



Spring 2021

## The Lantern, 2020-2021

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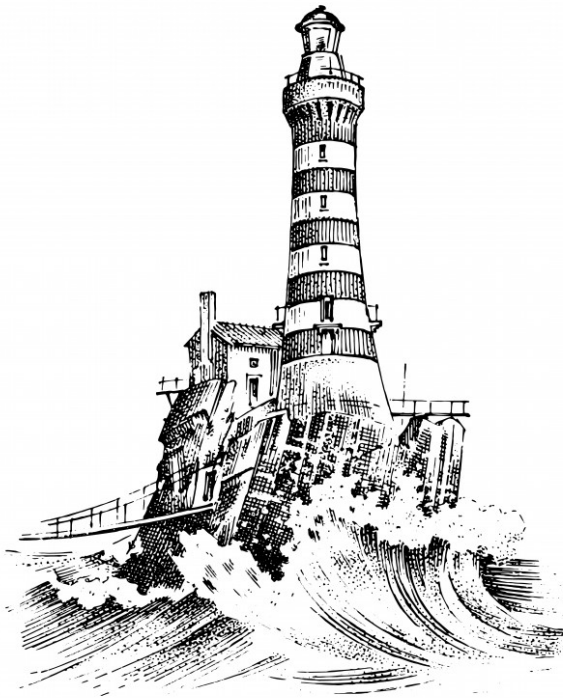
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# The Lantern





The Lantern  
Volume LXXXX  
2020-2021

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## Letter From The Editor

A few thank you's are in order before this book can finally get underway. First, a hearty thanks to Dr. Jon Volkmer, who has been a mentor and friend to me for the past four years. I don't often know what I'm doing, so your help with all of this was invaluable, Jon. This year's book is big, and I couldn't have done it all myself - so to my section editors and staff, your work was all marvelous and much appreciated. I know working on the Lantern this year was strange, to say the least, (and I'm sorry that my WiFi connection was so bad during all the meetings), but I think we pulled it off quite nicely together. I'd also like to personally thank Sam Ernst, who was the best production editor I could ask for, as well as a real champ about me messaging him incessantly at all hours of the day. Many additional thanks to those students and faculty in the English department who lent a hand or an email throughout the process as well – no publication is an island, after all. And last but not least, thanks to Nicole Kosar, editor of last year's Lantern, for egging me onto to apply for the job in the first place.

I chose this year's Lantern to be represented by a lighthouse, which is an unconventional light source for our book's tradition, but one that I feels captures our spirit perfectly. On those foggy mornings on the coast, ships wouldn't know which cliffs or reefs to avoid if it wasn't for that beam of light piercing the gloom. I have found that writing, my own and others, has become my beacon during uncertain times, fostering hope, strength, comfort, and many other neat tricks featured within the pages of this Lantern. With this, I'm giving it up – all of it is yours now.

To the reader, I hope that you find much to love further in, and some light to steer you through the waters of our lives.

Adam C. Mlodzinski

## Contents

### AWARDS

<b>Prose Prize</b>	<b>Judged by Jennifer Zwilling '99</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Poetry Prize</b>	<b>Judged by Pete Lipsi '10</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Creager Prize</b>	<b>Judged by Sarah Schwolsky '12</b>	<b>10</b>

### FICTION

<b>Aurora McKee</b>	<b>ONE THOUSAND AND ONE IS NEVER ENOUGH</b>	<b>12</b>
Jessica Schnur	HOUSE ON HAZEL AVE.	22
Griffin Banks	CROOKED MEN AT CROOKED ALLEY	28
Ryan Savage	HOME	39
Gabby DeMelfi	HONEYBEE	47
Marie Sykes	THE WITCH'S DAUGHTER	59
Marie Sykes	TRAVELING TO REYU	65
Samuel Ernst	DECEMBER 31 <sup>st</sup> , 2019	73
Kayla Weil	THE DOMINATOR ROLLS THE DICE AGAIN	78
Benjamin Tobias	RED FLOWERS	86
Anastasia Dziekan	MILITARY BALL	91
<u>VISUAL ARTS</u>		
Emily Bradigan	DROWNING IN COLOR	97
Nadia El-Mourli	EARLY BIRD	98

Isabelle Wesman	INTROSPECTION	99
Emily Bradigan	HOT WATER	100
Mairead McDermott	REACHING INTO SPACE	101
Kayla Weil	FLOATING MARIGOLDS BEFORE COVID-19	102
Chandrasekhar Palepu	SMOKESTACK 4	103
Robert Fisher	LONGING	104
<u>POETRY</u>		
Kat Saddler	HIS FIFTH YEAR ON AMSTEL ROAD	106
Liam Powers	WONDERFUL MOMENTS	107
Matthew Schmitz	CLEAN GLASS	108
Shayna Kushner	BETTY, THE DEBUTANTE	109
Shayna Kushner	TEAKETTLES HAVE IT EASY	111
Yakira M. Serrano Rodríguez	FUIMOS, SOMOS Y SERAMOS PARTE DE LA HISTORIA DE LA ISLA	112
Haley Bestrycki	KITCHEN TABLE	113
Haley Bestrycki	SHE COULDN'T	114
Anaya Demota	COOLING DOWN	115
Amy Litofsky	NOT SO PRECIOUS STONES	116
Vanessa Worley	DOMESTIC WILD	117
Vanessa Worley	VIOLET EATER	118



Anastasia Dziekan	I WILL BE SWEET	119
Amanda Weber	FLAVOR OF LIFE	121
Emily Bradigan	CLOGGED ARTERY	122
Morgan Mason	ALL TWENTY-SIX	123
Jenna Lozzi	THE GREATEST	124
Christian Ndaye	FROM ASHES OF WAR TO GOLDEN CITIES	126
Leo Cox	A GOOD THING	128
Leo Cox	INTRODUCTION	129
Sarah Buck	DEVOTION	130
Sarah Buck	LIFE OF THE GAMBLER	131
Olivia Cross	IMPRESSIONS: OR A DINING TABLE'S SOLILOQUY	132
Amy Smith	LOOKING GLASS	133
Val Eichler	MONTGOMERY PIE	134
Liam Worcheck	UNDER THE HILL	135
Ian Abrahams	PAPERBACK LESBIAN	136
Amelia Kunko	GIRL WITH PEARL EARRING	137
Ava Compagnoni	YOUR MIRROR	138
Anastasia Dziekan	JACKET	139
Rimsha Maryam	ILLUSIONS	140

<b>Aviva Schuh</b>	<b>STRAWBERRY GIRL (RAW SUGAR, SHATTERED GLASS)</b>	<b>142</b>
Cyn Ercole	I DON'T JAM WITH INSTAGRAM	144
Colleen Murphy	THE MORNING AFTER SATURDAY	145
<u>CREATIVE NONFICTION</u>		
Anaya Demota	A BRISK MONDAY MORNING	148
Liam Powers	EMERGENCE	153
Sarah Fales	POLITENESS AND PATTERN RECOGNITION	157
<b>Samuel Ernst</b>	<b>DOUGLAS ADAMS' GUIDE TO FLORIDA</b>	<b>162</b>
Ella Spencer	A LOVE STORY WITH FEMENINITY	172
Cyn Ercole	ROOTS	177

*KELSEY GAVIN – Cover Prize Winner*

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## Dysmorphia III

“Dysmorphia III is a sculptural piece I did in 2020, it is comprised of plaster, canvas, plywood, ink, acrylic, and plaster casts of different parts of my body. The process focused heavily on the act of layering various mediums on top of one another. This piece was a bit of a slow burn as it took multiple weeks to complete. This all came about as I was using the act of sculpture and plaster to investigate my disillusionment and disconnection with my own body.”

Kelsey Gavin

## One Thousand And One Is Never Enough

McKee's story is inspired by, but does not ape, classics that clearly have made a strong impression on her. The story is rooted in these, while reaching further and evolving various story elements to modernize and keep the reader engaged. The writing is mature. McKee uses vivid visual imagery but avoids the urge to over explain. The pace is just right, allowing for some character development, anticipation, and satisfaction as the tale unfolds. It was a joy to read, and I can imagine more great things from this talented writer.

### **Runner Up - Sarah Fales** “Politeness and Pattern Recognition”

Fales writes about a situation basically unimaginable to most of us in a way that allows the reader to feel the discomfort and anxiety that the condition produces. The writing is strong, evoking the sensation of not recognizing friends and even family members' faces.



Jennifer Adele Zwilling graduated from Ursinus College in 1999 with a major in History, and minors in Art History and Spanish. Zwilling earned her MA in Art History at Tyler School of Art, went on to work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and eventually became the Assistant Curator of American Decorative Arts and Contemporary Craft. Zwilling is now the Curator of Artistic Programs at The Clay Studio in Philadelphia, where she administers the Exhibitions, Collection, Resident, and Guest Artist Programs.

*Read Aurora's story on Page 12!*

## Strawberry Girl (Raw Sugar, Shattered Glass)

A relatable poem for anyone fallen victim to the trappings of regret and fond, possibly idealized recollection, this piece is as haunting as it is beautiful.

**Runner Up** – Colleen Murphy  
“The Morning After Saturday”

This poem begins quietly, but offers an unsettling, profound, and, at times, touching experience that gains power in its relevancy.

Pete Lipsi ('10) was most fortunate to study abroad in Florence, Italy, and see a few pieces of his own in The Lantern during his time at Ursinus. A resident of nearby Norristown, PA, with his girlfriend and fiendish cat, he currently works as a Senior Compliance Administrator at The Vanguard Group to fund his ongoing travels.



*Read Aviva's poem on Page 142!*

## Douglas Adams' Guide to Florida

Pure nostalgia and Americana! Ernst shares this relatable excursion to Florida so generously with the reader, not only through the utilization of regional description but also through the character's revelations, juxtaposing his experience on vacation with his family with that of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* novels. The "home sweet home" ending feels appropriate and significant considering the world we are currently living in. I felt I was there with the Adams family in the swampy humidity of the sunshine state; Ernst is wildly successful in the telling.

**Runner Up** – Leo Cox  
"Introduction"

This poem is extremely relevant and powerful in its vulnerability. Riddled with provoking imagery, (the only rainbows I touched/ frothed strange magic/ in gas station puddles), we are provided snapshots of the subject's journey to self-acceptance.

Sarah Schwolsky ('12) is a textile industry professional, specializing in the design and production of handmade rugs. Her expertise in the field has enabled her to work in amazing countries such as Australia and India. She holds a bachelor's degree in English and Studio Art with a minor in Creative Writing and was Editor of the *Lantern* her senior year. She currently lives in Manhattan and is studying interior design at Parsons School of Design.



*Read Sam's Story on Page 162!*

# FICTION

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## One Thousand And One Is Never Enough

*Note: Schehezerade is one of the main characters from One Thousand And One Arabian Nights. The last story she tells the sultan is inspired by 'The Masque of the Red Death' by Edgar Allen Poe, and her creative use of an ordinary lamp is inspired by Aladdin. Nnedi is loosely based on one of the Twelve Dancing Princesses, even though the other eleven had a very minor role in this story. Her name is inspired by Afrofuturist fiction author Nnedi Okorafor.*

From a distance, Nnedi's feet are a soft, smooth inky black. Up close, they're tough and callused from a near decade of painfully enforced lessons and grueling dance recitals. She's recently discovered that she can fracture a man's ribs with a well-aimed kick, or run for miles, barefoot, with her beloved in her arms.

Nnedi was nine when she came to the sultan's palace, still clutching a bloody lock of hair that she'd pulled from her twin sister's head as the slavers yanked them apart. That lock of hair would remain tucked in her pocket or wrapped around her wrist every day for the rest of her life.

At the palace she was introduced to her eleven new 'sisters,' a collection of girls drawn from across the globe amassed to perform for the sultan's entertainment. Or, more specifically, at his weddings. His many, many weddings to beautiful girls who never lasted the next day.

By the time she was seventeen, Nnedi had grown used to tracking blood across the floor after a painfully hard and fast recitation. She'd grown used to the brutal beatings, the enforced hunger for lazy dancers, the ever-present guilt that came from being alive when so many of the sultan's brides were not.

She'd resigned herself to the fact that eventually her body wouldn't be able to bear the strain of dancing anymore, and she'd be trucked off to a brothel, like so many of her older 'sisters'

already had been. Her parents were gone, her village was in ashes, and she didn't have a hope in hell of ever seeing her sister again. What did she have to fight for?

And then she saw Scheherazade.

At first, the other girl was just another future corpse politely watching the wedding dance at her husband's side, wrapped up tight in opulent finery as if already prepared for the grave. She was attractive enough, but she wasn't a heart stopping beauty the way that some of the others had been. Nnedi had trained herself not to look closely at the sultan's brides; this one shouldn't have been a blip on her radar.

But there she didn't look at Nnedi's dark skin and inky dreadlocks with contempt or disinterest, the way so many people in the palace did. Her eyes were fixed on the dance like it was the most interesting thing she'd ever seen, even more interesting than the bejeweled predator at her side.

(Scheherazade had later told Nnedi that she had been making up stories about the dancers and where they might have come from. From her noble profile and the grace of her movements, she'd thought Nnedi was the captured daughter of a king.)

It had only taken a few brief glances of those eyes to throw Nnedi off a step, earning her a few smacks of the rod later on. She didn't begrudge the king's new wife, though. In fact, she actually found herself a little sad that that the new princess would be strangled by dawn tomorrow, her corpse discreetly hauled out of the royal bedchamber and disposed of by some unlucky servants. So, imagine her surprise when Nnedi found Schehezerade kneeling besides one of the palace's many fountains the next morning, frantically gulping water as she shook with a mix of shock and exhaustion. She glanced up at Nnedi, eyes wild, and stammered something. It sounded like "I couldn't stay in there any longer," but her voice was so hoarse that Nnedi couldn't be certain.

Schehezerade tried to stand up too fast, only to fall backward with a groan. Nnedi leapt forward and grabbed her right before her head hit the ground; the other girl was shockingly light, and her ribcage vibrated like a hummingbird's.



"Easy," Nnedi muttered, helping Schehezerade to a nearby bench and trying to ignore how her own heart pounded.

She laid Schehezerade down and tried to make her as comfortable as possible, casting glances over her shoulder to see if there were any guards coming. A few of the wives had tried to escape their fate, but none of them had made it very far, and she couldn't image any of them stopping for water.

Nnedi looked down at Schehezerade, still conscious, but barely. The wisest course of action would be to go fetch help, but she couldn't make herself stand up. The king's wife just looked so small and battered, so painfully familiar in her vulnerability.

Schehezerade made the decision for her when she latched on to Nnedi's wrist with an iron hand, eyes still closed. "Don't leave," she murmured. "Please"

Nnedi didn't. She stayed there long after Schehezerade fell asleep, until it was time for her daily dance rehearsal. When she came back, Schehezerade was gone, and Nnedi wondered if she'd ever really been there, or if she'd been helping a ghost.

When she came back the next day, Nnedi found Schehezerade kneeling at the fountain again, and they repeated the same routine. But this time, when she came back later, she found the other girl sitting daintily on the bench, hidden behind a veil. No guards or servants in sight, and why would there be? The protocols for looking after a royal wife after the wedding night had been neglected for so long, they were practically forgotten.

Schehezerade looked up, those dark eyes flashing with welcome. "Come, sit." Her voice was still a little hoarse, but better than it had been this morning. She patted the bench next to her with a smile. Nnedi hesitated: they may both be prisoners, but the dusky-skinned girl was still technically her superior.

"You've seen me drool and drink water straight from the fountain by this point. If anyone should be nervous, it's me." Schehezerade pointed out, raising a delicate eyebrow. She was right, so Nnedi sat down, although she still feels uncomfortably bare in her thin, sweaty dancing skirt.

They sat in silence for a few moments, before Schehezerade spoke again. "Go on. Ask."

Protocol was probably in ashes at this point, so Nnedi did. "How are you not dead?"

She was sure what she was expected to hear, but it wasn't what Schehezerade said: "Stories."

"Seriously?" Nnedi couldn't stop herself from barking out a laugh, only to shoot a nervous look at Schehezerade for fear of offending her.

But the king's wife's voice was full of humor as she replied, "Exactly. I used to make up stories for myself and my sisters, and I thought it'd be a wasted opportunity to not pass one on to His Exaltedness before..." her breath catches, but she forges on. "And then he couldn't stop listening, and I didn't dare stop talking. When morning came, I was in the middle of a story, so he said he'd let me live another night, and then...I did the same thing last night."

Nnedi wanted to ask about the stories Schehezerade had told, but she remembered how exhausted the other girl had looked this morning and the last. Telling tales all night long must be exhausting as an endless cycle of performances.

"Well, you've really thrown everyone for a loop," she said instead. "There aren't any weddings planned for the near future, and the instructors are at a loss—that's all we're here for, really, to perform. The other girls have all been whispering about the exotic sex or magic spells you've been doing to keep the sultan happy. Adeela thinks you made a deal with a *jiin*, and Olga thinks you're some kind of demon in disguise."

Schehezerade laughed, and although men will one day tell tales about her speaking voice it's her laugh that Nnedi really loves, because it's so rare and fierce. "A demon! That's nice. I would love to be a demon." She blinked, studying Nnedi. "What's your name?"

Nnedi told her, and they spent another hour sitting there together, just talking about meaningless things. The next day, Nnedi came out to the fountain and sat with Schehezerade again, helping her drink. The day after that, she was already there when

Scheherazade came stumbling out. And the next day, and the next.

Nnedi doesn't remember when her conversations with Scheherazade stopped being a means of whiling away the hours with someone whose very survival was a curiosity and became something more intimate. She only knew that when she traded Scheherazade lengthy named for the more familiar Ade, it felt natural. It felt natural when they started comparing stories about each other's childhood: Nnedi spoke about her life in the village, and Ade revealed that her father was a small-time merchant who'd sought to increase his status by selling her to the king. And when they broke down in each other's arms, sobbing about the loved ones they'd lost and the people who'd hurt them in waves of pure fury and rage, it felt equally natural.

Dances resumed, although the exhausting wedding performances had been traded for simpler, less frequent evening entertainments. When Nnedi danced, she danced not for the sultan, but for the beautiful woman at his side, and she moved with a grace and joy she had never associated with dancing before.

She was beaten or starved a few times for being late to lessons, and every time was worth it. Her adopted sisters teased her for her disappearances, joking that she had fallen for a eunuch, but no one tattled on her or seriously tried to ferret out the truth, and for that she was grateful. A few of the others of troupe had had affairs with palace servants or slaves, although Nnedi doubted that anyone was venturing into territory as dangerous as she.

It wasn't an affair, of course. Not until the day that Nnedi saw Ade holding back tears, trying not to wonder if her mother and sisters knew that she was alive, and suddenly wanted to stop those tears by any means possible. When she leaned forward, the lips she met were sweet and acquiescing, and Nnedi finally understood why so many courtiers thrived off of sappy love poetry.

Even more special than the kiss was the day that Ade gave her a story: special because it hadn't been wrenched from her through or hastily added on to in the spur of the moment. It was

the story of a young mother searching for her lost son, only to end up navigating a dreamlike world above the clouds in a boat made of living color. There were jokes that made Nnedi giggle, sexual language to make her blush, and plenty of curses that Ade had heard used by her family's servants. It was the kind of story the sultan would never hear.

The triumphant ending made Nnedi happy, until she realized that Ade hadn't been able to push the tale to its full potential; her focus had to be on keeping straight the stories she would give the sultan tonight. More chilling was the possibility that she had keep the story confined to a single afternoon, because she might not be alive tomorrow to tell it.

It's hard, falling for with a girl whose head is perpetually on the chopping block. It's even harder to be the girl on that block, because as Nnedi's lot in life was getting a little easier, Ade's was growing worse. She'd confessed to Nnedi that she'd first started leaving the king's bedchamber after he left for his daily activities because she could feel the ghosts of all his wives pressing down on her, suffocating her. As time passed, those ghosts would follow her outside, haunting her dreams and robbing her of precious sleep.

This wasn't good; talking nonstop throughout the night was already putting a bad strain on Ade's health. She was finding it harder to string sentences together, harder to make the story interesting... harder to come with new ideas. They both knew that Ade would only have so many stories to tell at this rate, and then...

"He loves me," Ade said once, thoughtfully stroking Nnedi's hair as the dancer's head lay in her lap. "He says he's fallen for me, that he wants me to have his child." She sighed, glancing up a passing bird. "And I can never bring myself to ask, what happens when you have an heir? Will you still love me then, when I'm fat and tired and sick of being locked up with the souls of your other victims?"

Nnedi didn't say anything, because there was nothing to be said. All it took was one stretch of boredom, one burst of paranoia. The sultan might discover Ade's affair with Nnedi, or (more likely, considering his possessive nature and the betrayal

of his first wife) convince himself that she had a male lover. Ade was living on a ticking clock, and so was Nnedi, because their hearts were bound together with an unbreakable cord.

She started having nightmares about arriving at the fountain and finding no one there, even after she waited for hours. The third time she woke up, sweating and shaking, Nnedi started to think seriously about running away.

It was stupid, of course. Even if they escaped, the world outside the palace would no doubt tear them to pieces. Defying the sultan was suicide, and her sisters might all pay the price for her disobedience. Nnedi's life could be hard, but it wasn't in danger like Ade's was. The smart thing to do would be to walk away while she still could.

Except...except death was already an old friend of hers, ever since the slavers had come to their village. Except that being a slave meant dying a million small deaths before the last one. Except that with every day she felt lonelier and lonelier around her sisters, because as good-hearted as some of them were none of them were Ade. Except that Ade had skin like velvet, and a mind that buzzed like lightning.

Except that the idea of being a heroine in her own, real-life adventure story was the most terrifying and intoxicating thing Nnedi could imagine.

Ade didn't mind when Nnedi proposed flight. It was probably doomed to fail, but she'd much prefer to die fighting on her feet than strangled on her knees by her husband's men.

They started caching supplies in one of their secret meeting places; Ade stole food from dinner and wheedled water skins from her husband, claiming it's better tasting than wine and more convenient than the fountain. They went through plans, mixing Nnedi's practical sense of choreography with Ade's desperate imagination to create something that just might work. Nnedi steeled herself to start flirting with a particular stable boy in her spare time, leaving Ade quivering with simultaneous anxiety and jealousy.

They rode out intense waves of fear and self-doubt in each other's arms. They talked about where they might go after they leave, discussing both logical and fantastical options. When she

dreamt of the dead, silent girls who'd preceded her in the sultan's bed, Ade asked for their blessing.

One day, a fertility doctor rubbed special oils on Ade's skin and had her kneel for hours of prayer for sons. The experience was a wakeup call for her. Her womb was still empty, but it was only a matter of time before the sultan either gave her a baby, complicating their escape beyond belief, or simply got tired of waiting for her to get pregnant. They couldn't hold off any longer.

The night of their escape, Ade told the sultan a story about a king in a distant, snowy land. His people were wracked by plague, so he and his court secreted themselves in his castle for months of dancing and feasting. The sultan listened raptly; he'd always liked hearing about other people's flaws, as long as they didn't seem like metaphors for his own.

"One night, during a masquerade, a beautiful lady seemed to show up out of nowhere," Ade told the sultan. "She dressed like a court woman—better than a court woman, really, in all the finest silks and jewels. No one had seen her before, but no one could imagine how she could have forgotten through the locked doors. She made her way through the ballroom, inscrutable behind her mask, passing from partner to partner. There was something intoxicating and terrible about her, that no one could look away from.

"When it came time to unmask, she was dancing with the king. He reached out to her mask—a beautiful mask, all sculpted silver and gold—and pulled it off with trembling fingers." She paused, drawing out the suspense and giving her voice a brief rest.

The sultan waited, eyes glittering with the fierce need of an addict. "What did he see?" he asked breathlessly.

Ade looked at him: this sad, broken, vicious little boy who chewed up women like candy. She wondered if there was ever a point in his life when he could have been saved, or if the evil had been planted in him from the beginning. She would probably never know.

"He saw Death," she said, and stabbed the sultan in the neck. "And She was beautiful." She dragged her knife across the

sultan's throat, holding her hand over his mouth to smother his last gasps for air. The air around them crackled with ghosts as the dead wives stuck invisible fingers through his skin and ripped out pieces of his soul. He collapsed in a tangle of bright red and pale flesh, the smell of shit filling the air.

And just like that, she stepped out of her cage. It was as easy as taking her first breath after a lifetime underwater.

She wiped off her knife off on the sultan's blankets and dressed herself in his simplest set of shirt and trousers. She'd placed a bag under the mattress last night, along with her weapon, and she stuffed it with all the jewels and coins she could find. There was a ceremonial axe on the wall, which she used to dispose of the two guards conveniently keeping their backs to the bedroom door. Her skin buzzed with adrenaline, the rush of a story come to life in all of its fierce and bloody glory.

There was a fine bronze lamp in that room, a lamp that looked a lot like the one in a story about a jinn that she had told the sultan. Ade took this lamp to a room a few corridors away from the sultan's chamber and splashed its oil all over the floor. She used the remaining oil to soak a long curtain tassel, which she then laid on the floor. Finally, she took a candle and lit the end of the tassel, before dashing away as fire flickered slowly down its length.

Nnedi was waiting for her at their assigned meeting place, arms full of supplies, and lead her to the stables. The unlucky stable boy lay tied up and unconscious in a corner, bleeding from a slight wound in his head. "He fought harder than I expected," Nnedi said as Ade offered her one of the guard's weapons. Her hands shook slightly and there was a bruise on her cheek from wrestling with the boy.

She didn't need to ask if the sultan was dead. Ade knew that the haunted look in her own eyes, the blood she hadn't managed to completely scrub off her hands, her very presence, was explanation enough.

"The sultan's spirit will suffer for this," she murmured, bowing her head. Ade nodded, hating the forces that had pushed them to this, made them sacrifice a bit of their souls to survive.

But they both knew there was no turning back now, so when Nnedi looked up again her eyes were bright and clear. "Let's go," she said, her voice rock steady.

They loaded up one of the camels before Ade climbed on, clinging with sweaty fingers. Nnedi had spent her childhood alongside horses and cows, so it wasn't that big a leap to carefully guide the beast through the palace grounds, talking softly in its ear.

By the time they reached the gate, all of the guards were already sprinting back into the palace, attracted by the shouts of fire. Hopefully, Ade's prepared inferno was far enough from the sultan's chambers that people wouldn't stumble upon the bodies while rushing to put out the blaze. She glanced over her shoulder and saw her homemade jinns winking at her from a window, twinkling merrily as it covered their escape.

After they passed the gate, Nnedi climbed up in front of Ade and nudged the camel into motion. They vanished into the night unnoticed, quick as the wind and quiet as the dead. Ade wrapped her arms around Nnedi's muscled back, feeling the other girl's pulse vibrate through their ribcage.

She already knew that the way ahead would be hard. They would have to fight and bleed, steal and lie, be driven to snapping at each other from the stress and fear. The camel would be traded for bare feet, for a horse, for a stolen boat or carriage. They would know fear, hunger, and thirst in abundance. They would be pushed to their limits and discover things about themselves that they never imagined possible.

It would all be worth it, because they had each other. Because they were free.



## House on Hazel Ave.

The low rumble of tires over gravel hummed beneath my music. I slowly removed an earbud, beholding the house before me. Its eye-sore red shingles that clung to dirty white paneling gleamed at me in the distance, sinking me further down into the passenger seat.

“How long?” I asked.

“It’ll only be fifteen. Twenty minutes, maybe, tops.”

“I don’t understand why I even need to be here.” I slouched my shoulders forward, bringing my hood up to nestle around my neck. “I don’t want to see him.”

“Your father misses you.” Mom put the car in park. “Besides, you know I can’t carry all of these heavy boxes by myself.”

“If he misses me so bad, he could have just brought the boxes to the apartment and just saw me there before I left. I’d rather be with Melissa and hang out at the mall right now. Why do I have to make her wait and help you move stupid boxes?”

She shot me a look. Mom’s famous look that could slice through glass. The one where she barely turns to face me, but her eyes always manage to sideways slash at me. “Sara—”

“Fine, fine, fine.” I shut up real quick. I wasn’t ready to argue with her again. “I know, I know.” I threw the hood over my head, trying to stifle her gaze from my face. I deliberately popped the earbud back in, trying to drown her out. She didn’t notice, with great relief, or it’d be the fourth scolding this week. If I had to hear the old Sara-Elizabeth-you’re-fifteen-now-you-need-to-start-pulling-your-own-weight-in-this-house-and-act-like-it one more goddamn time I’d probably lose it and run away to join the circus or something. Her eyes were fixated on her purse, her hand rummaging through every nook and cranny of that bottomless pit. Her wig tilted forward, falling into her eyes.

Silent curses fumbled from her mouth as she shoved it back into place, the hair intertwining with her worn fingers.

“You run ahead,” she told me, not taking her eyes away from the conglomerate of assorted lip sticks and balms and crumpled shopping lists that stowed away for months on end. “I can’t find my wallet. This might take a while.”

I released a small sigh as I pushed myself out of the car, extra careful not to slam the car door shut behind me. Before me, the lawn was littered with papers, fluttering every which way as the wind gently kicked up in the bitter autumn air. My converse squeaked with every step, grinding gravel and pavement beneath my soles. Papers were stuffed under the door and haphazardly decorated the mantle, greeting me. They rested on peeling paint, lazily clinging to worn scotch tape. I knocked. No answer. Of course. I shuffled my playlist, filling my eardrums with the angriest, loudest, meanest music I could illegally download onto my iPod Shuffle. I knocked again, channeling my aggression through heavy metal drums that beat in time with my knuckle.

The door opened, funneling out thin veils of stale cigarette smoke and the dim light from the television on the opposite side of the living room. There he was: dad, clad in only pajamas and donning a red pen in his left hand, looked down at me from the stoop. His lower eyelids were lined with dark circles from what I could only guess were endless days of job searching and booze-filled nights.

“Princess,” he exhaled. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Yeah, hi, Dad.” I pushed past him into the house, laying myself beside the Leaning Tower of Newspapers that accompanied me on the couch. The music roared in my ears, drowning out his How have you been?’s and How are your mother and your brother?’s. He closed the door, his mouth forming the words of sentences I was too fed up to hear. I clicked off my music in my pocket.

“What?”

“Your mother,” he said. “How’s the new location been treating her?”

“Fine.” I crammed my fists into my pockets as I relaxed my back against the rigid pillows. “Mummum and Poppop have

been staying over for the past two weeks. They've made spaghetti and meatballs at least four times now."

He nodded. "Good, good." His hands slid into his pockets. "How's the job search?" I shot him a side glance.

That seemed to take him by surprise. "Good, good," he repeated, much, much quieter. The front door opened once more, Mom wielding her keys in one hand and her wallet in the other as she stepped into the dim room.

