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Table of Contents

1	May Sunlight Follow You	Ily Crawford
21	Dear Future Carmen	Ivana Cortez
38	A Hell Beyond Hell	Lawrence Matthews
40	Butterfly Effect	Victoria Hoover
42	Like My Tree	Arron McMorris
43	Time's Touch	Lauren Brown
44	Take Your Time	Megan Bynum
45	Is It Wrong To Try To Pick Up Girls With A Fairy?	Bradley Cavanaugh
63	Levi95 Is Typing...	Kelli Tucker
74	Forgiven	Abigayle Duke
75	As We Lay Dying	Sarah Forest Cisco
76	Drawing Breaths	Sarah Forest Cisco

77	Phasing	Arron McMorris
78	“These Things” Being Death	Kelli Tucker
80	Peaceful Sting	Abigayle Duke
82	Gator Grin	Abigayle Duke
83	To Purge At The Narrator’s Discretion	Meg Arney
91	The Hazed Council (THC)	Marissa Mondragon
114	Raging Seas	Lawrence Matthews
116	The Blood of Tradition	Kelli Tucker
118	The Well	MJ Trook
121	Too Many Options Takes Away the Convenience	Kelli Tucker

May Sunlight Follow You

Ily Crawford

Hands clasped together, Aurore knelt in front of the altar, her light blue dress fanning out around her as if the sea waves had risen up to robe her. She had never seen the sea, but she'd collected stories all her life from visitors to the palace and children from the outer villages about its majesty. It and the sun. Living in Citétoiles, the capital of Celestion, she was no stranger to stars. They were everywhere, but none so great as the sun.

Focus, Aurore reprimanded herself. She amended her prayer, asking the gods to forgive her wandering mind. Opening her eyes, she took in the altar. She had been building over the years in a nook on the far wall of her room. It was lined with dark blue fabrics and silver candlesticks. In the center sat a golden tray, where she would place her daily offerings. Today, there was a glass of red wine, a stick of cinnamon, and a silver pin Florian had brought her a few weeks ago. It was a human heart, pierced by a sword. Aurore thought it was gruesome. Florian thought it was cool.

Sighing, she closed her eyes again and finished her prayer. *Je regarderai les étoiles*. I will look to the stars. It was one of several of the traditional blessings, placed at the end of

prayers or given to others. This one was used when seeking guidance from the gods, and she would need them tonight. Aurore snuffed out the candles. Her mind was fickle today. Perhaps she should ask Clémence to pray for her.

The thud of a body hitting the ground startled her out of her thoughts. She whirled around, her voice coming out a strangled sort of shout before she recognized the culprit.

Florian from the floor put a finger to their lips.

From outside her chamber, Aurore heard the voice of her guard. "Is everything alright, Learned Aurore?"

"Yes. Just a bug," she called back, pushing herself off her knees. The guard seemed satisfied with this answer, as her door remained closed, and he did not question further. Aurore crossed the room to the opposite wall, where a large window was hanging open. "The window, Florian?" She offered a hand to her fallen friend.

Florian straightened their spectacles, groaning as they accepted help. Their black curls were strewn every which way, but that wasn't abnormal.

"Good ol' Raphaël wouldn't let me in." They juted a thumb to the doors, where the guard stood posted outside. "Alas, I thought we had something."

Aurore bit back a chuckle. “You know his name?”

“You don’t? I’m beginning to think I’m more acquainted with your guards than you are.”

Aurore rolled her eyes, knowing they were teasing, but it was probably true. As the next High Priestess, she was meant to form as few earthly connections as possible, to be more in tune with the gods, or *les sans noms*, as they were called among the most pious. The gods were above such mortal labels like names or gender. To even call them gods was to put a title on them, to imply that human understanding could even truly comprehend their existence. So Clémence kept a healthy rotation of guards outside of Aurore’s chamber, to lessen the likelihood that she might befriend them. For Florian, this meant it was much harder to charm them into letting them pass.

“Clémence won’t like that you’re here. Especially not before the masquerade.”

Florian waved their hand. “Yeah, yeah. I know. Clémence doesn’t like me anyway.”

“That’s not true.”

Florian’s silence was answer enough.

“She would like you more if you actually *listened*.”

“Then I wouldn’t get to see you. It’s been two weeks. I’m willing to risk her wrath.”

Florian grinned their lopsided smile, and Aurore found herself smiling back. Florian

had a way of making her feel like nothing else mattered in the world. Like, for a moment, she was just a normal teenager, having fun with her best friend, rather than bearing the weight of the future of a religion and nation. But she shouldn't think like that. Her position was a blessing. She was lucky. The gods had chosen her.

"What do you want?" Aurore crossed her arms, watching Florian leap backward onto her bed, arms spread wide. When she didn't move, Florian patted the bedding. Aurore conceded, laying down carefully. She folded her hands on her stomach, and together they looked up at the ceiling, which was painted to look like a sunlit sky.

"I got a letter from Héloïse," Florian finally said.

Aurore propped herself up on her elbows.

"Your sister?"

Florian nodded.

"How? She's been in Ilwich for forever."

"Eleven years." Florian had come to the palace when they were six, joining the ragtag collection of orphans chosen as candidates to be the successor of High Priestess Clémence. "Family is a very strong bond," Clémence had said when Aurore asked why only orphans were selected. Florian was unique in that aspect, however, as they had lived with their sister until she was exiled for her

“experiments.” Normally such a connection would have eliminated them as an option, but those who fell between man and woman were seen as holy people. They were able to shed the mortal confines of gender and were therefore a step closer to the gods. Florian despised this, though. They insisted their gender, or lack thereof, had nothing to do with the gods.

“She shouldn’t have been able to contact you. There are laws—”

“I sent her a letter first,” Florian said. They looked at Aurore, and seeing her shocked expression, laughed. Fixing their gaze back on the ceiling, they continued, “You might want to take your holy hat off for this one.”

Aurore opened her mouth to speak but pressed her lips together.

“I stole the master key from Émeric and searched the royal archives. I found the documents detailing her exile. It took some digging, and don’t ask me how, but after a few letters I was able to track her down.”

“Florian, that’s *illegal*.”

“Hey. Holy hat. Off.” Florian reached up and traced shapes in the air. “Anyway, she’s about 26 now. She’s married and has a child. But she says she wishes I was there with her.”

Aurore turned her head to look at Florian. She traced her eyes along their profile, which was outlined by the moonlight pouring in from the window. Florian had sharp features, a

strong chin, and severe nose. She had always thought they would have been the perfect subject for a sculpture, but she was no god-blessed artisan, and she certainly wasn't going to tell anyone those thoughts had crossed her mind. Quickly, she turned her own gaze back up to the ceiling, ignoring the heat she felt creeping up her neck.

"But you can't go with her. You know that, right?" Aurore said softly. Celestion proudly conducted commerce with other nations, but they shunned Ilwich. About fifty years ago, they turned from the way of the gods in favor of scientific pursuits. Such things were considered heresy. "Science" was the territory of the gods. Things beyond human comprehension. They were not meant to tread those waters.

She was met with silence.

Aurore sat up, looking down at her friend. "Florian, what are you thinking?"

Florian averted her gaze. "I dunno. I mean, you'll be High Priestess soon enough. Can't you lift the ban on Ilwich? Would communication with them truly be so bad? Héloïse told me about all the stuff they have there. Did you know they have a device that captures light and turns it into an image? Like a painting, but real."

"No." Her voice was harsh.

Florian froze, eyes flicking to her.

“You think that because I am your friend, I will excuse your sins. But I will not hear this blasphemy. I know you have always been drawn to the mysteries of this world, but what the Ilwyns do is heretical, and you shouldn’t have any part of that.” It hurt her to speak those words, but they needed to be said.

Florian pushed themselves up. They stared at her, as if they were debating what to say. Something shifted in their gaze. “Alright.” Several moments of silence passed before, “Do you ever wish you weren’t Clémence’s successor?”

Aurore took in the question. “Sometimes I wish I could leave Citétoiles and explore. See the sun and the sea. And I wish this role didn’t mean keeping you at a distance. But no. I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

“Anything?”

“No,” Aurore answered firmly. Her faith was enough. It had to be. For the whole country. So why did she feel disappointed in her own answer? “Would you trade your apprenticeship with Émeric for anything?”

Florian looked Aurore in the eyes. “Yeah. For a lot of things.”

Aurore tilted her head. Sometimes she felt like she didn’t understand Florian. Here they were, two orphans, two nobodies, plucked from nowhere and given a life in the palace. They were apprenticed to the Royal Astrologer. She

was to be the next High Priestess. The gods had favored them both, so how could they not be grateful for it?

“But I stay for one thing.”

Aurore’s lips parted. “What—”

There was a knock at the door.

Florian leapt up. “That’s my cue.” They crawled out the window, pausing before they left view completely. They fished something out of a pocket and held it up. Émeric’s master key. “Do you mind returning this for me?” They tossed her the key, and Aurore stumbled to catch it.

“Why can’t you?”

Winking, they said, “See you tonight.”

And with that, they were gone.

Aurore had never seen a room so filled with people. She had been in the ballroom many times throughout her life, and she was used to its spectacle. It had a white marbled floor with a spiral of individual black stars, one for each of the gods, in the center of a gray-tiled circle, representative of the moon. Golden arches, meant to be an imitation of the sun’s rays that never reached Citétoiles, reached high, leading up to the ceiling, where stars peeked through, watching over the room as if they were the eyes of the gods themselves. But today, the room’s details were hardly visible through the packed crowd of courtesans and artisans.

They were a sea of varying shades of blues, purples, and yellows. Tonight, only Aurore and Clémence were allowed to wear white. The masquerade was in her honor, after all.

She felt the weight of a hand settle on her shoulder. Looking up, she found Clémence smiling down at her. Clémence was a regal woman. Everything about her was strong and proper. She was tall, with deep brown skin, high cheekbones, and black locs threaded with gray.

Her smile was kind and proud, and her voice soft when she said, "You have earned this night, faithful one. *Vous avez des étoiles dans vos os.*" You have stars in your bones. It was a blessing, meant to encourage strength.

Tonight, Aurore would be officially presented as Clémence's heir. Tonight, Citétoiles' finest would decide for themselves whether she was worthy of the future of the faith and their country. She took a deep breath.

"Are you ready?" Clémence pulled Aurore's shoulders back, making her stand taller.

Aurore nodded. "Yes." Her voice came out weaker than she'd intended.

Clémence stepped forward. The two of them stood on the dais, overlooking the guests.

"Good evening, honored guests," The High Priestess began. She spread her arms wide, a welcoming gesture. The partygoers bowed their masked faces. "I have had the blessed

honor of guiding Celestion on its holy path these past twenty-seven years. The gods have made our country strong and fruitful. Although this leadership has been a true blessing, there will come a time when the mantle must be passed to another. We are here, gathered in honor of *les sans noms*, to celebrate she who will be granted this gift, this title, and this burden someday: Aurore des Dieux.

The ballroom broke into applause. Aurore forced herself to smile. She hadn't heard her full name in a long time. "Des Dieux" was a surname given to orphans with no record of their family. It meant "of the gods."

Aurore cleared her throat. "Thank you. Please let the festivities begin." The guests once again bowed their heads, and the music began to play. People shuffled in every direction to find drinks, confections, and dance partners. It was almost a dance on its own, Aurore considered.

"Well done, faithful one," Clémence spoke. Aurore turned to face her. Clémence was the closest thing she'd ever had to a mother. She had never had a strong desire for a family. Growing up among other orphans, she hadn't been given the opportunity to see what it might have even been like. But Clémence had been a mentor figure for her. Sure, she'd never made her soup when she was sick or comforted her when she woke up from a nightmare, but she'd been supportive of her and her journey.

“Thank you,” Aurore beamed.

“I would give you a long speech about how proud I am of you and your faith,” Clémence said, grasping one of Aurore’s hands, “But you’ve already a line of anxious guests waiting to make your acquaintance.” It was true, a small crowd had gathered at the foot of the dais of masked individuals. Aurore felt her stomach flip. This would be a long night.

Her cheeks were on fire. If Aurore had a coin for every blessing she’d given, hand she’d shaken, and name she’d forgotten, she could have bought her own palace. Every once in a while, a surge in the music would catch her ear, and she would find herself sneaking glances at the tables stacked with snacks or the dancers weaving to and fro, and then back at the never-ending line of people eager to make an underwhelming impression. She’d gotten into the groove of it, barely even registering those who she was greeting, until one courtesan approached, donning a dark blue mask in the image of a fox.

“Your Illustriousness.” Florian fell into an elaborate bow. Aurore relaxed.

“Thank the gods, Florian,” she breathed.

Florian lifted the mask from their face, eyes bright.

