

The Rubicon



2022

*Troy University's
Literary Journal*





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Troy University's Literary Journal

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Poetry & Prose



“Poetry is when an emotion has found its
thought and the thought has found words.”

- Robert Frost

A Blade of Grass

A summer day, bright and clear.

Ice clinks in fruity drinks and I see the people step onto the porch.
I know what day it is. Do they? Can my brothers, my friends, feel it in
the wind, as I do? Can they smell it in the air?

I cannot tell; they all just shake in the wind, and quake in the wind,
and no one speaks — God, I wish that we could speak.

I wish we could cry and scream and rage like the people do.
In the distance, The Machine gurgles and chokes and spits as it wakes.
It's hungry, so it eats. A simple thing. I am always the last to go.
I do not quiver as it comes for me; I know that I'll be back.

— Cierra Miller

A Fair Deal

Being your slave, what should I do but tend
upon the one I serve, so that I find
her eyes, or sapling maple peepholes — grant
me sight into your head.

Old melodies stress, concerns, thoughts, critique; just say the words
and here I'll be, an 8 on side all time.

Forever is perfect, conceived in a
daydream, yet still, you are perfect and I
am not sleeping. Looking cross pairs we shape
a good dup. Study your science, make
you my tutor for all the ways your smile
should shine. Bestow hidden wisdom, show me
your light. O she's something, you might deduce
how I bow to her like slave to master.

— Mason Sullivan



Ash to Ash

Beneath the stony pavement
lie still the liquid fire
that torments me and strengthens me
suppressing all desire.

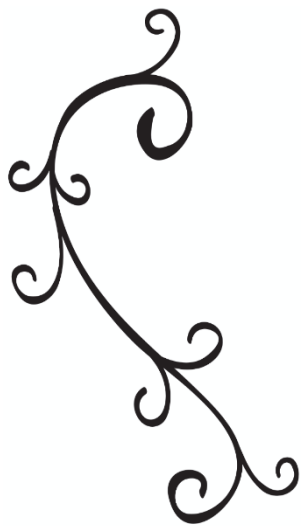
Beneath the molten mountain
where demons place their bid
the heartache of a thousand smiles
so brilliantly are hid.

Within the stone surrendered
to the quickly cooling heat
is façade with gilded trimmings
holding fast the Goblin Street.
Never once did core burst upward
like Old Faithful's sudden rush
Never once did earth plates shatter
leaving oaks and eagles hushed.

Just a stewing 'neath the surface
layered through to solid stone
cracking often from the pressure
but left solidly alone.

Ash and pumice only traces
of the storm within the ground
shaking violent through the ages
wreaking havoc, not a sound.

Bloodied knees from shoulders shaken
to the center of the being
solely balanced on the bridges
formed by hands and never seeing.
Knees that knelt in humble silence
on earth's carpet fine and red
now in crimson, peel from boils
that the earth below has bled.
Lilt of fire sparks the forest



when hope's feathers — sulfur wreak,
shameful pillaging of sunshine
hide beneath the cloud's retreat.

Here a paradise has fallen,
here the soulless find their norm
melted iron — stand no longer,
keep pursuing steady scorn.

Bloody, beaten, cracked, and boiling
from the heat within — Arise!
Hard as stone and faster falling
feet to hands — volcanic eyes.

— Cassie N. Lung

AT LEAST WE AGREE ON SELF-DECEPTION

Life has a melody, and I have two left feet.
Every time I think I'm starting to get the hang of it,
some external force chimes in—sometimes with fanfare, sometimes in
pressing silence—
and reminds me that I am not now, nor have I ever been,
nor will I ever be—
the conductor of this symphony.
This used to, understandably,
scare the absolute piss out of me.
But now —
Okay, now it still does, but sometimes—

SOMETIMES:

There's something insanely freeing about the absolute lack of control.
I cannot screw this up.
(The inflection there has changed, did you notice?
Before, I would have stressed the word not, my tone urgent, pleading—
But now, there's brevity; the emphasis is on the I.)
What I mean is:
I am laughably insignificant,

And it's great.

The world does not consult me over its morning coffee,
Asking how a two-year (and counting) pandemic fits into my schedule
or if now would be a good time to
fall in love—

It doesn't let me negotiate a timeline; it just happens whenever it feels
like it and

I, with my two left feet and newly purchased pair of knock-off Crocs,
have to stumble my way through whatever it has decided the latest
disaster is.

And do you understand how much pressure that frees me from?

Because how do you make a "FIVE YEAR PLAN" or "DEFINITIVE
OUTLINE OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE"—

when you can't even fully commit to lunch plans next week because
there's like an 87% chance that
something very science-y will happen, and you will be back to hoarding
toilet paper and wondering if
that lady really did feed her husband to tigers.

How do you hold yourself to a VERY STRICT, VERY INFLEXIBLE
timeline when—

"30 days to stop the spread" has now turned into "way too many days to
count of asking people to
please for the love of anything holy, just WEAR A MASK" with
different levels of urgency?

You don't.

Because you can't.

And isn't that great?

I mean—at first, it was terrible:

I had this dreadful sense of responsibility that I had to make sure I did
absolutely everything exactly right

or I would suffer the lasting knowledge that it had been I that single-
handedly brought down mankind

because I kind of rushed through the last few lines of "Happy
Birthday"—

But now! NOW!

— now TWO birthdays have passed, and isn't that absolutely wild
because I'm pretty sure it just turned to

2020 like four months (but also four hundred years) ago and—
Isn't time weird when we realize:
We have absolutely no control.
We can't keep people alive.
We can't cultivate empathy where there isn't any.
We CAN, surprisingly, wash our hands too many times, and your
knuckles WILL START TO BLEED but
We can't bring them back.
We can't see our friends or our family or even really ourselves anymore
because I'm sick of my reflection
being such poor company and
We can't make life go back to normal.
We can't plan a trip a month from now because—
...who will still be here a month from now, and will it be safe, and why
are guidelines so confusing and
—and none of that, not a single bit,
is something I have the slightest bit of control over.
—and that's fine.
I'm fine.
We're fine.
It's...fine.
It's fine.
Really.

— Samantha Neeley



Azaleas

A graveyard pouts
Behind this chain-link fence:
Rusted bicycles that lie like corpses,
And planted cigarette-gardens from whence
young scarecrows learn their moral discourses.
Somber, I came upon them from the west.
Death, Death — and then — beauty which bades
Amongst desolation — the pink boughs abreast
Iridescent rain domes and violent shades:
Red-purple, daunting blush, and pale-white seams.
Looking away — the world is rendered less real,
And as the soft-silk petals caress my dreams,
The sweet scent kisses my smile — and I feel —
Spring's ambition here, happy 'spite expenses,
And I feel a world without chain-fences.

— Emily Mosier

Before

Before your smile, my eyes were blind to love.
I didn't know my sight was filled with spots
of gray until I saw you beam. Dreams of
your upturned lips appear more often than not.
Before your laugh, my ears were deaf to joy.
My stupid jokes — sarcastic comments serve
a purpose now. That sound which I enjoy
hearing so much is one I don't deserve.
Before your love, my heart was numb to warmth.
A never-ending winter night alone.
But since the exchange of words said back and forth,
the summer sun is all I've ever known.
Because of you, my life has turned around.
How lucky am I, it's you that I had found.

— Sarah Thunberg

Being Held

I hope he knows how much I love him
and the way he looks in the morning.
Outside, songbirds sing their predawn tunes
the Sun murmurs in whispers of light
pushing closer to the horizon —
sleeping with heavy blankets of Earth —
pushing closer to the sky's embrace
just as I push closer to him now
sleeping with these blanks, me, my love,
pushing closer to his warm embrace
Asleep, he takes me, holds me to him,
kisses me as the sun does the sky

— Austin Swanlaw



Castle Walls

(Based on the painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder)

A breeze rolls in and brings the clouds along.
The trees begin to bend and sway, allowing
the wind to dance throughout their limbs. This day
just seems like every other: the children out,
the cows are fed, and life is as it seems.
Until you stop and really look at the view.
The castle sits so far and high, away
from normal life. The castle pays no mind
to kids, or cows, or winds, or clouds, or trees.
The only thing the castle pays any
attention to is making sure its walls
and land are far enough away from town.
Take pity on the castle walls, for they
can't see the way the wind moves with the trees.

— Sara Thunberg

Confessional

Love is a church: hallowed, personal,
and on most days, empty.
There is a basement used for storage,
spare pews and desires shoved down low,
like how there are cobwebbed recesses of your heart
with their own histories and cultures and intelligent populations
that trade amongst each other to survive —
grain for beans, the way that you flinch at the word “purity”
for how raised voices send you into a mute spell,
yet the choir demands hymns of worship.



Stained glass bookends every love, shatters with
every heartbreak
(and there's nowhere safe to step anymore).
At every pillar is a marble angel looking down
with cracked features and an empty stare.
Here is the lectern.
Here is the steeple;
here is the pulpit for sermons of hollow promises
spoken in foreign tongues.

- Daisy Miller-Wells

Cycles

For a time, I wondered if it wasn't you that I missed.
I experimented with the concept that finding another would fix me
enough to where I believed I was fine.
I bruised a beautiful heart in my search for completion.
No matter how much he cared,
his hand was not yours,
his eyes were not your eyes,
my heart was not his to keep as I have yet to reclaim it from you.
I don't know if I want it back.

— Brianna Lewis
— *Shea I.*

Decorated Girlhood

Summer days, when baking in sunlight was a
day well spent and Zeppelin blares through airwaves.
Ice cream, my guitar, and the chipped magenta
polish on our hands

Driving during afternoons, carefree, happy
from the lack of concern that flooded veins of
beings only worried with dinnertime and
colors of lip gloss

Lava lamps and posters of forgotten idols,
broken palettes, stolen old records from the
neighbors seem to decorate girlhood for us.
Now they're removed

Time has weathered teenage memories down to
dust, no longer able to feel alive like
previous versions but when I
serve me, I feel her

— Kathleen Deal

Eclipse

Even though our time together soon ends, I have a question.
Consider, my Sun, why must we drift apart?
Love is why. Love is what makes us come together, and fall apart.
In the end, you have lives to brighten and I have tides to pull
Perhaps it is better this way, for us to be miles and miles away
Soon enough, Earth will destine us to meet again.
Eluding me again, you smile and drift away.

— Amelia Harrell



Fated Ways of Change

Beneath my world, you slip
At dusk, our day is done

Setting like a destined drip
I'm night, and you are sun

Farewell fire, passion, pain
Fades of gold are we

Skyline painted with our names
melting into sea.

— Jennifer Bedsole

For Once

Based on the opening line of “Song of Myself” by Walt Whitman.

“I celebrate myself, and sing myself,”
for who I am today
could not have been
without the girl from yesterday.

The changes I've experienced,
the growth I've gone through, comes from her.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
because
the love I know,
the joy I feel inside,
for once, is not a lie.

— Sara Thunberg

For the Sake of Me

Can you see me,
here in the midst of my insanity?
I'm treading water in the tide pools of my existence.
My heart and mind in complete disagreement
over which thoughts are worth
my time and energy.

Chaos emboldens me,
screaming thoughts of overwhelming emotion,
never releasing their grasp — yet their clutches are a welcomed pain.
I wonder...
Am I truly mad and my mind only a conduit of liquid darkness,
or am I simply in touch with a deeper metaphysical reality than my
peers?

"Overwhelmed"
is the word that others use, and I myself —
when attempting to describe this feeling.
It's not quite precise enough, but it will have to do.
Betraying motives
seem to propel my beliefs and values into a downward spiral,
creating in me a sense of utter abandon that I never intended for myself.

I crave them —
These secret longings and sporadically interspersed fantasies,
Rotting the core of who I am and leaving me broken and in denial,
with cravings for more.
"Freedom"
The word leaves me bewildered as it's something I once had
but no longer do.

I was formerly in control of my mental capacities,
yet now I am slave to the beat of my own heart.
Escape is coming.

I will not stay here waiting, expecting a demise that is my own making.

The power rests in my sweat-gripped hands
and in the Palms bearing wounds that reveal healing scars.


Closer still,
as reluctant surrender takes hold of my innermost thoughts,
I know that I cannot be ruler of them.
Succumbing to weakness, I reach for Strength and trust I'm held.
No longer will I be subjected to myself.

Peace and Resolve:

The two entities that accompany His tender voice and gentle embrace.
Whether or not I remain tethered to the night inside of my mind
or whether in an instant I'm freed,
I will continue on... for the sake of me.

— Cassie N. Lung

From Sonnet 15



When I consider everything that grows,
I find design — the fragile roar of life.
The willow with its frazzled drape, the shock
Of blooming myrtle tufts; the dappled foal,
The fire ant, and frogs that screech or snore.
A falcon perches, creamy apron fluffed.
A whirring blur of blue, the bunting scrapes
His wings against the brush. Soon dark arrives,
And moths the size of apples crinkle past.
Mosquitos swarm. The pines all groan and creak
Against the wind. Cicadas scream and crawl
And flit, and eyes from bushes gleam. The deer,
Like myths of beauty, rise and graze in herds
Of stone. The art of night prepares the day.

— Linnie Russell

Frozen in Time

Frozen in time,
you're on my mind
The way that you are,
there I go again...
the way that you *were*.

I wonder if the trees knew that day
that when the sun faded away
our hearts would break
and we would never be able to make
that phone call on birthdays
or to shoot the breeze with you.
Who knew?

13 months apart
now stretches too far.
I get older, and you stay —
frozen in time.

But what I've seen
in the in-between
would amaze you.

I saw something —
A glow, you know,
in their eyes and on their faces.
A glimpse of you
melting through,
filling in the spaces.

— Aren Pace



Heart's (T)reason

“Kiss me sweet,” her heart implores,
“Run thy thumb along my cheek.”
Yet, bleak ache is love that head abhors;
Traitor, she battles forward in the dusk,
An onboard convoy of feeling and lust.

To head: “I must, I must,” explains heart,
“Sever the sense that keeps us apart,
For love demands you live it –
And surely, carnage of character
Can pale from love made implicit.”

Can you hear it? As love's clock ticks
In time with her stirring heart's breath
And wasted is the moon-lit kiss of dreams,
That sunshine shall forever be like death.
Yet, the heart beats to prevail, and schemes

Of headache: “You mock me and whine –
Discount my flusters as silly feelings, fine!
But, I beg,
Heed the wise warning I do impart:
Doomed is a marriage of head and not heart.”

— Emily L. Mosier

Hymn of Praise

For a time, I wandered without — not knowing the things, I doubt.
Thinking all was well and good — though evil was not yet understood.
But learning of you brought me peace — felt as simple as release.
I never knew that you were real — now, I worship with joy and zeal.

— Destiny Leigh Manning

I Bought Myself a Shelf Today

I bought myself a shelf today,
One of the cheap ones from Walmart
Made of pressed sawdust and cheap paint
That comes with colorful storage bins.
I sat with my shelf and my memories of you
And meticulously,
I separated, labeled, and packed you away.
When you walked out on me,
You left so many things behind,
So much to remind me of you.
Maybe you did it on purpose.
Maybe you wanted me to hurt,
To see those parts of you
And die a little more on the inside.
And for a time, it worked.
But I grew tired of your clutter
And how easily it destroyed my life.
So, I gathered it all up, and I locked it away.
I know I can't forget you,
And since you won't be returning
to collect your things,
And I don't have the heart to throw you away completely,
I stored you away into bins I won't open
In a room I never enter.
And maybe one day, I'll be able to walk by the door
To the room with your things
And I'll be able to pass without feeling even a little sad for you.
I won't let you disrupt my life anymore.

— Megan Butler



I Have Been Here Before

I have been here before.
Once, too far back for complete clarity
but still, I was here.
Somewhere down memory's pathways
I see with my mind's eye —
Too little to be vivid
yet enough to stir those feelings once more.
Here, in the silence,
no laughter or words to be heard.
Simply thoughts and daydreams from a young girl's heart.
Freedom cascading down from treetops
through the jungle of hair I refused to tame.
Starlight — just appearing through the last remnant of day.
Quiet stillness in swing's mid-flight.
No worries, no fear, no responsibilities.
Only this fleeting image of the girl I knew
long before cares took their toll.
I have been here before.
The quickening heartbeat as I begin to soar
and more so as I start to descend.
The peaceful surrender of bygone days
bring with it a fancy that I had long forgotten.
To feel that wind, to see the stars and moon dance together
up until bedtime.
To smell the sweet leaves as I jolted them from their slumber,
longing for just a few more minutes of this liberty — Mine.
Creation stirred to cradle me close,
and I remember.
I remember now, not the sight,
but the awakening.
The gentle thrill of this wordless song
pouring from and back into my soul.
These memories continue to fade as years pass
but the feelings are timeless.
I remember my heart at that tender age
and I will never forget — I will never forget again.

I will carve my name on this childhood tree
and promise by Heaven's power to visit often.
Holding fast to this rush of breath,
I'll remember.
I have been here before.

— Cassie N. Lung

I Saw Her and Wept

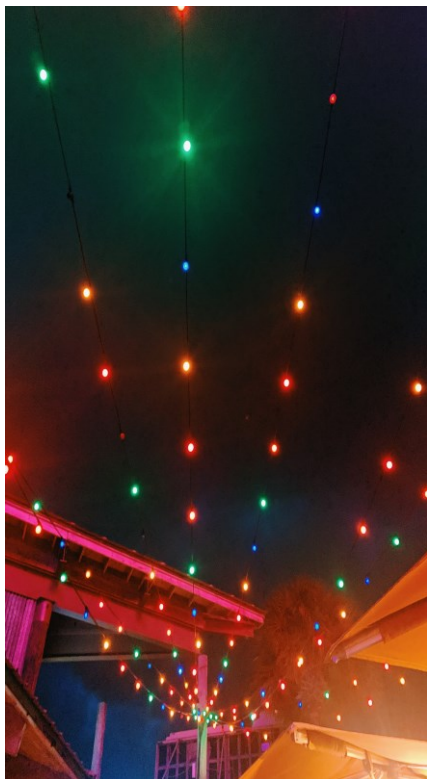
I saw her first in a dream. She stood in a field, golden wheat swaying around her, a soft breeze picking through her locks. The strands were free to move, wisps sticking to her cheeks, catching in her lashes. She was smiling, the sun catching in the lines of her teeth. To me, she seemed an ink painting, having been removed from her parchment by her outlines and given life in this world. She was Beauty, Grace, even. Her hair was smooth, shimmering like fish scales, and the sort of black that Night begged for. She was pale, and I would have thought her a statue of marble if she did not dance whenever she visited me. Arms up, wrists bent, fragile fingers threading through the air. She could weave the clouds, pull rain from them, and once, she gave me a strawberry seed with a wink. Emerald was her eyes. Green, green, *green*. An abundance of life in them, unmatched, and too much to be held behind those irises. Like a fawn, she would dance amongst the golden stalks, head thrown back, the atmosphere warmed by her laughter. Her dress, always the same, flowed amber behind her even when still. I wish I knew her name. When I first saw her, I wept. I would like to know who I shed tears for, who dampened my pillow and left me weak. I wonder if she would give it to me...and if I'd let her.

— Ashley Adams

If the Stars Could Speak

I live my life in a way
So that as the stars align
I am ready to jump into
Everything that is you
I live my life waiting
For you to say the magical
Words... to give me the green light
To sprinkle stardust over my
Eyelids as I'm sleeping
To make my dreams a reality
But I've realized — as the days
Turn into weeks and the weeks
Into months — I'm waiting for a
Version of you that only exists
Under the moonlight in your room
Snuggled in your sheets
When it's just you and me
We were the perfect pairing
Even the stars say so
If only the stars could
Convince you of our magic too.

— Victoria Cummins



Jazz

I'm deaf to everything she's sayin'. All I hear is her face. The café's nice, yeah, but it's only just a place.

I really can't stop staring because she's just amazing. I wonder what she thinks — A fool like me, just gazing.

Her lips are moving, but nothing's coming out. And now I guess this is truly what love is all about.

You ever been amazed by a woman's attractivity? Her whole-ness? Her one-ness? Her blatant exclusivity?

Jeez. Like, wow. I'm really at a loss for words. She got me black and blushing like a jock who's into nerds.

Wait, a minute. What's that? A vest in khakis tryna scat?

Dang! That dress in heels sure knows how to blow. Been so focused on the star, I ain't even noticed 'bout the show.

I swear, the way that sax got a mind of its own, the sound could turn the youth into thinking they grown.

Got half the café moving, booming to the sound. What's a church? Here, lost soul can be found!

Aw, man. Aw, man! Aw, mighty me! My woman done left! How can that be?!

Whatever. If she never came back, I still wouldn't lose my 'zazz. Now I'm too focused on bein' bout this jazz.

Like, what manner of magic is this? Got me gone like the wind! All this witchcraft of rhythmy could make a saint go and sin!

Ooh. Jeez. Nah, the culture ain't handled this. This here, here is Heavenly! Far beyond bliss!

This smoothness and richness and coolness of sound should signal extraterrestrials to come on down!

Vibes!

Vibes!

Vibes!

Jazz!

Jazz!

Jazz!

Hold on. Who was that girl? Nah. It don't matter, she was just a face. This café? Haha, yeah. This café's more than only just a place.

— J. Antonio Bass



Leaving the Water On

For just a moment
I thought —
perhaps the water is running, and I should go turn it off —
but I was wrong.

The noise was coming from
the kitchen
and so I went there to find the water I'd left on —
I forget quite a lot —

I'd left the window open.
I guess I had
and the sun was setting behind us somewhere tossing soft garments of
warm,
worn light onto the sprawling land
the base of the window frame was dusty, my fingers pushing down on
it, smushing into the dust
and sand blown from the road.

The sound of water
it splashed against the weathered wood —
steps leading into our home that need to be replaced —
and the roofs of our cars.

Rain trickled down from the sky, then poured
dousing the hot earth and metal and stone and wood in water
echoing through the window and into our home —
my dusty fingers were dry resting on the window.

I push the window shut,
it cries in discomfort as it hits
cutting me off from the outside, where it rains and the sun shines
at least I hadn't forgotten to turn the water off.

— Austin Swanlaw

Letter to the Devil

(Part 1)

You know, Devil, you don't have to be evil, and I know I said some messed-up junk about you before, but you don't have to be like this. These rules were put in place to keep us down. They said they were supposed to keep order.

They were.

But then things happened, in between. It was chaos. Which you said and say you love, but not really.

I've been there before — or at least somewhat — you've seen me. And I know we're natural enemies, yet at this moment, I just wanna let you know, it's a mess and I know it.

I may be new here on this earth, just a teen or youngster, as they call it, but it's all media and in-place rules that need to be changed. It's crap, and I know it, you've known it for years and are sick and tired of it.

I'm not saying to create chaos, or bring back the evil boys or do the same junk that's been done for millions of years.

Trust me, I've been there... maybe only for a few years or even a few months, but it feels like forever, and I'm already sick and tired of it. I don't know if I can save you. Heck, I don't know if you can save you, but I do know this... you can live a better life, for the rest of your life. And if you can't help it, if it's in your nature to punish people and living things, then you can do it to those who deserve it.

