

2018

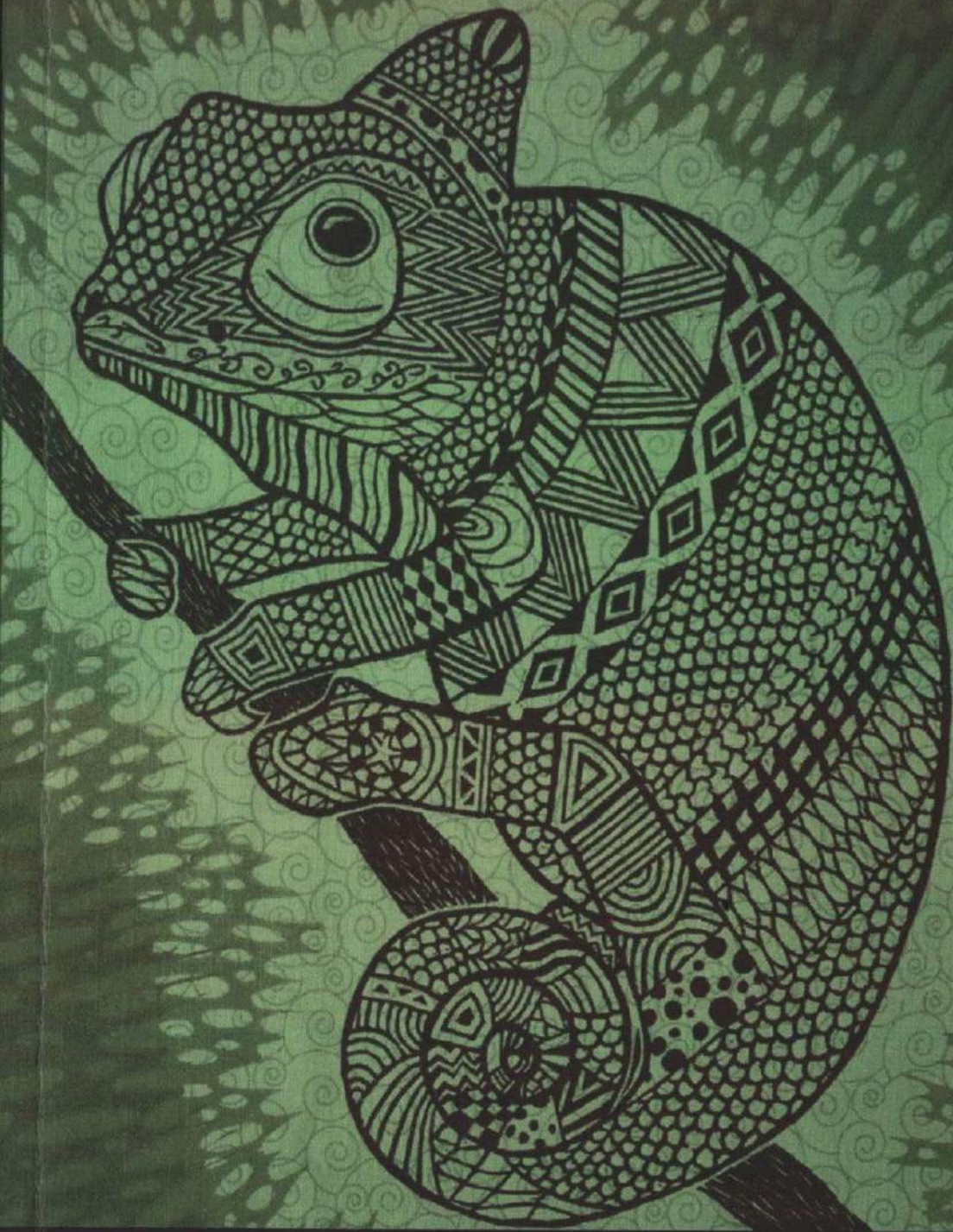
Spectrum, 2018

Northwestern College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/spectrum>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Northwestern College Publications at NWCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spectrum literary magazine by an authorized administrator of NWCommons. For more information, please contact ggrond@nwciowa.edu.



SPECTRUM

SPECTRUM

2018 EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor: Lucas Sander

Assistant Editor: Alyson Eversman

Copy Editor: Jayde Logemann

Design Editor: Abbey Slattery

Faculty Advisor: Samuel Martin

Off-Campus Judge: Michael Minor

Cover Art: "The Chameleon Within" by Camille Visser

NOTES

Writing always gives us a special window into the author's soul, and often that shows us a life full of experiences very different from our own. It's not always easy to see those differences and celebrate them, but we learn and grow together all the more for it.

It is also said that art is a mirror held up to society. We cannot learn unless we see who we truly are, and great stories, poetry, and art will always show us those parts of ourselves that we haven't seen before.

When you see into someone else's experience, you also gain better insight into humanity – into yourself. The pieces you will find in this year's *Spectrum* have done both for me, and I hope you'll let them do the same for you.

-Lucas Sander

Editor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY

Spanish Danza by <i>Emily Wikner</i>	6
I am a single page by <i>Liz Meier</i>	8
The Hardest of Life Lessons by <i>Alexis Karsjens</i>	10
A Letter for Patience by <i>Alexis Karsjens</i>	13
Dear Sydney Rae by <i>Emily Wikner</i>	16
Truth by <i>Carissa Tavary</i>	18
I Still Remember Much of That Place by <i>Alexis Karsjens</i>	19
Meteora by <i>Lucas Sander</i>	21
Mornings of Peace by <i>Alyson Eversman</i>	22
Snowflakes Are My Love Language by <i>Emily Wikner</i>	23
I'm Drawn by <i>Olivia Vander Ploeg</i>	24
We were made for love by <i>Carissa Tavary</i>	25
The Wisdom of the Trees by <i>Carissa Tavary</i>	26
A Limerick of Identity Crisis by <i>Marie Jeppesen</i>	27
Monarch by <i>Lucas Sander</i>	28
When Words Don't Come by <i>Alexis Karsjens</i>	31
Traveler at heart by <i>Jessica Karhoff</i>	33
Dog Days of Love by <i>Emily Wikner</i>	35
Ettinsmoor by <i>Olivia Vander Ploeg</i>	37
I hate this pen by <i>Carissa Tavary</i>	39
My sister as she died by <i>Carissa Tavary</i>	40

FICTION

Shattered Mosaics by <i>Candace Mitchel</i>	42
Heroin Needles by <i>Alexis Karsjens</i>	56
Thank God I'm Alive and Not in Jail by <i>Oliva Vander Ploeg</i>	70
3 A.M. Love by <i>Alyson Eversman</i>	84
Second Encounters by <i>Victoria Horn</i>	91
Hidden Abuse by <i>Alyson Eversman</i>	107

NON-FICTION

Not Heroes or Heroines by <i>Victoria Horn</i>	118
Just Behind the Curtain by <i>Victoria Horn</i>	129
The Secret Trails of Cedar Falls by <i>Emily Wikner</i>	134
The Life I Didn't Live by <i>Lucas Sander</i>	138

ARTWORK

Beastly Beauty by <i>Camille Visser</i>	12
Whitney Houston by <i>Jaycee Vander Berg</i>	30
Slug Love by <i>Michelle Simpson</i>	38
Getting from here to there by <i>Hannah Wamhoff</i>	41
Miniatures by <i>Camille Visser</i>	85
A Long Walk by <i>Abbey Slattery</i>	90
Kendrick Lamar by <i>Jaycee Vander Berg</i>	106
Oh Deer by <i>Michelle Simpson</i>	117
Chameleon by <i>Amanda Rens</i>	128
Giant Mouse by <i>Michelle Simpson</i>	147

POETRY

FIRST PLACE

JUDGE'S NOTES:

"Spanish Danza" light heartedly blends form and content to gesture toward one of language's most fundamental purposes: connection. We speak to connect to our friends and family. Perhaps we write in order to stretch that connection even further. The self-awareness of this poem welcomes readers to kick off their shoes and enjoy the breathless connection that poetry affords us.

SPANISH DANZA

BY EMILY WIKNER, SPANISH

<< ¿What study you? >>

They ask me with warm, inquisitive eyes.

The question strikes a chord within me.

<< Español, >>

I reply. Then language rapids race

toward me and sweep me away.

¡Dios mio! ¿Just what have I gotten myself into?

Sounds spew out my mouth and everyone
stares at me. They chuckle too.

one two three four five six

one two three four five six

The measures of music which me followed
during my adolescence, in this hour, them I see in
flowers complete.

Guitar strums commence as castanets appear
like the RRs I cannot force my tongue to rrrroll.

¡Uggh. I can't do it!

My speech is like a deer who flails her legs
to imitate the soaring of eagles yet I do not myself
relent.

Minor keys lively continue playing as if
a celebration of culture and a funeral for my competence
happen simultaneously.

My tongue sizzles with words I cannot remember
like salsa verde burns on my palate
bland and Midwestern.

(¿Did I just ask for a spoon or a cockroach!?)

I sift through a sea of infinite circle skirts flying
and colored, until I have a new harvest (ten words, maximum).

To put myself on feet an other time, I feel
a rhythm in my head my body cannot itself maintain.
It's too much.

un dos tres un dos tres

un y dos y tres y

Myself I fall down, my soul defeated.

To me, they shout:

<<¡La danza; ¡La danza! ¡Venga y
únete a la danza!>>

I am the stranger, welcomed.

I AM A SINGLE PAGE

BY LIZ MEIER, ENGLISH TEACHING

I am a single page
 in a long story that spans
 the ever that is the universe.
 An independent leaf
 of handcrafted *hanji*—
 paper made from mulberry bark
 and characteristically durable
 as the country
 where they discovered
 my mother
 alone:
 like Moses in rushes,
 except on hospital steps—
 Korea.

If Korea's l o n g
 history
 continues
 in me—in this miracle
 of biology pulsing
 a round trip each minute—
 can I claim my independence
 from it, since my Korean-ness
 crinkles my eyes
 the size of rice grains
 when I grin?

Can I claim connection
 to a nation
 whose art and relics

I've only seen in museums—
 in which my own
 reflection, my American
 silhouette, frustrates
 the clear picture I'd like
 to have of who I am.

Have I appropriated
 the strength and resilience
 of Koreans,
 the imperfections of *hanji* paper,
 for myself?
 Or are these cracks
 in my identity
 indicative
 of my humanity—
 my desire to belong?

THE HARDEST OF LIFE LESSONS FOR MY GRANDMOTHER

BY ALEXIS KARSJENS, LITERATURE

She stands there by the sink, in mid-July humidity,
Preparing evening supper. Her hands chapped red from the
Boiling sink. In an enormous home where, at age ninety,
She refused to stop, hurriedly pulling out
The china used only on Christmas, the set gifted by
Her grandparents, from her rickety cabinets.

Earthy potatoes and aroma-less pork, pungent
Pickled radishes and sauerkraut. She prepared
Since early morning; forming, creating, crafting
Recipes that her immigrant parents taught. The
Kitchen's alive with their past and her present love.

But, when dinner waves goodbye, it leaves
Me alone with her. Silence, our host, protrudes into the kitchen,
The only other sound is the *scratch-scratchings* of a
Sponge licking its partner, the plate. Rhythms for running
Thoughts, I guess. I climb her decades, her memories
Like mountains. The size of McKinley seen at dawn.

How did she live on her own?

Her hands caress a blackened stovetop coil, with
More precision than one should. She is...
A woman. A product of poverty and Black Tuesday,
Patton's War and shoulder-padded farm crisis. Resilient,
Unbelievably. Even still with care, she touches the cold
Of a once-fiery coil. Her light hands controlled by a
Heavy heart, taking precious time to clean forgettable things.

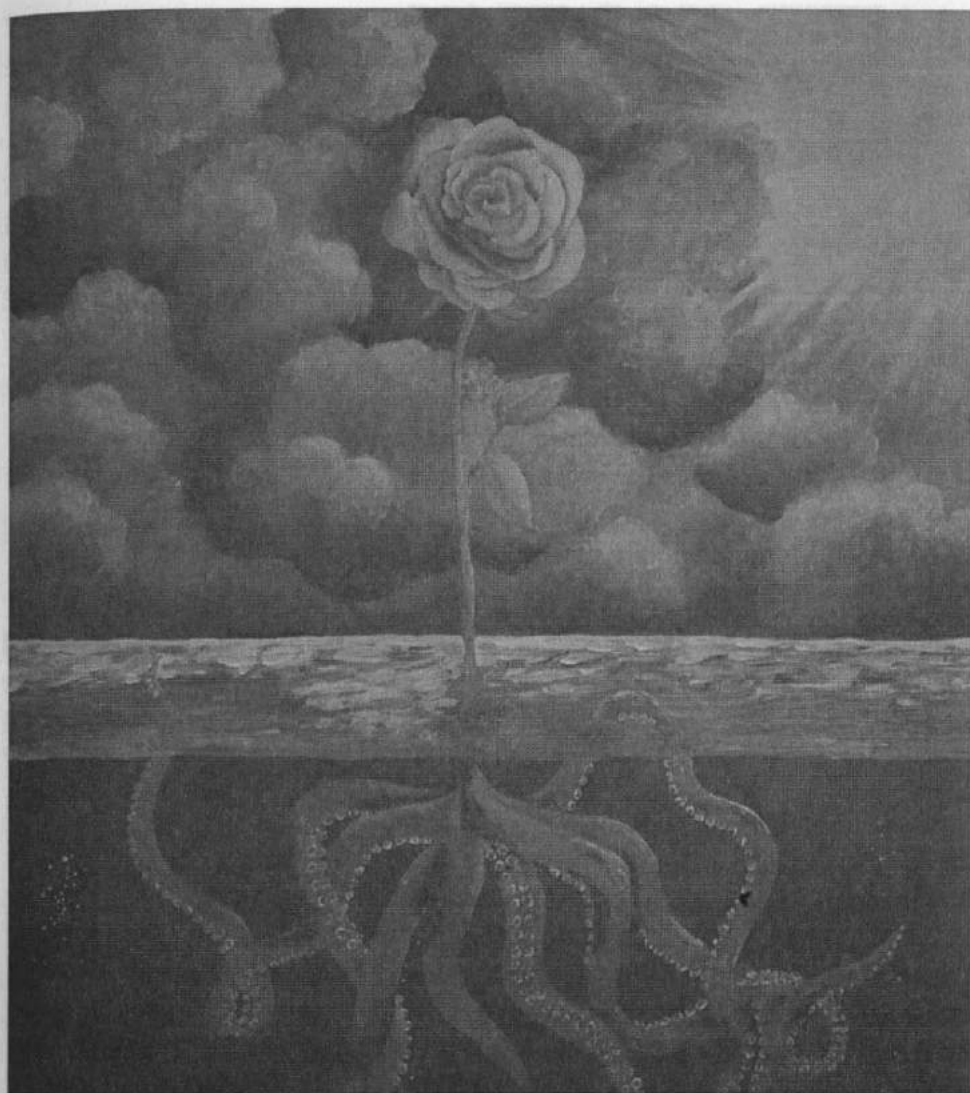
She reaches, ever so carefully; she lifts ever so lightly,

Removing it while a lonely woman escapes into her deepest
 Memories. The Happiest of recollections greet her: of a
 Husband and daughter still living above the wet marshland.

But even the happiest of these haunts,
 refuses to loosen its grip.

Echoless footsteps make their way back to the sink, head down
 Cast, with the coil in hand. The swishing of
 Pantyhose on her ankles as she rubs the chalky outside
 With her thumb, just as a mother her newborn babe.

Her newfound adopted child, the coil, is
 Now cradled in the sink of '70s yellow and green,
 Where yet she cleans with more care. But I, with her, decide
 To take up my sponge, turning lifeless faucets to
 Let tepid water run



BEASTLY BEAUTY

CAMILLE VISSER,
ART/GRAPHIC DESIGN

A LETTER FOR PATIENCE

IT WAS BECAUSE OF YOU THAT I LOVE AS I LOVE

BY ALEXIS KARSJENS, LITERATURE

To tell you the truth, I don't remember
 The last time I called you, or even when I
 Spoke to you. The last time that I could,
 I remember what you said to me at
 Graduation, "Make us proud," gave a hug of assurance,
 And walked out of the church. Your shoulders bare,
 Red sores imbedded in your skin.

To tell you the truth, I don't remember the lesson
 Of the last sermon you gave—Jeremiah 29, I think.
 There was a month, maybe two, that passed
 Where I didn't take the time to think about you.
 About your illness,
 an anemically constructed plague;
 a metastasis of murdering cells.
 It consumed you in a year's time.

Your happy smile—your "I love you"—
 Was meant for comfort like a quilt. But,
 That comfort, over time, turns into an insulated electric
 Hospital sheet of emu oil and knitted beanies
 From concerned congregants—
 They all seem to vanish

By year: 1

 month: 4

 day: 117

 hour: infinity—

Or, at least, that's how it feels.

When I first met the *Holy* nurses, they seemed
 As compassionate, at least by noon—drowned
 In five cups of the hospital's strongest coffee.

The *All Knowing* PhDs and MDs,
 Deities of the highest order, dug around
 Like children in your flesh-filled sandbox
 On that cold table. These doctors taught me
 Something from their playtime surgeries—

They
 don't
 know
 shit.

They don't teach matters of the heart in medical school.

That nurse you were so fond of at first,
 I don't remember their names. They were
 Hardening into stone, with little compassion
 For the pain you endured.

You...
 You!
 You,
 You.

A naturally born fighter you were supposed to be.

When a woman of God fights, she expects to win. But
 You didn't. You knew better than I...

 That phrase, "I fight like a girl," to hell with it.
 Instead, I'll send you the rowdiest
 biker gangs by express mail,
 Wrapped in bows of emerald green and dark blue.
 You needed all the help you could get.

That last night the nurses didn't come, but
 Stole away to dark back rooms. Alone, you
 Took one last breath, puffed tear-stained

Yellow cheeks. You told me,

“All will be well.

Pray for other things,

You needn't worry about me.

There will be another day for me yet. I'll dance with you then.”

But how can I dance when you're gone?

DEAR SYDNEY RAE

BY EMILY WIKNER, SPANISH

When you grew up, did you visit Lillie Lake
And see her working on the *Unfinished Tapestry*?

Did her regal brow furrow as she stitched
her words into the loom and insisted that
her readers call her Lillian?

Did she scold you when
you stroked the pages of her
masterpiece in progress?

Or are you a beloved thread she wove in?

Does your thread fall between the bread, fame, thread, and sleep
or perhaps the upward grade?

I think linguistic inclination's thread
ties the three of us together, bobs
through the loom up and down and
up and down and up and
down
(The McGuffey bloodstream stirring, I'm sure).

What do you think?
Would Lillie scold me for my silly metaphors
and my selection of bright colors?
Would she frown at my absence of pattern,
lack of rhyme?
Would she use her bold teacher's education
to correct my loosey-goosey
modern ways?

Or would my newfangled writings
 amuse her enough
 for her to step back
 and admire (or at least try to understand)
 my work on the Tapestry she continued and
 passed on?

With much love and
 many more words
 to come, Emily Ann

TRUTH

BY CARISSA TAVARY, ENGLISH TEACHING

Let's jump and
 swim in the deep dark of
 the universe with the stars as
 our fish and the planets
 as our buoys. The world is so
 small and the sky so deep.
 The skin-level surface on the
 crust of the earth acts as a shelter to truth
 but while they look to the wrong surface,
 never right in their mark, x
 marks the spot.

We will float
 easy in tranquility, flowing like a
 stream to an ocean bigger than
 our expectations.

They ask us
 what is truth? What is our
 relationship with truth?
 How can we make sense of the
 thing that lives in the gray chaos of two hearts
 smashed
 into one cosmic instance?

I STILL REMEMBER MUCH OF THAT PLACE

BY ALEXIS KARSJENS, LITERATURE

I still remember much of that place,
Even after all this time, that maze of pines and
Broken, defeated concrete slabs stacked chaotically
In tall green stalks. The vines, roped honeysuckle
Zigzagged across the top of the conquered cement.

The weeds grew year-round in those days. Dandelions
And violets danced together, mesmerizing
But deadly. Never A time when I didn't wish
To dance with them. A waltz, with
Self and nature, wrapped in sunlight.

That field of strange creatures that lie on the ledge
Of the crowded collection of mute giants—firs,
Standing tall, with you—never
Ceasing their rocking in the cool wind.

Cooler than normal that year, though the
Motherly sun still gave off her warmth
I watched her from afar,
As a young child does, watched my mother put
On her pearls and rose-colored lipstick
for a date with Dad. I hid
Some days in shadow of the sun, afraid
That she'd shut the door.

Falling down behind prairie-
Grassed hills and cattle pastures,
I'd never been more at home in those days
Than when I stood among the decapitated cornrows,
Looking out to the west and seeing that teenage grass
Waving to me in the

Crescendoming breeze.

I visit there still every couple years. These good friends
 Still know my name there. Where thoughts
 Ride with theirs and we can catch up on
 The days I spent with them in my childhood.
 They have imprinted their souls on me, kissed
 Me, with each movement of their beings.

They rock me to bed at night and sing me
 Lullabies of their language,
 The voices, I once knew.

METEORA

BY LUCAS SANDER, WRITING AND RHETORIC

Peeking out the window as
 we wind up the mountain
 Pushed back in my seat
 by the incline

We can drive no farther
 so we pull into the gravel space
 and scramble to the bumpy rock outcropping
 I step up and

My eyes fly
 try to take in all of the rugged
 orange-touched cracks of mountain
 The last of the outstretched sun filters
 through the pillars of stone

gliding over darkened valley treetops
 to set on my face
 Rays of twilight splash against the cliffs
 where ancient monasteries
 gather in the timeless light.

*If you have to choose, they say,
 Don't go to Athens or the Parthenon
 You must see
 Meteora*

MORNINGS OF PEACE

BY ALYSON EVERS MAN, BIOLOGY/ECO. SCIENCE

As days grow shorter,
I awake to listen
To the morning stars.
And as they sing, as if
it is midnight, their beauty
Reflects faint morning's glow,
And I bask in it, and it
Mimics the night
When the world feels

Still.

It is during these moments that no
One expects anything
From me. Only
silence.

And I rejoice in such peace.

SNOWFLAKES ARE MY LOVE LANGUAGE

BY EMILY WIKNER, SPANISH

You ravish my heart
 and capture my soul
 every time it snows

whether flakes hover in the morning rays
 or
 the storehouses of Heaven dump
 the entirety of their contents

my puff of breath escapes in awe

*If you have to choose, they say
 Don't go to Athens or the Parthenon
 You must see
 Myron*

I'M DRAWN

BY OLIVIA VANDER PLOEG, WRITING AND RHETORIC

My sister draws
her violin from its case
and nestles it between her shoulder and chin.
She draws a nice, slow melody around me
like a picture, a sheet, a gentle breeze
in a field hushed with wildflowers—
Poppies, Tiger Lilies, Daisies

Then the song changes.
Curtains drawn
in my mind like a window thrown
open to staccato raindrops pecking
metal. Her bow movements are precise and
tiny but expanding, vibrating louder—
half-notes harsh—
encroaching thunder

Then she quiets and slows, closes her eyes and she plays
and I'm still swaying as the song ends,
a Daisy still weaving
in a windless field

WE WERE MADE FOR LOVE

BY CARISSA TAVARY, ENGLISH TEACHING

We were made for love.
 Fierce, overpowering,
 washing over and
 knocking the given breath from our lungs
 as the force of the earth's gravity collides with our souls
 ripping the nature of this world from our crafted beings.
 180 degrees south of each planetary rotation
 we are anchored in the chaos of a wild, enthusiastic
 paranoia that questions our existence apart from this
 holy serotonin overflow
 where we see the unnatural neutrality of morality.

*Take me, this prodigal. Take
 me, this being still stung by death,
 we cry.*

Tether these souls to saints' prayers,
 holy witnesses. Death,
 where is your victory?
 Death, is this your sting?
 Our voice mimics pain and pleasure
 as in-between breaths proclaim
 a name
mine
 reverberating in breathless lungs.
 God.