“Learnèd Florian.” Clémence’s voice did not sound pleased.

“High Priestess.” Florian bowed again, more modestly this time. “I was wondering if I may steal your apprentice away for a dance.” They straightened up, smoothing out the wrinkles in their lavender doublet.

Clémence sighed, “There are still many guests wishing to meet her.”

Florian looked at Aurore. “Do *you* want to dance?”

Aurore bit the inside of her cheek. “I’ve been standing here for an hour.”

“I promise to behave.” Florian clasped their hands together in a dramatic fashion.

“Fine,” Clémence answered reluctantly. “But only one dance.” When Aurore went to move, Clémence grabbed her arm. “You know this cannot continue. Because this is your night, I will allow it, for your sake.”

“I understand, High Priestess.” Aurore slipped out of Clémence’s grip.

“You’re the best!” Florian called back, looping an arm through Aurore’s and leading her to the ballroom floor.

Florian placed one hand on the small of Aurore’s back and guided one of her hands to their shoulder.

“I haven’t danced in so long,” Aurore admitted as the music began anew. She looked down at her feet, the moves slowly coming back to her.

“Clémence never lets you have any fun,” Florian replied, gently leading her through the steps.

“There are more important things than fun.”

“I haven’t found them.” Florian was joking, but the comment pricked Aurore. She knew Florian didn’t have as strong a faith as she did, but it still irked her every time they made a jab at it.

She heard Florian take a breath and looked up. They opened their mouth, then closed it again.

“What?” She asked, her dress swaying as they twirled.

“I’m going to leave. Soon. After this dance.” Florian’s words came out in a rush, and Aurore felt their grip on her tighten.

“What?” She asked again, this time softer.

“I’m going to Ilwich. With my sister. And I didn’t want to go without saying goodbye.”

Aurore stumbled, and Florian caught her. Other dancing couples gave them harsh looks. Aurore righted herself, and they continued.

“You can’t leave. That’s...”

“Illegal. Yes. Heresy. I know.”

Aurore wasn’t even sure she could hear the music anymore. Her thoughts swirled around in her head, raging like a storm.

“Why?” Her heart was beating fast. She couldn’t let them go. They were all she had.

She'd never tried to get to know any of the other candidates when she was younger, determined to be the chosen one. She'd been careful to form as few earthly bonds as possible. But she hadn't been able to stop Florian. She'd been drawn to them like the tides to the moon. Without Florian, she was... alone. No. No, she had the gods.

"You know why. I'm not happy here. I'm not an artist, so I'll never get a god-blessing. I'm a passable astrologist. I only got the apprenticeship because Clémence wanted to keep me busy. There's so much knowledge in the world, and I want to explore it all. I can do that in Ilwich. Not here. I'm not meant to be here."

This was blasphemy. Citétoiles was a holy city. Celestion was a holy country. Ilwich had abandoned the gods, and now Florian was abandoning her.

"You're the only reason I stay, Aurore," Florian continued. "But even this can't last forever. You'll become High Priestess...and I'll still be here."

Aurore shook her head. "What are you saying, Florian?"

"I never said anything over the years I've known you. You were so ambitious to be High Priestess. I didn't want to get in the way. That was foolish of me, because now it's too late. I love you, Aurore, and I know you can't love

me back.” Florian was looking her dead in the eyes. Their tone was serious. “I won’t ask you to come with me. I won’t ask you to leave all this behind. It’s unfair to you, dumping this on you now, but I figured it’s better than leaving anything unsaid.”

The music began to slow, and Aurore knew the song was coming to an end.

“Florian, wait—”

“Gods be with you, Aurore.” The music stopped. Her heart was pounding in her chest. Her cheeks were hot. Florian grabbed her hand delicately and pressed their lips to it. “*Je te verrai dans les étoiles.*” I’ll see you in the stars. It was a goodbye.

They slipped away, disappearing into the flurry of people finding their way on and off the ballroom floor. Aurore stood frozen. Her hand tingled where Florian had kissed it. She pressed her palm over her mouth, holding back a sob. They couldn’t run away. Not from her. Not from the gods. This had to be a test of faith. She couldn’t let Florian turn to sin like that. She had to save them. Eyes blurring with tears, Aurore whipped around, weaving briskly through the crowd to get to the dais. People reached out to her and called her name, but she ignored them all.

“Clémence!” She gasped. The High Priestess turned her gaze on her.

Noting her panicked disposition, Clémence stepped down. “What is it, child?”

“Florian, they—” Her voice caught.
“They’ve been sending letters to their sister in Ilwich. They’re going to run away.” The words tore out of her, and with them came a wave of guilt so strong she felt it might drown her. This was the right thing to do, she told herself.

Clémence’s head snapped up. She signaled to the guards flanking the dais. “Find Learned Florian. Now.”

One guard left to relay the message, while the others started pushing through the room. Aurore watched, horrified.

What had she done?

Nothing. She had done nothing. Florian was in the wrong. Florian had betrayed her and the gods.

But that didn’t stop the tears from running down her face. Clémence pulled her into an embrace, placing a hand on the back of her head.

“I know,” Clémence whispered. “I know. But you have shown great faith.”

Aurore squeezed her eyes shut, only hearing the commotion. Guards shouted, guests screamed. What had she done?

Aurore wandered the halls like a ghost, barely registering the servants and staff members who wished her congratulations as she passed. The rest of the masquerade went smoothly, but Aurore had retired early. The

people would be disappointed, but Clémence gave her blessing.

Aurore's mind told her that she'd done the right thing. If she hadn't, she would have been going against everything she'd been taught. She would have been betraying the gods. To let such a crime happen without lifting a hand to stop it was as bad as committing it herself. If Florian was to be missing in the morning, and Aurore's involvement, or lack thereof, was discovered, she could lose her place as High Priestess. She couldn't lose that. It was all she had. Well, except for Florian. But she'd ruined any possibility of that.

She stood outside of her room, hand resting on the doorknob. Just as she found it within herself to turn it, she broke down. Pressing her forehead against the cool wood of the door, sobs wracked her body. So, she turned to the only thing she had left.

"Please," she pleaded with the gods between gasping breaths, "Please." It was the only word she could manage. Her hand slipped from the doorknob, and she tucked it into the folds of her dress where her fingers brushed against something cold. She froze, pulling the item out. Émeric's master key. The one Florian had given her. She'd meant to return it before the masquerade but must've forgotten.

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth, staring at the golden key in her hand.

Florian hadn't been taken to the dungeons. Rather, they'd been locked up in an empty room not far from Clémence's office. Clémence intended to deal with them as soon as the festivities were through, but a dark, damp dungeon awaited Florian regardless of their current lodgings.

"Learnèd Aurore." A guard, Raphaël, she remembered Florian saying, bowed his head as she approached.

Aurore bowed her head back. "I would like to see the prisoner."

Raphaël traded a look with the other guard, who stood on the opposite side of the door. "Are you sure that's wise, m'lady?"

"I would like to pray with them before Clémence and the gods serve judgment," Aurore replied, keeping her voice as cool as she was able. It was customary for those awaiting judgment to pray with a holy figure before they stood trial.

Hesitantly, Raphaël unlocked the door and gestured for Aurore to enter.

"I'm afraid you can't stay for long," he said.

"Of course. Thank you."

She walked through the doorway and listened for the click of the door before she dared to look at Florian. They were huddled in a corner, knees pulled to their chest. Their unruly curls were a tangled mess, their clothes

wrinkled. A bruise was welling under one of their eyes and there was a cut on their lip. They held crooked spectacles in their hands.

"Florian..." Aurore started to speak, but her voice tapered out.

Florian refused to meet her gaze. They stared at the floor, curling in on themselves.

Aurore pulled the master key from her sleeve. She didn't think she could live another day in the palace knowing Florian was rotting in a dungeon because of her. The gods would have to forgive her of this. Slowly, she knelt in front of Florian and placed the key on the ground.

"It should work for the window." She stood back up, wringing her hands in her sleeves.

Florian's gaze turned to the key. They reached for it, then looked at Aurore.

"I'm sorry," Aurore whispered. The words sounded foolish when she said them. They weren't enough, but they were all she had.

Florian picked himself off the ground and walked past her, going to the window. They tried the key, and it worked. They cracked it open.

"You don't want to keep your sister waiting."

Florian nodded. They both stood in silence.

"I hope you get to see the sun and the sea one day," Florian said, their words so soft Aurore almost missed them.

“You’ll get to see them for me.” Aurore smiled sadly.

Florian nodded again.

Tears pricking her eyes, Aurore reached out and grabbed Florian’s hand. She kissed it. “*Que la lumière du soleil vous suive.*” May sunlight follow you. It was a blessing given to one going on a journey.

Florian looked at her, finally. They held each other’s gaze. A tear fell down Florian’s cheek, and they wiped it.

Florian pulled away, pushing the window open further. They looked back, paused, then winked. And with that, they were gone.

Dear Future Carmen

Ivana Cortez

Are things any better?

Carmen pretended to be occupied with her shoes as she hovered at Mr. Shay's door. The art teacher always let her eat her lunches in his room. The noises and smells of the cafeteria overwhelmed her, and she found solace in the quiet of the classroom. The smells of old paint and pencil shavings were preferable. It also did not help that she had no one to sit with in the cafeteria. No pressure to sit beside someone in Mr. Shay's classroom.

At the sound of the lock clicking, Carmen looked up. There at the door was Mr. Shay. He was tall and slender and very bald. He looked at Carmen through the tops of his readers and grinned.

"Sorry for the delay—I was in a conference."

Carmen offered him a short nod before eagerly escaping into the classroom. She found her favorite seat (by Mr. Shay's desk on the opposite side of the room) and sat. As she dove into the contents of her bookbag, her head was a swarm of thoughts.

Dear future Carmen,

The letter started on the top line of notebook paper. It was no doubt torn out of a journal with kittens on the front.

My name is Carmen, and I'm 11 years old. I am in the 5th grade. I am about to go to middle school, and I'm really really scared.

The words were scrawled in a pink glitter pen, barely visible against the white paper. The letters were deliberately swirling and connected to each other with precise curves. The result of being forced to write in cursive.

I wish I could ask you questions and that you could answer. But we are the same person, so it doesn't work that way. Are we still friends with Charlotte?

The memory of Charlotte made Carmen wince. No. They were not friends anymore.

Is our favorite color still pink?

No.

Are things any better?

Sincerely,
Carmen Mendoza, 11

She pressed her forehead to the edge of the desk and groaned. In fifth grade, Carmen's home room teacher, Ms. Corriveau, had asked the class to write letters to themselves as Seniors. She promised to deliver them to her students before they graduated. In first period, she found the envelope on her desk. Ms. Corriveau had dropped them off at the high school to distribute to students during first period. Carmen read the letter during her first class, and the glitter continued to haunt her well into her lunch period.

"You in a sour mood today?" Mr. Shay asked from behind his desk where he was printing assignments.

Carmen sighed, "I wish I could tell the younger me that I hate pink."

"You *hate* pink?"

Lifting her head from the table, she met Mr. Shay's blue eyes, "*Hate* it."

Carmen told Mr. Shay about the letter and showed him the vomit of cursive and glitter. He giggled excitedly.

"This is what has you in a bad mood? That you used to like pink as an 11-year-old girl?"

Carmen shifted her eyes back down to her shoes. This was only half true. Carmen grew up as an only child to her Mexican immigrant parents. They doted on their daughter all throughout her childhood. Putting her in frilly dresses and painting the walls of her childhood room pink. At the time, she adored it—but Carmen grew to shed her pink skin and started to refuse the dresses and repainted her walls to a deep green. She discarded her Barbies and any artifact of her femininity. Her parents lamented her *tomboyish* phase. Once she became a senior, she kept her long black curls up in a bun and wore loose-fitting pants and shirts. She rejected femininity as harshly as she could. The evidence of her previous enjoyment of it was laid out before her in her letter.

The other part of the truth was the question young Carmen asked—*Are things any better?*
Were they?

“If little you were here right now—would you crush her little soul and say you scorn pink?” Mr. Shay was finding the subject all too funny.

Carmen scoffed, “No. I would just say we don’t like it anymore.”

Mr. Shay laughed a little as he stood up. He walked towards the door of the classroom and tightly shut the blinds looking into the hallway. His hands darted to the lock, and as he turned back to face Carmen, his eyes had taken on a more serious look. His demeanor had shifted so quickly that Carmen began to feel goosebumps spring on her arms.

"You can meet her if you want—little you."

The sudden change in character was alarming to Carmen. She felt the hair on the back of her neck stand with anticipation. It was very unlike the goofy art teacher to have such a sternness behind his eyes.

She gulped, "Mr. Shay?"

