



University of Northern Iowa

INNER WEATHER

Student Literary Magazine

Issue 2022



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INNER WEATHER STAFF

Claire Bathurst	Editor-in-Chief
Kellen Schmidt	Editor-in-Chief
Hailey Hershey	Art Editor
Lauren McGill	Fiction Editor
Lauren Hanssen	Nonfiction Editor
Ana Eagan	Poetry Editor
Cora Twedt	Copy Editor
Shelby McGriff	Copy Editor
Vince Gotera	Faculty Advisor



LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

CLAIRE BATHURST

Editor-In-Chief

First and foremost, I would like to thank my co-editor-in-chief, Kellen Schmidt, for working so diligently as the face of the *Inner Weather* staff. I would also like to thank Vince Gotera, the faculty advisor, for supporting our humble magazine and always encouraging creativity. Another big shout out to our art editor, Hailey Hershey, for putting together a beautiful, professional magazine under a tight deadline. And of course, we couldn't have gotten anywhere without our other editors, Ana, Cora, Lauren H., Lauren M., and Shelby. It's encouraging to see fellow students so excited about literature, and I hope this continues for years to come.

I would like to give one last thank you to all those who submitted work—without you, there wouldn't be a magazine at all. To everyone reading, I hope you enjoy the current issue of *Inner Weather*. UNI has some real talent and creativity, and I'm proud to be a part of it.

KELLEN SCHIMDT

Editor-In-Chief

Dear reader,

Thanks for taking the time to look at our magazine! We've all worked hard to get it to you and we hope that in its pages you can find something to remember. A lot of hard effort has gone into every word you see here, and that couldn't have been done without some very special people. Thank you to Claire Bathurst, my co-Editor in Chief, for keeping a watchful eye over everything and providing guidance where it was needed; to Hailey Hershey, our art editor, for her astoundingly quick and quality work; to Cora and Shelby, copyeditors, for reading literally everything in the magazine and still having ideas to share; and to all of our genre editors, Ana, Lauren H., and Lauren M., for your insights and openness to the world of student literature. Finally, thank you to Dr. Vince Gotera for helping Claire and I to bring together this wonderful group of students and for helping us to make the best version of *Inner Weather* we could make.

It's been a long and difficult year, but at the end of it you've all found yourselves there; the end of it. Keep discovering, keep writing, and please continue to carry on.

HAILEY HERSHEY

Art Editor

I had dabbled in spread design before, but never in designing a whole magazine. I was nervous but equally excited for the opportunity to work with the *Inner Weather* team to create this year's issue. *Inner Weather* gave me the chance to have creative freedom to design and present a magazine in a way I have never been able to before.

We have all felt the effects of the Covid-19 global pandemic for two years now, and it's finally starting to feel normal again. The fact that people were still determined and excited to create art and literature during this time is extraordinary. And being able to help those people publish their creations is an even better feeling. So a big thanks to everyone who submitted work to *Inner Weather*!

I would like to thank Professor Vince Gotera, the faculty advisor, for allowing me this opportunity to be a part of *Inner Weather*. I would also like to thank all of the *Inner Weather* staff for their dedication to this magazine and hard work to make this whole project possible.

Please enjoy the amazing literature and art presented in the 2022 issue of *Inner Weather*!

LAUREN MCGUILL

Fiction Editor

Fiction has, and probably always will be, my favorite genre to read. I fell in love with stories years ago, and that love continues to grow with each and every wonderful piece I read. I am so incredibly lucky to not only be a part of *Inner Weather*, but to be entrusted to read the lovely stories UNI students submit. No matter what is happening in the world, good stories can make anything a little bit better. I hope that reading our magazine, filled with so many passionate voices, not only brightens your day, but leaves you feeling inspired and makes you remember life is full of wonder. Thank you to everyone who submitted stories to *Inner Weather*, none of this would be possible without your work. And thank you to our dear readers, I hope you enjoy this issue and all the effort and love that has been put into it.

LAUREN HANSEN

Nonfiction Editor

An enormous thank you to everyone who worked on this magazine, for your individual contributions, and for being such a lovely group to work alongside. To Claire, Kellen, and Dr. Gotera, thank you for your guidance and leadership. To the other editors and copy editors, Hailey, Lauren, Ana, Cora, and Shelby, thank you for your dedication to cultivating great work. And to those who submitted work to be considered, thank you for sharing with us your artistic passions.

Creative nonfiction, I've observed, offers such a uniquely introspective understanding of how people see and experience the world. For that reason most of all, I am beyond grateful to have been granted the opportunity to read all of the magnificent nonfiction submissions. To anyone who submitted work, thank you for your bravery in sharing your insights and artistry. It has been a joy to see little bits of the world through your eyes.

Another final thanks to those reading this, not only for your support of *Inner Weather*, but your support of artistic expression and the vulnerability of every creator whose contributions are featured this year.

ANA EAGAN

Poetry Editor

Poetry often demonstrates the deepest reflections of the self and our experiences in the world. It helps us see the world through a creative lens, allowing beautiful images and stories to pour out onto the page in their rawest form. Sometimes it's nonsense, in squiggles and lines that only we ourselves can understand. Sometimes we can mold the words, shaping them into this beautiful artform.

It is important for us to reflect on our lives together, with the ones we hold close. It is almost necessary that we write, document, and share how we make it through the dark days, and through our better ones. *Inner Weather* has helped many of us do just that, letting us explore the places our minds can wander, through our words.

I am thankful to have read the submissions we received throughout the process of creating this magazine, especially those that have been selected in publishing *Inner Weather*. I also send a huge thank you to our Inner Weather staff, who have worked incredibly hard this semester to complete this magazine. Finally, a giant thank you to Vince Gotera for giving me this opportunity to encourage and share the work of our UNI students.

Please enjoy, and never stop creating!

CORA TWEDT

Copy Editor

I want to thank you for reading this issue of *Inner Weather*, and also I want to thank the genre editors, my co-copyeditor, our fearless leaders, Claire Bathurst and Kellen Schmidt, and our faculty advisor, Vince Gotera. Everyone worked so hard to make this a great issue for you all to enjoy. The one responsible for making the magazine so beautiful to look at is the amazingly talented Hailey Hershey. Everyone did a great job and I couldn't imagine a better group of people to collaborate with. It was so fun reading through the submissions that the genre editors picked. All were so unique in their own way and really shows the talent of the students at UNI. Continue to read and write, and be creative! Society will always need its creative minds for the future! Thank you for reading and enjoy.

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by Madeline Roubik

Honorable Mentions:

Samantha Davis
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Ana Eagan
synthetic affections

Judged by Caroline Ledeboer

Caroline Ledeboer is a writer of songs, creative nonfiction, fiction, and lately poetry. She has recorded eight albums as a member of Eacret and Ledeboer, and earned an Iowa Arts Council grant for their album, *Offspring*. She has been published on Narrative.com, in *Sentence*, *100 Words*, and as part of a collaborative novel, *Port Noble: A Lexicon*. She earned her MFA in Nonfiction Writing and an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Iowa, and teaches and advises at the University of Northern Iowa, when she's not taking long evening walks with her ball-obsessed dogs, Coco and Mistletoe.

"Max!"

Ebony yelled as her brother stared at her in shock. Blood dripped from two red dots on his wrist, the poisonous dwarf dragon fluttering to the grass at his side. His face grew pale and his legs buckled as the venom spread.

Ebony bolted across the schoolyard. "Max!" she cried again, but the boy had tumbled to the ground. He curled around his wrist, whimpering with eyes drawn tight.

Ebony stomped on the wing of the dragon, then flew to Max's side and grabbed his wrist. Already, silver tendrils of poison were ribboned up his arm.

"He got bit!" she cried as a teacher ran to the scene. "My brother got bit!"

Ebony stomped up the mountain path, her mind a million miles away. She could still see Max's face clearly, still hear his cry as the teacher carried him away. She couldn't understand why he chose to play with the dragon in the first place, but the result was deadly.

"Watch out for that bush," Ebony mumbled subconsciously as her brother, Drake, followed her like a shadow. "It'll turn you into a frog if you get too close."

He nodded, knowing that she had a far better knowledge of magical foliage than he.

"He's dying," she breathed as Drake listened with quiet interest. "I overheard Dad talking to the doctor.

The poison's spreading ... Max probably only has a week left before it kills him."

"Anything we can do?" His voice fell flat with emotion, every brutal comment and annoying noise stripped from his personality. Everything that made Drake unique had fallen away at the disaster until Ebony almost wanted him to insult her. It would have been so normal, so... painless compared to watching her brother die.

"The doctor said he needs Ausa Weed, and it only grows on Red-edge Mountain."

Drake nodded, knowing just how dangerous Rededge Mountain was. Not only was it covered in deadly foliage and vicious magical creatures, it was known as Death's Doorway. Only the most desperate people traveled on its slopes, and the few that made it back were trapped in the terror of what rested at its peak.

"I want to go!" she blurted out, surprised by the sound of her voice. Whipping her head around to face Drake, she stared straight into his shocked eyes, rambling on as if she needed to fit her entire argument into one breath. "I know it's dangerous, but I know more about magical foliage and creatures than anyone in our family! I'm the only one who can go, and it's not like Max has much more—"

"I'll come with you." Drake's voice drew her away again as her heart pounded like a mallet. His familiar grin was ribboned with mischief. "Or, at least as far as I can. You'll need as much help as you can get."

Ebony's heart leapt as a volcano mouse scurried beneath her feet, her voice squeaking in unison to the creature. She knew its bite was deadly, yet seeing the spindly body and tiny fangs were enough to frighten her even without the threat of poison.

"You keep jumping like that and you'll be dead before we even get to the top," Drake joked as Ebony tried to calm down with a deep breath. Even though she had just wished that he would go back to normal and hurl insults at her again, his words still stung deep beneath her skin. Rededge Mountain was dangerous enough without Drake's distractions.

"Well, at least I'm not a stupid—" Ebony yelped, the insult falling away as a few pixies jumped from the rocks. Stumbling back, she caught her breath as the glowing dots laughed in a flurry of tinkling bells. Ebony instinctively gripped her hand over her heart, wishing the adrenaline away as the pixies scattered into the rocks again.

"As I said," he joked, teasingly glancing back at her. "Easily startled." Ebony's skin boiled in rage at her little brother, the kind that she only felt for her siblings. It wove its way into her mind, the competition for attention, the constant arguments over nothing, and every stupid insult they shoved down each other's throat. She wouldn't let him win the game of insults, no matter how petty it was.

With new energy in her

bones, she pounded each foot up the rocky slope with an arsenal of insults hanging on the tip of her tongue.

"Why you little, ungrateful ... Drake!"

"What?" he asked as she grabbed his arm and yanked back. They stumbled down the slope, sliding on the gravel path. "What the heck? Why'd you do that?!"

"That's a basilisk's nest," she whispered, and Drake's eyes opened wide. Right in the middle of the path, the small mound of dirt wiggled and shifted. Molting into a streak of blue, the snake stared at them with beady eyes.

"What do we do?" Drake whispered and Ebony shoved her little brother behind her. Even though Drake knew nothing of the mountain's inhabitants, he still knew that basilisks were deadly.

"We scare it off," Ebony mumbled and leaned down to pick up a stone. Their eyes locked like a metal rod, she stared at the serpent. Her mind was running rampant with every fact she knew about them. Then, in a display of dominance, she pursed her lips and hissed.

The snake recoiled and bared its yellowed fangs. Again, Ebony hissed. "Get outta here!"

The basilisk made a clicking noise, flicking its tail in rampant aggression.

"I said move on!" Ebony chucked the rock as hard as she could, and before she knew it, the basilisk darted in a flash of blue. It streaked across the path, winding around the rock and straight for her.

Drake's hand met her back, pushing her out of the way. Her face was full of dirt, arms scraped, gravel pressed into her chin as up became down. She cried, scrambling against the stones as she pushed herself up and tenderly poked one of her scrapes.

"... Sorry." Drake grinned, although his voice was tight with fear. "I thought it was gonna bite you."

"No worries," Ebony warbled with a pounding heart. Grimacing, she brushed the dirt off of her skinned knee. "We don't need another one of us to get a toxic bite."

For a moment, they sat in silence while Ebony nitpicked her bruises and Drake pulled out a bottle of water. They had been hiking for hours, and they couldn't have been more exhausted. Drake's dark hair was matted to his forehead and Ebony's cheeks flushed from the heat, but the thought of a cure drove her forward. As much as it cost, she couldn't bear to see Max die from a dragon bite.

"This is as far as I can go," Drake spoke up after a few minutes of silence. Everything still felt muted from their brief encounter, her heart pounding as quickly as adrenaline flowed through her veins. "Everything past here could kill me, and you're the only one who knows how to, well, not die up there."

Ebony nodded at his teasing grin, his words hardly sinking in as she began to step forward. "Wait for me?" She asked each word a plea of its own. Drake shrugged his shoulders, his eyes bending to the ground.

"Only if you hurry," he joked, and Ebony's heart leaped at the small gesture. His nervous grin was all she needed to know that he cared about her. Finally satisfied with his attempt at a goodbye, she turned around and began the last stretch towards the peak.

Ebony was only a few feet from the last ledge of the mountain, out of breath and exhausted. She had gained little scrapes all over her arms and legs, all while her mousy brown hair had wound into thousands of knots. Even her mind was exhausted, having used every bit of knowledge about magic foliage to reach the top safely.

And all for a little girl with pigtails.

"Did you have a nice climb?" Bright eyes stared back at Ebony as she tilted her head and tried to understand what she was seeing. Layered in petticoats and childish laughter, the girl bent towards her with a spring in her step. Ebony tried to avoid thinking about the danger of the mountain, rumors of hallucinations tickling the back of her mind.

"Yeah..." she trailed off. Collapsing onto her knees, she watched the grin stretch across the girl's face as her dress bounced in the breeze. She was so peculiarly joyous...

"You must be tired," she declared and Ebony smiled, glad for a bit of conversation, even if the girl might only be a figment of her imagination. Nodding, she watched her skip through the flowery fields. The last thing she would have expected to

see upon a mountain would be fields of flowers, so unique they filled her mind with terrified wonder.

Stunning white petals shaped like an angel's wings and another with teeth the size of daggers caught her eye. Astounded, she hardly noticed as the little girl bent over her flowers, ruffling layers of embroidered petticoats. "You came here looking for a flower, didn't you?"

"Actually," she spoke, visions of Max's poisoned skin cutting through her mind like a knife. "I'm here for my brother. I was told that if I climbed up here, there would be Ausa weed that could cure him. He's seventeen and has a terrible dragon bite."

The little girl wrinkled her nose with a grin, plopping down amongst her flowers in a cloud of soft ruffles. "My name's Ausa, and these are weeds." She spoke simply as Ebony's heart jumped in excitement. "But none of it will cure him. I could grow him one, but you would have to pay."

"Uhh, I didn't bring any cash ..." Ebony trailed off, silently kicking herself for not bringing something so crucial to saving her brother's life.

"Not cash," Ausa giggled, leaning towards Ebony with the childish joy that lit up her face. Lifting her finger, she pointed straight at Ebony's chest, her grin suddenly taking on a much more haunting meaning. "I can save his life, but you have to pay. I'm going to need a seed to grow a cure."

Ebony's heart pounded unnaturally, a sudden strange beating springing from the little girl's words.

How could she have been so foolish to believe that something so beautiful was free? How could she not have seen the danger before? Staring back into Ausa's eyes, they seemed to take on a red tint from the sunset, as red and dangerous as her promise.

Before she could stop herself, Ebony swallowed another breath of air and tried not to imagine how it might be her last. Bending to a silent nod, everything became a blur of foliage and fading faces as Ausa's words echoed in her ears.

"You will make a beautiful flower ..."

Drake was sick of waiting. He had been joking when he told Ebony to hurry, but waiting was getting ridiculous. The sun had risen and set at least twice, and his stomach was beginning to hurt from what little food they had brought with them. At first, he debated leaving. He was hungry, tired, and sick of Ebony's game. It wouldn't be his fault for leaving his sister behind. She had taken her time and he had waited, and even without him, she was strong enough to fend for herself.

That's when he realized he had to drag himself up the hill, no matter how deadly the legend claimed the peak was. If something had delayed his sister; if something had hurt his sister ...

He didn't want to finish the thought.

Desperately, Drake hauled himself over the final cliff, surprised to see fields of flowers bending to his labored breathing. It was stunning, so

many beautiful and gorgeous plants that had never before met his eyes. Each one was filled with a sweet scent that reminded him of a memory he couldn't quite place, but couldn't entirely forget either.

