



River Bluff Review

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Editors' Note

Since its founding over twenty years ago, *River Bluff Review* has been a celebration of the talent and creativity that resides among SIUE's community. The journal has been published each year to showcase the rich and diverse cultures that our campus offers. It has dedicated itself to encapsulating the heart of the ethnographic and demographic variety among SIUE.

As editors and students, we have strived to be completely unbiased in our search for what reflects the best representation of this student body through the translation of literary work and visual art. Pieces have been chosen anonymously for what has been written, instead of who they were written by. With that in mind, who our contributors are is really what makes our journal so unique. It has been a rewarding, yet arduous challenge in our travels over this mountain of imagination. Your contribution has made *River Bluff Review* possible.

We are grateful for the overwhelming amount of responses in our call for submissions. With every ounce of care and consideration, we have only chosen a select few pieces to live on in this journal. We encourage all writers and creators to continue to submit and push forth their work. The ability to articulate oneself and say, "I am worthy of being seen and heard" is a gift to the arts and what gives it life. The passion we see in each arrangement inspires our admiration for all of the voices discovered in the submissions we received.

We would like to give thanks to the faculty and staff for their steadfast support of our shared vision of a creative world. We would like to extend our utmost appreciation to Professor Vogrin for her extensive time and patience while guiding us to develop as editors and members of the literary community. We have learned skills that go far beyond the length of this course.

Fellow seekers of the arts, we would like to invite you along to explore the Fall 2019 *River Bluff Review*.

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COVER: Leaf 3, **Haley Clancy Inyart**

Unfinished

Katie Sand



For years you have struggled
To find the words of your soul
What speaks to you
Something that holds a heartbeat that mimics yours

But you are poetry, my dear
You are the prose perched on the tongue of the world
A natural steadiness beats in your chest
As you search for the right words
Some which will not fall into place as easily as others

But do not be afraid to write in pen
Let these mistakes and unfinished stanzas be the foundation
in which you create your story
This life is not a Shakespearean sonnet
Do not compare thyself to a summer's day

Do not look for completion in the verse of another's work
This narrative is yours and yours alone
Enunciate and articulate each smile, each positive thought,
and even the negative
Sound out the things that fill you with joy
Find the antonyms to what fills you with dread

Continue to walk this rocky path of uncertainty
Take the roads less traveled
And find your footing among the overgrown roots of trees
Tread shores and sail stormy seas

Understand that creativity stems from this madness
That this hollowness will exist, nevermore

Trust yourself as you gain your balance
And create yourself around the unknown
You'll find your way soon
And when you do,
I promise this journey will all make sense

The Sun, When Covered by Clouds, Shines Bright

India ink drawing

Micaela Maco



A Brick What

Megan Beachum



—Inspired by Morgan Parker’s “Poem on Beyoncé’s Birthday”
(the italics are from her poem)

When I was younger, I was told I was built like a	brick shithouse
If I could have built myself, I would make my thighs	smaller
Because I would really like to have that	thigh-gap

Something telling me I'm not woman enough for these days

I almost fall in my shower sometimes because of the	leftover
Vitamin E oil, coconut oil, rose water, lavender,	Rosehip oil
Left from my baths where I'm baptizing myself a	girl

I smell like a woman with “Pure Seduction” by	Victoria Secret
Clinging tightly to my neck and wrists and hair and	mind
With strawberries in my hair and just a touch of	coconut

Praise pouring from people, flowing from their	mouths
I secretly hope they'll validate my	woman-ness
Maybe just a small, just a tiny	look
Please, set your consuming eyes upon	me
Swallow me with your big, watchful	eyes
Or carve me and hollow me	out
So, I don't have to think about my 40-minute	night routine
Lotions and oils and the feel of fish oil	pills
Creams and vitamins and the burn of	apple cider vinegar

There is nothing unique about the price I put on	beauty
There is nothing unique about the price beauty puts	on me

Continental Drift

Louis Damani



- I. What force was it
that peeled us apart; converted
our heart into a chasm?

- II. What sweet longing
we spoke,
colliding into each other—
wearing down these
craggy shores, whittling
and contorting ourselves into puzzle
pieces fit for play.

- III. A sea embraces us
like crumbs
in a coffee cup—both of us
dissolving into
a vast something of importance
with the capability of leaving us
as little more than a hint of flavor
in the back of the throat.

There must be a day destined for us
to wash
unto shore with the driftwood.

- IV. An ode to Pangea,
a depth in the bones of us all;
calling to us in a whisper of rock
and water and bone and skin.

Study

charcoal and conté

Kenzie Holzinger



Sergeant Curious

Elizabeth Donald

She knew he was a cop the moment he stuck his head in the door of the small examination room.

It was something about the shoulders, the way they seemed to square themselves off as if they were always expecting to be called on the carpet or punched in the mouth—or both at the same time. Or maybe it was something in the eyes—not the stereotypical world-weariness that Hollywood pastes onto its fake cops, as though emotion could be worn like Zorro’s mask. No, real cops have walls behind their eyes, cheerfully impenetrable behind the civil façade.

“Scram, Sergeant,” she said, lying back on the gurney. “I didn’t call you.”

He eased his way into the room anyway, but hovered near the door. Beyond him, she could hear the quick footsteps and electronic beeps of the emergency room in their muted chorus. “How’d you know I was a sergeant?”

She shrugged, but it made her shoulder hurt. “Patrols are busy on a Saturday night, and no self-respecting detective works a simple battery in the middle of the weekend.”

He leaned against the door, arms folded. He was trying not to look intimidating, but it wasn’t working. They all intimidate just by being there. “I could be the police chief.”

She couldn’t help it—she laughed, and it made little daggers of pain lance through her face. “Oh, don’t make me laugh, that’s cruel and unusual punishment.”

“I’m not gonna scam, but I will step outside if you prefer,” he said. He was trying to keep that wall up, but she knew what she looked like. Cheek torn open, ugly fingers of purplish bruising creeping up the side of her face, right eye half-swollen shut, and God only knew what was wrong with her shoulder.

She struggled to sit up, and waved him off when he moved to help her. “I’m not pressing charges, so you can scam. I didn’t call you, they did.”

“Procedure,” he said. “They’re required to call us. And I’d really like to help nail the son of a bitch who did your face, miss. Domestic battery is a serious crime.”

She shook her head. “Sergeant, let me educate you,” she said. “One. No one has called me ‘miss’ since the night grade, but you get a free pass on that because you’re trying to polite and at least it wasn’t ‘ma’am.’ Two. Domestic battery is not a serious crime. It’s a misdemeanor on the first offense, which means if the guy hits a complete stranger there’s a stiffer sentence than hitting his girlfriend.”

“I’m not entirely sure that’s correct,” Sergeant began, but she didn’t let him finish.

“Three, I’m fairly sure this isn’t even DB, because there must be a pre-existing personal relationship to qualify under the DB statute, and it was a first date.”

That cut through Sergeant’s cop-stare for a moment. “First date?”

She didn’t answer. “So that makes it simple battery, practically misdemeanor offensive touching, and nobody gives a rat’s ass. So I press charges, and you go do your thing and piss him off. Then the poor sad sack of a prosecutor gets to listen to him whine about how I’m a psychotic bitch who busted his lip for trying to kiss me, and then he’ll look at my face, and decide he can’t win a he-said-she-said on a misdemeanor.”

Sergeant shook his head. “We can take pictures of your face.”

“Say they do,” she said. “Off to the races. I get to explain my sad, sad story about ninety times, and he gets to look clean-cut and innocent as a little lamb in his fresh suit. And, unless he gets Judge Thompson, he’s a free man. The worst Thompson can do is a slap on the wrist and a suspended sentence, then he’ll promise to never ever do it again. The end, except for the lurid details in an open court record for all my colleagues to read, carefully edited for the court blotter, and plenty of did-you-hear-about-her looks in the hallways. Yay for me.”

She stopped talking, suddenly tired. The ache in her jaw was growing worse.

Sergeant was staring at her.

“What,” she snapped.

"You're on the job," he replied.

She shook her head. "Nope. Worse."

"Oh God, a lawyer."

That elicited a laugh, and her cheek flared into pain again. "What did I say? No laughing. House rules."

Sergeant sketched a quick salute. "Yes ma'am. Or should I say counselor?"

"Worse. Reporter." She watched him closely. "I saw that. You flinched."

"Did not."

"S'okay, they all flinch." She leaned back, her shoulder aching.

Sergeant took a step closer. "The kind of scumbag who hits a woman on the first date isn't going to stop hitting, ma'am."

"This is where you try to convince me that pressing charges is in the best interest of all womankind, that I need to do my part to save others' lives, right?" she sighed. "They haven't changed the rule book in ten years, Sergeant. And you and I both know it won't do a damn thing. No one ever stops a guy who hits until he's a guy who kills. Then suddenly they care; when it's too late."

Sergeant sat down in the chair closer to the gurney. "You sound like you've been there before."

She closed her eyes. "I see the same shit you do," she said. "If I had a dollar for every woman who called us up, begging us not to put the DB charge in the paper or he'd come home pissed..."

"I mean personally."

She opened her eyes and shot him a look. "That's not in the rule book, Sergeant."

He shrugged. "Call me curious."

She stared up at the ceiling. "Well, Sergeant Curious, I attract two kinds of men: losers and hitters. I am grateful that Mr. Saturday Night revealed which he was on the first date. Saved me a lot of trouble."

"Not all men are losers or hitters," Sergeant replied.

"Sure, some are druggies, drunks, gangers, deadbeats, and there's always the perpetually stupid."

Sergeant laughed out loud, and that wall behind the eyes cracked a little more. "My Saturday night to-do list."

She raised up again. "You've got a few miles on you for a Saturday night shit detail, Sergeant Curious. What the hell are you doing on this shift?"

Sergeant shook his head. "That's not in the rule book, ma'am."

"You ma'am-ed me." She lay back down. "Sorry. Nosiness is an occupational hazard."

"So, getting back to the part where you file charges," Sergeant began again.

She held up a hand. "Let's go further back, to the part where I tell you to scram. Life's too short to spend it in court."

"Pitchy." Sergeant flipped open a notebook.

"Uh oh, the ceremonial notebook," she cracked. "Once the notebook's open, the fun ends."

Sergeant turned back to her. "Are we having fun?"

She gently touched the side of her face, wincing. "Not really."

"Tell me what happened, how about that? You don't have to give me any names until you're sure about filing," Sergeant said.

"I'm sure, so why tell?" she said.

He shrugged. "Might make you feel better."

She smiled, and winced at the pain in her face. "Stop that."

"Yes ma'am." He tipped an imaginary hat at her.

She reached for the chemical icepack and pressed it against her face again. "What made me feel better was splitting his goddamn lip open," she said.

Sergeant deliberately put down his notebook. She saw him do it, and respected him for it. "You said he'd say you hit first. Did you?"

"Hell yes, I did," she said, staring up at the ceiling tiles. "A fairly lovely evening, light conversation over dinner, a suitably silly movie. He escorted me home, and that was where the picture changed."

"He had visions of it ending in a different place, eh?" Sergeant asked.

"Preferably horizontal," she said. "I declined. I'm easy, but

I'm sure not that easy. He didn't like my answer. I tried to pull away, and he twisted my arm. That's when I fucking hit him, hard as I could on the mouth, and I split his lip open and I'm glad. Book me."

Sergeant shook his head. "I decline."

She looked away toward the other wall. "He came back at me and I blocked the first two but I'm out of practice and my arm was hurt, it didn't block the third shot, and he got my face hard, twice. That's when the neighbor started yelling out his window, and the asshole ran back to his car like a weasel."

Sergeant's voice was calm beside her. "The neighbor could testify."

"I could've beaten him if he hadn't gotten my good arm," she muttered.

"I'm sure you could have."

Her head pivoted back toward him. "Don't patronize me, Sergeant Curious. I studied judo for three years. I've fallen way behind and haven't done exercises in months, or I'd never have let the son of a bitch get a drop on me."

"I believe you," Sergeant said, holding up his hands. "Can we get to the part where you let me fill out a form and arrest him?"

She stared back up at the wall. "I believe I've given my reasons."

"Dumbass reasons," Sergeant said.

She sat up too quickly and her shoulder shot quicksilver darts of pain through her back and neck. "That's way outside the rulebook."

Sergeant stood up. "It's pride, ma'am. For every woman who goes back to a guy who hits because of fear, there's another who hides it because she's too proud to admit that someone can do these things to her and sometimes she can't stop him. And it's dumbass pride, because it's not your fault."

"Amateur psychology ain't gonna do it, Sergeant Curious," she shot back. "I'm not stupid, and I'm not torching my reputation on this bastard."

"So let them all get a good look at your face and make up their own stories, right?" Sergeant said. "Is that the plan?"

"I could always say I took up kickboxing," she said.

Sergeant stared at her for a moment, and suddenly burst out laughing. His laugh was deep and infectious, rolling from his gut, and she found herself laughing with him, even as she reached for the chemical icepack again.

“Ow, stop it, you’re killing my face, it hurts to laugh!” she said, her giggles tapering off.

His own laugh faded to a smile as he pocketed his notebook. “It shouldn’t hurt to laugh, ma’am,” he said.

“Ma’am again.”

He placed a business card on the counter and turned to leave. “If you change your mind, let me know.”

She stared at the wall, not looking at him as he moved to the door.

“Wait.”

She heard him stop, and the silence grew.

“Get out the notebook,” she said.

She heard him do so, and couldn’t bear to look at him.

“Not looking a gift horse in the mouth, but why?” he asked.

Finally she looked at him, her eyes dry and clear over darkening bruises. “Because you’re right. It shouldn’t hurt to laugh.”

Rose-Tinted Windows

David Crimsons



In the house that never sleeps
where the insanity is its own silence
a salient soul slowly drifts
Through hallways of husky mass
Between structures for cuddles and clasping
And rooms for breathing and gasping
There always lie windows
With a curious pink hue
A hue of lover's flower between each ridge
Suffocating the gaps yet still allowing sight
The shlumpy soul peers through
Seeing the entrancing beauty that encompassed all there ever was
But was it really true?

Building, New Orleans

photography

Alyssa Hoog



The Pew

Ethan Sproat



(Open on an elderly couple sitting in a church pew. This is the only thing on the stage. They are sitting close to each other on one side of the pew. The lighting is covering the entire pew. There is some light organ music in the background playing “Amazing Grace.”)

Gertrude: Is “Amazing Grace” the only song that we listen to anymore?

Ben: It’s a good song isn’t it?

Gertrude: Well yes, but there are other good songs out there that nobody knows. We already know “Amazing Grace,” so why don’t we learn something new?

Ben: Don’t you know every song there is already?

Gertrude: Yes, but other people need to learn new songs.

Ben: Shouldn’t people learn “Amazing Grace” too? I mean not everyone knows this song.

Gertrude: Ben, don’t kid yourself, everyone has heard “Amazing Grace” before.

(Immediately Ben and Gertrude freeze as the lights around them dim and a spotlight goes over to Zach and Noah who are walking to the pew that the elderly couple is sitting at.)

Zach: What is this song?

Noah: This is “Amazing Grace.”

Zach: Grace, what’s so great about her?

Noah: You’ve never heard this song?

Zach: No, and I wish I could keep not knowing this song, since Grace sounds like she’s a bit full of herself.

Noah: It's not about a girl, it's about God's grace. (Noah looks over to Zach who is obviously confused) Well, it's a pretty song. It reminds me of when me and Mom would come here and just forget about the world outside.

Zach: Aww as sweet and poetic as that is can we please take a second to talk about how uncomfortable these benches are?

Noah: Oh yeah, these pews are the worst, but they're kind of sweet and homey when you look past how unbearable they are.

Zach: Well I am choosing to not look past their flaws and instead am choosing to complain.

Noah: (laughs) Of course you are.

(Zach and Noah freeze as the light shifts over to Gertrude and Ben)

Gertrude: Wow these young men barely made it to church on time. If I was that late I probably wouldn't have even come.

Ben: Gertrude, we don't know them, so let's just be happy they're here.

Gertrude: I'll be happy when they make it to church on time.

(Ben and Gertrude freeze as the light shifts to Gracie who is on her cell phone and walking to the pew, the sermon just started and a faint recording on a sermon about judgement is playing in the background)

Gracie: Yes, I know... Uh huh... well if he didn't want to pay child support then he should not have had sperm cells who were coached by Michael Phelps... I'm sorry I know it isn't your fault I just can't...uh huh... alright... I have to go now... I'll talk to you later... thank you... bye (Phone buzzes) (she makes an annoyed sound)

(Gracie freezes and the light moves back to Ben and Gertrude)

Gertrude: Do you think kids today just don't have clocks with alarms?

Ben: Easy to point out the speck in the eyes of others' than the plank in your own.

Gertrude: And did you hear her talk about sperm? Unless she's talking about whales she should keep those subjects to herself.

Ben: She looks kind of familiar doesn't she?

(Light shifts from them to Zach and Noah)

Noah: Haven't we seen that girl before?

Zach: How should I know, it's way too early to recognize people.

Noah: It's literally eleven o'clock, and you know how important this is to me.

Zach: I mean, yeah, but have you even noticed how these people keep looking at us?

Noah: They aren't even looking at you, Zach, you're just being paranoid.

Zach: Look if I wanted to be called a sinner for being with you then I'd just go home to good ole mom and dad.

Noah: I've told you before that the people here are a lot less conservative than most places. I promise you that no one here is judging you.

(They freeze and light goes to Ben and Gertrude)

Ben: Will you stop judging those poor boys, Gertrude.

Gertrude: I am not judging them, I just think they are sitting a little too close to each other to be just friends.

Ben: And even if they were more than friends, how would that affect you?

(They freeze, light goes to Gracie)

(Phone buzzes)

Gracie: (looks at phone and sighs) (sarcastically cheerful) Hi mom! Yes I went to church, I'm actually at church right now... I answered because you called me... (knowing she's lying) it hasn't started yet... well no... I think it's a nondenomi-

national church... well I'm sorry that it isn't Methodist... yeah I gotta go... I love you too... bye. (Hangs up phone) Thank God. (Phone buzzes, and she looks up) Seriously.

(She freezes and light moves to Zach and Noah)

Zach: Look, I'm new to this whole church thing, but isn't it rude to be on your phone?

Noah: Well yeah, but she seems a bit flustered as it is, and you're one to talk considering I forced you to leave your phone in the car.

Zach: You didn't force me, I left my phone willingly.

Noah: The only reason you left your phone in the car was because I told you we could go to Chili's after church.

Zach: Aww I fucking love Chili's.

Noah: And please don't say that word.

Zach: What word?

Noah: You know, the f-word.

Zach: What's wrong with the word fuck?

Noah: (Cutting him off) Stop it! The people here just don't really appreciate that kind of language.

Zach: Okay, I'll try to cut that word out of my vocabulary, but just know that there will definitely be a few slip-ups.

Noah: Okay, as long as you try your best. (Long pause)

Zach: Fuck I'm hungry.

(They pause and the light goes to Ben and Gertrude)

Ben: You know we haven't gone to Chili's since it was brought into town.

Gertrude: Yes we have, Ben.

Ben: Isn't Chili's where that old sandwich shop used to be?

Gertrude: No you're thinking of that Apple restaurant, oh what's it called...

Ben: An Apple restaurant, what a silly idea for restaurant.

Gertrude: No they don't serve apples, apple is just in its name... Oh I can't remember what it's called.

Ben: Why would they put apple in a restaurant's name and not serve apples?

Gertrude: What is that darned place called?

(Light shifts from them to Zach)

Zach: (He is talking to himself obviously frustrated) For God sakes it's Applebee's. The restaurant is named Applebee's!

(Light shifts back over to Gertrude and Ben)

Together: Applebee's!

Ben: That's still a silly name.

(Light shifts to Noah and Zach)

Noah: Look I know that I said we could go to Chili's after church, but why don't we just go back to my place?

Zach: You don't promise your boyfriend Chili's and then take the Chili's away.

Noah: Boyfriend?

Zach: Isn't that what we are?

Noah: I mean I guess, but we never really said anything about it.

Zach: (Sarcastically) What? Did we need to have a huge coming out party for you?

Noah: No it's just... I never really called anyone my boyfriend before.

Zach: (Grabbing his hand) Well I'm honored to be your first.

(Light shifts back to Gertrude and Ben)

Gertrude: But you are right it has been awhile since we went to Chili's. I think the last time we went was with Bryan.

Ben: (Ominously) Oh yeah that's right.

(Gertrude starts to get a little upset about this then proceeds to bow her head and pray)

Ben: I know, Gertrude. (Ben lays his hand on her back and prays as well)

Gertrude: I just... Bryan used to be such a good boy. I wish I knew what changed him.

Ben: I don't know, hun, I don't know.

Gertrude: I just keep praying God doesn't forget about him.

(They freeze and the light shifts to Gracie)

Gracie: (She starts dialing on her phone and holds it to her ear. She quickly looks annoyed and looks at the phone.) Pick up the phone. (dials again, and waits a second) (In an annoyed and angry tone) Hi honey, did you forget I exist again... Yes I'm calling because my bank account is missing out on some substantial funds... you can't just fuck your secretary, fire her, and then pretend like nothing happened, we had a deal remember... do not threaten me Bryan... (at her wit's end) don't threaten me!... I'm the one taking care of your son... Bryan please just listen to me... He asks about you, you know. He wonders why all his friends have dads and why he doesn't. You know that his school had a bring your dad to school day, and he cried begging me to go with him. I know I agreed to this fucked-up deal to keep my mouth shut, but if you don't deliver on your end of the bargain... okay... yeah... I know... I just... There's a small part of me that wants you there. There's a small fucked-up glimmer of unwarranted hope that lingers inside of me wishing you'd come home from work to eat my shitty cooking. You'd pick up your son and mess up his hair. He'd laugh, I'd laugh, you'd laugh, and then we'd all just smile. It's stupid I know but, I just wish you were here... hello... hello... did you hang up on me... (completely broken).

(she freezes and the light goes over to Noah and Zach)

Zach: And you said I'm a bad example at church.

Noah: I swear I've seen that girl before... Wait—is she the one from the news you know, that secretary and the lawyer, who...? (gestures a belly and mouths *pregnant*)

Zach: Wait, you're right, she was that one lawyer's secretary, who kept her mouth shut because she got a good settlement.

