her all semester and seeing that.”

- Emily Stanislawski

### Rivalry

Eden never knew she could feel so far away from her brother although she was only standing a few feet away from him. The door to his bedroom felt like an impenetrable barrier. Even if opened, Eden was sure her brother would stand right in the entrance, never letting her enter into his safe space. They've lived in this house all their lives and the last time Eden was inside his room was when they were six, playing with all the new toys they opened on Christmas. The Christmas after that, Eden only saw her brother at church, in the living room when their parents forced him to open gifts; and that was it.

*What on earth happened?*

Eden remembered how close her and her brother were as children, and from what she could remember, he ignored her for the first time on that Christmas and every moment afterward. The only times they spoke now were at family mandated dinners, at school (if they were required to interact) ... and that was it. But this weekend, their parents were on some trip up in the mountains with their booster club friends, leaving Eden and her brother to spend two weeks alone. And now Eden was questioning every aspect of their relationship when all she had to do was ask her brother what he wanted for dinner from Domino's.

Eden sighed, gulping right after as she finally finished gathering the courage to knock lightly on the dark oak door. “Hux?” Eden called out, her voice just as quiet as her knock. There wasn't any response. Eden could hear some muffled music through the door; she had great hearing, while her brother's hearing was worrisome; no doubt from the music he blasted in his headphones, which Eden suspected was happening right now. “Hux?” Eden yelled, pounding louder on the door. “Hey, I need your dinner order for takeout! Can you – “.

The door suddenly swung open. Eden was greeted by her brother, who was in fact wearing his wireless headphones around his neck. He looked like he hasn't slept in a while; his dark brown hair was wild, bags under his eyes that made his brown eyes only seem darker, and a rather sleep deprived, or possibly just annoyed, expression on his face.

"What are you yelling about?" Hux asked. His voice was hoarse.

"Uhm... dinner," Eden muttered out, recovering from her brother's rather blunt response. "I need to know what you want for dinner. I was going to order Dominos? Unless maybe you want something else?"

Hux blinked, looking down at his sister due to their six inch height difference. "We have the same taste pallet. I eat all the same things as you. Isn't that how the whole twin thing works?"

Eden narrowed her eyes. "No, I don't think so. There's a lot of things I like that you don't."

"Like what?" Hux asked.

Eden couldn't think of anything. The two of them did have the same taste pallet. She didn't think it was because of them being twins as much as a coincidence, but she didn't want to start an argument. She kept her mouth shut. "So... do you just want a pepperoni pizza and maybe some cinnamon sticks?"

"Add some pineapple on the pizza and it's good," Hux mumbled with a nod. Eden was about to agree that pineapples sounded good, but Hux opened his mouth before she got the chance, already starting to put his headphones back on. "Text me when it's here. I'm in the middle a game, so I probably won't come out until after you're done."

"Wait!" Eden interjected, taking a step across the threshold of her brother's doorway, which made him give Eden a questioning look. "I thought maybe we could eat together? Or...". Her train of thought died out, becoming silent as her nose scrunched up. *Something stunk*. "Is that... are you smoking weed?"

"Oh, chill. What are you going to do? *Call the police?*" Huxley teased with a roll of his eyes.

"Hux, if mom and dad knew you were smoking, they'd kick you out of the house—

"Which is exactly why I'm smoking when they're not in the house, *Eden*," Hux

whispered to her. “Unless, you are planning on calling Lisa and George to tell them I am smoking the *devil’s lettuce*?” He said in a joking tone.

“I know you don’t like them but you still have to be respectful to them. They are *mom* and *dad*,” Eden stressed. “And I’m not going to call them. I just... I hate the smell. Why are you smoking it anyway? It’s not legal here. You could get in trouble and— “

“Eden, why are you questioning everything right now? I’m just trying to do my thing, and you’re kind of intruding,” Hux stated. He seemed annoyed. Eden was really pressing her luck. But she found herself unable to stop.

“I wanted to have dinner with my brother,” Eden spoke quietly after a few minutes of silence. She wasn’t looking into her brother’s eyes when she said this, but rather focused on the Nike logo on his shirt. After Eden spoke, Hux scoffed, nearly laughing. This made her eyebrows furrow, finally lifting her head to look at him. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not your brother, Eden,” Hux said in a surprisingly soft tone. “By blood, sure. But you stopped being someone I called my sister a very long time ago. I don’t hate you, but I don’t like you, either. This can’t be surprising to you though, right? I mean, we barely talk. We don’t get along. When we do talk, we fight, just like right now. And they’re not just *little sibling fights* – they’re real ones. We don’t need a sibling dinner date. It’s not going to fix anything, and that’s fine. Just text me when it’s here and I’ll eat in my room.”

Hux moved to quickly swing his door closed, but Eden stuck her arm out to stop it. Thanks to her many years in dance, she had the ability to stop her brother’s strength decently enough. Hux’s eyes suddenly narrowed, his demeanor switching from an annoyed brother trying to have alone time to a presence that was more threatening. “Eden. *Move*.”

“No,” Eden spat, a tone uncommon for her. “What is *wrong* with you? I try so hard to involve you. Invite you to football games, offer you rides in my car, invite you to parties, buy you stuff – I am doing *everything* I possibly can and you are not even attempting to meet me halfway! How selfish are you that you don’t even want to try and connect with the person you literally grew in the same womb with!” It was an odd thing to say, sure, but she meant it – how could someone hate their own twin? Especially when she hadn’t done anything! “And you’re always so rude to mom and dad. Not even rude, you’re *mean*. Like do you get off on being a dick?”

“Eden, the fact I grew in the same womb as you is *exactly* why I don’t like you,” Hux suddenly hissed, taking a step closer to his sister. He bent down so his face was closer to her, looking her dead in the eye. “Do you know how much it sucks being related to you? How much is sucks being your *younger* brother?”

“We used to be so close, Hux.”

“Oh, so now you want to go ahead and quote *frozen* at me?” Hux spat. “Eden, I can’t explain it any simpler than *I don’t like you*. If it’s any consolation I like you more than our parents.”

“What on earth did I ever do to you?” Eden yelled suddenly, her voice strained. She wasn’t going to cry. Not when she hadn’t done anything wrong. “I don’t know what I did. We got along so well as kids. We had so much fun. And all I remember is one day you...stopped trying. Can you at least tell me what I did? So, I can try to fix it?”

“It’s not something you can fix, Eden,” Hux mumbled, straightening back up as he started to retreat back into his room. It was obvious he just wanted to leave the conversation, but Eden wasn’t ready to let him leave so easily.

“Please. Hux... Huxley, *please*,” Eden stressed. Her voice cracked. She hated appearing desperate and emotional. Both her and Huxley were raised under the mantra that showing emotion made them weak. Every time they cried as kids, they were given some sort of punishment. Huxley hated their parents for that, but Eden was made to believe it was one of the many reasons she was so accomplished. However, without the threat of her parents hearing her cry, Eden didn’t try to hide the tear that fell from her eye. “Just tell me what I can do to fix this. Fix us. *What did I do wrong?*”

Huxley looked down at his sister with a blank expression, but Eden swore she almost saw a hint of pain from the way he looked at her. He was silent for a few beats, his brown eyes watching a tear fall from Eden’s bright green eyes; the only notable difference between the two besides gender. She even got the one thing that made her stand out besides her personality; Huxley was stuck being a side character in his sisters’ story, and every sign about him and the people in his life proved that when comparing him to his sister he would always be obsolete. He slowly reached his hand out near Eden’s face. And, for the first time in years, he touched her. His finger gently brushed against her cheek, picking up the falling tear and brushing away the wet

streak it left behind. As his hand fell back to his side, Huxley gave his sister a small smile before it disappeared.

**“You were born,”** Huxley told her in a blank tone, slowly nodding his head with his words. “Just like I said, you can’t fix that.”

Eden stared at her brother in complete silence, almost not believing the words that left his lips. *He had to be joking, right?* There was no way her brother... her twin brother wished she had never been born in the first place at all. She just started to open her lips to ask if he did mean what he said, but Huxley cut her off.

“So, just text me when the pizza is here, yeah? I’ll eat in my room,” Hux stated with a small nod. He placed his hand on the edge of the door, stepping back inside of his room. “And don’t call me Huxley. You know I hate that.”

The door closed in Eden’s face, leaving the girl staring straight at the door once again. It was funny – a few minutes ago she was in this exact same position with a feeling of hope in her chest, and now she felt like her heart had been torn out and destroyed. This felt like her first heartbreak. Wasn’t she supposed to get this feeling from a below average boyfriend and not her own brother? Who knew familial heart breaks were a thing too. The girl sniffed once, rubbing her hand underneath her eye to get rid of the tear residue her brother missed. Then, her hand went to her pocket, pulling out her smart phone, tapping the screen a few times, and then raising the phone to her ear. There were a few rings before someone on the other end picked up, then stopped speaking so Eden could reply.

“Yeah, I need to place an order for delivery? A large pepperoni pizza... half of it with pineapples please.”

## The Waiting Game

The young boy sat in the cold room watching the game show on the small tv. Waiting rooms weren't fun, especially under the circumstances the child was in. He was waiting for the doctor to tell him if his parents survived their car accident. He sat next to his grandmother who held onto a rosary, praying over and over again. He never understood praying. He thought it made people seem desperate; his grandmother was no exception.

The doctor eventually came out an hour later, stepping in front of the boy's view of the game show he was watching. He had zoned out. Now brought back to reality since he couldn't watch the tv anymore, all he heard was his grandmother screaming and crying while she held onto the rosary. That was loud—and annoying. The female doctor squatted down to look the boy in the eye.

She repeated what she said to his grandmother now that he was paying attention. “We tried everything we could, but your parents were hurt very badly. I'm sorry, they're gone.”

The boy blinked, disinterested. “Does this mean I don't have to go home anymore?” he asked.

The doctor blinked, shaking her head *no* in response.

The boy smiled softly at this. “Can you move now? I want to see who wins the game.”



# Alyssa Bronk

“Alyssa Bronk’s writing is truly magical. She has a vivid imagination and the exceptional ability to translate her ideas into writing. Fantasy readers will fall in love with her charming characters, incredible imagery, and suspenseful plots. I am especially impressed with Alyssa’s drive; she approaches writing with a growth mindset, always motivated to improve her writing and create something remarkable. I am so proud of Alyssa for publishing in *Wordplay*, and I am thrilled that readers have the opportunity to experience her magic.”

- Sara Kalkhoff

Content Warning: Suicide

## a demon and a fairytale

[ *If only this was a fairytale, one with a happy end -*

It was supposed to be an easy meal, the sweetest of treats to a demon like her. Catherine had a bad habit of playing with her food, watching them steep in their depression and sexual frustration. The longer she played with them and let them stew, the more her mouth salivated to get a taste in the end. *She* somehow become an exception. Could demons even feel pity? Or sympathize with their meals? Humans were merely food, it’s as it’s always been and nothing more. Yet, Navi was just....different. She was someone who lived in that darkness for so long and was so *passive* to the way life wrung her through. It’s a laugh to think Catherine saw a reflection of her old self in the detective, but nothing was farther from the truth. The first part of their lives was learning a cruel lesson. Watching as men take things, break things over and over again and knowing their place in this system is not one to defy it. Upon their first meeting, Catherine only thought of her as a sweet meal. Something to play with and devour at the end. Yet, something in the demon’s mind changed this notion. Sadly, it was only when she pushed Navi far enough to *break* did she realize.

Navi held the barrel to her temple, the pressure shaking with her unsteady hands. She watched Catherine’s amber eyes melt in desperation, funny that emotion surfaced on the demon’s face.

“You know what’s funny-” Navi’s voice cracked with fear like loose gravel, but her words were firm with conviction. “No matter what choices I made, this was *always* the end for me.”

Her hollow laugh bubbled into drunken hiccups. “Nothing’s changed, within the unit, with your lies, or with *her*.”

Catherine bit her ruby stained lips, she didn’t want this. “Please, sweetie...think this through, you’re not in the right mind-”

“Oh, I don’t care about that anymore,” The demon’s words steadied Navi’s hand as she pushed harder into her skull. The barrel leaving an imprint into the skin as a final mark. A grin split open across the women’s face, “She was right all along-”

Catherine’s hands shot out to grab her friend’s, but all in vain as they passed through Navi’s solid form. Her words pierced hard like the bullet going through her skull,

“I’ve always been cursed!”

The rain grew loud for a moment, opening up to release then silencing for the loss. An inky black oozed from the pair of lips, fading in color. It pooled around the floorboards of the crumbling apartment and began to solidify into a familiar shape. A pair of holes sunk into the blob as a thin white liquid leaked from them. If you were to look closely enough, it was as if it was mourning the loss of a friend.

*- Sadly, this is a story, and all stories have tragedies in them]*

she has stars in Her eyes

Do you remember the river of light hidden in the pitch black? We can see it when we close our second eyelid. When the darkness swallows all light and the ground feels like it's given out beneath our feet. If you look down, you'll see it. Or at least, this is what Kaia tells me.

I walked along the beaten path of the forest where she loved playing. The mossy grass beneath my bare feet was heaven till they scraped against the massive tree roots I climbed over. Cicadas hummed to the summer heat, their song much easier to hear this far into the woods. Everywhere you looked in this forest, a deep green flourished with such an intensity, hence why we named this place after the precious emerald stone. You could easily get lost if you weren't careful, patches in the distance blurring together with their similar hues. Just as I was nearing our spot, I came across a decaying tree that had collapsed and blocked my path. The mighty girth of its trunk towered over my small body, denying me from going any further. With a huff, I pulled the straps of my sack tighter to my body and reached my hands high above for a branch. The tree groaned from my weight as I pulled myself up and over. My knees scraped against the crumbling bark. A cool pad of moss met me at the very top and my feet dangled from the edge as I guided my body to the dewy ground below, brushing off the stray pieces of dirt and tree from my clothing. The thought of going to see Kaia pulled my feet ahead with a little jump to my steps.

I finally reached our spot and pushed past the dense thicket, I saw Kaia sitting with her back turned and shoulders slumped forward. Her legs tucked firmly under her thighs. Sunlight streamed through the small clearing, making the green flora surrounding us glow. As I moved closer, her head shot straight up and hesitated just for a moment till she wildly spun towards me. Stubby cut locks of milky white hair framed the wide grin she held and a gentle voice filled my ear, "Nico!" Dainty hands pushed herself off the ground and she stumbled towards where I patiently stood.

"Nico, Nico!" Kaia's small hands patted their way around her front as she took small steps forward. She bumped into my chest with a small grunt and I reached to steady her. Kaia grasped at my arms and gently wove her tanned hands to my chest. Another grin split across her cheeks as she spoke, "You came back!"

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be gone for so long.” I went to guide Kaia down to sit but she pushed me away with a shake of her head, plopping back down onto her legs. “Everything’s fine, you’ve been busy right? With the shrine and imaginary demons,” The small girl waved her hands around with the word ‘imaginary.’

“Hey! Yōkai exist!” I untied the sack from my body and dropped it with a thud.

“Yeah sure,” Kaia waved her hand dismissively, “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Even if it was useless, I still glared at her. She was quiet for a moment till a laugh bubbled from her chest. It continued into a fit of giggles and I joined in her laughter. Her voice died down and Kaia shook her head. Slowly opening her eyes that blankly stared on forward. Everyone said they were dull or lifeless, like obsidian pools of black and blue all cased in a murky gray shell. But to me, they held the starry sky within them.

It’s a known fact amongst the villagers, Kaia is cursed. Her mother knew it from the moment she gave birth, and at the moment when she took her life. We are a village of exorcists and shinto priests. And like our job entails, they needed to cure Kaia of her curse. She was passed along like a disease from priest to priest who all tried to purify their patient. At long last Kaia became fed up and ran away to the solitude of the forest, which happened to be behind the shrine my family tended to. I kept her secret from my parents as they would have just sent her to another person who claimed they could fix her. It wasn’t all that hard since she spent all day in the forest. Our hidden spot was just outside the land next to an old shed, the lush bushes and trees were thick enough to hid ourselves from the rest of the world and the threat of yokai ruling over the forest keep any prying eyes away. This was our little safe haven.

“Nico!” Small tan hands tapped my arm, drawing my gaze to their owner, “Remember when I told you about the things I see when I close my second eyelid? The river of light beneath our feet? There’s so many of them in there! They fill up the entire river!” The young girl bounced on her legs. My lips pulled at the mention of them. I heard of them from a passing stranger, the purest of lifeforms, Mushi. At first, Kaia said she could see them only when her second eyelid was closed. Then after a while, she could see them everywhere. They acted like a guide to her, outlining different forms of life like a halo in her dark world.

“Kaia, I told you.”

“You don’t get it Nico! These aren’t your stupid Yōkai or whatever, they help me!”

“We shouldn’t mess with things we can’t understand Kaia!” I didn’t realize how harsh my voice got. Kaia flicked her head away with a pout pulled across her lips, her hands balled the loose fabric of the clothing resting in her lap. A weight settled in my chest for a moment but I pushed it down. Reaching between the folds of my sack, I pulled out a small box and unsealed the lid.

“I added an extra plum for you!” I brushed the small rice ball under her nose. The rice was still warm and sticky with a crackle from the seaweed wrap. The young girl’s nose twitched and she shifted back to face me. Cool dainty fingers brushed against mine and plucked the snack from my hold. After the first few bites, Kaia held a warm smile. I pulled another from the box and happily ate with her. We stayed in the forest till the sky tinted purple, and I snuck her back to the shed.

I awoke to a dreaded feeling coursing through my body that night. A feeling that was off clung to my body like sweat and made it hard to breathe. When Kaia wasn’t in her spot, I immediately ran to the forest. The humid summer night winds brushed against me as I looked for my friend. It was like she had completely disappeared. Once I reached more of the paths, the moon’s seductive glow illuminated the emerald forest with a blue light, making it much easier to navigate through the inky blackness. The further I went in, the more I noticed how strange they were acting. Mushi of various shapes and sizes clambered over the massive trees and between the stems of plants. Somehow, I figured following them would lead me to her.

A chorus of voices filled the air, all so light and sweet like the rain. From behind a tree root I could see towering beings sway one after another in a line. The Mushi had taken a human shape with robes of white and a thin sheet of cloth tied around their head to hide their faces. Soft blue light illuminated at their feet and carved a path as glowing plant life and fungi guided them through the night. The sweet voices grew in strength as they continued their somber song. Amongst the swaying beings something stuck out. A tiny girl with white hair and a grass stained dress, staring blankly ahead with her hands woven around the pure white robes of the Mushi. My mind screamed at me to grab Kaia and run as far as possible but I couldn’t move. My feet felt like they were filled with lead and my mouth rusted shut as I watched the Mushi simply walk away with her.

The line of Mushi all gathered around the clearing as I hid behind the tree line. The one guiding Kaia brought her to the center. Their song was steadily becoming louder and the voices

grew heavy with the tones they sung in. The Mushi in the middle turned to face Kaia and dragged its hand under her chin, lifting it gently to the starry sky clear above. I followed with my gaze and my eyes widened in horror at the sight. The moon was melting. Small glowing droplets dripped from the heavens and fell into the raised palm of the Mushi. The drops pooled and overflowed straight into Kaia's murky eyes. Some splattered across her tan cheeks and over the bridge of her nose. The song grew louder, stronger, and the moon continued to melt. Finally, my foot shifted, rustling the grass and I could move.

Pushing out from the trees, I knocked into some of the Mushi as they fell apart into their tiny abstract forms.

"Get away from her!" Tripping a bit through the fading light, I finally made my way over to a startled Kaia. The Mushi had since faded back into the forest with only the remaining light from the now full moon.

"Kaia! Kaia, are you alright?" My hands latched onto her shoulders, as if she'd disappear the moment I let go. She stood still and rubbed at her eyes. I began to wipe her face of the moon droplets, but the tiny white splatters stained her cheeks. Like constellations in the sky.

"Ni-co? Nico!" Her eyes began to open and my breath was stolen right from my lungs. Kaia's eyes glowed like the moon against the black sky. So bright and blue, so alive.

Kaia traced around my eyes, her finger tips ran over my cheeks and down my chin. I told her about every color she could find on my body. I've never seen her smile like that, my heart tapped against each rib bone. To say she was happy would be an understatement, Kaia had stars in her eyes.

"This is so amazing Nico!" She spun and danced around the clearing. Her arms stretched out wide, giggling all the way, tripping to the ground only to jump right back up and pick up where she left off. Out of breath, she faced me from the other edge of the clearing. Choppy and messy white locks framed those stunning glowing eyes. They were as blue as the moonlight illuminating her form. Her dress was out of place but a grin split across her tan cheeks speckled like the stars in the sky.

A short laugh puffed past her lips, "This is....painful," her grin flatlined and pulled downward, glassy tears spurted from her eyes, "Nico...it hurts."

Kaia's hands balled at her eyes, pushing into her sockets as a painful cry ripped from her throat. I was at her side in seconds. My hands grabbed at hers, trying to pull away to see what

was causing her this much pain, yet she kept them clamped to her face. Another painful yell flew past her lips. Solid white streaks leaked between her knuckles. It pooled from her palms and down her wrists in little plops, then glowing streaks of blue. My heart dropped to my stomach and I could feel it being eaten away. Kaia continued to sob out in pain as she slowly brought her hands away from her face, but I pushed them back. My spine crawled as one of my fingers slipped into her empty socket.

“Nico...I can't see, I can't...” I could hear her heart breaking with every syllable. I felt like I should have said something, but what? I reached for the end of my shirt, Kaia flinched at the harsh ripping of fabric. I removed her hands from her face and wound the strip of cloth around her head a few times before securing it tightly. My fingers lingered across her speckled cheeks.

“I'm so sorry Kaia.” Finally, I found my voice. Kaia trembled from my words. She collapsed into me, her milky white hair brushing against my chin. Even with no eyes, she could still weep.

# T. A. De Guelle

“I am very glad that I got to work with T.A. throughout the course of this semester. This semester, T.A. wanted to step out of their comfort zone in terms of what they write. T.A. did an excellent job of doing just that and brought in great pieces of writing to every session. It was amazing to see how T.A.’s writing progressed throughout the semester - I was always intrigued to find out what was going to happen in the next section that was written and enjoyed everything that T.A. brought in. Overall, I am happy that I got to work with T.A. throughout the semester and that I got to see how T.A. grew as a writer.”

- Rhiley Block

## Metahumans

Led by a guard into a stereotypical asylum, I was surprised at the interior. The walls were painted multiple colors like a modern gallery, and plushy chairs that you’d sink into and struggle to get out of dotted the room. A staff member led me past the receptionist desk as the secretary offered a cheery welcome. We walked down a hallway that was adorned with those “inspirational” posters which had one large word along with some random landscape picture.

I can’t think of a single person who has actually read what each one said or even felt motivated from them. They are kind of nice to look at, though.

Eventually we arrived at what appeared to be a library and study area. One of the walls was completely made up of windows that overlooked a sprawling hillside. An upper balcony circled overhead and contained more bookshelves and a fierce-looking woman with raven black hair who stared me down. I quickly looked away and instead focused on the two other people in the room. One was lounging on a sofa, bouncing their knee, and fidgeting their hands. They had a skinny build with unkempt long dirty blond hair that looked more dirty than blond. The other person was staring out the window before turning to look at me. He had a tallish frame with lightly tan skin, brown curly hair that laced the top of his head, grey focused eyes that had a hint of softness to them, muscles that—

I’ve been staring at him without saying anything this entire time, haven’t I?

“Hi,” I squeaked out as I flopped my hand into a wave at him. He smiled back and returned the wave. *Wow, that’s a really nice smile.*

“Matron Goddard will be with you all shortly,” stated the staff member as they left the room, closing the door behind them.

“About damn time,” Balcony Woman declared.



“Have somewhere to be?” asked Sofa Person.

The woman huffed as she turned away from the railing and walked down the spiral staircase. “I was the first one here, and apparently I was waiting for you all to show up.”

“Well sorry we couldn’t get here faster, your *highness*,” teased the person. They looked around at the rest of us before saying, “Might as well get to know each other. I’m Harmony.”

“That’s your name?” asked the woman.

“Yup. I came up with it myself. You got a better one?”

“That’s not—” the woman sighed, “Never mind. It’s Johanna.”

Window Guy piped up: “My name’s Harvey.” *His voice is so smooth.*

They all looked at me for a moment before I realized why. “Oh, I’m Eliot.”

Harvey smiled again. “Nice to meet you Eliot.”

“Likewise...” I trailed off as I felt my face start to redden a little.

“So! What can you all do?” Harmony eagerly asked. “You know, your *superpowers* or whatever you call them.”

“I honestly don’t know,” Johanna said as she tied her hair into a loose ponytail. “All I know is that these freaky dudes picked me up the day after I was almost beaten up.”

Harmony looked a little surprised. “Oh god, that must’ve been scary.”

“Yeah, the dudes were all like “We’re with the IMP looking for metahumans like yourself. We can offer you a place to stay” and of course I immediately agreed.”

“I meant the fight but that also sounds terrifying,” explained Harmony.

“That whole thing?” Johanna lightly laughed. “Nah, that happens more than you think. And it really wasn’t much of a fight. I felt like I knew where to hit them where it really hurts after I grabbed their baseball bat.”

“They had a baseball bat?!”

“*Had*,” Johanna emphasized. Although opposing from above, she had a bit of eagerness when it came to talking about fighting. “What about the rest of you?”

“Oh-oh. I can go next!” Harmony responded as they bounced out of the sofa and stood up. “Watch—I mean, listen—to this.” They pursed their lips and started to whistle.

It was very clear and sharp until Harmony moved their hands and flicked their fingers like they were playing an instrument. The whistle’s sound changed pitch from high to low in a matter of seconds. Harmony eventually stopped whistling, but the sound persisted. They then

moved their hands again seemingly shaping the sound like it was clay in the air. Another sound was produced from the original tune that created an ethereal harmony that danced above us and floated gently like an invisible musical cloud.

So that's why they named themselves Harmony.

Harmony lowered their hands as the notes faltered away until it was silent again. They were blissful with their eyes closed and bearing a soft smile. "Ta-da!" Harmony shouted as they opened their eyes.

"That was so freaking cool Harmony," said Harvey.

"Thanks, Harv. What about you?"

"I can do something like this," he said as he closed his eyes in concentration. Like a magician in one of those Vegas shows, Harvey started hovering and opened his eyes after achieving flight. He too broke into an enthusiastic smile that almost made me melt into a puddle.

*Pull yourself together Eliot.*

Harvey then reached out and pointed to a pillow on one of the armchairs. It slowly rose and was accompanied by a laugh from Harmony. "You're the really cool one dude!"

Harvey's smile grew wider, and he brought the pillow closer to him. He looked at each of us individually for a second before settling on me. I felt myself get a little flustered before hearing: "Hey Eliot, catch!" Harvey swiped his arm towards me as the pillow soared across the room, targeting its destination.

I suppose that now would be a good time to say that I was never really a sporty person besides track and had the hand-eye coordination of a goldfish. On top of that, I was distracted by Harvey's gaze and didn't realize what he said until the pillow was only a couple feet away. To no one's surprise, it collided directly into my face and made me fall back.

"Shit, I'm sorry Eliot!" Harvey yelled as I stared up at the ceiling, dazed but still noting the intricate detail on the fresco above. Nice. Johanna blocked my view and extended her hand, effortlessly lifting me up and almost giving me a head rush. I stumbled a bit as the world slowly stopped swirling.

"You're good, I'm just not good at catching things," I reassured Harvey.

"Hopefully that didn't hurt your memory, cause you're the last one left."

"Right, about that," I began as the others looked at me curiously. "I don't really have a grasp over my abilities yet. I mean, I could maybe summon a spark or two, but—"

Johanna cut me off. “What do you mean by spark, can you control electricity?”

“Well, not exactly, I—”

Harvey followed suit. “Is it more summoning electricity?”

“Sort of but not really? It’s more like—”

“Oh, so like doing stuff with electronics then.” Harmony added.

“I don’t know!” I yelled a little too loud. “I just do some sparks and that’s it. I’m not strong, I can’t manipulate my surroundings, I can’t move things with my powers; I’m just plain!”

“What’s so plain about being a metahuman?” A voice that reminded me of an old nun came from the balcony. We all quickly looked up at an older, almost elderly woman standing like a mountain over us. She had a dark wooden cane positioned sturdily in front of her traditional formal dress that together made her look like one of those stereotypical old teachers at a religious school. But it all felt like a façade; although appearing elderly, she could probably backflip over the banister or lift one of the sofas over her head with just one hand.

“Matron Goddard,” she stated. “Johanna, Harmony, Harvey, Eliot. Welcome to the Institute for Metahuman Potential.”

Johanna spoke: “So you’re gonna run tests on us and try to cure us?”

Matron Goddard gently smiled. “*Self*-potential, Johanna. We don’t force you to become anything. Our mission is for you to learn how to harness your powers and keep them controlled. I assume you all are aware of how society views metahumans?”

“We’re expected to use our powers as gifts to society like tools,” said Harvey.

“As opposed to being...?”

“Menaces, uncontrollable freaks, dangerous people who can’t be trusted or loved,” Harmony replied.

“Exactly. This is your first lesson: defining our role in society.”

“Why conform to a society that doesn’t appreciate us?” I muttered to myself.

“Repeat what you said to everyone else, Eliot.” Matron Goddard looked at me with her focused grey eyes. Her unchanged facial expression confused me, but I cleared my throat and looked at everyone.

“Um, why should we conform to a society that doesn’t appreciate us and only sees us as exploitable or dangerous?”

“Excellent question. Think to yourselves and ponder what your true role is to society, then.”

We remained silent in thought for a couple seconds. To be honest, I’ve never heard someone defend metahumans passionately save for the usual advocate here and there. Granted it has been only a century since the emergence of metahumans, the reason of which nobody knows, so it’s no surprise people don’t exactly trust us yet. I haven’t been in touch with my parents in years ever since I left home as soon as I turned 18, and I don’t think they would be too accepting either.

I wonder if the others shared a similar sob story, and if it’s just a rite of passage for us metahumans.

Matron Goddard pulled me out of my reflection. “Do you all not have emotions, dreams, or desires? Your meta-nature does not inhibit your humanity. Our goal here is for you to understand, appreciate, and control your abilities, and to not feel ashamed for simply being born different than the rest of humanity.” She finished with a soft warm smile that reminded me of my mother (in a good way, I mean).

