



WORDPLAY

ENGLISH '57 SERIES

SPRING 2022 COLLECTION

Acknowledgements

The publication of *Wordplay* is only possible through the dedicated work of the writers audacious enough to let the world see their creations. It is truly an amazing experience to see everything come together thanks to their hard work. It is an honor to share their essays, poetry, prose, and short stories through this collection.

Furthermore, the Writing Consultants amaze me with their diverse set of experiences and skills that they use to guide our writers. The consultants are willing to share their help in any situation when needed and show that every person has a valid voice deserving to be heard.

Without Megan Kraege, the Tutoring-Learning Center would crumble in disorganization and chaos. Thank you for your ability to keep everyone on task and moving forward to the next project seamlessly. You do magic every day.

Now for the Ship Captain herself, Emily Wisinski, our official Writing Center Coordinator. It is under her watch our writers are able to become their best selves due to the resources and time she allocates for such creative endeavours. Through empathy, compassion, and brain power snacks left at the back table does she bring us all together as a community. She makes the Writing Center feel like family. Thank you, Emily.

“One day I will find the right words, and they will be simple.”

- Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

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Essays

Kinsey Gade

“Kinsey was a terrific student to work with every week in her 157 sessions! This semester, our main focus was crafting an essay to highlight the alarming practices in professional ballet that cause dancers to suffer from eating disorders and other adverse health effects. Kinsey has experienced firsthand the toxic and intense culture in ballet, so we built off her personal knowledge through additional research to strengthen her reasoning and evidence. I was always impressed by the new ideas and quality writing Kinsey brought in each week, making my job really easy. I'm proud of the work she has accomplished this semester!”

- Kyle Pulvermacher

What's Eating a Ballerina?

If you were to ask a five year old girl what she wanted to be when she grew up, she might answer a princess, zoo keeper, dolphin trainer, or in my case a ballet dancer. Commercialized with sparkly tutus and pointe shoes, the ballet world seems to be a magical and idealistic realm. However, backstage conceals one of the most physically and emotionally demanding jobs. Eating disorders are a very prominent issue within the ballet industry and it affects a large population of dancers and contributes to a variety of mental issues that can plague them throughout their lives and careers. Even with the progressional awareness of eating disorders in our society, the ballet industry remains static toward this issue, although claiming it has evolved.

The history of ballet begins in Italy during the 1500s, where it was constructed. It progressed to France where it gained its own vocabulary and language, and from there traveled across Europe to Asia and into America. By 1795 the pointe shoe was created, giving female dancers the ability to dance on their toes. Unlike today, the “ballet body” wasn't a prominent issue during this time since voluptuous female bodies were encouraged. This changed during the 1920s when women's fashion introduced “boyish body shapes,” which revolutionized the ballet world. Females with a slim and skinny figure were able to jump higher, had more agility, and could be lifted easier. This age was also the introduction of profitable ballet companies and sprouted the ballet industry we know today. Although body image has changed vastly from the 1920s, the slim figure has remained and is labeled the “ballet body type” for the entirety of the ballet world. With this new body standard, female dancers were judged not only on their skills, but their bodies. Thus forcing young women with the passion for the art but a body that counteracts, to seek out methods for losing weight and fitting the ballet social construct mold.

As for personal experience on the matter, I started ballet when I was in fourth grade at a local dance studio. Eventually, I switched to an academy constructed to produce professional dancers. When I started classes, I found an entirely different atmosphere and teaching style, which I assumed was part of the level of professionalism known in the ballet industry. Many comments and critiques were made by teachers, directors, and while auditioning, regarded and aimed toward body image. I also took notice of the obvious attention and praise that were given to the thinnest girls in class or at an audition. I started using dieting and bad eating habits in order to make myself a figure acceptable to ballet, in hopes that I would start getting attention, promoting a possible career. Successfully, I received much praise for my dwindling appearance,

which further reinforced my eating disorder. When I started ballet classes I was 5'2" and 115lbs. After nearly three years of ballet training, I weighed 89lbs. Eventually, I quit ballet due to the toxic environment, in addition to my poor physical and mental state.

The art form of ballet is presented as "perfectionism" which for any human is impossible, yet every dancer, teacher, or choreographer in ballet will strive for nothing less than to be an image of such. This ideal, lived as a religion for the ballet world, is directly aimed at a dancer's body. With this, not only will a ballet dancer strive every day for their dancing and technique to be perfect, they want their body to be perfect as well. The National Institute of Health states that the most common mental effects from dancers are: eating disorders, anxiety, depression, perfectionism, self esteem, coping behavior, body image, and body weight. A study conducted at Norwegian's National Ballet House, the principal ballet company in Norway, showed 50% of their ballet dancers had in their lifetime, at one point, an eating disorder. The company currently employs sixty-seven dancers, meaning at least thirty-four of those dancers currently live with an eating disorder.

Santo André et. al, specializing in humanities and social science research, conducted a study about the prevalence of eating disorders within a ballet community. They interviewed fourteen classically trained ballet dancers from the ages 18-30 about body image and eating disorders. Their article, "Can A Ballerina Eat Ice Cream?" reveals the dancers having a "regular practice of several restrictive popular diets, constant restriction of foods considered "heavy" or "fatty," meal skipping and ignoring the signs of hunger, presence of overeating episodes due to stress and anxiety, feeling guilty about breaking their usual diet, classifying foods as "good" and "bad," "lean" or "fat," and excluding some of those foods from their usual diet." (André, et. al) The survey also discovered that 50% of the participants had signs of bulimia, 7.1% showing signs of binge eating, and 14.3% exhibiting indications of eating disorders in general. Finally, they uncovered that 50% of the dancers were unsatisfied with their current body shape and 57.1% revealed "their desired body shape was a leaner figure rather than one they considered healthy." (André, et. al) They concluded that ballet dancers practicing restrictive and regularly followed diets combined with the constant dissatisfaction of self-body image, commonly results in symptoms of eating disorders and poor psychological patterns. In concordance with the research presented, it is clear to state that the products of ballet have been reduced to eating disorders as a normality of their career.

In regard to the stance of directors and teachers on the matter, an article by The Washington Post writes of ballet dancer Anais Garcia, on her eating disorder and responses of superiors in the industry. Garcia states that in her auditioning process for the Baltimore School for the Arts, "she was rejected, she says, not because of her dancing, but because the faculty decided she needed more muscle tone." BSA faculty member Pera, commented back saying that "we never tell a student that they're fat . . . that would be a very destructive and horrible thing to say." She says she doesn't make comments that imply a student should look skinnier. "The student hears what they want to hear." Comments like these, made by instructors, illustrates how there may be disregard for comprehension between dancer and teacher, leading to body dysmorphia.

Anais Garcia reveals her total weight loss from 115 lbs to 79 lbs, in accordance with the negligence of her superiors as Pera reports that, “she and the other teachers had no indication that Garcia was going through a severe eating disorder.” Although faculty and ballet teachers take the non-provoking attitude in the cause of ballet dancers retaining eating disorders, the article also alludes to the argument by addressing a study conducted by Professor Michelle Warren from Columbia University. This specific study surveyed ballet dancers for three years from American Ballet Theater and New York City Ballet, which, controversially, are the two most respected ballet companies in North America, and top ten globally. “They noticed most students denied having an eating disorder, even when they showed symptoms of anorexia or bulimia nervosa. The researchers canceled the survey after 70% of the dancers dropped out of the study because they started to encounter trouble from the school.” This once more brings into question the industry's faculty and their intentions or regard of terminating eating disorders. Most, if not all, ballet schools preach for the health and wellbeing of their dancers, yet fail to take action when excessive weight loss or bad eating habits are visible and present.

Apart from ballet, eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, are still a prevalent issue within other sports. The National Council for Mental Awareness for figure skating estimates that, “85% of figure skaters have an eating disorder.” The NCAA, through the National Institutes of Health, reports that eating disorders for female gymnasts is around 51%. While these other sports are being reported and accounted for, ballet has rare to no records or estimates for the percentage of ballet dancers affected by eating disorders. This may be due to the privacy and lack of oversight within the ballet industry due to it being considered an art form rather than a sport. Unlike gymnastics or figure skating, ballet companies like The American Ballet Theater, The Bolshoi Ballet, The Royal Ballet, are self governed. There is no NCAA for ballet or dance at the professional level that regulates anything, due to its absence of competition. However, this does not mean that without formal competitions, there is no competition for reputation. Ballet companies do fight to be the best or one of the best institutes nationally and internationally, by their performances, low recruitment rates, prestige, and image. This correlates to, again, their dancers' level of technique, ability, and body image. Without regulation like other sports, it ultimately gives the instructors and faculty of individual ballet institutes, the ability to maintain and control their members and dancers under their own conditions.

There is much need for change and advancement in the ballet industry as it is progressively gaining popularity. However, with more interest in the art, comes a larger competition to acquire jobs, and consequently could motivate an increase of dancers to seek eating disorders or dieting to segregate themselves in achieving a career. There seems to be two large advancements needed: the adjustment of the currently approved “ballet body type” from a skeletal figure to one that is healthy, and the regulation of the art, at least on a national level, like the NCAA for sports. Faculty and big ballet corporations that house hundreds of dancers like The Bolshoi Ballet, American Ballet Theater, The Royal Ballet, ect, may be starting to take proper steps in ensuring their dancers are healthy and supported, but rest within their reputations, as no ballet company is idly looking at skill alone, today.

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Maddie Oxborough

“I had a lot of fun working with Maddie this semester. It was great to see her grow as a writer each session and be able to confidently express her journey as a runner in this piece. One of our main focuses this semester was using descriptive and figurative language to help the reader understand what she was feeling. As you read her story, you will really be able to connect because of how well she did with those things. I can’t wait to see what Maddie does next with her writing skills.”

- Rebecca Geiyer

Running: The Downfall and the Return

They say running helps improve a person’s mental health and controls the stress build up in the body. But when running started causing the stress and mental health problems, I began questioning if running was really worth it anymore. For a long time I wrestled with my thoughts, let my fear of losing take over, and relied too much on my competitiveness to carry me through every run, to the point of wanting to quit. I just wanted to escape running for a while. Peaking my freshman year of high school due to a collection of injuries and breathing problems brought on a hostility for running I never thought I would have. My goals felt out of reach but with a change in perspective, I was finally able to do something in college I worked a long time for.

After a successful freshman season of high school, I had big goals for the following year. I had made it in the top seven of my team, ran at state making an under twenty minute appearance, and then finished second in the state as a team. I was overjoyed with how the season ended, yet not satisfied with the entirety of it. As a result, I started competing against my teammates, including my twin sister, and beat myself up when I did not race well enough to my expectations. That is when I began noticing a shortness of breath that occurred every time I raced, creating a tightness in my chest and blurring my vision. It was like I was zoning out, and my mind was slipping out of reality. At first I thought it was the hot weather, just a normal occurrence in the humidity, but when it continued through the fall, I knew something was wrong. I ended every race in tears, and when my mom told me I should talk to a sports psychologist, I refused because I believed I could handle it. Turns out, I was wrong. I got tested for sports induced asthma but when that came back negative, we knew this block was mostly mental.

Throughout the rest of my sophomore cross country season, I only had obstructive thoughts of how bad running felt. These negative thoughts filled my head when I raced, instead of just simply running. I was stuck in my head the entire season and told myself I was running bad if my teammates started passing me. The stress I put on myself led to the shortness of breath that ended up being vocal cord dysfunction (VCD). Vocal cord dysfunction is when your vocal cords do not open properly, making it difficult for air to pass in and out of the lungs. I like to describe it as getting the absolute minimum of air while also running at altitude every run. Wheezing and stridor (a high-pitched sound during inhalation), air hunger (feeling your suffocating) and throat tightness, chest pain and chest pinching are all symptoms I struggle with on a daily basis. But, the worst part of it all was my lungs and head hurting after every run both

physically and mentally, like a massive headache and bricks pressed against my lungs from all the pressure of trying to breathe normally. My head felt like it was going to explode which tore me apart, especially since not many people could relate to it because of how uncommon it is.

Sophomore year was a rough one to get through. And it did not get any better the following year. I did not run a single pr since freshman year, and I kept telling myself I was no longer fast, and I would not run in college. This went on for the following two years until I finally had one race I was proud of in my final year of high school. Although I did not pr, I finally felt satisfied and kept a positive mindset throughout. I came very close; however, being only a second off, and I was able to run at state with my team. This race gave me hope going into college because I was so close to reaching my goal.

With my goal of getting a pr and being in the top ten of my team in mind, I was able to start off my college cross country season with high ambitions. I was used to training for a 5k, but now would have to jump to a 6k. I was nervous for the greater intensity training, longer miles, an extended race, and how my breathing would be affected by that. In reality, I could handle the training and enjoyed running big miles. In workouts, I was able to keep pace with the top group of girls which put me on track of being in the top ten of the team. Because of these performances, I was chosen to run at Ohio, a big meet to build up our team resume for a potential selection for nationals. Not only did I get to race at that competitive meet, but also had the chance to compete at the conference meet. These two races were big steps in the right direction and were huge confidence boosters for myself. Nevertheless, it was not all good. Unfortunately, I did not make it in the top seven of my team at conference, preventing me from racing at regionals. I was back to my regular self, doubting myself and full of disappointment. But then I thought of track, and was determined to make a comeback. If only I knew...

When track rolled around, I was running up to sixty miles a week and was in the greatest shape of my life. Workouts were going so well and I just felt fast. Although, I may have overdone it. I was pushing the pace on easy runs and double running twice a week. That's when my Achilles started hurting each step but I refused to take a break. I made the decision to race anyway, which I only regret a little. With my foot hurting, I ran a mile personal best in indoor track. I was ecstatic. I went into the race with no expectations whatsoever and turned my nerves into solely excitement. I started the race super strong and was keeping up with my faster teammates. I held on for almost the entire time and felt relaxed with my positioning in the race. I finished with a good time, but I could tell that I made my Achilles hurt more. After I ripped the tape off my ankle, the pain came rushing back in. Like I said, I only regret racing this mile a little because I was finally running like my old self again.

After that race, my Achilles started hurting not only when I was running but also when I was walking. It felt like the tendon was tearing every time I took a step, and I knew it was telling me to take a break. I started limping to classes, which is when my coach told me to check in with the athletic trainers. They put me in a boot and told me it was Achilles tendonitis. I could only bike for the next few weeks. At that moment, the pain of hearing I was not able to run hurt more than my actual Achilles. I got bored of

biking really fast and felt frustrated with my situation. It was like I had just gotten punched in the gut and running was the boxer. It was hard to stay motivated, and I knew this injury was going to be hard for my mind to grasp. But my mental toughness carried me through those two weeks and before I knew it I was back to wearing two shoes again. I had been doing PT with the athletic trainers and the day they told me I could start running on a treadmill, I almost cried tears of joy. Missing a whole season of indoor track may not have been ideal, but this injury also made me realize that I would rather deal with all the mental problems, pain, and breathing issues than give up on running altogether.

Being contained inside to run now and not knowing when I will be able to run outside again has made me restless, but it's all part of the progression. I am currently able to run two to three miles indoors with additional cross training which can get extremely repetitive. In high school, I would have tried to run through this injury and jump into running too fast. However, now in college I understand that patience and doing all the little things to let it heal will help me a lot more.

At that point, I was counting down the days until I could step outside and run again. Taking a week off during spring break helped me recover both mentally and physically. My Achilles felt fully healed, and I was ready to get back to racing.

Tuesday. I finally got cleared to run outside. I finally get to do workouts with my teammates again, which means I finally get to race again. This time; however, coming back smarter and stronger.

Thinking back over the last five years of my running career, I grew a lot from my freshman year. I learned a lot, but probably the most crucial thing I gained an understanding of is that your mind is powerful. Your thoughts do have an impact on your performance, getting past negative self-talk, to visualize what is possible, so you can get through barriers with a growth mindset. I wouldn't change a thing about what happened to me because it helped me develop as a runner, and most importantly helped me realize that running isn't the most important thing in the world. The people that helped me get to where I am today are the true heroes: my coaches, my teammates, and my family, that helped me run with confidence again.

Robbie Ptacek

“Working with Robbie was an enlightenment and joy during every session. Robbie is an amazing writer who considers all of the aspects of writing and deeply understands how to balance the many factors within good writing. I learned just as much from him as he did me. I am grateful for the opportunity to help him bounce ideas around and watch him develop his craft. I am confident he will excel at anything he puts his mind to and the world is made better through the presence of his work. Amazing job!”

- Jessie Szprejda

Bad Art And Why We Should Love It

evaluate /ih-val-yoo-eyt/ v. 1. To search for value in a piece of creative work.

In my last semester of college, I was feeling burnt out, so I took a creative writing class. My professor was a particularly interesting guy among a profession of unusual folks. He was the sort of person who loved to philosophize in his lectures. So, every day he'd share some new piece of wisdom. One that really stuck out to me was his definition of evaluation; to search for value in a piece of creative work. I remember him saying the words aloud and my slow hand struggling to scribble them down. When my pencil finally paused, it clicked in my mind, that was my approach to art. That was why I enjoyed so many 'bad' pieces of art. What do I define as bad art? Put simply, this sort of media is something that the audience would feel judged for having consumed. By this I mean, anything from video games that audiences trash to children's shows consumed by adults. Although these are both examples, I wouldn't consider them the end of the list. There are as many examples of beloved bad art as there are people in this world. This is because humans are so diverse; there is no stock-standard person in existence. Yet, as a society, we often don't celebrate this diversity of interest. Instead, we scorn it! We strive for normality. A perfect example of this is how people who vocally like bad media are bullied or made into social outcasts. Think of that unusual person in the back of the classroom that wore cat ears to every class or the coworker that spends more of their downtime drawing anime characters than chatting socially. Weirdos, one might call them. Well, on behalf of us weirdos, I will argue that everyone should strive to be unapologetically weird by admitting our love for bad media.

It's so bad it's good. For those who are unfamiliar, this phrase is used to explain the enjoyment someone gets from consuming a piece of art that is so bad that its poor quality becomes humorous. In my opinion, this is an excuse. Why would someone use this excuse? Personally, I think a lot of people don't want to say they unironically enjoy something others deem bad. They're scared to stand out and become the subject of ridicule. I understand that. It's hard to be different even in such a small way. Yet, can the joy you feel while laughing at the cardboard set of a 60s *Star Trek* planet be distinguished from laughing at a stand-up comic's joke? Ironic or not, you felt that happiness. Dismissing something "as so bad it's good" doesn't allow for a deeper reading of what drew you to that piece of art in the first place. Sure, maybe you do like laughing at the poor quality of something but there are many horribly constructed pieces of art, and I suspect you don't care about all of them. What is it in particular about *The Room*

or Hallmark movies that draw you to them? Maybe a personal anecdote will help! I love *Star Trek*. Throughout this essay that will become abundantly clear. *Trek* is famous for its campy, “so bad it’s good” qualities. My favorite piece of *Star Trek* media is colloquially called ‘the movie with the whales.’ A dear friend of mine once described *Star Trek: Voyage Home* as a movie where the Enterprise crew has to time travel to execute a whale heist to save Earth from an alien probe that is wreaking havoc on the weather using whale song. That description sounds really weird and it is. Its campy qualities are why I love it so much! It makes me laugh but there is more to it than just that. *Star Trek* is by no means the only piece of media that is campy but it is a world that is special to me. It’s optimistic. In the *Star Trek* world, everyone is welcome in the Federation of Planets and their differences are celebrated. People like me exist in this world and we have complex and beautiful lives just like anyone else. This might not be something everyone understands, but for a weirdo like me, that’s a haven reality doesn’t often provide. This is why *Star Trek* is one of my comfort shows.

Bad media is often likened to comfort food by calling it comfort shows/books/movies. Consuming it is like eating a big bowl of ice cream, trashy and comforting. In the fall of 2020, the world seemed to be leached of color. Everything beautiful outside of the white brick walls of the dorm room was imploding. The world was burning, people were dying, and all I could do was wait it out. Being in a single room, I had no one to talk to except during my weekly phone calls home. After the professor I had been doing research with decided to put her studies on hold, I had extra time so I started watching the original *Star Trek* series. I’d never watched it all the way through before, only consuming select episodes my parents enjoyed. This time, with nothing to do but hide in my dorm, I was able to finish the series. From there I was hooked and I kept consuming more and more *Trek* media. Even in its darkest moments, *Trek*’s hopeful optimism about humanity helped me slog through that lonely school year. That comfort isn’t something to be written off. Indulging in comfort media is one way to practice self-care. That’s why I would argue that the comfort food metaphor is a bad one. There is something harmful and self-loathing about chowing down on an entire bin of ice cream after a break-up. Bad media is not harmful in this way. You won’t gain extra pounds by watching an anime or two during your free time. All you will gain is a sense of joy because the artist has created something that speaks to the very core of your being when you need it most.

Communication is far more complex than we give it credit for. To communicate you must form an idea in your brain, formulate how to share that idea with someone else, and express that formulation. Then someone else needs to see that expression and extrapolate their own meaning from it. Basically, it’s like mind reading but there is this one big hurdle that makes that difficult. We can’t read minds. This means that no form of communication can perfectly transfer the creator's idea into the mind of their audience. So, some level of miscommunication is inherent to all forms of communication including art. In fact, that’s one of the beautiful things about art, it exposes humanity. Both in that it exposes the humanity of the creator through the expression of their thoughts and feelings, and that it exposes the humanity of the audience in the way they interpret and personalize the art. The deficit in bad media is that the creator likely did not expect their audience to get something out of their

creation that they did. A great example of this comes from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. One of the main characters is an alien woman named Jadzia Dax. Her species, Trill, can become hosts to a symbiotic organism that contains the memories of all of its previous hosts. The show makes it very clear that once a Trill is joined to a Symbiont, they are indistinguishable from the rest of the hosts. Jadzia is the most recent host for the Dax Symbiont. Because of her recently acquiring the Symbiont, Jadzia runs into quite a few people who knew Dax's former host, Curzon Dax. Curzon was a man and Jadzia's friends mention this often in a kind, loving, and humorous way. Jadzia is the epitome of the perfect transgender metaphor; something which the writers clearly never meant her to be. In this way, the artist's expectations often do not matter, because the trans community has made Jadzia our own. Just like the writers of *Deep Space Nine*, artists' expectations are often dashed.

To become good at something one must first fail at it and then fail again and then fail a few dozen times and then maybe you'll be pretty good. As far as I can tell, that's true of every skill including the creation of media. If you don't try to create something at all you'll never make something great. Often, you may even make something bad or something you're embarrassed by. In sixth grade, I wrote a 50-page story about the post-apocalyptic journey of two siblings. I remember sitting in the old computer lab late into the night as Mom graded papers in the other room. All of the school lights had flickered out and left the space dark except for the glowing light of my computer. In spite of the late hour, I typed away at that document. My masterpiece. I remember it being pretty good. I was young, after all, and 50 pages is an impressive number for someone that young. You know, memory is such a fickle thing. Recently, I found this story on a flash drive. I stuck the drive into my computer and opened up the document to find that it was 16 pages. Also, it was littered with squiggly red lines, fragmented sentences, and misused words. That's not to mention the plot or lack thereof. Needless to say, it was the writing of a 12-year-old dyslexic who'd only learned how to read chapter books the year before. I am not embarrassed to have my rosy memories dashed. No, I'm proud of that story because of its flaws. Because I can see how much I have grown from a decade of writing similar terrible stories. So, I consume bad art, in part because I know the creator is still honing their skills and one day might make something great. They may not, but there's only one way to find out. As renowned physicist Albert Einstein once said, "Failure is success in progress" ("A Quote by Albert Einstein").

In my high school's 2018 yearbook, there is a picture of me in a baggy gray sweatshirt trying to look tough while surrounded by a beautiful autumnal scene. Under the picture reads the quote, "Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armor yourself in it, and it will never be used to hurt you," Tyrion Lannister (Martin). Why am I bringing this up? By all accounts, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the series I stole my senior quote from, is one of the greatest pieces of fantasy media in modern times and by no means 'bad' art. Well, it's a profound truth. That's the way I think people should try to approach life and certainly how we should approach enjoying bad media. So what if you're going to stand out a bit for adoring *My Little Pony*? Let yourself enjoy that thing that you love not just for yourself, but for others who don't have the luxury of choice. Some people don't have the choice to not stand out, either because of the color of their skin, the language they

speak, or their physical or mental ability. Diversity shouldn't be a bad thing. It wouldn't fix all of the systemic problems of the world, but I think it might help everyone if we all just enjoyed our trashy movies and didn't have to tell half-truths about why. Art is a place where everyone can and should be able to express their personal idiosyncrasies and the interlocking threads of personhood. Trek understands this. In recent years, two transgender actors, Ian Alexander and Blu Del Barrio, became leading characters in *Star Trek: Discovery*. This means I get to see people who look like me, played by actors who are like me in a world I adore. That is something Trek has done since the very beginning. Famously, when Nichelle Nichols, the actress who played Lt. Uhura on the original series, met Martin Luther King Jr., he begged her not to quit the show which she'd already resigned from. He said, if she did, the producers would replace her with a white actress and then all of the young black kids who looked up to her and saw themselves in her as a prominent member of the Enterprise would have no one. So, she went to Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, and asked to stay on. He, of course, agreed. These examples of representation are important but generally not within the control of the consumer. Just like the art we consume, all we can be is ourselves, and all we can do is celebrate our glorious differences. So, wear that 'Team Edward' shirt! Armor yourself in the person you are and it can never be used to harm you.