"Frank," she sighed, "the collector just ran into me in the driveway. Have you given the papers to him yet?"

"No, not yet" he said. "I'm getting to it."

"You're on borrowed time, Frank," she said, "staying in a borrowed house." He looked down at his slippers. Mom grunted under her breath, heading for the kitchen with my father trailing behind her.

"Sara," she called behind her, "wait right there. We have some papers to fill before you come in here and help us."

"Yeah," I responded. I looked around the room. The botched spackle job on the parallel wall found me, right beside the picture frame of the old family dog. Two paint cans rested against the drywall, accompanied by spackle and tools scattered among the floorboards. It's weird to think that a man whose hands twist pasta noodles all day at the Kraft Factory in Philly for a living could make such a big hole. That was almost a month ago, too. I remember that look in his eyes as his pink-slipped fist sailed into the drywall. He couldn't even bother to fix it in a month's time, let alone find a new job.

"Piece of shit," I grumbled to myself, thumbing the iPod in my pocket. A whole lot of work for "splitting up", as mom called it. We're not getting a divorce, she told me. We're only splitting up for a bit. For a bit. Bullshit. He'll be back by the end of the month. He has nowhere else to go unless he wants to sleep in the county jail for trespassing on the bank's private property. I looked to the doorway, listening to Mom go into detail of how the new treatment at the new place was going.

"It's definitely an upgrade," she said. "At least this place knows how to discern cancer from a cyst."

The new place with little waterfalls and secretaries who leave candy out in a bowl. But such luxuries come with a price, and the toll here was our house, and my dad's sanity. All I see behind his dull grey eyes now is the way he screamed at her that night, the way he spat those words that singed her so bad she fled with me and my baby brother, cowering in our new apartment. We're done, she had said. Yet here we are again.

I forced myself up from my resting spot and went into the kitchen. An abnormally large pile of laundry spilled out from the basket that laid beside the even larger mass of boxes; an amount of laundry so large that no one person should physically be able to go through in only a week.

"The damn washing machine again," he continued to her under his breath and he stooped over the paperwork, his hand vigorously signing dotted line after dotted line. "I can't get the damn thing to work right."

"Have you been putting the detergent in the right slot?" she asked him.

"Yes."

"Or how about making sure it's not set to delicates? It's not going to use as much water as long as it's set—"

"God dammit; yes of course I fucking did that."

"You know," I said, "maybe if you hadn't been such an asshole to mom you could come back and live with us again, and she could do your laundry and do everything for you again like she always used to."

He slowly turned to me.

"Sara," my mother hissed. The stern anger that rested in her face was laced with fear as her eyes darted between the two of us. Dad slammed the pen down onto the table. He abruptly fumbled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket, white knuckling the worn lighter between his fingers with his other hand. He brought the stick to his mouth, dragging it deep into his lungs before releasing the dark smoke between pursed lips.

"Don't fucking talk to me like that," he said. The smoke rose around his head. I had always loved the smell of cigarettes from when he would sit a much, much smaller me on his lap, Mickey Mouse dashing across the television screen as the smoke

would swirl around the dim living room. I'd watch him, mimicking how his hands wrapped around the cig, carefully copying him with my lollipop stick. But right now, the smell made me sick. My mom covered her nose with a cupped hand, backing away from the dark fog that filled the warm kitchen air around her. He flicked off an ash, and I watched it flutter to the pale tiles below.

I swallowed back what I was about to say next, along with the tears that burned the back of my throat. In the silence, he only grew angrier. With a sigh, he picked up the pen and began to once again sign, his hand trembling more and more and his grip tighten around the pen, his knuckles flushed to white.

"Fuck!" he yelled out, before throwing the pen and papers to the side. They fluttered down like snowflakes, kissing the ground softly as they scattered along the tiles. He was shouting, now. Shouting slurs and swears, biting the cigarette in half with clenched teeth.

"You motherfucker," he continued. His shouts echoed through the halls, ringing through the rickety old infrastructure of the entire building. "I can't fucking take this anymore." He went on a tangent, cursing anyone and everything: the bank, the government, God, my mom; you name it, and he cursed it.

His hand slid along the pale wood butcherblock, until it met with the World's Best Dad mug we had gotten him for Father's Day last year. His fingers slid around the cool ceramic, clenching around the handle. It looked so small in his fist, I thought he could crush it in his bare hands. It wasn't long until the cup met the air, flying across the room until it connected with the tacky floral wallpaper that hid drywall beneath it. The shatter rang out, stinging my ears until silence filled them in its wake. The shards gathered in semicircles against the pale linoleum, swirling dust and bits in between, lining the crevices of grout that etched against the tiles.

Everything froze. I couldn't form my thoughts, and dumbfoundedly, I stared at the jagged edges that piled onto the kitchen floor. My father stood there, unmoving, unbreathing. It was as if he was in a pile of his own shards. There he was, the world's best dad: shattered, like the mug.

I felt my mom's hand on my shoulder, and I snapped back to where I was. Her hand felt so small, just barely able to grip my arm. She wouldn't even look at him, as his eyes pleaded for her forgiveness; clutching his gaze to the way her artificial hair clung to her face. He fucked up, and he knew that, but part of me still knows that he isn't a fuck up.

"Bring the boxes tomorrow around eleven," she said quietly. She led me through the door, leaving Dad to fade in the distance as the car slowly pulled out of the driveway. I didn't put my earbuds back in, leaving them to lay there tangled against my coat pocket, letting the silence fill the space between us. The apartment looked much smaller as the car approached, which seemed almost impossible considering it was as stuffy as a coffin with only two bedrooms and one toilet. I felt the dread settle in my stomach, weighing down a pit that made me feel sick. My mom put the car in park.

"Sara," she said quietly. She turned to me. She looked exhausted, the way the shadows clung to the harsh edges of her features, worn away by stress and chemicals. I thought she would cry, or scream, or anything that would show me how she really felt.

"Yeah, mom?"

"I love you." She got out of the car and started inside. I sat there, watching the wind blow the flags and windchimes of neighbor's porches. A sign clung to a rusty nail below the faded 205. It knocked against the front door, swinging back and forth, flashing the words "God Bless this House" in the pale sunlight. I got out of the car and went into the apartment, slowly shutting the door behind me.

## Crooked Men at Crooked Alley

The Barton Brothers were done in by a letter. Well, it was really a series of letters. Nonetheless, it was ink and paper, not bullets and gunpowder, that doomed the three poor brothers. US Marshall Dorian Bitters had written his old friend Sheriff Hargrove for one of their long winded “talks.” Just like that, their goose was cooked. Hargrove and Bitters were rebels once, as wild as they were young. Now, though, in their twilight years they were lawmen. Now they lined their pockets with American dollars, growing fat and growing old all the while. The two talked about, well, what they usually talked about. They talked about Bull Run. They talked about the way Virginia moonshine made them feel, and of course, about how much of a damn fool that bastard Lee was. They talked about old wars, yes, and the new wars, too. They cursed those damn Indians, what little Indians there were left to curse. They lampooned and maligned yankee politicians who couldn’t seem to put their peckers away and stop pissing on their grand, dead dream. They damned every owl hoot and mercenary gunhand in the West, which is how their correspondence came to the Barton Brothers.

The Barton Brothers were a terrible, thunderous trio of trouble. The Barton boys, for their numerous crimes, schemes, and deceptions, were wanted dead or alive in the Wyoming and Dakota Territories and just plain dead in California. They had come to the attention of Dorian Bitters for the “River Boat Raid of Flat Falls,” a particularly gruesome heist which left twelve guards and a pit boss dead, and a poor old woman with her nose smashed in. Bitters described in great details the features of the three scoundrel brothers that emblazoned wanted posters in many podunk, cowtowns of the West. The descriptions, even to the tin ears of Sheriff Hargrove, sounded suspiciously like the Milner brothers who had moseyed into Crooked Arrow not but a few short weeks ago. These brothers had come to town to sell furs

and other such animal skins. They were trappers, or so they told it. They had purchased a plot of land up in Tall Tree hills from Old Man Marsdale, a quaint little log cabin tucked and covered in all manner of brush and foliage. They didn't cause trouble, they didn't do much of anything, not yet at least.

It wasn't long till the realization set in, till all the dots were connected. A posse was formed. Bitters brought in ex-Calvary men. They were principled and mean, adept killers each one. Their faces still bore the scars of Indian tomahawks and Indian arrows. Hargrove's men were unschooled but eager. They were mostly townfolk, who loved their town enough to kill for it. Farmers and shopkeepers dusted off old hunting rifles. Boys who weren't quite boys and not quite men saw their chance to prove themselves through steel and iron. Even Indians, those that had accepted the laws of God and the laws of men, joined the massing force. In the end, all those who were willing and able were deputized.

They came for the Barton brothers at supper. The brothers were posted up at the Snakes' Song Saloon. As sheriffs, deputies, and government men encircled the saloon, the brothers ate fat steaks and runny eggs, guzzling down cold beers. Bitters, ever the sportsman, announced himself and made his intentions plain. He pledged mercy in exchange for civility. The Barton Brothers, being low, down, and dirty sons of bitches, declined with the roar of revolvers. The Barton Brothers took hostages. Cyrus pressed the barrel of his gun into the back of Hanz Schmidt, the German pianist with fat, Irish fingers. Ian put Elliot Farnsworth, the foppish, mustachioed bartender, in a chokehold. Malcolm put his palm over the mouth of poor Shelly McTiernan, a rancher's daughter polishing glassware for a couple extra bucks. It was like that for a while. Guns were gripped tightly in trembling hands. A dreadful, uneasy silence set in sour like. Cyrus was the one to make a move. He shimmied, pianist in toe, to a lantern above the bar and knocked it with one wild shot. It shattered, letting loose a fire. The fire caught easy, quickly making itself an inferno. As the posse moved in, the brothers headed out the back. They hogtied their hapless captives, mounted white horses, and made a run. It wasn't clean, the law was on them. As they went they



threw the hostages from their horses, left bound and squirming in the dirt and grass. They retreated back to their cabin, back to their house on the hill. It was then and there that the standoff at Crooked Arrow began. It was there that the Barton Brothers fought the world.

It took nine days, nine days of bullets and blood. On the final day, amid the ever-growing crowd, stood Father Loeb. For while the lawmen of Crooked Arrow stood vigilant over the brothers' bodies, it was Father Loeb who watched over their souls. Loeb was God's favorite sort of mad man. He had been all over, saving heathens and reading from his black leather book. He had been down in the jungles of South America, teaching tribesman with many gods the decent word of his one. Loeb travelled all across the coast of Africa, preaching to those that could hardly understand his foreign tongue. Loeb had been many places, delivered many men and savages, yet still there were souls to save. He was old now, though. Loeb was no longer fit to journey, that was the preoccupation of younger, more foolish men. Now Loeb preached in a small, creaky church in Crooked Arrow. Now he lived for Sundays. Now he listened to the confessions of cowboys. He heard, day in and day out, of their many infidelities and misdeeds. It had been a long while since Loeb braved bows and spears, disease and beasts, just to share what was in him. Now Loeb was old and tired. Loeb wasn't exactly waiting to die, but he was ready for it. He made his peace with God, and spent every day trying to share just a tiny sliver of that peace with everyone else. He stood on that hill, hands clasped and head bowed. He whispered prayers softly. His words were lost amid the chatter and the taunts of the crowd. This day, perhaps not even God could hear him.

“What've we got, Cyrus?”

“Not much.”

“Well shit, that's plain to see, Cy. I'm asking specifically.”

“Alright, then...we've got 'round twenty shells left for the Winchester. About thirty for the Colts I think. Running real low for the shotgun, lower than the others. I'd say maybe five, ten.

Beans are almost gone, maybe half a day's. Water's okay, we've got a couple gulps left each if we're fair about it."

"Speaking of...give that here."

"Aw shit, I ain't giving you no damn water. You already drank all the whiskey!"

"I was thirsty!"

"Yeah, well now I can't get drunk. I'm gonna die sober because of you!"

"Will you both just quit your fucking whining? Give him the water, Ian. And Malcolm, I swear to god if you take more than a tiny damn sip, I'll shoot you next."

"I won't! No fooling!"

Ian put the canteen to his brother's quivering lips. Malcolm took a slow, labored sip, letting out a sputtering cough when he was through. Water and spit trickled down his chin. He wiped it away with his right hand, his left gripped tightly around his belly. His grip was steel and iron. His fingers were strained from the effort. His knuckles were ghost white from the strain. He was holding back his guts. Y'see, Malcolm Barton had been shot in the belly.

Every man, woman, and child in Crooked Arrow filled the hills just outside of town. It was said, on that ninth and final day, you could hear the fluttering of a fly's wings back in town. Yes, every man, woman, and child waited with bated breath to see the Barton Brothers breathe their last. Except, of course, Mr. Harrington. Harrington was the town carpenter. While everyone was up on that hill, Harrington toiled away. He was hammering and sawing till his fingers and hands ached something fierce. Harrington was preparing three pine boxes.

Everyone in town had something to say and everyone in town said something. Lonnie Carr, the town barber, looked on in astonishment at that old log cabin. Lonnie was bald, which made his chosen profession quite queer. His head was smooth and shiny, and beet red that fateful day thanks to the scornful summer sun. Lonnie didn't have any hair, but he sure could cut it. That man was an artist with a straight razor, a sculptor with a jar of pomade. Lonnie had a way of making rough men look soft, or well, softer at least. "Gee willikers! I...I can't hardly believe it.

Just the other day, just the other damn day, I gave that boy a shave. I...I...I think it was the oldest one, Cyrus they said his name was? Although to tell you the truth, he ain't anywhere near old himself. The boy barely had peach fuzz! It might very well have been the easiest shave I ever done did!"

Cyrus was quiet. The quietest of the Barton brothers surely. Ian was smart, but silver tongued. Malcolm was stupid and loud, an ox in spurred boots. Cyrus was always quiet though, he had to be. Cyrus was the oldest, which meant he had taken the most lickings. Hell, even when Cyrus didn't do nothing, he got a licking. When Ian left his jacks scattered across the kitchen floor, and Pa Barton went in to get his midnight snack, it was Cyrus dragged out of bed by his collar. When Malcolm acted up, which was often, it was Cyrus who came out looking purple and blue on account of "setting a bad example." Pa Barton was trying to make him a man. He succeeded, in many ways. It was because of his father, because of his tyranny, that Cyrus learned the ways of the sneak and the cheat. Cyrus got real good at seemingly doing nothing while doing everything. Cyrus stole from his father because he was just gonna spend it on booze anyway. Just like that, he got good at stealing. Cyrus fired his father's guns because that old man's war was over, and he lost. What do you know, just like that, Cyrus became quite the gunslinger. Cyrus damned his father because his father had damned him. Cyrus didn't listen to his father, he didn't like him. Cyrus never met a lawman as cruel as his father. Cyrus never met a gun he feared more than his father's belt. Cyrus was born to wear the black hat. He'd probably even be buried in it.

The working girls from Trixie's Tavern were there, too. They wore their Sunday dresses, a far cry from the scandalous accoutrements of their moonlight escapades. They gathered together in a big circle, whispering and pointing from afar. Ruth Pupkin stood smack dab in the middle of those girls and swooned. "He came in not long ago, the middle one. I didn't think anything of 'em then. I didn't figure on him being no outlaw. He had a funny way of talking, a nice way, a sophisticated sort of way. He was so thin, boney. I reckon'd he must have been riding for days, hard and fast. He was sweet.

Above all else, I remember that, him being so sweet and all. He held me all night. He whispered poetry into my ear, sweet words, until I fell asleep. When the sun rose, before he put on his boots, he kissed me softly on the head. He may know his way around a gun, but he knows his way around a woman, too.”

Ian always had a book in his hand. Ever since he was a youngin’, Ma Barton had grand designs for the boy. She didn’t want him to be like Cyrus, a loving, but wild boy. She most certainly didn’t want him to be like her husband, Pa Barton, a man with too much mean and too much stupid. No, she wanted better for her second son. She wanted him to be better. With this in mind, every time she went into town Ma Barton brought back a book for Ian. Some he liked, the ones with knights and dragons. Some he loathed, the long ones about stuffy men that talked funny. She would sit with him, in the early hours of the morning, while Cyrus and Pa Barton tended to the farm, nudging him along. They’d sit there all day, till the sun fell again. Ma Barton was not a patient teacher, not patient at all. She would cuss at him when he read the words wrong, when he stumbled or stuttered. She would smack him about the back of his head when he’d whine, when he’d want nothing more than to stop and shut his eyes to the words and the world.

When Ma passed, Cyrus and Malcolm had nothing. They had nothing but memories and pain. Ian, though, Ian had his books. He read them all the time, now even without Ma’s cussing ringing in his ears. He read them till they fell apart. When he had to part with them, when the law was on them and they had to leave everything behind, Ian cried. He wept as softly as he could as his brothers slept around the campfire. Cyrus and Malcolm always used to joke that all that book reading made Ian such a good shot. It was “cause he could read all that fine print,” they’d say. While Cyrus coveted opportunity, and Malcolm coveted fine bourbon, Ian coveted books. To Ian, books were better than a pile of treasury notes or a mountain of gold bars. It is an undisputed fact that Ian Barton had stolen more books than any outlaw of the West, however meager or strange such an accomplishment may be. Some of his grifts garnered a reasonable bit of attention,

particularly the caper the press dubbed “The Great Literary Larceny of Cheyenne, Wyoming.”

“Hey, Ian?”

“Yes, Malcolm.”

“Whatcha readin’?”

“Our obituaries.”

“Aw quit foolin’!”

“Y’know they’re actually surprisingly well written. The words “bastards” and “fiends” are used very sparingly.”

“Aw hell, I’m being serious. I wanna know!”

“Why do you wanna know what I’m reading? It’s not like you’re looking for a recommendation. You can barely read those kiddie little dime novels you love so damn much.

“Might as well, tell him Ian. He’ll just keep jabbering on like that till you give in.

“He’s right, I...I will!”

“Alright, alright...I’m reading “Journey to the Center of the Earth.”

“What’s it about?”

“Aw sam hill, now I gotta read ya a bedtime story, too?”

“Ian quit being such a smart ass. The man’s got a hole in his belly, the least you could do is tell him what your cockamamie book is about!”

“Jesus, I can’t get any fucking reading done with you two hens clucking. Fine...It’s about these three guys, okay. These three they, well, find this doorway, or it’s really more like a tunnel. So they find this tunnel, these three guys, and they go into it on an expedition. Sorta like Christopher Columbus...you do know who Christopher Columbus is right, Malcolm?”

“Of course I know who Christopher Columbus is, smart ass! Y’all remember last Columbus Day when I shot that cock eyed Injun cause he was looking at me funny! Damn, wasn’t that a hoot?”

“Right...well these three guys go through this tunnel, and well this ain’t no ordinary tunnel, it leads deep, deep underground, right smack dab to the heart of the world.”

“Whoa...ain’t that something? What kinda stuff they find down there? Like rocks and such?”

“Well, a hell of a lot more than rocks, Mal, I’ll tell ya what. They find all sorts of things, dinosaurs, giant bugs, even monkey men!

“Whoa. What’s a dinosaur?”

“Well it’s..uh...like a really, really big lizard!”

“No kidding! Go on then, you’ve gone and got me curious now.”

“So the whole book is about them trying to get out, to get away from all that mean business. They high tail it, these three guys, away from the monsters and all that foulness, so they can get back to where they’re supposed to be.”

“Boy, that sure do sound like some book.”

“Don’t go singing praise now. I haven’t finished it yet. I’ll let ya know when I get there.”

As the sun got low, patience got thin. The townsfolk had wanted blood, and what they had got was boredom. The butcher, Morris Gruber, sold jerky to the tired and hungry people. Mindy Fawcett, the owner of Fawcett’s Fanciful Bakery, held big baskets of biscuits in each hand, going for five cents a pop. Beau Goodwin, a buffoon who considered himself a musician, played guitar badly and sang even worse, much to the dismay of the crowd.

Earl Doss was impatient more than most. Although, as it pertains to Earl, he may not have been irritable because of the stinking heat and the long hours. Earl might have just been peeved because his bottle of rum was bone dry. Earl was the town drunk, or one of them at least. Earl looked Irish, even acted Irish, but he was Dutch. He was a large man, not because he was strong, but because he was fat. His clothes were cheap. He smelled worse than most. He slept wherever he could, mostly in a mound of hay behind the Snakes’ Song. Doss only got mad when he was drunk, which is to say he was a particularly angry man.

“I hope he dies, that goddamn runt. I shoulda shot him when I had the chance. This pip squeak had the audacity to challenge me to a drink off. Me! Of course I said yes, because I like drinkin’ and winnin’! The whole bar circled around us to watch. Even the rough riders from Buchanan boys halted their poker game and turned their chairs toward us. We must of plum

drank the Snakes' Song dry! Rum from the Caribbean, wine from Italy, beer from Germany. We cleaned out the bar, even dipped into the cellar. We drank all night me and that boy. Or at least I did, that dirty rotten cheat! I don't know how he did it, but he swindled me that's for sure! I told him so, I really did! I told him how much of a bastard he was, how much of a con. He just laughed, and opened another bottle. So I drew on him, because of course I did. I had to defend my honor! I had him in my sights. I had my iron pointed right at his little pea brain. Y'know what this cocksucker did? He laughed. He fell out of his chair, drunk and laughing. He got the whole place hootin' and hollerin'. He made a damn mockery of me. I should have made him a dead man, I really should have."

Malcolm never had a chance. His brothers were rotten, and he wanted to be like his brothers. If they were going to do a grift, Malcolm always wanted in even though he was too young and green to be of much use. He'd be looking out when his brothers lifted candy and soft drinks from the general store. He'd run, screaming and crying into the road, distracting sweet old ladies while Cyrus and Malcolm lifted pocket watches from their purses. Malcolm was doomed. Malcolm broke bad young, far earlier than his brothers had. He was known to be crazy, always quick to fight and slow to reason with. It was on the night of Ma Barton's funeral that things really went red. It was that night that Pa Barton got well and truly drunk, more than he ever had and more than even the brothers thought possible. Pa Barton spat on sweet memories. Pa Barton drowned grief and love with liquor. "The no good bitch," he said. "The fucking whore," he shouted. Nobody knows what really happened, not even the lawmen that sifted through the broken glass, the wrecked furniture, and the blood the next morning. The only thing that was for certain is that Malcolm threw the first punch and it was a good one.

"I'm gonna die."

"You ain't dying."

"Yeah, I reckon you'll be alright."

"I'm fucking dying!"

“Aw hell, I said ya said ain’t, and I meant it!” Now you keep prattling on like this and you might talk yourself to death. It’s stuffy in this cabin and you’re wastin’ all the oxygen.”

“Mal, we mean it. You’re gonna be fine.”

“I got a hole in my belly, Cyrus! I’m a damn sight far from fine!”

“A hole in your belly ain’t nothing! You remember Freddy DuMont?”

“Naw, who the hell is Freddy DuMont?”

“You slept with his wife.”

“Oh...uh...oh yeah! Why the hell you bringing up that son of a bitch?”

“Well ole Freddy DuMont got shot, too. But Freddy DuMont didn’t get shot in his belly, no sir. Freddy DuMont got shot in the head. Yessir, Freddy DuMont locked eyes with the barrels of a shotgun. Freddy didn’t die, though. He had a big honking hole in his head, but he didn’t fucking die. He thought he was gonna die, just like you, but he didn’t. Now I figure if a shitbird like Freddy DuMont can walk away with a hole in his head, it stands to reason, you’ll walk away from a hole in the belly, fine and dandy.”

Father Loeb stopped praying. As the sky blackened, Malcolm’s skin became colder and whiter. Ian stopped reading. Malcolm was quiet, which wasn’t a disposition he was often in. His eyes were barely opening, his eyelids fluttering. His breath was deep and slow. Ian never stopped reading. Maybe it was because the sun was going down, maybe he was just tired of it. He just sort of stared off, into the dead shadows of the cabin. Cyrus peeked every now and then through windows cracked and shattered by bullets at the gunmen and the twilight sky. It was just then, as the sun was going red, that the man who never spoke much, talked.

“Hey Sheriff!”

“Yeah, don’t worry, I’m still here!”

“I wanna talk.”

“I’m always up for some friendly conversation. Let’s have it, then. To which rotten scoundrel am I speaking?”

“Cyrus Barton.”



“Oh well...the ringleader of the whole damn circus. I am truly honored, I assure you. What, pray tell, would you like to talk about? It sure as hell can't be the fucking weather.”

“I wanna make a deal, shitbird!”

“A deal?!? Shit, son, you should leave this whole highwayman business behind and become a proper comedian. Allow me to enlighten you. You see a deal involves leverage. Seeing as you're surrounded, sweating in a shack, leverage is something you ain't got.

Cyrus fired a shot. It put a hole right through Sheriff Hargrove's ten gallon.

“There's your leverage, fat man.”

“Shit! Alright, alright, put the pea shooter away. We were talkin' civil, right? Makin' deals?”

“Send in the priest. That's all I ask. You send in the priest and me and the boys will put down our guns and walk right out of here. We'll go peacefully.”

“There's a couple dozen corpses out here that would disagree with you, buster. Why should I trust you?”

“You shouldn't. What you should trust is if I don't see that priest in the next five minutes that a whole lot of people are gonna die. I've stolen, and I've killed, and you can be damn sure I've lied, but that, sir, is honest.”

Sheriff Hargrove didn't think about it much. He knew he had won, even if he was sharing the glory with the hangman. Father Loeb didn't take much convincing. He saved souls, that's what he did, or that's what he tried to do. Even if those souls weren't worth saving, he tried his damndest.

“Will you say a prayer for him, father?”

“No son, I'll say a prayer for the three of you.”

## Home

“Tommy... please tell me you are joking...”

The silence over the phone loomed for a few moments after. My mom, being as anxious as she can be, chose to soak up this stillness over the phone, probably to calm down. Like any good mom ever, she worried about her children. And when one of her children was stuck, with nowhere to go, having to quarantine about five hours away from home, she was bound to be an emotional wreck. It was a stupid decision of mine to head up to the University at Buffalo, especially amidst a global pandemic that laid off my entire family. But it had been months since I have seen Jackie, the girl who always had my back, even when we were just kids roughing around at recess. It was surprising to hear that she wanted me to visit, given how strict her school’s regulations were. It all went south the moment I stepped foot in her heavily perfumed apartment.

I spent the next twenty minutes or so on the phone with my mom describing my eventful day, starting with the phone call that Jackie received telling her that she was among a group that tested positive for Covid-19. I went into the whole story, recalling the tears I wiped from her face and the swift evacuation from her room. This led to the test she had to take—a self-administered elongated cotton swab shoved five inches deep in her nose. Worse than any calculus test she had taken, her crinkled nose and ruffled brows said it all. Now we just had to wait for the results.

From there I described the hotel that the University provided. Knowing it was too good to be true, you had to provide your school ID to get in. That is the moment I told my mom that Jackie and I split. What I didn’t tell my mom was how she let me in through the emergency exit, having a few beers in our apparent victory celebration. It was not until I drunkenly

wandered out of the room and ran into a staff member who asked for the same ID I had to show the front desk. Five minutes later, here I am sitting uncomfortably on top of my duffel bag filled mostly with Miller Lites calling my mom for help.

“So... what do I do?” I sobered up while listing the entirety of my day. The realness of the situation began to set in. “Can I just come home?”

“You know I can’t let you home, Tom,” said my mom after a long, nasally sigh. She continued after a short pause. “Uncle Mike isn’t doing too well, and you would be too much of a risk.” He had COPD, recently diagnosed in early February. I could just picture Uncle Mike chugging cheap beers, wheezing in between sips.

“But mom... I need somewhere to go!” I really did not know what I was going to do if she, my own mother, would not let me in my house.

I selfishly spent a little while to try and persuade her to let me home, similar to how I would whine as a kid in my transformers-themed bedroom, begging to be read another bedtime story. She did not budge as she used to. I needed to understand that this mess was all on me; there was nothing my mom could do to save my ass this time. All choked up, I said goodbye to her.

“I’ll see you soon, Tommy.”

“Hopefully.” The line went silent.

I lugged my bag across the empty lot to my dull, grey Tahoe. It was nearly ten o’clock at night. The almost full moon hovered directly above me, watching me sulk in my car, alone. I scrolled through various websites—Booking, Expedia, Airbnb—trying to find somewhere within my budget, let alone available. I was only able to bring a couple twenties and some change, the rest had to be given to my parents to help out at home, along with my credit card for groceries.

I called up the limited motels and apartments that came up, getting no responses. I muttered more than a few curse words after each dial. Clouds began to cover the moon. My head hung low as I tried to calm down, hearing raindrops tapping on my window. Things would have been so much easier if I just stayed

home, but I wanted to prove that I could do things on my own. I am an adult now, after all.

This was it, my final listing. It was a tiny, two room log cabin in the middle of the Catskill mountains. The Wi-Fi was spotty, said the owner in the description, and you had to stomp on the ground as you flushed the toilet to make sure it did not clog. The décor of the home looked like Carole Baskin had been hibernating here for years, leaving behind multiple tiger-themed blankets and pictures. Or maybe it was her house, I really could not tell. The best part was about a football field's distance from the front porch is a family-owned zoo. In the middle of nowhere. Full of lions, tigers, and bears.

Calling up the owner, Rick, I received an answer in seconds. "Hello there! What may I do ya for?" He had a thick rural accent, the type that a typical farmer would have. His enthusiasm was contagious. I gave him my name and told him my situation. He was happy to help.

"So, the place is available for this weekend?" I asked with high hopes.

"Well, I'll tell you what. Since I'm gonna be in the house, you can just pull up and we can talk about money when you get here," I tried to butt in, but he continued, "See you soon, buddy!"

"Wait! You're—" Rick hung up. I was not planning on staying with someone else, let alone in the middle of the mountains surrounded by man-eating beasts. This sounded like a horror movie just waiting to happen, but this was my only hope for a place to stay. I set up my GPS and made my way to meet my new roommate—the Tiger King himself.

His driveway was long and dimly lit by a few lamp posts, which made it even harder to see through the rain. It was practically midnight and the only thing keeping me awake was hunger and the aggressive beats of my 90's rap playlist booming through my speakers. The cabin was now in view of my headlights, and so was Rick, standing in the pouring rain. He waved at me as I parked the car. What the hell am I doing here? I muttered while putting on my mask.

"Hey buddy! Must be the one who's spendin' the night with me! Welcome." His smile stretched across his face, missing

one of his canines. He was not wearing a mask and had his arm extended for a handshake.

“Nice to meet you, Rick. You can call me Tom.” I reluctantly accepted his handshake. He held my hand a bit longer than I anticipated, and a lot firmer too. He went on to ask about where I am from and whatnot, but I asked if it would be possible to talk inside, away from the rain. He gestured towards the house and I followed in his muddy footprints.

