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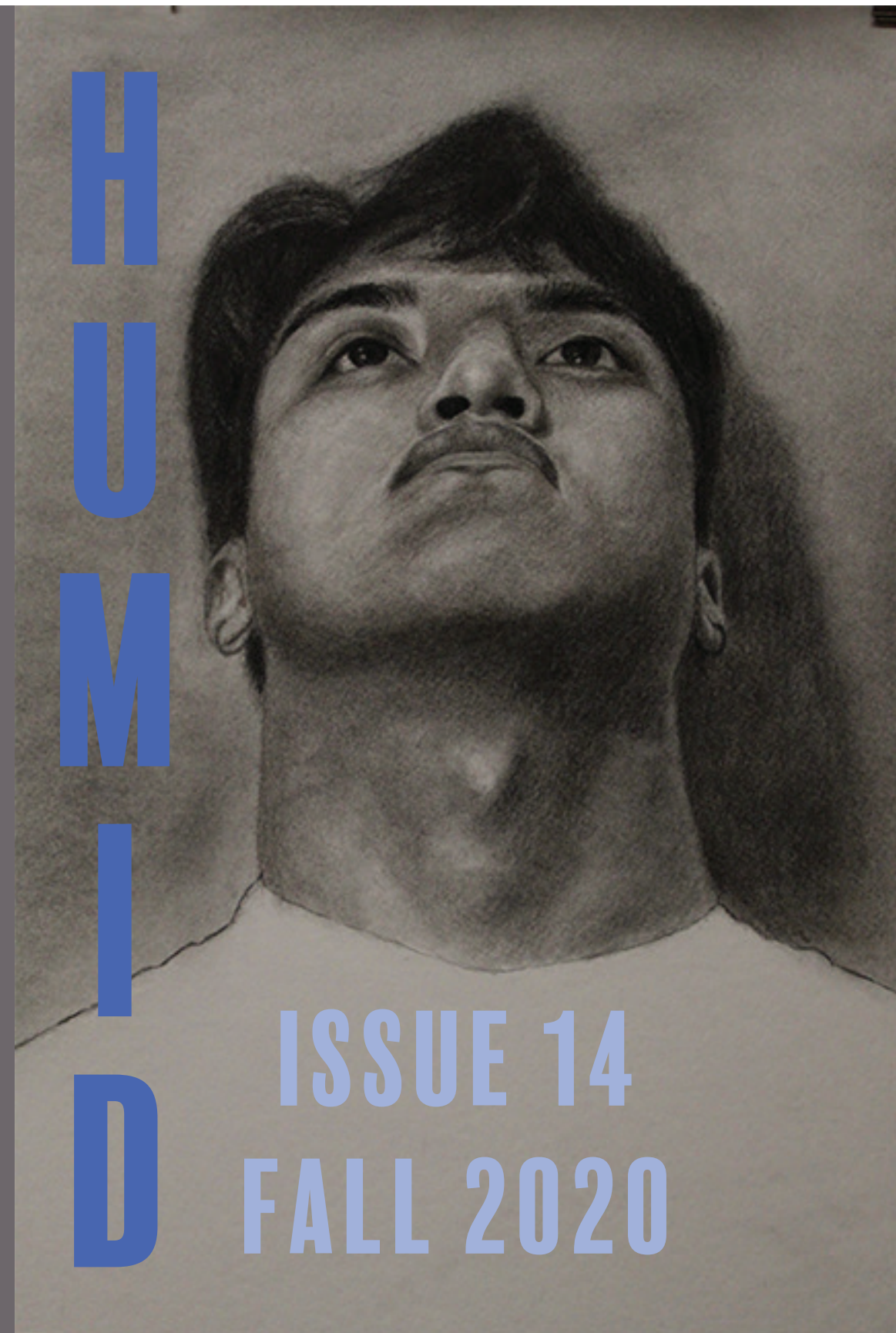
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# HUMID Fourteen

## Fall 2020 Masthead

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Hiba M. Kunwer, Poetry

## **Venom**

Do you ever wonder if the earth shivers  
as snakes dance across its skin;  
Silver tongues darting across its flesh?

Because I still tremble,  
from the thought  
of your twisted body around mine,  
your tainted touch, and unwanted writhing.

I still feel violated by your venom

which hides under my skin,  
like a snake you charmed  
to dance to the judgement  
from anyone I dare to tell.

While I suffer in my solitude,  
you continue to slither in my veins,  
making me want to slit every inch of skin  
you have ever savored.

Your puncture wounds  
are hard to see but they are there  
in the nights I coil into myself,  
in the scars on my body that I carved out myself,  
in the lack of trust in my relationships,  
because now I can't understand the difference

between an embrace and a constriction.

Hiba M. Kunwer, Poetry

## **Volcanic guilt**

The girl was in second grade when she crashed  
into her mother, boiling pot cradled.  
The skin melting off her limb was a lahar,  
lazily slipping off limb. To this day the girl cannot feel

any touch, or kiss on the bare site. Her arm solidified  
into craters of misshapen mantle, kept hidden  
beneath lengths of sleeves. Summers were as brutal  
as looking into a caldera before eruption. And yet it still burned

less than her mother's shame,  
seen every time a fissure of skin escaped the suffocating  
covers of long sleeve T-Shirts and jackets. A mother  
who despite every Volcanic Explosivity reading believes

each fault line in her daughter's arm  
will always point to her.

Hiba M. Kunwer, Poetry

## **A year of love in a single morning**

Her eyes are closed but it isn't dark.  
Instead there's a warm orange,  
that rests on the curtains of her eyes.  
When she slowly opens her blinds,  
she sees sun rays shining through.  
They look delicate and soft.

And so are the sheets.  
The ones they both had washed three nights ago,  
in the loud community laundry.  
They smelled of him on the days  
he had an extra spring in his step,  
when he performed on the stage that night,  
when he saw the dog on the way home to her arms,  
when he found the dandelion on their picnic last Summer.

She turns into their comforter's embrace,  
reminded of the crazy Cajun roll they had last Fall,  
the one that made them both tear up.  
Him from the spices, her from the laughter.

In her mind, she leans forward for a kiss,  
and is met with the warm feeling  
of every cup of hot cocoa, they had last Winter,  
curled up together in this very bed.

The room starts to smell of toast, and eggs,  
and she hears his gentle singing  
coming from the kitchen, like the Spring songbirds  
outside their window.

## Glyphosate girl

She has killed every plant  
she has have ever owned.  
Her thumb, a pulsing,  
hazardous, neon green;  
she is more radioactive than  
attractive, I promise.

She will *forget* to water you.

She will hide you from the sun  
when it shines.

She will pluck at your weak  
wilting petals.

She will rip your roots  
straight from the ground.

Because to her you are nothing  
more than a succulent,  
hanging on the veranda;  
resilient yet temporary. And she  
will always prefer artificial flowers.

## Hiba M. Kunwer, Poetry

### **I swear**

every time our pinkies intertwine  
while walking side-by-side,  
I wonder, if it's actually our fingers  
crossed in silent prayer;

to your God or mine, or another.  
If so, I pray that our meeting  
was planned long before you  
walked this planet, starry eyed,

telling me stories of soulmates  
being one body before lightning. Stories  
that leave me wondering why my holy  
book will not let me believe that you

could be the other half Plato spoke of. We  
are Perseus and Andromeda in the sky,  
perfectly aligned. So, I wonder, why  
we are seen as star crossed.

## The Mythical Brew

I chucked my steam pitcher after the receding Pixies. They were giggling madly as they flew away and across the street. Zipping past cars and through open windows. “And stay out!”

I stomped back into the coffee shop, letting the door slam behind me. The tinkling of the cheerful bell undermined my anger. I returned to my spot back behind the bar, my hooves clattering on the tiled floor.

Marie, the little Dryad I had hired last summer because Stacy said the shop need a “stronger female presence” (whatever the hell that meant) cowered a bit.

“What are you waiting for?” I snapped, “I still need to mix drinks.”

As though released from some imaginary chains, Marie flitted out of the coffee shop to retrieve the pitcher, her vine covered silhouette twisting and writhing as her structure focused and unfocused. Roses and thorns formed her features, but they were ever changing, refusing to settle on one appearance. I realized a huff as she disappeared across the street. Damn, she should know the routine by now.

“Excuse me—”

Double damn. I turned to face a stately Elf, her billowing clothes flowing in some unseen wind. Her grandchildren, the brats, stood snickering behind her.

“I do hope you plan on sanitizing that before you use it to make our drinks.”

“Nah, the dirt adds flavor.” I snapped.



The grandmother sniffed, her nose inching its way further into the air. She turned on her heel, an almost impressive feat with the height of those shoes; Elves always did have the most ridiculous sense of fashion. Her pointed ears twitched slightly in annoyance as she, with her brats in tow, stalked back to their claimed seats.

She didn't leave though. She wouldn't. We were the best coffee shop this side of New York and everyone knew it. You just didn't leave Mythical Brew. Not if you wanted a decent latte.

"Excuse me?"

I didn't turn to face the new-customer, I didn't have to. The timbre of the voice gave away her species.

"Whatcha want?" I continued to gather the supplies for the drinks, stooping down under the counter to grab a new bottle of caramel syrup. Damn Pixies.

"I was told to tell you when I got here." She continued as Marie finally returned with the pitcher. Her hands grew around the pitcher like it was part of her, her fingerlike roots intertwined with the metal. As she approached, they relinquished their hold, revealing the now rather muddy pitcher. It must have rolled into a puddle.

"Now who in damnation told you to do that?" I snatched the tumbler from Marie and glared at her as I continued to talk to the customer. I quickly rinsed it off with water. Good enough. Dirt does add flavor anyway.

"Mrs. Stacy, she told me to tell you when I come in for my first shift."

Now I did turn. "Your what?"

"My first shift?" The Human, short even compared to those of her kind, shifted from foot to foot,

uncomfortable. “Today is the fifteenth right?” She glanced down at her wrist. Finding no watch there she looked around the coffee shop bashfully. “Right?”

I turned on my hoof, shoving the tumbler half full of cream and sugar into Marie’s hands. I kicked open the door to the backroom, creating another hoof shaped dent in the wood. “Stacy,” I growled.

“Walter.” Stacy didn’t even glance at me as she flitted from one stack of papers to the next on her ridiculously oversized desk. Her vibrant pink wings glittering in the fluorescent lights, standing out even more in contrast to her white hair pulled back into a sensible bun sitting on the nape of her neck.

“Stacy, we talked about this. I will not have any of *their* kind working behind my counter.” I snarled, slamming my fist down on the table. “I put up with that Dryad. I know I don’t that much about women and I’ve humored you since Andria left, but this is too far.”

The impact pushed Stacy off the table and her wings fluttered once, turning the jump into a graceful float. Her eyebrows rose at the word “humored.” Perhaps that was a poor choice of words.

“Yes, Walter, I believe we did talk about this.” Stacy ascended gently up to my eye level, her tiny eyes meeting mine. “And I believe I told you, what was it? Oh, yes, ‘Your racist remarks and behavior have scared away a grand total of fifty-three customers in the last month.’ All good paying customers I might add.”

“I have standards,” I snapped, “So what? This is my coffee shop. I can choose who I want coming in here.”

“Excuse me,” The little Human peeked her head into the back room, her fingers twirling a strand of her short blond hair. “Mrs. Stacy, should I go?”

“Oh, no, sweetheart, you’re fine. The aprons are on the back wall by the coffee grounds. Go ahead and grab one. Marie will show you what to do.” Mrs. Stacy flittered up to the thing and gently removed the fingers from her hair. “And wash your hands, darling. Unlike some people, we do follow health codes.” She shot me a marked look.

“Sorry. Thank you.” The kid darted out of the room, her timid blue eyes avoiding mine.

“Walter, I think you should take the day off.” Stacy flittered back to her papers, lifting one with both hands to peer at the one beneath.

“I own this damn shop.”

“Yes, as you insist on reminding us every ten minutes.” Stacy looked up, “I hired Grace to help bring in the customers you keep shooing away. There is a huge population of Humans in this area, even more now since they just opened that community college on Paisley Street.”

“Damn those customers! We get plenty without them.”

Stacy glanced at me from where she was hefting a pen, although small, still much larger than her. “Walter,” She sighed, “Take a day off.”

“I will not.”

“Ms. Stacy, Mr. Walter,” Andrew, the Junior Manager, popped his head into the office, bending over slightly to fit his large Yeti frame through the door. Even though the door had been adjusted for my slightly taller Faun stature it still wasn’t enough to accommodate him.

“Andrew, thanks for coming in. We have a new hire like I told you. She’s out there with Marie.” Stacy smiled warmly, her smile filling in the familiar wrinkles on her face.

"I saw her when I came in," Andrew smiled his near terrifying big tooth grin, "sweet kid."

"Would you mind showing her the ropes?"

"Course." Andrew gave a mock salute, "Have a good day off, Mr. Walter, you deserve it."

"I'm not taking the day off." I growled as his huge form retreated from the little office.

"You are, Walter," Stacy said firmly, "because your daughter would be very disappointed if her father canceled on her again."

"My daughter—" Damn. "You called her?"

"Yes, and from what I could tell from the phone, she is very excited to spend a day with her dad."

"Damn!" I knew I shouldn't have given her that number.

"In fact, you better hurry, your reservation at the Frolicking Fates is at five sharp." Stacy glanced down at her tiny watch. "It's almost four thirty now."

"I want that thing gone from my shop when I get back."

Stacy shifted into a larger, more normal size, the wings shifting into her back and disappearing. Moving past me towards the interior of the shop she planted a light kiss on my cheek. It almost succeeded in alleviating my scowl.

"Have a good day off, Walter."

Damn.

\*\*

The Frolicking Fates was not my first choice. The jazzy music blaring from some hidden speakers seemed to reinforce the wrongness of my presence in my slightly stained polo shirt (courtesy of the Pixies this morning) and greasy hair I had hurriedly pulled back as I'd pulled up to Carson's house.

Carson didn't seem to notice; she never did. Her own hair was curled slightly, styled very similarly to how her mother used to do it when we had first started dating. It was now hanging down over her eyes, though as she rummaged through the large diaper bag on the chair next to her.

"Sorry again. The babysitter canceled on me."

"Yeah, okay." I looked out the window. A thump sounded on the table opposite and I pointedly ignored it.

"Ba Pa ba pa ba pa bapa bapabapabahapabehehh." The practiced words smeared into baby chatter as Mason kicked the table happily, his tiny toes stretching to reach his mom's cup. It was fortunate in this moment that faun hooves weren't something Mason hadn't inherited from his mother or serious damage could have been done to the table. As it was, there were a few dirty baby human footprints on the white tablecloth now.

"That's right, we're having dinner with Ba Pa!" Carson finally pulled the cup of Cheerios out from the bag. She sprinkled some on the tray in front of him and Mason happily began popping them in his mouth.

Carson set the half-empty cup of Cheerios on the side of the table closest to the window. "So how are you, Dad? You gotten back into the dating scene yet?"

"No." I grunted, picking up my menu again. A useless gesture as we had ordered five minutes ago.

Carson leaned forward taking my menu and placing it by the Cheerio cup. "What's bothering you, Dad?"

I subconsciously glanced toward Mason. Damn, I hoped she didn't notice. Her left eyebrow raised slightly. Damn.

"Dad, we talked about this." Lowering her voice slightly, "Mason loves you."

"I know." I grunted. That certainly wasn't the issue and she knew it.

Carson sighed, leaning back. "Have you heard from Mom recently?"

"No, have you?" I looked out the window again.

"Yeah, she just moved to California with, I think, Jeffery? No, Jackson. It was Jackson."

"I thought she already lived in California?"

Mason swung his arms wide sending the Cheerios skittering off his tray and onto our table and the surrounding floor. A waiter, a short Gnome, serving an adjacent table frowned, his nose crinkling as a loose Cheerio rolled across his foot.

"Mason!" Carson hurriedly removed the remaining Cheerios, mouthing 'sorry' to the Gnome. Then she looked back up at me, "No, because she moved to Dakota when she married Dexter, remember? Last summer?"

"Her turn arounds are getting quicker." I muttered. She was almost as flighty as a human.

Carson shrugged, lifting the now fussing Mason out of his highchair. "But I haven't heard anything about you, how are you doing?"

"I'm great," I forced between my teeth.

"Uh huh." Carson's left eyebrow inched slightly higher. "Did you hear I got a new job?"

"Yeah, the one at the daycare, right?" I fiddled with the fork. "How do you like it?"

"I love it! You heard they opened up a community college on Paisley Street right? With this job I can take classes there at night. I'm working on that law degree." She gave a soft laugh as Mason fingered his stubs of horns peeking through his curly red hair.

"The community college?" I looked up, finally. "That place is crawling with humans."

Carson sighed, deeper than before, “Dad, we talked about this. Humans are not bad.”

“Oh?” I snapped, looking pointily at Mason.

“You forget I married him, Dad.” Carson snapped, her patience finally running out. “And I wish you would stop talking like this in front of Mason. He can hear you, you know.”

“Yes, and then he left you! Humans are too flighty, I warned you. They have no sense of commitment. They may act nice but they never mean a word they say.”

Carson gave a pointed look which I ignored.

“And so what? Mason should know his dad was an asshole.”

“assholeee,” Mason babbled happily reaching his chubby fingers toward me.

Carson slapped her hands over his ears. Too late. “Oh, and your choice was so much better? I’ll have you know that at least mine was mutual! And Jax only remarried once.”

“So far!”

“Chicken Alfredo?” Our waiter, a skittery Naiad, held up a steaming plate. Water was dripping from his translucent form. It pooled on the ground but the droplets, ever a part of him, rolled along the carpet and rejoined him at his toes, bubbling up from there to the rest of him.

“That’s me,” Carson said, still glaring at me.

The Naiad dripped slightly onto Mason as he reached to place the plate. Mason giggled happily and reached up toward the Naiad. The waiter ignored him as he placed my steaming plate of Chicken Parmesan in front of me.

“Can I get an extra plate for the baby? We’re splitting.” Her eyes were still locked on mine. Damn. How had Carson gotten so good at glaring? She had been so timid as a kid.

“assholeee” Mason giggled again, “Baba Ba Paa!” He reached his fingers over the plate toward me.

Carson stood stiffly. “I have to use the ladies’ room.” She shoved Mason into my arms. “You two, work things out.” With that she stomped away her hooves clattering on the tiled ground.

I opened my mouth then closed it. “Damn.”

Mason looked up, his brown eyes wide.

“Don’t you dare repeat that. I’m already in enough trouble.”

In response Mason grabbed his toes and began giggling again. Although he lacked the hooves of a full Faun, his legs were nearly as furry as his mothers and the same scarlet hue. The fur looked a bit odd encroaching on his toes and nearly covering their wiggling presence. For that matter so did his little stubs of horns sticking out from his mass of curly hair. I poked them gently and Mason laughed looking up at me.

“Ba Pa!” A small smile crept onto my face. Carson used to do that when she was little. Little Faun’s horns were notoriously ticklish. I poked it again and Mason clutched his little tummy giggling madly. Carson used to do that too. Even when she grew older, her little horns no longer little and her favorite movies no longer starring animated characters, she still clutched her stomach when she laughed. She used to laugh a lot too. That was before she met him.

At first, he made her laugh too, but then—

I glanced out the window, swallowing down the anger bubbling up again. Mason had his eyes, Jax’s eyes. Those eyes had lied to me. They had said they would take care of her, they had said till death do they part, but they had broken her. They had broken my little girl. And I had believed them. I had let them take her away.



“Ba Pa?” Mason reached his cubby fingers toward my own curly hair, which had escaped from the band pulling it back.

I looked down. Mason had his eyes. But that hair, that laugh, that was all Carson. I pulled him close as Mason sucked happily on a hair he had managed to grab. He was Carson’s. Not his. Never his. Not anymore. He had given that up when he had left my little girl. These eyes made Carson happy. They made her whole again.

“Have you made up, yet?” Carson had returned and was looking calmer.

I grunted. The left corner of Carson’s mouth shot up. “Glad to hear it.”

\*\*

“You need to come by more often. We’re only thirty minutes out of town.” Carson unbuckled Mason from the backseat.

I grunted. “Sorry.”

“You work too much. Take more time off work.” Carson lifted Mason out. I grabbed the car-seat. It would need to be returned to Carson’s own car.

“We’ll see. I just got a new hire and she’ll need training.”

“Yeah, the human, right?” Carson turned but not before I saw the smile spread across her face.

“Wait.” I slammed the car door closed. “Was this all a plan? Is this Stacy’s doing?”

“I asked.” Carson fumbled with the keys putting Mason down on the front porch as she fitted it in its spot.

“You didn’t answer me.”

“Stacy’s a very sweet Fairy, you know.” Carson picked up Mason again before he crawled down the steps back to the car.

“Did she plan this just to get me not to fire that kid?”

“Not ‘just’ to not fire the kid. I did miss you too, you know.”

“Who does she think she is? My damn psychologist?” I dropped the car seat on the floor just inside the door.

“You should ask her out sometime. Girls don’t just like to be spoken to in the workplace. Take her somewhere nice.” Carson put Mason down again, inside the house this time. He sat just inside sucking on his thumb regarding the both of us.

“That scheming, no good—”

“Bye, dad.” Carson stood on the tips of her hooves to plant a kiss on my cheek. “I really enjoyed tonight. Come visit sometime, Mason misses you.”

“Damn.”

We both turned to look at Mason grinning on the floor. “Damn.”

Carson slowly turned back toward me, “On second thought...”

I crouched down, “That’s right, Mason, your damn Ba Pa got damn played by his own damn daughter and damn marketing manager.”

“Get out.” Carson pushed me back, but as she shut the door she was grinning broadly, and one arm was clutching her stomach as she began laughing. I had missed that.

\*\*

“You’re supposed to have the day off!” Andrew was grinning again. Did he ever stop smiling?

“Yeah, well, who’s going to make sure she’s trained correctly?” Certainly not Marie and probably not Andrew either, he was too concerned with some rubbish called ‘customer service.’

“Hand me that.” I turned toward the human who jumped at my words. She quickly handed me the paper cup she had been awkwardly been holding.

At least she was faster than Marie.

“Now, when you first start, don’t worry about those stupid designs idiots do on the top.” I snapped the plastic lid on top of the coffee. “You’ll just mess it up, put all the drinks in the paper cups and you won’t have to worry about it.”

“Actually,” the girl whispered, “I can make the designs.”

I actually snorted. Damn punk. “Let me see.” I handed her the coffee I had just finished and crossed my arms.

She gingerly took it and pulled off the lid. Then she raised her left hand slightly over the top and twirled her hand in midair. A slight popping emanated from her fingers as the foam on top swirled into a daisy pattern. She relaxed her fingers and lowered them back to her sides as she turned toward me. Her face a mask of pride and embarrassment.

“You’re a wizard?” Andrew’s grin threatened to eclipse his whole face.

“Well, that’s what I’m in college for. I’m not very good at it, but latte art is kind of my hobby.” She rubbed the base of her neck sheepishly.

I stared at the latte. Damn she was good.

“What was your name again?” I snorted at Andrew’s stupid face as I snapped the plastic lid back on.

“My name?” She squeaked.

“Who else?” I raised an eyebrow as I handed the latte to the teenage vampire across the counter, who promptly snapped the lid off and took a picture. Then he proceeded to take seven more. Ridiculous. It wasn’t that good.

“My name’s Grace.”

“Not a very good wizard name.” I shook my head as I moved on to the next order.

“My parents didn’t really want me to be a wizard. Elves are better at magic anyway.” Grace shrugged

“They’re right”

She deflated slightly.

“but you’re not too bad, kid.” I handed her another finished latte.

Grace grinned, for the first time since I had seen her. She didn’t grin like Jax, with all the teeth exposed, like a damn werewolf, or like Jackson’s close-lipped smirk in those horrible Facebook photos I pretended I hadn’t seen. She grinned like little Carson dancing in the rain in her muddy hooves her face turned up to the sky to catch the fresh grey rain.

“You were supposed to have the day off!” Stacy’s voice floated in from the back.

I turned, she had her arms crossed over her chest as she stood leaning on the door frame, shifted into a more normal size. I trotted over to her, taking her in as I came. Carson was right, I couldn’t do much better than her. She was loyal and responsible and lovely.

“How do you like the new hire?” Stacy interrupted my thoughts.

“She wasn’t so bad, for a human of course.” I muttered the last few words as I followed her into the office.

“I’m glad you finally came to your senses.” Stacy smiled her self-satisfied smile.

“Stacy.”

She turned, maybe the tone of my voice gave me away. Maybe it was the tremble that clued her in. Damn.

“Would you possibly be interested in going on a date with me?” I shifted from hoof to hoof.

“Well, now.” Stacy grinned, a laugh bubbling up on the edges of her mouth, “I thought you’d never ask.”

Damn.

## Special Features

I wouldn't say I'm "good" with faces. I think maybe a better way to describe it is that I'm good with features. There were a number of times back when my sister and I were both in high school when she would tell me a story about someone she had in her class, and I would interrupt her:

"Do they look like this?"

