



WORDPLAY

SPRING SEMESTER 2014

ENGLISH '57 SERIES

DIVINING

WORDPLAY

DIVINING

verb (used with object), di·vined, di·vin·ing.

13. to discover or declare (something obscure or in the future) by divination; prophesy.
14. to perceive by intuition or insight; conjecture.

INTRODUCTION

The Independent Writing courses in English '57 are uniquely structured. In the course writers meet weekly with consultants for the duration of a semester, during which they write and then collaboratively revise that writing. The process of this writing and revision in the course is hard to describe because it operates largely on the basis of interpersonal relation and is therefore wildly variable. Through discussion and interpretation, each writer and their consultant discuss the writing and revising process to produce an experience for each writer which is almost impossible to replicate. Familiarity, frank discussion, and joint creativity are just a few features of the program which lend it power.

It can be said that the process of writing is its own form of divining, and the same can be said for the process of revision. Writers discover, declare, and prophesy. Intuition, insight, and conjecture bring a writer and reviser closer to their work. What is to be done with that work can't be said. Some is taken down to its foundation and rebuilt over these weeks, and perhaps will be indeterminately onward. Some is discarded, some rediscovered. Some is even finished; of *that* writing, some has found its way here. This may not be the last place of publication for our writers, if it is the first.

Perhaps as readers, we may glean something from the works which come after this page.

There is yet divining to do.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The works created, culled, pored over, and--perhaps--perfected in the booths of the Mary K. Croft Tutoring-Learning Center are of course unique. No two semesters, as no two authors, produce the same writing. I'd like to acknowledge the hard work of all of the writers who submitted to this semester's *Wordplay*. In addition, I would like to extend that gratitude to their writing consultants, whose efforts and dedication are reflected in each writer's introduction. We would also be remiss to let our cooperating English professor, Lynn Ludwig, go without recognition.

Additional acknowledgement goes to Emily Hoffmann, whose own photography serves as the cover image for this semester's *Wordplay*.

Special thanks to the '57 supervisor Paul Kratwell, without whom we at the TLC writing lab are all surely lost, and who has provided me much sage counsel and moral support.

-AMY VIDA
EDITOR

WORDPLAY

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CONTENTS

DEFORD, BRITTNEY	1
FLICK, DYLAN	4
HARRIS, RICK	6
HILGART, MYKAYLA	7, 8
HOMAN, JENNA	9, 11
JOHNS, JAMIE	13, 15, 17, 19
KOTOWSKI, LAUREN	24
LEE, EVA	26
MARVIN, MARY	28, 29, 30
NELSON, KEOSHA	31
RUCINSKI, KIM	32
SEMROW, ALAN	36
SIMENSON, BRADY	38
STEVEN, STERLING	42
URTES, KYLE	45
VANEVENHOVEN, OLIVIA	46
VANMETER, WENDY	49

DEFORD, BRITTNEY

"Brittney has been a joy to work with this semester, and I'm not just saying that because she's a poetry fan like me! Her writing seems effortless though she puts an incredible amount of thought into the details. She also has a knack for creating characters that feel real to the reader without being overworked. Brittney focused on poetry for the first half of the semester, and this particular piece grew from a free-write on a fractured fairy tale." --Grace Firari

RED RIDING HOOD: THE CLAWS COME OUT

Digging for the Scoop

Dumpster diving isn't as easy as you'd think.
In fact, it's completely disgusting and downright degrading.
I didn't sign up for this! Getting the story is supposed to be fun, exciting even.
But nooo! Instead of giggling with famous people on the red carpet I'm here
with my camera crew digging through an old lady's nauseating garbage.
Needless to say, these shoes are ruined.
Why? you may be asking yourself. Allow me to explain.

The old woman is in fact the Queen of England. You see, once a month her
best friend's cousin's dog walker's daughter
drops by with sweets for the old bag (You don't even wanna know what I had to do to find THAT out!).
She wears her finest red coat and waltzes through the front gate like she owns the place.
My job? To find out why.
Some speculate that she's a drug mule, others that she's an undercover spy.
Doesn't matter; because of that little red bimbo I'm stuck digging through old shrimp and Kleenex.
Seriously. How much Kleenex can one woman use??

My boss says if I don't find something soon I'm fired.
I can barely afford my rent as is.
Really, what does he expect me to find? A detailed inventory of the items Red brings every weekend? Who does he think I
am? His fricken' fairy godmother?
Like I can utter *bibitty-bobbitty-boo* and the list will miraculously show up in this
Stupid hunk of metal.
Oh wait.....

The Witch Doctor

There's that reporter lady snooping around the Queen's again.
Can't she just take a hint? Nothing to see here!
Why can't I just come at night? I asked the Queen this question when she first found me.
"Because that will raise even more suspicion," she stated, with that fake accent of hers.
Honestly, I'm a little sick of the old bag.
Sure, I like getting the ingredients I need at no charge,

DEFORD, BRITTNEY

but what about my sanity?

I hope the Queen is feeling better...
and I hope that whole "Off with her head" joke was actually a joke.
What if I can't cure her?
I mean, my potions are good; But how good?

People call me Red, I'm a witch doctor from a rinky-dink town a few countries over.
Queenie recently became very ill, so he sent her best men to find
someone who could fix her.
That's when my best witch friend's husband's nephew's third cousin removed contacted me.
Ever since, I've been showing up at the Queen's palace door
with potions disguised as goodies.
They seemed to be working for a while but even since the *you-know-what* Queenie has
just been *different*...

Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes

Oh, where is that raggedy ol' witchy doctor?
I need my medicine... I can feel the changes happening again.
Ever since that night in Germany, I've been feeling ghastly.
Did they poison me?
And where did that strange gash come from?
Red says she doesn't know what's wrong with me
but I see the way she gets shifty and uncomfortable after being around too long.

Tonight is a full moon.
I am supposed to attend a ball this evening at Duke Hansel's castle
though I am not sure I can in my current... *condition*.
You see, I have been having dizzy spells and blacking out.
Several times I have awoken in the garden *covered in dirt*
And *spattered in blood*.

Ring, Ring, Ring, Ring.
I answer the phone with an air of discontent.
"I know what you are. I know what you have done.
I want 1 million pounds by midnight tonight or the story goes global."
Click.
That Reporter snob, she has been snooping around for a while now...
HOW DID SHE FIND OUT?

Happily Ever After

The Witch Doctor showed shortly after the call, though the Queen refused treatment.
Instead, she screamed and growled and cursed until Red left,
Afraid for her safety.

The Queen composed herself and requested the funds be placed in an easily carried bag.
She put on her least conspicuous clothing and slipped out of the palace at 11:30pm.

The Reporter was waiting near the dumpster that proved to be oh, so useful just hours before.
She looked around nervously.
Glancing at her watch she realized the drop was near. With a revolver in one pocket
And the evidence in the other, she bounced on her heels.

The Queen approached quietly, all the while in the darkness.
Her eyes glowed yellow,
the changes were happening again.
A low growl came from her throat, uncontrolled.

The wolf in the Queen's clothing come out to play.

OF MEN AND GODS

I
My friends on this auspicious day
We come together in remembrance
To revel in our leaders' penance
Of throwing e'rything into the fray.
A war of words if one does will
That threaten a people so irate
That any logical debate
Becomes a virus making ill
The state of moderate conversation.
With no citizen allowed a voice
Is what these Men bring by choice
To destroy this once-great Nation
And believe themselves untouchable
Within their precious, tax-paid spas
Eating sushi off polish'd terra-cottas--
Dishes made by undesirable
Pissants that can't earn a damn cent.
They can't pay for your fucking wars
But your stupidity bores
Into their pockets. They can't pay the rent
And their children starve on the street
Because Liberty is shut down
And even your God will frown
While you drink your whiskey neat
And people die left and right
For a chance to be set free
From a Corporation of tyranny
Brought on by people not so bright
To know this shit is just not right.

II
And you who call yourselves Agents of God
Who do nothing but cover fraud
With words stained black from lies
And actions, like shit, attract the flies
Of like-minded hypocrites
Though when caught throw fits
Of corruption without looking in a mirror:
Who bang small children in the rear

Because your wives can't provide
The same sensation for the 'ride'
And yet complain of moral destitution
Within a corrupted institution
That deems right from wrong upon
Those already from society withdrawn
Because your insistence on hate
Leaves no room for love in this debate.
You truly are insincere
That rallying behind fear
Is your only measure
To gain your pleasure
And ruining others lives
While hiding from your wives
Your shady mistress
And will still distress
When your closet is revealed
And you fail to shield
Yourselves against questions of your honesty
And rumors about your modesty.

III
And those who claim to be for the People
Yet rejoice from 'top the steeple
The benefits of Capitalism
And continue the enraging schism
Between Brothers of Liberty
And add to the growing poverty
Of those you claim to care
For. Your stain cannot compare
To the one left by your friends across the aisle, for it still
Is perverse, false, uncultured swill
You present to ignorant masses
Who take it in and forgive the passes
Of evil benefactions to your cause.
You never think nor give pause
To undying 'support' from incarnate Greed—
The ones who sew the evil seed.
Go on and spout your lie
That you are still for Vox Populi

FLICK, DYLAN

And put in your pocket Green fertilizer
That makes sure people are none the wiser.
When Corporations dictate reason
It makes you worse for ware on treason
Than the Trunks across the way
Who themselves will die one day
For their Betrayal to the people you claim
To speak for. Live with your shame
You pathetic lot.
And keep in thought
That the fish stinks from the head down.
Remember that before you drown
In the green rivers lining your pockets
And buy yet again more deadly rockets
That bring this country to its knees
And retire your titles of Trustees
Of this once-beautiful State.

IV

O evil souls of Power and Greed
Who sit atop the ignorant masses
Fucking everyone's asses
All for your insatiable need.
Have you no care for other Men?
Those not gifted with your exemption?
Do you believe that your redemption
Can be sealed away with the stroke of a pen?
You legislate to feed your excesses
Through hungry Patricians in Houses
Who would divorce their spouses
To wed what it took to buy their dresses.
What is it like looking down
From upon a gilded throne
Made of flesh and bone
Thinking us the mere clown
Dancing in the halls of kings?
You rape the earth of her treasures
You enforce disgusting, ill-gotten measures
All so you can buy more expensive things
That mean nothing once you're dead.
You show you fear the poor
Every time your delusions of grandeur
Exceed our ability to buy bread.

Whatever happened to that downward trickle
That was meant to help the poor and middle?
Why does it fester and fiddle
Because it's not left even an ickle
Impact on those of us down below
Who live daily check to check.
We aren't even a tiny speck
On your broken radar. And so
I call you out you fat shitstains
For believing yourselves more
Than what you truly are.
You aren't a venerated star
But more the attention-seeking whore
You constantly drag through the mud
And murder to keep up appearance
despite religious adherence.
You then blame us for the blood
That will never come off your hands.
We know too well your game
And no more will your fame
Be an excuse for "No one understands!"
As you slink back into your golden den.
Don't believe yourselves Gods among Men
You are all vile shitheels
Forever and ever.
Amen.

HARRIS, RICK

"Rick Harris is a mastermind. As we worked together this semester, I was witness to his creativity, his ingenuity, his passion, and his determination. Over time, Rick taught me more about the world of words than I had ever learned in previous English classes. It was a learning experience for both of us, with Rick showing me the wonder of the unknown and I trying to keep him grounded. What resulted was a magnificent journey through his novel and poetry. The following poem is a piece that Rick dedicated a lot of time and effort to, fine-tuning the specific words so that it is spoken, felt, and heard the way he imagined. It is meant to be read aloud, a play on words of sorts, and can be interpreted individually." --Jenny Bartram

IN THE MIDNIGHT DEW

not a creature was bourgeoisie
not even the sanguine slumber socks

paranoia and frivolous fortuity
while temptation traversed the fractal plane

in the paradigm of screams
the knights stole away the children

pungent chivalry would lead to twisted tales
where prickled absolution may encase your secrets

the Grecians would engage on the swivel slabs
surreptitiousness would lead to plausibility
and may the supernovas sing with dignity

HILGART, MYKAYLA

"MyKayla's optimistic spirit has made her a joy to work with this semester. She is always open to trying new ideas, which has lead to some inspiring, creative pieces." --Jensen Wohlgemuth

SPIDERMAN

You wear steel-toed boots when you come into the bank on Fridays.
I wore a frilly, white skirt and smiled your way from my window that day.
You said "hello" and began what I didn't know had already started.
I thought about it all through that weekend.

I wore a frilly, white skirt and smiled your way from my window that day.
You had called my work and questioned if I was available.
I thought about it all through that weekend.
I've seen all the torment behind those sky-blue eyes.

You had called my work and questioned if I was available.
The taste of Budweiser reminds me of those laughter-filled nights just talking.
I've seen all the torment behind those sky-blue eyes.
I am half her age, but all the wiser.

The taste of Budweiser reminds me of those laughter-filled nights just talking.
You put your hand on the small of my back as I turned to leave.
I am half her age, but all the wiser.
It all came in a rush—you are my escape from reality.

You put your hand on the small of my back as I turned to leave
I slid closer to you on that last summer night.
It all came in a rush—you are my escape from reality.
You wear a wall around your aching heart.

Truly, the best promises are those that cannot be kept.
You always find your way back.
You wear steel-toed boots when you come into the bank on Fridays.
You said "hello" and began what I didn't know had already started.

STUCK

I rev my engine once more, smelling the
hopeless burn while I continue to bury
myself deeper in the fresh snow.

Yet I sigh in relief, I want to be here.

I am certainly not getting out of here
anytime soon by the looks of it.

The snow is deep; it comes up way past my
calves.

It swallows my legs whole when I attempt to
wade through it, and gladly I allow it.

Safety.

I try to shovel my tires out of the thick,
heavy snow with my crummy little ice
scraper,

but to no avail.

No one knows that I am out here, and my
phone is flat dead.

Oh well, I tried.

I am not supposed to be here; I was
supposed to drive straight home.

Instead I turned a sharp left,

letting reality go for a bit.

I could stay here in the ditch all night, or for
a million years and

never be happier.

An old Chevy comes into view from around
the bend, and my heart skips a beat.

I smile to myself and slowly roll down my
window, taking this moment in.

Big blue eyes smile down at me and I hear
the laugh I have been waiting so long to
hear.

Finally. I am stuck.

HOMAN, JENNA

"Out of all the writing that I have had the pleasure of reading, Jenna's is some of the most tender and uplifting. It has the ability to make you reconsider the meaning of life and see the quaint beauty in things left unnoticed; her writing conveys the greatest qualities of being human. It has been my pleasure to work with Jenna, and I hope that you enjoy what she has to offer." --Michael Howard

TRUE LOVE

Ever since I was a little girl, I have always been obsessed with love. A major influence that started it all was the example that my mom and dad provided me, along with Disney.

My parents are the most adorable couple ever, and the love they share is so inspiring and beautiful. I never tire of hearing the story of how they met and how, despite being quite young and only knowing each other a short time before getting married, they knew that the love they shared was true love. They knew that their love would get them through any hardships they may encounter...and they were right. I find this to be so beautiful: the miracle of love and how it can overcome all things.

What I find to be especially inspiring and sweet is how my parents continue to love each other more and more every day and continue to always keep their affection alive. They still have little playful squabbles and tease each other, my dad still leaves an occasional love note for my mom or surprises her with flowers, they still fall asleep on the couch cuddled up together, and—sweetest of all to me—they still hold hands when they're out and about. Whenever I encounter this, my heart melts. In this moment I get a precious glimpse into when my parents first started dating, back to when they were teenagers, because in that moment they *are* teenagers. The love they share keeps them forever young, for they always will see each other as they did when they first fell for each other. They may even see each other as even more beautiful than when they first met, as each day they find a new reason to love each other even more and learn something new about each other. Though they've been together almost 33 years now, they manage to keep their love fresh and ever-strong. I hope to have as wonderfully steadfast of a marriage as my parents have had, for theirs is what I consider to be a fairy tale love.

Speaking of fairy tales, Disney was another major influence on my obsession with love. *The Little Mermaid, Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast*. they all had the prince charming who was oh-so-romantic, sweeping the princess off her feet, singing along to a song of true love with her, riding off on his noble steed into the sunset, ending in a happily ever after of chivalry and ball gowns. Yup, Disney sure set my expectations pretty high in the love department. It also firmly set in place my belief in the idea of "true love" and "love at first sight." I know to most people it's all a bunch of baloney, but I truly believe in it. Well, maybe not necessarily the idea of knowing you'd met your true love and then immediately saying "let's get married!" but I do believe that everyone has a person who is their true love, the one who is meant for them.