I was made for love.

THE WISDOM OF THE TREES

BY CARISSA TAVARY, ENGLISH TEACHING

What are your stories, old crooked tree?
 What can you tell a young sapling like me?
 What made your branches so twisted, so gnarled?
 Who marred your trunk to give off a smile?

I could tell, young sapling, of years I have seen.
 Of stars that have fallen from heavens you dream,
 The glimpse of first spring, the death in first snow,
 The celestial beings who touch valley green.

I could tell you of embers that came as an axe
 Who burned at the stake my friends who could last.
 I have seen deer make their home and men make their prowl.
 I have drunk in their blood and cried from such shallow.

But I have seen sunlight that dances through branches of friends.
 I have seen birds make their nest in the boughs I extend.
 I have been beaten by winds, by storms, and by snows,
 And stood through it all to tell you this so:

The small ones of man who come running through now,
 Who holler and play to make hallows of hollows,
 Or the new leaf of spring that makes vibrant from green
 Are the reasons I live to help forests teem.

Young sapling, life comes by fire and snow
 But reach for the joy when your branches are tor'.
 Darkness can reign in a forest so close

But grow towards the sun and then reach till its spent.

A LIMERICK OF IDENTITY CRISIS

BY MARIE JEPPESEN, ENGLISH TEACHING

I am just who I need to be
A little game of make-believe

But I can't quite imagine
What exactly will happen
When all that there's left

Is just me

MONARCH

BY LUCAS SANDER, WRITING AND RHETORIC

Bright orange with black is caught
among the wipers
This tangle catches my eye
as I walk from the car

That sucks

I go up to the windshield
Then I see twitching –
this glorious figure
still struggles with life

I hesitantly pinch
the fuzzy, stiff wings
Pained by the destruction of my touch,
I extract the creature from
among the blades

I set the body in the grass
glance down, and I know
I have to help
in the worst way

Before I can give
another thought, I set
my foot down where I had laid
those brilliant wings

Unsure, I stomp again
then walk away. Crossing the grass, I realize
that I took a life

It was mercy
 but I still wonder
 why it didn't feel like it.



WHITNEY HOUSTON

**JAYCEE VANDER BERG,
CRIMINAL JUSTICE**

WHEN WORDS DON'T COME

BY ALEXIS KARSJENS, LITERATURE

Why is it that I feel sad
When I sit on the porch outside,
A beat-up notebook and
Pen with which I try to write who
You really are, to me at least.
You have no body that I can describe
With human words. The words I have
Don't exist.

And so I body you in stories and landscapes.
You're my green Avonlea, my untamed Narnia,
And my adventurous Little House—all these and
None. All these in one. And none. You're where peanut butter
Swims with jelly, where sugar engulfs grapes.

You hopscotch in young children skipping
And the elderly tick-tock in their rocking
Chairs whose runners smile at the robustness of a
Childhood they once shared,
Innocent splendor
And chaos.

When words don't come, I sit
In that field, motionless and unaware,
Staring without thought. Happy and
Sad at the same time. Piano keys tinkling
The wind with the slightest chirp
Of cheeping robins, and the cold scolds
Of blue jays.

Forgive me when I only see you
 In warm sun rays, for you're
 Also the cool dirt—
 The seeds yet to sprout

Under foot.

TRAVELER AT HEART

BY JESSICA KARHOFF, SOCIOLOGY

I am a traveler at heart,
And I love the curried taste
Of a newfound adventure.
I sit amongst my books and look to the sky
Dreaming of when I might

Fly to South Sudan.
For I long to see Panreing
A gorgeous place, I'm told.
Where it is never cold.
I yearn to play soccer at midnight
With the moonlight shining bright
I want to hear the drums beating,
And the ferocious lions roar.
I wish to see the dark blue sky,
Pulsing with the stars.

From there to the edge of heaven,
I wish to see Pokhara,
Home to my best friend.
I want to hear the stories again,
And see where they were made.
I want to see the shop where she and her family live,
The school where she played and learned
to forgive.

But I cannot.
I sigh and look down.
For I am a student and
The bills must be paid,
Presentations to be made.

Yet all will be laid aside come graduation day.

On that day,
 I'll step on a plane and fly
 To Panreing, to Pokhara and others places
 Yet to be named.
 I'll wait for that day and
 nothing is better
 than a newfound adventure

Save every penny away.
 Because, even though I'm a student

I am a traveler at heart

DOG DAYS OF LOVE

BY EMILY WIKNER, SPANISH

Falling in love is like trying to train a puppy:

Your heart wriggles and
squirms and
makes a barking break for freedom.

You chase it down,
screaming its name,
bribing it with treats

(You can do what you want!
Save money!)

"Heart! Heart!" you call in desperation.
"Please come back."

You invite friends over to socialize your puppy love but
it still barks and jumps at strangers.

Attractive strangers.

"Stop drawing attention to me!"

It barks flirtatiously.

"Damn it!"

Bark Bark!

Why do you have to be so stinkin' adorable?

You buy state-of-the-art leashes to keep your heart
close to you.

"These either get chewed or snap
 due to constant tugging.

"COME BACK!" you yell, tackling your affections.
 You miss, though, and your heart streaks off in the distance.

"YOU ARE NOT GETTING AWAY FROM ME AGAIN!"

Your legs burn. Your lungs deflate. And you collapse.

Hey," a voice says, and you hear a yip.

There's a stranger—an attractive one.

And your puppy pants happily in their arms,

SLUG LOVE

MICHELLE KAPLAN
 TRANSLATION

ETTINSMOOR

OR PIKE'S PEAK, COLORADO

BY OLIVIA VANDER PLOEG, WRITING AND RHETORIC

We finished the climb
after two pain-staking hours,
breathing heavily
as we stood at the top—
me trying desperately to fill
my lungs after the rigorous hike.

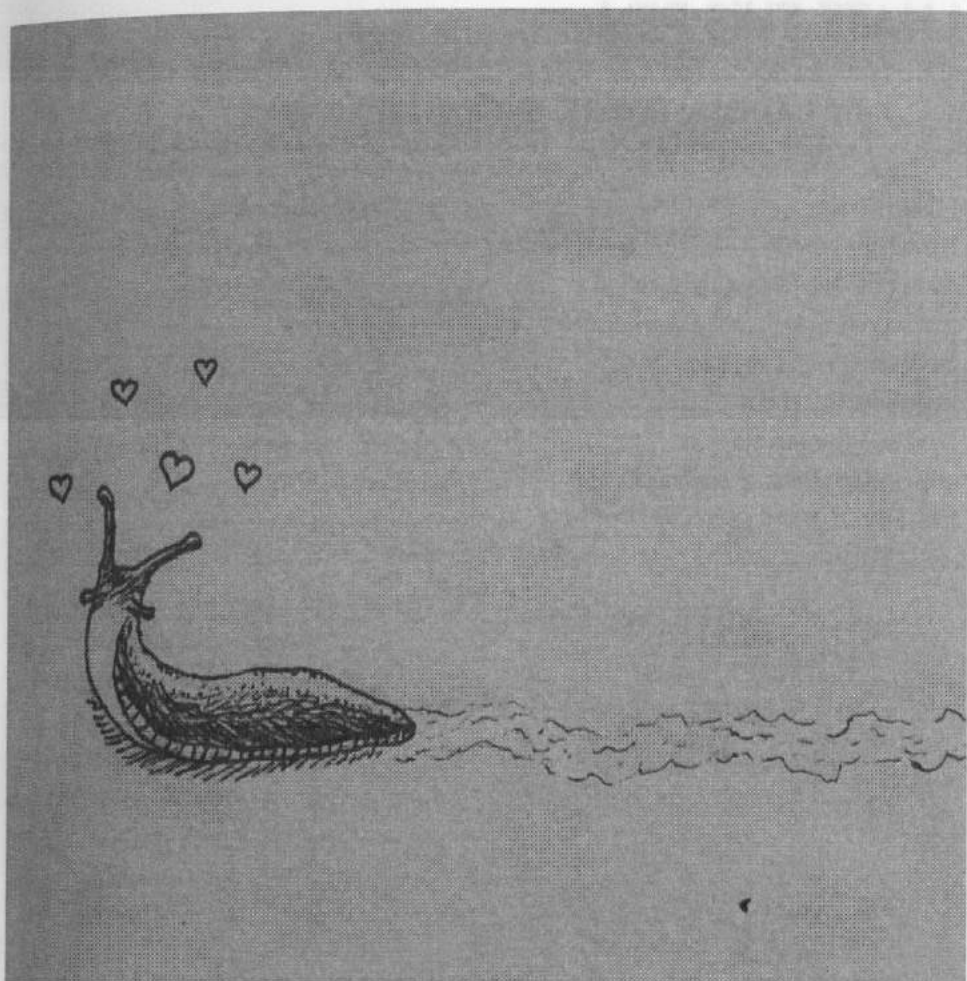
I'm more of a reader than a hiker; and travel farther
in magical lands than my own—Middle Earth,
Camelot, Narnia. But here I am in Colorado.

I turned around and admired the view
from the top of the mountain.
The huge valley we'd left below boulder-filled and distant.
From our vantage point each giant rock a dwarfed
stone. A natural rock garden.
Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum
could've appeared beside me, straight
out of *The Silver Chair*; and I wouldn't have blinked,
just continued our walk through this Ettinsmoor;
The wind whooshing like huge rocks
hurled by giants.

It was beautiful.

And I realized I'd stopped
Breathing. For a moment.

Below me a strange land
I know well—Narnia,
the land of giants.



SLUG LOVE

MICHELLE SIMPSON,
TRANSLATION/INTERP

I HATE THIS PEN

BY CARISSA TAVARY, ENGLISH TEACHING

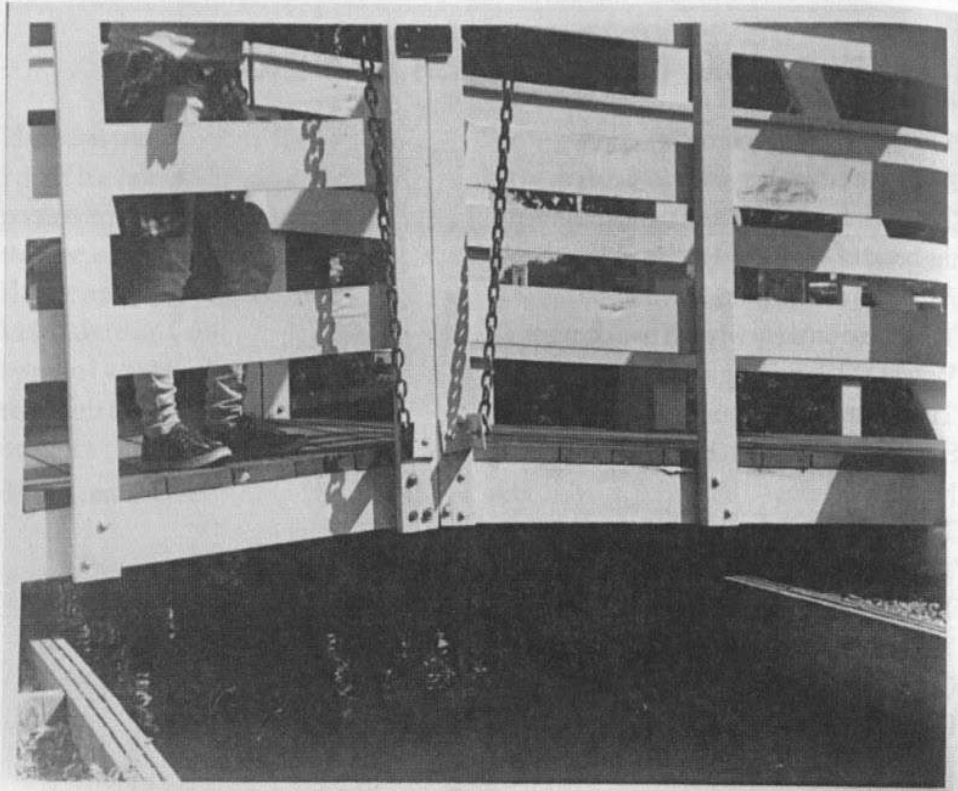
I hate this pen
I don't like how it
pools onto the page with black ink
that seeps through and smears easy
like the makeup I wear to
look older than I am
because I want my face to
outweigh the lack of confidence and
maturity
doesn't make sense

MY SISTER AS SHE DIED

BY CARISSA TAVARY, ENGLISH TEACHING

“Oh Ellen,” my grandmother cried
 As she sat beside her sister as she died.
 Two wrinkled hands held tight, the grasp
 the bond of sisterhood in that clasp.
 A gift, a chance, a miracle at least
 That these unlikely women two do meet.
 Watch! While we ring words of tears
 Their years reverse, and time gives release.
 Sat there, two women laugh are young,
 No fear; no haste,
 They sing the night away.
 To you, my sister; how I need
 To hang on—wait, don’t go.

God’s gift to man may be the lady
 But the lady’s gift is you.



GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

HANNAH WAMHOFF,
THEATRE

FICTION

FIRST PLACE

JUDGE'S NOTES:

"Shattered Mosaics" navigates the dangerous waters of familial love, loss, and living with mental illness. Despite the formidable challenges of balancing voices both real and surreal, the author manages to show compassion to these broken characters. Just as the protagonist creates something beautiful from broken glass, this story's sharp prose begins to piece together the broken lives depicted here.

SHATTERED MOSAICS

BY CANDANCE MITCHEL, THEATRE

Glass rains down all around me as I clutch the hammer tighter in my fist. I can feel the stinging cuts that cover my hands. I look at the mirror, happy with the pattern of the break. It's exactly like the first time I discovered the beauty of broken glass. My nurse was so mad when I took my chair and threw it into the bathroom mirror. He was even more mad

when I began to smash other glass objects and hide the shards in a box in the arts and crafts section of the hospital. It wasn't until my therapist saw my work that I was cleared to officially work with the substance, though under extreme surveillance. My doctor realized it helped me deal with my issues, and I was released the following month.

You should have broken things a lot sooner.

Go away...

No. You have to admit using glass was genius! I didn't even come up with that when I was—

SHUT UP!

Turning back to my art, I can't decide whether to strike again or gather the pieces off the floor. I walk to the other side of the garage and set the hammer down on the table across the way. I still had four more mirrors to smash before my art project could finish. I look down at my hands and wince.

My mom will kill me for forgetting my gloves... again.

I walk over to the sink and let the water run over the tiny cuts and scrapes. The soap burns as it disinfects each of the cuts. And I pat my hands bone dry.

Nice going, Grace!

"Peter?" I call out. "Hey, Peter can you come in here for a moment?"

"Did you cut yourself again?" He sighs, seeing my hands. "Mom's gonna be pissed."

Last time I cut my hand, she freaked out so badly she broke her favorite coffee cup and two plates when she went back to washing the dishes.

Peter enters the garage and gestures to the first aid kit next to the workbench.

"Why do you insist on using shards of glass for your mosaics?" He looks

at me, waiting for an answer. I tell him the same thing I do every time.

"Shards are raw—sharp—and it allows me to get my anger out." I wince at the sting of the hydrogen peroxide and the glare at my brother. "A little warning next time," I say. Though I know it'll never hurt as much as seeing her body floating on the surface of the lake.

"Quit being a baby," he says. "I'm almost done here. Just have to add the band-aids." He chuckles at the look of my hands. Multiply scarred. Almost mangled. "Are you calling it a night?" he asks. "Or are you going to keep going... *with gloves?*"

I shrug. "I have to finish this piece by Monday." I walk over to the mosaic and gesture to the last four empty spaces on the board. "Especially if I want to try and display it as the main exhibit."

I look over at the shards still hanging in the mirror's frame. Each shard seems to hold a section of Zora's swollen, blue-tinged face.

Don't I look great, Cosette?

I gulp hard and close my eyes tightly against the wave of nausea. I can tell the blood has drained from my face as I force the bile back down my throat.

"Hey sis... you okay?" Peter says. "You seem a little pale...." He trails off at the sound of car door. "I'm going to go distract Mom." He glances back at me and gestures to the gloves sitting on the work bench. And I watch his image fade in the broken glass.

You're despicable. Mom can't hurt me while I'm in here...

You're right, I think, but I can't leave. Not now. Mom can still hurt me.

You think keeping me a secret is protecting her? Tell her about me, I dare you.

She continues chanting this in my head until I put on my headphones and blare Be More Chill through the headphones. My favorite musical. I don't want to think about the accident that caused the voice to appear in my head. Since the accident she watches me through mirrors,

windows, still water.

If it can cast a reflection, she's there.

I grab the last shard of glass and carefully press it into the plaster. The image is a mix of shards and cut glass of different sizes and colors. It looks like the headlights of a car coming toward me. I pull my phone out of my pocket and take off my headphones and see it's nearly 6:30 p.m.

"Cosette, it's time for dinner!" The smell of lasagna permeates the house now, reaching even here in the garage. Mom must be in a good mood. Lasagna always means a good mood.

"Coming!" I say. "I just need to put the cover over my latest mosaic!" I finish adding the last few straight pins to keep the sheet from touching the wet plaster.

"Cosette," I can hear the smirk in Peter's voice. "If my dinner is cold waiting for you again, I'll win that bet, so please take your time."

Funny, Peter. I throw my gloves onto the worktable and run into the kitchen where Mom is just pulling the dish from the oven.

"Who's slow now?" I say and look over my shoulder to stick my tongue out at Peter. I wash my hands still looking at him, then reaching for the taps I see the pile of soggy band-aids I washed off in my rush.

Nice job, slick... You may join me yet.

I'll never be dumb enough to go cliff-diving drunk.

Keep telling yourself that.

I grab the band-aids, toss them in the trash, then inspect the cuts. They should be fine until after dinner. I know I should tell Mom about the voice, but she'd send me back to the help facility.

It's an asylum, Cosette!

I know.

Don't try and hide the fact. It's not helping anyone!

I know, I know.

I feel a small stab of pain and see I've picked at one of the cuts, causing it to bleed. I walk over to the cabinet and pull out a water proof

band-aid. I can feel Mom's glare on my back. She sucks in a sharp breath.

Tread lightly.

"It's fine, Mom. Only a small scratch." I turn to the table and she still doesn't seem convinced I'm fine.

"Please be more careful," she says. "You know I don't like you working with glass, but the doctors said it helps you, so I've allowed it. If your hobby causes you to have to get stitches, though, again, I will make sure you don't use glass in this house. Do I make myself clear?" She grabs my wrist and pulls me towards her. I can tell from her tone and the bruise forming on my wrist that she won't have any argument on the matter.

Good thing I'm not that stupid.

"I understand," I say—soft, passive. I know she won't make me stop my art altogether since it's the only thing keeping me sane. Though the bruise now forming on my wrist says I shouldn't have used my mental illness against her.

I just need to finish this piece, then hopefully the voice will calm... until the next thing triggers her to come back again. I never told my therapist or anyone about her—the voice. Sometime she comes in memories that wake from sleep screaming and sobbing. Mom tries to ignore my cries now, since the one time she tried to calm me I grabbed onto her throat.

You really think that was an accident? Did you forget about the bruises around your neck from that night?

Don't ruin another family dinner with your talking.

I take a seat at the table and grab the glass of water sitting in front of me. The seat next to me remain opens. I don't know why she still sets the table for him. Dad hasn't been home for dinner in months. I look across the table to Peter and glance back at the empty spot. He shrugs his shoulders as if to say: Who cares?

We both think Dad is cheating on Mom.

He already has an apartment in town for the nights he works late. We don't have the heart to tell her, though, because we both know it'll crush her. She dishes out the homemade lasagna with garlic bread now. Runs over to the fridge and pulls out a bottle of sparkling white grape juice and three wine glasses. We know it's silly, but on Italian dinner night we must go all out, and she won't let me drink the real stuff until I turn 19 this Friday.

Even then, it'll still only one glass, given my meds.

We drink the juice and eat the fantastic dinner she's made. At exactly 8:00 p.m., the phone rings. Like every night, Dad calls to say he loves us, but that he'll be staying late at the lab. Again. Typical.

Mom once again tries to get him to leave early. She never wins that argument, though. And instead she agrees and puts his dinner in the fridge. I'll need to cheer her up as she gets a little rough sometimes.

Sometimes?

It's time to show Mom the mosaic I finished. I've been working on it for the past two months. And she's been wanting to see it, but I don't let anyone see a work until it's done. I just hope she likes it.

"Hey, Mom," I say, standing behind her in the kitchen. Her eyes are slightly red from crying, and I feel awful. It was never like this before I snapped and Zora died. She rubs her eyes and looks up at me as if she's expecting Zora.

"What is, Cosette?" Her eyes fight to connect to mine. I know she blames herself for Zora's death when it was all my fault.

"I finished the mosaic," I say. "If you would like to come see it." I play with the ends of my hair. "The plaster should be dry by now." I'm anxious because every other time she's had me bring it to her. I want her to come into my workshop, though—to the garage—and see that I'm okay.

months. And she's been wanting to see it, but I don't let anyone see a work until it's done. I just hope she likes it.

"Hey, Mom," I say, standing behind her in the kitchen. Her eyes are slightly red from crying, and I feel awful. It was never like this before I snapped and Zora died. She rubs her eyes and looks up at me as if she's expecting Zora.

"What is, Cosette?" Her eyes fight to connect to mine. I know she blames herself for Zora's death when it was all my fault.

"I finished the mosaic," I say. "If you would like to come see it." I play with the ends of my hair. "The plaster should be dry by now." I'm anxious because every other time she's had me bring it to her. I want her to come into my workshop, though—to the garage—and see that I'm okay.

See my art, why I shred my hands.

"Well, I guess I can look." She pauses and I can tell she wants to see my art but wants more to avoid the garage. "Let me grab my shoes," she says, "and we can head out." She gets up and puts on her shoes. I wait.

This isn't happening. Don't show her the piece. It's a trap.

This can't be a trap. She really wants to see my art. I'm going to show her.

IT'S A TRAP!

I look to Peter for confirmation that this is really happening—that Mom is actually going to follow me out to the garage. He seems just as shocked as I am. He pushes me towards the garage door and slides on his shoes. The garage is unrecognizable as a garage now. There are work benches on all three of the walls. Hanging from the ceiling are the figurines I have been experimenting with. I wanted to work on sculptures, but I need to first convince Mom that I'm safe in my studio—out here. The drawers of glass seem unorganized to anyone but me. Or Peter. I lead Mom to the closest table where the mosaic rests.

"Cover your eyes," I say. "We just have to set it up. I think you'll

love it!" I pull over a stool for Mom to sit on.

I look to Peter who gives a slight nod. This piece is special because Peter and I made a plaster that dries clear. I carefully lift a corner of the sheet and, finding it's mostly dry, give a thumbs-up to Peter. We carefully move the piece onto the frame Peter has built, to which I've stapled Christmas lights.

"Peter," I say, soft, "can you turn out the lights please?"

"Only because you did most of the work." His eyes challenge me.

"Most? Try all the work." I stare at him and he stares at me. Mom shivers. "Please get the lights before Mom freezes." I laugh as he sticks his tongue out at me.

"As you wish." He bows and adopts a snobby accent. "Now a lovely piece by the artist Cosette."

Don't do this tonight. She's not ready.

What do you mean she's not ready? She came into the garage!

This won't end well for us.

There is no us! There is only me!

Cosette, you promised never to leave me. Why do you think I'm stuck here? I'm not listening to this. Just shut up!

I plug in the Christmas lights just as I hear a gasp from Mom. The piece seems dull until lit from behind, rainbow colors shining through its prism. The colors dance and swirl as my brother pushes play on the CD player. The song "Hallelujah" plays gently in the background.

"It's beautiful!" she says.

And before I can stop her, she touches her hand to the glass. Pulls back shocked. Pin-pricks of blood on her fingers. She stares at them, at her hand. Then her face changes. Peter grabs the first aid kit and wipes the blood off her hand.

