



# Elements

# 2017

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## Af Sanni

### “Orange Jumpsuit”

When the spring lifts,  
the white lilies grow beautifully.  
I'd be watching at the window,  
as the rain poured past the glass.

The white lilies grow beautifully  
after the coldness of winter has passed.  
As the rain poured past the glass,  
I would count the days until I returned home.

After the coldness of winter passed,  
I was ready to get back to my family.  
I would count the days until I returned home,  
until there were no more days left.

*I was ready to get back to my family,*  
yet here I am still writing.  
Until there were no more days left,  
I'd write one day after another.

Yet here I am still writing,  
drowning sorrows in black ink.  
I'd write one day after another,  
until the white lilies grew beautifully again.

Drowning sorrows in black ink  
when the spring lifts.  
Until the white lilies grew beautifully again,  
I'd be watching at the window.

## **Af Sanni**

“Changes”

Do you remember  
a time when we were combustible?  
When we danced on Charles street  
as moisture dripped from your red hair.

Do you remember  
when the sky exploded?  
Purples and oranges stirring above  
as we laid under the parting clouds.

Maybe I remember  
all of it a bit differently.  
Nostalgia about brown eyes and sunsets  
cloud how I remember everything.

## Af Sanni

### “Waiting In England”

I'm standing at the clock tower, waiting for the rain.  
Remembering how Lisa said she'd be here by dark,  
even though it's past 8 'o clock by now.  
So I'm stuck in a country that I don't even know,  
with some change and the box I got for her.  
*Maybe she just needed some space?*

Or maybe I need the space.  
Walking down the street, my feet splashing in the rain.  
I wonder what she's up to. Does she know I'm thinking of her?  
Shaking my head, I continue to move forward in the dark.  
Feeling lost amongst these people I don't know,  
I decide to stop in a bar and relax for now.

Time quickly passes as I look into the glass now,  
the brown liquid glowing like the stars do in space.  
*Maybe we were just too young, you know?*  
I finish the glass and look out at the rain,  
thinking about walking back to our hotel in the dark.  
And how missing a date is just like her.

*Do I really want to spend forever with her?*  
My thoughts are cut off by the woman next to me now,  
her legs long and slender, brown eyes smoldering and dark.  
After following her out of the crowded space,  
I find myself under the cover of the rain,  
making new memories with a woman I did not know.

I wake up to something that I do know,  
which is the sunlight beaming on me and her.  
That means I've been gone longer than the rain,  
and I should get back to my hotel now.  
So I close the door to her vacant space,  
and walk through streets that feel so empty and dark.

When I get back, the room is dark  
and Lisa is still, like all the beautiful sculptures that I know.  
Not wanting to invade her space,  
I sit in the chair across from her.  
The box uncomfortably jutting out my pocket now,  
my clothes still wet from the rain.

Somewhere in the dark, I forgot about her  
and made mistakes I know not to make now.  
But as I sit in this space, I find myself still waiting on the rain.

**Arielle Henry**

“The Lonely Wall”

There was an art in the way he charcoaled my eye. And picked me apart,  
Rock hard sums of gold, flying off after every clink.  
Creating massive sparks as they hit the ground  
Cracking and chipping

Away.

An art it was.

I simply couldn't resist the cold pointed metal digging into my skin.  
Ugh, it feels so good to be used again.

**Laurence L. Leff**

“Ode To a Rowing Machine”

written December 2016

One morning, I arrived nice and early at the Spencer Campus Recreation Center. The Concept Rowing machine near the stair case that I usually use was occupied so I walked to one of the two at the back of the center. It was still dark. As I was doing my thirty minutes, through the East-facing window, I saw the sun come up.

My father loved to sit at his breakfast table in the kitchen and watch the Sun come up in the East. Five years ago, I bicycled from Nashville to Charlotte, North Carolina. Being disciplined, I was up and on my bike just before dawn and rode into the sun rise. I told him that, thus, on that bike ride, I thought of him and vowed that whenever I took a major bicycle ride, I would plan it to ride from West to East.

So here I am, riding nowhere, but riding into the sunrise, thinking about him--who passed two months ago.

And the electronic doohickey on top of the machine told me I averaged eighty-seven watts over my session.

## Maria Chiaradonna

“Nothing”

I knew, I knew,  
I truly did know,  
I saw You  
Old friend, daring my very  
Word, You taunted me and laughed at me  
Mocking me while you poked and prodded at the core  
The snake in the Garden knew when to stop,  
Yet two is one and you are two  
Scales that hide lives, and eyes that mask your many lives  
I was the Man, I was a Crusader  
Or the lion in the derisive, confining pen, But dear old Friend  
An ode to the great fight, harr harr, swords to the slaughter!  
Pride torn and cut open, vessels to flesh, crimson river oh how you've come!  
Lacerations, sweat, bewilderment, not the warriors best  
My roots are rotten but I had planted my healthy seed,  
Dear old Friend, you have won the battle, yet as I, the  
War as my banners displayed running through the  
Melancholic streets, while my blood and tears drain into the ocean  
It is not shallow, but deeper, deeper, deeper, I see it!  
Deeper than the wounds, roots, and ruts  
Then sharp prod while you, being flushed out of me  
No longer does the cumbersome pain I bear  
Slipping, slipping, slipping  
Here, dear old friend,  
Where have you gone? I am here and you are not to be found  
My worn soul is replenished, for it no longer thirsts  
Ahh, indeed, this is nothingness, this must be  
Peace.

## Maria Chiaradonna

### “The Machine”

I am me. Therefore I am I .I am loved But not loved.Hated, full of distaste, Foul. I am weak, Predators watch with anticipation Dangerous eyes, They see me But do they really? I am beautiful, A dove, Graceful and strong,I am a giraffe, I see above so I can see others, But from all of this, I am me, Human. Since this, I am hated and a hater, Of both the same circumstance . Reflections. I see what I want, not who I am. I am beautiful, but I am horrific,Athletic, but manly, Vivacious, but annoying, Strong, but weak. Underneath, A fistful of life ,With every pump, Every beat ,Every hit of a hand, Life flows through this Beautiful yet horrific, Athletic yet a manly ,Vivacious yet annoying, Strong but weak. Look upon me, Then the reflection. Not of me .What is the difference ,Let me say, If I dare to dismay you, I have a life in my chest Words that grasp the wind from my mouth. Two souls that see through and out, Into the universe I wish to amount A machine, working and quenching me, Wisdom inside my beauty Workers that multiply every day, The beautiful words, Giving me life .So let me ask, Do not concede dear friend. What is different, From the reflection, Then to me? How can it be the same? Look away, Turn around. That enemy you saw, A contorted, And twisted, And manipulated, And hateful. That Thing that you saw, It's you but not true. That is not you. A perception of hate, A seed planted by a foreigner yet native. The hate and you. It's claws gripping at your machine, manipulating your two souls. Poor ,Poor, Poor, Poor. Heal your thoughts, For I am me, Therefore I am I. There was two now there is one, One was low the other high. Soaring like a dove in the sky, Stop. Stop...Curl your lips,Release that high pitched life full voice, And scream, Then scream louder. Let them see what you are.

**Michelle Sierra**

“Mad Love”

When Time is violent  
Calm is quiet, lying silent beneath cement  
Deep breath grapples with dead air  
Rationale drips slowly amidst raging waves of media and twisted fists  
Gnarled words hide common sense  
Hope slips away

When Time is violent  
Panic invades sidewalks  
Worry seeps, separating dreams  
Hatred hangs up on humanity  
Fear shuts off all light  
Freedom can no longer see

But when Time is up and violence has lost breathe  
Calm will rise and settle in  
Humanity will wash the wounds  
Common Sense and Hope will return  
Because somewhere...  
Love has left the light on

**Michelle Sierra**

“Sunday Dress”

Red Wagon filled with church clothes strolls to the laundromat on Saturday morning  
Rusted handle pulled by mama, I trail behind  
Five cent hopes of bubblegum and soda spins my Sunday dress  
Cousin Carmella chomps loudly trying to teach me how to snap gum

Saturday morning rituals  
Arroz con leche as music dances in the kitchen  
A full load for mama after late night shifts washing dishes at the American Café  
Automatic loaders, a blessing sent from St. Veronica  
Saved her hours of wash tubs and boiling hot water  
Decades of scrub boards and hanging clothesline

Red wagon filled with church clothes strolls to the laundromat on Saturday mornings  
Automatic Fluff-n-Folds twirl my Sunday dress

**Natalie Jacobson**

“It rained last night”

The sun hides behind the thick grey clouds  
the word damp and gloomy  
A tunnel of the deepest darkest wettest brown  
Large green leaves heavy with the rain

Wet damp cold seeps through my shoes  
The air is warm and still  
Moisture clings to my skin

Lush fields of verdant green  
Dewy with rain  
Trees dance with the whispering wind  
As the cold moves in

The clouds thicken  
A solid steel dome

The small puddle of a pond  
its water clear  
its water cold  
The bed soft with slime and moss

I slide so easily into the clear water  
I can see the goosebumps on my skin

The cold sets in  
Deep within

**Natalie Jacobson**

“The night is”

The night is that type of night  
That is cold and deeply dark and pinches at your skin.  
The stars are out, bright dots on the dark swath of the sky.

The faraway stars build themselves to dark oblivion  
Their light still shines, billions and billions of miles away it dances in my eyes.

You stand next to me. It is silent.  
The wind rustles the leaves of the trees and rushes at my ears.

We don't speak. There are many things to be said.  
I wish you would tell me them  
I wish you could tell me them

The night is cold and dark  
The earth moves slowly past the stars  
Maybe we will turn to the sun the dawn will arrive

Slowly I begin to see them now  
The patterns in the stars  
The shapes they create  
The mysteries and wonders they reveal

I wish I could show you them

But the earth moves on  
And the morning star looms.

**Shelby Davin**

“End of the Beginning”

I still remember,  
The time you professed your admiration  
Your gaze set in mine  
I remember, the way you braided my hair  
Your fingers entangled in my tresses,  
Like a confused seamstress  
The way you lit up the room,  
Like radium in the darkest abyss;  
That's what you fell into,  
Darkness, muted, eternal  
As you sank I watched, I remembered  
The end of time, your time,  
My time.

**Shelby Davin**

“Pocket Change”

I feel you in my pocket  
Weighing me down  
Making noise when I crave silence  
You are virtually, useless.  
Until this morning,  
While waiting for my morning coffee,  
You rescued me  
\$1.42 for caffeinated bliss  
Finding paper money, effortless  
Making change from the twenty in my pocket  
Was simply a pain, instead  
I reached in and caressed you  
Cold to the touch  
Yet the warmth of your heroism persuaded me  
Today I deem you useful,  
Today.

## **Af Sanni**

### “Girl With The Pixie Cut”

We sat in the homely coffee shop, keeping warm from the gusting fall winds outside. It'd been awhile since I saw my best friend. We tried to stay in touch, but we never actually met up after I transferred schools the year prior. Now that thanksgiving break was finally here, we had the chance. Sitting in the chair across from me, she didn't look any different than the last time I saw her. Her red hair was still cut into that short pixie style, her sweater was still just a little too baggy, and her purse once again took up most of the space on the table. It felt like we were back in Champaign.

Jean was always the wild child type. Everyone wanted to be her friend, guys couldn't stop themselves from asking her out, and she balanced the party life and school like no other. Hanging out with her, it always felt like there were just a couple more hours in the day. More time to do something new, another chance to go somewhere that nobody had ever heard of. We'd been friends since high school and she'd always been like this. Bright and optimistic. Qualities that I wished I had.

We ordered our coffee and started talking about memories we had from my time at University of Illinois. She spoke in her singsong voice about the time I went to a barn dance and ended up laying in the grass in an alcohol-induced stupor, in front of my at-the-time crush and her boyfriend. We laughed and also talked about friends I hadn't seen in ages, and I filled her in on how it was getting adjusted to my new school. She originally wanted to go to Western Illinois University herself, but got accepted to University of Illinois and chose to switch at the last second. At the time in Mooseheart High, it seemed like a miracle, someone getting accepted to

such an awesome school. But not to Jean, she was rarely ever phased, even by her own accomplishments.

Eventually our coffee came and Jean said she wanted to fill me in on something serious, her high-pitched voice dropping flat. “I dropped out of school.” It took me a second to process the sentence. She shuffled in her seat and explained further. “I spent too many semesters on academic probation, and now I have to take a semester off to have a chance to re-apply for the spring.” As she continued on, I just looked at her in disbelief.

Between all the trips to the bar, all of the house parties, and the nights that turned into mornings, she failed her way out of school. I didn’t judge her, as I had been down that road myself. But I wasn’t Jean. She told me about her plan to stay on campus and avoid telling her grandparents, who would’ve blown a gasket at the news. We spent the next couple of hours talking, and later on said our goodbyes, promising to hang out again soon. I did see my best friend again later on that week. But her brightness and optimism never came back from that warm coffee shop in St. Charles.

## Destiny Thomas

### “Family Affair”

*Dear Diary, I never wanted it to start off this way. With...this..lust. But his body, his smell was so alluring and I couldn't help myself. If anyone ever found out what I did, it could ruin so many lives. But, I love him and I know he loves me too. He has to.*

Yuri sat alone in her window sill staring aimlessly at the two lovers in the house across from her. They were kissing, hands caressing each other's skin as if they were silk. The man was now anxiously tearing off her clothes about to wander into her paradise. Yuri was hot.

“Yuri!” her mom yelled. “Yuri, come here for a second.”

Yuri rolled her eyes and said. “Coming mom!” She gave one final glance at the two across the street and went downstairs.

“You called?” Yuri said walking over to the fridge.

“Yeah. Your school called. What the hell were you thinking ditching school? I'm not gonna put up with this.”

“I wasn't feeling well mom. So I came home,” Yuri said eyeing her empty fridge, “Besides what's the big deal? It was only one day.”