When Marshall (my true love) and I first met, I didn't immediately know that he'd be "the one," but I did know that I'd never met anyone like him before and had never felt so free to be myself. And after that first date, I went home happier than I'd ever been before—love struck—and I was excited to see Marshall again, wanting to know him even better and to let him know me even better, too.

I often think back to those blissful days of our first few dates, and when I do, a goofy smile lights up my face. It

usually happens when I'm walking around campus or somewhere else public, and I'm sure the people who see me wonder what I'm smiling so goofily about, but I don't pay any heed to their stares because I'm lost...lost in my mind, cherishing the little memories of rapid heartbeats and butterflies: receiving a text that Marshall was outside in his car waiting for me, my cheeks would flush in nervous excitement as I took one last look in the mirror before I raced down the stairs and found his car waiting for me, and opening the passenger side door I'd see his handsome face smiling back at me; after classes were done for the day, I'd take a shower and hurriedly get ready before rushing out the door with a skip in my step and a smile on my face, get into my car, and drive to Marshall's apartment, and as I got closer, beautiful nerves of anticipation fluttered through me, and finally I open his apartment door and melt into his arms as he lifts me up for a tight embrace.

Those are some of the memories I think of the most, but there are so many others, so many that it would probably take a whole book to fill them, and there continues to be even more memories made each and every day. As time passes by, our relationship grows stronger and stronger, and I find myself, just like my parents, loving Marshall more and more every day. I was in love with love from the very beginning of my life, but now that I'm actually experiencing this love, I'm in love with it even more. It is captivating, inspiring, powerful, and so beautiful--the most beautiful thing I have ever known. This quote by Dr. Seuss really captures my life right now: "You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams." This is so true. My life is a fairy tale, and I couldn't be happier.



My parents holding hands as they walk through Mirror Lake State Park (December 2012)

BEAUTIFUL UNCERTAINTY

Today I went for a hike in the bitter cold at Schmeckle Reserve, entering my happy place where nothing can bring me down. Sure, the crisp air bit at my cheeks and gusts of wind created snowdrifts to “peril-ize” my path, but it all barely bothered me because I was lost in wonder of the world around me.

This morning was a particularly wondrous one. The temperatures were bitterly cold (around -8 degrees Fahrenheit), but the sun was shining brightly—almost blindingly so—turning the snow-covered path before me into a shimmering, rainbow road. I gazed at the beautiful, colorful crystals of light as I continued down the path, both mesmerized and filled with childish wonder.

When I reached an open, sheltered area on the wood plank bridge to Lake Joanis, I stopped and closed my eyes, reveling in the feel of the sun warming my face from the bitter cold. In that moment I was filled with such peace, feeling a deep connection to the world around me. The Sun became a live being, a comforter, who both literally and figuratively shined a whole new light and warmth upon my world. What was once a world of lifeless drudgery, disharmony, and confusion became a world of such beauty, warmth, and peace. It truly is amazing how Nature can change our perspectives so deeply...and how the artificiality, structure, and busy-ness of society can turn us into mindless machines who have no time to “stop and smell the roses,” so to speak.

The Earth is such a complex, diverse, bizarre, contradictory, and delightful, but dangerously unpredictable, place. The unpredictability of Nature is something we humans have the most issue with. We want certainty in life because of the very fact that we live in a world that lacks certainty. Nothing is truly certain: weather can change drastically without warning (cold, heat, blizzards, hurricanes, etc...), death can never be predicted and often happens to those we feel do not deserve it, and even the humans around us who we think we are certain about can turn around and change on us and do hurtful things to us.

To compensate for all this uncertainty, we try to create an illusion of certainty with our structured buildings, homes, laws, roads, businesses, and jobs. Eventually we find a partner and possibly bear children to complete the sense of certainty and security, but the irony is that the more certainty you wrap yourself and the world around you in, the easier it is for that certainty to disappear and be replaced with an abundance of *uncertainty* that’s enough to paralyze you, a shock to the system. Once you’re too certain of the world around you, you lose a grip on the true reality: *nothing* is certain. So, when uncertainties begin to crowd your world, it’s like being hit in the chest by a ton of bricks. Everything you believe in becomes questioned.

I’ve been giving a lot of thought about uncertainty lately. As my boyfriend Marshall and I’s relationship continues to progress, I become more and more certain...but I also have a lingering *uncertainty*. It’s not the uncertainty of my love for Marshall: that’s one thing I’m completely, unquestionably certain about. I think that love is one thing we can count on to be certain of in this world. Once we have fallen in love with someone, that love never truly dies. The uncertainty I feel is whether Marshall will always be with me, and how I would deal with the possibility of losing him from my life. I hate to think of this because I honestly thrive on certainty...I don’t really like change unless it’s planned, and I’m definitely not one who

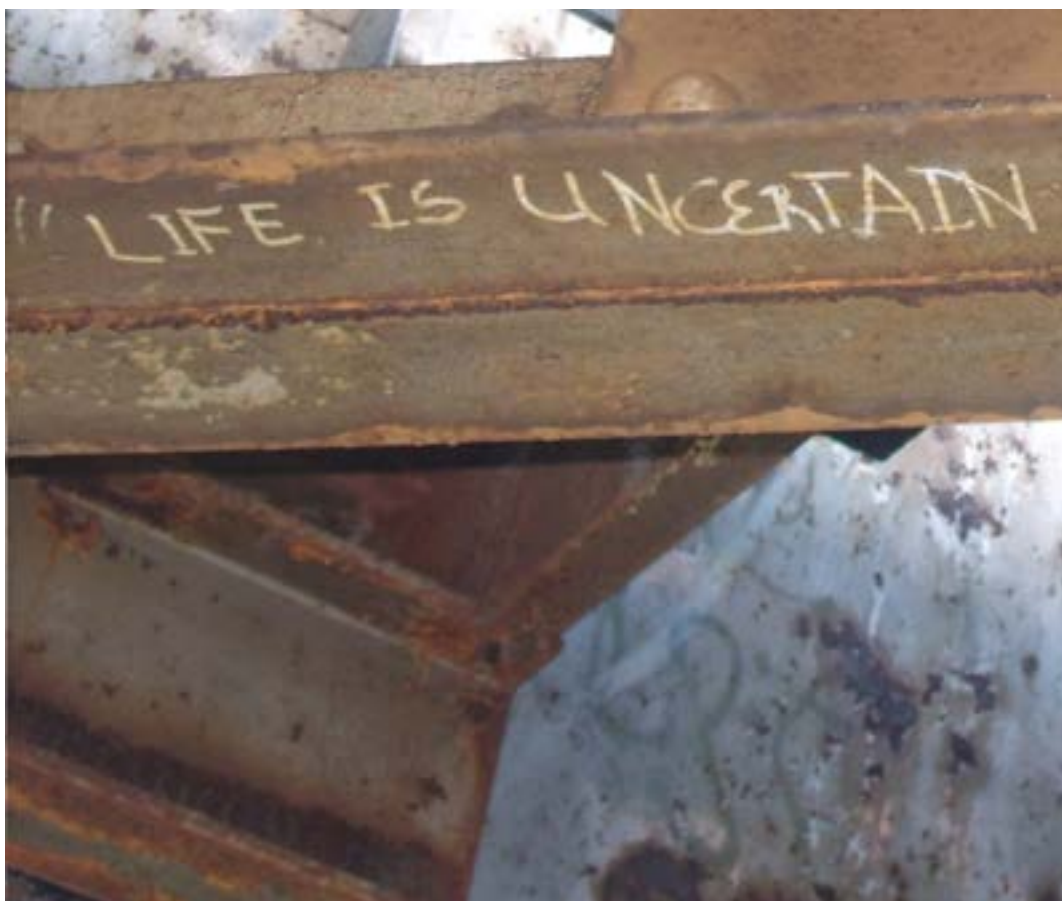
HOMAN, JENNA

likes to take major risks or do dangerous activities.....

Yet.....

Sometimes I *do* like uncertainty: taking a chance on romance, the first date, the first kiss, the first love-making...and especially the uncertainty of nature: storms, sunshine, clouds, rain, snow, ice, cold, heat, wind, etc...

Therefore, maybe we secretly, innately thrive for uncertainty, but we are taught to repress it by society and its structure. That's probably why I love being out in nature so much—its unpredictable, whimsical weather and its beautiful but dangerous environment and creatures. Life is meant to be unpredictable, and maybe that's a good thing because life is truly beautiful, unique, and perhaps even everlasting.



© Jenna Homan

“Jamie’s work this semester focused on writing haiku poems and a science fiction piece entitled “Tai Kumo.” While initially disparate in content, both of these projects challenged Jamie to make sure that she was writing with enough clarity so that the audience could follow her thought process. It is this aspect of her writing that Jamie has excelled at throughout the semester. In her collection of Haiku poetry, Jamie worked very diligently to bring the reader through the cycle of seasons in a year, using individual haiku poems to illustrate various aspects of each season. In “Tai Kumo,” Jamie builds a fictional world with enough detail and continuity for the reader to believe that this world could exist, while also inserting characters into the story whose backstories and relationships enhance the plot that she has created. She showed a lot of creativity and willingness to explore her ideas as fully as possible, which allowed her to write this inventive story.”

--Aristotle Leonhard

LETTER TO A FICTIONAL CHARACTER

From the first moment you first ghosted into my life, I had a feeling this day would inevitably come. I knew you would ask me questions like these, and I wanted to be prepared with answers that hopefully would satisfy you. Just as the words that trace your every step and flicker uncertainly toward your future, I hope that my power as it is right now will be enough to support you as you press ahead. . I hope to reinforce your idea of who you are by reminding you of how you came to be, how we both have grown, and how our unbreakable connection was forged.

First and foremost I feel the need to tell you, for some strange reason, that it took me *forever* to decide on your name. But you knew that already; I mean, you had just as much a hand in choosing your name as I did! We were just sitting and chatting one sunny spring-melt day, and there it was... you just laughed, didn't you? Don't even try to deny it – I know that's what you did. But that's fine – sharing our experiences and feelings is part of what I love about being with you; you don't need to hide, and neither do I. It's so easy being that way with you. When we first started out though, it was difficult bringing you to life... it was, after all, my first time giving birth to a fully new being. It felt like splitting off the most precious shard of my body; it felt like losing something I wanted nothing more than to keep. However... letting that tiny spark go produced a mind both part of and separate from myself. Even though we were apart, I still knew you were mine; I didn't feel anything less than joy. I was so young then... not even a teenager yet.

Do you remember how I used to describe you? I still have them tucked away – your first words, steps, and motions recorded, on a yellowed, ancient scrap barely holding in its binding. I can show them to you someday if you want... at that time, I could rightly say I barely knew you. Your appearance was so utterly foreign, yet somehow you managed feeling comfortably familiar to me. I didn't understand – I didn't know *how* to understand – until I realized that, throughout my childhood, I had literally been trained to see myself costumed in the guise of someone else entirely. Through that hazy despite malaise, I couldn't see or touch the real you either. Still, I did my best while stumbling along to raise you on my own, and learned with each new friend who joined us in that lonely, uncertain period. Thinking back on it now, it took a long time for the two of us to settle into our new skins, didn't it? Anyway... while we pushed forward, I realized you are just as unique, alive, vibrant and subject to change as I am, not just some phantom of my mind persistently following me out of the distant past.

With my self-realization, the moonlight which so often guided my pen became a palpable wave of energy. That new substance lent temporal robustness and bulk to your ethereal form, and permanently bestowed upon you the gift of your own flesh. Your father couldn't have given you more – a body to house the part of you that once clung in desperation to the fringe of my mind like a child too afraid to even attempt swimming. Since that night... after both you and I broke free of the chains that strapped us together and weighted us down... we haven't needed the moonlight's misty presence to see each other. That special substance did more than give you a physical form I could touch – it infused you with its purified aroma of

ochre and snow, and gifted you with its once lonesomely disembodied voice. With an all-new sound you could claim as your own, never since that day have you needed my permission to speak your own mind; be your words a comfort or reprimand, I have only grown to love them more.

As I watched you grow I decided to dedicate myself fully to raising you, your brothers, and your sisters who have since come. My goal has been to nurture you in a way that would allow you to flaunt your very best. The joy and release of creating each new shard of life – though never as strong or frightening as on that first day with you – is still with me now and is a feeling I grow fonder of each day.

It wasn't long before I realized that even with your new body and an ever-extending cacophony of family and friends, our minds and experiences would always be connected. It was for your sake that I strove to do and see more in my world. I broke through that daunting barrier called immaturity – a imposing blockade that, as its builder, it was my duty to tear down – so that I might better release you into a world of your own: a land still locked within my unknown memory. To understand and shape the world still forming from the disembodied mist around you, I explored my own. I traversed the largest of cities and most desolate towns, entered untouched deciduous forests, resilient prairies, and the hidden away acidic worlds of peat moss covered bogs... and so many more beyond counting. I didn't restrict myself to any given time either, be it past, present, or even the most improbable future possibility. Shattering even untried fetters, I observed the universe as it turned, and crouched down to see even the tiniest flower hiding its ephemeral beauty just beneath the gigantine, over-arching eons-old tree. Certainly I searched for those jewels, but I was not so distracted by my hunt to miss the bloody-coated feathers of a life just departed, floating down on an extinguished breeze amidst a shrieking cry breaking the motionless sky above. Some things I found turned out not to be gems, but amberite-encased poison. Against my better wishes, a mustier part of my mind chipped away each time I experienced the world's harshness. In order to protect you from those shards of persona borne of malignance, I learned the arts of defense and attack – methods I know will suit you well. It wasn't enough just to see, taste, and hear; there was still more I needed to do.

To feel the pain in your body, I left mine un-numbed even when I could feel myself breaking beneath the stresses and strains of crackled bone and shorn muscle. To feel the agony of your mind, and dive deeper with you toward that thing some would call a soul... I plucked unreservedly at my wounds that had long since covered over, and encouraged them to rankle and fester until the flesh-buried irritations of life, death, happiness and fear loosened their grip and revealed themselves. I wanted to feel it all with you – and have you feel it all with me. Even now, after so many years of drifting and swimming through that much unknown void, we have yet to gravitate to the center and end our eternally wandering, unmappable fall.

I wish... how I *wish* I could tell you everything that will happen to you, but the blatant fact is, I can't. I don't completely know or understand what will happen yet in between of here and there – the end – any more than I know what will happen to me as I stumble through my own life and try to head in the right direction within the vast, unknown, hazy world whose presence I am only just beginning to feel out. Despite what I don't know, there is one thing I can tell you for certain that I've learned through all our years together; out of everyone crisscrossing our multiverse whose frayed edges have repaired by threading the two of us unbreakably together, you are the one I can't force into anything. Even when I try it's obvious it isn't you anymore, just a shadow of what could never truly be. Your decisions and life, despite my meddlesome intentions, are still your own. But... nothing makes me happier. Even when bad things happen or events end up not going my way, nothing fills me with more elation than when you do what you think is right with the life we share.

JOHNS, JAMIE

SPRING TO SUMMER

Frosted over lake
Mist hangs between freeze and dry –
A crackling bang.

Sleet returns to snow
Halfway hailing from above –
Melting all things white.

Wet, dead grass re-frosts
The land glazes in fresh ice –
New buds force right through.

First breeze of spring-time
Open windows, let it in!
Winter clutter flies.

Time for spring cleaning,
Rearrange for a new year –
Unveil old cobwebs.

First sigh of springtime
Rivers fill and burst their seams –
Water cleans the world.

Trees finish bleeding
Winter stores stolen from them –
Watery sugar.

Fields of fresh furrows
Birds fly in from miles around –
Seeds bursting through shells.

The world flushes green
Uncurled sleepers bear their stems –
Happy to feel sun.

Bogs finish thawing
Buried muck loosens and shifts –
Turtles sun themselves.

Endless petals fall
Scatter on the barren ground –
New fruit-buds growing.

Caterpillars hide
Tiny lives tucked far away –
In heat, they emerge.

JOHNS, JAMIE

Birds flap their first wings
Trees fill up with more than leaves –
Eagerly they sing.

Temperance turns brash
Pastels turn to ruddy rich –
Summertime is here.

The longest of days
Burn and scorch the crisping land –
Wild fire lights the sky.

Seek out a shelter
Thunderclouds grey the west sky –
Warm rain pelts the earth.

A cricket chirping
Foliage rustles in air –
Winking embers fly.

