

WORDPLAY

SPRING 2024 COLLECTION



ENGLISH '57 SERIES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

What a year! The Tutoring-Learning Center is a place of growth, personal and collective. We hugged, we wept, we commiserated, we dreamed, we studied, and we wrote—oh, boy, did we write. Once again this semester, we've chosen to make the English '57 collection of work a collaborative one between tutors and learners.

We owe so much to the tireless efforts of Jen White, the TLC's assistant director, who always supports our mission of encouraging creative writing and expression, to the behind-the-scenes spreadsheet magic of Amanda Meidl, and to Bethany Kobiske, who shows up for us all, day in and day out—from new stickers off Temu to ice cream sundae surprises and Friday popcorn. The front desk staff: Reilly, Katie, Isabelle, Libby, and Sophie keep us on task, keep the calendars updated, and do so much printing.

Our student managers did so much to brainstorm and improve the TLC—whether it was Reilly single-handedly keeping the TLC ticking, Braedon always showing up and taking care of the tasks other people didn't get to, or Micah, whose ideas made meetings more fun and whose care for others is always visible.

Some of our tutors will be graduating—Halle, Taylor, Braedon, Micah—and some won't be returning—Kylie, Matthias, Gabrielle, Chloe—but the TLC will always be a space you can come back for a visit. And I couldn't possibly forget the beautiful artwork of Patience Graham on our cover—an homage to Taylor Swift, the queen of tortured poets everywhere.

- Jarita Bavidó,
Spring 2024 Writing Center Intern

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Serenity's Embrace

A cool breeze snakes around wooden ankles,
Sending a chill up bark-covered spines
Shaking the smell of pine free,
Allowing it to drift deep into her lungs

Rain begins to fall, gently
Taking care not to disturb the peace
It soaks the moss running across the ground
Allowing soft, wet noises to escape from under her boots

A damp fog settles itself across around her shoulders,
Hugging her with its frigid hands
Seeping through her worn yellow coat,
Raising goosebumps across her arms

As she wraps her jacket tighter around her small frame,
She looks up, rain soaking her senses, the scent of pine deep in her soul,
Finally at peace.

“Throughout this semester, I've had the pleasure of working with Jenna on poetry, short stories, and essays for other classes. In every one of our meetings, Jenna has shown a strong sense of vision; she knows exactly what she wants her writing to be, and we were able to work together to craft it into what she saw in her mind. Her work spanned various topics and forms, but in each, it was easy to see her unique voice shining through. Jenna was great to work with this semester, and I'm excited to see what she'll come up with next!”

- Jazmyne Johnson

Being

the point!	...
I am my own	
flesh and blood and bone and	i sit on asphalt
(the middle one	i roll my hands over pebbles
(like love)	(they stick to my palm and
sits like syrup)	i hurt
i climb like a ladder until i can't see	from curling my body like fingers
the bottom anywhere	from being such a little shape)
from the top	
i scream:	i am red palms
i am brave!	i am sour pomegranates
i am pretty! despite all the sweetness	(like -)
sickness	they plead:
please, swim	"God, not again!"
with me, in me	
begin to	finally,
be happy with me	i think <i>my name is also 3 letters</i>
sip me and <i>see me</i> and	
i am enough! despite	and finally:
-ness	the point
the point?	
I don't need you	
please!	
show me	
(i want you)	
be sat with me	
(and	
drink me	
and)	
please,	
please find pause.	

Resistance, in love

I am Valentine’s Day:

a 20-year-old zinnia,
 the long-and-short of incredible,
 taking up a lot–
 in the city, the garden between
 teeth.

chewed & chewed, ground & crushed
 spit, gummymushy, wet petals.

–the sun closes
 the sky, the orange-purple
 healing bruise of
 it–the suburbs to the lake-
 shore, the breezy-spring
 cool of it–the city garbage
 and their sweet smells.

My inside, my sweet smells, me–
 my plot my garden, outside
 your city, thinking
 My itch, your teeth scratching, chewing &
 wrappingwindingsnaking
 up my stomach, intestinal-grass stalking,
 the wind&squeeze,
 your garden grime and my flower-
 grave.

you call me “fake-
 spring” & “one month”
 say my womb is “honey-
 pink & warm”
 –incredible.

I am the scratch, the real-summer
 allergy, the cool-
 in-corners bloom, the bent-
 sun glow, caged-
 up cupid, a saint, a day–
 Resistance, in love.

“There are too many wonder-
 ful things to be said about Reilly to
 be summarized in one little blurb.
 However, a great place to start is
 with just how friendly and helpful
 they are, always volunteering to fill
 in, take up another role, or offer
 friendly advice to anyone who
 needs it. They truly bring a special
 energy to TLC, the room always ex-
 ploding with excitement upon their
 arrival. But, what I am in awe of
 most whenever I think about Reilly
 is their need to write, create, and
 put beauty into the world.”

- Micah Kurtzman

Past, Present, and Future

Such a pity for Present
who is often ignored;
far from her siblings
who are acknowledged.

Past—the oldest.

Her charm is nostalgia—and pain.
Suitors pursue her as they wish
to relive old memories.

Future—the youngest.

Her charm is hope—and fear.
Suitors pursue her as they wish
to have her guidance.

Present—the middle.

Her charm is unknown.
Few pursue her as they wish
to find her purpose.

Perhaps it is pleasant

to forget about Present
and chase what's apparent
to live a life dreamt.

Outcast

Quite a disaster—it's
Unfortunate how others
Interrogate quietness, who
Exists in a society that
Tenders speech; so, prepare, and
Solidify your soft
Ego, once confronters
Line up to make a
Fool out of you.

trouble in paradise

forget-me-nots.
true love and respect.
a promise of remembrance.
a meaningful flower
for a worthless person.

a garden of forget-me-nots
occupy my lungs.
lungs allow for breathing,
but the garden within
slowly drowns me.

at one stage,
baby blue petals
flee the garden inside,
bleeding during its escape.

the next,
entire flowers
flee the garden inside,
bleeding during its escape.

although I may drown,
it's breathtaking—really—
to feel.

i refuse to empty
the life in my lungs;

thus, that life empties me instead.

“Over the course of the semester, Mai Kao's writing has improved significantly. Comparing her work from our first meeting to our most recent is amazing. She has grown so much in her metaphorical tones, structure, and flow of her poems. I am so proud of how far she has come and cannot wait to see where her writing takes her in the future.”

- Andrea Zwicker

Elegy to a Dead Mall

To the local pizzeria, in which I had two memories:
The uncanny mural of cartoon characters in the bathroom
Ring-led and haunted by the Pink Panther,
And the thought years later that we should come again soon,
Realized just a few years too late.

To the JCPenney,
Headache-inducing, sterile hospital lighting illuminating
Suitcases, perfumes, and clothes I've never seen anyone wear
That seem to have only ever known the clearance label, sitting for years
In silence only broken by muzak, a time capsule selling what no one is buying.

To the grave of Younkers,
Memories of shopping for new school clothes and Christmas gifts
Reduced to a husk, "Everything must go!" signs left hanging precariously
In the darkness with their friends the rusting metal clothing racks
In the endless field of moist, damp carpet and forgotten darkness.

To all the little things, the wood-paneled garbage cans,
The Mike and Ikes and gumballs that had only ever known fossilization,
The dusty fake plants surrounded by brick fixtures, static since I was a child,
The ghostly outlines of storefront signs, imprints from a brighter past,
The 25-cent novelty machines that could test your lifespan at your fingertips.

For only a quarter, someone should've checked.

"I've been fortunate to see Jazmyne's skills grow as both a writer and as a tutor. They have one of the most impressive minds for storytelling that I have ever worked with, and it's always exciting when they bring in something new. It is evident in everything they do that Jazmyne is destined for great things." - Micah Kurtzman

The Cabin

These old stones are covered in dew,
The fire that once warmed them has died
More than a thousand lifetimes ago
And the lives that once burned so brightly
Are nothing more than ash on these stones
Washed away long ago by the cold, cold rain

It was on a night of rage and rain,
And the morning promised more frost than dew
But the coals crackled merrily on the stones
Celebrating the old year that had just died
The windows of the house glowed brightly
With the lives that lived so long ago

And though it was so long ago,
You can still hear the sound of beating rain
That covered up the sound of hoofbeats and torches shining brightly,
Hooves slipping on the grass like it was wet with dew
The fire had just slowly died
When the first blow came shuddering through the stones

And they rushed, feet slipping on the stones
Of the floor that was so long ago
And the blood of men who had just died
Mixed in the spreading pools of rain
Coating the grass like red-tinted dew
With the torchlight reflecting tenfold brightly

And with the moon's sliver shining in the sky so brightly,
Hard and uncaring as those stones
That battered the walls yet to be freshly dewed
To the ground, where they had been pulled from so long ago
And over the screaming, the torrent of rain
Covered the scent of those who that night died

They buried those who had died
In the morning that had dawned so brightly
And through the lightly misting rain
They laid them beneath the stones
And they sang a song wrote ages ago

By men when the world was newly dewed
And while they died so long ago,
The dew still shines brightly on these stones;
Watered with blood like the rain

The Fae

Wild winds toss the tops of the trees
And fire flickers across the lake
As strange chanting fills the air
While shadows flit in the cold moonlight
Shapes unseen by any mortal eyes
Tonight, by cold, cold light they dance

The fires, charmed by their magic, dance
And smoke wends upwards between the trees
Unblinking, they watch with dead black eyes
Still shining wet from the waters of the lake;
The drums that pound, pure as moonlight
And the maidens who dance as though made of air

Their dresses floating upon the air
One song bleeds into another, on they dance
Staring upwards as though captivated by the moonlight
Twirling in the clearing between the trees
Mist swirls between their trunks, blown from off the lake
The trees seem to watch with ancient wooden eyes

And all the forest seems to watch, waiting with eager eyes
As eerie howls rise with the tempo to hang in the air
They dance on the border of the lake,
Those forms of the singers who slip in and out of sight in their dance
And streaming down from far above the trees,
They are touched with the barest trickle of moonlight

The forest seems flooded with moonlight
And the snaking forms glow brightly to watching eyes
The drums seem hidden by the trees
Or were they always sounding, beat throbbing in the air?
The maidens spin, enthralled in their dance
Completely ensnared in the lovely song from the lake

Nary a ripple disturbs the surface of the lake
Reflecting tenfold the glaring moonlight
So long as the moon shines, they will dance,
And all those who watch with mortal eyes
Will find their senses take leave, and they will fade into the air
To join the fae in their moonlit trees

So join the fae in their eternal dance,
To be stolen from that well-trod clearing in the trees
Untouched by mortal step or eye

Undead

This body is already dead
Its beating heart is pantomime
Alive is for weaklings
Dress me in my funeral best and I'll slaughter
My friend writes poetry like breathing water
The last thing you do before you die
Within everything Promethean
Is the longing to devour the divine

“Hailey has been such an awesome learner to work with this semester! They are currently working on a novel that includes impressive world-building, creative character depictions, and a thrilling plot. I have been blown away by Hailey's ingenuity, and they are always willing to hear my suggestions. My sincere hope is that they continue to write because they are such a talent!”

– Gabrielle Sullivan

Nature Reclaimed

How have we let concrete and drab bricks become our habitat?
How have we forced the wild into cages for us to gawk at?
How have we let our city lights mask the star's luminance?
Why are our gardens in glass domes with controlled climates?
Why are our towns separated by roads that prevent us from walking with ease?
Why has the clean air Mother Earth gave us been polluted by our factories?
When we finally rule the whole planet, will there even be any life left to it?

Let the Earth reclaim control
Let the sun shine warm our souls
Let the vines rule over walls we called home
And let the grass sprout wherever we roam.

Let the flowers grow to our heights
Let the stars decorate the nights
Let the wild be released
And let nature live in peace.

“This is my second semester working with Elizabeth and it's been incredible. She has grown so much as a writer and has worked to find her niche. She's brought in poems, segments of larger works, flash fiction, and everything in between and because of that, she's found her style. I'm so proud of the progress we've made together and I'm excited to see where the rest of her academic career takes her!”

– Kacey Schmidt

That Clear Blue Sky

As I sleep the night away
My head dreams of that clear blue sky
As I dream, I say goodbye
To the clear blue sky

My night is restless
Tossing and turning
Rustling and tussling
As I once again say goodbye

Hours pass and I am yet to say hello
Hello to the clear blue sky
Or am I to never see the light again
Becoming a friend to the night

As I peer out of my lonely window
I see a gleam of light
Hope fills my heart
As I can now say hello to the clear blue sky

As the luminous ball of light rises
My excitement fills my chest
I partake in a deep sigh
As I get to greet the clear blue sky

Now as I see the shining light
I cannot help to think how acquainted;
With the night I have become
As I now rest my eyes

I say goodbye to the clear blue sky once more
As the night proceeds
I cannot dream of nothing more than
The clear blue sky

Once more I awaken to the twinkling light
Which illuminates the bedroom
I draw the curtains aside to make room for the radiating glow
As I say hello to the clear blue sky, in this infinite cycle that we call the day

April

As the sun passes over our heads
Gleaming with its glow
I go throughout the day glooming

As I drag myself and tread
As I bask in my sow
My head cannot bear the booming

But not to fret, I am not dead
Rather I have taken upon my low
Going throughout the day once more looming

I sit down in dread
With the crooked caw of nature's crow
As I get up with my day resuming

While my body is misled
My mind begins to overflow
All I need is a proper tuning

Taking on my needle and thread
Far gone with my work instead
All I want to do is to sleep ever so calming

Perfection

Perfection never seemed so close
With seamlessly perfect shrub
Followed by a crashing river
Comes my vision of perfection

Although perfect can never come to fruition
I still envision the mossy landscape
With overbearing oak
And the mazy river

But alas it will never arrive
As the coming of perfection
That flowing greenery wave
Will never come to fruition

“Dontae and I have primarily focused on poetry he has written throughout our sessions. Every week, we focused on expanding and elaborating on certain thoughts and adding in an addition stanza or two. His poetry prompts you to think deeper about a seemingly simple topic, and his thought process is evident throughout his stanzas. He is perceptive and his works will make you slow down. I really enjoyed working with Dontae and his wonderfully poetic mind.”

– Halle Reeder

To love, as bees to flowers

That **urge**

out of necessity
and desire
for all the sweetness.

For only the sweet pollen.
And temptation.
The pollen that **allures**
and floats and sings to them
until they buzz and hum back.

When a bumblebee stings the right person,
their wings give out
so that their nectary sweet dreams die with them.

A bee can travel miles and miles
but still
never land on the same flower twice.

She uses instinct.
Grace.

But her heart—
That is what leads her to sting.

A death wish.
A suicidal kiss.

This hunger for **more** than just the nectar.
For more than just the sugarcoated goodness.
Buzzing with the joy of pain.
Living for the hope of dying

For a last touch.
One last taste.
That fulfills
and kills.

11:11

Levanto la vista
para ver la hora.
Me dije antes
que me acostaría.

Pero ahora son las 11:11.

¡Pide un deseo!

Pienso.
Respiro.
Parpadeo.
Mi corazón late con fuerza y mis deseos
crecen.

De repente,
son las once y doce.

11:11

I glance up from scrolling
to check the time.
I told myself I would go to bed.
But now it's 11:11.

Make a wish.

I think.
I breathe in.
I blink.
My heart pounds as my desires swell.

And
just like that

It's 11:12.

"Though I don't see Kylie much outside of our Friday morning (usually Taylor Swift related) chats, she has been such a great addition to the TLC this semester. She is bubbly and kind, and it has been so much fun to get to know her. Her willingness to jump headfirst into new scenarios—from spontaneous OWLS to paper drop-ins—is so admirable. Kylie's positive attitude is genuine and refreshing, and I am so excited to see more of her writing and growth in the future!"

- Reilly Crous

Moving Mirrors

Rainy nights, driving in colorful, distorted asphalt;
sunny days, walking in transparent, two-dimensional glass panes.
Shadows on lakes that ripple when people try to skip stones.

One could live a life in those reflections.

In storm-soaked cement that stretches stoplights and streetlamps,
The black tar, taffy road sticks its webs,
spins its wet and warm cocoon-covers.

Under frozen streams of water,
the pine needles sparkle in the brightness of the moon,
and the dimming of the sun causes the snow to blind—
nerves tingle from seeping cold.

Of faces in glossy windows during daytime,
distorted by pebbles thrown to splinter,
where scrunched eyebrows and dead eyes focus ahead or behind: around.

One could lose a life in those reflections.

Smothered in blowing, hazy snow—begging for a different blanket; mud-
dled in dirt-caked windshields—screaming “clean me”.
Smudges cover the mirrors, and no one notices.

Grief of ****

It passed, the empty you have to mourn:
teardrops fallen, silence broken, lone,
existing. separate. content. worn.
It passed, the empty you have to mourn!
Emptiness a heavy whole—torn—
you're outcast when you want to be in.
It passed, the empty you must mourn,
your emptiness light and freeing.

"I have had the privilege of getting to know Katie and working with them in many facets this year. Many early mornings were spent reading, analyzing, and editing many styles of writing, but the one thing that always stood out to me was how clear her passion is in everything she writes. They are an immensely talented writer with a bright future ahead of them."

- Micah Kurtzman

In another string of the multiverse, perhaps

i.

i am sitting in the back seat
i am counting the road signs we pass
in the family van with a full tank
i don't ask why my parents don't talk
staring at the backs of their heads
i am coloring with sharp pencils
in the lines of princess skirts
i am squinting out the window into
the sun that blinds me
from my parent's silence

ii.

i am adopted into the subdivision
with granite countertops
and finished basements
with kids my age
of parents who work forty hours
i hide in the bushes with her
hidden from the pto
moms selling conservative yard signs



iii.

i am sneaking away
from her bedroom window
crawling over the sill and dropping
hard down to the wooden porch
clothing rumpled
backpack slung down
thumping against my hips
her shoes laced on my ankles
pounding against the ground
hidden under my bed

iv.

i am screaming after she leaves
watching through the dirty window
smudged with familial fingerprints
i watch as she turns the corner
playing peek-a-boo with her child
hands hiding her eyes
voluntarily handing over her baby
to whitewashed brick

crying into cheap sheets
i can't—i can't do it anymore

v.

i am sitting in my cleaned out car and
driving home to my unbroken family

“I have worked closely with Kacey in the past and she always has some piece of insight that challenges me to be a better writer. Not only is she a fantastic human, but she also has one of the most creative minds I've ever seen. She's always quick with a joke or to come to the aid of anyone in need. All-in-all, Kacey is a highly skilled writer, tutor, and all-around great person.”

- Micah Kurtzman

Dust

I crawl
 On my belly
 Through dry grass
 Ashes to ashes and—

There is a manuscript
 Glass-caged, carnal, tepid
 It crumbles as it opens,
 Exhales—

Cursèd, shady, stripping ephemeral
 Feathers, meat from bone
 Take stock
 Ahead and behind and beside,
 A child's shoeprint, stumbling across—

Is this multidimensionality? Wheezing thralls
 Of Hatred, Of Longing, Of Autonomy,
 of organized discord, of apathy,
 timid defenses against extinction and—

I question, untidy,
 Cruel curiosity.