"Do you like my garden?" A small, bright voice met his ears and he looked down. Hardly as tall as his waist, the mess of blonde pigtails and petticoats darted through the rows of flowers, laughter filling the air.

"Umm, actually, I'm looking for—"

"A flower." She cut in as Drake's words faded into her mess of giggles. "Everyone comes here looking for a flower! Let me know if you see one you like." Just like the wind, the girl drifted away again, drawn to each plant like a bee. Drake felt himself fall into step behind her, a daze settling over him at the sight of each stunning bloom.

"What's that one?" He found himself asking, suddenly entranced by a silvery lotus-like flower. Each petal was crafted with perfect symmetry, glowing in the late sunlight. The girl hopped over, her voice mystic with wonder.

"That's my newest one," she whispered as if it were a secret. Bending down, she dug her doll-like hands into the dirt, pinching the flower at the stem. "I grew it for a 17-year-old boy with dragon venom in his veins."

"Max?" Drake breathed, flashes of his older brother's feverish face dancing across his mind. Hesitantly, he reached towards the flower and brushed his fingertips across the

petals. It was so delicate, so beautifully priceless ... and the cure Ebony had been searching for.

"Go ahead and take it." She smiled, resting the delicate petals on his outstretched hand. "She already paid." Drake raised his eyes to meet the tiny girl, unable to express all the gratitude that swelled inside of him. He wanted to cry, to scream, to laugh all at once, but the thought of seeing Max up on his feet again was too much to bear.

His brother was in such a feverish wreck, covered and bound into the poison's grasp; it would be a dream to hear his laugh again. He couldn't wait to see him sitting at the dinner table, or beating him at checkers, or even just bored in class with every lovable quirk of personality he held. No more poison, no more pain; just Max, Drake, and Ebony ...

The smile faded from his lips, staring down at the flower as realization rolled across his mind.

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Wrinkled

Daria Tessmer

Swollen joints
of arthritic fingers,
bulging blue rivers
of varicose veins.

Weathered, worn,
pallid skin stretched
across ivory ridges,
crooked and curved.

Freckled dots
of age spots,
flicks of paint
on stressed canvas.
Delicate, dried,
somehow shriveled
like plucked peony petals.

Withered, wrinkled,
the hands of my grandmother.

How It Began

Taylor Brown

Do you ever wonder who fell first?
Sometimes I find myself asking
was it you
or was it me?
Was it my eyes
or your smile?
Did we fall like a ceramic plate,
so quickly we shattered at our first collision?
Or did we meld slowly
like a bag of gummies on a hot day,
losing track of ourselves and our boundaries over time?
I don't know.
I can't remember.
But sometimes I wonder what went wrong.

Ode on My Love's Tattoos

Hanna Kendall

May I ask what sweet ink blessed the recesses of your skin?
What story flows just below the surface,
Perhaps a memory of the garden
At your summer home in Maine,
Or a lover lost in vain!
Or just a little ditty,
Made for sticky syrup laughter to drip from your tongue.

Have you been told your body is a temple?
That your canvas is a holy shell
That only your holy, holy soul
Given by the Lord shall dwell?
Or is that why you elect to depict
a living portrait of dancing buds and a lightened moon,
Wherein your sheathe was pricked?

For I have seen many a story written on a page.
The smooth glide of a quill and ink.
Many a story wilt transcend our age.
But the impressions that muse beneath your skin,
Dancing beneath fingertip and scrutiny,
The silky petals of the fresh-cut daffodil
And the melodious heartbeat of the raven's wing
Flapping, fluttering! Fluttering, Flapping!
Across the cosmos, your story the raven will sing.

May I ask what bitter ink has cursed the obscure places of your mind?
What haunting rivers run intertwined,
Through the veins the needle had pierced?
Is a memorial to the ghosted faces
Of your past hiding just beneath the
Cotton rim hanging about your neck?
Is there an eerie harmony
Running its rhythms in time to your breath?

Oh how I wish the ink had favored my virgin skin so,
For the patterns that grace me
Are merely freckle, scar, and though I long to have my stories
Imprinted along with my woes,
I settle to see
Your tale, your tragedy!
Your fable, your fantasy! Immortalized in this mortal lifetime
Under the velvet fingertip's kiss
Of our true, true lover's bliss.

tangential thinking

Ana Eagan

think –
i've traveled
lost
amongst this, sea?

but wait,
I see that light [house]
in the growing distance...

where will it lead? [home]
that light glimmering
across the murky waters

encompass
my thoughts of a gliding
sparrow, soaring:

there is no direction.
only straight –
only forward –>

never back [wards]
tracking the train
of thoughtless wonder –

that ever cycling circle,
cavernous inside
of my brain

is simply brushed past,
preparing a blank bullet [canvas]
for the splatter.

i follow the sin wave
of my (e)motions;
towards the sickening splash.

Mother's Garden

Maddie Kizer

My mother never got her garden,
nor the house she'd spent years dreaming of.
Never a fan of plants or vegetables–
a resentment for what she couldn't have.

Her garden would've grown patience rather
than tomatoes. Compassion over herbs.
Strong roots filled with sacrifice and coming home
from her 9-5 to write thesis papers.

Her garden would've grown bubblegum
to match her soft spirit, her sweet tooth.
It would've been underwatered, both from
forgetfulness and placing others first.

No, her garden wouldn't be green and vibrant
it'd be pastel, completely unique.

Butterfly

Amanda Vogl

I remember when I was once a part of something bigger
A time where I was among all my siblings
And nearby, I could hear the whispers of my friends
I counted on them, they counted on me
Until the day the breeze was just a little too strong
And we flew
Scattered on the wind
Lost from each other
Tumbling
 Tumbling
 tumbling

Until I fell

I remember the loneliness, the growing
As I showed those around me how much beauty I could be
My scent a joy for those who paused
A soft, sweetness from my flowered petals
Sometimes I wonder whatever happened
To my siblings and whispering friends

Among those who paused
Was you,
You, you
Butterfly
The gentle flutter of your wings
I could feel against my petals
A gentle caress from the wind you make

I wonder
How does it feel to fly
When you spread your wings
To the sky?
Butterfly, butterfly,
Thank you for the moment you have given me
I can feel my time closing
I can feel my beauty withering
I am losing my seeds, my petals, my scent
Just as I know your wings beat weaker
Yet, butterfly, butterfly,
I thank you for your kindness

Fatigue

Daria Tessmer

Weary eyes and wilting shoulders,
larynx shredded to ribbons.

Charcoal grays and muted olive greens;
scratchy, starch pressed against my skin.

Draped like a velvet curtain
rubbing raw the soft, supple flesh found beneath.

Clawing away at my last shred of strength,
tendons ripped and torn through,
leaving my bones bare, naked and exposed.

Corner of 9th and 9th

Maddie Kizer

Stiff brown leaves fall from the heavy elm tree
onto the corner of 9th and 9th.
Across the street from the old folks home and
kitty corner to the friendly pharmacist neighbor
there lies a house everyone in town knows.

The sun begins to set, young kids yelling
in their assemble-me-playgrounds, the air
smelling of crackling bonfires at dusk and
adult laughter from last-season barbeques.

Middle aged parents going for a brisk dusk walk,
preoccupied by their bright red wagons pulling two snotty infants,
yet they all still wave to the family on the corner
of 9th and 9th, where I sit on the rickety porch swing
of my grandmother's love-filled home—

My sister and I flail our legs, too little
to reach the concrete below the swing,
my aunt and mother bicker near the off-white screen door,
husbands preparing to halfheartedly defend.

My grandfather waves to every passerby,
every dog walker, wagon-puller, truck driver
never failing to find something witty to shout—
a comment that stems into a ten-minute conversation.

Soon the stars come out followed by heavy sighs
and choruses of well... and hands on hips
and I'll let you go's with throaty chuckles
and eyes upturned expectedly.

We collect our Ziploc bags filled to the brim
with chicken and potatoes before turning our car lights on,
driving home with smiles on our faces.

Delicate me, what now

Ava Deitrich

When I was 19 I convinced myself that the word *delicate* would never belong
to **me**
hip dips, tiger stripes, sun bleached hair, *delicate* never fit into the vocabulary
of **me**
I would always let the branches scrape over my skin, tattoo needles of nature
making their mark
a bug bite swells, the mark of the *wild*
so that I could claim

every

itch and *scratch* and *scrape* as a **brand**

of bravery and strength

I could never be the *delicate* girl, it was never in my cards, in the stars, or on
the table

I dedicated me to be the *un-delicate* one

I would be the one stronger than any man, fiercer than any storm

I would *ravage* the earth and make my path across the desert

forty days would turn into four

A journey was simply a grocery trip, and the battles to the front lines

Seemed like a simple walk in the park

Then there was a *glitch*

in my reality, my position, my vision

My sword swung wildly, my punches missed, my feet bore blisters,

I didn't do crazy things, my journeys seemed so small

No dragons did I defeat, no kingdom did I save, no eyes did I open

I lived my life calm, the one

motionless spot in the sea of churning waves

I love to read, to write, draw, to create. I loved to teach and learn and inspire.

but how can I inspire, when I am uninspired by my own existence.

No magic comes from my fingers, no crowd can I conquer with speech,

the wild wild woman

She disappeared with the sheets, a soft, and humble girl awoke

A nervous, fidgeting wreck

A new world to work and mold and set,

What now?



Grudge

Antonia Goodwin

Sometimes I regret my decision
When you seem fun again
When you seem healthy
And you're begging me to pick up the phone
Then you go and fuck it up again
And I am thankful once more for my resolve

Danse Macabre

Stettson Smith

Wind whipping through the trees causing the cottonwoods to clap and the willows to dance. The forest full to the brim with growth, not understanding fall is coming with its harvest dance.

Running through the night, his voice drives you. Hair flying. Running to live, fleeing to fight. Chasing. Robust desire prances on the wind. Tag is only fun for one: a game of chance.

Autumn, waiting a turn in the cycle. Chilling the night in anticipation. No one understands. Elephant dead in the forest. Wind, chipping the mineralized beast, dreaming of days it'll prance.

Night life of the lonely is nothing short of death. Minds die of isolation while the body decays.

Sitting in isolation, pondering life, in a forest on the brink of death. Sit. Await yours, a glance.

Your perch gives a last breath, boys lunge, girls scream, as you intertwine with Night, a dance. The leaves fall around you, the wind welcomes with a symphony of demise, the Autumn dance.

Day & Night

Frances Lane

Skies after rainy days fill with rainbows
the end beholds the gold overflowing
In the distance we see the growing of
blooming flowers tall as can be.

Hearing a tune, the breeze carries around us
the trees dance along as they wave hello
Sounds of crickets hopping on the ground
feels as we are eavesdropping to some sound.

Soon silence speaks and makes their way to us,
glistening stars in the night sky with a soft chill
that brings goosebumps onto the skin.
We are surrounded by the nature's soft whispers

For Kelsey

Nick Johnson

I met you my freshman year of college,
Beautiful, sweet, and funny Kelsey Ray...
If back then I had my current knowledge, I'd
have more closely treasured every day.

Goddamn pulmonary hypertension is a
dreadful diagnosis for sure;
Though, to be fair, it does bear a mention –
Your sunshine soul stayed (generally) pure.

I'll always remember those eighteen hours,
Forever burned into my brain and soul;
One simple text, such that things had gone
sour, The journey of grief has taken its toll

The first and last time I saw you for real, Your
youthful face was framed in a casket; While
sitting in that sterile fun'ral home My mood
went to hell in a hand basket

In the year and a half that we were friends,
You left quite a powerful impression;
My thoughts of you will never end – Loss is a
tragedy; love, no question.

ART

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Milk Bath II Amelia Gotera - 2D paper collage



Untitled Ana Eagan - photography

Maiden with a Sword Heidi Groothuis - watercolor



Meilna I Amelia Gotera - photography



The Empress Hailey Hershey - screenprint



Grasshopper Rose Emma Stoffer - photography

Stacked Cecilia Masek - acrylic





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Eternally Burning

Cecelia Groah

Frantonville was a quiet town, too quiet, most people would say. It wasn't a peaceful quiet, but a tense one. Quiet that invited trouble. Quiet that was only drowned out by the sound of troublemakers, unfaithful bastards, and drunkards. Quincy knew this, that's why he'd left in the first place. As soon as he turned 18 he'd packed what he could fit into his '95 Chevy Impala and drove away without looking back.

He remembered that day like it was yesterday, pressing on the gas so fast that the only cop in town wouldn't have a chance in hell at catching him even if he wanted to. His parents were deadbeats and they'd spent more time trying to figure out how to get their next fix than they spent trying to raise the only child they'd had. The only real support Quincy had in his life was his grandpa, and now he was dying. That's why he'd come back. He should have come back to visit, but he'd got too wrapped up in life. Too wrapped up in running away from the people he didn't want to become like.

Though he hadn't been back in over a decade, Quincy found that he still had the route home memorized. With one hand on the wheel, he used the other to turn the radio down as he got closer to town. He couldn't quite explain it, but the air was always suffocating here. He couldn't fully catch his breath no matter how

deeply he inhaled. As he drove he looked out the window, taking in a sight he'd never wanted to see again. Fifty feet ahead of him stood the town sign, a bright green color that stood out against the dark everest green of the trees around it. The sign was covered in a film of dark brown rustic dirt. The "t" was particularly coated, to the point of being nearly completely concealed. From afar the sign read:

Frantonville

Quincy snorted to himself as he read it. Of course, no one would waste their time trying to clean it. Who would come to a shithole like this unless you were born here? He passed the sign and glanced towards the huge electrical towers that lined the side of the road. Power lines as far as he could see. Although they were tall, the surrounding trees were taller by many meters. No one lived in the stretch right outside of town and it'd become overrun by the old and tall Eastern White Pines, Basswoods, and Elm trees. The trees were huge and also thick in diameter with pines and leaves filling the air with the pungent smell of forest. Some of the trees were becoming so old and unruly that the branches were running wild, getting nearer and nearer to the power lines. It looked almost as if they were reaching for the electrical lines sinisterly, curving and twisting together.

He'd known he'd have to drive through town to get to the hospital, but he didn't think it'd bring back so many memories. Even the town sign reminded him of a memory he'd spent most of his life running away from. Some memories were buried so deep they were nothing but a whisper in the back of his mind. Coming back made them resurface. The trees brought back memories of riding bikes with his friends, and he had just passed the clearing that led to a pond where his grandpa had first taught him how to fish. When he thought about it, his grandpa had been the one to teach him how to ride a bike. His parents had been in jail most of his childhood, and his grandpa had swooped in and raised him, no questions asked.

Now his grandpa was in the hospital, how anyone had convinced him to go there was a testament to how truly sick he was. His grandpa had always said to him in that low gritty voice of his, let me die in my bed, burn my ass up, and spread my ashes in the damn yard, don't waste your money on a dead man. He always laughed after saying it aloud followed by the sound of a wet cough from years of cigarette smoking. In his memory, his grandpa was still healthy. Average in way of height, but muscular and strong from years of hard physical labor. His hair was thick and gray, it was always uneven as he cut it himself with a pair of garden scissors and a singular mirror. He was most commonly seen wearing an old, faded, red ball cap with sweat stains so

deep Quincy doubted the hat would ever unmold from the shape of his grandpa's head. Blue jeans that were hardly in better condition, steel-toed boots, and whatever plain-colored t-shirt he grabbed first.

Quincy smiled to himself as he pulled into the parking lot of the hospital. He realized he was wearing one of the t-shirts he'd stolen from his grandpa when he left all those years ago. It was much looser on him and the light breeze in the air made it billow out as he walked to the door that led to the front desk. Frantonville County Health was far from extravagant and was mostly populated by the dead, dying, or impregnated. It's the circle of life, isn't it? Quincy thought to himself sardonically. Perhaps many years ago the hospital had smelled of antiseptic and gauze, but these walls had seen too much. The air had a distinct coppery bloody scent to it, mixed with the odor of piss and death. The perfume and body odor of the other patients didn't help the overall smell, and he found himself getting nauseous.

He approached the lady at the front desk. She was middle-aged, a heavier set woman, with skin so light she appeared nearly translucent. She was chewing gum obnoxiously loud and typing away at her computer. He waited, heart knocking in anxiousness of how real this moment was, for her to notice him. The real reason he came back was starting to hit him, and he felt wound up and on edge. After a few minutes of standing there, he cleared his throat cautiously,

"H-hello? My name is Quincy. I'm here for my grandpa?"

"Well Quincy," the woman began, annoyance clear in her tone, "your last name would really help."

"It's Munson ma'am," he replied politely. He didn't know how many more times he'd be visiting and he really didn't want to piss her off if he'd be seeing her often. So he smiled placatingly as she typed his information into the computer.