Crystal clear river
Diamonds sparkle below –
Perfect cut of quartz.

Children run and play
In a freedom that's well earned –
But far too short-lived.

The sun never wanes
Treetops soak up excess light –
Wondrous patch of shade.

Frightened animals
Humans celebrate all night –
The fourth of July.

Not quite enough rain
Mechanical mist relieves –
Birds come out and play.

Sun-ripe warm berries
Fully plump from months of growth –
A sweet treat for all.

Plump land thins and crisps
Tallowed plants show off their fruit –
Nearing harvest time.

JOHNS, JAMIE

FALL TO WINTER

Enduring heat
Slumbers come early nightfall –
The first misty breath.

Leaves begin to fall
Padded footsteps chomp and crunch –
A tame tabby cat.

Fall has just begun
Clouds of summer fall to land –
Frozen drops of dew.

Early mist-morning
Jackhammers wake the forest –
Pileated bird.

Spirit of the fog
Wails a loud-laughed morning note –
Solitary Loon.

Harvested crop lands
Dry husks litter fertile grounds –
Ready to catch snow.

Dry red leaves, once green
Hang from slumbering treetops –
Fermented fruit, too.

Frost-misted lakebed
Stones sparkle beneath red flame –
Fresh caught broiled fish.

Bare rustling trees
Not everything is sleeping –
Flock of chickadees.

A grey win'try day
Indoors it is still temp'rate –
Drooping, dying plants.

Pumpkins light the night
Ghoulish laughter fill the air –
Children stay at home.

The first snowflake melts
Wood-fueled pyre-fires heat the lair –
A snowmobile roars.

JOHNS, JAMIE

Blowing blizzard winds
Drifting snow skirts like desert sand –
Buried overnight.

The snow is too deep
It covers everything now –
A deadly winter.

Glare-iced over roads
A path cut for toys of man –
They're not bumper cars.

Wind-frost whips harshly
Feathers freeze while gliding through –
No more chirping birds.

Thick snow and ice-pack
Erases the forest trails –
A frozen deer thaws.

The world is buried
Water feather-dusts all land –
Flat rooftops moaning.

Ice foiled river
Glass-topped liquid next to land –
Child swallowed whole.

A tree drops its load
Red-stained bones hang beneath boughs –
Meat to last winter.

Ice-sickled farmland
Frozen pools in terraced fields –
Bloody battleground.

Brown-dusted snowscape
Bronze-ing oil of dirt for land –
Spring is coming soon.

The first springtime thaw
Water flows along the streets –
Then freezes solid.

Winter or springtime
The sky hangs heavy and moist –
Dripping wet snow-boots.

TAI KUMO

High in the encapsulating mountaintops of a rugged frontier exists a world reclaimed by wilderness. Caustic, corrosive air keeps humans away from whatever of value may still linger in the lost land. On earth untrodden by others of their flesh and blood, a pack of ghostly children – once inhabitants of the valley-village below – patrol the inhospitable world. The specters are both lone residents and tireless guards whose singular desire is to keep even the most curious or unwitting of intruders on their respective sides. Each child has a name that now goes unspoken by their past families; except for the oldest-appearing one, whose sudden manifestation among the ruins of a recent past is thought to be the trigger to the others' spiriting away. Children are warned to stay far from the border, lest they suffer the same fates as their cousins and friends, although some adults also use it as a general warning against bad behavior. Adults are not completely safe, either. Upon the slightest glimpse of the spectral pack, even the most hardened survivor turns away, and hides from the visage of silent messenger of death whose voice is said to drive the land's insanity and corruption into the depths of one's soul.

You will see him if you stay here – the eldest boy, the unnamed stranger – as a lanky form with shoddy, uncut, snow-white hair that nearly blends with the mountain-peak's unending blizzard. Something flat, rectangular and black is always with him and is either gripped by pasty fingers and tucked underneath a colorless and wasted arm, or is stashed inside of his ankle-length, long-sleeved white coat. As herald to the pack, the stranger always leads the way. The boy's body glides with gusting swiftness, always before the handful of others half his size who trail along the intangible footsteps left behind.

The herd of ghostlings rush the blanketed earth on an endless cycle. They move in unvarying formation along the stark line drawn by a recently erupted cavernous cliffside. Their unshod feet pad with ease atop snow twice as deep as any child is high. Their variably pale bodies dodge trees in near pitch-darkness, and their way is seldom lit or sounded by jolts of ravenous thundersnow. Eyes of ruby, rose, and amethyst color their ever-blanching features, and their pupils – were one close enough to see them – are constricted to tiny points perpetually frozen by the slicing, whipping, crippling cold.

Mixed in with the old forestland, the carcasses of dead metal pipes thicker than even the oldest of the surrounding forestland's trees rest among the drifting snow, rise along cliffs, and lean their weighty girth against groaning tree trunks. A handful of bleeding cables still spark with a vague trickle of life from a palpitating heart beating somewhere unknown.

For the last eight years snow has fallen. The people clinging to life at the edge of this hostile land are only the hardest few among the many who either left, died, or disappeared. The insanity of such a beaten-down place would be easy to ignore or write off as a simple fairytale: if not for the scientists that have been flocking there ever since an event simply referred to as the World-Shift, and the disappearance of a certain man...

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"You don't believe what all those villagers were saying, do you?" An aged woman sighed in disappointment. Deep wrinkles cast hard-set shadows over her glaring face as she glanced out the window of the moving bus. Her fingers pricked and poked away at a curved keyboard sitting in her lap even when she wasn't facing the suspended holographic screen. The woman's violent voice shook as the rickety machine clunked along an uneven path that at times wasn't quite wide enough to allow the bulky vehicle's passage. Not many people could afford to throw around such an expensive piece of machinery – aptly named Shift-S9 – designed to withstand a variety of environments. If it were her choice, the old woman would have left many of its features out altogether. As someone who lived through the prior age, she couldn't care less if the billions of dollars in equipment both embedded in the machine and toted around inside melted into nonexistence...

so long as it took her where she needed to go, and let her do her work. The tawny-haired woman regarded herself as the singular indispensable thing on board, and that regardless of the expense associated with “necessary” equipment, her expertise and experience was beyond value in the new world. The land already reclaimed much of the otherwise avoided single road toward the cursed mountain, and made it immensely impractical to do anything other than charge ahead.

“But you have to admit it’s strange,” replied her younger contemporary from where he sat across a narrow aisle. A pair of silvertone hair-clips held his unkempt short-cut blonde hair securely out of his observant eyes. The typical crystalline color of the charms sparkled with a molten-rose hue in the light given off by the old woman’s computer screen. “Every time the primary team tried to go up, they always ended up back in the village, not remembering how they got there.”

“Those kids just weren’t paying attention,” the old woman laughed as she paused her hasty typing. “Listen here, Alcott, I was a part of the team that planned and cut this road,” she scoffed with a hearty kick at the tempered metal floor. “So long as the driver sticks to the map I drew rather than some ‘local’s’ hackneyed chicken-scratchings –”

The bus lurched unnaturally and cut off the ranting researcher’s lecture. Her paper-thin keyboard flew from its resting place on her lap and clattered to the floor. The artificial screen disappeared. “Damn new-age technology... it’s not durable enough for real field work!” The senior researcher scrambled for the fallen device while mumbling about how the road was supposed to be better taken care of than it had been, despite a contract between the Institute and residents almost thirty years prior. The younger researcher leapt toward the back of the overloaded bus. His spry body moved with a sense of imperative that few researchers his age commanded. He tried to hold the haphazardly stacked equipment at the back of the bus as steady as possible alongside four otherwise silent locals that his mentor hired to assist with their investigation of the mountain ridge.

“It’s Shift-Shock” the young researcher commented for anyone listening as he looked beyond the windows. Labored groans could be heard from him and the village men as the pressure inside the bus swelled, and the pull of gravity intensified. Dusk was surrounding them, and after several hours of driving they finally reached it: the place where the mountainous terrain separated from the surrounding land and formed the border to the largest Shift Zone in the world. After crossing the often-fluctuating border, the unprepared vehicle and its contents jugged and jolted on the sloping ground buried in years of snow. Despite the professed capabilities of the machine, the aim of the research team hadn’t been to go beyond the border.

“You moron,” the old woman screeched at the driver. She leapt to her feet at her student’s statement and bolted toward the driver’s side. The aged researcher pulled a side panel from the wall with a quick jerk and revealed an expansive control panel covered with screens, knobs, colorful buttons of every size, and a keyboard. The immediate strain of passing through such a strong border fried many of the vehicle’s outer measuring components, and the inner atmosphere had to be recalibrated and cut off from the outside manually before anything else had a chance to go wrong. “I told you to stay outside of the Shift Zone,” she hissed as she hastened to input data based on her raw senses. Once the pressure, air flow, and gravity were normalized, she pushed her way to the back of the bus. Strands of hair that spring loose from her tight-knotted bun streamed behind her as the woman moved with snappy energy that one would not expect from someone of her age. The female researcher paid no attention to the superfluously advanced equipment and frantic males around her as several large items fell and crashed, despite the efforts of her student and the men struggling to hold the toppling mound of excess steady. She dove through the collapsing towers of equipment cases and rummaged around in the wreckage for no more than a moment before reaching what she was after: a sturdy red case filled with a variety of items which in modern times was referred to as “old-technology.” “You so-called ‘locals’ are as useless as this heaping junk – move it, Alcott!”

“Yes, Dr. Oboro,” the younger researcher replied to her command. He hesitated to leave his area in the care of one of the local men. Unlike his mentor, the blonde-haired student still had respect for the expensive machinery as a necessary

extension of his own senses, and followed the fast-acting woman toward the front of the van. The driver struggled to keep the machine's lurching carcass from toppling over in the shifting terrain. Both researchers stumbled as the driver slammed on the brakes and began yelling in a language that neither of them understood.

"Speak English, man!" The woman hissed at the driver as she struggled to keep on her feet. "We are paying you to translate, not go off like the rest of these mules!"

"Kigea!" One of the local men shouted. The young researcher found the attention of his dark ochre eyes drawn to the back of the bus as his mentor continued to reprimand their struggling guide.

"Kigea...?" the young researcher repeated as the group behind him murmured the same word repeatedly. He continued to ignore the usual language of the easy-to-anger and oftentimes fervid Doctor Oboro. Unlike her, this young man observed those able to survive in such a harsh land in earnest, regardless of if their stories appeared "scientific" enough for the present era. If something were able to rattle the few brave souls who volunteered to assist the researchers, Luka Alcott wanted to know what it was. The curious young man directed his trained and calculating gaze toward the iced-over window that the frightened villagers now were frantic to avoid.

Alcott extended from beneath his brown coat a flawless white sleeve-cuff to clear the frost from the window. The cold outside had already permeated the Shift-S9's reinforced shell. His teacher had been right about one thing at least – readings from afar showed that even the most buffered new-era machines wouldn't keep people safe for long in such an extreme Shift Zone. However, danger from the cold was the last thing on Alcott's mind. Beyond the glass already re-frosting with his every breath stood a barefoot little girl in the flawless snow. He couldn't see her well through the wind saturated with ice-flakes, but in the moment Alcott had with her clear in his view he absorbed the color and texture of a rough-hewn, light-green dress. The plain article of clothing didn't cover her down to so much as her ankles much less did it coat the length of her plump little arms. The tiny creature appeared barely past her toddler years. Alcott's first reaction was a sinking heart – if such a small girl followed them up into the mountain and through the Shift Zone's border, perhaps after her father onboard, her life was in immediate danger.

Just as the young researcher was about to alert his mentor, the sounds of dropped metal and cracking, shattering glass covered all other noise. All of the local men gave up their assigned duties and instead sat once again in their allotted seats. The lot of brawny and dark-skinned valley-men trembled like a forest of aspen, and each set of frozen-coal eyes sealed themselves behind cinched eyelids. Hands made thick and rough through a lifetime of hard labor and tough survival covered over their owner's ears and showed no sign of budging.

"What are you doing," the blonde-haired man gasped at the men whose physical constitutions far outmatched his. Alcott frantically struggled to keep one of the larger parcels from toppling over on one of the seated men. His two arms made up less than the width of one of the hired men's, but he eventually managed to outwit gravity, if not out-muscle it. After a thankless rescue the blonde-haired scientist adjusted the metal case into a stable position. Just as Alcott was about to let out a breath in relief, he heard the sound of clattering metal from the front of the bus.

"Doctor Hibiki!" The old researcher gasped. She lurched forward and clung to the bus' front window, even as the learned translator mimicked the rest of the men from the local settlement. Doctor Oboro's body heat was enough to clear the window in a small section, and granted her a flawless view of the world beyond her glass and metal cage.

Completely forgetting about the child outside, Alcott sprinted to the side of his mentor. He was excited by the mention the name of his mentor's teacher, and the man whose face Alcott remembered well from his childhood years – the man who was now attributed as responsible for causing the World-Shift eight years prior, and killing billions with its effects.

However, when the student reached his teacher's side...

Standing undaunted in the stark chill of the whipping snowstorm was a boy younger than Alcott, but who was also far older than any other among the group of a dozen children loitering on the unmanaged and snow-coated path. The boy's emaciated body was bleached to the point he all but blended in with the snow beneath his sheet-like, uncut silver hair. Two crimson eyes cut through the opalescent shower of crystal shavings and shimmered with violent color in the otherwise stark environment. Vague lines in the snowshower traced the flapping sleeves of a dingy white coat designed in a style similar to the standard laboratory gear given to researchers with the Institute. Were it not for the light fall gear that Alcott and Oboro were allowed to wear over their standard dress during their trip up the mountainside, they would have appeared identical to the pale-skinned boy. Tucked underneath his arm and gripped tightly in the lethargic fingers of the fire-eyed youth rested a sleek, metallic, black pre-Shift laptop.

The boy's silvertone hair lashed with deceptive speed in the raging wind and made the crimson-eyed child's movements appear eternally slow. He walked with bare feet through the ever-deepening snow, but never broke through the crystalline water's surface as he floated toward the stopped bus. His bloodshot eyes rolled over to a huddled group of several children nearest the vehicle's front. The little girl in a disheveled emeraldite dress stepped forward along with two other boys whose ages appeared close to her own. Once she was within reach of an outstretched arm, Alcott was able to see her clearer than before. The girl's skin was so pale he could perceive her running veins and her dark violet eyes glittered with an eerie, other-worldly vitality. She placed her tiny hands on the metal exterior of the vehicle. One of the boys rested on the shoulders of the other and reached to place his hand on the outer pane of the layered glass.

Suddenly, raging wind and snow filled the metal cocoon with frozen air and deafening sound. Alcott reached for the jacket of his mentor as she tumbled from where she had lodged herself against the glass, and fell with her into the plush ice below. The cold chiseled through their thin layers of clothing and almost managed to freeze the two scientists before they even reached the ground below. Both Alcott and Oboro struggled to keep their eyes open, but the effort was not in vain. Through the glassy solid that coated their freezing pupils they were able to watch the Institute's prized Shift-S9 disappear.

Snow and rampant wind filled the vacated holes where windows once completed the impenetrable walls. The two boys supporting one another vaulted into the metal machine through the space once occupied by the windshield. A second young girl in a white lace nightgown skipped around the metal shell, and placed her hands on the surface in several places before she and the green-dressed child stepped back. A third girl in a sandy-white blouse and tattered brown slacks connected the points made by the second. A condensed, pale-gold ponytail streamed behind her as she skittered her fingertips along the outside of the machine. She flipped and twirled through the air at all angles like a skilled acrobat as she jumped with the wind. The two children who had gone inside erupted from a side window, and perched themselves in the branches of a scraggy evergreen nearby. A boy with black-tipped, murky gray hair passed between the two researchers as he too approached the vehicle. This child was even smaller than the others. He tripped a bit on the too-long cloth of his hole-studded cotton slacks, and his body was on the verge of drowning in his mis-buttoned teal shirt. The small boy wasn't even as tall as one of the bus' tires. He raised his hand, leapt three times his height, and struck the tempered steel with his tiny fist. A booming wave of energy outsounded the wind, and the pristine metal buckled, snapped, and fell apart in large chunks. Clean-shorn slabs of steel fell sizzling into the snow, and the innards of the mechanical beast spilt out into the open. However, there was something Alcott noticed was missing as he watched the dismantling of the grand machine. The village men were nowhere to be seen. His teacher was too preoccupied with the teenaged child standing before her to take notice of the actions of the small children, much less the strange absence of the translator and volunteers. It was possible that they ran away, but both researchers knew that it was a lot harder getting out of a Shift Zone than it was to get in. This was the main reason they didn't want not to enter the Zone during this particular trip – there were still too many unknowns. Now that they

were stranded inside... the best they could do would be to hold their breath, and wait for death in whatever way the Zone had to offer. The woman, not one to wait for anything, broke the silence and spoke to the eldest child as her student began swaying in the harsh wind.

