

Bent Pine

Central Lakes College

Volume 2 2021



Convolutions | **CLC OPEN COLLABORATION**



BENT PINE

A Journal of Art and Writing

Central Lakes College

Brainerd, Minnesota

2021

Made possible through Cultural Arts and Club funding from the CLC Student Life Committee, along with significant contributions from the CLC English Department and Verse Like Water poetry program. The CLC Foundation was also instrumental in starting this project in 2020.

INTRODUCTION and ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Bittersweet is defined as pleasure accompanied by suffering or regret. It is a term that is often used when someone is sad to see something come to an end. While this term seemed appropriate to label my feelings as I began this letter, I do not believe that it is quite accurate. I will feel proud; I will feel hope; I will feel curiosity; but I will not feel regret or suffer from having experienced this journey.

I am proud of the effort my fellow peers and my amazing advisor poured into this project. They have been the most incredibly resilient group of people I have ever had the pleasure of working with. Through the laughs, the frustration, and the Zoom fatigue, the Bent Pine Journal Club has created a legacy that will inspire the CLC community for many years to come. I am hopeful that the legacy that this group helped create will continue to evolve into something that becomes legendary. But most importantly, I am curious to watch the direction that future Bent Piners will take the journal in and how their interest in the humanities will evolve over time.

Our society has been tested to lengths beyond our wildest imaginations. This nation has endured lockdowns, uncertainties, and for many, loss. As readers, I think you will find that this year's journal reflects the feelings of hope, frustration, and the sheer resilience that the CLC community has exhibited over the past year.

To those that contributed to the journal, we commend and thank you for your bravery. Without your willingness to put your personal reflections on display, there would be no journal!

Desirae Rhodes
President of the Bent Pine Journal Club
Associate of Arts & Honors Program, 2021

After its first debut in the 1960s and early '70s, the Bent Pine journal returned fifty years later, emerging at the dawn of a worldwide pandemic in the spring of 2020. Now, in our second year of building this journal from remote workspaces and virtual meeting rooms, there is hope as people dream of a sweet summer and a fresh start.

Art serves humanity during a crisis. And art is birthed from crises too. The Bent Pine Journal Club is excited to share our second issue with you—full of visual art and writing from students, staff, and faculty at CLC.

Many people have made this possible. On behalf of the Bent Pine Journal Club, I offer a big thank-you to each of the following:

Central Lakes College Student Life Committee, Erich Heppner, and Student Senate. The English Department—Jeff, Leane, Ryan, Kate, Matt, Adam, James, Lori-Beth, and Julie. Leon Dahlvang, Sarah Gorvin, and the Graphic Design program. President Hara Charlier, Vice President Joy Bodin, Liberal Arts Dean Martha Kuehn, and all of the administrators at CLC who have been so supportive of this project. Kenn Dols, Chris Bremmer, and Jessie Perrine for help in promoting the Bent Pine. Mark Ambroz and the Videography program for live-streaming our event. Casey Hochhalter and Bruce Fuhrman of the Art Department. The Honors Program, Adam Marcotte, and Kate Porter for encouraging students to lead. The originators of the Bent Pine, including former advisors Joseph Plut, John Hassler, Evelyn Matthies, Verne Nies, and Rick Hill.

And I thank the members of the club from the bottom of my heart, for their time, commitment, enthusiasm, and belief in this project—Desirae Rhodes, Olivia Jackson, Miranda Ostlund, Kaleigh McCoy, Shay Johnson, Samantha Mrazek, Elena Uhlenkamp, and Chris Bremmer. Desirae, thank you for standing up to volunteer for this big job—you rocked it. Olivia, thank you for sticking with us and inspiring us with your profound artistic talent. Miranda, thank you for your graphic design expertise and always-ready attitude and punctuality. Kaleigh, thank you for your consistent interest in the project. Thank you to my colleague, Chris Bremmer, for offering your professional expertise. Shay, Sam, and Elena, thank you for joining us in year two—your intelligent and positive contributions helped us to ensure a second issue of the journal.

I will miss all of my club members as they now graduate and move on to other schools, jobs, and projects. You will be remembered. And I look forward to meeting the next crew of Bent Piners, who will, as Desirae said, carry the journal forward in new and exciting ways.

Brandy Lindquist
Bent Pine Journal Club Advisor
English Instructor, CLC

THE BENT PINE JOURNAL TEAM

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Kaleigh McCoy, Shay Johnson, Samantha Mrazek, Elena Uhlenkamp, and

Chris Bremmer.

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Mission Statement:

We are a team of creative students with backgrounds in various mediums of art. Our mission is to shine a spotlight on the artistic spirit of our CLC community. The Bent Pine is an outlet for any shy artist, developing writer, or proud poet. We want to celebrate and publish the imaginative works of students, staff, and faculty to illuminate the Brainerd Lakes Area. Together we hope to create something that encourages self-expression and a shared sense of belonging—through Art.

THE BENT PINE JOURNAL TEAM

FACULTY SELECTION AWARDS

Literature:

Chloe Hawks

“Green Eyes”

Samantha Mrazek

“Ash and Dust”

Torii Nienow

“Hands”

Visual Arts:

Alena Rehberger

Maze Runner

Kayleigh Horn

The Spirited Stallion

Sarah Gorvin

Compass

Cover:

Daniel Emilfork Study

Olivia Jackson

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FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

Daniel Emilfork Study | **OLIVIA JACKSON**



Compass | **SARAH GORVIN**



FACULTY SELECTION AWARDAsh and Dust | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

*All words in **italics and bold** are lyrics by Imagine Dragons from their song, “Radioactive”.*

MAY 2020

*Welcome to the new age, to the new age
Whoa, oh, oh, oh, oh, whoa, oh, oh, oh, I'm radioactive, radioactive*

The heavy gas mask stung against welts on her face, formed after days of use at a time. She could do nothing but stand, sweat, cry, and watch as the last of her friends took their final breath. He fell silent and still, six feet in front of her. Forced to stay at her distance, she fell to her knees, and she wept. They were all gone.

TWO MONTHS EARLIER

All systems go, the sun hasn't died

“Our flight home was cancelled.”

The class groaned in unison in the middle of the Baltimore Airport in Baltimore, Maryland on March 14th, 2020. The girl standing in the middle of the crowd dropped her backpack and her shoulders, a yawn escaping for the fifth time that minute. Running on five hours of sleep each night this week, she could have collapsed on the spot—though, then she would feel the need to wipe hand sanitizer all over herself and take ten showers.

One of the chaperones leading their trip waved them to sit and wait while they figured out what to do, so she complied, all but collapsing in the nearest chair. Her classmates muttered complaints and questions around her, but she assured them that they would surely find a ride home. There would be a way.

After hours of waiting and hoping, it was looking like they would not get back home. All

Ash and Dust | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

transportation had been put on hold, starting in the D.C. area and spreading west like wildfire. Their group was put up into a nearby hotel with terrible carpets and dimly-lit hallways for the night. At least, it was only supposed to be for the night, but one night turned to two, and two turned into three, and on the fourth day, the first one got sick.

It started with a small cough. Of course, at any inclination of any sickness, people were stuck into the basement of the hotel, closed off specifically to quarantine possible carriers. The moment the girl's classmate coughed a little too long and slightly raggedly, they were whisked out of sight. Their roommates, three others, were told to stay in their room and not to come out. Security guards in hazmat suits were stationed outside of their door as well as every other door in the hallway.

They were forced to pass their time with whatever they had on hand. The girl's roommates took most of their time to call their family and friends back home and update them on the situation. She stared out the window, trying to ignore the quiet sobs and blowing of noses coming from the others in her room. Dwelling would do her no good, she knew, and she continued to tell herself that it would get better.

Out the window, she could see down onto the town of Baltimore. Usually-bustling streets stood nearly empty, and cars sat scattered and abandoned. She heard a scream in the distance, even through her window, and her head snapped up, trying to see the source it came from. Nothing came across her vision except smoke and more people in hazmat suits, coming through each shop on the block, she presumed to search for more people. Her stomach churned.

She pulled the curtains shut.

Deep in my bones, straight from inside

This is it, the apocalypse

With most hospitals overrun or shut down, the group sequestered in their hotel was forced to fend for themselves. Most people did not want to get near whoever was infected, which

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

Ash and Dust | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

left them alone in their suffering. She could hear their moans of pain and cries of loneliness as she tried to sleep at night, shivers wracking her body when the heater went out at 2am. The networks had stopped broadcasting, so she relied on her phone for assistance. When the data networks went down, she knew she had to find some other way of communication.

They had not been allowed out of their rooms for weeks, but she could not bear to sit in the dark any longer. She found the warmest pair of jeans she could find, her least nice shirt, and her jacket. A scarf wrapped around her nose and mouth served as a makeshift mask; she laced up her boots as tight as they would go.

She slowly, slowly, slowly opened her door, just a crack. The men in hazmat suits were long gone, off to fend for themselves, she guessed, or on another, more important assignment. Her boots weighed her down as she trudged down the empty hall, trying to block out the whimpering of the sick and dying as she passed. She had no idea which of her friends were still healthy, or even, still alive.

The stairwell was eerily quiet and deserted. Each step she took sounded like a gunshot, and she shuddered. Gray walls closed in on her as she made her way down one flight, then another, then another. How far up were they? She could barely remember what life looked like outside of their room.

Stepping into the lobby made her freeze in her tracks. It was completely deserted. The front desk was bare, stripped of any indication that life had once existed there. Paintings hung sideways on the walls; glass lay shattered on the floor every few feet. Chairs were overturned, tables thrown at odd angles, and the sliding glass doors were cracked and smeared with something she did not want to identify.

At her feet lay a gas mask. She kneeled to pick it up, brushing off the layer of dust that covered the filters on both sides. They had been abandoned here, she realized. They had been forgotten; left to fend for themselves in whatever way they could. She was the only one out. She was the only one who could get what they needed.

Rising to her feet, she threw her scarf to the ground. The orange flowers looked terribly cruel against the broken glass and dirt-smeared, once-white tile. She pulled the mask over her nose, taking a slow, deep breath in. The filters rattled. Her hair fell loose from her hairband, and she cast the elastic, a piece of her old life, aside.

I'm waking up
ONE MONTH EARLIER

I raise my flags, don my clothes
It's a revolution, I suppose

“Time: eight fifty-three. Date: April one-four. Year: two-zero-two-zero. Railyard three, new shipment. Prepare for violence.”

The radio crackled as she adjusted the antenna so as to not lose the little signal she got in her room. Her roommates were long-gone. She had cried out the feelings of her loss long ago; she had brought their bodies to the river and let them float away, unable to hug anyone still left as they all stood ten feet apart from each other and wept silently. Afterwards, nobody had spoken. She had not had a conversation outside of necessities for two and a half weeks. She did not plan to.

It sounded as if railyard three was her destination for the day. Others had offered to go with her in the past, but she insisted on going alone so many times that her once-classmates, now nearly-strangers, had stopped asking. She knew it was safest alone, and also easier to get what she needed. If need be, she could grab-and-run, which was difficult to do in a big group.

She told herself this instead of accepting that, really, she just wanted to detach herself from others as much as humanly possible. There had been too much loss already, and she could not allow herself to give into emotional distress. Surviving was her priority. Surviving, and keeping others alive as well as she could. There was still hope, she reminded herself. The numbers were growing every day, but surely, there had to be something on its way to fix it. Whenever she began to feel hopeless, she would clutch the necklace at her throat—a souvenir she bought a month ago on their trip. It seemed like so much longer that she had lifted the small, circular diamond off of the rack and decided she had to have it. It was a reminder to her of the life that existed before the eternal hell that seemed to be repeating for her. A reminder that there could still be a way out.

Her wardrobe had changed to whatever she could find in the abandoned stores in the city. She found that cargo pants, combat boots, t-shirts, and bomber jackets were the most versatile

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

Ash and Dust | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

pieces of clothing in this situation. Those were the clothes she tugged on and laced up before slipping on her worn gas mask. She winced at the sore skin the outline pressed against; a result of constant use.

Over the weeks, she had learned to adapt and create makeshift supplies for herself to make her jobs easier. Now, she slipped the radio into a pack at her side she had dug out of the back of an eerie JC Penney so she could continue to listen if need be; she tucked a sheathed knife into her right combat boot for easy access in case there was an emergency (which there had been, in the past, so she had learned to be prepared); slung her empty backpack (ironically, Hello Kitty designed) over her worn shoulders; and holstered the pistol she had learned to use quite well all on her own.

Her walk out of the building was the same every time. She descended the staircase, every step echoing off of the tall, barren walls. Long ago she had swept up the broken glass shards enough to make herself a path to the door, on which she untied the knot in the rope holding it closed. She did not trust outsiders to stay away as they should. Bracing herself, she grunted as she pried open the sliding glass doors, the squeaking making her cringe and resist the urge to grip at her ears.

As she stepped out into the gray outside, she heard a train whistle far in the distance. Railway three. The radio at her side was silent, so without any other instruction, she pulled the door closed behind her and set off on foot across the road.

The air was still, which was something she had not felt before. Since the world had turned to chaos, the air had been calmer than it ever had been, which she found to be the definition of cruel irony. It was chilly out, and it stung her face, making her eyes water. She adjusted the mask tighter against her mouth. The filters rattled; her grip tightened on the gun at her hip. A newspaper flew across the street, and she bent down to sweep it up, squinting at the faded ink. The date read March 13th, 2020. **COVID PANDEMIC TURNING DEADLY**, the headline read. A laugh wrenched out of her lips.

Her path to the railyard was always treacherous for the reason that she had to avoid so many pairs of eyes on her way. Many did not have the luxury of shelter and found it under bridges and awnings, on benches, and inside makeshift blanket tents. She could feel all of their eyes on her, on the radio strapped to her hip, also something hardly anyone had the access to.

Without realizing, she ended up running past these areas many times, not realizing how hard she was pushing until she nearly collapsed from lack of breath.

But she never took her mask off.

The railyard was the one functioning asset in her immediate area. Trains came in and out every week or two, ran by people who she never saw, and never cared to. Those who had access to a radio with a broadcasting signal knew when these shipments came in and would gather to grab-and-go. Sometimes they got violent. Sometimes they did not.

That day, they did. She approached Railway Three cautiously, her finger sliding the safety to “OFF” on her pistol. Never would she kill someone, but she had good aim. Legs or arms were usually the victims of her shot, but only when necessary.

As she approached the open train car, a group of leather-clad figures stood from where they sat next to the large metal door. Through the door, she could see piles of rations and toiletries. She tried her best to keep her breathing steady, but she could hear it incredibly clearly through the rattling filters that did nothing to conceal her nervous inhales and exhales. She could see their eyes. They were dark.

“There is plenty,” she told them in a clipped tone. Her barrel stayed pointed down, but her hands were tight, and her finger hovered over the trigger. Fleetingly she wondered if she’d remembered to load it last night. A knot formed in her stomach.

The figures said nothing. Taking this as a green light, she stepped around them, at a fair distance, and slid off her backpack. Her right hand held the gun; her left unzipped the pack. Quickly she glanced at the pile to her left, just long enough to get a glimpse of what she needed. The figures had not moved when she looked back at them.

But she did not miss the flash of silver under a ripped sleeve. She was not the only one armed. Showing no indication she had seen, she slowly filled her pack with only what she needed—some bread, water, a roll of paper towels, and soap.

It was not until she had zipped up and slid on the pack that she saw the pistol she had seen flash under the figure’s sleeve now pointed at her. The figure’s voice was quiet. “Don’t come back.”

Her heart beat so fast she was afraid it was going to explode. “I have been coming here for months.”

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

Ash and Dust | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

“Your time here is done. Find another.”

Her knuckles were white on her gun, but she did not want to raise it and cause alarm, or worse, the figure to shoot. “There is no other.”

The gun clicked.

With a start, she realized the figure was out of bullets. It gave her the time she needed to point and shoot at the figure’s foot, who let out a blood-curdling scream and dropped to their knees. When their posse began to move and defend, she moved only from adrenaline. A shot to one’s shoulder. One got it in the thigh. One got too close, and she ducked before pulling her knife out of its sheath and slicing across the front of their thin jacket. Their eyes went wide before collapsing.

Then she turned, and she ran. Back and forth, in a zig-zag, her breath gasping in her head, the filters going RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE. Her boots pumping, slamming on the ground. Her eyes squinted against the wind generated by the speed she was going. The tears being swept away from the wind instead of going down her face. Run. Run.

We'll paint it red to fit right in

PRESENT (MAY 2020)

*I'm waking up to ash and dust
I wipe my brow and I sweat my rust*

Her rounds consisted of knocking on each door, never knowing which was still occupied, and speaking from the outside to ask if they needed anything. She usually had a stock to dispense out of, but there were so few of them left that necessities hardly seemed necessary any more. Many felt as if they were only biding their time. Many decided it was worth it to be with others for their last days. She could not make those decisions, but she had long ago banished any who made that decision from the premises. After what she had worked to build,

she could not afford another infection.

That is why she had moved out of the ventilated building and into the empty drugstore across the barren street. The ones who stayed in their hotel knew the risk of the ventilated and circulated air. Some took initiative to leave and attempt to find their own way, or perhaps their way back home, even though this was nearly impossible; some decided to take that risk and stay. She would not do so. Out of old shelves and supplies, she had built herself her own home, barricading the door when she was not out. Nobody was allowed in, ever.

Now she sat on the counter with her back against the wall, one leg dangling off the side, the other knee bent up in front of her. She picked at the rips on her jeans, entertaining herself by attempting to tear each individual thread of fabric. The rounds that day had been particularly quiet; she had seen unknown figures in hazmat suits—for the first time since the beginning of their quarantine—filtering out with body bags. She did not stop to think who they could have been. The people in suits barely gave her a glance, perhaps seeing the way she casually held her gun and was not afraid to make eye contact. She did not want whatever they had to offer. She did not trust them. She trusted no one.

The days had lost meaning to her. The only way she ever knew the date was from her small, hand-held, faithful radio that was now sitting under her tented leg as she worked at the slowly-growing hole in her stained jeans. Today, the machine had told her it was May one-four. It was hard to be sure, but she thought perhaps then it had been two months on the dot. The necklace stayed resting at her throat, now constantly smeared in the ash that was everywhere. It was slowly losing its shine, just as she was.

The radio spoke again. “Three-two-eight million dead. One-eight-zero-five-six sick. One-nine-four-two accounted for. Two unaccounted for.”

Two unaccounted for.

Two unaccounted for.

She knew she was one, but she did not know who the other could be.

A loud scream broke her from her thoughts. Quickly, she jumped down, slipping her radio into her satchel, pulling up her mask, and grabbing her gun all in practiced movements. She crept towards her door, tugging the knot to loosen the door handle.

Slowly, it revealed a sliver of light from the outside. She allowed herself to cautiously look.

FACULTY SELECTION AWARDAsh and Dust | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

One of her closest classmates had collapsed in the street. How they got out of the hotel, she did not understand, until she saw the broken glass in the street and the trail of blood leading to her collapsed peer. He was coughing so hard she was waiting for his lungs to shoot out of his mouth. Cracked lips, clammy hands, pale skin. She took one step closer, measuring the distance in her mind. Nineteen feet.

He caught sight of her, and gasped, as if trying to restrain oncoming, inevitable coughing. It was unsuccessful. His eyes were cloudy and far away. She wondered if he was even seeing her, or if he was seeing an image that was not there.

She approached again. Ten feet. The close contact, even though it was not close, made her hands shake. Every instinct in her body told her to run, to leave, to get away from the sickness in the air around him. The wind gusted particularly hard, whipping her hair into her eyes and whistling in her ears.

Two unaccounted for, she thought.

The heavy gas mask stung against welts on her face, formed after days of use at a time. She could do nothing but stand, sweat, cry, and watch as the last of her friends took their final breath. He fell silent and still, six feet in front of her. Forced to stay at her distance, she fell to her knees, and she wept. They were all gone.

One unaccounted for.

It was her.

When she found the strength to stand, the street was once again empty. There was no sight of the human life that had just been there moments before. She could feel the hollowness of the hotel in front of her where her class had once resided; no matter how hard she tried, she could not ignore the husk of her classmate in front of her; she realized, suddenly, she had nothing to stay for. Her focus had been keeping the final links to her life alive and well. Now they were gone. She was the only unaccounted for.

For months, she had been avoiding the men in the hazmat suits, but now she had no choice. She could not survive out on her own without a purpose.

Leaving her makeshift drugstore apartment was no difficult endeavor. She packed up what little she had left of her life, which was truly little. Most of her clothes had been either distributed to those who needed them, destroyed by various mishaps, or no longer fit her

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correctly. The misfit outfits she had scraped together were few. She packed the ones she did not have on.

The few food rations made their way to her pack as well. That was all she had, so, like always, the radio went to her side, her knife in her boot, and her gun in its holster.

The trek to the airport was long, but she barely noticed. It had been months since she had seen these surroundings. Ruin, dirt, and ashes covered every surface she could see. She stepped around broken syringes, newspapers, glass, old masks, torn blankets...

A graveyard of plane wrecks and upturned boxes and loading docks greeted her when the airport emerged around a corner. She climbed over the sideways wings, catching a glimpse of the name on the side of one. *DELTA 329*. The flight they had arrived on.

She kept going.

Getting into the facility was no problem; a few shots to the glass and it fell through at her feet. A jagged piece still attached gave her arm a nasty scrape as she slid through; she barely felt it. Inside, the floor was caked with a thick blanket of dust and ash, as was everything, it seemed. Her boots left dark footprints in the dirt behind her. The thought that nobody would see them made her grin for some reason.

When she had trekked through the entire building and finally found the opposite doors, a parking lot spread across her field of vision. She counted two cars that remained there. The closest one was a blue Jeep; she hopped in and felt for keys. As if in a storybook, she found them hidden under the visor.

The roar of the engine brought her back to life. She did not spare another glance back at the city she was leaving behind. Behind was the past; behind was ruin and pain; behind was somewhere her friends were buried; behind was where she never wanted to be again. Her diamond necklace lay on the dash, rattling in time with the engine.

The world had collapsed, but she had not.

*I'm radioactive,
radioactive*

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

Hands | **TORII NIENOW**

A pair of age kissed hands are held out to me
Their wise voice asks me for a dance as a younger pair of hands plays a
ballad on the piano

Her long fingers sing of waltzes and World War II
My hands connect to hers as we dance the tune of time

My grandfather's calloused hands are out reaching to me
His worn palms call for me as I cling to a tree branch
The same hands that held tools to support his family with hours in the fields
and critiqued my father's hands for being too soft
Stories of his life are shared from his swollen knuckles with the gruff sound
of a Minnesotan accent

My mother's patient hands clutch onto mine as she leads me up a steep hill
Her nimble fingers clip my bicycle helmet beneath my chin and she places
my feet on the pedals

With her hands on top of mine we race down the hillside
Wind rushes past my ears with the adventures of our time together

I look down at my hands
Light blue veins run under my skin
In them travels the blood and memories of my ancestors
Thousands of unwritten stories swing between my fingertips on a
playground of possibilities with games of my future

Hands come in every shape, size, and color
Each pair as beautiful and powerful as the previous
Memories sing and dance in harmony with our stories
The hands of neighbors and strangers linked in unity and empathy with the
strength to climb every hill that stands before us in a bright future



Green Eyes | **CHLOE HAWKS**

His shelves were full of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Rumi, and Charles Bukowski. His desk was covered in scribbled Post-It notes, Bit-O-Honey wrappers, and empty mugs of tea. This is what I noticed the first few times that I subbed in his classroom. These were the only details that I knew about the man whose face I'd never seen.