Would it have burned less if they melted?
 Is the cost of loss sufficient or deficiency?

Or am I simply ash and ashen
 Choking down—

“The first thing anyone will recognize about Taylor is their overwhelming love for life itself, but especially for the English language. It has been an absolute joy to get to know them and become friends over the past two years. They are such a knowledgeable person who is extremely accomplished as a writer already, which only means that the course from here is aimed for the stars. I eagerly look forward to Taylor's future. ”

- Micah Kurtzman

The Fog Lifted

The fog lifted across the sound. I came back to life.

I pause as the humid air enters
my lungs, astonished at its ability

to sustain my breath, though my body is
aching from the journey, though I long to
sleep. I remember the summer we found

a horseshoe crab close to death, on the
beach. Instead of releasing it into the

ocean, we kept it in a bucket until it
died. I imagine it's because we were
just kids, only now I feel guilty.

I imagine the things I would go back
and change. I imagine I would set the

crab free, but intervening in any way
is still intervening. I write my name
in the sand because I am here.

I collect seven pieces of sea glass on my
morning walk. I find one rare blue piece.

To the Vineyard I say *I am not in love*.
To the gull approaching cautiously
I say *I am not in love*. To the blue

sea glass, to the purple hydrangea,
to the grey-shingled houses and the

deep green lawns, *I am not in love*.

I exclaim with childlike wonder: carry
me out to sea, I'm leaving your shore.

Northwoods Night

Lonely cabin beneath the canopy
Fireflies emerge like fairies taking flight
Loon shrieks from the north-side nest
Faint aurora dances upon placid water

Warm glow against an endless sky
Sweet air through open windows
Waxen moon on fading embers
Sound of dice in a plastic cup

Bon Iver namesake album hums
Remedial noise stirs peaceful trance
Beth/Rest here on the old couch
Remission from worldly sorrows

Tap water like iron on my tongue
Climb the ladder to the loft
Talk until thoughts drift into
Cool sheets and a soft pillow.

The End of Seasons

The grass seeks the summer sun,

like I long for the return of childhood.

Why is it true that green is done?

The grass seeks the summer sun;

how I wish life was a cyclical run,

as the seasons dictate the wood.

The grass seeks the summer sun,

like I long for the return of childhood.

“Whether she’s tutoring or chatting or just quietly vibing, Gabby truly is a light in the TLC. She comes in every day with a smile and cute pants, radiating good energy wherever she goes without even trying. Gabby is patient and calming inside and outside the booth, and she gives that same understanding to herself in her writing. I’ve seen her poetry grapple with themes of home, loss, and societal trauma while still conveying messages of hope and growth. As she continues on with her education, I wish Gabby all of the kindness she has shown the world through her writing. <3”

- Reilly Crous

Haibun No. III

The sun was just beginning to reveal itself when I finally caught sight of the first ridge. I would be home by midmorning, assuming all went well. I slung my weathered white sack over my shoulder, and continued on, a joyful rhythm to my step now. The sun beams brilliantly burst forth from the nurturing orb and gilded all my surroundings in gold. The various shades of green glimmered as an emerald city about me. Upon the friendly ridge the dark green needles glistened before me, drawing me ever closer home. I paused for a moment on the crest of the soft dell, gazing out across the carpet of conifers. Then I dropped my sack for a moment. It slid off the rough gray tweed on my shoulder, and I gently set it upon the ground. I sat for but a minute to catch my breath and swallow a few morsels to break my fast, and then I rose alongside the sun, and continued on.

Gazing afore me toward
the hearth of my home,
I recall his bearded face

“Louis always had fascinating poetry and novel excerpts to share in our sessions. I looked forward to the chance to unpack the deeper meanings of his work and think about how nature and our descriptions of it can speak to deeper philosophical and even spiritual meaning. I especially enjoyed reading Louis’ *haibuns*, a form of poetry that was new to me but turned out to be one Louis was gifted at writing. He especially has a gift with the details— something so important for nature writers!”

- Jarita Bavidó

Embers

Dust being erased
As quickly as the ash escapes the board
Laughter in the hallways
Not invited to hear the joke
Wind pushing hair out of place
Air burning down the sidewalk
Music flowing from my ears to escape
Serenity followed by pain in the heat of anger
Pushing the doorbell because the key was forgotten
Echos burning through the house
Footsteps running down the stairs
Like a thunderstorm preparing to erupt
Door slamming from wind's fuel
For the last time the black and white tiled kitchen will rattle
A gunshot echoing through pots and pans
Roaring through the utensil drawer
Gunpowder floating
Ringing in ears while laid on the ground
Blood staining a chess board
Life saying "checkmate"
Lungs omitting no air
Saline dripping slowly
A flatline next to a hospital bed with tears in the background
Flipping through the newspaper to see a face deceased
Paper sticking together and peeling
Lowering into a plot
The sound of dirt hitting the casket
Wildfire in a dry zone
Heed the inferno of those who came before
Fire crackling
Flying up to the sky
Disappears

Emptiness

I sit in a room with dust flowing out of the vents and voices disassociating themselves from hollow bodies and I let my brain become a form of empty that feels not broken or cracked but just empty.

Not an escape from the assignments

I need to complete or any other form of deadline

I need to reach but an escape from the things I can control

how I feel. The emptiness is not a cage but a sanctuary

The love I have – how I show it

The fear I dwell in – how I chose to run or hide from them

The tears I swim in – how I keep myself afloat.

The emptiness is not an enclosure but a salvation

And in this emptiness I let the first thing that comes to me in and

I let it fill the everlasting space that seems to go on forever

And this thing is a firefly

Flickering a street lamp

Glowing a halo for those who are gone

Flying

Harmonicas from my Grandpa

“Harmonicas are actually really hard to play”
When you first opened the box it brought you joy

“This song took me a week to learn and I forgot it in less”
On Top of Old Smokey

“Yeah, this whole harmonica-gig may not work out”
If you want to continue you know where to find it

“There are better instruments”
Yeah, but your trumpet doesn't mean anything to you

“I wish I brought grandpa's harmonica when I moved”
It tasted like dust the first time you played it

“It's sitting on my dresser at my parent's house, untouched for years”
It's buried under books and papers, I can show you if you'd like

“I wish I could play grandpa's harmonica”
I can't remember why we stopped playing

“I love an instrument I don't have”
Just remember to grab it next time

“I love the harmonica”
I'm glad you remember

“I love my grandfather's harmonica
–scratch that, I love my harmonica

and I love my grandpa”
Always

Empty and I

Holding hands in a dark room
Crying over blank spaces
Laughing because our brain is hilarious
Calling out for a being and waiting in silence
Happy knowing that at some point there must not be a void
Screaming at no responses
Staring at the clock as if we can make it move
Wasting time because we wait for so long
Tearing up as they move on
Walking in hallow hallways
Expressionless as the space for friends grows vacant
Sitting together staring at a casket where we will go
Gazing at abandoned hearts and houses
Examining deserted lungs
Sharing sweet nothings with an old friend
Dying together

“This is my second semester working with Mydasia, and our sessions have been some of the most productive fun I’ve ever had in the booth. I appreciate how willing she is to share her thoughts, emotions, and experiences as we deep dive into her poetry. Mydasia has been incredibly receptive to all of my spontaneous revision ideas, and collaborating with her feels natural and engaging. This semester, she has really stretched herself as a creative, and I am so proud of everything she has done, including bringing in work she wasn’t happy with. Our sessions are one of the biggest highlights of my week, and I can’t wait to see more next semester :)”

- Reilly Crous

TW: sexual abuse

first ----

five years older

under winter's sobering haze

my youth reflected in the polished wood

familiar stance and broad shoulders, the flash

bulb takes my breath away

first ---- stabs the psyche, your hand over my mouth

a silent scream

a summer night

calloused hands in hands

and a sweet scent through the open window

enter a dark cave after prolonged entrance

a shiver not from cold

put up a fight to wish for the end, tears before

you said i ---- you

it's not ----

when you begged for it

lured like prey and protests silenced

lost the ability to run because you pulled the strings

five years later

the realization of power, your hand over my life

truth stirred in the exhale

that it was never ---- at all.

Power from Oppressor to Oppressed: Paul Tran and Reclamation

It is commonly known many societies structure themselves around oppression and the propping up of abusive parties. As oppressive systems continue to reign, so too will victims of these injustices speak out as a means to make sense of their trauma, share experiences, or even demand change. In their acclaimed collection *All the Flowers Kneeling*, Paul Tran explores the many emotions victims of abuse may feel and how the society surrounding them scrutinizes survivors. “The Santa Ana” focuses on Tran’s comparing himself to a force of nature, featuring anger as the poem’s central emotion. Throughout the piece, Tran explores how victims may take their power back through the appropriation of oppressive language and the pairing of historically derogatory slurs with empowering imagery and comedic jabs. Via this reclamation, Tran lifts their community and ignites the desire to fight back while mocking the oppressors who have sat atop their thrones for far too long.

Tran’s co-opting of oppressive language in “The Santa Ana” involves taking the power associated with phrasing or concepts used by oppressors and transferring it to the oppressed. Tran accents their appropriation with comedy, mocking the previous owners of these powerful phrases to empower their community further. As the tension of “The Santa Ana” reaches a breaking point, with Tran’s anger toward the society around them in full force, Tran lays scorched earth and quotes American Revolutionary Patrick Henry:

Nothing is safe
from me. Try me...
Give me Liberty,
Give me Death/Valley (133-134, 137-139).

Not only does Tran twist the intention of Henry’s famous words, taking what was a declaration on the rights of the Thirteen Colonies and retooling it as a Queer battle cry, but they demote the original phrase to a mere pun. Instead of bolstering the complaints of white colonists, it champions the strength of victims and mocks the previous audience of male abusers. Tran also employs the transfer of oppressor power to the oppressed more subtly with their declaration “We’re the only testament” (77). Here, Tran references the concept of the Old and New Testaments and declares their community as the sole testament; the sole thing worth believing. They take a statement of beliefs wielded as a whip toward people like Tran and invite the audience to laugh at

those who rather trust a centuries-old document than the experiences of real humans. By citing phrasing historically imbued with power, power stemming from oppression, Tran takes the longstanding authority of such language and uses it to lift the oppressed. They transfer the weight behind these words from parties who have long benefitted from the suffering of others to the victims, showing there is strength deep beneath the ashes of abuse.

Tran's reclamation of oppressive language in "The Santa Ana" extends beyond just co-opting phrases. Tran takes language and titles historically used to oppress and embrace their derogatory usage. Throughout the entirety of "The Santa Ana," Tran titles herself and members of their community as "bitch," with the most outright use of this term toward the end of the poem: "If this bitch and her bitches/most alone order and re-order/Heaven" (115-117). Tran's use of "bitch," a word historically hurled at AFAB and fem-presenting individuals as an insult by men, in this empowering light strips the slur of any power it holds over Tran's community. Instead of allowing Tran's detractors to brandish "bitch" as a silencing tool, Tran pairs the descriptor with the sheer power of reordering a biblical force to reframe "bitch" as a title of authority and strength. That this "bitch" and their fellows "bitches" could do a better job at such a heavenly position than any religious figure before them. Tran's reclamation of oppressive titles reaches deep into the past, donning historically insulting labels as a crown: "I'm flamboyant/I'm a witch/still burning" (24-26). Paul Tran's reference to the title of witch and burning directly alludes to the Salem Witch Trials, a time in American history when women were repeatedly persecuted under the guise of religion. To be called a witch was to be doomed, to suffer a fate worse than death. Now, Tran embraces the title and laughs in the face of the fire, still thriving as the flames lick at their heels. Tran's reclamation of the words of abusers is a direct mockery of how abusive individuals wield language like a whip. It laughs at abusers and embraces the titles hurled at them and their community, pairing the labels with powerful imagery to shame further those who spill such slurs.

The work of Paul Tran truly embodies the multitude of emotions survivors of abuse may feel as the days tick by. "The Santa Ana" is their exploration into a culture that upholds oppressors and how the oppressed can reclaim their stolen power and mock decades of abusers through language. In a society that pushes victims down, a society that insists they remain quiet and complacent, Tran rocks the boat and displays the desire for survivors to fight back against the system. To rise up, to take their abuser's power and make it their own, to embrace the derogatory; with each act of disruption serving as one step closer to the dismantling of oppressive structures.

Work Cited: Tran, Paul. *All the Flowers Kneeling*. Penguin Poets, 2022.

TW: Trans-Atlantic slave trade

Waves of Pain and Change: *love conjure/blues* and the Water Motif

When a community has been ravaged by so much grief and tragedy, it is difficult to see the light at the end of such a collapsed and flooded tunnel. Sharon Bridgforth takes the wounds that build up in a battered community and provides a soothing cure in her performance novel *love conjure/blues*, a story of a rural, queer African American community and the interpersonal conflicts between its wide array of characters. Throughout her novel, Bridgforth utilizes a motif of water, whether that be referencing the substance directly or the ways water takes shape through rivers and oceans. Bridgforth's water motif comes in two primary forms throughout *love conjure/blues*, as a tie to African-American historical trauma and as an avenue of healing for the characters. Bridgforth utilizes this dichotomy as a roadmap for her community to acknowledge the pain of their past and to persist together toward a communal future.

Bridgforth's early use of the water motif in *love conjure/blues* directly ties the current cast to their collective past by directly alluding to one of the most horrific moments in their collective history: the Middle Passage. As the narrator, Cat, discusses the time she spends with her family she notes the location she currently resides: the ocean. It is with this discussion of water and the crashing waves that she remarks "with a thousand voices talking in melody/it's not our home but is a place we live/the ocean" (Bridgforth 47). This allusion to a harmonic collection of voices mixed in with the sea's waves directly references the pain of the Middle Passage: a forced voyage of enslaved Africans to the New World with thousands of casualties. Cat cites the forced displacement of these individuals and the sheer violation of their journey by rejecting this space as a home for her ancestors. She is present in this moment of collective trauma, those who came before her singing out to her as the water approaches. Not only is the water used to access the trauma of the voyage of Cat's ancestors, but Bridgforth paints the ocean as a cemetery for the thousands of Black people lost during such inhumanity:

we / in the center carried
 pushed in the pull
 rocked
 gently (47).

The "we" acts as a tie between Cat and those who came before the cast of *love conjure/blues*. Those who were tugged to the ocean's depths by its waves until overwhelmed, residing in this enormous body of water for generations and rocked by its ripples to their final resting place. Bridgforth's connection of water and historical traumas speaks to how it functions both as a symbol of pain and as a place of mourning. It illustrates just how complicated historical trauma can be for individuals of a historically marginalized group. Bridgforth urges her community to sit with that pain and unpack it when ready, as Cat does when she listens to the voices lost by the ocean waves and acknowledges the horrors endured by previous generations.

The other side of Bridgforth's water motif coin occurs later on in love conjure/blues, as water plays a vital role in aiding or guiding its characters toward the path of healing. While water plays a part in healing throughout the book, it is directly responsible for one of the most elegant, therapeutic relationships in the entire book. In one of the penultimate sections of love conjure/blues, Bridgforth introduces two of her most tragic characters: the burnt-out Miss Sunday Morning and the scarred Sweet T. Both have a past adorned with pain and sorrow. It is with these two characters that Bridgforth bridges the gap between these two and sets up their pivotal meeting:

miss sunday morning come in with the river
miss sunday morning floated down layed up on a
rock / stretched out
sweet t found she
miss sunday morning had got tired too (Bridgforth 80).

Two of the most wounded souls in love conjure/blues are joined by the water, brought together by a similar pain. Miss Sunday Morning is exhausted in the same way as Sweet T, with her location in the river hinting at a possible suicide attempt. Instead of the water taking hold of Miss Sunday Morning like it did her ancestors, she is lulled by the river to her fateful encounter with Sweet T. A further passage alludes to just how vital water is to Miss Sunday Morning and Sweet T's bond and how their relationship is almost fated by water:

left / floating
with empty eyes / in silence. . .
swept away
landed in the wrong place / at the right time (81).

In Miss Sunday Morning's lowest moment, a time when she can barely bring herself to speak, she is carried by the river to exactly where she needs to be: with Sweet T. Bridgforth paints their love as one of the most beautiful throughout the entirety of her novel: a soft, soothing intimacy brought together by the water. These two come together and bring about some of the most beautiful expressions of the joy of resisting the pain of the past and finding a new purpose in love. By taking two of her most tragic characters and altering their paths through the use of the river, Bridgforth completes the dual role assigned to her water motif.

With her two contrasting uses of water in love conjure/blues, Sharon Bridgforth illustrates how something can bring about great pain and grief, but also promote healing and community. It is with her dual use of the water motif that Bridgforth spells out a path for her community: one of acknowledging the trauma of their collective past and resistance into a future of strength and love. Bridgforth's message to the African American community comes in the remaining pages of love conjure/blues, as an assumed descendent of the novel's characters speaks with their ancestors. They call out to those who came before and, with one last mention of water, lay out the time that is to come:

free in God's Delight
in the Name of/We are
flesh of the Ocean. . .
we are/your smile
my Heart
with Sight
Free (Bridgforth 87).

Bridgforth, through this narrator, imagines a future where she and her community are free of the pain that haunts them. They acknowledge the trauma of their past as part of themselves, part of their own body and soul remaining in the ocean as a result of history's horrors. They will never empty that body of water, that tomb below the surface, but they will move from that agony toward a future of freedom. Their eyes are directed to a world where they can look at the days ahead with hope and gladness: a true act of resistance toward any entity that once again wishes to afflict them. By using water dually, as a signifier of the suffering of Black communities and as an avenue for their individual members to heal their wounds, Bridgforth ties the bow on a roadmap for the community she so dearly loves.

Sharon Bridgforth's love conjure/blues extends beyond its performance novel roots to deliver a truly profound message to its audience. By drawing on water as a motif throughout the book, Bridgforth illustrates two sides of the same coin that is the experience of African Americans: the pain of the past and the hope for healing. Like the ocean waves, the sting of these traumatic experiences will pass, never forgotten, but scarred over. It is in water that some of Bridgforth's most battered characters are guided toward healing and love, building a stronger future for themselves and their community. In times of great oppression, times when the days ahead look bleak and it is too much work to imagine a world where one can be free, Bridgforth urges her community to resist. She urges them to envision a world where the threats subside and strive down a road they build together through homage to the past, healing of the present, and dreaming of the future.

"Angel has a passion for social justice and resistance that is beyond inspiring. His incredible work as a scholar is only outshone by the way he cares for his community and seeks to make the world a safer place for all. Angel's insightful analysis always gives me pause and so very much to think about. I can't wait to see the legacy he leaves behind."
- Jarita Bavidó

My ankle bracelet beeps, and the red light turns green. My movements are scurried and I'm looking at the bracelet in shock, in complete disbelief of what's going on. I wasn't lied to, Laura said this would happen and it just did.