"I should have known this would happen," Mom says roughly. "Something beautiful but deadly." She glares at me and the mosaic.

As if you planned this all along.

"Mom," I say. "I didn't mean for this to happen. I was going to round off the points tomorrow—"

Her look cuts me off.

"Well, that won't be happening..." She looks at me, but it's not my mom looking back at me. "I'm going to call your father. If he doesn't take you, then you will return to the asylum on Friday." Her tone doesn't leave room for arguing.

She pulls her hand out of Peter's and slams the door, causing three of the strung figurines to come crashing to the floor. All three I'd made for her.

I grab the broom, and Peter runs into the house.

I can hear their arguing from the garage as I carefully collect the glass and dispense it into my bucket of scraps. She hasn't lashed out this badly in months. Months of build-up. But she's gone too far. The tears run down my face.

So, how are you going to get us out of this one?

"Leave me alone," I whisper.

NO! I will not go back to that asylum. Look, all you need to do is give me control.

"Why would I do that? You taking control is what started everything!"

What started everything was you needing someone to protect you.

"Why would I need protecting? You appeared unexpectedly!"

You know why she's dead. Admit it. Why won't you admit it?

"Leave me alone. I just need to convince Mom to wait a while longer."

There is no changing her mind. She doesn't trust you anymore. We both know Zora was her favorite.

"I'm not going to go live with Dad," I say.

You have no choice. Dad can help us. Dad doesn't want to be married to Mom.

"You don't know that! Just leave me alone!"

Promise to call Dad... You call Dad, and I'll leave you alone. Deal?

"FINE!" I yell. "I will call Dad!"

I look up from my task to see my brother standing in the door. Behind him, I can see the shaking form of my mother. She has tears streaming down her face.

I see fear in her eyes, not anger.

"What are you?" Her voice is soft and accusing. "Who are you?" She seems to be looking through me. "Where is Zora?" She pushes Peter out of the way and lunges at me.

I duck and Peter grabs my shoulders and turns me towards my studio. Mom hadn't lunged at me but a hammer. She grabs the hammer, looks me dead in the eye, and then throws it into the middle of my mosaic. The crash of the glass shattering is overwhelming. Each sharp crash seems to reopen old scars. I don't realize I'm crying until my knees buckle and I fall to the ground.

Colored shards cover the floor, and Mom is breathing heavy as she drops the hammer. Glass crunches underfoot. Then nothing. I know she's gone.

You need to get up.

What's the point? Everything has been destroyed.

GET UP! This is dangerous.

What's the danger?

I feel a hand grab my shoulder and give it a gentle squeeze before the footsteps turn into stomping. The door hit my back where I'm frozen to the ground.

Why did she do this?

Because she doesn't like us. She changed while we were away.

Why did she ask us what we are?

Because we're different. She wants the old Cosette back.

What do we do now?

I know we need to clean up this space, grab our things, and leave.

What about Peter?

More than likely he will follow your lead. Call Dad.

I look around at the glass all around me. I reach and grab hold of the work table and pull myself up. Sweep up all the glass. Grab my sketchbook and the only remaining corner of the mosaic. I wrap it in a white cloth and sneak into the house. Completely silent as I return to my room. Hear a knock on the door. It's been an hour since Mom smashed the mosaic.

Should I answer the door?

Yes, but if it's your Mom, I'm taking over.

Okay...

I walk over to the door and open it a crack. I can see my brother standing there, so I open the door.

"Hey... may I come in?" Peter's voice is nervous. I look behind him. "Mom went to bed. Apparently destroying your entire studio tired her out." I hear the anger in his voice.

I open the door and gesture inside.

He takes a seat on the bed and I can feel his eyes on me as I close and lock the door. "So, what happened to Zora?"

"Mom always told us not to go out to the lake at night," I say. "You were gone at that one party after the football game. We were going to go meet some friends at the lake—Zora and I." I stare at my hands. "Zora had a couple drinks, I wanted to go home... but she wanted to go swimming. I stayed on the beach and skipped rocks... I didn't see her on top of the cliff until she jumped off the edge and into the water below."

I can hear the water lapping at the shore, even now, here in this room.

"I looked up and couldn't see her, so I ran out into the lake and found her. She wasn't breathing, wasn't responding, and her head had a huge gash. I called the paramedics, but I couldn't get her to respond, even when I banged on her chest, trying to help her clear the water. Nothing worked." The sound of sirens fades in my head. Only sobs now.

"It's not your fault." Peter wraps his arms around me. "It was an accident."

"I'm so sorry, Peter... I couldn't handle her death. I woke up in the hospital and couldn't face it." My voice quakes. "The doctors took me to a different room and from there mom signed the papers that sent me away."

It's your fault for telling them about me.

Well, I did, and they still think I'm crazy.

Peter sighs deeply. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm leaving. I'm going to call Dad and see if I can live with him. Might be nice living in a city apartment." I try to sound cheerful, but my voice is lackluster.

I grab my backpack and my duffel. The good thing about having lived in an asylum is that I don't own much.

"I'm coming with you." He gets up to leave, and I grab his arm.

"Peter, I'm not coming back. I'm not going to contact her again. I'm done with her." I know the defeat is obvious in my voice.

"I know," he says, "but Mom had no right to do that. I've only stayed here cause Dad asked me to look out for you." He throws a pillow at me.

"What do you mean Dad asked you to look after me? I thought he didn't care... I mean he's been cheating on Mom and staying late at the lab..." I can't wrap my head around a world where Dad cared.

"Their marriage ended while you were in... that place. He moved out and calls each night to check in. On you. Why do you think you aren't allowed to pick up the phone?" He gets up and walks over to the door. "My stuff is packed, and I called Dad. He's on his way. If you're serious about leaving, you have an hour to finish packing." He closes the door quietly.

I tried to tell you their marriage ended.

How is all this true?

Your Dad can explain better than I can. I just know we are stuck together.

You and me.

Forever.

Guardian angel or voice in my head, I don't know, but I take each stack of clothes out of the dresser and shove them into the duffel bag. I pack my backpack with all my drawing supplies, a few novels, my phone charger, and the money I've saved from the art I've managed to sell. I look at the bare walls of the room and realize this was never home. I felt more comfort from the blue-walled room of the asylum than I've ever felt here. Slipping on my black Converse All-Stars, I turn off the light and close the door.

Maybe it's time I stop running from the crazy.

You're not crazy.

I watch as Peter seems to be enthralled with the wall. The sound of a car pulling up is the only warning I get before the headlights pierce through the window and I run out of the house.

Peter follows closely behind, but not before I see him drop a note on the counter. I know it will hopefully bring her closure, but if I never see her again, it will be too soon.

I see the car, and Dad steps out of it, and I run to him.

I can feel tears run down my cheeks.

He tells me he's missed me, and that I'm safe, and places a kiss on the top of my head and lets me go.

I wipe the tears from my eyes and watch as Peter slams the trunk closed.

"Let's get going before she wakes up."

Peter opens the passenger side door and walks over to the other side of the car and gets in the back seat. Dad gets in the driver's seat and pulls out of the drive just as mom's bedroom light turns on from within. I turn away from the back window and face forwards. I fidget with my hands until I work up the courage to speak.

"Peter... Dad... I need to tell you something."

Finally, I won't be a secret.

I keep staring at my hands. "I have this voice in my head that gives me advice and sometimes criticizes me. She claims to be Zora, but that's not true."

I am Zora.

"I know, honey," Dad says, and I stare at him. Peter looks down at the floor, avoiding my eyes through the mirror. "I will explain it when we get to my place."

I look at them both in disbelief. I don't know whether to laugh or to cry with relief from finding out this might be normal.

"All you need to know right now is that you aren't crazy. I should have brought you both with me sooner. I'm sorry."

He pats me on the arm, then returns both hands to the wheel. I feel a wave of peace enter the car, and for once, I feel my muscles relax. The gentle motion of the car and the soft chatter of Peter and Dad lulls me to sleep.

HEROIN NEEDLES

BY ALEXIS KARSJENS, LITERATURE

Collin

My sixth pink slip in three years. Right there in my hand as I entered the house.

Screw the lot of them, those assholes. The low, cracking voice was familiar and gave me a shiver. I rubbed my arm, trying to get rid of the goose bumps.

I crumpled the slip and threw it on the kitchen island.

Where's the beer? The voice demanded. *I'm empty!*

"On the crate by the fridge," I said. My father always said that beer belonged near the fridge, not in the fridge. He'd slapped and screamed at me to get one for him, his body slumped on the couch, three bottles next to his yellow hand on the end table.

I looked towards the couch where he used to lounge. Looked over to a meager, grey lump of fur lying in the corner of the room. Near the furnace, inches away. I imagined the cat's fur caught in the radiator.

Hope that sucker burns one of these days.

I ignored him—the voice. No energy to stop it today.

Scratched the small fern sitting on the counter. Jennifer, I called her. She came from my neighbor's front porch. She didn't seem to belong there, so I brought her to my kitchen island instead. Unpaid bills stuffed inside her pot. To keep her warm. But Jennifer doesn't replace *her*—the girl with the brown, loving eyes. Jennifer's a sad excuse for finding love again, but things are as they are.

Silence.

What, I wanted to say, no jeer? Guess he's tired. I would be too if I drowned myself in the bathtub after I fell asleep with a bottle in my hand. What a great day that was.

I walked over to the couch, kicking a few empty bottles into the middle of the carpet. Souvenirs of the previous night's escapade with a Playboy magazine and a bottle of Zoloft. I hadn't wanted to, really. It all seemed forced, the voice goading me.

He's gotten worse since she...

I got to keep my mind off her.

So I slash through the list of all the other jobs that haven't worked: accounting, mechanics, dry-cleaning, and sewage. Not like I don't know why they all fired me. This time it was because it was my fifth day of work and also my fifth day showing up drunk, high, or late.

Today I was all three. The usual.

An IED in Iraq was the beginning of a steel leg and my unwanted relationship with this person in my head. Bet Levi didn't have this problem. Levi Benning was a piece of work. One minute he saved my life, the next he got my purple heart taken away over a lie he told our commanding officer. Said I deserted when I left my post that night, but forgot to mention I was stopping him from leaving his. Coward.

I stared at the curtains, remembering the face of the man I owed my life to yet hated. We saw war together—saw a child get shot one day in March. I coped by cleaning my rifle over and over again, and he found women in the village, between the legs of a new one every other night.

He'd say, "Why don't you come with me some night?" I knew then that I covered for him way too much. It was his fault I never got to see Hussein hang.

The voice came in the hospital. At the time, it didn't have a name or face. I imagined his face when he was silent, though. Couldn't hear him when I drank or when I plunged a needle into my veins. So, yeah.

There was a time I'd wonder if he had blue or green eyes, or brown. Maybe red eyes, the eyes of my father when he had his belt in hand.

I blink.

Wonder what's she's wearing today.

That purple blouse from our first date maybe.

A tiny slip and no panties, Son. Or she's in Levi's pants.

I punch the wall, knuckles blue from impact. "You've no right!" I say and take a bottle from the crate and chug it, tears streaming down my cheek.

She was the only good thing I've found. Made of knowledge and spoke the language of a clear night sky filled with stars.

I met her in a small coffee shop on 9th Street in the heart of Seattle. She sat in an oversized brown chair in a dark corner. A small lamp sat on the end table next to her. I remember her enflamed. Not the lamp light, but her goodness.

She was perfect.

A floozy, Son. Textbook example.

Her legs were crossed right over left. Large tome of a novel in her lap. Black hair tied into a knot behind her head, straw-like strands ahead of each ear. Her eyes were the color of dark chocolate.

A lighthouse, right there in the midst of the stormy coffee shop.

I ordered my coffee dark. Needed to be sober before I'd have the courage to approach her. She deserved that. Eventually I asked her if anyone was sitting in the seat opposite her. She said no. Her voice was warm. A large mug was wrapped in her long fingers. The book faced down on her thighs.

Wonder what's she wearing underneath? Don't you want to know?

Get lost. I squeezed the coffee cup, wanting to make a fist.

"Dickens fan, are you?" I said, reading the name on the spine.

"Yes, absolutely! I adore him."

"I believe I read that one when I was in school once upon a time. Can't remember how it goes, though. Wish I could get back into them, always took my mind off things. Any easy suggestions?"

"I would try something like...well if you want to go with something like Dickens, then I would try probably *A Christmas Carol*. It's fun and easy."

Books will get you a job in the factory, Son.

"Christmas story in September?" I chuckled. It was a strange feeling. I'd almost forgotten how to laugh.

"I like to think that one can read whatever one wishes to read, especially at any time one wishes to read it." She smiled back; her voice was soothing. Warm smile, welcoming. Her eyes were playful.

"I didn't catch your name," I said.

"Cynthia."

"Collin."

We shook hands, and hers were soft. That sobered me up quick.

That day renewed something in me, something that I hadn't felt

in an extremely long time. It was a sense of peace, or as close to it as I would ever get. I went back to that coffee shop for the next couple of weeks. Every day hoping to find that same radiant woman sitting in the oversized chair, reading her Dickens.

And she was there. The months passed by quick. By our fourth month together, I found that Cynthia had separated from her husband of seven years. For five of those years he cheated on her with a call girl from Redmond. She was devastated. Kept saying she deserved it. He said she deserved it. That asshole! I held her hand when she cried, and I embraced her when she'd scream her anger. She crumbled into my arms the one time and stayed there for a couple of hours.

Time traveled around us in those days. I slowly stopped hearing the voice of my father. Her kind words drowned out his. I gave up drinking, and she helped me look for counseling for my drug abuse. I began to sit in her chair at the shop when she couldn't be there, reading her copy of Dickens. The more I read, the closer I felt to her, and the more I wanted to be with her.

The seventh month into our relationship was the beginning of the end. I asked her to join me at my unit's small reunion. We sat in a taxi that was cool from the rain that had fallen a little while earlier. Getting out, I led Cynthia to her apartment, inside to her new building on the fourth floor. Cynthia had been eerily quiet since I posed the question about the reunion. Come to think of it, her mood had seemed off the whole night as well.

Cynthia's answer took me by surprise.

"I can't go with you because ... well ... I'll already be there." Her eyes were downcast, voice lowered.

"What do you mean you'll already be there?" I felt my eyes getting big. She opened the door to her apartment and then closed it, leaving me in the silence of the dark, unforgiving hallway.

I didn't hear her answer.

I saw her from across the room, standing near the door. It was a small room in the convention center that the head of our unit had rented. And it was drowning in sound. Cynthia wore a black dress that was tailored to fit her perfectly. She sipped punch; some of her knuckles blue. I stood in the small group that had invited me. They stayed loyal when Levi didn't, and I was grateful. My commanding officer had no idea I snuck in, and I planned to keep it that way. I needed to talk to her. So I excused myself and walked over.

"Cynthia...what's going on?" I said. "You won't return my calls. I was getting worried." The rooms felt stuffy, so I loosened the tight necktie of my military dress.

Unprofessional, Collin. She's no reason for you to act this way. Stand at attention, Son! Stand up straight!

I shrugged off the voice. She didn't meet my gaze.

"Not now Collin, they're about to cut the cake." Her eyes rose to the other side of the room—eyes empty of that sparkle I'd known. She didn't want to say anything to me.

"We need to talk about this." My voice rose. "Now." She didn't move. "Did I say something to offend you? If I did, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, really."

There was a long pause between us. She looked at Levi. There was fear in her eyes. I've never seen her like this before. Levi looked over towards us. He wore that devilish look that I knew too well. It made me sick. There was a reason why I wished not to keep in touch with him.

You know she's lying to you.

"How do you know Levi?" I made a fist. Levi looked hungry, as if

he'd bite her head off in an instant. I looked to Cynthia again. There was a pause of silence between the two of us. She started to pick at her nails.

What was going on here? Damn it!

"We know each other quite well, actually," she said, nodding at Levi. "A husband and a wife usually know each other that way."

I laughed out loud. "You're kidding me, right?"

Deep down you wished it, Son. Want to know the Gospel truth? You deserved this!

She always had a weird sense of humor, and I wondered if this was a joke. So I nudged her with my elbow, but she didn't say anything. Her eyes didn't leave the floor.

She wasn't kidding.

"This is the kind of stuff you don't just kid about," I said, trying to lower my voice.

"I'm not." Her words were quiet. A chorus of men singing "Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)." My unit had adopted the number as their own. The song drowned out her words.

"I thought you were..." I said under my breath.

Levi looked toward her again. She shivered.

"We were, but..."

"We were, but...what?" I snapped. My voice louder.

She played you, Son. She played you hard!

"Levi came to my apartment and persuaded me to come home again..." she began. "Please don't look at me that way. He said he was sorry for what had happened and he was willing to not do it again. That's what he said to me and...you know what? A part of me wanted to give him a second chance. Hell, he's given me so many."

She paused, looking towards Levi. "Collin, he's my husband. I have to forgive him. For better or for worse."

A breath escaped her, and she pulled away from my hand, holding

her wrist, trying to hide a bruise there.

"No," I said, "you don't have to forgive him."

But she did already, Son.

"It's not your choice," she said, "it's mine. Look, I'm sorry that I had to drag you into this. Believe me! I really wanted what we had to work out, but life's not like that. Life doesn't give you what you want. You and I both know that."

Jump off a bridge, ya worthless piece of shit.

I looked across the room to my friend, the man who dragged me out of that war zone, the only one who picked up little pieces of my flesh burning down into the gravel.

"There are just some things you can't forgive," I said, "even if you want to." I turn on my heels, giving them a soft click.

You're a sad pathetic excuse for a man, Son. Did you really think that you were good enough for her?

At least I didn't lie to her!

But you still lost her.

~

A rumped, beat-up copy of *Oliver Twist* sat three-fourths of the way open on the small cardboard box that served as my bedside table. The words no longer touched her kind legs and no longer held the scent of lavender she once wore. She'd once dropped this copy in the bath and wanted to throw it out. I told her no. Dickens would never belong in a dumpster, in a lonely alley surrounded by cat feces and banana peels.

I scooped up the copy. It had been the one she'd held in that coffee shop the first time I saw her all those months ago. I turned it over in my hands. Gave it a sniff, expecting for her scent to be there.

Look at you, Son. Crying over a damn book?

The tears fell and drenched the receding thin plastic cover of the one possession that reminded me of the one person I'd held most dear.

Stop your whining! Stiffen up.

I couldn't drown him out—no booze, needle, or prostitute could.

I hated him: that needling voice.

In the last month he turned into a human being again. He sat with me on the couch; he stood over me when I slept. His big hands would grab my neck, squeezing all the air that I had left to give. At first he reeked of Budweiser, then later Jack Daniels.

Damn it, Son! What are you? Trash?

He flared.

She never loved you. I know you hear me.

Squeezing the book in my hands, I wailed.

"You know nothing," I said. "You never loved me. Mama told me it was your special way. Well damn your special ways! If you loved me, you wouldn't have beaten me!"

At least Mary knew what was right! Mary understood how children were supposed to act.

The sounds of a black belt tanning my face. My arms cracking loud between his taunts. Blood slipping down my lip.

Be like your sister. At least she's useful to me. She's more worth than you'll ever be.

I picked up a lamp on the box. It shook in my fist.

"You're a pig," I said. "You hurt my sister more then you could ever've hurt me!"

I shattered the lamp against the wall. Grabbed whatever I could find, adding to the scratch marks where I'd shattered stuff previously. I collapsed, wailing, calling her name over and over again, the book tight to my chest.

"Cynthia, please, Cynthia!"

I went to her small apartment a week later with a strong dose in my system. A part of me felt that she would still be living there, but I should have known better. The apartment was empty except for a box behind the kitchen counter and loose sheets of bubble wrap and newspaper on the floor. No worn-down bookcases, the ones that used to greet my view from the front door. I remembered the shelves bent under the impressive stacks of mismatched paperbacks.

She'd sit there most evenings. A cup of coffee next to her on the ground, piles of books stretched out around her. Her back arched over them until she would pick up one and begin reading the first page. I knew that having those books in a certain place was the only thing that she felt she could control. I pitied her for it at the time. The small couch where I held her the night she cried vanished. Only four dustless holes on the floor now. What was I doing here? She was gone. I knew then that I'd never see her again, not as I'd hoped.

She isn't here, Son. Just drop it. Go home.

I stepped on a loose newspaper lying in the middle of the floor.

"Would you know where she went?" I asked the paper, picking it up.

The vision of my father stood in front of me. He wore blue jeans and a buttoned-down matching shirt. It was the face I only saw in my dream. But here he was standing in the doorway of the apartment of Cynthia's home. A hardhat sat on his kingly head, a leather belt around his waist.

"You're dead to me." I couldn't meet his eyes. I saw his large hands balled up in his pockets.

How am I if I'm standing in front of you? Tell me, Son. When will you ever learn that what I say is truth?

"It's no truth of mine," I said to him.

I needed to leave the room. It was stupid to hope she'd be here.

Then I heard her voice, faint in the hall: "There's one more box left in the kitchen." She walked in. Saw me. "Collin!" She had a set of keys in her hand. Dark circles around her eyes, and mud in the lines of her palms.

Her voice got very quiet. "What are you doing here?" Her words clumped together. "Wait, you can't be here. You need to leave. NOW!" Low, hollow footsteps in the hallway outside the door.

Leave now, Son. Follow the rules. For once in your life.

"Well, I..."

Really, what could I say to her? There were so many things that I could, but nothing came until the steps came right to the door. Then I said: "I love you, Cynthia. I have ever since I met you in that coffee shop eight months ago."

Levi strode in, arms swaying with his usual swagger. He'd heard everything.

See what you did now. If you'd only listen to me, you'd not be in this mess. His voice taunted me and I closed my eyes and balled up my fists over and over again.

Levi's eyes narrow, filled with anger and resentment.

"Well ain't this a surprise, Collin."

Cynthia looked horrified. We both stayed silent as we made our way to the kitchen where four folding chairs sat leaning in the hole where the fridge once stood. Levi grabbed two and forcefully shook them open as he walked to the middle of the room. My father was right, this was a bad idea. I grabbed the other chair for her and carefully opened it across from the chair that Levi sat in.

Goose bumps traveled up the steel stick of my leg as if it was actual flesh.

"Cynth," Levi said, "would you mind grabbing my phone out of the car. I'd like to catch up with my old army pal here." Levi looked at her, as if he owned her.

He then looked back at me.

She stayed there a while in her place, not moving. She didn't know what was worse: leaving Levi and I alone together or staying. Levi snapped his head back in her direction with a poison-filled glare.

"Now!" he barked.

When she finally pulled herself out of the door, Levi and I sat there for a while, both of us silent.

I began to say, "Look, Levi, I..."

He lunged and socked me in the jaw. Blood slid down my chin; my lip cut from one of his knuckles. Would've been deeper, I thought rubbing my chin, if you wore your wedding ring. Still had a good swing—I could give him that.

"Don't you 'Look, Levi' me!" he said.

"Maybe if you'd been there for her... instead of between the legs of a hooker, say ... I wouldn't have to remind you."

His eyes turned red.

He pulled me by the shirt collar up to his chest level. Slammed me down to the wood floor, kicking my insides in with every blow. With every swing, my father's words crept into my head again.

Get up, Son, and face me. I'll teach you what it is to be one of us.

The echoes of cracking leather hit me hard and I grabbed one of Levi's feet, tripping him and he crashed to the floor. I rolled over, getting up on my legs. Cynthia ran into the room, putting herself in front of me.

"Stop this!" she screamed. Levi slapped her and she fell to the ground.

He reached down to his ankle and released a Beretta M9. Fifteen rounds, he had fifteen rounds. He pointed it in my direction, his hand wavering on the trigger. Fifty to a hundred meters of effective firing range. Eighty-five, I guessed, with his skill. I was going to die here.

"You did this to yourself," he screamed at her. "You did this to yourself!"