The woman softened slightly under his smile. She scribbled onto a neon pink sticky note and ripped it off, handing it to him. "Here's the room number, visiting hours are from eight in the morning until noon and then again from two until seven. Go straight down the hall and take a left, you should see it," she explained mechanically, but not unkindly, as if she'd said the same line a million times.

He walked uncharacteristically slow compared to his regular pace. Each step he took felt like the means to an end, except this wasn't an end he wanted to witness. He turned left as the woman had told him to and came to an abrupt stop as the room number matched the sticky note in his hand. Faintly he could hear a soft beeping from inside the room and the sound of the TV. His eyes prickled with unshed tears as he recognized the show playing, it was a child's show, one he and his grandpa had always watched together. He steeled his nerves and knocked three times before slowly creaking the door open. What awaited him knocked the breath out of his lungs and his knuckles

turned white as his grip tightened on the door handle.

His grandpa looked nothing like the man he'd reminisced on earlier. For once his grandpa appeared as old as he was, plus ten years. He lay there with his eyes closed. His lips were dry and cracked, slightly parted as an extremely labored breath was taken every few seconds. He couldn't help but notice the tinge of blue in his lips too, a sign his heart wasn't properly circulating blood. His face was sunken in, cheekbones so prominent that it appeared his face was beginning the decaying process early. Most of his hair had fallen out and there was no red ball cap upon his head. There were no blue jeans and steel-toed boots. No smiles or cigarette-induced coughs. Just a sick old man at the end of his life.

He walked over slowly and grabbed his grandpa's hand. "Hey grandpa, it's Quincy. Sorry it took so long for me to come back home. I should've done more than call," he confessed guiltily.

He felt a weak squeeze on his hand and the shuddering intake of air before his grandpa responded. His voice was thin and wispy as he said, "Quincy, my Quincy, you look so grown up. A proper man now, like your father was at your age. I-I've missed-you." He ran out of breath at the end, struggling to finish his sentence.

"I missed you, every day. I just couldn't, not after what happened. I couldn't be here." He explained though he knew Grandpa

understood exactly what he was referring to.

It was silent for a long time after that and Quincy sat down, still holding his grandpa's hand. His eyes began to droop. It'd been a long day. Nine hours of driving, and he'd hardly slept the night before. He was too anxious thinking about his grandpa and the possibility of seeing ghosts from his past when he came back. His eyes slipped shut, maybe if he just rested them for a few minutes he'd feel better.

He was in high school again. He'd recognize those lockers anywhere. His mind was foggy, he'd taken too much last night. He needed to be more careful, Grandpa would notice if he didn't get it together soon. It's not that Quincy was a bad kid, he'd just gotten mixed up with the wrong crowd. It was kind of his birthright, wasn't it? Look at his parents, look at his grandma. They all failed. His grandpa was the sole exception. He knew he'd be no different. He knew it when, during D.A.R.E. class, he felt an unusual pull towards the drugs on the screen. A hunger he'd never known before began then, sending his brain into a frenzy. In a town like this one, getting them was as easy as going to the store to buy a loaf of bread.

The first time he'd smoked pot it was like every negative voice in his head was quiet. When he drank alcohol for the first time he'd plucked up the courage to ask Rhyleigh out, the hottest girl in school. She'd said yes, equally as drunk. The first time he'd tried cocaine he was already

drunk. His head felt close to exploding and the power surging through him was unmatched, he couldn't stop laughing.

The pattern continued until there were more drugs on his tried list versus his not tried list. It wasn't a problem until it was. Instead of being in class, he and Rhyleigh would ditch and run off to all the places they knew no one would look for them. Nothing but each other, drugs, and a dirty needle. They'd lay there for hours, tripping so hard Quincy felt like his body was ripping apart and coming back together in the most euphoric way.

Today was no different. They were graduating next week, and they wanted to skip one more time. Shoot up, fuck, piss around. Isn't that what all kids did? It was what the kids around here did.

"I've got study hall next with Ms. Perez. Meet by the gym?" He asked, raising an eyebrow towards Rhyleigh.

She was painfully pretty. Blond and sweet with big blue eyes, she looked like a doll. The drugs had yet to deteriorate her looks. The only noticeable feature was how skinny she was getting, but they both agreed they'd quit after graduation. They would be fine.

"Meet by the gym during next period, got it. I'll be there," she replied. She squeezed his hand affirmatively and turned around, grabbing her bookbag and walking away.

Study hall rolled around and Quincy found himself laughing as he and Rhyleigh made a break for it,

running out the doors to his Chevy. They climbed in, breathless, in love, excited for the future. She leaned in and kissed him softly. "Let's get out of here," she said, smiling sweetly after kissing him.

That sounded like a damn good idea. He pulled out of the school parking lot, driving down to their favorite spot. It was right out of town, past the town sign and down a dirt road. There were tall trees and bushes, so no one ever really went down there, especially not adults. It was the perfect place to hide out, their sanctuary.

To this day he can't remember what they talked about before shooting up. He just remembers laying there in euphoria staring at the clouds. The sun was poking out, but not enough to bother him. He closed his eyes. He breathed in and out slowly. Time passed. When he woke up and looked at Rhyleigh, she was dead. He doesn't remember the call, doesn't remember them taking her body, doesn't remember graduation, he just remembers the heartbreak. He also remembers the feeling of burning. A burn for a drug he wouldn't let himself have anymore. He-

Quincy jerked awake as a hand on his shoulder shook him. It was the night shift nurse, apparently, he'd slept a lot longer than he thought. His grandpa was set up and medicated for the night so Quincy hugged him gently with promises to be back tomorrow. He was stopped by a hand on his wrist. With a strength he didn't know his Grandpa had left,

he began to speak. "Quince-I don't know if I'll make it through the night. I was waiting for you. I wanted to see you again. To look you in the eyes and tell you-" he coughed suddenly and Quincy had to help him sit up, giving him water.

"Tell me what?" he asked after the coughing ended.

"Quit blaming yourself for what happened, and quit running. It's time to stop that, before you get to my age and realize you never lived," his grandpa stopped speaking. Quincy had never seen his grandpa look scared before, the expression he wore now was probably the closest to it he'd ever seen.

"I won't run anymore," Quincy acquiesced. Because how can you tell the one person on Earth you love the most that you don't know if you can keep that promise?

Quincy left that night feeling more relieved than he had in a long time, but also more scared as well. He felt as though he was on the precipice of normalcy he'd never experienced before. He just didn't know why.

One month later Quincy stood at the steps of his grandfather's house. It was small and modest, but still charming because he'd grown up here. He listened to his grandfather after he'd passed and cremated him. He spread some of the ashes on the property, but he was keeping some in an urn to put in his apartment. His grandfather had survived for two weeks after his arrival, and in that time they'd talked a lot. About his parents, about his girlfriend, about everything.

He had an address now, one that led to Rhyleigh's parents. It was time. It wouldn't bring her back, but they deserved to know about her last day, about how the drug use had all started.

Slowly he descended the steps, putting his hands in his pockets and walking towards his car. He walked very slowly. He wasn't in a rush. He too had moved to the next town over recently. Sometimes, he still experienced the burn. The ache. He was tired of letting it control him, was tired of running away from it. Today, he decided he'd run with it. Let it fuel his passions and take him somewhere that wasn't just filled with misery. He reached a hand up and felt the bill of his grandpa's red cap on his head. Somehow, it fit his perfectly. Fran-tonville was a quiet town, yes. But, sometimes it was easier to think when the world was quiet.

Anatomy of a Deer Hunter

Patrick Markovich

Don sat still in the tree stand watching the brush for any sort of movement in the distance. He was a short man, unassuming and quiet. His face projected an illusion of calm, but there was always something panicked beneath the surface of that expression. Don found himself in the midway of his life with no family, no friends, and a job as a professor at a community college. He was left with little more than regrets. As the December wind pierced through his camouflaged winter coat Don tightened his grip on the 12-gauge shotgun. For a moment he wondered if he died out in the woods how long it would take before anyone found him. Of course, he also reasoned it would be difficult to turn such a large weapon on himself. The bare trees swayed with the wind, their limbs shaking like dancing skeletons obscuring the light from the rising sun far off in the distance.

The patch of woods sat just beyond a vast field of tall grasses that hid hills far beyond the opposite tree line. From the tree stand, Don scanned the dead brush of the valley that crept down gradually towards icy waters of the Mississippi River. Light snow started to fall as Don continued to study the tree line. The flakes were light, the kind of snow that melted as soon as it touched the warmer ground. Don was suddenly alert to the sound of dead leaves crushing against the hard earth. He had trained his

everal years he spent hunting alone in the forest. The footsteps were close by, light but deliberate. He knew it was a deer immediately. Don raised the shotgun, closing his left eye as he peered down the iron sights. He aimed his gun left with his finger still off the trigger at this point. The grass of the field moved like golden waves, but Don pinpointed a small figure moving against the wind. A single black eye appeared out of the brush and although the deer was about 100 yards away from Don the eye seemed to widen in preparation to run. He placed his finger on the trigger as the doe's muscles tensed. The crack of the gunshot erupted from the gun, echoing down the valley. The sound drove the squirrels and the birds and the rabbits from their various hiding spots along the valley. A gunshot was not merely a loud noise to many of the creatures that inhabited the woods, it was something like a meteor or a plague, which for a moment disturbed every facet of their lives.

The doe stood no chance against the 12-gauge slug and its body dropped into the yellow brush. Don climbed down from the tree stand still remaining quiet even after he had killed his prey. He switched the safety on his shotgun back on and slipped the gun back into its fabric case. He approached the matted-down grasses where the doe's corpse lay with his hunting knife in

hand. Don knelt, pulling back the dying grasses to reveal a baby doe.

"Jesus Christ..." Don uttered under his breath as he attempted to hold back tears. The eyes of the animal stared up at him, dark and cold and questioning. Somehow the doe was still breathing softly, and Don had to force himself to look away. Sympathy was not something a deer hunter should be concerned with, but things had changed for Don lately. He forced himself to look back at the deer. The slug had pierced the animal's lung. The spattered, useless breath of the doe slowed as Don watched the light fade from its eyes. The eyes of the doe brought him back to the night he drove back to his small city in Eastern Iowa.

Don remembered the way his eyes were fixed mechanically on the dark road ahead. He was tired and his wife and daughter were breathing softly, content in their sleep. Don had been driving with his family on the interstate for hours now. They were coming back from a vacation in Wisconsin Dells and had left a little later than Don originally planned for. His wife was hungry, so they ate dinner, and now the drive had stretched uncomfortably long into the night. Don was the one who insisted they kept driving through the night without stopping. Don was the one who insisted on driving the whole way back even after his wife offered to take over. He felt a heaviness weighing on his eyelids as the lines of the road disappeared behind him.

Don wasn't always a quiet

man. There were times when he used to smile, when he used to laugh. The vacation was perfect, and he was thinking of all the things he did with his family as the road became more of an afterthought. His daughter Rose was just the right age to go on all the rides and Don's wife was happy to go with her. Don even went on some of the rides himself even though he always complained they made him dizzy. He wished he was back there, watching his wife and daughter bob in the wave pool laughing as the waves crashed on top of them. For a brief moment, he drifted, and he was there laughing and splashing his wife, but...

Don snapped back to attention realizing he had drifted asleep. It was too late. The car was drifting towards the median. Don jerked the wheel to the right. The car didn't straighten, instead, it skidded towards the right. Off the road. If it wasn't for the tree, maybe it would've been alright. If Don hadn't told his wife she could take her seatbelt off and rest, maybe it would've been alright. If he could've stayed awake, maybe it would've been alright. It wasn't alright.

As Don drove away from the hunting grounds, he knew he couldn't change any of those things. Don thought about driving his new truck off the road several times on his way back home, but he was a coward, and he wasn't sure that a crash would kill him anyway. He'd survived the first one.

Victoria stared ahead in her Intro to Biology class struggling to hold her attention on the whiteboard. She wasn't sure why or how she ended up in community college. Victoria figured that it would probably help her at some point in the future. It was moments like this one when Victoria started to regret her decision. The Intro to Biology class was only three days a week, but she found herself skipping at least once a week. Some days the thought of sitting in that class listening to Mr. Robinson drone on like a corpse was unbearable. Victoria had better things to do like skating and writing music.

It wasn't her fault that she couldn't pay attention. Anyone would struggle to focus if their teacher were Mr. Robinson. The man looked much older than he probably was, but it was hard for Victoria to judge. Victoria had never seen Mr. Robinson smile even a single time. He would simply recite his monotonous lectures over a chapter of the textbook. Then he would just stare at the class without saying a word. After doing this on the first day Victoria was the first one to get up and leave. She had rightly assumed that sad silence had meant class was over. It was a month into the school year when Victoria learned the story behind Mr. Robinson's empty, cold expression.

"Another thrilling lecture from Mr. Robinson. How does he manage to do it every week?" Victoria's classmate, Dinh had said to her on their way out of class one day. It was difficult for Victoria to make new

friends in school, but she had plenty of acquaintances and Dinh was one of them. Dinh was a scrawny but tall Asian boy with a selection of sneakers that made Victoria jealous.

"Do you know what his deal is? I mean honestly, something like... something isn't right there. Am I crazy?" Victoria asked tentatively like she was afraid of the answer.

"No, because I actually asked Ms. Flores about him recently, and yeah it's pretty fucked up. I kinda feel bad for the dude," Dinh changed his tone trying to sound respectful which confused Victoria.

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"Well, she said that... she said he hasn't been the same after he lost his family in a car accident. Apparently, he had a wife and a young daughter, but yeah..." Dinh's voice trailed off as they opened the exit closest to the lot they parked in.

"Christ," was the only word Victoria could manage at the time. Victoria wanted to ask more, but Dinh had already started walking towards his car. He was bound by an unspoken law of the universe: their class to the parking lot was all the time they had.

Despite everything Mr. Robinson had been through in his life he still took the time to wake up and go to work. In a way that was kind of admirable to her. Victoria was unaware of the calculating gaze cast on her by Don. He was observing her shoulder-length black hair and dark eyes. He thought the blue highlights

in her hair were pretty and he liked to think he would let his daughter get them too if she ever asked. Mr. Robinson was out of touch so he didn't understand Victoria's septum piercing or her sweater which looked like something a grandpa would wear. Victoria was unaware of Mr. Robinsons' eyes watching her very much in the same way he would observe a doe.

After class, Victoria and Dinh walked without saying anything to each other at first, but soon Dinh broke the silence.

"Any big plans for this weekend?" Dinh asked as they made their way down the sterile school hallway. Victoria was grateful for Dinh's question because she wanted to talk, but she was bad at starting the conversation.

"Probably going to skate a little bit, I've been working on my three-shoves. Will I see you there?" She asked, realizing she'd never asked Dinh if he also skated. "Nah, I'm just a poser. I don't even know what a three-shove is. I don't skate, I just like the style," Victoria was a little surprised but didn't think much of it.

"A three shove is just short for a 360 shove it. Basically, the board turns in the air— and oh shit."

"What?" Dinh asked as Victoria turned on her heel.

"Fuck, I have to go turn in my paper. I forgot to hand it to Mr. Robinson. I'll see you later Dinh we'll talk about it next time!" Victoria yelled back behind her as she was already making her way down the hallway.

"See you Victoria!" Dinh yelled back, not realizing the danger his new friend was about to step into.

Victoria went back to the biology room but found it empty. She sighed realizing that Mr. Robinson must have gone back to his office after class. Victoria was starting to regret saying goodbye to Dinh. Maybe I should've asked him to come with, she thought, walking towards the man's office. When she finally reached the door of Mr. Robinson's office Victoria felt a little ashamed. She figured he was just a depressed man who had become a little antisocial after what happened to him. There was no reason to fear him she concluded.

"Hey, uh I forgot to hand you my paper earlier Mr. Robinson," Victoria said placing the paper on the desk in front of Don.

"Oh thank you," he said softly as Victoria started to turn and leave, "What did you write about?"

"Oh, it's about the human body and how it's very adaptable to different diets. I'm vegan so I mostly focused on that diet and how that affects humans."

"Anatomy of a deer hunter." He read the title of the paper out loud which made Victoria shudder slightly for a reason she couldn't yet explain, "Maybe I'll become a vegan. Meat just hasn't tasted right recently."

"Oh yeah, it's an adjustment. I used to just be a vegetarian, but it's just more ethical and eco-friendly to be vegan. I'm sorry... it's all in the paper. Anyway, I've got to go," Victoria turned to leave. After she made her

way down the hallway Victoria quickened her pace, suddenly eager to get back to her car and get home. Back in Mr. Robinson's office, the man sat at his desk with tears in his eyes.

