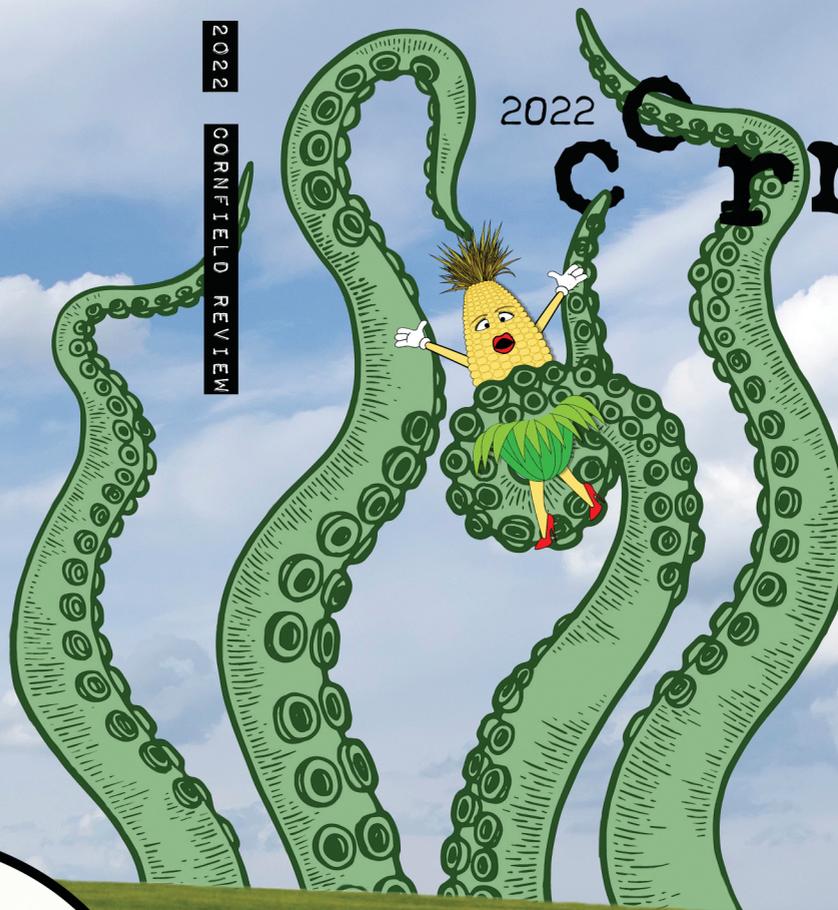


2022

CORNFIELD REVIEW

2022

cornfield review



reading is believing
ahhhh!



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VOL. 39





Cornfield Review

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Preface

WELCOME BACK TO THE LATEST ISSUE OF *CORNFELD REVIEW*. As people like to say, things have finally returned to normal. This, of course, is not entirely true, but I have to say that being able to meet in person (albeit socially distanced, masked, and slathered in hand sanitizer) makes the work feel much more familiar, comfortable, and (dare I say?) easier. Of course, it helps when you have a strong editorial board to work with. I tip my hat to them as I present to you the artistic and literary fruits of their labor.

This volume has a particularly strong collection of poetry, prose, and photography. One item in this issue that I'm particularly excited about is Sarah Holbrook's photo essay, "The Wolf in My Grandfather's Backyard, and Other Stories From the Columbus Zoo." This piece, a collection of personal reflection and original photography is not only an individual's discovery and exploration of a relative's interesting past, but also a fascinating archival project that reclaims a slice of local history surrounding one of the most noteworthy zoos in the country. Also, there's cool pictures of animals!

While this year's issue marks a return to business as usual (well, mostly usual), our intrepid editorial board really put in the work to bring this issue to press: enthusiastically soliciting submissions, promoting the publication, helping produce this year's virtual reading event, and creatively solving the typical challenges and problems associated with the publication game. I've listed this year's editorial board below. Alumna Christy Horton has again lent her graphic design expertise to this year's issue, designing the cover as well as other interior touches. This project simply can't happen without your labor, and so I salute you.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the many people who have lent their support for this publication over the years: Ohio State Marion's Dean and Director, Greg Rose; the Ohio State Marion English faculty; the Ohio State Marion Office of Communication and Marketing; the fine folks at Marion Technical College; the campus artistic creative writing community; our alumni and friends in the community. As the saying goes, it takes a village, and all of you help make one heck of a village! You have our deepest appreciation.

Cornfeld Review is published annually. The Editorial Board is interested in quality poetry, prose, artwork, and photography. Submissions are primarily solicited from students at OSU-Marion and Marion Technical College, although we accept submissions from off-campus writers and artists as well. For more information, please email me at mccorkle.12@osu.edu, or visit us online at cornfeldreview.osu.edu.

—Ben McCorkle, Faculty Adviser

2022 Editorial Board:

Amber Alexander
Alexander Harris
Sarah Holbrook
Haily Simeral

Andrew Coy
Alexis Hayden
Casey Schetter

The Cornfeld Review Mission Statement:

We strive to represent the literary and artistic voice of Central Ohio by giving area college students, writers, and artists an opportunity to see their work published in a professional literary journal. Additionally, we are passionate about achieving a cultural impact that goes beyond our local campus and reaches into the greater community.

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Poetry

Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing

i.

edifying my experiences makes it easier for me to sleep, instead of uselessly
maneuvering how to soften my fall. maybe it's because
deconstructing the past and pasting it to
red construction paper makes the wounds feel more tangible.

emotions within the memories I had of her fades away,
megan, you
don't even
remember what I smell like.

east was where my heart finally rested, torn from the
malicious grip of her false pretenses I
donated my time to myself and had
reason to believe you could still appreciate what was.

ii.

existing, no, trying to survive was
my full time job in high school.
“doesn't she know it's her fault?”
rampant is the

epidemic of preaching self hate and
maculate the need to push off responsibility.
dealing with impending suicide as a
response to my pain was

exploitative. my brain wasn't ready to turn off. my eyes grew
maculose, covered in flecks of liquid glass. filling up my eyes; they wanted me
debilitate, weak; i fumbled in the
restroom with my fingers against my tongue after lunch.

iii.

early to what I believed to be my funeral (i was wrong),
my friends shut the lid. i woke up,
disoriented, disorganized, only
rectified by my coping skills.

eager to find the solace within
myself, I tend to turn inward. i am still
disfigured in my shadow but it
resembles the closure i gave myself.

eyes, my own beacons in the mirror at night.
movement courses through my cerebrum, stirring me into
desensitization, a restful place for my abrasions to start
reprocessing.

—*Amber Alexander*

for the a.m.

I made carrying dead weight and the world
on my shoulders look easy.

Each step was calculated in the shoes you called
impractical when it rained.

Everything you gave me was not enough
or too much.

Your tears grew into a riptide. It carried me out to sea
the first time I visited the coast.

—*Amber Alexander*

glass roots

I can't remember the last
time I felt comfortable
touching myself this way.
the slow caress,
the imperfect curves
of my shoulder as it falls
like a pit to my clavicle.

My fingertips trace up
towards my neck
and behind my head
into a hollowed-out space.

Alone I have explored that
cavern; where the abyss
starts and spirals
out of control.

It took a lot
of attempts before
I wanted to slam
on the brakes,
not running through
every red light.

I didn't want to die—
just feel enough sympathy
before melting into
the walls of my childhood,
sending me through
my glass cerebrum;

it made the falling
feel like flying.

—*Amber Alexander*

to own a body

fragments of my body melt
into the scolding bath water

the small hairs on my ankles
cinch off

I become less flesh
more nothing

the running faucet a beacon —

red is the color of my skin
red is the color of my eyes
red is the color of my pain

—*Amber Alexander*

the precipice

I only materialized her
in vapor. it was a cruel fate
that I was drawn to
sipping sherry
in the afternoon.
the breeze didn't
peak from behind
the clouds.

I only had one
petal of her careless
flower left to press.
the stem had fallen
off months ago
after she promised
that she did love
me, that she was going
to leave him once
and for all,

she didn't plan
getting me caught
up in the tender trap
of adultery but here
we were, standing on
the precipice where I –
lost my breath.

it caught up to me
in love letters written
in graceful cursive,
full of hateful slurs.

I dumped torn
pages from the script
of my last play
she inspired me to write
into the Rhine
on my last vacation:

I went alone

and any woman with pierced ears,

a confident shoulder
shrug
could have been
her in that hotel lobby.

I, the adorning
of a razor in one
hand and a declaration
of my mistrust for the war
effort in the other,
had a tendency to tumble
into their arms: what a klutz
I had become.

—*Amber Alexander*

Dreams

(Verse 1)

I'd like to get to know you
I'd like to come and show you
My thoughts and my emotions
My thoughts through all the commotion

Can you feel this feeling of euphoria through your veins
Put down the pills I wanna wash away your pain
Dark nights in the city you with me
All the long nights I wanna know what's in your dreams

Is it scary like the world
Is it water at your feet
Can I look inside your mind
Discover all there is to see

It's a beautiful mind I can tell
You closed your eyes and then you fell

(Chorus)

Fell down deep where the ocean and the river run dry
Found my peace in the world when I look in your eyes
Dreams can change and the weather won't stay
But the way that I feel today it won't fade
So here's to you in the moment
My heart is yours you control it

(Verse 2)

Way down deep in a world that is falling
Just to hear you speak I'll come crawling

There's an abundance of fish in the sea they tell me
But it's you who stays on my mind while I sleep
There's a difference I feel it and I know they can't see
I can tell that your curious I'll tell you what I think

I think you're pretty think you're smart
So many things I wanna see
Thinking about you got me thinking about what I wanna be
I wanna be right by your side

Right from the heart I'm gaining nothing if I lie
I could tell you all the things you do that had me fall apart
All of that in the best way oh I know we came so far
I knew that I cared about you right from the start
and now your all that's in my head my dreams are no longer so dark

(Chorus)

Fell down deep where the ocean and the river run dry
Found my peace in the world when I look in your eyes
Dreams can change and the weather won't stay
But the way that I feel today it won't fade
So here's to you in the moment
My heart is yours you control it

(Chorus)

Fell down deep where the ocean and the river run dry
Found my peace in the world when I look in your eyes
Dreams can change and the weather won't stay
But the way that I feel today it won't fade
So here's to you in the moment
My heart is yours you control it

—*Dom Bertke*



Scan this code to hear the track on Spotify. Or visit:
<https://songwhip.com/kingdom-pink/dreams-down-deep>

Columns Holding the Skies

With the warm sun behind me, low in the summer dusk,
I wandered aimlessly, faithless and unsure.
And lo! in the wake of a trance upon me.
I saw a church in the skies—a Hagia Sophia.
The clouds, towering tall, like columns of marble
Vivid with coral, shaded with crimson, and rimmed with violet,
Sat on the troposphere, all around me.
Like titans they were, holding up the skies,
With their dimensions sculpted and shadows defined.
Gathered 'round were they—under the gateway,
Where that cobalt dome of heaven—opened aloft.
Painted were the nebulae on that ceiling of space,
Caught in a pose, like figures of saints.
The stars and worlds far away, dancing like spinning tops
Were emblems of divinity, beyond our mortality.
And there I stood—at the epicenter of it all—a witness of this church.

—*Jack Hardin*

My Memories of Summer

I pull over to the shoulder and get out.
The travelers of the highway roar by.
The sound of progress and hastiness depress.
I take a breath, and receive no relief.
I do not wish to go on.
Before I get back in—rain comes down.
I stop and look up.
The sky is bright and near clear
But rained like the trickles from a backyard sprinkler.
The clouds with their white sails and grey undersides
Went with the wind on the sky-waters.
The sun smiles past their large masts behind me.
I smile with the sun and close my eyes.
The highway falls out of hearing,
And the sound of falling droplets from years past
Come back as the laughter of my child-self comes to mind.
Cool was the water as I jumped in and out of the sprinkler's range.
The warm air was welcoming
And the green grass was wet,
Embracing my little feet.
My memories of summer.

And then, the sprinkler ran out.
I open my eyes.
Clouds of grey come along
And the sun fades away,
Along with my smile.
I stay for a moment.
I get in my car and join the travelers,
Going in the same, aging direction.
I do not wish to go on,
But maybe there's more to this highway.

—*Jack Hardin*

A World Far Beyond Dreams

I wake... blind in the night,
afraid and without sight.
Through the darkness I tread,
from a nightmare I dreamt.
I'm trapped by no walls,
like a maze without halls.
In a world with no light,
shrouded by the night's fright.
A coffin nailed by death --
for the world's final breath.
Yet I look to the stars,
and see a world so far.
A world far from man's reach,
unexpressed by all speech.
A high celestial dome,
like the churches in Rome.
A fathomless ocean.
An atlas in motion.
Graced by gods and creatures,
made for the sky's features.
With a belt of wonders,
painted without blunders.
Give me sight O' Theia.
Show me... to Judea.

—*Jack Hardin*

A Collection of Unconnected Haiku

Promises

Selene will not shine
In the pale light of daybreak
She guides us at dusk

Promise Polaris
That you may always know north
And find your way home

Take care of my heart
For you hold it in your hand
promise; keep me safe

Speak soft my dear one
With all of your promises
Sing me forever

Epitaph

You: take up this sword
Of tempered mettle made sharp
Just for the worthy

Scents of vivid green
Tell me stories of the past
And of future days

I hear people say
Gray skies foretell brighter days
They are idiots

Fin.

Who cares about why
nothing lasts long in the end
we're so very small

—Alex Harris

The Knight on The Hill

There once was a knight who stood firm in the dark,
For his sword, it was brave and his heart, it was sharp
Well his foes, they approached, and they called to him “Fall!”
And he said, “Not so long as I stand on this hill,”

As his foes became league, and that league became more
As two became three, and then three became four
They cut and they slashed, and they hacked, and they fought
But the knight, he still stood on this hill.

For an age they all fought and an age they all bled
And then the knight stood all alone once again
For his foes were struck down, he conquered them all
Then he fell to his knees on this hill

There once was a knight who stood alone in the dark
And his sword it was true but not as true as his heart
He vanquished his foes, slew them all at great cost
And now the knight, he still rests on this hill

—*Alex Harris*

Lost Sol

My Mercurial heart was made blue
from Lady Venus's curse:
my Earthly soul in agony.
And, although tragedy Mars my features,
You Pity Her, and not I; a discordant note.
To this Sad Turn I railed against the heavens and, in response,
Ouranos wept.
For the truth I heard from this Inept Tune was that
Our love - and my beloved - was Plutonian.

—*Alex Harris*

Love, Pain

Love

For the promise of life is but to ache
The hurts and harms of each are fate
The smaller stings of closed doors
The gaping wounds of lost Lenore
The severed piece of parted friends
The scar produced from meetings end
For every bruise healed, ten more gained
For without those souls your own is maimed.
Pain! For every love no longer mine
So is the curse of St. Valentine

Pain

With every day a new joy

The scar on my knee built my steady stride
I learned to let go with my grandfather's goodbye
My broken arm showed me to keep up my chin
My lost tooth taught me to grin
I look ahead because I wrecked my bike
I speak kind 'adieu's for those missed 'goodnight's
From each past wound, a greater sum
For them, I accept every injury yet to come
With every pain, new knowledge earned
With every scar, a lesson learned

—Alex Harris

an anticlimactic Family trilogy

for my Mom

planes and poetry my whole life.
my mind works like the sky
comes in waves like the ocean
yet
the MOon and the morning
are always waiting for Me.

for my ex step Dad

to watch a raindrop
fall down a window
to lose it
Doesn't mean it's not there.
your spirit lives in its reflection
and the memories never fADe.

for my Brother's step Mom

to touch a hurting heart that was never
made for you to protect,
to snatch a running nose not your own
that needed a foundation to grow,
to lift a young mind that was not yours
and called it your own.
YOU are the flesh that holds it all together
and makes it perfect.

—*Alexis Hayden*

For the Rest of My Eternity

The life inside my cage beats vigorously
with a passion to dispose of my whole being.

The fire it excretes threatens to burn my mind
and torch my soul, but it has yet to kill me.

Scorched and bloody
polaroid pictures engulf my brain
and solemnly wrap around my existence.
My sobs and cries are to no avail as I sing.
My hands tremble in ash as my cage thumps.
Jealous fragments of lonely disposition
become its sworn anthem
and my reflection
collapses

.
For the rest of my eternity I shall sit
and wallow in my deepest sorrows.

For if the life escapes or hunts another
it will be ever hungry and murderous
and no sincere mercy will be borrowed.

—*Alexis Hayden*

rotten sweetness

i licked the words off of his tongue
like the drippings of maraschino cherry juice.
they dissolved like candy floss
and stained like blue icing.
but the sweetness decayed my teeth
and left holes like cavities.

—*Alexis Hayden*

Breast Milk

Sometimes I sit
and listen to evening

where crickets scream
against the quiet night
and passing tires on inky pavement
carry strangers to destinations.

Pine trees grow tall
painting black silhouettes
against the indigo sky

and it reminds me
of how quickly
times passes.

