

Bent Pine

Central Lakes College

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BENT PINE

A Journal of Art and Writing

CENTRAL LAKES COLLEGE

Brainerd, Minnesota | Staples, Minnesota

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, trigger warnings have 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*

A NOTE FROM BENT PINE'S STUDENT PRESIDENT

When reviewing the submissions for this year's journal, I was once again astounded by the creativity of the students here on campus. Art is often thought of as a talent only few people are born with, but the sheer variety of people and perspectives within past and this present journal prove otherwise. It makes me happy to see the sheer amount of imagination my fellow students possess and their effort to bring their visions into reality.

Half of the joy art provides to the world is given to the creator who put the time and effort into the painstaking process of sifting through ideas and refinement of their work. Not to be cliché, but it is the journey of creating art, not the final product, which makes an artist and defines what their work truly is. The flashes of inspiration as the mind wanders or considers a problem in the process are the moments that give reason to art beyond getting an idea down on the canvas or page.

I hope that as you read through this journal you consider the effort everyone who has submitted—whether they made it in or not—has put into their process. If you are reading this as someone who has submitted to the journal, I hope you are able to take a moment to reflect on the journey that brought you to your creation and consider the future creative travels you may take from this point forwards.

Dashiell Moreland
Bent Pine Journal Club President
Associate of Arts Degree Student
Central Lakes College

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A note of gratitude from Bent Pine's Faculty Advisor

Bent Pine was first dreamed up in the 1960s at Brainerd Junior College. And because those initiators are out of reach, I don't know the story of how it began, how it was made, or why it ended in 1971. But I am sure, all those years ago, there were enthusiastic students who loved art and literature that rallied around the journal and made it happen, students like Dashiell Moreland, our current Bent Pine Journal Club president. Dash summarizes beautifully the importance of art and the creative process in his note. Our students deserve an outlet, a place to document these efforts. *Bent Pine* is here to serve our student creators with pages and pages of available space—ready to capture their work and hold on to it for the future.

I'm also sure that when *Bent Pine* was first published in 1966, it took a committed team of people to manifest it. Our team now, in 2023-24, is large—a collaboration of students, staff, and faculty. On behalf of the Bent Pine Journal Club, I offer a big thank-you to each of the following contributors:

A massive 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 makes it doubly rewarding and special. 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 instructors Casey Hochhalter and Bruce Fuhrman, for encouraging students to submit their art, choosing faculty selection awards, and supporting this project.

And to the English Department—Jeff, Leane, Ryan, Kate, Matt, Adam, James, Lori-Beth, Julie—for nudging students to submit writing, choosing faculty selection awards, and cheerleading this project along.

Bent Pine wouldn't exist without the additional support from all of the following: Megan Bistodeau, Accessibilities Services Director, and Andrea Carlson, Instructional Technology Coordinator, for helping to make the journal ADA compliant for online publication (a lot of work!); Student Guest Judge, Jennifer Fryer, for studying and selecting among 200+ entries during the blind selection process, alongside our club members. CLC Student Life Committee, Erich Heppner (Student Life Director), and Student Senate, for continuing to back up this project. President Hara Charlier, Vice President Cheryl Norman, Liberal Arts & Sciences Dean Anne Nelson-Fisher, and all of the administrators at CLC who have been so supportive. Chris Bremmer, for effectively redesigning our webpage this year. Kenn Dols, Marketing Director, and Jessie Perrine, Communications Coordinator, for generous help in promoting the *Bent Pine*. Jean Hale and Barb Villwock, CLC Information Specialists, for verifying student contributors and distributing journals at the information desk. Mark Ambroz's Videography Program and Brent Balmer for live-streaming our event in the spring. 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 Journal Club's previous members and officers for providing the student voice and leadership in this project.

And, as always, I thank the current student members of the club from the bottom of my heart, for their time, commitment, enthusiasm, and belief in this project—Dashiell Moreland, Kylee Larson, Laurie Tomczak, Jenna Jensen, Jesse Engen, Joelle Kelly, and Carolyn Nix. It has been an honor to work alongside you.

Brandy Lindquist
Bent Pine Journal Club Faculty Advisor
English Instructor, CLC

THE BENT PINE JOURNAL TEAM

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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.

FACULTY SELECTION AWARDS

Literature:

Andrew Stone

A Sizzling Dream

Ivy Matejcek

Hope for Two

R.H. "Dolly" Peterman

Whispers Like the Scent of Pine

Visual Arts:

Gavin Gast

Early Morning

Jody Kramer

Dazzling Delphinium

Mary Steward

Try Being a Little Less Hard on Yourself

Cover:

Biophilia by Sally Aadland

(from Sally): This pottery piece was created using a white stoneware clay and is wheel thrown, trimmed, and glazed. I have an affinity for nature and am passionate about having a connection between my clay pieces and the natural world. The 3 feathers in this piece are inspired by my mother's cancer journey and her 3 nature-loving daughters there for every step of her journey. Feather symbolism takes on different meanings for the many cultures throughout the world. For me, feathers serve as spiritual guidance representing our connection between heaven and earth. I also believe when you find a feather in nature it might mean that the spirit of a loved one is watching over you, protecting you.

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* Faculty Selection Award Pieces



FACULTY SELECTION COVER AWARD

Bent Pine 2024

The old barn had collapsed over the winter, and the rotting wood now stuck out at odd angles. The shattered pieces of glass glinted in the sun, like hundreds of jagged teeth, daring anyone to step closer, angry and forgotten. The red paint, now chipped and faded, could barely be seen beneath the pile of rubble. Torn black shingles hung loosely from what had once been a roof, now a shadowy blanket hiding a lonely pain, unspoken to the world. Rusted nails stuck out of the broken floor boards. Moss clung to the moist surfaces like tiny hands. An abandoned beehive hung limply in a corner, a chain loosely draped over the broken window pane, rusted beyond repair. Hinges from an old door, hardly visible beneath the splinters and fallen beams, gleamed dully in the fading light. Grass slowly climbed over the broken boards on the ground as the wind tore at the structure, as though it could somehow make it fall again. Its boards groaned in the wind, angry at the humans who had long since abandoned it here in this empty field, overgrown and wild. Forgotten but not silent, waiting for some woodland creature to provide it with any companionship. As the sky darkened, the sounds of the barn slowly faded to a whisper of fear, and a mouse crept softly through the grass, searching for a place to call home through the coming storm. Shelter for one, company for another, as the storm passes through till morning.



The biting Minnesota wind whipped at Dolly’s braids as she gripped the wheel of her beat-up Jeep, her heart pounding a rhythm louder than the snow crunching under her tires. Lake of the Woods County, located on the state’s northern border, stretched before her like a vast, untamed frontier. It was home to a small Anishinaabe land, held in trust by the Red Lake Nation. Dolly had not returned to these lands since childhood, which were also the jurisdiction of the sheriff’s department she dreamt of joining—a department that had never seen a female deputy, let alone an indigenous one.

Dolly, a senior at the tribal college majoring in law enforcement, wasn’t naive. She knew the whispers followed her like the scent of pine in the crisp air: too old, too female, too inexperienced, too different. But her determination blazed brighter than the northern lights dancing in the winter sky. Her grandfather, a former tribal council member and elder of the *Maang* clan, had instilled in her a fervent belief in justice, and she craved a chance to serve her community, to bridge the gap between the reservation and the often-hostile world outside.

The sheriff’s office, housed in a squat brick building that seemed dwarfed by the towering evergreens, hummed with activity. Dolly adjusted her Phi Theta Kappa lavalier, feeling its coolness against her heated skin. Inside, the receptionist, a woman with a wary gaze, directed her to Sheriff Perch’s office.

Sheriff Perch, a small man with a full mustache and a gruff demeanor, sat behind a cluttered desk. He eyed Dolly up and down, his expression unreadable. “You applying for the deputy position?” he rumbled, his voice gravel scraping against the pavement.

“Yes, sir,” Dolly said, her voice firm despite the butterflies fluttering in her stomach. “I understand I’m not the usual candidate, but I assure you –”

The sheriff cut her off with a snort. “Usual candidate? We’ve never had a woman, let alone an Ojibwe, apply in these parts. What makes you think you can handle this job?”

Dolly met his gaze unflinchingly. “Respect, sir. I respect the law, this badge, and the people I would serve. I know this community inside-out, its strengths, and its struggles. I can bridge the gap between worlds, and build trust where there’s suspicion.”

Her words hung in the air, heavy with conviction. The sheriff’s gruff exterior seemed to falter momentarily, replaced by a flicker of grudging respect. He studied her application, eyes lingering on the commendation for her work with troubled youth on the reservation.

“You got any field experience?”

Dolly’s chest swelled. “I interned with the tribal police this summer. Responded to domestic calls, assisted with search and rescue, even apprehended a suspect during a break-in.”

The sheriff raised an eyebrow. “Apprehended?”

“Yes, sir. De-escalated the situation, used non-violent tactics, and secured the suspect. He had warrants out, turned out.”

Something akin to a begrudging smile tugged at the sheriff’s lips. “Alright, listen here, my dear. This is no fairytale. It’s hard work, long hours, and danger lurks around every corner. You sure you’re up for it?”

Dolly squared her shoulders, the fear giving way to a surge of adrenaline. “More than up for it, sir. This is my land, my people. I’m ready to serve.”

That day, Dolly didn’t get the job. But Sheriff Perch surprised her by offering a week-long ride-along. It was a baptism by fire. The harsh realities of rural law enforcement unfolded before her—domestic violence calls that left her heart heavy, DUIs fueled by despair, and a constant undercurrent of distrust between some residents and the authorities.

While searching for a lost child during a blizzard, Dolly’s tracking knowledge proved invaluable. Following traditional signs, she spotted the child’s footprints near a frozen creek, leading her to safety. Sheriff Perch, initially skeptical, couldn’t deny her resourcefulness and courage.

The week ended with a grudging handshake and a gruff, “You ain’t half bad, kid.” It wasn’t an offer, but it was a start. In the following months, Dolly shadowed deputies, honed her skills, and earned the respect of her colleagues, one call at a time.

Her cultural understanding became an asset. She mediated disputes between community members and law enforcement, fostering trust and communication. She organized outreach programs, bridging the gap between the reservation and the county.

It was challenging. Prejudice lingered, whispered doubts followed her patrol car, and some residents remained wary. But Dolly persevered, her determination fueled by the belief in justice and the hope of a brighter future.

In the neon glow of a fast-food sign,
Buzz-buzz, Vrr-Vrr, zzzt-pop.
Ketchup and grease build a shrine,
A life forgotten with the swish of a mop.

Here stands man's greatest monument,
Where dreams are served with fries and disappointment.
Tired souls, weathered and worn,
Chasing the elusive dream since they were born.

Beneath the neon-gold arches, they toiled away,
Flipping burgers, serving dreams on trays.
In their land of plenty, where the gap grows wide,
Dreams were crushed and fried.

The dream, a distant refrain,
Flickered like a neon sign in the rain.
The promise of a better life,
Buried beneath the weight of toil and strife.

Eyes on the clock drowned in monotony,
Tick-tock, Tick-tock.
Home, a failed prophecy,
Only to mock.

A house, a car, and a family,
Riches a king can't afford.
Life, a rock of calamity,
They, Sisyphus, society ignored.

Minimum wage, like crumbs on a plate,
A bitter reminder of an unequal fate.
As the cost of living soared to the sky,
Dreams, like kites, failed to fly.

Rain fell on cardboard boxes, they call home,
Drip-drop, drip-drop.
Bending like the walls of a catacomb,
Here is where dreams come to a stop.

They watch the city's skyline gleam,
A distant promise, a far-off dream.
A sun setting so far yet so bright,
But dreams could still shine in the moonlight.

In the quiet of the night, they held on,
To the fragments of a dream, though the chance seemed gone.
For in their hearts, sparks remained shouting out,
Resilient embers that society had not stomped out.

In the fast-food symphony of sizzling fryers,
Embers, sss-pop, snap, and crackle.
People found strength in their silent desires,
Flames rising higher than the tower of Babel.

Flames of hope burning brighter than the sun,
They rise above the struggles,
Dreams finally to be won.
A light out of the never-ending tunnel.

Like Icarus, their waxy wings had come undone,
But now with wings born from embers and ash.
Their hope, like a phoenix, flies higher than the sun,
To heights no house prices could ever surpass.

Ponder now this beautiful flight,
As unimaginable as it may seem.
This modern parable in the neon light,
Finding hope of an American dream.

MARY STEWARD

TRY BEING A LITTLE LESS
HARD ON YOURSELF



Bent Pine 2024 **FACULTY SELECTION AWARD**



FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

Bent Pine 2024

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ENTRIES



When I was a kid, my dad always promised to take me out on fishing trips over the weekend. It'd get to be Wednesday or Thursday and suddenly he'd be talking about buying or renting a boat and going out on Mille Lacs lake, which was about the halfway point between his house and my mom's.

But then it'd get to be the weekend. I'd go up to his place and there'd be no mention of boats, tackle, or anything other than taking care of the goat ranch. This became a frequent enough occurrence that you could set your clock to it. He'd be bombarding me with texts and promises about all his wild plans for us on the weekends right up until the weekend hit. Then he'd be expecting us to learn to show animals for competitions he could make money off of.

Years and years passed exactly like that. It got to the point I wouldn't indulge his texts, letting them pass by me as I focused on my social life more and more. I didn't care much to continue betting on his ability to follow through.

But then one week he started calling me, sending me pictures of boats, telling me he'd won a load of money at a casino, and wanted to finally get around to kitting us out for the trip he had always promised me. But then, Friday came round, we got to the farm, and suddenly the money had been put away for "other things."

"I talked to my accountant," he started. "He says it's way smarter to have a little bit stocked away in case something at the lot happens."

It was a hard sell on his part. I knew where that casino money had really gone. Everyone in my family had heard that my oldest two brothers had been arrested on assault charges for starting another fight in a bar, and I had a rare opportunity that weekend to spend some time with them as they were staying with my dad. Dad had paid their bail, again. In this case though, I was glad to spend some time with my brothers. They're both 15-20 years older than me; by the time I could start remembering things, they were both out of the house and on their own. Most of the time at least.