My cell door then beeps as well before sliding open. I'm scrambling onto my feet, surprise jolting my body, but I also feel hesitant and cautious, yet Laura's words have deemed themselves to be true. I breathe deeply, preparing myself for the worst and best moment of my life, getting out of here and fighting the Myrmidons. Most of them were Gifted, like me but the non-Gifted ones, they are more than willing to put a bullet in my head.

I step out of my cell, looking left then right. Nothing, no one was out here. I break out into a sprint, going left and hoping for the best. If I went right, it would've led me to the cafeteria and the solitary cell rooms, so left was the best option.

However, alarms start going off. The sound makes me jump but I continue running, knowing this is my only chance. I feel my adrenaline kicking in, my heartbeat ringing in my ears and my body feels shaky.

"Stop, Dani Paige!" A Myrmidon shouts and I see they are right ahead of me. At least five of them and all but one have a gun. Instead of listening, I continue to run in their direction. "Freeze or we will fire!"

'You better or you're going to die,' I thought to myself, letting my Gift travel throughout my body and let my eyes glow. My face twists into a glare, ready to kill all five of them if they didn't move but I was also just willing to kill them. For keeping me and my friends here, for the endless times they could've helped us, but they chose to be pets for the people behind this.

One pulls his trigger, the bullet coming fast, and it goes through my shoulder. I cry out, my knees giving in as the pain flares throughout my skin and veins. Holding my shoulder, I gulp in the air and try to focus on healing but it's painful. I hear Myrmidon's footsteps as they approach me and two of them grab me, hauling me by my knees.

I lay limp as they drag me but once they are closer to the other three, my eyes snap open and blazing scarlet red. My head snaps to the three in front of me and two of them explode into pools of blood. I don't even blink as the blood covers me and the two that are holding me are next. Touching one leg and the other's arms, they are both screaming in no time, but they are quickly crushed and turning into pools of blood as well.

The last one is shaking and backing away, I lift myself up and stumble towards him. The hallway lights flicker, and I can imagine how I look to him right now. Staring at him is making it more painful, I realize as he begins to choke and cough up blood. He's dying from the inside out and his organs are failing, imploding within him.

I breathe deeply, trying to collect myself and let my energy come back. The blood and bodies were everywhere, blood was covering me nearly head to toe.

I make my way down the hallway, trying to find a supply closet but instead, I run into another Myrmidon and my eyes ignite scarlet red. However, I sensed something from him, and I took a closer look at him. He was young, the same age as me, maybe even younger but not by much.

Instead, I launch myself at him and my legs are around his neck before I flip him onto his back. Pinning him down, I grab his gun and point it at his forehead, but I don't pull the trigger instead, I bring my finger to my lips and indicate for him to be quiet.

His blue eyes, ~~Parker~~, are wide and full of fear but he nods, keeping quiet. I then look around and I see no one else.

"Ripley, you got eyes on her?" The comms come in and my eyes go to his name tag. *Ripley*.

"Answer it," I order, my voice cold and I press the gun harder into his head. "Tell them no and you only found bodies."

Nodding again, he reaches for the comms and presses a button before speaking. "No, sir. No sight of her, just bodies."

I don't bother listening to what is said over the coms. I haul Ripley up, shoving him forward. I have the gun still pointed at his head as we walk down the hallway, passing all the blood and bodies. I keep checking behind me, in case this goes completely wrong but luckily, I find a closet.

"Remove your jacket and turn around," I order, closing the door behind me. After he strips the jacket, he turns around like I told him to. I use my shirt inside out to wipe all the blood off my face before quickly grabbing his jacket, but I rip his name tag off. "Tell no one of this. If they ask, I knocked you out and took your gun and your jacket."

He turns around, still looking scared but he nods once more. But he asks me something that makes me freeze. "Why didn't you kill me? Like the others."

"I..." I swallow a lump that's forming quickly, feeling the memories surface. "You remind me of someone, someone I lost. You're also young, too young to be doing this and I didn't want to kill you nor will I."

With that, I swing the butt of the gun at his temple, and he collapses, unconscious. I take a deep breath, hoping it wasn't too damaging. He's a Gifted, brainwashed one at that and I hope they don't kill him for this.

I snatch his hat as well, covering my bloodied hair and slightly dirty face. I glance at Ripley once more, seeing that he is breathing then I leave the storage room, ready to get out of this hell.

"It has been an honor to work with Jolie this semester, and to see her continue to grow as a writer! Over the course of the semester, Jolie and I have been working on a few short stories that have sparked deep conversation and insight into many different topics. In her writing, Jolie consistently uses descriptive word choices and vivid imagery to bring her stories to life. I have nothing but faith that Jolie will go on to be a great writer. Nice job, Jolie! "

- Chloe Schroeder

Let's Play A Game

Brendon stumbled along the dimly lit hallway. Having lost his flashlight, it was now a struggle for him to make his way through the endless labyrinth of the building.

He cursed as he tripped on the carpet. *If only I wasn't tricked into coming here...*

Suddenly, Brendon stopped, goosebumps forming along his back. *What was that?!*

He heard it again, a soft whistle as though it were a long way off. To a normal observer, it would sound of cheerfulness and childhood innocence. It was a sing-song tune in G-minor.

Brendon, however, knew better. His blood ran cold as he realized what it was. *She's here.*

The realization sent his adrenaline running, and he bolted toward the door at the end. His hand fiddled with the knob as he flung the door wide open and continued running.

He heard it again, this time closer. Confused and terrified, he turned back into the hallway and ran the other way, his heart pounding against his chest.

Upon reaching the door, he tore it open and continued running through the rooms of the house, his mind racing. All the rooms looked the same to him, but he didn't care.

He only needed to run. Run as far as his legs would carry him.

He finally burst into a darkened parlor. An ornate rocking chair next to an extravagant side table was placed in the right corner, with a marble fireplace on the opposite wall. Between the two was a painting of two kitsune masks, one smiling in eternal laughter and the other frowning in everlasting sorrow.

Brendon didn't pay attention to what was in the room. He slammed the door behind him and locked it. He leaned his head against it, panting. *I'm safe here. She can't get me in here...*

That was when he heard it again, even louder than before.

She can't be here! Not now, not ever! That witch, she-

"Ah ah ah, that's no way to refer to your frieeends!" a high-pitched voice mocked. "It's nice to know you missed me, Brendy!"

Brendon's head shot up. *No!*

He slowly turned his head, hearing the click of a light switch as he did.

There, in the rocking chair, was that horrifying grin he tried so hard to forget...

Sparkle giggled like a little schoolgirl. "Funny that I ran into you, Brendy! I

thought you didn't like surprises..."

Brendon gulped, his back placed against the door. There was only one thought on his mind. *I need to Run*. He started fingering the lock he had previously turned, his hand shaking as he tried desperately to turn it back.

"Awwwww, don't go, Brendy. We just got here. Let's at least have some fun!" Sparkle whined, getting up from her chair.

"NO! IM NEVER PLAYING WITH YOU AGAIN!" Brendon screamed as his hand finally turned the lock. Grabbing the door handle, he turned it and ripped the door open, screaming down the hall.

"Ooh! Tag! My favorite," Sparkle squealed with laughter. "Alright, let's PLAY!"

She gave chase, but slowly disappeared from Brendon's view as he scurried through the rooms he had come through twice before now. Only one goal was on his mind:

Run.

That was all he could think about. It consumed his every action, every breath.

He would never stop running. Not until it meant he was safe.

He heard the whistle again. He knew she was toying with him; that she thought it to be a game. Where was that sound coming from? Brendon couldn't tell. Frankly, he didn't want to know. Not ever.

All that he knew was that he needed to *RUN*.

His adrenaline now working overtime, he accelerated down the corridor; the corridor that would never end. Everything became a gigantic, shapeless blur as all he could do was run. Try to escape.

But he never could escape.

"Hehehe! This is sooooo much fun!" Sparkle cackled, a high-pitched screech. "You're always good for a laugh, aren't you Brendy? Unfortunately, I'm getting bored, and it's time to end our game."

No.

Brendon refused to stop. He would keep running if it meant he would live; that he would get out. If it meant he would *survive*.

Noticing the end of the corridor, he slowed his run. There was a door at the end, his escape route.

Freedom! Freedom from this nightmarish hell at last!

Approaching the door, he turned the handle. It clicked and, with a groan, opened

into an empty room. Brendon didn't care where he was, though. He squeezed inside and quickly slammed the door behind him, collapsing onto the floor in exhaustion.

He sat there, panting. His eyes were closed in exhaustion and relief. *Finally*, he thought. *I'm safe.*

After what felt like an eternity, he opened his eyes, looking upwards at the ceiling.

OH NOOOOOOO! Sirens blared in his head as he stared into the gleaming smile of his pursuant.

"Helllllooooo, Brendy!" she sang. "It's sooooo cute that you think I'd leave you. Unfortunately, I'm bored. Which means it's time for us to end our game. Thanks for playing, and goodbyeeee!"