Johanna seemed to relax her guard after hearing the affirmations, or at least appeared to have relaxed part of her body. Harvey meanwhile looked like a proud statue and radiated confidence. *This guy is really gonna distract me a lot huh?* Shut up. Back to reality.

“Before we can conduct your lessons, we will conduct a simple series of evaluations to identify your grasp of your abilities,” Matron Goddard continued. “Think of it as like a physical exam or a baseline test. There is no pressure on your performance, so do not stress yourselves.”

I was already stressing myself. I still didn’t know how to summon my abilities, let alone even know what they are. What’s gonna happen, walk up to them and say “Hi my name is Eliot, and this is what I can do” as I barely summon a spark that flashes for only a second? They’re gonna kick me out and tell me that “I’m not ready” and Harvey is going to think I’m boring and we’ll never talk again and I’ll go back to my shitty job and tell my manager “Hey remember when I just left to go learn how to control my powers? Actually, I’m so terrible at using them that they don’t even want me, so can I please have my job back?”

“So um, who’s going first?” I somehow asked in the middle of my panicking hell.

“We’ll simply go in the order of arrival, meaning Johanna will start, followed by Harmony, Harvey, and finally you Eliot,” Matron Goddard answered. “Are you ready, Johanna?”

“Sure, but I don’t exactly have a clue what my powers are.”

Matron Goddard smiled. “That’s the point of the evaluations; we are not the only ones finding a grasp of your powers, you are included as well.”

Thank God.

“You can follow me to the evaluation room since you are ready then. The rest of you will continue to wait here until it is time for your turn. Once everyone is finished, we will debrief and go onwards from there. Any questions?”

“Will these tests hurt?” Harmony asked.

Matron Goddard chuckled a little. “No, no, they will not be excruciating. We go at your comfort level.”

Satisfied with their answer, Harmony responded, “Awesome, let’s get these tests rolling!” They finished their answer with their usual broad smile. The rest of us nodded in unison.

“Wonderful. Come along, Johanna. Let us discover your true potential.”

# Hailey Fuller

“Hailey was a joy to work with. I am so proud of all the work she’s put into this story. Her creativity and willingness to analyze her writing made each session productive and so much fun. I can not wait to see where her writing will take her in the future.”

- Maggie Broeren

## Untitled

### Aftermath of the Storm

The streets of London have grown colder this year compared to last. Perhaps it is the ever-changing seasons of summer to fall. Or it may be the fact that I have just lost my career. I have always believed that if I were to lose something it would be my mind. Being a poet and all, that is simply expected. However, in my 25 years of being a poet, I did not see this coming. I continue to ponder what has just happened while I carefully avoid puddles along the sidewalk. Maneuvering between each one, as if my worn-out shoes would be drastically affected by a little water. In fact, it might have even done them some good to be washed in the puddle.

The puddles continue to be an obstacle as I wander the streets. My mangled hat attempts to escape my head in the gust of wind. ‘Not so fast, if I can’t escape my head, neither can you.’ While I wander, I wonder what I would be doing at this moment in time if I had not ruined my shot. My golden opportunity to finally make something of myself. I can hear a faint, disappointed voice in my brain,

“My baby boy, you have so much potential! Make something of yourself! Something **other** than a poet.” Shut up. Shut up. Didn’t I get enough of this at home? I hear the nagging increase when another harsher voice lurks in,

“You are **lousy** Brennan! You **never** meet the deadlines I have for you and never have work to show! How am I supposed to keep you on if you never produce work for me to publish?”

Just great! Right when I thought I wouldn’t have to hear that anymore. All the constant mocking. The words of disappointment. I can’t take it! “Damn it!” I shout as I step into a puddle. If those damned voices wouldn’t be so distracting, I wouldn’t have stepped in the damn puddle! Wait, now I’m swearing too much. I told myself I would try to stop that; my attempt at becoming

more professional. Considering I need a new job now, I better be on my best behavior. The likelihood of finding another job as a poet is slim to none. Despite the field itself dying out, you have to be more than original to survive. Well, and you need to meet deadlines with your work. Not my strong suit. As for my actual suit, it is the only piece of clothing I have that remains undamaged. The suit is half the age of my career, so it has withstood a considerable number of rejections, belittling's, and long nights of creating works of garbage. And yet, the suit remains intact, while I remain in shambles. What better inspiration for a poet than tragedy!

### Darker Day, Brighter Night

By lunch, I was no where near done coping with the loss of my career. I could not face going back to my apartment with all my lingering unfinished works awaiting my return. A constant reminder of my failure. With that, I continue to wander. I could easily put in my earbuds and let the world around me fade away to the sound of Frank Sinatra. Or, if I am feeling up to it, maybe some Nirvana in the hopes of finding some nirvana myself. But none of that could beat the wonderfully chaotic noise in the streets. The singing, the magic, the dancing, and everything in between. I think I even see a juggler. They all seem to have a sense of happiness. An overall feeling of passion that drives them to be there.

“Are you lost?” I hear as I am lost in the noise.

“What?” I say in response.

“Are you deaf too?” This said in a much more sarcastic tone. Not aggressive or sincere, but definitely sarcastic, like we were old friends joking around despite the fact that I am twice his age. The young boy looks at me to respond but I have yet to think of a witty response.

“Not that I know of.”

This kid looks to be about the age of 12, maybe 13. His clothes are rugged but intact and his shoes were the same as mine. Only his shoes did not look like they had been worn throughout a lifetime of misery and let-downs. His shoes are only slightly dirty, probably just recently purchased. He also wore a cap on his head of black hair.

“You must be new to town. My name is Clarence Asher, your local street rat and singer. And you?”

I'll say, the kid has confidence. But that's the kind of confidence and cockiness that gets you chewed up and spit out in this world.

“Uh, look kid you really shouldn’t be talking to strangers. For all you know I could be a murderer or someone who could kidnap you and never let you see the light of day again.”

“I’ll take my chances.” He says this with a cocky grin. So full of optimism and kindness towards a complete stranger he had just met. His shoulders and head high, but his hands placed in his pockets. He is confident, but still guarded. Smart kid.

“My name is Brennan. Brennan Pechman.”

“Interesting. Well, would you like the grand tour?”

“No thanks kid, I have to get to a very important meeting I am running late for with Mr. Captain Morgan.”

I most certainly do not have a meeting. I can’t have a meeting without a job. My real meeting happens to be at the liquor store with a nice bottle of rum.

“Well, it just so happens that the liquor store is at the end of the tour!”

“How long does this “tour” take?” I say knowing the answer will not be desirable to me.

“The advanced tour throughout the entire street and meeting all the street performers will take approximately forty minutes. There is an option for an alternate tour.”

“Oh no. I will take the alternate tour please.”

“Fantastic! Another great option! My personal favorite. Although, I believe I failed to mention that the alternate tour takes an hour and thirty minutes.”

This kid was not exaggerating. About an hour into this tour, I found myself in the middle of town. I have already forgotten half of the businesses’ names that he has shown to me. I typically didn’t leave my house much for work, so these streets are pretty much foreign to me. As we continue forward, we approach the chaotically pleasant noise that I heard earlier.

“We are now approaching the best part of town. My part of town. Where all the street rats and alley cats mingle together to create a masterpiece.”

“So, you perform here? Aren’t you a bit young to be out here by yourself?”

“I’m not alone though, I know everyone here!”

Clarence begins to lead me to an older woman. She looks old enough to know a thing or two but young enough to have a youthful glow about her. Like being on the street is some sort of magical youth serum. She is wearing a plain yet colorful sweater and a plain pair of jeans.

“Brennan I’d like you to meet Silvia. Silvia this is Brennan Pechman.” But rather than say my name to Silvia, Clarence signs it to her.



“Silvia has been performing here on these streets her entire life. She is the most talented singer on these streets!”

As Silvia’s signing to answer Clarence, Clarence translates the actions to me. I do not have much experience in the world of British Sign Language.

Silvia signs, *You’re too kind, Clarence.*

Clarence and I continue our talk with Silvia and she gradually tells me about her experience of performing on the street.

*Originally, I was quite frightened. The idea that my art, my vulnerability, would be displayed was terrifying. Obviously, I’m not your typically street singer. But I think signing the songs rather than singing makes it much more unique. It also helps to keep me grounded some days. These streets have given me hope, love, and most importantly, inspiration.*

We continue our conversation further and Silvia’s story truly invokes something in me. She makes me realize that there is more to life than working for others. Being independent while doing what you love is something I’ve strived for many years to achieve. It has never worked out that way for me, especially trying to become a well-known poet. There are deals you need to make and people you have to know to make it big. That’s behind me now. I can be whoever I want now and choose how I want to make myself heard.

We finish our conversation with Silvia and Clarence continues with the tour.

“Hey kid, I don’t think I can stick around for the end of the tour. I have to be somewhere soon. It was truly a good tour though. I’ll have to have you show me the rest another time.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. See you around, Pechman.”

I ignore the fact that he just called me by my last name because I need to get home as fast as I can. I have so much inspiration building up from that one conversation with Silvia. I know exactly the path I must take. The path I never took to get to work because it was too long. The path I never took because of the chaos. The path I never took because I was too scared. I must join the street rats.

# Casey Gerber

“Working with Casey this semester has been nothing short of phenomenal. To say that he has gone above and beyond weekly in order to bring in not only a great piece, but a piece of art may be an understatement. When Casey came in, I immediately knew that he was one of the most talented writers that I had ever worked with, I felt as though I was reading work from some of my favorite authors. We did work on transporting the reader into the reading this semester by utilizing the senses, and well I’ll just let his work speak for itself. Be prepared to be warped into an incredible dystopian future that will leave you speechless and wanting more. Casey is incredibly talented, and I just want to thank him for allowing me to work with him this year! Enjoy!”

- Austin Stankowski

## The Inheritors

### Chapter 6

Small plumes of smoke seeped out of the crater in the thick, metal wall. Shaun’s jaw dropped as he stiffened at the sight. His eyes widened, darting back and forth between the ground and the chasm in the wall. Clyde gripped his aching chest as he started to wheeze. Dixon was already rushing in with his rifle tucked into his shoulder, ready to fire at anything that seemed like a threat. He disappeared behind a corner.

“Clyde, listen to me,” Shaun said in a concerned tone as beads of sweat dripped from his brow. “Calm down, son. Stay close to me and be ready to do whatever I say. Do you understand?”

“Dad, what’s going--” Clyde let out between gasps.

“Do you understand?!” Shaun shouted.

Clyde nodded and closed his eyes. His father turned back to the gate and summoned the Staff into his hands. Crunches of gravel followed in his footsteps. The unmistakable scent of sulfur filled Clyde’s nose.

“T-They blew the gate open.” Clyde whimpered out.

“God damnit, son, let’s get a move on!” Shaun’s voice came from beyond the wall.

He was lagging behind Dixon and his father. Clyde’s blood boiled, but he couldn’t take a step forward. Like a thousand-ton boulder, nothing was able to move him.

*You’re not ready for this... You’re not ready for this... You’re never going to be ready...*

“Clyde! What the hell are you doing?!” Shaun’s head appeared around the wall as he put his hands up. Clyde still did not move.

“Fine! You’re just dead weight now! Stay there and don’t move, you coward!” His father ran off once again.

Seconds felt like hours as the burning in his chest lingered. A gust of wind could have knocked Clyde off his feet as the rolling smoke held his attention for the longest of time. There was no sound in his ears, only the deafening tone of his thoughts. He stumbled and drifted as he walked towards the gate.

*Everyone is okay, it was just a malfunction inside the lock... The locking mechanism just exploded. Why is everyone freaking out?*

The dark cavern had glints of daylight at the end. Slivers of shrapnel latched onto Clyde’s shirt as he crawled through the wall, stabbing at his skin on every move. The smell of sulfur turned into an intense smell of iron as he reached the other side. He crawled out of the wall and reached his hand out and touched the ground, dipping his hand into a sticky puddle just out of view.

“B-blood...?” Clyde said as he looked down at what he put his hand in. He was surrounded by small puddles of blood.

When he looked up, the small puddles turned into a river of blood that rolled down the dusty dirt road. Clyde’s palms started to sweat as he traced his eyes along the stream. It led to the homeless camp. He tried his best to not look over into the gathering of tents that laid there peacefully just five days before but braced himself for the worst. He squinted his eyes tight, fighting the urge to look over. Every fiber of his body told him to look away but his naive curiosity couldn’t stop him.

Time froze as the horror just feet away flooded his sight. Blood was splattered on the concrete wall as lifeless bodies laid next to it. The tarp covering the encampment was torn, hanging lower than before and was smeared with red. A fire still burned a dim, dull light, exposing the red-shirted woman he gave the apples too just days before. They laid spread out all around, splotches of blood dotted their skin. On top of her laid the small cloth that swaddled her once screaming child. However, there were no more screams.

He turned away as he gagged at the sight.

“Jesus Christ,” Clyde cried out. “What the hell is going on here?!”

His cries reverberated off the walls. Nothing about this seemed right. The walls had provided safety for years because his dad would protect the city from anything. Any groups that

popped up were eliminated from what his dad told Dixon. Was that true? Did some fall under the radar? Who would just massacre all these people? Clyde put his palm to his aching head.

“Settle down Clyde,” He whispered as continued to push pressure onto his forehead. “You’re needed for this city. You’ve been trained for this. You’re ready. Prove to dad you’re not just dead weight.”

The burning in his chest slowly started to fade and his ears popped and eyes dilated. The roaring of the fire in the rundown building next to him was followed by the dripping of sweat off his chin. He took a deep breath in, inhaling smoke and the scent of death, and gagged once more.

*I’m sorry, everyone. We failed you.*

Clyde shielded his eyes against the scene next to him and he ran up the path. The sloshing of whatever liquid he was treading through occasionally was replaced with the usual sound of gravel.

“Dad?” Clyde called out. “Where did you go?”

There was no reply. The trail of blood abruptly stopped as the gravel and dirt turned into a concrete road. The spent bullet casings that littered the street jingled as he ran by. Reflections of the afternoon sun put on a dazzling display below the shattered windows lining the sidewalks. Clyde could now barely tell the difference between the homeless area and the normal streets of Charleston. It felt like he was running forever without seeing a single, living soul. He darted past storefronts with shattered windows and bullet hole-ridden cars. Pools of gasoline or coolant flowed like streams from some of them, filling the air with their scents. Luckily, he had not seen a body in this section of the city yet. City police had to be doing a good job at getting people out of there.

Gunfire rang out closely behind him. The deep bellow of a gun rapidly firing broke through the air. Single shots from obviously smaller guns popped out occasionally. The area quickly turned into a warzone.

*Pop! Pop! Pop! BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG...*

*Pop! Pop! BANG! BANG...*

*Pop! BANG-BANG!*

There was a brief silence as Clyde found himself lying behind a car.

“Well shit,” Clyde chuckled as he realized what happened. “Thanks for the ‘duck-n-cover’ training, Dixon.”

He started to get out of the cover of the car, cracking a grateful grin.

*POP!*

He dropped right back down, clenching his teeth. A sizzle of a speeding bullet shot passed Clyde, shattered the car window. The small shards showered the ground and his hair like hail during a storm.

“I found another one!” A female voice cried out.

Clyde peaked out from his cover to get a glimpse of the shooter. His eyes frantically searched through the sea of cars. There was no movement - no sign of any life whatsoever. The shards of glass in his hair started to itch.

“He’s behind that red car by the storefront!” The voice called out yet again. She stood up from behind a flipped-over taxi. “I’ll lay down covering fire in case they’re armed. Remember what the boss said. If it’s not the Ancestor or Inheritor, kill it! Move up!”

Suddenly, two more figures stood up and started running between cars, slowly coming up to him. They wore the same all-black uniform with their hoods up. Clyde observed the behavior of the people running upon him. They moved from car to car like a well-timed dance that provided them with constant cover. Their timing was unpredictable.

“These movements are too coordinated for regular people,” Clyde thought out loud. He scrunched his brow as his head raced. “These people are well-trained.”

*POP!*

Another bullet sent Clyde back to the pavement. It hit him like a wall: He was pinned down. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the disk. This was the rush he was looking for in the Regrowth; the rush of life or death. One wrong step could be the end of his life.

*Two of them are weaving in and out of the cars for cover... They all know where I am and if I move, she’ll shoot or relay information to them... If I stay low enough after somehow getting rid of her, the other two will be lost... I have to peek my head out quick and--*

A bullet passed his ear.

*Shit, she just missed me... She’s dead set on taking me out.*

A crunch came from his left. Clyde whipped around and jumped as he saw one of the black figures aiming a bloodied pistol at him. The disk flew at the figure's chest as a trail of blue light followed its path. Just like the deer, the disk slashed right through the figure who gripped at his chest before falling, letting out a quick chirp of pain. The disk came right back to Clyde.

*That was close... Way, way, way to close... Why is the disk all-- It's bloody. Wait, how did it get bloody? Did you kill that guy? There is no way... Instinct just took over and--*

"It's the Inheritor! Get him alive!" The female voice shouted.

Out of the corner of his eye, a black flash pulled his attention away from his thoughts. The other figure was running up on him now, broadsword drawn out and ready to slash. Clyde tensed up as he rolled out of the cover of the car as another bullet just missed his leg.

*I have to get rid of her... She's got me pinned down...*

The figure continued to charge at him. Clyde's training kicked in as he shifted his weight from left to right, reacting to every swing the man made. He continued to swipe and slash in a constant rhythm, reacting to his target's dodging. He raised the sword overhead, slashing straight down at Clyde's head. Clyde put the disk over his head, parrying the attack. He countered with a swipe of his own, hitting the black vest the man wore. There was an audible tearing when the disk ripped through the cloth. The man jumped back and looked down, putting his hand to his chest, ripping the vest off. Clyde was starting to think and act, not react to the man's attacks now. The bare-chested man bolted forward with the sword overhead now, letting out an angry yell.

Clyde rolled forward, avoiding the overhead sword swing, and landed right next to the man's leg. This was his opening. He took the disk and slashed at the back of his knee, slicing clean through the muscles. Blood sprayed on the concrete below him. The man screamed in pain as he reached for his leg. Quickly, Clyde rolled over the back of the man towards his sword-armed side. He slashed the disk right at the elbow, taking his arm clean off. The now armless man grimaced in agony once more. Clyde took hold of the man and propped him up behind a car.

"Who the hell are you and why are you here?" Clyde firmly questioned. He gripped the man's neck and held him in a loose choke hold, just out of sight of the shooter.

"Burn in hell, scumbag," The man blurted out, wincing in pain. "Burn in hell."

"You were sloppy with your sword anyways." Clyde threw the man to the ground.

"God damnit, Inheritor!" The woman cried out. "Stop it! Come out from behind that car!"

"Fine!" Clyde said. "But first, put your gun down and I'll walk out. If you don't, your buddy here will lose more than an arm and a leg."

"Do it," The man whined. He was gritting his teeth. "I'm dead anyway."

"Shut up." Clyde firmly responded.

A sharp clank came from the shooter's direction.

“Looks like she doesn’t care about you after all.” Clyde whispered to him as he let go of the man and walked out from out of his cover.

She stood still, hands up. Her eyes burned with pure hatred and disgust.

“What do you want from us?” Clyde questioned as he started to walk towards the woman. His slick, bloodied hand gripped the disk over his head. He was uncontrollably shaking.

She squinted as he walked towards her and tilted her head slightly. The closer Clyde got, the easier it was to make out a scar over her left eye.

“We want revenge for everything your kind put us through,” Her eyes filled with even more rage. “We want to bring everyone back! I want to bring my kids back! And...”

Her shouting echoed off the surrounding buildings.

“Spit it out. You’re not escaping me.” Clyde sternly said.

“And...”

“I swear to God I’ll take your head clean off! I know what you did to those people at the gate!”

She broke eye contact with Clyde and looked behind him. “I want you all dead.”

A sudden shout bellowed out behind him. He instinctively turned around and saw the bloodied man with the sword, swinging it down with one hand over his head. Clyde’s heart stopped as the sword slowly started to come down at his head. He felt the disk fall out of his hand as the sweat in his palms overtook the control he had over it. He tensed himself up, waiting for the blow to hit him.

*BANG! BANG!*

The man dropped as a red mist lingered in the air. The sword glistened with a reddish hue and hit the ground with the sharp chatter of metal on concrete. Behind him, a heavy thud hit the ground as well. Directly where the woman was before was Dixon, rifle aimed at Clyde.

“What did I say about trusting people during a crisis, Clyde?” Dixon wore the same angry expression the woman wore before.

“Never negotiate with people...” Clyde responded.

“That is damned right,” Dixon scolded Clyde. “Now let’s go. There were more of these bastards at your apartment building.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The doors were kicked down and trampled over before the men even walked into the destroyed and ransacked lobby. The chandelier above shone no light whatsoever as the only light that filled the room was the daylight that crept in through the smashed windows and broken down doors. The bullet-ridden walls confirmed the theory that every part of the city was being searched.

“I’ll keep watch down here,” Dixon said walking in behind Clyde. “Go to your penthouse and see if your mom and sister are there. I’ve checked the first dozen floors here already. There is a definite sign of struggle and... Some not so lucky ones.”

“Don’t think too hard about it,” Clyde said. “There was nothing we could have done.”

“I know,” Dixon replied. “But it was my sole duty to protect this city. I made a promise to your father that I’d keep everyone safe.”

“It seems like your police did a good job at that, Dixon,” Clyde calmly said. “I mean I didn’t even see a body on my way here. Be proud that you trained them how you did.”

Dixon’s eye flashed for a moment. His stern lips cracked open and let out a big smile as happiness flooded over him.

“I’m proud of everything you’ve done with me, Clyde,” Dixon’s voice started to crack. “I raised you like how I would have raised my son -- to be tough and strong. Now, get out of here. I’ll be fine by myself.”

He turned away from Clyde and showed the back of his sweaty shirt.

The elevator doors opened and Clyde walked in. Spent bullet casings laid spread out on the elevator floor signaling that the fighting spread into the apartment building. The casings rolled around the elevator floor as it quickly rose.

*They’re okay... They’re okay... Everyone will be OK...*

The same words ravaged his mind as the humming of the elevator bashed against his sanity. The passage of time jumped forward with every ding of a floor. Fifteen floors left... Ten floors left... Three... Two... One... His shaking hands had no mercy on his white knuckles as he strangled the disk. The doors opened on the penthouse level. A cool breeze from the broken living room window sent a shiver down his spine.

“Let them go,” Shaun’s voice echoed through the cluttered hallway. “They’re not who you’re looking for.”

“Mom? Dad?” Clyde called out as he stepped over a black-clothed body.



He walked down the hallway. Bodies of the intruders lay spread through the whole house. A single hole straight through the chest seemed to be the main cause of their deaths. Some of the bodies had major, clean slash wounds. This was the Staff's dirty work.

"Please, just let them go," Shaun continued to plead. "Take whatever you want from me."

Clyde the loose floorboards creaked with every step. The living room was filled with black-clad intruders. Their undivided attention was put solely towards the window, giving Clyde free access to hide behind the kitchen table. Shaun's back was being brushed up against by the curtain. If he were to take a single step back, he would be free-falling onto the pavement below. A katana measured the distance between Shaun and an unknown, masked man. A deep black aura accented the sharpened blade, occasionally rippling off the tip of the sword.

"Just let my wife and daughter go, alright?" Shaun begged. "I'll follow you wherever."

"We're not here to take prisoners anymore," The muffled voice told Shaun. "You're the reason we're all here. You Ancestors have brought nothing but pain onto this world. Now I get to take some pain out of it."

He drew the sword back and slashed forward with an elegant flourish, lopping Shaun's head clean off.

"No!" Clyde jumped up from behind the counter and threw the disk at the masked man. He flourished the blade once again and blocked the disk out the broken window.

Within the blink of an eye, Clyde was on the ground. His lungs felt as though they were going to collapse under the weight of two large people on top of him. A clearing was made in the gathering as a pair of creased leather boots walked their way towards Clyde.

"You must be his Inheritor," The man huffed out from behind the mask. "What should I do with you...?"

Without warning, the tip of the blade dug into the back of Clyde's hand. Cries of agony left Clyde's mouth and the man knelt in front of him.

"Kill you? No... Too easy," The man pulled at Clyde's hair. "Torture you? No... That's too humane of service for your kind. No, I know exactly what to do with you."

He pulled the sword out of Clyde's hand and stood up. He let out a moan of relief and his warm blood started to seep onto his cheek. The crushing weight remained as the boots squeaked their way towards his mother and sister. Clyde was helpless as he watched his mother being picked up by the neck.

“No, please!” Clyde sobbed out, wincing in pain. “Please don’t do this!”

The masked figure turned his head. Although he couldn’t see his eyes, Clyde knew they looked right into his soul. Lori kicked and screamed as the masked man continued to raise her. He drew his katana back, and quickly stabbed it right through her abdomen. A soft whimper reached Clyde’s ears before the horrified screams of Robin did. Clyde could only helplessly watch as her body fell to the hardwood floor with a loud thud, dead right as his sister’s feet.

# Will Gustafson

“It has been an honor both getting to know and work with Will this semester in English 257, and our weekly sessions were something I always looked forward to. Will came into this course already a *very* strong writer, so my job was to simply enjoy reading all that he writes and provide a different perspective. Not only is Will extremely talented in writing stories, but he is also a talented poet! Each session, I am continuously impressed by his level of thought, creativity, and dedication to details in both his poetry and story writing. I am so happy to have been able to meet with him every week, analyzing and discussing these masterpieces that deserve to be seen by everyone. He is truly a gifted writer and knows how to captivate the audience, making them never want to put the story down. I am very fortunate to have worked with Will this semester and I am confident that he will continue to be a successful writer in the future.”

- Hayley Bird

## The Villain Ain't So Bad

New York Eisley Bank was guilty of larceny. The corrupt organization enforced sky high interest rates on loans, and bottom barrel return rates on customers' accounts. They slipped ATM fees, inactivity fees, excessive withdrawal fees, and account “maintenance” fees into tiny cracks and back alley corners of complex documents and contracts. Loan sharks ate up liabilities like candy. Fortunately, in the regrettable circumstance of a robbery taking place on one of their properties, the unlucky accounts would be fully reimbursed. Most importantly, with funds taken directly from Eisley's personal cache.

Dr. Walters grinned to no one but himself. It always took months to find the perfect place, but the extra effort was always worth it. Eisley's reimbursement policy was new. It had been first implemented three weeks ago. However, the full extent of the program had only been in effect for about... he checked his watch. Thirty-seven minutes. It was always good to monitor corrupt banks' new policies. Eisley had been on his list for quite a while. To say he was eager for this heist would be an understatement.

Dozens of reptilian minions swarmed the bank in a practiced, organized manner. Armed robbers guarded handcuffed hostages, sharp lookouts watched for heroes or police officers, and muscular bruisers carried bags brimming with cash. Dr. Walters prowled in the background and carefully overwatched the operation, occasionally barking out orders. His scaly talons clacked against the polished marble floor.

Hacking into the digital version of Eisley Bank had been surprisingly difficult. Firewalls, encryptions, and code repatterning had made unbelievable leaps and bounds in the past few years. So instead of taking the money online, Dr. Walters decided to make a personal visit.

“You won’t get away with this!”

Walters turned his gaze to a small blonde woman dressed in an Eislian uniform. His lip curled with amusement.

“The police are on their way. You’re going back to jail.”

Courage. Very admirable. Few hostages ever had the guts to speak up, much less threaten him. Walters decided to ensure this woman’s safety. Looking at the nearest guard, he lifted two fingers and pointed them at her, nodding his head. The minion nodded back. Most bank robbers would ask why they were protecting hostages, but well paid men were exceedingly loyal. Unquestionably loyal. Satisfied, Dr. Walters turned away from their group and started making his way back toward the vault.

“You’re going to pay for what happened to Windbreaker.”

He spun around and snarled at her. The blonde flinched, but didn’t look away. After taking a few calming breaths, he warned, “Don’t speak of things you know nothing about.”

This time she kept quiet. Wisdom. Also admirable.

Still growling to himself, Walters walked away. Unwanted memories of the past filled his thoughts, making him oblivious to his surroundings. He only managed to get a few feet before something smashed into the back of his head. The impact was so powerful it made him stumble. Minions shouted and opened fire. Out of the corner of Walter’s eye, a blue and gold blur shot around the room, dodging laserfire and tossing hybrids around like ragdolls.

*Heroes.*

Pulling out his own weapon, Dr. Walters got up and added a few bolts to the hail of lasers aimed at the uninvited guest. Then he stopped.

She was tiny.

It must be a side effect of her abilities. There was no way the League would send a--

Dr. Walters caught a glimpse of the girl’s face. She couldn’t have been older than fourteen, maybe fifteen. Curse those arrogant fiends. They were sending *children* to fight him?

Hesitantly, Walters pulled a remote out of his jacket and pressed a few buttons. After a moment, the laserfire changed from deadly blue to red. Very painful, but not lethal. He then adjusted the settings of his own pistol.

While his guard was down, the young hero made a mad dash for Walters and punched him in the chest. He slid across the bank floor, scraping its tiles with his talons. With their boss suddenly in the line of fire, his minions stopped shooting. But they quietly kept their weapons trained on the intruder and continued dragging duffle bags outside.

“Triassic Tyrant, you are under arrest for armed robbery, endangering the public, and... probably a bunch of other stuff I don’t know about. Either way, you’re coming with me!” She said loudly. A few people cheered.

Mouth breathing fools. For shame, egging on a little girl.

Now he was annoyed. Not because everyone was cheering for his defeat, Walters had grown callous of the public’s opinion over the decades. No, he was annoyed because this hero called him by his supervillain title. *The Triassic Tyrant*. Oh how he despised the media. Their insultingly uncreative name had been ignorable for a while, but Windbreaker’s death had made him infamous. Now it was everywhere. Tyrant this, Tyrant that. Years later, and he *still* had an ongoing segment of, “Where Are They Now?” in the Times.

Dr. Walters rose to his feet, then began prowling around his opponent. Stalling for time of course. His mind was going a million miles an hour, trying to figure a way out of this bank. The Tyrant briefly considered surrendering himself in exchange for his minion’s freedom, but just as quickly dismissed the notion. His sacrifice might rescue them today, but the police would eventually hunt them all down.