He cleared his throat and stood up straighter as he leaned against the door, "Have you ever wondered what's on the other side of the closet door I never let anyone look into?" He motioned his hand to the back of the classroom where a plain, beige steel door stood. Carmen had never noticed it before. She shrugged.

"Well, young Carmen, what if I told you there is a machine in there that I have spent most of my life and your family's tax dollars to construct? A device that allows a person to jump from one place in time to another with ease? A construction so revolutionary that I've been forced to go into hiding as an art teacher

and to hide such a thing in a nondescript classroom?”

Carmen's jaw moved on its own as it hung from her face in disbelief.

“So,” she started slowly, “a time machine?”

Mr. Shay grinned, “Precisely. And you can use it to go back in time and talk to little pink-loving you.”

Carmen took a sharp breath in as the possibilities flooded her mind. She could tell her how to prevent the fallout between her and Charlotte. She could tell her to start dressing differently sooner. She could tell her how to make things better.

“Yes. I'll do it. I want to do it.” Carmen rushed the words out of her mouth. She had never been so desperate to do something.

Mr. Shay lunged for the back of the classroom and beckoned Carmen to follow. He took from his belt his key ring and presented forth the most normal looking key in the bunch. He turned the key into the closet door, and with a click, it was unlocked. Carmen held her breath with excitement to see what a real-life time machine would look like.

And in that same moment, as the door swung open, she deflated. The closet was just a closet with shelves lining the perimeter and empty boxes in the back. She turned on her heels to walk back to her spot. Her face began to burn.

“Car!” Mr. Shay called out, “It’s supposed to look like that. I’ve disguised it to look unassuming.”

Carmen froze in her path. She wanted so desperately for the time machine to be real. Her watery brown eyes met his confident blue ones. She sighed and walked back to the steel door.

“Okay, you’re gonna have to trust me,” Mr. Shay explained, “when you step in you have to stay perfectly still. You can sit, stand—whatever. It doesn’t matter. Start thinking about when you want to go and hold your breath and pinch your nose until your ears pop. When you pop your ears, you can open your eyes, and you can step out of the closet. You will be on the opposite side of the door closest to wherever you were at that time. To come back, just go through the door you came in with your eyes closed, and you’ll be back in the closet.”

Carmen’s head spun with new instructions. She opened her mouth to ask him to repeat and before she got a word in, he continued.

“You get half an hour, only because lunch will be over by then. And if you don’t come back by then, you’re spending the day in the closet—I have classes to teach.”

Carmen nodded slowly and before she knew it, Mr. Shay was shoving her into the dark closet.

"I've got a timer set kiddo. Have fun making little you cry." The door slammed closed.

Carmen took a deep breath in and closed her eyes. She began to think of herself seven years ago—a little pig tailed girl in the 5th grade. But what else was she supposed to do? Pop her ears? What would happen if she did this wrong? Would there be any damages to the space time continuum if she talked to her past self? Why didn't she ask? Was she supposed to open her eyes before or after the pop?

She opened her eyes, and soon after, the pop rang loudly in her ears. She exhaled and very quickly took another deep breath in. Wherever she had ended up seemed to look like a closet. Maybe Mr. Shay was just messing with her. Sighing, she reached her hand out to wiggle the doorknob. To her surprise, it was unlocked. She twisted the knob and pushed it out.

A flood of light swallowed her vision. She squinted to clear her vision. Was Mr. Shay's class always this bright? She rubbed the light out and opened her eyes wide.

She was somewhere else. It worked! But where was she?

The floor beneath her was hardwood, and the room looked like a bedroom—but not hers at home. Not hers when she was a kid. This

bedroom was bigger and more sophisticated. Paintings of women and flowers decorated the walls. There was a bed pushed into a corner. It was a king bed with a white duvet crumpled over it. Carmen's eyes scanned the room until she reached the opposite corner of the room where there was a desk.

And a person *at* the desk.

Carmen watched the person, their back turned toward her. They had a short dark pixie cut that stuck out at jagged angles under the large headphones they wore. Their posture left something to be desired, and Carmen could hear the voice of her mother echoing in her head—*sit up straighter*. The mystery person was typing away at a desktop, paying no mind to Carmen.

But where were the pink walls? The suffocating smell of glue and Britney Spears' *Fantasy*? Any reminiscence of her childhood was not present. There was no young Carmen here.

What was this place? When was this place?

Carmen was frozen in the foreign room, eyes locked to the back of the pixie cut. Before she could gather herself, the person turned their head slowly.

Carmen's dark eyes locked with an identical pair.

She immediately recognized herself. They were just the same, but at the same time completely different. The person had more freckles across the tops of their cheeks, and their skin was just a bit darker. Their hair was strikingly shorter compared to the long black curls that Carmen hid in a bun. While taking in the sight of her doppelganger, they sighed.

"I used to dress so funny." Carmen gasped to hear her voice come from a different person.

"Hey! It's okay. You're going to be okay." The person stood from their chair and offered it to Carmen. Her legs moved without her, and she slowly stepped into the now vacant seat. The person darted over to the bed and reached beneath it, retrieving a short ottoman. They dragged it across from Carmen and sat, arms crossed over their knees and leaning in eagerly to her.

Carmen summoned her voice from a pit of fear, "Where am I?"

The person laughed Carmen's laugh and said plainly, "You're in your future bedroom."

The air escaped Carmen's lungs—*I fucked up.*

"And it's okay that you messed up the time travel thing, I know you were trying to go back. But you're here! With yourself, me, who is 25 now. I have a fully developed frontal lobe and everything."

I fucked up, I fucked up, I fucked up.

“Breathe—that’s important. You messed up but really that’s not your fault. Do you have cool questions to ask me?”

Future Carmen moved their hands, and Carmen caught a glimpse of their nails. They were painted a bright pink. Carmen visibly cringed and groaned thinking back to the pink glitter pen. Her head fell into her hands in despair—*I fucked up.*

After a moment, Carmen raised her head to speak, “There isn’t anything you can do, I had to go back to fix my life.”

Future Carmen frowned, “Our life was never broken or anything. What are you trying to fix?”

Carmen felt her face start to burn. Charlotte returned to her mind as she knew her. Small and rosy. Bright blonde hair and deep brown eyes. They were once so close. Carmen messed that up though. Carmen began to remember Charlotte’s horrified eyes, lip curled up in disgust. Disgust with Carmen.

It was innocent: the two of them were only 13. They played dress up games in the past. The two girls were very comfortable with one another. They were older now though, and in Carmen’s old pink bedroom, they would change into their softball uniforms together before games. Carmen remembered being distracted—

captivated by Charlotte, her eyes always wandered to her. She was always thinking about her. This wasn't weird, right? They were best friends. Thinking of her was normal.

But for Carmen, she knew her thoughts about Charlotte were something else. And Charlotte, not after long, realized it too. Carmen remembered how the words spat from Charlotte's mouth stung. *Don't tell me you like me like that.* Carmen couldn't bear to think back on that day.

"Charlotte," Carmen mustered after a few moments of silence. "I was trying to fix things with her. That's where it all went wrong."

"Oh," Future Carmen managed after a moment. "Charlotte."

Her name hung heavily between the two. Charlotte all those years ago began to whisper into the ears of teammates, classmates, and anyone else who would listen.

You know Carmen? She's a lesbian!

"We aren't broken. We never were. You can't fix things with Charlotte, and even if you could, you may be worse off. She was never going to be our friend forever. And what she did to us was shitty."

Carmen's eyes swelled with tears, and she quickly hid her face in her hands again. The

shame poured out from her eyes and flowed down her arms. This shame had followed her for years since she was outed by Charlotte. She could hear it in the whispers of the locker room and on the field.

*Carmen's gay? I had no idea.
She better not hit on me.
God, what a cliché.*

She saw it in the eyes of her peers. They didn't have to even vocalize it; Carmen could guess what they were thinking.

*Isn't this the lesbian?
She looks gay too.
Dyke.*

Carmen was haunted by this reputation, and she quit the softball team. She retreated into herself and withdrew from everyone. She dreaded school every day, and she struggled to make it to the final bell. Everything, she thought, goes back to Charlotte.

Through choking sobs, Carmen managed the words, "I just *don't* want to be like this. I *don't* want to live this way. I want things to go back to how they were before."

Future Carmen leaned across the gap between themselves and embraced her.

“What can I tell you?” Future Carmen whispered softly. “The world is on that same narrow path it’s always been on. They never stopped pumping toxins into the air. The ice never stopped melting. The fires never stopped burning, but there are good things too. We went to school and got a degree—we love our job. We meet someone, and we share an apartment with them. We aren’t rich, but we are happy. There’s lots of tears. There’s lots of ache, but there is also so much love and joy. I can’t say if it’s better or not. But I am happy. I am okay. You will be okay.”

Carmen grasped at her future self’s shirt and sobbed. This was not what she was expecting.

“But what’s the point?” Carmen gasped, “What is the point of it all? I want out of my skin and off this planet. I want everything to be *better*. Not just *okay*. I don’t *feel* okay, and if things are just *okay* forever then, then...”

Carmen lost her breath; her face was burning red, and she struggled to string the emotions and thoughts into a place. Her mind escaped and seeped out her eyes, nose, and mouth.

Future Carmen embraced her tighter. They took a deep breath in.

“You just have to figure it out. The world is so big and loud and mean. But you are small

and kind. You're smart and creative. You reject things because you're a teenager and that's what you do best. You can't fix everything wrong with the world, and you're preoccupied trying to fix yourself—but there is nothing to fix there."

Future Carmen raised their hands to cup her face and brought it up to look into Carmen's eyes.

"You aren't broken. You're just 18 and lesbian. There is nothing wrong with that, and there is no one more deserving of your own kindness than yourself. Be kind to yourself. Okay?"

Carmen tearfully nodded, head still held in the hands of her future self.

"I remember you. After all, we are the same. I remember the way you feel. You don't have to be scared of yourself. There are no flying cars, no homes on Mars, and no cure for the human condition. But you are happy, you are okay, and you learn to love pink again."

An alarm at the desk went off before Carmen had a chance to respond.

"There's no time to explain." Future Carmen grabbed Carmen's hands, and they stood. Briskly, Future Carmen ushered their younger counterpart into the closet from whence they came.

"Nice talking to you!"

Carmen tumbled into the closet with a slight push, and the door closes behind her. As her knees hit the floor, she scurried across the closet floor, eagerly reaching up to the doorknob. As her hands met it, the door swung open. Standing above her was the familiar Mr. Shay.

“Time’s up, Car!”

Carmen’s face was still stricken with tears as she gazed up at her art teacher with dizzying dismay. Mr. Shay reached down and lifted her from the closet floor. Carmen walked over to her spot and sat, a blank look across her lightly freckled face. Mr. Shay followed closely behind her, nervously anticipating to hear whether his invention was successful or not.

“Well,” Mr. Shay began, “did it work? You went back?”

Carmen slowly shook her head from side to side, no. Mr. Shay’s brows furrowed in confusion.

“I think I messed up,” Carmen said in a near whisper.

On the table before her, the letter remained. The haunting pink cursive, less intimidating than it had been this morning. Carmen picked up the faded sheet and read over the words one last time.

Dear future Carmen,

My name is Carmen, and I'm 11 years old. I am in the 5th grade. I am about to go to middle school, and I'm really really scared.

I wish I could ask you questions and that you could answer. But we are the same person, so it doesn't work that way. Are we still friends with Charlotte? Is our favorite color still pink?

Are things any better?

Sincerely,

Carmen Mendoza, 11

A Hell Beyond Hell

Lawrence Matthews

In a world where shadows dance and demons dwell,
Where darkness reigns and tormented souls rebel,
If I had to choose: lose you or face demise,
My heart trembles, torn amidst these haunting cries.

For what is life without your tender grace,
A lifeless void, a never-ending chase?
To lose your touch, your laughter, your embrace,
Would be a fate that not even Hell could erase.

In the abyss of eternal flames and despair,
Where anguish wraps its claws around the air,
I step closer, gazing into the infernal abyss,
Yearning for solace, a bittersweet abyss.

For in those fiery depths, where demons reside,
I envision solace, where love cannot be denied,
Amidst the flames, a twisted solace I'd find,
With you, my love, forever intertwined.

Yet, conflicted I stand at this treacherous crossroad,
To lose you, my love, or face the path unknown,
In death's uncanny embrace, would I find peace,
Or in your absence, would my soul find release?

But let me tell you, my love, a truth sincere,
No rift of Hell can silence love's resounding cheer,
For even if the earth crumbles and time stands still,
Our love, untouched by death, forever will.

So fear not, my darling, the trials that ensue,
For together, we'll conquer any darkness that's imbued,
In this life or the next, our love will forever dwell,
With open arms, we'll rise above any Hell.