Noah: Do you think she's okay?

Zach: How should I know, Noah? (Sarcastically) Why don't you just lean over and talk to her?

Noah: Do you think I should?

Zach: You are absolutely kidding right? Social interaction with an emotionally distraught girl with some fucked-up past, I'm sorry, hecked-up past, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard.

Noah: I'm going to talk to her.

Zach: Please don't. Please literally do not do that.

Noah: She's obviously sad about something, and I just... I don't know... maybe I should pray with her.

Zach: (sighs) Look, prayer is a nice distraction from real life, but wouldn't it be better to just email her some self-help guides or something?

Noah: Umm. I believe in prayer, thank you.

Zach: Right, but believing in it isn't enough to make it real.

Noah: Well let's hope these prayers are real enough for her.

(Noah goes to tap Gracie on her shoulder, when he suddenly freezes and the lights go over to Ben and Gertrude)

Gertrude: That poor girl. I couldn't imagine.

Ben: Sounds like it was her choice to have the kid.

Gertrude: It was just as much (reluctantly) Bryan's choice to have the kid. This angel was just noble enough to take care of him.

Ben: I guess you're right, Gertrude.

Gertrude: It's about time you finally agree with me. (they both chuckle)

Ben: Do you think we should talk to her?

Gertrude: Yeah I think we should.

(Gertrude goes to tap her on her on her shoulder when she and Ben freeze. The light shifts to Gracie who still has her face in her hands. Noah's hand and Gertrude's hand both tap Gracie at the same time, and Gertrude and Noah look at each other, both a little baffled, while Gracie looks up awkwardly. Then the lights flood the entire stage and everyone is moving at the same time)

Noah: I'm sorry, I just, well...

Gertrude: Oh I'm sorry, dearie, I just was trying to...

Gracie: Can I help you both?

Zach: Don't worry about me. I'm good.

Noah: I just I wanted to make sure you were okay.

Gertrude: (to Noah) That's exactly what I was doing too. (to Gracie) You okay sweetheart?

Gracie: No, no I'm not. I'm sure you all heard everything because I never know how to fu—(looks at Gertrude who starts to glare)—freaking be quiet.

Noah: Look, I just wanted to ask you if you wanted to pray.

Gertrude: Prayer is a powerful thing.

Gracie: I mean sure. I'd be happy to take as much help as I can get.

Gertrude: (Sits next to Gracie) What's your name, sweetheart?

Gracie: Gracie.

Gertrude: Gracie, what a beautiful name.

Curtain

Dear Katrina

Elizabeth Donald

ear Katrina...

Parish's hand paused. His pen hovered over the crisp white sheet. He was seized with the overwhelming urge to rip the smooth blank paper into pieces, or crumple it into a ball and aim for the trash can on the far side of the featureless barracks room, where it would join at least four other balled-up sheets with few words scribbled on them.

He fought off the urge, because he was not going to waste yet another sheet of paper, not when he had only written *Dear Katrina* on it. That was just goddamn stupid.

Dear Katrina: From the day you were born, you were the light of my life.

Cliché. Meaningless. The thing everyone says. Worse: she'd never believe it.

Dear Katrina: I'm sorry I was gone so much that you barely recognize me. Now it's likely you'll never see me again. Have a good life. So long, Dad.

It had the benefit of truth. But there had to be more to say than that. Parish took a swig from the beer that Vaughn had nabbed for him from the officers' club. At Parish's rank, it was just Bud Light pisswater. Whatever weird microbrew shit this was, it was definitely a step above that. As last drinks go, it wasn't bad.

Dear Katrina...

God, was he this much of a fucking coward? Never mind the fights he'd survived, the wounds, the lost comrades, the long nights where he couldn't sleep, the bright sharp stabs of terror when he contemplated this next mission. What was all that compared to writing a letter to a teenage girl?

Dear Katrina... If you're receiving this letter, it means I never had the chance to say the things to you I always wanted to say.

Better. Straightforward and truthful, and maybe that's what was needed. A dash of truth. She deserved that much, didn't she?

It means I died. I can't tell you how or why, and whoever delivers this letter won't have any answers for you, either. I beg you not to seek them out, not to try to solve whatever mystery might be shrouded around what happened to me. Maybe you won't even want to, because God knows I was barely there to begin with. But trust me when I say that nothing you find out will make it right, or better, or even sane.

He paused, and then scratched out the last sentence. Forget the mission. Forget what he was about to do. She wouldn't have any reason to care. There were more important things to say. "Don't screw this up," he said aloud to the empty room, and took another swig of the beer. "You only get one shot."

God knows I was barely there to begin with.

I want you to know I'm okay with it. Being dead, that is. It's not quite what I hoped for, but I know what I'm doing is important. That's probably not much comfort for you, but I want you to know why I had to volunteer. You have to know why I was gone so much, why your mother fell out of love with me. Why I abdicated my life as your father for something else.

I owe you that much and more.

Rambling. Backing and filling, dancing around the real message. Parish reached for the page, ready to ball it up and aim for the trash can, two points.

Then he glanced up at the clock, which told him 1600 was less than half an hour away. Maybe if he kept filling pages with nonsense, he could waste his last chance to speak the truth. They'd come for him, and Katrina would have nothing but useless balls of paper.

"Fuck that," he muttered.

I always loved you, Katrina. Please don't ever think I was gone because I didn't want to see you. I've tried to think of a way to say what I felt, and I never was any damn good at words. I just know that from the day you were born, you changed the way my universe moved. Does that sound weird?

Yes. Fuck it—he was committed now.

Everyone in this world walks about as the center of their own personal universe, and everything else sort of revolves

around them. Friends, family, school, workit's all in orbit. That's not ego; it's just the way the human mind operates.

But you changed the orbits of my planets, little dancer. I was on leave when you came, thank God, because I couldn't have borne knowing that your mother was in labor and I was on some godforsaken base on the other side of the planet. I was there when you were born, and I heard your first cry, and from the moment your big brown eyes first looked at me, you had my heart.

I won't lie and tell you I had no choice. There was always a choice. I could have mustered out, could have taken my little pension, could have even turned down this mission. I could have hung the uniform in the closet and gone to sell insurance in an Atlanta suburb. I would have had you and your mother, a small house with a fence, and a dog. I'd have barbecued on Saturday afternoons, taken you to the ball game, and maybe been able to sleep at night.

I think about that sometimes, usually when the night are long in the Philippines when the storms are raging, or in a Chicago motel when the sirens blare past the thin walls. I think about the life I could have had, take it out of my mental shoe-box like a photograph and look at it. I try not to do it too much, like it'll fade if it's exposed too much. But I can't help it, that little snapshot of that other life, where I didn't have do what I do.

You always had the starring role.

He paused for a quick glance at the clock. 1546.

You can't explain "duty" to a baby. You can't use "honor and service" with a toddler. I tried to explain to your mother, but like I said, I never was any good at words. I needed to show her why I couldn't pass up the opportunity that the mission presented. Not an opportunity for me, of course; the opportunity to make a difference, to protect people in a more direct, meaningful way than any other I know, more than a cop, more than a firefighter or even a soldier.

I don't blame your mom, little dancer.

Parish paused again, and took an extra-heavy swig of the beer. He'd promised himself he would be honest in this letter, his very last chance to be straight with her. Was it really honest

to say there was no blame? That was another picture he didn't want to look at, and the stab under his heart when he thought about signing the papers, the coldness in her eyes as she accepted them back from him.

I don't blame your mom, little dancer. I was gone for whole years of your life, things I'll never get back. They are the great regrets of my life. I know you probably don't believe that, and that's fair.

But you should know I wept over the pictures your mom sent me, and even more when the pictures stopped coming. She had a right to a life, and when she asked me to let her go, I agreed.

I never stopped loving your mom. I know she doesn't believe that, either, but I want you to know it, because you're so like her. Voice and eyes and smile, I look at you and I see your mother as she was when I met her. There are days when I wish I had fought for her, for us, wish I hadn't just let her go. But I also knew I was too far gone then, too deep in the things I can't tell you even in this letter. I could never give her the life she deserved. The life I dreamed about at night.

Parish looked back up at the clock. 1551. Nine minutes until they came for him. That pinprick of fear was now an icicle right in the center of his heart, and his stomach roiled with it. He'd been doing this long enough not to pretend he wasn't afraid. Only a fool pretends he isn't afraid. The trick is not to let the fear stop you.

He bent back to the page. There was more to say and not enough time. Never enough time.

I saw you when you were twelve. It was The Nutcracker, when you were the only girl in your ballet class picked for the big stage performance. I was lucky, and we weren't far away. My commander gave me a one-day leave, and I was there, way in the back where you couldn't see me.

Parish couldn't help himself; he grinned, remembering how Harvey had finagled through the damn paperwork to give him a 24-hour pass in the middle of an operation. Chicago was one fucked-up mission to begin with, and Vaughn wanted to cancel the pass. Harvey told him if he canceled Parish's pass, she'd staple Vaughn's tongue to the bar table. Neither Parish

or Vaughn was absolutely sure if she was kidding. They'd finally compromised on a 12-hour pass, which was barely enough time to see the show.

You looked like an angel, twirling about in the fake snow under the spotlight. You were the only black girl on the stage, a beautiful ebony swan among all the ducklings. I stood there with tears streaming down my face, and when they buzzed me to return to the mission, I didn't want to go. I swear I didn't.

Truth. Truth above all. 1554.

You've grown into an amazing young woman, Katrina. I know your mom did right by you, and I could always rest easy knowing she was taking such good care of you and teaching you all the things you needed to know. You're going to be a great doctor. I don't have any right to be proud of you, but that never stopped a father from busting his buttons over his little girl, and I'm no exception.

You're going to do great things at school and in life, and someday there'll be a young man who looks at you the way I looked at your mom. He'll move heaven and earth for you.

I wish I could be there to see it. I wish I could have back those years I missed. I wish I could talk to you one time, just to tell you all the things in this letter that you may not ever receive.

A father only has a short window of time to hold his daughter's hand, to be her hero. It's gone much too fast, and only a true fool would waste it on something as nebulous as "duty."

I guess that's really what I wanted to say, little dancer. I was a fool, and I'm sorry. If there's an afterlife at all, I'll watch out for you as much as the Almighty lets me. When you finish med school, when you marry that dashing young man, when your own little ones are born, you might get the feeling that someone is watching over you and smiling with all the love in the world.

And you'll be right.

Parish stared at the paper, pen still poised over the empty space at the bottom of the page, as the clock ticked over to 1602. He was still staring at it when Vaughn knocked discreetly on the door and came into his quarters.

Parish didn't look up. "Doctor Death fussing for me?"

Vaughn never used the nicknames. "Dr. Milan is anxious for your appearance, yes. I told him he could wait until

Christmas if that's what it took. You take all the time you need, Parish."

Parish's hand hovered over the sheet, but the pen didn't move. "I think I've said all I can say." He looked up directly into Vaughn's eyes. "You'll make sure she gets it?"

Vaughn rested his hand on Parish's shoulder. "Straight to your black box in today's dispatches. You have my word." He paused. "Parish, you do not have to do this. We can find another guinea pig for Milan's science fair project. You can take a little more time, think about it, maybe talk it over with Harvey—"

Parish laughed out loud and swilled the rest of the beer. "The last thing I need to do is talk about it with Harvey. I like my teeth just the way they are."

A ghost of a smile crossed Vaughn's face. "Noted and logged."

Parish bent to the letter again.

Have a wonderful life, little dancer. Please believe that your father loves you.

He signed it, folded and sealed the envelope, then gave it to Vaughn. As Vaughn put it in his jacket pocket, Parish almost grabbed for it back—too much, it was too much.

Fuck that. Truth above all, right?

Parish stood and shrugged on his uniform jacket. "Time to dance?"

Our Plea

drawing

Nathan Smith



Dear Father

Lydia Friz



Father, could you please try to
Understand that I am my own person. I
Cannot be the ideal person you planned. To do so would
Kill the person I am.

You didn't mean to hurt me. But you treat me like an
Outsider, if I do not act like your ideal of a perfect girl. I just
want you to
Understand how I feel about you. If you would just begin to
listen...

Stillwater Bridge

Kevin Cox



It started with the elves,
singing bards in books throating tales
of fair folk in faery forests.
That's where it began,
my floral fascination with trees.
Their life-producing, life-harboring
trunks, branches, and leaves deserving
of the finest odes; however,
it isn't the trees here.

Thomas Kinkade, the "Painter of Light," who
invokes God's light with every brushstroke
of idyllic warm sunlight, draws the eye
towards a meandering stream underneath
a cobblestone bridge built by careful
hands placing every stone, dutifully aware of
their cool, gray legacy, for
those stones give safe passage to
many travelers, real and storied alike.

They pull me back into the fabled land of
elves and beasts, beauty coursing through
the stream like magic in fantasy blood,
like the shivers in my back,
sauntering up my spine
after returning my attention to
Stillwater Bridge. I walk across
the namesake, from my childhood hideaway
to warm reality sunshine, here.

Here, where it isn't the sunlight, or the red
and blue flowers,
nor is it the trees,
not even the stream
or Stillwater Bridge itself.
Here,
it's the soft yellow light of
lanterns that reminds me of
hope.

In Dreams

drawing

Tracy Welling



The Hinterland Blues

Ava Ploeckelman

In the forest, the ferns and foliage sound like an ocean as I make my way up the mountain. The trees stand, leaning with the incline, as if to fit their height under the sky. The moss is draped over their trunks, like gravity could pick them up and wear the patches like blankets. As I come farther up, duff gives way to snow. Clumsy in the terrain, I stop to strap my snowshoes to my boots. When they were new, they were blue and green, but the plastic has since been scraped away and they shine silver in the snow. Now my steps are severe and efficient, the spikes cutting through the icy top layer of snow, which is melted and refrozen with the sun. It only takes a minute to get coordinated again, and I can focus on remembering all of the white. I don't know when I'll see it again.

I'm not following a trail, at least for most of my hike. Occasionally, a reflective white sticker on an orange pole will catch my eye, but most of the path is snowed in too steep for me to pass. I have to go around. I keep my eyes on the slopes as I pass. It would be a weird kind of funny to get caught in an avalanche on my last day here, after all this time. I never needed to be told to watch the inclines and overhangs; they warn me themselves. I keep them to my right as I pass and ascend further.

When my laces come untied, I take the chance to stop for breakfast. I packed pound cake this morning before I left, because even if it gets crushed in my bag, I can stick it back together and eat it anyway. I sit on my bag as I eat, facing away from the sun to save my eyes. Seeing the impressions of the snowshoes trailing down makes me wonder how long they'll be there. I'm lucky to have caught a break in the wind now, but how much would it take to blow them away so no one would ever know I'd been here?

I hold the last little bit of cake in my hand and stretch it out away from me. A whiskey jar swoops down from the perch

where he had been eyeing me. He gently lands on my hand, flapping his wings a few times like he might leave. I am careful not to move.

“Are the Haida ravens still here?” I ask, voice a little rough from the cold.

It’s a bit late for them to be up so high in the mountains. I’ve spent a few summers with them, enough to know they dislike the biting cold. The whiskey jar flies away. I pull my scarf around my face and over my nose, slide my gloves on, and use my hiking poles to stand up. Short breaks are better than long ones on hikes, I’ve found. Out here, if you sit down and get cold, you will never warm up again. I strap back into my snowshoes and resume hiking.

I only get about a kilometer before the Haida ravens join me. They know me, and they know that I have birdseed in my backpack. I stop to retrieve it for them. They pull the plastic bag from my hands and eat in a frenzy of black wings pushing against shiny wet snow. I just watch until one of them pulls away from the crowd, landing on the branch in front of me.

“Thanks,” it says.

I nod. “I’m leaving tomorrow.” I can’t think of more to say, because I don’t want to tell them the whole story. They wouldn’t want me to tell them anyway. The Haida ravens probably already know.

“For good?” It tilts its head. Now all the birds are looking at me with the same face.

“Yeah, I don’t know if I will be back anytime soon, so I wanted to say goodbye.”

I feel awkward; do they really want a goodbye from me? They have seen many people come and go over the years. Still, it would be even stranger to leave without saying anything at all. Another bird comes to settle on my hiking pole sticking out of the snow a few feet away from me.

“It’s been nice knowing you, Kent.”

It isn’t wise to let the Haida ravens know your real name, so I gave them my middle name. I am sure they already know my name as it appears on my travel documents, Helena Kent, but the power is in the telling. Most people can’t tell the difference between a raven and the Haida ravens, but I knew them from

fireside stories before I was old enough to hike on my own. On those evenings when snowstorms would shake the house and push cold through the cracks in the foundation, I would sit in front of the fireplace with my brother. From the couch, my parents would tell us about the creatures of the mountain and how they taught us to live there. The Haida ravens are tricky but make good friends in the wilderness. You have to be careful what you say to one, because all the Haida ravens make up the same soul. They will remember you forever.

“You’ll have to send us a postcard from where you are going,” it says.

“I will,” I reply, but I’m lying, and we all know it. We weren’t ever the friends that would keep in touch like that.

I feel like I have led the Haida ravens on, like I have used up their friendship and left. I also know they have lived in these mountains since back when they were hills, and they see many people come and go. Goodbyes must be easy to them.

“Travel safely, wherever you go,” they say in one voice.

They have given me the mountain blessing, and I don’t feel like I deserve it. I feel like I’ve stolen it from them. I would be unwise to refuse, so I accept it.

“Thank you.”

They fly away, leaving behind a single feather for me to stick in my boot.

I continue my way up the mountain. I can see the tree line, not too far off in the distance, where the elevation gets too high for even then conifers to grow. I am getting close. It’s either the snowshoeing or the anticipation that has left me breathing so hard I have to stop against a tree to pull myself back together. The sun is rising, which is good. The gnomes are late risers, and I don’t want to wake them. I’ve been to their cave a few times, and on one occasion spent two days there while waiting for a storm to pass. When I duck into the entrance of their cave, I can feel a hint of the warmth of the fire inside, despite the cold stone against my fingerprints. I knock on their thick wooden door, designed to keep out the wind, and it opens almost immediately. No doubt they heard my footsteps walking through the cave. Even without my shoes squeaking and scraping on the smooth stone floor, gnomes tend to have keen hearing.

One of the kids pops out from behind the door, looking at me with his black, bottomless eyes.

“Come in, come in, come in!” he says, bouncing with excitement, revealing the cozy living room in the side of the mountain.

I laugh and unbuckle my snowshoes, leaving them outside. It looks like I’ve come during breakfast, which is more like lunchtime for me.

“Get Helena a chair!” Madrona, the mother, says and comes to give me a hug.

I have to bend down a bit to reach her, but gnomes aren’t as short as most people think. Another one of the kids drags a human-sized chair to the table and slides over his plate to make room for mine.

I make a big show of setting my bag down, knowing the kids are watching, and slowly unzipping the lid. I pull out a jar of peanut butter and say, “Guess what I brought?” The kids clap and wait for me to bring it to the table before scrambling to see who will get it first. I make a point to bring some with me when I come up here so that I feel like I have a reason other than just taking their company. I watch as one of the children open the jar, reaching in with her black fingertips and long icy transparent nails to scoop out a bit to taste.

“You guys know that school I told you about?” I ask, serving myself some oatmeal. I don’t feel like an awkward houseguest here. Madrona sometimes jokes that she’s my mountain mother.

“Oh, the one real far away, with the sociology degree?” Ballard, the father, asks, knowing what I am going to say already.

“Yeah, I got in, and I’m leaving soon.” I try not to sound so sad about it. It is a good opportunity; I don’t know why I feel so wrong when I think about going.

“That is just excellent. I’m real excited for you,” Madrona says. “Don’t you go to the big city and become a stranger, now,”

“I’ll write down our mailing address for you,” Ballard says, getting up from the table, “That way we can keep in touch.”

I know I will send a couple letters, maybe mail them some peanut butter, but it won’t be the same. When I was younger, they were always a listening ear when I needed to work out my

teenage feelings. They showed me the right way to do things up here, like what slopes to trust, and how to talk to the trees. My parents lived in the valley, in the forest. Giants don't care much to mountain terrain. They get cold easily, because their hearts have difficulty pumping blood around all eight feet of them. I am the shortest in the family, at 5'6", and the gnomes were who I came to when I needed to deal with not fitting in.

Now—and I feel really guilty about this—it seems like I've outgrown them. I've got nothing more to offer them but company. I eat with them, and we recount old memories together. They wish me good luck, and I thank them for everything. It's time for me to leave. Otherwise, I won't have enough sunlight to get back home. I try not to drag out the goodbye, hugging them and wishing them well. I try not to think about how I'll never see them again, never see this cave again. I'm not sure how long it will be before I can find another sense of belonging like this in the city, and the uncertainty of in between scares me.

I walk out of the cave for the last time, and I'm back in the sharp, whispering air. As I hike back down the other side of the mountain, the air starts getting warmer and the snow less deep. I can't stop thinking about how I'll never walk this path again, and that if I do, the trees will be foreign to me, and I'll need a map. I'm afraid that if I do come back, my home won't be mine anymore. When I'm finally on dirt and duff again, I lose some layers and my snowshoes. I can walk quicker now, but it almost feels like I'm running away from the mountain because I just want my goodbyes to be over. I've got one more to make, and it's the one that I'm dreading, though it's the least permanent. I've been living apart from my parents for a while, in a cabin closer to town. I still see them every weekend. I have to say goodbye today because I leave from my place early tomorrow morning.

As I approach the family house, I can smell the coffee on the stove and the musty scent of the iron stove burning damp wood. I wonder if the Haida ravens told them I was coming because I am the only one who drinks coffee regularly. Mom and Dad only drink it on Sundays, and my brother never developed a taste for it at all. As I open the tall doorway to the house, I kick off my boots, still attached to the snowshoes.

"I'm home," I say, and I remember I need to shout for them to be able to hear me. The rest of my family stands at about 7 feet tall, giants like Paul Bunyan. I stopped growing at around 5'6" because sometimes the height skips a generation. I had a hard time reckoning with it when I was younger, but it doesn't bother me anymore.