"Do they have a small face?"

"Are their glasses square and black?"

"Do they wear pale blue a lot?"

Almost every time her answer was, "I don't know." It was kind of frustrating.

\*\*

I'm not really sure where it comes from. Maybe from art, from those "I'm going to try drawing people again!" phases. Maybe from my dad, who never forgets a face and who desperately wanted his daughters to be aware of their surroundings and did his best to train us to be observant. Maybe it's a natural result of me being generally uncomfortable with eye contact, from me looking everywhere else when I'm talking to people and getting the chance to take in their teeth and eyebrows and widow's peaks and earlobes and nostrils and smile lines instead of just their stare.

\*\*

I know why I've kept it up though. I may not be the best at drawing faces, but maybe I can sculpt features out of words:

There's you with full lips like your mother's  
and puffed lower eyelids that make your eyes so much  
warmer.

And you with flushed cheeks and tightly-pulled  
hair and your prominent forehead.

You with the rounded face and attached ear-  
lobes with delicate gold earrings hanging from them.

You with the incredible profile made from your  
freckle-speckled upturned nose and rounded out chin.

You with the glowing skin and shimmering eye-  
lids and cheeks so full they immediately come to mind  
when I hear "apple of the cheek."

You with the feathers of hair drifting up from  
your cowlick.

\*\*

You with a chin like my father's and our cousins' and  
your brother's and mine.

Me with heavy eyebrows and shadows under  
my eyes and a constellation of freckles and moles and  
acne scars.

\*\*

There is so much beauty in all of it, and I want to put  
it to paper before I forget it all again, however I can.

## Nathan Thompson, Poetry

### **In Waves**

Was it the hunger of the flame,  
Or the motion of the wave  
That gave in the end?

Was it that our hearts burned too close too long  
Consuming and being consumed  
Reaching out for one more spark  
Gasping for one last breath?

Was it the shape of our lives,  
A time stretched out too thin,  
That the years folded in on us,  
And our memories dissolved in the rain?

Will you remember me?

Will I remember you?

I stood on the shore and watched this wave rise high.  
The burning sunset reflected off the surface,  
Creating a flame that sparked and danced in a cold place  
Trapped between the crest and the bottomless ocean below.  
But when the time had come and the light flickered out.  
The wave came crashing down on me,  
And I was fine.



## Shelby Hunt, Poetry

### Orbit

This morning I drive slow.

Cars skate past me

as my brain is lost in thought.

Blinding light flash my sensitive eyes.

My fingers grip onto the wheel as I am pulled back to reality.

*Go straight*

*Turn here*

*Watch your speed*

These are the things I normally think of.

I think none of these things today.

In a blink of an eye somehow, I still find my way to school.

Like a planet in orbit, I don't sway or falter.

I am consistent and orderly like a neat stack of books.

I don't fall out of line.

I'm where I need to be and where I have to be.

But the stack of books starts to tip to the side as I am transfixed on driving somewhere far away.

Gravity pulls me back to center and I let it carry me.

I let it carry the heavy weight of my skull and the heaviness of my shoulders.

I still end up where I have to be.

Today, I ended up where I'm not supposed to be.

## Leta Machogu, Poetry

### Hands

In the 9th grade Mr. Bass  
Taught us on planet Eyeth—  
Listening is a disability and  
One will need signs  
For Hands and Ears  
And there is no need for  
Riots like Gallaudet's  
DEAF PRESIDENT NOW

For people of Eyeth  
Life is sight  
Rather than sound  
*SOON,*  
*NOW,*  
*I REMEMBER.*  
The Deaf share with  
Foreigners who miss  
What is signed due  
To hearing distractions  
Of Bison songs nearby.

On Earth, at the bottom of the totem pole  
They have read lips that mouth  
Later,  
Not now,  
Never mind.  
Sharing information  
Is too hard for the  
People of the Ear

An eye for an eye  
Is how the bitter  
desperate teacher thinks.  
Two planets so different  
Should never collide  
The Deaf are done  
With our hearing  
Hand-me-downs.

Take off your mittens.  
Remove your hearing aids.  
Why conform in this world of hate?  
Isolation is bearable only for a short time  
My phone autocorrects  
*Deaf for Death*  
Suicide statistics  
And CI electrocutions  
Say it's not wrong  
Either way life ends  
Empty-handed.

*These kids are deaf and dumb*  
*Teach them to speak and hear*  
*If all else fails*  
*Place them at TSD*  
The Least Restrictive Environment  
Handcuffs the students  
In mainstream classes  
Plus, therapy sessions  
And pretend there is  
No Child Left Behind  
If they cannot speak  
To say otherwise

At the ASL tent  
He introduces himself  
*J-Chest, YOU WHO*  
*L-Cheek NICE MEET*  
I don't have to tell him  
I am a fraud  
CDI interprets the song  
I confuse *CHRISTIAN* and  
*CITIZEN* which one is it?  
Hearing status confirmed  
The light reflects off his  
Smiling teeth. Eyes like  
Moons survey my plump  
Freckled face and curling lips  
I am aghast. This friendly  
Interaction can happen?  
Mr. Bass could never imagine  
*J-Chest* forgives

Two-years later  
He and I go together like  
His famous rice and beans  
*You know he can't hear, right?*  
The widow says on the Sunday  
Before our wedding.  
*DIVORCE WILL*  
Another old woman signs  
Of course, he defends me  
I cry in the car until  
The windshield fogs up  
Is it that hard to accept a  
Deaf and hearing marriage?

Alexander Graham Bell laughs  
I hear my  
Telephone ring  
My love is calling  
From his VP  
He fingerspells something long  
My hands are full  
But I try to sign  
Lay down all the weight  
*WHAT?*  
His bird-like eyes  
Stare straight into my own  
B..L..E..S..S..I..N..G

It's a beautiful life  
When two cultures  
Can see eye to eye  
Who decides whether  
We hear or don't hear?  
God will uphold us with His  
Mighty right hand.

## Leta Machogu, Poetry

### Let Me Out

The spinning of the heart  
The tilting of the chair  
'Til death do us part  
Nerves pulling out my hair

Leg bounces up, down  
Leg kicks out, in  
Force your mouth, stop, frown  
Breathe, withdraw, held within

How many nights must I wait  
'Til I defeat this anxious fate.  
Distractions come, distractions go  
Yet my spirit resides at an all-time low

The shaking of the head  
The resting of the eyes  
I wish to stay in bed  
Send *her* out in my disguise

Heart pulses, thump, thump  
Heart shrivels, shout, shout  
Body melts, leaves just a lump  
Someone please, *please let me out*

## Heart Rot

Stunted pine trees stretch for miles in every direction; branches weakly swaying. They are sickly things, pathetic and frail. Shadows rustle all around, blanketing the underbrush like thick, cloying cobwebs. A few feeble rays of sunlight manage to break through in places; highlighting how dark and widespread the shadows are. A well-worn path cuts through the orange-brown carpet covering the forest floor. The first step is always the hardest, and the most familiar; hesitant yet certain. Ashley knows where this path leads. She's the one who keeps it worn into the underbrush.

Ok, deep breath. She knows all the twists and turns by now. No surprises. Yeah, that's what worries her, no surprises.

The first part of the walk isn't so bad. Sure, the shadows flicker just out of the corner of her eye, and the rustling whispers all around her are likewise sourceless but, she knows those voices at least. She can't quite make them out but she knows what they are saying. It's nothing she hasn't said before.

He's waiting for her at the oak tree. It had been tall once, proud and resplendent as it basked in its own ego. Thick, strong branches still overhead. A few of those have collapsed under their own weight, but most of them stubbornly stay up, casting clutching shadows over most of the forest. She can see those branches, the ones still stretched over the forest, and the fallen ones, as clear as day if she takes a second to think about them. The ones that have fallen left nothing but ruin in their wake, spitefully taking out everything in their path as they came crashing down.

The closer she draws to the oak, the more she can make out and the less she wants to. The bark is cracked and peeling in places. Where pieces have flaked off, discolored, crumbling flesh peaks through. Sickly yellow and corrupted brown infect the few leaves still stubbornly clinging to life. An earthy, musty, miasma of decay clogs the air, thick enough to cut with a butterknife.

Mushrooms have sprouted all over, feeding on the vast well of rot and ruin within. A legion of fungus was a fitting legacy for someone who had strangled everything around him for so long. The oak's roots penetrate the ground for miles in every direction, greedily leeching anything of value from the soil. Those mighty branches block the sun and catch the rain, stopping anything from truly growing beneath their influence..

Mark sits at the base of the tree. No, she reminded herself, he is the base of the tree. The parasitic roots don't surround him, they sprouted from him. The thick bark that had protected his putrefied body from exposure, the grasping limbs and lusting leaves that had blocked out the sun. They all came from him. Any integrity he'd once -

No!

She cut that line of thought off before it could get started. If he'd been what he pretended to be, he wouldn't be rotting away now. She wouldn't be -

"Oh hey Ashely, you came back," one crusted over eye opens and focuses on her, "I didn't think you would."

His voice is worse than the sight of him, worse than the smell. It is so much worse. His voice is nice. It's smooth, confident, deep and resonant. It still makes her shiver despite herself.



“Come here,” He says, and motions with one arm. The roots beside him respond, making a little hollow just for her.

Or Rebecca. or Abby. Or Sarah. Or Kate. Or any of her other “friends” who had betraye -

No. She stops herself again. That’s him talking again. More lies. More mani-

“Hey, I know... I know things got bad there, at the end. But, I’ve had time to think and well...” He trails off, his eye darting around, looking for the right words.

“You were right. I... I see that now. About me. About the drinking, the smoking.” He licks his lips. His voice is subdued, quiet. She has to lean forward a bit to make it out clearly.

“I... I know it’s probably too little too late... but I’m not drinking anymore. Three months sober tomorrow.” He tries to smile. Something small, with too many legs, pokes its head out between yellowed teeth.

She wants to tell him what he can do with his sobriety. That wouldn’t be kind though, and her mother raised her to be better than that. “Always listen to what someone has to say sweetie, and don’t raise your voice. It’s unladylike.”

“And look here, I’m on the patch. It’s hard, and some days I still light one up, but I’m trying. I’m down to half a pack a day now. I’ll have ‘em kicked by the end of the year. Isn’t that great Ash?

No one else has ever called her that... she never let anyone but him give her a nickname. She’d hated when anyone el-

“Besides Ash... I’m dying here. Look at me. I can’t live without you. If you don’t come back I’ll... I don’t want to wither and rot like this. If you don’t come back... I don’t want... I won’t go through that. I’ll

have to do something... to make sure it's quick. I don't want to suffer like this," There's a hint of desperation in his voice now, and way too much certainty She knows he'll do it. It'll be her fault.

"Look... I know I'm not perfect. I make mistakes,"

She shakes her head. No, no this is how it starts. She takes a step towards him. It's always the same.

"But I'm trying Ashley, and I know I probably don't deserve another chance but... if not for you... I'd still be that drunk I used to be. Still be the same loser."

She knows what he is but part of her still wants to go to him. Still wants to believe in the dream they'd shared, before she had woken up to find herself in a nightmare.

"I've changed... I am changing. For you Ashley, even if I can't be a part of your life anymore... you're still the best thing that ever happened to me... you've made me a better man. I think you should know that."

That counts for something right? He's trying isn't he? Her hand rubs at her side in an unconscious gesture, she'd bruised two ribs there, and fractured another. No, no that wasn't right was it? Hadn't -

"Look, I'm not looking for another chance but...you know... if you wanted to... give it another shot? We were good together for a while weren't we?"

Yeah before -

"You remember how good it was though right? How much we laughed and how everyone was so happy for us. We were happy. You remember being happy right? We can still be happy together and you won't have to worry about any of that."

They had been happy hadn't they? At some point. Why had -

"Shhhh. Don't think so much baby girl. You've been lost without me haven't you? But you remember

how good we are together right? How good it is to lay down here with me. How warm the ground is, how much I protect you from all the scary people who want to hurt you. From those skanks who said they were your friends. Isn't it better that they're gone now? They hurt you anymore. See what I've done for you? It was all for your own good baby girl. You just couldn't see it at the time."

That voice, so soothing and strong. She takes another step. It's easier than the first. Why is it so easy?

He reaches his hand out to her, "Shhh. It's ok. You'll be okay. Just lay down with me. It's nice and warm and safe. I'm not going to hurt you. Not if you're good."

She tries to hold back the tears as she takes another step, and then another. It's too much. Too much. She knows what he'll do but he's right isn't he? She's tired of being scared every-time she walks out of the door. She's tired of the panic attacks, tired of freezing whenever someone calls her name. She's tired of checking the lock on her door six times in ten minutes because what if she forgot and something bad happens. If all she has to fear is him, and he takes care of all the other fears, isn't that better than being afraid of everything? If she just lets him protect her, she won't have so much to be afraid of right?

She looks at him. The tears blur her vision. She makes no move to wipe them away. If she lets them stay, she can almost ignore how he looks. If she just lays down and listens to him, she can close her eyes and just let him wrap his arms around her and just listen to his voice. He'll keep her safe. Her leg twitches, high up on her thigh, where an old bruise hasn't quite faded yet. It won't be so bad. He says it'll be different

this time. Maybe he finally has changed. Maybe this time he means it. She wants him to mean it this time. She wants him to mean it so badly, because they did have fun, they did laugh together and there were so many good times and -

“That’s right baby girl. It’ll all be better this time. I love you so much baby girl. I’ve changed this time. I had to realize how much I love you for that to happen. I’m so sorry I hurt you. I’m so sorry it took me so long to realize that. That’s all over now though. All the hurting. All the secrets. It’s in the past. Water under the bridge right? No more hurting, no more fear, no more lies, just... us.” His hand has almost reached her. Just a little more and she’ll be close enough. She can just lay down and be warm and not afraid. The roots around her writhe weakly with sudden, hungry anticipation.

“I promise,” He whispers.

I promise. She’s heard those two heavy words dozens of times. She’s wanted to believe them so desperately each time.

“And every time,” a voice whispers so softly she isn’t sure it’s even real, “he was a lie.”

She looks down at the little hollow in the roots. She sees them, barely moving, writhing and twitching in anticipation. She knows what will happen when she lays down. They’ll find the same holes as before, the ones that have only just begun to heal, and open them up again. They... no Mark will dig into her again and -

She runs. It’s not a fluid motion, or a controlled one. She turns on her heel and sprints as fast as she can away from him.

There’s a second of shocked silence, everything in the forest, besides her, is motionless, gripped with shock. The only sounds are her feet tearing through the underbrush, her heart, pounding within her chest, and her own sharp, ragged, breathing.

Nothing in that forest is more confused than her. This isn't what happens. The path trodden through the pine needles ends with Mark. She never goes past him.

"Get back here," he shouts.

She keeps running, tears blurring her vision. She can hear him getting angrier. He promises the worst things he can do to her. Spots on her arms and legs flare with sudden pain as she remembers the last time she made him -

No! She cuts herself off again.

It wasn't her fault. She thinks that over and over again. It has become her mantra. She clings to it.

It was never her fault. She didn't make him angry. He had looked for any excuse to hurt her. It was never her fault. He had never been "teaching" her. It was never her fault. Her friends hadn't turned their backs on her. It was never her fault. He had enjoyed hurting her. It was never her fault. He'd looked for any and every way he could hurt her. It was never her fault.

"You're making it worse! The longer you run the worse it gets baby girl! Stop making it worse!" Mark roars behind her.

She keeps running. The tears make it hard to even see where she is going. It doesn't matter so much to her. As long as it is away. The shadows are louder now. The familiar voices. She catches bits and pieces of what they are saying.

"...what kind of mother..."

"Who does she..."

"Such a good couple..."

"...never been with him..."

"A good wife shouldn't..."

"...got herself into this..."

"..how could she do this to..."

She screams. There's no thought to it, no direction. Just raw pain. Her foot catches on an upturned root and she falls. She tumbles down a small hill. When she finally stops, she just lays there, breathing hard and hurting. Her arms are reporting dozens of scrapes, bruises, and scratches. She has trouble catching her breath. Her side hurts with each inhalation. The whispers seem to have receded at least. They're still there, but they're not as important in the face of her own aches and pains.

She opens her eyes to find the sun warming her face. At the bottom of the hill is a large clearing. In the middle of that clearing is one of those huge fallen branches. Sprouting all around it, amid a field of grass are her favorite flowers; blue bonnets.

Someone is crouched in the clearing, picking flowers.

She rolls over and pushes herself up. Her ankle protests when she tries to put her weight on it. She clenches her teeth over a scream and falls to one knee.

"Here," Someone says, "let me help you."

That someone gets a shoulder under her and helps her.

Ashley looks up... to see herself.

The woman helping her isn't the same Ashley the looks back at her from the mirror. She doesn't have the stress lines on her brow or around the corners of her mouth. Her eyes still shine. She doesn't check over her shoulder every few paces to make sure someone isn't following her; hasn't changed addresses four times in the last year. She won't look for the fastest exit route when choosing where to sit and eat her lunch and probably still drives the same route to and from work.

"This... is so weird," she mutters.

"Why?" Her double asks, helping her hobble over to a pine tree.

Ashley shakes her head, "I guess because it's all in my head. A dream. Not real."

Her double helps her to sit down against the tree, then reaches over behind the trunk to grab what looks like a first aid kit.

"Well of course it's all in your head," the other Ashley says and starts cleaning the latticework of cuts, scrapes, and bruises with some kind of antiseptic.

It stings, "That's why it's real."

She doesn't know how to respond to that, so she just leans back and closes her eyes while her double cleans the minor cuts and bruises on her arms.

Excitement makes her other self's voice almost bounce through the air, "Did you see them?"

She blinks her eyes open, "See what?"

"The flowers," the other her answers, and looks over at the blue bonnets, "they're finally blooming again."

She isn't sure why, but suddenly the tears are there again, and her other self's arms are wrapped around her. She leans into herself, letting out great big frame wracking sobs.

"I... I thought... I had... lost you," She manages to gasp out between full body sobs.

Her other self holds her, saying nothing, just comforting.

When her tears have run their course and her sobs have faded to the occasional snuffle, her other self finally says something.

"Oh silly, you can't lose a forest because of just one tree. Maybe you can't see it for a time, because you're focused on something else but, it's always there," The other her says.

She looks over to where the massive branch has fallen. The clearing is full of the trees that branch knocked over when it fell. Even as she looks, there's a sound like distant thunder, and she knows that another branch has fallen, and taken even more of the forest with it.

"But, but it still hurts," She says.

The other Ashley nods like a first grade teacher confirming that two plus two equals four

"Growth always does in one way or another. But look," She reaches down and cups a bluebonnet in her hand, "Even where the trees fall, they give way to new life. The forest won't be the same, it can't be after what has happened to it, but it will still be here, and now it can be something new. Not the same sure, but it'll be just as good, if not better than it was before."

Another sound of thunder, this one more distant.

Ashley shudders, "He's still here though, I saw him, I- I heard him."

"In some way, he always will be," Her other self says, "For better or worse he's a part of you now."

Silent tears well up and overflow again, "I just want to move past this,"

"There is no moving past it. You have to go through it. Healing is a process, not a product," Her other double says.

"I just want him gone," She says, with more heat than she'd intended.

Her other self, a patient look in her eyes, shakes her head.

"When a tree falls, it doesn't stop being what it is. No amount of anger can change that. That doesn't mean it'll stay that way forever. Eventually, it breaks down and the forest around it will use it to grow back even stronger."



They stay there in silence for a while. It's hard to tell how long. It could be a minute, it could be an hour. Eventually the world begins to turn hazy, like a thick mist is billowing in from all directions.

"Oh," Her other self says, "it looks like it's time for you to go."

"Wait," panic makes her voice shake, "I don't want to lose you again!"

Her other self's voice overflows with warmth, "You never lost me, and you never will!"

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The clock blinks 4:27. Ashley stares at it. Her blankets are soaked in sweat, and her throat feels rough. Another nightmare. She feels movement down by her feet and right when the clock turns 4:28 she feels something sniffing at her.

Buster, her black lab, sniffs at her face. She reached one arm up and wraps it around her neck. She licks her face, once, and she sputters the way she always does. His tail thumps hesitantly on the bed beside her.

She lays there for another second, and he tries to lick her face again. She lets out a little hiccup of a laugh and pushes his face gently away from hers.

"Down boy," She says, and finally sits up.

She throws the blankets off and gropes her way to her small bathroom where she turns the light on and splashes cold water against her face. She braces herself, and finally looks up at the mirror.

Her hair is a mess, a dull muddy-brown nest of tangles and curls. The oversized shirt she wears as a nightgown is rumpled and wrinkled, the neckline and armpits darkened with sweat. The lines on her brow and around her mouth stand out in stark contrast to her too-white skin. Her eyes are what she focuses on

though. They're sunken and tired, the circles around them dark and heavy as a truckload of coal, with two little spots of faded dollar bill green at the bottom. That's what they've always looked like, at least for the last few years. Tonight though, there's a spark in them and even through all the stress, worry, anger, and fear, through all the trauma, Ashley can see herself in the mirror, smiling back at her.

## Kaitlyn Stockholm, Poetry

### **Happy Place**

What do you do when you close your eyes,  
fall back into your mind, and there is only  
darkness there to greet you

instead of that empty, breezy, blue-skied beach  
hidden between tree-filled mountain peaks  
with perfect white clouds and salt-splashing waves?

Can a happy place run away?  
What do you do if you find it again,  
but it's different? Can happy places change  
without permission?

Now the water is just a haze,  
yet I find myself going back anyways.  
I don't fight as the blue skies turn gray  
and the trees don't sway. They sit still in their place,  
Then, like the happiness it used to bring,  
my ocean sneaks away from me.

They say never to chase the water when it retreats.  
Sound the alarms, get to higher ground, you don't want  
to be around. It won't be the kind waves that left  
when it comes back, but I don't move;  
I just sit on the beach, in my place,  
waiting for my ocean to return  
and swallow me.

Kaitlyn Stockholm, Poetry

**Nothing Ruins a Dress**

Nothing ruins that great pair of jeans  
like a rip right down the middle  
or a couple of pounds gained or lost.  
No matter what you try,  
they'll never fit like they used to.

Nothing ruins those killer nude stilettos  
like a crack in the sole where the heel meets  
the shoe and the clock start ticking.  
Only a few more wears before they break.

Nothing ruins that go-to white blouse,  
the one you can dress up  
or down and shows just the right  
amount of cleavage, like a spilled  
glass of red wine. No amount of club  
soda will perfect it; you might get the stain  
to fade, but you'll always be haunted by the faint  
scent of Cabernet.

Nothing ruins your favorite dress,  
the one with pink flowers printed against soft  
light blue fabric that billows perfectly around you  
on a windy day, makes you walk a little taller  
when you catch your reflection in a windowpane,  
like a funeral of someone gone to soon.  
But maybe if we filled the church with  
lilacs, sunflowers, and bright roses –  
dresses of blues, greens, and every shade  
of pink – we'd somehow forget

that nothing ruins a beautiful girl  
with a golden soul  
like a bullet in the head.

## **Just Fill Your Tank**

It is what it is to meet you.  
Since you're standing by it, could you pass me  
the yellow canister of plaster? I'd appreciate it.  
I keep telling myself it's just one brick after the other,  
but walls take longer to build than most people think.

You know you only got in because I'm not finished.  
So don't bother to unpack, leave your baggage  
by the door, I won't tell you mine if you don't tell me yours.  
Trust me, it's easier. Like the rest of 'em, you'll leave,  
gone by this time next year, and I'll watch your life play  
out through a screen, wondering if you ever think of me.  
You'll be another brick in my wall and I'll be a steppingstone,  
an open book trying to glue her pages together,

a walking rearview town who's rarely thought about.  
Some drive right through, maybe make a stop or two.  
Others stay for a while, but they always leave.  
You know it'll start to make you think  
What could be the problem? but when you're the  
common denominator, that's probably your answer.

So take your bags, keep your coat on. Before  
you start to settle, assume I'm some exceptional thing  
or I delude myself into thinking you'll be different.  
Just fill up your tank and get back on the interstate.  
Don't stick around. You've got a life to live  
and I have walls to build.

Kaitlyn Stockholm, Poetry

## **Legend Says That Once Upon a Time in a Land Far Away, They Grew Up.**

Legend says there were six kids who lived near the beach, all with unfathomable powers, a spectacular sight to see if you were lucky. Two were sisters, one with the ability to control the tide, the other the rise and fall of the sun and moon. With the other four they saved the world a few times over.

Once upon a time there was a merry band of six young outlaws. They rode through the west with cocky grins and pockets full of stolen gold. They found joy in robbing banks and searching for Father Joshua's lost treasure. There were two in this group who were feared the most. The best shots in west, they made Billy the Kid look like an amateur. And of all the people to do that, one was only a girl, and the other had a hook for a hand.

In a land far away, there lived a princess who always seemed to find herself in the middle of a mad warlock's plot. He was constantly sending his henchwomen after her, every time a new twist, a new lie with the same end: to get the princess out of the way so he could conquer the kingdom even if only for a day. But she was smarter than she looked, and she always had a friend looking after her. A hero, a soldier worthy of royalty, the two had a pact they would always be there to save the other. The mad warlock never had a chance.