As I gradually began to substitute for his high school English classes, I learned more about him. I had his students and his personal belongings to thank for this. It ranged from what he did and didn't like, all the way from no fringes on a notebook paper, no red pen ever because that was his grading color, no using the word can't in his class, and students can eat all the snacks they want as long as the trash goes in the bin. The CDs in a stack on the shelf told me which ones he actually listened to because they were the ones that were on top and without dust. I learned that the pristine book on his desk was never the one he was reading. No, it was the weathered copy beside his mug with dog-eared pages and penciled notes. His drawers told me another story with their contents: boxes of teas ranging from peach to vanilla macaron, journals filled to the brim with ink, adult coloring books, and books on Van Gogh and Monet, hinting at his artsy background. His students slowly warmed up to me, and through them, so did he.

At this point, I'd only been subbing off and on for Mr. Keats the last five months. He always left precise and concise lesson plans. The books were where he said they'd be. The webpages he mentioned were bookmarked on his desktop. The teacher's copy of the textbook and current group books were on his desk. At the beginning, his desk looked like a professional organizer had gotten their hands on it. Slowly, as I came to sub for him more, it grew messier, though I kept it tidy during my appearances.

As the first few months passed and I became one of the few subs in his room, I started to find notes. They weren't just any notes. They were more than the straightforward sub notes for the day's agenda. No, they weren't that simple. I can still remember the first one I found on a Post-It note:

So, Ms. Watson, do you like peanut butter on your waffles or syrup?

It took me by surprise, but nonetheless, I answered his call. Each time, I'd find a contrasting pen color and scrawl my answer underneath his. Then, I'd leave it somewhere where he would find it the next day. They were one-liners at the beginning and always interesting. Walking to his classroom from my car on those mornings, I'd fill with excitement at the anticipation of finding the next one. Sometimes, it took me the entire day just to find where he

had hidden them. In the closet. In a nook in a drawer. Under the chair. On the backside of one of his books. Hidden in plain sight amongst his current choice of notes and lists. They never failed to spark a smile on my lips, whether it was confused, astounded, or humored.

Guitar or piano?

FRIENDS or The Simpsons?

Vanilla or Chocolate?

Would you rather become a superhero or a wizard?

The Beatles or the Rolling Stones?

Slowly, the questions became more personal, and more than just “this or that.”

His questions became longer, and so did my answers.

What was the moment that made you decide to become a teacher?

Is Donny a good student for you, or is he lying to me about that?

What color are your eyes?

What book/film do you believe had the largest impact on you while growing up?

What is the one meal you always order at a restaurant?

Do you have a family?

Should I splurge and buy a new desk chair?

What book should I buy for my classroom you think that I need to have? Why?

Why don't you have a classroom of your own?

When is your birthday?

Star Wars or Lord of the Rings?

They were never a chore or tedious. No, they were fun and it felt as if I saw a little sliver of who he really was with each note. After a while, I started to write and leave my own notes for him to answer. At first, many of them were similar to the ones he had left, because I had wanted to hear his responses, too. I wanted to get to know who this Mr. Keats was that I was hearing so much about.

The newest one stares back at me, his half-cursive registering in my eyes.

What's your favorite part about subbing in my classroom? Don't say the students, that's what everybody says.

Giggling to myself, I reach over to his Pink Floyd mug to pull out a green pen. I take a moment to think of an answer. This time, I found the note peeking out from behind the smart

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whiteboard. The sounds of the end of a school day tickle at my ears as I scribble down an answer. Pressing it to an open square of wood on his desk, I turn back to the royal blue pad of Post-Its. Peeling one off, the green pen hovers over the paper, but I can't bring myself to write the question I've been wanting to know all along. He didn't have a Facebook or an Instagram that I could find. The high school doesn't have a wall of staff pictures like others I've subbed at. It's late winter, so yearbooks are still a ways off. For all I know, I could have seen him here before in the halls when I subbed in another classroom. Exhaling, I press the pen to the paper before I can convince myself to stop. Unlike the many times before when fear got the best of me.

What do you look like, Mr. Keats?

With a proud but nervous smile, I stick it to the desk, layering the first note on top of my response to today's question. It sticks to my lips as I bend down to reach a hand into my bag. The glossy bag greets my hand, and I pull it out to set down beside the note. A small bag of Bit-O-Honeys. Looking up, my eyes scan the empty classroom. Few footsteps, voices, and lockers slamming trickle in from the halls. I suddenly realize that this is the same view he sees, these are the same sounds he hears, and the same place he sits every day. Well, when he's not away on personal days, sick days, on holiday, and at workshops, hence my appearances. The thought knits something together inside of me, making me feel just that bit more closer to him. Something that's been slowly happening since I first stepped foot in his classroom.

One of the first things that did this was the posters scattered across his walls. A poster from the remake of *The Great Gatsby*, The Beatles' Abbey Road album cover, a cartoon of William Shakespeare, a unifying print of Keith Haring's art, and several posters of quotes from famous books - *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Kite Runner*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Life of Pi*, and even *The Hunger Games*. It delighted me watching him add some of them to the walls during my time here, and I'd been itching to purchase him one as a gift. I'm unsure of what he would like though, and the fear of failure has held me back from doing so.

A *bleep!* catches my attention. Casting my eyes to the dormant desktop screen, I wiggle the mouse. A red circle has appeared on the title of a tab opened to my email. Clicking over to it from a YouTube video he had me show the class, I find that I have a new message. At the sight of who sent it, my heart skips a beat:

From: Oliver Keats

Hi. I'm guessing you're still sitting at my desk. Now, that's a funny thought... I wanted to ask you a question while I remembered. I have to go out of town on Friday for a funeral. Believe me, I wouldn't go if I didn't have to. I apologize for it being short notice, but I thought I'd ask if you'd like to take it before I posted it to the sub database. Please let me know either way by tonight, so it has a few days to sit on the website to be claimed. Also, I wanted to say thanks for everything you do. My students really love you, and it makes me wonder what I'm missing. Enjoy your night!

Thanks,

Oliver Keats

"Keep your face always toward the sunshine - and shadows will fall behind you. - WW"

A smile warms my cheeks as I finish reading his words, and the familiar poem that ends every email of his. Quickly, I type up a response to him, agreeing to take the job on Friday with a thank you. A new email appears in my inbox shortly after from another colleague, which occupies my time before losing myself in my thoughts again.

Perhaps my favorite addition in his classroom is the Fender acoustic sitting on a stand in the corner. Of course, I've yet to see it move in the last five months. The stories his students have told me, in a way, have given it legs of its own in my mind. Much like the little notes we've been leaving for each other, something I already dread ending.

It was a Wednesday. I'm convinced that Mrs. Noble's Pre-Calc class is surely the bane of my existence. I keep cursing myself for taking sub assignments for math classes. Seeing that I'm terrible at the subject, I vowed to never take one of her assignments again, but the bills have to be paid somehow.

I found my respite in the cozy staff lounge. Couches lined two of the walls, along with an arrangement of tables on the other side of the room. Upon walking in, I find that one of the ancient history teachers has nodded off again on the plaid couch. Otherwise, the room is empty, and all to myself. If that didn't make me happy before, the assortment of food on the counter definitely does.

Voices float in through the open door as the plastic lid to the cupcakes opens with a pop! "Ah, looks like you got the last chocolate one. I was saving that one for me," a voice comments from behind me.

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Turning, I find a tall man in his late 20's walking in my direction. "Oh, I'm sorry, you can have it," I volunteer, holding the blue-iced cupcake out for his taking. His blush lips curl up with an amused smile.

Dimples fall neatly into his cheeks covered with thick stubble. Its deep brown color matches that of the short coiffed curls atop his head. Misty green eyes stare back at me in the middle of his round but sharp face.

"I'm only joking. Go ahead and have it. I already had one earlier. They're quite good actually, but I don't know about the vanilla. I never really cared for the flavor when it comes to cake and ice cream," he comments, passing me to stop at the nearby sink.

"Yeah, I like to forget vanilla exists half of the time," I remark, peeling away the paper liner of the cupcake. Leaning against the counter, I watch his ringed hand grab a red coffee mug from the cabinet.

"So do I. It's rather boring, if I do say so myself."

Nodding to myself, a silence follows his words. The sweetness of the cupcake is shocking when I take a bite. It makes me wonder how I devoured these sugar bombs as a child. A few beeps and a hum from the microwave echo throughout the room while I check my phone.

"Y'know, I haven't seen you here at the school before. Are you new this year or are you a substitute?" he asks, bringing my eyes back to his lean figure. He pulls a yellow square packet from his tight-fitting black slacks, a blush button-down tucked into its waist.

"I started subbing here this year," I answer before taking another bite of the cupcake. Half of it consists of the sickeningly sweet frosting that makes my teeth ache.

"Mmmm, I see. How do you like it so far? Are you a new teacher, is that why you're subbing?"

"Yeah. I went back to school kind of late in the game after doing something else. I figured I'd sub for some experience, because what's another year of waiting by this time?" I comment, observing how he fiddles with his black tie while searching in the refrigerator.

"Well, congratulations. It's a big step to go back to school, especially for something you love. It's a good profession. I've been teaching for seven years, and here at this school for five. Sometimes schools even hire subs they've had when a position opens, so keep your eyes open," he tells me, turning in my direction with a smile and a yogurt in hand.

"Thank you," I say sincerely, returning the smile. "I appreciate the vote of confidence."

"Sure thing. I know it helped lots when I was a newbie. I'll see you around. I have to get

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back to class before my students do first. Have a good one!"

Walking towards me with the steaming cup of tea in his hands, he pats my arm with his other hand on the way out. Nodding at my "thank you," a small "you're welcome" falls from his lips before the door closes behind him. Eating the last bite I can muster of the cupcake, I toss its remains in the bin. A thought worms its way into my mind as I sit down at the table.

I wonder who that guy was? And is he married, because God, he was handsome.

The smell of orange essential oil greets me when I step foot into his classroom the next time. The state of his desk made me frown and want to scratch the itch to clean it. I resisted and quickly forgot once his students began to find their desks.

Another day of seven classes came and went. Two classes of Introduction to Creative Writing, three classes of American Literature, and two classes of World Literature. Amusing YouTube videos broke up the monotony of the day, and those of his students. The lesson notes he left for me had become more concise as the months have passed, and as we learned from each other. His dish of Bit-O-Honeys on his desk had begun to dwindle, the one that he's kept stocked for my appearances. I'm just glad that he's put the bag I left to good use.

All throughout my day, I had been looking for his newest note, but this time it wasn't in any of his usual spots. After correcting some quizzes from today, I finally found it in the bottom left-hand drawer of his mahogany desk. Stuck to a tall can of Coke, my favorite drink of choice.

I'm sorry it's warm, although I'm not sure how you like to drink it. I just find warm soda to be rather nasty. The answer to your question is I have brown hair, I'm rather tall, and I like to dress up. Is that good enough for you? Now, what do you look like, Hallie?

My insides melt at the sight of his answer, but a groan follows at the vagueness of it. Off the top of my head, I realize that there are at least ten male teachers here at this school who are tall with brown hair, maybe more. I know that because I've seen them in the staff lounge or in the halls. The thought only grows worse when I lose count of how many teachers there are at this school. *Yeah, that sure helps a whole lot.* Annoyed, I pluck a pen from the mug and answer his question with as little detail as possible. *Two can play at this game*, I silently think with a sigh.

If you could have a jam session with any musician, dead or alive, who would it be, Keats?

Sticking the new note where its corner peeks out from under his tabletop calendar, my eyes return to the Coke. It's undeniable how I feel a little less perturbed at him just at the sight

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of it. *Only a little bit, that is.* Sure, I've subbed for a countless number of teachers at this school, and more so in this school district. A few of them are even friends or relatives, but I'd never connected with one before like I have with Keats. I just wish more than anything that I could find out what he looks like and what he's really like, but that's rather impossible with this whole subbing gig. It only drives me crazier wanting to know the other side of this fascinating human being.

There he was, snoring on the couch again, TV remote in hand. The weather channel is playing, surprising me very little. Snickering, I yank open the door to the refrigerator. After retrieving my striped lunchbox, I place the container of leftovers in the microwave. A laugh is heard over my shoulder, and when I turn, I find "Green Eyes" from the other day.

Tittering as the door closes behind him, he says, "No fail, John's always passed out on the couch."

"I know, it's every time I'm here. Maybe he should just retire already so he can take his naps at home. Then, maybe we could watch something on the TV for once," I comment, shaking my head.

"Nah, he loves it too much. I don't see him leaving anytime soon," he remarks, walking past me to search the shelves of the fridge. "What're we having today? You couldn't find any cupcakes this time?"

"No, those ones were too sweet anyways. They gave me a stomachache," I complain with a grimace. The beep of the microwave interrupts my thoughts.

"Mmmmm, I don't know. I thought they were pretty good." Rubbing his tummy, he pulls a breathy laugh from my lips.

The steaming container of leftovers almost burns my hands, making me dread trying to eat it within the next 10 minutes. Setting up for a lesson in Mr. Jackson's classroom was a pain, making me wonder why I take any sub jobs besides Keats' anymore.

"No free food for us today," he pouts at my side, closing the fridge door before venturing to the vending machine in the corner. My eyes drift to his outfit of choice today—a white button-down topped with a buttoned vest the shade of ochre, all tucked into brown slacks.

"That's why you pack lunch. I thought you'd know the drill by now, since you said you've been teaching for a while."

"I do, but sometimes I forget. You're already ahead of me with that part, it seems," he

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who doesn't have a name answers with a short laugh. Sliding a leather wallet from his pocket, I observe as he types in a number before I sit down at the table. "Who are you subbing for today then?"

"Jackson on the west side, which I'm quickly regretting."

"Ugh, I never cared for science much. Where were you a few weeks ago when I last saw you?" he questions, sliding out a chair across from me. An assortment of food hits the table with a slap before him.

"Upstairs in Noble's math class. Remind me to never sub for her again, because I can't understand Pre-Calc for the life of me. I never could in high school, so I don't know why I thought I could now," I chuckle. A warmth fills my cheeks at the sight of his lips spreading into an amused smile.

"Yeah, I never cared for math myself. Numbers never made a bit of sense to me. Words were always better," he explains. I find myself nodding along with him, my mouth occupied with a bite of spaghetti and meatballs. "What subject would you like to teach once the year's over and you go searching for a teaching job?"

"Um, probably something in English since that's my focus area. Dabbling in History has been fun, though. I always have a better time subbing in either of those classes," I reveal.

"I see," he replies, his head going up and down. The crinkling of a granola bar wrapper fills the silence between us. Crumbs pepper his chin, but he wipes them away from his thin beard. "How often do you sub here, then?"

"I'd say probably three days a week, but some weeks are four. Otherwise, I sometimes sub over at the middle school."

"Ah, so is your teaching license something like grade eighth through twelfth?" he inquires, picking up the black mug I hadn't noticed he had.

"Yeah, I thought that would give me a good range for those grades. With my experience now, I think I'd like to stay at the high school level, though," I continue, twirling a fork around in the noodles covered in tomato sauce.

"We could always use another good teacher here. You never know what'll happen," he smiles, standing to his feet with his snacks held in his large hand. Returning his smile, he adds his mug to that hand, patting my back once on his way out. "See you next time. Keep your head up, it'll get better."

"Thanks," I automatically respond. When I go to say his name, I find that I'm lost for words,

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because suddenly, I remember that I never knew it. Now, he's already too far away to ask for it.

Shrugging my shoulders, I stab a meatball with my fork, wondering when the next time will be that I'll see him again.

Because, he sure is nice to look at, and he's nicer to me than anybody else here.

Stevie Nicks or John Lennon, it's a tough call. Okay, I'm doing two questions from now on, because you ask such good ones. Who would you jam with then, Watson?

Question #2: What was the last concert you went to?

This time, I found the Post-It before the school day even started. It was on the seat of his chair, making me think he had wanted me to find it right away. I'd feel confident betting he remembered one of the last times when I'd complained about how hard he'd made it. Sometimes, I worry about how excited I get to look for these each time I sub in his classroom. Then, I remember it's only once every few weeks. That can't hurt, can it?

Today, the hallways were louder than they usually were after school. I attributed that to the boys' semifinals basketball game set to be played tonight in the gymnasium. Students couldn't stop talking about it all day, and many of them shared they'd be sticking around after school to attend. Checking my watch, I note that if I leave soon I should have enough time to stop at home to eat dinner before coming back for it, despite deciding to attend at the last minute.

The Sufjan Stevens song floating from his desktop fills the room as I get out books for tomorrow. My hands cramp from the copies of *The Kite Runner* I carry, making me feel grateful again to Keats—Mr. Keats for picking a decent classic for the class to read. Although I'd only read it a few years ago myself, and it broke my heart, I'm excited to sub next time to help his World Lit. class with it.

"Hey, be careful there. You're going to slip and fall with all of those," somebody says from behind me. Sure enough, it distracted me from the mission of bringing the pile of books from the closet to a desk.

Don't I know that voice? Turning my eyes to the doorway, there I find "Green Eyes" walking in with a coat slung over his arm. *Wait a second.*

"I-I'm fine," I stutter, but my actions that follow negate my words. My eyes run over his familiar features, and slowly, the puzzle pieces start to click in my head. Keats? A thought bomb explodes in my head, and the books tumble from my arms. "Crap, I'm sorry."

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Green Eyes | **CHLOE HAWKS**

“You’re okay,” he almost laughs, stopping in front of me. Kneeling down, we both begin to pick up the books, stacking them on top of each other. “Thanks for getting me set up for tomorrow, though. I appreciate it.”

“Mmmhmm,” is all that I can say, because any words that want to come out can’t get past the lump in my throat. One that’s there because of the realization I just had.

Green Eyes and Keats are the same person.

How did I not figure this out sooner?

“So, you must be Ms. Watson, huh?” he giggles, his head bent down as he helps me pick up the books.

“Hallie,” I titter, holding out a hand with a warm smile. He takes it and his handshake is firm. “Surprise,” I admit, and my laugh soon joins his. Before I know it, the both of us can’t stop laughing.

“Oliver,” he returns, dropping my hand. “Here.” Looking up, I find him standing in front of me, holding his hand out for me to take, again. A cozy looking maroon sweater covers his upper half, and blue jeans don the rest. “Fancy meeting you here,” he jokes in between laughs.

“You’re right about that,” I answer, taking his hand again. He helps me to my feet where I smooth down the violet skirt of my dress. “I can’t believe I didn’t connect the dots.”

“You’re not the only one,” Green Eyes comments—I mean, Keats—Oliver. *I still have to keep correcting myself.* I watch as he bends over to grab a stack of books, going to set one on each desk. “But I suppose there wasn’t any way to know.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t find you on Facebook,” I confess, quickly cursing myself for the slip up a few seconds later. Lifting my head from my own pile of books, I find his amused eyes on me from across the room.

“Ah, so you were stalking me online?” he smirks, a delightful laugh following his words.

“No, I wasn’t! You’re just one of the only colleagues I’ve subbed for who I’ve never met.”

My small stack soon disappears. When I return to the pile at the back of the room, so does he.

“So, what do you think? Are you disappointed then?”

“No,” I say automatically, lifting my eyes to the green ones that land on me. His cheeks lined with a neat beard crease with dimples as he smiles.

“Neither am I . . . Ms. Vance Joy fan,” he returns, holding my gaze. The sincerity in his words gets under my skin, going straight to my heart. The sarcastic joke inside of them makes me

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giggle.

Clearing my throat, I look away with what I'm sure are blushing cheeks. Most likely, an entire blushing face. "What are you doing here, anyways, if you were gone for the day?"

"I can't miss the boys' big game, a few of my students are on the team. I thought I'd catch up on emails and grading beforehand, but I didn't know you'd still be here."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was just leaving, anyways," I mutter, my movements stilling.

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm glad that we finally met, it was about time," Oliver insists. I nod before continuing to place a book at each desk. "Wait, you said you were short and all plain in your note. No, you're not, you fibber."

"Oh, like your description was any better," I scoff lightheartedly, setting down a book before grabbing another.

His rich laugh meets my ears, and I can't resist looking over to him. "You didn't give yourself enough credit, y'know," he almost coos. I almost swear that my heart melted into a puddle right then and there. That's if it hadn't done so already when I realized he's "Green Eyes." It's hard to hold back the excitement curling at the edge of my lips. Soon, I run out of books again and when I take a peek at him, so has he.

"Were you going to go?" he questions, and I deal him one back with a confused look. "Go to the game, I mean."

My body feels like jello and that any movement I make would be sloppy. Talk about embarrassing. That's the last thing I want to look like in front of him. With his dazzling smile, adorably dimpled cheeks, and how friendly he's being. Not to mention, the clean citrus scent wafting off of him. A smell I certainly would be okay with smelling for an hour or two—however long a basketball game is.

"Well, Rob around the corner bailed on me, so I have an extra ticket now. Would you like to join me? I was thinking of grabbing a sub from around the corner before. Concession food is always too expensive, and never worth the lines at halftime," he suggests, tucking his hands into the pockets of his jeans. One corner of his mouth climbs up his cheek, making it feel like maybe I'm not alone in these jumbled feelings. Or in the fun I've had carrying on this blind relationship with him.

"Yeah, that sounds like fun. Maybe we could get to know each other a little better than the few sentences Post-It notes can hold."

Slowly, the other corner of his lips curls upwards, making the dimple fall into his cheek

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once again. Nodding, his lips split into a full-fledged smile, singing with a chuckle. “I’d really like that,” he reveals before venturing to the door and shutting off the light. Extending an arm, he waves a hand towards himself.

“Hold on, let me get my things.”

“No rush. It’s not like I’ve waited seven months for this or anything,” he quips. By now, I’m certain that my face resembles a tomato. I just hope that in the muted light, perhaps he won’t notice.

Hurriedly, I slip on my light coat and drape a bag over a shoulder. My eyes catch something as I’m tucking my phone in a pocket. Grabbing one last thing, I turn to find him watching me from the lit doorway.

“What?” he wonders aloud, still with that smile etched onto his face. One I’m fairly sure I could get used to seeing.

“Here,” I tell him, placing the Post-It note in his palm. His fingers dotted with dark hairs brush against mine, just for a second longer than need be.

“Ah, can’t forget this now. Important stuff here.”

“Indeed,” I note, stifling a laugh as the sarcasm floats in the air.

I observe as his eyes flit across the paper holding my cursive, our steps echoing down the empty hallway.