She descended upon him as his screams echoed along the walls of the room. They would forever echo in the dark, empty silence. The world would be forever oblivious to his cries, his pleas for mercy.

~~~~~

Brendon awoke with a start, sweat pouring out of his body and pooling on his bed. He jolted his body upward, panting and shaking heavily. He looked around the room, his gaze shifting to every corner. Everything was where he left it, as still and as serene as it was when he went to sleep.

*It was just a dream.* He thought. *A nightmare. Nothing more.*

His heart rate slowed as he laid his head on his pillow, sleep beckoning him once more. He closed his eyes, hoping a peaceful sleep would finally come.

That was when he heard the whistling again. His blood ran cold.

"Goodniiiiight, Brendy! Let's play again sometime."

"It has been a pleasure to work with Andrew this semester. He is passionate about writing, and I have enjoyed discussing his pieces. Andrew is interested in creating complex characters and intricate relationships. He is a talented writer, eager to improve, and willing to challenge himself."

- Gabrielle Sullivan

***Strays: Calliope's Secret***

We worked on plotting and character design mostly this semester. Since all of that stuff is very behind-the-scenes and not very fun reading, I've submitted a work-in-progress page from the comic so you can see a bit of the process!

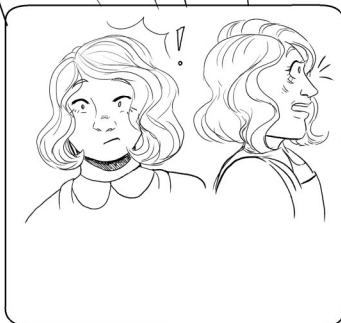
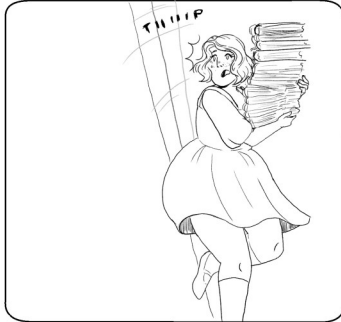
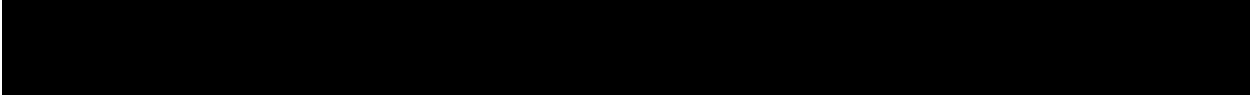
*Strays* is a comic about found family, dogs, coffee, and overthrowing an oppressive militaristic regime. Oh, and also magic.

In the world of *Strays*, magic users are drafted into the military at eighteen after four years of training. Despite the severe punishment for getting caught doing so, three young witches run away from the military academy and attempt to live undercover, keeping their magic hidden. In this scene, Calliope accidentally reveals her magic in a moment of panic to her human boss.

Enjoy!

"Before this semester, Patience and I knew each other, but not well. With that being said, I've had such an amazing time learning more about Patience and her (many years in the making) comic! She has led me through the journey they took to get to this point: of the initial drawings, the story that started to take shape, and now, actually composing some of her comic book! Patience has this ability to simultaneously write eloquently and create beautiful art, something that takes a lot of time to master. Throughout this journey, I have only been the person motivating Patience with my somewhat menacing "or elses". Patience sees the vision of what she wants, and her brilliant mind creates it. I can't wait to read the final "Strays" in the future."

- Katie Scheder



## Inheritus

---

They called me crazy, at first.

I understood it, too. So much of what makes us human is contained within our flesh and blood. Oh, I know many a scholar or philosopher would rhapsodize *lyrical about the profoundness of the mind, and how it shapes human nature, but as I see it, it is but a small part of a whole.*

A human is an ecosystem, a singular consciousness piloting a vast jungle of nervous signals and cords. Everything you touch, feel, observe, and interact with, you do so from within the confines of a processor not yours to command. The nerves that respond and inform you are no more connected or reliable than any data cloud. *The you that matters is buried behind living walls and subjected to its every whim.*

We all answer to its beck and call.

I chose otherwise.

They called me much worse than crazy, in the end.

But transcending the faulty flesh, embracing the divine patterns of circuitry, breaking free of the bounds of life, ascending mortality itself - I was Adam, first of a new breed of man. I became drunk with the concept, the idea, so caught up in the "if I could".

I was the first Natural Intelligence, a human mind chained to circuitry and the flow of data instead of blood and bones.

First in folly as well.

- Voltage, historian of Sohen Library  
(rabbid looking down alleyway, backlit)

### BIC

A loose scrap of cardboard caught under her wheels, making the bike briefly skid as she rounded the corner. Her breath hitched at the brief loss in traction, and she cast a glance behind her just in time to see the errant trash shoot out from under the wheels directly into the face of the lead rabbid. It screeched, a high, terrible sound, and slowed a second to paw the wet pulp out of its face, a second it didn't have as it was thrown to the ground by the slaving horde behind it. Bic bared her teeth at her pursuers in savage delight, before turning back to the street ahead. Her braid lashed behind her, snapping in the wind in time to the flicker of the bike's pure engine lights across the uneven brick that rose to either side of her, broken by the occasional alleyway. Crouched low over the sleek machine, she wove between the narrow walls and trash with speed born of desperation. As her headlights lit a wall ahead, she bit her lip, chanced another glance backward, swore, and eased up on the throttle.

Nearly simultaneously, she planted her right foot on the greasy concrete, jerked the bike into the harshest turn she could, and gunned it. The first time she'd tried this particular maneuver, she'd ended up on her ass and needed to replace half the bike's body. This time, dozens of practice runs made it as natural as breathing. The rear tire spun for a moment, caught in another piece of refuse.

With a jerk, it caught again and Bic sped into the throng of rabbids. Snarls of surprise and helps of pain rang between the walls as she tore through them, hard metal skeletons burying

## Short Story Excerpt

points into her thighs and arms. Most skated off of canvas pants and a heavy jacket, but a particularly quick lunge caught her forehead on a jagged elbow. Swearing, she tucked her head down further behind the windshield. Thick dribbles of blood coursed down one side of her face, torn away by the wind. She blinked them out of her eye.

She roared back down the alley, the sounds of pursuit slightly farther behind now. Glancing down at her fuel gauge elicited another sharp curse as the needle flickered on empty. Bic bit her lip, a rare moment of indecision.

She slowed once more, almost imperceptibly, and yanked the bike down a dark tributary. Wheeling along, she kicked the bike to where a pallet leaned against a spent oil drum. Swinging the bike around, Bic fumbled for the key and cranked it, cutting the engine with an angry hiss of coolant. The cool, heavenly light in the alleyway dimmed as the bike shuttered its ports, sealing away the atomic heart within. Bic lowered herself, almost lying atop the bike. The sound of discordant limbs and voices grew louder as the pack returned. In a burst of light and noise, the rabbids raced past the dark nook. Bic allowed a small smile to creep across her face as she reached for the key.

*Tic, tic*

The faint sound of claws froze her fingers on it. Daring to peek, she lifted her head. Limping the rabbid came into view. It walked on three legs, holding its left arm to its chest. It was lanky, lean metal limbs only containing what hardware was strictly necessary to power them. Wires frayed from its wrist like tendons. A starved, bruised torso hung from the grafted limbs, ugly and out of place atop the rusted structures of its limbs. A prominent tube connected the shaved head to the chest in place of a throat.

The face was the worst.

Like she always had, Bic cringed at the face. Pitted cheeks, sunken eyes, and puffy lips drew into a ghoulish countenance over cracked teeth. A dark smear marred the pale, drawn forehead, no doubt its injection site. And the giggling - insane, quiet laughter as the twisted machine hovered at the entrance to the byway. The rabbid's eyes shone in the dim light, lit by the fires of utter addiction. The demented humor reached a fever pitch, and Bic tensed. Another shadow appeared behind the rabbid, then a third, swinging a mounted searchlight into her meager cover.

Swearing, Bic reared up and cranked the key. The engine turned over once, twice. A bead of blood ran down her face, tracking over its dried fellows. The rabbids stiffened, eager for the kill and the reward of the liquid drug they could expect.

*Clika, clika*

Bic twisted her head, arm half raised to defend herself from this new threat.

What sailed out of the gloom was unrecognizable.

In a single bound, the massive *thing leaped over her and landed squarely among the rabbids, scattering them and crushing metal frames with terrible snaps and groans. The uproar was immediate, those on the fringes scrabbling back and screaming challenges, those below gurgling death cries. It rose as though nothing had happened, half turned, and roared.*

In a flash, it lunged and tore a rabbid's face off.

The thing flung itself at the pack, howling crazedly. With a click, the bike surged, finally coming to life beneath her. Without hesitation, Bic kicked her bike into the mouth of the alleyway. It was almost silent, the few seconds that the being had needed to reduce the hunters to fluid dripping off walls. Bic tensed, torn by curiosity and common sense.

Though it was tucked into the shadows, she could see something moving on the back of the monstrosity. An almost invisible person uncoiled themselves from where they had been

## Hailey Kurszewski

clinging onto its back and turned their head, scanning for targets. An ancient streetlight briefly fizzed to life, coating the scene in yellow light for a few seconds, as if a bolt of lightning had struck. Too late, Bic jerked to her senses and the figure stiffened, clearly spotting them. She ripped on the throttle, nearly sliding off in her desperation. For the last time that night, she threw a glance behind her.

In the red glow of taillights, the only things she could see were the round glares of a gas mask and two great, slitted eyes.

---

Technology grows, but humans do not.

That was one of the first lessons I had pressed upon me and one of the most important. Not physically, of course, but the simple fact of the matter is that what humans can do, what we can create, far outstrips our understanding of it.

Take me for example.

When I was reborn, I became something of a sensation. I was hailed a pioneer, a genius, a technological god. It didn't matter that I had been merely a part of a team, nor even a scientist in my own right. I was a subject - a great success at that - but a subject nonetheless. My digitization was a laurel I had yet to earn.

The technology developed for this project was part of a greater initiative, after all. A sensible solution to an outrageous issue. That issue being prisons, of course, and the overwhelming bounty of prisons inside. By digitizing them, one solved a host of complications - housing, feeding, waste management, all that is essential to life save a generator and a stack of processors. It would be horribly efficient.

If it had worked. One by one, the digital transfers failed. In their dozens, prisoners died, all wards of a state that now had millions to pay in restitutions. An explanation was clamored for and found. As it was discovered, one cannot become data unwillingly.

Speaking of criminals, it wasn't long before praise became accusations. It is wonderful, truly, what a digital mind can do to a firewall with half a thought. No less wonderful than the secrets behind them, I assure you.

Voltage, historian of Sohen Library

(bike and arm from the perspective of the viewer, looking down)

### **BIC**

The only thing she remembered of the crash itself was a truck horn. Loud, sonorous, bleeding into her ears with the exaggerated slowness of shock and memory. The spike of alarm, the slow rolling of her eyes up the smooth fender to the windows, and the horrified face of the driver. Vaguely, she seemed to recall a red light. Then a horn, and no impact, no pain, no *crunch* of metal crushing bones and flesh. Somewhere within her mind, was a dim recollection of a disgusted woman looking down on her and calling for Narcan, among other things.

It'd been better if they'd let her die.

Her bike had fetched up against the bumper, preventing her from going under the wheels. The curved body of the bike had sheltered her leg, but no such luck for her



## Short Story Excerpt

arm. Caught between the bike and the pavement her arm had been stripped. For twenty feet, or so she'd been told, had been littered with raw strips. She'd also been told the first EMT had thrown up and couldn't stop so they'd had to call more.

It'd been better if they hadn't.

The hospital they'd brought her to was cheap, but then again, it was more than she could afford anyway. And so was the arm, but she'd never heard of a phantom a company had splurged on. They were one-time investments and precious few would even be allowed to keep the *limb after the system washed their hands of them. She lifted the arm, opening and closing the three fingers. Too cheap for a full complement as well. The hospital staff had put the medical bracelet on it, the soft, bright orange plastic incongruous against the greasy steel. She reached for her bedside table and gripped the glass on it; slowly, she cautiously lifted it to her lips.*

It almost immediately slipped, clattering on the floor. Bic watched in almost detached amusement as the wet blotch on her sheet spread. She recalled a drunk hot-modder in a bar, the electrical tape he'd wrapped around mechanical knuckles. It was a good idea.

"Ms. Sader?"

The thin voice sliced through her reverie. She gazed dispassionately at the orderly.

"Yeah?"

The smaller woman pressed a packet onto her bed, ignoring Bic's outstretched hand, and dropped a paper bag. "You're free to go now, miss." In a quieter voice, she added, "There's a side exit."

Bic watched her go and reached for her clothes.

It was drizzling when she stepped out of the side door. Dimly, she recalled that it was supposed to rain Tuesday when she'd gone for a ride that Saturday night. Two figures waited in the lot for her.

"Hell of a fucking number you did to the bike, Bic!" Called the nearest, leaning over his handlebars. His leathers shone wetly in the streetlamps. The far man stood, swinging off the bike and moving to stand silently behind the first. "We patched her up good for ya, though. Took a while, but it was mostly body damage-" he broke off, cringing at the words. Bic nodded, eyes locked on her motorcycle as she passed them.

"It's good to see you, Bianca" the second rider offered softly. Bic only nodded again, watching the men pull back from her, men she'd drank and laughed and told terrible jokes with a few days ago. Men who had cared enough to rebuild her wrecked bike but couldn't bear to stand beside her. She kicked the stand away, sinking into the warm seat as raindrops pooled in her hair. With a quick yank, she pulled the bike around and leaned over the bars, letting muscle memory guide her home while the water leached cold up her metal arm and burrowed deep inside her.

Bic sat on her kitchen floor, watching ash collect on the end of her cigarette. Her landlord would have bitched before, but she hadn't even seen him for her rent in two months.

Not that she'd had anything to pay him with anyway. His silence suited her just fine. Next to her, an envelope rested on the ground. She picked it up in her good hand and turned it over. No address, no stamp, just a name, and what she knew lay inside it. She slit the letter open like a throat, letting slip the blood-soaked innards.

The message was one piece of paper, unsigned, undated. It had two sentences.

March 18th.

## Hailey Kurszewski

Oyama Square, Hakata District

The burning ash fell from nerveless fingers and fell to the floor. The linoleum browned under the heat and released a stream of bitter smoke in complaint. Then the letter landed atop it and within seconds Bic was watching the blaze, listening to the alarms go off and waiting for someone to come.

She didn't expect anyone, and nobody did.

Later, she stood at the window and watched the lights spring up over the city. Another cigarette dangled, unlit. Bic worked her jaw and pushed away from the dirty glass with a hard *clink*, *cringing as a lance of pain shot through her healing shoulder. She clamped a hand over it, gently rubbing the bandages as she paced. With a growl of frustration, she flung herself onto the motel couch.*

“You're fucked.” the words hung in the air, mockingly. After all, hadn't she been the one who had done this? No hand had forced those pills down her throat, nobody veered her bike into traffic. It was all her.

She felt around on the end table until her fingers hit cool metal. Unseeing, she pulled the picture frame towards her and gazed down unseeing at the photo within. She blinked the blurring haze of tears away. The photo was old, slightly grainy in texture, and soft from handling. It was a bright, late spring day and the light had cast hard shadows that made the faces difficult to see. One of the women was picking flowers out of her hair, laughing.

Bic looked at her mother and pressed her lips into a thin line. The picture itself was a few years old, maybe five. It had been the last time she'd seen her before the fire, before the debts, before they'd come for her mother's arm and made it just like the one Bic had, before the police had cordoned off the apartment and Bic had pulled up outside just in time to see Mom being pushed into a squad car. Just in the *nick of time to see bloodstained legs rolled into a body bag with the distinct ease of a corpse without an upper body. Just in time to have her world crash down. She'd barely moved into a second new place when she got a letter saying that her mother had died in prison of lung cancer. Bic grit her teeth. Why lock up a dying woman? It wasn't as though she'd been a killer - phantoms didn't kill anyone, only murderers in the eyes of the law. Bitterly she dropped the frame back onto the table.*

It landed on the open pill bottle, and the frame tipped over and sent the two of them sliding to the floor.

Bic hurdled the couch, eyes flickering between the shards of glass. Panic raised its ugly head, and anxiously she tamped it back down. She dropped to her knees, hands hovering above the glittering fragments as she searched. She licked her lips, fingers shaking in desperation. A pale edge caught her eye from under the couch and she lunged, grasping for it heedless of the sharp edges. She bit her lip and slowly pulled her arm from beneath it, trying not to drop its precious cargo.

She sat back with a sigh and looked into her palm. Three small pills rested in her hand and she slumped as relief flooded through her. They were all that was left of her new painkillers, good painkillers, and she didn't have enough left of her last paycheck to get more. She picked up the bottle with her free hand, wincing as her sore shoulder twinged and the slick plastic slipped in her grip. Tightening it, she dropped them onto the counter. Turning, she stepped back toward the side table.

A soft rip jerked her out of her thankful reverie. She wrinkled her brow as she moved her foot, grateful for forgetting to take off her boots last night.

## Short Story Excerpt

The photo, bright with glass shards, was torn beneath it. For a second she looked at it uncomprehendingly. Then horror gripped her, and she fell to her knees and picked it up, smoothing the folds. Glass rained down as she lifted it to her face. Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked them back, biting her cheek until she tasted blood, but still, they ran hot down her face and dotted her shirt. She curled inwards, pressing the picture to her face.

“I’m sorry, Mama.” Bic gasped out. Her body heaved with sobs. “I’m so sorry.”

Bic peeled herself off the floor, glass clinging to her face. She brushed it off. She looked at the window, darkening with the advent of nightfall. Moving mechanically, she pulled on a tank top and jacket, sightlessly sorting through rings and chains. She moved in front of the mirror and stopped, looking through her reflection. “I’m headed out,” she spoke aloud. Bic stood as if waiting for a reply, then turned and left.

She jerked open the door. A sheet fluttered down; the bold letters of eviction bright against the paper. Bic stepped over it and slammed the door loud enough to make the hinges rattle and send the notice spiraling down the stairs in front of her. She tramped down the stairs, listening to the echo of her heavy tread. She threw open the small door and strode into the dingy lot. Her bike was under her a moment later, headed for the street.

Bic steered into the flow, making her way towards the narrower streets. More bikes drew level with her, and she nodded at them before putting her head down and guiding the group towards the neon signs. She pulled up at the loudest, filthiest one she could find and tossed her head back, taking a good long look at the sign.

An atomic cloud - good as a church steeple to her kind.

She pulled her cuff over the metal hand and pushed open the door.

---

In life, I cannot say that I was ever much for studying. I was actually in college at the time of my...renewal, though I'd been near dropping out for the second time. Oh, I enjoyed learning - just never the way I was supposed to.

The first time I bypassed a firewall, it was purely accidental. The mere action of approaching it was *electrifying, feeling the proverbial gaze of the machine turned upon you. It asked, do you belong? Are you data? Are you allowed?*

I answered yes, of course. And I was in.

The interesting thing about being data is, the self is malleable. One's brain is a superhighway, connecting the farthest reaches of the biological self to one conductor: you. These roads are choked with traffic, in, and out, every second of every day. When you remove all that noise, everything that is you can be condensed down to very few thoughts. Concentrate hard enough, and you can become something else entirely.

This was in the days before N.I.I.D.'s, before weaponized firewalls, and before any of the infrastructure that shapes the human digital domain nowadays. It is almost exclusively my fault. When the firewall asked, I answered - all it wanted was confirmation. I got lucky.

But more importantly, I got *in*.



## The Pastor's Kid

I get up and check myself in the mirror again, fidgeting with my bow-tie a little more.

"I *swear* if you mess with that tie one more time," she says without looking up, "so help me God, I will hurt you Adam."

"Sorry," I plead. "I'm just nervous. Like, what if he doesn't show up? Or worse, what if he does and makes a scene?"

Mary puts down her phone and walks over to me, grabbing me by the shoulders.

"It doesn't matter if he's here or not," she says reassuringly, looking me in the eyes. "Today is your day. I'll take care of it if he acts up."

I nod, pretending like everything was going to be okay. Mary shifts my tie back to the way she had it before. The room goes quiet again before Mary tries to fill the awkward silence.

"If you had a choice, which would you prefer?"

"Huh?"

"For Dad to show up or not, which would you prefer?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him since Mom's funeral and he barely even acknowledged me then. I just—" I let out a deep sigh. "It would be nice to see him and all, but I don't know if he wants to see me, ya know?"

"I get it," she says comfortingly. "Dad is set in his ways and we really can't change that. All we can do is just hope that he doesn't act up if he's here. Lord knows that would be half a miracle itself."

I can't help but let out a chuckle at that.

---

Dad was a pastor in the church for as long as I can remember, so naturally we were a pretty involved family. Mom was an active member of the Sisterhood and Mary and I always had something to do with the youth group.

The youth group was always my favorite. We had Bible study every week and some sort of program each month. Sometimes they would tell us stories, others they would get us to participate in some activity. I remember one time, we had a youth choir from one of the community centers nearby come in and sing for us, all teenage kids my age and up.

As the pastor's kid, I was one of the first people to greet them and show them the way to where they'd be performing. The last kid to come in, a blonde-haired boy about my age, was dragging a dolly with a large box on it behind him. It looked pretty heavy, but there wasn't much I could do until the box was off the dolly.

We got to the presentation hall where they were to perform, where the boy let the dolly drop with a loud *thump*.

"Watch it Stevie. Don't break it!" one of the other kids scolded.

"You carry it next time and try not to drop it," he snapped back.

I felt bad for him. He must've been only a sophomore like me and the box had to be at least 150 pounds. I went over to him to see if I could help with anything.

## Micah Kurtzman

“Stevie, right?”

“That’s me,” he said playfully.

“Hi, I’m Adam,” I introduced myself. “Need help getting that thing up on stage?”

“Nah,” he said as he reached for a latch on the side. “I’m just going to take the equipment out and bring it up that way. You can help with that though if you’d like.”

He opened up the box to reveal that in the crate were foam-lined compartments carrying different pieces of sound equipment. We made some small talk as I helped him carry different pieces of equipment on stage.