“Yuri. I paid a lot of money to get you into that school.”

“I didn't ask you to do that. Did I?” Yuri's tone was acerbic. “If you don't believe me, ask Jake.”

“Why would I ask your brother?”

“He knows I was here. I'm not lying mom.”

Yuri's mom sighed and got up from the kitchen table. Yuri's eyes were cold and empty. Yuri smirked as she bit into an apple. "I'm going back to my room now."

Yuri hurried back to her room. It was dark and she knew she wasn't alone. She felt a warm and heavy breath on her neck. She knew better than to move. The dark figure pressed his lips firmly to her neck and her head flew back in delight. His strong, muscular hands wrapped themselves around her small waist and moved slowly towards her pants. Her mind fluttered back to the couple across the street. Without warning, Yuri was flung onto the bed. The dark figure climbed onto her and found his way to paradise. They rocked together until he finished and they lay there in bliss.

"I have to go now," he said as he got dressed. Yuri watched him leave the room as she drifted off to sleep.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.* Yuri reached over to her desk and tried to search for the snooze button. Her hand slammed down against the button as she groaned. She rolled out of bed and ran her hands through her brown hair. "I fucking hate Wednesdays," she mumbled to herself. Slowly, she walked to her closet. She chose a navy-blue sweater with white jeans. As she laid her clothes on the bed, she couldn't help but think about last night. She smiled to herself as she walked over to the mirror. "Fuck." she exclaimed as she noticed three red marks around her neck. She searched for her white scarf to hide her hickeys. As Yuri changed from her PJ's into her school outfit, she heard her door open.

"What the hell?!" Yuri yelled before she turned to see her mom standing in her door way. "Have you ever heard of knocking? Or privacy?" Yuri pulled her pants up and threw on her top.

“Yuri, stop sneaking Malcolm in the house at night. Especially if you two are going to be...sexually active.”

“Woah. Mom. Thanks.” Yuri said as she carefully put her scarf on and grabbed her backpack. “Can I have a ride to school? I don’t want to be late.”

“Go ask Jake. I have to get to work”. Her mom left the room and went downstairs to leave. Yuri walked across the hall to Jake’s room.

“Knock knock,” Yuri said opening the door. Jake was asleep with no covers and was only wearing his boxers. “Jake, mom left and I need a ride to school.” Jake mumbled something unrecognizable and turned away from her. “Jake seriously, come on. I'm going to be late.”

“Ughh fine. I need you to get a license Yuri.”

“I’m working on it,” Yuri rolled her eyes. “I’ll be downstairs.”

She walked into the living room and sat on the couch as she waited. She turned to look outside. She smiled gently as her neighbors shared a kiss and the husband left for work.

*I can't wait to have that. A man to love me and will always come home to me. A man who will never leave me. Not like he...*

“You ready?” Jake asked interrupting her thoughts.

“Yeah, let's go,” her eyes never left the window as she spoke.

Even in the car Yuri was distracted. Her father left them when she was only seven. She took it hard but never spoke about it. Jake and her mom seemed to forget about the whole situation but Yuri thought about it often. She had walked in on her mom and dad having sex a lot but it was shocking when she caught her dad having sex with his secretary.

“Jake. Did dad love mom?” Yuri asked sadly. Jake looked at the road ahead with blank eyes.

“Uh, yeah. I guess so. Why?”

“Well he just left us. No explanation or anything.”

Jake shrugged. “Yuri, look. Mom wasn’t happy. She knew about the affairs he had been involved with.”

“Why didn’t she say anything?” Yuri questioned.

“There was nothing to say. She stayed for us and when he decided to leave, why would she stop him?” Jake stared ahead with hateful eyes, “Dad was a coward. He was supposed to protect the family. Be there for mom...and you. He wasn’t supposed to go around screwing other women. He was supposed to love you two.”

“Do you love me?” Tears fell from Yuri’s eyes as she spoke.

“Of course,” Jake said glancing at her. He gave her a hopeful smile.

“Always?” Yuri asked.

“Forever,n” Jake replied smiling.

Yuri couldn’t get what Jake said out of her mind. She was so grateful to have Jake. She knew that he would never abandon her like her father did. Jake was always there for her since their dad left when she was seven. Every soccer game Jake was there. He was her savior. Yuri couldn’t focus in any of her classes. She kept falling into a daydream of how happy her family was before her dad fucked it up. Movie nights were her favorite. They’d watch all of their favorites and when Yuri fell asleep, her dad would carry her upstairs and tuck her into bed. Some nights, he’d stay there with her.

The final bell rung waking Yuri up from her daydream. She was anxious to get home. She rushed out the front doors of her school and quickly walked home. Once she got home, she walked to her closet and pushed back all the clothes, revealing a locked chest. Yuri grabbed the

necklace around her neck and put the key into the lock. With a smile, Yuri unlocked the chest. Dressed in skimpy black-laced lingerie, Yuri waited in her room for her next trip to paradise. Soon enough, her door creaked open.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” Yuri said seductively.

“Is that right?” the dark figure asked in a husky voice.

“Yes. Come here.” The dark figure walked towards her. She grabbed him and pulled him onto her. She pushed her tongue into his mouth and began to kiss him passionately. “Tonight, I’m the dominate one,” she said through her kisses. She rolled so that she was on top of him. She wasted no time and they both went to paradise. Lost in ecstasy, Yuri broke the one rule that the two had set in place.

“Oh Jake. Make love to me.” Yuri moaned. Jake tried to grab hold of Yuri and cover her mouth but he forgot that she had tied his arms to the bed.

*Fuck* Jake thought.

All he hoped was that they didn’t get caught. Soon Yuri was going over the edge. She leaned down to kiss him. Lost in their moment, they never heard the door open.

“What the fuck is going on?!” Their mom stood in the doorway.

## **Haley Helgesen**

### “The King and Me: My Many Meetings with Stephen King”

This is the very real story of the times I met Stephen King. I say real not to impress you, but to impress upon you the reality of what happened and give you a sense of the mortification I feel whenever I recall these encounters. Without further ado, I present my tale of woe: The King and Me.

Twas a long time ago, longer now than it seems, in a place that perhaps you've seen in your dreams... it was Florida. (That's the only part of this I'm doing in verse.) Five years ago, I was living in Sarasota, which Tripadvisor will tell you is known for its stunning vistas over the Gulf of Mexico, for being the home of the Ringling Brothers Circus, and for having somewhat-decent seafood. Tripadvisor will not tell you that Sarasota is mostly populated by people over the age of 70 who are basically waiting around to die. It's a stagnant town, punctuated by beautiful beaches, and wrinkly old men in speedos.

I'm working at a Ruby Tuesdays on the day I first meet Stephen King. For those unfamiliar, I advise you to stay that way. It's a glorified salad bar made famous for somehow pioneering worse versions of White Castle burgers. I've just gotten off a catering job, and am dealing with the subsequent existential crisis that comes from serving miniature burgers to nursing home patients and Viagra-hocking pharmaceutical reps. My wonderful boyfriend, Max, is sympathetic to my tiny burger crisis, and takes me out to lunch at the most romantic restaurant in town: IHOP. I would like to point out that Max is very romantic, and much better at picking out date spots, but alas, Sarasota is awful and IHOP is indeed its most romantic dining option. I don't actually like IHOP, but I am thankful for Max's kind gesture.

Surprisingly, we're the only ones in IHOP on that fateful Tuesday afternoon. As we struggle to decide which French Toast Special to order, I notice a man walk into IHOP and go directly to the bathroom. Seeing a skeletal, geriatric-looking man immediately beeline for the bathroom upon entering a building is an everyday occurrence in Florida, so it doesn't raise my suspicions in the slightest. A few minutes pass and the man exits the bathroom. This time I cannot help but notice how familiar he looks. Had I just served him a mini burger? Was he the guy that sneezed on the salad bar earlier? I blatantly stare at him as he passes, and either he doesn't notice my deer in the headlights look or he chooses to ignore me. The man walks out of IHOP and strolls into the Barnes & Noble next door. I know I'm obvious about watching him leave because our waitress comes over and smiles at me.

"You recognized him," she asks.

"Bathroom guy? Yeah, he looks really familiar."

"Which of his books is your favorite?"

"Bathroom guy writes books?"

"Yes," she laughs, "that was Stephen King."

My world stops. Creepy old bathroom guy is actually creepy old bathroom Stephen King! I've read every one of his books. He's the first author I metaphorically followed, and I just missed my chance to literally follow him. He had walked right past me because I was too distracted by IHOP's dumb seasonal French Toast Specials. I'm devastated, but I also have so many questions.

"Why was Stephen King eating at IHOP?" I ask our waitress.

"Oh, he doesn't eat here," she says with a surprising degree of awareness. "He just comes in to use the bathroom."

“He does what?”

“He comes in, uses the bathroom, and leaves. We have very nice bathrooms.”

“I don’t understand, is he driving out here specifically to use the bathroom, or is he doing other stuff and just happens to stop by?”

“Honestly, I’ve never asked him, but a couple times a week he uses our bathrooms, and then goes to the Barnes & Noble next door.”

Max grabs my hand and we race to Barnes & Noble. After some discrete searching, we manage to corner Stephen King in the new arrivals section. Max selflessly asks if he is in fact Stephen King, and he responds with a cheerful yes. At this point, I completely lose the ability to speak, partially due to being star struck, but also because I can’t stop wondering why my favorite author doesn’t just use the infinitely nicer bathrooms in Barnes & Noble. In any case, I manage to blurt out that I love him and his work, and I thank him for creating the stories that fostered my love of reading. He appears genuinely touched until I awkwardly hug him. I’m too self-conscious of what I’ve done to let go immediately, so the hug lasts for an uncomfortable duration. He doesn’t say anything when I finally let go, and since there’s no eloquent way to leave an interaction where you’ve stalked a person out of IHOP and into Barnes & Noble to tell them you love them, I proceed to run out of the store. I am giddy all over, and my intense embarrassment over the whole affair is assuaged by what I now recognize to be naive confidence that I’d never see Stephen King again.

Fast forward a few months. I am recruited out of salad bar hell into the classiest seafood restaurant in Sarasota. The place is reservation heavy and servers seldom have walk ins. This evening, I have a table of three booked with a cordoned off section. Such requests for privacy are not out of the ordinary given the caliber of the restaurant’s clientele, so I think nothing of it and

continue to prep. From the kitchen, I see the hostess seat my reservation and draw the privacy curtain up between them and the rest of the dining area. As I make my approach, I review the spiel I've prepared where I introduce the specials and encourage patrons to spend \$65.00 on a bottle of wine. I walk up, confident in my craft, but lo and behold, Stephen King, his wife, and his son are all sitting at my table eager to mortify me.

In that moment, I question if any gods exist and whether they are cruel or benevolent. I decide to give no indication that we've met before, or that I even know he's Stephen King. I smile and deliver my spiel. When I finish, I ask if they have any questions.

"Yes." Stephen King says plainly. "Are you the girl who followed me into Barnes and Noble a few months ago?"

And just like that I discover that the gods are indeed cruel, and I find myself at an impasse. Should I lie for the sake of carrying out the rest of the evening with a shred of dignity? Or do I answer honestly and offer him another server. I decide that since my constitution is already faltering I might as well be honest.

"Yes, yes I am." I say.

His wife and son begin laughing, but Stephen King only gives an amused smile. His son, also a noted author whose books I read, kindly points out that this must be incredibly awkward for me.

"Yes, yes it is." I answer.

To my surprise, King himself starts to chuckle.

"So you're a big fan?" he asks.

"Yes, I read Tommy Knockers when I was seven and I've been seeing a therapist ever since."

This makes the whole table laugh.

“Have you read my newest book?”

“I have.”

“And?” he asks.

“I didn’t like it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah... was that a dumb thing to say? Do you want a new server?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. You’re a bit odd, but you’ll do fine.”

“Wonderful! So... will you be having wine this evening?”

And like that, Stephen King and his family become my regulars. They are always kind, quirky, and polite. Stephen King orders the same thing every time, a BLT with fries, which is not what you order at a renowned seafood restaurant, but whatever, he’s Stephen King. During his visits, we talk about different TV shows, books, and movies. I end up reading *The Hunger Games* on his recommendation, and think it is just okay. At some point, I let slip that I am an aspiring writer and from then onward he always asks me how much I’ve written since the last time we saw each other. Spoilers, but no matter how much you write it’s never enough for Stephen King. It’s kind of surreal to be lectured by Stephen King, but his son and I end up bonding over being disappointments to him.

The end of our peculiar relationship comes when I inform the Kings that I am moving to pursue higher education. That evening, he leaves me a generous tip, and thanks me for all our conversations. He also tells me to put him down as a reference and to add him on LinkedIn. To this day, I have done neither because it feels too weird. I also think he may be aware that the \$65.00 wine I sold him every week was only worth \$8.00.

**Maric McLean**

“Head Games”

This is not my paper and you are not my audience. Is there anything more beautiful than terrible art? I don't think so. In fact, why don't we just sit in this white room right here? Yes, right there. Don't mind me, I'm just laying carpet down. Raise your feet please and thank you. My office needed some redecorating. A lot of crazies visit me here. Now then, would you mind telling me why you are here?

....

Oh fascinating! Not what you said, I didn't even hear you. It's just that this carpet is so soft! It's like cat hair. But oh no, it's not made out of cat hair is it? You see, I'm allergic to cats. You understand that though, as I see on your medical form it specifically says “Bleep Bleep is allergic to cats.” Oh I'm sorry, did you want me to say your name?

....

Well that's a shame! I don't know your name, and no you can't tell me. Moving on—you know my cats have really long hair. They're soft and fuzzy, kind of like cheetahs but without the ferocious, tearing you to pieces part. Or I guess I could say ‘the tearing you apart part’ but that doesn't quite roll of the tongue now does it?