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Poetry

Bella Berg

“Working with Bella this semester in English 57 was awesome. Each week Bella brought in fun poems or short stories that felt personal and meaningful. Bella did a great job with imagery, word choice, and her overall ideas. I looked forward to meeting with Bella to see what awesome rhymes she thought of each week; she made sure to challenge herself every session to become a better writer and learner. I hope everyone who reads Bella’s poems get the same smile and chuckle that I do reading them.”

- Braedon Gilles

In Our Eyes: Green

A deep forest whispering a thousand words through the pine.
A meadow of tall grass swaying back and forth back and forth.
The depths of a pond swirling with underwater life.
A sour apple plucked from the branch of a tree.
Peas in a pod, so crisp and fresh.
A snake slithering along a damp path.
The light shining bright that tells you to ‘Go’.
A little sprout that gives you luck when it has four leaves.
The deep shimmer of emerald representing people born in May.
Moss on top of a stone, dew drops magnifying its fuzz.
Vines that climb the side of a brick wall, filling in every crevasse.
A skewered olive resting on the side of a glass.
What those who serve wear, different patches to blend in.
A garden flourished with vegetation.
A frog hopping across a lily-pad.
The Amazon rain forest flourishing with life.
Mint gum.
The eyes see so much, but not enough at all.
They hold secrets, emotions, memories.
Grant intimacy and neglect unwantedness.
They tell stories our mouths don’t speak.
And reveal truths we try to hide.
We all have a deeper story glimmering in our eyes.

Tomorrow

Tomorrow is never promised
So why worry about today?
If you knew you wouldn't be here in the morning
To whom and what would you say?
Mom, dad, grandma, brother
My time is on its way.
I wish I did more
Worked less
But who has the time anymore?
We live life as if we'll be here forever
But our bodies wage a silent war.
We push ourselves
The signs we ignore.
Isn't it great?
Working the 9-5's
But deep down I crave my fate
When did money become more important than happiness?
Fixated on the hourly rate.
Why do I dread every week?
Full of stress, uncertainty, endless tasks
I've reached my peak
The same old routine
Nothing seems unique.
So, change your life
Chase your craziest dreams
You're in control of your future
No matter what it seems
The end is certain
It's what the world deems
What you do with your time
Gives it it's means.
Tomorrow is never promised
So do what you love today.

Reilly Crous

“Reilly has been a pleasure to work with this semester. With a love of poetry, Reilly carefully crafts lines to create rich images and evoke emotions, each word chosen meticulously. Every week as her tutor, I learned from her as we delved deeper into her poems - seeing her grow throughout the process - which has been both refreshing and insightful. I am sure that readers will be moved and challenged by the pieces she has chosen to publish in Wordplay as a small collection and sampling of her work. I am excited to see Reilly begin as a writing tutor next semester, as I believe her passion for writing will help inspire learners.”

- Jessica Lange

Universal Beliefs Collection

Song of Reason

the universe sang to me
last night, in my sleep
as i lay halfway to death,
it sang to me:
a song of light and of sorrow,
of blue skies and of thunder,
of a world without death
and of one without life
it cradled me in its arms,
singing: “Hush now,
it’s just a bad day,
but I can’t say they won’t get worse.”
it held me in its vastness,
in its broad and empty love,
all space-like vagueness
and silent promises
and it sang to me:
a sweet, gentle tune
with cryptic, yet sensible lyrics
that lulled me to and from understanding
“You may sleep and you may wake,
and you may not know the difference;
You may be held and you may be pushed,
but you will always have a place by my side.”
the universe sang to me
and what was i to do but listen?
because when the world speaks,
it’s for a reason

Care of Creation

i don't think the universe cares about us.
it sings and whistles, whispering and lamenting in our ears, shadowing our lamp-lit
nightlife and beaming sunshine into our dingy alleyways;
it laughs and dances to our music, twirling to our syncopated heartbeats;
it weeps for us—for our dampened fires and fallen friends—rages against our injustices
and holds the weight of our sullen bones.
it does all this, yet it does not care.

the universe is a great actress.
she's type-cast, more often than not, but the reason is obvious;
she performs her role well, molding her features to horror and shock as the actors
around her feign mere melancholy;
she cries in character, but never out, her true face always remaining stoic and glazed.
on stage she shines, and we will applaud her.

i don't think the universe has a goal.
he spreads his fingers, opens his arms, reaches out for us all;
he adopts us into his galactic graces, and we are subjected to his hold and to his will;
but he doesn't have a plan beyond holding, no motives behind his embrace;
a hug from the universe has no purpose but to occur.
when you are cradled by the coolness of the cosmos, it is up to you to feel the chill.

the universe doesn't care about us.
they hold us, they sing to us, they put on their grand show;
they wilt and bloom and decompose, they evaporate and precipitate, they direct our
conflicts and spin our planet, gift life and death and subject us to the in-between;
but they leave us to do the rest—to feel the deep sincerities, the bitter joys, and the sing-
song sorrows;
the loving is up to the people, the caring is up to the humans, the children of the
universe.
the universe doesn't care, but their creations will.

Letter of Confession

To My Glorious Universe,

I hate you.

My love, my dear, my star.

I despise your cruel fates—the ones you subject my enemies to.

I adore your infinities—your unlimited lack of thought.

I rave over your kindness for me and my ilk.

Thank you for your compliments and your never-ending gifts.

I will not stop despising you despite this—I hope you understand.

I love you.

Forever and always, my precious world.

But remember, forever always ends.

You set that rule yourself.

Yours Faithfully,

Steph George

“Steph and I had a great semester working to put this poem together. Thinking back, I remember our first session together where we read the creative, short story that this poem is derived from. Instantly, I can recall being impressed at their ability to meticulously choose words and create a live action movie within my mind. As each week unfolded, we worked to perfect each stanza, and include the major points within the story to engage the reader even more. Further, as each session drew to a close, Steph and I got more and more excited at how the poem was progressing and being fine tuned. With the final result in mind, I could not be more appreciative of all the time, energy, and effort that Steph has put into this. They have been such a joy to work with this semester. I hope you enjoy reading An Innocent Warrior.”

- Caden Berry

Innocent Warrior

Approaching the loosely hung paper
Sarah’s hands, swift and eager, grabbed the worn remains.
Seeing its reward lit the fire behind her eyes.

The cold air bit at her skin, delicate yet tough,
The winter air, cold and ferocious.
Her breath visible through pants and huffs,
Frostbitten skin, bruises and cut
Were nothing for the battle yet to come

Cracked lips part, breath bleeding through.
Gazing upon the beasts, she prowled like a tigress.
Silent footsteps, the herd far too occupied as they consumed the grass.
Moaning winds disguised her presence, the surrounding bison gaining no
suspiciousness.

Reaching for her chance, powerful legs propelled her through the sky.
The beast jumps and bellows, as it shouts a war cry
Her blue fingers curled around the dense fur of the bison, his hair fibers old and dry.
The other beasts dance a fearful ballad, unsure if they’ll die.

The girl, desperate for victory, clings with tight hands.
Seeking aid in her bag, she pulls upon its treasure
Unsure of what she’ll get, she receives a gift from the gods
A Golden lasso, serving as an extension from her hand.
With skillful movements, the winter air is pierced by its blinding light.

Victory is still miles from her standing, the fire now ignited within her.
The beast unyielding, blocks her path
The dance continues, as each party is left wounded.
Earth rumbling, wind rushing, neither give way.

Now connected by her golden lasso, the bison’s life lie within her hands
He lay entangled in the netting of her work, now making her face to face with her
adversary.

Kicking up dirt, the beast rages through fatigue.
Aware of her skills, she knew this battle tipped against her.
Her ambitions leaps and bounds over her true abilities.

“There is never one way to get where you want to go, but only one path to take at a time.”

Her mentor's words echoing through her empty head.
Failing to comprehend his advice, her mind off deep in some sort of haze
Unable to turn back, she pushes on

Now snapping back to her senses, the girl questions her path.
Nonetheless, the battle ensues, and the valley quakes with every blow.
Debris and loose dirt sully the blank snow.
Guiding his attention on her, she leads him to the cliff wall.
To which his collision, devastating, leaves him laying still, flat on the floor.

Shrugging off the impact, the beast readies for another attack.
Cold shivering hands, Sarah prepares for this raging monster.
Before she could blink, her eyes nearly frozen, he lay just mere feet from her.

The fight, hours of constant movement, ended with both parties yielding to exhaustion.
Reaching for her treasure bag, gold lights shimmering, she pulls out a potion.
Confusion rakes her brain as she reaches again, but comes up empty handed.

Sarah now realizing she's in over her head, she decides to utilize the potions contents to good use.

The bottle, dressed in golden vines, grants a warmth she's never felt before
Unable to commit to the mission, Sarah grants the beast a drop of gold.
Spring air soaks into his lungs, muscles clench and flex, as life is breathed into the animal's soul.
Gallop back, Sarah gazed into his eyes, the innocence of a warrior lay in them.

Seeing him off, she looks upon herself, worn and beaten, taking the potion in no time flat.

Warmth enveloped her, sending hot tingles through her cold numb body.
Blue hands turn pink, scratches and cuts close, as if time reversed itself.
Before leaving, she hears the bellows and grunts of other bison, knowing he was back with his herd brought a smile to her lips.

Looking down at her side, the bag hung decorative and light.
Her bag still serving as a mystery to her, why had it not granted her what she thought she needed

In the end to save her and the enemy, coming to the conclusion that it was not the bag.
Instead the girl's morals and ambitions, she could never take its life.
An innocent warrior was far too pure to be tainted by the acts of her own selfish desires.

Jay West

“Working with Jay this semester has been an amazing and breathtaking journey. To say that as a writer they have taken humongous strides would probably be selling them short. When I first met them, I could tell that they had great talent naturally as a writer, but when reading their pieces, it became apparent that at times they would also hold back, not wanting to confidently “cross the line” that could potentially polarize some people and instead toeing it. From that point forward we worked on embracing the confidence that they express verbally. This piece is a perfect example of what embracing confidence can truly deliver. Be prepared for an exhilarating poem that touches the feelings that many may go through when confronted with adversity in life. Enjoy the phenomenal expression of self-conflict and hurt that the author embraced and expressed in this piece, it is truly one you won’t soon forget!”

- Austin Stankowski

Pills and Potions

I’ve overdosed off the illusion of you and the love that was shown to me

I made you larger than life in my eyes as you shined brightly

My feelings took over as my mind ran ideas of a broken heart

As your eyes told lies of a happy ever after

I became addicted to you

As I remembered getting high off our memories

While feeling the body heat between us its was intoxicating

As i couldn’t breathe, but when you look into my eyes

I was transported to an everlasting joy

Pure happiness is the drug you used

To lead me into your web of pain and pleasure

I became an addict as i use your love for copping

Hoping you would see me for me

But the sound of I’m straight breaks the illusion of my high

As i used pills trying to find answers as to why we couldn’t work

Every potions i used didn’t work because it not mean to be

I’m angry because i still have love for you

But i must forgive but i won’t forget you

The time is over as the season of you has expired

It hurts me to move on but I think it's best. Why do we love, when love seems to hate us ?

Kenzie Hietpas

Trigger Warning: Eating disorder, rape, suicide

“Kenzie came into the '57 sessions with a passion for poetry. She writes poetry to have a creative outlook on her daily thoughts, creating very emotional pieces that most people will be able to connect to. Her writing is meant to help people know they aren't so alone and to have a learner like this is uplifting. My favorite poem of hers in these selections is the very last one, because of the way you can't predict how it will end.”

- Megan Bittner

I don't know when it started
It all happened so fast
One day poof
It was just there
Maybe in 2nd grade when I ran out of food so fast and no one else did
Maybe in 3rd grade when a boy asked me how I could eat that much
Maybe when I was 9 years old, and my dad asked me why I was grabbing more food
“You don't need to take more food”
“Stop eating more food”
So, I did
It started in middle school when people were smaller
When we all got on Instagram and saw all the small pretty people
When everyone wanted to be different than who they were
When we were younger, all we knew was beauty
We knew the beauty standards, but we didn't know how to change them
So, we didn't
So, I didn't
“Why aren't you eating”
“You need to eat”
“Oh, wow have you lost weight”
“You look so good”
I stopped eating

It started in high school when I didn't want people to know

I would eat small bits of food

"Oh, I just ate a big breakfast"

"Oh, I just ate in class"

I promise I'm eating

I promise

Promises are meant to be broken

Just say no

No

Why didn't I say no

Just say no

"Well, if you didn't want to, you'd say no"

"You never said no"

"You basically asked for it"

No

No

No

I didn't say no

But

That doesn't mean I said yes

I have a best friend
He's been there for me
Especially when I needed him the most
When my parents were fighting
When my grades were slipping
When I was bullied and the outcast
My best friend is forever going to be my best friend
He is always the one that tells me what a terrible person I am
He is always correct when people do not like me
He is loud when he says I am worthless and stupid
Ever since fourth grade he has known I am stupid
He knows my failures
My worthless life
He's helped me though
Helped me slice my skin
Helped me take all the pills
Helped me hide how worthless I am
Helped me attempt suicide
It did not work
I am still here
I am still fighting
But he will always be there
Watching and waiting in the background
Watching and waiting for me to slip up
Then he will come back
My depression will always come back

Yani Langford

“Throughout the entire semester, it has been an honor to help Yani on her mission to recognize her dreams and make them reality. With the resounding ambition she possesses, I am confident she can achieve anything she sets her mind to! It was a pleasure to watch her skillset grow underneath such motivation.”

- Jessie Szprejda

Surrounding Me

Your job is to serve and protect
But yet you're disturbing and wrecking
Why?
Why must you be cruel?
You only show empathy
To the ones you love the most

You took that baby's life
She's laying on the ground
While her loved ones are surrounding her
Your job is to serve and protect

Oh my heart drops
Aching for all those broken hearts
You broke the rule
Committing crimes left to right,
leaving families Hopeless

You see that bullet holds more weight
Then some of you fools
Families crying cause you broke the rules
Leaving them heartbroken and devastated
You don't see what you did was so cruel

Your job is to serve and protect
Why aren't you upholding your oath?
That innocent jewel lost their life because you were
So reckless thinking you were cool

Babies are dying!!
While you are sitting somewhere denying
What you did was wrong
Do you hear me!!
Babies are dying!

You're supposed to be a safeguard
You are supposed to stop the deception
Be a safeguard to our oppressions

Bring peace to violence
Not the other way around
That 911 call took too long
Now that baby is as blue as your shirt

They are fighting
Innocent people are dying
We as a community, are dying
So much going on in the world

I feel so small
My back is against the wall
I feel like everything is surrounding me
Babies are dying
Your badge is supposed to be a symbol of public faith
Your job is to serve and protect

Hallie Manville

Trigger Warning: Suicide, domestic violence, and rape.

“I’ve really enjoyed working with Hallie as a writer. This piece is one of the first ones that we talked about together, and right away I could tell that she does a great job at conveying emotions that her readers can feel within her writing. Hallie’s voice is very present as well, and I’m excited for others to hear her voice throughout this piece. I hope that Hallie continues to write in the future as I’m sure she would continue to do well with expressing emotions and making her voice present and heard.”

- Rhiley Block

I Didn’t Ask For This

I have always been comforted by darkness

Silence

warmth

It reminds me of my mother's womb

A safer place than my surroundings

My thoughts

My efforts...

I didn’t ask for this.

And yet Without warning or permission I remain..

In this state of mind

In pain

My mind suffocates me.

I didn’t ask for this.

to be ridiculed

tarnished..torn

To be Ashamed

Mocked

To be Dehumanized

Used.

A five year old mistaken for a doll

An uninhabited body

A pit stop for men

I didn’t ask for this.

To be a “mistake”

A missed pill..

Period..

Then awaits a quiet murmur

A silent tear falls from my unopened eyes

I didn't ask for this.

To be Passed around like a blunt between
Homes
Men
Guardians

I was not meant to be here.

A false escape from life is why I am here
The fourth floor is where I was first brought to life
Where The idea of me was created

I didn't ask for this.

To be conceived,
Out of pity
Loneliness
self hatred.

To be used as a pawn
For a one sided battle of ownership

A messenger

A blank sheet of paper
Being filled with lies
Scribbled with cruelty
And a barbie being declodhed
Beheaded

Just to be sewn back together.

I didn't ask for this.

To be held down against my will
Feeling my body turn limp
Eyes open watching my surroundings rock back and forth
Reaching for my dry clothes
Just to stare at you blankly waiting for an explanation

I didn't ask for this.

To be loved because of a made up idea
To be told that I am only here for your pleasure
To be reminded time and time again "you've changed"
"I miss the old you"
Who am I supposed to be?

An untouched being?
A delicate China doll?
A respectable lady?

I didn't have a choice.

My innocence was fingered out of me 15 years ago.

I didn't ask for this.

To be reminded of my sins

 To have lungs filled with milky smoke

A liver filled with empty nothingness

 A heart that struggles to beat

A nose that cannot breath

 A mouth that has been sewed shut and resewed

And a sacred place that has been filled with unworthy men

Was it because I Wore revealing clothes that suggested temptation.

 “You are asking for it”

Do not lie with man that is not your betrothed

 That is permission to enter without consent but...

I didn't ask for this.

So when you look at the girl with the bright smile and big eyes full of hope, with a heart that desperately wants to be loved, just remember... she didn't ask for any of this, she remains here until she is able to return to that dark, silent, warm place from the beginning.

Bri Williams

“The first day we met, Bri introduced me to her writing that was filled with talent and excellence. My first impression of her was that of a skilled author, and through every story and poem I have read, that statement only becomes truer. Working alongside Bri has been a true joy this semester; I have gotten to see her grow more as a person and a writer, while also growing myself, thanks to her. Bri has a passion for writing that rivals most; it’s because of this and her natural talent that I know her writing will be read and loved by many people someday. I’m very proud of her.”

- Devin Buckley

Hold My Hand

The experience one holds seems miniscule at a young age,

only for it to be snatched before you blink.

Dad can hold your hand for so long,

but before you can live he’ll leave.

Don’t think about it too long

for you deserve to celebrate

all you have achieved.

No one’s perfect.

No one.

No.

The future

holds much more

than you can imagine.

Don’t let him hold back

on every experience, good or bad.

Live for yourself and not through others.

He’ll never need to know who you’ve become,

for he backtracked the progress you could have made

instead of acknowledging that his daughter could prosper without him.

Megan Mosser

“I am so grateful to have been blessed with the opportunity to work with Meg this semester. Since day one, her ability to turn thoughts and words into something beautiful through poetry has been impressive. We spent a lot of this semester discussing themes, voltas (turns of direction in poetry), word choice, and imagery. All of her poems from this semester are worthy of publishing, but she decided to include the masterpieces of “We’re in This Together” and “Stargazing” since they were two that meant the most to her. Meeting Meg and having the honor of reading her poetry has been a highlight of my semester. Not only is she an inspiring writer, but also an amazing person. I am so proud of her success and excited to see some of her work being shared!”

- Emily Guilette

We’re in This Together

We’re in this together
Under the sickening glare of cheap artificial lights
Around a makeshift quilt of crumpled clothes
Over salt and snow and all things foreign.
We fight a battle
Walked into with a now-forgotten smile and ignorant expectations
Forced to adapt
Forced to forget
In order to belong.
We drive under the purple glow of streetlamps
Lights without an excuse
As to why they are different
Just like us.
We forget in this town
To stop and look around
Squint with tired eyes
And focus on the invisible
Who aren’t really invisible.
We stand back to where we always go
Under those lights
Around those clothes
Atop that salt and snow.
“We’re in this together”
Chapped lips reassure
To a reflection that only knows me
And me only her.

Stargazing

You suggested a date
The few times you do
Of gazing up at the stars
Eyes clothed with glitter
And back drenched with dew.
Your fingers leave mine
To point at someone's sun
And I laugh and giggle
Trying to find the right one.
But when your face is turned away
Green grass blended with your brown-haired hue
My mind wanders and asks
If I am ever a galaxy to you.
The blood you always see
Rushing to my cheeks
Is flooded with dust
From stars bright and ending.
Within the deep well of my eyes
If only you would look there
Dances stars and constellations like the Great Bear.
Between every laugh
Every unheard mutter
My lips spill cosmic secrets
Men have killed to uncover.
Freckles spattered across pale skin
Like paint from Pollock
Remain unnoticed
As they connect to form your sign Taurus.
Last but not least
That hourglass figure you think exists to please
Counts down with drops
Of golden unstable sun
How long you'll have
Your unreciprocated fun.

Prose

Lexi Kurszewski

“This past semester working with Lexi has been fruitful, and informative, both for her as a writer and for myself as a consultant. As I’ve been a consultant in the Writing Center for quite some time now, I assumed that I’ve largely seen it all with ‘57 learners. Lexi proved me wrong, for reasons she will immediately be aware of - notably from what I’ll term “peculiar” music tastes and in certain inserted characters in her fiction. It’s hard to forget those things, I suspect. I’m excited - as it’s a rare occurrence - to have a ‘57 learner train to be a consultant, with Lexi starting her training next Fall semester. With her, I know that I’ll be leaving my work in the lab in competent hands.”

- Jared Burkart

Miranda

“That’s non-fiction.”

“First you said that you didn’t want to write fiction, now you don’t want to write non-fiction?” She lifts a soapy bowl and inspects it before submerging it in the hot water once more.

“I said that I don’t want to write nonsense. There’s a difference.” As she scrubs, I take careful inventory of everything she has washed. I make a point to avoid those dishes. My mother has many talents, but being a dishwasher is not one of them. As she rinses the bowl, I watch her closely. There is a lot of my mother in me. “You still haven’t told me what to write about.”

“Write about whatever you want to!” The metal clinks against the counter as she sets down the bowl. Now, facing me, she dries her hands. The towel is yellow and white, with a floral design. It hangs perpetually on the handle of our oven, and I can’t help but wonder when it was last washed.

“I don’t know what that is. That’s why I asked you,” I rebutted.

“I’m not the person to ask for advice on writing.” That’s another thing my mother is not, a writer, “I can’t write because I can’t spell for shit, and I don’t know any grammar, ‘cuz I missed all that, because I couldn’t read.” It’s true. My mother is dyslexic, she couldn’t read until she was in the third grade. Her memories of the teacher who finally taught her to read are fond, “You remember that time when a lady dropped off like 18 boxes of books at our house?”

“I remember.”

She walks into the pantry to put away the bowl. Though my mother didn’t learn to read until after the other students, she had loved books. I think again that there is a lot of my mother in me. I recall how she once told me that Stephen King was her favorite author, but that she hadn’t read much since my sisters and I were born. I had always found it a little ironic, that she loved to read so much, but now doesn’t read at all and even more so, that she taught all her children to love to read but forgot to keep that love alive in herself. I can’t help but wonder if I might have to say goodbye to this love one day too, so that I might give it to my own children. After all, there is a lot of my mother in me.

“You used to love to read, you can’t think of anything that I could write about?”

“I have a real job to get back to. I’m sure you’ll figure it out!” She smiles at me before walking back to her office. Here at the end, it comes to me. There is so much of my mother in me, how did I not see it before? If I don’t know what to write about, she doesn’t have a damn clue either.

Nicolas Silva

“It has been so much fun getting to know Nick and his writing this semester. Deep thinkers and lovers of philosophy will identify strongly with his work. In this piece, Nick asks some of life's hardest questions, provoking readers to challenge their perspectives and worldviews. I always admire Nick's ability to maintain an open mind when writing about difficult topics, including religion, human psychology, and life after death. Nick's passion and dedication to his work really shines through in this piece, and I am so excited that he has chosen to share it with readers of Wordplay. Enjoy!”