“Hmmm, funny. It says ‘would you like to meet up sometime’ on here,” Oliver reads, casting his twinkling eyes to me. *Green Eyes*. “I was just about to ask you the same thing on my next note. But I had something that would’ve taken the cake for sure.”

“What’s that?” I remark, wondering how that could be. Those thoughts fly out the window when I feel his arm come around my shoulder. A squeal sounds inside of my head, but at least that’s far less embarrassing than doing it out loud.

“I was going to tell you that Tracy across the hall from me is leaving after this year. I may have recommended a certain somebody to the principal to replace her,” he hums, a knowing glint dancing in his eyes as they hover over me. “What do you say to being colleagues instead of being my sub?”

“I think I could get used to that,” I answer, letting a smile take over my entire face.

“So could I.”

Previously published on Wattpad.

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Maze Runner | **ALENA REHBERGER**







A wind of music blows through my mind,
I hum along as it whispers back.

An echoed rhythm of my heart beating,
Keeps the tempo like a drum.

A half step towards success,
Stumbling upon the right keys; a blue moon.

I once played songs of sorrow,
Now the song I play bursts through my veins.

I dream of fields with bees humming,
Wildflowers with hues of blues and purples.

An old couple floats in the sky; I see the future.

A whole step towards success,
I've reached the peak of a mountain; The elevation takes my head for a spin.

My breath becomes shallow like a river,
Listen to my tranquil heart and you'll hear my music.

The Farm | **KAYLEIGH HORN**





ETHIOPIA: MARCH 4TH,
CHALBERG THEATER, NOON

ARRIVE EARLY FOR A SEAT.

Horse | **MARISSA HERNESMAN**





Spring Time | **HANNAH NASH**





The Year was 2020,
when COVID came to rest.
The government closed businesses
and said staying home was for the best.
Schools all went virtual
and working from home became the norm.
Families all were forced to rely on technology,
it became the perfect storm.
It spread upon the earth and caused people to be afraid,
it took the lives of many and others ill it made.
Those around the world, felt COVID's inflicted pain
when the elderly, high risk and the sick became its biggest gain.
As the end of 2020 was finally coming to a close,
people prayed they would soon not experience such woes.
A vaccine had come to be from hard work throughout the year,
and gave a glimpse that perhaps an end to this pandemic was here.
No longer would we live masked in isolation and fear,
but once again we hoped we could hold our loved ones near.



Saguaro | **SARAH GORVIN**





Tree Swing at the Beginning of Summer | **THERESA HARSHA**





Symphony | **KINDRID SANDBERG**

It was a bright and sunny day.

The birds were chirping, the grass was green, and the trees swayed gently in the light breeze. Children played on the playground, the old swings creaking, and the sound of innocent laughter filled the air. A woman jogged alongside her dog, and a young couple held hands and picked wildflowers.

And me? I sat in the shade of an oak tree and watched them all.

People-watching. It was (and is) one of my favorite activities. There's something about how different everyone is, yet so similar to one another. They all think they're so unique, that their individuality is stronger than the mind-numbing uniformity that the rest of the world seems to share. It's like the whole world is a choir, and each person is singing a different note, but somehow, it's all still harmonious.

These were the thoughts that I was contemplating as I watched the world go by without me. Everything was moving along, hurried or calmly, everything in its own way.

But me? I sat in the shade of an oak tree and watched them all.

It all seems mundane, after a while. The people come and go, the sun rises and sets, the moon gazes down upon us with its wise, steady eye, and the stars wink playfully until they are forced to hide when the morning sun shines its fiery light.

One by one, the children left the playground, their joyful cries still seeming to echo across the city park, leaving a hole in the symphony of the world around me. I longed to get up, to join the people in their unconscious composing.

But I sat in the shade of an oak tree and watched them all.

As the people passed me, their eyes filled with pity as they read my sign, but they all passed me without a word in my direction. It was as if I didn't exist at all. Like I blended in with the shadows around me. Like I was invisible. It was frustrating. Who were they to look upon me and judge?

I wanted to call out to them, to tell them my story, to talk about the economy or politics, even to argue about something trivial, but I was worried that I would scare them, looking as I did and all.

So, I sat in silence.

I sat in the shade of an oak tree and watched them all.

A little girl walked up to me. She was only eight, maybe nine years old. She seemed to look right at me, but she was really just reading the sign in front of me. My heart dropped. She

was too young for this, too young to be exposed to what the world does to people whose voice doesn't quite harmonize with the rest.

"Mommy! What happened to her?"

The girl's mother made her way over to us, talking and laughing on her cell, not rushing as most do. When she saw me, when she read my sign, her smile slowly slid off her face. She took her child's hand and they hurried away.

I wish that I had said something, that I had told them it would be alright, that I was okay. But for some reason, my mouth wouldn't make the right sounds.

All I could do was sit under an oak tree, and watch them all.

I wanted to get up and run after them, I wanted to hug the little girl, I wanted to tell the mother that I'm sorry for scaring her, I wanted to be able to do anything but sit under that stupid oak tree and watch the stupid people go about their stupid lives. I wanted to scream and tell them that none of them were special, that none of them were any better than anyone else, that they were all just useless instruments singing a pointless song with no end to the mundanity of the tune! I wanted to scream, to ruin their beautiful harmony, to create such awful dissonance that they would all cover their ears and cry out with horror at the sound. But my voice wouldn't work, my joints wouldn't move, and the song that I had been a part of, the choir, the chorus, the symphony, none of it would reach me. I was an outsider, looking into the consonant homogeneity of the living world.

I couldn't play on a playground, I couldn't jog with my dog, I couldn't hold hands with someone and pick wildflowers. I couldn't join the people enjoying their day in my park.

But I could sit under an oak tree, watching them all.

My sign, the stone covered in moss and crumbling with age, held the words that condemned me to my endless future.

"Here lies Anna Elemond -- 1958-1983 -- Her life cut short by a person who is walking among you."

Please don't walk past me. I've been lonely for so long. You know where to find me.

I am sitting under an oak tree, watching my people walk, and dance, and talk, and sing their wonderful song, unaware of how much they would miss it when all they can do is sit and watch the world compose without them.





“Everything okay?” my best friend Autumn says to me. “Yeah, I’m good,” I reply with a pseudo smile and turn away with a harshly bitten lip. She reads me right away; she knows me. I know her. She is going to ask me something like “oh come on,” or “okay... now what is really up?” But today she didn’t, today she instead asked me to go on a bike ride with her. I accepted with the reality of knowing that she will ask me the questions that needed to be answered. So, our bikes come down and we set sail on the seas of suburbia, never understanding what bond we are creating on these mechanisms of man.

I am zooming. You probably could not have seen me if you were looking, I am fast. I am speed. All my troubles are behind me, I can beat them all if I go fast enough. “Wait up!” said the most amazing friend anyone could ever ask for. But I didn’t listen. My emotion is consuming me, I cannot stop moving, I must go. I must keep riding. I cannot stop. I cannot stop. “Please,” she says, and for that word, from *that* mouth, all fades away. I am slowing down, and we are closing in on each other’s presence, something so powerful—something that can be used for the greatest good, or for some colossal evil. “Autumn, how are *you*?” It is my turn to question, because then it won’t be about me, and I can float. Floating. How stupid am I? I am not stupid. I am a child of God. I cannot see the ground, emotion overcoming. I couldn’t see. What does it mean to be in *love*?

“Benny, please, what’s up?” Here, here, this, this, is what gets my heart... my heart that should only be in one place—the bosom of Christ. I’m spilling the beans. I cannot do it anymore, I cannot stand it to be so near to her but her devotion so far off, twisted between me, her school, or someone else. I thought about thinking about the question what am I thinking? She loves me. She really does love me, but I cannot see. I cannot see that action verb because I choose not to see that action verb. To smile. Where is the smile of Autumn Joy? Where is the smile of Benjiman? Here we are... half a mile into our bike ride of gloom... not seeing each other, but within two feet. Gears are breaking inside of me, and gears are breaking inside of her. I am being selfish, and I want to talk about me and how I can have *her*.

“Benny, *please*, what’s up?” I have no idea what I am doing. “Autumn, it’s just... I can’t,” I say, and I continue to speak. “I, I am scared.” She is scared, it was never me. I was blind, she was giving birth to love. I continue to tell her all the things that don’t make sense to my teenage mind, and she doesn’t know what to do with all this knowledge, this destructive knowledge of anti-altruism. The Creator notifies me of this foul of mine and my demeanor changes; I choose altruism.

It was too late. I am looking over at the lovely friend that God bestowed into my life and I see the walls crumbling, I see the bricks being tossed like cake, the fortress of selfdom becoming obsolete. I finally am choosing to love, but why didn't I just trust her? Why don't I just trust her? She is so worthy of trust. why can't I trust her? She deserves this trust. She deserves the world. I turn, and I ask—

“Autumn, how are you?”

Tears forming. Brain racking. It is her; it is her that is in the pain—it isn't me. It was never me. I am in a trap of death and I was believing it is about me until this moment. *This moment.* This moment she turns to me, wheels spinning, continuing to pedal fast and she is telling me how she is. How she really is. How she isn't enough. How she isn't worthy. How she isn't fit. How she doesn't deserve love, or even my friendship. She is low. How did I not know? She is very low. Why did I choose to be ensnared in darkness? She is so low she almost doesn't exist. The only thing keeping her going is *Christ* in me. Christ in me. She is talking low, and I couldn't handle seeing her with this gloom. I stopped the bike. Her bike stood motionless shortly after. Wheels halt, but tears don't.

I look at Autumn Joy Lanari, and I see beauty. I see tears. I see reality. I see a friend. A real one. I see trust. I see love. I see what it means. I see *her*.

She doesn't think she is worthy. I want to hug her. I want to hug her so bad. I want to hug her from the depths of my bones. But from even further within me... I know I cannot. I know I should not. I know she must know that I have this control over my bones to resist the urge to touch her. There, there was a time when I could touch her, but now... now... this is different. I know she is worthy of what *it* means.

325 days have passed.

Same suburbia. Same people. Same God. A different friend.

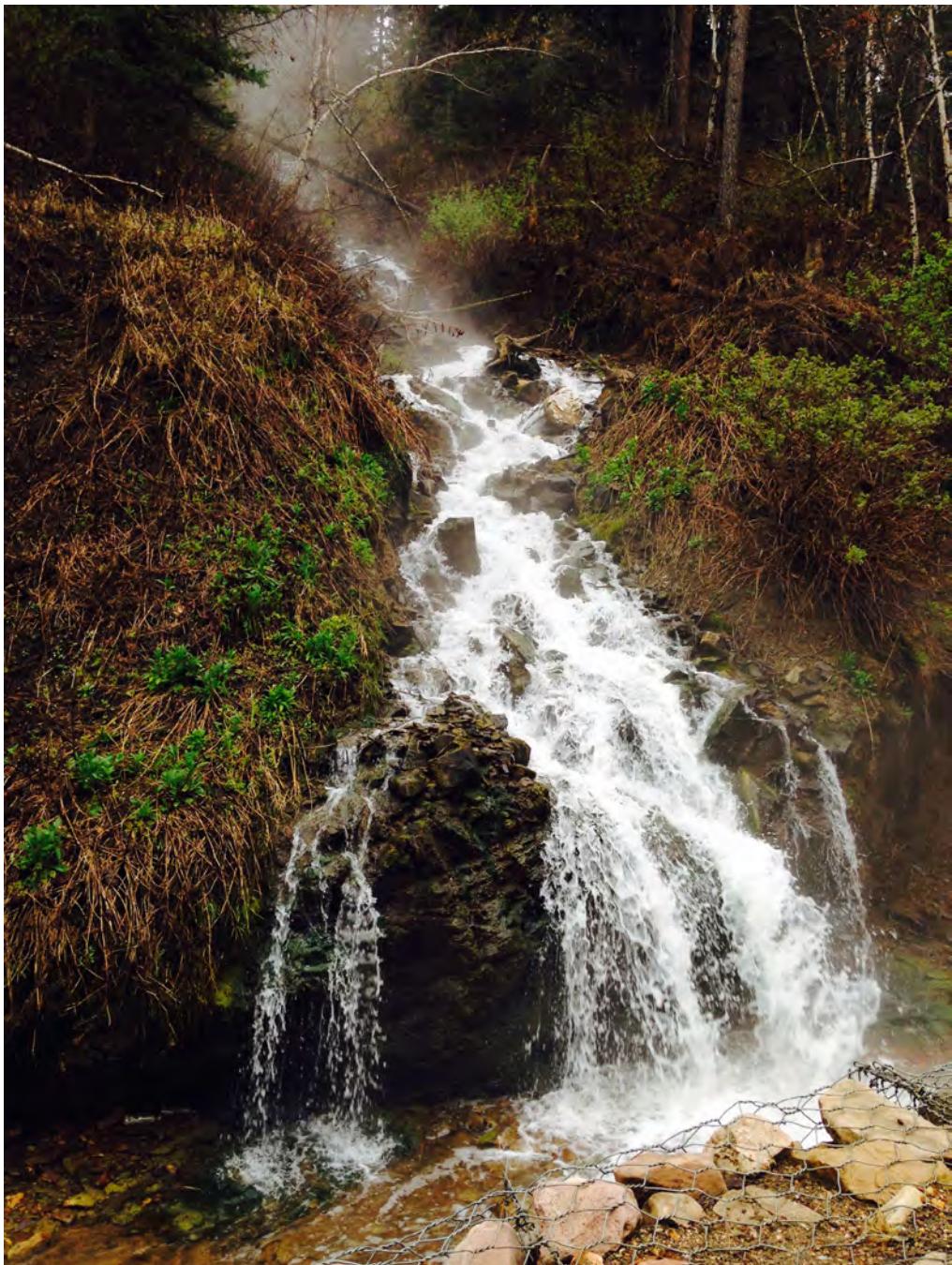
Today I lost my keys. Today I hung out with Autumn Joy Lanari. Today was one of my favorite days. Two hours away from home with no keys to the car I drove for those two hours. But I have something. I have something far better than keys to a car. Far better than keys to some... material. God has taken the keys to the car, but the keys to my friend... the keys to friendship with the most admirable, loving, *smiling*, generous, caring, worthy to be adored girl have been placed in my hand.

Lord, guide me in your grace. Show me how to drive. You have my heart, Lord. *Vamos.*

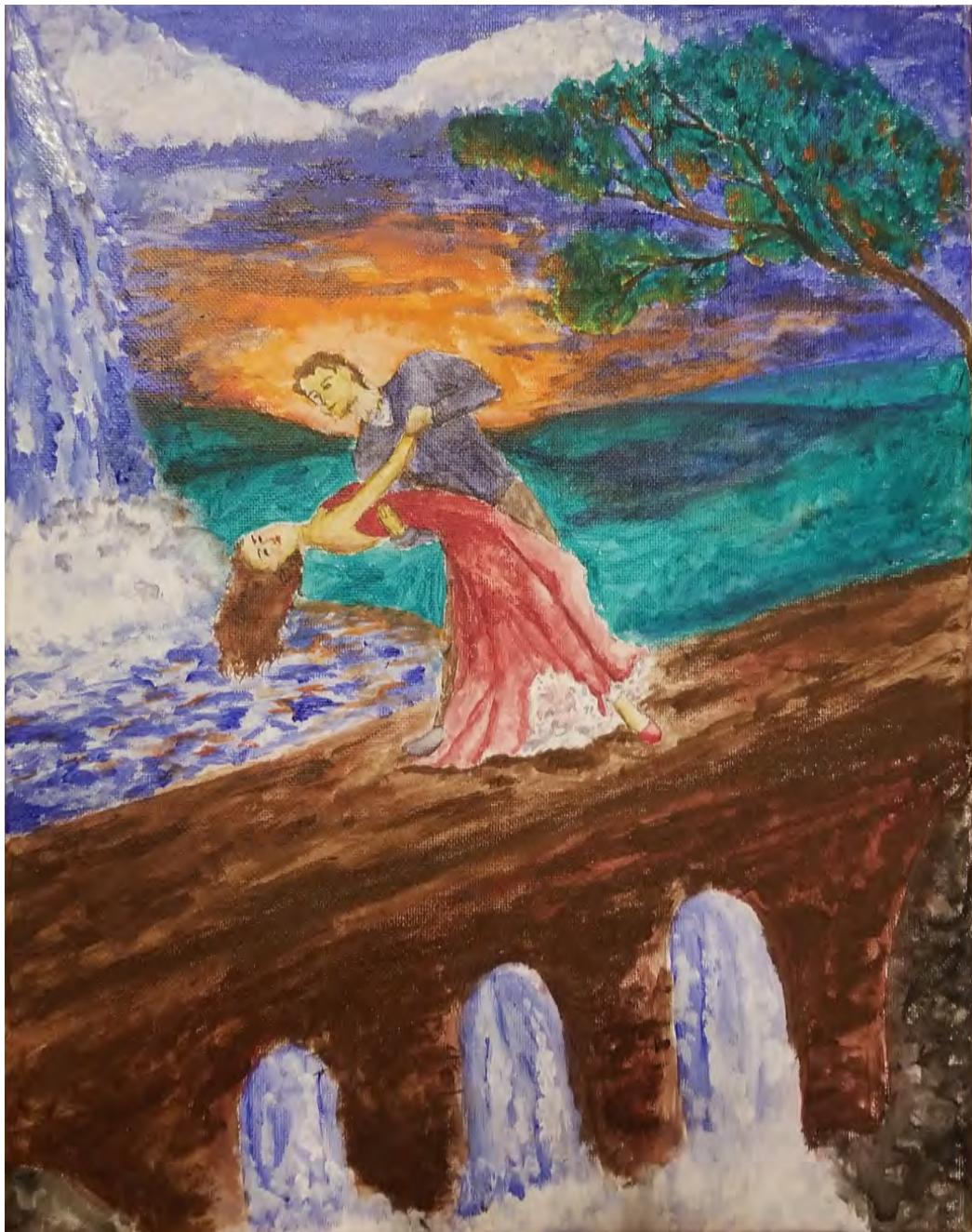












Large-flowered trillium
Triangle shaped white flower
Near rich, moist woodlands

Pink and white petals
A showy lady's slipper
Orchid of moist woods

Giant blue hyssop
Thick spike cluster of flowers
Deciduous woods

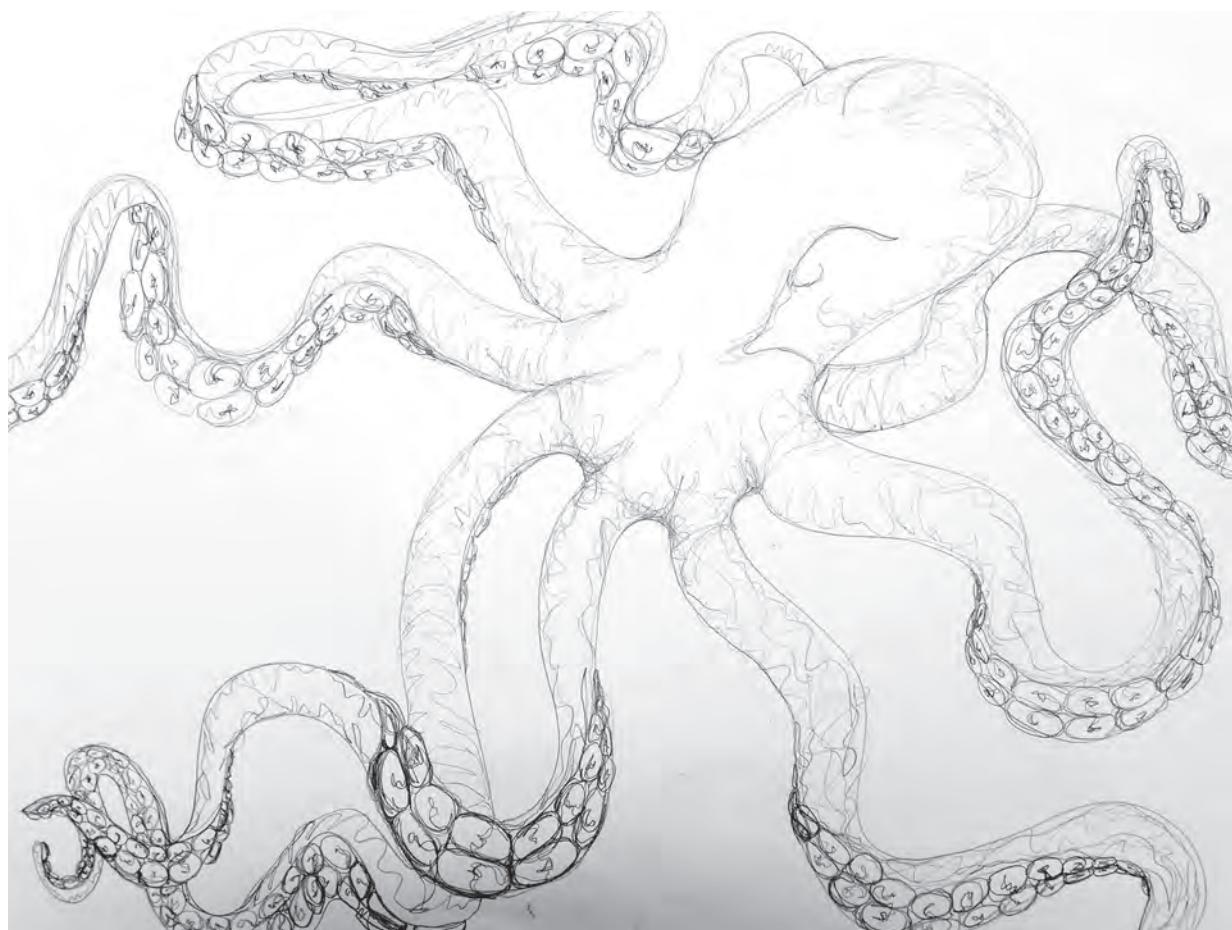
Lavender petals
A wild geranium
Dry, shady woodlands

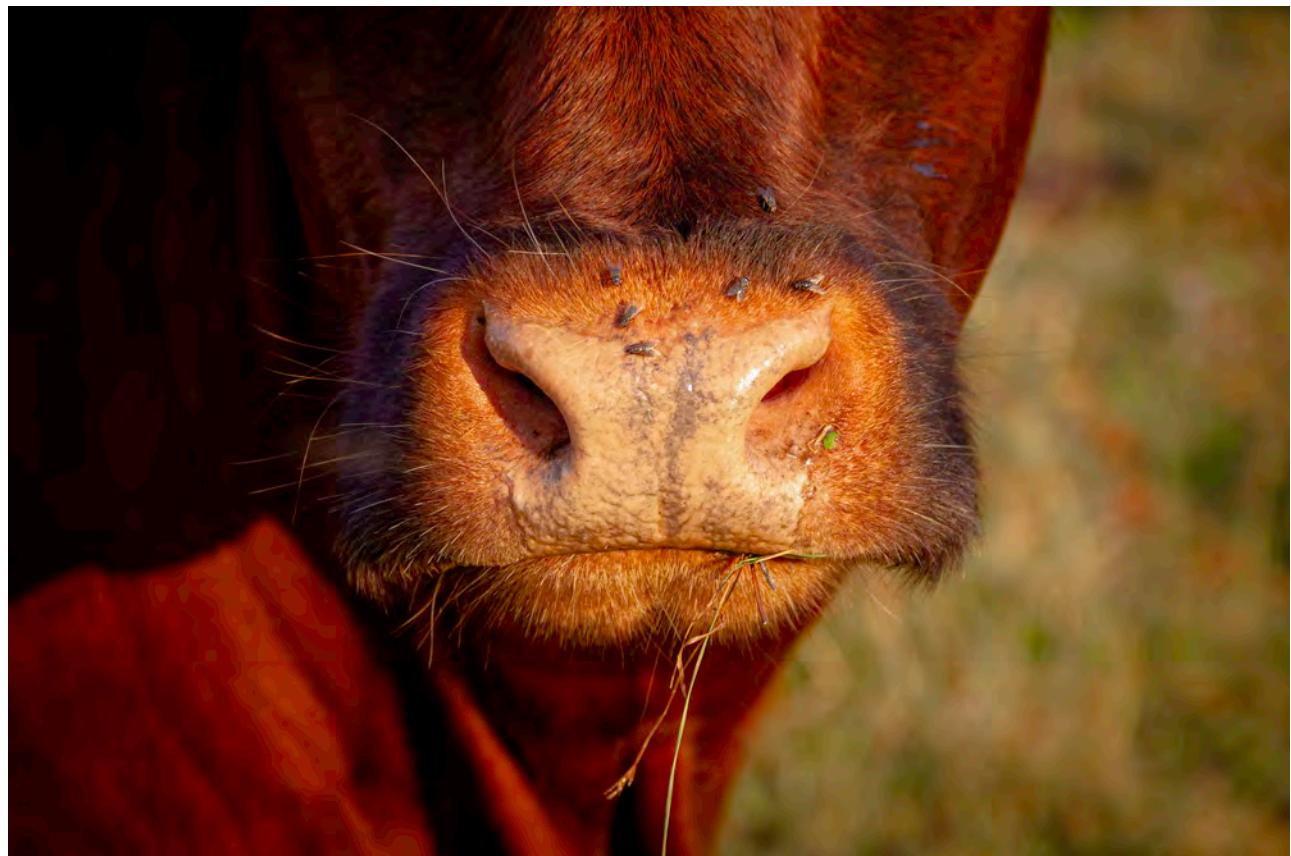
Purple fringed orchid
Lavender purple flower
By grassy marshes

White flowers on stalk
False lily of the valley
Shade, conifer woods



Mad Octopus | **ELIZABETH HEINTZEMAN**





Guarded | **SARAH GORVIN**





Chapter One
Becky
by Chloe Hawks

“And then when my soul saw you, it kind of went, ‘Oh, there you are. I’ve been looking for you.’”