“Yeah, I live just down the road from here actually,” he said. “Most of the other kids are from the other side of the town ‘cause it’s closer to the center, but my family moved a few years back and I just couldn’t stop myself from going there.”

“Well maybe you should try out the church instead. I promise we’re not *too* mean to newcomers,” I joked.

“Maybe,” he chuckled. “My family just kept going to the same church on the other side of town because we have friends there, but I definitely like this place better.”

He got called away from our conversation so he could warm-up with the rest of his choir.

“Sorry, gotta go.”

“We’ll just have to pick up the conversation next time you visit,” I said playfully.

“Yeah, next time,” he said with a smile on his face. He turned back to his group and walked towards them. He glanced back at me quickly and, if I didn’t know better, I’d almost say he was blushing. I turned back to meet the rest of the youth group for Bible study before the show.

The show started off with a few high energy pop songs, but progressively got quieter and slowed down. Each kid was taking the lead for different songs and as I watched, I just kept waiting for Stevie’s song, wondering what kind of song he would lead.

Finally, after a slow, more angelic gospel song, Stevie took center stage. The rest of the kids started humming quietly before Stevie began to sing.

*“Dance with me. I want to be your partner, can’t you see. The music is just starting. Night is calling, and I am falling. Dance with me.”*

His voice was so beautiful, I was in awe. I knew the song from a wedding I had been to. In fact, it was the couple’s first dance together. As he started singing, I noticed Stevie looking my way, almost like he was singing to me. I could feel my cheeks burning red as a swarm of locusts ran loose in my stomach.

*What is this, I thought. Why am I feeling like this?*

He looked around the room as he sang, but kept coming back to look at me. He’d give me this cute little smile before he went back to serenading the rest of the group. I couldn’t help but smile the whole way through his song.

After the concert, the youth group gave the choir a standing ovation before going back to the classroom to get their things. I hung back and helped Stevie take down the speakers and

other equipment.

“That was a beautiful song you sang,” I said, a little bit nervous.

“Thanks, I’m glad you liked it.”

We didn’t talk for a little bit, just worked around each other. The silence was killing me, but I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to ask him if he meant to sing *to* me, or if I was just some sort of crutch to him. I was just too nervous to actually ask him anything.

“I really like this church,” he finally said. “You all seem really nice here.”

“Uh- Yeah. Everyone here is super nice.”

“Okay, cool.”

*Back to the awkward silence. Say something, say something, say something.*

“So... How long have you been singing for?” I asked.

“Only for about three years now.”

“Wow, that’s impressive. I thought you had been singing forever with a voice like that.”

“Yeah, that’s what my Mom says,” he said, slightly embarrassed. “I used to be one of those shower singers before I joined the center’s choir group.”

*Oh thank God, back to normal.*

---

Stevie started coming to our church the next week. We would sit together and quickly became close friends. One week, after Dad had given a very passionate sermon about how homosexuals will burn in hell, Stevie stopped coming to our church. He asked me for my phone number that day, which I gladly gave to him. We started texting back and forth a lot, then started hanging out in person.

“So why’d you stop coming?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I just didn’t really like what your Dad was saying about gay people that one time.” Stevie’s eyes went wide as if he had told some secret that he wasn’t supposed to. “It’s because I have a lot of gay friends and it’s not their fault that they’re gay,” He blurted out. “And it’s not a problem that they’re gay, there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s jus-“

“It’s fine,” I said, cutting him off. “It’s cool that you have gay friends.”

He let out a big sigh of relief.

*Why does he think that would bother me? Just because I’m the pastor’s kid? I don’t care if he has gay friends or not, I just like spending time with him. Being around Stevie makes things better. I just like spending time with him.*

We hung out for a few more hours, sitting on his bed playing video games and watching stupid videos on YouTube. I noticed that we were slowly gravitating towards each other until we were sitting shoulder to shoulder. *I kinda like this.*

I ate dinner at his house that night before I started walking home. I went up to his room to grab my things before I left, pulling my hoodie over my head and bending down to tie my shoes. When I stood up, Stevie was standing close to me; I didn’t mind since we had been in each other’s space all day anyways.

“Alright, I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, later,” he said quietly.

## Micah Kurtzman

Before I knew it, Stevie had leaned in and given me a kiss directly on my lips. Not like a big important kiss, just a quick peck. I stood there stunned for a moment, my mind racing a million thoughts per minute. I didn't know what to say or do. His face turned red and I'm sure mine did the same. We both just stood there in silence before I turned and headed towards the door.

It was dark and cold on the way home. I lived six blocks away from him, which gave me lots of time to figure out how I was feeling.

My pocket buzzed when I turned the corner to my block. It was a message from Stevie:

sorry.

Don't be

I liked it

A year had passed and I asked Dad if I could go to the Pride festival. I told him I just wanted to see what it was about. Otherwise he would have questioned me endlessly about my motives for going.

"No."

"Why not!?"

"Because I said so and I am your father," he said angrily. "Those people are abominations and I don't want my child going to Hell with them!"

"Why are they abominations Dad? Because they're different from your perfect heteronormative ideals?"

"Because the Bible says they are! 'If a man also lies with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.' You know this Adam!"

"What's wrong with having sex with another man, huh? The only problem with it is that they can't have kids, what's so wrong with that? Just let them be happy."

"Why are you defending the- the- these monsters!? Are *you* gay?" he asked tauntingly.

"So what if I am? You're the one that always points out that the Bible says that all gay men should be laid to death. You going to do it yourself?"

He sat there stunned, face beat red and his mouth gaping angrily open. His head turned to look out the window, lost in thought.

"Get out of my house," he said softly, not even looking at me.

"What?"

"I SAID GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!" he shouted, knocking the table over as he shot out of his chair.

He stood over me, pointing rigidly towards the front door. I had never seen him this way— so loud, so red. I glared back at him, neither of us moving. Mom came rushing down the stairs.

"Oh my Lord, what happened in here?"

"Nothing Mom," I said. "I was just leaving."



## Short Story

She begged and pleaded for me to stay, stammering the whole time. And as much as I loved her and would have liked to, I knew that wasn't an option for me.

I walked out the front door and called Mary. She was the first person I told about Stevie last year. Since she was now out of the house, she told me that if I ever needed a place to stay, I was always welcomed at her place.

"Hey, Dad found out."

"Damn it." There was a brief pause. "How're you doing?"

"I'll be there in 20."

I was mad. On the verge of tears mad. But there wasn't jack-shit I could do about it.

"Alright," Mary said. "You ready to strut your stuff?"

I laughed. "Damn right I am."

I stood up and Mary patted the wrinkles on the shoulders of my suit jacket. I took a deep breath and made my way through the halls and out to the gazebo. Stevie was already standing there, wiping his hands together nervously, his beautiful blond hair slicked back, just the way I like it.

He notices me and his face lights up. Everyone turns to look at me as I start to walk down the aisle. I hear the *ooh*'s and *aah*'s from the audience and the *click click*'s from their cameras.

I step up into the gazebo with Stevie. Neither of us can stop smiling at each other as the pastor begins to speak. I look out into the audience to see who all is actually there.

As I'm looking around, I notice someone sitting in the front row. He is a lot greyer than I remember, but he still looks like the man that kicked me out all those years ago. The stern look on his face steals my smile.

*Please Dad. Just for today, be proud of me. Be happy for me.*

I don't expect a whole lot from him, just enough to show that he still cares. Just enough to show that he still thinks of me as his son.

And then he gives me a smile. Not a big important one, but a smile nonetheless. Enough to show that he cares. Enough to make me happy.

"Micah, what can I say? Thine, and thine only, thine, yea thine, thine surely thine, thine, O Micah, are the good wishes of every one in the TLC. From teaching us what *sonder* means— the radical notion that everyone around you has an inner life as robust as your own— to the constant care for other people, to your sense of humor and endless memes, you are one of the sincerest and kindest people I have ever met."

- Jarita Bavidó

## **The Man in the Woods**

Deep in a forest of an abandoned town, it is rumored that there is a man in the woods who targets teens. I get ready for my investigation and set my destination to the abandoned town. Walking to my car, my mother calls out my name, “Where are you going, hunny?” I can't tell her about my investigation so I tell her, “To my friends to have a sleepover.” Getting into my car, I take a deep breath and start driving to the abandoned town about 45 minutes away.

Looking at the beautiful trees and mountains, my car starts beeping, looking at my dashboard indicating to me that I'm low on fuel. I take my phone and set the directions to the nearest gas station. I choose the closest gas station about 3 minutes away. Pulling up to the gas pump I reach into my pocket to grab my wallet. I walk into the gas station and ask if I could get \$20 on pump 5. I walk out to my car and proceed to add gas into my car hoping this will be enough to get me back home from the abandoned town.

I get into my car and continue my journey. Listening to calming music I check my phone to see how far I am from my destination. “5 minutes? That was fast,” I said. I pull into the abandoned town and park on the side of the road. Getting out of the car to explore the mysterious sight.

I hear a tree branch break in the distance, telling myself it must have been an animal. I look around to see that most of the buildings are demolished and some worn down. Walking down the road I see a house that looks pretty new. I walk up to the house and peek through the windows. “It's too dark in there to see anything” I turn around and start walking to the door.

Turning the handle, I let myself in. Grabbing my phone to turn on the flashlight, I get a glimpse of a mouse eating some sort of food staring at me bluntly. Fear rushed through my body while hearing the same sound that I heard by the car. I turn around and see a man walking around about 60 feet away from me. I run deep inside the house trying to not make too much noise. In panic I found a cupboard about the size of a dresser. Opening the cupboard I get a foul smell fuming to the right of me, I turn to shine my flashlight and see blood stains on the wood floor. Curiosity took the best of me, I walked over to see if I could find the source of the blood. Examining the blood, I follow the bloody streaks and reach a black door. Turning the doorknob I hear someone walk into the house. In panic, I open the door to find stairs leading into the basement. Slowly walking down the steps, I trip on something. Falling down the stairs I slam into the ground with a toy car next to me. I get up with only a few scrapes on my arms and legs, examining the basement for a hiding spot. I find a box, rushing to the box I hear the basement door open. In panic, I get into the box as fast as I can, smelling the same thing I did upstairs. I look over to my side and see a dismembered head. Putting my hands around my mouth so I don't make a noise, I hear someone walking right in front of me. Holding my breath, I hear the person's steps dissipating, I slowly pop my head out of the box, I see the same man as I did earlier. I duck back into the box trying to stay quiet. I hear the man walk past me and go back

up the stairs. Hearing the door shut and click, I knew I was locked in. Getting out of the box I remember the dismembered head. Telling myself I won't turn out like that person, I explore the basement.

Finding a door leading into a different room, I open the door. My hairs on my body rise as panic sets in. I stand idly, staring at a dark room. The room is pitch black, I can't even see past the door. Smelling of rotten meat, I almost throw up. I grab my phone and turn on my flashlight. Moving my flashlight around, I get a glimpse of flyers. I walk closer and close the door behind me. The flyers resemble the ones I've seen in town, they show the missing teens. I step back slowly in shock, feeling nauseated. I snapped a few pictures of the wall with flyers. Breathing in my shirt to avoid the nauseating smell. I start walking back to the door until I hear the upstairs door click. I run back to the box and get in, I listen. I slowly look up and see the guy come down the stairs, I duck back down, slowing my breath. I hear the guy walk past as say "I know you're down here...come out". I stay hidden in the box and hear the footsteps stop right next to me. Listening, I hear him breathing like he was next to my ear. He walks into the room with the flyers, and I stand up and run up the stairs, trying to be quiet.

Hearing the guy start running I hide back into the cupboard. Looking out a small crack, I see him run up to the door. He shouts "get back here, I won't hurt you!" I tell myself "stay quiet." Watching him run outside, waiting a few seconds before I get out of the cupboard. I step out and see the same mouse just staring at me like I was some sort of meal. I hurry up the stairs, running into a room. I shut the door behind me and started looking for something I could use as defense. Searching through drawers assuming I'm in some sort of work room. I take in my surroundings and start thinking. I walk over to the window and look outside, wondering if I should go on the roof. I attempt to open the window but find a small lock that's keeping the window shut. I hear the guy stomping his way back inside and try to find a hiding spot.

I run into a closet that's full of strange orange bags. I open one in curiosity. Opening the bag I see red stains assuming it's blood. I close the bags and look around quietly in the closet seeing nothing. I hear the man walking up the stairs, each step sounding like he's closer to me. I hold my breath as he walks into the room. I step back and see a light in the corner. I investigate the corner while trying not to make any noise. I hear the man walk out of the room mumbling to himself. I look back into the corner of the closet and see a hidden pathway hidden behind the orange bag. I move the bag and attempt to open the door. I turn the knob and open the door. I look inside and see a small crawl space with lights that look like it leads outside. I crouch down and slowly make my way through the crawl space. I reach the end and see another door seeing sunlight from the cracks.

I attempt to open the door, turning the knob and pushing, it's locked. I tell myself that this is my only escape. I reposition my body and aim my foot at the door. With a powerful kick I successfully break open the door. Crawling out I stand up and run. I run into the woods towards the direction of my car, hoping I'm going the right way. I hear the man scream something but I can't make out what he's saying. Looking around hoping to find landmarks I see a

road. Approaching the road I see a building that looks familiar, walking towards the building. I start running again and see my car in the distance. Running as fast as I can, I make it to my car.

Getting in I grab my keys and attempt to start my car. It doesn't work. I look outside my window and see the guy walking towards me. I keep trying to turn the key to start my car, it still won't turn on. I look back to the guy and see he's closer, he has to be close to 500 feet to me. I continue turning my key and the car starts. Not looking at the guy I get my car out of park and slam on my gas. I look in my rearview mirror and see the guy standing right where my car used to sit. I feel a sense of happiness that I made it out. I look at my phone and see no signal. I keep driving until I find a gas station on the side of the road about 30 minutes away. I pull into the gas station and run inside telling the cashier to call the police. I explain what happened to the worried cashier.

Waiting for what feels like an eternity, the police show up. I run to the police officer telling him everything that happened and showing pictures for proof. I tell them the location of the house and where everything was, telling them about the dismembered bodies and the blood stains. I explain what the guy looks like, hoping they will believe me. I hear one of the officers call for backup. One police officer approaches me and tells me that they have been looking for this guy for a long time now and that they would catch him. I thank them and ask if I could go home. Walking to my car I check to see if I have any signal and pull up my GPS. I get in my car and set my destination to home. Driving home I go past the place I was at. Seeing about 10 police officers I feel my mind go at ease, telling myself I survived...

"Dakota came into 157 not really knowing what it was or why he needed it, but he has made the most he can of this class. Dakota has such a fun personality, and I'm so grateful that I got this opportunity to get to know him. He has such a comforting laugh and smile, which is interesting given the short story he wrote. Throughout the semester, Dakota has been willing to learn and implement the different skills we've talked about in his writing. It's been really amazing to see Dakota grow, not only as a person, but as a first year in college. College can be overwhelming and difficult, but Dakota has taken it in stride and kept fighting. Next semester, with Dakota in 257, will be so awesome! 'Til next fall!!"

- Katie Scheder

## Something is Fishy

Hannah and the others ran to the middle of the lobby at Ultramarine, finding one of their coworkers collapsed.

“He’s... he’s...” She gasped, watching for any sign of life from Jacob. He had only been hired at Ultramarine a couple weeks before, and while she hadn’t known him that well, he had always seemed like a nice person. He didn’t deserve any of what was happening to him.

“JACOB!” Bob cried.

He ran up to him, then sighed in relief. “He’s still breathing. He’s just unconscious.”

David pulled out his phone. “I’ll call the guards.”

The “guards” that David was calling were the security guards who worked at Ultramarine. Since the seafood restaurant was located on a private island, and the nearest police station and hospital were located on the mainland, it was difficult to get emergency help. The guards were trained in first aid and in basic medical procedures, so they could keep a person who needed emergency care alive until the real medical professionals could help them.

“He was wheezing and coughing before,” Hannah told everyone as they waited for the guards to arrive. “He said he was nauseous, so he was going to take a break and get a drink of water.”

“Sounds like he really wasn’t feeling well,” David said.

The guards finally arrived, worked on Jacob for a bit, and then left to take him to the hospital.

Hannah looked at the others. David, who she thought would have been calm and composed in a situation like this, kept looking in the direction where the guards had gone. Claire, looking at the floor, toyed with a bracelet she wore, something she would have hidden if Chef had been walking by. And Bob’s face was drained of its color. He stood frozen in place, his eyes fixed on the spot where Jacob had been, his hands placed in the pockets of his jeans. Technically, just like jewelry, they weren’t supposed to be wearing jeans either- and they certainly weren’t supposed to be wearing their long-sleeved work shirts like short-sleeved ones, even though Bob always did- but often times, as long as they worked hard, Chef would look the other way.

“He’ll be fine,” Hannah said, perhaps trying to convince herself more than the others. “He just fell unconscious. Maybe it was something he ate.”

Then David’s phone rang.

He put the call on speaker as he answered it. “How is he?”

She heard nothing but silence on the other end of the line.

And then, “He... didn’t make it.”

A loud array of gasps and cries erupted from everyone as they tried to ask the guards what had happened, how Jacob had died, and even if it was a mistake.

“Unfortunately,” the guard said, “we are unable to figure out what his cause of death is at the moment. We have contacted the proper authorities regarding this, but until then, we will be heading back to the restaurant.”

*Was this true?* Hannah wondered. How had everything changed so fast? Jacob had only been on the floor a few minutes ago, unconscious, yet still alive. And only a few minutes later, everything had completely changed.

“... You think it was something he ate?” Bob turned to her, looking her in the eyes. “That’s what you were saying before. What did he have to eat lately? Anyone know?”

“I saw Chef giving him a couple of dishes to try before,” Claire said.

“So did I,” David added. “It was like lobster and... what was that other one?”

“Pufferfish,” Claire told him, and then she gasped. “Wait. Pufferfish. That’s that one seafood dish where-”

“If you don’t prepare it right,” Hannah continued.

“It’s... poisonous. Completely fatal,” Bob finished.

“But Chef would never make pufferfish wrong! He’s never made a single dish of his wrong!” Claire cried. “I mean, we’ve never got complaints of anything being undercooked, or overcooked! I’ve never even

heard of anyone getting food poisoning after eating here!”

David looked at them. “No. We’re thinking about this all wrong. What if Chef *did* prepare the puff-erfish incorrectly? Only...it wasn’t an accident?”

“You mean...you think Chef *wanted* to kill him?!” Hannah’s eyes widened. “There’s no way!”

“It makes sense,” Claire said. “Something’s been bothering me. Isn’t it strange that, despite what just happened, Chef is nowhere to be found?”

Hannah gasped. “You’re right! He never even came over!”

“Of course he didn’t! Because he’s the killer!” Bob cried.

“He obviously killed him,” David replied. “I don’t know why, but there’s a reason. We need to find him, before he escapes. Maybe he already has. If we’re lucky, he’ll still be here.”

“Hurry,” Bob said. “Everyone, split up. We’ll find him faster that way. When you find him, scream.”

“Just be careful,” Claire said. “In case he wants to kill the rest of us as well. Don’t eat anything he offers you.”

And so, everyone split up and searched for Chef.

Hannah didn’t find Chef during her search, but Claire did, as evidenced by her yelling from the pantry a little while later.

As she rushed into the room, Hannah found Chef.

Only, he was dead.

Unlike how it had been with Jacob, nobody had any doubts about whether he was still alive. He had been stabbed in the chest with a kitchen knife, and blood was already pooling on the floor.

“Chef!” She screamed.

The guards, who had just come back, came over after hearing the commotion.

“This is now a crime scene,” one of them finally explained. “We will be contacting the police. In the meantime, none of you are allowed to leave these premises.”

“It’ll take forever for the police to get here! What if the killer comes back and murders the rest of us by then?” Claire cried.

“I hate to say this, but I think the killer is already here,” David said. “And it’s one of us.”

Everyone gasped.

“For your own safety, you are forbidden from investigating anything,” one of the guards said. “Please leave everything to the police.”

They kicked them all out of the pantry, and everyone separated themselves from each other, tension in the air. One of her coworkers was a murderer- but who?

The police wouldn’t be coming for a while. And despite what the guards had said, she thought it would be better for her to at least investigate a little bit than to not investigate at all. If the killer really would be murdering the rest of them soon- perhaps to cover their tracks- she’d want as much information as she could get to figure out who it was.

Was it Claire? Or David? Or Bob?

Three people she had worked with for what seemed like forever, and who she had always felt she could trust. Now, that had all changed.

She found Claire drawing next to her. “Listen.” She lowered her voice. “I think you should know something about David.”

“What is it?”

“So, Chef obviously killed Jacob, right? But I bet you anything that David killed Chef. I heard the two of them getting in a nasty fight this morning. Not sure over what, but it ended with Chef firing him.”