You can pay the price for those who rolled the dice.

And I know like the legends and heroes, and unmentioned, undeclared heroines before me — one day, I'm gonna take you down!! Yet lately, I've heard you've been asking for sympathy, and I've been hearing some rock & rolllllll, as well as some rolling stones. It sucks and it's a pity that I have some sympathy for now, but trust me, to be



honest, we've all been there before. So, I'll stash you my two cents on the corner of pents and keep moving, as I bid you adieu.

I know it's not the last I'll see of you, but until heaven, I'll still see our separate ways too. While my ideas — I'll conjure a-new. While I still see our separate ways too.

It doesn't have to be this way for you.

**Letter to the Devil:
The Devil Writes Back**
(Part 2)

I would stop, but you know, I'm a busy man and have a lot to work on my plate. There's lots to be done and lots of things on the schedule. Plus, haven't you heard? There is no rest for the wicked. I'm just doing my job here; why does everyone have a problem with it? Whenever I

Want
Or
Have
a
Little
Fun

The world has to be dramatic with it and goes berserk! It's not that big of a deal, well, maybe a small, little ordeal — but not THAT big of a deal.

You say my “fun” usually costs people their lives. Well, I don't care! Plus, frankly, people die every day — but that's not always my fault. Usually, Death's the one that's responsible and who they should talk to, not me.

I'm usually just picking up the scrapings and food that Death leaves me.

I mean, bodies — that one guy's carcass was pretty delicious.

Plus, even if I quit, someone else would just take my job and have the littering, looting, demonized “fun” anyways.

You see, there is no rest for the wicked and no other work that suits me
besides looting and committing sins that add onto
criminal mentality.

So, even if I wanted to stop, Ha! Hahehehue. Who am I kidding?! I
don't. As I said, there is no rest for the wicked. And especially none
more for me. Since '93.

— Domaja Hill

Lorena Court

The odds and ends of household wares
Are strewn across a table's top.
The neighbors browse; they borrow chairs
To sit and haggle as they shop.

A picture book with pop-up scenes,
A yellow yo-yo faded white,
A kitten stuffed with fluff and beans,
And glitter pens that might not write.

A dining set with gravy boats
As chipped and stained as ship-wrecked planks;
A baseball glove, three winter coats,
And two evicted goldfish tanks.

A Newton's Cradle resting on
A stack of aging reference books;
A chess set with a missing pawn,
And hedgehog rows of fishing hooks.

Few tapestries could weave a tale
As storied as the "worst" yard sale.

— Ellie Russell





“Maw”

I see myself in the
reflection. It creaks
and groans in protest;
ice is soft and yielding.

Crack!

When my lungs gasp in
water, greedy for its chill,
will it be peaceful?

Will I feel the sun
through the glass?

— Daisy Miller-Well

Memoir

I flow in ink through rivers of my mind
Unrelenting currents, oh my soul

The shallows creep, consume and paralyze
Treading pays a precedented toll

Direction from the falls, I seek to find
Still fluid, crusading with the cold

Reminiscent of a place, fate, and time
Congregating in the pools of old

The cavity that holds me unconfined
Is now a liberation to behold

To drown with revelation be the crime
Mortal is the story left untold

— Jennifer Bedsole

Midnight

As the clock strikes midnight, my sleep ignored
my mind weary, for the battle rages on:
the cavalry fighting stresses unknown
foot soldiers striking enemies, who are
too dastardly to describe in my prose.
The battle unwon, my mind and eyes close.

— Amelia Harrell

Myth as Meaning

The World has settled and sprung anew
with grass so damp and moist with dew
skies slumbering, clouds rolling past
somewhere — in the distance — storms clash
silent, in battle, sharp swords collide
hot like Hephaestus, bright sparks fly
Zeus, cackling a thunderous roar,
a grumble all I hear, no more

the sun paints an autumn day
the winds, with their chill, cannot stay
but soon will come, so mischievous
to douse the world in snow and mush
lands will die, turning hard as stone
Hades would know no better home
but soon Persephone will rise
to soften lands with gentle eyes

as Apollo rides his chariot
I long for life luxuriate
where summer keeps long past her stay
so as to keep Charon away —



that old Death who soon approaches
his cold, bony hand that motions
for my one coin, his gaze affixed,
to ferry through the River Styx

— Austin Swanlaw

On These Days

I don't know what it means
To be truly happy — to get to the
Bottom of it... I regularly work
To make other people happy
Because I don't know how to
Begin to cultivate this feeling
Within myself — my mornings
Often start with a quick
Prayer to the sun to find its
Way back to sleep so that I can too
Oftentimes, I'm drawn to the scale
To assess the damage done
From the previous day
Checking the mirror for
A sign to confirm the notion
That I'm not good enough today
I am constantly rehearsing conversations
Before it's my turn to speak
Anxiously zipping up the mask before
Pulling down the facade — because I don't
Want you to see me... to actually see me
Most days, I'm scared to live the life
I have chosen for myself because
I don't believe I made the right choice
Constantly second-guessing
Reliving my past decisions as if
They are my present moment

But there are few days between
The wreckage of thoughts and emotions
Spilling over between the memories
And the conversations that I no
Longer want to be apart of
It's on these days
That I find happiness worth
Searching for — on these days, the sun
Whispers sweetly to me as if
I am his long-lost lover
Pulling me from my sleep to
Greet me with a warm kiss
On these days, I am reminded
To be gentle with my body
For she is the definition of strength
Only deserving of love and kindness
On these days, I choose
To forgive myself for believing
That happiness was found
In the fleeting moments that existed
While my head was underwater
On these days, *Happiness* chooses
To stay — sometimes for
A brief moment, but long enough for me
To remember that even the sky needs
To cry, to feel the sun again

— Victoria Cummins

On Thinking of You

When I think of you
A smile forms on my lips
From where it started
Standing in a crowd of people
Knees shaking... an endless

Thought-reel of curiosity
To where we have ended — multiple times
A frustrated mess of anger

Alone... sinking to my knees
I am no longer shaking
I have found the saying
“Curiosity killed the cat”
To hold true because
I have died eight times
Even still — with one life remaining
I choose this one life with you

Simply put... I have given in
To everything that is you

— Victoria Cummins



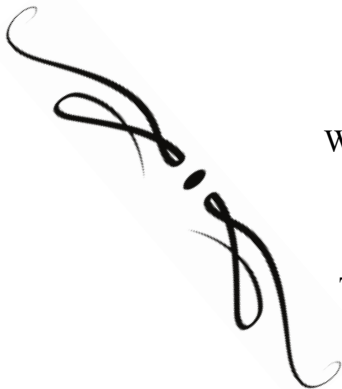
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Some of her scars came from defending others,
but most of them came from refusing to defend herself.

— Brianna Lewis
— *Shea I.*

Ophelia's Sonnet

Feelings second, I shall obey my Lord
and do as told – quiet passivity.
When my opinion's moot, what good is word
upon deaf ears? My own captivity.
I'm not insane and by all means, I'm fine,
but still the waves capture curious eyes.
Turmoil, I witness their plights as they dine.



The Royalty argues, outlining demise.

So, pansies, daisies, violets for flowers.
Perhaps some gifts will gather attention.
Then, columbine, fennel, rue for powers.
When words fall flat, instead show conviction.

Then I, so ill-content won't choose my fate,
but walk along with nature by the lake.

— Mason Sullivan



Polish Your Horns

Polish your horns, sweetheart,
And sharpen your pitchfork.
Your halo is showing,
And you don't want the monsters
To see that you're easy prey.

— Megan Butler

Posted

Hate to fade away from all the old familiar
Wish I could see my whole reflection in the mirror
Real mirrors — behind the antiquated glass, the wall is real
Walls were real
I still feel alive, but this is not my life
Your show — it's been jaded, faded, tainted by the glow
and time is never waiting
Go slow — this is not my face that everyone is facing
I bear the pain, though this smile is unrevealing
Inside my mind, the photograph is matted
Four by six, no duplicates, not live
And yes — that moment of a lifetime
Once
We had it.

— Jennifer Bedsole

Potential of You

I fell in love with the potential of you. I lowered my standards, hoping
that maybe you'd change.
Silly, huh?
I held onto something that wasn't meant to be held on to.
I saw something in you that you probably didn't even see in yourself.
I wanted to show you different when you weren't even worth being
shown different to.
Months of wasting time hoping one day you'd eventually change your
mind,
but time still waits and nothing had changed.
I know I should let go but somehow, I'm still hiding on...
praying for a release and God lets me be.

— Areya Sneed

Remember Me

Based on the opening line of "Remember" by Christina Rossetti.

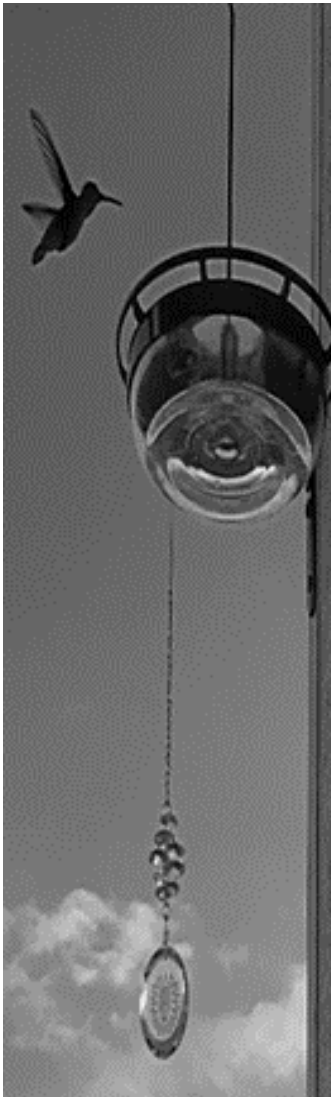
"Remember me when I am gone away."

I hope to not be gone for long. Just know
if I could stay, I would, for you.
Please don't forget the moments shared between,
the laughs exchanged; we felt untroubled joy.
I'll cherish every smile you sent my way,
for every one ignited something deep
within myself. You make me feel alive.

My greatest fear is that it's all just me.
I saw what I, my heart, had always dreamt.
In my defense, you're unlike any dream.
My brain had no idea you could exist.
And now I sit and wonder why you would
remember me when I am gone away.

— Sarah Thunberg





Remember This

Remember this feeling
This intense acknowledgment
That you deserve more
You are worth more than a timed
Amount of physical connection
For you are the pure essence of time
Consistently moving forward
You are worth more than
The sideways glance he gives
Because you deserve to be
marveled over
You do not deserve to beg
For love, because Love
Will come running after you
You are carefully put together
Thoughtfully you... your
experiences
Emotions, words... everything that
Exists within, in you
You deserve more than a weekend
Of memories that exist under
The moonlight... for darling, the
sun
Is rising on your misery
Remember this feeling
You are not the short poems
Existing in hidden pages
Of a book he is not willing to read
For you deserve to be read
Over and over and over again
Appreciated for just being you
There is no amount of sameness
In the world that could tie
His heartstrings to yours



For you have more feelings
Existing in your fingertips
Then he holds in his existence
Read this again
And remember that you are
Eccentrically you...
You are choosing yourself
As many times as it takes
Because you are worth the effort
The gentle touching, the extra minutes —
The overflowing, never-ending, forever growing
Amount of love that exists for you

— Victoria Cummins

Saying the Quiet Part Loud

Hello!
My name is...
Irrelevant
How may I be of service?

No, really, please: tell me how I can help.
Because if I can't help, if there's not a need, or a want, or a whimsy you
can delegate—
then, I might have to start looking at my own.
And, aside from the adjunct horror that presents more importantly:
I'm absolutely useless when it comes to that.
No good.
Absolutely below the bar.
Zero stars on Yelp.

So, let me be useful,
USE ME—
Make me indispensable.

Because for so long, I worried about words like “extrinsic” and
“intrinsic,” but really, it just all comes down to value.
And if high school economics taught me anything,
(and let’s be honest — it didn’t),
The one thing I would remember is that value,
(mine to you, of course)
is what my gym coach-turned-fourth period teacher called an “elastic
good.”

So, name your price.
A pound of flesh?
(Name the limb.)
My immortal soul?
(Sorry, there’s a line.)
My time, my peace, my sense of self—
“Whatever you need, whenever you need it.”
I am indefinitely and indiscriminately at your disposal.
So, please—
“Let me help.”
Really, you’re helping me help you help me.
This is a business transaction.
I solve all your problems,
Even those that can’t be solved and you—
You keep the noise at bay.
You quiet the deafening silence.
You let me have:
Value.

Because, if I can tell you a secret (I’m going to tell you anyway):
sometimes, when you’re not looking, when no one’s looking—
When there are no hands out, or 4 am phone calls or fires to literally or
figuratively extinguish—
I’m not sure I exist at all.
It’s the weirdest and most terrifying vanishing act I have ever witnessed
because it usually happens most

when I'm actually seeing myself,
when there's actually time to breathe—
Everything inside of me gets so big that I just—
disappear.

Until you text or they call or this or that needs to be done and then I can
feel my hands, and I'm acting
without hesitation and, what is this, do I actually feel—
Alive?

Because I didn't know personhood operated on some weird branch of
quantum mechanics that I don't at
all understand and thus will not try to "metaphor-ize" but apparently—
I only exist when I am observed.
I only exist when I'm observing your needs.
So, let me see.
How may I be of service?
(My name is irrelevant)

— Samantha Neeley



Search No More

Don't look where you cannot find me —
where hollow eyes and words collide,
when shadows hinge on subtlety
and leave me breathless from the ride.

I dare not grace the gravel pavement
where my feet before had danced.
I will not jade the melody
that tightly held my heart entranced.

Why now do oceans drive us further,
when we were just mere tears away?
Where open wounds were left in scorn
and there was nothing left to say.

Don't watch for me at dead-end alleys
far beyond forgotten haunts.
You knew me then but now, no more.
Forget all youthful, frivolous jaunts.

I am not now who once you knew,
so free I thought my mind to be.
The child had walked away with you,
revealing what was left of me.

Why do you search with vacant interest?
I left this place for distant shore.
Our touch was blessed for season fleeting
but now I ask you, search no more.
— Cassie N. Lung

Solitary

Time does wicked things to the mind in prison.
Stretches, warps, it pretzels what once was
A clever thought. The act of trying to keep your thoughts in
Order is grueling.

All alone, my company is made of flies and
Dust and visions. Questions are asked, and answers

Given, a scared soliloquist playing parts like
Actors onstage do.

“Sorry, honey,” Warden is saying, clearly
Taking savage pleasure in watching others
Struggle. *Funny*, voices are crooning, *Warden*
Thinks she is better.

Sudden freedom, finding that only minutes
Passed by. Creeping outward, I’m feeling guilty.
Warden holds a sign of my crime: a shoe that’s
Chewed up to pieces.

— Cierra Miller

Stress

You see rain release from the heavens onto her shoulders;
insignificant.

The wind pushes back ebony hair to reveal tender features and veteran
eyes;
noticed, but not seen.

Out of the blue, she trips on the smallest of cracks in the ground, and all
she held came falling down. You wonder, “How could she have been so
weak?”

But the rain was made of lead, and the wind contained shards of glass
you didn’t want to see.

But all you care about is the aftermath;
a mere inconvenience.

— Brianna Lewis

— *Shea l.*



Sunday

It took four years for night to fall;
For the crow to sleep and the owl to call.
I counted the hours, months, and days
'Till life went back to that nighttime phase.

I remember the heat;
The constant summer.
My chard soot feet —
an eternal bummer.

The sun burned the sky
A hot, rosy red.
The heat was so hot,
We wished we were dead.
We tried to take naps
But the day was too bright
Speak Lord, speak!
Lord, let there be night!

The nocturnal we watched
With jealous eyes.
Sleep during day?
It had to be lies!
But we did not wake them,
For they were at peace.
How would you feel
After breaking one's sleep?

We got right with Jesus
Who was nailed to the Cross.
Thanked God for His Son,
Whose life He had lost.
We dressed in Church clothes;
Fixed up our old Bibles.
Got a few matches
And burned all our idols.

We knelt at the altar
And put the time in
To ask God the Father
“Forgive us our sin.”
We kissed all the lepers,
Shook hands with the thugs;
Our foes became helpers,
Who gave us all hugs!

4 years later,
As I tell this tale,
That time did end;
Yes, it failed.
The Lord God heard
And remembered our plight.
He answered our prayer
To return us tonight.

We're a godly folk now
Who try to be kind.
We send up a praise
For whatever we find.
We do love the day,
But we cherish the night.
'Cuz soon we won't need it.
(For we'll see the light)

And that's alright.

But, until then,
We'll take to the shadows
To bring to the light
Those deathly hallows.

And we'll rest up for Sunday.
For that time is right
To honor the Father
For giving us night.

— J. Antonio Bass



The Distant Shore

I cannot see the distant shore,
the land I left to sail.
Far from this sea, so tempest-tossed,
far from the rain and gale.
Launching forth, on one command:
To trust the journey's cause.
Humbled by the call to leave
and no time left to pause.
I made my way in but a day;
my quest — at once begun.
Believing every breaking wave
propelled me toward the Son.
The shoreline's far beyond my gaze;
my comfort's lost to me.
I subdue each hint of fear
and sail on through the sea.
I have no clear direction,
no written map to guide.
Only Word that bid me "Come"
and Promise by my side.

Forever gone from known and clear,
following purpose and call.
Drifting off on faith alone
through calm and every squall.
My gait is set, my vessel sure,
defenses for attack.
I have far left the distant shore
and now — no turning back.

— Cassie N. Lung



The Grim Reaper

The Reaper's heart throbs hollow like Hell;
In his feathered arms, I heard the fire swell,
UP! DOWN! The burning ebbing of ash!
Like ocean tides with teeth that gnash.

I had oft imagined how death must feel,
Especially for me since I'm not real.
I'd see him draped in robes
with blood-dyed lines,
And his copper wings of dusk
would seize my heel,
The feathers crawling softly up behind,
'til I's enfolded, choking,
clutched, and blind.

Then I'd be whisked away into nothingness,
Gone as death-lust, my body, soul, and mind.

Instead, he carried me high above the sky,
The labors of men far in their ink-dot hearse.
And as he kissed my ear with a calming sigh,
My feet dangled over the universe.

The Reaper cut me with his hands of yin,
kneading his knuckles upon my skin.
Slowly, he ground me into a fine dust,
And flung forever all my tiny parts.

I was dispersed to live small and gust,
To dwell reminiscent in bleeding hearts. The
Reaper watched me go,
void of laughter,
And, musing, he floated there long after.

- Emily L. Mosier

The Tree

Finny:

The tree — sturdy, strong, and always growing stronger over time.

The tree — its branches reach out, growing stronger in stability.

Its roots grow deeper in good soil, being fertilized by the base every day.

This one is stronger than the others because this tree is ours.

Our friendship is as great as this tree; great in its stability.

Gene:

The tree — though appearing as strong and same over a few weeks and days, changes in ways

that not everyone sees.

Its leaves aren't constant but edible by forest creatures. Its colors are changing, and whisked

away by the forest wind.

Branches twist and turn chaotically, not knowing where they go — roots tangled and thrown

everywhere, randomly going wherever they choose.

The crown — pleasant in a winter's day, but eerie in the night.

The tree isn't always as good as it looks, so check twice; it's not as it seems.

— Domaja Hill

This Sacred Hour

Broken shards of my existence,
building up a strong resistance
to anything that would deliver me.

Hand in heart and breathing shattered,
letting go of all that mattered,
thoughts corrupt of what I'm meant to be.

Mistakes I've made now keep me frozen,

fragments of the life I've chosen
consume the path I thought would lead me home.

Footsteps fall on scaling shadow,
future lies unmarred and fallow,
past consuming fears that I'm alone.

I wonder if the pieces falling,
splinters of my sacred calling,
ever will be made as one again.

Still, time goes on, and on I follow —
treading destiny's tomorrow,
surrendered to the plans of mice and men.

Lessons learned, regrets unyielding,
Rising tide below me — shielding
anguished dreams that threaten to devour.

Peace, at last, I see before me,
night submits to free the morning
and now I only hold this sacred hour.

— Cassie N. Lung

Tinnamoren

Faultless, flightless, Christless
Touched mine eyes — whispered no word.
Found none but heart and soul to gird.
I tried to speak but spake unheard.

I was caught in the Tails of Night and Day
I was caught in the Throws of Leave and Stay

Absent of spirit,
But present of mind.
Judged conscience did fear it
So I charged it a crime.

My body — my being — lay dead in state.
I saw Senator Sico — face fat with hate.

His hair: like noodles sewn into an apple;
His scent: like strudels — wafted all through the Chapel.

How could this be?
No... How could this.... Was?
My demise was a blur; a haze; a fuzz.
My memory had failed me. And what all because?

Life lived never died the way that Death does.
Chill at the right of me
And Fever at my left
Thrill at the sight of me
Had Enhaf bereft

I then saw my help named Arrivadosa
She viewed my body, weeping: “Adiós, Hombre Rosa”

And then I saw the other Senators:
Atheru, Banda, and Aliggersalaf.
They all went and came
Coming on and off
The platform with the cradle
In which I was lying.
All of them dressed in tear stains from crying.

And there were more of them still - the Senators, ahoy:
Etilitannie, Kotokopra, Retejezus, and Freekjoy.
And more came to see me (and some just to spy):
Xixladeude, Brothermotra, Goldmanner, and Isonfive.

And still more arrived all just the same:
Scoobatroop, Stuporia, Vigrastannis, and Ender'Jamain.
These were my colleagues — my friends —
The aforementioned others.

All family — all blood — all sisters; all brothers.
Yet there was no W'nouthre.
For she had not been seen.
Not in the Chapel around me —
Not in front of my screen.

But I saw the hostage victim.
They had called her Celeste.
She shed not a tear.
And I credit it best.

I remember her tears
When I once drew breath.

She never stopped crying
Almost cried to death.

But before me she stood
Face dried like my heart.
It took all that I could
Not to tear me apart.

And then I remembered —
All the scenes were more-clearer!
The murder of Wendi!
The death of Maddenmirror!

And then I remembered
All that I forgot.
But 'twas too late then —
Now I lay to rot.



I remembered the chaos
And the face of Masahiro.
I remember the moment
My heart fell at zero.

I could see it all before me:
The harrow of my heart;
The graveness of my sin;
The evil of mine art.

It invades me now.
Yes, now.
More now than ever then.
And so will be said:
“Mourn him, the Senator.”
“Who?”
Woah, who?
Who but I! Tinnamoren!

— J. Antonio Bass




To a Friend

I sit and stew on past mistakes, and you
Come to remind me that they're gone, and I
Can rest. I worry 'til my tension snaps.
Collapsing in, my mind seizes static.
You bear the load, calm my thoughts,
and give me the strength to breathe.
You've sat for every tear
And steadied me with joy. You weep with me.
You're familiar with my sorrows. You've felt
Exhaustion beyond words. You've lived those sick
And isolated days and nights. You have
Reconciled my rambles, and you've known my
Heart in full. I don't have to earn your love.
You bring beauty from my breaking, and help

Me be a friend like you for those who hurt.