"Where did you get that," the old woman snapped at the crimson-eyed boy. She lurched forward in a weak attempt at grabbing the machine he held under his arm. Her target, unaffected by the extremes of the Zone, leapt beyond her reach with ease. "And Doctor Hibiki's coat –" the woman's breath caught in her throat. The air within this particular Shift Zone was unbalanced and incapable of supporting human life. The high levels of ozone were palpable, and mixed with other uncommon chemicals that burned the freezing flesh of the two researchers.

The bloodshot-eyed boy seemed to notice the two researchers for the first time after the woman's outburst. He knelt down in the snow before her collapsed form as she struggled to keep her eyes open. The boy leaned forward and whispered something into her ear, but through the blinding and deafening snow, Alcott couldn't understand a single word. Just as the fragile-looking boy leaned away, the woman collapsed. Crimsonite eyes redirected a curious gaze toward the blonde-haired researcher.

An unrestrained mob of tiny hands gripped Alcott's weakened body, and pulled his crumpling body toward their leader. Alcott's glazed eyes were unable to blind him – there was something about that child he recognized. He gazed in the direction of the black computer as the boy flipped open the sturdy machine with care and turned it so that Alcott could see the blue loading screen. Operations were initiating and running even without commands being inputted. Soon enough a picture began forming on the screen. Despite pixelation Alcott recognized the photograph as it formed from a maze of electric signals.

At the center was a man in a long white coat. He stood with pride before the old Institute headquarters in a lush city that no longer existed. The man's short-cropped black hair was slicked back and a respectably trimmed beard framed a modest smile. A sleek pair of glasses glinted in the powerful sunlight but couldn't hide the confident dark eyes of Doctor Hibiki – the Institute's founder, and most prolific researcher. His hands rested on the scruffy heads of two boys each standing beside him.

To his left was a scrawny and similarly bespectacled boy. His golden-blond hair was held securely out of his eyes using a pair of silver clips made from a rare metal discovered by the Doctor. The youngest person ever admitted to the Institute's head research team – still very much a child – appeared embarrassed, but also proud to stand beside his idol. This boy's appearance was a stark contrast from that of the other child in the photo. A broad, toothy grin was made to look all the more white by the child's black shoulder-length hair. A pair of aurelian, tiger-like eyes looked up at both the other figures with determination and awe. Although it was far too large for him, he wore a coat identical to his father's, and was never far from his side.

It was then that Alcott remembered why the apparition appeared so familiar to him. Even if his body had changed over the years and his existence had been ignored in the face of his father's disgraceful disappearance, Alcott never forgot his friend. His name was...

*"Lauren is a fearless writer with a great sense of humor. She has an amazing ability to describe settings, emotions, and so much more! This semester she has overcome many writing obstacles to transform herself into one amazing writer." --Lauren Hurtis*

## THE FIRST SNOW

In the absence of our homes, fourth floor Watson hall had found family in each other. However, Derek had moved in across the hall in the middle of the semester, and kept to himself most of the time. Of course we said hello in passing, as neighborly people do. He had a kind smile, and a gentle way about him. One night, our family sat in the hallway while Emma's music bounced and echoed off each of the poorly painted white walls. Footsteps drew closer and closer on the ancient laminate floor tiles. Derek approached with a laugh in his throat down the busy hallway past us to his room. Once it got to be quiet hours, Emma retreated back to her room. While I usually do the same, without thinking, I walked to Derek's door. My knuckle thunked against the hard wood, and it opened with trepidation. Derek stood wide-eyed in his door frame and smiled his kind smile. Without giving him time to say anything, I invited him to a walk through the forest preserve on campus. He agreed and we each bundled up in our coats and scarves.

We walked down the stairs to the lobby, talking about our favorite bands and music genres. He liked the grungy bands like Nirvana and Nine Inch Nails, which wasn't so awful. The metal door handle was cold against my skin as I pushed the door away from its hinge and into the frosty air. Our eyes looked up to the bright night sky and watched the first snow of the year fall to our soon-to-be red noses. We both smiled in awe at the sight and walked the concrete steps down to the sidewalk. We had the basic conversation of strangers attempting to get along. What is your major? Where are you from? What's your favorite soup? Simple get to know you questions.

Derek spoke of his love for music and art. He was, at the time, undecided, but was deeply interested in his artwork. He told me about his life at home in a small town in North-Eastern Wisconsin. He mentioned there wasn't much of a music or art scene, which was both a help and a hinder. He never got a chance to appreciate local talent, but it also made it easier for him to focus on his own work. I loved that he was so passionate. I spoke of my big city life in Chicago. All of the shows and art around the city inspired me and sparked a conversation that neither of us could find a way out of.

Before we knew it, we were crossing the road to Schmeackle's closest trail. Our footprints were the first in the new snow. Although late and dark, the light of the world reflected against the blanket of white on the dirt road. We walked the familiar path to nowhere in particular. I thought of Slughorn's hourglass in Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince. Time tickled slowly on as the conversations grew farther in interest. We had a lot in common and although we didn't know each other more than in passing before this night, it was surprisingly easy to open up to him, and he confessed its reciprocation.

There was a moment that a silence crept between our softly spoken words. It wasn't an awkward silence that begged for our attention, but a calm appreciating one. The snow crunched under our boots, and clouds our breath fought the snow to the sky. My cold hands dug into my pockets while his formed a ball of snow. I half-expected him to throw it at me, but instead he took a bite out of it and let it melt in his mouth. We laughed at his wonderful uniqueness in unison. I exhaled deeply in a state of complete comfort and content. Although the snow was freezing my feet beneath the mounds it had formed on my boots, I felt a warmth from within me radiate to my fingertips. I picked up a ball of snow and took a bite myself, and we continued on.

Derek stopped and I did too while I took another bite out of my snowball. He reached his arm out and pointed to the tangle of snow covered trees. My eyes followed his gaze to a family of deer. Four or five slender bodies of brown and white fur stood in footprints six feet away from ours. Their deep eyes blinked at us and we smiled at the natural beauty of everything around us. For a minute or two, we just stood and appreciated each other's existence in the world. In my head, all I could think about was the time I'd spent back home. Everything I once found new and exciting, I now found dull in comparison to this moment. I could have spent the rest of my life in the concrete jungle, listening to the hustle and bustle of cars buzzing by and trains whistling in the night, but in the silence of the night, in the first snow of the year, I found utter bliss.

*"Eva's writing is always exuberant, captivating and enchanting. For this particular piece, the first one we worked on together, she clearly demonstrates all of these qualities. Her talent is apparent in her ability to creatively express several perspectives while engaging the reader." --Cortney Sabin*

## STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

I've spent the majority of my life acutely aware of the fact that no matter what I do, no matter how much I try not to be, I'm still a statistic. There are 2,607 people that reside in Bethel, Maine. I'm one of them. 23% of the town is 18 years old or younger. I'm part of that statistic also. How many people in the world have brown eyes? 87% to 90% depending on the year. I've come to the conclusion that I'm absolutely ordinary, no matter what I try.

It baffles me that people try as hard as they do to be unique. No matter what they do, they'll always be part of a percentage, right? I tried for a while to dabble in the art of being different. It started with my name. Charlee. There are no "Charlee's" in Bethel. But in Maine there are a total of six living women named "Charlee" and one man with that spelling. My surname is what I consider an absolute abomination to the world of the unique and different. Even now it pains me to say it: Williams. It's right up there with "Smith" and "Johnson" as far as commonplace last names go. During my unsuccessful attempt at being remarkable, I did everything possible not to bring up my last name.

Here's what I did try: interesting music. It was a bust. I was one of three people in my senior class who had ever heard of the band Metronomy. I tried interesting movies: anything foreign. It was bound to make me stand out, right? Wrong. Sam Winters in the grade below me is apparently the biggest cinephile on the East Coast; he had seen every movie I brought up, even the contemporary silent ones. I tried my hand at a multitude of things: being a foodie, writing poetry, trying different martial arts that aren't that common, but I always managed to find someone that I know who also did those things. It grew frustrating.

So instead of leading a life in which I was perpetually disappointed, I gave up the unique things. I finally accepted my place as a statistic. I still accept it. But where did this feeling of absolute solitude come from? Supposedly, I'm linked to all of these people, some that I don't even know, or care to know. There are so many similarities between me and the next person, and I can do absolutely nothing about it. Fine. I'm begrudgingly okay with that.

New theory: we are unique in our emotions. No. False again. There are studies that measure the precise number of people with depression or how many people are optimists. I mean, there are even personality tests. I don't get to have my own personality-just mine-I have to share it with millions, billions of other people.

I mean, I look at the way I dress, my height, my weight, my eye color and my hair, the contents of my purse, the food I eat, and everything else. There is at least one other person on this earth that shares some of these qualities. There is no escaping the fact that I am statistically speaking, completely alone.

Sometimes I wonder what the statistic is on the amount of other people that feel this way; overwhelmed by the fact that everyone tells us that we are absolutely unique, but confused because we keep finding similarities. They don't have a statistic out for that yet, but I'm sure some obscure research facility is working on it, eager to enlighten society with more semi-useless information.



LEE, EVA

Like I said, statistically I'm lost in a sea of numbers; completely inadequate, completely ordinary, completely forgettable. I'm obsessed with it. But I know that if I can place myself into so many statistical pools-if I can find every possible statistic about myself-then maybe once all of those overlap, I will be solitary. Maybe if I compile every last fact about myself: Charlee Williams, the 18 year old foodie-poet with brown eyes from Bethel, Maine that can beat you up using three different martial arts, and enjoys music that only your alternative cousin has heard of, and films that only your grandmother vaguely remembers-there will be no one else with that equation of facts and statistics. I will finally be absolutely and completely different. After all, it's in my DNA.

## LENT

When I was little, we used to give up candy for Lent. Not voluntarily, mind. It was always mom's idea. The sucky part was, we were always on spring break over Lent. Every year. We couldn't have any candy over our break. Cookies, cake, brownies, soda, ice cream, that was all just fine. But no candy. Twix, mom used to say, were technically cookies. (They're not technically cookies. They are totally candy.) But we used to cheat that way, eating Twix until our tiny tummies hurt.

I guess I didn't understand then what 'fasting' was. And even now, looking back, giving up candy is nowhere near fasting. Some people go from sun up until sun down without eating or drinking anything. That would've made us complain to high heaven. God himself would've let us eat just to shut us up.

That's what Lent is about – fasting. You're supposed to fast in honor of Jesus, or something. Maybe to feel what he felt? But giving up candy can't compare to sour wine on a dry tongue. Giving up candy doesn't equate to a crown of thorns.

How can anybody really feel what Jesus felt? Hanging up there for all the world to see, dying in excruciating pain, tolerating the thrash of spiteful tongues. It's easy to say that no one has ever felt that because Jesus took the fall for all of us that day.

I disagree. I think we all know what Jesus was going through, and we feel it every day. That's the point. That's what ties us together as humans. We always feel the spike on our hands and feet, and we always cringe from the heaviness of our cross. People point at us hanging and wonder what we've done to deserve it, even from their own hills, hanging from their own crosses.

Then Easter comes. Christ is risen, hallelujah, where is my candy. Eat the whole basket within the week – jelly beans, chocolate bunnies, eggs. None of these things were present when Jesus died two thousand years ago. They were all borrowed from somewhere else, taken from another religion's too-trusting hands. We package them in pastels now, wrapping the blood of Christ in milk chocolate and painting it pink.

I eat all the candy I want, nowadays. Often far too much. I ate an entire bag of chocolate chips today, just because it was on my shelf. I don't give up anything and I definitely don't fast. I don't always feel the sting of the whip or taste the sourness of the wine. But I can always feel my cross following me around, smacking me on the head, reminding me simultaneously of the great privilege it is to have it at all and the great responsibility it is to carry it.

I don't usually see other people's crosses, but I know in the back of my mind that everyone has one. It's the part of my mind still swimming in the blood from every wound, still mingling with all of humanity, sharing a memory. For some, that memory is of Christ and his subsequently named days of Easter week. For others, it's the simple fact that we all breathe. Christ, if he was ever real, had to breathe. Christ had stressful days. Christ got headaches and sore feet and found it hard to inhale sometimes, I'm sure. Christ was human, down to his bones.

Easter is spring. Easter is new life. Easter is a basket full of candy. Easter is a day off, no matter the year. After all that Christ suffered, all the blood that spilled from his veins, all the insults he had to endure, he still got back up after three days. Easter is a celebration. Easter is getting back up and breathing again, not just for Christ. He had his turn two thousand years ago. Now it's ours. Now it's yours. Eat your candy. You are risen, hallelujah. Easter is just around the corner.

MARVIN, MARY

# HAPPY DEATHDAY

Happy deathday,  
hope you're well  
Well,  
as well as you can be  
Anyway  
it's been four  
five  
ten  
one hundred  
one thousand years  
since you last looked at me  
and said my name  
and gifted me a smile  
Sometimes I'm fine  
and sometimes  
the grief swallows me  
like a whale  
and my stomach is  
a black hole  
devouring me  
So.  
I don't know  
if the dead celebrate death  
like the living celebrate life  
if they have dead balloons  
and dead cakes  
and dead guests  
and dead laughter  
But if they do,  
and you're deadly dining  
on strawberry pie  
and whipped cream cake,  
I hope it tastes  
like life  
I hope you can  
slurp our sorrow  
off a spoon  
and know  
how many feet  
have stopped  
at your grave.  
Happy deathday,  
hope you're well.

## WHO SPEAKS

God speaks  
in your own voice  
So how can you tell  
what is God  
and what is you?

Who speaks  
in the dark  
when you are lost?

Who speaks  
in the morning  
when you decide to wake?

Who speaks  
at the crossroads  
when you choose a path?

Who speaks  
at the end  
when you close your eyes?

I am that I am  
says God  
you are that you are  
what will be that will be  
what was that was  
what is now that is now  
let me spout  
more mumbo jumbo  
until you finally nod  
like you understand

In a land of milk and honey,  
honey doesn't flow very fast  
forty years is too long to walk  
and water is better for the body  
The honey is not coming to you  
the tablets will always be in pieces

and the people will abandon you,  
I mean God,  
for something golden

I will stretch out my hand  
and smite Egypt,  
God says,  
you say,  
Egypt trembles indeed  
the first borns  
the palace guards  
the slaves  
all shiver at your might  
all die at your hands

You shall do my wonders,  
God says,  
you say,  
I said,  
take the staff in your hands  
and tell Pharaoh  
to fuck off

NELSON, KEOSHA

*"Keosha has truly developed her creative writing over the course of the 157 class. She uses her own life experiences that she recognizes as important, or meaningful, and gives them a unique and beautiful twist, while still allowing for others to connect with her writing. It is clear to see that she is an aspiring writer, and I believe that she will continue to explore and push the limits of her creativity for many years. It has been a joy working with her this semester." --Shannon McGinn*

## ALONE

People can't handle being alone.  
Afraid of what their mind is capable of,  
Drifting off into a land of unanswered inquests  
Made up dramas  
And what-ifs

A sense of unease begins to take over.  
You fear,  
You begin to panic as your mind wraps itself in continuous coils of questions

Learning,  
Seeing,  
Realizing- who you are.

Left with no one to turn to;  
No other breathing body to confide in or distract you,  
From you

Anxiety presents itself as you stare into the mirrors of your mind

Seeking a truth of your own-  
Feeling,  
Prying,  
Desperate for a glimmer of stability and comfort within.

A non-stop conflict-  
A war inside,  
Can sometimes leave you feeling

Alone

RUCINSKI, KIM

*"Since the first time Kim and I met to discuss her writing, she knew the exact theme she wanted to convey through her work. This solid, singular vision allowed her to shape everything about her piece around one particular, thought-provoking message. As we discussed ideas to convey this message, I was constantly amazed by her ability to encapsulate it within an engaging, entertaining, Holden Caulfield-esque plot-line."*

*--Michael Sandgren*

## WALKING THROUGH A SLEEPING WORLD

Walking, head down and carefully placing each step into the mud polluted slush. All that is visible of the next person is a hunched back, a hooded figure walking with the same sulk as the one ahead of him. Housing buildings rise like trees to the left looking like giant hornet nest. Across the field to the right small dark forms of human bodies can be seen marching like black ants. No features just a collection of little black dots scurrying along the single path. I wonder when they look this way if I am also but a shapeless figure undistinguishable from the next. But I dismiss the idea from my head, look back down and walk on.