- Sara Kalkhoff

After Death

What happens after you die? There are so many answers to this question, and I bet that a couple of them shot into your head as you read it aloud. The hard truth about what happens after we die is that nobody will ever really know because, well, once you die you cannot tell anyone what happened. You can never really find out what happens without dying. It truly is one of the universe's greatest mysteries that goes without any real explanation. So, today I ask you what do you think happens after you die? This question is seen by many as a conversation starter but at the same time can also be a very controversial topic due to the religious beliefs of countless across the globe. Many religions even frown upon the idea of curiosity beyond their teachings. People are often so afraid of uncertainty they are scared to look deeper into what it really could be. Therefore, many choose to ignore the question and not think about it. But here is what I think.

I think after you die your brain still functions a little bit. Scientists believe it is about 7 minutes that your mind is active after your heart stops. During these 7 minutes your brain goes through your entire life therefore people often say their life flashed before their eyes when a life-threatening experience happens. Other cases include those who are resuscitated and brought back to life in an extreme event. Now, during these 7 minutes as well It has been proven that your brain releases a natural chemical called DMT. For those of you who do not know about DMT, it is the most potent psychedelic drug that is known to man. It is believed to be used in ancient times in many cultures and religious acts to “talk to the gods” or connect with interdimensional beings. There have even been speculations of psychedelics being dated back to biblical times and referred to in the bible as well just under a different name. It is believed that when the chemical is released in your brain it unlocks other dimensions unknown to your current mind and that is the reason the trips are so crazy; what if they are not in fact trips but realities that you are unaware of? This would make perfect sense as to why your brain naturally releases the drug after death. Are the psychedelic effects of this drug really as they seem? And if they are why can we not naturally experience them? Why are the effects so vivid and why does our brain naturally release this highly potent drug after death? These are all questions we may never know the true answers to, but these are all questions that deserve to be asked.

Nate Zurawski

“Being Nate’s tutor has been a delightful journey as he pushed his creative bounds and sought to give voice to ideas not for the sake of argumentation, but for expanding others’ ways of thinking. The piece he has decided to share here is an example of that: a creative blend of poetry and prose meant to entertain and enlighten. Nate has made wondrous refinements in his writing skills over this semester, and this piece of devilish wit captures his progress perfectly. So without further ado, I would like to introduce Nate Zurawski.”

- Ella Breitenfeldt

LCF, Are You Out There?

It was just after noon. I had an appointment at 1:30 with Lily, a writing lab consultant for one of my classes. I hadn't written anything yet. Although, I had a couple ideas on different subject material. My main thought was that I would just elaborate on an earlier piece I wrote concerning the “Don't Say Gay” legislation that passed in Florida. I was also thinking of writing about the Will Smith incident, which I coined “the slap heard 'round the world.” Hashtag, slap heard 'round the world. Will Smith's televised shenanigans at whatever Hollywood awards ceremony seemed like perfect fodder for a paper on toxic masculinity.

I got to school and made my way into the library's computer lab. When I found an available computer to type up my paper I noticed this folded up paper sitting on the desk. Whatever it was, it was pretty much chicken scratch, but who am I to deny my curiosity? I muddled through the chaos and found it to be pretty entertaining. It looked like somebody had written some poems, or haikus, or something along those lines and just left them there. I looked around to see if I could spot any potential candidates for the artistic leavings I had just come across. But everyone had their heads down, seemingly focused on whatever task was at hand. I logged into the computer, opened up the “Don't Say Gay” document, and read through it. Something was telling me, forget it. I had little time to make any meaningful changes. Since the bill had already passed there wasn't much of a point to it anyways.

After making the decision to move on from that, I thought about Will Smith, then I looked back at that paper I found. Why not use it? It's not actually plagiarizing or theft if I don't take credit for it. I guess I thought they were worth some attention because I decided to tell this little story about how I found them. They were pretty much written in this same order but they weren't really organized in this fashion. Some were written in the margins; some were written with the paper turned sideways. Either way, I decided to have some fun with it. I found unique fonts for each one and I even went through the Arabic font to find the initials that were written in the top corner. LCF, whoever you are, I just want to thank you for giving me something to write about. I hope you enjoy seeing your words typed out in such fanciful form. I also hope I don't go to hell for this so please forgive me.

*Every Person
Salaciously Satisfied
Maintaining My Gaze*

Several ceiling fans
Several people I can't stand
How to make them fly?

I need a challenge.
An eating competition!
Bring me your children.

Angels have their wings
HE took mine away from me.
Now what can I do?

*Melotov Cocktail
Ak-47
Bringing down the hellfire
No one goes to Heaven.*

LCF

Short Stories

Ellie Atkinson

“Ellie worked diligently at her story this semester, and it was a pleasure to watch her writing style unfold. In this story, like many of her others, Ellie plays with clichés and manipulates them into something new and unique. Her descriptive and detailed writing allows the reader to picture the scenes and images clearly and vividly. I loved watching her stories change and evolve with every revision discussion and brainstorming session. Ellie is a talented storyteller and it was a pleasure to work with her!”

- Gavrielle McClung

Winter Warmth

One

I unlock my door and walk in. The peace of my quiet apartment is comforting compared to my loud classroom. I drop my heavy backpack on the floor. I sigh as I finally catch my breath after having to trek up four flights of stairs. The elevator just *had* to be out of order when I actually had my arms full. I really should've thought twice about living on the top floor. I just didn't want to deal with loud neighbors above me, even though *I've* probably turned into the stereotypical loud, annoying neighbor. I kick my shoes off as I take my winter coat off and hang it on a hook to the right of the entrance. My white cat comes out of her hiding place and sits at my feet, staring up at me as her tail waves. I slip off my shoes and winter accessories before picking her up and running my fingers through her soft fur. She purrs quietly as I rub under her collar. I carry her to the kitchen with me as I find her food in the cupboard. I pour a little scoop in her dish and set her down. The cat sniffs the fish-shaped kibbles before eating. My phone rings from inside my backpack and I answer it in a tired tone. “Hi Kelly.” “Hey, are you almost ready?!” She squeals.

“Yeah...” I sigh.

“Oh, come on. It will be great.”

I rub my forehead, not responding. I'm already expecting to be the biggest third wheel for a week. I thought maybe I'd find a boyfriend by now, since I've known about this trip for over a month, but still as single as ever.

“We'll be there in less than an hour.”

“I'll be here.”

“See you soon, Gel.”

I hang up on her after the disgusting nickname she refuses to forget.

All I want to do is lay on the couch for twenty minutes, but I haven't packed. Pairing clothes together for this upcoming week is the last thing I want to do after a chaotic day. Kids running around, excited for Christmas break. Holidays are exciting, don't get me wrong, but the day before vacation is insane.

I decide I need to just get moving and just push through my sluggish stage. I have a two-hour car ride before the flight so both allow me perfect sleeping opportunities. That's the motivation I need to go to the entrance of my little abode, where I dropped my heavy book bag that I'll be using as a carry-on. I take all my notebooks, folders, and books out. I make sure I have everything I could possibly need for school before zipping the bag.

I go into my bedroom, digging out my large suitcase from the top shelf in my closet that has become cluttered with random things that don't have a home. I throw it

on the bed and start flipping through my wardrobe, deciding what I want to bring. I begin throwing random items of clothing from their hangers and drawers behind me and to the general region of my bed.

Turning to the bed, I begin folding the clothing items and pairing them together. I place the makeshift cubes in the travel boxes. I probably pack way too many clothes, but I know that we'll be in the snow all day and I'd rather pack more layers than needed. Unfortunately, snow gear takes up so much space so I'm putting that in a smaller suitcase, along with shoes. I may overpack, but my mother always told me to have at least one outfit for every occasion.

I grab my toiletry travel bag and take it to the bathroom, filling the bag with random necessities. Face washes, makeup, lotion, medications and vitamins, etc. Again, overpacking just in case something happens like I break out in hives because I got bitten by an invisible snow bug.

Go above and beyond, within reason...or not.

There's a knock at the door as I'm zipping my suitcases. I roll them out by the front door and open the door to see my best friend and her boyfriend.

"Hey," I greet them and let them come in.

Kelly smiles and picks up my cat but gets clawed. She sets her down, disappointed. "No matter how hard I try, she still hates me."

"I think she knows you're not a cat person, babe." Michael jokes.

I poke at Kelly. "Marshie just has good intuition and sees through false advertising."

She gasps with a smile on her face.

"It took me over a month for her to get comfortable with me, so don't take it to heart, Kelly."

"Yeah, but she likes Michael." Kelly whines. "I'm less scared."

"Maybe you should become a cat psychologist," Michael suggests, and I laugh.

"Kelly doesn't have the patience for that."

Michael gives Kelly a wink as she fake pouts, pretending to be annoyed that her boyfriend and best friend are ganging up on her.

"Alright party people, are we ready?"

"Ugh, do we have to?" I groan.

"I think we need to celebrate the fact that we got you to actually do this."

"Hey, we haven't left yet and we're still in my apartment. Maybe I won't follow through."

"Gel, why do you think I didn't leave Michael in the car? He will carry you out if you have a hissy fit."

I scrunch up my face. I don't doubt Michael's abilities and Kelly knows me too well.

"Do you girls have enough packed?" Michael questions and stares at my two suitcases plus backpack in shock. "Are you actually going to use whatever the hell you bring?"

"I definitely will use my school stuff." The comment slips out of my mouth and I regret saying it.

Kelly gives me a pointed look and before she can say anything, I push her out of my apartment, not wanting to start an argument.

I'm about to lock the door behind me when Michael asks a question. "Is she going to be okay while you're gone?"

I stop for a moment, confused as to what he's talking about.

"Your cat."

"Oh, my mom's coming over tomorrow to pick her up. You know she would *never* miss a chance to steal Marshmallow."

Kelly shakes her head as I turn to them after the door is fully secured. "That is the most basic cat name."

I shrug. "She's a basic cat." I lead the lovers to the staircase, since the elevator is still out of order. We awkwardly descend the four flights with my luggage.

"Even your cat loves your mom!" Kelly drags on. "Why can't your cat love me?"

I laugh lightly that Kelly is still dragging this on. No matter how many times she's come over since I've gotten Marshmallow, which has been almost two years, the cat steers clear of my best friend. "My mom is an old cat lady. She lured Marshie to her with cats and treats. Don't take it to heart."

"Babe, it's not that big of a deal," Michael says with a light chuckle.

"It is to me! I'm a people pleaser."

"Marshie is a cat, not sure if you knew that." I joke.

"I'm a person that likes to be liked." Kelly deadpans and holds the entrance door on the main level open for Michael and me.

"I guess you'll have to spend more time with Marshie."

"I'll win her over! I'm not letting this go."

Michael and I laugh as he opens the trunk of his SUV. We play Tetris trying to make all the luggage fit with Michael and Kelly's ski bags being in an awkward position over the back seat.

I take my backpack of school stuff with me to the backseat while Kelly and Michael get in the front. Michael weaves out of the parking slot, navigating to the highway as Kelly pulls up the directions on her phone. "We have about two hours until we get to our destination!" She announces.

"That means we'll get to the airport between five and six," Michael thinks out loud.

"That gives us plenty of time at the bar."

Although I can't see his face, I can practically feel Michael's eye roll. Kelly and I are major wine lovers, contrary to Michael's love for beer. Whenever Kelly and I fly together, we like to spend our time at the bar while Michael likes to relax and be right next to the gate. He is very concerned that we'll miss our flight while we're at the bar.

"It's about a five-hour flight, right?"

I blink slowly, ready for a little nap as I continue to listen to the random conversation between the pair of lovers.

"I can't wait to go skiing tomorrow."

"You're going to get up at the ass crack of dawn just to go, aren't you?"

"Hell yeah I am. Depending on the time we get to the resort, I don't think I'll sleep, honestly. I love skiing to sleep."

"I know, but sleep is a good thing. You'll break something if you ski on no sleep."

"I don't need sleep."

Kelly changes the subject as we begin the "Should we get some food before we get to the airport? We all know how insane airport prices are."

“That's not a bad idea. I think there's an A&W at the halfway point.”

I hear movement and open my eyes. Kelly is looking back at me.

“Gel, what do you think? A&W?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” I look out the window and Michael is just entering the on-ramp for the highway.

“Then drinks at the airport bar?”

I laugh a little then nod, knowing that I'd never turn that down.

“You have to promise me one thing, Gel.” Kelly says.

“Ok...” I respond, skeptical of what she's going to say. I already know it's about me and bringing a backpack full of work necessities.

“You can't spend the whole week doing school stuff.”

I look out the window again, recently fascinated by the snow-covered crop fields, as if I haven't lived in the Midwest all my life.

“This is a vacation to relax, not a vacation to work.”

I look back at her, her position hasn't moved. She's giving me her attention, sitting in an awkward position.

“It is how I relax. I wouldn't be a teacher if I didn't like doing the work.”

“But that's all you do. You never stop.”

“So maybe I'm a workaholic sometimes, but I like doing it.”

“Or do you do it to escape reality?”

My heart stops. I know she's right, but that hurts. I get caught up in my work because I enjoy it. But I also don't really have a life outside of work, as good or bad as that is.

“I'm sorry, but it's true.”

“Kel-”

“Girls, girls.” Michael interrupts. “Let's just relax a bit. We don't need to start anything right now. We're only in the first hour of the vacation.”

Neither Kelly or I respond.

“So, I was thinking, we could stop at A&W. Yay or nay?”

“Sure,” I respond.

“Yeah, I'm starving.” Kelly notes.

“I think there's a gas station and A&W in about a half hour, is that cool?”

Kelly and I agree. She turns on the radio while I open my phone and click the Pinterest app, looking for ideas for a lesson plan refresher. Pinterest is my kryptonite. It's a dangerous rabbit hole that I'm easily trapped in. I could spend hours on the site, just looking at random things. I have way too many boards with too many ideas. It's either planning my house, wedding, outfits, classroom, or lesson plans. So many ideas, so little time.

The vehicle's speed starts to decline, pulling me out of my Pinterest world. We're off the highway and coming up on a stop sign in a smaller, random town. A diner and a little dealership are on one corner while a gas station and A&W are on the opposite. My stomach rumbles at the sight of the fast-food restaurant.

Michael pulls up to a gas pump and we all get out. Kelly and I go into the gas station's restroom while Michael pays for gas. We wash our hands at the sinks.

“I'm sorry Evangeline.”

It's not too often that Kelly uses my whole name. She uses the nickname she knows I hate, but it's weird when she doesn't use it. It's just something that she's done since we were in college together.

"I just want you to enjoy your vacation. I know you love your job and that's a great thing, don't get me wrong, but it's all you do."

I sigh and pull a few sheets of paper towel to dry my hands. "I know and I do it because I enjoy it so much. I still came on the trip and I'll try to limit my time with it."

"It's only the first day of Christmas break. You have until New Years to get it all done. Hell, you can just wing it the day of."

I laugh. "You and I both know that I would be sent into cardiac arrest if I just *winged it the day of.*"

She smiles. "I know, but you don't need to stress. You know what you're doing. You're good at your job. Just take a step back."

I run my hands through my hair as Kelly throws hers up in a ponytail and assesses herself through the mirror.

"This vacation will be good, I promise."

I open my eyes, utterly confused. I blink and look around my new and unfamiliar surroundings, trying to clear my foggy memory. Judging by the killed engine and other cars next to the one I'm in, we're in a parking lot. In the distance, I see yellow light illuminating a little village of cabins. Behind me is a mansion.

The resort.

Now I remember drinking at the airport bar by our gate then taking a few melatonin gummies after boarding. I think I fell asleep as soon as the plane plateaued after takeoff. I don't even remember leaving the next airport and getting in the rental vehicle, but it obviously happened.

I look at the time on the little screen on the dash between the driver and passenger seat. It reads almost three in the morning. It seems like time just slipped away.

"We're here!" Kelly announces and her loud voice is way too excited for this hour. Michael flicks on the interior lights of the rented vehicle and I squint. I slowly gather my things and open the door, getting out to stand and stretch my legs then leaning my head from left to right, loosening my stiff neck. I slip on my backpack and carry my coat as I meet Michael and Kelly at the end of the white SUV.

"How was your nap?" Michael asks, opening the trunk.

I yawn. "Too short."

He chuckles and rolls my luggage to me. I pull up the handles and wait for the couple to get theirs out. I end up carrying two of their bags so they can manage their ski bags. We go into the grand cabin-like resort. I stop at the front desk to check-in to my room with Kelly and Michael doing the same after me.

We finagle ourselves in the elevator. The door opens on the third floor and we find rooms 334 and 335 towards the end of the hall. The doors along the quiet hall are spread out, which gives the impression that the rooms are spacious.

"What time did you guys want to start the day?" Michael asks.

I look between the lovers, unsure of the correct answer and I shrug. "It doesn't matter to me. It's too late for me to think properly at this hour."

“Ten?” Kelly suggests and we agree.

“See you in a few hours.” Kelly and I each unlock our respective doors on the opposite sides of the hall and disappear. I roll my suitcases in my room and flick on the soft lights before I’m blown away. The large windows surrounding the stone fireplace are enticing. There’s a TV mounted on the stone feature, but that isn’t as cool as the scenery. Although it’s dark out, the glow from the outdoor lights showcases oversized pine trees billowed with snow.

Opposite of the feature, a crisp, white, cloud-like king size bed opposite of the fireplace. In the left corner from the fireplace, there’s a small sitting area that I’d easily spend all day in.

I look up at the exposed beams, allowing the suite to feel bigger. The wood is a beautiful deep brown, giving off the cabin aesthetic. I leave my suitcases near the door and beeline to the oversized windows, staring at the beautiful snow-covered pine trees.

This place seems unreal. Beautifully unreal. I remember booking the room but forgot what it looked like. I honestly didn’t think I booked a room that looked this extravagant. If Michael and Kelly are across the hall, theoretically they have a similar room. Maybe this was the push they needed to not force me into skiing all weekend. Maybe they’ll be the ones not wanting to ski and just stay cooped up all vacation. I’m definitely not complaining about that theory because I’d love to stay in this sanctuary for the rest of my life.

As much as I really don’t want to stop gazing at the scenery, I know I need to get settled in and I’m not tired so it’s a great way to pass the time. I flop the suitcases on the bed and unzip them. I take out the folded clothes and place them in a dresser near the bed. I place the traveling boxes in the closet before taking out my school supplies from my backpack and placing them on the desk to the right of the fireplace. I plan on working on it later today without Kelly’s knowledge.

I then wander into the bathroom with my toiletry bag. A shower in one corner with a bathtub in the other. I’ve only been in my room, haven’t even explored the rest and I’m already in love. I could spend the rest of my life here, no problem. I’d do anything to just come here and work. Who cares about skiing? Not me.

I look at the clock and it’s almost four. After the amount of sleep I got on the plane and on the ride to the resort, I’m wide awake. I could start a school project and that sounds enticing. I grab a few things from the desk, where I placed my school stuff, and grab a blanket before snuggling up on a comfy chair and starting a project. I, of course, use Pinterest as a starting point for ideas and inspiration.

I open a word processor and start creating an assignment dedicated to a division refresher. I could easily make a lesson about skiing. Multiple lessons about skiing. Maybe there’s a book that I could have a language arts lesson plan dedicated to. Good thing I brought all my books so I could look for one.

two

I open my heavy eyelids. The sun shines and the dusty snow glimmers against the as it blows off the green trees. I feel well rested after catching up on sleep over the past several hours. However, I’ve been in uncomfortable positions and probably didn’t get the greatest sleep. I’m still in the chair from last night, not even remembering falling asleep. I look at the books and papers spread out across the small table in front of me.

I stack the papers and books into a neat pile to return to at a later time. I stand and stretch while rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. The kink in my neck hasn't gone away and a massage would be amazing right now. I'm sure the resort has a spa and I know Kelly would be game for that, Michael not so much.

I look over my shoulder at the clock by the bed and it reads just after nine o'clock. My heart falls a little. I actually slept until the perfect time. I have plenty of time to shower, get dressed, and not be rushed. So there's no reason to not make it on time for Kelly's brunch.

I frown before my mood heightens as I'm distracted by the painting coming to life. There's so many things to look at and it's captivating. I force myself away from the mural, I switch off the lights I accidentally left on last night and move into the bathroom to shower before applying a little makeup. I select a comfortable outfit then grab my snow gear and I open the door to Kelly with full arms of snow gear about to knock with Michael next to her holding the ski bags.

"Good morning," Kelly greets.

I repeat the salutation and come out of my room, leading the couple to the elevators. "How was the rest of your night?"

"Amazing, I think I passed out as soon as I hit the pillow."

Michael chuckles. "That was after I had to tear your ass away from the window."

"It was so pretty though," Kelly replies.

"Just wait 'til we hit the slopes," Michael presses the down arrow outside of the elevator. "The view from the top of the mountain is probably almost as gorgeous as you." Michael winks at his girlfriend and my heart swoons simultaneously as it breaks. I'm so happy for my best friend, but I'm jealous because I want the same. Maybe not the same level of cheesiness though.

We enter the elevator as the lovers latch hands. I press "G" allowing the doors to close then the elevator begins its descent. After a few other resort-goers enter the box, we exit and go to the restaurant. The hostess shows us a specific cubby area designated to snow gear where we pause and set the items down then escorted to an empty table towards the middle of the busy setting. Our server brings us their specialty strawberry mimosas. I pick up my menu and scan through the options. Stuffed French toast. Omelets. Biscuits and gravy. There are too many choices and I'm starving.

Three champagne flutes are set at each of our placements by the young waitress. I immediately grab mine and sip. The strawberry *plus* champagne is absolutely delicious. I got a hint of mango and pineapple towards the end, which was a pleasant surprise. I'm tempted to order ten right now, but I resist the urge.

The urge to hide away with bottomless mimosas in my dream-like suite, is high as hell.

"Hey!" I hear Kelly exclaim as her chair scoots back against the wooden flooring and she runs to hug someone. I'm snapped out of my little vision and turn to see what the commotion is about. I can't see who it is, but Michael gets up after Kelly with an excited look. I follow my friends' actions out of politeness then peek around Kelly's shoulder and see it's Nika and Brad.

Friends...sorta.

I smile politely and greet the couple with pleasant hellos and hugs.

"Did you guys eat?" Michael asks.

Nika shakes her head. "No, we're just sitting down. Do you mind if we join you?"

“Of course!” The hostess pushes a table next to ours and we all sit in a big, happy group.

“What are the chances we’d see you?” Brad asks.

“Crazy, isn’t it?” Michael replies and then falls into a manly conversation with his old friend. Brad and Michael were roommates at the same college that Kelly and I went to. We knew each other briefly before coming to college and decided to room together. Nika and Kelly had a class and we three started hanging out. Brad and Nika were already dating, and she brought him around then they brought Michael around. And the rest is history.

It was only five years ago when the five of us met, but it seems like a lifetime. Slowly, I needed my own friend group, so I wasn’t an outcast in happy couples. Don’t get me wrong, I love Kelly, but I hated being a constant third wheel. I wanted Kelly, Nika and I to be close, but no matter how hard I tried, Nika and I never became good friends.

“Gel?” Kelly questions and I’m pulled out of my trance. I look up to the waitress who is clearly waiting for my order.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I quickly pick something random. Stuffed French toast. The waitress nods and writes down my order before Nika requests a spiked smoothie.

“How was your night?” Nika asks.

“This place is amazing,” Kelly gushes. “And we haven’t even seen the rest of the resort.”

“Brad and I have been here for a few nights and don’t want to leave.” Nika explains. “We’re supposed to leave in two days, but we were thinking about extending our stay. How long are you guys here?”

“A week,” Kelly and I respond simultaneously.

Nika nods and starts sipping her smoothie that was just delivered. “Are you going out on the slopes after this?”

Nika nods. “It’s beautiful. Brad and I are going to go for an adventure through the cute little town after brunch. We’ll have to hit the slopes together.”

“Yes!” Kelly agrees.

“How have you been, Evangeline?” Nika focuses on me and eats the strawberry that’s slipped over her glass. “Where has your life taken you? We haven’t seen each other in so long.”

I’m well aware and that’s equally my doing as it is hers and I’m not complaining about that. My life has been peaceful without her drama. “Good,” I respond honestly. “I’m a fourth-grade teacher at a private elementary school. So my life is pretty busy with them, but I love it.”

She nods. “Wow, that’s a handful. I could never. Did you leave your boyfriend - or girlfriend if you’re into girls - at home?”

Nika was always concerned about my love life, and it seems that never changed. I hold back a sigh and don’t let my face fall into a glare. I keep my answer vague to eliminate further interrogation. “It’s just Kelly, Michael, and I here.”

“I don’t see a ring,” Nika mumbles and I guess my answer wasn’t good enough for her.

“Nope, haven’t crossed that bridge yet.”

“Don’t want to be alone the rest of your life.”

