

Bent Pine

Central Lakes College

Volume 4 2023



BENT PINE

A Journal of Art and Writing

Central Lakes College

Brainerd, Minnesota

Staples, Minnesota

BENT PINE

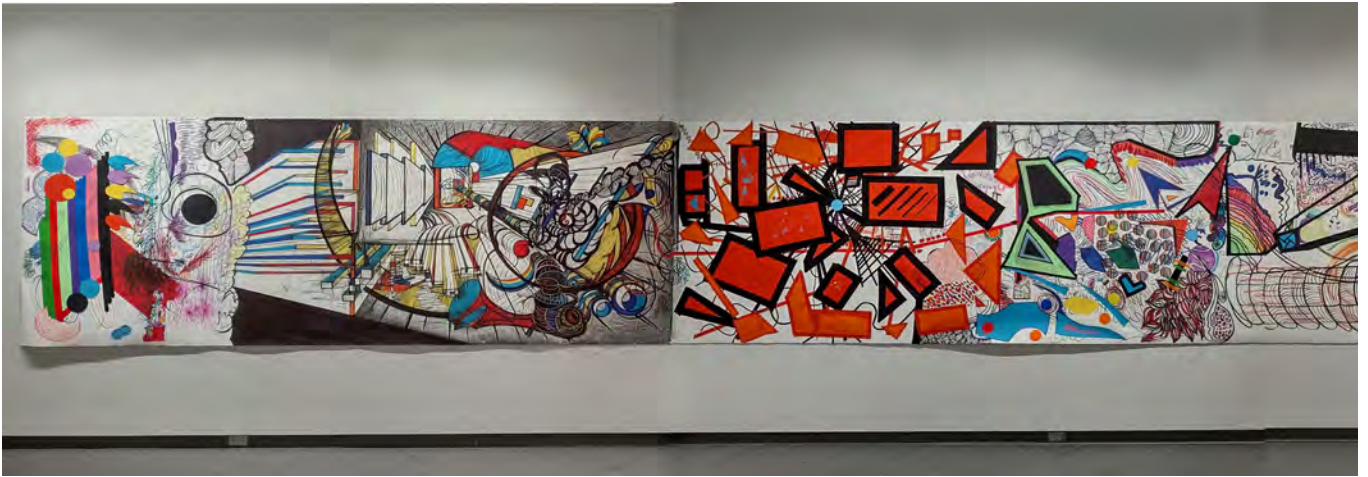
A Journal of Art and Writing

2023

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The ideas and opinions expressed in Bent Pine are those of the contributors and do not reflect the attitude of the Board of Trustees, administrators, faculty, or the staff of Central Lakes College. Content for Bent Pine was submitted by students, staff, and faculty. The pieces selected for inclusion were chosen through a blind selection process carried out by the Bent Pine Journal Club's team using Submittable.

TRIGGER WARNING: *Some pieces in this journal address challenging topics that could be triggering for viewers/readers. Where obvious, a trigger warning has been offered above the piece; however, it is impossible to predict what may be triggering to each individual who reads Bent Pine. We understand this challenge and welcome your input as we approach this sensitive issue in future editions of Bent Pine.*



Non-representational Art and Collaboration
by CLC Art Department and
the 2 Dimensional Design class
Gallery, #E422
CLC, Brainerd Campus



INTRODUCTION and ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have immense amounts of love and appreciation for the *Bent Pine* journal. My love stems from the purpose I am given on this earth, on this small rock in space: my happiness blooms with every opportunity to create art—art in as many forms as possible.

To create, understand, and appreciate is what makes life worth living and why I am finding art in every waking moment. I breathe in beauty and exhale my heart, existing to give someone the opportunity to unapologetically make art.

Bent Pine is a way for me to express myself as well as a vessel for CLC artists of all ages to fill. From the beginner artist to the acclaimed author, we have room for everyone, and that is what makes *Bent Pine* so important to the community of this college.

Payton Simonet

CLC Associate of Arts & PSEO student

Bent Pine Journal Club President

Every year the *Bent Pine* starts with no art or writing at all. We have nothing. Our inbox is empty; our pages are blank; the vessel is hollow. But then we put the call out—*send us your art, your poems, your stories, your hearts, your minds, your souls, your work, your lives*. And people do. The first submission comes, and they gather, until there are dozens and dozens of artifacts, each with a story—a process for how it was created and a reason why it was made. This commitment to transferring art from the self to the public moves us. *Bent Pine* offers emerging and established artists a place to speak. And the rest of us listen. For hope, ideas, innovation, beauty. For something that transforms us. Many people have made this project possible. On behalf of the Bent Pine Journal Club, I offer a big thank-you to each of the following:

The largest thank-you goes to Leon Dahlvang's Graphic Design Program and our CLC Print Shop who design the layout and print 100 plus copies of our substantial full-color journal. Creating this journal all in-house is an unusual feat. Thank you, Leon and crew, for all you do to make Bent Pine happen. BP wouldn't exist without you.

Also, a special thank-you to CLC art instructor and phenomenal artist, Casey Hochhalter, for inspiring CLC art students to create and submit work and for offering a critical and trained lens for how to think about art and talk about it.

And *Bent Pine* wouldn't exist without the generous support from these contributors: Bruce Fuhrman of the Art Department for aiding in the selection of art winners and sharing his art and photography expertise. Guest student judges, Alyssa Neistadt and Jesse Engen, for carefully poring through almost 200 entries during the blind selection process, alongside our club members. CLC Student Life Committee, Erich Heppner, and Student Senate. The English Department—Jeff, Leane, Ryan, Kate, Matt, Adam, James, Lori-Beth, Julie, and Laurel for cheerleading the project and selecting writing winners. President Hara Charlier, Interim Vice President Mark Johnson, Liberal Arts Dean Anne Nelson-Fisher, 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's Videography Program and Brent Balmer for live-streaming our event. 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 to *Bent Pine*'s first student president and Honors Program student, Desirae Rhodes, for stepping up the first year to lead the student voice in this project with enthusiasm and devotion—you helped me to see that we could really do this.

And, as always, I thank the members of the club from the bottom of my heart, for their time, commitment, enthusiasm, and belief in this project—Payton Simonet, Riley Schackman, Emma Tautges, Dashiell Moreland, and Carolyn Nix. It has been an honor to work alongside you.

Brandy Lindquist

Bent Pine Journal Club Advisor

English Instructor, CLC

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The Bent Pine Journal Club: Payton Simonet, Riley Schackman, Emma Tautges,
Dashiell Moreland, and Carolyn Nix.

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Bent Pine Logo: Mary Sawin

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.

Literature:

Linda Eiesland

What Lies Beneath

Emily Holtti

Please

Tabitha Kibwaa

Sometimes the Funeral Comes

Visual Arts:

Kylie Hurlbert

Monarch Repose

Noah Jarvis

Brave New World

Shepard Bruin

She Was Sharp as the Name of Needles

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*Faculty Selection Award Pieces



FACULTY SELECTION AWARD



Dearest Insanity,
I'm grateful
that you're only in my head thus far.
Even so, I know that one day you'll manifest before me
clothed in robes large enough to dust every corner of the room at once.
I could use you now,
if all you were to do was clean.
Alas, I fear
what else may accompany you.
My house is rather small,
rather cramped,
rather dark,
and rather lonely.
And sometimes,
if I'm being honest,
I crave a bit of love.
So,
if you will be attentive to me,
I guess I'll do as you say.
Iron your wrinkled robes.
Make your fragranced bed.
Whatever you want, Insanity.
Please,
just stay.

SHEPARD BRUIN

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

SHE WAS SHARP AS THE
NAME OF NEEDLES



WHAT LIES BENEATH

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

What Lies Beneath?

The quick red fox pounced
Landing with a swish of her tail,
Incisors sunk into a meal for her pups.
Gray mouse thought he was safe under the blanket of new snow.
What lies beneath?

Bubbles taking a roundabout course down the river,
Caused the kayaker to wonder, straining eyes into the murky water.
Comfortably camouflaged among swaying seaweed,
The painted turtle paddles beneath the paddler.
What lies beneath?

Soft, spongy terrain, stunted pine trees,
Twelve inches of brief, healthy green, then dead.
Watery bog for miles, choked with decay,
Dehydrates a body, dissolving bones and teeth.
What lies beneath?

Cozy flannel tucked in tight, burrito style,
A little girl settles in for the night, pink tongue resting on a space.
Curls fanned on a Cinderella pillow with uncomfortable bumps,
Tonight hides a wadded note to the fairy and her first teeny tooth.
What lies beneath?

Black, solid ice, fifteen inches thick,
Supports tiny houses with smokestacks,
Trucks sporting plows, snowmobiles and cars.
Skaters glide by a bonfire, flames leaping high where Nanook-bundled folks gather.
What lies beneath?

Red, yellow, black or white,
Each of us unique, eccentric, formed
By circumstances, background, poverty, wealth, education, choices.
Sharing one thing that lies beneath,
A heart that bleeds red.

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

On every weekday afternoon I always knew my daughter was home when I heard her sing
 “Hi Horse!
 Hi baby!
 You must be hungry!”

And I cannot speak for Horse but I assume he would not reply—
 I assume he’d continue turning over pebbles in his tank
 swallowing gulps of nothing
 and my daughter would get the fish flakes

And I would smile because
 how I love to see her love!
 How I love to see her taking care of things.

Horse
 (the fish)
 he was won by my daughter at the county fair
 we watched the man who oversaw the game pull three plastic bags out of a dumpster filled with
 water
 he held them at her level
 the bags bumped against each other
 her eyes skidded to and from frantic fins
 she told me later that the one in the middle was the prettiest
 but the one at the end looked the most lonely.

Picking up on her connection
 I began googling things I hadn’t googled before:
 “Average lifespan of fair fish”
 “Cause and effect for kids”
 “Do I focus more on the dumpster part or the ‘it was a fish’ part?”
 “How to explain death to your little girl.”

I was a bit pessimistic, sure, but
 I wanted to be prepared for the inevitable.

Horse
 (somehow)
 has not died.
 Perhaps this is to spite me?

SOMETIMES THE FUNERAL COMES

(continued)

Though,
my daughter would pray over his life every night—
that was how I knew she was going to sleep.

You know
After the first three months
I'd lay in bed
listening to her prayers
And I'd worry
because it was then that it occurred to me:
death would lead to a grief I wasn't ready to explain
when the body we would lay down
was blessed
and
was well fed
and was well loved.

How would I explain to her
my baby girl
that the death wasn't her fault
that there wasn't more she could've done
that she had done everything right and yet
the death still comes
a fish is a fish
horse is a fish
fish have a path
fish have short paths
even if we love them.
Even if we did everything right.

When you have kids, there are all these little things you learn again
with them.

(continued)

It is good to sing, even if your audience is voiceless.
There should be no shame in love.
Prayer is not useless.
Sometimes the funeral comes.

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD





CUTTING A TOMATO

The tomato is red and round and I can tell it's juicy because it seems to be the perfect amount of squishy.

I set it down on the board and grab my knife,
I hesitate.

Which way do I cut the tomato?
Should I look it up? Should I ask? Do I feel stupid for not knowing how to cut a tomato?

I push the knife into the tomato and it doesn't actually cut anything. It just presses a line into the bright red skin of the vegetable.

Okay, I use the tip of my knife. It punctures the tomato and I bring my wrist down.

Oh god, oh god, what am I doing?
The tomato is leaking juice everywhere and when it's finally sliced it seems there is more water and seeds than tomato.

I cut another slice, and another and another until I have several round-ish slices of tomato sitting before me.

Dice the tomato.

I don't know how to dice anything let alone a 70% water circle of red. Okay, just slice. I cut the tomato in lines and then flip it and cut the tomato the other way.

There aren't really cubes, but there are smaller pieces.
I dump the pieces into my cup, and do the same with the next slice.

In the end my cutting board is a massacre of tomato bits, juice, seeds and pieces that I don't think are supposed to go into what I'm making.

I have no idea how to cut a tomato, I realize as I look at the carnage on my cutting board.

I dump my cube-ish tomato bits into my pot with the other menagerie of amateur cut vegetables.

It worked.

I have no idea how to cut a tomato, but in the end,
It ended up just fine.