“He... got fired?” Hannah frowned. “So, this could be some sort of revenge.”

“Just be careful around him,” she explained, walking away as Hannah noticed a small, reddish spot on her apron.

She froze.

It wasn’t bright red. It almost looked as if she had tried to wash it a bit. Was it food?

Or was it blood?

Had she worn the apron as she killed Chef, quickly trying her best to get rid of any blood spatter

that had landed on it?

Had she missed that spot?

She'd have to keep a look out on Claire as well. Maybe her whole story about David had been a lie.

Despite her warning, she went over to David to find the truth.

She found him standing over by a group of tables in the back.

"Accusing me of murder?" He frowned after she explained herself. "I didn't do anything."

"I can't say if that's true yet," Hannah admitted. "Listen, though. Claire said—"

"Ugh. Claire? What'd she say now?"

"That you got fired."

He sighed, then said, "Well, if I deny that, it'll make me look like the killer. Yeah, it happened this morning. Chef was in a bad mood, and I said a couple things to him I shouldn't have, but it wasn't like they were that terrible. He fired me. I was just a bit upset about everything- I wanted to be treated better, you know, but I guess he doesn't care about a dishwasher like me much. Anyway, he told me today was my last day and to never come back. Don't know what I'm going to do for another job, but maybe I can keep this one since Chef is dead now." He paused, then said, "Sorry. That sounds awful."

"I know what you mean," she said. "That must have been rough."

"It was. Well, I gotta get back to work. Even if the restaurant's not going to open today, I want to have something to distract myself with. But honestly, if you want my take on it, I wouldn't be surprised if Bob was the killer."

"Why?"

"Well, Chef killed Jacob. And Bob mentioned this to me a few days ago, and I'm sure he wouldn't want you to hear this. But Jacob is his long-lost cousin."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He came to me, asking for advice on how to mention it to him. He wanted to get to know him better, but he didn't want to freak him out."

"Well, I'll talk to him then."

"Alright. Just be careful," David advised.

As he waved goodbye, Hannah saw a flash of something on his index finger.

A bandage.

"What's with the bandage?" She asked.

David immediately hid his hand. "Oh, it's nothing. I just got a scratch before," he said. Then, before Hannah could ask him anything else, he ran off.

Had that bandage been there before?

Had he cut himself on the knife that Chef had been stabbed with?

And wasn't it suspicious that he had left so quickly just now?

No, she couldn't make any assumptions. Anyone could be the killer, not just David. Speaking of which, it was time for her to talk to Bob.

"What do you want?" He snapped when she approached him. Then, he apologized.

"It's okay. I'm just curious about something. David told me Jacob was your cousin."

"What's he telling you that for? He wasn't supposed to say anything!"

"Well, two people *did* just get murdered. I don't think we have time for keeping things secret."

"Listen, that has nothing to do with Chef's murder. Jacob and I were just cousins. And we only met each other a little while ago, so it's hard for me to even think of him as one. If I were to kill someone, which I never would, I'd want to kill them for a good reason. Sure, I could have killed Chef because he killed Jacob, but it's not like we were that close. Why would I go through all the trouble of killing for someone I barely knew? Even if we were technically related? Anyway, scratch all this. If you really want to investigate - which we're not supposed to anyway- why don't you consider Claire?"

"Claire?"

He clutched at the edges of his sleeves near his wrists. "Yeah. Seems all nice and everything, right? Maybe too nice. I heard Chef was blackmailing her."

"Blackmailing her? Why?"

"Well, from what I understand, he stole her family's recipe- this really nice one that he was planning on putting on the menu next month. Sounds like it had been in her family for centuries. Of course, Chef

would have probably fired her if she mentioned anything to anyone. And it'd be hard for her to get another job that pays her this well, I think."

"Where'd you hear this? Did she tell you?"

"No, I just heard them talking about it a while back. I wanted to help, but I figured it might just make things worse."

"Wow. So, you think she finally snapped?"

"Yeah. She might've needed a way out. Killing chef would have saved her family's recipe, and also her job. Just keep that in mind."

And so, Hannah went to talk to Claire again.

"So," she said when she found her, "what's all this about Chef blackmailing you?"

Her eyes widened, and she quickly looked around, before whispering, "Who told you that?"

"Bob. He apparently heard something or other a while back."

"Well, he doesn't know what he's talking about! I mean, sure, Chef did steal my recipe and everything...and he did threaten me...but is that really a reason for me to kill him?!"

It was only now that Hannah realized Claire had taken her apron off.

Had she finally noticed the spot of blood on it, and gone to hide it?

Maybe it wasn't blood. But what if it was?

"I have to go," Hannah told her, running off before Claire could ask where she was going.

She ran to the back, heading to where the aprons were stored when she bumped into David.

"Sorry," she said.

"No worries. Just filling these up some more," he said. "I think Claire forgot about them. Not that it probably matters, considering everything."

She turned, noticing the containers of shrimp sauce on the counter.

Red shrimp sauce.

She darted over to the aprons, finding that the top one in the laundry hamper had the same red spot she had seen before.

Looking closer at it, she realized the red spot wasn't blood at all.

It was shrimp sauce.

She didn't understand why Claire had removed it, though. Maybe she had figured that everyone would assume the red spot was blood and incriminate her. Hannah wouldn't blame her if that was the reason why she had taken it off.

Either way, it didn't necessarily mean Claire was innocent. Maybe it was all a coincidence. She still could have killed Chef.

She headed back to the kitchen, watching as David, who had finished filling up the shrimp sauce containers, now worked on washing some dishes. As the dishwasher, David essentially had full reign of the sink area. At least, that's what Hannah felt like. Nestled in front of his pack of gloves- he refused to wash dishes without them- and his water bottle, which he always filled up with water from the sink because he claimed it "tasted better"- was a stack of plates, forks, and some knives.

Knives, just like what Chef had been killed with.

Who else could have touched a knife so nonchalantly at a time like this, except for the killer?

David still had a bandage on his finger. What was it from?

Had he cut himself when using a knife? When using the one Chef had been killed with?

She needed more evidence. Where could she find more evidence?

Where was a place the killer wouldn't think people would look? Somewhere they could easily get rid of evidence?

Then, she thought of a place.

The trash.

Sure, it wasn't the ideal place to look, but that wouldn't stop her. Maybe she'd find something important in there.

Luckily, there wasn't much garbage in any of the trash bags, so she didn't have to dig through a large amount of disgusting items. In most of them, she found nothing but a few paper towels.

But in the second to last trash can she searched, she discovered a pair of plastic gloves.



## Short Story

They looked like ordinary extra small gloves at first. She would have left them in the trash can if she hadn't noticed how strange they seemed.

The gloves were oddly torn and stretched, as if someone with much larger hands had worn them. But she gasped as she noticed something else as well.

The area where the index finger was on one of the gloves had been torn off.

Everything finally made sense now. This very glove was the key piece of evidence that told her which of her coworkers had killed Chef.

She headed into the lobby, calling Claire, Bob, and David over.

After the initial questions of why she wanted to talk with them, she finally explained everything.

"I know who killed Chef!" She cried.

"Really? Who?" Claire asked. "Was it—"

"David," she said, staring him in the eyes. "I can't believe you!"

"Excuse me?!"

"David, you can lie all you want, but I know it was you. Getting revenge on Chef because he fired you was the perfect motive. You stabbed him with a knife you had, but the glove you were wearing tore a bit and you accidentally cut yourself. That's why there's a bandage on your finger. And what's more, I have proof—"

"Let me show you something," David said.

He led the others over to the sink, and over to a nearby trash can.

It was the only one that Hannah had forgotten to inspect.

"Do you see what's inside?" He asked her.

Hannah looked in, then frowned as she saw a paper bag inside. "What's with the bag? Hiding some evidence?"

"It contains the shards from the glass I accidentally broke," he retorted. "Look inside, if you don't believe me."

Hannah opened the bag, finding the shards inside of it, just as he said. She noticed that one of them had a small spot of blood on it. "So, you cut your finger on one of these?"

"Yeah. I kind of wasn't thinking and I just grabbed it without any protection for my hands. Anyway, does that settle everything for you? Or do you still have this "proof" of yours?"

"Well..."

She reached for the gloves in her pocket, then stopped.

This didn't make any sense.

First of all, David had obviously cut his hand while picking up the glass inside the bag. Sure, he could have been attempting to create an explanation for why his hand was injured by purposefully breaking a glass, but it all seemed too complicated. After all, he could have just claimed he had cut his hand while washing one of the knives in the sink.

The gloves were extra small ones. Claire usually wore that size, so there was no way her hands would have stretched the gloves as much as they had been. Based on that, either Bob or David had worn them, perhaps to frame her. At first, because of the torn off index finger section, she had assumed David had worn the gloves. But what if the killer had purposefully torn off that section as a way to frame David as well? Or what if they were just the closest pair of gloves they could grab, and everything was just a coincidence?

In any case, she now knew who the real killer was.

"Bob," she said. "Would you like to confess?"

He took a step back. "You can't think I did it! David did it, obviously! He's lying to you!"

Hannah suspected Bob for another reason. She had only noticed it just now, even though she should have long before.

His sleeves.

He was wearing his uniform shirt with long sleeves, as he should have been. Almost as if he were trying to cover something up.

Like injuries.

"Lift up your sleeves," she said.

“What does this have to do with anything?! I’m not hiding anything!”

“Just do it,” David urged him. “If you really aren’t, what’s there to worry about?”

“This is ridiculous. Why do you need me to lift up my sleeves?” He yelled.

“Maybe I should explain first,” Hannah admitted.

She pulled out one of the gloves from her pocket. “As you can see, this glove has been unnaturally torn and stretched. It’s an extra small sized glove, but based on how it looks now, Claire, who usually wears this size, wouldn’t have worn this. That leaves you and David. I initially thought David was the killer, since the glove is torn a bit around where the index finger is, and he has a bandage on that same finger. But David has already proven how he cut his finger. He also has his own pair of gloves, so unless he wanted to go out of his way to frame someone else, he would have just used his own.”

“You can’t accuse me of anything with that!”

“Well, let’s look at everyone’s motives, then. I heard from all of you about different things everyone could have killed over. Claire, you had reason to kill Chef because you were being blackmailed. However, if you really were planning on killing him, I’d feel you would have spent more time planning an intricate murder than simply stabbing him out of the blue. Stabbing seems like something you would do if you were furious at someone all of a sudden, and you let your emotions overtake you. I don’t think many people would do that if they were dealing with such a constant problem. If anything, you would have tried to kill him with a more complex method. By poisoning him, maybe.

David, you had reason to kill Chef since he fired you. You may have wanted to get revenge on him because of that. But if you really were to kill him, I feel you would have done it when you were fighting with him before. You’ve had a chance to calm down since then, and with the way everything else has been looking, I can’t accuse you of murdering Chef.

But Bob, you had a reason to get revenge as well. We need to remember that Chef was only murdered right after Jacob died. And Jacob was your cousin. Despite what you told me, I think you cared a lot for him, and you figured that if he died, you were going to make sure the one who killed him did as well. So, you stabbed Chef, but something must have happened. He scratched you, or you cut your arm. You had to cover it up, so you unrolled your sleeves and acted normally, hoping we wouldn’t notice.”

Bob’s face turned pale. Then, he cried, “No. Hannah did it, guys! And I have proof!”

“What kind of proof?” She asked.

“The guards told us not to investigate anything. And yet, there you were, investigating. Obviously because you were trying to put together a whole story like this to frame us! And those gloves! How do we know you didn’t just put them on and kill Chef? Maybe you tore off the index finger just to frame David!”

Hannah calmly walked over and grabbed one of the extra small sized gloves, putting it on. Her hands were a little bigger, but the glove didn’t rip even as she wore it.

“Well, that settles it,” Claire said. “Bob, just roll up your sleeves!”

“That doesn’t settle anything! She’s faking it!”

“Just admit it,” David said. “We know it was you.”

After some more urging, Bob relented and lifted up his sleeves.

Several scratches were on his arms.

“You...really did murder him...” Hannah whispered.

“So, was it revenge? For Jacob?” David asked.

“He deserved it!” He cried. “Jacob and I might have been cousins, and maybe we only knew each other for a couple weeks. But he’s my family, and if someone hurts my family, or anyone I think of as my family, even if we aren’t blood related, I can’t forgive them. And seeing my cousin on the floor like that—well, I couldn’t just stand there and watch Chef get away. You know how popular he is. He was gonna worm his way out of jail. I couldn’t let that happen.” He looked at them all. “And don’t try and tell me that you wouldn’t have done the same thing for your family or the people you cared about. If Chef had killed someone you loved, you would have killed him. You can’t blame me for what I did.”

“Well,” Claire said, after a moment, “Chef shouldn’t have prepared that pufferfish wrong. He kind of deserved what he got.”

Hannah stopped. Five seconds later, she quickly searched up something online.

“Are we sure it was the pufferfish?” She asked. “I mean, Chef never prepares anything wrong.”

“What else would it be?” David asked.

## Short Story

"Listen. Claire, how long before he died would you say Jacob had the pufferfish?"

"About fifteen minutes, I think," she said.

"Well, I just looked it up, and pufferfish takes at least four hours to kill someone."

Everyone gasped.

"So," Bob finally said, "He...wasn't killed by the pufferfish? No! He had to be! This is a mistake! Claire, think harder! You're remembering it all wrong! Maybe it really was four hours ago! Or maybe he was an exception! It had to be the pufferfish!"

"But Bob didn't only eat the pufferfish," Hannah explained. "Cause he also had lobster."

"How could that kill anyone?" Bob screamed. "It was the pufferfish!"

"Easy," Hannah explained. "He had an allergy to it. Lobster's a bit of a fancy food, so I wouldn't be surprised if he had never had it before."

"But he would have had fish before, I'm sure," Claire said. "Wouldn't he have had an allergy to them, too?"

"Lobster are considered shellfish when it comes to allergies, which is in a different category than regular fish," she explained. "And while it's uncommon, there's a chance he may have had other shellfish dishes before- like crab, or shrimp- but only had a real fatal allergy to lobster. Maybe he had a few issues with the others, but only to such an extent that he didn't really notice anything was wrong. But most importantly, do you want to know how long it takes for a fatal allergy to kill someone?"

"Fifteen minutes?" David asked.

"Exactly. It can take only fifteen minutes."

"So, in the end," Claire said, "Chef didn't kill him. It was all an accident."

Bob looked at the floor, his hands in fists, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Bob..." Hannah began, but he interrupted her.

"Shut up! It wasn't an accident! It was Chef! He did it! He killed him! He did! You guys are all covering for him! If you really cared for Jacob, you would know Chef is the real murderer! It wasn't an accident! If it was really an accident, why did it have to happen to Jacob?! No! No! Noooooo!!!"

The guards arrived with the police as he continued crying out, and as they handcuffed him and led him away, Hannah could still vaguely hear him.

"Please, no! No! This is a mistake! I shouldn't be getting arrested! He killed him! He killed my cousin! Please, no!"

As Hannah and the others watched Bob get led away, the restaurant, cloaked with silence, led her to finally processing her thoughts.

Two deaths. And one person arrested. All in one day.

She felt like crying, but she couldn't. If she cried, the others would cry too.

"We don't need to be okay," Claire said after a moment. "I mean, we just lost three people we knew. Even if one of them is possibly heading to prison, we don't know when we'll see him again."

"I'm sure," Hannah said, fighting to keep her tears back, "that everything will be okay in the end."

David nodded, and Claire smiled a little.

"I'm sure, too."

"Christiana has written many short stories throughout our sessions. She is a wonderfully creative and always made stories with a goofy story-line, plot twists, and intriguing characters. We focused a lot on creating more dialogue between characters and ensuring plotlines made sense. I'm really excited that this was the story she chose to publish-- it's one of my favorites that she's written!"

- Halle Reeder

## A Chance Encounter

I woke up the morning of April 7th, 2023 wanting to crawl out of my own skin. My hair was puffed up from the Pride Ball I attended days prior, I was falling behind on schoolwork, I desperately needed to wash myself clean of the past weekend. My mind and body were completely depressed, and for good reason. I was a freshly single 21-year old girl with two friends, I was busy 24/7, and a man I didn't want kept attempting to pursue me. The last thing I wanted to think of was a persistent man at my student organization event. I was fully expecting him to show up to the karaoke I was going to that night, as he also showed up to the Pride Ball. I will say, it felt nice to win an award while ignoring his existence, but his presence shoved me into the shelter of my dorm room. I felt like something was wrong with me; why else would the men who want me go about it in the worst ways possible? Why couldn't I, a bisexual woman, just date a girl? Questions spun around my head like the prize wheel on *Wheel of Fortune*, and I was anxiously waiting for my self-deprecating "prize." All of a sudden, the only helpful question popped into my head: why don't you dress up? Dressing up always made me feel better, so I tossed on a long-sleeved halter top and mom jeans. It was a win-win; I could show off how I looked without my stalker, and maybe a cute guy would be at the event...just maybe.

Having taken some CBD gummies and a little bit of weed, I walked into karaoke forgetting everything. I dropped my baggage at the door, like an influencer family travelling to *Disney World*; out of sight, out of mind. I strutted in there like I was the only one present. I met up with a few of the girls in my ensemble to put on some makeup, and they asked me what I would be singing. I informed them of the situation and that I would be putting on a "fuck you if you're a dude" show on that stage, topped off with a Gloria Gaynor anthem to drive in my feminine rage. I ran upstage and paid my respects to the queen of post-disco, met with high fives at the very end.

I was fully expecting my best friend to show up before I went onstage, but she was busy getting ready. Moments before, I asked her to be my protective bubble from the man that wanted me. My mind was in a perpetual state of cognitive dissonance; I hated men at the time yet I wanted one to call my own *so bad*. I vented to her about how much I couldn't stand guys and how they only want one thing. She texted me to let me know that she was bringing her friend... who happened to be a guy. She tends to pull in people of all kinds: people with different morals, values, political stances and religions, so this individual would be a gamble. I love that about her, obviously, but I got (understandably) nervous. I figured she wouldn't shove me in the way of a conservative evangelical, but my brain loves a worst case scenario. With sweat dripping down my forehead, whether from the nerves or the high-energy performance I put on, I asked if he was cute. Despite entering the "man-eating bitch" phase of my life, I was curious if this individual would pull me out and save me from drowning in my own misery. She responded with a cryptic "he's not...*not cute*," which sunk my head even deeper. I asked the girls in my ensemble what this meant, they knew just as much as I did. Anxiously, I waited for them to show up.

After about 5 minutes, I felt the room shift like tectonic plates on the west coast; *there he was*. I was across the room, yet his magnetic force spun me around and glued my eyes to him. He wasn't "not *not* cute," he was a deity incarnate. My best friend did *not* warn me of how enamored I would be by his gaze alone. I turned to my ensemble mates with a quiver in my voice, "Guys. *That's* her friend. *Oh my God*, what do I do?" My voice turned from mellow to panicked in a heartbeat. I walked over to the duo and immediately tugged my best friend's arm. I got a better look at him, which made me even more neurotic. He towered ever-so slightly

above my head, just enough for me to still see his face while looking head-on. His stature was just perfect, dressed in plaid pants and a dark vintage sweater. I immediately imagined his arms wrapped around my body, encapsulating me in a tight embrace. He was well-kept; his hair was as dark as his eyes, brown and nuanced like wood burning underneath a campfire, a warm and gentle presence. The most notable thing about him, however, was his facial hair that framed his face. I never knew that someone that breathtaking could be in *my* presence. All of a sudden, my man-eater cravings were at bay.

He sat down at the table across from me, and every time he turned around I silently screamed at my best friend. She kept telling me to *just* talk to him, as if it's easy to talk to someone that attractive. Nearing the end of the event, I saw my window of opportunity shutting before my eyes. We got to speak about 3 sentences, and I had a bit of intuition; I couldn't let this one go. All of a sudden, I became valiant. There was *no way* he was leaving without me. In a tizzy, I reminded my best friend of an agreement we "made": that she would take me to *Wal-Mart* to get "snacks." I looked at her, immediately shot a glance in his direction, then right back at her. She all of a sudden "remembered" this agreement, and I invited him to join us. After parking my car on the street, I saw the duo walking towards their parking lot. I didn't want to miss this integral bonding opportunity, so despite my large chest and asthma, I ran like the wind to catch up. He asked if I was okay, and I omitted the prior fact about me. We walked and talked until we got to her car, where we bickered about who would sit shotgun. He pushed his body against mine, and despite all of my strength and resistance, he won shotgun privileges. I was *stewing* in the backseat, but mainly because I was sitting alone and not with this adorable stranger. The cloth seats of her Pontiac G6 became progressively harder as we drove along the interstate. I leaned forward every time he spoke, possibly putting myself in harm's way should there be an accident. I didn't care though; if I died in a car accident because I was sitting unsafely, I would die happy.

