



Wordplay

Join the conversation

Wordplay: Join the Conversation
'57 Independent Writing Class Publication
Spring 2018

“Literature, in fact, might be defined as the space in which, more than anywhere else, the power, beauty and strangeness of the voice is both evoked or bodied forth and described, talked about, analyzed. In this respect, reading literary text involves attending to extraordinary voices”

Andrew Bennett & Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature Criticism and Theory*

To all those with a desire to let their voices be heard

Edited by Emmalea Stirn

Photo by Anna Maria Hansen

Introduction and Acknowledgements

Hello and welcome to the spring 2018 English '57 class publication! I am your editor, Emmalea Stirn. Sit down, get comfortable, and join in on the wonderful literary conversation that is *Wordplay*!

I've said it before; taking the English '57 course is like joining an ongoing conversation all around the world. It is a chance for students to explore their own literary voices and become part of a never-ending sea of the written word. Down at the Writing Lab, our '57 students practice a variety of skills such as setting and meeting goals, collaborating and brainstorming, and editing. By the end of all their hard work, they have a portfolio of creative and academic writing to show for it.

Wordplay is about celebrating literature. In this publication you will find a variety of creative prose and poetry. The pieces in this book are original, inventive, and impressive, yet they come together to form a timeless artifact that showcases the value of creative writing, and the power we all hold within our voices. It is the power to imagine and create different realities and space just with our words. It is the power to participate in an irreversible process by sharing a story or a poem with peers. It is joining a cycle, like the authors before us and the authors that will come after us. Lastly, it is participating in a ripple effect. May you all continue to share your creativity in the world, and help make this world a better place!

Thank you to the authors who have submitted to this publication, you own a piece of the meaning of your work in a sea of endless meanings. You own what is not written as well. We all own the past, present and future of our voices. We own the inspiration and the experiences that have led us to our work. You have joined the literary matrix!

Thank you to the readers, you own your experience as you read these creative pieces. You own the way these poems, stories, and memoirs affect you. As you turn the pages, you own a chunk of history as you own a copy of *Wordplay*. It is worth engaging these voices.

Thank you to the consultants for your dedication and time each week in helping your learners succeed. All of you are so very important to the success of this publication. Thank you to Anna Maria Hansen for using your amazing talent with a camera to capture the vision of this publication. Thank you to the UWSP English Department and Lynn Ludwig for making this publication possible. Thank you to Cheryl Solinger for your investment in both the learners and consultants, and for making everyone's experience at the Writing Lab a positively organized, smooth experience. Thank you so much to Emily Wisinski for running the Writing Lab, believing in all the '57 learners, and giving me this opportunity! It has been a wonderful semester.

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Bridgman, Katelin

Katelin is one of the most worldly and motivated people I've met here at UWSP. Her style of writing is both down to earth and insightful. One of the many joys of working with Katelin this semester was her willingness to experiment. Katelin was very accepting of advice and expressed excitement when new ideas surfaced from the work she did in our sessions. I had numerous conversations with Katelin that went beyond conventional writing critiques. These conversations delved into the themes of Katelin's writing, and branched out into her core beliefs about the world around her and how she integrates those beliefs into her writing. One of things we worked on was having Katelin break out of a restrictive writing style that focuses on perfecting a sentence the moment it's written. I challenged Katelin to write pieces without using the backspace key and encouraged her to get the story out first before revising it. She accepted the challenge and created many noteworthy pieces this semester that I think she should proud of. It has been an absolute pleasure working with her.

~Allison Walker

One Day

I often miss the freedom of being young
Not having to worry about bills or my job or finding a new house
Being careles and having nothing to do is something I long for nowadays
I used to spend all day outside or watching TV
I didn't have to dress nice or wear makeup or do my hair everyday
I wish someone had told me that one day I'd look back and miss being bored
I can't remember the last time I was bored
I miss doing what I wanted when I wanted
Now my life is filled with deadlines and meetings and early mornings and late nights
I feel like I don't have time to breathe some days
I am so caught up trying to get ahead that I feel like I am falling behind
I am so worried for the future I am missing the now
I am so caught up in the past that I forget to enjoy where I am now in life

I need to slow down
I need to breathe
I need to relax

I need to experience my life instead of trying to rush it
Because one day I will long for being busy
One day I will long for having deadlines and meetings and early mornings and late nights
One day I will miss dressing nice and doing my hair and makeup everyday
And who knows when that one day will come?

For the Night is Dark and Full of Terrors

The darkness is wide and sweeps as far as the eye can see. No candle lights flicker in the distance. There is nothing but cold, dark space from here to who knows how far. What lies out there is seldom spoken of. For once it's told the fear grows and encaptivates us all. The stories of the past findings are bone chilling and vivid. They cause many to lie awake at night and fantasize over. You hear a creak or pounding and think it is coming for you. You don't trust your own ears. You don't trust your own eyes. For the shadows play tricks on the mind.

Gehrman, Gordon

Getting to know Gordon as a writer throughout this semester has been very rewarding. He has a deep-seeded passion for writing meaningful pieces that any reader could relate to and for leading an audience through a story packed with emotion. Being his consultant, I have gotten the chance to witness and discuss the depth of his pieces, while also finding what inspires him to write. I am grateful for the opportunity to work alongside Gordon and I think "Summer" wonderfully demonstrates his ability to guide a reader through an emotional story. I believe he will continue developing his ability to connect with the audience through his creative writing in his future and I wish him the best!

~Lucy DeLain

Summer

It's our coldest days that make us think of her warm weather approaching.

How a walk at night becomes full of glee when the scent of her warm breeze mixes with the hint of perfume. That's the smell of Summer.

Or how she keeps the street lights on, as if just for you, to guide you home and ensure your safety.

That's how we know her warm weather approaches.

Under a chilled oak, color returning to her as it has felt so long since her beauty did leave us. I see her most days.

When her son is out and we feel like a family again, I can tell she is truly happy, for this is where she belongs.

We have our bad days.

When neither of us can see our son, and her tears fall upon me in shoe-soaking dismay. Her violent voice whistling in anger as her hair fiercely dances and blows into every draining thought of gray when we are apart.

It's a funny story, really, how I fell in love with Summer. I feel that our time is so limited.

How the one thing that brings warmth to my heart, I get less than half my life with. I see her everywhere, and in almost everything I do, there are still so many months where my heart turns cold, and I feel that this is a grim reminder of her telling me that I never appreciate the time with her before she left.

That's how we know warm weather approaches.

My true love is with someone I have never seen but feel every day. Time isn't something to take for granted, so every restricted second you have with someone, you have to make the best of it. Because one day it will be time, and you will feel her warm weather approaching.

She might just be ready to see you again, but your eyes have grown weak from the years of looking at her beauty and will have 6 feet of sadness and stone in their way.

She'll plant her favorite flower there (And birds will sing songs of your love)

Griffith, Tegan

Tegan was an absolute pleasure to work with in the Writing Lab. After she brought in her work for the first session, which was the start of what she has submitted here, I knew our sessions would be exciting, productive, and beyond a shadow of a doubt, fun. I was not disappointed, either. In tutoring in the writing lab, some sessions are extremely one-sided. Either the tutor contributes most of the improvement or the learner does. Tegan's sessions, though, struck a perfect balance. She was creative and driven, constantly spotting opportunities for improvement. Yet, she was receptive to ideas and used them to get ideas flowing. She seemed to enjoy writing but was always critical of her own work, and the piece she has submitted here stands testament to her writing spirit.

~Ryan Loos

The Girl

I'll never forget the first time I saw her. It was a warm September day, the sun was shining and her hair was long and curly. It bounced off her shoulders and flowed freely in the breeze as she rounded the corner. She had a wonderful smile that widened as she got closer to me. She was so excited.

We spent a few hours together and decided to meet up again in a few weeks. Eventually I went home with her. I was lucky; others like me don't get a chance with a girl like her. She accepted my history and I loved her for that.

After a while I got sick and needed her help. She never gave up on me even if my care cost a lot of money. Her Dad would come over now and then to help her when I became too much. I'd like to think I helped bring them closer.

When times were good she would pack some snacks and blankets and we would take a ride out to the countryside. We loved to travel together. One year during spring break we decided to go to Lake Superior. We stayed at a cabin in Silver City and woke up to the cold, frozen shores. Once we warmed up we continued our adventure through the Upper Peninsula. There were plenty of photo opportunities for her and I and she loved to share them on Instagram.

Another time we took a trip across the state with her Grandmother. I wasn't feeling good and didn't want to be riding for most of the day. When we arrived at her father's house, I tried to rest but didn't feel much better for the long drive back home. It wasn't ten miles down the road when I forced her to pull over. We eventually arrived safely back home but I could tell I had been too much for her that day and I began to wonder what would happen the next time I got sick.

We found an online support group on Facebook. It turns out a lot of the members had some of the same concerns she did and they became a resource for us. It was through this community we found solutions to my ailments and when she had enough money saved we sought out care.

On the good days we would go out for a drive and when we'd stop for gas others would state, "She looks great for her age!" She loved to show me off and share our story with other people.

Life was good but the good days were limited.

My joints started to fail and we traveled less and less. I tried to be everything she needed me to be but it was hard to keep up.

I knew something was off but she never let on. She grew distant. We stopped going places and I was resting a lot more. She stopped taking photos of me for Instagram and fell out of the discussions in the Facebook support group.

Some people were surprised to learn of her behavior after we had been through so much together. Others questioned, "Well, maybe it's time?" Some even offered up their homes if I needed a place to go.

She started pampering me more than usual. It was like the good old days, just her and I. I was really hoping she'd take me on that trip to Montana that we had been dreaming about. After a few trips to the lake, I knew we weren't going to make it to Montana. Not together anyway.

I had tried everything to regain her love but I knew what was coming. I was too old for her and was too much to care for. My condition needed more attention from someone more skilled than she was.

I was to go live with someone else.

She told me that a nice man was coming in a few days to pick me up. He had more experience with conditions like mine. I was going to be living a few hours away but he told me there were others like me at his home and that I would be in good company.

The day he came to our home, it was cold and the sun was shining. It would have been a great day for a ride with her. She signed a few pieces of paper and handed them to the man. We tried not to make it a long goodbye; instead she opted to stay in contact with him via email. He agreed to send pictures and keep her updated on my progress. "We'll see each other again. Be good."

...

With all the paperwork finished, she backed me out of the garage, halfway down the block and shifted me into drive. She drove me slowly onto the flatbed trailer and he secured me down for the long journey back to his home where his other collector Jeeps lived.

Last time I heard she rode off with a brand new version of me, they even took their first road trip to a place I had always wanted to visit but never could, Montana.

I hope she's happy.

Hokanson, Abby

I had so much fun working with Abby and reading her work this semester. Although many of her stories address serious problems, Abby has a way of writing which is fun and humorous. She is very good at including the experiences of her characters as experiences her readers have likely had. This makes her stories very relatable and personal. All of Abby's stories have strong aspects of family and friendship, another thing which makes her writing enjoyable to read. This piece, "Echo," fits right in along popular dystopian novels, taking the best of each of them, along with some of Abby's own creative ideas, to make a new dystopian world. Abby has such a creative mind for writing, and I hope she continues making use of this talent in the future!

~Mattea Schlender

Echo

Today's the day, the day that affects and changes the rest of my life; it decides what will become of me, and my ranking. The year is 2193 and from what I've learned over the years is the outside world is a total warzone. I live within the Echo System, where everything is run like a well-oiled machine...or at least, it's supposed to. We live under the rules of Chancellor Thorn, and his soldiers that do exactly what they are told. A couple of those rules are no lying, take your morning antidote every day, do not do an unthinkable, and do what you are assigned to do whether it be school or work. If you do something against the rules, or an unthinkable, you will be held in a cell then released the next day.

The chancellor saved us from the rest of the world many years ago when it all started. He blames the cause of these tragedies happening on the air they were breathing. Before the Echo System existed, people were able to breathe in oxygen, that was before all the trees had gotten destroyed. Thanks to Thorn, he created a home for us all inside the bubbles of each Echo. There are different Echoes based on personal intelligence levels.

Echo 1 is where the scientists and brainiacs work to solve the lack of oxygen issue and helping Thorn. Then Echoes 2 and 3 are inbetweeners, Echo 2 is where the Chancellor's soldiers and guards live and train to be the best to protect the people of the Echo System, and do as Thorn says. Echo 3 is where the farmers and caregivers live, they make all the food, crops, and goods that get dispersed to the rest of the echoes; they are also the caregivers who take care of the elder. Last but not least, the weakest of all the echoes, is the one in which I live in, Echo 4. In Echo 4 we all live in poverty, the roads are all dirt paths covered in trash or debris, we get everything we need from the chancellor and Echo 3, the only people who have jobs that live here, are the teachers assigned to this Echo, houses are little run-down huts with tarps as a roof, some households even have 6 kids to one small room. But today's the day that all changes for me! I get to leave this beat up Echo and go see Echo 1 for the very first time!

Each year there is a ceremony held in Echo 1 where all the 20 years olds are tested and then placed into which you belong to, leaving behind your family and friends. I myself am Talia Ferris and am 20 years old, today is my testing day and my 2 best friends testing day as well, Harvey and Esmeray, we are all from Echo 4. This morning me and my parents trooped to the tunnels, my mom and dad not saying a word the entire way. As we were walking I looked around at all my other classmates some carrying their bag slumpishly because they didn't want to test, and some carrying their bag brightly and walking faster to the tunnels in excitement.

When we arrived at the tunnel station my mom and dad both gave me big hugs, I started for the entrances for the very first time...alone. I took a deep breath and continued my journey onward towards the brightly colored tunnels, I have never traveled outside of Echo 4, so this will be interesting. Each year when I was younger I used to watch all the 20 year olds enter the tunnels, and be so jealous of them and how they get to start their lives, one by one getting sucked into the tubes. Today I will be taking the blue tunnel, indicating that I'm going to Echo 1, normally you would already need to have paid to get this far, but the tunnels are free for the testers today.

I paused when I reached the panel I would step on to get sucked down sharply into the tunnels. You travel one by one at super speeds to get where you need to get within 30 seconds. Directly in front of me was the panel beamed with blue, and then I heard the conductor spat "NEXT!!" loudly as he was glaring into my eyes. I shakily stepped onto the panel finally, my knees feeling like they may buckle and hoped for the best, then WHOOSH a flash of bright blue sprung into my eyes so sharp I needed to close them.

In a blink of an eye I had reached solid ground, and I had made it to where everyone dreams of ending up, Echo 1. The tunnels here end right outside and instead of dark and gloomy, like how it typically is in Echo 4, it was bright and sunny. The grass is a healthy green color, instead of the dark browns or tans that I'm used to. I guess they were right when they say, the grass is greener on the other side. The buildings are all tall skyscrapers that are so shiny that you could see your reflection. Everyone's moving at a fast pace, flying cars and bikes that drive themselves were zooming past me with joy like they all have somewhere very important to be, and then *splat*. I had gotten run into by the next person coming from the tunnels.

There was a large group of people that all looked around the same age as me, and all were looking up at the beautiful buildings the same way I was, jaw dropped and eyes gazing. I walked over assuming they were the testers, and found Harvey standing with Esmeray both looking up in awe as well.

"Hey guys! How cool is this" I said surprising them

"This is absolutely *amazing!!*" Harvey said airily still looking around when we could see another group of older people, the elders, walking nearer to us. They must be working with Thorn and are here to bring us to our sections of testing.

It only took about 5 minutes to get to where we were going; we all paused in awe once more glaring at the large dome shaped building that we had only seen in pictures time and time again. This is where the Chancellor worked, where his office is held and where his soldiers are trained. Next door was the science lab that is very well known for helping Thorn as well, this is where the smartest of the smart go to work.

When we walked in we realized the room was shockingly very dim, and not what I would have imagined. But when we reached our separate testing rooms, they seemed as bright as the blue from the tunnels. On top of the desk in the tiny single room, were the test and a pencil. I urgently sat down in the chair and glared at the test. This was it, I thought to myself. It was like I was getting a glimpse of my future as I started to write.

I got done in about 45 minutes, they tell us we have 2 hours which is only for the cases of those who take forever during a test. But still, I was one of the first ones done, neither Harvey nor Esmeray were done yet, so I sat in the in the first room we walked into and waited. Others went to their designated stay areas for the night, but I just sat and kept waiting.

Harvey was done first then Esmeray came shortly after, I told them I had to go to the bathroom before we left, but we had no idea where they were so we walked around aimlessly searching for a restrooms sign. But we found nothing, after wandering the halls for about 5 minutes, we decided to just go back to our assigned stay areas. But that's when we overheard something, it was Thorn's voice we were hearing, but in a different tone than the one we typically heard him use. He was talking to a room of his soldiers.

"Alright so, looks like we will have to start on Echo 4 after the ceremony tomorrow then. After having a look at these scans, I think it's the perfect time to take action, no better time than now. Keep in mind they are a waste of our money, and cannot be put back into the real world!" He said while the three of us were all looking at each other in confusion.

"But sir, what do we do about the residents? Will they be absorbed into Echo 3?" asked a soldier wearing a dark navy-blue army suit.

"Like I said before...Release them, *all of them.*" Thorn stated in a stern voice and started heading for the door we were peering into. We ran back into the main hall then left the building at once, not stopping until we reached our stay area.

"What do you think he meant '*release them, all of them?!!*'" asked Esmeray in a new and sharper voice once we all caught our breath.

"It means he's going to order his soldiers and bots to release them...Which means we won't ever get to see our families ever again! But this isn't fair!! He only releases the residents who do unthinkables!!!" Harvey shouted

"Keep your voice down! You don't want them to know that we know! And we don't know what to do yet so just calm down." I stated trying to not look confused or concerned. We talked for the rest of the night about all the questions we had or what this could mean for our home Echo. But after hours of discussing the topic we decided it was time to get some sleep for the ceremony tomorrow.

As I was trying my best to get any sort of sleep that night, which was hard enough to do in the first place because when I wake it will be placement day, plus about Thorn wiping out Echo 4 was running through my mind all night. That's when I asked myself, what exactly is in our morning antidote? Why do we take them? No one has ever told us, and when I was younger and asked questions about it, I would just get shushed away and told not to worry about it. Conspiracies ran circles in my head, what was Thorn putting into our bodies? Then another thought came to mind...what if Thorn was lying about the outside world? Why do we follow what Thorn does and says hand and foot, when he could easily be lying? What if we were to escape the entire Echo System?! What would we find? *I need* to know what's outside these enclosed domes, and so does everyone else in the system...they just don't know it yet, especially Echo 4. My brain seemed to be bursting from my skull with ideas and thoughts; there was no way I would get any sleep.

The next morning, we all awoke in our comfy beds that we had to ourselves for the first time, got in our nicest clothes, and went downstairs to meet everyone else for the ceremony. On the way out we were all given our daily antidote needed, I grabbed it from the nurse at the door, and *pretended* to swallow it down, instead I shoved it in my pocket. I will no longer live under the umbrella of authority that is Chancellor Thorn. We saw soldiers lining up outside to go speak with Thorn and the three of us swapped scared looks.

I started, "Guys, I have an idea!" I said while yanking them back by the arm so no one else around could listen in.

"After the ceremony, whichever Echo we get placed into, instead let's see what's outside these walls! Thorn said that Echo 4 was a waste of money, and that they couldn't be put back into the real world...why would he say that if that's what releasing someone means!? Which has me wonderin' what he could actually be doing! Something's out there! I know it, I can *feel* it!" I said with pure excitement and my eyes bulging out of my head waiting to see what they thought of the idea. But, they didn't like it; they thought it was way too dangerous.

"Guys...who cares if this is dangerous! What if Thorn has been lying to all of us for all these years saying that he saved us! Why doesn't he want Echo 4 to be absorbed into Echo 3? That shouldn't harm him! We are onto something here!" I said, now shouting with my face starting to feel like it was getting hot.

"Talia...Your face is gettin' really red, why?!" asked Harvey with a confused look on his face.

"Because, I feel red!! I don't know...don't think about me right now, just think about the plan then after the ceremony we will go over it!" I said still confused why I felt this way.

When the ceremony was finally over, we found out which Echoes we belonged to, I was placed into Echo 1, when I found out I was in Echo 1 I felt something I've never felt before, it was warm and nice, but I'm not sure how. Harvey was placed into Echo 2, and Esmeray into Echo 4. All of us were in separate Echoes, but we knew that wouldn't last for long because either we would take down Thorn or be arrested by the end of the day because they both agreed to follow me beyond the walls of the Echo System.

After the final ceremony, our parents gave us all hugs and congratulated us on our testing and the Echoes we now belonged to. When they hugged me, I felt that same warmth and sort of calmness inside that I felt when I found out I was placed in Echo 1. Still confused how I had these feelings, I took initiative and brought them to a deserted corner of the room to tell them everything me and my friends heard yesterday. I needed to warn them to not go back, maybe they can hide out in Echo 1 for tonight, I told them. They kept repeating themselves saying that that's not possible, they also kept telling me to not worry about them and they will work everything out fine. But it won't be fine; Thorn is going to kill everyone in Echo 4...Including Esmeray if she goes back.

I had to force myself to walk away from my parents knowing this may be the last time I see them, to grab Harvey and Esmeray, we needed to do this now. The soldiers were starting to head for the tunnels, so they could beat the residents of Echo 4 back. When we made eye contact with each other we started for the outer walls, there was only one way to leave the Echo System, and that's only if you were banned for doing something unthinkable. Typically, if you do an unthinkable, you have a trial to see if the people think you should be banned, but we don't have time for that, we need to find a way out *now*.

As we walked to the area where people who do an unthinkable go, we realized that we have never seen the actual doors that lead to the outside. But we knew the area that they were located, so we decided to sneak over there while everyone was still distracted by the ceremony and we saw 3 guards outside a building attached to the outer wall.

"Okay how do we get past these guys? Any ideas? Distractions?" I asked the others

"Uhhmm...Not sure, someone just needs to stall them for a little bit," Harvey said

"I can do it, I'll just say someone needs medical assistance or someone nearby is in trouble and they are the first people I saw," said Esmeray confidently.

“Are you sure?! Because once we start this there’s no turning around,” I asked sharply.

“Yes, positive!” Finished Esmeray, and with that being said she ran around the corner to go get the guards to help with a fake emergency. Harvey and I crept up to the single green door that lead to the small building. We put our ears against the cold metal to see if we could hear anything, if another guard was inside, but we heard nothing but silence. I grabbed the knob and looked at Harvey before turning it, he gave me a nod of his head and I opened the door the slightest crack. No sound came from inside, that meant we were okay...so far. We opened the door all the way and inside was a machine, a big metal door, and at least 20 computer screens all spying on the different Echoes. The machine attached to the metal door looked like you needed a key card and a code to open it, we couldn’t do it, we failed.

A couple minutes go by of the two of us attempting different numbers to type into the machine, and conversations about how terrible it is that Thorn has been spying on us this entire time, but that just made us more curious as to what could be on the other side of that giant metal door. We were in the middle of trying to type another code when one of Thorn’s robots came pushing through the first green door and stopped directly in front of us. We sat staring in utter terror about what could happen next. Thorn’s face appeared on the front of the stomach where the scanner screen normally is and said,

“Hello Harvey and Talia, what do I have the pleasure of you two coming in here for?” he said while staring directly into our eyes.

“Uhm, just an accident, sir!” shouted Harvey at the robot.

“Well, I know that’s a lie because you two attempted the wrong code at least 3 different times, that means you were trying to leave...now why would you do that? Oh—and don’t try to run because we have you surrounded,” he said still somehow in an upbeat voice.