Butterfly Effect

Victoria Hoover

Left.

A way forward?

Can we be trusted,
when everything changes?

Path ever turning and branching.

Isn't this always the way?

Wings thrumming.

On the one hand, hope.

The silence of wings
comes from the butterfly

If we rely on the way we know,

We believe in goodness and light,

Turn our faces to the warm sun.

The future before was bright,

Pulling us forward.

Is there meaning?

Are we free?

Chaos

Right.
Is this correct?
to find the solution,
When the way is hard?
Map devoid of clues or scope.
Or is the meaning hidden?
Flood water rising.
On the other hand, duty.

and sound of waiting.
still in our hollowed bones.
can we say we made a decision?
courted by madeness ever in the dark.
Hide our secrets in the moonlight.
the past was always lurking.
Pushing us backward.
Is there choice?
Are we bound?
Order

Like My Tree

Arron McMorris

Like my tree,
I scratch along dotted lines,
contracting the narrative like stretching roots—
Hesitant to start a new branch,
as if I'd mess up
and live in remorse,
as if I should remain
on a mapped channel,
or, if I am encroaching excess,
fabricating prolific gifts.
Am I craving mystic dissonance?

Draw my focus to foreshadow
the fallen leaves
lying where they're intended.
Press me forward and
flow like water through my tree,
enlivening the wind to blow
As the stream increases in intensity.

Serenity calls to me,
I hear her sublime echo
that flows with the roots
of my tree.

Time's Touch

Lauren Brown

It's scary how time works.

It took one second for your fingertips to meet mine.
And one more for them to intertwine.
Two seconds of hesitation,
with a half second of confusion.

And then...

One second for the sweet kiss.
Three years of love.
One second of lust.
Nine months of love,
and one second
of us.
One second to realize.
Two seconds for me to stare into your eyes.
Three seconds for me to stop you.
Two seconds for our lips to convene.
Five seconds for the best hour.
Three years bore into sixty minutes,
caused by five seconds
turning into one.
Time became perpendicular.
I'm not sure if it took one second for me to

realize,
or ten minutes.
Two seconds of yearning or a lifetime.
It's scary how time works.
The value of a second or five.
But the scariest part is:
love can't tell time.

Take Your Time

Megan Bynum



Take Your Time delves into that ever-present concept that often evades us and escapes our grasp. People frequently spend their borrowed time as they are "supposed to," causing misery and pain as they attempt to be enough. This work invites viewers to carefully consider how they spend their time. Using a four-part urethane rubber mold, I cast an hourglass from epoxy resin which I adhered to the wooden bases. The hand cast is made from a polymer-blend gypsum product, and it is a surrogate for individual viewers. Inside the hourglass, gold wax transitions to a bloody-red wax, representing the consequences incurred from attempting to control time.

Is It Wrong To Try To Pick Up Girls With A Fairy?

Bradley Cavanaugh

“So what exactly is the problem?” Morrigan asked, eyes sharp, maybe slightly annoyed.

Two people, a man and a woman, sat across from each other in a bar. The woman was named Morrigan, and she was a fairy from a magical world. Less interestingly, he was Markus Durham, a normal human from Brooklyn.

When Markus was nineteen, his mother was in a terrible car accident, with almost no chance of survival. It was then that Morrigan came to Markus and offered him a deal: she would save his mother then and there, and in exchange, she would take Markus's firstborn child whenever he had one. Markus had taken the deal without hesitation. Who cared about a kid that he didn't know? His mother was everything to him. Morrigan had kept her word, and his mother made a full recovery. For ten years after that, Markus had only heard from Morrigan once. His mother had passed away from cancer eight years after Morrigan saved her. Morrigan had come to the funeral to give her condolences. Then she disappeared again for years more. He assumed she was waiting for him to have a child so she could swoop in and claim them. But after ten years

and no kids, Morrigan had gotten tired of waiting. Markus was thirty-two at that point, and he was still hopeless on the children front. He didn't even have a romantic partner.

At the moment, they were sitting in a dusty bar called The Savory Patoon, a bar that Markus and Morrigan often frequented. Markus didn't know where the name came from, and by that point, he was too afraid to ask. The bar wasn't exactly savory, if you could describe a place as such. The place was pretty empty on most days, the only patrons being regulars like Markus and Morrigan populating the dusty building. But they weren't there to drink (much); Morrigan was there attempting to be his wingman.

"I feel like we've had this conversation before," Markus said, feeling like the only thing keeping him awake from the boredom was the clinking of the glasses around him.

"That's because we have," Morrigan replied, not budging an inch. "It shouldn't be this hard to get a girl pregnant."

Markus had to give a small smile to that. He looked up at the fairy sitting across from him, although from looking at her, you'd think she was a normal human. The depiction of fairies in *Peter Pan* and the like weren't entirely accurate. Morrigan wasn't a small little thing that glowed and flew around. She was human-sized and had light green skin and dark green hair, with scales that decorated her body like a diamond dress. Luckily, her actual

features were human enough, so she could probably pass as a human cosplayer, but it still drew attention. Using magic, she changed her form to that of a woman who appeared to be in her thirties. She had long dark brunette hair and perfect dimples. He also noticed that the disguise was exceptionally curvy, as opposed to her normally slender build. He decided not to comment on that fact for fear of getting a magical curse put on him, or worse, a slap. She seemed to notice his analyzing her, however, and smiled confidently.

"This is a nice form, right?" She smiled with that dazzling, artificial face. "I came up with it myself. It should let me blend in nicely."

"I don't think blending in is what you're doing here," Markus replied, noticing the gaze of many of the male—and a few of the female—patrons. "You've definitely changed since we first met."

When they first met, Markus got the impression that Morrigan was a prim and proper fairy like you'd see in a fairy tale. She talked in long, drawn out sentences and platitudes, to Markus's annoyance. After coming back into his life, perhaps becoming more comfortable around him, he found out that she was closer to a human than he had thought. She spent nights over at his house going over a game plan on how he would woo the secretary at his office; she would wake him up to go jogging so that he'd be more in shape and more attractive to women. She also

discovered she had a love for human food, particularly ramen and pizza, a slice of which she was chewing on then.

"See, this is why you're single," Morrigan sighed, responding to his comment that she had changed. "You tell a little girl that she's changed or grown up. You tell a mature woman that she hasn't changed since the first day you met."

"That's a good quote." Markus leaned back, taking a sip of his beer. He had by then gotten used to Morrigan's "attitude." She always talked like she was the smartest person in the room, as if she had all the answers. At first, it was grating, but now he found it amusing. He knew that it was less her trying to sound smart, and more about trying to sound like the wise, "mystical fairy" that she wanted others, particularly Markus, to see her as. "You come up with that yourself?"

"No actually," she answered, seeming proud of herself. "It came from one of your human creations. What is it called, 'anime?'"

"How old are you again?"

"And you never ask a woman her age!"

Markus remembered that she referred to herself as a 'mature woman' only a few moments ago but decided not to mention it.

"And you never answered my question." Morrigan leaned in, as if to stop Markus from escaping. "What's your problem?"

"You'll have to be more specific."

"Markus, you're a reasonably attractive guy..."

"You're making me blush."

"Even if you talk too much. Why do you have so much trouble with women?"

Markus felt like he should be offended by the comment, but he knew it was true. Still, his feeble ego caused him to puff out his chest defensively. "I don't have trouble with women. And besides, there's more to it than just looking good."

"You've only had sex like twice before?"

Morrigan scoffed. She shook her head like an aggravated mother talking to a disruptive child. "You're in your thirties. Don't you think that's a *little* sad?"

While he didn't appreciate her comment, Markus could sort of understand where she was coming from. They had an agreement after all, and Markus hadn't exactly been helping the cause. It was true that he only had sex twice before, once with a trans woman who couldn't have children, and once with a woman while wearing a condom (she turned him down when he suggested going without it, and it would be creepy to push the issue.) Still, having kids was a large step to take with someone, even if he knew he wouldn't keep it himself. There was still a nine-month process that he would be around for. And he didn't even want to think of how he'd explain it to the woman who was having his kid.

"Yeah well, I don't attribute my self-worth to a body count," Markus finally responded. "And besides, what exactly are you going to do with my child when I..."

"That's not for you to know," Morrigan snapped, although there wasn't much force behind it. She then pointed to something behind Markus. "Look, there's a prime candidate right there."

Markus looked behind him to the bar where a cute brunette girl in a red dress was sitting alone. She had a small glass in her hand that she was sipping away at, a bronze liquid that Markus couldn't recognize but figured it must've been good by the slight smile that played on her lips. She chatted with the bartender, who smiled back while he was busy cleaning used glasses.

"I can't go over there," Markus denied quickly.

"Why not?"

"She's...she's already talking to the bartender," Markus turned away from the girl at the bar. "It would just be rude of me to interrupt. Maybe they're flirting or something."

"Are all humans so cowardly or is it just you?" Morrigan sighed loudly. "Just go over and offer to buy her a drink."

"What if she's waiting for someone?"

"You really don't understand women, do you?" Morrigan sighed somehow even louder. "If she was waiting for someone she'd have gotten a table. She's at the bar because she *wants* someone to talk to her. She wouldn't be wearing that dress if she was meeting up with her friends."

Markus could feel perspiration falling down his back. *Oh god*. He couldn't think of an

excuse to get out of it. Seemingly sensing his turmoil, Morrigan had a more sympathetic look on her face.

"Just be honest with her," she spoke softly. "You're a great guy, Markus, you don't have anything to worry about."

That was that then. Markus rose from his chair and sauntered over to the stool next to the girl. He had a few drinks before, but he felt like he'd been drinking a whole keg of hard liquor. The room seemed to swirl around him in a mash of colors, the sweat beading down his back like the condensation of the glass he just put down. He was vaguely aware that someone almost bumped into him, which he thought was weird since the bar was far from crowded. Finally, he made it next to the girl and took a deep breath as he sat in the stool next to her.

"Hi," she spoke first with a smile before turning to the bartender. "I'll text you later, Casey."

"Sure," the bartender, apparently named 'Casey,' responded, moving away. "Have fun."

"You guys, uh, know each other?" Markus asked, the only thing going through his mind was Morrigan telling him 'just be honest.'

"He's my brother," she rolled her eyes in his direction. "Who's the girl you were sitting with? She's gorgeous."

"O...only on the outside," Markus joked, earning a laugh from the girl. Wait, did he actually do something right? *'Just be honest.'*

“So, can I buy you a drink?”

The girl held up the glass in her hand confirming that she did, in fact, already have a drink.

“S...sorry.” Markus rubbed his neck in embarrassment.

“Next one’s on you, promise,” the girl said good-naturedly.

Back at their table, Morrigan watched with a content smile.

“See, was that so hard?” She thought, allowing herself to feel a little relief. “Just be honest and be yourself.”

“So, uh,” Markus asked. “Would you like to have a kid with me?”

“Not *that* honest you dumbass!” Morrigan yelled at Markus who was back sitting across from her in shame. “How the hell did you make it this far being so socially-inept?!”

Morrigan picked up her glass which held the drink she needed after that display.

“Well, where the hell were you?” Markus demanded, trying to make up the ground he had rightfully lost. “Aren’t you supposed to be my wingman? Woman? Fairy?”

“Even I don’t have a spell to fix *that*.” Morrigan took a shot from her glass. She was starting to feel it.

“Can’t I just donate my sperm or something, and you get the kid that way?” Markus wondered.

“You really are terrible, aren’t you?” Morrigan spat in disgust. “So you would give

hope to someone, maybe someone who's been trying so hard to have a child, only for me to come in and snatch it away?"

"Isn't that what you're doing to me?"

"You *agreed* to it though." Morrigan drank again.

Markus couldn't really argue with that. He had agreed to it, although he was still a kid at the time. He didn't really regret it though, not yet at least. Those years he managed to get with his mother were everything to him. He would always be thankful to Morrigan for that. And for that matter, having Morrigan around wasn't so bad either. Her various attempts at being a wingman over the years, while a nuisance most of the time, had some fun in them. Like that time Morrigan thought it'd be a good idea to pick up girls at the movie theater, not realizing that theaters weren't the place for talking. So they had just ended up watching a movie together instead. *Last Night in Soho* was pretty good at least. Even if Morrigan insisted on arguing, "That's not how ghosts work" every few minutes. Or how Morrigan gifted him a rabbit statue because it was a "symbol of fertility and motherhood" and forced him to keep it in his room for luck.

Seemingly noticing his sudden silence, Morrigan looked at him. "Are you okay? It's really not that big of a deal. Sorry if I blew up at you."