“Neither do you,” It slips out of my mouth, but it’s true. Usually I wouldn’t be so direct, but I don’t care anymore and part of me just wants to. It’s none of her damn

business if I want a relationship right now. I guess it's assumed that most people do, which she would be right about.

“Shame. Par-”

“How's your smoothie?” Kelly interjects before Nika can make the situation any worse. I glance at my best friend to my right, and she gives me an apologetic, yet encouraging smile. She knows that Nika was never my favorite person. I don't really know where Nika and Kelly's relationship went after college graduation, but I know they never really got *super* close during their university career.

“It's delicious,” Nika gushes and the drink reaches the halfway mark. “I think I want another. You can't even taste the alcohol.”

Kelly smiles politely and gives me a knowing look. Nika's slowly getting drunk right now which releases the barricades of self-control. It only reassures me a little since drunk words are sober thoughts.

The food luckily arrives, distracting me and not being the center of the conversation. It's a life update between the couples. I zone out for a handful of minutes, devouring my food, until I perk up, hearing my name in Michael and Brad's conversation. I look between them as Nika and Kelly have their conversation from opposite ends of the table.

“How have you been, Evangeline?” Brad asks.

“Busy, but good.”

“That's good. Are you still a teacher?”

I'm surprised he remembered. “Yeah, fourth grade. They're equally my favorite and most exhausting class I've had since I started teaching.”

“Happy to see that you followed your dream.”

I nod. Brad and I fall into a friendly back-and-forth conversation about our lives since we graduated, which was when we last saw each other. I learned that he moved just outside St. Louis to be closer to Nika's family, since the couple lives together. He found out that I switched school districts and love my job more than anything. He laughs at the fact that Kelly dragged me on this ski trip when it was just supposed to be her and Michael. Her reasoning was for me to see something other than my apartment or classroom. She's not wrong in the fact that I don't get out much, but I prefer those comforting settings to being out in a completely new region.

Our conversation subsides as the waitress brings the checks and clears our empty plates from the table. I relax in my chair, stomach full and ready for a nap after a large brunch. The urge to skip the skiing excursion with endless mimosas is even higher than before.

“Where are you guys headed?” Brad asks the table and rests his arm on the back of Nika's chair.

“The slopes,” Michael simply answers. “I can't wait to see the trails they have.”

Brad nods and Nika adds her two cents. “Well, we're going to explore the area, but we'll have to go on a double date before we all leave!”

I wait for Nika's blow that's bound to come my way.

“You *could* come too, Evangeline, but I'm not sure you'd enjoy being there.”

I take a silent deep breath and hold my tongue, it's not worth any reaction. As much as I want to smack her right across the face, I'm being a civilized human being. I don't need to make a scene on the first day.

“Nika,” Brad starts and gives his girlfriend a disapproving sideways glance. I can tell he wants to say more but chooses to restrain himself in front of friends. Brad was always one of my good guy friends even though we never got close, and I never had many male friends. She’s very controlling and I feel bad for Brad as I’m uncertain why he’s still with Nika. I never saw what he saw and *still sees* in her.

“We’ll have to see where our vacation takes us, but I’m sure we’ll see you two again.” Kelly responds.

“We’ll have to meet up to ski too,” Brad suggests.

“For sure,” Michael agrees and we say our goodbyes before we stand up and split. I feel slightly better now that I’m not in Nika’s presence.

“I’m so sorry for that,” Kelly says and gives me a hug. “You know how she gets when she’s drunk.”

“Doesn’t make it okay though,” I counter, trying not to take out my annoyance on my friend.

I know Kelly is friends with Nika and that’s okay, but I feel uncomfortable that Nika was being rude and Kelly is just sitting there, letting me deal with it. I will call Nika out on her bullshit because I can’t stand her, but Kelly won’t because she will avoid confrontation like the plague. She firmly believes in the “out of sight, out of mind” mindset and I don’t. I like to tackle confrontations head on. Maybe it’s because I’m stuck with dramatic fourth graders all day. If Kelly is truly friends with both of us, theoretically she should want happiness with both of us. I’m not sure where Kelly’s head is at after that brunch, but she was the one that wanted peace and no conflict. Well, now there’s conflict.

Kelly sighs. “I know.”

“So are we starting with the bunny hill?” Michael asks and flicks his eyes between Kelly and I, obviously trying to ease the slight discomfort and change the subject, but his face states the uncertainty whether the situation is dissolved.

“Yes, please.” I reply first, desperate to get fresh air and forget about the Nika situation. We go to the cubbies to put on our coats and grab our winter gear before following a trail to the separate building of the chalet.

After Michael takes me to the ski rental section, we meet Kelly at a table in a corner she saved for our trio. Michael lends me an extra pair of goggles and a face mask. I slip them both on before we’re officially all geared up and exiting the building.

“I could use a little refresher,” Kelly says. “It’s been a while since I’ve been skiing last.”

Michael nods and pushes his coat sleeve up to check the time on his watch. “I’m not sure if you two wanted to take a beginners course or just have me teach you.”

I shrug. “I don’t care. I’ll do whatever.”

“I think Gel would hit the instructor with her ski before long,” Kelly replies jokingly.

Michael takes that into consideration and laughs. “I wouldn’t put it past you. Sometimes the instructors can *really* dumb it down and make it more complicated than it is.”

“Let’s *not* do the beginners course,” Kelly suggests to her boyfriend who nods and leads us to the bunny hill lift.

Trigger Warning: Suicide, domestic violence, and allusions to the holocaust

It has been a privilege to work with Sam this semester. Sam's stories often feel very classical in an innovative way. This short psychological horror story is no different. I am always impressed by Sam's literary knowledge and I am sure his writing skills will only continue to impress as he hones them further. One of his greatest strengths is description, which he uses to pull the reader into the story. That said, you may want to keep the lights on while reading this.

- Robbie Ptacek

Alone

Snowfall. The late December storm ravished that part of the woods, smothering the trees in a blank, white shroud of snow. The ground had long since been suffocated, being covered in an extra thick blanket of the stuff. On normal trips, the cabin would have been a sign of life and civilization amidst this frozen wasteland, its stonework chimney sending tantalizing wisps of woodsmoke out from its fireplace. Now, it looked barren - an ancient edifice of a long-lost time. The windows were dark, with the curtains drawn, and the frontier stonework of the chimney stood up to the early evening light like a grey tumor. There was no smoke coming from the top, and the very cabin seemed to sag upon its foundations.

And somewhere, out in the woods, something stirred.

The snap of a twig, the low, soft crunch of new fallen snow as it was trampled underfoot. It was out there, all right; and from the tiny opening in the curtains, Trenton peered meekly into the frozen wasteland around him. His eyes darted from one dead bush to an overhanging carcass of a tree, who had cast off its leaves for the winter, and then into the desolate woods surrounding the cabin. It was out there - searching, prowling, waiting for him to step out of the safety of his cabin, where it would pounce out from the woods, and snatch him up - carry him off to wherever it came from. Or it would tear him apart, leaving his mauled lump of mangled flesh and blood to slowly freeze in the bleak winter cold.

But he would not let it get him. He would not set foot out of his house until its back was turned - when Trenton knew it was safe. He stared out from behind the curtain, staring out into the infinite white of the landscape, seemingly at nothing. At least that's what it would appear to be, to the untrained eye. To him, it was a wealth of signals to stay inside. He sat watching, waiting, wishing that whatever it was that was out there, that it would soon leave so he could go out.

While he hadn't seen it in the flesh, he knew what was out there: Sin - The Devil - True Evil; and it was up to him to just stay inside... at least until it left.

He took one last glance into the trees, and decided it was finally safe to go out.

As fast as he could sneak with one bad leg, he slunk up to the front door, and took one last inspective look out. One of the two dogs walked up behind him; he motioned it to stay and silently went out into the unknown.

His bad leg smarted exquisitely, especially out in the cold. Each puncture where a tooth from the bear trap had bitten into his lower calf. The bandages and tourniquet were at least doing their job in holding it all together - his limp still didn't help, given the scenario. He felt like a cripple, as he ambled slowly across the snow. *If only Strider hadn't gone off*, he thought bitterly, *then I wouldn't be in this mess - I wouldn't have*

stepped in my own damn beartrap. Outside it was white desert, with dunes made of snow, and devoid of all life... except for him and the Beast.

In time, he made it to the edge of the woods, and started making his way around the clearing, in search of something. He threw quick and constant glances over his shoulder into the woods, scanning the labyrinth of trees for any signs of movement.

Eventually, he found what he was looking for: the old steel-jaw bear trap he had laid out a couple days before. When he had tested the bear trap with a piece of a branch, before setting it out, he had found the mechanism had stayed incredibly well oiled - snapped the stick he tested clear in two. The trap now sat in the snow, shut - when Trenton had pried himself loose, he did so just enough to get his leg out - looking like the shut jaw of some great bear or

(beast)

lion. Trenton gingerly picked it up by the chain, and looking over his shoulder, made one last check for anything in the woods. There was no sign of life, but Trenton still wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. So, he limped at his fastest pace back to the door of the house.

As he turned the latch on the door, something moved in the woods.

Trenton leaned back on the door, and heaved a sigh, both exhausted and relieved. Now came the next part of the job. He opened the door from the kitchen to the shed, and went to the corner where he had gotten the trap. When he had pulled it out from the dust the day before, he had meant it for the Beast, but it had gotten Trenton instead. He threw it in, watching it tear down cobwebs from the flanking shelves of hunting and snowmobile equipment like it was fine ribbon. The beartrap sulked in the corner with the steel jaws facing away from Trenton - it reminded him of a child in a timeout, although he hadn't had one yet -

That thought struck him, and he felt a lump beginning to form in his throat. His brain became a whirl of shapeless emotion, that soon crystallized into one response:

I could have had a child... If only I -

Then, almost as immediately as the thought had formed, another one pushed it out:

NO!

Suddenly, all of the whirling torrents and tempests inside his skull ceased, and his inner mind became a calm sea once more. He left the shed and went back into the living room, and well nigh fell onto the couch.

He closed his eyes and drifted into sleep.

He floated down the river of his life and through tributaries of the past, as he slept. The current strong and muscular, pushed him gingerly along old Memory Lane. He drifted ashore to the day he came up to the cabin - that seemed like an era ago, now. He remembered getting out of the car and breathing in the fresh air of the woods. He had come there to get away, but it later turned out that what he was running from had followed him all the way up.

Or maybe it had been there all along?

It was the second day of the hunting trip that Trenton had found the carcasses. He had been tracking something with Elrond when he had come into a small clearing. It was there he had found the two rotting corpses of a buck and a doe. Their eyes were as black as obsidian in the void, and stared up to the grey, cloudy sky in fear and agony.

Their mangled flesh crawled with sickly white maggots, and deep gashes ran across their underbellies, where the innards spilled out and colored the snow underneath a dark, lively red.

Trenton squatted down by the doe and gazed into those deep, black eyes - eyes that looked without seeing. Inside himself, he felt something boiling up: a creeping, sick feeling that chilled his nerves and made his blood freeze in his body.

Something had killed these deer. Something not normal.

Trenton wanted to get out immediately. He started to look around, with his eyes dashing from one path into the trees, to another. His breathing got fast and heavy, and his hearing became attuned to every small breeze that rustled the bare branches of the trees; every twig that snapped from a small critter dashing across the snow-blanketed ground.

Then he heard it on the wind: a low, inhuman growl that shook him to his core. He patted Elrond on the side, lowly whispered, "Come." and ran the way he came. Elrond tailed behind him, his canine brain confused at why Master was so scared. The next day, and the next and next, Trenton would find more carcasses - not all of them deer - and sometimes hear the low growl again.

Trenton had a fitful sleep, interrupted by dreams that left him awake in a cold sweat and tears on his cheeks. The first one he had was of him running through the woods from something. What was he running from? Perhaps it was whatever was out in the woods, killing all the game?

The barren trees twisted around him in a labyrinth of darkness. The air, which was normally fresh and crisp, was now sluggish and reeked of death. As Trenton kept running, he heard heavy footfalls - definitely not the light but sure tread of a wolf, or the heavy gait of a bear. This one something else.

Trenton looked over his shoulder and saw a shadow, almost humanoid in its crouched stance, but it was inhuman in how thin it was. It reminded Trenton of the pictures of the starved jews in Auschwitz. It was too far behind in the trees for him to get a good glimpse of, but he frankly didn't want to look at it anymo -

Trenton's body went outwards as he fell to the ground. He couldn't see the root that had tripped him up. He could hear whatever the humanoid non-human was
(*beast beast beast*)

coming closer. It brought with it a stench - a foul, acrid stench like dead things in muddy water. Trenton tried to get back on his feet, but eventually gave up, opting to crawl backwards along the ground.

His back soon felt undergrowth so thick that it became a wall. The beast was coming closer, and Trenton could feel a lump of fear rising in his throat. He tried to get on his feet again, but his legs felt like bags of dead weight. His breathing was now getting heavy and fast, and every part of his body felt blood flowing through, as his heart worked overdrive in his final moments. He could now hear the thing's light, sharp growl as it sprinted on all fours towards him. Then it was on him.

Trenton had heard ghost stories in his youth about a monster from Algonquin folklore called a wendigo: a tall and thin creature with an incredibly emaciated figure and arms so long, that its stick-like fingers could reach down to the snowy ground as it stood up at its full height. Usually the wendigo had the head of a deer, but this one had the head of a human. Its skin was so pale, that it was nearly as white as the snow, save

the splashes of blood on its hands and around its lipless snarl. As it sprung from the trees and pounced on him, Trenton saw those long, thin fingers reach out and go right for his throat just before he snapped awake.

His bare chest was slick with a cold sweat, and his legs felt weak and clammy. His breathing hitched as the last fog of sleep receded from his brain. He turned out to the window and looked outside from his makeshift bed on the couch. Trenton gazed off into the dark woods, the skeletal trees rising up as if to grab the sky and tear it down. It was out there, watching - *waiting*. Prowling in the woods waiting for him to fall into its trap.

Trenton placed his head back on the pillow, the room feeling ten degrees colder, even under the covers, and he went back to sleep.

This time, he dreamt of the last day he saw his father. He looked down at the serene, blank face of his father as he lay in his hospital bed. His endless stare into whatever infinite he had crossed over to drove Trenton to clench his fist, the tears burning his eyes. He took two steps closer, as if to cement the event into his memory

(my father is dead)

and ascertain the lifeless body before him.

His mother stood behind him, stoic with her tall, frail figure looming over the scene, a finger twisting a lock of her hair. Eventually, when they would leave the hospital, it would reach into her purse, and pull out a pack of Marlboro cigarettes and a small brass zippo painted silver. She would pull from her smoke with a huge sigh of relief as she started the car and they rode home. But for now, she grabbed Trenton gently by his shoulder, and led him out of the room, and left her husband and his father to lay in a hospital bed. After the funeral, they would see him nevermore.

Trenton woke up with a grey evening light creeping into the living room of the cabin. He padded his face and wiped the tears away. His father had died of a stroke at the age of forty-five. None of them had expected it, but it had affected Trenton the most. The day before that trip to the hospital, he had taught Trenton to fish. "The key to fishing is patience." The father had told his son, "If you're not willing to wait for the fish to come, all you'll get is an empty lake and an empty belly."

The two had talked like this as they sat on the pier, the tin pail for their catches hunkered down in between them. He told him about important life lessons, and Trenton had listened attentively. Trenton had always thought his father was invincible, in that innocent and child-like way; but he also felt it on a different level. If he'd known the word then, it would have been "Stalwart". He was like a sentinel in life, to Trenton, with his mirthful and loving smile, his heart-felt belly-laughter, and his wise eyes, green as summer grass. This man almost wasn't a man, to Trenton, but a bear: strong as an ox, caring to the children, and fierce to threats. Trenton had thought his father would always be there, his warm and loving grin ready and open to help his son.

But that couldn't be so. When his father died, Trenton's mother took up the mantle of raising him, and it was always with a cold disregard. Where his father was a stalwart sentinel, she was a soulless Spartan. Trenton felt alone under the shroud of her cold carelessness.

He lay his head once more on the pillow, and looked up at the dark wooden rafters of the cabin. Something was out there on the prowl - that explained the dead animals. But Trenton had a gut feeling that it wasn't looking for wild game.

Trenton's thoughts snapped back to his father's death. He was the only one that Trenton had truly loved and admired. If he hadn't died, he would still have some semblance of a family. Maybe that would even be true if Sally were still here. When he had met Sally, he had seen everything caring and loving he had seen in his father. But even in marriage, he still hadn't been able to forget the past, and it eventually had caught up with him -

(STOP! NO!)

His thoughts of his wife were pushed down, and he returned to his mother. He could almost hear her stern, commanding voice in his mind's ear. He could almost see her standing in the sunny living room of the house where he grew up, one hand gingerly pinching a cigarette between the middle and forefinger, the other turning the page of one magazine or another. She may have been strong like a Spartan, but Trenton thought she lacked the capacity to truly love her kin. She was meant to be a lone wolf -

"Well, look here. Feel any better about yourself?" A voice of the past asked, disappointed.

"Why did you come here? Why now?" Trenton asked the phantom voice.

"Why? Hmph. I wanted to get a good look at you in the light."

"So that's it, huh?" Trenton turned to his mother. "You're only here to flaunt your victory over me?"

"I was never lookin' to win. I merely tried to make you strong. I wanted you to not crumble under the world's weight on your shoulders."

"Then why weren't you ever there? I needed your help. Do you think I could handle Dad's death, that young? You must be crazy."

"All you would've learned then was that you could only rely on someone's shoulder to lean on. Sometimes, you have to know how to wade through the darkness yourself. That's how I learned, and I felt it my duty to pass that on to you."

"All I ever learned from you was that you were cold and distant. You were never there; you were too afraid to help that you kept your distance. You're a coward!" Trenton spat.

"*Coward?*" asked his phantom mother. "Look, I tried to raise you to be a strong man. And you never listened to anything I said - instead, you just took the last train off for your own little world, and never did anything to save yourself. In fact, your thought of learnin' how to be strong was to just bottle everything up. And look where that has gotten you now! When your father died, you were all I had left; and I simply tried to raise you into the man he would've wanted out of you. What I see in you now brings me shame - "

"Please, stop."

"I failed my job to your father - do you know how disgraced that makes me feel?"

"Leave me alone."

"You thought you could push on by ignoring the ones around you, and now here you are: alone, heartless, thinking that you killed your wife - "

"No, please!"

"You think you're so close to rock bottom; guess what? *You dug yourself that far down!* Every little, painful thing - each cut, scrape, bad memory, and hurt - it was all just another fistful of dirt as you dug yourself deeper down the rabbit hole. And now you're so deep underground, that you think that you can't see the light. All you see is the

dirt, the roots of the weeds that have sprouted up around your hole, and not a single star in the sky above you - ”

“No!”

“You’re sad, lonely, pathetic; maybe you deserve to have dug yourself into your grave!”

“ENOUGH!!!”

He felt the presence recoil, but it still jeered at him. He turned away from her cold, sneering face. “What’s out there isn’t going to leave if you just lay around here, moping over the past. If you want it to be over, it is in *your* hands.” Then it was gone - replaced by another.

“Son?” the new voice said.

Trenton turned to it and saw his father, not aged a day over forty-five. His strong, sure arms hung at his sides when they would have usually been out from his body and in the air. His weathered and hopeful face had a wistful smile. The short, light-rust stubble that covered his lower face was reflected in the setting sunlight.

“Dad?” Trenton got up from the couch and limped over to the apparition. He reached out to embrace him, but his father said, “Afraid that isn’t possible, son. I’m still dead as a doornail. I can still sit down and have a chit-chat with you though. Come, pull up a rock.”

Trenton found a dusty ottoman, brought it up and his father spoke. “See you’re stuck inside and scared. I thought I would have given you the base to become a strong man.”

Trenton recoiled and cried out, “No, not you too!”

His father paused to reflect, and then chuckled in a quick “Heh.”

“I see your mother was just around the place.” he said. “She always had a way about her: she favored fast learning and rising to strength quickly, instead of nurturing. Well, what bomb did she leave on your doorstep, son?”

“The last thing she said before she left was that what’s out there won’t leave if I stay here.” Said Trenton.

His father sat for a few minutes in thought. “Well, if my guess is right, even if *you* leave, it won’t stay. It will just follow you wherever you go. This thing you’re so afraid of... it’s some sort of evil beast brought up because of your past - that’s what you think, right?”

Trenton nodded.

“Well,” his father said with a humble smile, “If you don’t want it to follow you around for the rest of your life, why don’t you face it, here and now?”

“But what if it kills me?” Trenton asked, whining like a frightened child.

“Oh, don’t say that. You’re my son, and my son is a strong man. I raised you that way, and now is your time to prove it. You even have my old peashooter over there.” He gestured to the old hunting rifle that Trenton inherited from his father’s will. “Your mother, while you might hate to hear it, has a point. That thing out there won’t go away if you do nothing,” Trenton’s father leaned closer and put a hand on his son’s shoulder, “But it’s up to you to kill it. You can’t phone a friend for this; you’re on your own.”

Trenton felt the strong hand and then leaned forward and embraced the father that once was, closing his eyes to hold back tears. But when he opened them again, his father had vanished, and he was only hugging thin air. He looked around the room, and

his eyes drifted to the rifle. And as he stared at it, his pulse started to quicken, and his breathing became heavy and strong - full of power.

He felt alive - as if he had just been taken over by some red-hot, boiling passion. It was not quite rage, or madness. Determination. Determination being pumped from his heart to every inch of his body, It stormed through his veins and penetrated his innermost cells. A cool fever spread over his nerves and muscles - determination would guide him for the next few moments, as he reached for his rifle, his father's old Ruger model 44 carbine, and turned the handle of the front door.

He felt no fear as he stood out against the greying evening, his gaze boring deep into the woods as he searched for the Beast. It felt like his feet weren't touching the ground as he limped to the midpoint between the cabin and the woods. Stoically, he flicked off the safety, raised the barrel of his rifle to the tops of the trees, and fired a single shot. Birds squawed and retreated to the cloudy night as he shouted, "You want me, shitheel? *Well come and get me! YOU HEAR ME? I'M WAITING RIGHT HERE FOR YOU, SO WHY DON'T YOU JUST POKE YOUR UGLY MUG OUT FROM YOUR HOLE AND GET ME, MOTHERFUCKER!!!*" Trenton waited, staring coolly into the tangled woods. The Beast would come, he thought - he knew it would. He checked the magazine - completely full, save the one warning shot - and put it back, and held his rifle at the ready.

What really was fifteen seconds passed, but to Trenton, it felt like a century; but he didn't care. He only stood, his gun pointing into the woods, waiting. Eventually, he heard twigs snapping, and he saw something rushing at him. Trenton snuck his right forefinger from the guard to the trigger and took aim.

The Beast jumped out from the dead trees and bushes and into the clear light of the evening. And in those last few moments, everything came back to Trenton, only fueling his determination.

He sat down at the foot of the bed, lost in worrisome thoughts. Things were falling apart, and Trenton didn't know if he could stand under the weight of the situation.

Sally stood in the doorway, a scared look on her face that she was trying very poorly to hide. "Trenton," she said, her voice wrought with worry, "Are you alright? You've drawn away these last few months." And in fact, he had. Inside, Trenton could sense a gathering storm: clouds of dark times and thunderclaps of bottled-up rage. The last thing he wanted was for Sally to get caught in it, like a lifeboat in high seas. He sulked at the foot of the bed, now dealing with a war on two fronts - the front within, and the front without.

"I don't want to say much." Trenton said, "I don't want you to change your thoughts of me. All I can say is I've been thinking about the past a lot - the time before I met you - I don't know how to live with it."

"What's so awful about your past?"

"It's hard to explain without explaining everything."

"So why don't you?" Sally asked. "If there's something you've been holding secret," she said, "I want to know - I *need* to know. I can help, if you'd just open up."

"I could never make you understand. The life I lived before I met you; the damn soulless idiot I was. You could never understand the pain I felt, back then." His fears began to rise. Sally came closer, and put her hands on the sides of his face.

“Trenton, please. Just hold me; show me you’re still the man I once knew. You can’t just crawl into your shell like this. I’m alone and I’m scared - scared for you. Please, I’m begging you Trenton - don’t do this.” And that was when hell broke loose in Trenton’s heart. He stood up, grabbed her shoulders in a deadlock grip of iron and the storm took over.