I sit with my breast in my hand

And stare into the horizon
watching shifting clouds sprint
across the sky.

The luminous moon peeks
through the dark clouds
with pink bellies

and I think about
motherhood

while milk spills from my bosom.

—*Brittany Violet Long*

For Brandon #2

I saw you again last night,
once my head hit my pillow
and consciousness took over.

I didn't see you lying on the floor
Pale skin slick with sweat
Gripping the sheets
Reaching for help
Alone

You were there and your skin was warm
Your smile was just as I remembered it

It was only for an instant

A fleeting moment

A glimmer of life

“Don't cry”

Then you were gone.

I searched for you
I clawed at your memory

I reached for my eye drops
Trying not to let it slip away

But nothing lasts forever.

—*Brittany Violet Long*

Moose Tracks

If you were to peek
in my window at 2 am
after the crickets have gone to bed,
you would find me
staring into the deep abyss
of a Denali fudge ice cream tub.
Cool spoon pressed against my lips,
swirling my tongue around
the salty, sweet flavor,
an orgasmic euphoria
of my taste buds.
In these quiet moments,
when my glazed eyes settle
into deep thought,
I find myself with sticky fingers
dreaming about how one day
I'd like to become a poet.

—*Brittany Violet Long*

Forest Fires

Brittle white trees stand like soldiers
at attention on their last breath.

With branches like skeletons
lonely and wondering why.

White clouds of fog embrace them
reminding of black, hot smoke
swirling through the land.

Broken branches lay forgotten
in the shadows, decaying
and salvaged by termites.

Reclaimed by milkweed,
Appalachian violets and
mountain wood sorrel.

Flame azaleas bloom with scorching red and yellow petals spreading through the forest like wildfire.

Moss like tiny green fingers that reach across the land. Vivid chlorophyll surging through their veins like pulsing blood.

Only Through ashes can come new life.

—*Brittany Violet Long*

Hospital Waiting Rooms

the scampering of feet
white halls, white walls

the murmuring of voices
Pleading and Praying

tears pound quietly
faint cries, sunken eyes

a deafening roar
scratching at eardrums

white gowns surround me

worry drowns me

—*Brittany Violet Long*

Be.

Bounded down by weight, that never seems to shrink.
Water flooding up, giving no time to think.
Days moving forward, and nights sailing fast.
Careful not to blink, the future becomes your past.
Hidden between each moment, is a flicker of life you see.
It always seems so lovely, you may ask “Is that me?”
That’s the fickle thing about life, you may think it’s about a goal.
But if you slow yourself down, you may feel it in your soul.
Life is not a destination, it is a journey to be had.
Please slow down and be, I promise you’ll be glad.

—*Jacob Redmond*

Bullfrog's Song

Chanting in the mist that some spirit breathes
across my pond, a bullfrog reminds me
this moment is all that matters. He bellows
beneath cattails ready to burst with seed.
As for me, I'm ready to implode, the world pushing
outside in. I tune-out the bullfrog's song, afraid
to live like the dragonfly sailing above water,
trusting the strength of onion-skin wings.
Or like the trout that springs from green depths
Intent on catching a fly in one leap. On the east
bank, foxgloves open bell-shaped mouths painted
white and magenta. From their spotted throats
secrets drop to lavender phlox creeping toward
the pond. Bees lullabye pink blossoms
cradled in weigela. I'm sure they echo
the bullfrog, while white cottonwood seeds
swirl like snow that muffles the world.

—*Darlene Slack*

Cold

January 28th, 2022

For the first time in a while it snowed. I'm not sure why snow makes me so excited, but I think it's because it reminds me of when I was younger. Sitting in the snow when everything is quiet during the night is one of the most peaceful things I can do, something about seeing the stars gleaming in the sky and the snowflakes gently landing and melting on my forehead calms me down and makes me feel like a kid again, with no care in the world other than making sure my feet don't get too cold.

Reminder: take a second to breathe and reflect on life from time to time.

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Cold

For the first time in a while, it snowed.
I'm not sure why snow makes me so excited,
I think it's because it reminds me of when I was younger.

Sitting in the snow when everything is quiet
during the night is peaceful,
something about seeing the stars gleaming in the sky,
snowflakes gently landing on my forehead,
makes me feel young again,
with no care in the world
other than making sure my feet don't get too cold.

But the world freezes,
Realizing that the cold is all around
Never ending,
Never leaving,
Never relenting.

Forcing me to realize something that chills me to the bone.
I'm standing here, in a white void.
I'm standing here, no light in sight.
I'm standing here, no soul to listen to.
I'm standing here, all alone.

—Casey Schetter

Rat Race

Cluttered mind, cluttered heart.
Everything around me feels like it is falling apart

Every day feels the same, repeating over and over again. Class, work, people, food, rest, repeat. It's all the same. I try to make it different but I don't think I can. I feel like a mouse running around a maze. As soon as he gets to the end, he's put back to do it again.

As boring as it may be though, I would not trade it away. It's safe. Why risk safety and comfort when I can always get the cheese at the end of the maze?

—*Casey Schetter*

Unmindful of the Thorns

Why do we so carelessly
Pick the rose
Sweet with all its petals
And not think of the consequences?

But if given the opportunity
To stop and smell the roses
Would you?

Why pluck the rose
For temporary beauty?

Unmindful of the thorns.

—*Collin G. Thacker*



Prose

thrust fault line

AMBER ALEXANDER

I LICKED UP THE SALT FROM HER SHIVERING STOMACH the same time I felt the Earth start to shatter beneath me. Her calf muscle was flexed above the bridge of my nose as she strained to grip my neck with her fingertips and fell back in a single breath. Slipping through the fault line of marble and sand, she choked me as she brought me spiraling down. The edges of this world were rusted. Reflecting on the surface of emeralds, her fingers were still snarling around my throat as she brought me to my knees, standing before me in her feminine ecstasy. A spider web of orchard vines replenished themselves around my torso, dripping overly fermented wine into a glass perched by her ankles. Her aura glowed with an excellence of shattered razor beams in primary colors. Together we created a cacophony of open doors and enough hope to rest on the edge of her tongue when I'm too busy swallowing molly ✨

the return

AMBER ALEXANDER

ONCE MY INSTINCTS HAD DRIED UP LIKE DIRT under my fingernails, i scraped and scraped and scraped. my pointer nail fell off and had the eyelash of an ex lover underneath. the bleeding wouldn't stop; the bleeding from my nail, from my sides, from my nose, leaving one bloody handkerchief after another in my small palms.

mucus stuttered from my lips, leaving a snail trail as it sealed each wound. the saline in my tears never burned as much as my sputum did; maybe it was because i always drank them, pouring them down instead of spitting them up. the tears i couldn't cry when they all left me fell to the back of my throat.

this gave me time to look out the window, alerting the vultures i had returned. ✱

new religion

AMBER ALEXANDER

BODIES WERE SPRAWLED OUT ACROSS THE DESERT SAND by the time my vices had arrived to the edge of my fingertips. this was an unwelcoming and barren place. the steam that released from my irregular heartbeat equated to a deep breath mixed with the smell of my blood and expired petroleum; both frenching in the wounds of dunes beneath my flat foot. holding a carcass in my hand, gravity forced its fluid to drop down the bridge of my nose after I pushed up my glasses.

my tea leaves warned me this would happen.

and i won't say i'm sorry because i'm not. this carcass could only scream in pain if i listened. anything could if i listened. but intrusive thoughts, the ripping of flesh, grinding in the backseat, her name after three old fashions, and house fires all sound the same to me.

the fragments of the creature looked pitiful in every mirror so i shattered them to shards of glass. i stopped filming my life and tried to overdose in the Hills for attention. i committed to destruction on orders by my past self, which led to my forgetfulness. leaving my walkman in the glovebox meant i had to suffer the extraction without duran duran.

we met an unfriendly gaze which reminded me too much of my past life three states over. the remaining creature smiled; poker faces had been outlawed last month. adrenaline waved within the cracks of the hamada on the floor of the earth.

“nice to see you're back for more.”

i was an addict to fame and finite destinies.

“fuck off.” *

my time on earth

AMBER ALEXANDER

I STARTED AS A DRIFTING CONTINENTAL PLATE ACROSS
young earth, volcanic with mafic lava. I roamed the
earth with you, fell to the pits of the underworld as
Persephone herself. my fate was dealt between poker
cards and six pomegranate seeds that burst open with
the beckon of my crooked front teeth. those seeds
became my lament as I stripped to my vulnerability. I
oozed with ink and bled on an innumerable number of
pages I now burn to keep me warm under the coldness
of the moonlight. I reverberated in the rising sun with
the sound of Tchaikovsky on the waves of sea foam
that lap at my ankles. I ended as a tidal wave pulling
away granular weathered rocks and parasitic mud
shrimp.*

atonal adagio

AMBER ALEXANDER

I AM THE SADDEST VIOLIN CONCERTO you've ever heard. The bow torments my g string until I feel like I'm about to collapse below the staff, slowly, surely, into the lowest registered screech I can muster. It's low and guttural but the woman sitting in the mezzanine's third row is on the edge of her seat. I strip a singular piece of horsehair from the bow as I spread myself thin and transcend above the staff, matching my vibrato to the same pitch as the soprano who haunts my dreams. A singular tear falls down the cheek of the man behind the woman who until that point was too busy trying to look down her dress. When I am in pain it is far more elusive than a wide neckline, but you'll mistake it for beauty every time.*

All I'll Never Know

AMBER ALEXANDER

“I MEAN SERIOUSLY, WHY WAS THERE SHEET MUSIC IN MY SAXOPHONE?” Antony asked, baffled by the crumbled up sheet music from last year’s jazz band concert he pulled from the alto’s bell. I couldn’t help but notice how his iridescent sapphire hues would glisten with joy that someone was giving him a chance to make a new friend.

My head became heavier as my own alto sax fell from my lap and forcefully pulled my neck strap down. Despite how loud the trumpets were as they warmed up, everyone could hear our obnoxious laughter at our clumsiness.

Our band director, Miss Berger, gave us a stern look as we adjusted ourselves in our seats. Instead, we bumped knees on purpose, a grin resting on our chapped lips. I could still hear him without looking over, even as the drums stumbled through triplets and improv solos. I could still smell his deodorant even as the diesel from the school buses wafted through the open windows of the small music room. If I closed my eyes, I could still tell it was his head that rested against my shoulder when he laughed too hard, like he did last week. Even with such an abundance of awkward adolescence touching, I would still wonder what his hand felt like in mine, or if a warm embrace would melt away my fears of growing close to someone.

“Have you guys figured out the solo yet?” Miss Berger asked, shaking me from my thoughts. She was standing in front of our stands; it was hard to avoid talking to her since we sat in the front row with the other saxophones.

“I want to give this one to Amber, and I’ll take the solo on the harder piece.” He answered for both of us with a nod. He was the first musician I didn’t feel I needed to compete against for a solo. I had a habit of fighting with another flute in concert band over who was better, but jazz band was more comfortable. Still, it surprised me that he didn’t try to take both solos. After all, I had only been playing alto for a few months

after taking summer lessons at the high school.

“Are you sure?” I asked, biting my lip out of a nervous habit.

“Duh!”

* * *

“Welcome to high school, tadpole!” Antony greeted me at the flagpole on my first day. The morning air was crisp for late August, the sun hiding behind the clouds making my farmers tan from band camp the week before more prominent in the shadowed glow.

“Shut up.” I grinned, shaking my head. 8th grade had been a long year without him. I still didn’t get the harder solos in jazz band because someone else had auditioned for Antony’s chair. Hiding on my freckled forearms were small scars from experimental self harm, more noticeable now that my skin had tanned for the first time in my life. Antony hadn’t noticed it during band camp, but as we walked inside the high school building and sat at a table in the common area before homeroom, he grabbed my arm with a frown.

“I’m okay.” I assured him solemnly. He looked as if he wanted to show me his own, as if to say the year apart from one another had been tough for both of us. Not having a friend to rely on for a whole year had brought turbulence to one another. He nodded his head towards his wrist, covered by a leather bracelet he got on vacation. My eyes spoke before my thoughts

could string together words.

“I’m okay.” He squeezed my arm softly before letting it go, doing so he could walk away as my very loud, and crass, friends started to run inside the building on a mission to find me. Before he left, he looked me up and down with a grin. “Mr. Hill is going to dresscode you for those shorts.”

“I’m sure they’re fine.” I brushed it off, checking if they were at my fingertips - they weren’t.

Mr. Hill dress coded me before first period even started.

* * *

I never asked him to Sadie Hawkins sophomore year because my best friend did first. I regretted it, and even though I liked the guy I had asked, going to dinner with Antony and his date, my friend, put me on edge. *I should have asked him* was the only thing going through my mind as I brought my spoonful of mashed potatoes to my mouth. Every sip of water I had only reminded me of band camp when we could linger by the water coolers during break, waiting for everyone to leave. We’d pour water down one another’s spine behind the bushes to help each other cool off before being separated by instrument... again. Now that we didn’t have time for jazz band in high school we never sat together in the same section. He went to dinners with the other mellophones, I tried my best to survive the drama that thrived in the piccolo section.

“Hello, Earth to Amber!” My

friends exclaimed across the table, waving their palms in my face. A few of the elderly couples glanced our way as they took a sip of coffee with their dinner. *Why does everyone look so grumpy when they go to Bob Evans?*

“What?” I asked as nonchalantly as possible. I could feel him kick my leg gently from across the table, making my heart skip a beat.

“Rachael’s mom is here, we’re gonna check out. Come on!”

I hurriedly drank the rest of my water and stuffed a roll into my mouth before standing up and grabbing my purse. My date gave me a weird look and started walking away with my other friends, leaving me to fumble with straightening my dress and shrugging my jacket on. What I didn’t realize was, in my rush, my chair leaned towards me and pushed me back with a strong force, making me stumble backwards into Antony’s arms. His fingertips rested on my stomach as he steadied me back to my feet. He still had his frame against mine as I gave up on the roll, putting it back on my plate, and tried to steady my breath.

“Woah! That could have been bad!” He let out a comforting laugh but I couldn’t help but feel embarrassed and grow flushed.

I walked out to the minivan to meet my friends. *I should have asked him.*

* * *

It was the first time I had the band room to myself since rehearsal

for the musical had started earlier that day. President’s Day was always dreaded because even though we had school off, it gave our director an excuse to have us to herself from 9 to 5 with no interruptions— other than the pre-programmed bells that still went off to indicate the period.

I was craving something to eat as I shuffled through a dance routine for the second act of the show, *5, 6, 7, 8, chasse right, chasse left, right cross step back, lean step ball change, right step ball change—damnit.* I kept missing the mark, reaching for my phone to restart the music at the dance break. As I adjusted my earbuds I figured out why I suddenly felt nervous; he was watching me from the band office. We were only separated by a door and a glass panel in the wall. He was here for pit rehearsal, as if it wasn’t already obvious by him carrying around his prized french horn in his arms. He gave our high school band director, “T” as we lovingly called him, a wave and headed towards me.

“Do it again but don’t think about it.” He offered, sitting down on a table with sheet music cluttering the surface.

“How the hell is that going to help?” I grumbled back, pulling my hair up in a ponytail out of frustration.

“Trust me, I’ll count you off. 5, 6, 7, 8—”

Chasse right, chasse left, right cross step back, lean step ball change, right step ball change, hop left hop right, skip 2, 3, 4, passe, passe, BAM.

“See, easy peasy.”

“Says the musician.” I teased, crossing my arms over my chest.

“That’s a bad argument, Miss. I’ve been in Symphonic Band since my freshman year.” I truthfully had nothing else to do with my time so devoting it to music and being in the more advanced band was never a big deal for me.

“Whatever. Speaking of which, did you talk to T?” I asked, moving over some sheet music to sit beside him on the table.

“Oh yeah, he’s writing in a duet for us in the John Williams piece.”

“Yes!” I raised my hand to high five him but as I went to place my hand back at my side, his fingers curled over mine.

“You have small hands.” He said gently, comparing his palm to my own. His soft, safe palms. I would have sat there all day with his palm against mine just to fulfill the yearning I had in 7th grade to hold his hand in jazz band.

“Pizza’s here, WHOO!” A freshman boy’s voice cracked from the choir room just across the office, making everyone from that room push their way out to go downstairs.

“Can you bring me back some pizza? We have to practice in the auditorium while you guys eat.” Antony said with an annoyed sigh, dropping his hand from mine as if the moment never happened.

“Oh, uh-sure. I’ll leave the plate in your band locker.” I nodded, maybe too sheepishly as he leaped

from the table and strutted towards the back stairwell leading to the stage.

* * *

I cried the last day I saw him in his senior year of high school. That afternoon in May, as we sat outside with special permission from T, Antony absentmindedly braided my hair.

I could only listen to him in snippets as my brain flooded with self doubt. He told me how much he hated our school, how much he despised everyone in his class because they thought he was an easy target. He thanked me for being the only person who truly appreciated him, the only person who truly saw him for who he was. I didn’t have anything to say back. I didn’t know what would even be the right thing to say.

