

Wordplay

Illuminate

Independent Writing: English '57 Series
Spring 2017

“Creativity is the way I share my soul with the world.”

Brene Brown

For the duration of a semester, the English '57 courses offer students an opportunity to meet with their peers at the place where experiences, ideas, and voices intersect. Each individual who comes into the Writing Lab has their own unique background and their own personality, which brings beauty and complexity to each interaction. Through collaboration, both the learners and the consultants learn about each other, and learn about themselves. Through a consistent dialogue, they discover what they believe to be profound about this world. In an interview, the poet and professor, Ross Gay, said, “I’m trying to encourage weird accidents of the imagination. I’m trying to set up a classroom as a place where people can make really beautiful mistakes, and where collaboration is among the highest of achievements. Radical collaboration, deep collaboration.” To reach radical collaboration, individuals must courageously put themselves out there, and I believe this is what one would find in our Writing Lab.

Within the confines of a writing booth, in the space of thirty minutes, ideas are sparked and ideas are spread. Language has the power to illuminate what is meaningful, and the pages of this publication undoubtedly illuminate the minds and the hearts of diverse individuals. I am honored to share their work with you. Enjoy!

Acknowledgements

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Table of Contents

Baeten, Caleb
Bargender, Michaela
Brown, Austin
Bundgaard, Lindsey
Collins, Mackenzie
Doucette, R. Andre
Fen, Charles
Foss, Thomas
Hagen, Adrienne
Hoppman, Jacob
Jacobson, Asher
Loepfe, Travis
Mamrosh, Katharine
Marrow, Brooklyn
Mathias, Jacob
Merriweather, Jaisa
Morrison, Griffin
Nelson, Jennifer
Rivera, April
Rouse, Corey
Santos, Lauren
Wilkoosz, Richard
Wisniewski, Kathryn
Wolfe, Jeremy
Ziebarth, Jenna

Baeten, Caleb

Caleb thinks deeply about his writing and always considers his readers. He asks for feedback and is open to suggestions. He is great at setting goals and planning major plot points in his work. Furthermore, Caleb's writing never fails to entertain. It is original, adventurous, and, at times, humorous. As a consultant, I found myself sitting back and enjoying the story as he read each week. I hope he continues writing long after his '57 sessions!

Amber Edwards

A Damned Shame

Few sounds are as visceral as gunfire. Your ears hurt from the intense pressure of it, and it's one of those sounds that can strike fear into anyone's heart. Everyone knows what the sound means. You can't outrun what's coming for you, it doesn't matter if you're as fast as Usain Bolt. Most people are smart. They try to hide, and then there's me. I don't hide, not anymore.

Let's back up a bit first. My name is Sebastian Rooks. If anyone were to describe me physically, it would be angular. I'm a little taller than average with dark hair cut short. The Nevada sun keeps me tan, and my job keeps me in shape. There isn't a whole lot special about my features other than my eyes which are a shade of blue that I guarantee you've never seen before.

Not too long ago I was a photographer. Well I'm still a photographer, but now things are a little different. I run my business out of a little strip mall just outside of good ol' Sin City, and it keeps the bills paid. If you see my Open to Enter-pretation sign lit up, stop on in, I could use the business.

I don't see myself as just a photographer anymore. I still do it for a living, but now I do something more. You see, I'm a Knight. I know, I know, it sounds like I should be put away somewhere, but hear me out.

The Knights have been around since...forever...in one form or another. However, it wasn't until the legend of Saint George that the Knights finally became a true force in the world. Knights are important...I mean really important, the fate of the world on our shoulders kind of important.

The Knight's purpose is to stand the front lines against the Outers. You've doubtless heard stories of knights in shining armor slaying some evil thing or another to save the damsel, or the country, or what-have-you. People love those kinds of stories. They fit into our lives, and they make us feel safe when the hero defeats the rampaging beast.

All kinds of stories and legends will lead you back to a Knight. Jack the Ripper, werewolves, dragons, shapeshifters, the chuppacabra, crop circles, possession, ancient deities. The list goes on and on. Most of those stories are real, they happened, and they are full of information about real world Outer activity on Earth. You need to get used to that if you want to

understand how the world really is. Once you have come to terms with that, you're ready to learn about the Outers.

Nobody really knows what the Outers are, or where they come from. One certainty about the Outers though is that they want to destroy this world and everything in it. That is a fact, and it goes back to the birth of the world.

However, we've managed to learn some few things over the millennia. From what we can tell, they have a society, or maybe it's more appropriate to call it a hierarchy. There are the lowest level of Outers that could be characterized as animals. Low intelligence, but serving their roles. Those higher up use them for whatever purpose they need. Whether it's to scare some locals, or slaughter entire countries, you'll find these Outer Beasts in willing servitude to their masters.

As you move up the hierarchy, you encounter Outers with increasing levels of intelligence. With increased intelligence comes greater levels of power, influence, and sadistic intent. The upper most levels of the hierarchy are populated by the Outer Lords, and they are beings of unimaginable power.

If you have heard of the birth of England and the legend of Saint George the dragon slayer, then you have heard the story of the one Outer Lord that was ever slain. Saint George is the only known Knight to have faced an Outer Lord and survived the encounter. The Lords are the major players, they are god-like in their power, and their legends are the most awe inspiring in the world. If the birth of a nation was the legendary result of one Lord dying, it can only be speculated as to what roles these beings have played in the history of our world.

That's the easy part of describing the Outers to you. The hard part is trying to describe them physically. What they look like, what they sound like, even what they smell like. One of the reasons why it can be so hard is because they're all different. From what the histories of the Knights show, there has never been a report of one Outer physically looking the same as another. There are similarities to be sure, but nothing exact.

The ancient histories are full of descriptions that try to make sense of something that the human mind can barely comprehend. When a person tries to describe an Outer, they usually equate appearances to something that they can make sense of. A great example of this is actually the classic dragon figure that was made famous by the Outer Lord that Saint George slew.

The description of shield-like scales, claws like swords, a scourge for a tail, and rows of teeth deadlier than spears was easier for historians to describe when in reality a more fitting description would be much different.

Flesh that appeared slimy with rivulets of blood visible beneath the surface. When touched, it did not yield to any pressure and had the texture of stone. The beast's five limbs were of varying lengths and shape. Most were tipped in what appeared to be sharpened bone, not horn or talons...but bone. The last, and largest limb, was laden with hard muscle and lined

with small open mouths of gnashing teeth, which continued their eternal chewing long after the creature was slain. Where the head of an animal would normally rest, this monstrous creature possessed only a lump of writhing tentacles varying in length and tipped with a serrated, clear material harder and sharper than steel. No eyes were ever found and the only orifices that the being possessed were those on its longest limb.

You can see the problem.

Outers also possess a complete lack of symmetry, without fail. It's one of the few constants that they all share between them. Even the ones that can pass in appearance as human have something about them that gives it away.

Most anything from Earth possesses, and is obsessed with, physical symmetry. If you don't believe me, try this. Think of the last bad haircut you had. I guarantee the feeling of it being wrong had something to do with a lack of symmetry. Now try to imagine an entire being that would give you that feeling just by looking at it.

There is one more important fact that you need to know about Outers. All of them, from the lowliest Beast to the Outer Lords themselves, possess a power that most people would consider Magic. Whether or not it is actually magic, doesn't matter. What matters is that they can do things that defy natural laws and physics. It is this defiance of natural law that requires the most powerful of Outers, the Barons and Lords, to need help from our side to summon them into our world. Our reality prefers balance, the Outers don't, so the Knights receive the most help from the world itself fighting back. Almost like a body fighting off an illness or infection. Like most bodies, if the things that keep it in balance are off, infections can spread.

Chaos is what the Outers need to have in the world to allow them to cross over, and the greatest forms of chaos tend to stem from human suffering. Humans themselves are, in many ways, the Outers greatest allies in our world.

This magical power gives the Outers an advantage in every conflict they are a part of. In ancient times, we used to have no way of countering this advantage until, as fate would have it, Saint George discovered something miraculous in his fight with the Outer Lord Gyp'darett.

In most of the stories you've heard, especially the oldest ones, the evil what's-it dies when the valiant hero strikes a mortal blow with a special weapon. Silver bullet, stakes to the heart, cut off its head, whatever the case may be. In reality, these things still work just fine, but it's in the details where you can find the truth.

The silver bullets are obvious, the stakes tend to be ornately crafted with special metals, and the sword is often referred to as magical. It turns out that there are two things in our world that give us an edge against them, and both have their own way of helping us defeat the Outers.

One is silver, like I said that one is kind of obvious from the stories. Silver acts like a poison to the Outers. It has an effect that breaks down the physical make-up of any Outer, causing it great harm. Close proximity to silver can even cause discomfort to Outers, and they

tend to stay away from areas with large amounts of silver nearby. This is where a lot of the “shining armor” stories come from.

You can tell when silver is affecting an Outer when it starts to tarnish. Science explains this as oxidation of silver’s component molecules, but it’s actually the stain from an Outer’s energy that causes it to darken. This is the reason why the Knights have spent a long time integrating an appreciation for silver among the cultures of the world.

The second substance that has been found to give humanity an edge against the Outers is one that was only discovered by Saint George himself. Our historians were able to determine that when Saint George slew the Outer Lord, he wielded a sword that was made of silver, but it was also decorated with intricate inlays of cobalt. His armor as well was made more ornate with the addition of this strange metal.

When the battle was over, it was discovered that the additional material in his sword and armor seemed to pulse with a vast quantity of absorbed energy from the Outer Lord, likely saving Saint George’s life in the process. After a great deal of observation and experimentation, it was found that this material not only had the ability to absorb an Outer’s energy, but it could be repurposed and used to do amazing things.

Modern Knights refer to this repurposing as Appropriated Mystical Phenomena, or Amp for short. Knights are now equipped with Amped weapons and armor to help in their fight against the growing Outer threat. Every Knight trains in the ways of using Amped items to get a specific result, and Amped items are painstakingly crafted to elicit one type of effect or another.

Centuries of study and learning have gone into discovering how to utilize this energy, and though we have come a long way, we still don’t know everything. A Knight armed with silver is dangerous to an Outer, but a Knight armed and trained in the use of Amp is the most dangerous force we have to use against them. No Knight would be caught without some type of Amped item on their person at all times. Well...all of them, except for me. I can somehow do it naturally within myself. Just like an Outer.

That starts to lead us back to the bullets.

Don and I have gone up against groups of Outer worshippers a couple of times since I’ve joined the Knights. We’ve usually been able to stop these cults before they could fully assist an Outer to enter our world. Last time, however, they were able to complete what they were doing and summoned a Baron into our world. Barons are powerful Outers with only one goal so far as we can tell, and that is to spread chaos and death in service to their Lord. I was able to stop the Baron and destroy it, but it hadn’t come easily and the price for doing so was high.

Since then things in Las Vegas had been quiet where the Outer are concerned. I’d started to relax when I’d had one of my dreams, or visions, and I knew that something big was coming again if we didn’t find a way to stop it.

When I have one of my dreams, I see strange glimpses of what the Outers are doing. We don't know yet if they are limited by how close the Outer activity is to me. So far as I can tell, they are always about some sort of activity that I can have an effect on. I'd been having these dreams my whole life before I had realized exactly what it was that I was seeing in my dreams. Now I take them very seriously, I know what happens when I ignore them.

They are different than most people's dreams. I don't forget them when I wake up, I can't. They stay with me, sometimes changing in little ways, until whatever it is that the Outers were planning, or doing, is finished one way or another. Then they fade just like any other dream. I'd been awake for nearly an hour, but I could still remember the newest dream in perfect detail.

I can see nothing but darkness, and I feel that I am surrounded by dirt, stones, and various plant roots. It's not a tunnel, but rather it pushes down on me as though I am buried. I don't feel of fear or panic, it is more a sense of excited urgency to escape. I can tell that I am naked. I can feel things crawling across my naked flesh. Long, thin, slime coated bodies leave lingering sensations of cold wetness behind in their wake. This too doesn't cause me any concern. I can't move, I can't breathe, and I can't hear anything. It doesn't matter, maybe it should?

I'm looking down at a hole in the concrete floor illuminated by long Florissant overhead lights. It is filled with freshly turned soil, and I feel accomplished as I take in the sights around me. There are others in the room I stand in, but their faces are covered in crimson mud. They speak words to me that sound hollow and far away. A low hum or rumble in the background further distorts their words into senseless noise. I feel something warm and wet ooze down the side of my head and over my left ear. I pull my hand through my hair and find it stained with a red so deep it looks nearly black in the harsh lighting. Stained all the way to my elbow, to my shoulder, and further. I scream in exaltation.

I'm back in the ground again, with the wriggling things, and I feel something tugging at my toes...my fingers. It doesn't hurt, but I can feel pieces of me disappear, like the lights being turned out in a building. The wriggling things are everywhere now, they cover me, and I can feel them growing as I shrink away. I am nothing but food, and I revel in it.

I had woken up alone in my apartment, lying on the floor of my bedroom next to my bed. I must have rolled off the mattress and not woken up when I hit the ground. It had been an awful nightmare, and I knew something was happening so I quickly gave Don a call.

Donald Shooter was once my handler when I had first joined the Knights. He'd been the one to make me a Knight's Bachelor, or squire, and had taken responsibility for my training and my life during those early years. He'd also been the one to keep the rest of the order from killing me when they finally learned what I could do. Don is a friend, the greatest kind of friend you can

have. When he answered the phone, I told him that I'd had a dream and he had me drive to his place to meet him.

Don lives above the bar he owns called The Shooting Gallery, and he was waiting behind the bar with an empty shot glass and a cold bottle of beer when I arrived. It was still early in the morning, so I'd grabbed the beer and he put the glass back on its shelf. He made me tell him everything while he wrote it all in a journal he's been keeping since the first time he found out about my dreams. I've kept my own journal too, a dream journal I mostly keep out of habit from when I'd been seeing a therapist as a child.

We've been finding patterns in my dreams. Information that would help us figure out what to do, but it usually only came through in the way of most dreams...fucking weird.

After that, we'd both hit different sources for information to try and figure out what it all meant. Don hit the underground scene mainly. Owning a bar that caters, mostly, to societies 'undesirables' can make you some interesting friends.

I spent my time reaching out to some of my friends and contacts for anything strange happening around the city. As a photographer I had some connections with a local paper and the police department have me on file as an information source. My street photography has something to do with that, but mostly it's my past that keeps the police interested.

I haven't always been the most upstanding of citizen. The word terrorist has been thrown my way a few times, not really like you hear about now though. After I left that life, I became a freelance war photographer for a while, and I've seen my share of atrocities.

None of my sources panned out, nothing weirder than normal had been reported to the police, it is Vegas after all. My contacts in the news didn't have anything for me either, and I had been contemplating reaching out to some contacts from my old life, when Don got in touch with me.

Don had eventually learned from a local dealer, who specialized in high end pharmaceuticals, that some people had been buying up a lot of his product lately. They weren't regulars, and he had initially been worried about them being cops. He'd eventually learned that they weren't, they were mostly business men, or people in the local gambling scene, and he hadn't thought anything more about it. But the amount of product they'd bought wasn't something that he was going to forget any time soon.

They'd had him deliver it to a small storage unit outside of the city on the way towards Hoover Dam. That night, Don and I had gone to check the place out and after a quick look around, Don had found records of the renters for each unit.

Don made it very clear that he did not break into the businesses filing cabinets to find the records. They had, in fact, been lying out in plain sight when he'd opened the, miraculously, unlocked door to the manager's office.

There had been one renter who was currently taking up several of the available storage units and after we'd poked around those units we'd found several empty dirt stained barrels,

and some water damaged cardboard boxes. Whatever had been in the boxes had stained them red when they had gotten wet. We knew we were in the right place. The dreams are like that.

After that we had gotten lucky. While we were still there, someone had pulled into the unit's parking lot. We'd watched as the man went into another of the units that was owned under the same renter's name, and pulled out another of the cardboard boxes.

When the guy left, we raced back to Don's SUV and pulled out after him. A little tailing and several minutes later the man's truck veered off the road taking a service road toward the Hoover Dam. We'd followed, lights off and a good distance back, until we came to the end of the road and found the man's truck along with several other vehicles.

Don and I armed up, and snuck into the service entrance closest to the vehicles. The door latch had duct tape over the frame to prevent the automatic locking system from engaging. The normal grey surface of the tape had worn down from heavy use, and looking at it more closely I could see several older pieces of tape underneath the outer most layer.

When we'd entered the building, we were immediately forced to choose which way to go as the door opened into a hallway that led in both directions. We had been about to split up when Don noticed a trail of red drop stains on the concrete floor leading to the right.

As we made our way down the hallway, we did very little to hide any noise we made. The place was loud. A constant heavy droning sound filled the space, killing any small sounds we made before they traveled very far from us. Due to this, we'd moved quickly down the hallway. There was very little in the way of cover to block anyone from seeing our approach if they were looking. Any the doors that dotted the hall were rare and all were locked when we tested them. Working on the assumption that the exterior door's lock prevention would be the same for interior doors as well, we quickly moved past each of these doors.

Eventually, the hall widened from a basic concrete hallway into a more open area. Over the noise around us, we were just barely able to make out the sound of voices. The area where the voices were coming from was directly in front of us in a large open space filled with huge concrete pillars and with a floor sloping slightly downward.

Don and I had been able to creep close enough to see what the group was doing and found them surrounding a large hole that had been smashed out of the concrete floor. We watched as the man we'd followed from the storage units handed the small box over to another man very carefully, and then quickly backed away.

We had been about to draw our weapons and ambush the group when I heard something slap down to the floor behind us. Whatever it was must have been hiding among the pipes overhead and out of sight.

I'd turned to look at the source of the noise, and found myself looking at something that I can only describe as an eyeless, fur covered leach, with legs...a lot of legs. It was easily the size of a Great Dane and was covered in stiff bristled fur the color of the grey concrete around us. In the moment it took me to come out of my shock at seeing, whatever it was, the thing let out a

whistling scream that seemed to come from two places at once. Then with a weird undulating motion, it threw itself right at my face. Its sucker like mouth seemed to swell to twice its previous size and fold back on itself as it flew through the air. Hundreds of worm thin tendrils, each about a foot long, shot out ahead of its lurching body.

As it flew through the air, I got my left hand up in time to grab hold of a fist full of the wriggling tendrils and pulled straight down...hard. Whatever kind of Outer it was, weighed far less than its size would suggest, and I overbalanced as I easily turned the creature's forward momentum into bone crushing force as I smashed its sucker face into the concrete floor. Its back end snapped forward over my nearly supine body and I noticed that the end that had been facing me was almost exactly mirrored on the other back end. The difference between them was that the sucker mouth on the back end was lined with what looked like serrated shark teeth instead of writhing tendrils. Really big, serrated shark teeth.

I was still holding onto my fistful of wriggling tendrils when the back end whipped over me, and both mouths elicited a gurgling cry of pain as I began to drain power from it. That's my gift, or curse, however you want to see it. Just by touching an Outer, I can drain the power from it the same way that cobalt can.

I twisted the fingers of my left hand to tangle in the mass of tendrils, and jerked up with my right to grab the other end of the thing just behind its other mouth. The coarse fur of its body felt as hard as iron, and dozens of the hair fine needles pierced my skin. I held on despite the pain, and gripping tightly with both hands I stood up and lifted the thing above my head.

"Don!" I cried out "Help!"

Don had taken cover behind a pillar, drawn a 9mm, and had begun firing into the group of worshippers as soon as he had seen me grab the Outer. At my call, he made a quick spinning sidestep toward me drawing a long, silver knife from a sheath at his lower back.

His spin took him away from his cover position and just close enough to me to reach out and glide the razor edge of that knife along the length of the Outer's body. With one more rotation, he was back behind his cover position, knife back in its sheath, and sending silver flashes streaking from his gun towards the remaining cult members again.

As his knife passed through the creature, it split open like an uncooked sausage and brownish red fluid began to ooze from it. While it did, the creature convulsed in my hands like an eel, my right hand screamed in agony as more, and more of the fur needles pierced my flesh.

I let go with my right hand and, with a cry of pain-fueled rage, swung the thing out with my left hand as hard and I could, smashing it into another nearby concrete column. The force of the impact was so great that the mass of tendrils I had been holding on to ripped free from the creature with a little pop and the creature actually stuck to the wall. More gore exploded from the thing, covering the pillar in the Outer's stinking fluids.

The death of the beast fills me with power. The savage energy that courses through my guts tears me out of my reverie over the last few days, and I turn to face the remaining cultists. Several of them are down already, bullet holes leaking blood onto the grey concrete floor. The remaining men and women take various positions of cover around the room, and they are armed and returning fire, which I'd hardly registered during my battle with the Outer Beast.

"Get behind me," I yell to Don as I lunge past him.

As I do so, I stretch out my hand, and feel the terrible energy that has pooled in my midsection twist and writhe within me like a living thing. The pile of broken concrete shards that were left over from the hole the cultists had dug fly through the air and hang suspended off the ground creating a fractured wall barely two feet in front of me. As I stride forward, Don right on my heels, bullets from the cultists begin pounding into my improvised shield. Bits of concrete chips and puffs of dust fly every which way as the cultists unload in our direction. As pieces of the concrete break down, I use more power to fill the gaps with new pieces.

The energy I had collected from the Outer twists and turns inside me like a scared animal as it slowly drains away while I hold the shield in place.

The gunfire sputters to a stop. Men and women begin cursing while they fumble to reload. I look to my right as a man cries in a high-pitched wail, "Lord liderios" before charging out from behind cover. He holds his handgun by the barrel making it into a rude club, and fanatic devotion replaces the fear he should be feeling.

A shot tears its way out of Don's gun bare inches from my ear, and a crimson mist of blood fills the air as the back of the man's head explodes under the force of the killing blow. The initial shot is quickly followed by two more to the chest as Don ends the man's life in the perfect rhythm of a trained killer. Mozart couldn't have played a better cadence.

As members of the cult begin reloading their weapons, I send the remaining shards of my improvised shield shrieking out from me in a semi-circle. The power within me tears at my insides with jagged claws as I use yet more of the stolen energy.

Thuds of painful impact are followed by grunts and cries as hundreds of pounds of shattered concrete smash into the cultists with the speed of major league fastballs. After the barrage, few of the cultists remain conscious and none are willing to put up any sort of fight.

As the remaining cult members surrender, Don pulls out a bundle of zip ties and begins to secure the survivors. I pull out my phone and call our commander.

"Yes," a woman's voice slides through the phone. Her polished Oxford accent clearly recognizable even over the drone of the magnificent Dam around us.

"Natalia," I say with exaggerated care, "it's Sebastian."

"I know." She replies.

"Don and I are down at the Hoover Dam. We've just cleared a group of liderios' cultists and we need them rounded up."

There's a moment of stunned silence before she replies that a team will arrive in less than an hour.

I give her the directions to the small service road before hanging up the phone.

As Don continues to secure the survivors with no resistance, I look down into the pit.

It's deeper than I would have imagined, and I can see rich soil inside. The hole is wide enough for a man to lie down in it, and as I lean in closer, I can see that something is making the dirt move. As I watch, hundreds of similar, tiny, versions of the Outer we had killed boil to the surface only to sink back down again. The roiling motion of the dirt reveals the mostly consumed corpse of a man before the dirt flows over him again. The damage to the corpse is so severe, that I am unable to determine even what age the man had been, though the body is too large to be that of a child. Thank God.

With an effort of will, I tear the last writhing bit of energy from within me and sacrifice it to light the air on fire. A flash of intense heat scorches my face as a boom of blue flames fills the hole. Sudden thick wet smoke chokes the air with a putrid smell so foul that I vomit into the pit. When the smoke clears enough for me to see again, the hole opens before me and it is nearly emptied of dirt from the resulting explosion. The charred remains of the tiny Outers can be seen littering the floor.

"Looks like cleanup will take a little longer for the crew today" Don says.

"Yeah" I reply dryly, "it feels like the cleanup never ends."

Bargender, Michaela

Michaela Bargender is a creative writer who can bring an interesting twist to any subject she is writing on. Her piece "Poker Face" uses well-chosen descriptive words to portray a heated and humorous story. The reader will have fun reading her entertaining and creative short story.

Emily Crook

Poker Face

When the woman strolled into the saloon, we all thought she was a man. She was wearing chaps, long, pointed-toed boots with shiny spurs, a bandana, completed with a tanned, deer hide hat, and carrying a long, thin package in her hand. She had two holsters tied around her thighs that said serious business.

Everything about her screamed trouble, but a group of men thought they'd start something.

Being the sheriff in this here town, I'd normally mention the dress code here and shoo them all away, but this woman was...intriguing. She wasn't the normal girl who made herself scarce when there was trouble a'brewing.

I watched, hand on my six shooter, just in case, as the cowboys jeered at her.

"What happened to your skirts, honey? They's the latest fashions to catch you a man, don't you know?"

She directed her cool, grey eyes on him, smiled haughtily, and replied shortly.

"You're behind times, friend. Even if I wanted one, skirts ain't the only pretty things that can rope a man's 'tention."

She pulled out her rifle from its leather casing with her gloved, careful hand.

"Feast your eyes on this, gentlemen. The Sharps lever-action, breech loader. Shoots 45 caliber in 110 grain metal cartridge. Barrel's 30 usually, but mine's got 34 inches. Double set triggers, and it shoots up to 1200 yards. An expert can shoot a bit further." She pulled up a chair, turned it around and straddled it. "Latest off the market, boys."

The men stared at the rifle in awe. So did I. My hand slipped off my shooter.

"And how does a lady like you get money for such a weapon? Prolly don't even know how to use it!"

The men laughed, but the woman chuckled.

"You're lucky I'm having a good day," she said with a seductive air about her, and leaning forward she lifted her hat to see him better, "otherwise I'd use it 'n put a bullet in your knee."

The laughter died on their faces.

Any woman who knew their place around here has never, *ever* talked to these men like that.

"Play poker?"

“Have no use to play poker.”

“How 'bout now?”

She considered them.

“Alright.”

She let her hat fall to her back, the pull strings jumped up her neck, and she watched as the men dealt the cards. The men picked up their cards and she took turns watching each man's expressions. They sorted their cards without realizing she was watching them, and when they did, they weren't happy. She was watching for their tells. It unsettled them, and made them nervous.

“Pick up your damn cards!”

I smiled, already gauging the men bit off more than they could chew as she complied. She picked up her cards without looking at them, and waiting for the men to be distracted with the bidding before observing her hand.

She knew what she was doing. I watched her from under the brim of my hat as the game progressed. She'd throw her hands wisely, making the men cocky. They'd drag their winnings toward them, and straighten the bills and coins into organized, counted piles to try to annoy and aggravate her. But she knew their game before they began to play it. She put on a show of being bored, pretending to not pay attention. She was making the men restless, but she was calm. Like she knew that money was hers.

I moved to the bar to get a closer look. The bar man jerked his head to the poker game, and I nodded to acknowledge I was watching.

She was winning.

“Full house,” one man said, laying out his cards, and reached for the pile of money in the middle.

She slapped her hand on top of his, and the men exchanged glances as a straight flush smiled out at them like teeth as she spread her hand out on the table for them all to see. That was the tenth hand she won in a row.

The cards were drawn, shuffled, but the woman frowned, as if contemplating her next move. Then she drew one of her shooters as quick as a whip on cattle and shot the deck of cards right out of a man's hand.

The table erupted with movement. Chairs scraped the floor and swung over to hit the floor like a hammer on nails. Half a dozen guns were pointed at the still sitting woman. She was still as calm as ever.

My gun was out before I knew it, and I walked over the table.

“Hold it!”

I bent down and picked up a card with a hole in it. The king was beheaded. I looked at her from under my hat. “Why'd you shoot the deck?”

“They were cheating.” She said calmly, but sternly.

Confidence.

“You have proof? 'Cause I was watching too, an' I didn't see anything.”

“Check his sleeve.”

I moved over to the man she nodded at, and I reached inside his left sleeve.

“Nothing.”

“Other sleeve, Sheriff.”

I grasped several cards the same style as the deck they were playing with. The men stiffened ready for action.

“Don't move a muscle unless you want me to shoot out your knee!”

I moved on to the next man and the next man, finding several high ranking cards up their sleeves. I threw them on the table.

“Well, gentlemen. You know the rules. Only *clean* games here.”

They stood there stubborn, greedily eyeing up the money on the table, so I squeezed the trigger, sending a warning at their feet to make them dance out.

“It's all yours.” I said, holstering my gun. “You have quick eyes. And a quick draw.”

Her grey eyes rested on mine.

“You have to be quick if you want to keep what's yours 'round here.”

Brown, Austin

Austin came in for our first or second session with something much like an chronological essay, but he expressed a great interest in transforming it into a short story. This posed a challenge for him, because this first draft, being very essay-esque, lacked many of the normal elements you see in a short story. Yet, over the span of our sessions together, Austin developed considerable use of story writing skills, including dialog, word choice, and detail selection. He has grown greatly as a writer, and his piece, "The First Commandment of Wrestling," shows it.

Ryan Loos

The First Commandment of Wrestling *Always Work Hard*

It was a typical high school, on an average Wisconsin December day. There was snow on the ground, and the air was frigid. Others were bundled up, shivering, trying to avoid the cold. All I thought as I passed a group of these weaklings is that the cold air or snow does not matter because it was wrestling season.