“SHUT UP!!! FOR CHRIST’S SAKE, YOU BITCH, CAN’T YOU JUST LEAVE ME ALONE?!? SHUT UP!!!” Trenton shook her as he roared, the storm within now blowing full force, and those few moments of untethered fury caused the world around him to slow down. Trenton gazed deep into her eyes, almost boring into her soul as the storm broke. He could see his reflection on her corneas, and he saw himself snarling like some evil beast - his teeth bared into a silent, roaring scream. His face was contorted so he looked monstrous, and his pent-up hatred flowed through him, now a vessel to the man he was in times past. Trenton stood there, in the middle of frozen time, releasing the interior of his sad heart - a heart of Sin, the Devil, and True Evil.

But then, time sped back up again, and he saw what he was doing to her. Tears had run down Sally’s cheeks in two perfect, crystalline waterfalls. On her face was a look of shock and appalled horror, and she raised her hands to cover her face, her eyes threatening to open up and cry again. Trenton pulled away, slowly backing into a corner, that same shocked look of appalled horror on his face. “My God.” he said, nearly voiceless. “My God.” he repeated. He curled himself up into a ball and failed to force back the tears.

He spent the next three days in a cheap motel across town, the room carried the stench of joints passed and love affairs decades laid to rest. There, he just lay on the bed realizing what he did, and trying to finish the campaign against his inner turmoil. When he had opened the door to his home upon his return, it had the ominous gloom of death inside. When he walked into the bedroom to find her body on the bed, the now empty pistol in her limp hand, he also found a note in her empty one - crumpled up into a ball and held onto tight in rigor mortis.

All the note said was this: “I can’t bear the weight of this broken heart. I’m sorry, Trenton.”

Sally’s suicide was a severe blow, and he well near collapsed in on himself from it, all the bottled up emotions threatening to destroy him completely. But not only did he remember Sally, but on that cold December evening as the Beast lunged at his throat, he felt her beside him, steadying his whirling mind, and his hand; adding fuel to the fire in his heart.

Determination blinded Trenton, but guided his aim straight into the open maw of the Beast. His twisted sneer matched the Beast’s own. And when his finger squeezed down on the trigger within the cool calculus of destruction, Trenton’s sneer became a hellish grin in his intent to kill. When he heard the sharp, booming report of his hunting rifle sound through the darkening clearing, his brain exploded with a euphoric fireworks display of malice and fury. Fury at the Beast, that had been the man he was; the Trenton that had threatened to suck him into his past and make him crumble and suffocate under its weight.

The Beast suddenly recoiled as if it had just been sucker punched, and was knocked back onto the snowy ground, sprawled and bleeding from the back of its head, but Trenton didn’t stop - the cork on all of his bottled-up rage and fury and hate and

emotion that had been stored since the death of his father had been blown right off, and it was now bursting out of the neck and into the determination that now guided him. He fired another shot - the dead lump twitched as the second round pierced the chest and heart, and broke part of the ribcage. Trenton fired another, tearing through the flesh of the Beast's plump hind leg. He fired another, this one blowing the hole in the Beast's head wider; and another shot blew it even wider. The head of the Beast was now a mangled puddle of blood, brains, and pieces of the fractured skull. Trenton pulled the trigger again... but there was no shot.

Trenton tried again, but there was nothing. And again - much of the same. *Empty*. he thought. During this entire transaction of events, he had said nothing - just fired and fired until he had nothing left to fire.

That cool fever he had felt started to recede. Trenton lowered the gun and looked at the slumped corpse bleeding into the snow. What flesh hadn't been torn away by the barrage was covered with a thick coat of grey and white fur. He came closer, and looked at the blown-apart head of the beast. From what he could make out of the mouth, he saw two thin trails of a soapy foam running down the lower jaw. He had gunned down a rabid wolf without any remorse.

His breathing had now become heavy, each exhale like lead as he shoved it out of his lungs. This was the beast he had been so afraid of? His sense of determination was now completely gone, and he stood there, completely dazed. Overhead, the clouds began to let down a small flurry.

Trenton stood there for perhaps ten minutes, feeling spent; even empty. It was as if a great burden had been unloaded from the depths. From killing the beast that turned out to be only a rabid wolf, he felt like he had been cleansed in some way. All the emotions he had bottled up since the death of his father had left him now, and he felt cleaner. A smile touched his face, and he looked up.

Snowfall. The late December sky was covered with thick grey snow clouds, and the air around him was speckled with the white flakes. The welcoming chill in the air nipped at Trenton's nose as he looked into that late December sky and his smile widened. He threw his arms outwards, holding the rifle like a wizard's staff in one hand, and welcomed the end of an old day - an old time. He started to laugh; merry laughter that was now starting to sound like his father's. His laughter grew louder, until it was a shout against the night. As he stood there in the snowy clearing in front of the dead wolf, he basked in this new feeling of freedom. He felt like a new man now that he had shed himself of evil.

Eventually, his mind returned to his body - and it was freezing cold. He padded at his face and realized he couldn't *feel* it. This made him laugh even more. He breathed in deep and turned and limped back to the house.

Before he closed the door, he took a last look at the dead wolf that lay slumped on the white blanket covering the ground, and then one more look up at the sky. It was full of more stars than Trenton could ever remember seeing in his life. He wondered if the stars, and whatever was up there, forgave him.

If Sally could be beside him, Trenton figured, *she* would.

Madalyn Carpenter

“Madalyn made incredible progress this semester, and I am so proud of the hard work she put into the development of her writing. She began this semester with a clear goal to write this submission, and she worked diligently to achieve this goal. My favorite part of working with Madalyn was watching her come out of her shell and gain confidence in her writing abilities. This story explores young heartbreak and personal growth in a unique and interesting way. Madalyn grew exponentially this semester and I feel very lucky to have been apart of her journey to complete this story!”

- Gavrielle McClung

Rebuilding Of a Heart

1

I don't want to get out of bed. Shocker right, me not wanting to get out of bed? All jokes aside, this time was different. Most of the time I don't want to get out of bed because I'm lazy.

This time I was lazy and heartbroken. It was already nearing 1:00pm. I somehow convinced my parents that I was “throwing up all night” and “couldn't move without having to throw up.” They were skeptical, but nonetheless let me stay home.

I had already gotten several calls from Brianna and Jade, who were my lifelong friends I met earlier in the year. I gave them minimal details about what happened, and asked them if we could all hang out today. I knew they would help me through the whole process, but for the moment I just wanted some time to myself to process what had happened. It was my idea to hang out though, so I drug myself out of bed and stayed in the sweatshirt and sweatpants I slept in. I told Jada I was driving to her house and would be there in fifteen. I couldn't bother to brush my teeth or hair.

Pulling into the drive, it looked like Brianna was already there. I could feel the back of my throat begin to sting and my eyes welled up with tears. It was hard enough already that I had to explain everything to my friends, but I had to relive the heartbreak all over again. I know they would be supportive, but I couldn't help but feel like a loser. Jada was currently in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend, and Brianna has had some casual boyfriends here and there. I've never even been asked on a date. I know right, who lets a guy who's never taken you out on a date break your heart? Walking in, I could hear them both talking but as soon as I closed the door it went silent.

“We're in here.” called Jada from her room which was only a couple feet from the front door. It didn't take long for me to burst into tears as I told them about how Chase broke it off.

This is the guy you've been hearing about. Chase is the typical high school kid who could do no wrong in the eyes of the town. He was popular, he played football, and he was attractive. All the attributes that give a guy a successful 4 years of high school. He was very flirtatious, which I found out the hard way.

I never curl my hair unless it's a special occasion. Some people may think a football game isn't a special occasion, but I believe the situation calls for it. Brianna did my makeup because I'm not very confident doing it myself yet while Jada curled my hair. I needed to look my absolute best tonight if I wanted Chase to notice me. Brianna and Jada were the girls to help me with that.

It's been exactly two weeks since we stopped talking. A very small part is doing better, but the larger part is hopeful. Hopeful that when he sees me tonight, he'll remember why he fell in love with me. Hopeful that he can still see I'm in love with him. We walk outside and the wind instantly flattens my curls, which can pretty much explain how the rest of my night went. Brianna hops on the aux playing her usual R&B. It's easy for her and Jada to get lost in the music, but the only thing on my mind is Chase. Was he even going to see me? If he did, was he going to acknowledge me?

Before I knew it, the forty-minute drive to our rival's school was over. Realization hit me like a brick wall, and I didn't want to get out of the car. Jada and Brianna got out and started walking, expecting me to follow suit. They only got a few steps away from Jada's Subaru before noticing I wasn't behind them.

"Macie come on, what are you waiting for?" Brianna asked, slightly annoyed as she opened the back door where I was sitting. I'm sure she wanted to get into the game because her brother also plays on our school's football team.

"I can't do it. Everyone knows what happened! It's going to be so embarrassing to walk in front of everyone. Who knows! There are probably seven other girls attending this game just to watch him play and-" I was cut off by Brianna before I could continue.

"Macie, have you learned absolutely nothing from me?" She asked in a desperate tone. She leaned into the car and grabbed my shoulders. "No one else's opinion matters, especially no one at this school. Jada and I know who you are, and we now know what kind of person Chase is. If I have to, I'll let everyone know what kind of person he is."

Thankfully there was no one around us to hear me get a much needed reality check. From an outside perspective what she said could sound harsh, but that's how you know she cares.

We pay for our tickets and find the bleachers with our fans in it. Nearly the entire student section was full. Even though our school is small, we always show out at football games. Still, our side looks like nothing compared to the opposing team's fans. The East Oak Eagle's student section and the rest of the supporters are fully decked out in their school's colors. Almost all of the students' faces are painted, with eagle wings on either side of their eyes, and at least one hundred white beaded necklaces around their necks.

"Dude this place is packed." Brianna said searching for an open spot in the student section where we could sit.

"I refuse to sit behind freshman. If they're anywhere near the front they're getting the boot." Jada scowled folding here arms.

There were in fact a couple of freshman boys sitting a little too close too the front for Brianna's liking. She ended up leading us to the student section and before we can even get there the 3 boys move so we can sit in the second row. She is very influential among the student body, so the boys were more than willing to move. Sitting down, I

feel my body trembling. I wasn't meant to be here. It's so embarrassing for me to come here and expect him to be looking for me in the crowd like I'm looking for him on the field. Me wanting him to run up to me after his game and hug me and twirl me in the air like I'm the only girl he wants to touch. That's not this reality though, and it never will be. The sooner I can realize that the easier it will be. It just takes time.

Warm-ups are almost over and contrary to my belief our eyes keep meeting. Captains are called and he looks at me. Captains break up and he looks at me. Starting line up is being called, and you guessed it, he's looking right my way. Jada starts screaming as her boyfriend's name is called, and a couple of seconds later it's Brianna's turn to cheer for her brother. Then Chase's name is called, and damn near every girl in our school starts cheering. I don't want to look behind me and see which girls are cheering because then I would judge them, and how can I judge them if he's doing the same thing to them as he did to me. I bow my head down and make myself think of literally anything else other than him.

The Eagles kick the ball, and the game is started. To be honest I don't know much about football, what I do know is that we're down by twenty-one in the first quarter. I still catch Chase giving me side glances, but never for too long just in case someone catches him doing it. We wouldn't want that now do we. We're two minutes away from halftime and a touchdown is finally scored for the Princeton Bears! In the midst of our team celebrating the touchdown, no one notices a kid from the Eagles is down. A couple seconds after I notice it, several whistles are being blown and what I presume is the Eagle's head coach, the physical trainer, and a worried mom from the opposing team stands is rushing to this kid. The crowd is silent, and I'm officially bored. Yes, I'm sorry for whatever happened to the kid, but it's freezing out and I know I saw hot chocolate at the concession stands when I passed it coming in.

I grab my purse and start standing up when Jada grabs my wrist.

"Macie, what are you doing?" She asked, appalled.

"I'm going to get some hot chocolate while they figure out what happened to this kid. Do you want me to get you a cup?"

"First of all how dare you, you know I hate hot chocolate. Second of all you can't get up from the stands right now, that would be extremely rude." She said letting go of my wrist and putting on a concerned face for the boy.

I thought about it and the last thing I would want is for me to be walking my happy ass down the bleachers and accidentally tripping. I silently sit back down. A couple of minutes later they get the boy up on his feet with his arms around his coach and the athletic trainer. The traditional clapping after an injury occurs, and it's my cue to finally get up. Without wasting a second, I'm on my way to the concession stand.

4

As I'm waiting for my hot chocolate to be made, I get embarrassed. Why was I looking at Chase so much? I hope it didn't show on my face how much I was hurting. I don't know if he would get satisfaction from it, but just him knowing how much he affected me would give any guy a boost of their ego.

My inner monologue was cut short when I heard a loud clunk behind me. Easily scared, I jump, and turn around to see what caused the noise. The boy from the Eagles who injured himself had dropped his helmet and it was somehow rolling towards me.

You would think the helmet guard would stop it from its continuous roll, but it was only stopped once it hit my foot. I debated on grabbing it because after all, they were my school's rivals. I stopped myself from being petty, and picked it up. Both of his arms were around shoulders anyways and I don't expect him to magically heal himself to come get his helmet.

I was going to give it to him without looking, but something in me told me to look up. I'm so glad I did. He is so attractive. He's tall, has semi curly black hair, broad shoulders, and such a cute smile. Wait, why is he smiling? Have I been staring for too long? Dammit I definitely have been.

"What's so funny?" I asked in with an insolent tone in my voice.

"Nothing." He said, with a smile still on his face and a hand extended out for his helmet. I handed it to him, and just as I was about to ask him where he got hurt, his mom got out of their van and yelled for him to hurry up. I'm glad he flashed his bright smile at me one more time because I wouldn't get to see it again for another year.

5

Walking back to the stands with my hot chocolate in hand, I couldn't help but think about how cute that boy was. No matter how much I wanted to think about the boy with the bright smile, my mind finds a way to wander back to Chase.

Walking back to the stands with my hot chocolate in hand, My mind finds a way to wander back to Chase. I just met the cutest boy I've ever seen, and yet Chase has such a grip on me I can't even enjoy it. Did Chase even notice that I had left my spot in the stands? If he did notice, was he wondering when I was going to be back? If I was ever going to come back?

I'm back to the student section and I survey the area to find where I was sitting again. I was so nervous when I first walked into the game that I didn't notice the girl sitting right behind where we were. I stop and stare at her. She doesn't notice me because she's too busy cheering. Cheering for the number twenty-five. Chase's number is twenty-five. It all sinks in.

He was never looking at me.

He was looking at her.

He was always looking at her.

As embarrassing as it would be to go back to the stands and try not to cry the rest of the game, it would be more embarrassing to go back down the bleachers and cry in the car. My craving for hot chocolate is now gone, so I hand it off to Brianna. I think the girls may have noticed the mood change.

"Hey girl, what's up?" Jada asked in typical Jada fashion. She places her hand on your adjacent shoulder to make you look at her.

"The girl behind me is wearing Chase's jersey." I said not picking my head up from the ground. Brianna asked Jada what happened because my response was muffled by the loudspeaker announcing, "Touchdown for the Princeton Bears!" Jada relays the message to Brianna and I look up to see her glaring at this girl. It is B's signature move.

"Jada pinch her or something and get her to stop." I say in a swift tone while slapping her leg. Jada gets her to stop, and all of our attention is focused back on to the game with the end of the third quarter being announced.

Nothing happens in the fourth quarter, and we end up losing by just one touchdown. I have no one to talk to after the game, so I ask Jada for her keys and make my way back to her car while the girls converse. We're all pretty silent on the way back because the boys are always in a bad mood after losing, especially losing to our school's rivals. It, in turn, puts everybody who has to talk to them in bad moods.

I'm in no mood to stay at Jada's house tonight, so when we arrive at her house, I hop in my car and put on some sad music. I really shouldn't do that because then it almost makes it impossible not to swerve my car into a ditch. I somehow control myself, and make it home intact.

...

The following months of my life were a blur. The more days that passed, the more of a loss I felt not being able to talk to Chase. I did everything I could to try and get over him. I was constantly over at Jada's house to distract myself. I would go out with other friends as much as I could. At night when you're all alone in your room is when it gets difficult. There's no laughter amongst your friends. There's only you, and your thoughts. It was pretty easy to sit and cry to your "definitely crying" playlist on Spotify, or to make a Pinterest board of quotes about everything he did wrong. It didn't help that I had to see him at school every day. As the months went on, the less I started to go out. You would think I would start to get over it by now, but it was reality sinking in that he's not coming back.

After that realization hit, it was easier to start coping. I blocked him on everything, I started going back out with my friends, and I even deleted the Pinterest board! Summer had come and gone, and while thoughts of him still popped up often, it was easier for my heart not to sink every time.

Going into my junior and his senior year, I still wasn't completely over him. I also had to go back to seeing him every day. At this point he had started dating, and seemed to be very much in love. The hardest part was knowing that I wasn't the girl he wanted to change for. That being said, I realized my heart still wasn't ready to open for someone new quite yet.

I spent the rest of the year trying to figure out who I wanted to be. I was tired of not going out because of what one boy did to me. I decided that I wanted to start reading more often. The escape from reality I got while reading was something I had never experienced before. I read a lot of poetry and self-help books and realized I wasn't alone. So many other young women have gone through the exact same situation I had been in. I also started to put more effort into school. I wanted to get into a reasonable college, and my grades weren't reflecting that. Instead of moping around the house, I took the time to sit down and do homework or study even if it was for only ten minutes at a time. While continuing to work on myself, the most important thing to me was hanging out with Brianna and Jada. We didn't have very much time left together. Sending them off to college was approaching and I didn't know what I was going to do without my biggest supporters.

Time again slipped past me and before I knew it I was crying as each of them walked across the stage. A couple more names were called before I heard Chase's. As the whole school applauded, I just sat there silently. The main thing was, I didn't cry. I was able to watch him walk across the stage and not immediately think about all of the times

we had, or how he broke my heart. I guess I was just happy. Happy that he was happy, and happy that I was finally happy

...

Summer before my senior year was a little crazy. I was out partying with Brianna and Jada... a lot. I was finally starting to come out of my shell. There were also a lot of beach days. Well if you can call the sand next to a lake a beach. We were sprawled out on our beach towels one day when I got a notification.

Alec Jones has requested to follow you on Instagram.

I click on the profile and couldn't believe my eyes. It was the cute boy from the Eagles I met almost 2 years ago!

"You guys are never going to believe who just added me!" I said raising myself to my elbows and lowering my glasses just to make sure I have the right guy.

"Who?" Jada and Brianna ask at the same time, both unfazed with the warmth of the sun hitting their skin.

"That guy I told you about, you know? The never ending rolling helmet guy from like ages ago!"

"Oh wow really, that's cool." Brianna said, flipping onto her stomach so her back could now tan.

"Why aren't you guys excited? He's so cute." I ask now sitting up the rest of the way

"It's just, you've always talked about guys adding you, and then we never hear about them again. I'm glad he's cute, but I'm gonna need more than a "he added me" to get me excited." Jada shrugged her shoulders and now flipped herself to her stomach.

"Okay then." I said sarcastically while typing his name into Snapchat. I found his username and clicked "add user".

"I just added him on Snapchat." I said pushing my glasses back up and laying down. Brianna and Jada now shot up at the bomb I just dropped.

"You never add a guy first." Brianna said with her jaw hanging low.

"That's so out of your comfort zone." Jada was in just as much shock.

"I can be surprising at times." I said. If only I knew where adding Alec that day would lead me.

Shortly after he added me back. He told me he "couldn't believe he came across the most beautiful girl again" while scrolling through the suggested followers page. We talked for a couple weeks before we went on our first date. I showed up to his house in nice jeans and a light pink shirt I had picked out earlier that day with Brianna and Jada. The same couldn't be said for him. He opens his front door in a East Oak Eagles football shirt and sweatpants. Opposites attract I guess.

"So where does your job have you right now?" I asked, trying to make small talk while on the drive to his favorite ice cream shop. I learned in the couple weeks we texted before meeting that he graduated in the same grade as Bri and Jada. He went into the work force shortly after.

"The city coming up." He said not taking his eyes off the road.

"Oh, nice." I said, looking away from him. Who knew this kid was going to be so awkward in person. Aside from the awkwardness, I was also freezing. I get it was midsummer, but it was evening and the AC was on full blast right in my face. I guess I can't blame him for being awkward if I'm too scared to ask him to turn his AC down.

We arrive at the ice cream shop where I just tell him to get me whatever his favorite flavor is. It ended up being some double chocolate brownie flavor. It wasn't my favorite, but I pretend to like it so I wouldn't hurt his feelings. A small thought of Chase then appeared. He had never taken me on a date. He would sneak over to my house then after a three minute conversation leave to go to some party. The more I thought about it, he never really took the time to get to know me. He just knew the basics, and flirted here and there, and that was enough for him.

The thought didn't make me sad, it just made me realize how upset I was over someone who was really nothing to me. Alec may be awkward right now, but he still cracked jokes here and there. The main thing is, he took me out on a date. It's the bare minimum, and I'm just now realizing that. I will never let someone give me less than that again.

...

A few more weeks went by, and we went on a second date. Then there was a third. Then I was invited to his brother's wedding, which is a pretty big step for two people who aren't dating. I think he got that after everyone at the reception asked how long we had been dating for. The next day he asked me out. The first few months were great. He came over to my house, I went over to his, and we found time with his busy work schedule to go on more dates. The honeymoon faze was starting to fade, but I realized I wanted nothing more than to try and figure it out together. I was always reassured he wanted the same things as me because he wasn't afraid to fight for me.

We grew together and as individuals, and that was more than I could've ever asked for. Sometimes growing as individuals brought on fights, but we always figured it out. There was nothing I wouldn't do for him and vice versa.

Life likes to throw curveballs at you, and you think you won't be able to live through it. That's why growing as an individual is so important. You need to know what works best for you before you can know what's best for other people. If we were ever to go our separate ways, it would be difficult at times, but I will get through it. He has taught me so much and I'll be forever grateful. After everything he has shown and taught me I know he wasn't my first love, he might not be my last, but he'll always be my favorite.

Will Gustafson

“Each semester I have worked with Will, he continues to impress me. This semester, we often lost track of time discussing and analyzing his unique, dynamic, and expansive stories and the universe in which a multitude of them take place. Will truly has a gift—he is extraordinarily talented in creating stories unlike anything you have ever seen before; even the smallest of details are well thought out and carry an air of continuity within the setting. I am very thankful for the opportunity to have worked with Will these past few semesters, watching him flourish as a writer and a person. I hope to one day read how this story ends. Never stop writing!”

- Hayley Bird

The Dancing Bug

Jacob looked warily at a large sign in bright red letters painted in raspberry juice. The billboard was surrounded by lightning bugs, which made it flashy and eye-catching. He'd never been nervous coming to the Swampy Log, but tonight was different. His wife rubbed his lower carapace.

“It’s alright,” she reassured him. “You’re going to do fantastic!”

But Jacob wasn’t so sure. He’d never done anything like this before. How had Alice convinced him to do this again? There was still time to back out. No one had seen them yet. Maybe they could just slip away--

Alice pressed her front six claws against his back and pushed him through the door. So much for slipping away.

Jacob looked around. He wasn’t a regular at the Log, but the bar wasn’t an unfamiliar place either. It hadn’t changed much since the last time he’d visited, a wedding for his thirty-sixth little brother. He looked up at the lantern bugs hanging from the ceiling, which was the mossy inside of a rotten log. There were red and brown toadstools tastefully placed by the bar, with various bugs filling them. Grasshoppers, beetles, dragonflies, some woodlice like Alice and himself, but there were odder bugs drinking at the bar. A grizzly looking spider sat at the far end, drinking out of a bottle filled with a mysterious red liquid. Jacob didn’t want to know what (or who) it was. A few bees were sipping some nectar near the stage. A rarity. Bees weren’t often seen far away from their hive. Jacob heard that their work hours were absolutely *brutal*. An elderly looking butterfly sat with what appeared to be his grandson, a brightly colored caterpillar who was munching happily on a leaf.

As much as he tried to avoid it, Jacob’s eyes were eventually drawn to the brightly lit stage, which was currently closed with a bright red curtain made out of an old piece of cloth one of the giants had dropped near the swamp decades ago. Hal’s father had found it covering the Log and decided to make something out of it.

“Jake!” Speak of the devil. Jacob turned to face the owner of the Log, a tall pincer beetle, his mandibles spread in a wide grin. “Good to see you lad. Are you ready?”

Jacob wanted to curl up into a ball and roll out of the bar, but he nodded. Tonight would either be the best night of his life, or the worst.

“Ready for what?” Alastor, a black beetle Jacob was vaguely familiar with, turned to the small group and took a large swig of treesap. He was one of the bar’s regulars.

“Jake’s one of tonight’s dancers!” Hal chirped happily.

“Lil’ Jackie can dance?”

“Yes!” Alice squeezed the joint of his ninth leg. “He’s so good.”