"Thanks, Rose," the man uttered to no one.

Victoria noticed a dank smell that she didn't recognize as she started to come back to her senses. She couldn't recall how she got in this place. A slow creeping realization took hold of the girl like the moment you realize you're stuck in a nightmare. She couldn't remember going to bed, in fact, she didn't remember walking out of school that day. The last thing she remembered was talking to Dinh. She let that thought linger for a bit, but that wasn't the truth. The last thing she remembered, she realized, was walking away from Mr. Robinson's office. It was dark and cold and she wished she had on a heavier jacket. The fleece flannel was all she had and her ears were getting cold. She still couldn't figure out where she was and panic was starting to set in. Gradually, Victoria awakened fully to a soft tilting motion that felt familiar. All at once, she pieced together the breadth of her surroundings. She was in the backseat of a car.

Victoria struggled to control her breathing as she turned her head to look at the driver's seat of the car. She moved her hands to brush her dark hair from her face and found they were bound together with duct

tape. She realized the driver would know she was awake soon, so she moved her legs slowly to the side. When she did this Victoria realized that her legs were held together by several layers of tape and zip ties. The bindings were tight and she could barely feel her legs as she moved them off of the seats onto the ground. The movement was too swift and the driver glanced in the rearview mirror. It was dark now, but Victoria recognized his face. Just as she feared, the man was Don Robinson.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Victoria asked in a frantic half-yell.

"I'm sorry..." Don said at first, "I'm sorry it's just... I'm really sorry I didn't want to do it like this."

"I'll fucking kill you when I get out! What the fuck is wrong with you?" Victoria screamed as she felt her face get hot, but she held back tears. You don't deserve my tears, she thought, clenching her jaw as tight as she could. She knew she had to stay calm if she wanted to get out of this, but it was becoming more difficult.

"I promise I didn't want it to end up like this. I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it the easy way, but I've been researching and I think I found a way for me to live in peace." Don spoke confidently. He was starting to shed the skin of the quiet man he'd become.

"Just let me go, I'm sure there is a way for you to live in peace that doesn't involve me. Clearly, you need help," Victoria tried to soften her voice but was doing a poor job of concealing her anger.

"I really am sorry," Don sounded genuine in his own way, but that didn't mean Victoria was safe. In fact, there was a certain resolve in his voice which she recognized. He had a dangerous fixation on whatever he set out to do. Victoria felt like throwing up as Don pulled the car over.

Victoria flinched as Don threw her over his shoulder without much effort. While Don seemed like a slight man, he had a certain natural strength about him. Victoria shut her eyes tight knowing she would have to fight down the road. She continued to grind her teeth in anticipation of the moment Don put her down. Don was muttering to himself as Victoria remained silent. Something about Rose. She knew now there was nothing she could say to convince the man to stop whatever it is he was about to do with her. Victoria attempted to shut out the thoughts of the things Don might do to her by clenching her bound fist. Victoria's acrylic nails dug into her palm threatening to pierce her skin. Victoria couldn't tell how long she was carried, but it felt like an eternity before Don set her down against a tree. She was in a small clearing and she made sure to note the direction of the road. She also noticed the sound of water somewhere close by. Don stood over her and Victoria noticed a black bag strapped to his back. He held a knife in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

"This is your last chance to let me go," Victoria spat with all the anger and fear that was welling up in her throat.

"We're both going to be free. I'm sorry you have to go through this, but you reminded me of my daughter. Soon I'll be free of all the mistakes I made," Don's voice was still dripping with that eerie resolve from earlier.

"Fine, if you want to be free then just fucking kill yourself, but there's no reason to involve me. I'm not your daughter, your daughter is dead, and you fucking killed her!" Victoria screamed the last part expecting a harsh reaction from Don.

"Not yet..." Don said softly, "Soon my Rose will be back, soon she'll be back here with Daddy," Don turned around with his flashlight illuminating something on the ground briefly. Victoria craned her head around the man trying to get a glimpse of what it was. "I can't bring her back like this. That's why you're here."

Don continued to ramble as Victoria struggled to understand what she saw on the dead ground. A deer's twisted corpse was situated in the middle of a concentric set of circles. The circles seemed to be painted on the ground with the blood of the doe. Behind the deer was a large tree trunk staked into the ground with a slightly smaller branch across the middle, forming a cross. Victoria didn't fully understand Don's plan, but she understood that the cross was meant for her.

"What are you going to do to me?" Victoria asked as Don knelt down with the knife.

"You will be gone, and in your place, Rose will be returned to

me. In the form of that doe. A life for a life." Don spoke as if it were obvious as he lowered the knife towards Victoria's bindings.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," Victoria spoke with a new sense of calm in her voice. At that moment Victoria felt those words were not a threat, but a promise. Don knew if he wanted the ritual to work, he would have to fasten Victoria to the cross before killing her. Don's eyes widened and he hesitated a moment before cutting her bindings. He would have to do it one way or another. Victoria waited for the precise moment her hands were free before standing up. Her legs were still bound, but she could still fight. In one swift motion, Don cut away the bindings on Victoria's wrists.

Immediately, Victoria knew what she had to do. It was just like committing to a skate trick, she knew it couldn't be half-assed. She lunged for the knife, grabbing the blade with her left hand. She stood up on her bound legs as the blade cut into her already bloody palm. She knew what she had to do next, and she had no time to ponder the decision. She closed her left hand on the blade completely and launched her right fist into the bottom of Don's jaw. He loosened his grip on the knife allowing Victoria to throw it away with all her strength. Don had been shocked at first, but soon reacted by slamming the flashlight into the back of Victoria's head.

"That fucking hurt!" Victoria screamed. Her vision blurred, but

she kept up with the man, punching him several times in his face with both hands. She knew how to throw a punch, and she had been in one fight before when a guy called her friend a dyke at the skate park. In the confusion, Victoria noticed the black bag from the man's back fall to the ground. Victoria put all her strength behind her next punch. She sent a right hook across Don's jaw already lunging towards the bag on the ground. She fumbled with the zipper hoping she would have enough time to get whatever was inside out. Her bet was right, a shotgun was concealed in the case.

Victoria had never shot a gun before, but it was her only hope at that moment. She had seen enough horror movies to know she had to switch the safety off, so she fumbled her numb fingers around the area above the trigger until she heard a click. Don was still dazed when Victoria aimed and pulled the trigger recklessly. The sound of the shot sent a shockwave through the woods and Don landed near the circle on the forest floor. In the dark, Victoria could see the black blood from his guts on the ground, seeping through his corduroy coat. Victoria watched the small doe in the circle stand up and look back towards her. Its cold dark eyes were now filled with fear. They studied the girl before darting off back into the forest towards the rushing banks of the Mississippi River.

I Always Thought We'd Have More Time

Shelby McGriff

We're staring at each other in the middle of the crowded airport. All around us, bodies are constantly in motion; everyone in such a hurry to get wherever they're going. And yet, for us, time seems to stand still. You're standing a few paces in front of me, one hand grasping the handle of your suitcase and the other absently running through your hair. A nervous habit of yours. We make eye contact, and my heart sinks when I see the look on your face.

Neither of us wants to be the first to speak. We don't know what to say.

"You're really leaving, then?" I ask, my voice quivering as I try to hold back my tears.

"I don't have much of a choice," you say. Your voice is strong, confident. But your eyes tell a different story. You can't fool me. This is hurting you, too.

"You do, though. You always have a choice," I plead. I take a step forward, testing the boundary between us. How close is too close? If you touch me, if you hold me one more time, will it be enough for you to change your mind? For you to stay?

You take a step back, and that tells me all I need to know. I look into your eyes, but the emotion from a moment ago is gone. You've put up your walls. I am no longer welcome.

"You knew it would come to this. I told you from the start," you say.

I knew. I just didn't think the

end would come so soon.

I try to come up with something else, anything that might convince you to stay. But all I can do is stare. Warm tears leave my eyes and stream down my cheeks. I let them. There is nothing subtle here, no dignity left to uphold. I am done pretending. I have nothing left to give.

You watch me and for a moment I think you might tear your wall back down; that you might close the distance between us and make everything okay. But you don't. You turn around.

"I always thought we'd have more time," I whisper as I watch you walk away.

Daycare
Kayla Cook

"One thing we have noticed," Breanna said, "is Kaleigha does talk about wanting a mommy a lot, understandably, as she hears friends talk about their mommies. She mentions her Nana and Papa quite a bit—also, understandably—given how much time they spent with their grandparents in Tennessee."

As we sat in the tiny chairs that fit Kaleigha, I looked at the names written on the hooks for the coats. Emma, Cora, Asher, Sebastian, George, Henry, Evan, Austin, Adalyn . . . a name Cara and I had discussed and liked, but we landed on Bella. How we had agreed on our youngest's name was now faded from my mind.

I stared blankly at Breanna, an ache shooting through my gut, seeing my leg bob up and down. Trying to remain still, I rested my ankle onto the opposite knee, clasping my hands together.

"And," Sarah said, "another thing you should be aware of is, Kaleigha—if another student is talking to a teacher, she'll sometimes come over and take over the conversation." Her calm demeanor pressed the weight of her words against my stomach.

I inhaled and I exhaled. "Is she—is that a huge concern you think?"

"Given the circumstances? It would make sense why she'd be possessive sometimes." Breanna said. "But what is more of a concern, is

when she throws tantrums, because it scares other kids. Or when she refuses to cooperate, like we've talked about before."

My wet eyes gazed at the dark blue Kaleigha-sized table. "Yeah, I'm sorry," came out of my mouth, though I didn't know what I was apologizing for exactly. If anything, I owed my kids an apology for moving them 1000 miles away from people they spent over half their time with for nearly a year.

"Don't be," Breanna said. "You're doing the best you can, and she's been through a lot."

Did the "best" I could mean that I should've made different decisions about touring and moving when Cara had died? The reminder that maybe things could've been different for Cara had I been home that Saturday afternoon, instead of preparing for a show, created a haze over me. It's not your fault was something I had to constantly remind myself of. Breanna was saying more things, and I made eye contact and nodded. What caught my attention was: "It may be a good idea for Kaleigha to talk with someone about the feelings of loss she's experiencing, because she's struggling to process those emotions."

To hear that, after everything I'd done to reverse the lack of processing I'd done for myself and with Kaleigha and Bella, felt like someone just punched my face. I found myself

asking, "You think she needs therapy?"

"It's something to consider." Breanna's tone grew softer.

"I mean, do y'all think it would help?"

"It could." Sarah ran a hand down her silky dirty blonde ponytail.

"What else can I do?"

"Talk about how moving makes her feel—makes you feel." Sarah played with her light blue fake nails. I noticed the engagement and wedding ring on her finger. "Same goes for when she's upset about not having a mother."

I nodded. "All right."

"It does seem like Kaleigha has a pretty good understanding about what happened," Breanna paused. "At least as much as she can." I barely ceased to understand the last twenty months.

"So, do you really think she needs therapy?"

"That's not our call to make," Sarah told me.

"I mean, y'all are with her a lot, so I value your opinions."

"I definitely think it could help her process some of the emotions she's feeling," Sarah's voice customer service voice grew higher. "Is she adjusting well? Yes. Is she kind to others? Usually, unless someone is getting way more attention—then she starts interrupting or butting in. Things to consider, because kids don't like that." Then Sarah added, "It's just when she gets upset, she gets really upset," Sarah said.

"Will she grow out of it?"

"Well, sure, she probably won't kick and scream forever when she's upset," Sarah said, "but that doesn't mean she won't act out in other ways if you don't take care of the root of the problem."

"I mean, don't we know the root of the problem? It's not like the root of the problem can be fixed, for a lack of a better word."

"You can treat the symptoms of the break though," Sarah said.

Did they think my kid was broken? "By having her talk about it to a stranger?" I put my hands up. "Don't get me wrong, I'm all for counseling, but she's four, so will that really help her?"

"It may help to get some outside help," Sarah told me. "Just to help her process things in a healthier way."

"I feel like we do talk about it. We do process it. And maybe it's not showing, but we do." My voice faded out in a crack. I'd done everything I could to be vulnerable with Kaleigha and Bella—but Kaleigha especially—only to be told it still wasn't enough? I hated this.

"It's clear that she has emotional support from you," Breanna said, "but it still may be good for her to process everything with someone from the outside."

"Why though?"

"Because you're not a professional," Sarah reasoned, "and neither are we. They can help her process the trauma she's experienced at such a young age. You asked for our opinions, and we're just giving it to you." I

wished I could swallow the rock that made it hard to speak.

"How is she doing socially?" I didn't even recognize the sound of my own voice. "Does she have friends?"

"She does," Breanna told me. "She's become really good friends with Lily."

"The one she took the doll from," I stated, giving a small smile. They'd had a few playdates. Lily's parents were the kindest people, and didn't live too far from us.

"Yup," Breanna said. "She apologized to Lily, and then they've been at each other's side ever since. You know that Kaleigha is a sweetheart."

Though I knew it to be true, and it melted my heart to know that the teachers saw Cara in Kaleigha, too, it didn't make what they'd just told me sting any less.

I fought against the brisk cold wind, catching the door before it hit the shiny black truck next to me. Slamming the door shut, I allowed the wells to build up in my eyes, tilting my head back, my hands in praying position, resting against my mouth and nose. You didn't do anything wrong. You're fine. Kaleigha will be fine—But I went on tour. And moved them. I heard a scream inside my mind. I'd tried to make the guilt disappear. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder if my kids might still have a mother had I been home. STOP doing this. It's

not your fault. Did I even make the right decision—moving back here to Iowa? It didn't help that I had so much homework to do . . .

We'd been in Ames for three months. All the last three months had been work, school, kids, homework, and bartending, and then more kids. I had no time to think about what I was doing. All I knew was that I was tired, busy, stressed. But I let myself feel this moment for what it was; it hurt to be told that my kid needed therapy. She was four. I knew it wasn't anything I'd done wrong, but that didn't mean I'd made the right decision either. Was moving Kaleigha and Bella away from Donna and Charlie, Cara's parents, a mistake? The warmth from the tears streaked my face as I gave myself a moment before pulling out of the parking lot. Agh.

I wanted to be kinder to myself, like my counselor back in Nashville had suggested, but I knew moving caused Kaleigha and Bella a lot of confusion. How would I not care though? I thought about the days where I'd done everything in my power to not cry. To not feel it. This burning ache through my whole body was all too familiar. I'd known all too well what that felt like for an extended period of time, and to have it come back like this somehow felt like an ambush, even if the tears would last a minute.

Being back in Iowa eased missing Cara in a way I had wanted it to, despite how guilty I felt for trying to start again. Being away from everything, minus her children, really did

create space for something new. And I was okay. I was also super busy. Intentionally, but maybe not in a bad way.

Tonight had just been a reminder that there would be negative implications from the circumstances my kids had endured, partly my fault. Partly not.

I unlocked the door, the cold burning my fingertips as I struggled to unlock the door, trying to remember what the hell was going through my mind when I decided to get this spider-infested house.

"How'd it go?" Mom asked me, sitting at our kitchen table. She'd set up shop at the table.

"Fine." I put my keys on the hook. "Did Kaleigha and Bella get to sleep okay?"

"Bella wanted Donna," Mom never ceased to forget to remind me.

"Sometimes I want Donna, too," I mumbled.

I let Mom watch my children because she was free labor. If I didn't maintain the relationship I had with Mom, I wouldn't be able to financially survive either.

"What?" she asked.

"Nevermind." I slipped off my shoes and hung my coat up in the closet.

"I heard you, Austin."

"Okay, then why'd you ask?"

"What did Kaleigha's teachers say?" She ignored my comment.

"I dunno." I walked through

the tiny walkway of the kitchen, and I grabbed a cup from the cupboard, glancing at the fridge. A picture that Kaleigha had drawn of our family, included Cara, Donna, and Charlie. She'd drawn it right after we'd moved back in August.

"What do you mean you don't know? Is she doing okay at daycare?"

"I mean, yeah, she's fine if you consider everything that kid has gone through the first four and a half years of life."

Mom looked at me. "Did they mention her not having a mom?"

"I mean, of course." I leaned against the wall because if I walked away, she'd wonder why

"Well, what did they say?" Mom was literally the last person I wanted to have this conversation with.

I stared at the light blue walls from the previous owner. This home truly was a downgrade. Half the square footage, but between daycare and school, despite help from the government, and not being able to work a nine-to-five job, this house was the only way we were going to make anything work.

"Don't worry about it!" I barked.

"She's my granddaughter, Austin! Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she'll be fine." I sort of believed myself. I filled the cup up in the sink before taking a sip.