More time passed. The promises kept rolling in, and for another year or so, nothing really changed. Then, finally, a few weeks after my 12th birthday, I was dropped off with my dad near Mille Lacs, and—instead of turning towards the country road that would lead us to my father's house—we turned onto the highway and headed towards the lake.

"Where are we going?" I asked, "Will there be time for Dairy Queen?"

"Yeah probably not this time kiddo, you'll be catching your dinner tonight!" It was still winter, not exactly a time for boats, sunshine and swimsuits.

We drove out onto the lake, something fairly nerve-wracking for someone who has had a fear of drowning ever since they were a child. I expressed this fear to dad as we rode in his massive pick up across the ice, who dismissed me out of hand for being a soft, easily frightened kid.

He wasn't wrong, of course. I was a pretty risk-averse child at the best of times and an absolute nervous wreck, riddled with anxiety, at the worst of times. But this fear was based off of something more real for me, even though I wasn't thinking about it at the time. I was (and am) afraid of drowning and risking drowning because of a lived experience earlier in my life. When I was an even younger child, around the age of 3-4, before my parents had divorced and my dad hit a bad-luck streak that destroyed my father's at the time considerable wealth, we lived in a huge, three story colonial-style house with a lake in the backyard.

One time, my youngest brother and cousin, both of whom were almost seven years my elders, were out on that lake during early winter, walking across the freshly formed ice along the lakeside. I was impressionable, as most young children are, and threw on all my heavy winter gear to follow my older family members' example. I clomped my way through the snow to the outer edges of the lake and began to trace my brother's path across the ice when I heard the ice begin to crack under my weight. I froze when I heard that noise, and the next thing I can recall I was sitting in my dining room with my aunt who had seen me fall in, and rushed to fish me unconscious from the lake.

So, as we rode in my father's big truck across the ice, uncertain if were safe, my heart was pounding out of my chest, and it showed on my face.

"Why ya look like that kid?"

"I dunno..."

"Well, quit it. I didn't spend 4,000 dollars on an ice house for you to complain about your first fishing trip."

"Actually, Grandpa Dan took me once before he -"

"Then your first trip with me and your brothers." We finally came to a skid and then a stop outside of a tiny red hut situated probably 200 feet from the closest shoreline.

The ice has got to be five or six feet thick, I thought to myself. *There's no way I'd fall through all that.* I was correct. I alone weighed only around 70 lbs., not anywhere near the weight the ice would begin to crack under. But the Ford F-150 was another beast entirely. I

had and have no clue what they weigh, but I knew it was probably more than 70 lbs.

As I grabbed my stuff from the car—a backpack loaded with snacks, video games and homework that I had just found an excuse not to do—I turned to hear my father chastising my older brothers as smoke and a rancid smell floated from inside the box. As I stepped into the ice house for the first time, I had to admit, it was in fact larger on the inside, as had been promised by my father when I first saw the ice house. There were three bunks stacked on top of each other in one corner—I rushed to claim the top one, of course—and a small cot opposite the bunks. There was a small stove, and a few chairs and a table. But no outlets. This upset me at the time; after all, how was I supposed to charge my Nintendo (the thing that I already knew would be the real entertainment for me on this trip)?

My two eldest half-brothers, my father's sons, were huddled around a small hole made in the ice, a couple small fish already having been caught. I pulled up a bucket to sit on (as they had commandeered all the chairs) and a rod to use and began re-learning the basics of fishing from my brothers for the next few hours.

As you may imagine, this got very old very quickly to a pre-teen that was used to playing on his Nintendo while my dad worked on the farm or at his car lot. And between my father and brothers constantly correcting and annoying me, I had decided to tuck myself into my bunk and pretend it was going to be a normal weekend.

After some time, I passed out in my winter gear, the thin thermal blankets not seeming enough for me. I awoke to one of my older brothers, the middle child of us three, standing over me in my bunk.

"Heard you were scared of goin' under from pop."

"Yeah, I've fallen in once before and that was scary..."

"It's not that bad kiddo, lemme show ya." He gripped me by my underarms and carried me over to the hole in the ice. I could smell the beer on his breath, a familiar scent that usually followed them and my dad, especially when they were visiting.

When stuck between fight or flight, I almost always froze as a kid. And in this instance, I followed that pattern. Silently, I slipped from my brother's grasp into the inky blackness that awaited me, and for maybe ten seconds I stayed there, terrified for my life. I felt a yank, and allowed my body to go limp, my twelve-year-old brain somehow managing to convince me that some kind of predator had already spotted me, and was about to drag

me further down.

Instead, I popped back up out of the water into the lit Ice house, taking a series of gasping breaths while my oldest brother lost his mind with worry towards me and anger at the middle child.

My father had passed out. Nothing would have woken him up from his liquor induced dreams, not even a full-on three-way yelling match between his moron children.

The next day, I called my mom and had her take me home. She was, of course, somewhere between rage-fueled mama bear and sick with worry for me as I recounted the events of that Friday to her. This incident ended up a black mark on my father's record with everyone around him: the court, his family, and me. He always hated being reminded of his failures, and this was no exception.

"Remember when Bryant threw me in the lake as a joke?"

"Stop, kid."

"That's why I don't trust drunks."

"I said STOP, dammit!"

After that weekend, we never talked about going fishing again.





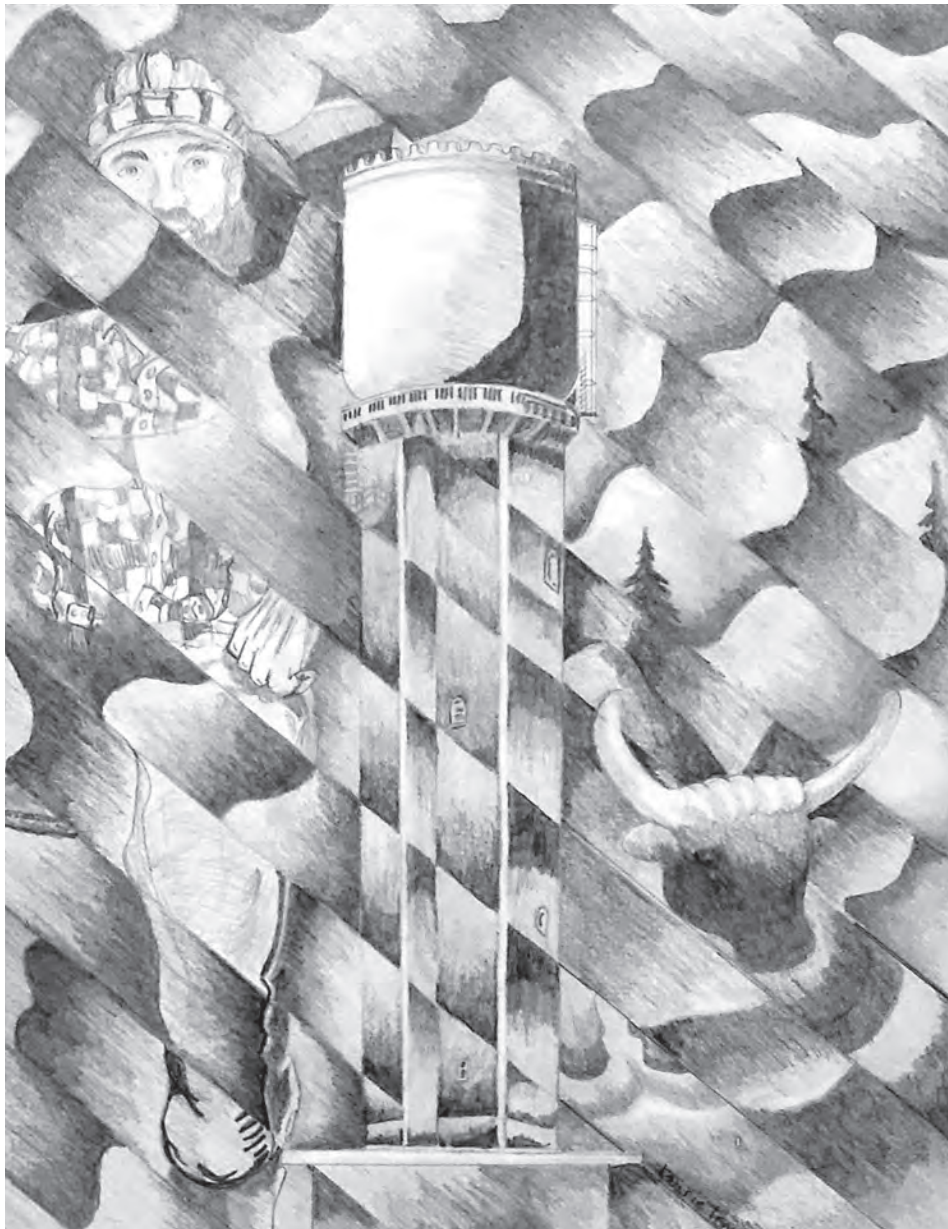








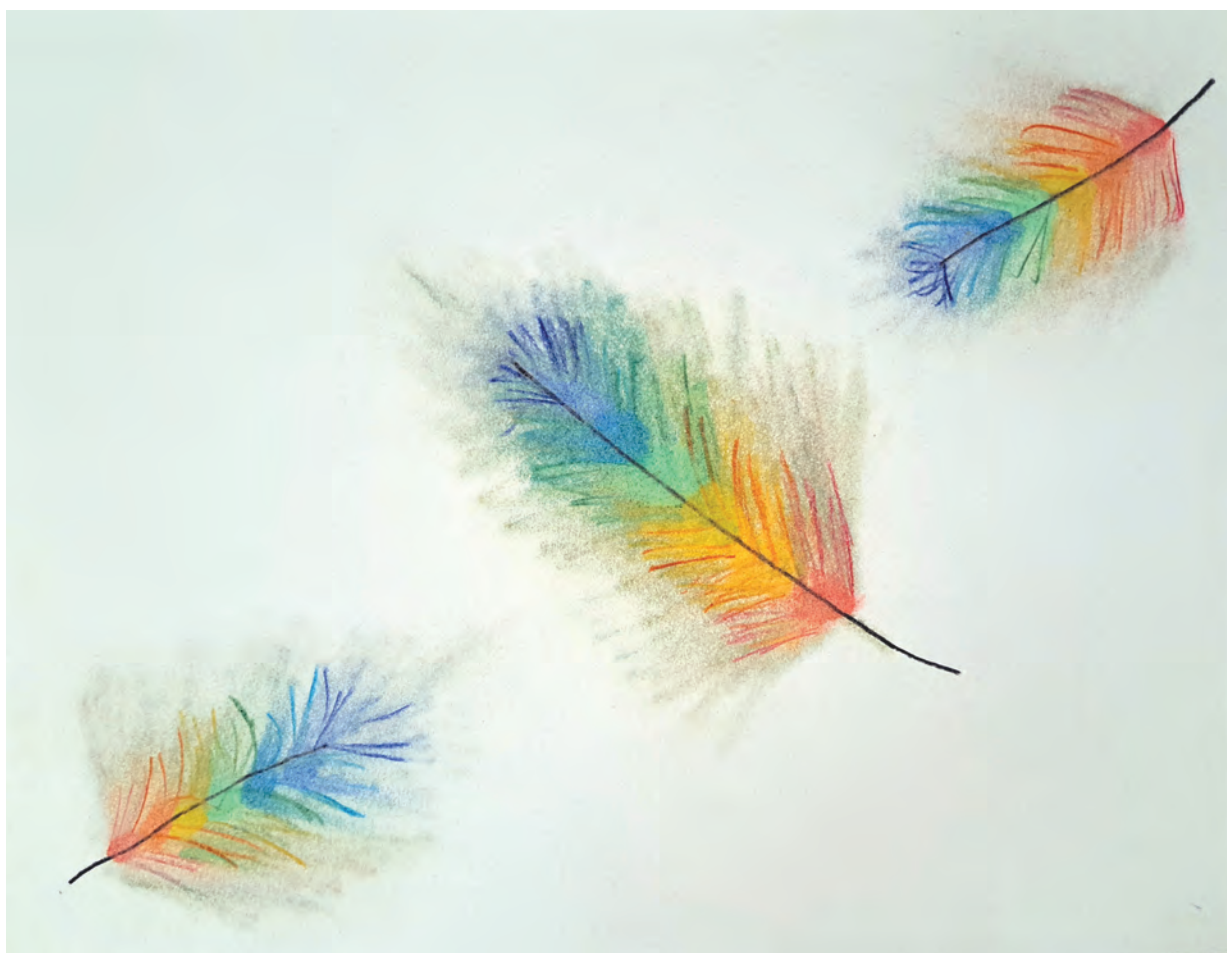
Just when I thought the light was coming through
The tragedy strikes so suddenly
Tears are shed saying goodbye
My voice is but a quiver when I speak
But I strive to stay strong-willed
Memories flood my brain
Tears flood my eyes, burning as they trickle down
In almost an instant it happened
Like you were needed up there more than here
But I wasn't ready for you to leave me
Selfishness consumes me, I want you back
Sadness fills my aching bones
And sorrow reverberates through every inch of my soul
The pain I feel can't be worse than how you felt
Hopefulness brings me to another day
Knowing you are with me always in my heart
Watching over, guiding with not a fear left
My sweet heavenly Angel flying high
The sunbeams must be your glowing soul
Because without that, the world would be a dark place







Glances
That's all I have
Glances
Waiting for him to look
Glances
He never does
Glances
My friends making fun of me
Glances
Building courage
Glances
He leaves
...
Glances











Dance little dew drop,
Slide down the stem,
Slip past the ant,
To my petal's hem.

Hide your moisture.
Before the sun sees,
And steals your magic.
From my leaves.

Down to the earth
It is safe to hide.
"Whoops," gulped the root,
"Sorry, I lied!"