Jacob wished she wouldn't say anything. When he failed spectacularly, every word of praise his wife said about him would make the situation magnitudes more embarrassing.

"Can I just go backstage?" he asked Hal.

"Of course!" Hal clapped his upper carapace with a large claw. "Entrance is on the right."

Jacob quickly scampered off and slipped behind the red curtain.

...

To Jacob's utter dismay, being backstage was even more nerve wracking as being offstage. He looked around wildly, taking everything in all at once. There were no dressing rooms, just one big room bustling with various performing bugs. There were a few makeup assistants and stage crew workers helping out, but this was a smaller bar with only a few customers. Resources were spread thin, everyone shared the stage and props to some extent. The active and overwhelming environment did nothing to calm Jacob's nerves. He quietly shuffled into a corner and tried to become as unnoticeable as possible.

Unfortunately, it didn't work. A fly with a bright red tie buzzed over to him and introduced herself. "Hi! I'm Janet, the stage director. Are you Jacob?"

Jacob nodded solemnly.

"Excellent! You'll be on in about fifteen minutes. If you want to head over to Alexander, our makeup bug, he's right over by that stack of background panels." Janet pointed to the other side of the room, where a glamorous green beetle was waving at him to come over.

The beetle seemed friendly enough, but Jacob still felt like he was going to spew mulch. Janet hurried off to help someone else and Jacob started shuffling his way to the makeup station. About halfway there, he slammed into someone and almost fell.

He looked up to see a giant horned beetle regarding him coldly. Jacob didn't think that his nerves could be strung any tighter. He was wrong. One look from this longhorn had him literally shaking in his boots. Behind him, two bugs started laughing hysterically.

Jacob tore his eyes off the towering beetle and turned to see who was laughing at him. Seated by a long rack of glittery costumes was a cricket and a flea, dressed in identical red leotards.

"Watch where you're goin' poly!" cackled the flea.

Jacob quickly hurried over to Alexander, before he could humiliate himself even further.

...

Jacob was right, Alexander *was* nice. And admittedly very good at his job. Jacob liked how the makeup made his eyes shine. And whatever Alexander had done to his antenna made them fluffy and bright. Jacob had shown up in his best suit and his favorite green bowtie, which he thought could not be improved upon. But the makeup artist let him borrow one of the Log's dark green vests, which Jacob immediately loved.

After a few minutes however, the high of a brand new look began to wear off. Janet brought him over to a three legged stool right behind the left curtain. The sinking feeling in his gut steadily returned. He could imagine all the eyes from the audience fixed on him, quietly judging him. Jacob wanted to run out of the Log and never come back.

He started listening to the music onstage to try and distract himself. It was beautiful. Jacob was no musician, but he could name and distinguish every instrument he'd ever heard. The three onstage right now were the harp, flute, and piano. The singer was performing in a language he was not familiar with. The song they played was very sad, reminding Jacob of a dreary, overcast day by the lake. But something about it was hopeful too, like any moment the sun would peek through the clouds.

The song ended and the crowd gave the performers a round of applause. A few seconds later, two flies came out with their instruments. The pianist was still onstage waiting for Jacob. They smiled and said words of encouragement to Jacob, but he barely heard them.

Coming offstage was the biggest spider Jacob had ever seen. It was massive, black hair covering every inch of its body, except for a big red spot on its abdomen in the shape of an hourglass. It regarded Jacob coldly, its eight dark eyes glittering malevolently.

"Good luck." The black widow said as she passed him. Jacob was stunned. He heard his name being called, the crowd giving him a polite round of applause, but he couldn't move.

She had the most beautiful voice he'd ever heard.

Eventually, Janet had to literally lift him out of his seat and shove him onstage. Several bugs laughed. Jacob looked around. The bar wasn't full by any means. Most tables only had two or three bugs occupying them, but to Jacob it felt like the whole swamp had come to watch.

To his left, the third member of the band was still sitting at her piano. She was very young, still a grub, probably the other band members' daughter, but she sat there poised like a grasshopper, ready to leap into another song. She nodded to Jacob to tell him she was ready. He had sent in the music he would dance to earlier in the week. It was one of his favorite songs, but it wasn't very popular. Jacob hoped that wouldn't matter.

He nodded back reluctantly, and she began to play. The song started off slow, and Jacob moved awkwardly around the stage. No one was paying him much attention, but the song had just started, and wasn't very interesting yet. He spotted Alice in the crowd, who nodded encouragingly. The song sped up a bit and Jacob moved with the music, emblazoned with new courage.

Then the song entered one of his favorite sections, and Jacob pulled off one of the more difficult moves of the dance, twirling and leaping through the air. Pride flushed into his thorax when he heard someone clapping, and it heartened him to keep going.

Jacob lost himself in the music, dancing his little buggy heart out. He moved, he twirled, he slid, he curled himself into a ball and rolled across the stage several times, a move only a woodlouse or a millipede could have pulled off.

The song reached its finale, and Jacob completed his dance with a move he called a Sideways Roll. Unbeknownst to him, the giants would have referred to it as a cartwheel. But Jacob hadn't any idea what a cart was, or a wheel for that matter. The move was very difficult for him to perform, seeing as his body was not a perfect circle. Jacob had to partially curl his body in order for his middle legs to reach the ground.

The pianist finished the song with several rolling notes and Jacob slid the edge of the stage on his knees, his six upper legs spread wide.

Only his wife applauded. He looked down to see the bar largely ignoring him. Even Hal, who had been very encouraging about the performance, was talking to a customer and had his back to the stage. A few of the other patrons, noticing the song had finished, gave him a polite, half-hearted applause. The grimy looking spider in the corner gave him an irritated look and returned to his drink.

Somehow, the crowd ignoring him was worse than if they booed him offstage. Jacob swallowed and awkwardly got to his feet. He managed to squeak, "Thank you!" then retreated. Now that he was no longer dancing, he became very self-conscious. He could feel everyone's eyes on his back as he fled the stage.

"Hey!" Jacob paused, looking over at the pianist. She smiled warmly. "Nice job! That was really good for your first time!"

Wonderful. He was being patronized by a grub. Jacob smiled back uncomfortably, then slipped backstage.

...

Jacob hacked at the earth with his shovel, breathing heavily. It was early morning, *very* early morning. The sun hadn't risen yet, but there was the beginnings of a vague, purple-ish hue on the horizon.

Jacob had been awake for hours, trying to shift the roots of this clover. To collect dew properly, the plant had to be adjusted at a very precise angle. Of course, Jacob didn't have to do this now. In fact, it was quite dangerous to try and shift a clover when it was covered in dew. The drops could slide off the leaves and onto his back. If enough rained down, he could drown in the puddle or simply be killed on impact.

But the manual labor helped clear his mind. Last night he thought... what? That he was a good dancer? That the crowd would give him a standing ovation? He hadn't even wanted to go. So why was this bothering him so much?

Jacob stood up straight and leaned on his shovel. He panted heavily and wiped the sweat off his face. He didn't notice the screen door opening, but he did hear Alice's footsteps on the gravel behind him. He turned just in time for his wife to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"Sweetie, what are you doing?" she asked, settling herself in the crook of his arms.

"Just moving some roots." Jacob pointed up at the leaves over their heads. "This clover's unbalanced, so I thought I should--"

"You shouldn't be doing this at night!" Alice scolded him. "Certainly not without someone watching you!"

He stared down at the base of the clover.

"What are you doing out here so early?"

Jacob sniffed, then continued shoveling. "Couldn't sleep."

His wife watched him work for a moment, very carefully. Then she looked at the shack and said, "Do you remember my Uncle Archie?"

"Crazy Uncle Archie?" Jacob grunted, "The one who got himself eaten by--"

"Don't interrupt." Alice sniffed indignantly.

Jacob smiled. "I'm just saying."

"Don't start this again."

"Why should I listen to someone who thought he could raise fish?"

“That’s not what happened.” Alice said with a huff. “Anyway, my point *was* that you shouldn’t be out here trying to hack your problems into the dirt. You should be at that bar, figuring out what went wrong.”

Then she kissed him and went inside.

...

That night, Jacob returned to the bar. He thought it would be humiliating, going back. Instead he found himself slipping into the crowd and virtually disappearing. It was nice, but it also reminded him of how the crowd had ignored him last night.

He went over to Hal and ordered a drink, then asked him if he could talk with some of the dancers.

“You want to get in on the secrets of the trade?” Hal asked, “Do a bit of snooping?”

“W-well I--”

Hal laughed. “Of course! No problem. Let me get Buford. I think he’s done for the night.”

Buford. Was he that giant horned beetle he bumped into last night? Jacob started to backtrack and tell Hal he changed his mind, but the bartender was already gone. Nervously, Jacob seated himself at a table and waited.

Hal returned with Buford. Jacob trembled as they shook claws. His face was like stone, expressionless and unforgiving. When Hal left, Buford cleared his throat and asked, “So what would you like to know?” His voice was deep and he spoke like this was not his first language.

“J-j-just... like how--what--” Jacob stopped himself and took a deep breath. “W-what do you do? When you dance?”

The very tip of Buford’s mouth curved into a smile. “You would like to know the technique?”

“Yes,” Jacob said with relief. “Yes, please.”

They talked for hours about different forms and poses. Buford even recommended several schools Jacob could attend to properly learn how to dance. He was surprisingly friendly and not at all scary once Jacob spent some time with him.

“You have much talent.” Buford said, “But I am not sure I should be the one to teach you. Our styles are very different. I must dance slowly, yes? You are much quicker.”

Jacob recognized that Buford knew what he was talking about, but he couldn’t articulate very well speaking Jacob’s tongue. He wished they had a translator, but they had to make due.

Eventually the conversation drifted to other things. Buford was from very far away, and didn’t have the money to visit his family there. Apparently, even with all its flashy lights and fancy costumes, being a small-time dancer at a bar didn’t pay very well.

After ten drinks or so, most of the patrons had filed out of the bar. Buford was starting to look sleepy. “I must go,” he announced. “My family will worry. It was wonderful speaking with you.”

Buford gave his condolences about the show, “It was not meant to be. The bugs here are very... casual about dancing,” then left after gulping down the rest of his sap.

...

The next night he talked to Burt and Frank, who were otherwise known as the Jumping Jacks. They were the cricket and flea who had laughed at him, so Jacob wasn't really looking forward to speaking to them again. The night went about as well as he thought, with them laughing at him more and bragging about themselves. It certainly wasn't as enjoyable as his conversation with Buford. He probably would've left if they weren't so good at their job.

They constantly criticized him about his dancing. They never got overly critical and said he was bad, just that it was wrong somehow. Frank, the flea, kept insisting he should utilize more jumps. "Those bouncing, rolling bits you did were pretty good," he admitted. "But you should really be trying to catch the audience's attention more."

"What do you mean?" Jacob leaned forward.

"Well, they get bored." Burt said, "If you aren't constantly trying to draw the spotlight, they tend to drift back to their conversations."

Jacob had never really considered that. He thought that dancing, like any form of art, should be his own flair to be later interpreted by others. Being popular, or doing things solely for the audience's entertainment, had never really held much importance in his mind. He wanted them to like him, but he wasn't sure if that was all there was to dancing.

He kept listening and found that the duo took the crowd's opinion very seriously. More seriously than their own opinions. They talked about visiting other towns to watch other dancers to find certain trends, reading media about famous dancers far away, anything to be better.

The conversation exposed him to a whole new world of dancing.

...

The third and final night was one Jacob was both looking forward to and fearing more than anything. Hal introduced her as Queen of the Red Sand, but she insisted he call her Marie. Like last time, the giant spider made him shake in his boots the second he saw her, but once she spoke Jacob relaxed. How could a bug with a voice like that be bad?

Jacob learned that like Buford, she was from very far away. Her voice had an exotic twinge to it that fascinated him. She could speak much more eloquently than Buford, so she must have been living around the swamp for a very long time.

They talked about her homeland and how she came to be in the swamp. Jacob asked her about the differences in singing and dancing, where she had been taught, anything and everything. After a while he realized she hadn't said anything about his dancing. When he asked, she frowned.

"It was very good." She took a sip from her drink. "Why do you ask?"

"I mean, what do you think was wrong with it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Yes, you were very passionate."

Jacob couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or not. Reading his expression, Marie decided to elaborate more. "You have been dancing for a very long time?"

"Yes. All my life."

“You got lost in the music, I could tell. You have experience, you have passion, what else is there to dancing?”

“Technique?”

Marie laughed. “That comes with experience. It is good to test out different forms and musics, to stretch your abilities to the limits. But if you ask me what was wrong with your dance, I will have to say nothing.”

She stood up from the table. “It was wonderful meeting you, Jacob. Have a good night.”

Everyone had already left the bar. Jacob looked at the sky. It was late, very late. It must have been past closing time, all the fireflies and lantern bugs were done with their shifts and getting a few drinks. Jacob looked outside and watched the stars sparkling in the twilight.

Talking with the dancers was supposed to clear things up, but instead it had just made everything more confusing. Some of the information he gleaned contradicted itself. Appease the audience, but also just dance for yourself?

He left the bar with a strange feeling in his stomach.

...

Jacob took a long time to get home. His mind buzzed with information. Whenever it did that, he liked to look at the stars. The vastness of the universe always made his problems seem so small and manageable.

He had come up with a new routine. He had started to work on it after his failure at the bar, but all his conversations with its dancers seemed to change it radically.

It felt good. The dance was more flashy and elegant, and therefore more interesting. Jacob was sure that people would love it. He wanted to go back there and see if that was true.

He imagined the crowd roaring with applause. Everyone clapping him on the back and saying what a good dancer he was. A fancy looking bug from the big city offering him a contract to dance in higher places. He imagined moving into a large apartment and buying Alice lots of nice things. She liked painting, but they were always forced to buy cheap, dull looking paints made from common berries found around the swamp. Jacob could buy her all the fancy expensive paints she could ever want.

But he also thought about the Jumping Jacks, who were almost like slaves to the audience, working ceaselessly to create the dance that would please them most. He thought about Buford and Marie, stuck in a dingy bar dancing for scraps, forced to stay here away from their homelands.

His little old farm wasn't much, but he was better off than most.

Jacob went home. He kissed his wife and scooped her up in a dance, humming some music. She laughed and kissed him back.

That night, Jacob slept peacefully.

Mitchell Karstaedt

“It's been wonderful to work with Mitchell this semester and witness his exponential growth as a writer. He has shown excellent improvement with his writing and storytelling, and crafted an interesting and dynamic story within sessions surrounding world-building, character development, and magic systems for his Medieval fantasy world. Exploring how important descriptions and visual storytelling was, and how they could directly reflect the world and characters of the story, was our primary focus during our sessions together. Please enjoy the fantastical world Mitchell has created!”

- Theresa Yonash

Maldraxa

In the distant land of Maldraxa the sun shines beautifully every day, there is never a worry about the weather. The land is surrounded by mystical woods. With fantastical creatures many only dream of. Such as fairies, dragons, and rhinepluffs. Tall looming trees to the north of the castle hold many swamps and underground caverns considered too dangerous for the normal adventurer. The woods to the west have been harvested mainly for farming land connected to the village. This land provides nourishment for everyone in the kingdom, including the royalty. Off to the east is a vast ocean that has been unexplored for the most part with many dangerous species of serpent lurking in the waters. South of the castle is the path leading to the other kingdoms such as the land of Saber. As well as many trading towns on the way.

In this mystical kingdom there lives a Princess by the name of Rianaya who is 17 with long beautiful brown hair with a slim body and beautiful brown eyes you can get lost in for long periods of time. She is very aware of how pretty she is and very often takes advantage of it. She was a stunning woman but she was also quite cruel as of recent months for reasons that nobody quite knows. The King Bellowalomy is the most kind soul one will ever meet, with a heart as pure as gold, will as strong as steel, and shows a love stronger than anything. He lost his beloved wife when Princess Rianaya turned sick due to unknown causes. Now he himself at age 45 has fallen fatally ill a few months ago without a cure in sight. People are claiming he has been looking paranoid ever since he got struck ill. Then there is Atlastis, the most beautiful person to ever roam the planet. She is only of age 15, but she is considered to be the castle helper. With long golden hair always hidden from sunlight by a transparent hooded cowl. With bright blue eyes. She has always had a tumultuous history with the royalty. The Princess doesn't treat her as a person, yet the King treats her as one of his own children. She doesn't know much of her past. All she knows is she was once saved from some creature out on a rampage in the woods nearby and was brought into the castle and was taken care of. Many people assumed she was an orphan, but no one really knew. Except for King Bellowalomy who has kept it a secret for its seemingly dark past. Nobody is entirely sure where she came from, there are many stories flying around. One is she was raised in the walls which is quite absurd, or the one most people agree with. She was saved in the woods from a ferocious creature by the fearless knight Gradari. She has no memory of her mother since the King neglects to speak of her. Although now she has learned that she is better off not knowing.

The King's condition has become increasingly worse. He is losing touch with the magic of the kingdom that keeps the kingdom and its civilians safe from dark magic. He

fears the worst with his dwindling power so he requests Atlastis to aid him alongside Princess Rianaya.

“Why did you request her to be here father?” Rianaya asks.79

“Can you grab me a glass of water sweet daughter?” Bellowalomy asks ignoring the question she proposed.

“But why not make her do that?” She yells back.

“Because she’s grabbing boring things that you don’t want to do.” He replies.

“Fine, I’ll be right back,” she mutters.

“Now, Atlastis come here my dear, for there is much to tell you and not much time.” Bellowalomy beckons her closer.

Atlastis leans in close to hear the King's whispers.

“You’re so beautiful if only you knew the truth, you know that cowl you bear upon your lovely hair?” He gestures to her hair, “Try taKing it off” he requests. She is unable to remove it and she asks him why. He responds with, “Why it's because it’s cursed upon your head for eternity unless the spell is broken, which I’m afraid I’ve always been too weak to do.”

Atlastis backs up and questions, “why are you telling me this sire? Why have you taken such interest in me as of recently?”

“Because my dear, you are my daughter too. You are Rianaya’s sister, and you are more powerful than anything I've seen in my days.” Bellowalomy answers. Too stunned to speak, Atlastis backs away from the dying King. “For we don’t have much time, I don’t have much of my power left. I need to imbue it into your sister to protect her from an evil spell that I sense upon her.” He starts going into a meditative state to conjure his power into a single source. He takes that source and imbues it into a droplet.

Just as Princess Rianaya comes back with the glass of water the King takes his dying breath to put the tear shaped power into the water and tells Rianaya to drink.

Reluctantly she does and as she swallows the last drop Bellowalomy becomes limp. He is soon confirmed dead. The castle helpers start taKing his body down to the royal catacombs where he will forever be put to rest. Immediately the atmosphere starts to feel unwelcoming. Dark clouds gather outside the window. But there is no storm forecasted for today. Something happens with Princess Rianaya, she collapses to the floor but immediately gets back up with a strange look in her eye. It’s not sadness but rage, pure rage. She takes a deep breath. “Atlastis, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE, WHY HAVE YOU KILLED MY FATHER?” Her voice booms throughout every corridor of the palace.

Atlastis calmly replies, “Princess Rianaya I promise I didn’t kill your father. He summoned me here to speak to me privately. Although what he said made no sense, what I do know is he spent the last of his power to try and protect you from something. And it is my duty as your helper to protect you from unknown evils. So lets ge-”79

Rianaya screams back cutting her off, “NO I DON’T NEED YOUR HELP YOU MURDERER, MY DAD, THE King IS DEAD BECAUSE OF YOU. YOU EXPECT ME TO BE IN DANGER?”

“But, it’s not my fault! I swear-”

“Hah, rubbish. Now get out of my sight before I banish you.”

“Y- yes your highness.” Atlastis stutters.

Atlatis is still shaken up about the King's death. "Things don't seem right." She mutters to herself. *It doesn't seem right to not announce the death and just go straight to dinner like nothing happened, She thinks for a moment. Could this be what the King was protecting the kingdom from?! I have to go let the Princess know. She swiftly walks out of her room and into the dining hall.*

On her way over to the dining hall an unusual woman approaches with a plate of food. "Please dear Atlatis, give this platter to the Princess for I am in fear of her wrath. She's got quite a temper recently as you may have noticed."

Atlatis glances towards the dining hall. "O- ok, I did noti-" She stops. She turns around and the unusual woman has disappeared. "Um, what's going on here?" She frantically exclaims out. She continues onto the dining hall ignoring that strange interaction.

Atlatis starts walking slowly to the table, but she notices a dark shadowy figure behind the Princess. "That can't be good..." Atlatis mutters to herself. "Here, here's your dinner my Princess" she says with hesitance. Suddenly the Princess starts getting visibly red in the face. There is a glistening in the platter.

"ARE YOU TRYING TO POISON ME?" Rianaya screams furiously. "Who's but yours could this long golden hair be from?"

"What, no! I swear I would never do such a thing." She replies.

"Who's but yours could this long golden hair be from?" Rianaya says while gritting her teeth.

"But I wear this cowl on top my head to prevent such a matter of happening!" "First the King, now me?! I never trusted you. I should have told dad to get rid of you so long ago." She pauses.

"For it cannot be me for I have not shed a single lock of my golden hair. I swear this by my life."

"Well if you swear by your life I can arrange that. Guards take her away to the dungeon immediately!"

"Please don't you know I would never do anything to harm you."80

Two brawny guards start carrying her away to the dungeon. "We're sorry ma'am. We are just doing what we are told for fear of making the Princess upset." They mutter to her as they take her away as to not have the Princess hear them.

They lock her away in a cell with a scared looking boy, a knight that looks familiar, and a frail old woman in the corner sleeping.

"Atlatis?! Why are you down here?" The knight asks "Rianaya thought I killed the King and tried to poison her. What are you doing down here, Knight?"

"She said this is her thanks for saving you and bringing you to the castle." Atlatis looks confused, and thinks to herself, *Could this be the knight Gradari?*

"Are you the Knight Gradari? Are you the one who brought me in from the woods?!"

"Why yes, yes I am child."

From the corner they hear a low mumble that sounds almost angry.

"And what are you guys here for?" Atlatis gestures towards the other prisoners.

The little boy stands up. "I don't know, but please don't hurt me. I'm friendly, I pinky promise!"

The boy holds up his pinky to Atlastis. She locks pinkies with the boy and says “I trust you.” She speaks softly.

Suddenly the old woman in the corner wakes up, “I heard someone new come in, how are you deary?”

“I am scared but that's besides the point, we need to find a way out of here before something worse happens to us.”

“Well, it looks like you've come to the right cell at the right time.” The woman spoke softly.

“Really? Do you guys have a way out? Why are you still here then?” Atlastis says with an excited tone.

“Well we didn't have quite enough power to do it.” The woman says with a mysterious tambre.

“But I don't have any powers to lend you. I'm so sorry to let you all down.”

“But on the contrary, beautiful. I sense some mysterious force built up inside of you.” Atlastis reflects back on Bellowallomy's words *you are more powerful than anything I've seen in my days* she hears echoing in her head. “All we need to get out is to come close and join hands. I'll say a little something that my family taught me to get out of a tricky situation.”

“Wait, that's all we need to do? Hold hands, why didn't we do that before, you never said anything about this to us.” Gradari exclaims.

The woman grits her teeth and says, “Like.. I.. Said, We didn't have enough strength.”⁸¹

Gradari sighs but agrees and reaches his hand out for Atlastis. Atlastis goes to grab his hand and the little boy's but the woman says, “No! Not his hand, for.. for, it is needed for you to hold my hand for it to work properly.” She says frantically. Atlastis holds the little boy and the woman's hand and the woman mutters something barely comprehensible under her breath. “Erun mari Atlastis Cronex xenorC sitsaltA iram nure.” Then suddenly the woman looks a few decades younger than before. Her wrinkles disappear, her posture is perfect, her hair is a beautiful blonde color that quickly changes to black with a wave of her hand.

It all happened in a flash but Atlastis swears she saw the woman looking like the queen holding her as a baby. “What did those words do?” Atlastis says while starting to feel dizzy.

“I have no clue my family told me to say it when there was trouble I needed out of. Now let's look at these cavern walls.” They start feeling around the walls for hollow points. “Dear Atlastis come put your hand here and close your eyes and push.”

She does as commanded. Her hair starts to glow wildly bright, same with the womans but then suddenly the wall collapses open to reveal the hidden caverns.

“Woah lady! Why didn't you tell us you were magical?” The little boy asks.

“I promise I'm not, it must have been what the woman said. Wait, where did she go?” Atlastis replies looking dazed

“She went on ahead while you were passed out.” Gradari informs.

“Wait how long was I out?”

“Doesn't matter, lets catch up to her!”