"What did she say?"

"Mom, I don't really want to talk about it."

"Is she okay?"

"Yeah."
"Is she adjusting well at day-care?"
"For the most part."
"Why'd you get all snappy with me?"
"Because you're not the most . . . understanding person when it comes to the way I've parented."
"What is that supposed to mean?"
"I don't need to explain what that means."
"Well, I was right, wasn't I?"
"Right about what?"
"I don't need to explain what that means," she tossed back.
Fuck you.
"I've tried." My voice cracked unexpectedly as I slammed the glass on the counter.
"I know you have," she told me. "And you've really pulled your act together."
"I gotta do homework," I mumbled.
"I mean that, Austin."
"You mean it when I do what you want."
"Why are you being like this tonight?"
"Being like what?"
"You're irritable. Are you okay?"
"Kaleigha isn't happy here, Mom. She misses Donna and Charlie, and she misses being with them all the time and misses me being home. As unconventional as our lifestyle was, it worked for us. Now, she's here, and she's going through more grief. Same with Bella. So, if I'd stayed

on tour, they'd at least be with their family all the time."
"Until they go to school."
She was right.
Then she added, "Of course they're going to be shaken up from moving away from Donna and Charlie, especially after losing Cara, but in the long run, this is the best thing for them."
"They told me Kaleigha needs therapy, Mom."
"Her mom died, Austin. That makes sense. You probably need therapy too."
"I went to therapy," I mumbled.
"You did?"
"Yes," I said quickly.
"Do you still?"
"No."
"When did you go?" Her tone changed into something in between curiosity and support.
"February until we moved."
"What made you start going?" I searched for the judgment in her voice, but I couldn't find any.
"I . . ." I sighed. "I had a panic attack on stage, and Chris made me go."
"You had a panic attack on stage?" She was now just concerned.
"Yeah."
"What happened?"
"Uh . . ." I gripped the back of the chair that was across from Mom. "I literally felt like I couldn't breathe while on stage, which made singing difficult—that made it worse, and I was crying."
"What did you do?"

"Sam saved the song, and then I somehow managed to finish the show."
"When did this happen?"
"February."
"What triggered it?"
"I think I just hit a breaking point—like, I was extremely anxious, and I wasn't even sure if I believed what I was preaching—for a lack of a better word."
"Did counseling help?"
"Yeah, definitely."
"Well, good for you."
"Thanks."
"I know you've also had a really rough two years, and your dad and I are so proud of you. I know you've had to make impossible decisions, and I know that it may feel like you aren't able to do anything right, but you're a really good dad to your girls. And I know you don't get told very often that you're doing a really good job, but you are living out an impossible task; working at the camp and the bar, going to school full-time, and raising two girls on your own."
"You haven't always felt that way."
"That's not true."
"Oh, really? You have said some pretty destructive things."
"No. I just told it like it was."
"The way you went about it was not kind, Mom."
"It hurt because everything else hurt."
"I cried twice because of the things you've said. And I don't cry very often."
She stared at me. "I'm sorry."

That wasn't my intention."
"Are you actually embarrassed by me?"
"Did I say that?"
"You totally did."
"Why did I say that?"
"Because Kaleigha wanted Donna more than me on Christmas Eve, and you said that was embarrassing. You said it in front of the whole family."
"I'm sorry if you felt called out." Her voice was detached.
"And you've reminded me twice that I wasn't there when Cara died. Do you realize that I blamed myself for that?"
"Blamed yourself for what?"
"I still sometimes convince myself her death was my fault because I wasn't there."
"Then you need to go back to counseling, because that is not true. It's not your fault, and I do apologize if I said anything to make you think I think that, but you—do you blame yourself?"
"Not really. But it goes in waves."
"I think you should go talk to someone until that guilt is gone, because her death is not on you."
I finished the water before putting the glass on the counter.
"Then why did you say those things?"
She didn't say anything for a moment, so I just stared at her as she thought about it.
"I knew that being on tour wasn't the best thing for your kids, therefore it wasn't the best thing for

you either, and I think I tried to get that across to you because nothing else was working."

"Well, it worked, I guess."

She'd been right all along. "But it also seemed like you were jealous of Donna and Charlie."

"Jealous of losing a child?—

No."

"Of course not! You are jealous of the time they got to spend with Kaleigha and Bella."

"You really think I wanted you to quit your job and dream because I was jealous of Donna and Charlie? No!"

"Then why did you say the things you did?" I yelled.

"Because maybe I screwed up, Austin," she yelled back, but then she said quietly, "I'm sorry if I hurt you." There were tears in her eyes. I could hear the emotion in her voice.

"Be honest: Do you think I fucked up my kids?"

"No." She didn't skip a beat. "Absolutely not."

"Do you think they're going to turn out okay?" I whispered.

"Well, you can never predict the future, but I think that having you as their father ups their odds of being just fine."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes!" She walked over to me, grabbing my wrists. "Look at me." I did.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you. Or if I told you anything to think otherwise. Truly, Austin. I'm so sorry." She fought back tears, but moisture bordered her eyes. "You're a great father. I know

you would give anything for your kids, even if it means giving up your career that you gave up everything for, too. They're going to be fine. And I'm so proud of you. Your kids are proud to call you their dad, and they don't even know the extent of the pain you've endured—you're enduring."

I believed her. She also wasn't a crier. I hesitated, but I pulled her into an embrace.

When she pulled away, she asked me, "Are you happy here?"

I thought about that. I'd been in a grind for the last few months. I'd been so busy between school and work and my girls. And I somehow made time to hang out with Ali a few times a week. "Yeah, actually."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I mean, I'm okay. Like actually okay."

"What does 'actually' mean?"

"Like, life is good. I still have bad days, but I'm learning that I'm okay, even when I do have those hard days."

"What are the hard days like?"

"The hard days are the days where I convince myself that there's no point to anything or this is going to be hard forever."

"How do you handle those times?"

"I center myself back to the moment or on truth. God is bigger than any battle I face, any fear I have about the future. Most of my fears are rooted in lies anyway."

"You're very wise, kiddo."

Then she asked, "Do you

have those days often?"

"They're usually not full days.

They're usually just moments, ya know?"

"No, I don't, because I have no idea what it's like to lose a spouse at twenty-six."

"I'm glad, because I wouldn't be here if you did."

"That's true."

I gave her a smile.

The Broken Home

Reaghan Andersen

The cool summer breeze brushed across the tall grass, and swept through the bright leaves high in the trees. Signaling a summer storm that will soon to roll in. A young girl can be seen walking down the street, her nose buried in a book, the tenth romance novel she had read that week. She took the same path to and from town everyday, and nothing ever changed. The same birds sang the same songs, the same neighbors waved the same greetings, and the same abandoned house stayed boarded up to all who looked upon it. Though today felt different.

As the young girl continued to walk her same path, a young man caught her attention. A young man, dressed in century old clothes stood trimming the overgrown bushes and flower beds that laid on the abandoned property. The girl remembered the stories told of the house by her grandmother, it was said the mother of the home was sick, and one day when the father was away, she burned down the home she had built. Her and her children trapped inside with no escape, burning them all to death. Once the father had returned, he was so stricken with grief that he too killed himself on the ashes of his old home.

The house still stood, rickety and falling apart, a standing symbol of the tragedy that happened there. It is rumored that the place is haunted, the spirits of the family stuck in an endless loop of grief for their tragic

past. But today, a young man was on the property, staring at the young girl who passed by.

"Excuse me," said the man, surprising the young woman. She stopped and looked up at the young man trying to gain her attention. "I apologize, I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Oh, no it's okay," replied the girl.

"It is just, I am new to the neighborhood. My family and I just moved in, and I was hoping to get to know some of my neighbors." He spoke so properly, as if he wasn't of this time period.

"Really, nobody has lived in this house for almost 100 years. They say it is haunted by the old family that died there."

"Well then I best be careful," the young man says, a toothy grin appearing on his face, his eyes shining with warmth. The young girl can't help but giggle at his antics, and felt the heat appear on her cheeks. He reminded her of the men she would read about in her books, the ones that were charming and kind, but the main character never fell for, as they were too nice. The ones she fell for, the ones she would hope to find one day in the real world.

"I'm Elizabeth Tylor," she said, sticking out her hand for him to shake. Though he didn't take it, just looked at it and back up at Elizabeth.

"Sorry, my hands are a little

dirty to be shaking hands with a lady," he apologized, showing her his dirt covered hands. Awkwardly, Elizabeth slowly put her hand back at her side.

"Anyway, it is nice to meet you, Elizabeth. My name is William Moore," he said, "What book are you reading there?"

Turning the conversation away from the awkward encounter, Elizabeth glances down at the now closed book in her hands. She was reading *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen. It was one of her favorites, this was definitely not her first time reading the story.

"*Pride and Prejudice*," she tells him, holding the book up so William could see the cover.

"Ah, Ms. Austen, a very well-known author indeed. You know she is my sister's favorite author. She wanted to become a writer after reading Ms. Austen's books."

Elizabeth looked up at William with a smile on her face, "Well looks like your sister and I have something in common." She says, Elizabeth had always dreamt of becoming a writer. Just the idea of writing a novel so distinct that society has an entire cultural reset filled her with joy.

"Well then you must come meet her sometime," William stated, another toothy grin appearing on his face. Before she could answer, the toll of the clock tower chimed midday, telling Elizabeth that she was going to be late for shift at the local grocers.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go or I will be late to work," she told William, a sadness appearing in her

voice. "Will I see you around?"

"I am not too sure, I do not know that many people here," he said, "But you are more than welcome to visit anytime you wish."

"Okay then, see you later I guess," Elizabeth said, turning in the direction of town and jogging to her destination.

"Goodbye, Elizabeth."

As Elizabeth entered the grocers, she was greeted by many of the local townsfolk and Mr. Jones, the owner of the store, also known as her boss. Walking behind the counter, she pulled on her apron and tied her hair back, moving immediately to help her first customer of the day.

The day went on and Elizabeth could not get the boy she met earlier out of her head. There was something strange and endearing about him, though she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Something the matter dear," asked the customer on the other side of the counter.

"Oh don't worry about me, just lots on my mind," she replies, hoping to reassure the customer.

"You young kids always seem to have your heads in the clouds, thinking the world owes you something."

"Oh no, it's not that at all, I was just thinking about the family that moved into the old abandoned house down on 3rd Street."

"Nobody has lived in that house for almost 100 years, my dear."

"Are you sure," Elizabeth

asks, confused.

"Of course I am sure. Do you really think that with all the stories told about that house, a family would actually consider living there?" asked the customer.

"But I just talked to somebody on the way here," she replied, "He told me that his family moved in not too long ago."

"What did he say his name was deary?"

"William Moore."

"The Moore's were the family that died in that house."

And with that the customer grabbed their belongings and left the store, leaving Elizabeth standing there, dumbfounded. She was even more confused than she was before. She needed answers and there was only one way to get them.

—

As Elizabeth walked up the porch of the abandoned house, the sun was almost set in the sky. A beautiful red sunset painted across the western horizon, though dark storm clouds loomed towards the east. Elizabeth couldn't help but notice how unstable the house looked. With boarded up windows and broken floorboards, it would be almost impossible for anybody to try and fix up. Maybe the customer was right, that nobody lived here and she really had talked to a ghost. There was only one way for her to find out.

Elizabeth reached up to knock on the door, only for the door to slowly creak open at the first touch. She wasn't surprised, the door was

barely hanging on by its hinges. The slow and creaky movement of the door almost acted as a welcoming, beckoning her to enter. She looked around her, making sure no noisy neighbors were watching the house, bearing witness to her actions. After reassuring herself that nobody was watching, she turned and cautiously entered the house. She had to be careful, any mis-step and a floorboard could break, sending you straight down to the basement of the home, a broken ankle becoming your new accessory.

Upon entering, she could see what looked to be the living room. Walking around, she could see the old wallpaper peeling from the walls and the burn marks etched into darkened wood, any furniture left was covered with stained white sheets, and at the far wall stood a grand fireplace, blacked by its age. Moving towards the fireplace, she was shocked to discover that there was freshly charred wood sitting at the bottom and the distinct smell of burning wood, though faint, hung in the air, proving that somebody was here.

At the top of the fireplace mantle, Elizabeth found a small picture covered in dust and ashes. Brushing off the excess, Elizabeth noticed that the picture was an old photo of a family. Upon further investigation, however, she recognized a familiar face in the man that stood at the far edge of the portrait, the face of William Moore. Turning the photo over, it read, "Moore Family Christmas

Party, 1890."

Elizabeth could feel the blood leave her face, her fingers and toes becoming numb. It was William Moore who she met with this morning. But why did he speak to her? She had walked the same path to the same destination since the beginning of the summer. Plus she has lived in this town almost her entire life, and passed by this house thousands of times. Why, after all this time did William speak to her? Why now?

The sound of scraping furniture from upstairs startled her out of her thoughts. Looking up at the ceiling then down at the burning fireplace brought even more questions to her mind, and she needed all the answers.

Elizabeth put the picture back onto the mantle and went searching for the staircase that led upstairs. Finding them in a smaller hallway that connected the living room and the kitchen, she started her ascent up the stairs. With each step Elizabeth took, a creaking could be heard as each stair cried out in pain, ceasing her efforts to be quiet. If whoever was here didn't know she was here, they sure as hell would now.

Once at the top, a roll of thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance, and Elizabeth entered the first door on the left. Upon entering, Elizabeth felt a shiver run up her spine. She had entered what she believed to be a bedroom, though very small, as at the far wall sat an old bed with ruffled sheets beside a boarded up window, and a dresser stood next

to the door. Though, what seemed to have frightened her, came from the desk that sat neatly across from the bed. A candle was lit, sitting atop of the desk, faintly illuminating the scattered belongings strewn across it. Getting a closer look, there were pieces of parchment, most blank, but few with scribbled out marks made with ink. Somebody was writing something, but was unhappy with their work. Moving some parchment aside, Elizabeth found another photo. This one was also a photo of William Moore, but he was standing next to someone, a woman Elizabeth did not recognize, as she was not in the previous photo, though she did look oddly familiar. Turning the photo over, it read "William Moore and Elizabeth Taylor, Engagement Date November 14, 1889."

"Elizabeth?"

Startled, Elizabeth turned around quickly, only to see a familiar face, "Oh William, it's just you."

William gave her a mixed look of confusion and anger, prodding her to explain what she was doing breaking and entering in his house.

"I am so sorry," Elizabeth explained, "I was just wanting to take up your offer to visit with you and the rest of your family. When I saw the door was open, I just let myself in, which was very rude of me. And again, I'm sorry."

"Well, I guess it is alright, we do not get many visitors." William sighed, "Though what were you doing wandering around my bedroom?"

"This is your room," she said, shocked that he would live in such a small space, "I was downstairs, then I heard a noise coming from upstairs and went to investigate. Curiosity killed the cat, I guess."

Outside the summer storm seemed to arrive, bringing with it buckets of rain that it started to pour onto the old house. The pounding rain could be heard all throughout the home, and Elizabeth swore she could hear slight drops of water, as the old roof was definitely leaking in a multitude of places.

"I see you found a photo of mine," said William.

"Oh, yeah, it was hard not to notice," replied Elizabeth, "You look quite happy, who is she?"

"My fiancé, we were destined to be wedded in the spring, but my mother decided that if she cannot live happily, then none of us could."

"I'm sorry, that must of been hard," Elizabeth paused, almost debating whether or not to tell him what she knows. Finally, building up her courage she says, "But that photo is dated to the 1800s. I know you are not from this time period, I know you died many years ago in this house. You and your sibling being killed by your own mother as she killed herself right alongside you, and your father comiting suicide right after. You are the ghost of William Moore."

William stared at the girl, surprised that she managed to figure it out. Not many people did, only until it was too late. "Clever girl, you are correct, I am the William Moore that

died here all those years ago, killed by my own mother. Me and my family's deaths becoming local legends, while our home is left to rot. No one wants to touch the physical remains of the tragic story that happened in their perfect town many years ago. So the memory goes untouched, but not untold, as many tell the tale of my family, some twisting their words. Though we do get a few visitors every once and a while, but they never make it out to tell their tale of how they survived the Moore house."

William steps closer to Elizabeth until she could feel his cold, lifeless breath on her cheeks. He reaches up to caress her chin, as if to make an act of comfort, his eyes have grown dark, a sickening look within them. The toothy grin that Elizabeth had come to love since she first met him that morning reappeared on his face, though it is not the same as before. All it's warmth and happiness has disappeared, his smile now looked like that of a predator, just before they pounce on their prey.

"William, what is my name doing on the back of that photo?" Elizabeth asked, scared of the answer she already knows.