Wrestling season always brought out my *'big man on campus'* attitude. I walked with my chest puffed out and with swagger. I knew that no one would ever be able to stop me because of my natural gift to take other wrestlers down.

Running on my natural talent alone, I had accumulated a total of two wins and six losses. My coach expected me to win the tournaments these wins and losses happened at. He was very unhappy and told me I needed to start doing better, or I would lose my varsity spot.

I thought to myself, "How could he say this to me. Me of all people I am a naturally gifted wrestler. Those six losses were nothing but flukes. But those wins those were good wins."

Later that week Coach told me he is going to have my teammate Andy wrestle me off for my varsity spot.

I was ready for the match just like any other. I thought, "This match is going to be easy. Andy's skill is pretty much fodder when compared to mine."

The walk over to the wrestling room was like any other cold December night. Practice was pretty uneventful. All we did was drill some new moves and do some conditioning.

I looked at the clock as I drilled the double leg takedown just one more time. Then Coach blew his whistle signaling the end of practice, and the start of my wrestle off. I thought, "I can't wait to take him down and pin him."

The sides of the room filled with my teammates as Coach told everyone to get off the mat. Andy and I both went to the center because we knew why he had done this. Coach asked us if we were ready. We both shook our heads yes in reply.

“There is no way I can lose. Andy is only a C-team level wrestler,” I said to myself. After shaking out and slapping my legs, Andy and I shook hands. The room was dead silent. Not a single word or noise came from our teammates.

Then Coach blew his whistle signaling the start of the match. Andy took me down in seconds.

“How could this happen? How could Andy of all people take me down so easily?” This shock followed me the whole match and before I knew it, the match was over.

Andy had tech-falled me, which is wrestling’s mercy rule. But, more importantly, he beat me mentally. The room was silent. My teammates jaws dropped. No one in the room had expected the match to turn out like this. Although looking back on it now that was probably just me.

Practice was pretty much over at this point. So we all went to the locker room, showered, checked weight, and went our separate ways. The second that I left the school property I felt both an emotional numbness and an urge to quit.

When I got home I did not say a word to anyone or even eat. I just went straight to my room and fell asleep. The next morning I woke from my slumber, and looked out the window. There was a fresh coat of pure white snow on the ground no tracks anywhere. It was a new day.

I got ready while thinking about what I could have done differently in the match. “Maybe a push here. Or a shot there. Should I have tried to go harder the whole time? Ugh, I don’t know. Maybe I should just quit.” But I had to go to school.

Once on school property I thought, “If anyone else in my shoes quit after losing they would only be disappointing themselves. They would be a fool.”

I then started my usual morning walk in the high school hallways. Not many people were there yet. It was only 7:15. Class did not start until 8. Then, about 15 minutes into my walk, I saw Andy bragging to others about how he had tech-falled me the night before.

I thought, “What gives him the right to do that. I cannot quit now.” Before practice that day, I said to myself, “I will work as hard as possible until I beat Andy and earn my spot back.”

I was not sure if I would follow this pledge until I got to practice that day. Once there, I pushed myself harder than I had ever previously done. I kept my promise. I used Andy to push myself. If he was running, I had to run faster. If he was doing pushups, I had to do ten more. After a while, I was not happy just working harder than Andy, I wanted to be better than everyone. There was even one time I was running laps, passing everyone. I did not want to stop, I wanted just to keep going. The combination of running and doing better than everyone at that moment, gave me one of the best highs of my life. That is until I completely stopped sweating. My coach made me stop for safety reasons. I was not happy with this as I wanted to keep on getting better.

Thoughts of challenging Andy ran through my head. I still was not sure if I was ready. One event changed that.

Andy and I were in the same group for a workout called Monkey Rolls. I was becoming very frustrated because Andy was not trying at all during this workout, and he had the varsity spot. I even lost my cool and started screaming at him to pick up the pace, which he did not do. Andy's lack of hard work is what made me start to realize I was ready to wrestle him for my spot back.

Two days later it had been three weeks since I lost my varsity spot. I decided it was time to ask Coach if I could wrestle off Andy. I walked out of class at the final bell and went straight to Coach's office. I waited for him to arrive. My palms started to sweat from the anticipation. Coach opened the door after the longest five minutes of my life and said, "You look like you have something to say."

I cleared my throat and asked him if I could wrestle Andy off for the varsity spot. He then told me with all the hard work I was putting in he expected me to pin him.

The expectations Coach had were higher than my own. I was very scared for the upcoming battle. I did not know what to expect. This nervousness only got worse as practice went on. Then Coach told Andy and me to warm up while he smiled at me.

That smile gave me confidence, but not the cocky kind I had when I lost, just enough to make me think, "You can do this."

Once again the mat was cleared. Andy and I took the center. Coach asked if we were ready. Both of us replied yes.

Instead of shaking out my legs, I looked at my teammates. Although they were not allowed to cheer, the looks and smiles on their faces showed that they had faith I would win. Then I looked back at Andy; we shook hands. Silence filled the room. Coach blew his whistle, and the match started.

The duel began with me taking Andy down in the first 30 seconds. The pace kept growing until I was eight points ahead. It then turned for the worse.

Andy had put me on my back for five seconds, diminishing my lead to three points. I thought, "No! Not again! I did not work that hard for nothing!" These thoughts gave me a push and made me wrestle even harder.

I gained ten more points before the match ended, making the score eighteen to five, two points away from a tech-fall. I was so excited that I won the match. All my hard work was starting to pay off. Andy seemed angry at the loss. He left the gym after shaking my hand.

After Andy had left, Coach stood in front of all of us and said, "The reason this happened is simple. One wrestler was working harder than the other." These words and this experience made me realize that if a person works hard, they will eventually succeed no matter what. Just imagine what someone could do with a lifetime of hard work if a boy can go from getting tech-falled to becoming a wrestler and winning back his spot in three weeks.

Bundgaard, Lindsey

Lindsey is a writer beyond her years that will go far in her literary career. Over this past semester, she has brought in many genres of writing, and was able to master them all. Her ability to produce abstract stories with deep meaning has blown my mind time and time again. It has been a privilege to work with such a brilliant student that has enlightened me with her creativity.

Jessica Wenzel

Stalling

I've got a story in my head
I just don't know how to tell it.
Too many paths to take,
This way, that way, no, dead end.
Words flee at the sight of a pen,
Shy away in the face of freedom
Or is it bondage?
Trapped in a page
Bare to the world
Vulnerable.
Each word, letter, sentence, paragraph
a soul, a
Life all its own.
Each a struggling breath
Against the opposing
Push of the world.
I work against this push,
The ticking of the clock
The countdown to...
What?
Do these words buy me time?
Each takes a minute, gives an hour?

How long do I live now?

Collins, Mackenzie

Mackenzie was an absolute thrill to work with every week. She has a deep connection with the topics she writes about, which is evident in her poetic and charged writing style. Our discussions often centered on combining her abstract ideas with concrete examples. The result always struck a balance of using high language to create a real image in the reader's mind. Her piece on figure skating, for example, embodies this balance of abstract and concreteness, a true testament of Mackenzie's ability to write.

Dylan Couch

EVERYTHING

Loners~

Some will be cruel and some will be mean.
There are many who cry, their tears still unseen.
A symphony of hate, laced with bitter sorrow.
Each person praying, for a better tomorrow.
Too scared to speak up, when you may be alone.
Your thoughts always screaming "You're on your own!"
But for the other people, you set the tone

Abused~

As individuals we can be weak and frail.
You won't fight for something with risk, you might fail.
But anything worth having is worth fighting for.
To risk your soul to have something more.
To have the courage to say that something is wrong.
To take all the abuse and remain standing strong
You lead the world in change with your warrior's song

Outcast~

You sit on the sidelines all by yourself
You think you're too different for everyone else
You have nowhere to turn to, and no one to see
You think "There's no one who can be just like me."
Broken and worn, in a world that doesn't care
Sometimes it feels like it's all too much to bear.
Innovative and different you have idea's to spare
Student~

You work hard all day and all through the night
You do your very best to get the answers right
Friends are important but your studies come first
Sometimes so stressed you feel ready to burst
But you want a bright future and a happy life

So through hardships you'll continue strife.
With your nose to the grind you smile in spite
Sweet heart~
You get along with pretty much everyone
Sometimes you can't wait and just want some fun
You're confident and you believe in yourself
You see someone sad and you just need to help
You have lots to give and wear a constant smile
Even people like you have bad days once in a while
But you'll do your best to go the extra mile

Artist~

You blaze your own trail regardless of rules
Just about anything can be used as tools
You love to tinker and make something unique
Your personality is as colorful and not at all meek
You get bored and need to do something fun
The worst part of the day, is when it's all done
People unique like you help the world run.

Hothead~

You're stubborn and just plain difficult
It's your way or no way it's the way you're built
You speak your mind like it or not
To deal with you it takes quite a lot
You argue your point and you stand your ground
You'll push and push and knock others down
You're determined to make the world go round

Leader~

You're the opposite of the hothead
You listen to others and what's being said
You lead the way and help get things done
But because of this you're not always fun
You want things done, and done right
Even if it means you can't be polite
With each situation you shed a new light.

Peacemaker~

You find different ways to help compromise
You're smart and use logic so your choices are wise
You're patient and eager to find the answer

You're calm and collected and slow to anger
You can look from new angles and see what to do
No one can solve problems as quick as you do.
You have good solid solutions and ideas too.
Couch potato~
You're lazy and hate hard work
You think math is just boring as dirt
You're possibly smart if you'd just use your brain
Your lazy personality drives others insane
What's the matter where's your motivation
You only seem happy when you're on vacation
At least you teach others how to be patient
We each have these parts
In our soul and in our hearts
Not one person is just one thing
We laugh we cry we dance we sing
We are every piece, we are EVERYTHING.
~Everything.~

Take a Stand

Looking around I see so many people who are too afraid to stand up for what they believe in.

Whether they think something is right or wrong, they sit idle and watch silent and as guilty as those causing the wrong. You probably don't ask why this is. After all humanity is wonderful at ignoring a problem until it directly affects them. The first reason people don't speak up is because they're afraid, odds are their fear is justified. We all fear taking a stand because we believe we'll be doing so alone. But at the end of the day what does it matter? With roughly 7.4 billion people in the world it's highly likely at least one person will follow you at your side. Reason being, human beliefs, morals, and values are far less diverse than we'd all like to believe.

The second reason for fear, change. Change often times is coupled with uncertainty, you don't know if a change will turn out to be good or bad. As such many deem it a risk not worth taking. The third reason, they afraid their beliefs and cause will differ from those precious to them. It's hard to risk losing those important to you. The fear of being alone, unloved, unwanted; however you'll find that friends, and family come and go. This is the natural way of things, to fight it would be foolish as it is inevitable. With those you lose, you gain more. New friends, and family related by blood or not is irrelevant.

Change can make things different. However, if there was never any change we would still have slavery, we'd still be under the thumb of the British Empire, we wouldn't have religious freedom, and we wouldn't have the right to speak our minds. But change can also make things worse, for example the French revolution, when Robespierre slaughtered thousands. But had no one stopped him it would have continued. Fact is if you never take the initiative and never take that risk you miss out on something that could change your life for the better. Life will pass you by as the world continues to change, as it always has regardless of our wants or needs. Imagine if Martin Luther King never would have stepped up to say that all men are created equal, segregation is wrong. He believed in a cause, he wanted his children and future generations to have the opportunity and freedom that America is supposed to represent. The point I'm trying to make is that, if you never stand up then you can never be the change you want, you can never have a say in what is right or wrong. And the cold harsh truth is that by not taking a stand, you really have no freedom at all. Personally I find regret has a far bitter taste than that of freedom, liberty, and happiness.

Skate

Few sports are as beautiful as figure skating. One can only describe it in a poetic fashion, if only to properly catch its true encompassing beauty. Each figure skater is an instrument. Their arms and legs delicate silver strings plucked just right in order to orchestrate a passionate story. Stories of love and heartbreak, of lust or disaster. Evoking emotion from spectators creating a sort of elegant catharsis. One that is ever-reaching and far superior to plays in a theatre.

The ice is their cold stage, unforgiving despite the heat of the romance and despair playing out on it's polished surface. The detail of each elegant dance and motion, flowing as would a thread through soft pliant silk, weaving a bewitching cloak of tales.

Spins, leaps, and intricate footwork. Despite occasional mistakes and painful falls. The triple Salchow, so named after the skater who invented it. An elegant jump launching into a spin using the silver blades beneath their feet. Upon landing one leg previously crossed over the other spins out and glides across the ice around the skaters grounded foot, drawing on the white surface like a pencil on paper. A masterpiece of forward momentum in both grace and precision.

But there is also a silent strength, the muscle and will required to execute such emotional and physical control within each tendon, fiber and cell of the body. Beauty, a force of righteousness, without which strength means nothing. A symphonic ballet of the skaters very soul, hours of blood sweat and determination. Reaching a breathtaking climax in performance, the kind which even the most talented actors can only dream of achieving.

The sparkling cloth they adorn themselves in only furthering the immersion of oneself within the tales. Each glittering methodical choice in fitting so meticulously chosen so as to best represent their noble craft and the fantastical worlds they create. As if while skating they are both giving and losing their soul to their work. Such apparent devotion is so colorfully represented it's enough to make one's heart ache.

Yes...there are many beautiful sports, but none ever reach figure skating's divine presence.

Doucette, R. Andre

It was an incredible opportunity to work with Andre throughout the semester and watch this piece develop and come to life. Using his own personal experiences working in a daycare, Andre conveyed, through careful word choice and vivid descriptions, the chaos of such an environment in a comedic way that had me stifling laughter and waiting in anticipation to see what he would write next. Additionally, it was incredible to see how he integrated a serious appreciation and recognition for those employed in child-care settings. Though brief, these moments of recognition left me reflecting on the type of character it takes to work in such an environment, character which Andre has acknowledged and applauded. Working with him these past several months has been enjoyable and entertaining, an experience that I am glad to have had.

Kayla Theune

Daycare

After working for a daycare for 2 straight weeks, I can officially say that the people who work there need a certain charisma to enter the subculture of yelling, crying, and random waves of exhausting drama. If you're not ready to take this leap, then you will soon realize that these little kids can make or break you.

When I first walked through the doors of the South Milwaukee Daycare it was quiet. Little did I know that in just under an hour, kid by kid would enter through those same doors until that peaceful, one story building, would erupt into uncontrollable behavioral mood swings resulting in riots. For the first few days I couldn't grasp onto how fast moving I needed to be in order to make the children at ease without setting off a chain reaction of wild senseless behavior. Their behavior would range depending on who was in the small classrooms watching, and the chemistry that was flowing around.

For example, every morning this sweetly kind five-year-old girl named Alyssa would be the first one to arrive to day care. She would quietly put her things away in her cubby and begin to sit down and start playing with little cars on the racetrack themed carpet. Most of the kids early in the morning would come in and follow the same procedure. Everything is going well and calm, until Tristan walks in.

I'm convinced that whenever this small child walked through the classroom door that the whole universe is changed. As soon as he steps his little foot into the doorway to the classroom, I know the day will go one of two ways. Either I will be chasing after him full throttle as he tries to cause as much destructions as possible, or he will be extremely crabby, not listening to anyone but his internal conscious. However he is feeling, I know that I will be scrambling around all day trying to calm him so I can get a breather. But I'm not the only one who has it hard when Tristan comes to class. As soon as he arrives he takes a stroll around the classroom looking at his options of toys for the day. I was always confused at this because the toys would be the exact same in and day

out. There was no need to check for unaccounted for toys until I realized that he was not checking on the toys but simply sizing them up. This meant that he was going to see who was having the most enjoyment out of the toys and then decide to steal it away from the other children in the room, taking it for himself.

As I watch the crime take place I hear a loud motherly like yell coming from the front of the classroom. "Oh Hell No! Tristan! Give Isis her cars back and come here". But of no surprise Tristan showed his dominance by pretending he couldn't hear her. Mrs. Brown, on the other hand was not a woman I would want to infuriate in any manner. This was going to be a heavyweight showdown and I can't wait to see who comes out on top. "Tristan!" she barks again soon realizing that he is playing tough guys and is going to force her to physically come take the cars away. Next thing I know Mrs. Brown stomps over towards Tristan and grabs his tiny four year-old body and carries him out of the classroom. He is outmatched and resorts to kicking and screaming with all the fury he has but it is no match. As soon as the classroom door closes shut behind them it becomes quiet.

So silent that you could hear the echoes from Tristan's screams from down the hall. After a few minutes the classroom started to pick back up with speed. With Mrs. Brown and Tristan out of the picture I was the only adult in the room with fifteen other maniacs starting to realize that was the case. They knew that if they disbursed around the room that it would be very difficult for me to be able to watch everything that was going on.

Andre was in the corner aggressively playing with a bulldozer truck by ramming it into the wall or wooden cabinets as hard as he could. While I start walking over to Andre to calm him down, Isis ran up to me and grabs me by the hand demanding that I read a book to Alyssa and her. As I look down at her friendly face, I am unable to say no. I walk with them to the reading corner while I yell to Andre to stop smashing his toys and come sit by me while I read. It actually worked, he brought himself and his bulldozer over to the corner to myself and the girls. Now that I have a little audience brewing, the other kids at the table playing with paint begging to notice that reading time is about to undergo and want to be part of the fun. I begin to read "Flat Stanley" to the group while in my mind I'm thinking that I must be doing a great job managing all these kids without Mrs. Brown in attendance.

"Tristan! Jill, he's coming your way!" I hear echoing down hallway followed by a high pitched scream. Tristan has managed to escape out of the room he was kept in and is now running while yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Can this kid be stopped?" I thought to myself as I stop reading to focus on the ruckus that was taking place just outside the classroom door and so did the other kids in the room. This split second of silence on my part resulted in Andre and a few other children to stand up and run over to the door yelling for Tristan. As I watch from the reading corner on the opposite side of the room I knew that they would never be able to open the childproof door lock. But, within minutes Andre was able to put together a plan where he grabbed the stool from the bathroom

and climbed up to pick the door like a professional locksmith. “Dammit” I muttered underneath my breath so that Isis and Alyssa couldn’t hear me as I stood up to run over to Andre and his accomplices. As soon as they get the door to swing open, Tristan comes crashing through the doorway yelling with a big joker like grin across his face. They were able to pull off a perfect bait and switch within seconds as now Tristan is back in the classroom. He thought he was in the clear until Mrs. Brown stumbles in shortly after and swoops down to pick up Tristan from the backside. This intense hot pursuit for Tristan led all the kids in the classroom to piggyback off his energy and begin to run and romp all around the room in pure chaos.

“Mr. Doucette, I thought you were capable of watching over the classroom while I was away.” Mrs. Brown said out loud. I thought everything was going as well as it could but as I turn to look all around the room I begin to understand her perspective. The kids from the painting table didn’t wash their hand and or supplies therefore leaving a blue and yellow trail all around the room and on the carpet. The bathroom was unlocked and someone managed to unravel all the toilet paper onto the ground while leaving toys in the toilet. Everything was a mess and I couldn’t believe that I was outplayed by a bunch of kids.

Laughter was the only response that came out of me as I began to walk around the classroom to pick up the toys from off the ground again. As I look at the kids around the room, I notice that they are already onto new and better toys as if they had no remembrance of the last hour. They have a full tank of gas again, and are ready to go for round two. I on the other hand was exhausted and ready for a nap but knew I need to keep my attention on high alert for the next event to take place.

Kids show that they have the ability to bring out either the best in people or the worst. Either way they will push your physical and mental boundaries to a brand new field that you might have never thought existed. The South Milwaukee Daycare made me fight every day and I give only the upmost respect for anyone who lives their lives inside of a daycare.

Fen, Charles

Working with Charles this last semester has been a remarkable experience. As his 357 consultant and a fan of fantasy novels, it's an honor to say I'm one of the first people to read his novel "Sealing Song." The creativity and imagination surrounding his work makes you wonder if you just pulled a book from the fantasy fiction shelf of the library. Pay attention to detail because it creates a world for you to explore that is nothing less than sublime. Throughout my time working with Charles, it is easy to notice that creative writing is second nature for him. Thank you for showing me what a passion for writing looks like.

Ben Vosters

From Sealing Song

Chapter One

Alistair: Physical Exams

The chilly night sky wrapped around the Veramir estate, clear moonlight illuminating the stone villa as well as the land around it. Far above, Taerr's rings hung in the air, softly reflecting violet light over the land and filling the would-be shadows that the moonlight couldn't reach.

It was quiet, the appropriate amount of quiet for the middle of the night. Birds flew past, their wings gently beating the wind around them, occasionally letting loose a small chirp or caw to no one in particular. Trees rustled in the night, adding their echo to the birds aloft in the sky.

Tall fences formed a barrier around the lands of the villa, firmly planted in the cool, solid earth. Just a night or two earlier, gold and violet bannisters would have been hung on the fences, celebrating the Founding, the grandest festival in Norgard. Now only one banner adorned the tall gate in front of the estate, which bore the black and aqua dragon of House Veramir.

Within the estate, things were just as soft and still. A wolf's head hung above the barely crackling fireplace in the entrance hall. Sir and Lady Veramir slept in their chamber, comfortably letting the beautiful night pass them by. The first born, Tristan, and the younger of the twins, Cecily, both slumbered in their rooms, each one dreaming of the festival that had passed.

Only one member of House Veramir was truly awake. The older of the twins, Alistair, was reading through the night, unwilling to let sleep hold him until his work was finished. His black hair was haphazardly tied back, keeping the bangs from falling into his eyes and sweat from doing the same.

His proper attire was discarded in the corner of the room, leaving him wearing simple trousers and a plain, though heavy, shirt. Rows of tomes lined the walls, each one a source of knowledge for those with the dedication to learn. Alistair was one such individual, as most nights he spent digging through old books, their contents all but lost to others.

This particular tome was something special. Passed down through the Veramir clan, many of his ancestors had attempted to crack its complicated runic language, but none had ever succeeded. He had dedicated the often-sleepless nights of two years to scribbling attempts at

translations on any surface available to him, but had made hardly any progress.

Alistair woke up, his precious book resting under his head as if it were a pillow. Light filtered in from the window, casting an illuminated streak across his face as he raised it from the table.

He cursed under his breath as the morning sunlight blinded him.

“Alistair, you in here?” A voice called from outside his study.

He sleepily stumbled to the door and opened it, wiping his eyes as Cecily stood there, already fully dressed and ready.

“Breakfast is ready. And get dressed, it’s a busy day.”

“Why?” he asked, the word falling from his mouth.

“Our skills exams.”

“Oh, right. Thanks.” He shooed her away as he groggily realized the importance of the day. Once it fully dawned on him, the urgency in his eyes flickered to life as he scribbled notes from his studies on some parchment and stuffed the book into his bag.

He ran downstairs, rushing to his bed chamber to change for the big exams.

“What should I wear?” he asked himself. It was important for him to make a good impression for his skills test. “Too formal and I’ll have no flexibility,” he debated out loud. “Too relaxed and I’ll look bad for the administrators.” For several minutes he stood there, his face wrung up in a puzzled expression as he attempted to decide.

Eventually, he took a lace-up shirt from his wardrobe and a pair of slightly loose black trousers. He pulled on a pair of heavy leather boots, testing their flexibility before settling on a slightly lighter pair. Over his grey shirt, he threw on a deep azure jerkin with dull silver trim, the leather just thick enough to offer some mild protection.

He finished rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he glanced at himself in the looking glass, tying his hair back to keep his vision free.

Taking a small amount of water from his basin, he washed the most recent runic translations from his forearm and swiftly made his way downstairs.

“Finally,” Cecily said as he stepped into the dining hall.

“You clean up nice,” Tristan added.

“Thanks.” Mild irritation tugged at Alistair’s voice.

“What exams you got?” Tristan asked, ignoring his annoyance.

“Too many. Today is physicals: bastard and rapier. Tomorrow is mental: philology, Kollish, and Eldren.”

“You’re studying two languages on top of ancient texts? Rough.”

“I’ve told you this before.”

“And you expect me to remember? Rookie mistake.”

“To be fair,” Cecily started, “you really shouldn’t expect him to remember. But also, you did this to yourself. I’m only taking rapier and Eldren and even I’m stressing out for this.”

"I think I'm in an okay place. Philology is my best subject, and I'm decent enough with Kollish. Eldren I'm iffy on."

"Even with Andri and Robyn around? They're both fluent," Tristan said.

"I don't know. Maybe I should have dropped Eldren this year. I'm not making the progress the instructors want from me."

"Too late now." Cecily's voice offered no sympathy for her brother.

"Truth. How long until the exams start?" His words were jumbled by a half-mouthful of cheese and bread.

"About an hour, we should probably get over to the Academy soon, though. Don't want last pick for blades," Cecily answered.

"Sounds good."

He finished up his bread and strode down to the stables with his sister. As they made their way in, they saw that the horses had been fully readied for the trip already.

Alistair took a moment to admire his steed. The three-year colt stood proud in his stall, the dark leather saddle contrasting against the pale gray of his coat, flecked with the occasional black hair. The majestic animal's white mane was left long and flowed over the sides of his head.

"You ready, Hearth?" Alistair asked under his breath, offering a small lump of sugar.

"He sure is," a familiar voice called from the rafters.

"Robyn, I see you're ready for the trip," Cecily said, her voice light.

"Gotta be." She jumped down and grabbed the reins of her mare, Ambre. Seeing his bodyguard in the filtering light of the stables was always something he looked forward to. Robyn was quite beautiful, with her slender eldren mouth and sharp ears making a stunning contrast to her piercing human eyes. Her face was cupped by mid length brown curls, each one falling haphazardly down to her shoulders.

Alistair only knew one other Half-eld, a first year at the Academy. In all honesty, he was jealous of them. Besides their natural beauty, their eldren blood allowed them to use magic, something he had always wished for.

"You ready for your exams?" She asked the twins.

"I think so," Cecily responded, though her voice was slightly nervous.

"Most of mine should be okay, but I'm not good at Eldren."

"We'll quiz after your physicals, let's get going."

The three of them led their horses from the stable before effortlessly mounting, something they had been doing seemingly since birth. Trotting out the front gate, they began the short ride to the Academy.

Riding through Norgard City, Alistair went over sword techniques in his head, occasionally lifting a hand to practice a particular rapier parry or attack in the air.

"They're going to ask you to do first parry into seventh, it'll catch you off guard. They do it every year." Robyn's advice was helpful. Alistair had far less experience with rapier than with

bastard, so knowing any tricks was more than welcome.

The tall buildings of Norgard were usually something that Alistair never cared for, always preferring to be home or out in the quiet forests, studying his tomes. The only thing he enjoyed as much as his research was swordplay, and after his exam he would be licensed to carry a sword outside of the Academy.

The trio skirted the town square, far too busy to get one horse through, let alone three, and instead took a more round about path. Eventually, they made their way to the wide gate of the Academy with a half hour to spare until the rapier exam.

They stabled their horses as Robyn bid them farewell, making her way to the stadium seating. The twins walked quickly to the sign-in for exams. Alistair marked his name down for rapier and bastard sword before the two of them walked through the long halls of the Academy on their way to the armory.

"Alistair and Cecily Veramir?" The weapons master asked. Even sitting down, he was a mountain of a man, nearing Alistair's standing height.

"You've known us for three years, Professor Tarris, you don't have to ask," Cecily responded.

"I do have to ask, actually. It's part of the whole thing." He chuckled, his adherence to rules clearly only something he put up with for the job. "Two rapiers?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds good. Alistair, you have bastard too, right?" Tarris looked at him accusingly, he had been teaching Alistair some of the more advanced bastard sword techniques for the past few months and Alistair knew that he would have been disappointed if he didn't take the exam this year.

"That's right, but I figured I'd pick that up after the rapier exam."

"You might want to pick one out now so you don't lose out on your options later."

"Smart. Can I leave it here until then?"

"First come, first served, and you were the first one to get here. I'll set it aside for you."

"Thanks."

"Not a problem."

"How many rapiers are left?" Cecily asked.

"Only a few, but we still have some good ones. This morning we got rid of some of the worse blades, finally melting them down for scrap."

"Probably a good idea, the one I used for my session last week had a big chip in it." Alistair's voice was bright at the news.

"Well, pick out your rapiers, we don't have all day." At Tarris' suggestion, Alistair made the first move to pick a decent blade. He found a nice, simple one; just a crossbar and a finger guard adorning the hilt. The more elaborate rapiers always seemed too busy to Alistair. Having been originally trained in the bastard sword, he preferred a more minimalist approach to hilt

design. Evidently, most of the other students had felt differently, as the simple rapiers were in far better quality than any of other remaining blades.

As Alistair expected, Cecily picked out a more worn rapier with an incredibly elaborate swept hilt. She was always drawn to the fanciest looking things when simpler ones would suit the job just fine, or in this case, better.

He set down his chosen rapier and looked through the rack of bastard swords, finding a new looking blade nestled among the older ones. He inspected it closely, but couldn't find any blemish or scuff on the polished steel. He handed the bastard sword to Tarris and picked up the chosen rapier, signing it out as his sister did the same with hers.