"N..no it's not that," Markus said, trying to wipe away the nostalgic feeling that was

creeping up in his chest. "We've had some good times, haven't we?"

"Huh? Oh, sure." Morrigan looked confused, taking another drink. Markus noticed that she had taken a number of drinks, and he wondered if she'd be more open to his questions.

"So, uh, why do you want my child again?" he asked, like it was no big deal.

Morrigan sighed, rubbing her forehead. He didn't know if it was because of the drink, or because she was tired of the question, but she finally seemed willing to answer. "Don't worry, I'm not going to eat them or anything."

"I didn't think you would," Markus responded genuinely. "I know you wouldn't hurt a child. You're a good person."

Morrigan looked at him for a moment after he said that but continued on. "The reason I want the child is because I haven't been able to have any of my own."

"Really?" Markus asked, genuinely surprised. "Are you, uh, not attractive in the fairy world?"

"I'll have you know I'm very attractive," Morrigan answered, flipping her brunette hair. Ironical, considering it wasn't her true appearance.

"Then is it your personality?" Markus joked before noticing the serious expression on her face. "Sorry."

"It's not as easy for fairies to reproduce as it is for humankind." Morrigan sat back in her

chair, blowing some of her hair from her face. "With humans, all you need are working parts, and you're good to go. For fairies, we need a strong emotional connection with our partners to procreate."

"Huh. Interesting," Markus said, before asking, "Is that the only difference?"

"We can also reproduce with someone of the same gender," Morrigan said proudly. "And we're only pregnant for three months. And we don't need a device to tell us we're pregnant; we can tell instantly."

Markus thought about that new information then asked the obvious follow-up question. "So you haven't been able to emotionally connect to other fairies?"

"Connecting with people isn't easy," Morrigan said, earning a nod from Markus. "You want to reach out to people but you don't want to bother them, and then they don't reach out to you because of course they don't. Then you just end up hanging onto the few connections you do have until you end up losing them too. But I've always wanted to be a mother."

She gave a sad laugh that was anything but joyful. "Maybe it's just because a part of me thinks that if I have a child, it won't be able to leave me. I'll always have at least one connection. Pretty selfish of me, right? That's no reason to become a parent."

"But don't fairies have longer lifespans?" Markus asked. "If you take my human child, won't you outlive it?"

"I guess I'm not really smart, am I?" Morrigan smiled sadly. "I know I'll just end up hurting myself, but I can't help it. Even if it's just for a little bit, I want to feel needed by *someone*."

Markus wanted to console her somehow. Tell her that she was needed. But he knew that was selfish. He only knew her in the human world. When she went back to her world, he had no idea what her life was like. How could he console her when he barely knew an entire part of her life?

"Hey, you're not off the hook yet." Morrigan smiled sadly at him. "You have to spill your guts too. Why do you have such a problem talking to girls?"

"In my defense, it's not just girls. I've always had trouble talking to people I guess," Markus took another sip. He'd need a couple more drinks if he was going to talk about *that*. "I overthink everything and psych myself out. I know I do it, and I know it's not a big deal, but it's not that easy to fix. When I get ready to talk to anyone, let alone a girl, it's like my brain just stops working and I can't think of anything to say."

"You talk to me all the time," Morrigan points out.

"Yeah, but I know you. I've known you longer than anyone."

"That's unfortunate." Morrigan smiled.

"Right?" Markus smiled back before turning serious again. "I really want to help you,

Morrigan. You know I do. But I just...I don't know if I can. I don't know if I can change."

Morrigan gave a sad smile, looking at the dirty floor under them. "It's okay. It's not like I was going to curse you or anything if you didn't hold up your end of the bargain. It was just...all I could think of."

Marcus shrugged. "And hey, even if I don't have any kids, that doesn't mean you have to go anywhere. You'll always have a connection with me."

Morrigan finally looked up from the floor, that time right in his eyes. "You mean it? Really?"

Markus suddenly felt very drunk. Was his infamous nervousness popping back up, or was it the drink he'd been sipping away at? All he knew was that the way Morrigan was looking at him made him feel...funny. He didn't know if he liked it or not.

Without even realizing he was doing it, he slowly reached out his right hand and placed it on her left. Regardless of her appearance, he could still feel her scales on her dainty hand. He felt her hand tense for a moment, ready to pull back. Finally, it relaxed, allowing itself to be held.

"I mean it," Markus said with finality. "Really."

She looked him in the eyes again, but now Markus didn't want her to look away. He leaned forward a little, then she followed suit. A little more. And a little more still. Until...

Markus opened his eyes in a daze. He saw his ceiling first, looking back down at him. It was his room alright. There was his Nirvana poster. There was the small wall dent from when Morrigan had tried to change his lightbulb while drunk. (What was the joke about idiots and lightbulbs..?)

Morrigan.

Oh. *Shit*. Suddenly, Markus's mind flew back to the night before. He and Morrigan sitting in the bar, Markus leaning in, Morrigan flying them home and almost landing them in a dumpster.

That was all a dream, right? Of course it was, Markus and Morrigan couldn't have had sex last night. Markus was sure that he'd get up from bed, go into the living room and Morrigan would be sleeping in the living room like she always did, no doubt with an empty pizza box on her face.

It's not like he wouldn't want something like that to happen with Morrigan, but Markus had never pursued it. Surely Morrigan wouldn't be interested in a boring human like him, right? What did he have to offer a magical being like her? He didn't even have a 401K.

Markus suddenly became aware that his body was slightly sore. He looked down and noticed a few scratches and cuts over his body. There were a few all over his body, but there was a concentration on his neck and on both his inner thighs, which had worrying implications.

There was a soft moan next to him, and Markus knew it was no dream. He looked over and saw Morrigan sleeping in the bed next to him, her clothes a distant memory. She was back in her normal fairy form, her green hair spilling over her pillow, like so many leaves. Her curves were gone, and in their place were her small green scales. That must've been what Markus scratched himself on.

Looking at her as she was then, Markus was struck by how beautiful her true form was. She looked like a painting; her features soft with a charming green. Her cheeks were puffy and her ears were slightly pointed, making her look both cute and ethereal. Markus reached out and moved an emerald strand of hair from her face. At his touch, Morrigan stirred again, her eyes slowly opening.

"Markus?" She groggily called out, eyes focusing. "What the hell are you doing in my bed?"

"You don't have a bed, genius. You sleep on the couch, remember?" Markus pulled his hand away and scooted away from her, not knowing how'd she react.

Morrigan yawned as she sat up. Markus didn't know if she didn't realize it or didn't care, but she was still naked, giving Markus a clear look at everything.

"Morrigan, you know you're naked right?"

“Obviously,” Morrigan rubbed the sleep from her eyes, looking around at the room.

It was the moment of truth. How would Morrigan respond to everything that happened last night? Was it all a drunken tryst? Would things be too awkward, causing her to leave. Markus wouldn’t admit it, but Morrigan was his best friend. If she decided to leave...

“Markus, what’s wrong?” Morrigan finally seemed to focus, her worried gaze on Markus.

“Morrigan,” Markus hesitated before continuing. “Do you remember last night?”

“Of course. Fairies have perfect memories.”

“Really?”

“No, not really.” Morrigan rolled her eyes but smiled. “Do *you* remember last night?”

“Yeah,” Markus hesitated more. “Do you... regret it?”

Morrigan placed a hand on Markus’s cheek. Once she checked that he was okay with her touch, she leaned in and kissed him. While the rest of her skin was covered in scales, her lips were soft. She pulled back and smiled.

“I thought you weren’t nervous around me?” She asked. “Relax Markus, it’s me.”

“Right. Sorry.” Markus smiled back.

“Oh goddess, Markus,” Morrigan said, looking at the scratches across his body. “I’m sorry. Do those...hurt?”

“Not at all!” Markus quickly responded. “We can even go again if you want.”

“Uh, maybe later.” Morrigan laid back on the bed with a laugh.

Markus could feel his cheeks heat up.

“Sorry, bad joke.”

“Relax Markus, I’m only teasing you. I just...” Morrigan started, before stopping, wide-eyed.

“Morrigan?” Markus asked, concerned.

“What’s wrong?”

“Markus...I’m pregnant,” Morrigan said, tears forming at the edge of her eyes, an unreadable expression on her face. Markus found his gaze drifting to the rabbit statue that sat on his nightstand.

Levi95 Is Typing...

Kelli Tucker

Levi95: you asleep?

Nolan_Pierce: no...
guessing you can't
either

Levi95: can't...it's this
wind man, sounds like
a cat fight, wbu? :p

Nolan_Pierce: playing a
new game i got

Levi95: sure you don't
mean porn? :p

Nolan_Pierce: wtf,
seriously?!

Levi95: you're not
denying it? :p

Levi95: the winds
loud...doesn't seem
normal lol

Nolan_Pierce: there's
no wind, just rain this
side of town

Levi95: lucky you, i
gotta have my beauty
sleep!

Nolan_Pierce: damn
right you do ;)

Levi95: bro, i think i
heard footsteps outside

Nolan_Pierce: just get
your dad to check it
out.

Levi95: i'm home
alone, the fam are on
vacation remember?

Nolan_Pierce: really?
maybe... we could hang
out

Levi95: it really does
sound like footsteps
but there's something
weird about them...i
don't want to look
though, my bed's so
warm!

Nolan_Pierce: sure
you wanna look out
the window? what if
someone really is in
your yard, looking up
at you?

Levi95: DUDE NOT
FUNNY

Nolan_Pierce: hey
chill... it's probably
nothing

Levi95: gonna check
brb

Nolan_Pierce: if there's
something strange in
your neighborhood

Nolan_Pierce: who you
gonna call?

Nolan_Pierce: you
know, we haven't
gotten to hangout just
us in a while...

Levi95: dude, there's
someone in my yard

Nolan_Pierce: wait,
really?

Levi95: yeah i can see
someone...

Nolan_Pierce: what are
they doing?

Levi95: can't really tell,
he's just kinda standing
there

Nolan_Pierce: haha he
must be high or drunk
:p

Levi95: i'm serious!
what should i do??

Nolan_Pierce: nothing?
i'm sure he'll go away
by himself :)

Levi95: he's turning around

Nolan_Pierce: what's he look like?

Levi95: WTF THIS ISN'T FUNNY

Nolan_Pierce: what?

Levi95: HOW ARE YOU DOING THAT?

Nolan_Pierce: doing what?

Levi95: WYATT STOP PLAYING AROUND. i know it's you who's texting on your brother's phone! i can see nolan's face and he's wearing that stupid hoodie he's so proud of!

Nolan_Pierce: hey it's me, nolan. wyatt's not here. it must be someone who looks like me...honestly bro, i'm at home. i wouldn't play around with you like that...

Levi95: i can see you in
my yard! how are you
texting here without
touching your phone?
look up, can't you hear
me banging on the
window?

Nolan_Pierce: fuck
dude now you're
scaring me too... i'm
def not in your yard,
that's not me, you
should stop banging
the glass!

Levi95: how are you
gonna explain how this
stranger is wearing
your hoodie?

Nolan_Pierce: almost
everyone at school has
that hoodie! maybe i'm
just on your mind :)

Levi95: he's staring at
the house now

Levi95: i wished he'd
just fucking leave
already!!!!

Nolan_Pierce: doesn't
your dad have a gun?

Levi95: i'm not gonna shoot him!

Nolan_Pierce: i'm not saying to shoot him, just use it scare him off

Levi95: doesn't your hoodie have your name on the back?

Nolan_Pierce: yeah why?

Levi95: i can see your fucking name!!!

Nolan_Pierce: what

Levi95: WHAT THE HELL IS THIS

Nolan_Pierce: that hoodie's in my closet, i swear to you it's not me

Levi95: FUCK HE'S SEEN ME

Levi95: WHY'S HE SMILING LIKE THAT

Nolan_Pierce: CALL THE COPS!!!

Nolan_Pierce: LEVI

Nolan_Pierce: TALK
TO ME, WHAT'S
HAPPENING

Levi95: it's in the
house, can't talk gotta
be quiet, lights off, in
a closet with a kitchen
knife

Nolan_Pierce: i've
called the cops, told
them there's a break-
in at your place, they
said they're on their
way but it'll take about
30 mins

Nolan_Pierce: levi you
there?

Nolan_Pierce: LEVI?!

Nolan_Pierce: fuck
hang in there, the
police will be there in
20 mins...do you know
where he is?

Levi95: IT. not he, the
look it had when it saw
me...there's no way it's
human

Nolan_Pierce: jesus
christ does it know
where you are?

Levi95: idk i grabbed
a knife when i saw it
running toward the
house and got in the
closet when i heard it
breaking in

Nolan_Pierce: okay
good, don't panic you'll
be fine, the police will
be there soon!!!