A small whirlwind of black hair rushed in front of me. Three shots to the small of her back. She fell forward, crashing to the floor.

I plummeted after her, pleading to God to catch her. A pool of dark liquid ran the floorboard grooves. Twelve rounds now.

I turned to face him. Anger swelled up in side of me; my father's taunts fueling the fire.

That's it Collin, come on. I dare you.

I lunged at him.

A breath released from my throat. I fell backward, near Cynthia. Heard her give small breaths; patchy, wheezy, broken.

Ten rounds.

"Cyn..." I moaned. A rock crushed my chest. A tear ran down her cheek. I tried to breathe and held her hand and squeezed it.

Cynthia

Silvia, my neighbor lady, called the police when she heard the gun shots that night. I'd wished she called them earlier when she saw Levi slap me in the hallway. Collin would still be alive and not laying in a simple wooden box in front of me.

I lay my hand lightly on his chest, wishing that I could feel one last ounce of warmth that I once cherished. The cloth of his suit jacket is stiff. Four people have come to see him other than myself. None of them sheds a tear.

I didn't know what happened to Collin that night at first. I woke up on a gurney as they were rolling me through a hospital emergency ward. After hours of surgery, I sat in post-op dazed and confused. Desperately, I asked nurse after nurse who came into my room what had happened to Collin.

After a couple of hours, I got my answer.

"Do you know if a Collin Pearce was admitted into this hospital? He was also shot. Please, I'm desperate." I pleaded with a nurse.

She slowly walked to me and helped me move the back of my bed to a sitting position. She sat on the edge and held my hand.

"I'm so sorry, miss. They tried to perform surgery but..."

My heart shattered.

"Your friend didn't make it," she said.

I blacked out then. Must have. I was out for four days. I wished that they left a scalpel in my body when they closed me up. I didn't want to keep on living. Not without him.

Levi shot himself, I'm told. He wouldn't drop his gun. I feel no sympathy for him, not anymore. Never will I ever again feel anything for him.

I kiss Collin's cold forehead and lay a letter under his hand. It's my final goodbye. I pull myself away from his coffin and face the church pews. Pause. Close my eyes and a tear falls down my face.

I got to keep going now.

I'm halfway down the aisle before I turn to look at him one last time. A good look, so I can remember each and every detail of his face, his caring hands, one more look at the box.

I walk out of the church and take a deep breath and look to the sky.

It's sunny but cloudy.

THANK GOD, I'M ALIVE AND NOT IN JAIL

BY OLIVIA VANDER PLOEG, WRITING AND RHETORIC

Written with all my love for Grandpa Gordon.

Our time together on this side of eternity was far too short.

I can't wait to hear about more of your shenanigans.

I rub the sleep from my eyes and the stairs creak beneath my socked feet. The sound of my grandparents' voices and the smells of Dunkin' Donuts coffee and Grandma's perfume drift down to me from the kitchen. I am warm in my Broncos hoody and flannel pajama pants. I make my way to the table, which is on the green carpet just outside the kitchen. Grandpa is leaning over, taking the bag out of the trash can, and Grandma is facing the toaster in the back corner of the kitchen. Her silver hair shines in the sunlight streaming through the glass door. She always worries that her hair doesn't look nice, but I have never seen hair like it before. I think it's beautiful. Grandpa doesn't have to duck to avoid the copper pots hanging from the ceiling as he goes to put the trash on the deck outside.

The bench creaks as I sit, and I scan the table for what I want to eat. There are at least six boxes of cereal, a box of muffins, bananas, and apples. I grab a box of Honey Bunches of Oats and pour it into a bowl. The sound of the flakes hitting the bowl lets Grandpa and Grandma know I'm there.

Grandpa turns to me and his spectacled eyes meet mine. "Good morning, Baby," he says. "Do you want some milk with your cereal?"

"Yes, please," I say with a smile.

He shuffles to the fridge and pulls out the gallon of milk. Returns to the table, unscrews the lid, and struggles with the paper tab. His hands shake as he does it. I want to do these things for myself so he doesn't

have to, but I don't want to take away the joy he gets from being able to serve me. He pulls off the tab and pours milk into my bowl.

"Thank you," I say.

As I eat, I gaze around the room. Memories flood my head as I see Grandpa's bugle displayed on the China cabinet. The dresser over there holds cards and the rules to Canasta. The counter in the kitchen is cluttered with desserts and paperware. I turn towards the window and stare at the snowcapped Rocky Mountains.

Six months now since I was last here, my haven.

I wish the twelve-hour drive to Colorado was shorter and I could come here more often. I'd sit for hours, staring out the window at the snowy mountains strung across the horizon like pearls on a necklace.

But my lazy thoughts are interrupted by Grandma asking if I'd like some pancakes or waffles. "I can just zap the pancakes in the microwave or throw the waffles in the toaster," she says. "It's that easy!"

I suppress my laughter at Grandma's enthusiasm for frozen breakfast foods. I don't really want either, but I know that she buys them specifically for my siblings and me, so I feel bad not eating any. "I'll take a waffle," I say.

She walks over to the freezer to get the waffles and Grandpa rests his hands on the chair across from me and asks, "How's school going?"

"Pretty good," I say. "I'm in a new building this year, so that's different, but it's been going well."

"Have you taken trigonometry yet? That was my favorite class in high school."

"I start that next semester."

I see his blue eyes twinkle, and he asks if I've played hooky yet.

I laugh. "No, Grandpa. I haven't played hooky yet." Then I look him in the eye. "Did you ever play hooky?"

"Oh, yeah. We used to skip school to jump the trains. It was a lot

of fun. Have I ever told you about the first time I played hooky with Jerry Stanton and Don Grisly and how Jerry didn't talk to me for a while because of what happened later?"

I set my spoon down. "What happened?"

"That Jerry Stanton was always getting your Grandpa into trouble," Grandma says with a shake of her head. She sets a waffle on a plate on the table in front of me. I look down at it, a little surprised that it's not burned.

"What about Jerry Stanton?" my brother Ben asks as he enters the room and grabs a banana from the table. I slide over on the bench so he can sit next to me.

Grandma sighs, "If you're going to tell the story, Gordon, you should sit down."

Grandpa pulls up the chair he has been gripping, and he begins his tale.

It was October of 1951 and I was living in Iowa Park, Texas, at the time. In those days I spent a lot of time with Jerry Stanton and Don Grisly. We had some times together, a lot of fun times, some dumb times, and some gross times. It was a week before my fifteenth birthday and we were in Black's Drug Store about twenty minutes before I had to work there, sitting on the red stools and sipping cherry cokes.

"So, Gordon," Don said, "What're ya gonna do for your birthday next week?"

I shrugged, "Dunno. I probably ain't gonna do much besides go to school, go to work, go home." I slurped up the last of my coke and set it on the counter.

"Ah, come on Gordon," Jerry said, "Ya can't work on your birthday."

"I hafta," I said, pulling at my too short sleeves, uncomfortably aware of how poor my family was. Jerry and Don didn't understand what it was like to have to get a job

at the age of eleven to be able to eat.

"Mrs. Black," Jerry said as he spun on his stool to look at my boss' wife. She was organizing some shelves nearby. "Can't ya let Gordon have the day off for his birthday?"

Mrs. Black pursed her lips. "I dunno. We might need him that day."

"But it's his birthday," Jerry whined, putting it on thick. "You hafta let him do somethin' fun."

"Well," she said, "I s'pose it wouldn't hurt none to give him one day off. But I'll hafta talk ta Mr. Black."

Jerry grinned. "See," he said, slapping his stool, "ya don't hafta work!"

I stared at the checkered tile as I waited for the redness to leave my face. "So, what're we gonna do?" I asked.

"We could" —Jerry paused a moment as he thought— "We could play hooky!"

"Jerry! We ain't gonna play hooky. We hafta go ta school." I was appalled. Mostly cause I actually liked school and I didn't want to get in trouble for skipping.

"Come on, Gordon" Jerry said. "You're gonna be fifteen. That's old enough ta skip school. All the older boys play hooky. It'll be fun!"

It was useless arguing with Jerry. When he made up his mind, no one could get him to change it. "Fine," I said. "What're we gonna do?"

Don said, "We could jump the trains."

Jerry and I both turned in surprise to Don. Usually it was Jerry who suggested dangerous things like that and Don and I just followed along. But this time it was Don's idea.

Jerry just grinned.

So, we decided to hop on one of the cars pulled by a steam engine

on the Fort Worth to Denver Railroad. Since it was a steam engine we knew it'd have to stop to get some water and we thought it would stop in Electra, which was about twelve miles away. We planned to have some fun in Electra, then hitchhike back to Iowa Park.

On my birthday, we went to the train yard about fifteen minutes before we knew the steam engine would depart. I noticed the refrigerator car right away. It was painted white and had the words: "Anheuser-Busch Beer Car" written in black paint on it. The letter A was painted below this and had wings coming out of it. We climbed into the car next to the refrigerator car and played marbles while we waited. Don won. Then we heard the engine blow, saw the white smoke float past the car, and felt the lurch of the train beginning to move. We stood at the open door of the car with our toes dangerously close to the edge, felt the wind blow through our hair, and watched the landscape fly past and the trees blur. Perfect.

Then we passed Electra.

And we looked at each other, panicked. Jerry just shrugged and yelled above the chug-a-chug-a: "It'll probably stop in Vernon. That's forty more miles out, but we can still probably find a fella ta give us a ride back."

Don and I nodded, hoping Jerry was right.

We knew it'd be at least an hour before we reached Vernon, so we moved farther into the car and sat down with our backs against the cool metal. Don sat on my left and Jerry on my right. "So, Gordon," Don said, "what are ya most excited about doin' in Vernon?"

"I hear they have a real good music store there," I said. "I'm hopin' ta get Louis Armstrong's *Satchmo at Pasadena* with the money my brother gave me for my birthday."

Jerry smiled. "We should go there first. I'm fixin' ta get a surprise for ya."

"What's the surprise?" I said, ribbing him—hoping he'd tell me.

"Well it wouldn't be a surprise if I told ya, Gordon, now would it?"

I shrugged. "Guess not."

Don laughed. "We should also go ta George's Café."

"Yeah!" Jerry said, eyes big. "Their chili's real good."

As the two of them talked about all the great food they'd tasted at George's Café, I pulled out the money my brother had given me and looked down at the three crumpled dollar bills.

I hoped it would be enough to get a record and a meal. I'd never had money to spend. Not on things I actually wanted.

Felt kinda like being a king.

And an outlaw.

Don slapped me on the back and I jumped. "Don't worry, Gordon. It's your birthday, I'll pay for ya." My face turned red, but I smiled and thanked him. We were quiet the rest of the ride as we thought about the fun things we'd do once we got to Vernon. I picked up my bugle that I always carried with me and played "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans" as I thought about the new Louis Armstrong record I was going to get.

The train stopped in Vernon and we got off quickly so no one would see the stupid boys who decided to travel fifty miles from home by train on a school day.

We walked into town and soon came to the music shop. My heart began to beat faster as we grew nearer. I could tell just by looking at the store that it was nicer and had more things than the shop in Henrietta. There was a white sign that read, "Spencer's Music Store" above a dark green-and-white-striped awning. And beneath the awning a huge picture window that showed guitars lining the left wall behind the counter, organs and accordions lining the right wall, and in between, three rows of records. I had never seen such a wide selection of instruments and

records before. Felt like the big city.

We went through the dark green door and were greeted by a tiny bell ring, a musty smell, and and Bing Crosby's "Way Back Home" crooning toward us. The man behind the counter looked up from an accordion he was working on as we walked in. He had graying hair and was wearing a black suit and navy tie. He looked at our dirty khakis and sweaters, pushed up his black rimmed glasses, and said in a nasally voice, "Shouldn't y'all be in school?"

"Nah, we don' have school today," Jerry said.

The man didn't seem to buy it, but he went on: "Don't break anything unless y'all wanna buy it." Then he went back to fixing the accordion.

"Gordon," Jerry whispered, "go look at those records. I'm gonna get yer surprise!"

I watched him, hoping to catch some of the conversation between him and the man behind the counter, but Don pulled me towards the records. "Let's find that Louis Armstrong."

The records were alphabetized, so it didn't take long to find the album. I pulled out the record and read the price on the sleeve: \$2.77. With tax that'd be \$2.85. I'd just enough money to buy it.

I continued browsing the record selection, looking at all the treasures. As I looked, songs floated in and out of my head: The Andrews Sisters' "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," Francis Craig's "Near You," Frankie Laine's "Mule Train," and many more. I wished I had more money so I could buy more of those records, but I was thrilled just be able to afford Satchmo at Pasadena.

After a few minutes Jerry came towards me and handed me a small box. "Happy birthday, Gordon! Already paid for."

I stared down at the box that was only about an inch wide and a little longer than my hand. It was red and had a maroon diamond on the

top with golden letters that spelled, "The Super Chromonica M. Hohner."

My hands shook as I opened the box.

Inside was a silver harmonica with the same words inscribed in the top. The lights from the store reflected off it and made it glow. I stared at it open-mouthed. So much nicer than the old, beat up harmonica I already had.

Finally I whispered, "Thank you, Jerry. It's beautiful."

Jerry grinned, "Go ahead. Try it out. I'm sure it'll sound just as beautiful as it looks when ya play it."

I looked nervously at the store clerk.

"It's okay," Jerry said. "He said you could try it out in the store. Go on!"

I gingerly pulled it out of the box, put the box in my pocket, and took a deep breath. Then I began to play Milhaud's "Suite Anglais," written for Larry Adler, one of the greatest harmonica players at that time.

Don and Jerry stared at me with open mouths as I finished the song. "Wow," Don said. "You're good!"

I smiled as I put the harmonica back in the box and put it in my pocket. "Thanks." I went to the counter and bought my record. Then we left.

After going to George's Café and a bowling alley—paid for by Don and Jerry—we decided we should start trying to hitchhike back. We went to the south end of town and held our thumbs out. At first no one drove past, but by this point it was about 4:30 in the afternoon so we figured it wouldn't be long before people got off work and there'd be more cars.

After about twenty minutes, an old, rundown 1928 Ford Model A Coupe with a rumble seat drove out of town and slowed as it got closer to us. As it came to a stop the window rolled down and a billow of cigarette smoke blinded us. And when it cleared, we saw Mr. Bradford.

Our principal.

We all swallowed, waiting for the long lecture that we were sure was coming, but his face was emotionless as he said, "Y'all get in. I'll drive ya home." We glanced at each other, then hurried to get in. Jerry got in next to Mr. Bradford, then Don, and I sat by the door. It was a tight squeeze, but we were small enough that we fit. It was a long, silent ride. Mr. Bradford gripped the wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. The stress of the whole thing began to twist my stomach and I thought I'd wet my pants, sweat beading on my forehead. The three of us didn't dare say anything, let alone look at each other.

When we got back to Iowa Park, Mr. Bradford dropped us off at the school, then drove away. Didn't say a word. When he was gone, Jerry cheered. "We just got away with playin' hooky and got a ride from the principall!" He gave a whoop.

The stress slowly melted away and I smiled. There was something exhilarating about being rebellious and getting away with it, having an adult know and not say anything. We agreed that we'd to celebrate, so we went home to get some supper, then met up again to walk around town.

We got some cherry cokes and sipped on those as we walked. When I finished my coke, I pulled out my bugle and started playing different tunes. Pretty soon, though, I saw a police car coming towards us. The police officer got out and said, "Son, you're disturbin' the peace with that bugle playin'. I'll give you a warnin', but if I hear ya playin' that noisy contraption again I'll fine ya for it."

My face grew hot and I nodded. I thought we'd continue on our way, but Jerry had to complain to the officer. "Aw, come on. It's just a little music."

"I don' care if it's music. It's disturbin' people. Got a few calls already."

"If that's disturbin' the peace then they don' know good music

when they hear it. We're tryin' to enjoy ourselves in town, so we'll play a bugle if we wanna."

I elbowed him to get him to stop. "Jerry—"

"No, Gordon. You can't just let people walk all over ya. You hafta stan' up for yourself. If ya wanna play your bugle you should get ta play your bugle."

The police officer's face grew red as a tomato and he said. "That's it! If you have no respect for the law, I'll hafta fine ya. The fine for disturbin' the peace is \$7.50."

I glared at Jerry.

This was his fault. All I had in my billfold was the fifteen cents left from the money my brother had given me. Don and Jerry had enough to pay the other seven dollars and thirty-five cents. That crushed our celebration, so we returned home shortly after that.

The next day at school, Don, Jerry, and I were sitting in history when Mr. Bradford came in and whispered something to our teacher, Mrs. Johnson. The three of us looked at each other with wide eyes.

Then Mr. Bradford left, and Mrs. Johnson sent Don out to the hall. I could almost hear that big old paddle whistling through the air and sounding like a shotgun blast as it smacked down on Don's backside.

Don came back in the room, red all over and holding his rear, and Mrs. Johnson told Jerry to go out. He got the same as Don and came back in the same pain. I was sweating waiting for Mrs. Johnson to call my name, but she just turned back to the blackboard, and I heard Mr. Bradford walk back to his office.

Somehow, he'd forgotten I was with Don and Jerry.

Jerry was not happy about this.

When we got out of class, Jerry turned to me. "Why didn' you get whipped?"

"I dunno."

"It's not fair!" His voice grew louder, and I looked around to see who was listening. "You shoulda got punished, just like me an' Don."

"Jerry," Don said, "It's not his fault that Mr. Bradford didn' remember he was there. Don' get at him."

Jerry still spoke to me as if I had been the one talking, not Don. "You musta done somethin' to get out of it. How could he have forgotten you but not us?"

"I dunno. I didn' do anythin'. Honest."

Jerry huffed, turned on his heel, and walked away. Don followed.

I thought Jerry just needed some time to cool off and that he'd start talking to me again after a day or so, but he didn't. I couldn't understand why he was blaming me for not getting punished, but nothing Don or I said could get him to see that I hadn't done anything to get away with playing hooky. I gave up trying after a few days. If Jerry didn't want to talk to me, I wouldn't talk to him.

For the next couple weeks, I spent most of my evenings alone or with my brothers. Don tagged along with Jerry most nights.

Two weeks after we'd played hooky, while Jerry and Don went on their own adventure, I had one of my own. I was still mad about the night I got fined for disturbing the peace—or for Jerry mouthing off. So, I decided to mess with the cops a little. I grabbed my bugle and climbed the water tower in the center of the town. I could see everything from my position over a hundred and fifty feet in the air. I saw a police car on the south side of town, so I went to the north side of the water tower and cut loose on my bugle. Then, I watched as the car sped over to the north side of town.

As soon as it was there I walked over to the south side of the water tower and let out another long blast. The police car sped over to the south side. I did this a few more times. Those guys probably thought I was traveling by jet that night.

I found out later what Jerry and Don were doing while I was watching the police try to chase me. They'd decided they were going to try to steal some pumpkins from the best pumpkin patch in all of Wichita County. So, late that night, they went three miles out of town to this farm and were crawling through the patch when Jerry felt something hard and cold against his nose.

The farmer was sitting there, in the field, with his double-barrel shotgun up against Jerry face. He said, "I'm gonna shoot yer head off, boy."

After a lot of begging and pleading not to be shot, the farmer marched them the three miles back to town and handed them both over to the sheriff. The police were a lot harsher in those days, and they locked Jerry and Don in a cell. When I got home, my brother told me Don had called on the telephone, asking me to come bail them out. The bail was ten dollars. I tried to convince my brothers to help me out, but they didn't have that kind of money. I knew I would get eight dollars from Black's Drug Store the next day, but I would still need two more dollars.

I thought about not bailing them out because I was angry with Jerry, but that wouldn't be fair to Don. Besides, I could never be so angry with Jerry that I'd let him stay in jail. He had his problems, sure, but I still cared about him, and he was still my friend.

All night I thought about how I'd get those two dollars to bail Jerry and Don out. I knew I'd have to pawn something, but what?

As I finally drifted off to sleep, though, I knew what I'd sell.

When I got off work the next day, I went to the little pawn shop on Main Street. A bell rang as I opened the door and a man with white hair and brown eyes stepped out of the back room. "How may I help you?"

"I wanna pawn this," I said as I placed my new Louis Armstrong record on the counter. "It's brand new. I've only listened to it a few times."

The man nodded, pulled the record out of its sleeve, and examined it. "I'll give ya \$2.15 for it," he said. And I took the money over to the station and they let Don and Jerry out.

Jerry still wouldn't speak to me, though. He didn't even look at me as we walked out of the station.

Don turned to me and said, "Thanks, Gordon. How'd ya get the money?"

I looked at the sidewalk and said, "I pawned my Armstrong album."

"You what?" Jerry snapped.

I looked at him and he turned red, realizing he'd broken his two-week silence with me.

"Gordon!" Don said. "You were so excited to get that record! How could you pawn it?"

"Well, I didn' have ten dollars, so it was either that or the harmonica. And I wouldn' pawn Jerry's gift ta me."

Jerry stared wide-eyed at me. "Gordon, I can't believe you did that."

"Maybe I'll get a new record for Christmas," I said, shrugging.

Jerry stared at his feet. "I'm sorry I've been so angry with ya."

I smiled at him. "That's alright. Just glad I could bail ya out."

Years later, when I was on the Iowa Park Police Force, I was going through some old files and I had to chuckle to myself as I found a file labeled: The Great Pumpkin Heist.

~

CAMILLE VISSER

As Grandpa ends his story, he says, "We got into lots of shenanigans and there were more times when Jerry wouldn't talk to me or I wouldn't talk to Jerry, but in the end we were friends for life, along with

Don. Jerry and I even ended up being partners on the force."

"Is he the one," Ben asks, "That wanted to see what would happen if he shot an old barn with his gun and it collapsed?"

Grandpa laughs, "Yeah, that's Jerry."

"Wow," I say. "You were quite the rebel when you were younger."

Grandpa's blue eyes twinkle as he says, "I was, and all I can say is, Thank God I'm alive and not in jail!"

We all laugh, and as the laughter dies down, I ask, "Grandpa, will you play us a song on your harmonica?"

He reaches in his pocket and pulls out his harmonica wrapped in a handkerchief. He begins to play Milhaud's "Suite Anglais," and I close my eyes and hope that moments like this will never end.



MINIATURES

**CAMILLE VISSER,
ART/GRAPHIC DESIGN**

3 A.M. LOVE

BY ALYSON EVERSMAN, BIOLOGY/ECO. SCIENCE

She looked back once, breath growing heavy. She didn't expect to be running straight into a clearing with a cliff. She tried to stop, but it was too late. She was already falling—

~

Alex shot up in her bed when she felt she was falling. She panted, sweaty from the horrendous dream. A frequent dream. She turned to her right to check the time. 3:00 a.m., she read from her alarm clock, squinting without her glasses. She was thinking of going back to sleep but could feel her body trembling.

It was just a dream, she chided herself.

But it had been a reality at one time.

She headed to the kitchen, her refuge when anxiety overtook her. She fumbled for her glasses. Big frames, easy to find. Once they were on her face, she snuck out of bed. She didn't want to disturb her sleeping husband, so the walls were her guide as Alex wandered her way down to the kitchen in the darkness.

She reached it without any difficulties or injuries. She squinted again as she turned on the lights to the kitchen. Once her eyes adjusted, she headed straight for the freezer and her favorite comfort food: Ben and Jerry's Chocolate Therapy.

She always bought a couple pints at a time in case her anxiety kicked in. She was down to her last pint. Her husband didn't know about this late-night snacking, of course. No one did. She'd told him about the dream before but had felt guilty about it, so she couldn't bring herself to tell him anymore.

She opened the lid, grabbed a spoon from the drawer behind her, and dove in. She moaned in happiness, the ice cream cooling her. A handful of her blonde hair got caught in her next bite and she uttered a little curse, imagining how bad her bed-head probably looked right now.

Without too much thought, she threw her hair up into a messy bun and continued eating.