They left the armory and passed through a common hall, watching several other students practicing for various exams. A couple Eldra were working on simple magic, forming darts of concentrated air and launching them back and forth at each other, trying to catch the bolts before they made contact.

Seeing them, especially their use of magic, always struck deep envy in Alistair, even more so than what he felt with Robyn and other Half-elds. He shook the jealousy from his mind and brought it back to the coming exam as he approached the wide gates of the combat staging arena.

Foss, Thomas

Meeting with Thomas each week was always a pleasure. His intriguing personal memoir of his time studying abroad in Columbia drew me in during every session. With his hilarious depictions of the people he met, to the beautiful imagery of the places he saw, he makes his readers feel like they are right there experiencing the same situations. I am grateful for having the opportunity to work with Thomas and learn so much about the culture in Columbia through his eyes.

Amanda Wroblewski

5221

As the dental hygienist leaned over me to grab the fluoride, she asked me when I'd be leaving, for how long. That summer, before what would have been my senior year of high school, questions about my departure to Colombia were ubiquitous; they came from classmates, my mom's friends, my friends' moms. They were accompanied by numerous other inquiries: "Can you speak Spanish?" Yes. "Are you nervous?" Of course, but I said excited instead. "How did you pay for this?" Grandma. Just before she could place the foam mouthguard in, I gave her the answer I started giving everyone: "Mid August, for a year."

Six months later and riding in cars was my favorite thing. Sitting in the back seat with the windows down, it was easy to forget the dry heat outside; and the breeze was fresh once we climbed into Cúcuta's newer suburbs. Some nights it would be so hot that heat lightning would flash across the cloudless sky. It was on a night like this I vividly remember going to see my newborn cousin, well, newborn host cousin. I didn't have any real family in Colombia.

I knew this part of the family well. It was my host mother's brother whose name I have now forgotten, and his wife, a woman so slight I never could have imagined her carrying a child. They had just bought a new home on the hill. In Cúcuta things are opposite. The rich people live low, toward the center, near a stream that was once, I'm sure a river. The poor people lived on the hill, along with the new luxury developments. I was familiar with the *conjunto* they had moved to. I passed it everyday before school on my two hour bus route. It was surrounded by slums and empty lots littered with broken bottles. But the community itself was rather posh; the house was likely bought for its showability and bargain price set low for the dissatisfactory surroundings.

The long drive was, in the end, the only reason I decided to go; the house was more than twenty minutes from the center. I was almost as excited about my host family's new white Renault, the same station wagon Cúcuta's police drove, as they were. I had only ridden in it twice, preferring always to have my neighborhood's guards just call a taxi than wait for my host mother, Sandra, to get ready. This was lengthy process that involved make-up and what may as well be called an at home blow-out, for her just to drop me off at a friend's house. It was a hot

night, and I knew we would be taking the new car, so I went downstairs and waited on the couch.

It was nearly a half hour before Sandra trundled down the concrete spiral staircase. I had mistakenly forgotten to take into account the aforementioned pre-departure beautification. Luckily, I had not forgotten a book, and in between short, but pleasant, conversations with my host father, Juan Carlos, on our white leather couch, I picked up a few pages. I am sure, though, that nothing had stayed with me and probably I had to reread a good deal of the chapter. The book was more of a way to avoid directly engaging. When our conversations grew slow again I would just sigh, glance at the ceiling to show mock annoyance at the tardy Sandra, and return to my reading.

Any reticence to engage wasn't so much to do with my Spanish skills, which were by then better than any of the other foreign exchange students', but a general lack of shared interest with my host family. My friend Meg, a very nice girl from Minnesota did an exchange in Ocaña, a smaller and much calmer Colombian city in the mountains. She told me once what a relief her exchange had been. Her real parents, who I met a few times, and who I always assumed were divorced for their constant arguing and sharp glances, were in fact still married. Meg told me they fought; they were strict, always cracking down on grades despite her 4.0. Meg's host family in Ocaña, however, was a dream. They lived in the penthouse in the tallest building in the city. It only five stories, but status still they had. Every weekend they would take trips to the family's farm with her many cousins, aunts, uncles, and more abuelas than anyone can possibly know what to do with. She loved it, and was so grateful to have such a supportive family for once, even if they would only be her's ten meager months.

My situation was the opposite. My family at home was accepting, loving, and kind. I used to jokingly call them the only real middle class people. If there was any slight financial discomfort, it was when I was very young and my mother ran a daycare. And at four it's hard to complain about family finances when all one really wants is a three dollar pack of Pokémon cards. I may have never seen the purchase of a boat, or cabin, or even a new car in my youth, but there were always possibilities for a nice summer camp and brand-name Crayolas.

It was a shock when moving to Colombia I found out that my host dad owned a business and two new American made cars; the Renault they bought halfway through my exchange after deciding their Jeep was too bulky. Maids are quite common in South America, along with gated communities and guards. As were a Catholic private schools. All of these I had, and had to grow accustomed to.

For me, adapting to all these changes seemed easy at first. I would talk each day with my maid, Rosi, while she cooked and ironed. I bantered with the community's head guard: Gelvez. We would joke about all kinds of things as I waited for my cab by the gate; and he was always there to laugh with me as I hobbled home from the bars just before my two a.m. curfew. Problems soon arose, and before I knew it I was being chastised by my family for my friendliness

toward what may have well have been called the lower caste. One night, I had special permission to break my curfew and come home at four. Sandra called Gelvez to ask when I had returned. Knowing about my usual two a.m. time, but not the extended hours, he lied smoothly and said I had arrived between one-thirty and one-forty five. Unfortunately, I had already told Sandra my real arrival time of three-thirty. She just laughed heartily, pointing her finger at me, and said something like “You are getting too close.” I had the feeling she would use the incident in an argument about my adjusting to Colombian culture later on; I can’t remember if she did.

No matter how long I lived in Cúcuta I never got used to the nuances of Colombian wealth. I continued with my path of blind friendliness no matter social class. Many of my classmates resented this too. An obese boy called Santi, who looked not unlike Seinfeld’s Newman, and had his own new car at fifteen once sneered at me for kissing my friend Marysol at her birthday party. “But, she’s a waitress,” he had said, as if that were explanation enough. He was usually so kind, if not incredibly naive, and I never got over the disgust I felt after he had tried to shame me for being friends with her. Unfortunately for me, such comments weren’t rare my nouveau-riche Cúcuta. I heard them from my host family almost daily.

“You’re getting too thin,”

“Your shoes are too worn,”

“You can’t wear shorts in public,”

“You look like a peasant.”

Fighting such absurdity felt like the only option no matter how hard I began making things for myself. So, I continued with my small portions, my old leather loafers so full of holes, and my cooling shorts in the hundred degree weather. I probably did, in their eyes, look like a peasant.

I could hear the clack of Sandra’s favorite red patent leather heels before I saw her. One triangular strap around the side, the peep toe sandals didn’t afford a very good view of the few toes that did slip through the front as they were meant to. She wore the pair almost every time there was occasion for fancy dress, not that this nine p.m. visit was anything to gussy-up for. The shoes always reminded me of something Ronald McDonald’s less fortunate cousin might wear. Because of the height of the heel she was forced to clutch the railing as she hobbled down, already out of breath. Her right hand, that which wasn’t on the handrail shot up in a half wave as she saw Juan Carlos and I waiting. An expression of urgency shot across her face. Whenever Sandra was getting ready it seemed she paid no attention to the time. As soon as she finished and realized how long she had taken things got hectic.

She hooted as she made her way to the door, faster now that she had left the treacherous stairs behind. Both Juan Carlos and I followed, our normal strides only slightly slower than her quick clacking across the tile; finally we would depart. The small square of grass that could be called a front yard was used by Sandra and Juan Carlos as a place to park the new car. Sandra struggled to walk across it in her tall heels. I slid in the back seat, taking in the lingering smell of new leather.

We drove down the one way street, winding around the three double rows of houses in the gated community, known in Colombia as a *conjunto*, literally translating to collection. It was of utmost importance that we drive the right way. Although I had witnessed many of my neighbors go against traffic for convenience, I never saw Sandra or Juan Carlos indulge. Our house was on the end of the row sitting closest to the entry gate. Turning right would have given us a straight shot toward the main street, but obeying the rules Juan Carlos once again turned left, letting the new white car glide slowly through the compact grid. Turning once more our lights illuminated an outdoor gathering which obstructed our path. In their white plastic chairs, the family sat in a large circle around a matching plastic coffee table covered in hors d'oeuvres and drinks. It was probably a birthday. This behaviour of setting on the street was quite common in the neighborhood and acceptable so long as the party was agile enough to get out of the way when necessary. Each family member, perhaps twenty in all, grabbed their chair and brought it into the car port, allowing us to pass. I imagine my host parents enjoyed this event to some degree. The family, huddled by the sidewalk was forced to bear witness to our shiny new car; my host parents' relative wealth was successfully reiterated.

There are many factors that played into Cúcuta's interest in wealth. Like many developing areas, there was a new group of rich people, all competing to establish just how well off they were. This city in particular had the misfortune of witnessing this phenomenon for the second time. The last time, two generations ago, was with money from oil. Trade with Venezuela, a country not five miles east, was once a major economic factor for Cúcuta. People dealing in Venezuelan oil and residing in the more developed Colombia had plenty of money to spend. On a visit from Dubai, my second cousin Camila told me in English about her late uncle. She recollected a youth spent at his house, playing in his pool. He had three cars, two in Cúcuta, one at his vacation home in Miami. This uncle wasn't rare, a whole generation had gotten rich off of easy Venezuelan resources. Now, Venezuela struggles with one of the world's worst economies and a predicted inflation rate of up to 720% in 2017. A whole generation of Colombian businesspeople found themselves disenfranchised by Venezuela's collapse. Camila's uncle's four cars and vacation home were long sold. It was up to her generation to try and rebuild any wealth which once was, all while living under the shadow of all that had been lost.

Stopping in front of the guard house, Juan Carlos yelled for Gelvez to open the gate. It seemed short compared to the twelve-foot concrete wall which encircled the conjunto. In reality, the grey iron gate was probably around five feet tall. It's vertically placed bars would have been hard to scale. As good as it was at keeping people out, the conjunto's security sometimes made it feel like a prison. During my first week, I tried to go outside the fence for a jog and wasn't allowed to by the guards. My host parents didn't think I had familiarized myself enough with the area to leave their neighborhood. Frustrated by this as I was, they were probably right. The many gated communities which made up that part of the city, called Parques Residenciales, were easy to confuse. They were a sea of high white walls and electric fences. Gelvez waved

back, pushed a button, and the gate slid slowly open, receding behind a hidden slit in the perimeter wall.

Reminders of Cúcuta's missing money weren't relegated to the memories of its older citizens. As we drove out of my neighborhood—called *Parques Residenciales*, or in English Residential Parks—we passed not only many other neighborhoods like my own gated sector, but blocks of large street-side homes. Packed together, imposing but narrow, the homes were objectively quite grand. But, no matter how tall the columns, how ornate the old marble floors, these were the houses of yesteryear. All the nice new homes were surrounded by concrete fences like my own.

A Google image search of Cúcuta won't yield much. There is however, one piece of interesting architecture that does usually pop up: a bamboo walking bridge spanning Avenida Libertadores—a name I still have trouble pronouncing—one of Cúcuta's busiest roads. We passed it more than once a day during my year in Cúcuta. Being so close to home it became a useful signal for when I was nearing my bed after all those long nights out. The bridge was a nice contrast to Cúcuta's otherwise dusty walkways and crowded roads. It was surrounded by trees on all sides and stood atop an artificial berm. Although I rarely walked across it, driving under it became something of a must. As we entered the highway we did just that, letting the car gain speed as we ascended past the bridge and onto the busy streets surrounding. The wind picked up, and I let it wash through my hair. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a bright flash as the heat lightning streaked across the sky over the mountain.

Despite the car's constant shifting in order to weave around potholes and in between other vehicles, the ride was smooth and the wind blew. I wished I had remembered a sweater. This on a day when the temperature could have easily reached one hundred degrees. Between the milder hill temperatures and the open windows, one could almost convince themselves that the air was cool, that it was fresh.

Seeing the lights from above any city can be daunting. Cúcuta was no exception. Only from above could one take in the entirety of the area. Living in the basin of the surrounding mountains, near the center, I was rarely afforded such a view. Any chance to see Cúcuta from above was a welcome one. From the center with its few tall buildings, all the way to the slums which crawled gingerly up the hill, lights shone brightly. On the nights without smog, the light seemed to go on forever. I stared behind me at the bright expanse until we finally pulled into the high gate of my uncle's new neighborhood.

The most impressive thing about the conjunto was its excess of green space. In Villa Real, the conjunto I lived in, we were limited to a small park that was at most half the size of a football field. The sod grass was rough and artificial looking, not enough to fool someone from Wisconsin where lawns grow lush and naturally green. Villa Real's pool was large considering the lack of green space adjacent to it. Ours was one of the largest I saw in any Colombian conjunto. Here though, the pool was likely comparable, although I never saw it. This would be my first and only

visit to my uncle's neighborhood, no matter how many times I passed its outside on my bus route.

Full of palm trees in the custom of Cúcuta, also called The City of Trees, the roadways inside were wider than in my own neighborhood. There was also a great deal more space between these roadways and the tall houses which lined them in identical rows. I was taking in these observations simultaneously to Juan Carlos and Sandra. I, however, didn't have to worry about any negative comparisons to my own home. They were the ones who worried about their reputation in the family, how wealthy they seemed. Luckily for me, I had already been deemed poor and all-around inadequate, so I didn't have much to prove.

Houses in neighborhoods like these were formulaic, no matter how new, how tall the ceilings. The dark front door to my own house entered into a sort of reception area. To the right my parents had placed a clean L-shaped white leather couch. It was modern and perfectly framed a dark coffee table, with a veneer finish. The room was stark, and the furniture was just for show. Except for our time waiting for Sandra, we rarely used this part of the house. Across from it, in what was in some houses an actual designated study, was a modern desk with a frosted glass top, this too rarely used. I knew from Rosi that the furniture had been costly, but to any outsider with even the most cursory experience from HGTV it looked cheap. I was never fooled by the layout. To me, it looked cold, an impression not helped by the overused air conditioning which was set to a chilly sixty-two degrees. Although Cúcuta's heat sometimes neared unbearable, it always seemed ridiculous to me that I had to put on a sweater when entering the house. The walls were white stucco, the floor high shine white marble, and probably the poshest thing about the house. It spanned the entirety of the first floor and was cleaned regularly by a contracted floor polisher lest it begin to show the slightest bit of dirt. There seemed to have been a fear that the house ever appear lived in. Behind the spiral staircase was a combined dining and living room. It was long and narrow. Some homeowners opted for a smaller space, just a dining room, allowing for an expanded outdoor patio. Because the living room was so long it went all the way to the house backing ours.

Our patio was a sad one, off the kitchen. Too small to use for anything other than laundry, I went out only when talking to Rosi as she hung up the daily wash. I never saw Sandra or Juan Carlos use it. But, as we dismounted from our station wagon and made our way to the large white house, I got the feeling my aunt and uncle hadn't worried about cutting into the dining room to afford themselves a bigger backyard.

Having now arrived, Juan Carlos knocked and politely waited. Laughing, Sandra stepped in front of him and casually swung open the heavy wooden door. Silly as she was I always appreciated Sandra's unapologetic attitude when it came to family. If Juan Carlos felt a tinge of embarrassment it was only because Sandra, in entering so quickly, had broken some of Cúcuta's many formal social rules. In this case, that guests had to be greeted before entering their inviter's home. But, this was family, and disregarding the fact that her sister in law had given

birth not two days before, she waltzed in. Sandra's red heels, clacking loudly against the marble floor, probably gave away her arrival before anything else. My uncle called from upstairs; he would be down shortly.

Although identically placed, the reception area in my uncle's house went much deeper. Not only did they have a clean, new couch as we did, but an accompanying loveseat. It was as though someone had doubled the space in Sandra and Juan Carlos's own home. The furniture was set strategically for conversation, all of it surrounding a dark wooden coffee table. There was a degree of livability I found absent in Sandra and Juan Carlos's house. The arrangement was almost enough to balance the cold feeling given off by the identical white flooring and stucco walls. I noticed on the coffee table a bowl of fake fruit; they were covered in little plastic dew drops. Sandra likely noted this too, though for a different reason. Fruit isn't exactly hard to come by in South America, so I found it comical that in the bowl my aunt and uncle had opted for styrofoam over the real thing. My host parents, however, didn't see a bowl of tacky fruit, but the absence of something more expensive: flowers. Sandra and Juan Carlos kept not a bowl, but a vase. Never missing a chance at splendour, Sandra made sure it was always full with new flora.

Once a week she would go with Rosi to pick new arrangements. Overhearing once a conversation between her and Juan Carlos, I recall laughing to myself. She asked to borrow his pick-up to get the week's flowers. As silly as I thought it was, I would see quickly she really had needed it. Deciding to go with, I got into the then empty truck, and we made our way to what could be called Cúcuta's flower district. We parked alongside rows and rows of flowershops, all overflowing with buckets of roses, beehive ginger, lilies, red palulu. There were spooky bunches of lobster-claw, bright pink and aptly named. The buzzing of bees was all around; the fragrant air wafted down the street. It was a little oasis in the grey, dusty, city. People here didn't have to worry about the low river's occasional flavor of fresh sewage. I stared, mesmerized at the flowers, both exotic and familiar. There were wreaths, and small arrangements with pre-attached cards. I heard a crash, Sandra started. Rosi, already carrying an armful of fronds didn't flinch. In a store across the street, full of different vessels, small and large, someone had dropped a vase.

Two hours must have passed before we finished. Hemming and hawing, Sandra spoke with most of the vendors, soliciting all manner of arrangement. By then, the bed of the truck had been filled, as well as much of the extended cab's back seat. Some of the fronds were too long for the truck, and I had to hold the leaves that had been forced through the back window. I always hated those fronds. Rosi would place them in the back corner of the dark living room; there they would sit, imposing with their red tipped leaves and giving no pleasant aromas. When we got home Rosi would fill vases of myriad sizes with flowers, setting sometimes two arrangements in each room, excepting the kitchen; Sandra never bought any flowers for the room where her dutiful maid spent the majority of her time. My favorite were the fragrant lilies;

Sandra preferred the bright pink, lipstick-like, alpinia. I imagine Rosi just liked whatever dropped the fewest petals.

When first moving in, I thought the flowers were just a gesture, the white alliums in my room a temporary “welcome to our home” type decoration. I was pleasantly surprised when I discovered them to be the norm in my new home. Over time, I got used to the smell as it swept through the house. Each week, when new vases were brought in, I hoped for fragrance, or maybe coneflower to remind me of my mom’s Wisconsin garden. Those, however, I was told, didn’t grow well in Colombia’s heat.

While Sandra felt pride knowing her home was superior to her brother’s, at least in the floral sense, I felt almost sorry for my uncle. His living room smelled sharply of Glade plug-in and I was then especially grateful for the vase on my nightstand.

Looking back, the way my uncle came downstairs is even funnier because of modern cultural context. When Donald Trump was greeting the Obamas, he left Melania behind at the bottom of the steps. Three years prior, my uncle had done the same thing. Skipping down the spiral staircase, almost identical to our own, he kissed Sandra on both cheeks and hugged Juan Carlos. As he shook my hand, I glanced over his shoulder to see his wife, probably still weakened from labor, move gingerly down the steps in her pajamas. A better person would have jumped to her side, would have held her hand as she hobbled down. But, as it was I greeted my uncle, and smiled dumbly at the unfortunate woman as she finally reached the bottom of the stairs. She smiled back, revealing a mouth full of navy blue braces. Orthodontia had become the newest fad for wealthy middle-aged women in Cúcuta.

As my aunt feebly shook my hand I began to appreciate the stress she had been through. Tiny as she was, the delivery must have been an ordeal. Although Sandra and Juan Carlos didn’t tell me about any unexpected complications—something I am certain I would have heard them discussing endlessly—someone so small must have had trouble. She looked exhausted, and I began to wonder if my uncle had invited Sandra, or if she had invited herself. Embarrassed for my host mom, and enticed by a plate of warmed up empanadas—fried pastries common in South America—I left the conversation before it had even begun. As grown-up talk turned to abuela and troublesome maids, I texted my Danish friend, Mette, to ask which bar we’d be going to that night.

I had nearly forgotten about the baby by the time the nursemaid brought her down. Although not as fragile as I had expected, the baby still looked much like raisin. Swaddled in her pink blanket, she looked up at us with a degree of skepticism. I could empathize with her; having lived in Cúcuta for six months I certainly knew what it was like to have five Colombians staring at me simultaneously.

For some reason, babies never respond well to me. Is it possible that I harbour some evil spirit invisible to myself and the rest of the world? Perhaps only the purity of infancy can reveal the truth. Dogs are the same way. As my aunt passed the baby into my arms, it almost

immediately began to cry. Sandra and Juan Carlos laughed, they had been privy to the event before. I had met plenty of new baby cousins in those six months. I passed the baby back to the nursemaid. It was the gentlest game of hot potato I've ever seen.

Sandra hinted toward the stairway. She wanted to see the nursery. So, leaving the baby with her nursemaid, the rest of us went to see. Conjunto houses mostly had three bedrooms. In the front there was a large master, and two smaller rooms in the back, a shared bathroom in between. Smaller, though they were, it would be silly to say the bedrooms were cramped.

My room in Sandra and Juan Carlos's house fit a queen bed, a nightstand, and a console almost perfectly. Like a hotel room, there was space enough to walk on each side of the symmetrical set-up. On one side there was a large aluminum framed window below a wall-mounted air conditioner. A closet lined the wall closest to the landing; it helped to block out any sounds that echoed from the lower level. Like the rest of the house the walls were white stucco. In the square room they didn't seem so cold, and contrasted well with the dark veneer closet doors. Instead of white marble as below, the second floor had cheaper ceramic tile. The repeated stamped texture was easy to spot; I loved to walk slowly across it, feeling the grooves of the cold floor beneath my bare feet. Ugly, thought it may have been, the tile had faint blue flecks, some color at least in the otherwise barren home.

The nursery was where my room would have been. Walls still yellow from when the gender was unknown, the room was slightly larger than mine. The crib was shiny and white. The mobile hanging above it was multicolored with horses, hearts, and shapes. There was a new rocking chair in the corner with a soft light behind it. Compared to my white room, the nursery was a box of crayons. Just like the baby, everything was new. Sandra cooed as she walked around, surveying the loot. There were a lot of "I remember when Karen was born and..." sentences. Sandra's nostalgia was visible; she had only once had a new nursery like this one, and the newborn who stayed there was now grown up and living in cold Minnesota.

More than nostalgia, I could sense jealousy in Sandra's tone. Her hand ran along the railing of the crib, the shiny red fingernails tracing its perimeter. It was a rare moment when I empathized with Sandra. She no doubt missed mothering someone, and all the material that came with it. Here she was, looking at all the spoils of her sister-in-law's new motherhood. I almost felt sorry for her.

It wasn't a surprise what Sandra decided to do next. After looking at the nursery, Sandra told Juan Carlos they'd need to stop at the furniture store on the way home. She said she needed new cups. I wasn't interested in watching Sandra waddle around, looking for something to ease her envy. Since, it was nearly ten I told Sandra and Juan Carlos I'd order a cab at the gate and take it to see Mette. They shrugged, not thrilled about my taking a strange taxi at night, but not protesting either. I said goodbye to the baby one last time, wished my aunt and uncle good luck, and winked at the tired nursemaid.

We left the house simultaneously. "I'll be home by curfew," I called to my host parents as they entered their car, and I went to the gate. I watched the white car weave through the small streets and out the main entrance. Juan Carlos waved goodbye. Soon, the taxi pulled up and I got in. I told the driver the name of my usual bar where the beer was cheap and smoking was allowed. Quickly the cab descended into the center and I rolled down the window as the air began to feel warmer.

Hagen, Adrienne

Adrienne has a style of writing that is different from most people. Her specialty was creating these amazing analogies for her pieces that go far beyond the cliches most readers see. I thoroughly enjoyed overseeing her writing because I also got to see a glimpse of Adrienne's life in all of her works. It has truly been a blessing to work with such a bright individual that has worked diligently on her following pieces.

Jessica Wenzel

Canary

As I've gotten to know you, I only heard the melody you sing that was strawberries and acoustic guitars to a person's ears. Your sun colored feathers shined like justice, and your onyx eyes looked beady in comparison. You acted like a lovable, huge dog around a human child in my presence. It was like you were a beautiful sunset meant to happen, with no mistakes whatsoever. I couldn't believe you at first when you made it known that you felt like a worn-out car tire on a lone family vehicle. You told me that you couldn't handle the overwhelming amount of stress that comes with living in our tree, because we have to work in order to nest there. You seemed to complete this work effortlessly, just like I was. I had no idea that you were barely holding on and about to give up. All the while, I did the best I could with what I had. It was like I collided with a train and survived, but your revelation of defeat was a tame admission compared to what you told me next. Your confession that you were a bonfire that willingly drew moths in and burnt them all to a crisp had haunted me ever since I heard it. I shouldn't be haunted by it, for I am a phoenix and I can survive the fire. Still, the illusion of sweetness combined with the truth of hurt and defeat had hit me like a lightning strike. Even though I could not die from the lightning, the pain is not any easier to deal with. You still have the same song that you did before. Your feathers and eyes look the same way. You still act nice in my presence. However, though I can never tell you this, I will not ever see you as flawless again for as long as I continue to live. What you have done is something that if I did, I wouldn't be able to tolerate it and instead regret it for the rest of my life. Why should I hold you to a different standard?

Stop and Enjoy the View

Imagine walking down a path on which there are trees, plants, and grass along various man-made buildings. It is five in the evening, so you are done with classes and work. You are tired, so you've been looking down for a while, only noticing the sidewalk and ground. At this point in time, you are so fatigued that you have to be seated. You then take a seat on a patch of grass and decide to look up. The sky is breathtakingly beautiful. There are dark, deep purples mixed with voluminous burgundies and toned down yellows. The sky currently has a few stars in one area of the purple part of it. These stars shine like diamonds, and are scattered out like bread crumbs on a kitchen floor. Along with the sky, you see a few trees that seem to look void black due to the darkness, although logically speaking, they should look like healthy, unharmed trees in the daylight. There is a building in the middle of the nature you see that doesn't look particularly stunning from the outside, because it is a rectangle shaped structure built and layered with bricks. Some of the windows on this building have gel clings on them. These gel clings, you can tell, mostly relate to upcoming holidays, like thanksgiving, as well as anything one can find in nature, such as the brown-red leaves of autumn, and the snowflakes of winter. You can't see exactly what they look like right now because it is getting darker by the minute. It takes a while, perhaps half an hour for you to regain your energy. Someone who lives in the building, who turns out to be a friend of yours, notices you outside while they are doing work at their desk by the window of their room. This friend is a girl with straight mid-length brown hair, sunburnt skin, and a swimmer's build. She is currently wearing a t-shirt and pajama pants. She seems to be kind of distracted from her work, as it was the only way she was able to notice you. However, she is happy to see you. All she does is wave at you, and you wave back. By the time you have your vigor back and get up, the sky is dark blue and pitch black at the same time. The stars are all over the place now. They shine like miniature lamps. You continue walking along your way, as you have no place to be tonight, except for your house.

Hoppman, Jacob

Jacob's intellectual curiosity leads him to write for his own purposes, to investigate deep, abstract ideas and questions that inhabit his work as a philosophy student and his existence as a human. Throughout this past semester, Jacob has written pieces that probed everything from David Hume's is-ought distinction, which he plans to present at the Student Research Symposium, to elements of Stoicism in George Orwell's *1984*. Working with Jacob and seeing how he processes complex ethical and philosophical dilemmas has truly been an exceptional experience, and I invite everyone to join in by reading his pieces, "1984, Stoicism & Virtue Ethics" and "Necessity."

Chelsea Phillips

1984, Stoicism and Virtue Ethics

The last thing one would assume from Orwell's *1984* is that it provides for us a guide to living. But if a person's philosophy is to act with the worst possibilities in mind, as to not be dismayed when the worst occurs, rather than the best, then *1984* is one of the best novels one could read in the proper frame of mind to have.

Though the political dimensions of the novel are what is most emphasized, Orwell also could be argued to have a rich insight into people as well. The characters of Julia and Winston could be displayed as examples of two modes of human beings; the pleasure seeking and the moral and truth seeking.

Though Julia clearly cares for Winston, most of her character is displayed as defined through sensuality and pleasure seeking. She hates the Party because the Party opposes all the things she enjoys. She isn't concerned with whether Big Brother exists or if the Proles can be led to revolt against the State. In fact, she seems to recognize it for the hopeful dream that it is while Winston, the intellectual character, for a time is lost in the possibilities created through abstract thought rather than concrete experience.

This relates to Stoicism, which seems to unintentionally work very well with the novel. Though it is inevitable that Winston and Julia confess, what they believe is that they can stay true to each other and by doing so themselves. That their love and humanity will preserve their dignity and individual existence. But all things are beaten out of them through pain and irrational phobias (rats for Winston, we never learn Julia's) and that seems very appropriate – the Stoics believing that all fears and painful emotions being created by irrational thoughts and evaluations of things. It is a very Stoic value to have their integrity (their Virtue) be their main emphasis in the novel rather than the seemingly possible goal of destroying the Oceanic Inner Party, which would be the goal of the Consequentialist.