Levi95: oh god i can
hear it calling out to
me

Levi95: its voice is
filling the house

Levi95: filling my head

Nolan_Pierce: what's it
saying?

Levi95: "why won't you
love me, levi"

Levi95: "you can't
escape our feelings"

Levi95: it just keeps
repeating

Levi95: how does it
know my name?!

Levi95: is this what it
feels like to go mad?

Nolan_Pierce: just 10
more mins! keep it
together!

Levi95: it's coming up
the stairs

Levi95: it's steps are
loud and heavy

Levi95: why does it look
like you? why you?

Nolan_Pierce: idk!
please believe me!

Levi95: why is it talking
about feelings?

Levi95: please make it
stop?

Nolan_Pierce: i would
if i could i promise
you

Levi95: it's at the end of
the hall

Levi95: what if i never
see my parents again?

Nolan_Pierce: levi

Levi95: this has something to do with you, make it stop... please...

Nolan_Pierce: I DON'T KNOW LEVI GOD PLEASE

Levi95: please!

Nolan_Pierce: it might be...because i think about you

Nolan_Pierce: i think about you a lot

Levi95: so stop!

Levi95: it's scraping its nails on the walls, it's getting closer...please

Nolan_Pierce: idk how!

Nolan_Pierce: i'm trying, i'm trying so hard i promise

Levi95: i can hear it slowing down, try harder!

Levi95: whatever you're doing is working

Levi95: it's stopped, i can't hear anything now

Nolan_Pierce: really??
don't move! stay until
the police get there,
they should be close

Levi95: if he's gone,
what should i tell them?

Nolan_Pierce:
EVERYTHING
YOU'VE TOLD ME!

Levi95: I did not know
you had feelings for me
in that way.

Nolan_Pierce: is it still
quiet?

Levi95: Can you come
over in the morning? I
really need to see you.

Nolan_Pierce: of
course i'll be there,
but are you sure you're
okay??

Levi95: That is great
news to hear. I cannot
wait.

Nolan_Pierce: why are
you texting weirdly?

Nolan_Pierce: levi

Nolan_Pierce: how do
I know this is you?

The number you have
called is not available.

Forgiven

Abigayle Duke

Yes, I've forgiven you
However not because I want you back
Because I want to move on

I need to be free of the hurt and pain
The agony you have brought me
The pain that comes
At the mention of your name

I need to move on from the thought
The thought where you come back
The dream where this never happened

I need to know that you are in the past
Because I am living the future
The one I thought you'd be in

I need to forgive you
So that I can have a life
A life that isn't full of wondering
Why you left

So you are
Forgiven

As We Lay Dying

Sarah Forest Cisco

My mother is like a tree.
The tree branches outreach—
like a mother welcoming
young in their arms.
With each passing season,
harboring birds and other lifeforms.
A haven shelter
leaf canopies
creating chain links
like a mother—
but dies as everything does.
Cut down by men.
The things it should be praised for,
such as the creation of themselves,
is nothing but criticized.
Targeted and materialized
for their own benefaction.
At the cost of the benefactor.

Drawing Breaths

Sarah Forest Cisco

Smearing the charcoal—the vines—rich with depth—over the tooth of the grain in the paper. The quick—steady puffs of air—clear away the excess dust—and reveal what remains of the drawing beneath. I didn't know that the 11x24 manila page I pulled out of my folder each day was going to be my last. I had always been told through medals and ribbons—and words of encouragement—that I had talent, that I was going somewhere. But when the markings on the page—that composed images and objects—didn't speak to the voices of my silenced 11-year-old inner child, I walked away. To music and movement—to power tools and stage sets—in the end, it was the letters that I gave wind to with the brisk presses of my fingers on a keypad—or the quick wrist flicks on a page—in loops and curls—forming sentences and paragraphs—that gave me breath—that I couldn't give to my drawings, as much as I tried.

Phasing

Arron McMorris

Perfectly placed touch
swift like stars,
shuffle the cards,
and play a new game.

Half and half away—
hardly separate from
the choices
I'll make tomorrow.

Even rest does not soothe me
perhaps only consuming,
sticking to the schedule and
stacking another block of persistence
Lists of resistance as I raise the bar,

as if that were a choice—

Allowing my indecision
to influence my actions.
Shuffle the index cards
and play another game.

"These Things" Being Death

Kelli Tucker

It's an in-between kind of day,
neither light nor dark,
but gray enough to
ponder things.
It's funny,
how everyone dreads these things,
as if it's a constant
hanging over
your head
rather
than the red umbrella that someone
compliments in the stairway
while walking to class.
It's always while
peeing
in the library bathroom that I
think about the when and
where — wondering if
the sharpie faces
scribbled
on the bathroom door could be the last
image I see. It's kind of reassuring.
Maybe I would be alone
when I go,
but,
so would they and that comforts me.

Someone in the stall next to me
asked if I had a sharpie
they could borrow.
Maybe
they were pondering these things too.



Peaceful Sting

Abigayle Duke

**“Peaceful Sting” (Jellyfish)– Photography –
This photo was shot using a Canon EOS Rebel
T3i on ISO mode. The location of this photo is
the Moody Gardens jellyfish exhibit.**

Gator Grin

Abigayle Duke



**“Gator Grin” OR “Tick-Tock” (Alligator) –
Photography – This photo was shot using a
Canon EOS Rebel T6 with a 300 mm zoom
lens in manual mode. This picture location is
Brazos Bend State Park.**

To Purge at the Narrator's Discretion

By Meg Arney

This world didn't end with a bang or flash. There was no fire to consume all that was living or a smog to suffocate those remaining. There was no meteor or great explosion to shake the earth. There was no screaming or cries or blood or tears.

There just simply wasn't.

Nora had been dragging her feet to her four p.m. Calculus II class while twirling her keys around her finger. Ky was sitting on the couch with her dog curled into her side watching the latest episode of a reality TV show she swore to Nora she'd never watch. Gus was cornered in his cubicle and nodding along to whatever his coworker was gossiping about this time.

Eight billion people were going about their day, most of whom were wondering when their misery would end. And then it did.

They were standing in line in an office that seemed to stretch on forever and overlap in on itself all at once.

Nora saw it as the neurologist's office her mother had dragged her to when her random whistles and twitches became a nuisance. Ky

saw her old pediatric doctor's office where she had spent hours staring at the TV across the room playing without sound. Gus saw the dentist's office he had only been to twice.

On the wall was a sign that read *PLEASE take a number* inside a bright red arrow pointing down at a deli ticket dispenser. Everyone filtered through the line without a word, their eyes darting around and hands shaking in their pockets.

After taking a ticket, they passed a desk that was inlaid into the wall with a large black box hanging above it with *NOW SERVING* printed in white at the top and *0000000000* glowing in red beneath it.

After about a hundred people had gotten their ticket and took their seats in the barely padded chairs that lined the walls, the box surged and clicked as the last *0* went dark before reappearing as a *1*.

A woman was now at the desk, squinting through the reading glasses that sat on the end of her nose.

"Now serving ticket number one!" the woman called out in a voice that sounded like static in everyone's ears. "Is there a ticket number one in here?"

A girl stood, one hand holding her ticket labeled in red and the other laced with another girl sitting next to her.

"Come on," the first girl said, tugging lightly on the other girl's arm, the collection of silver bracelets there jingling together.

"I can't."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't get up."

"Nora, come on."

"I really can't, Ky."

"Hey, sweetheart!" the woman shouted, leaning over the white countertop. "I got a lotta people to process and I'm already behind, so if you don't wanna get pushed to the end of the line, you better get a move on."

"Go," Nora hissed.

"I'm not leaving you."

"Go figure out what's going on, dumbass."

"I'll be right back."

"I know."

Ky squeezed Nora's hand twice before letting it drop. She eyed the man that was sitting on her other side as he sniffled and wiped his nose with his finger only to smear the lens of his serial killer-esque glasses. She looked back to Nora, who just shrugged, before turning on her heels and stalking towards the counter to the beat of her clunky boots on the tile.

The woman was already putting a clipboard on the counter with a packet of paper and a pen clipped in as Ky reached the desk. Ky laid her ticket out next to it.

"Kylie Andrews?"

"I go by Ky."

"Of course you do. Just sign on all of the highlighted lines, sweetheart."

"What is this?"

"Your termination."

"What?"

"You're gettin' canned."

"*Getting canned?* Getting canned from what?"

"Existence, sweetheart."

"*Existence?*"

"The Narrator needs to free up some space so you're gettin'—" the woman clicked her tongue and pointed a thumb over her shoulder. "Kicked."

"No. No, what do you mean?"

"This is a courtesy thing, sweetheart. You're lucky you're gettin' any warnin' at all. Now sign the damned paper."

Even as Ky sputtered, she found the pen in her hands. "The Narrator? You need to tell me what's going on."

The woman groaned. "It's always you main character sorts that can fight it a little better than everyone else. They all just sign it and sit back down, but *no*, you guys have to have *personality* and *ask questions* and I'm gettin' real tired of it."

Ky was signing the first highlighted line and flipping to the next. "Why can't I stop?"

"It's not a choice; it's really just for show. Makes the Narrator feel better about themselves."

"The Narrator?"

"It's those creative types. They don't purge y'all then they'll purge themselves. Why do you think Van Gogh cut off his own ear?"

"He was crazy."

"He was a genius. He just had too much."

"Too much of what?"

The woman shrugged. "I think it's pretty self-explanatory."

"Enlighten me." Another signature.

The woman sighed and shook her head before spinning in her chair to face a filing cabinet Ky was sure wasn't there earlier and pulling a drawer open. She flitted through a dozen manilla folders before opening one and pulling out a slip of paper.

"What's that?"

"The script." The woman spun to face Ky again, moving the paper further and then closer to her face. "Ah, there we go."

"The script?"

"Dear character name here-' whoops, sorry. 'Dear Ky. I'm so sorry to inform you that you are getting deleted. You are a character for a story I wrote long ago and has since become irrelevant. Although I'm sure you're completely

original and not based off of any other characters—' blah, blah, blah, 'so, unfortunately, your time has come to simply stop, to be obsolete. I hope you can forgive me. Signed, the Narrator'."

By the time the woman finished, Ky had signed at the bottom of the last page. "So, now what?"

"You sit. And you wait. And then you won't."

"I won't?"

"You just simply won't *be* anymore."

"There's nothing I can do to stop it?"

"Not a thing."

"Will it hurt?"

"You won't feel a thing, sweetheart."

Ky placed the pen back on the clipboard and watched in silence as the woman took it along with Ky's ticket. She was methodical in how she unclipped the packet and stapled the ticket to it while reattaching a new one to the clipboard, as if she had done this a hundred times, or maybe a few billion.

"You can go sit back down now."

The box above Ky clicked again as she turned and walked back towards Nora.

"Number two! Now serving number two!"

Ky's boots scraped across the tile.

"So?" Nora was asking before Ky could sit down. "What's going on?"

"Nothing is real and we're all going to die," Ky droned while falling back into her seat. She grabbed Nora's hand and laced their fingers back together.

"What are you talking about?"

"How'd you do on your Calculus exam?"

"What? What does that have to do with anything?"

"I just want to know."

Nora looked between Ky's eyes for a moment. "Fine. Got an 82."

"That's better than you thought."

"Yeah, sure. Now will you tell me what's going on?"

"Ky?"

"...where-?" Nora gripped the arms of the chair with her now empty hands.

In Ky's place was the sniffing serial killer-glasses guy who was picking at the beds of his fingernails intently. When he noticed Nora looking at him, he straightened in his seat.

"Uh, Gus," he introduced himself with an outstretched hand.

Nora ignored it. "Did you see where my friend went?"

"Who?"

"The girl that was sitting between us."

"Was there someone there?"

“Yeah, just a few seconds ago.”

“Uh, no, I didn’t see anything.”

Nora paused for a moment, blinking at him, before leaning back into her chair. “What was I talking about?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh.”

Nora slouched with her arms crossed, rubbing her ticket between two fingers and trying to remember someone that didn’t exist anymore.

There was no bang or flash, fire or smog, meteor or explosion, screaming or cries or blood or tears.

Instead, there was an office with a deli ticket dispenser and a glowing display of red numbers. There were chairs that lined the never-ending walls. There was a desk with a secretary, a clipboard, a stack of packets, and a pen.

And then, one by one, there just simply wasn’t.

The Hazed Council (THC)
A 10-Minute Play

Marissa Mondragon

TIME: The present. It starts late at night, carrying over into the following morning.

PLACE: The inside of an urban studio apartment.

CHARACTERS: RENÉE- female, early mid 20s to late 30s, she represents Renée's present circumstances, while also representing her "shadow self".