“We heard you talking to the soldiers yesterday! Why do you want to release all of Echo 4!?” I shouted bitterly

“Well you see...Echo 4 isn’t doing us any good and they are well, a waste of money, it would be doing what’s best for the System.” He said while looking to the side and pausing,

“Release them.” He continued to his soldiers as a group of three of them came running back in, yanking Esmeray along behind them. The three of the soldiers chased after Harvey and I, leaving Esmeray to herself, I dodged them each trying to run out the door until they had us trapped with full syringes trying to find a vein on our squirming arms. They tell us the Echo System has gotten rid of murder, but that’s not true, they just call it by a different name. Out of nowhere there was a large group of people, civilians of the Echo, coming to watch what was going on, but why, I thought to myself? This came to a surprise to the soldiers as well, so they lowered the syringes to hide what they were about to do to us. I looked around and I saw on all the computer screens that what was going on right now in this room, the soldiers attacking us, was being shown on every single one. But how?

“You’re welcome! That shows you that someone placed into Echo 4 can outsmart even Thorn’s soldiers!” Esmeray shouted very matter-of-factly.

“How’d you do that?” I asked with a grin on my face

“I learned how to stream this stuff in a class I took, I just used the camera that’s used as surveillance for this place and turned it around. Oh, and I streamed it on every single building in every Echo in the system,” she said as though it was so simple.

“Hmmm, so wanna give me that code now?” I said smiling up at the soldier that had put a gun to my head.

“NO! Kill them! NOW!!” shouted Thorn walking into the room.

“Wait!!” I screeched as everyone paused

“The morning pill we’re required to take every day, it clouds our judgment and makes us lose certain feelings, I don’t know how to explain it, but what he’s doing is wrong! I skipped mine this morning and I can tell you that we’re being robbed of the best things in life. And no one’s gotta listen to him anymore after this door is opened!! You all know what you’re doing is wrong by releasing someone, you’re actually murdering them! Please.” I continued while making eye contact with as many guards and soldiers that I could, trying to get them on my side. There was a pause of silence as everyone’s eyes in the entire System were on us in this room; it was so quiet it seemed as though the world had stopped, everyone was waiting to see what would happen next. I stood shaking in the shadow of my younger self who would have never stood up to Thorn and was blind to see what was really going on. Waiting to see what my fate should be, to be released or to be listened to.

All the guards were looking around at one another questioning if they should listen to me, when Thorn leapt from his position to attempt to grab a syringe from one of them in anger. The guard instead then threatened to turn the syringe on him, and everyone froze.

“Well, what are you guys waiting for!? The girl’s right, what we’ve been doing over the years is wrong and we know that. Someone hand the kid a key card.” The guard stated while nodding at me and I mouthed thank you to him.

The other guards backed off as I walked towards the metal door. I scanned the card, and the numbers on the key pad lit up that same light blue color that resembles the tunnel to Echo 1.

“54313” A soldier shouted out at me as I stood staring at it. I pressed the numbers in and the door breezed open a crack with an airy PSSSHH sound. I turned around and Thorn was now standing in the door frame,

“This is all of your’s last chance!! If one of you doesn’t kill this little brat then I will!!” he shouted while grabbing one of the guns from a soldier. But he was stopped by every single one of his guards and soldiers, all holding him back or holding a weapon towards him. I looked over at Harvey for that last head nod with a grin from ear to ear.

I started to open the heavy door slowly, at first my eyes needed to adjust to the brightness of the outside. When I could finally reopen them, my jaw dropped to the floor, and so did everyone else’s. The sun was brighter than I have ever seen it before; I could feel the warmth of it against my cheeks, and the nice breeze of the wind in my hair. And lastly, I saw other living things, plants, and animals there’s even trees covering the grounds. Thorn *had* lied for all these years about the outside world and wiped our memories so he could rule over us and to use his guards and soldiers for his own pleasure. I took one last deep breath, looked behind me at the Echo System, and stepped onto the soft squishy grass, and everyone followed. Everyone was jumping around with joy, they had remembered, I ran to give Harvey and Esmeray hugs. We did this, we conquered what most were too afraid to step up to. It was like I was alive again as everyone was smiling and laughing in the grass or climbing trees. I only have one more question, what’s going to happen to Thorn now that his secret’s out...?

Honore, Johanna

I am so grateful that I got to work with Johanna as my first '57 learner. She has a vivid imagination that would always shine through in the writing she brought to our sessions, and it was always an adventure to delve deeper into the fantasy world she created. It's been great getting to know Johanna as she draws inspiration from her own life experiences and decorates her stories with complex characters and intricate details that make them come to life. It's easy to enjoy her writing and get lost in it, and I hope she continues to grow her skills as she finishes her novel!

~ Lisa Parlato

Hide and Go Dance

I opened my chocolate brown eyes and shrieked with delight. My Grandma had found my hiding place yet again. I had been crouching behind the heavy oak door that led to her 'Daisy Room,' chosen because I believed that fairies, with iridescent wings and dresses made from the petals of the softest roses, lived there. The sunlight bounced off the blindingly white flower petals that adorned the mellow, yellow walls and caused the room to be filled with a beautiful ethereal glow.

I had only been in hiding for a few minutes but to someone as small as I, it seemed like a lifetime. My Grandma, her hair fine and white like freshly fallen snow, and eyes that sparkled with what seemed like never ending youthful energy, lifted me from my protected shelter and spun me before giving me a tight hug.

"There you are my little fairy," she exclaimed before setting me down on my chubby toddler legs. The floor, covered in soft carpet that seemed to be made of clouds, tickled all ten of my tiny little toes. Soon after I had touched down, I was once again off like a rocket. I raced as fast as I could waddle down the hall and managed to make it to the bottom of the short staircase that led from the upstairs bedroom of magic and daisies, to the kitchen, filled with the sights and smells of dinner. I could hear the oven beep to alert us that it was ready for the chicken that my Grandma had lovingly coated in seasoning. I could smell the freshly chopped garlic, resting neatly in a pile on the grape shaped cutting board.

After a slight pause I began to prance around the kitchen table singing a song I had learned that day from Elmo's World. I came to a stop at my Grandpa's chair, where he sat and shouted out the answers to the game show questions even before the contestants did.

It was then when a wonderful thought entered my five-year-old mind. I tugged at the end of my Grandpa's sleeve and stared up at him with my very best puppy dog eyes.

"Granpa?" I asked, trying to be as sweet as the honey that was placed on the rolls we would later eat that night with dinner.

"Yes, Chickadee?"

"Will you play the dancing song pweese," I begged.

In response he stood and walked over to the stereo that was propped on a side table near the back of the kitchen. I followed at his heels, taking three steps for every one of his.

My dancing song, which I later learned was called *Sweet Home Alabama*, began to play and I giggled while my Grandpa scooped me up and began to bounce in time to the music. He soon placed me safely on the floor and I began to use the table, as my pivoting point around which I spun and jumped.

My Grandma came down from the upstairs where she had been cleaning up whatever mess I had managed to create and, in no time at all, I was watching my Grandparents dance hand in hand. The way they turned and wove together seemed to

create a little bubble in which they existed separate from the rest of humanity. I stopped and watched this dance, one as old as time itself, and basked in the light that seemed to erupt from all around.

I felt in that moment a pure and undiluted love. That radiating happiness that shone from my Grandparents reflected back to me and I laughed in unabashed delight before running into them for a hug. My too short arms latched around their legs and I looked up at their smiling faces and knew this is how life should be.

Kong, Lisa

Lisa was one of my last two '57 learners in my last semester at the TLC. Over the course of the semester, she has become more open and comfortable during our sessions. The story she wrote is from the point of view of a very young child and in first person, two things Lisa rarely writes in. I am proud that she challenged herself and tried to improve writing in first person. Writing from a young child's perspective was difficult as well because it was important to recognize the language ability of the child. Initially, she detested even the idea of editing but through some encouragement, she recognized and accepted the importance of editing and began to do it on her own. Her confidence in her abilities and herself grew as our sessions progressed.
~Michelle Wilde

Who was the real monster?

I knew that I was always a special little girl! My mommy told me so! I lived in a small and cozy house with the most beautiful mommy anyone could ever imagine. My mommy was the best mommy in the whole wide world! Her blue eyes would twinkle twinkle like the little stars at night in the book she read to me. I love it when my mommy picks me up for hugs. Her long brown hair smells so good, like the flowers on the kitchen table! My mommy told me that I was her best, best girl and that she would never wish for anything else. I love her, big, big much!

Everyday my mommy would tell me to stay in my room and be a big girl. She would give me dolls and tell me that she would be home soon. She told me not to go outside because outside there are big, bad monsters! She told me not to look out the window or else the monsters would come get me, and that's why I stayed in my cozy, cozy room. I told my mommy that playing with dolls was no fun and that I was lonely. Then my mommy got me a white rabbit called Eddie! Eddie was different from other rabbits. Eddie was a special rabbit! Eddie didn't have any fur but he was always very warm. He also had very big blue eyes and a red spot on his cheek which I loved to kiss. I also love Eddie big much! Eddie and I would play for a long, long time. I was never lonely because Eddie was always there!

When my mommy comes home at night she would bring me the most yummy food, like pizza! I love pizza big, big, big, big much! I would also share my pizza with Eddie. Eddie also loved pizza big, big much! Mommy would look so tired sometimes and I would ask her why. She always told me it's because she was fighting monsters to keep me safe. My mommy is the big strong mommy ever! I love my mommy big much! One day after my mommy's battles, she came home and pat me on the head. I love pats! She told me that today she was tired so I should go to sleep early. She put me to bed and gave me her kissy kisses and a huggy before leaving me in my room. I was tired so I went to sleep with Eddie. I woke up at night and I felt like I had to pee so I tiptoed out of bed. I slowly opened my door and that was when I saw something big, like a shadow, moving in the living room. I was very scared! I was so scared that I couldn't even move anymore! I thought that it was a monster that got into our home! I watched as the monster entered my mommy's room.

After a while I heard my mommy yelling behind her doors. I was too scared. I didn't know what to do. I knew my mommy was a big, strong mommy! She told me she was always uh... "defeating" monsters! I don't know what happen but I must have been too scared and tired that I fell back to sleep. When I woke up I found my mommy looking at me with not a very happy face. That was when I noticed the puddle under me on the ground. I

started to cry and jumped to hug my mommy. I told her I was very scared because I saw a monster go into her room and then I heard her yelling. My mommy pulled me close and told me that everything was okay, that I was just imagining things. She always told me I had a big imagination. I believed her because she is my mommy, and afterwards she cleaned me up and gave me ice cream! I love ice cream! I tried to feed Eddie some, but he said he didn't want any. That night my mommy tucked me in early again and made sure I had used the bathroom.

I was sleeping but then I heard a big noise. I got up from my bed and opened my door. I looked to see another monster there! The monster was shaking big much. I was so scared so I just stood there. After a while the monster stopped shaking. The monster looked up and looked into my eyes.

"H-help!" the monster called out in a very high pitch voice. I shook my head as the monster started to crawl closer to me. "Help!" the monster called out again.

"N-no! Go away!" I tried to close my door but the monster was faster as the monster pulled at my door first, "No! Mommy!" I pushed the door but the monster was big strong! I cried for my mommy again and this time I saw my mommy behind the monster. My mommy pulled the monster away and the monster started crying and crying. My mommy told me to close the door and I did as I was told. Then I ran to my bed and hid under my blanket. I hugged Eddie and after a while my mommy came in. She walked up to me and patted my head. She told me everything was ok and that I shouldn't be scared. After that she went away and I looked down to see Eddie looking at me with his sad blue eyes. He told me he was scared and I told him not to worry because I will protect him.

The next day my mommy brought in a square box and set it in my room. My mommy told me that the square box was a magic box and after that she pressed a button on the magic box and I saw a person in the box talking to me. The person was talking about the ABC's and her name was Mr. Happy. I knew my ABC's! My mommy told me that when she is gone I can watch the magic box but that I can't touch any of the buttons or else I will get into big big trouble. I told her that I won't touch any of the buttons and that if I did Eddie will tell her and she smiled before leaving to work. The magic box taught me a lot and a lot of words! I love watching the magic box with Eddie! My mommy continued to tuck me in early at night.

There were still days where I could hear the monsters outside my door, but I knew that my mommy was always keeping me safe, but Eddie didn't think so. Eddie kept telling me that we had to go outside and that outside we need to get help. I told Eddie that we can't go outside because there are big monsters outside and he told me that my mommy was lying so I yelled at him that my mommy would never lie and that we don't need help! I stopped talking to Eddie because he was being a bully. Mr. Happy said that bullies aren't good! He tried talking to me but I didn't listen. After all he was just a stupid rabbit! After my mommy came home I told my mommy what Eddie said. My mommy wasn't happy that Eddie was lying. Later that night when I was sleeping my mommy took Eddie away. I don't remember much other than Eddie's voice as he told me he will come back for me.

A couple days after that my mommy went to work and I was watching the magic box. I was dancing in front of the box when my elbow hit a button on the box. Mr. Happy disappeared and I saw Eddie in the box.

“Eddie!” I called out to him but he didn’t answer me. I kept calling his name but he didn’t answer and that was when I heard a high pitch voice, like the monsters, speaking from the magic box.

“Police states that a young, albino boy was found in a dumpster yesterday night. The boy was found when a staff worker had gone outside to dispose of garbage. The police and an ambulance arrived soon afterwards, however, the boy passed away shortly after he arrived to the hospital. An investigation is taking place to find out the identity of the boy. All that we know at the moment is that the boy is about four feet eight inches tall, has blue eyes, and a red birthmark on his face. Police also states that this boy may be related to the other cases of the murdered women as similar markings were found on his body...” the magic box was speaking so fast with such big words that I couldn’t understand much of what was going on. I heard the front door opening and I jumped up. Mommy wouldn’t be happy if she knew I had touched the buttons! I started to push the buttons and then Mr. Happy came back on just as my mommy opened the door. I sat back down and started to sing the ABC’s after Mr. Happy as she started to dance around in the magic box. I hoped that she didn’t tell my mommy I wasn’t watching her the whole time! My mommy walked in and gave me a big huggy and told me she missed me. It seemed that she didn’t know what I did. Whew!

When we were eating dinner that day I asked my mommy what “passed away” was. My mommy dropped her fork and I looked up to see her looking not big happy.

“Where did you hear that phrase?” she asked, with her low voice.

“Huh?” I didn’t know why she was so scary. My mommy stood up.

“I said, where did you hear that phrase?!” her voice was the biggest I have ever heard it as she slapped the table.

“M-Mr. Happy told me about it!” I said and then I couldn’t help it and I started crying and crying. My mommy picked me up but I didn’t want her to so I moved away.

“Honey,” she called out but I shook my head.

“No! Bad mommy! Bad mommy!” I ran to my room and closed my door. My mommy came and knocked on my door but I told her to go far, far away. She said sorry to me and told me that she would buy me ice cream if I forgive her. I love ice cream, and I also love my mommy so I forgive her. I opened the door and my mommy gave me a big, big hug. After that I asked her what “passed away” was and she told me that “passed away” was when something or someone goes somewhere far far away. I didn’t understand her. Eddie didn’t go far far away. Eddie was in the magic box with Mr. Happy. Is inside the magic box somewhere far, far away? Was Eddie going to come get me and take me with him far, far away?

My mommy told me that it was okay, because that far far away place was safe. I told her that we should go there so that we don’t have to be with the monsters anymore, but my mommy told me that it was okay because she was with me and she will protect me so that we don’t have to go to that far, far away place. My mommy is the best mommy! I love her big much! The next day my mommy went back to work and I was watching Mr. Happy again. I looked at the buttons and I was very curious but I told myself that I shouldn’t be touching the buttons. I didn’t want to be a bad girl. Mr. Happy wasn’t the only one on the show today. There was another thing on the show. The thing had long blonde hair and brown eyes. When it spoke the sounds it made were high pitch just like the monsters that came into the house! I was very scared and I yelled for it to go away and for Mr. Happy to

run but Mr. Happy just smiled at the monster. Mr. Happy went up to the monster and they started to speak to each other.

"Hi everyone! Let me introduce my special guest here name, Chirpy! Chirpy is a wonderful girl with a beautiful smile, I mean just look at her!" Mr. Happy said. Huh? Girl? Her? Why was Mr. Happy calling Chirpy a "her"? Mr. Happy and Chirpy didn't look alike at all and Mr. Happy was a "her". I'm a girl and Chirpy didn't even look like me or my mommy! Her voice was too high like the monsters! She must be tricking Mr. Happy so that she can eat Mr. Happy! Oh no!

"Get out of there Mr. Happy! She's going to hurt you!" I yelled but Mr. Happy didn't seem to hear me.

"Why, thank you so much Mr. Happy! I'm very glad to be here with you along with everyone watching the show. I've heard that you're a very nice man and I'm very excited to teach the kids some interesting facts today! Shall we begin?" Chirpy clapped her hands together and started to smile very big but I didn't understand anything. Man? What is man? I only know of girl, and boy (which mommy told me only Eddie can be a "boy" because Eddie is a rabbit), and her, and she, and him, and he. What is a man? Is my mommy a man? My mommy looks big much like Mr. Happy. They have big much voice too!

"Now then kids, today we are going to play a game call *house*," Chirpy was talking with that high pitch monster voice, but I wasn't scared. I don't know why. I was more curious as to why they wanted to play house. Why would anyone want to be a house?

"Ohh! *House* is one of my favorite games!" Mr. Happy said as they sat around a round table. Chirpy took out a basket and put it on the table.

"I'm going to play the role of the mom here. Is that alright with you, Mr. Happy?" Chirpy asked. Huh? Why was the monster going to play the role of mommy?

"Does that mean I'm going to be daddy?" Mr. Happy said back. What? What is "daddy"?

"Of course! Now then let's get started kids! Gather your mommies and daddies together for a fun game of house!" Chirpy started to cheer but... I didn't understand... daddy? What is a daddy?

"Mr. Happy, what is daddy?" I asked but Mr. Happy didn't answer me. "Mr. Happy! What is daddy?" I kept asking but Mr. Happy wouldn't answer me. He was playing "house" with Chirpy. I didn't feel like watching anymore because Mr. Happy was ignoring me! I don't like being ignored! I remember mommy pushing a button and the magic box would be uh... mommy called it "turned off". I wanted to "turned off" the magic box. I started to push the buttons again and then the monster who said "passed away" showed up on the magic box again.

"No! I don't want to see you!" I told the monster but the monster wouldn't listen to me. Another monster showed up but the monster was just smiling and not moving and it seemed like they had the same voice. This monster had brown hair just like my mommy and big big blue eyes. I like blue!

"Shelbert Winston, described as five foot for with long brown hair and blue eyes, was last seen leaving work two days ago at approximately eleven p.m. She has gone missing now for the last thirty five hours and the police are currently searching for her. If anyone has any information then please get a phone and dial authorities at 9-1-1," the monster was speaking too fast again for me to understand. All I understood was "missing". I remember when my doll went "missing". I was very sad... but what was missing? I don't remember. I

pushed the buttons again and it returned to Mr. Happy and Chirpy and I just let them keep talking. I was sleepy so I got on my bed and I fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes Mr. Happy wasn't in the magic box anymore and it was very dark in my room. I was very hungry so I was going to my mommy's room to ask for food. When I was in the living room there was a big big bag in the middle of our room. On the bag was a big big zipper. I almost tripped on it because I didn't see it at first. I was confused. Why was there a big big bag in the living room? I stared at the bag and then the bag started to move! I was surprise. Maybe my mommy had brought another rabbit for me to play with. When my mommy brought Eddie, there was a bag in the living room too but the bag was a small bag not a big big bag. I could hear some noises coming from the bag and I tried to open it. I pulled the big big zipper all the way down and then I looked inside. I did not see a rabbit. I saw one of the monsters that always fought with mommy. The monster pulled the bag back as the monster stood up. I fell to the ground because my legs felt like jello.

"Where am I?" the monster looked at me with big big blue eyes. The monster's hair was brown and very messy! There was a cut on the monster's face where I saw blood falling down. I just shook my head. I didn't know what to do.

"Mommy!" I cried and the monster got very blurry because of my tears.

"Shh!" the monster put a hand over my mouth but my mommy heard me as I saw my mommy come out of her room. I opened my arms out to my mommy and tried to run to her but the monster was giving me a tight huggy and I couldn't. I didn't like her huggy! I felt the monster's hand on my stomach and the other one was still covering my mouth.

"Let her go!" my mommy yelled.

"Who are you? Where am I?!" the monster yelled back.

"Let my daughter go!"

"No! Tell me! Who are you? Where am I? Where is this?"

"Just let her go first and I will tell you," my mommy said. The monster moved the hand on my mouth away.

"Little girl, who is he?" the monster asked me.

"He?" I didn't understand. Who was the monster talking about?

"Him! Right there, in front of us!"

"Huh? You mean her? You mean my mommy?"

"Mommy? You mean your dad?"

"No! She's my mommy!"

"No! That's your dad!"

"No! She's my mommy!" I yelled and then I saw my mommy running at us to save me. She pushed the monster and me down.

"Ah!" I heard the monster yell and then my mommy pulled me away from her and pushed me onto the couch. I turned around to see my mommy fighting the monster. "No! Let me go! No! You monster! Let me go!" the monster started to yell at my mommy. Monster? No... my mommy wasn't a monster! I watched as the monster grab my mommy's hand and bite on it. My mommy let out a yell.

"You bitch!" my mommy grabbed the vase sitting on our little table and hit the monster with it. After that I saw blood coming down the monster's head and then the monster didn't move anymore. "Fucking bitch should've stopped struggling so much!" my mommy yelled, "Don't blame me for doing what I do. It's your fault for looking so good... looking like how I can never look no matter how fucking hard I work! No fucking doctors or

fucking drugs can help me!" I watched as my mommy grabbed the monster by her ankles and then pull the monster into my mommy's room. After that my mommy came to me and smiled at me. She put her hand on my face, but I didn't like it. She asked if I was okay and I nodded my head because I couldn't speak. I felt like there was something stuck in my throat. Then she told me I was a good girl and that I should go to my room and sleep and I nodded my head. I didn't feel so good anyways. She smiled and then watched me as I walked into my room. When I reached my room my mommy smiled again as she nodded her head at me. I closed the door. After that I waited until I heard my mommy's door shut and I felt very dizzy. My stomach didn't feel so good and I felt something big in my throat. I bent over and I started to puke. My breakfast and lunch came out very fast and I still didn't feel any better. Usually I did when I puked but I still felt bad. I went and sat in my bed as the monster's high pitch voice echoed in my head. *You monster!* I can still see the monster yelling at my mommy. Why was she yelling at my mommy like that? Who was the real monster?

Konkol, Corissa

Corrissa and I worked together this semester on a number of different pieces that she wrote, one being Courage Uncovered. This story describes the life of a courageous young woman who defied societal and familial norms to visit and, ultimately, join what she later found out to be called the circus. This story is a nod to The Greatest Showman and the heroism that the first men and women of the circus took to be themselves. This epic tale enveloped me in a world full of color and energetic music which excited me and always put a smile on my face while listening. Throughout the semester I have greatly enjoyed working on this piece and even found myself looking forward to Wednesday when I would be honored to hear more of it. Working with Corrissa has been rewarding, because I was able to see a different type of writing-style that I do not do on a daily or weekly basis. This semester has definitely been a two-way street of learning for the both of us. Corrissa impressed me with the description of her work which transported me right into the story and left me wanting to stay in it. I know that she will continue to amaze and entrance others with her writing in the future.

~Spencer Vlach

Courage Uncovered

“So, tell me do you wanna go? Where it’s covered in all the colored lights. Where the runaways are running the night. Impossible comes true, it is taking over you. Oh, this is the greatest show.” (The Greatest Showman)

Unique, individual, different, colorful. An array of words that mean you don’t mesh with the normal crowd. You don’t belong to the majority. Most of Gia’s life she was told this is the opposite of what you should be. She was told to fit in. Blend with the crowd. Don’t stand out. Keep to yourself. It was a survival tactic for the cruel world as her father told her. If she did this, she would escape the poverty she now was a part of.