"Welcome home, Elizabeth Taylor."

Teihihan
Britt Mitchell

Buzz, Buzz, Buzz...
Buzz, Buzz, Buzz...

Rolling over to shut his alarm off, Jarvis stretches and rubs the sleep out of his eyes. He does not hit the snooze button multiple times before crawling out of the bed as he would normally do. He is excited because this is the last day before winter break and his class is going to be having a big party to celebrate.

More pep in his step than normal, Jarvis heads to the bathroom to ready himself for the day. Brushing his teeth, washing his face, brushing his hair, and putting on some cologne, he wants to look his best for the party.

Laid out on his bed is his favorite pair of jeans, a Micheal Jordan jersey, and his brand-new red and black Nike basketball shoes. Checking himself in the mirror, knowing that he is looking fly, gives himself a little wink, grabs his phone, and heads downstairs to get some breakfast before heading to school.

Kissing his mother on the cheek, Jarvis says "I love you", puts on his thick North Face jacket and hat before heading out the door for the day.

It's cold outside, the leaves crunching under a new layer of frost as Jarvis steps on them as he takes the shortcut through the woods to

school. There is a path that many of the kids take that cuts between the community of Bear Claw Ridge and the Bear Claw High School.

Off in the distance, hidden between the sounds of chirping birds, there is a faint sound, barely audible, but he can make out "Hoopa Loopa" in a deep raspy voice.

Thinking it was only his imagination Jarvis continues on his way to school. Climbing the final hill to exit the woods and reach the school grounds, there is again an odd voice in the distance.

"Hoopa Loopa" echoes louder through the trees.

"Hoopa Loopa" gets louder and louder.

Jarvis, freezes, turns around to identify what is making these strange sounds in the middle of the woods. Looking through the trees he can make out what looks like a pair of bright blue floating orbs between the trees, they quickly disappear. At that moment, Jarvis is startled by another "Hoopa Loopa". However, this time it is coming from the other side of him.

Spinning quickly, Jarvis once again spots a pair of blue orbs by another tree just seconds before they too, disappear.

"Hoopa Loopa" now rumbles directly over his shoulder.

Frozen with fear, Jarvis' heart begins beating faster and faster. Between the throbbing sounds of his heartbeat, he can hear the slow

crunching sounds of the frozen leaves approaching from his back accompanied by a low, deep snarl.

Knowing the clearing is just ahead, Jarvis finds the courage to make a run for it. Climbing the hill as fast as his legs will carry him, he digs deeper and deeper, running as fast as he can. Throwing his Chicago Bulls backpack off, he hoped that the reduction of weight would allow him to run faster.

Jumping over logs, branches, and trees whipping by his face, blurring his surroundings into one tunnel of terror. Looking off to his left and right Jarvis spots the blue orbs closing in on both sides of him, now encased in large, dark shadows.

"Hoopa Loopa, Hoopa Loopa" the voices are closing in on all sides as Jarvis sprints for the sanctuary of the school.

Only feet away from the clearing, Jarvis turns to see if he has outrun the shadow figures with bright blue eyes. The eyes are gone, the woods are silent, "was that all real or fake?" Jarvis thinks to himself.

Realizing that his imagination has been playing games with him, Jarvis calms himself and turns towards the exit of the path. The exit was not clear this time, it was covered by a large dark shadowy figure, eyes burning blue, and a fog seeping through a snarled mouth filled with teeth designed to puncture.

"Hoopa Loopa" echoes again, then the woods fall silent.

Walking down the path to school, Hegan with his headphones on, jamming out to a playlist his mother made for him. It is some of her favorite jams from back in her youth when she was an aspiring DJ, mainly 90's hip hop and rap songs that the majority of kids today would have no clue who is the artist. This is a special connection that they share, their love of music.

Bouncing along, Hegan is unable to hear the frost-bitten leaves crunch under his boots or the morning sounds of the woods. Birds chirping, squirrels running through the leaves, all sounds that have gone unnoticed by Hegan as he focuses on the lyrics of Notorious BIG, Juicy.

Walking up the final hill before hitting the clearing for school, Hegan spots a black object hidden in the leaves about five feet off the path. Removing his headphones, looking around to see if there is anyone around, Hegan uncovers a Chicago Bulls backpack.

"Jarvis..." Hegan calls out, knowing that the bag belongs to his friend.

Hegan spends about two minutes calling out and searching for his friend with no luck, he knows something is wrong because Jarvis would never leave his favorite bag in the woods under some leaves to get dirty.

Giving up, Hegan puts his headphones back on and heads to school carrying his friend's bag, thinking to himself, maybe someone had stolen it and ditched it in the woods.

He would return the bag to Jarvis at school, there was no way he would miss the big class party today.

Heading to the front doors, Hegan meets up with his friend Jay,

"Hey man, have you seen Jarvis yet?" asks Hegan

"Not yet, why?" Jay answers as they finish their personalized hand-shake.

"I found his bag in the woods, it's not like him to leave his bag out there. I wonder if someone stole it." Hegan says.

Heading down the hall to their lockers, Hegan and Jay greet their friends and ask everyone if they have seen Jarvis yet. No one has seen Jarvis this morning and Hegan starts to wonder what could have happened. Jarvis was going to use this party to ask out a girl he has a crush on, Sade.

Walking into class, Hegan noticed that Jarvis was still not there, so he sent him a text. "Hey man, where are you?"

Half the day has gone by with no response from Jarvis, he was still not in school either. Hegan then went up to Mr. Lacey and asked him, "Have you heard from Jarvis or his parents? He said he was going to be here and I found his bag in the woods on the way to school."

"No, I haven't heard from his parents or the office." replied Mr. Lacey "I will send an email to the office and see if they have heard anything, thank you." Mr. Lacey continued.

Sitting in class, watching the last few ticks on the clock before win-

ter break began, Hegan couldn't help but think, "What happened to Jarvis?"

The final bell rings, all the students pack up and head out for a nice long winter break, many of them wondering where their friend has gone. Hegan grabs Jarvis' backpack to take with him, he plans to stop by his house and return it, hoping that all is well and to find out why he missed the most anticipated day of the month.

Knocking on the door, Hegan is greeted by Jarvis' mom, "Hello, is Jarvis here?" Hegan asks

"No, he left for school this morning and has not returned home yet." his mom answers.

"He was not at school, here is his bag. I found it in the woods on the way to school" Hegan tells Jessica, Jarvis' mom.

"What? Where is he then?" she shakily says as Hegan can see the concern growing on Jessica's face.

"I don't know, I texted him earlier. I just thought he was at home sick," answers Hegan.

Panic starts to set in as Jessica is starting to realize that her son may be missing.

She calls her husband and asks, "Have you seen Jarvis? He didn't make it to school and Hegan found his bag in the woods just off the path."

He has not seen or heard from Jarvis either. Emotionally, Jessica looks at Hegan as snaps, "This better not be a joke, boy."

Hegan reiterates, "I am not joking..."

Jessica runs to grab her

phone, she calls the police to notify them of her son's disappearance.

When she gets off the phone she asks Hegan "can you call all your friends and see if anyone has seen or heard from Jarvis yet today."

The last person to see Jarvis was his mother.

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Crashing into You

Ana Eagan

I'm wasting your time - you whine that I'm taking too long to get out the door. A low thrumming emerges from the radiator, covering the sounds of my tracks as the sinking floorboards creak under my toes. I see us cuddled into the crevices of my family's time worn pull-out couch. I watch you slam me down into the pit of my grubby corduroy beanbag chair. I was a moth flocking to your burning flame, you filled with lust and me filled with a desperate passion. I feel you pester me from my pocket, seeking my whereabouts while my keys clank into the ignition shaft.

We've done this dance a hundred times over, walking along the tightrope line - tugging and pulling our strings to elicit a reaction from the other. A repetitive cycle: you want me, you don't. You want me, I want you - wait! You can't. A tidal surge of emotions rumbles under the surface of my skin, but the slow crashing of waves pull them back under. My commitment has never wavered: just like my trusty '99 Honda Civic. The dusty car motor begins to rumble under the hood, clicking and groaning until the belt screeches in alarm. I duck my head and barrel out of the driveway, GPS notifications blaring with suggestions to visit that pale stony house on Vista Court.

My headlights click off, parked too far up the road for anyone to see. You never let anybody see me - never really posted or shared your

love, not even with me. Silver meets rubber, and the thud of the door echoes across the emptied suburbs. I take a second to collect myself, prepare even, until the waves swell back into the low tides - I let you know I've arrived. Once again, you're telling me to wait, it'll just be a moment, they're awake upstairs.

I wonder what would happen if I ever made you wait, if I took away what you really wanted from me - everything I've never received in return, from you. I run through the possibilities, the flashes of your pain and anger, the memory of your grip around my throat. I felt the fear in your eyes, the panic of you losing me when I passed out, that singular accident. Emergency sirens blare and flood my brain, trying to drown out those thoughts. The regret, pain, and love you felt for me flashed across your eyes in that rare moment - and I was addicted. That was our love.

To me, you were always as unpredictable as the deep, thunderous blue ocean I compared you to when we first met. I explored the depths of that darkness, the greatest of your worrisome trenches and the ferocious creatures lurking in the gloom of your life. Braving your addiction to nicotine, and the brunt of your thrashing anger; I was the soother of your pain. You whispered to me that I felt like home, while we were plastered to the floor of your childhood basement. I wanted to pull

you out from the abyss, away from their clutches.

Only you decided to drag me down with you.

I bow my head, resigning myself to the reality of our motions, the constant swaying of tides. I stare up at the moon, and admire her elegance in controlling the currents - how I wished I could mimic her magic. In the distance, the howls of neighboring dogs echo throughout the neighborhood. Bodily instincts kick in, and my mind has relinquished itself into the rhythm of our regularly scheduled dance. Quick! We only have a moment, for your parents are finally back asleep; so my slippers smack against the pavement and I scurry along my normal route.

Headlights dash across my vision, and I dart towards the window well in a clumsy manner. The dogs next door are set off, and their howl startles me. My leg crashes against the metal of the ridged well, and I plunge down into its crater amongst the bed of coral rocks. Panic engulfs my thoughts - it takes everything in me not to wail with those domesticated wolves, begging the moon for her forgiveness. My throat is caught, choking on the saltiness of my tears. Slowly, I raise my scraped knuckles to the window pane.

There's an instant anger in your reaction, you let me in and scold me for being so reckless and noisy. I should've waited longer, I should be stealthier next time. Will there be a next time? I almost hide the pain in my leg, but you notice it anyways.

You tease me again, place a kiss on it to make it feel better. I let myself fall into you, your warmth filling me with a false sense of security - of home. Your arms wrap around me, and I breathe in your salty air. I could fall asleep here, I imagine, in this safety blanket you've provided me in return for all the commotion you created. I could fall asleep here, I think, but it'll be just for a moment.

Divination: The Language of Hands

Ava Deitrich

White lit walls reflect off of eyes almost never before opened. Blinking, taking in the light, cornea bending, the pupil adjusting to this new magic of the world.

The first magic I had experienced. Light is magic in many ways. Fingers curl into a soft palm, clammy and untouched. Fingers open, palm up, grasping at the light. Then suddenly the magic is gone, some shadow has cut it out of my view and this "thing" fills up the edges. Something reaches towards my hand, fingers spread wide and palm reaching for the sun, for the light. Then it happens. I come into contact with the thing, calloused and warm, slightly shaking. I wrap my tiny fingers around it, tiny fingernails digging into something rough and warm.

Tiny ears begin to hear my own coos and the shuffling of the space around me. The thing above me breathes in and out, slowly, then its breath catches. It won't begin again for a while. I hear mine continue on though. Suddenly, a sigh, long and heavy, emerges from the thing.

"Boo-Boo?"

"Boo-Boo."

A laugh follows after, small, a chuckle really. It sticks. Fingers curl and dig in deeper to the fingertip that has come to rest in my palm.



Little hands make little piles on concrete benches. Leaves are turning in their annual style, and a fall breeze finds its way to us, tussling the hair on my head and on yours. I gather materials one after another, after another. Ingredients for what will become my masterpieces. The pebbles from the playground are the chocolate chips. The sand I gathered from the sidewalk, my seasoning, sugar and spice. Twigs are my utensils, sometimes weapons; crafting my creations. One dollar for a special, two dollars for a masterpiece. Sprinkle just a little bit here, mix in some mud there, add a dash of pebbles.... done. Little fingers hand over the final concoction; giggles follow as you "eat" it, licking your fingers and grumbling for more.



Bigger hands now. Fingers running along the edge of the decades-old tables. Flour ingrained in every stretch of wood, and the energy of three generations in the air, now four. Fingers steal cookies from the counters, ask for “snakes” made of icing to run around them; twisting from knuckle to fingertip. Aprons are struggled on, shortened for the little legs that stretch beneath them. Fingers hold onto grandparents’ hands and ring up customers on a cash register. Change counted back, 50, 60, 75 and 25 makes 10. Bigger feet now run to help. Slide across ritualistic paths worn in the wood. Freshly painted fingernails grasp onto the edge of counters, cracking eggs, and mixing flour, sugar, shortening, butter, milk. Pebbles and sand have been replaced. Twigs are now spatulas and spoons and pans and mixers and knives. Weapons still? Only sometimes.

My mother’s hands trace the outline of the top of my head. I hold my fingers, grasping the edge of the doorjamb, tiny little daggers grasping onto wood, asking to add an inch or two. 5’9 was the goal, the end game, the prediction. The inches never came but something else did. Tiny fingers came to trace the outlines of women on the box t.v. Face to face these two. Hand to hand combat, a deluge of fingers and elbows, striking one another, grasping and tearing away. An arrow to the heart, a tragic, but heroic end, her own Themyscira. A helmet that chooses its moment wisely to slip off, sunset catching the glint of metal and the shine of eyes filled with tears. My eyes tear back, and my hand grabs for hers, credits roll, my hands falls against the black static. Long lost and mythical. Doesn’t everyone hope to be like that someday? I do. Like dragons, or the fae, disappear into a narrative, a story, and haunt the outer edges of the mind like grain on a film camera. My mother told me that we were alike, these women on the screen entrapped in battle and us two, sitting together on the couch, scrunched knees and a tangle of arms entwined. Battles are waged differently now.



Holding hands is scarce now, like a long forgotten language. It lays dead at my side. Unmoving, un-grasping, unwilling. The childhood layers left me years ago, as did the hands that I grasped. Fingers tugging on one another, sweat collecting slowly between palms. That’s not allowed now, or uncool? I haven’t deciphered this code of young adulthood yet. There is something new that whispers in between the cracks in the fingers of others. Whispers that lead from the lines indented in their palms to the fingertips laced with something so sinister, yet sweet?



Grown up hands scrounge through cabinets for the metal bowls, passed down time and time again. Fingers search between spices and boxes to find them: flour, sugar, shortening, eggs, milk. Pencil marked hands grab an apron, still branded with the sixty-year-old insignia. Over the head, around the neck. Grab the string, around once, around twice, then tie. Flour sack towel, great grandmother embroidered, over the shoulder. Grown up lungs take one deep breath in; there it is. The flour, four generations in the air, the oven pre-heating; the air is thick, but comforting. Hands begin to grab measuring cups, soon disregarding them for the flow of familiarity. A dash of this, a spoon of that, then we mix. Taste test. Grown up shoulders work in rotation, kneading the dough, then wrapping it up, now to rest.



I was right, holding hands is sweet like this. The sinister faded away in an instant, replaced by the roughness of a palm against mine. Ten fingers, two hands, one’s nails are bitten almost to the point of no return, the others are cracked and peeling, what a pair. Five fingers can bend over mine, one full knuckle when held palm to palm, is this what it’s like to erase the mirror? Lines etched at birth snake across theirs and mine, and we twine them together, two snakes now stuck. Sweat doesn’t pool like it used to, at first it did, but familiarity

makes it vanish, blown away by the whispers that our palms sing to one another, lullabies to the fears and a dance for the fingertips.

Two hours later, or maybe 10 years, or maybe more. The dough is taken out of the refrigerator. The cold air blasting, but not like in the ones before. Hands gently cradle what will become an heirloom, unwrap, and set on flour. The kneading begins again, shoulders rotating, hands grasping. Finally, I reach for the rolling pin, repetition molding it into shape. Cookie cutters taken off the wall, worn edges and handles, history etched with each batch. Press down, lift up. Soon there are enough to fill pan after pan. Ding! Oven goes off, opens the door, both heat and heart rush out. Vanilla warmth pours into the kitchen, no, home(?)