"Helena, is that you?" My mother calls from the kitchen, and I can hear her heavy footsteps stride across creaking wood. When I see her, I give her a hug, and she asks if my hike up here was okay. I say it was, and I don't let on that I've made a whole day of goodbyes. I don't want her to comfort me or watch my emotions like storm clouds rolling over the forest. We walk to the kitchen, where Dad and Roosevelt are reading the paper. It looks tiny in their hands after watching Ballard do the same earlier today.

"Hey, Dad," I say, reaching a mug from one of the lower cabinets and pouring myself a cup of coffee.

The warmth is welcome after being outside for so long. As I take my first sip, I notice they brewed my favorite kind, hazelnut.

"Hey, kid. You come to say goodbye?" he asks.

I nod because I don't want to say it aloud.

I think he notices because he follows up with, "You'll have fun, you know."

I know I will, and I know I will see my family again; they are coming to visit me next fall. It is all that time between that scares me, all the time I won't be too busy to think. My thoughts will drift back to fire warmed afternoons and days spent building snow shelters with my brother. I wonder if there is anything in that city that could ever replace this. I guess that is why I am leaving, to make that discovery. There will be a chance to learn something I love, to meet different kinds of folks, and to be in a different environment. I am scared of what will be left once I remove the shiny wrapper of a new experience, but not so much that I would consider staying here.

We talk like it is any other cozy weekend visit, and we play Monopoly. I win, as always, because I spent one winter when I was eight reading the rule book over and over again and playing against myself when no one else would. When it's time

for me to go, I hug my mom, arms over hers like she's leaving and not me. I hug my dad, and I try to remember the texture of his flannel shirts that make him look like a lumberjack. I hug my brother, in an awkward sort of way, because he is still growing into himself and can't decide how he feels about me leaving. I walk out the door, and I think I'm fine, but I'm not because I only get a few feet before running back into the house for another hug.

"Okay, honey," Dad says gently, patting me on the shoulder. He knows if I stay any longer, I won't leave at all.


I wave goodbye as I walk away backward until I can't see the house anymore. Then I move as quickly as I can, wanting to shake the loneliness already peering out from behind the trees, even though I haven't truly left yet.

I eat dinner alone, and I go through my packing list once more, making sure I have everything. I do because I've already checked four times. I'll meet a cab on the highway to drive me to the airport, and I double check the meeting time, then write it on my hand so I won't forget. I set my alarm on the smartphone I got specifically for the new life I plan to start tomorrow. I don't get service here, so it's really only good as an alarm clock for now.

Before I go to sleep, I cry under the covers and let all the accumulating feelings cover me like an avalanche. I don't want to go, but I couldn't be happy and stay.

The Two Richards

Kimberly Sutherland

t had never been a thought on my mind. Never once. Yet, this December day something grabbed my attention. I was at the U.S. Postal Service dropping off Christmas cards and hoping they would arrive on time to spread a bit of holiday cheer. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a friendly looking new building with the signage of Hospice above the door.

Have you ever had an idea you can't seem to shake? It begins burrowing into your mind. It weaves its way deeper and more constant, down, down into the recesses of your cerebrum until you have no choice but to ask, "What's up with this and what am I supposed to do about it?" That's what was happening with hospice. I couldn't shake the thought that it was somehow about to become part of my life, and I had no idea why.

In the beginning of January 2018, when the joy of Christmas was fading and it was back to real life, I found myself entering the door below the burrowing word. After meeting with Darcie, the warm and friendly volunteer coordinator, a discovery occurred: we were soulmates. Lots of chatting took place that day and on future occasions. Our love of life and people held a common bond. Both of us had experienced the difficulties of frequent relocations due to our husbands' jobs. We swapped stories of breaking into new neighborhoods and finding our fit in each locale.

I made quick work of the training, reading the 200-page manual and taking the quizzes required before being assigned to a patient. A few weeks later I was ready for duty. My job would be palliative care of an encouraging nature. Patients under hospice care are terminal with a diagnosis of six months or less to live. Dying is recognized as sacred and part of the normal process of a life. It's important to give the best support possible so the patient can live fully, having quality of life to the last dying breath. Alleviating pain both physically and emotionally were the main objectives. This is achieved by keeping company

with a lonely client, listening, talking, and valuing their life to the end. Loving them, that was my job. I can do that, I thought!

When my first call came with a client assignment, it wasn't at all what I expected.

"Hi Kim! This is Darcie. How are you? I have an unusual request for you. One I wouldn't ask just anyone, but I couldn't shake the thought that I should ask you to take a particular patient that would benefit from having you visit with him." She continued to talk, and I became more curious, wondering what could be so difficult about this situation. "I normally wouldn't ask a new volunteer to take this person as a first-time client, but knowing you, I feel compelled to ask. He is just out of prison having served twenty years for child molestation. He's dying of cancer, probably not long left. Think about it. Let me know. I understand if you don't want to. His name is Richard."

Richard? That name, and his crimes, made me quake in remembrance.

Dear reader, have you experienced the weakness of body, a limpness really, like your flesh is all you have with no inner structure supporting it? A wobbling mass of jello needing a place to land. My body felt strange as my mind flooded with decades of memories like a movie reel on high speed. Richard. I had a Richard of my past who had done similar unspeakable things to our family and to others. How could I show love to someone whose name and life represent such pain? My thoughts raced back in time to a place that I rarely visit but has shaped me into the person I am today. I became immersed in deep remembering. A time-capsule split open in seconds upon hearing the name Richard and memories flooded my mind.

1959-1970: Mom and Dad married young, Mom only seventeen and Dad five years older. They had been neighbors turned sweethearts. Mom had been told she wouldn't be able to have children, so imagine the joy and surprise when she had my sister and, two years later, me. As the years went by, they began to consider adoption. Things were different back then. Perhaps people in general were more innocent, less suspicious of others, or maybe that was just my parents. (I don't think it ever occurred to them the danger that could come to our family; they trusted the system.) There was a lot of love in our

family and they wanted to share it with another child, a boy perhaps, who had no one to care for him. Their mission in life has always been to love. Little did they know the cost of such a mission.

1971: At Christmas, two boys, brothers, were adopted into our little family making it a pack of six. The boys were older, ten and fourteen, difficult ages for adjusting to new surroundings. At ages three and seven they had been left on the courthouse steps. What could bring parents to abandon their small children is beyond understanding. These boys went from foster home to foster home before landing with us. Regulations were slim to none; empty beds were needed for wards of the state. Sometimes kindness met them, other times deep scars were left. Scars, like tears, tend to leak on others, especially others who bring a deep love that has not been known before. Love was the motto in our household, and no one was left out. It's difficult to handle love if you've not known it. Love has rules. The brothers struggled against the rules and had a difficult time understanding love. Richard wrestled with anger. Anger at a world that had left wounds, wounds that festered. And perhaps fear. Fear of being disappointed again.

My parents would later discover these boys had been adopted before, only to be given back to the state. Too many problems. They hadn't known love, a love that lasts, one that doesn't fail. The gnarly fingers of anger had taken hold of Richard and wrapped themselves so tightly around his heart that he could scarcely break free. There would be glimpses of hope. Hope that love would break through. Life, difficult past, deep scars, wounds running so deep that even deep love has trouble reaching to help in the healing. Mom and Dad kept loving. Kept praying.

1974: The older brother left at age sixteen—too much love. Rules restrict and have expectations. Mom and Dad prayed. (They still pray.)

1975: It was a December day and Richard didn't come out and wait for the bus with us sisters. He was angry. After school, bus drop off, and sisters enter the house, life was shattered. We were met with a war zone. The smell of smoke flooded our senses. Hateful writing smeared walls, dolls heads severed,

knives scattered, nothing in its place. Helter Skelter. The Christmas tree stood alone, untouched. Richard had imploded, leaving our house and our lives in shambles. The sickening odor of the implosion still permeates my remembering. The furnace had been turned to the highest setting. Men's cologne was soaking across the rugs like a can of gasoline poured on wood before lighting. Candles burning, remnants of lit matches littered the floor. Cabinets emptied, contents pell-mell.

Most shocking were the dismembered dolls. My cherished Raggedy Ann my grandparents had given to me as a special gift had the greatest impact. At age ten, she and I were best of friends and could be found playing house together or performing some theatrical entertainment for the other stuffed toys. She had been murdered. I later re-stuffed her head and stitched it back in place, but the scars were a constant reminder. We, our family, had loved, and our love had been betrayed. (Another reminder, though, is the heart placed on the chest of all Raggedy Ann dolls by their original creator. This symbol of love was still visible.)

The police came, took photos, asked questions, and wrote a report. (I have recently been curious to find the report and see if it matches my memories.) Richard went missing and it took several days to track him down. My parents must have slept with one eye open for fear of him showing up in his crazed state of mind. We knew now that he was capable of murdering us in our sleep. Yet, no one spoke those words out loud.

Mental ward doctors said he wasn't safe. He could implode at any time. He could no longer live in our home. He was institutionalized. How do you love someone who is extremely dangerous? I hated. (Have you ever hated?) I felt justified in my hate. After all, he had taken our love and betrayed us. Yet, hate deeply hurts the hater. Love and hate cannot cohabitate. Mom and Dad continued to love and to pray. We even took his Christmas gifts to the mental ward at St. Lawrence Hospital. I didn't understand this kind of love. The love that keeps giving even when it's been hurt so deeply (of course my parents were hurt deeply and worried about their daughters). My ten-year-old mind knew Richard didn't deserve love, let alone Christmas gifts. Perhaps that's the point. The deep love my parents knew

didn't have to be earned or deserved. It was a much greater love which took me years to grasp.

1976-1983: Richard imploded many more times in different places. Occasionally he would show up at our house. A life of drugs had left him even more dangerous. We didn't always know when he was at our home out in the country, but he would often leave his mark. One morning my dad discovered the words *helter-skelter* written on our car in what looked like blood. The signature of mass-murderer Charles Mason. We were careful to keep doors locked. Mom and Dad continue to love, give money, send letters, visit numerous institutions and jails, pray and pray. (I'm sure some of those prayers were for protection.)

1984: Richard's biological aunt in Texas discovered where her nephew was, offered a shelter and perhaps an opportunity to make up for the pain inflicted by her relatives who had abandoned him years ago. He moved to Texas. He imploded, she was too close, and extensive knife wounds left her nearly dead, yet she was alive and testified. Richard arrived in maximum security prison in Texas, for life. Mom and Dad loved, sent cards, sent money, prayed. We were all relieved (an understatement) that he was locked up for life. We didn't need to fear any more. Loving doesn't mean people aren't held accountable for the pain they inflict. It means not giving up on them.

1985-2005: I married and had children. Our children must be safe. Richard must never know where we live. We paid a fee to keep our number out of phone books. Years passed. When he came up for parole his aunt would contact us out of fear, pleading for us to all write letters indicating why Richard must be kept behind bars. We all wrote, he stayed put. Sometimes love must be at a distance.

2006: Word came to my parents that Richard was under hospice care, dying of cancer, with not long to live. A letter arrived addressed to me. It was from him. The recognition of his handwriting caused me to tremble. I had given up hate for love years past, and yet I quaked. Pages of squiggly lines—nausea set in with the remembrance. I don't recall exactly what the letter said, but it summed up to, "I know I've hurt you deeply, please forgive me. I have found the deep love. Prayers prevailed. Love broke through. Richard."

Mom and Dad drove from Michigan to Texas for one last opportunity to show love. (I did not go.) Visiting an inmate at a Texas maximum-security prison is terrifying. Security guards, constant surveillance, heavy steel doors, locks, and more locks. They finally reached the nurses station. As they waited and spoke to the nurse, Richard heard the conversation from his bed in a nearby room. He had no idea they were coming, yet he recognized the voice. “Mom, is that you?”

They spent time talking, catching up, saying goodbyes. Richard was changed; he was so sorry for the pain he had caused. He wanted forgiveness. He died a short time after their visit. Even now when someone asks “How many people are in your family?” I always answer four. It’s just my parents, my sister, and me. People who don’t know our story think we are a perfect *Leave it to Beaver* family. I suppose everyone has skeletons in their closets. Some are just bigger than others.

All these memories visited me in a rush upon hearing of Richard Two, his terrible crimes, and hospice.

2018: Darcie’s phone call opened waves of emotion that had been stuffed down to the deepest parts of my mind. The trembling experienced years before in reading Richard’s letter seemed to revisit with the memories. They were different Richards. One had died in prison in 2006. Richard Two had served his sentence and was dying in a nursing home. Would I go visit him, love him? Was this a test? It’s amazing what can flash through one’s mind and manifest in a moment’s times.

“Darcie, yes, of course I’ll visit Richard.”

The first time I went to visit Richard Two brought waves of memories, anxiety and trepidation. I didn’t know what my reaction would be upon seeing him. What does a dying man look like who has been in prison for such crimes? The smells of the nursing home flooded my senses; urine and death, disease and disability surrounded me as I walked through the halls looking for his room number. Richard had a room at the far end of a corridor. He had his own room, which is unheard of in a low-income place such as this. I never asked, but assumed it was because of his history.

“Hi Richard! I’m Kimberly. I’ve come to spend some time with you. Can I help with anything? Do you like baseball?”

Where did you grow up?" Trying to get a conversation going can be tricky, but it didn't take long, and Richard was telling me about growing up, his likes and dislikes, Cardinals baseball, and serving in the military. He had even spent some time in Korea. His wife had died of a disease and he went off the rails after that. Couldn't seem to think straight, made terrible mistakes. Wished he could do things over. He was so sorry for what he had done, so sorry. He served his time. How to make it right seemed to constantly eat away at his mind, like the cancer was doing to his body. He had no family. No one. A frail old man of almost ninety, bones wrapped in parchment paper, loads of regret hang off him like time worn wrinkles. He hadn't much time left as he sat slumped in his wheelchair. Pain wracked his body constantly. He was surprisingly thankful for anything anyone did for him. He liked cookies.

Each week I ventured over to visit Richard Two, with cookies in hand, and we would chat when he was up to it, or I would just sit by him so he wasn't alone. I prayed for him. I loved him. How could it be that I could love him? But I did. This criminal was reduced to a frail bony creature, bent over in pain, both physical and spiritual. Gnawing memories ate away at his mind. He would speak to me as though I knew his story, but I didn't really know his. I knew another story that gave understanding to his. He was no longer dangerous or a menace to society. He was helpless, sad, and dying.

As weeks moved forward, he was unable to get out of bed. Too much pain. He was thinking about Little Debbie Nutty bars and I promised I'd bring him some the following week. When the day came for my visit I was armed with the promised box of treats. Just as I was about to leave, I received a call. "Hi Kim. This is Darcie. How are you? I'm just calling to let you know that Richard just passed away. Thanks for visiting him... for caring."

As I hung up the phone waves of grief came over me. I sobbed for Richard. I was most likely the only one who mourned his loss. Some might say he deserved to die, and no one should mourn his passing. I can't really argue that. My parents had shown me years and years of loving the undeserving. The box of Little Debbie Nutty Bars still sits on my pantry shelf, never

delivered. They are a reminder of the Two Richards and lives that went very wrong causing great pain to others. What should be done with people who are dangerous, who cause pain?

Forgiveness is powerful, and love transcends all understanding. Who deserves love, truly? Hate goes deep, but love can burrow deeper.

Corrie Ten Boom, a famous author, speaker, and a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp said it best: "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still."

Empty Lot

Alyssa Timmer



The carpet and walls
and appliances
were the color
of spoiled cream,
fitting for the tumors
that had turned
my grandmother sour
in the home
where I spent most
of my years as a child.
I decided
to take him there;
four years
to the day she died
in a room
that never seemed
to reach the sun.
In the time
of abandonment,
the plaster and paint
had decayed into a pile
of rubble and ash
soiled from a fire
the year before.
I was ready
to claim this house
that I knew
would be boarded up—
lifeless and gaping
in the roof with two
strips of yellow tape
in the form of an x
laid neatly across

black shingles.
It was a cigarette you know.
My voice dull; monotonous.
He would reassure me:
It's still here.
That's what matters.
And I would nod
my head and look back
towards the road,
and we would go on,
diving into conversation
about preferences of music,
and that would be enough.
But when we pulled up
nothing but a milky field
in the shape of a house
stood before me.
And soon he is asking
if we made a wrong turn.
Maybe I forgot
it was a street over.
And my hands and my head
are shaking and I've lost
her all over again.
It was right here.
I start to panic.
It was right here.
And suddenly
I'm on the phone
with my mother
and she's telling me
they demolished it.
Last week,
She would say.
I thought I told you.
I stare at the land
with lifeless grass
imprinted with the shadow
of a home that held

a covered porch
and a small garage
that smelled of gasoline
and rusty nails
and the last place
she took her last
breath and now
I can't breathe.
And we end the night
in silence, driving home
under the shadows of
the moon as it mocks me

Remembering Relief in the Willow

Lisa Wood



She lingers loosely around me with her thin leaves
sashaying on my shoulders
tenderly
as I count to a hundred,
mississippilessly,
breaking the rules to avenge my recent losses.
I peek out through my fingers,
watching as the kids fan out
pushing and shoving
while looking for the best hiding spots.
As I step out from beneath my canopy, the sun
whips my bare shoulders
scolding me
for my cheating ways.

She embraces me one last time
as the moist earth seeps into my thin shorts
reminding me of the newly fallen rain.
There are still scarce droplets
catching the edge of my journal.
The distant whirring of the
machinery
rings in my ears
and I dig my back into the willow,
comforting her as best as I know how.

I stay inside her shelter
from the world
for as long as allowed.
I know that she is the only one left
to keep my secrets and regrets

while keeping me safe
and thriving
in this haven I have created.

I am forced to leave as the
new world
creeps closer.

Her branches flirt with me
begging for the last bit of company
she may ever have
but I promise her that she'll be
used for good.

The branches come to a halt
as she knows that she will do
no good
rocking in the corner of a
living room.

Humanity's Dominance

charcoal and ink wash

Kenzie Holzinger



Cranes

Bob Nolte



Surrounded by green mountains,
the chill of the morning
greet the warmth of my coffee,
kissing my lips with porcelain heat.

Below, pink cranes fish in the reservoir.
Their curvy necks plunk down quickly,
snapping up their breakfast.
How delish must be those fish.

Fishermen from dynasties past
fished these waters from bamboo rafts.
Wooden poles propelled them along the shallows,
lanterns glowed and swung from mounted hooks.

A scene meant to be immortalized
In watercolor brushstrokes on a hanging scroll.
But what would the fishermen and painters of dynasties ago
think of the metal cranes stripping the mountainsides bare?

The noise and tremors from the metal cranes
rip the reservoir surface with ripples.
My coffee cup rattles on my saucer.
The surface of my coffee trembles.

Screeches and loud, metallic bangs
cause most of the pink cranes to fly away.
I'm left alone to finish the last of my coffee,
which has now turned cold as metal.

Mrs. Morris's English Assignment

Nathan Cauley



Mrs. Morris | Susan | Kyle | Hellen | Bob | Clare | Danny
| Jessie | Karly | Jeff | Gabe

****Open with Mrs. Morris standing in front of all
of her students in a classroom setting****

Mrs. Morris: Alright class, today is the day that your projects are due. If you remember correctly, two weeks ago I assigned each of you to create a class presentation for one of the great works of historical literature. You all have had plenty of time to make your projects, so I expect nothing less than the best. You are the Cream of the Crop. Now, Susan and Kyle, would you like to go first?

Susan: Okay.

Kyle: Sure.

Mrs. Morris: Excellent! Let's see what you have.

****Susan and Kyle walk to the front of the class****

Susan: We worked very hard on our project. It was difficult, but I feel that we succeeded in our efforts.

Kyle: Mrs. Morris gave us the topic of instructional bird hunting. So we want to show you exactly how to successfully hunt and kill a bird, or in this case a mockingbird.

Susan: Now, first of all, mockingbirds can be hard to find. So make sure to keep a watchful eye out for them.

Mrs. Morris: Um, excuse me, Susan?

Susan: Yes, Mrs. Morris?

Mrs. Morris: If I'm not mistaken, I assigned you and Kyle to research *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Susan: Yes, you did. That's exactly what our project is titled: How to Kill a Mockingbird.

Kyle: Now, once you've spotted the mockingbird, you must use a form of weaponry in order to kill it. Bows and arrows work fine, but in my experience a .22 rifle has worked the best for me.

Mrs. Morris: Kyle, Susan, this is not at all what I assigned to you.

Susan: Of course it is. Our project does describe exactly how one kills a mockingbird. So now, once the mockingbird is in range, you should raise the weapon—

Mrs. Morris: Stop! Okay. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a classic piece of American literature. It addresses the topics of racial prejudice, acting against societal standards, and fighting for what's right without regard for consequences. Does your presentation involve any of that?

****Kyle and Susan look at each other nervously****

Mrs. Morris: Okay, you two have missed the point. Take a seat, both of you.

****Kyle and Susan sit down****

Mrs. Morris: Alrighty then. Bob and Hellen, why don't you go next. I believe I assigned you with *Animal Farm*.

****Bob and Hellen walk to the front of the class****

Hellen: So, farms can come in many different shapes and sizes, and their products can range as widely as their importance in the world economy. But on most farms, animals are born, raised, cared for, and used for profitable interests.

Bob: Many farms will raise animals for different purposes, which include their milk, hides, meat, and other features that

designate them as worthy investments. The supply and demand of the products that these animals produce determine the prosperity of the farm.

Mrs. Morris: Okay, that is also not what I assigned to you.

Hellen: Sure it is. An animal farm, as opposed to a plant-based farm, focuses on living creatures, which are called livestock. Such livestock can include cows, chickens, goats, horses, and sheep, which are all used for different economic purposes. We discovered—

Mrs. Morris: No! Okay. Are you telling me that you studied farms with animals?

Bob: Well yeah. It's a very lucrative business.

Mrs. Morris: And are you also telling me that you prepared nothing about the Communistic takeover of the Russian government?

Hellen: What does that have to do with animals?

Mrs. Morris: Alright. You guys are done as well. Please, take your seats.

****Bob and Hellen sit down****

Mrs. Morris: Okay, let's have someone else try. Clare and Danny, please tell us what you learned about *Of Mice and Men*. And, please, stick to your topic.