I love you like Icarus loved the sun,
I am bound to fall,
And I will not only fall I will crash,
I will crash to the ground like meteors in the sky,
And I will cry, sobs wracking my body like earthquakes wrack the ground beneath us,
The cries of my love will echo through my heart like the bird's song in early Spring,
But I love you,
(And I will smile as I fall,
I will smile as I scream and sob,
I will smile because I got to touch the sun before I fell)
I love you like Icarus loved the sun,
Your smile shines so brightly,
And your words are like solar flares upon my heart,
I love you like Icarus loved the sun,
Full and warm and passionate,
You are my every waking thought,
I smile like a fool seeing stars in the sky for the first time when I look at you,
You brighten up my world,
My heart leaps and my lungs freeze when I see you radiate in beauty and love and joy,
I love you as Icarus loves the sun,
The warmth,
The passion,
The bright overwhelming emotions filling me from the tips of my toes to the crown of my head and
all I can think of is you,
All I can think of is your words,
And your smile,
And your touch,
I have flown to the highest reaches of love,
And I love you,
I love you,
I love you,
And I love you like Icarus loves the sun...

SHE WOULD ALWAYS DRAW EYES



I shut every door
close every window.

I tell the air
to leave me alone.

I didn't need it anymore.
I have no use for it.

I tell the light
to leave me alone.
I do not want to see it anymore.

—an end in sight

ERODED WILL







Douglas, groggy from sleep, opened his eyes. Wincing in pain, he sat up from his thin cloth, which lay on a wooden bench connected by rusted nails to the wall. Come to think of it, it might've only been rust. With a good stretch, and a snap that could easily be mistaken for thunder, the pain was relieved. Douglas looked out the window over his bed, and it was still too dark to see anything but the warm glow of the wooden lamp posts that lined the street. They were too dim to illuminate anything but themselves; they might as well have been glorified candles on the ends of sticks. Douglas lay back down on his back to sleep for whatever remained of the night, but he was interrupted by his growling stomach. Eyes closed, Douglas remained on his back, hoping the sounds of his empty gut wouldn't keep him awake, but again it grumbled. He rolled onto his side away from the window, but it changed nothing. No matter how he tried, there was no way he could get back to sleep. Not when he was as hungry as he was. (His bed being stone-cold and stiffer than a board wasn't helping anything either.) He sat up with all thoughts on food. He had made up his mind.

Douglas grabbed a lantern designed by his friend, a master in magic. It looked like a tiny bird cage with a handle on top and a weighted base. Nothing inside looked like it could produce light. On it was an engraving that read "Douglas the Determined." He smiled at the sight of his name. He lifted the object up with one hand, and with the other, he snapped beneath the base. As if acknowledging his request, the bars of the lamp shot beams of energy towards the lamp's center, which merged into a spherical form that cast a light so bright you could faintly see the house across the street from Douglas's. He waved circles counterclockwise with his hand at the lamp--it dimmed to a brightness that wouldn't blind him.

The light was still enough to illuminate his house, contained in one mediocre-sized room. From the bed, Douglas could see his kitchen on the other end of his box-of-a-house. It had a woodfire oven and stove, shelves where his spices would go if he had any, and cupboards with locks in case anyone were to steal from him (a common occurrence). His suit of armor that passersby could see clearly across the room from the window gave people the idea that he had money to spare. He did, but there just wasn't enough to go around or to pay for better housing. Just enough to pay for food that won't poison him and repairs for his armor and weapons so he could do his job properly. He was hoping that his continuous tributes to the king would earn him a life like a noble's: lounging in their ivory towers on their beds of silk and cotton, savoring the taste of a greasy leg of lamb bathed in spices galore. It's not like the nobles did anything special

MIDNIGHT SNACK

(continued)

to deserve the good life, but the reality of the caste system wasn't in his favor. A bit of extra coin and that's all he gets in return for embarking on quest after quest and staring death in the face more times than any one of his neighbors could count. A life of nobility was a far-fetched dream that Douglas was determined to achieve.

Wielding the magical lantern like a weapon, he walked through the decaying doorframe of the door, which he locked behind himself. Strapped to his belt—yes, he had a belt—was a leather pouch containing a portion of his royal earnings. Next to it was a dagger, which reflected the light from Douglas's lantern, just in case anyone were to try anything pick-pocketey so late at night. He heard word of petty thieves stealing from the people in his part of town, so even though no one in their right mind had the guts to cross Douglas the Determined, he was ready for anything.

It was great as far as late-night strolls go. The cool night air, the starry sky, the view of the king's castle far above the horizon, the dim glow of the streetlights, the fact that he was using a magic artifact crafted by his friend to light the way... It was a gorgeous stroll. Of course, it all ended with his arrival at his destination: the bakery. Douglas snapped beneath the lantern, causing the light to seep back into the bars. He opened the door, ringing a tiny bell above it, causing the shopkeeper who was sleeping blissfully with his head resting on the countertop to snort into the land of the awake. Population: 2. He didn't quite recognize Douglas in the confusion.

"Unhand that loaf, thief!"

"A warm welcome to you too, Richard."

"Douglas!" He fumbled upright to greet his best customer. "Another case of the late-night munchies, I assume?"

"Munchies like you wouldn't believe." Douglas set his lantern down by the door. "I couldn't rest knowing that I could be snacking on one of your legendary loaves instead."

"Friendly as we are, I got a business to run here, so flattery won't get you the dough. You gotta hand over mine first."

"Busted." Douglas undid the twine binding his coin pouch tight and reached inside of it. He pulled out two coins, one of gold and an engraving to a man with a magnificent beard and bejeweled crown, and the other... the exact same. He tossed the coins to Richard, who caught them neatly.

"Only the best for the best, I see." "I like to call it 'the usual.'"

"Stow the boasting, hotshot. I'll get it out for ya."

(continued)

As Richard disappeared into the pantry, Douglas had a chance to take a look around. It was a nice place, fancier than most, mostly because of Douglas's payments and tips. It even had two windows! Most folks were obligated to one window per building, but any more was a true sign of wealth. The place was floored with swirly marble tiles, dotted with wooden waiting benches, and covered with crumbs. A sweet, fruity aroma caused Douglas to perk up. Richard came back into the room cradling a burlap sack.

"One luxury loaf, still warm from this evening, baked with only the finest blackberries, walnuts, and more from this year's harvest. Don't forget to return the sack once you're done with it. We only have so many."

Douglas took hold of the sack. The sweet scent was even stronger with the bread in his hands. "Will do. Take care, Richard."

"Good night, Doug."

Douglas strode back out into the night, bread in one hand, lantern in the other. He opened the sack and took a peek inside at the luxury loaf. It was *indescribably wonderful*. He closed it back shut to save the meal for home, and to prevent anyone from trying to describe how wonderful it was . . .

The smell was so powerful that it felt like he was walking a whole new street, even though he knew exactly where he was, which was the same path he took to get to the bakery. The mountain-top castle you could see far above the horizon was behind him now, and the breeze blew against his back as if hurrying him home. Douglas reinspected the items in his hands: a lantern of magic you don't even need to touch to illuminate, an *indescribably wonderful* loaf of bread he considered a late-night snack that cost two units of the highest currency in the kingdom, not to mention the whole pouch of them he kept on his hip. Maybe he did in fact already have the good life, even with the better life just out of reach.

Douglas entered his home more fulfilled than when he had left. He had *indescribably wonderful* food, a bit of exercise, and a newfound appreciation for the life he already had. He sat back down on his bench of a bed and took the luxury loaf out of the sack that held it, which he set at the foot of the bed. He retrieved the knife (he only had one, though he could buy more) from his silverware cupboard (not a drawer) and cut a perfectly-sized slice. He took a bite. The bread was soft, slightly crunchy where the nuts were, and sweet and gooey where the fruit was baked into the bread. The saltiness complemented the sweetness of the berries. He tried his hardest not to describe it, yet he couldn't help but fathom how *indescribably wonderful* that slice of bread was.

MIDNIGHT SNACK

(continued)

When he was done, Douglas had only eaten a third of the bread. He got up, setting the bread aside. He then went toward his set of armor, which had scratches covering nearly every inch. Douglas shook hands with the lifeless figure, causing the gauntlet to detach from the armor. He put it on and then took his hand back out—now holding a key, which he used to unlock his pantry cupboard. The satisfied knight placed the bread inside, closed the cupboard door, and locked it. Dropping the key back into the gauntlet, he reattached the glove to the armor set. It was a brilliant hiding spot.

Douglas lay back down onto his bed, pulling the covers over and resting his head. He snapped beneath the lantern, turning it off, and plunging him back into the same darkness he started his midnight journey in. Reflecting on how nice his night was and how indescribable his meal was, he drifted back into the land of dreams.



Shepard's fan art is of the character Gabriel, designed by Andrei Mishchenko for the video game ULTRAKILL, which was created by Arsi "Hakita" Patala.

SUNRISE RIDE



This is an excerpt from a longer story.

Somnus. A boy, one of a thousand others, slumped at a cold steel desk in front of a monitor, watching a broadcast about New York City, “the city that never sleeps.” But in this world, Idem-Dissimilis was, “the planet that never sleeps.”

The bell rang; it was 3 am exactly. Every child rose in unison and walked out of the hall in single file lines. Each had enough time to make it back to their living quarters, study, get ready, and make it back to integration training by 5 am. Every child had stood and left except one.

For the second time, Ceter had fallen asleep during integration training. It was protocol for incompetent students to be reinstructed, so Ceter’s limp body was dragged to behavior training cells by a pair of figures dressed in pearlescent white coats. In the cell, his body was prepared to receive a dose of zeraht concentrate, a supplement ten times stronger than pure caffeine.

The malnourished child had always dreamed of being one of the lucky few who made it through integration training and met the requirements for ground operation. But even with his dreams, he was too stubborn for his own good. Since a young age, Ceter had secretly stopped taking zeraht, not wanting to be slave to the Authorities, relying on them for supplements. So, he lived off of willpower and two hours of sleep nightly. Though he knew he couldn’t do it forever, it was better than having no free will . . . That was until a few months ago when he fell asleep at training.

The first shot of zeraht made Ceter feel blissful, light, airy, floating. He stayed awake for days on end. But after the effects wore off he lived in delirium, in a state between waking and slumber. With the second shot of zeraht, Ceter knew he would have enough build-up in his system to become reliant on it . . . addicted.

Both of Ceter’s thin arms were tied at the wrist as he lay on the surgical table. He became slightly conscious as a doctor flicked the syringe, readying the zeraht...but again drifted away...until bolting up, arms and neck strained from the whiplash. He’d had his second dose.

The second shot of zeraht made Ceter feel blissful, light, airy, losing track of time . . . unbeknownst to Ceter two weeks had passed, two weeks of monotonous integration training, two weeks of . . . The bell rang; it was 3 am exactly. Every child rose in unison, including Ceter, and walked out of the hall in single

SOMNUS

(continued)

file lines, with just enough time to get back to their living quarters. *The effects had worn off.*

—

Ceter stumbled to his cell, grasping at walls that grasped back as though pulling him in. The hallway drifted on forever . . . walls, turning into doors, turning into hallways, turning into an inescapable prison of sleep cycle.

—

He lay in his living cell staring at the mural of shadows on his ceiling that warped into faces, shapes, living creatures, that jumped into reality with the intention to kill. He flung himself from his bed and fell onto the floor, senseless.

—

Waking up in the bright light of thousands of TV monitors, they were blinded. The light lifted him and sucked them into the screen—bringing him to a world of the unknown. Pearlescent lights shined from the cement forms all around them, skyscrapers of New York that they always saw during their training.

—

They stood in the center of the road, car horns honking around them, growing louder, lights brighter. Then they saw themselves in the reflection of a taxi, growing until they became one with it. They were thrown into the air until met with the black tar where they were met by the cushion of pillows where they were met by the cold sodden water.

—

They woke up in a bathtub becoming fully conscious and aware of their state. It stood fully clothed and dry and stumbled through hallways grasping at walls that grasped back as though pulling it in. The hallway drifted on forever . . . walls, turning into doors, turning into hallways, turning into an inescapable prison of . . . black.

—

It crawled through the darkness towards the light of a monitor, arms bowing under its own weight. The light only grew smaller, until its eyes were opened. It sat criss-cross on the cold cement floor watching a boy.



