

Touchstone

Victoria Horn

Three knocks echo
the pounding in my ribcage;
three words beat
against my hungry eardrums.
“Come join me,” she yells through the woods,
our question and answer reverberating—
breath abandoning my body,
my voice cracking like dead bark
as I clutch my touchstone,
stuttering,
Keep me safe

Rain smudges the ground
in autumn colors beneath our soles.
My gaze slides over her reflection—
muddy eyes shining,
repeating the dark vitality of earth
pearls gleaming inside rose-red lips,
petals unfurling messages
of friendship.

The trees undress as we tear
the layers of doubt separating us,
her eyes promising to plant me
in her heart’s soil—
so I dig through the past,
but slowly, to bare
the touchstone in my chest.

Time running through our fingertips,
relentless as the dark hunting the sun.
The trees lurk in their grim nudity
and I follow the glint of her teeth, bounding
through their grabbing limbs
I want you to meet my friends,
she grins
darkly—
and disappears.

I am surrounded
by wolves
in human skin.

Crouched in tight-knit circle,
their bristling shadows froth
with longing, snarling
toward the heat
of my hammering pulse.
Their leader uncurls,
her wilted lips baring
ominous yellow teeth,
her black eyes mirroring
the hole in her chest
where seeds whither
away from sunlight.
She watches me shrink
from her looming pack—
I stumble for safe words
but they bark and laugh

and lunge

for the pounding touchstone
caged within my bones.

Their jaws smear
my blood in the snow
and she covers their tracks,
leaving me as a warning
for others.

I clutch at my open chest,
blood-slick with rejected love,
eyes shut tight, grasping
my mangled touchstone,
screaming to the trees.

Why do her dark eyes burn
while mine flood the banks
of my cheeks?

Why do her teeth cut the ties
while mine sew strings
of vulnerability?

Why do her lips bleed hatred
while mine bloom
with offerings of love?

Why does she fear my embrace,
like ribs around a heart?

What beasts ravaged
the meat inside her ribcage?

The trees linger, looking
as I lie shivering in snow.
Warm breath whispering on my cheek—
I open my eyes to find
an angel, palm outstretched,
porcelain fingers reaching
for the hand that covers
the gaping hole in my chest.
My blood stains her life line—
she reaches into her pocket
and presses something missing
into me, so I beat stronger,

my scarred chest pounding
when she touches me,
a proud throb
as something
swells beneath
the shiny, pink skin—
love.

Let the wolves come.

Victoria Horn is a sophomore Writing & Rhetoric and Literature double major at Northwestern College in Orange City, IA. She has been obsessed with the written word from the moment her mother and father began reading to her as a child. She has avidly been writing poetry and short fiction since junior high. Throughout her love affair with writing, she has cultivated a heart for writing poems about the people and experiences that have shaped who she is today, as well as writing romance fiction that isn't cheesy. After graduating from Northwestern, she plans to get a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and pursue a career as a YA fiction author. This is her first publication.