She leaned onto the kitchen's island and took a couple more quick bites. Then hopped onto the island and crossed her legs, and continued to eat. By then, her body had stopped shaking, but now, without her permission, tears silently rolled down her face. Alex tried to ignore them and shoveled in a few more bites of Chocolate Therapy.

She was halfway through the container when she heard some noisy footsteps. She jumped when she noticed her husband appear in the doorway, looking half asleep. He was naked except for the black workout shorts that he wore to bed. His dirty dark hair was pointing everywhere and his soft chocolate-brown eyes squinted as they were adjusting to the kitchen lights.

"Alex?" he began, his voice still sleepy. "What are you doing?"

"I couldn't sleep." She took another bite. Swallowed. "And then I got a chocolate craving." She didn't mention the reoccurring in which she raced off a cliff trying to catch up to her plummeting husband, chased by divorce papers.

He squinted, but not because of the light. He was staring straight at her.

"Have you been crying?" he asked.

To avoid the questions, Alex stuffed another spoonful of ice cream in her mouth, holding back new tears. She swallowed and then looked up at him again, knowing he'd be able to see the tears. She could see the light bulb go off in his head as he connected the dots.

"You had the dream again, didn't you? Oh, darling," he said and walked towards her and hugged her.

As he said the word darling, Alex flashed back to the night she was getting ready for a date with her ex-husband. She had been looking forward to it all week and made sure she was looking her best. She'd styled her best black dress with gold earrings and heels. They'd agreed to meet at a fancy restaurant, but her husband never showed.

She'd called him after an hour to say: *Darling? Where are you? I've been waiting for you at the restaurant for over an hour and I'm going home. So that's where I'll be.*

Alex had ice cream for supper that night and cried herself to sleep. Later, her husband finally arrived home and woke her up yelling.

He'd thrown his clothes on the ground and had slept on the couch that night. All Alex could do was cry herself back to sleep, feeling horrible. But that was then. Different husband, different night, different house.

Same ice cream.

"It'll be alright," her husband said. "It was just a bad dream."

She burst out in tears. Dry, obnoxious sobs that made it hard for her to breathe.

"Why does this keep happening, Gus?" She sobbed into his shoulder. "I don't want it to; it just does."

He remained silent, only rubbing her back to calm her down.

"I just want it all to go away," she said. "But how can I make it go away?"

"I'll think of a way," he said.

Gus hated when she had this dream; it made him feel like he was failing at his job as a husband. Divorcing her is something he'd never even think about, but somehow that was his wife's only nightmare.

And here they stood.

He turned towards the almost-empty ice cream container. "I guess ice cream will be on the grocery list for tomorrow." He smiled.

Alex smiled in return, even giggled a little.

He laid his hand on her cheeks, using his thumbs to wipe away the tears running down her face. "You're so beautiful," he said.

"You think so?" She blushed.

"Are you kidding? I couldn't stop staring at you while you were eating that ice cream a minute ago." He pointed to the almost-empty container. "You're the most beautiful girl I know." He kissed her gently on her head.

He remembered hearing Alex get out of bed, but had thought she was only going to use the restroom, so he'd turned over and fell sleep again. Five minutes later he'd felt for her, but her side of the bed had gone cold. Wondering where she went, he'd staggered out of bed and wandered around the house until he saw the glow of the kitchen light from the stairs.

And that's where he found her, sitting cross-legged on their white

countertop, stuffing ice cream into her mouth. He could tell she'd thrown up her hair into a bun, and her big-rimmed brown glasses made her look tan and healthy, though her eyes were red. The kitchen light spotlighted her and she looked like an angel.

As Gus watched her, another light bulb went off in his head. Maybe he could show her just how deep his love was for her, and maybe that would help. He never blamed her for the dream. She was already scarred once by a divorce—she didn't need his blame.

"What is it?" she asked, tears making her eyes look ten times bigger, and lovelier.

"Let's dance," he said, and left her sitting on the counter as he headed to the other side of the kitchen where their cell phones were charging. "I have the perfect song, too."

"It's three in the morning, Gus."

But by this time he had his phone in his hand and had located the song he was thinking of. He pressed the play button and held out his hand to her as the music started to play.

"May I have this dance?" he asked, innocent.

A smile grew on her face as she recognized what song was playing. It was the first song they'd danced to at their wedding.

He hoped the message would be clear. His wife of six months would never have to worry about him leaving her. If that message reached her, he hoped the dream might stop.

"I wouldn't want to dance with anyone else," she said and set down the now-empty ice cream container and took his hand. A tingle went up her body from their touching hands. She put her forehead on his shoulder as he placed his hands around her waist.

They swayed together, silently, in love.

As the chorus came on, Gus lowered his head to reach her ear and sang softly. He continued as they slow-danced in circles in their kitchen. She could feel the tension leave and the song spoke to her in a different way tonight than it had at their wedding. Alex gave him a gentle, very soft, almost teasing kiss. And they danced.

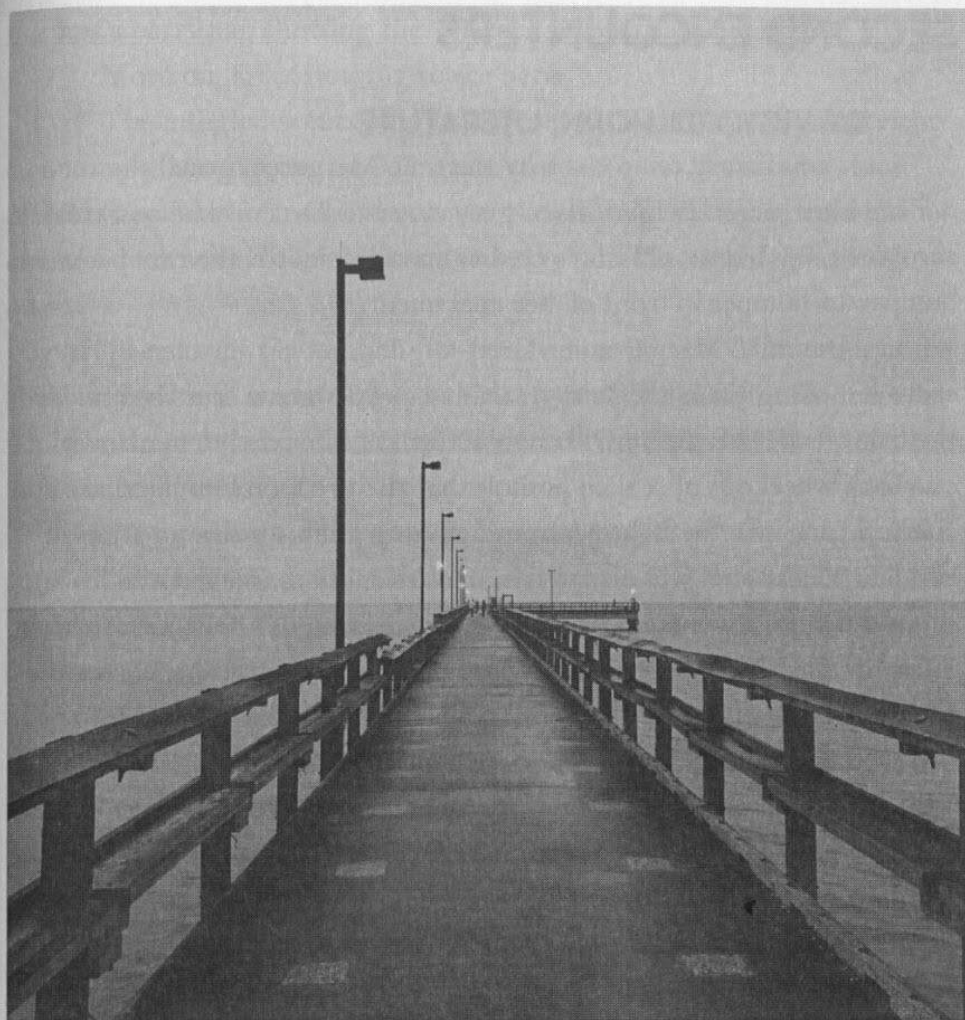
And when the song was nearing its end, Alex hugged Gus and they continued to dance.

"Do you think you'll be able to sleep now?" he asked.

She answered him with a kiss and he smiled and picked her up, noticing the empty ice cream container again.

"I guess we'll have to buy two containers next time," he said.

But Alex knew they wouldn't need any more Chocolate Therapy now.



A LONG WALK

**ABBIE SLATTERY,
WRITING & RHETORIC**

SECOND ENCOUNTERS

BY VICTORIA HORN, LITERATURE

It was nearly ten o'clock by the time Margaret turned the corner onto her street. Behind silver-gray clouds, a December moon rolled across the sky like an old film's credits and illuminated the cars parked bumper-to-bumper in front of her apartment.

"Damn it," Margaret muttered, angling her car into the solitary space left along the curb. Slushy, salt-and-pepper snow crunched under the front fender of the '86 Oldsmobile Cutlass. She tried to maneuver one back wheel out of a slick pothole, but the tire found no purchase and clunked back into the hole. Margaret gave up after her second attempt and left the car as it was—frozen in upward motion, free from solid ground till the snow melted and gave way or she got a tow out of there.

A flash of blonde hair passed by her window and she felt the distinct sensation of beady black eyes watching her, but when she whipped her head to look out the passenger side window, no one was there.

I need a drink, she thought, a chill climbing her neck.

Margaret cut the engine—James Taylor mid-belt—and cracked her door open to remove the emergency police light from the roof of the car. She hid the little square light carefully in the crack between armrest and passenger seat, along with her radio. Without the squeaky blast of hot air against her face, she felt the windshield's chill, a dense wall of cold pressing against her face. She grabbed her bomber coat and her briefcase, shook her hair free from its ponytail, and locked the doors as she climbed out into the brisk air.

I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend, Margaret sang along with James Taylor in her head, walking double-time to the beat, *but I always thought that I'd see you again*. Her tongue formed the words in her mouth but held them there—the blue-black night a silent

her lips a barricade shutting the 70s rock show inside her skull.

Move on, folks, nothing to see here.

The mingled scents of gyros, freshly baked filo pastry, and rich cigar smoke hung in the air. Margaret stopped outside the front door of Mr. Papadakis's Greek Restaurant, the only light coming from the cracked door behind the counter that led to Mr. Papadakis's personal quarters.

The elderly Greek man was perched on the seat of a wrought iron chair wedged into a snow bank, a thick cigar clenched in his front teeth while he draped garish, fat-bulbed Christmas lights around the wide front window of his store.

"Not getting soft in your old age, are you, Pop?" she teased, a nervous edge in her voice. At least she could hear it. She rubbed her fingers together and lifted them to her mouth, breathing on the icy tips. Hoping for casual. The flat smoothness of Pop's cheeks—habitually plump with buttery bass laughter—told her she'd failed.

He puckered the cigar, took a long puff, then drew his lips back to exhale out the corners of his mouth. Margaret felt her skin creep at the way his mouth looked detached from the rest of his face. She wanted to shut her eyes.

"Dn'tcha wrry, Maggie," he said around the cigar. He exhaled a long thread of smoke into the sky. "It's just for the Christian kids. Mrs. Baker wants us to make 'em feel at home in this churchless neighborhood." He winked at Margaret, his brown irises slivers of toasted almond. He picked up a glass of red wine balanced precariously on the windowsill and took a swig.

Margaret licked her lips and tried to remember the last time she'd had a drink.

The lights cast clownish colors across her wrinkled blue shirt. Eerie red glinted off the badge pinned to her jacket. She shifted, self-con

scious though she'd known Pop for years.

"I'm sure the Virgin Mother pushed Jesus out her vagina under Technicolor lights just like these," she said, rolling her eyes. Pop guffawed and Mr. Moskowitz threw open his second-story window and barked, "Would ya can it?"

"Oh, stop your incessant whining," Pop shouted back, replacing the cigar between his lips. "Or I'll blasht shome polka mushic up your ash."

Mr. Moskowitz flipped Pop the two-fingered bird and slammed the window shut.

Pop swiped the cigar from his lips. "Fer a borin' ol' Jew, he raises a lotta hell."

Margaret quirked a smile at him, cheeks rosy cold—picture of Christmas cheer. Too bad neither of them had any.

Across the deserted street, the white-hot marquee in front of the old-fashioned movie theatre flickered and emitted a dull, droning buzz. TH PR NCESS BRID 10 30 PM, it shouted, gap-toothed, its last E nearly wiggled free by the wind. Twenty-odd years ago, little Joni had tugged on Margaret's hand and stretched up on tiptoe to point at Inigo Montoya's mustache on the poster beside the ticket booth.

"Mama," she'd squealed, "will you paint me a mustache like that for Halloween?"

For a second—held captive by the memory—she slipped a fiver to the attendant, watching Joni thrust an invisible sword into the air and shout, "Prepare to die!" in the crowded theatre.

Pop plucked the cigar from his lips, bringing her back. He nodded toward the marquee. "Ya seen that one?"

"Oh, yeah," Margaret said, never taking her eyes from the stark black letters.

Halfway through the film, Joni had climbed into her lap and fallen

asleep—the two of them crunched up like caterpillars cocooned in a springy red auditorium chair. Margaret had woken to white light, Joni still dead asleep, legs curled tight against Margaret's stomach—her little girl's head wedged beneath the armrest, the way it had wedged under her ribs in the womb.

The marquee flicked off, leaving the street flat black, the memory forfeit.

"Maggie girl," Pop tilted his head to catch her eye, "you look like you could do with a drink." He waved her back toward the restaurant counter. "Why don'tcha come in for a glass with me and Mrs. Pop? Come in and warm up."

Margaret shook her head. "Thanks, but I should get home. Feed the cat." She smiled softly at the old man. "I'll stop in sometime tomorrow," she said. "Save me your finest creations, kay? I've got the babies all day." She wrapped a hand around one of Pop's suspenders, his crisp linen shirt soft under the backs of her fingers and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, his skin cool and leathery.

Pop knocked a fatherly chin-up gesture under her chin when she pulled away.

Blue sidewalk salt crunched beneath her regulation boots as she walked the remaining half block to her brownstone. She thought about what her grandkids would look like tomorrow, opening a brown paper bag full of fresh-baked baklava. In her mind, their faces light up. Emmett shoves his hand into the bag and devours one in three bites. May jumps up and down and hugs her legs, one hand sticky with syrup.

Imagining the kids like this, Margaret felt appreciated. For once. In all likelihood they will refuse to even try it. She knows her heart will throb and give way and she'll eat it all herself.

Margaret walked faster and thought about the relief she'd feel if a mugger came up behind her right now. She would Tase the shit out of

him.

Behind her foggy front window, her cat, Jackson Meowne, lazily twitched his whiskers and leapt from his spot on the living room window-sill. When she inserted her key and jiggled the door open, he trotted over to thread his poufy gray tail in and out of her legs. She tossed her jacket and briefcase into the corner, then shoved the door closed and secured the deadbolt. She slid off her boots without bothering to unlace them and scooped Jackson up, balancing him against one hip—baby-style—so she could draw the lacy front curtains closed.

Margaret deposited the tomcat in his favorite burlap armchair and untucked her shirt. She switched on her mother's beaded rose lamp. Brushed a finger along the tasseled edges. The quiet tinkle of glass beads brushing together sent a thrill through her chest.

Chime-like, the beads whispered bright secrets in her ears.

Chimes talking to me, she thought. Definitely time for that drink.

She wandered over to the mahogany liquor cabinet that served as her TV stand. It housed only one bottle. One slim, unassuming, burgundy bottle of the port wine—the kind her father drank on Sunday nights in the backyard with the stars and, later, with Margaret.

She hadn't touched the bottle in twenty years. Not since the day his will declared she could have it.

"I s'pose it's well aged." She blew a piece of curly gray hair out of her eyes and dug out a Japanese sake cup with three painted crosses on its side. "You'll have to do, poor unfortunate soul," she crooned to the cup as she opened the bottle and poured an inch of deep crimson liquid.

Margaret had barely registered the sickly-sweet sensation of chocolate and cherries on her tongue when she heard a voice come from the loveseat on her left:

"Miss Margaret Wainwright, finally turned to drink, have we?"

"For the love of God," Margaret said, "go away."

She pivoted slow to face the young woman she knew she'd find there.

Katherine Clements sat cross-legged on the velvet green couch cushions. She stroked a hand slowly over Jackson, who was curled up, grinning, circled by her legs. She twirled one long braided pigtail with her other hand. And Margaret stared—as she always did—at the woman's blonde hair, somehow dark and light at the same time, sunlight filtered through a jar of thick honey.

"What kind of welcome is that, Maggie?" Katherine asked. When she spoke, looking up at her, Margaret could see the roof of her mouth—gum-less, glinting bone stark-white in the relative darkness of the room. Katherine pressed her lips together and Margaret caught a flash of Katherine's stretched flesh sizzled char.

That was new.

Margaret blinked a few times. Poured herself another shot of port. Downed it. *A two-drink evening*, Margaret thought. *Haven't had one of these in a while.*

"Why do you ask so many questions?" Margaret's voice sounded raspy and strange in her ears. The wine burned in her stomach.

"Why do you ask so many questions?" Katherine shot back.

"Why can't you change out of that stupid sweater?" Margaret said. "I thought nurses were paranoid about cleanliness."

"Not much fashion choice in the afterlife," she said. "Not many laundry machines either." Her sweater, a massive, Christmas monstrosity complete with knitted nativity scene, appeared to be 40% wool, 60% dog hair and little gray flakes like newspaper ashes.

Jackson meowed at Katherine.

"Jackson doesn't seem to mind," Katherine said. "I think he likes his women dead, don't you, kitty?"

Margaret furrowed her brow. It was unusual for Katherine to talk

so much about death. Sure, Katherine made the odd remark now and then about her soul wasting away in the sterile cement basement where Margaret's precinct filed its accidental death reports. Since the department had declared her case closed two months ago, though, Katherine had taken to haunting Margaret's office, murmuring, "No one understands me, no one will ever understand me, why couldn't you understand me? You barely even tried, you gave up on me, you could have done something for me..."

Katherine wove garlands of guilt trips around Margaret's gray head. But she never mentioned any afterlife—not till now. And as far as Margaret could remember, she hadn't yet admitted she was dead.

Margaret looked up at Katherine, at the sweater she wore, and saw—for a split second—the yellow-knitted North Star singed a horrid brown. Margaret looked at Katherine's ugly sweater. "I wouldn't be caught dead in that thing," she said.

Katherine rolled her eyes so hard Margaret caught a glimpse of something crusty and red-black behind her eyelids. Margaret tried not to think too hard about what that might be. "Oh, please, Margaret, you wouldn't be caught dead, period. Full stop."

When Margaret had gone to the department counselor a month ago, he'd told her to throw aside her police instincts. And Margaret had walked out of their first session. "I swear, it's more likely that man wants to turn me into some blubbering New Wave bimbo," she'd shrieked to her captain, "instead of an officer who can look at a dead body without it following her around for the rest of her life."

The captain told Margaret to go home and think about who she would rather be: someone who talks to a counselor or unemployed.

Katherine had spent the rest of that night staring at Margaret. Not speaking, just staring.

Sat across from her at the dinner table while she slurped curry

lentil soup. Stood in front of the television when she turned on the 10 o'clock news. Skulked in the corner of her bedroom and blinked, blinked slowly, as she tried to fall asleep.

Margaret had gone back to the counselor the next day. "Interrogate yourself," he'd said.

Margaret looked at Katherine now.

Katherine pushed up out of the armchair—Jackson jumped down as she rose, flicked his tail at her feet. "If something happened to you," she said, "it would take a good long while for anyone to realize they should even look for you. You know that, right?"

Margaret scoffed. Her mind could really be a bitch sometimes. "How do you figure that?" She wanted to knock back a few more glasses of port—maybe the whole bottle—and pass out.

Katherine flicked through the pages of an encyclopedia of dog breeds and shrugged. "You're too capable for your own good," she said. "You never accept help from anyone, so no one feels like you need them." She lingered on a page about basset hounds. "You push away anyone who really cares about you, so no one will think much of it when they don't see you for a week."

Katherine shrugged and shut the book with a loud thump. "It'll probably be your super who finds you in the end. Or some kid playing in the park. Or maybe one of the shopkeepers. Maybe Pop."

For a moment, Margaret imagined Pop going to toss a bag of leftover *barbouni* and slimy grape leaves into the dumpsters behind her apartment and finding her body there, her own garbage bag still in hand.

Margaret shook her head to erase the image from her mind.

"Want to know how I know?" Katherine snarled. "Because that's what happened to me."

"Wait, what?" The floor shifted under Margaret's feet. She put a hand to her forehead and shut her eyes for a minute. The darkness behind

her eyelids writhed and churned—*papier-mâché* set pieces, delicate layers of black waves moving in opposite directions.

"No one came looking for me, Margaret," Katherine said. "They found me in the fire. But I was ... *I was already ...*"

Margaret popped her eyes open. Katherine was—sadly—still there, but she seemed to be stuck—her face slowly turning red, mouth hanging open, ready to vomit. A dry heave, but nothing came out. Katherine kept closing her mouth, saying, "I was," making the vomit-face, closing her mouth. Again, over and over.

Katherine balled her stark white hands into little fists and stamped her foot on the ground. She made a noise in the back of her throat like the sound Pop made when he'd smoked one too many cigars that day, a low, wheezing growl. "I came here to tell you," she said, "and *now I can't even do that.*"

"You didn't come here to do anything," Margaret snarled. "My shrink keeps asking me what purpose you serve." She knocked back another shot of port. "I keep telling him none. You're just a bitching figment of my imagination."

Margaret's heart pounded hard. She felt the wine at the back of her throat, threatening to burn its way back up.

Katherine didn't look fazed. "I serve a purpose," she said. "I came to make sure you see the truth."

Margaret frowned, her eyelids suddenly heavy. Glassy film creeping over her eyes as she looked at Katherine. "I could see things more clearly if you got the hell out of my head." She could hear herself slurring now. Felt like she was staring through some kid's fusty fish tank, floating in the fluid of her own brain, fish dead in the water.

"Wake up, Detective."

"I'm not... not a detective anymore," she said. "Never should have been." Limbs had gone limp as spaghetti. She had the undeniable urge to lie down. Her eyes flickered shut again.

Something smacked Margaret full in the face.

Her head snapped back—a sickening crunch, like chicken bone forced down a garbage disposal—and red-hot pain flaring through her face. Prickly light particles thrilled through her cheekbones. “Shit!” she hissed, clutching the bridge of her nose.

The encyclopedia lay on the floor beside Margaret. Jackson crouched beside Katherine in a tense near-pounce, staring in the direction of the book’s loud slap against the hardwood. Paws stretched flat, muscles taut, feline pupils mere slits.

Katherine crossed her arms and stared at Margaret in bored expectation. “Can you hurry up already? Just because I’m dead doesn’t mean I’ve got all night.”

Blood poured over Margaret’s lips.

She looked up at Katherine, who cocked an eyebrow. Margaret kept her eyes trained on her and staggered back into the corner of the room.

She didn’t even recognize the sound of her own voice when she groaned: “How did you do that?” Words thick behind the blood in her nose, her breath ragged. “You’re a figment of my imagination. You’re not here.” Her hands shook. She grabbed a scrap of fabric from her sewing table and tried to clear her nose. Dabbed gingerly at her nostrils. A spark of pain ripped through her forehead whenever she brushed the bridge of her nose.

Katherine snapped her fingers in front of Margaret’s face. “I need you to focus, Detective.”

“Not a fricking detective.” She pinched her nose to stop the bleeding. “You broke my nose.”

“Yes, I did, *Detective*,” Katherine said, matter-of-fact. She aimed her fingers as if to flick Margaret’s nose.

Margaret reached up to whack Katherine’s hands out of her face, and their hands connected, and Margaret’s blood smeared the ghost’s hand.

Margaret’s heart thrilled in her throat.

Katherine’s hands were solid. Somewhere in her head sirens were screaming.

This is a hallucination, Margaret told herself. This isn't real, your nose isn't broken. You're dreaming.