THE AEGIS



Eyes. He had the eyes of a kind, caring man that would do anything for you.
Move the world for you.
Eyes that show, "I'm here for you, for whatever you need."
Eyes that say, "You can trust me." And by that moment, you do. You trust him with every fiber of your being, every piece of your soul because of those eyes.
Eyes that were carved and colored by angels up above.
Eyes that make you believe once he spots you, you are safe with him.
Eyes that would make you, persuade you to, tell him anything and everything dark and terrible and good about yourself.
Eyes that make you feel like you have home to come to, a home where violence, struggles, chaos and danger can no longer exist because of those eyes.
Many times, we hear eyes are a window of a person's soul and man, did I believe that when I saw his.
Until behind those beautiful colored eyes, all I saw was nothing.
Those eyes didn't have a soul—those eyes didn't make me feel safe, wanted, not alone anymore.
Those lights behind his eyes were gone.
Those very lights I saw when I first met him all those years ago were no longer in the man I love.
Only darkness had taken over.
I look at those beautiful eyes and I don't see the man who made me feel like home. I don't see the man that made me smile every day.
I don't see that man at all.
Darkness was all I saw and the only thing that remains.
Darkness and a bullet inside.

MOVING NIGHT





LILY OF THE VALLEY





LONGINUS SEES

When ordered to put my lance into the side of the crucified Jew,
The other soldiers mocked me again for my lousy vision...cataracts, katechon.
I had to squint to put the tip above his lowest right rib, but the shaft
Moved on its *own*, pulling away from me, and into him. The gush
Of water and blood covered me, and when I wiped my eyes clear,
I tasted salt, smelled roses, and
I could see the world again, like when I was a boy.

When I proclaimed loudly who he was, the Prefect slapped me so hard
I saw stars, and my head was spun towards Jerusalem.
I saw Pilate's wife weeping, wringing her hands about the dream,
I saw the curtain tearing top to bottom,
And all his apostles, except for John, running in ten directions.

As the skulls of Golgotha began to rattle with the earthquake,
I glimpsed in the distance, bedimmed by the eclipse,
A crowd of tiny boys, hundreds of them emerging
from the cemetery, the Holy Innocents Herod
Slaughtered so many years ago, coming towards the Cross,
Towards his mother, into whose arms Yeshua was placed when they took him down.
I drew close, and helped clean his body before we put him in the tomb,
And the children, raised from the dead, encircled us in silence,
As the world began again.

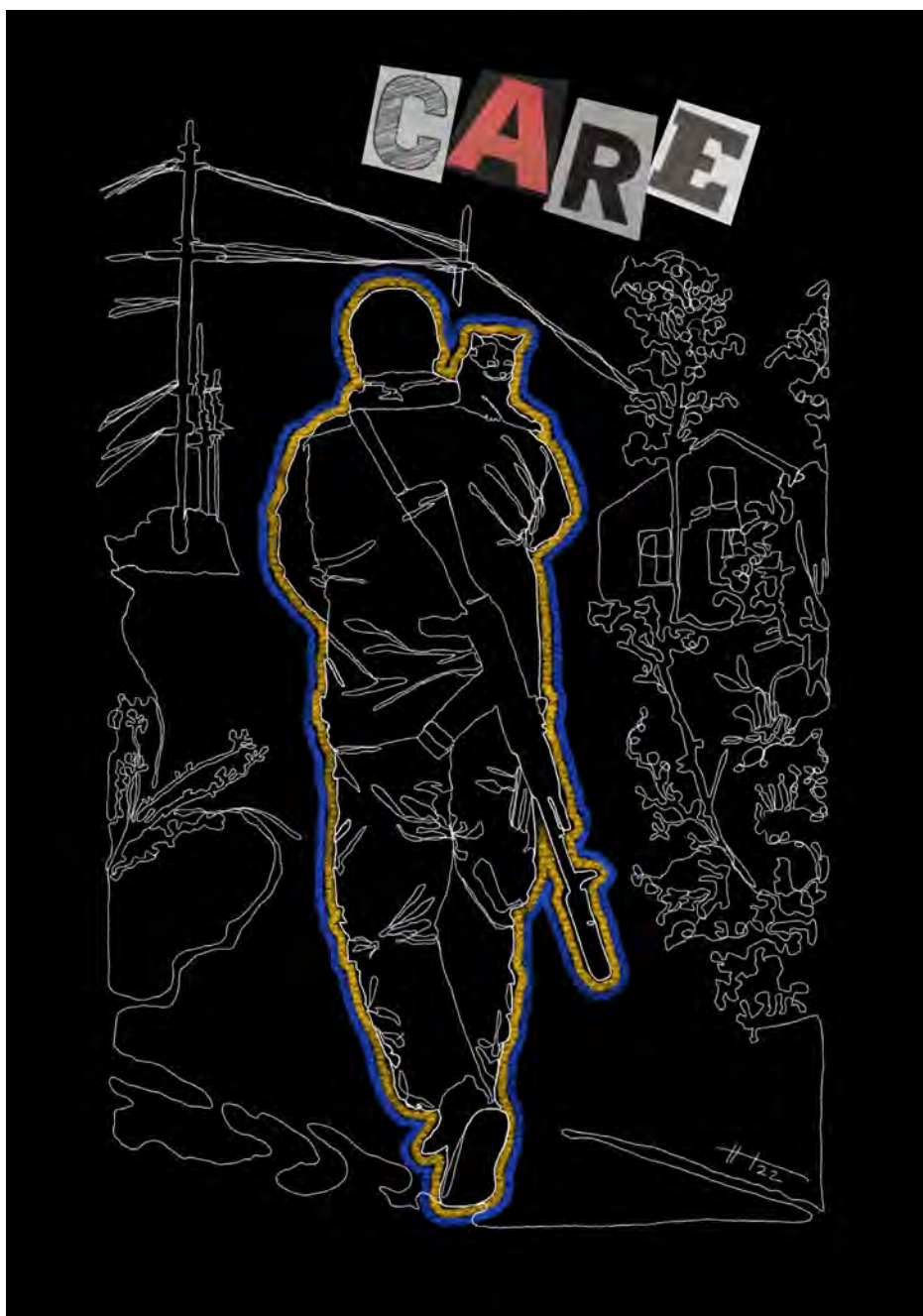


UNBREAKABLE UKRAINE:
DEVOTION





UNBREAKABLE UKRAINE:
CARE



Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap.

"Hey Julie Jo, what's that incessant tapping?"

"You can hear it?" I asked, stopping mid-step. Maggie and I were on our way to see two of our favorite English instructors, Ryan Deblock and Matthew Fort. Maggie (pronouns "they, them, their") and I graduated from Central Lakes College's new Honors A.A. Program. For two years we challenged each other and our instructors. Of the dozen students who began the program in 2010, only Maggie and I earned our degrees in 2012. At graduation, we promised to keep in touch, and as often was the case, lost track of each other. In 2022 plans were made to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Honors Program. The Honors Committee suggested the first graduates say a few words. Maggie and I did not disappoint. After leaving the stage, we chatted through the rest of the celebration. Before parting ways, we hugged, and again promised to stay in touch. We kept our promise through calls and emails until Maggie decided to return for a late winter visit.

"Are you okay? You look like you saw a ghost?"

"Oh, Maggie, you have no idea! I hear that tapping every time I visit 'Your Fortship.' No one else seems to hear it. Did you hear which room it came from?"

Tap tap tap tap tap tap.

"This way, it's coming from the conference room." Maggie raced through the open door and pointed to an old-fashioned typewriter. "It looks like the typewriter is causing the tapping. Maybe it's stuck or something. What does the paper say?"

"Help me please," I read the words that clung to the still-moving paper. "What do you think this means? Who do you think typed this?"

Maggie took a step towards the counter. They were almost to the machine when...Tap tap tap tap tap tap. Maggie took one more step forward and read the word as it appeared on the paper. "Charlie. It says Charlie. Who's Charlie?"

We both took a deep breath. "Do you think," Maggie began, "it's him?" Without missing a beat, I knew who "him" was. At graduation, one of the retired instructors told us that a student, at what was then called Brainerd Junior College, had disappeared in the 1960s, before Deblock and Fort were even born. This student's ghost supposedly still roamed the building. In the fall of 2011, Maggie and I tried to learn anything we could about the student and the circumstances surrounding the disappearance. Then we graduated, and I forgot all about the rumor—until this moment. Apparently, Maggie didn't forget.

"Umm." My thoughts were interrupted by the pluck of the keys. Tap tap tap tap tap tap

CHARLIE NEEDS HELP

(continued)

tap tap tap tap tap. The conference room lights flickered and the doors slammed shut. I was super freaked out and at the same time, curious. Curiosity won out as I read the words to myself.

"We need to leave now, Maggie." I grabbed Maggie's hand. The lights went out, leaving the emergency exit sign as our only light. I tried to guide Maggie to the door. They wouldn't budge—neither would the door.

"What does it say, Julie Jo? I need to know what it says."

"We need to go, now!"

"Not until you tell me. I'm not afraid." Maggie stretched to her full 5' 4". They locked eyes with me. I gave in.

"Dead. Student. It says, Dead Student. Can we go now?" I turned and again tried to push the door open. But the doors were locked. "Let's call security."

Maggie looked at their phone. "No service."

I tipped my phone up to see the screen. My battery went from 56% down to 0 in the blink of an eye. "Umm. Any ideas?"

Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap tap tap tap.

Maggie turned on their phone's flash light and pointed it to the typewriter. "Find. Me. Please." Maggie said before asking, "How? How can we find you?"

"You really believe Charlie is here? Now?" They nodded their head. It turned out Maggie was far braver than I felt and far more sensitive to the spirit world than I imagined. They took a deep breath, put their hands behind their back, and spoke to the empty air.

"How can we help you?" It was a simple question. The typewriter took on a life of its own, like a Ouija board. We watched the keys depress one by one. Tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap tap.

"Trap door. Fort. floor."

"Okay. What do you want from us?" Maggie stood tall and spoke clearly. It was like they were a different person. The exit sign reflected in their eyes, causing them to appear red.

Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap tap tap tap tap. "Take me to my family." The typing paused. "You want us to find your body? Under Matt Fort's office? And take you to your family?"

Tap tap tap tap tap tap. "Please." We read the word together.

"But the conference door is locked. We can't get to Fort's office." The door clicked and squeaked open. I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Together again, just like old times." I tried to laugh,

(continued)

but couldn't find the humor in the situation.

"My battery is at 50%," Maggie said while turning on their flashlight.

I looked at my phone again and saw that it had returned to 56% power. I tried to dial out. "I have power, but no service."

With a beam of light ahead of us, we made our way to Fort's office. Two steps from the door, it swung open on its own. "Okay," I said. "What now?"

"We go in and look for the trap door. It's the only way to set Charlie free."

"Are you sure about this?" I asked. Maggie shook their head yes. We stepped inside. Our flashlights settled on a small rug. It was the only thing covering the carpeted floor. I lifted the corner just as Maggie's hand shot out from next to me.

"I'll help."

Together we pulled the trap door open. Maggie pointed their flashlight around the opening. "Hold my legs." They said. I grabbed hold tight. "I see a jar in the corner. I'm going in."

I helped lower Maggie to the space beneath Fort's office. They ducked their head and disappeared. "Here, take this." They pushed a goldenrod colored, dusty vase up the opening. "Don't drop it."

I put the vase on the floor and helped Maggie up. They dusted their hands off and lifted the lid. I sneezed, causing a cloud of a dark and flaky substance to float into the air. The hallway lights turned on and we could hear the typewriter in the conference room. Pulling the door behind me, I balanced the vase with my left hand. "Ready?" I asked Maggie. They nodded.

Tap tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap tap tap. Tap tap. We watched as the words appeared on the paper. "Thank you. I see the light. Go."

Maggie and I took the vase to the police station. A few months later, the vase was returned to us. "It's just campfire ashes," the detective told us. I found that hard to believe. We watched Charlie walk into the light that night. We both saw him disappear.

Maggie and I decided that the vase should remain at CLC. We kept the location to ourselves to avoid upsetting any spirits. If you look carefully in the east end, you may find a vase that looks like an urn. Inside are ashes. Are they campfire ashes? Or Charlie's? You may never know.

MEAD DROUGHT





PLAYING IN THE DIRT





UPON SEEING PICASSO'S "CAT CATCHING A BIRD"

You might imagine my pause
when you hung a window-size,
framed print of Picasso's "Cat Catching a Bird"
above the headboard in our bedroom.

Overlooking our queen-size bed, now,
is a feral cat with menacing claws,
who seizes a poor bird in its needle teeth.
In the horror of gaping wound and broken wing,
the bird struggles to escape its tormentor.