“What’s this? A little girl playing hero?” Walters growled. He didn’t want to scare her, but one must keep up their reputation. “Run away little hero. Before someone gets hurt.”

“The only person who’s gonna get hurt is you when I put my foot in your mouth!” She was brave, like the blonde woman, but there was carefully masked fear in her eyes.

Understandable. The Tyrant was rather terrifying.

He laughed. “What’s your name, Little Hero?” The audience, currently the Tyrant’s hostages, watched them silently in the background. He wanted to give this girl a chance to name herself before things got nasty. Their judgment could be harsh.

She looked embarrassed. “I’m... new.”

“New? What a terrible name.” A few minions snickered. Walters glared at them. They shut up and continued dragging money out of the building. Most had already slipped outside. He just had to stall for a couple more minutes. “A superhero should always have a proper title. So what is it?”

“They didn’t give me one yet.” Below her mask, the poor dear’s cheeks flushed red.

“Then name yourself,” he shrugged.

Stunned, she stared at Dr. Walters like he was insane. The young hero clearly never even considered the idea before.

“If you won’t give me a name, I’ll make one myself.” The Tyrant gave her a toothy grin. “That’s a threat by the way. I’m terrible with names. Isn’t that right, Barrysauros?”

A long-necked mutant gave Walters an annoyed look.

The girl blinked. “I don’t--”

“Golden Gal,” he said, waving his hand dramatically.

“What are you--”

“No. Too flashy.” Dr. Walters decided. “How about Wonder Woman?”

“Look--”

“Nevermind. Copyrighted. The Fourth Powerpuff Girl?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Definitely not.”

“Golden Idol?”

“Seriously?”

“The Oscar.”

“You’re messing with me now.”

“Captain Shiny.”

“How dare you.”

“The Dazzler.”

“These are all terrible.”

“The *Mega* Dazzler.”

She gave him a deadpan stare.

“You know,” Walters said, tapping his chin, “I think I got it right the first time.”

“What, Golden Gal?”

“No.” The Tyrant began prowling again, baring his fangs into a terrifying grin. “You’re nothing but a Little Hero.”

She opened her mouth to say something back, but a man in the back of the crowd shouted, “Hey! Are you gonna save us, or are you just gonna talk?”

Dr. Walters turned to snarl at him. He was one of the people who cheered before. Another coward who talked people into doing their own dirty work. He’d rather walk over the dead body of a little girl than risk his own skin.

That was a mistake. The second he turned around, the Little Hero made her move. A fist connected with his stomach and knocked the wind out of him. It might’ve killed him if he hadn’t been wearing armor. It *definitely* would’ve killed him if he had been human.

The Tyrant sailed through the air and slammed into a column, the blow severely bruising his spine. He tensed when his raptor instincts suddenly screamed, urging him to climb higher. Dr. Walters quickly sank his claws into the stone and scrambled out of the way. The area where he had been just a moment before was pulverized when Little Hero leapt forward and sank her fist elbow-deep into solid marble.

That was bad. She didn’t know her own strength. Dr. Walters was willing to bet a large amount of money that this girl received her powers less than a month ago. His velociraptor brain took over again, leaping to the nearby second story ledge then sprinting atop the handrail.

Little Hero followed, though not as gracefully. She missed the jump and smashed through some more marble. The Tyrant might be lighter and more agile, but his opponent was much, much stronger. She quickly gained on him, outstretching her hand to grasp his tail.

Dr. Walters spotted a metal rail overhead. Using his momentum, he jumped up and grabbed the bar, swinging up and around, planting his feet into Little Hero’s shoulder blades as she sped past. While he was careful not to pierce her skin with his talons, the kick was still strong enough to knock her to the ground.

Dropping to the floor, he pulled out a small metal disk from inside his duster. He tossed it at Little Hero’s back, but she spun around and swatted it out of the air. The disk activated instantly, wrapping her arm in thin metal wiring. She tried to tear it off, but Walters flung three more disks at her, binding her arms and legs.

The Tyrant froze. Windbreaker’s bloody body flashed before his eyes. Through the cruelest of fates, Little Hero lay in the exact same position. But now wasn’t the time to lament.

“Stay down,” he advised before jumping over the railing. The thirty foot drop would have at least shattered the ankles of a normal person, but the Tyrant didn’t hesitate. He landed gracefully on his feet and strode toward the exit. Waving his minions to come along, he called, “Time to go boys!”

The prehistoric pack didn’t need to be told twice. They knew that when the boss said it was time to leave, drop everything and run. They abandoned the last six or so bags of cash they were carrying and sprinted out the door. Wailing sirens approached rapidly. The Tyrant followed close behind, the last robber to leave the building. Only looking over his shoulder when Little Hero choked back a frustrated sob.

Dr. Walters looked around the room. All eyes were trained on him. No one sought to comfort the little girl crying her eyes out just a flight of stairs away. But the Triassic Tyrant’s stony heart cracked like an egg. He wanted to run up there and help her. To tell her she did well, she almost caught him. Maybe she would win next time. She just needed a little more time...

God, he needed to retire.



# Stephanie Hogan

“Stephanie has such an excellent creative voice, and it was an absolute pleasure to be able to work alongside her. Throughout the semester, we worked on crafting the narrative of this story, exploring who the characters were to each other, and we walked through each scene with great care. She has a great grasp on characterization and allows the reader to care about the characters instantly. I hope that Stephanie continues to express her creativity through her strong writing—I would happily read anything of hers.”

- Kala Buttke

## The Treehouse

Despite the dark wood being faded and the tall green weeds having taken over, the Treehouse looks exactly how I remember it; its stability only reinforced as it stands confidently between the two redwood trees in my parent’s backyard. They are moving in two days, my parents. They promised that once I graduated from college they would find a new place, and even though I haven’t lived here for five years, I’m having a hard time saying goodbye to everything. Especially to the Treehouse.

For 8 years, the Treehouse had been open for the world. It was light and colorful, painted only with the happiness and laughter of childhood imagination. As I stand below the Treehouse, I realize that before I can leave this place, my final farewell must be dedicated to what lies inside the tiny house above me. Walking up the creaky ladder now, it doesn’t feel right to be going up without him... without Ollie.

Ollie.

My sweet Ollie.

\*\*\*

I met Oliver Maine when I was 6 years old.

We were eating lunch in the first-grade cafeteria.

“I always put ice in my milk.”

That was the first thing he ever said to me.

“It tastes colder. Grandpa says so too.”

His voice was bright and there was a warm glow to his squeaky sound. It was like a familiar song, echoing above the perilous sea of my peers. He sat down next to me, and I

remember feeling confused. I couldn't figure out why he would want to talk to the lonely girl who was sitting by herself, indulging in nothing more than applesauce and strawberry milk.

But that's who Oliver was - he sat by the people who didn't have anyone. He was kind.

But Ollie wasn't kind in the way you would first think of someone as kind. No. He was more than that. He was unbelievably kind; kind in the sense that he was the embodiment of its entire meaning. He didn't just say "good morning" as a routine greeting - he would make the statement confidently, and the warmth in his voice let you know he actually meant it. He didn't remember your name simply because he should - Oliver would truly make note of who you are and intentionally know your name, reminding you of your significance.

\*\*\*

As I get off at the top of the ladder and sit down on the perimeter ledge that surrounds the Treehouse, silhouettes of my childhood memories immediately begin to dance around me.

The first thing to welcome me is our blue bottle cap. It's the one that Ollie found on our first day together and it is still taped up next to our entrance, serving as our doorbell.

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"Ding ding dong!" Ollie sang, pressing down on the cap we had just put up together. "The sound of our doorbell is cooler."

I was sitting inside the Treehouse just watching Ollie talk. Before he came, the Treehouse was vacant. It was an empty place that held the invitation to a possibility I could never have because I didn't have anyone to imagine with... until now.

"Okay!" He said, pushing his way in through the doorway. "Sadie, you go out there now and ring the doorbell. Make sure it works."

Following his orders, I made my way outside and stood on the ledge in front of the entrance. As soon as I pressed my finger down on the cool plastic of the doorbell, the replication of Oliver's song greeted me from within.

"Oh, hello!" Ollie declared, opening an imaginary door and inviting me inside. "Welcome, welcome, welcome to The Treehouse."

\*\*\*

I make my way into the Treehouse now, crawling in through our entrance. It doesn't take long for me to realize that everything we left remains. It's all here: the drawings that we made,

the pictures that we took with my polaroid camera, even the tiny little wooden box that holds our rock collection for the fairies.

As more memories begin to flood in, I notice the drawing that hangs on the leftmost wall of the Treehouse. It's the one that Ollie made of the two of us on the swings at recess.

The swings had always been our favorite.

\*\*\*

When Ollie and I were in middle school, we would run to the swings as fast as we could every day after lunch. Of course, it didn't really matter how quickly we got there - the swings were always open because everybody knew they belonged to us. But still, we ran as if our lives depended on it.

After reaching our destination, Ollie and I would make sure that we were lined up right next to each other. On my count, we would push off at the same time and pump our legs in sync, beginning our climb to the top of the world.

I would always look over at Oliver during this. His eyes would be closed and his breath soft; the pinnacle of happiness existing in his magnificent smile.

Then he would look over to see me.

The depth of Oliver Maine's amazing blue eyes paralleled the depth of his beauty. When his eyes met mine, something inside made me feel complete. I couldn't explain it back then, but I know now that it was the genuine feeling of being truly and completely loved.

\*\*\*

As I sit here continuing to trace the memento-filled walls of mine and Oliver's place, our tiny cosmic that we called the Treehouse, I am reminded of our everything.

I see the tear that I accidentally made in our screened window, and I remember how Ollie cheered me up by telling me how cool it was that now we had a secret entrance for the fairies. I see the broken steering wheel that is somehow still stuck on the wall beneath that window, and how Ollie would captain our ship, steering us away from the monsters that lie in the waters below.

Finally, my eyes wander to the ultimate shrine we created that hangs above the inside doorway. We had spent an entire day putting up beads, stickers, glitter - anything we wanted - and it all surrounds my favorite picture in the world, the one that my mom took of Ollie and me

on Halloween in sixth grade. We are dressed up as Peter Pan and Wendy, our favorite characters from our favorite movie.

\*\*\*

The best night of my life was when Ollie and I were only eleven years old. It was the night of Halloween and even though most everyone our age had stopped going Trick or Treating, Ollie and I were ready for our adventure. Every year, for as long as we had known each other, Ollie and I would dress up as Peter Pan and Wendy. We never wanted to be anything else, we were always Peter Pan and Wendy.

We had gotten ready together at my house and before we left, we made sure to take our positions in front of the garage door so that my mom could capture our picture. Then, it was time. With one hand hugging Oliver Maine and the other clutching a pillowcase that would soon possess sugary magic, I spent that night in the air; flying from house to house with my best friend. We made our way through every path and every obstacle as we conquered the neighborhood. We didn't care what time it was, and we never thought about how long Trick or Treat would last; all that mattered to us was making the night count.

After coming back and counting all our candy in the Treehouse, we laid together in the sleeping tent that my dad had put up for us in my backyard. We had opened all the windows and I could feel a warm, crisp breeze waving across our shadows as we looked up at the stars. Laughing at each other, crying to each other, and smiling with each other, we spent the rest of the night being and sharing everything.

Before drifting off and allowing my dreams to take over, I remember thinking about the last thing Ollie had said to me before he fell asleep.

“Sadie,” He whispered, squeezing my hand.

“Yeah?” I squeezed his hand back.

“I want us to be like this forever. I am so happy.”

“Me too, Ollie. Me too.”

\*\*\*

This Halloween picture that sits above me in the Treehouse has been in here for a long time. Even before that, it had lived on the refrigerator in my parents' kitchen, and as I look at it now, I realize that I've just discovered its final home.

As I slowly peel it off the chipped wooden wall, I'm surprised to see that the picture has remained completely intact; not a single tear or crack has ripped it apart. I put it in my right shirt pocket, taking it with me.

Looking around, I embrace every last trace of love that exists in this tiny infinity. I wrap myself up and release my breath, letting my eyes fall through the open window next to me. Across the beauty that lies below the Treehouse, I can see him.

His smile is exactly how I remember it.

## R. E. Jensen

“It has been a pleasure getting to know R.E. over the course of the semester. It was nice to see him challenge himself by writing pieces of various genres. From comedy to science fiction, R.E. was always open to pushing himself outside his comfort zone to become a more well-rounded writer. I am so proud of him for being vulnerable with his writing and publishing one of the pieces he is most proud of!”

- Morgan Witt

### Meditation Tape #3

Hello.

How are you feeling?

You are here because it was recommended you receive a guided meditation in hopes of controlling your anger.

Who recommended it? Don't worry about that detail.

Let's take a moment and reflect on why you're here. Can you think of a moment you lost your temper?

Maybe someone cut you off in traffic and briefly turned you into a professional destruction derby driver.

Maybe you work at a post office and use people's packages as training dummies.

Maybe your boss was being rude to you so you performed a series of punches that would make a professional boxer impressed before parading around the office while your coworkers did a ten count.

Really it could have been anything. We both know what you did, though.

Anyway, enough talk about the past. Let's focus on the present.

Take a deep breath. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.

You may find it hard to focus on your breathing. Most likely due to the screaming.

We suggest not attempting to escape your restraints like others may have attempted. Our guards rarely miss.

Instead, clear your mind and relax. Focus on doing this breathing exercise properly. Try not to think about why you're here, but instead on how you can be better.

Did you finish your breathing? Very good!

Let's move on to the next exercise.

Your mind is most likely still racing thinking about your future. You may be thinking such things as “Why am I here?” or “How did they get into my house?” or maybe even “Who are these people?”

We encourage you to take a moment and take all these thoughts that might cause you distress and imagine them as leaves on a tree. Watch each thought gently flutter down into a flowing stream.

Wave goodbye to these thoughts, just like your parents waved goodbye before that horrific incident with the Titanic reenactment all those years ago. What a shame that they didn’t survive. But that’s the past now. Turn your parents into leaves and watch them float downstream, never to be seen again. Just distant thoughts and memories that have no control over you.

Are you still there?

Sorry. That was our attempt at humor. It’s okay to laugh, you know.

We are nearing the end of our meditation. Have you been enjoying it so far?

Please be sure to leave us a review about your experience here today. We won’t be taking your opinion into consideration, but at least you can feel like you made a difference.

Now for our final exercise, we are going to think about your future.

As with everyone on this Earth, you have a future with nearly infinite possibilities.

Maybe you’ll get the career you always dreamed of and marry the love of your life.

Maybe you’ll have kids together. Perhaps you’ll realize that you’re feeling burned out on your career and make an impulsive decision to quit.

Maybe on the drive home you’ll dread telling your spouse and kids that you might be upending their life in order to find a better job because you just couldn’t handle it anymore. There must be more to life than this though, right? Are you truly destined to work until your old age and then get less than half of your life back as retirement?

Why should you be forced to slave away in order to live? Don’t you have the right to exist without it coming at a cost? Should you really have to prove that you deserve to do what you want instead of being forced to do what is required??

Maybe you’ll pick up McDonald’s on the way home. Their fries are starting to sound good. I personally recommend the chicken nuggets. Maybe a happy meal. After all, we’re all happy here. Right?

We’ve reached the end of our session. What did you think?

We hope you feel better soon.

The phone rang several times before my therapist finally picked up.

“Hello?” they asked, clearly drowsy. I must have woken them.

“Hey, uh... I think you gave me the wrong tape.”



# Steven Novinska

“I have had the privilege of working with Steven on his novel for three semesters. He is very talented and hardworking, and the progress he has made as a writer over the course of this project is incredibly admirable. I always look forward to the conversations that arise from our sessions, but watching his skill and personal style as an author develop has been one of my favorite parts of working with him. Steven’s novel is an impressive feat of creativity and dedication, and I couldn’t be more proud of the work he has done!”

- Gavrielle McClung

## Who Are You

Dust particles fogged the window and flowed through the air in whimsical chaos. Light filtered through the small glass, it’s rays easily distinguishable amongst the cloud. Regardless, it was peaceful. This was one of the few moments of silence Frederick was allotted throughout the day.

The concrete surrounding him wasn’t even the hardest thing in the room. Splotches of brown, red, and orange infected the iron door that separated him from even larger concrete rooms. Opposite the door, one twelve by twelve glass pane stood between Fredrick and the outside world. The glass was new, but it was still here before Fredericks time, so new is all but relative to him. As if adding a lonesome view to a concrete cage was really the ‘humane standards’ this place needed. This room was one of many in the cookie cutter infrastructure he was a part of. Fifty other rooms adorned the halls and housed people just like him - if housed is even the correct term to use.

Well, that’s what it says on paper at least.

Frederick sat behind those gray walls, in his gray jumpsuit, on top of his white sheets for the one hundred and fifteenth day in a row. Must be November fifteenth then.

The only color in the room emanated from his iris. Even the number on the back of his jumpsuit was a stark black. Hard to see while lying down sure, but his underside only hid his name. Well, Frederick was his birth name, but a couple months in a place like this renders that thought obsolete. One hundred and fifteen days since he’s heard that noise.

Small jingles soon turned into loud creaking and groaning as a guard opened his door, but never entered. Instead, a small boy took his place - who also happened to be dressed like a sidewalk. His chest blocked his name from view, just as Frederick’s did. Even though the boy

isn't opaque, Frederick knew his name well before he came in. Knowledge of a place like this removed his urge to look towards the door, so he kept his unfocussed-focus on the ceiling. He'd see the boy enough over the coming months anyways.

With enthusiasm rivaling that of the decor, Frederick greeted his new guest. "So you're my new roommate, huh?"

Officer Clyde poked his head around the corner sternly, "Treat this one a little bit better than your last one, O.K.?"

Ushering the boy further into the room, groaning returned, and a harsh slam followed. A small panel slid back on the iron door, revealing Clyde's face once more, "I don't want to hear a peep out of here."

"Well, if we're all supposed to be so quiet..." Frederick finally turned his head towards the door, "Why are you going around slamming doors?" he snarked.

Clyde stood in the doorway, beat red behind the panel. "Watch your mouth kid, talking is a privilege that *I* grant you."

"Surely the warden would be upset if she caught you slamming doors during her nap again." Frederick reasoned. As he looked back towards the ceiling, his hand raised to gesture how indifferent his feelings were on the matter, "I'm just looking out for your best interests Clyde, we both know that."

Barking murmurs spit out of Clydes mouth. Individual words were indistinguishable from gibberish, before they became inaudible all together when the panel slid shut.

"Auf Wiedersehen." Frederick huffed.

The boy began to move closer to his bed, "You speak German?"

"No actually." Leaning up from his bed, Frederick watched as the boy squatted down to place what little he had under his bed. Just as he predicted, 25 was pasted on his back, but it was in yellow. The numbers were fresh, lacking cracks and blemishes. "And neither does Hitler out there, but he barely speaks English either."

The boy was caught off guard and laughed precariously. Stopped in his tracks, he restarted the small process of placing his extra clothes under his bed. As the laughter subsided, the boy was left with a smile. "What's your name?"

"Frederick. But just call me Twenty-Six."

"Really? No way!" The boy gasped.

Frederick looked at the boy, perplexed. “Why are you so excited by that?”

“The name’s Rick.” The boy beamed. However, Frederick sat in the same spot on his bed, deadpanned. “Or you could call me...” Reaching under his bed, he grabbed the extra jumpsuit he had. Unfolding it completely, he flipped it around. “Twenty-Five!” Holding it in front of him, he wasn’t sure why Frederick called himself by his number, and the confusion that was etched into his face was not lost on Frederick.

With a soft smile, Frederick just nodded his head. “Hey, that’s lesson number one out of the way.”

Small laughter and amusement seemingly turned off. After refolding his shirt and putting it back in its rightful spot, Rick looked to the floor in an attempt at avoiding any and all eye contact. Words began to pour into his brain, but all they did was build a dam by his tongue. His shoulders began to shrink, along with his posture.

He looked like a completely different kid than the one who first came through the door.

“Hey,” Frederick began, “You doing alright man? You seem... frazzled.”

Rick looked in Frederick’s general direction but couldn’t bring himself to look Frederick in the face anymore.

Frederick watched as Rick's attention danced around the room, surmising that his mind was a similar place to be.

“I... I just don’t really know what to do.” Rick sulked. At that moment, he wasn’t really sure why he said the things he did. Part of him regretted it instantly, but now that it was out there...

The muscles in Fredericks face contorted in an unfamiliar fashion. It was rather strange - Frederick was almost uncomfortable with the feeling while Rick didn’t even realize what was going on. Wrapped up in his own imagined reality, Rick was doing anything and everything in his power to muster up whatever courage he had left. He’d need it to fight whatever backlash was going to come out of Fredericks mouth.

When seconds of uncomfortable silence turned a dozen, and then those dozens banded together to form an entirely different unit, the minute, Rick grew insatiable.

It was the first time Rick really looked at Frederick since he walked in.

Now, Rick had looked at Frederick when he walked in, but didn’t *really* look at him. Not like now. Fredericks hair was matted, and small strands here and there seemed to diverge their

own path, but it was relatively well kept for a place like this. It was obvious Frederick needed a haircut, but that was a luxury Rick would soon learn was hard to come by. Well, that was true - unless you made friends. Frederick parted his hair to the left to keep it out of his eyes, but in the coming months parting might not even solve the problem. Obviously, Frederick didn't do any sort of physical exercise in his free time, however, his metabolism was active enough to keep him skinny. Skinnier than Rick that is.

Yet on top of all of that, Frederick was smiling.

Taken aback, Rick was confronted with emotions he wasn't mentally prepared to handle. Anxiety, relief, ecstasy, fear, and above all - confusion. Nothing in his playbook prepared him to believe Frederick would've taken that bit of weakness in a positive light.

But here they were.

Chuckling to himself, Frederick gazed out the window at the passing altocumulus clouds. "If there's one thing in this place I've learned, it's how to hide things like that."

Annoyed at himself for indulging in any semblance of safety, Rick sunk into his bed.

"I'm *not* saying that so you can be discouraged though," Frederick emphasized.

Unsure of what to believe anymore, Rick rubbed his face with both hands and dropped his arms at his side.

Frederick kept his focus on his words and the free-flowing clouds. "People aren't here to make friends. In fact, their very purpose here is to leave as soon as possible." Glancing towards Rick, he could tell the boy was listening, but by God did he look worse than himself. "So, if they want to be your friend, they will be." As Rick laid there unresponsive, Frederick attempted to crack a joke. "And if you're going to look rougher than me on day one, you're going to die of old age before you make it to winter."

Damnit, Rick thought. Completely caught off guard, Rick was laughing like when they first got in the room - but this time was different.

It was genuine.

Relieved by Rick's partial change in attitude, Frederick switched his train of thought. "There are some things you should know about this place though," he sighed. "You already know to use someone's number, and that's a great place to start."

Rick nodded, simultaneously keeping his focus on Frederick and the ceiling.

“Alright, lesson number two,” Frederick stated. “The schedule around here doesn't change. With the exception of some holidays of course.”

Nodding his head in bed, that rule seemed self-explanatory to Rick.

“I'd tell you what it's like, but honestly, you'll learn it a lot faster by just living it.”

Frederick added.

Rick began to sit up finally. Propping his pillow against the wall, Rick crossed his legs and rested his back against the wall. “Nah, that makes sense.” Rick agreed.

“Let's see here then...” Rummaging around his brain like a chest banished to the attic, Frederick formulated another point. “Another good thing to know is that all of the guards here are dickheads.”

Cocking his head to the side, Rick sat puzzled. “All of them?”

Frederick nodded. “Pretty much yeah. Personally, I don't get into much trouble, so they don't give me much back. But you'll find yourself in hot water here just by existing sometimes.”

“That hardly sounds fair,” Rick huffed. He watched as Frederick chuckled to himself. Scowling, Rick couldn't help but be a little offended by this. “Hey! What's that for?”

Ignoring the relative annoyance creeping in the back of the conversation, Frederick kept on chuckling, “I'm just gonna warn you right now man, the sooner you learn to accept that, the better.”

Faint murmurs emanated from the hallway, distracting Rick for a moment. Rattling his brain, he realized it's been oddly quiet since his arrival. “Doesn't mean I have to like it.” Rick smugly protested.

Frederick waited in silence for a moment before this naturally brought Rick's attention over to him. Staring him dead in the eye, Frederick asked, “And you think I do?”

Caught off guard, Rick huffed, “Well... you don't really seem like you do.”

“That's because I don't.” Frederick assured him.

Rick's eyes narrowed as the perplexity played with his cheekbones, “How can you not?”

Frederick looked away from Rick and back out the window. The clouds were still passing, like they always do, and the sky was still as blue as ever. “Agree with me or not. I really don't care. If there's one thing I've learned from my shitty time here...” pausing for a moment, he let out a shallow sigh, “Is that sometimes, life just isn't fair.”

Rick nodded in agreement. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean we can’t try to make it that way.”

Frederick also nodded in agreement, but he was still gazing at the passing clouds. “I used to think like that.”

A conflicting memo popped into Rick’s head. Is it... inappropriate to ask?

“I just think it’s too much of a hassle now.” Frederick shook his head before letting it succumb to the will of gravity. “Life’s already hard enough.”

“What...” Acknowledging his own hesitation, Rick realized that if any time was the time - this was it. “What changed?” he gulped.

Watching Frederick trying to process this question was troublesome. Eerily enough, Frederick didn’t physically react at all. His body sat slouched over itself, and his arms rested heavily on his legs. The only thing that gave Rick a hint that his question was received was when Frederick began to press his own lips together.

Almost dead to the world, Frederick monotoned, “I’m sure you’re going to hear it from the others sooner rather than later anyways.”

Watching patiently, Rick’s body fought between fear and curiosity alongside the change in atmosphere.

“Well, for me at least, everything changed...” taking a deep breath, Frederick slowly exhaled before revealing, “when my father died.”

Unsure of what to say, Rick’s mind just shot straight to the generic. “I’m really sorry about that man.”

Frederick’s hand began to grip his leg so hard blood could no longer flow to the tips of his fingers. As his forearm trembled, he looked back through the window. “Yeah well, everyone thinks I did it.”

Rick sat speechless. It wasn’t at all what he was expecting. 287-DCWY Juvenile Detention Center was specifically branded for non-violent offenders.

Rather annoyedly, Frederick began to ramble. “I already know what you’re thinking. Just like everyone else - how’d I end up in this place?” Realizing what he was doing to his leg, Frederick let go of his knee and shook his hand. “It was a he said, she said battle, and luckily for me the judge was the only person in the room who seemed to take pity on me. Because of my perfect record up until that point, and a literal mountain of conflicting evidence, his death was

pronounced as accidental.” With a forced laugh, Frederick continued, “Only stroke of luck I’ve had since.”

Rick’s mind struggled to keep up with all of the newfound information, and it wasn’t just the words. Seeing Frederick get so worked up called upon something within Rick that he wasn’t even sure was right. Before he even had time to comprehend what he was asking, Rick asked, “Are you... ok?”

Two years. It had almost been two years since Frederick heard anything like that. Overwhelmed by even the sliver of care that Rick showed, Frederick turned to the wall behind him.

Rick watched as Frederick urgently hooked his head towards the wall. In an attempt to reconcile his question, Rick backtracked. “Hey, I didn’t mean it like that. I just...”

Completely cut off, Frederick held his hand up to signal Rick to stop. “No, it’s not that.” Lowering his hand and finally allowing himself to turn around, Frederick looked... different. “It just caught me off guard. That’s all.”

With a sigh of relief, Rick joked, “Well don’t scare me like that then!”

The dull murmurs in the hallway manifested into more than just noise. Group conversations and the asynchronous marching could be distinguished outside of their door.

Eager to change the subject, Frederick went back to the basics. “How old are you anyways?”

“Oh me? I’m fourteen.” fretted Rick as he leaned back against the wall. “What about you?”

Frederick mimicked the boy, relaxing on his bed in a similar manner. “I’m seventeen.” Thinking harder about what Rick just said, Frederick sat confused for a moment. “Ya know, kinda surprised they put us together with that big of an age difference. They usually try to keep everyone within a year here.”

“So everyone around here has a roommate then?” Rick guessed.

“Well, not everyone. Whenever someone has a single, they quickly fill the position because it’s less rooms to clean and look after.” Frederick scrunched his nose and sneezed. Frantically shaking his head and queueing back into reality, Frederick continued. “Ugh sorry. This place is stupid dusty sometimes.”

Looking towards the window and the respective waves coming in, Rick quickly put two and two together. “That really doesn’t surprise me actually.” Out of general curiosity, Rick asked, “How long did you have a single room then?”

“Thirteen days.” Recalled Frederick. “After the first month or so that you’re here, there really isn’t anything interesting to do except count the days.”

Rick joked around a bit, “Wow, you’re really selling me on this place.”

“I didn’t realize this was a sales pitch,” Frederick retorted. Having fun with it, Frederick decided to buy into the bit. “In my professional opinion, I think you should try to buy something else.”

Without hesitation, Rick spit back, “You should think of a different profession, man.”

“Think of a different profession?” Sounding offended, Frederick raised his voice a bit. “This is my livelihood!” He burst.

“Your livelihood? You must have a pretty shitty life then,” Rick chuckled. Immediately regretting the words that just exited his mouth, Rick attempted to apologize, but just froze.

Frederick’s face turned from joking to stern in the blink of an eye.

Rick’s relaxed persona was shattered and reconstructed by a group of kindergartners. “I uh,” Rick stuttered, “I didn’t mean it that way. I promise.”

Frederick scowled at Rick. His eyes stabbed into Rick’s very soul. He didn’t waver; in fact, his expression might as well have been etched into stone.

However, the spell was quickly broken. Frederick laughed wholeheartedly for a moment, itching his eyes. “Oh man, you should’ve seen your face. Don’t be so hard on yourself man. I get it, don’t worry.”

Rick laughed a jumbled bag of nerves, irritation, and general relief.

The two sat in silence again before the jingling of keys interrupted them. Groaning and creaking revealed officer Davidson standing in the doorway. “Come on you two, it’s time to eat.”

Frederick took this opportunity to compose himself and stand up. Moving towards the door he stopped in the middle of the room.

Seeing Frederick stand there caused Rick to do a quick double take. Looking outside for the first time since he got here, Rick realized that there was actually a decent view.