So...are you just going to stand there reading or are you going to talk, hmm? Because it's kind of weird with this whole monologue thing. Now, I know you tried to talk to me earlier, but it just didn't feel like you were trying hard enough. Here, let me help you. I just going to put this here and you use it to say something all right?

---

Now, you see, you were supposed to write something there. You aren't even trying. Oh well. I can't blame you for not being talkative. After all, you are allergic to cats and I brought them up, didn't I? Three times now to be precise. Now, if you look to your left, you will see a door.

....

No, your other left. Do I need to teach you directions? Anyway, that door there will take you out of here. If you want to leave—hey, I wasn't done talking to you—oh now look what you've done. You've gone and fallen through the door. If only you had waited for me to tell you that it was a trap door. What a shame.

He should be here right about, thud, now. It's nice of you to finally join me. We wouldn't even be speaking if you had any brains. You should have waited for the other me to say that specific door, not any of the others, was a trap door.

....

Wait, there was only one door? Are you sure? The other me sure is sadistic. Anyway, welcome to the land of honey! It's not the metaphorical land of honey where all of your dreams come true. However, I'm afraid it is the actual land of honey. You know, where everything is made out of honey. It's all over your shoes by the way. And your back from when you fell earlier. No matter. How does it feel to finally be rid of those cats and in this sweet smelling, syrupy land of honey? It's so sweet it could make you sick to your stomach. Err, one moment please.

Ah, that's much better. The only thing that tastes better than honey going down is honey coming back up if you know what I mean. You do know what I mean right?

....

What do you mean that's gross? No wonder the other me wanted to get rid of you so bad, what with the only giving you one door and all. That cruel bastard. Oh look, some cats have made their way down here too. They are just falling from the sky, meowing at nothing in particular. They make the funniest sound when they hit the honey too. Listen.

You hear that? That plop sound that makes you laugh because you know the cat landed in honey but you still think it is animal cruelty because we pushed the cat through the door and made it fall hundreds of feet. Oh, but it's ok. The cat enjoys licking the honey off of its paw. Now if only we could look that elegant while licking our hands. Here, you try that. Just take your hand, bring it to your face, and lick it. Not too hard now. We don't want any skin coming off. Do you taste the honey? No? Good because that would be really weird.

So, do you have any last words?

....

What do you mean "what do you mean"? I just assumed you were having a stroke or something since you have been completely oblivious to everything I have said. Except for the licking your hand part. That was adorable. You were like a fuzzy little kitten trying to be all adorable and such. Licking your paw when I told you to. Oh well, I've had my fun with you. You should be sinking into the honey any minute now. Any minute...ah, there we go. Now, before you go, I need to tell you this important life less--.

I just love it when a plan comes together, don't you? Here you are in this rock hard chair, struggling against the hand and leg restraints you so graciously put on yourself. I bet you are wondering something like, "What am I doing here?" Well, let me tell you. You are here to learn how to read and write.

....

What? You already know how to read and write? Well, that's just nonsense. If you knew how to read and write, then you wouldn't be learning how to read and write now would you? Yeah, how do you like that logic? I should write a book. I'll call it, *How to Read and Write by Reading and Writing*. Sounds glorious doesn't it? I would buy that book. I would even get it signed by the author, Bleep Bleep.

....

No! You didn't write the book silly. Just because you were told that your name is Bleep Bleep doesn't mean that every little thing by Bleep Bleep is by you. Silly human. Don't mind that smell in the background. That sweet, greasy bacon smell. Haaaaw-yeah, that's the smell. Actually, scratch that, let's mind the smell. That sweet and savory smell of cooked cat. Wait, you did know that it was cat we were cooking right?

....

Oh, well this is awkward. The cat sure is tasty though. Smells like bacon, tastes like chicken, is chewy like frog legs—you've had frog legs right?

....

God you're lame! I think I'm just going to leave you here while I enjoy my tasty cat...Actually, you should leave. I think it's time for you to get back to your life, just not yet.

Remember, I'm, trying to help you. Is it too repetitive to use another trapdoor here? Oh who cares, bye bye!

So, here you are again. Back in the office type room with the nice cat-hair-like carpet. What's that? You don't want to talk about cats anymore? Well, all right then. There is nothing I can do about cat, I mean that. You know what I meant.

It looks like it's time for us to say our goodbyes. I'm sorry it has to be this way but we both have better things to do. I have to get back to my research and you have to get back to...sitting there I guess. Anyway, you have my contact information if you want to do this all again. Just don't schedule another appointment soon. I have much better things to do.

....

What? You don't have my information? All right, then. My number is \_\_\_\_\_ and my email is \_\_\_\_\_@\_\_\_\_\_.com. See what I did there? That's called being mysterious and playing hard-to-get. Like that one person you can't get to talk to you no matter how hard you try. You know, your cat. Don't you wish you had more control?

## Morgan Cusack

### “Pancakes at Penny’s”

I have long since lost faith in God but there is no getting out of Sunday mass with my mother. Normally, I count the tiles on the floor, or stare blankly at a random brick in the wall. Sometimes I have staring contests with the six year old two pews over. Recently though, I have had something new to hold my attention.

I don’t know anything about him, not even his name. He and his parents moved to town a few weeks ago, and no one seems to know much about them. That doesn’t stop the rumors of course, but I learned a long time ago town gossip meant very little.

I spend most services sneaking glances at the boy, trying to glean some understanding of him from afar. Sometimes I think I feel him looking back at me, but that’s probably just wishful thinking. I have been trying to work up the courage to talk to him since I first saw him. Haven’t had much luck yet.

Today, mass ends and people file out of the little church. The front entrance is a bit crowded because everyone has to shake the priest’s hand and tell him how good his sermon was. I give him a passing wave and go to wait by the car. Mom’s going to take her time talking to all her church friends. I lean on the passenger side door and turn my face to the sun steadily raising in the sky. It wasn’t nearly as hot as it should be for the beginning of summer.

“Hey,” I jump slightly at the sudden hand that touches my shoulder. I look up at the person it belongs to. It’s *the boy*. He looks older than I originally thought. A few years older than me, at least sixteen, maybe seventeen.. He had thick dark hair and the warmest brown eyes. His lips were strained in an awkward smile.

The boy pulls his hand back at my reaction, it goes to rub the back of his neck. “Sorry,” he mutters, staring at the ground.

“Hi,” I say. Nice, very eloquent.

“Uh, hi.” He gives a small wave. He pauses for a second before continuing, “I’m Az.”

“Gray.” Apparently I can’t say more than one word at a time.

“Gray,” he says my name, testing it on his tongue, before nodding. A long silence stretch between us, neither sure what to say next.

“Az? That’s a nickname right?” I force the words out, something to fill the silence. Five word, though. Progress.

“Yeah. It’s a long story, believe me.” He shrugs with a small smile.

“I got time.” Shit. That sounds weird. Don’t creep him out. I take a breath and force myself to relax. He’s just a guy. No reason to be so nervous. I can handle this.

He chuckles, “It’s a long, *embarrassing* story. Got to know me a bit longer to get that kind of information.”

“I can understand that.” I get a little bolder, his laugh giving me courage. “Don’t want to give away your secrets too easily.”

“Oh, no, that would ruin my mystique.” He says without missing a beat and I find myself laughing.

“We can’t have that, now can we?” He shakes his head; that brilliant smile never leaving his face.

“I came over here for a reason.”

“Yeah? It wasn’t just for my amazing small talk?” Az snorts and it makes me smile even bigger.

“Sorry, no. My parents are going out to eat with some people from church and I really don’t want to go. I was hoping you could point me to where I could get breakfast.”

“Mm, if you’re looking for good food,” I swing around to look down Main Street and point to a little place near the end of the street. “Right there, a dinner called Penny’s. All their food is great but I can personally promise their pancakes are amazing.”

Az follows to where I’m pointing and nods. “I’ll definitely be going there then. Thanks for the directions.”

“Sure thing,” I figure that he’s going to go but he lingers there on the sidewalk.

Az rubs the back of his neck again, “Uh, if you don’t have plans already, do you maybe wanna maybe join me?”

“Yes!” Az looks a little startled at my enthusiastic answer. I blush a nice shade of red and backtrack. “Oh, uh, sorry. It’s just that I don’t want to go to brunch with my mother either.”

“So we’re in the same boat then.”

“I guess so, just let me go tell her I’m leaving. Then we can go.” I leave Az there to go to find my mother. I spot her talking with a few other parishioners, two of which I recognize as Az’s parents.

“Gray!” My mom beams when she sees me approach. She grabs my shoulder and pulls me close to her. “This is my son Gray. Gray this is Catherine and Felix Chase.”

“Hi,” I wave in greeting.

“It’s nice to meet you, Gray.” Mr. Chase says as he offers me his hand. I shake it and nod.

“We saw you talking to our son, Az.”

“Yeah, he’s actually why I came over.” I glance at my mother. “I was going to grab breakfast with him, if that’s okay?”

“That’s a great idea!” Mrs. Chase says with a wide grin.

“It’ll be nice for Az to make a friend.” Mr. Chase looks almost relieved by the news.

“Of course you can go sweetheart.” I can hear the forced cheeriness in my mother’s voice.

“Just don’t be out too late, okay?”

“Yes, I promise.” I say and my mother releases me. I leave before she can change her mind.

Az is leaning on my mom’s car, fingers tapping a rhythm on his thigh. He straightens when he sees me, I smile and say, “Come on, food is calling.”

The walk to Penny’s is a quick one. I pull open the door and our arrival is announced by the tinkling of a little bell. The diner’s mostly empty other than two men talking at a table in the corner and a woman sipping coffee and reading the paper at the counter. I grab Az’s hand and lead him to the counter, a few seats down from the woman.

An older woman comes bustling out of the back carrying a plate of eggs and toast. She smiles warmly at me, “Gray! Where have you been hiding? I haven’t seen you in weeks!”

“Hiya, Miss Lilly,” I say as she sets the plate before the woman reading the paper. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around. Finals had me swamped.”

Miss Lilly comes to stand before me, “And how did those go, sweetheart?”

“Great, few As, few Bs. Better than I thought I’d do.”

She waves her order pad in a dismissive gesture. “You’re a brilliant boy, I’m not surprised.”

I flush a little under her praise and shift uncomfortably. I glance in Az’s direction and realize he probably isn’t acquainted with our server. “Oh, Miss Lilly this is Az, Az this is Miss Lilly.”

“Well, hello there young man! I haven’t seen you around before.” Az jumps slightly at Miss Lilly’s bright and boisterous tone.

“Oh, yeah, no, my family just moved into the area. It’s taken a while to get things settled so I haven’t really been around town.” Az looks at his hands, fingers fidgeting for something to do.

“Welcome then,” Miss Lilly beams brightly. “Now I’ll stop talking your ears off and take you orders.”

“You know me, Miss Lilly,” I lean against the counter and grin.

“Pancakes and chocolate milk,” Miss Lilly nods, writes it down, and looks to Az.

“The same, please.” He says it almost sheepishly.

Miss Lilly points her pen accusingly at me, “He’s gotten to you has he?”

“I don’t—?” Az looks at me confused.

I roll my eyes, “It’s nothing, Miss Lilly just thinks I have an unhealthy love for pancakes and that I inflict it on everyone else.”

“*Thinks.*” Miss Lilly scoffs, “I know you do. Anyway, I’ll get these to Art.” With that she disappears into the back, leaving me and Az in silence.

After a few beats Az speaks up, “Miss Lilly is very lovely if only a bit... loud.”

I laugh, “Yeah, she takes a bit of getting used to.”

“I think that applies to the whole town.”

“Without a doubt. Not use to small town life are you?” I hazard a guess.

Az stares at the counter, tapping his fingers against the cracked linoleum top. “Yeah, things here are a lot different than where I grew up.” He looks up at me, the smallest smile touching his lips. “But that’s okay, I think I am going to like this different.”

We don’t really talk about much else. The silence is long but not unpleasant. Soon Miss Lilly comes out with two glasses of chocolate milk, which she set them in front of us.

“Here you go boys,” I don’t even hesitate to take a big gulp of mine.

“Don’t drink that too fast, Gray.” Miss Lilly tries to sound authoritative but the smile curling at her lips kind of ruins it. “You would not believe what happened once—” She starts to tell Az but I cut her off.

“Don’t tell him that!” I have to force myself not to blush again. She laughs but thankfully leaves without another word.

“So…” Az stirs his drink with a straw. “What are the chances that I get to know that story?”

“If I can help it, zero.” I point my own straw at him, “Now try it, I swear it’ll be the best chocolate milk you ever tasted.”

Az laughs quietly and take a sip of his drink; I watch carefully for his reaction. He hums happily. “It’s pretty good.”

“‘Pretty good’? That’s it?” I scoff in mock offence.

“It’s just chocolate milk, Gray.” Miss Lilly returns and set two plates down before us.

“And we were getting along so well.” I have to fight to keep a straight face.

“You know, not everyone has a sugar dependency like you.” Miss Lilly teases.

“It’s not a dependency, I just have a sweet tooth.” She responds with a hum before making her way over to one of her other customers. I glance at Az and see he’s taken his first bite. Nudging him with my elbow I ask, “Amazing right?”

“They’re really great,” It was muffled by food in his mouth. He shoots me this little smile that I can’t help returning it.

It’s easier to talk as we eat. He tells me about the city he’s from and what his parents are like. I tell him about my two older siblings and slightly overbearing mother. I didn’t notice we had

both finished until Miss Lilly came by with the bill. Az made a move for his wallet but I wave him off.

“Let me get this,” I pull out a few dollar bills and hand them to Miss Lilly. “Consider it a welcome to town present.” Az tries to protest but I won’t hear any of it.

Miss Lilly frowns at me as she counts out the bill, “This is far too much,” I shake my head when she tries to hand be back the extra.

“Keep it, it’s your tip.”