— Linnie Russell

To Stand Still



In the raven darkness
in the crimson sands
of that barren,
Godless beach
I waited for the final sunrise
and listened to the waves.

On that coastal graveyard
no buzzards laid claim
to the infants,
they flew South.
But what good would flying from heat do?
The South was no haven.

But the end came, at last,
the sunrise was beautiful.
I thought of her
and the kids.
The sun stayed half a year. The beach dried.
I stared on. Unblinking.

Western Victoria,
the antipode of this place,
my brother called
and left texts.
He prayed for the night to go away.
He froze and thawed by March.

— Werner Quintanilla

Untitled

Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.
But what is my truth?
The truth of a college student.
Always broke.
Always tired.
Always stressed.
Always depressed.
My life consists of no life.
School, school, school.
Work, work, work.
The clock does not stop. But my life did.
My life stopped from being fun and frivolous.
To now busted down and broken.
When the maturing of a kid does not come with more but with less.
Less time.
Less money.
Less fun.
Less life.
And more strife.
However, with the flames of passion knowing someday I will rise past
this hump.
Knowing these feelings will subside.
A real job.
Real money.
Real freedom.
A real-life once more.
And that shall be my truth.
The truth of the life I worked for.

— Kaleyah Gilbert



Without Love

Without love, I part my lips
For not a single drop
The sultry sun cannot afford
The cost to warm this heart
A stone to skim the sea
I laze ashore, unsought
Rejected by the pull of deep
A shallow fate be fought
Without love, wilted is the plucked
Parched, satiated not

— Jennifer Bedsole

You

You love to ask, “What’s on your mind?” and yet
my answer doesn’t ever change. It’s you. The one
that fills my thoughts is always you, in every way:
your voice, your laugh, your smile, your eyes, your words, your love.
At times, I’ll try to think about before, when *us*
was just a dream that filled my head on lonely nights.
But now, because of you, I’ve come to realize, dreams come true.
What once was longing turned to love before I had
the chance to even question it. You hold my heart
between your hands, its pulse in sync with yours. I trust
you with this vital part of me because it beats

for no one else but you. So, when you ask again,
“What’s on your mind?” instead of saying “You,” I’ll read
these words aloud, and maybe then, you’ll know what I mean.

— Sara Thunberg

You: In a Different Universe

You: In a different universe, we’d be perfect...

Me: Let’s pretend for a moment that we are in a different universe

The one where “we’d be perfect...”

What does perfection with you look like?

Am I your sun rising and falling each day,

Are you my moon to light the darkness,

Found within my soul- the night stars within my sky?

Or are you the darkness my soul is searching for?

Perfection with you is a messy bed

Sheets tangled just like our fingers and legs

Locked on to each other- interlaced and cozy

Orange juice dripping from your lips

Drowsy eyes and sleepless nights with you, perfection —

in this otherworldly universe — is where you are

Perfection is where I want to be.

— Victoria Cummins



11/05/2021 — 2:37am

I'm just scared, okay?
I've lost you more times
Than I can count
And I can't lose you again
Because, to be quite honest,
Losing you feels like
Searching for a light switch
In complete darkness
A never-ending grey scene
Of rainy mornings
A thunderstorm of sadness
A cloud of frustration
Persistently tender in the places
Where your fingers
Grazed my skin.

— Victoria Cummins



You're just my type!



Short Stories



At the Foothills of Salvation Mountain

by: Werner Quintanilla



The ancient, desiccated corpses of the lake's once-prosperous Mozambique tilapia crunched beneath Roger's worn boots against the salt flat. *Oreochromis... mossambicus...* mumbled Roger, letting himself juggle and taste the vowels on the tip of his tongue. The dead fish stared back at him with a blank, quizzical look, free from the torment of memory — it was all too much, this whole place was. He marched on through the drying landscape, where the corpses of the fish were still fresh and smelled of death in the unforgiving desert sun. Roger turned a knowing stare at the beached fishing boats scattered about the wasteland of his former youth. He could not help but feel defeated. It was hard to believe that only a few summers ago many of the corpses he stood on would have provided for numerous fishing trips with his adoptive father, who now walked alongside Roger in his solemn journey. Perhaps, because of the grief in seeing the decay of a dream he shared with his son, or perhaps out of quiet respect, the older of the pair never so much as uttered a sigh. The elder was a seasoned war pilot who had flown commercial jets to make a living, and Roger first met him somewhere near this same area, when he asked a stranger for some water. “Where are your parents? Do you know who can help me?” the man asked him.

“Now I know what that is sir. That’s a mighty nice P-51 Kingcobra and, fortunately, I know my way around a plane enough to try to give you a hand at it — my best guess being an empennage issue by the looks of it, sir.

“How old are you?” the man asked him.

“Can I please have some water, sir?” replied Roger.

Roger was rugged from an early age and experienced enough to take care of himself on his own; hence his desert excursions. Without any support from his biological parents, Roger relied on his books and had been knowledgeable enough in the practice of raising an assortment of flora and fauna long before he had ever stumbled into the desert and met his father. Roger had enough expertise to survive on his own. His favorite species to study were the mighty *adansonia digitata* and the

classic *rosa rubiginosa*. A prodigy and, according to his father, a walking farmer's almanac, he made his living raising livestock, a practice which he single-handedly taught his father in his free time. They both shared a favorite, *ovis aries*, but his father, the artist of the two, simply called them "sheep."

"It is a shame how quickly the sea has been drying up, right sir?" asked Roger. It used to be nice back then, despite the working relationship of the demure son and loving father — men who seemed more like co-workers rather than family. Roger stopped walking and looked around again. Still, there was nothing. But this place would always hold some empty weight to it, like a seashell so muted one could not even hear the sea. All the pieces were in place for the magic to return. The boats were ready, though the paint was stripped as a result of the bleaching, merciless sun. The California sun was almost good. But the water was gone, and his father was dead.

Roger's thoughts were interrupted by Elephant, who suddenly appeared to trumpet another stupid question.

Huh? Oreochrome Mozambique? What is that? What, is it, these fish? These are fish, these are tilapia, so I don't think that these are Oreochromes, they don't look like Oreochromes, and you and I used to eat Oreos all the time, and they were good, but these are fish, and not Oreos because they smell and to be quite honest, to be quite frank, who is frank? To be quite honest I'm not quite sure what a chrome is, do you know what a chrome is? It is certainly not these—

"Yes..." Roger hissed. "They are tilapia. It's... another name for tilapia."

Ohh... I get it! squealed Elephant in a fit of laughter. I was worried for a second because it's been so long since you and I ate cookies, remember? Yes, and I was worried for a second because I said, Oh my goodness, did they change the packaging on these cookies? And I thought, No no no, that's absurd, these are fish, these are, these are big pretty fish and I have not seen milk puddles yet these cannot be cookies, these are fish! That's wonderful! Fish! Fish! Friendly fish! Dance, Roger, oh won't you dance?

Elephant stumbled around in circles, his steps so jovial and light that the fish corpses beneath him stayed intact as if there were no

stupid, bumbling African marsupial stomping over them recklessly. Didn't he know the bones could be preserved as fossils? Did he care?

Roger diverted his contempt back to the sound of all the fish corpses that were desecrated under his heel. With a few deep, steadied breaths, Roger envisioned Elephant's routine settling down from its frenzy to the whimper of scorned abandonment. Lay down and die, Roger believed, which thus, came true. How about an embolism this time? If Elephant was not such a light stepper, then perhaps Roger would have heard him crumple to his death right then and there. Cruelty was not Roger's natural state, but Elephant knew better than to bother him in such a way. Making Elephant's death painless was more than enough mercy Roger could show. Besides, he'd materialize again in a few minutes anyway. He always did.

Roger pressed on, as quiet as his father, and was finally able to reach the town they had always longed to return to. At 223 feet below sea level, the empty husk of the desert town of Bombay Beach stood to be the lowest altitudinal community in all of the United States. Roger knew this by heart. At the outskirts of town, Roger let out a soft, pearly chuckle, snorted in amusement, and realized that this was the closest he had ever been to Hell.

Walking through the shell of his beloved, old resort town, Roger, his father, and the occasional Elephant witnessed everything and nothing, and the overwhelming burden of Roger's indifference and pain began to gnaw at his heart. From his dilapidated office window with eager, yet defeated eyes, his hands folded over a mountain of tour pamphlets and boxes of souvenirs and cheesy beach trinkets that were ready to be claimed by no one. He sat in his grave and said nothing. When he saw the boy walking, he still said nothing.

By the crumbling remains of the sheriff's office, at the moldy neon-lit brothel, a dusty man in a purple wig desperately performed an obscenity with his mouth and a phallus for the disgusted Roger. Had Roger been interested in such a thing and paid just a bit more attention he would have noticed the tears on the man's face and the hand that extended outward holding a wad of cash, a suggested bribery to simply

be called beautiful one last time. There were no prostitutes here. They had long since moved to other things.

In the community cemetery that hardly looked any different than the salt flats, Roger observed the newest gravestone. The inscription read the name of the old town drunk he used to know. Engraved was the inscription, *"Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain but for the heart to conquer it."*

At the county bank, painted in all white, sat the county banker — whose reputation of business school and law school degrees decorated his clinical office. He failed to notice Roger as he toyed with a graphing calculator, pretending to calculate the losses of businesses he long since condemned, suffocating in the fact that each and every one was a friend whose only curse was a spat to the cruelty of unforgiving nature, who could never blame him. He would complain to his wife that as cruel as his job was and as much as it made him unhappy, it put money on the table, because at the end of the day, someone had to do it.

It was a short pace after this, that another man, a stout traveler with a burnt complexion and a large backpack, asked Roger for a match. Roger quietly obliged.

Why would you need light--the sun is out, can't you see that the sun is out? What is that thing burning in your mouth? Should I be worried? I don't think I should be worried, or should I be worried? But maybe I shouldn't be worried? I need your help in telling me whether or not I should be worried, pleaded the exasperated Elephant, but the man either ignored or failed to notice the scorching flames of the combusting elephant that towered before him on his cigarette break.

Realizing he was lost, Roger asked a man who he recognize as once being good friends with his father, for directions. The man's face was buried in a road map he had long since etched into his memory. Without so much as a glance, the weathered man pointed Roger in the proper direction without recognizing him, all-too used to tourists who would be completely disinterested in such a miserable place. He too sat in his grave.

"North, sir? I just came from Chiriaco. The summit? I'm trying to figure out whether I continue east or turn south eventually, sir."

“It’s the fastest way out of here,” said the man.

The rest of Roger’s pilgrimage consisted of empty desert, and the ruins of adolescent memory — which was accompanied by frequent visits from Elephant. If anything else could materialize, Roger would have chosen the satisfaction of his father’s beloved service pistol. However, late-stage melanoma was fine. Not that you could see melanoma from the outside anyway. Elephant would simply just have trouble breathing or a sudden chest pain and then fall. All deaths from natural causes sort of blended into each other, it was the stench of blood that proved to be the most exciting, but the smell of iron easily overwhelmed the senses, it was best to space such deaths out. By the time Roger arrived at their destination, the sun was setting, and the smell of the rotted *oreochromis mossambicus* and gallons of Elephant blood had long since been forgotten by his olfactory sense. He was particularly offended that Elephant refused to be bothered by such a stench in the first place, let alone to even acknowledge such displeasure, or even remember his last death. Elephant’s innocence always seemed to win, and it made Roger nauseous. It didn’t matter. This was a sacred place, and Roger needed to leave those vices at the door. It is a sin to be so cruel, Roger. Your mercy must prevail over your wrath, his father would say.

Roger felt refreshed to stand before the bright, hand-painted mountain his father had always dreamed of one day visiting. It was late and, fortunately, there were no tourists or flocks of grinning sunburnt Christian families asking for pictures that were always rumored by locals to be a nuisance. Roger was half hoping there was, as he was under a rare sort of temperament, given the sensitive nature of his journey. He would have obliged them with a smile. Reveling in the beautiful landscape, Roger was especially patient this time around, gulping down his annoyance as Elephant surveyed the religious, colorful scenery and read aloud the bright, carefully crafted statements that almost overwhelmed his periphery. After all, Roger was here with and for his father. His father likely would frown and say nothing about the cruelty during the journey, but spilling blood on the mountain would

have been strictly taboo, even for Roger's tastes. Roger's patience and empathy would have been appreciated and, for once, he listened to Elephant with a patient "I am listening", or "Oh". These were all Roger could return.

It's really a wonderful thing I've become so good at reading now, right Roger? I've gotten very, very good, very good, so good, like g-o-o-d, spelling too, type of good! Elephant trumpeted in laughter. Like, look at that one! Wow! Look at what it says on the mountain! Hill? Mountain. That one says God is universal in pretty, bright paint. What is God, Roger? And this says Love is universal, and I just don't think I can understand Roger, because how can it be both things at once? How on Earth is it both things at once? Which is it Roger, which is it? What does that mean, and what does it say? It says Jesus? I don't think I know any. What does that mean, Roger? Please tell me, who is Jesus? Oh please, please! Explain God to me!

Elephant hopped up and down in excitement, so quietly and gracefully that he did not disturb the softer sand under his feet, pointing with his tusk. Roger tilted his head, reading the religious affirmations the late Mr. Knight had intricately adorned onto the mountain. Roger, even with his unusual temperament, understood that the Bible was off-limits for Elephant, as he would have been left with more questions than answers, which would have annoyed even his unusual patience. Never being the believer himself, Roger instead settled on answering the question with one of his father's favorites from the book of Genesis that he had always questioned in his younger years. Ignoring Elephant's earlier questions, Roger explained the story of Isaac and Ishmael, who, despite their differences in character and personality acquired in their adult lives, both of the very different men came together to bury their father after his death. This story seemed to please Elephant, who smiled his thanks and appreciated the desert mountain before him, and his best friend, in silence.

After a few minutes, Elephant cleared his throat and broke the unusual silence, the cracks of his older voice breaking through the youthful facade. Then, spoke Elephant with a coy smile,

I suppose you and I would find it indubitably proper to call you, Ishmael?

Roger let out a laugh that he had never heard before, laughter that, unfamiliar to him, hid the tears that began to form in his eyes and the sudden shame he felt. He understood this was goodbye.

“Yes,” he said, “I suppose that would be the proper assessment, dearest friend,” said Roger.

Roger stiffened his shoulders and continued his walk with his father by his side, stopping after about ten or so paces to take a final glance at Elephant, but his presence was nowhere to be seen. He might have been scattered by the unforgiving desert air, consumed by the inevitable infinite nothing he had been abandoned and tortured into for so long. Or perhaps he began to believe in some book he would never have the patience to read or the jagged angel wings of buzzards and flesh flies carried him out to the decaying sea and gave him the only heaven the rotting world could ever truly offer his innocence. Or perhaps he must have returned to the town on tiny wings of his own, eager to help the town’s misguided souls find their way again. Perhaps he lifted the children of lost tourists with his trunk to hoist them on his back, doing a little dance that called for a bout of clapping and laughter and the reinvigoration of the lost human spirit. Or perhaps he was at the lifeless salt flats, spewing the abundance of alkaline purity out of his giggling trunk, happy to return the beauty of life to the Earth and swim amongst the fathers and sons who effortlessly fished for their endless supplies of tilapias and pupfishes and Oreos and lifelong memories and the smell of roses again and the sanctity of a perfect friendship you really only had one chance in life to ever truly experience.

At the foothills of Salvation Mountain, Roger scattered the ashes of his father.

AURORA
(English)
by: Rachel Rush



The last time I visited the orange house, she was not there. She had been hospitalized with a disease no doctor would give a name. It killed her slowly, and I had no name to blame when I screamed my silent prayers to the saints she loved so much.

Aurora.

That was her name.

The old orange house used to smell like Aurora. On that day, it didn't smell like her anymore. Instead, it smelled like my Aurora was missing. I just wanted her back.

In case you didn't know, Aurora smells like yellow roses. Yellow roses with freshly brewed coffee. That was the first thing I noticed when I opened the door, that there was no smell of fresh coffee. The coffee table wasn't ready. No baked cake. No goodies from the neighbor's small bakery. The house needed Aurora to be alive.

I walked inside. I passed the lifeless kitchen, and there was no food being prepared. This never happened when Aurora was in the house. The old wood floor would let everybody know I was there. Except that there was nobody but me. I could hear my own silence, and it hurt.

It's never supposed to be silent in a Brazilian Grandmother's house. There was always a loving and loud heartbeat waiting for me, as if I was the most important person in the world.

And I was — in her world.

So, the silence echoing that morning from the old wood floor was as painful as not having her smiling with her arms open to me.

Her impeccable white lace curtain was still there, hanging in the silence, separating the dining room from her visitor's only living room. Once I touched the lace, it reminded me of how many times we played peek-a-boo there and how many times she fussed at me for putting my dirty hands on the fresh, clean lace curtain. She would be very proud of me if she saw me now, "an adult", and my hands are clean most of the

time. At least, I try. But she wasn't there. She was in a hospital room that was not decorated to her taste.

I still had a room there; she kept most of my things because she wanted me back after college was done. I had a room with two single beds, the same ones I grew up sleeping in. One for me, one for my sister, but she found a way to make each of us feel special. She had the pink lace bedding I never liked, but she said it was pretty for visitors to see. It was a little dusty, just enough to let me know she hasn't been in the house for a while now. Bed sheets should be changed every week if we were in the house, and every fifteen days, if it was just for visitors to see the pretty room. That was one of the Aurora rules that I grew up assuming every household would follow because she said so.

I saw my face reflected in the mirror that she had put in the room for my sister and me last Christmas. She said the one in the bathroom and the one in my mother's room were not good enough for makeup, and just in case I wanted to come back home someday, I would already have a good mirror. My face was swollen; I had cried a lot and slept very little since the day that phone rang. It wasn't long ago that all her granddaughters were in the same mirror, fighting elbow to elbow and doing our makeup to celebrate her 80th birthday. She had let me put some more modern makeup on her and gave me her old blush as a thank you. She was always finding a way to give me something. I still have her old blush with me.

It was on the twelfth of May when we celebrated with her. It was one of the first days of July when I visited the house for the last time; she had been in the hospital for over a month now, with a disease no doctor would give a name. I never thought the same mirror would reflect such different images in this short amount of time.

I paused my thoughts and made a video. It was 2008, and the phones were not great back then. I wanted to save every little thing about Aurora that was left in that house. Everything reminded me of her, yet everything was screaming to me that she was not there. Her big Bible in the family living room was open on the wrong prayer for that day. Aurora would never let that happen. I did not touch her Bible because we are not supposed to do so without her permission. I stopped my video when I noticed the windows open in her room. If you ever met my Aurora and

her orange house, you would know her number one rule: her room's windows must always be closed. The guest room window occasionally stayed open, but her room windows were always closed. It was on the second floor, and sometimes children would visit. Children are sneaky, and my grandmother saw a boy die once. He fell from the second floor, and she felt powerless. She never recovered from it, and she watched her windows like a mother bird watches their little ones. I did not have the guts to go inside her room initially; I closed my eyes and shut the window in a hurry. I did not look at her little altar because I could not bear seeing that her yellow flowers were not there. Her saints must be missing her too.

As my mom requested, I grabbed the clean towels and the clean bedsheets that were meticulously organized in her old chest in the family living room. Another Aurora rule: you need to be considered an adult, from her point of view, to have permission to open her chest. Her point of view had nothing to do with age. It was my first time opening it by myself. I guess I was an official big girl now.

When I arrived at the front balcony, I could not hold my tears anymore. That house had been missing my Aurora as much as I did. The orange color was losing its vibrancy. "How is your grandmother?" Somebody screamed with a crying voice—one neighbor and then another one. People were happy to see somebody in the house, and they came out of their homes, asking me about my Aurora. They told me that there was a book of prayers, a group of friends lighting candles every night, and meetings at the church in her name every day. Everybody wanted Aurora back. I learned how to share my grandmother with the whole community at a very early age, and I found some comfort knowing that so many people loved her that much. That day, before I left the house one last time, I turned the entrance light on, as she would always do, so people would think she was there, and the house would feel alive.

I left the house from the same back door I came in, watching every little object hoping to have as many memories as possible. I noticed that the old clock had stopped. I would stop too, if I was home and Aurora could not listen to my songs.

I made sure everything was closed. I want to tell you that I did not look back, so you would think for a second that I am strong, but I did. I did it so many times I lost count of it.

My dad was waiting for me in his car. He didn't go inside because he did not like to see me crying. From his old car's side mirror, I watched as the house got smaller and the little light I left on got weaker. That old orange house was never meant to be empty. It was the only time in my life that I saw a lifeless orange color.

I didn't feel like talking, and my dad had no words that would comfort me. The drive to the hospital took something between 30 minutes to a lifetime; I could not count time under so much pain.

"You must be one of Aurora's girls," the lady at the front desk at the hospital told me. We know we all look the same. The walk to her room was the longest I can remember ever walking. When I went to her room, she looked so little. I thought for a second that she would never die but, instead, disappeared a little every day.

After I moved out of the orange house, her big eyes would light up every time she saw me. That will forever be the most beautiful thing my eyes have ever seen. They were even bigger on that day. I hugged her and could smell all the yellow roses the house was missing.

Her arms were still my favorite place to be.

We talked for a long time. Holding hands. She complained that she wanted to be dressed in her own clothes and that nurses kept taking her blood when she was asleep at night. She asked about the house and the windows. She asked me twice if I was sure they were closed. Then smiling, she confessed that she knew she was asking it twice, but she just wanted to make sure.

She was looking alive, and she confessed to me that she had hopes that she would be back home in time to help plan the September church festival. She gave me "that look," and I knew she wanted me to be there for the festival too. I knew that look very well. She gave me the same one when she put the big mirror in my room, hoping I would return home someday. She changed the subject and asked me not to tell my girl cousins that she gave me a full box of expensive soap somebody gifted to her on her birthday. I was the only grandchild to get a whole box. She

made a joke about why people gifted old people with soap so much. She always preferred perfumes. I still have the last soap from that box.

When the nurse came to inform me that visitation time was over, she pounded like a two-year-old girl leaving a fair and said it is never enough time when she is with people she loves. She held my hand and asked if I was going back to college. I said yes, but I would come back in September to see her festival. She smiled. I did my best not to cry, as I had promised my mom before entering the room. She said she loved me, hugged me, and blessed me. As my Aurora hugged me, she asked me for a favor, whispering it in my ear; she wanted me to tell my mom that she wanted to go home.

September never came for her.

That was the last time I saw my Aurora alive.

Aurora
(Portuguese)
by: Rachel Rush



Da última vez que eu visitei a velha casa laranja, ela não estava lá. Tinha sido hospitalizada com uma doença médico nenhum soube dar um nome. A doença misteriosa a matou vagarosamente e eu nunca tive um nome para culpar quando eu gritava minhas orações silenciosas para os santos dela.

Aurora. Esse era o nome dela. A velha casa laranja costumava a ter o cheiro de Aurora. Mas naquele dia, não havia mais o perfume dela. A casa cheirava saudade, indicando que ela não estava lá. Eu só queria ela de volta.