Who could sleep tonight?
Who could escape the shock
of this startling scene, one of Picasso's
commentaries on the atrocities of a civil war,
now dangling from our pink speckled wallpaper?

Who could look away from the wild-eyed
feline, enlarged in the belly,
caked with mud, far away
from the pillow and the saucer of cream,
resorting to combat for survival?

Who could ignore the injurious alarm
in the fragile bird's cry,
as it's dragged away, most likely
to a shadowy corner of an abandoned shed,
wide-eyed and unprepared for such finality?



"Cat Catching a Bird" (1939)

(continued)

UPON SEEING PICASSO'S
"CAT CATCHING A BIRD"

(continued)

And is it just me tonight, lying awake
in the dark, who sees
that we've dragged ourselves
into a darkness far from a love
that once purred and stretched itself
lazily in the sun,
dragged ourselves into a hole
far away from a future
that once touched the sky,
had wings?

FAREWELL.





THE HOPE OF SPRING





INTENT



As I pin the badge to my shirt,
Pride swallows everything about me

The click of the radio quickens my pulse,
Proudly stepping into protector role

Knowing tonight could be my last,
Giving my soul to cherish the lives of others

Feeling alone around all these people,
Feeling lost but so found accepting the path

Not many understand why we walk this path,
After falling and damaging ourselves

The calling of which it's named,
Doesn't always leave a choice

It gives life to many and safety to all,
To wear it means to be good for everyone

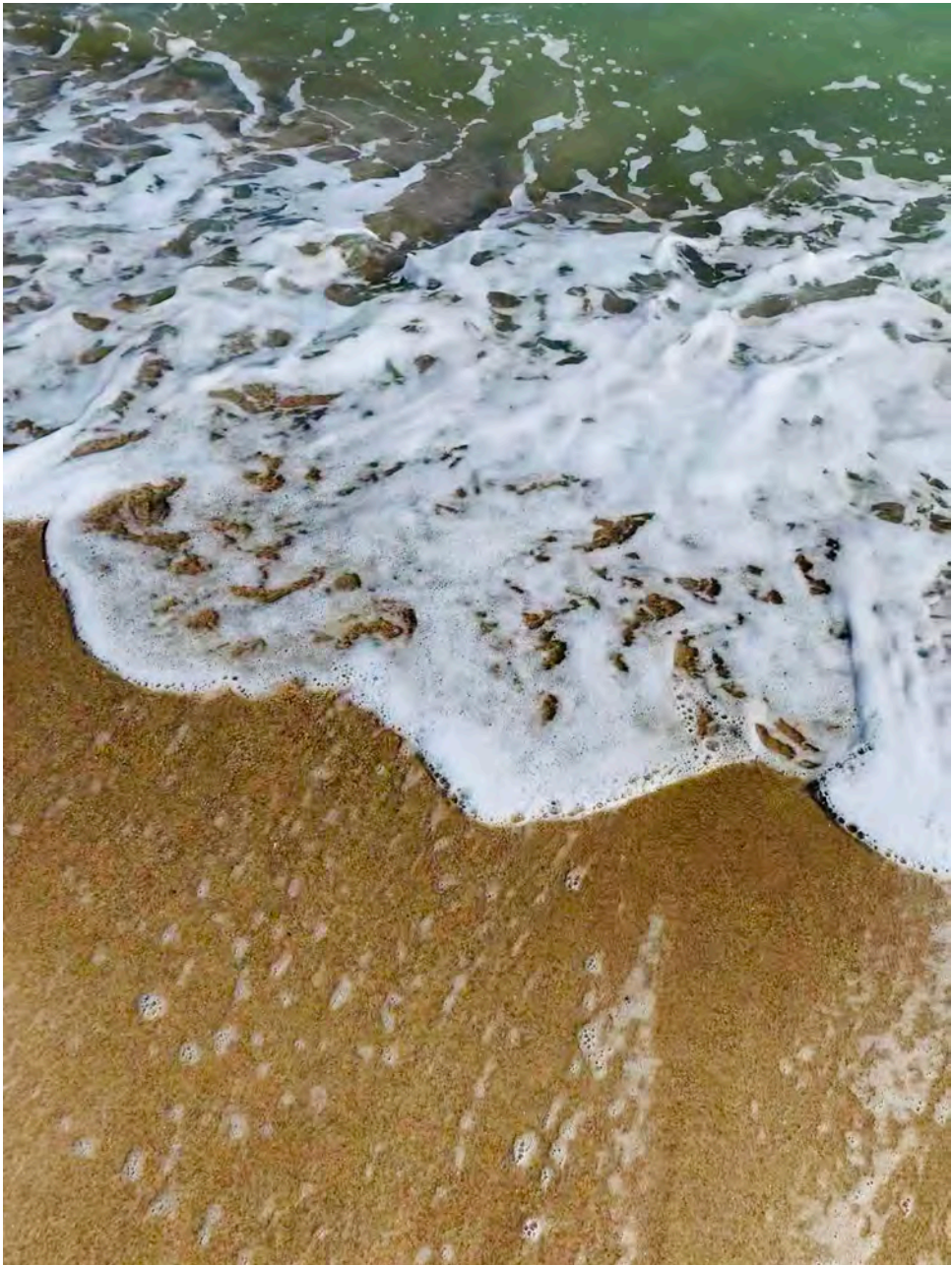
To sacrifice one's own self in spite of others and to
Be devoured by society's hate brings a special person

But to portray the protector and wear it like a clown,
Makes no one less than the devil itself

To give up civilian life for the guardian's path,
Is to wear invisible armor to shield humanity

In honor of all people's lives,
We proudly give our all.

OCEAN WAVES





I CAN'T FORGIVE YOU; I CAN'T FORGIVE MYSELF

Trigger Warning: This fictional story contains references to child abuse, sexual assault, self-harm, and suicide.

She radiated sunshine. She swung on trees. She never stopped entertaining those around her. She became the person she swore she would. She never wanted alcohol to consume her life. She told herself she would never live that lifestyle. She never even cared about a boy's opinion. A few sad events changed her. When people walk by her, a slight chill grasps their skin. She is not the girl she used to be. She drinks too much, and she can barely handle being sober. Her confidence left after every boy did. Her tears dripped along with the blood on her wrists.

My mind is a place with walls covered in memories of people I hate. These walls have not become blurry. The time did not make them fade, or even chip the paint. These walls will stay in perfect condition until the end of me.

Here are the walls that controlled my life.

Wall I: Peter

You were the first man to break my heart, but certainly not the last. I did anything to make you proud. I dedicated my life to a sport I did not love just so you could scream at me from the stands. I cleaned every part of the house just for you to yell at me for touching your shit. I watched my sisters destroy things I had never touched, but for some reason you “disciplined” me. Anna drew all over the couch, but she blamed me. Anna was always your favorite, so of course you believed her. That day you whipped me twenty times with the belt. It snaked around my tiny body. It covered my body in bruises. If I wore enough layers, the belt would not hurt as bad. Moments like this continued throughout my life.

Mom said, “You can’t hit her like that.”

“I’m fixing misbehavior,” you said. And you slid your belt back into the belt loops of your pants slowly, one belt loop at a time.

“I mean it. Stop,” she said.

You walked away and slammed your door shut.

She did not like it, but she did not know how to control you. I will never understand how you could look at a little girl and just beat the shit out of her. You decided to turn to verbal abuse, which to some people may be better than physical abuse. You use your words as weapons. Your words cut deep knives into my heart that hurt worse than any physical pain ever could.

“You put on a lot of weight since your freshman year of high school,” you said.

(continued)

I CAN'T FORGIVE YOU;
I CAN'T FORGIVE MYSELF

(continued)

"It is normal to gain weight from when you are 14 years old," I replied while fighting back tears.

I can't even eat a meal in the kitchen without you commenting on what or how much I am eating. I can't wear any clothing without you making a comment about how fat I am. You make me feel worthless in every way. I am beyond insecure, and I will never be able to fix that.

Thank you, Peter.

Wall II: Evan

I met you at fourteen years old. You were my first love, my first kiss, my first boyfriend. I put my entire heart into our relationship. You had your entire heart in it too, but then someone better came along. I was not surprised by that. Pretty much anyone is better than I am. I saw you texting her.

"She is just a friend," you said while hiding your phone.

I believed you. I believed everything you told me. Each day you started answering me slower, and suddenly your parents took your phone at night so you were not able to call anymore. I wonder if you lied about that too. I went through your phone the next time I saw you. I know that is wrong, but I am glad I did that. I found out you had been cheating with the girl who was much prettier than I could ever be. After I asked you about her, you made me feel like the bad guy.

"I feel so bad for hurting you," you said. "But you are texting that girl," I said.

"I hurt you so much I'm going to cut my wrists tonight," you said. "That's not my problem," I said.

"If it sounds like I'm trying to get attention ignore me," you said.

I comforted you after you were the one who cheated on me. That night I cut myself too. For the first time in my life, I found a way to turn my mental pain into physical instead. That will forever be my favorite coping mechanism.

Thank you, Evan.

Wall III: Andrew

I crossed your path at sixteen years old. We clicked quickly. You made me laugh, and you made me feel on top of the world. You gave me all of your attention, until you didn't. At the beginning it started with you FaceTiming me every night, telling your mom about me. You took me to the movies. You hugged me goodnight. You told me you were in love with me and wanted to marry me. Well, that did not last for long. You turned into the guy that only asked for nudes. Every night I hoped you would ask about my day.

send pics, you texted.

probably not tonight, I texted back.

please send them, you kept texting.

fine, I texted.

I CAN'T FORGIVE YOU; I CAN'T FORGIVE MYSELF

(continued)

So of course, my attention-seeking self sent them every single night. Every single night. I loved you, and I constantly needed to please you. Shortly, you asked me if I wanted to have sex. I did not really want to, but I decided to say yes anyways just to please you. I felt disgusted after I did that. I became a person I did not want to be. My whole life I told myself I would wait for marriage. You were happy after though, and that was all that mattered to me. The next day you told all of your friends. You promised you would not tell anyone. I still forgave you because I loved you. I loved you. After you got what you wanted, you told me that you never liked me or even cared about me. You just wanted to have sex. That made me realize I am only an object and nothing more. My smile did not matter to you. My laugh never made you smile. My personality lacked emotion. I was not anything besides an object to you. That is all I will ever be to anyone. I am content with that.

Thank you, Andrew.

Wall IV: Trystan

I met you at seventeen, recently single. What better way to fix my heartbreak than to go to a frat party? I was visiting my older sister at college, but I was still in high school so I had never really done anything like that before. I arrived to the party.

"You look thirsty," you said. You handed me your drink.

"I guess," I said. I grabbed the red solo cup, almost squeezing the drink out of the soft cup.

I was having a really fun time, until whatever you put in the drink hit me. I felt so sick. My brain lost touch of reality. Luckily, you offered to let me lay in your bed. All I remember is falling asleep in your bed. The next morning, I woke up covered in bruises, and I woke up feeling extremely sick. I am not sure what happened that night. I do not know if that is a good or bad thing.

Thank you, Trystan.

These are the walls that controlled my life. I gave my life to drugs, and alcohol. I spent most of my days in bed. I decided I did not want to be on this earth anymore. I fought the demons long enough. I find a gun in the drawer and put it to my brain. The sky darkens. Memories flash through my brain, but this time they are happy memories of me swinging on trees and laughing.

While all of these events are not that tragic, they affected that girl very much. Unfortunately, she has no more stories to tell. Her story ended and self-hatred consumed her. It was too late for a light to come into her life. The deep cuts turned into scars that would never heal. An innocent girl lost her way in a world full of darkness. The darkness swallowed her whole.

"A dish of raw, thinly sliced meat, carpaccio is named after Vittore Carpaccio, the Venetian painter known for the characteristic red and white tones of his work."

—The Casual Carnivore Cookbook

Barred owl, boss patron,
settles into his usual seat
above my wood pile at noon.
This is his best view of the dining room.

The snow has lain clean its tablecloth,
starched and stiff,
flattening marsh grass.
Owl sets his crooked cutlery in place.