The novel shows the value of doing things for their own sake and focusing on internal things (what we do and our estimations of things) rather than what befalls us. Stoics, perhaps more so than any other school of philosophers give adequate personal advice for how to live in

the world of Oceania and IngSoc – if the human mind is strong enough to maintain their lofty recommendation of being resilient to even the harshest agonies of the body.

This emphasis on “common decency” and morality outside of ideology is a very Stoic virtue. And an inalterable totalitarian system emphasizes the non-consequentialist grounds for it. Though by happy happenstance the virtues seem to align with a better world for one’s self and others, it is not the reason why the Stoics argue we should be virtuous. We should be virtuous to achieve tranquility. Arguably this too turns into a type of consequentialism but it is a consequentialism that is focused on our internal state(s) rather than outer events in the world. It seems that any conception of virtue ethics must rely on some form of well-being and consequently consequentialism or else it dissolves into a type of arbitrary virtue selection. For if well-being has nothing to do with action/attributes, then what is to designate a virtue from a vice save from whim?

Though the novel is a very good expression of the strengths of Stoicism it also could be used to highlight potential faults. Though the Stoics understand that we cannot help but feel pain if we are tortured it is up to us (whether pre-determined or not) they find whether we allow this fate to personally affect us and we sell our dignity cheaply. The latter half of this seems more believable than the first. The idea of being tortured indefinitely and remaining calm seems not possible. For although the stoics are right in that we do not control our bodies experiences of pain and pleasure and that we should focus only of that which is in our control, they are wrong in believing that our moods are entirely contingent on our thoughts. It can also be argued how much we control our thoughts, but even if a person does have complete control, it seems that poor health and conditions will inevitably wear on a person and the pain will prevent him from feeling tranquility, though he may be content knowing the Thought police have yet to break him.

How the Stoics would respond to the idea of pretending to be broken is interesting. In a sense, they would differentiate between being broken and pretending. The fact that you’re acting the way they want you to means that they control you and any argument for your integrity would be solely on mental resistance which is a pretense that has no real effect on the world but the Party purges both to safeguard their existence and out of the pursuit of power which is their goal rather than using power as a “means to an end.”

This “Will to Power” version of virtue ethics too becomes effectively a form of consequentialism. A system that is almost a warped or shadow image of Stoicism, where the soul is carved out rather than given nourishment and everyone is miserable because they focus on mere survival in a hellish world rather than being happy because they focus not on their happiness but their virtue.

Necessity

AABCA ABCBC ABCBC AABCA

If all things follow from necessity,
If all things which are must be,
Then one might say it's foolish to be alarmed.
But that doesn't change the fact,
That Nature has necessarily made a fool of me.

For though it may be foolish to respond,
With anxiety to that which causes us harm,
This is how we all were made.
For some to say there's no cause of alarm,
Is to add yet another level of dismay.

Although contentment should be our aim,
The passions of illusion necessarily take their hold.
So that we strive for happiness rather than serenity.
Since lasting satisfaction was not a feature of Man's mold.
Necessarily continuing the cycle of desire, dissatisfaction and misery.

So though all things follow from necessity,
That doesn't necessarily mean anything to me.
And this too flows from the Laws of Life.
We all act out our roles and play our parts,
And necessarily cling to fantasy and impossibility.

Jacobson, Asher

My sessions with Asher throughout this semester were not only interesting and engaging, but also fun. He crafted very well written and creative poems, and I looked forward to what he would bring in each week. I enjoyed Asher's writing because it was artfully unique, and he experimented with a multitude of writing styles as we progressed through the semester. Our conversations during these sessions were very enjoyable as well. We discussed his work in depth, and analyzed many concepts that his writing brought to light. Asher is very skilled at writing creatively, and I hope to get a chance to read more of his work in the future.

Brian Maes

Time Rhyme

If time were a book, would I have my own page?
After all the time I took, will I die of old age?
And if we took a minute, to pass several times by.
Could we find time passes differently between you and I?
If time is like water, then it flows downhill,
Ever seeking rest and calm eternal still.
If time is everlasting, then I am but a child.
They'll ask, "How long did he live?" ...
"I don't know, awhile."
Maybe time is finite and will come to an end,
Or it doesn't exist, and we all just pretend.

Loepfe, Travis

Travis was truly a pleasure to work with this semester! One of his writing strengths that I admired throughout this semester is his amazing, detailed descriptions that he incorporates into his writing, making the reader believe he or she is actually in the story along with the characters. This strength of his is evident in the prologue to his short story, "Antonia." The story portrays an individual who becomes a gladiator during ancient Roman times. Travis researched this era of time, and put his own spin on his short story by making the main character a woman gladiator, which would be uncommon or unheard of in Roman times. I know readers will enjoy this prologue as much as I have, and will be left wanting to read more!

Abby Wallace

Antonia

The thunderous thud of her heartbeat rang through her ears. She felt the heat of the sun bearing down on the blood stained sand that stung her feet. She glanced into the lion's eyes, knowing full well he was hungry. He crept forward, closing the distance with each step of his giant paws. Her blood stained his teeth and his eyes dilated with every little movement she made. Her earlier actions allowed the beast to clamp his mighty jaws on the soft muscular flesh of her arm. Swift movement was the means to her survival, the lion wasn't going to give her the chance to grab any substantial weapons. She noticed; however, sticking out of the sand was the hilt of a basic hunting dagger sitting just feet away. It would have to do. Sliding to the dagger she gripped its cool iron. This startled the lion and he lunged toward her, his claws extended almost doubling in width. In a blur, she laid back and plunged the dagger towards the bushy throat of the beast. The crowd sat in silence as the lion's body hid the woman from view. The tail twitched and the head bobbed as the two struggled on the hot sand.

The beast was alive, but fading fast, as the crimson poured from its golden fur. She pressed her arms against the tremendous weight of the lion's lean chest but was too weak to lift the beast. In her right arm, the stabbing pain from the beast's powerful bite sent her in and out of consciousness. Her breath felt cool and her body grew fatigued as she rested beneath the beast's carcass, the crowd roaring. Guards removed the lion to reveal the clawed and bloody torso of the woman. The chilling smile on her paled and dirty face looked peaceful compared to the wreckage that plagued her body from the neck down. The last thing she remembered was the firm grip of the guards tugging her across the warm sand before the world went black.

Mamrosh, Katharine

Katharine has impressed me with her writing since day one. She works diligently to provide intricate details in her fiction pieces that always make for a thought-provoking read. Her creativity and metaphorical imagery enthralls readers and causes them to engage in deeper thinking about her characters and story lines. She gains her inspiration from the seasons, old English literature, music, and unique films. Katharine admits her creative “voice” has become much stronger over time, and her readers are sure to feel the powerful, underlying themes of this voice in her exceptional writing.

Bella Pietsch

Pick, Girl, the Roses

The house was dim when he walked in, lit only by the sun that peaked through the gap between two gauze curtains. It smelled of fresh bread, honey, perfumes-- scents Lucas only remembered from visits to female relatives during his childhood.

“Too dark, huh?” The young woman standing in front of him said. She pulled the curtains back and let light tumble into the room, setting her presence aglow. Her hair was blonder than he remembered and she wore a dress that was surprisingly old fashioned for someone her age: pale blue with nautical stripes, something one would find in an old photograph of a smiling woman at sea.

In that bright moment, it occurred to him how little he knew about her-- other than that her name was Abigail and that her greatest sin was praying for the death of her husband.

Lucas, or Father Lucas, as he was known to his congregation and likely to her, did not usually visit the homes of women he gave reconciliation to. Though at twenty-eight, he did not have as much experience as a priest, he knew that spending a Sunday evening alone with a young widow was most unusual. However, there was a certain magnetism he felt towards her since she shared her sins with him the week before. He imagined such an innocent looking woman would state only a few familiar sins-- premarital sex, perhaps skipping mass a few times each month, a petty fight with a roommate, etc. But instead she had cleared her throat and told him of her dead husband, who had been sick with brain cancer the years leading up to his death.

She had married him at eighteen, her baseball playing, high school sweetheart who was told he had only a year to live, simply because she wanted to fulfill his dying wish. Their love story made the local paper at the time and helped her gain the crown of Junior Miss Virginia. However, he did not die in the fall like everyone had he would. He ended up living for five more years, but remained ill and restless, waiting on Abigail every moment for his care. *Too sick to raise a family, too sick to have a career*, Abigail began to resent herself for marrying him on such a selfish whim. She prayed to God daily, in the furthest part of her mind, that he would finally die so she could live again, and last year, her prayers were answered.

Abigail had cried to Lucas during confession, which was fairly common; however, her cries were desperate and pleading. Instead of the usual tear or two drifting down a cheek, she sobbed into her dress, clenching her fists and letting out jagged, terrible gasps. It hurt Lucas to see such a reaction, and reminded him of his own mother's reaction to his father's tragic death (electrocuted while putting up Christmas lights). Though he had been told a thousand times to react to emotional confessionals with serenity and poise, he could do nothing in that moment other than reach out for her, hold her hands, caress her hair, and let the crying stranger collapse into him. It was a strange, intimate interaction and he had played it over and over in his mind since: the desperate sound of her cries, her wet eyes locking with his as she broke away from his embrace, the muffled "thank you" she whispered into the nape of his neck. Lucas had never been that close to another human, not once.

"I hope you don't find it weird that I invited you here," Abigail said, referring to the invitation she gave him at the parish's spring picnic the week before. She had found him under the sun, praying the rosary with an elderly woman who had a sick granddaughter. *Father Lucas*, she had said in surprisingly cheery voice, her hair tangled carelessly in the wind, *would you like to have dinner at my house next week?* It was too casual, too blatantly sincere of an invitation to deny.

Lucas shook his head. "Of course not. I appreciate the thought."

She smiled and he began to fiddle with the buttons on his shirt. During their moment in the confessional room he had felt so natural, but now he felt stiff and awkward. As a priest, shouldn't he feel some sort of sagacity when in the presence of his parishioners? The priests Lucas studied with had never been anything but regal, even those his age, so why did he feel like a terrified boy?

He scanned the room, looking for a way to change the subject. Abigail was something of a minimalist, it seemed, as she had few decorations besides a vase of daffodils, some candles, a couple of picture frames. One particular photograph that rested on her piano caught his eye-- a teenage Abigail among a group of girls, clad in school uniforms. The other girls had trendy, highlighted shags that Lucas remembered being in vogue a decade ago, grass-stained stockings, and held cigarettes or worn books. Abigail, however, had her hair in two, juvenile braids, wore a long pinafore, and donned a toothy grin. Her innocence reminded him of Heidi the mountain girl, or Maria from *The Sound of Music*-- images of green pastures, empty skies, and yellow wildflowers flipped through his mind like the magazine pictures he had once been captivated by as a child.

"Do you play?" Abigail asked from the kitchen, where she was setting the table.

It took Lucas a minute before he realized she was talking about the piano. He tore his eyes away from the picture. "Sure. I play the organ sometimes before and after mass."

Lucas then played the exuberant opening notes to Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer", something he had played at an elementary school talent show as a boy.

She started to laugh. "I hope you're joking, otherwise you must drive the clergy crazy." He felt himself relax. "I am joking, but I actually did take lessons as a boy. Do you play?" "No," Abigail said, letting her shoulders drop. "It was a wedding gift from my parents, something to tie the house together. I always figured I'd learn, but with my husband Hal sick and all, I never had much time."

She seemed to drift away a little, and Lucas did not know how to reel her back in. He stood, just watching her, until she straightened her spine and said, "You should play another song, something less fanatical."

"Fanatical? 'The Entertainer' is a classic," Lucas said and then folded over the fall board of the piano. "Perhaps after dinner."

She responded with a good-natured smirk and led him into the kitchen, where she had set up wine, peppered chicken, and jasmine rice. There was a fern plant in the middle of the dining table that she fondly referred to as 'Leonard', after her favorite musician Leonard Cohen. She explained that she was allergic to most furry creatures and couldn't stand reptiles or fish so that "Leonard would have to do for now" as far as companions went. After saying this, she began to blush like mad and went on about how she had not meant to come across as so lonesome, but it did not bother him.

"I assure you," Lucas told her, "the life of a priest is as solitary as it gets."

This seemed to relax her somewhat, but she still furrowed her brows. "Then why did you become one?"

Now he was blushing. "Oh no, I didn't mean to come across as ungrateful. One of the reasons I became a priest was because of the lifestyle, actually. I was very quiet and independent growing up. Priesthood seemed to suit me."

This was true for the most part-- Lucas had been an outcast through childhood, though it was not all by choice. After the death of his father, his mother became depressed and struggled to provide. Lucas had no other choice but to wear cheap, outdated glasses, shoes three sizes too small, and thrift store clothing that never quite fit his unnaturally tall body. In short, every awkward teenage part of him was emphasized. His peers stayed far from him, perhaps out of pity or perhaps even disgust, and he had no other choice but to learn to walk through life alone. Joining the priesthood was the only time he ever felt a sense of togetherness, though by then, he had already begun to doubt if companionship was important at all.

"And you don't ever feel lonely?" Abigail asked, sounding more amazed than curious.

Lucas shrugged. "Not especially."

He had never really felt any burning desire to be in the company of others, for he did have to appear in front of a crowd every Sunday during mass. Though even in his free time, evenings spent alone with nothing by his side besides a book, he did not think much of friendship or family. However, that night of Abigail's confession, Lucas had felt some empty part of him fill

up-- a part of him he did not know existed- and ever since, there had been a certain gnawing in that same place, longing to be filled again. He didn't know what to make of it.

"Do *you* feel lonely?" He finally asked her after letting the question toss and turn in his mind.

She set down her fork and pondered this. "I suppose I am, which I know is ironic considering my circumstance... but I never did pray to be alone. That was never what I wanted. I prayed for him to die, and I to live, which is a completely different thing."

Her voice faltered with her words, and for a moment he was afraid he had upset her, but then she looked up from her plate and their eyes met-- hers holding a surprising amount of intensity-- and something indescribably personal passed between them. Perhaps he was just feeling the wine, but looking at her through the ferns like that, he felt as if they were moving closer, though they remained firmly in their seats. Lucas even gripped the sides of his chair, just to make sure, though it was not his body, but something from inside his soul that seemed to gravitate toward her, and with remarkable speed.

It was not long after dinner when Lucas found himself floating through the house with Abigail, who seemed to have a story for almost every decoration. The grandfather clock in her bedroom was a family heirloom, passed down from a watchmaking relative who had died after accidentally stepping on a landmine. The vintage dresses in her closet had been sent to her by a childhood friend who had moved from their small hometown to open an antique shop in London. The bible she kept underneath her bed was a wedding gift from Hal, who used to read romantic passages from Song of Songs to her before he became too ill. Her stories were surely nothing out of the ordinary, but regardless, Lucas found himself fascinated. A part of him wanted to stay frozen in those moments forever-- to shut his eyes and just listen to her talk until he knew every inch of her history by heart.

"What about that picture there-- the one on your piano?" Lucas worked up the courage to ask when they moved back to the living room and she started running her hands along her bookshelf, talking about the stories she would read as a child.

She turned her head. "What about it?"

He felt himself tense up. "You look so different from the other girls. I couldn't help but wonder why."

Abigail began to laugh. She came over and held it in her hand, and for a strange second, Lucas thought she looked like she was going to cry. "My parents were very conservative... They would not have it if I wanted to wear a skirt that showed even the slightest bit of knee, or even if I wanted to use lemon juice to lighten a streak of my hair. I never resented them for it, or anything like that, but I always did carry this strange feeling with me-- that despite living in such a large house, I never had room to breathe."

“Do you still see them often?” He asked, unable to help his curiosity. It seemed impossible that such a kind-hearted girl her age could be so alone.

Abigail set the frame back on the piano and took a seat on the bench. “Not for a while. They used to visit often when Hal was at his best. Sometimes we would all watch baseball together, or play Scrabble, and usually we had a nice time. But there was one day, when we were all playing charades, that I completely lost it. I was trying to act out an airplane and Hal couldn’t seem to get it. He had a lot trouble with cognition then, but I thought if I tried hard enough-- to make sound effects and move my arms like wings-- that he would finally understand. I did feel bad for him, looking at me with such a clueless expression, almost like a child, but I mostly felt bad for myself-- I had a husband that couldn’t grasp a simple game. So, I began to shake him, screaming, ‘I’m an airplane, you idiot, I’m an airplane’. My parents were horrified, and did everything they could to calm me down, but I was already so far removed from myself.” She stopped and looked away from Lucas then, focusing on the window, where the sun was already setting in shades of gold. “I ended up hitting him across the face, right in front of them. They were so ashamed, but they didn’t understand what it was like-- to be married to a man who wouldn’t stop dying.”

The room became soundless. Abigail turned to look at him again with an unusually cautious gaze, as if she was preparing for him to leave or condemn her for sinning. But Lucas knew that this was a planet full of sinners. In only a year after being ordained, he had heard confessions from bishops who had molested altar boys, from men who had affairs with their best friend’s wife, from teenage girls who bullied peers into suicide. It was clear to him that not everyone is made up of goodness-- some people throw sins around like poison darts, some people take pleasure in rotting the world around them, but listening to Abigail’s confession, then and now, he knew she was not one of them.

He reached out and brushed her face with his fingertips, she leaned into the palm of his hand, and it suddenly seemed as if they were back in reconciliation where they first began to know each other-- only instead of a small, confined room, they were in a house with large windows and wide open spaces.

“I’m sorry for telling you such a terrible story,” Abigail said with soft eyes.

Lucas shook his head. “I like listening to you talk.”

She smiled and pressed his palm against her hand before intertwining her fingers with his. “Tell me something about you.”

He let out a broken laugh. “What is there to tell?”

“Anything,” she whispered, their hands still tightly wound. Something about touching her filled him with a certain warm fear, as if he were in the presence of the sanctuary lamp-- a candle in the Catholic church that must always stay lit before the tabernacle-- terrified that one wrong move would extinguish it forever. But the fear faded when she said, “I just want to know you.”

He felt his heart rest. No one had ever said anything like that to him before.

Sitting upon her living room floor, with the sky outside dimming to a shadowy cobalt, Lucas found himself telling Abigail all that he knew about himself: his distaste for Christmas lights, his childhood affinity for railroad cars, how he had shaken hands with the pope during a trip to the Vatican he took in his early twenties. He even moved to the piano, much to her delight, and played a solo version of Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* while she lit candles and drank dark wine.

In those moments of curious intimacy, it suddenly occurred to him that he was a man trying to impress a woman, just like in the movies.

Of course, the wrongness of it all did strike his mind repeatedly, but only in lightning flashes-- the *rightness*, however, sank deep into his soul like midnight rain permeating morning soil. How the tension of these two states clouded his psyche and disabled him from thinking about both the past and the future, leaving him with nothing more than a single stream of sunlight shining into the present.

"I wish you could play the piano for me every night," Abigail said once he settled back down on the floor with her. She was wrapped in a quilt with her knees pulled to her chest, her blonde curls winding down the patterns. "Music always gives me a sense of calm."

Lucas felt heat rise beneath his cheeks. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, and I have to say I agree. Though, I suppose I can play for myself anytime I want."

She laughed until her lips faded into a soft smile. "But wouldn't you enjoy hearing someone else play?"

"I don't know," Lucas said and then considered this. "Maybe you could play for me."

"Not unless you like Hot Cross Buns," she replied and they both broke into laughter. Her expression became weary though, and she reached out to touch his arm, suddenly speaking in a hushed voice. "But really, don't you ever feel like there's something missing in your life? Or is it true what they say about priests-- that God's love alone is enough to sustain you?"

Lucas felt the weight of this question press on his heart. To give her an answer would be to deconstruct the foundation of his very existence-- in which he had become immune to loneliness, in which he never felt loss of human connection because he had never felt connected to anyone in the first place-- and lay it out for her to be seen and scrutinized.

He focused on the shivering flames of the candles and inhaled. "I do feel sustained in many ways, by God's word and the expectations of my parishioners, but I would be lying if I said I have not kept myself from wanting more."

She turned to lay on her side, and without thinking, Lucas did the same. "What do you mean?"

"Before I became a priest, I did dream of having a wife and a family, but those dreams always felt too large, too impossible." He felt himself blushing. "That sounds insecure, I know,

but I was young and quiet-- joining the priesthood, where I was sure I would fit in, sounded easier and much less painful than wanting things I thought I could never have.”

For a moment, Abigail was so quiet and still that Lucas could hear nothing but his own heart beating. Finally, she met his eyes and said, “I understand what you mean. After high school, all my friends left our small town and started to change and grow into these brighter versions of themselves while I remained completely colorless. I knew I had to live with the choice I had made-- the choice to stay with Hal after he did not die-- so it felt futile to spend all my time *wanting*, but after a while, I could not help myself. Lying in bed at night, with a husband too sick to love, *wanting* was all I could do.”

Lucas did not know what to say to that, because despite their similarities, their situations were ultimately different-- Abigail had preserved her dreams like caged butterflies until Hal’s death released them, but Lucas’s dreams were long crushed underneath the weight of fear and uncertainty-- if that weight were to somehow be alleviated, there would be surely nothing left of them.

“And is there anything you want now?” Lucas asked. After all, she was still young, and if she wanted, he was sure she could enroll in school or move out to the city.

Abigail did not say anything for a moment, and in her hesitation, he became suddenly aware of the space between them and how quickly it seemed to be dwindling.

“What I want is for you to stay,” she said, sounding breathless, and before Lucas could make any effort to reply, she sat up and continued. “Before I gave you my confession, I felt so thrown away. Waking up every morning in the house Hal’s parents bought for us was a reminder of everything I have ever lost: my family who won’t speak to me, my friends who moved away, the five years of my youth spent playing nurse. I started to think it was a punishment for feeling lonely after praying for Hal to die. But when you held me in that room while I cried, I suddenly felt as if I had never been anything but wanted. I know you felt that way too. Didn’t you?” She tilted her head to the side with one last pleading glance, and repeated herself: “*Didn’t you?*”

In that silence, he felt her retreating, but could not think of a way to stop her. Of course, he could tell her yes, but it wouldn’t be entirely true. For him, their moment in the confessional room was not the first time he had ever *felt* wanted-- it was the first time he had ever wanted, the first time he had ever felt a desire that had lips, and teeth, and a beating heart-- and that alone made their situation all the more dangerous and all the more real.

In times of distress, Lucas usually turned to prayer or meditation. He would imagine that his heart was a house with a door that could swing open and shut. He would imagine that if he let God into that door, he could lock him inside and keep him there forever. However, now, Lucas could no longer imagine his heart as a home with God locked inside, but instead saw only a house without locks, or doors, or walls-- burning to the ground. Everything inside of him seemed to be on fire and he was desperate to put it out.

At last, Lucas exhaled and told her, “I can’t.”

“But why?” Abigail asked, sitting there with wide eyes and shaking hands. “Why not?”

A thousand ways to deny her began to race through his head. He could tell her that a priest spending the night at a young widow’s house would be wrong, or even that an unmarried man and woman alone together was enough of a temptation. But instead, the only words that left his mouth were, “I don’t have a pillow.”

Abigail was quiet for a moment, her hands still trembling, and then began to laugh in such a way that seemed to fill the room with light-- reminding him of the warmth of spring after a long winter. “Wait here.”

Abigail left and after a few moments of rummaging around, returned with an armful of afghans and pillows. They blew out the candles and folded the blankets across the floor, letting the glow of streetlights shining through the window guide them before settling down, side by side.

Without much thought, Lucas ran his hands through her hair, feeling as if he were dragging his fingertips across the surface of a still lake. In response, she wrapped her arms around him and curled her small hand into his, and they fell asleep intertwined like that-- sin blooming inside of him, the petals falling into her hands.

He began to have a strange dream where he was giving a sermon-- standing in front of a cold church in his robes, the candles emitting their lonely, orange glow, flickering shadows across his bible-- all familiar pictures. However, he did not gain his usual sense of comfort and satisfaction, but rather felt cold and solitary, even in the presence of his parishioners, even in the presence of God. It was only when he woke up, pressed against Abigail, did he feel warm, and loved, and whole.

In the morning, Abigail took Lucas to her garden, where they sat and watched the sun bring the world to life again. Hyacinth, roses, and verbenas grew wild around the yard, while lettuce, carrots, and tomatoes were grouped in small white picket fences. There was also a lonely fringe tree in the back corner, which she seemed quite proud of. The strange tree looked dappled with snow from afar, but up close Lucas could see the individual petals that sprouted from each branch: thin, white strips, like paper mache (he mentioned this and she laughed at him).

The whole scene looked like something from a story book: Abigail sitting carelessly on the grass in a white dress, burying her nose in the flowers, appearing like a Renaissance muse. It was as if God had handed him the lens into the divine.

Lucas took a seat next to her, their knees touching, so close that they could almost kiss, and brushed a stray lock of golden hair from her eyes. “You make me feel like I’m in some sort of fantasy.”

Her relaxed expression faded into a sad smile. “Don’t say that.”

He tilted his head. “Why not?”

“Because fantasies aren’t real,” she said and plucked a rose from one the beds, twirling it between her fingers, before continuing, “and I am real. Do you not see that?”

There was nothing for Lucas to say then, as he did not know any words that could express how he felt about her presence. Of course, he knew she was real; it was her realness, in fact, that was so unfathomable to him. Before last night, he had never been held so closely, for no one had ever wanted to. Just as he questioned his own desire for her, he questioned her desire for him, and felt embarrassed even considering such a thing. Being wanted was still an alien feeling to him, and every time he found himself starting to enjoy it, some haunted part of him would rise to remind him of its futility.

Lucas watched Abigail in the silence as a gust of wind blew through the idle air, causing the flowers to shiver. Goosebumps pricked his arm. He knew he did not need to feel wanted, his own rationality told him that, but God, how he wanted it when he was next to her. But how could he tell her? Where does one learn to say such things?

Abigail tore her eyes away from him and focused on the ground. “I want you to stay, Lucas. I know I said that last night, but this time, I mean forever. That sounds ridiculous, I know, but for the first time in years, I do not feel alone. I no longer feel like a sinner. I feel holy when I am next to you, and I don’t want to lose that feeling.” She stopped and looked at him again, the breeze brushing the edge of her dress, making her look like she could float away. “Does that make any sense?”

“Of course it makes sense. I feel that way too,” Lucas said, feeling his heart swell with both happiness and sorrow. “But I am a priest, Abigail, above anything. I can’t stay with you.”

Her eyes become foggy and wide. “What if you weren’t a priest?” Lucas opened his mouth to reply but she continued. “What if we started over and left everything behind? What if we traveled somewhere far away, somewhere with big mountains and wide open fields, and lived in a little apartment with a piano and a thousand houseplants? What if we could go to dance halls and movie theaters and bars where no one knew our names? What if we could fall asleep next together without being afraid to touch each other? What if we allowed ourselves to *really* live, without any fear?”

Lucas laughed. “That would be nice, wouldn’t it?”

“Then let’s go,” she said and stood up, reaching for his hand. “Let’s leave right now.”

“Are you serious?”

She gave him a look that was half-torn apart. “Yes. Are you?”

He did not know what to say, and instead tried to pull her onto the grass again, but she resisted. “Abigail, I can’t--”

“Please,” she said in a voice so soft that he had to read her lips. “I want to feel alive again.”

Then, in that garden, she cried to him the second time: her head buried in his chest, her arms wrapped around him like delicate vines. The wind would not stop blowing, and Lucas

wondered if it was trying to tear them apart or pull them away to some fantasy land where they could be unburned of the past. So, he stroked her hair, and on a whim, told her that he would think about what she had said, and maybe consider her dreams a reality. Then, in a slow series of moments, her crying came to an end and she curled up next to him onto the grass until he had to get up to prepare for his next sermon. And when he finally departed, he kissed her on the forehead-- a kiss equally embedded with promise as it was equally embedded with pain.

The following Sunday, Abigail found Lucas before mass. They had not seen each other since that morning in the garden, and Lucas was unsure of where they stood. He thought about calling her once or twice, just to hear her voice, but feared it would do more harm than good, for he had not thought about her plan at all.

Without seeing her, his solitary mode seemed to have set in again, and he had almost become content with her absence. Upon her return, however, Lucas felt his painfully sweet feelings for her sink back into his mind like wine soaking through silk.

"How are you?" Abigail had greeted him in a hushed tone, despite catching him alone-- a rare occurrence during a Sunday evening, when altar boys, deacons, and choir members were usually hustling about. She was wearing a soft-looking pink dress that kissed the stone floor as she walked, making her look like some sort of delightful flower that grows between cracks in the concrete.

Lucas looked around the church before replying. "Busy, actually, with all these spring Baptisms-- which personally, I find a little overrated. There's no reason a child can't be baptized in the winter."

Abigail smirked for a moment, until her expression ran cold. "I don't want to know how the church is. I want to know how you are."

Lucas blushed, suddenly a little too aware of his own awkwardness, and straightened his spine. "I'm alright. How are you?"