Caso você ainda não saiba, Aurora tem cheiro de rosas amarelas. Rosas Amarelas misturadas com aroma de café recém coado. A primeira coisa que eu notei quando abri a porta naquele dia foi que não havia cheiro de café fresco. A mesa de café não estava posta. Não havia broa no forno. Nenhum pão fresco da padaria. A velha casa laranja dependia da minha Aurora para se manter viva.

Eu entrei. Passei por uma cozinha sem vida, não havia nenhuma comida sendo preparada. Isso nunca acontecia quando a Aurora estava em casa. O velho e já gasto chão de madeira avisava todo mundo que eu tinha chegado. Exceto que dessa vez não tinha ninguém em casa. Eu podia escutar o meu próprio silêncio, e isso doía.

Talvez você não saiba, mas nunca ha silêncio na casa de uma avó brasileira. Na velha casa laranja sempre havia um coração batendo em alto som esperando por mim como se eu fosse a pessoa mais importante do mundo. E eu era, no mundo dela. Por isso, o silêncio ecoando na velha casa laranja naquela manhã era tão dolorido como não ter os braços dela abertos para me receber.

A impecável cortina de renda ainda estava lá, pendurada, em silêncio, separando a sala de jantar da sala de visitas dela. Tocando a cortina, eu me lembrei de quantas vezes eu brinquei de pique esconde com ela naquele mesmo lugar, e quantas vezes ela me chamou atenção por colocar minhas mãos sujas numa cortina tão branca. Eu acho que ela teria orgulho se me visse agora, bancando a adulta, mantendo as mãos limpas a maior parte do tempo. Ou ao menos tentando. Mas ela não estava ali para ver. Ela estava em um quarto de hospital com uma decoração que ela não gostava e reclamava sempre que eu ligava.

Eu ainda tinha um quarto na velha casa laranja, ela mantinha algumas coisas minhas caso eu quisesse voltar depois dos estudos. Bem, tínhamos um quarto com duas camas de solteiro, as mesmas que crescemos dormindo nelas. Uma pra mim, uma pra minha irmã. Mas a Aurora sabia fazer cada uma de nós se sentir especial. Ela tinha colocado a velha colcha de rendas rosas que eu nunca gostei, mas ela dizia que era linda para receber as visitas. Estavam um pouco empoeiradas, o suficiente para denunciar que ela não estava lá já havia um tempo. Roupas de cama devem ser trocadas toda semana se estivermos em casa, ou a cada quinze dias, se for somente para as visitas verem o quarto arrumado. Essa era uma das regras da Aurora que eu cresci acreditando que todas as casas seguiam, porque ela me dizia que era assim.

Eu vi meu reflexo no espelho que ela pendurou no quarto pra minha irmã e pra mim no ultimo natal. Ela disse com um sorriso no rosto que o espelho no quarto de minha mãe, e o do banheiro não eram bons para maquiagem, e a gente precisava de um espelho decente quando

íamos pra casa. Meu rosto estava inchado; eu vinha chorando muito e dormindo pouco desde o dia que recebi aquele telefonema. Não fazia muito tempo todas as netas delas estavam ali, naquele mesmo quarto, lutando por um espaço naquele mesmo espelho enquanto nos arrumávamos para celebrar os 80 anos dela. Naquele dia ela me deixou colocar uma maquiagem mais "moderna" nela, e me deu um blush que ela havia comprado como agradecimento. Ela sempre buscava uma forma de me dar alguma coisa que era dela. Eu ainda tenho ele comigo. Era 12 de maio quando celebramos com ela. Foi em um dos primeiros dias de julho que eu visitei a velha casa laranja pela ultima vez. Ela estava no hospital há mais de um mês com uma doença nenhum médico encontrou um nome para eu poder culpar. Eu jamais imaginei que o mesmo espelho pudesse refletir imagens tão diferente num espaço de tempo tão curto.

Eu me lembro de tentar pausar meus pensamentos e tentar fazer um vídeo. O ano era 2008 e os telefones não tinham a qualidade de hoje. Eu queria salvar todas as coisas sobre Aurora. Tudo me lembrava ela, mas tudo indicava de forma gritante que ela não estava em casa. A bíblia gigante dela estava aberta no dia errado. Aurora jamais deixaria isso acontecer, mas eu não mexi porquê não mexíamos na bíblia dela sem a devida permissão.

Eu notei que a janela do quarto dela estava aberta. Se você chegou a conhecer a minha Aurora e a velha casa laranja dela, você sabe que uma das primeiras regras dela é que a janela do quarto dela deve ficar sempre fechada. A casa é no segundo andar, e crianças às vezes vinham visitar a Aurora. Crianças são sorrateiras, e minha avó viu um menino morrer uma vez. Ele caiu do segundo andar, e ela se sentiu impotente. Ela nunca se recuperou do trauma, e vigiava sua janela como passarinhos vigiam suas crias.

Eu não tive coragem de entrar no quarto dela no início, mas fechei os olhos e fui, fechei a janela correndo e não olhei para o pequeno altar que ela mantinha. Eu não suportaria ver que as flores amarelas que ela colocava para seus santos não estavam lá. Os santos dela deveriam estar sentindo saudades também.

Eu peguei as toalhas e as roupas de cama limpas que estavam meticulosamente organizadas no baú que ela mantinha na sala de estar, conforme a minha mãe pediu. Ah, outra regra da Aurora, só adultos

mexem no baú dela. Você precisa ser considerado um adulto por ela para ter permissão de mexer no velho baú. Acho que foi a primeira vez que eu mexi naquele baú sozinha. Acho que ela me qualificaria como adulta agora.

Quando eu cheguei na sacada, eu não tinha mais como conter as lágrimas. Aquela velha casa laranja sentia falta da Aurora o mesmo tanto que eu. A cor laranja ia aos poucos perdendo o brilho. "Como está a sua avó"? Alguém gritou com voz de choro. Um vizinho, outro vizinho. A vizinhança estava feliz em ver alguém na casa, saíram de suas casas para pedir notícias da Aurora. Me contaram que havia uma corrente de orações, velas sendo acesas, e reuniões na igreja todos os dias pra ela. Todo mundo queria a Aurora de volta. Eu aprendi a dividir minha Aurora com a comunidade desde cedo e me fazia bem saber que tantas pessoas a amavam e a queriam bem. Aquele dia, antes de ir embora eu deixei a luz da varanda acesa, como Aurora fazia. Assim, as pessoas pensariam que ela estava lá, e a casa parecia viva.

Eu saí pela mesma porta que entrei, observando cada coisinha, tentando salvar tudo na minha memória. Me certifiquei que tudo estava trancado. Eu queria poder te dizer que eu não olhei pra trás, porque assim você acharia que eu sou uma pessoa forte. Mas na verdade eu olhei. Olhei tantas vezes que eu perdi a conta.

Eu vi pelo retrovisor do velho carro de meu pai a casa ficando pequena e a luz que deixei acesa ficando fraquinha. A velha casa laranja não foi construída para ficar vazia. Acredito ter sido a única vez que vi uma cor laranja sem vida.

O trajeto ate o hospital demorou qualquer coisa entre 30 minutos e uma vida toda; eu não conseguiria medir o tempo sentindo tanta tristeza. "Você deve ser uma das meninas da Aurora" a moça na portaria do hospital me disse com um sorriso. A gente sabe que se parece. A caminhada ate o quarto dela foi a mais longa que eu me lembro ter dado na vida. Quando cheguei no quarto, ela parecia tão pequena que eu pensei por um segundo que ela jamais morreria, ao invés, desapareceria um pouquinho a cada dia.

O brilho nos olhos dela quando ela me via, desde que eu me mudei da velha casa laranja, será sempre o momento mais lindo que já testemunhei. Seus olhos brilhavam ainda mais naquele dia. Eu a abracei,

e pude sentir o cheiro das flores amarelas que estavam faltando na velha casa laranja. Os abraços dela sempre foram meu lugar favorito nesse mundo. Conversamos por um longo tempo. De mãos dadas. Ela reclamou que preferia estar vestida com suas próprias roupas e que enfermeiras entravam no quarto a noite quando ela tentava dormir para colher o sangue dela. Ela perguntou se a casa estava em ordem e sobre a janela do quarto dela. Ela me perguntou duas vezes se eu tinha certeza de que a janela estava fechada. Sorrindo ela confessou que sabia que tinha perguntado duas vezes, mas como era eu, e ela precisava ter certeza.

Ela estava cheia de vida, e me confessou ter esperança de sair do hospital a tempo de poder ajudar a planejar o Jubileu em setembro na igreja. Ela me olhou com aquele olhar que eu já conhecia bem, ela queria que eu fosse pra casa no feriado. Ela então mudou de assunto e me pediu para que eu não contasse para minhas primas que ela me deu uma caixa de sabonetes que ela ganhou no aniversário dela porque eu tinha sido a única neta que ganhou uma caixa fechada. Logo em seguida ela fez piada com o fato de ter ganho um monte de sabonetes de aniversário, e porque pessoas gostam de presentear idosos com sabonetes. Ela sempre teve preferências por cremes com cheiro suaves. Eu ainda tenho comigo o ultimo sabonete daquele caixa.

Quando a enfermeira veio avisar que o horário de visitas havia chegado ao fim, ela emburrou como uma criança e disse que nunca a deixavam tempo suficiente com as pessoas que ela ama. Ela segurou minha mão e me perguntou se eu estava voltando pra Juiz de Fora. Eu disse que sim, mas que voltaria em setembro pra ficar com ela no feriado. Ela sorriu. Eu fiz força para não chorar conforme havia prometido pra minha mãe antes de entrar no quarto. Estávamos todas tentando ser fortes naqueles últimos dias.

Aurora disse que me amava, me abraçou e me abençoou. Enquanto ela me abraçava, ela me pediu um favor, sussurrando na minha orelha: ela queria que eu falasse com a minha mãe que ela queria ir embora pra casa. Setembro nunca chegou para ela.

Foi a última vez que eu vi minha Aurora em vida.

Bitter Casualties

by: Emily L. Mosier



After, nearly everyone agreed that the day Charlie Delacroix died had had a beautiful morning. The Autumn air had been comfortable. There had been vibrant pumpkin and sunflower patches along the road, and all through the morning hours, a languid breeze had shaken the red and gold draped trees — some of the leaves breaking off in twirling somersaults. But, as Harriet would later recall, the trees were already graying and half-naked. The empty branches were somewhat twisted and gnarled, their sharp twigs pointing out accusingly between the leaves – like the bony fingers of skeletons. The sun had been burning violently all the week prior, and the smell of rotting grass hung stubbornly in the air.

The girls began that morning reclining on a splintering picnic table outside Tanner's Grocery and Deli, a small country store that had half its lot devoted to pumping gas and the other half to outside dining. In the afternoons, all the county hookers would sit at the picnic tables and whistle at the male patrons. Of course, the teens had more innocent intentions. They weren't so much eating as they were trying to savor their last few moments together before having to part ways for school. While Eve and Maggie were fortunate enough to attend the private Christian academy, Harriet was enrolled in public school with the hicks.

Harriet sat on one side of the table across from Eve Lancaster and Maggie Oscar. Maggie was wearing a pair of oversized sunglasses that made the rest of her face seem small and feminine. Somewhat snarling, she sipped orange juice and vodka out of a plastic cup with a pink bendy straw. Her boyfriend had broken up with her during class two weeks ago, and Maggie was still reeling from it, acting much more sensitive and angsty than usual. Eve sat next to her, eating a biscuit with one hand and scribbling some random answers onto a math sheet with the other. Eve had dark, cropped hair and a singular purple streak dyed across her bangs, and Harriet could see the little dip in Eve's nostril where her nose ring would be as soon as school was out.

“Harriet, you’ve got to do something with my hair,” Maggie said, exasperated. “I didn’t even have the heart to brush it this morning – just, up it went into a bun! I think I’d be embarrassed to go to school like this.”

“Of course,” Harriet responded. “You can’t let James think you’re still distressed over him.”

They went around to the side of the store where the bathrooms were, so Harriet could run the brush under water. Eve kept the door ajar by standing in front of it. She lit a cigarette, blowing the smoke outside. While she braided, Harriet admired Maggie’s soft, auburn hair – it was so nice and girly – and she couldn’t help but frown at her own appearance in the little square mirror.

Her own hair just hung dumbly, and her face was layered in foundation a couple of shades too pale because it was her mother’s. She wore striking black mascara, unintentionally making her eyes look sunken in — craters in her ghostly face. Her hips were thin and bony so that her silhouette did a little dip as it went down — hence the high-waisted skirt that flared out to her knees, hiding her figure.

“I want to vandalize something,” Eve said. “Let’s write something on the wall. Something deep. Harry, you read. Give me a deep quote to leave here for the drifters and lost souls.”

Harriet hated being called Harry, but she didn’t comment on it. Instead, she thought for a moment before quoting *The Grapes of Wrath*: “Someday the armies of bitterness will all be going the same way. And they’ll all walk together, and there’ll be a dead terror from it.”

Eve pulled a sharpie from her back pocket, crackling with laughter. “I love it, Harry. Sounds ominous.”

* * *

Harriet spent most of the school day waiting for it to be over, trudging through the seconds as if they were mud. After lunch — which she always ate alone in the library — there was a pep rally, so she went to the gym instead of class. She didn’t like school events like this, but if it got her out of trig, she couldn’t really complain.

She sat in the bleachers amongst her peers but alone nonetheless. She told herself that she liked being alone, that she was just naturally independent, but deep down, she knew that wasn’t true.

Stupid bleachers, she thought. Dull, red bleachers – a symbol of the life drained from the kids forced to sit in them.

The marching band came waltzing into the gymnasium, blaring the school anthem on their glistening instruments, their reflections playing back at them from the gym floor as shimmering figures of light. They wore matching red and blue uniforms and sparkling white shoes. Everything about them was shiny and bright. *Too bright*, Harriet thought. Blinding, like an interrogation lamp or a solar flare. She wondered if they knew the real world lived in the dark.

Charlie, a scrawny boy in desperate need of a haircut, winked at her as he lugged around his saxophone. She screwed up her face and shot him the most disgusted look she could muster. He lived right down the road from her in this rustic, yellow house with dirty windows. His yard was planted with cigarette butts and barricaded by a dingy barbed wire fence. He was downright trash. She bet it had cost him all the money he earned working as a stock boy to afford being a band kid.

Next, the cheerleaders came in, bouncing cutely up and down, waving their pom-poms — braids flapping against their pretty, bare shoulders. They knew they were gorgeous, and they bragged with their confident body movements. Seeing them made Harriet feel like crying. They gestured for the student body to stand, but Harriet remained seated, glum, her head in her hands as everyone around her merged into a sea of exalted cheers. The girls did their little pep routine with a couple of three-person pyramids and threw tiny plastic footballs into the bleachers. One of them hit Harriet in the head, bouncing off to her feet, and three kids simultaneously dove for it like starved vultures.

The band came back out for the grand finale. They spread out over the floor and played pop music but then teetered off, leaving Charlie playing alone in the middle. He arched his back and swayed back and forth with these rapid notes – these intense, gripping notes that seemed to tear at her skin. Such ferocity — her whole body went tense, held captive, she was suffocating. Charlie's eyes were closed, and he was sweating, his long hair sticking to his forehead – you could tell he wasn't really there anymore; he was merely a vessel for the notes. When the rest of the band came back in, she relaxed some. They played for a few more moments, and then it was over. She could leave.

Harriet promptly marched outside to the schoolyard, and Eve and Maggie were already waiting for her in Maggie's convertible, like always ("Hey, Harry!"). She climbed into the backseat with relief. Charlie's distressing solo had made her head hurt, and her ears ring; the combination made it feel like there was a swarm of bees buzzing around inside her head and bumping against her skull.

* * *

It wasn't quite dark when they bumped into him. The sky was a half-dark – purplish gray and spotted like acne with piss-yellow stars. Harriet was in the back of Maggie's car, her hair whipping around her head in this angry whirl, and there was half a case of beer at her feet, freezing her ankles and making them numb. The three of them had wasted the afternoon driving around with the radio blasting at top volume and smoking, only stopping occasionally at a party, a store, or a boy's house, just to cause a scene or say they had been there. Eve had had the idea of spray-painting this popular spot outside town, so they stopped for gas first, and Charlie was at the pump next to theirs.

He was with three or four other band kids. The game had probably just ended and they were giving him a ride home. He was still in his band uniform, but she noted that it had lost some of its shiny luster. She slipped down a little in her seat, hunching her shoulders and hoping he wouldn't see her, but he did.

"Oh, hi, Harriet!"

"Hi," she answered weakly. Eve pursed her lips and watched them curiously while swiping her card at the pump.

"Your hair looks nice like that, wind-blown, I mean. You look spirited and, I don't know, free, I guess."

"Thank you. *I guess.*" What a weirdo.

Maggie pulled her sunglasses down her nose from the driver's seat and looked over them flirtingly. "Harriet never told us she had such a cute friend. What's your name?"

"I'm Charlie Delacroix, Ma'am!"

Severely frowning, Harriet said, "We're not really friends."

"Yeah, but I'd like to be."

Maggie giggled. “Well, Charlie, Sir, we’re about to go hang out at that tunnel, you know, near where those peanut farms used to be. You can come with if you want. We’ll take you home afterward.”

“Yeah!” Eve interjected, “You can spend some quality time with Harry!”

He agreed, grinning widely, and went inside the station to tell one of his band buddies to phone his mother and let her know he’d be home a little later. While he was gone, Harriet whined to her friends.

“Guuyyys — I don’t like him!”

“Don’t be rude. Honestly, Harry, you’re a little prudish. Some male affection wouldn’t hurt you.” Eve smirked.

Charlie came back and climbed into the car next to Harriet, and they left. The “tunnel” they were going to was actually just this really long underpass on an old road twenty miles outside of town. It was basically just a get-high spot for the local teens, but Harriet liked going because the inside was covered in graffiti, and it was actually really pretty and neat to look at. Real rebel-against-the-establishment type stuff.

Eve turned around in her seat and tried to start a conversation with Charlie, gesturing to his uniform, “So you’re in the marching band?”

“Yeah, I play the saxophone for the school. But I also play guitar and the piano, and I’m trying to learn the violin. I’ve always been super into music, even when I was a little kid. It just comes naturally to me.”

“That’s really cool.”

“No, it’s not,” Harriet said. “Natural talent is extremely overrated. It’s like praising someone for their skin color or how pretty they are. Why celebrate that? It’s just stupid.”

Charlie yanked his hand up fast from where it had rested between them, and Harriet realized suddenly that he had been about to hold her hand. She shuddered a little in disgust. There was an awkward silence the rest of the ride there. She was glad to see the underpass, the square walls jutting forth from a tunnel of darkness. She could see wisps of graffiti that started on the walls and continued into the tunnel, just a hint of the vibrant colors inside. Maggie had two flashlights in her

glove box that she gave to Harriet and Charlie. “Eve and I will use our phone lights,” she explained.

They entered the tunnel as a group. It had rained the night before, so the concrete walls were still moist, and there was an awful mildew smell.

Maggie played some hip-hop music full of vulgar innuendos on her phone, and Eve pulled a spray-paint canister from her bag. She shook it and painted a vertical red line. Charlie went ahead of them some, pointing his flashlight on the wall and admiring the artwork. Harriet thought he was being anti-social because of what she had said in the car. She stood next to Maggie, watching Eve paint.

“I really wish you hadn’t invited him, Mag.”

“I thought he would be more fun. The guys at our school are fun.”

“He thinks he’s so cool, but he’s not. He’s a nobody.”

“He seems to like you a lot.”

“I think his crush on me is repugnant. It’s vile. Charlie has the equivalent social ranking of a cockroach.”

Eve stopped painting for a minute and turned to look at them. “*Jesus*, Harry! If you really don’t like him *that* much, let’s just leave him here.”

“Leave him?”

“Sure, we’ll just drive off without him. It’ll be a nice trick. He doesn’t have a phone, does he? He’ll have to hitch back.”

Harriet thought about it and decided she liked the idea. It would serve him right. “Sure,” she said. “Let’s do it.”

“Are we all in agreement?”

“Yeah,” they giggled.

They let Eve finish her graffiti drawing – a harsh, red army soldier flexing his biceps and smiling toothily. She signed her name and last initial, Eve L., on the soldier’s helmet before dropping the paint can on the ground.

“Okay.”

Hey, Charlie,” Harriet yelled down the tunnel, startling him. “We’re leaving! Without you!” And then the girls ran toward the car.

Charlie ran after them for a moment and then stopped, confused, at the mouth of the tunnel. He turned his flashlight on them. The girls jumped in the car, and Maggie revved the engine. Realizing they were serious, Charlie started running again.

“You can’t leave me here!” He shouted at them. His voice was shrill with panic. “We’re like twenty miles from town!”

They ignored him and pulled out onto the road. Harriet turned around in her seat. It didn’t take long for Charlie’s figure to disappear because it was completely dark now, but she watched the tiny, circular beam from his flashlight as it grew smaller and smaller. Her gut twisted. She kinda wanted to tell Maggie to turn the car around, but instead, she said aggressively, “Serves him right, scummy piece of poor white trash!”

Eve giggled. “But he’s just as poor as you, Harry.”

* * *

The rest Harriet learned later, but she imagines it vividly in her mind over and over again. The experts say Charlie tripped and broke his ankle. Harriet can see him walking along the side of the road, kicking up red dust with each footfall, his lips scowled in misery and frustration. He’s holding his jacket in one hand and his sleeve is dragging the ground and is all dirty. It’s dark, and he’s upset, so he simply doesn’t see the hole, which is probably just a little dip in the ground. But he doesn’t see it and he lands hard on his ankle, and he falls to the side some but doesn’t realize that he’s on the road. Just the very edge of the road, but the road nonetheless. He probably sits up for a moment, drawing his knees to his chest and craning his neck to look at his ankle. And he’s hurting and preoccupied and cursing her. And it’s dark, so the driver doesn’t see him. The driver is distracted because there’s a country store girl in the passenger seat. Harriet can see Charlie’s anguish-stricken face as the truck’s headlights finally find him and he looks up. It’s a face that she sees every time she closes her eyes or even blinks – an image stuck in her vision, her own little personal hell, and she’s pretty sure it’s the face she’ll see when she dies.

Breakfast for Dinner

by: Ellie Russell



Shadows crept along the grass as a coral sun set below the fence. The first stars peered out from behind a dappled sky. Johanne looked up from her technical drawings and watched the advance of twilight. Night fell first upon the far end of the backyard, enveloping the old wooden swing set. A memory prickled at the back of Johanne's mind— she and Kit were scratching their heads over an installation manual, their architecture degrees thwarted by the Go Gecko Playpro Company. A two-year-old Maxon toddled about their feet, clasping his chubby hands and doing his best to recite a nursery rhyme. Joy swelled inside Johanne as she reminisced on that day, exactly nineteen years ago. She took a sip of her tea and closed her eyes, savoring the tang of nostalgia and hibiscus.