Forests surrounded the compound, creating a wall unique to the barbed fencing separating them from modern society. The Rockies could be seen if you got close enough on the



right side. The sun was beginning to set, and a purple gradient connected the sky to the mountain peaks. There was a giant field behind their cell, but it was segmented from the other half of the building. Guard towers dotted the corners of each. Oddly enough, it didn't seem like all of them were really being used to their full potential.

Rick stepped away from the window and turned to see Frederick still in the same spot. His hands were in his pocket and his head hung towards the floor. Just like his jumpsuit, Frederick had a big number on his back. Twenty-Six, cracked and worn. It's jet-black outline sat nicely on the gray cloth it was tattered to.

Frederick began to move towards the door, pausing just before he exited. "Let's go get some food." He motioned Rick towards him, "Come on, the food's actually not so bad here. Plus, now you can tell me all about how you ended up in this hell hole."

It took a second, but Rick took his leap towards Frederick in the form of a casual stride. It was a decision he made on his own, but he liked it. Walking out the door, the two made their way across the second level guardrail separating them from a free fall to the first floor, and down the stairs. Crossing the common area for their wing of the building, they walked into the hallway to join the rest of the kids all heading to dinner.

Walking through the halls messed with Rick's sense of direction. Although it felt like he was moving in a straight line, when viewed from above, the complex formed an 'X' on the plot of land it was allotted. Their wing is known as wing A. Wing A is (generally) subjected to the bottom left, whereas wing B is to the right. Connected by an elongated hallway, the mess hall was directly across from Wing A. Formerly, across wing B was the front entrance. Since their wing houses the first fifty numbers, they get the first letter of the alphabet. This logically makes it so the latter has the last fifty numbers, or fifty-one to one-hundred. Nothing more, nothing less.

Those branches were dedicated to twenty-five cells, each housing two kids, and split between two floors. The main area was commensal for that wing. Round tables with smaller, floating round chairs attached gave more than enough seating for the fifty that were allotted to live there. A true commons area was held on the second floor above the intersection on the first floor.

The true commons area had everything that the other two commensal areas lacked. Individual seating, separate tables, couches, a few lasting board games, cards, and even a coveted television set.

This room was usually the first to go when 'special circumstances' arose.

Outside between the two wings was the weightlifting area. The grass that was once prolific in that section had been eradicated. It's not like this area was landscaped by any means. Small bumps in the terrain would send someone's ankle in an undesirable direction, and most of the larger rocks had been moved for safety reasons. However, it didn't stop kids with nothing better to do than to dig holes in search of 'buried treasure' as some would call it. In fact, there was nothing really special about it; small area, few benches, couple free weights - even two punching bags for those with temperamental problems. Most people just used it as an excuse to get outside and enjoy the fresh air rather than lift weights.

Guards spent most of their time on patrol, or, well, guarding certain areas that kids shouldn't have access too. When they had time to themselves for a while, or general office work to complete, they could go to a few parts around the main entrance, or the second floor.

The tallest part of the building was above the commons area on the second floor and connected its way to each and every part of the building.

That was the warden's office.

Rick watched as the mob of children from wing B convened at the crossroads and made their way to the mess hall. Two guards were posted at the intersection to block the hallway to the front entrance.

Seemed a little overkill since the doors were locked electronically, Rick thought.

Red's, Blue's, Green's - an entire rainbow of colors unfolded before Rick's very eyes. A smile crept over his face when he saw other kids walking around with yellow numbers. Sixty-Two, Ninety-Two, there weren't many; however, it was comforting to know they shared something with him. He might even be able to make some quick friends.

The more Rick looked around the more he could feel his smile fading. It wasn't that he was just thrown into a new environment, the looming sense of isolation, or even the pressure that comes from being surrounded by kids like this. In fact, he wasn't thinking about himself at all. Something was just... off.

Nobody else had a black number. Nobody other than Frederick.

## Casey Ptacek

“During the course of this semester, Casey has shown an incredible passion and dedication to each project she brought into the center. She showed a great dedication in consistently fleshing out her stories, characters, and their relationships. By blending together her interests of science and the world, as well as her passion for creative writing, she created engaging and dynamic works. Casey has improved beyond measure in the short time in the Writing Center, and it was a blast to work with her! Enjoy this piece.”

- Theresa Yonash

You, I do not deserve.

Now you, my little brother, I did not deserve.

I have a memory of a memory of the day we brought you home. Your little head was warm against my leg. When I ran my hands through your fur, I found it was all soft as velvet like your folded ears. The scream I let out when a tick migrated from your leg to mine nearly frightened our car into the ditch. Startled, I'd brushed the tick off of me and it vanished. It was a mystery until the little guy reappeared on Mom's arm. I've always felt bad about that. If I had been calm enough, my parents could have pulled it off my leg without any hassle. Never have I been that calm.

I realize now that I should have remembered what I did to you, little brother. I should have had some shame for that slight as well. I shunned you; I relegated your tiny form to the other side of the car seat. You were so young and you'd never been away from your fluffy siblings before. You must have been scared. I know a thing or two about fear. For frightening you, I'm sorry.

The memory of what I did to you isn't a memory of you at all. It's a memory of Mom telling me what I'd done. It's a memory of new shame burned onto my heart only to scar and heal with time.

It will scar.

I remember the color of your golden coat from faded photos. The one where I put you in a dress is a particular favorite of mine. It was a pink frock, dotted with flowers. You were only a pup but already you put up with me. You put up with a lot. I know we played a lot of dumb kids games like the floor is lava. You would have preferred fetch.

You put up with my tears too. Every kid sheds a few of those during puberty but we both know I shed more than most. I remember the way they'd soak into your fur, darkening the gold of your coat. Your fur was no longer velvet but instead I could feel the stiff natural waterproofing between my bunched fists. You would lay there, warm and comforting. You never pulled away. You let me grieve.

I should grieve.

That was before your fur was dusted with white like the quartz sand beaches you used to love. On the trip to our annual summer vacation, we'd stick our heads out the car window, tongues flapping in the breeze. Our family went to a cabin on the chilly banks of Lake Michigan. Do you remember the way we could feel the temperature decrease as we approached the water? Do you remember the scent of the lake? I do.

We used to swim together. I loved swimming with you. One time you scratched up my legs, leaving my pale skin risen and red. You were scared in deep water and I wasn't a true lifeguard yet. You've been forgiven. Not that a few scrapes need forgiveness. Besides, I've done far worse to you.

I missed you when I went off to college. My parents sent me pictures of you. As always, you were my handsome little brother in those photos. You've always hated cameras and would look away from the lens unless someone pushed your muzzle into frame. Whenever I saw the grimaces you made in those pictures, I was reminded how much you're like me. I missed you.

I miss you.

When my parents brought you to campus to see me that first year, it broke my heart. The air was chilly and the leaves blushed with the colors of fire. You were skinny and shaking. You wouldn't look at me but I could see the white around your irises. You were so small and weak, just an old man that shouldn't have been on a drive. I felt terrible as I pet you and I forbade my parents from traveling with you again. Instead, whenever I came to visit, you would give me a warm greeting. So, we both aged separately.

We changed.

I don't know when it happened but your fear took over.

You'd always been skittish and scared. Fireworks in particular would set you off. Panting and drooling, you'd pace around the room. That is, until I hugged you tight, my face buried in your bristly fur. Your body shook like an earthquake but I had you. You were safe and that made you shake less. For a while, that was enough.

Then one day, it wasn't.

You got scared of being alone. You'd pace through the night, keeping our family up. Nothing we did could calm you; not even when Dad and I slept on the floor beside you. Whenever we returned from leaving you alone for the day, we'd come back to upturned garbage cans and we'd find you lodged behind the couch. I could see the faded pink veins around your irises.

I think it happened slowly. A compilation of expensive drugs and your resistance to them. At some point, our parents decided to kill you.

And I let them.

Mom needed a moment to check you in so the pair of us sat outside the clinic in the grass. The ground was cool and wet below us. Your breath was rough as you panted. The air smelled fresh. You smiled at me and I knew you were happy, happier than I had seen you in a very long time.

You weren't a pup again and you weren't alright, but you deserved to live. Mom didn't see it when she came out and I didn't say anything when she led you inside. So it's my fault too.

I was angry with my parents for a long time because that was easier.

It was easier to blame them but I know better. If I had the agency, I could have fought for you. I should have. You were my little brother and you needed me but I didn't save you. After you saved me, I failed to return the favor.

So, I don't deserve you, little brother. I haven't let myself think about it. I haven't let myself mourn because I know most of the mourning is pain and blame and loathing. That's not what you deserve.

You were the best, little brother.

Do you remember Ash? He used to be frightened of all dogs. And do you remember our favorite cousin Sara? She was also terrified from a bite she'd received as a child. They weren't ever scared of you. You were too soft and too sweet to be frightening. You were the kindest soul I've ever had the pleasure of knowing.

I want to remember that. I want to mourn that.

I want to be like that.

Sometimes I used to think we were twins. We're both blond and runts of the litter. We're both shy and sweet; old ladies had good things to say about us. Neither of us liked to be touched unless it was our choice. Then there was the fear. We were a pair of scaredy cats, both frightened of everything and anything as far as my memory carries.

We were the same and yet you are so much better than me.

You deserve my memory and my mourning but I don't deserve you, little brother.

Not today. Maybe I will tomorrow.

Ask me again tomorrow.

# Nat Reiter

“It has been my pleasure to get to know Nat throughout this past semester and experience her writing. Nat is a gifted humorist with a knack for creating cynical characters and hilarious situations that we can all relate to. She has a background in theater that shines through her writing by scenes of dialogue that always leave me laughing and memorable one-liners. I thoroughly enjoy reading her new work every week. Nat is a prolific writer with endless ideas. I can’t wait to see what she creates in the future.”

- Hayden Juneau

## The End of the World

When the End of the World appeared on the calendar, Janet didn’t give it a second thought.

Between the faded work schedule and Camel blue cigarettes, it appeared without a trace on the store’s calendar that was behind the counter. It was another quiet day in the small convenience store Janet owned. The store’s few aisles with which Janet had stocked only the necessities were devoid of people leaving her with only the clock to entertain her. Wanting something to do to pass the time, Janet glanced at the calendar to see if she had missed something important and that’s when she first saw it.

It was a simple, clear message that had appeared on August 27th, about 2 weeks away. Janet had to do a double-take, certain that her eyes had been playing tricks on her. Her first thought was that someone had miraculously snuck behind the store counter and scribbled their idea of a joke onto it. Upon further investigation, Janet found that the newly made event was written in the same style and color the holidays were in thus disproving her original theory.

Assuming it was nothing more than a calendar manufacturer’s attempt at a prank, Janet ignored it after that first glance and focused on the much more terrifying day when the auditor was coming. Janet was one bad report away from having her store repossessed which would leave her with less than nothing. If anything, this “End of the World” was a little too good to be true. Janet could do with a good apocalypse to wipe the books clean.

So, Janet left it be. Maybe she had accidentally bought the calendars from some “prophet” who thought they were the second coming of God. The stress she had currently been under had caused her to make some bad decisions already and this mishap in ordering could be as simple as her messing up the usual vendors. She turned back towards the counter, her eyes



falling on the old cash register from the '80s. Maybe she could try and figure out why it decided to break for the umpteenth time while the store remained as empty as ever.

As the day went on, Janet found the strange message harder to forget about. With the store deprived of customers but the shelves fully stocked, there was nothing to do but think about the strange date. As much as she tried to forget about it, it became harder and harder to not wonder about it at all.

Her curiosity got the better of her right after lunch. Taking the calendar off of the wall, Janet placed it face up on the store's counter. Pushing the penny dish and almost expired candy bars out of the way to make room, Janet checked the calendar for any bible verses first. Finding none, she then flipped through a few of the coming months to see if any more messages predicting the end were there. After a quick once over of September through December, Janet noticed nothing out of the ordinary. The calendar was as normal as any other besides that one date.

Letting the calendar pages go, the current month reappeared with the same eerie End of the World message waiting for her. Janet walked away from it and towards a small kiosk filled with various planners hidden by the soda dispenser in the right-hand corner of the store. Pulling one off at random, Janet flipped to August. There it was again. Clear as day on August 27th was The End of the World.

Janet cycled through the kiosk of planners, both out of boredom and curiosity. Each one had the same message on the same day. August 27th, over and over again. The End of the World, over and over again. This was much more widespread than Janet had originally thought. Putting the planner back on the rack, Janet stood with her arms crossed. The flickering light of the drink coolers highlighted Janet's confused but impressed expression, the rows of colorful drinks reflecting in her dark eyes.

She chuckled dryly to herself. It looked like she had 15 days before this newfound holiday. Seemed like an insignificant amount of time for this type of deadline but hey, who was she to judge? Janet went back to work, confident that this was a hoax and no one would be stupid enough to believe it.

Janet had put it out of her mind after that and went about her business. None of the customers that came in that day brought it up so Janet assumed it was nothing to worry about. It

wasn't until she had closed the store and retired to her apartment just above it did Janet hear about August 27th again.

The local news station whose breaking news section only ever consisted of little leagues matches and the misadventures of local drunks had made the date its head story of the night. Janet had turned on the channel mostly just to make fun of the news anchor they had that week only to find the freckled 20-something-year-old mumbling through a teleprompter about calendars.

“A strange occurrence has happened today on everyone’s calendar,” The news anchor said, his eyes flickering from the camera to the teleprompter. “The, uh, End of the World is apparently coming for us on August 27th as many people report seeing the event appear out of nowhere on their calendars.”

“And many people are idiots,” Janet mumbled to herself as she turned off the TV and reclined back in her chair.

This weird occurrence only proved what Janet knew at 16: everyone in this town has an IQ lower than the national average and Janet is in some sort of hellscape for being here. She sighed to herself, certain that this would blow over in the next 48 hours and the world would find something else utterly pointless to worry about soon.

The next day, Janet was wiping down the coffee bar when a heavy thump sounded across the store. At the register, a short, somewhat paranoid-looking man with unkept hair but wearing a pressed suit was being overshadowed by a tower of bottled water cases. Janet stared in shock. She didn't know she had carried so many 24 packs of the drink in her store.

“Party?” Janet asked as she walked over to check the man out.

“Apocalypse,” The man responded.

Janet paused in her scanning to give the man a once. He sure didn't look like one of her regulars whose eyes seemed permanently dialed or told her about the day-to-day life of the voices in their heads. He looked like the kind of man who would try and rush her, claiming he had an important meeting to get to so she should cut corners on his behalf.

She had heard him walk in and immediately had stereotyped him as such. What with his annoyed appearance and quickness to get where he was going, Janet hadn't given him a second glance. She had heard him cursing as he went from the snicker bars to the motion-sickness pills,

but she hadn't bothered to help him. After all, he wouldn't have given the 5'6 55-year-old in the pale blue uniform a second thought besides thinking more highly of himself for having a "real job." He must have been looking for the 24-packs which had been collecting dust in the back next to the choose-your-own number lottery tickets. Janet gave him a skeptic look.

"You believe the calendar?" Janet asked, not disguising the disbelief in her voice.

"It appeared right in front of my eyes," The businessman replied in all seriousness, his eyes wide. "One second it was a blank day and then that message was there."

Janet, now interested more than anything, set down her scanning gun and gave the man a curious look. "And what do you think is going to happen on that day?"

"I have no idea but whatever it is," The man replied as he tapped the wall of water beside him with a chuckle. "I'll be prepared."

Janet handed him the receipt, which he refused, and watched as he stumbled out of the store with the cases of water that weighed more than him. A perplexed look crossed her face. That was one nutjob she wasn't expecting to meet today.

"You should listen to him, you know," An older woman who was next in line said, setting her desired purchases in front of the store owner.

Janet looked down, finding herself far more excited in the buying habits of people beyond that of making a few bucks. A collection of bibles that her parents had purchased decades before greeted her. Janet didn't know what corner of the store the woman found these in and she wasn't about to ask. From the teeth marks on one, Janet assumed it was the same place that annoying ass rat was holding up.

"I figure one of them should be right," The woman said matter of factly. "I have to make sure there isn't a sin I've overlooked."

Janet tried her best not to look annoyed at this notion. After a lifetime of being told she was going to hell, Janet didn't have the kindest opinion on religion. She held her snide comments back as she resorted to her usual way of dealing with God's Children; which was keeping the interaction as brief as possible so she could get back to her "satanic ways."

Janet finished the transaction as quickly as possible. She ripped the receipt from its roll and went to hand it to the old woman. Instead of the old woman refusing it as the businessman had, she gripped it tightly and made intense eye contact with the store owner.

“You best be thinking of what you’re going to do to prepare for the coming of our Lord and Savior,” The woman warned.

“You both have given me a lot to think about,” Janet nodded along. The woman nodded her own head approvingly before waddling out of the smudged glass doors with her rat-torn bibles.

Janet kept an eye on the entrance for any more crack-jobs to walk in. She slowly pulled out an order sheet from under the counter and bought as many cases of water and bibles she possibly could. She may not have been able to understand the actions of the past two customers but she understood she could make some money off of this.

Setting her pen down, Janet leaned back against the tall wooden cabinets behind the counter. She crossed her arms as she thought to herself. The businessman had bought all her 24-packs of water which came close to \$30 in one transaction. He had done it to survive the apocalypse he believed was coming soon. The old woman had the same train of thought just with a different outcome which earned Janet roughly \$35.

*This is an interesting case of demand.* Janet thought to herself before the bell above the door rang and pulled her out of her thoughts.

Janet turned to see a young man in an annoyingly colorful Hawaiian shirt making his way into the convenience store. He made eye contact with her and in three swift strides made it to the register.

“How much alcohol can I buy in one transaction?” He asked as he drummed his fingers on the counter.

Janet blinked at him. “Can I ask why?”

He scoffed like his reason was obvious. “Gotta have a party for The End of the World.”

Janet tipped her head slightly to the side, a half-smile crossing her face.

“As much as you can afford,” Janet replied.

“Awesome,” he said, a loose smile on his face. He gave Janet two thumbs up before he started walking towards the back of the store to the beer cooler.

“Cash or debit only!” Janet shouted after him as she flipped her inventory list to the alcohol ordering sheet.

She looked up from her order to see how much this customer was planning on buying to get a ballpark of how much Janet should buy. The Hawaiian shirt man was currently struggling

to lift a case of Busch Light with his twig-thin arms. Janet watched as he continued to stack various brands of beer around himself, forgoing the cheap options and choosing primarily the expensive drafts. Janet turned back to the ordering sheet and instead of filling it out, she simply wrote “as much as you can give me” on top of it.

Janet thought there had to be more people like these three that wanted to prepare for “The End of the World.” Money seemed like little concern to people if the quantity everyone had bought already was any indication. Janet glanced around the store, a plan slowly starting to form in her head. Janet tucked her pen behind her ear as she smirked to herself.

“I’m going to make a killing off these idiots,” Janet said as she pulled out a loose-leaf of paper and began to draft out her idea.

The third day after the calendar’s warning, Lydia came in.

Lydia was the 23-year-old Janet had hired to help her keep the remaining sliver of her sanity. Lydia was a whirlwind of joy and optimism; the only thing brighter than her smile was the platinum blonde hair that grew in thick waves out of her head. She was a hard worker, staying late and coming early when Janet needed an extra hand. She was also apparently an idiot if her belief of this so-called “End of the World” was anything to go off of.

It was a slow afternoon in the store with little to do. While the speed had picked up in the last two days thanks to the supposed End of the World, the foot traffic reached a lull mid-afternoon. This left Janet and Lydia alone to prepare the store for the next rush of people.

Lydia had been going on and on for the better part of her shift about all the things she was going to do before the world ended. She had already scheduled a road trip with her boyfriend Rod, who Janet disliked with a passion. Janet, unfortunately due to its incredibly suffocating size, could hear every detail about Lydia’s plans despite the pair being on opposite sides of the store.

“And I apologized to Mark about the time I almost ran him over with my car,” Lydia rattled off as she mopped the floor that afternoon. “And Jeff, you remember Jeff,”

“I don’t remember Jeff,” Janet replied from where she was by the coolers.

With a cigarette in her left hand and a sharpie in her right, Janet was busy marking up all the prices while Lydia made the floors sparkle. How the blonde managed that was beyond the

owner, but Janet wasn't one for asking questions; especially ones that would result in a 45-minute PowerPoint presentation she didn't want to sit through. Again.

Janet heard Lydia's footsteps as she rounded the store corner to face the owner. Lydia gave Janet a chastising smile like the older woman was pulling her leg about not knowing who Jeff was. With a mop in her left hand, Lydia gestured with her right in Janet's direction as if it would help with the store owner's memory.

"Jeff!" Lydia emphasized the name like that would clarify anything. Janet gave her another dead stare which forced the blonde to elaborate. "He's the one who tried buying beers with a fake ID."

"Ooooooh, Jeff," Janet said as the image of a greasy, black-haired boy with a severe case of acne tried to play it off as a 30-year-old came into her mind. Janet blew out a small cloud of smoke before responding. "Dumbass."

"Says the person who's smoking indoors *which is illegal*," Lydia said, her voice dropping in the way it did when she became uncomfortable. "I've never seen you smoke before. It's so disgusting, why would you start?"

"It's The End of the World," Janet responded mockingly as she turned a 3 into an 8 with her sharpie. "I can do what I want."

"Which is..." Lydia tried to prod but Janet just glared at her confused.

"Which is what?"

"What you're going to do before then!" Lydia clarified, bringing the original topic of conversation back. "What are you going to do before it all ends?"

"Nothing, because it's not real," Janet responded flatly, turning an eye back to what she was doing.

Janet was halfway through changing the prices of the more sought-after goods like beer, water, and the fruit cups that would outlive her. The store owner had already raised the prices in the day before to test the waters and still hadn't found the limit of what people would pay. Janet had also started clearing out some space for her future product lines to better fit the new vision of the store she had. There was a lot to do still before the delivery driver came in two days but Lydia seemed determined to distract Janet.

"What do you mean it's not real?" Lydia asked from behind the older woman.

Janet sighed and brought the cigarette back up to her lips. She was going to need all the help she could get with this impending conversation of stupidity.

“It’s a joke,” Janet replied, turning to face Lydia completely. “Some hotshot pulling a prank on everyone.”

“It can’t be a prank, it happened all over the world,” Lydia pointed out. “My professor even canceled class over it. He said that we need to go out and live our lives before it’s over!”

“As intrigued as I am about what your community college professor thinks,” Janet responded before putting her sharpie behind her ear. “I’m not about to turn my life around for this complete bullshit.”

Janet started to walk away but Lydia blocked her path. She tried to move to the side but every attempt she made was stopped by the blonde. Stuck between Lydia and the coffee bar, Janet had little means of escape.

“Let’s say that the End of the World is really coming,” Lydia said with a wave of her hand. “Is there anything you want to say before it’s over? Confessions you want to make or perhaps words of praise?”

The eager eyes and wide smile were enough for Janet to know that Lydia was begging for a compliment. Janet brought the cigarette away from her lips so she could gesture to the floor in front of the counter.

“You missed a spot,” Janet said, deadpanned. Lydia whipped around to see where Janet had pointed, and the store owner was able to slip by the younger girl. She hoped that this would make Lydia drop the subject, but the girl was persistent.

“Come on, Janet!” Lydia said as skipped past the soda machines to follow Janet to the register. “There has to be *something* you want to do or say!”

“I’m not going to become an open book because some calendar salesman snuck a joke onto the latest addition, and if you want to keep a job you better shut up about it too,” Janet said, her voice more snappish than intended. A little bit of guilt washed over her after the fact. Lydia didn’t deserve to be snapped at like that.

Lydia, seemingly unfazed, dropped her mop on the ground and walked over to the counter. She leaned her elbows on it and placed her head in her hands, giving the store owner her best persuasive look. Janet slanted her eyes, this was the complete opposite of what Janet wanted her to do. Maybe she should have snapped more.

“There’s gotta be something,” Lydia insisted.

Janet groaned, finding herself both worn down by the younger woman for the umpteenth time since knowing her and feeling guilty enough to continue talking. The only way to make the blonde shut up was to play her game, at least for a little while. Then she could send her to take the trash out in the blistering August heat while Janet got to stay near the fan.

“Who’s there to confess to?” Janet asked with a shrug. “Parents are dead so I can’t tell them how terrible they were. Siblings live across the country and I’m not buying a plane ticket to see those assholes.” Janet physically grimaced at the idea of apologizing to John or Susan. “If anything, they should be apologizing to me.”

“You never talk about your family despite this being your family’s business,” Lydia pointed out frowning her brow in slight confusion. “Didn’t you grow up in this store?”

Janet paused. She didn’t remember telling that to Lydia. “Who told you that?”

“I don’t know, I heard it around town,” Lydia replied with a shrug of her shoulder. “I got told a lot when I started working here, like how asbestos is the ceiling, and how only crackheads shop here, and how anyone who works here will be trapped forever, and have their life force slowly sucked away until they’re nothing but a sad, angry person.”

“People need to mind their own goddamn business,” Janet grumbled as she looked away from Lydia and out the window as if the gossipers were there now.

Lydia let out a loud sigh and slumped against the counter in response to Janet’s closed-off-ness. Falling to her knees, she clutched her hands together and looked up at Janet with an annoyingly persuasive stare. Janet tried to ignore it, but it proved impossible.

“Can I please learn *one* Janet secret?” Lydia begged. “Pllleeeeeeasee?”

“Fine! Just one!” Janet gave in, her compassion for the girl getting the best of her. Lydia opened her mouth but Janet quickly cut her off with a snap of her fingers. “But just one, and it can’t be about my family.”

Undeterred by the parameters, Lydia jumped to her feet and started to look around the store for inspiration. Janet mentally cursed herself for opening this can of worms on herself and so willingly too. Now she would have to answer whatever question Lydia asked which served Janet right for having feelings.

Janet racked her brain for any question Lydia might ask. At least she had been able to cut Lydia off before the girl got to ask about her foggy-minded father or her asshole of a mother, not



that there was much to say. She suspected that Lydia was going to ask how Janet inherited the store and she could gloss over some of the unsatisfactory details.

Lydia finished her scope of the store, her eyes returning to Janet. It didn't appear that Lydia had thought of a good question yet as she was still concentrating. Janet began to relax, Lydia would probably end up wasting her question and the store owner had been worrying about nothing. Right before Janet started to feel calm, Lydia's eyes focused on a space just above Janet's shoulder.

"Who's that?" Lydia asked as she pointed towards a tacked-up picture on the wall behind Janet.

Janet narrowed her eyes and looked to where Lydia was pointing. A picture of a woman tacked up on a corkboard behind the counter. Janet covered her shock with a cough and quickly tried to regain her composure.

"I told you," Janet cleared her throat as she turned back to Lydia. "That's the wall of shame, if you see that woman you take her out."

"Why isn't it like the other photos then?" Lydia asked with a tip of her head.

The picture Lydia was pointing at was a candid shot unlike the mugshot-like pictures that surrounded it. The woman in the picture wasn't crying or undeniably on drugs. She looked far too normal up there with her clean, brown hair and sparkling hazel eyes. Janet found herself wishing Lydia had asked about Janet's home life instead.

"I told you, she was an egotistical maniac who only cared about herself. She wanted a nice photo and that's why it looks different," Janet snapped back. She made a mental note to remove the picture when Lydia was gone. "Get back to work, this place won't mop itself."

The response did little to soothe Lydia's curiosity, but she returned to her mopping despite it. Janet anxiously drummed on her arm as she tried to smoke her feelings away. She hated the mixture of anger and sorrow with the becomings of regret that started clouding her mind. Luckily for her, she wouldn't have to think about it for long as customers started to arrive. Janet pushed the feelings away with her work like she always did and soon the feelings returned to a less-intense ache.

It wasn't until the end of the day that Janet gave the woman in the photo a passing thought. She had just finished counting the motherload of cash she had gotten that day and went

to the cabinet to grab a deposit envelope to put them in. The smiling face of the woman caught Janet's attention again and the mess of emotions from before came back tenfold.

Janet's stomach twisted in response, and she wanted nothing more than for it all to go away. Focusing on the anger, Janet ripped the photo off the wall and turned towards the counter. She had intended to throw it away in the trash just below the register but found herself frozen in place. Her hand tightened around the picture, not quite ready to let go of it yet.

"Come on dumbass, just do it," She hissed to herself in the empty store. She had been meaning to toss the picture for the past decade but she had never come close to doing it. A few minutes passed of Janet hovering over the garbage can with an ironclad grip on the photo she wanted to get rid of so badly but couldn't. After realizing this wasn't a battle she would win, Janet cursed herself and shoved the photo underneath a wad of inventory reports to deal with later before she turned in for the night.

"You're really going to stay open?" The delivery man asked with a confused stare at the store.

It had been 5 days since the so-called End of the World and people had started jumping ship. Suicides and strange accident-related deaths had been up 30%. Nearly every business had shut down or been shut down as their employees walked out to enjoy the last days of their lives. Weddings, divorces, violent fits of passion, and rage had been up tenfold as the world around Janet started looking like one out of a cheesy apocalypse movie. Janet kept her store open despite it all, even if everyone thought she was insane for doing so.

"Up until the 28th," Janet said snarkily as she signed the order form. "Plan on going on vacation then."

"To each, their own I guess," The delivery man sighed. "This is my last route and I want to say that it's been nice coming here, especially since you hired Lydia." He paused and looked around a little. "Is she here?"

"I gave her off," Janet responded as she handed back the clipboard. "She and her boyfriend are seeing the world while they still have it."

Janet had tried to oppose this idea of spending time with Rod, but Lydia hadn't listened. Despite Janet telling Lydia he gave off a familiar bad feeling, and reminding the girl that she had

been a 20-year-old woman in the 70's - when murder was practically an extracurricular activity- Janet had been unable to sway Lydia to her side.

“Smart kid,” He replied as he took the board from her and started to drive his trolley away. He hesitated at the door before giving the shop owner one last look. “Do something fun, Janet, before it passes you by.”

“Oh I’m a barrel of fun,” Janet replied as she watched as customers bought cases of the freshly delivered canned goods up to the counter to purchase. She hadn’t even needed to put them on the shelf.

Janet’s store had taken on a new look. It no longer bore the same resemblance as a quick-stop shop. It was now split into four sections of what Janet had decided were the four main ways of how people were taking the so-called End of the World.

The first aisle was for the End of the Worlders. These people had seemed to have assumed that the end meant everyone would die at once from some tragedy and they planned on being drunk when that happened. Located front and center, every kind of booze, beer, and bottle Janet had gotten her hands on was there. It also contained a wide variety of junk food and other sinful delights that the End of the Worlders couldn’t get enough of in their final days.