We pulled up to the store, and I tried to keep up with him. The fluorescent lights shone in my eyes, reflecting bright whites that would normally induce a headache. They didn't bother me though, because the beautiful man standing by my side was all I could see at that moment. From time to time, my best friend would walk away while we were standing alone together, giving me a nod. I knew *exactly* what she was doing. I took the opportunities she gave me to build our foundation. Between creating new inside jokes and subtle flirting with hints of poking fun, I knew I needed to keep him around as long as possible. Something was so endearing about the teasing; where I would normally feel offended by jokes about my height, I felt like I was at home. Unfortunately for me, unless things are spelled out I won't fully comprehend anything. I excused myself and my best friend, telling him that we were going to have "girl talk," and he told me he *loves* girl talk. Fuck. He was SO onto me. I anxiously told him that he wouldn't understand what it's like to have a period, and frantically pulled my best friend into the sewing aisle. I asked her if I was doing okay talking to him, and she gave me an "are you serious right now" glance. She reassured me that I was doing great, and that he seemed really into me.

After we checked out, we walked back out to the car. We did the same song and dance as before, wrestling over who would get shotgun. Though we were in public, I wanted him to keep pushing me against the car door with his body. My best friend rolled her eyes and reminded him that he already sat up front. I took my (well-deserved) seat and he took the one right behind me. I took solace in the fact that I was up front, but something felt wrong. As we drove down the highway, we talked to each other with our hands, opening and closing our palms with each word. After some back and forth, his hand grabbed mine. I sat dormant for a second, trying to figure out if he was holding my hand because he liked me. In hindsight, *of fucking course*

## Emmy Pinzon

*it was because he liked me! Why else would he be holding my hand?!* Opening up my chest to the front, I swung my arms below the headrest and gave him both of my hands to hold. He gently caressed his thumbs against my hand, and despite us being sweaty, we stayed that way for 10 minutes. I needed to feel his touch for as long as possible. Yet another instance where my sense of danger dissipated because of him; if I died during a car crash at this time instead of the last, I would die even happier. My anxiety fizzled away with each stroke of his hand. We pulled into the *McDonald's* to get my best friend some food, and I paid. I pulled my hand away for a split second to pull out my wallet. I immediately put my arms back into position, and cheekily told him “I never told you to stop.” I had no idea who this person was, but I knew that she was starting to fall in love with someone she just met. We got dropped off in front of my dorm, and he started to walk away. “Wait!!” I yelled from the front door. He paused for a second, and I squeaked out “I *need* your Snap!” I was so desperate that I wasn’t thinking of my word choices. He walked over and attempted to give me his Snapchat, but my hands were full. “Yeah, because I can *definitely* scan your code right now,” I said sarcastically. He offered to help me carry up the snacks that I *most definitely needed that night*. He kept solidifying why I liked him so much; he held all of my stuff, held the door for me, everything a true gentleman could do at a door. We got up to my room and put my snacks away. I stood there for a second, staring at him in the doorway. Everything paused around me as he stood there; I so badly wanted to ask him to stay with me for a little bit. Sadly, I snapped back into my anxious personality and frantically sent him home. Despite his dorm being within walking distance, I insisted on driving him home. I dropped him off at his dorm (and made some “accidental” wrong turns), wondering what would have happened if I had just invited him to stay. When I got back to my dorm, he texted me saying that it was nice to meet me. I balled up my comforter in hopes of creating a pseudo-man-I-just-met, and cuddled up to it. I settled into my bed, and we texted about random things until 1 AM. I contently fell asleep, hoping, but understanding, that our story might end right then and there.

### **Boy was I wrong.**

The very next day, I was greeted with a good morning text from him. Off the bat, we started our day with a long conversation. While he was out hammocking, he asked me if I wanted him to bring two hammocks back to school with him or a double so we could share. I hadn’t gone hammocking in a while at this point, but I knew exactly what he was doing. I thought to myself *damn, is everyday gonna be this good?!* But yet, I had no idea what was to come. I reluctantly got myself ready to sell some succulents with my sorority for a fundraiser. I jokingly invited him to come buy some plants and sent pictures of my favorites. He told me he would be down in a few minutes, with his hair tangled from a restless sleep in an oversized hoodie. Crowded around the sales table, I told the girls in my sorority about him, down to all the details of the previous night. I asked them what the “thumb thing” meant, and they reiterated that he was *quite literally holding my hand*. After a few minutes, he shows up to the table. He did a complete 180 with his appearance: his dark hair was brushed through to emphasize the masterpiece that was his face, and he styled yet another vintage sweater. He must’ve known how weak I get over fluffy dark hair and vintage sweaters. I asked him if he would buy a plant, he said he only had his debit card. I demanded he go take out some cash, and he did. Not expecting to become a plant parent that day, he bought two succulents for our fundraiser. My sorority sisters grilled me a little bit more after he walked away, telling me that all the signs pointed to yes.

## Short Story

Later that evening, my sorority little and I decided to go to another karaoke event. Since he didn't get to hear me sing the day before, I invited him back. He was out to dinner and asked for 20 minutes to get there. This karaoke was light on participation compared to the other, and I needed to stall. I ran up to the emcee and told them that I was waiting for a guy. They happily obliged with extending the event until he arrived. After a few people went up, he sat down in the chair next to me and we got to talking. The emcee walked up to me and asked if "that cute guy got here yet," to which I told them that my friend had arrived. Close call. I was finally able to sing, and every time I looked at him I couldn't help but laugh and mess up. Our eyes would meet every time I looked over at him; he had puppy-dog eyes and a goofy smile resting on his face. How could I *not* hit sour notes when I was that distracted?! After I sang, the three of us hung out and played some foosball. I mentioned being hungry, and he offered to buy me some food because the dining hall was closed by that point. My car was too full for multiple people, so I dropped my little off at her dorm and drove back to the University Center to pick him up. My breathing, all of a sudden, shallowed.

When I parked in front of the University Center, he was standing outside ready to go. I was met with waves of tranquility, so asking him to drive around with me before eating was no big deal. We spent a good hour and a half just driving aimlessly, talking about everything on our minds. As we passed by billboards and highway signs, we sank deeper into comfort with each other; topics that would normally take months for people to feel safe discussing felt almost like second-nature to us. This man, whom I only met the day before, already knew practically everything important about me. Despite roads being some of the most dangerous places to be, I knew I was safe. I knew that in that moment, he built a forcefield around me to make sure I never felt pain under his watch. *Is this the peak? Will this car ride be the best part of us knowing each other? When will he get bored?* I cycled through these thoughts for a while, but when he eased into more conversation with me, the thoughts were put to rest.

When we got back into town, we got our food. We ordered 12 Cinnabon Delights from *Taco Bell* which came in one bag instead of two. We pulled into the main parking lot to eat them, but then he asked if it would be easier to just eat them in my dorm. *Thank God, no heavy lifting on my part.* I turned the car back on and drove to the lot closest to my dorm. We walked up together, my heart picking up speed; him coming up to my dorm room felt more surreal than it did yesterday. I was petrified; this was step one of any relationship forming, and (despite being an atheist) I prayed to anyone who would listen that it would go well. We passed through the door, trudging through the mess of my room. We sat down on the bed and I propped up against my pillow and he sat on the other end. Gulping the anxiety down my throat, I told him that he can get more comfortable than just sitting at the end of the bed. He scooted closer to me, slowly but surely. He put on a YouTube video and got comfortable. Checking in every time he got closer, he eventually got close enough for me to swing my legs over his lap. I was elated; he was definitely into me. After some talking, he started to run his hand up my leg, starting from the bottom. Understanding that he was equally, if not more, anxious, I reassured him that he can move up if he's okay with that. His touch was enchanting; I felt astral forces pulling us together. We were the universe's puppets, and they wanted to watch a show about two kids falling in love. He draped his arm around me, with the crook of his elbow embracing the back of my neck, and rubbed my shoulder. I was finally able to relax after weeks of being on edge. As I settled in, he grabbed my chin gently. I squeaked out a "...hi," not knowing what he was going to do. He pulled me in slowly for a kiss, and I immediately craved more. Fireworks went off; booming colors filled the dark skies of my mind. Our lips fit together like a lock and key, and I knew at that moment we opened a new door for the both of us. After he pulled away, I immedi-

ately pulled him back for more.

As the night progressed, we got closer physically and emotionally. I felt safer with this stranger than with people I knew for years. I asked him if we could take our relationship slow before getting too intimate; as someone who has had her heart broken by jumping the gun with intimacy, I wanted to protect myself. He happily agreed to take the time to get to know each other. We went on the most magical dates possible, even though it was just to the honky-tonk local bowling alley and the dining hall. We walked around our college campus late at night, talking about everything under the sun (well, the other stars, actually). Even though we had just met, he saw me in my most vulnerable moments and held me close as I sobbed. He brought every dull color to life with just his presence. He was proud of dating me; he showed me off everywhere we went, taught me how to love myself, and gave me love so pure that I was convinced I was dreaming. I thought that every single day would be our peak, but as the days rushed by they got infinitely better. Every day felt like the “best day ever,” like a child going to the carnival; I finally felt a sense of freedom, and I tasted what it was like to be youthful and alive.

I fell asleep the night of April 18th, 2023 feeling like a brand new person. The feeling of wanting to crawl out of my own skin was nonexistent, as I was finally free from the prison my own head. After weeks of casually dating, the man that swept me off my feet made our relationship official. Sitting in my bed, he looked me in the eye and asked the question. My heart lit up as I gave him a profound yes. I knew I loved him from the moment we met, and he solidified that as he asked me to be his. I thought I was crazy for falling in love so quickly, but it was always right. From that day forward, he became my extension; we went everywhere together, even if it was just to the grocery store to get “snacks.”

“Emmy is an utter joy to interact with. Not only is she a dedicated writer, but she is unabashedly passionate about her work no matter what other's say about it. She elegantly distills themes of love, fate, and the common experience of heartbreak in every piece she produces, meaning my time with her this semester has been one of exploring the human condition. Every work she has brought in has been one I've absolutely adored, not only dedicating many of her pieces to her loved ones but outright crafting pieces about them and the impact they've had on her. Emmy is a wonderful writer and someone who I hope continues to give us that little bit of hope that we may find true love one day and the importance of compassion and kindness.”

- Angel Bronk



## The Meaning of Life

Life is ironic to me. It takes depression to know happiness. It takes stress to understand calm. And it takes absence to value presence.

No one should ever regret a single day in life, as each day is a blessing in disguise. The good days teach us happiness. The bad days give us experience, and the worst days teach us lessons, while the best days provide us memories.

However, to achieve those memories... we must learn and understand one of life's most simple truths.

You'll never get to experience the same moment twice. Once we realize this, life becomes meaningful.

I think life is about the journey of discovering our meaning and understanding and accepting who we are.... And who God created us to be not who the world made us believe we are.

I think we Strive for those moments of true Ecstasy and meaningfulness..... because those are the moments when we are closest to God. We get this unexplainable enlightenment and weightlessness because in that moment..... we are exactly where God wants us to be in life being exactly who he created us to be.

"Justin was great to work with this semester. Even though Justin did not want to take the English 57 class, we did a lot of good writing. Justin's hectic schedule and life challenged him, but his grit got him through this class. We worked on a variety of pieces ranging from short essays to a complicated capstone paper. I learned a lot and enjoyed working with Justin to improve his writing. This well written piece represents Justin and I think people should take the time to read it. I wish Justin good luck on his goals beyond graduation this spring."

- Braedon Gilles

## Academic Anxiety

Sinking. I am sinking.

The water is cold- so cold I can't take a breath while my brain tries to fight it. I feel the white heat of panic rise from my stomach and coat my forehead in sweat as the water rises to my waist.

I look around, but there is no one else panicking. Am I exaggerating the circumstances, or is everyone better at hiding it than I am?

Another breath and I feel the water reach my chest. Another, and I open my mouth to scream for help, but nothing comes out. I am sinking faster, deeper into this icy, unforgiving black water.

Another breath, and I am now treading. Tiredness fills my eyes, fills my very bones, but I refuse to give up. I refuse to let the water take me down with it.

Another breath to steady myself. Minute after minute, day after day, I tread.

What can I do besides continue forward?

## People Watching

I get so distracted by everything.

People, mostly.

I love to people watch—observe, really.

A man sitting alone on a park bench drinking his morning coffee, a student working hard on their computer, a group of friends walking to class laughing. A professor lecturing to a class, the students either writing notes or doodling. The track team going for an outside run on a warm day, talking as they make their laps. A group of friends playing volleyball in the sand courts, getting increasingly more competitive. Humans just simply being human.

As for me, I am made human through those around me.

I pick up on passing conversations and giggle at what some people are saying. I notice patterns in the way someone moves or speaks. If I am around someone enough, I can pick out their mannerisms, the way they say certain words, their hand movements, their emotions. Sometimes they are surprised I notice the things that seem so trivial, so small. They don't know that it's automatic for me. So I simply give a soft smile, tuck my hair behind my ear and say,

“It's just something I've noticed.”

“Whenever I think about Halle, I am immediately reminded of her drive and passion for everything she does. She cares for everyone and everything so deeply, exuding love wherever she goes. Everybody already knows that Halle is going to succeed in everything she does, and I am ecstatic to see where she goes in life!”

- Micah Kurtzman

## Misplaced

She forgot it. The stupid, faded, bag she brought everywhere. The thing that banged into walls and never fit properly on her side and took up a shit ton of room in the closet. She forgot it, remembering though, to take everything else.

The kitchen had only the installations attached to the wall humming softly in it, a half full bottle of ketchup and molding leftovers from two weeks ago sat in the fridge. The living room had been stripped of any and all furniture and fixings other than a table too heavy to be worth the hassle of carrying out. The at-home-office that saw little use now an empty room with only the intents in the carpet as proof that anything had been there at all. The house had been gutted and cleaned like a deer carcass, its skeleton and decaying skin all that was left behind.

Even things that weren't hers had vanished without a trace. The sweater given by a late mother at Christmas, a graphic tee from a band that swung through town four summers ago, a pair of hiking shoes broken and beaten into that she had always let her wear. The walls sported pale, square outlines where things used to be. Pictures removed from the dresser, nightstand, and mantle, leaving the one left with only the worst images. She remembered to take it all and left her with this stupid, fucking messenger bag.

She gripped its strap as tightly as she could, putting every ounce of anger she had into the leather. The bag was a black hole as it sucked in the light and shined it back through its imperfections. The coffee stain from senior year faded on the front, the broken buckle from backing it over with the first car, pins she spent too much time collecting stayed strong, taunting.

She flipped it open, searching for something. A note, an apology, a reason that it was left behind when everything else had been taken away. The pockets were dug through, the inner lining torn apart. The more the search goes on, the more all she wants to see is something, nothing too much to bear. She hoped she'd find the ring she dropped three months salary on seven years ago, but she knew the silver and gold would be sitting behind dull, pawn shop glass.

There's nothing but faded brown leather and that stench that had been there since she bought it fifteen years ago. The kind that was found in the history archives from her job, in her father's attic where dust circled, anger in its disruption, first-editions of favorite novels they'd comb through antique stores to find.

Most of all, it smelled like the flea market spontaneously pulled off the road to explore. The smell of sweat and metal and gas lingered still in the crevices of the fabric

## Short Story

next to the moments of that day. Laughter, feel her arm wrapped around mine as she dragged me over to the seller to pick it up. The sun is still hot and they're still oblivious to all that waited down the road. She picked up the bag and even though it first got a no, followed by a groan and argument that she didn't need another bag, the wallet was pulled out and produced the twenties she's was seeking. She kissed me on the cheek after she said she had the most precious thing in the world, something that she promised time and time again she'd keep forever. In front of friends and family, in front of strangers, in front of her in the moments where it had just been the two of them.

She had promised an uncountable number of times. And she forgot it.

Because beer makes me stupid and vodka makes me brave, I stumble alone down moonlit streets of glass. Uneasy tennis shoes try to grip the surface of the sidewalk as I fumble through walking that would put me at most third in a competition among two years olds. My hands stick out at my sides like an acrobat. Suspended between the earth and the heavens above on top of a piece of decaying concrete.

I think the night was fun. There had been shots and beers and Red Apples Ales whose tart taste still lingers on my tongue. I roll my tongue around my mouth to catch the nonexistent droplets.

I think of the lonely fridge back home, raided and besieged upon by college seniors who were busy celebrating they end of midterms, backs turned to finals that loomed over the counter. Hunter though who told me she was graduating at was graduating at the end of the fall semester. I had just met her. The thought made me sadder than I anticipated.

The street lurched forward to trip me but I am smarter than it. I jump when it does. I laugh as it curls at my feet, defeated for now. The exchange gave me confidence to keep walking, foot in front of the other. I grin, looked up as a toddler does to it's parents when it walks from a table to a chair and pause.

I look up at the stars and feel the crushing realization of how far away they truly are.

"Nat knows how to pack an abundance of detail into tight, powerful works. I've had a wonderful time working with her this semester! She has such skill with capturing a character's voice and maintaining it, something she executes to great success in this piece."

- Taylor Schmidt

## Dwellings from Germany

Graffiti with words I don't know, names I don't recognize, meet my eyes as I ride to my next destination. The walls on the S-Bahn station are covered with a myriad of colors. My friend sits next to me, her boyfriend across from her, and they talk. Words I can't follow leave their lips, and I just stare out the window—watching the blankets of paint. Waves of letters bleed into geometric designs, almost making me dizzy. But I can name the reds and blues and yellows here.

I watch and watch.

I pet dogs when I can because they don't need words like people do. They sniff my hand and let me feel a little more normal—less like I don't belong. A wag of a tail speaks to happiness, and whines equate to more pets. Communicating without saying a word, but without words I feel so helpless here. The dog barks, drops something at my feet, and I get roped into throwing the football again.

Over and over.

There's so much history in the buildings around me. I stare at the Humboldt Universität where my friend wants to study, at the Brandenberger Tor that's history I don't know, murals on the East-Side-Gallery stare back at me, so I don't forget the Berliner Mauer. They speak of peace yet politics, the damage done yet can be stopped. Architecture I love stands over me, tall, and grand statues return my looks. Everything consumes me, both body and mind. My friend guides me with her boyfriend, and I follow behind. The bricks walk with me.

Seen and unseen.

I sit through a sermon in a 13th century church to a god I don't necessarily believe in. I look at other old, beautiful, giant temples that make me want to believe. There's something about the largeness-of even life itself- which has me feeling small. Shuddering under the magnitude, looking up, a slight recognition of the vastness and immensity of this chaotic, unknown world leaves a spark alight in my brain. Yet, I'm not convinced that there's even order here, although I feel compelled to.

Big and small.

My friend talks to me, in English, and I appreciate it more than she can understand. She applauds my minimal German that I don't use often, only after I ask if what I'm saying is right. She defends me from this random guy who asks "why are YOU here?" and has the audacity to ask her, too. Her mom, her friends, talk to me in English, too. They could never know how grateful I am. They still talk in German around me, but they try.

A welcome distraction.

**Better When Dead****Chapter 1, July 1980**

Death lands on my finger. Her wings flutter, then stretch out to fold up against her yellow and black striped back. Her stinger carefully drags across my hand, tickling the surface of my skin, and when she lands on the button of a bruise on my knuckle, I think she's going to do it. Thrust her knife into the target on my hand. Blood and poison mingling below, racing up my veins like roots to a tree until it infects my heart. My head. My lungs.

I know why Death is here. She's come to watch the show. Perched on my hand to watch the semi-truck hurtling towards us at sixty miles per hour, puddling towards us through the thick, stagnant air. With my other hand, I pet her back. Soft, but rough if it were fur.

She crawls up my wrist, her needle like legs tangling in the hair on my arm. She stops at the red, raw indentations on my wrist, studying them quizzically.

Then Death leaves me. She flies away.

"Hey!" A voice calls, deep and gruff. "Missy! You alright?" I ignore him, I can smell the clouds of nicotine and diesel wafting towards me. I want to follow her, chase her into the woods. But she's gone. Death has left me to the cruelty of man.

The man from the truck stumbles over, a jean jacket spread out in his arms the way one would cautiously hold a blanket to catch a feral cat.

"Ya' alright?" He asks, the words strained through gapped teeth.

"Whas' your name?" He asks. I can see his gold wedding band, snug tight on meaty fingers that have grown around the ring. He has a wife. Maybe kids. He would do this for his kids.