Before long, the shadows had reached the porch, blanketing all the rose beds. Collecting her cup, Johanne rose from her chair and went indoors, abandoning her worktable with its sketches, measurements, and unopened DIC check. Her entrance was met by a flurry of Winnie's barks. The old blue merle Border Collie barreled across the kitchen floor to welcome her, wagging her entire body along with her tail. Johanne tried and failed to calm her down with petting. "I know, I know — you're excited to see your Maxie."

Doing her best not to trip over Winnie, Johanne preheated the oven and gathered up everything she needed from the cabinets and fridge. She picked up a cooling rack and set it inside a baking sheet. Then she grabbed a knife from the block and slit open a package of bacon. Strip by strip, she laid it across the rack before popping the sheet into the oven. While that baked, she tore open a bag of hashbrowns and dumped them into a broad skillet. She threw in a pad of butter, several grinds of salt and pepper, and a sprinkle of Cajun seasoning before clicking on the burner.

Next, Johanne cracked three eggs into a glass bowl, stirring in milk, vanilla, and cinnamon. She got out her faithful nub of nutmeg and grated it in for the finish, then set about slicing up a small sourdough

loaf. Once that was finished, she greased a pan and placed it on another burner. She started dunking bread slices into the mixture and slapping them onto the pan. Three *thunks* and a cheery sizzle later, she stirred the hashbrowns again and began cracking eggs into one last pan, adding salt, pepper, butter, shredded cheese, and garlic powder. She flipped her toast to let the other sides brown, then paused to admire the gilded crust that greeted her.

Hearing the faint hiss of bacon, she opened the oven and took in a waft of savory smoke. The pan beneath the elevated strips had caught all the drippings, allowing the meat to crisp. She turned over each slice with a pair of tongs and closed the door. Now the hashbrowns had reached their golden zenith, so she slid them off the burner. She forked the finished French toast onto a paper-towel-covered plate and tossed in the next batch. The scrambled eggs were starting to puff up, so she stirred them and added a few more grinds of pepper. Lastly, she set a paper towel on another plate for the bacon.

When the clock over the kitchen table read 7:00, everything was ready, resting atop the oven and counter. Hot and tired but pleased with her handiwork, Johanne collapsed into a chair.

Winnie came over and lay down on top of her owner's feet. Johanne scratched the collie behind her feathery ears. "Maxie should be here any minute. He's in for a birthday surprise— breakfast for dinner!"

She lost herself in memories of birthdays gone by. Maxon hadn't made it back for any of his since he'd gone out of state for college, but he'd promised to come home for this one. *The big two-one*. Pangs of pride and wistfulness clashed inside Johanne. It didn't seem possible, Maxon being that grown up. Time ticked away, and Johanne's recollections gave way to restlessness. She rose and covered the plates and pans with tinfoil to keep everything warm. When finished, she opened the freezer and made sure Maxon's Dutch Chocolate ice cream was at the right temperature.

By the time 8:00 rolled around, she was hovering by the front door. Twilight had long since passed, and now night obscured the cul-de-sac that lay beyond the sidelight windows. Johanne's heart leapt every time she caught sight of headlights, but each car only trundled past. Winnie waited alongside her, her ears pricked and tail wagging.

At 9:00, Johanne migrated from the foyer to the living room, standing beside the telephone. *Maybe there's bad traffic. Much later and he'll probably need to get a hotel room. He'll ask to call me from their phone, I'm sure.* She snacked on almonds and finished her tea rather than spoiling her dinner, should Maxon make it after all.

* * *

Midnight came and went. Johanne sat with Winnie in Kit's old recliner. As she hugged her dog, she stared at a portrait perched atop the fireplace mantel. Kit was in his uniform, holding a newborn Maxon. Her late husband's face was alight with a delirious, half-stunned love. *It was the middle of the night when Maxie came then, too,* Johanne reflected. She pictured Maxon's eyes—blue at birth, but dark as Dutch chocolate now, just like his father's. She hadn't seen those eyes in three years. She hadn't seen Kit's in sixteen.

She squeezed Winnie tighter. The Border Collie turned to lick her arm, staring up at her owner with glass-blue eyes. Heat rose in Johanne's throat and a tear rolled down her cheek, splashing into Winnie's fur. Johanne brushed it out with her fingers. She took a deep breath, trying to remember the sunset and the swing set. She thought of how much she loved her son—even as she missed watching him pour too much syrup over his French toast. She imagined seeing him from a long way off, running to embrace him, and throwing another birthday party for him.

She let herself cry for a while, then got up from the chair and put dinner away to save for breakfast. Johanne would leave the light on for Maxon. And Winnie, for her part, would sleep by the front door, waiting for him to come home.

Check Up

by: Mason Sullivan



Three polite yet firm taps rang off the beige metal door, which opened as a fourth knock landed. A young nurse practitioner waltzed into the small examining room, taking her post across from her patient. Her striking green eyes did not leave the clipboard. On the examination table, Trey crinkled the paper beneath him as he squirmed. The nurse's long brown hair looked like it had been through Hurricane Katrina this late in her shift, but the smell of her dry shampoo graced the air. Uncomfortable with the lack of eye contact, Trey's eyes darted around the mint-green walls and dry, tan furniture. She flipped through the papers on her clipboard slowly as Trey attempted to look casual. Her interrogation began, "What's wrong this time Trey?"

"Hi Mags, lovely to see you too. I like the brown nail polish." He began to smile, but Maggie's piercing gaze sent him right back to discomfort.

"My nails are purple, and this is the fourth time you've been here this month. You are clean as a whistle Trey."

"That's the lucky number, right?" His goofy smile crept back at the corners as he dared to test her reaction. Maggie's eyes remained locked, penetrating as she strategically pushed her glasses up to hide a small smile. His jokes weren't good, but the confidence in his delivery won some sympathy. "So," he continued, "Plain and simple Maggie, I'm not feeling well. I'm nauseous, I can't seem to get a blink of sleep, my body hurts, I can't eat, I think I'm probably dying."

"You seem pretty happy for a dead man."

"Well, figured maybe you could still save me."

"I will have to get the basics then."

Maggie turned and reached under the tacky counters by the sink. As she gathered a few supplies, Trey stealthily checked his breath, straightened his favorite shirt, and tussled his tumbleweed afro. Maggie turned to face him as he gathered, making him quickly flail his arms to his sides. His cheeks flushed.

"We'll start with your blood pressure," she said as she adjusted the black cuff and positioned it on his arm. As Maggie applied pressure,

she looked up at Trey from her stool. The cold color of her eyes seemed electric under the fluorescent lighting and send jolts down his spine. It was at this moment she chose to strike. “You like me don’t you Mr. Highland?” Maggie squeezed the cuff tighter as if she hadn’t said a word. Trey’s body overheated as his brain scrambled for an answer. His dark brown eyes grew wide as his gaze flickered around the room clawing for words.

“I might... just a little.”

“Hmmm, your heart seems a little more enthusiastic,” Maggie said, finally relenting her smile. Trey was broken. His fair brown skin felt burning red as he fought for any other way to reason his excessive visits. On his first visit, he had been absolutely smitten. He’d been reasonably worried over his appearance due to how rough the flu had been to him. So, he returned, chickened out, returned, and chickened out. Each time trying to muster enough courage to make conversation.

On his second visit, Trey had learned Maggie was a volunteer reader at the children’s library, deepening his infatuation. His third visit was fruitful, however, when he had an opportunity at the end of his check-up, he choked. Maggie’s direct addressing of Trey’s interest wrecked his brain. His thoughts moved but gained no ground like a hamster on a treadmill. The pressure in his head was like a water balloon filling in a sink and the walls around him threatened to make it burst.

Finally, he spoke, “Let’s say, hypothetically, that I am absolutely dying to get to know you.” He stopped to catch her gaze again, and, noticing the corners of her mouth rising microscopically, he continued, “so, how would a quick coffee sound when you get off?”

“Well, I suppose it depends how quick you’re talking,” she answered, leaning into her stethoscope, “sounds like you won’t have long to live with your blood pressure this wound up.”

“Guess I better make it count then.”

“In that case, I get off at seven.” Maggie released the cuff’s pressure, removing it from his arm. “I’ll let you settle down, be back to get your vitals, and Dr. Yin should be in shortly to make sure you live to see seven tonight.” She let a bright smile rise over her face and exited, this time more clumsily and lacking grace.

By the time Dr. Yin arrived, Trey's smile had not left. The lanky doctor slithered through the beige metal door. Grabbing a pen from the pocket of his lab coat, Yin sat across from Trey and lowered his reading glasses. Plainly, he asked, "How are you feeling today, Mr. Highland?"
"Pretty good actually."

Corvus Oculum Corvi non Eruit

Part 1 of 2

by: Haley Rose McInnis



On this particular day, Viktor Peskov was a bit more hurried than usual. He brushed the mop of black hair out of his face and shrugged on an ebony trench coat. He straightened his tie and fastened his leather gloves as he examined himself in the mirror. Emerald eyes above a black sea of ink and guilt. He picked up the pocket watch that was sitting on the antique oak dresser. The gold glinted miraculously in the dim candlelight. On the back of the watch, it was inscribed:

CORVUS OCULUM CORVI NON ERUIT

A RAVEN WILL NOT PLUCK OUT THE EYE OF A RAVEN

‘Honor amongst thieves,’ as he preferred to call it.

Viktor shoved the watch into the depths of a hidden pocket inside his coat — in his haste, failing to fasten the chain. He knelt down and felt for the old polaroid picture taped underneath the dresser. It was still there. After blowing out the candles that illuminated the room, he opened the door to rush downstairs — the musky smoke followed him. He was going to be late.

* * *

The soles of his oxfords made a violent click against the marble floor. Once he arrived at the ornate burgundy door, he retrieved a knife from his sleeve. He pried open the top casing of the doorknob to reveal a button. He tapped the morse code for ‘Glass.’ - - . . - . . - , and fastened the cap back on the knob. The door creaked open. Once inside, it shut quickly behind him. Three separate bolts on the door made a brutal sound as they were locked all at once.

Viktor knew the room all too well. Every inch of the office was decorated in various shades of red. Thick velvet curtains prevented the intrusion of sunlight. A chandelier made of stained glass illuminated the room in an unsettling manner. The maroon floor tiles hid droplets of blood. A mahogany desk was placed in the center. Viktor approached the man sitting behind it.

The grey-haired man lit a cigar. "Did you finish your assignment?"

"Yes," answered Viktor.

"Bourbon?" asked the man. He raised his eyebrows as he picked up a crystal decanter filled with amber liquid.

"Yes."

He poured it into a crimson goblet made of hand-cut crystal and handed it to Viktor. He gazed at the facets of glass.

"Have a seat. We need to discuss your next errand."

"That won't be necessary," replied Viktor as he took a sip of the familiar liquid.

"And why is that?"

Viktor sensed anger in his voice. The man peered at him with one eye, the other covered by a leather eyepatch.

"I will not be your marionette anymore, Father."

"If you want your child to live, you will do as I say," said Mr. Peskov as he tugged his shirt collar away slightly to reveal a necklace. The charms were human teeth, a mark of his transgressions.

"Don't make this about him. He doesn't even know I exist. I've already paid my debts," said Viktor, his voice like ice.

Mr. Peskov put out his cigar and considered his son. He absently twisted a glimmering ring on his finger.

"After all that I have built for you..." he sighed.

"It was never for me," said Viktor, "and you know it."

"Very well," replied Mr. Peskov.

He then flipped open a golden case on his desk to reveal a button.

He tapped : (Eye)

Viktor's eyes grew wide.

"No, Father — *Please!*"

His father smiled. Viktor heard the door creak open behind him. As he turned around, three men approached. Two of them detained Viktor as the other one drove a brass-knuckled fist into his face.

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When Viktor woke up, his head throbbed and his stomach ached. The inside of his mouth had the metallic taste of blood. A cold wind blew and caused the long strands of grass to dance around his half-conscious body. After a moment, he sat up on his elbows and opened his swollen eyes. The orange sky was almost hidden against the branches that reached toward him. A few dead leaves floated to the ground. He felt the gritty dirt beneath his palms. After remembering what had happened in his father's office, he quickly opened his coat and checked the hidden pocket. The watch was gone.

"I've been released," he sighed. His voice was hoarse. The sigh turned into an incredulous laugh. He walked to the edge of the forest clearing and saw a road. A house was not far down the path. He wiped the blood from his nose with his sleeve. As he stepped out of the shadows, he noticed a child walking down the street, his head in a book.

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## **Corvus Oculum Corvi non Eruit**

### **~The Shadow~**

#### *(Part 2)*

by: Haley Rose McInnis



As I was walking down the street, book in hand, I tripped and fell. I wasn't looking where I was walking and managed to get my foot stuck in the gutter. I scraped both of my hands, and my paperback was soiled in the damp leaves that littered the pavement. While sitting on the sidewalk inspecting my wounds, I had the eerie sensation that someone was watching me. I glanced up and scanned the area. Desolate street, empty houses, a forest in the distance — but what was the figure standing at the edge of the woods? Whatever it was, it was tall and

much larger than me. A light breeze scattered the leaves around me and goosebumps rose on my arms. I arose from the ground, grabbed my novel, and began to walk back to my house. I walked a bit quicker this time and made sure to pay attention to where I was going.

When I got home, I washed the dried blood and dirt off my hands and went upstairs to my attic bedroom. I live with my mom, and we recently moved into an old, small house. She works two jobs, so I don't see her often. The floral wallpaper is faded and peeling from the walls. Rotting floorboards creak, and the water pipes drip a greyish liquid. The house smells vaguely of mildew and mothballs. Although I do not like living here, I actually enjoy having a room in the attic. It is quiet, and I have plenty of space to play. I do not know any of the neighborhood kids yet, so I spend my days engrossed in novels or building miniature houses with Legos.

There is one window in the attic. It faces the woods, and I can often see red foxes or deer if I am quiet enough. I put my desk next to the window to look for animals. It was nighttime and I had started to doze off, but wanted to stay awake until my mom got home. She hated when I didn't go to bed until she got off work because it was usually late at night and I had school the next day.

I gazed out of the window and noticed a man standing at the edge of the forest. *It's the same figure from earlier*, I thought. There were a few lights on the outside of our house and they illuminated him slightly. He appeared to be much older than me, probably in his mid-thirties. He was dressed completely in black, and his face was so pale that the dark circles under his eyes looked like bruises. Maybe they were. With his ebony trench coat flapping freely in the wind, he looked like a human embodiment of a raven. He raised one leather-gloved hand at me in a wave. I pressed my face against the cold glass trying to get a closer look, but at that time I heard the front door creak open. I jerked my head away from the window and turned around when I heard mom downstairs saying that she was home. By the time I looked out the window again, the man was gone.

I went downstairs to tell my mom what I had seen. I found her in the living room, sitting on the couch.

"I saw a man outside the house."

“When? Where was he?” she asked.

“A few minutes ago, just standing at the edge of the woods,” I replied.

She stood up and walked down the hall to the back door and opened it. No one was there. She shut the door, locked it, and started to walk with me upstairs to my room.

She looked down at me and said, “Well, if he ever comes any closer than that, I want you to call me. I don’t want you to leave the house while I am not at home.”

My temper began to rise.

“What am I supposed to do all day in this house?”

“It’s not up for discussion. When you get home from school, you are to go inside and stay there until I get off work. Do you understand?”

“Fine,” I said.

“There are bad people in the world. You may not realize it now, but you will someday. I don’t want you to find out the hard way. Now, you need to go to bed. It’s late and you have school tomorrow.”



The next day I went home immediately after the school bus dropped me off at the end of the street. I quickly went inside, locking the door. I was restless and wanted to do something fun. I settled on investigating my mother’s room, even though she would yell at me if she found out. I rifled through her desk drawers first. I found nothing interesting — just bills and receipts. After that, I decided to explore the contents of her closet. It was surprisingly large for our small house; a walk-in closet with shelves lining the walls above the clothing racks. There were lots of small boxes on the shelves, but I could not reach them. I decided to bring a chair into the closet and stand on it so I could grab a few. I succeeded and poured the contents of one box onto the floor.

There were tons of polaroid pictures. Most of them were of my mother, with people I did not recognize. I did not know many of my family members. I never met my father, and I haven’t seen my grandparents in years. I figured the pictures were of my family or my mother’s friends from a long time ago. She was younger in all of the



images. One photograph stood out among the others. It was a picture of my mother with a man. I pocketed the picture and cleaned up the mess I made.

I went to my room and sat at my desk to examine the photograph. I happened to look up at the same moment a figure appeared at the edge of the woods. It was the same man from the day before. *Strange*, I thought. He looked like the man in the picture. He raised his hand and beckoned me to come outside. I hesitated. I knew my mom would be angry if she found out, but curiosity got the best of me.

I went out the back door and slowly walked up to him.

“Who are you?” I asked.

He knelt down in front of me, so he was able to look me directly in the eyes. His pale green eyes were replicas of my own.

“I am a friend of your mother’s.”

“Is this you?” I replied.

“It is indeed,” he whispered. His voice was rough like sandpaper against wood.

“How do you know my mom?” I questioned.

“May I come inside?” he asked.

He ignored my question. I let him inside anyway.

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### Excerpt from *The Legioncy*

by: McKenzie Dahlke



### **Chapter 1— Lemuel (Date: September 30th, 4073)**

I can no longer tell exactly how long I’ve been in this unnaturally dark room. How long the walls have been shadowed black, how long the sweat has been dripping relentlessly from my forehead, how long it’s been since I’ve seen the cold rain or heard commanding thunder from the heavens somewhere above me. I can’t really say much of anything. I guess it has been at least a couple of months now. Ha, I

guess I would be punished for even using the term “months,” I forget what they’re calling it now; “cycles,” I think? Or maybe that’s what they’re calling “years.” The Legioncy doesn’t want us to use the calendar system anymore. They say you can’t pinpoint time from day and night or know for sure that a day is twenty-four hours. That just sounds like a bunch of sciencey hulabaloo to me. They claim that seven days a week was first created in the Hebrew Genesis and that it’s “too religious” for us to tell accurate time by. I say that’s pretty ridiculous. Why should we change the universal system of time? Just to please the President? How are you going to tell me that I don’t know the night is night and day is day?

I assume it’s been at least seventeen years... cycles? Ya know what, no. I’m going to say years. What can they do? I’m already locked up. No, maybe eighteen years now since the Legioncy outlawed religion. Although, at this rate, pretty soon even years, or whatever you call it, will be wiped away from history. Eventually, the term “religion” will be unknown to all those not in the top five or ten families. They’re always coming up with new ways to “*perfect*” the people — to make us all equal; to make us all... *controllable*.

From the second I was born, I was at a disadvantage. My parents named me Lemuel, meaning, “devoted to God.” Little did they know how their son would one day be targeted just for his name. The specialized soldiers monitor anything to do with religion — Christianity is beleaguered more than anything else. I think it’s something about God that scares all the leaders of the Legioncy. They just can’t stand the fact that people have a hope of heaven, that people won’t care what they look like, that people won’t serve the world and its empty promises, that people are willing to lay their lives down for their faith... something about that terrifies the leaders of this world.

Sometimes I can feel my green eyes crashing like chopped down trees, they weaken a little more with each solitary second that I sit in this chair. My once tan skin fades into a ghostly grey and the sickly bruises on my body are constantly recovering from the last time I was “maintained.” It’s kind of fun playing games with the guards when they come in — especially the ones in training. They haven’t gotten the specialized trooper Genome yet, so they’re either super confident or

super scared. I was blessed with an education at one of the intellectually designated schools — so that one day I could pass the Bar Exam and be allowed into society as a “productive” adult, maybe even become a trooper. I guess God had different plans for me; I still get mad about that sometimes.

I didn’t get into the specialized upper-class school system until I was fifteen. It was a little late to start that sort of education, but every year the upper district chooses a few misfits from the lower and middle districts to attend their fancy schools. It’s like charity if the purpose of the charity was to keep the poor population from throwing riots. It took me an hour to walk to the first bus I could take to that stupid school. In the lower district, we still have real grass and dirt, when you get into the middle district, it all starts to become plastic. And it *smells* like plastic. Gah, I hated that plastic smell. “Pray for them Lem. Most of them don’t even know they’re trapped,” my mother would say. *Mom...* yeah, she knew more than anyone.

The first day I walked in that school, I felt like an ugly smudge on the front of someone’s pressed white shirt. And they *looked* at me like a stain, like I was this unfortunate thing so out of place, but one they couldn’t do anything about it. Some students looked at with more curiosity than disgust. “So, your parents haven’t had the Genome procedure?” They’d ask, astounded by my tales of trees and dirt roads and a mother and father who actually hugged. But soon that awe faded, and all we did all day long was keep our head stuffed in a book or doing personalized gym exercises. In the upper district, and even some of the middle district, your first twenty years of life are dedicated to preparing for the Bar.

The Bar Exam consists of three main sections. Section One is based on studies: how intellectually capable you are and in what academic areas you can benefit society. Section Two is based on your physical attributes: if you’re too pretty they write down what surgeries you need to receive to “fix it,” and if they deem that you’re too ugly — they do the same thing. If you’re too muscular or too curvy, they give you prescriptions and a dated schedule to fix it — we all need to fit in a checklist box so we can all benefit society; so we can all be an intricately designed puzzle piece that fits perfectly into their calculated

game. Makes sense, right? They think we all need *fixing*. But the worst is Section Three. The part of the test where they implant you with Genome R. It's called that because Genomes A-Q were either different and specific, or unsuccessful. One even caused a potential genocide in all the Legioncy. It's funny how in a society so fixated on getting rid of religion, they do so many things that have happened in the Bible. So many mistakes could have been avoided if they only knew God and would lay down their pride and pray instead.

They strap you to this flat white table, in a room utterly opposite from this one; a place with white walls and bright blinding lights. Then they put you to sleep, open you up, invade your brain, and inject Genome R. If the Genome takes effect after three days, you are released into society. If not, you're released into a science lab, or more than likely, into the world after this one. If you're lucky, all of these physical and psychological "fixings" only take two weeks.

Genome R completely changes your human nature. It makes you susceptible to suggestions from the Legioncy's leaders and ultimately diminishes your sexual drive, physical desires such as drinking or smoking, and even represses your natural process of dreaming. You have now become government property, and you are now "perfect" for the world without emotion, without opinion, and without a God. It even takes away a few days of your short-term memory — a side effect of people tampering with your brain, I guess.

My parents had me illegally. Thirtyish years ago, marriage by your own will, and soon after, undesignated sex events — were deemed illegal. The Legioncy would decide if you were fit to have a child and how many; it is an act of service, not an act of love or right given by God. It's funny how society works, isn't it? To be perfect, you mustn't be you at all. To be right for the world, you must be designed from an imperfect world. How is that any better than having faith? You're telling me that having faith is worse for me than you literally cutting my brain open? Yeah... I don't know about all that.

I feel my fists tense into bruises as I hear the boots outside. They clank loudly against the cement floor and, for a brief moment, I exhale — thinking maybe, just maybe, they had passed my room. But every time, without fail, the heavy door unbolts. Two guards visit me

regularly, they aren't much older than me, maybe late twenties. I call them Cain and Able like from the book of Genesis. They hate that, but I find it amusing. If I'm going to be stuck in this sweatbox because of my faith, I might as well use it to my advantage from time to time.