Legend says years went by, and the sisters left the beach.  
One stopped timing her movements with the waves,  
the other paid less attention when the moon  
and sun switched their places.

Once upon a time, the outlaws never made away  
with the treasure. He took the coat hanger  
from his shirt sleeve, and she took the plastic guns  
from her belt, gave up her hat.

In a land far away, the worthy solider hung up  
his sword and left to join the others –  
though our princess, eyeing her crown,  
begged to stay in the realm for just a little bit longer.

Because legend told her she didn't have to grow up,  
and once upon a time she believed that.  
But in a land far away, in a house no longer  
lived in, there's a bedroom. If you look close enough  
you can see the faint silhouettes of seashells,  
black ten-gallon hats, gun holsters, hook-hands, and swords  
melded into the walls of the place where the worlds  
they built were left to waste. Powers became myth,  
outlaws kids, a kingdom made only of a bed  
and closet. Time took their epics made them  
memories that will warp like aged books.

Now she knows legends can change.

They grew up. Now there are six kids,  
closer to adults, who gave up adventures  
a long time ago. But if they sit for a second—  
take a breath, concentrate, when the real  
world gets too loud they can still hear the sound  
of the waves as they danced on command, smell  
the grass the horses kicked up as they galloped faster  
than that of any law man's, and feel the weight  
of that wilting paper crown. They can never go back,  
but they will always have the memories of the  
legends they forged once upon a time in a land that keeps growing farther and farther away.

## **If Faith is Not Enough**

Stare down the barrel of a loaded gun  
if crashing waves and soft winds  
don't quite silence the thoughts in your head.

If you need to know whether you  
love them or love them not.  
If you find yourself fearless.

If you want to see exactly what  
rock bottom looks like.  
What it feels and sounds like.

It looks like the barrel of a loaded gun.  
Feels like a shaking finger.  
Sounds like a heart beating through a chest.

Stare down the barrel of a loaded gun  
if you need to know what you regret,  
what you still find worth living for.

If God seems to have left you  
crushed by the weight of unexplainable pain –  
if you can't move on till you find Him again,

stare down the barrel of a loaded gun,  
take a deep breath, and as you let it out –  
if faith is not enough –

pull the trigger.



Cierra Krause, Poetry

**Bury Me**

Bury me in maple  
whose limbs rocketed  
children to the moon  
on a worn-out tire-swing

whose branches held  
a pirate ship shaped  
like a make-shift house  
coasting over the Pacific

whose canopy once shaded  
the pages of a novel  
leafy and old  
too captivating to put down

whose knees cradled  
the heads of sleeping dolls  
with their stringy hair and painted faces  
yearning to be held close

and whose leaves fell  
in between our faces  
as our lips neared each other  
for a gentle and sweet kiss

## **Angel Hair with Artichokes**

My ex once told me about cooking artichokes with his mother when he was eight: how she'd start the process by hacking off the head's thorny top before boiling it in salt water. Once it had dulled (or "browned," as he called it) from its vibrant green, the petals would come away easily, with the meat at their bottoms waiting to be scraped away by his crooked but eager front teeth. Eventually, having peeled all the protective layers away, he could have at the succulent heart at the center before reaching his greedy fingers out for another artichoke as it came out of the pot.

I remember the time he came home with an artichoke head of his own. When it was done, he generously offered me one of the leaves without telling me only part of it was edible— the stinging jab of the whole petal promptly turned me off of the vegetable altogether. He kept the heart for himself, and after many years of boiling me in his tears and mine, dulling my youth out of me, and patiently peeling away all of my protective layers, he ate my heart out and promptly went in search of the next one.

So when I heard you confidently order the Angel Hair with Artichokes, I made a face. That made you laugh. You teased me for being picky, and, not to be made out a child, when you offered me some, I took it with determination despite my dread, expecting another hard-to-swallow jab. It wasn't until my teeth sank easily into the tangy bud that I realized you had offered me your heart.

## Beau McAfee, Poetry

### Cracked

Her smile propels light into hearts  
until they can't help but overflow with joy.

She laughs like she's lost track of time, never knowing  
when to stop and not caring who hears her  
explosion of    staccato    giggles.

But something lurks within, clawing, scraping  
itching for a way outside, wanting to yell  
*see me.*

but staying silent,  
still,

It waits, wanting to be more than a contagious  
smile and admirable, unapologetic laugh.

It waits to be known deeply, to have a warm hand  
to hold, eyes that look through the cracked  
shell of false happiness, to have someone to reassure  
it that it is

real.

Beau McAfee, Poetry

**We aren't Getting Married this Fall**

Just one car crash can change it all,  
ran into a tree gone unseen.  
You were to be married that fall.

Unprepared when you got the call,  
falling as words ripped out your spleen.  
Just one car crash can change it all,

pushing you down until you're walled  
in a dark room, wanting to scream.  
"You were to be married that fall";

the only thought you can recall.  
Soon ripping your dress at the seams.  
Just one car crash can change it all,

leaving you to feel broken, small,  
like the debris left at the scene.  
You were to be married that fall.

Now I'm left with no one to call  
and wishing it was a bad dream.  
Just one car crash has changed it all.  
We aren't getting married this fall.

## Beau McAfee, Poetry

### **Rivers Flow To and Fro**

You came into my life  
as a raging river, carving  
out canyons where I put  
up walls.

Unlike that of the sea,  
your water was sweet  
and pure. Once afraid  
of drowning, you taught  
me to swim.

This water surrounded  
me and matched my remaining  
walls with flowing reassurance.  
But rivers were made to run  
and earth to be still.

You came into my life  
as a raging river, and with  
that same intensity,  
you were  
  
gone.

## **The Girl I Could've Been**

The girl I could've been did not wake in the early hours of the morning with a man standing above her telling her to go back to sleep. Her world was not flipped in a split second.

If the girl I could've been went to the custody of her mother, she would never have a home. She moved houses every year or so and eats ramen noodles for dinner. She was raised to be a bitch, like her mother – a hell-bent conservative who refuses to change her mind. She picked up smoking and drinking before it was legal, because her mother let her, offered it to her. She met so many dogs, only for them to be given away months later with each new move. She is hard around the edges, and she does not have a good life. She was taught to play the victim, and blames all her injustices on her. She is her mother.

Someone I am glad I will never be.

If the girl I could've been went to the custody of her father, she would almost know a home. She moved houses every five years or so and ate steak for dinner. She is uncompassionate. She once owned a cat, but it ran away because she was told if she didn't hold the kitten while inside she'd have to put it outside. It was a birthday present she never saw again. She is hard around the edges, but she did have had a good life. She didn't argue so much with her father as I do, because she shares his same ideals. *Be tough, all the time, show no weakness. Do your work, it's as simple as that. Depression is not a thing, just ignore*

*it*. But when he joined the army, she would share something in common with me. For a time, a lot shorter than I, she would be raised by her paternal grandparents. And only then will she learn compassion.

If the girl I could've been went to the custody of her paternal grandparents instead of her maternal, she would have been a lot more peaceful in her mind. She does not struggle to express her emotions. She does not hide how she feels. She knew love a lot sooner than I. She is kinder, stronger, more altruistic than I. She is not be afraid to love. She knows one home and dances around a large garden of roses and turtles. She knows what happiness is.

If the girl I could've been went to the custody of one of her parents, maybe they wouldn't have felt the need to replace her. Maybe she wouldn't have eight siblings. She has five, or three, but not eight. She does not struggle to see her siblings because of distance, or arguments or other things out of her control. She is not jealous of the newborn baby who finally fulfilled her father's dream of having boys before a baby girl, so the baby girl can have older brothers to fight for her. She is not angry by the fact that she won't get to meet the baby, or see her two younger brothers, until her father returns back to the United States after spending three years in Germany because her step-mother was deployed there. My parents wouldn't feel as if they lost their chance to raise me. They wouldn't have fought for weekends when I was younger or gotten angry when I went on trips with the other, or when I canceled a visit due to a school obligation. The girl I am wasn't meant to have married parents, they weren't meant to love each other, only me and all my half-siblings.

The girl I could've been never worried at such a young age about what older men thought of her. She was not scared at brushing against their arm in a crowded supermarket. She does not watch their eyes follow her body as she walks through the aisles. She does not shake around the presence of a male figure. No matter who it is, family, friend, stranger. She was not scared to kiss that boy in sixth grade, or date that boy her sophomore year of high school, or kiss that boy her junior year, or hold the hand of the guy she met her sophomore year of college. She loves freely and wholly and does not think long on whether to open up. But her senior year of college, she missed the chance to meet the most loving man in the world. She missed her chance because she isn't cautious with who she met or loved, and because of that, because she is not picky, she does not get to meet the love of her life.

The girl I am would have never gone to the custody of her mother, because the man who hurt me when I was three was her boyfriend. She never let me forget it. I grew up hearing about what happened to me and I could never let it go. I could never get over it because she never did. She doesn't know I blame her for it happening.

The girl I am did not go to the custody of her father, because she has an older sister – a sister who was going to the custody of their mother's parents. I am exactly a year and five months younger than my older sister. She was four when our lives were flipped. At such a young age we couldn't be separated without crying our eyes out... so I went to the custody of my maternal grandparents.

The girl I am was raised by her mother's parents. She grew up in one home her entire life. She shared a bedroom with her aunt and older sister.



Their aunt moved out, got married and had two kids, but their uncle stayed home, and still lives there even though he is twenty-six. The girl I am was yelled at constantly and her room was always a mess. She was a wreck. She was bullied in school. Pushed down. Discouraged by her peers. One day her sister ran away, and the girl I am snitched because she was scared. Her sister moved out before graduating high school. Years later she now has three kids... she's only twenty-two. Our parents kept having children.

The girl I am fought through her darkness. She fought until she was on her own, except she was only on her own when she was at college. She was free from the influences of toxic family, until she returns home, or until her mother calls to rant about how much motherly relationships suck. At least her mother calls to also tell her about the wellbeing of the three siblings that live with her. Her father never calls. He doesn't know that being tagged in posts on Facebook isn't enough.

As a first-generation college student, the girl I am finally got it right. As the only female on her mother's side of the family to reach the age of twenty-one and have no children, she finally got it right. She did not falter where her family members did. She persevered. She pushed on. She found happiness where there was none. She survived.

## Michael Oglesby, Poetry

### Unsaid Feelings

This pounding red pushing my heart to its limit.  
The shaking of my hands fueled by boiling blood.  
My eye's grow dark and I lose my self.  
I become something else.

A storm tearing apart the world.  
Desecration raining down an injustice to the innocent around me.  
Dark thoughts consume my once gentle soul.

A monster?  
A man?  
I no longer remember where one begins and the other ends.

This feeling that retched control from my soul.  
This cloud of evil that governs my thoughts.  
Till I crave nothing.  
But to destroy you,  
That which I held so dear.

Am I a man?  
Or am I a monster?  
Yet nothing more than a puppet lost.  
A beast screaming out at no one in particular.

## **Like Father Like Daughter**

My dad served in the army during the Persian Gulf War and was out before I was born, so I never had to deal with him being away on deployment and being gone for months at a time and I was never part of one of those surprise reunion moments that make you cry when you watch them on YouTube. I suppose my childhood was just privileged like that. He came home to my mother (before she was my mother) with a screwed up back from jumping out of Blackhawks and being wrenched in all sorts of wrong directions by the harness that caught him. He came home with a slew of new and worsened health issues: chronic migraines, fibromyalgia, insomnia, irritable bowel syndrome, asthma from a childhood of inhaling second-hand smoke now even further exacerbated, joints and muscles that threw him from helicopter doors aching due to the experimental anthrax vaccine or exposure to chemical weapons and oil fire smoke or all of the above and more. Nothing contagious, though, or, at least, so the world might seem to think. But my father came home with another sickness, one that many other soldiers come home with, even those that managed to dodge the probable causes of Gulf War Syndrome. One that spreads, though people may not realize it, and though people really may not want to admit it.

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I'm not sure if my mother's infected. Many military spouses tend to be the ones in the household that catch it from the veteran because they are often the veteran's caretaker. My mother has also had the longest exposure to the disease, to my father's flashbacks and irritability and heightened aggression. She is the one that taught me and my sister when to step back. She is the one that knows more: what months are bad, an inkling of why those months are worse than others. She is the one that lived through it, albeit on the other side of the world. She is the one that soothes his nightmares.

I remember there was a time when we were watching television as a family, one of those competition shows like America's Got Talent or The Voice where the tragedy of your backstory carries almost as much weight as your talent. One of the contestants was sharing their personal tragedy, though it was one of the vaguer ones, something about struggling with doubt or having to constantly overcome a voice in her head that told her things were bad. My father was unimpressed.

"Doesn't everyone have to deal with that?" he asked.

"Apparently, some people don't," I replied. Some people simply don't have that negative voice in their head. Some people are healthy like that. It's a concept I understand to be true but that I find difficult to fathom.

My dad said that my mother was the closest person to that sort of mentally healthy that he knew. I considered that for a moment. My mother was determined to be happy. She collected smiley faces. She prayed. She denounced negativity and pushed it away

and encouraged others to do the same, though I'm not sure she ever offered a suggestion on how exactly to do that.

But I also know that, when I was telling her about how frustrated I was that I had to text my father every time I moved when I was out with my friends, she dismissed me. "That's just how he is," she told me and my sister, "and we have to live with it. That's what we have to do to make him comfortable." After all, it's just a text. Probably a much smaller deal than I was making it.

I also know that, years later, when my family had one of its first "healthy" conversations about feelings, she started to cry with my sister and I. She told my father that just because his issues were solely his, that didn't change the fact that she, my sister, and I still had to deal with them. I was so happy to hear those words coming out of her mouth, but I was still crying. I was thinking about all those years lived under the doctrine of that's just how he is, that's just what we have to do. I was thinking about how it was never just a text: it was near swearing and near-tears as I remembered that I had forgotten, it was fear that I was going to be punished and never allowed out of his sight again, it was shame when my friends would look at me concerned because deep down both they and I knew this wasn't normal. It was a reminder that even when I took a little too long to tell him exactly where I was and exactly where I was going, he still followed me, no matter where I would go.

My mother spoke up too late. She had already enabled it to spread.

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I remember feeling awkward about the first and only time my sister, Bailey, went to see my counselor. She had not asked to, but my dad had insisted an appointment be made for her immediately after mine so we only had to make one trip out to the Midland Vet Center, and she didn't really have anything to say about it except, "Okay." I think he figured that he had made the mistake of waiting for me to ask for help, and he wasn't about to let the same happen to her.

I sat next to him in the lobby while we waited for her. My face was blotchy and the pores on my cheeks felt tight and dry and my lower eyelashes were clumped in weird groups. I always cried during appointments. I figured he knew, but he never really asked about it because I think we had established that's how I preferred it. He'd ask me how my appointment went, I'd say fine, and we'd drive home or, that day, sit in the lobby and wait on my sister, in relative silence.

Sometimes I wonder what Bailey said to the counselor. Did she talk about me and how I would push her away when we were younger because I'd grown into introversion before she was ready for me to? Did she talk about school and what teachers that had me first and her second expected of her? Did she talk about our parents' expectations of her?

Maybe she didn't talk about any of it. Maybe she said nice things or told the funny story about how she used to cheat against my father in *Go Fish* by looking at the reflection of the cards in his sunglasses while they waited in the pick-up line when I was in kindergarten, back when she and him spent weekdays alone together for the two years that I was in school and she had to stay home because she was too young. Or maybe she didn't really say anything at all.

That's probably what actually happened. The counselor would ask her questions, she'd offer some short, succinct response in her nonchalant, matter-of-fact tone, and then they'd sit in silence for a little bit. I could see it:

"Do you have any issues you want to discuss today?"

Bailey would shrug. "No, not really."

Silence.

My sister wasn't much of a talker, and it took me a little while to realize that it was because she didn't want to talk, not because she couldn't. She usually just didn't have something she wanted to say. She didn't choke on her words, she didn't force them out, she didn't hold them in. It was much simpler for her. She didn't have the impulses I had. Sometimes my father will call for us, and I will instantly get up, sometimes running across the house in order to keep him from waiting, while Bailey won't even move. And I will stand before my father, hiding my panting as we wait in pained silence. Sometimes she never comes. "Where's your sister?" he'll ask, and suddenly I'll feel responsible. Sometimes I even have to wander back and find her. "C'mon, Dad wants us," and I'll have to bite my tongue to keep myself from pleading for her to move faster as she leisurely rises.

Back in the office, when the counselor brought Bailey into the lobby, back to my dad and me, her expression looked about the same as it did when she first went in. No tears. No blotches. No clumped eyelashes.

The counselor said Bailey didn't really show any sign of the sickness that had followed my dad home and suggested that further appointments would not be necessary.

I'd imagine my dad was relieved. I know I was.

I also know I was more than a little jealous that, for her, it was so simple.

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I never asked much about what happened while my dad was in the military. I'd get snippets of stories, though: there was a can of 7-Up labeled in Arabic out in the garage. When he'd ask us to organize his file boxes, Bailey and I would find papers with names we did not recognize but that he would smile at. He'd tell us about PT, about MRE's, about how he'd curled his toes to convince doctors that he did not have flat feet, about getting high scores in Tetris on the singular Gameboy that his company shared. The number combination he uses for PINs and attaches to passwords was the number printed on the side of the Blackhawk he'd jump out of. I never asked for more though. It seemed like one of those things you weren't supposed to ask, like when police officers would guest speak to my elementary school class and the teachers would scold us for asking if they'd killed anyone.

I know more did happen to my father, though. I know because my mother taught me to stand back when I'd try to wake him up, to shake him then jump away, because there was a chance he'd wake up disoriented, see me standing over him, and attack me. I know because one time we pulled up into the Best Buy parking lot and it was busier than he expected, and he quietly told me that we might have to leave as we were walking into the store. I know because every night he very meticulously armed the alarm system and made sure the security bar was positioned correctly around the front doorknob to prevent the door from being kicked in.

I know because when I was sixteen, perfectly old enough to look out the front door's peephole and then retrieve the package I saw, he scolded me for doing so. He said I shouldn't be opening the door because I wouldn't think to look at the vehicles parked on the curb and make sure no one was hiding behind them.



I know that my father, like most fathers, wanted us to be safe: my mother, my sister, and I. That's why there were security bars on the doors at night. That's why every window had a motion sensor. That's why I got in trouble for opening the front door or not texting him every thirty minutes. That's why he had me put one of those tracking apps on my phone after I was eighteen. That's why anytime I wander outside, his motion-activated camera system records me wandering around so he can ask me what I was doing out there whenever he decides to go through the footage. I told my counselor that I knew that was why he did those things, to keep us safe.

"Do you feel safe?" she asked me.

Silence. I hadn't thought about that. "No." I had to choke the word out through tears. No, I did not feel safe. Because where my father would see kidnappers or murderers or enemies behind cars or explosives planted in the Best Buy whenever he was anxious and paranoid and afraid, I had started to see him.

I had caught the sickness.

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My dad is better, now. You don't ever really get cured of PTSD, you just get less affected by it. You get better at dealing with it, once you have help. I know he's better, though some days I have a harder time believing it than others.

Sometimes, though, when veterans come home with PTSD, the symptoms and behaviors associated with the condition can pass to their spouses or children. This is known as compassion fatigue. Secondary post-traumatic stress. Secondary traumatic stress. STS. It goes by a lot of names. Sometimes it affects

one child but not another for reasons that aren't explicitly outlined. Most commonly it affects spouses, but sometimes it doesn't.

Sometimes the wife enables it to spread.

Sometimes it misses the younger sister but festers in the older one.

Sometimes it doesn't get recognized or admitted until it's too late, until even though I know my father is no longer the same person I've been afraid of all these years, I can't unsee him as that. I can't shake him, no matter where I go.

## **Catch Your Death**

Jamie stood alone in the silence of the snowfall, his face turned upward, snowflakes kissing his cheeks and settling on his lashes. He didn't know how long he stood there, in the middle of his front lawn, but Jamie could feel the snow soaking through his sneakers, then through his socks, his feet lowering in temperature until they matched his ever-frozen toes. It wasn't uncommon for his street to be this quiet at this time of night – barely six o'clock, but you couldn't tell from the cloud-crowded sky. Jamie lived on a dead-end street in the middle of Permilion, North Carolina, surrounded by neighbors in cookie-cutter houses who were either too old to leave their homes or too antisocial to get up from their couches and look away from their TVs.

Permilion wasn't exactly a small town: the McDonald's manager didn't know Jamie's name, but could spot his face; the pastor at St. Christopher's knew Jamie's name, but little beyond that. Permilion neighbored Boone, not a large town itself, but was tucked away behind a stray bump of the Appalachians and so was unknown to most of the world. The teens came to call the town "Nowhere, North Carolina," 'cause apparently nicknaming towns is what you do with your spare time when you're not sipping sweet tea and sitting on your back porch. That wasn't to say Permilion was a ghost town – once in a blue moon a van or two full of tourists would visit the emerald museum, and a few years ago a lost funeral procession

used the Walmart parking lot to turn around. That was to say there weren't many newcomers.

Not that Jamie wanted more people to come. The not-quite-big-not-quite-small feeling the town had was more than enough for him. If anything, Jamie wanted people to leave. The not-quite-big-not-quite-small feeling seemed to grow smaller by the day, leaving less and less room for Jamie West to breathe.

"Jamie!" The boy tore his eyes away from the gray sky to his mother, standing just inside the front door, hands on her hips. Never a good sign. "Is this where you've been this whole time? Come inside, it's time for dinner."

"I'm not hungry," said Jamie.

"James," his mother said, voice tired, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I don't have time for this. I worked hard on this meal and –"

"– me not eating it upsets you," finished Jamie, already shuffling to the door. "I know." I, standing a ways from him, followed behind.

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Jamie pushed his asparagus around his plate, eyes pinned to the window, ignoring whatever story his fourteen-year-old sister Beth told his parents, her arms waving about in Jamie's periphery (she was talking about her latest musical obsession, so Jamie wouldn't be interested anyway). He watched the snow continue to fall, little white specks in the dimming light – not enough to result in a huge pileup, but the weatherman said it was supposed to snow through the night.

Fingers snapped in his face, pulling Jamie out of his thoughts.

"Earth to Jamie," his father said. "Anybody in there?"

“Always,” said Jamie, though there wasn’t any life behind it.

“What were you doing outside?” his father prodded. “Seeing how red you could turn your nose?”

“Enjoying the peace and quiet,” Jamie said.

“Nearly catching his death was what he was doing,” his mother said. “Next time you need to wear more than just a coat. A hat, at least.”

“If I catch my death does that mean I don’t have to do the recital?” Jamie said, a little too loud.

“James Alexander!” his mother said. “We do not talk like that in this household.” Jamie continued scooting his vegetables around his plate. “Have you even practiced today?”

“He was supposed to go after me,” said Beth.

“Shut up,” Jamie said.

“Jamie,” his mother sighed, “we’ve talked about this. You’ve got to practice if you want to have a good recital. And you promised you’d play.”

“Yeah, ’cause you said it was the only way to keep Beth interested in playing. I don’t know why you want us to take lessons so bad – I won’t need these skills as a chemist.”

“Karen Ross says her son Terrence is maintaining a four-point-oh GPA while also being on the robotics team, the debate team, and in orchestra,” his mother counteracted. “I don’t see why you can’t do the same.”

“You forgot to mention *Class President*,” Jamie said, disgust coating every word. “Terrence Ross is an overachiever who everyone but the teachers and administration hates, and I’m surprised he hasn’t been nominated for Most Likely To F–”

“Hang on,” said Jamie’s father, pointing at him with a forkful of chicken, “I thought you wanted to be an archaeologist.”

Silence hung over the room.

“No, Dad,” Beth said, slow enough to make sure he heard every word. “That was before he wanted to be a history teacher, and after he wanted to be a pediatrician.” And before a pediatrician, a writer, and before that a botanist, and before that –

“What I’m trying to say is,” said Jamie, “I don’t see the point of playing piano if I’m not gonna do it as a career.”

“Well, I don’t see the hurt in having a hobby,” said his mother, her voice growing more irritated by the second, “and you’ve been doing it for so long anyway, why don’t you –”

“Because I *hate* it, Mom!” said Jamie, slamming his hands on the table. Jamie, *why*. “And I wish you and Dad would stop making me do it.”

Jamie and his mother wouldn’t break eye contact. His father and Beth stared at their half-empty plates with wide eyes. Yikes.

“You’ve barely touched your food.” His mother spoke in a calm voice that radiated everything but. “If you’re not going to eat, then you can go start practicing.”

“Mom –”

“That was not a suggestion, James.”

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Jamie sat on the piano bench, glaring at the black and white keys. They stared back. I leaned against the wall next to the piano, watching Jamie. He looked at the sheets of music spread in front of him and, conceding, played the first phrase. Then the second. Then the third and on and on and – that’s an A flat, Jamie, not an A. No, A *flat*. And that’s an E, Jamie. And that’s a B. No, a *B*, Jamie, B *natural* – Jamie – damnit, Jamie!