It was 1820 in New York City. This is the city that never sleeps. There was a constant flow of people and commotion in the streets. All kinds of people traveled here in hopes of work in a factory to better their lives for their families. However, the city life was centered around a system of hierarchy. Anyone could look around and see the class distinctions. Everyone knew where they belonged in society, or if they didn’t they learned very quickly. It was the way of life that everyone followed.

Gia Barrett’s family never stayed in one house too long. The first few years of her life the Barrett family lived as farmers, like their ancestors before them. The family farm was not much to look at, but it had been in the family for four generations. It was the Barrett legacy. Father, William Barrett, grew up on that homestead. Sheltered from reality, he lived his whole life under the same roof with the love of his family. Never having a lot, but having enough to live comfortably. After the sudden pass of William’s father, the workload landed on his shoulders. His mother had died at childbirth, so now he oversaw caring for his four younger siblings. He worked from dawn to dusk out in the fields, tending to the crops and animals. Years passed, and the family ties began to fade. Sibling arguments over how to run the farm tore his brothers away as they set out to make their own life.

William met his wife to be, Julie, after Julie’s father contacted William in a hurry to marry off his daughter. She was getting too old for bachelors out looking for a suitable wife. Chasing away all her other suitors left Julia seeing her best years behind her. She agreed to marry to start a family while she still could. The marriage was rocky at first. These two bull-headed people would not bend for the other. Yet, as time went on the attraction grew

and finally so did love. It blessed William and Julie with three beautiful children and a respectable farm to spend their days.

The economy hit a hard time and the Barrett's lost it all. This caused the family to move in and out of small homes or apartments in the city, while their father worked odd end jobs to make ends meet and keep food on the table. William knew he had to do better and support his family. It was a constant worry on his mind. Gia was the youngest with two older brothers, John and Samuel. Gia was eight-years-old while her brothers were twins and both seventeen. They were pretty much adults at this point and would be moving on to start their own families. Their loss of income was another concern that was always in the back of William's mind. Around New York there was not much work to go around because of the large mass of people living there. The men of the family spent their days wondering the streets trying to find any sort of work. At this time Gia was sent to school and her mother went out and looked for work as well. These dark and troubled times left the family dependent on one another to survive.

School life for Gia was not a walk in the park. She faced constant teasing from fellow students for the way she dressed and how she looked. Even at a young age the other children knew that Gia wasn't like them, and that her family was considered the low life of the town. Unfortunately for Gia, the horrible treatment did not end with just the other students. Even the teachers at her school would not give her the time of day compared to the other, wealthier children. However, Gia was not fazed by this ridicule. She worked hard to keep her grades and be one of the top students in her class. She didn't know it at this time, but her endless will to fight for what she deserved would be what gave her a life she had always dreamed of having.

The public was not so kind to the Barrett family. People talk, and everyone knew that the Barrett's had nothing, so therefore they treated them like nothing. No one offered Mr. and Mrs. Barrett the respect they would to any other adult. Store owners would keep a close eye on the family members around the store. Out of fear they would steal something. Even at the local church for mass when the Barrett's were in their Sunday best they stood out like a sore thumb. They could not afford to have the newest clothes, or to follow the latest fashion trends of the time and it was seen by all. Gia was not ashamed of who she was or where she came from. She saw the way others looked at her and she did not take that lightly. Her father told her to keep those feelings in because no matter what she did or said she would be an outcast to them.

Gia was a talented girl. Her style of dance was like no one else. She glided across the dance floor when an upbeat song started to play. Gia also had a voice that stopped people in their tracks. When she sang even the birds would silence in order to listen to her sweet yet powerful voice. Her father told her that to keep safe she must hide her gifts because her style of song and dance would not be accepted by the town. She tried her best, but no matter what she did, Gia could not keep her song inside.

Months flowed into years and the town still stayed the same. A buzz had come about the area. A brave man had stepped out of the box of social hierarchy. He had collected all the "freaks" and "weirdos" together and put them in the public eye. Gia had only heard the whispers of the town about this show because her family could never support such a controversial performance if they wanted to live in peace with the community. However, Gia was intrigued. She wanted to attend the show and witness all the kinds of people in the

world. Gia craved to find a world where she belonged and where she was accepted. Where she was no longer an outcast.

As time went by the popularity of the new show, called a circus, only grew. The tension in the town was present everywhere you went. The members of the show faced ridicule and violent attacks frequently erupted. Disturbed mobs formed with the purpose of ridding their city of the “disease” that was called the circus. Riots escalated, and they burned down the building where the shows were held. Many were devastated at the loss, but the ringmaster refused to be stopped. Then the tradition of using a tent in an empty lot to continue the show was born. These attacks only pulled more people from far and wide to witness what all the commotion was about.

One day upon arriving home Gia questioned her parents if they could go to the show. Her mother’s eye opened wide with fear and she was silent. Her father was stunned. William needed a minute to collect his thoughts before addressing Gia’s question.

“Absolutely not, I would never be seen at that place,” William remarked. “I’m not giving anyone in this town anymore reasons to look down on me, and you will not either. That is the end of it.”

He could see the disappointment in his daughter’s eyes and it killed him. His heart sank in his chest having to crush his daughter’s hope and dreams. However, he knew that it was the best thing to do for her. She needed to learn how the world worked, and that life is not always pretty and clean cut. Gia nodded her head in understanding to what she was being told. Her mother led her to her room for the night.

“I’m sorry Gia. Your father just wants the best for you. No matter what he will always try to shelter you from harm and keep you safe. You will understand one day when you are older,” her mother explained. She gave her a hug good night and left the room.

That night Gia lay in bed playing her father’s words over and over in her head. For the rest of her life, Gia would be an outsider. Even if she reached a higher station she would always be the girl who wasn’t born into a comfy lifestyle. The girl who was born to a lower class, and had no business being around the elite. She would be different. Pretending to be someone she is not for the rest of the life was not how Gia wanted to live. She didn’t know what her future held, but she knew it wasn’t going to be the simple safe life her father had planned for her. She wanted more. Gia had never had the courage to embrace who she was, but she knew that had to change.

Gia did the most dangerous thing she had ever done in her life. She went into the family saving jar and took some money. Knowing this was not fair to her family, but still feeling that this was something she had to do. She took the money she stole from her parents and bought a ticket. She didn’t know it, but that decision would change her whole life.

Gia went to the show and paid her way into the event. As she walked in past the curtains she immediately was hit by the noise. Hearing the “ohhs and ahhs” of the crowd watching the act. The ground was pounding to the beat of the music. The song’s lyrics reached Gia’s ears and she felt a sharp pull toward the show.

“So, tell me do you wanna go? Where it’s covered in all the colored lights. Where the runaways are running the night. Impossible comes true, it is taking over you. Oh, this is the greatest show.” (*The Greatest Showman*) Then, she saw what she had been waiting for.

Tigers were jumping through hoops that were lit on fire. People were swinging from ropes in the sky, while others danced along to the music standing on top of elephants. A

man who had to be at least eight feet tall was walking around with a man who was only four feet tall around the rink. A woman with a beard was belting out the notes leading the other performers. Groups of horses were prancing around the area, while colorful birds were flying over the crowd's head. All the performers were dressed in bright colors that sparkled when they caught the light. Gia stopped and looked around, stunned, trying to take it all in. The music took over her body and Gia began to dance and sing along without any care in the world. She finally felt free. The ringmaster noticed her and came into the crowd.

"Care to join us?" he questioned with a smirk and an outreached hand. Gia's eyes lit up with excitement and took his hand. She joined him on stage and felt it in her heart that this was home.

After the show the rest of the group did not approve of the sudden joining of a new act. They needed proof of Gia's skills and if she was ready to stand with them against the brutality of the society. Without hesitation she was ready. She got center stage and sang with such power, people thought her lungs would burst. After the completion of her initiation she was admired by the rest of the group for her bravery and talent.

She learned the woman who had a beard and could sing like no other was named Lacy. Lacy had been hidden by her family to prevent her from shaming the rest of them with her looks. The eight-foot man was George, and the four-foot man was Jimmy. They both had spent their lives as well hiding out in their homes from the judgmental world outside their doors. Gia saw how all of these people were so similar to her. They all were looking for a place to belong and where they are not judged by how they looked on the outside.

Gia spent her days with the rest of the act at the same tent sight doing the same show. The ringmaster treated everyone like family. The group knew that they all had each other's backs; they had to stick together against the rest of the world. Gia wondered how this "family" had all started. Finally, curiosity got the best of her and she asked the ringmaster himself, Phineas Taylor Barnum. Barnum stopped in his tracks and smiled after Gia asked the back story behind the group.

"Now that is a story. Take a seat; you are in for a good one. It all started with a dream. I grew up having nothing. I fell in love with a girl who had it all. We dreamed together of a world that we would shape into something magical. I had to work hard to provide for my family at some basic job that was going nowhere. I was suddenly let go when work became short and I was no longer needed. One day I took a chance and bought an old museum with the money I had left to fix up and share with the world. I wanted to strike it big and make my name known. I didn't want my family to live the life I had. The museum didn't do that for me. I realized I needed to give the people something they have never seen before. I started my adventure to find the people that could do just that. I brought them together, out into the world. I showed them that they don't need to hide who they are. Not everyone here liked the show as you have seen. The burning of the building was just the beginning. Who knows what people like them will do next because we didn't stop. No one here is willing to give up what we have, and that's enough reason for me to give this all I've got and then some."

After hearing the tale Gia felt a new-found respect toward all the people she had been working with. They all were like her. Searching for a way to break-free and feel belonged.

The circus was a continued success for many more acts. As time went on however, the audiences got smaller and smaller. Worried of the declining revenue, Mr. Barnum had to come up with a solution sooner than later. He decided to take the show on the road. All they needed was a tent and area to set it up. The performance became a traveling circus. It brought in new crowds all over the United States. The new cities brought much needed paying customers to the shows keeping the circus in business.

Along these road trips the circus picked up much needed crew members and workers to help care for the animals. As fate had it, one of those stable hands became Gia's husband. His name was Jonathon, and he had grown up with a strikingly similar life as Gia. They hit it off and became each other's closest friend in the group. However, this friendship turned into more and love grew in its place. Their wedding was held after one of the shows in the tent. Gia invited her family, but never did receive any word back. It wasn't long before Gia got pregnant. Mr. Barnum happily agreed to her participating in odd and end jobs around the circus until after the baby came. Gia gave birth to a beautiful girl, who lived with them on the road with the circus.

Gia had the honor to perform and share her gifts with the world she lived in. She had found a group of people who welcomed her with open arms and accepted her for what she was. Gia earned more money than she ever could have dreamed about while still doing the things she loved. After paying her family back, Gia continued to write to them every day in hopes that someday they would come see her show. Gia had built a life for herself that she could be proud of. One that was true to who she was after finding the courage to go out and get it.

Being part of a circus was a very big commitment. Out of everyone in the group it was hardest for Barnum. His wife and two little girls had stayed in New York while the circus traveled. He wanted them to have a normal life. After leading the circus for three years he decided to step down as ringmaster. Barnum wanted to go back to New York and be with his family. He was sick of missing out on his children growing up. He told the group at the end of his last performance because he didn't want to make a big deal out of it. In his heart he knew one day he'd be back to see them.

After Barnum, a longtime member of the group, Phillip, took over and continued the legacy. Seeing Barnum leave made Gia start to think about her own life with her family. She wanted her daughter to grow up in a stable environment, with constant love and support from her and Jon. After speaking with her husband, they decided to stay with the circus for two more years to save up enough money to live and raise their child in comfort.

On the night of Gia's final show the group surprised her with a special performance. It took place in her home town of New York. Where it all started for Gia. She had invited her family in hopes they would come see her perform at least once. As Gia looked out into the crowd before the start of the show she saw her father and mother taking their seats. Gia's heart swelled with happiness knowing they had come. Barnum also came and joined in on the performance in honor of Gia. Never had a circus performance been so grand. All of Gia's favorite songs were showcased and all her favorite animal performances were featured. The show ended for the first time ever with a firework show. The sky was bright with all the colors of the rainbow. Gia could not have asked for a better way to spend her last night with the group that became her family.

After her time in the circus Gia and Jon settled down in a small town just outside of New York. Gia's parents came to visit frequently. Both of her brothers were still living in

the cities and working for very promising businesses. The family would go watch the circus every time it came back into town. Gia and Jon were always happy to reconnect with old friends.

When Gia looked back on her life she couldn't believe how far she had come. She had overcome poverty and built a comfortable life for herself and family. Gia was able to find who she truly was and discovered the type of person she wanted to be. All of her hard work and determination had paid off and gave her a life she was proud of. The circus had given her a family and the courage to be herself.

Citation

"Hugh Jackman (Ft Keala Settle, Zac Efron & Zendaya) -The Greatest Show." *Genius*, 27 Oct. 2017, genius.com/Hugh-jackman-the-greatest-show-lyrics.

Love, Rachel

I greatly enjoyed working with Rachel as one of my last two '57 learners. I was hoping my last semester at the TLC would be memorable, rewarding and interesting. Rachel definitely made it so. Initially, all of her work was extremely quirky and lacked the quality of writing and passion that I could tell right from the beginning she had. While they were fun and unique pieces, I knew I had to reel her in more and redirect her energy to a piece of writing that was more worthwhile. Over the course of the semester, we did different activities to try to make writing fun and creative again for her. It follows a young woman who has multiple personality disorder as she spiraling out of control. The story she wrote has excitement, tension and action.

~Michelle Wilde

Lurking Partner

My muscles felt exhausted by the end of the night. It'd been six long hours and I was ready to get home. "Hey Brady, is it cool if I clock out?" I shouted back to the kitchen. After hearing a loud 'yeah' in response I wasted no time at all clocking out and leaving for the night. As I walked to my car I took off my visor and settled in. My back molded to the chair finally being able to relax. I let out a sigh before starting the car.

The roads were just as they always were, a little busy, but that's what you get when you live in Chicago. You felt in your eyes that as soon as you got home you'd be lights out. Your eyelids drooping a little already.

A bright light shone right on your side of the window with a loud horn honking....

But nothing happened. No crash. No collision.

My eyes fluttered open to see the clock on my side.

8:07

I sat up pulling the covers from my legs and scratching my head. I really don't remember getting home last night...But no matter. I got home and that's all that matters right? Nothing peculiar, sometimes your mind plays tricks on you like this.

Recently I had been getting these blackouts more and more frequently and it was starting to worry me. It worried me enough that I scheduled a doctor's appointment. Hopefully they'll get me in soon...

Another day passed with no incidents. Around 9 at night I began craving some takeout, so guided by my stomach I left my apartment. Chicago could be a scary place at night; you just had to make sure not to put yourself in a dumb situation that could get you hurt. So obviously don't go into alleys or start fights with people you don't know. I never felt truly safe out and about at night but something felt off tonight. I looked behind me to see a couple people walking in the same direction, nothing out of the ordinary. After a deep breath I continued on my way.

It wasn't long until I had my takeout and was making my way back to my apartment. That feeling of being followed still clung to my skin. I looked back again and didn't see anyone familiar. The guy with the hoodie might be though...but there are a lot of people in Chicago so it could be purely coincidence.

I picked up my pace just in case, staying close to the buildings on my right. Not many people were on the streets anymore. As the guy got closer to me picking up his pace, I blacked out again.

...

The next morning was fuzzy. I was very confused where I was and what was happening. I slumped into the living room to find that the T.V. was already on. Hmm...

I kept it on and turned up the volume, walking to the kitchen to get a box of cereal.

"Police say that the suspect is 5' 8" with brown long hair and blue eyes. She was seen last night caught on tape murdering her mugger and then fleeing the scene."

Hearing the news report I sat down and kept listening to find out that this happened close to where I was.

"Here's the video clip, I will warn you it is graphic but we've cut some parts out."

At first the video was fuzzy. It looked like the apartment building a couple blocks away from me. The woman got pulled into an alleyway by a man. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as the slow realization dawned on me. I walked closer to the T.V., trying to catch every detail of the woman. The video was pretty fuzzy so nothing too incriminating was shown.

This woman on the video looked familiar, as did the man. Looking closer I knew that I owned the same shirt as her. But that couldn't be me I would remember something like that...

Although I did black out...What was taking control of me if this was the truth?

"Police say this was not the work of the Midtown Murderer who is still lost on local police radar and-"

Shaking the crazy thoughts rattling in my head I left for work.

This was too much to process right now so I might as well throw myself into my job.

...

It was hard at first to ease back into reality and forget what I saw on the news, but nothing was set in stone and I hadn't gotten any calls from anyone so I must not be the woman. There are billions of people on this world that look alike and have that same t-shirt so there's nothing to worry about. Everything is fine...It's good...I'm ok...

Once I fell into the usual routine of the diner my mind was preoccupied and calm. Although there were a couple sudden shocks every now and then making me jolt back into that fantasy of horror. Eventually my shift was over and I got into my car. I made sure my breathing was regulated and calm. I needed to be in control of my actions. The drive home was relatively boring like always, but I appreciated the normalcy of it.

After trudging up the stairs I finally got out of my uniform and into some pajamas when I heard my phone buzz.

"Hello?"

"Hi! Are you Jessica Bragston?" A chipper voice on the other end asked.

My mind first went to a telemarketer but she seemed to know a bit too much about me. "Who's asking?"

"My apologies, my name is Susan Craig. I'm a part of the police department and I wanted to bring you in to ask you a couple questions tomorrow around 9 pm. There was a murder near where you live and I wanted to know if you saw anything." I swallowed hard as my heart rate picked up. I didn't do it so there's nothing to worry about. I didn't do it. I didn't do it.

"U-uh sure, that's fine." I sputtered out attempting to keep my tone as neutral as possible. This woman was a detective so I'm sure she can tell when someone is lying.

“Sorry about the late hour my partner and I have such a busy schedule, you know?” I offered a fake chuckle wanting to speed this conversation up as fast as humanly possible. Susan didn’t seem suspicious so there’s not a problem and everything is ok...

“Yeah I understand.” After exchanging pleasantries I hung up and sat down on my bed feeling numb and cold. All I could think about was going to jail or how they would convict me. My stomach was dangerously close to emptying its contents all over the floor. Deep breaths... I counted to ten slowly after that until my head stopped spinning. This was all too real. I stared at my phone thinking about who I should call, or if I should call anyone at all. I could always trust my mom, but how would she react? Deep down an insecurity of mine crawled up making me wonder if she would turn me in or talk to someone else about my predicament. Paranoia was strangling my brain making the lines fuzzy. Getting up on wobbly legs I flopped into bed, eyes wide open, ready to get tomorrow over with. Whatever may come tomorrow the only thing I can control is myself. For the rest of the night I went over what happened in my head about a dozen times before dozing off to a restless night’s sleep.

...

“What do you mean you’re bringing her in? She’s a loose lead, if it’s a lead at all.” Rebecca was exasperated by her partner’s recklessness. A false accusation could lead the police into some very hot water and she knew this, yet she continued on with her crazy ideas...

“She is obviously the one on the camera.” Susan argued back. Both women were making their way to an interrogation room to prove the other wrong. “Jessica has an apartment near there and she fits the profile.”

“Wait-” Susan and Rebecca looked at each other. Rebecca practically pleading with her eyes for Susan to call off the interrogation. The woman sighed before looking back up at her partner. “I’m just worried is all, you don’t have a very clean record as of late with the Midtown Murderer and it makes me worry that you could lose your job. Did you at least brief the captain on this?”

Susan looked away clenching her jaw. The Midtown murderer was causing her and the task force an immense amount of stress. The families were putting a lot of pressure on the task force and if the case wasn’t solved soon then Susan was going to be replaced as the leader. As the case continued to slump on, nothing was found except for bodies and mocking notes at the police’s expense. In her defense, Susan only wanted answers and to keep the citizens of this city safe. As dead end after dead end fell into her lap she fell victim to her anger forcing her to become a little rougher with the potential suspects she interrogated. If anyone needed this interrogation to go right it was her. “No...but if it goes well then I’ll tell her. If it doesn’t I’ll just tell her that she lived by and I thought it would be helpful to get some of the neighbor’s opinions on what’s going on.” Susan refused to look at her partner as she walked into the room. Jessica was already sitting there, calm and still.

“Hi, I’m Detective Susan Craig and this is my partner Rebecca Hansen. We wanted to ask you some questions about the murder on your street that happened a couple days ago.” Jessica nodded and clasped her hands together on the table.

“Whatever you need detectives.” Jessica offered a small smile as Detective Craig pulled out a file. Photos spilled out once she opened it. They were blurry photos of the two people in the alley on the night of the murder.

“Do you recognize either of the people in this photo?” Detective Hansen asked looking at her to gauge her reaction. As Jessica scanned over the photos nothing seemed to come up, no micro expressions of anger or fear. Rebecca felt her blood boil a little already knowing that Susan brought this girl here with nothing to show for it. She loved Susan like a sister, she really did....But if Susan kept this behavior up Rebecca would have to report her to the captain, for her safety and the safety of the civilians as well.

Jessica shook her head, brows furrowed. “No...I don’t think so.”

Susan mentally counted to ten and continued on. “Were you anywhere near that street at the time?”

Jessica looked around the room attempting to call on her memory. “No, I was at home.”

“Can anyone confirm that?” Susan pursed her lips, pissed that Jessica refused to tell the truth. Susan didn’t see any signs of lying but this had to be the girl, there was no doubt about it.

Jessica tilted her head a bit, confused. “Is there something you’re accusing me of?” Her tone was darker now.

“Yeah actually there is, don’t even try to get out of this one. The new interrogation rooms were built to silence anything in here so no one’s coming to help you.” Jessica and Detective Craig glared at each other.

“I’m so sorry about Detective Craig, she’s under some stress and hasn’t quite been herself lately.” As Rebecca talked Susan closed the blinds and turned off the camera. “Susan what the hell are you doing?” The strong willed detective ignored her partner and slammed her hands down on the table in front of Jessica. No movement came from the girl, she was as still as a statue.

“Listen, we know you did it. That video matches where you live and what you look like. Confess now and maybe we can shave a couple years off of your sentence.” Susan slapped down a piece of paper and a pen.

Detective Hansen couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Detective Craig you’re acting like a child and I think you’re way out of line. There is no concrete evidence that this woman is our suspect. The video is blurry if not completely pixilated to the point that it’s hard to even tell what street they’re on!” Jessica continued to flip through the photos as the two Detectives argued.

“She matches physical description of the killer!”

“So does half of Chicago! Do you know how many girls look like her? You are so wrong about all of this!”

Jessica closed the folder and looked around the room one more time with her cold eyes. “Personally I don’t know Detective Craig, but this time she’s right.” Both detectives stopped in their places. Susan trying her best to hold her composure.

“So you admit that you killed your robber?” Detective Hansen asked. Jessica smiled at them both and leaned back in her chair.

“Oh I’ve done more than that. I will say I do enjoy the cute little name you gave for me, Midtown Murderer was it? Yeah! I really dig it.” Jessica leaned into the table with a mocking smile. “If you really want some dirt you should checkout Havens Park, nobody really thinks to look at a hole buried six feet deep vertically do they?”

Susan pushed the pad of paper and pen forwards. “Don’t leave out any details.”

Jessica looked at the two detectives with a devilish grin. "Oh I won't..." Before either of the detectives could react Jessica grabbed the pen and plunged it into Susan's hand. Jessica's fist collided with Susan's face swiftly before putting her into a choke hold and taking her gun.

The mood in the room shifted quickly as Rebecca stared down the barrel of the gun.

"Jessica, you don't have to do this. You have options."

Jessica only offered a smile in return bidding both detectives a goodnight.

...

"We have a code black, repeat we have a code black at West Town Mall. Bomb squad suit up and head there as fast as you can." The captain was directing traffic in the precinct to the best of her abilities, but it's not every day that you get a bomb threat. Let alone one from the Midtown Murderer themselves.