The place was exactly as it looked in the photos online. There were no walls to separate the rooms, they sort of just blended into each other. It reeked of animal shit and pine needles. A little bit colder than I thought it would be too, considering the fireplace was crackling in front of me, but the tiger theme was even more vibrant in person.

“So, what’s up with all the tigers?” I laughed, pointing at the tiger stripes that smothered the drapery. I do not think he found it amusing.

“It’s my business, son.” The way he pronounced ‘business’ sounded like ‘busy-ness’. “My business is my life. And it jus’ so happens that my wifey decorated the place.” He went to the fridge to grab a drink. He looked back towards me. “You hungry?”

“Yes sir! What do you have?” My stomach did the talking for me. I walked closer to the fridge, to see it overflowing with raw bagged meats and cans of Heineken. Rick passed me a beer and tossed a steak on the stovetop. His hospitality eased my wariness, but it still remained in the back of my head.

After several beers, an extremely rare steak, and a few shared laughs, Rick and I came to an agreement. He understood that I had no money, so he offered me a discount in exchange for my work at the zoo. I would be a big help, he said, since no one else was around this week. We shook hands to our arrangement, then raised our final beer as a toast. I waddled off to my worn-out cot tucked behind dusty chests of who knows what and wrapped myself with multiple layers of tiger fur blankets. I forgot to text my mom where I was and Jackie for updates.

Rick woke me up early in the morning. I sleepily followed him to the back of the zoo. The distant roars of lions welcomed

me to this putrid shithole. He walked me through what I would be doing—shoveling the massive heaps of shit in the cages. Nothing different from my janitorial job back at home, cleaning the bathrooms of rich pricks who would not even acknowledge my presence. Maybe the lions care more than the humans do.

“I only got one rule for ya,” he pointed behind me after batting a few flies from his face. “You see that room? Don’t go back there.” I looked back to see the heavily chained room, marked off with a dozen “Restricted Area” signs. It looks like I would not be able to get in there even if I tried. I shrugged and said ok, too tired to question what was behind there.

“Are ya ready, kid?” Rick blurted, handing me a rusted shovel. I do not understand why he refused to say my name.

“Ready as I’ll ever be!” I faked my enthusiasm, taking the shovel from his grip.

I spent the next couple of hours shoveling mounds of shit, my white sneakers caked in my work. The only view of these animals would be when Rick dragged them into separate cages from me, tranquilizing them to make his job easier. I watched him do this multiple times, and each time all the full-grown brutes would flinch at his sight. Every cage they were tossed into was old and definitely not updated. This sure was not the Philadelphia Zoo.

I noticed how Rick would take a trip to the forbidden room every now and then. My curiosity grew as I wanted to just try and get a glimpse of what was behind the immovable steel gate. But Rick was hovering over the place like the flies did the shit. I had no shot to check it out. Finishing up one of my last lumps, I noticed Rick closing in.

“You mind watchin’ the place for a lil’? I gotta go use the shitter.” He slapped my back on his way out the humid cage, not even waiting for my response.

I finished up my last bit of work, shaking off the bottoms of my shoes to see if any white survived. Rick had still not returned. Now was my shot.

I headed over to the massive gate and gave it a shove. Nothing. I kicked at the bottom of it. It sort of budged, but not by much. I kicked and shoved, slowly making progress just for a

tiny glimpse of what the barred room may hold. Just as I got the crack open, my phone rang.

“Hey mom, what’s up?” I backed away from the door. The sluggish lion gave a gurgled roar in the background as it woke up.

“Hey—Tom what the hell was that? Where the hell are you??” She exclaimed.

“I am ok, don’t worry. I found a place to stay and I am working for the owner on his farm.” If she knew I was working with these murder machines she would have flipped out. I saved myself the headache.

“Oh ok, that’s good, I guess... Have you heard anything from Jackie?”

“Nothing yet.” Shit, I forgot to text Jackie good morning.

“Talkin’ on the job, eh?” Rick came out of nowhere, scaring the hell out of me. I dropped my phone in what I hoped to be mud. I guess it disconnected my phone on impact. I didn’t get to say I love you to my mom.

“I...erm...uh...” I couldn’t think of what to say.

“It’s alright, kid. Dinner’s ready inside if you’re hungry.” He gestured back to the house. I guess I’ll never know what is behind the gate.

We ate dinner together, another bloody steak, and talked for a little while. The sun had been absent for a while now, leaving room for the full moon to shine through the bare oak trees. As beautiful as it was, it made me feel very uncomfortable. I am usually a sucker for the night sky.

“Hey, Tom, right?” I nodded, surprised he knew my name. “You mind runnin’ to the zoo real quick? I left the meat freezer unlocked.” He talked with his mouth full, spitting chunks in my direction.

“Uh.. yeah sure.” He tossed the thick ring of keys at me, completely missing my hands.

“It’s the uh—” he hiccupped, starting to become noticeably drunk. “The silver one.” There were like 10 silver ones, but I slipped my now-brown shoes on and made my way towards the door. “Grab the flashlight on yer’ way out!”

Shining my way through the darkness, I made it to the freezer. The eerie silence was broken by the growling of an animal I could not identify, followed by the clanging of the keys. I managed to get the key right on the third try. As I tucked the keys into my pockets, the “Restricted Area” sign flickered as the beam of light passed by. I was drawn to it.

Fumbling through the keys, I tried one after the other to unchain the gate. Nope... nothing... nada... bingo! The corroded chain dropped to the dirty floor. Pushing the hefty entrance open, I beamed the flashlight through the room. I was pretty disappointed.

The flashlight illuminated the room, revealing a bare table and cupboard, along with a leather-back journal. To make my trip worth-while, I skimmed through the thick journal. It contained a hand-written list of names and numbers. Some names had lines through it, others were circled. I read through the list out of boredom.

“Jonathan T.–20514, Rebeka S.–20621...” The list went on, each name with a line through it. I flipped through to the back of the journal. The very last name made my heart sink. “... Thomas R.–20925.” My name was circled.

I had to get the fuck out of there. But how? Amidst my panic, I vomited on the wooden table, falling back onto the ground. My heart was pounding a million miles a minute. My fingers tingled and shook, making it hard to pick myself up. I ran to the house to grab my keys. Rick was waiting on the front porch for my return.

“Got worried that you mighta fell in the cage there, Tom! Wouldn’t wanna see you go like that.” He chuckled as I came closer. He was too drunk to notice the fear in my eyes.

“R-Rick... um... h-here are your keys.” I dropped them on his lap. “I gotta run to my car to grab, um...” Nothing came to mind, but he intervened.

“Alrighty! Just don’t be too long.” Rick burped in my face. “I gotta show you somethin’. You’ll love it... I know you will.” His tarnished smile plagued his face, following me as I ran in to grab my wallet and keys. I left my duffel bag in the room.



My phone was vibrating in my back pocket, but I ignored it. I need to get out of this fucking place.

“I’ll be back.” I said, with no intention of returning.

“Don’t be too long.” He finished the rest of his Heineken.

As I was out of his view, my pace sped up. Now running to my car, I jumped in and twisted the key. It sputtered out. Twisting it again gave the same result.

“Come on you piece of shit!” I shouted, punching my steering wheel. Rick was now up and waving me down. “Fuck!”

One more twist of the key ignited the engine. Without even thinking, I slammed on the gas, driving through the brush and tree stumps. I watched Rick come to a halt in the middle of the driveway, yelling who-knows-what. I sped off, not knowing where I would end up. I barely had any cash in my pocket or gas in my tank. All of my clothes and beers were long gone, abandoned at the cabin.

My body felt so weird after this encounter that I barely felt my phone still vibrating in my back pocket. Pulling off to the side of the highway, I answered.

“Babe! About time you answered. I got something I need to tell you.” I listened, nearly crying at the sound of her voice. It was what I needed to calm me down. After a few seconds of savoring the call, I answered.

“Y-Yes?” I barely got out of my lips without sobbing. Tears threatening to escape my eyes at any moment.

“You can come home, I tested negative!”

## Honeybee

*“Honeybee  
come to me”*,

Blair darted to her bedroom with wholesome enthusiasm as her mother’s hypnotic voice wafted through the air, singing the lullaby she wrote for her when she was born. Blair jumped on her mother’s lap, giant hazel eyes gazing with wonder as she continued,

*“through the trees  
along the breeze  
sing it loud  
sing it proud  
one more wish  
steal a kiss  
fly out of harm  
into my arms  
once you wake  
you’ll be safe  
and warm  
forever more”*

After holding out the last note, her mother cupped her face with both hands and planted a kiss on her nose, cheeks, forehead, chin, making it all the way around to a quick peck on the lips. Blair couldn’t help but giggle as her mother showered her in affection.

“Mommy,” Blair said inquisitively as she laid her head on her mother’s chest, “why do you call me honeybee?”

“That’s a very good question, my love,” she began like she’s reading a bedtime story, “I always found honeybees to be a sign of hope. You see, honeybees are pollinators, do you know

what that means?" Blair, intrigued, shook her head. "It means they are important in helping plants grow fruit, seeds, and flowers. They spread life wherever they go and even though their lives are often short, they are responsible for keeping so many other things alive. We as a species couldn't survive without them," she paused as Blair gasped from amazement. She continued, "In a way, that's what you are to me. You brought me back to life when I felt hopeless. Now, as long as we're together, I'll always have a reason to grow."

"Really?" Blair questioned.

"Really," her mother said confidently. Blair sat up, faced her mother, and just stared. After fifteen seconds of Blair's compassionate stare, she reached up to kiss her mother on the forehead following with the biggest embrace a five-year-old could muster.

"You give me life too, mommy," she said.

Jokingly, her mother continued, "It also helps that you're sweet!" They both giggled in each other's arms.

"Goodnight, my little honeybee", her mother whispered while she tucked Blair in.

"Goodnight, mommy", Blair said gently.

"I love you," they said simultaneously through their vibrant smiles. Her mother blew a kiss and silently left the room, carefully dodging Blair's mess of toys on the floor. The door creaked closed and Blair fell asleep instantaneously as if the light switch were somehow connected to her consciousness.

For the past five years, Blair has only been able to fall asleep with this nightly ritual. One time her mother fell asleep early, exhausted from a long day of gardening, when Blair was around three years old. She woke up at 1:03 am on the couch, confused as to how she could have possibly slept for that long. Moments later, as she was making her way to the bathroom to brush her teeth, she heard a blood curdling scream coming from Blair's room. Panicked, she barged into the room across the hall and found Blair on the floor, flailing around, covered head to toe in sweat. She swept her daughter into her arms in one swift motion and began singing to her. As soon as her melodious voice reached her ears, Blair stopped shaking and by the end of the

lullaby, Blair's night terror had completely dissipated. Her mother never missed a day since and Blair's experienced nothing but sweet dreams.

The ritual continued for five more years after and every night the bond between Blair and her mother grew stronger. They were their own little family, and that was the way they liked it, leading a simple, perfect life.

One night, Blair's mother went out to the market to get her some ice cream. Blair had just had a dance competition that evening, placing first for her solo, and her mother was beyond proud of her shining star. Any time either of them accomplished something, their tradition was to celebrate by sharing a pint of strawberry ice cream and watching musical movies that they would sing along to.

These were Blair's favorite nights for two reasons. The first is that she loves sharing her victories with her mom, it's almost sweeter than the victory itself. The second is that the market was just around the corner so any time her mom took a trip there, Blair got her first delicious taste of responsibility. She felt so empowered that she would round up her stuffed animals in a line and assign them tasks as if they were all younger siblings she was put in charge of. She danced around the halls, teddy bears cleaning the living room, owl puppets doing the dishes, and one crocheted honeybee started the laundry. "Mommy will be so happy when she sees the work we've done", Blair said aloud to her minions, giggling while imagining the giant, warm embrace her mother would give her when she walks through the door.

Hours passed and her mother failed to return home. Blair sat calmly on the couch, still in her costume from ballet, eyes plastered to the front door, patiently waiting her mother's return with the strawberry ice cream she had promised her. A tiny wave of suspicion crept up Blair's stomach, but her persistent optimism pushed it down. She stared and stared, jumping at every car door, and running to the window any time she heard footsteps, though they were always coming from the apartment above. "It's okay," she whispered out loud, stroking the crocheted bee nestled in her arms, "she'll be home soon."

Blair tried to stay up for as long as she could since she couldn't go to bed without her lullaby and a goodnight kiss, but with the long day she had, it was getting difficult. She threw some water on her face and turned the television on to watch some cartoons in a desperate effort to calm her nerves and keep her awake. With every passing minute, exhaustion enveloped her tiny, frail body. She felt the pull of the void, the excruciatingly slow shutting of her eyelids. She nodded off and, a couple of times, was able to jolt awake to the music playing on her show, but eventually she lost her resolve and gave in to her instincts.

Thirty minutes after she drifted off to sleep, she began sleepwalking. She opened her eyes and rose from the couch, a mindless zombie wandering the halls of her desolate apartment. She recognized her surroundings, but she couldn't distinguish between her dreams and the veils of reality. She spotted shadows moving along the walls, taunting. She panicked and began pacing, faster and faster she moved to outrun the shadows. Soon she was in a full sprint, choking on her sobs, when suddenly, a loud knock at the door made her fall to the ground. She answered the door, still uncertain of the reality of her experiences.

A police officer, looking into the soulless eyes of the sleepwalking little girl said, "Hi there, what's your name?"

"Blair," she responded monotonously.

"Are you feeling okay?" He asked, noticing her tear-stained cheeks.

"I'm waiting for my mommy, she needs to sing me a lullaby," she said.

"Is there anyone else home?" He wondered, concerned for the girl's safety.

"No, it's just me and my mommy. I don't know where she is. She needs to sing me a lullaby. I'm having the most peculiar dream."

"I need to tell you something," he said solemnly. She looked at him, confused, but her eyes were still blank. He continued, "We, uh, we found something and, um...well, uh, your mom isn't coming home." She didn't move, not even a little. She felt her body turn completely to stone, the tears turned to ice, blocking the exit. "Are you okay?" he asked, once more.

After a few seconds of her standing motionless, she passed out, hitting her head on the wooden floor panels. The officer tried to catch her, but she fell too suddenly and too fast.

The funeral happened four days later. Blair was staying with a middle-aged man who referred to himself as Uncle Raymond, he sat next to her at the service. He put his arm around her for comfort. She didn't move, but he was a stranger, they all were, and she certainly didn't feel comforted. 'I didn't know mommy had a brother,' she thought to herself, but she was good, and she complied, never speaking a word. She hadn't spoken since she had found out what happened, she hadn't even cried, really. Every other hour or so some tears leaked through her iced-up ducts and ran down her cheek, but she never flinched. People spoke at the service—she didn't, how could she—saying the most cliché bullshit about how tragic the loss is and how she was so young. Blair didn't mind their responses because they were true, but she wished they would speak from the heart, sharing memories of her mother so she could pretend for just a few short moments that her mother was alive, even if it's just through a story.

Everyone tended to shift the attention to Blair, "You're so strong," they'd say, it made her uncomfortable. This day is about her mom, she didn't want anyone to focus on her. Plus, she thought she was the farthest thing from strong. 'Do they think I'm strong because I'm not crying?' she wondered to herself. Blair never understood why crying was associated weakness and blocking up emotional release was a strength. She'd feel stronger if she could cry.

They buried her in a graveyard three miles away from her apartment complex. 'Only a fifty-minute walk' she thought, already planning another visit, though she hadn't even left the first time. She watched strangers pay their respects. Blair stood over the grave, peering in.

"I have some stuff to take care of, can you just stay here for a bit?" Uncle Raymond said gently, gripping her shoulder tightly. She didn't react, but he knew that she wouldn't leave the grave, not without force; she wouldn't abandon her mother that

quickly. Once everyone was scattered about, she pressed her ear to the ground hopeful that if she listened hard enough, she'd hear the echo of the lullaby. She closed her eyes and concentrated. Silence. The silence was so deafening, it filled her head and swallowed her body whole. She was a second away from bursting from the pressure when she opened her eyes and spotted a honeybee, flying over the grave. She felt a wave of calm and stillness. The honeybee landed on her nose and the first word she said since the incident was to the bee, "Mommy?" When she spoke, her nose twitched, frightening the bee. Reflexively, the bee stung her nose, its body falling to the ground. The sting hurt Blair, but she didn't move and didn't make a sound. She just laid there, paralyzed.

She watched the end of her nose as it began to swell up. She enjoyed watching her nose double in size, she felt like laughing but her efforts were thwarted by a tickle in the back of her throat. She coughed to relieve it, but it only got worse. The tickle spread up her throat and to her ear, she sat up anxiously, clutching her throat. The hives began to multiply, a new one every second, but she was too focused on her labored breathing to care. Every time she wheezed in; her airway got smaller. Smaller. Smaller. 'This is it,' she thought, 'Mommy's taking me with her'. She was tempted to just fall in the open grave right now, burying herself with her. She wondered what these strangers would say about her at the inevitable second funeral service. She guessed they'd say she was strong until the end. She passed out, scraping her head on the tombstone on the way down.

"Honeybee, come to me," Blair heard as she felt ghostly strokes through her hair, her mother's heavenly soft voice flooded through her body. This was the first moment she'd felt safe since the last time she embraced her mother. "Mommy," she said out loud.

"Is she awake? I think she said something?" she heard faint voices in the background, but the chatter was indistinct, and she couldn't tell who was speaking. She wanted to stay asleep, in the comfort of her mother's lullaby, but a doctor was saying her name repeatedly and it distracted her from the warmth. Her eyes slowly drifted open, blinking rapidly. It took a couple of minutes

for everything to come into focus. She gazed off at the IV, looked at Uncle Raymond who she now recognized as the voice from before, stared at the doctor and that was the moment she finally felt something. Once she knew she was in a hospital room, she felt more suffocated than when she was experiencing anaphylaxis. The ice blocking her tear-ducts broke and she erupted into fits of sobs, tears flooding harder than ever before. She wondered how her body could produce so much liquid. She thought for sure she'd run out of water eventually.

Concerned, Uncle Raymond tried to console her. "It's okay, Blair, breathe," he said as he mimicked a breathing motion.

"I-It was mommy," she spoke through her sobs.

"Blair, I know you're upset, but she's not here," he tried to speak, but she wouldn't leave much room for him to respond.

"You should have let me go!" she screamed, echoing across the entire second floor of the hospital. A brief pause of silence, her panic ceased slightly. She asked, in a resigned tone, "Why didn't you let me go?" He just stared at her confused. "I don't know how I'm supposed to grow," she explained, looking down at the needle in her arm.

"Honeybee—" he started before Blair immediately cut him off, "please...please don't call me that," she responded, solemnly. Uncle Raymond put his hand on hers, a simple gesture to show his support though he knows he could never be enough in her eyes. He left the room with the doctor. She fell asleep, longing to hear her mother's voice again.

Around a week later, once Blair had fully recovered from being in the hospital, she walked all the way to the graveyard by herself. She grew an inch within that week, though she had no clue how since she was mostly bedridden. She was excited to share this news with her mom since they would always measure their heights on the wall. She made a mark for herself and then marked her mother a foot above what she used to be, climbing on a chair from the dining room. Her mom could take any form now, she rationalized, so she thought she must want to be slightly taller. Blair brought a pint of strawberry ice cream and, though it was mostly melted, she stuck in two spoons and began eating



while singing along to one of their favorite songs. She felt close to her mother, the most at peace she'd felt since she died. "I grew," she said. "I did it, I didn't think I would without you," proud of herself, but unaware that, though they celebrated physical growths, her mom always meant emotional growth. In that area, Blair had taken several steps back.

Her eyes shortly drifted and fixated on the withering corpse of the honeybee that stung her the previous week and her peace faded, replaced by an overwhelming sense of self-loathing. She saw herself in the honeybee, she was so certain her mother got her nickname right. Honeybees, seen under a normal light, are beautiful and loving creatures who will do anything to protect the ones they love, and this was Blair's understanding for most of her life. However, in her sole interaction with an actual honeybee, it stung and almost killed her. She wondered if that's what she was; a destructive force whose intentions are good but hurts the few around her who care for her most. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was at least partially responsible for her mother's death. If Blair hadn't gone to the dance competition, her mother would never have gone out to the market and she wouldn't be dead. She was absolutely convinced she should have been the one to die that night and prayed, pleading over her grave for God to take her instead.

When she got home, she looked in the mirror but could only see the image of the decaying honeybee's corpse. It filled her with so much anger, so much sadness, that she punched through all the mirrors in her room. As the blood poured from her freshly cut hands, she took her crocheted honeybee and tore it apart, one string at a time. She felt better momentarily until the pain struck along with the guilt. She tore apart her favorite thing in the entire world, the bee that her mom crocheted for her. She laid in bed and permissively allowed tears to run down her face, but she didn't make a noise. She didn't want to bother Uncle Raymond. She fell asleep, clutching the remains of her mangled stuffed animal, staining the sheets with pools of blood.

For the next two years, Blair survived by just existing, numbing herself to everything around her. She visited her mother less and less but only because she was terrified of seeing the

corpse of the honeybee again. She still talked to her mother every day; she just couldn't always convince herself to physically go to the grave. Even on the days she did, she often closed her eyes while she was there, avoiding any potential panic attacks.

Uncle Raymond had to keep a close eye on her after he found out what she did to the mirrors and what she did to herself. She would have bad nights where she couldn't control her impulses and he had to stay with her the whole time making sure she didn't do anything too self-destructive. She was reluctant because she always hated crying in front of people, but a small part of her, the part that knew she needed to keep growing because she knew it was what her mother would have wanted, didn't mind him being there.

Uncle Raymond didn't mind watching over her in these emotional states because he grew to love and care for Blair more than anyone else in the world. He loved her like a daughter and when you love a child, you'd do anything to help. He knew those feelings weren't reciprocated, but it didn't matter. He'd hold her in his arms and sing until she fell asleep. Those were the rare occasions that Blair wasn't completely numb to the world and, though they were difficult for both, they preferred these nights because they were the only nights Blair would feel.

On the two year anniversary of her mother's death, Blair and Uncle Raymond went to the flower shop to buy some red lilies, her mother's favorite flower, and walked to her grave. Blair was dreading it because she knew she'd have to open her eyes; she couldn't keep them closed, not on the anniversary. When they arrived at the grave, Blair's eyes started shut and as they approached the tombstone, she made a fist around the flowers, pricking herself on the uneven roots.

Uncle Raymond whispered to her, "It's time to leave the flowers, Blair." She hesitated. He continued, "We'll do it together," he grabbed her hand delicately and she lessened the tension, placing the flowers around her mother.

Reluctantly, she slowly blinked her eyes open. Her eyes went straight to the bee's corpse, as always, but she saw something she was never expecting to see. She spotted a singular flower that grew through the dead bee's corpse, standing there

beautiful and tall, alive, and thriving. She let herself cry but, for the first time in over two years, they were tears of joy. The tiny spark of hope she held onto these last two years, the one spark that kept her alive, suddenly grew to a ball in her stomach. She could feel it again without having to search for it. Uncle Raymond noticed this shift in her, he felt the tension lift off her slowly but significantly, flowing through the breeze. He held her hand and they cried together.

Usually after visiting the grave, Blair wants to be alone. This night was different. Uncle Raymond was surprised when Blair wandered into his room, twisting her fingers, and he could tell she wanted to ask him something, but wasn't sure how.

"Did you know," she began, fixated her eyes on the ground in front of her, "that honeybees die trying to fight off potential threats so their family will be safe?"

"That's an interesting fact," Uncle Raymond replied, skeptical that that was the reason she came to talk to him.

"Um," she continued, about to ask the question she's always been afraid to. She continued, anxiously, "How did mommy die?" Uncle Raymond knew someday soon this day would come. He bookmarked a page in the book he was reading, placed it on the nightstand, and motioned for her to sit next to him.

"Well," he began, "on her way back from the market, strawberry ice cream in hand, she noticed someone suspicious across the street. He peered in the window to your apartment. She thought it was probably nothing but decided to approach him, asking if he was okay. She was such a good person. The man was taken off guard and pulled a gun on her when she asked. She offered to help him out, but he wouldn't take it. She figured that if he needed something, she could give it to him, and it would stop him from having to commit a crime. Instead of admitting he needed something, he shot her. Disgusted by what he had done, he turned the gun on himself. I know it's morbid and not what you'd want to hear, but her primary goal was trying to keep you safe. That's all she ever cared about," he finished.

"Wow. Okay. So, mommy died to keep me safe?" Blair asked, scared for the response.

“She died because you were, and still are, the single most important thing in the world to her. When she saw that man, she never once feared for her own safety, she was worried about you,” he paused, waiting for a reaction he didn’t get. “You know, she may be dead, but she’s not gone. She lives on through you and with you, every single day. You think about her all the time, you tell everyone stories about her, and you talk to her every night. Wherever she is, she hears you and she talks back. She would have loved more than anything to grow alongside you, but she’s watching you grow on your own and I know she’s prouder of you than you could ever imagine. She would die a thousand times to keep you safe,” Blair stayed quiet, processing the information. He continued, “I know you think it’s your fault, Blair, but I need you to listen to me right now and I’m serious about that,” she didn’t move. “Blair, look at me,” he said sternly. She looked up, tear pricking her eyes. “You are not the reason she died, you are the reason she lives on,” he said as she began to sob.

Blair quietly sobbed for a few minutes when, suddenly, through tear-stricken eyes, she spotted in the corner of the room, the crocheted bee that she tore apart two years prior.

“What’s that?” Blair asked, pointing to the corner of the room. “Did you do that?”

Uncle Raymond felt uneasy because he couldn’t tell if she was happy or mad about the present he was going to give her, he began explaining somewhat defensively, “I learned to crochet to fix it for you. I figured you regretted tearing it up.” She darted across the room, grabbed it as if she couldn’t tell if she was dreaming, and squeezed it to her chest, flooding it with tears. With every teardrop that fell, they could both sense her guilt surrounding her mother’s death and the mutilation of one of the last things she created melting away for the first time in two years. She mouthed, ‘thank you’ and sat back down next to him.

“Uncle Raymond?” she said inquisitively.

“Yes?” he responded.

“Can you sing to me?” they both paused, completely still. “You know...that song.” He hesitated answering, unsure if it

would be okay. Without speaking, as if she read his mind, she continued, “Don’t worry, it’s okay now, you can say it.”

“Honeybee, come to me,” he began with a voice almost as angelic as her mother’s. She nestled herself in his arms, gradually drifting off to sleep as the hum of the lullaby enveloped her. She felt safe, and she felt warm. Precisely as the lullaby ended, she passed out and, though salty teardrops stained her cheek, her vibrant smile was still plastered on her face. “Sweet dreams,” Uncle Raymond whispered as he kissed her forehead; and she did have sweet dreams. She never had another nightmare again.

## The Witch's Daughter

If Kenzie Blacknell knew anything of the miserable town she hailed from, it was that they could not be trusted under any circumstances. Her mother had once trusted them, and she burned for it. At. The. Stake.

They tried her for witchcraft when Kenzie was only seven, and gave her what the mayor deemed a fair trial. "If she burned," he decried with a torch in hand, "she shall get a pure burial. If not, she will be punished for crimes of witchcraft." The town cheered, but what did it matter? She burned, and yet still, she heard the whispers as she grew up. "The witch's daughter" smiled. "The witch's daughter" can read? "The witch's daughter" is dangerous. "The witch's daughter" can't be here. "The witch's daughter" must be stopped.

The true irony of the situation was that Kenzie did not even believe in witchcraft. If there really was some higher power, especially one that her mother drew her own power from, why did she burn?

Her mother was nothing more than a town apothecary. A talented one, that knew how to bring people back from the verge of death, but it is not like Kenzie had seen anything truly impossible. She just was the last talented apothecary the town had ever seen.

Her mother told extravagant stories. And that was it. Stories that Kenzie may have once believed, but stories all the same. Fiction. Lies. Her father was nothing more than a man on the road now, who took off bored of the town he grew up in - not one of the feared Changelings by any means. Her and Aunt Meagan got into trouble growing up, but not with faeries and demons. Those did not exist.

And her mother was never happy, no matter what she told Kenzie. She longed for a life outside of the town, and was

planning to leave not long before she died. She longed for the husband that left her with a daughter too young to remember him. She longed for her own stories to be real, and most of all, she longed for a town that did not ostracize her for being smarter than they liked their women.

But none of that made her a witch, not by the typical measurements. And certainly none of it made Kenzie Blacknell a witch either, or any other creature they could make up a name for. But it made Kenzie two things: careful, and smart. Cold and calculating, maybe. Wary, but clever.

Growing up, the town's official motto was some archaic phrase for hard work pays off. Just keep going. Keep your friends close, and your family closer.

The town's real motto was: guilty until proven innocent. Slash and burn. Keep your demons far away, but your friends further. But Kenzie stuck to her another motto altogether: keep them scared. If the town did not want to interact with her, teach her, or exist even, fine. They had nothing she wanted, and she found other ways to learn.

But if she kept the town scared, kept everyone else scared, they would leave her alone. They would not question her, and they would not mess with her. Their curiosity might make them interested enough for her to be the town cryptid, but their fear drove them away when they got too close.

Admittedly, it was easier said than done. Despite hating the town, she wanted to restore the Blacknell farm and cottage that had fallen into disrepair for the first time since it was built when the town was founded. That meant hiring laborers to work the fields, the gap between her and the town being approached for the first time in the six years since the burning. And it meant the mayor and his cronies, some of the only ones who had never moved on, would be going after her once again. It was always something different every year.

Age thirteen: weeds. "She can't grow crops if her fields are overcome with weeds." They started off small, spreading weeds throughout her property. Seemingly, no matter how many they planted, more grew on the neighboring farms.

Age fourteen: tax laws. “No one has paid taxes on this property in years, so we will seize it.” But, when Kenzie had started the farm, they decreed it illegal for women to pay taxes. So how could she pay taxes when there were no taxes in the first place?

Age fifteen: inheritance laws. “Actually, the town owns this entire farm, and you will have to surrender whatever claim you have to it.” They claiming women could not inherit anything without a male relative. But they failed there because, since her father was only ever declared missing and was the legal owner, the house was still owned by him and Kenzie was simply the caretaker.

Age sixteen: labor strikes. “The witch’s daughter only hurts you!” The mayor grew more and more desperate to keep her down each year, so, for a few days, he paid the laborers to stay away. Kenzie said strike, and suddenly the mayor’s funds he promised he would use dried up. They returned within a week.

She learned the hard way that, when they are scared, they stay away. Her mother got too friendly. Too trusting. And the town pounced on her like a cat on a mouse. The cat may have gotten sick with disease for years after the mouse died, but the mouse still died and the cat still lived, so who really won?