By then I had given up my dream of living in Los Angeles with him or traveling back to Chicago so we could enjoy our trip that was spoiled by the girl who made fun of us for not having money.

He had already committed to a school in Nashville,

I was thinking about applying early to Ohio State in the fall. the dream was over, but he still permeated my thoughts.

Even after being friends for four years, how couldn’t I think that was what love felt like? Unsolicited candids to show how he really saw me, drinking coffee together before homeroom, inside jokes, celebratory

hugs after a football game. He never stopped comparing our palms after that day in the band room; any excuse to linger our fingertips a little longer.

How could I not be upset the night he graduated he didn't invite me to the after party and he started dating a girl I hardly saw him talk to? How could I not feel like the universe was tricking me because his younger sister ended up being my best friend my senior year. I ate dinner at her house once a week and came over after my last homecoming dance. And there he was, visiting from college, letting me borrow his blue sweatshirt with black circles because I was cold.

He looked overworked, tired; I daydreamed about sneaking off to his room and kissing him tenderly to take away the pain we both felt within ourselves. As if to prove to him that he only had to wait one more year for me. To prove I'd do anything to show him my love, my tenderness, my compassion, my unwavering attraction to him even before his braces came off and his acne cleared up. I imagined wrapping my arms around his frame, laying in silence, or perhaps not, laying with Debussy in the background. We'd let the moonlight offer our only glimpse of one another, his thumb would draw itself over my palm. I'd tell him how breathless he made me before the dance when he caught me in his arms, tell him I really wasn't sorry for accidentally dragging my lips across his arm just to taste his salty skin.

Instead, I sat on the couch with

my friends and read poems about lost distance love while he slept in the next room over.

The truest, most holistic love I've ever felt was unrequited. Every time I listen to jazz, drink a hot coffee, or read poems about long distance love, I am haunted..✱

Firsthand Witness

SALWA AZRAK

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, MY FAMILY AND I BEGAN TRAVELING TO VISIT MY GRANDPARENTS, uncles, and cousins in Turkey. We went every summer, and with each visit I became more and more attached to the country. I fell in love with the people, the food, the spectacular natural views, and the culture, to a point in which I tried to learn the language. Turkey's rich history intrigued me. I was fascinated to learn about the Ottomans' rise to power, and the history of its rulers. Overtime, this country became my third home. This may sound complex, let me explain. The United States is my first home, my first love, the country in which I was born and have lived in my entire life. My parents are from Syria, and therefore I feel a love for Syria and feel it is my second home. Now, I began to love Turkey. Turkey is a unique country that joins cultures of East and West, filled with a rich history and a strong economy.

Shockingly, the summer of 2016 turned out to be one that will forever be etched in my memory. Summer break had begun, and I excitedly traveled to Turkey, specifically the city of Istanbul, as I had done in past summers. We visited mosques with beautiful courtyards and minarets that were high up overlooking the city. We visited museums, luxurious palaces that once housed government officials, and historic shops that somehow still seemed as if they carried the scent of history. The Bosphorus sea was a destination that stood out to me. It was a place I loved going to for late-night walks with my family. During the night you could see the city lights reflected in the water, and you could feel the breezy wind that almost flowed with the birds. It seemed as though everywhere I looked, people were drinking tea, walking around casually, and laughing. It felt so relaxing and yet so vibrant. I arrived in late May, and up until June, everything was normal. The city was bustling with people commuting to work, kids running outside during their summer break, and women happily chit-chatting in the streets. It felt like the perfect summer.

That was of course, until July 15, 2016! It began as an ordinary day. It began with a trip to the grocery store, then a visit to a historic mosque. That evening began as normal and uneventful as well. My family and I had a habit of listening to the news on

the television after dinner. However, this evening was a little different. My grandpa was busy in a meeting, and my uncles were out with friends. Soon enough though, my uncles came back and said, "Something seems off in the city, there's a heavy police presence in the streets, and the internet is being extremely slow with several social media websites off-limits. "As they had just completed their sentence, a now-famous female news reporter on the news channel TRT came on tv with breaking news stating, "the military has completely taken over the administration of the country to reinstate constitutional order." She also mentioned that a curfew is in place and that martial law is to be imposed across the country. Just as soon as I had heard the news reporter speak on tv, I suddenly began hearing a loud swoosh sound! It was the sound of helicopters and fighter jets hovering above our heads, going up, and then swooshing downwards towards the building scaring people into their homes. Each time a fighter jet dove down, It felt as though a bomb was about to fall on my head.

Unquestionably, I began to panic, as did everyone else in my family. I began thinking that I or someone I love might die. I remember asking my mom, "Do you think we are all going to be okay?" It was scary how in just a couple of seconds everything around me changed. A few minutes ago, we were just sitting snacking on some fruits, and suddenly I felt as though my life was in danger, as well as the country I loved.

At that moment, my thoughts raced to Syria. Sadly, I was only able to visit Syria about four times when I

was very young before the war there started. I have many memories from those visits. I remember how the streets were always busy, people were out walking around buying from stores that were located along the streets and having huge family gatherings. It was like Turkey. My grandmother's uncle, making him my great uncle, was once the president of Syria. However, one day there was a military coup, and they overthrew him, put him in jail until he got very ill, and he then died. He may not have been the greatest president, but he was a decent man who loved his country and served humbly. Sadly, I never got to meet him. Remembering this and seeing how much worse the country got after the coup, the thousands of people that died, and the millions of people that had to flee, I got scared. I was afraid of what may happen to Turkey because of what I had witnessed in Syria.

I remember that night, how thunderous the jets were when they were flying above us. They were so close to the building that the noise was terrifying. I was sitting in the living room when the jet flew by for the first time, and it sounded like a bomb was being dropped, my family and I's first instinct was to duck down due to the noise. This was the exact moment I thought the building was going to collapse from the powerful noise that came from the jets. I held on tight to my blanket, and just closed my eyes tight, and prayed to God to help us. I remember us calling my dad, he was in the U.S. due to work, and us having no idea what to do since we did not live in Turkey. We took our passports and got a small bag ready filled with essential things just in case we had

to run for our lives. The U.S. State Department was keeping in touch with us, telling us to stay home until further notice because they were trying to figure things out. I remember talking to my siblings, and saying, "What if they bring us a helicopter and take us from the window?" This exact thought seemed pretty cool to me.

A couple of hours later, the news reporter came on, and the president found a way to communicate to the people through a facetime call to the TRT news station. His message to the people was simple, he asked them to get out onto the streets and fight for their country, and that no one should give up on their country. Seconds after the president ended the call, thousands of Turkish citizens were in the streets. My uncles left the house to go observe the protests. This was frightening to me because all I could think about was "will they come back safely?" And they did. The entire night I could not sleep. The jets were flying all over and I could feel the building shaking. I remember watching the news report showing the thousands of people that flooded the streets who were standing up for their country against the military. The military was throwing bombs at them, shooting at them, moving their tanks towards them and no one moved. They all stayed standing, not allowing the military to go anywhere. The sight was horrific. You could see the many people that have been injured or killed. I began thinking to myself, "Would I stand up like that for my country, and risk my life?" I began to feel guilty because I couldn't think or imagine myself standing in front of a tank, or soldiers pointing their guns at me and risking my life for my country. The

people I saw that night risking their lives for a country they loved became my inspiration.

The next day, July 16, my family and I decided to go out and protest with everyone else, even though we were told to stay inside. The coup was believed to have ended and that the people were able to stop it, as well as the president. The coup had failed, but many died, and many were injured. It was a sad time for everyone, families were grieving for their lost ones. However, at the same time, it was a time filled with joy because the people were able to take their country from the attackers/enemy. We went out, and the sight was something truly amazing. Cars filled the streets, honking, and waving the Turkish flag. Everyone was chanting, music filled the air. It's hard to explain how I felt. I was so happy but the feeling wasn't just happiness, it was a beautiful feeling that's indescribable. Perhaps it was a mix of joy, humility, pride, and inspiration. Although we didn't know the Turkish language, we were able to learn what the people were chanting and began chanting alongside them. We raised the Turkish flags high for all to see. Above all, everyone came together, no matter how old or young, Turkish or not, everyone was standing up for Turkey on that memorable night. *

The Best Day Ever

KENDRA FARLEE

TODAY IS THE DAY! EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE PERFECT. I get to celebrate the thing that makes me the happiest. Or I guess who makes the happiest

I hardly slept last night due to excitement and woke up this morning before my alarm. I jump from my bed and spring into the bathroom. My reflection has a wide smile on her face. Today is going to be perfect. I've had all the details planned for weeks. I have all the supplies hidden under my bed where no one will find them. I quickly brush my teeth and hair. I do my makeup simple today. I pack my nice dressy clothes and decide to wear some comfortable clothes until it's time for the date. Then top it all off with my favorite crocs.

My phone dings from the bedroom. I cheerfully skip over and see it's a message that says, "Happy four years, Babe!" With four yellow hearts, my favorite. I squeal.

This is the happiest I've ever been. There is no way it can get better than this. They say, "You know when you know." Well, I know. This is how I want to spend the rest of my life. Who I want to spend the rest of my life with.

Carter and I are going on four years strong, as seen from the text. Again, the best four years of my life. He's gotten me through high school, awful jobs, toxic friends, crazy parties, and every kind of high school dance imaginable. He's my first boyfriend, and first love. First everything really. He has my whole entire heart.

Now we're about to go off to college together. This will be our biggest adventure yet, and I'm so excited. We both are. All we need to do is find a place close to campus. We'll be going to The Ohio State University in Columbus.

Carter came into my life a little after my mom died, when my depression was hitting me hard. I was spiraling, and Dad didn't know if I was going to ever get better. Mom died from stage four Pancreatic Cancer.

The complete opposite of Carter. That was the hardest thing I've ever had to deal with. A fifteen-year-old girl losing her mom. She's never helped me get ready for any of those high school dances. She won't see me graduate or get a job. She'll never get to meet her grandkids. She never got to meet Carter or see how happy he makes me.

When she left, I was so broken. She'll never know that Carter was the one who put me back together. He's the person who built me back up until I was whole again.

I used to not be able to go even five minutes without purging my stomach. It was hard for me to even stand without my legs giving out. You see, my mom was my person. The one you share everything with, gossip to, rely on, and trust with every fiber of you being. And she was ripped from me, way before I was even ready. It was nice when "that person" finally shifted to Carter. Now, he's my person.

After three months of hiding from the world, my dad finally convinced me to go out. He just so happened to take me to the bookstore in town, where I met Carter. And no, it's not what you're thinking. We didn't have an adorable meet cute where we bump into each other, and books go flying everywhere.

No, we met because Dad had gotten me a large caramel frappe from the coffee shop next door, which I chugged, naturally. Nature took its course, and suddenly I had to pee so

bad. After my quick bathroom break, I walk back out into the bookstore only to spot a book with the most beautiful cover. Soon after, I was drowning in stories of dragons, princesses, witches, and warlocks. So, of course, I wasn't very self-aware.

The next thing I know, I'm being tapped gingerly on the shoulder by a cute, curly headed boy. He told me very politely that I had something stuck to the bottom of my shoe. I looked down, and to my horror, there was about two and a half feet of toilet paper stuck to my foot. And the rest? Well, we've been inseparable ever since. The perfect love story.

Flying down the stairs and rounding the corner to the kitchen I find Dad frying pancakes.

"Hey, there's my girl. Excited about today?" He asks.

He knows. Of course, he does. He's grateful to Carter for everything he's helped me with. Dad claims I'm the person I am today because of Carter. He's helped me grow. I can't help but agree with him.

"All the things are under my bed and ready to go. I'm going to head to Carter's when he goes to work in... twenty minutes and set everything up." I can hardly keep the squeal out of my voice. I wonder if he's getting me anything.

"Alright." He says. "Eat up and get going."

* * *

Exactly thirty-two minutes later, I pull up in front of Carter's apartment building with my two duffle bags of

streamers, balloons, his favorite candy and drinks, and you guessed it, rose petals (real ones).

Heading up the elevator, I get the jitters. Today had to be perfect, he deserves it. He's been going through a lot between work and trying to find us an affordable place close to campus. I will make today great I promise myself.

I unlock his apartment and get to work. Balloons here, streamers there. I spray my perfume in the air all around the apartment. I light some candles, and even make his bed, where I spread a generous amount of rose petals. I open the curtains, and let the beautiful sunshine in. Even the weather is perfect today.

He thinks we're just going to the movies, but I wanted to do something special before we have to leave this place. This apartment holds many memories and milestones for us. It's going to be really hard to say goodbye.

I walk out into the living room and inspect my work. Everything looks good in its place except... the island; it's bare. Great, I forgot to get flowers.

I check my phone. Carter gets off at five, and our movie is at eight. It's three thirty now, so I have plenty of time. Grabbing my keys, I take one last look at the apartment then head out to the car.

I feel like I should get something sophisticated, and no so girly so I don't cramp his style. Maybe I shouldn't even get him flowers. But then what would I put there? Okay

Emery, breathe. Now is not the time to go into a mini freak out. Flowers will be fine. He'll appreciate anything I get him, I'm sure; he always does.

I shoot off a quick text to Carter telling him I can't wait for tonight with an emoji that's blowing a kiss. I can't wait to see the look on his face. I plan to be there when he gets home. I'll have to park my car out back because I want this to be a full-on surprise. It's going to be so great.

In my car, I blast my favorite Imagine Dragons song, and head to town. I decide to just go to the grocery store since I'm broke now from buying all the party supplies. I find a perfect all white bouquet, and as I'm heading back out to my car my pocket buzzes. It's a text from Carter.

"Hey Babe." It reads. "Sorry, but today has been a crazy day at work. We are swamped and my manager asked me to stay a little longer. Won't get off till six forty-five. Come over around seven forty-five. It'll give me time to shower and get ready. Don't worry, we'll have plenty of time to get to the movie. Love you!"

My shoulders slump in disappointment, and my cheerful stride breaks. He said we'll still have time so this should be good. It's fine. Things are still going to go smoothly. We'll just hang out at his place after the movie. I'll have to text Dad the change of plans. If I'm waiting that long, though, I'm going to need food. Plus, Panda sounds so good right now.

After I go through Panda, I

decide to head back to Carter's to wait. My hands are extremely full by the time I get there, too. My coke in my left hand, flowers under my arm, food hanging from my elbow, purse draping from a shoulder, and hand dangling from my fingers. The walk up to his apartment seems to take forever, but I finally reach his door, which I practically crash through.

Once on the other side, I stumble over disregarded shoes that were definitely not there when I left.

"Shit!" I grumble. I would've been seriously mad if my Panda spilled.

"Em?" I hear from the other room.

"Carter!" I screech excitedly. I run, with my hands still full, to his room. He meets me halfway, and half dressed, too.

"It's only four thirty." I state. "How'd you manage to get off this early? Were you just about to shower? Are you hungry? I got Panda." I hold up my bag for reference. "We can share if you want, or stop somewhere else on the way?" I smile and bounce a little on my feet.

"Shower?" He's barely holding eye contact. He's looking everywhere but at me. "Oh yeah. I... Uh... was getting ready." He replies with a nervous laugh.

"Alright, well you finish your shower, and we'll get going. I'll save my Panda for a different day." I make to move by him into his room. "Did you like your surprise?" I ask.

He quickly moves in front of me, and looks confused when he says, "Supr-Ohhh." He looks around as if seeing the room for the first time. The balloons, the streamers, flowers, candy, all of it for him.

"Yeah, you're the best." He adds with a quick peck to my cheek. "I really appreciate you."

I smile. "Alright, go shower." I say and try to slide by him again.

"Actually." He shifts. "I don't need a shower. Let's just head out now."

I arch a brow. "What's up with you?" I prod jokingly.

He laughs a little unsteadily, almost like he's nervous.

"I'm just excited. I've been waiting for this all day." His eyes are still darting everywhere but my face, and he's shifting my balance constantly.

"Hey." I say as I take his cheek in my hand that's holding my keys.

"Nothing has changed. It's still you and me against the world. I love you and this is the happiest I've ever been."

He swallows hard and runs a hand through his hair. He seems agitated.

"Oh. I know what this is about." I say with a chuckle.

His gaze finally cuts to mine. His eyes are large and worried. "You do?" He asks.

"My surprise is in there, isn't it?" I ask with a knowing smirk.

He laughs. It's not his normal laugh, more shaky and... relieved?

"Yeah. It's not ready yet, though. I should've known I wouldn't have

gotten it past you, Em.” This time his smile I genuine and relaxed.

“I’m sure its ready. Let me see.” I move a fraction of an inch, but that’s all it takes.

The sun has reflected off something on the floor behind Carter’s left thigh. I look closer to see it’s a glossy black stiletto.

My breath hitches in my throat. Suddenly, my vision is blurry. I look down at my scuffed up white crocs with custom charms. I shove past him into the bedroom and stop dead in my tracks.