Policemen and the bomb squad alike ran past the door to the interrogation room. Jessica put the phone of the detective on the table. She sat back and stared blankly into the wall in front of her, eyes glazed over as if she were on autopilot. In that moment she felt nothing, no remorse or regret. Maybe a little hungry. Her brain felt hazy, she could tell she was losing grip of her body and had to react quickly before the adrenaline wore off. Jessica's hand came up to her arm to itch her skin.

She had to think about any evidence that could incriminate her. There were no cameras in here, so that's fine, but there are cameras in the hallway and pretty much everywhere else. That's nothing too hard to take care of. Jessica didn't talk to anyone when she got here so no witnesses. Her eyes moved from two different spots. She was spiraling, there were too many things to think about and not enough time to deal with them.

Once she came to her senses she pulled her nails away from her arm, now covered in angry red markings. There was a job at hand and it needed to be done now. Jessica took Susan's phone and gun and put them in her purse. Before going out into the war zone that was the precinct, she pulled her hood up and walked out casually. Nobody seemed to notice her at all. Once she hit the front she noticed the secretary, about 45 with a motherly vibe. Jessica quickly pulled off her hood.

"Hi there how can I help you dear?" The older woman asked with a smile.

"Hi! I was just talking to one of the beat cops that came in and he said he noticed that your headlights were on. I thought you might wanna know just in case your battery runs out." Jessica smiled.

The older woman's brows furrowed before she went back into her normal happy expression. "Thank you dear! I'll go check." Jessica watched as the secretary left before taking a seat behind her desk. She only had a couple of minutes to delete the footage and disappear before anyone found her out.

After a couple clicks and some backspacing all the video evidence of her presence was gone. Jessica got off the comfy seat and went on her merry way, for there was much more to do and things to burn. In the distance she heard a scream, smirking she glanced at the precinct one last time before leaving.

...

The air felt different in my apartment, slower if possible. I flinched, moving my left hand. When I looked at it I noticed some bruising on the knuckles. Trying to recollect what happened at the interrogation seemed impossible. All I could remember was walking down

to the department and waking up in my bed. Something was very, very wrong. I couldn't even conjure up an image of the detective who called me. My mind felt like it was simmering. I pulled the covers off of my legs and stumbled into the bathroom of my apartment. Looking into the mirror I didn't recognize who I was looking at. She looked sad and disheveled, hair a giant mess with a couple of scrapes littering her skin. Looking at my hands, one was normal and the other was purple. What did I do to myself? I could feel my head spinning as I tried my best to latch onto reality.

We're ok... Everything is ok...

With the thinly veiled sanity I had left, I walked out into the living room and put on the T.V. Hopefully that would calm me down. After flipping through some channels I finally decided on one.

Police say that the Midtown Murderer has struck again with a bomb at West Town Mall killing around 40 people.

My head whipped hearing that name. The Midtown Murderer...There was something about it that seemed familiar, too familiar. Parts of my mind were moving trying to unlock memories I didn't have. I felt as if I was itching at the barrier between two people. There was something about that name that I knew... I've heard about the Midtown Murderer, everyone has, but this familiarity almost felt intimate. It felt like I knew places that I shouldn't. An image that kept popping up in my head was a forest. It looked almost like Havens Park.

In other news two detectives Susan Craig and Rebecca Hansen were found dead in an interrogation room at the department. They have no suspects so far but this has been ruled murder.

This was the last straw to break, I knew in my heart it had to be me. I felt almost numb to the chaos raging in my body.

Deep breaths... I couldn't let whatever waited in the back of my mind to take hold of me again...

Police are sending out every officer they have to start a search for the serial killer...

The news in the background wasn't helping my condition. I turned it off in haste and sat back down. Finally I was by myself, but was I? I didn't know who else was a resident in this body and it made the hair on the back of my neck stick up.

What should I do...what should I do...

I don't know what evidence they have but if they haven't come for me yet they must not know it's me. I assumed there wasn't any video evidence because if there was they'd be banging down my door. I got up and started pacing with my arms crossed.

There were too many angles to think about and I had no idea what my other mouth has been saying. Someone could have seen me walk out of the police department, someone could have known that those two were going to interrogate me and connect the dots.

My attitude was declining and quickly. All the possibilities of evidence were building up against me. Could I go to jail if my other self did this? Most likely...What would my family say? How long would I live my life behind bars? Would I ever see the sun again...

A loud knock at the door suddenly pulled my attention.

...

"Are you Jessica Bragston?" An older looking man and his partner stood there motionless.

Jessica nodded. "Yes, what can I do for you officers?"

“My name is Mark Coldon and this is my partner Brad O’Conner. We just wanted to ask you a couple of questions. We saw that your number was in one of the detectives phones and wanted to see why that was.”

Jessica smiled. “Oh ok, yeah Susan Craig right?” Mark nodded. “She called me asking if I knew anything about the murder down the street but I didn’t know anything.” Jessica shrugged a little.

Mark nodded and wrote something down in a tiny notebook. “Alright that’ll be all from us, have a good night ma’am.”

Jessica’s smile dropped once she closed the door. Her movements were machine like, walking with a purpose. She went to her room and picked up her laptop. There was no telling how long it would take them to find out what happened or what she did, but she didn’t want to be here to find out.

JetBlue Airways

One Way

6:45 PM O’Hare May 4th

10:50 PM Moscow May 4th

Now all she would have to do is disappear for a while, send some letters to explain why she was leaving and everything would be set. The Midtown Murderer needed a break....Russia sounds like a good place to go.

Merriweather, Jaisa

It has been a pleasure to work with Jaisa throughout this semester, and to read the various pieces that she brought to our sessions. Jaisa's strength in writing lies in her reflective use of imagery and the invocation of emotions; she is able to write honestly, and can connect with her readers through effective use of the artistic proof of pathos. She also has a good sense on how to structure her writing, creating lines and stanzas that complement the tone of her piece. Because of these qualities, I believe that Jaisa has a very promising future in writing both prose and poetry.

~Brian Maes

The N- word

when you first hear the word, you're in shock
like you're not in your body and you are on the outside looking in
you've heard stories of your grandparents being called this word when they lived in a
world that made it apparent they weren't the equivalent of a human being
you hear about it in history class
you hear that it happened to someone you know on campus
yet that word being yelled from a window at you while you were just going about your day
and minding your own damn business
someone decided to tear your day apart with just one word
one word that stings so much it flashes you back to the moment right there when it was
said
and there is a nasty pit in your stomach
and you can't quite decipher the feeling
it's anger
because you screamed back with a fuck you and stomped away
it's hurt because it makes your soul and heart sink to the depth of your core
it's sadness because you can't grasp the fact that you still live in a world where this word is
still said to hurt and demean and embarrass
you begin to wonder how your grandma felt
how your sister felt
how your mom felt
this is what it must've felt like because i can't imagine anything else
and in this moment there is still that pit
and it'll be there for a while
and the word will still echo in my mind

oh that dark, ever-present, trite word

Untitled

i'm finding myself in these places
wrapped up in
reflections of windows and mirrors and my shadow
i just see my body, in its form
yet continually manipulated by outer surfaces and every time, my fists ball up, teeth clenching
self-esteem sinking
"you don't look good enough today"
"why isn't your ass small enough"
"why isn't your stomach flat enough"
"why do you take up all this space"
all these intrusive thoughts take up the container in my head and it's incredibly infuriating
because i've always wondered what was good enough since i was 13, wondering if when they called me
fat was it true and how i could fix it
and by fixing i mean destroying
and at the ripe of age of 22, my thoughts continue to linger with good enough
am i good enough for my major
am i good enough for my friends
am i good enough for him
am i good enough without him
am i good enough to just have mindless encounters with someone
god
what the fuck is all this good enough
i've never figured it out because sometimes i wonder if good enough can just be good enough for this
present moment in time
or will i always be wondering why my good enough will never be good enough
i'm finding myself in all of these spaces and i i'm just floating through with these good enoughts hanging
off of my limbs and somehow it weighs me down in the same space
and here i am again wrapped up in myself
in mirrors, windows and that ever present shadow

Untitled

I never really thought about how much I've been through
And it's a strange realization
All that I've endured in this life
Sometimes I tend to forget the winding roads and the storms
Yet in those moments when I do remember
I can't really fathom how I weathered through that
Can't grasp the fact that
I am still standing on these two feet that have carried me
When my tears were so heavy I could barely stand
And when I just stood in place and would not dare to
move
Because doing so would break me in half
All of the shit
All of the gut wrenching torture
And all of the endless nights where I lie awake
And wondered how this was my life
And how I got here
And while I could look back
And think about how all that stuff was so awful
And get stuck in in the messiness
I could think about the amount of growth
How even though life at the time was a
weed
I cut it off and planted a new seed
And I am rising from the nourishment
Of the sun
And the water
It's funny how the grittiness
And bitterness
Of life can make you
Bolder
Wiser
Resilient
And that's just because of all I went through

Wishes for the Moon

last night i asked the moon to bring me
peace that i haven't held in my stomach
and in my heart
for the longest time
i had a season in my life that felt like nothing but
turbulence
an intense air always over my head
forever waiting for a moment of cleansing breath
and a release of my balled-up fists
the turbulence has quieted down
yet the presence of it still lingers

the moon
she won't give you what you ask right away
but i know eventually
the steps i take
will feel like soft grass on a summer afternoon
and i'll smile and
my cheeks will awaken with an utter joy
that they have missed
and my stomach
and heart
will flutter
with the soft wind that carries me through space

oh moon it's been so long
so please let it be s

Murphy, Aurora

It's been an absolute whirlwind of fun and intrigue getting to know Aurora and her writing throughout this semester. I can hardly put into words how impressed I've been with the level of thought and personal character that she infuses into the poetry that she's shown me. From the very start of our time together, I knew Aurora had something special about her that set her writing above from even the professional writing that clogs our phones and computers on a daily basis: Ms. Murphy has guts. I've always been struck by the staggering amount of courage that shined through in almost every piece of writing she brought to the table. She is never afraid to tackle the tough issues, nor does she lie to us by creating happy endings where they shouldn't exist. Aurora tells it like it is and I think you'll agree after reading through the pieces she has submitted to this semester's edition of Wordplay. It's been a privilege working with her, and I can't wait to see what else she will give to all of us in the future.

~Nicolas Donisch

Start New Lame Story

So quiet was she, to the listeners. In the mind, however, an orchestra of conversations took place. These many conversations covered a wide range of subjects, confirming the answer but do not raise your hand, they are not looking at you and who would, dinner tonight, look at their shoes not their faces, things that wouldn't make sense to anyone listening. That is why she makes sure no one listens, or maybe her mind selfishly wants those conversations private. Though she is lonely, her mind keeps her company. She is always nervous, but her mind spends most of its time reassuring her that there is nothing to worry about. This is why she is so often quiet; she is working with her mind to calculate the probability that something could go wrong. Despite that she knows nothing will go wrong, surely, her mind has told her this many times. She enjoys the time spent with her mind, when she engages in conversation with another, she feels her mind change to fit their mind. She doesn't like this; she doesn't like that when she is thinking alone she is completely different than when thrown into interaction with the 'normal.' She contradicts herself a lot; this is another reason why she is so quiet. She doesn't want to confuse anyone else; she can't take being seen as different or weird. She is working on it.

If Character Has Bad Memory

The worst possible scenario intruding my thoughts, like a pop up ad with no option to close. I am forced to restart and hope this time my malware detector is working.

Terrible scenes, body freezing, eyes clamping, heart racing scenes that find pleasure in my horror. A mind forced to succumb to this haunting reliving of an unwelcomed image, panic, rage, and helplessness.

Seeping into my dreams, turning a fantastical flight to a crash landing where I am audience to my minds distorted remake of that day.

As helpless as an infant watching a murder, only I remember the feeling that swooned over me. A sudden feeling of heinous static electrifying my body, a shock.

Living in a scene at first, thinking everything okay because it's only a movie, to feeling dazed when being thrown back into reality having to face the sheer terror only seen on TV.

Wishing it was TV, being able to flip back to happy couples deciding where to live,

I was stuck in my scene, flustered when finding there was nothing I could do but yell for some other hero to do what I couldn't.

Now I am stranded in my own mind as scenes from that day are torn apart and pieced back together with other scenarios all with the same ending.

Guilt replaying, reminding me at the most inappropriate times, where I am forced to restart in hopes that this image will just leave me alone.

A Day in the Life

Hopeful is the best way I can put it, plainly. Not a dreading the alarm kind of day, but a, "what should I eat for breakfast?" Tiny sprinkles floating with a cool wind, dancing from side to side. Rising to my shoulders, gliding to my chin, small tickles, light feather touches. These are what I call happy feelings, but they are physical feelings. Not in my head, those in my head feelings then result in the physical. The physical cheek to cheek smile and walking in long, strong, strides. Eating a banana sitting by the chilled window, the neighbor's dog is outside. Not thinking about due dates or which person my roommate hates. Just enjoying the morning for what it is, hopeful. Later in the day I could receive a bad grade or slip on ice. My mood could plummet down like a plane with no gas. I will then look at the day through unhopeful eyes. Nothing will show me its beauty, the earth turns off, along with those tiny sprinkles. Those fall gently to my feet, feeling heavy. Not now though, now I feel light because the air is on and I could do anything. I was once told, "Anything that can be said can be said clearly, anything that cannot be said clearly cannot be said," However, clarity for me is too easy. Yes, the banana is yellow, but it is also a yellow half-moon, peeled back to expose its soft insides. A metaphor that, despite some hard casings, once you peel back the protective cover, see what's underneath. Hopeful, I could have said that the banana can be crushed, mushed into an unrecognizable sludge. But that would be me after I slipped on ice.

“Helping”

The People
the young people all
talking about the end of
our world
but no action

Speaking as if their words
are so powerful
their words alone are
so important they could move
mountains

Maybe, in their online photos
the, “haha look I’m touching
the mountain”

Meaningless spoken verse
to fit the current agenda
of “what’s popular today”

“We are like literally killing the
world”

Trapped Children

All in suits ordered and shipped to
them

right after that

‘must have’

TV turned on all those

‘what if I look different?’

sitting straight with newly paid for
locks of

‘now I’ll like myself’

out in public feeling

accepted

in at home feeling unknown

‘BUT I HAVE 3 MILLION’

strangers following

spoon feeding self-consciousness

and fantastical social

acceptance

Each one feeling alone,

unappreciated

Until

A hit of electronic hearts

pings and lights up

‘Finally I can like myself’

open it up and the comment

rips at their cookie cutter self

dragging them back into a

pit

of

‘someone PLEASE give me

confidence’

Everything Gives You Cancer

“Riveting!”
exclaimed the yellow haired hag
“Never have I been so, what’s the word... Taken aback! Yes, taken aback.”
She had never seen such splendor before. Such glorious colors and trickling fog.
“I feel as if everyone I love is here surrounding me, I am tightly wrapped, gently, touched by
warmth.”
She peered closely into the deep jungle with a wonder in her eyes, filled with a curiosity as
the years rolled back. She was young again, following her question-filled mind to find the
answers swimming within.
“Am I on earth anymore?”
The Yellow Haired Hag left earth.
With her family surrounding her, the lifeline went flat.
Forever young.
Everything gives you cancer.

Untitled

Try to be clear. Equal amounts of clear and metaphor. A literary composition

Omernik, Rachael

I could tell right away that Rachael had a talent for detail. At the beginning of the semester, I worked with her on a developing novel that, from the get-go, had a lot going for it. I thought drafts of this story would take up our time in the writing lab, so I was a little surprised when she decided to give poetry a try for the first time. When she brought in her draft, she expressed how worried she was about it being cliché or stereotypical. When she read through it, though, I noticed nothing of the sort. On her first try, she had made a poem with enough wonderful and thought-provoking detail to avoid feeling overdone. After a couple sessions of polishing, this is the poem she has submitted, and it shows how quickly Rachael's writing can go from draft to art.

~Ryan Loos

You are

You are the blue sky on a summers day,
Endlessly mysterious.
You are coffee on an early morning,
Warm, enlightening, and awakening.
You are the blooming flowers of spring time,
New, bright, and welcomed by everyone.
You are the clouds on a bright day,
Protective of something greater.
You are the sun after an endless night,
Rejuvenating my muscles and bones.
You are the summer breeze on a hot July day,
Unseen but felt and loved by everyone in your embrace.
You are the laughter and warmth of the holidays,
The joyful ambiance.
You are clean laundry before bedtime,
Relaxing and calming.
You are the music in every song,
Wrapping around my ears with every note,
Comforting my mind.

You are everywhere and everything.
And yet,
Only you cannot see it.

Pelky, Brooke

I have really enjoyed my time getting to work with Brooke during our '57 sessions this semester. Brooke's dystopian future stories were amazing pieces to read, leaving me at a cliffhanger at the end of each session. She has a way of telling a story where you are anxiously anticipating what will happen next. Watching the story develop and change throughout our time together, to now seeing it published in Wordplay has been a rewarding experience for both of us. I am excited to see where Brooke's writing will take her in the future. Until then, enjoy her first dystopian future piece!
~Amanda Wroblewski

Brains or Pains

I woke up every day to the same fear that crawled through my soul. I was just the average skinny, seventeen-year-old brunette girl. I lived in what used to be known as Ohio 300 years ago, that is now called Halstona.

"Alsea get down here now!"

That was my mom yelling at me since it's apparently my job to raise my five younger brothers and sisters. She a bit heartless since her sister got the inheritance from my grandparents.

"I'll be right there mom."

As I rolled my eyes, and put on my ugly blue shirt, and ripped jeans, I slowly shrugged downstairs.

"What the hell took you so long to wake up, Alsea?"

"Mom, I had another nightmare about being taken for testing."

"Oh boy, you need to stop worrying yourself about that and help more around the house."

All my mom cared about was making the house look spotless; like it even mattered. We were so poor we didn't even get hot water. She didn't really care about how I felt. I was the oldest, so all the attention went to my siblings. I was pretty much the second parent, since my dad is either at work or drunk. All I worried about was being taken in for testing from the government, which meant I'd either be enslaved/put to death or live in this depression slump. My town has fallen apart, and if you're not smart enough they either eliminate you or put you to do hard labor.

My annoying younger sister Bristol; "Alsea make me oatmeal now."

"One second, snot."

I constantly only heard my siblings screaming crying, and my heart beating out of my chest while my throat tightened up to the point where I thought I would pass out. Sometimes I wish I would pass out just to get a break from the same dull life of being a servant in my home. I am not in school because to my mom just got a job working at her friend's bakery, so I am left watching 3 of my siblings. I envied my friends who got a real education. I thankfully had books that I study from every day to get the knowledge I will need to pass the test.

“Alsea, I am leaving you do the laundry and dishes.”

“I do every day, Mom, since that’s all you think I am good for.”

“That is not true, I need you here or else we’d be on the streets or enslaved.”

“Don’t even joke about that mom, it’s not funny.”

“You need to lighten up Alsea. My god. Have a good day, bye.”

She finally left, and kissed my sibling’s goodbye, but not me.

I was exhausted from all the constant tension of the pressure being on me to raise my siblings. I started to clean up their mess they left all over our dinner table. I notice in one of my sibling’s oatmeal bowls there was a tooth.

I asked, “Who’s tooth is this?”

“It’s mine. It fell out when I bit on my spoon,” my brother Ronny said.

“Ok well throw it away, that is disgusting, Ronny.”

Sometimes I felt bad for my siblings, since we were so poor my Mom had to explain to them not all kids have the tooth fairy come to their house. It was only a matter of luck if the tooth fairy came, and we weren’t lucky, so she never did. We did get some Christmas presents that included every year a candy bar for each of us, and either a stuffed animal or a puzzle. It was nice but compared to everyone else it was nothing.

My youngest sister, Blare, screamed, “Alsea can I please wear my pink dress?”

“Oh my god for the millionth time NO you can’t, Blare, that is only for when we go to church!”

“That is not fair. I hate you Alsea! You are the worst sister ever.”

I was used to having my siblings say mean things to me like that to the point I didn’t even bother yelling at them back. I didn’t really like them, but I guess I was all they really had since my dad is a dead beat, and my mom is selfish. I was 18 in less than three weeks, which meant I had to take the test to see what my fate was. I studied one hour every night before I went to bed. Math problems, spelling words, science questions, and history facts ran through my mind constantly. I was going to pass this test! My friend Ana who was a year older than me took it last year and she didn’t pass. They killed her by shooting her in the head. I didn’t know she was killed till five months after she died. I miss her so much. I see her family from time to time and they act like it never happened.

This one test determined whether I lived or died, and I take it next week. My mom was going to be home any minute, and the laundry still hasn’t been done.

“Click,” the door opens.

“Mommy, we missed you,” my siblings said as they ran to the door.

“Hi, kids. I had a long day, so I am going to bed, goodnight,”

“Goodnight,” I said in a sassy annoyed tone.

I did so much more for my siblings than mom, yet I got no credit, or love from them. I never want kids, thanks to my siblings. Its 9:00 o' clock which means it's time to study. This time I was nervous to study and quiz myself because I take the test in seven days!

Beep beep beep, my alarm went off.

"Oh my god it's seven in the morning," I screamed.

I can't believe I passed out studying last night, this isn't good at all. Oh no this can't be happening. I run downstairs to wake my siblings up for school with tears running down my face.

"Alsea why are you crying? Are you hurt?" my little sister Bristol asked.

"No, I am fine just go take a bath right now, and don't worry about me."

No one ever worries about me, but it's kind of nice when my siblings somewhat care, but they won't understand what is happening. You don't find out about the whole testing survive or die thing till you're 15. I walked outside to pick some apples from our apple tree when I noticed Trenten. Trenten was this guy I kind of always had a crush on, but never had the guts to talk to. I didn't feel I was enough for him. He waved to me, and I just stood there looking like a lost sheep. I can't believe he waved at me. I ran into my house and had the biggest smile on my face.

"Wow what are you smiling about, Alsea. I don't see that side of you very often," my bitch of a mom said.

I didn't even say anything back to my mom since she just ruins everything for me.

TWO more days till I take my life or death test!

...

It's the day I take my test! I can feel my heart beating out of my chest to the point where the room is spinning. I am finally out the door getting up before my mom, so I didn't have to hear her annoying nagging. As I am walking towards to government testing building I see Trenten. Why the hell is he up at 6 in the morning unless he is taking the test too! Oh no, he can't be the same day I am.

"Alsea, is that you?" yelled Trenton.

Oh my gosh why is he talking to me again. He stopped walking and I walked up to him, then we slowly started awkwardly walking together.

"Yes, it's me," I said in a flirty way.

"What are you doing up so dang early, Alsea?"

"Well I got some things to take care of, how about you?"

Why is he being so nice? I literally haven't talked to him in two years.

"Alsea, I know you are going for your test, so am I."

"What, we are taking it the same day?" I asked in a concerned tone. This literally is so bizarre, that part of me feels like its fate.

"I guess so, when was your birthday?" Trenten asked.

"Mine was two days ago, how about you?"

"What, so was mine!" Trenton said in an excited voice.

"That's crazy we have to same birthday October 17th."

Going up the stairs into the test building was a moment I never will forget. The building was tall, grey with hardly any windows. It was the biggest building that I've ever seen. My feet froze, weighing me down making it 20 times harder to walk up the steps. I could smell alcohol and something burning. I could only image the horror that could be from. I forgot for a moment that Trenten was walking right aside me, since I completely zone out into my own little world for five minutes.

"Alsea, are you ready for this?" Trenten asked.

"Hell no!" I replied.

I can't believe this day has finally come. I am not excited at all, but at least the anticipation will be over. The first thing I see entering the building is a Must Check In sign. We are rudely greeted by a tall chubby man with a huge mole on his left cheek. He loudly tells us to sign in and to press our pointer finger on our left hand to this weird code detector thing. I was starting to get nervous right about now. After the man stops yelling at us with basic instructions Trenten and I are split up within a second.