“Gray,” She chides, about to protest but I hold up a hand to stop her.

“You know you earned it, Miss Lilly. You work so hard every day.”

She sighs in defeat but a smile touches her lips. “You’re too good to me.”

“Only because you deserve it.”

Az smiles politely, “Thank you very much, Miss Lilly. It was great to meet you.”

“Of course, sweetie!” Miss Lilly chirps cheerfully, “Make sure to come back in sometime.”

Az nods vigorously, “I will, I promise.”

“Good, now out with you both.” Miss Lilly waves her hands in a shooping motion. “Go enjoy your summer.”

I lean over the counter and press a quick kiss to her cheek. “See you soon.”

“I’m holding you to that!” Miss Lilly calls as I guide Az out.

“That was great.” Az says as we walk up the sidewalk. “Thank you for that, really.”

“No problem.” I nod, “Honor Point can be kind of boring but there are a few good things around here. Penny’s and Miss Lilly are just the start.”

“Care to show me the rest?” Az asks hesitantly.

“I would love to.” I grab Az’s hand and tug him along. “Come on, I know just the place.”

“Oh yeah?” Az laughs, a sound that warms my chest, “And what exactly is this place?”

“It’s a surprise!” I say, a teasing smile curling at my lips. “Don’t ask questions-”

We’re barely off Main Street before I hear someone call, “Gray!” I look up, startled, and see my mother standing by the open driver side door of her car.

“Mom?” Horror washes over me and I rip my hand out of Az’s grasp. I take a few steps away from the other boy, putting a bit of space between us. I keep my eyes fixed on my mother, afraid to see Az’s reaction to the sudden distance.

If my mother had noticed our closeness she isn’t showing it. “Good, I found you.” Her face was unreadable and it was putting me on edge. “Come on sweetie, let’s go home.”

“But I was gonna show Az around.” Mom looks at Az, taking him in for the first time. Her face pinched, looking completely unimpressed.

“Gray.” She says, tone hard and clipped, leaving no room for argument.

“Right, of course, sorry.” I turn back to Az, sheepish.

“Rain check?” Az asks hopefully.

“I-” I stop, flinching as my mother yells my name again. I back away from Az. “I’m sorry, I really am.” I turn and run to the car.

I barely hear Az say, “Bye, Gray.”

I climb into the car and my mother starts heading home. The silence is long and heavily. Finally I speak up, “I thought you had brunch?”

“We finished.” She says, her eyes never leaving the road.

“Ah, well how were Az’s parents? They seemed really nice. I think me and Az are going to be great friends—” My mother cut my rumbling off with a sharp look.

“Don’t want you to see that boy ever again.” Her tone is icy and demanding, this is a demand not a request. Yet I find myself questioning it.

“What? Why? Az is really cool, he—”

“His parents told me he’s gay, Gray.” She spits the words out like they’re venomous and my heart stops.

“Oh,” I whisper, suddenly it all makes sense.

“I won’t have you tempted, not again.” I flinch, trying not to think about that party. James and the game of spin the bottle that got out of hand. My life was ruined the moment that boy kissed me.

“That was one mistake,” my voice said small and pathetic to own ears.

“One that I am going to make sure you never repeat.” My mother hisses, “I will not have you turn out like Dean. Do you understand me Gray?” Dean, it’s the first time I’ve heard her say my older brother’s name since she threw him out last year. Since he came out as bisexual. I shiver at the memories.

“Yes, Mother.” I say, looking out the window and trying to banish Az’s brilliant smile from my mind.

## Rebecca Gonner

### “The Photograph”

The unlatching of the door barely catches David’s notice from his desk chair across the room. His knuckles strain white as he grips the controller, mashing X in a furious attempt to take down the CPU fighting him as the scantily clad sword hoop wielder Tira. Playing as Maxi—known for his speed and easily combined nunchakus moves—he still couldn’t evade Tira’s attacks. David pounds his fists, still clenching the remote, as the CGI character again swings her deadly hoop around her disproportional hips to knock down his character, his health bar taking a substantial hit.

“Soul Calibur still?” His roommate Chris dumps his backpack by his desk as he watches David dodge the next attack, finally getting a hit in on Tira and managing a critical attack.

“I don’t know why you always play as Maxi, he’s totally OP.” Chris’s point is proven as David’s character swings his nunchakus dramatically, delivering three powerful and unblockable blows to his opponent and sending her flying off the stage.

“K.O.” The deep announcer voice declares David’s victory as David quickly taps A to skip Maxi’s taunting.

“Who cares if he is more powerful than the other characters? I like playing him and I can win with him, who gives a fuck?” David pushes his blond hair out of his eyes. Normally this length would bother him and he’d have gotten it cut by now, but he can’t bring himself to care.

The next battle begins, this time with Maxi paired off against Natsu, a lithe female warrior with two short blades and an acrobatic move set.

“Dude, can you actually look at me for like two seconds, I think we need to talk.”

“Later,” David begins smashing buttons again as soon as the announcer says “fight,” ignoring the cramping in his fingers from holding the controller for so long. He also ignores the twitching in his legs. He’s filled with restless energy since he’s started sitting in his desk chair for hours on end.

“No dude, now.” Chris crosses their small dorm room to David’s gaming set up in the corner, reaches for the remote sitting in front of the TV, and promptly turns it off.

“What the fuck, man?” David finally looks up, his eyes wide with disbelief.

“I feel like asking you the same thing,” Chris throws his arms up in frustration, still holding the TV remote. “What the fuck are you doing? Look, I’m not one to tell people how to live their life, but when was the last time you left the room for a reason other than food? Have you even been going to class? Every time I come in here it’s like you haven’t moved an inch since I left and it’s always you fighting some female Soul Calibur character. Why?”

“Look, I go to class, alright?” David slumps back into his chair and grabs the chain around his neck, fiddling with it absentmindedly as he avoids eye contact with Chris. “I’m not an idiot, I’m not gonna pay thousands of dollars and put myself in debt to fail my classes. Now back off, and give me the remote.”

“David, what happened?” Chris runs a hand through his curly mop of hair in frustration.

“You don’t geek out to me about your comic books anymore, you completely stopped going to the gym, you haven’t even touched your guitar in days.” His arms reach helplessly towards the acoustic guitar propped against the post of David’s lofted bed, in the same dismal position it’s held since David got frustrated with the song he’d been trying to write the other week.

In the whole first year that Chris had roomed with David, he'd constantly grabbed his guitar whenever he needed a break from homework or a distraction from his own head. There was hardly a day that went by that he wasn't plucking at the strings three or four times, whether he was working through a 30 Seconds to Mars song or writing one of his own. David's songs were usually about break ups. Chris had a secret joke with his girlfriend that David was the male Taylor Swift.

David looks over at the abandoned guitar. As he does, his face shifts from closed off and stubborn, slowly melting into quiet despair. He leans his elbows on his knees and drops his head into his hands. His whole body slumps with an exhaustion that seeps down to his bones.

"Chris," David's voice sounds hoarse with emotion, as though the words were getting caught in his throat. "I can't talk about it, ok?"

Chris sighs, the tension leaving his body now that he's finally gotten through David's hard outer shell. He walks toward his desk and grabs his chair, pulling it over next to David's. He plops himself down and checks the time on his watch.

"Look, I gotta be at a rehearsal for Rent in like an hour. Until then, I'm here if there's anything you want to just get off your chest. You can't keep isolating yourself like this, you're gonna have to talk about it eventually."

Silence fills the room for several seconds. Eventually, David huffs out a breath and shifts in his seat. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out something small and crumpled, then hands it to Chris without looking at him.

As Chris takes it he realizes it's a folded photograph. He unfolds it to reveal a girl standing next to a rope swing, holding the rope and smiling at the camera. It's very Senior-

picture-esque. Her short brown hair curls and frizzes in a wild mass around her face, and braces shine on her teeth.

Chris looks up at David, still slumped in his chair, green eyes filled with surprise and concern.

“This is the picture that used to sit in the frame on your desk.”

David nods.

“Why do you still have this? I assumed you’d stored it in the box with the rest of her stuff months ago. For Christ’s sake David, it’s been a year.”

“No,” David’s voice cuts out sharply. “It’s been six days. A year ago she broke up with me. Six days ago she blocked my phone number, officially cutting me out of her life.”

Chris shakes his head in disbelief, “I thought you stopped talking to her before the summer. I remember that you video chatted a few times after the break up, but I thought you were done by the spring.”

“We’d meet up whenever we were both home from school, and we texted for a while over the summer. Until she decided to cut me off again.” David’s eyebrows furrow in frustration, he begins to wring his hands together in agitation.

“Oh, man...” Chris looks from David to the crumpled picture in his hand. He’d had no idea that all this time, David still hadn’t moved on.

“Look,” Chris sets the picture aside and tries to catch David’s eye, “you can’t keep being so down on yourself man, you should start working out again and pick up your guitar, might help you feel better.”

“There’s no point. She’s never gonna take me back, she doesn’t even want me in her life anymore.” David sits up straight, finally looking Chris in the eye. His voice raises slightly.

“Getting in shape, writing the songs, it was all for her, man. And now it’s for nothing. She’ll never see the progress I’ve made, she’ll never hear the songs I wrote for her. I can’t stand to look at that stupid guitar.” He stands, cringing slightly from the ache of having his legs bent too long.

When he makes to head for the door, Chris stands and blocks his path.

“It doesn’t have to be for nothing,” Chris reaches and grabs David’s shoulders, as though he could channel hope into his friend through this simple contact. “Maybe you blew it with her, but there are other girls. And honestly man, her loss, ya know? If all this working out and getting healthy has really been for her then she clearly can’t see what’s good for her. Stop doing it for her and start doing it for yourself. You can’t just keep moping and feeling miserable all the time, you deserve to be happy.”

“But I don’t Chris!” David shakes out from under Chris’s grip. “That’s just it. It’s not her loss, she was right to cut me out. I don’t deserve her, I’m not sure I ever did.”

“Bullshit man, you’re a great guy and a great friend.”

“You don’t know what I did to her. I loved her more than I loved anyone, and I still did that to her…” David stays quiet for a few seconds, breathing heavily as though it took a lot out of him to admit this. “I don’t deserve another chance. With anyone.”

“What could *you* have possibly done that was so bad?” Chris takes a step back, now that it seems like David isn’t about to make a break for the door.

Silence settles in the room as David struggles to find a way to let out what’s been writhing inside him. His eyes dart around the room, looking anywhere but Chris.

“Do you remember those skits they made us watch at freshman orientation? About the consequences of drinking underage and different rules in the dorm halls?”

There's a pause as Chris tries to decide if this is David's desperate attempt to change the subject.

"Yeah, I mean I didn't pay much attention cause they were boring, but I remember them."

"There's one that I haven't been able to stop thinking about for months. Two people were playing a couple that had been together for a while. In the skit, one of them wanted to have sex but the other wasn't interested. The one who wanted to tried to convince the other, saying how good it would feel, saying they'd done it in the past, saying how much they wanted it. The other one tried to say no for a while, but eventually gave in. After the skit was done they said that that was a form of sexual abuse." David has grown distant, his eyes unfocused, like he's forgotten Chris is even there. Chris waits for David to explain, giving him time to come back to the present.

Finally, David seems to remember his surroundings. He runs a hand through his hair, his eyes darkening with anger. "I did that to her, Chris. For years. We were together for over three years, and the only complaint she ever had was that I pushed her too much. Not only that but she told me she felt guilty, *guilty*, that she couldn't want me more, that she didn't want to make out all the time like I did. I never pushed her for sex but we did other things...god, I'm glad she never agreed to have sex with me, who knows what I'd have done to her then." David's voice cracks here, as though this is the first time the thought occurred to him. The horror of his past is written across his face. "She told me over and over again how awful I made her feel, and I just kept doing it..."

David collapses into his desk chair, all energy seeped from him after revealing what he's harbored for so long. Chris stands stunned in place; he wasn't sure what he expected when he confronted his roommate earlier, but it wasn't this.

“I don't deserve a relationship...if I'm alone, I can't hurt anyone else the way I did her.”

The silence in the room is almost palpable after the whirlwind of emotion that just swept through. Chris works to process all he's just been told as it becomes clear David has no more to say on the matter. David reaches for the T.V. remote Chris had set aside and turns it back on. The sounds of Maxi fighting Natsu pull Chris from his reverie.

Chris glances at his watch and makes a decision. He steps forward and once again takes hold of the T.V. remote. The screen clicks to black.

“Dude, what the fuck?!” David jumps out of his chair, ready to fight Chris for the remote.

Chris quickly reaches the remote behind him so David can't snatch it, “I have to leave for my Rent rehearsal, come with me.”

“What, no, why would I—”

“Look man, that was a lot of crazy shit you just told me. And it's awful that it happened. But you realized you were wrong, and clearly you're sorry for it. There's no way you're gonna let it happen again. You were in high school man, you were still just a kid. You know better now. You deserve a second chance—not with her, but with someone new. And the first step to that is getting you out of this room and interacting with people again. C'mon, we could use an extra hand back stage, I know you used to do theater in high school.”

David stares at Chris in disbelief, controller hanging limply in his hand.

“Dude, you're making me late, let's go.”

After a few seconds, David sets down the controller and grabs his coat. As Chris heads out the door, David turns back into the room. The crumpled picture of the girl lies abandoned next to the T.V. where Chris had dropped it. David crosses to it and picks it up. He thinks of her. The way she looked sitting next to him on the front porch swing, eyes closed and enjoying the breeze through her hair. The way her face turned tomato red when she was embarrassed, which was often. And the last time he'd seen her, the hurt and desperation in her eyes when she'd confronted him, wet trails shining on her skin, not a trace of the smiling face he sees now. He refolds the picture and slips it back into his pocket. Taking a deep breath, he follows Chris out of the dorm.