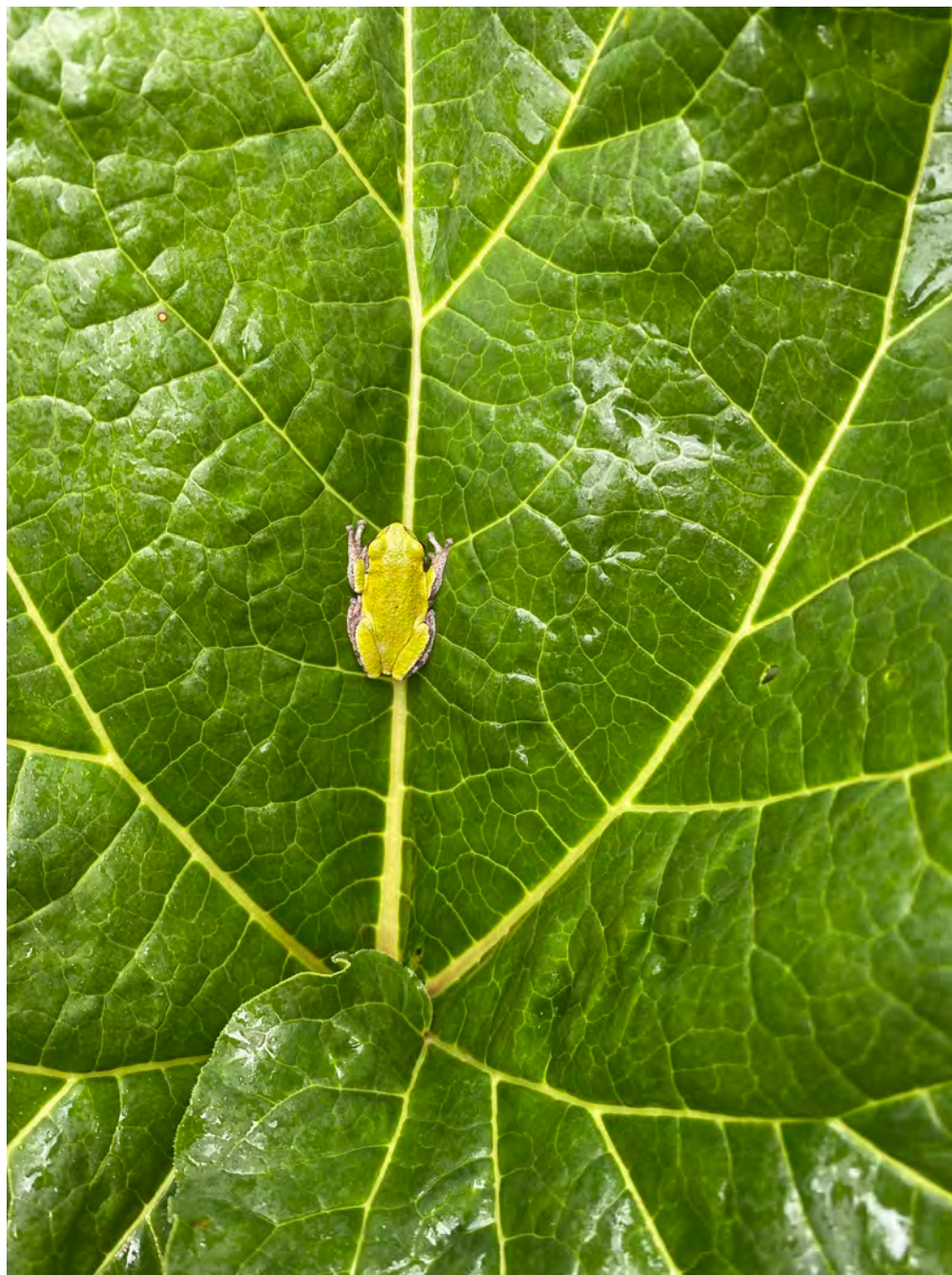
From his perch he's Buddha,
enigmatical, indifferent to pleasures
of squirrel, woodpecker,
a whole family of voles below.
It's not hunger but hunter
that chooses cuisine.

A couple of crows loiter nearby—
punks, tuning things up,
a one-note motif,
foreshadowing:
someone's going down.

In the ledger where accounts
of this world are written,
today something is scratched.
The maître d' gives an approving nod,
and owl's table is cleared
of its remains:
a streak of red,
the scraping of life
on bone white plate.

BUMBLE BEE





COURAGE





HOPE



FROM WHICH I SAT AND
WATCHED THE BIRDS



UNTITLED

I stare at her with balled up fists

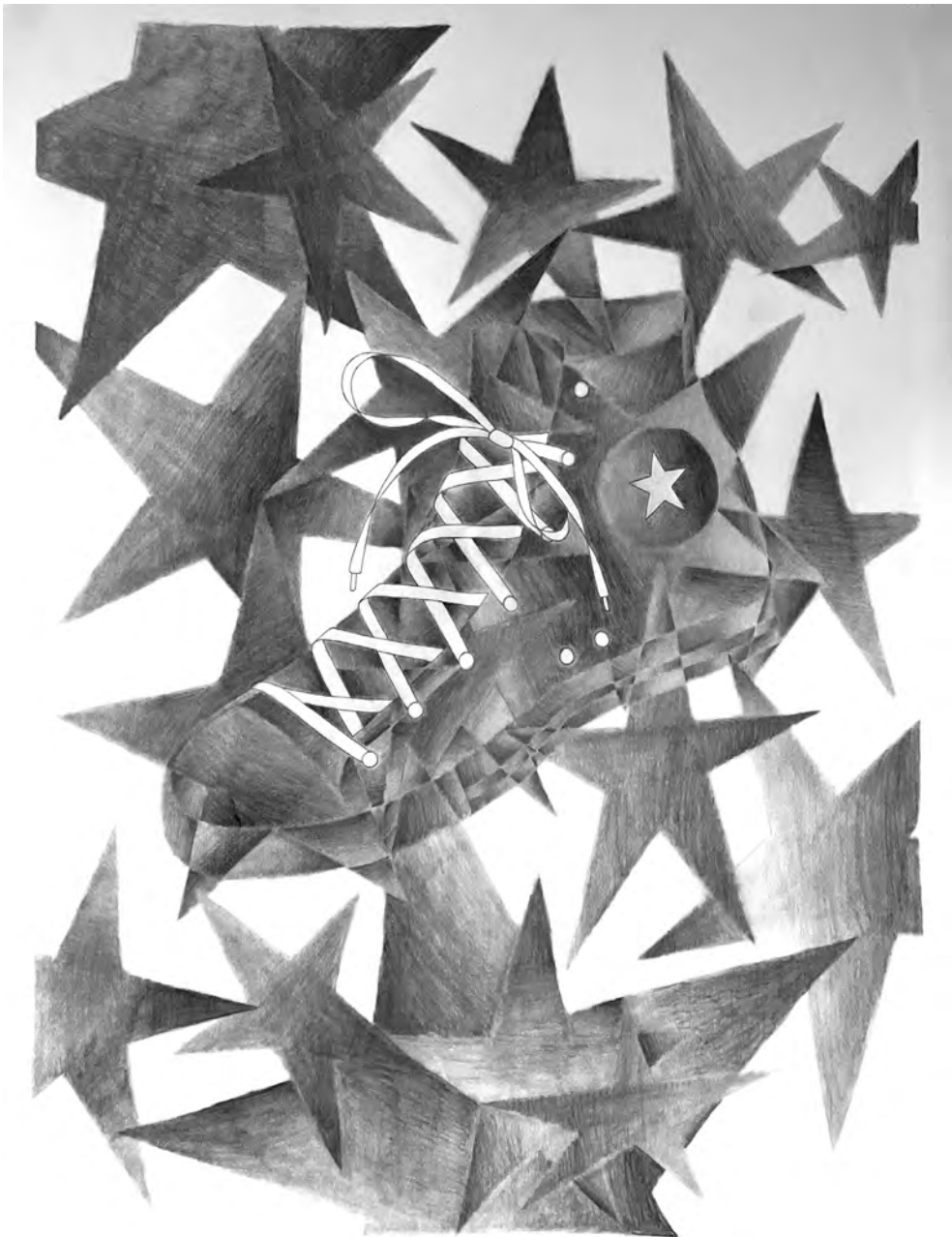
Her hair frizzes.

Her clothes sag.

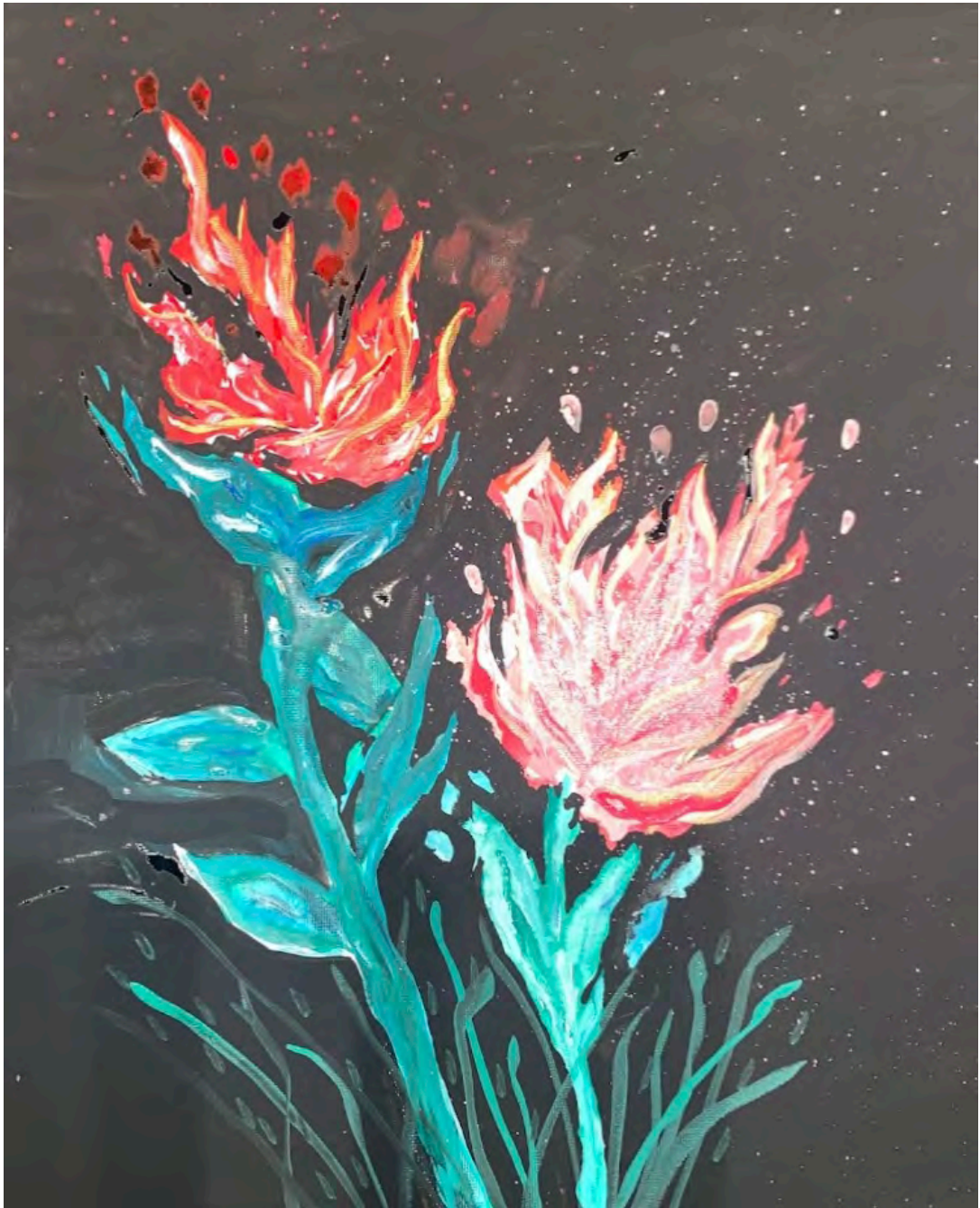
Her yellow teeth hide Behind her big nose.

How could anyone like her?

I went to punch her, and the mirror shattered.