I walk through the glass doors almost as though being herded by the other students, maybe this is the only way some students are capable of getting to class having to be thrown into the middle of a crowd unable to break away and getting carried to knowledge by means of other people.

I get to the stair case and begin my ascent to the top. Looking over to my right I see a grey clothed student looking so unenthusiastic that he almost seems to be haunting the staircase like a ghost; a ghost who is incapable to change the present situation or the past and by no means intends to look to the future. I pass him by unable to stand watching this ghost drag himself on.

The classroom is filled with students some eager to learn but most eager to fulfill some other requirement. Carefully placing my feet almost like a dance between the rows of desks and chairs I hope that my presence does not disturb or bring any sort of attention. I finally get to the familiar chair and sit down as quickly and smoothly as possible now finally feeling a sense of relief; as though when you sit down you become part of a well-oiled machine of students ready to engage and create ideas and conclusions.

One minute to nine and the girl who sits next to me comes in with a look of complete obscurity. She tends to be late for class and constantly tries to justify the reason for her tardiness. And like always she ends her justification with,

"I'm gonna try to be here earlier tomorrow", and in ending her testimony with this it all ends up sounding like a bunch of bullshit. I give a halfhearted smile and say,

"I know what you mean, morning classes can be rough."

"I'm so glad that this lecture is only fifty minutes, otherwise I don't think I could handle history any longer than that."

"Ha! Right?" I reply trying not to seem over enthusiastic but still believable. I wonder what makes going to class so painful for her. Maybe it's the fact that she has to actually think so early in the morning, and her brain just can't handle it. I chuckle a bit under my breath and sit back in my chair thinking to myself on the pleasure of this class and how the lectures are like stories being told. Class begins and I can feel the mood of the room beginning to press down upon each student soon creating a fog of boredom that encompasses all.

End of class, I stand to put on my jacket slowly and with care. I have no need to rush. I know that the halls will be

swarming like the inside of a wasp's nest as soon as I step out the door. Carefully, I walk out only to get swept up into a crowd of people. I feel like we are cattle being pushed towards some unpleasant end that to most is just another class, sadly. But I go with it, knowing it is the best way to get where I need to be.

Once outside I get a sense of relief as the cool air hits my face. Most people dread having to walk outside to get to their next class. I don't mind. I feel like I am able to shed the anxieties and troubles of the previous class and they will just blow away with the crisp wind.

I head to my last class for the day, Art and Design, and maybe the only one I look forward to. It takes me away from the negativity of others and lets me enter a place where I can feel free to create and do as I please. As I walk through the building I gaze at the beautiful artwork. Sometimes when I pass through the halls I feel as if I am in a dream. I love seeing people's art because it makes me realize how each individual is capable of viewing the world from a completely different perspective.

It always takes me the longest to get to this class. Not because I dread going, but because I find myself staring in awe at some new piece of art displayed. When I finally reach the class I collect my supplies and sit in my usual chair. I immediately begin to work on my project, carefully putting the paint down slowly on the empty white canvas. Pushing and pulling the paint, creating a world entirely of my own. I don't have to think of anything else when I am here painting. The world around me no longer exists, it is just me. I like to paint because it makes me feel as though no one else could ever be me. I am an individual with ideas that only I possess. I'm sure this is why people create, so that they feel real and significant. So I sit and paint slowly with care and pleasure.

After class I pack up my supplies with much melancholy, I walk back into the swarms of people, depressed and burdened with books that never seem to open. I stare at each figure as I walk back home, wondering what dreams they carry with them on their backs, or do they carry the dreams of another. Can some be burdened by expectations? Are each of these hunched figures I see carrying their burden by choice or do they carry the empty dreams and aspirations of others.

"Hey, what are you thinking?" I look to my left and see a familiar face questionably staring at me.

"Oh nothing, just walking." I reply with a bent smile, knowing that most people who ask such questions don't really care about the deeper inner thoughts of the mind, but merely do so because sometimes there are no other ways to initiate a conversation.

"I see, so you done then for the week?"

"Yup" is all I answer as the smile grows on my face. I look forward to the quiet peace of the weekend away from everything and everyone.

"Well, I found a party tonight. So, ya in?"

"I don't know I have a lot of shit to get done." I say, hoping the question won't be pressed; but I'm wrong.

"Aww come on it won't be the same without you there."

Hesitantly I agree, and continue to walk.

...

I walk out of the party into the fresh crisp night air. The winter cold stings my lungs but it feels good, almost like a frozen baptism. The noises follow me up the steps, not just music but also the humming of multiple voices all trying to overpower the next. I am unable to distinguish one conversation from the other. Each voice just blends together making the bodies packed in the basement seem more like one big monster roaring from the depths.

“Hey man, can I bum a cig off ya?” I ask as I walk over to a group of guys huddled together like cattle trying to shield each other from the harsh winds.

“Yea sure. Here. You smoke then I take it?” I chuckle as I reach for my lighter from my stiff jacket pocket. Twisting it a few times in my hand I look over the familiar design, cheap with an unrealistic sized picture of a buck, and chipped around the edges. A soothing glow escapes from the lighter, somehow comforting on this cold winter night surrounded by strangers. I light the cigarette and inhale knowing that the eyes of the strangers are still upon me waiting for my answer. I exhale. The smoke gets twisted up into the cool night air mixing with the smell of beer and sweat. I look back at the strangers their faces darkened by the shadow from the street lights, give a smile and reply.

“Only when I drink; And I drink a lot.” With that I turn to leave. The sidewalks at night give off a feeling of abandonment, almost as though it has been forgotten. Quietness is all around me. I look for lights in the dark shadows of the inhabited houses, but smart people are always sleeping at this hour. So I walk inhaling and exhaling. I stare down at the ice covered sidewalk admiring how the yellow street lights bounce so beautifully off the frozen snow, making it for a second seem warm and inviting. Inhale, exhale. The cigarette tip burns a brilliant red and then dies down to a comforting glow.

Leonardo da Vinci once wrote “I awoke, only to see that the rest of the world is still asleep”. As I walk along the deserted sidewalk I look about me. Everything is calm and silent the crisp night air gives the impression of a sleeping spell upon all that it touches. The world is so cold that the slightest movement would cause everything to break and shatter. Yet I walk, against the cold night air while everything and everyone around me lay asleep too scared to move in the harshness of the winter.

Last inhale and exhale, I can feel the burning cigarette on my fingers yet I welcome the heat for a moment savoring it as though once I put it out I would feel completely alone and distant. Finally, I drop it and watch as it falls to the ice cold cement sidewalk, red and orange sparks scatter from the end looking like a small firework on a cool Fourth of July night. I continue to walk, awake and alone down the familiar path.

I look at what I can see in the darkness around me and it is so beautiful. The dark branches of the barren trees form exquisite silhouettes against the illumined sky. The simplicity of their outlines makes them even more remarkable. It is funny how when one is alone they are capable of seeing things that may not have been so easily perceived with others around. I wonder if others can see what I see in the night sky or do they simply see darkness and feel the cold? It scares me to think that others are missing this humble miracle because they are asleep. Not just at night but throughout their day. Their mornings are bitter and heavy. They slog their way to class, haunting the halls with empty stares. Do they not see the knowledge being poured forth upon them? Knowledge, the only thing that cannot be taken away. Once you possess information and understanding it belongs to you, you own it; and yet they don't collect it. They throw it to the side and instead dwell on other matters such as the weather or social importance and upkeep. To this I say they are fools. Fools who go about life like ghosts empty and void of any sense of passion and beauty. Fools. They hide behind expectations and society hoping that their conformity will be sufficient.

I recall a quote by Hemingway, it is funny how other people's words can so easily captivate the mind. Words the tools and pieces to build a masterpiece, to create feelings and desires, to reveal dreams and fears; words can create, words can destroy. They will heal and they will injure. Hemingway said “The best people possess a feeling for beauty the courage to take risks, the discipline to tell the truth, the capacity for sacrifice. Ironically, their virtues make them vulnerable; they are often wounded, sometimes destroyed”. The idea of who we have to be or who we have to become, this expectation is the venom that destroys people. When we become incapable of separating ourselves from others and other's opinions of who



we should be that is when we become our own poison slowly disintegrating our individuality.

I look down at my feet walking ever so careful on the icy sidewalk. My face raw and red from the air. All of a sudden it has become empty, completely empty. I look around trying to grasp onto sign of life, something to indication that I am still here. It is quiet. My feet make a dragging sound as the heels of my shoes brush the cold concrete. I welcome the noise, though soft it is I feel comfort again. The trivial noise brings me back to the world once more, and I walk; walk straight, past dark empty windows. I walk straight, through the cold winter night air. I glance to my left at a shop window black with desolation. I see the yellow street lamps reflected plainly in the black window, and there right before me is reflected a black figure. I stop and gaze at the familiar outline that is so faintly revealed on the black glass. Although no detail can be seen it mimics me, having the same movements. I control this black figure.

The silence is shattered as I hear my name called through the bitter night. I turn and see familiar faces and forms approach me from across the street. Their presence chases away the darkness and harmony of this cold beautiful night. I look back upon the familiar figure in the dark window only to see it gone; replaced instead by an unrecognizable mass of black, an ugly distorted monster. I see no individual figure the monster moves in every direction uncontrolled by anyone body. I try to move to find myself within this beast, but the monster only stirs more. I am lost. Trapped now within this black form.

“Shall we?” I say with an obligatory smile to my fellow prisoners. And with that, we walk on.

## SEMROW, ALAN

*"Able to shed light on today's complex social issues, Alan is unafraid of jumping into the controversial world of transgressive fiction. His raw, gritty writing style gives an unfiltered perspective on the real world, and the influence of his favorite author, Chuck Palahniuk, is evident throughout his work. Alan was a pleasure to work with this semester, and I wouldn't be surprised to see his work in the publishing world in the near future." --Aja Zarling*

## DIANE LANE

I like Diane Lane in the movie *Unfaithful*.

I like Emmylou Harris a lot.

*Titanic* is by far the most overrated movie of all time.

I really like Kathy Griffin.

I don't think Chelsea Handler is that funny.

My favorite film is *Leaving Las Vegas* and I think the book is a masterpiece.

The only movie I like starring Kate Hudson is *Almost Famous* and I think she's really good in it.

I dislike Celine Dion.

I think Sharon Stone is underrated.

I have a lot of respect for Madonna even though she kind of seems like a mean person.

Sheryl Crow is the only woman I'd ever consider dating and/or marrying.

I like Dennis Cooper.

*Fight Club* is brilliant.

So is Chuck Palahniuk.

I dislike all of Kelly Clarkson's songs.

I used to like "Sex and the City."

I still like "Ally McBeal."

Patrick Wilson is extremely sexy.

*Kill Bill* is Tarantino's best film.

"My Heart Will Go On" is one of the worst songs I have ever heard.

I think it's funny that Oprah's network is called OWN.

*Angels in America* is a piece of sheer art.

I like the show "Girls."

Alanis Morissette doesn't know how to pronounce the word "figure."

*Rolling Stone* is the only magazine I read.

I think *The Catcher in the Rye* one up's *The Great Gatsby*.

Nicole Kidman's a classy bitch.

I like *Jackie Brown*.

Coldplay is just okay.

I'd definitely hang out with Gwyneth Paltrow.

I really miss Debra Winger.

I loathe Elisabeth Hasselbeck.

Alicia Keys is a classy bitch.

## SEMROW, ALAN

I wish Kurt Cobain was still alive.  
I don't like Shania Twain.  
I like the score to the movie *Fargo*.  
I think Katy Perry is ruining music.  
I like the show "Weeds," but the last two seasons sucked.  
I like the movie *Closer*.  
I like the movie *Fargo*.  
I'm not a huge fan of T.S. Eliot.  
I like Virginia Woolf.  
Leo DiCaprio is definitely overrated.  
I used to like the movie *Black Swan*, but one night I got really drunk and danced around a party, quoting lines from it. It pissed a lot of people off.  
That kind of ruined the movie for me.  
I love Laura Linney.  
*Naked Lunch* changed my life.  
I like Laura Dern.  
James Joyce is not that great.  
I actually really enjoyed *Nightwood*.  
"Mother and Child Reunion" by Paul Simon is a badass song.  
I'll admit, there were a few people who started watching "Arrested Development" before me.  
I really liked Norah Jones's last album.  
My least favorite movie is *He's Just Not That Into You*.  
Kristen Wiig is an American treasure.  
So is Bob Dylan.  
I miss Lauryn Hill.  
I like Emma Thompson.  
And sometimes, just sometimes  
I really get a kick out of kissing my girl friends on the lips.

*"Right away this semester I was impressed with Brady's narrative skills, and he has only grown since then. Working with him has been a pleasure because of his ability to look critically at his own writing and make necessary changes for improvement. With his talent and his passion for writing, I think this is a name to look out for in the future." --Jensen Wohlgemuth*

## OUTRO

Uncle Gunnysack was whistling in a graveyard.

He plucked his banjo as he skipped along, merry as could be. The world was coming to an end, and for Gunnysack, that was a reason to celebrate, a reason to dance. God had begun to write the world's last story, so Uncle Gunnysack was taking it upon himself to write the world's last song. He was a man of music, after all, the composer of the human spirit's symphony of evil. The voices that tell mad men to kill, the nightmares that force people to be afraid, and the niggling insecurities that drive us all to hate are among Uncle Gunnysack's oldest, and finest, orchestrations.

His music rang true with people all over the Earth, and the dead were no different. In fact, if anyone desired the pick-me-up that Gunnysack's music provided, it was the dead more than anyone. Most people believe dead is dead, and all desires stop at the same time as a man's heart, but the dead still want everything we have, everything and more. They envy our lives, and they envy our music.

A cold wind blew through the graveyard that night, a cold wind that followed Gunnysack wherever he went. The soft snowfall was taken by it, whipped into a frenzy of dancing flakes. The naked trees swayed in the chill, like the claws of Hell stretching to the stars of Heaven. The snow surrounded the branches in sparkling clusters, and Gunnysack thought it looked like fairy dust.

"Y'all ready for magic tonight?" Gunnysack said. He had his hands cupped around his mouth, calling to anyone, living or dead, who was willing to listen. "It's in the air, boys and girls. I can see it! I can smell it! Hell, everybody, I can even taste it!"

Gunnysack now cupped a hand over his ear, waiting for a response.

"Oh, I get it," Gunnysack said, bursting with a loud chuckle. "Those aren't the senses you had in mind, are they? You wanna feel this magic, don't you?" He cackled like he was the only man in on the world's funniest joke. "You wanna *hear* this magic!"

More wind swept across the field of tombstones, as if in response to the banjo man. It had that slow, creeping moan you only noticed when walking around the dark places of the world. The wind was never scary in a park on a sunny day, but take that same wind at night in a cemetery, and you'll have chills going up your spine.

"Is that *your* music?" Gunnysack said. "Are y'all singing to me?" He played a couple more chords on his banjo. "Your magic is getting stronger every minute. I'll be damned if it ain't starting to tickle."

A lot of places were good for magic, but graveyards were best of all.

"Especially for my kinda magic," Gunnysack whispered.

Graveyards have history, and they have emotion. Graveyards have prayers, and offerings, and best of all, graveyards have bodies. Those are things magic can use, things magic can feed on. Every curse, and every spell, needs something to fuel it, and there is no better place to find that something than the hallowed ground of the dead.

"How y'all enjoying these Wisconsin winters?" Gunnysack said. He skipped along, letting the light covering of snow crunch beneath his feet. "Y'all picked a lousy spot for your final resting place." Gunnysack snickered, playing more notes on

his banjo. "Because honestly, *rest* is one thing you ain't gonna get."

Gunnysack shuffled through the sea of graves, sidestepping now and then to avoid tripping over tombstones. He ambled along, skipping and whistling to his own song, and to the song of the whirling wind. He clapped a few times, giving himself a round of applause, and set his course for the dead center of the graveyard. Pun fully intended.

In the middle of the Green Bay Memorial Cemetery was a large fountain, somewhat frozen, with a tall, angelic statue inside of it. The statue was a man with flowing robes and a huge pair of wings that were wide enough for a person to lie across. His arms were held open to his sides, prepared to embrace the world.