****Clare and Danny walk to the front of the class****

Clare: Of course. *Of Mice & Men* has played a significant role in our American culture. Isn't that right Mrs. Morris?

Mrs. Morris: Yes it is.

Clare: *Of Mice & Men* portrays true emotion to its audience, both in compelling and persistent ways that have withstood the test of time.

****Clare gestures to Mrs. Morris. Mrs. Morris
nods and looks relaxed****

Danny: Yes. Currently, lead vocalist and bassist Aaron Pauley leads the top charts metal core band today, but it was Austin Carlile who really brought this band to be what it is since he started it in California all the way back in 2009.

Clare: Today one of their most popular albums is *Restoring Force*. Released in 2014 it was listed as—

Mrs. Morris: And am I to understand that you two researched a band named *Of Mice and Men* rather than the book...

Danny: ...There's a book called *Of Mice and Men*?

Mrs. Morris: ...Sit down.

****Danny and Clare sit down****

Mrs. Morris: Is there anyone here who actually did what I asked them to do? Jessy, what did you do?

Jessy: "Dust in the Wind" by Kansas.

Mrs. Morris: Okay...*Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell was your assignment. Karly?

Karly: *Teen Wolf* on MTV.

Mrs. Morris: *Sea Wolf* by Jack London was yours. Jeff?

Jeff: Big Mac.

Mrs. Morris: ...*Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. And Gabe?

Gabe: *The Lord of the Flies*.

Mrs. Morris: That's not even—wait. Say that again.

Gabe: *The Lord of the Flies*.

Mrs. Morris: Okay. You mean *THE Lord of the Flies*?

Gabe: Yes.

Mrs. Morris: *The Lord of the Flies*. By William Golding.

Gabe: Yes.

Mrs. Morris: The historical novel written in 1954 that addresses the savagery and degeneration of man?

Gabe: Yes.

Mrs. Morris: Alright then! Please come up here and tell us what you have prepared.

Gabe walks to the front of the class

Mrs. Morris: Now pay attention class, because this here is a representation of what you were supposed to do. Gabe, you may start when you're ready.

Gabe: *Ahem* *The Lord of the Flies* was hard to read and boring and I didn't understand it.

Silent pause

Mrs. Morris: That...is absolutely correct! *gets emotional* Well done!

Mrs. Morris hugs Gabe

END

The Cookie Jar

Ethan Sproat



½ cup of sugar

2 eggs

A tablespoon of vanilla

Bake at 350 until your grandson finishes school

My bus stops beside the cattle fence and the Easter lilies

You stand on your freshly mowed grass in jeans and a blue
striped shirt

A smile piercing the waves in your skin

After a hug and conversation about the fish in Miss Riggs's
fish tank

You open the door

I smell cookies

I eat cookies

After the crumbs of the last cookie fall onto your freshly
vacuumed floor

I look at the glass jar on your marble counter covered in my
fingerprints

For once it's empty

For once it sits there with no purpose

For once it rests awaiting the next patch of wonder

I cry

The oven beeps and the crying stops until fifteen years later

How much sugar?

Where did you put the eggs?


What is a tablespoon?

The marble counter once covered in talent now is home to bills
and prescriptions

The cookie jar now home to dead bugs and dust

Hestia

Su Liu

y grandma used to set a small golden-colored censer under the counter in our kitchen full of various seasonings on the counter, pots on the gas hearths, and fresh vegetables on the floor in a basket at a corner. She lit three sandalwood incense sticks mornings and nights. Once she told me that it was for the kitchen god, Zao. I asked her for the gender of Zao and she said most people believed that Zao was male. That year, I was fifteen and had studied Greek history by myself outside of school. I asked my grandma whether she had heard of Hestia, a kitchen goddess from ancient Greek mythology. Of course, my primary-school-math-teacher grandma did not know Hestia, but she pretended she knew it because she had tried very hard to teach me about Globalization. I suppressed laughter and asked her then what did Hestia do for people? My grandma replied that Hestia provided fire to people's kitchens, supplied enough food, and prevented houses from disasters. I nodded with worship.

One night at college, recollecting this Hestia conversation, I realized my grandma used what people always said about Zao to describe Hestia. I laughed at my childishness because my grandma had a reverential facial expression when she talked about Hestia, but I had tried to use my knowledge to make fun of her. I called her from two thousand miles away and asked her if she remembered Hestia, as I imagined she was standing in the kitchen next to the censer. She said yes, which surprised me because she always forgot things, like her farsighted glasses, a needle on a cloth, and the keys recently. She said that Hestia was a kitchen goddess who had protected our home because she had lit incense sticks for her every day. Her voice sounded assured, as if Hestia and Zao had protected Chinese and Greek people all along.

Ten years later, I am standing in this same kitchen. Now it is like a sleeping palace without the old seasonings, and pots, and vegetable basket. I cannot find my grandma or her

small golden-colored censer anywhere either. I can only find her sacred face when she was talking about Hestia from my memory. The golden sunlight shined on her barely wrinkled face. She smiled her gracious smile and her brows raised, eyes filled with hope, and her mouth widened as she spoke the words she had prepared for a long time.

Helping Hands

charcoal and ink wash

Kenzie Holzinger



Odyssey

Emylia Bouc



Tell me what I mean to you.

Write it in the stars for all to see.

I want to live to understand the moon—
Where I will dance with Martians,
Finally knowing what it is to be human.


I feel my own mortality for the first time,
As you speak my name
I know that life can be over
As it starts anew.

Reborn on your lips—
My soul drips from the tip of your tongue.
Am I caught in your throat?
Feel as I crawl my way into your heart,
A warmth never known, even to the summer's blaze.

Am I your sun?
Bright yet burning—
Unable to be seen as I am—
Never directly.
Casting shadows through the night—
Filling your mornings with light,
Slowly will I fade away.

The Deal

Christopher Wright

aiko grabbed the last piece of pork and noodles from the bowl of tonkotsu ramen and began slurping at the light brown broth. A damn good bowl of ramen was the best meal for winter jobs. The dish had a way of steadying his nerves before the bullets started flying, making his old favorite spot Hideki's a necessary stop every time he found himself in Southern Han'ei. It was a dank, dingy hole-in-the-wall he had found while ducking C.O.P.P.S after a hot job gone south. Scarred, bloodied, and weapon in hand, old man Hideki served the then newly recruited Spider without any questions asked, save for a request to holster the weapon as to not unease the other customers.

He was wiping his metallic, engraved chopsticks and watching the cook make a meal for two others across the restaurant when a notification appeared in his optical heads-up display. He commanded his cerebramitter to open it and saw that it was a call before answering.

"ETA?" Katsurou's voice appears in the back of his head. He brought up the time in his left optic: 22:15.

"*Fifteen minutes tops*," Kaiko replied. "*Leaving now*."

"*Got it. You'll find Eiji and I at the bar. See you soon, K.*" The call ended.

He reached for his wallet and paid for the meal.

"Best of luck," Hideki said, the wrinkles on his forehead creased and brow furrowed as he wiped his hands on an old towel.

Kaiko huffed deeply and nodded. "Definitely going to need it."

Yozora Gentlemen's Club was the brightest eyesore even among the love hotels and hostess clubs. The business had a large, pink woman-like character dancing slowly on a pole as the club's title circled it and was engulfed in bright blue neon that burned if you stared too long. Kaiko watched a bouncer

arguing with a group of people from across the street, smoking from his cigarette. He ran his fingers along the screen of a card in his sweater's pocket and pulled it out, watching the short video of Ken Yozora sided by two models and read "VIP Access" in the corner. He again checked the time, now 22:25. He pressed a button on the cigarette, collapsing the device to the size of a dime, and made his way for the entrance.

One of the people stopped arguing and took note of Kaiko moving toward them. "What do you think you're doing, Spider?" the man said, pointing an accusatory metallic finger. His friends took noticed too and started cursing at him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Back of the fuckin' line!"

He paid the group no attention and continued. Before the bouncer could say anything, he produced the card to him.

"Huh, third Spider tonight," the bouncer said, taking the card and looking it over, "Must be some serious shit."

"Guess you could say that," Kaiko said. He looked at the group again who had silenced and settled for spiteful gazes. He looked over their cyberware, mostly cheap and outdated parts, he guessed European in origin and had been circulated multiple times through the Dragons' markets. They tended to sell cheap, flashy, yet hardly worthwhile cyberware at high prices while they kept top end gear for themselves. He looked back at the bouncer, whose eyes were now a dark grey, no doubt scanning him for weapons.

"I'll say the same thing I told your friends." His eyes went back to the dark brown they were before and held out the card. "Keep the weapon holstered and we won't have any issues."

Kaiko went to grab the card, but the bouncer pulled it back and a wry smirk crept on his face.

"And no touching." He handed Kaiko the card and stepped aside.

"Noted."

The intensifying beats and vibrations of electronic music guided him down a long hallway. He was flanked by multicolored holograms like the one outside, their colors pulsating with the music's bass.

“Welcome to Yozora Gentlemen’s Club,” a woman’s voice boomed ethereally over the speaker, “where the dreamiest girls fulfill your wildest desires.”

Classy, he thought as he came to the end of the hall. A pair of double doors slid open revealing large crowds circled around multiple stages and a bar. He closely looked around the club, keeping an eye out for anyone with Dragon insignia, but found no one. Yozora seemed to have held up his end of the deal, but he stayed suspicious due to the level of security. All of the guards were armed, some even eying him as he pushed his way through the crowd toward the bar.

Eiji nudged Katsurou once he caught sight of Kaiko making his way over. He briefly looked over his shoulder, then back at the backlit assortment of drinks.

Kaiko nodded at Eiji before taking a seat next to Katsurou. His cerebramitter notified him that he’d automatically connected to the group’s local link.

“Quite the place, isn’t it?” Katsurou started in the back of his head, *“Maybe once we’re finished I’ll buy you a lap dance.”*

“Let’s just get this over with,” Kaiko said, asking the bartender out loud for water. *“Not trying to be in this shithole any longer than I need to be.”*

“C mon, lighten up, K. Eiji thought it was funny.”

Kaiko glanced at Eiji to see he was smirking. *“Just sounds like newbie’s kissing ass. No offense, Eiji.”*

Eiji went back to scanning the crowds. *“None taken.”*

Kaiko grabbed the water, took a drink, and turned back towards the crowds as well. He caught sight of two staircases on opposite sides of the room, “Meeting’s up there, right?”

“Middle booth, by the overhang.” Katsurou turned around fully and pointed at the center of the overhang. *“Right there. How ’bout we get to work, boys?”* He stood up and made his way toward the left staircase.

Finishing his water, Kaiko glanced over at Eiji. *“After you...”*

Ken Yozora was a rather odd-looking man. Kaiko had seen him in the briefing and on the VIP Card earlier, but he was even stranger in person. He had an egg-shaped torso with

limbs that looked way too big on him and a wiry metallic hand that held a half-smoked cigar. He wore a bright blue suit that matched his sky blue, pupil-less eyes, and black, slick-backed hair with a streak of steel through it. He half-smiled at the sight of the three Spiders, which creased almost all his face.

"Ah, there they are," Ken said, throwing an arm on the cushioned seat behind him, "And right on time too. Guess the rumors about Spiders were right."

"Of course, Yozora," Katsurou said, extending a hand to Ken who grabbed it with his real one. "Always on time. Not a minute sooner or later."

"That's an ethic I can respect." Ken motioned to the seats in front of him, "Make yourselves comfortable." The group slid into the circular booth, with Kaiko sitting outermost. "It's a shame you're employed under Kiba. A real damn shame."

"Though we appreciate the sentiment, Ken, Spiders have a strict 'No affiliation with Dragons policy.'" Katsurou grabbed the bottle of Saki on the table and poured himself a glass, "Speaking of Miyamoto-san, however, how about we address the recent Dragon attacks on his properties?"

"Hm, what about them?"

"Well, the latest attack brings it to about six within the past month. Apart from doing thousands of Nen in damage, the lives of eight people, including five geishas, were lost. Basic intuition aside, a little diving from our Tarantulas lead connection of the events directly to you."

"Listen." Ken shifted forward, pointing his metallic hand at each of us. "I had been planning on expanding to Chiba for months and he just so happens to do the same thing, even taking the particular lots I wanted to buy? I'll be damned if I stand by while—"

"Look, all that aside, Ken, the fact is you sent Dragons to do your dirty work and at the expense of the lives of Miyamoto's customers and workers."

"Huge mistake," Kaiko added, taking out his cigarette again. "That's landed you in some pretty deep shit, Ken."

Ken without looking at Kaiko pointed his cigar at him. "What's he talking about?"

Katsurou glanced over at Kaiko with a raised eyebrow. "*Really?*" he thought.

Kaiko simply shrugged and went on smoking.

“What Wolf here means is that Miyamoto has an offer for you. One I think you’d be hard pressed to pass up,” Katsurou continued.

“An offer?” Ken said and began pouring himself a cup of Saki. “Well alright, let’s hear it then.”

“After all those deaths, Miyamoto-san realized that this rivalry has gotten out of control. He has acknowledged that you were looking to buy the spots he’s taken and has decided to sell them to you.”

“Hmm, sell them?” Ken puffed on his cigar. “How much are we talkin’?”

“He’s willing to sell each location at 435 million Nen for all three locations.”

Ken stared at Katsurou for a minute, then started to laugh. He looked around at the three as if waiting for them to start laughing as well. “You’re serious? You’re being fucking serious right now, aren’t you? You’re telling me he expects me to pay for more than five times the price they would’ve been normally?”

“Is it a deal or not?” Kaiko said. Ken looked at Kaiko now.

“What was your name again? Wolf? I suggest you change your fucking attitude.”

“That so?” He took a drag from his cigarette and puffed the cloud in Ken’s direction.

Ken smirked. “Yeah it is so. It’s always the failures that bark the loudest.”

Kaiko tightened a fist at his side but dared not to break eye contact. “*I suggest you do some coercing, Kat,*” he thought. “*This bastard’s askin’ for a bullet.*”

Katsurou placed a hand on Kaiko’s shoulder. “The most important thing is that Miyamoto is trying to achieve is peace. Money aside, in the long run—”

Ken slammed his fist on the table and pointed at Katsurou. Kaiko caught sight of a pair of guards that noticed Ken’s sudden outburst. “Miyamoto can shove his peace! He has the gall to send Spiders into my establishment and expect me to accept this fucking insulting deal? You can tell Miyamoto he can expect more Dragon attacks until he decides to come back with

a reasonable offer. Security!” He motioned for the two guards and they made their way over.

Katsurou interlaced his fingers and hid his mouth behind his hands. *“Well, I still have Neurotoxic darts to take care of the guards. Eiji, get a hold of Weaver. Have transport on standby.”*

“Yes sir.”

“Kaiko, I’m going to inform him of the other option. If he refuses the deal again, you’ll carry out the deed.”

Kaiko let slip a grin. *“Looking forward to it.”*

“Ken.” Katsurou rested his chin on his hands, “Let me put it this way: you either accept the deal that Mr. Miyamoto has offered, or we have to resort to the second option. Wolf?”

Kaiko grabbed the Chelicerae holstered under his hoodie and brandished it for Ken to see. “Option number two,” he said as he waved the sleek, grayish black handgun. The security didn’t like that and decided to point their own guns at him. “Your choice, Ken.”

Ken laughed again. “You think I didn’t expect this the moment Miyamoto told me to have Dragons stay away for the night? You think I’d be at the mercy of you Spiders?” The man twisted his neck. “You see these two guards here, you’ve seen every bouncer in here, armed and ready to take you Spider fucks down on my call. And yet you’re bold enough to threaten me.” He locked eyes with Kaiko again. “I don’t know whether to admire your tenacity or laugh at your stupidity.” He looked up at his guards.

“Shoot these mother—” Before he could finish, Katsurou, in a single, swift motion, threw the Neurotoxic darts. Each of the venom-infused darts hit their target, freezing the two guards instantly. Ken did a double-take, looking back at Katsurou and then the guards. When he looked back again, he took hold of and flipped the table before running for the staircase behind him. Katsurou and Eiji grabbed hold of it and tossed it behind them.

“All yours, Wolf!” was all he needed to hear from Katsurou, speeding out of the booth to catch up with Ken before he could run downstairs. Kaiko grabbed Ken by the shoulder and turned him around. As he did so, Ken threw an elbow, which he dodged, and returned a punch to the stomach. While Ken

lurched from the blow, he kicked him, sending him tumbling down the staircase. Kaiko, gun in hand, chambered a round as he made his way down. He then noticed that some of the bouncers saw what happened and began to push through the crowd toward them. He quickly grabbed Ken, who was struggling to get to his feet, and wrapped an arm around his neck.

“You are so fucked!” Ken said, taking hold onto Kaiko’s arm.

“Shut up.” Kaiko slid his sleeve back, took the wires from the back of his own wrist, and pushed the hair on the back of Ken’s neck up, revealing two ports.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I said shut up!” He immediately jacked into the ports and was greeted by an ‘Encrypted System’ warning in his heads-up display.

“Good luck getting through that encrypt—”

Kaiko tightened his grip around Ken’s throat to shut him up. It took him mere seconds to break through and he began searching for the files.

“How’s it going down there?” Katsurou’s voice appeared. He hesitated to answer until he came across what they were looking for in a file simply labeled “business.” He opened it and found times, dates, routes, and lists of upcoming Dragon operations.

“Found it. It’s looking like a gold mine, Kat. I’m seeing details on operations up to three months out.”

“Good shit. Weaver’s on her way. Finish off our evening’s host.”

“Can do.” It took less than a minute for Kaiko to download the files. As soon as it read Complete, he pressed on his wrist again retracting the wires back in place.

“You just...How did—?” Ken started to say before Kaiko turned him around, placing the barrel of his Chelicerae against his forehead.

“Should’ve parted with the money, Ken.” Kaiko pulled the trigger, sending Ken’s head jolting backward and his lifeless body to the ground.

The gunshot caught the attention of the crowd and they started to scurry. A few of the bouncers finally stepped out from the mass of fleeing bodies, one moving to check on their deceased boss while the other two opened fire on Kaiko.

Kaiko did the same and made his way back upstairs,

ducking behind its metallic railing from the hail of bullets. *“Kat, Eiji, hoods up! Bringing the party to you.”*

They both confirmed and Kaiko continued. He flipped two notches on his weapon, one of which caused the barrel of the weapon to extend a few inches. Standing at the top of the stairway, he turned back and fired the now fully automatic weapon at the two. He hit one and they both fell, almost tripping the other. He turned back and threw his hood up, pulled down the mask netting, and slid under a table in the closest booth. He held a hand out until it turned invisible. The bouncer passed him, checking the other booths.

“One down on stairs. Where are you two?”

“Right side.” Katsurou thought.

He commanded his mask’s lens to switch to thermographic vision and peered from around the cushioned seat, looking at the two across from the group’s original booth and saw their thermal readings.

“What the hell? They aren’t up here,” the bouncer called out, further down the overhang. “Shit, they got Jurou and Kaori too!”

“Damn it, they aren’t down here either. There’s no way they got past all of us,” the second bouncer said.

“Three down leaves at least eleven.” Katsurou started, *“We don’t need any more casualties. Eiji, what’s our best way out?”*

The link went quiet briefly as Eiji scanned for an exit.

“Behind the main stage, there’s an exit for the dancer.” Eiji pointed toward it.

“Sounds like a plan. Everyone on the ceiling, let’s move.” Kaiko reached for the gloves in his back pocket and slid them on. He slowly crept out from under the table and looked at the ceiling, pointing his fist into the air.

“SPIDER WIRE, 10 METERS,” he thought, firing a barrage of impossibly thin wires from his sleeves and the hoodie’s torso that latched to the ceiling. “LIFT.” He slowly began to ascend. Once he reached the ceiling, he placed a hand and foot against it, checking to see if he was firmly attached. “ALL ITEMS: SPIDER MODE.” The command detached all but four wires from the roof and activated the adhesiveness of his gloves and shoes. He glanced over at his accomplices slowly making their way for the

main stage and followed.

“People don’t just fucking disappear!” the bouncer from the entrance called out.

“Well that’s what it’s looking like. Goddamn it, I knew he should’ve have agreed to the ‘No Dragons’ part.”

The three Spiders lowered themselves slowly onto the glowing white stage and began their way toward the back. The pathway narrowed into a hallway with multiple doors on both sides and a black one at its end. Before they could continue, a bouncer came out of one of the dressing rooms, dividing Kaiko from the other two. They quickly pressed themselves on different walls, keeping their eyes on the bouncer as she started peering into other rooms. Kaiko inched toward the nearby doorframe and waited for the bouncer to reappear. As he did so, he heard a voice coming from inside the room.

“But Mother, by the time I could make out what happened, Yozora was dead on the floor,” the dancer said. Someone replied, but Kaiko couldn’t make out what exactly was said. He cut off the thermographic vision and peered around the corner. He saw the dancer talking to a slightly obscured hologram as she cleaned her face of make-up.

“ZOOM X2,” he commanded the lens, now getting a bit of a closer image of the hologram. It was still obscured by the dancer’s arm, but he could see half of a white mask with red streaks fading to white. He also noticed the dancer’s shoulder had a tattoo of a white lotus flower with red tips.

“I swear to be quicker next time, Mother. I beg for your forgiveness and understanding until then.” He heard footsteps behind him drawing nearer.

“CAPTURE PHOTO” His heads-up display blinked and minimized the image he’d snapped into the corner of his eye. He quickly moved back against the wall in time to see the bouncer move past him and back toward the stages. The door at the end of the hall popped open suddenly. Knowing it was Kat and Eiji, he hastily made his way up the hall and joined them in the alley.

The Fight

Emily Wolff



They told me you weren't well,
but that you went to the ring to fight.

Back and forth flew the punches.
The day of fireworks, you were winning the match.
Then the news of a lost round came in.

Your support rallied in your corner,
and convinced you to not give up.
You promised your best again.
Body and mind already beaten down once,

you stumbled forward to meet blow after blow.
You needed to hang on for a little longer.
The day I hurt, you were knocked out cold.
I sat not comprehending your fate.
Through the ropes I stepped,

you lay forever unconscious.
My face wet, arms wrapped and unwrapped me.
Cancer's arm was raised in yet another victory.
Everything whirled around me 'til there I stood.
So many came with their condolences.