TWIN FLAMES





MN NUTHATCHES

White-breasted nuthatch
Blue-gray above, white below
Mixed forests and groves

Gathering insects
Climbing down tree trunks headfirst
Active little birds

Red-breasted nuthatch
Blue-gray back; reddish below
Coniferous woods

Dashing from the trees
Wedging nuts in crevices
Hacking them open

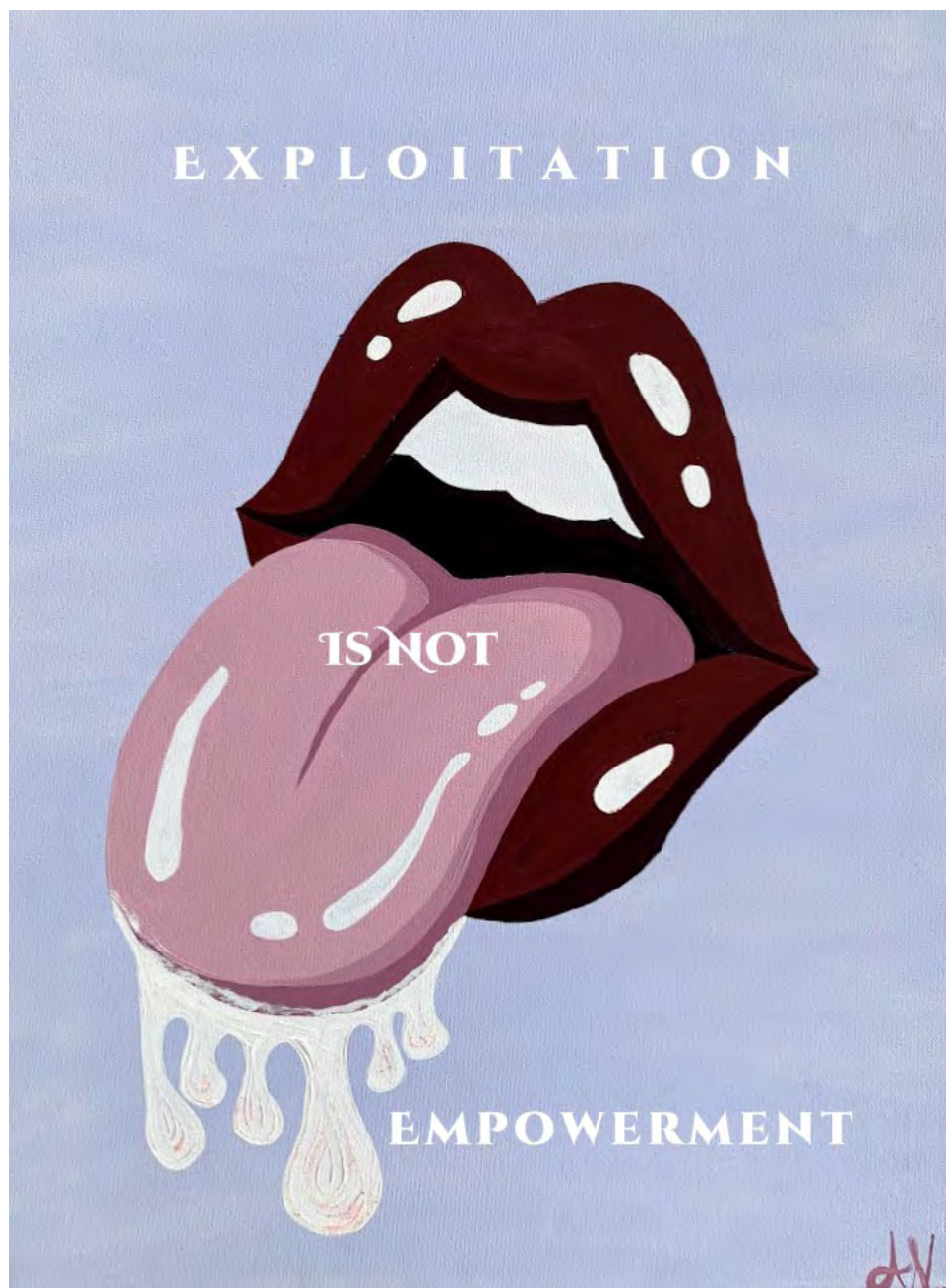
White-breasted larger
Slightly upturned long thin bill
Capturing insects

Red-breasted smaller
A distinctive black eye line
Devouring seeds



THE NIGHTFLY (CURRENT YEAR)





THE LONGEST ROAD





TO START A POEM

I tell the first line to take a deep breath,
while it sits shivering in a hospital gown,
and I press my stethoscope to hear its lungs.

I turn the key and pump the gas,
the way I started my old Pontiac in winter,
letting the poem's engine idle and warm.

Sometimes I squint as I thread it,
the nylon line through the little eye of a fish hook,
my wooden row boat perfectly still on the cold pond.

When I'm lucky, I find plenty of newsprint
stuffed into its teepee of dry kindling,
and I'm holding a box of strike-anywhere matches.

But most days, if I light a match, only smoke appears,
and that snowy branch hovering overhead
makes me feel like I'm writing for my life
and the poem is going to freeze to death.



THE LAST STAND

As the wind drew her sharp teeth across my skin
I embraced her intimacy, leaning in
I had prepared for this: my guts wrapped in a ball, ready to be thrown away.

My arms (sore from long hours of reaching for nothing)
Struggled to wrap them—the insides—the something—
But finally, now compact as I am, I might sink to the bottom and stay.

Sometimes you're lucky
when listening to jazz
if you can hear the moment
when the trumpet player
takes that deep, measured
breath before she starts her solo.
Tonight, that's happening
while I'm listening to Nadjé Noordhuis,
on *Ten Sails*. Her relaxed,
hypnotic breath leans into me,
under the room's dim lights,
with an almost anxious certainty
that I'm going to lean in, too.
And if you've never heard that breath,
that moment before the trumpet's
golden melody begins,
you might be interested to know
it's a lot like the feeling
when you're about to kiss
the person with whom you know
with certainty
you're falling in love.

THE FARMER



Where does your mind go when someone asks about your comfortable spaces, where you know you'll be safe? For me, it's my dad's truck. My dad is a hunting dog trainer, and he travels a lot for work. He drives a dually with an 8-hole dog box for a topper. Behind it he pulls a huge dog trailer with 24 welded dog boxes, a spot for a mule, and bolts to click a hammock onto. The rig smells like wet dogs, food, general stink so familiar it smells good, and diesel fuel.

You could hear the truck from a mile away—the rumbling of the engine, an occasional bark of an impatient dog, and '90s country playing 24/7 in the background. If you could walk into the trailer, you would have a multitude of things to touch: soft dog fur, oily scoops of dog food, the prickly and scratchy leashes, warm blankets, and dirty carpet beneath your feet. There's a vacuum, but it's barely used; a comfy passenger seat, filled with blankets on a cold day. An audiobook usually plays as you drift off to sleep on a long trip. These are the components that make his truck and trailer so appealing.

Fall and springtime, in our world, is the field trial season. We pack up the truck and trailer, loaded with dogs and drive to whatever state the field trial is in. Twenty minutes down the road, and everyone is settled and the audiobook has just finished chapter one. This is the time where passengers (me) are usually lulled to sleep for the next two hours. One of the last things I hear before I'm sleeping is my dad on the phone talking to someone, or chapter two starting.

After I wake up, the smell of greasy truck stop food will fill the cab of the truck. There's a delicious smelling breakfast sandwich sitting on the console for me, along with a pop that smells distinctively of cherry. Probably cherry Coca-Cola.

"I didn't feel like dealing with you while you're hangry, so I just got you food anyways," my dad said. "Thanks," I grumbled. I didn't feel *that* hangry, but I probably was. I gratefully ate the sandwich and chugged the coke

"Where are we at right now?" I asked. The final destination was Spivey, Kansas. Truly the middle of nowhere. "Well, right now we're coming into Le Mars. You know what that means!" Dad said happily. Le Mars meant we always stopped for Ice cream, at Blue Bunny, the founding place of the famous ice cream brand. It was kind of funny to me that one of the most popular ice cream brands was founded in such a little backwater town in Iowa.

I felt my blanket beneath my fingers, soft and fuzzy. This is about the point in the trip where I'm ready to go run a mile and a half. My socks feel too tight on my feet, and I have a pounding headache.

DAD'S TRUCK

(continued)

"Are you nervous?" my dad asked. "Pfft. Of course not," I replied. But that was a lie. I always got nervous, and he knew that. I pushed my white and baby blue tie blanket up against the cold window so I could drift off to sleep.

I know I am about to wake up from a nap because the only sense I have is hearing. I can hear the muffled voice of my father, outside of the truck talking to someone. *Wow! I thought. I can't believe we're here already. I definitely did sleep a lot.* Groggily, I slipped my Birkenstocks on my feet, the form fitting shoe welcoming to my swollen ankles. I hopped out of the truck and got all my stuff to bring inside to the room I would be staying in. Kansas smelled like manure, oil because of all the oil rigs out here, and dry, burnt grass.

I was excited to run my dog, Yanta. My stomach felt like a bunch of marbles being shaken just thinking about it. *I'll cast him off out into the field, and he will run in a great pattern to flush up the birds for the gunners to shoot.* I thought. *Then, he will hup and wait for his name to be called. He will go and make an excellent retrieve impressing the judge, and we will go to the second series to do the same thing to get into the third.* I was beyond ecstatic. I've run in so many trials before but I always get overly nervous and excited.

I heard the unlatching of the dog kennels from outside, and realized I forgot to help my dad unload all of the other dogs we brought to run. Since my dad is a professional, he runs in the open stake with the dogs people pay him to run. I am not a pro, so I compete in the amateur with my own dog. Usually altogether we have anywhere between 4-8 dogs running in any given trial alone. The rest of the night was uneventful.

We went and ate dinner at a friend's house nearby, and went back to the dusty but comfortable house we were staying at. I walked up to my room to go to bed, thinking about the next day and the events it would bring, including the long ride home in dad's dually. There are ups and downs about the truck, of course, but it is still an incredibly cozy and comforting place to be. Nothing bad can go wrong while you're there. The smell of diesel fuel, the warm touch of stinky English Springer Spaniels, and the noise of '90s country and audiobooks will always bring me joy.



WELDED DICE CUBE



He was one right turn away from home when he shut his car's headlights off. By the time his mailbox was in sight, his foot had gone from the gas pedal.

Everything was fine.

The man coasted a few more inches and turned the steering wheel, cranking it farther and farther until he gained the muffle of his lawn. His driveway's personally perceived miles were marked by plastic playhouses and upturned bikes.

Exiting the car and creeping in an awkward light-footed dance to the porch, he clutched at his pocket to keep his keys hushed. He reached a quivering hand to the door knob and twisted, pushing in and hearing the hinges squeal.

He bit his knuckles to keep from crying.

A small voice chirped, "Daddy?"

He sighed. "Yes, Daddy's home."