If she kept them scared, they would stay away. And even those drawn to her by curiosity eventually would leave, even the boy next door. Even if, no matter how temporarily, she considered them a friend.

But age seventeen: the decennium. “This week marks the tenth year since the Blacknell Witch was banished.”

They said banished. They always meant burned. But they enjoy celebrating her “leaving” the town. As far as the mayor was concerned, when he wanted to rally the town in his favor, he had vanquished all of witchcraft. When the mayor wanted to stoke the fear that kept him in power, he reminded them that some of her traces remained. Namely in Kenzie.

But that did not stop him from throwing a festival, and the biggest one they had ever had in Kenzie’s memory not for a major holiday. The laborers she hired for the farm did not dare request that week off, but they complained about seeing spirits on



the field in the morning mist, like they had the week before. Kenzie knew it was just mist.

And she had almost entirely forgotten about it, brushing it off as a way for them to go to the festival. After all, it had been a whole decade since her death, and a decade since Kenzie had believed in anything remotely supernatural. But it was the night before the tenth anniversary she realized they were not lying.

She was standing in the field that had only grown wildflowers since she burned to ashes, standing in the exact same spot she became fertilizer for the flowers. Kenzie did not let anyone near it, so she was already half way out to scream at them to get off of her land when she realized who it was. And when she realized that, she ran towards her, only getting close enough to hear her mother say “Kenzie” one more time before she heard the snap of a branch, and saw a figure darting over the hill.

But Kenzie did not care about them at the moment, only about the now fading apparition. “Mother!” Kenzie shouted, but she faded as quickly as she appeared. Her mother had always told Kenzie of how sometimes ghosts haunted the most important anniversaries of their deaths, but she called it a lie like everything else. Now, well, what really was a lie?

Her aunt was not expecting her home that night, but she raced home anyway. If anyone knew who her mother had been, it was surely her aunt. She told her aunt everything that had happened, and her aunt laughed a little and asked, “now you believe us?”

“Everything will be okay,” her aunt had said, but that was before she saw the approaching fire in the distance.

It seems that there is a fine line to ride for how scared you can make an entire town. And it seems it is not good to remind the town on the night where they already wanted to reenact her death, and they had relieved everything but the burning. The mayor and his cronies had flecks of black powder on their faces even. Not from the ashes, but reminiscent of the powder her mother had sprayed on their faces when she called for Kenzie to run. The majority of the cronies, the ones that did not die, were blinded. Yet the mayor, who led the pack, was only left with scars all over his body, from where the powder fell on him.

Kenzie, once again, had called it basic science. Now she knew better.

Meagan told Kenzie to run, like her mother did ten years ago. Even if the fire was not for her, she should not have stayed in town this week to begin with. Kenzie was sent packing away, and her uncle decided to walk down and talk to the mobs before they got too close to the house and the farm. If her aunt was the one to walk down, they would just have another problem on their hands.

But as Kenzie rounded the corner not too far from the town, she found herself knocked off her horse, and surrounded by the other half of the mob. The ones who went out without their fire.

Apparently Kenzie tried too hard to be scary. She inspired too much fear, and that fear overcame the cowardice of the town and the flames came back.

“Witch,” they shouted, some of them too young to even remember what happened that day.

“Murderess,” they continued. Murder of who? Kenzie still never had figured out who they thought she murdered.

“Liar,” they chanted. About what?

They pushed her forward, with their pitchforks towards the flames. It seems that even if the Blacknell Witch’s daughter did not believe in magic herself until that night, they could still try her for witchcraft.

A mock of the morning itself ten years ago.

Kenzie stepped forward, avoiding the poking and stabbing of their pitchforks. “This is disappointing, you know,” she called to whoever could hear but they were so, so loud. “You really have not learned anything at all.”

“Monster!” they continued, and as Kenzie was about to answer, she was knocked face first into the dirt, fading out almost immediately. Maybe this is better, she thought, beginning to lose consciousness.

She awoke in her mother’s field, the one she had let grow wild with flowers. Only there were no more flowers, and it was noon, and Kenzie did not really know what happened. She smelled vaguely of smoke, and looking around her rested charred

remains. She stood up, only to see children on the edge of the forest, watching on as she did so many years ago. She tried taking a step closer, only to look down and see that the crunches she stepped on were not branches at all. They were something harder, and far more monochromatic. She supposed the town got the whole festival and reliving down to the t. Except, just this once, it was not a Blacknell who burned.

## Traveling to Reyu

*Dear reader,*

*Be warned: Reyu may be known for its magic and wonder, but traveling to Reyu is a task few can achieve. There are many matters to consider (only some of which are covered), but, even for the most experienced traveler, one false step and you could be the dragon's next meal. Therefore, the Council of Elders has formally requested me to give you this warning at the beginning of the guide, and to ask you to write a final will and testament before you embark on your journey in the event of your most probable death.*

*I know a warning of death has not stopped the majority of you. As you know, many are curious about Reyu, but the fact you have been able to procure this guide says something about your ambitions. Maybe this year the death rate will go down.*

*Reyu remains a place of mystery and, before, only the most skilled could find it. Some challenges will be discussed in this guide but, remember, not all will be. Travel at your own risk.*

I pause, lifting my pen from the paper, and look out my window at the sprawling city below, full of beautiful architecture, unheard of technologies, and magic. Reyu remains to be an untouched gem since only the most bright, creative, and clever minds ever reach it - or, in the case of some Reyuians I know, are born here.

It took longer for the Council of Elders to even consider my request to write this guide than it would take a dragon to count its hoard of riches, and yet here I am, all these years later, unsure of whether this is truly a good idea.

With a sigh, I put the pen down, grab my coat, and walk out the door, knowing the only person that can give me advice does not support me in the slightest.

### *Obstacle One: the Candy Cane Forest*

*I hope you know by now that the Candy Cane Forest is not a forest made entirely of candy canes (for that would be far too easy and too sweet), and that many refer to it only as that because the forest is composed of psychedelic, red-and-white trees which smell of mint. To write this guide, I myself sought to experience the effects of the berries from the mint-tree hybrid known to most as the “candy cane” tree to be able to inform you first-hand. While the effects may vary depending on the person, in my experience, eating even three berries results in passing out and suffering severe hallucinations. I, an experienced Reyuian, knew how to handle the situation and tried it as an experiment, but I do not suggest you do the same because it will result in almost certain death. Most do not have the luck I do of traveling with a partner, and while there are plenty who start with a partner, for one reason or another, they do not finish with one. That is something we will discuss later in the “frequently asked questions” section, if you can find it.*

Having taken the same path as a child, the Candy Cane Forest was also my first obstacle. Scared and naïve, I ran straight through, knowing not to trust or touch anything there. Since then, I have gone through this path approximately seventeen times, choosing to go other routes or off-path entirely the hundreds of other times. Often, I will try a new way to go to Reyu, however the paths are the best and only way for anyone not from Reyu to go there. I have heard stories of people wandering off-path and winding up right where they started, or worse.

Even though I was an experienced traveler, the Council of Elders thought it was best for me to travel through the path I would write about one last time with a friend they assigned to oversee it.

Well, friend was a rather strong word.

“Are you ready?” Tom snipped. I sighed, putting my journal away. Tom’s mood did not get much better over the next few days which I later found out was partly due to a previous addiction to the berries. Surprisingly, like anyone with a brain, he never tried the berries undiluted, especially not in the Candy

Cane Forest where its effects were said to be strongest, and therefore could not tell me what its effects would be on me.

The trek was quite simple as the Candy Cane Forest was the easiest obstacle by far, but still, I made sure to document anything that seemed out of the ordinary - it is a constantly evolving maze, after all.

“Are you eating the berries here?” he asked as we approached a clearing next to various caves and tunnels, a small bridge in the distance.

“Do you want to stay here for the next few days?” I replied.

“Well-” he cut off when I swallowed the berries anyway, sitting in the grass. “I guess it doesn’t matter now.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t-”

Three days later, I woke up with dirt streaks on my pants and dancing, red-and-white parakeets above me. It seems my companion, for lack of a better word, did not agree with my decision to take the berries then and there and dragged me off into a cave.

“Happy now?” he asked me, already packed so he could run at any moment.

“Yes,” I responded, attempting to blink away both the hallucinations and Tom. “I think I understand the effects.”

“Of course you do,” he rolled his eyes, leaving me alone in the dark cave with the potentially hallucinated parakeets and the very real dragon.

### *Obstacle Three: the Rickety Bridge*

*Not all obstacles will have misnomers like the first and this bridge, much to your dislike, is rickety. However, a rickety bridge is nothing special, so how would this be an obstacle?*

*Simple: one would never be able to guess.*

*To the regular observer, it seems to be in perfect condition when it is, in fact, filled with gaps. To avoid falling to your death in the rocky river and being eaten by the goldfish, I suggest you gather some of the psychedelic mint-tree berries and throw them on the bridge ahead of you to see where the gaps are. The good*

*news is, even if you fall, the goldfish might have snacked on the berries and become overrun with hallucinations.*

*Or it might have attracted them because they thought someone was about to fall and impale themselves on the rocks below. Again, this path is not for the light traveler.*

I, like the many times prior, convinced the dragon to go back to its pile of shiny objects and that my bones would be very ugly roasted and piled on top. Luckily, he agreed with me and even asked how my cats were doing in the city. I told him that they had taken to speaking and, in turn, asked him about his grandchildren and whether they were finding nice caves of their own. He laughed, telling me to get out of his cave before he started to cry which, of course, would result in me being burned by acid.

Tom was waiting for me on the other side of the bridge, and a pile of seven of the over two hundred berries we collected on our way through the forest waited for me on my side of the bridge.

“You could have left me a few more!” I shouted over the chasm.

“I thought you were the expert!” he shouted back.

“I am,” I mumbled, throwing a berry in front of me, noting where it bounced before falling. “I have three PhDs and a number of certifications that mean I am qualified enough to know where to leave your body and make it look like an accident.”

#### *Obstacle Four-and-a-Half: the Fire Rocks*

*You might have noticed some steps have been skipped. It would do you good to note that.*

*As for the fire rocks, you can easily get past them - personally, I found them the easiest obstacle - if you know the rhythm.*

*In Reyu and the surrounding, lesser-known villages, it is commonly known that fire rocks are rocks that seem like your regular Other - a term Reyuians use to describe anything not from Reyu - rocks but burst into flames if you step on them at the*

*wrong time. Sometimes they have mouths and fangs, but do not worry, that is fairly rare.*

*They also respond to rhythm and, if you are patient, will show you their rhythm at night under certain constellations. I would love to tell you which but this is still meant to be a challenge, and the guide mostly warnings.*

*If waiting during this obstacle is too much for you, I suggest you reevaluate your decision to travel to Reyu. Patience is what people need most but always seem to forget, and the spirits of the path have no time for anyone who would not appreciate what is there.*

Judging by the mob of goldfish waiting eagerly for my fall, Tom probably dumped a large portion of the berries in the water to attract them. Of course, even with few resources, I was still able to make it safely across the bridge, now one of my favorite obstacles, thanks to the look on Tom's face. He never said it but I knew that he was one of the many who did not support the creation of the guide. After all, he was born in Reyu and never had to struggle to get there like I did. If I died during our trip, the creation of the guide would be delayed, if not cancelled entirely. There would be investigations, of course, but it would take weeks for them to arrive and, by then, any damning evidence my death was anything more than accidental would be erased by the mountain.

When I reached the other side, he was already set up for the night in a location perfect for watching the stars. Yes, the stars are nice on the mountain, but it is the stars that make the fire rocks share how to get across. I knew a colleague who studied this for years and never found an answer for why they do before going missing one night years ago. Some say you can hear his voice whispering what he found in the wind from time to time.

This was my first time traveling through the fire rocks since the memorial service so I sat that night, listening for his voice. "Help," he said.

"Help," I echoed. "Where?"

Tom looked at me strangely, as if, for the first time in his miserable life, genuinely concerned for me. He did not ask what I



was talking about for he already knew. “Did you know him?” he asked, after some time.

“Help!” I heard once more, resisting the urge to jump up and go after him. I knew it was just the birds across the flames trying to get me to wander off.

“Yes,” I said after a moment. I had assumed it was the birds then but now I’m not so sure.

Tom only nodded, but it was unspoken what stayed on our minds: even the best can get killed if they are caught off guard.

*O t cle Fi : he Bi ds*

*T e i n t uch to s a ut t e e b r s. O ly th t so wi l peck ur eyes ou a d me wi ck ur liv r s) o nd s me, ly handful, w l b fri d ou d e y r p tr of sa e pa age th ugh e nes g gr nds.*

*Th se irds ar extr m ly protective o t ir ts t en y pre nts, esp ially sh ny one .*

*Befriend them, a task much harder than deciphering this, and you will reach Reyu. Otherwise, you may end up like the instructions.*

What happened after the fire rocks and before the pixies Tom and I agreed to never speak of again. It was then I decided Tom might not be so bad after all.

*Obstacle Six: The Pixies*

*If you manage to get past birds of Reyu, you will reach their close relative, the pixie. These pixies are both more vicious and kinder than the birds for their standards are higher but their logic is sounder. Sing them a song, write them a poem (do not, I repeat, do not recite a poem from someone else. They will know and they will rip you to shreds), or tell them about how beautiful they are. As long as you woo a single pixie, the rest will back off.*

*Remember: a single pixie can only vouch for strangers once in their lifetime but, if they remember you, they can vouch for you again.*

“Macie?” I called out, stepping ahead of Tom and glancing around the trees for the thousands of hidden pixies waiting inside. Macie had mercy for me all those years ago, and I had not forgotten it.

After a few moments, she came fluttering out so I took out the cheese from my backpack. In an instant, she grabbed it and would have bit my finger if I had not pulled away in time.

“Ahh, still sweet,” she smiled, holding only half the cheese now.

Tom’s eyes darted around, as if taking this in for the first time.

“What’s wrong?” I had asked because, oh, I had thought it would be so simple.

“I haven’t crossed this way before,” he said, looking around.

I scrunched my face. “This is the quickest way.”

“Also the riskiest way,” he said, taking into account the pixies swarming above him.

“Then you best start singing,” I told him, glancing around. If I had known, while his voice was beautiful, his song would have such a horrible effect on the pixies we would be chased out, I would have agreed to leave the forest and take the one week trek around. We still would have been forced to sprint, but it would have been ten feet rather than ten miles up and down hills, over roots, under branches, and through rivers until we reached the first gate of our home.

*If you make it this far in your journey, congratulations but do not think your journey is anywhere close to ending after you make it past the obstacles. There will be a final test to see who you truly are, and who they are letting into the city.*

In the small, seemingly insignificant fishing village I was born, most ten-year-olds were taking exams to see if they were fit to stay in school or would be better off cleaning fish at the markets. Instead, I opted to run to Reyu and never look back.

After the week of getting past the various obstacles, it was another two before I was allowed into the city. Two weeks spent

taking hundreds of tests to analyze thousands of different qualities about my ten-year-old self. Most of it is foggy when I try to remember it, but I still feel it was the scariest part of traveling to Reyu. I would have rather died at the hands of the pixies or gone up in flames while crossing the fire rocks than be sent back to the village that had taken the lives of my parents. Sometimes, when I am traveling in the east, I visit the ruins of what used to be my home. Of where my parents had been born and killed. Of where I might have joined them had they not left me orphaned.

It's been centuries but there has not been a day when I have not been grateful.

I reach Tom's door and pause, biting my lip. What would he even begin to say to this? To the fact I have spent years working to create this guide and am still hesitant? I turn away when the door opens.

"You really don't need to wait outside my door for ten minutes, you know?" I roll my eyes and keep on walking. "Want to come inside?" he finally says.

I turn around, looking at him for the first time since we arrived home two weeks ago, and follow him inside.

*That being said, I genuinely wish you success in reaching Reyu. Perhaps, if you make it that far, we will meet one day. Do not be a stranger. After all, I did save your life.*

While we sit at his table, I spill my thoughts to Tom and, for once, he listens before giving some advice. I even tell him of who I was when I first crossed - the real, scared me. Not the adventurous ten-year-old most in the community thought I was but a terrified orphan in desperate need of a guide.

When I finish, he can't control his laughter. "Nina, really? You still think you don't know what to do?"

## December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019

Bushkill, Pennsylvania

“I don’t know about you guys, but normally I’d just be sitting at home with my family on New Year’s Eve,” Mark says. He wears a hoodie that says WALLENPAUPACK in purple letters, and he holds a Wii Remote. The Christmas tree casts beige shadows across the white-carpeted room.

“Yeah,” I agree.

Bobby Stiles displays his array of video games for us. “We’ve got Mario Kart, Smash Bros, Wii Sports Resort...”

“Let’s save Wii Sports for later,” Mark says. “We want to end the 2010’s the same way we began it.”

“Are we feeling Mario Kart, then?”

“Sure,” Bobby says.

We get everything set up, and then we start to play. I had heard that men’s obsession with sports and video games was an evolutionary relic from our prehistoric hunting days. Our brains are hardwired to socialize while looking at something else—a pack of mammoths, or a TV. Apparently, only women talked face to face.

“Can I just say something?”

“Hmm?” Mark says.

“I just want to say, I can’t think of a better way to spend New Year’s.”

“Oh, totally,” Bobby says.

Mark is in eighth place. “All I get is a banana? Seriously?”

“Connor DeShelney and those guys are probably out getting drunk some place,” I say. In my head, I add, here’s to a year I won’t spend alone.

New York, New York

I fling my 2020 glasses to the hotel bed. They're branded with the logo of a gym that will see a spike in attendance for the next two weeks and will go back to normal once everyone realizes resolutions are a sham. I don't remember the name of the hotel we stayed at, but I remember its logo. One of those obnoxious minimalist designs, with the name made out of negative space. An image defined by what isn't there.

"It was your idea to go Times Square," I tell her.

"I wanted to see it," she says. "My family never got to take extravagant vacations to Spain, or Paris, like yours did."

I sit down on the bed. "I'm gonna need a lot of shifts at the theatre to pay for this hotel room."

"We can go back down." Jane sits next to me, but does not touch me. "It's almost midnight. We can make it."

"By now, our spot's been absorbed into the crowd."

She sighs. We sit in silence.

"You'll feel better after you take a shower," she says. "Get that fish smell off you."

I stand up.

"We can watch it on TV," Jane says. "Or we can watch the Twilight Zone marathon."

I sigh.

"Maybe this summer we'll have enough money saved to travel Europe," Jane says.

"No. Life threw a bucket of fish at me, and I'm going to throw a bucket of fish back at it."

"Connor—"

I leave the room. Then I realize I forgot my novelty glasses. I go back into the room. I grab them angrily. I need them for the full effect.

When I reach the lobby, I see the bellhops try to disguise their disgust.

"Good evening," one says. He puts on that formal bellhop smile, but I can tell he's trying not to gag at my putrid smell.

I stroll out the revolving doors to the streets of Manhattan. People pack the streets like sardines. Cars honk. Enormous

electronic billboards shine overhead. I head down the sidewalk until I find a bodega.

“Would you happen to have any fish?” I say. Frayed lottery and cigarette ads completely cover the windows. Blue light shines from behind the cracks.

The storeowner covers his nose with his shirt. “Freezer.”

I go to the back of the store, stepping over a cat that seems interested in me. I find a box of freezer-burnt fish sticks.

“Gordon Fisher’s Man Sticks?” I say. “Must be the generic brand.” I pay for my ammunition, and set out back in the direction of Times Square. I hail a cab.

“Where to?”

“That’s the thing. I’ve got kind of a moving target. I’m looking for a cab.”

“What do you think this is?”

“I’m looking for a specific cab.” I check my watch. 11:59. “Do you know a cab driver by the name of—”

The driver tosses a bucket of mackerel at me. Slippery fish slap my face. Bright lights blink inside the taxi, and a gameshow tune plays.

“You just landed in the Fish Cab,” the driver says, with a voice that now sounds more Drew Carey than Danny DeVito.

“Happy New Year! Now get out of here!”

I slide out of the cab, dripping fish onto the snowy sidewalks. The Fish Cab speeds off into the new decade.

Valley Hills, Kentucky

“Great Scott!”

“What do you want this time?” Scott said. Scott was maybe my best friend, a young lad in a stylish vest.

“Scott, my boy, I’ve just invented a time machine.”

“Listen, doc, my mom says I should stop hanging out with you. She thinks it’s kind of weird that I’m hanging out with a random old man.”

I shivered in the open garage. My neighbor’s Christmas lights blinked and danced across the street. I looked at Scott. “Is that your New Year’s Resolution?”

“I guess.”

“Don’t. You see, I found out that New Year’s Resolutions never work. It’s a scientific fact. That’s because resolutions try to change the future. You can’t change the future, Scotty. The only way to change things is to change the past. If you want to make 2020 a better year, you have to go backwards. Once I figured that out, I had only the simple matter of building a time machine.”

“So, where is it?”

“It’s here,” I said, patting my Tesla on the hood. “I put a time machine in my Tesla.”

“You made a time machine out of an electric vehicle?” Scotty said. “And you’re going to drive it into the past where all the infrastructure it requires doesn’t exist?”

“Yes, but it’s cool, Scotty.”

Scott shrugged. “Beats watching the lunatics in Time Square.” He tried to get in the car, but bumped his head on the gull-wing door.

“Who builds a door like that?” he said, rubbing his head and getting in the back.

I got in the front. “Now, boy, you’ll see there’s no better way to spend the New Year than by going back to the old ones.” I changed the station. They wouldn’t have 80’s music where we’re going. “Where are we going?” Scott said.

“Pangea.”

“Okay, when are we going?”

“Right now.” I put the car in drive and floored it. Scotty screamed as we careened straight ahead at the neighbor’s house, running over a light-up reindeer before dissolving into the vortex.

Dimensions shattered around us. Neon polygons twisted and transpired. Clocks, cows, and silverware flew past us and into the void.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Scott said.

“Sorry. I like to take the back roads.”

Bright light consumed the vortex, then dimmed to reveal a primordial swamp. The Tesla dove headfirst into a lake of mud. I opened the glove compartment and passed its contents to Scotty.

“What’s this?”

“An air mask. You’ll need it to out here.”

“Well, okay, doc.” Scott pulled the transparent contraption over his head, and I did the same. Then we set out into the prehistoric muck.

“Did we really have to go back this far?” Scott said, shuffling past giant ferns. “What are we even looking for?”

“Where everything went wrong.”

We trudged through the bog for what seemed like an hour.

“Good thing the car can drive itself, eh doc?” Scott said.

“Yes, yes it is, boy.”

“I can’t wait until we get back to 2020 and we can take these masks off.”

“Shh, Scotty.”

“What?”

“There it is.”

I pointed to the muddy beach of the primeval sea. A fish-like creature with legs stood submerged offshore, gazing up at the land. We tiptoed closer.

Cautiously, the fish took its first steps onto dry land.

“Shoo!”

The fish gave us a look.

“You heard me!” I yelled. “Shoo! Get out of here! Scram! Can’t you tell land’s no good?”

The fish looked at us, like a dog who had been stepped on. I thought it might even cry.

“There’ll be no evolving into higher life forms on my watch.” The fish meekly turned itself around and plodded back into the water.

“Yeah,” I said. “Don’t show your face around here again!”

I waited to make sure it actually left. Scotty looked like he was at a loss for words. Until he wasn’t.

“Do you think that did it, doc? Did we fix 2020?”

“Hard to say. We haven’t stopped existing yet.”

“Can we go back to the present now?”

“Sure thing.” I started the walk back. “Do you mind if we skip ahead a couple of months? For some reason, the whole concept of January never sat right with me.”



## The Dominator Rolls The Dice Again

“You don’t have to keep doing this to yourself, Steven. You can stop all of this right now if you want to!” screeches the dazzling cop with skin a bit too perfect for reality. The sound of the TV pounds against the lofty ceiling of the massive house, vibrating the living room walls as Kat sits mesmerized by the mindless drama.

Kat lets out a bitter laugh and whispers to herself, “Oh yeah, Steven totally seems capable of change at this point. For God’s sake, he’s holding that girl hostage right now!”

Kat has seen this episode before, so she knows exactly what’s going to happen. It bores her to see her beloved characters move across the screen, trapped within the same plot as the day before. She always wonders what they would do if they could escape it. There’s nothing productive about thoughts like that though, so she tosses it aside with a reckless energy.

Glancing at the chrome clock hanging above the maroon fireplace, Kat groans as she lounges on her caramel couch. They’ll be home soon. That’s when everything tends to go to hell. Tonight, Kat’s got a question for her dad that’s bound to set off a fantastic display of dysfunction. Suddenly, the tinkering of clicking clocks overpowers the roaring TV set. An expression of doom settles upon Kat’s freckled face as she’s dragged back to the reality of her current situation.

Zoning out, Kat thinks back to last week when she had her unfortunate car crash. It was a perfectly average morning; the air was heavy with the dew of the night before. Kat felt hopeful for the day, though a weary apprehension filled her as she started her commute to her community college. Kat was waiting to turn left when she looked up to see a huge black Ford Explorer barreling towards her. The sound of metal clashing followed. Chemical

dust from the airbag swirled in the tiny blue Honda, hot against Kat's skin. It burned.

Since then, Kat's been careless.

Slinking down into the cushions, Kat twirls her long copper locks and tries to escape her problems for a little longer. She imagines her lonely grey home as a steel fortress, instead of the suburban nightmare it is.

Kat fantasies she's gazing down from the tallest window when she spots her parents riding bareback to the gates. She exclaims aloud, "Raise the alarms! Release the gators into the moat. Quick, we are under attack." She shouts out the window to the confused faces of her parents, "Get out of here."

He shouts back, "Hey, we pay the mortgage!"

Her mom winces saying, "Don't shove that in her face, Dear."

Cocking her head to the right, Kat admits she can't argue with her Father. She sighs and says aloud, "I don't even know why I try."

A door slams, Kat's eyes open as her father rushes into the living room where she lounges. "Get up now. There's no sleeping here," he booms. "Why aren't you in your room anyway?" Kat remains motionless, frozen by the ancient instincts that whisper within her to run. Before Kat can even respond, he's shooting out another remark. He points to a pair of sneakers in the front hall and rumbles, "Who put these damn shoes here?"

"I was just sitting here. Not sleeping either. And I don't have to live in my room, do I? I'm a twenty-year-old, you know?"

Dad huffs, rolling his eyes. "These shoes don't belong here," he says as he tosses them onto a pile of other miscellaneous items in the hall closet. "Every damn day we have to do this!"

"Why? Just why? You don't have to throw them! They're expensive."

"You don't have to put them there either. Why are you buying expensive shoes anyway?"

Kat's head jolts back, squinching her nose. She shakes her head and laughs. "Well, gosh. Welcome home," she says.

Turning away from her father, Kat begins to hum “Memory” from the musical *Cats*. Kat knows from her dad’s controlling attitude already, that her question is not going to go over well. Hoping to ignore it for a bit longer, Kat calls out, “Girls, my baby girls! Come to me girls!”

From behind a nearby wall, slinks a beautiful Bengal with orange and brown stripes. Her tiny white face makes her golden emerald eyes pop. “Aww, my darling. Where’s your sister?” says Kat jokingly.

Kat bends down to pet her petite Luella. She looks up to the sound of claws tearing through the house, “Sylvia, is that you?” A chubby silver-blue cat skids into the room, making Kat laugh.

“You really have to stop talking to them, you know. This is the start of some kind crazy cat lady thing. You better cut it out before you’re too old to get a man.”

“Cool. I’ll think about that.”

Seeming annoyed to not get a rise out of Kat, her dad continues on. “My mom had 10 cats at one time when I was young. Even with four sons, she couldn’t stop bringing them in! We had no room for them, they’d get lost in all the boxes everywhere. So, we let them outside a lot.”

This piques Kat’s interest and she looks at her dad directly. “You had 10 cats?” questions Kat.

With a faraway look in his eyes, he says, “I would have 10 again. But things can get out of control quick.” Snapping out of his trance, he barks, “They’re just money and work.”

“Oh. Yeah, I know.”

“When will Mom be home?”

Kat sighs, “Hopefully soon, but probably not. Why don’t you check what it says on the calendar?”

“What calendar.”

“The same calendar” – she rolls her eyes – “I tell you to check every day.”

He says “I don’t where it is. Show me.”

Kat wants to ignore him, but a small sliver of her also wonders when her mom will be home too. Rising slowly, she says “Okay. Hold on.”

She passes an overcrowded table with scattered piles of bills, cassettes, and an assortment of her dad's bizarre vitamins to reach the calendar.

Kat yells out, "She should be getting home in five minutes!"

Silence is her response. Looking around the corner of the kitchen into the foyer, she notices that her dad is missing.

Oh no, thinks Kat, I just messed up big time. She should have asked her question before he got to the next step in his daily routine. His mood gets even worse after he looks in the mirror.

Trudging up the stairs, Kat sees her dad hunching over the sink of the bathroom with the door open. He's only centimeters away from the reflective surface. She walks closer to her dad as he continues to intently examine his reflection. Fingers lightly running across his tired face, he turns his head side to side. Kat knows he's looking for flaws. Microscopic spots on his skin to be exact. Or he's looking at his thinning hair, really anything he deems imperfect is worthy of his scrutiny.

Sympathy swells in Kat as she ponders what anxiety her dad must have to be so insecure over nonexistent micro flaws.

"She's coming home now, basically."

"Oh, great." he says unimpressed.

"Um...yeah. So. Is now a good time to ask you a question?"

Gasping, Kat's dad responds in quick, fast breaths. "I hit it big tonight, you know. I won \$356.23 in only three hours! I almost broke my personal record of \$542.78 in winnings for one night!"

Kat's doubts he won that much. She thinks how can you even win all that in one night?

Glancing at Kat and her skeptical smile, he quickly reaches into his pocket for proof. Proudly grasping a folded stack of bills, he waves it in Kat's face.

She steps back. "Oh. Wow."

Starting to count aloud, he nearly chants "One hundred! Two hundred! Three hundred! Two twenties, a ten, a five, and six ones! And I already used the change to help buy a pretzel."

He haphazardly tosses a twenty onto the carpet, “Here, you probably need it.”

The twenty-dollar bill sits there for a moment. Both of them staring at the green face of Andrew Jackson. Kat’s apprehensive of his money, since it’s usually followed by more ridicule. Leaning down, she scoops the twenty up from the ground. Money is money after all, regardless of what Kat’s dignity is whispering for her to do.

“Now, I’m basically The Dominator” – he says as he pretends to throw imaginary dice in a rolling hand gesture – “down at that casino, they all think I’m the best. They all know me down there now. Like a fan group.”

Kat huffs, “Oh my god, honestly can you be any more into yourself than you already are?”