Dear reader,

I hope this finds you well, but I am certain that it will not.
Perhaps you witnessed a terrible thing, and
You are looking for comfort in between the pages of books.
Perhaps you are stricken with guilt and
Looking for a justification in the lines and rhymes.
Perhaps you are being engulfed by grief
And are seeking solace in my words.
Whatever the reason, you are here.
I regret to inform you that
There are no pages, lines, rhymes, nor words to ease your racing mind.
Searching aimlessly will do you no favors; it will only enhance your behavior.
Do you feel it yet? All that despair?
If you don't, then there is no point in further reading.
If you do, then good.
Out of that feeling will come your greatest story.
Put your torment in a queue.
It won't be quick, like flipping a switch.
It'll take time, as all things do.
I know that isn't what you were hoping to hear.
But you'll find tranquility in your blues.







The elation of the beginning
Feeling free and pure joy
Jumping in head first to engage
And taking off sprinting
The weight of the world won't stop her
The sights she will see won't slow her down
Thriving through the journey
Forcing yourself to do better, be better
Reminding yourself why you started
When you suddenly realized you lost your identity
Turn around to dial back, but the maze confounds you
Persevere deeper into the abyss, mostly getting darker
Hints of the brightness peek out, stay your path
Fighting to get back the elation, but it's just out of reach
The monster consumes you not with hate, but by stealing your emotions
Resting your head to have solace on the cold ground
Waiting for darkness to consume your every being
Lights brighten before you, squinting it away
Gasping to breathe, as your tears flow
An emotion, a piece of happiness back
Grabbing on tightly, refusing to let go
Dragging yourself to the midst of the brightness
Hands reach out to hold you up
Arms embrace your body
You are no longer fighting alone
True elation is when you find solace in yourself
With the strength of support and openness in your heart





The love you give isn't the love I receive
I don't feel the love you give me
Because I don't feel loved
I feel anxiety, heartache, pain

I overthink
I hurt myself
I'm pushy
I'm too much
I'm not perfect
I'm not enough

All because of the expectations of the ones who came
before me
The sisters that I love, but you love them more
The comparing,
You need to be more like your sister
Or, when they were your age they did this
The judgements,
Get up, stop being lazy
Why are you eating again
You need to go to the gym
The manipulation,
My day was worse
Stop talking too much
That's not important

I have battles with my thoughts
Stay silent,
don't show emotions,
their feelings are more important,
Don't fight,
I'm wrong you're right,
I'm too young
I don't know anything

Do you call this love?
Because all I feel is the pain you inflict







SUMMER SUNSET
ON WALDEN POND

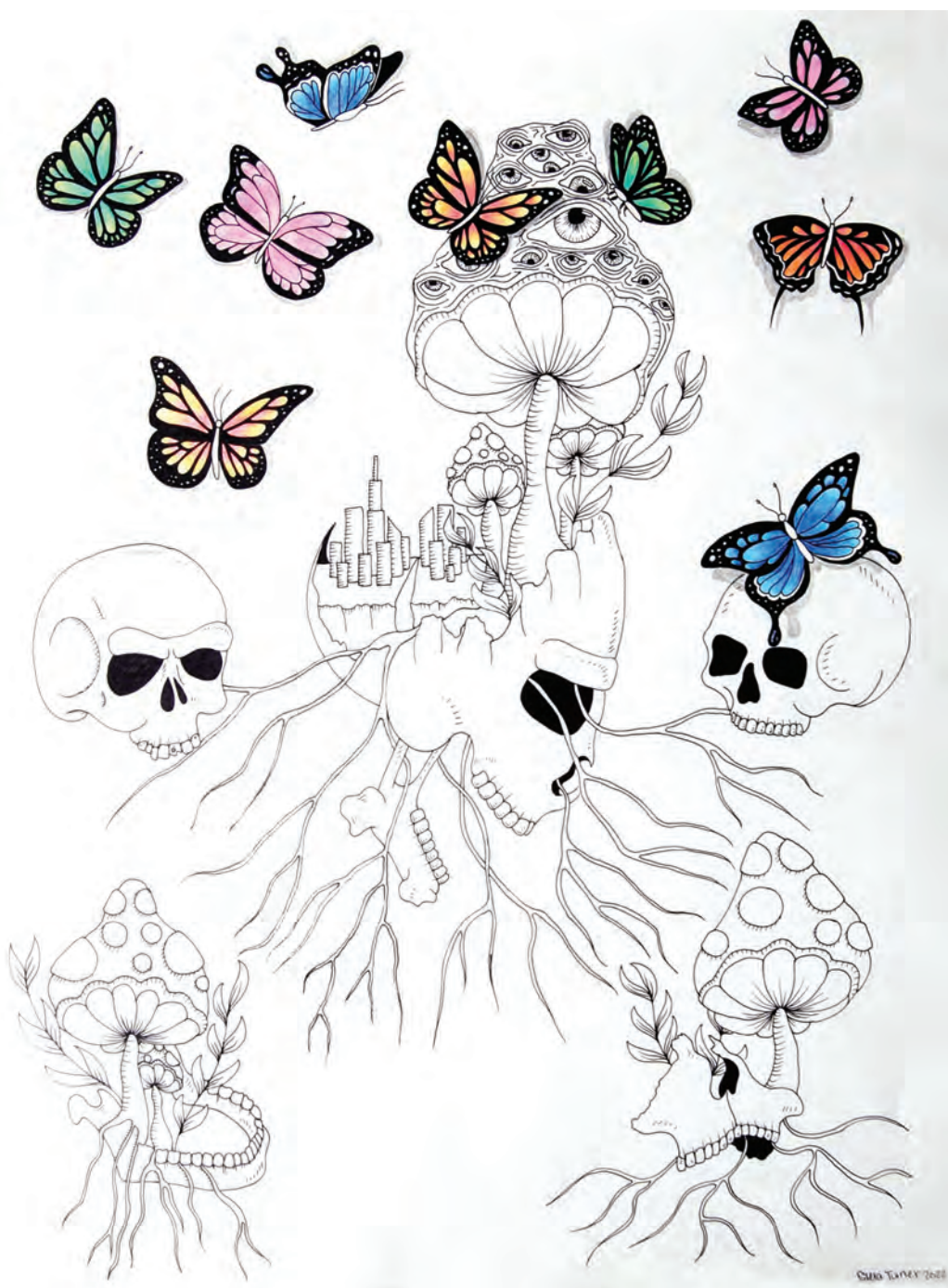
ALITA REQUE-PETERSON







Just because I turned a page
Doesn't mean I wanted the book to end
You took my pause
As abandonment
My bookmark
As a barricade
But as I reach the end of this page
I feel them singeing at the corners
Fire engulfing the back cover
Burning my hands
My tears never enough to dull the heat
To put out the flame
The fire seemed to appear from nothing
Turning sweet vanilla air to suffocating smoke
I cry out to my book
The one with so many chapters left to read
It turns to ash in my hands
When the fire leaves my hands burned and blistered
My lungs filled with bitter smoke
I sit on the floor at the bottom of my bookshelf
Sobbing at the loss
Of the chapters
I
Will
Never
Read
So no,
I did not close the book
But I could do nothing
To dull the fire
That was burning under the pages
From the moment I picked you up

















Down on the other side of the house
A path leads around to the garden.
Where thistle has outgrown the plants
And the earth has dried and hardened.

You don't stop here, keep on going.
Keep an eye on the path ahead.
Bend low for an overhanging branch.
Turn left where the clay turns red.

Once you reach the split spruce stump
If you stop to hear the wind,
You can hear the brook that sang to me,
And imagine how the water glistened.

Now walk straight toward the lofty pine
Some twenty acres to the right
You will come to our secret place,
Which is totally hid from sight.

The deer have left the grasses flattened.
You can see where I lay my head.
And he lay down next to me, right there!
There was magic in the words that he said.

Yes, it was there beneath the pines.
He carved his love into my heart.
All we shared still lingers there.
As fierce as a well-aimed dart.

He took me easily, he took me twice
He took me for a fool,
And in return I took his life
Where the brook becomes a pool.

How do you expect me to live with the pressure
I make too many mistakes to be loved
But you love me when you need validation
I feel like I'm not good enough
I cry, wishing I was good enough for you
I feel empty,
Because you don't believe in me
And the one person that did is gone
I try to hold on to something that was never there
I cry in the arms of the person
I left you for,
Thinking that I'm broken
He is the only one that feels like home.







I met a toucan
A candid toucan
A candid toucan who can do the can-can
“You can?” I asked.
“Yes, I can,” replied the candid toucan
Asked I, “Can candid can-canning toucans can-can on a canakin?”
“A canakin of what?”
“Say, a canakin of candleberries?”
“I’m sure that I can,” said the candid toucan who can do the can-can, “but where can we find a canakin of candleberries?”
I shrugged, suggesting, “A cantina, probably.”
So we began to scan the land for a cantina with a canakin of candleberries
And along ran a canary
A canary cantillating
A canary cantillating caninities
A canary cantillating caninities of canorousness
“I’m looking for a candent canthaxanthin candle,” said the canary. “Can I scan with you?”
“Yes, you can,” said I and the candid toucan who can do the can-can
And again we began
Until we met a cannoneer
A canvassing cannoneer
A canvassing cannoneer with a can of canola oil
“I’m searching for a canon,” said the candidate, “with a cannon to fire my cannonball from.
Can I scan with your clan?”
“Yes, you can,” said I, the candid toucan who can do the can-can, and the canary
cantillating caninities of canorousness
And again we began
And canoed through a canal
And ran into a cantina
A candy cantina
A candy cantina in Cancun
A candy cantina in Cancun called The Candescent Cancun Candy Canyon Cantina

Inside was a canonesse

A cantankerous canonesse

A cantankerous Canadian canonesse

A cantankerous Canadian canonesse beneath a canopy

A cantankerous Canadian canonesse beneath a canopy of cantaloupes

"We're here for a canakin of candleberries," said the candid toucan who can do the can-can

"And a candent canthaxanthin candle," said the canary cantillating caninities of canorousness

"And a canon to fire a cannonball from a cannon," said the canvassing cannoneer with a can of canola oil

"Ask the canty candymaker," said the cantankerous Canadian canonesse beneath a canopy of cantaloupes

The canty candymaker was canning canescent candelilla candyfloss

While holding a candlewood candelabra

And a candlefish with a candidateship of candor in a canvas canteen

"Can you help us?" the candid toucan, the cantillating canary, the canvassing cannoneer, and I asked

"That I can," replied the canty candymaker

First was the canvassing cannoneer with a can of canola oil, who received a canon to fire a cannonball from a cannon

Next, the canary, who cantily cantillated caninities of canorousness with a candent new canthaxanthin candelabrum

And last, the candid toucan, who could indeed do the can-can on a canakin full of candied candleberries

"My, my," said I, "you really *can* can-can. What else can you do? What's your next plan?"

"Nothing, really," said the toucan, "After all, I'm just a bird."

And then flew away.



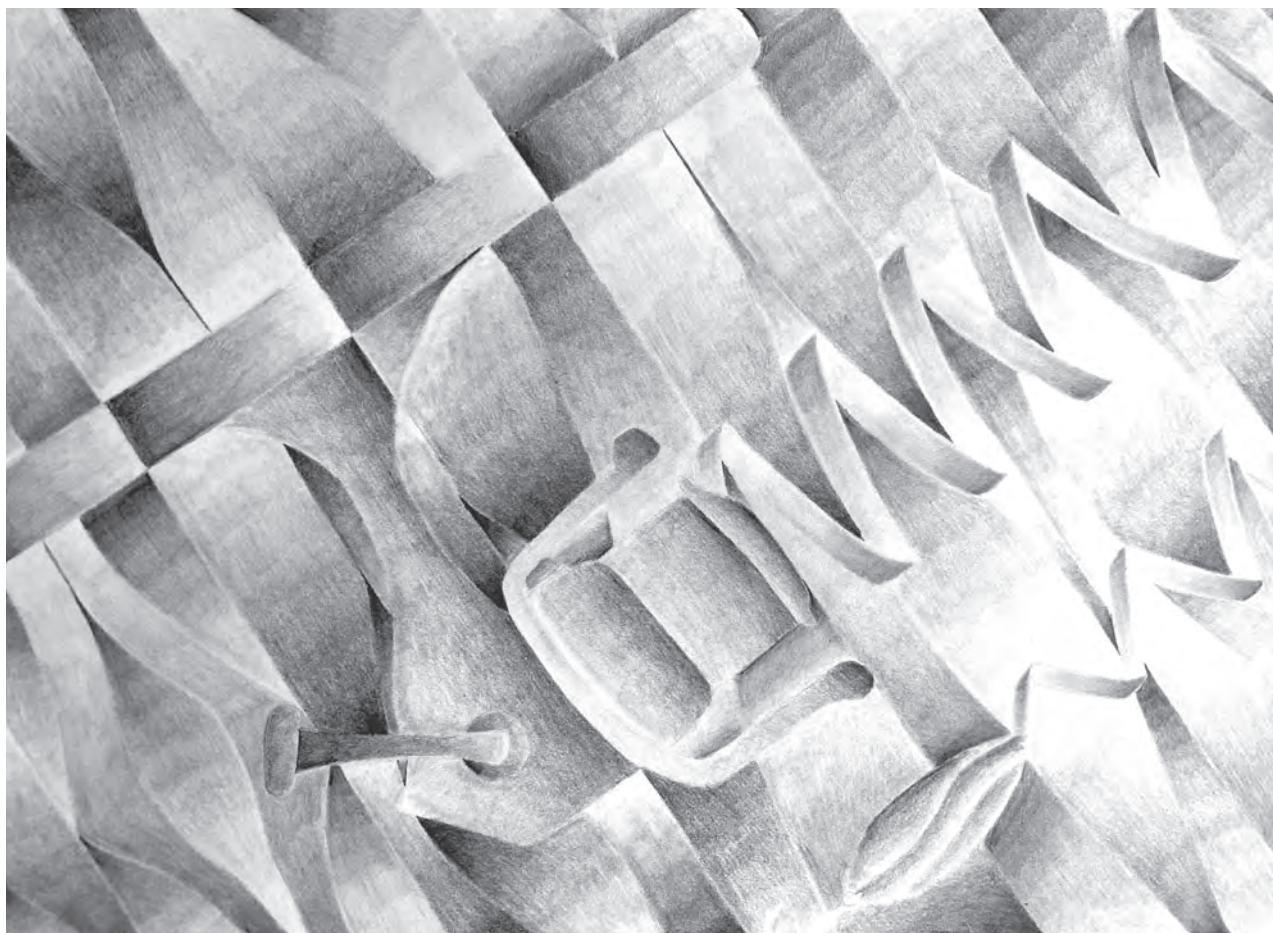
It's an asylum
White padded walls
Nobody cares for me
Nobody calls
Chains and locks
Straitjackets, clocks
And all you hear
Is tik tok

I'm in a mental institution
No possibility of school or tuition
Life is my only competition
My brain is in full confusion

The only walls are white
Nothing seems to be right
Wanna go see the sunlight
But I'm stuck here putting up a fight

And no
I cannot leave or go
No windows, just walls, and doors
Trapped to chains held by the concrete floors
I have been stuck here since I was 12 at least
They said to live a normal life, I needed a priest

I'm lost and trapped
By society
But oh god
Accept my apology
Please, please forgive me...