- Unknown

“You can do this. You can do it,” I mumble under my breath, my eyes glued to the orange LED number that climbs higher and higher above me. “No, I can’t. I really can’t,” I groan, running a hand through my tousled curls for the twentieth time this morning. A loaded sigh falls from my lips and it only gets worse when the new number on the screen registers with me.

Well, before I can prepare myself anymore—not that it’s even possible at this point—the gleaming elevator doors slide apart. *Grrrrreat*, I think as I take a step and almost trip over the door jamb. My eyes dart around quickly and luckily nobody notices. At least, I think so. I adjust my hair to splay it over my shoulders, and smooth the flowy black skirt of my dress, suddenly wondering how many wrinkles I’ve put in it since leaving my apartment. My head goes down almost immediately and I mess with the sleek fabric, searching for new imperfections.

“They’re going to think that they have the wrong person when I walk in there. I’m all over the place,” I whisper under my breath, picking off a long hair with a disgusted look. “I don’t know how I even manage to look mildly presentable on paper, because when they see me they’re going to be regretting a few things.”

The bubbles of nervousness rise inside of me as my eyes flit to the window to my right. Sunshine shines down on the rest of Minneapolis, but it hardly registered with me this morning walking to and from my car. No, not with the tornado of thoughts spinning around in my head, and the September breeze.

After a few attempts of smoothing out my wrinkled clothes, I finally take the next corner. There I find the reception desk, and hear phones ringing everywhere. A brunette lady with impeccable curls picks hers up. “Lawson and Rooney, this is Michelle,” she groans into the mouthpiece with a smile. I look away with bugged-out eyes and back to in front of me, just in time to almost run into somebody.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t really watching where I was going,” a voice hurries, leaning over to pick

up something off the floor.

“It’s okay, neither was I.” Smiling, I bend down and grab the yellow notepad he had dropped.

“Thank you. I keep dropping everything today,” he sighs as he stands back up, setting the legal pad atop his notebook and laptop. They’re pressed against his chest clad in a patterned purple button-down. I look up and meet eyes with him. His eyes are the color of the sky on a stormy day, and they’re somehow pretty even though you’d think not.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s something you have to get used to around here, I guess. Busy busy,” he replies, one side of his mouth quirking up into a charming little smirk. “Hey, you um, look kinda lost. Can I help you find something or someone?”

“Yeah, I would actually love your help. Could you point me in the direction of uh, Peter Jennings?” I reply, taking a second to remember the name. *It is too early for this, and also too high up with how tall this building is. What was I thinking applying here?*

“Sure thing. If you go down the hall and take a right at the desk, and the next right, his office is the third on your left,” he says, turning and pointing behind him. His sandy blonde hair falls across his forehead, and he pushes it back swiftly when he’s facing me again.

“Thank you, um . . . I never got your name.”

“It’s Asher,” he smiles again, showing his even white teeth.

“Thanks for the help . . . Asher.”

“I don’t mind it a bit, it gives me a little break from the madness around here,” he smiles, and I think if I had known him back in school, maybe we would have been friends. *Maybe if I got the job here, we could be friends*, I think hopefully. “It was nice to meet you—.”

“Becky,” I giggle shortly, holding out my hand with a smile.

“It was nice bumping into you, Becky. Good luck with Jennings.”

“Thanks,” I say. He nods, holding his belongings a little closer to his chest before taking off.

My eyes follow him for a moment in his purple button-down and khakis. One sleeve rolled up and the other fastened at his wrist. *Asher. Hmm. I wonder what his story is.* I start past the rows of floor to ceiling windows, sensing following gazes and whispered words of those who mill around. My feet move fast and I hope to God there won’t be another tripping incident. I especially hope so, since I was all too lucky that nobody saw the last time it happened. I mean, I hope so.

A breath shakes into my lungs as my hands sit at my sides. Taking a second to flatten my dress, I look again for any wrinkles or hairs. My eyes lift to the frosted glass door I stopped in

front of and the name etched into it. Clearing my throat, I lift my hand drawn into a fist. I knock once and take a step back, nervously looking around. My head snaps back around when there's a small creak. The door swings open to reveal a man in his late twenties before me.

"Hi, you must be Rebecca Holte," he says gracefully. His words flow at just the right pace, not too slow and not too fast.

"Becky, please. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Jennings."

"It's great to finally meet you, Ms. Holte. I've heard lots of great things about you. And you're very punctual I see, which is even better," he says, smiling. Lines form around his smile in the middle of his cheeks. "Come in, please."

"Thank you," I say quietly, following him into his office. His fingers run through his short manicured hair the color of honey. We go on to exchange pointless "good mornings," "how are yous," and mindless comments about the upcoming warm front.

He holds out a hand pointing to the two black chairs across from his sleek wooden desk. I sit down in the left one, placing my purse at my feet. Folding my hands in my lap, I wait for him to do his damage. My attention is drawn to the photos on his walls and the few on his desk. There, I find one of him beside two other sharply dressed men, one with lots of curly hair and a blonde one, but it's not Asher. The two other men are in the midst of shaking hands with the camera holding their attention. *Ties and Smiles is what I'd call it, if I were a photographer.*

He takes a seat across from me in a chair behind his desk, but his attention seems to be elsewhere as he clicks away impatiently on his computer. I take advantage of the time to continue to inspect his office, and I'm met with disappointment, because aren't lawyers supposed to have bigger offices than this? All he has in here is his desk, these chairs, a bookshelf, and a potted plant that sticks out like a sore thumb. *I don't have much room to speak, I realize, but isn't it rather plain looking for a lawyer? I thought they made the big bucks.*

Wait, what was this guy's title, anyway? Of course, I can't remember it now.

His thin lips split into a huff and then an uneasy smile, "I'm sorry. I'm just checking on a colleague of mine. I uh, haven't been able to reach him this morning. They've probably slept in and are running a little late," Mr. Jennings softly laughs, his cobalt blue eyes carrying over to me.

His long fingers push the top of his laptop down with a satisfying thud. The light catches the shiny metal on his pointer finger as his hand moves, and he pulls one of those legal pads out. *Well, I guess it'd make sense for lawyers and the like at a law firm of all places to use them, because that's where the name came from, I'm guessing. But still, I don't know, it seems cliché.*

"I guess we'll just get into it then," he says, meeting eyes with me and flashing a short smile. His attention soon returns to the paper covered with black scrawling. I cross my legs and fold my hands on my lap, twirling the silver band on my finger around, around, and around. It could make somebody dizzy, but it grounds me instead. "I just have some questions I would like to ask you, it shouldn't take long."

"Yeah, no problem," I smile.

Question after question drops from his lips, like he'd promised.

My availability.

What are my strengths?

And then, what are my weaknesses?

Why do I think I'm a good fit for this job?

What could I contribute to the company?

Little questions about my resume that he of course pulls up.

The usual interview questions.

Well, I thought so.

"You've held a position like this before, I see," he mentions quite randomly. He rummages in a drawer before putting on his horn-rimmed glasses to read from my resume. "A few years back, it says."

"Yes, I did. It went quite well and I enjoyed it. I ended up being offered a job that was better for me at the time, though. I finished out my time there before taking the other job."

A mumbled 'mmmm' comes from him as he nods his head. A strand of dirty blonde hair tickles his earlobe as he sits with his chin in hand, writing something.

Some god-awful thing, I can hardly even imagine.

Shut up, Becky, I tell myself with an internal groan.

There are muffled voices outside the door, and it opens, slamming a second later. Mr. Jennings' head shoots up and he yanks off his glasses, still clutched in his hand as he stares wide-eyed at something behind me.

Well, somebody.

"I'm a little busy, if you haven't noticed," he snaps, and I hope to God I'm not about to be put in the middle of some husband-wife feud.

"Well, you kept ringing my fricken phone, Pete. So, what the hell d'ya want?" a deep, slow voice retorts. Instinctively, my eyes drop to my lap. *Or, is it a husband-husband feud this time?*

Turning around is most definitely not an option, but who is it? The way he says “ringing me” sounds like home to me. Like my Grandpa’s weird language that sticks out sorely. They have such a lovely voice. He does.

He.

“I’m in the middle of an interview!” he spits, trying to regain his composure, but it’s a lost cause. I swallow, trying to find the forest black tiling at my feet interesting. If that weren’t the hardest thing, because although it is, this man’s voice is even more so.

“What for, huh?” the deep drawl says.

God, who are you?

“Well, if you’re so bothered to know, it’s for you!” Jennings snaps. I was trying not to listen, but the second those words flew out of his mouth, my curiosity ran rampant and I couldn’t stop. Everything in me is wanting to look up, but then it’s telling me not to.

“Ooo, is it now? Did you get me a good one, huh, Pete?” they reply. My heart begins to thump quicker in my chest, and with more labor. His feet pick up and next, I hear his incoming footsteps. God, yes. I’m dying to know who you are. “Hello there, are you gonna be my new one? Petey here says I can’t keep one for the life of me, so here he is interviewing me another one. How’s she doing so far, Petey? Think she’s a winner?”

“Shut the hell up, Hare,” he groans through gritted teeth. I’ve looked up now and I see Jennings shaking his head into his hands. His freckled neck is as red as a tomato. The poor guy.

“It’s nice to meet you . . . I’m Harrison. I hear you might be my new personal assistant,” Mr. Gravelly and Deep speaks again, the voice moving and I think, stopping. The last words fall from his lips, the very ones that my eyes land on instantly when I turn to face him.

Long bubblegum lips show a dazzling smile beneath his long chocolate curls in front of me. Then, I look up and see those green eyes.

When I see those, I know I’m done for.

It doesn’t help that he’s dressed to impress. A pastel blue suit hugs his lean and tall body. A satiny white button-down reveals wisps of chest hair where he’s left it unbuttoned a few. It gives me a peek of the black ink decorating his chest.

“H-Hi,” I stutter, digging my nails into my thigh, probably ripping my black tights. I mentally curse myself over and over for the fact that I can’t even talk straight. But my God, is he handsome, and then there’s that smile.

“Hi again. I’m Harrison, and you are?” he replies, his thick eyelashes tickling his tanned skin

when he blinks those charming green eyes.

Shit, I almost murmur when my eyes catch the way sunlight dances across the many rings donning his fingers. More so, the way that his hand is held out towards me. I belatedly wrap mine around his and he shakes mine firmly, the warm bands of metal surprising my clammy skin.

“I’m Becky- uh, Rebecca Holte. But, you can call me Becky.”

Way to go, you absolute loser.

“Ah, that’s a pretty name you’ve got. I like it . . . and you. So, what d’ya say to being my personal assistant?”

“I’m not even finished with her interview, Hare,” Jennings pipes in, and ‘Hare’ holds his hand up to him, although his back is to him. “I have five more to do today. You can’t just—.”

“Shut up, Pete. I’m your boss, so I can do what I want . . . More importantly, I think she’s just right for it. Cancel the other interviews . . . I found my new assistant. Her name is Becky,” he nearly barks at Mr. Jennings. I gulp when his eyes fall on me towards the end of his words, showing the smallest of grins.

“You’ve known her for three seconds. I wanted to at least do like, a test day before we decide anything.”

“Then we’ll do just that, won’t we?” he says with the beginning of a smile as he stares down at me. More than anything, I want to look away. I have some kind of feeling that would be a bad idea, though. “Grab your stuff and come with me, I—.”

“Hare—,” Jennings begins, but I know one thing already, and that’s that “Hare” loves to interrupt.

“I said I know what I’m doing. She’s going to be my assistant after all, isn’t she?” he says, having taken a few steps away from me, steely eyes on Mr. Jennings. Something silent passes between them until they arrive on me. Then and there, my heart goes back to galloping like a horse because of him looking at me. “Follow me, Holte. I hope you don’t have any plans for today, because you’re getting properly trained by none other than me. You lucky duck.”

My hand flies to my purse sitting at my feet, and I toss it over my shoulder when I stand in a hurry. Meanwhile, he’s already at the door.

“I, uh—,” I begin, but he looks back at me and his eyebrows scrunch in the slightest, as if he’s just daring for me to say something. “No. I’m all yours.”

“Good, that’s how I like my assistants to be, all to myself,” he smirks, long fingers covered in rings wrapping around the door handle. He’s ready to go at the drop of a hat while I can hardly

get a bearing in these heels.

My lips part but nothing comes out, because what do I say? Is there something I'm supposed to say? I don't say a word. I just nod with a forced smile, watching him walk out the door. His long legs move fast, definitely faster than mine in heels. The pastel blue slacks donning his legs billow with every step, footsteps loud and proud on the marbled tiling in his shiny leather boots.

"Look alive, Holte. I'm not stopping because you can't follow! I've got a consultation to get to and you're coming with," he calls. I make a last-ditch look at Jennings behind me, finding him sitting there looking exasperated.

"Good luck, you'll need it," is all he says before sitting back with a sigh and clicking away on his keyboard. I take that as yet another cue to get out of here, and so I give jogging in heels another well-deserved go. My high school prom wasn't a complete success, so why not give it another try?

I spot his head of shoulder-length curls down the hall a ways already. I run faster, fully aware of everybody and anybody who could see me right now. Good Lord.

"Hurry it up, Holme!" he calls.

I sigh, picking up speed.

"It's Holte!"

"What's the difference?" he mutters ahead of me.

After a few more moments, I finally catch up to him and stop at his side, heaving for air. "First thing to know about being my assistant is that I'm never stopping for you, 'cos I have loads of stuff that I need to do on a daily basis. And 'cos of that, you should always be ready," he says, using his hands to speak before stuffing them away in the ocean of blue coating his legs.

"Ready for what?" I question, waiting for an answer that doesn't come.

Hmm, what an extravagant thing for a well-known lawyer to be wearing. Boy, it doesn't just stop there. I somehow hadn't noticed before, but now, I notice the gold necklace interrupting his chest. The top of a soft-toned black flower petal tattoo peeks out of his shirt.

A flower tattoo? Hmm, this man just fills me with questions.

"I'm sorry, sir. This is just all um, kind of a lot. I didn't expect to be getting into it today, so I apologize."

"It's fine, but I don't want to repeat myself. So, you best be remembering these things. And, Holme?" he says, long legs moving a mile a minute, it seems. *My goodness.*

“Yes, sir?”

“Call me Mr. Rooney,” he responds, his eyes falling to me with the slightest of smirks. He looks away, stopping in front of a frosted glass door bearing his name, and pulls on the handle opening it.

Harrison Rooney. Attorney at Law. Managing Partner.

My new boss.

“Yes, sir,” I answer, catching the closing door and walking into the room after him. He turns his head, giving me that same hard look from before. “Yes, Mr. Rooney.”

He only nods as he crosses the large open room, sitting down in the black leather office chair behind a grand wooden desk. “Sit down. Oh, and don’t forget to take notes. I do hope you brought a device of some sort, or at least a pen and paper,” he directs, pulling himself closer to the desk with a raise of his dark eyebrows.

“Yes, of course,” I say after taking a seat in front of him, leaning over slightly to pick up my purse and ruffle my hand in its contents. *Yeah, because who brings their laptop to a job interview?*

With a quiet sigh, I come out holding my phone and try my best to avoid his eye contact. I know he’s probably judging me right now, but I try to ignore it. I put my passcode in and bring up a new note, unbeknownst to what to title this as, so I just hurriedly put down the date.

September 9th, 2021.

How little I knew that this day would be one I’d never forget.

When I’m finished, I look up, surprised to not find his eyes looking at me bearily. Instead, they’re raising to someone behind me. I turn around and once again, I’m caught off guard by another stranger behind me. *Why does this keep happening to me?*

“Come in, come in,” Mr. Rooney says gruffly to the middle-aged woman standing shyly by the door. A pink cardigan is pulled around her plump frame. He looks down with an obvious huff and then to his computer for a second. His eyes float back to the nervous woman slowly walking over to the chair beside me. “Yes, please sit down, Mrs. Mitchell.”

“Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Rooney.”

He softly hums a confirmation and distractedly, whilst typing away on his expensive-looking desktop computer. “Oh, this is Ms. Holte. She’ll be helping me out today, taking down some notes about your case.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Mitchell,” I say, sending her a smile as she removes her brown

purse from her shoulder.

“Please, call me Debbie,” she insists, crossing her legs and smoothing down her dress pants. I can’t help but notice how Mr. Rooney looks up at her briefly with disdain. Suddenly, I began to dread the rest of this day even more, and I didn’t think that could be possible.

“Well, Mrs. Mitchell, why don’t we start from the beginning with your husband?” he sighs, sitting back in his chair as he gives me a look. I take that as my cue.

“Oh, yes. Should I begin with his lying, or his twenty-year-old mistress?”

Today is going to be a long one.

“For goodness sake,” it comes out as a perturbed sigh when he closes the door to his office an hour later. I close out of the note on my phone, hands cramping and achy after all of that typing.

“Can I get you anything, Mr. Rooney?”

“I could really go for a coffee after that,” he comments, looking at me. I watch a question float across his face. Perhaps a grin should be followed up by his remark, but one doesn’t come. Instead, he stalks off to his desk and types fast on his keyboard, forgetting I’m there.

My lips hardly part when his start to, but his words come out faster. *That love of interrupting, eh?* “A coffee from Starbucks, with two shots of espresso and a dash of cream,” he spews out. I hardly have time to pull my phone out again to write it down.

“Yes, sir, of course. Is there anything else I can get for you while I’m there?” I ask and to my surprise, he looks up from the screen of his computer. It’s a brief look lasting only a few seconds, though.

“The veggie and brown rice salad bowl . . .” he trails off, his bottom lip now between his thumb and forefinger as he thinks. “As well as a chicken B.L.T sandwich. And use *this*,” he finishes, sticking a hand in his pocket. It comes back holding a thick, black leather wallet. It opens and after a few seconds, he’s holding a metallic gold credit card out to me. When I reach out to take it, he pulls his hand back.

“This is the firm’s credit card. You only use it on purchases that I authorize. Is that clear?” I nod. “You shouldn’t ever need it, but if the occasion arises that you do, the pin’s 4912. Don’t worry about the limit. It’s quite new and that’s my business to worry about, anyways. Did you catch all of that?”

“Yes, I got it,” I say, trying not to repeat myself, but what do I say that I haven’t said

already? "I'll be right back with that, sir," I finish, taking it from his outstretched hand. My clammy fingers go around the cool metal handle of the door, pulling on it a second later.

"And, Holme?"

"It's *Holte*," I nearly retort, turning around. There I find his hard green eyes already on me. His head moves with a slight nod, making me wonder if the corner of his mouth raising is a trick of the light, or if I just got the smallest smirk out of him.

"Well, *Holte*, don't forget extra kale on the salad and extra mayo on the sandwich. Oh, and hold the broccoli."

"Hold the broccoli on *what*?" I repeat, staring at him from across the spacious open room. He just clicks away at his computer doing who the hell knows what.

"Bye, *Holte*," is all he says, but I'm still lost. *I am so lost today, it's not even funny.* "What're you doing still standing there? I want my lunch!"

"Yes, s-sorry," I reply, turning after letting go of the door. I think that just maybe, I hear him laugh. My eyes go into the back of my head with a groan as I turn down the hallway. Stopping, I look down each way, unsure of which side we came from. He was the one leading and it was well over an hour ago, so I don't know.

I turn left at random, and a few seconds later find the main lobby. I almost ram my hip into a crappy desk sitting tucked away from the others, without a soul at it. *I wonder who sits there.*

At last, I found the good old elevator. I step on and lean against the back railing, my phone already in my hand as I Google the closest Starbucks. Result after result pops up, and I go with the first one. I'm happy to see that it's only three blocks away. Yet, my parking garage is probably a thousand steps in the other direction.

I pitch my heels onto the front seat, and start my car. I'm ready to go until my phone explodes with its generic ringtone. The number is weird and long. I don't recognize it other than that the location is here in the city. I answer it, because if I don't they may not leave a message. That bugs the hell out of me, even though I've never known why.

"Have you left yet, *Holte*?" at the sound of the raspy voice, I have to hold in a groan.

"No, I was just going to. I didn't know that you had my number, Mr. Rooney."

"Well, it's on your job application, now isn't it? I was just looking at it, actually. Your resume is quite good - you've had lots of jobs, I see. Pete did good at picking you out of the bunch," he blabs on casually, as if I'm not wasting time and gas sitting here. I've put my car back into park by now. "Anyways, that isn't why I rang you. I'd like to talk about your resume and such, but

that's for when you come back. Make that coffee a venti and hot."