There, on the made bed, covered in loose rose petals, lays a girl. I don’t recognize her, but she’s beautiful. That’s an understatement; she’s absolutely stunning. Curly brown hair, slim figure, long legs, and her skin almost matches her hair. From wear I stand it looks like she has the perfect complexion. She’s my complete opposite.

My heart is in my throat and sits there like a heavy lump. I’m distantly aware of my leg getting soaked, and I look down to see I’ve dropped my coke.

“Oh.” I say in a shaky voice. The tears and there, but I refuse to let them fall.

The girl looks up at me and beams.

“You must be his sister I hear so much about! Emery, right? I’m Rory. It’s short for Aurora.” She says excitedly as if she’s not half naked in my boyfriend’s bed.

I swallow my emotions, and pride and look back at Carter. He looks absolutely miserable like shame personified. That’s nothing compared to what I feel. I make sure he sees my face. Change my mind; this might be the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I turn back to the girl, Rory. I clear my throat and look at her with a smile.

“You must be the girlfriend.” *

THE KING OF
LIGHT &
THE GHOSTLY
KNIGHT

JACK HARDIN

IN THE DUSK OF HIS DAY WAS THE KING OF LIGHT, dying in his deathbed of the west. His blankets of gold, which stretched across the horizon of his bedchamber, faded and withered away. Across the bedchamber, hovering above his throne of the east like the reaper, was the knight of ghosts, armored in death-white. The king's throne, once his divine right, now belonged to the ghostly knight. The knight raised himself to the ceiling, turning it to his own dark domain as he stared down at the dying king.

"Your night is sovereign," said the king, "but my dawn is heir."

With that, the light of his rule fell into the abyss. With one last hurrah, his blood sprayed onto his greying blankets but fell out of color as everything turned black. With darkness as overlord, the knight shined bright with victory, casting out decay of his own skin across the ceiling. They ate away at the paint, forming their twisted art as their spawn multiplied. The columns holding the ceiling froze over, all the way down to their mighty bases. The plants of the king's garden hid themselves in the ground. The knight's eye blazed through the palace rooms, watching his new subjects fall in dismay as they built fires in desperation.

In the darkest hour, at the realm's coldest era, the time of ante meridiem approached. The decay, spreading their diseases, halted their progress. A light, dim among the disconsolate dark, lifted the throne of the east. The ceiling went alight in blue flames, burning the decay away from the artistry of monarchies until it was completely cleansed. The knight ran away to the west but was caught in the flames. As his hollow glow was burned away, the king of light emerged from his throne. In the dawn of his day, he rose from his seat to meet the knight.

"Your day is princeps," said the knight, "but your dusk is fate."

With that, the knight disappeared in the flames, cowering away in the plaster of the ceiling. With his majesty's eminence-- the snow melted away, the plants bloomed again, and his subjects rejoiced as he rose higher to the ceiling from his magnificent throne. *

Fragments

ALEX HARRIS

“YOU WON’T FIND WHAT YOU’RE LOOKING FOR,” was the sound that greeted Erin as he stepped inside the diner.

“I’m sorry?” Erin asked, taken aback.

“What? Oh! Don’t worry about it kid,” the grizzled man behind the counter answered, after a moment of confusion. “I wasn’t talking to you. Take a seat wherever, I’ll be with you in a minute.” With that auspicious start, Erin cautiously made his way over to the bar seating. Glancing around he saw that the place was nearly empty, save for a table or two, and a guy at the counter with a long, ragged, beard who had clearly been there for years. Sitting down next to the beard guy, after giving him the distantly polite nod of two people who were forced to be in close proximity but had no desire to speak to one another, he watched the sole man behind the counter bustle his way around.

“Hey there, sorry about that,” the man made his way over after a few minutes. “Name’s Jack, what can I do ya’ for? Coffee?” Nodding his assent, Erin allowed the man to fill a mug for him, and sipped it tentatively. Yup, still gross.

“Actually, I was wondering if you might be able to help me.” Erin said. “I wanted to go out to Mount Reliquia, but there aren’t really any trails or anything. I was hoping I could talk to a local that knew their way around...”

“Hah,” Jack gave a rusty chuckle. “A tourist! That’s a new one. Canton ain’t exactly a happenin’ travel destination.” That was an understatement. With a population of two hundred on a good day, the rinky-dink town Erin had found barely had a post office, let alone a motel. But that was why he was here, after all. “Well,” the diner worker broke Erin from his thoughts. “Anyone who hunts out there would probably be able to give you what you needed, but out here that hardly narrows it down. What was it that you were looking for?”

“I lost someone,” Erin said after a long moment, staring towards the ring on his index finger. “Pushed them away, and before I could apologize, they were gone. I guess I’m just looking for some kind of absolution. If there’s any still left to find.” Jack gave him a strange look.

“Shit kid, I was just asking if you wanted

directions to some landmarks or an actual guide, not your deepest secrets.” Forcing himself not to blush, Erin looked away and noticed even his ragged neighbor was looking at him with an unusual expression. Great.

Thankfully, someone chose that moment to walk in, sparing him from further embarrassment.

“Hey Jack, how ya been?” the newcomer called out.

“Todd! How’s it goin’?” the man behind the counter replied. Erin sat patiently, pretending to sip his coffee, and allowed the men to forget about him as they exchanged the small-town pleasantries of folks who clearly knew everyone in town.

“Did you see that news story last night? The tourism board in Britain is thinkin’ about rebuilding Stonehenge for a couple million bucks.”

“Why, so that some ‘sorcerers’ can make it ‘magically’ disappear again?”

“Pffh, magic.”

“You don’t believe in magic?” Erin couldn’t help interjecting. The men paused, remembering his presence.

“It hardly matters these days, doesn’t it?” Jack answered, after a long moment. “Even if it was real, it’s not like it is anymore.”

That was true, more or less. Around five years previously, every bit of known magic in the world had vanished. Be they people or places, plants or animals, practically everything related to magic simultaneously disappeared. And people had noticed. Sure, most magic had been hidden, tucked away in corners away from Normal’s, but not

everything had, or even could’ve been. Stonehenge, the Pyramids, certain kinds of flowers, even platypuses, they all disappeared.

In the past, such large-scale mystical events had had people standing by with logical explanations and concealment spells. But without those spells, and with no people left to care, there was no way to keep it under wraps, and so the secret had gradually filtered out. There were a wide range of reactions; some had merely taken it in stride, whereas others remained in fervent denial. The question everyone asked, regardless of stance, was “Why now?”

The general consensus from those few Normal’s who’d known about magic beforehand was that it had something to do with the environment. Every year, it was harder and harder for their magical friends and relatives to cast spells as the ambient pollution around them increased. Magic had probably left before it could be suffocated.

“Excuse me,” a woman addressed the three of them from her seat. “I don’t appreciate you talking about such an obscene topic while there are children around. If you’re going to mention ‘The M- Word’ please take your conversation somewhere else.”

“Sorry Sue,” Jack winced, and turned back to Erin. “It’s off topic anyway. You were saying that you wanted a guide, Todd here could probably help, he’s goin’ up there in a few days if you wanted to wait...?”

“No, I think I’ll be okay by myself. Thanks for your help fellas.” Erin said, even though they had given him pretty much nothing to work

with. He quickly paid his bill and left, knowing that he'd be better off searching by himself if that was how everyone in town reacted to magic. One of the problems inherit in small towns; rural areas tended to be inhabited by people that preferred to pretend that magic had never existed. Probably to avoid facing the fact that they had literally rendered their own planet some degree of inhospitable to wonder. He rubbed his ring again.

"Excuse me? Wait!" Glancing behind himself, Erin saw that the ragged man who had been sitting next to him had followed him out.

"You're a Seeker, aren't you? A Seeker of Magic?" Freezing, Erin gave the man a look. That was the name given to people who, upon realizing that magic was real, had refused to accept its disappearance and begun scouring the globe for anything magical that might still be found. Left unsaid, was the fact that most people considered Seekers to be idiots, holding onto childish fantasy. At best, anyway, usually they were delusional lunatics.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Erin said brusquely, turning to leave.

"WaitWaitWait! I can help you! I think I know what you're looking for; I used to have magic!" The man brandished his arm, revealing a tattoo Erin recognized as an alchemical symbol. Either the guy was telling the truth, or he was one of those delusional lunatics, but regardless, he could probably tell him *something*.

"Alright," Erin said. "I'm listening."

* * *

The man, who had introduced himself as Reagan, had driven the both of them out to Mount Reliquia

and now, as the pair of them stood standing at the base, Erin realized that he would have to make a decision. He could either check his ring now and reveal it to his scruffy companion, or risk a trip wasted. He examined Reagan for a long moment, the man staring at him dopily with an eager expression on his empty face. It would probably be fine; save for the beard he seemed the type to be beholden to childish fantasy.

"Don't mention this to anyone." Erin said and twisted the inset stone on his ring, activating the magic that lay dormant within it. Immediately, his mind was illuminated with a sixth sense, almost akin to radar or sonar, save for the fact that it was nothing like either of those things. A 'pulse' echoed out in all directions. Faintly he felt a 'ping' in the distance, causing the wave to rebound back. As quickly as it had appeared, the sense vanished again, leaving his mind utterly unable to describe what it had just seen. Without his ring's assistance Erin's brain just flat out wasn't equipped to interpret the information. It went beyond trying to explain sight to the blind; it was trying to explain sight to a species that had never evolved the ability to see. The only thing he retained was the certainty that there was definitely *something* magical on the mountain.

Reagan, having realized what just happened, looked at Erin's hand with a gleam in his eye.

"An actual way to cast spells without magic. That's amazing!"

"That was hardly a spell.

That's like comparing a safety pin to a broadsword." Erin quipped, although he was aware how crazy it was to

someone who'd been completely without magic for years. "Before the Departure, someone who had magic could just *do* that. Not one of them would have considered sensing magic even a cantrip. Or so I understand it, anyway."

Reagan gave him a curious look, but led him up into the highlands just the same. Erin did his best to absorb the scenery, despite the fact that that had always really been Lena's thing. The trees were some kind of deciduous species, spaced closely enough together that there wasn't much in the way of undergrowth, although not so closely that he didn't have a decent line of sight on his surroundings. Occasionally, Erin could catch a glimpse of the sky, which was clear, save for the rare cloud. That wasn't the goal though, yet despite his efforts, Erin couldn't quite see it the way that Lena would've, couldn't view its majesty. She would have pointed out some shade of green on the leaves could be used in a poultice, or gushed over a rock that looked like an irritated aardvark or something. Then she would have made a cheesy joke about 'seeing the forest for the trees' to make him cringe. Gods, Erin hoped he'd see her again. He would. He had to.

Quietly, Erin walked, trying to capture her mindset, a task made even more difficult by his guide, who seemed bound and determined to fill the silence with inane chatter. The sight of magic must have gotten the man excited; he hadn't been nearly this chatty on the drive over.

"I think there was a conclave that used to live up here. There was

probably a well of magic or something that they were tapping to power their rituals. It's all decades old though; no idea why they would have left, even before the Departure, but I've found all sorts of stuff over the years. Of course, most things aren't really designed to store magic, so nothing's lasted for more than a moment." Reagan aborted an attempt to touch his beard, unable to still his hands' anxious fidgeting as they walked. "But you'd know that wouldn't you? You seem like you've been doing this a while."

"Five years, three months, eleven days, and two hours," Erin said dryly. "But who's counting."

"Alright then." Clearly sensing he had poked a sore point, Reagan changed the subject. "I can take you to the general area where I found most of the stuff, but not anything more precise. My magic senses aren't exactly what they used to be."

"I meant to ask about that. You said you had magic, as in you used to, but don't anymore? You were a sorcerer?" Erin asked.

"Well- um," Seeing the uncomfortable look on the man's face Erin tried to backtrack.

"Unless you didn't want to talk about it."

"It's fine, it isn't a big secret," Reagan sighed, and nervously tugged on his beard. "I was never really much of a sorcerer. Minimal talent, and hardly a diligent practitioner. I was too fond of technology to use more than basic cantrips; I drove a car, did my taxes online, I even had a smartphone. I'm sure you get the picture." Erin nodded. Magic was notorious for cooperating terribly with tech; anything smarter than a toaster tended to fail pretty much

immediately when brought into areas with high magical concentrations. By the same token, however, the more urban, and therefore polluted, an area was, the more likely a spell was to fail. Reagan must have been using practically zero magic for his stuff to have stayed in one piece. "When the magic of the world left, I was given a choice, same as everybody else: stay here and lose my magic, or go with and lose access to all that. In the heat of the moment I panicked." He gave a halfhearted smile. "I've never met anyone else dumb enough to have made the same mistake."

"I'm sorry, I can't imagine what that was like." Even though his ring granted him an extra sense, it was only a glimpse of greater insight. To have been born with that sense, only to lose it, was probably a feeling akin to being crippled.

"It's fine." He tugged his beard again. "Well, it isn't really, but not even magic could change the past." Having thoroughly killed the conversation, the pair proceeded to walk in silence for several minutes, the wooded hills growing gradually steeper. Despite the increased verticality, the tree line hadn't thinned in the slightest, still obscuring any visibility more than a few dozen feet in any given direction.

"What about you? You said someone gave you that ring?" Reagan asked, eventually.

"Yeah."

"Oh- sorry- y-you don't-"
Reagan must have picked up on how little Erin wanted to discuss the subject.

"No, it's fine," Erin interrupted. Reagan had shared his own shortcomings, the least he could

do was reciprocate. "Her name was Lena. Or is Lena, I suppose, she's probably still alive out there, wherever everyone else disappeared to. I never had magic, but that never mattered to her. She was my partner, but more than that, we were best friends. The day magic left the world, we were having a fight. It was stupid, I don't even really remember what it was about, but we were furious with one another. When her choice came, she was angry enough at me that she took it without a second thought." Erin laughed humorlessly. "She made this ring for me, you know. To help me find my way through the concealment spells, and since I don't have any magic, she built it with its own internal reservoir. Now that there's hardly any left in the world, it just happens to work pretty well as a magic radar." He wrapped his arms around himself. "I'm hoping that I find some real magic someday. Enough to see her again, apologize. Although, I've been searching so long, sometimes I wonder..." The pair lapsed in to silence again, the minutes stretching on until at least an hour had passed. The ground had gradually been infiltrated more and more by rocky outcroppings, until the pair was less walking and more climbing.

"Why did you come here in the first place? Canton never had much of a magical populace." Reagan asked, panting heavily and clearly looking for a distraction from their physical exertion.

"That's why I chose it to begin with." Erin remarked, heaving himself up onto a rock. "I've been searching for years, long enough to see a pattern. Everything that's been left behind was

forgotten. Any artifacts I've found have been things that've been lost for a long time. Long enough for whoever owned them to have forgotten about them."

"What about Atlantis or Avalon? Those are lost places; they probably have plenty of magic in them." Erin gave him a flat, unamused, look.

"It isn't enough for it to have been lost, it needs to have been *forgotten*; even us Normals know about those places. Even if they actually exist, they probably just got sucked away with all the other magic." Erin pulled himself to his feet and dusted off his hands, as the two reached a relative plateau amongst a copse of trees. "Canton is about as remote as it gets these days. Plenty of places for things to have fallen through the cracks." The pair stopped, and Erin checked his ring again.

"You've thought about this a lot."

"I have been at this for a while." Twisting back and forth, he tried to figure out which way to proceed up the rocky hillside.

"I know. That's why I'm really sorry about this." Erin heard a mechanical click. Turning slowly, he saw that the man had drawn a revolver. "Give me the ring please."

"Delusional lunatic," Erin sighed, slowly raising his hands. "Of course."

"I *said*, give me the ring." Reagan growled.

"Hey man, alright. Calm down." Erin relented. The thing about lunatics was that they were dangerous. That was doubly true for the desperate. Just his luck to have run into someone who was clearly both.

Carefully, he reached for his ring, watching Reagan's expression closely. The moment he saw the man relax, he threw himself backwards, ducking behind a tree as the sharp retort of a gunshot echoed off the surroundings, and sent shattered splinters of bark careening onto the ground. Straining his ears as cracks continued to sound, Erin listened closely to count the shots, ignoring those which were only reflections from the rocky mountainside.

Three- Four- Five- There!

Taking off the moment the gun was empty, he darted from tree to tree, trying to always keep some level of cover for himself just in case. He needn't have bothered though, if the sounds of muffled swearing and rapid fumbling to reload were any judge.

"Was what you said even true?" Erin called, cupping his hands to increase the echo and disguise his location. "Or was it just a sob story to get me out here alone."

"Yes, it was true!" Reagan snarled. "You wouldn't understand, you've never had magic. Being unable to cast spells- it's like a piece of me is missing. Your ring will let me do magic again!" For however long it lasted in the hands of a guy like this. He'd probably burn it out in a matter of days, especially considering how heavily he relied on technology. Erin had been sympathetic before, but there was only so much empathy that he could bring to bear with someone that was actively attempting to shoot him.