THE LOST STUNTZ BAY BOATHOUSES,
LAKE VERMILLION





BUCKTOOTH THE TINY



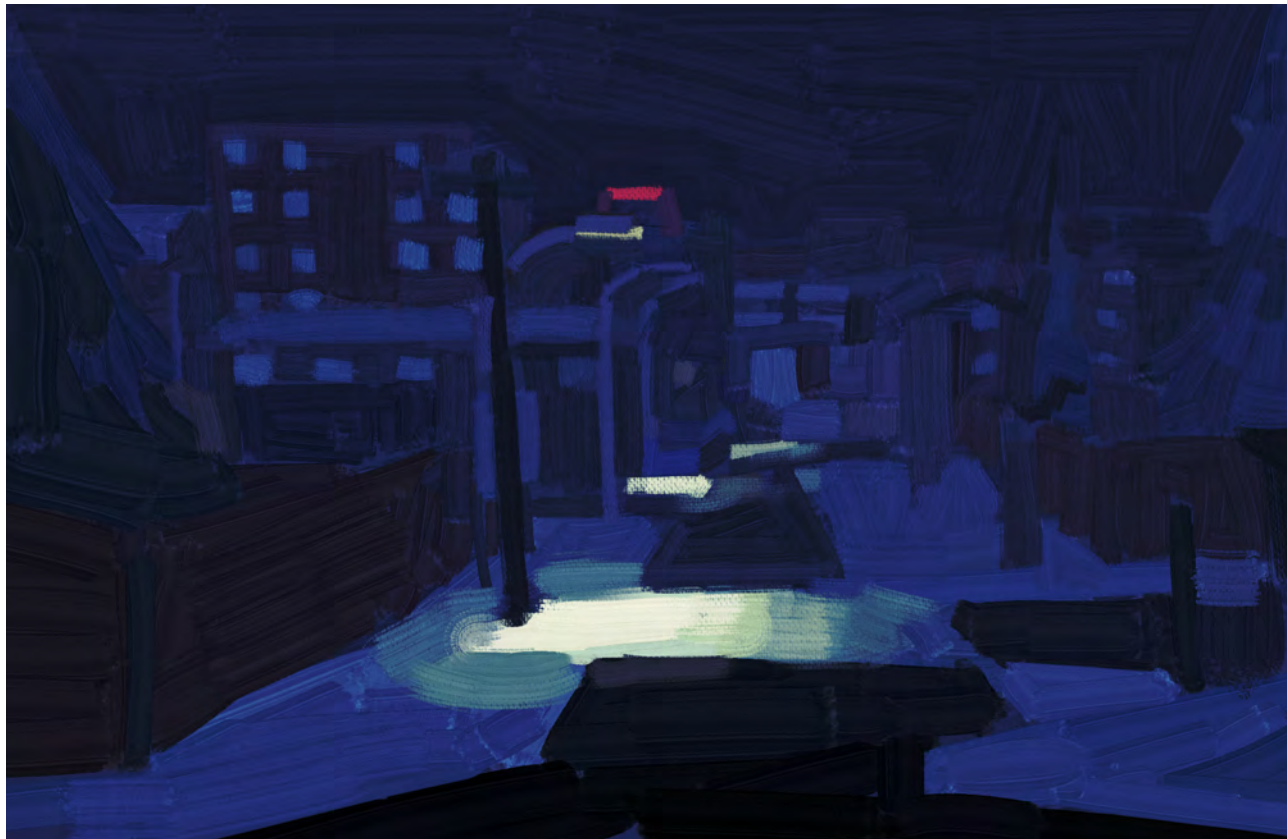


METAL ROSE





BLUE SHIFT





2•28•23 11:41AM

Trigger Warning: This poem contains references to school shootings.

At approximately 11:41 a.m. Brainerd Police Dispatch received a phone call...

I read the words,
I left the school at 10:00,
I didn't have to be there and I had homework to do,
So I went home.

That an individual was going to Brainerd High School with a firearm.

My friend had messaged me,
Saying it felt a little too real,
In reference to our One Act,
Lockdown.
It was a little too real that she was sitting in a classroom,
With the door locked,
Not knowing what was going on.

The building was put into a "soft lockdown" until law enforcement could confirm the campus and building were secure.

I wasn't even there,
But I feel like I am going to throw up.

The Bureau of Criminal Apprehension and Brainerd PD are investigating the source of this call. It is similar to other reports statewide during the past 24 hours of threats being called into Minnesota high schools.

Someone thinks this is a game,
Or someone is going to shoot up my school,
Both make me feel sick.

I am scared,
To go to rehearsal for our musical,
To walk back into that school,
I. Shouldn't. Be. Scared.

Out of an abundance of caution, we will continue to have law enforcement presence around and in our building.

We don't know,

(continued)

Someone might take it as an invitation,
 Some kid might be just fucked up enough to try,
 The police are still there,
 They'll try to keep us safe,
 They shouldn't have to be there.

Thank you for your appropriate and respectful response to this incident.

How am I supposed to respond?
 Should I walk back in,
 Shoulders back,
 Head up high,
 An easy target in those halls?

I have to rehearse for our show,
 I play a nun,
 It's not the part I wanted,
 But I'm planning on doing other shows.
 I'm going to do other shows.
 Don't take that away.

I have to sing in our choir,
 We are performing for the middle school tomorrow,
 We want to show them that they can do great things,
 Make great music,
 That they(we) can create art in a war zone.

I go to school to learn,
 You're supposed to teach me how to live,
 Not how to survive,
 And definitely not how to die.

Sincerely,

What world do we live in?
 This is America,
 And we are fucked.

2•28•23 11:41AM

(continued)

If kids have to walk back into a school
With fear in their hearts
And legs shaking with the urge, the adrenaline, the instinct,
To run,
Not from bullies or tests,
But from guns.
What are we?
Who are we?

I want to learn,
I want to keep trying for that new role,
I want to perform our choir songs for those kids,
I want to graduate,
I want to live my life,
I want to laugh with my friends.

How the fuck am I supposed to do that,
If a kid I saw on the swing set in elementary school,
Grown up with me,
Is looking at me from the other end of a loaded weapon,
Their eyes are set to kill,
And mine are set to never see another friend,
Another test,
Another hallway or classroom,
Another sunrise or sunset,
When all I can see is the barrel of a gun,
What will my last words be?

A plea?
To my friends to run,
To my parents to keep going,
To my little sister that it'll be alright, eventually,
To my teachers that they did their best,
To society that we should've done better,

(continued)

To the person standing in front of me... please don't shoot.

To God... please. don't. shoot.

I want to go to school.

I want to graduate.

I don't want to play this sick game anymore,

A test...

What do you do at school?

A. Run

B. Hide

C. Fight

D. Learn

The answer key? It was a trick question—you pray to whatever you can bring yourself to believe in, and survive by any means possible.

This is America.

I go to school.

I learn. I laugh.

I hide.

I run.

I fight.

I die.





FRESH MINNESOTA APPLE



I had been watching them for days from the tree line. The whole lot of them dressed in off-white tunics, scattering there and about. It was amusing really, and a little surprising that they hadn't noticed my presence as I had gotten a bit careless about how much I was hidden in the forest. It could be reasoned that they were much too busy—that was alright with me.

It took only about a day more when I found they no longer were getting ready for something. Instead, they seemed joyful and danced about together. The meals appeared as grand feasts, piled upon wooden tables which were decorated with intricately stitched cloths. The fact was, I could not for the life of me, figure out what this was all for. In all my years, I could not recall a single holiday or tradition that warranted all of this at this specific time in the year. The near week of preparations for a glorious gathering.

My hearing was immaculate, so says I, though I could not figure out any of the clues. The impatience of my heart though, was soon soothed as the talk shifted to the next part of their ceremonies. I lifted my head to take in what I could.

"My friends—the hour has drawn near. As was foretold, this is the night when the wishes of our *herra* are carried out. As he has told our ancestors, our people have waited the many long years and finally it is the night. And just as he proclaimed it, she is waiting patiently as well."

The man became silent and turned his head away from the others, his eyes meeting mine just inside the wood.

"She has come."

What in the seven hells? Slight chills ran down my spine. Had I truly been so out of touch with my surroundings, allowing myself to be spotted and observed for what I now assume had to have been for some time?

Joyous noises arose from the table, their cheering drifted into the night.

As much as I felt a bit of unease, my curiosity of course got the better of me, as it so often did. My hand brushed my hair back from my face as I stepped forward, a smile taking hold of my lips as I played along. I remained unspeaking.

The next few minutes went by in a flurry. I was rushed but welcomed into arms of love—or so it seemed. I was really unsure but, again, still curious. The chatter was loud and mostly in a tongue I neither knew, nor cared to, though it strangely was familiar. I did not converse, only followed when beckoned and did not have a speck of worry in me at this time. Not even when seeing the pile of wood, reminiscent of an ancient funeral pyre. I obliged them by sitting upon it after a series of what

WATCHING FROM THE WOODS

(continued)

I assume were animated expressions of thanks, only observing as several figures lit up torches to healthy flames. Now perhaps, if I were a bit more sane, I would be frightened, but I had not been forced into anything. You try living a couple thousand years without scenes of adventure—see how interesting your life gets. Being burned alive was actually very low on my internalized list of fears. Even so, I didn't plan on going through with this apparent sacrifice.

It was here that I was starting to consider a way out of the predicament. It really wouldn't be difficult, but the execution was the issue. Making a grand exit was a temptation too great to pass up and I still wanted to find out more about what was even happening. Who was this "*herra*" they chatter on about—it's one of the only words I actually understand from most of them—who predicted me to be peering at them from the woods? Perhaps I would wait for the billows of fire and include them in my strategy. Chanting had been going on in a wide circle around the very obvious sacrificial platform and the torches hadn't even been pushed to the wood. I, unfortunately, did not have any longer to think out my exhibition.

My brain functions were cut short as I spied the cause of my headaches since my creation, leaning his smirking little head against a tree. Well, color me surprised. Really, I should have guessed. The whole thing actually, only now, was being put into place in my mind. The festival, the borderline cultish behavior, my demise (or near)—all of it.

"Wait." The bane of my existence spoke up.

"My dear ones—"

The area was silent. All eyes were on him, and all jaws might as well have been on the floor.

"This girl—" so condescending, "is not in need of a rebirth of flame. She has since proven herself from the time of your ancestors." He winked in my direction, and I nearly leaped from the pyre to smack the idiotic expression from his face. "And today, good and faithful—" He paused there, thinking, "... humans, you have proven yourselves to me as well. Enjoy your celebrations, may your cup overflow and your years be long. I'll keep my caring hands over you as I always have—and all that jazz." I rolled my eyes and he shrugged, now grinning.

The humans all appeared confused at the speech at first, all words lost. This had obviously been a large part of their culture, or religion. They had to be dealing with shock and very possibly disappointment. Surprisingly to me, one by one each joined in his smile. "Our *herra* has spoken!" The phrase echoed, the strange and unusual tongue forsaken, louder and louder to the heavens. And on went festivities as if there had been no interruption. After I hopped off, the wood was lit for a bonfire, giving their night a mixture of

(continued)

glow and shadow.

"What is wrong with you, *Hroka*?!" The anger in my voice as I stalked towards him was to mask my amusement. I had feelings of pity because they had been waiting for this event for centuries by the sound of things. At the same time, again, I had been drawn in and entertained for the past week.

"I have no idea as to what you could mean, *Forvitni*."

"This was all you?!" I narrowed my eyes and continued walking, past him and towards the woods. He followed as I knew he would. "What, you just go around creating religions and cults in your spare time now?"

"But did you like it?" There was an air of laughter lacing his voice. He continued on once he heard nothing from me. "You're so readable, *Forvitni*. You appeared very interested to me."

"I was not. And I'm very angry with you. How could you do this to them?" I was still in front, though hiding a smile. He knew it. "Where is the damn language from? I couldn't pick up a word."

His step fell next to mine as we reached the cover of trees, stars disappearing from above us both. "Made it up."

"Shut up." So that's why it seemed so familiar to my mind.

"I did!"

"All for a..." What was it? "a prank?" I scoffed. "And how did you know I would be there?"

"Oh, *ást*, that was simple. Your name is a dead giveaway." *Hroka* bumped my shoulder. "Your *föður* definitely got that one right."

"Have I mentioned how much I hate you lately?" I muttered under my breath. Admittedly, he had me there.

"You love me, *Forvitni*."

"YOU TRIED TO HAVE PEOPLE SACRIFICE ME!" I whipped around, facing him.

"Sounds like a great wedding present to me." My words didn't cause a single change in his stupid expression.

"It was... juvenile." I narrowed my eyes, again.

"Oh, come on. It was all in good fun. I just wanted to get a smile on your face—like the one you're trying to hide from me and have been since we left."

"Whatever you want me to admit, it's never coming... and you better have something else up your sleeve for my present or I might just turn you down."

He put a hand to his chest, feigning offense. "Not even a good old-fashioned sacrifice satisfies you."

WATCHING FROM THE WOODS

(continued)

Even *Hroka* was a romantic, so he later gave me my actual gift, but he couldn't pass up any opportunity to mess with me—no matter if it took hundreds of years' worth of preparation. Such a nuisance.

En þrátt fyrir það elska ég heimska andlitið hans. (But, even so, I love his stupid face.)

Will I ever tell him that? Hell no! His head is big enough.