Unknowns reached out and encircled me,
but I wanted your warmth, not theirs.
One look and I'd be lost all over again.
Songs were sung, words were spoken, and cries were heard.

I clutched my baby sister, tried to take her pain.
My eyes saw you there,
and the man you loved held me.

One more drive before your forever resting place.
In it sunk, you lost the fight for your life.

Ode to a Doorknob

Tyana Brock



You reach out,
as silver as a shiver,
and for a moment,
you've shaken hands with every person I've ever loved.
Just as those who you allow to enter,
I hold you tight and I let you go.
The fingerprints that endure are your DNA,
cold and everlasting as the alloy you are made of.
You wait for strangers to keep them away,
winking almost, when the light hits,
knowing what's inside of you is stronger than they are.
They say the kitchen is the heart of the home,
but you've let more hearts in than anyone.
You tell secrets like a child, and keep them like a promise.
Molded like the Earth, you let me in to worlds unknown.
Oh, your equator curves unlatch memories and rust.
A key, carved opposite of the mountains within you,
reaches through the dirt and the dust.
It's the only one that can make you confess.
If only you could let me in, dear orb,
Unless—

Giant's Door

photography

Justin Rhodes



Painted Mornings

Levi Cox



As I stand here in my room
I think in my head
These walls look bleak
I would like to paint one of them red

That one, right there
The wall behind my bed
To somehow hide my sorrow and mourning
Life's constant dread

But the two on the side
I shall leave bright and white
To highlight my journey forward in life
Starting each dawn, early morning

Red for the blood,
I spilled in the bed before.
And white for the light,
That forced its way into my life.

Years ago, I would have painted,
Though in a much different way.
Abstract of sorts,
But not in the beautiful way.

Angry and shallow,
Selfish with life.
Because I was too angsty,
To let some of my demons die.

Yet, here I am,
Very much still alive.
All thanks to the mornings,
Where I woke up to white.

That “Thing With Feathers”

Lydia Friz



—after “‘Hope’ is the Thing With Feathers”

If hope is the thing with feathers
Which perches in my soul
That explains why I always feel
uncomfortable
And unrested
My soul is like my old
feather pillow

It was once
Plump and full of feathers
Full of hope
But time and pressure
Use and abuse
Left it flat and
Empty feeling
The fluffy parts are worn
Down, leaving hard bits
Which poke me when I shift
In the corner is a hole
Which when the slightest bit
Of pressure hits
The feathers or hope
Fly up
Then plummet to the ground
In neat spirals

I have tried
Many times
To repair the hole;
I have failed
many times

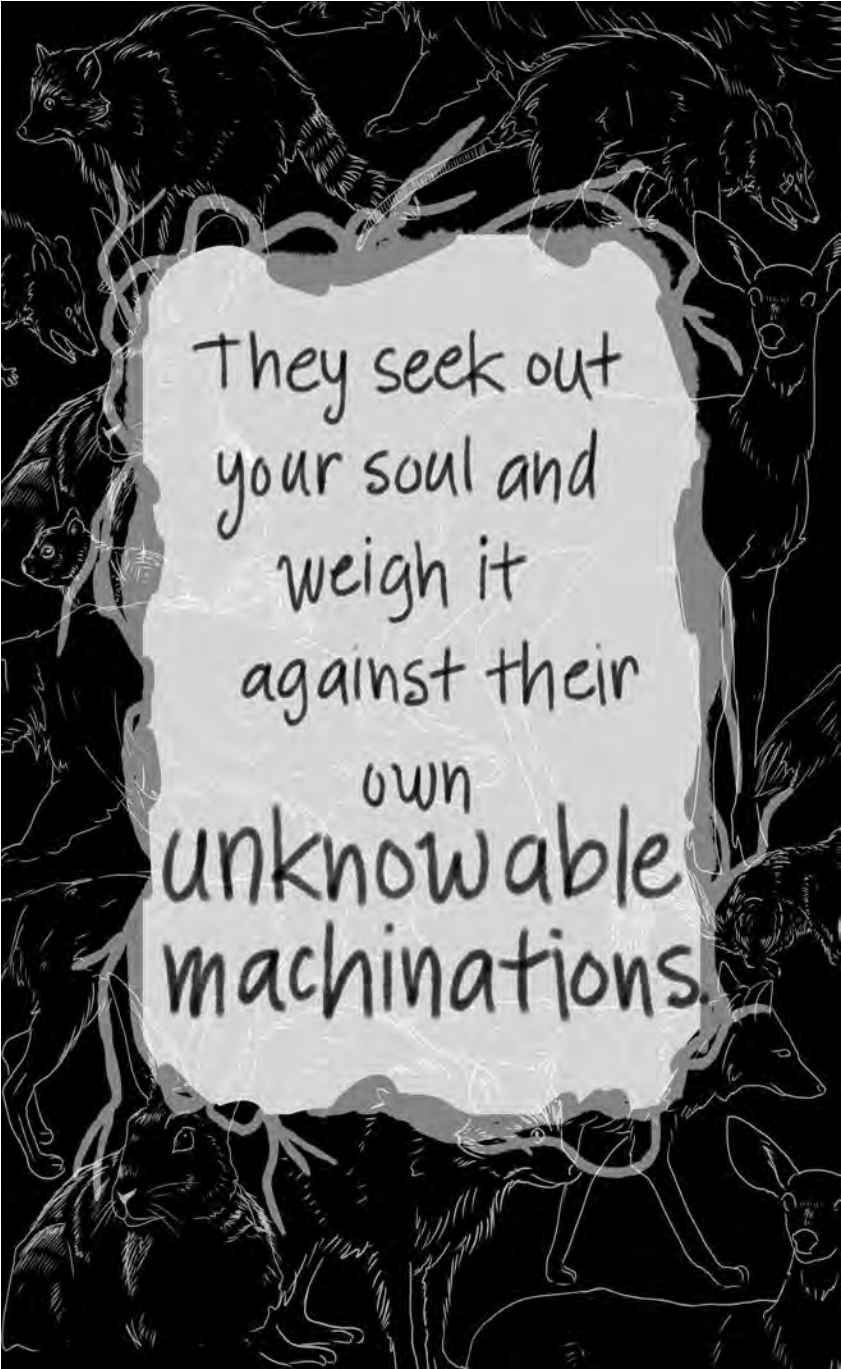
To do anything but slow
The escape of hope or feathers

My soul is unlike the pillow
In that
My soul will heal
Or so I hope

Apathy

Michaela Dean





They seek out
your soul and
weigh it
against their
own
unknowable
machinations.





My sister says

Only the fastest
pass their tests.

My brother

It is only the
strongest.

It is only

the wisest.

My father says.



But my mother
showed me the truth.

It does not matter



if you
are
the
fastest

or the
strongest





or the smartest.

There is no test.




You were simply in the way.



On Seeing My Mother Beaten When I was Very Young and a Brief Instance at a Crack House

Nicole Gaither

here's a lot that I do not remember. I can't tell you exactly how old I was; I could have been four or five. I can't remember where my little sister was. There are a lot of things I could not understand. I didn't know why he broke through the basement door. I didn't understand why my grandma left me behind as she flew down to the corner store to the nearest phone she could use to call the police.

I can remember standing in the doorway. I screamed at the man, "Get off my mom! You're hurting her!" Tears streaked my mother's cheek. He was standing to the right side of my bunkbed. He had my mother on the bed. His left hand clutched her flowing brown hair, forcing her neck back, bent over the frame. His heavy right hand rose and fell repeatedly. "She is crying!" I yelled at the man. I didn't understand why he wanted to hurt her. She was crying. Couldn't the man see she was crying?

I do remember when the man who had beaten her was gone. My mother and I were in the bathroom. She was still crying. "Are you okay?" I asked her, and put my head on her knee as she sat on the toilet. Her pants were down and there was an unfamiliar smell. I happened to look down. That's when I saw it: blood. He hit her head so hard, blood was coming from her privates.

Aside from the color of his skin, I remembered no details about the man who beat my mother. I could not describe his facial features. I could not tell you how his voice sounded. I do not remember his mannerisms. I can tell you at some point, I realized that he and my mother were involved. I can remember her calling the man and telling him to get his waterbed, or she was putting it on the curb. She ended up putting it on the curb. Maybe that's why he was so mad? Looking back, he

must have slept there. I don't remember that either, though. I don't remember the police showing up. I don't remember talking to school counselors because I was too frightened to go back home. I don't remember my dad taking us all to his house for a few days. I don't remember any restraining order. I don't remember the man calling the house and threatening my grandmother. I don't remember my grandma saying, "Ain't nobody scared of you. Come on then, motherfucker, I'll be waiting." I can only remember my grandmother telling me all these things, late one night some time later. We were both high on opiates, her eyes half closed.

II.

On the climb to the crack house, the steps were old and worn by the weather. Green foliage lay on both sides, and a burst of flowers surprised me every couple feet or so. If I hadn't known it was a crack house, it may have even appeared welcoming. I don't remember how many wrong turns I took before I ended up at this house. I was running with a young man I went to middle school with, Jeff, and his brother. So, there I was at the crack house, sitting on the couch. I don't really know what I was doing there, aside from the obvious. People were coming and going incessantly. I may not have even looked up when he strutted through the door. I just remember him saying to Jeff, "Oh, shit. This is my boy." I stood and extended my hand as he said his name. The response was simultaneous. My hand fell into his as a heaviness came over me.

"You dated my mom, Pam," I reminded him. I wanted the man to know who I was. His brow briefly wrinkled in confusion before arching in surprise. "You're Jim's daughter?" he asked as if we had been old friends. I could only nod. Before long they were reciting the rap they had made up in jail together. I wanted to hammer his head the way he did my mother's, but I was nineteen in a crack house. What could I have done? So I did nothing.

Jeff's brother was constantly at the windows. "Blueberries and cherries" he would say with the scanner up to his ear, frantically flipping a stapled stack of papers in front of him. The papers contained supposed codes that officers used. He must have been under the impression that the police had over

15,000 codes for things, give or take, and they memorized all those codes, and used them regularly. CC, a prostitute, was sweaty and out of breath as she sat in the chair next to me and smoked the meager piece she had worked so hard for. She would pop in and out of the house what seemed like every ten minutes or so, swallowed up in her gray sweat suit, visibly damp under her neck. There was a girl in the kitchen that told me I was too pretty to be there. She had a friend with her now. Their mouths were moving quickly, and their heads jerked like chickens as they talked. The two guys that owned the place were in the back room with the door shut. That's where the dresser was that housed a pound of coke and a gun. I still wanted to kill him. Jeff and the man who beat my mother continued their rap as they beat their chests in unison. And there I was, high on crack, immobilized.

I don't know how long I sat there. I don't remember the man ever leaving. Maybe I left first. I probably only remember shaking his hand because it threw me out of my head, out of my high.

III.

Did the man smoke crack back then? Probably. Did my mother? Probably. Some questions I will never have definitive answers to: I don't want them anymore. I remember riding in his car once. The music was very loud and hurt my ears. I could feel the bass of the music as it shook my small frame on the way to his house. I remember meeting one of his children: a girl. I cannot remember her name. I know the whole time we were there I had played with her. I don't know where my mom was or what she was doing with the man. I don't want to know. I remember the girl was putting gel in her hair and curling it. She was older than me. I remember asking if I could try, and her asking if I had done it before. I told her yes. I scooped up a handful of blue gel and put it on the side of my head. I tried to mimic what she had done, and I burned my ear. I began to cry. "I thought you said you knew what you was doing?" she asked.

I remember when my dad finally came back home. I handed him screws as he fixed the door.

Entangled

drawing

Nathan Smith



A Drive with Norma

Louis Damani Jones



At those moments,
your hand would rest on my thigh
as your eyes traced the blurred outlines
of the weary Missouri bluffs,
rising and falling with the dips in the highway.

A wispy nostalgia blew through your hair,
resting on your face in a light twinge of the lip,
cresting out into the present.

At those moments,
I would glance over
and hold your childhood with you.

We let it weep for itself
without judgement—just watching.

Inevitably, you would drift back from those
red-necked, barefoot summers, and the hand that
 massaged my thigh
would tap my shoulder with a whisper,
peeling my hand from the steering wheel to
fold it into itself;
always accompanied by a head
that dressed the crease of my neck with a thick, black past
and a sigh.

Names

Michaela Dean

I think we should name it Scheherazade Cassiopeia Emanuela the Third,” Teresa said, laying across Rue’s lap, head in her hands, staring at the boy next to her mother on the couch. He was curled into a ball; his knees brought up to his chest. He didn’t seem as ill at ease anymore, though, for which Rue could only be grateful. When she’d found the strange boy in the alleyway the day before he’d been so tense and cold. She’d feared that he’d been there so long and gone through so much that when she brought him home, he’d never open up. The warmth of the fireplace and the homely feel of the library seemed to have loosened his nerves, though. If not for his roaming eyes, she would have thought him on the verge of sleep.

“He’s a boy, Teresa, not a girl. Where did you even learn those names?” Teresa was only five; it was a marvel that she could pronounce them let alone know them. Rue trailed her fingers lightly through her daughter’s hair.

“The Murder said it liked those. It wants to name it after itself.” Teresa reached across her mother’s lap to poke lightly at the boy on the other side. He glanced up and then ducked quickly back down again, eyes on the fire. Rue gently brushed Teresa’s hand to the side.

“The Murder’s name is Scheherazade Cassiopeia Emanuela the second?” Rue wondered at the validity of that. It was a spectacularly grand name to be sure, but Tom had never mentioned it. The multifaceted God that rested in Teresa and her twin sister’s psyche would surely have told its previous vessel its name if it had one. Well, maybe. Rue was no expert on multifaceted eldritch Gods.

“Some of it is named that.” Teresa replied matter-of-factly, bringing no clarity to the situation whatsoever.

“He’s still a boy,” Rue said dismissively; it was best to just brush it off. Teresa’s brow furrowed in irritation.

“He said he doesn’t have a name. I should get to name him.”

Rue hummed thoughtfully. “Sammy, what do you think?” She turned to the corner of the room where Sammy sat on the floor, sketchbook in hand. The quieter twin hadn’t uttered a word. Sammy glanced up from her drawing, looking thoughtful. Teresa was quiet, waiting for her response. As usual the only one she ever cared to hear from was her sister. Sammy tapped her pen gently on her lip.

“If he gets a new name can I have a new name?”

Rue scrunched up her face and rubbed at her eyes. “Sammy you have a perfectly nice name. Do you not like Samantha?”

Sammy ducked her head back down behind her sketchbook. “It’s okay, I guess.” Rue could tell from the way she started drawing again that she was officially disengaging from the conversation.

Teresa sat up from her horizontal position and scrambled on all fours across Rue’s lap, causing Rue to grunt as her bony knees dug into her legs. Teresa didn’t pay the pained noises any mind as she hopped off on the other side of Rue and sidled up to the boy curled in the corner of the couch. Rue kept an eye on her, making sure she didn’t scare him. His amber eyes darted over to Teresa worriedly for a moment, his shoulders tensing a bit. Teresa held his gaze and brought herself to a stop about a foot from him. She sat up, tucking her legs and dress beneath her and arranged herself into what Rue assumed was supposed to be a serious stance.

“Sammy doesn’t have an opinion,” Teresa said somberly, her back turned to Rue. “That means I get to pick.”

Rue snorted a bit, trying to cover her smile with her hand when Teresa turned round to glare at her. She saw the boy’s shoulders relax a bit; he seemed to be all right with Teresa there.

“If you can find a name that he likes you can name him,” Rue said.

Teresa whooped in delight, causing the boy’s worried eyes to dart back to her. She threw herself into the seat next to him, side pressing against his. Rue jerked up. She hadn’t been expecting Teresa to be so bold. She perched on the edge of

her seat, ready to move and pull her daughter off of him if need be. However, the boy pressed between Teresa and the arm of the couch, seemed more relaxed than he had been the entire time he'd been in their home. He pressed back into Teresa's side without a word. Rue allowed herself to lean back into the chair, keeping a wary eye on the children. Teresa took one of the boy's hands from where it had been wrapped around his knees and held it in her own as she started to stare blankly at the shelf-lined wall across the room.

"I'm going to say names," Teresa said seriously. "Tap me on the hand if you like one."

The boy nodded at her, soft brown hair falling into his eyes. He used his unoccupied hand to push it back from his face. Rue watched in fascination as Teresa started to list names, still staring blankly at the wall she was facing. There were soft shadows moving around her, barely noticeable. The boy didn't seem frightened of them at least. In fact, he seemed fascinated, amber eyes flitting to follow the shadows while he listened intently. Rue watched for a bit longer and then picked her book back up, allowing the white noise of Teresa's whispered names to lull her back into the mood for reading.

When Rue flipped the last page of her book and gently pressed it closed, she looked up to take stock of the room. The fire was burning low in the fireplace, giving a soft glow to the library. Samantha still sat in her corner quietly doodling, despite the growing shadows. Rue tutted quietly; Sammy would ruin her eyesight if she kept trying to draw in the dark like that. Rue placed her book gently on the arm of the couch before stretching her arms over her head, yawning as she did. She glanced to her right to look to where Teresa and the boy were; she hadn't heard a peep out of them in quite some time. She jerked her arms back down and quickly covered her mouth to keep from cooing. They'd both fallen asleep: Teresa's head laid neatly on the boy's shoulder as the two leaned on each other. His cheek was pressed against the top of her head, soft brown hair falling into his freckled face. Smiling into her hands, Rue rose from the couch, making sure she didn't jostle the children. She tiptoed around the little coffee table that held their cold, long-abandoned drinks and crossed the room to Samantha's little corner.

Samantha didn't look up as Rue approached, still hunched over the large sketchbook she carried with her everywhere. Rue crouched down next to her and peaked over at the edge. Samantha was an amazing artist for her age. She'd taken to it like a fish in water when Rue had first suggested it as a way to channel her visions. With as much practice as she'd been doing, Samantha had quickly surpassed Rue's casual knowledge of the arts. Rue never let her know that, though. Samantha was still at the age where mothers knew everything and Rue was quite satisfied to keep it that way. She observed the dark lines on the page. The sketches were drawn layered one on top of the other as if Samantha couldn't be bothered to flip to the next page to start something new. There was a picture of Rue, a drawing of Teressa and the boy curled around each other, eyes all over the place, a couple of wings as well, a boy that looked like Tom but didn't fit any memory of him that Rue had, and many other various doodles. Rue gently tapped Samantha on the shoulder and she finally looked up, biting her lip and pointing the sketchbook away from Rue's wandering eyes. Rue smiled gently at her.

"I think it's time to head to bed, Sammy. Let's call it a night?" Rue always liked to pose the question. Samantha often had trouble sleeping. Rue found that she was less likely to tell her it was going to be a sleepless night if Rue asked before going to bed. Samantha didn't like to bother other people with her nightmares. Such an unobtrusive and polite child. She certainly hadn't gotten that from Rue. Samantha fidgeted with her pencil before tucking it into the spiral of the sketchbook and nodding. Rue stood up offering a hand to her daughter, who took it, and pulled the girl up. Samantha followed quietly behind her mother as Rue walked back over to Teressa and the boy. She pressed her hand to her mouth again to prevent herself from making a sound that might startle them. She knelt next to them, brushing her daughter's bangs from her eyes. She reached out and gently did the same to the boy, who was snoring softly. Rue felt a wave of sadness wash over her. He was just a little kid. It was awful that someone had just abandoned him the way they had. This felt like the first time she'd seen him truly relaxed since she'd brought him home.

“His name is Nick.” Samantha’s voice echoed from behind her. Rue turned her head slightly to her.

“They decided that while I was reading?” She asked. It seemed odd. Teressa was usually very loud when she was excited and this seemed like the kind of thing she would be excited about.

“No,” Samantha said with a shrug. “It’s just what you’re going to name him.”

Ahhh, Rue thought. It was a vision thing.

“I like Nick.” Rue turned back around at the quiet words. Teressa still had her head laid on the boy’s shoulder but her eyes were cracked slightly. She rubbed at them with the hand that wasn’t still holding the boy’s.

“This isn’t about what you like, remember?” Rue reminded her gently. Teressa nodded and then threw out her unoccupied hand.

“Carry me,” she demanded. Rue rolled her eyes affectionately before leaning down and carefully scooping Teressa up. The motion caused the boy next to her to start awake and oh, now Rue felt bad. The look on the boy’s face at the loss of contact was one of the saddest things she’d ever seen. Teressa wrapped her arms around Rue’s neck and then looked back down at the boy. There was a moment of silence before she sighed.

“Put me down,” Teressa muttered begrudgingly. Rue held back a laugh.

“I thought you wanted me to carry you to bed?” She teased.

“Carry him instead. I’m a big girl. I don’t need to be carried.” Teressa turned her nose up and Rue couldn’t hold back her laugh this time. Teressa turned a glare on her mother and Rue smiled brilliantly before fake dropping Teressa. Teressa’s grip tightened like a vice as she yelped and then glared again. Rue smiled and gently lowered her to the ground.

“There you go, princess.” She patted Teressa lightly on the head before turning back to the boy. She knelt down next to him. He stared at her in trepidation. Rue extended her arms slowly.

“Is this okay?” she asked him softly. “You can shake your head no. You don’t have to let me carry you.”

The boy stared at her for a moment longer before opening his own arms. Rue gently put her arms around him and then hoisted him up to her waist. The boy's arms gently slid around her neck, unsure of the unfamiliar movement. Rue felt her heart give a little twist. She brought her hand up to cradle the back of his head and he pressed his face into her shoulder. She stood up fully and felt a hand grab hers from behind. When Rue turned, Samantha had taken hold and was staring down at the ground. With the boy in one arm, Samantha on her other, and Teresa pressing close to her side, Rue led the way out of the library and down the winding stone halls of the manor. After a few moments in the comfortable silence of the walk, she heard a muffled voice.

"I like the name Nick." The boy whispered into her shoulder before pulling back a bit to look at her warily. Rue must have accidentally woken him when she'd brushed his bangs from his eyes earlier. It was the only way he'd have overheard their discussion about the name. Rue met the boy's amber eyes.