“Well, I am The Dominator. I know the secret to throwing the dice. I just never lose.”

Kat thinks back to the night two years ago when her dad first told her about The Dominator. He pounded on her bedroom door at 3 AM, a grumpy Kat appeared and he started to play a YouTube video. “Look, look. Your mom won’t wake up right now, but you can watch. Look at this guy throw the dice. He knows how to win every time.”

That’s when all this nonsense about craps began with her dad. He was obsessed with The Dominator’s method of setting the dice to control what numbers would come out. In Kat’s eyes, The Dominator was nothing but a guy that went to casinos too much and had freaky good luck at them. Maybe, she was wrong though. Her dad has been bringing home money nearly every day since that terribly annoying night.

“Oh, well then now really is a good time to ask you a question.”

“Uh, what are you-“

“I was wondering if you could give me that insurance check you promised to give me, remember? I need it to buy my new car, so I can get to work and everything.”

“Oh, yeah! I’m not giving that to you anymore.”

Kat is not shocked by his response, but she has to ask for the sake of her car. “What do you mean you’re not giving it to me. How am I supposed to buy my car without it?”

“Well, I was thinking about it and it was my name on the title. So, it’s my money according to the law. Anyway, you don’t deserve all that money for yourself. What would you even do with it?”

From downstairs the front door bangs closed, signaling her mom’s long-awaited arrival. In a sing-songy voice, Kat’s mom greets her family saying, “Hellooo, what’s everyone up to tonight?”

“Mom, Dad has lost it again. He’s saying I can’t have the insurance check to buy a new car.”

“Oh my, why is he saying th-“

Getting frustrated, Kat spats out “I paid for that car’s insurance every month for a reason, Dad. So, if I crashed, I would be protected from stuff like this! You can’t keep the money.”

“We don’t have enough money to give you that check. And like I said you don’t deserve it, you never do any hard work. I work all day so you can live here. My parents never gave me any checks.”

From downstairs, Kat hears her mom audibly sigh. Slowly, she walks upstairs to confront her husband and Kat. Wearing a Hello Kitty scrub shirt and pink polka dot heart socks, she pushes her lavender glasses onto the top of her graying hair to scratch at her face in apparent stress. As they argue, she stands idly by only able to watch them yell louder.

“I’m working three jobs right now, so I don’t know what you’re talking about. All I do is work hard. Anyway, that’s not the point. I pay the insurance. I crashed, it’s my check. You should give it to me. Duh.”

In a stern voice, Kat’s dad yells “You got to learn. Life is hard. And people don’t have to give you anything. I’m thinking about putting the money in an account to save for a trip to Reno. Wouldn’t it be great if I went to Reno?”

This completely confuses Kat. He literally waves money in her face and claims to still need help funding to go to Reno?

“Mom, say something! Seriously, say anything!”

In a sad voice, she snaps, “I already told him in an email that I think he’s being a loon about the check.”

“That’s all you have to say? Really? I need your help” says Kat urgently.

“What’s the point in me talking?” she yells, storming away into her standard room. “No one ever listens to me anyway!”

“Wow. That’s helpful, mom!”

Kat is shaking with rage, confusion, and hopelessness. She keeps thinking of her imaginary steel fortress where she’s in charge and no one else.

She fantasizes how she would sit upon a golden throne and proclaim equality for all in her grand land. And when her ivory glittering carriage fell apart, she’d just call up her fairy godmother to get her a brand spanking new one.

She’s not in her steel fortress though. She’s in his right now.

Kat’s willpower drains away, seeping into the floor and staining her house with another frustrating memory. She knows from experience that he’ll do anything to win a battle, so she’ll save her lungs the energy from saying anything else.

With a quiet discontent, Kat says as she stumbles into her standard room, “I hate you; you know. You could make my life so much easier and instead you make it worse.”

From inside her room, she hears her dad loudly tromp down the stairs to his standard room and yells, “You all can pack your shit up. See how easy life is then.”

Now separate from each other, Kat ponders why her dad has to make money so difficult. Why he has to make everything so difficult for her. It just makes her want to give up on tomorrow.

Hours later, Kat hears a hesitant knock at her door. Opening it, she’s surprised to see her dad holding his laptop open wide. “Do you want to look at this?”

Still mad, Kat remarks back, “Not really, what is it?”

“Just look!”

On the computer screen shines an ad for a brand-new silver Mazda sports car. Way out of Kat's price range, the car's listed for more than double the amount she was hoping to spend. It looks like true luxury to Kat, whose old car didn't even have powered locks.

"I'm getting it for you. I'm going to buy it with cash tomorrow night. My name will be on the title, of course. But it's your car. What do you think?"

Kat's feels a sensation of satisfaction rise within her body, mixed with anger and indignation. She isn't happy that her dad still refuses to put her name on her own car's title. But still she thinks thank god, I was starting to get worried. "I really don't need all that. Just a car will do."

Sounding excited, he says in a rapid overly high-pitched voice, "You knew I would get you something nice! It's going to look so much better in the driveway next to my Mustang over that old clunker you had"

Looking unbelievably tired for her young age, Kat nods and with a sour laugh says, "Yeah, I know. You somehow always do this."

And deep down she did know. She may not fully understand why he does the things he does, but she did know exactly what would happen. She's seen this episode before.



## Red Flowers

I like to say I was a cynical child. I was not. No, that's just what I tell myself when I want to feel like I didn't cause my parents unnecessary grief, much less when I describe myself to others. Though that's also the point where words like "Idiot" and "Brat" and "Shithead" come into play, depending on the audience. Strangely enough it's always the preachers who don't care about the cursing.

What I really was, however, was a severely introverted preteen who couldn't be pulled out of their books and their "educational" youtube videos. Something like a family roadtrip to Disneyland, a whole two days stuck with my sister and my parents? That should have been the most miserable of prospects to me. In some ways it was, since I can remember nearly nothing about the trip.

And so what I thought was my cynicism was outshined by an appreciation for the image of wealth, comfort, and cleanliness that the Disneyland hotel we'd pulled up to presented not just to us, but the whole world. Long, white sidewalks overlooking rows of flourishing plants and gurgling ponds whose fountains spouted towers of water maybe 20 feet high. Well dressed and better kept men and woman coming and going from the hotel like a precession of ants, taking luggage away like a well-oiled machine. Birdsong and polished glass, unmarred logs and the cries of cicada's...

I had plenty of time to take it all in as we slowly made our way around the small, circular lot waiting for our own turn to have our bags taken so we could check in. Despite it being nearly noon, I had been tired down to the bone, unlike my sister. My sister, the reason I hadn't been able to slip back into my sleep.

"Are we there yet?" She'd begun to ask the moment we passed the first Disneyland sign.

“Yes.” My mother’s initial cheer was replaced by cold dread.

“Are we there yet?” My sister repeated for the eightieth time, trying to jump out of the car and run out into the hotel. She’d declared she’d ask that question once for every new or interesting thing she saw.

“She just told you yes, Mary.” My father tried to save my mother, busy driving the car and unable to focus on both other drivers and a needy child. In this, I at least take pride. I may have been a stubborn sort of hell child, but I was a quiet one.

“But why are we in the car if we’re here?” Mary whined.

“Because.... Oh, would you look at that, a convenient excuse not to answer!” Your father chuckled as the car came to a stop at last. “Now all you have to do is wait until the nice men come and get our stuff – “

And then his phone rang with all the finality of a church’s bells.

“ – Ah, hold on. Hello? What is it, Mark?” My father answered my uncle. His face fell as he listened, my uncle’s voice little more than a whisper from my seat in the back of the car. That whisper became as quiet as a windless day once my father slipped out of the car, coming to a stop beside the hotel’s door. He stood directly in front of a long row of bright red flowers.

And as a bored child, I was left to imagine what conversation he was having. Primarily by voicing aloud what I thought was going on in a silly voice. I was proud of my imagination, then – it had kept me entertained all the way to Disney as every shadow I didn’t recognize I made an actor in a story I felt now deserved a conclusion.

“ We’ve done it. We’ve done it at last, sir!” Said Mark, who for the stories sake I had assumed was a man who simply happened to share my uncles’ name. My father uneasily paced back and forth in a small circle, almost disbelieving of the news it seemed like he had already accepted.

“You don’t mean?” He said, tearing up a little.

“I do. We’ve caught bigfoot, sir. An entire tribe of them. Their secret to defeating the shadow people is ours!” The voice on the other voice rose above all the birdsong. It was a storyline I

had made on the way here, even when my sister had been so bored to tears that she had literally begged me and bribed me to stop talking.

“But what about the giant turtles, dang nabit!” My father beat his fist against the side of the hotel so hard it not only drew the eyes of everyone outside but made me startle. My mother sat in the car, looking at my father with narrowed eyes and tapping her fingers against the rim of the steering wheel before getting out at last. My father raised his voice, faint and ever so hard to fully make out. It was easy to fill in with a silly voice, though. “What about the giant turtles!”

My mother got out of the car, then, approaching my father as the small circle he was treading like he was determined to murder the soles of his shoes. He met her halfway between the car and the hotel, on the brick crosswalk which no cars drove between. They exchanged brief words, and before I could even think of miming their conversation, my father had opened the car door with gaunt face to say four simple words.

“Your grandfather is dead.”

A silence followed, my scowling mother pulling him away as my sister started to bawl. I sat there, feeling numb inside. Not surprised, or sad, or upset; not even empty, not really. I felt as numb as my gums did when they were spread with Novacaine. I could hear my mother and my father arguing, loud and angry at some moments and quiet and consoling in others. I didn’t feel like imaging their conversation this time. It’s topic was obvious, and my father declared as much to me and my sister.

She refused to go home.

“I’m not crying because Grandpa’s dead. I’m crying because we just got here and now we have to go home.”

My father was gobsmacked. I was simply awed. I wanted to stay, but was I going to be selfish doing so? Was I being as horrible as my sister for not wanting to leave? I loved my grandfather, didn’t I?

I was better than that, wasn’t I?

“The funeral isn’t until next month, Jon. We’re here and we already paid.” My mother pulled my father away from the

angry, grieving diatribe he was prepared to spew at my sister with a touch on his shoulder.

“Surely we can get our money back. We haven’t even checked in yet.” My father rubbed at his stubbly chin, fondling his lips like it was a stain he was trying to get rid of.

“Neither of us are ready to go through another two day drive. Especially not you.” My mother looked him in the eyes, and something cracked. I think now that something cracked from the first moment he stepped out of the car and heard the news as he stared down at a row of perfectly kept red flowers, vibrant and full of life. But here and now I got to watch him break again as any energy he had left to be angry or to argue simply left him completely and utterly.

“Ok.” He said, looking from my placid face to my sister’s tear stained cheeks. “...Ok.”

The trip that followed surely must have been fun. There’s an entire photo album sitting on my sister and I’s shelf that probably proves that. Yet all I can remember is the spectre of misery that hung over all of us, ready to descend the moment we left Disneyland, already clinging to my father like it was his shadow. I don’t think he smiled once the entire trip, save perhaps for times he stared wistfully at the oldest parts of the park.

I remember something else, actually. One moment where my father leaned against the stone fence of a bridge and looked out at the sunset as we walked back to our hotel, the river before him dyed orange, and I realized that he was as slouched now as when he stood. I wanted to say so many things then.

“Are you ok, dad?”

“Do you want to go home?”

“We can go home if you want.”

“Dad, did I love Grandpa like you did?”

“What was Grandpa like when your Grandfather died?”

So instead I said nothing, because I’m a coward at heart. I stood there, looking out at the sunset from the opposite side of the bridge as I leaned against my mother’s legs, and I didn’t say a single word to him until the next morning.

When my Grandfather’s funeral came, I spent far less time than I should’ve mourning. It wasn’t that I didn’t miss him. It

simple hadn't sunk in yet that he was gone, not when he had spent so many years slipping away from us that even then all I had to truly remember the man my Grandfather used to be were memories. I simply hadn't looked the truth of the matter in its eyes yet.

It was just a more literal matter when it was an open casket funeral.

I could have slipped away on my own, walking up to the well-lit casket and staring into the almost-sleeping facing and rictus smile of my grandfather, his hands clasped together on his chest and dressed to the nines in his oldest suit. That's what I expected to see, what I wanted above all else to avoid seeing. What few memories I had of him I thought of as precious, and didn't want to mar by adding his corpse to their number.

Instead, I waited until my father was ready to go see his father's body. It took what seemed like an eternity of exchanging sorrowful stories and empty platitudes with an endless line of cousins, aunts, and uncles I had never met before and haven't met since. When he was ready I said no words to him. I just took his hand in my own and felt it clasp around it, a strong grip that made me feel as small as I must've seemed to him.

The sight of my Grandfather wasn't nearly as haunting as I thought it would be. A single, bright red flower was tucked into his jacket pocket, petals ever so slightly wilted. Just like when we met, I could hear my Grandmother's voice. This was no sight that would be seared into my mind forever. My imagination had left me dreaming of a world worse than it really was, no matter how much tighter my father held my hand as he stood there.

I didn't care to keep track of how long we stood there because for once how long I had to wait didn't matter to me. I think that's one of the very few things I've not yet come to regret.

## Military Ball

I stand in his arms moving just enough to give the faintest idea that I'm dancing. We're pressed close, too close for me to look him in the eyes, and that's fine with me. His palms are sweaty, and the hand he's got on my lower back moves awkwardly like he has no idea where to put it. He touches me like he's trying to disarm a bomb.

I look the part of dynamite, in a red floor length dress that I already wore to another school dance. No one here would have seen it or remembered it, though. The red pairs with the roses in my corsage – I hadn't even realized this was a corsage sort of event. It covers up the partially faded drawing on my wrist of swirling stars and moons. He'd frowned when he saw it.

"Don't you know that stuff can poison you? It seeps through your skin and gets in your bloodstream or brain or whatever."

"Oh, in my 'blood or brain or whatever'? Yeah, right. I'm not gonna die from ballpoint pen, genius."

"Well, it's not in the dress code."

"What's the point of following dress code if I'm just gonna drop dead from terminal ink disease?" My mouth twisted into a smirk.

He didn't laugh, just muttered, "At least you're covering it up," while he strapped the roses to my wrist.

He takes another step, and I go with him. I just go with him. Just like I went with him to the arcade that's stuck on the side of the mall like a cancerous capitalist mutated growth, because the rest of the guys were playing laser tag and he wanted to bring me along, even though I could tell I wasn't invited. I went with him, and I lost, of course, because these guys wear camo to class and run obstacle courses for fun, and I'm tiny and have a C in gym class. He only had enough cash for one round,

so we waited around under the neon lights, trying not to trip over kids rushing past to redeem their five hundred tickets for Chinese finger traps, while we listened to laser blasts and laughter in the background.

I went to his car, I let him take me home. He still had longer hair then, dark black and almost at his shoulders. But he'd ditched the guyliner already – that was the first to go when he started “cleaning up”. He put in a The Cure CD and skipped tracks until he got to “Friday, I’m in Love”. He might still only have goth rock in his glove compartment, but a newly reformed Chase couldn't be caught playing anything less than radio sanitary singles that hit top 40. I did not kiss him goodnight. I am seventeen watching eighteen load and prepare to fire, and I have never been kissed. I did not call him my boyfriend then, and tonight the word does not even cross my mind.

I scan the room for some kind of reprieve and find what I'm looking for in the dark circled blue eyes of the only guy there with no “military” element to his outfit.

We met in the hallway by the bathrooms. Dates have to wait patiently for their other half to finish, standing guard outside the doors like something is going to happen. Male chauvinism is as over as American wars as the female cadets had apparently insisted that they could, and should, fill the guardian role while their male counterparts did their business, and that left me slumped against a wall listening to more flushes than sinks turning on.

I glanced over at him, wanting anything better to look at than the stickman on the men's room sign that was as featureless and blank as Chase was trying to become. I noticed his hair first. Long and shaggy, past his shoulders. An indication, if there ever was one, that he was not of this world either. My hypothesis was proven by his suit – his suit, not his uniform.

“I can't believe we have to wait here.” I threw out as a test. “I mean, I'm just a date.”

He laughed and rolled his eyes and said, “I know, right? I'm just a date too.” He said it like one word: just-a-date. “And now I'm missing some great songs.”

I strained to listen and heard that he was referring to a Green Day song. Alright, god, so maybe it was just “Good Riddance,” but it conjured up visions of blasting “21 Guns” and “American Idiot.” Visions, even of something a little more hardcore, a little less mainstream, an underground concert where the tickets are free because punks that grungy are just happy that people showed up. Visions of band t-shirts and leather jackets, of chucks and fingerless gloves. Visions of that hair of his trailing his head in perfect arcs while he headbangs. Visions of telling him to “sit still, idiot,” while I try to smudge out the dark mess he made around his eyes. Visions of a bottle of something cheap or shoplifted smokes or fake IDs passing from his palm into mine. Visions of a long drive, of shouting along to the lyrics on the way, of red lights blurring into streaks when we blaze through them. Visions of getting away with it, of —

And then the men’s room door swung open, and the rules were back in effect, and my fellow just-a-date was being dragged off by some girl with the tightest ponytail I’d ever seen, and I was back on Chase’s arm like decoration.

Now, I train my eyes on him, at least as a reminder that I am not the only outsider here and try to coax fantasies back to me where I am more than just-a-date.

Still, my focus is interrupted by the antics of others nearby, the ones that belong here.

I watch their rituals like Jane Goodall watched the chimps, equal parts enthralled and confused. Slightly disgusted. I do not understand the intricacies of their formality. There are rules for how we are to walk together, and who is supposed to speak first, and there are mysterious consequences that are never fully explained to me for if I sit down, and he doesn’t pull out my chair for me.

I’m no good with rules. Not rules like these. Not getting picked up and posed like I’m military ball date Barbie. Not getting gawked at by other “cadets” that apparently heard Chase talk about me and apparently didn’t think I was real. I wonder what he said about me that convinced them I was made-up, because I had myself almost convinced that he wouldn’t want to be associated with a girl like me anymore. But between barely



muffled wolf-whistles and references to “chest candy,” I must have made a more than decent fantasy. I feel their eyes on me now, but looking around, I can never seem to meet them.

“Hey.”

I startle and look up at Chase. I don’t know when his voice got so sharp like that. Is that some drill sergeant instilled affectation? It reminds me of how I say “heel” to my dog. My dog Chase. That used to be a funny coincidence.

“What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” I say, “just people watching.”

“Hm.” It’s a sound like he’s sizing me up. And then he stiffens, his shoulders firm, his stance desperately pleading to be viewed as imposing. “You’re supposed to be focused on me.”

So, I focus on him.

I take the opportunity now, while he’s got my attention, full and undivided for maybe the first time that night, and I look at him, really give him a good look, in the full light of the hotel ballroom. I stare at him like I’m trying to see the brushstrokes that painted him. His hair – buzzed short. His jaw – clean shaven. The microscopic scar that designates where he used to wear a lip ring. The way his brows furrow over tired eyes, dark circles that outlived the makeup wipe revolution he dragged across his face. Everything is stripped bare, steamed and pressed like his uniform.

He used to be a walking work of art. I remember when the nervous hand he won’t touch me with bore nails painted midnight black, messy spills over the cuticles he never cleaned up, peeking out of his hoodie sleeves from how he balled his hands in them like paws. I remember holding back his bangs so they wouldn’t get in his eyes while he lathered drug store Manic Panic knockoff dye into his unwashed hair over his mom’s nice sink. I remember the way it used to be easy, and relaxed, before he went and sterilized the whole thing with all these labels and rules.

I don’t think being forced to look at him is one of the rules. Not the official ones. But he says it with all the confidence as he’s said every other rule.

“Right,” I say, and then, stupidly, I add “sorry.”

I hate the sound of the word when it escapes me like an exhale. We weren't supposed to have "sorry". We were supposed to have "sucks to be you," and "whatever," and "who gives a shit?", but we weren't supposed to have "sorry".

"Sorry" is the sound he made, half-crying into the phone to his parents, still on a paranoid buzz after a cop in a speed trap busted him for double-dipping in DUI and underage drinking. "Sorry" – said to parents and not passenger.

But he accepts the apology. He moves his hands but does not relax them. We're dancing again.

I steal glances, peeking over his shoulder, to get glimpses where the new rule says I shouldn't look. With parade march precision, he turns us, and every time I am thwarted. I am blocked. It only makes me try harder.

Even if I never succeed, I'll probably be able to find my mystery man in the pictures from tonight. My stomach twists a little thinking that they might end up in the yearbook.

They had me pose with the other girls in the group picture. I told the photographer I'm just-a-date, but she didn't care.

"Tonight, you're one of us," she said, urging me into place.

I'm short enough to get sent to the front.

Every girl that was around me has held a gun.

I think they might have been staring at me.

I didn't mind it quite so much as when the boys did it.

I'm glad at least that it's a slow song. I don't have to watch him try to dance anymore. He could survive a mosh pit back before he decided he needed to straighten out, but now he can't keep up with the music. It doesn't help that I wouldn't move with him, not with how he was flailing. The fact of it is that I don't want people to think we're a couple. He'd tried to hold my hand earlier in the night, but I'd slipped my fingers out from under his within seconds. I'm his date, but I'm not his girlfriend. I'm a friend doing him a favor. It picks at me even when he says "us" and "we." There is no single unit that is "us." There's my old dress, and his hoverhand, and my heels dodging his dress shoes. There's a girl who's developing a sour taste in her mouth for the military for not-quite-political reasons, and an

ex-emo junior cadet who's had a crush on her since he was in 6th grade and has the same name as her dog who hates him. But there is no "us."

His hand brushes over my wrist. It scratches against the corsage, so I just shove it out of the way, revealing the interstellar artwork that adorns it. Izzy, who sits in front of me in chemistry and passes me notes with obscene jokes about the teachers on them, drew it for me. She wants to be a tattoo artist when she graduates—or drops out. I went over to her house yesterday. She draws on her walls. I looked around like an archeologist and traced early signatures back to elementary school. It wasn't until then that I learned her full name is Isabella. Her fruit punch red dyed hair fell in her face while she stuck her tongue out and went about 4 creating her masterpiece. She put her iPod on shuffle while she worked, and every so often in the pause between nu metal and classic rock songs, I swear she could hear my heartbeat pound. She sang along to every song that played; somehow, she always knew all the lyrics. Her black painted lips curled around every syllable perfectly.

She asked me, near the end of the session, if I'd ever had a serious relationship.

I said "No." It seemed like the right word. I chased it with an "I mean, not really," while she blew on the ink.

"I don't want to be your first," she'd said, as though I'd asked her to. We'd never said a word about it before. I mean, god, okay, I wanted. But I'd never have had the guts to think I could just have it. "Not your first for real. I'd ruin you."

When I opened my mouth, no sound came out. Soon enough it was just goodbyes, and thank yous, and the sound of my mom pulling up in her driveway.

And me, a night later, dancing with some guy I'd known for years and still pretended was her. Hard, given his height, and his awkward motions, not like I'd seen her lean flexibly half-dancing as she tried to get a better angle over my skin. But not impossible.

He pulls me away from the dance floor eventually, mutters something about not liking the song and being too tired to keep dancing.

I'm tired too, but differently than him. I wonder if he knows. I wonder if he's figured out yet that I keep glancing at my purse because I desperately want to know if I've gotten a text from her. I wonder if he knows he's fighting his first war, right now. I wonder if he knows he can't win.

He pulls out my seat for me.

"Thanks." I don't mean it.

I receive a nod like a salute in return.

I look down at my wrist and yank at the ribbon, snapping the roses off. I let my thoughts drift into the galaxy.

I hope the ink really does seep through my skin.

I hope I stay ruined.

# VISUAL ARTS

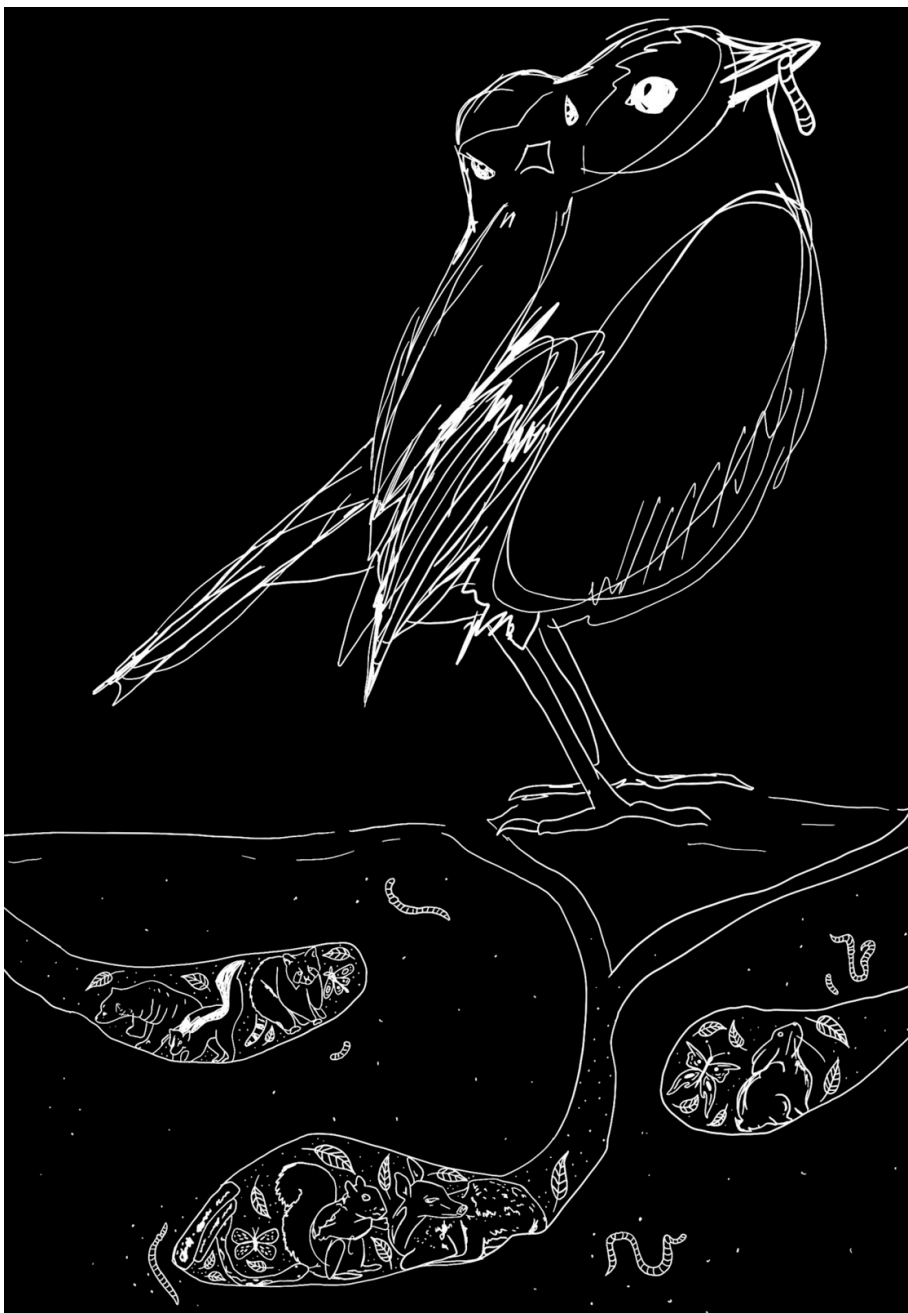
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# Drowning in Color



# Early Bird



## Introspection





# Hot Water

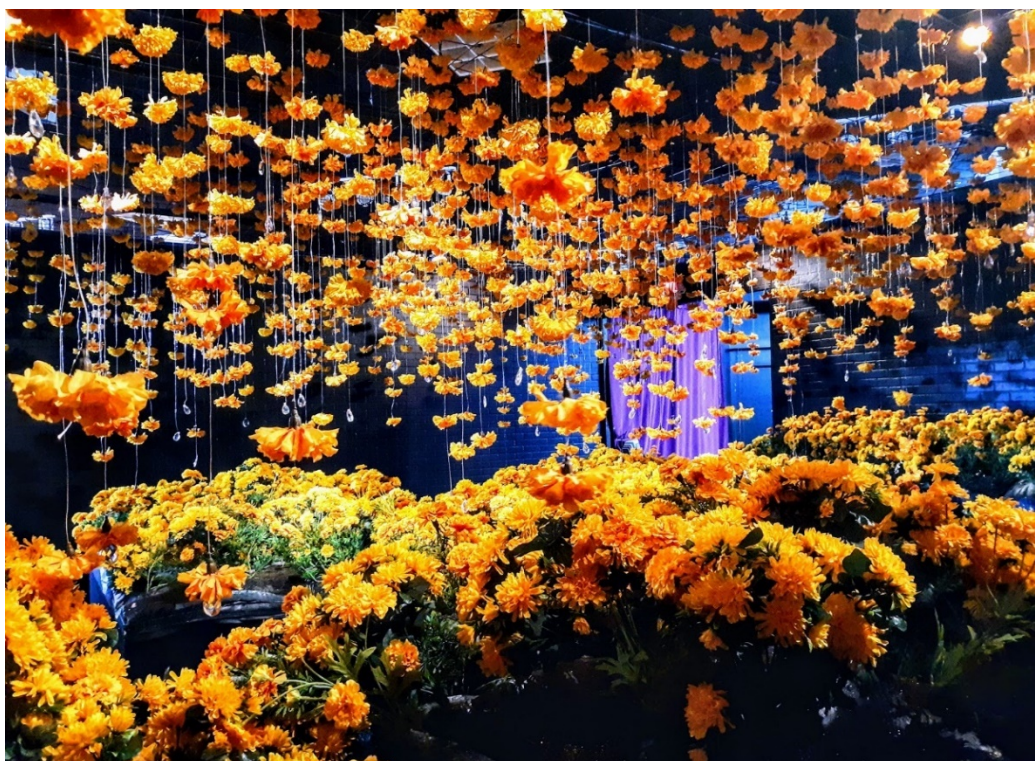


# Reaching Into Space



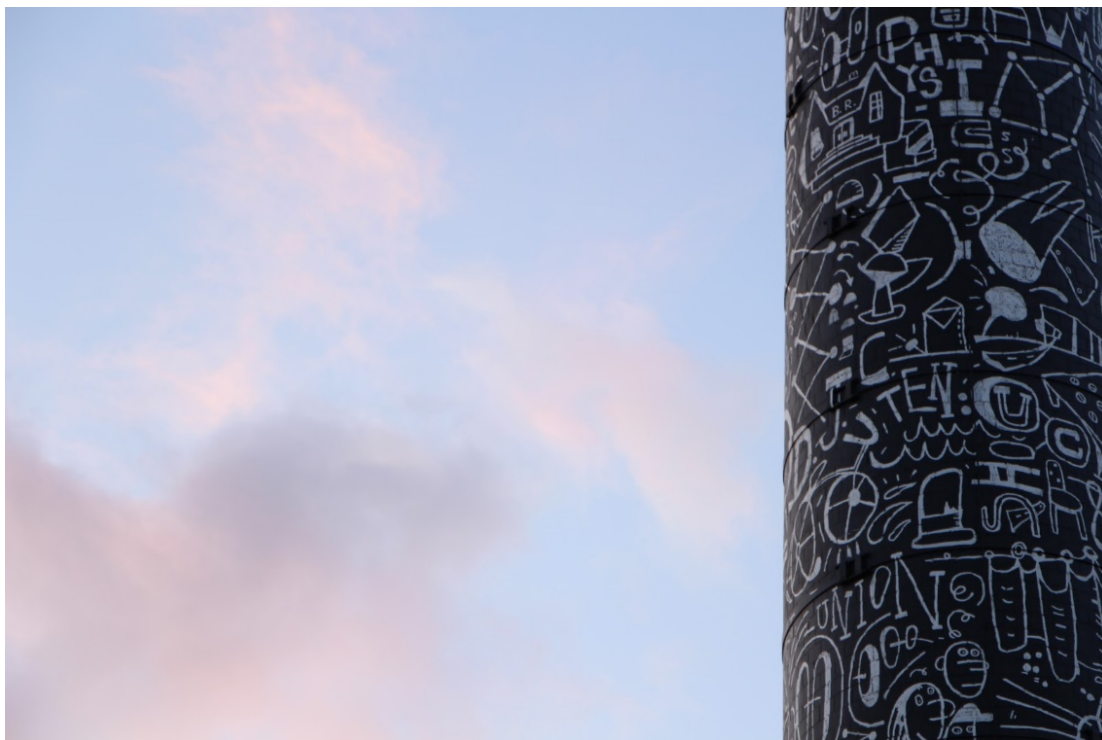
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# Floating Marigolds Before COVID-19



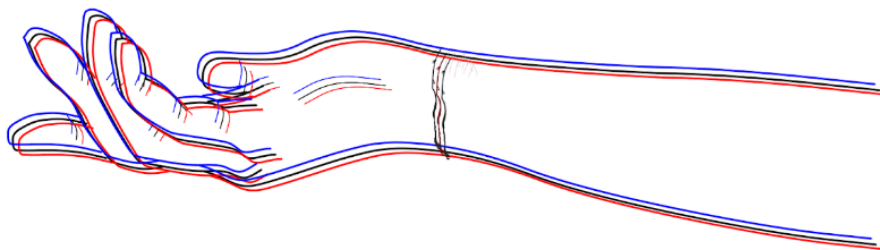
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# Smokestack 4



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# Longing



# POETRY

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KAT SADDLER

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## His Fifth Year on Amstel Road

His eyes reflected me like glass  
The symmetry of sympathy  
The widowed walls of his heart  
I saw myself in him.