"What's a *venti*?"

"Have you never been to Starbucks in your twenty-something years of existence? There's got to be one on every corner around here," he almost scoffs back at me. I have to take a focused breath so that I don't snap back at him. Although unfortunate, I need to impress him on my first day, which has already been enough of a mess.

"No, I have. I'm just not familiar with the sizes, I'm sorry. I usually just say if I want a medium or something."

You know, like a normal person, I'm tempted to say.

"Well, it's a large, Holte," he sighs, pulling on my strings. Somehow, he only pushes me further into the ground with how I'm feeling today.

Great.

"Okay, thank you for explaining that to me, sir."

"Stop calling me sir, already. You're making me feel old, Holme. I don't like it."

"I'm sorry," I say softly, looking down, ignoring how he mistakes my name again.

Awkwardly, I play with the spare hair ties hanging around my gear shifter.

"And would you stop apologizing so much? My goodness," he groans. I sit back with a sigh, letting my head fall against the headrest. I wait for him to say something more, seeing as how he's such a stranger that I'm blank as to what to say next. "Just go and get my food, already. And I guess if you'd like, get yourself your own lunch while you're at it—on a separate bill, of course. Oh, and one more thing—I want a slice of the chocolate marble loaf cake, and the biggest water they've got," he sighs and with that, he's gone and it's silent.

I toss my phone onto the passenger seat with a groaned "whatever." Exhaling a long breath, I put my car back into drive. I nearly peel out of my spot and hope to God that nobody takes it while I'm gone.

If I make it back, because I'm unsure if I even want to see him and his firm again.







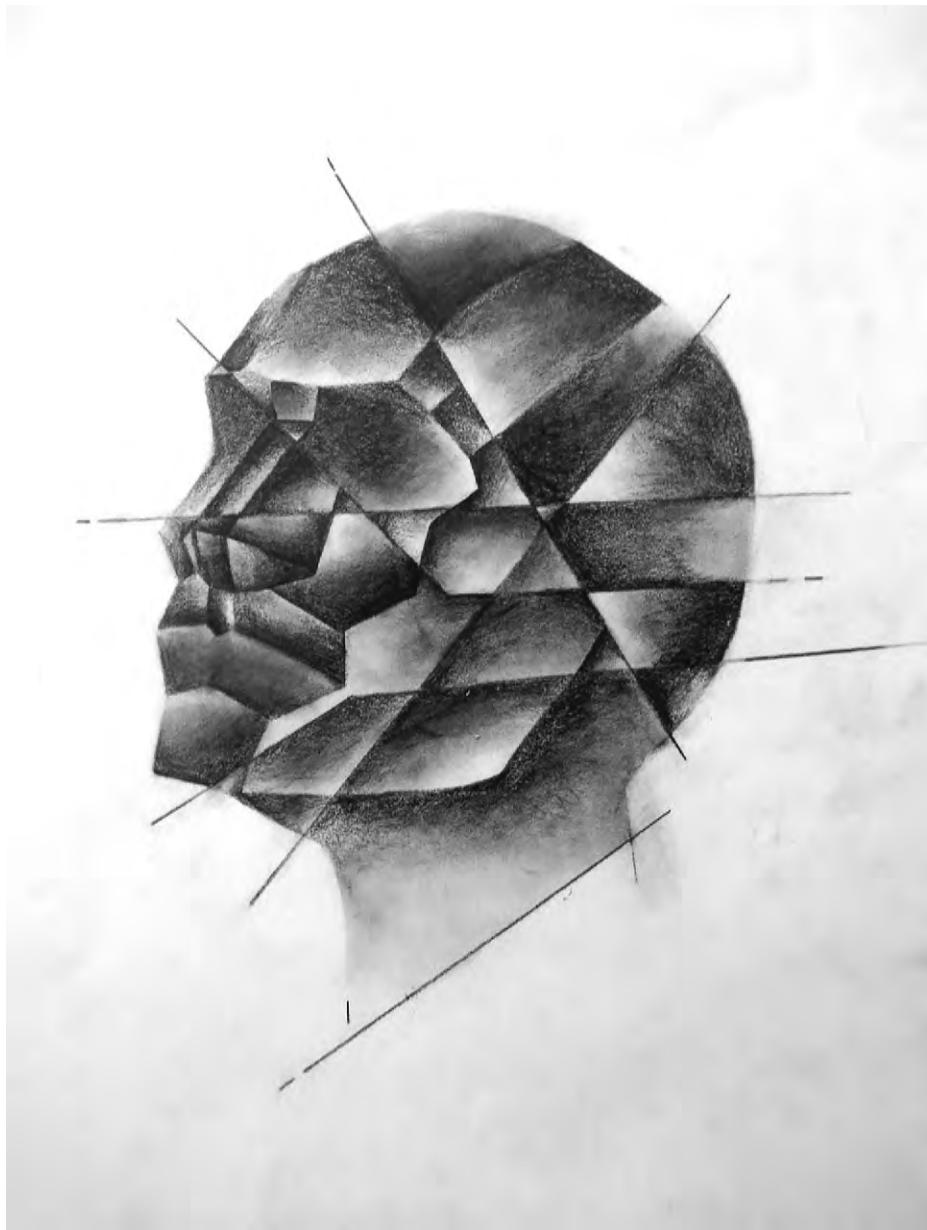
Broken Crayons | **MIRANDA OSTLUND**





Frosted Pine | **DELANI COLLINS**





Uninvited Guest | **CASEY HOCHHALTER**





Give him his name and he will know he is Anishinabe.

Give our boy a stick to dig in the dirt,

rocks to toss from the water's edge

and you have given him happiness...a lesson in setting high sights high.

Show him deer tracks and a forest filled with acorns

and you teach him curiosity.

Set him up on the limb of a tree

and he can take his next steps with vision.

Guide him through the sugar bush and he will gain great lessons.

Teach him how to pick birch bark and his Elders will be forever grateful.

Let him help set a net and he will feel forever useful.

Let him touch the warmth of the earth and he will learn to build.

Let him splash and sing in the waters of the big lake and our small streams

and he will be cleansed.

Teach him to set his tender young feet upon parched rice and he will know purpose.

Let him gather and test the berries as they ripen and he will learn appreciation.

Let him walk along as we set snare and await in quiet for the deer

and he will learn patience and to be a mighty hunter.

Walk in the woods...and listen and he will learn to hear.

Let him watch as we sharpen our spears and lay waiting for our winter's fresh catch

and he will be in awe of the lake's pure beauty and learn accuracy.

Sing...yes, sing him our songs.

Greet the moon, the sun and the stars with our songs.

Let him wander near the drum and his heart will be filled with joy
and memories of our ancestors.

Teach him gentleness with his cousins, the animals and small children
and you have given him a life laced with love, belonging and tenderness.

Let him mill around the Elders and he will gain wisdom, always giving back.

Cherish the moments with his siblings and he will know about family.

Touch him, hold him, tickle him and let him feel.

He will give back so much.

Shining black eyes, wild imagination
and always, wondering why.

Giggles, joy and laughter, at nothing...at everything.

Gratitude for our teachings.

Gratitude for our seasons.

Be proud of who you are and where you come from little man.

You are strong, passionate and wise.

Stay strong in this world little one.

Love,

Mom









Right now you are looking so far forward
You're missing what's in front of you.
Your sights are focused on being a teen;
Driving, makeup, and boyfriends, too.

Darling, please slow down, just breathe.
You're going to miss where you are.
I know it's boring and lazy right now,
And thirteen seems so far.

But thirteen, dear, is not what it seems;
For you will have heartbreak,
And I do not mean from a boy;
This is a different heartache.

I wish I could tell you easier times
Are right around the bend.
Unfortunately, darling, that would be a lie.
It will not be the start of an end.

Friends will leave when you least expect
And people are not as they seem.
You will be disappointed and hurt.
You will cry and you will scream.

So enjoy the time you have right now,
Even though it's long.
Growing up isn't half as nice
As they say it is in song.

Enjoy your dolls,
Enjoy your time,

Enjoy your family,
Enjoy your life.

One day you will blink
And everything will change,
And it won't feel as nice.
You'll feel a little strange

When your dad can't pick you up now
And bring you in from the car.
When suddenly the thought of high school
Doesn't seem that far.

Slow down and take it in.
I know that's hard to do;
But if I knew what I know now,
If I was once again you,

I would ask my grandpa more.
I would give him way more hugs.
I would take advice when it was given,
Not dismiss it with a shrug.

Now go, go play,
Relish the time
You have right now
In your prime.





Precariously Perched | **LIZZY BUSCHER**





The fierce wind whistles in my ear as my hair whips around my face like a tornado. In the darkness, all I can sense are the horrible creatures of my imagination and the unbearable feeling that I am being watched. A coyote howls in the distance, probably looking for an innocent, unsuspecting rabbit to bite into. Or an eight-year old girl—anxiously doing her nightly chores in the pitch black. After chucking the musty-smelling hay into the horses' pen and hearing the whinny response, I turn into a rabid cheetah; I do not think my legs have carried me faster in my entire life. After all, I've not had to outrun the unspeakable death that is surely waiting in the dark before.

A fear of the dark is typical in the lives of children. Sleeping with Hello Kitty nightlights is only deemed adorable when you're seven years old, and insisting your older brother walks with you to the garage at age seventeen will surely get you ridiculed at the next family get together. Yet, in seventeen years that intense fear of the dark morphed me into a strong, brave woman full of integrity and yearning for opportunities to understand myself. Something in me screamed in agony over this childhood fear that had prevented me from truly living. I could not stand any longer being controlled by a lack of illumination from a nearly perfect sphere of hot plasma. With one stargazing, sunset-seeking, midnight running, adventuring summer, I changed my perspective and my life.

Allow me to paint the image of my summer life in your mind. Birch, basswood, white pine, elm, raspberries, wild rice and ginger, and meadow rue surround a magnificent and historical lake. Approximately three miles long, 1,701 acres, and ninety-two feet deep, Many Point Lake is nothing short of spectacular. The first inhabitants of Many Point Lake were the Ojibwa tribe, followed by the French fur traders and loggers in the 19th century. At this point, the valuable white pines were chopped down, and new vegetation was birthed. To this day, the pylons of the logging railroad are still visible at the surface of the clear water. To add to the integrity of this lake, it is currently a Scout Camp for youth and families in the BSA organization. I am blessed to have called this incredible place my home for three consecutive summers: staying ten weeks at a time in a ten by fifteen-foot canvas wall tent. As a staff member, I am expected to be a role model to youth aged ten to eighteen, and a respectable member of society to their adult leaders. I spend my summers

with twenty or so other staff members, many who are under the age of twenty-five.

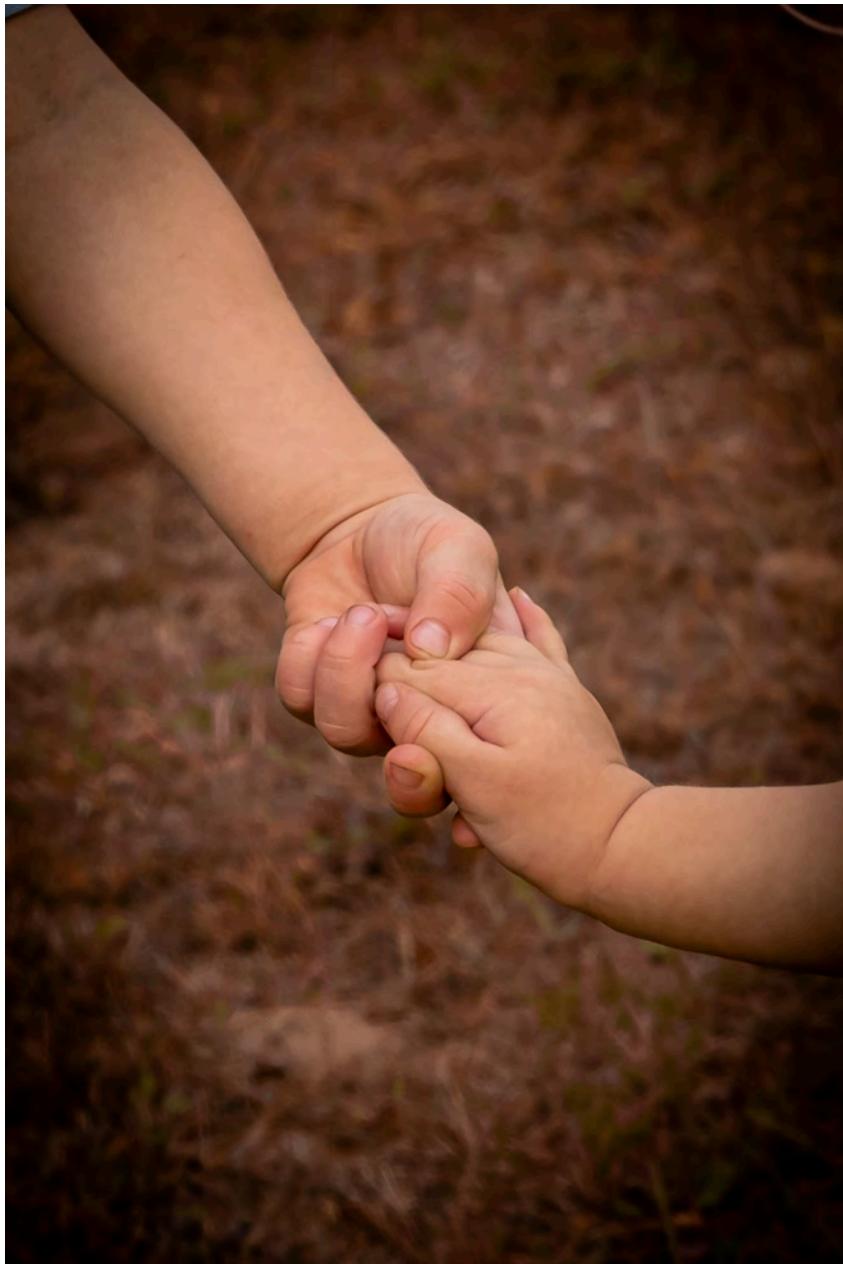
Though I love my job teaching the youth of today vital life skills and numerous nature-involved merit badges, that is not the primary reason I return year after year. Camp is as much an adventure for our participants as it is an incredible life experience for staff members. I have yet to undergo a summer that I did not feel more confident in myself or learn a new strength that I never thought I had, as well as realize the weaknesses that I can improve on. And my fear of the dark was perhaps the greatest weakness I possessed. In a place full of people trying to better themselves, you will find genius minds, creative souls, and baffling confidence. Within a week of being the Voyageur 2020 Nature Center Director, I found a few boys who were just as hungry for growth and adventure as me.

We spent countless sleepless nights in my Nature Center simply talking about our insecurities and who we were and wanted to be. They all had such a strong sense of knowing who they were and were not and had the ability to reflect on their actions and thoughts better than I had my entire life. I took note of how they approached their insecurities and realized that they simply confronted them. If they were afraid of public speaking, they volunteered for every morning announcement they could get. One was worried about life passing him up without experiencing enough of it; so, he never passed a chance for spontaneous adventure. I epiphanized that if I were to ever confront this fear and be able to understand my own dark thoughts and insecurities, I would need to engulf myself in darkness, literally.

After that first all-nighter, I took advantage of my youth and would map my sleep schedule so I could wake before sunrise, then later watch the sunset, stay awake all night and enjoy yet another sunrise and set of the next day. Sleep deprivation did not exist. When I felt tired, I consulted my peers, and we pulled all the astronomy books and telescopes available and spent the waning hours of twilight finding constellations that are only visible in the summer months. It is quite overwhelming when you think of how small and insignificant your life is, but when you realize that there are innumerable lessons in the stars, you can truly learn about your own identity and aspirations.

Another benefit of the people I chose to surround myself by is that they were always down for late night runs and swims. We would set off from the lodge or tent city, where we slept, with our headlamps on and running shoes tied tight. Heading down the old camp roads in the middle of the night is intimidating to say the least. Behind every flower is a gnarling coyote, and the houses found on the edge of Many Point property presumably shelter ax-murderers. Or so I thought. Little did I know, the moon shines brighter when reflecting off the sweat of your back, and the lake is a solid piece of clear glass after eleven p.m. Similarly, my mile times had never been better than when I ran at night, bonus points for solo runs. After a run one night, the three of us went to the beach and jumped into the lake, running shorts and all. We disrupted every sleeping fish with our splashes and cackling laughs before floating on the surface. It was in this moment that I no longer feared anything, in fact, I felt completely whole. As if I had found myself in five miles of darkness, bottom-less water, and my own thoughts. I was not anxious about the animals of the lake, the whistles of the wind, or the stars that stared down at me. As I attempted to connect the stars in my mind, one sped through the dark blue night and disappeared into another dimension. My first shooting star.

Living in fear of darkness is living in a bright solitude. My fear of the dark allowed a darkness to consume me from the inside until I ran directly through my fears, literally. The experiences that I missed as a child hid key elements of my identity and my own soul. To experience a shooting star this near to adulthood was pathetic, and I refused to live in a pathetic, mind-suppressing fear when the darkness holds intense adventure and potential.







I can remember the last night we were at peace.

At the time there was a feeling of dread,

hanging over us,

an impending storm.

The smell of rain in the air

even though it was dry and sunny that day.

Twinkling lights and warm air.

Talks about topics we couldn't agree on.

I could see you heading down a bad road,

way before you ever could.

I knew I knew you best.

You didn't seem to care.

There were things I should have said to you,

ways I could have expressed myself.

The signs we crafted for each other...

I just threw them out a few months ago.

along with the faded Polaroids,

our smiling faces,

usually stupid faces,

stuffed into the garbage can next to our memories

and old chicken from the fridge.

The last night we were together,

everything felt okay.

Of course we didn't want it to end.

We stalled as long as we could,

but eventually we had to leave.

If I would've known I was walking away from you

just like you'd walk away from me two weeks later,

what would I have done?

Would I have left?

Would I have stayed?





Ode to the deer I hope has died
That hit my car on the driver's side
Why did she do this? She took it too far
When she took her head to the side of my car
Not another on the road, no one in sight
When she thought the time to cross was just so right
But boy did she learn
It wasn't her turn
No she didn't too get far
Stopped short by my car
And though it could have been prevented
here I am with my car that is dented

Skyline Drive, Duluth Minnesota

| **MARIE CURRENT**





Lonely Sunflower | **DELANI COLLINS**





Anxiety | **GABRIELLA AMICK**

Anxiety.

You don't define me.

You don't get to choose who I am or what I love. I won't let you.

But you influence my head and my actions and I don't know how to stop,
allowing you to take hold and all control and drive in your direction until you stop.

Anxiety.

You don't define me.

I'm sick of you running my heart,
running my thoughts, my body's movements or lack thereof,
running my emotions and confidence,
running my ability to participate or stand at the side, afraid.
I'm sick of it.

Anxiety.

Why are you a part of me?

This wasn't how it used to be!

You crept in and took hold and now I can't get rid of this thing I don't want to call
my own,
this thing that hits me when I least expect it
or changes a day into fear and pain of the next step,
this thing that causes me to lose sleep, or not eat, or sit in silence,
my mind a million places
other than here.

Anxiety.

Why are you a part of me?

I didn't choose or ask to feel this way. In fact, I'd like it better if you stayed away.

I didn't know that pushing feelings down and living in a state of hurt, anger, and
denial would cause an anxiety disorder to arise but then,

How could I have known?

Well, shouldn't I have known?

My family struggles on different levels—caused by different traumatic episodes or
just nothing, a genetic thing, a buildup of little things, the point being, shouldn't I
have thought that this could happen to me,
in my perfect, always happy life that I seemed to live in, that others thought I lived

in, and I
thought I lived in,
now turned into a life that I'm just trying to live in day by day, a struggle to decide
the emotion I feel, to find the motivation to strive, to find the emotion to survive, I'm
not talking suicide, just pain that creeps into my whole life, that I can't shut out, and I
can't hide, and sometimes I don't know how to make it subside.
It seems to me,
that you,

Anxiety,
just don't leave.
When you do it's only temporary,
is there a way to be rid of you permanently?
I look at those who have struggled for so long and I feel the answer is what I've
known all along.
No.
I'm stuck now, in these anxious feelings of confusion and doubt.
Now this worry that overwhelms me, causing my heart rate to increase and my
breathing to not properly release, the tension I feel just to get a breath that's real.
My oxygen is normal, it's all in my mind, but I can't make the feeling that I'm not
breathing enough, subside.

Anxiety.
Why did you come to me?
Is this part of God's plan in the working?
Or Satan trying to distract and deter me?
I don't know how to cope, not yet, but I'm trying,
I'm trying to learn how to live with worrying all the time, thinking so far ahead that I
get lost, worrying to the point that my stomach gets in a double knot.
My mind plays tricks telling my body to react in ways that I don't understand and
can't explain, it only results in pain: mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, relational,
you name it,
and it has happened to me but more so it's happened to those around me.
Although I know I've felt many feelings, I know that many have felt so much more
and I've got it easy, I should be thankful for the luck I've been given instead of griping
over the pain I am living.

Anxiety | **GABRIELLA AMICK**

Anxiety.

You don't define me.

I'm more than a label or a condition or a diagnosis. I'm more than worry or pain or my hopeless lowest.

Anxiety is a part of me but it doesn't define me.

It tries to takes control but it doesn't control me.

And I won't let my anxiety so surpass the other parts of me that I forget the things in life important to me and rely on myself and society instead of going to the one Who died on a tree, gave His life for me, knows what anxiety is and knows the reason that I have been given it.

Anxiety.

You do not define me.

I am loved and worthy, beautiful and valued beyond my understanding.

Anxiety.

You do not define me.

And my life won't be dictated by the things you try to place on me, instead I reject your ways and accept those of peace.

Peace.

Passes all understanding.

Overwhelming.

Calming.

Enveloping.

Comforting.

Loving.

Peace.

Anxiety.

You do not define me.

I am a patient of peace.