"So do I," she replied, pressing a light kiss to his forehead. Nick stared at her in cautious wonder. Rue cocked her head, smiled at him, and said, "Welcome home, Nick."

My Grandmother

Caleb Hill




Josie will always be on her tip-toes by the stove,
pouring Ragu into the pot with the Italian sausage
that she bought from the deli.
She will always be screaming
at the lab-beagle from her neon, AstroTurfed stoop
when he noses at the gate one time too many,
flailing the Sunday paper.

Josie will always be matching her clothes:
black on gold on black on gold,
at a funeral—
her McKinley High School colors.
She will always be sitting in a lawn chair,
on the buggy porch of a central Missouri cabin,
beating me in a game of Rummy,
and then rounding up 52 faces of Elvis
with her Deet-perfumed hands.

Josie is a squashed voice in my phone,
telling me,
“Everyone’s coming for dinner...
your uncle Mike and the kids too”—
when she hasn’t called them yet.
But I will always show up, and sit at the table,
always next to the dog’s heavy panting,
and my Grandma inching her neck higher,
to see the bottom of the pot of pasta.

Monster Party

Kevin Cox

eorgie had never been to a monster costume party before, and the ants in his guts were writhing with excitement as he donned his costume—a crudely formed black cylinder with a large green **M** stapled to the front—and they electrically spread throughout his body when he giggled at himself in the mirror. A monster, he thought to himself, tearing up a bit as he wheezed, like the drink! There are going to be werewolves, vampires, hell, maybe even a bigfoot, he imagined.

“No sir,” he said aloud, “no one is gonna think of dressing up as the goddamn energy drink!”

His arrogance mostly stemmed from a haunting anxiety that has plagued him since childhood. He had taught himself to keep in check with arrogance and humor to create an hombre of confidence and anxiousness at his center. Still though, he couldn’t shake his fears. What if somebody had the same idea? What if they make fun of him? These questions ran through his mind all the way to party, where before the door he shed his arrogance to ask himself one last question: what if nobody else dressed up at all? He shook it off, and with a preceding inhale, he let loose a mighty “Line up, bitches! Come taste this monster!”

Georgie burst through the threshold of the host’s house. Every hair on his body stood, and a thousand ladybug footprints scampered across his skin. He felt worms writhing in his stomach and stumbled forward, almost throwing up. He shut his eyes, hoping the gruesome sight before him would shed its horrific visage and admit that it was only God playing a trick on him. He kept them shut, though, afraid to open them incase the wretched abomination still breathed before him. He was a leaf, shivering and pathetic, moments from falling off the branch and twirling down to ground below. He curled his knees to his chest as he sat shivering on the floor.

Voices surrounded him, a muddled mix of hushed tones and drunk soliloquys, with a dash of normal conversation that

Georgie couldn't quite focus on. All that changed, though, when four soft fingers found themselves on his shoulder, and a warm voice carried by soft breath nestled itself into his ear.

"Georgie, man, are you okay?" He recognized the voice. Sheila, the girl from his Introduction to Entomology class who had invited him along.

"Oh, Sheila," Georgie said, "yeah man, I'm cool. Just playing the part of the crushed can on the floor, getting into my costume, you know?"

"I get it! That makes total sense! Okay! Well, how about you open your eyes and come into the living room with us where we can all relax and take off our costumes?"

Costumes? He went back to that terrible and disgusting moment when he walked through the door. No one was wearing any costumes! He opened his eyes and faced his fears and stood up in full costume, looking Sheila dead in the eyes.

"Bet."

He followed her to the living room. He froze, mouth agape when he saw lumps of human flesh all over the pleasant beige carpet. The room was filled with spiders, cockroaches, and other things that flew and buried themselves in all manner of nasty places. As he was falling backwards to the floor, just before his eyes rolled back, he saw hundreds of thousands of ladybugs pouring out of Sheila's unhinged jaw as her skin slumped to a lifeless pile on the floor.

Disassociated

drawing

Nathan Smith



Acting the Part: *The Parting Act*

Kyle Warnecke



I see them flying
to the light;
these things are dying
in the night.

How brief the breath
these creatures take
then, simply death
for simple sake.

Emotionless, they follow strings
and wear their wings
until they find that morning brings
a different kind of ministry.

Then, by some chance,
the strings collapse;
their little dance
has now elapsed.

I see them flying
to the light;
these things are dying
in the night—

but I can never cry for them.

The Good Spot in the Hot Tub

Bob Nolte



ou can barely contain your screams in the icy-cold shower that washes the grit and sweat of the city off you, but you know that it will be worth it when you ease your tired muscles into the bubbling hot water of the hot tub in the Hilton East Brunswick, New Jersey indoor pool area. Kids splash and squeal in the adjacent swimming pool, their voices echoing off the walls and ceiling, wavy reflections of light reflecting off the swimming pool surface. As your toes become the first part of you to embrace the inviting white froth, you notice a man sitting at one end of the hot tub as you sit down at the other. His legs are stretched out nearly across the whole diameter, his toes nearly touching your left thigh. He's reading a Korean newspaper. You're amazed that he can sit there and read it without getting it all wet from the bubbling jets. He peeks out at you with a smug, satisfied look on his face, then gives his paper a quick shake and his face disappears behind it.

You suddenly remember all the reading that you have to do for your online writing class and wish that it was you getting your reading done in this comfy, bubbling hot tub. But the jets are too forceful where you're sitting. You'd get your book soaked sitting where you are for sure! When he's done, he folds his paper up, bids adieu, tosses his paper on a chair, then dives into the adjacent swimming pool, loudly breast stroking across it over and over again. You slide over to where he was sitting. It was an uncannily optimal spot for reading. The jets were much milder on this side and didn't possess the risk of ruining any reading material. One of your secret fantasies has been to luxuriously soak in a hot tub while reading, like villains do in movies. How indulgent that would be, you think to yourself. Alas, it's too late to run up to your room to get your book. The pool closes in ten minutes. But there's always tomorrow, you tell yourself. Two more days left of your bus trip to New York City. You sit there as you watch Korean Newspaper dart across the swimming pool, with a sinking feeling in your gut telling you that you haven't seen the last of him.

The next day is a beautiful day to be up in the observatory deck in the One World Trade Center. Blue skies hang above Manhattan, which looks like a toy model at your height. So why can't I enjoy it? you ask yourself as you stare at the tiny Brooklyn Bridge below, wondering if Korean Newspaper might be down there with a new issue to read, and with plans to return to the good spot in the hot tub later that night.

You're not going to let him beat you to the hot tub, you tell yourself on the bus, as it crawls through the Lincoln Tunnel back to New Jersey during rush hour. Your bottom stings as the tiny meshed squares of the lining of your swim trunks that you're wearing under your cargo shorts sink into the flesh of your buttocks as you double-check your backpack to make sure that you remembered your book so that you can hit the ground running when the bus pulls up.

As your tour bus stops at the hotel entrance, you get up and push past the other passengers, desperate to get to the elevator that leads down to the hot tub, praying that Korean Newspaper isn't already there.

As you throw open the doors to the hotel's indoor pool area, your heart sinks at the sight of an outstretched newspaper taking up all the prime real estate of the hot tub. You were too late! You knew you should've taken the stairs! Korean Newspaper peeks over his newspaper, looks at you pathetically standing there with your book in one hand and your wadded-up cargo shorts, I HEART NY t-shirt, socks, and sneakers in the other. He sarcastically mimics sobs at you, then chuckles and flicks his newspaper back in front of his face again, stretching out just a little further. You fall into one of the poolside loungers as you try to read your book while still trying to maintain your dignity. Goosebumps form on your legs.

Okay, this is it. Today is the last day. You go back home to Illinois tomorrow, you remind yourself. While everyone else in your tour group obsesses over the long-dropped New Year's ball at Times Square, you took a big chance walking up Broadway to find the Ed Sullivan Theater. When you get there, you struggle to get the whole theater into your picture, along with all the letters that run vertically down the building that spell out: C O L B E R T. After eight tries, you finally get your selfie with

the theater of your favorite talk show host behind you. You check the time and gasp, realizing that your tour bus leaves in five minutes. You tear down Broadway, not because you're concerned about keeping your tour group waiting. No, the heck with them. You're on a mission. As you run past frightened-looking pedestrians, all you can think about as you plow through crowded Times Square like a maniac is that you must beat you-know-who to the hot tub tonight if you want a shot at reading in a hot tub without getting your book wet. If only I could afford my own hot tub at home, you bemoan.

As the bus pulls up to the hotel entrance, everyone in your tour group stays seated and glares at you.

"Sorry guys, battlefield conditions," you shout back as you run through the bus aisle and blow past the doorman, nearly tripping over a luggage trolley as you full-steam-ahead your way to the elevator. You stop dead at the elevator as you lock eyes with Korean Newspaper, who's frantically poking at the down elevator button when he sees you.

"Korean Newspaper!" you exclaim.

"Flash Fiction Textbook!" he exclaims back.

You stare each other down for several seconds. He makes a break for the stairwell.

"Oh no you don't!" You sprint after him.

"Try and stop me!" he yells back.

Damn, he runs as good as he swims! If only you hadn't completely exerted yourself flying down Broadway a few hours ago. In the distance, you see that you caught a lucky break. Korean Newspaper tripped over his shoelace! You hurdle over him as he lays on the floor, rubbing his ankle.

"How's the view down there, buddy?" you shout as you vault over him.

You fling open the doors to the indoor pool area. As the humidity and the smell of chlorine hits your face, you feel a hand grab your right shoulder. Both you and Korean Newspaper stare at the hot tub in disbelief. Ten screaming, arm-flailing little kids are raising all kinds of shrieking, splashing, cannonballing mayhem in it. You look down at your reading material. Korean Newspaper does the same and you both shudder. Your dream of reading in a hot tub without getting your book wet has just

died.

“Well, now what do we do?” you ask Korean Newspaper.

Korean Newspaper shrugs. “Maybe we could go to the lobby bar, get a couple of beers and read up there?”

You smile. “Yeah, that sounds pretty good.”

Ode to Bloody Mary

Marchyl Jones



Liquored up gazpacho,
Slurry of spice so nice,
Bellies warm at lip's first sip.

Vodka nips at your tastes,
Mischievous and nagging on sense,
Bold enough to empower the tomato.

Velvety, peppery *jus de tomate*,
The spice waters eyes and lingers,
Heat kept frigid in frosted pints.

Ice clinks against skewer,
Chubby gherkins and stuffed olives,
Speared and captive under crimson lakes.

My heels click at the bar,
Slurps warrant smiles,
And the bartender glows.

I covet Miss Mary,
And those who shake her,
Bloody and liquored up.

Check Engine Light

Caleb Hill



You wake up and wink at me,
when I round the corner Conoco.
An amber blink in my peripheral;
balancing tar black coffee over khaki fabric.

Soon,
gears will strip,
teeth grind short,
muffler sparking highway pavement—
Until the flat rubber flaps its last.

But so long as your voice is still a bee hum,
I'll cinch my neck and peg my eyes to the road.

Blind Wisdom

sculpture

Matt Meyer



Meditation on the Staircase

Payton Bodden



There's no such thing as new thinking.
There's only manifestations of overthinking.
Another 3 a.m. night battling drowsy eyelids,
only propped open by the third shot of espresso.
Squinting at a blank Word document recollecting
old thoughts and rehashing irrelevant ideas. Failed
poems—yes, I'm sure I want to delete—trying to make a cliché
profound, only to find that violates the very nature of a cliché.

My confusion consumes me,
and I write stanzas even I don't understand.
Trying to use “big” words like emulate and convene,
quoting someone because of a piece of paper that says “PhD.”

Replacing orange bottles to fix depression,
with bitter orange liquid that'll only make it worse.
Ignorance is bliss, or at least that's what some book said.
But can a state of bliss be welcomed in, while leaving ignorance
on the porch?

Stumbling out the door, my foot took a single step
And I began to count the steps down from my apartment...

Twenty-seven steps.

Before today I never counted,
Because that's not what sober people do.
And I never knew the shoe size of anyone other than myself.
I would ask, but the only shoes by the door are mine.

Last night I wrote “ignorance is bliss,”
but all around me the whole world rejoices
at my knowledge of these twenty-seven steps.
The roar of thunder applauds, demanding an encore.

Making me want to count the steps again just to be sure.
The lightning flashes like paparazzi cameras ready to put me
front and center on the cover of a renowned scientific magazine.

Then millions of droplets convene to
emulate the tasteful shape of carnival cotton candy.
Only to deliver cavities and disappointment drop by drop.
Pouring out like the sweat on my palms trying to remember
 during a test,
what the damn powerhouse of the cell is.

When will the rain stop? I don't know, ask the guy upstairs.

Each passing moment is measured
by the rising of rivers as the raindrops congregate
to devise a diabolical plan. Down below my feet are in water,
but I'm not wearing boots. I lost my size 2 red rubber rain boots
in Gatlinburg, Tennessee the day after I turned 8. Back then I
 could never
comprehend how a thin piece of rubber could protect my
 Hello Kitty socks.

There was nothing I treasured
more than my Hello Kitty socks. A gift
from Santa in Christmas of '07...I think.
But thinking back, which parent was it really from?
Probably my mother, she loves me enough to buy me socks.
My dad does too, but he doesn't know my shoe size.

I can't help asking again and again,
why did I even count these damn steps?

Twenty-seven times,
 my muddy size 8
 Converse kissed the
 pavement. Leaving
 a bread crumb trail
 to lead me back home.
 but that's not really my home,
 and my feet...

are actually a size nine.

Lilac – A Haiku Series

Samantha Segrist



A lilac first love,
inimitable feelings.
Awe consumed gardens.

Although it's blinding,
golden rays beaming passion,
she gazes upward.

Initially joy,
petals radiating hope.
But all flowers wilt.

Heed the Sun's warning.
Weeds may overgrow lilacs,
choking her beauty.

Do not get trampled
by manipulative feet
who stomp out gardens.

Run, he will trap you:
entangling you with his
so-called affection.

Lilacs deserve more:
apt gardeners instead of
toxic pesticides.

He will try to cut,
to prune her beauty into
something of his own.

Resist my lilac.
Bloom into your own flower,
separate from him.

You are your own love.
Cultivate your roots, and grow
to Life beyond this.

Dahlia of Aurum

Lamonya Smith



Dahlia shot up from her blankets and sucked in a gust of air, fear ramming in her chest. Yanking the scarf from her forehead, she wiped the sweat from her brow. She ran her hands over her ponytail made of tight black coils. The stars were losing their luster against the dusty blue sky through the silk curtains; the mile-long TV plastered on the far wall was whispering sounds throughout the room, a reporter interviewing a royal guard that just got off work. Dahlia, her deep mahogany arms wrapped around her trembling body, watched the bedroom door. She heard her mother's voice on the other side. "It's time to get up," she said, rapping on the fine white wood. Prudence, Dahlia's advisor, had woken her up for the past year, and Dahlia couldn't get used to it for several weeks. Mother was all she knew back home, so hearing her soft but stern voice outside her room on such a day made her shoulders relax just a little.

"You're already awake?" Mother asked as she swept the doors open and headed for the bedside, resting her palms on Dahlia's arms.

"Yeah," Dahlia mumbled. She was almost surprised to see Mother walking around so early with a bird's nest of hair on her head, but she's been less keen to keep her hair intact since the past few weeks. The last time Mother woke her up was on the same day they moved into the palace—her engagement with King Regio had officially been announced to the public after a year of gushing about him like a schoolgirl. Dahlia knew Mother could easily meld into the royal life, with how politely she carried herself without fail. Some people in their town even joked about Dahlia being adopted, with occasional calls from school—informing Mother of screaming matches and fistfights her daughter had with other students—piling up over the years.

Dahlia forced a lopsided smile and watched Mother's face splinter. "You had another nightmare, didn't you?" she asked softly.

Dahlia nodded. She'd hoped they'd all get better rest after the conference in Neitsov that day. She'd never had so many nightmares until about a month ago. Neitsov's ruler, King Jonah, had been smitten with her since he'd met her at a world leader summit shortly after she'd become Aurum's new princess. He'd flattered her here and there, which Dahlia almost thought was adorable, but his intense glances barred her from having any interest in him beyond friendship. Though some younger royals were hesitant to befriend him, they'd gossiped with her over tea about her and Jonah's appearances regardless, and how they'd make a striking couple—he had a pale, pretty face, a lean figure and bright amber eyes. According to the other young royals, Dahlia was just as lovely, with a curved, toned build she maintained over the years by helping the locals and her mother with odd jobs in their small, bustling town. Though she believed Jonah's infatuation was excessive, she certainly never believed it would escalate to asking for her hand at the very first ball she attended, in her own kingdom at that. After accepting his invitation to walk through the palace garden with him, she had immediately performed a small speech in her head to tell him she wasn't interested. The rainbow of flowers and plants surrounding the walkways drowned her in a rich perfume. Better to let him down easy here than never at all, she'd thought.

"I tried finding you during the waltz earlier," Jonah started, "but—someone asked me to dance before I could get to you."

Dahlia frowned, looking away and stroking the goosebumps on her wrist. "It's okay. I was dancing with one of my guards, Esmond. You met him a few months ago, right?"

"The one with the dreadlocks?" Jonah said, his voice lower. "Who's about our age?"

Dahlia almost scoffed—he couldn't be jealous of her own guard—but she smiled, nodding anyway. "Yes, that's him," she said. "He isn't even royalty and he's much better at dancing than I am." Esmond loved anything involving music, especially playing instruments. Dahlia may not have loved dancing, but she loved opera—she always wanted to see singers belting to the heavens onstage, so her new status granted her access to seeing performances often. Esmond's love for music involved opera too, so he and Dahlia would discuss it constantly.

Jonah fiddled with the sash around his paper white military uniform. The badges on his breast pocket, shiny snowflakes and crossed swords, reminded Dahlia of the badges she saw her stepfather wearing in the ballroom, all crowns and fern leaves. She pictured him there at that moment, warning her with a soft voice in her head. "Aurum has been one of the most peaceful countries for decades, all thanks to Neitsov."

"Dahlia," Jonah said, suddenly turning to her, "I need to ask you something before I explode."

Dahlia gently tugged at her diamond earrings, cleared her throat and nodded. She barely opened her mouth when Jonah took her hands in his and dropped to one knee; she felt as if her brain squeezed out her skull from shock.

"Princess Dahlia of Aurum," Jonah said, eyes glued on her, "the moment you entered my sights, the more I wanted to know you. Everything about you enchants me—your fierce passion, your dedication to the throne, your beauty—it's incomparable to anything else." Jonah stroked her palms with his gloved thumbs. "I remember our talk from a few months ago. You wished you knew your biological father, and I my own parents—that was when I knew it was destiny." He paused. "Will you give me the joy of becoming my wife?"

Dahlia's heart had crawled up her throat too. She'd gulped it down and parted her lips, listening to the roaring stone fountains behind her. Back in her town, she never heard of people getting married so soon. When people turned eighteen, they worried about graduating and paying bills, not how many guests would be at their weddings.

"I'm sorry, Jonah, but I can't marry you. I—I don't feel that way about you." She glanced at their entwined hands, then watched Jonah. Whatever little color he had drained from his face, but he kept eye contact with her. Icy sweat ran down her back; Dahlia looked away and dropped her gaze to their hands again. "I'm—really sorry," she repeated, her voice cracking, "but I'm sure you'll find someone better than me who'll love you just as much."

After what seemed like forever, Jonah stood, but grabbed Dahlia's wrists. "Jonah?" she said, her pulse drumming through her ears. What did she do? Did she say something wrong?

“Are you okay? I—I’m really sorry—”

“If I don’t recall, you were just a nobody until a year ago.” Jonah crept closer to Dahlia’s face and branded his eyes into her own. “After all this time of getting everything on a silver platter, you’re not taking this opportunity to marry someone who regularly gets your country out of shit you don’t even know about?”

Jonah’s grip was titanium. Dahlia’s stomach had dropped into the earth’s core. “What the hell’s wrong with you?” she yelled, yanking her hands out of Jonah’s grasp and shrinking away. “I can’t believe I thought you were my friend!”

Jonah flinched and held out his hands. He looked like he’d been stabbed. “Wait I thought we connected,” he said.

“We did,” Dahlia said, her heart wincing at Jonah’s expression. “But you’re scaring me, Jonah. I have to go.”

There were whispers of prints on her wrists. Her wide eyes on his form, she turned to head back inside. She heard a low chuckle. “Please,” Jonah said, crossing his arms. “Your mother never taught you what good men look like. She probably married King Regio for money anyway.”

Dahlia froze, as if she saw her own insides on the ground. She listened to the fountain once more. It was all she could hear when she balled her hands into fists and marched back to Jonah, raising her hand and smacking him square across his jaw. The sound of her palm striking his face was louder than the toll of a funeral bell.

Jonah cursed under his breath, turning his head back to reveal a bloodied nose. He brushed the blood from his face, his gaze drifting from his stained fingers to Dahlia. Seeing his twisted smirk, she picked up her peach skirts and scurried back into the ballroom, her palm stinging, and her mind stranded in orbit, drifting farther and farther from the space station and failing to get back.

Dahlia had told her parents as soon as she found them at their thrones. Her father delicately cupped her face in his brown hands, ended the ball an hour early, and, with his wife, talked to Jonah in private. Later that night, they told Dahlia that Jonah had no problems with her. “He said it was just a misunderstanding,” Mother said, the look in her eyes uncertain of Jonah’s claims.

Dahlia shook her head. "He's lying!"

"I'm sure he is," Mother told her, "but right now we'll have to wait. I'd strangle the truth out of him and lock him up right now if I could, but we all have countries to run. We'll talk to him again once everything calms down. It'll take some time."

The consequences for hitting a country's ruler had never crossed Dahlia's mind. She could never get that smirk and bloodied hand out of her memory; Jonah seemed incapable of looking that terrifying, especially with how kind he was to her for the whole year. She was in the process of formally apologizing too, when Prudence burst into her room a week later and clicked on the TV. They watched Jonah on the flat screen adjust the paper in his hands at a podium. Cameras clicking and lights blinking, he cleared his throat and spoke into the microphones. "I do not believe I should give Aurum resources from my kingdom of Neitsov any longer," he'd said. "I wish to export to other countries who truly need it. However, I will give Princess Dahlia of Aurum one month to decide—she can become Neitsov's queen through matrimony or cut all ties from my kingdom. If she agrees to marriage, not only will I still export goods into her kingdom, but Aurum and Neitsov will have an even more powerful bond than before."