## **Af Sanni**

### **“In Transition”**

There's certain moments in life that stick with us, forever etched into our heads, helping define who we are and how we see the world. There's also the moments that we try to force ourselves to forget, stacking new memories on top of them like office papers, hoping that the past remains buried under the weight. On rare occasions though, we're shaped by the moments that we run away from, but also defined by those same fragments of the past that we can never shake.

What seems like a million pieces of green glass decorate the pavement, glass that I'd later attribute to Heineken beers, an African father staple. My mother rushes back into the car with my younger sister and seats her in the minivan next to me and my brother. She's bleeding, side effects of having a beer bottle smashed against the side of her head. Past the driver's seat and out the window I can see my dad, furious and still holding whatever's left of the Heineken bottle. Time moved quickly as my mom pulled the minivan out of the Chicago driveway, and the only feeling I remember was fear.

That's how my earliest memory goes. I queried my mom about it once when I got older, to which she was surprised at my accurate recalling of the events. She pulled her wavy black hair back and flipped down her left ear to reveal a now-faint scar, right where the bottle made impact. She told me that my dad was crazy. I wanted to say something, to ask more questions, but the words never did end up coming out.

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Sometime shortly after our time living in Chicago and a short stint in New York, we ended up moving to a quaint housing complex called Ginger Ridge in Calumet City. It was me, my middle brother Wale, last-born sister Jade, and my mom. I was nine years old at the time and still struggling to speak fluent English after coming back from a year-long trip to Nigeria, where my brother and I were enrolled as students for a school year. We had to pick up Yoruba, the language named after the tribe that both of my parents were from, to function well in Nigeria. It was so much more different than English, the sounds were harsher, and one had to contort their lips to get some words right. We'd spend the days on my grandfather's estate, going to school and spending an hour each day afterwards learning to read Arabic and the Qur'an daily.

My grandfather had a farm on his estate in Aiyeye, which my grandmother tended to daily. There was the noisy chicken coop, the cages where they kept the dogs, and the swimming pool full of fish. My brother and I always would walk up to the mango tree and grab a fruit to eat, the sweet taste of a fresh mango being something that we could never replicate back home. I remember being in marvel as Christmas passed without snow ever touching the ground. In Nigeria, the "winter" was just as hot as July. Wale and I would run through the hallways of the massive complex that my grandfather owned, occasionally being scolded by an adult for causing a ruckus and disturbing the adults.

When we did get back to America, we were right back to being students. I eventually made my way to the fifth grade at Caroline Sibley elementary school, while my brother got to skip a grade and end up right behind me in the fourth grade. I'd always wanted to be a good student, even back then, but I never wanted to put in the work. I would be in classes and only pay half-attention, busy sketching away anime characters and coming up with my own stories. When we did get home, it was straight to the TV to watch Toonami on Cartoon Network, waiting for

shows like *Dragonball Z* and *Yu Yu Hakusho* to come on. After that, we'd eat and either play video games or wait for wrestling to air. The next morning, we'd watch *Power Rangers* and then head off for school. There was no time for homework.

Of course, my mom would disagree, and during every parent-teacher conference, she'd listen to teachers go on and on about how her son had the potential to be a good student but "Just doesn't try hard enough." In-between every couple of words spoken by my teachers, my mom would turn to look at me with a scowl. That *you're-about-to-get-your-ass-whooped* scowl. I'd be upset with my teachers for ratting me out, not knowing that they're setting me up for some painful punishment later in the day, but I soon got used to it. I became familiar with that word, potential.

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After sixth grade, my mom decided it was time for a change, so we packed up and moved to South Holland, a neighboring town to Calumet City. We lived in our own house on the corner of the street, where the bus stopped right in front of our door to pick students up in the morning. I enrolled at Coolidge Middle School, a school that I hated with every fiber of my being. My siblings and I didn't want to leave Calumet City, where we were familiar and had established our friend groups. I just didn't like the students at Coolidge, and they didn't like me either. Students were split into cliques based on attractiveness, smarts, or gang affiliation and I didn't identify with any of the three, so I just floated, struggling with being the new kid.

"Ah-foh-lah-rin," I'd say every time someone asked how to pronounce my name. They'd make us wear these heather gray shirts with "Coolidge" printed on the front and tiny red shorts for gym class, both of which I hated because I didn't go to the Laundromat frequently enough for

mine to not smell like sweaty gym socks. I spent middle school drifting further inwards and sketching more and more, which my grades suffered for. So the phone calls from teachers intensified, and I'd get sent home with more letters that required parental signature. I'd gotten smarter though. I'd beat my mom back home from school and clear the incriminating messages from teachers, that way I'd keep my punishments to a minimum.

As smart as I thought I was, there were some situations that a middle school student couldn't dodge. The most outstanding being the progress report. Teachers from each class compiled their grades for the quarter into a report and sent students home to bring back their parent's signature on the sheet by the end of the week. Earlier on in the school year, my mom would take us to the buffet to celebrate a good quarter, or let us buy a new game. We'd just recently got a Nintendo GameCube for transitioning from Calumet City to South Holland nicely, but now we were in the latter stages of the school year. My grades had slipped, and so did my brother's. Neither I nor Wale was sure how my mom would react, especially since the move wouldn't be an excuse since my younger sister Jade excelled in her classes.

Whenever parent-teacher conferences came around, my mom would always threaten us with the idea of calling our dad about our failures in school. It was the nuclear football of our Nigerian household. Failed a class? "I'm going to call your dad." Got into a fight? "I'm going to call your dad." When we showed our mom our progress reports for that school year, she relaxed in her bed, didn't yell or even get up to dole out a punishment. She simply spoke,

"I'm going to call your dad."

To the three of us, that was a god-sent reprieve. My father was a specter in the Sanni household, a ghost often heard about but never seen. We'd occasionally hear that he was in

Nigeria on business, or that he was in the city working on his real estate business. No matter what the news was though, he was never around. The last active memory I had was of him crashing my tenth birthday party with his most recent girlfriend, drawing the ire of my mom and causing confusion amongst the guests. Those words spoken by my mom were our get-out-of-jail-free cards. We went back to the basement to play *Super Smash Bros. Melee* like nothing happened and soon went to bed. By the time we got off the bus back from school the next day, I could hear my father's booming voice in the distance, like a siren.

He was towering at the wooden dining table in his black trench coat, speaking to my mom when all of us were called into the kitchen. He looked the same as he always did; a short fade for a haircut, 5 o'clock stubble, rough brown skin, and the deep lines into his forehead that became more pronounced when he got expressive. Our progress reports were out on the table in front of him. "What's up with your grades, man?" He asked in his growling voice. My dad had a penchant for saying "man" a lot.

Of course, we were too petrified to respond, which only further annoyed my dad. He'd go on to lecture me about how I was the oldest and named after him, how I should be setting an example for my siblings. He continued to ramble on until a pause where the air was still until he spoke the most dreadful words to hear in a Yoruba household,

"Get me the omorogun."

An omorogun is a wooden stick often used to stir food, what most people would refer to as a turning stick in America. But to us, an omorogun is the instrument of death, used to dish out punishment with force. If Satan existed, this was his trident. My brother was led down to the basement where we played *Super Smash Bros.* the previous night and took his hits, and then I

was called to the basement for my turn. My dad alternated between slapping my left and right palms, with enough force that he snapped the omorogun and had go back upstairs to get a second one. For the whole next day, I would sting in pain at even balling my hands into a fist. I couldn't draw or play video games until the weekend ended; my burning red palms a reminder of my lackadaisical approach to school.

I reminded myself that I didn't cry once throughout the whole thing.

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Early into my sophomore year at Thornwood High School in South Holland, my mom decided that it was time for a change again. As an adult now, I realize that the move was due to a combination of factors, one being that South Holland was becoming a more dangerous area to live in, another that my mom was no longer able to afford the price of a house on her own. My siblings and I didn't appreciate the magical single mother powers that our mom had enough at the time. My mom had another child in the year of 2005, my now-youngest half-sister Zainab, which changed the dynamic of our house. The stresses started piling up, taking care of a newborn daughter, covering the bills, trying to make sure the other three of us were still taken care of. She started to look less and less like the caramel-colored, always smiling, twenty-something year old mother that was in the framed photograph on our living room wall. She needed a change probably more than we did.

So we gathered as much of our stuff as we could, stuffing our video games and toys into boxes and trash bags, moving to a tame city a couple of hours north of our old house called Elgin. I hated this move more than any of the ones we'd made. Moving from Calumet City to South Holland involved switching schools, but the two towns at least neighbored each other.

Elgin was a whole galaxy away from everything I knew. I was leaving behind my recently-formed group of friends, leaving behind the after-school sneaking sessions into computer labs to play *Halo*, saying goodbye to my group of all-black friends that enjoyed *Naruto* and comics just as much as I did. I'd note to my siblings how eerily quiet Elgin was, and wondered what anyone did there for fun.

Even with the fresh start though, some old habits followed from our old house to our new townhouse. I finished my sophomore year at Elgin High school on a mediocre note, still in academic cruise control. I'd do just enough to maintain a "C" average, catching the ire of my mom, but not so much so that she'd detonate on me. She spent her free time watching Nigerian movies and on the phone with various Nigerian aunts and uncles, gossiping about who wore what to which party. My brother Wale and I started to enjoy being popular at Elgin High, our Fresh Prince-like high top fades making us instantly recognizable figures. My sister Jade was getting used to her new middle school and my youngest sibling Zainab was getting old enough to start going to school as well. South Holland moved further and further into the rear view mirror for us.

On a random day that fall my dad came to our townhouse to pick me up, he wanted me to meet my half-brother, who was a football player for the University of Illinois. I'd always heard about my other side of the family, the siblings on my dad's side that I never met. When I was at Thornwood High School, my half-brother played basketball and football for our in-conference rivals. I remember going home and getting online to check his ranking amongst the rest of the high school athletes, comparing myself to the number of stars that were illustrated next to his name. My mom always called my dad's side of the family "useless," a term that was applied to my dad as well. I didn't know much about them, but I wanted to meet him, and potentially

establish a connection. Maybe I could get tips on sports and becoming athletic, or maybe ask him questions about college. So I hopped into my dad's white Toyota truck, and off we went to Homewood.

When we got there after sunset, my half-brother got in the truck and greeted my dad, and responded to meeting me with "cool." I sat in the truck as they talked about grades, girlfriends, and sports. The highway lights would briefly bounce off my father's face as we progressed towards Champaign, as I sat in the backseat listening and watching the cars blow by. When we did finally get there to drop him off, it was like arriving at a kingdom. The buildings were massive and looked ancient, way fancier than anything that I'd seen in Elgin. The street lights illuminated the scene, burning the scene of sculpted statues and an amazing gym into my brain. My dad told me that if I focused in school, I could eventually go to a school like that.

Focusing in school wasn't particularly my forte though, and another quarter passed as I failed biology and a geometry course. My "cruise control" mode wasn't as effective as I thought, and I wasn't enough of a genius to walk into geometry tests blind and walk out with an "A." My mom, increasingly frustrated with how her punishments proved ineffective, picked up on a new threat that fall.

"I'm going to send you all to boarding school."

Occasionally, her voice would become shrill and she'd yell that out from her room whenever one of us screwed up. Sometimes she'd say it in Yoruba, which we'd respond to with the same blank expression that we'd have if it were in English. I was already on my second high school in less than three years; I had the leverage on my side. I knew my mom was tired of moving from place to place. There was no way she'd sign up for another transition. According to

*Zoey 101*, boarding school was an awesome place anyways. So the winter came as we ignored my mom's idle threats and continued to enjoy our time in Elgin. When the second week of December came, that Monday our mom told us that tomorrow would be our last day at Elgin High. On Tuesday, he had a half-day as the school dismissed us early because of our transferal. Wale, Jade, and I spent the rest of that day packing.

Mooseheart. That was the name of the boarding school that we were headed to, where they had students of all ages and even a zip code of their own. The next day, my father joined us as we began our first day on the campus, where I'd spend the next year-and-a-half before graduating in 2011.

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One the more recent times I saw my dad was the winter break of 2013, when it was New Year's Eve and also his birthday. I had just dropped out of the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, and had yet to tell my family at the time. We were slated to meet up with my dad and half-siblings in the city for a small get together, but I ended up totaling my mom's car on the highway before we ever made it there. I called my dad to let him know what happened, to which he asked if I was ok, which I replied "Yeah." Wale sat in the car with me, freezing from the cold and wondering how I'd explain to my mom that I crashed her car, as we waited for one of his friends to come pick us up from in front of the Eisenhower Tower in Maywood, Illinois, where we'd leave my mom's car to come back for. That was the last day that I cried.

Now, my mother calls me every once in a while to ask why I don't check up on her, to which I always reply that I'm busy with school. I'm never actually that busy, I'm just the worst

at reaching out to people. Years of moving around will do that to you, I suppose. My family is still in Elgin, where my mom lives with her boyfriend and Wale and Jade both attend the local community college. Every once in a while, Wale will call me to complain about how my mom is always sending him on some errand, how there's always a new goose chase when you live at the house. I tell him to focus in classes and transfer from Elgin Community College like I did, then he wouldn't have anyone telling him what to do. My youngest sister Zainab, now eleven years-old, sometimes sends me a snapchat of her enjoying her time schooling in Nigeria, which always puts a smile on my face.

## Rebecca Gonner

### “Mirror, Mirror, Fuck You”

My mother is helping me take in a shirt that is a bit too big on my slim frame. We stand in the kitchen by the oven as she pinches the thin straps of the top—a lacy black tank top meant to show just a hint of midriff that my b cup breasts fail to hold up properly—checking and adjusting till they sit at the proper length. The light through the large window over the sink shines on my porcelain white stomach, a strong contrast to the black top and one I hope to take full advantage of.