The two walk in, very condescendingly, so I mentally prepare my body for the beating I know it's going to take. Most Christians aren't kept in here as long as I am. Usually, they either consent to be inserted with Genome R, or they're used for public execution displays — like my parents. Cain is a tall and brutish figure with perfectly neat blonde hair, and he always, and I mean *always* smells like rotten fruit. I can't explain it. Able is younger than Cain and is clearly still in training. I can tell because of his attitude. After a few years of training, all troopers receive another Genome; I think it's Genome F. Genome F was specifically designed to be given to all troopers or other military personnel. It makes their minds more adept for combat situations, increases their reflexes, promotes the intellectual capacity, and diminishes their will for mercy.

I was born a little taller and bigger than the average male, so I usually recover from their beatings, which might be why they've kept me around. I guess I would look completely different physically had I made it to Section Three of the Bar.

"Hey, guys, I was so worried you wouldn't come to see me today." I start the conversation first, might as well get it over with.

"Shut the hell up." The one I call Cain replies to me. I refer to him as Cain because he is much bigger and much more aggressive than the other, probably because he's had the Genome. In fact, I think Able has only slapped me maybe once.

"So cranky today. You know, God doesn't like it when you talk to a brother like that."

I feel his strong fist hit me for the first time today, *or maybe it's night*, on the right side of my jaw, almost knocking it out of the socket. He really is cranky today. The taste of crimson floods my mouth as I gaze back up at him, his partner standing firm in the corner, his blonde hair gelled back so not one strand is out of place... God forbid.

“Don’t say that name in here. You’re crazy still using that kind of talk. Just take the dang Genome procedure. Ain’t no reason to keep being my bit—”

I cut him off mid-word, “You know you really shouldn’t use that kind of language.”

“I will talk however I want.”

“You may not want to harbor all that hate in your heart.”

His dark blue eyes flame at me with fury. Able’s thin and tall frame detaches from the corner.

“And why is that?” Cain moves his face so close to mine I can smell what he had for lunch. An Italian sandwich, with *lots* of onion.

“Despite what you may believe, I’d like to have you in heaven with me one day.”

He glares at me shocked for a moment; he always does when I say things like that. I only meant it half-heartedly, I’d more like to see him in a ditch, but I know that’s not right to think. That’s the thing about this society, they just can’t comprehend when a person wants to do good, just to do good — just to serve the Lord.

“Don’t tell me what to do! To hell with you!” He erupts. One single strand of hair perks up on the side of his head.

“No, I think you mean YOU.”

I probably should’ve kept that one to myself. Again, I feel Cain’s fist pushing against my face, then into my rib cage, forcing all the breath to leave my crippled body. It’s times like this where I question God’s plan, where I wonder if there’s even a God at all — when I think maybe, one day, I will rot away in the dirt, and that’s it. This room will try to do that to you. This *world* will try to do that to you.

“I ain’t goin to no hell. There is no hell!” Cain screams as he rubs his fist back and forth with his other thumb, looking to Able like he’s supposed to get him a hot towel or drink of water. Cain’s at least talking to me today more than usual.

“Then what is there?” I ask with what breathe I can muster while thinking back on the dark moments when I worry that I’ll simply rot in the dirt. This is where my game begins, where even though my hands are tied to this chair, I hold all the power. God holds all the

power. Even in the times that I doubt, deep within me, I know there's a God. I've felt it. I've seen His work in the world. I know He is there for me after this life and even at this moment. Ables' thin face actually flinches for a second, like maybe he's truly pondering the question, but Cain's broad, violent face is not amused.

"How should I know?!" That is all he has to reply. It's interesting that he uses the word "hell" even though he doesn't believe in the place.

"Well, you're not supposed to know," I admit.

He looks at me puzzled like he's lost. But then again, I suppose he is, they all are. You're lost when you try to find yourself in the world, because you never will. How do you explain that to someone who refuses to understand?

"What's that supposed to mean?" Able finally speaks up from the corner, trying to sound intimidating.

"I mean, you're not supposed to know what God knows. That's the point of trust. That's the point of having God because we're all so helpless otherwise." I hesitate to say it because I know what's coming next. I feel Cain's fist jab at me repeatedly up and down my face and chest, my eyes rolling to the back of my head. I'm almost passing out. I'm losing too much blood. *Gosh, I feel helpless.*

"I wish they would just burn you already. I'm getting bored with you." Cain replies breathlessly. I guess beating me really takes a lot out of him. I think if I were in good health, I could beat him in a fight.

I've tried so hard to search for God in this room, but it's like He's left me. I stare at the wall for hours, and sometimes even hallucinate pictures of my mom, or the way I wish my life was, but God isn't there. *God, why aren't you here?* I plead to Him in my mind. I can't speak anymore; all I can do is spit out the blood. But still, I feel blessed Cain makes way for the door. I guess he's tired today. Able walks over to me instead of the door and curiosity overtakes me. Surprise spreads across mine and Cain's faces as Able takes his hand and slings it across my right cheek so hard I almost scream, but as soon as Cain is distracted, I feel something cold enter my hand. Something as small as a flower, but firm as stone.

This is an ancient prison hall, some of the only few cells still locked with a key and handle — probably in all Legioncy prisons. I’ve never felt a key before, but somehow, I know that’s what rests in my hand. *The key... Able has given me the key!* My eyes grow wide for only a moment before I clench my fist and pretend to be beaten. Cain walks out and Able follows. As his dirt brown eyes look back at me, I give him the slightest nod of appreciation, or at least what I think is a nod with the mobility of my now beaten head. God has heard me. I don’t know how, but I know it’s God. I *know* it is. I feel an overwhelming spirit engulf me, a sense of hope, a sense of joy, a sense of purpose, and I know. I just know this is what it means to be a Christian. To suffer the earthly torture — but to receive a heavenly reward. I don’t know how I will escape, I don’t know anything yet, but I know God will guide me. I’ve decided to change Able’s name. He will now be Gabriel, the beloved angel of God.

Once, months ago, one of the doctors in the science lab tested me and asked me, “How do you know there’s a God?” I had to think about it for a long time. He was studying my brain I guess — trying to understand the way Christians think. But humans can’t fully understand *God*. And I think that just eats up scientists. It’s faith, how do you describe faith scientifically? You can’t. But it’s moments like this where I know it... where I feel it. This overwhelming, almighty, indescribable power. *A purpose*.

In the awful, terrifying, overwhelming center of the raging storm — I know God is with me.

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## Running

by: Mason Sullivan



The slow summer crawled toward fall and the weight of the world rested on Thomas’ shoulders. Sprawled across a cheap, cream-colored rug that was once white, his gaze surveyed the walls. Their dark green paint made him feel like he was in a bowl of pea soup – which,



come to think of it, he didn't even like. His *real* dad had liked it. The rotten green paint and chunks of brown boxes nauseated Thomas. His room had become a corpse, stripped to the bone. There were scattered remains of his past life where posters hid dust. Thomas' brow furrowed as he anxiously bounced his leg. Home was foreign. A *Fragile* label was half-stuck on the wall next to him. It waved in the ceiling fan's current like the flags at the river docks he'd visit with his dad. As he felt his mind begin to wander, Thomas knew he had to escape.

He stood and rummaged through a couple of boxes before triumphantly raising an album with a fiery red and orange cover. Thomas flipped the disc and carefully guided the needle to track five. Hendrix's rendition of *All Along the Watchtower* poured from vinyl trenches, filling the near-empty room. Jumping to his toes, Thomas slid into a pair of Converse that looked like they had seen Hiroshima and threw on a beat-up denim jacket riddled with frays and holes older than his seventeen years. As he passed the mirror, his gaze froze on his own reflection. Thomas' left eye was almost shut from swelling, but his manic grin still stole the portrait. As Jimi's guitar riffs electrified the air, the boy was led to the window in a daze of mindless intuition, as if his nerves were in the hands of some grand puppeteer. The white paint on the windowsill chipped as Thomas creaked it open. Just then, a voice boomed from behind his closed door in the hallway, "WHAT WAS THAT?"

Thomas hesitated, knowing it was only a matter of time before Rick busted into the room. "Get out here boy," Rick yelled, pounding on the door, "or I'll come drag your ass out!" This was all the convincing Thomas needed. With a leap, he fell to his knee on the old brick pathway below the window and ran. He ran along the busted chain-link fence and down the road. The fresh fall air stabbed at Thomas' lungs as he took off from Ferguson to Decatur Street. The boy ran farther than he believed he could without rest. Reborn, his adrenaline pumping, it was only after a few awkward strides he felt the cut on his knee. It was only a scratch – he was free.

The two-lane, neighborhood roads were quiet and illuminated in the warm, orange glow of the streetlights. The cracked, black road stretched out endlessly before him. Houses of uniformed white panels

and brick blurred together as Thomas cut through the darkness. The rickety chirps of cicadas ahead pulled the boy forward until he stumbled upon a fork in the road at the edge of his neighborhood. “Where am I going?” Thomas questioned aloud, trying to catch his breath. A *clink* of light metal hitting the ground startled Thomas, looking down to see the black leather strap of his dad’s old watch broken and on the ground. He picked up the watch with haste and noticing no damage to the watch’s face, checked the time before placing it carefully into his pants pocket: 11:52 P.M. It was long past his curfew and a fury of a beating would surely be waiting for him at home. Looking back for only a second, Thomas turned toward the strip of abandoned buildings to the right and continued into darkness.

The sidewalk ended and Thomas slowed to a walk through the overgrown grass just off the road. A railroad crossing ahead marked the border between his neighborhood and downtown. Marching onward, he could make out decaying garages and hangar-like sheds in the darkness which neighbored a graveyard of stripped warehouses upon worn dirt and loose, gravel pathways. Shards of broken glass and amateur attempts at graffiti desecrated what was once a bustling hub of production. Thomas didn’t know what they used to do here, but the railroad’s placement suggested some sort of shipping or manufacturing. One particularly large brick building grabbed the boy’s curiosity as he cautiously peeked behind a fallen garage door. As he stepped into the ruins, the sound of an engine churning behind him grew closer and closer. The little blonde hairs on his neck rose to attention as a pair of bright headlights turned the corner. Thomas felt his heart fall into his stomach as he recognized the dingy red paint of his mom’s boyfriend’s old Ford Bronco. An anxious shiver ran up Thomas’ spine as he tried to remember how to run. He managed a shaky stride or two before tripping on an uneven patch of grass. “I said get over here boy,” Rick announced as he opened the door, unleashing a wave of empty Pabst cans to the ground below. “Your dad not teach you to respect your elders ‘fore he died on you?”

Thomas felt a burning rage crawl up his body, his hands clenched tightly on the grass beneath him. Once he’d risen like a newborn calf to his feet, he grasped a stone firmly by the top and hurled

it with all his might toward Rick, who was now stepping from the truck. Only after he had let go, did Thomas conceive the severity of this attack. Both he and Rick tensed as the stone came crashing down just over Rick's head and straight through the red Bronco's windshield. The crash was followed by a still silence in disbelief of the watermelon-sized hole. Rick's mouth hung wide open, but this time without yelling or any noise for that matter. Then, turning stiffly to Thomas said slowly and honestly, "I'm gonna kill you."

Without hesitation, the boy ran for his life. He jumped over the worn railroad and into the forest toward downtown. As he dashed through thorns and branches, he could hear the Bronco starting again from behind. Thomas continued into the thickness of the trees and his fear only subsided once he'd escaped the sound of Rick's Bronco. He stepped carefully through the darkness, thankful for what little moonlight snuck through the treetops. Eventually, the trees opened to the small hills lining the river. The orange lampposts of downtown glowing to his left, the river on his right. With nowhere else to go, he walked and walked into the quietness of the night.

Downtown was quiet. The shops were all closed, a few yellow lights painted the skyline, and even the beggars lay soundly sleeping. Thomas did his best to respect their space on the sidewalk. After what seemed miles, he rested his hands in the pockets of his jacket. Surprised, he brought back his hand to reveal a beaten pack of Marlboro reds. He turned eighteen next week, once August came around, so this pack he'd stolen from Rick. Only one cigarette was missing, Thomas had only taken the pack to spite him in the first place. Suddenly, a bright light flashed in his face.

Nearly clearing the treetops in fear, his heart in his chest, Thomas exhaled as he realized he was on Forest Ave. Before him stood Jackson Hospital, where his mother worked. He checked his father's broken watch. It was nearing 1 o'clock. An ambulance hustled beneath the glowing red "Emergency" sign, next to those unforgiving doors. Thomas stopped to think of what his mother regularly witnesses. She didn't tell him much more than "the babies and the coworkers," but sometimes the strain in her voice caused her words to crumble. That

was already more than he could bear. Not wanting to see a body on the stretcher, Thomas continued toward the parking deck.

The sky was too dark to view the stars from the top of the parking deck. Thomas climbed a short piece of concrete wall and faced the darkness. Nearly slipping away, the voice of a stranger startled the boy.

“Scuse me, man, you got a cig?” Thomas looked over his shoulder to observe an older, unkempt man. He looked like he could very well be homeless, but one can never be sure when it comes to late-night acquaintances. Perhaps he lived on the street, nevertheless, his demeanor seemed genuine and his eyes just.

“Yeah,” Thomas said, hand already fumbling through his jacket for the Marlboros. He tossed the pack to the man who caught it with surprising dexterity.

“Thank ya son, your parents musta raised you right,” he said with the grin that corny old men do. The man placed the cigarette in his mouth and tossed the pack back to Thomas who grabbed his own. Thomas’ hands shook as he lit a match over his cig and handed the box over to the man. He felt he was hiding his emotions well, but the man could see his mask cracking in the match-light. The man broke their silence and continued, “hell, maybe they didn’t, but keep that head on your shoulders and you’ll get far.” The man’s gaze surveyed Thomas, determined to get something through. “That’s a nasty cut on your leg, ya know there’s a hospital right there,” he added with a chuckle.

What Thomas believed to be a scratch on his knee was much deeper than he realized, but nothing some super glue couldn’t fix, so he responded casually, “yeah, I fell.”

“Oh yeah?” The man shot back, “your fall give you that shiner too?”

The silence consumed them like a humid fog. Thomas was growing weary of the man’s prodding butt he kept going. “You got two arms for workin’, two legs for walkin’, and a brain keepin’ you quiet, you’ll do alright kid. Take care of the little things, there won’t be biggens, but remember everybody needs each other.”

“I don’t.”

“Then why you ain’t jump off that wall there?” The man’s harsh words were anything but malicious. “Now kid, you know that’s somethin’ dumb. Seems like you just came up here to think, so I say this: nothin’ good lasts cause nothin’ bad does either. You can sit around cryin’, drown in your tears and all or you can get up and work your ass off to make it just a little bit better, then a little more better, ‘til you look back and can’t recognize your own face. Son, what’re you gonna leave behind in this world?” Thomas’ eyes rose to meet the man’s own, both a fiery shade of amber. After a moment of silent understanding, the man turned to exit, saying, “Anyways... thanks for the smoke little man.” The stranger grinned and paced, slowly, down the parking deck and returned into the darkness.

Thomas mulled along the edge of the deck. Kicking up dirt and trash as the loose soles of his converse plopped along. He reached into his jacket pocket and looked again at his father’s broken watch. Still ticking under the lightly scuffed glass, it read 1:25. *Mom’s about to get off.* Thomas took a turn for the stairs but hesitated. He took another look at the river. Now seeing the glow of the stars peeking out of dark clouds dancing in the reflection of the water, he threw the watch and turned ahead.

He took a step forward, then raised his head on the next. Thomas descended the black, metal staircase hastily to the ground. His stride widened as he ran toward the scaling concrete walls of the hospital. He leaped over the neatly cut shrubs before the double doors, nearly being hit by a car in the drop-off zone. Thomas stumbled over the bricks and through the door. He made it.

Bright white lighting blinded him for a moment. He opened his eyes to see the familiar drowning white walls, beige furniture, and artificial plants of the lobby. His eyes darted from patient to nurse like a madman. His eye had now swollen shut and the cut had covered his leg in blood; not to mention the dirt he’d gathered. Those who had noticed him were beginning to tense.

“Excuse me, sir,” a young nurse at the desk said, but Thomas was not listening. Looking frantically to his right, descending the great stairway, he saw the pink purse his mother could fit the world into. Thomas ran to his mother’s arms but stopped in his tracks five feet from

her. The small woman's jaw hung limp, haunted. The dead look in her eyes she carried the nights her words crumbled. Burning in his mother's shock, Thomas hung his head.

Tears in her eyes, she found her voice, "Oh, Tom...", she managed, "did he hit you?"

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**The Green Fairy**  
by: Haley Rose McInnis



Smoke wisped in the air as the match was being eaten by flames. Tallceon Lacus lit his cigarette then shook out the dazzling orange light, tossing the charred piece of wood onto the cobblestone street. The city was predominantly grey — the buildings lacked color, the trees were bare, and the sky overcast. With the cigarette flaring in the corner of his mouth, he flipped the collar of his tweed blazer up around his neck. The bitter air enveloped him, and the tips of his fingers began to feel numb.

When he arrived at his flat, Tallceon put out his cigarette and unlocked the door. He picked up the Venetian mask sitting on his desk. It was an old-fashioned plague doctor's mask with a curved hollow beak — ivory in color and embellished with golden embroidery. Black mesh covered the eye holes. He stood in front of a mirror, fastened the mask on his face, took off his blazer, and exchanged it for a black trench coat. The coat was lined with silver buttons that he methodically fastened one by one. He put on a wide-brimmed fedora, enshrouding his ebony hair.

Tallceon whistled to himself as he stomped his foot against the floorboard next to his desk. The board dislodged, and he pulled out a cane from the hole. The staff's handle resembled a large silver wasp with emerald eyes. Putting on white leather gloves, he admired himself in the mirror. Hidden behind the mask was a smile as sharp as a dagger and eyes the color of soot.

\* \* \*

The sun had set, and the stars appeared vibrant against the blackness. Tallceon walked down a flight of cement stairs and entered an alleyway. He approached an oak door and knocked seven times. A small hole in the door opened, and a blue eye appeared.

“Code?”

“*Incendium.*”

The door opened — Tallceon entered the room.

Even through the mask, the scent of minty tobacco flooded his nostrils, and smoke stung his eyes. The sound of rough laughter, deals being made, and clinking glasses filled his ears. He made his way through the crowds of people and noticed an empty chair in the corner of the room. Tallceon sat on its green velvet and observed his surroundings. In his line of work, he quickly learned that the key to blending in was to stick out. Even appearing as if he were about to console a victim of the Black Death, he was not the oddest piece in the room. The women dressed in gold; the men wore black. Felix noticed one man dressed as a gargoyle in a grotesque mask, black suit, and horrific bat-like wings attached to his blazer. He passed a glass of champagne to a woman clothed in golden silk with a mound of glittering lace upon her head, veiling her face.

At that moment, the crowd parted slightly, and a woman approached him. She wore an elaborate sequined dress adorned with shimmering yellow tassels. Her ebony hair cropped above her chin was tangled with black feathers. She sat on the arm of his chair with the scent of bergamot and lilies.

“He’s in the back,” she said.

Tallceon nodded, got out of the chair, and walked to the back, into a room hidden by a damask curtain.

“Well, Tallceon. It’s been a long time; it has,” said an elderly man in a raspy voice. He was rather short, had a long grey beard, and wore a thick velvet cloak. The deep purple robe almost looked black and smelled of leather and dust.

“Hello, Merlin,” replied Tallceon as he removed his mask.

“I have come to tell you that the boy has removed the sword from the anvil.”

“Arthur?”

“Well, yes — but Sir Kay has claimed that he was the true beholder.”

“You know what will happen if he claims the throne,” warned Tallceon. A bead of sweat dripped down the back of his neck.

“That’s why I need you. I have come for *la fée verte*. Using magic would not be permissible. After Sir Kay reveals the truth, Arthur will rightly take the throne.”

Tallceon unscrewed the wasp handle on his cane and emptied the contents of the hollow pole. A vile of green liquid appeared — ‘the green fairy,’ or absinthe.

“One condition,” said Tallceon. “I want to be a part of this. Take me back with you.”

“Very well. You have earned my trust,” said Merlin. He absently twisted his beard and then pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. “I cannot bring you immediately. You will have to wait until soon after Arthur becomes king.”

“Agreed.”

“I will create a position at court for you. You will gain the trust of King Arthur to remain undetected. As it should be, you can no longer be Tallceon Lacus. We shall call you Lancelot du Lac.”

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## **“The Story of an Hour”**

A Critical Essay  
by: Gracie Coppage



“The Story of an Hour,” by Kate Chopin, is a short story set in the late 1800s and displays superb writing, intricate storyline, and attention to detail. Within this New Orleans tale lives Louise Mallard, whom one gets to know throughout the hour of the story. For the duration of this hour, one has the opportunity to observe Louise while she is delivered the news of a lifetime and follows her as she works through the waves of emotion threatening to crush her very being. Yet, all is not what it seems in this story. The author’s use of ornate



symbolism weaves this story into a classic masterpiece. Throughout “The Story of an Hour,” Chopin illustrates the burning desire for freedom by the use of symbolism. Louise’s room, the window, and her last name can all be found as symbolic and illustrate the message the author conveys.

One of the symbols that Chopin wields throughout her short story is Louise’s room. It is described in the story as being exclusively “her room” (287). In every mention or utterance of Louise’s room, it is always portrayed as being hers alone, with no mention of sharing the room with her husband Brently. Within the confines of her room sits “a comfortable, roomy armchair” facing an open window (287). While sitting in the chair it says that “she sat with her head thrown back, quite motionless” save for the sob erupting from her (288). The armchair represents a comfort, an escape from her current, startling reality as she faces her husband’s death. During Louise’s time in solitude, enclosed in her room, Josephine comes upstairs seeking to comfort her grieving sister — but alas, the door is locked. The door’s locking signifies her internal sorrow, her loathing lack of freedom in her marriage and life. It also suggests that she wanted the room, the only thing truly hers in the house, to stay solely hers. While there are multiple symbols explored in the boundary of Louise’s room, they all express her desire for freedom.

Another symbol that the author uses to indicate the yearning for freedom is the window. While she is seated in her chair and gazes out from her lone window, Louise perceives “clouds that had met and piled one above the other” (288). Clouds lying atop one another depict the feeling of being smothered or repressed. Being looked upon as frail or ill by her family members due to “being afflicted with heart trouble,” can conjure feelings of being smothered and inadequacy, as represented by the clouds (287). Amongst the clouds in the sky fall a “delicious breath of rain” which cleanses and nourishes the new creations growing in the “new spring life” (287). Spring is symbolic of a new life to begin, something that Louise Mallard does not have. With no children to warm her cold home, she is left to witness the new life beginning to form outside her house without being able to contribute to it herself. This rain showering is not a heavy flow but much of a delicate mist. Rain signifies cleansing, a washing away of the old and bringing in the new.

The recent death of Brently, even though she grieves for his loss, can be seen as her cleansing, a new beginning. The author's meticulously written storyline can illustrate all of the symbols to be found living just outside of the window.