Me in my wife's world
I never have to clean
She cooks me dinner every night
Not that I want to take a bite...

Me in my wife's world
She does all the chores
I sit all day and watch my TV
She just lets me be...

Me in my wife's world
She takes care of the kids
She goes to all their stuff
Getting off the couch is tough...

Me in my wife's world
She sometimes cries all alone
At night, she asks what else she can do
She says all I ever wanted was you...

Me in my wife's world
The doctor says I have days left
The cancer has reached almost every part
I never meant to break her heart...

Me in my wife's world
I've prepared her for when I'm gone
I keep telling them we will be together again
I'm only scared cause I'm not sure when...

I sang my favorite songs
Took as many pictures as she could
I knew she would

I feel myself not finishing this day
I wiped her tears away

I hugged my boy and kissed my girl
I'm no longer in my wife's world





The initial gut punch you undergo when you receive the word that your thirty-eight-year-old son has drowned is undeniably physical and emotional. Patrick was swimming with his ten-year-old twin half brother and sister at their father's lake home in Siren, Wisconsin. Patrick traveled to Siren at least twice a week to visit his father, to play games, garden, and swim with the twins. That late Monday afternoon was warm, sunny, and the lake was placid. They were playing "alligator" and diving from the dock in ten feet of water. All three lined up on the dock and took the dive. The twins returned. Patrick did not. The twins began to scream, "Patrick!" Their father heard them, ran down to the dock, and immediately called 911. In no more than a few minutes, five different EMS units responded. The first unit used a canoe near the dock and launched a drone. They found Patrick in minutes, in ten feet of water and ten feet from the dock. The two EMS responders brought Patrick to the dock and attempted to resuscitate him for 45 minutes—while his father held his hand—but they could not revive him.

When I got the call about the drowning, I fell to the shop floor, a guttural howl coming from the pit of my stomach. I still cannot remember who called me. It is all right not to remember those first few days or even weeks. The memories will come back to you. I learned that emotional and physical existence is day by day. Not just living but surviving and being able to function. I want to give some suggestions that have helped me to survive the unimaginable.

Will yourself to function. Functioning can be as simple as performing activities of daily living. Will yourself to get out of bed or up from the sofa. Move your body—it is as easy as taking a small stroll or walking your dog. Will yourself to take a daily shower or a relaxing warm bath. Will yourself to eat. Your family or friends will undoubtedly bring food or meals to your home. Eat to keep your strength up. Will yourself to stay hydrated; water will be your friend. Buckets of tears will come those first few days and weeks. A box of tissues nearby would be helpful. Will yourself to grieve. Let the tears come, let the memories come, let the guilt come.

Lean on your family and friends. They will be there for you. They might also share their grief journeys with you. And they will share their memories of your child. In the weeks following Patrick's death, I cried so hard with my friends whose toddler granddaughter had died—they came over on a warm, sunny afternoon to visit. This little girl had never gone home from the hospital since she was born. I

was so sad for her grandpa and grandma; but so happy that my son had lived thirty-eight years of a full, adventurous life. I felt fortunate that I could call or text my family, my friends, or Patrick's father any time day or night. And believe me, I did. The kindness you feel from friends is like a warm hug you will never forget.

Be prepared in the first few days, weeks, or months for your child's spirit to come to you or pass through you. I felt Patrick's spirit pass through me powerfully in the first few weeks. It was a shuddering through my body that woke me in the middle of the night. Another time I saw him drowning in the lake and I was reaching out to him but could not help him. I woke up at the back door screaming his name. I learned to date and journal these events. I always keep this journal with me. Once when I was driving, Patrick's face appeared on the windshield of my car. As soon as I stopped driving, I immediately journaled this event. I keep a picture of him in this journal.

Be prepared for the information you will receive in the coroner's report. In an accidental drowning, it is mandatory for an autopsy and coroner's report. Ask questions. You deserve to hear the report and what the coroner has to say. This information might take six to eight weeks to become available, but the coroner will be sagacious in sharing this report with you. Patrick's death was ruled an accidental drowning. There was no reason, no trauma, no stroke, no heart conditions, no drugs, no alcohol, nothing. I wanted a reason, something concrete. Patrick was a good swimmer, and he was very physically fit. The coroner explained to me that most of the public is unaware that accidental drowning occurs much more frequently than we realize. I had to be content with that answer.

Allow yourself to celebrate a beautiful life. We had a magnificent service about two weeks after Patrick drowned. Over three hundred friends and family from all over the country attended. Our family asked all attending to wear their favorite rock or reggae tee shirts. The service was in Saint Paul, MN, Patrick's current home base. Patrick had purchased a home in the West Seventh Street area of Saint Paul, and he was rehabilitating it. Patrick had lived in Ashland, Oregon for many years, but he traveled all over the world. He spent two months in Hong Kong, Macao, and Singapore. He made many trips to Mexico and the Caribbean. Patrick spent several months in Prague, the Czech Republic

and Kyiv, Ukraine before the war broke out. Patrick spent one or two weeks eight separate times in Paris, France. The reason he traveled so often to Paris is that he accomplished the feat of getting a full body tattoo, from the neck down. It was a work of art and Patrick modeled for advertisements and at tattoo conventions. Patrick played disc golf professionally and won a few tournaments. His favorite disc golf courses were in Hawaii. Patrick's true calling was playing poker, which he did professionally. So, of course, his favorite place in the world was Las Vegas, Nevada. Like I always said, "Patrick never asked me for money!" The after party was at Tavern on Grand in Saint Paul, MN. This was one of Patrick's favorite spots. We ate walleye and toasted Patrick more than once. We regaled each other with colorful stories of Patrick's life. Our family and friends took the tavern over until they closed early.

My question to myself is "Does closure ever come?". I have felt a need in my soul to carry Patrick's story forward, to say his name, to talk about him with others. I have this need even to this day nineteen months later. I have pictures of him all over from every stage of his life. I have kept articles of his clothing so I can smell him. I never got to see Patrick after he drowned. He had beautiful hair and soft dreadlocks. I asked the funeral director for his hair, not just a lock but all of it. I have crafted Christmas gnomes and used Patrick's hair for their beards. On the first anniversary of Patrick's drowning, I brought thank you cards to the five EMS units that responded. Patrick's longtime girlfriend Katie and I visited with Patrick's father, and we threw flowers in the lake where he drowned. We sat on the bench that was donated by the lake association with a plaque commemorating Patrick. This bench is at the public landing. All these small gestures brought comfort to me, but closure? I do not think it will ever happen to me. I miss Patrick so much and think about him every day. But Patrick, an ardent Bob Marley fan, might remind me, "Love would never leave us alone."

Written in loving memory of my son, Patrick Theiler.















My earliest memories are living in Minneapolis in the yellow house. I know my family moved frequently from what I have been told; but the yellow house on Filmore Street and just off Broadway holds fond memories for me. When I look back, my parents were background noise in our lives. Arlene, Arlen, and I were born within three years of each other and the bond we three shared is as strong today as it was when we were living in that yellow house.

But, like most families in the late fifties, our parents didn't stop there. Three years after I was born, my mother gave birth to twins—Mark and Mary. Through no fault of their own, the twins stood apart from Arlene, Arlen, and me. They were referred to as “the twins” as if they were a separate entity. And that is how we saw them. Their arrival in our untroubled home became a demarcation line: *before or after* “the twins.”

Uprooted and Transplanted

It was hard enough for mom to keep up with three rambunctious kids, but adding the twins multiplied her stress tenfold. It was not unusual for her to be a mother to the five of us, master the art of presenting delicious meals on a limited budget, and attempt to run a household like the TV mothers. Something would have to give and there was a shift to curtail our feral activities. This meant the freedom we had become used to suddenly stopped.

Sometime after the twins' first birthday, it was decided they would go live with my grandmother (mom's mother) on her farm in the northern part of the state. Grandma had the twins during the week, and we would drive up north every Friday night and spend the weekend, heading back to the city mid-day Sunday.

This arrangement allowed mom the opportunity to find a job to help supplement the family income. And it gave us three older ones the opportunity to spread our wings once again. The twins were out-of-sight and out-of-mind.

This new system worked well (as far as we were concerned) but our parents had issues with it. Dad and Mom wanted their family together. Whenever possible, Mom would stop work and Mark and Mary would come back home. Then, for reasons that adults do not share, she would begin another job and back to the farm the twins would go.

When I was nine years old our world was turned upside down. The decision was made that we would leave Minneapolis and move “back home” as Dad said. We were uprooted from our familiar neighborhood and transplanted into rural Aitkin County, far from everything we knew.

I lost the friendship of the dozen or so neighbor kids that I had grown accustomed to roaming with. I lost the freedom to drop by Delmonico's corner store for penny candy or dime comic books. I lost Gus's Service Station, where I could get a handful of peanuts from the row of penny dispensers, just inside the service door. And what a treat it was when I was the lucky one to get the "free" peanuts when the bell rang on the ninth twirl!

In return, for the familiarity of the five or six city blocks that I gave up, I now had an extended family. I was launched into a world where everyone knew me. Suddenly grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and total strangers claimed to know me!

Among the faces, old and new, was my cousin Karen. While I vaguely remembered her from earlier visits, our reconnection brought us closer together in ways I would never have imagined. I was lost in the familial middle among my siblings; she was likewise, the one girl amidst brothers. Karen had five siblings: there was a seven-year gap between the two oldest children—a demarcation line for Karen too—and then her brothers Leonard and Thomas, herself, and her brother Robert came up the rear, all in quick succession. Karen and I were opposite sides of the same coin!

Hazards and Chores

My folks bought a forty-acre farm (we called it a farm because we had a vegetable garden). Arlene, Arlen, and I had to adapt to the changes. Even though our farm was small, there were hazards, and it was our shared "responsibility" to keep each other, as well as the twins, safe.

Once, we stumbled onto some redbelly snakes inside an old, old car abandoned in a corner of the field. While Arlen and I were convinced they were poison, Dad said there were no poisonous snakes in Minnesota. We decided Dad did not know everything and did our best to keep the twins away from there.

Just down the road was a large culvert where the water ran fast; we had to make sure they did not go wandering around there on their own. The clear water cut through a swamp; then in the spring it would rush angry enough to cut away the solid packed gravel and push the culvert into the swamp on the opposite side of the roadway. Even in mid-summer there was the risk of falling in and drowning.

The old barn was a great place to play and climb-- to make "forts." But there were dangers of rotted floorboards, obstacles like disintegrating swinging ropes, and a myriad of hazards that kept us on guard to protect our youngest siblings.

Years earlier, before we moved to the land, there had been a well that went dry. What remained was a large gaping hole in the ground where yard waste and old metal pipes—junk and anything that would not burn—were tossed into the pit. We were told to stay away, but it was like a siren’s call tempting us; daring each other to jump across its width.

Arlene had chores inside the house, helping mom with cleaning, dishes and washing clothes in the old wringer machine. Arlen did the outdoor jobs like firewood, watering the garden, mowing, and raking the yard. I was stuck with Mark and Mary.

Mark was quiet. He was easy to boss around. Mary, as Dad would say, was “a real pain in the butt.” It was up to me to amuse them if they had nothing to do. My job was to stay close and “keep an eye” on them. I was the closest in age to them so instead of enjoying the fact that I was one of the older kids, I was permanently stuck at the kiddie table. I would be the one to give up what I wanted to do to keep them occupied and out of trouble. I resented them.

Dad got a job as an over the road truck driver. He left early every Monday morning before we woke up and he got home Friday night, in time for supper. The folks would pack as much quality time into their weekends as they could. They had their own routine of running into Moose Lake after breakfast: shopping, visiting, paying bills. Grown up stuff.

Arlene was our “babysitter” when the folks drove into town, twenty-five miles away. The easy access to the Delmonico’s was replaced with a rare trip into Moose Lake. Every few months we might go into the Farmer’s Co-op on Saturday morning, where we would trail behind mom as she shopped the grocery aisle. Dad would debate the price of tools while he wandered around the hardware department and shared a cup of coffee with strangers he had known all his life. At some point, one of us kids would create a scene and we would all be sentenced to sit out in the car “until we knew how to behave.” A rare treat would be the chance to walk through the Ben Franklin, where we could find the coveted penny candy. Dad would laugh and give us a dime each and say, “Don’t spend it all in one place!”

And time passed; one year and then another. Mom and Dad began taking Mark and Mary with them when they went into town or visited neighbors. Arlene, Arlen, and I re-discovered our independence. We explored our forty-acre woods until we knew the lay of the land by heart. We swiped Dad’s nails and tools to make forts and treehouses that were just as dangerous as they looked. We followed the deer trails; hunted for berries; and tried to make bowls from the wet, spring clay. We even tried smoking the Indian grass, like in the John Wayne movies.

There was an enormous boulder in the middle of the field; it was surrounded by willow brush and a few struggling birch trees. The three of us would lie on the rock, outstretched arms blocking the sun from our eyes. We would discuss curiosities; like why did the light that shown through our closed eye lids change shades of red? When we were on the rock, the brush and young trees that surrounded our hiding place made a perfect cover.