“Your stomach is so smooth and perfect. I used to have a stomach like that.” My mother’s comment comes suddenly, and I imagine my smooth, unblemished stomach next to my mother’s. Stretch marks, almost like scars, cover her torso, the signs of three kids now fully grown. The wrinkled skin sags across her midriff, excess now that no fetus grows in her. Bone white lines maim her, as though it were some beast that came from her rather than three human babies.

I never imagined my mother cared about looks. Growing up she’d been more concerned with teaching me cooking techniques or being sure I’d practiced for my piano lesson than helping me apply mascara or discussing how to properly coordinate outfits. In the nine years she was a stay at home mom, she always wore what was comfortable. You were more likely to find her in an old t-shirt with her hair pulled through a baseball cap doing yard work than putting on makeup or out shopping for clothes. Even when we went to the pool or out on the river as a family, she never tried to hide her stretch marks, wearing a two-piece swim suit and enjoying the sun with the rest of us. I never thought to question how she felt about the skin across her

stomach, the testament to her role as a mother. Her observation of my stomach is the first time I consider my mother could even have insecurities about her body.

I remember seeing pictures of my mother pregnant with my older brother. She's smiling, blue eyes shining, hair tied back from her face, the markings of age I've always known her to have nowhere to be seen. My brothers and I all got our skinny genes from her, and her belly was big as a watermelon on her slight frame. In the picture, her shirt covers her stomach, but I can imagine the skin stretched over my fetus brother. It's smooth and taut—it has yet to relax into the stretch marks I know and love.

“When you're pregnant,” she holds my straps in place and sticks a safety pin through the fabric, I tense, wanting to shrink away, fearing the prick of the sharp metal, “buy cocoa butter and spread it over your skin every day. It'll help it shrink back down after the birth so you won't have stretch marks like me.” She finishes securing my straps and sends me to change my shirt.

\* \* \*

It's picture day in elementary school. I'm wearing a purple dress with pink flowers—think tropical and you'll have the right idea. My brown hair is in its straight phase, which lasted from approximately age five to age eleven, and it hangs around my face from its center part, symmetrical and dull. The photographer waves me up to take my place. Yellow footprints on the floor show me the exact unnatural position they want us to stand in for optimal efficiency. I squirm under the bright lights, wishing I was back in the comfort of the shadows.

Though I can't see them with the lights blinding me, I know the rest of my classmates stand in the line awaiting their turn or cluster on the other side, having already stood for their picture. No one pays attention to me, but I feel the pressure of being in front of everyone nonetheless. The big camera stares at me with its giant lens like the Eye of Sauron, and I don't

want its gaze on me any more than Frodo did. It looks into my soul, finds every insecurity, and captures it on film. The tripod, the lights, the covers to soften the light, this equipment is a whole different species of camera than the handheld digital my mom brings to family gatherings.

From the shadows of that tower he calls a camera, the photographer asks me to place this arm here and tilt my head forward slightly, as though these slight shifts in position could mask my pointy elbows, curve-less waist, non-existent hips, and awkward smile. His assistant comes over to guide me because apparently I'm head tilting wrong. Her closeness makes me uncomfortable, and my desire not to be touched brings my head to the appropriately awkward angle. She also takes a moment to tuck my hair behind my ear, and I feel it bunched there, all crowded together, the strands too close for comfort. I resist the urge to push it back into place, because I know she'll only tuck it again. What in reality takes only two or three minutes seems to last at least ten. I finally form my face into what feels like a smile and the flash goes off. I unfurl myself from their careful staging, release my hairs from their captivity behind my ear, and quickly shuffle off to the right side to join the others who've completed the mandatory photo shoot.

I already know what I'll see in a few weeks when they distribute everyone's photos. The side of my face exposed by my tucked-away hair, lips technically turned up at the corners but nothing anyone would call a real smile, brown eyes staring with the slight discomfort of the whole experience. Pointy elbows, stick-like arms, fingers held at awkward angles meant to look natural. White skin, brown hair, and purple dress all contrast off each other, distinct. The teacher will hand out the envelopes, the cellophane panel on the front that allows you to view your photos will crinkle like a potato chip bag, I'll either flip it upside down or shove it in my backpack immediately while the other girls show theirs off. Their faces sit comfortably in front

of the camera. Her blond hair, her petite nose, her straight white teeth, her deep blue eyes, they all seem to have some feature worth showing off. No one asks to see mine, the blessing to the curse of not really having friends.

Unfortunately for me, my parents are the type to buy those photo frame Christmas ornaments for every school year. They come in packs of three, so it's perfect, one for me and each of my brothers. My discomfort each picture day is proudly displayed in the torsos of angels and faces of snowmen, framed by snowflakes and penguin stomachs. They aren't all bad. I was cute in kindergarten, with my two long pigtails perched high on my head and my smile excited and genuine. Fifth grade, when I cut my hair to the chin to donate, made a bit of a comeback as well. For the most part, though, I've lovingly labeled years seven through eighteen of my life as "the awkward years." And they hang from the branches of our artificial tree each winter for everyone to see (to make matters worse, we have a rotating stand, so there's no hope of hiding the worst ones in the back). The gangly hair, the crooked glasses, the teeth-less smiles, all celebrated with Christmas cheer. My years of quickly shoving my school photos into hiding was for naught. My insecurities will be seen, whether I like it or not.

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Purple silk swishes around my legs as I twist back and forth in my dress, the light catching on the fabric as it folds and expands with the shifts in motion. It isn't really silk, there's no way our deteriorating, private high school could afford such luxuries, but it's shiny and smooth so that's what I call it. The deep purple skirt connects to the elaborately beaded bodice that ensnares my torso; thankfully the boning that holds the top up only occasionally pokes me uncomfortably. I glance around the high school cafeteria, temporarily our show choir practice space, at the other girls dressed the same as me. There's a group of them chatting just a few feet

away. They're all so pretty. I don't know how I always manage to find myself surrounded by beautiful people. The purple of their dresses stands out vividly against the pale pink and tan tiles of the floor and the plain white cinderblock walls. As the boys continue to practice their number on the risers, I wander closer to the girls near me to hear what they are talking about. I may be quiet and shy, but I'm always listening.

"Having these tights rolled up around my thighs always makes me feel so fat," Christina complains, flicking back her straight brown hair and lifting her purple hem to display the slight bulging of her thigh where she's rolled the black footless tights up. Our outfit for the second half of the show includes black tights, but we don't have time to pull on a pair of tights while we frantically change dresses and shoes during the guys' number, so our director came up with the solution of buying footless tights that we can roll up under our first dresses so they won't be seen, then quickly pull down during our costume change to be ready for the second dresses. It isn't the most comfortable, and rolling the tights up is a pain, but it's efficient.

"Everyone's thighs bulge, Christina, it doesn't mean you're fat." Melissa: blond hair, blue eyes, long eyelashes, nose like a Who straight out of *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, and sweetheart of the Wahlert Catholic High School music department. As the other girls in the group hoist their skirts to show that she's right, I lift mine to check as well. Two skinny legs peek back at me shyly, the black fabric lashed around them like a death grip, the bottom hems likely wondering why they are forced to accommodate thighs when all they signed up for was ankles. I quickly drop my skirt hem again and try not to draw attention to myself. I don't quite succeed.

"Hold up, uh-uh, not everyone," proclaims Emily, a beautiful, curvy girl a year older than me who's always placed in the back of our formations "because she has good arms," which is

what they say to console girls who are always placed in the back. She's the best at doing show choir hair (a large poof surrounded by voluminous curls) and always offers to help the other girls when her blond hair is done (she's a bit of a mom like that). You can find her waving a curling iron around someone or another's head in the home room at every competition, the smell of hairspray thick around her. "Rebecca Gonner's thighs don't bulge at all."

I shift uncomfortably as all eyes turn to me, surprised and perhaps slightly accusing, although that could just be my imagination. To me they seem as a pack of wolves: strong, intimidating, focused single-mindedly on their target.

"Well," Christina gestures to me impatiently, "let's see it." Despite being only slightly over five feet, Christina has a presence that is much bigger. She can intimidate when she wants to and she knows it. Her face has strong lines: a straight nose and strong jaw that mean business. When she turns her eyes to you, you feel it. Her body is filled out comfortably, she is sturdy. As someone who can be pushed off balance by a strong breeze, I envy her.

Through the discomfort of so much attention, I manage to reluctantly lift my hem, revealing perfectly straight, bulge-less thighs.

"Wow," Melissa breathes as sighs of envy roll through the group, "what I wouldn't give to have legs as skinny as yours."

"If I had legs like that I'd feel comfortable wearing short shorts!" chimes another girl.

"Do you even have a lick of fat on you?" Emily places her hands on her hips in disbelief.

A familiar guilt crawls its way through my veins. The guilt of being born skinny. The guilt of having what everyone else seems to want so desperately. Sometimes it feels like my presence, my mere existence, makes other girls blind to how beautiful they are. Well, not my

existence, more the existence of my skinny. If they looked through my eyes, though, they'd see it. They'd see the presence they have, the way an eye is drawn to them when they enter a room. They'd see the beauty in their curves and the way they fill out the choreography. Their bodies move to the music in a way mine never can; my lanky limbs lack the substance to look anything but awkward. These thoughts run through my head, but I remain silent. I can't tell them of their beauty. No one wants to listen to the skinniest girl in the room talk about body image.

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A stack of textbooks clutched to my chest, I try to keep my head down as I make my way through the high school hallways. My unruly dark hair falls in my face, its frizzy, wild thickness making a perfect curtain to hide behind. I can feel every grain of dirt on the linoleum floors through these black flats, but there was no way I was going to wear heels at school all day for one choir performance in the afternoon. I'm achingly aware of how I stand out in my dark purple blouse and black skirt surrounded by the school dress code: collared polo shirt of any solid color, and khaki, navy, or black slacks. I shift my books to one arm and tug down on my skirt with the other, trying to keep it at the regulatory three inches from the knee, but it's hard when it creeps up with every step I take.

I reach my Spanish classroom and head to my desk as students chatter around me. When I reach the fifth desk over and third desk back, however, something's not quite right. It's occupied. Staring back at me from my desk are blue eyes under furrowed brows, a flat nose on a square face over the broad shoulders of a high school football player. Eleven years has not been long enough for me to get over my discomfort around Nathan Reimer, but then elementary school bullies tend to have that effect.

I wait for him to move: we both know that's my desk he's sitting in. He stares at me, eyebrows drawing together, and my mask of hair isn't enough to keep me hidden from his scrutiny.

“What's wrong with your face?”

I attempt to shift my hair further in front of my face while also maintaining eye contact, a difficult task. I don't want him to have the satisfaction of thinking he's getting to me.

When I pulled my mom's makeup out from under the bathroom sink this morning, I was already dreading having to wear it on my face all day. Only the insistence of Ms. Mumm, the choir director, that all the girls wear makeup during performances convinced me to attempt applying any cosmetic concoction to my face. Despite the fact that she owns the makeup, my mother is no help; I inherited my lack of interest or talent for fashion of any sort from her. So it was on my own that I pulled out the eyeliner, mascara, and red lipstick that morning and began painstakingly applying it to my face. With my glasses settled on the side of the sink and my face leaned three inches from the mirror, breath fogging the glass with every exhale, I'd done my best to line my eyes, darken my lashes, and paint my lips as subtly and effectively as my limited skill could manage. More of my time was spent wiping mascara off my nose or fixing mistakes in my eyeliner than actually properly putting the makeup on my face. All my attempts at subtlety were useless, and I knew it. The fact that I never wear makeup was enough to make it glaringly obvious when I did, but my porcelain white skin certainly didn't help by contrasting with the red on my mouth and black on my eyes. This school-wide choir concert was forcing me to do one thing I try most to avoid: draw attention to myself.

“Oh my god Nathan, what is wrong with you?” Marissa’s shocked face rises to her almost-six-feet of height as she stands up from her desk. The only time she seems comfortable with her height is when she’s on the basketball or volleyball court.

I can feel my face heating from embarrassment as I pray this will all be over soon and wish that I were anywhere but here.

“What?” Nathan leans back in my chair from the verbal attack, his face incredulous and his arms rising to his defense.

“Don’t listen to him Rebecca, you look fine.” Emma flicks her wavy brown hair out of her round face. She has the prettiest smile, her dimples emphasize the apples of her cheeks which frame her nose perfectly. Her hazel eyes look shocked, but her concerned glance can’t settle the unease in my stomach. I didn’t want to wear this makeup. I didn’t want to dress up for class today. All I want is what I want every day: to be left alone.

Nathan finally shoves out of my seat with a huff and moves away. I quickly fill the space he’s evacuated and do my best to hide behind my stack of textbooks that I’ve finally placed on the desk. As I silently wait for class to start, I count down the minutes until I can take this mess off my face.

\* \* \*

They tell me the face that stares back at me in the mirror is mine. All that it’s attached to as well. I can’t say I disagree. The girl across from me in the full-length mirror attached to my dorm room door moves when I move, how I move. We are in perfect unison, but I am the one in control. The girl in the mirror is pretty, beautiful even. So I guess I am too. The girl in the mirror has a smile that makes others feel happy inside, most can’t help but smile along. Including me. She’s tall and thin, but not awkward, most of the time. There are moments, like when she goes to

the gym (which she hates doing but does to spend time with a friend) that the girl in the mirror once again feels trapped by pointy elbows, skinny legs, clunky feet. Usually in these moments, I try not to look, to save the girl in the mirror the discomfort, but I don't always succeed.

Most of the time, though, the girl in the mirror looks confident. It's these times that I find I can't stop looking at her. She smiles, sticks out her tongue, strikes a pose some might call sexy, others might call goofy. She angles her shoulders and tilts her head slightly, so I can admire the delicate clavicles and graceful neck that rises to a small chin and feminine face. She loves when she gets to show off her legs, especially in a tight black skirt that hugs her hips and heels to make her legs look just that much longer. That girl is an attractive young woman, and I'm not entirely sure where she came from, but I'm glad she did.