And it is rewriting my story into one that truly defines me.



frogge | **OLIVIA JACKSON**

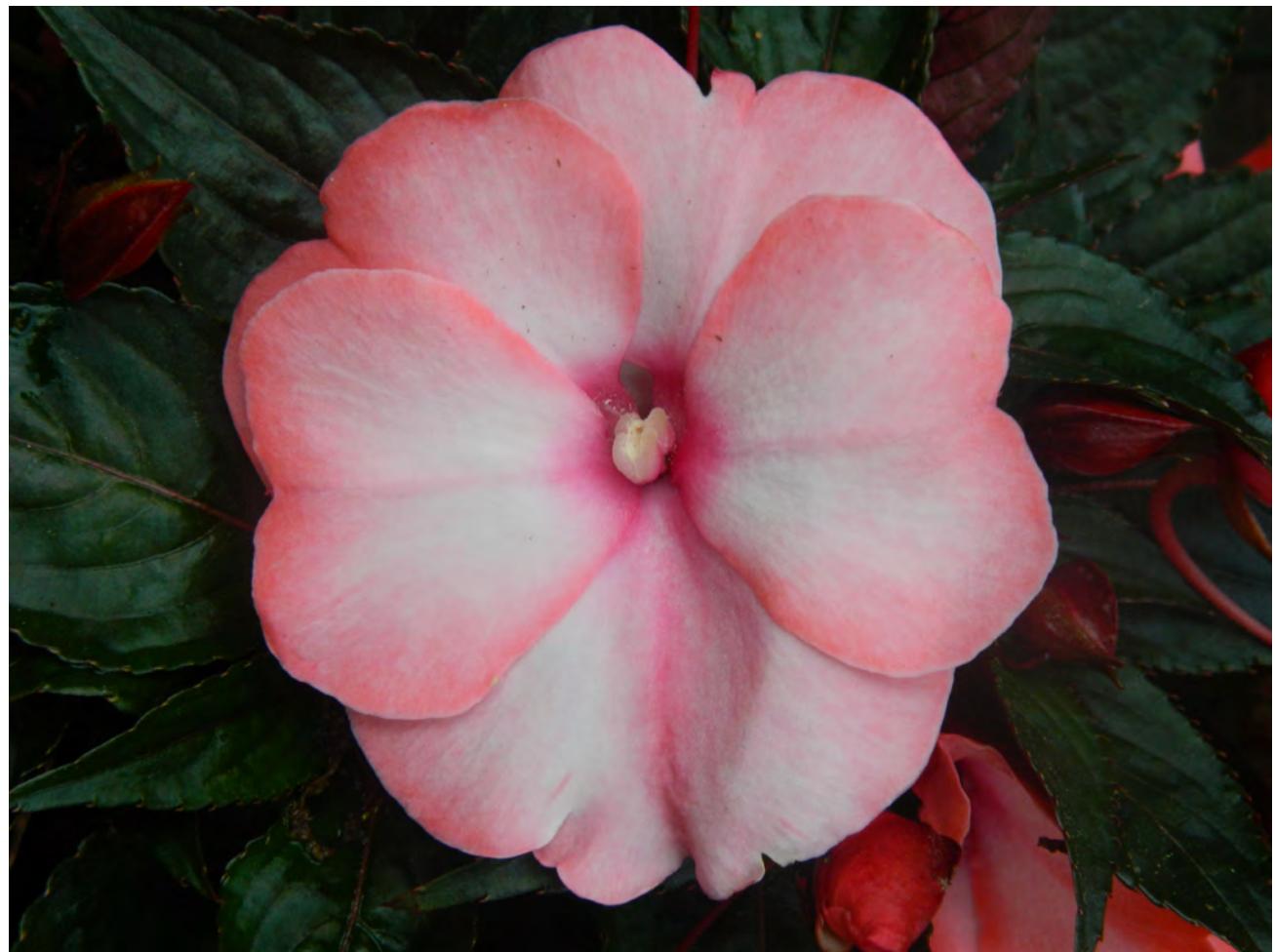




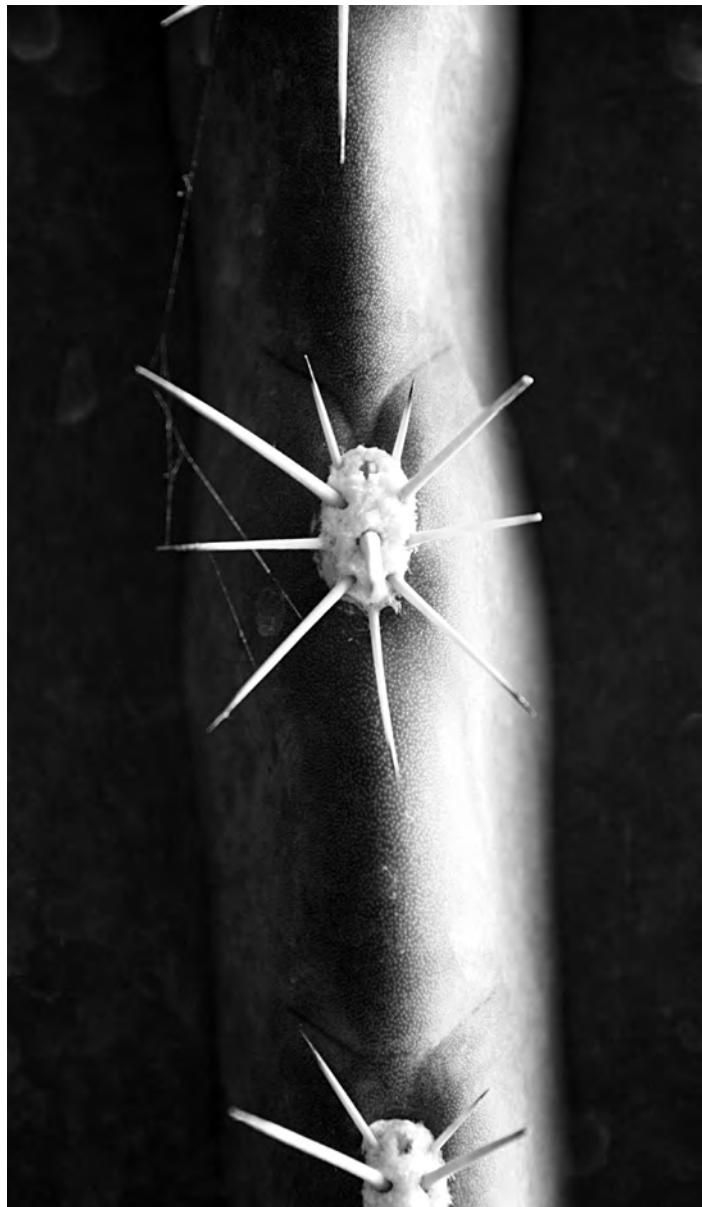




Drifting,
Through time.
Feels like it flies by
But moves too slow.
Trees,
Stand still as the wind blows.
Their leaves rustle
But only slightly.
Disoriented,
My mind is full
And loud.
But right now it's quiet.
Heartbeat,
Yours is steady
And rhythmic.
It keeps me tethered.
Focus,
I try to stay awake
And alert.
But I'd rather dream on.



Walking through a field of sunflowers,
I find myself tiptoeing on the stepping stones that lay ahead.
I'm vigilant and aghast to life,
a habit to blow away in the wind.
No more hiding in the shade,
for the sun must shine.
I will channel my inner goddess and blossom as the sun hits
my petals.
I've found a way to love the flower I've grown to be,
With no intent to wither away.
I will plant myself and shine, with a vibrant yellow, revealing to
you my true potential.
Don't cower at the gnawing of the birds and squirrels that tear
at your center,
for if you stand strong you shall blossom evermore.



We do not differ
So why do we hate?
Our colors may vary but
We are the same inside

We do not differ
The cells would match—
But can a soul have a cell,
So then it is shaped,
Made to be different—to war with each other
By hate and lessons learned in lies
Grown like a tree
Through people not strong enough to stop it

We do not differ
So the hate is taught
Kneaded like bread to rise in younger generations
The hate is there—like a plague it spreads

We do not differ
Can it be stopped?
Can all the little children be saved?
From the believed lies of their parents?
Or is this it

We do not differ
By identical cells
The whole world destroyed
By something that does not differ

We destroy ourselves
Although with each generation
Comes another chance
And yet we never really grasp
The hardest of easiest thoughts
We do not differ



Reading became less and less when you came.

You being the endless book I wanted to read.

Losing myself in your pages.

Slowly you erased me.

After you left, I started a new book.

Not a new chapter.

I burned the book, along with you...

But leaving let me love myself again.

Thank you for that.

Reading every day, forgetting you less and less.

Love is a blessing oh, but a curse.

As there is good and bad everywhere.



Fall River | **ELIZABETH HEINTZEMAN**







Words are the ink that slip from my pen and form into letters
They're the gleaming, black coats of muscled horses that race across the page
Each letter is a glistening jewel in the horses' manes and tails
And every apostrophe and comma are the gold buckles on the bridle and saddle

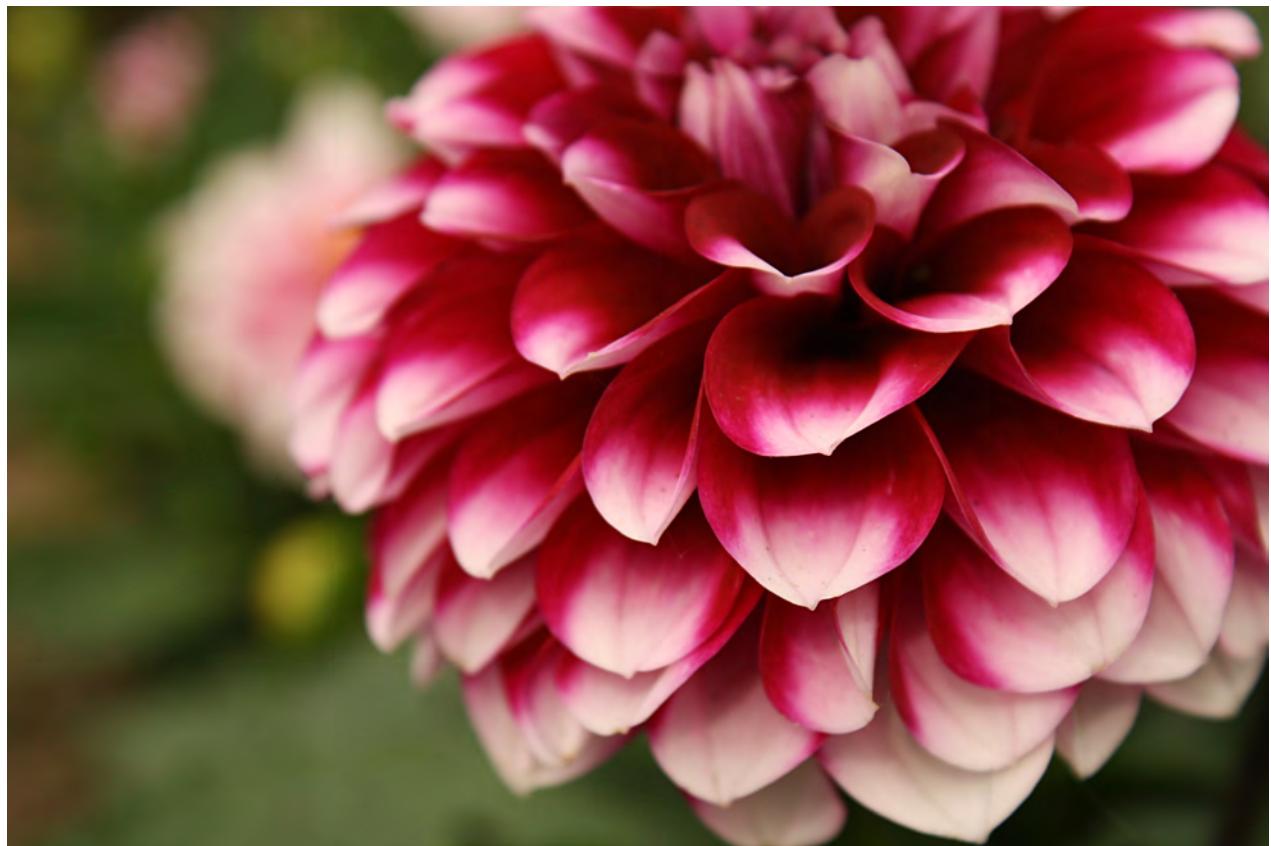
Words are the stars that fall from our lips as we speak or sing
No matter the language
The vibration of vocal cords spread stardust
And enchant the listeners
At every breath, stars collide
And the tails of comets grow with each drawn out vowel

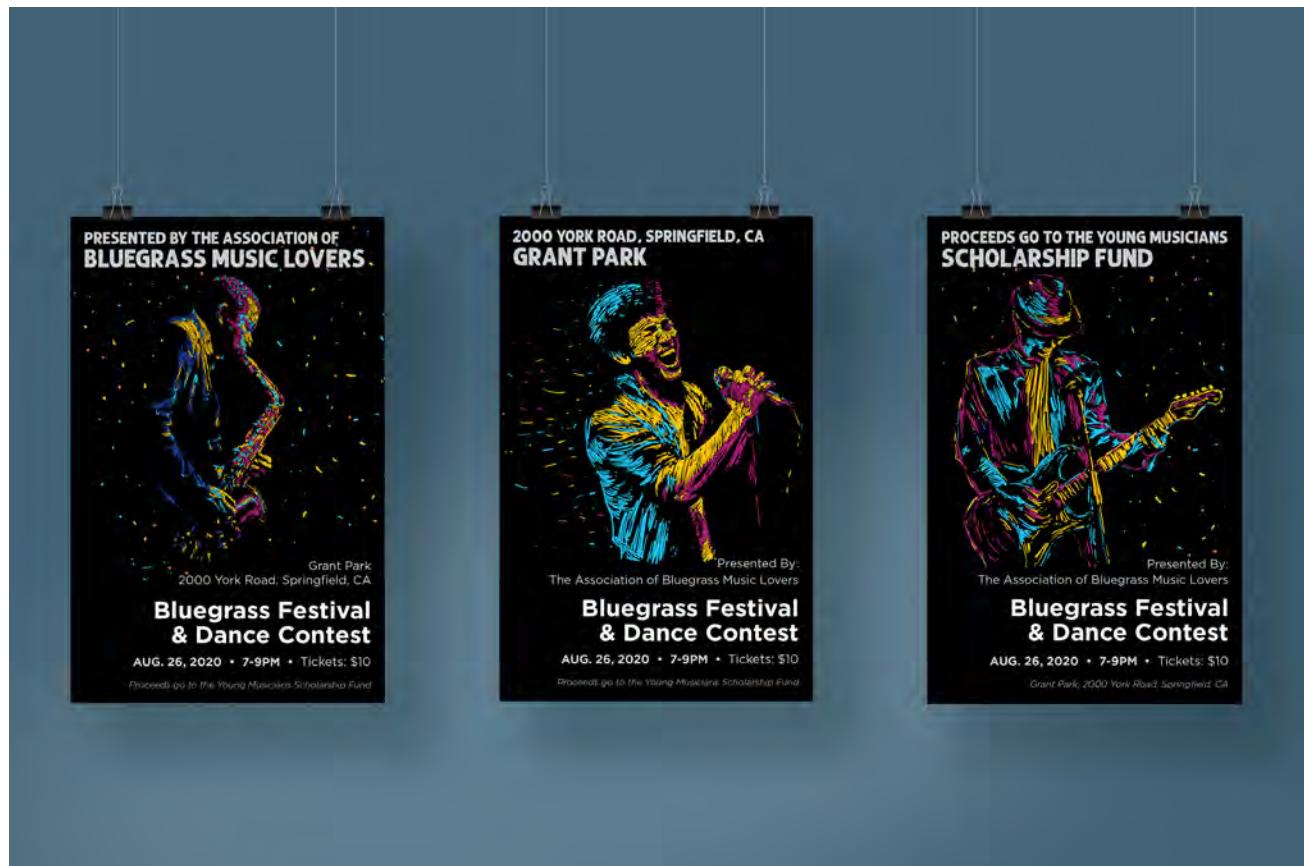
Words are magic tricks people learn with sign language
Each movement of the hand capturing the attention of the onlookers
Their eyes wide in wonder and smiles full

Words are the peaks conquered across a page full of braille text
The exploring fingers slid across each mammoth mountain and bottomless basin
Thirsty for knowledge, they survey every nook and cranny

Words are the spider webs that connect us all together
Each connection brings people and families together, and holds the hands of lovers and
friends
Words are the race horses racing across the sky with the falling stars
Giving everyone knowledge, magic, love, and a voice

Petals Fade | **LIZZY BUSCHER**





Guatemalan Girl with Her Weaving | **ANNE NELSON-FISHER**



The heavy air matches the weighted penmanship on the staff
Branches and clotheslines draw lines and spaces on the lazy, summer sky
Clouds of quarter notes wander aimlessly
As the birds and the orchestra sing through the humid air
The idea of campfires and kayaking swirls among the woodwinds

Sharps and flats fall off the page like leaves from trees
Apples and pumpkins crescendo as yellow school buses fly with the birds
Who're migrating South with their oboe solos
Lonely porch swings cry ballads in the autumn breeze
And the smell of cinnamon with nutmeg wafts from Grandma's kitchen

Staccatos and legatos dance on the bitter wind
Landing on eyelashes and hair of owners with red noses and cheeks
Children wrapped as gifts stumble through the frosted countryside with sleds gripped in their
gloved fists
And the jolly eyes of parents gaze through the window at skyscraper pines and stalactite icicles
Winter's chill kept at bay by the eighth notes of laughter and smiles

Light tiptoes through bright new leaves
A slurred, flute breeze skips along falling petals
The spring smell floats with the trills of French horn birds and their new chicks
A bright bobber swims on the freshly melted surface of a lake as shrieks of joy fill the air
Each moment lasting longer and longer as a ritardando grows into the final double bar line

Girl and Her Dog | **ELIZABETH HEINTZEMAN**



Reading came to be less and less as you entered my world.

Your soul, the endless book I wanted to read.

Losing myself in pages filled with you

Slowly you erase me, denigrated as pages would collect my tears.

After being brace enough to leave, I started a new book.

Not a new chapter.

I burned the old book, along with you...

Leaving let me love myself the way I needed.

Thank you for that even if you caused me pain, Thank you.

Reading every day, losing the memories of you more and more.

Samantha Mrazek

Things You Would Say to Other People, so You Should Say Them to Yourself, Too

You look good today.
Plus, I love your sweater.
Hello, I wanted to say
Your skin thrives in this weather.

You are a wonderful friend.
Your kind heart is sincere.
I want our time to never end,
Because I enjoy you here.

Your eyes are beautiful,
My dear.
Your laughs are plentiful,
And music to my ear.

You are valued,
You are precious,
You have wooed
And refreshed us.

More than your weight,
More than your features
It's not up for debate.
In yourself, be a believer.



Through the Rain | **SARAH GORVIN**











Perched high in a tree
A barred owl scans the earth
Searching for a meal

Peeking from a hole
A thirteen-lined ground squirrel
Sprints across the grass

Lingering nearby
A female black bear with cubs
Sunset approaching

Silence to chaos
The owl spots the squirrel
As the hunt begins





It was two in the morning and while the streets continued with their nonstop noise, inside there was a dead quiet, that was until a sharp ring pierced the silence of the small house. Blindly reaching out she grabs her phone and answers the call, still too near to sleep to react properly.

“We need you again.”

Four words is all Celeste heard before the call was over as quickly as it had started, and the silence of the house returned, but only for a moment as the rustling of sheets and the creaking of floorboards filled the air. It was a voice she hadn’t heard in almost five years; one she was content never hearing again, at least while she was awake. The voice had plagued her worst nightmares—sounds of his screams and flashes of blood haunted her almost nightly, but that was then. Now she made her way down the hall to the room where slept the reason for leaving it all behind her. Celeste stared through the dark room to the small girl sound asleep without a care in the world.

Two arms wrapped around her, pulled her out of her thoughts and back into the present.

“You didn’t think I wouldn’t notice you get out of bed?” Sleep filled her fiancé’s voice, not that she heard it much, her mind still too focused on the phone call.

“He called me, Maddox.” She turned and looked up at him, her turquoise eyes meeting his hazel ones. “He called me after everything and said he needed me... how... what do I do here?” Her voice was shaken and rough, so unsure of the words she spoke.

“You come back to bed and sleep on it. Whatever problem your brother is having will still be there in the morning. C’mom.”

With one last glance at their daughter, Celeste allowed herself to be pulled back to their room and back into their bed. She tried; she really did, but no matter how hard she wanted to fall back asleep, her mind whirled around. Orion’s voice repeating the words he said to her, “We need you again.” For what? What could be so dire that he needed her again all these years later. What could he not handle alone?

The sun peeked into the house a few hours later. The noise outside elevated as the world around her woke, and, in thinking about what it all means—the children getting ready for school, their parents for work—she knew that she had to go back. If he needed her it had to be important, that her little family wouldn’t be the only ones at risk.

Later that day the goodbye was the hardest. Fay just didn't understand why mommy had to leave, while Maddox understood all too well that this could be the last time he'd see Celeste alive. Putting them together is what made it unbearable, neither parent able to say a proper goodbye without Fay getting too much of an idea of the gravity of the situation. She forced herself away from them and into the car waiting to take her back to something she'd left for a good reason. She took a deep breath while resisting the urge to look back, knowing that while she wants to see them one more time, to watch them fade into the distance would be far more painful. To distract herself she picked up her phone and called the man that put her in this mess to begin with.

"I knew you'd make the right decision."

"The right decision?" She bit back, "Why don't you try explaining to my daughter why mommy has to leave? Or better yet you be the one to tell Maddox what happened if I don't make it home." She doesn't know if it's unfair to him to be this angry. Maybe it is; after all, he is the one that pulled her away from the new life she built, and it is his fault she almost lost it before she even had a chance to have it. "The last time we worked together I almost died, not only endangering my life but also Fay's, so who the hell are you to call me up in the middle of the night telling me that you need me?"

"You're upset. Celeste. I wouldn't have called if I didn't truly need you, but this is something I can't do without you." She couldn't tell if he was sincere; chances are he wasn't (too overconfident and egotistical for such a thing).

"Well, you've got me, I'm on my way and ready to be briefed when I arrive."

There was a brief pause before she heard his voice again. "Isn't it funny, for as much as you wanted to get out, you didn't even move a full hour away." Hitting Celeste once more with the sincerity, she was starting to wonder if he really meant it. "I'll see you when you get here." And with that the conversation was over and she was left with her thoughts for the rest of the drive.

Watching the estate come into view was a weird feeling: on one hand it held so many bad memories that she fought every day to move past, while it also held many more good ones. Ones of her parents, and her brother, of sleepovers with friends and secret ones with boyfriends. Where exactly does the balance lay between these two? Pulling up to the door,

she sees that he's already standing outside, tall and broad—the exact opposite of her in every way, well, except for their eyes. She steps out of the car, stops when she realizes her brother is halfway to her already, his arms stretched for a hug which she returns.

“Last time I saw you, your hair was blue.”

“And yours is still green, I see.”

“Why mess with success?” As he runs his hand through the aforementioned hair, she can see the scars from that night creeping on his arm, peeking out from under the fabric of his t-shirt. He must be able to feel her eyes because he quickly lowers his arm and pulls on the fabric.

“I’m sorry.” She quickly apologizes, partly for staring but possibly also for seeing him venerable, even for just a moment. From then it would be easy to slip into the way they used to be. She should; her twin brother is right in front of her literally welcoming her with open arms.

“We should go inside. I know Hunter is dying to see you again.”

“He hasn’t kicked you to the curb yet?” Orion laughs and wraps an arm around his sister, leading her into their childhood home for the first time in almost six years. Just like the outside, the inside hasn’t changed much, still the tall ceilings and the ornate wooden paneling, the wrought iron railing on the stairs in the foyer, the paintings are even the same. It’s eerie—so much has changed for her, but this place seems frozen in time.