He bathed in whiskey.

Counting the hills and valleys  
On his bleached spine  
Caressed by fabrications,  
Unwavering manipulations—

He just stood there.

Pining for the door  
The numbing metal  
Slammed—its scraps, a diaspora  
Of a broken escapade—

His glass refilled.

## Wonderful Moments

I know we'd rather all forget it,  
but high school did unfortunately happen.

We all know those types of people,  
the ones who never really left,  
Obnoxious athletes  
with glossed hair and too much cologne  
bickering about Manchester and Baltimore and New York  
while doodling on a math exam.

The preppy popular cliques,  
gossiping about Lisa's drunken weekend  
after she got tacos dumped on her for cheating  
and who Miles is fucking now  
because that's really what's worth  
learning in this godforsaken building.

But some are stuck in time, never turning nineteen.  
Another permanently empty seat in my English class  
another face I won't see at afternoon rehearsal,  
another reminder to not cross that line,  
because this is nothing new to us.

So maybe we should be grateful that we  
have those memories of packed halls  
and joints, of scrambled eggs and brains  
on test day, and of so many sleepless nights  
and blurry dawns and overflowing backpacks.

Now consumed by coursework  
and drowning in equations and exams,  
I almost miss those little wonders.



## Clean Glass

If my shoulder rests on bottom windowpanes  
staring out within the world—wide open—  
then I might be caught wondering back and forth  
between fields of my personal wandering.

A step outside could make me social  
to leave my home in hopes of others  
or stepping back  
stepping back could force a pause  
that clears my eyes and hugs my family.  
I could be wrapped up in safety  
but lose my chance at broken spirits  
my opportunity to see hope through hope crushed  
or mountains through empty driveways.

The life I'm meant to live demands these fears  
as a terror of windows unentered  
people unconnected, loneliness unaddressed  
homes unkept, days unseized  
or hearts never broken due to nothing to break for  
like windows  
which sit in cowardice. Noncommittal  
never in the world, never out of the world.  
Please let me never be like windows unshattered.  
Let me break for those I love  
and those I will.

## Betty, The Debutante

I think I have a right to live my life the way I like.  
-Malala Yousafzai

I often think of my grandmother  
The one sporting her cheetah printed  
Velour bucket hat, while attempting  
To calculate a 20% tip  
On a meal of \$23.00,  
With her thin blond eyebrows knit together,  
Knowing she would unintentionally  
Rip off the server from a meal  
“that was just marvelous.”

Her practically untouched shrimp scampi  
While wasteful to those  
With hallowed cheeks and empty bellies  
Is out of her control  
And ingrained into her  
When she was just a little girl

I am always irked  
With her leather sandled feet  
When she kicks over the water bowl  
Set out for my pets  
Splashing water all over the wooden planks  
Unaware of the puddle she created

Exasperated every time  
I remember how she was taught  
To keep her head high without  
Glancing at the ground  
Or to always leave food

Left on her white china

I often think of my grandmother  
And her debutante self  
Dressed in a flowing gown  
Unable to walk and eat as she pleases  
Did she ever picture this as her life?

## Teakettles Have It Easy

In the early morning,  
The sky still painted navy  
And birds chirp  
And they flutter about shrieking,  
Loudly.  
The teakettle whistles  
As drops of water run down the sides,  
Sizzling against the simmering burners.  
While I rub sleep from my eyes  
And comb through my hair, left  
in tangles from the night before.  
My father stumbles from his room  
Bumping into the wall  
Half hunched over  
Silently cursing himself.  
Hair parted to perfection,  
Freshly blow dried,  
Despite the time and effort.  
His fresh pressed collared shirt,  
Unappreciated, at his cubicle.  
Deep violet semicircles,  
Hide the skin, Underneath his eyes.  
“Good Morning.” He grumbles.  
As he grabs his Disney mug,  
Finally ending the whistling  
And taking big gulps of jasmine tea  
Deepening his ulcer buried in his stomach  
Repeating the same routine,  
Day,  
After,  
Day.

## Fuimos, Somos y Seremos Parte de la Historia de la Isla

¡Ay, muchacha!  
¡Qué lío!  
Exigencia de perfección  
que solo dejan cuerpos vacíos.

¡Ay, trigueña!  
¡Qué jodienda!  
Cómo la cogen con tus rizos  
y con tu pureza.

¡Ay, mujer!  
¡Qué problema!  
Todavía es la hora que se quejan  
cuando abres la boca;  
dicen que quema.

¡Ay, muchacha, trigueña, mujer!  
¡Qué ignorancia!  
Ya obedeciste por mucho tiempo;  
ahora que aguanten el fulgor  
de una mujer boricua,  
guiada por el dolor y el lamento  
de todas las que lucharon antes que tú;  
por las que con orgullo dijeron  
“yo también cuento.”

## Kitchen Table

The wind blows my torso against the leather seats,  
my limbs become suction cups.  
Using every possible muscle, I turn my head  
towards the rays of light, fighting to shine between the  
mountains.

My father tilts towards me and blurts out “Windows too much?”  
“No, it’s all good”  
He tilts his head back glancing at my mom on the way.  
My eyes drift back towards the mountains,  
ignoring the laughs from the front seats.

Driving in circles to get higher and higher up the mountain,  
the roads felt never ending, as did the laughs  
during those long Sunday drives.  
The engine turns off, and so does the laughter.

The yelling echoes, from room to room,  
shelves of wine glasses shake with fear of shattering,  
it bounces off the walls into fragile ears.  
My puppy runs from the origin of noise,  
jumping into my arms as if she was my protection.  
My head peaks around the wooden frame of the doorway.  
From each of the corners of the kitchen table, anger came,  
it passed right through the memories of big turkeys with gravy  
galore, and Lucky Charms casually soaked in milk.

Countertops acting as the ropes, for the round less boxing match.  
Landing at the tower of faults and imperfections.  
The things that are put aside for a later time in hope that it never  
comes, but it comes in circles.  
It starts at the kitchen table.

## She Couldn't

Things happen in movies.  
Alleyways are secret bedrooms,  
red cups mean yes please,  
compliments are hidden messages.

His fingertips make her skin freeze.  
She doesn't run, she couldn't run.  
She doesn't scream, she couldn't scream.  
"She didn't say no", she couldn't say no.

Smiling isn't her giving permission,  
it's her way of trying to escape.  
Laughing isn't her saying yes,  
it's her trying not to be targeted.

Her walking away, doesn't mean follow,  
it's her last cry for help.  
Her being nice, isn't your invitation,  
it's her trying to stay alive.

Things happen in life,  
alleyways are nightmares that make you scream,  
red cups are someone's chance to get lucky,  
compliments are pieces of her ripped to shreds.

## Cooling Down

You never really acknowledge the cooling down period on a hot summer's day. The heat consumes your body  
Fiery reuptake swallows you whole

Cooling off is easy, a subconscious act  
The celebratory period, the pop of confetti, the buzz of a kazoo  
it soothes you.

It sets you adrift in the clear blue ocean.  
You're teeming with bliss as you are purified  
of the hot blood of strangers.  
That clarity tainted with your indifference.  
You remember your body is the vessel to a steamy victory.  
Your nation rears its ugly head and you cover it  
blanketed by the ocean of boiling red.

But in your eyes only you deserve freedom.  
The existence of your traitorous counterparts  
insults you like a slap in the face, the flaming sting of a punch,  
like the swell of a busted lip, your fear grows.

Grows for someone you've never had the pleasure  
of locking eyes with, introduction of souls is a casualty  
that feeds the earth from imminent ash.

Like rough sketches on a notepad  
with spoils of graphite that blacken lands.  
Reconciliation is a concept for monsters, who cool down  
effortlessly.  
The breeze that comes to carry your worries away  
and place them elsewhere.  
A place where cooling down is an unachievable act.



## Not So Precious Stones

She was a jewelry store.

Eyes of sapphire and aquamarine that were too easy to drown in,  
Garnet lips pursed to whisper sultry secrets into the ear,  
Obsidian curls with swirls of amethyst hidden within to be  
discovered,  
Quartz skin that hypnotized fingers to kiss it,  
And a coal heart.

They say if you put enough pressure on it, coal can become  
diamond.

Such seems fitting for her:

A gem seemingly rare and priceless but truly unremarkable and  
fake;

Something that looks beautiful and holds nothing but ugliness  
inside.

The other gems were just the same.

Of course, it is also a myth.

Coal never can become diamond, just like hate can never become  
love.

It took too long to learn this.

Years of life wasted to gazing at worthless gems filled with  
abrasive lies

That can't be returned at the same price.

Precious time and money lost to her and her not so precious  
stones.

Another store I stopped visiting.

## Domestic Wild

I spend time weaving willow boughs  
Into crowns of catkins and sallow buds,  
Spring's return wrapped into royal fashion  
To rest on a single skull.

How many overripe persimmons  
Knocked free with swift hands  
Do I have to bite into before someone  
Comes to savor them beside me?

When will my apple berry pies  
Welcome home my new favorite face and  
Warm our house? How long will I wait  
For this one pleasure?

My geese gave me pearly eggs today  
And the rooster will wake you in due time  
Would you be okay with wild onions  
In your omelet this morning?

## Violet Eater

Little girls don't eat flowers, they frame their faces  
With dandelions, daisies, baby's breath.  
I bloom into sundresses and nylons,  
A terrible trade for dungarees.  
I'm handed roses, carnations, lilacs  
But I still swallow violets.

She and I spend our last day in the creek  
Bruising ourselves on rocks and drowning  
Daydreams into the copper-colored water.  
Because I knew the mermaid beside me,  
In all her dandelion gardenia glory,  
Would never be a Violet Eater.

I spend hours in flower fields  
Picking, pruning, plucking petals,  
Mourning isolation from girls with dandelion braids  
Who twirl in swirls of pollen I can't bring myself to watch.  
A boy I barely know holds me to his chest and  
I start to wish I didn't want violets.

## I Will Be Sweet

I will be sweet.  
I will wear Mary Janes and let you  
Measure the length of my skirt,  
And I will drink diet Coca-Cola  
From glass bottles and hold them  
So that the label faces the audience.

I will keep the room tidy,  
Smelling of baking cookies and corset strings,  
And the door will stay unlocked.

And I won't cry except on camera.  
And I won't smoke except in private.

And I won't even talk about the other blonde—  
I swear I won't.  
And I will take it as a compliment when you show me how easy  
it would be for you to —  
Well, I'll be polite, and I won't even say "force".

I'll be sweet like Betty Crocker™ yellow cake,  
And my thoughts will be the color and consistency of  
A strawberry milkshake.

I will publicly endorse the brand of foundation and concealer that  
I use  
When I so desperately need to cover up the—  
In a flash! It really works!  
Three easy payments...

And I won't be too revealing to the paparazzi  
Other than to look good in candid photos

And be seen entering and exiting events  
Drinking Dirty Shirleys and doing sinfully innocent things with  
the cherries,  
Because the cameras love it.  
Even though you tell me not to. Playfully.  
While you have a very  
Playful  
Grip on my arm.

I'll get better at walking in heels  
Without breaking them.  
I'll find a glass coffin and wait to be kissed.  
Apply eyeshadow directly to my animation cell so I still look  
Alive and beautiful  
Passed out.

I'll repeat my own face so many times it loses meaning  
And I'll die a parody of myself.

And I'll let you give my eulogy and tell them all  
Just how sweet I was.

## Flavor of Life

Do spoons swoon?  
Swoon as our tongues?  
Our tongues when they taste  
taste the delicious delicacies  
delicacies of life  
Life, which comes in many flavors  
flavors from around the world  
the world in which we share  
Swap your plate with my plate  
My plate that differs from yours  
yours that differs from theirs  
theirs that will cause their spoon to swoon.  
Swoon as our tongues  
Our tongues for the salt lick of life  
Life, that is an ever-changing flavor.

## Clogged Artery

My heart is too full

A sponge, saturated with  
sentiment and fervor,  
devout and cherished  
as it fills up, taking in more and more  
until it leaks, overflowing.

I've swallowed up everything on  
my plate, offered to me by  
a number of inconsequential persons  
that pass through me every day.

They don't say much,  
in fact, not a word is spoken at times  
but i smile anyway  
and feel as my heart swells  
for no one.

## All Twenty-Six

It's in the way you hear the sounds spewing from her lips.  
Letters strung together so delicately.  
With needle and thread.  
Over and under.  
Under and over.  
Into words.  
The lady that opens your sheer curtains each morning,  
she tells you she knows a song.  
Like fresh linens from the dryer  
Embracing,  
keeping warm.  
And momma?  
Her letters taught you how to write your name.



## The Greatest

The doctor that will cure cancer  
is not studying at Harvard right now,  
He woke up with the flu on  
the day of his SATs,  
He could only afford to take the test  
once,

The best singer in the world  
is not at Julliard,  
She is in her community college's  
music program because her  
father died two years ago,  
And she is all that her mother  
has left,

The most talented actor of his  
generation has not been in a single film,  
Because he is trying to keep his family  
together in a refugee camp,  
Halfway across the world  
from Hollywood,

The Olympic athlete who would  
not only be a hero to her country,  
But also inspire the entire world  
cannot focus on her training,  
Because she must care for  
five younger siblings and  
her parents are nowhere to  
be found,

The young writer whose stories

could touch millions cannot develop his craft,  
Because he must get up in the early hours  
and work in the same mines that crushed  
his brothers just months before,

The most enthralling dancer  
to ever grace the stage will never  
get out of her village,  
She cannot think about doing ballet  
when she does not even have  
regular shoes.

## From Ashes of War to Golden Cities

In my dorm room, I pull out my laptop,  
pour coffee in a mug, and take a sip,  
opening Xcode, and my assignment to make  
a software to change the world. Instead,

my mind bubbles up the stories of Congo. When I  
was three years old, my father lifts me to his shoulders,  
holds my hands above his head, and we walk  
through the village to the river kavimvira.

He says, “My son, you may not understand,  
but I will tell you anyway.” He puts me on a  
big stone, while he stands in water, shedding tears.  
“In 1997, the second Zaire civil war erupted. The sky

is dark, filled with smoke, grenades, and houses  
burning. Bodies of people are scattered on the ground,  
on the roads, bathing in their own blood. Forests  
are laid flat, rivers run red. People run on foot

to Angola, Tanzania, Uganda. Your mother tries  
to run, but you are too heavy, so we hide in the forest.  
You are kicking in the womb, and she can not  
help but to scream. We are terrified the soldiers

will hear. An old woman sees your mother is about  
to give birth. She tells your mother to scream  
again, and there you are, born in a forest, in a war.  
The war ends when you are born. People return

to their homes. We rebuild with mud and sticks, while  
the UN and Rwanda come, providing aid to clear

our fields, rebuild our roads, bury our dead.” I awake to my cold coffee, and to the certainty of my true

assignment. It is born of knowing the soldiers never left, of knowing the aid they provide is to corporations robbing resources for American satellites and Chinese’s cell phone factories, while my country still looks like the time

of Jesus. No! No more! It ends now! Our cobalt’s, coppers, diamonds, tantalum, tin, and gold no longer yours—unless for a price, our price, for a people’s betterment. This is the world I must change.

## A Good Thing

I don't remember my father's face, but I remember Sunday mornings and tuna fish sandwiches, lawn chairs shielded behind easels and empty windows, painting

day lilies that crept like wildfire over the fence. I remember the deep orange and pink-lipped tinge, converging in blood spatter at the center.

Before my mother threw away all the photographs of him, refused to listen to Frank Sinatra, piled boxes of paperwork in the driveway labelled "Jackass Taxes"

for when he came to pick them up in his shining red Tesla, or when he forgot about the boxes and me, waiting in the big window with my duffel and my little box of paint.

Don't use more than the tip of the brush, he said, you can have too much of a good thing. Before the cheating, stealing, shit-talking, popping off to Hawaii in the off-season,

the unpaid alimony, and the drunk pounding of doors, we raced milk-carton boats downstream and picked raspberries until our hands bled the velvet sting of hymnals. Before our past lives crystalized

into the good things we missed, I remember the abundance of dead flowers tucked inside Cat Stevens CDs. I grow to hate the red flush of wet paint and dying flowers, however the stench of rot.

## Introduction

Yes I am the fearful scrawlings  
and tense glances between bathroom stalls.  
Finally nice to meet you. I am  
the piles of discarded pink dresses,  
porcelain thimbles of tea grown cold,  
and the long hours of practicing my signature  
with a new name. Yes I can recite  
suicide statistics lettering backs  
of pamphlets overflowing in trash cans  
at my first pride parade,  
zealots jeering over the bridge  
as we hold our heads, wipe the spit off  
our necks from across the barricade.  
We toss candy to children on the sidelines, watch  
the crossing of summer light,  
the street's transformation of prison to prism.  
To them, how vivid and colorful the world  
must seem. At that age, the only rainbows I touched  
frothed strange magic  
in gas station puddles. Still I kiss my likeness  
under the wilting moon in the park  
across from the house preaching America's Greatness  
in the window, and joke  
about the straighties and the cissies and  
who's most likely to be  
hate crimed first. Yes actually  
I am whatever the sum is of fag and tranny and  
the shame and the starving touch,  
inviting you to keep warm inside  
my hollow body. And now, my good world,  
it really is nice to meet you.

## Devotion

I am a loyal dog. I do  
what I'm told. I go along  
with you, sticking by your side  
from dawn till dusk. Sometimes  
I scream, my cries echoing  
in the almost empty hall, but you  
only laugh and beckon for me  
to follow while you do things  
I hate. There's nothing I can do  
but watch, waiting to play again. I am

The most loyal dog, devotion  
never wavering for you  
and only you. Doesn't that make you  
happy? Kick me, throw me under the bus  
and still I cling to you, stupid  
and pathetic. I am blind  
to the hatred you hide beside your heart  
because you are mine. You do no wrong  
in my idiot eyes.

This dog can't stay anymore. She is  
worthy of love, no matter how much  
her people tell her otherwise. She is  
beautiful, she is intelligent, and still  
she is so fucking loyal. She is  
a loyal bitch, and forever  
will she be free.

## Life of the Gambler

I'm telling you, man, I just have a terrible poker face! Ask anyone I know-- that is, if you can find them-- and they'll tell you. Like, my tells are so bad. I'm so unlucky-- hit-- too. And would you look at that, I guess I jinxed myself. Can you give me 20 in chips, please? Sorry, the bill's all crumpled. It went through the wash.

Do I look young to you? That isn't a trick question, I swear-- I got carded at the door and the man said I looked like I was a freshman in high school. A *freshman*, for Pete's sake! I turned 24 yesterday. Twenty-fricking--hit--four. Maybe it's my outfit. I'm *sorry* I prefer comfort over style, is that suddenly a crime? God, I suck at this game. No, I'm going to keep playing, don't worry. This place'll have all my savings soon enough.

I've always wondered what it was like to work at a casino. Lots of people, running around from place to place, dealing with drunk idiots and addicted losers. I mean, addiction is obviously a serious problem, but--hit--you know what I mean. Can I-- hit-- ask you a question? Is that allowed while you're working? Actually, never mind. It isn't important. Here's another twenty.

I wonder if my friends are having a good time. I saw one of them at a slot machine earlier, and she looked like she was doing well? It's just pushing a button, how hard can it be? Blackjack, however? This takes *skill*. Skill I obviously don't have, but at least I'm trying, right? I-- hit-- could get better if I wanted to, but where's the fun in that? It's too much thinking.



## Impressions: Or A Dining Table's Soliloquy

Bought as a table  
kept as a monument

I was treated as fine as gold when I arrived  
good, solid wood  
a table for dinner parties  
to impress  
I was the Pottery Barn dream

Until she ruined me.

You mourned your lost treasure  
aghast that her kindergarten math homework  
left ghosts of addition  
on my lacquered surface

But I have collected more carvings since:  
nursing school  
precalculus  
needle points  
the finest of crayon art

You have breathed your life into me  
and once more I am golden.

AMY SMITH

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## Looking Glass

I hate looking in the mirror  
All I see is you.  
All I see are your eyes.  
All I see is your light.  
And every crease in my widest smile  
Are ones I got from you.

I hate looking at your pictures.  
All I hear is you.  
All I hear is your laughter  
All I hear is your fading voice.  
And in every speck of color in my eye  
Are ones I got from you.

I hate finding your things.  
All I smell is warm tea.  
All I smell is tarnished metals.  
All I smell is your perfume.  
And every delicate bone in my hand  
Are the ones I got from you.

I must confess that while it is true,  
It is only because I miss you.

*~ In loving memory of Oma Naomi ~*

## Montgomery Pie

The owl visited me again last night.  
I couldn't quite make out what he said,  
But he was a welcome guest.  
He was solid proof of the connection that we share.

Aunt Jo told me that you would sit  
And listen for the owl in the maple tree  
While waiting for her to get home from late night shifts.  
I didn't forget; I thanked God for giving me a connection to you.

I was driving the back roads on my way to move in this semester.  
I almost hit a cardinal.  
Grandma says they're a sign of a loved one who has passed.  
I always liked your red truck, even if I didn't say so.

Were you ever in Montgomery County?  
The namesake of Montgomery Pie?  
We've been trying to make it for Thanksgiving, but it's so hard.  
The top always caves in on itself and gets soaked in syrup.  
I found somewhere around here that makes it.  
I think you'd like it.

When you were leaving, you left us with more questions than  
answers.  
I keep asking the owl, but he flies away.  
What were your last words?  
I was crying; forgive me.

## Under the Hill

Why do  
they call  
it fall  
ing in  
love,

When it  
could be  
something  
much better?

Like a  
dog on the beach,  
a day with a friend,  
or writing your mother a letter.

I'd want it to feel  
like something more real  
but it can't be put into words.

A set where you swing  
a dove with one wing,  
the cold spot in bed,  
a thought in  
your head.

## Paperback Lesbian

Night had fallen down,  
as had our friendship.

I followed her to the library  
on a quest for literature of the  
lesbian variety.

We searched the shelves,  
uncovering the complexities of  
GenderQueer:  
Voices From Beyond  
the Sexual Binary,  
and yet I found no book a more  
difficult read than her nearly blank cover.

Was this the end?

She had found the treasure  
pages filled to the brim  
with lesbian letters  
and nonbinary notations.

We headed down to check out.  
I checked out an understanding  
that things would be different for a while.

And put her back on the shelf.  
I didn't have time to read  
anyway.

## Girl With A Pearl Earing

A sparkling drop dangles in the air  
Adjacent to a fair complexion  
A curtain of beige is suspended by its side  
Its creases folded to perfection

Soft blue contrasts a plane of white  
As an ocean resides against a beach  
A thin slope divides an unusual face  
And rests above two lips of peach

Curious emotion beams from grey eyes  
And a longing air plagues their pale gaze  
They glance behind with a bright and fixed stare;  
An image of light in an ashen haze

A caramel cloth rests upon her slight frame  
Swaddling her in a yellow heat  
Flecks of blue and green cling to the cloak  
Like a clear sky to crops of golden wheat

In her unwonted face simplicity teems;  
In her doe-eyed stare plainness reflects  
But by the precious gem bestowed upon her ear  
Her inward and outward charm connect.

## Your Mirror

I am as flat as you wish to be,  
You cannot see me for my eyes are invisible.  
Our eyes do not appreciate the same reflection,  
You see the worst version of yourself  
Filled with dissatisfaction.

While you drown in your own disgust,  
Your beauty fills the lungs in my chest.  
I cannot stand to believe that you do not see the same as me.

I am honest, you look to me and I reflect back.  
I try to make things as clear as possible,  
But you're stuck on a streak  
Of not seeing excellence in my reflection.

My heart does not stay with me, but in you  
When you break down in front of me,  
I shatter too.  
When we are apart, you no longer hurt.  
But when you are gone, my heart leaves with you.  
When you stand there bare; I see grace in your skin,  
Courage in your eyes, and charm in your smile.

My hands are stuck to the wall  
Allowing my presence to only cause you pain

I lose my strength and fall off the hinges.  
My bones break into a million shards,  
But your next seven unlucky years  
Will never make up  
For the tears that once  
Drowned your beauty.

## Jacket

No, I am not a girl.  
I am a hand-me-down jacket.  
Thrown on and off of bodies,  
In and out of thrift stores,  
Always picked up on discount,  
Slung over shoulders and tied around waists.  
Had my sleeves ripped off, patches sewn on,  
Pins affixed to my pockets and removed,  
Seams pulled, buttons pried off with teeth.  
No, I am not skin and bones – just denim and zippers.  
I have hung loosely around the chests of girls,  
Clung tightly to the arms of men,  
Been flung carelessly into a washer,  
Tumbled and shrunk,  
Hung from bed posts,  
Steamed and ironed out,  
Stolen from a boyfriend by a girlfriend,  
And never given back,  
Cut up and taken in,  
And bleached, folded, bent  
Over backs of chairs,  
In the trunks of cars,  
Clutched and ripped and mishandled and stained,  
Always sold “as is”, price fixed, no haggling,  
Written on in permanent marker:  
Initials of someone I don’t remember,  
Forced into the back of closets,  
Always the furthest back,  
On old plastic hangers lifted from department stores.  
On and off of bodies  
And never quite fitting.



## Illusions

We spun round and round  
in circles under golden rays,  
warmth draping upon  
you and I,  
palms enjoined  
and laughter rolling with the breeze.

We race up overgrown hills,  
to the very top,  
pushing against grassy blankets brushing our shins.

Oh, the intoxicating smell of fresh lavender  
rising from the great expanse below!

And so we roll and tumble,  
like gleeful children,  
down into the Earth's purple embrace.

And your company was enough to  
lull me in a lazy spell,  
heart so full and whole.

And when I awaken,  
as I always do,  
my heart's heavy and dull.

I remember that enchanting day as if it were just now.

I wonder...  
back then,  
did that glowing afternoon ever happen at all?

Your warmth  
may have been the sun's  
Your laughter  
may have been the echoes of my own  
Your presence  
may have been the scent of endless lavender,  
laying so close by me

Perhaps,  
you never were there.

## strawberry girl (raw sugar, shattered glass)

she tastes like overripe strawberries,  
fresh and soft and  
a little too sweet.

tangible and palpable  
so real, so gentle  
but with calloused palms  
and bruised-up knees  
and somehow too good to be true  
too good to be mine.

she is velvet under me, under-  
water, we move slow.

i see her hair like leaves  
that sunlight folds,  
floating to the surface  
turning water pink  
for lemonade.

leave the leaves in,  
minted, slightly  
bitter with  
the sadness of lost summers  
and wasted time,  
i wish i'd told her sooner.

all this time i  
could have had  
something beautiful.

she's beautiful.

and she's burning,  
in my ribcage,  
reaches in and lights me up.  
strikes a match to  
burn her sugar  
and dissolve my every breath.

saccharine strawberry girl,  
crush my heart  
under your skin  
to jam, jelly  
preserves compote marmalade.

strawberry girl, drinking  
pixie sticks and  
cracking bubble gum, she  
tastes so real, but  
so impossible, like

hazy days and strawberries,  
but she  
could never be mine.

## i don't jam with instagram

phones glued to our hands  
i'm scared we've turned digital  
converting our life updates into  
likes and comments and follows

i'm scared we've turned digital  
trading conversations for  
likes and comments and follows  
social media hurts our tongue

trading conversations for  
fake news and opinions  
social media hurts our tongue  
interacting through screens

fake news and opinions  
scrolling and scrolling, for what?  
interacting through screens  
how can we consider this reality?