"Okay," she said, her voice growing softer as one of the choir leaders came through the door to set up her sheet music. "But I still want to leave. I can't stop thinking about it in the middle of the night. I'm making plans when I'm supposed to be dreaming."

"Perhaps that's a good thing," Lucas offered.

Abigail gave a sad, half-hearted laugh. "If you really believed that, you would come with me. You would change your life too, and we could make ourselves happy."

It hurt Lucas to look at her then. Perhaps if they had been back at her house, in that garden or on her living room floor with those bright and burning candles, he would have let himself go. But they were in the church-- a place where a congregation waited for him, a place he had found solace in for the past decade, a place that needed nothing more from him than what he was comfortable doing. Of course, leaving with Abigail was a romantic idea, something

not even his wildest dreams could have roused, but it surely could not be real life-- not for someone like him.

"Lucas," she said, reaching to touch his face before retreating. "Please. I'm not going to ask you again."

Like a dumbfounded child, Lucas could suddenly do nothing but shake his head. He didn't know how else to deny her, for he didn't want to, and he feared it would somehow be revealed in his words. He feared that if he even thought about being with her, God and all the angels in heaven would mock his stupidity, his cowardice, his disorganized mind that wavered in and out of organized religion. How could he speak in a moment like this? How could he think?

Abigail stood frozen for a minute in a half teary-eyed state until she took a deep breath and seemed to collect herself. There was a long pause before she turned around to leave, but eventually, she did.

It was only a few weeks later did Lucas find out from a parishioner that Abigail had really left that day she met with him in the church. Apparently, she sold the house Hal's parents gave her for some large and unknown sum and moved somewhere out west, some place without as much rain and history as their little town in Virginia. Apparently, she was happy.

For awhile, it was almost impossible for Lucas to picture her outside of anywhere but her garden among budding flowers and early light, where she seemed to glow like the morning itself. It disturbed him to think of her traveling on a train alone, or pushing through a crowd in a busy airport, broken-hearted and vulnerable. And it especially hurt to think of her so far away-- not in miles, but in days.

It hurt him so much that sometimes he found himself staring at himself in the mirror, crying, wondering who he was only to conclude that perhaps the sobbing man looking back at him is exactly who he was-- that perhaps he was not Lucas the poor kid with the dead father, or Father Lucas the priest, or even Lucas, a lover who once embraced a woman for a whole night's sleep, but merely a nameless face, soaked in tears. Perhaps that was his natural state, and who he was really fated to be.

However, those were melodramatic thoughts, he knew that-- ones that were ultimately useless in the long-run, and could serve no other purpose than to purge him of whatever unresolved emotions that still obnoxiously stirred in his heart. And fortunately, as the days went by, it did become relatively easy for him to return to his usual schedule and his usual contented solitude. He just could not help but sometimes dwell on how quickly and passionately Abigail had passed through his life, and how little it ultimately changed. All for the better, though, he assumed, certainly all for the better.

Although, during rare moments, he sometimes couldn't help but to betray his faith and imagine that in some parallel universe he did go with her-- a universe where maybe they would already be settled in little apartment in the city, spending their days listening to old records and

drinking wine as skyscraper lights shone through their window. Or maybe they would live in some bungalow, out in the country, surrounded by empty fields and distant mountains. Maybe at this very moment they would be standing in some wide stretch of wildflowers. Maybe the sun would be setting and her hair would be lit up in gold. Maybe he would reach out to touch her and they would kiss until the sun sank below the horizon. And then maybe they would walk together, back to their home, where they would dance all evening and fall asleep on white sheets. Maybe he would be happy. Maybe he would be warm. Maybe he would *really* be living. And maybe his heart would *really* be full.

But then again, he always thought, without fail, time-and-time again, maybe not.

Marrow, Brooklyn

I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to work with Brooklyn this semester. She made each week so bubbly and fun with her bright personality. I really enjoyed reading about her experiences and reading about her favorite TV shows. She brings such a unique voice to her writing. She keeps her ideas organized, yet she writes with a kind of stream of consciousness. Her writing goes where her mind does. I could pick out her words from anywhere!

Jenny Peterson

Mandy and Mickey

I'm sure a lot of people have heard of the show *Shameless*. This show focuses on a poor family of 6 siblings living in south side Chicago just trying to get by. Many of the characters introduced have obstacles in their lives that they work to overcome. I will be focusing on a pair of siblings: Mandy and Mickey Milkovitch. The reason I chose these characters is because I feel like most viewers see them as antagonists when they are actually just damaged. Many people have this misconception about the two and I wanted to give some insight as to why they act the way they do and what they are really like. Before I go into explaining them individually, I want to give you a bit of background information that will help you to understand what they've been through together.

Mickey and Mandy live in a small house with their father and two brothers. Their mother died when they were young which means that the only adult influence they've ever had is their father, Terry. Terry is angry, in and out of jail, abusive (sexually and physically), bigoted, and just an all-around horrible person. Growing up with a parental figure like that would normally damage most people beyond repair, but it didn't completely ruin them. Instead of turning out like their father, they stayed together and supported one another. They defend each other against harmful threats, like families are meant to. However, this doesn't mean that they have a normal sibling relationship. A lot of that has to do with the environment they grew up in. Where they live, everyone is tough and can really defend themselves. That being said, it's no surprise that they don't really express their feelings or have heartfelt conversations with one another. Mickey and Mandy have pretty aggressive personalities, so no one really gets to see their soft sides very often. However, that doesn't mean that they don't have them. Even though they were raised by the same person, they have developed very different issues.

Mandy is Mickey's younger sister. Her problems begin when she starts getting sexually abused by her drunken father. I believe that this trauma fuels the negative thoughts she has of herself and helped to create the defense mechanisms she uses every day to keep people away. One of those defense mechanisms is aggression. She uses her anger as a wall to keep people from discovering anything about her that she doesn't want them to know. In addition to this, she uses her sexuality. When someone gets too close and begins seeing her vulnerable side, she uses her

sexuality to distract them so that the topic is dropped completely. As you can see, one of Mandy's main problems is opening up to people. Deep down, Mandy is a very sweet girl and a great friend. If she feels that you are worth it, she will go out of her way to do nice things for you. She will stand up for you at all times against anything and anyone. Mandy is just broken and doesn't trust easy. Her issues with her father have caused her to think less of herself. With her being stuck in that mindset, she can't really get too far. She stays in this cycle of abusive relationships because that's what she thinks she deserves. Along with being sweet, she's insanely loyal. She will be there whenever you need her, just like her brother.

Mickey is one of the scariest and toughest guys in the neighborhood besides his father. To be honest, he probably has more walls up than his sister does because he tries to keep up the front of being the toughest guy around. He tries so hard to keep up this rouse because he doesn't want anyone to know he's gay. Being gay is something that was never accepted by his father. It still isn't. Mickey was taught to have no tolerance for homosexuality. When Mickey starts having feelings for Ian, things get complicated because he can't come to terms with the fact that he is gay. He doesn't want to admit it to himself or anyone else. Because he's a guy, he's expected to keep his feelings and everything inside. So, he has this internal struggle of coming out and happily being with the guy he loves or ignoring his feelings and being what his father expects him to be.

As crappy as their upbringing was, Mickey and Mandy turned out to be pretty incredible people. They stand up for their friends and family and are fiercely loyal. Most people judge these characters based on how they act, which is understandable. However, what most people don't get is that they act that way for a reason. There is always an underlying story that explains why people do the things they do. These are my two favorite characters from the show because they are so complex and misunderstood. I hope reading this changes the way you think about these characters or at least gets you to open your mind up to view people differently.

Mathias, Jacob

Working with Jacob has been amazing, to say the least as he is a very engaged and meticulous learner. Jacob always comes prepared to each session. He takes the time to craft stories and is genuinely invested in making them better in our sessions. Since this was my first-time to have a learner who is non-traditional, I was initially apprehensive. We have gotten comfortable in our learning space and each session teaches me something about the writing process—which I truly cherish. Read below his story, written and experienced by him. Thank you.

Apoorva Sarmal

From Speechless: A True Story

The last time Andrew Mathias spoke at length was at his brother's wedding. As best man, he made a funny and sincere speech about the bride and groom. He toasted warmly and everyone clapped. Unbeknownst to all, less than a year later, he'd never be able to speak again.

The morning-sun shone into a bedroom window on a September morning in southern Illinois. The day was warm and Andrew woke up blinded by the sun, drenched in greasy sweat. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and got up to use the bathroom and brush his teeth. He ran cold water over his toothbrush and squeezed a gob of paste on the bristles. The toothpaste spread through his mouth like an icy wave as he started brushing the fuzz off his teeth when a sharp needle of pain shot through the left side of his tongue. He hissed inward while trying to suck the betraying paste away from the source. He rinsed his mouth and another wave of agony seared through his tongue and choked him as tried to swallow it away.

"What the fuck was that?" he thought as he looked in the mirror his eyes watering, and his mouth agape to diagnose the source. An amoeba of swollen pink flesh blistered out in a ring on the side of his tongue. A raw scab filled the sickly offensive sore. Annoyed, Andrew shut his mouth and went to eat breakfast.

"God damn it!" he cursed spitting out a half chewed piece of toast which had sent another needle of fire screaming through his mouth. He left his uneaten breakfast on the table and stomped out the door to work. On the way, he stopped at a pharmacy for a tube of Orajel, assuming he only had a bad cold sore or worst case scenario—massive herpes.

Weeks went by and the sore got bigger. Andrew, stubborn to a fault, was now only eating pureed soups which he could swallow with the least amount of searing contact with the tongue. He started losing weight. His clothes no longer fit and his belt was now strictly decorative. He finally went to a doctor who diagnosed him with an infection. He was given antibiotics he could barely swallow as his tongue had now swollen to fill much of his mouth. A week and a course of amoxicillin later, there was no change. He returned to the doctor. Orders were given to biopsy the tongue. Andrew hesitantly asked what was being diagnosed.

“Cancer,” said the doctor.

On the day of the biopsy, Andrew was told to stick out his tongue. He forced it out with great difficulty as his tongue stretched the scabby sore beyond its limits. The doctor stabbed a narrow tube with a razor-sharp edge into his diseased appendage and extracted it causing a flame of pain like biting one’s tongue, eating a lemon and then pounding a rusty nail through the incision. It carried a sample of bloody diseased flesh, snipped off and sent to a lab.

Andrew called his brother Jacob that afternoon. His voice quivered as he explained what was happening.

“Shit,” said Jacob. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing yet,” said Andrew. “Don’t tell Mom and Dad any of this. I don’t want them to know until I get an actual diagnosis.”

“Okay. Call me tomorrow as soon as you hear,” said Jacob as he went into worry.

With hesitant steps, Andrew returned to the doctor the following morning. His eyes pierced the doctor’s as he took in the news that he had cancer. Squamous cell carcinoma—the doctor called it—a type of skin cancer caused by too much exposure to UV rays. Andrew often worked outdoors but the doctor confirmed it was not enough to be the cause of the cancer. He was told the disease was common—it affected over three million people every year and was very treatable.

Andrew called his family to explain what was happening. He choked on his tears and then his tongue as he said the word cancer to his parents, Paul and Karen. Worry spread like wildfire and the family spent the better part of the day staring into nothing while trying to rationalize the news and searching for a sense of reason and logic.

Cancer soon gained control of everyone’s lives. Andrew took a leave of absence from work and returned to live with his parents throughout his treatment. Tears were shed as he and his family visited relatives and shared the news.

“Wow, you look like you lost weight,” said an unsuspecting aunt. Andrew’s weight loss had not gotten to the point where he appeared sick but his former 350-pound frame had thinned by the weight of a few toddlers in the past few months.

Andrew smiled as his cheeks reddened in embarrassment. Karen’s eyes welled up with the burden of knowledge as everyone sat around a table. She started telling her sister and brother-in-law what she knew but averted her eyes as she began to choke on emotion before she could say the word cancer.

Andrew recounted the past few weeks to his aunt and uncle, wincing occasionally as his teeth brushed the sore on his tongue. The hum of the ceiling fan was the only sound in the room as everyone nodded their understanding of the news. Hugs were given and the family left another victim in their wake of unwelcome news.

“Well that’s some shit,” said Grandma Valeria after she heard the news. Everyone giggled and blushed at this as Grandma was never one to swear.

Appointments were made. Oncologists and surgeons were met. Medical terms like lymph nodes, stage four and malignant are thrown around like candy. Mayo Clinic soon became a second home. Treatment was to be the usual rounds of chemotherapy followed by radiation treatments. Extensive surgery was a possibility ending with a full glossectomy and laryngectomy or removal of the tongue and voice box, respectively but the hope was it wouldn’t go that far. The family believed in the medicine and hoped for the best. Prayer chains were started and endless phone calls came from well-wishers.

As best as it could, the chemo and radiation progressed like normal. The usual symptoms are there. Fever and nausea come and go and Andrew’s hair just goes. He makes a joke of hit—grabbing his chest hair by the fistful and tearing it out like some kind of Incredible Hulk/Sasquatch.

Winter comes and goes and so do the treatments. The cancer has slowed and surgery can begin.

On a cold April morning, Andrew, Karen and Paul awoke before dawn. As coffee was made not much was said; they climbed into the car. It was the day of the surgery. They arrived at Saint Mary’s hospital shortly after 6:00 AM amidst a crowd of gray and exhausted patients. Andrew was checked into surgery and his parents set in for what would be a very long day.

Jake, his wife Rachel and brother Sam arrived later in the morning and found the family fidgeting in the drab gray waiting room as other families arrived and left with their own worries in tow. Sometime in the afternoon, the lead surgeon entered the waiting room. The family rose on shaky legs and their fingers twitched as they prepared for the news.

The surgeon went on to explain they had cut away all the cancerous tissue and there were no complications during the surgery. He said Andrew would most likely have to eat a liquid diet through a tube for the rest of his life and he’d breathe through a hole in his trachea from now on. When Andrew first heard this was a possibility, he got excited about being able to win bar bets on who could hold their breath longer. If he had his trachea covered, no one would know he was breathing. On the other hand, he could no longer blow his nose or smell so he wasn’t sure if this was really a fair trade.

“He’ll never speak again,” said the veteran doctor with the practiced unemotional tone of giving harsh news. “The good news is we think we’ve got all the cancer.”

The wide-eyed family thanked the doctor. Karen was beside herself after hearing the bittersweet news. She shook her head and swallowed hard with guilt.

“Well, we pushed him into it,” she said, always one to take the blame for family tragedy.

“Don’t start with that,” said Paul. His abrupt stop was less than conciliatory but his wet eyes showed a harder truth underneath his cold gaze. The two exchanged a rare hug before they wiped the tears from their eyes.

“You can’t think like that,” Jake said scolding his mother, “Has Andrew ever done anything he didn’t want to do?”

The family paced the waiting room and hospital halls in anxious contemplation before composing themselves into another session of interminable waiting. At some point, they stepped out for a tasteless dinner in a feeble attempt to pass the empty time.

After twelve hours of surgery, Andrew was wheeled into recovery. His face was lined with thick stitches where they’d reconstructed his neck and his face swelled so wide he looked like a Halloween mask of himself laying on a table. A breathing tube extended from his trachea and forced air into his lungs as he learned to breathe anew. Another tube extended from his stomach, his now only source of food.

“Is there anything we can get you?” asked a nurse.

Andrew wrote “water” on a white board, his only means of communicating anything more complicated than “yes,” “no” or “fuck you.” The family squeezed his hand in turn and left him to rest as he drifted off into a haze of painkillers and exhaustion.

Merriweather, Jaisa

It has been a pleasure working with Jaisa this semester. Together, we have worked on revising her poetry and prose pieces. Each piece of writing that she brought in was personal, raw, yet easily relatable to her audience. When Jaisa writes, she pours out all of her ideas and emotions, which is evident as you read through each sentence of this piece. Throughout the semester, we have worked on organizing her thoughts and ideas, while staying true to the overall message and purpose of her writing. I have enjoyed seeing the growth Jaisa has made in her writing and I believe that many will instantly connect to "SBW."

Serena Holdosh

SBW

When I was younger, my mother would tell me, "you're a strong black woman."

She would put her hand on my shoulder, look deep into my brown eyes that I didn't have an appreciation for then.

"You're a strong black woman."

The words did not resonate with me. They didn't become ingrained in my mind.

In one ear and out the other as they say.

I didn't see myself as strong nor did I want to acknowledge that I was black.

I rejected that my skin resembled the crayon in the box.

Had disdain for my friends who looked like porcelain dolls with blonde hair and blue eyes.

When I came home from school crying or was down and out about how my body was changing through the process of puberty, my mother said those words that I began to hate.

"You're a strong black woman."

I wanted to shout at her that I wasn't even a woman, I was still a teenager with no idea of what the real world was like outside of my imagined reality.

I didn't even consider the thought or take on the responsibility of being a woman.

It was too scary, being a woman.

It was also too scary to be strong.

At that point in my life, I felt like the weakest person on this earth.

My self-worth was dependent on a scale and making sure that I got rid of every calorie that entered my body after gorging myself with pizza or another kind of junk food that I thought was forbidden to eat at any other time.

"You're a strong black woman."

No, I don't think so.

Turning 20, I realized my mother had said those words less to me.

It also made me realize that if she wasn't saying those words to me, who was supposed to tell me?

Who was supposed to assure me that I was strong when I was away at school?

Who was going to tell me to embrace my blackness?

I guess it was me.

But, after so long of rejecting those words, maybe I needed to be the one saying it to myself, ingraining it in my mind.

Maybe I needed to say, "yes, you are strong and you are black, and you should embrace it."

As I've become older, looking in the mirror and seeing the brown in the reflection hasn't made me want to crawl out of the skin I was born in.

As I've experienced roller-coasters, hit speed bumps, and rolled over many hills, I've recognized that there is some strength inside me.

Yet, there is still a struggle to know it's there sometimes, but it's there.

And my blackness will always be there. It never left, and it has grown with me.

So maybe you're right mom.

You've told me this entire time.

It's been an existing fact that I had to discover on my own.

The journey was taxing and long and it's still going on.

But,

I am strong.

I am black.

I am a woman.

Morrison, Griffin

In this story of many parts, Griffin balances wit, fantasy, and conflict in a way that endears you to his two focal characters, Wolfy and Jackson. Griffin writes about the pains of being different, the cruelty of adolescence, and about how having just one amazing friend (with extraordinary abilities) can prove the antidote to the struggle of teenhood. Nostalgia was a feeling that I commonly experienced while reading Griffin's writing. In my opinion, his ability to put me back in my own high school days, although long passed, is a testament to his skill as a writer. Our weekly sessions were a true high point of my semester, and I can say with sincerity that Griffin's storytelling ability is something to be admired.

Abby LaRonge

Howls of Truth

Prologue

The teen sat back on his branch, thinking about how cold it was tonight. Dressed in little more than a tee shirt, shorts and some shoes, a small part of him regretted wearing an outfit so scant of warm clothes into the wintry forest, where the temperature barely scathed double digits. Still, the cold had never really bothered him enough to dress normally in the winter months, so here he was, all alone in the dark and cold, perched a few feet above the ground in the branchy embrace of a healthy pine. To most, the sight of a teen in such dress in such an environment would spark fear and concern that he was homeless and in danger of suffering a frigid death. Of course, that wasn't really the case. The teen was out here of his accord. After all, there wasn't much that could compare to the peacefulness of a lonely night in a winter forest.

The teen has a personal philosophy that the true beauty of winter can't be found until you've spent some time outside in the frigid cold under crisp winter moonlight, hence why he was there, in a tree, all alone. He was enjoying himself quite a bit, smiling contently as he laid back against the trunk of the tree. He looked out at the forest around him, his subtle brown eyes observing the intricate design of the forested land ahead of him. Nothing in the world could compare to the serenity of a silent night like this, he thought. Not a single soul to be found, just himself and his thoughts among the dead quiet air. Just as he liked it.

Tonight seemed to be especially quiet, the teen thought to himself. He glanced around for a few moments before a sudden breeze blew through the trees. He shivered, surprised by the sudden break in the stillness. The wind seemed to come out of nowhere. Looking again, this time up to the sky, the teen saw the once starry tapestry above him gradually darkening. He could make out ominous clouds being pushed across the sky, aided by the now strengthening wind. It clicked in his head now, causing the teen to grin and chuckle.

"A snowstorm, my favorite."

He slid off his branch, landing on the ground beneath with a soft crunch of the frozen grass underfoot, wanting to get a better view of the coming storm. The darkening sky was

already looking caustic as the wind slowly picked up, stirring the storm clouds above. A few flurries had begun to fall, gliding down from above to grace the earth before their heavier cousins were to come. The teen raised his hand up and let them fall into his palm, watching them melt almost instantly as they landed. The teen smiled again, letting his hand fall back to his side and looking ahead as the snow fell around him. If there was one thing that could make the silent chill of a winter night any better, it was a heavy snowfall.

He remained idle for a few minutes as the snowfall grew heavier. The teen watched as snow began accumulating around him on the forest floor, the treetops above him, and his uncovered shoulders. Despite the snow and cold, he remained unmoving, merely smiling to himself. There was a level of delight he found in things becoming buried under the thick blanket of snow. It was a new layer of natural beauty to be added to an already masterful creation. It was also very fun to play in, and the teen wanted nothing more than to let loose in the drifting snow.

The teen sighed and shut his eyes, taking a deep breath and holding it within his chest. He could feel the wind and snow brush across his bare skin, but in spite of the growing hostility from the weather, he kept as still as he had before. He relished the cold against his skin, feeling the tiny flakes stick to the hairs of his arms and legs as they fell around him. He took a moment longer to bask in the feeling before slowly letting his breath go. As the breath left his chest, the rest of his body seemed to fade and pale in the embrace of the falling snow. The more the air left him, the whiter and less defined his physical form seem to become.

His face was calm, though, eyes still shut as the last of his breath escaped from his lips. He drew a small breath in opened his eyes, gazing out from behind the snowfall with eyes that now glowered with an icy blue as frigid as the wind that blew around him. They remained motionlessly staring out ahead of him, fixated on nothing as the rest of the boys physical form faded into the white. All that remained now were the icy blue eyes, unblinking as the snow fell faster and harder, soon guising their mysterious glow in white. No trace of the teen was left, and the only thing left in the forest was the sound of a howl of a wolf, carried in the whipping wind from beyond sight.

Part One
Chapter One

Jackson couldn't stop staring. The husky teen's faint grey eyes were wide and focused on what was outside, fixated on the wonder they saw. When he had went to bed the night before, there was maybe an inch of snow crusted to the ground around his house. Now as he woke up, there was easily ten inches of the powdery stuff strewn all across the yard. The amount of snow was almost unbelievable. He blinked a few times and shook his head, assuring himself that it wasn't some sort of dream he was in, but there it remained before him. As reality set in, his eyes suddenly went wide, and a broad grin quickly took over his face.

"It's a snow day! No school!"

The teen laughed wildly and tore himself away from the window, pumping a fist in excitement. He had been hoping for a day like this ever since classes had resumed. It had only been a few weeks since school had resumed from winter break, but Jackson already felt sick and tired of the daily grind of high school. Homework every night, less than stellar teachers putting pressure on him to work even harder than he already was, and lest he forget his ever friendly classmates that just loved to taunt him. A snow day was exactly what he needed right now.

But just as suddenly as he had started to celebrate, he stopped himself as a small amount of dread crept into the back of his mind. Jackson may have seen the amount of snow outside and assumed it was a snow day, but what if school hadn't actually been cancelled? He bit his lip in a brief panic and hurried over to his desk, firing up his laptop to find his schools website. Rapidly scrolling through the pages, his eyes scanned every inch of the site to find the answer he so longed for. It took a minute, but he found his answer, and all of the dread in his mind blew away in an instant.

“Yes, it’s an actual snow day! No school!”

Jackson shot up from his seat, celebrating again and dancing around his room to his own tune of joy. His wish had come true, and now he had the whole day to do whatever he wanted. Better yet, it was a Friday, granting him an extended weekend, furthering his excitement for the newfound free time. Despite the weather conditions, there was plenty for him to do on this mini break. Not that it mattered any to him. He already had a plan in the works for what his goal for the day was: Hanging out with his friend Wolfy.

Coming down from his excitement, Jackson began preparing himself for the day ahead of him. He quickly changed into more weather appropriate clothes, a pair of jeans, a video game logo shirt with a thin sweater over top and some warm socks for his feet. He then switched gears and started to gather up some odds and ends in his room and swap them out with the schoolwork in his backpack. He grabbed his Nintendo 3DS, a notebook and pen, his earbuds, some extra clothes for the weekend ahead, and his wallet, all of the basic necessities for a teen like him

Now fully packed and almost ready to go, Jackson then grabbed his coat, gloves and winter hat. He put on his coat and slung his backpack over his shoulders. Placing his hat overtop his earthen-hued hair and gripping his gloves, his next objective was to make his way downstairs and get his boots on before heading out for the day. It was still early enough that his parents were asleep, so he’d be able to make it out of the house before they could stop him and make him shovel the driveway. They’d be a bit annoyed about it, his mother especially, but he did wake up before and leave before they could actually ask him do it, so he was clean of the responsibility.

Silently, Jackson crept downstairs towards the door. His boots rested in the hall just before his path to freedom, and he hurried to put them on so he could be on his way as soon as possible. Fiddling with the laces for a few moments, he had them on in no time at all and was

ready to make his way through the tundra outside. He hopped up, grinning wide, and began to open the door before being stopped by an unfortunately familiar voice from behind him.

“Leaving so soon, Jackson? I thought you had to shovel the driveway before going out?”

Chapter Two

After what had seemed like a millennia of shoveling the driveway clean of snow, Jackson was finally on his way to his friend’s house. His mom, by some parental miracle, knew that he was going to try and sneak out into the winter wonderland to escape his chores. Jackson hated having to do it, but luckily, his mom hadn’t been too annoyed with him, and his quiet obedience and hard work doing the task had actually earned him some praise in the form of twenty dollars. The extra cash would never fail to brighten his day.

Now fast on the track to Wolfy’s house, his mind was racing with thoughts about what the pair would do for the day. The snow, although somewhat of a detriment to movement, opened many doors for exciting adventures. They could sled down the local hills, trying to avoid crashing into the tree-laden landscape, take a trip out into the woods to have a snowball fight, or maybe just skip out on the snow all together and sit inside playing video games all day instead. So many things to do, and only a single day to do it. It was a bit depressing that the day with this much potential was so short, but Jackson didn’t plan on squandering any of it.

With all these ideas running about in his head, Jackson couldn’t help but laugh a little bit at himself. He sounded like such a child with all of these juvenile fantasies running amuck in his brain. He did enjoy loving little things like that, and even though it may have not been readily apparent, he enjoyed learning things in school in a similar way. It’s what made him, him, but such things are what also caused him all of the hell from his classmates in school. To them, he was just some loser, a nerd that was too caught up in his childish fantasies that could never be cool like the adults they obviously were.

For a while, Jackson had believed them. The torment and taunting, the random shoves and bumps he received in the hallways at school, and the exclusion he received from his peers really hurt him. He gradually began to think that maybe they were right, and he was in the wrong for being the way that he was. It had been a dark time for Jackson. That changed, though, when he met Wolfy.

It was a bit of a cliché story. It was the beginning of Jackson’s sophomore year, the lowest point of his life. He had been alienated by his peers at the end of the last school year, and the dread of being all alone for an entire school year had been slowly festering in the back of his mind. He barely managed to get out of bed that morning and make it to school on time. It was in the yearly homeroom introduction to the new school year that he met Wolfy. The teacher had

introduced him among the typical new faces to the school being advertised as new friends to the returning students.

The period drew to a close, and the new kids dispersed amongst the many pre-formed cliques that attracted them the most, or the ones that they had been kind enough to accept them into their group. Jackson had put himself far in the back of the room, away from these groups, knowing already that his misfit persona made it impossible to fit into any of them. Head low and attention fixated on his 3DS, his attention was brought to reality by a sudden voice from beside him.

“Hey, sweet 3DS dude! Can I ask you whatcha playing?”

Startled, he looked up to find that in front of him, one of the new faces was staring right at him, smiling warmly and looking quite eager for an answer. He was taller than Jackson, built much like him. His eyes were bright and cheery looking, and radiated so much confidence for someone talking to a stranger. Jackson didn’t respond at first, struck dumb by the appearance of this shining star in his otherwise dark, lonely space. Seeing his hesitance, the other teen tilted their head to the side, wondering what was wrong.

“Hey uh, are you okay? Did I say something wrong?”

Gulping and shaking his head quickly in response, Jackson responded shakily, “N-No, you’re fine. I-I mean, I’m fine. No wait, I-I mean, I’m playing Pokémon. I’m sorry...”

Jackson felt his cheeks growing hot in embarrassment as he fumbled over his words for a response. His mind was in a state of panic, caught off guard by the sudden appearance of someone who seemed so interested in what he was doing. This person before him was someone new, unaware of what a reject he was. This was someone who may have had interests in looking for a friend in Jackson, who now looked like a complete idiot in front of him. His bumbling had probably made him think twice about talking with him, ruining any other chance of interaction.

But as he internally berated himself, the friendly soul before him seemed unfazed by his response, and instead of walking away from the awkward teen, he remained where he was and kept smiling. In fact, Jackson’s response seemed to excite the other teen even more.