“Urgh!” Jamie slammed the keys, a horrid, clashing noise reverberating throughout the living room. He’d been working on this piece for weeks, and he wasn’t closer to playing it right than yesterday.

“Careful with the keys, Jamie,” his father called, still at the dinner table with the rest of the family.

“‘Careful with the keys.’ No shit,” Jamie muttered.

When he was seven, Jamie’s mom inherited her now-dead-practically-unknown great-uncle’s piano and had it repaired, signing Jamie up for lessons soon after the repairs were complete. Jamie would admit to liking the instrument at first, when all he had to learn was *Jingle Bells*. Over the following decade, however, his joy dwindled. These days he was forced to learn now-dead-practically-unknown concertos or canons or whatever the hell his dusty, cat lady piano teacher gave him. At this point, he would rather be doing SAT prep than memorizing Beethoven’s *Piano Sonata No. 8*. To put it simply, Jamie wanted to quit. He wanted his parents to stop breathing over his neck about his latest musical chore. He...

He wanted to go outside. Outside was quiet and calm and so cold that your entire body became numb and you could let yourself forget feeling and thinking and being. Outside you didn’t have to learn a fucking sonata.

“How’s the practicing going?” his father called again. Jamie turned back to his music.

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Whether or not Jamie actually had a death wish, one could find him sitting in the snow in nothing but his pajamas, his black parka, and his black wool knit cap at one-thirty in the morning. But no one did, because it was one-thirty in the morning. His unprotected hands and feet had lost all feeling, but, for some reason, Jamie reveled in it.

He never did get a hang of the sonata – instead, Jamie hammered out several more clashing cluster chords, crumpled his sheet music into a ball, stormed up the stairs, and slammed his bedroom door, falling face-first onto his bed. He remained there, despite fearing the expected reprimand from his parents (which for whatever reason never transpired), and despite the numerous times Beth knocked on his door asking if he was okay. And he remained there, scrolling aimlessly through his phone, until he heard his parents turn off whatever late-night talk show they were watching.

After counting to a hundred, Jamie slipped out of his room and unceremoniously tripped on air, falling to the floor right outside Beth’s door. He froze, expecting her to open her door with its tacky, rainbow-lettered “Bethany” decal, but the house was quiet. Jamie wasted no time rushing down the stairs, quiet as he could, and out the front door to where he currently sat.

Jamie’s eyes were back on the sky, now clear of clouds but full of stars. The weatherman lied; the snow finished its fall – while Jamie was practicing, no doubt. I sat next to him, but not too close, my arms resting on my knees just like Jamie. I watched as the white puffs of his breath came and went, smoke without the cigarette. My eyes found the lights of Jamie’s across-the-street neighbors’ Christmas tree through their living room window.

“Why do they still have their Christmas lights up?”

Jamie yelped, jumping away from me. Well, that was a first.

“I mean it’s well past New Year’s,” I continued. Maybe I’d just imagined his reaction.



“Who are you?” Jamie said, his rapid heart-beat heard in his ears. I turned to face Jamie, and the red of his nose and his cheeks paled. If my nose and cheeks could be red, they probably would’ve paled, too, because not only could he hear me – he could see me.

“Who are you?” Jamie said again, though this time it came out as a whisper.

“Um,” I said, rising and brushing myself off, fully facing Jamie. “I’m your Death – capital D.”

“What does that mean? You’re like the Grim Reaper?” said Jamie. “You don’t look it.”

“Cause I’m not hooded and wielding a scythe?” I said. “Honestly, *one guy* sees his Death and writes about it, and y’all just go along with it! Infuriating. Ruins our whole reputation.”

“Okay...” said Jamie, struggling to function. “W-Why do you look like me?”

It was like looking into a mirror for Jamie. I mean, I was his spitting image, if Jamie’s skin was tinted blue and if the bags under his eyes were deepened, looking like the aftereffect of twin black eyes, and if snowflakes tinged his mussed, dark hair like literal frosted tips. I even wore the same days-old gray shirt and plaid pajama pants as he did. To put it plainly, I was blue-filter Jamie, sans coat and hat.

“Cause we take the form of however our Person’ll look when they die,” I said. “That Reaper guy was a weird –”

“Wait, wait,” Jamie interrupted. “I’m gonna die? When?”

“All y’all die eventually, first off. But from the looks of it,” I looked down at my own blue-tinted self, “I’m guessing it’s from freezing in the snow tonight.”

“*Tonight?*” said Jamie.

“Jamie, you’ve only got two layers on, at best, in negative-seven-degree weather,” I said. “I’d say the probability’s pretty high.”

“But I can’t die – not right now! I’ve got... school. And that stupid recital. Mom’ll kill me if I die before that recital.”

“Well, lucky for you, how you die’s not set in stone,” I said.

“How so?”

I paused, trying to formulate it in a way he would understand. “You were taught in church that God gave humans free will, right?”

“Is this you confirming God is real?” Jamie said.

“I’m just confirming what you were taught.”

“...Yeah, I learned that.”

“So, as I said, each capital-D Death takes the form of how their Person’s gonna die. But if their Person evades that little-D death, they take the form of the next most-probable one. For instance: I was there when you nearly had that car crash on your second driving test in Boone.”

“That wasn’t my fault, though,” said Jamie, on impulse, like he’d had to defend himself multiple times – ‘cause he had. “Boonies can’t drive for love or money.”

“Yeah, yeah, but third time’s the charm, right?” I smiled, knowing third time wasn’t really the charm. Jamie didn’t pass till his fourth. “But I was there, in the back seat. And you should be glad you didn’t see me – oh, Lordy, it was awful. The whole left side of my face was concaved, and I had a million scrapes and bruises. Good thing you hit the brakes when you did, or else that would’ve been *bloody*.”

“How come I didn’t see you then?” said Jamie. Was he getting closer to me? The five feet of space between us seemed smaller. “How come I’m just now seeing you?”

“Maybe since it’s a higher likelihood, probably the highest yet – *what are you doing?*”

Jamie blinked. He was inches from me, his arm stretched out, nearly touching mine. I should’ve been watching. I should’ve been paying attention.

I took a step back.

Jamie could’ve sworn that for a split second, I was wearing his coat and hat. I could’ve sworn that, too. “I was...” He took a step forward, snow crunching beneath his numbed feet, his eyes slightly glazed.

I took a step back.

“Did you *want* to die tonight, Jamie West?”

“I –”

“You touch me and you die, no question.” Why was he doing thi – oh, *fuck*. “Oh, *fuck*! They warned us this would happen!”

“Who? Said what would happen?” said Jamie. Did he take another step forward? I took a step back, just in case.

If my nose and cheeks and ears could be red, they would’ve most definitely paled. “You’re trying to catch your Death.”

“No, I’m not!” said Jamie. His eyes cleared a bit, but he had to fight the urge to take another step.

“Yes, you are,” I said. “I didn’t think it would happen on my first Person. The older Deaths – the ones whose first Person’s passed; who’re on their sixth, seventh Person – they told us stories about People wanting to pass early. Like a – *stop it*.” I almost swatted Jamie’s hand away but thought better of it at the last second. “Snap out of it, Jamie!”

“Wouldn’t you want this, though?” asked Jamie. His brown eyes cleared and uncleared, cleared and uncleared. A storm was raging in Jamie’s eyes. I tried to search his thoughts, find out what he was feeling, but I couldn’t. His whole being was in a fog. For once, I couldn’t read him. “Isn’t this your job?”

“This isn’t about what I want,” I said. “I don’t control my Person’s life. My *job* is to take you when it’s your time. But this can’t be your time – not like this.”

“You’re saying I’m defective.” He took a step forward.

“I’m asking you if you really wanna die, here and now.” I took a step back, my spine bumping up against a neighbor’s tree. “In the middle of Nowhere.”

“I –” Jamie’s movements were stuttered. “I want to stop suffocating. In that house, on this street, in this damn *town*. I wanna *leave*.”

“There are other ways, Jamie,” I said. I couldn’t make my legs move. “I know you know that.”

Jamie laughed, but it didn’t sound like him. He took a step forward. “You don’t even know me.”

“But I do, Jamie. I’ve known you all your life,” I said. Was my voice quivering? “I was there when you were born and your heart stopped working, just for a second. And I was there when you ran into that street-light playing Frisbee in middle school, and I was there when you stared at your biology textbook for an hour, your eyes never leaving that one line – what was it? ‘This in turn can render the resulting protein non-functional.’ It didn’t mean anything, but you stared at it, letting your mind wander –”

“Shut up!” Jamie shouted in protest, but he took a step back, lowering his arm.

“And I’m there even when you’re safe and sound. I’m standing by the piano when you’re struggling with music, and I’m sitting beside you every day on the bus, and I’m lying on the couch while you and Beth argue over the TV remote. I’ve been there, here, unseen, for seventeen years.” I took a step away from the tree. A step closer to my Person. “I know you, Jamie West.”

Jamie didn’t respond. He didn’t even move. We stood across from each other, an almost perfect mirroring, two versions of one boy: one alive with clouds in his eyes, one his Death with eyes full of fear.

“Jamie.”

I wasn’t the one who spoke. One moment, Jamie and I were at a standstill. The next, Jamie sat where he had at one-thirty in the morning, yards away, eyes to the stars like nothing happened.

Beth was shaking his shoulder.

“Jamie,” she said again. She was bundled up in a coat and hat and scarf and mittens and everything a sensible person would wear. “What’re you doing out here?”

“Thinking,” was all Jamie said.

“I heard you making noise outside my door,” said Beth. “Woke me up. You’re not as sneaky as you used to be, huh?”

Jamie smiled at his sister, rising to meet her. “Guess not. I suppose we should be heading back in.”

“Please,” said Beth. “I’ve been out here for twenty seconds and I’m freezing.”

I stood in the snow in awe, in wonder. Did he really forget? Was anything that happened real?

“You wanna talk about why you’re *really* out here?” asked Beth as they walked back inside. I followed behind, sliding in just before Jamie closed the

door – what else was I supposed to do? Where else would I go? I glanced at the grandfather clock, a soldier in the middle of the hallway. One-thirty-two.

Jamie stopped on the doormat, glancing at the old piano. Though hesitant at first, he walked to where his music lay crumpled at the foot of the piano bench, picked them up, and smoothed them out, before placing them back on the stand.

“No,” said Jamie. “I don’t. Not right now.”

As the two walked up the stairs, their layers discarded on the floor for their mother to scold them about the next morning, I saw something shift in the corner of my eye. I turned, looking at my reflection in the grandfather clock’s glass.

I no longer wore Jamie’s pajamas, no longer had dark, exaggerated bags under my eyes, no longer had disheveled hair with a scattering of snow.

Instead, I wore (Jamie wore) a red sweater and khakis, brown dress shoes on previously-bare feet. My face (Jamie’s face) was clean and awake with no sign of exhaustion. My hair (Jamie’s hair) was combed and gelled, the frost already long-forgotten.

When would this happen? *Where* would this happen? Would it be at church? At a fancy dinner? At the piano recital? Would this be the final one? Would he see me again? I had no way of knowing. I just had to wait.

## Abbie Williams, Poetry

### **desire**

all of this time,  
I thought I wanted to be a poet,  
when really I have been trying to become the poem.

I want the stammer of my voice to be alliterative  
I want the crease in between my eyebrows to be imagery  
and every freckle on my body a metaphor.

I want my dimples to ooze out allusion,  
every tear that rolls past them is symbolism.

I want to learn how to scream in color.  
I want every wrinkle to ring out repetition like it's a prayer.  
I want my hands to sculpt amens.

I just want to be,

poetry.

Abbie Williams, Poetry

**an unapologetic realignment of the way I view myself**

in about fifth grade I started telling myself,  
like a mantra,  
that no matter what happened I would be skinny by senior year.

but I have been through far too much for me to be taken down over the disappointment of something as  
fluctuant as weight

so  
it is senior year  
and I am fat,  
and I am okay with that.

when I told my body this she cried out in relief,  
“I have been waiting my whole life to hear that.”

when I told my body we did not have to hide anymore  
she rose out of the ashes and stood firm among the flames and her fat.  
everyone knows grease fires are the hardest to put out.

when I told my body she was allowed to take up space,  
she sprouted roots and made her way through all the soil;  
not caring if she took every drop of nutrients-  
we have starved for too long.

when I told my body I was not going to disown her anymore,  
she took my hand  
and we made it here  
together:  
to this moment.

I do not know how I could live this long  
and despise the body that has gotten me here.



I do not know how I could drizzle hatred all over my thighs  
that are simply so in love they must kiss every time I walk.  
I do not know how I could criticize the wings on my arms  
when they are just trying to help me fly.

I did not expect this,

I figured  
if I made it here,  
still this big,

the world would collapse under my weight.

but I am a senior,  
and I am not skinny,

and I am okay with that.

Abbie Williams, Poetry

**spots on your face**

I told myself,  
I was never going to write a poem about you unless you ever loved me back.

so what kind of fool am I,  
putting pen to paper  
and wasting my time over the boy  
with curly hair,  
and pale skin.

but if only you could see,  
how every blonde piece twirls so perfectly.

and if only you could see  
how the spots on your face create constellations;

how unfortunate for me that the night sky is my favorite thing to write about.

## Shadow

In early afternoon, sun drips golden light through leaves and branches of various trees that hang over a freshly landscaped yard. Flowers of many colors stand in a row alongside pale stones forming a walkway toward a two-story farmhouse doorstep made of bricks. Purple thyme creeps over hedges lining a good-sized barn where two thoroughbreds and a bay pony tear off bits of alfalfa, sending tiny flakes into a breeze coming in through their very own windows. In the opening of overhanging branches at the driveway's end, an aluminum gooseneck squeaks over unlevel blacktop in the country. And I stand far off in anticipation because I will soon lay eyes on my new project.

A passenger door opens before the engine dies and a middle-aged woman steps onto the asphalt. "I wish you had given us a different route. This trailer didn't like going up that steep feeder road."

I said, "Oh, I hope you guys didn't bottom out. I'm so sorry." I had no idea the trailer they were pulling would be this long. It never occurred to me that it would be a problem to get up the hill.

Mrs. Potter's warm smile is forgiving. "We figured it out. My husband is coming. He'll get her down."

The driver door closes. Mr. Potter comes, removing his hat and reaching for the latch. Hinges creek as heavy doors fall open from the center. We see a long tail of silk gradually lifting higher. A stench

follows five pounds of manure thumping planked floor three to four times in a row. And there the flies gather, with some of them left buzzing around her as they are flicked away from glistening hocks. She stomps once to frighten away the rest. This method works, momentarily. Finally, her neck bends as she gazes around her hindquarters, having our reflections in her dark eyes.

Mrs. Potter holds out a solid blue lead. "Just so you know, she is halter broken and that is all."

I smile and nod to acknowledge this statement as I take the rope and cautiously step in to slide between the interior wall and this thousand-pound creature. I know little about her other than what I was told over the phone. Shadow is a two-year-old halter broken Arabian mare with personality.

The hook snaps through the ring of the halter and I gently pull in my direction in order to lead her out. She lazily follows, almost reluctant. The two of us make it to the ground without me getting stepped on. She is halter broken. Barely.

We say our temporary goodbyes before Mr. and Mrs. Potter drive home. They came four and a half hours to bring Shadow. I have been around horses most of my life and yet I am nervous. I am because every one of them is different, having their own personalities and dispositions. I am also aware of the dangers. I began doing this because it is something I love. And even though I do not consider myself a horse breaker, this is what I have been doing for the past year. I should feel confident by now, but I am not.

I leave Shadow in a patch over to the side of my friend's farm. Here she can adjust. Every day, I feed her, and try to get my hands on her. She throws her nose into the air, snorts, and runs off kicking her heels. I am not sure if she is playful and feeling good

or attempting to intimidate me. After a few days, I go out into the patch, pour the grain and turn away. Shadow's breath is against my back as she nudges into me. I leave. Her curious steps are heard from behind. Pulling out my phone and holding it up, I can see her now as she trots up close and then bolts between me and the fence. We do this routine for several days and then, finally, Shadow lets me halter her.

I am thinking Shadow will be a terror, given how she acted for the first several days. Instead, she is calm and unsure of what I am asking her to do. I lead her around the farm as she pushes against me. I make her back up to establish distance. I walk. She walks on my right side again. I stop to see if she will too. She does not stop but walks past me. I yank the end of the rope to let her know she needs to stop. When this happens, she turns to face me. Good. We continue. Shadow finally stops when I do but loses her balance in the process, crossing one leg over the other as if to clumsily bow with her nostrils flaring. I laugh while I get this on video.

While I am doing other things, Shadow is tied to a tree. This does not go well at first. I am thinking she has been tied before if she is halter broken. Seeing her sit back on the rope scared me. After this one experience, everything is fine. She stands calmly every time I tie and groom her. All it took was for her to know what she needed to do. The more time I spend with Shadow, the more I realize that you only need to communicate something to her once. She never forgets and does exactly what you ask her to do, reading my cues and responding accordingly.

In this experience with Shadow, I realize that those who "teach" horses how to do things are not really teaching them at all. With horses, body language

and non-verbal communication is essential. A horse knows how to back up, how to walk next to you, how to stop. Horses do these things every day of their lives. When you work with a horse, it is about bonding, earning trust, communication, and desensitization. If there is any learning to be had, it is the human learning how to communicate with the horse, and how the horse responds to that communication. Again, I am not a professional horse breaker. This is my personal experience.

During the second week of bonding, tying, leading, grooming and manners, Shadow responds quicker. The two of us are beginning to trust each other. I have also learned her personality and disposition. Shadow put up a front at first. She did not know me well enough to trust and so she tried to manipulate me by seeing if she could push me around. When realizing that I was not interested in chasing her or darting out of her way as she galloped past, Shadow began to respect me. She may have even liked me a little because I had been feeding her grain all week. Perhaps even a treat here and there.

In week three, Shadow and I begin the longing phase which helps her pick up on coordination and understand all that I want to communicate from the ground, both verbal and non-verbal. This too is an important part because she and I must learn to understand each other before I hop onto her back. Any pressure on the line lets her know when to stop, when to turn, or when to back up. Doing this process from the ground is vital.

Shadow and I work on flexing, which entails pulling her nose around until she gives into pressure. When she does, I release her. Flexing left and right makes her soft and supple. This is important to having

better control over a large animal. It teaches her to yield. For example, if she is suddenly frightened while I am on her back and bolts or takes off bucking, I can pull her head around to disengage the hind end. Flexing is important to having a horse that is under control.

After a month of having Shadow in my care, I begin casually lying over her back in wide open pasture. I do this all week until she stands perfectly still. Eventually, I climb all the way up and put my leg over. She does nothing which is what I had hoped for. No fear on her part. I am a little nervous. Since Shadow does so well with me sitting on her back, I halter her, attach a lead, and climb back on. I ask her to flex right and then left. She does each so well that I put slight pressure from my heel into her side and gently pull her nose around. Shadow's response is to walk in tight circles which is what I want. She is so calm and responsive that I allow her to walk in larger circles by giving more slack. And before I know it, Shadow is taking me for a ride. We ride bareback all week.

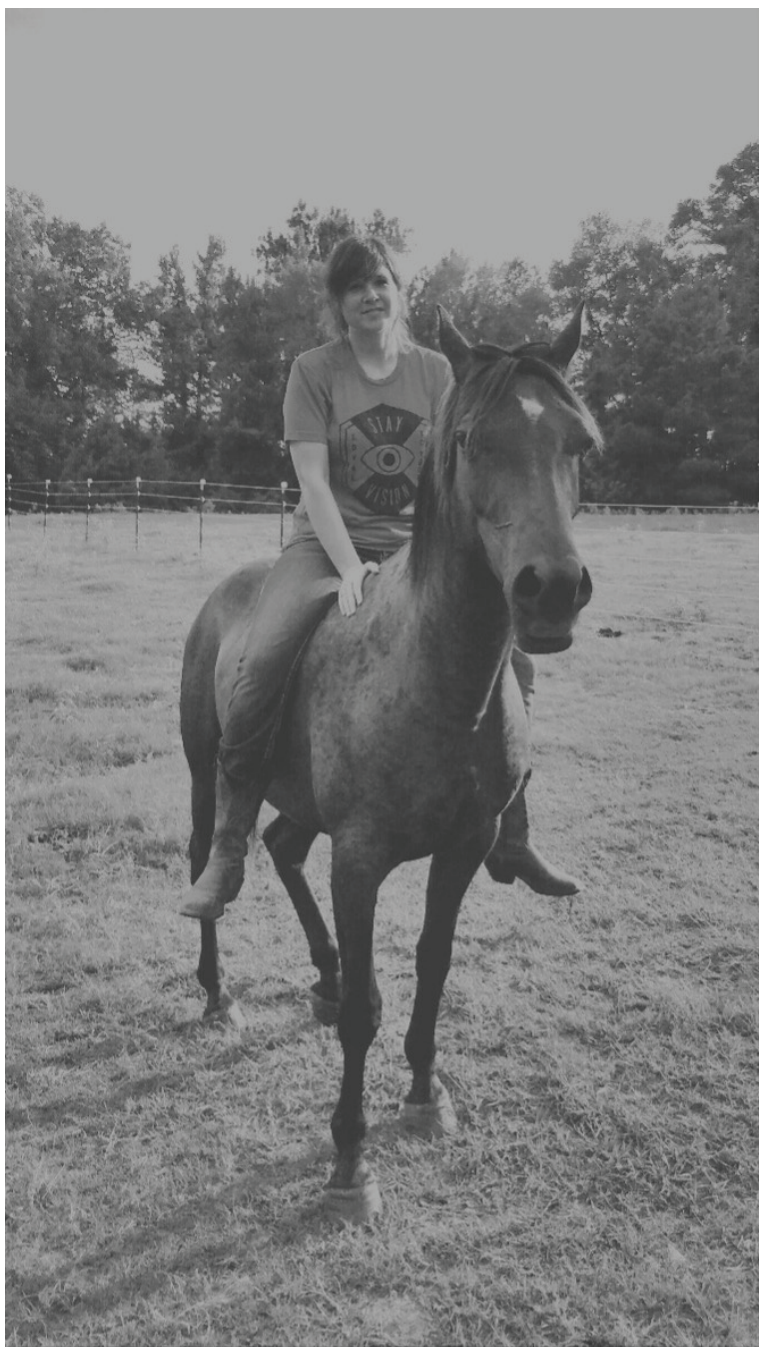
The following week, Shadow experiences the saddle, which is a little awkward for her at first, especially when I tighten up the cinch. We do the same groundwork we did before. For the first few seconds she takes off bucking. Later, she calms down. With this, she grows accustomed to wearing the saddle. After quite a bit of longing her with it on, I finally climb up, put my feet in the stirrups, and ride her around the farm. My friends bring out their lawn chairs, sandwiches, and iced tea, to watch the progress me and Shadow have made. We walk, trot, and lope. She responds nicely to verbal and non-verbal cues. All nervousness and fear of "breaking" Shadow to ride is now slipping away.

In late afternoon, sun is beginning to fall back behind the tree line. Shadows form at the ground under swaying flowers, and crickets begin their evening song. Mr. and Mrs. Potter return for their Arabian mare. I realize that I have not had her with me long enough. During this time, the two of us formed a close bond. I cannot imagine a day without her. But when it comes time for her to go home, seeing Mr. and Mrs. Potter happy that Shadow is ready to be safely ridden puts a smile in my heart.

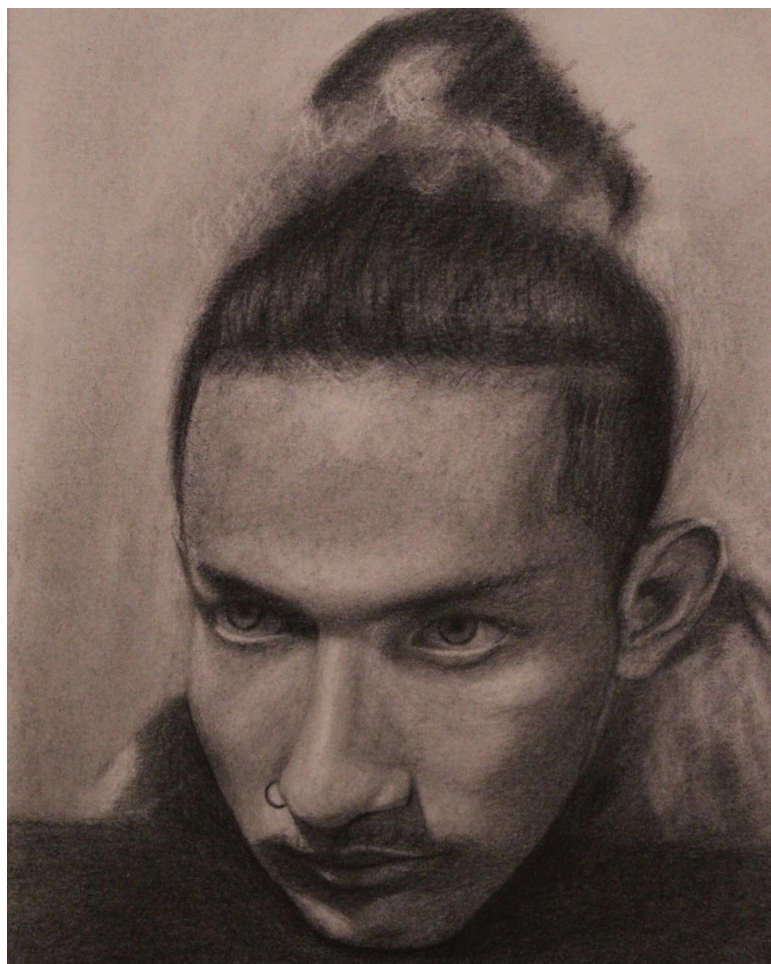
Before Shadow is hauled away, Mrs. Potter says: "You need to visit us in south Texas whenever you can."