## the morning after saturday

i know girls waking up with  
little flakes of vomit in their hair  
eating plain toast to nurse their  
achey heads back to normal  
downing water,  
popping aspirin—  
damage control.

girls,  
promenading with their heels  
dangling from their pinky finger  
past the library  
past the early construction  
past the trash in the gutter;  
home.

girls;  
checking their roommate's pepper spray  
while they sleep  
holding their breath like landmines until  
they know that it is  
unused; whole

girls;  
unused, whole.

girls;  
fragrant, flaming,  
straining like phoenixes;  
sweeping up the ashes,  
keeping the soot in bottles on the wall  
trophies of the resurrection

proof that magic exists

rubbing off the stray glitter on their eyes,  
in between their knees,  
they think  
am i a gold mine?

they think  
send a canary into me  
tell it to sing if it finds anything  
worth saving and  
i will pan the little nuggets out;  
the little nuggets,  
diluted by now.

girls;  
stale breath,  
testing the limits of their new bruises,  
shaking the spirits from their bones  
sleeping,  
waking,  
blurring out again;  
dreaming, i hope.

girls;  
the morning after saturday is for us,  
bringing each other coffee  
rubbing shoulders,  
returning belts,  
putting together separated memories,  
watching the sun rise, mining out the little nuggets,  
unzipping each other's dresses, reviewing the pictures,  
holding each other's hands across wrinkled bedsheets—nails  
chipped,  
hair uncombed,  
smelling of ash,  
regrouping—  
Reliving.

# CREATIVE NON-FICTION



## A Brisk Monday Morning

I squirmed on the black leather seat in the back of the rented Toyota as my mom sped down the highway, leaving Philadelphia that brisk morning. We took turns-- my brother and I, to decide whose turn it was to sit in the front seat for the upcoming 2-and-a-half-hour drive. It was still dark outside when we left, and I had been plagued with exhaustion, slight irritation, and a slither of excitement because I got to miss school that Monday morning. I normally brought a pillow for the ride, but I was more concerned at completing some homework that I procrastinated in doing so I brought my backpack, forty pounds of pure academic pain. That soon became my make-shift pillow and I fell asleep to the soothing sound of the heat blowing from the vents of the car and the poking and prodding of the seat belt buckle in my lower back.

When I opened my eyes again, the sky was blue and my mom was pulling into a Wawa off the side of the highway, our routine rest stop for mornings like these. The sound of static and a slew of pop songs woke my sleeping figure up completely, that and my mom asking if I wanted any breakfast. I told her no, probably fixed on some weird diet that my pre-teen self made up, thinking that would help my self-esteem in any way possible.

The stop to Wawa took no more than ten minutes. We were on a time crunch and she wanted to grab some things from the Walmart in the parking lot adjacent to the Wawa. What usually is packed with cars to the outskirts of the lot was then empty, not a single car parked there, this should have been my first tell-tale sign. The frosty air nipped at my skin when I left the comfortable warmth of the car. My mom, younger brother, and I walked briskly into the store, I was instructed to grab a cart and the squeaky wheels of the cold metal cart wobbled as I raced down the freezer aisle to meet them.

It was strange, there was no background noise, no distant chatter from other customers, no hustle and bustle that I never really paid attention to but was always there, in the background, like the music that you hear while waiting at the dentist office. My reverie was quickly interrupted by a man. He was well over six feet; he had a scratchy salt and pepper beard and long gray hair underneath a worn-down baseball cap. Most likely to cover up his imminent baldness. He gave me a long glare, and I felt at fault, I always did when another human and I crossed paths and I wasn't met with the immediate friendliness that I tried so hard to give to others, especially, especially old people. He was holding what I thought was a spear, like a very long spear with a strap attached to it but it turned out to be a gun- a rifle of some sort. I was frozen with shock. Surprised at the fact that people were allowed to bring guns into a Walmart! I was caught staring at him and immediately scurried off, afraid that he might point that large weapon at me.

My mom chastised me for taking so long, emphasizing how little time we had. Although her face was covered, I could tell how annoyed she was through her eyes. They were a gentle brown, and in the just the right lighting, you could see specks of hazel and green, when they weren't flashing me a look of exasperation or urgency of course. In public, my mom's main forms of communication were her voice and her eyes, she somehow knew how to fill me with a suffocating amount of intimidation, flexing her authority through just one look. (I'm immune to it now.) I guess I also became a master at reading facial expressions, body language was not a means of communication when we were in public because her long dark garb did its job in covering her body for modesty's sake.

I have watched my mother, single handedly take care of my brother and I for so long and I admire her for all of her hard work. The eye thing and her resilience and all of her other qualities are the reason why I respect her so much and it was this day that I found out that I had even more respect for her than I thought possible.

The three of us finally made it to the register, and what I hadn't realized was her growing irritation as we neared the front

of the store. We put the items on the conveyor belt, hearing the grouchy woman scan each one. The man-- the man with the gun and a certain bravado that sickened me to my very core-- approached us. He seemed to be familiar with the grouchy woman, completely ignoring my family and me. He asked the woman if she was "alright" he sounded like he was talking with his mouth full, as if he hadn't fully swallowed whatever he was chewing on. She responded smugly, her crotchety attitude was distasteful and left a sour taste in my mouth and her scent of cheap perfume invaded my nostrils. The man hovered over us, I could feel his body heat from behind and my mom grabbed me and my brother tightly, I could see from my peripheral he gestured to his rifle when he asked if the woman was in any danger. The grey-haired woman straightened her crooked spine, gracing us with the meanest of scowls, her big brown mole above her lip scared me ever more.

In a fit, my mom refused to purchase anything, and the woman smirked, mumbling something under her breath. My mom stormed out, with my brother and I in each hand and we returned to the warmth and safety of the rented Toyota with the hard leather seats. She drove off and we were on the road again within the minute. My brother and I looked at each other, asking our mom if she was okay, something we used to do a lot when we were younger because she rarely ever smiled and she has a pretty serious resting face.

Her response was always the same, "*I'm fine. Are you okay?*" We were met with the same uneasy silence and I asked if someone could turn the radio up, the sound of the familiar pop song slowly evaporated the intensity of the car ride.

Whenever I sat in the back, I drew shapes on the window from the condensation. I remember writing "asshole" in the window. I did not know how to express my feelings at that moment, and yes, those people were way worse than your run of the mill assholes, but guilt quickly overcame me, and I wiped it away before my mom or brother could see.

We soon arrived at our destination, the Federal Correctional Institution. Its gray and dreary exterior seemed luxurious to its cold and unforgiving interior and I retold the

story to my dad with great fervor when we saw him. My brother silently sat beside me; he didn't do much talking those days. My mom quickly interjected, downplaying the severity of the situation, not wanting to worry my concerned father. I persisted, wanting my dad to say something, as if his consoling words were some major act of heroism, something that at the time I did not know I needed so desperately.

*"Enough."* was what I heard my mother say in a stern finishing tone. The subject of the racist Walmart man with a gun slowly died as they began to talk about more jovial things, I was afraid that I was going to burst into a million pieces if I said another word about it. What she did not realize was that I needed my dad to be there in the moment with me, he fueled my courage, but my mother did not need him to feel brave, she did that all on her own just fine. As I squirmed in my hard-plastic chair that squeaked against the scuffed white floors, I listened to them talk, holding back stinging tears that threatened to fall but I wouldn't let them. The rest of the visit went by in a blur.

That was our routine every two weeks for a long time. The four of us, playing games and talking about the future and school, and friends within those cold white brick walls and that icy linoleum floor. I would sometimes get lost in my thoughts, wondering how and why I was the one stuck in such a hard life, what did I do in my past life to deserve this? Being an experienced over thinker which my dad says I get from him, I wondered what other micro-aggressions my mother has experienced as an openly Muslim woman in America and soon realized that her pill was the hardest to swallow. She raised my brother and I alone, visited her incarcerated husband biweekly to ensure that my brother and I maintained a relationship with him, and she wore her garb every day proudly, something that I never could see myself doing back then or even now. Her ferocity, passion, and motivation inspired me to be a better person, even in times of struggle. She's steadfast in her beliefs, loves fervently, and her pride and integrity protect us all the time.

In a world full of hate, she loved us with all of her might and currently still does. My mother would always tell us to be better than she is, and I'd like to think that with age, I will be.

The sky was a clear blue that drive home and the snow that had been plowed on the side of the road had a pretty sheen, almost resembling a crystal-like effect on the once dingy snow. I had replaced the music from the radio for my earbuds and was determined to finish at least one piece of homework before returning home. It was an easy drive after a long Monday. The rental car, our passage home, reminded me of Cinderella's pumpkin carriage, a break from public transportation, a break from the unrelenting routine of school to home and our day to day lives. That day was refreshing, a wakeup call. I was reminded of a lot of things that brisk Monday morning and thankful for all I did have and thankful for my mother and all her efforts to ensure our safety as best she could without my dad in the picture.

As we sped down the interstate, the low sound of the engine humming as we neared closer to the city, I heard my brother ask if we could get milkshakes on the way home, the first thing he had said all day. My mom nodded, mentioning how we deserve some ice cream after the day we had. Nothing sounded more appealing.

## Emergence

Most people think trauma is like getting hit with a bus. You don't see it coming. Then out of nowhere, you're lying on the pavement forty feet away realizing your legs are broken. Most people confuse trauma with shock. Shock is getting hit by the bus, and trauma is leaving the hospital 3 weeks later and realizing you'll never be able to walk again.

The only thought I remember having after leaving the hospital was, "Did I really end up missing spring?" It was a sunny 65-degree day in late March, but I had been admitted back when the wind would still bite my fingertips earlier that month, so my heavy hoodie wasn't exactly functional anymore. I had been gifted a heaping helping of trauma, wrapped in a bow and too many layers of wrapping paper, that I then got to unpack. The past five months had been a blur, a blur that was only smudged more by medication and seventeen-hour-long school days. Even after I got out, I was just dropped right back into the life I had been so abruptly pulled from, so there wasn't exactly time to process what had happened.

My first alarm went off at 7:05am. School technically starts at 7:20, and it takes five minutes to drive the half-mile from my house to the front door, so just enough time to throw on a pair of jeans, grab my backpack, sports bag, and instrument and stumble out the door. One of the benefits of the Woodland Hills School District is that poor public school's only priority is to get as many kids to graduate as possible, so they don't lose any more funding. If you were halfway smart, you barely existed to most of the administration. Which means my guidance counselor couldn't care less if I took a performing arts class instead of the required lunch period. If I was lucky, I'd have left myself a couple granola bars in one of my bags. Classes ended at 2pm, but that hardly made a difference. Three hours of soccer practice, or tennis practice, or rifle practice, were typically followed by three

hours of memorizing drill, hauling instruments up to the practice field, and complaining that the brass is the worst section of the band. Of course, during the other half of the year, band practices were replaced with twelve-hour tech days and rehearsals that went past midnight, because opening night is two weeks away, and the reputation of the school hangs on the quality of our shows. We have to prove we can do at least one thing right.

In retrospect, it's rather simple. If the metaphor is "burning the candle at both ends," I had simply lit the entire candle on fire. If there was an activity, event, sport, or competition my school offered, I was involved in it. I had completely internalized the idea that I am only worth as much as I can do. I wasn't exactly the most popular kid around, so "if you can't join 'em, beat 'em" echoed constantly in my head. Sleep became an afterthought. Two full meals a day was a minor miracle if I was even that lucky. I lived out of my backpacks, out of classrooms and the backseats of buses, and every free moment was a chance to work on another project. On the way to a soccer game? That's a perfect time to squeeze in the AP Physics homework. We aren't rehearsing my scene right now? I'm down the hall building a robot for Science Bowl. Free time was nothing more than a dream I pretended to have when I pretended to sleep.

Only problem was, I eventually ran out of candle to burn. And when I ran out of candle, the only thing left to burn was me. Once I realized I was slipping, I was already too far down the slope to catch myself. One or two days late to school became an everyday occurrence, which became full weeks where I wouldn't leave my bed. My snowball became an avalanche, and I was the skier who was foolish enough to think I could outrun it.

Now why in the hell would I ever willingly choose to push myself to do all of this, mostly for arbitrary achievements no one will care about or remember ten years from now? I didn't even really care that much about half of what I was doing. Maybe I was told "Oh, so close! Maybe next time!" too many times when I brought home a 95% on a test, or maybe I didn't have to worry about having close friends when I knew half the school through one activity or another. But I'd be lying if I told myself that those were the real reasons for all of this.

I have, and unfortunately always will be, that one annoying space kid. I can recite the paths of the Voyager probes, the names of the astronauts who died on Apollo 1, and reasons why the Earth is most definitely not flat. I never remember a time where this was not part of who I am. The iron in our blood that gives us life was made in the dying breath of stars billions of years ago. The helium in our balloons is likely even older, from the birth of the universe itself. We are just one shape the universe has decided to take, and, for a brief moment, the universe can stare at itself and admire its beauty.

Unfortunately, I became aware of this existentialism far earlier than I probably should. Our little world is a painfully small and insignificant place, plagued by the petty problems of those too short-sighted to see past their own greed. Nothing I can say or do will ever change that fact. We are doomed to fight and die for little to no reason, and when the last of us is gone, the world will spin on without us. We could create a utopia if we wanted to, but we choose self-destruction instead. Combine that with social issues and a less-than-smooth home life, and I could conjure up a pretty reasonable case for no longer existing. I knew there was a bus that was going to hit me, so why not just step into the road?

But instead of facing it, I ran. But how do you run from an idea, something permanently nestled in the corners and roots of your mind, waiting for you to sit back and relax so it can slither out and whisper in your ear? If one voice is too loud, drown it out. If I kept myself busy enough, I would never have to stop and fix the only problem I knew could get the better of me. Unfortunately, entropy comes for all of us. Everything is doomed to wither and die, to erode as the universe seeks to rebalance this colossal mess it has made. I couldn't run forever. And, like a horrible twist of fate, the dam I had built to keep back the floodwaters was the first to come crashing down on me, before the flood came to drown me beneath the rubble.

I spent twelve days in a hospital, even though hospital is not the right word, but it is the one I will use. Hospitals exist to heal the sick, not just to prevent them from dying. We were all broken in there, an almost comical contrast to the oversaturated



yellows, greens, and blues of the floors and walls. I got a wristband with basic medical jargon and my admission date when I got there, everyone had one. I still have mine, buried in a small corner of my room at home, covered in crayon scribbles and those wrinkles paper gets when something has been handled too much. We would compare how long we had been in, and if we thought they would let us out soon. Melanie had already been here twice, Nat and Riley almost seemed happy that they were here at the same time, this time. Try as I might, there are some images I will never be able to erase.

Mary couldn't have been more than fourteen, though we had no way to know. She was small, almost too small, with greasy black hair which hadn't been washed in weeks that stood out against her blue medical gown. She never spoke, at least not to us. The orderlies almost coddled her, as if the world was too much for her. Only a few of us had an admitted date older than three weeks. Mary's was over 10 months ago. We never saw anyone come to visit her, or even heard of anyone ever coming to visit her. If we stayed up late enough, we would hear the older male orderlies taking her down the hall for EST, electroshock therapy. I still get flashes of her face sometimes.

I type this at my desk in my sophomore year of college, surrounded by Post-it notes, sticky shot glasses from last night, and those all too familiar drugs to keep the floodgates up. Every day the surreal feeling of being in this moment fades a little more, but I cannot escape the thought that I cheated an end I should have met.

It would be easy to dismiss all of this as a bad dream, lock it in a box and bury it in my mind, and forget about it. I almost want to. My story has no moral, no clean ending all wrapped up in a bow. I am still running, still using metaphors to hide my meaning, so I don't have to explain to everyone why I may just disappear someday. Maybe if I write enough of it down, these faces will live on in this page instead of in my mind.

## Politeness and Pattern Recognition

When I tell people I'm bad with faces, they don't really understand what I mean. It's not that my memory is bad, or that my eyes are impaired. I try to explain it like this: Imagine that you've crash landed on a planet where all of the people look like drawings colored in by a child. Every person is a complex scribbled swirl of a crayon box of colors, thrown together with all the care of a Jackson Pollock painting.

They're all undeniably different from each other, but those differences are so random that it's impossible to remember which person has what quirks. Maybe you can tell that one such creature is mostly blue. Maybe you know that one has a bright red scribble on their arm. That's great! You feel proud of yourself for remembering, for connecting those dots. Except lots of the creatures have bright red scribbles on their arms. The excitement fades.

How are you supposed to be sure that this creature with the red scribble is the one you want to be talking to? You can memorize a few, of course, enough to recognize them, even if you couldn't picture the entirety of their scribbled faces in your head. But unless you really focus, there's no way you would recognize someone, after seeing them once, twice, even a dozen times. Stranger still is the fact that none of the creatures have any trouble recognizing each other. To them, it all comes as naturally as breathing.

So, you have to learn to adapt.

Being face-blind shapes the world into a dance of politeness and pattern-recognition.

A girl in the cafeteria with shoulder-length blond hair and a Forever 21 outfit might say "Hey Sarah." It's then up to me to respond. But what do I do? I'm certain I've seen her before. That doesn't help me; I've seen a lot of people. I give her a smile, bright and full of recognition: the kind of smile you give a friend.

She passes me in the hallway, and she's gone. I wonder if she's a friend. She knew my name. Do we have any classes together? It's gets easier and easier to accept that I'll never know.

Over time I learn to recognize people. Not what they look like, not really. I understand, instinctively, that I'm looking at my father's face. I just don't know what makes it his.

Really, I tend to think of people as concepts instead. My father is a face that I see in pictures, yes, but to me he is a person made up of values, joys and frustrations, shared memories, quirks, and fears he tries not to express, all jumbled up into a sense of Dad that I know instead of a face. It's like a signature, like a frequency, like a recipe, that might share a style or tune or flavor with someone else but remains entirely unique to that person.

That's where the pattern recognition comes in.

For two years I was a teaching assistant in a middle school, on top of my time spent there as a student myself. I watched classes of students pass through and spent hours noticing things: cataloguing the sets of identifiable traits that make up different people. I didn't need to recognize bone structure, acne constellations, eye color to recognize the flow of the classroom underneath.

The artistic girl sat in the back, at a table by herself because she got distracted if there were others nearby. The smallest boy read the dictionary during silent reading time to prove that he was the smartest. I could already sense the directions that students would gravitate when their teacher allowed them to choose a partner for groupwork. There is repetition in the way that boys get hard around the eyes when they're asked about how things are at home. There is a pattern of defiance in girls' mouths when they're asked why it took them ten minutes to walk to the water fountain two doors down. They aren't the same people, but a red scribble on the arm is a red scribble on the arm all the same.

It's almost embarrassing how long it took me to realize I was face blind. I thought everyone was like me up until a couple of years ago, when I made a casual joke on the way back from the movies. Something about having to tell the actors apart based

on their voices. My family was quick to voice their confusion, which only escalated the more I elaborated on what I thought was obvious at the time.

The very first thing I did when I got home that night was to look up face-blindness. Prosopagnosia, as Wikipedia calls it. There wasn't much listed on it. Apparently, it mostly occurs after brain injuries, but it's congenital for a small percentage of people. No one in my family seems to have it, but unless I was dropped as a baby, congenital is only explanation.

My attention caught on a section about Prosopagnosia in childhood. Children with Prosopagnosia, Wikipedia told me, may appear to be anti-social. (This wasn't entirely antithetical to my experiences growing up.) Children with Prosopagnosia may gravitate towards friendships with classmates who possess distinct features or a clear style of dress.

Herein lay the problem.

Do you have any idea how alarming it is to look back on your childhood and realize that every child you'd ever approached to befriend stood out like a camel in the arctic?

For my first six years of schooling, I only had two friends. The first girl routinely wore clothes like blue jumpsuits, yellow leather jackets, or red bowler hats, often at the same time. She was the only student in the class whose parents let her pick out her own clothes, and she was not a young lady of subdued tastes.

The second girl had a cloud of blond hair that no hair tie could contain and sounded like a warbly cartoon animal. Her voice deepened a little as she aged, but it never lost that fluttering quality that I could pick up from three tables over. Later on, as I got to middle and high school, parents started allowing their children more self-expression. That, coupled with puberty, meant that my friend group expanded to include boys and girls with blue and green hair, buck-teeth, scars, shaved heads, and increasingly varying body types. Even then I might not recognize them. If someone came to school with a new hairstyle, glasses, or even dramatically changed their makeup, they'd often have to speak a few sentences before I connected the dots.

They were all wonderful people who I'm glad to have known, but they troubled me, nonetheless. Had I befriended

those people because I genuinely was drawn to their personalities, or because they stood out to me from a crowd of identical faces? Did it even matter since I knew that I still cared about them? There's something to be said for the value of diversity, but is it better or worse that I chose that variation based on criteria that only I could see?

I can't even recognize myself. Looking in a mirror or at a photo, I know logically that I'm staring at my own face, but the woman staring back at me could very well be a stranger. When I was a child, I'd sit in front of my bathroom mirror for ten or twenty minutes at a time, getting lost in my own reflection. I'd lean in close to see the colors and patterns of my irises, lean back out to study my cheekbones, smile and frown in turn to see how it changed the face I was getting used to into a completely unrecognizable one.

The other part of that Wikipedia article that interested me was a list of notable Prosopagnosiacs: Jane Goodall among them. Part of me wonders if that was part of why she chose to forego people altogether and go and live with the apes. Or maybe, conversely, she was so good at recognizing chimpanzees because she had already learned how to tell faceless individuals apart.

It's a skill I hope I learn soon. As I've gotten older, it's been harder and harder to pass off my lapses of recognition as childhood distractibility.

College, in particular, has presented some unexpected challenges. I might have come here expecting to have familiar faces look unfamiliar, but I'm just as often faced with the opposite problem. So many years in my hometown with the same people meant that leaving gives me a daily onslaught of false positives. I have to fight the urge to call out a greeting to the red head in the dining hall: she's not my high school classmate. My brunette hallmate, Hope, leaves me wondering where I've seen her, until I remember that another brunette Hope rode the same bus as me from fifth grade onwards. All of the little differentiating tells I've come up with over the years are suddenly pointing to the wrong people.

And how will things continue as I grow up? After all, I want to be a teacher. While I may have learned to differentiate

the children as individuals with their own accomplishments, how am I supposed to so much as take roll call if I can't tell which of those individuals I'm looking at? How am I supposed to know which brunette boy at a table of brunette boys just answered my question and deserves points? How do I know the right girl has showed up for detention?

Still, I know this is a part of me that I can't change. That was something else listed online, right at the top of the page: no known treatment. It makes sense, of course. Something went wrong with my brain development. There's no pill you can take before bed that can rewire your neurons. This isn't something that's going to go away.

Then again, it's also not the end of me.

A couple of days ago, I got an email asking for a cover photo of myself for an award I had achieved. After searching through my phone for a few minutes, I realized that my attempts at categorizing myself were going to be fruitless, and I knocked on my roommate's door to ask if any of the possible pictures I planned to use looked like me. She laughed and told me that they all looked like me. I thanked her and went back to my room to submit one.

A couple of months before that, I watched *The Big Sleep* with my family. A large cast of conventionally attractive white people in a film without color is especially hard for me to keep track of. But, while my family joked about how I couldn't tell the protagonist from the murderer, they let me know who was on screen every time I asked. I certainly wouldn't have gotten through the movie without their help.

I have to keep reminding myself that I'm not bothering people by asking for help. I remind myself that there are people willing to remind me of how I know them no matter how many times I ask. Being face-blind is inconvenient, but there will always be workarounds if I'm willing to look for them. And hey, with the number of cases of mistaken identity I rack up each day, at least it keeps my ego in check.

## Douglas Adams' Guide to Florida

“If you’re lucky, you might see the two monkeys we have here on property,” Joe said. “These are the last two we have. That’s not enough to regrow the population.”

Joe was our tour guide. Well, I don’t remember his name, but he looked like a Joe. He had white hair and wore a white polo shirt. His face was gaunt but happy. He led us through a courtyard brimming with eccentric statues: honking tabletop geese, a big-eyed frog, and tigers taken from carousels.

“The squirrel monkeys like to hide up in the trees. They’re not native to Florida, and soon, they won’t be here anymore.”

Two months later, I went back to Fort Lauderdale.

*The story so far:*

*In the beginning the Universe was created.*

*This has made a lot of people very angry and been widely regarded as a bad move.*

This is the opening line to *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, the second book of the blue and green paperback collection of Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy novels I started reading in the summer of 2019. I read this line in Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton International Airport. I was sitting in one of those seats that’s conjoined to the other seats in the terminal, like segments of a chocolate bar. Across from me was the dark hardwood façade of the PA Pub, the airport’s sole restaurant. It’s early, and the place was empty, but I can’t imagine it gets too busy in the evenings either. The terminal also boasts The Spirit of Lehigh, a gift shop specializing in all things Lehigh Valley. Apparently, we’re known for marshmallow Peeps and Crayola. I imagine people landing in Pennsylvania for a vacation, and kids eagerly picking out candy and crayons to take home. I have never

seen this happen. People don't vacation in the Lehigh Valley - people live in the Valley, and they vacation in places like Florida.

My great-grandmother used to live in Fort Lauderdale. We called her GG. One day, before I was born, my great-grandfather Bing said to her, "Why don't we move down to Florida and get a nice place by the beach?" GG was reluctant to move, but eventually they found a condo with a balcony and an ocean view. Bing died before I was old enough to remember him, and GG passed away a few years back. Like many people who die of old age, her last months were long, disgusting, and cruel. My Aunt Cindy flew down frequently to take care of her, and her home. One day, GG turned to Aunt Cindy and said:

"Isn't funny how I was the one who didn't want to move down here, and now I don't want to leave?"

"Yes, isn't it?" Aunt Cindy had replied.

Aunt Cindy owns the place now and shares it with the family. I'm in college, and I've gone down almost every year since I was a kid. Being there now is like meeting up with an old friend. We need to tell each other the same stories and inside jokes every time we reunite, and it never gets old.

Remember when we told Aunt Keeker we were going to the store Wings, and she thought we were getting chicken wings? And we always get to have the variety pack of mini cereals. And every time, Mom recounts the smell of dirty dishrags in the Peter Pan Diner. I've incorporated the area into my own personal mythology, through memories as well as fiction. Near the Sawgrass Mills mall, my protagonist Caleb encountered reality TV-star Crocodile Cody. In a movie script, an evil swimming pool supply company based out of Pompano Beach sold explosive chlorine tablets.

This time, we drove down from Disney World. I read another chapter as our car traversed A1A to the condo.

*"That's it!" said Zaphod. "I got it. I told the computer to send us to the nearest place to eat, that's exactly what it did. Give or take five hundred and seventy-six thousand million years or whatever, we never moved."*



The same place can change a lot through time. When we stepped out of the condo elevator, we saw how the hall had been changed. All white, clean, and modern.

“There used to be a table here,” my dad said. “GG used to decorate it for all the seasons.” He’s a tall guy, and when not at the office, he always wears a baseball cap. It’s usually a Phillies cap, to show Floridians where we’re from. Dad’s the one to talk to strangers, cracking jokes to cashiers, conversing with people on the bus, or asking tour guides if they feed little kids to the alligators.

We rolled our suitcases over to GG’s place.

“Who wants to open the door?” Dad said, holding out the keys.

“Ooh, me.” My sister Sydni is the go-getter of the family. She spends her free time applying for scholarships.

“The door handles are new too,” Dad said. “They used to be knobs.”

I didn’t like all this change. It felt like they tore out my memories along with the old carpet.

*And on the tablecloth sat some dozen half-eaten Italian meals, hedged about with half-eaten breadsticks and half-drunk glasses of wine, and toyed with listlessly by robots.*

One night we had dinner at Nick’s Italian Restaurant. Not quite the *Restaurant at the End of the Universe*: it opened in 1974, and the murals on the neighboring synagogue go back to Genesis. The kids’ menu at Nick’s says, “10 and under”, but my little brother Simon is fifteen. He always orders the build-your-own pizza. He will be the baby of the family until the end of time. Douglas Adams’ Bistromathics (the mathematics of Italian bistros, a powerful energy source for spaceflight) would find a whole new range of theorems in the build-your-own pizza. The variable ratios of cheese to sauce can split reality into a multitude of different timelines. The amount of pepperoni is a constant zero.

In the morning, we went to the beach. A line of black kelp marked the extent of the last high tide. It stretched in both

directions, as infinite as the line of hotels and condos in front of it. I got closer, and saw gnats swirling in it. My dad, my brother, and I, stepped over it, and waded into the water. The salty waves battered us. More seaweed bobbed up and down in the surf. Simon put on his goggles. We could usually see fish here. I put my goggles on, too, and ducked my head under the water. It was all black.

I surfaced and looked back to the beach. Scientists have suggested various causes for this sargassum invasion - pesticide runoff, changing currents, climate change. Whatever the reason, it's not going away soon. Huge orange tractors patrolled the shore and shoveled the seaweed into buckets behind them. This must be what Sisyphus does when he comes to Florida, and when he's not doing laundry. Slightly reassuringly, the city of Fort Lauderdale uses the seaweed for compost.

Since the ocean was a bust, we walked to the beach. The fishing pier a mile ahead of us marked Lauderdale by the Sea. We always take a night to stop in the various stores there. Shops sell T-shirts, boogie boards, and unicorns that look like Donald Trump. The town also boasts several motels, named Blue Strawberry by the Sea, Sea Spray Inn, or Dolphin Harbor Inn. I've never seen a dolphin in Fort Lauderdale. Maybe they left for outer space, like the dolphins in *The Hitchhiker's Guide*, saying:

*So long, and thanks for all the fish.*

The crown jewel of Lauderdale by the Sea is Diamonds and Doggies, a pink-infested boutique that sells exactly what it advertises: expensive jewelry and dogs that can fit inside purses. Taped to the wall, they have photos of celebrities who came to the store. Including one of Jeb Bush hugging a puppy.

I'm not in the market for diamonds or doggies, but it's a tradition to stop by. Just like the build-your-own pizza, the Jungle Queen boat ride, or our excursions to Sawgrass Mills mall.

We went down to Florida for Memorial Day Weekend that year, before I knew anything about Ford Prefect or Zaphod

Beeblebrox. That's when Sydni said, "Why can't we do something different?"

"Like what?" Mom said.

"I don't know," Sydni said. "We always do the same stuff whenever we come down here."

*Here the sun shines brightest of all, glittering on the swimming pools, shimmering on the white, palm-lined boulevards, glistening on the healthy bronzed specks moving up and down them, gleaming off the villas, the hazy airpads, the beach bars and so on.*

A1A runs parallel to the beach throughout Fort Lauderdale, including at its public beach in an area known as Las Olas. Las Olas is Spanish for "the waves". Here, cargo ships dot the horizon and beachgoers zipped down sidewalks on electric scooters.

A1A is like the planet Krikkit from the third Hitchhiker's Guide novel. Adams adapted it from a story he originally wrote for Doctor Who. The inhabitants of Krikkit were a peaceful, pastoral people. A thick dust cloud covered their planet's sky, and so they never thought anything was up there until one day a spaceship crashed down. To find out where this spaceship had come from, the Krikkit developed space travel themselves. For the very first time, the people of Krikkit glimpsed something outside their planet:

*For a while they flew on, motionless against the starry sweep of the Galaxy, itself motionless against the infinite sweep of the Universe. And then they turned round.*  
*"It'll have to go," the men of Krikkit said as they headed back for home.*

Thus began their quest to annihilate the entire world.