"Who in the blue hell are you supposed to be?" Gunnysack said to the statue. There weren't any signs or plaques to denote the name of the angel. Gunnysack assumed it was some religiously innocuous figure to maintain political correctness. An angel was fine, but once you call that angel Gabriel or Michael, you start infringing on every American's God-given right not to believe in God. Gunnysack jumped to the pedestal the angel stood upon, and wrapped his arm around the statue's neck, like they were old pals. "You know what, I'm gonna call you Chad."

Gunnysack strummed his banjo with his free hand, tapping his toe to the beat.

"You like music, Chad? You wanna help me write a song?"

Gunnysack bounced the banjo in his hands, like he was holding a baby. That was true in a sense, because the instrument was like a child to him. That old girl played more songs than any man could imagine, and cast more spells than any man dare dream. The banjo was just a conduit for the power inside of Gunnysack, but she sure did play a pretty tune.

"I'd like to thank all of you for coming out tonight," Gunnysack said. He held his hand to his brow, gazing at his audience of tombstones. "Though you didn't have much of a choice."

Gunnysack laughed at his own joke, as he always did, because no one else ever laughed when he was around. He adjusted his banjo strap, and did something he only did on the most special occasions, something for when the deepest and darkest work had to be done.

He rolled up his sleeves.

"This song is called "The Apocalypse Mambo."

And the music began.

Gunnysack caressed those strings like he was sliding his fingers across a beautiful woman's skin. The tune started soft and gentle, but after a few seconds, he increased the tempo. He played an ancient number, a song older than the forests, the seas, older even than the dirt under his feet. He mixed it together with a few hits he heard on the radio to give it some zest, and blended it into a musical stew. He stepped up his pace, putting that stew to a simmer. Faster and faster he played, building it to a bubbling boil.

That's what you do with really good songs, the ones that mean something. You have to hop aboard those sons a bitches like they're bucking broncos. You have to break them in before they can be played properly. The song whinnied and reared in a savage attempt to unsaddle its rider, but that only convinced Gunnysack to tighten the reins, whipping that wild beast into submission.

Gunnysack plucked those strings like a man possessed. He played so fast, if a normal man did the same thing, his fingers might bleed. Hell, a normal man's fingers might set on fire! Steam billowed from those wiggling mad hands like the rising mist of a tea kettle. He played faster still, until at last, that God-damned banjo had no choice but to cry uncle. Begrudgingly, those strings submitted to his will, playing all by their lonesome.

"Whoa, boy, whoa," Gunnysack said to the banjo. "Easy now."

When you tame the animal, you've got to train it next.

"Slow it down," he whispered, snapping his fingers to help the banjo get on beat. "No, no, no, don't get lazy with it. You gotta feel this shit. This song's gotta live, it's gotta breathe!"

The banjo didn't have Gunnysack's natural flair for music.

"Listen now," he said, stomping and clapping. "You gotta do it like this, baby."

Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap. Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap.

"There you go," Gunnysack said. "Keep it easy. Keep it smooth."

Gunnysack hopped off the statue podium, and landed on the edge of the fountain. He danced along the concrete ring with a jaunty stride, balancing like a man on a tightrope. The banjo hung free from the strap, keeping itself in perfect time with Gunnysack's direction.

Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap. Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap.

The earth shivered; not a full-on quake, just the tremble of a frightened child. The snow shifted on the ground, swirling like it was shaken in a globe. The trees swung, waving in concert with the banjo's bouncing rhythm. Even the tombstones moved; quivering like Jell-O.

Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap. Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap.

Gunnysack was feeling it, the banjo was feeling it, shit, the whole graveyard was feeling it. Gunnysack leaped from the fountain, and landed atop the nearest tombstone. He continued his feverish dancing, stomping and clapping like the crazy old fool he was, having the time of his eternal life. He hopped from one tombstone to another, like a frog hopping between lily pads.

Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap. Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap.

He felt like Bo-fucking-jangles putting on a show-stopping musical number. He busted out the jazz-hands between claps, wiggling his fingers like Al Jolson, and did a bit of tap as well, like Gene Kelly.

Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap. Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap.

Fingers began to rise from the graves, wiggling with jazz-hands of their own.

Gunnysack launched at the branch of a tree, and snatched it. He swung from the boughs like Mowgli hurdling through the jungle. He went from tree to tree until he came swinging back to the middle of the cemetery, and to his good buddy Chad. He flung himself to the statue with a final leap, and landed atop the angel's wings. Without taking even a moment to steady his footing, Gunnysack was dancing on the statue, not slipping the least little bit.

Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap. Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap.

"Rise up!" Gunnysack said. "There's work to be done!"

The rotting and wiggling hands stretched out farther still. Entire arms of brittle bones and decaying flesh appeared from the graves, scratching their way to the world above. Faces with glassy eyes, yellow teeth, and pale skin emerged from the deep, snarling and groaning like mindless animals.

"Come, my children!" Gunnysack said. "The world is yours again!"

Hundreds of corpses climbed out of their graves, and approached Chad and Uncle Gunnysack. They walked with heavy, plodding steps, stumbling like a drunken mob after last call. The undead formed a circle around the banjo man, watching him with rapt attention. It was like they were hypnotized, which was appropriate, because they were.

"Don't be shy!" Gunnysack said. Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap. "You only live twice!"

On cue, the gathered throng of undead nodded in line with Gunnysack's tune, spilling dirt and snow from their

swaying bodies. They tilted to the left, and to the right, like pendulums. They looked sloppy and unorganized, like most zombies would, but within a minute, they were mimicking the banjo man with perfect coordination, stomping and clapping to the beat.

The dance of the dead.

Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap. Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap.

Uncle Gunnysack had himself quite a band, a band to perform the lullaby that would sooth the world to its final sleep. His music would spread far and wide. It would slip through speakers like a whisper, but burst into minds like a shout. The people of the world would tap their toes, sing gently along, and sway just as easy as the corpses in that cemetery. Platinum wasn't strong enough of a word for how big his song would be.

"And they're gonna sing!" Gunnysack shouted. "And they're gonna dance!" he bellowed. "And they're gonna die!"

Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap.

Stomp-stomp. Clap-clap.

Stomp-stomp.

STEVEN, STERLING

*"During the Vietnam War, certain drugs were on the market that didn't just do what they were advertised for. Obesitol was meant to cure obesity, but it had a 3-day high that came with it. The soldiers could buy Obesitol at the store, and at first just used it for energy while in combat or while working. Sterling's poem is about his experience with Obesitol and other drugs while in Vietnam." --Melody Metz*

## OBESITOL

SPEEDING THROUGH THE VIETNAM WAR

Looks like a vanilla bottle, only looks like,  
the liquid comes inside is guaranteed to bake your cake.  
Different than mother's German chocolate,  
really fast, so fast it cures tired blood, not to be confused with Geritol,  
or Carter's Little Liver Pills, this stuff got a kick.  
Right here in Can Tho City, on the beautiful Mekong River, Vietnam,  
not River City, there ain't no music man.  
Soldier's speeding with me, speeding by you, all around you.  
Obesitol for 3 days of no sleep, followed by paranoia so complete.  
American G. I. you #10

I started to believe, but then I forgot in what.  
Obesitol for those fat Vietnamese, fat Vietnamese as rare as Yeti,  
French were here before us, they made Obesitol.  
Now I remember what is right, go see the chaplain, he can not fail you.  
Well! I said, I didn't mean it. Didn't mean what son. (I'm not his fucken son)  
Now, What was that, I have to stay here, baking in this God forsaken oven.  
I said I lied about my being arrested. We know, we don't care, get back to work.  
You don't get it. I said, The chaplain dismissed me, said, No more of this nonsense.  
Obesitol for those days when you can't take it anymore.  
American G. I. you #10

Sitting down by the dock on the river, thought I'd say bay didn't you?  
Obesitol got me up now, three whole days man!  
Time to open up a new one, but wait my friend, try some of this,  
Black Tar Heroin, Some friend he was.  
Wonderful, feeling nothing, as my cigarette burns through my fingers.  
Bliss envelopes me, I'm gently floating above the crowd, out the window,  
EE, get cummings over here, the ballon man grab my string, quote the Raven Nevermore.  
The best, no this is a super duper stupor,  
I'm not here, I ran away to a cool place called Shangri-La, way on high.  
Obesitol still with me, ----- as I hit the deck, out cold.  
American G. I. you #10

Insatiable appetite, shooting the shit the same way I drank beer, no end.  
Welcome Ladies and Gentlemen, to the Olympics of Drug abuse.



## STEVEN, STERLING

(the cameraman slaps the host because he's nodding out), the host snaps in response,

"Here in his walking stupor, the winner in the I should be dead category".

Sterling, still alive after 27 cc's, still talking, Papa-san puts alcohol in the mix.

Just a few words to our stoned fans out there, way, way, far out man!

Obesitol gives me a leg up, way up, and therefore I win, or

I can't believe I am still alive, "alive, alive, It's alive!"

Without Obesitol to keep my heart pounding, I'd have found death.

I shoot the shit like I drank the beer, never enough in Never Neverland.

American G. I. you #10

Shooting gallery, not our name, we called it Papa-sans,

Papa-san mainlined more than anybody, he always glowed yellow.

If the light was just right we all glowed yellow, Mellow Yellow,

Root Beer the color of my pee, That's just not right!

Don't shoot until you can see the yellow in their eye's, don't shoot period, it's me.

Everyone was grounded, sickness hit papa-san's place, hepatitis B.

No one escaped the dreaded Hep B, soldiers fell like leaves from the trees in the fall,

fell into hospital beds, an epidemic of self-inflicted small wounds.

Wounds that healed quickly on the outside, dying inside, sicker than dogs.

Two weeks rest, back to work, light duty for a week. Please send me home?

American G. I. you #10

"Five hundred miles from home", played constantly on the Armed Forces Radio.

I went to the PX, cheap everything, a buck and a half buys Bacardi by the quart.

Sitting in the EM club as the Gook band plays, "Proud Mary" Rolling on a Ribber.

"I think, therefore I am", the PX sold "The Moody Blues", Descartes on LSD.

Music to my ears, juice freaks were still everywhere, John Barleycorn lived on

Got a bottle of the stuff, Obesitol to the rescue, drink beer beyond that point---

At first Obesitol was OK then it was down to papa-san's for more, black tar,

sitting on the barracks stairs, Puff the Magic Dragon was throwing up,

a steady stream of trippy orange lines in the sky, sounds like a person tossing their cookies.

A plane, C-130 mini-guns a blazing out the side, 2 or 3 mini's barfing bullets!

American G. I. you #10

The Chaplain again, I volunteer for combat, want to get away from papa-san's,

chaplain thinks I'm nuts, was not trained to fight, trained to fix airplanes.

Chaplain tells me to leave, anyway by the time I was done talking to him, captain religion!

An army joke, "Sounds like a personal problem son, better go see the chaplain".

Can't you see R. Lee Ermy saying that to a young troop.

Down by the river, I shot my baby, shot me too, more Obesitol and blackness.

50 feet from papa-san's door, this gigantic river flows, the wide Mekong.

locals bathed, washed dishes, laundered their clothes right next to the shore

On stilts these planks about a foot across went 15 to 20 feet out above the river,

# STEVEN, STERLING

that's the spot where locals and visitors alike emptied their bodily waste.  
American G. I. you #10

His name, not important, I forgot anyway, he was truly stoned, fucked-up, unstable,  
I think he was drunk and black tar stoned, stumbling, to piss off the plank.

Mama-san was naked 15 feet away, bathing in the raw sewerage of the Mekong,  
he finds his pecker and falls in, off the plank, into liquid shit, the river of no return.  
The naked woman laughs so loud, all come running to see, standing in water,  
he falls about 3 feet from plank to brown sludge, the poor slob in 3 feet of water.  
Slash down in the Mekong, crap colored, soldier drenched, first real laugh in many a day.  
He crawled out through muck and mire, mixed with excreta,  
at least he might be a little cooler, always over 100 degrees, Hot Time Summer in the City,  
Back to my Obesitol and the relief the needle gave.  
American G. I. you #10

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

The story is true and there is more, this is far from finished...

Where? Vietnam, at the War's peak of American involvement.

Who? A lowly enlisted man about to become a very sick kid.

When? 20 July, 1969 Through 19 July, 1970

How? I joined the US Army to avoid the conscription, the draft, that allowed me to have more control over my M.O.S. (Military Occupational Standard) which was given as an alpha-numeric grouping. My grouping was, 67H2C9. That translates to, fixed wing aircraft repairman, ejection seat specialists. No helicopters which meant that I was not going to hang by a nylon belt out the open door of a Huey Helicopter while trying to pick off the Vietcong, North Vietnamese regular, or anybody else that was trying to kill us. It was easy to get fucked-up or real dead becoming a door gunner, or crew chief on that same bird, (crew chief when in flight becomes the door gunner on the other side of the copter. A lose, lose situation.

Why? Because of the Cold War, our US Forces, 550,000 strong when I served, not counting a large number of civilian workers employed building an infer-structure in a country that needed a great amount of improvement. America stepped in a civil war between their North and South Vietnam's. We had some allies, an Artillery Battalion from Australia (est. 1,000 men, and a strong contingent of South Korean Marines (est. 10,000 men). I would not have enlisted if it were not for President Nixon's promise to pull out of Vietnam in a short period of time. President Richard Milhouse Nixon's efforts to shut down the Vietnam War were puny. He made it last five or six years longer than it should have. There were huge amounts of money to be made if Nixon's effort was less than powerful, and he succeeded in dragging his feet. The wheels of the American economy are lubricated with human blood. We did lose in 1976. Since my Vietnam service I never vote in any public election because no one deserves my trust.

URTES, KYLE

*"Working with Kyle has been a singularly pleasant experience. He has a sense of humor and a perspective that are insightful as well as amusing. He is an idea factory, and it has been really spectacular to get to talk with him about those ideas and to see the way in which they develop." --Amy Vida*

## VIOLATIONS

The room was oppressed with darkness, the only rays of hope glowed sickly from the street lights outside. That was irrelevant of course, I could not reach the light. He was there, like a gate that needed no lock.

He sat there, right there, in my chair. So comfortable, so smug in his pristine suit. His hair untamed, his skin the color of a fresh corpse. His mask, his horrible mask, how I dreaded that thing he wore upon his face.

That mockery of a face, indents without eyes, a voice without a mouth. I often tried to imagine what terrible, twisted thoughts slithered behind that mask. What unspoken horrors were plotted behind that blank porcelain gaze.

I always found out in the end, he was nothing if not generous with his creations, he would hold me prisoner where I stood. To scream would be foolish, the silence of the night would not permit it. Or so I thought, but then his sick game began.

It started as no more than a murmur, barely perceptible. Growing louder I heard them clearer although there were no words to understand. The sound of a thousand voices from a thousand violated mouths invaded my mind.

There were no words, only the sound of carnal lust, violence, rage joy and fear all combined into a horrific symphony. I fell to my knees, ears covered, my breath catching in my throat. His mask tilted curiously with me, watching, waiting.

This was not the end of course, the conductor of this mad orchestra had yet to reach the climax of his masterpiece. The wall, my pristine white wall was the next victim. It was subtle at first, but then I saw the change.

Cold solid rough wall was now soft, warm and smooth. It held all the qualities of quivering flesh, torturously tempting me to touch. Soon small holes formed and I was at a loss. If it was truly possible the voices flowed from the holes like warm perfumed musk.

A tongue slipped from the wall, wagging in anticipation. I then saw the holes from what they really were, formless mouth spilling their vulgar song upon me. The tongues licked and lapped at the air, drinking in the cool night.

The tongues drooled and teased, searching, probing for something to taste, to feel. I closed my eyes and lay on the floor, hugging my knees to my chest. The wet noises that accompany tongues violating my ears as the orgy of pleasure, pain, regret, love, joy and sorrow flowed from their impossible mouths.

It's over now of course, I sit in my chair where my tormentor sat as he conducted his insane performance. The voices are gone, the mouths closed, the wall solid and cool once more. I sit there waiting, waiting for another night and another show.