Unfortunately this girl, with all her confidence, is trapped in the mirror. I rely on the looking glass to show me she's there, that she's real, that she's me. And by this reliance, I too am trapped. Sometimes I wish I could escape it, that I could say "Fuck you, mirror" and walk away, and never need to look again. That I could know that she's there without her looking back at me. That I could trust that I'm not still that elementary school girl standing on the yellow feet, uncomfortable in front of the camera. Still, I am trapped, and I feel it every time my eye is drawn to a reflective surface, in my need to check, to be sure she's still there, the girl in the mirror with the confident smile.

**Sarah Radtke**

“Untitled”

**Allen Dullin**

“After the Fire”

## **Cheyenne Rideaux**

### **“Neverland”**

She smiled up at the boy as he floated outside of her window. His ageless face smiling at her, like a child staring at a new playmate.

“Are you ready to go?” He asked innocently. She nodded her head, taking a moment to look back into the room that she would be leaving behind. The room she stayed in was barely a room at all. The wooden floorboards were dark in some spots from water or piss. The wallpaper was peeling. Her bed was a single, dingy, mattress that laid in a corner on the floor.

The boy kept his hand stretched towards her, waiting patiently.

“They call me Peter. Come with me, I promise you will never feel lonely again,” he whispered. Without another moment’s hesitation, she took his hand and followed him out of the window, trusting him to catch her. Her foot slipped out of the window, pulling her body fully out like a rag doll. For a brief moment, she imagined herself falling, plummeting to the world below. However, she remained floating in the air. She let out a breath that she did not know she was holding, feeling as though she let go of the only anchor that was keeping her on the ground. Like a balloon, she floated, kept out of the clouds only by the hand that held hers tightly.

The two of them soared above the city life, looking down at all the corroded buildings and garbage that covered the ground. A chill filled her as she soared through the air, but inside she could feel nothing but a burning fire. She stared at the people, watching as their faces showed all the dreams that they once had. There was a lifelessness about the way they walked; looking like robots from high above. Her heart filled with sorrow, but that was quickly erased by the adrenaline that flowed through her the higher she flew. She held on to the boy’s hand tightly, flying towards the stars as fast as she possibly could. Her heart pounded in her popping ears as she reached the

brightest star in the sky. She looked at it with wonder, letting it blind her as the two of them soared to the new world.

When the light dimmed, she was in a whole new world. The bright green grass contrasted with the vibrant blue of the ocean. The sun beamed down on her, warming her entire body like a warm hug. Mermaids and fairies flew around them, giggling a musical sound that filled her with ease. She smiled, smiling brighter than she knew possible. This world showed her something she never thought she would see again.

Beauty.

However, just as soon as she had caught a glimpse at the perfect world, she felt her body begin to sway in her spot; feeling the adrenaline start to slowly fade.

"It looks like you are getting ready to go home. Do you want to return?"

She looked at the ageless boy. She nodded her head desperately, already dreading the thought of leaving her new home. Peter smiled, placing his hand on her cheek as he stared at her with his dark eyes. "Then find me. You know exactly where I will be. The only rule I have, don't let anyone know. We already have Captain Hook after us," he instructed her.

"Yes sir, I promise. I won't tell a soul about you," she promised in a child-like voice, a baby girl desperate for her father's approval. He smirked, leaning down and pressing a kiss against her forehead just as the world started to fade away.

She awoke, her head spun as she tried to look around the room. The smell of mold, piss, and smoke filled her nostrils, making her gag. The room was too dim to actually see anything. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dimness, but as soon as they did, she wished they hadn't. The beauty from her dream- or rather, her hallucination- was long gone. An image of a

dank room filled with shabby mattresses and people lying amongst each other like a pit of snakes made her skin crawl momentarily. Rolling over, her skin scratched against the mattress she laid on. She would most likely need a shot if it broke the skin.

Oddly enough, she was not surprised to see the man that was beside her. His back was towards her, making it hard to catch a glimpse at his face. However, she knew very well that even if she could see his face, she would not recognize him. The air around her was stuffy, as though it was filled with smoke. With a deep breath, she brought herself up to a sitting position. Her hand rested on her chest as she attempted to take in even breaths. *Just like last time.* She made the mental note. She always found the morning after the hardest to deal with.

She glanced around. There was a cover, slightly wet, draped over her body in a way that covered a majority of it. With shaky hands, she lifted the blanket. To her relief, she was still wearing her short black dress and green thong. Despite not having a bra on, she figured it could be far worse.

Her legs wobbled beneath her, giving out as she took a step towards the window. The only thought on her mind now was the memory of her vivid dream world. Peter, standing at the window, just as she had wished all those years ago. But those childhood stories were lost on her long ago. This time, she did not bother to get up. She laid back on the ground, shivering as her insides began to burn. The high from last night was quickly fading, leaving her with the aftermath she knew too well. Her hand flew up to scratch at her arm, almost clawing at it as she tried to satisfy the itching sensation that ran through her.

“Nyx? Are you here?” A voice asked from the other side of the door. She froze, her mind flashing quickly to an image of the storybook Captain Hook. The people around her did not move though, most likely still on their own high, or just dead. It was near impossible to tell. She dragged

herself into the corner, keeping as still as possible as she tried to act as though she were invisible. But it was too late. The door opened and she was being stared at by a familiar face.

Sal stared down at her with worried eyes. He took one whiff of the room and was taken aback, pulling his shirt up in an attempt to cover his nostrils from the awful smell. He forced himself to step into the room, trying to carefully step over the dark, wet spots on the wood while avoiding a lanky brunette girl, possibly a few years younger than Nyx, who was lying with the needle still lodged in her arm. He placed his free hand on Nyx's arm and hoisted her up to her feet.

She didn't try to pull away as he took her out of the room and into the rest of the torn down house. Once out of the room, he turned to stare at her with the same concern that was painted on his face daily. "Nyx, do you know how worried I've been for you? What the fuck are you doing here, again? Squatting, really?" He asked in a rushed voice. She stared back at him, trying to focus on his words. Her head still swam, far off in the ocean of Neverland. He could tell she was not fully there, throwing his hands up in the air in a gesture of giving up.

A long beat of silence passed before he was able to look at her again. This time, his gaze dropped to her arm, sighing as soon as he saw all the marks that scarred her once perfect skin. "Shit, this again? Did you not learn anything from mom?"

She pulled her arm away violently. "Don't fucking compare me to that woman!" She yelled at him. She wanted to say more, but just shook her head, "I don't need this. I was fine. I was with someone who understood me, why did you take me away?" She asked in a wavering voice. The boy looked back into the room, his eyes falling on the man who laid in the bed she once occupied.

"Who him? Who the fuck has you on smack this time? I know drugs make you do shit, but this..." Sal began to say, but he let the words fall and hang in the space between the two of them.

"Forget it, you wouldn't get it."

“Then tell me. Do you want to be like mom? Is that it? You want to leave?”

She shook her head, closing her eyes as she tried to remember the Neverland she just abandoned. That was where she wanted to be. He was right, but he was wrong. “No, no, no, no, I just need to go back. I need to find Peter,” she was speaking erratically as she tried to pull away from her brother. He reached out, holding her tightly against him as she tried to leave. But she screamed, struggling against him as her insides began to burn even more. She felt like she was on fire, needing to claw at her skin that encased the fire. “Listen, I don’t want to be like mom. I don’t want to be in the same situation as her. I just... I need help...”

“Let me help you. Give me a chance. I can’t lose you like we did mom,” he said in a desperate voice. Nyx nodded her head, wiping the tears that started to force their way to the corners of her eyes from the pain of her short withdrawal.

“Okay... okay, you can help me. Just let me wash this shit off my face.” She saw the skepticism on Sal’s face, but she tried to keep her face straight. Slowly, he began to back up, watching carefully as she made her way towards the bathroom. She walked to the bathroom, turning back for only a moment to give her brother a quick, reassuring smile.

As soon as the door was closed, she turned on the faucet, letting the sound fill the room. She stared straight ahead at the dingy window on the other side of the room. *Why are you doing this? Go back to him*, she thought to herself. She froze, staring out the window at the dark sky on the other side. Just as she was beginning to doubt her decision, the burning sensation that had started in her arm began to spread through her body, making her feel as though she was standing directly in a fire. Without any more hesitation, she ran to the window and yanked it up. Although the opening was small, she managed to barely wiggle her way out. She fell to the ground, pulling herself to her shaky legs.

She ran through the town. It looked so different from last night. When she had soared over it, all the darkness and garbage seemed to be beautiful in its own way. Now that she was amongst the trash, she felt disgusted. Everything around her mirrored the black gunk that sloshed within her. The darkness in her mind came to life in the streets of the city. She passed by the hookers, a dark version of the mermaids she had seen in Neverland. The gang children; like the fairies that had giggled so sweetly in her ears. She closed her eyes, trying to hold onto the thought of Neverland as she ran.

She shook the thoughts off, trying to shake the image of Neverland back into her mind. She ran down West Madison street, reaching the intersection of South Kenton avenue. Her feet forced her forward towards the West Garfield Park district, despite her brain begging her to stop. She never went through the area, finding anyway she could to avoid it. She couldn't go through it.

*“Just wait here with your brother. I will... mommy will be right back,” the woman in front of her said. Sal held his sister's hand tightly as they stood at the entrance of a local ice cream shop. She could remember that very moment. The woman had brought the two of them there in the middle of June, promising to give them a good day since school was over. Sal was 18 and Nyx had just turned 12. She nodded her head obediently as she stared at the glossy look on the woman's face. The woman smiled, scratching at her arm as she looked around nervously. Sal's face refused to show any sort of emotion. Nyx knew what that meant. He was angry. He always knew better than her.*

*“I'll be right back, I promise,” the woman spoke once more. Nyx continued to nod her head, but it felt robotic the longer the woman stood before her.*

*Sal placed his arm over her shoulder, pulling her against his side. "Okay, whatever you say. We will be right here," he told the woman in a cold tone. She reached out to touch his cheek, but let her hand drop inches away.*

*The day was long as they stood there. Waiting.*

She pushed the thought away as violently as she could. She had to forget. She needed to forget. She would find any means to erase the memories, like always.

When she reached the abandoned railroad, she ran towards the cave-like entrance. "Peter, Peter!" She called out desperately. From somewhere in the darkness, she saw a shadow move. Slowly, the boy-man appeared, smiling at her with a wide smile. He came up to her, taking her in his arms. She melted at his touch, feeling safe again.

"I need to go back. I need to get back," she told him desperately. He took her hand, pulling her further into the railway.

"You know; it will cost you to go to paradise. The trip isn't cheap," he informed her as he rummaged in his pockets. He pulled out a little packet of what looked like yellow glitter. *Pixie dust*. She smiled, reaching out towards it, only for it to be pulled away. "It's going to cost you." Peter started to reach towards her with his free hand. His fingers slowly closed around the hem of her dress. She nodded, not caring as his hand roamed over her body, inching its way towards her thong.

"The dust first," she said as she reached for it again. He chuckled, a musical sound like the fairies. He pulled away from her, digging into his other pocket to pull out an old needle. He filled it with the pixie dust and took out a small elastic from his back pocket. She smiled brighter, the heat rushing to her face. Slowly, the fire returned to her core, no longer painfully burning as she realized she would get what she needed.

“Are you ready to go?” He asked, just as he had at her window. She nodded her head just as eagerly as she had before.

Neverland was just as she had remembered. All the colors shone like a child’s nursery painting. She stared up at the bright sun that shone down on her as she sat on the sand of the beach. The mermaids swam near her, trying to entice her to take a dip with them, while the fairies flew above her and urged her to join them high above. But no matter how peaceful the world around her seemed, there was something wrong.

The fire inside her was dim. All she felt was a cold chill. A freezing that would not leave, no matter how bright the sun shone above her. Her body shook on the sand, thrashing slightly as she felt sick.

The world around her shook, disappearing briefly to be replaced by the railway. Her vision was blurry, but she could barely make out the image of Peter being pressed against the wall by a police officer.

“How could you do this, you bitch? Did you call them? You fucking brought the cops!” Peter yelled towards her. She could barely comprehend his words while her name was shouted and bounced off the walls of the abandoned tunnel. Sal ran towards her, pulling her head up so it was resting on his knees while he cried. She could not hear what he was saying though. For the first time, she felt scared. Scared of what was next to come. Scared it would be too late. Scared of the fire going out.

Word: 2810

**Matt Gamperl**

“Yawning Pines”

“Kristian, I need help.”

The phone felt cold in his hands. He couldn't even focus on the text because he had just woken up. *Stupid fucker, what did she do now?*

“What do you need now? Do you have any clue what time it is?”

“meet me a little past 740 blackjack road now please.”

*Seriously, blackjack road? That's like a 40-minute drive from here. I'd have to go all the way across the bridge into Illinois to rescue her bitch ass.*

“Elizabeth please tell me what happened.”

“Just meet me there.”

“Alright I'll be right there. DON'T MOVE.”

He hopped out of bed and started to dress. The snow wasn't that bad, but there was enough to make him throw on a pair of boots. *What could she possibly need that she needed to wake me up at 2 in the morning for some stupid bullshit?* He ran outside to turn his car on, hoping that the minute he was giving it to heat up would be enough that it wouldn't feel like the arctic inside. He grabbed gloves, a hat, and his jacket and prepared to make the 40-minute trip out to Blackjack road.

The little blue Ford Focus was used to this trip, though usually it was with a pair of skis, some poles, and a little green backpack with “ULLR” written on the front of it, destined for the small ski resort that has since seen better days. Something was off with the way Elizabeth was texting that rubbed him the wrong way. *She better not be using again.* Something didn't seem right about those texts. *And why would she bring me all the way out to Blackjack road? Fuck it,*

*I'll find out soon enough.*

He looked at the digital clock that constantly flashed in the middle of his dashboard. 2:32 AM, only 20 or so more miles before he found out what the big deal was. At least by this point his beat up sedan was spouting warm air so it started to feel a little like fall inside the car.