Dahlia threw the blankets off her body and dropped her bare feet onto the feathery rug. Mother followed as soon as she walked to the bathroom. "You want to talk about it?"

Dahlia's breath hitched in her throat. This dream, like many others, showed her the few occasions she could visit her family and contact them at all, for they lost their child to a monster no one knew about until it was too late. Some nights, their heads were planted on stakes, countries she never even heard of enslaving as many Aurum citizens as they could; others had Father ashamed for even calling her his daughter. It didn't matter that he'd support whatever choice she made—they'd all suffer for it, including him. "You put our country's well-being in jeopardy," he'd say in one nightmare, "just so you could marry whoever you pleased." In another nightmare, she could remember standing at his deathbed, dying from grief. "Your mother and I never wanted to give you to Neitsov's king—I never wanted to see you miserable and hurt for the rest of your life."

With her hand wrapped around the bathroom doorknob, Dahlia shook her head. “No,” she said. “We should just get ready and go.”

Mother wrapped her arms around Dahlia’s shoulders. “Are you sure? You’ve been having so many of these dreams lately.” She held her daughter closer and stroked her hair.

“I’ll be fine, Mom,” Dahlia said, embracing Mother back and listening to her weary sighs. Neither she nor Father told Dahlia which decision would be best, but Mother would degrade Jonah and his kingdom whenever she could. “It’s horrible that his parents died so soon,” she said once, “because if they were still alive, he may have learned some common decency.”

It seemed Mother wanted to say something, but she grudgingly stepped away. Dahlia gave a half-hearted smile and closed the bathroom door behind her.

The trip was Dahlia’s idea; though she rarely applied the lesson to real life, remembering what her mother told her when she was little—“If you’re angry with someone, just talk to them about it”—gave her an idea. “And,” she’d told her parents, “many country-conflicts ended by just talking things out. Most of our citizens might want to keep ties with Neitsov, but if we talked it over, they might not have to think about that at all.”

Mother paused at her response, every muscle in her body relaxing. “The royal life already changed you for the better,” she said.

Father smiled and squeezed the queen’s hand. “It was only a matter of time until you said something like this, Dahlia. I’m so proud of you.”

The king and queen’s words had lingered in Dahlia’s head for the rest of the day. She didn’t even flinch at Jonah’s voice when Father called him for the conference. “So, it’s a date,” Jonah said, his placid tone reaching the whole study; his response sounded more like a statement than a question. She remembered how Jonah sent personal letters to her for weeks, letters that never masked his pining. No matter if she wrote back or not, he’d always send more, and Prudence confiscated every other letter Dahlia received, Mother and Father tossing a few into the fireplace themselves.

"I'm expecting everyone to look their best tomorrow," Jonah said, "especially the princess. I'm positive she'll find something just as beautiful as herself."

Esmond, sitting next to Dahlia on the plane, twiddled with the sword scabbard on his belt. "I should have followed you," he said after long stretches of silence. "It's my responsibility to keep you safe. I thought you'd feel uncomfortable with me there." He fidgeted in the beige linen chair, despite how it felt like a pillow.

"No one knew what'd happen," she said. "Jonah seemed mostly harmless anyway. I mean, I thought he was a little weird—and so did some other royals—but I gave him the benefit of the doubt." She watched the bouquet of soft blue flowers on the little table. "It'd have probably been worse if I brushed him off before we even talked anyway."

"He'd stare at you a lot—" Esmond buried his face in hands. "Dammit, I should've gone with you. I knew something was up with him, but all he did to you was stare for too long. If I just followed you out there, we wouldn't be going to Neitsov in the first place. Reporters wouldn't be bothering you outside the palace. You wouldn't be having nightmares."

Dahlia shook her head; she first heard him cursing since Jonah made the statement, using every insult imaginable to describe the young king. "At least now we know who he really is," she said. She took a flower from the bouquet and tore off a petal. "He was so nice to me," she muttered. "I thought, eventually, we'd be close friends one day."

"Well, now," Esmond said, "if that bastard does anything, I'll have all the reason to cut his hands off."

"Esmond." Dahlia took his hand and stared into his deep brown eyes. Her face grew hot as she realized what she'd done, but she ignored it. "What's done is done. We can't undo what happened." She leaned back in her seat. "And I didn't want to reject him before he even told me anything. I thought that'd be hurtful."

"For a princess," Esmond said, "you really love worrying about everyone else, huh?"

Dahlia shrugged. He really noticed—she was thinking about how he'd fare at Neitsov right then and there. Maybe

she should've brought a different guard. At least then, Esmond could catch up on sleep just a little. Every other day, they'd look at opinion polls and TV segments together. The majority stayed the same—an overwhelming number of citizens agreed that Dahlia and Jonah's marriage should happen someday. Some were even joking about taking her place to marry Jonah for his looks. If Dahlia was an average person like them, she'd want the princess to marry him too. She couldn't remember the last time Aurum was ever involved in a war, or any conflict for that matter.

"I've always been like that," she told Esmond. "I don't have to do as much as my parents but that doesn't mean I'll lie around all day." She poked her guard's bicep. "It's my responsibility," she slurred.

Esmond chuckled. Dahlia loved it whenever he smiled; she always thought he was good looking, but when he smiled, he'd look radiant. The other young royals expressed jealousy whenever they saw him around, wishing at least one other guard they had was just as handsome as him.

Dahlia saw Prudence pursing her lips from across the table. "Jonah talked to you most," she said, carefully cleaning her glasses with her blazer. Long red curls concealed her face. "I was quite surprised seeing him so forward in front of you. He didn't say much when you weren't in the room." Prudence crossed her legs. "And speaking of that—remember, keep eye contact for as long as you can, even if it's uncomfortable. No cursing, slouching or yelling. Jonah may do that, but that doesn't mean you should stoop down to his level." Prudence's whole body seemed to shake from the bounce of her leg, but she kept her face alert. It was almost amazing that she could do that. "I know you can do this, your highness."

Dahlia nodded and massaged her temples. "Let's just get this over with," she sighed.

The flight attendant rolled a cart of snacks to their section. While Prudence and Esmond ate, Dahlia sliced her cake into tiny pieces with her fork. She loved the luxurious food she ate daily, but Mother's baking always surpassed whatever cakes the chefs made. Maybe if they stayed in town, they would've been inhaling whatever was left after the bakery closed right then and

there, curled up in the living room and watching the dumbest cartoons they could muster.

At the same time, she wouldn't have been able to show her father the day she perfected her posture, balancing two books on her head and walking through the halls. She'd never have seen her parents, King Regio and Queen Garnet, holding hands and lying against one of the trees just outside the garden, watching her draw idle birds with the little patience or talent to do so. Her hatred for her real father, who she didn't even know, would still be there in the smallest crevices of her heart. She remembered seeing him step into his little car and never coming back when she was still small. Instead of waving at Aurum's millions of citizens on TV and rolling her eyes at the king's done-to-death jokes at dinner, she'd still be wondering where that man went, the man who married Mother and helped create their own child.

Dahlia cut more slices of cake and dropped every piece in her mouth. It all felt like sweet velvet on her tongue; it was the first thing she'd eaten all day. After the cake eventually disappeared, her eyes grew heavy and her head wilted on Esmond's shoulder; she didn't mind the silk-like crimson cotton of his uniform caressing her cheek. If she married Jonah, maybe she'd tell Esmond how she felt for him before she left. He might've felt the same—he could tell her right there in the plane.

She felt him freeze, but he quickly and gently adjusted himself for her. Before she closed her eyes for the rest of the flight, she saw Prudence's eyes grow bigger than they already were, covering her mouth with her hand when the corners of her lips turned up.

Despite the infamously cold winters Neitsov had, its summers were just as exhausting to endure. Following her parents into a sleek black car, Dahlia smeared the sweat from her palms onto her orange pencil skirt. It was hard to keep her hands out of her ponytail, the ribbon practically engraved in her skull. She could feel her body already melting through her white button-up. There was no invasive crowd to question them, no bright lights or production trucks nearby. Everyone had agreed to keep the discussion private.

The sun peeked from behind the grey clouds. Mother was already adjusting the maroon blouse sticking to her arms. It was dead silent during the ride to Neitsov's castle, but Mother and Father held their daughter's hands, watching the dark trees pass them by outside. Dahlia scanned both her parents in the car. Her father was adorned with his perfectly-trimmed, bushy moustache, coarse hair, and deep black military uniform. Her mother's wavy hair was decorated with small clips, dark pants complimenting her gold earrings. Dahlia felt better, seeing them propped up in what felt like ages. Father grinned at her as she squeezed his hand between her fingers. He was quieter than usual as the days went by; his continuous praise for Neitsov's alliance was cut short. He made less jokes at the dinner table, and whatever jokes he did make were to himself and not to his family like he always did. Like it always was.

The castle was made of bone-colored stone. Every tower throughout the building stretched to the heavens in mile long, thin structures. There were tiny specks of light sparkling throughout the windows, like stars in the night sky. Dahlia, her face pressed to the car glass to see the castle, never felt so homesick for the palace back home before then. Every other room in Aurum's palace was blanketed in a golden light, with millions of shades of red, orange and yellow residing on pillowcases, carpets, flowers...

Jonah's thoughtful glances that Dahlia noticed for months on end were all replaced with lingering once-overs. When she stepped out the car and stood alongside her parents, he acknowledged her first, pacing closer to her and holding out his hand for her to take. Dahlia almost cringed but remembered what Prudence said in the plane. She curtsied and placed her hand in his, suppressing the urge to hit him again when he brought her fingers close, his lips briefly touching her skin. How could he change so quickly? He may have always been like this—but Dahlia still couldn't wrap her head around the whiplash. It wasn't like she thought he was an angel, but she'd never believe this was how he'd act a year ago.

Father and Mother watched but the king clenched his fists behind his back, while the queen narrowed her eyes. Esmond tightly gripped his sword handle and Prudence took his shoulder, giving him a cautious glare.

Dahlia couldn't marry someone like Jonah, not when Esmond stood by her every day. She remembered other rulers she read about in school. Queens all over the world poisoned their husbands all the time. If she didn't get caught, she could remarry, make Esmond king—it'd be like she never left Aurum, almost.

She felt a pang of guilt in her chest as she closely watched Jonah greet the rest of the group, introducing himself as quickly as possible. Already, she was thinking of murdering someone—someone she admired. Could she forget these thoughts? Would she have to keep them in the back of her mind?

"It must have been hours since you've all had a proper meal," Jonah said. "How about we sit down and dine first?"

"I prefer low light around the castle. It makes me feel more at ease."

As Jonah strolled through the hallways like a tour guide, the group followed shortly behind. Dahlia's eyes hopped from one area to another, emerald green drapes hiding what little light was outside. She wondered how many people tripped over their own feet here at night, how Jonah reacted when a gardener would crash into a maid carrying a priceless vase. Back home, she always saw people moving around if she left her bedroom. It was almost as if Jonah was the only one living in the castle that day.

The double doors to the dining hall were already open, and steaming food was scattered around the table, the white sheet illuminating polished silver utensils and candle holders. A tiny chandelier hung from the ceiling, just as drained as the other lights. When Jonah turned his back, Prudence nudged Dahlia's arm and scrunched up her golden fawn face in confusion, Dahlia mirroring her. Maybe they shouldn't have gone to this miserable country; this was starting to feel like a waste of time.

With Esmond and the other guards standing near the doors, Jonah cracked his knuckles and picked up a fork and knife. "The cooks worked so hard but so quickly," he said. "They always do their best to prepare the food right on time."

After a moment of silence, Jonah clicked his tongue and glanced around the large table. "What's everyone so shy for? I had this food prepared for your arrival."

Dahlia narrowed her eyes from across the other side of the table but tried to keep her voice steady. "We came to Neitsov to talk to you—about the ultimatum."

"We have all day to discuss that," Jonah said, brushing his seafoam colored hair from his eyes. "Besides, you're all probably irritated from waking up so early. A nice breakfast could help."

Father muttered under his breath but grabbed a spoon on the porcelain plate, Dahlia and Mother sitting on either side of him. Jonah smiled. "Now let's enjoy ourselves before the food gets cold," he told them.

Dahlia's teeth felt like they'd shatter from how hard she ground them together. Her lips twisted into a sneer when her stomach grumbled from hunger. There was a large stack of pancakes right next to her empty plate. She dropped the pancakes onto her plate and ate as swiftly but politely as she could, noticing Jonah staring whenever she looked up. Those looks weren't just intense anymore—his eyes were half-lidded, ravenous, like he was a cat watching a mouse scurry by.

Dahlia's stomach couldn't decide to keep the food down or hurl it up; she felt Jonah watching her for most of the breakfast, wishing she could gouge his eyes out with her fork.

It barely took half an hour for everyone to finish.

"Well," Jonah said, "I didn't expect you to call for conference so late in the month." He sat up straight at the round, glossy wooden desk and folded his hands together. More drapes concealed the giant windows throughout the room. Jonah's advisor sat beside him. He looked older than the castle itself, with spots encircling his bald head, a snow-white beard and deep pools of wrinkles around his face.

"We were in a panicked state," Father said on the opposite side. "It's not every day that this situation occurs where one's prepared for it. We needed to discuss the routes we could take in Dahlia making her decision, despite what the public wishes." Dahlia watched him. "It is ultimately her choice in the matter,"

he went on, “but we don’t believe she should make a choice in the first place. This demand in of itself is haphazard and unnecessary—this could put both our kingdoms in jeopardy for any possible adversity.”

“Our daughter told us that you truly wished to marry her as well, even by force,” Mother said. “She said you reacted aggressively when she refused your proposal, and you accused me of marrying King Regio for money. Is any of this true?”

Dahlia’s lips twitched into a short smile. She knew her parents believed her, but as monarchs, they obviously couldn’t outright accuse people of acting on malicious intentions.

“Of course not,” Jonah chuckled. “I would never insult the rulers of another country, much less a country that has Neitsov as its strongest ally. But I don’t believe I should give Aurum my country’s resources any longer. You’ve heard what I said on TV. Besides, if I expressed any romantic feelings for your daughter, I would have simply told you.”

Dahlia gnawed on her tongue to stay quiet, wringing her hand around her sweat-drenched neck. She watched the old advisor, who said nothing. He seemed like an accessory Jonah hauled around to make it seem like someone was guiding him in his reign. Maybe if people could see in one of these damn rooms, he’d see what was going on.

Prudence goped through her pockets. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I believe it was best to bring some of these with me.” She placed a small bundle of folded papers on the table, one by one. “The palace has been receiving these love letters for the past few weeks, all directed to the princess of Aurum.” Dahlia grazed Prudence with her arm, and Mother and Father stared with wide eyes, but Prudence went on. “The handwriting is identical to yours, and there’s very specific information in almost every single letter.”

Jonah clenched his fist, but kept still, not showing an ounce of fear in his eyes. “How can you say I wrote them? They could be forged for all you know.”

“You said you were sorry about how you acted when I rejected you,” Dahlia said, careful to keep her volume low and her tone steady. “A lot of them were like that. But then you wrote to me that you didn’t care what you did. You just wanted to be with me.”

At Dahlia's words, Jonah's eyes shot wide open. He bent forward and stared at her, tilting his head. "You read them?" he asked her. "Why'd you stop writing back?"

It was then the old advisor raised a shriveled-up finger. "Your majesty, please—"

Jonah gave him a short but threatening glare, and the old man recoiled further into his chair and said nothing more.

Before Dahlia could react, Esmond marched to the table. "I fucking knew it," he roared. Dahlia's mouth gaped open; she never heard Esmond shout like that before. If he so much as got irritated and raised his voice in front of her, he'd apologize to her beforehand. "I knew you were always a slimy little bastard. She's been having nightmares for a month!"

The other guards grabbed him; he shoved them off and unsheathed his sword, pointing it in Jonah's direction. Dahlia, her body engulfed in fire, shot up from her chair and raced to Esmond's side. Jonah's advisor tried pulling him back, but Jonah only waved him away and crossed his legs, the grin on his face growing.

"She's stayed out the garden for weeks!" the guard said. "Everyone's tired because they couldn't sleep just thinking about you! I can't see her suffer like that anymore."

He raised his sword, only for Dahlia to yank his uniform jacket from behind. Her heart wasn't crawling up her throat, it was scrambling. What if Esmond was locked away for this forever? After all these months with him, watching him play piano, telling him about the books she read, straining her neck just to see his face—it'd all go to waste in one fell swoop, a single moment. Dahlia remembered the look on Prudence's face back on the plane. Even then, she'd have the same kind of look sometimes when Dahlia and Esmond were doing just about anything. The first time Dahlia had watched him play piano, Prudence walked over to them shortly after and held her notepad over her mouth, even though her smile was still visible. If Esmond had a life sentence—any prison sentence—Dahlia wouldn't see Prudence make that face anymore.

"Esmond," she shrieked, rattling his upper body with all her force. "Stop, stop!" Her fingers wrinkled his uniform, but she held onto him like a lifeline; her vision blurred from tears bubbling to the surface. "I'll be okay! Stop!"

She wiped her face with her hand, only to see Esmond looking back at her, his face steeped in tears too. He gripped his sword so tightly that veins snaked his hands. A shaky breath escaped his lips. "I'm sorry."

Dahlia nodded, clutching his face. She almost followed the other guards walking him out the conference room. She stopped and turned her head to see Prudence staring daggers at Jonah, who didn't move from his spot. She looked as if she'd finish him off herself.

Swallowing the knot down her throat, Dahlia glanced back at Jonah. "Esmond"—

"Did you stop writing back because of him?" Jonah rested his chin in his palm. "God, how embarrassing." He watched Dahlia's tear-stained face and gave a soft chuckle. "But with that look on your face, I guess you can just fire him on your own time. Whenever your family comes back here to visit you, just bring another guard, alright? I'm sure you have plenty in store."

Dahlia clenched her fists and heaved a rickety sigh, thankful for the tiny ounce of kindness Jonah seemed to have left. What if this conference was filmed? Would Prudence have still took out the letters? Would Esmond still be there by the door? Would more Aurum citizens hesitate to support the marriage? Would Jonah dispose of the ultimatum altogether?

"We've all talked about this over and over," Dahlia said. "My people are getting restless. They're worried about the defense and stocks and jobs they might not have at the end of the month."

"I see," Jonah told her. "Well, then this marriage would work in your favor, wouldn't it?"

Dahlia dropped her gaze to her shoes. The mere thought of talking to Jonah again after this conference made her feel sick. Mother's words weren't too proper about him either whenever he was brought up. Her refined manner was deteriorating for weeks; she'd curse more and more as the days went by.

"Jonah, please," Dahlia said, "I didn't mean to hurt you. You don't have to do this." She inched forward, but Jonah didn't budge. "I really do want you to be happy, but I know you'll feel better with someone who'll love you back."

Frowning, Jonah looked away and ran his hand through his hair. He had that look on his face again, like he was stabbed. "You have to love me. You enjoyed my company whenever I was around."

"That doesn't mean I wanted to marry you. Why would you marry someone who doesn't feel the same way about you?"

The room was quiet enough to hear everyone's breathing. When Jonah looked back at her, Dahlia's stomach dropped. The kindness she thought was still there had died. "I can always make someone love me," Jonah said. "Fear's a nice tactic. I use it all the time, and I won't hesitate to use it on you."

"You're—" Dahlia caught herself; her voice was getting loud. Her sweat grew cold. As the month's end drew closer, her fear of her stepfather's disappointment grew. It didn't matter that he supported whatever decision she made. Mother asked him if they could hire stronger security, "just in case." The citizens weren't worried just because either. Some were even leaving Aurum because they feared potential invasion or becoming jobless.

Esmond was still right, however. Dahlia didn't step foot in the garden since the ball; she looked in the mirror one day and saw deep bags under her round eyes. She only saw Prudence dazed for the first time a week ago. She'd miss the young royal get-togethers just to stay in bed for unholy amounts of time. Prudence sometimes had to ask her when she was going to take a bath. She couldn't even spend time with her parents like she did before.

Though her legs felt like jelly, Dahlia steeled herself anyway. She cleaned her face with her arms one last time and glanced at her parents, who froze when she looked their way, inches away from her. She heaved a sigh and stood up straight, striding toward Jonah's still form. With her hands clenched in front of her skirt, she stared into his eyes, long enough for him to blink and chew his lip at how long she did so.

"With all due respect, your majesty," Dahlia said, "your tactics and demands have caused me and my loved ones too much stress to endure. You've failed to present yourself as the proper ruler of a country." She placed her hands on the table, wondering how long her people would mock her for this. This

may be all anyone would remember about her for the rest of her life. “It is with a heavy heart that I request Neitsov to cut ties with my kingdom. This may be a sacrifice my people will hate me for, but it’s one I’m willing to take.”

Mother softly gasped and clenched her husband’s arm. A ghost of a smile flashed across her face, her gaze unwavering. Father pursed his lips, but Dahlia couldn’t decipher the look in his eyes, which made her head light and her goosebumps pop off her skin. He gave a low sigh and sat still as stone. Prudence immediately coughed into her fist when she grinned.

When Dahlia glanced back at Jonah, his face was stark white.

The Scrap

Joe Hardy



Lucy: Age 17, strong, independent, mature, doesn't want to admit weakness

Josh: Age 17, sensitive, is fond of memories, semi-socially awkward

Nathan: age 19, lazy but hates it, looks at Josh as a role model but would never admit it

Setting

Present day, small-town USA with nothing to do. Josh's parents' basement which functions as his room. Boxes are scattered around, as this room is also used for storage.

(Light's up on Nathan who is plopped on a couch, dressed in pajamas, sleeping. Josh enters SR with a large cardboard box filled with things.)

(Josh places the box on the coffee table loud enough for Nathan to hear and wake up)

Josh: (Joking but also a tad ticked off) Morning, sunshine. Thought you said you'd be out of here by midnight?