Lastly, Chopin displays her use of intricate symbolism within Louise Mallard's last name. When Louise weds Brently, she is forced to dispose of her maiden name and undertake his surname. This becomes her entire identity; no longer Louise, but forever "Mrs. Mallard" (287). Her last name has now become a shackle to society, revealing the hidden symbol represented within it. She is now bound to this life of solitude within the prison of her house, all because of her last name and role as a missus. Her only duty in life is to host parties and look pretty, letting her husband shine as she withers into nothing more than a perished wallflower. Much to her dismay, Louise's surname of Mallard holds witness to yet another symbolic aspect of her life.

When one envisions a mallard duck, pretty visuals of brown ducks adorned with vibrant green heads and iridescent blue hues on their wings, come to mind, highlighting the birds' beauty. Yes, these are mallard ducks, but they are males. Parallel with Louise, female mallard ducks are simply brown, easily overlooked, and forgotten by others. The pressing views and roles that society pushes on Louise can be seen throughout the short story, stamping out any freedom she may have. One of her main roles as a wife is to produce children, yet "there would be no one to live for her during those coming years" (288). Children, what is seen as a crown for mothers, will not be worn by Mrs. Mallard. The lack of children in her life illustrates her failure as a wife, as seen by society. Through the oppression and despair displayed in Louise's life, one can begin to see the freedom she covets.

Kate Chopin's story of Louise Mallard spreads light on the vast array of symbols to be found within her beautifully poetic story. The inside of Mrs. Mallard's room holds more information than one can take in at first glance, often showcasing the messages to be found in ordinary objects. Furthermore, the symbolic new life beginning outside her window testifies to Louise's inner sorrow and pressing need for freedom. Similarly, her surname presents hidden meaning, resulting in a sad epiphany of sorts. Through analyzing "The Story of an Hour," the

yearning and burning desire for freedom can be found. Society and the traditional role of a wife in the 1800s era can feel almost like a vice, squeezing life until there is no more. The symbolic use of objects, words, and metaphors are found throughout Chopin's work. Although one only spends an hour's worth of time with Louise through the couple pages of words, the story and lessons will stay a lifetime.

#### Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour." *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, edited by Kelly J. Mayes, 12<sup>th</sup> ed., W. W. Norton Company, 2017, pp. 287-288.

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### THE SUICIDE CLINIC

by: Emily Mosier



*Every productive society should have this written on their heart — an unhappy citizen is useless.*

The waiting room was boring. It was ordinary, like any waiting room anywhere. Colorless carpet and dull walls that faded into the background. Normal waiting room chairs, normal waiting room people. Even the fish tank was forgettable and drab.

His gaze flickered anxiously from one face to another. The people were diverse, but they all had the same slow, boring air of furniture. No bright colors. No scars. No stories here.

He looked at the fish tank and tried to believe that he was more alive than the rest of the room. The more he looked at the fish, the more he hated the fish — and himself. He mindlessly fingered the paper folder in his lap, folding and unfolding the corner.

It was a relief when the small thing of a nurse finally sauntered into the room and called his name. "Jonathon Young."

He rose and followed her down a hallway and into a pragmatic, red-colored office where she abandoned him. There was a maroon armchair and a large red oak desk. Behind the desk was a very tall, very plump man with a greasy face. He had thin hair and mouse-like whiskers on his chins, and he wore a deep black suit with yellow buttons. The name card on his desk was engraved: *Administrator Ross Fritelli*.

Fritelli gestured to the armchair, and Jonathon sat.

"Good evening," he said.

"Evening. How can I help you today?" Fritelli's voice was jovial and feminine. His teeth were tiny and yellow.

"I'd, um, like to, um, file my second verbal request and, possibly, get an appointment date, today."

"Wow! You're already pretty far into the process." Fritelli pulled a piece of paper out of his desk drawer and began writing on it, his head bent. "Full name?" He asked without looking up.

"Oh, um, Jonathon Lee Young."

"Age?"

"Seventeen."

"Reason for request?"

"Terminal illness."

At that, Fritelli stopped and, to Jonathon's dismay, looked him straight in the eyes.

"You're very admirable," Fritelli said. "I'm glad you're not one of those blokes who come in here and give the reason of 'hopelessness.' It's ignorant, honestly. Nothing but immaturity. I can understand mental illness as a reason, to a degree anyway, but when someone comes in here wanting termination because they feel sorry for themselves - Yikes! I want to talk them out of it, but it's against the law, me being a clinic official and all. Personal autonomy, you know?"

Jonathon gave his head a curt nod. He wanted to tell the fat man that any reason for suicide was hopelessness, but all he said was, "Yes, Sir."

Fritelli continued, his neck fat vibrating like gelatin while he talked. "Don't get me wrong; I think it's a great thing. Everyone gets to decide for themselves how much suffering is bearable - complete

freedom of belief!" Fritelli paused, and his neck took a second to settle back into place. "But you especially are very admirable, Jonathon, because people like you are the reason our ancestors pushed so hard for these clinics to exist. Very admirable, very admirable. Do you have your papers?"

Jonathon handed him his folder.

"Let's see. Medical diagnoses, parents' consent form, *first* verbal request, suicide letter. Yep! It's all here." Fritelli straightened the papers by tapping them against his desk. "You're all good to go, John. The soonest appointment I can get you is at eight o'clock Monday morning. Just report back to the clinic then. I'm legally required to remind you that you can change your mind at any time. But," Fritelli smirked, "I'm sure you won't. Enjoy your freedom, kid."

Jonathon walked out of The Suicide Clinic alone, thoughtful, and his hands in his pockets. The night was thick with blackness, and he couldn't decide how he should feel. He had roughly thirty-seven hours to live. He had spent more time in The Clinic than intended, but he began walking in the direction of City Park anyway, hoping he wasn't too late. He had promised Abra he would be there as soon as he got out. He neared the gated entrance and was delighted to see that the firework show had not started. He was going to be able to keep his promise. The ticketer knew him and waved him through without payment.

City Park was the most popular recreation allowed. There were hundreds of acres of sycamore and sweetgum trees and pleasant walking trails. There were clearings and playgrounds and gorgeous gardens that bloomed all year: blood red roses and royal blue magnolias, and bright yellow sunflowers that stood in tall, neat rows and swayed gently when you walked by them. It was no surprise that people chose to spend so many of their hours here - the park was the soul of the city, a serene bright spot boxed in on all sides by gray factory life and smog.

Each Saturday night, there was a firework show by a different local artist. Fireworks were a very sophisticated art form, and very tricky. The artist had to plan, create, and time everything with excruciating mindfulness. His dad had once remarked that these shows

were almost like movies, but he had looked sick and refused to answer when he asked what a movie was.

The spacious clearing set aside for the show was full of people, and Jonathon took his place amongst them on the damp grass. While he waited for the show to begin, he made up a story in his head about a woman who lived in the sky and controlled the affairs of men. It was an original, unheard-of concept, and he smiled at the thought of what a great novel it would make. Then his smile melted away and the fireworks started.

It was the best show he had ever seen. Giant pictures of people and animals and love danced across the sky — trail-blazing and made of fire. Ash and hot, gray paper fell in his hair. He savored the stentorian bangs of thunder, and his heart dropped as each image exploded and fell back to earth. Jonathon cheered and clapped more vigorously than anyone else.

The show ended, and there was huge applause. Abra, the artist, stepped up onto a park bench with a microphone in hand, and she thanked everyone for coming. Colorful smoke billowed in the air behind her. There was another round of applause, and everyone got up to leave.

Jonathon approached Abra as she stepped down off the bench. He hugged her, trapping her arms and pressing his cheek against her shoulder. She laughed, wiggled free, and picked a shred of paper off his jacket. "The show was incredible," he told her as he kissed her on the mouth.

Abra was eighteen years old, and she was the type of person you couldn't help but fall in love with. She had chestnut brown hair and freckles, one on the tip of her nose. She was an enthusiastic, chimerical girl — a literal ray of sunshine - and nothing could have kept her from music and art. His favorite memories were of them sitting in the back of the bus, her legs thrown over his lap, and the sunlight making her hair golden. She would sing and play her ukulele, and he would listen and smile and admire the gap in her teeth.

They strolled hand-in-hand over to a wooded trail where they could walk and talk in private. Moonlight fell on them in broken beams through the treetops. Jonathon told her about his appointment.

"That soon?" Abra asked, heartbroken.

"That soon. I'm going to die within the next few years anyway. Does it really matter when?"

"Of course it does!" She exclaimed. "There's so much you could still do. And you don't know you're going to die - they're always coming up with new treatments."

"I'm tired of new treatments."

"But there's so much to live for, like, bright colors and walking in the rain, and me." Her mouth quivered with melancholy.

"I'm tired, Abra."

She didn't plead with him further, and she felt ashamed and selfish for wanting to. It was disrespectful, and besides, it was his constitutional right to die. They doubled back through the woods and entered The Park's Cafe, a quaint, peachy building. They ordered ice cream and sat at a small, metal booth next to a window. Half of Abra's face was blue under the bright, fluorescent lights, and the other half was a flimsy yellow from the window. They discussed everything except him: their families, school, culture, and about how sports had finally been made illegal.

"I don't see the harm," Abra said. "Some people think they're nice."

"They're dangerous."

"So is alcohol. So are cigarettes."

"But those are slow killers, and worth it, too. Besides, wine is fine in moderation and cigarettes don't really cause lung cancer. That's just an old wives' tale."

"Killing yourself is dangerous."

Jonathon tried not to show his irritation. "That's different."

"I know."

Silence, and then Jonathon prompted her, "Do you think so?"

"Do I think what?"

"That sports are nice."

"Well, no."

"See! They're stupid!" He shrieked, emotional. "Sure, people are mourning over it now but in another generation, they won't know to be upset. Instead, they'll turn to intellectual things that will advance our

society and they'll be much happier for it. I mean, where would we be if we squandered all our time on useless things?"

"Happy? No, no. Never mind. I don't mean that. I love you," she said.

Abra smiled at him, and Jonathon gave her a forgiving look that said *What a lovely, silly girl I have.*

He reached across the table and took Abra's hand. He leaned forward and kissed her knuckles, softly. Their conversation turned to other things, and their speech became easy again. Abra was her happy self again. It felt normal sitting in the cafe with her. The only off thing was that his ice cream tasted like ash, but he ate all of it anyway. Now that his days were numbered, he was tainted by death, and so was everything he touched. There was nothing to do but accept it. After they finished eating, Abra drove him to her dorm. They made love for the first and last time. It was a macabre experience. Then she drove him home.

It was well past midnight, and his mother was the only one still up; his father and sister were asleep. She was sitting on the edge of the living room sofa, the radio on, quietly playing static. She had been waiting for him and stood up when he came in.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Eight o'clock Monday morning."

She made a dreadful, gurgling noise like she was being strangled, and she choked out a few words that didn't make sense. Her dull hair was collected atop her head in a messy bun, and her face looked sunken and caved in like she was strung out. She gave him a peck on the cheek and rushed out to order a cake so it'd be ready for the party the next day.

He went to bed, but couldn't turn his thoughts off well enough to sleep. His illness sometimes caused him to be bedridden for weeks at a time. During these spells, his mother had to stay home and take care of him. She did a wonderful job; she doted on him and never complained. Soon, he wouldn't be a burden to her anymore.

Laying there in bed, Jonathon imagined how much happier his family would be without his mood swings and him being sick all the time. He could see their grinning faces, and he thought of all the places



they could afford to go when they didn't have to worry about medical bills. There would be nothing to be ashamed of anymore, nothing holding them back. Yes, he thought dreamily, they would be much better off without him. He knew his death would hurt them, but it would be the *last* time he hurt them. When he had told his father he wanted to request termination, he had clasped his meaty hands on his shoulder and said, "I'm proud." Then, they had smoked cigars together. Jonathon finally fell asleep dreaming about tobacco.

The next morning was Sunday, and Jonathon wanted to help set up for the party that would last all day. His family wouldn't hear of it. "It's for your honor," they said. So he sat outside and tied and untied his shoes until the guests started to arrive.

The party ended up being more of a farce than anything, but he gave his family credit for trying. Their apartment was a modest mint green color, and they had hung fairy lights in loops around the ceiling. There were photographs of him everywhere, displaying the milestones of his life like priceless museum exhibits. There were large bouquets of colorful flowers and the table was filled with a buffet of his favorite foods, a giant seven-layered cake sat in the center. It was sweet and thoughtful, but the atmosphere of the party was sweaty, uncomfortable, and boring.

Hordes of people milled in and out the door with their shoes on, tracking in dirt. They stood around like they were dead, and the ones who weren't awkward talked too loud and said dumb, cliché things like, "I love you." His relatives hugged him once, remarked on his height, and disappeared to get drunk or to flirt. Children cried, pulled at the decorations, and chased each other around. Jonathon did his best to act like he was having a good time. He put disks in the phonograph and danced, and told too many jokes.

There was a mutual dislike between him and most of his guests, but he greeted each of them with fake sincerity.

"You know, my niece had chronic depression, and termination was the perfect solution for her. Isn't it just a blessing how you can choose when to stop suffering? Why, hardly anyone *chooses* to live past sixty anymore."

"Yes, Ma'am. We live in a lucky country."

And, "Way to take death by the throat, Johnny! There isn't anything we can't conquer, huh?"

"Oh, yes Sir! I'm my own man!"

His schoolmates reminisced and told stories about him. They patted him on the back and rustled his hair. One or two looked at him with something close to jealousy. The only person he was slightly glad to see was Dr. Hurston, a man he had come to respect over the years. Dr. Hurston politely took him aside and asked if he was sure of his decision. Jonathon told him, yes, and he nodded gravely. They hugged, and he told him he was like the son he never had.

Later, drunk, Hurston boasted loudly over a pint that he simply could not wait to use a body with such a condition for research. "A win for science," he laughed merrily.

The sky darkened to evening, and he knew the party would begin to dwindle down soon. He was exhausted, so he stepped out into the yard for a moment of air. Jonathon's sister appeared at his elbow two seconds later. At thirteen years old, June was a wire-framed girl with black bangs and glasses.

"I have a present for you," she said, holding up a silver chain with a dangling metal locket. He held out his hand as she dropped it in his palm. "For you to be buried in," she said meekly. With misty eyes, she vanished back into the apartment.

He opened the clasp. Inside were two pictures - one of Abra, and one of his sister. His girls. He slipped it over his neck and hid it in his shirt. He heard a high-pitched chinging noise and his dad's heavy voice saying, "Gather 'round. Gather 'round. I have something to say," Jonathon stepped back inside and stood just beside the door. He quickly scanned the room for June, but couldn't find her. He did see his mother, though, sitting in a chair behind his dad. They nodded at each other.

The living room was crowded, and people hugged the walls. His dad stood upright on a chair in the middle of the room. He held a champagne glass high in one hand and a spoon low in the other. The light was on, but darkness seeped in through the windows and cracks in the door, casting a grave look on his dad's low, drooping features. He spoke with a confident, booming voice that captured everyone's attention.

"I just want to say that I have an incredible son, and he has enriched my life in magnificent ways. He has made me a beautiful person. He is humble, smart, and a true man. I won't lie and say everything's been easy," he paused, and they made eye contact, "but that's alright. The harsh reality of life is this: we're all going to die, and life will go on without so much as a single tear. The ocean will still rage, flowers will still bloom, and the sun will still rise. It is up to us to make ourselves matter because death doesn't take into consideration our own perception of our worth. Life is *hard*! It's *painful*! We get sick or hurt, and you can ignore that pain, you can be inspired by it, or, hell, you could even find comfort in it! But some can't do any of that. They can't let it go. Happiness is the ultimate goal in life, and happiness is a choice, but it's the hardest choice you'll ever have to make. We must not find fault in those who can't make that choice."

Jonathon's mother started sobbing, hiding her face in her hands. Everyone shifted uncomfortably, embarrassed for her. Jonathon resisted the urge to go and comfort her, afraid he'd embarrass her further. Flushed, his dad tugged on his coat sleeves and hurried through the rest of his speech. His mother's sharp inhales of breath were audible between words.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that I respect my son's decision. He is honorable, he is wise, and despite nature's indifference, his life has been prodigiously meaningful. I will always cherish the time I've spent with Jonathon. We all will. Through us, he will live forever. You all have my gratitude for being here and for your support; it shows how far our society has truly come. To Jonathon!" His dad lowered his champagne glass and drowned it.

Everyone said together, "JONATHON!"

The speech signaled that it wouldn't be inappropriate to leave, but first, everyone insisted on sitting down on the sofa beside him for a picture - and to get their last words in, of course. The camera burned his eyes. A big flash, and then the hunky machine spat out the little, white square. Jonathon glanced at a couple of them and he thought he already looked like a ghost. His brown hair was limp and stringy, his mouth pale, and his eyes were yellow from medication.

One by one, he said goodbye to everyone he knew.

Afterward, the apartment was a disaster. Dirty plates and cups were scattered throughout the home. Half the fairy lights had either fallen loose or been pulled down, and some little kid had picked the flower petals to shreds all over the carpet. His family went to bed without bothering to clean up.

Jonathon ended the night drunk, lying flat on his back in the yard. He looked up, and the sky seemed infinite; the grass was soft and cool. Spreading his limbs out like a snow angel, he imagined that the ground underneath him was hollow. He imagined that it could open up and swallow him whole until he was no more.

"I don't want to die," he whispered to no one. But it was too late and he knew it. He repeated his name to himself over and over again. "Jonathon Young, Jonathon Young, Jonathon Young." He was real, and for the first time in his life, he felt like it. He liked to make up stories and play games with his sister. He had a deep appreciation for colors and he loved other people with a terrible fierceness. He felt an uneasy fear about the darkness ahead of him. Jonathon laid there, hollow and small, in the grass until the orange light of a new day arrived.

The barber showed up at their door around six o'clock. He was completely primed by the time eight rolled around: scrubbed pink, neat new haircut, and a perfectly tailored suit, deep black with shiny yellow buttons. He wore his sister's necklace underneath, and he felt the cold metal against his heart. The barber even gave his face enough coats of make-up to make him look healthy.

He marched to The Suicide Clinic a new man.

In history class, it is taught that suicide used to be a stigmatized, dishonorable thing — a shady, fleeting illness, and then an epidemic. Now, it is common knowledge that quality of life is the most important thing, and what constitutes quality is to be determined by each individual for themselves. Freedom is an essential part of happiness. Who is the government to say you can't die if you want to? It's victimless, so what's the harm?

They didn't allow anyone to go in the room with him, so he was all alone — unless you counted the tall, silent doctor who hid his face in a surgical mask.

Jonathon barely felt the IV go into his arm. The doctor asked if there were any last words he wanted recorded, but he couldn't think of anything, so he just shook his head.

The bed was warm, and he listened to tiny, mechanical noises. Thinking was hard, and he saw sunspots that he mistook for fireworks. The ceiling was blue, but, oh God, the walls and floor were a sparkling white. The window was covered with a black sheet. The window was covered. The window was covered, and no light could get in.

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## **The Time Fate Was Wrong**

by: Molly Brandolino



Most people think Fate is romantic. The idea that there's a person, opportunity, or even a moment they're destined to find that will change their entire life's trajectory, sounds exciting and magical. They're wrong. Fate isn't random; it's methodical. It guides the universe and its people along a neat path of its own careful making. Those spontaneous moments the world so cherishes are planned meticulously down to the most minute detail. Fate makes sure that things happen the way they are supposed to happen.

I should know. I am Fate.

Rather than waving a wand, aligning the stars, or whatever it is that people think I do, most of my days are spent delaying planes and subways and arguing over weather with Mother Nature. All for the purpose of orchestrating what I like to call "little interruptions," otherwise known as "twists of Fate." This job, with its repetitiveness and predictability, gets a little tedious after a few millennia. After all, a book's plot twist isn't as exciting for the author who has rewritten it five times just to entertain an audience. Now and again, though, there are outliers who break up the monotony of my days. There are those who stray from my careful itinerary to create a fate of their own design.

Though they crash through all my hard work, these people are secretly my favorites, for it is so rare that Fate is surprised.

I met one of them on a particularly boring Tuesday a couple of months ago. It was raining in the most annoying way possible: heavier than a sprinkle but not a downpour. It was just enough to make everyone's clothes sticky and uncomfortable but not so much that Mary Langston would choose to drive the short distance to work that day, instead of walking. A deliveryman rang her apartment's doorbell exactly two minutes before she left, providing just enough distraction that she forgot her umbrella and was forced to pick up a newspaper to protect herself from the irritating drizzle. She hopped down off the curb at Jefferson and Maine (not Bellview and Cedar, as that curb was a hair too short), jostling an ad loose from the Lifestyle pages showing auditions for *Wicked!* with a major theater company. This provided her with the perfect opportunity to reach for her dream of becoming an actress. My job was nearly done for the day, or so I thought.

I was waiting for her in a small café not too far from Miss Langston's newsstand. She came here often, much to the delight of the café's baker, who always rushed from the kitchens to greet her with flour-caked hands and a shy smile. Today was no different. The old, brassy bell above the door jingled cheerfully as she marched into the cozy space. The determined *click-clack* of her steps stood out like a clock ticking too loud and too fast, offbeat from the café's easy pace. She reached the counter seconds before the baker did. Her bright, crystal eyes didn't meet his soft, amber ones right away, instead choosing to survey the assortment of pastries in the cloudy glass case before her with rapt attention. When she finally looked up and announced her choice of a bear claw and a cherry danish, it was my time to step in.

The café's atmosphere did most of the work for me, but I added a few extra touches like a Portuguese song playing on the radio, an advertisement for a travel agency on the bus bench outside, and a particularly good deal on almonds from the baker's supplier so that the scent of D'Amaretti biscotti would waft through the air. You see, this woman had been enjoying an extremely successful career at an investment firm and had the stress and money to show for it. However,

she also had a childhood dream of visiting Europe that had only grown stronger with time and, despite her recent sabbatical from work, she had failed to act upon it. I figured, like most people, she just needed a little push.

It's what I planned for her. It seemed right. I knew her dreams, fears, and entire life's journey thus far, as I do for everyone. But this girl knew what most people often forget. No one, regardless of omniscient knowledge, can know us as well as we know ourselves. This is true even for those who follow my plans. It is up to them to choose their Fate each day. I only make introductions to possibilities. Some work to stay on the path I have shown them, while some cross to a different one after some time. Others, like this girl, pick another path entirely. I am but a broker in deals of their own makings.

Then why, you may ask, am I necessary at all? If everyone ultimately chooses for themselves, why does Fate exist? The answer is simple. People need suggestions. They need someone to point them toward doors that are cracked open, ones they may want to look inside. Without me, the universe would be directionless — trapped in a never-ending, cosmic version of the “What do you want for dinner?” debate. You're welcome.

Anyways, back to the girl.