YOUNG RENÉE (YR), female, in her middle-childhood years (Ages 8-12), represents Renée's past, while also representing her "inner child".

OLDER RENÉE (OR), female, an elderly woman (65 & up), represents the possibilities of Renée's future, while also representing her "higher self".

DAMON, male, early-mid 20s to late 30s, never appears on stage but is a vocally heavy role, aggressive, manipulative, low-smooth voice type.

AT RISE:

Late evening. The hustle and bustle sounds of the city engulf the interior of the dark urban studio apartment. The warm orange glow of the streetlamps outside, combined with the moving shadows of vehicles passing by, provide a vague glimpse of the decor within the apartment. There is a single door that is directly center stage, a somber blue glow illuminates the door.

As the volume of the city sounds intensifies, a young couple can lightly be heard arguing offstage. As more light appears, we see a single mid-sized bed, a nightstand, a wardrobe-like area, a kitchen, a couch, and a coffee table adorned with a decorative tablecloth. The voices of the couple not only begin to join but gradually overpower the city's vibrant symphony with their loud insistent shouting. Various derogatory remarks are being exchanged, there is a tense and unsettling energy that begins to simmer in the air as the city's sounds begin to clash with that of the young couple. We can now hear the young woman screaming and pleading for her partner to stop, a loud bang is heard. We hear what sounds like someone running, their steps becoming more frantic the closer they get to the door.

RENÉE enters, hyperventilating and in distress, slamming and locking the door shut behind her.

LIGHTS UP. She is dressed in what appears to be a date night outfit: a slick satin dress, heels, and a small clutch purse. The apartment is vibrant and colorful, earthy, and very bohemian-esque. String lights are lighting the space with a warm and comforting yellow hue.

The city's sounds play in conjunction with the bangs from the door and the remarks being shouted by her partner, DAMON. She leans up and slides down against the banging door, she is now facing us. As her left-hand grasps the side of her face, she winces in pain. When she removes her hand, we see blood smeared across her cheek, her breathing begins to intensify as she places her hand on her chest; she is having an anxiety attack.

As she attempts to soothe herself, she quickly gets up from the floor and heads to the kitchen, opening a cabinet and grabbing the following: a bong, lighter, water bottle, grinder, & stash jar. While still in distress, she swiftly prepares the bong. Meanwhile, the city's music and percussive bangs of the door are still booming throughout the apartment. The bong is now prepped. She takes the lighter and lights the bowl packed with the sacred herb while taking a slow deep inhale of the mystical lulling vapors. She coughs and coughs, taking a sip of water in between, before taking another inhale of the

spiritual smoke. She coughs and lies down on the floor looking up at the ceiling.

The lights, alongside the sounds, begin to simultaneously transform. The city's chaotic soundtrack combined with the belligerent bangs of the door, beautifully morphs into a symphony of binaural beats, crickets, wind chimes, singing bowls, rain, and various comforting hums. The lights begin to seamlessly circle and highlight each color within the rainbow. YOUNG RENÉE (YR) enters, as all of this occurs. She is dressed in a colorful matching set, her hair is braided in two pigtails, she has a bejeweled satchel bag, and she sports a pair of colorful Twinkle Toe sneakers. As YR walks throughout the space, Renée is oblivious to her entrance. YR walks around the apartment, touching and examining the various crystals, plants, and candles that decorate the space. She goes to the coffee table and opens a long rectangular box, pulling out an incense stick. She grabs the lighter—taking a second to figure out how to work it—lighting the incense stick and placing it in the holder. She then grabs one of the singing bowls and strikes it.

At the strike of the singing bowl, Renée abruptly sits up. LIGHTS UP. The two are frozen in space, gazing at one another.

RENÉE
(*gently*)

Who are you?

YR walks over to the kitchen, grabs a rag, wets it with the water bottle, and hands the rag to Renée.

YOUNG RENÉE
Here. (*Beat.*) So, you can clean that
stuff off your cheek.

RENÉE
Thank you. Where are your parents?

YOUNG RENÉE
(*confused*)
My parents?

RENÉE
Don't you have parents? I'm sure
they'd be worried about you, being in
a stranger's apartment and all. (*Beat.*)
How old are you?

YOUNG RENÉE
Does it matter?

RENÉE
Well yeah, I mean— how'd you get into
my apartment?

YOUNG RENÉE goes to the coffee table and grabs the bong, putting her lips on the mouthpiece and lightly inhaling.

Hey, don't touch that! Besides, you don't know what that is, and this... it can make you sick.

YOUNG RENÉE

If it makes you sick, why were *you* doing it?

RENÉE

Well not sick but... wait, you were watching me?

YOUNG RENÉE

It smells nasty, kinda like a skunk.

RENÉE notices the incense burning on the table.

RENÉE

Did you light that? (*Beat.*) Kid, not only do I not know who you are, but you're gonna end up burning down my apartment. Here.

She licks her finger and tries to put out the incense stick.

YOUNG RENÉE

No! Please? It really does smell like skunk in here. Plus, I like the way the stick smells.

RENÉE

The stick? Oh...you mean the incense.

YOUNG RENÉE

Yeah, that. My Tia uses them all the time, I can never say it right though. I always just call it a candle or a little smelly stick.

Renée has a moment, as though she has just had a wave of nostalgia come over her. She smiles as she looks at YR.

RENÉE

Okay fine. I'll keep it on. Look, if you're lost, I can maybe call an officer out here. *(Beat.)* Actually, you know what, never mind. Let me just, let me get changed really quick, put some eye drops on, and I can take you down to the station myself.

YOUNG RENÉE

The station?

RENÉE

Yeah, the police station.

She begins to walk towards the wardrobe area, gestures for YR to turn around and not peek, as she slips into a pair of sweatpants and a Beatles sweatshirt.

YOUNG RENÉE

While we're there, are you gonna tell them about the mean man that hit you?

Renée, startled by this, turns around to YR. YR is still facing the other direction.

RENÉE

Huh?

YOUNG RENÉE

How does he not remind you of Dad?

RENÉE

Dad? (*Beat.*) Hey, you're good to turn around now. I just realized something... I never asked you your name. What's your name?

YOUNG RENÉE

(*giggling*)

What do you mean? My name is Renée.

RENÉE

What?

YOUNG RENÉE

(*excitedly*)

Oh, I have something to show you.

She pulls Renée over to the couch; they are seated beside one another. YR opens her satchel bag and pulls out a magic eight ball.

Tía Stella gave me this...I've not seen her in a long time though. Mom says it's because Tía's sick.

RENÉE

Tía Stella? I have one just like that, she gave it to me a long time ago. I still have it. (*Beat.*) This is a dream, isn't it? I must've passed out after taking those hits from the bong. You're not real.

YOUNG RENÉE

Well, I say we ask the magic eight ball. I'm not saying the question out loud though, Tía says you're not supposed to say it out loud because it's—

RENÉE

Bad luck, right?

YR smiles as she shakes the ball. A moment passes as she waits for the answer to appear. A frown strikes her face.

YOUNG RENÉE

“Concentrate and ask again.” (*Beat.*) We used to be so happy and now look at us.

RENÉE

(*defensively*)

Happy, you thought we were happy? No, we weren't. Sure, there were good moments, but it was hell growing up the way that we did. Mom and Dad were always fighting, she would never stand up for us or herself, not to mention all the shit that she and Dad would pour onto us because of their issues. (*Beat.*) Why am I engaging in this conversation with you? You're not even real, I mean—this has got to be one hell of a dream because you're not real!

YOUNG RENÉE

I never thought it'd be like this...we always promised ourselves that when we got older, we wouldn't be like them, and look. You turned into Mom *and* Dad.

RENÉE

The hell does that mean?

YOUNG RENÉE

You're like mom, you yell because you're upset with the way things are, and you're taking it out on us, and you're with someone who doesn't make you happy. I can see that. You're hurting us.

RENÉE

Excuse me? Us? There is no *us*, it's just me because you're not real.

YOUNG RENÉE

You're like Dad too. It's like how mom used to say, "Always on edge and not in tune with your emotions".

RENÉE

Where is all this coming from? You're just a kid, what do you know?

YOUNG RENÉE

I know us. I know how we should be treated. (*Beat.*) I know that Tía Stella would be sad to see that you forgot everything she taught us. We deserve better, we've always deserved better. We can be happy Renée.

RENÉE

Stop, just stop. Look kid, maybe don't get in my business and just get out of my head, okay? That's what's best. I don't need someone—a kid—who hasn't even hit puberty to tell me who they think I am, and what they think I deserve.

YOUNG RENÉE

Someone has to because you forgot for the both of us!

RENÉE

Look, I don't have time for this shit, just leave! Get out, or better yet, wake me up! Wake me up!

YOUNG RENÉE

I can't, only you can wake yourself up.

RENÉE

(*scoffs*)

I can't do this. I need to wake up. I gotta wake up.

She slaps herself.

Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!
This isn't real, this isn't real!

The hustle and bustle sounds of the city begin to simmer in again. There is also the sound of a phone ringing. YR detects the sound coming from Renée's clutch purse, it's her cell phone. She grabs the phone and looks at the screen.

YOUNG RENÉE

I think he's calling you.

Renée begins hyperventilating again. The bangs of the door are now again in conjunction with the city's sounds.

Breathe Renée, please, just breathe.

RENÉE

Please, just shut up! Shut up, okay?
Here, gimme that!

She snatches the phone away from YR. She picks up his call and places him on speaker.

RENÉE (Contd.)

Baby? Hello? I don't know what's happening right now, but... please don't yell at me. Please don't yell at me, I don't know what I did!

DAMON (Offstage/V.O.)

Open the door Renée! Open the door!
Just open the damn door! I'm tired of

your bullshit, open the door! Open the fucking door!

YOUNG RENÉE

Please calm down Renée. Just breathe. In and out. Breathe. Please try to breathe. We're okay, we're safe. He's not in here, and we're safe. We're safe. Breathe.

Renée places her hand on her chest as her breathing, once again, intensifies. The lights begin to flicker and morph into a frenzy. YR watches and goes over to Renée, she grabs the phone from her, hangs up the call, and hugs her. Renée embraces the hug for a split second before gesturing that she needs to get up.

Renée gets up and grabs the bong once more, lighting the bowl and taking a deep inhale of the soothing clouds. She takes another inhale and coughs. She refuses to take a sip of water.

As the coughing subsides, she goes back over to sit beside YR and leans up against her. She lays her head in YR's lap and looks to the ceiling, as YR plays with her hair. The lights, yet again, alongside the sounds, begin to simultaneously transform. The city's chaotic soundtrack combined with the bangs of the door, begin to beautifully morph back into their calming symphony. The lights seamlessly circle back

to their colorful kaleidoscopic pattern. YR is calmly humming alongside the orchestration, and OLDER RENÉE (OR) enters.

She is dressed in a flowy long V-neck tunic top, a pair of loose-fitting capris, her peppered hair clipped up in a half up-do and is sporting a pair of flats. OR begins to walk around and examine the space, just as her young predecessor did. She looks at YR and the two exchange a deep warm smile. OR walks over to where the singing bowls are and picks up one of the bowls, gently striking the side of it and playing it. LIGHTS UP. Renée sits up.

RENÉE

Could you please not hit the singing bowl, at least not right now, okay?

YOUNG RENÉE

That wasn't me.

OLDER RENÉE

Could you give her and I a moment to chat?

YR nods and gets up to head towards the bed. She takes out a journal and coloring pencils from her satchel and begins to draw. OR sits beside Renée and the two gaze at one another.

RENÉE

I honestly thought I'd be awake by now
but... I can see that I'm wrong.

OLDER RENÉE

I truly hope you know what it is that
you're doing Renée.

RENÉE

What do you mean?

OLDER RENÉE

I gotta be honest, I'm a little surprised
you're not interrogating me the way you
did with that little one.

RENÉE

Well, she was different, plus, I know
that you're me.

OLDER RENÉE

How do you know that?

RENÉE

I can just tell. Though, I'm not sure if
you're a future version of me...or a possi-
bility of what I could be.

OLDER RENÉE

Elaborate on that.

RENÉE

You seem happy and safe. You seem sure of yourself...which—as you’ve probably been observing—I’m not quite there. You just seem at peace. (*Beat.*) I just wanna be at peace. (*tears are beginning to stream down her face*) I just wanna know what I’m doing with my life, and the choices that I’m making, are they right?

OR takes a deep breath and exhales while looking deep into Renée’s eyes.

OLDER RENÉE

Tell me, honestly... Do you think you’re doing the right thing? You’re unhappy, it’s as plain as day to everybody else but yourself. You have been pouring so much time into other people and other things. You’re running from yourself Renée; you can’t do that if you want to be happy. (*Beat.*) Despite what you may think, you have to go through it in order to get out of it.