“You play Pokémon? Dude, that is so awesome! I love Pokémon a ton! We should totally hang out sometime to play together. I could use someone else who likes the games to hang out with. It’s so hard to find people who are actually cool enough to really love Pokémon.”

Cool? This stranger thought that playing Pokémon made him cool? Jackson had never met someone in his high school career that even liked Pokémon, let alone thought that playing it made you cool. He felt a sudden welling of excitement inside his chest that poured over into a smile, and with it, a boost of confidence to keep on talking with the other teen.

“Y-Yea, I love Pokémon a lot. I’ve played it since I was a kid... If you ever wanted to play, I could probably find time to hang out and play it with you.”

The other teen lit up even more than before and grinned wide, giving Jackson a thumbs up. “That’s great, sounds like a plan!” He then cocked his head to the side, looking a bit confused

suddenly. “I just realized, I didn’t even introduce myself. I’m Wolfgang, but Wolfy works just fine too. And you are?”

Jackson smiled a bit more and nodded to Wolfy, taking what was left of his confidence to stretch his hand out for a handshake. “Jackson. My name’s Jackson.”

The pair had become inseparable since that day. They were always hanging around one another, consumed with whatever activity it was that occupied their time, more often than not a video game of some sort. When not playing video games or in school, they were usually outside in the woods just beyond Wolfy’s house. They often hung out there amongst the trees, just talking and doing whatever they felt like in the privacy of the brush. Wolfy had some sort of affinity for the outdoors that Jackson did not, but overtime, Jackson himself began to warm up to the idea of being outside just as frequently as he was inside. It was just one of the ways Wolfy worked his magic to help Jackson become someone almost completely different from before.

It was startling how much the presence of a friend in his life influenced Jackson and provided him with what he needed to combat his mental struggles. With Wolfy around, he had found someone that made him feel more human, more loved and accepted, and the energetic aura that seemingly radiated from Wolfy nonstop helped to raise the darkened spirits of Jackson’s mind. Wolfy liked Jackson for who he was, finally letting him feel more comfortable being himself in his own body, unlike his peers.

That being said, the rest of his peers still didn’t care for the outsider in Jackson. They still taunted and passive-aggressively excluded him, but now, their opinions weren’t a problem. With Wolfy by his side and the new brand of confidence he wore, Jackson could shrug off their words as the garbage it was. It also really helped that Wolfy was surprisingly intimidating to many of his past bullies, even though he was as threatening as a sleeping sloth. It was just another reason that Jackson loved having Wolfy as a friend.

Chapter Three

Bringing himself back to reality, Jackson found himself smiling wide he continued through the snow while reflecting on his past with Wolfy. Remembering his first meeting with Wolfy never failed to brighten his mood, and even if it was a bit sappy, he was glad that he had found a friend in him of all people. The two worked as a duo, and had complimentary personalities; Jackson’s quiet, thoughtful demeanor and personality meshed well with Wolfy’s outwardly extroverted and energetic (sometimes too much so) personality. From the outside looking in, it was almost unbelievable that the pair were friends. Jackson was very reserved and cautious, while Wolfy leapt into anything and everything headfirst with gusto. But the pair didn’t have time for outsider opinions, they were far too busy having fun living their lives.

Laughing a bit as he thought, Jackson looked ahead at the snowy path he traveled. Just over a small hill ahead of him, he could see Wolfy’s home coming into sight. Not that it was hard to see, of course. Wolfy didn’t really live in a house, per say, more like a small scale mansion that

took up half of a block. Styled like an old Victorian manor, the house itself was very tall, an expertly designed abode that was a sight to behold. A black and red-bricked wall lined the perimeter that not only enclosed the house, but doubled as a cage to a garden that, no matter the time of year, always seemed to make the house all the more amazing.

As he approached the impressive house, the place seemed all the more grandiose and large when seen in the snow, Jackson thought. He was a bit jealous that Wolfy got to live here of all places, but that's what comes with having parents that were loaded. He didn't know what Wolfy's parents did, nor did he know where they usually were whenever he was over hanging out with Wolfy, but what Jackson did know was that Wolfy was very well off, and more than happy to share all of his goodies with his best friend.

Of course, all of those extras were just that to Jackson, extras. Wolfy had done so much for Jackson ever since befriending him that it seemed almost wrong to take anything more that Wolfy may have offered him, even if he insisted it was fine. Jackson never wanted to intrude or impose on his friend, making it clear to Wolfy that he was okay and didn't need any of the gifts he may have offered. He often worried that Wolfy may think that the only reason they were friends was because he had money that Jackson didn't.

Wolfy never thought this was the case, however, and often worried about Jackson whenever he declined. He insisted time and time again that he would never think that, and began to wonder if there was something more to his refusal of the gifts. But every time he would press Jackson for an answer, his friend would always deny this was the case. He reassured Wolfy that he was just fine, smiling brightly. Wolfy was never sure if he should fully believe his friend, but still, he was his friend, so he chose to trust Jackson.

Little did Wolfy know that beneath the surface of Jackson's smile, the lingering fear of losing the best friend he had ever had constantly gnawed at him. It was the lasting effect of being unwanted for so long that, even with his friend, he felt like more of a burden sometimes than a companion. It was something that even to this day he struggled in silence to cope with. He never had opened up to Wolfy about it, and probably never would. He didn't want to worry his friend, or worse, lose him over lying about being okay for so long....

Chapter Four

Just as his fears and anxieties began to verge on a panic attack, Jackson found himself suddenly snapped back to reality as he ran right into the entrance gate of Wolfy's home. He yelped in pain and fell backwards onto the ground, barely catching himself to avoid crushing his backpack. He groaned in pain and shook his head, feeling like such an idiot for being too lost in thought and getting hurt as a result. It seemed to be a running theme with his life, Jackson thought.

Picking himself up and shaking the snow and dirt off his clothes, Jackson sighed and went up to the gate once again. Now that he was back to reality, he could actually use the intercom

built into the right pillar of the gate to call for Wolfy to open it up and let him inside. Pressing the middle button on the intercom's keypad, a chime sounded for a moment before going silent. Another moment later, and the gate itself began to open for Jackson. He smiled and slipped through the gate quickly, hurrying himself up to the house itself to finally begin spending time with his friend.

Before Jackson could even get to the front door, he was suddenly hit from the side by a snowball. The impact almost made him fall over once more, and with a yelp of pained surprise, he looked around for the source of the projectile. His eyes scanned around the snow-stricken scenery and couldn't find anything at first, but another snowball from his side brought his attention to an oddly shaped pile of snow. Jackson smirked, knowing full well that Wolfy was behind the pile, and kneeled down to make a snowball for himself.

He waited a second for his friend to pop his head up to fire again, getting into position to fling his snowy projectile right at Wolfy. As he waited, he was suddenly attacked from the side, this time by a large force that tackled him to the ground without any warning. Jackson cried out as he hit the snow-covered ground, but quickly began laughing and tried to shove his assailant off of him.

"Wolfy, dude, get off of me! I'm gonna die of frostbite on the ground!"

His remark was promptly met with laughter from his friend, who removed himself from Jackson. After unpinning him from the cold ground, Wolfy leaned down and held out a hand out to help him up. "Sorry dude, but I saw how you looked on the ground at the gate and thought that maybe you wanted to say hello to the ground again for old time's sake."

Jackson rolled his eyes and laughed himself as he took Wolfy's hand, standing himself upright next to his friend. "He's not a friend I like to get intimate with. He's a pretty cold, hard dude, not the kind of company I like to keep."

Wolfy laughed again and shrugged, the six foot plus teen standing over him with a goofy grin plastered across his face. He set his arm around Jackson for a moment before his face grew sheepish. Before Jackson could react, Wolfy had him quashed in a hug. "I should apologize for kind of bombarding you out of the blue like that. I should've been a bit less.... Brutal, with my greeting."

Jackson smiled back at his friend and waved his hand. "It's no problem dude. I know you were just playing around like you always do. But uh, do try and be a bit gentler with me next time. I'm a little fragile, you know."

Wolfy laughed and blushed a bit, his hand rubbing behind his head in mild shame. "Right, I think I can do that next time." He then smiled and gave Jackson a thumb's up, their sign that all was good. Jackson smiled and returned the gesture as he began to straighten himself up. The tackle had left his clothes caked in snow twice over now. He could also now feel the cold seeping more through the layers as a result, causing him to shiver a little as he cleaned himself off.

Wolfy was covered in snow as well, but he was much slower to remove the snow from his clothes. Even though it was the middle of winter after a heavy snowfall, Wolfy wore a pair of tan cargo shorts and a thin sweater overtop a tee-shirt. To many, such a wardrobe would be crazy. Not to Wolfy, who wore clothes like this all times of the year. It could have been snowing with thirty mile-per-hour winds and Wolfy would still be in summer clothes. The cold did not bother him at all, ever, and it was something that fascinated (and slightly irked) Jackson, who could barely keep warm even in his winter clothes as is.

Chapter Five

After the pair had finished cleaning themselves off, Jackson and Wolfy worked their way inside to finally get down to enjoying themselves. Once inside, Jackson stripped himself of his bulky winter attire and hurried after Wolfy, who had already run off towards his room to fire up whatever gaming console they were going to play on. The day proceeded as one would expect from a start like this, nonstop gaming and goofing off between the two friends. Only a few snack and bathroom breaks were taken as the day progressed in an endless focus on gaming. The duo in this natural state summed up their friendship; playfully competitive with one another, yet always focused on the fun and company each one provided to the other.

Eventually the pair burned themselves out on gaming as hunger and exhaustion began to set in. Setting his controller down first, Jackson looked back to his friend with a weary smile, seeing how Wolfy himself was holding up. He too seemed to be drained, eyes tired in appearance as Wolfy shook his head to try and bring himself back to reality.

“Ugh, it’s been a while since we’ve had a gaming binge like that, dude. I don’t think I could play another game for at least a week....”

Jackson laughed and rolled his eyes, poking his friend’s side. “Yea, right, if by a week you mean an hour, tops. All you need is a little food and drink and you’d be ready to beat me down in Smash Bros again without any hesitation.”

Wolfy smiled over at his friend and laughed, nodding in agreement. “Yeah, you’re probably right. What better way to end a meal than to smack your sorry butt around the stage a few times over?”

The pair broke down into hysterical laughter, their exhaustion and hunger finally getting the best of them. It took them a few full minutes of breakdown to recover fully before getting up together to find themselves some food. They wandered their way towards the kitchen, idly talking about strategies they could to improve their skills the whole way through the halls of the large house. As they walked, Wolfy suddenly stopped talking and gasped, halting in his tracks and prompting Jackson to also stop, looking rather concerned with his friend’s sudden action.

“Hey Wolfy, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

Wolfy shook his head after a brief second of silence, smiling at Jackson. “Oh uh, it’s nothing. Just realized I forgot to bring something with me from the room. I’ll be right back, I need to grab it quick!”

With that brief explanation, Wolfy dashed off back down the hall towards his room without another word, leaving Jackson behind him and somewhat confused as to what had just happened. He had no clue why Wolfy had acted just like he had, but didn’t think much of it. Odd things like this were common occurrence with his friend, so this wasn’t anything too unsettling, at least he thought.

Now alone in the large, empty hallway, Jackson took the time to let his eyes wander around the walls and check out the scenery. He of course had been in here many times before, but he had never actually paid all that much attention to the actual decoration of the house. Now that he had some time to focus on the walls, he began to notice something that made him curious. The walls lacked any sort of decoration, seemingly bare barring a few pictures of Wolfy here and there.

That seemed odd to Jackson, but he guessed not everybody else’s parents were as obsessed with lining their home with pictures of themselves and their families as his were. But his thoughts left him with a question: Why weren’t there any pictures of Wolfy’s parents anywhere? As he thought more about it, Jackson had known Wolfy for two years, yet had never once seen his parents in that entire time, ever. Whenever he had asked about them, Wolfy would usually respond with a saddened face, saying that they were away on business of some sort. Jackson never pressed further with his friend, mostly due to his personal fears of pushing Wolfy away. The curiosity remained, however, and the question had never been completely answered.

Jackson thought about this, wondering what the situation with Wolfy’s parents was and where they actually were, whether it was actually business that occupied their time, or something else that Wolfy had yet to tell him about. He didn’t get much time to think about it, though, as Wolfy reappeared by his side before he could get very far with his thoughts. His friend was smiling again, looking more chipper than he had a few minutes before.

“Alright, I got what I needed. Sorry about that dude, didn’t mean to keep you waiting like that.”

Jackson smiled back to his friend and shrugged it off, nodding ahead towards the kitchen. “It’s no trouble dude, all that matters is that you’re back and now we can finally get something to eat. I’m starving!”

The pair both laughed together and hurried off towards the kitchen to get their snacks. They rummaged through the cupboards and pantry, pulling out all of the snacks they could find. Another great thing about Wolfy’s house was that his kitchen always had an abundance of food, both regular and junky, which made any trip to the kitchen a food filled adventure. Once they

had raided the food storage and their arms were loaded with snacks, they began to head back to Wolfy's room to continue the gaming binge.

The duo again talked on their return to the room, but the whole time there, Jackson couldn't focus completely on the conversation. He couldn't shake the odd feeling he had gotten from earlier when thinking about Wolfy's parents. Things didn't seem to fit together about the whole situation, and Wolfy's dismissiveness didn't help the matter. Still, as weird as it may have felt, Jackson tried to ignore it the best he could. He had food to eat, games to play, and a friend to hang out with, and nothing was going to take away from his fun, not even his worries.

As one would expect, the weekend progressed just as Jackson had hoped it would. The pair played video games the entire time, taking breaks only to sleep, bathe and to replenish their snacks when necessary. There were many laughs and good times had, and it was like a paradise for the friends. But nothing can last forever, and the arrival of dusk on Sunday night was their call back to the less delightful reality that awaited them. After the two had said their goodbyes that night, Jackson left Wolfy's with a growing heaviness burdening him. The feeling of the struggles of real life had already begun to return to him in strides, much to his dismay. Still, Jackson had at least had a nice break from it all, and was very appreciative that he could at least his time off with his friend. That fact alone brightened his mood for the solitary walk home, where nothing but a few snowflakes, his thoughts, and a wolf's howl in the distance where his only company.

End of Part One

Nelson, Jennifer

Jennifer and I have been working together for a year, and I must say, she is such a talented writer! In her short story, she continually expressed her originality and creativity. I know others will be enjoying her work as much as I have!

Alejandra Perez

Keeping Secrets

“Another one to add to my collection,” she mumbled to herself as she added another charm to her bracelet. She looked around the room and shook her head. “It’s almost like nothing even happened here.”

Odessa took a deep breath and turned to leave the room the spirit was held in. Upon further inspection, she realized that it was a very cute room, filled with plushies and fairy lights. “That sick reaper... taking refuge in a little girl’s room,” she thought to herself. “Good thing I took you out when I did.” She shook her head as she quietly left the house.

It was a cool day in mid-October, and the air was filled with the spooky energy that Halloween brings. Odessa tossed her hair over her shoulder triumphantly. She had beautiful golden blonde hair that reached down to her waist. She walked with the grace of a seasoned dancer—graceful and daintily, yet also powerful and with purpose. She had the kind of unique beauty that turned heads wherever she went. That morning she had lined her amethyst colored eyes with her signature winged eyeliner. Her lips were stained a deep burgundy.

She headed toward her apartment. Halfway there, she began to examine the charm the reaper left behind. It was pretty, a blue-green stone set in a peculiar shaped silver base. In her two years hunting reapers, she had never gotten a charm quite like this one. Most charms emit an eerie glow, but this one was dull and lifeless. It was still exceptionally beautiful, perhaps even more so than the others due to its uniqueness.

Odessa entered her apartment and plopped down onto the couch. Her four-month old kitten immediately jumped into her lap and began purring. The kitten began rubbing her face against Odessa’s in an attempt to make Odessa pay attention to her.

“Alright, alright,” Odessa said with a hint of annoyance. “I’ll pet you, just wait two seconds!”

Artemis mewed and continued rubbing her face against Odessa’s until she sighed and caved in. She began scratching behind her ears and Artemis’ eyes closed with happiness. Content, the little caramel colored kitten laid down on Odessa’s chest. Odessa examined the kitten. She was getting so big! She looked at her little brown feet and the brown spots that were scattered across Artemis’ back. She quit petting Artemis and she immediately opened one golden eye in annoyance. Odessa chuckled and returned to petting her.

She began to think back to the day she found Artemis and clenched her teeth. She had found her on the side of the road covered in a mixture of blood and dirt, limping on a broken paw. It was clear that someone had tried to use her as bait. Odessa immediately took her home to wash her up and get her warmed up. She took her to the vet the next day to have surgery on her broken paw. The vet stated that had Odessa found her one day later, she would have died.

Odessa snapped out of her trance when she heard a crash. She was very confused for a second before she realized—she wasn't alone. The crash came from the direction of her bedroom. Sensing Odessa's fear, Artemis began hissing. Odessa scooped her up and tossed her into the closet.

"Shhhh!" Odessa hissed. She didn't want anyone—or anything—harming her baby Artemis.

Odessa inched closer to her bedroom door, holding her breath. She had no idea what to expect. She had placed charms all around her apartment in order to ward off reapers. The thought of robbery crossed her mind, but how had they gotten in? When she came home the door was still locked and Artemis hadn't sensed anyone's presence. So how did this even happen?

She armed herself with a pocket knife and slowly opened her bedroom door. She was shocked to find a man around her age standing in the middle of her bedroom with his back to her. She took a quick glance around the room to see what the crash was. Everything was still intact except for the lamp that was sitting on her bedside table. It had shattered, and there was glass all over her floor. The strange man was hunched over it, frantically trying to pick up the pieces of shattered glass. He stood up and glanced over his shoulder towards the door, and made eye contact with Odessa.

"Oh dear, I've gone and made a mess, haven't I?" he asked her in a heavy British accent. "I'm terribly sorry, I'll buy you a new one, I promise!"

Odessa stared blankly at the man. She was confused as to who he was, and why he was in her bedroom. Also, why was he being so polite?

"Uhhh, so, you are...?" Odessa questioned him, her voice shaking. She kept her knife pointed in his direction. Although he was an intruder, she almost felt like she could trust him. I mean, he hadn't killed her yet, right? And he *did* offer to replace the lamp he broke...

He located her trash can and dumped the glass into it before winking at her and answering. "Well you see dear, that's not an easy question for me to answer. Also, you should really think twice before frightening someone like that, I could have cut myself with that glass." Odessa rolled her eyes and lowered her knife, more annoyed than scared. "Alright, now you're just ticking me off. I'll only ask you one more time. Who are you, and what are you doing in my bedroom, you creep?" she snarled.

Oh no, it looks like I've cut my finger open, one second my dear," he responded with a smirk on his face. He then proceeded to walk into the bathroom attached to her bedroom.

Odessa noted that he knew exactly where he was going. Enraged, she followed him into the bathroom.

"I see you know your way around," she hissed at him. "Care to explain how?"

He sighed, washing his hands with her pumpkin pie scented hand soap. "All of these questions are really irritating, I'll have you know." He dried his hands on a towel and faced Odessa. "Well, as you've probably figured out, I've been watching you for a while," he explained.

"What the hell, you creep!" Odessa yelled, lunging toward him.

He easily dodged her, shaking his head disappointedly. "My, my, I wouldn't be so hasty to harm me my dear. The Elders wouldn't be so thrilled to hear that their favorite scout was injured by one of their workers," he remarked with a hint of amusement in his eyes.

Odessa immediately tensed up. "What do the Elders want from me?" she asked.

He grinned. "Now that you seem to trust me a bit more, allow me to formally introduce myself. My name is Jasper, and I am working with the Elders to make sure that all of their workers are doing their jobs correctly and efficiently. If you have nothing to hide, you'll be okay and we'll get along just fine." His emerald green eyes shifted to a blood red for a moment, then returned to their stunning original color.

"Lovely, they've sent one of *you* to check up on me," Odessa said to him with an unimpressed look on her face. She sighed, knowing there was nothing she could do. She was stuck with him, whether she liked it or not. He smirked, seeing the look of defeat in her eyes. "Now, now, it won't be *that* bad, will it?"

"It probably will be," she sighed. At that moment, she heard a loud scream. "Artemis!" she cried out. Odessa ran back to the closet she threw her in. "Artemis, I'm so sorry, I forgot you were in there!"

Artemis strutted away from Odessa, clearly making a point to ignore her plea for forgiveness. She went up to Jasper, and began to rub herself on his legs. He bent down to pet her and she purred in response, glancing back at Odessa in order to be sure she was watching. Odessa sighed loudly and sat on the couch. Artemis jumped up next to her and climbed into her lap. Odessa began to pet her, although she was a bit offended that she gave Jasper her approval. Artemis rolled onto her back, purring loudly. Clearly, she thought allowing Odessa to pet her belly was going to make Odessa less irritated with her. Sadly, it worked. Odessa then glanced over at Jasper. "So, where do you intend on staying?" she asked him sassily.

"Well, to be quite honest, I was hoping you would allow me to stay here..." he replied sheepishly.

Odessa was surprised to see this side of him. He'd only been in her life a short while, but she hadn't expected to see him lose his confident attitude. She smirked. "I like knowing he has at least one weakness," she thought to herself.

"Fine," she quipped, making sure he knew she was still in charge. "But you're sleeping on the couch."

Jasper smiled, and went back to his overconfident, cheeky self. “Awesome, it’s a deal then,” he agreed. He sat down next to her on the couch and turned the T.V. on, flipping through the channels. He glanced over at Odessa, pleased to see her scowling. He was happy to see he had this effect on her. From what he’d seen while watching her, she never lost her cool. At that moment, his cell phone buzzed. He fished it out of his pocket and looked down to see a text from one of the Elders, asking him to check in. “I’ll be back in a moment,” he told Odessa as he excused himself.

He dialed the number as he stepped into the hall outside Odessa’s apartment. As the phone rang, he noticed it smelled vaguely of mildew. He found this surprising, because Odessa’s apartment was in pristine condition.

Elder Frost answered the phone, startling Jasper. “You’re late,” she hissed.

Jasper smirked. “Well you see, I’m having a bit of a problem,” he told her, imagining the look of fury that he was sure was currently on her face.

“What. Kind. Of. Problem?” she asked him.

Jasper laughed. “You can unclench your teeth dear. It’s a minor setback. She found out we were watching her and— “

“SHE FOUND OUT?” Frost yelled into the phone. “I swear to god Jasper, I’ll have your head for this!”

“Calm down Frostie, it’ll be fine! She doesn’t even really know why I’m here and I’ve already gained her trust. If things go how they are now, I can get even more out of her than if I was just watching her from afar.”

He heard Frost sigh. “Well, I suppose you do have a point. Don’t screw it up, and don’t be late for a check-in again.”

“Yes ma’am!” he responded. “You’ll see why they call me the best, I’m great at what I do.”

“Was this really an accident?” she asked.

“I am highly offended you’d even suggest that!” he exclaimed theatrically. “Well, gotta go, bye!” he said quickly as he hung up the phone, not giving her a chance to say anything else.

Jasper rolled his eyes, took a deep breath, and headed back inside. He opened the door, and Artemis ran up to him and meowed. He bent down to pet her, but she easily dodged his hand and strutted away. He stood back up and looked around Odessa’s apartment. It still shocked him how clean and organized it was. The building was so run down, and yet her apartment almost felt luxurious. He took a deep breath. The awful smell of the hallway had made him feel a bit nauseous. He was pleased to discover the faint scent of pumpkin in the air.

Odessa looked back at him from the couch. “You ready to go on an adventure?” she asked with a little bit of excitement in her voice.

“Of course! I’d be a fool to turn down first row seats to the Odessa show,” he replied as he winked at her.

“Alright, but I have a few rules. Don’t get in my way, and don’t die,” she told him sternly.

“Yes, of course your majesty!” Jasper teased, bowing to Odessa.

“Okay, let’s go!” she exclaimed, throwing on her jacket.

“So, where are we going?” Jasper asked as they walked out into the parking lot.

“Lucky for you, we are going to my secret hunting grounds,” Odessa replied ominously.

“However, it takes a bit of hiking to get there, so I hope you aren’t too attached to those shoes,” she said to him, eyeing up his fancy dress shoes.

He looked at her and smirked. “To be honest, these are my least favorite shoes. I’ll be fine,” he replied. “But I am curious, how do you know where to go?”

“It’s simple. Right now, I’m just going to the place in town that has the thinnest barrier to their realm,” she explained. “Most hunters spend decades trying to find that special place in their area. I found it in one year. I guess that’s part of what makes me the best.”

He looked over at her, seeing hesitation on her face. “What’s wrong?” he asked her.

She paused in the middle of unlocking her car. “Don’t you sense it?” she asked nervously.

“Sense what?” he asked.

Odessa quickly locked her car back up and began sprinting in the direction of the forest.

“Come on!” she exclaimed. “It’s this way!”

Jasper jogged beside her obediently. “Care to explain?” he asked her, getting annoyed.

“There’s no time,” Odessa told him with a hint of fear in her voice. “Something is seriously wrong here, I can sense it.”

“Is it a reaper?” he wondered. Clearly, she wasn’t going to tell him. “But if it is, I should sense it too, shouldn’t I?”

Jasper almost ran into Odessa when she suddenly came to a stop. “Whoa, what’s going—“

“Shhhh!” she hissed, staring straight ahead.

Jasper looked past her to see a large reaper. It was easily the most terrifying and impressive one he’d ever seen, and he had seen a lot. Jasper stood there, stunned, as Odessa snapped into action. She quickly got into position, shouting at Jasper to get out of her way. Jasper obeyed, amazed at her reflexes. After Jasper was a safe distance away, he turned back to observe the fight. The reaper was so magnificent, it took his breath away. He began to think about the first time he ever saw one.

The first reaper he ever saw was very typical. It was about four years ago, just after he turned 17. A strange man came to his door one day and told his parents he wanted to be Jasper’s mentor. After a bit of discussion, they agreed. The man started training Jasper almost immediately, with only a brief explanation beforehand. The explanation proved to be a bit too brief. The sight of one took Jasper by complete surprise, and he ran away from it, leaving his mentor behind to take care of it. The beast looked like a cartoon come to life. They almost always appear as if they are 2-dimensional. They all have their own unique forms, some

appearing as flowers, while some appear as mythical creatures, or even as abstract art. When they go after children, some will take the shape of their favorite cartoon character. Some people become overcome with emotion over the beauty of them, or they become completely petrified, depending on the appearance the reaper. The reaper uses this as an opportunity to devour the souls of these people, leaving nothing behind. Their loved ones then forget about their existence, and life continues as if these people never existed in this world. Because of this reaper, that had almost been Jasper's fate. Odessa's quick thinking had saved his life.

Odessa stared up at the beast, her mind and heart racing. It was horrifying. It was a hairy looking wolf-man type beast with at least 30 eyes spread out all over its body. Unlike most reapers, this one looked 3-dimensional and super real. For a moment, she wondered if she would be able to feel its fur if she reached out to touch it.

"Odessa, watch out!" she heard Jasper cry out to her. She snapped back to reality and quickly dodged the beast as it lunged toward her.

She took a deep breath and once again got into position. She stood with her legs apart, and with her arms stretched out in front of her. She began chanting in the forgotten language, and in 30 seconds she had conjured an ornate bow. She strung a light arrow into her bow and shot an arrow directly into the beast's chest. She lowered the bow, satisfied. Usually one arrow would kill even the strongest of reapers, and her aim was always impeccable. However, something wasn't quite right. The light from the arrow turned to black smoke and the reaper smiled as it pulled the arrow out of its skin. Odessa stared wide eyed as the beast doubled in size.

The beast continued to grin as it swiped at Odessa, knocking her over. Odessa gasped for air as she realized her side was bleeding profusely. She swore under her breath and heard Jasper shouting in the distance. She shouted at him to stay back as she got into a different formation, ears ringing.

She kneeled down with her hands flat on the ground. She winced from the pain as she moved, but she continued anyway. She started chanting once again, this time with her eyes closed. Jasper had been running toward her to try to help, but stopped when he saw what she was doing. Could it be? He had never seen this ritual done in person, but he had heard the rumors. But what could she possibly be thinking? The only person who had the power to do this ritual successfully had died many years ago. Yet here Odessa was, attempting to do it herself. Jasper couldn't help but prepare himself for the worst possible outcome. If this didn't work, she would die, and all Jasper could do was watch.

Suddenly, a pale red light surrounded Odessa. It grew brighter and brighter until Jasper was forced to look away. When he looked back, his jaw dropped. Odessa's eyes had gone from their usual amethyst color to a blood red, and a guardian spirit floated behind her.

"Oh my god," Jasper whispered to himself. "I can't believe she did it. And to think, a dragon as her protector. *The* dragon at that..."

The dragon guardian roared and charged at the beast under Odessa's command. The dragon consumed the beast, and turned back to Odessa. She nodded at the dragon, and it responded by nodding back in understanding. To Jasper, it seemed almost as if it was bowing to her. The dragon disappeared as a puff of red smoke, and Odessa dropped back to the ground.