The second aisle was for Judgement Day-ers. Religious texts and various holy objects made of the finest plastic lined the shelves. This aisle was a little bare which didn’t mean a lot of potential profit for Janet with the material side of things. But Janet had adapted and began to charge priests and preachers by the hour as they tried to save as many souls as possible in the back corner of the store.

The third aisle was the apocalypse aisle. Canned goods, bottled water, knives, practically anything you would need to survive a barren landscape was there. Bullets and can openers were sold behind the counter for four times the original sales price. This aisle seemed to have the most traffic as people squeezed their way through to stock up for their coming new normal. Janet had stationed this aisle near the middle of the store so she could keep an eye on them. Just because they thought a lawless land was coming didn’t mean it was here yet. No one was shoplifting on Janet’s watch.

The final aisle was stationed on the complete opposite side of the store as the Judgement Day aisle was since that was where the cultists shopped. One plus side of living with the demented was that Janet had heard her fair share of cult innerworkings and had prepared for it.

She had somehow struck a deal with a local slaughterhouse and picked up some pig blood that was flying off the shelves. Tinfoil had also been a smart investment and was disappearing just as quickly.

Janet looked over her bustling store as she walked to the register to check out a growing line of customers. It was as if someone had waved a wand and turned all the dust bunnies into customers. There was hardly room to move without being elbowed in the side. The store had changed a lot, the clientele too, but overall, it was still the same place.

“Your tab is up to \$100, Father John!” Janet yelled over her shoulder at a priest mid evangelizing before leaning over her intercom. “Ladies, gentlemen, and the second coming of the lizard god Kronos, this is a reminder that we only accept cash and debit at this establishment. Thank you very much for spending your very limited time with us and have a wonderful End.”

Janet squeezed the newest bills into the overflowing register as the bottled water was already flying off the shelves. Sales had been off the hook. Once all these idiots finally realize that they were wrong about this crap, Janet will be counting her fortune. Slamming the register door shut with a grin, Janet barked “next!” and prepared herself for the next customer.

“Hi, Janet!” Lydia’s voice took Janet by surprise as the young woman appeared at the counter.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Janet asked, confused. “Shouldn’t you be enjoying your last days on Earth?”

“I’m taking a break to come see you!” Lydia replied as she set down her desired purchase of what appeared to be half the candy aisle. Her green eyes sparkled devilishly for a moment before slyly bringing something out of her pocket. “And to give you a present!”

“I don’t want it.”

“You don’t even know what it is!”

“Lydia, there’s a line,” Janet replied, gesturing to the group of very impatient people behind her.

“This will only take a second, I promise,” Lydia reassured.

She pulled out a folded piece of paper from her pocket. Snapping it open she handed it to Janet like it should mean something to her. Janet grabbed it from her hands and gave it a once over.

“What is this?” Janet asked, not bothering to read it herself.

“It’s an app that helps you find people from your past!” Lydia chirped. “You just need to upload a photo and whatever information you remember, and it finds them.” She placed her elbows on the table and leaned her face on her hands, wiggling her eyebrows “I thought you could use it to find mystery woman.”

Janet stared down the paper like it was about to bite her hand.

“This is an incredible invasion of privacy,” Janet said, slightly stunned. “You know that right?”

Lydia shrugged. “Everyone’s using it.”

Janet crumbled the piece of paper and tossed it to the side. “And everyone’s believing this shit about the End too.”

“Can you hurry it up?” groaned someone from behind Lydia.

The younger woman perked up and turned around to face the crowd that had gathered behind her. The disinterested, tired, and impatient people were glaring at the pair that were wasting their extremely limited time. Lydia shot them an apologetic smile.

“Sorry!” Lydia said, which promoted some grumbling as she turned around. “Guess I should get out of your way, what do I owe you?”

Janet paused for a moment. She cleared her throat and avoided eye contact.

“It’s on the house just get out of here,” Janet said under her breath.

“Really?” Lydia asked, an even bigger smile breaking her features. “Is this your way of thanking me for helping you find your mystery woman?”

Janet rolled her eyes and shot Lydia another glare. “It’s my way of thanking you for not bringing Rod in with you.” Janet glanced out the window to see if he was anywhere nearby. “He better not be waiting outside.”

“He’s in the car,” Lydia replied as she gathered the bags of snacks in her arms. “He hates being in here because you keep glaring at him.”

“Good,” Janet said. “I don’t like him.”

“He’s really nice, I don’t get you guys,” Lydia shook her head sadly.

Janet continued to glare at the window. “I think he just reminds me of my brother.” She looked back at Lydia. “Or Ted Bundy.”

“Will you stop calling him Ted Bundy?” Lydia asked. “He’s only ever been nice to me! A bit standoffish recently, but nice!”

“That’s how they get you,” Janet warned.

“Whatever,” Lydia said as she gathered her food. She smiled up at Janet before she started to leave the store. “Good luck finding mystery woman! I can’t wait to meet her!”

“I’m not going to find her!” Janet shouted back as someone in blood-red robes replaced Lydia at the counter.

Three knives, a pint of pig’s blood, and a few rosaries were rung up to a total of \$63. Janet turned towards the person in the strangely stained robe and dirty face.

“For another \$100, I’ll throw in a human sacrifice,” Janet said dryly.

The robed person checked their pockets and let out a disappointed sigh before gathering their items and leaving. An endless cycle of strange transactions followed the day out. While it made the time go faster, it didn’t make the nagging feeling in the back of Janet’s head go away.

She couldn’t help but glance at the doors expectantly as her eyes played tricks on her. A strangely familiar scene of Lydia walking through the glass doors embarrassed, heartbroken, and with nowhere else to go played in front of Janet’s eyes. Janet shook her head to rid herself of the feeling, but it still lingered, quietly waiting like it always did.

# Annika Rice

“It’s been a pleasure getting to know Annika over this past semester and seeing her work move forward. From this, and always the active goal in my sessions, seeing her ongoing development as a writer warmed my heart. I believe that Annika fully committed to her work, took the time needed to think it through and – the hardest part always – write it. Each week, Annika eagerly came in with new additions to discuss and took the thoughts we generated in each session with the upmost diligence. Annika, I’m excited to see this work when it is fully realized, and I know you have the capacity and determination to see it through.”

- Jared Burkart

## The Illegal Kitten

“Louise, I’m starving,” Ivory complained. She had slept through the dining hall hours, taking an impromptu nap after a long day of college classes and homework.

“Huh.” Louise stated.

“I’m starving,” Ivory repeated, groaning as she got out of bed.

“Kwik Trip?” Louise was glued to her laptop, watching Netflix, and eating extra buttery popcorn. Kwik Trip was Ivory’s only option at that time of night. Even Taco Bell was closed... no nachos for her.

“Do you want to come with?” Ivory asked her roommate, hoping for a companion on her late-night expedition.

“No.” Louise deadpanned, stuffing her mouth with popcorn, also exhausted from her schoolwork. She hesitated for a moment, knowing Ivory would go anyway, and said, “Be safe.”

“Okay, see you soon.” Ivory stood up, threw on a sweatshirt, grabbed her pepper spray and prepared for the hike to her destination. It was only a block away and she found herself walking this path consistently.

The sweet taste of cookie dough and plain, delicious, vanilla ice cream was calling her name. *Ivory, Ivory*, it shouted as she made her way out the dorm and onto the street. Ice cream

was a necessity. She spent a few moments contemplating buying a sandwich to compliment her sugary treat.

The streetlamps offered companionship on her journey. The small college town was always hustling and bustling with people and events, but this evening felt tranquil, as if everyone but Ivory was already at their destination. The university always brought the town to life during the school year, as if adding a little more city-living to the woodsy region.

“Mew!”

Ivory whipped her head around in the direction of the sudden noise. She was halfway between the dorms and Kwik Trip, her stomach grumbling in anticipation.

“Mew!” She listened intently for the noise, looking around for a cat. She always had a love for furry friends and deeply missed her cats back home. Seeing a neighborhood cat would make her night complete.

“Hisssss!”

She looked a few feet away from her and spotted a small lump of orange fur.

“A Kitten!” She whisper-shouted to herself. *How exciting!*, she happily thought.

“Mew! Mew!”

The cat was no larger than her hand. She surveyed the area, looking for any other kittens and its mother. To her dismay, there was no family in sight.

“Where did you come from little guy?” She cooed, attempting to gain the animal’s trust. *Cats can tell when you’re a cat person, right?*, she contemplated, trying to convince herself that years taking care of her two cats, Peanut and Coco, would help her in this moment.

Ivory was keen on making many things happen. Having an almost perfect GPA, being the president of the university’s Yoga and Meditation Club, finding time to party with her erratic friends, and now, most of all, possessing an illegal kitten on campus grounds.



“Hi friend,” she took a step closer and softly murmured to the cat, completely abandoning her food mission. She had subpar snacks in the dorm that she could munch on later.

He squeaked: her heart melted.

There was no way the kitten would survive out here on its own. Its whole body was shivering and so was she. Ivory even thought about an eagle swooping down and snatching the kitten. She frowned and shook away the thought. She wouldn't let that happen.

The little stranger had instantly meowed his way into Ivory's heart. Not one doubt crossed her mind when she spotted him alone and shaking in the cool September night's air: she was going to take him back with her. He needed rescuing and she would be his knight in shining armor.

“You can trust me,” She murmured, attempting to comfort her soon-to-be friend.

“Meow!” He cried.

She spun her sweatshirt around, so her hood was in front of her and got close enough to gently grab him. He hissed and sunk his little teeth into her thumb. It hurt only for a moment, and she swiftly set him in her hoodie, still lightly holding him from underneath.

She was able to get a closer look at him now. He still shook violently, partly from his cold body temperature and partly from fear and uncertainty. His fur was dirty. He looked like a cow... if cows were orange. Ivory sweetly consoled him the whole walk back to his new home. He shrilly meowed in response and squirmed around, confused.

“What is that?!” Her roommate, Louise, groaned, assuming it was some sort of rodent.

“I found this little guy on the curb,” Ivory cooed, stroking the kitten's head which wasn't any bigger than a ping-pong ball. “He was scared and needed shelter.”

“A cat?” She still couldn't make out what the animal was due to its filth.

“Kitten.” Ivory jokingly corrected, trying to erase the worried crease between her friend’s brows.

“You do realize that we could get into major trouble for having it in here, right?” Louise was a people pleaser and aimed to follow the rules... well, some of them. This rescue situation stirred up more concerns than her underage drinking endeavors and occasional late homework assignments.

“No one has to know!”

“Where will it go? Our room is practically a closet, Ivory. Where will it pee? It’s going to stink in here. What about fleas? Or—”

“I’ve got this all under control.” Ivory insisted, feeling confident in her swift problem-solving abilities. A plan was formulating, swirling around her head like a tornado, along with other questions like *Did I finish all my homework? Did I finish organizing the fundraiser for yoga club? Do I need to do my laundry?*

“It’s one o’clock in the morning, girl. How will you build this critter a safe living space and a box to poop in?” Louise raised an eyebrow, challenging her dear friend who always took more helpings of responsibility than she could chew.

“I may or may not have some ideas brewing.” Ivory set the small animal on her desk and stared at it; her bright blue eyes filled with hope and the unmistakable magic of love at first sight.

“Well, we better get to work.” Louise stood up from their cozy futon and got a closer look at the petite animal. Ivory grinned, thankful for her support, even if it was going to waiver in the morning when Louise would wake up and clear her head with a cup of coffee.

The roommates worked until 2am to convert a storage tub into an impromptu habitable abode for the kitten. A shoebox with sand from the volleyball pit sufficed as the litterbox, and a towel as a bed. They filled a small bowl with milk but couldn’t offer the poor thing anything but crunched up Cheerios to eat. Shopping in the morning was a must.

“It still looks so scared,” Ivory sighed, “but at least this is better than the street.”

Ivory had a few more nips in her direction when she cleaned him off with a warm washcloth, revealing his orange fur more prominently. With the power of teamwork, the kitten was safe, warm, clean, and somewhat nourished.

Louise yawned in response, and they bid each other goodnight, with an occasional squeak of a meow from their third roommate, who could only pay rent in purrs and occasional scratches.

\* \* \*

The next morning Ivory woke up with more pep in her step than usual, excited to greet her new friend. She climbed out of bed, careful not to wake Louise.

She walked over to the make-shift cage and the little kitten stared up at her. He hadn't touched the Cheerio's but drank all the milk. He seemed more content than he was yesterday.

“Hi friend,” She softly smiled, picking him up. He immediately started to crawl up to her shoulder, purring loudly. She sighed in relief, thankful that he was warming up to her.

It was still dark in the room, so she turned on her desk lamp and investigated the cage further. There was pee and tiny little dropping of poop everywhere.

She sighed again, this time in frustration. *Of course I need to teach him how to use a litter box, she realized, he's probably only a couple weeks old and doesn't have his mom around.*

She cleaned up the feces and replaced the towel. When she went to fetch him a fresh bowl of water, Louise woke up, yawning loudly.

“Morning!” Ivory smiled, setting the bowl of water into the kitten's miniature home.

“Have you thought of the name for him yet?” Louise yawned again, and climbed down from her lofted bed.

“I’m still thinking,” Ivory replied thoughtfully. “I’ve always wanted an orange cat named Pumpkin, but I don’t think that name is meant to be.”

“I agree,” Louise nodded, starting up the Keurig for her morning cup of coffee. “He’d be one tiny pumpkin.”

“I’m going to go shopping soon, do you want to come with?” Ivory asked.

“Sure! I don’t have class until two anyway.” She filled a mug with half and half creamer and too much sugar.

“Perfect!” Ivory grinned. Merely shopping for groceries with Louise was fun; the two of them always found a way to make ordinary things enjoyable.

Ivory let the kitten roam the room under her supervision while Louise drank her coffee. He squeaked and moved slowly, still teeny and frail. Louise observed quietly, taking her time to wake up. She was never as much of a morning person as Ivory.

Before the two of them left, Ivory carefully set the kitten back into his humble abode and they each gave him a light pat on the head, telling him they’d be back soon.

They drove to Target, one of their favorite stores, and headed straight to the animal care section, deciding they’d make some detours on the way to the checkouts later. Ivory read the list out loud, and they tried to buy the most affordable, yet adorable, items they could for their new pet.

“Look!” Louise smiled, “These bowls you can paint and then bake in the oven, and it’ll last forever!”

“We can put his name on it once we decide what it’ll be!” Ivory joyously declared. They instantly put it in the cart. After picking out kitten food, some toys, a litter box, the litter (which warranted further research for what brand to buy), and some more towels, they were ready to go.

Alas, on all trips to Target, two girls are bound to be sucked into the tempting endcaps of each aisle. What a dangerous place to be!

“Louise I’m too broke to be looking at clothes,” Ivory groaned, unable to take her eyes away, “You know it’s my weakness!”

“Stay strong,” Louise chuckled, “You know I need a new dress for the Delta Phi fundraiser!”

“I know, I know,” Ivory shook her head, laughing. “I still don’t understand why you’re in a sorority.”

“The truth?” She raised an eyebrow, looking over at her.

“Besides meeting frat guys?” Ivory rolled her eyes, giggling.

“There’s always that,” Louise smiled, “but I wanted to join because I like doing the fundraisers and socials... and growing up, I always liked watching *Legally Blonde*.”

“You never told me that before!” Ivory’s jaw dropped, “I love *Legally Blonde*!”

“It’s a classic! My sister was the one who got me hooked and joined this sorority five-ish years ago and she loved it.”

“That’s fair enough. We should get some popcorn and watch the movie later while we do our art project!”

“Yes ma’am!” Louise quipped, quickly finding a new dress to buy before the two of them headed across the store to the snack aisles.

After finding a bunch of wants and needs, they checked out their items and piled them into Ivory’s car. Ivory drove them back to the dorms and Louise watched the small-town pass them by. The leaves were on the brink of changing into beautiful reds and oranges and everyone in the town spent as much time outside in the sun before it got too cold. Families walked about,

taking their dogs on walks. Louise suddenly missed her dog back home and wondered if she would like having a cat around.

Once they finished unloading all their groceries into their dorm, Ivory worked on re-assembling the kitten's home while Louise prepared for class. Ivory didn't have class on Fridays and was thankful for the time off every week.

It appeared as though the kitten still didn't understand what the litter box was for, as there was sand everywhere in the cage. It looked like he got bored and deeply explored his space.

"I'm glad we bought him toys," Louise observed, peering down at him.

"I'll teach him how to use the litter box." Ivory nodded. Louise giggled and wondered how she would do that.

Once Louise left for class, Ivory did some research on how to train a kitten to use a litter box. She got some treats ready as rewards and tried her best to be a good teacher for her pet.

The kitten was growing to love all the attention he received, purring, and satisfied with his new kitten kibble and canned wet food.

"Oh, you're a happy little guy, aren't you?" Ivory scratched his head, and his purr rumbled louder. For such a tiny creature, he had the tendency to create boisterous mews, yips, and yawns. The little guy was quickly finding his voice and Ivory adored it.

Suddenly, she had her lightbulb moment.

"Motor!" She grinned, excitement filling her chest as she booped the kitten on the nose. "Your name will be Motor!"

Ivory did some homework assignments and her laundry while Louise was at class, enthusiastically waiting to tell her friend the kitten's name.

\* \* \*

“Motor?” Louise wrinkled her nose.

“C’mon Louise!” Ivory’s jaw dropped, disappointed, and offended that her friend didn’t like the name she picked out, “It’s adorable!”

“It’s a part of a car.”

“So?” Ivory retaliated. She wasn’t going to budge. This cat’s name was going to be Motor and Motor it shall be. “It fits him perfectly!”

“Alright, alright,” Louise groaned, “I’ll come around to it.”

“Good.” Ivory triumphantly smiled, “It’s his destiny.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Louise chuckled. “Did you teach him how to use the litter box?”

“I did,” Ivory nodded, “I did some research, and it seems like he doesn’t need too much training. He should just have instincts to use it from now on. I think he was just stressed from being in a new space.”

“*Mew!*”

“Oh, isn’t that right?” Ivory cooed to Motor. She picked up the furball and he started climbing all over her.

“Ouch!” Ivory yipped, “Your claws are so sharp!”

He looked at her, almost smiling as he continued to climb, going for the jugular.

“Okay,” Ivory plucked the mischievous kitten off of her, “You’re done.”

Coincidentally, Louise was leaving to go to the bathroom. Motor scurried to the door and ran out into the hall before Ivory could finish yelling *no!*

“Motor!” She cried as the two of them frantically ran after the kitten. He didn’t know his name yet, so there was no use in calling out to him. Luckily, Louise scooped him up quickly and handed him over to Ivory.

“This one is naughty.” she said.

Ivory hurried back to their room and their neighbor Kayla spotted her. Ivory internally groaned, not too acquainted with the girl across the hall. Kayla was a front desk worker for the dorm and seemed as busy and responsible of a person as Ivory. However, she was unsure of how Kayla would respond to her having an illegal kitten.

“Oh my god!” Kayla’s jaw dropped, “That’s a kitten!”

“Shhh,” Ivory begged, “Keep your voice down.”

Ivory darted into the room, beckoning nosy Kayla to follow her.

“I had to see what the ruckus was all about and I’m so glad I did!” Kayla grinned, petting the feline escape artist. “How was herding cats?”

Ivory lightened up, laughing slightly before asking Kayla to keep the kitten a secret.

“Oh, you have my word,” Kayla agreed, “Just as long as I can visit him!”

“Of course,” Ivory smiled, deeply relieved that their cover wasn’t blown. She knew that the kitten couldn’t be kept a secret forever, as they’d have to have friends come visit their dorm soon, but she didn’t want everybody and their brother to know about him.

Louise returned from the bathroom and was instantly worried about the kitten’s identity being known to too many people.

“No one will tattle on y’all,” Kayla told her, “Don’t worry too much.”

Louise still appeared worried, but Ivory trusted Kayla. She seemed genuine. Maybe they would even make a new friend in the middle of the debacle.



“Well,” Kayla stood up, getting ready to go, “I’m glad I got to meet y’all’s kitten. What’s his name?”

“Motor,” Ivory happily replied.

“Oh, I love that!” Kayla grinned. Louise rolled her eyes as Kayla left, who made sure the cat didn’t follow her out.

“I’m not convinced,” Louise plainly stated. “I think this is riskier than we expected.”

“Take a chill pill,” Ivory was suddenly irritated with her friend’s uptightness. *Why is she so back and forth on this?*, she asked herself.

“I don’t want to get kicked out of the dorm!” Louise’s voice was shrill and anxious, feeling attacked by Ivory’s lack of understanding.

Ivory sighed and contemplated her friend’s feelings. It frustrated her that Louise would pick and choose what would stress her out. Seemingly little issues would sometimes escalate into big dramatics, while other times the world could be ending, and Louise would be carefree.

“Okay,” Ivory nodded, trying to simmer the abrupt tension in the room, “I understand your concern, but I really don’t think we’ll get kicked out if we are caught.”

“I don’t know.” Louise crawled up to her lofted bed and mumbled something about taking a nap.

“Goodnight,” Ivory said, knowing that the sleep would help her feel calmer. Ivory looked at Motor and sighed again.

She had already formed an attachment to him and didn’t want to give him up to a shelter. She also did not know how her parents would react to her bringing a pet home to pawn off—they already had two older cats and a kitten would be too much. There were a lot of uncertainties at bay, and she couldn’t seem to find the lighthouse.

Her heart was slowly breaking when suddenly the fire alarm went off. Motor fearfully scurried under the futon, and Louise cursed as she climbed out of bed.

“I’m sorry I got so worked up,” She shot an apologetic glance to her friend, but Ivory was too preoccupied with Motor to notice.

“Should I take Motor with us?” Worry swelled in her chest. She didn’t want to leave her beloved furry friend behind.

“It’s probably just a drill,” Louise said. In response, Ivory sniffed at the air and could’ve sworn she smelled smoke.

“I have to take him with.”

She stuck her arm under the futon, taking a minute to finally grab him. He squirmed and meowed in protest, still frightened by the loud sirens.

“It’s going to be okay,” she cooed, “Shh, shh.”

She reluctantly put Motor in her backpack, and he meowed loudly. Louise waited patiently for Ivory to get Motor situated. Both girls knew that this could end badly.

The two roommates were the last to exit the building and their RA Eric gave them an odd look.

“We should go to my car or something,” Ivory declared, thinking quickly on her feet.

Louise agreed and they started heading to the direction of the parking lot when Kayla ran up to them.

“Is the kitten okay?” Her eyes were wide with concern, and she didn’t bother to hush her voice. The meandering residents of the dorm lingered about, and Louise looked around to see if anyone heard.

“Shush!” Ivory pleaded, “Keep your voice down!”

She could feel Motor squirming in her backpack as he cried out.

Kayla apologized, but it was too late. Their concerned RA had started walking over to them.

“What do we do?” Louise sharply inhaled and held her breath cinematically. Firetrucks pulled up to the curb and students moved out of the way, bumping into them.

It was too late. Their RA was quickly approaching and for the first time in what seemed like forever, Ivory didn't know what to do.

# Brittney Riehle

“I very much enjoyed working with Brittney throughout the entirety of the semester. Brittney’s main interest when it comes to writing has been short stories. At first, Brittney was a little more reserved and kept to herself, but as the semester went on she started to become more confident in herself and her writing. It was great to see how her writing improved as her confidence improved, and I’m really glad that she decided to submit to Wordplay. I always enjoyed my sessions with Brittney, and hope that she continues to write in the future.”

- Rhiley Block

## A Heart for Christmas

Blake James never thought of the idea of love. To her love was just something everyone wanted but never had. This all changed when another woman's gift showed her the way.

When Blake was 22, she found out that her heart was not functioning like it was supposed to. The doctors gave her a 30% chance of living past 25 if she didn’t get a transplant. This gave Blake three years of waiting for a donor, before she knew her condition would get worse. As two years went by with no luck, Blake began to give up on the idea of getting a heart and made peace with the idea of dying. This all changed on the night of December 24. But before we get to that, let's start with how Blake got there. The date was June 23, it was a beautiful summer night in the city of La Crosse, Wisconsin. Blake was sitting at home watching a movie, her dark auburn hair pulled up into a ponytail, her pale freckled face almost covered with the blanket she held up to her face. When suddenly, she heard a vibrating across the room. She realized it was her phone vibrating on the kitchen counter moving around causing the black and gold case to giggle, but figured it was only her mother. Her mother called her every night to make sure she was ok, Blake liked talking to her mother - but knew the only reason for the calls was to make sure she wasn’t passed out on the floor or something worse. The vibrating stopped and Blake went back to her movie, but after a minute the vibrating started again. She paused the movie and went to grab the phone. But to her surprise it wasn’t her mother, it was a number she felt was familiar, but couldn’t quite figure out why.

She answered the phone with a simple “hello”, on the other line she could hear the voice of Dr. Rollins the doctor who had been treating her for the past three years.

She could hear the excitement in his voice as he said, “Blake we found a heart.” The phone slipped out of her hands and dropped to the floor as Blake stood there in complete shock. A minute passed and once the shock had settled, she bent down to pick the phone up.

As she placed it to her ear, she softly asked the doctor, “Are you serious?” He could hear the realization in her voice, he knew that she had been waiting for this news and now that it was here, it was a lot of emotions for her.

As the tears began to fall from Blakes bright sky-blue eyes she asked, “How long?”

The doctor looked down at his feet and smiled. Laughing through his voice he said, “You free tomorrow?”

Blake smiled as the tears began to form, “Wouldn’t miss it.”

### **The Day**

As the next day came Blake felt the anxiousness come over her as she sat in the waiting room. She was getting a heart; she was going to live. But what also came to her mind was who died for her to live. The donor was said to be anonymous; all Blake knew about them was that they were a 24-year-old female that passed away in a car accident. Blake wanted to know more about her but felt that it might be too painful for the family. At that second the hospital doors burst open, Blake’s mother Bella came rushing in. Blake could see the huge smile on her face and tears in her eyes as she paced towards her.

She wrapped her arms around her like a bear and shouted, “you're gonna be ok, all my prayers have been heard.”

“Mom, people are looking,” Blake said, embarrassed.

Bella pulled away as tears rolled down her cheek, “I'm sorry. I’m just so happy that my little girl is gonna be alright. When are you going in?” The doctors had said that the surgery would be at 2 o’clock. They looked up as the clock read 1 o’clock.

Soon after a nurse walks out, “Blake James” the nurse blurted. Blake raised her hand as the nurse directed her to follow.

“It's time for me to get prepped,” said Blake with a nervous but excited look.

“I’ll be right here when you're done,” expressed Bella as she hugged Blake and kissed her on the head. As they separated, Blake walked through the doors knowing what comes next.

### **6 Months Later**

As the months passed after the surgery, everything went well. The surgery was a success and Blake now was living her life free of the illness that constantly kept her down. It was now December 1, and Christmas was in the air. No one knew what it was, but Blake seemed a bit

more excited about everything than she was before. Some said it was because of the new heart, while others said that it was just because she knew she was gonna be around for a while.

Blake always loved Christmas: the decorating, the food, the presents. She loved every aspect of it, and now she was even more happy because she knew there would be many more to come. During the days Blake worked as an Elementary school teacher. She loved little kids and being around them brought her mood up every day. As the holiday was coming up, Blake asked everyone in her class to say what they will be doing this Christmas.

“I’m going to Florida.”

“I’m going up North.”

“I’m staying here and spending time with my family.”

As Blake listened one of her students raised her hand fast so she could be the next to answer.

“Yes, Jenny?”

“What are you doing for Christmas Miss James?” Jenny asked.

“I’m spending the holiday with my mother and sister”

“Are you going anywhere special?” shouted Eric from the other side of the classroom.

“I don’t know, maybe I will,” exclaimed Blake.

Since November Blake had this feeling of visiting a town called Rudolph, Wisconsin. She had seen this town as a huge Christmas town and wanted to see what it had to offer but no one could come with her, as her mother and sister had other things to do up to Christmas day. But as Blake had this time, she made the decision to travel there as it only was about an hour or two away.

### **Rudolph, WI**

Blake had everything packed and ready to go. Her hotel was booked, her bags were packed, and her plans had all been scheduled. She loaded her car and began her journey. As she drove her excitement was overpowering as she couldn't wait to see all the Christmas festivities. As she got closer and closer her excitement rose. When she finally got there, she was amazed as the whole place looked like a little kid's dream. The streetlights were covered in tinsel and lights. Images of Santa, reindeer, and presents hung from the lights, sparkling in the winter sun. The whole town was filled with smiles- it felt as if Blake had entered another world that didn't have the struggles she had to deal with in the past. Blake drove slowly so that she wouldn't miss a

minute of the festivities around her. Blake was in complete awe of the festivities, she completely ignored everything else around her. Her body jumped as she heard her GPS blare telling her to turn right in the direction to her hotel. Her eyes turned back to the road in front of her, she turned her wheel and drove on to the hotel. As she pulled in, she could see that it wasn't just the streets filled with decorations, but the buildings as well. The roof of the hotel was covered in sparkling lights, a life size sleigh and reindeer sat on top of the roof just like the story *The Night Before Christmas*. As Blake walked in the sliding doors her eyes focused on a huge lit up tree in the center of the lobby. Filled with Christmas lights, ornaments of all kinds, gold tinsel that shined from the lights above, and a bright golden star placed right at the very top. The tree was so tall it seemed as if it was going to hit the ceiling. She made her way to the front desk with a smile so bright, she knew that this trip was going to be worth it. At the front desk she was greeted by a tall man with caramel brown hair, lightly tanned skin, eyes as blue as the ocean on a sunny day, and a jawline so sharp you could cut a rock on it.

He looked at Blake and asked, "Checking in?"

"Yes. Um, it should be under Blake James," she replied hesitantly.

"Yup here it is Miss James, you're in room 223," he replied, handing Blake the keycard to the room.

"Thank you," Blake's eyes move down to his chest, focusing on a small metal pin spelling out "Lucas". Blake turns around and heads upstairs, as the day has set and a new one begins.