Hours could pass, with us returning to the house only when our mother's angry shouts alerted us that we were needed for something or another, NOW.

Fearless Cousin Karen

I was lucky; my cousin Karen became my best and dearest friend. She was an entire year younger than me but having grown up on a farm, she had knowledge beyond her years, and she was fearless! Karen could walk through a field of Holsteins, pushing aside the 1500-pound dairy cows as if they were nothing more than annoying house flies. She opened my eyes to the warm, squishy joy of fresh manure squeezing through my toes. She taught me how to wash those same toes in cold, rushing water at the culvert just down the road. She warned me not to catch my cousin Lenny's outstretched hand if he was holding the electric fence with his other (advice I ignored only once).

By the summer of '69 when I was thirteen, I had explored every inch of her family's acreage with her. I knew the worn cow paths that snaked through the fields and woods. Karen showed me how to navigate through alder brush without getting slapped in the face by tricky branches. I learned how to follow the trail that led to Split Rock, the small, secluded lake surrounded by scrub trees, cattails, and willows.

One late August day leaves a memory. It was Arlene's sixteenth birthday. It was a tradition to gather family and friends to share birthday cake and ice cream. Each family brought one birthday card that held a single dollar bill tucked inside; this was the birthday girl or boy's gift. No one was rich, no one gave more than that single dollar. And us kids all looked forward to that card! There were never any surprises; the only thing that dictated the size of the haul was how many families showed up. If grandma and grandpa came, add a dollar. If relatives came from Moose Lake, add a dollar. If neighbors came, add a dollar. The adults frequently joked about how often that single dollar bill went back and forth!

I was anticipating the arrival of the Maki family all day; my aunt, Uncle, and all four cousins. I was especially excited to see Karen. It had been several days since the last time I saw her. When they finally pulled up the dusty drive, I rushed outside to meet the car.

Karen and I tramped across the field to sit on the rock. Here, we laid out plans for the afternoon. We had both looked forward to the time we spent together. This was the end of summer; school started in a few days. There was an urge to do something we had not done already. But what?

Within minutes, Mary followed us out to the rock.

"So, what are we going to do?" Mary asked expectantly. "Momma told me to go play with you guys, the boys don't want me." As she studied our faces, I felt a pang of guilt. I did not want her tagging along. Then she instantly erased any guilt by adding, "So you have to let me do whatever you do!" Her arms crossed in front of her chest, legs spread apart, looking as defiant as our banty chickens. In reality, she was a four-foot, nine-year-old, party-wrecker!

"We're just going to walk down the road, not much to it. But you can't keep up with us in those flip-flops," Karen said. "Go change your shoes, we'll wait for you here." Absolutely gleeful, Mary jumped up and down, spun around and headed back to the house shouting, "I'll be right back!"

She had not run four steps when Karen and I jumped off the rock and began racing in the opposite direction. As we raced along, we exchanged triumphant giggles. We did not have a plan of what we were going to do, but we had gotten rid of Mary!

We were quickly closing the gap between ourselves and the main road when we heard her outraged cry. "I am going with you! I am going to follow you! I'm going to tell momma!" She hadn't been fooled at all. She must have checked if we were waiting for her almost as soon as we'd taken off!

As Karen and I hesitated and looked back, Karen reassured me, "She can't follow us for long. She'll give up."

"Yeah," I nodded in agreement, "She'd rather be with Mark and Bobby anyway," I said to ease my conscience. As a rule, Mary, Mark, and Bobby were stuck at the hip.

We jumped the ditch, running to stop in the middle of the dirt road to survey the situation. I could see Mary's blonde ponytails bobbing through the tall weeds. She was still coming.

"What are we going to do?" I asked Karen. While I was that entire year older than her, I was not leader material. We had established a pattern where we thought, talked, and always decided to do whatever Karen came up with. Karen simply had better ideas.

"Well, let's follow the tree line and see if she keeps coming." Karen waved across the road, at the neighbors' neatly mowed hayfield at the edge of the woods.

"Yeah," I grinned. "She'll give up and go back."

The two of us slowly jogged along, casually exchanging news about what had been happening since the last time we had been together. We had run the length of the forty-acre field and stopped to shimmy under the old barbed wire fence.

"I see you guys!" an angry Mary hollered from behind us. She was halfway across the field, red-faced and still coming.

Karen grabbed my arm and we darted into the woods.

"We have to go back," I sighed to Karen. "She'll just keep coming."

"Not if we go faster!" Karen laughed. "Our plan today will be to lose Mary. Come on, follow me!" and with those words, Karen charged through the thicket, her long legs flashing ahead of me. I kept my eyes on the ground, doing my best not to trip over the uneven field while I struggled to keep up. Uncertainty filled me for a moment, I shot a long glance behind. I just knew that Mary was still following.

We ran for a couple of minutes; stopped to check out where we were. We listened; the tall grass was moving enough that if Mary were still chasing us, we could not hear her. There was willow brush growing thickly all around us, but I could see the tops of some basswood trees growing farther on the right side.

"If we keep going that way, what's there?" Karen asked. She waved her hand straight ahead of us.

"I've never been out this way," I hesitated, feeling embarrassed not to know. "We've got the road behind us or the road over there," I pointed my hand to the south. "We can cross the field and then take either one. They're both good to just walk."

"Let's just keep going straight," Karen replied. "I think that should lead us somewhere so we can get a better idea of where we're going." She grinned her special grin, "Let's see where this old cow path will take us!"

"Let's go!" I agreed, suddenly excited to move on. Then just as quickly, I thought of Mary. "Do you think she is still behind us? What if she falls too far back and really does get lost? I would not have been surprised if she didn't get herself lost in sheer spite."

Quickly, Karen held up her hand, signaling me to stop. "Shhh, do you hear anything?" I held my breath—I did not hear anything except birds and the breeze tickling the

underbrush. I thought I felt something run across my foot! I jumped. "I don't hear her."

I hoped she had turned back. If I were her, I would've. Being out in this tall grass and brush is not someplace I would want to be alone. These tall weeds would have been over her head.

"Yeah, she turned around." Karen's confidence fed mine.

Karen did a graceful twirl and began to dance in a carefree way, as she sang, "Indian Lake is the scene you should make with your little one. . ."

"Just keep it in mind if you're looking to find a place in the summer sun!" I joined in. We marched, single file though the scrub and thistle. For the next few minutes or so (we were not keeping track of time) we sang our entire song list of the Cowsills, Tommy James & the Shondells, the Monkees, and more. This past summer, music had become the soundtrack of our lives.

Losing Mary

Suddenly the field opened to a marshy looking place: with cattails, cordgrass and clumps that grew like tree stumps out of the dry grass bed.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Should we go back? Should we head towards the other road?"

"Well, it looks pretty dry, don't ya think? If we stay on the high stuff, we can climb across on the grasses and not get wet."

I indicated my new brown Mary Janes with my new white stockings peeping out from under the straps. "Except we're both wearing new school clothes and I have on my new shoes..." I left it hanging in the air. I was reluctant to face my mother's wrath if I wrecked my clothes. I had begged her to let me dress up and I had promised I would not get dirty.

"It's not far to that hill. Once we get on higher ground, we can circle back to Autio's field. We will almost be at your house," Karen offered up.

"That makes sense. And I am getting thirsty, so we could head back," I agreed.

Karen stepped across the dry looking swamp bed and put a neatly pointed shoe on a clump of dried cordgrass. "It's good," she said, her confident smile spreading across her sweaty face. She delicately took another step, then another. I followed, not so confidently. I eyed the rough ground uncertainly.

I continued to follow her into the marsh, moving gingerly. Neither of us talking as

we searched for someplace solid to plant our feet. The late August day had seemed to suddenly get warmer and warmer. It was hot. I noticed for the first time that there were also mosquitos, deerflies, and bugs with wings in the heavy air.

Then, Karen gave out a yelp, falling backwards into me. I, in turn, fell on my hands and knees into the black, stinky muck that was the earth beneath our feet. We were splayed out like a Twister game. Her face staring into the sun, my nose inches from the black goop.

I rolled over onto my butt, surrendering any hopes of escaping without damage. I was not sure how I was going to stand up. Karen had landed on her rear end; she was up to her elbows in rotting, smelly mud. Throwing her head back, her long blonde hair tickled the muck like a horse's tail teasing a fly. We were defeated.

"Fuck," she said. It was startling to hear, but it was the perfect word for our situation.

We spent the next several minutes thrashing about in mud that went passed our ankles. Once we were up-right, we surrendered to the marsh. The oily muck making sucking noises with each step. Cattails, willows, whatever we could hold on to, was used to pull us free and then up the slight hillside. On dry land, we checked each other out. It was not good.

"Let's just get to the high ground and circle around the swamp to the road." Karen said.

"Yeah," I gave her a bleak smile, shrugged, and gave a snort through my nose. "We stink!"

It seemed to take forever to circle the lowland, to get to the field, to cross the dirt road and finally to get within eyesight of the house. I did not know how long we had been gone, but they might be getting worried about us.

As we made our way in silence, I began to think about Mary. What if she *had* followed us? What if she was lost somewhere in the woods and Karen and I had no clue where to look for her? The sky to the west was taking on a peach color hue. While we were trudging through the swamp, the afternoon had slipped into the evening.

What if Mary was in the swamp, watching the same evening sky. She would be afraid. I was afraid for her. I was afraid I would have to tell my folks I had lost Mary.

Karen was quiet too. Our non-stop chatter had stopped. Our singing had stopped. We slowed even more as we trudged up the driveway. The sun was low enough that the lights inside glowed ever so slightly.

Everyone was in the house. It sounded like they were enjoying the cake and

strawberry ice cream. I could hear my mom and dad's voices along with my aunt and uncle's. Other voices were mingled with teasing laughter. I prayed that Mary was inside. I wished we had not left her. I wanted to cry.

Karen stepped aside so I could walk through the kitchen door ahead of her. Stunned silence slammed into us as we walked into the room.

"What happened to you two? What the hell have you two been up to?" We were slammed with questions from all directions.

"Jesus, you stink!" My cousin Lenny laughed. He always appreciated it when someone else messed up.

"We were just thinking maybe we had to get a search party to look for you!" Then mom's eyes widened as she took in my clothes. Her lips thinned slightly, a sure sign I would hear more later.

Karen's mom, my aunt Helmi, was beginning to assess the damage herself. She was not happy.

I only had eyes for Mary. She was sitting cross legged on the floor between Mark and Bobby, her hair still in tidy ponytails and her shorts and top neat as a pin.

I twirled around to look at Karen, my relief was reflected in her eyes. Speechless, we looked at each other, then began to laugh, real sincere laughter.

Things could have been worse.









Bent Pine 2024



For as long as I can remember, I have loved taking long walks outside. Even more so ever since I got my first dog five years ago, who has since joined me on my walks. The feeling of freedom and safety that being outside gives me, I've never been able to find anywhere else, no matter where I've looked.

Last summer, late in the season, I decided to go for a long walk, an adventure if you will. I grabbed a small backpack, put in some water, a snack, some treats for my dog, his stuffed monkey he brought to me, grabbed his leash, and we set out. It was around mid-day, and the sun was bright up in the sky. The air had that distinct smell that only happens when the sun is shining without a cloud in the sky, and there was a slight breeze that took the edge off the heat.

We started off down the dirt road, and kept to it for about half a mile; then we cut under a fence into an open field whose owner I knew to be friendly. The field was about two miles long by two miles wide and had a watering hole in the back that had old car parts sticking up out of a mound of earth just behind it. To the right is another field that is connected to this one by a fence that is down in the corner closest to the watering hole. There was a little bit of woods next to where the fence was down, and, as we were walking over there, my dog was running around smelling trees and old cow scat. After we hung by the watering hole for a bit and had some water, we crossed over to the downed fence that separated the two fields. The other field was roughly 4 miles long by 6 miles wide and had a young forest, about one mile by half mile, off in the far-right corner.

As we entered into the larger field, my dog ran over to a spot about 20 yards ahead where I saw a scattering of white things on the crabgrass. As I got closer I realized that the "white things" I was seeing were the old bones of a cow. Cleaned by scavengers and bleached by the sun, the bones were as white as the snow that blankets them in the winter. I could tell that it was the bones of a cow, as there was one large skull, two femurs, and only enough ribs for one. The bones were scattered around in no particular order and my dog and I took some time walking from group to group, studying and poking at the bones. As I looked at them I felt a little unsettled. I mean sure, I had been around deer carcasses, and squirrel carcasses, beaver, too, but the cow was so much bigger than those were, and for some reason that disturbed me. Not my dog though—he was having the time of his life, running

around and smelling what I assume was a delicious banquet to him, all laid out. When I looked at the skull I felt as if it was looking at me too, and I couldn't help but wonder why it was here. Maybe it got sick and died, and the owners decided to leave it there instead of dispose of it, or maybe they butchered it and brought back the bones? Whatever the case, it was now in front of me, and I wasn't going to waste this opportunity.

After my dog and I had finished looking at all the bones, we went over to the small woods at the far-right corner of the field and stayed there for a bit. There was a tree that had fallen against another tree and it made a perfect chair. We sat for a while, eating some snacks and drinking some water—remember, it was quite a hot day. My dog sniffed our backpack, checking for more snacks, and then we ducked under the fence again and headed back home on the road.

When I got home I called my oldest sister, who likes stuff like this as much as, or even more, than me, and we set up a time where we would go and gather some of the bones to clean and maybe display. On the chosen day we grabbed my dog again, an old sled, and our rusty-red truck and headed over to the field. It was a bit of a trek through the two fields with the sled, but once we arrived we started looking for the bones we wanted to keep and the ones we wanted to leave. After loading up the sled, we pulled it to the old pickup, put the sled in the back, the dog in the front and headed home.

To be honest, we haven't cleaned the bones yet—they're sitting in a pile in the back of the house. Moss and lichen have grown over the skull covering like the snow in the winter. Seeing it makes me think of a fantasy story where an old skull sends you on a quest to save the world with your canine companion and your older sister for company, and perhaps you'll even meet a dragon on the way.