People who travel A1A tend to look out their cars on the ocean side. That side has the palm trees and the lifeguard towers and the parasailers. The other side is tall bushes behind a fence. Just as the Krikkit thought there wasn't anything beyond the dust

clouds in their sky, it's easy to think there's not anything behind the bushes. It's a real life S.E.P. field (Someone Else's Problem). But we've ridden down A1A so many times, we've seen the signs and the low-key, unassuming entrance in the fence.

"What about Hugh Taylor Birch State Park?" Sydni said.

"It's just forest," Dad said.

"What do you do there?" Mom said.

"It's a park." Sydni looked through the info on her phone.

"What about 'The Bonnet House Museum and Gardens'?" It looks like it's right near there."

I put down my notebook. "I wouldn't be opposed to going. As long as we still go to Sawgrass and the Jungle Queen."

"I guess," Mom said.

Ariana Grande came on the radio as we drove down A1A.

*I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it.*

The Bonnet House parking lot was grass under some trees. We got out, and Sydni fiddled with her Polaroid. Palm fronds and other forest debris littered the ground. The ditch in front of us looked like it could hold an alligator. In all my years of going to Florida, I've never seen an alligator in the wild. They seem to mostly inhabit postcards.

We paid at a smaller building. The woman selling tickets looked at Simon and said, "He's under twelve, right?"

Then we made our way to the main house. It was yellow brick. We waited for a tour with many other people, on a long bench under an awning. Fans blew hot air down at us. My water bottle grew lighter and lighter. The gravel in front of us seemed to bake in the sun. Geographically, we weren't far from the hustle and bustle of Las Olas.

Finally, Joe came out. He gave his opening spiel, then led us into the mansion. Eclectic art filled the house. The former owner, Frederic Bartlett, had painted fish and a turtle on the one ceiling. Mounted fish lined wood-paneled dining room walls. Elsewhere, paintings depicted exoticized characters in turbans. The Bartletts populated the house with their own creations, as well as curios they acquired from across the globe.

“They saw it, they wanted it, and they bought it,” Joe said. Simon and Sydni looked at each other, trying to hold in their laughter. He had unwittingly quoted Ariana Grande almost word for word.

“The Bonnet House gets its name from the bonnet lily,” Joe explained. “Which is bright yellow, just like the Bonnet House’s walls. You can find that lily in the pond out back here. It’s actually a freshwater slough, separated from the ocean by the dune.” Joe led us to a large patio on a hill. “When Hugh Taylor Birch first bought this land, this is what all of Florida looked like. Now, this and Hugh Taylor Birch State Park are all that’s left. We recently lost a piece of land we had for a while. If you saw a high-rise under construction on your way here, that’s what that is.”

Here, I quote Ariana, not Adams:

*Whoever said money can't solve your problems,  
Must not have had enough money to solve 'em.*

Thanks to Birch’s wealth, the Bonnet House became one of the first buildings on land previously settled by the Tequesta Native Americans. Now, it remained the last holdout of the past in a city of condos. Condos bought by people like my great-grandfather Bing. He saw it, he wanted it, and he got it. I’m divided between my desire to preserve nature and my desire to claim Fort Lauderdale as my own. I like to imagine that one day I’ll write a bestselling book series and make enough money to buy one of those mansions on the Intracoastal Waterway. Actually, if I was a billionaire, I’d buy up a bunch of properties and turn them into little pockets of nature. Like that abandoned Howard Johnson’s in Lauderdale by the Sea. For some reason, rich people don’t do that. I guess I can’t say I’d be any different if I was them.

“We own a section of the beach on the other side of A1A,” Joe said. “But people think it’s a part of the public beach and just put their chairs and their towels down on it. We put signs saying it’s property of the Bonnet House, but they don’t listen.”

Joe also told us about himself. “I went to a St. Joseph’s Catholic High School. I don’t know if it’s still around anymore.”

“They go to a Catholic high school back home,” Dad said, pointing at Simon and Sydni.

“Oh, really? Where are you all from?”

“We’re from Pennsylvania,” Dad said. “Around the Lehigh Valley area. It’s kind of near Philly.”

Joe smiled. “Like I said, the locals don’t even know about this place. We get the tourists, because they see us on TripAdvisor, but we don’t get the locals.”

“You’re right,” Dad said. “My grandmother lived down here, and I’ve been coming every year since I was a kid, and I never even knew this was down here. My daughter actually found this place when she was looking for things to do.”

“Like I said, it’s the tourists who find us.”

I looked for the monkeys, but never found them.

In August, I got a few more chapters of *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* in at the Atlanta airport. Flying into Allentown meant we needed a connection. It wasn’t even 10 in the morning, but I was hungry since I ate breakfast around 4 or so. It was still dark when we woke up. I had half a lobster roll left in the fridge from dinner last night. Lobsters aren’t even native to Florida, at least not the edible kind. I just felt like I had to get seafood since we ate at Aruba Beach Café, right next to the pier. I’d recommend their lobster roll for dinner, but not for breakfast at 4 in the morning. I think I got a quarter of the way through before I opted for cereal instead.

We had reservations for the Alburdis Tavern that night, to celebrate Dad’s birthday with the extended family. Alburdis, one of those Lehigh Valley towns home to long-gone industries, got its name from a civil engineer who helped build the railroad that passes by. Train-themed memorabilia decorates the walls of the Tavern, and the seats at the bar have names like “The Caboose”, or “The Locomotive”. Whenever the Norfolk Southern roars past, the bartender spins a wheel with the names of all the seats. Whoever it lands on wins a free drink. We’d have plenty of time to relax at home before our 6:30 reservations.

Then our flight got delayed again.

Eventually, we walked that long hallway down to the plane. I often wonder about the people I see in the planes to Allentown. Here, in Atlanta, were people from the same place I was. But they were strangers.

I got comfy in my seat. Outside the window, workers scurried around. I read some more, wrote some more. I asked Mom for some gum.

Then the flight attendant stood up at the front of the plane. "I'm sorry, but our team discovered a problem with the plane as they were doing their rounds. We apologize for the inconvenience, but we're going to have to ask you to deplane."

The passengers let out a collective groan. We all shuffled out of the plane, with all our carry-ons, and went back to the terminal. I read more, wrote more, and played some games. Eventually we got a new plane. I settled in my new seat but held off on the gum. Once again, I reached into my bag for the Hitchhiker's Guide.

In this chapter, Zaphod comes across a spaceship that by all means should have been long abandoned. When he goes inside, he discovers all the passengers, still alive, sitting in suspended animation. Every so often, the ship's robot crew wakes the passengers, tells them they need to wait for supplies, and offers them complimentary snacks to hold them over. A few minutes later, the crew freezes the passengers again. They repeat this cycle over and over, waiting for supplies that will never come. The passengers have aged years from all the accumulated minutes they've been reanimated, and now sport shaggy beards, and cry out for help every moment they're awake.

I looked up. Life imitates Adams.

The flight attendant stood up at the front of the plane again. "I apologize for the inconvenience, but the pilots have timed out. Please remain patient until we find our new pilots."

"You've gotta be kidding me!" exclaimed a passenger who may have had one too many Pan-Galactic Gargle Blasters.

The pilots emerged from the cabin, and gave us a wave that seemed to say, Good luck with that. Then it was just us and the flight attendants.

"Well, that stinks," Mom said. "But what can you do?"

“Yep,” Dad said. “You don’t want them to be flying when they shouldn’t be.”

I played more videogames. I had finished *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, and figured I might as well start *Life, the Universe, and Everything* while I was here.

A fresh batch of pilots entered the plane. People cheered. A little while later, our plane taxied down the runway.

“I can’t believe it,” the inebriated passenger said. “We’re actually moving.”

The people on the flight didn’t feel like strangers anymore. We’d been through this together. Finally, we made it to ABE, collected our luggage, and drove home.

“It smells like grass here,” Sydni said.

It did. The whole Lehigh Valley smelled like grass. It was the kind of thing we only noticed after spending some time away.

“Florida’s all condos,” Dad said. “No room for grass.”

We made it just in time to join our family members at the Alburtis Tavern, and we entertained them with stories from our trip. I felt like Arthur Dent, coming home to England after travelling the galaxy.

My dad once asked my cousin, who’s a pilot, what his favorite airport was.

“Probably ABE,” Jason said. “It’s small, the people are nice, and it feels like home.”

“My favorite airport is the one in St. Maarten,” my younger cousin, Joey, said. “You come down over the beach as you land, and you can see the people waving to you.”

I’m with Jason. And Arthur Dent. I like the predictable comforts of home. Home can mean the potholes of Pennsylvania or the tacky shot glasses in our favorite Fort Lauderdale gift shop. But potholes and shot glasses are not eternal, much as they may seem so. Things change. Fort Lauderdale was once untamed wilderness. Now it’s just untamed.

*And so the Universe ended.*



## A Love Story With Femininity

Kids shrieked on the soccer field as they played tag under the warm noon sun, drying a blanket of grass slippery from dew. A group of 8-year-old girls, clad in a rainbow of colors, enthusiastically assumed the roles of “mommy” and “baby” in their daily game of house. Yet despite all the chatter, shouts, or occasional tantrums that transpire during an elementary school recess, the only sound I allowed myself to hear was Heather’s humming.

“What’s that you’re singing?” I asked cautiously, peering at her through narrowed eyes. The two of us sat amongst brown scratchy woodchips at the base of a tree—an incomparable view of the playground in its entirety. I traced the mounted words on the memorial plaque dedicating this tree to a person of the past, daring her to say it.

“Love Story. It’s by Taylor Swift.” Heather continued humming, sifting through wood chips with her chipped manicured nails. She had brown hair like me, except hers was straight and mine was curly. I looked at her. She was such a girly-girl.

“I thought we didn’t like Taylor Swift.”

“Well, I do.”

“Well, I don’t.” I leaned up against the tree’s wooden spine, watching the boys pass a horrendously flat basketball back and forth on the blacktop and zeroing in on my little-girl-fantasy crush. So, Heather likes Taylor Swift, I thought to myself as I observed her baby blue t-shirt in comparison to my Beatles one. She and I were truly very different. I supposed Taylor had a nice voice, but all the other girls were obsessed with her. That was all that mattered.

Several months later, as frost replaced dew and hardened the winter ground, Heather would approach me during recess with her new best friend, Natalie. They would scan me up and

down with icy judging eyes, me and my dear raspberry colored coat, and sweetly question how long I had owned it for. When I answered—about, maybe, two years?—they would inform me that they got new coats every six months. My friendship with Heather did not endure, but the concept of “girly girls” and what femininity meant to an 8-year-old girl were long-lasting. What was it? In reality, was I repulsed by Taylor Swift and the color pink because I did not like them, or because I was a child taught by society that she should embody those things? I would not realize until years, and even a (thrilling) Taylor Swift concert later, that my rejection of femininity was only a response to the internalized notion of who, and what, I should be as a young girl.

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Standing by my locker, aimlessly fiddling with the metal dial, I watched—subtly, I hoped—the nonchalant posse of girls saunter down the hallway. Or maybe it was at lunchtime, the cafeteria bustling with middle schoolers, that I observed from one of the banana-colored tables as they arose—a collective whole—to throw their trash away. Either way, I didn’t understand the fascination with the “popular girls.” Was it because they wore leggings and rolled down caramel UGGs, or came back to school each Monday sporting a new customized sweatshirt from that weekend’s bar or bat mitzvah? They wore short shorts and I wore t-shirts, as Taylor Swift would say. These girls were the epitome of femininity. They upheld the stereotypes of what it is to be an 8th grade girl, transforming into the middle school version of listening to Taylor Swift and wearing little pink dresses. I’d contemplate my vibrant green snakeskin fabric lunchbox—which was hideous, though I never thought so at the time—and look over at their practically identical Vera Bradley’s.

My two best friends and I, therefore, paired leggings with popularity. Scornful, tight, revealing atrocities. Ariana and I played saxophone together during sixth period and baked cakes after school, while Rachel and I, being neighbors, would leave crumpled notes or trinkets beside each other’s front doors. We vowed to be different and never conform to that standard.

Refusing to wear leggings, therefore, was an unwritten rule. Which is why one day, when Rachel came to school in grey capris, Ariana and I were understandably shocked.

“Rachel, are those—”

“Leggings?” Ariana finished, a mixture of awe and surprise. A sea of forest green lockers lined the wall where we stood before science class. I leaned against mine, having already withdrawn my monstrous binder.

Rachel cast her moss green eyes upwards under her glasses. “I need to do laundry. All my other pants are dirty. But who even cares?” The excited chatter of thirteen-year-olds between classes began to dissipate as the warning bell sounded.

“I mean, it doesn’t matter,” I said, “it’s just unexpected. That’s all.” It was true, Rachel had always been the most vocal about never painting her nails or piercing her ears. The three of us slung heavy backpacks over our shoulders as we headed to class, where we would proceed to create lyrics and choreography to better learn the stages of mitosis.

And once again, several months later, I would push past the inescapable guilt and step into a pair of Old Navy leggings I had tentatively asked my mom to buy. It was time to grow up; clothing didn’t define me. I’d walk through the door of my classroom, hovering in a cloud of nervous excitement, owning the fact that behaving like a girl—whatever a “girl” is supposed to behave like—was okay. I’d be wearing a slightly cropped white tee with baby blue sleeves, only for my middle-aged teacher to suggest to my thirteen-year-old self that “maybe next time, you should wear a tank under your shirt.” She was a woman. I remember her judging eyes that scanned me, scrutinized me, shrunk me just as Heather and Natalie had done that cold day on the playground. Years later, the message was still the same.

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*suppose it was not here in the city but down on the beach  
or far into the woods and I wanted to go  
there by myself thinking about God or thinking  
about children or thinking about the world, all of it*

*disclosed by the stars and the silence:  
I could not go and I could not think and I could not stay there  
alone as I need to be  
alone because I can't do what I want to do with my own body*

I sat in the center of Olin 102 amongst the four other girls in my CIE class, one of us reading June Jordan's Poem About My Rights with passion. A passion that maybe only comes from living those words and feeling them resonate with your own experience of life.

A ring of male students surrounded us. We are used to their eyes, but this instead was respect and quiet listening. I was not thinking or focused on their presence; I only watched my classmate's curls bounce as she read and felt the sisterhood in that circle radiating. The professor wanted this poem to be ours and ours alone, to amplify the voices of women in a world where we're taught to stay back.

Once she finished, we dissected the poem in the quiet of our minds before launching into a fervent dialogue. It took us on dark walks at night, holding keys close through an expanse of fear, to the pressures of dress codes at a young age.

And suddenly, I found myself recalling my 8-year-old self's contempt for Taylor Swift, and painted nails, and all things girly. "Hey, did you guys do this too?" I had never put my rejection of femininity into words, but here was a group of once self-declared tomboys who chorused back that yes, they had!

The circle pulsed with ease and unity. I was not the only one, never was. But was this a triumphant moment, or simply a reflection of how conditioned we really were? Five little girls, across five different playgrounds, growing up with one hundred stereotypes to conform to.

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My mom pulled into the crowded lot outside the house on sixth avenue—a spontaneous weekend visit that would take us to a farm filled with animals and, hopefully, apple picking. My fabric mask that she had carefully stitched together warmed my face

amidst the chilly onset of fall, and I hopped into the car to see her wearing one, too. We could not embrace but were very excited to see each other.

To our dismay, the farm was closed. I peered through the gates into a deserted lot, the rust-colored barn and silos standing quietly against a blue sky. So instead, we decided to get chai lattes and sit down by the river.

I look just like my mom. Same nose, curly hair—though hers is darker—but she’s always taught me to be my own person. To overcome the eyes that scrutinize and never let them succeed in making me feel less than who I am. To value individuality and avoid pressure to conform to society’s wishes for me.

After some time, we ventured down a trail along the river and watched the sparkling, rushing water create currents. It was deserted just as the farm was, and I couldn’t help but allow June Jordan’s words to echo in my mind. This was an area we did not know; perhaps another stranger did. I wondered why we were taught as girls to dress a certain way, and how it might have contributed to the situation I found myself in. I wondered if she was thinking so, too. But sometimes there has to be an escape from the world and those thoughts, so instead, I focused on the water.

## Roots

Half of my being was once broken off and rebroken off. She was split and grafted onto just one family tree. Mama and Dad did not raise me together. My paternal roots were chain sawed by the grand paternal persona of responsibility and obligative authority for guardianship. Mama's adopted father planted the father figure in my life right beside my grandmother who also helped raise me like the mother figure i needed while the real one worked for me. They monitored my germination and made interpersonal decisions before the birth of my fruition. Her family who adopted my seed, watered and nourished my soil in our forest for the trees, where she sprouted my leaves of genesis. Creating a thickness, a grounding, an expansion.

The black limbs: my aunts, my cousins, my nanny. They were all cut off, and in my mind, that's how i rationalized their unphysical non-existence. I was curious about my father: who he was, what he looked like, and if i looked like him. I was about six years of age, and after my mother's Myspace message to Jim, he knew for the first time i was his daughter. He was blindsided by my birth and all of the years that passed without his first-born daughter in his life. He was not allowed to be included in the life of his daughter by the grandparents of his baby girl who told him he was not welcomed because his life wasn't put together enough. The worst part that will always haunt us both forever is the atrocity of our blood relationship which was severed and kept hidden from the both of us. Knowing now and attempting to align the puzzle pieces together of the bigger picture of my life cuts deeper than the ignorance that prevailed us. The maturity i carried--the inquisitive and persistent drive to discover more of me, beyond me, enabled me to understand the Sins bestowed through Cyn from my creators.

She stemmed from a hybrid plant of different cultures at the city roller rink. The Palace is where they met. I joke

sometimes that i was basically conceived in skates, but i digress. The Palace was the place where I had a couple birthday celebrations in the past. Where i spent sweaty sessions circling the slick wooden roads in the new age, driving down high Philly roads, trying to learn my long-lost family limbs as an adult tree. Reconnecting a joining of blood that never seemed to match my type until an autonomous self-introduction. I planted myself in the belief of understanding where i come from in our family tree. Knowledge of my other half was and is necessary for lack of a familial love i never knew i needed. Until aunt Starr's backyard where it was written in the stars, my intuition spoke to me that it was time to learn, understand, and take notes of our generational stories and personalities.

### **roots;**

The last night before my flight back home at aunt Starr's house in Arizona unfolded conversations that shared our souls. Aunt Beanie wouldn't go with me because of their own faulty relationship and my cousin Zenique wasn't allowed to join me either because of how aunt Starr made her feel embarrassed and uncomfortable on several occasions prior. Nanny Ellie picked me up with her flamboyant cross-dressing husband, Jeff, to aunt Starr's house where i met my cousin Jason again one year later.

That night, we ate chocolate edibles and a homecooked meal all together. We sang to music videos. We smoked prerolls, toked up on thick thumb Ls, and inhaled big iced bong rips, with the classic chains of light green spirits of course. The depths of the dark matter and colorfully burning exploding consistent stars, made up of different constellations--i gazed, i gazed, oh how i gazed. Our galaxy from the stable waters of her pool--staring--the shooting Capricorn Starr with the free spirit of a curiously adventurous Sagittarius empowered the cosmos of the Leo Lion's time and space within an entire second. The vastness of what i witnessed, i wished on (and still wish on), i wished, oh how i wished: To be. To be okay. To speak without silencing. For contentment and stability. For love reciprocated and unconditional within me and extended outwardly.

And for my blood to flow fluidly like my related women who carry us with absolute care.

**roots;**

Black blood dispersed inside the Afrikan diaspora. My father took a DNA test and shared the results when i was a young teenager in freshman year of high school, avoiding the lunch hour, on the phone in the courtyard of the art rooms and cafeteria. Another attempt to replant myself in their lives where i mistakenly denied them at that time. A significant percentage revealed West Africa.

A place where Our People were bonded trans-atlantically. Traveling westward last month to Arizona, i learned orally that our ancestral lineages were historically traced and archived by older family. I learned we were not always enslaved, but rather became indentured servants.

**roots;**

I grew up in a vegetative state--my child self could not talk--but now i am no longer silenced. I make sounds now because my people in the forest are around now. She budded, and flowered, and ripened. I think now, she was raised quickly and too soon, dropped petals like winter quickly approaching too much, blossomed again and again and again always after too often.

But she kept rebirthing by deepening my roots and recycling her leaves to compost in the background. The sun, like Arizona heat, warmed my soulful world in mellow yellow hope. The moon at night continuously pulls her in and out like tides undulating. And although the riptides and tidal waves were violent, i was never lost in the dead sea.

Isolated moments spent alone coming home from school and unlocking the door with my house key i finally received at age ten, the option to sometimes feed myself, the responsibility of finishing homework and chores, and awaking myself the next day like clockwork repetition. Isolated moments of emotional reactions in times i couldn't cope within myself, so i would lash out. No one really questioned why i was feeling this distressing pain, this depression, this constant obsessive and compulsive anxieties of perfectionism, and this ceasing of eating and over-exercising. It seemed to me, they only cared enough to spend money on professionals who they thought could help me. Sure,



the therapy and medications helped me. But professionally, the "all-knowing" doctors only addressed the "what" of my problems and not the how's and why's of my struggles. It left her unable to triumph on my own.

She could have never known the timing of my budding, my flowering, and my ripening until my adulthood when i would soon meet the family who had been concealed from me. Then i would understand how her mind operates, how open and honest my dad's family is talking about their mental health, and how being heard and understood from them from earlier on rather than these past two years would have affected my life differently and assumingly more positively.

But she had to grow up with the silencing of the mental and emotional bodies. Her guardians didn't understand her. My blackened limbs understood me because they understand our struggles and triumphs within themselves. I ultimately feel robbed of who i did not have and what i did not have.

My connections were taken, unrooted, and naïvely broken from me. But i kept rebirthing myself from her ashes like a phoenix by deepening my roots and recycling her leaves to compost in the background.

### **roots;**

Connected academically, and technically, but spiritually, I feel free in my body rhythmically. Movements beaten repeatedly inspired me emotionally. Mama Africa, who we call Mama Jeannine, called me the African Queen. Two years under her instruction, i personally transformed exponentially, yet gradually. Esteem rose in me, not arrogantly, but confidently embodying my beautiful body physically and caressing the dances of legacy we practice neo-traditionally. I used to hate her body and what she couldn't do. I now embrace the person who carries me, now i follow where i take myself, and now i am proud and amazed of what i am able to do.

I saw my tribe, minus myself last year, and it was clear i had to appear on that stage next year. I did. Last year checked off my first dance recital in the Lenfest Theater, more specifically, my first recital performing West African Drum & Dance. We danced Yanvalou--a ritual style dance of Haitian religion and

culture--symbolic to the harmonic balance of humans and our lives in our world. I undulated the white waves of water within refracting energies that extended out of my body and radiated from me. I flowed like reading a story where the coming chapters that followed turned themselves like the long white skirt i wore on stage, twirling around elegantly and angelically.

My dad's sister, Aunt Beanie, and her daughter Zenique, sat with my mother who took our picture before the show. Before the show, i showed them a place where i call my community, my home, where i eat and sleep. I showed them with my anticipatory excitement and through the movement of my body. Reconnecting to me, they arrived up to the bears in the town of bumblefuck, Pennsylvania down from the hustle of North East Philly to see a woman from their tribe find their source of life.

I cheered and chanted with the leader! I cheered and chanted with the leader who knew a piece of my roots from the Philly Attic. We came down from the closeted cob-webbed attics and came out to dance our souls about. The daughter in the piece our leader choreographed was no longer suffocated nor smothered. He grew stronger from our common struggle and our shared triumph. The resonation reached the magnitude of a melancholic dripping of flooded tears. He willed to dance this chapter of his life to expose the victimization of sexual assault to an audience. It took time, but i learned, too, from my struggles to flower in triumph. We grew our power.

I became a leader too, and i cheered us on in the name of Justice this year, barely reaching the courts to serve this Justice he and all the men shall be deserved three times harsher. Not just for me, but for everyone who has been silenced, and also for my severely severed roots.

It was just one show and three to go, but oh, oh, oh, it lasted forever!

We danced in myself together.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Ian Abrahams** is a Biology major who uses he/they pronouns. He believes that climate change is a hoax, the fossil record was staged, and that the government is run by reptilians who abducted him in 2014.

**Griffin Banks** is a senior at Ursinus College. He is a Media and Communications major with minors in Creative Writing and English.

**Haley Bestrycki** is from Scranton, Pennsylvania. She is a sophomore at Ursinus. Her major is Economics with a minor in Creative Writing!

**Emily Bradigan** is a sophomore majoring in English and Theater Design. Emily enjoys both writing and art, so she's overjoyed to have both in this year's Lantern.

**Sarah Buck** is easily swayed by shiny objects, movie/live theater tickets, actual feedback on her messy writing, and Italian hot chocolate. If you give her any of these things, she will love you forever and you can never get rid of her. Ever.

**Ava Compagnoni** writes well on paper, but her greatest form of expression comes from her excessive hand motions and swinging while having an in-depth conversation.

**Olivia Cross** is a freshman English and history double major from Lincoln University, PA. When not writing, Olivia enjoys sewing and collage art.

**Anaya Demota** is in the Class of 2023. She is from Philadelphia, and her favorite part of the city is Penn's Landing. She is still figuring out what she wants to officially study, but it will be centered around humanitarianism.

**Cyn Ercole** is a senior majoring in Psychology, with minors in African American & Africana Studies and Creative Writing. She is a spoken word poet, storyteller, dancer & drummer, scholar, daughter, and a creative creator. Cynn timer is also a spiritual witch, Madame Majika, who connects puzzle pieces of life through poetry.

**Samuel Ernst** is a senior English major with minors in Creative Writing and Computer Science. Just for the record, he supports pineapple on pizza.

**Sarah Fales** is a freshman double major in English and Education. She is also the 2020 winner of the Ursinus Creative Writing Scholarship.

**Robert Fisher** is a senior who has done art on and off for the past ten years. He's been wanting to return to it; now hoping to improve on his currently favored sharp and rough style artistic style.

**Kelsey Gavin** is an Art & Art History major, who loves reading and writing on the subject of art.

**Shayna Kushner** is a senior studying International Relations with a triple minor in Arabic, Peace and Social Justice, and Middle Eastern Studies. She dedicates her poems to her loved ones for helping her to overcome any obstacles she may face.

**Amy Litofsky** is a junior English and MCS major who spends more time in fantasy than reality. She'll come back to reality eventually... probably.

**Jenna Lozzi's** statement in her 2020 Lantern bio still stands.

**Nadia El-Mourli** is a freshman. She is an Abele scholar, and her intended major is Studio art. She does free-lance graphic design and artwork for multiple bands local to Pennsylvania.

**Morgan Mason** is a Junior at Ursinus College. She is an English major with minors in Creative Writing and Media and Communication Studies. Apart from schoolwork, Morgan is a sister of Phi Alpha Psi sorority.

**Mairead McDermott** is a freshman studying art history.

**Gabby DeMelfi** is a senior Psychology and Media and Communication Studies major and Dance minor.

**Matthew Schmitz** is an Education and Psychology major from Lewis Center, Ohio.

**Kat Saddler** is a senior Media and Communications major with a minor in German. She is involved with the Dance program on campus and is also a tutor for German students.

**Aurora McKee** is a freshman with an undeclared major. She comes from Garrison, New York; her parents are psychologists, she has a twin sister, and the family dog is a Westie who still manages to stir up an impressive amount of trouble despite being blind.

**Christian Ndaye** is a senior computer scientist and writer. He is originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and moved to Kenya as a refugee at the age of 12. He wrote a book of poetry, "Feelings of Poetry" to process his experiences.

**Liam Powers** is a sophomore Physics major and Mathematics minor. He spends his time listening to Lord Huron and hunting for skinwalkers in the forests and beaches of Michigan.

**Ryan Savage** is an optimist. He believes the world will be back to normal soon. He also believes you liked his story.

**Jessica Schnur** is a Freshman who plans to major in Media and Communication studies. She hopes to go into writing as a career.

**Yakira M. Serrano-Rodriguez** is a from the Class of 2024. Originally from Puerto Rico, she came to Collegeville to pursue a major in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. She is a first-generation college student, as well as a published author.

**Amy Smith** is a first-generation student at Ursinus currently undeclared but intending to be an Environmental Studies major. When she is not busy studying, she enjoys all different forms of art.

**Marie Sykes** is a freshman English and astrophysics double major. As a Navy Brat, she lived in eight different places before Ursinus but if you want the easy answer, she's from California.

**Amanda Weber** is a junior East Asian Studies major with minors in History and English. She is currently taking Japanese classes with the goal of working as a professional translator.

**Leo Cox** is a freshman English major with a minor in Creative Writing.

**Kayla Weil** is a senior student, a part of the class 2021. She is an English major from Norristown, PA. Her passions include writing and reading, singing, photography, and animal rescue.

**Vanessa Worley** is a sophomore biology major and is thrilled that 2021 is a Brood X cicada year.

**Colleen Murphy** is a sophomore English major who believes the COVID quarantine is the best thing to ever happen to introverts.

**Rimsha Maryam** is a freshman BCMB major with a minor in Biostatistics. When in doubt, she can usually be found in the nearest library. Currently, her room tends to be the “library” but without the books or the solitude.

**Amelia Kunko** is a freshman at Ursinus College. Amelia enjoys writing, drawing, playing guitar, and watching movies in her free time.

**Liam Worcheck** is a Junior English and Philosophy double major. He was happy to act as the editor for the Visual Arts section this year.

**Ella Spencer** has been writing since a young age, when her stories consisted of stuffed animals and deep-sea mermaids. She’s not sure how much has changed since then.

**Isabel Wesman** is a sophomore Politics major from St. Louis, Missouri. She enjoys spending time with friends, traveling, drawing, photography, and has an affinity for Russian dwarf hamsters.

**Benjamin Tobias** is a freshman at Ursinus College.

**Val Eichler** (they/them) is a senior English major and Education minor from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In their spare time, you can find them hiding in their room, eating Wawa mac and cheese.

**Chandrasekhar Palepu** is a Psychology and Neuroscience major who hopes to go to medical school. He finds writing in third person very difficult and hopes this bio doesn’t sound too weird.

**Aviva Schuh** is a 19-year-old writer, artist and musician from just outside Philly, PA and a sophomore majoring in English and Psychology.

**Anastasia Dziekan** is a Junior English major with minors in Creative Writing and Education. She is also a magician and the vice president of Lit Soc. We cannot confirm that she is a vampire, but we strongly suspect it.