I think I might take them up on that.

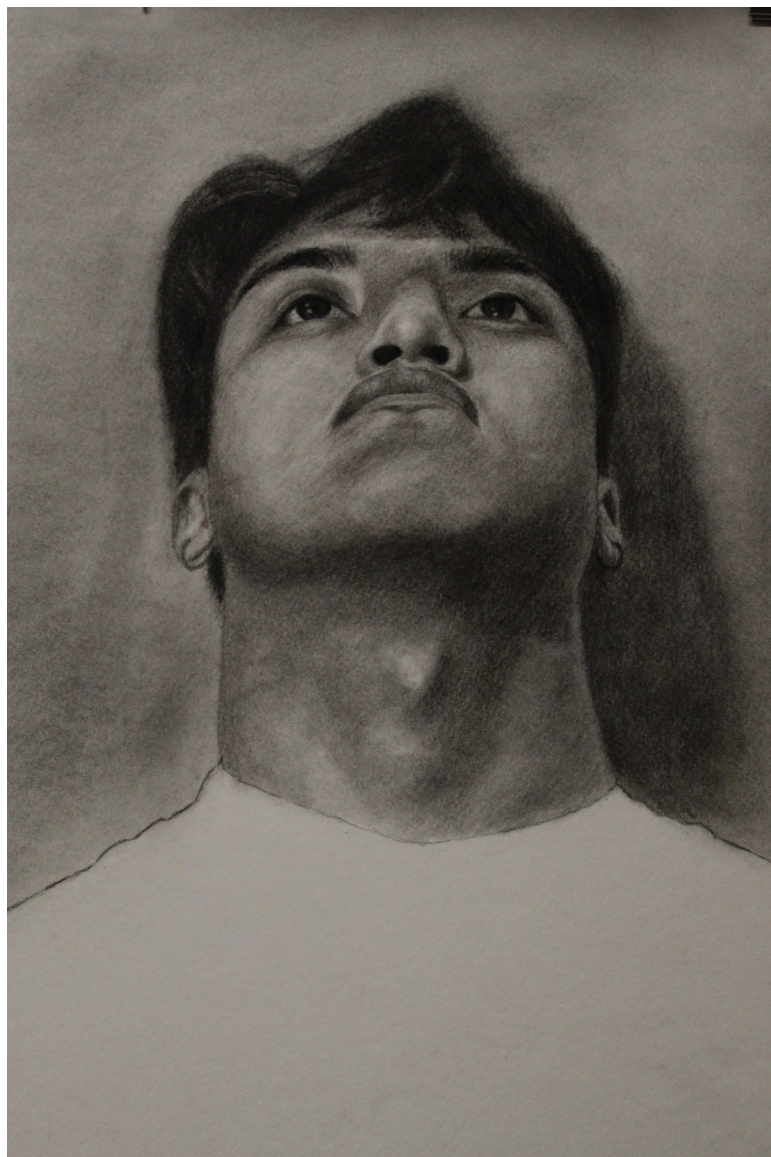




**Shadow**  
Mary C. Hancock

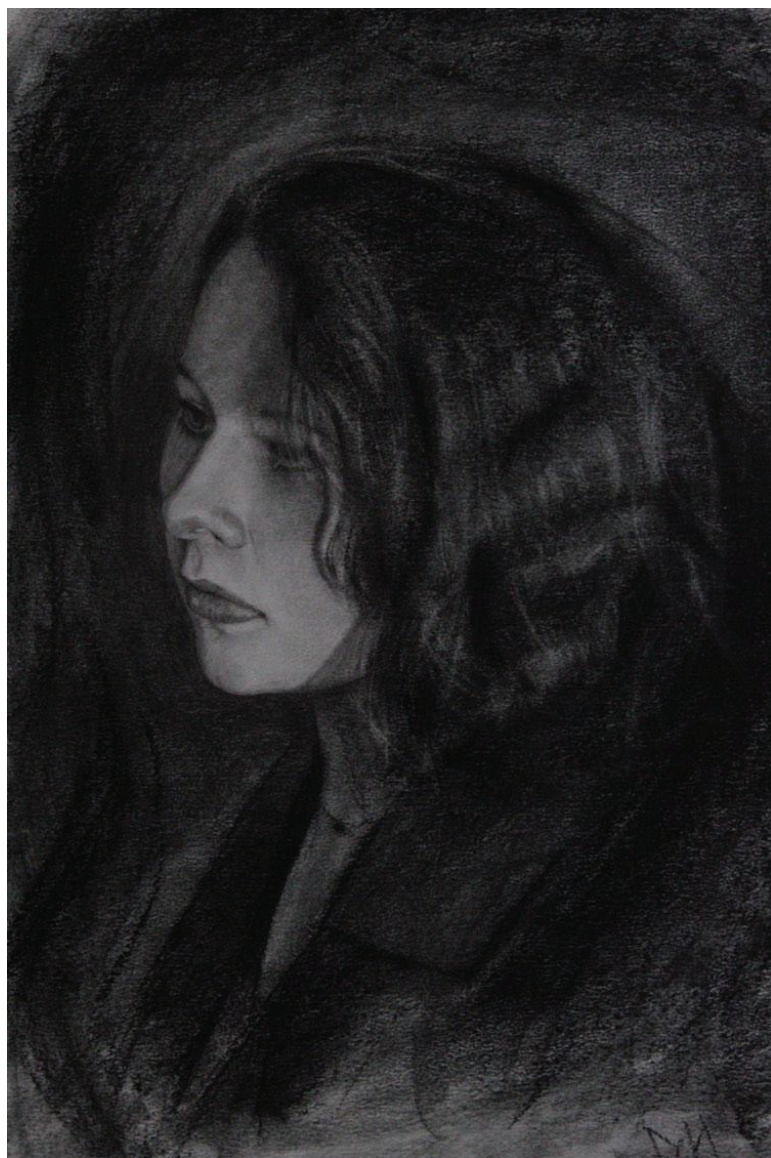


**Image 1**  
Dedrick Hill



**Image 2**  
Dedrick Hill





**Image 3**  
Dedrick Hill

## Red Dress

I wore red. It was the color to attract men and infuriate women (it was unclear whether the infuriating came from attracting the men or the color itself). At least that's what Google said. I'm not sure I believed it, especially considering I hadn't done either and I had been at this stupid party for four hours.

Four hours of throbbing, blaring music that made my eardrums ache. Four hours of neon strobe lights that seemed to scream, along with the mass of bodies on the dance floor. Four hours of a dark corner as far away from the high DJ and drunk crowd as I could get.

I risked another sip of the horrid fruit punch. My fingers wrapped protectively around the red cup. I hadn't put it down since I poured it forty-three minutes ago. Mom's warning about predators ringing in my ears. I could catch glimpses of the acquaintance who had dragged me to this party through the writhing swarm. I would have left already but my sensitive conscience wouldn't let me leave the intoxicated Melie to find her own way home. That, and I refused to brave the mass of bodies and drag her out.

I sighed and shifted. Heels had been a stupid idea. Heels were for Opera, fancy dinners, and dates, not dancing. Not this kind of dancing at least. A man in the corner of my vision took a cautionary sip of his own punch and made a face.

He had been hiding in his own corner for almost as long as I had, watching the crowd like a

wary animal. Any sane person would have struck up a conversation with him, bonding over the mutual discomfort. After all he was only a few steps away and his suit was rather nice. But he could be a horrible man like Mom had always said there would be at parties like these. A horrible man just waiting to ambush any naïve girl who goes up to talk to him. So, I hadn't said a word.

Mellie stumbled out of the crowd almost directly in front of me, searching for a bathroom or another drink. I couldn't tell which and I certainly didn't care. I sprang into action and lunged at her, grabbing onto her arm. My drink jumped out of the cup at the lurching motion and sprayed her across the face. She said something to the effect of, "Huh, what?" but with the blaring music and drunken slurs I couldn't make it out. I started to apologize and then thought better of it as Mellie started squirming out of my grip.

"We're going home, Mellie." I began to guide her towards the door, praying fervently she would not remember the drink when she woke the next morning. Some poor freshman in Mellie's sorority had spilled water on Mellie's dress last semester and well...she wasn't part of the sorority anymore. I managed to drag Mellie almost to the door before I heard someone calling to me over the crowd.

"Hey!" I turned and saw my companion in awkwardness waving at me as he jogged towards us.

Although he didn't look drunk or malicious, every instinct in me screamed to run, with the deadweight of Mellie though, who was staring stupidly at him, I doubted I could get to the door before he caught up with me. I watched as he approached. My eyes kept flicking towards the door. I was so close. So, so close.

“Hey!” He said again as he reached us, “Are you leaving?”

“Yeah?” I didn’t know where he was going with this. Why would he have finally decided to talk to me? Maybe he just wanted a dance, like a guy in a Hall-mark movie. I couldn’t see him waltzing me around this dance floor though, and I wasn’t interested in the kind of dancing that was going on. Or maybe he wanted to follow me home and murder me in my sleep. Mom’s warning about predators rang all the louder. My nails dug into Mellie’s arm. She whined and squirmed. I moved toward the door again, but his words caused me to pause.

“Do you have cash?”

I turned back to face him, wide eyed. He wanted to rob me. And then he would follow me to my apartment and murder me in my sleep. Then there would be no witnesses. If I said yes would he rob me right here? But if I said no, he would know I was lying as soon as I waved down a taxi.

“Could I-” the boy paused, a blush creeping into his cheeks, “Could I borrow some cash?”

Borrow? Was this how all robbers acted? Is that what they called it now, borrowing? I wished Mom hadn’t sheltered me as much, maybe then I would know the lingo.

He shifted from foot to foot, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. He had rather nice eyes for a robber.

“I’m sorry, my brother,” he pointed into the crowd, “dragged me to this stupid party and then stole my wallet, to buy more alcohol.” He glanced disdainfully at the bar, “I haven’t been able to find him, and I’ve been here for five hours. I just want to go home.”

I blinked. Very nice eyes. “Uh, well, how much do you need?”

“Just enough for a taxi.” His hand moved up to run through his hair. Very, very nice eyes. Murderers and robbers couldn’t have nice eyes like that.

I nodded subconsciously surprising myself. I turned back toward the door, my face flushing a bit. Mom was right, I needed to be more careful. I didn’t know this man, he was a—

He grabbed the handle and pulled it open for us.

Gentleman.

I found myself frozen, staring at his nice black suit accenting those wonderful eyes. He raised an eyebrow. I jumped into action, dragging Mellie through the door. The guy followed.

He waved down two taxis while I fumbled with my wallet. It was difficult to dig through my purse while keeping a tight hold on the wobbly Mellie. As I retrieved my wallet, Mellie leaned in, or more accurately, fell on me. She smelled of alcohol and something acidic and foul. I gagged.

“He’s so hot.” She was obviously trying to whisper, but it came out so much louder.

I flinched and jerked out a fifty-dollar bill. Mellie continued talking.

“*Carol*,” she dragged out my name, “You’ve never been on a date before.”

Shut. Up. I shoved the bill into the guy’s hand as he tried unsuccessfully not to smile. He covered his mouth with his hand, but the amusement was dancing in those wonderful eyes. Mellie, I will kill you.

The guy opened the door to our taxi as it pulled up. I helped Mellie in and then slid in myself. Before he closed the door, he looked at me directly; eye to wonderful eye. The smile was gone.



“Really, I appreciate this. Can I make it up to you somehow?”

I shrugged, helplessly befuddled in the intense light of those blue eyes.

“Coffee?” He broke contact as he glanced at the second taxi pulling up before looking back at me. “How does coffee sound? I’ll take you out sometime.” He fished a slightly crumpled piece of napkin out of his pocket and rummaged in the other for a pen.

*Could be a predator, could be a murderer, could be a robber.* Mom’s voice rang like a bell.

Could be a nice guy.

I took them, my fingers shaking slightly. I quickly scribbled my number down and held it out to him. He took it, glanced at it and then slid it into his front shirt pocket. Next to his heart.

“Thanks, I’ll give you a call.” He gave a bright smile before shutting the door in my stunned face and jogging over to his own waiting taxi.

I stared out the back window at his receding yellow cab.

“An address?” the taxi driver, an older man with weathered grey hair, asked, tapping a finger on the steering wheel.

“Oh, of course!” I quickly recited my address and then sank into the dirty, sticky seat with a sigh.

*“You’re in love.”* Mellie used the same singsong as a child as she swayed in her own seat.

I gave her a non-committal shrug, before turning back to the window. As the city lights flashed by, I sighed again, bigger and deeper this time. Maybe red *did* attract men.

## **And Michael Was Certain**

Michael Chapman could know just about anything about a person's life in an instant. He knew Della Sullivan, the owner of Madame Sullivan's Palm Reading, Fortune Telling, and Seances where he worked the reception desk, was as much of a fortune teller as a magic eight ball was, that she had already been run out of four of the neighboring towns for fortune-telling fraud, and that she had once run away from home and joined a cult for a brief stint in her twenties. He knew that Anne Marks, a regular at Madame Sullivan's for about a year now, always asked if her husband was being unfaithful when really Anne was the one cheating on her husband (with their child's female piano teacher no less, whom Mr. Marks had only passing fantasies about).

Michael knew that his current server at Mary's Diner had a squabble with one of the busboys over some girl last night and would be caught tonight hiding his tips in an attempt at petty revenge. He knew the new dishwasher would cause a backup tomorrow during the lunch rush, which would cause the owner a bit of irritation, but because this dishwasher at least had some standard of cleanliness compared to her predecessor, she would be allowed to continue her employment. And Michael knew that Emery Mackenberg would be pulling into the parking lot to meet him in three minutes and twenty-eight seconds, and that, despite all of this knowledge, when Emery sat down in the faded red booth across from him, he would be just as unsure about what would happen next as any ordinary person.

Emery Mackenberg was a woman of certainty: she had known she wanted to be an accountant since she was thirteen, and a master's degree, several job applications, and a few years of paid number-crunching later, she had become a comfortably paid financial manager for a national credit union. Her mother, whom Emery considered to be a tad old-fashioned, had bemoaned Emery's lack of a marriage and children, which Emery had deprioritized over her education and career almost out of spite as well as personal necessity. However, now that Emery was well settled in a permanent-looking job position, she couldn't help but notice the emptiness of her house in the evenings. Never one to hesitate, she immediately set out to rectify her loneliness and had set up a first date with a man she met through an online dating service the day she created her account. Still, despite how sure of herself she claimed to be, Emery's last boyfriend had been when she was still in school, and she was feeling nervous about the date. She had managed to show up to the restaurant a couple of hours early and found herself needing her time occupied, which led her into Madame Sullivan's across the street, even though she was relatively certain fortune-telling was nothing more than quackery.

Michael had known all of this by the time Emery disrupted the cedar incense-scented waiting room air and approached his desk for the first time. Emery had studied the list of available services only briefly—Michael guessed she'd pick palm reading—she picked palm reading. When she had emerged from the gauzy purple curtain separating the lobby from the seance room her lips were pursed in irritation. Michael didn't even have to use his abilities to know it was from

having just blown a hundred dollars to let Madame Sullivan run her talon-like fingernails along the lines of Emery's palms, only for Sullivan to end the session saying Emery was surrounded by "negativity." For the low, low price of another session, Madame Sullivan could help Emery dispel that negative energy—it was Sullivan's go-to scheme for newcomers.

"This is all fake, isn't it?" Emery had said, gesturing to the dimly lit and smoke-soaked posters hanging in the lobby. Michael was obligated not to say, but his expression showed his answer anyway. She scoffed and had been almost out the door, on her way to Mary's Diner across the street (which she had chosen because she was familiar with both it and the area, giving her sense of control) when Michael decided to say something.

"I wouldn't eat there if I were you."

She stopped and turned to look at him.

"The place across the street," he added, "They're having some cases of food poisoning tonight."

He had known she wouldn't listen, had guessed she would assume it to be some weird last-ditch attempt at spooking her into returning (which, Michael thought now, it really might have been). She was going on her date at its original location, and she was going to have the salad she always had (which that night would be prepped on a cutting board that the previous dishwasher had failed to properly sanitize), and she was going to spend a week in and out of the bathroom, and then she was going to come back to the shop, though Michael, for the life of him, couldn't figure out why.

A week later, Emery was back, looking pale and much worse for wear. She approached Michael at the desk, and she asked him to tell her fortune, and then it all made sense.

The one exception to Michael's abilities was himself: he was blind to any outcome that directly involved him and his future. When he was nearing his high school graduation and was presented with two college acceptance letters—one from the local community college where around eighty percent of the graduates ended up stuck in their hometown for life or the expensive and highly selective out of state school where a huge chunk of freshman applicants barely scrape by, if they got by at all—Michael chose neither, too uncertain about either option and thinking he'd be safer staying home with his mother until she pushed him to get his own place. He had stumbled upon his job at Madame Sullivan's by accident and had stayed there for as long as he had because he didn't have any ambitions to go elsewhere (and the idea of him working there was too amusing to pass up). He lived life going with the flow, through the motions, and he had never had any desire to do otherwise until Emery walked back through the shop door again.

And now here he was, with her across from him in the worn red booth and eating her usual salad, the same one she had eaten on that first date (though this one was made and served with thoroughly sanitized utensils and dishes). Michael wondered if the man that had been sitting across from her that night had felt the way he was feeling now. But of course, that man hadn't, he hadn't known nearly as much about Emery as Michael did now, all he knew about her was that she was a "math-lover looking to get back in the dating scene." He didn't know she had set a new record in mathematics at her state's academic pentathlon when she was in the eighth grade, didn't know that she once bought the entire stock of toasted marshmallow-scented

lotion from a Bath and Body Works which she still used to this day, didn't know that she still wore pantyhose to work every day even though it wasn't a requirement because her mother had insisted that that was what it meant to dress professionally, and, on top of everything, that man had not continued to see Emery. Then again, Michael had no way of knowing if he would get to see Emery again after tonight, so he and that man might have something more in common after all.

Emery cleared her throat, and Michael was brought back to the present. He thought, or maybe hoped, that he saw the slightest hint of concern in her expression, but he didn't have time to dwell on it.

"Ready?" she asked.

She had already extended her hand to him. He took it, feeling the softness of the skin on the back of her hand, and he could smell her lotion: toasted marshmallow. He rested the fingernails of his other hand in her heart line, something he had learned from the palm reading poster in Madame Sullivan's lobby, and her fingernails brushed against the heart line of his own palm, and he wondered if she somehow could tell how longingly his heart was reaching for hers.

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The first time he had told Emery's fortune at her request was in Madame Sullivan's waiting room. Having recovered from food poisoning, she had another date arranged, this time with a different man, someone named Joseph Stephens, and she was wondering if the date would be a good use of her time as her budding relationship with the man from her first date seemed to have fallen through. Michael had hesitated for a moment: he had only done something like this once before, and that ended in a freak out

and an accusation of him being a stalker that stole the person's information, but fulfilling Emery's request was certainly less boring than staring at the lobby for another hour. He asked to see the man's profile, and she offered up her phone. Joseph's picture seemed decently attractive and had professional levels of photographic quality, and his bio explained he was an aspiring actor and that he had used his headshot as his profile picture, which struck Michael as odd. Emery cleared her throat, and Michael handed her phone back over, and she asked, "So how does this work?"

Michael had recalled the last "fortune-telling" he had done, where he had immediately launched into saying all of his newfound information, and thought that perhaps it might make things more comfortable to give Emery some sort of pretense. (Looking back on it now, though, he wondered if he had really just been trying to form an excuse to hold her hand: he certainly felt like that's what it was now.)

Emery's hand in his for the first time, having finished making vague gestures over her palm, Michael had laughed to himself, which made Emery's lips purse. He asked her if the two of them had agreed to meet up at that bar across town, River Bait Taps, and watched her eyebrow twitch to show the slightest hint of surprise before she said yes.

"Funny," Michael had told her, "considering he's a catfish."

Joseph's photo was a stock image that could be found on the first page of search results for 'normal guy' photos. He could tell Emery was still skeptical and urged her to check for herself, and soon "Joseph Stephens" was on her phone, just below "A Normal Laidback Guy Stock Photo" and "Normal Man Standing Image." Naturally, Emery had been a bit upset,

and Michael suddenly found himself trying to reassure her that it would be no big deal in the long run, that someone like her was sure to find someone else with ease, and he knew it. She had laughed, or maybe it was a scoff, but she half-smiled after, and Michael would come to realize it was the first smile of hers he'd seen. She thanked him before the shop door closed behind her, and the sound of the bell above the door had seemed to ring in Michael's ears for just a little too long to be normal.

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For Emery's second session, she called the shop while Michael was at the desk and asked if he could meet her when he got off of work. The call had been a surprise to Michael, and his heart had jumped when the phone rang and continued to beat insistently as Emery spoke. They met up at the diner across the street like they did today, and she asked if they could go through a few profiles together so Michael could point out the best choice. It had actually been pretty amusing, at least to Michael, but for the first time, Emery had laughed with him, even if it was just a little bit. Eventually, they settled on someone named Phillip Harris, a vet assistant working with the local animal shelter whose hobbies included trying to cook, yoga, and weekend karaoke, who Michael knew was going to win Emery over with a mostly in-pitch rendition of an 80's pop song made famous by Whitney Houston that would make her laugh harder than she had in a long time, though Michael did his best not to spoil the surprise for her. Instead, when Emery asked why Michael picked Phillip, he said she'd simply have to trust him.

"Fine," Emery had laugh-scoffed, "but if things go badly, I want to be able to say 'I told you so.'" Michael handed over his number in a heartbeat.



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He didn't see Emery again for months, at least, not in person. Instead, he looked at her past and saw her high school team winning regionals in academic decathlon; saw her get her hair cut to its current shoulder length and become immediately pleased with the result; saw her arriving to work on her first day as an accountant dressed in a smart skirt and blouse, pantyhose, and plain black pumps and still smelling of toasted marshmallow. He saw her indulging in her guilty pleasure of watching taped episodes of daytime soap operas. He saw her ordering hot cocoa at Mary's Diner before she had discovered her now-usual salad, eyeing the flickering neon that advertised Madame Sullivan's Palm Reading, Fortune-Telling, and Seances, where Michael had been just across the street all this time. He saw the time she had come home from work and realized maybe she wasn't so certain about what she had always wanted from life, maybe she was lonely, maybe it was too late to be anything else, and she had cried, secretly, for just a moment. And then Michael could suddenly see himself taking her in his arms, telling her she was wrong, it wasn't too late, he was certain.

He started to see himself bumping into her when he knew she was grocery shopping, asking her if maybe she wanted to go out somewhere. He saw himself on her doorstep telling her he had realized he might be in love with her, and then he saw her eyebrow twitch in surprise, or he saw her half-smile accompanied with that half-scoff-half-laugh noise, or he saw her purse her lips, or maybe he saw her laughing—not the little way she laughed with him during their second session, but hard, uncontrollable laughter at just how absurd he was being, and so he did and said nothing until she called.

She was still seeing Phillip after all these months, but she wanted to know if, as she was starting to suspect, that he was the “one,” and she knew that there was only one person that could say for certain.

Michael knew. He knew from the moment she asked. Phillip Harris had fallen for Emery from the moment he heard her laugh. He, at the moment, was practicing a recipe for beef tenderloin with red wine reduction, one that he would perfect along with an imitation of Emery’s favorite Mary’s Diner salad just in time for the date when he’d propose, and Emery would say yes with a full smile. They would play Whitney Houston at their wedding.

And yet, sitting across from Emery in that worn red booth with her hand in his, his fingertips on her heart line, Michael could almost see himself saying something different: “No, but I love you,” and he could almost see her eyebrows raised in surprise, could almost feel her hand ripping away from his grasp, or maybe instead she was taking his hand back, maybe her mouth was twitching into a sort of half-smile, maybe she was laughing.

And Michael knew. He withdrew his fingertips from her palm, and they would still smell of toasted marshmallow by the time he had made his way back across the street to his desk. He looked at Emery, who was still waiting expectantly, and told her Philip would make her very happy. That made her smile at him, a smile wider and more sincere than he had ever seen it, for what Michael knew was the last time.