Cecilia answered the telephone, clamping the receiver against her good ear.

"I can't hear you very well," she said to the reedy voice crackling through the line. "If it's urgent, drive out to the farm. Genevieve has baked coffee cake this morning." Outside, brow-shaped ridges of snow formed icy waves that flattened against the horizon. In the living room, two rectangles of buttery sunlight rested against the wall.

"That was the sheriff," Cecilia said, returning the handset to its cradle. "Though what he wanted I cannot say."

"I hope Teddy's not in trouble again," Genevieve said, her gold-rimmed glasses marking the only visible difference between the eighty-year-old twin sisters.

"I doubt that, dear. Teddy's dead."

"Oh, yes. I remember now. Teddy's buried in Oak Lawn Cemetery. Isn't he, sister?"

"No, Teddy's in Iron Hills Cemetery. Mother and father are in Oak Lawn."

"What do you think?" Genevieve asked, stepping away from the two-foot-tall, wooden Christmas tree that rested on the card table. She had glued so many fake rubies, pearls, and earrings to it that none of the lime green felt underneath showed.

"Marvelous. Now we just need some tiny presents to go underneath it."

"Oh, good humor, sister," Genevieve chirped. "Good humor, indeed. You don't think I used too much glue, do you?"

"Of course not." Several marble-sized dollops of glue appeared scattered on all sides of the tree. Cecilia spotted a pair of her favorite earrings glued along one edge.

"You really don't think I used too much glue?"

"Absolutely not. It looks perfect."

When her sister shuffled into the kitchen, Genevieve removed a handkerchief from her threadbare apron and began blotting the most egregious spots.

###

Sheriff Walsh parked his patrol car on the shoulder across from their mailbox. The driveway had not seen a snowplow all winter, so he had to step in partially covered tracks a delivery boy had made earlier in the week. He struggled through twenty yards of shin-deep snow, squinting as he took in the century-old farmhouse, the dilapidated red

barn, the battered silo, and a line of rusted tractors and wagons parked along the field's edge.

He apologized as packed snow from the soles of his boots missed the rug and spilled onto the cracked linoleum in the entryway.

"You sure don't see many farmhouses this old anymore," he said, removing his square rim glasses that had fogged over.

"No, it certainly is a treasure, isn't it?" Cecilia said. His normally pale and freckled face, now reddened by the sub-zero wind, made him look like a boy who had just come in from recess on a bitter Minnesota day. He brushed his black hair with one hand, exposing the sharp V of his widow's peak, as he followed her into the living room.

"Our Christmas tree," she said, pointing at the card table where the center sagged from the tree's weight. "Though I cannot take credit for it. Genevieve is our artist in residence." He scrutinized the lumps of excess glue that remained. His gaze then fell to the base of the tree where a set of rosary beads were pasted to the foundation.

Cecilia ushered him to the ladder-back chair where their father had often sat while scrutinizing The Old Farmer's Almanac. After trips to the kitchen to retrieve cups, plates, and the stainless-steel percolator, she sat next to Genevieve on the crushed velvet sofa, draped with quilts to conceal the bare spots.

"I'm sorry," Genevieve said, addressing the sheriff. "I have no idea who you are. You must be one of Teddy's friends. I'm so forgetful these days. I inherited that from our mother. She was always forgetting where she placed her Bible, and sister and I would have to search the whole house for it."

"This is Sheriff Walsh," Cecilia said as she served from the chipped Formica table, placing a generous wedge of cake on his plate before pouring coffee. The liquid settled in his cup; an oily slick swirled on the surface.

"Are you here to collect Teddy?" Genevieve asked.

"No, ma'am."

"Won't you try some of Genevieve's coffee cake?"

"Oh, I will in a moment. It smells delicious."

"That's so nice of you to come and visit us," Genevieve said. "We don't get many visitors. Do we get many visitors, sister?"

"Well, ma'am, I wish this was just a social visit." He placed a manila envelope on the coffee table. His eyes found a spot on the wall where a picture had once hung. Soot now framed a slightly less faded rectangle of wallpaper. "I'm afraid my visit here this morning is strictly police business. I'm required to serve this summons for your failure to pay the Jorgenson Funeral Home regarding your brother Theodore's burial costs."

"Our brother Teddy," Genevieve recited, "is buried in Oak Lawn Cemetery."

"No, dear. Teddy's buried in Iron Hills. Mother and father are resting at Oak Lawn."

"Oh, yes. That's right, sister. Mother didn't want to be buried in Iron Hills because a man who was going to the electric chair had a plot in that cemetery."

"I don't recall ever seeing an invoice from Jorgensen's," Cecilia said. The sheriff's gaze dropped to floor level where several Christmas card baskets lay stuffed with unopened mail.

"I don't know what the man did to get the electric chair," Genevieve continued.

"Well, Sheriff, are you positive he even sent an invoice?"

"More than a few. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here. Mr. Jorgensen keeps a pretty close watch on his money, ma'am."

"So do thieves."

"I don't know," Genevieve mused. "I suppose he could have been a thief. Do they electrocute thieves? Sister, why did mother not want to be buried there?" Cecelia rested her hand gently on Genevieve's knee. She rearranged the quilt to cover a spot where stuffing from the seat cushion poked through.

"What outrageous sum does he claim that we owe?" Sheriff Walsh opened the envelope, removing and arranging the court documents. When he read the total, Cecelia felt a sharp pain like a needle stab her chest. "As I rightly said, the larger crime here is Mr. Jorgensen's highway robbery. That appears more grievous than the crime of misplacing a bill."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Those are the facts."

"Teddy's buried somewhere, I guess" Genevieve said. Sheriff Walsh tucked the documents back into the envelope.

"What happens if we refuse to answer this nonsense?" Cecilia asked, craning her head forward.

"Well, I don't think it has to come to that and I wouldn't advise going against the court. The Hepplewhite name has been in the county register for over a century. People around here remember your parents fondly and folks in church, in particular, are more than sympathetic to your situation. They don't blame you for your brother's . . . Well, I'm sure they would want to chip in and help pay what you owe."

"In other words, charity." Cecilia stared at him until he broke eye contact to drink his coffee.

"I'm just saying there are better ways than ignoring a summons. It would be no different than what the church does now for your groceries."

"What do you mean? The church?" Cecilia asked.

"After your folks died, Father Pike figured the two of you could use help with groceries and expenses. He takes up a collection for those in need." The pain stung her again. She felt splinters forming in her throat.

"I remember," Genevieve interrupted, "I remember now. Mother thought the electrocuted man would tunnel over and take her down to hell with him."

"I don't understand," Cecilia said, her hands clenched into fists. "Father had an account with Jim at the grocery store."

"I'm afraid that money has been gone for some time." She heard a sharpness in his tone. "Now, I know that Mr. Jorgensen isn't interested in seeing this go to trial. I talked to him once already. He just wants the money he's owed. I'd be more than willing to talk to him again about settling the whole deal. One Sunday collection would put a large dent in this. Might even pay it all off. I can talk to Father Pike for you if you'd like."

"Oh, sister, we could have a bake sale to raise money," Genevieve said. "Remember when mother used to have bake sales with the other ladies?"

"You would have to bake every day for three calendar years to pay off such an outrageous sum, dear."

"I'm tired, sister."

"Sheriff, have you checked for overcharges in Mr. Jorgensen's invoices?"

"Sister, I should lie down," Genevieve said. "Thank you for the pleasant visit. Please take some coffee cake with you." He rose from his chair when Cecilia stood up to help Genevieve from the sofa.

Cecilia guided her around the card table and paused just before the doorway.

"As for Father Pike taking up a collection for us, I cannot—will not—accept charity. Is that clear, Sheriff? As soon as you leave, I will be calling the grocery store to make that abundantly clear."

After she helped Genevieve into bed, Cecilia returned to the living room and began clearing the dishes. Sheriff Walsh offered to help, but she wouldn't allow it. From the kitchen, she watched him take a bite of the coffee cake and then spit it into a napkin.

When she came back, he was studying a faded photograph on the wall next to the empty space where Teddy's picture once hung. A film of dust covered the kerosene lamp on the side table; the fake rubies that once hung from its base now adorned the Christmas tree.

"Our mother and father on their wedding day," she said.

"I see."

The costume jewelry on the tree had continued its slow exodus toward the bottom. The topmost layer had slid far enough to expose a sickly green band of felt.

"Well, I should get going. I'll leave this paperwork with you." His lips pursed when he stopped talking, as if he still tasted something unpleasant.

"Sheriff, I'm afraid"

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid Genevieve has had one of her spells today. Please forgive her temporary lapses."

"Well, ma'am. That's understandable. The cemeteries are only a few miles apart, just in different townships. Your folks must have set up a plot for your brother when he went to prison, before his execution, that is. He was down at Florida State Prison, if I recall."

The sharp, needling pain stung again. When she spoke, her words sounded like they came from someone else's voice.

"Yes, mother insisted. It was up to me to make sure Teddy's body got home safely."

"I'm sure that"

The Christmas tree broke through the card table. It made a dull thud when it struck the floorboards. Rubies and earrings came unglued and scattered in different

directions, clanging on the floor and ricocheting against the trim until they came to rest. The tree had split open. Its hollow center looked like a gaping, black wound. Cecelia heard the Sheriff speak but his voice sounded muffled and distant. It felt like watching the weight of her life break through a plane and split in half. The stress and strain of holding the family's name together had forced a different kind of rupture. She felt her body slacken. The muscles in her jaw loosened, but she could not speak.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" She clutched her chest until the sharp pain, like an invisible tendril, reached its shadowy end and dissolved.

"Yes, I'll be fine."

"That's too bad about the tree. Was your sister making it as a gift for a relative?"

"It was for us." She lowered her arm, resting it against her side. "We're the only ones left."

He offered to help clean up the mess. She didn't argue this time. When he bent down to retrieve the last ruby that had slid underneath the end table, she clutched his forearm and squeezed until her joints ached.

"Would you . . . Would you please speak to him for us?"

"Father Pike? Yes, ma'am. I'll see to it."

She watched as he retraced his footsteps in the deep snow. When he started the patrol car, a plume of exhaust swirled above the trunk and then fell to the ground like chimney smoke driven down by a sharp gust of wind. He pulled onto the highway, pausing by the corner of the field where a mound of Teddy's belongings lay covered in snow. A shirt sleeve had poked through the surface and flapped like a shroud in the biting wind.









This is the first few paragraphs of a horror book I have been writing. It's told in the first-person perspective of a woman named Tallia who hunts monsters. I came up with the idea after years of reading horror stories.

The room was cold and carried the scent of an old garage. Almost wet and earthy. The dim fluorescent, yellowing lights resting on the high ceiling did practically nothing to illuminate my surroundings; instead, it only added to the already creepy atmosphere. My mouth was covered by my left hand in an attempt to quiet my labored breathing. I had been moving nonstop since I got here nearly two hours ago. I had tried not to run much so I could stay hidden. But, I could only do that for so long. And “so long” had passed—now I was trying to catch my breath. I had taken different twists and turns while running and was now completely lost. I’d accidentally backed myself into a corner with nothing but a concrete wall keeping me hidden from the *Thing* that was in here with me. It had first spotted me turning a corner and wasted no time in hunting me. I, in turn, had wasted no time running as fast as I could to get away from it. Hoping to find somewhere that would give me an opportunity to take it by surprise. But now it was close by. I could hear it moving around.

I couldn’t help it, I was shaking. Partly from adrenaline and partly from fear. I reached for the pistol clipped at my side and slowly moved my hand away from my mouth in preparation. I lifted the gun out of its holster as quietly as I could manage. With both hands, I held onto the gun keeping it aimed at the floor. A bead of sweat ran down the side of my face. I barely noticed how cold the wall I leaned against was. The scratching from the creature was closer now, maybe 10 steps away, 5 steps, four, three, two. . . I moved into its field of vision and aimed the pistol at it. The lighting made the creature look silhouetted—it was almost humanoid in its figure. And it was tall, maybe 7 feet, and lanky. The eyes were two long vertical slits that were spread open and didn’t seem to blink. It let out a loud, inhuman scream, once its eyes landed on me, that sent shivers down my spine.

Without a second thought, I pulled the trigger and. . . nothing happened. “FUCK!” I shouted. I pressed it again frantically, and again and again, but it was stuck. No, not stuck. I had the sinking realization that I had left the goddam safety on. Before I could correct the mistake, loud mechanical whirring sounded as the creature shut down. The once dim lights from before, quickly lit up the entire room. Drowning me in

bright lights that made me squint my eyes until they could adjust.

"Alright Tallia, what happened here?" Khali asked over the loud speaker. With the newly brightened room I could more clearly see the mechanical monster they had made for this part of my training. It was gray skin tightly wrapped around a metal robot skeleton. It was 7 feet tall and skinny with long arms and sharply pointed fingers. Its mouth was tight and cracked into many thin lines all across its face. Though it wasn't real, it was a direct recreation of one of the monsters outside of our walled cities.

"I-" I let out a loud sigh. "I didn't turn my safety off." I could hear the sound of laughing in the background coming from the speakers. It was *not* coming from my supervisor Khali, but instead from my partner who was also watching my progress from the large window that overlooked the entirety of the training room. I glared up at the window.

"It was a simple mistake. It won't happen again. I'm sorry," I said, placing the gun back in its holster.