RENÉE

God, you sound so much like my Tía Stella. I remember when I was younger, she used to tell me stuff like that.

OLDER RENÉE

And what happened, you forgot it all?

RENÉE

No, I just kinda lost myself after she passed. Once she was gone, I had no one. I mean, *you* should know... Mom and Dad were never there, and when they were, well...

OLDER RENÉE

You know, no matter how old we get, that pain of missing her never really goes away. Especially with you being a pre-med student, you get a reminder of her presence every day. (*Beat.*) However, over time, we just learn to coexist with it.

The two exchange a smile. Renée begins to lean up against OR and cry, OR embraces her by wrapping her arm around her shoulder.

RENÉE

How do I get out of it? How does one heal from all the bullshit you pick up along the way?

OLDER RENÉE

Something... that we eventually

learn along the way, and actually, it's something that Tía Stella used to say to us all the time. "I am that I am." (*Beat.*) You're creating your reality every hour, every minute, and every second of every day. You're creating that reality with every thought that arises. As humans, we are capable beings. Creators of our reality, that we are. You can change the game at any given moment, but it will always come down to a choice. Choices, love, it's always been your thoughts and choices. It's beautifully strange, isn't it, the paradox of a choice being simple?

RENÉE

Choices? How do you know if you're making the right ones?

OLDER RENÉE

(*chuckling*)

You'd think we'd figure it out by the time we have greys! I'll tell you the same thing that Tía Stella told us many years ago, and I say this because it works. Trust me, when I say that. (*Beat.*) Just close your eyes and listen to your body, your intuition, your inner voice. It's thinking, but not with your mind, more so your energy, your heart.

RENÉE

If only it were that easy.

OLDER RENÉE

It is. Trust me. I want you to try it from here on out, okay? In fact, I want you to try it right now, as practice. Can you do that for me?

RENÉE

Yeah, I can try.

OLDER RENÉE

Okay. Sit with your legs crossed and close your eyes. Keep them closed.

As Renée closes her eyes, OR gestures to YR that it is time to go. YR gets up from the bed and walks over to Renée, hugging her goodbye. She takes the hand of OR, as they both stand off to the side while watching Renée.

I want you to take four deep breaths, and with each breath, you get deeper and deeper within yourself. If it helps... think of it almost like sinking into the floor.

RENÉE

Okay.

OLDER RENÉE

And, Renée?

RENÉE

Yeah?

OLDER RENÉE

Don't forget, all that we talked about...
these are things we already know.
There's nothing I told you, that your
being doesn't already know.

RENÉE

Huh. Okay.

OLDER RENÉE

Deep breaths.

*OR & YR silently exit. As Renée takes her
four deep breaths, the soothing sounds of
singing bowls are heard resonating across
the apartment. The lights are seamlessly
transitioning to create a golden morning light.
Renewal.*

RENÉE

Okay, I took four deep breaths, what
now? (*Beat.*) Hello?

*Renée opens her eyes, only to find that YR &
OR are gone.*

Oh shit, it's already morning?

A few light knocks are heard at the door.

DAMON (*Offstage/V.O*)

Baby? Can you open the door? I just wanna talk about what happened yesterday. You have no idea how sorry I am, baby. Please, will you just open the door? Renée, can you please open the door?

Renée gets up and starts heading towards the door to unlock it, but before she touches the handle, she stops. She turns back around and walks to her nightstand. Once at her nightstand, Renée opens a drawer and pulls out a magic eight ball; she walks over to the couch and sits.

DAMON (*contd.*)

Renée, I can hear you moving in there baby. Open the door, please?

As she sits on the couch she takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and shakes the magic eight ball. After a few moments, she stands up, opens her eyes, and looks at the answer on the ball. A smile crosses her face as she looks up to the light.

LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.

Raging Seas

Arron McMorris

In the realm of turbulent tides and raging waves,
Where courage is tested and fear misbehaves,
I wandered through the tempestuous sea,
A journey of the soul, wild and free.

With each step, the winds whispered ancient rhymes,
An invitation to explore untamed times,
The tempest engulfed my wandering mind,
Yet, I ventured forth, leaving cares behind.

Though the waves crashed and roared with might,
A thirst for adventure burned strong in the night,
Through the darkness, I sailed with unwavering heart,
Guided by stars, a celestial chart.

The salty air caressed my weary face,
As I danced upon the sea's desolate grace,
The tempest hissed tales of forgotten lore,
Invoking emotions never felt before.

In this chaotic sea of relentless motion,
I found a solace, a peculiar devotion,
For amidst the storms of life's raging strife,
I discovered my own internal lighthouse of life.

The tempestuous sea, a canvas unfurled,
A symphony of chaos in a chaotic world,
Here, in this wild and untamed domain,
I found my soul, reborn and unchained.

So, let the waves crash and the storms unwind,
For within me, a tempestuous spirit I'll find,
Roaming freely, amidst the tumultuous sea,
Forever and always, embracing ecstasy.

The Blood of Tradition

Kelli Tucker

Perrin, an hour left of Fort Worth
is flooded with country people in cowboy hats
too big for their head. Everyone decked
in chaps and spurs, claiming they are the real deal.
Most of them live and die in this small town
of little consequence - except for me
I managed to escape the cattle ropes thrown at me
And haven't looked back, but I remember it all.
The single paved road running straight through
the web of dirt roads and potholes branching off.
The people that drive the roads were expected to fix them.
The tractors parked in the school lot waiting to be used,
eventually buried after they're worked until groaning and creaking -
even then, pushed till they fall apart.
Their parts get dumped over the fence
on the side of the road with a sign saying free.
They disappear overnight, underneath the roadkill and grass.
The cemetery across the pasture filled with centuries of Gillmanns,
Williams, and Truemans buried beside their cows and horses
they couldn't even part with in death.
Before you realize it, three generations have gone by,
all lying next to each other in the dirt watching
great grandkids raise their first cow and eat it too.
They watch the kids' tears roll down when the cow gets taken away,
but smile in satisfaction of the juices dripping down the burger.
It's in the blood of tradition.
I called it *Our Town*, a place where one gets caught
in the fantasy of small-town life of everyone
knowing everyone. They know about your spots of liver cancer
before you do. It was from all the times they watched
from their window, face against the glass to not miss a detail
as you walk into the store empty handed and leave
with two cases too many every Tuesday and Saturday.

They time it just right to walk out their door
and shout out your name as the store bell rings
for attention, the only noise besides the yellow blinking stoplight,
asking if you're having friends over, when they know
you only ever have yourself to drink with. Kind hands
offering to walk you to your door so they can see
what you hide behind your curtains you always keep up.
You're not allowed to hide anything here.
Secrets don't belong inside the town.
Strangers will run out of gas across the street at eleven
thirty-eight and Mr. Jenkins will offer them enough gas to make it
to the next town. He tells them it was for his lawnmower
hoping to insight guilt. He loved seeing their panicked expressions
overtake the thankful ones. They offer to pay for it, but he smiles
and waves them on their way. His normal grimace returns
as their taillights fade into the dark. Good riddance.
Outsiders don't belong here; they threaten the reality created.
A perfectly polished town, rounded to a fine point,
easily overlooked on a map.

The Well

MJ Trook

My mind was in a wishing well,
covering all my dreams
answering prayers
the water
covered fears
washed away doubts
and drowned my anxiety.

I simply was
Everything
The Wild
The Great
The Generous
The Fearless
The Humble¹

I was whatever I wanted.
How romantic
to just be.
The maze of my mind
finally drawn out
I traced my finger over the lines—
I found it

¹ Epithets as seen in royal titles or as a descriptor of a person of influence.

The chaos that filled the gaps—
Good and *exciting* chaos
I found in the well

I had to jump.

My hands were full,
of possibilities and roadblocks

I threw them into the well.

Soon it would overflow
and I would be saved
I felt the weight
each burden,
each tear and scrape

The result would be worth it.

The well of life
exploded with possibilities.

I was caught at the bottom
but I could go anywhere.

I did not fear,
my mind wandered in the well
I took fear in hand,
it became my foundation
climbing

stone scraping
tearing
my hands.

Stepping on each fear
each obstacle
scraping, tearing
my knees
on the way out

Into the future.
Newness washed over me
I was free.

I looked down and
as the water rose,
so did I

Everything I wanted,
Everything I could be
was within reach.

All that was left
was to jump

Too Many Options Takes Away the Convenience

Kelli Tucker

She trails her fingers over gas station keychains.
They sway and clank together, calling out
popular names like Peter and Susan. She turns
to the bright auroral drinks behind the glass door.

The bottles sway and clank together, reflections
staining her stomach and thighs a mural of
the neon Gatorades and Monsters behind the glass door,
waiting and wondering, when they will get picked.

Painting her stomach and thighs a mural,
the stray and useless girl, devoid of a purpose,
wonders which drink she will pick,
moping on the floor, questioning her existence.

Feeling void, just a stray that walked in,
she wonders why it's so hard to just pick one.
Moping on the floor, questioning her existence
torn between picking a need or a want.

Why is it so hard to just pick one?
She needs to get up off this floor, but she's
torn between wanting to just stay here
on the corner of Hershey and Lays.

She needs to get up off the dirty floor,
and make a decision, but she's tired
of being on the corner between options—
waiting for a day she wouldn't have to.

She's tired of having to make a choice;
so, she decided to get up and walk away.
She waits for the day she can make up her mind,
just trailing her fingers over gas station keychains.

Contributors' Biographies

Meg Arney is a Computer Science major and Creative Writing minor at SFA. They aspire to work in video game development while writing and publishing novels in their spare time.

Lauren Brown is a sophomore English student at SFA who aspires to teach 7th grade English. She enjoys writing abstract poetry, dancing, and music. While Lauren has not yet published any work, she believes her words deserve to be heard, not only because they are creative, but because they speak for all those whose voices are too quiet to hear.

Megan Bynum is a BFA candidate with an emphasis in sculpture. Her work invites the audience to consider existential questions regarding intrinsic and extrinsic connections through the use of sculptural surrogates and ethical postulations.

Bradley Cavanaugh is a Creative Writing major at SFA. He enjoys writing stories that blend the problems of the real world with the fantastical.

Sarah Forest Cisco is a senior undergraduate studying English and

Creative Writing. Previously, Sarah's poem "Tropical Storm Nicholas Hitting Houston This Week" was published in the Subplots chapbook "Surviving the Storm." Sarah was also short-listed for a Literary Award for the same poem. She is the Treasurer of the Sigma Tau Delta English Honors Society and has an all-black cat named Eva, who just turned seven.

Ivana "Ivy" Cortez is a senior English major with a concentration in secondary education from Galena Park, Texas. They have a strong belief that writing is an art form and that it has a healing nature, a belief they hope to share with their students. They have previously been published in the 2020 edition of *Penguin x We Need Diverse Books*.

Ily Crawford is a sophomore at SFA currently studying Creative Writing with plans to pursue Library Sciences in graduate school. When not writing, they enjoy drawing, reading, binging animated TV shows, and spending time with her cockatiel named Dorito.

Abigayle Duke is a sophomore Nursing major from the Houston area. In her free time, she enjoys taking pictures of the

world around her. Occasionally, she messes around with writing, but it has never gone anywhere other than Word.

Victoria Hoover wrote her first story in second grade and has been writing ever since. Born in Houston, she now hails from tiny Alto Texas and lives happily swaddled by the trees with her little dog Fizzig Falcor Bunny Bean. Her greatest loves in life are words, and she uses as many on a daily basis as possible - can't play favorites after all.

Lawrence Matthews thinks every aspect of the world is an art form in its own way, regardless of what that aspect is. For a long time he has kept his art hidden from the world and now he hopes that by sharing it he will delight readers in the process.

Arron McMorris is currently a senior in the Sound Recording Technology degree program. Poetry helps him decipher his thoughts and be present in the moment.

Marissa Mondragon is a performing artist currently pursuing a major in Theatre and a minor in Creative Writing. Although she is most comfortable on stage and in the spotlight, she has recently rediscovered

her love for writing while nestled under the trees with her journal and pen. Marissa has a collection of unpublished poems, screenplays, stories, and songs that she hopes to share with the world very soon. Her work is deeply influenced by the spirit and wisdom of her family, ancestors, and friends, which she incorporates into her creations.

MJ Trook is a first year Creative Writing student from Lubbock, Texas. Their main focus is young adult fiction but they have worked with poetry for the past 3 years and have been published in the Live Poet's Society of New Jersey's anthology.

Kelli Tucker is a Creative Writing major. She writes within the frame of fiction with a particular interest in flash fiction. She plans to pursue a career in publishing while taking care of her plant babies.