## **You Can't Love a Ghost**

Sunshine breaks through the slits of the blinds, forming lines of glittering ambers that coax me awake. Your hand slides across my abdomen, fingers gently brushing against my skin. I turn to face your caramel eyes that used to look at me with complete understanding. You brush my hair out of my face, kiss me on the forehead, and vanish. I learned about phantom limb from some random article and I wonder now if that applies to people as well. If so, you're my phantom person. No matter how often I tell myself that you're gone, I feel you. I catch your hand holding mine when I walk the trails near our house, I hear you laugh when I trip over my own feet, and every morning I feel you next to me. You're here, but not how I want you to be.

I spend my nights at clubs and bars. I put on my best outfits, get free drinks, and dance too close to guys I don't know just to feel something, to clear my head from the thought of you for a few hours. The loud music and alcohol drowns you out and between all the hands on me, I can't tell which are yours. For a while, I'm able to escape all the pain that comes along with you being here. Then morning comes. The alcohol wears off and you're with me again, a reminder of what our life should be like. A reminder of what has been taken from me. I tell my family not to worry, that I'm fine, I don't have a drinking problem, but that's a lie. I wouldn't know how to tell them the truth. That the love of my life has been dead for three years but still haunts me and holds me back from moving on. Sure, that would go over well.

One night I took my own car to my favorite club, Genesis. They had the best DJ in town and a plethora of men willing to buy anything that breathed a drink. I'm not sure why I didn't take an uber like I usually did. I guess I wasn't planning on drinking that night but that didn't last long because after ten minutes of being there, I was taking shots. I made my way to the dance floor but something was different. You were there, right next to me. The alcohol wasn't strong enough, the music wasn't loud enough, and you wouldn't leave me alone. I kept squeezing my eyes tight and hoping you would be gone when I reopened them. No success. Then the DJ put on our song. The song we first danced to at the random frat party where we met. I tried to ignore it, to dance through it, but every memory of you came flooding back; how you would cook me a gourmet meal every anniversary, bring flowers to my soul sucking office job every Monday, and make me dance with you when I got home from work.

Now I live off of frozen dinners, drag myself into work, and dance with strangers — but tonight, I just wanted to be left alone. Unfortunately, men at clubs don't tend to listen when you revoke consent. Every unwanted touch sent me further and further into my own skin. Surely I'm sober enough to drive, I thought, I only live an eight minute drive away. I was wrong. I didn't see the light change to red or the eighteen wheeler crossing into the intersection, I just saw the road. Then there was the tightening of my seatbelt, a symphony of shattering glass, and movements that should only be accompanied with rollercoasters. Everything went black.

When I regained consciousness, I was stuck in the car, unable to reach the seatbelt. There was debris

and fire all around me. I looked over and you were in the seat next to me. Just like the night you died but this time you reached over and clicked my seatbelt. I dropped down and crawled out. Looking back at the car, you were still there. You smiled at me, nodded your head, and disappeared. The other driver never stopped but someone else pulled over to help and said that an ambulance was on its way.

At the hospital they ran all kinds of tests to make sure I was okay. In hushed voices they were all saying something like it's a miracle she walked away with only scrapes and bruises, how is she alive, and her alcohol levels were high. Other than being sore I felt fine but they wanted to keep me overnight to make sure. I asked them not to call anyone, I didn't want my family to worry more. I went to the bathroom to clean myself up. My mascara and eyeliner had run down, adding to the dark circles that already invade my under eyes. I had scrapes and bruises everywhere. Staring at the girl in the mirror, I didn't recognize myself. Who have I become? I rinsed my face with water and crawled into bed, promising myself that tomorrow would be different. No more alcohol, no more random guys, and no more you.

Sunlight shines through the window, trying to lift my eyelids. Pulling the covers over my face, I try to go back to sleep but it's too late. I'm wide awake. I stretch my arms up and expect to feel you when they come back down but I don't. Looking around, you are nowhere to be found. For the first time in three years I woke up completely alone. A smile creeps on my face, but I quickly shrug it off. I still miss you. I always will, but it's time to move on. I can't love a ghost for the rest of my life.

## Love is a Daisy

I met you at the five-star bistro on 54th Street where I worked as a waitress. You, with your shiny oxfords and fitted grey suit without a speck to intrude upon your perfectly proper attire. You, with your dark, slicked-back hair, smoky eyes, and wildly charming smirk. With one glance, I felt myself retreating into my own skin, trying to avoid looking down at my never-been-ironed-probably-covered-in-crumbs-from-the-Pop-Tart-I-had-for-breakfast button up. I was used to feeling inadequate here but until you, I never let it affect my work. You smiled at me. My body went into a panic, leading my feet to the bathroom, I splashed my face with cold water, whispered to myself, “Stop being a wimp, you need this job, and walked out only to smack right into you and fall to the ground.

“I’m sorry. Are you alright?” you reached a hand down to help me up.

I grabbed your hand, stood, and clinging to what composure I had, replied, “No, it was- I mean, yes, I’m fine. Um, I should get back to—”

“Yes, of course.”

We proceeded to tango left and right until we went our separate ways. Me back to my tables, you to yours. Soon you became a regular. Thursday nights were yours. You sat alone and never in my section, thank God I thought, but you always made sure to shoot a smile at me. I smiled back but was careful to keep my distance. Then one night you asked for me to be your server, great. This was it, time to introduce myself as a good, totally not infatuated with you, waitress.

“Hi, I’m Harley and I’ll be your server tonight.”

“Hey, Harley. I’m Charles.”

“Can I get you started with something to drink?”

“I’ll just take a water. No ice.”

Another no ice guy I thought. I knew your type. I used to date a no ice guy. He also had no human emotions, no respect for women, and no reason to date a girl who would never make anything out of herself and work at a diner where she only made five dollars an hour plus unsatisfying tips for the rest of her life. But you were a no ice guy with a nice smile and you smelled really, really, really good. “No,” I told myself. “Stay professional. Bury any hint of feeling and do your job.” You always ordered the most expensive entree on the menu which meant you were either rich or swimming in credit card debt, the later I could relate to. I tried to keep the conversation as professional as possible but you insisted on getting to know me, where I was from (a small town outside of Jersey), my favorite color (lavender), my major in college (Art but I dropped out), the name of my first pet (Mr. Tickles the hamster), everything ( ). Eventually, we worked up a deal. You would tell me something about yourself and I would tell you something about me.

Weeks went by and we kept up this routine. Me the server, you the customer, getting to know each other one question at a time. Your favorite color was red, you worked as a C.E.O. for a company that invested in new apps, and you had the kindest eyes I had ever seen. I lost my parents in a car crash when I was fifteen, lived with my aunt for a while but decided to move to the Big Apple. The plan was to make it as a painter but that dream has yet to be realized and I’ve been working here ever since. Your smiles turned into flirting and it became harder to resist the urge to flirt back.

On April thirteenth you asked me on a date. The best worst day of my life. I was running late to work because my cat decided it would be fun to hide my wallet behind the fridge. How cats get behind fridges I could never understand. Then on my way to the subway station some unidentifiable liquid dripped right onto my head, wonderful. And of course, I missed my subway and had to get on the next one headed in the right direction which wouldn't be for another fifteen minutes. Finally, with perfect timing, it started to pour as soon as I got off the subway near the bistro, leaving me drenched with no way to dry off before entering a sea of rich, snobby sharks. At least the unidentifiable liquid was washed off me. Just as I felt myself retreating into my own skin, you smiled at me and as I walked towards you, you handed me a bouquet of flowers from the seat next to you. Daisies, my favorite. Tied around them with a blue ribbon was a piece of paper: "Bar on the corner on 56th and 8th. Tomorrow at 8 p.m." scrawled in blue ink.

I looked up at you with a smirk, rolled my eyes and said "Ok."

The next day I got off of work at five and spent two hours getting ready to look the best I had in years. After rummaging through my closet for something to wear and creating a mountain of unsightly clothes on my bed I slid on a red dress. The one my mother told me to throw out years ago, calling it "skimpy"; one of the several times I didn't listen to her advice. The bar was not what I expected. It was rustic, walls lined with reclaimed wood, floors of unfinished concrete, and no one was dressed up. The lighting was dim but I spotted you immediately. You came in with jeans and a Beatles t-shirt on, your hair ruffled. I stood out as I always do, but not because I was underdressed. That night I was the shark, you the minnow. I sat at the bar, pretending not to notice you. I waited for you to come to me and you did, with that confident walk you lived in.



Leaning on the bar you said, “Hey there. I’m looking for this girl, maybe you’ve seen her around? She’s in this red dress that could make a guy do just about anything.”

You slid your hand down my arm and around to my back. I was used to this sort of thing at bars but never with guys that I was actually interested in or even acquainted with.

Playing along I replied, “Oh I think I’ve seen her somewhere around here. Where’s the suit?”

“I figured I would let you see this side of me tonight.” You grabbed my face, going in for a kiss but I stuck my arm out, pushing you away.

“What is it?” you ask.

“Buy me a drink first.”

So you did. The most expensive wine they had. We drank and laughed, more than I had ever laughed before. We asked deeper questions, what we wanted out of life, if we believed in God, if we wanted kids, which you did not. You asked me to dance with you, in the middle of the bar. Ignoring every easily embarrassed bone in my body, I accepted. In that red dress, with your hands around my waist, I felt invincible. When the song was over you got the kiss you wanted and I felt my walls coming down. This was the point in relationships where I ran, too scared that I would get attached and you would leave. I had gotten used to leaving before I got left but I couldn’t work up the nerve to walk away from you that night.

I’m not one to go home with guys on the first date but you made me feel special and that feeling lasted for a while. Soon every day became ours, spending time together after we were off of work. You had this way of making me feel like the most important person in the world. Listening was your greatest skill

and you never failed to reassure me. You tried to shower me in gifts, but I always refused. After three months of dating, I gave you a key to my apartment. Normally I would be embarrassed of my place but you didn't care and I wanted to spend more time with you. One night I came home from work and you were there, with an easel holding a Mark Rothko painting.

"How did you—"

"I know a guy," you smirked.

"I can't accept this."

"Well I can't return it and I think you would enjoy these shapes more than me."

"Shapes. That's the best you got?"

"Oh I'm sorry. Do educate me on the subject of Mr. Rothko please," you mocked.

"Shut up, jerk," I rolled my eyes and you kissed me on my forehead. That always made me feel safe, a reminder that I was yours. You pulled me into a hug and in that moment I thought this is it, this is where I belong. Some part of me always expected to be brought back into reality, though.

I stayed in this world of safety and laughter for five months, until one night. I was working at the bistro, covering someone's shift, and had just come from the kitchen when I saw you walk in and sit in my section. But you weren't alone. There was a woman with you: a tall, long-haired, model type woman. You pulled out a chair and she sat, tossing her hair out of her face and smiling at you. I walked to the table and when you glanced up at me, you froze. Bury your feelings Harley, you can't lose this job, I recited in my head over and over.

"Hi, I'm Harley and I'll be your server tonight. Could I get you started with some drinks? Maybe a nice glass of wine?"

"I'll just take a water," you mumbled.

"Sparkling water for me," the woman with you said, once again tossing her hair away from her face.

This time I noticed her ring. You had one on too; you never wore it before that night. I went towards the kitchen to get the drinks but my feet led me straight out of the back door to the alley and into the pouring rain. The usual smell of rotting fish was hardly masked by the rain but it didn't bother me. I leaned against the building; I just needed a moment to pull myself together. A few minutes later you met me outside.

"Harley, I can explain."

"No. I understand perfectly. You have a wife," I said without taking a glance at you.

You moved closer to me. "It's not like that. She just came back. We were separated... I... I don't love her."

"Then you should have got a divorce." I was looking at you now, dead on, holding my own ground for the first time in my life.

"It's complica—"

"You lied to me, Charles. And why would you bring her here of all places?"

"She insisted on coming here and I couldn't make up a reason why we couldn't and you weren't supposed to work tonight. Look, I love you." You tried to grab my hand but I jerked it away.

"No. You don't get to do that anymore. We're done." I rolled my eyes and started to walk away but—

"Are we? I found a pregnancy test in the bathroom. When were you going to tell me?"

"Tonight." I wanted you to hold me, to pull me in with your strong arms, but you just pushed me further away.

“I can take you to the doctor on Monday. I know a guy, a friend, he won’t say anything.”

“What?” I knew you didn’t want to have kids but, wow. “I’m keeping it.”

“Okay, okay... I’m sorry. At least let me help you,” you said grabbing my arms and squeezing tight as if your grip could make me stay with you.

“What are you going to do, get a divorce?”

“No, I can’t do that.” You let go.

“Why?” A tear started running down my cheek and you wiped it away.

“Her dad is an investor in my company. If I divorce her, he’ll pull his shares.”

“So your job means more to you than me?”

“No, I just—”

“I can’t do this. Don’t worry, I won’t tell your wife, you deserve to be in an unhappy marriage. Go to hell, Charles.”

I walked away from you. You called my name over and over but I focused on the sound of the rain, drowning you out all the way back to my run-down studio and cat who always greeted me with scratches. I grabbed the Rothko painting and tore it to shreds, until the shapes were unrecognizable.

You left my key in the PO box along with a note: “Moving to California, I’m sorry,” scrawled in blue ink. Despite leaving work that night I still managed to keep my job but you never sat in my section again, never shot any smiles in my direction. You turned out to be just another no ice guy. A no ice guy with no ability to tell the truth, no common sense to tell you that you shouldn’t bring your wife to the place your girlfriend works and no idea of what the word love means. I was just another girl, blinded by charm

and expensive things, searching for true love, unsure of where to find it. My mom always told me to stay away from no ice guys and I guess that would have been helpful advice to take.

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I met her at the hospital on 18th Street. Her soft yet rough skin, clenched fist the size of the world's smallest lemon, and blonde peach fuzz on her head. She had your smoky eyes, but she was all mine. From her first cry, I knew she needed me and I needed her. It was as simple as that. We didn't need you and your lies or your money. We would be okay and she would grow up knowing that she was safe. I pulled her into my chest and whispered "my Daisy, my everything (Daisy). For the first time in my life, I felt true love, a love you will never know.

Amelia Kleiber, Poetry

## **If You're Having Trouble Sleeping**

Come make yourself a place among the soft  
down-feather pillows. Coffee only keeps  
your weary head from lolling about, off  
on adventures in dreamland until beeps  
alarm, disarming night with light of day,  
so leave the coffee cup behind and find  
the magic Slumber assures. Oh, just stay  
and welcome sunset, stars; and close the blinds  
before the neighbors think to look inside.

If all the seconds, minutes, hours Sleep  
demands were years instead of moments tied  
together, would you hide? Or dive in deep  
and finish fighting demons? War will end  
when nightmares cease to reign, and peace defends.

Amelia Kleiber, Poetry

### **What the Kamikaze Lane is for**

The hot august sun  
rebounds off the cracked blacktop  
of north street, and I  
sit between yellow lines  
in the center of it all, sweating  
like the half-empty cup of Sprite  
pinched between my legs,  
too large for my cupholder, waiting.  
Yin yang yellow arrows taunt  
me, begging a decision: right or left?  
World whizzing past on both sides,  
and I, paralyzed as the pollen  
stuck to my windshield, with my  
white-knuckle grip on the wheel  
waiting for my place.

Amelia Kleiber, Poetry

### **My brother's green truck**

was a \$4,000 piece of junk  
and our greatest treasure.  
Hurtling down 99  
rumbling along neighborhood streets  
we could feel every BUMP  
as we moved forward

one night,  
sailing around the turn of an overpass  
dizzy with childlike exhilaration  
swallowing cold air and becoming intoxicated  
with anticipation and momentum  
like in the seconds before leaping off the high arc  
of a swing, the same lightheaded  
panic as meeting a stranger.  
When I look at my driver, I  
am looking at him  
am hearing him  
for the first time he  
is grown up with his feet  
firmly on the ground and I,  
lurching forward  
on the edge of another  
wild arcing leap,  
hang on his every word

"You can sing  
any song you want to."  
words worth more  
than any truck  
except this one.  
Words giving me permission  
to let go of the handles and

JUMP.



## Carson Owens, Poetry

### **Our Blue Smoke Sky**

A cup of coffee and a shared cigarette  
We're seventeen, slick and sly  
Our parents think we know nothing yet  
One quiet blonde, one big mouth brunette  
Our friendship gets us by,  
Along with coffee and a shared cigarette  
The world could hand us any threat  
Into unknown worlds we pry  
But our parents think we know nothing yet  
We don't owe this world a debt  
Down midnight roads, we fly  
With our coffee and a shared cigarette  
Our dark lipstick is our best asset  
Black smeared across our eyes  
Our parents think it's too much, and yet,  
We cling tight to CDs and cassettes  
Under our blue smoke sky  
Created by our coffee and shared cigarettes  
And our parents think we know nothing yet

Christina Ellison, Fiction

## Model Home Midnight

This could be the living room. It's the main room of the semi-built house, and has a cathedral-like ceiling, and I think there's gonna be windows in those gaps up there with a chimney in the alcove between them. I'd like a chimney.

Kansas is leaning on the hallway balcony railing, looking at me examine the room below, her phone's flashlight illuminating my back, my shadow a dark giant across the yellow wall. Kansas, poor thing, fell victim to her parents wanting their child to have a... *unique* name. My parents were the opposite; I'd need more fingers and toes to count all the Annas I knew.

I say that I want a chimney. Kansas says when we get a house we can have one if we can have a kitchen backsplash. I turn to her and laugh and say yes, yes, we can.

\*\*

The stars are abundant tonight. As we lay on our backs on the wooden roof, the skeleton of the home bearing our weight, Kansas plays connect-the-dots with the sky, her finger drawing whatever shapes she can make, her voice supplying a story. A shark, a boat, a sailor, a net. A hurricane. I say her stories always end bleak. She says they're realistic.

\*\*

The night is warm – as most nights are in Houston suburbs – but Kansas still wears her brown aviator jacket. She's only been wearing it since sev-

but, five years later, I can't picture her without it. She told me on another rooftop another night in another neighborhood that it hides the bruises. I told my mom the following day and she promised she'd talk to Kansas' parents, but nothing ever came of it. I don't even think Mom called.

\*\*

We can hear the train from here, the one that passes Little Pine High at nine and two and midnight. Its whistle sounds like a wailing woman. I ask Kansas what she thinks it sounds like. She says it sounds like a train.

\*\*

We climb back in through what will be an upper window. This room could be an office: a desk beneath the window, a painting of the sea by the absent door – not of Galveston, with its silty water and sun-dried kelp. No, somewhere like Florida or Spain, or Corpus at least. Somewhere clean and blue.

The air smells of pine and dust, as homes at this stage do. I glance through the framing to the other rooms, their emptiness awaiting futures we'd never know. How many homes have we invaded? How many wooden skeletons have we infested? And to what end? And for what reason?

I ask Kansas why. She says she wants to imagine a world of her own.

She asks me why. I shrug. I don't have an answer – not one as meaningful as hers. I look through the would-be windows of the cathedral living room into the abyss of the night, the stars yearning to be one of Kansas' constellations.

Some just want a chimney. Others want to be free.

## **On the Banks Beneath the Sycamore**

The air is misty. It's foggy, but not heavy, like it's settled just above my reach. I can't see far down the river, but I can spy the outlines of the trees that stand along the banks like soldiers when the sun is unobstructed and people row in their kayaks. But the fog doesn't worry me today. I'm not here to kayak.

I stand on a large mound of dirt that both interrupts the river's path and makes the rapids swirl and froth, the current powerful enough that if I jumped in I'd be carried away, never to be seen again. Behind me looms a tree, a sycamore, strong and tall, its leaves fallen, all yellow and brown and scarlet and clumped together in dampened clusters like they're the tree's own footsteps.

I'm at the riverside to witness the wind and the current make patterns along the surface, looming over the water as the tree looms over me. My brother and I used to want to build a house amid its branches, to become masters of the tree, but we were denied help by every man we could find, then every boy, then everyone else. So the sycamore remained barren, and remains barren to this day, save for the orange-breasted orioles and rust-breasted robins, while the humans resign to picnicking at the sycamore's feet.

Today I'm the only one to stand in the company of the sycamore, the wind that whips the river whipping my cheeks, the invisible needles of ice scratching at my unprotected skin. I'll get a talking-to about the redness of my face when I get home. I can picture

my mama scolding me, her forefinger wagging. I can picture how I'm going to answer *Yes, Mama* before I head up the stairs and she continues sipping her white wine. And I can picture myself coming back to this spot on the banks of the river tomorrow, repeating the cycle.

But that's all for a later time. In this instant I stand in the quiet of the gray sky and in the loudness of the rushing river. I stare at the moving water, unending. And I want to jump in – oh, how I want to jump in. The water would freeze me in an odd position and my face would go white and I'd be carried away. Far, far away. Maybe I'd see my brother when I reached the end, his face as white as mine.

I sit as close as I can to the edge without falling in and let my ungloved fingers dance on the surface of the barely-waves. I can hear my brother's voice in the back of my mind telling me it's time to go home, it's getting late, it's getting dark, but who's he to tell me anything? He's not here anymore. It's just me, with the sycamore at my back and the river at my front. And they're all I need for now.

## When I was Eight

When I was eight, I set the carpet on fire. I was often left alone in the house, and I developed a strange obsession with discovering the secrets that lurked around every corner. I wandered from room to room looking under everyone's bed. I was hunting for the monsters that go bump in the night, but there were none, and little eight-year-old me decided they were allergic to the sun. I rummaged through closets, hoping to come across an unwrapped Christmas present, even though it was June. I had a theory that my parents bought presents early, to get those good deals my mother used to rattle on about at the dinner table - a dinner table that now only features ~~two plates and two chairs~~, one plate and one chair.

When I was alone, I didn't bother searching my own room, even though it was a complete disaster, or a "pig sty" as my father called it, I knew where everything was. I could immediately find an old sparkly purse, the journal I used to draw in, the black stuffed cat I named Shadow; and I could always find the makeup bag with sewing needles in it that I kept even though I never learned how to sew, maybe one day ~~my mother will teach me~~, I will teach myself.

Amid exploring my parents closet, I had the sudden urge to sneeze. All around me were perfect materials to use as a tissue: a brown leather jacket, a pink shawl, a cashmere sweater, but using clothes to wipe my nose was such a seven-year-old thing to do. I wasn't seven, I was eight. I left the closet and

frantically searched the bathroom for a tissue as the pressure built up in my nose. My mother would have been so relieved to know that I didn't use her clothes to catch my germs. I was proud of myself in that moment, and then I realized, I wouldn't ever be able to share my accomplishment because then my parents would know I was snooping. Eight-year-old me was conflicted.

After I sneezed my snot into the soft tissue and wiped my nose, I threw it in the trash can that sat next to the counter; on the counter was a candle. The candle was white and short, slowly burning, left behind by my forgetful mother. That moment was my first time being unattended with fire, I was very excited. I stood on my tippy toes and pushed aside all the makeup tubes that sat in my way of reaching the candle. Grasping it by the sides I tugged it towards me and then there I was, nose to flame, a warm hello. The flame waved at me, invited me to shake its hand. I reached with my little fingers up to the bright yellow and then I touched it. I yelled. It hurt, but it didn't hurt as much as the time I was stung by a bee. No, that was so much worse. The stinger got stuck in my arm and swelled, apparently, I was allergic. I was six at that time so of course I cried for hours, but I didn't cry when I got burnt. I wasn't six, I was eight.

My skin was red and angry for a few minutes, but eventually settled down and was a happy little finger again. That day I learned not to poke fire with your hand and to use something else. That something else? A tissue. I plucked one from its box and held it above the flame. The flame flicked itself towards the soft material. First, the smoke took its tendrils and painted the face of the tissue, and then the fire began to devour the edge and spread itself out, just like when

I dropped my grape juice on the floor that morning. The flame was bigger, bigger than when it was on the candle. Halfway up the tissue I felt the heat, it was too close for comfort and I didn't want to get burnt again, so I dropped it... on the carpet.

Eight-year-old me panicked. I turned the faucet on and thought that maybe if I made the sink overflow it would spill to the ground and put out the fire, but the sink had overflow holes in the bowl. I glanced at the counter, searching for something that could hold water in it and I decided to use an empty makeup bag. It worked, kind of. The fire was still there, growing little by little to replace the section I doused. I remember yelling out in frustration, and a tear or two slipped out. I almost gave up, I almost stopped and let the fire run its course and burn my house down, and then I remembered only babies do nothing, I wasn't a baby, I was eight. I searched the bathroom again, and in the corner sat a bucket. Knowing that the bucket would be hard to fill up in the sink because I was short, I decided to use the bathtub. Water poured out of the faucet, rushing to fill the bucket. When the water reached the top, I heaved it out of the tub, struggling to lift it over the edge; I was so close to successfully clearing the obstacle, but the bucket and water were too heavy. The bucket tipped over and fortunately for me, doused the remaining flames. In the middle of the floor was a burned blob of carpet, there was no way I was going to be able to hide that.