"Bye Trenten. Good luck!" I blurted awkwardly.

"Bye Alsea hope to see you again."

I couldn't really tell if Trenten was kidding or not, but it wasn't really something to fool around with. I hope to see him, but at the same time it's too good to be true. As I am walking away from Trenten a short, skinny blonde lady quickly grabs my arm pulling me away. She walked me to the first part of the test. Her face showed absolutely no emotion like a robot. The hallway is dark with nothing covering the walls expect a poster of the kid who got 100% on every portion of the test "Max Blaine." He is about 47 years old now and is one of the presidents for the Testing Center.

"You have 85 minutes to complete this test. If you get over a 75% you pass. You may begin now."

I grabbed my pencil and started seeing what problems I could do without writing out steps. The first test is the math proportion. I hate math, but at least we get a calculator. 100 questions and 80 are multiple choice. I need to pass 3 out of the 5 tests if I was going to survive a normal life in this messed up world. I was getting in the multiple-choice part. Oh boy I really don't think I will any of them right.

"Time's up. Put your pencil down now!" The blonde lady says.

Perry, Michael

It was an absolute pleasure to get to know Michael as a writer during our weekly '57 sessions. Working with Michael was anything but 'work.' Each week he shared with me the creativity of a brilliant and gifted mind, acquiring a true knack for composing a combination of thoughtful, suspenseful, and complex stories. As I began to dive deeper into one of Michael's stories, I found myself consistently anxious to learn more about the characters, plot, and alleviate the cliffhanger he had left me on. Although that story is still in the works, Michael equally excelled at writing the short story "Nothing Else Matters Anymore." The story is able to connect an intimate experience with the environment to a powerful realization of what the future may hold for our planet. This semester Michael worked on connecting with his audience, character development, and incorporating the right 'dose' of witty humor. These improvements have transformed Michael's work from impressive to outstanding. Michael truly has a talent for putting his thoughts on paper, I know his work will continue to shine as he continues his future journey as a writer."

~Lily Firkus

Nothing Else Matters Anymore

I'm the last one on the boat.

I'm the last one on the boat because I'm also the newest in the group to diving, and so I haven't gotten the gearing up part of diving down pat yet. It's harder than it looks, as you make sure that nothing will malfunction down there. Mistakes here could be fatal, so I take my time.

I slip into my BCD (buoyancy control device), spray some defog onto my mask, get my fins on, double check that my snorkel isn't attached, verify that I've got 3000 psi of air, ensure my regulator works, confirm that my backup regulator works, check to see if my camera is securely mounted to my wrist, and finally make sure my BCD will inflate. In movies people just put scuba gear on and it works, in real life, I don't have that luxury.

Now that I'm ready, I stand up with the help of captain Zane and take a small step. A small wave rocks the boat and I immediately fall back on my ass.

"Dammit," I say.

"What?" asks Zane.

"I can't walk on the boat."

"You'll get your sea legs soon enough," he reassure me.

I then get up, make my way to the edge, fill up my BCD, pop my regulator in my mouth, put a hand on my mask, and take a step into the inky black water. It's dark, dark enough for me to question what's beneath me, even though I dove this site two hours prior and the reef is only 20 feet below me.

Now that I'm in the water, I meet up with everyone else in my group. I'm the novice, with this being my 10th dive. I'm with a couple from San Francisco who did this dive the night before but didn't see anything. A former dive instructor and her husband, with over 2,000 dives between them. A Canadian who dove with great whites off the coast of South Africa. Another couple who did this same dive 20 years ago and were hoping for the same experience tonight. And me. Dive number 10. Numbers 7, 8, and 9 were earlier today.

Our divemaster, Josh is in the water too. When we were on the boat he asked, "Who here hasn't done a night dive before?"

Of course, I was only one to raise my hand.

“It’s okay,” he said, “Diving at night is just like diving during the day, only there’s one big difference.”

“It’s at night?”

“No, it’s dry. There’s no water.”

I smile, remembering that as I descend into the water below. The scream of air from my regulator when I inhale and the torrent of bubbles that come when I exhale are deafening. The only thing I can hear is Josh tapping his tank with a metal rod to get our attention.

Follow me, his hand signal says.

As we swim, I find that under the black water it isn’t as scary as it is above. I can clearly see the lights atop other diver’s tanks, light coming from the boat, and the lights of snorkelers above who peek into the water column, trying to make out anything beneath them. I’m glad I’m a diver, the view from down here is worth it.

We follow after Josh, our dive lights cutting through the water to show off the night life of the reef. Plenty has changed from our dive a few hours earlier. The tangs, morays, and sergeants of the day have all disappeared. Soldier fish now swim about, their wide eyes reflecting back at me as my light drifts over them, while schools of goatfish trawl the sandy bottom.

I don’t have long to look at them, as Josh grabs our attention, and begins to swim towards a box with three dive lights in it, all pointing up. It almost looks like an underwater campfire, as the beams shine a blinding light upwards. On our earlier dive, we dropped it off, got it set up, and turned on the lights. Now, as we swim towards it, we see what the campfire has attracted.

Five massive black manta rays swarm the lights, each of them easily larger than my 6’2” arm span. They also weigh several times more than me, yet somehow can move through the water with greater ease than my slim 160 lbs.

All of our attention is focused on the manta rays. We gawk and swim clumsily through the water, pointing our fingers and cameras at the huge creatures. It’s amazing. I can’t swim straight, and get smacked in the head by another diver’s fins. Half of me is paying attention to what I’m supposed to be doing, while the other half remains in a constant state of amazement. Eventually I find my spot around the campfire, where Josh grabs me, and sits my unmindful body on the bottom.

Our bubbles stream upwards, dancing and playing with the lights as manta rays make pass after pass. I turn on my camera, grab a rock so I don’t float away, and stare at one of the most magical things I’ve ever witnessed. I’d say that it was breathtaking, but the deafening noise of my breathing ensures that I can’t write that here.

The rays slip through the water over our heads, performing underwater somersault after somersault above the lights. The white underbelly of each manta ray has a unique grey pattern that looks like a Rorschach test, which you can use to identify the rays after your dive. Their massive wings beat overhead, the powerful strokes sending pulses of water my way, as the rays get within inches of my face. On their backs I see what I originally think to be reflections of our dive lights dancing on their backs, but upon closer observation see that it’s a pattern of white flecks on the mantas themselves. I have no way of describing it than as the stars of the night sky covering their backs. The rays are drawn in to the plankton that our lights attract, and do pass after pass over my fellow divers and I as I try to soak in every second of this. At times I want to reach out and touch one of them,

but know that doing so would actually hurt the rays. Occasionally, the rays bump into each other comically, like two armless drunks trying to hug.

The current rocks me, the rays swim overhead, I shiver a bit in the cool water, and just fall in love with the moment. I don't think there's enough ways I can say "It's incredibly amazing," and describing what it's like just doesn't do it justice. I'm enthralled.

Eventually, my camera battery dies, the awe of it all fades a little as I accept that this is really happening, and a thought creeps into my mind.

This is what we stand to lose.

This is what's going to disappear when the oceans warm up and ecosystems collapse. It's this magical moment, where captivating behemoths perform back flip after back flip, will disappear. That, given time, nights like this, where the star-covered bodies of black manta rays that swim above bewildered divers will cease to exist. That this moment right here, is me appreciating the majesty of something on borrowed time.

And with that thought, a little water fills my mask.

Peterson, Kathryn

It's been wonderful to get to know Kathryn over the course of the semester and see her grow as a writer. She finds inspiration in the most unique and interesting places, like the short Facebook post her story is inspired by. Her creativity shows in her characters, and we've been working on articulating this through description and detail. Kathryn is very dedicated, and has done an excellent job developing her story. She is good-natured and friendly, and I always looked forward to our discussions about her ideas and writing process. I am so excited about her story, and for her future creative writing!

Ruby Malek

Déjà vu

Inspired by a Facebook post by Bombsquad

I am a ninety-two-year-old man, and I am feeling that my time is near. I have been all around the world, through two wars, and a depression. I have seen a lot with these two eyes. And now as I lay in this hospital bed with my daughter by my side, I feel as though my life can end peacefully.

While I lay here with my eyes closed, I think back on my life at all the good and bad memories. I think about my childhood and how my mother used to always sing while she cooked in the kitchen. I think about my times at school and how I used to date this amazing woman with long brown wavy hair and bright blue eyes. I remember leaving her to join the war, and the sad look on her face as the bus drove away. I remember watching my best friends run into the smoky fields to hopefully return to my side, only to find myself waiting alone. I remember coming home to my family and friends after the war, only to find that there is no work for me here. I remember going to my woman's house thinking she would be long gone. Only to see her sprinting down the road to run into my arms, as she had been waiting for me while I was away. I remember watching her come into the little wedding chapel in a silk white gown, thinking that I am about to be the happiest man on earth. I remember two years later having a beautiful baby girl in my arms, and watching her grow up into a sweet and caring young woman.

Remembering the good and bad, I feel my breaths getting slower and slower. I look up at my daughter for the last time. She's sleeping in the chair next to me holding my frail hand in hers. She looks so beautiful. I take my last breath and leave all my pain and worries behind.

I enter into a blissful eternal sleep. I see a light thinking I've entered into the kingdom, only to hear screaming and a lot of flashing lights. I then see a doctor and a few nurses smiling and working frantically to pull my body out into the light. I look back at a scared and exhausted woman, and an even more scared man standing holding her hand. I think back quickly to how I was just a dying man a few seconds ago, but am now a screaming baby just being born. How was that even possible?

As I get older I begin to lose the memories of my past life as an army man and father of one. I begin to experience new memories as I enter into this new life I have been given.

My first memory as a new child of the name Nathan, which is apparently my new grandfather's name, I remember taking a bath with my other three brothers who were very similar in age as I was. We are playing with little navy submarine boats. I suddenly get this feeling of nostalgia and remembrance. Being only three, the feeling leaves as quickly as it came. Now at the age of three, you haven't had much experience to the outside world, so

how could I possibly know what the submarine was besides it being my favorite toy for the bath?

I am now ten, and my older brothers and I are in the kitchen eating our big bowls of Cheerios, with more than the one spoonful of sugar my mother usually allows. I hear her singing. My mother often sings the same song, but only a few verses. It is such a sweet and comforting sound. I suddenly get that feeling again. A feeling that sends goose bumps up my spine and makes the hair on my arms stand up a little. A feeling of hearing that song somewhere else or from someone else. I ask my mother where she heard the song she was singing and she said she just made it up one day. The feeling is still there and stronger, but I move on about my morning as if nothing happened.

It's my sixteenth birthday today and my mom and dad and my three older brothers are singing around me, while I blow out the candles on my vanilla birthday cake. They take me around the backyard and toward the front driveway. There my grandfather sits in a beautiful red truck and my dad whispers in my ear, "It's all yours, bud." Here it was again, that feeling of hearing that before.

With all the emotions of my birthday, I can remember all the past feelings that I've had growing up as Nathan. Although only a few, I remember them all so clearly. Then I get some memories that feel like dreams rushing into my head. I can see the boat, but it's so lifelike in my head. I can hear a woman singing the morning song, but it's not my mother's voice. I can hear and see the red truck, but it doesn't quite look the same.

Why do I have these memories in my head that I haven't quite experienced? Then it hits me! I've lived a life like this one before. All the nostalgia that I have felt before feels so real to me now. This feeling of Déjà vu is what keeps coming over me. My next question is, who was I before? I come back to reality when my mom shakes me with excitement and asks "Don't you just love the color?"

Citation

Bombsquad. "Post." Facebook, 24 Nov. 2017, www.Facebook.com/BombsquadStudios

Ress, Cassie

It has been a great experience getting to know Cassie and her writing over this past semester in our 257 sessions. It would be unfair to say that Cassie did everything she needed to do for the class—she went beyond any expectations. Cassie's dedication for writing was present in every session. Every time I sat down and started looking at what she had brought, I knew it was a work of passion and thought. She had always taken the class, and, more importantly, her writing seriously, and in the end it shows wonderfully: as she has a collection of great works. In our sessions, we mainly focused on the flow of a piece as a means to championing what is trying to be told. I wish Cassie the best in her future writings, and I am confident that she will achieve what she wants if she puts her mind to it.

~Jared Bukart

What Do You Want?

What do you want?

Those are the words I hear the most.

What do you want?

For your birthday, for Christmas, in this relationship, in the future.

What do you want?

I often respond with simple things.

Clothes, money, books, flowers, a laptop.

Things people can buy, things you find on a shelf.

But clothes, money, books...they are not what I really want.

What I want is not something you can buy.

It's not something you can find on a shelf.

It's not a gift you can wrap or a card you give.

What I want is something else entirely.

What I want is to feel safe again.

To be happy like I was when I was 5 years old playing with my Barbie dolls.

To walk around and not feel like at any moment I am going to burst out crying.

What I want is to go to bed at night and not have nightmares about the men who said they love me but just use me as a throw away pleasure toy.

To not wake up in the middle of the night crying because I can't get the image of him beating me emotionally and verbally just because I wanted to sing a song.

What I want is to not be scared of walking around my school feeling that if a man with a gun came in and shot someone that I wish he would shoot me first just so I could be free from the pain.

What I want is to have someone love me for me and not who I try to be.

To have someone there to comfort me when I feel like hurting myself.

To not be invisible to everyone except the people who see a way to use me.

To not have to hide in my shell 24/7/365 days a year.

To not curl up and cry when I have panic attack after panic attack.

What I want is not something you can buy on a shelf or online, it's not something that you can wrap and exchange at Christmas.

What I want is not clothes, money, or books.

No.

What I want is something else entirely.

Betrayed

March 16th, 2001

Lucas said he loved me, wanted me to always be his; marry him and be his children's mother. He even gave me a rose, with a box that had a dazzling necklace in it. Though I didn't realize then, that it was a complete lie. Lucas had me thinking that he was The One for me.

I believed he was telling the truth until I walked in on them together, embracing heavily. His hands crawling all over her body, Lucas's lips on her neck. Her saying his name over and over, stretching her neck upward so he could kiss everywhere he could, and wrapping her leg around him so he was even more close to her. I staggered back and hit the door accidentally. Slam!!!! They tore apart and stared at me.

I finally got a good look at the girl who was in my bed with him. Red wavy hair; hazel eyes, fair skin, beautiful... she was everything I wasn't; I had brown hair that came down past my shoulders, dark brown eyes, and plain clothes. Though that was when I noticed the necklace that was tied around her thin perfect neck. It was the one he gave to me on our two-year anniversary, when he promised he would marry me.

I watched her grab her shirt from the floor to cover the lacy pink bra she had on, as he zipped and buttoned up his pants and tried to grab for his own shirt. My eyes were starting to water when I turned around, opened the door and walked out. I could hear him screaming my name "Veronica! Veronica I can explain!!" I didn't stop walking till I was out of the house and in my car. When I was driving away, I saw him come out the front door and run to the edge of the yard-still putting on his shirt.

March 20th, 2001

I hadn't seen him or talked to him in days, nor did I want to. I only had been gone for almost three weeks helping my cousin do a research project in Mexico, when he found that other girl to replace me in everything I was to him. I slept at my best friend Ava's house not daring to go back where I knew I would just get my heart broken. Why couldn't he have waited a few weeks for me to come back home? He couldn't wait while I waited for him to come back from his business trip that took half a year to finish.

I was sitting in bed at Ava's house, writing in my journal when I remembered something. My eyes slowly found my ring finger and I saw that I hadn't taken it off yet. I told him if anything not to get me a big fancy one, but to get me one that was simple, explaining that I was his forever.

I started thinking about how he asked me to his...Forever. He took me to a beach (just like every guy does) where we spent the whole day there. We were watching the beautiful sunset when he pulled out a small box from his pocket and held it. "Roni, I want to ask you something. I know we have had our challenges in the past though I believe we can do anything if we're together. So, Veronica, will you please marry me?"

I didn't think at the time Lucas would hurt me, especially the way he did. Lucas cheating on me with some other girl; I never thought of it, though it might be the reason why I said yes to him. Because I believed that he would stay faithful to me and he loved me. Though it was a mistake that I trusted him; the only person you can trust is yourself. Maybe now and then you can find one person who you can trust though it's rare that you do.

It was still painful to think about what had happened. Why would he do this to me? After all I have done for him-waiting six months for him to come home, helping pay the bills though I'm busy trying to help my mother. I cooked for him, and even stayed with him when he got drunk, yelled at me, then passed out in the living room.

March 31st, 2001

It's been a little bit over 2 weeks since I caught him with her. I checked my phone this morning too, 8 voicemails, 15 missed calls, and 24 new text messages-all from the cheating bastard Lucas. He must have known I was torn apart when I found him and the other girl together, right? I fell back on the bed thinking about what I should do. Should I tell him to leave me alone because he broke my heart into a million pieces? Tell him to have fun with the new girl? Tell him that he and I are done? No. he already figured out that I'm done with him forever.

I would have to go back and get my clothes and everything else I owned... though Lucas can keep the necklace he supposedly bought for me. I decided I would wait until he was at work or out of the house when I would get my belongings. I couldn't let Lucas see me so heartbroken when I would find her clothes, her jewelry, pictures, anything that used to be his and mine home.

'I just don't understand how he could do this to me...' I thought to myself as I was at my friend's computer. Checking the time, I saw it was close to noon, Lucas would be at work. Putting on my shoes, I threw on my coat and grabbed my keys. Before leaving, I gave

Ava a hug and a small smile before she went back to taking care of her little boy, Isaac. Getting in my car, I started the journey to my house. I slowly pulled into the driveway, shut off my car, and stared at the place that held so many memories.

Unlocking the door and turning on the lights, I see the mess in front of me. Beer bottles and used tissues litter the floor as well as the counters. Shaking my head, I walked up the stairs to my room. Having my hand on the knob, I heard a soft cry coming from inside the room. I knew who it was; he cried a few times in front of me before, but never this much to become a complete mess. Slowly opening the door, I see him, curled up in a corner crying and looking at the picture of him kissing my cheek on one of our few but amazing dates.

Hearing the door open, he looked up and saw me, "Roni? Is that you?" I nod my head in response and walk into the room.

"Yeah, it's me, Lucas." Putting my hands in my pocket, I look at the broken man in front of me. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

He looks at the ground and shakes his head "I can't go on without you here to come home to Veronica," glancing up at me, he continues, "Roni, please forgive me, I didn't mean to do that to you. She was just...she was at the bar last night and things escalated."

Sighing, I answer him. "Lucas, I can't forgive you after that. I could when you were drunk and accidentally hit me, but not now. Not after I walk in on you almost making love with another girl"

He stands up and stumbles a little bit, "I didn't mean to hit you or cheat on you all those times okay? The other girls were just at my disposal when I needed them."

Looking at him shocked, I ask, "This has happened before?"

Lucas clears his throat and mumbles, "a few times, when I went on those business trips, the boys and I got some girls to um...help us relax."

Shaking my head, I sigh, "Lucas, get your stuff and go, I definitely can't forgive you now after what you did and have done."

"Veronica, I told you that it was a mistake and that I'm sorry, please don't do this to us, I love you!" He begs staring at me.

Taking my hand out of my pocket and walking over to Lucas, I hand him the ring; slowly closing his hand around the small valuable object in his palm, "I'm sorry Lucas, but we can't do this anymore, please leave."

Nodding his head, Lucas packed up his stuff and put it in the back of his pickup truck. I walked out with him, "Good luck Lucas, with everything."

Softly looking at me like he can't believe what is happening, he says, "y... you too Veronica,"

Watching him get into his truck and pull away, it hit me of what happened. I walked in on Lucas cheating on me, I didn't talk to him for a few weeks. Coming back, I found out this wasn't the first time he had cheated on me, I kicked him out, and now I'm living on my own. Wow, so many things in only a short period of time.

April 29th, 2001

It's been a little less than a month since I kicked Lucas out of our house. Truthfully, I've been happier, of course it still gets lonely sometimes, but I got myself a Siberian Husky puppy to keep my company. I named her Angel, because she saved me in my darkest moments. She was my ray of sunshine; most of the time I go to work and come home and play with her. It's so cute to watch her run around and play with Ava and her son who visit me on a weekly basis.

After that day, I cleaned up and found a list of names, dates and place; Lucas had cheated on me with 12 different girls, most of them models. Of course, in a small town like Leavenworth, Washington word travels fast, plus my neighbor told me so I didn't have to guess how many. I called Ava and told her everything that happened, and she made me feel better. She gave me a word of advice, that you can't trust anyone but yourself. Seeing as how Lucas cheated on me 12 times, I believe that so well; but now that I have that lying, cheating bastard out of my life, I've been a lot happier...sort of.

That's when I remembered, I haven't gotten my monthly friend in a long while. It's been a little bit over a month since Lucas and I had sex, almost 2 months and a week to be exact. Not dwelling much on the thought, I went into my kitchen with Angel trailing behind me. After filling up Angel's food bowl, I set it on the ground, she started eating while I made myself some tea. Once my tea was done I sat on the couch curling up under my blanket and read my book. Angel came and curled up next to my feet when she was done and snuggled in close.

Not feeling good, I put my tea down and ran to the bathroom. Throwing up everything that was in my stomach, I sat beside the bathtub. Swearing, I texted Ava and asked her to come over with a few things. When she got here, she came in right away with the test. After the nauseous feeling went away, I was okay to do the test. I didn't know what to do and I hated the fact that I had to wait to find out. Thankfully, Ava stayed with me to help calm me down.

'Ding, ding. Ding, ding' the timer went off. I went into the bathroom and looked at it. Two lines, there were two lines. I desperately shook my head and tears started falling down my cheeks. "Ava?" I said coming out of the bathroom crying. She looked up from her book and ran over to me hugging me. "Hey Veronica, it's okay; it's all going to be okay. You can give the baby up for adoption or you can keep it."

Shaking my head, no I told her that I will not give the baby up for adoption. "The baby needs a father too..." I say sitting on my bed, "The baby needs its father...but I don't know if I can face Lucas anytime soon. I still love him, but he cheated on me... Ava, what the hell am I going to do?" She wiped the tears away "you need to tell Lucas, just so he knows and that maybe he would help with the baby seeing as it is his." As well as promising me

that she will be there for me through everything and that I can call her anytime I need to. Ava stayed with me until she had to pick up Isaac from daycare.

June 23rd, 2001

I stared out the window looking at the wind blow through the trees. Sighing, I put on warm sweatshirt and my tennis shoes and grabbed Angel's leash. I locked the door behind me as Angel kept pulling on her leash. Walking around the block with my Angel smelling everything and wagging her cute little tail I started to smile. Occasionally, I saw one of my neighbors and waved to them. Finally coming back to my house, I stopped in my tracks. I saw Lucas standing at the door, waiting. Sighing Lucas started walking back to his car; stopping when he saw me. He stared at me for a while, cleared his throat and said "h... hey..."

Quietly responding *hi* back to him, not knowing what to say to him; what was I supposed to say to the man who broke my heart, the father of the child I am carrying? I looked at him and noticed the dark circles under his hazel eyes, the same beautiful eyes glazed over, his brown hair a mess, his dirty clothes. As the cold air blew over me, Angel pulled on her leash trying to go to Lucas as she wants everyone to pet her. Lucas looked down and smiled as she ran over to him. Angel licked his hand as he bent down to pet her. "You got a puppy?" Lucas asked me. Nodding my head, I watched him play with Angel and remembered why I fell in love with him in the first place. He was so passionate about everything, so caring, loving, kind, romantic.