### **Exploring the Town**

The next morning, Blake woke up earlier than normal, excited for the day ahead. Usually, she would never wake up before 10 when she didn't have to be at the school, but today was different- she felt a burst of energy that she hadn't felt before. When she was dressed and ready for the day, she walked down to the lobby to start to explore the new city outside. The lobby was as amazing as she remembered from last night. She walked past the front desk looking forward to what comes after the sliding doors. She kept thinking of the different places she had read about and the stores that she had seen on the way to the hotel. Her mind was imagining so much she almost didn't hear the voice talking behind her. She turned around and saw Lucas standing at the front desk looking at her. She looked at him and explained,

"Sorry, what did you say?" He smiled and laughed "Daydreaming are ya." he remarked.

“What if I was, it’s my mind I can do what I want with it,” she said with a bright smile on her face.

“What about, if I may ask.”

“This city, I have never seen one like it. It’s so beautiful and amazing,” she proclaimed.

“If you want, I could show you around.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be working? Who’s gonna manage the front desk if you leave?”

“You do realize there are other employees here other than me, right? I can just have someone else cover the front desk while I’m gone.”

“Won’t your manager be mad if you leave during your shift?” She said teasingly.

“I don’t think he’ll be too mad” Pointing to a picture of himself under a plaque stating “manager”.

“Fine, I could use a local to help me find my way around.”

“Alright meet you outside in a few minutes.”

As she walked outside and stood next to the dark wooden bench covered in snow next to the door, an idea that had been on her mind for a while resurfaced. Blake really wanted to know who the donor of her heart was, but as it was anonymous, she felt she would never know. She wanted to do more digging after she got the heart, but she always felt that she would just hurt the donor’s family if she came around asking questions about their deceased loved one. But it had been months, maybe the family might like hearing from her - maybe they would love to meet the person their daughter saved. The idea flooded her head now more than ever, it felt as if her heart was telling her to do it. After minutes of consideration, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned around and stood inches apart from Lucas. They both hesitated and stepped back.

“You ready to explore the town?” Lucas said with a quiver in his voice, releasing a puff of smoke like air.

“Yeah, I can’t wait to see what this town all has to offer,” Blake responded.

“Then let’s get going. Do you want to take your car or mine?”

“I don’t have a preference; we can take yours if it’s most convenient for you.”

“Sure. Hop on in.”

The day flew by, as Blake and Lucas traveled all around Rudolph - shopping, sightseeing, and of course eating, who would come to a new town and not try the town food. As the day came to an end and the sun began to set, Blake and Lucas visited the last store. Above their heads hung



a huge lit sign reading *Kris Kringle's Ornaments*. Just as they began walking through the bright red door, the sound of a familiar song startled them both. Lucas put his hand in his coat pocket and pulled out his phone.

"A Thousand Years. Nice ringtone," Blake said laughing.

"Hey, it's a good song, and it has special meaning to it," Lucas replied, looking down to the floor.

"I'm sorry if I offended you."

"No, it's just a hard subject to talk about."

"No worries, I won't pry."

"Thanks," He replied as he let out a small laugh. "I really should take this. Why don't you head inside and I'll be right there," Lucas said, stepping away from the door onto the sidewalk.

"Ok, take your time." Blake replied as she walked through the door.

The store was filled with all kinds of ornaments - ones for occasions, decorative ones, musical ones, and a lot more. As Blake's eyes wandered around the store, she completely missed the person in front of her. Bumping into a woman, almost knocking her to the ground.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. I'm such a klutz. I was looking around and didn't see you," said Blake guiltily.

"It's ok, no harm was done," replied the woman. Her hair was as yellow as gold, her eyes so dark they were almost black, and lightly tanned skin with freckles all over.

"I'm Blake by the way. I'm visiting the town and have been getting distracted by everything. It's just all so cool and beautiful."

"Oh, believe me I understand that. I've lived here my whole life, but whenever Christmas came around - everything turned magical. I'm Jo."

"Nice to meet you, Jo. At least now I know two people in town."

"Great. Everyone here is so nice, if you ever need anything don't hesitate to ask."

"Thanks, I will," Blake replied as she turned around to pick up the Chapstick she dropped.

"I better get going, but it was really nice meeting you. Hopefully we'll see each other again."

“Yeah, otherwise do you have a cell phone I could...” Blake said as she turned back and saw no one. “Where’d she go?” Blake whispered to herself as she searched the room for Jo.

“Looking for something?” Said a voice from behind Blake. She turned around to see Lucas standing there looking at Blake confused.

“Just a person I was talking to, I turned my back, and she was gone.”

“Maybe she had to get somewhere.”

“Yeah maybe, it's just a little weird. That call took you a while.”

“Yeah, it was the hotel. They need me to head back as the person who took over for me is almost done. Anyways the stores are closing soon so if you're gonna buy something you better make it quick.”

“Ok, I'll be quick.”

Blake walked around the store and grabbed a few ornaments to place on the small tree in her room. After all the exploring was done, Blake and Lucas got in the car and headed back to the hotel. They walked into the hotel and walked up to Blakes room.

“Thanks for showing me around. I had a lot of fun,” expressed Blake

“Yeah, I did too, I haven't had fun like that in a while. Uh, have a goodnight, I'll see you tomorrow,” said Lucas smiling and blushing.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

### **The Donor**

It was now 5 days before Christmas. Blake and Lucas grew closer and had spent pretty much every day together, whether it was around the town or in the hotel. Blake felt something more between them but felt there was always something else on his mind that was holding him back. He wouldn't tell her what it was, he kept saying that it was something too hard for him to talk about. She didn't want to intrude but she wanted him to feel comfortable enough to tell her.

Blake had also spent more time with Jo, although she never was able to get a phone number from her as Jo explained that her phone was broken. They would set meetups around town and hang out for hours on end. Jo became one of Blake's close friends

Blake loved everything around the town - the people, the atmosphere, and so much more that it was becoming hard to think about leaving. She was dreading the next 3 days, as she knew they would be her last. She was leaving to go back home on the 23rd, so she could spend Christmas eve with her family.

As the weeks passed Blake did more research on trying to find her donor but was having little to no luck. The hospital wouldn't get back to her with the information as Dr. Rollins was on break. She waited and waited for a phone call or email, but nothing came. Then finally she got a response. Dr. Rollins had stepped into the office for a day to get something and saw the message from Blake. He felt compelled to email her right away. The email stated:

*Hello Blake,*

*I am sorry that it has taken me so long to get back to you. I have been with my family on vacation, I came to the office and saw your message. I know how bad you want to know who the donor was, so I talked to the family, and they said that I can share the information with you.*

This was it; Blake was finally gonna know who saved her life. The anxiousness and excitement ran through her head as she read on.

*The donor's name was Elizabeth Joelle McKinley. She was a 24-year-old chef from the town Rudolph Wisconsin. Her parents are Amelia and Jack McKinley, she was also engaged to be married but we never got the name of her fiancé. That's about as much as I can tell you, if you would like to know more, I have asked the family if you would be able to contact them. They said yes, so their information is at the bottom of this email. I hope this gives you the information you wanted. Have a Merry Christmas.*

- *Dr. Daniel Rollins*

Blake's eyes went wide as everything made sense - the feeling she had about coming to Rudolph must have been a sign from Elizabeth. She was helping Blake find the answers. Blake felt overjoyed at the feeling that she would finally get to know more about this girl. She grabbed her phone and dialed the number at the bottom of the email. Ready to call, when she heard a knock at her door. She stood up from her bed and walked to the door. As the door opened, she saw a bright smile that made her heart flutter.

"Hey, I was wondering if you wanted to go grab a bite," said Lucas

"Uh yeah, just give me a minute. Why don't you come in."

Lucas walked into the room and stood close to the bed, his eyes looking at what was on the computer.

“What is this?” Lucas asked, pointing to the computer.

“Oh that, that's an email from my doctor. Remember how I told you about my heart transplant? Well, I have been asking my doctor for the information on the donor and he finally got back to me.”

“So, this name here is the person who donated the heart?” he said hesitantly.

“Yeah, why? Is everything ok?”

“Elizabeth McKinley was your donor?”

“Yeah, did you know her?”

He paused looking at the screen in awe.

“Lucas?” Blake questioned

“She was my fiancé,” he replied.

“What? You were engaged?”

“That's the thing I could never bring myself to share. She died in a car crash 3 months after I proposed.”

“Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry.”

“I have to go. I can't be here right now.”

“Lucas, wait, did I say something wrong, or something?”

“I just...I have to go,” he said as he walked out the door.

Lucas walked out the door as Blake stood there in shock. Lucas's fiancé was her donor.

### **The Last Day**

Blake's mind couldn't rest thinking about the shocking news she just found. Her heart donor was the fiancé of the guy she liked. Her mind raced as she put together everything that happened in the past few months. The feeling of coming to Rudolph and meeting Lucas, to Blake it was a sign from Elizabeth showing her the happiness she deserved. But did she just lose all of that by Lucas finding out? She tried calling him multiple times, but he never answered.

“Why is he ignoring me?” Blake wondered.

“I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't cause her accident.” But the loneliness made her feel like he thought she did.

She knew she had to talk to someone, but the one person she wanted to talk to - didn't want to talk to her. The only other person she was close to in this town was Jo, but she had no way of contacting her. As she walked out her hotel room the next morning, she hoped to run into Lucas so she could talk to him. But when the elevator lowered to the first floor and opened, she only saw a young girl at the counter.

"Hi, is Lucas around?" she asked as she walked up to the desk.

"I'm sorry, he's not. He left in a rush last night and hasn't been back since. He said that he had something that he had to take care of and that he didn't know when he would be back," replied the girl.

"Ok, thank you anyway," Blake said with a saddened tone in her voice.

She walked out the door, tears forming in her eyes. When she heard a familiar voice that lifted her mood.

"Hey stranger," said Jo

Blake turned and wrapped her arms around her in a bear hug. Tears running down her cheek, landing on Jo's shoulder.

"Hey what's wrong?" Jo concerningly asked

"It's Lucas," Blake explained. "He's ignoring me like I did something wrong."

"Now why would he be ignoring you? You guys have been so close since you arrived, what changed?"

"He found something out about me, and I-I just don't know what's going through his head."

"What did he find out? What did you kill somebody?" Jo joked

"You didn't, did you?" she said with a serious look on her face

"No, of course not." Blake replied with a laugh

"Then what was it?" Jo asked

"Remember how I told you that I had a heart transplant?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I wanted to know the donor, so I looked into it and found out my donor was his fiancé."

"Oh, your donor was Elizabeth."

"Yeah, did you know her?"

“Since I was a kid. I grew up with her and Lucas. They were sweethearts from early on. He was always in love with her. Everyone thought they would be together forever. Then when he proposed everyone in town celebrated. This town has always been like a close-knit family, when something big happened everyone knew about it and celebrated. Then when something bad happened, everyone grieved together. When Elizabeth died, everyone came together and supported Lucas and her family. They were told that Elizabeth saved lives through her donations, but they only wanted her to be saved,” Jo expressed

“I can imagine how that felt. My family would cry almost every day because of my heart condition. As the years went by, I got worse and worse. I acted like I was fine, but in reality, I was suffering and so were they. My mom, my sister, and my brother all would try their best to take the thought of my condition away, but it only would last a little bit. If I had passed, I can assume that that's how they would have reacted.”

“If Lucas is ignoring you, it might just be because he needs time to process. I don't think he hates you if that's what you're thinking, it's just hard for him to know that the woman he was getting to know has a part of the woman he loved. Just give him some time, he'll come around,” Jo advised

“I don't have time. I'm leaving tomorrow.”

“Maybe leave him a letter. If he doesn't talk by tomorrow, leave him a letter telling him how you feel. That's the best I can think of.”

“Maybe you're right. If we don't talk before, I leave, I'll leave him a letter. But let's hope it doesn't come to that,” said Blake. “Well, I better get going. I have things to do before I leave tomorrow.”

“Ok, well it was good hanging out with you while you were here,” Jo said, reaching for a hug.

“Hey, hasn't your phone been fixed yet? We can keep in touch,” Blake asked

“Yeah, it's just taking a while. Why don't you give me your number and when it is done, I'll text you?” Jo replied.

“Ok,” Blake said, handing Jo a piece of paper with her number on it.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye,” said Jo

“Not for long hopefully,” Blake smiled

## **Leaving**

The whole night Blake tried to find Lucas and get a hold of him, but she had no luck. He hadn't come back to the hotel and the day had come for her to leave. She took Jo's advice about writing a letter but was having a hard time thinking of what to write. She didn't know what to say to make things better. She too was shocked by the information about her donor, but it wasn't her fault. All she could think of was explaining her ordeal to him to show her feelings. She spent the whole morning writing and packing. She hoped when she got down to the lobby, she would see him and be able to talk to him face to face. But that sadly didn't happen. When she traveled down to the lobby with her suitcases in hand, she only saw once again the young girl at the desk.

"I'm sorry to bother you again, but any word from Lucas?" Blake asked hesitantly.

"I'm sorry miss, he hasn't come in or called," replied the girl

"Well, I'm checking out. Here is my keycard."

"Thank you, I will get this into the system. And you're all set to go. Thank you for staying with us and we hope to see you again."

"One last thing, can you give him this for me," Blake said handing her the letter

"Sure thing, I'll give it to him when I see him."

"Thank you, goodbye."

Blake walked out the door with a heavy feeling in her heart, she never got to talk to him or say goodbye. She opened her car door and looked at the town she had come to know and love. Tears forming in her eyes, she turned to face the windshield and drove on.

The sun was almost set when Lucas arrived back at the hotel. As he walked in the door, he heard a voice from behind the counter calling him.

"Lucas," said the girl

"Hey, what's up?"

"I have something for you, a guest dropped this off for you."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, why don't you open it. I'm gonna go clean up a little."

As she left Lucas looked at the letter for a second and grazed his finger over his name in writing on the top. He turned it around and opened it up. His eyes lowered down to the bottom of the letter seeing it was from Blake. He hesitated on reading it but went on.

*Dear Lucas,*

*I know that you may not want to hear from me, but I had to write this and let you know how I feel. Over these past few weeks, I have loved getting to know this town, but I've also loved getting to you. I know that the whole situation with Elizabeth has been hard, after hearing what you all went through after her death. I can't imagine what it felt like to hear that she was my donor. But don't hate me for saying this, I think she somehow brought us together. I was somehow drawn to this place, and I couldn't understand it, until now. I think that Elizabeth was bringing me here, bringing me to you. Before the surgery, I had accepted my death and thought that I would never have love or children. My whole family had grieved the loss of the life that I could have had. But when I got a second chance, I wanted to live it and, in a way, I think that that was because of Elizabeth. I know it's hard to think that I have a piece of Elizabeth, but I'd like to think that that piece brought us together.*

*Love, Blake*

As Lucas finished the letter his mind raced as he ran to the elevator. When he reached room 223, the door was open. He walked in hoping to see Blake, but only saw the cleaning lady. He ran downstairs to the lobby and searched the area but saw nothing. He ran up to the counter to the young girl typing on the computer.

“When did the girl in 223 check out?” he asked

“Earlier this morning, why?” she replied

Lucas put his hand up to his head in frustration, “Do we have any information about where she’s from in the computer?”

“Let me check,” she said while looking at the computer

“I found her address; she lives in La Crosse.”

“How far is that from here?”

“About a 2-hour drive”

“Text me that address,” he said as he ran out the door to his car.

## **Christmas Eve**

Blake loved spending Christmas with her family, but this year it was not the same. She had lost one thing that she had hoped to have for Christmas.

“What's wrong sweetie?” asked Bella



“I met someone mom. I really liked him, but he must not have liked me as much.”

“Oh honey, I'm so sorry. Did something happen between you two?”

“He found out that my heart donor was his fiancé.”

“Oh my.”

“Yeah”

“Well, you know what I always say, it just wasn't meant to be.”

“But that was always towards things in the store, mom. This is life.”

“I know, but if he doesn't want you, then he's missing out because you are one of the best people out there. And I'm not just saying that cause I'm your mom and you're technically the best parts of me.”

“Mom!!” Blake shouted with a laugh

“Thank you,” she expressed

“Hey, the best way to cheer someone up is to make them laugh.”

“I love you”

“I love you too. Now go have fun, talk to your brother and sister. Play with your niece, I think she's been looking for you.”

Blake walked to the living room to see her niece Lexi snooping around the tree.

“Hey those are for later, no peeking,” Blake said with a funny but serious tone.

“But I see one with my name on it.”

“Well, we'll open it after dinner, but for now how about we go play in the backyard.

What do you say?”

“Yeah, I'm gonna build Olaf.”

Blake smiled as Lexi and her went to grab their snow gear. They walked out the back door and ran out into the snow. As they played outside, the doorbell rang. Bella walked to the door wondering who it could be as everyone was already there. She opened the door to an unfamiliar face.

“Can I help you?” She asked

“Is Blake here?” the man replied

“She is, may I ask who you are?”

“I'm Lucas, a friend of hers from Rudolph.”

“Rudolph, oh, I understand. Uh come in, come in. I'll go get her,” Bella said excitedly.

Bella rushed out the back door to see Blake helping Lexi build a snowman.

“Blake!” she shouted

“What?”

“Someone’s here for you.”

“Ok, I’ll be there in a minute,” Blake said in confusion.

She finished the snowman and walked up the patio to the door. As she opened the door, she saw the smile that made her heart flutter with anxiousness.

“Lucas? What are you doing here?” she asked nervously

“I came to see you. Can we talk?”

“Sure. Follow me.”

“He’s cute,” Bella said as Blake walked past her.

She led him to the kitchen as the family all watched.

“What did you want to talk about?” Blake said nervously

“I read your letter. I’m sorry for ignoring you. I couldn’t believe it. I knew that one of Elizabeth’s recipients wanted to contact the family, but I didn’t think it was you. I needed time to process it all. I went to talk to Elizabeth’s family and told them everything, they told me to follow my heart. And my heart was telling me to go to you.”

Blake looked at him with shock, was this really happening? Was she really gonna get her happy ending?

“Blake? What do you say, give me another chance?”

“SAY YES!” Shouted Bella from the other room.

They looked down and laughed.

“Ok, I’ll give you another chance, but if you mess up, you’ll have them to deal with,” she said pointing to the door to the other room.

They both smiled as they looked up to see that they were standing under mistletoe. They leaned in and shared a kiss. They pulled apart and stood there smiling, as Bella and the rest of the family came barging in full of excitement. Bella wrapped her arms around Lucas and said, “Welcome to the family.” They laughed as the family calmed down and began to sit for dinner. As Blake and Lucas walked to the table, he looked at her wanting to say one more thing.

“Also, I figured you should know a little bit about Elizabeth,” he said while grabbing his wallet and pulling out a picture.

Blake looked at the photo in shock.

“Or as she usually went by Jo,” Lucas continued

Blake smiled as she realized Jo had helped her more than she thought. Jo was there for her the whole time and even helped her with Lucas. Her eyes began to tear as she knew that Jo approved of her and Lucas and brought Blake the happiness she thought was long gone. This Christmas was truly one to remember.

As the years went on Lucas and Blake stayed happy. After 3 years together Lucas proposed at the hotel, near the tree where they had met. And every year they hung an angel at the top of the tree to symbolize the angel that had brought them together. They knew that they wouldn't be there if it wasn't for Jo. They made it a tradition that every Christmas they visited her grave, as her donation had saved more lives than expected.

The End

# Kala Rue

“It has been an absolute treat to be able to work with Kala and gain real insight into one of the Writing Center’s finest consultants. There’s much I could unravel here, but I find that Kala’s included chapter of her working novel speaks more volumes than I ever could (especially considering I’m limited to a few sentences). It’s a vivid tale, one felt actively. Reflecting on all my years as a consultant, I don’t think I’ve ever gotten more attached to any other learner’s characters as I have with these here, in my wanting to understand their mind and watching their dynamics play in my head. I don’t say this lightly, there’s a deep level of admiration I have for this piece and where it is going (but don’t tell Kala I said anything that nice about it).”

- Jared Burkart

## The Coruscate District Delivery

The late evening train hummed through the station. Cosima Accardo uncrossed her arms and pushed herself up off the bench. She nudged her companion’s leg with her boot.

“Ryota,” she said firmly. “Time to go. We’ve got a job to do.”

Ryota Mura’s head lolled, dropping towards his chest. He jolted out of his daze at another prod from Cosima and fluttered his eyes open. “Thank the light,” he muttered. He brushed his black, uneven cut bangs out of his deep brown eyes. His nose and cheeks were splashed pink from sunburn, which made his smattering of freckles stand out against his cool, taupe-brown skin. A scar along his cheekbone flashed white in the light of a nearby Radiant-charged lamp as he stood up.

Cosima turned away to assess the train as it docked. Attendants already jogged alongside. The neon flashes of the Radiant coating their hands illuminated the train as they checked for any damage, or signs of overcharge from the Radiant that powered it. Two drivers stepped out of the front lead carriage and swapped with the new drivers on standby. One of them rubbed their hands together as they boarded, brilliant gold sparking off their fingers.

Ryota sighed. “Did you see they’re installing Radiant lamps in our neighborhood?”

“I’m surprised we didn’t have them sooner,” Cosima remarked. They lived on the edge of the industrial sector in the Coruscate District, which already ran on Radiant. Almost everything was powered by it in the city-state of Sunlit, and the Trinity Train System was no exception. She didn’t care either way, as long as the government left her alone. Ryota grumbled inaudibly next to her. He, on the other hand, had plenty to say about the Radiant dependence. She’d heard about it too many times.

Cosima tuned Ryota out and reached into her jacket pocket to make sure the paper string of tickets was still there. Their employer had thankfully paid for her and Ryota's round trip. Cosima would've turned the job down if she hadn't. It already didn't pay as much as Cosima preferred. She watched the attendants finish up and they began hauling open passenger doors. A couple of ticketers stepped out of the train and waited.

Ryota stepped in pace beside Cosima as she headed for one of the carriages.

"Slow night," he commented, observing the sparse lines.

Cosima nodded. They'd be boarding in no time. Her focus flitted around the station and then settled on the attendants loading luggage into one of the farther carriages. They heaved at a large box, and finally getting a hold of it, shuffled backwards into the carriage. It was mostly nondescript cardboard, but Cosima caught the flash of gold embossing decorating the side of the box: it was the intricate and swirling pattern of their employer's seal. She remembered seeing it in the wax she had stamped their documents with. The corner of Cosima's mouth lifted into a relieved smirk. That box was their mark.

"We're clear," she mumbled to Ryota, her eyes skating sideways, briefly looking at his face. She wished he wouldn't grin so openly. Still, his enthusiasm set her chest thumping with adrenaline.

Cosima dug into her pocket and tore off their first two tickets, handing one to Ryota as his quicker pace carried him ahead of her.

"Thank you for using the Trinity Train System. Sit where you like," the merfolk ticketer said in monotone. Her pink, finned ears drooped as she stifled a yawn, her pointed teeth flashing.

Cosima smiled in thanks. During daytime rush hours everyone received assigned seats, and she was glad for the freedom of the night.

Cosima reached out and tugged at the back of Ryota's canvas coat. "Let's get as close as we can. I don't want to go for it right away, but we need to make sure we're the ones getting it off the train."

He nodded and headed right, through the length of the carriage. He slid open the door to the next one and stepped inside. "How far?"

"Four down," Cosima said without missing a beat.

She stayed close behind Ryota as he went through the next carriage. There were a few people still seated, not ready to get off at the Coruscate District Station. She and Ryota would

have to ride all the way to Auldlight's Station with the box and ensure it got handed off. Their employer had seemed certain that someone would want to steal it, but didn't share the exact contents. A job was a job, Cosima told herself. They couldn't afford to be selective. It wasn't her problem to worry about what they were delivering, as long as they were paid.

Ryota went through two more carriages.

"Let's stop here, the luggage car is next," Cosima spoke behind him.

Ryota lifted a hand in affirmation and slid into one of the furthest set of seats, so that he was facing toward the door to the luggage carriage. Cosima turned to pull the door to their carriage shut. She noticed the lock and wished she had a key. It would be better if no one could come through at all. Apart from them, the carriage was empty at least. Cosima felt a mote of her anxiety slip away. She moved to join Ryota and sat across from him.

"I think I'll order a drink." Ryota shuffled around, looking for a menu.

"Are you serious?" Cosima narrowed her eyes at him. "We don't want anyone in here."

Ryota pouted. "Would it really hurt—"

"You can handle being sober for a night. We're on a job."

Ryota slumped down in his seat. After a pause, he asked, "Are you worried about Leigh working alone at the Alcove tonight?"

Cosima waved a hand. "Of course not, she's done it before." Leigh was the only other employee she could afford to hire at their tavern. Cosima would almost rather have no one else working there, but Leigh had already been with them for over a year. Cosima needed the Alcove to be able to stay open for customers when she and Ryota had jobs to run—even if those customers were few and far between. Cosima trusted Leigh. She was more than capable of handling the business while the two of them were away. She felt that her shoulders had tightened up towards her ears and tried to relax.

Ryota seemed to notice her tension and smiled. "We've got it easy tonight, right? We'll be done in no time."

"Since when are you the practical one?" Cosima quipped, though she was grateful for his straightforward outlook.

The train lurched once and crept forward, then quickly gained speed. Cosima looked out the window just as the train whooshed out of the station's tunnel, gold and silver Radiant kicking up into view from beneath them, spilling over the rails like shimmering ribbons in the night. The

train linked each of the four districts within Sunlit, and connected it to two other countries: Dirra and Luo'ru. Sunlit saw the train as the pinnacle of innovation and magic, devised by the prestigious institute of magic, Aulldlight.

Cosima felt the slight pressure in her chest as the train rose skyward, onto the raised track that coasted above the city. Even though the sight captivated her, the height set a sweat in her palms. Multi-colored lights twinkled in the sprawl below, and Cosima squinted through her own reflection in the glass to try to pick out their neighborhood, where the Alcove was—her home. She shook her head and looked away, feeling like a child. Across from her, Ryota's eyes were closed. His chest rose and fell at a dozing pace. The light above the walkway cast a dim white glow over the two of them. It washed out Ryota's face and watered down the brown skin of her hands. She picked at her nail beds, flicking her gaze around the carriage every so often. The trip to the Aulldlight District Station was a straight shot, a little over an hour. Cosima resolved to shake Ryota awake if she felt herself getting tired. She wasn't worried about anything getting past her for the time being.

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A scuffling, followed by a thump, sounded behind her, too loud over the significant hum of the train. A tingling went up the back of her spine. Cosima stood, turning to face the door to the luggage carriage. She saw a red glow flash through the one glass pane as a shadowed figure passed in front of it. How had anyone gotten in there? No one else had come into the carriage during the past forty-five minutes or so, and all of the rest of the carriages were for luggage. Cosima crouched below the view of the door as another thump sounded. Whoever it was hadn't noticed her, at least. She reached out to shake Ryota's knee.

“What now?” he mumbled, blinking into full-consciousness.

“Someone got past us,” Cosima said. She unzipped her jacket and reached into the hidden pocket sewn into the left side, and drew out a set of brass knuckles.

“At least something's happening.” Ryota joined her in the walkway, crouching down. There was a whisper of metal as he unsheathed a knife from where it was strapped against his chest, hidden under his coat.

Cosima frowned at him. “Be careful, I want to keep this clean if we can.”

Ryota clicked his tongue in annoyance. “I know how we work. You act like this is my first job.”

Cosima opened her mouth to retort but a loud crashing came from the luggage carriage. She kept her mouth shut, attention drawn to the door as she saw that a red light bloomed behind the glass. Cosima rushed forward and slid down against the wall next to the door, careful to stay out of view from the window. The door should have been locked, but whoever was in there must have unlocked it. Cosima wet her lips and glanced at Ryota, who had followed and stationed himself opposite her. He nodded once. Cosima tested the handle, felt a slight give, and quietly began to slide it open. Ryota caught the door from her and carefully pulled it the rest of the way.

Boxes, suitcases, and bags were strewn all over the floor. A suitcase had popped open from its fall and clothing spilled out. The light from their carriage didn't illuminate very far, with the only other source being a red glow amidst the luggage racks at the back. Cosima could see a pair of hands floating in the darkness, coated in crimson light. Whoever it was seemed to notice her and Ryota, and they vanished between the shelves.

"They've trapped themselves," Cosima whispered and flashed Ryota a satisfied smirk.

"All yours," Ryota replied.

Cosima stalked forward down the walkway, stepping over the luggage.

There was a flash of scarlet in her periphery but she couldn't turn fast enough to meet it. The shock clouded her vision and pain blossomed in her ribcage. Cosima stumbled sideways, falling between the racks. A few boxes came loose and hit the floor as she cracked into the wall with her shoulder. A gasp wrenched out of her throat. Cosima grit her teeth, scrambling to get up despite more pain bolting down through her right arm. A large man loomed in the walkway above her with a blazing, scarlet baton of Radiant in his hand.

"You're not train staff." He frowned at her. "If you're here for the goods, beat it. We were here first."

"You're not taking our stuff," Cosima snarled, her usual composure snapped. Her face burned from the anger at being taken by surprise.

Ryota came rushing at the man, his knife flashing. The man whirled, bringing his baton up in time to lock it against Ryota's blade. They pushed at each other, sparks flaking off where the knife bit into the Radiant. Ryota pushed harder and cut through the baton, the magic bursting into neon scarlet shards and floating through the air around them. The man didn't have time to react before Ryota caught him with a left hook to the side of his face.



Cosima darted past the man as he faltered from the blow, intending to search for the other thief. Having to deal with two people was a nuisance, but not hard for them. She flexed her fingers in her brass knuckles as she tried to focus in the near-darkness of the rest of the carriage. Ragged breathing came from a row at the very back, alerting Cosima's attention as she drew near. The figure leapt out into the middle of the carriage, their fists aglow and swinging. Cosima braced one and then two punches away with her forearms, wincing from the hard red surface of the Radiant that coated their hands. She shouldered her way into their open guard and landed a punch in their abdomen, hearing them gurgle in pain from her metal-strengthened blow. The person dropped to their knees, the Radiant dissipating in a shimmer of sparks as they held their hands up.

"Please," they choked. "I-I didn't even wanna do this, don't kill me."

Cosima frowned down at them. She had never killed anyone, but she wasn't about to ease their fear. "What are you here for?"

"Just looting, I—we heard there were some big valuables on this route tonight, that's all."

Cosima pursed her lips, suppressing her mirth. She could handle some simple train thieves. It didn't seem like they were aware of the particular package she and Ryota were escorting. She looked over her shoulder, squinting to see Ryota bending down over the man, who had ended up on the floor. He had his fingers to the man's neck, and straightened after a few seconds.