"You say as a sorcerer. Holding a gun." Erin drawled. Peeking around the trunk, he saw that his opponent had gotten rather close to his location, yet clearly didn't know exactly where

he was yet.

“What do you mean by that?”

Reagan moved closer. Wait for it...

“It means that if you actually deserved your magic back you wouldn’t still be relying on technology.” Wait for it... “You know, the thing that made magic leave in the first place? If I gave you my ring, you’d break it in a few hours, and then we’d both be out of luck.” Reagan took another step closer, and that was when Erin lashed out, ripping the gun from the man’s hand in a well-practiced twisting movement, before steadily aiming it back at the man. “It also means that if you’re gonna try and rob people you should know how to use your tools, namely that guns are *ranged* weapons. As in ‘don’t get close to the thing you’re trying to shoot.’”

“How did you do that?” the would-be thief asked in stunned shock.

“Buddy, I’ve been at this for years. You meet a lot of stupid people as a Seeker. You’re nothing new.” Stripping the laces from Reagan’s shoes, Erin wasted no time in using the makeshift rope to bind the man’s arms around a nearby scrubby tree. Reagan began to thrash heavily yet, despite all his frantic effort, he was stick thin and fairly easily manhandled.

“Please!” the man wailed. “I need it!”

“Need it? For what?” The man just continued his futile efforts to escape. “No seriously, what would you even do with it? If you were an active Seeker it might be useful, but you already said you’ve been in Canton for years. Would you entertain yourself ping-ponging it off all the *nothing* that’s out here? At least I have a goal other than ‘me want magic.’” Erin finished

tying the knot and disarmed the gun, pocketing the bullets. Having realized that he wasn’t going to turn this around, pathetic tears began to drip into Reagan’s sad beard.

“Listen, I’ll be back to free you after I find whatever’s up here. Should probably be about an hour, assuming you don’t manage to get yourself free before then. Which would honestly be pretty pathetic: I’m terrible with knots and these are only shoelaces.”

“Screw you!” The man choked out, his eyes red and face blotchy.

“No thanks,” Erin chucked the gun into the woods and started walking again, giving a jaunty wave.

“You won’t find what you’re looking for!” Reagan shouted, just before he was out of sight. “Your girlfriends long gone. She’s probably forgotten all about you. Just give it up already!” Erin paused, and took a deep breath, reminding himself the man was just trying to get under his skin.

“Bye Reagan,” He called back in a faux cheery voice. “Don’t be here when I get back.” Stalking off, he waited until he was sure he was out of earshot before relaxing.

“Hypocrite,” he muttered. Give it up? Coming from the guy who pulled a gun on the first person with the faintest hint of magic on them in order to steal it? That was rich. Noticing his hands were clenched, he forced them to relax, and walked silently, save for his thoughts. Eventually, the ground leveled out and the tree line thinned. Glancing around he saw that he had reached pretty much the top of the mountain. He activated his ring again and then, after looking around, he finally found what he had been tracking. Shakily, he bent down to grab

it, before standing and gazing at his prize.

A cracked watch.

Blankly he clicked the button on the side, the hands briefly spinning into position, before it exhausted its pitiful internal reservoir of magic and froze again.

“Dammit,” he whispered.

Drawing the ring from his finger, he clenched it in his fist. Maybe Reagan was right. The man absolutely had multiple screws loose, but it had been five years, and it felt like he had barely taken a step from the starting line. And that was assuming it even mattered anymore, Lena might have completely moved on by this point. Taking the ring and pulling back his arm, he was about to hurl the thing off the mountain before the view caught his eye and stole his breath.

An emerald sea rising into an azure sky, dappled with cotton. From his vantage point, you couldn't see any signs of human existence. Standing here, with fresh air that tasted like hope, it wasn't so hard to believe that the world still had magic left to find. After an endless second, the moment faded and it was only trees and clouds again. But for that brief shining moment, it was like he was seeing through Lena's eyes. Slipping his ring back on his finger, he pulsed it one more time, to see if there was anything he missed before he got moving again.

Gazing down at the landscape, Erin smiled. ✱

The Overlord in the Gas Station

ALEX HARRIS

“HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO ME IN SUCH A MANNER!” the man shouted.

“Look sir,” came the deadened reply of the teenage cashier. “We have Marlboro and Lucky Strike for six dollars, and gas for three-fifty. If you want anything from the alcohol cooler, I’d need to see your ID.”

“Have you any idea whom you address?” The man tossed back his cloak of bloody scarlett to reveal a suit of heavy plate wrought from blackened metal, it’s heraldry a snarling Hydra. “You’re speaking to the commander of a hundred armies, the slayer of a thousand kings. All behold my glory and fear my wrath! I am The Overlord Of Monsters!”

“That’s great sir. You still have to pay for your purchases.”

“I AM A GOD!”

“Alright, ‘god,’ your total is eleven-thirteen. If you can’t pay, please step aside and allow me to help the next customer.”

“You-” the man swelled in indignation.

“YOU!” came a voice from by the door.

“You.” the cashier’s voice grew impossibly more dead upon seeing the newcomer. Whereas the man was cloaked in crimson, she was bedecked in blue, with armor of shining silver. Her long golden hair was bound in a simple braid with a strand of leather, her brow was adorned with a delicate golden circlet, and her sharp features with an unkind sneer.

“But of course you would be helping this blackheart! I should have known your allegiances after you tried to stop my noble quest!”

“For the last time ma’am, we do not sell ‘evil’s bane’ ‘Justice’s mercy’ or any other kind of weaponry.”

“A likely story.”

“Aha! As you see, Noble Hero,” the man interjected. “I have beat you to your goal yet again!”

“Foul brigand! You may have arrived first, but this battle shall see me arise champion!” The pair lunged at one another and began pushing, shoving,

hair pulling, and all sorts of other uncouth behaviors. As the acne ridden teen beheld the duo's childish scuffle, the youth decided to do something unkind: Make these lunatics someone else's problem.

"Have you tried the gas station up the street? They might have what you're looking for."

"A Decoy? How like a vile trickster," sneered the woman, who turned to leave. "I shall be sure to remember this once the day is saved."

"Not if I snatch victory from your grasp!" cried the man, rushing to beat her out the door. "And I'll have you know this ruse hadn't fooled me for a moment..."

The cashier stared blankly after the fading voices of the bickering pair, before turning and looking at the mess that they had left behind for said employee to clean up: shelves knocked askew, snacks decorating the floor like spent shells.

"I hate my job." *

The Tale of the Good Witch

ALEX HARRIS

LONG AGO, IN A FAR-OFF PLACE, THERE LIVED A WITCH. Certainly not an Ordinary Witch, oh no. She was a *Good* Witch. The wind was her guide, and she spoke with a song. And, like all Good Witches, she was as strange as she was wise, and she was very very wise.

Now, this particular Witch loved stories. She would spend days upon days doing nothing but learning and listening and reading nothing but. Until one day, the Good Witch decided that she needed to share these stories with someone else. She traveled from the far-off place way across the sea, to a not-quite-so-far-off place. Once she arrived, she went to a park, and found a group of the local children, and spoke to them.

“Hello children. Would you like for me to tell you a story?” The children, who rarely had the time or the interest for such things, reluctantly agreed. And so, the Good Witch gathered them all up and had them all sit in a circle with her.

“Well then... Would you like to hear about the story of the Girl in the Green Gown?” A few children agreed, but most remained silent, until one child, who was unusually impatient, spoke up.

“But Miss Good Witch, everybody already knows the story of the Girl in the Green Gown!”

“Oh, do they?” the Good Witch smiled. “Well why don’t you tell me about it then, if everybody knows it.”

“Well,” said the impatient child. “One day the Girl in the Green Gown is on the way to visit her grandmother’s house. On the way she runs into a Bear, who asks her what she’s doing. After she tells him, the bear runs ahead to the grandmother’s house and ties her up and locks her in the closet. Then, he puts on some of the grandmother’s clothes. When the Girl in the Green Gown arrives, the Bear tries to trick her, but she doesn’t believe him, and she beats him up and rescues her grandmother, and they lived happily ever after.”

“Oh, I see. Is this the version you’ve all heard?” The Good Witch asked the other children. They muttered among themselves, confused.

“...I thought the bear ate the grandma...”

“...No, he ate them both...”

“...Wasn’t there a Huntsman that saved the day?”

“It sounds like everybody *doesn’t* know the

story of the Girl in the Green Gown.” The Good Witch said, after none of the children could agree on which version was the true one. “How about I tell you all the version that I know?”

“Once upon a time there was a girl. Except she didn’t have a gown, and it wasn’t green. There was a bear who talks to the girl and then beats her to her grandma’s house. Once he’s there, he gobbles up the grandmother. When the girl arrives, the Bear tricks her into eating some of the grandmother’s flesh, and drinking some of her blood. Then he convinces the girl to take off all her clothes! In the end the girl manages to escape by tricking the bear into letting her use the bathroom and sneaking out the window. Once she makes it home, the girl promises to never talk to bears again.”

The children stared at the Good Witch in shock.

“What, is that not close to your version? How about this one: Once upon a time there was a girl. She liked to wear Green, but she never wore Gowns. She meets the bear, travels to grandma’s house, and gets tricked by the bear. But this time, the bear eats her too. Luckily, a Huntsman happens to be passing by, and while the bear is asleep, he cuts open the bear’s stomach and frees the girl and her grandmother, none the worse for wear. Then they fill the bear up with stones, and when he wakes up, he’s so heavy that he falls over dead. The End. Is that more like it?” The children nodded hesitantly. “The truth is, children, that there are a lot of versions of the Girl in the Green Gown. Every new one adds something, and every new one takes something away. The oldest versions were told before there were stories told just for children. They were gruesome and

explicit. Always be grateful for your stories children; you didn’t always have them.

Then the Good Witch stood up and brushed herself off.

“I’m afraid that’s all I have time for today. Be kind to one another, children.” And with that, she got on her broom and flew off into the evening.

* * *

The next day, the Good Witch went back to the park, where she found the children waiting.

“Hello children. Would you like for me to tell you a story?” The children, not quite so standoffish as before, agreed, and so the Good Witch gathered them all up again and had them all sit in a circle with her.

“Well then... Would you like to hear about the tale of the Storyteller?” The children started to agree before one child, who was particularly well-read, spoke up.

“But Miss Good Witch, we already know about the Storyteller.”

“Oh, is that right? What can you tell me about him?” The children eyed each other cautiously.

“He wrote stories, right?” said the well-read child. “Like The Girl from The Sea and The Ill-favored Swan?”

“Don’t forget about The Queen and the Cucumber!” another piped up.

“My favorite’s The Naked Penguin!”

“Children, children,” chided the Good Witch. “You’re all correct; he did write those stories. But what about The Storyteller himself? What was his story?” The children shuffled in their seats, but none of them spoke up.

“Let me tell you his story. Once upon a time there was a storyteller. His mother was a washerwoman, and his father was a shoemaker. He was an

only child who lived in a single room house, and spent his days wandering by the river while his mother worked. Eventually he became the storyteller we know and love today, but not without much difficulty.” The children nodded amongst themselves. That made sense. But here the Good Witch spoke again, for she wasn’t finished.

“Let me tell you his story again. Once upon a time there was a storyteller. He was adopted, his parents were members of nobility, his mother was a countess, his father was a prince and he grew up in a huge manor. Eventually he became the storyteller we know and love today, and everyone immediately loved his work and so he lived out the rest of his days writing.” The children frowned. That was completely different! But the Good Witch still wasn’t finished.

“Let me tell you his story a third time. Once upon a time there was a storyteller. His mother was a washerwoman, and he had one stepsister, for his father, who was related to nobles, died when he was young, and his mother remarried. He was able to go to school because a family friend convinced the King to pay for it. Eventually he became the storyteller we know and love today, and although it wasn’t easy, he quickly rose to great fame and, despite his many struggles, wrote more stories than anyone else ever has.” The children looked at each other in confusion. Which story was the real one?

“The truth is, my darlings, that no one knows how the Storyteller grew up. He could have been rich or poor, an only child or one of many. His family might have been noble, but it could also have been nobody. You see, the Storyteller has told so many stories about his own life, that even now we

still don’t know which one is the truth. But that’s okay, for even though we don’t have all the answers, we still have all of his wonderful stories.”

Then the Good Witch again stood up, and again brushed herself off.

“I’m afraid that’s all I have time for today. Be kind to one another, children.” And with that, she got on her broom and flew off into the evening.

* * *

The next day, the Good Witch again went back to the park, where she found the children waiting for her,

“Hello children. Would you like for me to tell you a story?” The children, who at this point were far more invested than they might have her believe, agreed and so, again, the Good Witch gathered them all up and had them all sit in a circle with her.

“Well then... Would you like to hear about the tale of the Boogeyman?” Here the children grew quiet and their eyes grew very wide indeed. They sat, with their quiet mouths and wide eyes, until finally one child grew enough courage to speak up.

“But, Miss Good Witch,” said the brave child. “The Boogeyman isn’t real... isn’t he?”

“Oh, my dear child,” cried the Good Witch. “The Boogeyman is as real as you or I!” The children looked at each other with frightened faces, until the Good Witch took pity on them.

“Now now, there’s no need for those looks. The Boogeyman may have been real, but he was only a man. He couldn’t turn himself into a monster or bring darkness wherever he walked. He didn’t even ever bite anybody. However, back when he was alive, he was certainly scary. Once upon a time there was a man. He was certainly frighten-

ing to his enemies, but his own people liked him enough for him to have been king three times over. His armies slew many with him at the lead, and they were brutal. He executed and staked so many people that he was eventually called the Impaler. Eventually his army fought another that was so big that they had no chance, and so the man was killed. However, people were so scared of the man that they wrote stories about him, that made him scarier and scarier. So many that those stories eventually turned into the story of the Boogeyman that you know today. So keep that in mind, children, that behind every monster is a man.”

And with that, the Good Witch stood up and brushed herself off for a third time.

“I’m afraid that’s all I have time for today. Be kind to one another, children.” And with that, she got on her broom and flew off into the evening.

* * *

The next day, the Good Witch went back to the park, where she found the children waiting. Only this time she didn’t have them gather in a circle, and this time she didn’t ask them if they wanted to hear a story.

“Today, children, I want you to tell me a story.” The children looked at each other in confusion. *Them?*

“Yes you!” called the Good Witch. “Go on, open up your books and find a story to tell me!” The children were all excited, and as they looked through their books they grew more and more so. Any story they wanted? This would be fun!

Once the children were all ready to share their stories, they got back in their circle. But wait; where was the Good Witch? The children looked left, and they looked right. They

looked high, and they looked low. But the Good Witch was nowhere to be found.

At first the children were sad. But then one child, who although not the wisest, had the biggest heart, made a suggestion.

“Maybe that was the point?” spoke the big-hearted child. “Maybe Miss Good Witch taught us everything she wanted to teach?” The children looked at each other with dawning realization. Maybe that was right! After all, they had all been excited to share their own stories. Would they have even brought their books to the park a few days ago?

The children realized that, although the Good Witch had left very suddenly, she would remain in their hearts. That they would all carry a piece of one of her tales with them until their hair was grey. And, most importantly, she had reminded them all how to love stories. Just as she did. *

CREATURE
AND HIS
TALE OF
LONELINESS:
THE SURGICAL
CYLINDER

ALEXIS HAYDEN

THE ROOM WASN'T UNCOMFORTABLE. It resembled what Creature would imagine a fairy's surgical room would look like. Everything was sharp, but soft. The smells of vanilla and sweet buttermilk flew through the air like the ghosts of butterflies; the smells he associated with the Lady. She entered the room, butterflies and blazing embers of sweet aroma trailing behind her. Her brisk movements yielded an aura of red, butterfly smoke which struck the same fascination and awe Creature had when he first met her. Everyone that Creature had met before her only came with an aura that screamed black and gray, spiders hanging by threads attached to their shoulders; but she was different.

She approached him with her soft grace and rested on the sparkling toadstool next to his surgical place. She lifted her hand, a rather large needle placed in between the bony joints of her fingertips. Creature never cared for needles though he existed only of stone and glass. Needles reminded him of his purpose: needles reminded him of the Doctor.

Her nimble fingers strategically placed the sharp prick in the center of Creature's chest, the anesthesia coursing through his stone-cold heart. bloody grooves of lonely disposition intertwined with jealous fragments of clay flesh.

"Don't hold your breath, it'll all be over before the butterfly in that chrysalis emerges."

She pointed to a bright, green morsel that hung from the top of the window at the peak of the cylinder.

Creature's eyes fluttered and he faded as he swam through an auburn sea to seek his purpose.

* * *

Loneliness...

"It's all that I feel, all that I am. The soul purpose of my being is to have and to hold this emotion. To let it eat me away inside until all that's left is the singular fetus that grows in MY head, in MY mind."

The words of agonizing loneliness drifted around the rocking chair Creature sat in, the one that creaked in the same rhythmic pattern each day on the front porch. The words knocked on the front door and reflected an echoing scream into the bright, blue sky.