Now I hold my great grandmother's hand. Wrinkled lines long worn with time entwine with mine. Her grip is light, fingernails turning more purple by the second. Veins stand out against paper-thin skin and slowly sink back in as the blood recedes back to its maker. Her nails are well kept, clipped and painted a bright red, her final choice. Not her final one, my bad. Threaded fingers squeeze mine back, eliciting a glance and a smile. Those same fingers lose hold and slowly fall from mine, catching them, I set them down on the white mattress, patting them into place, a final



"There you go."
"150 graves."
"Ordinary women."

Weapons buried side by side with bowed legs, formerly muscled arms, strong wills. Iron daggers spread like halos and bronze-tipped arrows at the ready for one final ethereal battle. Wounds suspended in time, marks of battle, wear and tear. Tattoo kits lay used at their side, depictions of lovingly detailed images adore their arms. Fingers come to grasp the band that I call mine, one smiley face, one moon, one star, one flower...The tattoo band on my arms. What if. 5'9 never came, 5'6 came and then stayed. The Ice Maiden of Sibera, a long lost sister connected through thousands of years by a needle and stain. Fingers running over the same diction of family, outlining shape after shape.

I hold my mother's hand as the needle digs in deeper, puncture after puncture, little pinpricks.



Bangs sound throughout the house at 3am. Lights are flashing on the street outside, painting my world in sparks of blue and red and white, then black, then the pattern repeats. No one was there to hold his hand they tell us. My grandmother has been trying to call all night. She found a corpse lying beside her, one that used to be my grandfather. No one holds my hand this time. No one held his.

There's a difference I've come to find between knowing someone and knowing someone.

You can tell when they hold your hand.

Paper Veins
Mallory Schmitz

There are two weeks until Christmas, and I'm home for the first time in three months. As my parents go to work and my little brother heads to school, I take advantage of the quiet house and stoop down by our old piano, opening the plastic tub of sheet music. It is so close to overflowing that when I undo the latch, the lid gently lifts itself up as if it is finally able to take a breath.

I card through the music: one song I remember pounding out loud and clear and making my parents give me a stern warning that I'll wear the keys out, another song I vowed to never play again after choking under pressure at a recital in front of hundreds of people, and a handful of pieces I don't recognize- they probably belonged to my mom. Then I see it, a hidden relic at the bottom of the tub. A yellowed specimen that has been softened over the years, creases and cracks sprawling like veins pumping with the traces of every single person who has held that one piece of paper. I hold the fragile paper with reverence in the light of the window and notice a name scrawled in pencil at the top: DOYLE.

When I was 10 years old, I sat at my grandparents' house looking at a similar aged piece of paper that I could sense was bursting with history. I had found it tucked inside their piano bench underneath a John Denver songbook and a few hymnals; sheet music for "Home on the Range."

The music unfolded into two pages, with an image of a herd of strong buffalo gracing the top of the pages. It smelled like an old library book, the ones that I was inclined to pick up based on the rugged, stained covers alone. Looking at the notes, I knew I could play it. Sight-reading was my strong suit, and I couldn't help but wonder how long it had been since those notes had lived off of the page.

My grandma was in the kitchen washing dishes and my grandpa was quietly sitting on the couch across the living room when I placed the music on the stand. He was a big man, but gentle. I was afraid of him when I was a child, and I had no real reason why. If he wasn't silently reading the newspaper over a cup of coffee at the kitchen counter, there was a very good chance he was working on farm equipment out in the shed by himself. He did most of his talking out there, when it was just him, the barn mice, and his wise-eyed beagle.

I played the song through once, more or less perfectly, when I heard my grandpa stand up from the couch and make his way over to the piano. I didn't question him or even look him in the eye. I figured he would look over my shoulder at the music, perhaps silently wonder how this raggedy piece of paper survived the move into my grandparents' new house.

Instead, he sat down beside me. I felt the bench shift under his

strong body of a true farmer. Without explaining himself, he placed his dirt-stained hands on the lower half of the piano keys and said, "Ready? One, two, three, four--"

And we played, myself the notes inscribed on the sacred piece of paper and him a booming, improvised series of chords that fit so well you would think he wrote the original piece. I had a soft smile on my face as we were reaching the end of the song when my grandpa indicated that he wanted us to play it through one more time.

A few measures into the second time through the song, a bellowing voice came from right beside me. "Oh give me a home," was the sound of the ocean that I had never seen. "Where the deer and the antelope play," vibrated my soul like the lowest notes on a pipe organ. "And the skies are not cloudy all day," dripped into my ears like the sweetest honey.

Once the show had finished, he nudged me with his elbow and whispered, grinning, "'Bet you didn't know I could do that." I couldn't hold back the silent smile on my lips.

I have never heard my grandpa sing since. It makes me sad sometimes, knowing he has such a beautiful, electric gift living inside of him that almost never sees the light of day. I wonder why, of all people, he chose to share a little glimpse of that gift with me. Whether he knows it or not, his vulnerability that day brought him infinitely closer to my heart, all because I happened upon the best treasure map imaginable inside that

piano bench.

I don't know what happened to that particular copy of music. It may still be inside my grandparent's piano bench, waiting in earnest for the next time it gets to live and breathe. But I found another sheet of music that belonged to my grandpa, a copy of "Silver Bells" in the very bottom of my family's tub of sheet music. The reds and blues on the cover are faded, the copyright date is far before either of my parents were born, and it has the name "Doyle" scrawled in all-caps at the top, a name people always say is "old fashioned" when they meet my grandpa. Just looking at it, I can already tell that it is way too difficult for me even as an adult, but I still stumble through playing, my hands tripping over one another and trying to stretch farther than should be possible.

As I sit defeated at the piano, unable to tame the beast of "Silver Bells," I'm not bothered that I don't have any conversations with my grandpa. We connect through his quiet listening to my piano playing at Christmas and my eternal jealousy of his ability to play by ear. We are musicians, our own class. We have an understanding of the delicate, the need to protect the sacred. And as I gently dust my fingers over the creases in his thin sheet music, I know that the veins that run through his ancient sheet music run through me as well.

Prom Night

Hanna Kendall

It was a coming-of-age movie, eyes meeting in a room filled with music and teenage angst, you in a rented tux and me in my too-expensive dress. I was excited to stand on my tiptoes to dance with you, moving body against body to a cheesy love song. The disco ball hung low from the ceiling, twinkling around the room and ready to illuminate our magical moment. My eyes were telling you I love you, that I just want to dance with you, you are my whole world and I want to be yours. I saw you return my glance, my baby-blue eyes meeting your brown ones, beckoning me to come to you. I know now that when your eyes flashed back, they were saying, "please don't make me dance, please don't make me dance, please don't make me dance." I guess we got lost in translation because I still walked over, three-inch heels clacking on the gym floor, and asked, "Do you want to slow dance?"

I expected a smile, big and bright and real, and for you to grab my hand and lead me out to the dance floor. I expected you to hold me close and for us to rock back and forth, my cheek on your chest and your chin resting on my head.

"Not really," you said, apathetic, not even looking down at me. I took an involuntary step back and stared. The rest of the gym was still dancing, still chatting, still glittering from the turning of the disco ball. At that moment I thought about what

makes a disco ball twinkle: hundreds, maybe even thousands of tiny mirrors, only becoming beautiful when the light gave it something to reflect. The disco ball was no longer beautiful to me. We had become that disco ball; just disconnected, fragmented pieces of glass. We didn't have a light. We weren't shining, we were just broken. I kept staring until you finally looked at me and said, your voice tinged with annoyance, "What?"

"Nothing." I resigned back to the spot I had been dancing with my girlfriends. A few still stood there, having no date, and I grabbed their hands. We danced together, swaying in place as the love song came to a close. They had made the moment magical for me, and I will forever be thankful that they are the ones that stuck around. I thought that my world was contained in that high school gym, standing still in the corner refusing to dance. Instead, it was just you, standing alone, watching the world move around *you* as *you* stayed stagnant. The world is so much bigger. There is so much more dancing for me to do with so many people who make my world spin around like that disco ball that hung on the ceiling.

It was still a coming-of-age movie, just not the one I had hoped for in the beginning. It was the kind where the girl realizes her worth. She realizes that she should have dumped your sorry ass on the spot and danced the night away with her friends.

The kind where she didn't give a damn what you or anyone else thought about her. I'm not a disco ball anymore; I don't need light from you to shine on me to make me beautiful. I create my own. I am Christmas lights on a dark December night, I am a single flame in the cold, I am the sun.

The House on Tahoe Avenue

Nolan Rochford

As I turned into the lane, my parents' acreage gazed back at me in the language of rural Iowa. The property sat in the middle of a cornfield, with one long skinny lane making its way through the crops, bordered on each side by small strips of grass. From the road, the view has changed many times over the years. Since I was thirteen, when we moved from town to the country, the barn had come down, and a line of young Aussie Willows blocked vision of the crumbled concrete foundations leftover. To the left, the machine shed - my parents' catch-all storage - was missing metal sheets from its roof, blown off in the storm that took the metal silo. My parents' tiny farmhouse and garage stand to the right in their steadfast, prairie glory.

If you were to look at it from above, the acreage was divided into four quadrants: the House, the Yard, the Barn, and the Sweetcorn Patch. Like any practical farmstead, each held a significant purpose, with no space left unused. In olden days, there were pigs and cattle and other sorts of livestock. Now, only my mother's chickens and cats roamed those old haunts; them, and the wind.

My parents' tiny farmhouse and garage occupied the heart of the property. Parts of the white siding on the house had green mold on them, an issue my parents tried to solve with a power washer every summer, to no avail. This mold found its way into

the house, too, creeping into window alcoves and corners of the basement. In the winter, it browns, and becomes green again in the spring, like an inescapable rot.

Along the house's edge, tall oak trees stand in a line. During the summer months, the grass beneath these trees was the softest on the property. The summer I was fifteen, I spent a lot of time beneath those trees, laying on blankets and reading books. Those moments left my younger self feeling smart and picturesque, basking in the light of the sun, and enjoying the greatest intellectual joys of pollen allergies and detective novels. The summers after that, my mom began letting the chickens graze during the day, so that grassy haven wasn't the best place to lie anymore. When I pulled up in my college car, a bare patch of Tyvek recalled a storm when I was in high school.

"Mike!" my mom had screamed for my dad. She was dressed in a big tee shirt, shorts, and my dad's thick flannel, yelling to be heard over the rushing wind. My mom's laying hens struggled against the air currents, floating as they attempted to walk back to their coop.

Across and beyond the hayfield that backed the property, a tornado had touched down on the leaves of dry soybeans, sending dirt and crops flying into the already yellow air. The trees of our windbreak tossed and screamed against the air,

their willowy leaves and thin branches swaying and snapping with the force of the wind. Across the property, the barn moaned and cracked as shingles flew from its roof. Out of our sight, the wind picked up my dad's work car and slammed it into the side of the machine shed over and over, cracking the windshield and denting the body all over.

My dad stood between our house and the Aussies, wearing summer clothes that flapped dramatically in the wind. He yelled, too, but he was too far away for us to hear. He pointed at my brother, running across the yard with two chickens clutched in his hands. They ran to the coop, shutting up the birds; across the field, the tornado swirled through the beans, moving parallel to the house.

Getting out of my car in the present, I stood and watched in my mind's eye as I slammed into the front door, desperately trying to open it against the pressure of the wind. Finally pushing it open, I almost fell into the unstill air of the house. In a line, my parents and brother followed me, slamming it shut behind them. Through the kitchen window, I watched as the lights flickered and shut off.

Abruptly, my mom interrupted my gaze, waving with her mouth set in a pleasant line, framed by the white-trimmed outline of the kitchen window. I blinked, the air stilled, the yellow receded, and I made eye contact with her in the present. I cheerfully waved back.

Climbing the steps and into

the house, I looked at the mess that autumn hunting season makes my parents' mudroom. The hall tree was laden with various coats and jackets, ready for any kind of seasonal weather. Both of their pairs of boots sat at the ready, while a few other sets waited for other seasons. My dad's ancient, cracked cowboy boots stood at the end of this line, whilst my mom's chicken-chic chore boots bookended the front. My parents' dogs barked on the other side of the door separating the mudroom from the rest of the house.

Turning around to close the front door behind me, I watched as a young Nolan stepped past myself, dressed in a thick blue sweater and skinny jeans. He threw the door open, jumping into a hug with my first boyfriend, Tom. He stood on the front step, illuminated by the light from the doorway in the cold, night air. His winter coat was covered in snow from the blizzard he drove through that winter to reach our place.

I stepped to the side as I watched a younger me pull Tom inside.

"My parents are going to love you." I told him then, "Just like I do."

I opened the door between the mudroom and the kitchen, watching Tom's back as he reached out to shake an invisible hand. I blinked, and the light changed. The dining room sconces flickered off, and the light from outside filtered back in through the windows.

My mom stood in front of the

kitchen window, washing a big white Tupperware bowl in the sink's basin.

"Howdy!" I said, setting my bag on the floor. The dogs jumped at my legs, begging for attention.

"Howdy," my mom said flatly, setting the bowl on a drying mat. It's stained a mucous green-yellow color from numerous adventures in pickling. Batch after batch of cucumber pickles were made in that bowl by my great-grandmother before she gave it to my mother, her hands thick with arthritis. My mom mostly used it as a popcorn bowl.

Making conversation together, my mom and I set the table with three plates at three chairs: my dad, my mom, and myself. Luke's - my brother's - place sat inconspicuously empty. He was at college the town over, and he had little time to-

"-come home and see us." My mom said over the phone.

I was in the car, driving to work, and I called to check in. My dad was in the field for harvest, so I was trying to call her more now that she spent most nights alone.

"Really? That's pathetic." I responded back, scanning the road ahead of me for police. I had gotten pulled over the previous Labor Day, so I had been on edge ever since.

"Well, I don't know if I'd call it that. He's busy. I understand that." I'd sighed loudly into the phone.

"I'm busy, Mom. I work thirty hours a week with a full course load, and I still find time to come home and see you and Dad."

The silence on the other end of the phone was telling. My mom agreed with me, but she couldn't find it in her to stay mad at her youngest son.

Staring at his empty place at the table, I asked her, "Has he found time to come home lately?"

"No." Her reply is as stony as I her insides aren't.

Sitting down in my spot, I looked up. "Are we sure it isn't something else? He isn't exactly the best student."

She sat down in her seat to my right.

"He said he flunked his calculus test, but that's all I've heard."

I put my hands against my forehead and closed my eyes, resting my elbows on the table. Luke was a homebody, so this behavior was unheard of.

When I opened my eyes, the light in the room has changed again. In my chair, I stared at Luke across from me. He was sixteen. His glasses were the gray pair he wore in high school, and his hair was thicker than it was now. To my right, his high school girlfriend - one of my best friends, then, named Maria - laid a card down on a deck in the center of the table. We were playing UNO.

"Green!" She declared.

To my left, another of my friends groaned good naturedly.

Luke scooted back from the table.

"I'm going to the bathroom," he said. "Don't peek at my cards."

Tracing his path with my

eyes, I waited for the sound of the bathroom door closing. Looking at his girlfriend, I asked: "How's he doing?"

Maria sighed. "Fine. Better than yesterday, at any rate."

He'd had a breakdown during choir rehearsal. Sitting behind me on the risers, he'd stood suddenly and walked to the bathrooms, where a friend said he was crying about something personal.

My other friend shook her head, opening her mouth to talk, but-

I blinked again, and my mom's face replaced Maria's to my right.

"How's his mental health, do you think?" I asked her.

"God, I don't know. He doesn't talk to us about that kind of stuff."

"Well, you should know to ask!" I grumbled. I stood up from the table and leaned against my chair, looking down at her. She looked older in that moment than she ever had before.

"He's not like you."

"Anxiety and depression run in our family, Mom. You have to look for these things."

She sighed. "I know. What do you think your dad and I have been doing? He doesn't even talk to us about most of his daily stuff. Why would he talk to us about his mental health?"

I turned away, walking through the living room and upstairs, onto the landing Luke and I shared. His bedroom stood a stone's throw from mine for years, but now he was

in another town staying silent and disconnecting.

As I crested the top of the stairs, I switched the light on. A twelve-year-old Luke stood in the doorway to his bedroom, the lime-green walls he inherited from the previous owners framing his back. Ahead of me, a fourteen-year-old Nolan stood in his own doorway, pimpled and with swoopy bangs. Both of us stood in nothing but our pajamas. It was the middle of the night, after all, and I'd woken him up because it sounded like he was crying.

His eyes were red, and his hands shook.

"Why were you crying?" I'd asked. My own voice shook with the question from nerves. Luke and I didn't speak to each other about that kind of stuff.