"You're gonna want to set that nose before it heals like that," Katherine said, tilting her head and scrutinizing Margaret's nose—her handiwork. "I could probably do it for you."

"You can set my nose?" Margaret said, distracted.

Katherine rolled her eyes. "When we get back."

"Back from *where*?" Margaret asked. She tried to blow a stream of hot air out her nose, but her nose was still gushing and she shot several drops of blood onto Katherine's shoes.

Katherine grabbed Margaret's hands in hers. Margaret barely had time to wonder again at the solid sensation of her hands, the absence of heartbeat, before Katherine jerked her head forward—shoved it straight through Margaret's face.

Margaret felt Katherine's skull clunk against hers, a bullet bursting in her brain. Her thoughts ricocheted into shrapnel under the pressure of their two minds converging. And the world spun out sickly.

The first thing Margaret felt was loneliness. A chomping feeling in her gut like sadness and anger steeped together.

Rain streamed down from a gutter outside a fogged-up window. Red and gold reflected and splashed across the pavement, near-inversion of police lights. Across the street, a row of ducks hung upside down by their feet in a storefront window. Margaret could smell onions sautéing, the pungent sweetness of hot and sour soup cooking next door.

A Chinese lucky cat waved at her in an eternal loop from the coffee table beside her now.

"I just don't know. I don't know if I'm ready for this." Margaret felt the strange sensation of moving her lips, of hearing words come out

that weren't her words.

A deep male voice responded, "How can you not know? After all this time?"

"It's a big commitment, Jeremy. I just want to be sure." Margaret's hands moved together of their own volition, like a claw machine programmed to demonstrate its movements before the player chucked in their money. Margaret felt like a puppet and wondered who was pulling her strings.

That's when she noticed how taut the skin of her hands was, far from the wrinkles and protruding veins she saw every day. And then she felt herself playing with a ring. A gold one on her left ring finger—diamond the size of a small dog's eyeball.

A Chinese lucky cat waved at her in an eternal loop from the coffee table beside her.

"I just don't know. I don't know if I'm ready for this." Margaret felt the strange sensation of moving her lips, of hearing words come out that weren't her words.

A deep male voice responded, "How can you *not know*? After all this time?"

"It's a big commitment, Jeremy. I just want to be sure." Margaret's hands moved together of their own volition, like a claw machine programmed to demonstrate its movements before the player chucked in their money. She felt like a puppet. Wondered who her puppet master was.

That's when Margaret noticed how taut the skin of her hands was, far from the wrinkles and protruding veins she saw every day. And then she felt herself playing with a ring. A gold one on her left ring finger—diamond the size of a small dog's eyeball.

"Katherine," Jeremy said—and Margaret saw Jeremy across from her—"you can't keep doing this." And then it clicked: she was inside Katherine's body.

Inside her body on the day Katherine died.

Margaret noticed Jeremy's curly hobbit hair, so dark it looked wet, one curl hanging loose over his freckled forehead. She recognized that hair. She'd interviewed this guy after Katherine's death was called in. He'd walked into the apartment while they were taping off the kitchen.

She could feel Katherine's wariness of Jeremy in her tensed neck muscles. Could see in their shared consciousness the brooding looks he'd shot Katherine across a crowded café two years ago, the same look he'd shot his Katherine whenever she came home late from the hospital or got a little tipsy or brought her guy friends over for brunch. The same look he was shooting his Katherine now.

Margaret's perp radar went berserk.

"I can't help how I feel," Katherine said in Margaret's voice. "I can't snap my fingers and magically feel *ready* for all this." Margaret watched Katherine's hands twist the diamond ring clockwise on their finger, the cold metal rubbing their knuckle the wrong way. Margaret winced at the strange chemical aftertaste of the tea Katherine gulped from a floral-patterned mug.

"Why not?" Jeremy blurted. "*Why* can't you feel ready for this?"

"I just..." Katherine trailed off. Margaret could feel their body tighten. "Please, give me a *little* more time."

Just leave her alone! Margaret tried to yell, but her own words wouldn't articulate.

"You're never gonna stop changing your mind on me, are you?" Jeremy shook his head. Margaret didn't like the way his eyes looked—flash-frozen fish eyeballs stocked in the Chinese grocery.

"I promise," Katherine said, and Margaret felt panic in their throat. "I'm thinking really hard about this, okay?"

"I know!" Jeremy screamed. "That's the fucking problem!"

Margaret felt tears on Katherine's cheeks. Then something struck

her, and she spasmed inside Katherine, felt Katherine's whole body seize and relax, seize and relax. She tried to gain control of Katherine's muscles—their body—to put her fully functioning brain to use and make it stop—*just make it stop!*

But it was as if she lay frozen in Katherine's soul, shut away in some back freezer where her muscles would never thaw in time to move the meat on this dying girl's bones.

Even as she thrashed in her mind—her mind inside Katherine's skull—trying to suspend Katherine's fatal seizure, Margaret knew she'd never rewrite this ending in an official police report.

All she could do was die with Katherine, this ghost's second death lonelier and more horrifying than the first.

Same old Margaret.

Margaret heard Katherine's voice in her head, the Katherine she knew, with whom she was dying in this memory.

They convinced you to give up. And now that's all you know how to do.

Margaret felt the fear sprinting through Katherine's body. Felt her lungs seizing up.

You're worse than they were.

Katherine's chest heaved, extremities spazzing, breath rattling slower, slower.

Then, nothing.

They never gave me hope.

Margaret wanted out of this breathless body, out of this place, out of this life between.

Just make it right.

Margaret glimpsed Jeremy's delicate hand, curly hair sprouting from his knuckles. He slipped the diamond ring from Katherine's twitching left finger before her vision fuzzed black.

Make me wrong, Katherine said, her voice sounding like Margaret's.

The memory yanked out from under their feet, and Margaret emerged, gasping, alone in her own body again.

~

"Maggie? Sweet Maggie girl?"

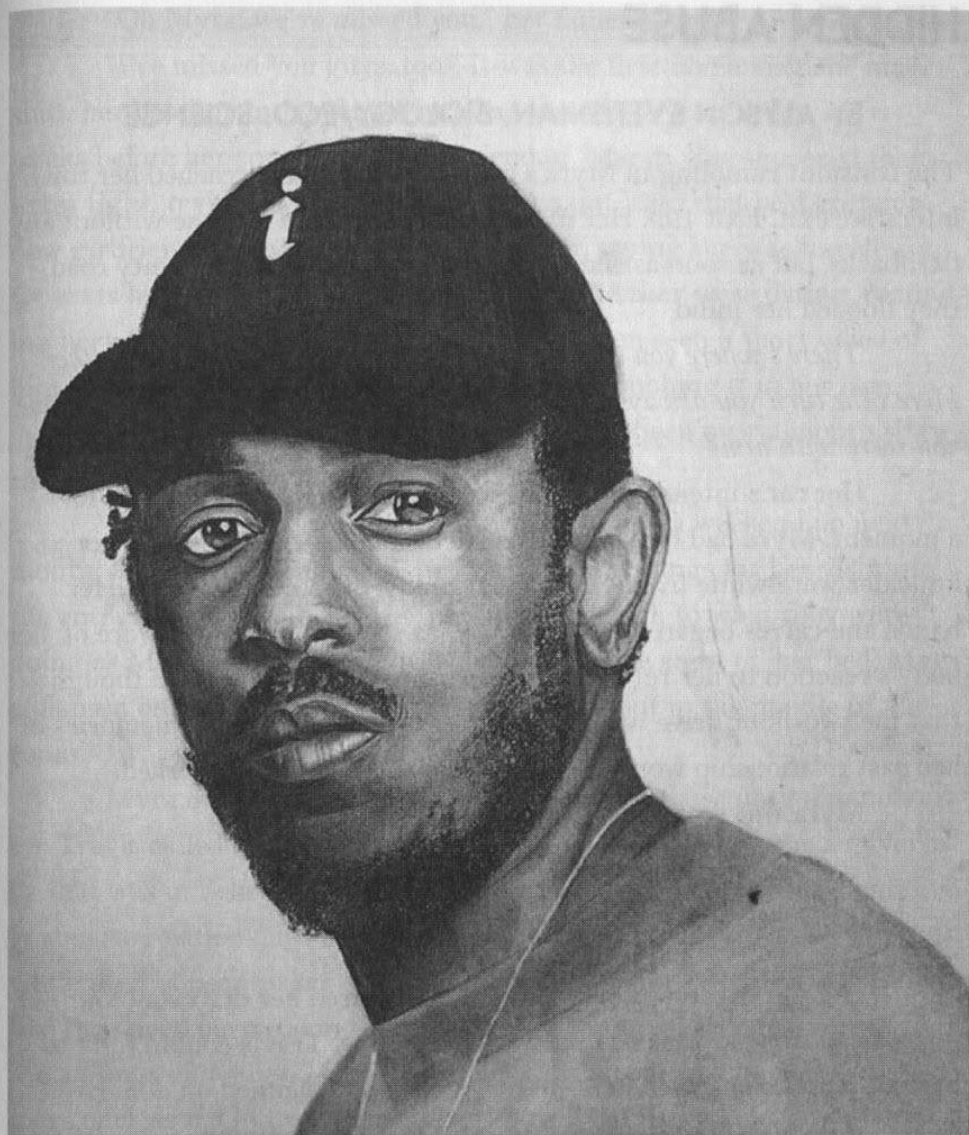
"Pop," Margaret said, opening her eyes. "How'd you get in?"

"Spare key under the mat," he said. "I finished the kids' baklava early. Whatcha doin' on the floor?"

"Long story," she said, trying to get up. "Can I use your cell? I gotta call the captain."

"Sure, but first, your honker is even bigger than mine. Let's go get that set right."

"No, leave it. It's right like this. Just like this."



KENDRICK LAMAR

JAYCEE VANDER BERG,
CRIMINAL JUSTICE

HIDDEN ABUSE

BY ALYSON EVERSMAN, BIOLOGY/ECO. SCIENCE

The constant rumbling in Myra's car decreased as she reached her town's interstate exit. Exit 199. Her main goal was to make it home without any flashbacks, but as soon as she turned right onto a familiar county road, they flooded her mind.

There's where you and Travis went to your first concert together. Here's the turn you always took to get to his house. Remember how in love you were with him?

Her car's intensifying vibrations scared the thoughts away for a moment. Myra had been going seventy in a fifty-five zone, and her knuckles were white from viciously gripping the steering wheel. Her hands and calves began to shake as well as she became more aware of her body's reaction to her returning home from college. Myra had thought that the two-hour drive would distance her enough that the memories of her past relationship would eventually go away. It hadn't worked.

Myra was scared of going home.

~

Her nerves stayed on end until she entered her driveway, four miles away from town; away from where he was. Travis couldn't get to her as long as she stayed here, so that's what she planned on doing.

But she still thought of him, and that was draining.

Myra's parents greeted her with open arms and much needed love. They knew about the breakup but not the extent of the emotional abuse the relationship had caused.

"You're finally home!" her mother exclaimed.

"Oh Myra, we've missed you," her father added.

"I've missed you guys, too." It was the first home visit she made since her breakup in January. Myra had wanted to come home a few weeks before her spring break at the end of March. She squeezed them extra tight, trying to vent her frustrations out. Like that he'd gotten a new girlfriend two weeks after dumping her, saying she was too clingy. Or texts he sent, something he never did while they were dating, reminding her of how fast he moved on. Myra had even seen a short video of him dancing around a room with his new girl, rubbing it in her face.

"You should come home more often. It's been over a month since the last time you were home," said Myra's mom.

"I know, I'm sorry. I'll definitely try to free a weekend up next month, okay?" She dragged in her load of belongings for her visit into the entryway of the house. Her parents went back to what they were doing as Myra took her stuff to her room. At the sight of her bed, Myra collapsed onto it, leaving her luggage spiraled out in the middle of the room.

Myra didn't even notice the effects of the abuse until a month after Travis called it quits; they were just shy of their two-year anniversary that was in February. She had come across some facts about emotionally abusive relationships online, such as the victim feeling shame and guilt while their abuser makes excuses for their behavior or the victim feeling like they need permission to make decisions to go places. *I've felt all of these things and more*, Myra had thought. It all seemed to click with each mere click as if God was letting her know what had happened, prodding her to move on. It was then Myra realized how far away she drew herself from God while being in that toxic relationship because Travis had been everything she ever wanted. But Myra still decided not to tell her parents. She didn't want to re-live any moments by going through it all again.

She remembered the time when she was eating out with her friends when Travis had called her, asking she was doing. After telling him, he grew angry because she wasn't spending time with him. Myra had ended up leaving the restaurant early so she could be with Travis to make him happy. Instead of showing appreciation, he pouted all night about how he never hung out with his friends, making Myra feel ashamed for being with hers when Travis was all alone.

A few months after that happened, Myra and Travis were out bowling with a few of Travis's friends; he'd even invited her. But when he dropped Myra off at her house, it was a completely different story.

"Why do you always have to hang out with my friends and me?"

"What do you mean?" Myra was confused because Travis was always inviting her to come along.

"You're always hanging out with your friends, so can't you let me be with mine? You don't always have to be with me, you know." Myra cried herself to sleep that night, wondering what she was supposed to do.

She hid her crying from her roommate, but here, in her own room, she could cry.

So she did.

After unpacking all her clothes, her parents suggested they go out to eat as a family to celebrate her arrival. A slight nervousness shook her body. *I'll be ok*, she reasoned. *They'll protect me from him.*

They ate at a Mexican restaurant and discussed all the decisions

Myra was making for her next semester's courses, the fall semester of her junior year. She was really enjoying herself, feeling more confident about being in town. Until Myra glanced at a particular corner booth, where a couple was having a date.

Remember your second date with him? You had some chicken nachos while he ate a huge burrito. You couldn't get enough of his dazzling bright smile and how he was such a gentleman towards you. Afterwards you had your first kiss in his car, remember that?

Myra was fed up with the restaurant now, she didn't want to come home just to be reminded of all the good times she had with Travis. She ate her food quickly when it arrived and encouraged her parents to leave the place a little faster than usual. Myra's parents gave her questioning looks but shook it off, remembering that they had to run to the grocery store before returning home.

They said they'd stop at Hy-Vee and Myra's choked.

That's where Travis worked. Or used to.

She felt her legs shake at the store, the automatic doors opening, her face heating up. She fiddled with the fashion ring on her finger. Tried to focus only on her parents as they wandered through the store, looking at the other sales while they grabbed a few bundles of paper towels. Her legs relaxed a little as they went through the majority of the aisles.

No sign of Travis, thank God.

When they turned down the final aisle, though, she saw him. Travis and his mother discussing something on a shelf. Neither of them noticed Myra or her family. Travis' thick blond hair was all messed up, like he'd just woken up or didn't care about his appearance. A look she'd always loved. He was wearing some blue shorts with a maroon t-shirt, the style Myra had never understood but had grown to adore.

Her legs shook so bad she could barely stand. But when she finally looked up again, Travis and his mother were gone.

Myra's parents put microwave popcorn and some candy into the cart,

oblivious to the whole incident. Myra tripped twice as they headed to the checkout lanes, and they made it back to the car without any more incidents—her parents trying to start up new conversations, but Myra just wasn't in the mood to talk.

As they were driving home, Myra's phone vibrated. Thinking it was her cousin, she looked at the text. But then she saw the unidentified number on the screen, one deliberately deleted a few months prior.

Hey, it read. Was that you in Hy-Vee tonight?

Myra thought of deleting it. But she didn't want to hurt his feelings either. Seriously? she thought, after what he did to you?

Yeah, that was me, she typed.

Lol, came a quick reply. *How are you?*

Myra was frightened, but typed back: *I'm good.*

He didn't reply.

~

Myra was having a particularly good day prepping for her upcoming internship with a local environmental district that summer when she received another text from the discarded number: *Hey, I just thought you would want to know that my heart stopped while I was coming home from college a few days ago and my girlfriend had to call for an ambulance. I was airlifted to another hospital and now the doctors are saying that I might need open heart surgery...*

She read it again, tried to put her phone down, but read it a third time. Was she supposed to feel sorry for him? She decided to play the supportive friend card.

Thanks for letting me know! She wondered what to type next. Please keep me updated on what's going on. Her fingers hovered over the keypad. I'll be praying for you and your family.

Thanks.

She wasn't sure how to describe the feeling that came over her as she re-read the text. Her own body seemed to be fighting against itself. Half still secretly in love, the other replaying hurtful memories over and over.

This all kept up for a while and soon Myra's grades dropped and school became harder and harder to focus on.

Sometimes she'd text Travis for an updates, like before and after his surgery, which turned out to be successful. But no word came from him, even after his promise to keep her updated.

Stop crying over this guy, she told herself. Focus on school.

But what if he still loves me, she wondered, and just needs time to tell his girlfriend? I supported him even after he broke up with me, that's got to show something. Myra's body numbed, waiting for a message from him—a simple text.

Finally, after getting no replies, Myra texted her mother to see if she'd heard anything. Her town was small enough that Myra knew her mother would know some new update about Travis.

Haven't you seen his recent Facebook post? Her mother texted back.

No, I deleted him as a friend, remember? Why? What's the post about?

I don't really want you to see it, Myra. You wouldn't like it.

Will you please screenshot the message and then send it to me?

Myra ...

Please, Mom.

Alright.

Hey everyone, Myra read. I wanted to update you all about what's going on with me concerning my surgery. A month ago, my heart stopped working. After reviving me, the doctors decided that I needed open heart surgery because my right coronary artery connecting to my heart was out of place and needed to be fixed immediately. The surgery was successful, but now I need rest for about six months. So, there goes my summer. No fun, no hanging out with friends, no working, and no physical activity. I

would also like to say thank you to my family and especially my girlfriend for supporting me through this difficult time. Also, it's my mom's birthday. Happy birthday Mom!

Myra could hardly hang onto her phone after reading the post. Her eyes blurred. *What about me?* she wanted to scream.

~

Myra eventually wrote Travis a letter, to break any connection left: to be free of him. And sending the letter felt good, and she moved on and tried to save her school year from hitting rock bottom. In fact, it wasn't until she received a phone call from Travis about her letter that she actually remembered sending it.

"Myra," he said when she answered the call.

Myra, thinking it was her future boss calling her, chimed: "Yes, this is she."

"I just read your letter." She recognized the voice then. And then she was mad that he had just read her letter. "I wanted to know if we were still friends," he said. *Did you not read the letter?* Myra wanted to scream.

"I sent you that letter a month ago," she snapped, "and you just read it now?!"

"I was so caught up in my surgery and the recovery that I didn't have time to read it."

Bullshit.

"So," he said, "are we still friends or not?"

"I don't know. Are you going to ignore me? Because if you are, that's not being a friend, Travis."

"I didn't mean to treat you that way," he said.

Oh, look at that, more bullshit.

"Like I said before, I was caught up with my surgery and was angry

about not being able to enjoy summer this year, and I'm sorry that I took that anger out on you."

"Just because you're in that particular situation," Myra said, "does not mean that you have the right to treat me like shit." She heard him sigh in frustration.

"Well, I'm sorry," he said. "I've just been caught up in a lot of stuff right now."

Myra didn't answer. She'd said what she wanted to say, which was a first. She listened to him breathe.

"I gotta go," she said at last, wanting the phone call to be over with.

"Okay, I guess I'll see you around then."

She half slammed her phone on the table. And she didn't feel like doing much the rest of that day. That mood lasted a couple of days after the call. It was then she realized that she needed to do one last thing to help her finally move on, break free of him.

~

The weekend before she started her summer internship in her hometown, Myra decided to venture out to the place where she and Travis met. She figured this would be her final hurrah, so to speak, with her past.

She put on her favorite outfit: ripped maroon skinny jeans, a long, flowing silky gray shirt, a rose gold heart pendant, golden pearl earrings, and her brown pumps, so she's tower over him if he showed up. She only brought three things with her: a large cup of Caribou coffee, a blanket, and her Bible.

The place where they met was a public park, but one with acres of trees and open space for disc golf. She had to travel towards the back

end of it, to a clearing in the trees that showed a postcard picture view of the nearby lake outlined by spring green. Myra looked for the freshest patch of grass and spread her blanket on the ground. She sat down on it crossed-legged and took a giant sip of coffee, clearing her mind.

She began reading passages from Isaiah, asking God to help her forget, to let go. And she started letting go: of that memory of being stood up at the bowling alley. She'd called and texted and played a game a finally went home and cried herself to sleep. She'd woken up to find her phone blown up with messages from him. What she thought were apology texts at first, turned out to be angry messages. Yelling at her for not waiting around for him. The next day, she'd bought him a new pair of shorts so he'd forgive her. He didn't even say thank you.

A little tension lifted from her shoulders. And she read some from Corinthians and the Psalms and then turned her mind to how happy she was when she received the call informing her that she had gotten the job for the internship she wanted. All of her hard work had paid off, and she was proud of herself. Happy. Like when she was with family, laughing about good memories.

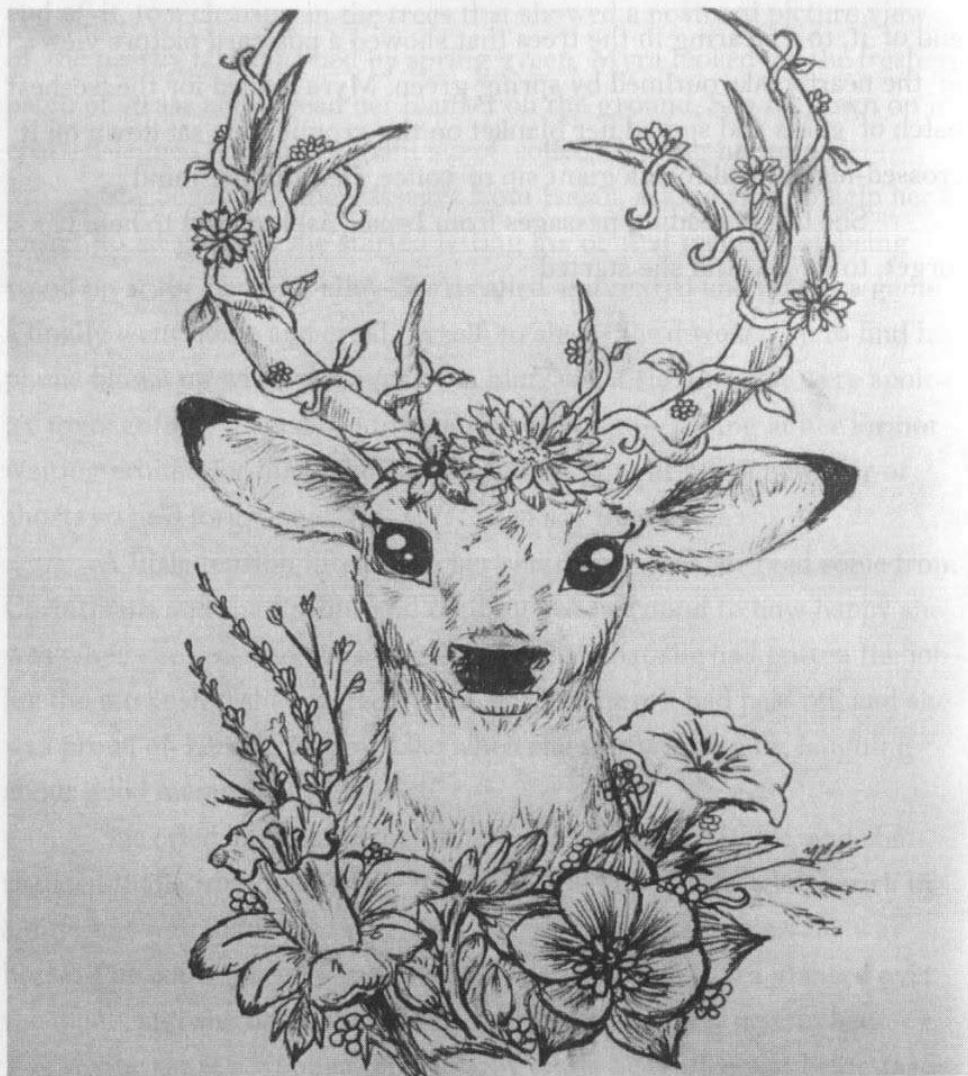
She cried and that helped, and her mind cleared some, and she realized that's what mattered—having a clear mind. She left the park by a different way than she'd entered it, and stopped at a café on the way home. The coffee makers screamed pleasantly as she Myra glanced over the menu, and she barely heard the door open and close behind her.