Dejected, eight-year-old me walked out of the bathroom, leaving everything where it was, even the sink running. When I got to the door I gave one last glance at the mess I made. My eyes landed on the candle that sat on the counter, laughing. I remember becoming angry at the happy little fire that danced on



the wick. Mocking me as if it was saying, “you put me out, but I’m still alive.” Little eight-year-old me didn’t want it to be left alive, burning on its little stick, so I walked back into the bathroom, picked up the candle and tossed it under the water falling from the sink. Only when the light went out and the smoke waved one last goodbye, did I turn off the faucet and leave the room.

My mother wasn’t going to be proud of me. My father might have laughed, but my mother would’ve scolded him and then they’d get into another argument. I didn’t want to hear another argument, so I did what I always did when I wanted to run from a possible problem: I hid under the blankets of my bed, clutched Shadow to my chest and hummed myself to sleep.

I woke up to the yelling. The bathroom was a mess and the carpet was burned. There was only one person to blame. I could’ve said it was the monsters that hid under my bed, or the caterpillar on my window sill, but those excuses never worked before. I was grounded, longer than the time I cussed at school, and longer than the time I spilled blue nail polish on the couch. Apparently setting the carpet on fire was only something a problem child would do, and problem children get grounded for long periods of time, especially when they ruin the “best day ever” as my mother said.

That day was the best day ever because she was pregnant, and I was going to have a little brother or a little sister. I was going to have someone I could tell about the time I stuck metal keys into the socket and not get in trouble for it. Little eight-year-old me was excited. I hope the baby will be a girl! For eight years I spent each day playing with dolls by myself, and I was

finally going to have a friend. Over the months her belly grew bigger, and my room grew smaller. Toys were packed up, and random things I hid under my bed were thrown away, random things like a sparkly purse, and the make-up bag full of needles. Two months into the new year, I had a birthday, the same month my mother went into labor. I was confused because my parents told me the baby was supposed to be born in May.

I was nine when my mother and my father disappeared into a hospital room and I was left outside with a coloring book and some crayons. I sat there for hours with a nurse, coloring a dog purple. When my dog was done, I drew a family with two parents and two children. I gave the family a dog, a purple dog, and I put a swing set in the front yard. On the swings were two girls. In the open garage, I remember drawing two pink bikes, because I knew my new sister would love pink. On a separate paper I drew a bedroom. The bedroom was also pink and had two beds and two mirrors. The mirrors were for when nine-year-old me grew up and could teach my new sister how to do makeup. By the time I drew two desks and two chairs, my little hand was cramping. I stopped drawing and observed my surroundings.

I was alone in my little corner of the waiting room. Every now and then I watched the nurse at the welcome desk glance at me with a sad smile and then back down to her papers. It made nine-year-old me uncomfortable, I decided not to look at her anymore. Around me were people I had never seen before, some of them had smiles on their faces and some of them cried after a man in a long white jacket, the doctor, talked to them. Little nine-year-old me didn't want to talk to that man, he made people sad.

I was almost asleep when my father came to sink into the chair in front of me. He wore a frown and had red streaks on his cheeks; he wouldn't look at me, he just sat still, not saying a word. I think he had talked to that man. We sat there waiting for my mom to come out, but she never came. Nine-year-old me decided that we would come back the next day, and gladly walked out the door squeezing my father's hand, excited to go to sleep so I could wake up and see my new baby sister in the morning. But when the morning came, we didn't go back to the hospital, nor did we go the next day, or the day after that. The next time I left the house, I was dressed in black.

At the funeral I ~~cried~~, I didn't cry. Even though my mother was dead I had no feeling, I was numb, dissolving, melting like the wax on a candle stick. The fire spread, destroying me, burning me from the inside out, but I didn't feel it, because I was numb. I was oblivious to the sounds of my father weeping, and I was oblivious to the fire that raged in my heart. Little nine-year-old me was collapsing under the weight of a burning building, and it was too hot to breathe.

When your house burns down, you find a new one and when your whole world burns down... you ~~find a new life~~ try to move on.

When I moved to the new school and to the new house, I made new friends who made fun of me, told me what to do, and said I was ugly. They were not my friends, but I didn't know that then. When they asked me why I moved, I told them I set the carpet on fire and the fire grew and grew until it ate the whole house, I didn't want to tell them the truth. They called me a freak and made fun of me during school; sometimes they told mean jokes about how I killed my family and that's why I only lived with my dad. It wasn't

true, I was the only one home when I set the carpet on fire, but for some reason their jokes about what was false, was better than them joking about the truth.

When I was twelve, I bled through a pair of white jeans. I didn't notice until I got off the bus one day after school. I looked at the seat I sat in to make sure I didn't leave anything behind and saw a red circle imprinted on the bus bench. I was horrified and thought that I was going to die; maybe if I had a mother, I would have been alright. I ran home from the bus stop ignoring the laughter that attacked my back, I just kept running until I got to my bedroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I stood there for a few minutes before I decided to change my pants. I put on black leggings and stuffed toilet paper in them to staunch the flow of blood, like I saw doctors on TV do when someone was bleeding. I felt like I was wearing a diaper, I didn't want to wear a diaper, but I also didn't want to die. When my father came home from work I hysterically announced that I was dying. The fear that crossed his face was what I remembered most vividly from that day. I don't remember how we figured out that I was okay, and I was in fact, not dying, all I remember is his face when he thought he was going to lose me too. Twelve-year-old me realized I wasn't the only one who was burning on the inside.

When I was fifteen, I found new friends who didn't belittle me every chance they got; however, they still weren't the best role models. When they suggested we skip school, I agreed. We spent our money at the store buying all the junk food we could and went to my house. My father wasn't home, he rarely was. That strange obsession I used to have when I was eight returned. I wanted to uncover the secrets of the house I had yet to search. We found alcohol in the cabinets, and cigarettes in my father's bedside drawer; nicotine was forever stained on my lips.

When we were sixteen, we discovered boys. The kind of boys that convinced me to drop out of school, the kind of boys who played with my body, and the kind of boys who broke my heart.

When I was seventeen, a fourth kind of boy began to sneak into my room. Bellamy was not like the others. In the middle of the night my window would raise up and his figure would creep in before shutting it behind him. I sat on my bed, waiting, willing. His calloused fingers running across my skin was the greatest pleasure seventeen-year-old me had ever felt. I fell into his baby blue eyes, like one would jump into a pool on a hot summer day, so suddenly yet so spectacular. Bellamy whispered in my ear, saying he loved me, saying we would be together forever, but forever meant nothing to me. Nothing lasts forever. Forever doesn't even last nine years. Regardless of how I felt, I let him make me his. It felt good to belong to someone. We shared cigarettes and partied every night we could. He'd work during the day and I would stay at my house all day, watching TV or sleeping.

When I was eighteen, shortly after he stopped smoking and partying, he left me, for someone who believed in forever. For someone who didn't smoke, someone who had a job, who went to school, who had a family, someone who had a mom. Bellamy ~~wasn't like the others~~ was just like the others. I didn't cry, crying was for six-year-olds.

When I was nineteen, my Father got sick. We spent days at a time in the hospital. I talked to the Doctor, a different one than the one who made my Father sad when I was nine. Every night he had to be in the hospital I sat in the single chair next to his bed holding his weak hand. I told him stories that he didn't know about, stories he didn't remember, and

fictitious stories about a little girl and her sister, those were his favorite. The day he got his diagnosis was the day I stopped smoking. He spent his birthday in the hospital bed, he turned forty-five. I bought him a yellow balloon with a smiley face.

~~When I was twenty my Father died from lung cancer.~~

I am twenty and my Father died last week from lung cancer.

The dress I am wearing to his funeral is as black as his lungs. I sit front row at the service, by myself. We, no I, have no family left. Small groups of people show up together, my father's friends, my father's coworkers, my friends, and him, Bellamy. He walks with a group of mutual friends from high school, slightly off to the side, as if he doesn't want to reconnect with the toxic people that we used to associate with. I watch him as he comes closer to me, I can see it in his eyes, he has the intention of coming to say hello, but thankfully the ceremony begins; I wasn't ready to face him again. The officiator speaks some words, and a couple people stand up to speak but it's all a bunch of white noise. I'm melting again, in the summer heat, collapsing under the weight of a burning building. Suddenly, everyone begins to walk by me to lay a rose on my father's casket. Every single person touches me in some way: a shoulder squeeze, a side-hug, a full hug, a pat on the head, but I don't move, not even when Bellamy kisses my cheek. I don't want to move until my father takes my hand, walks me to our car, drives me home, and makes me a glass of grape juice.

I am still as everyone leaves and I am still as the casket lowers to the ground, only when the grounds keeper tells me that I need to move, do I.

I stand up on wobbling legs and walk to the side, to watch as the tractor moves the dirt. I am surprised when someone comes to stand beside me, I thought everyone had left. Though, I am not surprised to see that the person is Bellamy. I turn my head to look at the man in the black suit. I remember how naïve we once were, just children playing a game. A game that I just lost. His black hair is the same as it was two years ago, wild and curly, kind of reminds me of the carpet I burnt when I was eight, only his hair is longer. We lock eyes and I see myself suffocating in their depths, surrounded by smoke and flames. He reaches with his hand towards me and wraps his arm around my waist. When he tugs me towards him I try to resist, but he is stronger. His fingers on my back are cold, a great contrast to the wildfire slowly being doused by his embrace.

For the first time since my father died I speak. Pushing away to look at his face, I ask, “Where is your girlfriend? Aren’t you supposed to spend forever with her?”

He smiles sadly, “a girl once told me that forever doesn’t mean forever.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

I lay my ear against his chest, listening to his strong heartbeat, the most comforting sound I’ve heard since I was nine, a sound that represents nothing but life. We watch as the tractor covers my father in dirt, tears form at the corner of my eyes, ~~but I don’t cry~~ and though I am not six, I cry, because age shouldn’t restrict our emotions. Even at eight, nine, twelve, fifteen, eighteen, and twenty, we cry, because crying is just what humans do.

## Carson Owens, Poetry

### **Memories Ablaze**

The four of us,  
sitting around  
our backyard bonfire,

scorching flames  
illuminated our innocent grins.

Jokes and laughs  
cracked  
in time with the smoldering wood.

The sweet-smelling smoke was no bother –  
it was warm, and it danced  
alongside us.

Since we could toddle,  
that bonfire had always  
burned white-hot.

But then, the cruel rain came.  
You all ran for cover together –  
I got lost.

I raced through those deafening  
freezing bullets,  
my vision wet and black.

The wind whipped my cheeks raw.  
My joints locked from the cold.  
Still, I ran.

Suddenly, there was a  
break.



My world came to a halt.  
The quiet air arrested my  
worried feet.

I turned –  
my beloved bonfire, my beloved friendships

were extinguished.

Carson Owens, Poetry

**the night you said i love you**

pools of blue gleam  
peeking  
from a mop of disheveled hair

the car  
speeding along a flooded road,  
barely

hanging on, tires  
spinning  
and i try to hang onto

your smell, sickly  
sweet, stale cologne and weed  
i can't

roll the window down  
the rain, wind, i  
scream

as we flip  
the trees give way to stumbling  
broken silver

## **An Ounce of Sympathy**

Concrete halls and a sense of odd familiarity filled Kaden's static-stricken head, if she closed her eyes and let her fingers drag across the white painted bricks she'd be back in her high school's hallways. Alarms and hollers from the men they passed in their cells were given little attention; she kept her head forward and eyes glued to the back of the officer's head. His badge had read Scotts and, as he walked, all the weapons and tools on his belt clicked or jingled with every step. She wondered how long it took for someone to get used to that weight, if walking through these halls day in and day out were the reason his shoulders hunched ever so slightly, and his feet dragged just so against the concrete floor.

She kept her eyes trained on his back but pushed her thoughts away from the prison guard – or, technically, correctional officer – but Kaden liked the way 'prison guard' sounded, and she wasn't naive in believing there was much in the way of corrections going on between the gated yard and stone walls.

She wondered if she should be concerned with the lack of anxiety she felt as she walked through the humid hallway, if there was something wrong with her feeling no sense of fear – all she felt was intoxicating anticipation, the same kind you felt on a roller coaster. But not the kind that starts to boil with every inch the cart climbs before slinking over the summit to send you plummeting towards the ground – no, it was the kind that began as soon as you stepped onto the ride,

the kind that makes you want to vomit, whispering *is this thing really fastened?* As the safety bar comes into place, the kind so unquenchable it masquerades as doubt to make your excitement about defying gravity and sheer abandonment for anything safer sound less utterly suicidal.

Because at the end of the day that's all this trip was – a suicide attempt, a way to hold a knife to her neck without picking one up, slicing her wrist in a way she'd be certain to live through it.

She was playing with fire, running with scissors, ripping stitches, looking for closure where there was none, so she'd have an excuse to drown in pain.

Or just plain drown.

A hand on her wrist snapped her attention to the guard in front of her, and the face that wasn't Officer Scotts' staring back at her made her jump.

"You okay, sweetheart?" this new guard asked.

She found brown eyes that looked too soft to handle a job like this, hid under thick furrowed brows. She started to answer but, nodded instead, finding words unnecessary. He looked at Officer Scotts, who had moved past the metal detector she was probably about to be sent through and nodded shortly.

"We just need your bag," he said turning back to her. "It'll stay here with us. You can take in your phone."

Looking at this older officer now and hearing his voice more clearly, he reminded her of Sam Elliott without the famed mustache. This discovery sent her mind into a heated debate on whether that resemblance stood or if it was nothing without the mustache. Part of her was hungry to focus on anything other than what she was doing. As she walked through the metal detector and proceeded behind Scotts, she didn't fight the static that came back.

They walked through another short hallway stopping at a red door with a large window. Scotts lifted his badge to what she supposed was a camera. A buzzer rang, and locks clicked. Aside from the numbers and letters written in large block white, grey, and black letters and a few extra rooms, the whole place looked the same. White brick walls, concrete floors, doors about every three hundred yards in the large hallway- if that's even what you would call it though it was rather more of a middle ground - between the cell blocks.

It was starting to change as another red door opened to Scotts' badge she walked through to see another door off to the left closer than the one that mirrored the red one they had just come through.

She stepped onto the roller coaster.

She could see the room now as other windows showed its contents along the left side of the hallway. Tables adorned the room, no more than a few chairs at each one. A guard stood in each corner, with one by the door she was approaching another by a door across from it.

The door opened.

They stepped through – there was that roller coaster feeling again.

The safety bar came down over her head

The door shut behind her - it locked into place.

Kaden saw him; she didn't quite know how, but she knew it was him. She assumed few things about him had changed; his short hair was gray now, stubble lined his jaw, dark chapped skin stretched out from a white shirt worn beneath a beige jumpsuit.

This was the part where anger was supposed to spring forth, like Athena burst full grown from Zeus' head, meet the triumph of seeing him sitting there in

cuffs on his wrist, guards eyeing him, and dance off into the sunset together because, that's what justice really was wasn't it? A place where anger correctly placed won? But Justice tended to sleep behind her blindfold and Anger's fatal flaw was the pain it bred in the one who felt it rather than the one it was directed toward.

This man in front of her had spent years escaping his cell to fall into her dreams and spin them into nightmares – but in all those years, all those dreams, he hadn't spent a second knowing she existed.

She watched as a woman and her child came through the door opposite her, the one she would have come through if she hadn't spent her morning interviewing the warden for her dissertation paper she was writing on the inner workings of a prison, something she had been interested in regardless. But him being here in this prison of all places was just a freighting coincidence. One she couldn't help but exploit for her own naive craving of – something she couldn't quite put a name to.

He sat at the table, calm and unbothered. For a brief moment she wondered if he'd look as unbothered if he was sitting in the electric chair – but that's not what Jesus would say and either way, New Mexico outlawed the death penalty ten years ago.

It didn't take more than ten steps for her to get to the table. She expected some sort of... *something*. To come within an arm's length of him and feel nothing was wrong.

She sat down searching for anger in the table's metal top and found only a blurred reflection of herself and his shadow across it.

"You the girl writing some paper or somethin'?"

His voice made her stomach churn. He'd never had a voice in her dreams. She'd spent so much time concocting the stories in her head that they'd gone and turned into memories-silent, haunting memories slowly becoming solid with every centimeter of him.

He hadn't had much of face in those creations either, but he did now, close enough to touch, to grab, to tear apart. It was soft...

Soft and so unalarming it made her skin crawl. She hadn't expected horns, but she wasn't prepared for pleasant. She wanted to see the blood on his hands, scratches up his arms – any signs of the life he'd taken and the hell she knew her aunt had given him. But the only thing she could find was the beige jumpsuit, the cuffs around his wrist, and the prison walls around them. Barely enough.

"I'm writing a dissertation."

"Masters, or somethin'?"

"PhD, actually."

He looked her up and down. It bothered her she still felt so little toward him.

"You a little young for a PhD." She couldn't tell if it was a question or a statement.

"I graduated early, took some grad courses during undergrad," she explained halfheartedly, reaching to grab her recorder.

"Well, that is impressive."

This was the part in the conversation where she should say thank you, he'd say you're welcome, and the conversation would find a new topic, maybe the weather. But she felt no thanks towards him no matter the context and could at least feel the utter disdain toward the possibility of participating in small talk with him.

Setting the recorder on the table in front of her, she decided eye contact with him gave her the same reaction as sticking a fork too far down her throat.

“So, you have a few questions for me?”

Kaden hadn’t meant to find his eyes again, but there they were right where she left them searching her face for an answer other than her silence.

“Yes, I only have five, they should be pretty painless,” she said, asking for him to give her a couple more moments to set up her recorder.

It was already on and working, but she needed time to compose herself, to win the battles in her head and heart and ultimately the war that had been brewing within her for years.

“You’ll have about two minutes to answer each question.” She went through the rest of her procedures, taking a deep breath. “Now, the point of this is not whether you’re guilty or not. I am not trying to trap you. I am simply exploring the difference between detainees that maintain their innocence and ones that admit guilt.”

A soft chuckle filled the space between them for a brief moment. She thought it had come from her head, but then he began to speak.

“I’m afraid after so many years, there aren’t many differences between us. A cage is a cage. Some deserve it, others don’t.”

She nodded, without much force and started question one. “How long have you been incarcerated?”

“For this charge, forty-five years. I did a stint down in Texas – Huntsville – for six years before that.”

She had already known that, but if she ultimately had to use him for her report, she’d need evidence to back that claim. Her grandmother’s words weren’t exactly a viable source.



Her mind lurched to her grandmother, to what she'd say if she knew she was here, knew who she was sitting across from.

It sent her back to the afternoons she and her sister would spend across from her grandmother listening to the stories she'd tell of their aunt, to the mornings she'd passed her picture in the hall, or the split second of deafening silence when Kaden or her sister were accidentally called by her name. There were thousands of stories of her aunt rushing through her head, but only a single one of him. The one that had put the cuffs on his hands.

Moving through the rather boring questions, she listened to his answers. He told her what charge he was in for, how long the trial was, whether he felt he got his fair trial or not, how he believed he behaved while in prison, and of his claim of innocence – and if that claim, in his opinion, made him a better or worse prisoner.

“Guilty or not, none of us want to be here. I guess I talk to lawyers more than the guilty ones,” he answered, voice more relaxed than the beginning.

*More than the guilty ones* – she couldn't keep herself from flinching.

With every word that came out of his mouth, she searched for a slip – anything she could use to pry that claim of innocence from his grasp. But she supposed the longer you repeated a lie, the more you start to believe it. Whether anyone else does is irrelevant – even eyewitness accounts and three different versions of DNA evidence.

As he finished his last answer, those battles in her heart and mind roared back to life, almost knocking the breath out of her.

Fighting the urge to ask more, to scream, to curse his soul to the worst kind of damnation, she pulled her recorder from the table and let a soft “That will be all,” slip from her lips.

Once again, she found his eyes. They were searching hers for something. There was an age to him she knew was there but hadn’t noticed before. The way his eyes narrowed made the lines on his forehead more visible to her, the darkness underneath his eyes clearer.

She wondered if he was starting to find something odd about her. Her fair skin and small form likened her to a quarter of the population, but maybe her light brown-near-blond hair, her grandfather’s nose, her grandmother’s eyes, her aunt’s initials that matched her own scrawled in small cursive letters on the golden plate around her neck, were starting to scream at him. Haunting him in a way he would not have expected.

She watched him watch her – the room quiet and seemingly closing in around them.

This – this right here was the part in her dreams, where she’d stand, walk away, turn from a man with the idea of a face, no voice, and blood on his hands. But she wasn’t been able to walk away just yet.

He spoke up before she could.

“You seem like one of those *save the world* types,” he sighed. “A lot of you come through here, I’m sure some of them appreciate it.”

“You don’t?”

“I’m going to die in here.”

Naivety crawled through her throat, carrying a terrible form of guilt on its back.

He continued. “You’re young and filled with this idea that the world around you will be better

because you want it to be better, not because you make it better.” He shrugged a bit, taking a look at that room around them. “Well, maybe you put some effort. But it’s a dark place, we’re a thousand miles from good, and you gotta realize quick that *better* might just mean *a little less bad*, nine hundred and ninety-nine miles from good.”

In the depths of her mind that still held on to the possibility of magic and fairy tales, of a world and its rulers bred from good and opposed to all evil, the part of her fueled by hope and glitter-filled rainbows thought she might be the one to break him. The fraction of her face that favored her aunt would snap his heart in two and push his guilt over the edge.

But then there was that guilt – something entirely different – she wanted him to be innocent.

She couldn’t fathom why she felt that way. Maybe it was because she didn’t want someone who looked like that – calm, approachable, kind – to be capable of the things she knew he was capable of. Maybe it was because, she was a bleeding heart, or the lies he had beaten into truths were starting to resemble it.

Or maybe it was because, as much as she had felt the connection, as much as she saw the pain the stories put on her father’s face, heard the way her grandmother had to talk about her daughter in past tense, or noticed how her grandfather avoided the subject at all cost, she had never known her aunt. And now she knew him.

She had allowed him to crawl from her nightmares to sit on a metal bench in front of her and speak as if she had no clue what he did. As if he was just another subject in her study and his claim of innocence or admission of guilt had no bearing on her life outside the walls of this room or the pages of her research.

She watched as the guard called time and two of them stepped forward to collect him.

That small breath of hope came back – the one where she'd look up and see everything that made him a monster, or Satan himself carting him back to his cell.

Again, nothing came, nothing but a curt nod and a set lip as he walked away from her. And as he did, for a split second his age faded from his face, the color turned to black and white and he was standing in front of her not as the man she'd spent half an hour talking to, but as the mug shot she'd found fourteen years ago in the bottom drawer of her dad's desk, that she shut so quickly she never got a good look at his face.

She waited with bated breath, every step he took she expected something to come from it but, there would be no poetic end to this – no swell of a song as she walked back through the prison's halls, no understanding, no confession. She would have to crawl back to that odd version of peace she'd spent her life living in, that place between loving without knowing and longing to have someone back she'd never had in the first place.

The truth would stay suffocated under a caged man's thumb, and she'd done nothing than strike a match just to let it burn her.

He was just through the door when she looked up again, taking the ounce of sympathy she hadn't meant to give him and the rope of lies he'd forgotten to hang himself with. Leaving her with nothing other than the same static she came in with and a soft, kind face for a nightmare.

Brianna Dunston, Poetry

**At Last, You Are the<sup>NO</sup> Exception**

I was afraid to touch ~~you~~ with my pen:  
to trace out the lines of ~~your collar bone,~~  
~~or your pelvis, or the tendons in your neck~~  
with something so permanent.  
What if I draw ~~you~~ wrong,  
and ~~you think I don't love you~~ as you are?  
Or worse, what if I mess up,  
and ~~you~~ decide ~~you~~ want to go?  
It's better that I keep my attempts at mapping  
the path of ~~your veins~~ in graphite lead,  
so if ~~you leave, neither of us~~ has to worry  
about leaving mistakes behind:  
I can erase them for ~~both of us,~~  
like we never happened in the first place.

But when ~~you~~ outline me with ~~your hands,~~  
~~fingertips~~ running along my bare skin  
from my chin to the shell of my ear,  
around my shoulder blades and down my spine,  
and ~~you stain~~ the nape of my neck violet  
with ~~your lips,~~ I ~~start to believe you~~  
when ~~you say you'll be the one to stay,~~  
to ~~forgive,~~ and instead of penciling ~~you~~ in  
with shaky fingers, it is with smooth,  
~~certain~~ strokes of ink that I draw out  
your brow, your eye creases, your smile lines  
and cupid's bow, your mouth promising  
I won't need my eraser ~~this time.~~<sup>again.</sup>

## **Secondary Succession**

### *An Ode to Fire*

You, fire, have long since been restricted where I was from: people feared your sparks would catch the dry brush, that your tongues would emerge to lap up the paper grass and skeletal mesquites of the desert with your insatiable appetite before turning, still ravenous, to our houses and schools and infrastructure and, well, us. I remember seeing you on gas flares while driving on the highway where oil companies used you to burn off excess natural gas, reducing the pressure on both the oil plant and oil industry, your flames flapping in the waves of your own heat like red flags, warning of your destructive potential in the desert, your destructive potential in general, but you were safely confined to the tops of the flare stacks, seemingly harmless.