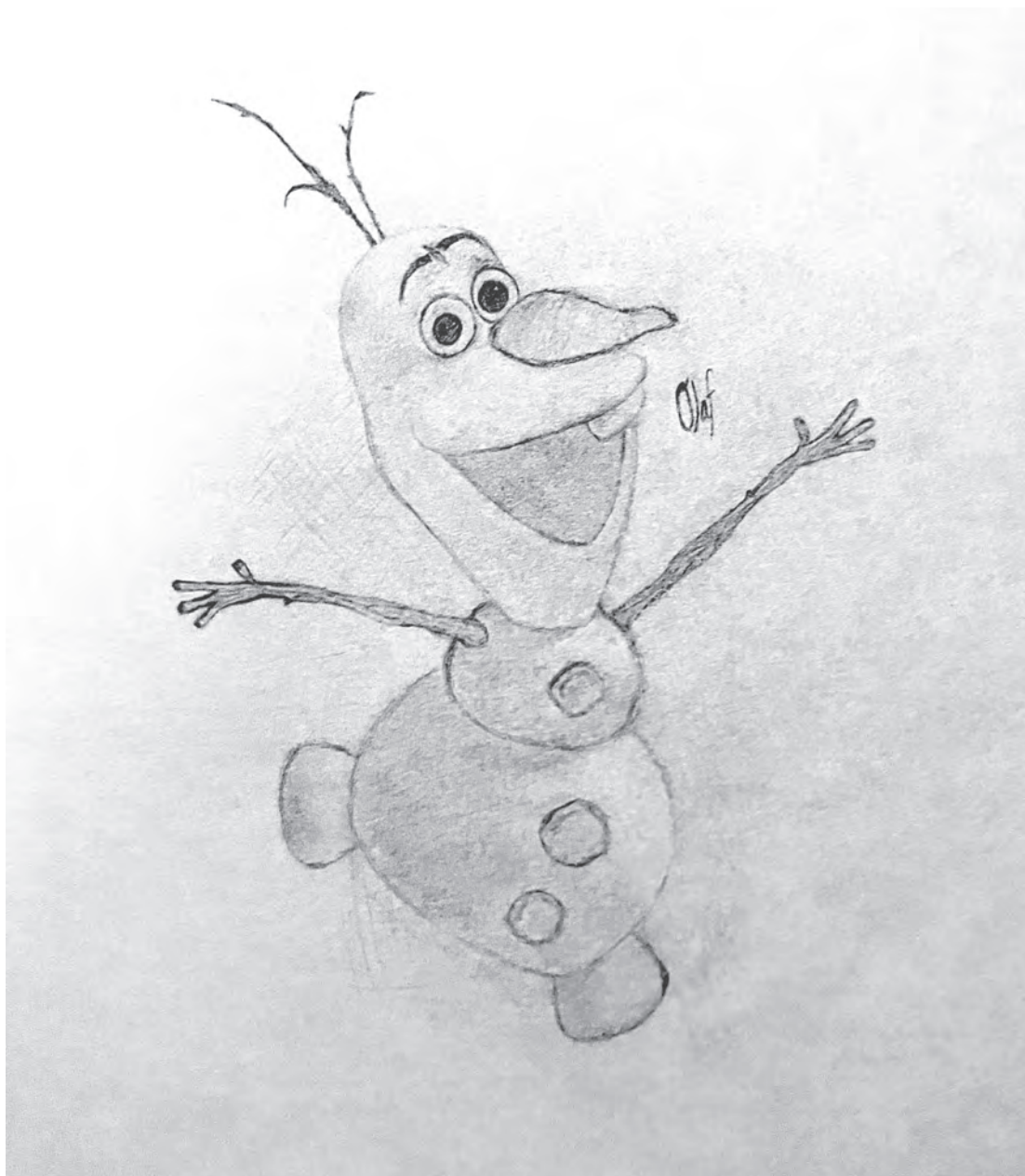
"A simple mistake that will get you killed-" I could hear him turn away from the mic to yell at my partner.

"Naught, enough. If this were a real situation, your partner would've been torn apart just now," Kahli said in a stern tone. The laughing ceased and I could hear Naught clear his throat before replying with an ashamed "Sorry, Sir." Khali didn't respond. He turned his attention back to me.

"Tallia we're going to run through this again in about twenty minutes. This time *Check. The. Safety.*" Khali sounded tired. I didn't blame him, he had been running through these sorts of trainings all day with new recruits. I walked my way out of the maze of concrete walls to the steel door with a big EXIT sign plastered above. I pushed on the door and left the room, glad to have a short break. Through the door was a long hallway leading to other parts of the facility, and a staircase to my immediate left that led to the observation room. I always hated those stairs: they were obnoxiously steep and skinny and I had tripped up them more times than I would like to admit. And I hadn't been working here long. I walked up the stairs and opened the door. My supervisor was sitting down next to the window by a control system, looking over some notes he had taken during the training. I took a seat next to Naught at a table that was placed in the back corner of the room. Without a word he just handed me a

coffee. I grabbed a scrap of paper that was sitting on the table and began to write down the day's events.

My name is Tallia, and I've decided to document and share my experiences as I work at this job. I'm twenty-four years old and I survived the end of the world. Which many would argue is still ending today. The day it happened isn't something I remember in great detail. You know how people will ask you if you remember where you were and what you were doing after a really traumatic event took place? And most people can remember it, almost as if they were right back there? Well, I was just four years old, and I barely remember a thing from that day. All I know for sure is what I've been told. That things weren't always like this, with the walled off cities and the regulations on travel. And just how dangerous everything is now.







Coniferous trees
Produce cones and have needles
Minnesota pines

The tall white pine tree
Slender, greenish-blue needles
Flexible and soft

The scraggly jack pine
Short, stout, olive-green needles
Stiff, slightly twisted

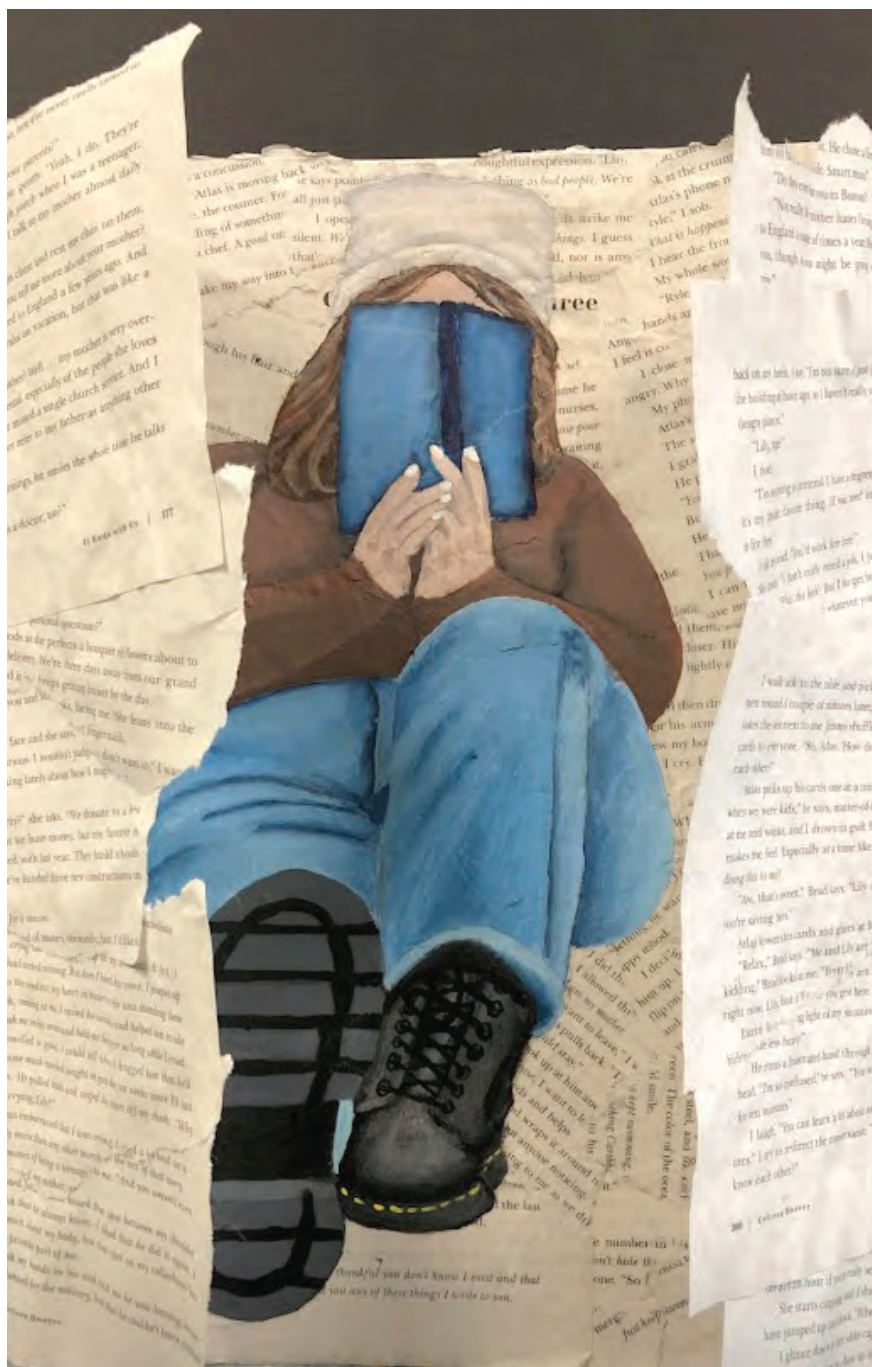
Norway pine—red pine
Dark yellowish-green needles
Snap when they are bent

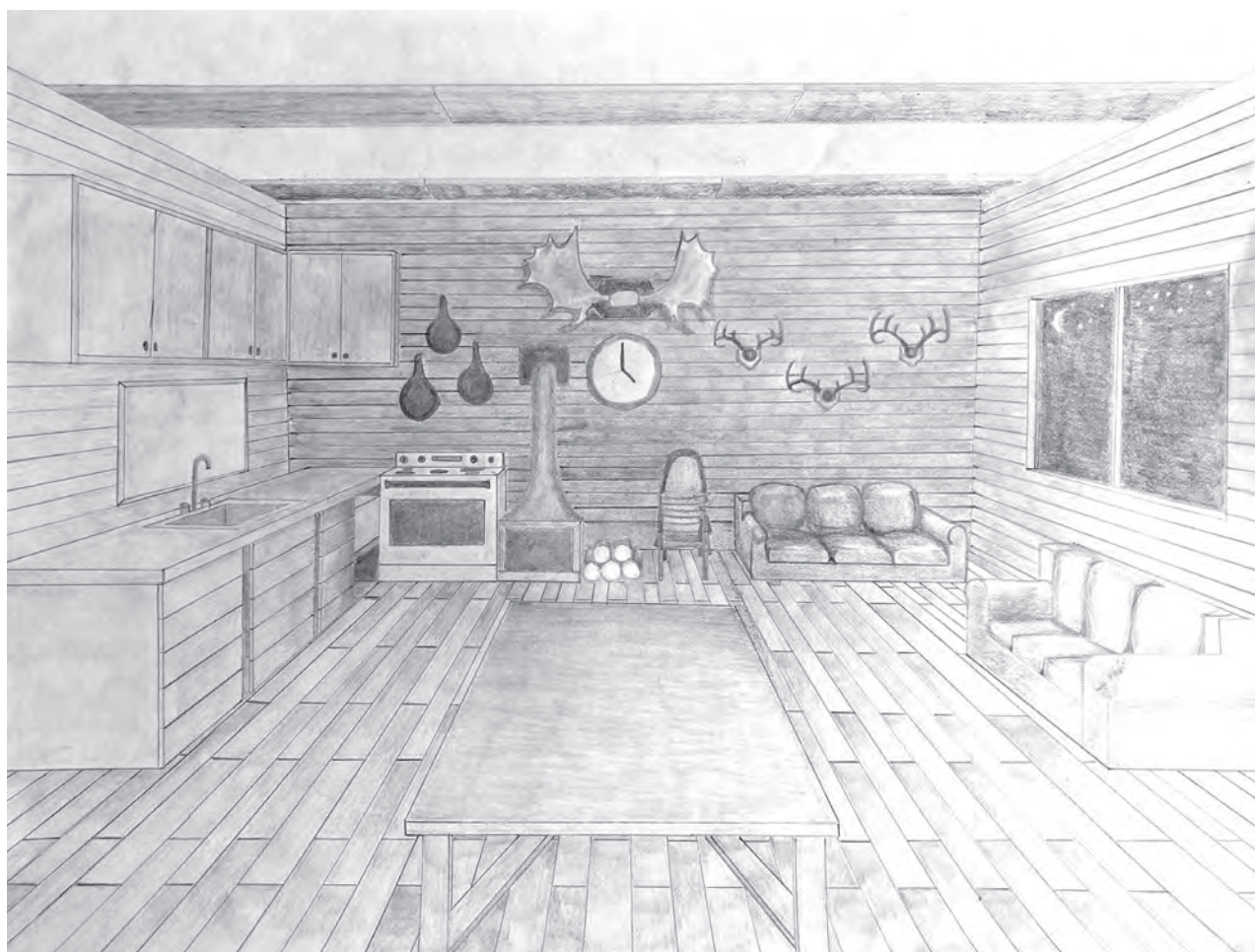
Minnesota grown
Conifer, evergreens, pines
White, jack, Norway pine



When the road in life gets hard and the lessons get rough,
Lift your head up high and remember to get tough.
For every single hardship is a lesson along our path;
hardships help us to grow and learn, but they never truly last.
Our life is what we make of it, so live it being kind;
put your best foot forward and leave your mistakes behind.
Give yourself the grace to fall along the way,
but pick yourself back up and carry on each day.
For know tomorrow will be better, and hardships will fade away;
As long as you put in the work and try your hardest each and every day.
Life is what you make of it, so give it all you got
For the only way to create a better path is to give it your best shot.
Don't let your past define you and learn from your mistakes;
Because, remember, life's greatest joys
are in the positive changes that we aren't afraid to make.