As she paid for her pastries, the baker had become affected by the atmosphere I had fruitlessly created and was recounting a story from his time at culinary school in Paris. It was the perfect final touch, but rather than heading home and booking a plane ticket, the girl left the bakery in the opposite direction from which she came and found herself across the street from a vacant building for rent. She stood there for a long time, and I with her, both of us deep in thought. Suddenly, she turned from the building and began walking back towards her home. I thought I might have been right after all until she pulled out her phone and dialed the number on the “For Rent” sign. Then she dialed a number for a quote on a fence to surround the building's yard, googled where to buy pet food and supplies in bulk, and created job postings for groomers, trainers, and animal caregivers on several job search sites. Confused and out of breath, I struggled to keep up. No one had energy

like this girl. By the time we reached her apartment building, where we were greeted by her beloved Labrador, Lucy, I began to see her vision.

Yes, she had been looking for a change, something rewarding to fill her time, but traveling wasn't it. Her answer was to make a difference and do something wonderful with what she had earned. She wanted to give back to her best friend, who greeted her after every hard day from work. That's exactly what she did.

About a month later, her non-profit animal shelter was up and running. I stopped by once in a while, just to see how her dream was going. I usually found her outside in the large, enclosed yard playing with the rescue dogs or in the warm cats' room, petting the kitties lounging on their condos. She was always beaming.

I had never been so happy to be wrong.

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## **Those That Haunt Us**

by: Alexis Ellison



I haven't slept more than four hours a night this week. I managed to force myself out of bed today. I showered, brushed my teeth, and did a load of laundry, but my bathroom counter is still cluttered. I can barely find a spot to place my phone. I've accomplished things today, and yet... the bathroom door slams open.

"Hey, Callan! I see you're trying to fix yourself again. You *really* think you can do it on your own? You really want to try this again?"

Ciaran. I can already sense his malicious intent. I can see him wearing an old black sweatshirt and smell his heavy cologne; the stench of filthy laundry emanating from his disparaged corner of the room. I hate him.

"What Ciaran? What do you want?"

"Aw, come on, don't be like that. I'm just checking up on my favorite little buddy."

"We are not 'buddies,' Ciaran. Go away."



“That’s cool, that’s cool... where is Lilith? I haven’t seen her all day. I miss her.”

“Then go with her and leave me alone. She’s too overbearing.”

“Of course, of course. Hey, don’t you remember when we met her for the first time? It was finals week. You were so stressed about your exams I thought you were going to implode. And then Lilith and I took care of you.”

“Stop. Lilith made it worse. She brought up the worst possible outcome so often that it made me worried. I’m surprised I didn’t collapse from all that overthinking.”

“She still does. You should see yourself. It’s hilarious. You look terrible.”

“You’re the only one who thinks it’s funny.”

“Lilith enjoys it, too. Even if she doesn’t show it. You’re fun to talk about.”

“You mean to laugh at.”

Just then, Lilith barges into the door, causing Ciaran to stumble.

“Lilith — you cow — you almost knocked me down!”

“What? Did you say something? You said something. I swear I heard you talking about me.”

I hide my face in my hands as I lean forward against the bathroom counter, knocking over the cluttered mess across the tile floor. “No, no, no. I don’t know if I can deal with both of you right now. You’re going to make me have a...”

Their bickering stops. A gradual smile crawls across their lips as they embrace. “*Panic attack!*” they exclaim together in unison.

“What is it? What happened Cal? Is it because you think Brennan hates you? What did you do wrong? Why did you do something wrong?” Lilith frowned in forced interest.

“Oh, Lilith, please. He doesn’t need to worry about that. Of course, he hates him. If he didn’t then he wouldn’t have left him. He’s a terrible friend, you know.”

Ciaran turns his head over and gives me a wink.

“Isn’t there some way that he can fix it? Can he fix it? I hope he can.” Lilith mused.

“Maybe. But Callan is the reason he left, anyway. Why would he ever want to befriend Callan, again? He loves being alone, why would he want to be friends with anybody?”

My vision blurs as my eyes swell with unshed tears.

“Callan, if you offended Brennan so badly, then aren’t you worried that the rest of your friends will reject you — just like your mother did? That was your fault too remember? Do you miss her too? He doesn’t need to worry about it, though, right Lil?” Ciaran smirked.

I can no longer hold in my tears. It feels like my chest is collapsing.

“No, no. He definitely needs to worry about it. His friends already left him. He’s alone. And it’s *his fault*.”

“Get out.” I growl.

“What?”

“Get out, *now*.”

“Dude, chill. We’re just having a conversation.”

“You’re assholes...both of you. My mother dying is not my fault. Brennan is going through things of his own. All you do is terrorize me. You’re monsters. You aren’t my friends.”

I shove Ciaran into Lilith, trying to push them out of the door. They don’t budge.

“If that were true, you wouldn’t keep us around.” Ciaran states.

“If you could push harder, you’d do it. You like having us around. Don’t you like having us around? You like having us around.” Lilith seems pleased with her delusion.

I push them both out of the bathroom with a final shove, “Shut up! If I knew how to get rid of you both, neither of you would be here anymore!”

I slam the door and turn the lock before either of them has a chance to respond. I lean my head against the doorway. *I’m not sure how I would function without either of you, but at least you wouldn’t be able to make me feel like this.* I admit this in a whisper. They’ve been here all my life, how couldn’t I?

I scramble for my phone amongst the clutter and click on a contact. I can’t be alone right now. Not with *them*. I can hear them,

chattering about me in a frenzy behind the door. I place the phone to my ear and the ringing echoes in the silence of the small bathroom.

“Hello?”

“Sanne; I need you right now.”

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When Ciaran and Lilith quiet down, and I’m sure they’ve fallen asleep by the door, I manage to drag myself out of the bathroom and into the living room to wait for Sanne. The only light in the room emanated from a small lamp next to my couch. The soft yellow glow revealed the chaotic state of my apartment. Empty fast-food bags were scattered across the coffee table amongst a clutter of old soda cans and water bottles. The atmosphere is unpleasant. I can’t bring myself to solve the issue, much to the amusement of Ciaran and the dissatisfaction of Lilith.

A quiet tap on the door brings me to my senses. Sanne is here. She bursts into my apartment as soon as the door opened, “Callan, what’s wrong?”

Struggling to keep up with her pace, I respond, “Well—”

“Callan. Who are they?”

“Who? There shouldn’t be anyone else in the apartment.”

“So, are you telling me that those two broke in here? Because they don’t seem to be trying to rob the place.”

I follow her line of sight to find her staring at Ciaran and Lilith.

“You can see them?”

“Am I not supposed to see them? Who are they? They seem familiar.”

“They — are my friends. They aren’t very nice to me. They’re both horrible, actually. We had an argument today. I want them out, Sanne.”

“Ha... and yet, we’re still here...” muttered Ciaran in his sleep.

“I see,” Sanne spares an unimpressed glance at Ciaran, “Do you want to go outside for some privacy?”

“Yes...I would like that.”

We walk out into the brisk autumn air. It’s almost cold enough to throw a jacket over my thin sweater.

“So, what’s the situation with those two?” Sanne asked.

“I don’t know how to get rid of them. They follow me around my apartment. They insult me and terrorize me, and guilt me about things that aren’t in my control. I don’t know if I can handle either of them much longer.”

“How long have they been with you?”

“Ciaran has been here for a very long time. I don’t remember exactly when I met him, I remember knowing him since I was little, but I met Lilith during my freshman year of college when the anxiety of school started getting to me.” I stare at the traffic below us, remembering their cruel words. “I don’t know why I’ve let them follow me around for so long. They aren’t my friends. I just got used to them. I’ve let them stay for too long.”

She places a gentle hand on my back, “I’m so sorry, Callan. What do you call them?”

“Well, I call them Ciaran and Lilith, but those aren’t their real names,” I hang my head in shame, “They’re...”

“I know what they are, Callan.”

A few tears begin to fall as the feeling of relief overwhelms me. I crumple to Sanne’s chest as she consoles me. I should feel a little embarrassed. I feel like a child.

“Hey...hey,” Sanne’s voice has a careful gentleness to it, “I understand. I struggle with something like that too, okay? They just look a little more like my parents than me. You are not alone. Do you hear me, Callan?”

I nod.

“It’s okay if you cry, you know.”

I feel myself fall apart in her embrace in relief. I cannot even feel ashamed to feel like a child anymore.

“I know someone. She’s my therapist. She has helped me a lot. I can tell you her name and give you her contact information when we get back inside. Would you like that?”

I nod again.

“Okay. Let’s do that.”

Ciaran and Lilith stand against the sliding door. Their features look warped, and their bodies are disfigured. They are melting against

the glass. They twist and convulse in their agony, but the sound of their desperation is scarcely larger than a whisper. After Sanne helps me clean up a little, we end the night off with a movie.

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## Walking in Autumn

by: Ellie Russell



“The goldenrod’s turning brown,” Lori observed. “Kind of looks like cotton.” She hugged her jacket tighter, puffing against the cold.

Her mom gazed out over the frost-bitten field. She and Lori were out walking, listening to an audiobook that was tucked into Lori’s coat pocket. The story was reaching its climax. As they listened, Lori drank in the sights and sounds of their neighborhood. Across the field, she could see the rose bushes in their backyard. The neighbors’ Bradford pears were blazing against the late October gray, and the lake lay like liquid mercury from a distance.

A mockingbird caught her eye. Perched atop a nearby fencepost, it sang through its madcap medley. *Probably the same one that always woke me up at the crack of dawn this summer.* Other birds twittered all around, from old oak branches and the high weeds. She listened for a while, then paid attention to the book again. The road bent and wound. Before the chapter ended, just when the spy was about to be marched in, they reached the stop sign they’d always used as a mile marker. “Aw man, I gotta head back,” Lori said. “I need time to change for the party.” She paused the book.

“What time does it start?”

“Six o’clock.”

“Okay. Drive careful.”

“Yes, ma’am! I think I should be back in time to hang out tonight.”

“Sounds good. Tell Owen and Dad I’m making baked potatoes for dinner.”

As her mom marched on, Lori turned and started back up the road. *Wish I got in earlier. I’ve missed our walks.* Anxiety tugged at the

corners of her mind, but she shooed it away in favor of excitement. She thought of the party— of her hometown friends and her favorite Halloween mini-series. The country felt oddly quiet without a narrator. Construction clay clogged the treads of Lori’s shoes, and she looked around at all the half-built houses and half-laid foundations. Up the neighborhood’s only sideroad, a little girl rattled about on her tricycle, her parents sitting on their porch swing. They waved as Lori passed by the cul-de-sac.

Rounding a corner, she covered her lips and nose and breathed into her hands. She glanced over at the oak-wreathed fishing pond. She thought about the time — almost a decade ago now — when some neighborhood kids had taken her and her best friend Kate fishing. They hadn’t caught anything, but they still had fun casting lines and goofing around. Nowadays, the whole lot is fenced in and sprouting “**NO TRESPASSING**” signs. The new property owners said they’d do something with it someday.

A little further on, a bluebird flurried past. It perched on a mailbox and tipped its head, black-bead eyes glinting and little chest quivering. Lori stopped and watched it, breathless with admiration. When it flew off, she noticed that the mailbox flag was up. *I remember when Kate and Ann, and I used to pick flowers and weave them around all the flags. Gosh, that was back in like, fifth grade.* Ann was married and working now. Kate and her boyfriend were planning on getting engaged in the spring, once she’d finished her internship. She already had a job lined up.

Lori kept walking. She thought of the song that would open their *Over the Garden Wall* watch party. Since no one was around, she sang a snatch. *“Our long bygone burdens, mere echoes of the spring... but where have we come, and where shall we end?”* Lori waved as a car trundled by. She glanced at all the houses she passed — houses whose kids had grown and gone, whose owners had moved out or passed away and been replaced by new ones. One driveway was lined with crepe myrtles — their leaves dappled orange and green like hard candy. She watched the house and felt that her chest was crammed with those myrtle leaves, rankling and scratching.

The former owners had always hosted her youth group's Halloween party. Lori looked up the driveway and remembered the costume contests, basketball games, and chili cookoffs. Back behind the property were the woods where they'd play late night games of capture the flag. Armed only with glowsticks, they'd race across the pine needles and leaf litter, vying to tag invaders, guard prisoners, or steal their rivals' standards. While the base in the close-growing pines was more strategic, Lori always preferred the little hollow with its noisy brooklet and fallen tree bridge. *I'd usually volunteer to guard the flag.* She snorted in amusement. *The one time I went on offense, I stepped in a hole and rolled my ankle!*

She remembered that time — how her older brother Owen had helped her back to the house, waving off the other team and finding the flattest route. He was leaving in the spring. As close as they'd been since he'd finished college and moved back in, he had saved up enough to take in-person grad classes a few states away. Gone would be the jam sessions, the road trips with friends, and even just hanging out watching football games. *He'll be gone, too. But... there it is.*

She took a frosty, trembling breath. "The world keeps on going," she muttered. "So where am I going? What am I going to do once I graduate in the spring?"

She stopped for a moment; then she realized how cold she was getting. "I'm gonna be late." She followed the road and tried to put a spring in her stride. Despite her best efforts, though, her melancholy grew with every step. The future was right there— a yawning, dusk-drowned cavern into which she'd have no choice but to plummet. She tried to think of some revelation that would ease the bite of time. But nothing came besides the faith that always lay beneath her life. Lori missed the old days, and she would miss these days, fast-fading.

She watched as the wind caught a neighbor's hickory and rattled loose a few of its leaves. They swirled down, falling like gilded ticker tape. Lori kept walking, remembering that fall was her mom's favorite season. "There's beauty in the change," she'd say.

Lori picked up her song. "*How the gentle wind beckons through the leaves, as autumn colors fall...*" She stared out over the open pastureland. *I think it's okay to be sad about it. And to not know what*

*comes next.* She stepped up her pace, picturing her dad coming home from work and waiting in the living room to say hi. Owen would be sneaking downstairs to swipe more Reese's pumpkins— brainfood for the online midterm he'd been working on.

She thought about her friends and the watch party. And as she passed the field with its dying goldenrod, she finished out her song, deciding to change one word.

*"Dancing in a swirl of golden memories, the loveliest... lives... of all."*

She switched on her audiobook, listening for the climax.

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## Why You Probably Shouldn't Ride the Bus

by: Werner Quintanilla



I envision myself outside, in Los Angeles — the city I grew up in, and I'm wearing a jacket I thrifted at a store that I've never had the opportunity to return to. My mother says that I should not be disclosing where I bought the jacket. *"Bajita la mano en decir que es de segunda, diles que lo comprastes nueva,"* she advises me. I don't care. She also says that I shouldn't be out this late, because dangerous men lurk in the shadows, in *my* shadow. She says they will either rape me or beat me, rob me and kill me, and because of the incessant ranting she makes about it, I find myself picturing the start of the confrontation happening sometimes. I still don't care. It's a rather dangerous daydream. "Get in the car!" he commands, gesturing towards the back. He is overweight, balding, sweaty, and driving a busted van. I use my knowledge of television cliches to imagine the biggest loser imaginable. He's a short man, a stubbly, smelly little guy, and he has these plates from Alabama, just because I like it. In my dream, there's always some kind of Alabama. An "other place." A place I long for, that I've never been. I take a long, hard look at his plate, and I start to talk about Alabama. Talk to me about Alabama. *Alabama? I'm thinking of going to college there, nice!* Epitomizing my own angst, I shake his hand, introduce myself with a



smile, and I close the door behind me as I step into the welcoming darkness.

I am now at a liquor store, buying the cheapest thing I can to get some change for the bus. I take the farthest seat back that is available (only old people sit in the front) and I put my headphones in; a song to pass the time. During the pause that happens between songs, I catch snippets of people talking to each other, making small talk for just about anything. It keeps the boredom away, it lightens up your heart, I think. I've been watching too many movies. Outside I see them parting in separate directions on those busy Los Angeles streets, most likely to never see each other again. I wonder if they'll ever come across each other someplace else — if they'll remember their “instantaneous acquaintance.” I wonder about who they are, what they've done, and where they're going. I wonder if they wonder too. I look at the ocean of unfamiliar people, all unique and at the same time indifferent and unrecognizable from the rest. You aren't *special*, you're only *unique* like *everybody* else. Humanity's juxtaposition, you could call it. The duality of man or something. Which one of these folks is going to die this week? Which one knows this? Which one doesn't? Which one of these folks cares about what I heard in the news today? Which one of these people will I fall in love with? All of the people here are beautiful and yet carbon copies of each other — indifference. I am shocked by the indifference of the world and the people within it. I don't mean that I think people feel indifferent toward one another, but that they are both so special in an unspecial way. They all need the same comforts, and as beautiful as that is, the sameness is a mute that speaks volumes. They all just want a conversation to cure their boredom, to tell a stranger how much they loved someone today, usually keeping out the intimacy, those *good* parts. “*I loved someone too.*” I should've told them before they disappeared forever. I should have been indifferent. I should have been part of that special human clique.

Occasionally the bus stops, but less so if you happen to be on the Rapid, which I just happen to be. The instant the doors swing open our sworn purpose extends far beyond what the confines of the bus allowed us to accomplish. It's like a fresh breath of air or coming back to life. I can walk! I have my legs back! The automobile is the metal sarcophagus

within a concrete one. Despite the multitude of buses throughout the city, I always find myself in the same place, on the same street, on any given day. I am desperate to leave, and if I have to be indifferent, I'll at least feel some type of new indifference somewhere else. I don't know anything else. I don't know a thing. I'm okay with that. *The regular fare is \$1.75. Seniors and Medicare fare is \$0.75 peak hours, and \$0.35 off-peak. Please watch your step.* I do not have any care for your idle conversations involving the fluctuating price of apples by the pound at the supermarket, because I will forget the conversation in under an hour, but I will contribute to the massacre game nonetheless. Short-term memory scares me. The apples. Tell me *more* about the apples, lady. Without even a passing glance, I see Julia, age 53, who could have given a riveting speech about her test results, and her unique business ventures, for the last time. And all she talked to me about was apples. And as far as apple conversations go, it wasn't bad. In any given case, she gets off before me and she is free. To me, that freedom is the privilege of not having to finish a conversation. Or never saying goodbye. I don't. "*Nos vemos,*" we tell each other, or see you later, and I have absolutely no idea what that really means. I remember to thank the familiar bus driver.

Every man with a van is just another man with a van with something to do, something to prove. Something to need. We are all selfish to some extent, and in a certain sense, I'm glad our unique-nesses supersede our selfish natures. If I had to live a shameless, decadent lifestyle, empathy should be the currency. At least we try, anyway. *You like Alabama too? I've been meaning to go back. You're headed there, right? What's your name kid?* It's a scene that can play out in my head over and over again. At some point, it used to be Nebraska for no good reason at all. It gives me hope. I'm still going to get murdered, so I let it play out. It's okay. I ask for at least the change to take a bus back home. He gives me a dollar to take a bus back home. Whatever that's supposed to mean. *Alabama! He used my money to make it back to Alabama!* Or whatever it was at the time. At some point even earlier, it was San Francisco. My faith in humanity is restored, while my blood coagulates around me on the busy street. I love that man, and I will miss him dearly. There is a surprising air of ease in the situation. I fall softly, the way a tree falls in the sand. My sense of peace stems from understanding that

in some small way I helped a stranger feel better, no matter the consequence. On lazy days, it's enough to give a little time to hold a door open. On busy days, it's my own happiness that is given. On the daily, it is all I've ever really had to live for.

My ever-growing cesspool of blood smells foul enough to snap me back into consciousness. I pick myself up, gashed in the abdomen, and I smile at the bus driver who knows me by name, and the exact same commuters every day, in exactly the same seats. Here, I sit across a pretty girl on an almost empty bus. She's about my age. I see her reading something, and watch her leave before my stop. She seems anxious, and in a hurry. I often look back and hope she has some sort of Alabama of her own. I hope she has dreams. I hope she is good. I wish I could have had her name, at least at the time. My friends call me chickenshit. I never asked then, so I asked elsewhere to someone later on, almost as if it was in another parallel life. I'm better off for it, because as far as life goes you come across someone who instills complete doubt in your ideas of all people being uniformly unique, making you rewrite endings of old pessimistic bus stories. But sometimes, still, I place myself in the old shoes of a much lonelier, much younger man, who fantasized about falling in love with a bus stranger, and I always come to wonder what she took note of from me in turn before she got out of those bus doors and never came back. Then again, she didn't know me, so she probably never took anything at all.





## Letter from the Editor:

A heartfelt thank you to every reader, contributor, and sponsor, for believing *The Rubicon* to be worthy of your time and financial investment. When you read, contribute to, and share this publication, you become a part of Troy University's vision to reach individuals with a renewed perspective and fresh artistic outlet every year. Through creative expressions like *The Rubicon*, students proudly showcase their artistic talents through both written and visual art. With so much darkness that can be found in this world, we aim to be a light of hope, intrigue, beauty, and culture, that will inspire all to continue cultivating the talents that are unique to them.

We would never be able to achieve our goals without our talented contributors and, of course, our incredible sponsors for their overwhelming financial and moral support. Thank you to Dr. Kirk Curnutt, Troy University's English Chair, and the entire English Department for cultivating this opportunity for Troy's students and consistently being a resource of help and encouragement. Dr. James Ortego, the English Chair of Troy University's Dothan Campus, you have our sincerest gratitude for supporting our team's efforts and for the instrumental role you play in helping to bring the work of Troy's student body to print. To Dr. Chris Shaffer, the Dean of Troy University's Library, *The Rubicon* team is immensely grateful for your contributions toward publishing and for your willingness to bolster the journal's continued growth.

Without *The Rubicon* volunteer staff, the journal would never go to print, but without the ongoing, heartfelt dedication of Dr. Ben Robertson, printing would never even be a possibility. Dr. Robertson, the past two years serving as Editor in Chief under your advisement has been a true blessing. Troy University is made better by your presence and *The Rubicon* is one of the many marks that applaud your daily efforts. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do for the students at Troy.


I want to take this opportunity to recognize the *The Rubicon* team for their hard work on seeing this year's publication through to the end. In her second year as Assistant Editor and on-campus Publicity

Chair, McKenzie Dahlke has been a vital part of *The Rubicon's* publication and is a constant help, encourager, and voice of cheer for all who have the privilege of knowing her. Taye Bass has been our right-hand media pro (besides contributing his fantastic material) and has done more to get the journal through public channels than all of us put together. He is hardworking, loyal, and has been an absolute joy to work with. While there are too many on our team this year to dote on individually, each member of the *Rubicon* staff played crucial roles in spreading the word, raising funds, contributing to, and creating this year's journal. Team, I cannot begin to thank you enough for your hard work and willingness to do everything necessary to get this journal to print, and for the fantastic attitudes you have maintained.

It has been an immense pleasure to have served as Editor in Chief of *The Rubicon* these past two years. Thank you for allowing me the honor of working beside you all in such a meaningful and creative capacity. While I will miss being in the Editor's seat (rightfully reserved for current students), I look forward to being an additional resource for future teams and am privileged to be a part of Troy's literary legacy.

In closing, I personally encourage you all to never stop growing, never stop learning, never stop doing everything you can to become the person you were created to be. Uplift and inspire others through who you are, how you love, and the path you choose to pave. Step out in faith and no matter what — **keep moving forward!** Blessings on all, love to each heart, and I'll see you in INK.

Sincerely,



Cassie N. Lung

Cassie N. Lung  
Editor in Chief, *The Rubicon*