## VANEVENHOVEN, OLIVIA

*“Olivia and I have been working together for the last two semesters. I am so incredibly proud of the progress she’s made in her writing in the time we’ve had together. Although she’s willing to take my criticisms, questions, and editing remarks, she has never lets her voice disappear from her writing. Thank you, Olivia, for letting me be part of your journey.” –Brittney Deford*

**AUTHOR INTRODUCTION:** The following passage is an excerpt taken from my memoir that I have been working on for the past year. From the time I was eleven I had wanted to share my story in the hope that it could one day help others with their own trials and mishaps. I suffer from anxiety and depression and have been dealing with it for several years. I have had to undergo experiences that placed me in hours of therapy sessions, and things that ultimately changed my life forever. Throughout my memoir I compare myself to Alice from Disney’s Alice in Wonderland. Much like Alice in Wonderland, I too was lost in an unknown world with characters that seemed foreign to me, yet somehow vaguely resembled people I once knew. I too had to face the unnerving reality that I, in fact, was no longer in reality, but in an entirely different world all together. I had stepped into a rabbit hole, and I was falling hard. This particular piece of writing is just a small section from the larger narrative of my life. This final part in my memoir is about senior year, as you will see it was a very important turning point in my life. To this day I look back not with regret, but with the knowledge that one mishap can truly flip your world upside down.

## PART IV: DEFENDING THE RED QUEEN

Senior year seemed to just fly by. If it wasn’t for all of the pictures and medical bills, I don’t think I would have remembered much of it at all. It went off to a pretty good start; meaning I was off medication and didn’t have any men in my life to distract me. My social circle was much closer than in past years and I was even making new friends. In general terms I was *good* again; focusing on my classes, doing my homework, staying involved in school; everything Diane and my parents were looking for. Then life caught up with me and I got a huge blast from the past. The opening weekend of my senior musical, “Footloose,” an old friend contacted me after he had seen it. He said that something in the way I danced and held myself together just really attracted him. I was appalled, yet flattered. He ended up somehow convincing me to come over, mind you it was now two in the morning. We drove to his house where I proceeded to stay until five in the morning, and during this time situations presented themselves; situations that would later become problematic.

By the end of November I had already been to Planned Parenthood twice. I never thought I would become one of those girls that had a baby before graduation, but apparently God had a different plan for me. The simplest way for me to describe my initial thoughts towards the baby were fear of the consequences. Do I keep it? Go full term and adopt it? Or the unsettling choice of aborting it. My religion would rule out one of those options almost instantly, but it was a topic of discussion for quite some time with the father of my child.

Could I abort it? Could I really turn my back on my religion in the hope of creating a better life for myself? After the eighth week I could find out the sex if I wanted too, and I made the terrible mistake of asking. Knowing the sex made the decision that much harder. Now I saw it as a person, not just a clump of unisex cells. There was no way I could do what the baby’s father had asked, even if we magically had enough funds to pull it off. I had to decline the only option he saw fit, but that unfortunately led to an hour long argument as to how I can’t do this to him because he’s too young and has a life to live (even though he was 22 and had just graduated college). *He has a life to live?* I was hardly 18, just entering my senior year

and he was more concerned about his reputation than he was mine. So I made the courageous decision to let him off the hook. I told him that I didn't need him if he wasn't going to be supportive. I could do this completely on my own, or so I thought.

About the time the ninth week rolled around I was preparing to tell my parents, specifically my mother, about everything that had happened. Up until this point I had kept it locked away inside myself, keeping it from everyone. I didn't want to believe that it was happening and I thought the easiest way to do so, would be to tell no one. Doing so only made the conversation with my mother that much harder. I'd been skipping school and calling myself in a few times a week for the past several weeks, so my mother knew something wasn't right. I can still remember the day when my mother came home during her lunch break, which is something she normally wouldn't do, and confronted me about skipping. I remember just falling to the floor and crying out how sorry I was, and how scared I've been. That's when my mother found out I was pregnant. She went into shock, at a complete loss of words. Eventually she composed herself and began to fire question after question.

"Who did this to you? When did this happen? Where did it happen? What were you thinking?"

She didn't give me any time to speak, so I answered them inside my head.

*Jordan. After the musical. His house. I wasn't.* She finally ended with, "Are you ok?" But wasn't expecting me to say anything. We both knew I wasn't.

After talking to my mother for hours and making her promise not to tell my father or Jordan's parents, I accepted that I was indeed pregnant. My mother and I discussed different options for me and began talking about what my future might hold. I had to acknowledge the fact that I would be a single mother, fresh out of high school, with no real future in my headlights; just me and my baby boy. My mother offered to help out financially as long as I promised to try and attend college once my son was old enough to enter a daycare program at our community college. I reluctantly agreed, and began planning out the rest of my senior year academically and socially, because it was severely going to change. With this new hope that my mother gave me, I wasn't as fearful of the pregnancy as I had been originally. I felt empowered and ready to conquer all of the ridicule my community would throw my way. I was ready to be the mother of my son.

My son never made it past week nine. I was taking a shower one night after school and suddenly I dropped to the floor in immense pain. Before I realized it, my legs and the floor of the shower were completely covered in blood. I knew what had occurred and didn't even bother to stand up. I just sat on the floor as the shower ran over me and sobbed. I sobbed for myself and for the little life that I would never get to hold in my arms.

Something in me changed that night, something that I will never again get back. A loss such as that leaves a void so deep and black; a place of despair and sorrow. I naturally became withdrawn for a few weeks allowing myself to mourn and grieve for my unborn child. Having to go through something such as this truly changes a person and their way of thinking. I can whole-heartedly say that this experience forced me to grow and mature in ways I had never considered before. I transformed into the young woman my parents had always built me up to become. I was in a sense happy and proud of what I had become, yet torn and distraught because a piece was forever taken from me.

As time dragged on I sought to become more actively engaged in school and social settings. It was still unsettling to discuss the pregnancy with my family and close friends, but I had to eventually push aside the emotions once the rumor began to spread around school. Somehow word got out that I had been pregnant and due to the fact that students couldn't see a baby bump and hadn't heard anything along the lines of a miscarriage, they assumed the worst. Just as everything seemed to finally be taking a positive turn, my world was flipped upside down. A rumor of a pregnancy is difficult enough to deal with, but now with word of abortion circulating through the halls, I felt completely defeated. The friendships I had

worked so hard to mend, were fractured beyond repair. People looked at me with disgust and I had no one to turn to for support. The people I had relied on and looked to for guidance wanted nothing to do with me. *Slut, Whore, Home wrecker;* were just a few of the words students threw my way. I thought I was at terms with the pregnancy, but attending school each and every day was intolerable. I felt so alone and soon became depressed and withdrawn. My mood went back to the way I felt when I first found out I became pregnant. My emotions did a complete 180, transforming from the hopeful, empowered young woman to the depressed, timid teenager everyone saw me as. I was lost within myself, seeing no way of my true self surfacing.

Things only got worse from here. The few close friends that had done their absolute best to stay by my side, could no longer shrug off the rumors and comments that were circulating through the school. As frustrating as it was to watch them leave me behind, I understood how difficult it must have been for them to hear those awful things about me. For a few weeks I was still depressed and stuck in a persona I didn't want to be, but soon my mood began shifting once again. While depressed, I kept telling myself how ridiculous it was to allow others to control me and ultimately, my emotions. I was better than that, stronger than any of my tormentors anticipated. Not only did I want to prove them wrong, but I wanted to show myself what I was capable of, because I knew it would be extraordinary. I had become my own worst enemy, but I knew that I had the ability to turn into my own empowering motivation.

\* \* \* \* \*

The reasoning behind part four being titled Defeating the Red Queen, is because that is exactly what I had done. In the novel "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," the Red Queen is known for creating trouble and destruction, but is first and foremost portrayed as an innocent loving queen. I took this concept and used it as symbolism for the internal struggle that I had dealt with up until the end of my senior year of high school. On the outside, one might see my persona as innocent and loving, but few would know that underneath demolition and negativity fed my mind. Like the Red Queen, I never truly cared who my actions could hurt, I only did things to better myself without any concern of the consequences. In the end I became isolated and alienated from everyone I had ever loved or cared for, and the only person I could blame was my alter ego: The Red Queen. I knew I had to change my ways no matter how difficult the struggle. I soon became resentful towards her and told her again and again how she was no longer a part of me. She did not belong inside my head, there was no longer room for her. She needed to know that she had exhausted her stay and was not welcome anymore. I felt empowered after my experience because I had defeated the Red Queen once and for all.

*"It's not often that I work with creative writers, so working with Wendy was a very exciting experience. As we bounced ideas off of each other, I enjoyed seeing her story develop as the page numbers grew week after week. In our first session she said that she had never finished writing a short story and that her goal was to finish one. With this goal in mind, it was extremely rewarding to read the completed story during our last meeting before the Wordplay submission deadline!" --Samantha Kulinski*

## THE END

*"All things must pass away."*  
-George Harrison

It's 3pm and I'm standing on the edge of what used to be a beautiful lake. I look down several feet to the lake bottom; with the absence of water, all there is to see is trash and the decaying bodies of fish. The combination of the obnoxious stench from the lake and the sweltering heat causes me to become nauseous. I reel around suddenly and vomit into a nearby bush. I tell myself that I've got to get out of here. But where could I possibly go? There's no escaping the end of days; I'm trying to survive in a world that is dying.

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To pass the time that I have left, I decide to climb up some rocks to a cave that overlooks what remains of the lake. Once inside, I sit down against one of the cave's walls and ponder whether or not I should drink my daily ration of water. I hold the tiny bottle up to the light and turn it slowly; the rays from the sun make the water inside sparkle. So this is what is supposed to keep me going for an entire day? I cannot help but laugh—surely I will not survive for very long on this small amount of water and the meager portions of food I've been given. Although I know that others are in the same situation as me, I can't control my emotions any longer. Overcome by the intense heat and feelings of hopelessness, I unthinkingly throw the bottle against the wall of the cave; the bottle shatters into tiny pieces. I watch in horror as the precious water spreads slowly across the floor. Realizing what I've done, I get on my hands and knees and try my best to lick up as much of the water as I can. Feeling pathetic and frightened, I start to cry hysterically. Suddenly, I faint and am engulfed into a dark and dreamless sleep.

\*\*\*

I awaken to the taste of metallic in my mouth. Alarmed, I quickly sit up, once again resting my back against the wall of the cave. My head throbs with every beat of my heart. I soon discover the source of the metallic taste—blood from a small cut on my forehead has made its way down my cheek and into my mouth. I figure that I must have hit my head when I fainted earlier. Not caring, I tear a piece off of my shirt to use in order to stop the bleeding. While attending to my cut, I can't help but wonder how things could have gotten so bad in such a short period of time. I laugh bitterly as I recall what I've heard from the radio and television regarding recent events.

Just like other catastrophic events throughout history, the current situation stemmed from the greediness of one man—in this instance, a dictator from the East who initiated war against neighboring countries to obtain precious natural resources. I find it ironic how children from all over the world are taught from an early age to share and to get along with others, but somehow it's acceptable for adults to engage in wars in order to gain access to land and to 'solve' problems. Acting like a spoiled child, the dictator rushed ahead with his plans without thinking of the consequences that would result—his obsession for the land was too great. And so, a new kind of bomb was developed and was dropped on one of the

countries; what was meant to be a scare tactic soon resulted in a global disaster.

Several days after the bomb was dropped, countries to the West of the blast started experiencing a change in climate and an unnerving depletion of the environment. Within weeks, communication to these countries was lost. The United States sent troops out to investigate the matter, and discovered what remained of these countries to be completely leveled and billowing with smoke; no survivors were found. Overtime a disturbing pattern of events was known to occur without any exceptions. As the aftereffects of the bomb drifted through the air on the wind, countries that were affected would witness a moderately paced deterioration of the environment and an abrupt disturbance in communication technologies that would lead to isolation.

Regarding the last part of this pattern, no one knows for sure what causes the final annihilation of the countries. After all, how could anyone? There are never any survivors. For us who remain, we are left in a constant state of apprehension wondering how we will die. Will we die slowly? Quickly? Will it be painful? Peaceful? Will death sneak up on us, or will it confront us head on? While I sit here reflecting on past events, I cannot help but think that very shortly I'll know the secret as to what happened to the other countries. I also think that it is sardonic how the man who started this calamity will be the last to die. I wonder how he feels knowing that eventually the winds will bring death to his doorstep. Does he find comfort in the extra time he has been given? Or is the extra time driving him mad? Please God forgive me, but I hope it's the latter.

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It's strange how time no longer matters...each day seems to drift into the next without any rhyme or reason. I live out the remainder of my days in an unnerving haze, haunted by memories from my past and devastated knowing that I'll have no future. I can't remember exactly the last time I saw my sister...was it two or three weeks ago? Even a few weeks seems to be like years ago. I had gone to her apartment to help her pack to travel to Europe. She was excited because the editor of the magazine she worked for had specifically recommended her to cover a story in England; she believed that this assignment would help her obtain a full-time reporter position. And besides that, who wouldn't want to travel to England? After packing, I went shopping with her to help her pick out a dress to wear while out on the town. She ended up buying a short, blue plaid dress that suited both her physical appearance and personality quite well. As I watched her examine how she looked in the dress from every angle of the three dressing room mirrors, I couldn't help but think that she was going places. To me, she had it all...intelligence, talent, beauty, and luck. My sister was one of those people who could fall out of a tree, and land directly on their feet, completely unscathed by life's harsh realities.

I drove her to O'Hare airport in early April. The two-hour drive passed quickly as she excitedly talked about all of the sites she wanted to see while in London. She joked about how she would buy me a key chain, a spoon, and a t-shirt—the usual cliché souvenirs that one can't help but love to receive. She also talked of the plans she had for my college graduation party in May. Just hearing the ideas she had for my party started to get me excited, for no one could throw a better party than my sister. Once we got to the airport, I accompanied her as she picked up her boarding pass and then stayed with her as she waited to go through security. Before I knew it, we were saying our goodbyes and she was telling me how she would call Mom and me every night. As she was leaving, my sister turned around towards me and shouted above the crowd how she would be home a week before my graduation and that I was going to love my graduation gift. And with that said, she gave me her usual wink and smile and went on her way. That was the last time I saw her.

My sister kept her promise and called Mom and I every night to tell us of her adventures in London. While there, she toured Buckingham Palace, visited several art museums, and rode on England's famous red double-decker buses. She



even enjoyed the story she was assigned to cover; the people she interviewed were interesting and she was able to shoot several photographs to accompany her main article. But then her happiness soon ended as the aftereffects from the bomb dropped in the East started to make its way West. One night her conversation revolved around how the British government was starting to evacuate people out of the country by plane. Riots were starting to spring up in London and other neighboring cities as it became clear that only a limited number of people were going to be able to board the planes due to time and resources. At the beginning of this fiasco, my sister seemed hopeful and determined that she would be able to return to the states. She talked cheerfully about planning my party and all of the things she was going to do when she got home. However, as time wore on, I believe she came to accept the realization that she wasn't coming home. Nevertheless, whenever she talked to Mom on the phone, she remained in good spirits.

The last time I would talk to my sister was sometime in early May. We were lucky that we were able to receive her call since phone reception all over Europe was starting to fail; slowly, but surely, the world was starting to be silenced one country at a time. It had been a few days since Mom and I had last spoken to my sister, so we were relieved to hear her voice once more. That night, we talked about a variety of topics including memories from our childhood and plans for our 'futures.' Our conversation was rather lively and happy, but had an undercurrent of unspoken sadness. Pretty soon a few hours had gone by, and both of us realized that we couldn't stay on the line forever. My sister told me that she wanted me to find something in her apartment—it would be on the right side of her closet, nestled underneath two or three blankets. With that said, we exchanged our goodbyes. After I hung up the phone, I couldn't help but feel sick to my stomach, for my sister's goodbye had a tone of finality. My sister never said "goodbye," just "see you later."

Over the next few days, it became evident to me that my sister would not be calling again. Others in the neighborhood had also lost contact with loved ones who either lived or were visiting overseas; Europe had fallen. In a state of disbelief, I went to my sister's apartment. Without her there, the apartment felt desolate, no longer warm or inviting. No matter where I turned, I was bombarded with recollections of my sister. It was as though her ghost lingered within the rooms; I saw her sitting at her desk typing up a story, at the kitchen sink washing dishes, and the two of us sitting on the couch having a movie night. Not being able to handle these memories any longer, I rushed to her bedroom to the place where she had wanted me to look. Sure enough, to the right side of the closet, nicely hidden under three blankets, I discovered a small box with my name written on the top in her handwriting.