Jasper sprinted to Odessa, who was passed out on the cold, wet grass. Jasper noticed that the cuts on her side were very deep. Yet, she was somehow still alive. He'd never heard of anyone surviving physical contact with a reaper. He sat on the ground with her head in his lap as he quickly dialed the number to reach the Elders. Elder Ember answered.

"Jasper! You're a bit early for your next check-in, what's going on, are you ill?" the old man teased.

"Ember, it's an emergency, we need a healer at once! She's going to die, please hurry!" Jasper exclaimed. His heart was pounding.

"I'm on my way," Elder Ember responded, his playful tone gone.

He arrived a few minutes later. "Oh my!" he exclaimed when he saw Odessa. "Was this from a reaper attack, or from a wild beast?"

Jasper glared at him. "You think I wouldn't have been able to save her from a pathetic animal? Do you really think that little of me? That little of her?"

Elder Ember sighed. "I wasn't implying that at all. I've just never seen someone survive an attack like this." He seemed very concerned, and it terrified Jasper. He'd only known Odessa for a short time, but he couldn't imagine life without her.

Elder Ember began the healing ritual. Jasper watched, holding his breath involuntarily. He couldn't stop reliving the scene in his head. He should have done something. He was an idiot for freezing up and letting her take it on by herself. Jasper was still beating himself up when Elder Ember interrupted his thoughts to announce Odessa would be fine. Jasper breathed a sigh of relief.

"Take her home Jasper, and take good care of her," Elder Ember told him. "She'll be alright, she just needs rest."

"Okay," Jasper replied. "Who should I report to about this incident?"

"Don't worry about it," he replied. "It will be taken care of."

Jasper was taken aback. How could he expect Jasper to sit back and not report this? It was extremely irregular, and if there were more of them out there many people could die. If one almost killed Odessa, how could anyone else stand a chance?

Elder Ember saw Jasper's look of concern. "I assure you, my boy, all will be well in the end. You just mustn't tell anyone about this, are we clear? That's a direct order," he told Jasper sternly.

Jasper nodded, though not entirely convinced everything would be fine.

"Good then. I'll be taking my leave now, he told Jasper. With this farewell, he walked a few steps, and disappeared.

Jasper picked Odessa up and began to carry her back to her apartment. He was greeted by a very fluffy Artemis, whose fur was on end. She knew something was wrong.

Jasper sat Odessa down onto the couch and Artemis jumped up on the couch next to her, sitting like a guard on the arm of the couch. She meowed at Odessa, as if she was trying to wake her up. When she didn't, Artemis looked at Jasper, worry in her eyes. Her face looked so goofy that he couldn't help but chuckle as he patted her head and assured her that her momma would be fine. He then grabbed a chair and brought it up by the couch next to Odessa. Artemis climbed into his lap and began purring like she was trying to cheer him up. He petted her absentmindedly, waiting for Odessa to regain consciousness.

After a few minutes, he noticed something in her hand. He gently pried it out of her hand, and he realized it was the reaper's charm. It was solid silver, in the shape of an eye. This was unusual. Usually, the charms had precious jewels or stones. This one didn't. The eye also made Jasper's skin crawl. What did it mean?

After what felt like an eternity, Odessa woke up. Her eyelids fluttered open. Jasper immediately leaned forward, nervously asking Odessa how she was feeling.

Odessa blinked a few times, trying to adjust her eyes to the harsh light of her living room, clearly disoriented. Remembering what happened, she sat straight up. "Where's the charm?" she asked, holding her head.

"What's wrong?" Jasper asked with pure concern in his voice.

"It's nothing, it's just a headache," she replied, wincing. "The charm, where is it?"

Jasper looked at her skeptically while he fished in his pocket for the charm. "Ah, here it is," he said as he held it up.

Odessa groaned and fell back on the pillows she was lying on. "Of course it's an eye," she muttered. "It couldn't be something pleasant, like a pansy or something."

Seeing she was beginning to act like her usual self, Jasper's goofy grin returned.

"Whoa there, if you radiate any more sunshine, I'm going to go blind," she teased.

Jasper rolled his eyes. "I'm just glad you're okay. You really worried me," he told her, the light disappearing from his eyes.

"Yeah, I didn't really think I would make it either," she admitted to him. "Is it safe to assume you've never seen a reaper like that before either?"

"Never," Jasper replied. "Also, care to explain the whole dragon thing?"

Odessa sighed. "I don't really know. I just knew we would die if I didn't do something and I just reacted based off of my instincts. I knew if I failed it would kill you too. So I decided it was worth a shot."

"And next thing you know you had a dragon guardian at your command?" Jasper asked half sarcastically.

"Well, yeah," Odessa replied sheepishly. "Her name is Seraphine by the way."

Jasper's jaw dropped. "You don't mean- she's not the Seraphine from the legends, is she?"

"Yes, I suppose she is," Odessa responded thoughtfully. "But if it is her, I should have the tattoo right?"

"I mean, if the legends are true, then yes," Jasper replied.

"I'll be right back," Odessa told Jasper, heading toward the bathroom. "Will you feed Artemis for me while I look for the tattoo? I'm sure you know where her food is."

"Of course I do!" Jasper grinned as he peeled Artemis off of his legs. "Black pants, not the best idea," he mumbled to himself as he tried to pick the white fur off of his pants.

As he grabbed Artemis' food, he tried to remember how exactly the legend went. He was beginning to remember when he heard Odessa call out to him from the bathroom.

"Found it!" she yelled to him. "I was looking all over before I realized-it's on my wrist!" she said as she held her wrist up to show Jasper. "See?"

"How did you miss that?" Jasper asked her.

"I don't know, I think it must have just appeared as I was checking my back," she replied. "So now I just have a rad tattoo, eh?"

Jasper rolled his eyes. "Do you realize what exactly the tattoo does?" he asked her, clearly annoyed she wasn't taking this seriously.

"Well, to be honest, I never really paid attention to the whole story," Odessa confessed. "I just listened to what you need to do to try to conjure a guardian. I've always wanted to be able to do it myself." She grinned. "And now look at me! I always knew I had it in me."

Jasper just stared at Odessa. "You thought I was the cocky one?" he asked her with a hint of sincerity.

Odessa deflated. "Well, no. I just thought if I worked really hard, I'd eventually be able to do it. I wasn't always the best at this, you know?"

Jasper flinched. He hadn't meant to make her feel bad, but he couldn't imagine her as anything other than the cool, collected professional he had come to know. "I can't even imagine you as anything but the best," he told her. "Don't let that go to your head."

Odessa gave a half-hearted laugh. "I never had much confidence growing up. I used to get picked on a lot because people thought my dad was weird. I guess I believed it back then too... it's not really something they tell you when you're growing up, you know? Nobody was like, 'Ayyyy your dad hunts crazy demon things for a living.' Everyone would just pick on me, saying that he was never around because he was cheating on my mom. Which of course was never true. But when he died, everyone stopped. They still looked at me like I was a freak, but none of them could remember why. None of them could remember him, but they began to spread rumors that he had run off with another woman when I was a child. But we knew what happened. I was thirteen at the time. That's when my mom finally told me about the reapers, and what my dad did. That was also when he told me that once I turned eighteen I'd be sent to

training for the same job. It was a lot to take in all at once,” she told Jasper, staring off into the distance.

“But you started your training when you were sixteen, didn’t you?” Jasper asked gently.

“Yes I did,” Odessa sighed. “After my dad died, my mom lost a part of herself. She stopped looking me in the eye, and she distanced herself as far from me as she could. I guess I reminded her too much of him. She developed a very bad drinking problem. When I was fourteen she started dating some no good loser that somehow convinced her into letting him stick around. He decided that he was going to act like he was my father and started to boss me around. He would threaten to hit me if I did anything to make him unhappy. One day he was hanging around my house while my mom was at work and I told him to leave because he wasn’t welcome. That was the first time he hit me. When my mom got back he went on a beer run and I told her what happened. She never did believe me that he did that. I never told her about anything he did to me after that. I had to deal with his abuse until I turned sixteen. That’s when he convinced her they’d be better off without me and he convinced her into running away with him. That’s how I ended up in the foster care system. That is, until Elder Rowan came and took me for training. She’s been a blessing. She never forced me to do anything I didn’t want to do. She even got me this apartment, instead of making me stay with her. She let me have a few months to sort out my feelings before we began my training. She was so kind to me, and she was always supportive, even when I failed. My mother always used to tell me I’d never amount to anything, that I’d share the same fate as my father. That almost happened today...” She turned to Jasper with tears in her eyes.

Jasper pulled Odessa into a hug. “But it didn’t. You saved us. All on your own. You saved so many people today, and you were so brave. You reacted when all I could do was stare. I couldn’t even help you...” Jasper trailed off, his voice cracking.

At that moment, Jasper’s phone rang. They separated, and Jasper cleared his throat before answering. “Hello?” he answered.

“How is she?” asked Elder Ember. He sounded like he was trying to keep the worry out of his voice.

“She’s doing fine now,” Jasper responded.

“Good, I’m glad to hear. I was worried,” Elder Ember sighed. “Does she have the tattoo?”

“Yes,” Jasper responded, glancing over to see the tattoo on Odessa’s wrist as she pet Artemis. He heard Elder Ember gasp quietly.

“How familiar is she with the legend?” Elder Ember asked.

“Not very, apparently. Do you want me to make sure she’s well informed about what may happen?” Jasper asked.

“Yes, please do. She needs to be prepared. I’m not sure why that reaper was so strong. I’m afraid there may be more where that one came from. I’m considering having Elder Rowan stop by for more training, do you believe that is necessary?” he asked.

“No, I think she’s a lot stronger than we originally thought,” Jasper replied. “I think as long as I tell her everything I know about the legend, she’ll be fine.”

“Alright, I trust your judgement. Let me know if there’s anything you need. And remember- no one is to know about this, not even the other elders, understood?” Elder Ember said very seriously.

“But why?” Jasper asked, frustrated that Elder Ember was clearly hiding something from him. “What are you hiding?”

“When I have more information, I’ll tell you. Keep her safe Jasper. Our fates may rely on her,” Elder Ember warned as he hung up.

Jasper stared at the phone, dumbfounded. What was going on? He went back to where Odessa was playing with Artemis.

“Welcome back!” Odessa said to him. She had returned to her usual self. “What did they want?”

Jasper smirked. “They gave us homework. Tomorrow I have to tell you every last excruciating detail of the legend.”

Odessa groaned and looked at the clock. It was almost midnight. “We’ll we’d better get to bed then, or I’ll fall asleep during your lecture.”

“Good idea. I didn’t get a nap, unlike you,” he teased. Odessa punched him in the arm.

“It’s not like it was all that refreshing,” she retorted as she headed toward the bathroom to get ready for bed.

Jasper snapped his fingers and was in his pajamas. Did he really need to snap? No, but he just genuinely found it hilarious. He chuckled to himself as he got comfortable on the couch. Artemis jumped up onto his chest and began purring as he pet her.

“Don’t get too comfortable, your mom won’t be too thrilled to see you all cuddled up with me instead of her,” he whispered to Artemis as Odessa walked back into the living room in her pajamas, her hair pulled up into a messy bun. Artemis flopped over in response, demanding belly rubs.

Odessa sighed. “Come on Artemis, time for bed,” she told Artemis sternly. Artemis obeyed, sprinting to the bedroom. Odessa smirked. “See? She still loves me the most.”

Jasper laughed. “Don’t leave her waiting, she might just change her mind!”

Odessa stuck her tongue out at him as she headed to her bedroom. “Night!” she chimed.

“Good night!” he responded.

Jasper tried to fall asleep, but he couldn’t stop thinking about everything that had happened. Why was Odessa able to conjure the legendary guardian? Where was her mom now? Why and how could she abandon Odessa like that, much less treat her so badly when she was around? How could Odessa remain so cool and collected after everything she had been through? He had so many questions racing through his head. After a while, he heard a door creak open, and moments later Artemis jumped back onto the couch with him. She purred and kneaded him

with her paws in order to make him feel better. It worked, and he fell asleep with Artemis cuddled up between him and the couch.

Odessa woke up in the morning and got ready for the day. She walked out to see them still in that position. She smiled and took a picture of them before gently waking them up.

“Are we going to do this or what?” she asked Jasper.

Jasper smirked. “I see you’re very eager to learn this morning. Alright, you’d better get comfortable,” he instructed her. “It’s going to be a long one.”

It was 250 years ago. A hunter named William and his wife, Eleanor, were on vacation. They were on the beach of a quaint little island, soaking up the sun. Eleanor was lying on a beach towel with her eyes closed, clearly enjoying the sun and the quiet atmosphere. William was sitting at the edge of the sand, with his legs in the water. He was looking out over the sea, watching the storm that was approaching in the distance. He figured it would take about 2-3 hours before it reached the shore, if it didn’t die out beforehand. He looked back at his wife, and his face lit up with joy. His love for her was stronger than he ever thought was possible. After an hour, he went back up by Eleanor.

“That storm is approaching quickly, we should head back to the hotel,” William suggested.

“Oh my, it’s approaching much faster than I thought it was!” she exclaimed.

They arrived back at their hotel just as the rain began to fall.

“Whew! We made it just in time,” Eleanor gasped, trying to get more air into her lungs. They had ran the last five minutes of the trip.

“Are you okay?” William asked as he rushed over to her, helping her into a chair.

“Don’t worry, so much about us, we’re fine,” she replied. “It’s good for a mother to get exercise during the pregnancy.”

“But it’s not good to over exert yourself,” William reasoned.

Eleanor got up and kissed William’s cheek. “We’re fine dear,” she told him, her voice gentle. “Nothing is going to happen to us, I promise.”

“You know I can’t help but worry about you,” William muttered.

Eleanor smiled. “Alright, I think we should change and head for dinner,” she suggested.

“Good idea,” William replied. “I’m starving!”

They headed to the fancy, overpriced restaurant attached to the hotel. It was beautiful, with dimmed lights and magnificent chandeliers. They were seated at a beautiful table decorated with rose petals and candles. It was extremely romantic. William decided that now would be the perfect time to tell her the news.

“Eleanor, my love, I must tell you something,” William started nervously. “I’m retiring from my position as a hunter. I want to stay with you and our baby for as long as I can, and my heart is telling me that this is the right thing to do for not only me, but for us and our baby.”

Eleanor gasped. "Can you even do that?" she asked, stumbling over her words. "I've never even heard of a hunter quitting!"

William grasped her hand. "I know, I know. But I just have this terrible feeling..." he trailed off as the wind picked up and the lights flickered. "I was honestly thinking of calling them now."

"I think it's the storm that has you so on edge," she suggested. "I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning, when it's over."

"But don't you feel it?" he countered. "It was supposed to be sunny all day today-there was only a 0.5% chance of rain!"

"Weathermen can never be counted on, my dear, you know that," she replied. "They also said it would rain on our wedding day, and it was beautiful out."

William looked down, defeated. She was probably right, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something horrible was about to happen. He wanted to leave, but where could they go? They were on a tiny tropical island, without a way of getting off. They didn't even know anyone here. He looked around the restaurant. It was extremely busy, which shocked him. He couldn't believe there were so many people out in the storm.

As he was looking around, the lights went out. He heard a few children scream, and then he heard the parents murmur half-hearted promises that everything was going to be okay. William had a feeling that it wouldn't.

All of a sudden there was a crash as something crashed in through the window. William knew what it was before he saw it, and his stomach dropped. It was a reaper.

"Eleanor, get out of here!" he yelled over the terrified screams of everyone in the restaurant.

Eleanor froze in disbelief and terror as a flash of lightning illuminated the reaper. It was a massive, two-dimensional reaper, and it looked like an abstract painting of waves. "I'm so sorry, she whispered.

William ran in front of her, trying to shield her from the reaper. "Don't apologize, just run!" he yelled, watching it make its way to them, killing everyone in its path.

William then began using the strongest magic he knew how to use. He stood, chanting and going into every formation he could think of, but nothing seemed to be working. William began to get desperate. It was killing so many people, and it was only a matter of time before it reached his wife and unborn child.

He was mid-chant when he heard her scream. "Please, save me William!" Eleanor cried out.

William opened his eyes for the first time in a few minutes to see the reaper standing a few feet from his wife. She had somehow ended up in the far corner of the room. Out of desperation, he knelt down, his eyes closed. He used a mixture of all of the strongest chants

he knew, doing whatever came to his mind. After what seemed like forever, there was a flash of red smoke, and there she was.

Seraphine appeared in all of her glory, causing people to scream once again. She was a huge dragon, with blood-red scales, jade green eyes, and powerful wings. She looked at William and nodded to show that she was at his command. He lifted his hand toward the beast and began chanting yet again. There was a great battle between Seraphine and the reaper. It seemed as if it was an eternity, but after a few minutes Seraphine was victorious. Unfortunately, they just weren't fast enough. The reaper had gotten to Eleanor before they could stop the reaper.

Seraphine looked back to William with what seemed to be sorrow in her wise eyes. She nodded to William and disappeared in a puff of red smoke.

William headed back to the hotel room with his head down. He knew in five minutes, those who survived would forget everything that had happened, and they'd forget the loved ones they had lost completely. He wouldn't have the luxury of forgetting.

In the few months after, William returned home and announced he was retiring from being a hunter. The elders didn't stop him. He reported everything that happened, and retired in a cottage in the woods, cutting off ties with those he loved. He couldn't handle the fact that they acted as if Eleanor never existed. That's where he stayed until his death.

Rumors flew around the hunter community after. Some say Seraphine was just another demon that wanted that reaper dead. Many tried to recreate the spell afterwards, but none were successful. Those who failed died. There were also rumors that the spirit of William's unborn child would return one day when the time came, and the world needed Seraphine again.

However, there were also rumors about the tattoo. After William returned to the hotel room, he took a shower. This is where he noticed it. It was a beautiful tattoo of a dragon, presumably Seraphine. It was a gorgeous scarlet red color. They say he resented the tattoo, and that it just served as an awful reminder of what happened that day. Some even say that the tattoo meant he could conjure Seraphine at will afterwards, but it is believed he never tried to.

"Wow, thanks for the extremely depressing story at the ripe hour of nine A.M." Odessa teased. Jasper just glared at her in return.

Odessa's face fell. He clearly wasn't in the mood for her jokes. "Honestly, I'm really touched by it. It made me realize how lucky we were that we both survived."

Jasper nodded. "Yeah, I can't really believe it myself. I thought we were dead for sure."

"But it's okay, according to the legend, I should be able to summon her again, right?" Odessa asked.

"Well, no one really knows for sure," Jasper responded. "I also don't really think we should push our luck."

"I think you mean you don't think I should push my luck," Odessa responded with fire in her eyes. Jasper knew he needed to tread lightly.

"I just don't want you to get hurt," he told her with sincere concern.

Odessa rolled her eyes, and Jasper knew he was in trouble. "I can handle myself," she quipped. "You act like I'm a beginner, but I'm not. I am *the* best hunter since William. Do not baby me Jasper, I don't need that from you."

"I know, I know," Jasper quickly responded.

Odessa rolled her eyes and picked Artemis up from Jasper's lap. "If you'll excuse us, we have a vet appointment we need to attend," Odessa said stiffly. "You can do whatever, just don't destroy my apartment."

"Wait, I'll come with you!" Jasper insisted. "What if something happens?"

"I can take care of myself. I've had enough of you for a while. It's just a vet checkup," Odessa responded, clearly agitated.

Jasper just watched as she stuffed Artemis into her cat carrier. It was a fight he knew he'd lose, and he was kind of hurt by her words. Against his judgement, he let her go. All he could do was watch her walk out the door.

Odessa drove to the vet, furious with Jasper. She couldn't believe that he would imply that she needed protection, much less his protection. She knew he meant well, but he acted as if she couldn't take care of herself. He barely even knew her!

Artemis started crying in her carrier, interrupting Odessa's thoughts. "Shhhh, it's okay," she told Artemis gently. "We're only going to be there for a few minutes, I promise."

Jasper sat on the couch after Odessa left. He didn't even turn the T.V. on, he just sat there and began to think. He only wanted to protect Odessa, but now it seemed like he broke her trust. What could he do to get it back? He knew they'd only known each other for a few days, but he couldn't help but feel a connection to her after their near-death experience. Did she feel the same, or did she just think he's an overprotective creep?

As Odessa pulled into the vet's parking lot, she realized something was wrong. She sighed. Another one already? Reapers were pretty good about spacing out their attacks, and Odessa had to admit to herself that even though she told Jasper that she felt fine, she was still feeling a bit weak after the last attack. She shrugged the feeling off. It was unlikely that there'd be an attack so soon. She brought Artemis into the vet.

Jasper couldn't stop thinking about Odessa. He couldn't shake the feeling that something horrible was going to happen. He didn't want to follow her and make matters worse, but he just didn't feel right. Should he ignore her wishes and go after her, or should he just ignore his instincts? As he debated this his cell phone began to ring.

"Hello?" Jasper answered.

"Jasper, it's Elder Rowan, are you with Odessa right now?" she asked him.

"No, we had an argument and she--"

"Get to her. Now. It's urgent," Elder Rowan ordered. It was clear she was worried about something.

“Is she okay?” Jasper asked, terrified. As he spoke, he threw on his tennis shoes and rushed out the door.

“She is right now,” Elder Rowan answered. “However, I’m not sure for how long. Do you sense it, Jasper?”

“Yes, I do, but I didn’t think it was possible. Two attacks this close together? It’s unheard of!” he exclaimed.

“I know,” Elder Rowan responded. “I have a feeling it’s because Seraphine has returned.”

“So you’re saying that Odessa has become a target?” Jasper asked. He already knew the answer.

As the vet examined Artemis, Odessa couldn’t help feeling like something was wrong. The vet noticed her fidgeting and assured her that Artemis was a healthy little girl, and Odessa had nothing to worry about. Odessa smiled at her, appreciating her attempt to make Odessa feel better. Unfortunately, that wasn’t what she was worried about.

Jasper ran to the bus stop near Odessa’s apartment. He wished he could use his ability to apparate, but he’d be running the risk of a civilian seeing him, and he couldn’t afford to risk it. Luckily, he had enough cash on him to afford a ride to the side of town Odessa’s vet was on. He hoped he wasn’t too late.

After the vet was done with Artemis, Odessa paid the vet and turned to leave. She was furious to find Jasper standing in the doorway, struggling to catch his breath.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” Odessa snapped. She turned back, thanked the vet, and stormed outside. Jasper followed, trying to find a way to reason with her.

“Odessa listen, something terrible is about to happen-don’t you feel it?” he pleaded.

“Of course I do, but I can handle myself Jasper! I can’t live my life with you following me everywhere! Just leave me alone Jasper, all you’ve done since I met you is lecture me!” she yelled at him, her voice shaking. “I’ve lived the past three years of my life without a parent to lecture me, I don’t need you to do it now!”

“Odessa, I’m not trying to be your parent, I’m trying to help you as a friend! And I was going to stay back today, but Elder Rowan called and ordered me to get to you as soon as possible. I swear Odessa you have to believe me!” Jasper begged.

“Why did Elder Rowan tell you to come here?” Odessa asked the anger gone from her voice.

“She just told me to get here before it was too late,” he responded. “I’m honestly surprised she isn’t here herself, she sounded pretty worried.”

“You spoke too soon my dear,” Elder Rowan said, her voice like velvet. “I had to take care of some things first, but I’m glad we both made it here on time.”

Jasper turned toward Elder Rowan and began to examine her. He had reported to her a few times, but he had never actually met her in person. She was much smaller than he thought she would be. She was just under five feet tall, and she was very slender. She had chin length

chestnut hair, and she had a naturally beautiful face, free of makeup. She didn't look very old, but the Elders usually didn't look as old as they were.

To be continued...

Rivera, April

April has been so much fun to work with this semester. Each week, she brought in picture perfect poems that were able to really capture the state of the human heart. Her ideas are so insightful and so relatable. They get to the root of what makes us human. I was continually surprised at how pretty and how compact she is able to make such big, complex ideas. I hope she continues to write and share her poetry with the world!

Jenny Peterson

Untitled

I wake from a troubled sleep
In the middle of the night
Reaching for the hand
That once held mine so tight
My fingers touch the pillow
Where you once laid your head
And I run my hand down
The cold, cold sheets on your side of the bed
My head spins from the perfume
That lingers every place
And I kiss the trace of lipstick
Left on your pillowcase
Here in this nightmare
I remember the day we wed
And I clutch and tear at the tear stained sheets
On my side of the bed
My arms long to hold you
My lips hunger for your kiss
And I just couldn't stand to go through
Another lonely night like this
The hands that once caressed you
Take a bottle from the drawer
It says take one for sleeping
But I am taking many more
What good is there in living
When all the dreams we shared are dead
So at last I lay me down
To sleep on your side of the bed

Mom

Miss you, miss you, miss you, everything I do
Echoes with the laughter and the voice of you
You're on every corner, every turn and twist
Every old familiar spot whispers how you're missed
Miss you, miss you, miss you, everywhere I go
There are poignant memories dancing in a row
Silhouette and shadow of your form and face
Substance and reality everywhere displaced

Love

When at first my love we parted
I was blind and broken hearted
Then through the tears I have stumbled
Losing faith and often humbled
You hurt me love, I know not why
For you said our love would never die
But time heals pain, we start again
And for me, I know not when
Love will come to me once more
A stranger knocking on my door
A person walking down the street
Who with open arms, I'll gladly meet

Endless Love

My love for him was endless
It grew and grew and grew
It sparkled like bright diamonds
It glistened like the dew
It went beyond all other loves
For it was always new

So Little Time

It took so little time
To fall in love with you
So little time to lose my heart
And half my reason too

Brown

My favorite color of-
Wooden doors
Leather soles
Oaken floors
And sinful souls
Trunks of trees
Paper bags
A dusty breeze
Battle worn flags
Hot strong coffee
Farming land
Caramel toffee
Warm clean sand
Tasty meat
Chocolate pies
Tanned feet
And his eyes

Jealousy

Cold as a block of ice is your heart
You've no feelings for others
You'll tear them all apart
Your eyes glance over them
With hatred so bold
Your face is one
We all know of old
Your hands so strong
Can rip the toughest
Your biting teeth
Can tear flesh of the roughest
Can you guess what this monster can be?
It's only the jealousy running wild in me

Contentment

You mean so very much to me
I simply can't express
The sweet contentment that you bring
The joy without the stress
Right now to you, I'm simply nice
A well respected friend
I hope your feelings for me go deep
A beginning without an end
You mean so very much to me
That I can be any place
And need not concentrate too long
To see your smiling face
To me a song is all the world
For I just love to sing
But even this can't match the joy
Your goodnight kiss would bring
I think of you each long day through
And never sleep it seems
But even when I finally rest
I see you in my dreams

The Woman I Am

The woman I am hides deep in me
Beneath the woman I seem to be
She hides away from the stranger's eye
She is not known to passersby
She goes her way the woman I seem
But the woman I am withdraws to dream
The woman I seem goes carelessly
When love goes by – does not seem to see
But the woman I am knows sudden fear...
And hides more deeply when love draws near
For love might look closely perhaps...
And see her beneath the woman I seem to be

Signs of Love

The touch of his hand
The sound of his name
The things that take my heart
And set it aflame
The look in his eyes
When he says "I love you"
The way my heart beats
When I say it too
The way that I feel
When he kisses my lips
The shock I receive
From his finger tips
All these are feelings
Of love that is true
And now that it's reached us
There's nothing to do
But love each other
As long as we may
And live happily day by day

Love

Take a glove
Remove the G
And what is left
Remains to thee

Rouse, Corey

It has been a very enlightening experience working with Corey this semester, and one that will be hard to forget. This will come as no surprise once you dig into Corey's poetry, which is some of the most thought provoking work I've ever personally seen in the TLC. A wonderful sense of rhythm and musicality tends to surface when reading Corey's work, and it is no surprise considering his artistic and musical background.

Corey has a profound way with words, and I hope you enjoy reading his work as much as I have.

Nick Donisch

What a Wonderful Life

Sometimes I wonder how grass still grows on such evil ground?
Sometimes I wonder how evil knows everybody loves it now?
Sometimes I wonder how love would sound played on another's heartstrings,
And I wonder if another person would listen right if a voice started to sing?
Sometimes I wonder if a voice were to cry out of the void,
Would it die and be destroyed while you tried to avoid?
Sometimes I wonder if a try is worth a second chance,
And then I wonder if that chance even gets a second glance?
Sometimes I wonder if a second is really worth the time?
If it's not then I'd rather it be second in my mind.
I wonder if my mind is something I really must define?
Because some time, I might find, my mind was never even mine.
Sometimes I wonder if never was meant to be forever;

Then I remember God, and possibilities we'll forever never be together.
Sometimes I wonder if together we could face what may?
I wonder if what comes, may one day be decay?
Sometimes I wonder if decay turns into flowers,
And if that's the reason we have a season when grievance is empowered?
Sometimes I wonder if the seasons wind with winds of change,
When I'm wandering in the winter as the snow has me scatter-brained?
Sometimes I wonder if we wander somewhere over yonder,
would we ponder creations this created world has conjured?
Sometimes I wonder if creation was more of an experiment;
Mixed mold in a jar and Jesus forgot to take care of it?
I wonder if I forgot everything I used to know off in more thought,
And if the lessons I've learned are worth ones I've begot?
Sometimes I wonder if life lessons are hidden in mom and dad's talk sessions,
And I wouldn't enter descension if I would think, *God bless 'em?*

Sometimes I wonder if a blessing is a curse in disguise?
That's why no matter how hard we try, we'll get tangled like twist ties.
Sometimes I wonder if it all really matters,
When one day the sure will shatter?