Destiny Lloyd

“Working with Destiny this semester was very rewarding. She came into the ENGL '57 session wanting to express her creativity that she doesn't get to show in her everyday life. Getting to work with Destiny on her first chapter of "The Magic Box" was very exciting, getting to be one of the first people to read it, and I'm sure all readers will be able to enjoy this very fun and creative story that she has written. Destiny also incorporates her sisters' names into the piece, both Miracle City and Serenity Castle are named after them, creating an even more personal connection to the book she is writing and showing the love she has for her sisters.”

- Megan Bittner

The Magic Box: Chapter 1

My name is Matthew. I live in New York City on Basu Drive. The big red brick house at the end of the road belongs to me and my parents Maria and Darwin. My mother is a therapist, and my father a surgeon. I am the only child in the family, which is okay with me. My parents are very successful and have given me a great life. They never talk much about their careers and how they became so successful. I've always thought maybe it would be nice to follow in one of their footsteps. Although, cutting people open and hearing others' problems all day doesn't appeal to me very much. Maybe it's in their genes to love those things, I wouldn't know. We don't talk much about our heritage or relatives, even on birthdays and holidays. Today is Saturday. I don't have school today, and my parents are going to work, meaning I am home alone for most of the day.

“Matthew come down and eat breakfast before it's time to go!” my mom says.

As we sit down in the dining room at a silky black glass table, underneath a large crystal chandelier, my mom goes on to cook my favorite food ever invented. Pancakes.

“Happy birthday son!” my parents say at the same time.

My mom has what I would call the best pancakes on earth. Today I am 16, I feel as if there should be some rite of passage for me. Isn't 16 supposed to be a big deal or something? I don't want much for my birthday. I am not short or in need of anything and we aren't a materialistic family. What would be particularly nice is to know more about my family heritage. My parents can seem very secretive at times, but it's about time I knew something! Right? At school I can hardly participate when we do “round the world” activities about where everyone comes from and what their culture is like.

I begin to ask my mother questions as she is heading out the door. “So, mom...” I say.

“Yes?” she responds.

“I was wondering if I could know more about our family... I mean I don't know my grandparents or any of my cousins or aunts. I would like to get to know them. After all, whoever they are, they are my family. I find it hard to believe we don't have at least one relative out there that you can introduce me to.”

“Yes, sure, maybe, your father and I are just protecting you until the time is right. Maybe that time is now,” she says as she smirks at me and winks at my father.

At this point, I didn't know how to feel. They both kiss me on the forehead as they head out of the door to go to work. I am then left pondering the meaning of a small smirk. As soon as they headed out of the door and I said my goodbyes, the floor began to shake. I felt it under my feet as the walls around me began shaking. While losing my balance, I looked outside my living room window to check and see if anyone was experiencing the same encounter with the earth beneath them, as I was. I began running up the stairs as

steadily as I could, my heart was racing, and my ears were warm. I felt an overload of nerves as my confusion took over. As the floor begins to calm itself, it leads me through a path using the floorboards. I find the main room causing all the disruption in the house... and surprisingly it stems from my parents' room. As my curiosity takes me over, I open their door.

There is a large blue portal coming out of a small rusty box about the same size as my hand. The air begins to swirl in a shiny green color and moves in circles like water. While standing in place for ten seconds I was simply taken aback, as I have only seen these things happen in movies. After a couple seconds of being in shock, I reached out my shaking hand to touch the portal to see what it feels like. It was like a wet and soft wave on my fingertips. I had never felt such a thing, not even on a beach from a real wave. I did not know what to do, but decided it was time to try and break out of my shock. Slowly looking around me to see if anyone else had entered the house. There was no one. Stretching my legs through the portal along with the rest of my body, was nothing short of an impulsive decision. A wave of nausea and a slight headache began to come on as I fully entered the portal, then there was a dark flash that knocked me out almost immediately.

As I woke up, the smell of daisies brushed across my nose. My vision steadily returned, and I could not recognize anything. There was not much to recognize seeing as I was sitting in a field full of daisies. While embracing a slight feeling of terror, I also felt lots of excitement. A bit of an extreme birthday gift, don't you think? This unknown beautiful place I just so happen to have fallen or stepped into has a species of daisies taller than I had ever seen before. As I gather myself and stand up, the daisies are so tall they begin to tickle my neck. Across from me stands the blurry image of a tall beautiful blue and silver castle. It's simmering in the sunlight. I begin to think to myself that this must be a dream. My phone vibrates under my foot, and it is my mother calling. Another impulsive decision on my end was deciding to answer when I was pretty sure I was having a lucid dream.

"Honey, Matthew are you there?" my mom says.

"Umm it depends on where "there" is mother," I say.

My dad, who is there with her says, "Don't go anywhere we are on our way!" I could hear him breathing so hard through the phone, it felt like a strong wind in my ear.

They both sounded worried, yet I felt excited and frightened at the same time.

"You are in Miracle City," my mom says, "You wanted to know more about who you are and where you are from."

My mother, knowing where I was, got rid of the slight terror I felt. She began to tell me how my grandparents thought that this would be the perfect time to show me who I truly am. I began to think the same as well. While making my way out of the field of daisies, I noticed a girl no further than 20 ft away from me. She gave me the oddest smirk. I started to walk in her direction to maybe ask for help when something else grabbed my attention.

"Mathhewww," ... I jumped as I heard a sudden yet far yell of my name. No doubt, my mom had somehow made it to Miracle city, and it did not take her exceptionally long at all. It would have been impossible for her to make it to our house from work, in the two minutes we talked over the phone.

"Mom... Is that you?" I say wearily, and *almost* sure that it is her who is calling my name. Running through the field toward the direction the voice was coming from, I

discovered my parents. There they were... both my mom and dad were less than eight feet away. I ran up and hugged them both as if I were a two-year-old who had been separated from their favorite teddy bear.

“We did not expect you to find Miracle on your own, but we are here now, and we can help you through this process,” my mom says.

“What process exactly do I have to go through?” I asked.

“First let’s get you home and all settled in”

“Wait! I don’t want to leave we just got here, and you have to tell me what’s happening and what this place is.”

“When I say home I mean here in Miracle, this is our home”

Shocked by her statement, we continued walking along the path of daisies. The daisies turned into sunflowers, and the sunflowers turned into tulips. It became easier and easier to navigate through the field. As we walked through the tulips, an old woman dressed in a blue silk gown with a corset and an old man wearing a silk cape approached us. My parents introduced me to them as their grandson.

“Grandson?”, I said. *My grandparents Rosa and Mark are the current King and Queen of the City of Miracle?*

“Nice to meet you Matthew we have been waiting for you and have missed you dearly”, my grandmother says as she hugs me.

“Don’t get to spoiling him just yet mother,” my mom says.

“Come here my boy!” my grandpa also leans in for a hug.

This was an emotional moment for me, as it gave me a feeling of content with my identity. The fact that I got to meet them at all was the best birthday gift I could have asked for. Even if at first, I thought it was a lucid dream. We followed them to a path outside of the field and we headed toward what grandpa called the “Palace of Serenity”.

“This is where we live, and where you can live if you would like to,” my grandpa says.

I felt a little disoriented because I have a home... but why not have two? Maybe I would like this home better than a place where I always felt lost and barely had friends. Maybe this was a chance for me to discover myself.

“No rush, take all the time you need to think,” my mom says.

We reached the steps of our golden blue home, with what I was told had 300 bedrooms and who knows how many bathrooms. What would I decide to do? Go back to the world I have always known... or embrace this new one.

“There is someone I would like to introduce you to... you may recognize her” my grandma says.

Echo Taft

"It has been a wonderful semester working with Echo on progressing her stories and sharpening her skills. This semester, Echo worked on several different stories centering around various themes to challenge herself as a writer. One of our main focuses this semester was working through writer's block, and she did a great job pushing herself to keep writing, looking for inspiration in new ideas. Even when we got stuck in a session, Echo was still engaged in finding a way to move forward. She put a lot of time and effort into this story in particular, and I am so excited for you all to read it as well. It was a lot of fun reading through and helping refine her work, and I'm sure she will continue to develop her stories and skills!"

- Grace Dahl

Taft After Midnight

The invitation crumpled further in her hand with each step Kayla took. Her voluminous pink skirt was too big to comfortably sit in on the subway. She scrutinized herself for not thinking of that before its construction was complete. She hadn't even arrived and her feet were already killing her, but she was thankful the sky was still a peachy shade of orange.

Kayla found a crack in the sidewalk by accident and took a quick dip. A stranger caught her by her bicep as she fell into their lap. "Thank you," she whispered, stunned by the new woman's beauty. She was wearing dress slacks and a black button-down rolled to her elbows. Her hair was dark and cropped, like a member of a boy band from the nineties, perfectly framing her freckled face.

"It's okay. I've got you. Besides, we're at the dance hall, it's probably better you fall out here than in there."

Kayla stood back on her hand-decorated heels and straightened out her skirts. Once steady, she held out a hand. "I'm Kayla. And you are?"

"Tony." Her hands were unexpectedly soft, though they looked calloused from a distance. A breeze rushed through the couple's hair as they lingered into each other's eyes, unwilling to let go.

Footsteps came up behind the two of them.

"Hello, stranger!" Kayla went in to kiss her cheek. She tucked a fallen strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "Tony, this is Cindy. Cindy, this is Tony."

"Nice to meet you. I love your dress."

"Well, all the credit goes to Kayla." She cleared her throat, "I'm cold, so I'm going to head inside if that's alright." Her footsteps trailed back into the building as Kayla met Tony's eyes again.

"Where'd you find Cindy's dress? It's miraculous."

She swayed at her ankles. "I made it, actually." She waited to let the shock rise on Tony's face. "This one too," she said, smiling down at her creation.

"Impressive."

"Well, it better be otherwise I completely wasted five years of my life and over a hundred thousand dollars of student loans, which my dads would not be happy to hear." She spoke fast with a hint of heartache. She started again with a swallow, "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm head chef at The Lemon Gallery. It used to be called Basil Toss," she threw an open hand over her shoulder, "We rebranded after the shooting last year."

“Yes... I was sorry to hear about that.”

“It’s just a part of life at this point,” Tony said, scruffing her hair. Kayla shivered in the breeze. “I’m parked around the corner, let me grab my jacket for you real quick.”

Kayla didn’t have the time to protest. She was left to lean against the chilly pillar for the time being. She caught the false scent of Paris in the air flooding her with memories of cold nights like this. If she closed her eyes, she could still hear the hum of late night dinners and smell the perfume she was only able to purchase across seas with hints of rum and vanilla. Though none of those nights had rats in the back of her brain planting seeds of love.

Tony came back, jacket in hand, and draped it around Kayla. It smelled, just a little bit, like traditional chicken noodle soup. She nestled into the rich familiarity and tried to hide her blush. “You’re too kind.”

“The world is too harsh.”

“That’s true too, I suppose.” She sighed. “So, do you like dancing?”

Tony stepped back and offered a hand, “Not by myself.”

Kayla almost stepped out as well when a crunch of the door handle pushed outward letting yellow lighting flood through the crack. Cindy called out, “Guys, I wasn’t kidding when I said it was cold. Get in here.”

They were greeted by the body heat of those already dancing. They all had a certain grace in their evening gowns and three piece suits, moving in blurs of bright color. The band did an excellent job at making themselves only as noticeable as they needed to be both while playing and in between songs Kayla’s hands entangled with Tony’s ignited a dry shock. Kayla felt inclined to pull back, but let the muscles in her hand fall slack once more, noticing the calm within her partner. “Wanna dance?” Tony asked as the band kicked up again.

Kayla calmly nodded, and together they fell into the expanded crowd, finding their place in the, now settling, grid. Their hands shifted upright, to the level of their shoulders, still clasped together, though no longer intertwined. Across the beginning bars, Kayla was stunned by how well Tony could dance, and more so how well they moved together. She’d had plenty of awkward dance partners in the past, but there was no need to find their footing together. Soon they had to make an unfortunate trade. A wink was thrown to Kayla from the woman that took her spot. She attempted to distract herself from her longing by getting caught up in the music, yet Tony stayed in her mind. Her thin cocky smile taunted Kayla's body, calling her in from peripheral glances.

Kayla’s new partner was wearing a corduroy suit jacket. “You look absolutely darling,” he said, over pronouncing his vowels, making the rotten egg smell even more prominent.

Kayla choked back any grumblings, “Thanks.” He stepped on the hem of her skirt, making her miss a count. “Va te faire voir,” she muttered under her breath. She grabbed the winking woman from earlier and promenaded around, until she was safely back into the comfort of Tony’s care. The dance finished with the followers circling around in the center, they turned to their partners, curtsied, and the dance was over.

“There you are, Princess.” Tony grabbed Kayla's bare arms from both sides, taking in all of her beauty, before she pulled back from fear of coming on too strong. She made a glance to the glossed hardwood floor, continuing to be mesmerized by Kayla's reflection.

“And you as well.” Their eyes reconnected. “I must say, you’re the best dancer of the night so far.”

“I’ll try to keep it that way,” Tony said as the band introduced a waltz. They took each other’s hands and fell back into perfect step. Each movement was a fluid turn of gears, until the shattering of a glass echoed from the drink table. Kayla’s body tensed at the sound of everything falling. She stumbled before rushing through the crowd to escape out of a side door.

Tony scanned around for Cindy and mentally begged for her to make eye contact, but she was too caught up in her own footsteps to notice. Tony’s arms crossed before her. Looking down, she found her feet, in oversized wingtips, making their way over to Kayla’s exit. Down at the end of the hallway Kayla was crouched, shaking against the balcony rails. Her mind was in tangles. Cold concrete built itself around her as she started digging at the skin on her arms.

Water, Tony was reminded. She dipped back into the main hall and made her way through the labyrinth of dancers. It was the fastest option. They had now set out plastic cups, in addition to the glasses. Tony filled two cups with water and ice and another with a pile of maraschino cherries. Holding them above her head, she braced the maze once more. At the doorway, Tony kicked off her shoes and placed them next to the wall with her jacket.

She placed one cup near Kayla and continued to hold her own with the cherries between them. In a swift move, Tony made her way to the ground, sitting across from someone half gone. “Hey, Kayla.”

Her eyes moved up to meet Tony’s, but her fingers still quickly traced her forearm up and down. Closer now, she could see the scars from torn up skin.

“Is it okay if I touch you?”

Kayla nodded.

“May I take your hands?”

Kayla nodded again.

Tony straightened her back and stretched out Kayla’s arms, cupping her hands. “Can you speak right now?”

Her body stayed still, aside from the heavy shaking. [Text Wrapping Break]

“Okay, that’s okay.” Tony paused, gathering her thoughts. “Let’s do some box breathing, okay? Inhale for four seconds, Hold for four seconds, Exhale for four seconds, Hold for four seconds. Do you want to do that?”

Kayla nodded.

“Okay,” Tony swallowed. “In, two, three, four. Hold, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four. Hold, two, three, four.” They sat alone, with Tony chanting, for quite some time. When Kayla had stopped shaking as much, Tony pulled back. “Are you able to speak now?”

“I think so.”

“Okay, let’s do a countdown. Name five things you can see.”

Her world had finally stopped spinning and her eyes were now back in focus. She moved her head to find five things. “I see the stars. I see the buildings behind us.” Things outside were still dark yet, office and apartment lights only gave the vague outline of a concrete jungle, but thankfully were dim enough to give stars their room to shine. She

pulled her vision closer to herself. “I see the twisted balcony rails.” She tried to follow her eyes along with anything significant. “I see the floral wallpaper. And I see you.”

“Good, what are four things you can feel?”

She pulled back her left hand, and attempted to reach anything worthy of touch. “I feel the silk in my dress, the grout between tiles on my calves, the cold water, and you.”

“Good. What are three things you can hear?”

“The band, for sure.” Kayla nodded along with her thoughts, there wasn’t much else. Someone from the street honked their horn. Kayla exhaled quickly. “The cars, I suppose.” Kayla continued hunting around for anything.

“I usually struggle with this one too. It’s okay, we can mo-”

“You’re voice, there’s three.” Kayla’s smile was broken, but still, finally, present.

“Awesome! Now, two things you smell.”

Kayla closed her eyes with a deep inhale. The world swirled around her. Decaying leaves were drifting alongside the wind. It shifted, bringing out the stubborn restaurant in Tony’s jacket and Kayla’s perfume beneath her ears. Her mind started to wander back. Tony’s hand tensed around hers in an attempt for affirmation. A wave shot up her spine. “Leaves,” Kayla eventually sputtered. “Ueh.” She shook her head. “You, I guess. Your jacket smells like soup.”

Tony chuckled to herself. “Yeah, I’m not surprised.” She reached to pull the cup of cherries from her side and held it out. “For our last challenge we have taste.”

“I’ve never actually had one of these,” Kayla said, rolling it between her fingers.

“No time like the present.” Tony set the cup down between them and grabbed one for herself. “On three?”

“One.”

“Two.”

“Trois.” Kayla’s teeth snapped down on the soft fruit. Something in her eyes shifted as she was greeted by the sweetened almond flavors. With a quick swallow, she looked at Tony, still taking in the taste. “Delicious.”

“I’m glad,” Tony said, letting each other sit in their own thoughts. “Do you feel like getting back out on the dance floor?”

“I think I just want to go home.” Kayla stood up, wavering slightly on her heels. “It was really nice meeting you. You’re incredibly kind and I hope you have a fantastic life.”

“Kayla, wait.” Tony hopped up. “Let me come with you.”

Outside, away from the noise, Tony paused. “Did you drive?” She asked, grasping her keys in her pocket.

“No, I don’t drive.”

“That’s okay. Where do you live?”

Kayla scratched the back of her neck. “Just down the street, really.” Kayla pulled a few bobby pins out of her hair and stuck them on the neckline of her dress. Releasing her hair, she was able to take down her braids and shake them out while her and Tony continued moving.

At the corner they each followed what they thought was to be the correct path. Tony caught herself when she realized the cold void next to her. “Hey, Kayla, I’m parked over here.”

She was waiting to cross the street. “My apologies, I think my brain is still glitching in some places,” she said before dashing back. In place, they seamlessly went back to their synchronized pace. “And, Thank you for driving.”

“No worries. I’m just glad you’re feeling a little better now.” Tony’s white LeBaron chirped awake. She moved around Kayla to open the passenger door for her. “M’lady.”

Kayla chuckled and collapsed into her seat. After lifting her feet into the car, she tugged the door closed, as Tony found her way. The car grumbled to life. Kayla was right: it was only a short drive from the way she described it. Tony could only hope she was able to soak up all the time she had remaining with Kayla. There’s no fun way to drop a girl off after talking her down from a panic attack.

Kayla lingered in the car, staring at her swelling feet in uncomfortable shoes. At her core, there was something telling her that Tony would be intrinsic to her life; she couldn’t let Tony escape. Not now. Not so soon. “Would you like to come inside?” she murmured.

Tony couldn’t understand the frail words. “I’m sorry?”

“Would you like to come inside?” Kayla turned to face her. “I feel bad for making you leave early. The least I could do is make you a cup of tea.”

“Oh,” Tony turned off the engine, “Uh, sure.”

Reagan Thyra Russell

“It was a pleasure to work with Reagan throughout this semester in English 57. Reagan is a super creative person who loves to write fantasy. I was intrigued every week to listen a new story about a new world through new eyes. Reagan likes to write beginnings to bigger stories; it was hard to stop sometimes when I was hooked and wanted more from the page. Great imagery and dialogue made me feel like I was watching a movie in the booth during our sessions. This short story published in wordplay is no different, it is well worth the read. I feel like Reagan could write some awesome fantasy books in the future!”

- Braedon Gilles

Sealskin

There was a tapestry that hung along the wall in the North Wing of the house. Half of it was sun-stained due to it being so close to the high window that overlooked the ocean. But even with the slight damage, it was still beautiful. The image was underwater, with a rich blue sea, brightly colored fish, and bright green seaweed. But the main focus of the piece was the seal women.

The tapestry had seals swimming through the open water along with naked women. Their skin was pale, and their dark hair was mermaid-like, and though Birdie knew it was just fantastical artwork, there was something not quite human-like about the women. Something she couldn't quite name.

“They're selkies,” a voice said, carrying through the hallway. Birdie whipped her head around to see Mrs. Borgen at the end of the hall, her hands folded behind her back and a rare smile tugging at her lips.

Birdie's face flushed, and she quickly looked back down at her, scrubbing, “Imma sorry, Ma'am. I didn't mean to be taking so long.”

Mrs. Borgen threw her head back and laughed, which had Birdie taken back a bit, surprised to see such a joyful action from her mistress.

“Oh, lass, there's no need to hasten yourself,” Mrs. Borgen went on, walking closer to Birdie's place on the floor until she was standing next to her and offering the girl her hand. Not wanting to disrespect her employer, Birdie took it and stood up, turning once again to face the tapestry.

They were quiet for a minute, standing back and admiring the stitchwork of the cloth piece and appreciating the use of colors and different threads. But then a question popped into the younger girl's mind.

“What's a selkie?” Birdie queried, tilting her head to the side as she turned to Mrs. Borgen.

The small smile that had been on the older woman's face now grew even larger.

“They're magical creatures,” she replied, reaching out a hand to touch the face of one of the sewn animals. “In the water, they seem just like any other seal. But when they come onto land, they shed their coats and transform into people.”

“So they're like mermaids?” Birdie asked, turning back to the tapestry.

“Aye,” Mrs. Borgen nodded. “In a way, they are. They can bring storms and summon large schools of fish to the coast.”

“Have you ever seen one?” Birdie asked before realizing that it was a stupid question to ask.

But once more, she was surprised when Mrs. Borgen nodded and said, “Yes, but that was years and years ago.”

Birdie noticed the familiar dark shadow that cast over Mrs. Borgen's entire being, not unlike the outside storm. Her face was blank, and her eyes were off in the distance somewhere. Her hand rested over her heart as if she was checking her pulse, and she was dismayed by the results.

"Is everything alright, Ma'am?" Birdie asked, unsure what else to do.

Sucking a breath, Mrs. Borgen shook her head, "No," she whispered, "No, it's not."

"Is there something I can do, Ma'am?" Birdie asked, growing worried about the fact that Mrs. Borgen looked ready to faint, "Take you to your room, or fetch you some water?"

Before Birdie knew what was happening, Mrs. Borgen grabbed her by the arms and turned them face to face. Then Birdie was left staring into Mrs. Borgen's dark blue eyes, slightly afraid but unable to move

Finally, Mrs. Borgen nodded and said, "Yes, Birdie, there's something you can do for me. But you must promise me that you will not tell Mr. Borgen that you did it, do you understand, lass?"

"I, I, I don't know if I," Birdie stuttered at the mention of Mr. Borgen but nodded, "All, alright."

"Good," Mrs. Borgen sighed in relief, mimicking Birdie's shaking nod, "Good. Now listen to me, what you're to do is go to the attic and look for-"

"Birdie!" Ms. Maggie's voice called from around the corner. This caused Mrs. Borgen to jump a foot away from Birdie, letting her go in the process.

Ms. Maggie turned the corner and looked at the two of them for a moment as her eyes narrowed towards Birdie and asked, "Is everything alright, Ma'am? Birdie's not causing problems, is she?"

Slowly Mrs. Borgen turned to look at Ms. Maggie and shook her head, "No, no, she's fine. She's doing as she's told."

When she heard that Ms. Maggie gave a stiff nod before addressing Birdie, "Have ya' finished yer chores?"

Birdie, whose head was still spinning from the encounter with Mrs. Borgen, blinked before nodding her head wordlessly.

"Good, then ya' can come help me in the kitchens," Ms. Maggie said, already heading downstairs.

"Mrs. Borgen had a task for me first," Birdie said, stopping the other woman in her tracks. They both looked at the lady of the manor when Birdie asked, "Ma'am?"

But Mrs. Borgen shook her head, "Nothing, lass. Run along and go help, Ms. Maggie."

Birdie opened her mouth, wanting to argue but shut it knowing better, and made her way after Ms. Maggie to the kitchens.

Birdie had never cared for kitchen work, but with the encounter with Mrs. Borgen earlier, it was even harder to focus on cooking. She had asked Birdie to go to the attic. The one place where the mister had banned almost everyone from going, even his wife, and he had two men take turns watching the doorway at all times. What was up there anyway? Why did Mrs. Borgen want it? And why didn't Mr. Borgen want her to have it? It's not like there was anything up there that-

"Birdie!" Ms. Maggie squealed, snapping Birdie out of her thoughts, "Stop staring off into nothing and come here. Ya' can lay the tableware."

“Didn’t the mister request fish for dinner?” Birdie asked as Ms. Maggie handed her the things to set the table, seeing bowls, and not plates.