"He'll just be out for a bit," Ryota called to Cosima. "Did you find out who these people are?" He stepped over the man on his way to join her.

"They're nobodies—petty train-looters." Cosima heard the person whimper behind her and she noticed the glint of the knife still in Ryota's hand. She gestured at him and he looked down, then sheathed the knife.

"We don't have to worry about these two." Cosima turned pointedly back to the person where they were still kneeling, and they nodded vigorously.

Ryota grinned. "We got a decent fight in."

The person gulped, their pale face going even whiter.

Cosima assessed the carriage around her, taking stock of the mess on the floor and a few boxes ripped open on the shelves. The train shuddered under their feet and Cosima knew the trip

must almost be up. Ticketers would be coming through each carriage shortly to alert the passengers and collect any tickets for those staying on the train.

“Look, your companion will wake up soon,” Cosima addressed the person coolly. “I don’t want to see either of you again. Clean up in here, keep whatever you’ve already pocketed, and get out of here when we get to the station. Got it?” She waited for their nod and added, “Try not to get caught again.”

Cosima turned to go and look for their package. The person scrambled over to the man on the ground and crouched down to pat his face.

Ryota followed behind Cosima. “Are you alright? I’m sorry I didn’t see that guy right away, either.”

She shrugged, felt a pang in her shoulder and ribs, and regretted the movement. “I’ll be fine. Probably just some bad bruises tomorrow.” Cosima spotted their box, sitting precariously halfway off a lower shelf. She removed her brass knuckles and returned them to her pocket as she crouched down.

“Don’t take too long,” Ryota commented as he stepped around her. “You don’t want to get caught back here with train-looters.”

Cosima ignored him as she traced a finger over the embossment on the box’s exterior. It depicted a crescent moon, large over a rising sun. A gold border of swirling filigree surrounded the symbol. She had never seen this imagery before, but the familiarity of the sun reminded her of Sunlit’s symbol: a sun with leading lines outstretched below it, to signify its rising path. Cosima recalled that even Auldlight’s insignia had a rising sun, shining over the silhouette of the institute’s buildings. She grabbed the box’s edges, intending to push it back into place, but paused when she felt a shift. Cosima frowned and slid her hands down its sides. There was a subtle edge at the bottom, as if what she was holding was just a lid. Her fingertips tingled and nerves buzzed in her chest. Cosima tugged upwards, her suspicions confirmed as the top of the box came off. Peering in, she saw there was another box inside. Cosima smiled wryly, amused at herself. She was snooping more than usual, but of course it had led to nothing of substance this time.

Cosima returned the lid and shoved the box onto the shelf, then stood to leave the carriage. She turned and pulled the door shut, where through its window she saw the man had started to sit up into consciousness, his companion fretting at his side. She shook her head,

feeling a swell of nostalgia in her chest. She and Ryota used to be like them—petty thieves and thugs. They were hardly better off now, defaulting back to doing dirty work, but for other people this time. All for the failing tavern she'd been saddled with.

Cosima sat down across from Ryota as the train lurched. She crossed her legs and leaned back into her seat as if nothing had happened. A ticketer slid the door to their carriage door open.

# Cameron Schuler

“Cameron is a total sweetheart and I have loved working with her in the Writing Center. She always had a story behind each of her pieces and I loved hearing about the inspiration behind her writing. We always had the most fun conversations, and we always made each other smile! She is such a strong writer and was always receptive to any suggestions I had for her. I have enjoyed getting to know Cameron and the person she is, as well as watch her grow as a writer.”

- Eryn Murphy

## Warm Blanket

I always thought that when I met the love of my life it would be sparks and wildfires. I expected love at first sight, the eyes trailing from my eyes to my lips. I expected the fairytales and movie scenes of what love is supposed to be. I didn't know that love can be soft and warm, a blanket fresh out of the dryer laid on you. I didn't know love could be kind and considerate, putting my needs and wants before their own. I didn't know that someone could love me enough to leave everything they know behind, that they would be happy to follow me anywhere. I always thought love was butterflies in your stomach, and knots in your chest. The anxiousness of starting something new that could last the rest of your life. In reality, it's the calm after the storm. It's looking at them through teary eyes and knowing everything is going to be okay, because they're there with you. It becomes less of "mine" and "yours" and more of "ours". I always said that I wanted a partner that would be my favorite teammate, who would hold my hand through the ups and downs, and who would always cheer on my success. I found a teammate that is willing to have the hard conversations or is okay with sitting in silence while I sort out my thoughts. My teammate is willing to work hard for both of our dreams but keeps me grounded when I drift off. I know I could do life without him, I know I could achieve my dreams and do everything I ever wanted to do on my own. But I don't want to. Having him there, on my side, has become just as important as achieving those goals. Knowing that even if I fail, I'll still have a hand to hold and a warm blanket waiting for me at home.

## Cami's Castle

When my family decided to move away, I wasn't shocked. They had been talking about it for years. In all honesty, I expected them to be moving much farther away considering my childhood was filled with talks of tropical islands and no more snow days. When my grandfather died my freshman year of college, I certainly did not expect my parents to buy his house. It was old and in need of updating, but it had been in the family for 3 generations and was on the lake my dad grew up on. He played ice hockey, learned how to fish, and how to drive a boat on that lake. So, when they announced they were moving from our tiny town in the south of Wisconsin, to a city in Michigan, it was almost expected. I knew that meant they would have to sell my childhood home, but since I hadn't lived there in years and my life is now in Stevens Point, I wasn't too upset about it.

In truth, I ignored it; I pushed down those feelings of nostalgia until they were nearly obliterated. I moved on with my life. It wasn't until my mom called me to tell me the house sold last week that I really allowed myself to feel the emotions that come with that. I cried into my partner's shirt because I realized I would never get to go back to that house again. I would never again pick raspberries, strawberries, peaches, and pears with my little brothers. I would never again get to swing on the playset my dad and I built when I was 7. I would never get to teach my kids how to ride a bike by pushing them down the hill, just like how my dad did. I was hit with such an overwhelming sense of sadness and loss that all I could do was weep. This past summer, I had my last cup of coffee on the back porch, and I watched the sun rise for the last time without even realizing it. My childhood bedroom was painted over, the couch where I heard my first "I love you" from my first love was sold, and the truck I learned to drive in was a state away.

After that moment of weakness, I carried on with my life again. I drank my coffee and watched the sun rise through my apartment window, I went grocery shopping with my partner, and life carried on. I didn't know how much I needed closure until I got it. My mom called me to say the couple that bought my childhood home had a 3-year-old daughter. They were smitten with the house and especially with the playset in the backyard. They called it "Ella's Castle" and little Ella cried tears of pure joy when she got to play on it and be a princess just like I used to. Knowing that another little girl was going to get to have the same amazing childhood that I had warmed my heart and gave me a new sense of peace. No, I would never again run through the

yard and climb the old maple tree, but this little girl will. Knowing that my castle is now hers, and she's going to cherish it for years to come, made saying goodbye a little easier.

# Arianna Soto

“Arianna is such a talented writer and she portrayed that in various ways in the Writing Center. She expressed that she has been story-writing since she was little, and it shows vividly in her writing. Most of her pieces that she brought in were stories and I have been impressed with her writing from day 1. We had lots of fun bouncing ideas off each other, as well as getting to know each other and building a relationship. She is a genuine and strong person, and I have loved being able to work with her throughout the semester!”

- Eryn Murphy

## A Long Walk to Albertson

I spent my life watching people. Observing the way, they acted in different settings such as school, around family, friends, all of it. College taught me the painful truth, that everyone has a sad story behind them. Some are better at hiding it, but others, their thoughts escape their mind almost screaming out for help. I am one of those people.

It was a long walk to Albertson. Here, I pass new people every day. All of them with diverse backgrounds, a new story, and a new heartbreak we know nothing about.

He sat on the bench, his head bowing down with squinted eyes, almost as if he were making a wish. The leaves circled around him as a gush of wind picked up and slightly pushed my body to the side. Hair blowing directly in my face. I looked a little harder to see his hands folded. He was praying. His prayers were loud.

Today I walked past the girl that survived the night. The struggle with life had caught up to her and she thought she had no more motivation left. The words of the ones around her were too much to handle as her spirit had been broken for more years than she imagined it was.

“ It was as if an angel had talked to me and said, “one more day. You’ve got this.””

A few more paces, the dead leaves crunching under neither my boots with every step I took. The summer days, had turned to fall. The shorts and tank tops we once wore turned into sweaters and jeans. Some of us never stopped wearing those as they covered up our cuts and bruises; the things we thought were once “our marks of love.”

The laughing Jocks were secretly drained. The competition was too much. Pressure to be the best took a toll on their academics and failing grades became a vision in their futures. The girl with the smile was forcing it, remembering what her mom told her, “No boys will find you beautiful with a frown on your face.” Her happiness didn’t amount anymore to those who cared about her.

For another girl, it was a year ago today that her grandfather passed away. I could see it in her eyes. The tears she was holding back as she looked at his picture on repeat. Not just any picture, the one from the day she was born. She wore his old work hat that day. He remains thriving in paradise.

Today, I walked past the girl that got her first A on an exam. Her face gleaming with excitement as a smile for once was genuine and her passion in life was now found once again. Her walk had an extra skip as she walked out of the building.

It was a long walk to Albertson indeed. My thoughts took over myself while I was not observing the individuals around me. I recognized that each and every one of them reminded me a little bit of myself. I too was a little broken along with them all. Praying for a better day, the loss of a loved one, trying to survive every day like nothing is going on, and that once in a while happy moment I realize it is all worth it for my future.

I reached the building, getting to my favorite study spot. I reflected for a moment, staring out the windows at all the broken souls that walk among us. I'm not alone.



## Hurtful words

The loss of you rearranged my world. I'm still figuring out if it was for the good or the bad. Your hurtful words tore through my skin sinking deep into my soul. In the beginning I knew I would take a bullet for him any day. I'd fight off his demons and carry the weight of his world on my back.

The hurtful words. They kept me up at night, daydreaming in class, and walking around in fear. Fear of the knife that had already backstabbed me once.

Most days, writing was the form of comfort I had, but recently my romance novels had turned into stories of despair.

“How dare he make me feel like the enemy when he almost ended a life.”

I dreaded coming back, his existence was so close. A presence only the devil could enjoy. All good memories were now a thing of the past.

It is hard to believe that there was one time I would take a bullet for him, but I never realized he would be the one pulling the trigger. I broke my own heart trying to hold onto the memory of him.

It is now that I pick up all the broken pieces, wipe the tears from my cheeks, and stand up with pride. Your hurtful words can't get to me anymore as I know who the real enemy is.

I trusted my heart in his hands but now I take it back for he was never man enough to care for it.

# Adrian Swan

“It has been a wonderful semester getting to know Adrian as a person and a writer throughout our ‘57 sessions. Adrian is a strong writer who likes to incorporate more mature themes into her stories, and we have worked through how to write characters dealing with love, grief, and everything in-between. It was a lot of fun seeing where she wanted to take her stories and helping her plan how to get there. One of our main focuses was learning how to flesh out her characters by breaking down the similarities and differences in their personalities and motivations to see where conflict would naturally occur. I think she did an excellent job with this story and I know that she will carry that same passion throughout her writing career.”

- Grace Dahl

## The Chaperones

The post concert ringing in my ears still hadn't stopped when Nevada hopped off the stage to meet me after the merchandise sales started slowing down. I was still coming off the rush of my dedication. His legs swung over the bar of the window. “What was that all about?” I asked, not knowing if he meant the sweet words as a friend.

“I felt really empty when you all left,” he paused,” Specifically you, Iris.”

I felt the rising heat in my cheeks, and swung around to grab a sip of soda. I felt a few drips fall past my mouth and onto my chest. More came as I started shaking. Nevada leaned over and grabbed the cup out of my hand and made his way to the floor of the merchandise booth. The splotch was much more than I could've pictured. It grew as my drink was being absorbed. His hands found their way to the hem of my shirt, slowly making their way up, taking the shirt with them. I lifted my arms above my head to help him out, the shirt collar got stuck on the crown of my head. He pushed his body towards mine “Is this what you want?” The shirt fully came off, and I stood there in front of him with my mediocre bra.

I nodded. “Is this what you want?” I called back.

“I've wanted it for a long time.” We were touching again, his arms came down around me and we met each other to make out. I got lost in him, I didn't have the space in my brain to care about anything else. We were finally together, and that was all I wanted.

Then came the gunshot, a scream, and then another.

Ben was the third family member Emily had lost. Her brother, after one of his biggest performances yet. I didn't want to push her to talk about it, but it'd been two days. She'd only eaten pudding and mashed potatoes. I stood in the doorway, watching her small shaking body. Her pink slippers were still on, peeking out from the bottom of her sheets. I took a deep breath and entered her personal pit of despair.

Sitting next to her on the bed, I put a hand on her shoulder. "Hey Em."

"Hi," she murmured.

"I'm just making my rounds this morning, wanted to check in."

She pulled herself up and dried her eyes. "You'd think losing people gets easier. I spent my whole life mourning my mom, the past three years mourning my dad. I don't know what to do. It's only a matter of time before it's you guys, or even me."

"I know." We pulled apart and I looked into her deep brown eyes. "But you've got a whole team of people he--"

"A whole team of people to lose," she said.

"Pushing us away isn't going to make it hurt any less. We love you, and we loved your brother. Nevada and Jenna are taking care of the funeral stuff and all that. You take care of yourself."

"Thanks." Her mouth perked up to one side, but still added up to be a frown. "Hey, how about we do a girls night. I need to redo my hair."

I put my arm around her shoulders. "Absolutely."

Emily and I stayed close together until she decided to take a nap before our big night. My stomach rumbled as I made my way out the door. The newsreel kept playing in my head on loop. *Three dead and six wounded inside and near Basil Toss on Main Street. The police are still looking for the suspect, John Brogan. Witnesses say the suspect was last seen that night wearing denim jeans and a black hoodie.* The half empty package of kraft cheese called my name from the fridge. As I was spreading mayonnaise on the bread with the pan heating up, Toby walked in with his sweatpants on; as per usual his shirt was nowhere to be seen. He hopped up on the false marble island. "How's it, it going?" he asked.

“Good. I mean, clearly life sucks right now, but all things considered I’m not doing too bad” I trailed off, unsure of what else I could possibly say when the grey cloud hadn’t passed us by yet. “How are you holding up?”

He put his head to his hands, rubbing his silver framed glasses above his forehead, pushing his curly hair out of the way. “I don’t know, really.”

“Do you want to unpack any of it?”

“I uh, I don’t, I don’t know.” I hadn’t heard him stutter like this since the fourth grade, it’s strange what grief can wash up. “Inadequate maybe?”

My sandwich landed and sizzled on the hot pan, “How do you mean?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. Minutes of awkward silence were cut off by a phone call. Toby slid off the counter to take it in private. “Hi, Mom,” was all I heard him say.

I took my grilled cheese out to the back patio with my tome of a diary and a random pen from the table. *This isn’t a time for me to process my emotions, this is simply a dump.* Processing was to come after. *No judgement. No distractions.* One bite of grilled cheese swallowed, I started scrawling, tossing out every thought from my head as the sun beat down on me. *I get it, I promise I do, but it's too much.*”

“Is now a good time?” Nevada asked, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“Sure,” I nodded. “Is everything okay?” I turned to his seat as I closed my journal around the pen. His chair scraped on the concrete, making itself known to the neighborhood, but somehow passed without any damage.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that night, and through all the grief, I’ve never really gotten an answer as to…” He had trouble finding his words, “Where we’re at. The two of us. We were close to… something. And then things happened and I ju-”

Saving himself from the embarrassment I butted in, “Now is not the time to figure it out. I know you want answers, but I don’t have them. I’d like to get over the mourning period before jumping into anything.”

“Yeah, no, I understand.” One of his legs crossed under him as he readjusted in his seat, not intending to leave.

“How are the funeral plans coming along?” I asked, plainly.

“Pretty good. Nine in the morning, the day after tomorrow. Small endeavor so far. I sent a mass text from his phone inviting people. Jenna said it would be fine if we held it here and let people mingle around, eat some dip.”

“So like a birthday party, but sad?” I asked, trying to at least lighten the conversation.

He chuckled to himself. It was nice to hear his laugh again. Or anyone’s for that matter. “Yeah! Pretty much.” Summer winds blew through his hair highlighting his cheekbones and freckles. “Why? Do you think it needs to be anything more?”

“No, I think anything more and Em would crumble to dust.” My focus shifted to my nails but Nevada allowed me the space to continue, “I know she’ll be okay eventually, I just think she’s in a fragile place at the moment.” I pushed a fallen strand of hair back behind my ear and met his deep green eyes. “Are you doing okay? You lost your best friend and immediately had to shut it off to plan a funeral. Now you’re here asking about a relationship. Where does Ben fit into all of this?”

“I think I’m good. It sucks, and it hurts, but,” he shrugged, “I think the funeral will be a proper goodbye and I’ll be okay to fully move on.”

I grabbed my plate and my book, and began to head back inside. “Okay, let me know if something comes up that you want to talk about. I’ll be in my room, I’ve gotta get out of this heat.” I grabbed a glass of water and schlepped to my tiny bedroom.

I finished eating, hydrated, pulled the yellow cover over my head, and let out a muffled scream. When we were little playing house, I was always the mom, and sometimes it feels like that role never stopped. I’m so tired all the time.

As my eyes shut, the childhood treehouse reconstructed around me. Ben’s mom, from the stories, was so proud of herself. It was the first big project she worked on while pregnant, thankfully she finished it in time. Emily, Ben, and I spent hours up there. Mud potions sat on the windowsill, harnessing the power of the sun while we had our orange juice tea party. Ben being the oldest, insisted on being the king, I his queen, leaving Emily to be the princess. When Ben rushed out to make a formal decree, his foot missed the branch and he slipped. Their dad rushed out before Ben had the chance to start crying; he must’ve been keeping watch in between filling sudoku answers.

I kept watching Emily pick the autumn leaves out of his shaggy coils. Tears rushed down his face, and quickly mine as well.

In a flash, his nine year old body was sitting on the hospital bed with the blue cast around his arm. Emily was sitting by his feet while their father talked to the doctor about care instructions. The audio was cut out of my memory, replaced with only the pitch of a flat line. His t-shirt started showing blood as it pooled through his abdomen. My mouth couldn't move as I tried to scream for his dad or the doctor. Braces grew around my arms and ankles as I tried to get up. Trapped, I watched Ben and Emily's father evaporate into nothing. The floor cracked under me, dropping my helpless body into ice water.

"Dude!" Jenna shook my shoulders. "DUDE!" My eyes threw open.

"What?!" I said, clearly pissed.

"You were screaming bloody murder, what's up?"

I sat up, shivering. After adjusting my glasses I read the clock on my desk; just after four. "Just had a bad dream, that's all." Tugging on my cardigan, I made a mental checklist of what I needed to prepare. "I'm going to try to get over it while I make dinner." Plates in hand, I made my way from under the stairs and into the kitchen.

She followed, "Is there anything I can help with?"

I took a deep breath, turning to her. "I love you." She's so bright, but I didn't trust this girl to make eggs in the morning let alone help with dinner. "If you'd like you can tenderize the chicken."

She stood at the marble counter after I split the breasts, pounding to the beat of a random song on the radio. I sat mixing the wet dip and crust coats. I let them sit on the counter until she was done while I peeled potatoes into the sink. Things felt normal for once; I was in my element and I didn't have to worry about the others. Jenna was doing well. Nedada was too. Emily and Toby were at least making progress.

Jenna washed her hands and went off to dance around. Emily, hair halfway dried from a shower, joined in, taking her girlfriend by the waist and pulling her in close. The heat in the kitchen was finally regulating my body back to the summer air. Sweater found itself on the back of the couch before I slid back to the island. Breaded chicken made its way into the pan. While I waited for it to become more golden, I began baking the fries.

The five of us gathered in the living room for dinner. The couple took their typical seat: legs intertwined on the loveseat. Toby sat in between Nevada and I, reminding me of our conversation earlier that day. Toby also remained in control of the remote, he surfed through movie after movie before we gave up and threw on a random movie from our childhood, basking in the young comfort. Everyone really liked their meal. Toby even went back for seconds, always a compliment from the boy that eats like a bird. When he returned, he sat in the corner chair and winked at Nevada. I don't think I was meant to see it. I rested my plate on the coffee table and settled into the couch, tucking my legs under a blanket.

Toby had been cracking forced jokes throughout the movie. I watched Emily tense up at every line. "You're not my fucking brother," she eventually blurted, storming off to her room.

"Whoa, what?" Toby looked taken aback.

Jenna and I exchanged glances, deciding we'd both go up to join her. There was no time to waste in Emily's mind. She started sobbing halfway up the steps. We found her on their shared bed, curled with her head to her knees. Jenna grabbed Lopsy, all gray and faded pink, to lay at Emily's feet. I sat in fear of my voice. Jenna spoke up, "I thought you were doing better," she said, with a dry voice.

I glared at her, *why the fuck would you say that?* I thought to myself.

"I don't understand what got you riled up?"

Emily pulled her head up slowly. Her face was puffy and dripping wet. "Of course you don't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You've never lost anyone Jenna, he may have been your friend, but you have no idea what I'm going through right now. My family is *gone*."

"But I'm your family."

"You don't get it, Jenna."

Her face transformed. Jenna pulled away and stormed out of the room. "Good night, sweetheart," She said with a sour tone. It was the last sword in Emily's fragile heart. Her words stung me as well.

"What a bitch."

I sat with Emily in my arms. After a while she gradually stopped crying.

Toby knocked at the open door, ringing his neck. “Hey, can we talk?” His eyes searched for hers to make contact. I slowly shifted off the bed, and finagled my way out of the room.

I still hadn’t gotten any time to myself, this was my only chance. Shuffling through the cluttered top of the credenza in the front hall there were gum wrappers, a used tissue, a random assortment of batteries, and tons of other crap. None of which were my keys. Footsteps sounded from behind me. “Looking for these?” Nevada dangled my carabiner on his index finger.

“Uh, yeah, actually.” I pushed a strand of hair behind my ear. “Why do you have my keys?”

“I needed to borrow your tiny knife.”

“You have plenty of knives.”

“Tiny boxes.” We both paused as I scowled. “You headed out?”

“Just a drive, wanna come?”

I rolled my window down, allowing the breeze to hit me as I backed out but it blocked out the scent of his cologne. It was sweet. Not enough guys wear cologne anymore. One time I tried telling Ben that, but he didn’t seem to understand that body spray is far from the same. His father then had the same talk with him. Nevada’s phone connected to the bluetooth first, the night started to the gentle riff of an acoustic guitar. *In the lake we are cryin’, In the lake, Iris and me.* It was our song. “Sorry, it’s just set to shuffle, I can change it if you’d like.”

“No.” I glanced at him and smiled. “I like this song.” He smiled back.

Cruising at night always brought me peace. Passing under street lights, I’d convinced myself to temporarily forget everything that happened, even allowing myself to drift my thoughts to Nevada. *Just because something bad happened doesn’t guarantee that it was necessarily a bad omen.*

After a half and hour of silence, we wound up at our old elementary school. I pulled to the curb. “Let’s talk,” I said, shutting off the engine. His hand slipped into mine, fingers interlocking, we walked over to the swingset. When we sat down I finally let my heart pour out. “I want to be with you, I’m just scared of starting it in such a gross time. I mean, I’ve been watching my friends collapse and it hasn’t even fully hit me yet. I’m terrified and I don’t know what I’ll do when it does. But I do like you like that and I want to be with you, I promise.”



“I know, I’m in the same boat. But we don’t have to start with anything specific.” He brushed the hair out of his eyes and chuffed. “We already live in the same house. We’ve been friends forever. There isn’t going to be a traditional path of a relationship. I think we’re allowed to have a weird and messy start. I’m sure he’d never told you, but Ben was the biggest advocate for us getting together. He helped me write the dedication at the concert.”

I looked up at the stars; Vega shone bright above us. “It was a really nice speech.”

He inhaled, preparing for a big sigh. I felt his hand, still in mine, begin to shake. His voice broke as he spoke up, “I’m gonna miss him.” He pulled his hand away to wipe the tears from his eyes.

“I know, I am too.” I got up and stood behind him, pulling his torso to my stomach and placing a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay to cry,” I told him as his muscles tensed up.

When we got back to the house, his face was still red. I tossed him a pair of sweatpants as I changed into my nightgown. My body melted into his under the covers. “Thanks for being there for me tonight. I love you,” he whispered into my ear.

“I love you too.” The saying left a weird taste in my mouth. It was the first time I’d said it as something other than friend. It didn’t matter though, he was there, and he cared about me. All was shitty, but all was well.

I didn’t remember when I’d fallen asleep by the time Jenna yanked open curtains across from the bed. It woke up Nevada too. “Please turn off the sky,” he said through his gravely morning voice, pulling the covers over head. Jenna made direct eye contact, her eyebrows raised.

“Nothing happened,” I mouthed. She pointed to the door. I tugged on my slippers and followed. Shutting the door behind me, “Nothing happened,” I said again.

“Then why is he in your bed?” she asked with the demeanor of a chatty fifteen year old girl.

“He was cute and sleepy and I wanted him there.” We found our way to the kitchen and I pulled out ingredients, on autopilot, for cinnamon rolls.

“Cute? Wait, you *like him* like him? It wasn’t a drunken weirdness?”

I reached the measuring cup into the flour. “Okay, first of all, you, Toby, and Ben are the only people in this house that drink and second of all, are you oblivious?”

“Fine, maybe I am, just tell me what happened. Tell me everything!”

“So last summer- Oh can you melt one-third cup of butter for me?” She nodded. “Anyway, he and I got pretty close, I helped him with lyrics a lot of the time or I would just sit and embroider while he did wherever, and eventually we found this abandoned farm with a cute lake and we would just hang out for hours on end, but then we both got busy with school and then the three of us left for Australia. Then at the concert, when we got back he sang a song about me and gave a short speech so things kinda spiraled from there, but then... you know.” I didn’t want to mention it. “But we talked last night, nothing was really decided but I think we’re together somehow, even if there really isn’t a label on it.” I moved to grab the butter from the microwave.

“Somehow I didn’t see any of that coming.”

“It’s okay, plus you and Em were in the bathroom making out at the concert for most of it.” I said, running my scrapper through the bowl.

She grabbed a chair from the dining table and pulled up to the island. “So,“ she brushed her hair back, “Tell me more!”

“I don’t know what there is to say. He’s funny and kind and I like his face. And he actually, finally, opened up about his homelife last summer.” Jenna’s jaw dropped. “And Ben was the one to help him write what to say to me, and it’s sucks that I can’t tell him thank you, but I’m sure he can hear me from wherever he is now.” When I looked back up, Jenna was curled into herself. “What happened?”

Eyes wide and brows raised, the words fell out of her mouth “I’m such an asshole.”

I dropped the spatula against the metal bowl, putting a hand on her shoulder as it clanged. “Hey. What’s going on?” I don’t think I had ever seen her lose her composure before.

Her mouth started running a mile a minute, “It just hit me that he’s like *gone* gone and I was such a jerk to Emily last night and I- I...”

I grabbed a glass from the cupboard behind us, filling it with the tap. I sat down with her as she drank, leaning against the cold baseboard of the island. I spoke slowly and tried to keep my tone soft to cushion the blow. “I agree with you. You were a jerk. Emily was really hurt after you left last night.”

She looked up at me, her eyes entirely welled up, “How do I make it up to her?”

I shook my head. “You apologize. You don’t expect forgiveness. And you just have to keep going. If she wants boundaries you have to respect them while she gets over it, and while she gets over her brother.”

I went back to the cinnamon rolls while Jenna processed. Leaving the dough to rise, I went back to my room and grabbed clothes to get dressed. Nevada was still asleep, positioned like an oil painting. I only had a few comfortable moments to admire him. Maybe it was too soon for color, but I’d run out of clean black t-shirts. Only one leg though my pants, there was a knock at the door. I waddled over “Hello?” I asked through a crack in the door. It was only Emily, “Hey, come in.” I glanced at Nevada. “Actually, wait out there, I don’t have pants.”

Once ready, I squeaked through the door, trying to make sure Jenna is the only person to find out about Nevada and I in such a compromising way. Especially when we hadn’t clarified what we were. Of course they’d all believe us, but it wasn’t worth the energy. “How are you doing this morning?” We stayed in the short hallway.

“Better, Toby and I talked it out. I think Jenna and I are still on the fritz. She didn’t sleep in our room last night, so of course I couldn’t sleep. I don’t know what to say to her. I don’t think I should apologize, but there’s a part of me that feels like I should? I’m lost, and I don’t want to lose her too.”

“You do not have to apologize to her.”

“And I agree, but I don’t know how to build-” Footsteps came from the kitchen. “Hey J.” Emily said with a twinge of pain in her voice.

“Hey,” Jenna said. I took a step back. “Can we talk?”

Emily glanced at me for approval. “Uh, sure.” The two of them walked past me and into the living room.

The sweet dough still had eighty minutes to rise. I went back into my room and journaled at my desk, but I kept getting distracted. Photos above my desk were lined with our smiles from all the years past. We spent the last three months of his life in a different country. As much as I loved my time in Australia, I would absolutely give them back in exchange for Ben.

The walls were thin; my focus got pulled to Emily and Jenna’s conversation. “I didn’t understand why you couldn’t do the same and it scared me. We at least had the time to process with your dad.”

“I get it, but what you said still hurts.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“I’m upset, but not mad. Besides, I want you to be my forever and it’s hard to see forever when you’re angry. Thank you for apologizing though.” One of them started sobbing.

I couldn’t focus on writing and went back to examining the photos. There was prom, all three homecomings, winter formal, their earlier gigs, group halloween costumes, and everything in between. I snapped out of it when I heard rustling in my sheets. “Well good morning,” I said.

“Morning.” Finally waking up naturally, his voice was prepared for the day.

“Um, I know it’s early morning and we haven’t talked too much about it, but I’ve been stressing about it for a while now.” I took my next words slowly, “What are we, exactly?”

He sat up to face me, my knees parallel to the desk. “Partners?”

“I’d like that.”