Knowing that I must tell him about being pregnant, I invited him inside what used to be our house. I took off Angels leash and put it in the closet along with my coat and shoes. Lucas took off his jacket and followed me to the kitchen where I made him a cup of coffee and water for myself. I praised myself for wearing a baggy sweater, so it wouldn't be obvious that I was pregnant considering the only people who knew was Ava, my mom and my doctor. We stood in the kitchen and talked for a little bit until I started to feel dizzy and almost fell over. But thankfully Lucas caught me and carried me to the couch where he laid me down and sat next to me. Lucas kept asking me if I was okay and how I had been over the past few months.

"Lucas, can you just shut up for a minute please. I have something to tell you." I said, getting annoyed. He closed his mouth and nodded, giving me the sign to continue. I took in a breath and looked at the ground "Lucas...as much as I am going to get annoyed by saying this, you need to be around more often. I can't do this by myself. As much as I hate you for cheating on me with those 12 models...a part of me still loves you. But that's not what I wanted to tell you."

Pausing I had to build up the strength to tell him. I looked at his face only to see in his eyes that he was scared and nervous about what I was going to say. Sighing, I looked down at my cup of water. I sat up straight and looked into his beautiful hazel eyes before the words came out "Lucas...I'm 4 months pregnant...and you are the father."

TO BE CONTINUED!

Rohde, Abbi

It was a wonderful semester working with Abbi every week on the novel she is titling Criminally in Love. Since our first session, Abbi had a clear direction and drive to make headway on her novel. Little by little, Abbi worked to develop her plot, her characters, the world within which her story takes place, and her voice. This passage from Criminally in Love demonstrates the emotion Abbi brings to her writing, accompanied by her developing art for description. The rest of the novel-in-progress is as enthralling as this excerpt, but this moment in the protagonist Melanie's story beautifully brings together the narrative threads Abbi has woven.

~Kathryn Wisniewski

Criminally In love

And for a moment, I had thought that was true, when the nurse had said this she was making her way to the door giving me a “good-luck” glance. But before she could push the door open, two figures burst in, they were my parents, I was happy to see them but not happy to see who followed. Dark suits, is what I called them or more commonly known as police. I reach out for my parents, running into my outstretched arms they squeezed me with both their strength combined, I could tell my mother had been crying for when she pressed her cheek up against mine, I felt the moisture from the tears. I hope what was coming for me didn't happen but it did, one of the Dark suits came over and handcuffed my left wrist to the hospital bed. It was happening I was going to jail, just like Liza. I held my mom tighter than ever, more tears dripping from my eyes. “We love you” was all I heard from my mother before they dragged her and my father away, she was fighting them trying to be by my side but I couldn't help with this useless handcuff on me, my father broke free and grabbed me tightly again, “take this” he whispered at me, pushing a small item into my hand, gripping it tightly. I didn't let it go, not even when they grabbed my dad away, it took three men to pull him out of the room. I couldn't speak, I was shocked, paralyzed. One of the taller, muscular Dark suits came walking towards me but the nurse stepped in his way, trying to move around her she put herself in front of him again.

“Do not come any closer, sir,” she spoke with a shaky voice.

“Why not,” he answered harshly.

“She is not fully stable, nor ready to leave, she hit her head pretty hard when she fell.”

He looked at me with a glare as to double check that I in fact still had a band-aid on my head. Glaring back at the nurse, “When will she be discharged and ready to go.”

Looking at the clipboard in her hand, just to buy time for me to process the situation that had happened, she looked at the suit and spoke more sternly than the suit himself.

“She will not be leaving this room until tomorrow afternoon at her discharge time of one-thirty P.M, but I will advise in advance that if I see any of you suits in this room disrupting my patients rest and recovery, I will go straight to your boss for entering without patient or parent consent.”

And with that, he looked me over once again but more like a piece of steak and turned on his heel and left the room leaving us both shook to the bones.

Schwark, Margaret

Margaret is unlike any writer I've ever met. Her stories are so original and creative. She has a way of writing in which the reader is pulled into the story, engrossed in every aspect of it. While many of Margaret's stories were quite intense, she has a way of adding little bits of humor and light heartedness to each piece. Margaret's stories make you think, and led to many great discussions on her writings in the booth. The submission Margaret chose for this publication is one of my favorites. It is a series of short stories, each of which make the reader question what's coming next, and how each of the characters is connected. I enjoyed working with Margaret very much, and hope she continues sharing her writing so others can enjoy it as much as I did!

~Mattea Schlender

The Grackle and the Desperado

High Place Phenomenon

There is something about steep river bluffs that makes a person want to jump. Over the edge. Out into nothing but sky and air. All the way down to the unyielding ground.

Daniel had no intention of doing this when he climbed down to the outcropping, but the urge washed over him, and he pulled back from the edge. He leaned against the rough stone and closed his eyes, breathing in slowly. The forest filled his senses; damp, warm, and silent. He could smell the soil and the moss against his back. In any other situation, it might have been peaceful.

The tower lay in the woods some yards away. Years ago, its field of view would have shown a beautiful river valley, with green spreading up the hills in all directions. Now, massive pines dwarfed their stationary neighbor, who had collected moss and lichen instead of girth and height.

As he walked back from the outcrop, Daniel glanced to where he'd parked the old Monte Carlo, and thought briefly about driving back down the mountain. He hadn't made a deal yet, after all. Maybe his reluctance was a sign.

Sign or not, Daniel started up the narrow path. The tower loomed over him like a sentinel, haunting and still. Places like these were usually covered with graffiti or garbage, but there was nothing to show activity except an indecipherable sign strung on a chain across the stairs. The Grackle was probably already up there.

Daniel closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then stepped over the chain and began the slow climb to the observation platform. He could smell the rain in the approaching storm.

The Meeting in the High Castle

The Grackle watched the thunderheads billow in the distance, entranced by the power and beauty. Wrapped in a long coat, he resembled some sort of shrouded bird. Daniel couldn't bring himself to look at the Grackle, who stood barefoot on top of the observation railing. In another time, he might have had a panic attack, or been sick, but now there was only a tight knot of nervous fear. As for the approaching storm, Daniel saw only the promise of harsh rain and tearing winds. The sooner they left, the better.

"Can you come down from there, please? It's just...you're giving me anxiety right now."

The Grackle ignored him, turning on the ball of his foot like a tightrope walker.

“Are you afraid I will fall?” he asked. His golden eyes glinted, though there was no sun above them. “Well?”

“Yes.”

Daniel felt a chill go down his spine as the Grackle peered at him.

“It would not hurt me,” he said, “like it would hurt you.” He slipped down off the railing and paced around the deck, gazing out through the trees.

Daniel had met immortals before; they were more common than people liked to think. No two were the same, and their personalities varied with age and experience, but there was always something chaotic beneath it all; a madness. Daniel saw it often, especially with the ancients.

“So, you need a driver, that’s all?”

The Grackle turned around slowly. He glanced at Daniel a moment before shifting his eyes away.

“For now.”

Daniel moved aside to let the Grackle pass. He disappeared down the moss-covered steps, and Daniel was left alone. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

When Daniel returned to the clearing, the Grackle was already sitting in the Monte Carlo’s passenger seat. He didn’t say anything as they drove back down the mountain, except to remark that Daniel’s taste in music wasn’t as bad as he assumed it would be.

On the Road

The premise was simple: there were places the Grackle wanted to go, and he needed someone to get him there. Daniel just happened to have the best reputation.

Daniel really didn’t care one way or another what the Grackle did on the trip. It wasn’t any of his business. After it was over, he would continue as he had before, and wait for the next opportunity to present itself

As the trip went on, Daniel would look back and realize his life was divided. There were things he knew for certain before he met the Grackle, and things he knew for certain after he’d met the Grackle.

Murders of crows meant death was not far behind in that place. A black cat crossing your path really was bad luck, but only because such beasts held secret meetings at full moons and sacrificed first born children. The blank-eyed girl working the teller at the first gas station they stopped at must have sold her soul to a cross-roads demon. Her face was too calm for it to be anything else.

Daniel would always be superstitious to an extent. Not that he believed his mother would end up a quadriplegic if he happened to step on some uneven pavement, but things could come back to bite you. They always did.

The Warning

Corn fields surrounded the diner. Inside, Daniel and the Grackle sat at the front counter, eating hamburgers that were more grease than meat. They’d been driving across the country for five days.

As much as he tried to ignore it, Daniel could not shake the feeling that they were being watched. It had started recently, creeping in whenever they stopped, and it was getting worse.

From time to time, Daniel cast glances at the other customers, but none of them seemed to even notice his presence, or the Grackle's for that matter. Not that anyone ever noticed the Grackle.

As they finished eating, Daniel noticed the Grackle suddenly stiffen. Before he could ask what was going on, the Grackle stood up and ran out of the diner. Daniel gave the startled waitress an apologetic look and slapped a ten on the counter before following.

The sun blinded him as he ran outside. Daniel shielded his eyes and glanced around, but the Grackle was nowhere to be seen. Finally, he came around the corner of the building and saw the other man standing near where they'd parked. He didn't move as Daniel approached.

"Hey, what the hell-?" Daniel stopped. The Monte Carlo was gone. "Where's the car?"

"It's there."

The Grackle was staring across the lot. Daniel followed his line of sight and saw the Monte Carlo framed against the endless wall of corn. All four tires had been slashed.

"What the hell?"

Daniel walked across the lot. As he got closer, he saw that the car's windows were open, and hundreds of tiny specks moved around inside, almost like static. A few feet away, the smell of decay filled his nose, thick and sour in the heat. He heard a low, droning buzz. Something was very wrong.

Daniel moved close enough to look into the front seat, and what he saw almost made him sick. There were flies, hundreds of them, maybe thousands. They filled the car, swarming over the mutilated crow carcasses piled on the seats and floor.

Daniel turned away and noticed Grackle was standing behind him.

"What the fuck is this?"

"A warning."

Daniel stared blankly at him.

"We need to leave now," said the Grackle. Without another word, he turned on his heel and walked back to the diner.

Daniel spent several moments frozen where he stood. He felt lightheaded. The endless drone of flies continued to fill his ears as he moved away from the car. He'd expected strange things might come from traveling with the Grackle, but this? This was terrifying.

At length, the Grackle reappeared. He passed Daniel, who was leaning against the shaded wall, and dropped a small key ring into his hand, then meandered in the direction of a gray pick-up truck. It was from the 70s at least; an old soul, not unlike the Monte Carlo.

The Grackle stopped beside the passenger door and waited. Daniel did not ask how he had come by the truck keys.

They left the diner and went north.

Susie Miller's Interlude

Beth Carlyle did not have a sister. Sometimes, people said that Susie Miller was her sister. Sometimes, people said that Susie Miller was Beth Carlyle. Susie Miller was not Beth, but she did have a sister.

Susie's sister was named Lydia, and she'd died in an automobile accident in Grand Rapids when she was twenty-two.

Ten years later, a letter came in the mail, tucked among the bills and shiny sale ads for Target and Fleet Farm. There was no return address, only a hand-colored stamp of wood violets on a windowsill.

Susie didn't notice the letter right away. Her son Ezra came in with a scraped knee, and she set the mail on the counter and forgot about it.

Three days later, Susie dropped off Ezra at the bus stop like she always did. She went to the Supervalu and did her grocery shopping for the week, handing over carefully clipped coupons. Julie Davis was working the checkout lane when she came through.

"Find everything alright, Susie?" Susie nodded as Julie scanned through ground beef, pasta, and cans of tomato sauce. "Mm, spaghetti?"

Susie smiled. "I'm making it for Ezra's birthday this week"

"Ooo, how old is he now?"

"He'll be eight on Wednesday."

Julie handed Susie her change. "Eight already? Good Lord. Well, you tell him Aunt Julie wishes him a happy birthday, alright?"

"I will."

"You have a good day now, hon. Don't forget to read the letter."

Susie was halfway to the door when the words clicked. She paused and turned around, but Julie was already helping the next customer and didn't notice her. As Susie walked to the car, she wondered if she'd just imagined the words, but they continued to play back in her head.

Don't forget to read the letter...don't forget to read the letter. What letter?

Susie drove home with her groceries, growing more and more concerned by what had happened at the Supervalu. Now that she thought about it, the voice hadn't even sounded like Julie.

Beth's

The name of the restaurant was Beth's Twin Bluff Restaurant, but no one called it that. They just called it Beth's. The context was usually something like this:

'Hey, we're going to Beth's for brunch, you wanna join us?' or 'I like your t-shirt.' 'Oh, thanks, I got it at Beth's' or 'Hey, do you remember that time we went to Beth's and they ran out of pie?'

Except they never said the last one. Beth's had never run out of pie. It never ran out of anything.

Beth's had opened one Sunday morning in June. No one in Melson remembered the old building on the edge of town being renovated back from the throes of collapse, but it was. Neither did they recall any advertisement for a new restaurant, but there was the sign, and the white-painted building at the base of Pierre's Bluff and the Lost Sister.

That first day, the line was out the door. Though people hardly knew how it had gotten there, Beth's was clearly the place to be. By afternoon, the talk was that they would "run out of food at this rate." Because really, the entire town had come through at one point or another. But Beth's never did run out of food. It never ran out of anything.

By the time the gray pick-up rolled into the parking lot, Beth's had been serving up hometown cooking for five years. While the line no longer stretched out the door, you'd be hard-pressed to find a table on a Sunday morning.

Beth's was the best. Everyone said so. The strawberry rhubarb pie had been voted finest in the county four years running, with an almost certain fifth victory on the horizon.

Daniel sat on an old wooden chair with a calico cushion. All around him lay the epitomes of Midwestern small-town charm: patterned wallpaper; little knick-knack shelves with delicate scroll woodcarving; waitresses that knew you by name and asked how your kids or grandkids were doing as they filled your mug with fresh coffee. Daniel couldn't say why, but it unnerved him.

Their waitress' name was Susie. Like the other waitresses, she was cheerful and welcoming, and commented on the torrential downpour outside.

"It keeps raining like this we're gonna run out of places to put it."

Daniel nodded and mumbled a reply. He ordered a Denver omelet for himself and two soft-boiled eggs with toast and bacon for the Grackle, who'd disappeared into the bathroom as soon as they arrived, and still hadn't come out.

Before Susie walked away, Daniel asked, "Is Beth a real person?"

Susie's eyebrows were raised slightly when she turned back. "Sorry?"

"The Beth in the restaurant name. Is she a real person?"

Susie laughed. "As far as I know. Or else she's a ghost." She nodded to a woman standing at the hostess station with a new group of customers. "That's Beth. She started this place a few years ago. Wonderful lady."

Daniel nodded, never taking his eyes off Beth as she led the customers to their table. She and Susie looked remarkably alike.

"A lot of people say we look like sisters, actually," Susie said, laughing again. "We're not, but she's certainly real."

As Susie turned around, she jumped and almost dropped the pot of coffee. The Grackle was standing right behind her.

"Oh Lordy, hon, you scared me."

"I'm sorry."

The Grackle stared intently at her. For a moment, Susie seemed about to reply, but then she blinked and turned away to refill someone's coffee. The Grackle sat down.

"I've never heard you apologize to anyone before," said Daniel

"Her sister died."

The Grackle spoke with such nonchalance that it took Daniel a moment to register what he had said. Meanwhile, the Grackle grabbed a handful of sugar packets and began to dump them one by one into his mug, watching the streams of crystals tumble out.

Still unnerved by the comment, Daniel glanced around to see if anyone was watching. As usual, no one seemed to notice them, but then Daniel happened to look at the hostess station.

Beth was staring at them. Her arms hung at her sides, and she did not blink.

When Daniel finally managed to tear his eyes away, his heart was pounding, and he felt like he'd been plunged into icy water.

The Grackle was still opening sugar packets.

"She does not want me here, but she understands," he said. "My friends are few and far between."

"...Right."

Daniel took a sip of coffee. He didn't ask what the Grackle meant, but he wondered if the storm had something to do with the incident in Iowa. The rain still showed no sign of letting up.

Seemingly engrossed in the packets of sugar, the Grackle thought about the last time he'd taken shelter from a storm like this.

Rain Interlude

It happened one evening in some city or another; the Grackle couldn't remember. He had never meant to wander into the decrepit theater, but it was raining and cold and the glowing neon pulled him in like a moth.

He walked past the ticket counter, past the single, blank-eyed usher, and into the dark auditorium. He sat near the back, close to the wall, in a chair whose upholstery had come straight from an apocalyptic wasteland-which only meant that it was worn, and full of holes that might have come from mice or might not have.

The only other people in the theater, an old man and several young adults, never noticed him. They had no reason to.

The movie began with a black screen. The already-low lights dimmed to nothing and music came from crackling speakers. Amid the smells of cigarettes and stale popcorn and rotting fabric, a story of nothing flashed before the Grackle's eyes. Never once did he blink.

After a time, the pictures ended and words rose out of one void and into another. The old man and the young people left, as damp and dejected as when they'd entered, and still oblivious to the thin figure in the last row.

The room lay silent. No one came to sweep. The Grackle sat alone until he knew the rain outside had stopped. He stood and left the seats and smell and peeling paint behind.

In the lobby, the Grackle stopped at the door and peered at the woman behind the ticket counter. Her eyes were golden, and she watched him in silence. After a moment, she nodded, and the Grackle nodded back before disappearing into the night.

The theater burned down two days later.

Scott, Dashanay

Dashanay and I had deep intellectual conversations each time we met as we discussed the inspiration for her writing. I have come to learn that she is not afraid to write the truth. She is not afraid to question the world, and explore why things are the way they are and why people do the things they do. Everyone is wondering the same thing; Dashanay is just bold enough to write about it. During our sessions, we worked to shave her writing down to the message she wishes to get across, while staying true to her own unique voice. Everyone should read what Dashanay has to say, it brings clarity to this chaotic world!

~Emmalea Stirn

True Story

Who best to start a book about you, than you?
Would you rather someone write your story, or you live it through.
It's your life, and you should choose.
And if you are indecisive, than let life choose you.
Just remember growth is the objective, as well as, finding your truths.

In your book of life, the page starts, and ends with your day.
But only you determine if that page stays.
If you'd like, you have the choice to rewrite
And leave the empty space for you to explain.
Just don't forget there's always time for a new page,
and you determine the end and start of your day.

For those who feel less than, just remember no book is too thin.
Some books may seem better, but your story has yet to end.
When you feel a lack of confidence fill your pages from within.
Remember that your story is for you, and their story is for them.
Understand that only you can write your purpose & live it through.

Loner

I've always been a loner.

sometimes by choice & always because of the unknown.
with people there is uncertainty.

I am uncertain if I could ever be
who they want me to be and
still be ...
me?

If so I wonder who will be there in the long run &
who's waiting for the chance to leave.

I've always been a loner.

sometimes by choice & always because of the unknown.
with me there is sanity.

I can breathe
I can think
I can see
where I want to be in the long run.

What's uncertain is who will be there to witness my success,
who will be there during hard times, late nights, and have my back?

Meanwhile,
those who left will watch with greed and envy wishing they didn't leave.

I've always been a loner.

sometimes by choice and always because of the unknown.
with me there is comfort.

there's so much grey space between fake and real,
there's so much uncertainty about the known,
there's so much certainty about not being wrong
there's no real value that comes with being known.

I've always been a loner,

my love for being alone outweighs the need to know.

What is

What is Success?

Is it the accomplishments we make?
Or is it the challenges we conquer?

Why are some people birthed into wealth?
And some people birthed into poverty?

Waiting to be labeled as a product of their environment
Is this fate?

What is fate?

Is it a set timeline
Of events that await?

Are we supposed to
Configure the unknown
Or are we supposed to wait?

Again what is fate?

What is time?

Is it how long we have to live
Or how long we live our life?

Am I supposed to let god
Or am I supposed to live for "I"?

What is life?

Is it a collaboration of experiences
Or is it the constant finding of "I"?

Am I supposed to live for experiences
Or am I supposed to live to find?

What is greatness?

Is it the time we spend aspiring
Or is it the mistakes we make?

Is it better to just wonder?
Or is it better to learn as we create...
What we recall as great.

Tough Love

Let me save you
from the love you think will hurt you.
Remember love is not the criminal, you are.
Your actions are holding you hostage to a love you claim you don't want.

Your preference don't change, and your mindset remains the same,
how could you expect a different result?

Love doesn't abuse people.
People abuse love.
Remember that love is a human thing,
and humans can use love how they want.

Remember that everyone doesn't love the same and
love comes in many shapes and stains.
You may be unhappy with your love you're in
because that is the wrong love for you,
as I stated before it's up to you to choose.

Some love success, food, or family.
Some love people, money, or cars.
Some love faults, some people love hard,
at the same time there's people who don't know how to love at all

There are many obstacles with love
But obstacles are made to be conquered.
The most important action in love is figuring out what's right.
There's Different kinds of love and different kinds of like.

Self-love

Self-love

Is the way you treat yourself
When no one else is around.

Self-love

Is overused and misunderstood.

Self-love

Is something you may see,
But it can also be hidden.

Self-love

Is constantly changing
And never took place the same way
Amongst different people.

Self-Love

Is something that can't be brought.

Self-love

Is a reoccurring activity that requires time,
Commitment, and continuous self-evaluation.

Self-love

Is a task that is taught which means it can be forgotten.

Self-love

Is the drive in oneself to create the best version that they can be,
Self-love is loving every inch of thee ...

Sellers, Clarinda

I had a wonderful time working with Clarinda this past semester. She is a very talented writer who never ceases to impress me. What always amazed me about Clarinda was the diversity that she had in all of her pieces. One week she would bring in a piece that was lighthearted and fun, and the next week she would bring in something that was filled with emotion and drama. Clarinda was never afraid to step out of her comfort zone and try writing about something new. She has grown a lot as a writer during these sessions, and I feel honored to have had the opportunity to support her this past semester. Clarinda has worked very hard on both of these pieces and I am excited for everyone to be able to read them.

~Aubrey Nycz

Winter Will

Winter will arrive, and
Summer will pass.
You cannot stop the unstoppable.

Babies will grow up and
Our parents will age.
Time must never stand still.

There comes a time,
When we have no say.
When our bodies decay,
and minds will fade.

Nevertheless we shall live,
In our blissful ignorance.
We will play and laugh and love.

As we should.
All our energy is exerted
And our last breath ceases.

Winter will arrive.
Summer will pass.

Under the Sky

Cool, Refreshing, Quietly Still
I reach out and trace the pretty petals

Warm, safe, soothing sunshine.
I close my eyes, feeling the warmth spread over me,
I glow. Feverish with a tranquil mind.

When one passes another takes place.
A butterfly emerges from his wings, lazily drifting away.
He floats.

As the tree branches rustle, the bushes around me
Mumble and my Mind stumbles.
For the crows caw,
I wonder.

What could startle them, I ponder.
The creek creaks stronger,
The clouds grow darker.
I lay.

Quietly Still, my sky flower and
Butterfly fades into one.
I recall,

Oh, How the Sun once smiled,
The Moon pushes over.
How the Clouds once played,
The Stars take over.
I stay.

The Quiet ceases, the breeze blows harshly.
The Earth tries to swallow me whole.
I sink.
I fall.

Deeper and further to the core,
The insects dig until I am no more.

Finally, I now share the Sky, the Sun, and the Moon.
I can be whatever I please now.
I am the cloud in the shape of that pretty, pretty flower.
I cease.

Sylvester, Vina

Vina has been great to work with this past semester. When she said she wanted to write a short horror story, I was a little wary for two reasons. One, this was one of my very first learners, so I had relatively no idea what I was doing, and two; I'm one of the most easily spooked people on earth. Once Vina started bringing in bits of her story though, all my inhibitions went away. Right off the bat, the mystery intrigued me, and soon I found myself wanting to know more. Vina's talent in crafting suspense and tension played out strongly over the course of the weeks we spent in the booth. I began looking forward to our next meeting, because I was hooked by the story. Vina managed to create a well-written horror story, filled with suspense and darkness, but with fantastic moments of levity as well. I actually laughed out loud at some of the incredibly humorous dialogue that Vina was able to write into her story, which helped break up the tension and make it thoroughly enjoyable to read. I loved Vina's story, and it was such a genuine treat to watch her grow in her confidence and abilities as a writer during the time I got to spend in the booth with her. I'm positive she will go on to do great things wherever life takes her, and I wish her all the best. Keep on writing.