A squawking squirrel
Gathering hidden acorns
A thick furry tail

Bucks and does browse shrubs
White-tailed bucks have shed antlers
Does prepare for fawns

Striped skunk in the brush
Opportunistic omnivore
Fruits, nuts, carrion

Curious raccoon
Appealing mask—black eye stripes
Excellent climber

Minnesota March
Sunset—calm, peaceful, and quaint
Time to get some rest





Warped thoughts driving ones cravings,
Locked in a cage of routine while losing your savings,
Friends become strong with a vision that is left unclear,
Focusing on the battles in life that can't seem to disappear,
Promptly wondering naked inside a momentary lapse of reason,
The inner circle loves of your life, look at it as betrayal or treason,
Through a feast of friends without a care, you'll take on any dare,
Through time, should you become lost, tripping, landing on that snare,
Finding your way out, back, above ground, searching for that breath of air,
Feels impossible without some one that cares,
Truth will hit hard in the small reality one has become to acknowledge,
Pull yourself away from that ledge,
Release those negative thoughts in your head,
Step forward into your new skin while holding on to that belief in change.
For the change is the new normal,
It's real,
Go to it now! Folding the past away while starching the page of each new day!



















This is the beginning of a book I am currently writing. The main protagonist is a mid-sized 18-year-old named Dahlia, like the flower.

Trigger warning: This fictional story includes violence and mention of sexual assault.

“Shit.” I cursed as blood dripped on my bracelet. I picked up the body again, this time being a little more careful. This was pretty difficult. The guy was tall, fast, and strong, but not as strong as me. I know, a short midsize girl strong? Yes, that can happen! It was actually a weird story on how I was able to get him where I wanted him to be before I finally struck.

Here I am hiding behind a tree, waiting for my target Josh—he is the average male, six feet, with a six pack, dirty blonde hair, and has a basic dickish personality. You might be wondering why I’m hiding. No? Well, I’m going to tell you anyway. Josh is what I call a *menace to society*. My best friend went to a party and he was there. She drank a little too much that night and Josh decided to be touchy with her. She told me that he was “just making a joke,” but I guess that “joke” involved him touching her in places that shouldn’t be touched. I actually blame myself. I blame myself for what happened to her that night because I believe that if I was there she wouldn’t have been in that situation. I could’ve stopped it from happening, but I’m here now so he’ll never do it again, to her or any other girl. That’s why I’m doing this. In the corner of my eye I see Josh coming from the right of me. I hide the knife in my sleeve and walk towards him.

“Dahlia? What are you doing here? I thought I was meeting Nina.” That’s the excuse I told him so he would meet me in the woods.

“Oh, she couldn’t make it. She wasn’t feeling well.” I scoffed and started sliding the knife down my arm into my hand as I walked closer to him. When I looked back at him he had the biggest smirk on his face. As much as I wanted to make a snarky comment, I need this plan to work.

“Ohh,” he pretended to have sympathy for her. Even though he’s the reason she is “sick.”

“What happened? She was just fine the other day.” Yeah, *fine*. She pretended she was okay so no one would suspect anything.

"She started to feel sick after the party." I'm a couple feet away from him now, slowly getting closer to him as I reach for the base of the knife. "Nina said someone made her feel uncomfortable. Do you know anything about that?" Now I'm just a foot away from him.

"No, I only saw her a few times at the party." He started to back away from me and I kept following him until he hits a tree. Perfect.

"Oh, then why did she tell me you did more than just see her?"

"I - I don't know what you're talking about." The look of pure confusion is good.

"I know what you did! I know you sexually assaulted her, so stop lying!" The fear in his eyes was like a drug.

"Okay, fine I touched her, b - ." I gripped the knife as hard as I could. I placed my left hand on his right shoulder and rested the tip near his heart.

"I'm sorry, what were you saying? I can hear you now." I dug the knife in, puncturing the skin, seeing the blood slowly changing the color of his white t-shirt. It was mesmerizing. I wanted more. I want him to feel every second of pain.

"Okay, okay, I'll tell you everything, j - just move the knife. Please." I love hearing the word *please* coming from a boy, it's like he's giving up his power.

"Okay, fine. But do you promise to tell me everything?"

"I - I promise." I slowly removed the knife away from his chest, my hand still putting pressure on his shoulder. I wanted this to be documented, so I placed the knife in between my belt and my jeans while I grabbed my phone. "Why did you grab that?"

"I want this to be recorded so I have proof against you. So, spill. What did you do to Nina?" I made sure to press the red record button, and it's close to his lips to get every word he says. "Okay, go."

"Well you see, I was at Justin's party. I saw Nina and I walked to her," I can tell he hates this, hates that a woman has power over him. "She was almost trashed, jumping on tables and dancing, grinding on everyone too. It's like she was asking for it."

"Asking for it? What does that mean, she was just having fun!"

"Yeah, and I was having fun with her. I don't understand what the big deal is—she had a good time."

"A good time?! You fucking raped her."

“She didn’t say no.”

“And you think that’s okay? To rape someone? And specifically, my best friend? Because you’ve made a big mistake on that.” There was so much anger bottled up inside me, and I felt like I was going to explode. “Do you know why you made that mistake?”

“Ummm, because you’re in love with her. Everyone can see that you are obsessed—well, except Nina herself.” What the fuck is this boy talking about. Yes, I love her but that’s only because she is like a sister to me. “Do you honestly not see it?”

“The only thing I see right now is a boy who thinks he has the right to do whatever the hell he wants! But guess what, you can’t.” I stopped the recording, placing my phone back into my right back pocket. I feel Josh’s weight shifting under my grasp trying to get out, I kept pushing him back but he still wouldn’t stop. My weight shifted for a split second and bam! I was on the ground and there he was in the distance running away. I got up as fast as I could going after him. He’s running faster than I thought but I am smarter than him. I see that he is running into the woods. Stupid boy. If you want to get away from someone with a knife, you should go to a road or a house, and it’s a good thing that I already walked through these woods. So, I don’t run straight to him, I start running to the right of him. I know that is the first turn he’s going to make. I believe that he’ll turn his head to the right to see if I’m following him, so obviously he’s going to run to the right, and that’s how I’m going to cut him off.

I ran for a few minutes before I saw him, right on time. I start to run faster, coming close. I can feel the vibrations of his feet hitting the ground. *Come on just a little faster...* *Gotcha!* I reach my arm out, grabbing his left shoulder, shoving him until he falls down to the ground.

“P- P- Please, don’t hurt me!” I love that he’s begging me to stop. The only reason why it’s bad is because he made it bad.

“You know I was actually going to spare you but you had to run, didn’t you?” The look on his face is priceless. He tries to move away, so I placed my left foot on his abdomen, applying pressure and slowly crushing his ribs. Every breath he takes I add more and more pressure, making it harder for him to breathe. Making it feel like at any moment he’ll just pop. I slowly start to grab the handle of the knife in my belt, taking the knife in eyesight. I lean closer to his face watching it turn from scared to pure terror. I pressed the knife on the

base of a vein in his neck applying a little pressure and with one quick swipe he stopped moving, blood oozing out of his neck. Feeling my anger disappear as the blood leaves his body.

And that leads us to now. I'm glad that I brought my matches with me. I placed him in a pile of leaves and twigs, burying him under them. I keep piling until I can't see the body. Taking the pack of matches out of my left pocket, striking the match and letting it fall onto the leaves. It felt so freeing. I walked back a few feet, watching the flames grow.

Thirty minutes go by and the body is nowhere to be found. Well, at least the flesh. The only thing left to get rid of are the bones. It's around 11:30 so it's too late to do it now; my mother will be pissed at me for staying out after midnight. I look at the pile of nature to double check. (I don't need the cops on my ass, especially after they caught me smoking a blunt the other day.)

I finally made it home with five minutes to spare. I turn off my car, grabbing my phone and the keys out of the ignition and locking the vehicle. When I walk through the front door I see a very angry mother looking back at me.

















Strengthening love on a stalemate,
The eyes that looked back didn't hold on,
The torched soul tells his story through the darkness of past pain,
Pain lost,
Driven deep within that mental vain,
Brought back through rage, emotion, confusion,
Boiling cost of love,
Imaginary love,
Smile at this pain. . . for it is winning,
Now sell yourself well and start that new beginning!











Dear Volleyball,

Thank you for a lifetime of joy and struggle and frustration and pride. I have been a part of a volleyball team every fall since I was fifteen. I have been helping volleyball teams for 37 years—33 years as the head coach at Central Lakes College. My experiences with volleyball people and teams in the gym have defined who I am and how I learn and teach and communicate. Volleyball, you have taken me to different states and cultures. You have helped my family have something to rally around together. You have brought me best friends and incredible mentors. You have exposed me to other people—how they react and think and feel. You have made me feel connected to people in a way . . . like no other. I feel like I'm ME when I'm around volleyball people. You have definitely broadened my understanding of the human existence.

Volleyball, you have helped me be confident—you are where I have done some of my best “work.” Volleyball, I felt called to use you as an avenue to lead young women; to model and teach confidence; to provide opportunities so that people can experience the rewards of consistent hard work. Knowing there was a group that relied on me every afternoon in the fall taught me to prepare and plan. You taught me to put others first, you taught me to take sincere pride in others' accomplishments, you taught me that EVERYONE on the team matters, you taught me what dedication and sacrifice can result in—pure joy! Confidence comes from experience. I am confident that I have been successful because I put in the time and work and heart and soul into being a great volleyball coach.

Volleyball, you have helped to teach me humility—you have often made me reflect on how I could have been better, to recognize that I cannot control winning or losing, to realize that I sometimes get it wrong. You have allowed me to experience disappointment and many many opportunities to learn and grow. So many opportunities to be resilient and tough, to power through, to lean on others. You also taught me what lack of dedication and sacrifice can result in—an aching in my gut that I have been determined to avoid again and again.

Volleyball, you have taught me to love people, to be kind and supportive when people are in need, to be nurturing and demanding, to balance high standards with deep caring. A coach loving a player is like no other relationship. I am so grateful to be a small part of one of the most important times in a person's life: the 13th grade, where young women are figuring out who they are and what's important to them. Volleyball, you have provided me a front row seat to watching and sometimes helping young women learn and grow into who they are meant to be.

Volleyball, you have always taught me to want more, to never be satisfied. You are teaching me now that there is something else for me. Some next phase. Some other way to be in the world. Many people know me as a successful volleyball coach, but I have always been so much more. I am a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend, a yogi. I am a leader and a learner. I am a helper. Now it is time for me to reclaim the other parts of who I am, to lead and learn and help in other ways. I'm excited to explore those other ways.

Thank you, Volleyball, for a lifetime of learning and growing. You will always be a special love of my life.



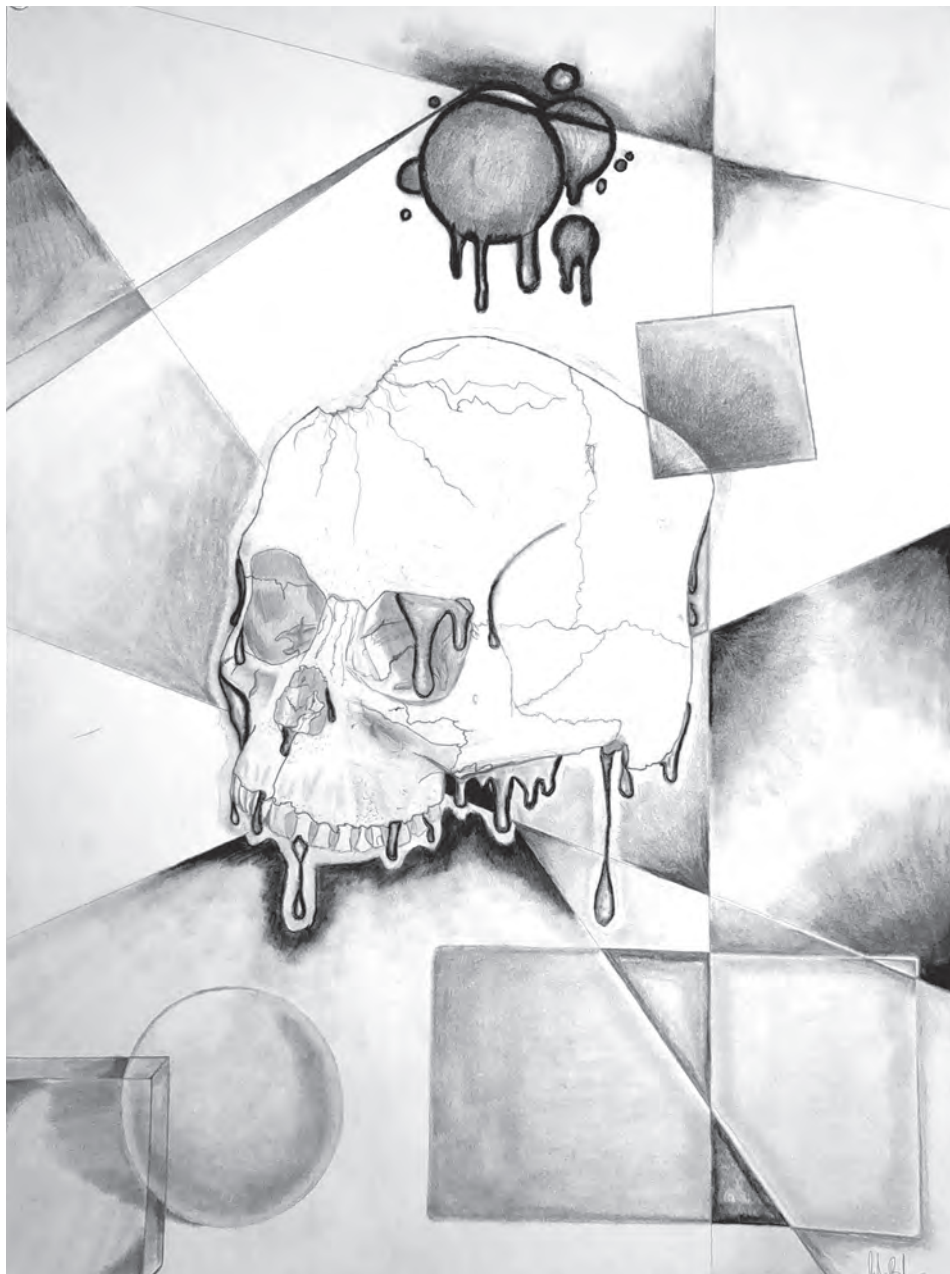
AN OLD AND LOYAL TRUCK

MARY STEWARD



Bent Pine 2024











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