Across the Mississippi lay a sleepy little northern Illinois town that blossomed during the winter due to the ski resort and stagnated the rest of the year. At this time of night there was nobody else out, all having better judgment than himself at this current moment. Driving a little faster than the posted speed limit, he passed through the floodgates that stood guard outside of the main road leading into town, ever ready to stand between the river and the town built around it. Darkness had taken hold of the small town, not a light to be seen amongst the buildings adorning the main road, nor on the church that stood atop the hill looking down at the town. Almost as soon as he entered, he was already through the sleepy town. He pulled his phone out, *may as well text Elizabeth and let her know where I am.*

“Almost there. Only about 10 more miles down US 20. See you soon.” His fingers buzzed over the digital keyboard. He knew it wasn't smart, the roads were already slick and he couldn't see well with the snow falling in sheets now. Kristian couldn't care less, the mystery of this whole thing now fully engulfing him. All he wanted to do at that moment was find out why he was driving down a dead county road at 3 in the morning. He wasn't even all that mad, just intrigued. The sign for Blackhawk drive appeared on his left, and his destination was getting closer.

After what seemed like forever he finally was getting close to where Elizabeth had said she wanted to meet. The secluded set of trees that crowded along the edges of the county road seemed almost ready to swallow it, wiping the small road from all existence. Snow began to fall

even more abundantly, making the large pine trees look like shadows, looming over him with a sense of foreboding. He saw the big black SUV Elizabeth always drove pulled over to the side of the road, though the skids in the snow clearly showed it wasn't on purpose. Kristian turned down the Mumford and Sons he was blasting to better concentrate on what was happening, slowing the car down enough that the Mjolnir hanging down from the rearview mirror started to sway back and forth with some force. He sat for a moment and took a breath.

Kristian opened the door and exited the vehicle. Suddenly, Elizabeth came running from the SUV and threw her arms around him.

“Finally. I thought you were gonna ditch me.”

“Of course not.” He could smell the alcohol coming off her almost from the moment she got within arms reach. *Shit, it's even been an hour since she first messaged me. She must be trashed. There goes her parole.*

Kristian broke away from the hug and stared her in the eyes, his hands bracing her at her shoulders to make sure she didn't fall.

“Elizabeth what's goin' on? Why do you need me out here?”

Her eyes darted away from his as soon as the question left his lips, taking it as a veiled accusation that only she could shed light on.

“A couple guys and I went down to that biker bar just off US 84 and I may have gotten a little tipsy before I left.”

“Did you join in any drug use? You know you can't keep doing that shit.”

“No, no I swear I haven't.” She shook her head violently while she said that.

Kristian immediately pushed her against the car and lifted up her sleeves, looking for any recent track marks. Scanning both her arms he couldn't find anything new, so he moved his

focus to her hands. The space between fingers was a common place to shoot up once the veins in the arms collapse. *Nothing there either. At least she isn't back on the H.*

“You didn't ingest any other drugs did you?”

“Kristian I swear all I did was drink.”

He could tell by the tone of her voice she was being honest.

“Do you need a ride? I can park the truck a little farther off the road and we can get it in the morning.”

“Ya... but I need something else too.”

Weary, Kristian looked over at her shivering in the oversized hoody, her arms crossed with the snow piling up on her.

“What is it?”

“There was an accident.”

Kristian started to look around and could see what he had missed before: little scratches on her face that would have been barely noticeable, little droplets of blood in the snow from where she must have been pacing, and a small off colored patch of skin beneath her nose where she must have wiped some blood away from.

“What happened? Move over to the passenger side of my vehicle so you can get out of the cold”

As they moved towards the car he could see what looked like an almost larger pool of blood forming near the tree line about five feet from the road. Pausing, he opened her door and then moved towards where the puddle was forming. Sensing he was catching on, Elizabeth jumped up. Stumbling out of the vehicle, she slowly made her way towards him.

“Kristian, I hit someone on a bike going the other way.” She bit her lip the way she always did when she knows she’s in trouble. A tear formed and fell slowly down her face. He kept walking, intent on finding out what exactly had happened.

There, about twenty feet in front of the SUV, was the metal skeleton of a motorcycle with a skid leading into the wood line. Kristian stopped, stuck between the possible body of a biker and Elizabeth. Turning slightly, he looked back at Elizabeth.

“Kristian can we please just go.” She knew this would mean jail time. The tire marks in the snow prove she swerved her car numerous times before impacting the bike.

“Elizabeth can you please sit in the car. I’ll be back in a second, don’t worry.” Kristian remembered a time when they would have done anything for each other, and he still would. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, knowing that what he was going to do was the right thing.

After making the call, he went to check on the biker. Laying face down in the snowy ground was a man dressed in jeans and an 80’s style pink parachute jacket. The wind had picked up at this point causing the snow to blow around in a tornado like fashion, the trees making a moaning, yawning tone as they swayed around him. He felt the guys neck for a pulse, and received an icy touch in response. *The man had obviously been dead for a while, probably having bled out while she was sending me the initial texts.* He walked back to the car and sat down in the driver’s seat.

“Hey Liz remember when we first met? It was some stupid move in day party freshman year, remember that? And then Sam introduced all of us?”

“Fuck ya, haha! Then all ten or so of us went upstairs and watched Game of Thrones.”

“Ya, fuck that seemed so long ago. What’s it now, six years?” Kristian pulled a pack of Turkish Royal cigarettes from inside the driver side door and stuck the carton up to his mouth, pulling it away to reveal one stuck in his big mouth. Looking over, he offered one to Elizabeth who gladly accepts. The sound of sirens could be heard in the distance as the zippo flicked to life.

**Allison Hartman**

“We Grew Up”

We grew up  
Filling our bellies with sweetcorn and watermelon  
Crops that flourished in the floodplain’s fertile soil  
But the fruits of our neighbor’s labor sloshed in me  
As though I was empty, a vessel to be filled  
You didn’t tell me what I was missing

We grew up  
Untethered by parental definition of roles  
Throwing rocks, stomping in the Mississippi’s mud  
Screeching with pure joy as we ran in summer storms  
We sang songs sung by men in musicals  
Dressed up as warriors for Halloween  
I justified it, saying there were no good girl characters

We grew up  
And rounded out, smoothed out  
Like the pebbles my sisters skipped across lakes  
At your urging, I cut my hair  
But told everyone it was for convenience  
Told myself that was the only reason  
You were real to me  
But to others, your inability to seesaw  
Was evidence against your existence  
An existence that even to me  
Eventually faded  
As I explored a newfound tangible world

We grew up  
In different states  
But went to school in the same riverside city  
Where the streets downtown had organized names  
We didn’t know them, but still knew where they went  
Ironic then, that in high school we got lost  
Long enough for the sun to chastise me  
Slap my bared shoulders for wearing spaghetti straps  
We never listened to her  
Unlike the high school  
We felt comfortable  
Expressing ourselves through exposed paper skin

We grew up  
Playing male-led video games

Too stubborn to back down  
We never tempered or tethered our tongues  
Instead, we lashed them like silver whips  
Targeting anything and everything  
United in our core desire to pick a fight with injustice

We grew up  
Went our separate ways  
To California, Colorado, Illinois, Wisconsin  
You were my sister  
Not by blood, but by bond  
A bond strengthened  
When I took my first hesitant steps outside a closet  
To walk toward you  
That baggy, stained shirt you gave me  
Somehow still smells like you, though it's been years  
And on days when I miss you so much it hurts  
I wonder if I am still your sister  
The girl you knew is no longer me

We grew up  
Struggling to find ourselves  
I hoard sundresses and smell like vanilla sugar  
I have two pairs of steel-toed boots and an immunity to poison ivy  
The first time we met  
I knew who I was, but not what I was missing  
You knew what you were missing, but not who you were

We grew up  
Joined at the hips, not the lips  
Painting colors on our cheeks  
Decked out in bright stripes  
Our bodies proud flags on parade  
On Valentine's Day, your gift to me  
Was a whisper  
That you had maybe, finally found who you were  
I was still empty  
But you would help me find what I was missing

We grew up  
Shunning the societal rules and roles  
Sticking our tongues out at pronouns and significant others  
Content to define ourselves our way  
He, she, they, them  
Boyfriend, girlfriend, yes, no  
You were something else

Someone new and more  
Unsure in your footing, which I had only ever seen in me  
You've never played in Iowan floodwaters  
But I still borrow your laugh  
For late night delirious jokes  
While I intertwine your fingers and mine

We grew up  
Watched others do the same  
Into men, women, both, neither.

I grew up  
But don't know what I grew into.

## Allison Hartman

“Scarred”

Like everyone else, I have scars

From the day I was born, I collected them like limited edition lunchboxes  
My favorite pair of brown sandals hide them  
Where my dog dragged her leash across my ankle  
Where I got stitches for the first time  
Where I stepped on a comb that went right through my foot

My epidermal scars are battle wounds, reminders that I’m somehow still alive  
After mishaps and mess-ups and mistakes  
They aren’t the scars of a veteran, but of someone who never went to war in the first place  
Cutesy circles and stripes

I keep the ugly ones buried under my skin  
The scars that pump the blood in my cardiac muscle  
The scars that control my emotions, my thoughts, in my grey matter  
The scars that control how see, how I hear, how I speak  
The scars that prove I was on the front line  
Stay hidden  
Because no one would want someone who had to stitch themselves together  
No one would want someone who is still bleeding

I stopped wondering why the world treated me poorly  
And traded it for wondering why the world treats me so well  
I no longer question what I did to deserve heartbreak  
But question what I did to deserve love  
“What did I do to deserve this?” is a scar  
That I may never be able to reclaim

I have long accepted the beauty of the world  
That people can be good, that they can be bad, that they can be neither, that they can be both  
But when someone shows kindness to me  
I feel born anew  
With the knowledge that someone has given me  
Basic human decency

When someone says my name with warmth  
Something deep within me hums harmoniously  
When someone approaches me first  
My arteries dance the Charleston  
When someone leaps to my defense  
I feel my heart stop and drop

And roll  
Building up speed  
Running along my axons, my capillaries, my nerves and tendons and tissues  
Crashing over all of my scars, but for once  
The phantom pains don't throb  
This sweet stimulation  
Makes them sing

I will always take years to trust someone fully  
I will always be ready to leave someone behind  
I will always be amazed  
By kindness and consideration and caring  
By the idea that I am worth befriending, worth loving, worthwhile

I take what I can get  
I embrace the sugary sensation of validation my scars left behind  
I respond to the red flags that make them wince in memoriam  
I allow myself one person, two, three, to see my scars  
My ugly scars  
The throbbing, jagged marks across my heart, my mind, my eyes and ears and mouth  
The scars that sometimes, stop bleeding

We all have scars  
But we all wear them differently  
These are the ones I am proud of  
Badges of honor that prove  
I have made it this far, somehow  
I will continue to keep going  
Somehow

## **Rachel Troyer**

### **“The Foul Deed”**

You were a building covered in cracks and choking vines,  
Ready to wrap around my jugular.  
You were that one lone tree tied with yellow ribbon awaiting death,  
And I was the chainsaw that did the foul deed.  
You were the window with the blinds glued shut to the world,  
Only peeking out to scare the mailman away.  
You were the jam packed journal filled with crimson and pitch black ink,  
And I was the senseless animal that shredded each and every page.  
You were the ice on the windshield shattered by a blunt edge,  
Which was me chipping away violently.  
You were the tipped over coffee cup spreading its contents to its many victims.  
And I was the very first one the burning contents touched.

## Rachel Troyer

### “My Lost Friend”

From a distance they believe  
The tiny toes have grown together  
To create a water born creature.  
Diving down into my own imagination  
And pulling others along with silent ferocity.  
Pretending so fiercely my skull  
Covered in soft innocent hair  
Splits into two identical pieces  
The ocean churning inside  
Makes my whole being a sea  
Of chemically treated water.  
The deep end is my frenemy  
Someone that embraces with its mass  
But pulls you under at the same moment.  
Looking from up above the world  
It has a wide grin ready  
To invite me over.  
The current changes swiftly  
And the imagination bleeds from my ears.  
That board that once was  
My conquest crackles up above me  
Like *Moriarty* knowing the final problem  
But never willing to share.

## Rachel Troyer

### “Ars Poetica”

A poem should be sculpted,  
As if by the hands of Michelangelo.

#### Social

As a pack of hyenas during a bad joke.  
Mute as a stalking feline,  
Shaking its hind legs before it strikes.  
A poem should be paper thin,  
Like the birds being tossed by the wind.

-

A poem should be light,  
Fitting snugly into the holes of your heart.  
The trinket that you keep at your chest,  
One of kind that would take a piece of you if lost.  
Passed down from your parents,  
Whispered as bedtime stories.  
A poem should be like lint,  
Forever lining your insides.

-

A poem should be spoken,  
With low rambling voices that send shudders.  
In smoke-filled coffee houses,  
Where the hipsters are born.  
Each word followed by clink of glasses,  
Vibrating tabletops with each word.  
A poem should be Eternal,  
Outliving even those silly sparkling teenaged vampires

## **Natalie Jacobson**

“Cold as stone, soft as lace”

She's sweet and sticky  
Sour like sugar  
Hard and cold as delicate lace

Her heart hammers  
Blood boils and pops  
Roils through her veins  
in spurts and globs

She's in the pink of rose  
The blue of the sky  
The peach  
with skin so soft  
you can taste it

Heaven's Light glimmers off her hair  
A ruddy light shines behind her eyes

The metal is cold  
in her hot hands  
The bang reverberates  
in her skull

The rust colored stains  
are visible  
Between the flecks of glitter