~Cannon Van Handel

The Mysterious Boxes

On Thursday March 8th, 2009 the Stevens family bought a beautiful new house on a dirt road outside of town. They were ecstatic to finally find the house of their dreams, but little did they know soon their luck would change. While the parents, Will and Stephanie, started unpacking the U-Haul, the kids, Kevin and Kristen, took off into the house. They wanted to explore the attic and basement before the extra belongings crowded all the good hiding spots. Kevin headed to the basement first and Kristen followed behind. Kevin flipped the light switch on to see what was down in the basement. There was nothing down there, so then he turned back around to head to the attic with Kristen following behind. Kevin flipped the light switch to the attic to turn on the light. Both Kevin and Kristen found a box in one corner of the attic. The box looked like it had water damage; the corner was bent up and looked like it had been sitting in that corner for a while. Kevin started to walk towards the box to see if there was anything inside of it.

Kristen grabbed him by the arm and said, "Don't go near that box."

"Why?" asked Kevin.

"I've got bad vibes coming from it," Kristen said.

"Whatever," replied Kevin and he opened the box.

What he found was creepy, but not really that unusual. There were some baby pictures and a couple locks of golden blonde hair, the hair was the part that made the contents of the box strange. It had some dark spots on it that resembled the rust on their parents 1990 Toyota Corolla. Kevin gently put the contents back in the box and put it back where he found it.

"Let's get out of here and not tell anyone about this creepy box," said Kristen.

"I don't see what's wrong with it, it's just a box with some sentimental baby stuff," replied Kevin.

But in his heart, he was genuinely intrigued and scared at the same time, wondering why this single box was left in the attic, forgotten in time to sit and collect dust until this specific day.

Kristen gave Kevin a dirty look until he finally said, "Fine! I won't say anything about the stupid box!"

“Thank you!” she replied.

Kevin then mumbled something under his breath that Kristen couldn't make out, but she ignored it since she knew he was just mad that he couldn't show off his findings. They finally went back downstairs to help unpack and start setting up their rooms, which were right down the hall from each other. As Kevin was unpacking his stuff that was in storage because it didn't fit in his old room, he found a box that eerily resembled the box from the attic. He opened it and ran down the hall to show Kristen, as he was running he bumped into his dad and dropped it, resulting in the contents being scattered everywhere.

His dad asked, “What's the hurry?”

To which Kevin retorted, “Nothing, just wanted to show Kristen some pictures I found.”

Will didn't question his son; he just helped him pick up the pictures and continued to his room. As Kevin got to Kristen's room he showed her the box and she asked why he took it out of the attic. He told her he didn't and that he found it in his boxes from storage, she didn't believe him, and they argued back and forth, until he finally convinced her that he wasn't lying. Kristen then thought that they should tell someone, but Kevin told her they should just ignore it and go on with their lives. Even though deep down, he was terrified of the coincidence that the boxes were extremely similar and had the same contents. The family sat down at dinner that night and the kids were strangely quiet, so Stephanie asked Kevin and Kristen how they liked the house.

They both replied with, “It's nice.”

Kevin added, “It has a nice creepy old feeling.”

Kristen shot him a dirty glare that could have shot a hole in a bomb shelter, thinking he was going to say something about the box. Even though she wanted to say something they both agreed to keep it a secret. After dinner Kevin did the dishes and Will cleaned up the leftovers and put them in the fridge, Stephanie and Kristen both went to bed. Stephanie fell asleep right away, but Kristen had an uneasy feeling from the day and couldn't fall asleep, she kept thinking about the stupid box and wondered why Kevin had the same box. She went up into the attic to look at the box that was up there, but it was gone. Where the dust that had collected on and around the box looked undisturbed besides the marks from when they had originally found it. Kevin finished the dishes and went to go to bed but saw the attic door open and wondered who was up there, and why. He crept up the stairs and saw Kristen sitting there staring into space, he then said her name and she instantly went off on him.

“You lied to me! You told me you didn't take the box!” she said.

“I didn't! I found that box in my stuff from storage,” he said.

She continued to accuse him of lying even though he wasn't, and he sat there trying to defend himself. They agreed to drop it and he apologized even though he didn't know why he was apologizing. They both went to bed, but Kevin lay in bed staring at the box in his room puzzled at where the box they had found went to. Kristen laid staring at the ceiling until she finally fell asleep after clearing her head of everything that happened during the day. At around 2 in the morning, Kristen woke up for some reason and heard a noise coming from outside of her room. She thought maybe that she was dreaming and that it was just her dream, but she pinched herself and was wide awake. She quickly hid under the blanket hoping whatever was making the noise would go away. She took a few peeks

from under the blanket, but quickly hid under it again when the noise happened. She built up the courage and shot out of bed and ran to Kevin's room, shaking him and shouting, "WAKE UP! WAKE UP! I HEARD A NOISE AND I THINK IT'S FROM YOU DISTURBING WHAT WAS IN THE BOX!"

Kevin woke up, rubbing his eyes and said, "First off, quit yelling. Second off, what time is it? And lastly, WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?"

"It's a little after two and I heard a noise coming from outside of my door, and I think it's from you because you opened that stupid box and moved the contents around," Kristen replied.

"Whatever, you're probably just dreaming, now just go away and let me sleep."

"I'm not lying, and I wasn't dreaming, now I'm not going back to bed until..."

Will and Stephanie come running down the hallway and shot right into Kevin's room.

"What is all this yelling about?" asked Stephanie.

"Yeah, it's almost 2:30 in the morning," added Will.

Kevin and Kristen both looked at each other. Kevin motioned Kristen to come near him and he whispered to her,

"Should we tell them about the box?"

"NO!" Kristen forcibly whispered back.

"Well, then what are we gonna say? Actually, you can tell them since I can't."

"Fine. Nothing, I just heard a noise coming from outside of my door and I thought it was Kevin making it and playing a joke on me."

Kevin shot Kristen a weird look but gave her a thumbs up.

"Mmm okay? Well no more yelling and both of you go back to bed," Stephanie replied looking confused.

Will and Stephanie both went back to their room and Kevin went back to sleep.

Kristen walked back to her room and laid in her bed talking to herself,

"I know I heard the noise, I know it wasn't fake. Why won't Kevin believe me?"

As time passed Kristen finally fell asleep. The next morning comes and she wakes up to find the box sitting on her night stand. She stormed down to Kevin's room and barged in to demand an explanation of why he put the box there. Half asleep he replied to her with

"What are you talking about, the box is right here..."

Then he saw that the box wasn't where he put it the night before.

"I swear I didn't move it, it was right there on my dresser when I fell asleep!"

"You liar! Why do you have to mess with me all the time? You know I get scared easily!" she yelled.

"I'm serious, Kristen, I think that box is possessed because after you came into my room last night... Well this morning I finally fell back asleep and started having a nightmare that mom and dad were possessed and trying to attack us," Kevin replied.

"That's the same dream I was having!" Kristen said nervously.

They talked back and forth trying to decide if they should tell their parents about the box or not, and Kristen finally convinced him that they should.

"Fine! But you're going to be the one to do all the talking," he said.

"That's okay," she replied.

The family went down to the kitchen for breakfast and everything was eerily silent, so Kristen decided to break the silence.

“Mom and dad, I have something to tell you...”

“What is it?” Will replied.

Kristen began to explain everything from the moment they found the box.

“Really?” Stephanie said.

“Can I see this box?” Will said looking at Kristen with a skeptical look.

Kristen looked at Kevin who nodded to her to go grab the box from her room. She went to go get the box and brought it down to the kitchen nervously. Stephanie and Will both started laughing and told the kids that these were pictures of them.

“Why haven't we seen them before then?” retorted Kevin.

“Because we thought these got lost many years ago,” stated Stephanie.

The kids looked at one another skeptically because come to think of it, neither had seen any pictures of them growing up besides school pictures. They were clearly older than kindergarten pictures, though, seeing as the kids are 15 and 17 now.

Later that night Kristen and Kevin were sitting in the living room talking about how weird their parents acted when they brought up the box, it almost seemed like they were trying to cover something up. Then they heard a noise coming from upstairs that sounded like something fell and scattering on the floor, then someone fumbling around trying to pick up whatever fell.

As they were heading upstairs, Will came running down the stairs carrying an old wooden box that had some stuff rattling around extremely loudly. He ran past the two kids without a second glance or saying a word. The contents sounded similar to a bunch of baby rattles.

The kids agreed that their parents had been acting extremely weird ever since they told them about the box, so they decided that they were going to do some spying on Will and Stephanie. Kristen and Kevin followed them around the house for the next couple of days, although after the initial strange actions their parents seemed to go back to normal... Temporarily.

“What was with mom and dad the other day?” asked Kevin.

“I really have no clue at all. Honestly it was super strange, that they snapped one day then were back to normal the next,” said Kristen.

“Yeah, it's kind of scaring me,” said Kevin.

“Me too,” replied Kristen.

“What are we going to do?” asked Kevin.

“I'm not too sure...maybe we could just follow them around some more and see if they do anything weird again. Also, did you hear what was in the wooden box that dad brought down? It almost sounded like there were baby rattles in there, but it couldn't have been because it sounded too loud for it,” replied Kristen.

“Yeah, we could do that and yeah, I heard it too but I'm not too sure what was exactly inside,” said Kevin.

“We need to investigate to see what's inside.”

“Yeah, we do, maybe when mom and dad go to bed we could head into their bedroom and look to see what's in it,” said Kristen.

“Sounds like a plan to me,” said Kevin.

Later that night Kristen and Kevin waited for their mom and dad to go to bed. 11:30 came along and their parents were fast asleep. Both of them crept out of Kevin's room and into their parents, where along the bedside of their dad laid that wooden box. While Kristen

kept watched of their parents, so they wouldn't wake up, Kevin quietly crept to it. Once Kevin got to it he quickly grabbed it and both of them quietly ran back to Kevin's room. They both looked at each other, while Kevin was still holding the wooden box. On the top of it, it read: "The Lost Souls." Both of them were creeped out immediately but were anxious to see what was inside. Kevin tried opening it but found out that there was a lock in the front and needed a key to open it.

"Aww dang it," said Kevin.

"What?!" replied Kristen.

"There is a lock on it which means I can't open it."

"Really? Maybe dad has the key somewhere, I'll go look."

"No, I'll go look for it."

"Alright, but don't get caught."

Kevin got up and quickly ran to their parents' room. A half hour passed, and Kevin didn't return, Kristen started to get worried that Kevin got caught or something bad happened. Kristen waited a few more minutes and as soon as she was going to stand up, Kevin came barging in.

"What took you so long?" asked Kristen.

"I had troubles finding the key and mom woke up," said Kevin.

"Oh, no. Did you get caught finding the key?"

"No, I hid it in my pocket as soon as she woke up."

"Oh thank God, did she say anything?"

"Yeah, she asked what I was doing in their room."

"Soo what did you say?"

"I said, 'I thought I left my baseball in here' and she gave me a weird look and rolled over and went back to sleep."

"Really? A baseball?"

"Well what do you want me to say? 'Oh, I'm in here to find a key for the wooden box that was on dad's bedside, so Kristen and I could open it and find out what's inside.' Like no."

"Well I mean you could have come up with something better than a baseball. But whatever, you found the key and that's all that matters. Now hand me it, so I can open it."

Kevin handed Kristen the key and opened the wooden box. Both of them were shocked to see what was inside. Inside were baby rattles and attached to them with string were pictures of kids. Kristen quickly shut the box and gave it to Kevin. Kevin opened it and looked to see what was inside and then quickly shut it and stuffed it under his bed.

"What was that? I mean I know what was in it, but-" said Kristen.

"Me too, but like who are those kids?" said Kevin interrupting Kristen.

"I'm not sure, but I'm scared. Like what if mom and dad killed those kids and kept their baby rattles and a picture of them, then attached it to the rattles," said Kristen.

"I don't know. I mean, I hope not because that would be creepy and scary. But what should we do about the box?" asked Kevin.

"We should just put it back by dad's bedside, so we don't get asked in the morning if we saw it," said Kristen.

"Alright sounds like a plan," said Kevin.

Kevin grabbed the wooden box from under his bed and ran back to their mom and dad's room. He quietly opened the door and put the wooden box back on their dad's side of the bed and put the key back where he found it.

Just as soon as Kevin was about to walk out of the room he heard the blankets on the bed shifting, he turned his head slightly to see his dad standing right behind him. Kevin freaked out and tried to run, but his dad grabbed him by the arm and spun him around. His dad started choking him while Kevin gasped for air, he was stomping his feet on the floor to try to get Kristen's attention, but it didn't work.

Kristen sat in Kevin's room waiting for him to come back until 2 a.m. when she fell asleep on the chair in the corner of his room, when she woke up she looked over and saw Kevin in his bed. When she was going to get up and head to her room, she saw that Kevin had bruises all around his neck.

"They almost looked like handprints," Kristen whispered to herself.

She stood there looking at him to make sure he was still breathing. She was thinking of waking him up and asking him what happened. Finally, she decided to wake him. She tapped him on the shoulder a few times and said:

"Kevin, Kevin, Kevin wake up," Kristen quietly whispered to him.

"Whaaaat?" replied Kevin.

"What happened to your neck?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your neck, stupid there are bruises around it and they look like handprints."

Kevin pulled the blankets off of him and pushed them to one side of the bed. He got up and went to go look in the mirror to see what Kristen was talking about.

"Oh, Jesus!" said Kevin.

"See what I was talking about," replied Kristen.

"Now I do see what you are talking about."

"Who are they from? Or what happened?"

Kevin sat back down on his bed in silence.

"Well?" said Kristen.

"I briefly remember what happened," replied Kevin.

"Well are you going to tell me or just sit there staring at the floor?"

"Alright, alright I'll tell ya, or what I can remember. I remember walking back to mom and dad's room to put the box back and when I was about to leave I heard the blankets moving. I slightly turned my head and saw dad standing right behind me. I freaked out and tried running, but dad grabbed me by the arm and spun me around. Then he choked me, and I was stomping my feet on the ground hoping to get your attention, but obviously that didn't work. So, I think I blacked out and woke up to you telling me to get up and realized I was in my bed somehow."

"Oh my God, I am so sorry. I fell asleep in that chair in the corner and when I woke up I saw you in your bed. So, I figured everything was okay, but then when I was going to get up and go to my room to go to bed, I saw that you had bruises around your neck."

"It's okay...I mean it would have been nice if you could have helped me."

"I'm sorry...but let's get some sleep and let's see if mom or dad say anything in the morning."

"Okay, be careful I'm not sure if dad went back to bed or if he's standing outside of my door."

“I will.”

Kristen quietly crept out of Kevin’s room and looked around to see if their dad was around. Nowhere in sight was their dad, so Kristen quickly ran to her bedroom and locked the door behind her. She ran to her bed and quickly hid underneath her blanket. It was around 5:30 a.m. when she finally fell asleep. Kristen quickly shot out of bed when she heard a loud bang coming from the kitchen. She looked at the time and it was 10:15 a.m. and was skeptical to come out of her room. She unlocked her door and opened it, a crack to see who or what was in the kitchen making that noise. She finally saw her mom walking around in the kitchen. Kristen headed down to the kitchen to see that there was pots and pans everywhere on the kitchen floor.

“What happened? I heard a loud bang and it woke me up,” asked Kristen.

“It was me, sorry. I was trying to get the waffle maker out and it was stuffed way in the back of the cupboard and when I went to go and pull it out, all of the pots and pan came with it,” said Stephanie.

“Oh my, I thought it was something else.”

“No,” Stephanie laughed.

“But could you go wake your brother and dad up and tell them waffles are going to be done soon?” asked Stephanie.

“Yeah, I guess I could,” said Kristen

Kristen was scared to go wake her dad up because of what happened last night. But Kristen headed up to Kevin’s room first to go wake him up. She got to his door and opened it and walked right in to see Kevin fast asleep and then looked to see if the bruises were still on his neck, which they still were.

“Kevin wake up,” said Kristen.

Kevin rubbed his eyes and stretched out.

“Whaaaat?”

“Mom told me to come wake you up because breakfast is almost done, and I still have to go wake dad up, but I’m scared because of what happened to you last night.”

“Hmmm, how about this I’ll go wake him up I promise I’ll be fine, but if something happens and I yell or do something to get help you better come save me. Also, are the bruises still on my neck?”

“Okay, I promise this time I will come and help you, and yes they are.”

“Okay, good I want mom and dad to see this and I’ll tell them what happened.”

“Okay.”

Kristen and Kevin both walked out of his room and then saw their dad walk out of his. Their dad never said a word to them once he saw them and just headed straight down to the kitchen. Kristen and Kevin both looked at each other like ‘what is going on with dad lately’ look and headed down to the kitchen. Once their mom got done making the last waffle, they all sat down at the table and began to eat.

“Umm what happened to your neck?” asked Stephanie.

“Well you see dad saw me last night and he grabbed me by the arm and spun me around and proceeded to choke me. Then I tried gasping for air and I was stomping my feet on the ground trying to get Kristen’s attention to help me and well that didn’t work,” said Kevin.

“What are you talking about? I never choked you. I was asleep all night last night,” said Will.

“Well his neck says otherwise,” said Stephanie.

“Well, I don’t remember choking him at all last night. Maybe if he would stop playing those stupid video games, he wouldn’t be talking so much nonsense,” replied Will.

“Dad. You choked me last night. The proof is all over my neck. Also, I didn’t play any video games last night, I haven’t played a single one in three months,” said Kevin.

“Whatever. Just shut up and eat your breakfast,” said Will.

“What has gotten into you? You have been grumpy a lot more lately,” said Stephanie.

“Nothing. Just got a lot on my mind right now,” said Will.

All four were sitting at the table, eating their breakfast not saying a word to each other. Shortly after they all finished breakfast Will went back upstairs into the bedroom and slammed the door shut.

“What’s up with dad?” asked Kristen.

“I’m not sure, but it scares me that he put his hands around Kevin. Like what else is he capable of?” said Stephanie.

“Exactly, I’m scared of what he is going to do next. Like what happens if I’m next or you, mom?” said Kristen.

“I hope it’s neither of us, or even Kevin again,” said Stephanie.

“Me either,” said Kristen.

Kevin and Kristen both headed upstairs and into Kevin’s room.

“Maybe we should tell mom about the wooden box we found in their room and how it was by dad’s bedside,” said Kevin.

“I was going to, but I didn’t know if you would have been okay with me saying it,” said Kristen.

“Yeah, I would have, but I mean I’m glad you didn’t and that you waited to ask me.”

“Well yeah because of all what happened to you, but we should go tell mom now before dad decides to come out of the room and does something again.”

“I agree.”

Kevin and Kristen walked back downstairs to find their mom still sitting at the kitchen table.

“Hey mom, we have something to tell you,” said Kristen.

“Yeah? What is it?” asked Stephanie.

Kristen explained to their mom what happened ever since their dad brought down the box from the attic up until what happened last night. Then Kevin interrupted Kristen to tell their mom what their dad did and what had happened to him.

“Oh my, I’m so sorry sweetie that happened to you. I still can’t believe that dad choked you and it’s making me not want to even sleep next to him because what if he chokes me while I’m sleeping? Also, what box are you talking about? I’ve never seen this wooden box with baby rattles in it,” said Stephanie.

“I hope not mom and what are you talking about? You never knew about the wooden box with baby rattles in it with pictures attached to them?” asked Kevin

“No, I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Hmm that’s weird, I figured you would have known about it,” said Kristen.

“Do you want us to show you the box?” asked Kevin.

“Sure!”

Kevin and Kristen headed upstairs as their mom followed behind them. As they got closer to the room they could hear noises coming from inside, it almost sounded like a

demonic laugh. All of them stopped dead in their tracks once they heard “stop right there and don’t come any closer” coming from the room. They all looked at each other with a scared look on their faces and didn’t know what to do next.

“Maybe we should back away from the door and figure something out,” whispered Stephanie to Kevin and Kristen.

“No! Well I mean we could, but we need to stand up to whatever is behind that door,” said Kristen.

“I agree,” said Kevin.

“Okay, well here is what I’m thinking. Maybe we should call a priest to take care of whatever is possessing him and an ambulance for Kevin,” said Stephanie.

“That sounds like a good plan!” said Kristen.

Stephanie looked up the closest priest on her phone and called, meanwhile Kristen called the ambulance for Kevin. A short while later the ambulance showed up and checked Kevin’s neck and not long after the priest showed up. The medics asked what happened to which Kevin explained and they looked him over and gave him the all clear. The priest asked the family what was going on and then proceeded upstairs to the room where Will was at. Once again, the demonic voice said, “stop right there and don’t come any closer.” The priest ignored it and continued to walk closer and closer. Once the priest got to bedroom door, he opened the door quietly and found Will sitting on the bed, rocking back and forth with the box in his hands.

“Will?” asked the priest.

Will quickly turned around.

“Oh my God! Dad what happened to you?” asked Kristen.

“Honey! Oh my God, I can’t even look at you,” said Stephanie.

Will’s eyes were pitch black, his right arm was bent backwards, he had a weird, happy smile on his face and when he stood up his left leg was turned backwards.

“Please Father, do something and help get my husband back to normal,” said Stephanie.

“I’ll do the best I can Mrs. Stevens,” said the priest.

The priest started to do his ritual to get whatever was possessing Will out of him, then grab the box with the key and handed it to Stephanie. Stephanie quickly ran out of the room with the kids and ran downstairs as the priest stayed in the room. Stephanie open the box to find the baby rattles with pictures attached to them and underneath it was a newspaper article that dated back to January 15, 2000. The title said, “One Baby Found Dead, Leads to Mass Killing” In the article, it talked about how there were babies being brutally killed and their baby rattles went missing, also that they couldn’t find the killer.

“Oh my God. I can’t believe dad did this,” said Kristen.

“Me either, I have to call the cops and turn dad in. I’m sorry kids, I had no idea he did this,” said Stephanie.

“It’s okay mom, do what you have to do,” said Kristen.

Kevin nodded in agreement. Stephanie looked up the non-emergency police phone number and called and told them what her husband did. The officer said that they will send two officers right over to ask questions. Shortly after Stephanie hung up, the cops showed up at the house. They knocked on the door and Stephanie went and answered it to let the officers in. Stephanie and the kids explained all what happened and said that they had no idea that he killed babies and kept their rattles in a box with their picture attached. One of

officers asked where Will was and they all told him that he was upstairs with the priest. The officers proceeded upstairs and found Will and the priest in the room.

"Mr. Stevens?" asked one officer.

"Yes?" answered Will.

"You are being put under arrest for murdering babies back in January of 2000."

"What?! What are you talking about?"

"We've been looking for you for a while but had no leads to where you were."

"You must have the wrong guy because I wouldn't harm a child, even my own!"

"Well the evidence of the box with the rattles and your kid's neck say otherwise."

The officers arrested Will and brought him downstairs to say goodbye to his family and apologize for what he did. They also grabbed the box for evidence and then put him in the back of the cop car.

"Does he really have to go to jail?" asked Stephanie.

"Yeah, does he have to?" asked Kristen and Kevin.

"I'm sorry to say, but yes he does have to go to jail for what he did," said one of the officers.

"I mean he didn't really do it, whatever possessed him made him kill those babies. I really don't think my dad would harm a child especially us, well I mean Kevin's neck says otherwise but still," said Kristen.

"I agree with her I know he wouldn't harm a kid, I've been with him for 7 years," said Stephanie.