The Icelandic Translations

herra- lord

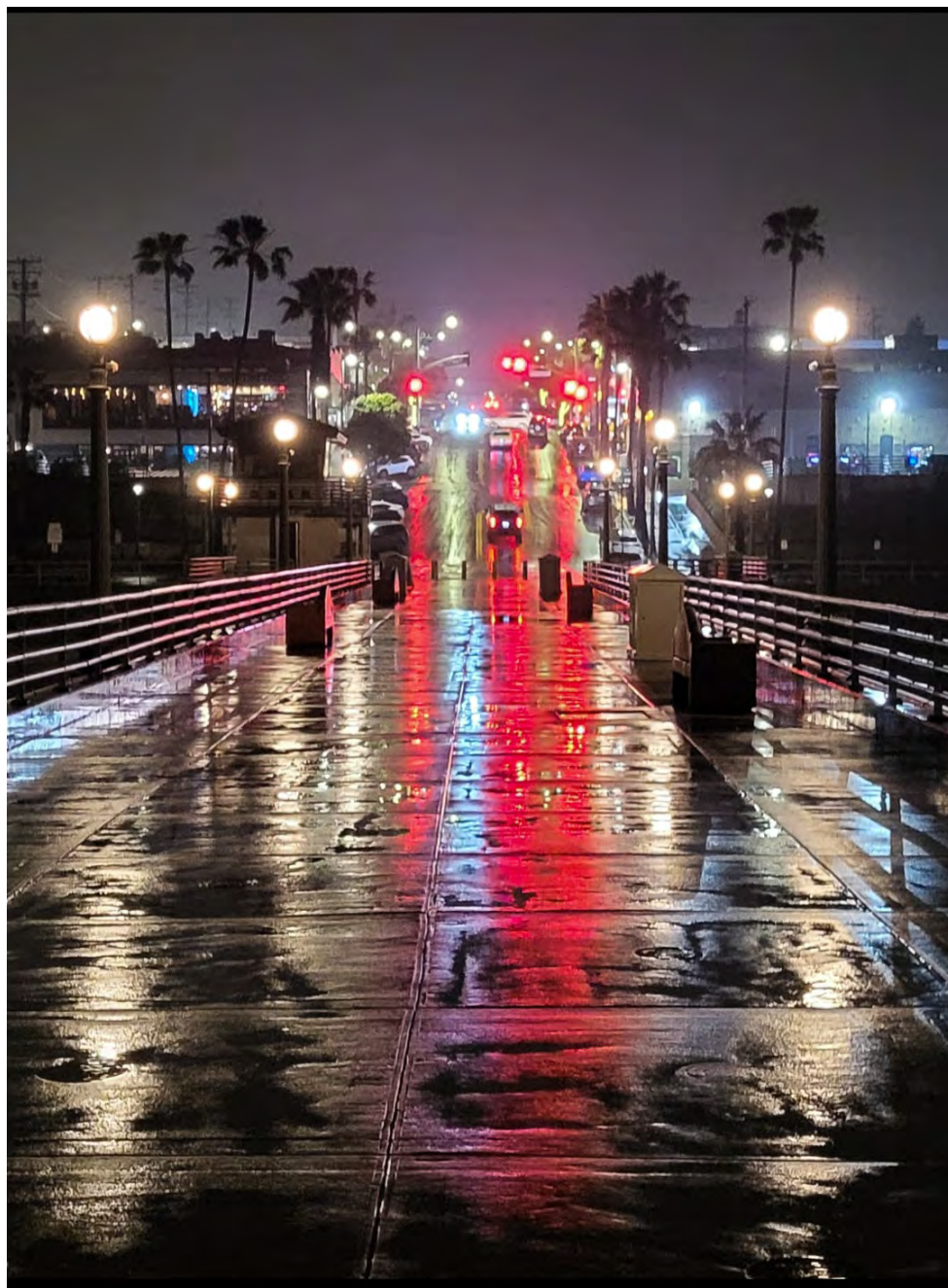
Hroka- Arrogance

Forvitni- Curiosity

ást- love

föður- father

MANHATTAN BEACH ON A
RAINY NIGHT



BUILDING NO.2



Full Circle

Slipped on the slender ring finger, the young, optimistic bride smiles. The year is 1912.

I symbolize commitment, perseverance and a physical tie to whatever was ahead.

Scrubbed clothes,

Washed dishes,

Bandaged wounds,

Home-made pies and doughnuts sold for extra money,

Held her dying daughter,

Cleaned vomit spewed by the drunken husband,

Tended him as he died,

Laughter and gestured stories,

Buried a 40-year-old son,

Gardened,

Cooked pie plant sauce,

Set tables for family dinners,

Lined windowsills with flourishing African violets,

Wiped tears of sorrow and laughter, her own and others,

Willing hands put to work and help,

I experienced the gamut of life with her.

Slipped from the slender ring finger of the embalmed widow, the year is 1974.

I am wished for by the youngest granddaughter but bequeathed to her daughter,

Then bequeathed to her daughter where I lay in a pouch in a dark drawer.

The postal service drops a package at 1004 18th Street NE. The year is 2022.

The granddaughter who wished for me, surprised beyond measure, tearfully received what only God could orchestrate.

The granddaughter who wished for me, slipped me on a slender chain as her finger is too large.

What I symbolize has not changed, on a ring finger or around a neck.

Commitment, perseverance, and a physical tie bridging memory to whatever is ahead.

SELF PORTRAIT (IDEALIZED)





I JUST REALLY LIKE JELLYFISH



This small piece of sand could be woman or man,
Lay here among millions in the palm of my hand.

When thrown to the wind matters not where they land,
For all create structure on which we may stand.

One piece insignificant one barely can see,
Had once towered high in the form of a tree,
In the form of a branch and the form of a leaf,
Once built as a shelter providing relief.

Once provided closure and reflected grief,
Once used for the fire to see one's belief,
As embers transform a new purpose to be,
No longer of structure as wind sets it free.

So when thrown to the wind
Matters not where we land
For time makes it certain
We all become sand.

DE YOUNG



I hope you can read this. I've never written a letter before. Then again, I've never been off the hanger on my own. I bet if you came home right now and found me crumpled at the kitchen table writing this letter with your favorite Waterman pen (yes, the same fountain pen you left in my left breast pocket until it bled Midnight Blue into one corner) you'd drop dead from shock.

Let me get to the point, and explain why I'm writing this letter to you. It seems you need reminding that I'm your favorite shirt. Did you forget that the same way you forgot to pay the water bill last month? The same way you walk into a room and can't remember what you went in there to get (you've been doing that a lot lately)? Or, how you never remember where you left the remote (check underneath the couch). Well, I have not been as forgetful.

For starters, I remember the day you found me. I was the last black watch tartan flannel in Marshall Field's and had been resting on a dummy's shoulders for over a month. You came in to buy a fall jacket, spotted me, and told the clerk it was "love at first sight." Those were your exact words. Why, then, have I been demoted to a dusty clothing rack in the laundry room?

Do you remember wearing me every single day that first week? That weekend you took me to watch your alma mater's homecoming game. Unfortunately, your old college buddies tagged along and I blame them, not you, for the ketchup and mustard on my right cuff. If they hadn't started high fiving you and everyone else around them, it wouldn't have happened. The Miller Lite you dribbled down my front—that was your fault. But I still loved you. When your team won, you told "the boys" (appropriate title given their intellectual maturity) that I was your lucky shirt.

Your *lucky* shirt. So how did I go from your lucky shirt to the forgotten one?

Do you remember that every weekend in autumn we'd walk to the edge of town to visit your parents' gravesite? In one corner of the cemetery, a slender path formed a seam through the woods and parted the tall grass, and we would follow the trail down a gentle slope, past rock piles covered in aqua green and gray lichen, and past a glacial depression where we once startled a fawn. When we reached the pond's shoreline, we'd lounge in the grass, listening to the geese discuss their southern flight plans. The red-winged blackbirds made shrill complaints and turned the cattails into metronome pendulums. Across the pond, Irish green leaves hid an A-frame cabin from view in the summer, but in autumn the maples turned Royal Stuart and their leaves floated onto the water. Then the aspens followed suit, turning daffodil yellow until we saw the outline of the cabin's roof, a thin sliver of smoke rising from its chimney. I felt happy just to be so close to your skin, to feel your warmth sink into the warp and weft of my fabric. Even when you didn't shower (very cave mannish, by the way) I still loved you. Those afternoons became some of my happiest memories.

YOUR FAVORITE SHIRT

(continued)

Your dating life (if you can call it that) . . . not so many fond memories. Talk about bad taste. And to think you were starting to blame me for your problems. Let's revisit some of the ones you thought loved you, starting with Panda. What spiteful parents curse their child with a name like that? You assumed that she appreciated your sense of humor (you don't have one) because she laughed at all of your one-liners (they weren't funny). But she laughed at everything. When you took her to see *The Shawshank Redemption* (not a comedy, by the way) she laughed all the way through it. And that laugh. Good heavens, she sounded like a tommy gun. When she dumped you, you found Lark (what was your fetish with women whose names belong in a nature guide?). Lark, the one who smoked like a cold war spy and drank scotch with a twist of lemon because she liked its "zing." As a member of the tartan family, I cannot abide anyone adulterating scotch in such a manner. But I still loved you. I loved you even after Denise (who called herself Fawn—yet another one in your animal menagerie) commanded you to stop wearing me. I didn't complain when you gave into her demand. You could have at least washed, dried, and hung me up before tossing me on the laundry room floor, though.

Thank heavens for Catherine.

Of all the women you dated, I didn't mind that she got closer to you than me. She was stylish and beautiful and intelligent. I knew she was the smartest woman you'd ever meet when she said,

"That black watch shirt looks great on you. Why don't you wear it more often?" Catherine had remarkable taste. She didn't even mind if you wore me two days in a row. She introduced us to fabric softener, that gooey blue magic that came in a powder blue bottle with a bear cub on the front. How good it made me feel. How many times did you see commercials for fabric softener while wasting a good Sunday afternoon watching football? It never dawned on you to buy some for me? Catherine knew how to take care of me. When one of my buttons cracked and fell off, she sewed a new one in its place, and when the seam on my right sleeve began to give (another one of your neglectful moments), she stitched me up.

Then again, she mended both of us.

I wasn't angry when you chose not to wear me for the wedding, either. I understood that weddings are formal affairs and that's why you rented that white shirt, even though he proved to be a starchy old cuss who thought he was better than the rest of us "closet commoners." I imagined how beautiful Catherine must have looked, her daffodil yellow hair pinned back, her bright smile, that one crooked incisor (the imperfection that made her even more perfect), and I dreamed of how much the three of us would be happy together.

Catherine brought picnic lunches into our lives, and that became our new ritual each autumn.

(continued)

Certainly, you remember her famous smoked ham and brie sandwiches. Your only responsibility on picnic day involved filling the thermos with coffee, and you always managed to spill some on me. Then we walked to the cemetery and visited your parents. Then to the pond for our picnic. The two of you took turns imagining what the couple in the olive drab cabin across the shore were like. They must be an older couple, Catherine said. He builds a fire in the morning to take the chill out of the air before waking her. They drink coffee in the porch overlooking the lake, both dressed in flannel bathrobes from L. L. Bean (my suggestion, if I could have made one), and they look out on the pond as the geese depart and the leaves float down to the water.

"That will be us one day," Catherine said.

She introduced us to Brahms, Beethoven, Davis, and Coltrane. We loved Coltrane, the way he could leap the melody into outer space and float it back to earth each time. The birthdays. The anniversaries. Falling asleep on the couch together after drinking too much wine (you, snoring like a lumberjack). Laughing together until your stomachs hurt. Holding hands at football games. Learning to cook together. Practicing the poetics of love. We were all too busy to notice how the shaded corners of every cemetery encroach upon the dead and the living.

I miss Catherine. In my world, we shirts don't last long. Usually at the first tear, if we don't have a Catherine in our lives to mend us, it's into the trash. In your world, humans suffer great pain. You took such good care of her. First, when she became ill, you drove her to all her appointments and made late night trips to the emergency room. When she got worse, you fed and cleaned her. You held her hand when she felt scared, weak, and could not stop crying.

I loved you the most then.

After she died, you didn't leave the house for weeks. Then, weeks turned into months. It's been over a year now. I know I'm not the same shirt you found in Marshall Field's that fall morning. My cuffs are frayed, my collar worn, my colors faded. I know you still hurt. I know that you've changed too. For example, you've gained so much weight you couldn't button me up even if you wanted to. (How about just one frozen pizza per week, unless you're planning to change your name to the Red Baron?) All I ask is that you wear me. Forget the buttons. It's in style again to throw me over a tee shirt.

Think of this letter as a wake-up call. You must go on living.

The nights are getting cooler and soon the geese will visit the pond. All I ask is that you wear me. Take me to the cemetery, so we can visit your parents and say hello to Catherine. Then, if you feel up to it, we could walk to the shoreline, rest in the tall grass like we used to do, and watch the silvery smoke rise and disappear into the sky once again.

KOI





GLACIER NATIONAL PARK SKYLINE





CROSS MY HEART





PHOTO SHOOT WITH NANA





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