"I wasn't crying."

"That's bullshit, Luke." I'd sworn with my friends but never at home or at him. We were that kind of young. His eyes widened.

He gulped and looked down at his feet. He was just beginning to grow leg hair.

"I'm bigger than all of the other kids."

I scoffed, and said, "Of course you are, Luke. That isn't news."

He shook his head a silent No. "I'm fatter than the other kids, Nolan. I'm one of the fattest in my grade."

I watched as fourteen-year-old Nolan, unsure what to say, simply moved across the landing and hugged twelve-year-old Luke, who

began crying harder. Looking down at his arms, I'd been shocked at the time to find delicate white marks scoring them.

I flicked the light off and back on, banishing the two teens (children) away. I walked across the landing - through where I'd cried with him so many years ago - and stood in the doorway of my old bedroom. He stole it from me two years ago when I moved out, moving my childhood furniture to his old room and shifting his queen across the landing to my old spot.

Nowadays, he spent most of his time in his college dorm, but this room still stank of him. Illuminated by light from the hallway, the floor was strewn with clothes. Trash and food wrappers swam amongst shirts and basketball shorts. The bed was unmade, with the comforter and pillows chucked into one corner. A black trash bag full of trash sat in front of the window. Posters from the musicals I was in during high school were still taped to the closet door.

The second floor of the farmhouse was more dated than the downstairs. What wiring there was snaked in plastic guards attached the wall, powering wall lights and extension cords. Walking across my old bedroom, I pull the cord attached to the wall light. The bulb was still one that I put in during high school- a special eco-friendly yellow bulb that I spent my own money on. The white ones gave me headaches.

Turning around, his bed was gone, and my high school bedroom

was revealed to me. A ramshackle bookshelf stood to my right, filled with Harry Potter books and knick-knacks from school trips to Disney and Washington D.C. My younger form stared at the back of his door, where a mirror is mounted. Dressed only in underwear, I was sixteen. On the bed, a laptop sat open, and The Sims background music filtered through its speakers.

I stared as my younger self stretched their stomach into shapes, pulling back the fat to make the stomach flat, playing with the hair beginning to run up my stomach at the same time.

"All I have to do is pinch off a few pounds," I had whispered to myself, moving my hands from my stomach to my thighs.

I blinked and the placement of my younger self changed. Dressed, he sat on the bed next to his high school best friend, sobbing into his hands. She was crying, too, in solidarity. She was as sad I was, though neither of us really understood why. We cried together because it was the right thing to do. We didn't know how to recognize depression at its beginning, especially in each other.

I shifted my eyes and my younger self moved again, sitting on the floor next to the window wrapped in a quilt. Outside, the light was beginning to peek over the hill of the field, framing the Usher Ave farm in front of it. My younger self is leaning against the wall, with their cheek against the window, silently crying.

"God, I'm so tired," he said.

In the present, I watched as he tried to do breathing exercises to calm his breath. In great shuttering breaths that gave way to sobs, he hugged his knees closer chest, before finally giving away to the inner grief of life and teenagerhood.

"Why do I have to work so much harder, every day, to make it back to this room?" He asked himself through the tears.

Flashes of high school classrooms and faking smiles and laughter echoed in his ears and mine.

I blinked. I was sitting next to the window, mirroring the position of my younger self. When it was my room, succulents lined the window ledge. Now, all that sat there was a hunter's orange pocketknife- a gift from my dad to Luke when he was a kid.

My cheeks were wet. I was crying now, too, I realized.

I took my phone out and opened a text message. Previous messages between Luke and I opened, but I began composing a new one.

"Hey, I heard you haven't been home in a minute. Mom and Dad miss you, and so do I. Let me know if we can do dinner soon. Love you! See you soon!"

I sent it. I began composing another.

"I wanted to ask...Are you okay?"

My finger hovered over the send button.

Untitled
Taylor Brown

Dear New Residents,

Welcome to your new home. I am writing this to inform you of all the fond memories your house holds. This home used to belong to my Aunt Rhona and Uncle Pat. They lived here before I was even born. Every Thanksgiving we would eat a feast around the dining room table, that had been prepared by my aunt and my mother, although mostly by my aunt. She always used to tease my mom about her method of cooking everything from a box. With my aunt, almost everything was homemade. After dinner, we would retire to the living room to watch football and eat pie, either apple or pumpkin (they always prepared both) topped generously with whipped cream. When someone became bored with the game on TV, you could hear the clink of the dominoes at the dining room table as they prepared for our next game. The winner of which would receive their pick of a holiday themed lottery ticket. When the day ended, my family would sleep in the small bedroom across from the bathroom. My parents would sleep in the bed, while my brother and I slept on the floor in front of the closet, whose light provided some comfort against the darkness. As the years went on, and my brother and I grew, these arrangements changed. I was given the back bedroom, next to the master. I remember spending so many nights looking out the window toward the creek gazing at the few lights from town through the limbs of the now leafless trees and listening to coyotes howl in the back field. While my father remained in the bedroom we all used to share, my mother often slept on the couch in the living room, as my father's snoring grew louder and less tolerable over the years. And my brother, he claimed the entire basement for himself. But these were only the Thanksgiving arrangements. Summers were a much different story.

In the summers, this house acted as a home base for all of my family's cross-country camping trips. My cousins (six of them) would join my brother and I for shenanigans of all kinds. In the yard, we would slip and slide down the back hill (and then the front hill after we effectively killed the grass on the back hill), have water balloon fights, and sing karaoke on the back porch. Our vocal group TAAM (Taylor, Alison, Audrey, Marisa) really brought in an audience with our renditions of Sh-Boom and Total Eclipse of the Heart coupled with elaborate shuffle-snap dances. When we weren't performing, we would take hikes down to the creek where we would catch frogs, have picnics, and tell stories of broken rules and forbidden adventures from our year apart out of our parents' earshot. When we weren't outside, which was mainly at night, we would all be in the basement playing crazy games of truth or dare, Life, or some other

activity we invented. Our favorite was Dare-or-Chicken, a rendition of Truth-or-Dare where Truth wasn't an option and instead every player received three "chickens" or opportunities to opt-out of a dare.

All eight of us slept in that basement I don't know how many nights over the course of so many years. If you could see the history, you would find so many stories about a bunch of kids growing up and bonding in a place that was always a second home. There would be stories of fights, messes, all-nighters, pranks, games, friendship, and love. And despite seeing so many miraculous places, somehow, visiting this place was always the highlight of the trip and the thing us kids looked forward to most every year. As soon as we would pull in and begin the journey down the long winding driveway, the excited chatter would begin and seatbelts would start being unbuckled. We spent so much time each year planning what we would do once we got here. And now it is time to plan our next adventure somewhere new.

I hope you enjoy this house as much as we have and create as many memories too. In case you are wondering, the public library in town has a nice selection for all ages, the park is a nice place to spend a fall afternoon, and Nash's is a great spot to grab a snack and a drink on a hot summer day. I realize that this town may not seem enchanting with its old brick buildings and abandoned houses with chipped paint, but knowing that I will probably never see them again leaves me with a deep feeling of loss. The loss of a piece of my childhood, and the loss of two people who played a pivotal role in my early life. I know that I am always going to miss it, and if you ever decide to move, just know that you will too.

Sincerely,

A girl who sort of grew up here

Callused

Ana Eagan

The dew of this golden morning slowly seeps its way into the cotton fabric of my colorful socks, finding its home in the sweltering heat that my toes endure every day. It's not a cooling feeling, nor does it help relax my ever-swaying feet. Instead, the dew becomes wet and sticky, latching fibers to my skin as if they have become one with the fabric. I rock my body back and forth, swinging my toes through the chilly air in the hopes of drying the underbellies of my feet.

My thoughts turn to my mother, of the genes I inherited, and the conditions she cursed me with. A myriad of problems, back pain, poor posture, sore feet: all caused by a genetic dysfunction that prevents extra skin cells from shedding. The daily work of life has not always blessed my mother and I, condemning us to limp and lean on each other for the rest of our lives. I place my foot down onto the cold concrete underneath our deck, abruptly stopping the motion of our hanging swing. With only one foot down, the chains rattle as I rock and shake in every which direction. Two will steady me – as my mother has secured me in the space of her life, as I have cemented her in my own.

Instead, I simply lift my foot again. I let myself enjoy the chaos and disorder of our motions: in the pain of our step, of our reluctant jogs, and the shifting of weight – or blame – between our two halves. Behind, I have left little but the extraneous dew from my socks, formed in the shape of my footprint. It lingers in the shade of our deck, for the light could not reach the damp crevices of the bedrock. My mother's woven swing will slowly make its way back into the rhythm of our previous order, a balance remaining. A damp imprint in the sand of life – I know the scars I have left behind, in the way my mother has left her stamp on me.

The Number Four

Cecelia Groah

His shoulders sagged in a way that symbolized defeat. 50 pounds lighter, the skin on his face sagged haggardly and I shuddered at how death looked palpable in his features. For just a moment his regular five o'clock shadow turned into ashes before my eyes, reminiscent of cremation and my heart stuttered in my chest. And for another moment after that, the oversized black sweatshirt he wore turned into the grim reaper, swallowing him whole and taking him away. I surged forward and reached for his hand, it was clammy and wet with tears, but I held firm, afraid of what would happen if I let go. His cries of anguish shook his whole body. My father had never been one for crying, and he was never one to be scared. He was always strong and I never was. But in this moment I felt that I had to be his strength, his titanium wall, or he would crumble into himself and disappear. He was normally my sanctuary, and I loved him enough that I called him my home. Each tear that fell shattered that facade more and more, and I realized in that moment just how fleeting life really is.

Four was a harmless number, overlooked in most cases. But when it was preceded by "stage" and followed by "cancer", it was a different arena entirely. It had started with harmless shoulder pain, probably from early mornings working outside in the winter. He was pressing 60 after all, being old is just like that, right? But then came the dizziness, and the excruciating pain. He said it felt like hundreds of knives twisting in and out of his shoulder and collar bones at all times. Then his vision went and his world went black. I grew to hate looking at his body. He didn't look like my dad anymore and each glance at him was a reminder that he would be leaving me. His time on Earth kept shrinking and I refused to acknowledge it.

In my heart, I was still five years old. His rough, calloused hand gripped my small soft one. Hands that had been worn down by the wearies of life versus hands that still had a whole life to live. It was the first day of kindergarten and I was terrified, but the feel of his hand kept me anchored. I felt even safer when he knelt down and wrapped me in his arms and promised he'd pick me up after the day was over. That sense of security was the best feeling I had as a child. The feeling of his love was my favorite. Now I am 19 years old and he is laying in his bed, unable to get up. His handshakes with the effort of trying to pull me close but he forces himself to anyway. His breath is hot on the side of my face and there is a lump in my throat from trying not to cry. He thanks me for being his happiness and admits that he is terrified to leave me, more scared than he has ever felt in his entire life. He apologizes for being sick and for making me sad. The lump feels like it's going to explode and I start choking with the force of my sobs. His love is no longer safe, it feels suffocating and fleeting. Yet, when he's gone, how will I replace it?

Virtuosity, Nature, and a Child

Mallory Rickels

Claude Monet's painting *Garden at Giverny* is intensely hued. Nature is splashed in every section of the painting. Archways concealed by the verdant ivy guide the observer to the main focal point. Hidden away is an elegant entrance representing a prodigious venerable antique styled Italianate home. A design well known to the age of the late 1800's to early 1900's. The sun warms the fallen leaves carpeting the vertical path, bestowing its share in "gold." The assorted strains of biennials are each painted with care. We can only imagine how beautiful that location was when Monet crafted such a stunning piece of art. The viewer can notice the attentive placement of each stroke of paint. The combination of colors delicately blended to create a two-toned variation, further enhancing the realistic appearance. *Garden at Giverny* presents a sense of childlike innocence through its beautiful environment that has not yet been touched by the harsh realities of nature.

This painting replicates my childhood home in the country of Iowa. It was a beautiful house with an open porch with white siding like the entrance of the Italianate home being presented through *Garden at Giverny*. On that porch I would sit in a rocker and watch Iowa storms approach. One specific evening was sunny with one small fluffy cloud in the sky that had cloud flashes. Never again have

I seen a small cloud during a sunny day have its own personal "tantrum." My Mother worked diligently in the gardens that she created. Our backyard had a large garden in the center that had an archway covered with pink roses and had countless flowers having the various shades of yellow, blue, purple, orange, and green ivy carpeting and climbing various pieces of décor. I loved that garden, not only for its fragrance and its beautiful appearance. It was loved for the animals that would shelter beneath those plants. Cute rabbits would enjoy the consumption of weeds and the occasional choice of a flower. Garter snakes and their snakelets would house beneath the ground underneath their favorite plant and eat their protein rich meals of bug and frog. On special occasions I received a visit from a bull snake. My favorite visitor was the fox snake who would choose to bath in the rays beneath the yellow flowers, just like the ones in the painting. The leaf carpeted path looks like the path my dog made in the woods that I would follow to reach certain destinations to climb specific trees. I first learned about Claude Monet in my elementary art class. We were taught his biography and how he would travel the world finding specific moments that inspired him to stroke glossy acrylic onto a canvas. Creating *The Castle at Dolceacqua*, *Houses of Parliament Sunset*, and *The Waterlily Pond with the Japanese Bridge*.

Monet's paintings were personal to me in these ways of persuading feelings of my home and nature itself. Through his paintings of homes, plants, waterways, and bridges they all brought back my current moment in that time of my childhood. The virtuosity of *Garden at Giverny* is the most valued work of his because it provides me the sense of my earliest home where I had all those experiences.

Winter Silence

Caleb Brandauer

The pathways spiral down and fork in near endless directions that twist and turn and creak like knots in a tree. Blades of shamrock green perk up as browned pines twist and spin while falling off from above. The forest shrouds itself with the canopy of pine and cedar, but a grand birch tree stands proud. The forest mixture meets the deep azure waters of a small lake where the water is a darker blue than the sky and twice as clear. During the day, a few ruffles up in the large birch tree by the lake, but the animals don't pay much care towards the old tree. There's a shrivelled call from a loon, telling her children to stay close, and not to swim too far away.

The nights here grow colder and colder with each moon. Temperatures drop and small delicate flakes begin to fall. Animals begin to go to their resting places earlier and earlier each evening. The geese are long gone, for this place is far too cold for them this time of year.

As Winter approaches this little haven, the amber schemes through the woods are coated in white, while the old mossy green is trampled down beneath the snowfall. The oaks and cedars are all shielded from the unforgiving sleet coating outside of their outer shells while the birch stands alone to fight against the harsh weather.

The once dark blue waters have begun to freeze over with a thin

arctic frost. There are small pools of water scattered where the cold could not quite hold its chilling grasp. As loons can no longer stroll on the water, they escape into the warmer and sheltering forests.

The nights are silent this time of year. The echo of a shout would carry through the entire lake and ring in an eerie tone. With the rest of the wildlife silent, a grand strix perches in the old birch, patiently waiting for its prey to move. While covered in its own shield of brush and leaves, the bird is nearly invisible to the outside.

As the winter snow creeps even into the warm Spring sun, little droplets of melted snow creep off of slanted surfaces, cascading down frantically as they splat on the ground with various pitches and volumes of cadence. The warm air of this Winter Spring is cooled by the powdery snow from below.

As night falls, the droplets crystalize like little diamonds on the ground creating a smooth glossy cover on the surface. With no noise from the busy days of the easily seen northern wildlife, the only thing that can be heard are the piercing splats of the continuing drops from above, which easily find a resting place on the floor below.

The gleaming sun begins to glimmer with a brand new brightness. As the icy snow melts, the ground becomes moist as the melted snow soaks into the ground, and muddy

puddles rise to the surface. Small trees spring up with new life as their branches bloom with a newborn scarlet. The once bright green blades of grass have now been discoloured into an almost watercolour yellowy beige.

The northern wildlife is once again vibrant. Blue Jays once again chirp with glee and the flocks of geese are returning from their journey away during the cold months. The loons return to the lake, where their shrill calls echo into a song of the returning Spring.



Reaghan Andersen
Caleb Brandaeur
Taylor Brown
Kayla Cook
Ava Deitrich
Ana Eagan
Antonia Goodwin
Amelia Gotera
Cecelia Groah
Heidi Groothuis
Rachel Heine
Hailey Hershey
Nick Johnson
Ian Joyce
Hanna Kendall
Maddie Kizer
Frances Lane
Patrick Markovich
Cecilia Masek
Shelby McGriff
Britt Mitchell
Mallory Rickels
Mallory Schmitz
Stettson Smith
Emma Stoffer
Daria Tessmer
Amanda Vogl