A whispered yelling, *alone... lonely... loneliness.*

As Creature continued to absorb his daily dose of lonely, a small pocket from the sky burst into flames and embers of butterflies began to emerge from the direction of the shining sun carrying a lady with them. She floated down to Creature like a softly descending cloud: his eyes sparkled with wonder and curiosity.

Her lips parted and a flurry of beautiful red butterflies escaped, her Cupid's bow perfectly retracted. "I used to sit in that rocking chair, my fate given to me just the same. What have they given you, my poor soul?" She said in a voice that felt like a sweet toothache.

"Loneliness. Loneliness is what they've given me," Creature said to the Lady as he clutched the negative space between his clay chest and glass spine. Without meaning to pry he asked, "You have been in this rocking chair? The Doctor put you here too?"

Creature tried to soak in the image of her, the presence of her. He noticed a scar that parted her Dutch braids, about the length of three monarch butterfly wingspans. *Why does she feel so familiar?*

"Yes sweet Creature. I was the one before you." She pointed to the scar, "And here is where you used to lay. Doctor floated you before I escaped because he suspected I might fly away, as I did."

Creature stared, eyes glazed and wide, for he knew his existence should not be before the demise of his previous creature, yet here she was. Here she remained in all her glory and power. Awe and attempted amazement overcame Creature. He had so many questions for her, but anything,

anything at all, failed to escape his lips.

She recognized his body's false attempt at surprise for she could see the loneliness trapped behind his eyes. She spoke with an outstretched hand, every good intention resting in her palm. "Fear. Fear was what they gave me. Fear so powerful, so remorseful that it returned a favor in the form of courage. Courage so intense that it gave me the power to fly away and so I lifted myself out of that same chair and I grew wings to fly. I flew so far that I found a flower garden, one to call my own. I want you to come with me so I can heal you... *so I can heal us.*"

Without a spoken word, Creature took her outstretched hand, his loneliness still being the only purpose he'd ever had. When loneliness was all he had ever felt, an outstretched hand he was sure to take.

They retracted into the embers, a glow still hazing his memory. The flight to the place was warm and it wrapped Creature in something Lady called a hug. *How nice this would be if only my loneliness could turn into happiness,* Creature thought to himself as they flew to this place. Lady said a sweet end awaits.

* * *

Before the Place:

Lady held Creature tightly as they continued to fly in the red warmth and the silky brightness. Right above the stratosphere, they circled the world like a comet, both suns beaming down on them, lighting their way.

Creature began to mumble under his breath, "MY head, MY mind." A few minutes passed... "MY head, MY mind."

Lady spoke with slight concern, "I sense you have hatred

towards the being trapped behind your eyes. I was just going to write the end to our story for our new beginning once we arrived, but I think we should float your fetus before I do. You have my genes, and I don't think you see it, but your loneliness is turning into jealousy... and jealousy is not one you want to end with."

Creature began to think about what she said. His thoughts echoed inside his memory... *loneliness?... jealousy?...how can it be?...*

Before he could finish his thought, they arrived at the doorstep of the tall, cylindrical building. *This must be the place*, he thought to himself. They entered and wafts of vanilla crept into Creature's nose. *It smells like her...*

It smells like her...

It smells like her...

* * *

The Place:

Creature's eyes began to flutter and his ears rang with the sound of a sad baby. Bright lights and one single butterfly appeared in the blur of his vision. As the butterfly flit through the air, he inhaled scents of vanilla and sweet buttermilk. Beams of interrupted sunshine dove into the window where the broken chrysalis lay on the windowsill invaded by prickly rose vines. *I barely missed it.* His head spun, felt lighter, like a clay balloon resting upon the shoulders of a drawing mannequin.

Creature turned his head to the left where the Lady sat on the toadstool holding the source of the crying. *He's so small, so innocent.* Her loving arms wrapped around

the miniature creature, tender eyes staring at a button nose. *Why is she holding him... and not me.* Creature felt something sinister inside: jealousy. A scathing passion boiled inside him, something so selfishly built by the face of loneliness. His arm extended outward, reaching for something he couldn't quite reach: comfort.

As Creature's raging fire burned for the crying, miniature creature, he met the gaze of the Lady. Something soft, something warm began to melt the rage inside him. The red, butterfly glare from her eyes flashed away the burnt feelings left inside, opposing the raging storm that was brewing outside the chrysalis window. A soft, "Shhhh shhh" came from the Lady's sweet lips, comforting the newborn. Her eyes wandered into Creature's and he knew the flotation was successful.

The Lady pulled the toadstool closer to Creature and reached out to place her hand over the scar that now cascaded down his forehead. Her touch felt like satin, something nostalgic and maternal. Creature's eyes closed in a hazy fuzz, realizing that loneliness wasn't his only purpose.

She placed her other hand over the miniature creature's forehead, connecting the two with her butterfly wings. *How could I be jealous of something that's just like me? After all, he was the only thing keeping me from being completely lonely.* Creature felt the cries echo and bounce around the hollow shell that the baby creature had left behind. The wails soaked into his core, and he too began to cry. Creature blinked and empathy now grasped onto his core the way loneliness had.

The Lady embraced them both in her wings, Creature and the

newborn being her only connection to the world outside their bubble. In all her magnificence and fiery aura, she took flight, both creatures clasped in her grasp. They flew through the rose window and into the thunderstorm of flashing beams and ice cold tears; the water stinging their skin like sharp needles. No more red embers were to be seen, the only light coming from the thunder. They floated down to the garden below and sunk into the mud, like a flower petal uniting with its cold shadow in the dirt.

The garden that surrounded them was nothing short of magnificent, even as the storm raged around them, colorful azaleas and hibiscus flowers seemed to hug them as if trying to protect them from the storm. Water lilies and cattails sorrowfully waved at them from a nearby pond, as if saying goodbye to an old friend.

Creature and Lady sat across from each other, eyes closed, foreheads touching, sweet embracing with the third clasped between them. Before the land could swallow them, replacing their fragments with dirt and soil, The Butterfly Lady lifted them into the air, beyond the stars where they could start anew. The Surgical Cylinder only a reminder of what was to be left behind. Creature began his transformation, not only made of glass fragments and clay flesh anymore, the gravity around him pulling and tugging as if he was no longer a puppet to the world he belonged. *Is this what peace feels like? What a blissful feeling.**

The Feeding of a Young Mind

ALEXIS HAYDEN

I STILL REMEMBER THE WAY HE LOOKED STANDING OUTSIDE the bunker door before the yellow hawk scooped him up and lifted him away like nothing. His wavy, brown locks took flight in the dull wind. The tips of his black converse almost pointed at one another, his legs on the verge of caving into the hard dirt below. His bottom lip quivered as he tried to speak his last words, his mind a prisoner of their power. His emerald green eyes stared back at me, begging to be saved before he finally fell into the grasp of the talons upon their arrival.

The ultimate demise of his short life wasn't just an end, but a continuation. The hawk brought the boy back seven hours later, throwing him against the ground like the waste of the land amongst the desolate clay. He walked to the bunker door dragging his converse across the deserted land; his tiny red and blue backpack dangling from his small, cherubic hand; his emerald eyes still begging to be saved, just like mine. He walked into my arms like a zombie, lifeless and fading for the yellow hawk would be back again tomorrow for its daily feeding. ✱

JUST AN AVERAGE BUSINESSMAN

ALEXIS HAYDEN

TO MEET THE EYES OF ANYONE IN THE CITY IS PRACTICALLY ASKING FOR SCRUTINY. To your left you'll see one of those designer students wearing exceedingly overpriced bits of fabric they call 'fashion.' But one look from them and their eyes are judging your suit-and-tie because it's not 'in.' To your right you'll find a homeless person on the ground with a cardboard sign that says,

HOMELESS.

FATHER OF TWO.

PLEASE HELP.

LOOKING FOR WORK.

GOD BLESS.

But you won't be surprised to find that no one has a nickel or even a dime to spare. On the rare occasion that your path of sight touches theirs, you're met with eyes full of disappointment because your black-and-white attire screams *I have money*, and yet you choose to keep that dollar in your velvet-lined pocket. Strutting past the student and the homeless you'll find a businessman sporting a black-and-white suit with better velvet-lined pockets than yours, shoes a little bit shinier than yours, hair with a little bit more gel than yours, and a tie that's a couple hundred dollars more than yours. He holds the gaze you'd regret meeting the most.

"I mean, who carries around change these days, anyway?" Charles Fleur thinks to himself as he scoffs past the beggars knowing good and well he has a crisp five in his pocket. The right side of his upper lip is pulled to the sky as if to snarl in disgust and the glare from his icy, blue eyes feels like static on a TV with no signal. He doesn't even give a second glance at the designer student; in fact, he doesn't even give them a glance at all. He doesn't have time to breathe in their scrutiny as he carries the weight of his own.

Charles could be described as... your average, judgmental businessman: a crook, a cheat, a fake, a clown. His monopoly sits on top of the debt of those less fortunate than him. "Hey, if they're willing to be stupid enough to give me their money, might as well

let them,” is Charles’s thought process. He always has his nose a little too close to the sky and his head tilted a little too cockily. The skyscrapers around him feel small compared to his ego and the honking of every car is drowned out by his arrogance.

click, clack, click, clack

Charles slaps his Balenciaga Rim Oxford dress shoes against the pavement making sure his presence is known to everyone who passes. Every now and then he cuffs both hands inside his jacket and shifts it forward. “It looks cool,” he thinks. The image of the beggar escaped his mind a few blocks back. “Out of sight, out of mind,” he whispers to himself as he approaches the subway entrance.

**click...clack clack...click
click...clack clack**

He scales down those seven steps rhythmically in routine; just as routine as the scams he commits seven days a week. As Charles continues with his iniquitous pattern, he fails to notice that today the subway walls are a little grayer, the people stare a little harder, and the yellow line that separates the people from the train is a little duller. Although he forgot about the beggar those couple of blocks back, his sneer is frozen; an imaginary fish hook still pulling his lip to the sky.

Charles steps on the train and finally comes face to face with the first person of the day who rejects the opportunity to meet his gaze. It’s usually the other way around. A clown who... “Most definitely doesn’t work

for children,” Charles thinks, sitting across from the businessman’s routine standing spot. A smirk advances across the left side of the clown’s face.

“Weird,” Charles whispers under his breath.

A name tag inscribed

MR. FLOWER

spans across the left side of the passenger’s jacket pocket; a poorly scribbled flower right next to it. The suit he’s wearing is brown with vertical mauve stripes making him appear a few inches taller, even in his slouched position; The fact that his pants are two sizes too big helps his height too. A cigarette hangs out of the right side of his mouth, right where the crook of Charles’s sneer would be, and atop his head sits a black Fedora with a wilted, pink flower peeking down at the littered ground. The last thing you’d notice about the clown is, well, what makes him a clown; the paint on his face. His skin is a textured, white, cracking canvas with pink smeared across his lips like he tried to put lipstick on in a taxi. His eyelids are hidden under his hat, but the visible dark circles under his eyes are the most prominent feature of the look.

The doors to the train close and Charles grabs onto his rung as the train car lurches forward. Only now does he recognize the dullness of his surroundings and only now does he realize that he’s alone on a subway train... with Mr. Flower. Mr. Flower’s smirk has dissipated and he’s returned to letting the paint do it for him.

Charles begins to feel uneasy, his cockiness softening as he questions if the clown reacted to his thought earlier. "Nah, it can't be," Charles continues.

"Oh yes it can."

Charles's eyes widened. "But... your mouth didn't move."

"It doesn't have to," The same voice replies. It sounds like Charles but Charles didn't say anything, and neither did the clown.

"Am I dreaming?" Charles questions.

"Look around, does it look like you're dreaming?" It definitely doesn't look like he's dreaming. I mean, he's on the exact same train he takes to work, in the exact same spot, at the exact same time. Although, the train is significantly more empty than usual. In fact, it's barren save the clown and Charles.

"I never dream of real places so there's no way," Charles half mumbles, half internalizes.

"Looks like you're stuck with me then." The clown's grin returns as he deeply inhales a puff of smoke from the cigarette pulling his left hand from his mouth in a V-shape. His free hand now clutches a gold pocket watch that Charles hadn't noticed before.

"What the hell do you want?" Charles internalizes while eyeing the watch in the clown's hand.

"It's not what I want, it's what you want," says the clown.

"What do you mean it's what I want?" Charles says aggressively.

He had never really thought about the question before. What did he want? Charles never really tried to crack his skull or his chest open to observe what his brain or his heart wanted; he just wasn't the type of man to think that way. What he did know is that he was always striving, reaching, grasping for something bigger; something bigger than him.

"I guess I want to be the best?" Charles thinks hesitantly as the edges of the clown's lips turn downward. He still hadn't got it quite right.

"The best, huh? Guess what, I used to want to be the best. In fact, I am the best; better than you."

"It's not a competition, man," Charles says aloud and then scrunches his face in confusion. He says it again a little louder as if he's had an epiphany. "It's not a competition...man."

"If it's not a competition then what's that there in your pocket?" Mr. Flower teases the businessman's mind even though the clown has already gotten what he wants.

Charles reaches into his pocket and feels the honest Abe as if to confess to his faulty morality. Mr. Flowers mirrors Charles's action and places the watch back in his pocket.

"You're not gonna mug me are you?" Charles thinks to himself even though he knows he's not really thinking only to himself anymore.

Mr. Flower reaches down to adjust his pants hem, and as he does Charles identifies in bold letters across the top of the clown's shoulders,

**FLOWER
HYP**

**BED
NOTICS**

As he sits back up, the clown lifts his hat just slightly so the shadow of his flower is still cast over his face. Piercing through the shadow, the windows to his soul reflect back at Charles; icy, blue, static frames that materialize goosebumps on the back of Charles's neck. All of a sudden, Charles regrets having the opportunity of meeting the clown's gaze.

"Welcome to reality, *Mr. Fleur*," the clown rasps as he finally reveals his hoarse voice.

"You're just a damn clown," Charles says.

"And you're just an average businessman," replies Mr. Flower.

Charles rushes off the train and fails to mind the gap on the way out. He hustles up the odd number of steps, no time to process the **click, clack** of his shoes. He stops at the top step and looks back down into the subway. "No more looking back," Charles says as he turns around and continues upward and out. Across from the spot that Charles stands a billboard reads

TAKE BACK LOST TIME NOW.

Charles doesn't pay the sign much thought, but he can't help but wonder about the pocket watch.

He inhales the entirety of the city for the first time. More than just the city, he scans the people with his windows and wonders what they think of him. As he starts on his route

to work he sees a designer student, a businessman, and a beggar. The designer student's eyes judge him, but he doesn't mind. The businessman doesn't meet his gaze, but Charles is no longer filled with scrutiny. The beggar's eyes plead, and Charles knows he has a dollar to spare. ✱

RUSSIAN ROULETTE

ALEXIS HAYDEN

HE PLAYED RUSSIAN ROULETTE WITH HIS WORDS UNTIL ONE went too far and got lodged in the back of his throat. It rummaged around his windpipe looking for a path to escape, but found itself in a relentless cycle of repetition. It coated his tonsils like phlegm does when you have a cold. A thickness draining down his throat and flowing out of his fingertips like running water. After that word escaped, the fibers of his finger prints felt different to me. I imagined her frame grinding against his, the phlegm flowing from his mouth and fingertips to hers. His past becoming her future and my past becoming a distant ricochet of lies. If only she knew where the phlegm came from maybe she would find that the fibers are chipped paint from where he flicked the bullet into the wall and covered up the evidence. ✱

**FALLOUT:
CHICAGO**
CASEY SCHETTER

THIS STORY IS MY TAKE ON WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN AFTER THE EVENTS OF **FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS**, as I believe the Courier decides to go east and travel with ED-E to Chicago, both to explore a ruined America and to ensure ED-E gets there safely this time, rather than getting shot whilst traveling down a highway.

The story picks up with the Courier arriving in a bar in Chicago, more towards the outskirts of the city, covered in snow and ice. He wears NCR Ranger armor, except it's slightly modified compared to the versions of the armor that the NCR Rangers wear when fighting and hunting. The armor's colors are very mute, with a combat vest that contains military green colors, a tag that has "NCR" with a line through it, along with "Fuck the" right above it, green military fatigues with more armor plating covering the kneecaps all the way down to his feet, creating what looks to be like an armored boot and leggings, and finally a large cowboy-like duster covering the rest of his upper body, excluding his head, but over his arms and back, with more plating worked into the duster to create shoulder pauldrons and bracers along his forearms, and not to mention the large gashes across his chest and left arm from god knows what thing he encountered within the wild, wild wasteland.

He also wears a fairly thick metal helmet that completely encases his head and face, it almost seems so natural that it feels like when you're looking at it that it is attached to the body armor, but it is indeed its own separate piece. This helmet also has a long antenna that comes up and sticks out of where his right ear would be, giving it an alien look. One thing that stands out the most on his armor and his body, however, is the crimson eyes, making you almost feel like you're talking to the Devil himself.