Seeming to sense what his sister’s thinking, he changes the subject. “I didn’t change anything. For a while it was because I wasn’t able to and then enough time passed. I just didn’t think about it.” His eyes follow the room too, as if he’s reliving all the memories of this place along with his sister.

“Well, aren’t you a sight for these sore eyes?” A new voice echoes off the walls and his smile can be seen all the way down here from where he is on the landing, and Celeste smiles right back. “Motherhood looks good on you; it been treating you well too?” She meets him at the bottom of the stairs as he wraps her in a tight hug.

“Very well actually.” She can’t help but pull out her phone and show her brother’s boyfriend pictures of her little girl, curse of being a parent and all, having to show off your child to anyone who asks.

“She is adorable, and I’ll say this for Orion because he never will: We would love to meet

her." Hunter ends in a whisper, glancing across the room at the other man. "And I also know he thinks about what happened every day and feels horrible about it; so, cut him some slack please? If not for him then for me and my sanity?"

Of course, he has to say that when so many thoughts are already jumbled up inside her brain; of course, he has to make this already so much harder on her. She could just move forward but remembering the past is what keeps her from going back and making the same mistakes again, putting the people she cares for in danger. And after the last time, she swore she'd never do that again, she couldn't do that to Fay or Maddox. But then there's Orion to consider. She wasn't the only one that got hurt that night, yet she blames him as though the whole incident was his fault, when they both played a part in what went wrong. Maybe that's what needed to be said for it to click in her mind, that she was partly to blame in putting her unborn daughter at risk that night, that if she had told Orion, they wouldn't have gone out that night. Who knows? It's all too messy. The emotions are messing with her, the nostalgia, the everything—it's overwhelming her senses. But Hunter's words resonate in her mind and one thing is for sure: she needs to stay present, because if Orion needs her now things must be bad.

"Okay, so to start we have lunch in the dining room because your bother, one track mind of his, wants to start training and you definitely should not do that on an empty stomach." Hunter continues to ramble but Celeste's mind is too focused on Orion to hear it all. He walks differently now. What was once an overconfident swagger is now a subdued pace; he even brushes his hand against Hunter's, almost daring to hold it as they walk but not quite sure of it.

Throughout the rest of the day, Celeste keeps noticing all the subtle changes to her brother, like how when they're sparring, he takes an extra second before he reacts, almost afraid to make the wrong move. It leaves him open and at first Celeste leaves it alone; who's she to be poking at his weak spots when he's been doing fine on his own? That's not to say that as the week continues, and they fall back into a similar routine, she doesn't take advantage of that moment to strike. It was easy to fall into old habits: the joking, laughing, even her powers seem to be more at ease. She hates to say it but the more time she spends here, the less angry she's able to be with her past and with her brother. He has more scars

from more than just that night, no doubt from missions he's tried to take on alone, and it's seeing that, she realizes Orion and her are more alike than different. He has a life too; he has someone who expects him home every night too, but he doesn't get the choice to run away, to hide from the things that go bump in the night. He has to face them and hope he's strong enough to do it alone. The morning after this realization, she shows up to breakfast with blue curls bouncing off her shoulders. If she's in, she needs to be all in. For Orion, and Hunter, but more importantly for Maddox and Fay. After all, her brother needs to be around to meet his niece.

The first one to speak after the initial shock is her twin. With a smile in his eyes and a grin on his lips, he shifts in his seat and speaks slowly. "Welcome back, Sapphire." That's when his eyes shift and you can see the darkness inside him finding comfort from the light inside her, and hers the same. Her spine tingles and it feels like jolts of light calming inside her; it's the best she's felt in a long time and all from three little words.

From then on everything feels easier: she flows better while she's sparring; her abilities react calmer and smoother; the light she wields has for years been harsh and unbearable, but now it holds a soft glow in her hands. Just as potent, but at a new peace. She didn't know the conflict was raging so deeply inside until she felt it lift off her shoulders, and after a few more days of this calmness, she feels ready, she feels strong, she feels prepared. But all of that couldn't have prepared her for what Orion called her for, a task that almost destroys that peace as soon as it came, all with three more little words.

"It's him again."

The "him" that almost cost her everything, the "him" that haunted her nightmares. Australis. She sees the blood and horror that left them the last time they went up against him; then she sees Fay, her sweet innocent daughter who she almost lost because of him. It sends her head into a tailspin with her mind going over every terrible thing that could happen this time. She knew Orion was in trouble if he needed her but this? It can't be this, she can't face him again, she could lose everything again. The room feels like it's spinning around her until it all goes black.

A panic attack, that is all it was, but the fact that the mere mention of Australis sent her into a panic makes her wonder what would happen when they go to face him. She knows it

worries her brother too; she overhears Orion and Hunter outside her room once she comes to.

“You can’t go up against him alone—he’ll kill you this time and you just got back up on your feet from the last time you went at him alone. I can’t lose you Orion, I won’t do it.” It’s the most scared she’s ever heard Hunter before; his voice is low and panicked, which is something he never is. For as long as Celeste has known her brother’s boyfriend he’s always been the voice of reason in their little trio; he’s not panicked, and he’s not scared.

“I can’t exactly bring Celeste with me. You saw her, Hunter. I didn’t even say his name and she hit the ground. It’ll be more dangerous to bring her in there with me. I was wrong to drag her back into this. I’m going to go call Maddox to come bring her home and we’ll find another way.”

“There is no other way! You go in there alone and you are dead, then who will be left? Huh? Think this through. So, what if it takes a bit more time? If that’s the way it has to be let it, let Celeste get more comfortable with the idea of going up against him again...”

“WE DON’T HAVE TIME!” Her brother’s voice booms loudly, bouncing off the walls around him, reverberating and making it sound so much louder. “I’m going in tonight, are you with me or not, Tech Support?” Hunter had always been their eye in the sky going into mission, but not even in the heat of a fight had Orion referred to Hunter in that way; even in their normal couple fights, he’d never stoop that low. She hears heavy footprints walk away, ones that she’s almost positive are her brothers. With that in mind she takes the chance to get up and exit her room where Hunter is standing there, his face unreadable.

“I’ll go with him. I’ll keep him safe and bring him back to you.”

That night, for the first time in years, she suited up, her hair pulled back high and the suit that still fits like a glove, even the domino mask on her face. It should all feel foreign after five years, but it doesn’t. It still gives her the same feelings, strength through animosity, although that isn’t hard when no one knows who you are underneath a blue mask. If she knew all the feelings in the world, Celeste would say this was the best: she felt powerful, invincible, courageous, fearless, and she felt like she could take on anything. Even when thinking about Australis, she felt stronger than she had only a few hours earlier, a newfound confidence in the face of facing him. She’s scared still—who wouldn’t be—staring down the barrel of a gun, seeing the bullet that could end your life and ruin so many others. But she has to do this.

She has to go with her brother because, if she doesn't, there is no doubt he will die, and she can't live with that feeling. She can't live without Orion anymore; she was a fool blaming what happened on him. It wasn't his fault—she knows that now. It was immature to put that on him; she was looking for someone to blame and he was an easy scapegoat for what happened. Time changes perspective on a lot of things, but being back in the environment you ran away from changes it more. She stopped seeing her brother as a villain against her and started to see him as her family once again. If they survive this there'll be family dinners, and brunches, and holidays again, her daughter will grow up knowing her uncle and hopefully be young enough to forget the time when he wasn't there. That's what fay deserves, a family that's there for each other—something she thought she had given her by walking away, not realizing she was doing the opposite. She walks down to the cortex, her steps strong and powerful, her head held high. The sight of her stuns Hunter but the look on Orion's face is hard to miss. He's scared. No, he's terrified. His strides over to her are rushed and urgent, his voice low as he speaks to her.

"Celeste, what are you doing? You're not coming with. I can do this on my own." His face shows more than his sister knows he was intending. Call it twintuition or whatever, but she places a hand on his cheek and smiles softly at him, sending an assuredness with her words.

"I'm not letting you do this alone; I'm not abandoning my family again." Their eyes lock and for a minute they're locked into their own conversation, one the rest of the world will never know. The silence stretched on, though neither twin registered it, too focused on the other in front of them until they came together, and Orion's bulky frame enwrapped around his sister.

From then on it was a quick debrief, the who, what, where, when, and whys that are critical before the twins were gone, Hunter behind as their unseen backup. Like everything else this week, she fell back into the old patterns, flowing effortlessly into fighting, Hunter in her ear giving her warning—it's electrifying. And her powers seem to agree. The light shoots from her smooth and precise, when met with the darkness that is her brother it's explosive in the absolute best way possible, everything is perfectly in sync, which is the complete contrast of how they were in her last mission; the one that ended in the accident, but that won't happen this time because now they're a team, a true team.

Everything was going perfectly. They were three levels down, moving freely through the waves of security. Anyone looking in would've assumed Sapphire and Emerald were the bad guys in this situation, the way they moved through dozens of men and women, slamming them to the side as though they were rocks on the sidewalk. But these people were protecting someone so much worse than the monsters in the worst nightmares, and that put these people on the wrong side of this fight. Everything was fine till something sent them flying to the sides of the room; then suddenly, after everything goes dark, it's like she's thrust into the past.

They went into the fight, fighting themselves over a difference in how they should approach the situation, and, like always, Emerald won, and they went in guns blazing, which they both quickly learned was a mistake. Within minutes Orion was on the floor, his suit torn to shreds and his skin with it and a puddle of blood forming around him. She watched her brother screaming from the pain, hands clutched around her stomach waiting for the moment the same happened to her, instead she was flung across the room and impaled on something; the pain radiated from her abdomen and in glancing down she saw the blood covered metal extending out right above her left hip. It was the worst pain she ever felt. Accompanying the pain was the fear that her brother's stupid idea could cost her the baby's life and if that happened, she would never forgive him. The twins glanced at each other both on the edge of consciousness as a cloud of darkness covered the room. Briefly, Celeste thought it was her brother doing this—supplying them a cover—but soon their attacker made himself seen. His skin was as dark as the cloud he emerged from and in his eyes flashed lights of pink and yellow like those of the Southern Lights. He didn't say a word. He let the weight of his presence press down on the injured heroes while he lowered the darkness to consume each of them. Celeste called out to her brother, now unable to see him, to see if he was alive. She tried to reach Hunter on the coms but was met with the same emptiness as was around her; it was as if she was in her own world alone. She had no idea when the darkness lifted. She blacked out alone from the pain, she hadn't even awoken when Hunter had rescued them--in fact, she hadn't come to for almost a week, and by that time Maddox had taken her away to get better.

This time when the darkness faded, she wasn't bleeding out; neither was her brother. They were tied down, across the room from each other but facing one another. The room

though was the same one from back then, cleaned up considerably, free of debris, the marble floors shining, the whole room lit up by a grand chandelier. It all resembled a palace ballroom from a fairytale, which somehow added to the pit in her stomach. When their foe appeared at the front of the room, the lights she had seen in Australis' eyes danced around him—he was getting stronger, and, when glancing back to Orion, she could tell he wasn't shocked. He knew... no, now is not the time to get angry with him. That's how things went sideways last time. He's her brother, her twin, they're partners in this, and they need to stay united. She pulled at the ropes holding her, which is when she heard his voice for the first time—it boomed loudly, filling the space and commanded her to stop... but like she would listen to him. She kept struggling until the darkness Australis controlled filled her lungs and she felt as though she was suffocating on the air she needed. Struggling to breathe she gave up the fight against the ropes, which seemed to please her captor as she heard him thank her before she gasped with a breath. With one escape plan ruined she began to look around the room for something, some way to free herself.

"I would appreciate eyes on me." His voice, though powerful, was like a snake; it was smooth and solid, but it wasn't his words that made her look at him but the small body that he revealed next to him. The soft blond wisps that lay on the table were all she needed to see to know he had her daughter. "Relax Celeste." He knew her name, he had her daughter, and he knew her name. "Fay is just sleeping, with a little help. And she'll stay that way as long as I get what I want from you and your brother."

Hearing Fay's name slither out of his mouth sent a rage through her, and suddenly she wasn't herself. The light that she contained inside her exploded outward, obliterating the ties around her as all she could feel was the blinding rage. And as if the darkness inside Orion sensed the unrest with its twin, just as Celeste's restraints had fallen away, so did Orion's as the darkness emanating off of him magnified. They met in the middle of the room and their eyes glowed white and black respectively, but only for a minute before they both began to swirl with the colors of the Northern Lights. Stronger together is what their parents had always told her but until this moment she had never understood that. She still didn't understand why they had this ability but, in this moment, it didn't matter, all that mattered was getting to Fay. With her brother alongside her, and their hearts on the same page for

once, everything seemed easy. Hits were deflected and parried with ease; they gained ground on their enemy who fought hard to keep them at bay but in the end it wasn't enough. Still, he showed no fear as Celeste pulled him away from her child and made a move to slash his throat. She would've too—who puts their hands on an innocent child and uses them for leverage? She was fuming with rage when her brother stops her.

"If you do this, you will be no better than him. And I know you. You are so much better, you don't let hate control you. If you did you would've never come when I called you. Do not let him bring you to his level." Sincerity from Orion. She was doubting he could do that at the beginning of their reconciliation, but here it is, open and true. He's right though. She drops her hand and rushes up to her daughter, letting Orion deal with their foe. Fay is all that matters to her right now. And once she scoops up the little girl into her arms, the rest of the world around her fades way. She feels the rise and fall of her daughter's chest against her own and she realizes she was wrong. Even without knowing all the feelings in the world, this is by far the best: knowing the person you love most, the person you would sacrifice everything for, is safe in your arms. Nothing could compare.

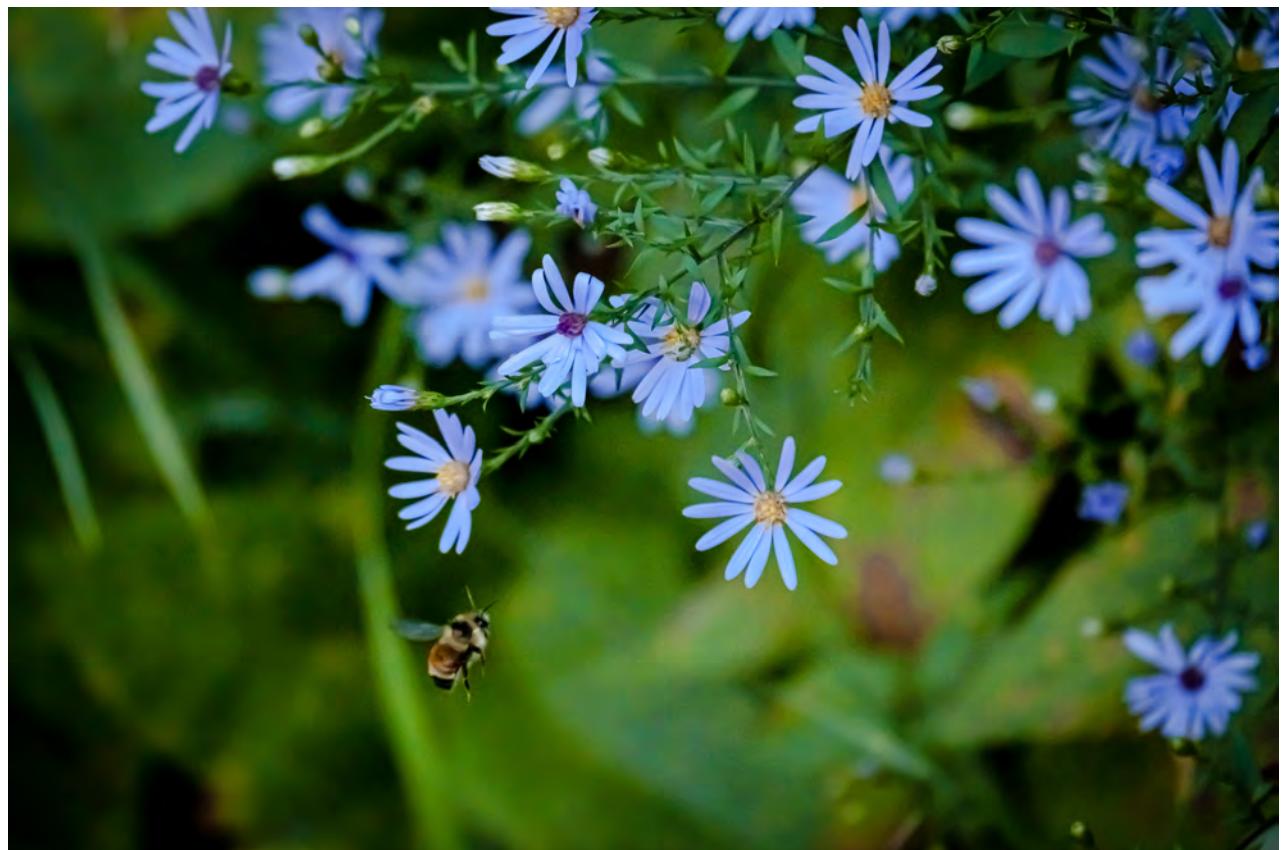
Maddox came to the house right away before Fay had even regained consciousness. What he found when he entered Celeste's old bedroom was his girlfriend still holding their child. Neither one said a word as he climbed onto the bed to hold both of his girls. They stayed that way until the four-year-old girl opened her eyes, looking up at her parents. Celeste and Maddox could see the colors that saved her life dancing within her.

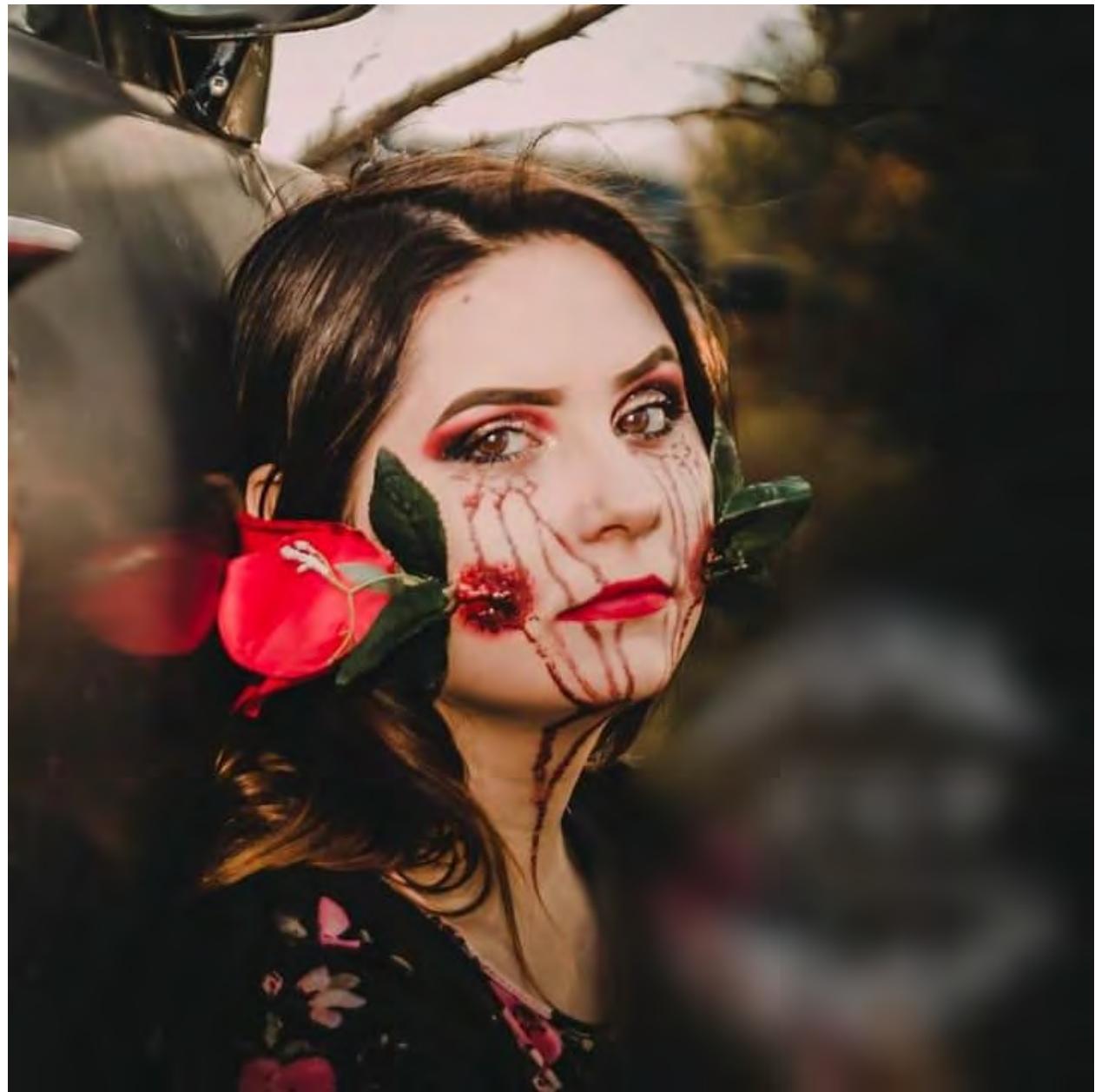
Nothing was easy from there on out. Celeste would never abandon her brother again. She couldn't even if she wanted to. As soon as Fay and her uncle met, she became obsessed, and Orion happily obliged, which made the two of them inseparable. It made Celeste and Hunter happy to watch the self-proclaimed "tough guy" melt by the touch of a little girl. And while things changed no one in their family would ever complain because even though things were challenging, and complicated, at the end of the day they came home stronger, and more united because of it. Family does that. It gives you a reason to fight so that each day can be better than the last.

Summer Fishing | **ALENA REHBERGER**









Remembrance | **SARAH GORVIN**
Illustration by
MARY SAWIN



“It’s only going to be a few days, John. It won’t hurt hiking through a little snow.” Mom threw her pack over her shoulder, stepping through the door.

Dad stood there, concerned. “I know, but what if...”

“Nothing’s going to happen. I will be home soon. I promise.”

I opened my eyes, the whole world on its side. The sky was grey and gloomy, and the trees created dark shadows against the bright snow. I groaned, pushing myself up to a sitting position. My head felt heavy on my neck. I thought back to the dream, trying to remember what Mom looked like. I couldn’t remember anything about her, not even her face.

I rubbed my head, finding a tender bump just above my ear. When I brought back my leather gloves, blood was on my fingertips. What in the world? I looked around. To the left of me, a large piece of ice laid in the snow, hints of pink on its cloudy surface. I picked it up, weighing it in my hand. It was very similar to a piece of hail, being the size of a golf ball. I looked around, but I did not see any other ice chunks. Where did this come from?

I tried to piece together what led up to me being in the middle of the snowy forest. Dad and I were bow hunting for my 8th birthday. I hit a doe, but lost her blood trail while I was looking for her. I couldn’t remember where Dad or Makwa, his Ojibwe friend, was at the time, or how long I was looking for the doe. The last thing I remember was something hitting the side of my head.