Perhaps that's the key to keeping you tame, Man's Red Flower: planting you in a brick hearth flowerpot or a metal firepit bucket, rather than letting you grow wild. Indeed, when I find you in a glass vase, growing from a wick planted in wax, I am fascinated rather than afraid, and you smell so sweet: like baked goods or spices or, ironically, water. I can watch your petals of light and shadow dance off your flame and onto the room and lose myself to frantic counting of the petals that vanish: *Love me, love me not, love me, love me not,*

*Love me...* I have been burned by you before. You're in my head, turning the steam engine of my mind to ensure its gears keep turning and that I keep working, but I am inadequately insulated against you, and the efficiency of your hissing mouths and tongues hurts, and now that I'm running out of fuel to feed you I know that it's an inevitable matter of time before both of us burn out and shut down. Thank you, though. It's been a good run.

If I could make one last request, though, while we're both still able to fulfill it: perhaps you can make use of that potential for destruction everyone's so afraid of, and use it on me. You can have me, all of me, for your fuel, and we can both finally burn all the way out, red flags blooming from the flare stack wick of my skull until all that remains are ashes mixed with the dust of the desert.

And perhaps, from there, something new can grow.

Brianna Dunston, Poetry

## **The Smoke Alarm's Beeping and I Can't Find the Batteries**

Here we are, sitting alone, together  
in bed, growing closer to separate  
with every breath of incense-scented air  
permeating the room through wisps of smoke  
that I'm watching dance away from the flame,  
watching the ember, trying to forget—

but what is it that I'm meant to forget?  
What was said when we first got together:  
how I said that you had been my first flame  
in years? How you said we'd be separate  
from the rest and outlast the wisps of smoke  
that had left others needing fresher air?

Maybe we already ran out of air  
the last time we had something to forget:  
the time you drove your demons out with smoke  
that left both of us choking, together,  
and you vowed to keep yourself separate  
from the habits you'd used to fuel the flame.

Maybe it was when my mind was aflame,  
when my panics left me gasping for air,  
but I still tried to keep you separate  
from that form of me because I forgot  
what it's meant to mean to be together  
and that I can't hide fire in its own smoke.

Though maybe now we're both just blowing smoke,  
still futilely tending our dying flame  
(just because we once lit it together)  
and scraping by on each other's stale air.  
Maybe we can just forgive and forget  
that it crossed both our minds to separate



again. What if we just... did separate?  
But in your bed watching the incense smoke,  
I don't really think I could just forget  
how when our skin touches my heart feels flames,  
even if we might be running low on air.  
Why shouldn't we suffocate together?

We shouldn't separate. We can't light new flames.  
Let's just watch the smoke, use up our air,  
forgive, forget, suffocate: together.

Brianna Dunston, Poetry

### **After the Flower Gram Fundraiser**

The carnation had been left on the sidewalk,  
already wilting in the west Texas winter sun:  
a discarded expression of middle school affection,  
a red blot amongst the dark blotches of old gum  
dotting the grey walkway.

She had been staring at him,  
following him again, subtle as never,  
when he plucked it from the pavement.  
The bud drooped from a crack in the stem,  
and when he tossed it away,  
it was beheaded properly,  
and the flower landed at her feet,  
crimson petals curled to kiss the tip of her shoe.  
He hadn't been looking back when he threw it,  
but she told herself he had meant it for her,  
and from the moment she scooped the blossom  
off the ground, she held it against her chest  
as if to show him her heart.  
For a moment, she believed he  
might have been offering his to her.

The flower was withered:  
wine-colored bruises splotching its scarlet fan  
that still smelled of watered-down sweetness.  
By the end of the week, the whole bud—  
in the absence of proper roots—  
would shrivel into a burgundy scab,  
and her misplanted affections  
would soon shrivel with it,  
but today, imagining that the soft petals  
pressed against her cheek were his lips,  
he had given her a flower,  
and she'd swear she loved him for it.

## **The Freaks Come Out at Night**

The sun sank into the ocean, the rays streaming across my hands and the steering wheel, the clear box in my shot gun seat bouncing some of the light back at me. I stared out the windshield wishing I wasn't in a tux with my hair slicked back, so I could be driving past all the little pastel beach houses and white picket fences with my windows down. I glanced at the clock on my dashboard. I was still on time.

After I got dressed, I wrote a note to Mom, placing it on the plastic wrapped sandwich I left outside her door explaining where I was in case she came out of her room. After my twin sister, Kit, died, and Mom forced us to move states, I figured she'd be better. She'd return to normal. But I guess a change of scenery doesn't bring back your daughter or help you trust your son again. My phone began ringing, and I answered without checking the ID, expecting it to be Hadley making sure I wasn't running late.

"Shawn Glen, you know better than going somewhere without asking permission." I was wrong.

"Mom, it's just prom. I'm not driving cross country to go to a Bowling for Soup concert." I tried to keep the anger at bay. Her lack of faith in me always stung. I deserved it for being the reason Kitty was dead, but it didn't make it hurt any less. I didn't know the car was going to smash into us, but I also wasn't supposed to be on that road. But shouldn't my mom not have allowed us to drive ourselves with only a permit? I wanted to blame her the way she blamed me. I

wanted her to not be afraid of me when we were in the same room, to not watch her curl into herself as I loomed over her small frame. I wasn't even allowed to touch her anymore. The last time I tried was at Kitty's funeral a year ago. I had tried to hold her hand, but she ripped out of my grasp and stepped away. I wondered if she wished I'd disappear, if the burden of having to worry about me weighed too heavily on her shoulders constantly. It was the only thing keeping me in her life, or she'd leave me behind. I was the monster that kept her imprisoned in our home. My father had kept his job in New Mexico. He didn't want to deal with us anymore. They weren't divorced, but they didn't live together either. And it was my fault.

"You come home. You know the rules; no driving at night." I parked in front of the yellow house with the cobblestone walkway, grabbing the plastic box, stepping out of the car.

"Mom, I made a promise months ago to go to this dance. I told you back in April."

I stopped on the porch, sandwiching my phone between my ear and my shoulder as I fixed my hair. I noticed a curtain move through the front window of the house. By the time I looked up, no one was there. "I'm already at her house, anyway."

"Whose?" I strained to hear my mom over Hadley and her mom on the other side of the door, her mom asking who it was, and Hadley saying, "No one."

"Hadley. You've met. I brought her to the house once," I said. "I have to go. She's waiting on me." And with that, I hung up. I'd pay for it later. I rang the doorbell. Hadley opened the door then, her face tired.

"Oh, it's your school dance tonight," her mom said from the entryway. "Hello, Shawn Glen."

"Prom, Mom. And, no Shawn and I just like dressing in formal wear to lay around the house." Hadley made a face at how clueless her mom could be.

I smiled. "Hello, Mrs. May-Gruene." I glanced down at Hadley, taking in her black prom dress, the skirt puffy. Her blonde, and pink-streaked hair was curled into tight ringlets. I noticed the gold heart locket I bought for her birthday around her neck. I wondered if she had ever put something inside. I suggested a quote that meant a lot to her or a place that was significant to her life. "You look beautiful." I hoped I wasn't making a stupid love-struck face, because she would hate that. We were friends anyway. I didn't want to be, but I didn't want to lose her either. She was like a bird, fragile and always out of my reach. She didn't trust people anymore and I understood that too. Life had made her cautious.

"Thanks." Her smile didn't meet her eyes. Instead they were unfocused. She blew air out of her cheeks as she resituated her shawl in her arms.

"I didn't know what kind of dress you would be wearing, so I got a wrist corsage." I held out the box, a pale pink chrysanthemum nestled inside. She took it, examining the flower. I slid it on to her tiny wrist, tightening the ribbon so it wouldn't slide around all night. She ran her fingers over the petals. I watched and wished I knew what she was thinking about. "Ready to go?"

She nodded, sliding her arm through mine, as we walked to my car, her shouting her good-byes over her shoulder. She kept her hands folded in her lap as she stared out the window. "Maybe we shouldn't go," she said. I turned to look at her. "Maybe you should just pull over and I can walk back home."

I looked out my back window. We had barely been driving for five minutes, but I pulled over anyway. "What's going on?" She was biting her nails and twirling her necklace around her finger.

“I just thought I could do this but, I can’t.”  
Her eyes were watery, which was how I knew it was serious. She never allowed people to see her cry. She thought it made her look weak. She finally met my eyes. She was begging, as much as Hadley begged anyway.

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I was surprised she had wanted to go at all when she presented the tickets to me at lunch in April. I was sitting on the floor in the back, left corner of the library in the Manga section. Hadley came bustling into the aisle, and dropped her backpack down next to me, out of breath.

“We are going to prom,” she said, sitting down and flashing me the tickets.

“Oh my gosh, this is such a surprise. I had no idea. I would have dressed better if I knew this was happening today.”

“Shut up,” she said rolling her eyes, handing me the tickets.

I stuffed them in the front pocket of my backpack. “If I had known you wanted to go, I would have asked, but I figured you weren’t interested.” I felt bad.

Hadley hated going to school activities. The only ones she went to were my track meets, but she always sat at the very top of the bleachers with the stoners. I knew she hated it, but she came every time, wearing a shirt with my name and number on the back, and I loved her for it.

I wondered at times when I would look up and see her sitting there if we would have become friends eventually if she hadn’t come into the Italian restaurant I work at the end of summer, instantly reminding me of Kitty.

She didn't have any friends at school after Sophomore year. Her boyfriend, in short, tried to assault her sometime after his mom died, and Hadley was the only one really there for him. He changed the story and her ex-best friend and him, spread rumors till everyone turned on her. I was new this year. I didn't know anything about her. It was almost like we were fated to be friends.

We kept to ourselves. People like that always have a tendency to find each other. I don't really know how it happens. I think Hadley and I would have done that, if I hadn't followed her around at school after I found out we had a class together. I just had to get to know her, to be near someone with the same spunk Kitty had. It made me feel like she wasn't totally gone.

"I need to show my face," Hadley said. She had never sounded like that before, like a different person. She never cared what people thought, especially since everyone either hated her or was afraid of her. "I need to prove to Ashton and Lindsay that they can't keep me from doing anything. That they don't get to win."

"I'm confused."

"Ashton asked Lindsay to prom today after class."

"Yeah, so?"

"Lindsay was flaunting it in front of me because she thinks no one will ask me because how low on the totem pole I am. I told them that wasn't true because you already asked."

"But I didn't ask."

She sighed like I was being stupid on purpose. "I know."

"Are you saying you want to go because you don't want them getting in the way of you experiencing your first prom or that you want to get back at them?"

"I'm not going to poison the punch bowl if that's what you're asking. I'm just tired of them controlling me. I'm tired of playing the monster they made me out to be." She leaned her head back then, deflated. "I want to be happy. I want to go to prom with someone I actually trust. I want to dance and be having so much fun I won't notice all the people staring at me for once. Don't you want that too? Don't you want to not be freaks for one night?"

"We aren't freaks," I said, leaning my head back too.

"Yes, we are. I'm the school psycho. You're the guy that turned Ashton down when he offered you a place among the popular crowd."

"Yeah, track practice would be easier if I had taken him up on that." We both laughed. I understood what she was saying. She didn't want to be the damaged girl carrying around a dark secret, just like I didn't want to be the guy that killed his sister and destroyed his parents' marriage. That was who we were, but it could be possible that for once we didn't have to. We could just be teenagers, at a stupid prom with lame decorations and bad punch with overly played pop songs. I wanted that for her. I would do anything to give that to her.

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The sun had officially gone down, the car bathed in darkness, except for a streetlamp a little ways down the road. "How about we get there, and then if you still don't want to, we can go get dinner or something instead since we got all dressed up?" I didn't want her to miss out, or to regret not going later on.

"Okay," she said, putting her hands back in her lap. I put the car in drive, heading for the Boulder Coast Country Club.



I parked in the back of the lot since we were late, and it was almost full. I felt bad for her having to walk the distance in her heels, but she said she didn't mind. She opened her door, getting out and smoothing down her skirt, so I figured that meant we were actually going in. I offered her my arm again, and she looped hers through just like before. "Ready to go?"

"No," she said, but started walking anyway.

The theme was Enchanted Forest, so when we walked in, tree back drops were all over the walls of the ball room, pinecones were in the center of the tables in gold bowls, and little twinkle lights were strung all along the ceiling. I half expected fairies to be flitting about but looking at all the bell-shaped dresses girls were wearing, I decided that was close enough. "Do you want to get a spot at a table?"

"Yeah." I followed her to a table near the back of the dance floor, away from the stage. She set her shawl down, surveying the snack table. "I think I'm going to get some cheesecake," she said, walking off. I sat down glancing at all of our classmates dancing and laughing at tables with their friends. I tried to avoid catching Ashton's eye, as he danced with Lindsay, since they had noticed us walk in and were both staring in my direction with sour expressions like they'd just stuck a hand full of War Head candy in their mouths. I used to do that, and I'm positive that was exactly what I looked like. Hadley came back to the table offering me a spoon. "They were out of forks, and I didn't feel like waiting for someone to run to the kitchen and get more."

"That's fine," I said.

We ate in silence, Hadley bobbing her head to the beat. I wondered if she knew any of the words to the songs playing. Pop wasn't her style. I wondered if

it used to be. I tried to imagine her in a glittery pink dress slow dancing with Ashton and giggling in the girls' bathroom with Lindsay as they reapplied lip gloss. The girl that sat with me now would never do any of those things. She was a hard shell. I wondered if I would've wanted to be friends with that Hadley, or if I would've looked her over thinking she was just another popular crowd clone. I wondered if she would have liked the old me better. The one without circles under his eyes, that had to figure out how to take care of himself and his mother on his own. The one who went running more than he did anything else otherwise he'd explode from all the guilt, and anger and grief weighing on his shoulders. That constantly thought about Kitty and Hadley, because they were all that kept him from losing himself entirely.

"Do you want to dance?" Hadley was staring at me. "We've been here for like an hour. I didn't really want to sit here all night."

I smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. I zoned out." I stood up and held out my hand.

"Obviously," she said.

We stayed in the back of the dance floor. A slow song was playing I'd never heard before, but it was pretty and had an easy beat to follow. Hadley wrapped her arms around my neck, mine resting on her waist. We left space between us, because I knew she'd prefer it that way. "Do you like the theme?"

"People don't typically talk during slow dances," she said. I nodded. "The theme is nice," she said then. She rested her head against my chest, and I hated myself for holding my breath as soon as she did it. I focused on swaying and the small, pink and green lights that skimmed across her dress as the disco ball rotated above us, and I tried not to ruin anything for the duration of the song.

When it ended a teacher took the stage, holding an envelope. "It's time to crown the king and queen," he said into the mic. The students around us stopped, as they began clapping and shouting.

"Do you want to go sit down during this?"

"No," she said. She seemed nervous, but I couldn't understand why, until I caught Lindsay looking smugly in our direction, her arm snug around Ashton like she was telling everyone she had claimed him and to back off not that anyone would dare mess with them. "I want to stay here."

"And the winner of prom king is... Ashton Meyers!" Ashton didn't even act surprised, he just kind of pushed Lindsay off of him and climbed on to the stage, the rest of my track team whooped and hollered obnoxiously. A student on the prom committee placed a crown on his head, and he bowed.

"And the prom queen this year is... Hadley May-Gruene? Is this right? I don't remember this student being on the ballot." The teacher kept pointing at the card trying to get the student helping him explain, but she was as confused as he was.

But it all made sense to everyone else, laughter erupting around us as people turned around. Hadley's face was red, but I couldn't tell if it was from anger or embarrassment. I could see tears in her eyes, though. She mumbled something under her breath I couldn't make out.

People split down the middle, Lindsay making her way toward us. "Like anyone would vote for you!" she shouted. "Go home, Psycho Slut!" And she threw her punch on to Hadley's dress. The real queen of the Enchanted Forest was out for blood, her subjects falling in line behind her. And suddenly, the trees on the walls felt as though we were lost in the woods, monsters lurking in the shadows.

Everyone else joined in screaming “Go home, Psycho Slut!” splashing us with punch, both of us backing up and spinning around trying to avoid the splashing as best as possible from all directions, until Derk dumped the entire punch bowl over our heads from behind. Red liquid was in my eyes, and I swiped at my face, seething. Hadley looked like she had been in a blood bath, like she had been murdered. It scared me, and I pictured Kitty again after she went through the windshield in the wreck. I spun around and punched him, his nose making a satisfying crack, just like mine did last year when I picked a fight with a football player for telling me no one cared Kitty was dead. It was Lindsay I wanted to punch, but Derk would have to do.

“Stop! Stop it! Stop!” Hadley was screaming at me, pulling on my clothes.

“Stay down,” I spit stepping over Derk on the floor. My hands were red, but the blood had mixed with the red punch and I couldn’t tell what there had been more of any longer. Hadley pulled me out of the ball room, as she stormed back to the car. I had no clue how she was walking so fast in her heels, punch droplets flinging off of her skin and hair.

The air was cool when we burst through the doors of the country club, and into the night air. “Hadley, slow down!” I said, jogging to catch up to her. I reached for her elbow, but she jerked away from me, the same burning hurt I felt when my mother rejected me coursed through my veins.

“Get the hell away from me,” she said, walking away.

“Are you mad at me? I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have punched Derk.”

“I don’t care that you punched Derk. I care that you made it worse.”

“Worse? Look at yourself. How did I make it worse?”

“I don’t mean tonight, Shawn Glen.” She never said my middle name. She thought it was stupid I used it. It wasn’t my fault. My family had called me that since I was little. Even my extended family, my friends.

I stopped walking. “What do you mean then?” I hated how small my voice sounded.

“Me being friends with you has made my life more difficult than it already was. You are as exiled as I am, and the two of us together makes it even worse.”

“I don’t understand.” I was trying to make sense of her words. I could hear them, but they were jumbling up in my head. “Are you saying I’m a burden?”

She was crying. I could tell by the clear streams slithering down her cheeks as they sliced through the drying red mess on her face. “Yes.”

I finally understood. She was pushing me away. If she hurt me bad enough, she knew I’d leave her, so she could prove to herself how alone she really was. That I wasn’t permanent. Sometimes I wanted to either kiss her or shake her, so she’d finally understand she’s not as alone as she thought she was. Tonight, I just wanted to finally let her be right. “Fine. I’m sorry my existence makes life hard for you, Your Majesty.” I started walking away.

“This wouldn’t have happened if you’d just let me get out of the car earlier.”

I stopped, spun around and started back toward her. “No, this wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t told Lindsay I asked you to prom. You said that. You used me to help you get back at them. Don’t act like you’re innocent. You’re always playing the victim.

Well, sometimes you're not, Hadley. Sometimes you're the bad guy. Take responsibility for yourself, or at least do something about it." I was in her face then, pointing my finger in her direction, my eyes watering.

"You mean like how you still won't tell your mom how you feel or tell her off for how awful she treats you? You mean like that? You said you would talk to her months ago, Shawn Glen. And here you are still making her dinner and running back to her and apologizing."

"You don't get to lecture me. This isn't high school crap that you will forget about one day after you go off to college and then become some big time CEO or whatever. This is real. This isn't, *'Oh I used to be popular. Oh, Shawn Glen, people used to worship me. Now I'm a bitch because I'm not wearing a shiny gold tiara on my head anymore.'* My sister's dead. My parents don't even live in the same damn state anymore, and my mother hates me. That's what really being alone is like. Stop thinking you're so freaking special. The world doesn't revolve around you, Hadley. Trust me. I learned that a long time ago."

"Go to Hell!" she shouted at me. She tugged the locket off her neck, mashing it into my hand, pushing past me.

"Oh, that was a great come back!" I yelled back at her. I didn't know where she was going. I didn't know how she planned to get home.

I opened the locket. Inside was a picture of us. I sat down on the steps. I imagined us dancing in there, laughing and spinning around in fast circles, and because I felt like it, I imagined Kitty there too. We were alive and aglow with happiness because we had no real problems. It was just high school, and in a year, it would end, and we'd realize how cruel life could be.

Alicia Combs, Poetry

**Outside/Inside**

Inside you're crying,  
tears cascading.

But I'm standing outside.

My face against the glass, I call to you.  
I want to help.

My love is written in stone,  
So, I'm throwing rocks,

but I break more than I fix.

My face against the glass, I call to you.  
I want to help.  
I'm sorry.  
I just wanted to help.

My hand pressed against the glass,  
I can't reach you

but I'm here if you need me.

I'm standing outside.  
I want to help.  
You're crying.  
Please let me inside.





## Contributors' Notes

**Clinton Bolton** is a Navy veteran from Timpson, Texas currently living in Nacogdoches. He is a Junior at SFA pursuing a bachelor's degree in creative writing.

**Alicia Combs** is a junior at Stephen F. Austin. She is an Orientation and Mobility major and Creative Writing minor. Alicia was born in Germany (unfortunately she didn't pick up any German), and her current hometown is Wylie, TX. Her favorite weather is raging thunderstorms when she can cocoon herself in blankets to read and drink probably too much tea.

**Brianna Dunston** is a creative writing major from Odessa, Texas finishing her second year at SFA. She is a T.E. Ferguson Creative Writing Scholarship recipient and the first-place winner in the poetry category of the Piney Dark 2020 Horror contest.

**Christina Ellison** is currently a junior at SFA studying creative writing and literature. From a young age, growing up in Spring, Texas, Christina has enjoyed reading books and creating stories. She would like to thank her friends and family for being so supportive of her throughout her writing journey.

**Mary C. Hancock** is a Creative Writing major at Stephen F. Austin State University. Her goal is to be an author and teach on the subject. She was born in Nacogdoches, Tx and now lives in the tiny town of Garrison, TX. As a fan of horses, she has chosen to write about her own experience with breaking "Shadow."

**Shelby Hunt** is from Atlanta, Georgia. She moved to Georgetown, Texas when she was 15. Shelby is currently a Freshman at SFA and is majoring in Creative Writing. You can usually find her writing or curled up with a book in her hands.

**Amelia Kleiber** is a sophomore from Katy, Texas. She is studying English with a focus in Secondary Education and a minor in Creative Writing. She is so excited to have her poetry accepted into Humid for a second time and has enjoyed improving her writing over the past year. When she isn't helping edit essays at the AARC or serving as a student leader at the Baptist Student Ministry, she likes to read, spend time with family and friends, and write on white boards as much as possible.

**Cierra Krause** is a native to Deer Park, Texas and will graduate from Stephen F. Austin State University in December 2020 with a BFA in Creative Writing. Once she graduates, she will be pursuing an MFA in Publishing at SFA. She was awarded Best Fiction in the 2019 SFA Literary Awards. She has a short story published in Bright Flash Literary Review and a poem published in the SFA Subplot's Koala Love chapbook.

**Hiba Kunwer** is an immigrant from Karachi, Pakistan who moved to the United States in 2016. She is an Environmental Geology major, minoring in Creative Writing and Applied Statistics.

**Beau McAfee** is a senior at Stephen F. Austin State University and will be graduating in May with a major in Theatre and a minor in Creative Writing. She is from Red Oak, Texas, a town south of Dallas. She looks forward to pursuing her passions in the arts after graduation.

**Michael Oglesby** is a sophomore attending SFA for a creative writing major, Hailing from Garland, Texas. He had found a purpose in writing and thoroughly enjoys poetry, along with writing fiction. His favorite Novellas are in the fantasy genre, and one day he hopes to publish his own fantasy novel.

**Carson Owens** is a 23-year-old senior creative writing major at SFA. Originally from Longview, TX, she grew up writing stories and drawing as a hobby. She graduated from Longview High School with credits from the International Baccalaureate program; the rigorous English coursework within the program is what inspired her to become a creative writer.

**Kaitlyn Stockholm** moved from Beaumont to Denton Texas, where she was active in theatre and youth ministry. She will graduate from SFA with a bachelor's in History (Secondary Education) with a minor in Creative Writing in the fall of 2021. Her love of history, adventure, and storytelling came from her Grandparents and her father, her love for reading and others from her mother, and her humor from always wanting to make her older sister, friends, and extended family laugh.

**Leta Machogu**, when not writing poetry, is working toward her Bachelor of Science in Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Through teaching and interpreting, she strives to create respect and positive changes between the hearing and Deaf communities. She believes language has power whether signed, spoken, or written. She wants to thank her aunt for her endless support and also her husband for inspiring her poem "Hands."

**Nathan Thompson** is a Creative Writing BFA major at Stephen F. Austin State University. His play *The Fabric of Our Reality* was produced as a part of the off-stage 2018-19 Centennial Highschool series. Originally from Frisco, TX, he currently resides in Nacogdoches, TX. This is his first publication.

**Kennedy Thurmond** is a senior this year in the Creative Writing program at SFA. She's from Richmond, Texas. She plans to go attend graduate school for Library Science. She hopes to one day publish novels and be a New York Times bestseller. She wants to thank her family and friends for always believing in her writing.

**Abbie Williams** is a freshman at Stephen F. Austin State University.