"Once again, I'm sorry, but he must be taken to jail for what he did and to keep the community safe," said one of the officers.

"Okay," said Stephanie sadly.

They all stood there crying and waving goodbye as the cop car pulled out of their driveway.

Wisniewski, Kathryn

Working with Kathryn on this piece and throughout the semester was a great experience. Watching her go from a page of ideas to a polished story was a rewarding adventure. As Kathryn explored a new genre while writing a Fantasy short story, we were able to have many discussions about word choice, tone, narration, dialogue, themes, and the norms of Fantasy literature. Kathryn is a fantastic writer and editor and I have definitely learned a lot from her during our '57 sessions. I believe this piece is an exemplar of her writing abilities and it is a great read. Enjoy!

~Damon Salm

Witches Burning

East over that hill there is a place that was once known as Comfrey Briar, though it is no longer called such. What made the place what it once was is no longer there, and since I can recall, no one has spoken of the events that led to its destruction. Arrowwood neither forgives nor forgets, but I have had to do both. And this is that story...

... The fire consumed everything, the tongues of flame reaching high into the night sky, far over the rooftops of the town.

The next morning, those who had been lucky stood outside with bare feet, hugging their arms around themselves, unsure of what to do or how to keep warm in the briskness of a March morning. Those who were not lucky would never wake to see the destruction left by the voracious blaze.

The skeletal remains of buildings smoldered for some days before the conflagration's monstrous appetite was finally appeased. The town lay under a grey blanket of silent slumber. No bird, no animal, no human stirred.

The first to return noticed it immediately. The tingling in the earth. The odd scent of unnatural ash. And it was fear that soon overtook them, overpowering even their grief for lives, livelihoods, heritages, and futures lost.

My father was among them. He stood in the center of what had once been our farm, the twisted corpses of what had once been barns circling him, a demonic fairy ring. We had lived on the outskirts of the town, but our home was still made of timber that did not escape the destruction that engulfed Arrowwood.

Not much happened in those first few days, but eventually, the dead beams were carted off and the layer of ash blew into the countryside. The land looked bare. I came to the farm with my father, though I didn't help him and my uncle haul the destruction away. Instead, I would wander out to the edges of our property to the west and peer into the tree line as the sun set behind the twisted branches.

The town called it Comfrey Briar.

It was the strange way the light played in the trees, warping itself into odd contortions, that called to me. The moss hung languidly from the branches, and the tall grass whispered a melodic lilt of unsung notes.

Two parallel trails had been beaten down, creating a sort of road that had long since been covered in a blanket of dead leaves through which squat mushrooms poked their bald heads.

When the last of the March snow melted, I followed that trail, my father and uncle locked in an endless debate of the futility of their work. The weeks of gazing into that mesmerizing tree line eventually enticed me into the briar's embrace. I walked happily for a time, squatting occasionally to inspect a flowering plant or a hole in the side of a tree. I

felt as if I had been walking for hours, but taking into account childhood's warped sense of reality, it might have taken me fifteen minutes to explore one hundred yards into the woods. A few paces more and I came upon a shallow ravine in the moist earth. I took careful steps to the edge and peered down to see a babbling brook, slowly conveying water from a pool of rocks down to a miniature waterfall a few meters away.

As I gazed into the enchanting swirl of water, I lost all sense of time. A cacophony of flurrying wings above me jolted me back to the present. My eyes snapped to the sky where I saw the raven take flight, accompanied by the sound of its plaintive cawing. The sudden flight of the bird jeopardized my already precarious stance on the edge of the small ravine, but when my eyes came back to earth, an even greater shock lay in store.

A face. A small, pale orb peering out from the reeds that grew out of the licks of water. It was a child's face, a child who could not have been any older than myself, but there was something unrecognizable in those lilac eyes.

I can still see that face. I still remember gazing into those eyes. I remember it as if in slow motion-the jump of fright of seeing that face, the twisting of my ankle on a tangled root, the almost motionless fall into the icy trickle of water-all while locking eyes with the strange girl. I see those lilac eyes in my mind every day, and it took me many years to unravel what it was I saw in them.

Wildness.

By the time I had detangled myself from the knot of roots and reeds enough to look around again, the face was gone. My father and uncle must have already noticed me missing before they heard my startled cry. Before I had thought to call out for help a second time, they were there at the small stream in the forest, dragging me out of the mud.

My father was two years older than my uncle, but they still battled between themselves to claim a position of authority over the other. The family farm had been inherited by the elder, and the younger's childhood need to please morphed into jealousy which sometimes manifested in irascible anger. Without the stability of an established farm, my uncle was a jack-of-all-trades in town, subsidized by wild hare business ventures in his attempt to buy my father out of the family's land. My father's status did not stop him from occasionally being taken in by my uncle's charisma. He had even taken a loan from our neighbor, Mr. Johnson, in order to bail his brother out of jail when his drunken weekends got out of hand.

This usually unyielding sense of competition dissipated between the two men as they worked together to recover my safety.

After they had hauled me up the shallow but steep embankment, my father knelt down to inspect my limbs for damage. That's when we felt it-a cold wind that did not fit the beginnings of April and the melting snow around us. When my father had concluded his inspection, we looked up to see my uncle standing tall as an arrow, eyes fixated on something in the distance that I had not noticed before.

It was a column of smoke and the hazy outline of a chimney just peeking through the trees.

"That isn't-" my father began, the quaver of a question in his voice, but my uncle's continued fixation halted his speech.

In the flash of another moment, I was wrapped up in my father's overcoat, being hurried back towards the warm rays of sun that would never fall in Comfrey Briar. I

couldn't be sure, but as I was whisked away, I thought I heard rustlings behind us in the brush, like a small animal scurrying away through the spring-sodden leaves.

It was my uncle who rallied the remnants of our town, whose rumbling voice boomed over the openness left behind by the fiery destruction. I was still wrapped in my father's coat, his sturdy hands on my shoulders trying to stifle the flow of tears that had sprung out of fear for the odd feeling in the air. It wasn't the fright of the fall that had made me cry but the electricity of rage crackling in the air around me.

"I think it is about time we shift our attention to what is really going on here." His voice echoed. "We all know what is in Comfrey Briar, and to ignore it is to allow it to escape from its crimes. Look at this!" He swept his arms wide. "Is this *natural*?" He said the word as if it dripped with poison. "And now! She's going after the children." My uncle and I locked eyes, but my father turned and pulled me away from the growing crowd of fathers and sons. The rest of my uncle's words faded as my father continued to draw me away. "She cannot be permitted to continue living out there and wreaking havoc on the lives we build here. Good lives! Upstanding..."

I could hear no more.

In silence, my father and I returned to my mother and my younger sister. My mother's legs had been badly burned in the fire, and she had been spending her time in my uncle's home, about a mile down the road, just outside of the ring of destruction. She ached from the burns and from attempting to subdue the whims of the explorative five-year-old. Upon our arrival, I was sent outside with my sister, evidently having recovered enough to leave my father's supervision. Even in the yard outside, I could hear my parents' furtive conversation, garbled by the glass of the windows. Not long after, my uncle arrived and the conversation between him and my father grew even more heated.

Snatches of their angry voices floated out into the open air.

"-necessary!" my uncle was yelling. "Unless you want to tell the whole town what really happened-"

My sister played in ignorance.

"-your personal vendetta! Your own hurt-" My father's voice. I had never heard him yell so. "She has left everyone alone for so long-" Some of his words were indistinguishable, garbled by the stones and glass through which they passed. "-would kill her family if they ever found out!"

"You speak a word of this," my uncle slung in return, "I will ruin you. Johnson saw you the night of the fire-"

More garbled speech.

My father's voice ended the conversation. He spoke clearly, his anger morphing into something else. "You ruined her once. Do not do it again."

That evening, when we were allowed to return indoors, the house was steeped in silence.

I tried to close my eyes and sleep that night, but the haunting image of the girl's face kept floating behind my eyelids, lilac eyes grazing my soul and jolting me back to consciousness every time I dozed off. They were not evil eyes, but they were piercing, a degree more intense than any other human eyes I had ever seen. I slipped from the bed I shared with my sister, taking a jacket off a hook and lacing up the boots that had been stained with mud from my days wandering our fields.

The night air hit my face and sent the hairs on the back of my neck rising. The crickets chirped, and I hoped no one heard the rasping of the door as I fitted it back into its frame. I walked quickly through the open air, kicking up dust as I wove my way down the road to the family farm.

I entered the woods and was calmed by the squelch of the moss beneath my boots. My feet carried me in the same wandering path I had taken earlier that day, or maybe it had been the day before already. My concept of time again escaped me. I had no idea if we had already crossed the threshold of midnight. All I knew was that the stars shone brightly overhead, casting a blueish glow on the leaves of the trees that rustled in hushed whispers in their groves.

And then I heard it. The babbling of the brook, the licking of water against erosion-smoothed stones. I crept closer, the same as I had earlier, carefully edging my feet to the brink of the steep embankment. As I did, I noticed many growths of a plant that I hadn't recalled peppering the banks of the stream upon my last visit. It was small, only about a foot high, with reaching, dark green leaves and clusters of bell flowers the color of... lilac.

I knelt to examine the closest of the plants. I cradled one of the blooms in my palm, drawing it closer to my eyes as they strained for sufficient light to study the flower. As I did so, a soothing sensation spread up my arms, like dipping my fingers, then hands, then wrists into a pool of cool water.

The hoot of an owl broke through the quietness of the forest, and I dropped the blossoms. The odd sensation dissipated. Coming out of my trance, I looked around, and my eyes fell on that tell-tale column of smoke rising from amid the trees, the grey swirls catching the light of the moon and scattering it in all directions like a kaleidoscope.

I backtracked a few steps until I found a fallen branch that looked sturdy enough to support me. I hauled it through the underbrush back to the small ravine, pushing it across the short expanse and using it as a bridge to scramble the few paces across. Once on the other side, I stopped, listening to my heavy breathing and both proud of my ingenuity and fearful of the newness of my surroundings. Assembling my courage, I began my trek towards the column of smoke. The image of the girl flashed across my memory. I continued my journey.

It was a small cottage, exactly what I would have expected of anyone living on the outskirts of the farms of Arrowwood. Perhaps it was a bit old, creepers of ivy scaling the walls and moss growing in the cracks of the stones, but it looked sturdy enough... and a bit homey.

I crept up the cobbled path to the front porch, wondering why my uncle had called this place "unnatural." There was an odd sensation in the air, a sort of warm tingling, but it was pleasant and welcoming, not malicious. I peered into one of the dark windows of the cottage.

The room that met my eyes was lit by dying embers in the fireplace. The smell wafted over me before my eyes adjusted to take in the dimly lit space. The enveloping smell of warm bread and brewing vegetable stew warmed my bones. As I looked into the gloom, I saw shelves lining the kitchen walls, precariously filled with glass jars that gleamed in the moonlight that crept its way in. Several large pots stood around the room, filled with rich-looking soil. The table was piled high with the same purple-flowered plant that populated the nearby stream. And a rocking chair sat steadfastly next to the hearth, swaying ever so gently, as if it had been occupied only a moment before.

The wind rustled the dead leaves on the porch, swirling them around my ankles, and carrying on its shoulders a chiming laugh. Turning around, I saw her. The wild red curls of the little girl. Her bare feet treading lightly on the forest floor. Entranced by the atmosphere of Comfrey Briar, I followed her as she disappeared between the trees.

I ran for what seemed like an eternity but did not catch another glimpse of the child, only hearing her lighthearted laugh floating on the breeze, first from the east, then from the west. I twisted and turned through the tangles of trees and bushes, chasing the elusive, desperate for something tangible from the ephemerality of the briar.

Having thoroughly lost the trail, I slowed my pace and felt the iciness of the wind. I wandered further for what seemed like an hour, and I eventually found my way to the edge of the woods. There was nothing left for me to do but to retreat back to my uncle's home.

I woke in our bed in the wee hours of the morning. Having successfully sneaked back into the farmhouse just a few hours before, I now wandered the house, peering into the small rooms in search of my relatives. I had left my sister unroused in our bed and found that my mother had fallen asleep sitting up in a chair in the kitchen. My father and uncle were nowhere to be found. In bare feet, I ventured out into the yard. As I looked around through the low-laying mist of early morning, I saw no sign of the two men, but my eyes rose to see a billowing cloud of smoke rising from the forest. On a tear, I ran again down the dirt road. I had not made it very far, however, before shadows appeared before me, looming in the distance. They came forward, and I recognized two of them: my father and uncle among a group of several other men. My uncle wore a triumphant look while my father's eyes floated, as if unsure where to focus. I stopped in my tracks, and the men moved past me in their crowd. All I could do was watch, fearful to move or speak. They disappeared up the road, and I looked at the growing column of soot and ash rising into the early morning sky.

The forest was quiet...

...These are the only memories I have of the place, the last of the memories anyone would ever have—a collection of fleeting images, always interrupted by a sound or a movement, a distraction designed to protect the fragility of Comfrey Briar. That cottage was Arrowwood's only hope for revival, but it had been swallowed with the same angry flame that engulfed our homes. The fire fed more fire, but I was never certain whether or not I was the only one who truly knew what we lost that day.

After we left Arrowwood, my father never again spoke of my uncle. We did not return to the skeleton of the small town for the man's funeral. After the day of the second fire, the plants with the purple flowers ceased to grow and the farms ceased to bear crops. That odd feeling in the air never returned. And Arrowwood was lost forever.

For many years after, I dreamed of the flames licking up the trees, engulfing the cottage, and ending in a wall at the small stream that worked so diligently to protect the briar. I would awake in a sweat, startled from my mental terror of the conflagration by a small face peering out from the smoke.

Wynn, Calvin

*It has been nothing short of a pleasure to work with Calvin this semester, and it was apparent from the beginning that he has a natural talent for writing. What I admire about Calvin as a writer is that he's an experimenter; he always finds ways to challenge expectation and tradition through form and narrative style. Even more, he does this candidly and without apology. I'm so glad he decided to showcase *The Funeral of Arthur Dennington* in particular, because it's highly representative of his prose style. It's evocative and embedded with humor that may catch you off guard, but I encourage you to allow yourself to be challenged while reading it, because you'll be a slightly different person afterwards. Enjoy!*

~Monica Swinick

The Death of Arthur Dennington

"I won't ever forget you." Being an honest man, those were the last words Arthur Dennington spoke before he died.

His death, a Thursday, around 9:35 p.m., didn't cause many waves in town. He lived a small and simple life; he went to work, ate dinner, went to bed, rinsed, and repeated. On his days off, Arthur walked to the river with his rod and tackle box and fished until dusk. Of course, winter caused a bit of a snag for him, so he would just sit on the riverbank for a few hours contemplating life's intricacies and smoking his pipe. Inevitably, his routine was the death of him. One careless moment, one patch of slick ice, a quick dip in the river and that was that, hypothermia.

In accordance with Arthur's wishes, his lawyer read his will to his ex-wife and two children, three days after his death, at four o'clock in the afternoon. Arthur was not a rich man and didn't have much more to give away than his little old house and the sad lifetime of memories within.

"Thank you for coming this afternoon. My condolences. Arthur was a good man and a trusted friend." His lawyer commented before getting straight to business. "Arthur wished for me to read you his last will and testament without taking up too much of your time, so I'll begin. It reads:

My Dearest Family,

If you are hearing this, I am dead. For that, I apologize. It was not my intent. I hope the untimely news doesn't cause undue stress. I loved you all and am sad to leave. I don't have much, but I would like for you all to have some things to remind you of me.

First, I would like for my home and three acres of land to be sold and the money evenly split among the three of you. This is the first gift I have for you all. I hope that the money, though it might not be a great amount, will help to alleviate any financial burdens you may have. Aside from the things I am giving you, I would like the remainder of my estate to be sold, and the proceeds given to the Jackson County Home for Homeless Dogs; as they care for creatures of the highest virtues.

Second, to my horrible ex-wife Tammy, I would like for you to have my 1958 Ford Edsel. You may remember this as the chariot which we rode to conceive our first, darling child. This is the same vehicle that you ruined the upholstery, because you refused to sheathe the swords you bought from the flea market that summer you ran over my favorite dog. Please, treat it better than you treated me when you divorced me and took my kids.

Third, for my first born, and favorite son Ricardo, I leave my vintage baseball cards. The set is slightly damaged, but you already know that. When you set my sitting room on fire on your 15th birthday, they were in the chifforobe you doused in lighter fluid. Along with the baseball cards, I leave the very same chifforobe. It may require a little elbow grease to shine the burned parts, but I'm sure you can handle it.

Last, to my darling son Jeremy, I leave my extensive Hummel figurine and plate sets. They are what you have been begging me to give you for years. Now, with my untimely passing, I give them to you. I would hate to see them sold, however. The only thing I can ask is that you keep them safe, clean, and untainted by your horrible cocaine addiction. Please, if you ever need money for drugs, I would only ask you to sell other things.

I love you all. I hope your lives are fruitful and pleasant.

Signed,

Arthur Dennington

"I'm so sorry!" The lawyer said immediately after reading the will, "Please, forgive me, I had no idea! He told me I couldn't read it until the specified day and time!"

"That's why I divorced him. He's a bastard in kitten skin." Tammy said with a perturbed grimace. "Well, is that all? Can we throw him in a hole yet?"

"The funeral is tomorrow at six a.m., at the cemetery off Fifth and Blanker Street. I apologize profusely, I really didn't," was all the lawyer could say before Tammy cut him off.

"Don't bother apologizing for him. Seriously, he was a terrible person. That is precisely why he lived such a pitiful life. Did you know that his own mother didn't talk to him for three years before she passed? He wasn't even invited to the funeral. One day the boys and I got a call from his father and he swore us to secrecy. We had to leave for the services while Arthur was at work!"

The lawyer stood in astonishment. Arthur had always seemed pleasant, never an unkind word for anyone, always gentle, and minded his manners. Was this the real Arthur? The mean spirited and vindictive asshole his family thinks he is? He could only imagine that at some point someone must have gotten him all wrong.

Tammy and her sons left the room without so much as a goodbye. Leaving behind nothing but bad memories and confusion. The air about them seemed sad, but relieved.

Ricardo and Jeremy seemed more than peeved that Arthur had said such things in his final words to the world.

“Ma, why was dad such a prick? I mean, there ain’t no reason he needed to out me for the *occasional* month or two that I spend in Tijuana. Those cartel guys are real nice to me!”

“Jeremy,” Ricardo belted, “Those guys are only using you as a drug mule. You know it! Hell, you told me last summer when you came back, stinking to high hell, because you hadn’t slept or showered for three days! Don’t you recall it? Damn no, you don’t!”

“Well at least I didn’t go to prison for lighting my girlfriend’s apartment on fire! So, what, she was sleeping with the guy from the gas station! He makes good money as a cashier and its honest work!”

“Boys! I’m sick of this bickering! Your father was a no-good son-of-a-bitch and he’s still making us crazy! Now, I don’t want to hear another word out of either of you if it’s gonna cause an argument!”

Her word was final. The boys knew she was right, apologized to each other, and went back to their hotel to prepare for the funeral the next morning. It was a stressful time for them all, even though they hated their dearly departed father. Before they knew it, morning had come.

It was dreary, cold, and a little wet; the perfect way to annoy everyone in attendance, of which there were not too many, at that. The lawyer, Tammy, Ricardo, Jeremy, Father Wilton the preacher, and a young woman holding a painted box turtle were all that was in attendance. Everyone but Father Wilton took their seats at a plot, covered by a small, flimsy looking rain canopy. Father Wilton stood next to the casket.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to mourn the tragic loss of our,” Father Wilton paused for the briefest of moments, “mutual acquaintance, Arthur Dennington. His life was a testament to the tests of faith God sets before us. We all know that his life was not one of grandeur and luxury. He was a simple man, an honest man. Now, I’d like to have Miss Melody Ansel, the woman who found poor Arthur half in the river and comforted him in his last moments, to say a few words.”

Melody seemed perplexed. She had only attended the funeral because she felt so terribly bad for the man. As far as she knew, he was trying to save his pet turtle and saved its life. She found him there, with the turtle on his chest, dying. Speaking though? That seems a stretch by any measure. However, she had been called upon to speak, maybe knowing all she had done for Arthur would give his family some sort of comfort.

“I didn’t know Arthur, personally. I had seen him around town a time or two, and he always seemed pleasant. I don’t think I can say much, anyway. I was just taking an evening jog when I saw him with his turtle. I covered him with my jacket to try to keep him warm. I knew the turtle must have been important to him, and maybe you all too. He said, “I won’t ever forget you.” Those were his last words. I don’t know if it will give you any comfort, but I have the turtle here with me. Does it have a name?”

Ricardo looked as confused as the rest of his family when he spoke out, “Dad had a severe phobia of reptiles. That ain’t his turtle.”

A mortified look was painted on Melody’s face as she thought to herself, “Whose damned turtle is this? Where did it come from? Why the hell won’t he forget it? Was he talking to something or someone else?” Knowing that her questions would never be answered, she took the turtle and left.

Arthur Dennington was laid to rest on a Monday morning, at the cemetery off Fifth and Blanker Street. He was an honest mad who never owned a turtle and was not missed.

Zamzow, Ali

Ali is a strong woman who writes poetry just as fiercely as she lives her life. I love Ali's poetry because it is her: unapologetic, real, and perceptive all at once.

~Olivia DeValk

Untitled

You don't make a noise.

You know this is how the boy likes you best

Like coffee made up of mostly cream and sugar

weak

Be a tree they say, quiet and there whenever he needs

Your eyes screamed pain, but your mouth had a Barbie plastic smile

You're his home, he comes and goes as he pleases

Your emotions, his doormat reading

"welcome"

He does not lock the door, he throws away the key, he knows

You will not let anyone else enter

The silo outside is filled to the brim with your sad

The wind, his words, are stronger than you and knock you over.

You become a leaf and float

You tell yourself

the good will come again

But the fever never breaks

The sore never subsides

The music never turns back on

The thunder never stops

Your skin is pineapple, yellow and green

But still you stay silent

Ways my father has hurt me:

"fuck you"

"boys will not like you because you

swear too much" fuck you.

"no one will put up with and marry your sister"

"college volleyball is a waste of your time"

comes to my volleyball games

sits in the stands

reading his hunting magazine

Has called me *"Maggie"*

That's our old dog's name

"you don't know when to shut your mouth"

Ways my father hasn't loved:

Hasn't loved my mom in years

Hasn't hugged me in years

Hasn't said *"I love you"* in even longer

To grandma:

Remember when I was younger,
well I guess we both were, and
we would go out and walk the railroad tracks?

When life was slow, and easy, and my mom would drop
me off for the day in the morning; I'd come over
and you'd make me eggs and toast. The usual.

We would spend the morning pounding the dough for coffee cakes,
In-between letting the dough rise by the vents on the floor,
We would go for walks, picking up treasures on the way.

We would gather railroad spikes, feathers from birds, and
funky wood for Uncle Ron to use and put his

birds on that he carved from wood.

Walking the tracks was always my favorite though
Trying to balance on the rail, or stepping on every other tie,
Not needing to stretch my legs to keep up, because yours are short too

Or if it was too cold that day, we would stay inside and
cover pinecones with peanut butter and bird seed,
creating little homemade bird feeders

you taught me about making, and appreciating
things
places
nature
and in return it made me appreciate
you.

In an alternate universe where he didn't kill himself

They would still be living together

She would call me every couple of months, crying when she couldn't stand it anymore

He'd hit her
She'd make up an excuse
She'd get out her makeup bag
Cover the black, purple, green, yellow skin

In this alternate universe God doesn't listen to me
He doesn't answer my prayers

She would call me crying on a Tuesday night,
The next day he would post a "woman crush Wednesday"

No one knows they are liking his apology.

In this alternate universe she is scared
And so is he
He can't control himself

He punches her,
And it beats him up too

In this alternate universe they both lose



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