A low moan which turned into a screech made me jump, and I dropped the ice chunk. The eerie sound reminded me of an elk, but it seemed to growl and hiss at the same time. It came again, cutting the silence like shards of glass. It made my spine crawl. What was that? The sound didn’t come again. The silence, however, was even more nerve-racking.

“Logan!” a female voice called out. I turned my head towards the sound, my heart racing. I recognized that voice, but I could not put a face to it. Only a pair of mismatched ice blue and earth brown eyes appeared in my mind. The voice called out again, but it disappeared in the wind.

I shivered, my hands and feet numb, even with my warm apparel. I got up, the world

The Wendigo and the Boy | **ELENA UHLENKAMP**

swaying slightly. I widen my stance to keep myself from falling. "HELLO?" My voice pierced the silence. The cloudy sky started to darken with the falling snow. I didn't have a lot of time before dark. "DAD? MAKWA?"

Silence answered my call. My heart sped up, and my hot tears made it difficult to see. I wiped them away. Having little choice, I began hiking through the snow. It crunched underfoot, disturbing the silence. I called out to Dad, hoping he was still out there. Slowly, my feet grew a little warmer, but my voice became hoarse with so much yelling.

"Logan! Logan, where are you?"

"Dad?" I couldn't believe my ears. I ran toward his voice. "Dad, I'm here!" Snow started to fall thicker, and the wind picked up. "Where are you?"

"I'm over here!" His voice was so close. I could almost imagine being back at the cabin, the fire chasing away the chill of winter and Makwa telling the stories of his people. Dad called again. "I'm here! Just follow my voice." I was almost on top of his voice.

As I ran, the trees seemed to darken and grow taller. Their bare limbs reached out to grasp what little light was left. The sudden smell of rotten flesh assaulted my nose, stopping me dead in my tracks. I gagged, covering my nose from the stench. I looked around to see where the smell was coming from, but I found nothing. Dad was also nowhere in sight. Something didn't feel right. "Where are you?" I called out again, my voice cracking like thin ice.

"I'm here." Dad's voice seemed to come out in a hiss. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. Above me, branches creaked loudly. I looked up, and a monstrous beast fell from the treetop, landing with a solid thud. My breath caught in my throat.

The beast was close to nine feet tall, with an elongated stag like head and smoldering red-yellow eyes the size of saucers. A set of six-point antlers sprang from its head. The front part of its skull was exposed, the bone yellowed and covered in dried blood. What skin it had not covered in dirty brown fur was ashen, stretching over its frame to the point that its bones could burst out. Its ribs were exposed, showing a heart covered in frost, pumping dark blood. Its limbs were extremely long, and the beast showed signs of extreme starvation. I slowly backed away from the beast, which in turn crept forward. All I thought was the legend of a monster I learned

from Makwa. A monster who was once human, but transformed into a creature of nightmares after committing cannibalism. Wendigo.

In panic, my heel hit something. I lost my balance. I fell hard on my back with a yelp. My body was folded over a fallen tree. I frantically scrambled backwards, rolling over onto my stomach and scrambling onto my feet.

Something wrapped around my left leg. It yanked me, and I fell to the ground, dirty snow going into my mouth. I spat out the dirt and melted snow just as I was dragged backwards. I screamed, twisting around to see the long, blood covered tongue of the wendigo wrapped around my leg. I shrieked again, and the wendigo swiftly dragged me towards it.

I patted my belt, desperately searching for my hunting knife. My hand hit against its bone handle. I yanked it out, almost dropping it in the process. I gripped it tighter, my hands shaking. With a yell, I stabbed the wendigo's tongue. Blood spurted everywhere as I pulled the knife out.

The monster wailed in pain, its tongue unraveling from my leg. I crawled onto my feet, the knife still in my hand. The beast's tongue hung limp from its mouth, blood oozing out of its wound. To my horror, the wound fused back together within moments. The long, fleshy tongue slithered back into the wendigo's mouth. The horrid creature grinned a blood-soaked smile, the strange moaning screech escaping from its throat.

Terrified, I ran, weaving through the thickest of the trees surrounding me. Icy snowflakes whipped into my eyes, driven by the harsh wind. I wiped my eyes, hearing the hissing breath of the beast behind me. I ran faster, getting disoriented with the dark trees and the oncoming blizzard, frozen air burning my throat. My chest felt like it was being ripped open.

Abruptly, the wendigo swiped at my thigh, causing me to flip into the air and land hard against a tree trunk. Air escaped my lungs, and my vision grew unfocused. I felt myself slide backwards down a hill, bumping along until my feet hit against something hard. I turned my heavy head, seeing a large boulder at my feet.

Adrenalin pumping hard in my veins, I scrambled onto my feet. Pain emanated from my back and the cuts on my thigh. It made it difficult to focus and breathe. I leaned against the boulder, limping around to the other side. I slid down to the ground and hugged myself, shivering.

"I know you are still out there, little human." The wendigo's voice didn't hide its true nature. Its voice was like nails on a chalkboard, sending shivers down my spine. "There is no way

The Wendigo and the Boy | **ELENA UHLENKAMP**

you can hide from me." Snow crunched several feet from my hiding spot. I whimpered, my heart lodged in my throat, making it impossible to breath. "I can smell your delicious blood. It lured me out of my long slumber," it whispered. "It's been years since I had human flesh. I'm famished."

Something grabbed the back of my coat, hoisting me up into the air. A blood curdling scream escaped my lips. Knife still in hand, I tried to stab the thing holding me. Instead, I fumbled, dropping the knife into the snow.

The wendigo turned me around to face it, opening its terrifying jaws. Blood filled saliva dripped from its teeth, and its breath reeked of death. Its throat was like an endless frost covered pit that you couldn't see the bottom to. I squeezed my eyes shut, praying that the nightmare will end soon.

All of a sudden, the wendigo screeched, dropping me. The snow managed to break my fall. I opened my eyes in time to see another humanoid creature ripping into the wendigo's face. The wendigo whipped its head back and forth, bellowing. It managed to swat the much smaller creature off. It flew through the air and hit a tree. The trunk groaned loudly, and I half expected the tree to topple over.

The second creature got up quickly, shaking the snow off its bald head. It was much smaller than the wendigo, with leathery grey skin, and bloody, broken lips. Its large eyes were bicolored; blue and brown. Another wendigo? It seemed to be the case.

The small wendigo snarled at the larger one right before launching itself. It grabbed at the larger one's eyes. The large wendigo screamed. I looked away, feeling nauseous. The sound of shifting snow, groaning trunks, and screeches were all I could hear of the two creatures' struggle. When the sound of a woman's scream pierced the air, I turned back. I half expected to see a female when I looked. Instead, I found the small wendigo pinned underneath the larger one's claws. The large one snarled at it, before returning its attention back to me. One of its eyes were gouged out, but I could see it slowly reforming. I froze under its gaze, scared to move.

The large one stepped towards me, releasing the small one. The small one gave a high-pitched screech before launching itself at the big one. It managed to land on the big one's back, ripping into the large one's flesh. The large one wailed, trying to grab the other. In moments, the large one succeeded, grabbing the small one and flinging it away like a dirty rag. The small one disappeared into the dense blizzard.

Slowly, the large one turned back to me. With a hiss, it lunged, its mouth wide and

bloody.

The small one appeared again, knocked it to the side. The big one struggled, raking its claws over the smaller one's back and chest. For a split moment, the small one looked at me, its eyes eerily humanlike. They seem to say, I'm sorry.

As fast as lightening, the small wendigo ripped the big one's throat. Blood gushed out of its neck; the only sound it made was a gargled sigh. The small one kept ripping into the big one, swallowing bits of flesh whole.

Although terrified to the core, I couldn't take my eyes off the feeding. The small wendigo gave low groans between bites of flesh, its body becoming more taunt and seeming to grow ever so slightly. The big one didn't move or struggle. It just laid in the snow, its eyes clouded over and dark blood pooling out of its neck.

Suddenly, the small wendigo cried in agony. Its limbs made sickening cracks as they lengthened. Its head became elongated, the nose of the skull ripping the skin like wet paper, continuing to push out. Bloody antlers stretched from its head, and fur grew from the taunt skin left on the beast. Despite the obvious pain it felt, the no longer small wendigo kept eating, crunching through both bone and cartilage like a starved animal. Soon, the body of the large wendigo was gone, all except for the heart. The no longer small one grabbed the heart in its mouth, crushing it under its molars. The heart cracked like ice, and the wendigo swallowed the bloody shards. Blood dripped from its mouth. It continued to grow, shaking in agonizing pain.

Finally, it stopped growing, panting hard. It was even bigger than the one before, with a fourteen-point rack of antlers, and over twelve feet tall. It had more fur and sharp teeth than the one before, and it was just as deathly thin. It lifted its head, releasing a moaning screech into the sky, the sound shaking the trees and making the snowflakes seem to hover in mid-air.

The wendigo turned its head towards me. My breath caught in my throat, and I was frozen in place. Slowly, it walked to me, its bloody footprints staining the snow. My mind screamed for me to flee, but I couldn't move, my thigh throbbing and my body freezing. The wendigo stopped, its face inches from mine. For several heart beats, time froze. I found myself lost in the wendigo's eerily familiar eyes. Where have I seen those eyes before?

It reached out a claw towards my face. I whimpered, straining to get away. The wendigo's claw touched my forehead, freezing my skin like frostbite. My eyes became unfocused, and I could see nothing but white. Not a moment later, the creature gently removed its claw, the world

coming back into focus. It shook its fur, breaking the silence. "I'm sorry," it whispered. It turned away, bounding off into the thick snowfall. Within moments, it disappeared, and I was left all alone in a winter waste land.

Faintly, a voice called out. I strained my ears, recognizing it. However, I didn't call out, too afraid to have the same experience happen again. Within moments, however, my dad, along with Makwa, appeared. My entire body relaxed. Dad's pace picked up when he spotted me.

"Oh God, Logan," Dad said, seeing the red snow underneath me. "Are you alright?" He took his scarf off, wrapping it tightly around my leg.

I nodded. Makwa stopped just short, studying the bloody footsteps. He cursed under his breath. "We must go."

Nodding, Dad picked me up, carrying me tightly in his arms. "What happened?" he asked gently.

"A..." My words were stuck in my mouth. All thoughts and memories shifted in my mind. The memories shined and then cracked like ice, melted, then reformed. A grizzly bear charging at me, its mouth covered with blood. A woman stabbing it in the heart, then dragging the beast away with inhuman strength. She only turned back once, just for a moment, before disappearing, taking her blue and brown eyes with her. I recognized her immediately.

"Mom!" I cried, trying to get out of Dad's arms. "Mom!"

"Calm down, Logan," Dad said. He held me tighter. "You're alright."

I stopped struggling. "It was Mom! She was here!"

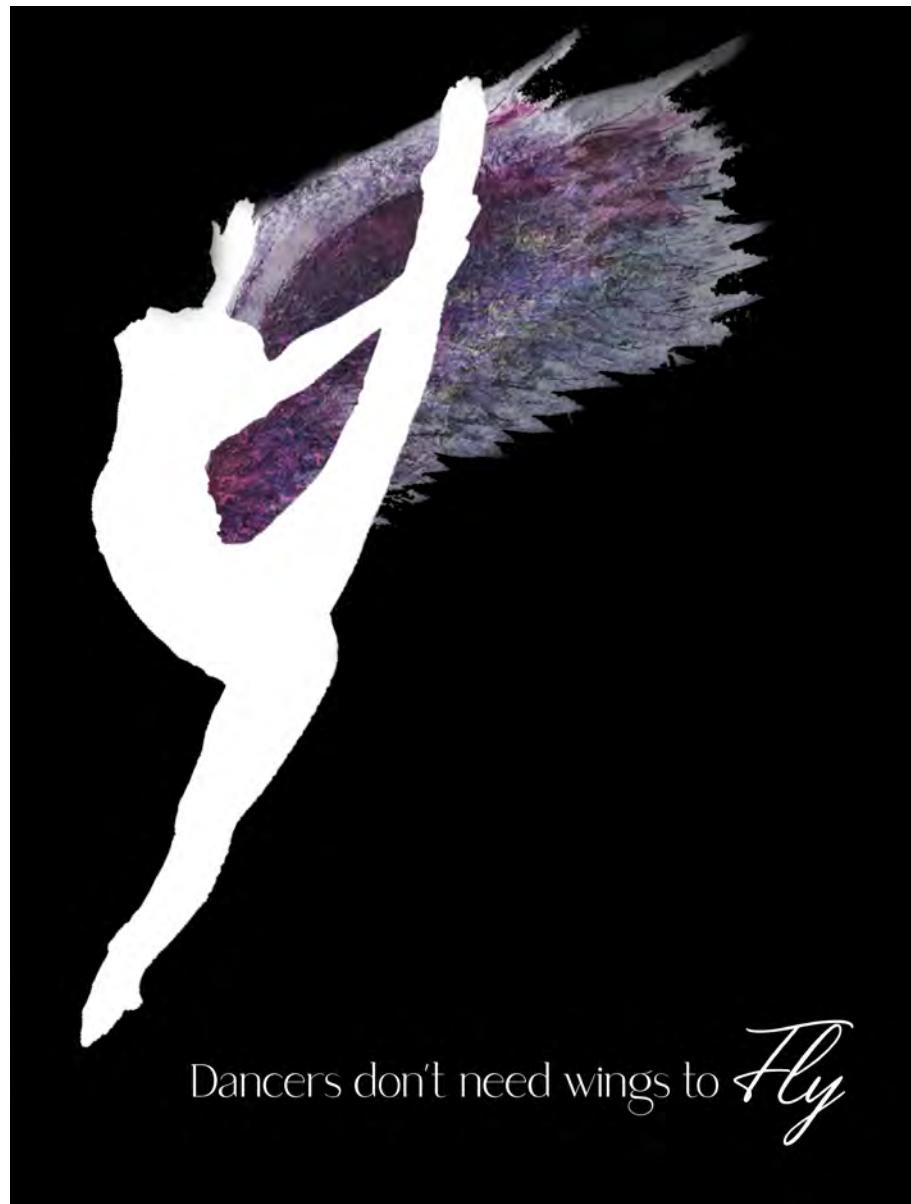
Makwa looked at Dad, confused. "I don't remember having your wife with."

"No," Dad said. He held me even tighter to his chest. "Wendy disappeared on a weeklong winter hiking trip about two years ago with a close friend of hers. A blizzard swept through, and neither she, nor her friend, returned. A year later, a passing hiker found their campsite. Only one skeleton was found, belonging to Wendy's friend. There were bite marks all along her bones. My wife's body, however, was never found."

Makwa looked back at the blood. "I would say you would never see her again, my friend. She may not be herself anymore."

In the distance, another moaning screech could be heard, and it seemed to be full of sorrow.

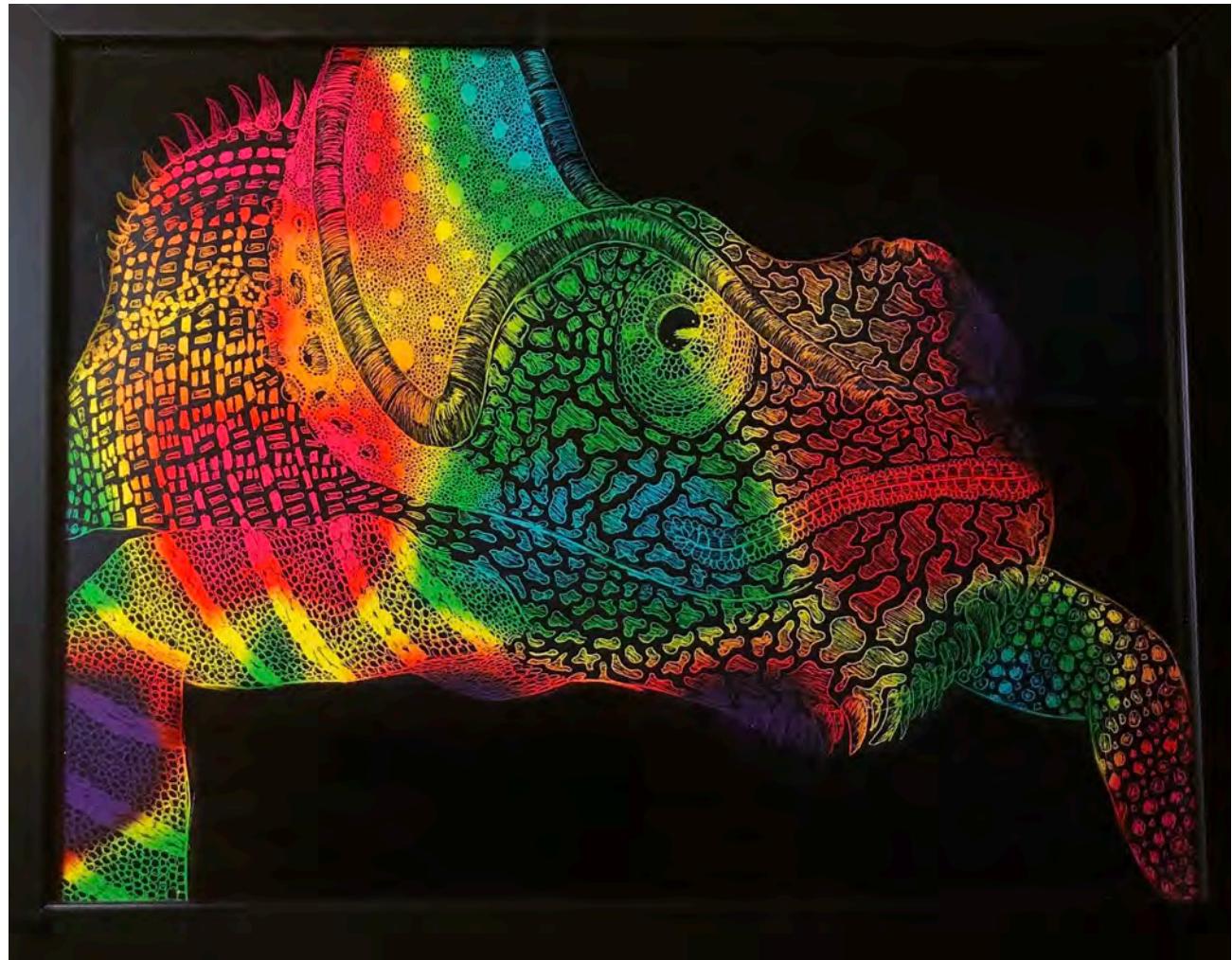
The End















Fear is an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that something or someone is going to cause pain, is a threat, or dangerous. So, are we, as a society afraid? Yes. Am I afraid? Yes. I believe the world we live in perpetuates a constant state of fear. What really matters though, is if we make the conscious decision to live in that state of fear or not.

The year of 2020 has brought on many valid reasons as to why someone may feel okay to live in fear. Coronavirus has brought a fear over many people to the point of not thinking it is acceptable to even be close to somebody else. This can become confusing because each person deals with fear differently. Some people may not be very worried and not mind if you speak to them without a mask on, while others get very tense and filled with fear if somebody is too close to them without a mask on. This is a great example of how it matters what each individual decides about a fear inducing situation, or any situation in general. That emotion of fear is always there and available to you at any moment. There are so many things in this world that you could be afraid of. You must become aware enough of yourself and the world around you to know what you are afraid of and make the conscious decision to not live in that constant state of fear. The emotion of fear is normal; we need it to survive as humans. It is when we start to operate in fear instead of faith, that we start to see the effects and emotional turmoil that fear can cause in one's life.

In Adam Mayblum's "The Price We Pay," he writes, "If you want to kill us, leave us alone because we will do it by ourselves. If you want to make us stronger, attack and we unite." This reminds me of ignorance. To be ignorant, is to lack knowledge in some area. When you are ignorant, even if something is wrong or hurting you or others, you still do it. You do what is normal to you and your world. When you receive knowledge, that is when you have the power to change. So how I interpret Mayblum's writing is this: If you want to kill something, leave it alone and feed it no knowledge. If you want to get stronger, attack yourself or others with knowledge and unite. In "Tragedy and the Common Man," Arthur Miller states, "It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time—the heart and spirit of the

average man.” If there is no “king” leading you, lead yourself. The average man has just as much power to change or make a difference in this world, as a king does.

When I think about the concept of living in a constant state of fear, I think about my own life. From my earliest memories of childhood, I can remember always being on alert and observing everything around me. I remember the feelings of constant anxiety and fear, knowing that something about my life just wasn’t right. I couldn’t put my finger on what was wrong because it was my normal. I grew up in a very divided, unstable, aggressive, and chaotic environment. My mother was an uneducated, single teen mom with three kids by the time she was twenty-two. She has suffered from a crippling drug and alcohol addiction since she was a child, causing her to fail in many ways as a mother. Before I could even remember, at roughly age 1, I was told a story about me and my mother by a few eyewitnesses.

I was crying because I wanted my mother. She was on a usual drug binge shortly after giving birth to my little sister. She was trying to hide away in her room, leaving my eight-year-old sister to care for me and my sister. After continuous crying and not being in my mother’s arms, she came out to yell at me and aggressively place me onto the couch. As she walked away, I ran after her. She turned around, grabbed me, and threw me from one end of the living room to the couch. Where I hit my head on the wall and fell to the couch screaming and crying. Then, she walked into her room without even looking back and caring for me. My sister was left to care for two screaming babies. It would be harder to believe my mother did this without having the memory myself, if this wasn’t like my mother’s character. As a young child I watched my mom beat my older sister. Out of anger and protection for both my sisters, I would jump in to try and hurt my mom in any way I could while the youngest usually blacked out in the corner or some other room. I battled my mother, myself, and just about anyone else around me. My father struggled with the same addictions as my mom, only he had money. When I saw my dad, I loved it because it was better than my mom’s. But he was a very aggressive, angry, and loud person, even after he got sober. It is experiences like these that perpetuate things like fear, anger, and anxiety in people’s lives at

a young age, making those emotions their sense of normalcy.

In James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," he says, "I could see where I came from very clearly, and I could see that I carried myself, which is my home, with me. You can never escape that." This can be scary to think about. When you become self-aware enough to see that how you carry yourself is learned, this can bring a fear over you. Making you constantly afraid of who you can become, if you choose to become like the world around you. It is not until you are conscious of the fact that those feelings you have lived with for so long that you thought were normal, are not, and they're hurting you. Now as an adult, I could choose to continue living in the cycles of fear, chaos, and anxiety. Or I could choose to be aware of the world around me, but operate in faith, peace, and joy. This is the decision that lies in front of each and every one of us.

So, do I have reasons to be afraid? Most certainly, we all do. Do my thoughts run wild at times with worries? For sure. But no matter what comes my way, I have to make a choice every day to try and bring my fears and thoughts captive to my faith that everything is working together for the good, rather than operating in fear. This is a process, not an overnight success. A decision you have to decide to make every single day, because the world will not stop giving you reasons to be fear-filled. What decision will you make today?

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