"Oh geez," he mumbles only once he reaches me, "you're that girl. The one from the news, aren't ya'?" I don't know what I say, I nod maybe, but rely on my appearance to give that away. Hot blacktop crunches under the bare soles of my feet. His hands are safely on my shoulders, not any lower, just resting on top.

He opens the passenger door of the truck, a small, steep, step ladder urges me inside. The cab is thick with the smell of beef jerky and even stronger with the worn-out

## Katie Schimke

air fresheners trying to mask it. They hang, small cardboard pine trees, from the rear-view mirror like a small collection. His shiny head, with sunglasses rested atop like a headband, bobs up and down through the windshield as he shuffles around the truck.

The driver's door opens. "Okay. Okay." He bears a nervous smile that looks as though he's trying to see how roughly he can bite his teeth together. On his door, he scans the controls until he lands on a button that locks both doors. I claw at the lock in my own door, prying at the small rod until it stands upwards in the air, firm. My hand lingers on the door handle.

"Unlocked?" He asks. "Okay, yeah. Unlocked. You got it."

In the corner of the dashboard, a small gallery of wallet size pictures surrounds the speed gauge. A woman with large, teased, hair and two round circles of Pepto-Bismol blush smiles. Two young girls link arms in matching plaid dresses, too big of backpacks slung over shoulders. The taller girl makes a pair of bunny ears behind her sister's head.

With the radio in his palm, he falters, following my gaze. He peels out the photos, placing them on the dashboard in front of my seat. "That's my wife. Elizabeth. I call her Lizzie. Then my two girls. This one," he points to the girl making the bunny ears, "that's my oldest. The funny one, Becky." His grease-stained finger drags to the other girl, "And my youngest, the shy one. Diane. And I'm Joey." I catch the name badge on his shirt: Joey Krevitz embroidered in blue cursive thread. I watch his smile falter, unsure of how to present himself. Then the waiting radio in his hand.

"I'm Addie." I tell Diane and Becky and Elizabeth, but sometimes Lizzie. "Simmons."

Joey mumbles into his palm: Yes, he's sure it's her. No, she is alive, he is positive. In the passenger seat. A white dress. No, he's not crazy, she's wearing a long white dress.

Melissa wore a black dress by the time I met her. "You can take that off you know." She mumbled. Then dry, bony fingers tugged the blindfold down from my face. I tugged it back, in a panic to shield my view, but she grabbed my hand and carefully guided it to my lap.

"I'm Melissa." She smiled. Her lips were rubbed clean of lipstick, stained with leftover cherry red. The evidence smudged on the back of her hand. She fanned out the skirt of her black dress. Then, Melissa Landry spent the last hour of her life telling me



exactly what was going to happen next.

“Ms. Simmons?” A voice echoes while I look in the woods. They’re blue now. They haven’t been bright for three days. “Can you hear me?” A face fills the air next to me. It’s a girl. It could be a girl, not much older than me, but she must be a woman. Wearing her EMT uniform, a latexed glove shaking my arm back to reality. There’s a line of bodies behind her, waiting for me to exit the truck.

I nod, finally. “I can.” She smiles a bit, encouraged by this, but when she looks beneath my eyes instead of in them, is when I realize hot tears mingle with the sweat on my face. She grabs my hand, cautious, prying out a crinkled and folded picture of Diane and Becky from my fist that somehow ended up clutched tightly in my grip.

"The picture," I turn to Joey, "I'm sorry-"

Joey waves a dismissive hand from the driver’s seat, his eyes glassy. “It’s okay. It’s okay, honey-” I don’t hear the rest.

The woman escorts me down the step ladder and deposits me into the back of an open ambulance. Artificial light melts into my skin, seeping into my pores and flushing them clean of the dirt, debris, and last seventy-two hours.

A boy, wearing the same uniform as the woman, trains his eyes to land anywhere but my face. With a pair of shiny sheers, he cuts at the itchy material until it hangs off my shoulder. Then without permission, inserts a needle into the crook of my arm. While my blood pumps through a clear tube into his hand, I finish where he left off, and tear the white dress where the scissors stopped. A puddle of white fabric pools at my feet.

“Katie and I have worked together for the past year and It’s been a fantastic experience as a tutor. We spent a majority of this semester writing her novel and I’ve had the pleasure to watch both her and her writing evolve over time and become something she was proud of. Her work with symbolism and vivid imagery was such a fun process to watch. I’m waiting to see her work published!”

- Kacey Schmidt

## Flesh

Levi Carter-Reed clawed out of his grave on a Wednesday. The aluminum that had once been his van twisted up around him like a forest, like a wave, a sea of hands seeking to wrap him up and carry him down, down... but Levi still had his breath and strength in his arms. He pulled himself through the shattered windshield, ignored the way his tires had bitten deep into the field at the bottom of the hill, ignored the glancing sting of glass and sand slicing into his palms. He sank into that feeling, the burn in his bones, forced his muscles to carry him further, latched onto the numb buzz of not-pain in the back of his skull and heaved himself to the side of the road. Only then did he look back. The passenger's side of his van was twisted up and flattened against the ground, cloying steam gently trailing up to meet the moon. Gasoline hung heavily in the air, pooling unevenly atop the freshly refrozen soil.

It was hard to see much when the sky was like this, winter-black and empty. It was the kind of darkness Levi imagined small animals saw when they were eaten whole, something velvet-rich and heavy and devouring. The kind of darkness that swallowed up worlds and stars and whatever fell between the couch cushions. The kind of darkness you saw staring up from inside your own grave. It was so quiet, too. No birds rustled in the trees. No buzzing locusts or croaking frogs disturbed the roadsides. Levi was alone with the wind, his own heaving breaths, listening desperately for the faint crunch of gravel beneath someone's tires on a road that could barely accommodate one car, let alone two. His body was heavy, lying there beside the road. His eyes stung. His flesh was a soft thing. Levi wasn't sure if his face was wet with tears or blood. He'd just wanted to go home. There was no feeling like that raw surge of fear, barreling down a dark road and suddenly realizing that he wasn't alone. He hadn't seen much, just the shadow of a long body and twin lights in the darkness, a scant few inches apart, reflecting back the glow of oncoming headlights, a white-knuckled grip keeping the steering wheel dead straight. It was one of the few useful pieces of advice his father had ever given him.

The buck twitched where it had landed in the center of the road, the proud antlers that crowned the ridge of its brow lying in splintered fragments on the black asphalt. Levi couldn't keep himself from staring as it pulled in a wet, rattling breath, damp nose twitching sluggishly. There they were again, staring each other down, hazy breaths hanging thick in the air like the dust kicked up by a scuffed step on dry earth. The thing bleated, just this side of unintelligible. If one squinted, turned the noise just a bit sideways, it almost sounded like his name.

No. It couldn't be. It didn't have anything to say to him, not anymore.

Levi's hands shook, tucked inside the cuffs of his jacket. He could have excused it as adrenaline, would have, but there was no one else for miles in either direction. Wouldn't be, until the foundry workers got off that final shift. There was no one to pretend for.

The blood on his lips was drying, cracking and tacky and crusting. He wished he had anything to soothe the ache, the busted skin around his eye, his mouth. Vaseline, maybe, or Carmex. Bacon fat, if he had to. He'd done that once. Her funeral had run long, his starched collar choking him in the sanctuary of a country church. He'd heard the girls whispering about it. Not quite a sin, not quite makeup, but a little something. A touch-up, they'd called it, to make the picture a little nicer than it was in truth. Levi had been desperate for it. A nicer picture. Later, while Levi's father guzzled whiskey in his office, Levi had crept down the stairs to the kitchen, had pulled the can of grease from the cabinet above the fridge, had dipped the very tip of his pinky finger into it and hoped for a better view. That was the first time Levi's nose had broken. It was fitting, that this time should be his fault, too.

The air felt wrong when Levi pulled it into his lungs, somehow more hollow, and he had to push his shoulders back to keep the tissue from catching. Levi swore he could feel something crawling across the open, exposed flesh of his stomach. His skin was cold where it had slammed against hard plastic and tempered glass, aching and bruised. He hadn't thought, driving home that night, that the last time he caught the ghost of his mother's perfume as he sat in what had been her seat would come with an activating airbag. He hadn't thought much at all beyond that hunger, that need. To run *to* instead of running *from*. The crawling feeling intensified, sharpened, like he was nothing more than meat, like the carrion birds were already circling—

His shirt was wet with blood.

It was uncanny, he thought, that darkness, that stuttering series of stops and starts, of legs and feet dully scraping against the ground, desperate and moving and yet amber-slow, clumsy in the action. Levi stared at the [thing](#) in the road. Its cream underbelly was framed by a tan suit jacket, lapels splayed unevenly where they bracketed his tenderness. The buttons didn't match well with the fabric. He'd always said so.

Failure. Movement. Softness, always softness. Levi had always had too much of it. He should have left. He should never have come. For a moment, just an instant, Levi saw himself rising, saw himself driving his boot into the thing's ribs, kicking until they caved in, until there was nothing to maintain that hesitant, stuttering, gurgling, wheezing breath. Levi held his own oxygen deep in his lungs, clenched his fists until the nails, even cropped short as they were, bit into his palms. Drown it. Bury it. Patience, he needed to keep a grip on patience, needed to keep a cool head. Focus on the cold, he thought. Focus on the trees, the way the twitching, dying thing was slowing, quieting... It was nearly over. Don't look, he

## Taylor Schmidt

told himself. Don't look.

It was a mistake, he thought. All of it. Life and death and oblivion. To think that you died, and then were dead, one stop and the next. It was a continuity. It was as vast as the stars, and deep as the roots of the trees, as warm as fire and love and anger. Levi didn't know what came next. He didn't know anything at all— except that he knew that, now. He hoped, even as the ants crept closer to his eyelids, that he wouldn't forget it. Levi was made of moss, of soil. He was built to hold water, designed with crevices and gapping pools, every facet built in its image. Levi thought about rainy days. About sitting on hardwood, staring out the window and feeling the beat of all the times he thought he wouldn't make it pounding against the sill.

Levi settled in, let his cheek press heavily into the dirt, and prepared himself to watch the thing die. He owed it an ending that meant something. Not a good death. Not an honest one, certainly. Meaningful, though? Levi could manage that. Later, he thought to himself, after it was dead, after he felt better, he could try to get into his glove box and pull out a flashlight, could try to find a phone, a flare, something. Maybe he could salvage part of it. Maybe this night didn't have to end in a total loss. He twisted the worn silver band of his class ring, running his thumb over the raised numbers. Levi didn't have the money to fix any kind of damage now, didn't have the time to leave his car in the shop for more than an hour or two... but then, right in that very instant, he had nowhere to be. He had no will to go. There was no hurry to get home, to leave behind the cold and barren road for a colder, emptier house. Levi had no reason, no ability, not to see this through to the end, so he fixed his eyes on the buck's stuttering ribcage.

Fuck.

The ice crackled. The branches creaked. Levi's hands started to prickle, and he adjusted slightly, asphalt burning into his skin through the thin layer of denim. He could feel his eyelashes, the frost forming slowly on them. He hadn't even realized he was crying. Water again, holding him, leaking out of him. Inside him.

Inside it.

The deer snuffled a bit, more wet sounding than it had been the first time, squirming uncomfortably as the blood frothing around its mouth started to freeze, soaking into the fabric at its throat. It gurgled, low and unrepentant, and Levi swallowed. With a slow, stuttering movement, the buck turned its head to look at him. There was nothing in its eyes. Nothing. No warmth, no rage... just round, flat, empty eyes meeting Levi's own as the buck took shallow, honking breaths. Quietly, they slowed. Stopped. Stilled. Every part of the thing just sunk, collapsed in a little more, fell loose and limp and lax where the impact had thrown it. A few minutes passed and Levi was staring down a corpse, with thin, twisted wire and transparent, glittering shards scattered across the darkness before him.

The wind. The trees. One set of shaky, panicked breaths.

They said it was easier the second time, that the first time was the most difficult. Levi was unsure. He didn't think it would ever get easier, seeing a dead thing and knowing he caused it. Knowing he'd taken a thing that could not be returned. He was bad at that. At taking things. At accepting them. It gave him some comfort, that that hadn't changed. Levi rubbed his hands together, trying to bring warmth back into the red, cracked skin.

The car's radio crackled abruptly, nearly out of range, flicking at random between a commercial for a cheese factory and some ballad that had yet to leave the Top 40. The static between stations was warm. There were living and dying things in this world other than him, other than the new carcass six feet from his face. He closed his eyes, sunk into the voices, and fought apathy for the first time that evening. There had to be more than this road, than this barely-a-man body of his, than suffering and death and pooling blood on his father's god's green earth. He could feel his hands. He could feel his legs. He could hear, now, hear something other than wind and breath and shifting grass. He was dizzy, flesh screaming from exposure, but he could feel. He could move.

Levi gritted his teeth and twisted, ignored the gut-deep nausea as his skin strained with the movement, and pulled himself to his knees. He crawled, inch by painstaking inch, over to the cooling body in the road before grabbing hold and dragging it back to where he had been laying. The flesh felt too soft under his palms, stretching as bone and joint were reduced to places to grab, places to latch onto and heave.

No more.

It would be more than bone and sloughing skin, more than fur and food and flesh. It was an obstacle. It was a triumph. It had breathed and died and begun again. It had made and nearly unmade him. He would rest. Levi heaved the body off onto the shoulder, nesting it in the curve of the ditch, gently folding the legs as best he could while his own arms trembled with the weight. There was a dark streak on the road showing where the thing had originally landed. Another, nearby, where he had. Levi knew he didn't need the flashlight. He fought to take another breath and nudged the body into a more natural position, pulled his jacket from his shoulders and draped it across the head so he didn't have to see those blue lips and dead eyes anymore.

Sometimes these things just happened. Sometimes deer just ran out into the road, but God Damn it, Levi knew this was different. His legs were burning and numb at the same time, and he could feel how red they were getting in the too-smooth way they brushed against the insides of his jeans. There was blood on his hands, blood on the new snow, blood in the water trickling down into the ditch around the melted-out divot caused by the slow sink of a cooling corpse into the loam. The green wool of his letterman was slowly taking on a cranberry hue, but the leather of the sleeves stayed cream-colored and perfect.

Dead flesh on dead flesh, unloved and unstained.

Levi couldn't stay here. It rang in his head, behind his eyes, a throbbing, inconsistent clamor that grew louder with each breath fired, airless and grim, into the night. He couldn't stay, not with this dead deer and its dead eyes burning holes in the wool of his jacket. This couldn't be his, this life, this death. There was more to him than his father's empty advice, than a rattling helmet and the chattering of teeth. Levi Carter-Reed was more than a name, more than a legacy, more than that house on a hill fenced in by small-town gossip. He bled, didn't he? He cried. He moved. He sweat and screamed and crashed to the ground. He felt guilt, for this, for her, for being ever, always, unendingly insufficient. That had to mean something. This life, all of it— it had to have been for *something*. It *did*. All this death had to have meant something.

Levi pulled himself up, stumbled, fell to his knees beside the road. The curve of the earth welcomed him back as he crumpled, a solid line following the curve of his ribs, gently cupping bruised and broken skin. Tender. Earth and of-earth, separated by fabric, thinner now that the jacket was gone. Brown grass and dried blood. Dead things. The sloping land held him there, propped him up against the wind whistling through the trees, against the fine powder of glass covering the earth in gleaming, crystalline fragments, against the cold he'd long since gone numb to. Levi watched with trembling hands as the radio grew louder, still flitting between stations in a frantic catch and release, as the hazards blinked awake, as the engine sputtered to life with a dull, gurgling grumble.

Levi didn't turn to face the new corpse behind him, still sinking. He thought about rain cascading on the roof of his childhood home, banging furiously against the windows. He thought about his mother, how they would match, now. Cold-bodied and bruised, battered and fading. He thought about his father, about his deer mounted side by side in the living room. Levi wondered if he was proud of him. If this death meant as much as those.

He kept his eyes on the ditches and dells in front of him, followed the flickering glow of the right headlight along the treeline, scanning. He tried not to think about the broken, twisted reading glasses, the way they'd shattered against the asphalt. He tried not to think about how much lighter he felt with a near-totaled car, with his letterman jacket playing shroud in the ditch behind him. If he fought hard enough, shoved it back far enough, the memory of that dead, empty stare wouldn't flicker behind his closed eyelids. If he choked down enough bottom-shelf vodka, pretended the burning in his eyes was from sweat alone, he could bury this. He could forget it all— what he'd lost, what he'd taken. That body, just feet away, with purple fingers and a shattered skull.

Levi had always been a liar.

## It's OK to be Wrong

“Be ‘umble. Christianity is like a greased pole. If you aren’t getting closer to God, you’re falling away. Women should learn in silence with all subjection. Children should be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

The preacher was a diminutive man from the hills of Eastern Kentucky. There were quirks in the way he spoke—little tells of his past that the long years as a Mennonite had not erased. On Sundays, he spoke from a homemade wooden pulpit, plain oak, honey colored. On Wednesday nights, he knelt on a carpet sample with a tight gray weave and red squares, on the cold concrete floor of an old church basement, gray paint chipped and chipping. The children, oppressed into silence heard him drawl, “O Lord, our Lord, we come before you today...” the opening lines of a prayer long enough to be its own sermon. His seven sons filled in the space after him. One of them was a 17-year-old who liked to talk to little 8-year-old me about the big ideas that made the world go—until the day he told me women should be utterly silent in church—not even opening our mouths to sing. That was the day I knew he wasn’t really talking to me—my ideas weren’t enough for him to take me seriously. But I was 8, and they said I cared way too much about everything.

There were other men who loomed too-- the great tall ex-Amish man from the Upper Peninsula, with his booming voice who used King James language in his prayers but who I knew beat his sons for listening to country music. Or the deep-voiced, seminary-trained man with the penchant for Greek and questionable relish of the word *Eros*, who had bounced between churches all over the country-- whose idea of teaching Greek meant memorizing, “*En archei en o logos*”...In the beginning was the Word.” They were there too, poisonous and loud. But it was those Eastern Kentucky men that really destroyed me.

I never fit in there. I was too much, too loud, too wild. I asked too many questions and had too good a vocabulary and too sharp a wit for a girl. Wasn’t it something then, when I was 16 years old and the preacher’s daughter invited me on a family trip to the Eastern Kentucky hills.

It was winter but there that meant mud season—splattered up the sides of trucks and silly white puffer jackets because you had to really gun it to get up into those hollers. I remember the sulfur smell of the water in the shower, rotten eggs cloaking the air with an unescapable pall. Maybe that was why everyone smoked—the scent thick on clothes, in cars, in the wood paneling of houses. We played Rook for hour after hour—the tar from the cigarettes leaving a gritty film on the cards. My friend’s 18-year-old cousin kept looking at me. I looked at the Pepsi can on his left, studiously ignoring him. By the end of the first day, she told me that he liked me. I panicked. We stayed up until the wee hours of the morning, trying to make sense of it all. The next day, we played a board game with her 48-year old uncle. By the end, I thought I had done something wrong because he watched me too. Where was the preacher now? I was 16,

just trying to figure out what was happening in a culture alien to me. It was just four days, but it felt like a decade. I could feel the vowels changing as they came out of my mouth, and I wanted to fit in—but it wasn't my world and I did not want to be wed to that land. Men from Appalachia had destroyed me and then they had leered at me and I could never trust them.

But the TA in my first philosophy of education class at Liberty University was from Ducktown, Tennessee—and though his accent surprised me, he thought more than anyone else in that classroom, by a lot. And then I married a man from Texas, whose family prided themselves on their Appalachian roots. And did we ever talk—philosophy and theology and religion and what a fallacy was and how to argue. But he didn't talk like that preacher, and so I never heard the voices in my head at war with each other. We looked on from the outside, labeling and categorizing and defining our trauma in terms of new lexicons and theoretical frameworks. Each new class I took at UWSP gave me ways to both understand and sometimes pathologize my past and to organize my present reaction to it.

When I walked into class with another man from Eastern Kentucky, I expected more of the same. I had questioned my faith and dissected my own still beating heart until there was no more magic and no more god and nothing more than the sparkles on pine needles and the shadows of deep space time and the chaos of existence. But no-- there's something odd about those Eastern Kentucky people. They say things that stick in your craw—about God and knowledge and what we can't know. About reasons for things and illegitimate bifurcations. And now there are two short, dark-haired men from Eastern Kentucky duking it out inside my head. God, this is a mess.

“It's OK to be wrong, and difficult to be right. There's enough darkness for people who want obscurity, and enough light for people who want to find God.”

“Jarita is one of the most influential characters in the TLC, not only due to the immense amount of work she does for her job on the daily, but for the life she brings to the space. She is energetic, kind, and true to herself. I deeply value the critical, philosophical, and introspective perspectives she provides both in casual conversation and more formal projects. One of the things I admire most about Jarita is her willingness to not only give to others, but to genuinely care and invest herself in the community around her. Interacting with Jarita is always such a positive experience, and I am so proud of everything she has done and continues to do for the TLC. :) <3”

- Reilly Crous





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