# Mai Yang

“It has been wonderful getting to know Mai throughout the semester in English 257. Each session, she continued to impress me with her passion for writing stories and her talent of never running out of story ideas. Her stories are so unique, intricate, and the level of care and thought she puts into each chapter is evident. One of our main focuses this semester was to provide more detail and work on understanding the plot of the story, and I believe that Mai has soared above all of my expectations, creating countless plot diagrams and character charts to ensure her understanding of every angle of her story. I am very thankful for the opportunity to have helped watch her grow in her writing skills this semester, and I hope to one day read how the story ends. “

- Hayley Bird

## Remembrance: To You Who Would Kill Me

The person called Hana Hermann is dead. Her time of death is January 13, 20XX. Now will you tell me how you know this person's name and what connection you have with her, Miss Zinnia Augustin."

*Dead? Hana Hermann is dead? That... that's impossible, if I'm dead, how am I still here?*

I sprung up from the hospital bed, yank onto the officer's brown leather jacket, as my eyes stare straight into his dark brown eyes, looking for a tiny bit of truth that Hana Hermann isn't dead, and the officer is only delivering false news.

"Officer. That cannot be true. How is Hana Hermann dead when she, when I am standing here without a single stretch on me?"

Even though such clear words left my mouth, I can't shake off the trembling of my body.

The officer stare back with coldness and impatience clearly showing in his eyes. That cold stare sends goosebumps throughout my body as I feel my body slowly shrink, trying to hide itself from his eyes.

*I... I don't believe I have done anything to deserve such cold eyes.*

I can hear a loud "tsk" from him as he forcefully yanks my hands away from his jacket. Turning his body, he opens the first drawer, picking up a hand mirror and pushing it towards my chest.

"Look, how does your appearance look anything like Hana Hermann?"

I stare at the hand mirror, "This... this appearance..."

What the mirror reflected is the appearance of a woman who seems to be in her early twenties with glossy dark chocolate wavy long hair and grey eyes. This appearance is completely different from my normal shoulder length black hair, paired with straight bangs, and dark blue eyes.

I took a step back from the officer as my body lost all its strength and tremble down onto the bed.

I can feel the chill on my feet and all the blood seems to be drained off from my body.

"It can't be... it can't be true," I can feel my voice trembling as those words escape from my mouth.

"Now you should know the difference between both of you and should be able to tell me your connection to her."

"Hana is dead... I'm dead... Hana... I... Hana... I... Impossible," I just kept mumbling those words to myself, slowly enclosing myself inside an illusion as I stare at the unfamiliar reflection in the mirror.

Bam!

The sound surprise me to stare at where it is coming from. It was the sound of the officer's large hand smacking onto the desk.

The officer ruffle with his already messy hair as his own impatience grew.

To calm himself down, he took a deep breath and close his eyes. When he opens them again, he asks, "Now will you tell me."

I hold my hands together to stop the trembling as I look up at the officer questioning, "Off... officer! That can't be true. H... how?"

He didn't answer and directed a question said, "I heard from your doctor that you called yourself Hana Hermann as soon as you awoke. You wouldn't mind answering some questions for me first before I answer yours, would you?"

I shook my head repeatedly as I realize that the officer is avoiding my question indicate that Hana Hermann (I) really am dead. Even though my mind accepted that fact, somewhere in me, I just can't accept it.

I jump at the officer as if I am a madman demanding a clear answer that would satiate me. The cracking sound of the mirror that escaped my hand as I jump at him didn't bother me at all. The only thought in my mind is demanding some solid prove that I or my body somehow is dead.

"Give me proof! Give me evidence or I won't belief you. How can I be dead? I... I'm right here! Hana Hermann is right here."

He clicks his tongue as he savages through his right pocket for something. What he took out is his police notebook and a photo that is tucked in. He places the photo right at eye level to my face as he said, "You see."

I saw a woman in homewear clothes laying silently in a pool of blood. The woman is laying in a dorsal position, without showing her face but I know that the person in the photo is Hana Hermann. The large burn scar on her left arm provided more support that it really is Hana.

Even though I feel the urge to gauge, I try to grab the photo, only being able to grasp onto thin air.

He said, "This should convince you enough. Tell me what you know about Hana."

"I'm Hana? That's Hana? Who am I?"

"Will you stop wasting my time and tell me the truth."

*If I'm not Hana than who am I? Whose body is this? Why is this body in the hospital?*

Maybe he is growing more impatience or feel that I wasn't listening to him, the officer grabs my white hospital gown's collar.

He questions, "Do you know who I am?"

"No."

"Then you are not Hana Hermann. She is a much better person and kinder than anyone I've known."

As he said those words, his eyes became more tender as if he's talking about someone he loves or someone he is very familiar with and consider important. I stare deeply into his eyes and found some redness in his eyes; they didn't seem to be from him getting anger but from crying.

Before my mind can think, I voice out, "Is Hana important to you?"

Instead of saying, 'am I important to you?' I feel like it's better to say, 'is Hana important to you'. He is convinced I am not Hana while I don't know either I am or am not Hana Hermann.

"Of course, she is the turning point in my life. But all this doesn't concern someone who isn't her," he said as he loosens his grip on my collar.

"Kris! That's the second loud sound I've heard coming from the room. What's going on in there?" another officer came in.

Instead of dressing like the person he called Kris, he seemed to be neater, wearing a formal suit.

"What did the doctor say?" Kris asked as he saw the person coming in.

He sighs while scratching his head. Looking at the small notebook on his hand he answers, "The physician didn't say much. He listed what the patient, Miss Zinnia Augustin have told him, and her answer doesn't really match the information we have on the victim. The physician also stated that she might have developed some sort of delusions such as delusion of grandeur, to think that she's the victim. Also, the patient's family is waiting to see her. How did your interrogation go?"

"She's not Hana."

"And."

"..."

"That's all? There's nothing else."

"Like what."

"Like... Maybe she made contact with the victim somewhat and confuse herself with her? Or she was at the crime scene?"

Kris walk up to him, "I didn't have time to interrogate her but from the look of things, she doesn't know anything or have memories of anything. Aren't you going to pick up your phone?"



"I was waiting for you to finish with your sentences," the officer in the suit said.

He answered his phone and for some reason his face started to change to that of disbelief. He peers over into Kris's ear, whispering something that made his eyes widen and dashed through the door as if a husband hearing his wife is going into labor.

"Kris! Kris! Wait. Wait for me! Sorry Miss Zinnia, an urgent matter came up," he said as rushes out of the door too.

"Wait right there and don't do anything..." those were the last few words I heard from him as his figure disappear.

There was only myself alone inside this square hospital room. It was all silent with only my breath echoing back at me. Without the tension and the people, I broke down, felling onto my knees, clenching myself close, I cried.

"Who am I?"

## Chapter 2: This Place

I stare at the reflection in the floor mirror. The appearance of Zinnia Augustin is reflected in it instead of Hana Hermann.

"Who are you? Is this the place I belong? Am I supposed to accept that I am Zinnia Augustin now? I know almost nothing about you! Only the fact that you are a murderer suspect or... used to be one?"

I stare at the old newspaper with the head title 'Two Inky Murders with Suspects Retained' I found lying on top of Zinnia's desk in the open. Water bubbles in my eyelids falling uncontrollably down my cheeks.

"What happened? Why is this happening to me? Why! Who am I? Who?" I smash the mirror with my right fist and drop to the ground, cupping my quavering body. I didn't feel the numbness in my injured hand at all. I can think about is... *why me?*

I repeat to myself, "Am I supposed to accept this?"

The shining sun reflected through the window didn't energize me, instead, it deepened my mood, as if it is telling me to accept who I have become.

I walk to the window, enclosing all the windows and plump onto the bed. My eyes slowly begin to close after two days of non-sleep but the question of 'who am I?' and 'acceptance' still linger behind my mind as I drift to sleep.

When I open my eyes, my sight was blurred, I couldn't clearly make sense where I am. As my eyes adjust to the lighting of the room, I try to remember the last thing I did.

*I remember crying myself to sleep and laying sideways on the bed but why am sleeping as straight as a log. What happened after I fell asleep.*

I turn my head to find myself hook up to an IV line in Zinnia's bedroom.

"Did I faint?"

There was no one there to answer my question as I lay there quietly before I decided to close my eyes again and fell asleep.

The second time I woke up, a woman in her forties is holding onto my hand. There was tenderness in her eyes as she looks at me tearfully. It was the look of a mother caring and worrying about her daughter.

"Who?"

Her face lightens up with relief as her voice quiver to say, "It's me, your mom. Zinnia, it's mom, mom."

"Mom?"

"Yes, it's mom and this is your older sister, Emily."

The woman that looks like a younger version of 'mom' wept her tears, nodding her head, and smile kindly at me.

I stayed in bed for three days without moving or sitting just like a cloth mummy. Even if I get tired of just laying still, the concerned look from 'mom' as she stayed by my side, kept me laying

quietly without a complaint. When the physician finally allows me to get up from the bed, I feel like I could burst into tears at how happy I am.

*Grrroowwl! Ggrrroowwl!""*

The sound of my stomach makes loud unkind music at how hungry it is after staying in bed for three days and sustaining my own health with only fluids from the IV pump.

"Zinnia, you must be hungry. Clean yourself up and come down, I'll cook some simple soup for you to eat."

I nodded at her feeling a bit embarrass.

I walk my way towards the closet and choose the most simplest and plainest clothes that Zinnia had. After I, savage my way through her drawers to find her undergarments and walk into the bathroom.

I grab the toothbrush holder with the toothbrush and toothpaste inside, planning to brush my teeth as I wash up too, so I can just kill two birds with one stone.

After stepping out of the steamy bathtub, I rubbed my hair on the white towel trying to dry it.

I stare into the bathroom mirror as I continue to dry my long hair. What appear was a blurry black shadow staring back at me. It was standing in the same position as me, mirroring and coping everything that I did.

I step back.

*What's this? Am I seeing things after being glued to the bed for days?*

My mouth begins to quaver as a loud scream which I thought I could never make or have came out.

*Kkkkyaahh!*

'Mom' pops out from the door still with her apron on. I storm towards her, hugging her closely into my arms. I can feel her warm heart racing and her rapid breathing that she's trying to calm down from worrying about me. Just listening to this and being able to hug her made me feel at ease, even if she's not my mom.

She called the physician back again.

I sit next to her holding her hand tight knowing that there is a person next to me to support me. The physician holds up a mirror towards me, asking questions about what I am seeing and my experience before and after waking up. He also asks if I have taken any kind of medication and about my emotions.

"Mrs. Augustin, I believe that your daughter, Zinnia might've built a defense mechanism around herself as though she cannot accept who she is or accept herself wholeheartedly."

"Then... then... what shall she do?"

"As I've told you before, she might be experiencing retrograde amnesia due to the shock of her accident, she could have also developed hallucinations from her proclaiming to be someone else, but without further diagnosis, I can't tell you much. As a friend, what I can tell you is that treat her nicely, answer her questions, let her form new memories, and in due time she can get better. I would also recommend that she meet a therapist to receive counseling. Let me know if there is further questions or problem."

"All right Dr. Hu. Thank you."

After the physician left, I didn't focus on what he was saying instead I ask 'mom,' "What does he mean when he said as a friend?"

'Mom' didn't stop holding my hands as she smile sweetly at me, and patiently told me, "Dr. Hu is Mina's older brother and Mina is your best friend. You always told me that Mina feels like another older sister and always treating you like a kid, since you get hurt a lot."

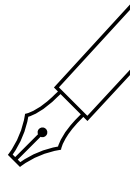
*Growl. Growl.*

The sound of my stomach acted up again as I rubbed my belly feeling embarrass and hunger.

She giggles as she said, "Come, my child should eat something to get better soon."

I can feel the kindness, sweetness, and feeling of love a mother has for her child coming from her. It makes me happy but at the same time it chokes me up, knowing that all this emotion she displays is for her child Zinnia, it wasn't meant for me an outsider.

# Essay



# Aelar Hartmann

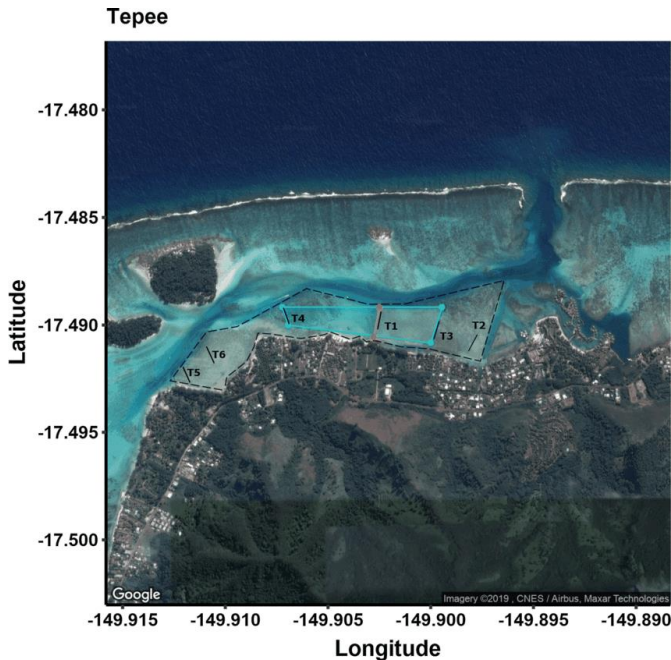
“Working with Aelar has been very enjoyable this semester. Aelar is a gifted writer, including in creative writing, evidenced by using several sessions to work on a short story. However, we spent the majority of our sessions working on this research paper in order for it to be ready to be published in *Wordplay*. The dichotomy between the two pieces brought excitement and challenges for both of us to work through in our different sessions. Aelar originally took this research paper on as a fun independent project, without the intent to publish. This in itself showed drive and commitment. Now, I am so pleased to see how far this project has come and the wiliness to put in effort to get this piece done by the deadline. In fact, Aelar met with me for three consecutive days to perfect this work, and I am glad the goal of publishing was met!”

- Jessica Lange

## The Behavior of Blacktip Reef Sharks (*Carcharhinus melanopterus*)

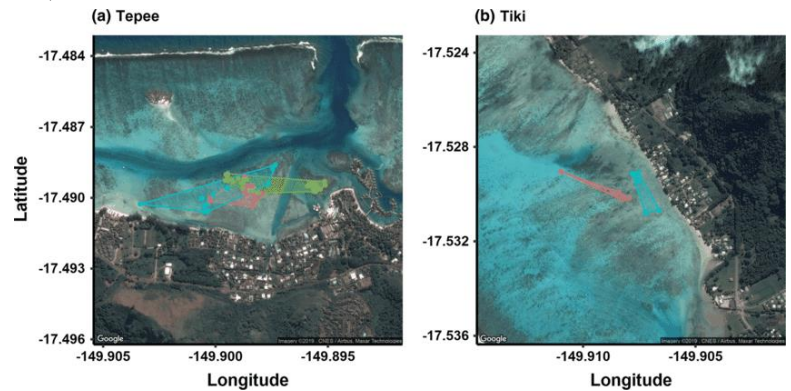
The blacktip reef shark (*Carcharhinus melanopterus*) plays a significant role in coral reef ecosystems and maintaining the shark’s population and health is important to the health of the coral reefs itself. Movement and behavior of the animal can give information needed to preserve both of these things. The link between movement and population dynamic is complex. This connection manifests as behavioral decisions that can affect survival and reproductive success. Movement is critical to understanding the species. As movement is studied, information regarding how the sharks occupy space gives possible insight into hunting methods, evasion from predators, and life-history patterns of the blacktip reef shark. These movement patterns can give possible insight into sex-based differences as well as ontogenetic, or throughout development, differences in the species (Schlaff et al., 2020).

The juvenile blacktip reef shark’s movement is calculated by their home range. The home range of an animal is the range at which the animal does routine things like eating and sleeping. In this study, there were two main ways that the home range of juvenile blacktip reef sharks were estimated. The first was acoustic telemetry. Acoustic telemetry uses high frequency sounds to transmit information from one site to another. The other method was mark and recapture. Juvenile blacktip reef sharks were captured with gillnets between February and May 2012 and marked with an identifying tag before being released and recaptured again (Bouyoucos et al., 2019).



The specific sample of juvenile black tip reef sharks came from two areas of French Polynesia: Tepee, the main sight, and Tiki. Out of the 35 sharks that were captured and released on Tepee only seven were used to estimate the home range of the juvenile sharks. These sharks were captured at sights other than T1 after 10-45 days at liberty. There were three sharks caught between sights T1 and T3 while the other four were caught at fishing sights T1 and T3 (Bouyoucos et al., 2019).

Active tracking using the acoustic telemetry technique over the period of at least 72 hours of six sharks, two from the Tepee sight and two from Tiki resulted in 12-100 detections. These results show that the juvenile blacktip reef sharks prefer shallow waters and areas that are sheltered by coral and other objects. While the neonates mostly avoided deep channels and exposed sandflats, some of the braver sharks ventured out more. Like one in the Tepee group who spend its nights swimming over sand substrate at the edge of the channel (Bouyoucos et al., 2019).



Sharks are highly mobile animals. They exhibit complex movement patterns with a wide range of both spatial and temporal scales. The differences between the sex of the animal can stem from a range of reasons, such as conserving energy during the mating season and reproductive strategy. Site fidelity and home range estimation are key methods for understanding how and why blacktip reef sharks move. These methods can identify important habitats through use of specific areas. This can be done by restricting the movement of a sample to a region that is much smaller than they can use.

This study uses one study site, Orpheus Island. Orpheus Island is just off the coast of Queensland Australia that is inshore of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The island is 12km long and around 1-2.5km wide. Average depth of the site is less than 5m with a max tidal range

of 4m with some of the bay becoming completely dry at the lowest levels of the tide. The study site is surrounded by a fringe reef with a depth of 8-20m. While this study focused on the sex differences in movement in the blacktip reef shark, size differences were also noted. Large sharks were categorized as having a stretch total length (STL) of 998-1452 mm while small sharks were measured at 510-812 mm STL. There were no sharks that measured between these two lengths (Schlaff et al., 2020).

The method used for this study was passive acoustic telemetry used within reef habitats at the Orpheus Island study site. A total of 59 sharks were tagged, sexed, and measured to the millimeter between December 2010 and February 2013. Of the sharks tagged 32 were female and 27 were male. Only 40 of the 59 sharks were included in the final data due to no data or limited data available. The 40 sharks were tracked for a period of 80-889 days with an average of 424 days individually. A residency index was established which was defined by a presence history. The presence history was defined by the individual being detected at least twice a day within the array. These presence histories were used to calculate the ratio of days at liberty and days spent withing the acoustic array. Space use estimations were made by using kernel utilization distributions (KUDs). KUDs are distributions that give the probability density that an animal is found at a given spot. This method provides for less biased home-range area estimations. These were calculated using short-term centers of activity. These represented the mean position of each shark over a 30-minute period (Schlaff et al., 2020).

Strong site attachment to reef habitats was shown with 28, or over two-thirds, of the sharks staying at the study sight for most of the monitoring period. A total of 19 individuals never left the study sight. Over half of the sharks were detected in the study site for more than 70% of the observation period only a few of the sample population used more than half of the area. There were significant differences of roaming patterns within size differences ( $p=0.025$ ) but there was not a significant difference in roaming within sex differences ( $p=0.188$ ). Residency didn't show a significant difference in both size differences ( $p=0.054$ ) or sex differences ( $p=0.540$ ). Two male blacktip reef sharks included in this study left and returned to Orpheus Island at around the same time each year and would stay in the site for around a month at a time. These two sharks would arrive in November or December, the beginning of the species mating period, each year the time of arrival would vary by 1-2 weeks throughout the years, indicating that their movements were highly coordinated. (Schlaff et al., 2020)



In terms of their usage of space, there was little to no difference between males and females for the majority of the year until November and December when the males would use almost twice as much space as females would. This indicates a difference in levels of fidelity to the home range between males and females. Female blacktip reef sharks would consistently re-use 55%-75% of 50% KUD core areas, but with a noticeable decrease in December when the overlap would drop to 45%. The mean overlap of monthly 95% KUD ranged from over 80% to 60% in most months but that would drop to below 50% in December. Males of the species would see a similar pattern with 50% KUD ranging from 55%-85% throughout most of the year and 95% KUD at 75% for much of the year, but both would drop to below 40% from October to December. This suggests a change in behavior or an increase in movement for both the males and females of the species. Core and extent of space use by females was higher than that of males from January to March as well as in the month of June, while males showed little change throughout most of the year with an increase from November to December (Schlaff et al., 2020).

Out of the 59 sharks that were originally tagged, 20 of them were fitted with acoustic depth tags, 7 (all female) were adults while the remaining 13 (3 female, 10 male) were juvenile. The monthly depth among the large female sharks ranged from 3.1-5m while the small females mostly remained within 1m of the surface. Small males' seasonal depth was larger than that of small females, but there is not comparison to large male sharks due to none being tagged for depth use. Large female sharks were observed in deeper depths between the months of August and November and returned to more shallow water in December. Some of the small males would use deeper depths throughout the year while others shifted to deeper depths in September and October. There are also differences in depth present throughout the day with large females present in shallower (3-3.5m) water at dawn and dusk and reaching their deepest depths (5m) at night. Small males mimicked the large female in many ways but with greater variability in individuals and only reaching 2m as their deepest depths. Small females largely remained within 0.5m of the shore.

Both studies show us that juvenile blacktip reef sharks like to remain in shallow waters in the reef. They use less space than their older counterparts and this may be because the shallower waters offer more protection than other places in the reef. While the adult sharks tend to stray to further depths, they often stay near the reef itself with large female sharks staying in their home ranges and possibly relocating, within the array, during reproductive seasons. This may be mate-

searching behavior or a matter of personal selection. The movement patterns of the male sharks may also represent mate-searching behavior. Studying the movement of these sharks, and others like them, give insight that may have been more difficult to discover otherwise, such as why and how they use the space the way they do. This is important for many reasons, not only to protect the species, but their home as well. The link between movement and population dynamic shows us the roles that each member plays and how this has affect their survival and reproductive success.

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# Lindsey O'Brien

“Lindsey did some excellent work this semester and took the initiative to create an informative research paper on something she cares a lot about. As this was a personal essay as well, Lindsey put a lot of her own character and background into this essay, which really gives it so much strength and heart. I enjoyed working with her throughout the semester to help her on her journey in creating this work. I'm certain that she'll accomplish whatever she sets her mind and heart to in the future!”

- Kala Buttke

## Go Green by Thrifting

The average amount of money Americans spent on clothes in 2020, was \$1,800. But the average amount of money women spend on clothes a year was \$4,800. And most only wear 20% of what they buy and the rest just sits in their closets (Bowling). If Americans were to spend half of that, they would have that much more money to spend on family vacations, vehicles, food, or to save for the future. One way to save money on clothes, and also to live green is to go thrifting. A thrift store is a store that sells second-hand clothes and other household goods, typically to raise money for a local charity. A charity is an organization whose primary objectives are philanthropy and social well-being.

The number one benefit of thrifting is reducing waste. Shopping at a local thrift store is a simple and easy way to shop green. Manufacturing, producing, packaging, and distributing new clothing takes a lot of energy and water. Disposing of unwanted clothing also takes a toll on the environment. In the United States, individuals throw out 60 to 80 pounds of textile waste each year (Beall). It can take months and even years for these materials to fully break down in landfills! Water is involved in almost every stage of clothing production. It takes water to grow cotton: it takes up to 713 gallons of water to grow the cotton needed to make one t-shirt; a pair of jeans takes over 2,000 gallons of water (Beall). Also, cotton is an extremely pesticide-intensive crop. The pesticides can often contaminate ground and surface water. Extensive pesticide usage leads to soil acidification and agricultural run-off, which causes hypoxia, low oxygen levels in nearby surface waters and subsequently disrupts ecosystems. By choosing to buy secondhand clothing instead of brand new, you reduce waste and help the planet. In this way, thrift shopping is the ultimate way to live out the “reduce, reuse, recycle” motto!

The second benefit is to curate a one-of-a-kind wardrobe. Whether you want to stay on top of the latest trends or express your individuality with unique and vintage clothing, thrift shopping allows you to create a wardrobe that's completely one-of-a-kind. Thrift shopping is a lot like a treasure hunt: you never know what you might find.

The third benefit to shopping at thrift stores is scoring high-quality goods at a low price. There's nothing quite like the thrill of finding a great bargain, and at thrift stores, amazing deals are around every corner! Save on clothing, furniture, books, games, and so much more for the entire family. It's a great feeling to know you're getting more for less by choosing to shop at a thrift store over a traditional retailer. You can also find your next DIY project there for cheap! From furniture to décor to fabric, there's no shortage of thrift store finds that are ready to be upcycled into something new! The next time you go thrift shopping, keep your next DIY project in mind. Many pieces simply need a little "TLC" to come to life. It's amazing to see how thrift store finds are transformed with a good cleaning and a fresh coat of paint or cutting up a t-shirt and restitching it.

And lastly, you support the community. Unlike big retail chains, many thrift stores exist to serve others, not generate a profit for stockholders. Choosing to shop at a thrift store that's driven by a mission to help others, like the Fond du Lac Goodwill, is a wonderful way to make a difference in your community.

Fast Fashion involves cheap, trendy clothes that sample ideas from the catwalk or celebrity culture and turn them into garments in high street stores at breakneck speed to meet consumer demand. The problems with this are that there is a lot of textile waste, CO2 emissions, water pollution, and unsafe labor conditions (Smith). Other alternatives are to buy quality over quantity, timelessness over trendiness, manufacturers that use sustainable and fair labor practices, to buy second hand items at a thrift store, and repair, care, or donate the item (Smith). Slow fashion is on the rise. Companies like Goodwill, or other thrift stores, Patagonia's Worn and Wear, any small local boutique, Levi jeans, ThredUp and other online resellers that support slow fashion. Companies are trying to offer alternatives with mindful manufacturing, fair labor rights, natural materials, and lasting garments.

Not only can you go to thrift stores but also rummage and garage sales, estate sales, or consignment shops, and what is becoming more common today are thrift accounts on social media platforms. Instagram is becoming a new platform for selling clothes and other thrift finds.

I personally have a “closet” as I like to call it on Instagram, named Authenticgrace.co. I started it in the winter of 2018 to sell old clothes out of my closet that I simply didn’t want anymore. I would sell shirts for 25% of what I bought them for, so I was losing money on these items. Nothing about it was professional or popular. In March of 2020, when quarantine hit I had so much more free time on my hands and decided to turn it into a little business. I made it look more professional with a nice profile picture with a white background and try-on pictures. Instead of selling my own clothes I would resell the clothes I bought at a thrift store. Now I would go to Goodwill, St. Vincent de Paul, and other thrift stores to find clothes to resell. While doing this you have to be patient and look through every rack, and all sizes. You have to know your brands and know how much they’re worth brand new and how much someone would pay for it secondhand. You have to look at the quality and see if there are any stains, rips, or spots on the item. And you also have to know your audience and know what kind of styles they like and the prices they can afford.

When I’m home from college I’ll go thrifting at least twice a week, they are always getting new donations every day so I almost always find something when I go, but there are times I walk out empty handed. My mom also does the same thing but with furniture and house decor and now has a brick and mortar. She has taught me to save money by thrifting but also to know how to be a business owner and have it be a paying job. Now at college this is my full time job and only income. I’ve created a business that not only I love, but it's unique, it's perfect for my busy life, and I can make a living off of it at age 19.

In highschool I hated thrifting. I went to a small private school where you never once said you thrifted your shirt. That was embarrassing. My mom has been going her whole life, her and her sister went all the time in highschool since that's all they could afford. In highschool I remember telling my mom it was so gross and we have enough money to buy new items. But now, my mom and I go together and find items for our businesses and now I still go by myself too but i’m always on the look for items for her to resell as well. Some of my best finds were Patagonia tops for about \$10, which sell for \$100 plus, a Lululemon jacket I bought for \$20 and sold for \$125 and a black North Face jacket I bought for \$20 and sold for \$150. A Burberry scarf I bought for \$3 is worth over \$400. And my favorite and best find ever was an authentic Louis Vuitton Purse for \$10.75 and is worth \$1,400. But finding these things took a lot of time

and patience before I finally found them. It takes a lot of knowing the brands and searching every rack to find something like these items. You don't find them every day or even every month.

I surveyed over 1,800 highschool and college students and asked if their closet was mostly thrifted or new items, over 63% of kids said their closet was mostly thrifted items. There were also 47% of the people who did thrift on a regular basis (meaning once every other week). The other 53% that said they don't shop at thrift stores because it's "old, grandpa clothes", "it's gross", "it's too much work to go through the racks", "why would I shop there when I have enough money to afford new clothes", "only broke people go there", "I never have, and never will" and "that's embarrassing or I'm too embarrassed to step foot in a thrift store".

I asked those same 1,800 plus students what their best thrift find ever was, whether or not they thrift. I got answers like, "North Face Brown Puffer Jacket, really fly windbreaker, senior year prom dress, cheap Patagonia fleece, lululemon tank and tee, Vera Bradley backpack I use for school, Doc Martens and a North Face winter coat." Others found, "corn on the cob costume, a leather jacket, Levi jeans and khakis that fit perfectly, alcohol/beer tees, adorable vintage sweaters, Nike Air Maxes, college apparel, Lululemon leggings that were my size." More finds were, "vintage leather Polo Ralph Lauren crossbody, cute shirts to crop, Gucci purse and slides, Yeti water bottle, cute knick knacks for my dorm, apparel from the restaurant I work for, Vineyard Vines new with tags pullover." And lastly, "an expensive painting, brand new Nike baseball cap, authentic Louis Vuitton purse, Madewell jeans, new golf clubs that were the perfect height, and a vintage Miller Lite hoodie with a beer pocket." These girls got these items for a tiny fraction of the brand new price and were also helping out the environment by one single purchase.

By shopping at local thrift stores or second hand shops, you can reduce waste from the landfill, you can create a one-of-a-kind wardrobe to fit your personality, you'll score high quality items for less than half the price, and you will also be supporting the community by shopping there. Brands like Shein, Forever 21, Victoria Secret, and Zara are all fast fashion businesses that create problems like textile waste, CO2 emissions, water pollution, and unsafe labor conditions (Smith). After developing a love for thrifting I started Authentic Grace Company in the winter of 2018. I am now able to shop secondhand while making money. Thrifting is a win-win situation, for you, your community, the environment, and your bank account.

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