“There’s no fish to buy in the market,” Ms. Maggie said, looking rather crossed about this, “The storms keep ‘em on land, and damage half the boats. And when the fishermen do go out, they pull nothing up.”

Birdie pressed her lips together into a thin line and made her way down to the dining room. She couldn’t think of a time when there had been no fish to buy in the market. It seemed almost impossible with the town sitting on the coast as it did. Yes, she could think of times when the sea had been rough for months on end, and fishermen had trouble getting large catches, but there had always been at least something. A few haddocks, a tuna or two, something.

But then again the out-of-season storms that had been pounding the town for weeks on end now did make it understandable. Though Birdie didn’t like to think about what it would mean if it went on like this for much longer. Their people had never been the best farmers.

As she laid the table, Birdie heard a bang in the direction of the front door. It was so loud it could have been mistaken for a bolt of thunder from outside. Swallowing, she knew that Mr. Borgen was home. She turned back to her work. It’s not like he’d come after her. He never bothered with Birdie and her chores. He wouldn’t start today.

“Girl!” a voice barked, “Come here!”

Birdie yelped and looked to see Mr. Borgen standing in the doorway. His eyes narrowed in on her, and his face was like an overcast. Birdie’s feet were stuck to the ground for a moment not wanting to come, but then she remembered what happened to Tommy when he didn’t act quick enough for the mister’s liking, and shivered. So she moved from the safety behind the table until she stood in front of Mr. Borgen

“Yes, sir?” she asked, looking down at her feet, so she didn’t have to think about how much he towered over her. How much bigger he was than her. If she didn’t look up at him, she could maybe forget.

“Where’s Ailia?” he demanded.

It took Birdie a minute to remember that Ailia was Mrs. Borgen, and she answered, “Imma not sure, sir, I guess she’d be in her room at this hour.”

“She hasn’t been near that attic, has she?” he snapped, making Birdie shrink in on herself. She then remembered Mrs. Borgen grabbing her and asking Birdie to go to the attic. Fear gripped her body, not only for herself but for the mistress.

“No, sir,” she lied, shaking her head, “You can ask Mac and Lyon if you don’t believe me.”

“Look up, girl,” Mr. Borgen commanded. Birdie fought with herself to tilt her head back to meet the mister’s face. He stared at her for a long while, dark eyes burning into Birdie’s face. His mug with his snarling teeth and the long red scar reminded her of a crocodile, and his temper and demeanor was what Birdie figured a real one was like. Ready to snap her in half at any second if she made the wrong move.

“Get back to work,” he said bitterly, finally turning away from her. Once he was out of sight and ear range, Birdie let out a sigh and leaned against the wall for support. That was as good as that encounter could have gone but her head and heart were still struggling to recover from the anxiety.

She would have been perfectly happy if she didn’t have to be in the same room as Mr. Borgen for the rest of the day. But she would have no such luck.

“It’s yer turn for serving tonight,” Ms. Maggie said, handing Birdie the trays with the Borgen’s supper. She opened her mouth to argue, but Ms. Maggie gave her the sharpest look in the world, and the young girl cowered.

As she got closer, Birdie’s stomach sank deeper and deeper. Dinner for the Borgens was usually a tense, aggressive encounter and Birdie became jumpy just thinking about the last time she had served dinner on her own. Finally reaching the door she took a deep breath and stepped into the dining room, praying for the best.

Mrs. and Mr. Borgen sat at opposite ends of the long table. Mr. Borgen still seemed to be in a foul mood, and Birdie had a feeling it was only going to get worse. She gave Mrs. Borgen her meal first, who took it with a small nod. Then as if she was approaching a wolf instead of a man, she gave Mr. Borgen his.

“I thought I told Maggie to make fish tonight?” Mr. Borgen asked, scowling at Birdie, demanding that she give him a reason why he was disobeyed.

Birdie swallowed and said, “There were no fish to buy in the market today, sir.”

“Oh, no fish,” Mr. Borgen said, glaring at his wife, “Any idea why that might be, Ailia?”

The way he said Mrs. Borgen’s name made it sound like it was a curse or something dirty, and the tone made Birdie break out in a sweat.

Slowly Mrs. Borgen looked up from her supper, and in a voice that seemed to hold no emotion whatsoever, she asked, “Why would I have any idea?”

Mr. Borgen was fuming as he brought his fist down on the table with a bang, making Birdie jump and cringe, and sent a spoon and butter knife flying.

“You know damn well what I’m talking about, woman!” he growled, “Do you mean to starve this whole town to get your way?!”

“I’m not doing anything,” Mrs. Borgen said, trying to keep her voice calm.

“But it’s still your fault,” he went on, “The storm, the loss of fish. It’s all your fault, isn’t it?”

It was such a ridiculous statement Birdie couldn’t even fully understand it. Mr. Borgen had never been known as the most reasonable man on earth, but to accuse his wife of causing storms and the town having a lack of fish was near loony.

Mrs. Borgen sat up straight and pushed her shoulders back as she looked her husband down, “If I *am* connected to any of it,” she said coldly, “Then it would be because I am here. And my presence here is a direct result of your actions. Making the storms and fish disappearing, *your* fault.”

Mr. Borgen shot up from his seat and banged his other fist down on the table, “Careful, woman! Careful now. If you don’t watch yourself-!”

“You’ll what?!” Mrs. Borgen cried while getting up from her seat, “What will you do? Please,” she spat, “Enlighten me.”

The couple stood perfectly still, glaring down at each other. The tension grew and grew. Birdie could feel her heart hammering in her chest and was terrified that one small movement, any word, would cause something horrible to happen.

“Birdie,” Mrs. Borgen finally said, her voice strained, “You may leave us now, lass.”

“Are you sure, Ma’-?”

“GET OUT!” Mr. Borgen roared, grabbing his glass and throwing it down on the floor where it shattered.

Birdie gasped and hurried out of the room as fast as she could.

When she made it back to the kitchens, Ms. Maggie tried to ask why Birdie was back so soon, but soon enough, the shouts from the dining room could be heard from their far corner of the manor.

The yelling went on like the wind and rain outside of the house. Loud yet muffled by the wall, and there was nothing anyone could do to get rid of it. Then, when it finally stopped, Ms. Maggie sent Birdie with a broom and water pail to go and clean up whatever mess was waiting in the dining room. Once again, Birdie approached the door at a snail's pace, almost shaking to see what the room now looked like and even more terrified that either Mr. or Mrs. Borgen would still be there.

To her relief, no one was there, but to her dismay, there was a good deal to clean, broken glass scattered on the floor, dinner was spilled over the table, and Mr. Borgen's chair was knocked over. There was also a red stain on the carpet that, after a moment of panic, Birdie realized was wine. Rolling up the sleeves of her gown, she got to work.

As she swept and picked up tiny pieces of glass, Birdie wondered once again why Mrs. Borgen was married to the mister. They weren't arranged as Birdie's own parents had been. Mrs. Borgen wasn't from the area and seemed to have no family or prospects to speak of. The two had no children, so there was no scandal to hide or cover-up. They certainly weren't in love, nor had they ever been; everyone knew of that.

The only answer that made sense to Birdie was that Mrs. Borgen was a beautiful woman, and rich men tended to like having pretty wives.

They said that before Birdie's time, the lady of the manor was much more breathtaking. Her eyes, like the dark sea, and long black hair that framed her pale sunspot face perfectly. She then, as she is now, was a little bit rounder than most women would prefer to be, but she carried herself in a way that nobody noticed or cared. They also said that Mrs. Borgen used to be more lively. Her laughter carried through the manor's halls like music, and her smile was like the sunrise over the ocean. But over the years, with Mr. Borgen's worsening persona, those faded too.

When the dining room was clean once more, Birdie made her way to the kitchen. When she got there, she was almost exhausted at the sight of Anna, who, as always, was rambling on about some story or other.

"You know I once met this traveling man," she mused, drying the dishes Ms. Maggie handed to her, "He had this funny way of talking and strange markings all over his face and neck. Anyways he told me that there are invisible people all around. In the trees, in the air, in the water. He said they cause things like rain and storms, even when the fish and animals come and go."

"Like a selkie?" Birdie asked absent-mindedly as she dumped out her water pail.

"Don't ya' think yer a little old for fairy stories, lassie?" Ms. Maggie asked, not looking up from her work, so it was hard to tell which one of the girls she was talking to.

"I once heard a fishmonger's wife say that a sailor found a selkie's coat on the shore," Anna chirped, "When she came back for it, the sailor kept it from her and made her his bride. While she was gone, her family sent bad luck to her husband and those around him. She only got her coat back and returned to the sea years later when the sailor died, and she found it again."

That was a story that caught Birdie's attention, and she asked, "So she needs her coat to go back into that water, to go back to her family?"

"Aye, she does," Anna said, still smiling away, "Oh! Which reminds me of the story I heard from a dancer in—"

“Alright, that’s enough chatter,” Ms. Maggie said, tossing a rag over her shoulder, “Ya’ go on and help Moll finish for the night and then off to bed with ya’. Birdie, I have a job for ya’ lassie, and ya’ better listen carefully and do just as I say, understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Birdie said, hands pressed to her sides, standing in front of her.

Ms. Maggie took off something from around her neck and held it in front of Birdie.

“The Misses has been asking for the thick winter blankets,” she said, “Yer to go to the attic and fetch them and bring them to her, do ya’ understand? No dilly-dallying or grabbing anything else. Just the blankets. Mac’s on guard, so ya’ show him the key, and he’ll let ya’ up. Got it?”

Birdie swallowed before nodding, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good,” she said before finally giving Birdie the key, “Ya’ give that to me before bed, do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Birdie said once more before making her way to the most restricted area of the house.

Mac was seated on a chair in front of the door to the attic. He raised a skeptical brow at the sight of Birdie, but when she held up the key, he nodded his head toward the door, which she then unlocked.

The place smelled like dust and was dark, and the small candle that Birdie had barely did anything to light up the room at all. There wasn’t much in the attic so it was only a few seconds until Birdie spotted the blankets, but before she could grab them, she noticed something out of the corner of her eye.

It was a smallish wooden chest painted navy with gold gildings of waves and fish. Ms. Maggie’s warning came to her mind, and the thought of what Mr. Borgen would do if he found out that she had been going through things in the attic made Birdie feel faint. But there was something in her gut telling her to look inside. Just to take a peek, she wouldn’t take anything. She’d just look.

Setting the candle down, Birdie slowly opened the trunk’s lid, holding her breath, waiting to see what she’d find. Only to be a bit disappointed

Inside it wasn’t much. A paper package tied closed with a green ribbon. Birdie picked it up to inspect it and noted that it wasn’t heavy. It felt like some sort of blanket or fabric based on the feel.

Then from somewhere downstairs, there was a thud. Coming back to herself, Birdie quickly shut the trunk as quietly as she could, pressing the package to her chest, and holding the blankets over the top to hide it. She grabbed her candle before she hurried down the stairs and locked the attic door, trying not to look suspicious as she passed Mac on the way to Mrs. Borgen’s room.

Birdie found herself wanting to run but knew that it would make the floor creak if she did, and that would draw attention to her. So she walked as calmly as she could to Mrs. Borgen’s bed-chamber. She took a deep breath before knocking when she got to the door.

“Come in,” Mrs. Borgen called.

“The blankets, Ma’am,” Birdie said, stepping in and shaking a bit, as she handed them and the package over.

“Thank you, lass,” Mrs. Borgan said, “It’s been getting so cold with the rain, and I just need a wee bit-”

It was then that the older woman noticed the package, and looked up at Birdie.

“It was in a trunk up in the attic, Ma’am,” she said, still not knowing why she looked, why she took it, or why she gave it to Mrs. Borgen.

Looking back at the package, Mrs. Borgen let the blankets drop and sat at the foot of her bed. Slowly she unwrapped it after a minute of staring in disbelief, and once it was open, she gasped. Inside the package was a sealskin, gray with black and brown spots like the pelt of a Grey seal. Mrs. Borgen’s hands shook as she slowly picked it up, holding it to her face. Rubbing the fur against her cheek before pressing it to her nose to inhale the scent. When she pulled the pelt away from her, she looked up to meet Birdie’s gaze. Even though her mistress was happy, Birdie still felt the need to explain herself.

“I, I know I wasn’t meant to-”

Before getting the words out, Mrs. Borgen jumped up and wrapped her arms around Birdie tightly before pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Borgen gasped, sounding ready to cry, “Thank you, lass.”

“I,” Birdie began as Mrs. Borgen let her go, “You’re welcome, Ma’am.”

There was a bolt of thunder just then, but it made Mrs. Borgen smile even wider.

“Run off to bed, lass,” Mrs. Borgen said gently, “You’ve done good work today. You deserve rest.”

With a tiny nod, Birdie made her way to the door, “Yes, Ma’am. Goodnight, Ma’am.”

“Goodnight, Birdie,” Mrs. Borgen said, looking down at the sealskin again as if it was made of gold.

Birdie hurried off to give Ms. Maggie the key before turning to her own room. Once she was dressed in her nightclothes and her hair was brushed out, she made her way to bed. But before she could get there, she noticed something as she passed her window.

The rain and the storm had finally seemed to let up for the first time in ages. Out in the distance, walking towards the beach was a woman’s naked figure.

The woman turned to look at the manor, and it was a second before Birdie realized that it was Mrs. Borgen; the sealskin held tight in her arms. What was she doing out there, naked of all things?! Did she want to catch her death? Birdie almost wanted to go out and see just what the older woman was doing, but she stopped.

Mrs. Borgen wrapped the sealskin tightly around her shoulders and then turned to walk towards the dark black waters. As soon as her feet touched the water, there was a golden glow that Birdie could see even from her bedroom window. The rays grew brighter and brighter the more she waited in the water, until she finally dove down fully submerging herself, and the light disappeared with her.

Throwing the window open, Birdie heard nothing but the sound of the wind and the bark of seals that seemed to be having a family reunion.

Bri Williams

“My time working with Bri Williams over the course of this semester has been wonderful. Bri’s writing consists of excellent word choice which brings beautiful detail to every story, well thought out plots that leave readers aching for more, advanced character development that would make professional authors jealous, and a talent for symbolism and themes that leaves readers stunned when they realize the connections. One of Bri’s goals this semester was to create writing that was worthy to be in wordplay, and as her writing consultant I can say it upmost confidence she has achieved, and even surpassed, this goal. I’m very proud of her.”

- Devin Buckley

Across the Bay

Flora never thought much about the weight her organs held. She always imagined them ghostlike, always there but never thought of. Except, as the cold, sickly feeling crept closer and closer to her chest, she realized just how noticeable some organs could be.

Feeling trapped in the moving vehicle, unable to penetrate her head from the window, she rested her head on the cool, biting glass. The radio blasted festive ballads played by Alaska, Flora’s mother, who loved to listen to the traditional pieces.

“Oh, how I do love these songs!” declared Alaska, realizing her daughter has not spoken within an appropriate time frame. After no response, Alaska swept a strand of hair from Flora’s head, disregarding the hard, cold shiver sprung from Flora. The shiver ran so deep, Flora felt it pierce her heart.

As they sped down the road, Flora’s mind began to drift. She missed the assurance of what the sun had to offer, wishing it could unthaw her, from the inside out. But she knew it would never happen, for the sun hardly sprang out these days.

When Flora was seven, Alaska had packed a picnic for them to bring alongside the ocean shore. Flora remembers the rough sand along her fingers; Alaska remembers thinking about Flora’s future. As they chased each other in the warm sunlight, everything seemed perfect. And it was. Flora normally was a sensible person, but in that moment, she wished she had the ability to transport back to a more joyous moment. If only she would have known what her future would hold.

When Flora was ten, she realized she had an extreme case of academic validation, created by the one and only Alaska. When she got home from school, her mom was at the kitchen table looking over her report card. Flora did not even need to see the paper herself. Alaska’s face showed everything—the disappointment, the bad, and the unacceptable. Ever since that day, Flora saw Alaska differently than she used to.

When Flora was fourteen, she realized bad things occurred in the world. What could be worse than getting a B- on an assignment? The idea that she would never be enough for her mom. At the age of ten she just wanted to please Alaska. At fourteen, she just wanted to please herself. She remembered thinking how she would never be able to.

When Flora was sixteen, she grew distant. Hiding away in her room, she devoured her schoolwork, tearing into one after the other. When Flora glanced into the window, she swore Alaska’s eyes were iced onto her. Alaska, unintendedly, created her own castle made of ice, and Flora refused to enter it.

When Flora turned eighteen, she stopped caring. The sun that used to shine so often clung to the clouds, refusing to show itself. Flora did not mind though. She was

getting used to the presence of the clouds. The prickly air seemed to settle deep within her, creating a castle of its own, allowing no one to enter.

At twenty, Flora imagined herself basking in the heat, at college, with the wind in her hair. Flowers of every color would embrace her as she walked through campus. She would not have a care in the world, never thinking of the icy hold Alaska has had on her.... Did she forget to turn in that assignment?

At twenty-two, Flora imagined Alaska at her college graduation. Would she be clapping and cheering? Or would she be sitting at home, flipping through channels on the television? Flora knew the answer. Alaska would never miss something so important to her.

At sixty, Flora imagined what would happen if Alaska were to die. Would she reminisce about the hardships Alaska and her faced? Would Flora feel regret? Or would she have been glad to cage herself away from Alaska? It dawned on Flora that life is selfish, and time is cruel. The ice in her heart loosened its hold on her—the front gate unlocked.

As Flora imagined what was and what could be, across the bay, the white fluff began to melt, and the smell of promising buds began to blossom.

Trigger Warning: Murder, Domestic abuse and violence

The Rules I Followed

Walking along the halls of yet another school didn't faze me anymore. I walked along the halls painted red—no, black and yellow—and saw all the potentials. Wait... scratch that. They're not potentials... they're friends.

I rushed to my locker, head down, clutching my brand-new textbooks to my chest, attempting to blend into my surroundings. As soon as I approached the small, metal door, all of my books slipped from my skull crushing grasp. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a glimpse of red reaching towards my books—no, brown.

As she handed me my History textbook, she spared me a soft smile.

"I don't recognize you," she stated, pushing her wavy, maple hair over her shoulder. "Are you new here?"

"Yeah," I was so tired of being asked that. "My name is Myra."

Rule #1.

I stuck my non-occupied hand out towards her.

"I'm Eva," She grasped my hand with hers.

On her right hand, a silver, petite ring sat on her ring finger. It matched her silver necklace that hung elegantly on her collar bones. She wore a white pair of converse, matching her black leggings and white sweater. She was put together. Clean. And nice. Exactly what I needed in that moment.

Rule #2.

We were together *a lot* the next few months. Doing homework, going to coffee shops, and venturing on spontaneous shopping trips. However, we never went to each other's houses. Eva never said why we weren't allowed in her house, and she never asked why we never went to mine. Not that I would answer her anyways.

On Tuesday, she approached me at my locker looking like a complete disaster. Her hair was matted, make-up smeared, and was wearing a pair of mismatched socks.

"What happened?" Did that sound genuine? "You look like you've been hit by a bus."

Her lips began to tremble. "My parents are fighting," She broke down, covering her red, mascara smeared eyes—no, Myra, they're black. "I th- think they're going to get a di-divorce!"

I grasped at the opportunity in front of me. "If you need to, you can come to my house," I grabbed her wrists and pulled them away from her face, forcing her to maintain eye contact with me. "You know, to get away from the fighting."

Rule #3.

She pulled her lips into a soft smile and nodded.

Within the time it took for her to come over, she crashed. Rarely did she attend her classes, do schoolwork, or answer my texts. Her parents managed to work things out, but the fighting grew in volume and depth. I hardly saw her anymore. I grew anxious and worried.

Today I received a call. Ten minutes later Eva arrived at my front door.

"Come on in," I wish she would have worn the silver necklace. Dad likes silver.

Today she seems happier. Livelier. Made a new. The red on her fingers is evident of that—no, no, no... she never paints her nails. Except, she was unable to erase the shadows that sulked under her eyes, or her sunken cheekbones.

I rush her to my room, eager to show off my stash of books. From *Pride and Prejudice* to *Percy Jackson*, I shove them into her waiting hands. Eva looks at the cover, then places them into their respective piles. One that she liked, and the other she would never read in her existence. I could tell she liked the distraction.

After a few hours went by, Eva grew anxious. The more she twirled her fingers around the others, I could tell she needed to leave.

“The sun is about to set,” she squeaks out. “I should probably head back home.”

“You can come over whenever you need to,” I tell her before she can leave the door. “Or whenever you’d like.”

She stops, her hand splayed on the handle. Then, she starts to cry.

“Oh, Myra,” she wails. “My parents hate me! Ever since they started to fight, I somehow became a target! They both said they wished I would just disappear...” She falls to the floor, wrapping her hands around her curled up knees.

No. This is too perfect.

“Stay a while then,” I exclaim, throwing my hands up into the air. “We can play some games in the basement to take your mind off everything.”

Her bottom lip quivers as she gets from the floor, announcing she would like to play.

From my room, we walk down the hall, prance down the stairs, pass the living room in which mom is cleaning, and reach the basement door. I steal a small glance towards mom before opening the door, gesturing for Eva to go first. Without a second thought, she begins the decent to the basement.

Rule #4.

“What is all of this?” We reach the last step. “Where do you keep your games?”

I swallow the red that demands recognition.

“Behind that door,” I respond, staying on the last step.

Without another question, Eva walks to the door.

Rule #5.

I rush up the stairs, eager to reach the top. Without a second thought, I slam and lock the door. Eva’s muffled screams reach me at the top of the stairs. With practiced actions, I take three deep breaths, walk past the sound of music from the living rooms stereo, and reproach back to my room. Saturdays are meant to sin for the purpose of repenting on Sundays, I remind myself. As I close my bedroom door, I wonder what outfit I will wear for church tomorrow.

Rule #6.

I was in the fifth grade.

My dad had spent all of his time in the basement. I never knew what happened down there... and to be frank I didn’t care. I had my mom to occupy me. She would play loud pop music and dance with me in the dining room, swinging my arms across my body.

It was not until I was ten that I started to understand what was happening. That was when I began to get involved.

Her name was Sarah Camdon, lived on 438 Baker Street, and wore the same pink flip flops to school every day. She had become my best friend. I would rush home from school, eager to tell my parents all of my adventures with Sarah. They would ask questions.

“Have you heard about her parents?”

“Does she have any siblings?”

“Is she close with her family?”

I, of course, only knew she liked the color pink, was good at math, and enjoyed picking flowers. Wanting my parents approval, I asked Sarah the ever-growing pile of questions.

It was at this time that I received the rules.

“This paper is imperative,” my dad said, placing the paper onto the bed I was sitting in. “If these rules are not followed... you would have to be punished as I was.” Punished? I did not want that.

I glanced at the paper and noticed there were only six numbers listed.

#1: Be approachable. Attract friends to you. *Am I not like that already?*

#2: Get close to them. *Seems easy enough.*

#3: Find the opportunity to invite them over. *Why do they need to come to our house? I've always went to other people's houses...*

#4: Before she leaves bring her downstairs. *I've never been to the basement of our houses.*

#5: Leave your friend downstairs, while you run up and lock the door. *Why am I leaving my friend... shouldn't I stay?*

#6. Go back to your bedroom and pray for your sin. *What sin would I be committing?*

“When did you get so fast?”

My hands had begun to blister from my ferocious digging. I knew to leave the gloves inside. The pain was welcoming.

“I've had some practice,” I remind my dad, slightly irritated. I may never know what he's done to them, but I always clean up his mess. The feel of the gravel on my hands provides a sense of calm in the midst of all that is wrong. And that terrifies me.

“Don't forget to sprinkle the calcium hydroxide on her,” my dad calls out, reaching towards the red stained bottle. The tension in my muscles subside. I've always found the color red comforting.

After dad tosses me the bottle, I spread the powder on top of the human-shaped sheet nestled into the ground. I couldn't help but imagined what happened to her. Was it suffocation? Did she get stabbed? Was she in pain? How much red had been spilled...?

Ugh, Myra, stop. Don't think such things. It will ruin you...

I never imagined myself at this stage in my life. Husband. A child. A job. It always seemed out of reach and unattainable. Until now.

It hasn't been easy—my mind has been playing tricks with me. Every turn I take I see him. Dad. He looks at me as if I am a disgrace. A disease. I can't let him control my life. I can't. He would understand... right?

I reached for the scissors located in the knife block, my fingers lingering on the knives. The smooth handle feels soft on my fingertips. I wondered if he used this sort of weapon... No, no, no, you make the rules now, Myra.

"Hey, mom," Jacky, my daughter, calls out. "I have a friend to bring over tomorrow."



Sponsored by the English Department &
the Tutoring-Learning Center of
the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Spring 2022