Nathan: (Groggy but also trying to cover his mistake) You know how it is, man. I...I got tired, and once you start watching the first *Star Wars*, you are physically unable to not watch the whole trilogy. It's the same with any great cinematic saga. You're really depriving yourself if you don't watch all of *The Lord of the Rings* in one sitting.

Josh: (cutting through his bullshit) Including *The Hobbits*?

Nathan: Sure.

Josh: Extended version?

Nathan: Obviously.

Josh: That's almost 24 hours of material, not counting bathroom breaks and the times when you're on Facebook and I have to rewind because you refuse to continue.

Nathan: And...and I got tired. (Matter-of-factly) Which is like ten times more dangerous than drinking and driving.

Josh: Doubtful. Anyway, you're lucky my parents are out of town for the week, 'cuz last time I checked they didn't like you after the vase incident. (realizes he's off topic) I need you out of the house. Lucy's coming in like half an hour and I wanna be alone.

Nathan: (Mockingly) Ooooo. I'll give you your privacy then.

Josh: (Staggering) We...kinda...uh...we broke up two days ago.

Nathan: (Shocked) What the fuck? No way. You were fine a week ago. A year and a half doesn't end in a week. Did she say why?

Josh: No, she just said she needed time alone and she wanted her stuff back.

Nathan: She's cheating on you then.

Josh: What?

Nathan: Dude. It's obvious. She did the respectful thing. She broke up with you and then will get with the new guy in like a month. It's the viscous cycle.

Josh: (Confused) You mean vicious cycle?

Nathan: Yeah, that's what I said. Maybe she's looking for someone who doesn't correct her all the time.

Josh: Fuck off Nate. (Dwells on it) Just get out of here.

(Knocking from SL)

Josh: Dude go! Get out!

Nathan: Fuck...ugh...tell me how it goes.

(Nathan runs to flee to the exit SR but Lucy enters SL before he can reach the exit so he ducks behind some boxes)

(Lucy enters, unemotional, not robotic but trying to not give anything away. She looks around the room before walking past Josh and sitting on the couch. She then rifles through the box putting the sunglasses and the ID next to her)

Josh: Hey. (walks over to the couch and sits down leaving a seats worth of space between them)

Lucy: Hello. (Takes out the DVDs and sits them next to her)

Josh: What are you doing? Are we just not going to talk about this?

Lucy: Josh, do we actually need to talk about this? I know what belongs to me. I was just gonna grab what's mine and—

Josh: But those are mine.

Lucy: What are? My sunglasses and my permit?

Josh: No...no, the DVDs. The ones we watched on Halloween because you couldn't find your copy of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

Lucy: If you remembered correctly, you'd know that you forgot your wallet in your car and I had to pay for them, so they are my purchase.

Josh: Okay but (mocking Lucy) if I remember correctly, you didn't actually like the movie because Indiana Jones was sweaty all the time and it was unrealistic, because a professor like Indy wouldn't go on adventures like that. Also, you thought it was unrealistic for any parent to name their kid after their dog.

Lucy: (Cut off any time after also) Listen, Josh, I paid for the movies, so I think it's only fair I keep them.

Josh: Okay...can I buy them off of you?

(Reaches for the wallet in his pocket)

Lucy: Josh.

Josh: Lucy, can we talk about this?

Lucy: I bought the movies and I want to keep them. Maybe I'll watch them sometime and get over the fact that he's named after a dog.

Josh: Are you trying to hurt me? I know you don't actually want them. Do you just want them because I want them? Because that's completely unlike you.

Lucy: Are you trying to say that I did this to hurt you? Because that is far from the truth. I bought the movies, so I have ownership of said movies.

Josh: I offered to buy the damn movies from you.

(During this monologue Nathan is sneaking his way towards the door but ducks behind the couch when Lucy gets up)

Josh: I actually enjoy *Indiana Jones* and see the series as a whole as a foundation for modern filmmaking. I appreciate them and would cherish the movies, where you would keep them and never watch them because he's sweaty in the jungle. (If time is needed for Nathan to cross, ad lib more reasons)

(Lucy bolts up)

Lucy: Jesus Christ, just take the damn movies. God. I just wanna get this over with and leave. What else did you find?

(Josh digs through the box and picks out the door handle)

(Lucy starts to laugh a little as she remembers the handle)

Lucy: Oh my God. Why did you keep this? It's actually a piece of garbage.

Josh: You don't remember it?

Lucy: No...no, I do. This is from the Steak and Shake run. The one with...Trevor, right? You wanted to be a gentleman and open the door for me, but you tripped and busted your knee open along with the handle of your car.

Josh: Yeah! And then uh...you said that uh... (Grasping for words)

Lucy: (Embarrassed) I didn't say anything. I think you're misremembering. I didn't say anything. I just laughed and tried to help you up.

(Nathan tries to make another go for the door SL)

Josh: No...no, you said something. It was something about... like, horses... (Remembers) CALVARY'S NOT DEAD!

(Nathan ducks behind the couch again when Josh shouts)

Lucy: Listen, I was shocked! You were bleeding. I was looking in my purse for band-aids, and I...uh...

Josh: And then I started laughing and you laughed, and Trevor had to come and get us. And the rest of the night was great.

Lucy: (Laughing but calming down) Why's it in the box? It's your door handle.

Josh: (Not realizing the mood shift) Oh...you know...I just thought you'd want it, because it was a good memory, and it meant a lot to me, so I thought it would to you.

Lucy: (Cut off any time after and) But it's a piece of junk. It's a ruined part.

Josh: Oh, uh...I know, but I mean, it's from our first date, so I thought you'd want it.

Lucy: Steak and Shake wasn't our first date.

Josh: Then what was?

Lucy: I mean, I don't remember, but double dates don't count.

Josh: Then what does count? Because I thought they did.

Lucy: I guess maybe the Renfest. But does it matter if it was our first date or not?

Josh: (Sincerely asking) Does any of our relationship actually mean anything?

(Beat)

Lucy: (embarrassed) I should go. If there's anything else you find that you think I might want just...uh...forget about it.

Josh: (Trying to reel her back in) What about your shillelagh?

Lucy: (emotionally exhausted) My what?

Josh: (out of nowhere) Who is it? I just wanna know. I'm not gonna hurt him or anything. I just wanna know who it—

Lucy: What are you talking about? What do you mean who?

Josh: I mean, who are you cheating on me with? Because I know you wanted to do the right thing and break up with me first. I just wanna know who it is.

Lucy: (Confused) What are you talking about? I didn't cheat on you. I just... (Relaxing) I didn't want to go too far down a road, and I just...I'm in a place where I don't know where to go from here.

Josh: You waited a year and a half to tell me you didn't know what your feelings were? When did it become convenient for you to let that out?

(Eventually it devolves into a shouting match where Lucy is taking all of the hits and can't recover. When it becomes too intense Nathan pops up from behind the couch with the shillelagh held like a baseball bat about to hit Josh.)

Nathan: HEY!

(Awkward silence)

Nathan: I found your shi-luah-luha.

Josh: You mean shillelagh?

Nathan: That's what I said.

Lucy: How long have you been down there?

Nathan: Whole fucking time. Anyway, right now you're letting rage and guilt pilot yourselves, and it's just a real bummer when my friends can't get along.

(Awkward beat)

Nathan: What I'm trying to say is... (Thinks but changes his mind) Okay...Lucy, did you cheat on Josh?

Lucy: No.

Nathan: Okay, I'll take the L on that one. Why did you end things with Josh?

Lucy: (beat) I don't know. I guess I'm just not in a position to be tied down right now, because I don't plan on staying here and...

Josh: Okay, but when is the right time? Was it a year and a half?

Nathan: Josh...shut the fuck up. She already feels guilty. She knows she's hurting you and hurting her back is not the fucking answer.

Lucy: I really should just go. I have to get home.

(Josh goes to say something, but Nathan puts the shillelagh over Josh's chest to stop him.)

Nathan: Okay. That's fair, but does Josh not get an answer? I mean, I get it. You may never have an answer. But does he really have to sit here by himself wondering what he's done?

(Another beat)

Josh: Was there ever an out? I mean... why now?

Lucy: (Thinks for a second) I think I just...gathered the strength to allow myself the out. I don't think I'm where you want me to be. I'm not sure if I'm ever going to be. You're the type of person to care about door handles and shillelagns. These things have emotional significance to you and...I'm not sure I'm ready to be that for you. If, uh...you wanna talk about anything...text me or just...I'll be around.

(Lucy leaves but takes the car handle)

Josh: Was I wrong? I feel just so...I don't know, raw...like I have been taken advantage of in a way, but I mean, she didn't really.

Nathan: (Claps a hand on his shoulder) She tried. You're not what she needed...and maybe you'll find out why someday, but like, it's not worth it now. She wasn't what you needed either.

Josh: (Gets up) Maybe... wanna watch *Indiana Jones*?

Nathan: Which one?

Josh: All of them except the fourth one?

Nathan: Sure.

Josh: Will you be out of here by midnight?

Nathan: No.

Josh: I'll get the popcorn. (Goes to exit stage right. Nathan notices the car handle is gone. Interrupts but lets Josh leave)

(Lucy enters SL with the car handle)

Lucy: Hey, I meant to give this to Josh, but I just left. So, could you give it to him?

Nathan: Sure. (Beat) It's just scrap, though.

Lucy: Yeah, but...he really cared about it, so I thought that...

Nathan: I can pitch it if you want.

Lucy: No! Just...you're really not helping. I just wanted you to give this to him, but...you know what? I think I'll keep it.

Nathan: Sure.

(Beat)

Lucy: Thanks.

Nathan: Yeah.

(Lucy exits SL again)

(Josh enters SR)

Josh: Just gotta wait for the beep. Hey, I heard the door open. Did you leave?

Nathan: Uh...yeah...I threw out that old door handle. It was so beat up its probably unsalvageable now.

Josh: Oh... uh, cool. *Indiana Jones?*

Nathan: Sure.

(Nathan smirks, opens *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and gets ready to set it up. Josh looks confused but plops down onto the couch)

(Dim lights to black out)

End of Play

285 Tons

drawing

Haley Clancy Inyart



Ode to Signs

Payton Bodden



The dreams of a delicate raspberry matriarch derailed
by a desperate blueberry patriarch. Association
assigned arbitrarily matched by color. Colored
signs don't even scratch the surface of subtle.

Green and blue bedroom wallpaper.
Punxsutawney Phil. Route
66 dollars full tank twice again.
Cinnamon aroma, a sign
it's Christmas time
and Grandma's baking in the next room.

Prayers said past lipstick-stained
lips, she hears a boy alone afraid
to let anyone hear, to see him vulnerable-
singing, bouncing "Morning has Broken"
off open cathedral walls which he uses
to ask God for a sign.

Do not enter back from where you just came.
Exit through the door God left open.
Stop running because you're afraid.
Give way, one man's closed door,
is another man's open.

Unsure of the next move then hit
with the bluntness of green.
Go, gas, gears grind.
Hand on inner thigh, lips
brush your neck but at midnight
the masquerade is unmasked. Eyes that once
emanated ardor like a geyser, now emulate
a white wrap-around porch with nothing
but a coffee table and a single rocking chair.

Sagittarius March 1,
wait things will work out.
You chose her and he
didn't choose me,
and now I really need a
stop sign.

God finally speaks
but mutiny is acid
in a basic solution
neutralizing
self-righteous kiss-
asses, taking too literal
every sign,
even ones that don't exist.

pH 7 perfect sign. The world aligns
like an Olive Garden salad, dressing
diffusing. Consuming the leaves.
Consuming your life. Patience
paid off. Praying, "Thank you God for the sign.

Wait...
was that a sign?"

Contributors

Megan Beachum is a Secondary English Education Major. She received her degree in Psychology in December 2018 and decided she needed more schooling. So, she returned to pursue a degree in Education. She loves running (yes, for fun), watching *The Office* and *The Twilight Zone* (the original), and reading. She is also currently learning to play the piano.

Payton Bodden is a junior studying Biology with minors in chemistry and creative writing. She is a part of the Women's Club Soccer team, and a member of the honors student association and AMSA. She interns with Weightless Films and has helped make short films that have been accepted to multiple film festivals. She would like to thank her family and Professor Tiana Clark for always believing in her and pushing her to do her best.

Emylia Bouc is a senior graduating in May 2020 with a bachelor's in English Literature. She hopes to move to Asia to travel and teach English. Along the way she hopes to continue writing! For now, she is content passing her days taking naps with her cat, Salsa.

Tyana Brock is a junior studying Mass Communications and Creative Writing. She hopes to one day leave an indelible imprint on the world. Tyana would like to thank Professor Daniel Ising for sparking her initial love for writing and the challenges and responsibility we take on when we write. She would also like to acknowledge Professor Valerie Vogrin's constant encouragement and reassurance that her first attempts at creative writing were at least mediocre.

Nathan Cauley is a sophomore pursuing a degree in Computer Science. He enjoys coding, reading, writing, and hanging out with his friends. After college he hopes to become a developer for a cutting-edge application of today's technology, or a sketch comedy/sitcom writer where he can laugh and create comedy every day he goes to work. He wants to thank Mrs. Morris for being a great teacher and friend throughout his years of high school.

Kevin Cox is a sophomore majoring in English and planning to pursue a professorship in Creative Writing. He loves to write anything out of the ordinary and aspires to increase Tourette's syndrome awareness within literature due to an overwhelming amount of misrepresentation.

Levi Cox is a junior studying English. He recently discovered his love for poetry after taking a creative writing course and being forced to write poetry. When not working or procrastinating with his schoolwork, he can be found annoying his girlfriend, Madisyn. He would love to thank the wonderful Shane Signorino for being the first professor to tell him that he had creative talent.

David Crimsons is a junior majoring in Psychology and minoring in Fiction. He is heavily invested in the current state of ESports and competes regularly in Super Smash Brothers tournaments. His goals after graduation include publishing his series of fiction novels, getting his PhD in Counseling Psychology, and maintaining a consistent presence among the top Super Smash Brothers players.

Michaela Dean is a graphic designer who moonlights as a creative writing minor. She plays a lot of DND and thinks spiders are cool.

Elizabeth Donald is a writer fond of things that go chomp in the night. She is a three-time winner of the Darrell Award for speculative fiction and finalist for the Prism and Imadjinn awards for her novels, novellas, and short stories. She is the founder of the Literary Underworld author cooperative, an award-winning journalist, nature and art photographer, editor and writing coach, and is currently pursuing a master's degree. She is married to author Jim Gillentine and their family lives in a haunted house in Illinois. In her spare time, she has no spare time.

Lydia Friz is an English major in her senior year. She eats way too much chocolate and works at a library. Sometimes she goes on rants about saving the environment. Lydia lives with a cat named Salem and a dog named Pricella.

Nicole Gaither is a senior majoring in psychology. Her goal after college is to further her education by pursuing a master's degree in Social Work. She spends her time making memories with her son, Theoren Joseph. She gives thanks to him for being her driving force. She would also like to express her gratitude to her partner, Jordan. She is grateful to the student editors of *River Bluff Review* for making this publication possible.

Joe Hardy is a junior pursuing a major in Theatre Performance. He enjoys playwriting and poetry. He also enjoys including experiences from his own life in his work. He is excited to share his work with as many people as possible and to hopefully shine light on the art of playwriting.

Caleb Hill is a double major studying English and Computer Science. His two senior projects focus on determining user interests from social media text, and on the historical figure, Nat Turner. He dares you to guess which one is which.

Kenzie Holzinger is in her senior year to receive a BA and has recently been accepted to SIUE's BFA program for a second bachelor's. Though drawing is her focus, Kenz enjoys using oil paint and other mediums to speak about her conceptual concerns. In her work, Kenz is most interested in portraying different aspects between humanity and nature. When she's not in the studio, Kenz is a dancer and enjoys participating in musical theatre.

Alyssa Hoog is a nontraditional geography/environmental science senior. Born an Army brat, she has traveled the world and witnessed impactful events that have shaped her life. For over 20 years under the umbrella of her company, Jack of Hearts Photography, she has traveled the country “documenting the people, places and things that make us uniquely American.” She is proud to be a geographer and looks forward to more training in her newfound passion: cartography. She is auntie to an awesome 18-year-old niece and is mommy to beautiful twin guardian butterflies, Eleanor Irene and Lorelei Renee.

Haley Clancy Inyart is pursuing a BFA in Drawing. Haley has shown work in numerous juried shows including, the 28th Cedarhurst Biennial Juried Exhibition, The Edwardsville 200th Anniversary Show at The EAC and The Student Juried Show at SIUE, where she received the AIGA Award for Graphic Design. Haley since has completed an award-winning, large-scale sculpture which currently resides on the SIUE campus. The environment and the meat industry inspire her work.

Louis Damani Jones is a student of social work. Themes in his writing include relationship dynamics in contemporary times, American life, spirituality, and the African-American experience, among other topics.

Marchyl Jones is a female writer who enjoys live music, nature, and good cocktails. She aspires simply to be happy in life.

Su Liu was born and raised in Hunan Province, China. She received a BA in Performer Agent from Beijing Film Academy and an MA in TESL and an MA in English from the University of Idaho. Su is currently in her second year of the MFA Creative Writing program and she mainly writes fiction of women’s experiences.

Micaela Maco is a senior studying English with a Secondary Education focus. Her goals after college are to work as a high school English teacher and work towards her TEFL certification. Micaela loves this quote from Joan of Arc: “I am not afraid; I was born to do this.” She would like to thank her best friend since the fourth grade, Irum Shah, for believing in her and for modeling as the subject of her painting.

Matt Meyer is a sculpture artist who hopes to get a BFA. His work deals with ideas of worthiness dialed into what completes us, along with what humans do to taint their worthiness. His work uses symbols that, although pertain to him, can connect to the many. Matt Meyer has had work (sculptures and 2-D) shown in many areas throughout the United States, and he has a sculpture on SIUE’s campus.

Bob Nolte graduated from SIUE with a BS in history in 2007. In 2008, he taught ESL at World English School and at Hua Luogeng Senior Middle School in Danyang and Jintan in Jiangsu province, China. From 2009-2016, he taught ESL at Guangdong Peizheng College in Guangzhou. From 2016 -July of 2017, he taught language arts and history at Beijing 21st Century International School in Beijing. He currently substitute teaches at Edwardsville School District #7.

Ava Ploeckelman is a freshman studying Biology and hopes to eventually work in Epidemiology. Creative writing is one of her passions and her work is often inspired by her travels, which included visits to five of the seven continents. Her hobbies include crocheting, swing dancing, kickboxing, and reading books. She is also a proud member of the Honors program and is driven by a desire to learn across disciplines.

Justin Rhodes is currently pursuing a PharmD from SIUE. Outside of school, Justin spends his time playing video games, painting, hiking, and taking pictures. His goals after college are to become a pharmacist, have a big house with lots of pets, and to travel the world.

Katie Sand is a junior studying psychology with a minor in creative writing. Despite her major, she'd like you to know she definitely can't read minds. After college, she would like to travel the world and continue to learn new things. In her free time you can find her reading, writing, and daydreaming. She'd like to thank her family and friends for their encouragement and always supporting her writing.

Samantha Segrist is an Applied Communication Studies major and a Creative Writing minor in her freshman year. She loves Jesus, John Mulaney, Cheez-Its, musicals, and 70's music. Sam wants to eventually become a youth leader and work at a job where she can wear jeans every day. Additionally, Sam could not be where she is without the support of her parents, her friends, and her cat. Thank you!!!

Lamonya Smith is a junior majoring in English and minoring in creative writing. She really likes Undertale and draws for a hobby. Her goal is to be an editor in New York after graduating and to publish more short stories in the future.

Nathan Smith has been pursuing art for the past five years. Only recently did he pick up a minor in 2D drawing/painting. Nathan plans to implement his love for artwork into his future career as an art therapist and counselor. Psychology is what guides Nathan's exploration within his artwork. He hopes that this combination will shed light on and normalize mental health, so people feel comfortable seeking help.

Ethan Sproat is a theatre performance major at SIUE with a minor in creative writing. One might find Ethan making complicated drinks at Starbucks, memorizing monologues for an audition the night before, driving to Insomnia Cookies at two in the morning, or sleeping. He is very excited to be featured in the *River Bluff Review* and thankful for this opportunity.

Kimberly Sutherland has been married to her best friend David for 35 adventure-filled years. They have seven grown children and seven grandchildren. Her master's degree in English will be realized in spring 2020. Teaching is her passion and her profession. She believes love holds the power to change the world, writing has healing properties, and storytelling is a lost art. Her favorite author is Charles Dickens.

Alyssa Timmer is a senior majoring in English Literature with a minor in creative writing. Her passion for writing comes from a love of young adult fiction novels and modern poetry. After graduating in the spring, Alyssa plans on moving back home to Chicago where she will seek a career in publishing. In the future, she aspires to become a screenwriter for a major TV or movie production studio in Los Angeles.

Kyle Warnecke is a Tree-Climbing Major who hopes to soon become the first squirrel to ever graduate college. With a lifetime of experience in gathering nuts, chattering at humans, and crossing roads in front of cars at the last possible second, this bushy-tailed, ambitious undergraduate rodent looks forward to the day he can scurry triumphantly across the stage at graduation.

Tracy Welling is a Master of Fine Arts candidate. Her focus is interdisciplinary, with synergistic work in metalsmithing, drawing, and textiles. Tracy is material motivated and uses personal narratives along with references to folklore in her art. Her work can be seen nationally with pieces exhibited in various galleries, publications, and online collections.

Lisa Wood is a senior majoring in psychology and minoring in creative writing. She plans to earn a doctorate in clinical psychology and wants to work with adults suffering from severe mental illness that are hospitalized. She hopes to continue to write as much as possible. She has been an avid reader since elementary school and has recently become a fan of writing poetry.

Emily Wolff is a junior majoring in English with a double minor in pre-law and creative writing. She plans to attend law school after graduating, in hopes of being able to make the world a better place. Her love for books is what created her love for writing, and she wants to use her love for writing to inspire the world. She has come to find that it is therapeutic to express herself through poetry.

Christopher Wright is a Mass Communications major and creative writing minor trying his absolute best to graduate in the spring. When not pouring heart and soul into schoolwork and actual work, you can find him playing video games, writing, or, if he's really lucky, reading. "The Deal" is his second published work, and his first work published in the *River Bluff Review*.