Upon walking in, he unslings his rifle from his shoulder. He places it beside his seat, the buttstock facing towards the sky by his left hip, showing off the Native American dreamcatcher that is attached to it, as well as showing off the fine quality of the slender rifle itself. Its gleaming silver barrel along with its wooden features is something of master-level craftsmanship that very few would ever be able to create in their lifetime, let alone call their own.

After finding his seat, he calls over the bartender, who slowly makes his way over after being pulled away from whatever book he may have been reading, in the background, "I Don't Want to Set the

World on Fire” by the Inkspots can be heard playing quietly.

“What can I get yea, stranga?” the man behind the bar spoke with a fairly thick accent, sounding almost Italian.

“Dixon whiskey, if you have any, would be great.” The Courier speaks with a lighter tone than one would’ve thought at a first glance. But still, he’s very articulate with his words, although the tone is being warped a bit by his helmet as he speaks, you can still hear the certainty and weight in which he speaks.

“That’s an easy enough request.”

The man finds a bottle of whiskey and a glass, when he pops the cork to begin pouring it out, the Courier raises a hand to stop him.

“I’ll just take the bottle if you don’t mind.”

“Well, that’s fine and all, but it’ll cost ya. These bottles don’t come cheap, they cost a pretty ca-.” Before he can finish his sentence, a large sack of caps hits the table, a few of them spilling out of the bag. “Ya know what? I think that will more than cover it.” The man quickly gathers up the caps and stores them away, as if trying to hide them from any prying eyes that might be in this cold, empty bar.

“So, uh, you’re not from around here, are ya?” the man looks at the Courier, awkwardly picking up the glass he had just placed down and a nearby rag, cleaning it as he speaks.

“No.” the Courier says, almost staring through the bartender trying to look at what’s behind him.

“Well, welcome to Chicago then. The Heart of the fuckin’ Wasteland. In case you were wonderin’, it’s colder than a mutant’s bare ass here. If I were you, I’d look inta gettin’ somethin’ warmer, otherwise, you’ll sooner

die freezing your balls off than getting blasted by the damned Brothahood.”

The Courier looks back to the man, a bit intrigued by this at first, then back to the wall behind him, “Noted.” Still in his very dry tone. He begins to notice all the sports memorabilia behind the man, thinking almost all of it had to have been from before the Great War. Without taking his eyes off the wall, he pushes a button on the side of his helmet to open a hole to his mouth, and he steals a drink of the whiskey.

“That’s some strong shit. Haven’t had it in a while and I do not miss it very much.”

“Yeah? And I neva seen a man take a drink of it and not drop on his ass on the spot, that shit could knock a death claw out for a week!”

The man puts a glass away, looking around for a second, then flings the rag over his shoulder, dries his hands, then puts one out towards the Courier, “Names Benny by the way. Benny Goodman.”

At this, the Courier gives a bit of a chuckle.

“Aye, what the hell’s so funny about that, eh?”

The Courier brings his gaze back to Benny, “Nothing, just brings back memories from an old... acquaintance.” Then went back to study the décor once again.

“So this buddy of y--.”

“Acquaintance.” He snaps back.

“Yea, sure, whateva. This ‘acquaintance’ of yours, you don’t sound too fond of him, why’s that?”

Without turning his head back to Benny, he responds, “He shot me in the head.”

Astonished, Benny chirps back, “Woah woah woah - wait a minute. He shot you in the head and your happy-

ass is still walkin' around? You're damn lucky you're alive! How'd you get him back then? You had to of, right?"

"I didn't, no." He responds, quite plainly.

"What?! You're tellin' me a man shoots you in the gourd, splatters ya brains everywhere, real bad stuff. You come back from the dead, walkin' and talkin' and shit, and you DON'T go hunt his ass down and deliver some good ole' fashioned wasteland justice?"

"Yep." He takes another drink of whiskey. "Man it still tastes like shit."

"You're a crazier son-of-a-bitch that I thought you were then, huh? That's wild, just fuckin' wild!" He looks around for another second, deciding to grab another glass to clean.

*I've lost all ambition for
worldly acclaim*

*I just want to be the one you love
And with your admission that you feel
the same*

*I'll have reached the goal I'm dream-
ing of
Believe me*

The Courier finally broke the silence between them, "So you said there was a Brotherhood of Steel presence in the area?"

"Yeah, but the walkin' tin cans can't tell the difference between a Super Mutant or a man mindin' his own business though, so you best stay away from them unless you have a damn good reason to try and talk to those idiots."

"I think I'll be fine." Sneaking another drink in.

"Can I ask ya somethin'?"

"Am I allowed to say no?"

"No. So what're the big ass claw marks on your chest from? Couldn't've been from some dog or

somethin' right?"

He chuckles again, "No. Definitely not just 'some dog' or something. Much bigger than a dog."

"Ah c'mon, ya really gonna make me guess? Raiders? Uhhh Yao Guai? Rad Scorpis? An angry ex-lover?" "A death claw."

Benny's eyebrows perk up in an unbelievable way, "A death claw?! You're shittin' me, right? No way in hell you saw one of those things in person and thought 'yea I'll wrestle you and win', then actually fuckin' doing it without it ripping your limbs off!"

The Courier thinks for a second, then another drink, "It was a nest of them, actually. Around 20 or so."

"You're dead serious aren't ya? I bet that 'acquaintance' of yours is happy you didn't hunt his ass down then, huh?"

"To be fair, I did go find him, I just didn't kill him," he says plainly.

"Now I know you're just a looney. Why in the HELL did you not just pop his ass when you found him? You coulda from what it sounds like." Benny is in utter disbelief at this point.

"We were in public, surrounded by his goon squad. And honestly, I just wanted to know what was so important that he had to go out of his way to find some courier trying to deliver a random package that he felt he needed to kill him for. Once he told me what it was and why it was so important, I couldn't blame him one bit. So, I let him live to walk the wastes again. Karma would get him back anyway."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, what the hell was this thing you were carrying that was so important?"

"It doesn't matter."

"C'mon man, it's gotta be at least a litt--."

“Did I stutter?” This time, if he could, the Courier would be shooting lasers through Benny with his eyes, had he had the ability to do so.

“Jesus! I’m sorry, just curious man.” Benny puts away the glass he was cleaning, not knowing what else to do, he grabs the first glass again and begins to inspect it and reclean it, as if he hadn’t done the job before.

“Ya never gave me your name.” Benny says

“Well, everyone calls me Courier Six, I don’t really remember my name other than that title, and that is all that really matters now anyway.”

“Well, Six... can I call you Six?”

The Courier nods his head.

“Well Six, I’ve got to say, you are probably the most interesting man I have ever known, and as you can tell this fine establishment sees a lot of people in and out of here every day, so I would take it as a compliment.”

The Courier looks around, the entire place is still completely barren except for him and this man behind the counter, “Yeah, business is booming, huh?”

I don’t want to set the wwoooooorrrrd

The radio loses its life, and along with it, brings complete silence in the bar.

“Goddammit! I loved that fuckin’ radio! Fuck... do you know anything about fixin’ things?”

The Courier contemplates if he wants peace and quiet for a second, then decides, “Yeah, I can take a look at it.”

Benny brings the radio over to him, he ruffles through his pack secured around his waist and pulls out a screwdriver and some spare electronic parts, but as he’s working to unscrew the cover of the radio, the door is kicked open.

“Shit...” Benny whispers meekly under his breath.

“What’s wrong now?” The Courier says without lifting his head.

“It’s the fuckin’ Five Pointas. You can help me out, right? Right?” Benny sounds very worried about this. The Courier, on the other hand, is continuing to fix the radio.

“Can’t leave, radio’s not fixed yet.” The Courier says, popping off the cover of the radio and working on rewiring the inside of it.

“How’s my boy Benny doin today, eh? Does he finally got those sweet, sweet caps that he owes us yet?” the man says with a fox grin on his face, as he walks in he pulls around his baseball bat and taps his shoes off, getting rid of the slush and snow that was on them, and with his free hand, he brushes off the dusting that was on his black fur coat, then flicking ice and snow off of his black fedora and pulling his sleek brown hair back into place before putting the hat back on. Three other men follow in behind him, wielding what seem to be submachine guns and one of them holding a large metal ball with what looks to be a California license plate used as patchwork for part of its body, he drops it on the ground with a large clank and some sparks flying off of it as well.

“Look Babes, I told you I would pay ya back and I meant it! I just--.”

“We are sick and tired of excuses Benny boy!” He slams the baseball bat on the bar as he scolds Benny, also making the whiskey bottle jiggle and shake to the point it almost falls over.

The Courier catches it before it falls over. “Be careful, please. This wasn’t cheap.”

Babes slowly turns his head and gives his full gaze and attention onto the Courier, “The fuck did you just

say to me? Do you not know who the fuck I am?"

For a second the Courier turns to look at Babe in the eyes, "No, I don't, and frankly I don't care. Please don't spill my whiskey, thank you." He returns to the radio.

"Six--cut it out." Benny squeaks under his breath, looking at Babes to see how he might react.

Babes let out a hearty laugh, and a half-moment after, his goons join him in a raucous chorus. With a derisive sneer, Babes simpers "You hear this shit, boys? I'm soooo sorry, Mister 'Six'. I'll make sure to be ever so much more careful next time." As he speaks, he punctuates this point with a delicate tap of his bat to the bottle of Dixon, knocking it neatly into the Courier's lap. "Oops! So, so sorry, I got the butterfingers." Chuckling, Babes turns back to face his men, wryly adding "Maybe that's Batter-fingers?" to the resounding guffaws of well-heeled lackeys.

"You owe me for that bottle now," The Courier says, looking straight at Babes as he puts down the screwdriver. "It really wasn't cheap, ya know?"

"I'm sure my good pal Benny over here would be more than okay to give you another bottle on the house, it's an honest mistake, really!" He says in a childish manner.

"Of course. Not a problem at all, sir." Benny begins to scramble behind the bar to find a new bottle of whiskey for him when the Courier raises his hand to tell Benny to stop.

*I've got spurs, that jingle
jangle jingle *jingle jangle!**

The radio springs back to life. "I said **you** need to pay me back, not him" the Courier begins to turn his whole body towards Babes, "or did you mishear me, since you can't seem to

listen to anyone but yourself."

Babes smile turns into a snarl, as he moves the bat into both of his hands, winding up to swing, "Why I oughtta—" and as he swings at the Courier, he moves in one quick motion to both deflect the hit of the bat, grapple Babes, and unholster his golden 1911 to move it up to Babes' head and use him to point at his goons closer to the door.

"That's no way to treat a tourist or his little robot friend, now is it?" The courier says in a demeaning tone, almost like he's speaking down to a child. In a much more declarative and clear tone, he says, "ED-E, which one of these mongrels tried denting you up?"

ED-E begins to boot back up and float back into the air and points toward Babes. "Babe Ruth with the hit, IT COULD GO, ALL, THE, WAY, AND IT'S GONE!" ED-E states in what sounds like the voice of an announcer from what can only be assumed is a prewar broadcast, with Babes looking increasingly more and more worried as this interaction goes on.

"You know, the more I'm around you, the more I'm wondering how you're alive, considering how much of a dumbass you are," he says directly into Babes' ear. He turns to look at Benny. "Hey Benny, this meeting has been a blast, a hoot even. Thanks for the heads up and information on the Brotherhood of Steel, how about I pay you back by getting rid of the filth here in the bar?"

"I don't think that's needed, it'll only cause more problems than it would solve, you can let him go, Six."

"As you wish." As he pushes Babes towards his men, he spits, "go annoy the living hell out of some other wastelanders, you're not worth our time." He holsters his pistol and picks the bottle of whiskey back up to take

another drink, before finally finishing the bottle and closing the hole in his mask.

Stunned, Babes looks at his men and screams in a rage, "What the hell are you doin'?" Put some fuckin holes in this son of a bitch!" as all of his men begin cocking their weapons and holding them up ready to fire

"Here we go." The Courier mumbles, as he spins around grabbing the medicine stick and calling out, "ED-E, lethal force is authorized."

"Time to die, Communist bastards!" This time the voice from ED-E sounds like a soldier preparing for war.

All hell breaks loose in the bar, with the Courier hitting one of the goons in the back straight through the skull with a shot from his rifle, cranking the lever down and aiming to shoot again, but being rushed and thwacked with the baseball bat from Babes. ED-E takes aim and shoots another goon in the leg, leaving a hole the size of a Nuka-Cola bottle in his leg. The goon falls to the ground screaming in agony as the smell of burning flesh and gunpowder fills the room. The last goon's gun jams, and he's frantically trying to fix it as he notices his friends falling left and right around him. ED-E hits the one on the ground in the face with a shot from his laser, reducing him to ashes on the ground before everyone's very eyes. The Courier takes the hit from the baseball bat, knocking the rifle out of his hand. The force blows him back onto the bar. He grabs the empty whiskey bottle and smashes it over Babes' head, with Babes stumbling back in rage and pain, screaming out and going for another strike with the bat. This time the Courier ducks out of the way of the hit, shanking Babes in the right forearm with the broken bottle, leaving shards of glass in the wound. Babes falls to the ground in terror and pure

fear of what he had gotten himself into, the Courier without a second thought drawing his pistol and without looking shooting the last goon twice, once in the heart and once in the head, ensuring that he would be dead.

"Another win for America over those dirty reds!" ED-E says floating over to the Courier.

The Courier crouches down beside Babes. "So, are we done being mean yet."

"Fuck you!"

"Hey now, that's not very nice.

Do you know what we do to people who use bad words around their elders? We have to teach them a lesson. Now open wide." The Courier breaks off a piece of glass and forces Babes to chew on it, hearing the crunching noise in his mouth along with muffled screams and blood coming out from the corners of his mouth, "Are we ready to be nice now?" and with that, Babes' tears mixing with the blood from his mouth, nods his head yes. "Great. Now Benny, since he was so rude and decided to open fire in your establishment, you get to decide what we do with him. Do you think he should live, or should he be put out of his misery?"

"Jesus Christ man just kill him already! Don't you think that was a bit much?" Benny says with shock and fear in his voice, barely able to muster the words out of his mouth at all.

"No," the Courier says in a monotone voice, "he spilled my whiskey." And without looking, shoots Babes twice, once in the head, and once in the heart, "and now I go find the Brotherhood of Steel and let them know how I feel." As he packs his things and leaves the bar. ✱

WALKING THROUGH COLUMBUS MAKES ME FEEL SO SMALL.
Through crowds, in between large buildings, and hearing all the noise drown out me and my thoughts feels... great.

Back in my hometown it felt like every action was being watched, like my worth was constantly being analyzed or recorded. It felt like one small misstep would lead me to be shunned from society and that I would be forced to observe and interact from the outside, and that terrified me. Being isolated and alone terrifies me. Yet choosing to be alone, to observe on my own accord, understanding how to blend in and what to do so that I could disappear made me feel safe.

TALL THOUGHTS

CASEY SCHETTER

The difference in feeling alone in a city compared to a small town is subtle but crucial; everyone wants to be alone in the city. They all wear their AirPods and keep their heads down, making sure to not make eye contact so that the attention of another person won't accidentally be captured, they avoid people and interaction, they do not care about you or what you are doing, and it's wonderful. I can finally walk and talk the way I really want to; I don't have to care anymore. I am finally me, without consequence. And that's all I've ever really wanted. *

THE OTHER SIDE

HAILY SIMERAL

THEY THOUGHT IT WAS GOING TO BE ANOTHER NORMAL WINTER SNOWSTORM. That there were going to be inches of white, cold, frozen flurries floating down to the ground and covering the black pavement and the grass that is no longer green from the cold weather. That they will all have to wake up extra early to be sure to make the track to work safely. But, when they awoke from their sleep they came to find out that the roads have been closed and no one is allowed to drive. The schools have been canceled all day and everyone gets to stay at home. For the Lager family, this was the best outcome. Sadly, they couldn't go sledding and snowboarding like they usually do on snow days, but they did their best with what they had here at home. They made pancakes and bacon for breakfast and the kids got changed into their snowsuits to be able to play together outside in the frigid cold.

Meredith and Matthew Lager shoveled the driveway and cleared the mounds of snow off their cars while their children, twins Wesley and Tucker would play in the yard making snow angels and having snowball fights. Matthew will join in on the fun with his boys and toss them into the soft piles of snow just to hear their loud and controllable laughter erupting from within. The Lager family will all make hot chocolate when their noses turn red and their cheeks become rosy. They will sit by the lit fireplace and warm their toes and watch television before they all go to sleep for the next day to come and they all go back to their normal lives, and be grateful for a wonderful day off from the typical, busy day they've become accustomed to.

When Matthew woke up in the morning, he noticed the house seemed much quieter than the usual Thursday morning. He walked around his home and didn't see any sign of his wife or his twin boys. Not even their pug was running about.