She sat at a wooden table nearby while her coffee was being made and then took in the appearance of the guy who'd walked in behind her. Taller than Travis; she'd look him in the eyes, even in her high shoes. His hair was dark brown and cut short. He was wearing jeans with a long sleeve shirt and Nike shoes—clothing that matched, she noticed. Myra noticed him stealing looks at her every now and then.

She tried to ignore him, but then he crossed the room to where

end of it, to a clearing in the trees that showed a postcard picture view of the nearby lake outlined by spring green. Myra looked for the freshest patch of grass and spread her blanket on the ground. She sat down on it crossed-legged and took a giant sip of coffee, clearing her mind.

She began reading passages from Isaiah, asking God to help her forget, to let go. And she started



OH DEER

MICHELLE SIMPSON,
TRANSLATION/INTERP

NON-FICTION

FIRST PLACE

JUDGE'S NOTES:

The influence of writing – that most introverted of public performances – is so often delayed. How can any of us know when or even if the words we channel will touch down for landing? How can we know if our words will ever reach their ideal audience? “Not Heroes or Heroines” grapples with this barrier between life and writing. It affectingly reminds us that even books considered by many to be great, are only great because they meet us

NOT HEROES OR HEROINES

BY VICTORIA HORN, LITERATURE

To the 2014 Black V gang: the only other V on earth with which I'd want to share an initial.

"Of all of us, Dally was the one I liked least. He didn't have Soda's understanding or dash, or Two-Bit's humor, or even Darry's superman qualities. But I realized that these three appealed to me because they were like the heroes in the novels I read. Dally was real. I liked my books and clouds and sunsets. Dally was so real he scared me."—S.E. Hinton, "The Outsiders"

Sometimes, on Saturday nights when I'm groping through the darkness, following the glowing golden lights taped along the floor of the movie theater, memorizing the way my every step feels like I'm about to topple right into my sister silhouetted against reality's blinding fluorescent lights, Ponyboy Curtis shows up. Something about the way my eyes are still half-glued shut from sobbing so hard (every theater in America has a pool of my prime DNA on one of its seats), and something about the ripping sensation of stepping outside that black box of dreams... Something about that unwilling expulsion outlaws me, exiles me, brands me "*Public Enemy No. 1*" to both reality and dream. If reality is for the mundane and dream is for the holy other, I am falling through the crack, forever falling into company with Neruda's "certain dark things [...] to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul." But somewhere in that hazy purple space between, Ponyboy is grabbing my hand and whispering, louder, louder, "When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness of the movie house, I had only two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home..."

I was in eighth grade when I met Ponyboy Curtis. I can't recall much about the very first day we were introduced, but I do remember everything about the room where we met, down to the last Steno pad and the woman who kept Ponyboy and the greasers tucked in her back pocket, always on hand when some poor kid who carved dirty words into

desks all day and hadn't washed his hair in a week mouthed off about the pointlessness of reading some stupid dystopian novel about an old man giving memories to a boy. This woman could sing the praises of Lois Lowry all day without that hood in the back lifting his head once, but she knew exactly what she was doing when she tossed a copy of *The Outsiders* onto each of our desks.

My most vivid memories of Mrs. Michele, the ones flashing white-hot like marquees against the murky gray of junior high school days, all happened in the month or so we spent reading *The Outsiders*. Writing the word 'nonchalant' in a notebook in the middle of The History and Theory of Rhetoric, I'm suspended like a fish, my mouth smacking open and closed, by the memory of neatly writing 'nonchalant' in blue colored pencil on the right-hand column of my *Outsiders* vocab page, the pressure of the pencil against my cramped fingers working to form the gargantuan writer's bump I'd brandish proudly in college lit classes seven years later.

I cock an eyebrow at some off-hand chauvinistic comment in some gen-ed class, and I drop through an invisible trapdoor to the day Mrs. Michele asked if anyone could cock an eyebrow like Two-Bit Mathews and I had to sit there turning beet red while everyone craned their necks to get a good look at the strength of my *frontalis* muscles. I'm staring at the back of some strapping young Dutch boy's head in chapel, and a wormhole opens right up into Mrs. Michele tousling her blonde locks to demonstrate what Pony means when he says Darry's got a cowlick.

To the outside observer, this little independent film of unrelated snapshots seems utterly worthless, like the thick plastic librarians put over book covers to (unsuccessfully) deter children from picking at them. But if I could shove a light projector through the center of my chest, the kind Mrs. Michele used to draw plot diagrams in green erasable marker on shiny transparent paper, those memories would start glowing rosy gold behind that observer's eyes. Ponyboy and Robert Frost were wrong about one thing: there is one gold that can stay, and that's it.

To this day, I'm not sure what it was about that slim little book about Socs and greasers and rumbles that grabbed me by the throat and reduced me to a trembling ball of sobs that rivaled Johnnycake's the time the Socs jumped him real good. There was little that I—a naïve sprout, wallflower with gangly arms and an inferiority complex—could really relate to in terms of plot: Johnny and Ponyboy, the two youngest greasers in their gang, murder a powerful Soc out of self-defense, run away to an abandoned church which promptly in set on fire, a fire from which Ponyboy and Johnny save some schoolchildren, but Johnny pulls a Jesus and sacrifices himself, and wild, rebellious Dally kills himself out of grief for Johnnycake, the only person he really loved, and Ponyboy is left to sort through the brokenness by writing a novel about it.

What exactly about a novel like that, full of death and passion and grief, could I, a white, middle-class, small town girl with a rep for being a goody two-shoes, relate to?

The only death I'd seen in my fourteen years of life was Grandpa Don, and I hadn't even had the heart to look at his made-up body.

And yet, whenever I think back on that time in my life, golden and then gone in a flash, all I can remember is this feeling—this lavender-tinged feeling of me, too, of the whole world being pried open before me and the people in it rushing in from utter darkness into a blinding spotlight where hands grabbed mine and touched my shoulder blades and caressed my hair and wiped my cheeks, glistening; glistening with tears that kept coming, revelations that Ponyboy and Johnnycake and Sherri "Cherry" Valance were taken from the very ribs of living, breathing people...

Seven years after my first encounter with the Curtis boys and their gang, I'm sitting next to a frosty window in the popular campus dining hall, shivering beneath a drafty air vent and sharing a leisurely

lunch with a friend. The sun is streaming in, illuminating the look of wonder in her big doe eyes as she tells me *To Kill a Mockingbird* is her favorite book and picks her way slowly, reverently through the part where Atticus kills the rabid dog in front of Jem.

Her eyebrows are lifted ever so slightly in the center, the words come faster, and I watch the enlightenment fall across her fluttering eyelids as she tells me she loves Atticus Finch for his justice and virtuousness and humility—his godliness.

I can see in my mind so clearly a picture of her reading the book for the very first time, curled up under an afghan in bed, her eyes glistening one minute with glee at Scout and Dill's antics and another with overwhelming empathy as Atticus listens to Jem tell Scout about their mother. Watching her face in our present moment, I am overcome with the swelling need to sob, a feeling I fight to suppress, not wanting to frighten her.

It's that feeling again.

That holy *me, too*.

While I'm struggling to hold my poker face (badly), she asks me something about whether I am a crier when it comes to books or not, and I almost laugh right in her face. I happily drop the aloof (another *Outsiders* vocab word—thanks, Mrs. Michele) mask I'd been hiding my tears behind and launch into a semi-sarcastic history of my emotional relationship with books. (Thankfully, she isn't the sort of person to go dialing the mental institute asking for a straightjacket when I mention the many occasions on which books have made me cry so hard I couldn't see. She's the sort of person, the sort of reader—the sort of friend—who would get inside the straightjacket with me).

I have never been one for reading anything by halves.

There's this quote I love by the writer Rosemarie Urquico, a writer whom I'd never heard of until the day I stumbled across this gem of a line about her so-termed "girl who reads": "When you find her up at 2 a.m. clutching a book to her chest and weeping, make her a cup of tea and

hold her. You may lose her for a couple of hours but she will always come back to you. She'll talk as if the characters in the book are real, because for a while, they always are." It might sound crazy, but the simple idea of making a warm beverage and embracing someone sobbing over a book reduced me to a puddle the first time I heard it (and every other time after that).

But I know there are people out there who understand that reaction—they're the same people who understand why Scout's little "Hey, Boo" feels like a knife to my aorta every time I think about it, why I bawl like a baby every time Cherry and Ponyboy talk about watching sunsets, why I wanted to punch down brick walls when Daisy stayed with Tom Buchanan, why I could only cling to the staircase rungs and cry when Jo published *Little Women* and Professor Bhaer said reading it was like opening a window into her soul. To those people, my people, it is far from crazy to be overcome by someone pouring you a steaming cup of cocoa and rubbing your back as you gush in hiccupping sobs about how Matthew was born to be Anne Shirley's father because he bought her a twenty-pound bag of brown sugar and a dress with puffed sleeves. Those people live with me in that murky space between reality and dream—they understand that it's a rare being who has enough compassion in their bones to spend on comforting your grief at losing a fictional character as you turn the last page.

It is in this collision between me and my fictional friends and these flesh-and-bone figments of reality—this meeting-in-the-middle shaded a soft blue-gray as delicate as swirls of creamy milk in dark tea—that I feel the inadequacy of words. I feel the weight of my lifelong love affair with books and language and big, beautiful, fictional people—and the comparative lightness of my own life's stark white pages suddenly lifts me up out of my comfortable hobbit hole of dreams into non-fiction.

I've had a few of those moments in my life—moments where the fuzzy, home-video-style fantasy of fiction spins out from under my feet and my eyes adjust like binoculars to the demure grandeur of my own existence—but it is a rare experience that comes close to matching the prickling sweetness of a particular time in the fall of my sophomore year of college. This was the experience that sent me packing across the state of Iowa and back to my Illinois roots, jibed me throughout a year of panic attacks and held my hand through my first year of therapy—then carried me back across Iowan farmlands that had changed as much as I had. The dead, dry brush hurrying past my car window promised something barren below, but I could read the earth again, knew the green shoots were preparing their return and felt this memory that had been my own blessed rain preparing to burst up like rich red chrysanthemums from its roots in harder days. This moment had whispered a need for change in its present airing, and it whispers triumph now in playback, a fulfillment of prophecy.

It was a crisp autumn evening in October, one of those hazy dusks where the last few Maple leaves rustle with the promise of a fat, round moon, and the air stirs with the earthy smelling magic. Fallen twigs snapped under my shiny black combat boots as I hurried—*heel-toe, heel-toe, heel-toe*—across the campus green toward the theater. My hands trembled in tandem with the dry grasses fluttering in the wind. I rubbed my middle finger down the center of my palm, picturing, as I always did when my hands started to sweat, Carly Patterson (my idol at nine years old) rubbing her palms with chalk before her beam routine at the 2004 Olympics. I would rather have been in Carly's leotard than my rose-patterned, already-sweat-stained dress—I would take that kind of international stage fright over the excruciating nerves I was enduring at the prospect of meeting the ten people waiting for me at the end of this walk.

I was going to have fro-yo with the Northwestern improv team.

From the very beginning of my freshman year, I had been the Black V's biggest fan and most dedicated groupie—if instead of “groupie” meaning the stereotypical screaming fan throwing themselves at any member who breathed in their direction, “groupie” actually meant an introvert contentedly sitting amid the crowd at every single show and having uncontrollable giggle fits, but continually peeing her pants whenever a member walked by her on campus and made eye-contact. And yet, there I was: a victim of my own passion for an art I could never perform, voluntarily going to get fro-yo with the coolest cats I had ever met in my life. Damn my love for drawing—I'd been the one to enter their t-shirt contest, win it, spend another six months perfecting the design with the team's input, and then discover my reward for such enjoyable, low-risk work was spending an evening with the people I'd vowed never to speak to, on pain of mortification. But I couldn't very well say no.

The night started out as expected—me getting lost trying to find the group's practice space, nearly photo-bombing a promo picture of the group members being taken for our school newspaper, and immediately dropping the ball when one of the guys tried to joke around with me. Then there was the incredibly terrifying moment, on our trek down to the fro-yo place with the unpronounceable Dutch name, when everyone busted out into a group rap, complete with space for expected free styling, each member filling in the blanks—during which I feigned temporary deafness and prayed harder than ever before that Harry's invisibility cloak would fall from the sky around me.

If anyone had asked me about the first thing that happened when we finally arrived and sat down to eat together, I would have karate-chopped them to the moon before I ever spoke such awkwardness back into existence. And yet, this is the night I keep rolled up in my shirt-sleeve, where Ponyboy kept his pack of cigarettes.

The night changed with one woman's intake of breath—shifting

imperceptibly to any lookers-on, but jerking out from under my buckling knees—transformed from somber *film noir* to Joseph's coat of many colors. I never have to dig very far into my chest to find that moment, when Leah Wielenga (the woman everyone wanted to be—Beyoncé included) leaned her elbows against her knees, caught my shifting eyes with her exuberant browns, and asked me the one question I can never resist: "So, what do you want to do with your writing major?" Then, excitedly after my answer, "What kind of books do you want to write?" And all the while, as she leaned forward to listen to my half-sheepish, wholly-flattered reply, I felt the world whirl past the picture I'd looked at through my slide projector for twenty years and—*click*—land firmly on reality, tinged gold like the leaves outside the frosty window, like the leaves in Robert Frost's poem, like the leaves Johnny told Pony to be for the rest of his life.

Suddenly, I realized I was someone they wanted to know, someone they might have thought was too cool to approach, someone they might have felt nervous to meet for fear of screwing it up. But it was something else, too, something I'd not been able to articulate until the moment it changed: I was not supposed to be like the characters in the fiction books I loved—they were supposed to be like me. And the people around me, that group of comics and hooligans and dreamers—they were not heroes or heroines either, were not the people in the dusty old storybooks I had pored over as a child. They—we—were so much more.

We were real.

For the first time in my life, I was seeing in 20/20.

On our way back to the theater—its bright clock tower proclaiming life's onward dash, seemingly impossible after such a revelation—it started to rain. But we didn't move faster. We stopped outside—just stopped completely, stood there in the rain. Moments of idle chatter passed, and then, as I decided they probably wanted to get on with their practice and started to leave—they called my name.

Come back...

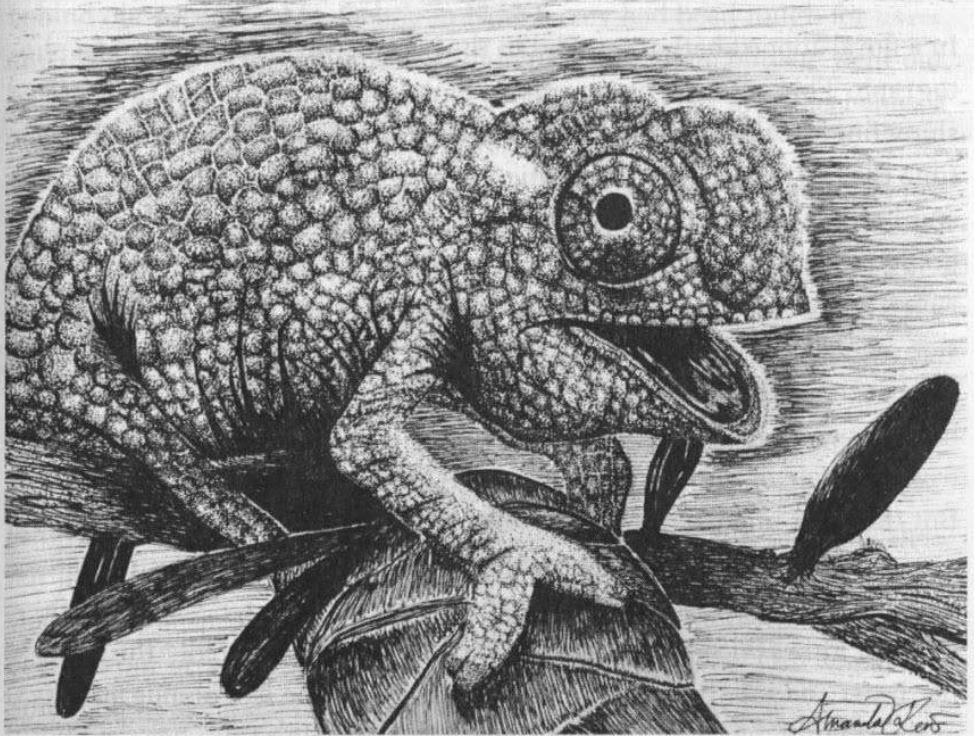
I turned around and there was Lincoln—our infamous environmentalist weirdo, the true Lincoln in the minds of us at Northwestern (screw the one in the top hat), the Lincoln I still picture first, two years later, when I hear the name—stretching wide his arms, beckoning me to embrace him, opening toward me, yes, the shape of the cross. I felt the fluttering tickle of a single raindrop against my cheek pounded rosy-red with heartbeat, and then I was swallowed whole. I wrapped my arms tight around his waist, pressed my face against his chest the way I did with my brother, felt the brush of his soft curls against my ear and his palms resting gentle on my spine—and then, the rain disappeared, overtaken by the blanket of arms forming a sun that engulfed Lincoln and me. The eleven of us stood there, wrapped around one another, holding onto the night before the rain could wash it away.

Looking back, that was my *Outsiders* moment—the moment when the Sherri “Cherry” Valence to my Ponyboy pressed complicated truth into my ignorant brain and my knees buckled to the painful beauty of reality.

But it was something more, too, something simple—it was mine.

I strolled home slowly that night, my face tilted up, kissing a deep blue sky. Somewhere, softly, faintly, Gene Kelly was singin’ in the rain, but

I was the girl he was aiming to be.



CHAMELEON

AMANDA RENS
PSYCHOLOGY

JUST BEHIND THE CURTAIN

BY VICTORIA HORN, LITERATURE

In a floral-topped hatbox, stuffed in the back of my closet, there is a photograph. This is an old photograph, colors muted with layers of dust and shiny fingerprints whose fixed swirls merely enlarge proportionally each time the box is opened. This particular photo was taken when my twin and I still looked scarily alike, when we still shared in the yearly pain of going to Mrs. Decker's house and clenching our toes around salon chair rungs while she and Mollie yanked identical French braids against either side of our heads. Just that day, we'd endured such treasured torture, and all that remains of our patented waves in the photo are wisps of baby hair that escaped during nervous itches and costume changes and gallops from one side of the stage to another.

But the most important thing in this photograph stands between us.

She is wearing a black velvet variation of the fancy outfit she wore most years on this day, and her skin, even below ten years' worth of dust, glows with the promise of blood pumping devotedly through her heart and into her cheeks. This was the year she had blonde streaks at the front of her dark Brunette hair, wisps escaping from her ponytail to match ours. The smile on her face—so wide and open I can see her tongue, can almost hear her giggling—is Jesus transfigured, her eyes crinkling and beaming from the sun deep inside her chest. The look in her eyes holds me captive, her cheek press firmly against my head, then and now blurring into muddled purple. And yet I can't seem to look away from the way her arms engulf our frames completely, the way her hands scoop us under the armpits and pull us close to her, the way her fingers spread wide over our tiny ribcages. I feel her there now, always feel her there, tugging me gently by the ribcage toward her.

Jen. Her name whispered reverently.

When I was five years old and still sleeping behind walls of floral

sheets in my grandparents' basement while my parents looked for a house, my mother went out on the hunt for the perfect dance teacher. Sav and I were professional kitchen dancers even at that age, so leaving behind our eccentric Ms. Delma in New Jersey had been tough for us—and even more so for my mother. I didn't know it then, but she went out to every dance studio in our area on a quest to find her precious babies a new home in which to dance, a new reason to keep dancing.

She found that reason in a dinky little studio on Main Street, just a few years off the ground, yet filled to the ballet bar's end with students—each one enamored of the bright young woman bursting with compassion and patience and devotion to the body and the art it could make.

My mother spent one afternoon observing Jen teach the class of kindergarteners we'd be joining, and by the end of that one hour, she knew we—her codependent, cripplingly-introverted “dolly babies”—belonged with Jen. Not only does my mother still talk about how safe she felt leaving us in Jen's care, but she often tells me of the strange feeling she got when she first met her. Like this woman would be the one to draw us out of our tiny, two-person shell and into a world of wonder. Some might say that was magic, but really that was just Jen.

Magic had nothing to do with it.

I don't have a set first memory of Jen, don't even have a clear sense of my first few years with her. I close my eyes on gray-blue evenings when the whole world feels like an ancient wooden trunk and my heart presses reverently against her ethereal hand on my ribcage, and all my memories flood together in a sea of chiffon and sequins and velvet. The good fills my bones with nostalgia lighter than the yellow bone marrow enabling my arms to round in a perfect en haut. The bad presses the balls of my feet into the earth, holds me fast and grounded.

The first thing I see is a hat—a black, sequined, mini top hat with black feathers, and a matching leopard-print dress. I'm popping my hip to the beat, if a bit timidly, as Aretha Franklin preaches R-E-S-P-E-C-T

into my impressionable ears. I tumble down a rabbit hole of feather boas where the words, "don't go Hollywood on us," reverberate against the memory of Jen beckoning to six-year-old me—me, out of all the others—to come shimmying forward and mouth, "Somebody stop me!" Another year floats by in swirling green and gold Irish costumes, and my father's eyes crinkle deeply at the corners, as they still do whenever he talks about Sav and I jumping and clapping in fringed and polka-dotted pastels to The Archies' "Sugar, Sugar." Hot golden sunshine spills onto wooden floors where Jen stretches us out of ourselves and into human paintbrushes poised to make the first mark. *Up, out, and over*, she'd say as we reached for the soles of our feet. I see Jen in her black leotards and flowing chiffon skirts gliding across that same black stage on which we performed for thirteen years, the bright white spotlight following her every leap and *chaines* turn, echoing the default trajectory of my own vision all those thirteen years. My heart registers the blooming life shooting out from Jen's eyes at the start of each new dance year, those days she twirled us toward new songs and new routines and new dancers we might become.

I plant her roses in the black soil of my stomach.

My mind *chassés* through stretches of time glowing bittersweet purple-blue, like the sky pressing against the studio window, cracked just so to let a tender autumn breeze caress our sweaty legs stretched out on the bar during technique class. But soon the pinpricks of starry nostalgia give way to tumbling heaps of shadows that strip away the flat 2D image of a storybook dance career and round it into something mortally tender, flesh and blood. I fall through heavy velvet curtains and land in a world, not of dreams, but of despair and desire and delicate humanity.

Here, the sky pushes green-black against the studio window, breaks in, snatches me out of the air mid-leap and wraps sickeningly around my ankles. There are endless days of this torment, days when my ankles throb and swell under packages of frozen peas and cauliflower, days when the skin around my ankles splotches like red and white water-

colors, days when I'm so sick of the constant heartbeat in my feet that my mind winds in circles around the temptation of an ankle amputation.

And then there are the blue-black nights when I slugged through my personal Hellmouth at school and the thought of *pliés* made me want to throw up, nights when I was so sick of being around people that dancing with them felt like a desecration, nights when Daddy's Oldsmobile churned to a defiant stop two blocks from our house and I could impound the stupid thing, Pink Floyd cassette and all. But the most pervasive ache in this landscape is not the pain of swollen ankles or the anxiety of calculus homework waiting at home or the frustration of an extra two-block walk before sleep. No, times were nothing compared to the times the world fuzzed to film noir and the only thing I saw in those wall-to-wall studio mirrors was a girl who loved to dance and a world that hated her body, a body too flabby and soft and pliable to ever make anyone feel what she felt when she danced.