Shaking, I slowly opened the box. Inside was the daintiest picture frame I had ever seen; it was made completely of blue glass with a daisy design etched in silver. The frame contained a picture that I knew and loved so well—it was a picture of the two of us at Camp Rockwell when we were children. At the time, she was ten and I was seven. A tear started to make its way down my cheek as I looked at the picture. My sister was helping me hold onto a bass that I had caught while fishing; we were laughing, revealing our missing teeth. Wanting to see if my mom had written anything on the back of the picture, I opened the back of the frame. Out of the frame dropped a small, blue envelope. I quickly opened the envelope to find a short letter addressed to me. My sister had written that she was proud of my accomplishments in college, and that as a graduation gift she had made reservations for us to go camping at Camp Rockwell in the later part of June. Unable to control my emotions any longer, I crawled up onto my sister's bed and cried for a good half hour until I could cry no more. Then, for nearly an hour, I stared silently at the ceiling, thinking about my poor mother. Every night around seven, Mom would sit near the phone, expectantly waiting for my sister's call...a call that would never come.

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A week had gone by since we lost contact with my sister. During this time, I was inconsolable and spent the majority of my days alone. I tried distracting myself by attempting to complete assignments for my classes, but found that I no longer had any ambition. Several days passed by until I felt like I was ready to talk to someone. I decided to confide in my boyfriend since my mother denied that my sister was gone and my grandma was emotionally distant. My boyfriend took me to the movie theater, which was one of the last forms of entertainment in our town. However, it too was closing due to the fact that people were mostly staying at home with their families. While sitting in my red velvet cushioned seat, I noticed that apart from a few people sitting up near the screen, the place was dead. I found this to be unsettling when I remembered all of the times the theater was so packed that you wondered whether or not you could find an open seat. Although everything around me was familiar—the aroma of fresh popcorn, the dimming of the lights, and my boyfriend's arm around me—I could find no solace. As the film played out on the screen before me, I found that I couldn't pay attention to the story plot. Uncomfortable thoughts regarding my sister seemed to be on an unending loop that continued to race through my mind. I suddenly felt claustrophobic, as if the ceiling and walls were enclosing in on me; at times, I couldn't even catch my breath. Once the film had ended, without even waiting for my boyfriend, I quickly ran out of the theater. Although the evening air was warmer than one would normally expect, I felt relieved to be out of the suffocating environment of the theater. Before long, my boyfriend joined me outside the entrance, and together we walked towards his car.

We remained in the parking lot for a time, with the windows of his car rolled down. After minutes of sitting in silence, he asked me if I was all right. Without saying a word, I shook my head and broke down crying. He leaned over in his seat and held me until I could compose myself. Once I calmed down, I looked at him expecting to engage in a serious conversation. I couldn't quite interpret the expression on his face—was it uncertainty or apprehension? In the moments to come, I sat in disbelief as he made meaningless small talk and even referenced some of the jokes we had between us. Seeing the expression of disgust on my face, he turned bright red and quickly apologized. He explained that he didn't know what to say to comfort me, and that the only way he could deal with the current catastrophe was through humor and by pretending nothing was wrong. A painful silence built up between us, only to be shattered by me. Without looking at him, I said decisively that I was walking home. Although he protested and gently grabbed my arm in order to prevent me from leaving, I shook his hand off of me and then slammed the car door. I heard him shout out my name as I walked down the sidewalk. I didn't care; I kept walking.

However, when I got home, I started to care. I realized that I was probably too harsh with him. In the past, he had always been considerate of my feelings. After all, he was right by my side when my father died. Perhaps it wasn't too much of a stretch of the imagination to believe that he too had fallen victim to the strain of current events. But although I truly deemed this to be the reason for his behavior, I couldn't help but feel angry that he acted this way when he knew I was mourning the loss of my sister. After all, my sister and him got along famously. As the time neared 10:30pm, I kept glancing over at my cell phone, expecting a text message from him. Every night at this time he would send me a goodnight text. However, on this particular night I wouldn't receive any text messages from him. Feeling depressed, I crawled onto my bed and slowly drifted off to sleep. I didn't even bother taking off my makeup or getting undressed.

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Perhaps there's some truth behind the advice that one should never date a coworker. This became clear to me the next day at work. The day started out just like any other day at work—I clocked in, chatted with a few coworkers, got a cart, and headed over to the hardware department to see what merchandise I could put out onto the shelves. However, the one

thing that wasn't ordinary was the anxiety I felt towards coming across my boyfriend. Nothing had been resolved from the previous day. I didn't know what to expect on encountering him. When I first entered my department, he was nowhere in sight, so I immediately went to ascertain how many pallets of hardware my partner and I had to put away. After looking through the pallets, I was relieved to find that we only had one pallet that contained roofing nails and various kinds of dry-wall and construction screws. While loading boxes of nails onto my cart, I noticed my boyfriend standing in an aisle talking with a few of his friends. Upon seeing me, he quickly looked away and pretended not to notice me. Wheeling my cart past them, I momentarily stopped and asked to briefly talk to him. He agreed and we walked over to the ever-deserted electrical department.

Once we made sure we were out of the sight of our coworkers, we started to discuss what happened the previous night. We each explained the reason for our behavior—he was trying to cope with the catastrophe via humor, while I was expecting him to be more considerate regarding my sister's death. We then stood in an awkward silence waiting for the other one to be the first to apologize. After awhile, I got fed up and left him in electrical. I didn't believe that I should even have to apologize for the way I acted; in my mind, my behavior was justified. Back in hardware, I took my frustration out by working at a quicker pace than usual; my partner gave me a concerned look, but I didn't care. I kept thinking to myself how annoyed I was that my boyfriend could never take anything seriously. His philosophy was that because life is too short, one must not waste it by being unhappy. And so because of this, he made everything into a joke. However, as I saw it, life isn't just one joke after another; some things are just not funny. My thoughts were soon interrupted when my boyfriend came into the aisle where my partner and I were working. He appeared to be uncomfortable and had a difficult time looking me in the eyes. As he started to joke around with my partner, I finally had enough, and decided to leave and go work in what was left of the garden center.

Escaping to the garden center didn't improve my state of mind. The automatic doors opened, letting an intense and appalling stench emerge; the flowers that were once so beautiful—in all different colors—were now withered and rotting. I could not feel any indication of a breeze; the stagnant air made the stench of decay that much worse. While wandering through the deserted aisles, I came across the carcasses of the songbirds that used to entertain me by pleasantly chirping and happily flying around. I appeared to be surrounded by death. It was there in the garden center that I finally accepted my fate—death was coming for me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. To keep my mind off of this revelation, I lost myself in my work. Five of my coworkers and I were given the task of relocating certain items from the garden center into the main part of the store. We worked in silence, without even taking any breaks. Halfway through the shift, my boyfriend approached me while I was loading bags of mulch onto carts. He offered to help me, but I refused his help. It killed me to see the hurt expression on his face as he turned and walked away. I wanted to run after him and tell him that we were okay, but my pride wouldn't let me. I watched him as he went around to people and informed them that in ten minutes there would be an employee meeting.

The meeting was short and straight to the point; our hardware store was closing and we were out of work. The news came of no shock to me because it was common knowledge that the state government was taking control over local businesses. Government officials said this course of action was meant to protect employers and employees alike if there happened to be riots. At exactly this time tomorrow morning, troops would be in charge of the distribution of our merchandise. With that said, our managers thanked us for our service and wished us the best of luck. We were then sent back one last time to our departments to clock-out and to turn in our work vests and tools. I said goodbye to all of my coworkers that had eventually become my friends over the years, knowing full well that I would never see them again.

On my way out of the store, I suddenly realized that I didn't want to leave things the way they were with my boyfriend. I truly loved him, although at times I could not understand him. I was wrong in only considering my own feelings; I should have understood that he too was having difficulties regarding current events. Going back into the store, I raced down the aisles to the building materials service desk. I asked several people where he was, and was devastated to find that he had left 20 minutes earlier. I made my way to the automotive department and sat down on the floor. Burying my head in my hands, I wept silently. I was certain that I would never see or talk to him again, that I would never be able to apologize. I suddenly felt alone, and I had no one to blame but myself.

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Graduation was neither an eventful nor happy occasion. The commencement ceremony took place on what was left of the lawn on the north side of the university; the decaying, brown remains of the grass made a sickening crunch with each step I took. The intense heat from the sun was unrelenting; underneath our black caps and gowns I, along with all the other graduates, were sweating to death. But one must adhere to tradition, no matter what horrific event looms in the distance. Looking around the campus grounds, it was shocking to see how quickly the environment had been destroyed. Within less than a month, the trees had slowly lost their leaves and started to rot away, the flowers had withered and died, and the small lake had been depleted entirely of water. The animals that often were so entertaining—the chipmunks, squirrels, and rabbits—had started to disappear. But what I hated the most was that not one songbird could be heard pleasantly chirping. It was against this lifeless backdrop that I would be given my college diploma—the only honor I would ever receive in my life.

Despite the fact that the world was ending, the graduation ceremony was carried out in the usual fashion. And of course, this included the long, drawn-out speeches that were meant to motivate us-- the ones telling us to use our knowledge to solve society's problems, to be the leaders of the world, to live life to the fullest. Inside my head, I laughed bitterly; I would never be able to live life to the fullest. Until recent events, I used to dream of how I envisioned my life to turn out. Dream about landing the so-called perfect job. Dream about being able to rent an upscale apartment. Dream about traveling the world, experiencing different cultures. These dreams used to seem within my reach, so tangible only a few weeks ago. It's funny how none of that seems to matter to me anymore.

These rambling thoughts of mine were then interrupted by the wail from a baby in the audience. On the sidelines there stood a young woman with bright red hair. She was holding the upset baby in her arms, trying to calm him down by slowly rocking him back and forth. After a couple of minutes of not being successful at quieting him, the woman started to become embarrassed at the attention she was drawing to herself. She was just starting to leave the ceremony when he finally fell silent. Smiling, the woman kissed the top of his head and then resumed her place on the sidelines. A young man who had a small stuffed bear soon joined her. As he playfully teased his son with the toy, the boy happily reached up towards the stuffed bear, all the while opening and closing his small hands. After seeing this little scene play out, I couldn't help but want to be in the woman's place. For the first time, I realized that the goals I had been working towards all these years were mostly all superficial. I had never in my life dreamt of becoming a wife and mother, but now the idea didn't seem so dull and conforming. I guess it's true that we always long for the things we can never have.

Before I knew it, it was time for the diplomas to be distributed. My peers and I lined up in single file, and then slowly made our way towards the stage. For me, the short walk seemed to last forever. I felt as though I was on death row and was walking the green mile. I tried to keep my head high and find enjoyment in the moment, but failed miserably. Along the main aisle that led to the stage, friends and family members sat expressionless. Whenever I would make eye contact with someone, they would quickly look away. Everything was silent except for the weeping of mothers. However, this weeping was not the joyful kind that one hears at weddings, but an unnerving and an unnatural weeping. Here we were graduating, most of us not yet 23, so full of life and promise, but we were dead, being mourned.

While I stood in line waiting for my name to be called, I looked out at the audience. I saw my mother sitting in the middle of the sixth row. Unlike most of the other mothers, she was not crying or overly upset. Ever since we lost contact

with my sister, she had gone into a state of denial. In her mind, the world was not ending, and my sister would be returning from England at any moment. Although it pained me to see her lying to herself, I decided to let her live out the remainder of her days in her imaginary world nevertheless. Next to my mother sat my grandma. At the age of 82, she was still as mentally sharp as ever, and stayed strong in the face of current events. I once asked her how she could be so calm and composed when all around her the environment and mankind was wasting away. In her soothing voice she confidently replied that she didn't fear death, for she had lived a long and happy life. It must be this very mindset that keeps a lot of the elderly active during the present adversity.

Two rows behind my family sat my roommate's mother and brother. The two of them looked straight ahead with no emotion showing on their faces. Only a few weeks prior my roommate and her family mourned the loss of her father. Her father was trying to retrieve food rations that a man stole from an elderly woman, but in the process ended up dead with a bullet in his head. Following the death of her father, my roommate was inconsolable, locking herself in her room and refusing to speak to anyone. However, three days later she finally wanted to talk to someone, so she confided in me. She told me that she felt depressed and all alone, and how she didn't want to attend the graduation ceremony knowing that her father wouldn't be in attendance. Once she had calmed down, I gently suggested to her that she attend the commencement ceremony since her father was looking forward to seeing her graduate. After thinking things through, my roommate decided to walk at graduation in memory of her father, although she was still in mourning.

Continuing to look at the audience, it amazed me how humans react so differently to the prospect of certain death. In times of trouble, you learn who has faith and who doesn't. Some of the people who were so hypocritical of others can no longer be found at church on Sunday. Where are they? They sit bitterly at the bar wondering why they must die. The people you once thought were of no good are the ones who are doing the most good for others. People who were known throughout the town as being strong are emotionally crumbling along the wayside, while those known to be weak are establishing themselves as leaders. Some people decide to live their final moments to the fullest, while others decide to take their lives. Some people decide to hide from the truth and live their lives like nothing is wrong, while others decide to accept the truth and somehow carry on. And then there's me. On the outside, I appear to others as being in complete control of myself, but if only they could see the storm that is raging within me. I'm scared. I'm angry. I'm confused. It's only a matter of time before they'll see the real me—a vulnerable little girl.

As these thoughts passed through my mind, I was brought back to reality when I heard my name announced. Taking a deep breath, I ascended the stairs and made my way across the stage. A professor dressed in a black robe with a red stole around his neck shook my hand and gave me my diploma. Upon leaving the stage, I felt neither proud nor disappointed; I felt emotionally numb. My mother was waiting for me as I returned to my seat, with a camera in her hand. She told me to smile. The people around us looked at her as though she was crazy. I mustered up the best smile I could, all the while trying desperately not to break down crying. To make matters worse, I noticed that there were two empty seats near my mother and grandma—two seats that were supposed to be for my sister and my boyfriend.

Once the ceremony was over, I ran across the campus to a place where I could be alone. I sat on what was left of the grass and stared silently at the diploma I held in my hands. I couldn't help but think about how much of my life was spent, and as it turns out wasted, earning this diploma. What was meant to be my ticket to a successful life is now a worthless piece of paper. I got up, and made my way over to a fire ring; I reached into my purse and pulled out a lighter. Without really thinking, I lit my diploma on fire and threw it into the fire ring, watching as the flames slowly consumed it.

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I glance down at my watch; it reads 5:30pm. Again, I've gotten lost in my thoughts...but does it really matter anymore? Nonetheless, I know that I must head back towards town if I want to pick up my portion of tomorrow's food ration. I start to leave the cave and make my way down the rocks when I'm startled by a sudden noise on the trail below. Determined not to be seen, I crouch behind some large rocks. My heart starts to beat faster as I realize that whatever or whoever it is, is slowly climbing up the rocks to where I'm hiding. Once the sound gets nearer, I recognize the familiar resonance of footsteps. I'm filled with apprehension, for I'm afraid to encounter someone I don't know when I'm all alone and far away from town. These days, you just don't know who is sane and who has completely lost sight of reality. When the footsteps have stopped a few feet from where I'm situated, I slowly and silently peer from around the rock to see who it is. Although the man has his back towards me, I know exactly who he is, for he is the man that I love. As I emerge from behind the rocks, he turns and faces me. And there we stand for some time, looking at each other in silence. I can't help but feel safe when I'm near him, for everything about him is pleasantly familiar—his dark brown hair that so many times I've run my fingers through, his gentle cocoa brown eyes, his tall and lanky figure. But then, this happiness vanishes as quickly as it came, when I remember how cruel I was to him. When I start to cry, he rushes over to me and holds me closely in his arms. I try to apologize for how I've acted, but he gently places his fingers over my lips to silence me; his boyish smile tells me that all is forgiven. He then pushes my hair back, and holding my face in his hands, kisses me tenderly. The kiss seems to linger on; it's bittersweet. When it's over, we gaze into each other's eyes and say nothing. The tranquility of the moment is soon shattered when in the reflection of his eyes I see that something is coming towards us from out of the East. My body tenses as I comprehend that the much-anticipated time has finally arrived. I start to lose what composure and courage I have left. I guess it's one thing coping with the inevitable when it's so far removed from you, but another when you finally come face-to-face with it. Sensing my distress, he draws me nearer to him, and whispers in my ear:

"Don't worry, Audrey. Close your eyes, and it will all be over soon."

I look up into his eyes once more; they are calm and at peace. I notice something in his face that I've never seen before—confidence and maturity. And at that moment, I find my final strength in him. The last thing I'll ever see in this life is his gentle smile—the smile that I've grown accustomed to, the smile that always puts a smile on my face. I lean into him and he holds me so close that I can feel the beating of his heart. I rest my head on his shoulder and close my eyes, and then together we wait for the end.





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