Careful Little

Oh, be careful little mouth what you speak,
Or you may find yourself babbling up the creek.

Oh be careful little ears what you hear,
Because some things that are fuzzy don't come in too clear.

Oh be careful little eyes what you see,
Though the worst may arise around the.

Oh be careful little feet where you go,
Since it is difficult to know when to walk alone.

Oh be careful little brain what you comprehend,
Because it has still got to fit God in;
Something was important, but it seems we've forgotten.
Is it logic that looks at its coffin as a godsend?
If so, then Godspeed to death, and what is left is begotten.

Oh be careful little mouth what you say.
You see, your charm and charisma have the power to sway.

Oh be careful little ears to whom you listen,
Since an edict can flip in an instance.

Oh be careful little eyes what you see,
Because the greed can become one begrudgingly.

Oh be careful little feet where you go,
Once you own a car, and you can hit the road.

Oh be careful little brain what you put out as poetry,
For there may be maladies amidst those melodies.

Oh be careful little mouth what you hold in,
As some words should be spoken

Oh be careful little eyes where you search,
Because certain information hurts.

Nameless Aims

The words you say hang in the air;
Where, once in a while, an adept ear can hear
Vocations suspended there,
With no explanation that is clear.

Sure of a sound
That permeates as resonance,
But senses are a shroud
For what can't fully be put in sentences.

A sense that it's closing in
Like shadows lingering unseen,
Has us supposing sin
A whole lot nearer than we think.

And if we sink, well then, we drown
Since floating is a trait
Only commonly allowed
To those lifted of their weight.

As the less fortunate are lulled
Lower into the consistency,
The straw is finally pulled
Which brings them to the epiphany

This is not the place to be.
This isn't who I was,
This isn't me;
This is enough.

Our profundity is under scrutiny.
We amuse the Omega
With our mutiny;
Our impunity creates no age of
Immunity, It's make-believe;

Metaphysical, as the sheol and celestial.
Facts form a facade as sturdy as the tabernacle.
Come form a troop for this spiritual battle.
Appears this corral could use a good rattle.

How about a Rapture.

Santos, Lauren

Working with Lauren this semester has been a great experience. It was always a treat to see what new addition to her ongoing novel she would bring in each week, and how the story was beginning to develop throughout the semester. Her improvement with descriptive dialogue between characters was very evident throughout the weeks we spent working together. I am proud of her accomplishments thus far and excited to see where her writing will take her in the future!

Amanda Wroblewski

Wild Child

Alex, dressed in black, slipped from her room and went down the hall to her brother's room. She turned the knob and pushed the door.

It made no noise as it opened.

"Wyatt," Alex whispered, edging towards his bed. "Wyatt."

He didn't stir.

She flicked the flashlight in her hand on, shining it in his face. "Wyatt!" She hissed.

He groaned and held up a hand, shielding himself from the light. "What the hell, Alex?" He glanced at his alarm clock. "It's two in the morning. What are you doing?"

Alex turned the flashlight off and leaned against the door. "Perfect time to go on a midnight adventure."

Wyatt slowly pushed the covers back and eyed her clothes.

She wore leggings, a sweatshirt, and black boots. Her magenta hair was loose, but a beanie hung from her hip to hide it later.

"Does this midnight adventure involve robbing a bank?" Wyatt asked, meeting her gaze with a raised eyebrow.

Alex snorted, laughing quietly. "No. But as the place I want to go to is private property now, black clothes are the way to go for this adventure."

Wyatt didn't miss a beat. "The park by school."

"I'm going whether you want to join me or not," Alex informed him. "I just thought I'd extend the invitation to you."

He pressed his lips together for a moment. "If we get caught," he whispered, "Mom is going to skin you alive. She might even skin me alive too."

A slow smile spread across Alex's face. "Then don't get caught." She opened the door again. "I'll be in my room when you're done getting dressed." She crept along the hallway, sticking to the wall to make sure the floor didn't creak, and slipped back into her room.

The window was already open, letting in a gentle breeze. The curtains swayed, casting shadows along the floor.

Alex twisted her hair up into a bun, securing it with a hair tie and some bobby-pins, and pulled her beanie on.

Wyatt slipped into her room after a few minutes and shut the door behind him. He looked to the open window. "Are you sure about this?"

Alex grinned at him as she headed towards it and shimmed out of her bedroom. She reached for the trellis and swung onto it as slowly as she could, gritting her teeth as she felt splinters from the aging wood prick her skin. She climbed down and soundlessly dropped onto the front yard.

Wyatt climbed down after her, the trellis groaning beneath his weight, but it held up. After a few seconds, he was dropping onto the ground beside her. He wiped his hands on his pants and looked at Alex, his hazel eyes bright.

"Come on, Shrimp," she whispered, heading down the street.

It took them nearly forty minutes to reach the park, going carefully so they weren't spotted. Walking around at night in all black was, after all, not the best idea.

Alex walked onto the playground and climbed up the stairs, sitting down on the rickety bridge that led up to the slide.

Wyatt sat beside her. "This was bought five years ago. The owner has yet to touch it too. It's just sitting here, growing weeds and rust. What's the point if nothing is being done to it?"

"Who knows?" Alex stared down at the ground, at the weeds peeking through the bark. "Sometimes people just like to do things because they can. Because they have to power and the means to." She leaned back on her hands, her legs swinging lazily over the edge of the bridge. "When we were younger, I'd order you around because I was the older sibling. I had the power to do so."

Wyatt gently knocked his shoulder into hers, smiling. "You were a horrible sister back then."

"I know." Alex knocked her shoulder against his. "I was drunk on older sibling power."

He laughed. "I remember you had me clean your room once while you and Mark ran around out back."

"Yeah." Alex frowned, her eyes sweeping over the deserted park and the empty road. She lifted her gaze to the sky, scanning the stars and the clouds drifting overhead.

"There was this one time..." Wyatt began, launching into a story from their childhood.

His voice faded to the background as Alex stared off down the road, until she saw two dots of light sweep onto the street. "Wyatt." She gripped his wrist.

He halted mid-sentence, his eyes wide as he followed her gaze, noticing the headlights. "Shit."

"Come on." Alex pulled him to his feet and climbed the stairs to the slide. She crawled in, far enough down so that Wyatt could climb in after her, and crouched down. She watched as a beam of light swept across the slide, holding her breath, waiting.

The sound of the engine turning off seemed to echo in the night.

The car was parked.

Wyatt glanced down at his sister.

Alex was still barely breathing. Her head tilted to the side, her gaze on nothing in particular as she listened.

Footsteps sounded on the playground bark.

The beam of a flashlight shone up into the tunnel of the slide.

Alex froze completely. She gripped her brother's hand, her heart beating wildly in her chest. She feared the police officer could hear it.

The beam of light went away.

Wyatt carefully glanced around the corner of the slide entrance. "He's going across the park. Start going down. Slowly."

"No, Wyatt, I'm just gonna stomp down as fast as I can so we can get caught." Alex shot her brother a withering look.

He rolled his eyes. "Sarcasm is your best friend, isn't it?"

"Quite possibly." Alex took a step forward, hands braced on the plastic walls. She moved down the slide and when she reached the exit, she peeked around the edge.

The officer and his flashlight were on the other end of the park.

"Come on." Alex scrambled out of the slide, yanked her beanie down right over her ears, and ran for the copse of trees.

Wyatt was right beside her.

Light flashed past them.

"Hey!" Someone shouted.

"Run!" Alex yelled, pushing herself to go faster.

Wyatt was gasping beside her, but he didn't slow down.

They broke through the trees.

Alex turned to the left, going further down towards the woods. She glanced behind her.

The beam of light was fading. The police officer ran down the other direction. Towards the street and houses.

Wyatt, noticing that, slowed, leaning against a tree. "Holy... Shit," he gasped, clutching his chest.

Alex stared at her brother. "Out of shape much?" She was barely winded. "We were running for barely a minute."

He lifted his gaze and glared at her.

She grinned. "Nothing like getting chased by the police to up your adrenaline, right?"

He chuckled. "Yeah... Sure."

"Come on. Let's get back before he realizes we turned left."

They hurried home, and Wyatt climbed the trellis first, tumbling into Alex's room with a small shout.

Alex froze for a moment before climbing up the trellis after him, carefully stepping over him, sprawled at the base of the window, as she climbed through. "Really?"

He rubbed the back of his head. "My foot got caught."

She paused for a few moments, listening. When she was satisfied that Diane hadn't woken with his clatter, she plopped down beside him. Her hat slid off her head, pulling some of the bobby-pins with it. She freed her hair and ran her hands through it.

Wyatt sat up, kicking his shoes off. "I need to get into shape."

"No kidding." Alex unlaced her boots and pulled them off. "Maybe lay off the video games in exchange for a run every once in a while."

"I'll pretend you didn't just say that."

Alex got onto her bed and shoved his shoulder with her foot.

"I'm just gonna stay right here." Wyatt fell back onto the floor. "Your carpet is pretty comfortable."

"The moment you start snoring," Alex warned, handing him a blanket and a pillow, "your ass is back in your room." She tossed her jacket onto the floor and crawled beneath the blankets, maneuvering so she could pull off her socks and leggings. She threw them onto her nightstand.

"Why'd you pick the park?" Wyatt asked in the dark of the room.

Alex flipped over onto her stomach, twisting her hair onto the pillow. "I like a little risk in my life."

"Wild child."

"Little did you know, I have that tattooed on my butt."

Silence.

Then, hesitantly: "really?"

"No." Alex laughed. "I have two tattoos, and neither of them are anywhere near my butt."

"Thank god," Wyatt breathed.

Alex curled onto her side and stared out the window, at the stars shining bright in the sky, until her lids were heavy. She drifted off into dreams filled with the scent of flowers and the light of the stars and the thrum of music.

Wilkosz, Richard

Richard came to our first meeting knowing he wanted to write stories that focused on dialogue. As he wrote throughout the semester his writing evolved into natural, relatable, and thought-provoking pieces that encompassed important aspects of conversation. In this piece Richard was able to create an entire story through a conversation between two people. His style of writing pulls you into the character's lives and leaves you wondering what happens next. It was a pleasure to be able to work with Richard throughout the semester and I know that his writing will keep growing as he continues to push himself to try new pieces.

Rachel Zach

Uncomfortable

"Zofia... with a zee?" he asked his blind date.

"It's Polish," she replied, "and more unique than John."

John laughed and sat down at the table. He didn't even have to look. "Already know what drink I'm getting. You?"

"Same," she said. "I'm a regular."

"Really? I'm here a lot, and I've never seen you around."

"What time?"

"Happy hour."

"Oh. I'm here last call."

"And yet we both ended up here. How 'bout that?" No reply. He looked around for a new topic of conversation. Scared of the ever-growing silence, he fell back on, "So... what kind of music do you listen to?"

That got Zofia's attention. "Cookie Cutters, Interstice, some Weird on Purpose, you know..." John's face made it clear that he did not know. "Heard of any of them?"

"Nope. But those sound like alt rock bands, like Twenty One Pilots."

"Alt rock, yes," she said. "Pilots, no. Nothing alike."

"I mean, alt rock all kind of sounds the same."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that." She gruffly pushed back her hair, dyed a color John couldn't quite figure out.

"No. Shut up." It was the waitress behind them. "Zo? And John? Are you two...?"

"Just met," said Zofia. "Can you please take our order?"

"Sure can!" The notepad came out. "The usual?"

Zofia nodded. "I'll have my usual too, thanks," said John.

She scribbled down the orders. "Wow, I didn't realize..." Zofia looked up with concern. "It's nothing. They'll be up in a bit. See you guys later!"

"How do you know Torey?" asked Zofia.

“Oh, we used to date back in the day. All good now, though.”

“Same, actually.”

“I see... um, what were we talking about again?” He fiddled with his sleeve, revealing a tattoo Zofia knew she’d seen somewhere else. “Oh, right. I just listen to what sounds good. I mean, when you get down to it, music is just vibrations in your ear.”

Zofia said nothing, but her eyes certainly did.

“Okay, let’s try something else,” said John. “Where do you work?”

“I’m a barista at Issie’s. I manage their performing arts nights—bands, slam poetry, all different types.”

“I work HR at Wells Fargo. Your job sounds a lot more fun.”

“Nights are; days aren’t.”

“9-to-5 slog, then the good stuff? We’re more alike than I thought. All jobs are kind of like that, I guess.”

Something snapped in Zofia’s eyes. “You know, not everything is basically the same.”

“I mean, when you get down to it, we’re all just people trying to get by.”

Whatever snapped, her eyes rolled over it. “Yes, I get it. You don’t see color, you don’t talk politics, and—let me guess—you’re one of those ‘spiritual, but not religious’ guys...”

“Well, yeah. Muslims, Christians, Buddhists... they’re all trying to tap into the same thing.”

“Of course.”

“Oh? And what about you?”

“Semitic Neopaganism.” A scoff. “What? Am I not trying to tap into your vague higher power too?”

His scoff fell into exhausted laughter. “Honestly, do you just go on dates to show off how special you are? With this parade of obscure-ass labels? You act like there’s no one in the world quite like you—always the exception.”

“Yeah? Well, did you ever think that maybe you’re just scared? Scared that there are people different—wildly different—than you? With all this ‘one world, one heart’ bullshit, you try to pretend that everyone is just like you—always the rule.”

The tense hush fell over them again. Before it had been the silence of strangers. Now it was the silence of enemies. Insults scratched at their lips, barking to be let out.

Torey, overhearing the argument, just set down the drinks and shuffled away. For Zofia, a rye Manhattan. For John, a bourbon Manhattan. Two drinks on opposite ends of the same table.

Wisniewski, Kathryn

Kathryn's short story, "An Appointment with Samara", takes a new twist on the horror genre. She sets the tone of the story right away by providing the reader with a sense of loneliness and despair, through her descriptive language and strategic use of personification. The simple plot somehow makes the story even more unnerving. Yet, despite the seemingly simple nature of the story, it maintains a sort of complexity that leaves you thinking about it long after you have finished reading. Through all of her writing this semester, Kathryn has skillfully demonstrated that a few words can say a lot. This story is no exception.

Gabrielle Kittredge

An Appointment with Samara

Matthew woke up with a headache.

Life didn't agree with him.

He shuffled around his studio apartment, too exhausted even to turn off the buzzing alarm on his nightstand. Stacks of pizza boxes and law books were scattered on the floor. The moth-eaten curtains were drawn but didn't drown out the noise of rain falling hard against the windows.

As Matthew fumbled around in the glow of the microwave clock which read 9:22 a.m., he did not notice the manila envelope slide silently under his door. It lay bright orange amid the gray dust bunnies, soggy welcome mat, and muddy shoes that had built up around the door.

After running a wet brush through his too long hair and shaking out yesterday's white collar shirt, Matthew trudged toward the door, languid despite being two hours late. He tugged on the muddy shoes and heard them come down on the mat with a crinkle. It wasn't until he opened the door that light made its way into the apartment for the first time that day.

It fell to illuminate the orange rectangle on the floor.

Matthew stepped back, leaving behind a muddy footprint on the otherwise pristine surface.

With shaking fingers, he ripped open the top of the envelope, leaving two jagged edges like teeth waiting to devour his curious hand. He reached in anyway.

His fingers met nothing.

In confusion, he finally flipped the switch to the right of the door, wincing with the sudden amplification of light. Peering into the envelope, he saw a small piece of paper cowering in the bottom of the envelope. He tipped it over, coaxing the elusive scrap into his open hand.

It was a business card.

The front read "S. SMITH" in tiny blocked letters.

He turned the card over, willing it to stop shaking so much in his grasp.

"Your presence is requested at 45 Baghdad Street, New York City. Please arrive promptly at your scheduled appointment time. I look forward to meeting with you."

Matthew's stomach dropped.

Underneath the typed message was a hand-written time.

"2:45 a.m."

A stillness enveloped Matthew which he could not break. A long moment passed. Suddenly, he found his muscles again. Still clutching the envelope and business card, he slammed the door, deadbolting it from the inside.

With newfound agility, he strode over to the table which resided under the apartment's only light. He swept the array of bottles to the floor with one arm, causing an enormous crash and shattering of glass. Matthew dropped the business card on the table.

He turned the manila envelope over in his hands, its papery expanse suddenly seeming much too small for the message it had delivered.

For the first time, he peered through the muddy footprint he had left on the envelope.

"To Mr. Matthew Milo Feinstein, Jr.," it read in the same handwriting he had found inside.

"No," Matthew said in a shaking voice to the empty apartment. "I need more time. He needs to give me more time."

Matthew glanced at the clock, still glowing out of the dark face of the microwave.

10:15 a.m.

His stomach fell again... because he knew. He knew that there would be no more buying time. His had run out.

In sixteen hours and thirty minutes, he would be dead.

The street was dark.

Matthew's eyes had no trouble peering through the gloom. He had spent all day in his apartment, the lights off and curtains still drawn. There had been no point in doing anything else, in pretending any different. He had spent his time. All that had been left to do was wait.

With firm steps, Matthew moved through the shadows of Baghdad Street, trying to keep his breathing steady as he made his way to number 45.

It was 2:34 a.m.

Under other circumstances, Matthew might have chuckled to himself. This was the first time he had been early to anything in over a decade.

What was the point of putting it off any longer? He knew what to expect. Matthew would go inside and finally look Smith in the face. He would meet the man who would kill him.

When he reached number 45, he didn't knock on the door. He swung it open with ease and strode into the ever-deepening gloom. He would do this with dignity.

As he walked down what seemed to be a long hallway, a light came into view in the distance. As it grew nearer, Matthew saw a single chair sitting in an impossibly bright spotlight. He knew that chair was for him.

When he got within ten feet of the stark circle of light, he stopped.

He glanced down at his watch.

2:40 a.m.

He had five minutes.

Matthew forced himself to level his breathing. He knew this was coming. He was ready.

The minutes passed.

At 2:45 a.m., Matthew's watch let out one, long beep which echoed in the silence.

At that moment, Matthew saw a flash of movement.

A young woman had stepped into the circle of light. She was beautiful, wearing a short, black dress and high heels. A lipsticked smile shone out of her perfect features.

She rested a hand lightly on the back of the chair.

A moment passed before she spoke, her smile conveying nothing but ease.

"Good morning, Mr. Feinstein," the woman said in an impossibly cool voice, the smile not wavering on her perfect face. "I've been waiting so long to finally make your acquaintance. I am Samara Smith."

Wolfe, Jeremy

If you're flipping through this publication for the funnies, or just a dose of wit amidst the poetry, then look no further than the writing of Jeremy Wolfe. Throughout his time here at the TLC, Jeremy has never failed to produce those subtle twists of writing that can make the most serious work utterly hilarious. This isn't to say that Jeremy doesn't have a serious side, as he can employ those same subtle twists to turn an average day into the saddest one in a lifetime. It has been an extraordinary pleasure to work with Jeremy during our time together and I hope his work interests you as much as it did me.

Nick Donisch

What Happens When You Die?

It's kind of like falling in your sleep, you know? You're just slipping, and slipping, and WHAM you're awake. Heaven's pretty obvious when you see it; everything's white and clean and you *feel* white and clean. And someone asks you how you're feeling.

"I just died," I remember telling them. They never *really* listen, they already know you're feeling better than *back down there*.

They don't have a lot of "kumbaya"s or virgins or reincarnations. No angels or St. Peters or anything. Just a lot of blank white and a couple people dressed in white – they help out a lot. They're very good at making you feel *safe* and *content*. And that's what the afterlife is all about, anyhow; none of this holy immortality or anything – just feeling relaxed in a world of white and clean.

Sometimes you get to see your family and friends, too. It's a shame to know that they died, but at least they got to see you again. Mom, Dad, brother. They all cry a lot, plus they're very bad at conversation. Maybe some people are better at accepting their fate than others.

And the walls will be pretty soft, even though they're tough to get through. The people in white will tell you not to break anything, but they won't really understand that you want to get out. When they find out you haven't been taking the pills, they'll look upset.

Just ignore them and enjoy yourself. You've waited a lifetime for this.

Home for a Month

I think back to
Sweet tea,
Summer breeze,
Short blades of grass;

Where your dad
Worshipped a
Wooden cross always

Where your mom
Washed your clothes and
Watched you grow

And there were friends
And movies
And food
And moving
Away.

I remember
Pale white
On pine.

Home.
For a month.
To pass the time.

Where the rent
Is talking you
Out of suicide.

Where my fears can be torn
By the shine
A family's living love.

Where meals are earned
By the sight
Of your dripping blood.

Reading paperback novels,
Hearing southern drawls,
And "Christ will come agains."

Where puke streaks
Match your Green sheets
And you can't trust your friends.

My Friend Eats a Piece of Shitty Milk Chocolate.

Here cadaver-white hands opening aluminum foil – all of her defined by this spill of morning through the window like she’s either an angel or an actress right in front of me. The chocolate finally presenting itself and immediately finding itself stolen away from its home into her left hand. Her right holding the wrapper and her skin shining like diamonds or gold or plastic-waste; all covered by soft fabric pajamas of equally magnificent-slash-dull tones and shiny-new-penny-copper hair falling down her scalp like crisp autumn leaves or Lucifer or roses in winter.

She takes a bite. A crunch, and the chocolate is less than it was. Her pupils dilate; cascae toward the blue horizon of her irises going, going, gone. Her jaw rends its victim mercifully. Her brow furrows. Her eyes move to mine. She gulps and the chocolate is gone from reality just like that. She inhales and opens her mouth and I anticipate her voice:

“Well that was pretty shitty, to be honest.”

A Poor Attempt at Sad Writing

I got my suit pressed for it. Never wore the thing a day in my life. The suit was as much a waste of money as your casket. I don’t see what an empty wallet has to do with closure. The whole theatrics of death is a goddamn scam. We could’ve just put you in a dumpster and set it on fire and we would’ve been happy.

I remember how you started going downhill; drinking, smoking, carrying a prescription bottle around. You screwed a lot of friends over. I doubt you had any left when you croaked. Most of them would’ve enjoyed watching you die –now they’re at your wake for food and self-pity. What you would’ve said to them now – Jesus Christ.

The universe is infinite – a fact generally accepted by scientists around the world – because time and empty space are both conceivably infinite. Infinite means anything that is possible has happened, is happening, or will happen. There is a reality where everything is the same, but people speak only in vowels. There’s a reality where cats and dogs procreate. Where Ghostbusters 2 never happened. A reality where you never died. Where you never stuck the needle in your arm, or passed out on the floor, or choked on your own vomit.

They throw dirt at you in a *compassionate* way, for once.

My Best Friend's House

Aluminum lines their windows to keep the sun out. When you come down from crack, light sensitivity can be a real issue. His mom indulges in it most – or at least it looks like it. She eyes me up from across the hall. Her hair is thin and greasy. (Do they shower here?) Her eyes are puffy. (As if she could cry.) Her whole body looks small and weak. Time has left more marks than tattooing, and her flesh folds into itself and into itself and into itself. The skin around her face looks like raisins and melted plastic. She smiles – teeth yellow and misshapen, as bad as her oldest daughter's teeth had recently been.

"Hi Brandon. *Hey Jeremy.*" Her voice struggles to leave her throat. Her eyes water a little from trying to talk. She hasn't broken eye contact.

Her youngest daughter is next to her. Five years old. She's seen her family screw strangers more than she's seen reruns of Sesame Street. She stares at us, lethally twists the head of her stuffed animal - a mercy killing, I assume.

Unstoppable

LEDs light up the room with smoke and vapor
(her hands always look so small and shaky
with a mixed drink in them).

Empty bags, old tobacco without its paper
(her hair flows down; gorgeous, warm and waving;
hides the thoughts in her head).

Two creatures huddle by the window together
(when the world bends its will to her demand,
anything's possible).

Sit here for a minute until you forget her.
(Glass pipe to her lips, lighter in her hand –
- she is unstoppable.)

Ziebarth, Jenna

Jenna has been absolutely wonderful to work and learn with this semester. Her passion for her writing comes out so clearly in every piece that she brings. Jenna finds inspiration wherever she looks, and her pieces send powerful messages about important ideas and events. Jenna's writing is carefully constructed - each word is intentional and purposeful. The topics and ideas that Jenna pursues in her writing are ones that people can connect to and ones that make people think critically - Jenna's writing is writing that makes a difference. It has been a pleasure to get to know Jenna, and I hope to read more of her pieces in the future.

Shelby Steinke

Today

In this episode,
we eat lunch on a bench,
discuss race and the weather
and learn to skip stones.

It's funny how quickly life changes.
And by funny I mean terrifying.
Yet here we are, completely aware of this
and instead of panicking, we throw rocks.

What are we supposed to do?
Let the world tear apart our carefully folded
paper homes?
Watch society engulf our backyard braided
bracelets?

No. We'll throw stones.
Some will skip, all will sink.

We're not ignoring it. We're not numb.
But sometimes it's nice to turn down the volume.

Perkins at 6 AM

I'm at Perkins having coffee.

For some reason, I cannot muster the energy to see the bright side.

Trying not to cry, I pour another cup.

I look up and a realization pierces me like a syringe pierces pretty much anything,

Deep and sharp, then dull and familiar, like an ache:

the other side of the booth is empty.

There's an awful 1950's-60's one hit wonders playlist in the background.

Every song is either about "that lonely night" or "the first time I saw you."

There's no in between.

It's like the world wants me to notice how alone I am.

Or at least Perkins does.

I stare at the empty side of the booth as my coffee turns lukewarm.

Blurry lyrics trickle down from the speakers.

In the still... of the night.... I held you.... held you tight...

I swear to God I will destroy the sound system in this God damn restaurant.

The waitress drops off my check but I don't go to the counter right away.

I sit there.

Clinging to this ache for a reason I've never been able to find.

Why am I addicted to this feeling?

It's like the drug in that syringe is necessary for me to function even though I hate it.

Like my lukewarm coffee.

It's gross and unenjoyable yet I'm still drinking it.

Why am I still staring at the other side of the booth?

The booth answers, "You're hoping he'll come back."

"No, I'm not."

"Well, you're hoping for something."

"I'm not hoping for anything. Hope is for the weak."

"Hope is for the human."

(Here I was. Having a conversation with the empty side of the booth at Perkins.)

"The hardest thing to learn about loneliness," the booth says, "is how to turn it off.

How to indulge in it when you need to, and how to remove the syringe when it consumes you."

I get up from the booth, dragging my brain and my heart behind me.

I paid the bill, left the hypodermic at the table, but no matter where I go, the injection follows.
That dull pang of isolation always finds its way into my bloodstream, whether I want it to or not.
It doesn't even give me a high.
What kind of drug is that?

Reasons Why a Person is an Ocean

Oceans are constantly pushing things away
and forcefully pulling them back.

Oceans hide everything far below the surface.
Appearing open and free on the outside
only to reveal a vast, dark world underneath.

Trying to tame the ocean is as useless
as trying to tame the creatures in it.

Parts of the ocean are warm and others are warm.
Some parts of the ocean may never be discovered.

Trying so desperately to hold on to someone,
they swallow them whole.

Salted, partially polluted,
yet still completely mesmerizing to some.

Oceans possess more secrets, mysteries and unmade discoveries
than any encyclopedia series could ever publish.

There's this idea about love that you have to share all of your deepest thoughts
and surrender all that is sacred.

But what happens when the rest of the ocean gets discovered?

Does the ocean even belong to itself anymore?

Ladylike

You'd make more tips if you unbutton your shirt a little.
You're cute when you're angry.
You're too tall to wear high heels.
Your outfit is distracting the boys.
He's mean to you because he likes you.
You should smile more.
You have "resting bitch face."
Sit like a lady.
Keep those legs together.
You look like you're asking for it.
You'll want kids some day, you just haven't met the right man yet.
Hey gorgeous, come sit on this dick.
Relax, it's a compliment.
That's a man's job.
Let him lift that for you.
Slut.
What war on gender equality?
Whore.
Is it that time of the month?
You're so sensitive. Calm down.
You shouldn't wear that. You don't have a thigh gap.
You would look prettier with some makeup.
You look like a clown with all that makeup.
You should lose some weight.
You're so thin. Have a cheeseburger.
You run like a girl.
Well, what were you wearing? How drunk were you?
Bitch.
Women will complain about anything.

Goddesses with glass shard fingernails and souls of golden fire, you will have to claw and burn your way through everyone that says you can't do something. You are not a Barbie doll to be put in a car and undressed and played with. You are more than a body. You are a brain. You are a voice. You were made from iron and lightning. You have super powers. Any person who dares to doubt you should prepare to hail you. Goddesses with legs too long for those heels. Goddesses who don't have a thigh gap. Goddesses called sluts. Goddesses called whores. Goddesses who were asking for it. Goddesses with resting bitch face.

Unite.

Sharpen your talons. Stoke your flames. Prepare for battle. The next time someone makes you feel small, or less, or weak, eat their doubt alive. Swallow it whole and let it char on the embers in your belly.

Refuse to be silent.

Do not extinguish.

Engulf.



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