Sickeningly sweet schoolgirl voices ring around a rosy in my head, poisoning the petals of my hard-bought self-esteem with whispers that Jen had relegated Sav and I to the group of infantile dancers too weak to handle advanced choreography. In my head, I spat their words out, told them Jen would never segregate her dancers into so vile a hierarchy, and even if we were with the "weaker" dancers, maybe Jen just wanted Sav and I to lead and encourage the younger girls to become strong and confident. Like us.

But I didn't even listen to me.

Jen never knew about any of that. If she had, I think we'd all have known it. From the woman who left no foot un-pointed and tolerated no half-assed attempts to remember the steps, some might have expected the sky to break loose from its chains and fall down like barbed wire if she caught even a hint of such rumors. But Jen was not a thunderstorm—she was a hot, humid night in July. Put all your love into your body, and all the art you could make with it—put all that under her guiding hand, and she would wrap herself around you in devotion so overwhelming you'd

feel it on the moon. But kick your perfect legs in the faces of other dancers and pirouette them out of love for the equalizing art of dance, and you'd better get ready for the dark, oppressive weight of her angry disappointment. July had nothing on Jen when it came to the way her sadness clung to my every cell.

I still remember the night I realized none of it mattered, because it was the first and last night I ever danced like none of it mattered—not the girls who kicked themselves in the face trying to degrade others, not the hateful cells swelling up in my ankles, not even the girl staring back at me in the mirror. Because when you dance like none of it matters, everything does.

That is the night I go back to every time I whisper her name. Jen. It's dark and quiet. Even the stage lights settle into a soft simmer. I stand, utterly still, in a silence so plump and profound my heart lifts, cherry picked, into my trachea. I feel Sav's purple-pink sadness press against my palms, and my tears linger somewhere behind me, not so far off, merely held back by this sacred silence. Then, the deep reverberations of plucked guitar chords, and a voice like milk and honey singing, "Oh, my, I didn't know what it means to believe," and my soul stretches through my limbs as I step forward, toe-heel, for the last time. I'm swaying, we're all swaying, our palms transfigured into velvety roses drifting in the wind. My hips carve infinity, my shoulders round back, my chin tilts up, up as the voice croons, "But if I hold on tight, is it true? Would you take care of all that I do? Oh, Lord, I'm getting ready to believe." Kneeling, palms spreading wide with invisible nails, music fading, Sav's trembling hand brushes mine.

It is finished.

And Jen is there, just behind the curtain, her eyes watering me through all of it.

THE SECRET TRAILS OF CEDAR FALLS

BY EMILY WIKNER, SPANISH

For the first seven years of my life, I grew up amongst pastoral beauty on the outskirts of Denver, Iowa. To the north lay a bending, waving, golden (if summer green could be a golden shade) field of corn. Highway 60 to the west, with only a weeded ditch and my bedroom window separating me from the cars traveling into town. A neighbor's house sat on the south side of our property, and to the east my real treasures: a swing set, a play house, and a patch of wildflowers behind our garage. Those acres were not big enough to contain my imagination, though, and with my little sister by my side, I'd run around the big grassy fields—a princess in the heart of Iowa.

My beloved kingdom crumbled when my parents decided to join the travelers of Highway 60 and move to Cedar Falls. They bought a house far too big for five people, next door to my grandparents. They traded cornfields for asphalt and a big open sky for towering trees. Later, they told my siblings and I that they moved our family into town so we'd have "more opportunities" at church and in school.

All I felt was that I'd been completely uprooted.

Cedar Falls seemed even more foreign to me as I struggled to make friends. For a girl who grew up in The Middle of Nowhere, Iowa—population 1,627—Cedar Falls seemed looming, towering, menacing, like it was a cobra about to devour my mousy spirit. I hated it. I hid in dark corners to avoid being crushed by the active city, and my heart pined away for my kingdom of big open fields where I could run free once more.

My dislike toward Cedar Falls did not begin to fade until I was fifteen, when I began running. At first, my short routes only took me through my closest neighborhoods. I mentally prevented myself from running anything further than a 5k, as if venturing out farther would

result in the city devouring me. Then, inspired by my father training for marathons and half marathons, I discovered something wild and beautiful: the trail systems of Cedar Falls.

Spread between the Cedar River and Big Woods Lake and the Western Old Peoples' Home, the trail system covers hundreds of miles around the town. The long tunnel of tall trees and wooden bridges nestled between the bustle of Main Street and the dull roaring of Highway 58 became a new home for me. In some ways, the trails were more familiar and more comforting than the walls of my own bedroom. They were regular, patterned. And I quickly learned that junior high was little more than a mile from the tall, tan tower of Cedar Falls Utilities and the dog park was about a mile in the other direction. I knew the little hill on the path, muddy patches filled with sand from when the creek flooded, and the tall grass and chain-link fence that separated my world from the hustle of the five o'clock 500 commuters. As I got more serious with long distance running, long runs became my favorite workout because long runs meant being on the trails, and being on the trails meant coming home.

Running through those meandering trails became an outlet I used to deal with all forms of stress in my life. I ran to prove my inner strength to myself. I ran for a time to deal with complicated emotions. With angry feet pounding and a stubborn heart resisting, I learned how to pray and surrender myself on the concrete surface of the trails. Whenever something went wrong in my life, I could go to them and they'd embrace me, engulf me, encourage me to move forward in my life. With every step I took, they filled me with a little more wonder and pushed me a little farther. Those trails, the interconnecting network of pavement through the heart of a preserved deciduous forest, gave me a place to put down new roots.

I did not discover the secret trails of Cedar Falls until my eighteenth birthday. I always knew in the back of my head that my beloved running paths had a twin: a creek that flowed and gurgled beside

e it; however, the barricade of verdant summer leaves or rich autumnal golds prevented my curiosity from fully merging itself with that waterway. Like many young teenagers before me, and I suppose many that will follow in the eroded footprints of my Chacos, I'd taken small hikes through Dry Run Creek on a sweltering summer's day, but I never really asked myself, "Where does this creek flow?"

Naturally, with a runner's sense of local geography, I knew the answer: Any small stream in Cedar Falls has to, at some point, wind its way into the Mighty Cedar River. But anyone can know that. It's a different thing to know the drop-offs of the creek, to know where the creek bed is sandy and where it's rocky, to know when a secret highway tunnel will lead you to a dazzling grotto.

It's a different thing to know a creek the way you know a friend.

After a birthday expedition of the section of the creek surrounding the dog park, my heart was set. This trail, though formed of water and not pavement, was part of my new home, and for that reason, I had an obligation to explore it.

A friend and I quickly formed the Cedar Falls Creek Stomping Club and made ourselves the present-day explorers of the secret trails of Cedar Falls. We resolved to hike the entire creek, one lovely segment at a time, from Paw Park to Pfeiffer Park, where the creek and river merge and marry.

Our bodies covered in warm sunscreen, we enjoyed the refreshing current of the creek gently swishing around our ankles as we walked between two tall bulwarks of foliage and tried not to trip on the uneven creek bed. As we talked about life and enjoyed the forested beauty, I wondered how I could have lived eleven years of my life in Cedar Falls and never explored these waters before. Clearly, I never fully experienced the magic, the wonder of this trail even though I had traversed beside it for over three years.

On one of our expeditions, we went under Highway 58 through a secret tunnel which funneled into a gorgeous grotto before traveling

downstream again. The beauty of that grotto took me aback so suddenly that I walked straight off the ledge and plunged into water four feet deep. I swore, having dragged my backpack into the water with me, and laughed at my own general clumsiness as I regained my footing.

Then I paused.

The golden rays of the past-noon sun burst through the gaps of the bright green leaves and sparkled on the water.

I had not discovered a grotto. I had discovered the heart of Cedar Falls, and it dazzled me.

As my friend and I continued our downstream trek, I realized that the menacing town I hated in my childhood was actually enchanting. I had discovered a place where I had royal blood once more, and I set my heart loose, running freely.

THE LIFE I DIDN'T LIVE

BY LUCAS SANDER, WRITING AND RHETORIC

The first horror a soldier experiences is the moment the bus pulls up to training camp and the drill sergeant emerges from the building, already screaming what all the recruits are doing wrong. There are many other horrific firsts in a combat career, but that voice that yanks a new recruit out of the civilian life they've always known into the weight of the 24/7 protection of a nation, is the first of the firsts.

As I sat listening to a choral concert, a night dedicated in memory of those who have served and in respect to those who still do, I thought about how different are the lives that those servicemen lead. Sometimes it seems like the only difference between us is a uniform and a weapon, but a soldier is a very different person than the civilian they used to be.

And I hate sounding pretentious, but I should know.

The three months I spent in U.S. Air Force Basic Military Training was the hardest and yet the one of the most formative times of my life. I won't pretend to know the actual horror of war, whether it's fighting in trenches in Europe, ducking bullets and slapping mosquitoes in Vietnam, or desperately trying to spot Improvised Explosive Devices on patrols in Iraq; I didn't completely finish Basic before I was sent home. But as a young man raised in a decent home, where my childhood growth and learning came through encouragement and rewards or reasonable punishment, nothing was more utterly shocking than the first 24 hours of my military existence.

The almost constant barrage of yelling—telling us how incompetent we were, how stupid we were, and what a sorry day it was when America had trainees like us defending it—was like being dropped into a tub of ice water, hauled out, and then dropped back in again every time I or anyone around me made a mistake. And what do you do? You shiver in front of the men who control every minute of the next seven weeks of

your life.

The memory of the morning of my first day still sends shudders through me as I recall how I stood at attention, shaking uncontrollably at the foot of my bed from shock, fright, and what felt like the most degrading verbal assaults I'd ever experienced.

In the time since I separated, I've been able to appreciate the bond that must inevitably form after years of combat with the same unit, as well as the closeness that exists without thought between two people in the same army, even if they've never met before in their lives. When we hear our national anthem, when we honor veterans in parades, and when we pray for our armed forces overseas at the dinner table, we do our best to picture the horrors of war and the difficult lives away from home that they must lead. We don't usually think to be sorry for them after they come back home, back to the same lives they had before but as markedly different people.

Modern studies have been done on the effect that going through military life can have on someone's personality, and the results can be drastic when compared to other factors in life. These men and women have come to rely not only on their instincts, but also their squadmates and command chain for their survival, and this difference in priorities and dependency changes the way a soldier lives life. The immediacy in that bond is something that cannot be replicated. I've never lived a harder life than during my weeks in full-time training, but there are days when I'd give up what I have now to go back to living with those bunkmates I learned to survive with. But why? Because of the unique understanding we had of one another.

It's not that we didn't have problems with this kind of dependence. It is only human to point a finger when something goes wrong, and this happened repeatedly in our first weeks of training. We quickly learned, or at least the smartest of us did, that it was much easier to focus on the solution rather than pass the blame, since everyone suffered as a result anyway. Our Dorm Chief, Trainee Dillan, was the one who

recognized this and made sure that we worked on making our beds perfectly and scrubbing the shower walls spotless instead of arguing over who was supposed to fill in on toilet duty when pasty-pale, scrappy Heisey was gone. It didn't seem like a big issue then, but ironing that out and making sure we all ended up on the same page had an impact on how we performed in training exercises.

The more we realized we'd get stuff done in the dorm, the more we worked together as a unit, and that's more important than anything else in any military situation. Our instructors would never be completely satisfied with anything less than perfection, but when we got a somewhat reluctant word of approval, we felt pride, as we felt when we managed to outperform other groups by working as a team. A single word of approval could make us damn proud ourselves, and we'd work all the harder to live up to it.

No matter how irritated we might get, at the end of the day our flight (our group) depended on each other and did our best to work with each other to achieve success. It becomes a natural habit for a soldier to work with their team, and certain things become unsaid constants. When that team is broken up, when a soldier comes home and has a different set of people to deal with, it's a much different kind of stress than in the combat zone, one that is exactly the opposite of what that soldier's been trained for.

We soon found out that it wasn't all happy-fun-times as best buds, though. The fifth week of Basic was BEAST week, which was an acronym that pretty much told us we would be thrown into the Texas desert to pretend that we were deployed in the Middle East. It was the hottest time of the year – in Texas – and we were thrown into a zone, designated "Vigilant," with three other flights: all of us told to survive on MREs, go through patrol training, and most of all, work with the other flights to perfect drills involving air raids, armed and unarmed intruders, and chemical attacks.

In spite of how well we'd learned the importance of teams work

ing together, there were more than a few instances when our trainee leaders pointed out which team had let them down and what the other flight needed to do better. Naturally, this created tension among our zone, and we all suffered because of it. It took time, but by the end of the week, we'd found ways to work out differences and come together, all except one leader who refused to wake up in the middle of the night and take his turn at guard duty. Nobody was appreciative of the argument that this caused at two in the morning, waking up half the tent, and not even his own team would side with him after he signed someone else up for the shift and went back to sleep.

We don't always get a choice of what team we get to be a part of or who we're going to work with. Sometimes it just takes time to get used to working together to be able to form a cohesive effort. The luxury of time is never-present in the military, though, and the military's approach is that you have to work together now and find ways to like it later. This resulted in us working our hardest and giving our team effort from the start. While it wasn't my favorite aspect of being part of a team, it was more helpful to talk neutrally with someone as insufferably inattentive as skinny, awkward Trainee Lynn about how to clean the drinking fountain than to do it *my* way, come back to him doing it over again *his* way, and argue about who was being more efficient.

As I look at the things I did in Basic, my level of productivity, and compare it to the procrastinating, trivial attitude I've often taken towards work at home or school, the one thing I don't miss, and yet need desperately, is motivation. In Basic Training, the words "attention to detail" are ones to live by, and our training instructors made sure we understood that whether it was a missed speck on a mirror or an unswitched firing selector on an M16, any unnoticed detail could eventually end up literally being the death of someone. It wasn't hard to see the importance there, and even without the prospect of being the cause of a fatality, we knew that any lapse would result in an extreme bout of shame in front of the instructor and the entire flight. So a lack of motivation isn't often a prob-

lem in the military.

Motivation, though, is something I often find lacking now. In everything. Unless there is a deadline looming. Rather than see that my lack of action, work, or learning could have a fatal result for someone, it's hard to see anything except a struggle between free time and work. I have to keep hold of the idea that my persistence, drive, and enthusiasm to work for improvement now could have powerful results in my life and in the lives of many others down the road. The only problem is that those results are much harder to see if I don't strive for them now.

I know that the grace of God led me to where I am today, that I wasn't meant to finish Basic Training, but I still wonder where my fellow trainees are right now. Is Knudsvig finished with his Special Ops training yet? Is Strange on the fast track to Staff Sergeant? What is that miserable, belligerent Hoffman up to? Why do I still care about guys who I roomed with for a few weeks and will never see again? In one of our last weeks of training, we passed around a memo pad and all wrote our phone numbers down on it so that we could keep in touch afterward.

But two days later, I failed my fitness test and was relocated to remedial training with other PT failures and trainees who had been injured in training. I only saw two members from Flight 533 after that.

When I first came into the new dorm in the MedHold (Medical Holdover) squadron, I was scared, disappointed, and doing my best not to cry as I saw the last six weeks of hell go down the drain. Knudsvig, one of our element leaders and very possibly the most mature and smartest of us all—definitely the most fit—was there to pass me on to the new squadron. As we were waiting outside of the building for the sergeant in charge of processing to bring us in, Knudsvig saw what a hard time I was having and started talking about what the future could hold. He told me that I'd pass my test the next chance I got and be back in no time, and even if I didn't, there would be plenty of opportunities to finish BMT and graduate.

After I calmed down a bit, I started telling him about how encour

aging our Colonel had been when I met with him about my failure, how he had been kinder than the other officers and told me that this wasn't the end of the world, and how I thought that no matter what else happened, I wanted to do that for somebody someday.

Knudsvig looked at me for a minute and told me that I should definitely consider becoming a commissioned officer someday. I thanked him for the thought, and ever since then, I haven't been able to get out of my head the absurdity of recommending that someone who was in remedial training be an officer in the future. The power of someone believing in me that much—no matter how much I knew it was mostly pity—has driven me since to never give up on myself, even when I did give up on Basic Training.

The first of my former flightmates that I saw after I left regular training was Tsou. I remember watching him leave regular training with an injured ankle—he'd done something stupid, but I don't remember what—and had imagined how pissed he must be. He was stocky, one of the fittest guys in our dorm, and even if he wasn't always personable, he was good at just about everything and could be hilarious when he wanted to be. When I brought my stuff up to my new dorm, I was surprised to see him standing by the locker next to mine. He was surprised to see me, and after I told him why I was there, he was both sympathetic and surprisingly encouraging. I had always seen him as one of the fitter, more influential guys in our flight, which I most definitely was not. I didn't really expect him to talk much to me at all, but he wanted to know how the rest of the guys were doing in the week since he'd left, and rather than being angry at being held back in training, he was optimistic about his chances to heal up and graduate soon, even if he was bummed that he wouldn't be with the men with whom we'd been through the past two months of grueling workouts, drills, and dorm life.

Life with my MedHold flight was very different than what we called line flight, or regular training, and there were distinctly separate rules and lessons to learn. There was less real training and more down-

time, for one, and fewer dorm chores and more errands to run. There was more opportunity for slightly more casual interactions, and I got to know Trainee Kesner from the dorm across the hall rather well during workouts and kitchen duty. There were even times when we'd enjoy ourselves, if we were careful, but we learned to be cautious in walking that line after getting in trouble a few times.

A couple of weeks after I came to MedHold, after my original flight was graduated and off to other technical training bases around the country, I was with a wingman making a supply run to the BX, our base's equivalent of Wal-Mart. I ran into Trainee Lau inside, who had the same high-tier job designation as me and slept a couple of beds down in my old flight, and I asked him why he was still here. He told about the extra weeks of training he had to do before he was shipped off to the language school that we both would've attended, and I saw a weird glimpse of the person I might be less than a week away from being. It scared me a little bit, and I wasn't sure why.

It was hard to keep my sanity in MedHold; it's a much more depressing place than line flight because there are trainees coming and going almost every day for various reasons, and I had to watch trainees who had finally gotten better return to training, and those who failed or were "broken" permanently get sent home. For the first two weeks that I spent there, I tried not to pay too much attention to those others because I knew I was going to get back on track, even if I graduated late, and join the greatest Air Force in the world. As the weeks went on and I barely made any progress, I adjusted the schedule in my head, and thoughts of home inevitably began drifting through my mind.

It had been over two months since I had seen a face from home, and as I thought about that fact, I realized that I didn't want to spend the next six years like that, going home once a year if I happened to be in the country. The more I thought about wanting to go home, the more I prayed about it. The more I prayed about it, the more I felt that I wasn't meant to spend six years of my life following orders of other men with-

prayed about it. The more I prayed about it, the more I felt that I wasn't meant to spend six years of my life following orders of other men without question. The more I felt that, the more I wondered what everybody back home would think of me, what my parents who had been so proud of me would *do* with me now—and what would I think of myself for the rest of my life? I know now that God has called me to something very different than serving in our military, and I'm OK with that. There is a part of me, though, that wonders what everyone thinks when I tell them that I went through Basic Training and decided that God had different plans for my life.

As it turns out, I did fail.

On my fifth and final chance to pass the test and continue training, I still couldn't come close to the required number of sit-ups. I had already decided that I wanted to go home, but I couldn't bring myself to just give up; I had to at least try to pass the test. I didn't need to worry; no matter how much effort I put into our daily workouts, I had barely ever reached half of the target number of sit-ups. After that final assessment, I sat around for another week and a half while my paperwork was processed. When the call came for me to pack my bags and catch the bus to the airport, I froze for a second, looking at the fellow trainees and the dorm around me.

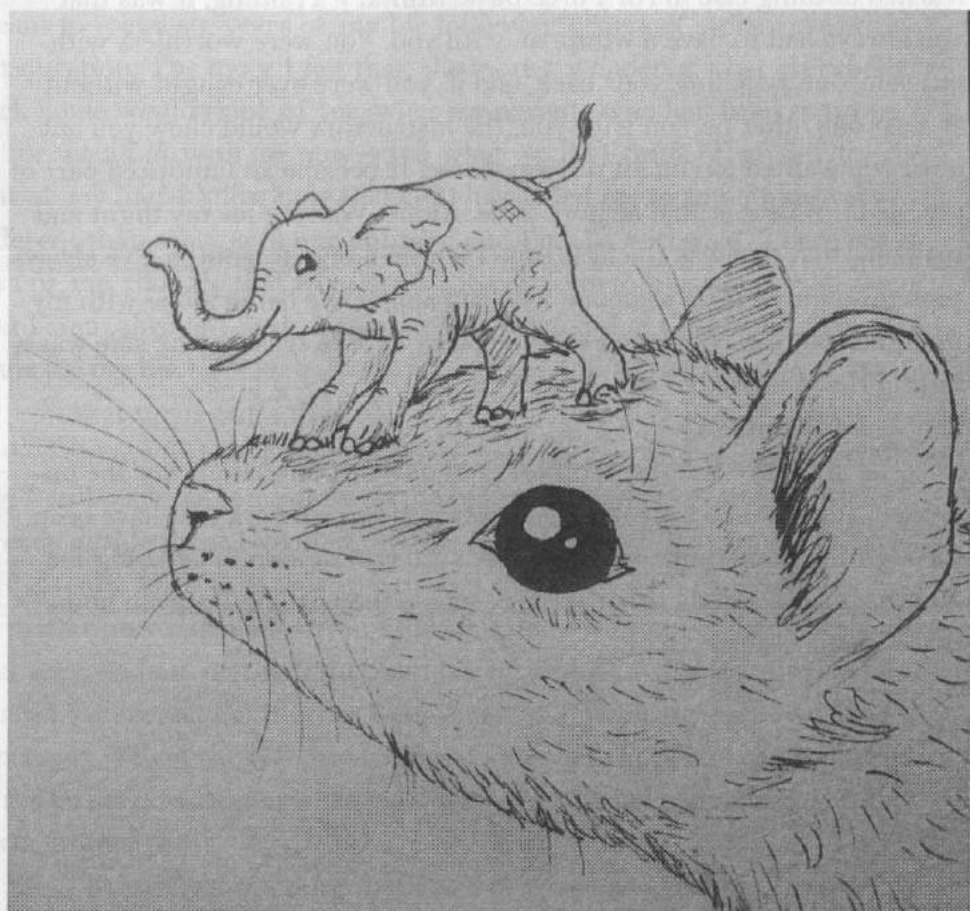
The parts of training that I had despised and the parts that I appreciated blurred together in a dreary thought when I compared it to the picture of home, of hugging my family and surprising my friends when I got back. The rest of the day was a rush of excitement as I packed with the others who got to go home in the same group as me. As we processed, left, and went to our separate flights, I sat waiting for mine, the last to leave. It was strange to be back at the airport that I had so excitedly flown into three months earlier. It was strange not to have a sergeant looming over my shoulder or waiting somewhere within earshot to call me out on any mistake I made.

But most of all, it was strange to be without a wingman. If we

learned nothing else in Air Force Basic Military Training, it was that you always had to have a wingman with you. You were worthless without someone watching your back, and if you were ever caught without at least one other person with you, the instructors would chew you out until you wanted to run all the way home. It became an unnoticed part of my life until I sat at that airport table. Alone. Waiting for my flight and realizing that this was the first time I'd been alone in months. I've always thought of myself as someone who can appreciate being alone with my thoughts, but always having someone that I could trust by my side was a feeling that I missed.

I still miss it.

I still have friends, brothers, and now a roommate... but the unspoken, automatic trust that exists between two soldiers that have been through the same thing, whether that's a terrorist assault or living for months on end among other strange men a thousand miles from home—that's irreplaceable.



GIANT MOUSE

**MICHELLE SIMPSON
TRANSLATION/INTERP.**