"Quincy?" He calls for the dog to come out from his hiding spot. When he didn't come out, and he walked around his usual relaxation spot, to the right of the sofa, and didn't see Quincy snoring up a storm, he gave up. He insists that his family is at work and school, and then he begins to get ready for his normal day.

When Matthew opens the backdoor to get to his old, rusty car that is running on its last leg, he gets this weird feeling in the pit of his stomach, like something feels off around him. He can almost feel the wind change, and it gets a little rough and a bit cooler. He shudders and rushes to get into his car and start it up.

"Here we go old girl, let's hope for no traffic please. I cannot deal with it today." He whispers to himself, placing his head on the steering wheel, as the car engine hesitates while starting up. As he drives into town to get to the gym, he notices the traffic is basically nonexistent and he hits every green light pos-

sible in this small town. There seems to be more green lights allowing him to drive through than there are town roads. Once he gets to the gym and parks his car, he notices there aren't many cars in the old parking lot. He checks his phone one more time to see if any of his family members have tried to contact him. And still, complete silence when he turns on his phone screen.

He walks into the musty gym that seems like the building has been sitting here for the past century, the brick is crumbling little by little, and the windows have a tint stained on them, indicating they haven't been washed in quite some time. Matthew walks in and sees an old employee that used to work there when he had just joined this gym. The man has hair that looks like it should belong in the little salt and pepper shakers on dining tables. And the old man smiled with the very few teeth he had left.

"Graham! What on Earth are you doing back here?" Matthew says and goes to shake Graham's hand. The old man holds onto his hand with both hands a little too long, almost as if the old man were studying him like a textbook.

"It's fantastic to see you again Mr. Lager." Graham speaks so softly it's almost inaudible. "Shame it has to be in a place like this."

"It's just a gym, what is the problem?" Matthew says to himself.

"Well Graham, if you don't mind me, I'm going to hit the treadmill. But it's great to see you." He says and begins to walk away.

"Yes Mr. Lager, it's so strange you're here in this place." He whispers to himself again, this time making Matthew turn around and watch the old man. Graham disappears into the back door band then a quick, cold breeze runs through the room, making Matthew shiver to his core.

Matthew met Graham here in the gym back a couple years ago when his family moved to town. He was scared to enter the gym just because Matthew suffers from social anxiety and constantly feels like he's being judged by people. Graham was the

first person to speak to him and make him feel comfortable here. He walked Matthew through the building and showing each machine, and the locker rooms and everything in between. He spoke about his family to Graham and vice versa, they became friends quite quickly and once Graham's wife passed a few years back, him and his family insisted that they invite Graham to holidays just so he wouldn't be alone. This man showed Matthew to not judge a book by its cover and to appreciate people for who they are and how they treat you and others.

During his run, Matthew tries his hardest to ignore the way Graham was speaking and the way he looked. He remembers that he always looked like he was brimming death's doorstep, but this time, something was off. Then, the last thing Graham said to him stuck into his mind. *It's so strange you're here in front of me*'. What the hell did that mean? He saw Matthew here every Thursday and Saturday, those were his days off and Graham was always scheduled to work. With the unnerving feeling growing in the pit of his stomach. As that was the second time today that he realizes he's had this feeling today, it's begun to terrify him.

As he drives across town to make his way to his favorite place to eat something before heading home, he is stopped by a cop car who is sitting in the intersection flashing his harsh bright lights. Matthew wonders what it is that's going on, and then he proceeds to open the door and stand to see a very long, very slow funeral procession approaching him.

"Ugh," he grunts. "Great."

As he waits for the procession to make its way past, he gives his wife another try on his cell phone. It rings... and rings... and rings, until he's met with her softly spoken voice when he's met with his voicemail when Meredith does not answer.

"Hi, you've reached Meredith Lager. Please leave a message and I will get back to you as soon as I can." Matthew just loved the way her voice sounded. He always loved her voice. He felt like he was in heaven and she was his angel. Everything was so

peaceful and calming whenever she was around. It felt like he was on cloud nine when she agreed to marry him, like his only dream came true, until she gave Matthew the true meaning of love in his life, his twin boys. When he found out they were gifted with boys, his world became whole. He's taught his boys to play almost every sport they watch, except swimming, since he's never learned for himself.

He has taught his boys everything it means to be a respectable young man, and he's beyond proud at who they've become. He loves that Wesley is attached to animals and wishes to be a zookeeper and care for the animals and not just throw raw meat at them and call it a day. And Tucker wants to be a therapist and help people with their problems.

He recalls back to when he and Meredith came to the conclusion they were having twin boys. He couldn't believe he had to raise, and teach, and guide two boys into manhood. It was the scariest and most courageous thing in his life. Then, nine months later, he finally learned what true love really felt like. The kind of love where you would lay down your life for this person that is mere seconds old. And where if anything or anyone hurt this little human, you would go to the end of the Earth to take that pain away and see a smile spread across the small fresh face.

When the boys got older and become more independent, Matthew started teaching Wesley and Tucker what it means to become a man. To take responsibility for their actions, teach them sports and how to ride a bike. The love a Father shows for his children. He's heard some sad stories from friends of his of children that were left and not cared for the way every child should, so Matthew vowed he would make sure his boys knew how much they were loved.

His family is everything in the world to him and he hates when he imagines that something could've gone wrong with any of them, and now they've gone all day without any communication? Not even a simple text from his wife telling him she's busy and that everything is fine. It's as if his family had fallen off the face of the

Earth.

He sits down in a rather empty diner to order his food, while still trying to contact Meredith. And with each passing unanswered call, he grows more irritated and to make matters worse, all the more worried. Did she get into an accident? Is she in the hospital? Are the boys okay? Why haven't the cops or the hospital called yet? Are they dead? All the worst possible outcomes came into his mind as he was thinking about his family.

"Here ya go sir, enjoy." A middle-aged woman throws down his plate of food.

"Thanks," Matthew says shortly and sets his phone down and tries to focus on what is actually happening and calms himself down before he does anything rash.

After a few minutes into his food, Matthew watches a seemingly familiar face walk into the diner. It looks to be, from the distance away he was, his old co-worker, Andy.

"Andy? No, no that can't be him. Not possible," he says to himself as he goes back to his sandwich, "I must be seeing shit today." First he saw Graham, who hasn't worked at the gym in almost three years. Then one day, he just stopped showing up to work and no one spoke or heard from him anymore. Then, he thinks he sees Andy, and he knows that he passed away in a terrible car accident years ago.

He and Andy met at their construction job a few years back when they were assigned to work the signs to direct traffic together. The conversations they had through the walkie talkies were the funniest thing Matthew had heard in a long time. He laughed at the way Andy would describe the people in the cars driving by. He would call them stereotypes based on the cars they owned. They would get coffee together at the Tim Hortons near the office, and Andy rapidly became his best friend. They would sit back and barbecue and drink beers on the weekend and their families would go camping sometimes. Matthew would call him the brother he never had, being an only child himself. At his funeral Matthew sat near the front since he was deemed as much family as his blood

relatives. He felt the day drag on knowing he wouldn't hear his laugh again, or see his lifted pick-up truck speed in the parking lot, or even see him cuss out their manager every other day. He felt himself die a little bit with Andy.

Once he snaps back to reality, Matthew gets up to pay his bills and intently watches the familiar man grab his takeout food and walk out and around the corner. Once he is finished, Matthew walks in the same direction as Andy. as he's walking he tries Meredith one more time, and still no answer. "Dammit!" he says through gritted teeth and shoves his phone into his jeans pocket. Andy has been walking for what feels like miles and suddenly, he stops at a crosswalk. Matthew stands a few feet back and contemplates on what to do in this moment to see if this is the man he thinks. He tells himself he's going to run across the street and act like a lunatic to be able to face Andy. So, he grabs a newspaper from the metal stand next to him and places it to the right of his face so Andy won't be able to notice.

He walks intently to the crosswalk and proceeds to nudge Andy in the shoulder and shouts from the middle of the crosswalk, "sorry man!" and he looks over his shoulder and hears and sees that the man is an exact replica of Andy.

He turns around in complete shock, and Matthew can feel his heart pound in his chest and the air around him becomes thick. "What the hell is going on." With that, he heads in the direction of the diner in a spooked state by the events of today. He needs the one thing he cannot seem to find. Meredith. She's the only person that can calm his anxiety down when it's become too much for him. She's quite literally his saving grace.

"Pick up Mere, please pick up." Matthew says into the speaker, awaiting her soft voice to be on the other end. When met with her voice-mail for what feels like the 100th time he shouts, "Dammit!" and throws his phone against the brick wall that was closest to him. He is at a complete loss for what is going on around him. Emotions are becoming too much for

him to handle and he finally starts to cry and slumps against the wall and places his head in his hands. He begins to convince himself that he'll never see his family again and must try to get a hold of himself at this moment.

"Please, please, please." He whimpers to himself. And then, in that moment, he hears a soft voice that never needs an introduction...

"Matthew?" He looks up and sees Meredith's great aunt June. He sees her standing in front of him and he is in complete shock and awe. She looks just like she did the last time he saw her, wearing her golden hoop earrings, and her blonde hair curled up into a low bun and she is wearing her usual dress she always wore to their family Sunday dinners at Meredith's mothers house.

Matthew idolized Aunt June, and he always knew she had the most perfect thing to say at the perfect time when he was going through a strife. He met Aunt June first, when they worked together and she knew he was perfect for her niece but she wouldn't let him near her without proving he can move on from his childish ways and become a man worthy of being in her family for the long run. He got her to see himself in a different light and to work harder, to become respected in any room he walked into. Aunt June made Matthew the man he always wanted to become, and he finally did all thanks to her.

"June? Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Come with me." She softly says, reaching out for her hand for him to grab as she stands him up.

"June, have you seen Meredith? Or the boys? What is going on?" He quickly says.

"Relax son. Everything is going to be fine."

Everything is going to be fine? He wonders what she meant by that and why she is acting so calm that he hasn't heard from his wife in some time. He hasn't seen or spoken to his entire family since he woke up this morning. He's had weird encounters with some people in his life, and he's pretty sure he's completely lost his mind and can't tell what's real and

what's not.

June walks a few steps in front of Matthew and leads him up a small hill that is used for sledding in the winter and it overlooks a small valley where the other side of town is located, where not many people go.

"Look here Matthew," June says and extends her hand outward to the valley.

Matthew gets right next to her and he sees through a few clouds a green tent and massive flower bouquets standing around a small group of people in all black clothing. He realizes he's watching a funeral and a family saying goodbye to their loved one.

"June, what the hell is this?"

"Look closer." She whispers, with a soft sympathetic expression across her fragile rosy face.

As he does, he notices a blonde haired woman and two boys about the age of his own standing in front of the crowd. He looks at the woman more intensely and then he realizes, that's Meredith. He feels all the air deflate from his lungs and immediately falls to the ground in sobs so loud, even he can't seem to muster the willpower to quiet down.

"June... is this my funeral?" He says through his tears.

"Yes my dear. You hit your head while shoveling snow and without thinking, you fell asleep with a concussion and passed in your sleep. I'm so sorry," she crouches down to be at eye level with him, tears forming in her soft moss green eyes.

Matthew places a hand on the back of his head where all of a sudden, he can feel the goose egg that has risen to let him know that what June is saying is the truth.

"But, but this... what is this?"

He throws his hands around the area to indicate that he thought all along he was on Earth, in his hometown, living his daily life.

"This... is right before you pass on. Everyone you've seen today has passed as well. Graham and Andy, they passed years ago and you've come to see them."

Then, it was almost as if a lightbulb turned on in his head as he's

remembering the events from the day.

"The funeral that passed me today... was that?" He says, wiping the tears away from his eyes so he can see his family more clearly.

"Yours, yes it was. This is so you can see that everyone is okay, and that there's no need for worry."

Matthew is shocked but he sees his family all smiling when people go around and share memories they had with him. He loves his family and he taught them, even in gruesome and depressing moments, to see the light in everything and to always try your best to smile. He watches his boys talk to each other and smile. He watches Meredith looking up to the sky, almost in his direction and smiles when the sun warms her cheeks and blows a kiss into the air. A single tear falls from Matthew's face and he blows a kiss in her direction as he watches them get into the car and drive off.

He lowers his head, fully accepting what is actually going on.

"Matthew, look at me," June starts. "When you look up at the sky and you see the stars millions of miles away or when you see the moon light up the sky so bright. When the sun is rising in the sky and the wonderful colors from the morning sky come to view, it's the moment when you feel complete euphoria and utter peace in that moment, you'll know just how much your family loves you, no matter where you are in this universe."

Matthew smiles at her words and knows everything is going to work out for himself and for his family.

"Are you alright?" June asks.

"Knowing nothing happened to them, and we're all safe and sound. And I'll still be able to watch Meredith live her life to her best capability as she taught me, and to watch my boys grow into the men I know I raised well to do the things in their lives they're destined to accomplish. So... yes, I think I'm alright."

"Come on." June smiles and she takes his arm in hers and walks him into the light that he was told he'd see as a child when someone was ready to pass on. ✨

Art
&
Photography





Amber Alexander, “animal crossing”



Amber Alexander, "franklin fountain"



Amber Alexander, “on the avenue”



Jamie Baldwin, “The Palace of Fine Arts”



Gavin Buehl, "As Time Flies"



Gavin Buehl, "As Time Stands Still"



Alex Harris, “Discarded #4”



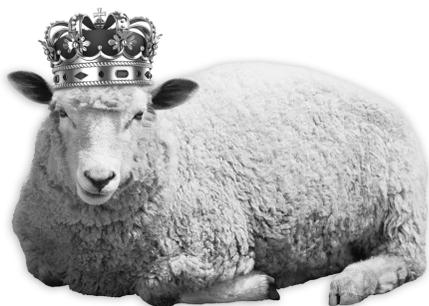
Auke de Jong, “Blue Dragon of Kiyomizu-dera, Kyoto, Summer 2019”



Auke de Jong, “Kinkaku-ji (Golden Temple), Kyoto, Summer 2019”

SPECIAL

SECTION



THE WOLF IN MY GRANDFATHER'S BACKYARD

AND OTHER
STORIES FROM THE
COLUMBUS ZOO

SARAH HOLBROOK



THE FIRST THING YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT MY GRANDFATHER is that he always does his research on everything ranging from the complexities of composting, to the benefits of raw diets for cats, to even figuring out a replacement for his ancient laptop. Many nights while visiting my grandparents at their ranch, I've come downstairs for a snack, only to sit on the basement stairs and watch him pore over his latest interest and scribble down notes and ideas on how to improve it. As I've grown older, I've found that I can relate to him; spontaneity does not come naturally to me, and, much like my grandfather, I prefer to look before I leap. This particular picture took a lot of research to see if his plan was even viable, and then he had to get permission from the zoo before he could snap it.

What you should also know about my grandfather is that, as my mother would say, stubbornness is a family trait that comes directly from him. After purchasing props and coming up with a plan, he went to the zoo and asked permission to take photos of Walleia, a young wolf he had become acquainted with while taking pictures for the Columbus Zoo. His proposal? A nighttime photography session of Walleia in his backyard, which was right in the middle of Columbus and close to Bishop Hartley High School, where both of his children went to school. It had to be done at night, both for his idea to work and because he didn't want his neighbors to call the police. At the time, he was one of the only members of the photography club, and the zoo knew he was more than capable of taking good pictures; his photos had been used for the Columbus Zoo's Christmas cards for several years straight. Still, it was a daring proposal. Surprisingly, the zoo agreed to his plan, and arrangements were made for Walleia to be transported to his house for the shoot.

The night of the shoot, a full moon shone high overhead as Pop set up his props and lighting. After the zookeepers arrived, they let Walleia roam around the backyard as he snapped his pictures. Although she was a wild animal, he wasn't worried about her getting too close; of Walleia, he said that "she knew me because I was around her a lot, and she was a lot like a dog. She accepted me, and so I was able to get up close to her and take these pictures." This particular photograph was featured in the 1983 calendar of the Columbus Zoo, and the story of the wolf in my grandfather's backyard became a matter of family lore. My grandfather is a very humble person, but I can tell from how he tells the story and how many times I saw this picture growing up that he is most proud of how his backyard shoot had turned out.



While many of my grandfather's pictures were spur-of-the-moment, this particular picture was planned out carefully. Like all births at the zoo, this birth was a big deal; it even merited an announcement in the Columbus Dispatch! For this picture, he had to practice working with a special film used to take photos in low light because bright lights would have upset the mother. He practiced in his basement by setting up one of his children's teddy bears and then taking pictures of it until he got the hang of it. Then, standing in a room just outside the burrow the zoo had built for the polar bear to give birth in, he snapped this picture through the small window the zookeepers used to peek in and check on her and her cubs.



According to my grandfather, this particular subject was a large male lion he had snapped many pictures of. He remembered that a circus performer would come and walk a tightrope across both the lion and tiger enclosure; on one side of the big cat display were the lions, and on the opposite side were the tigers. It was a pretty exciting display, especially because the performer was so confident in his abilities that he didn't use a harness!



This particular photo was taken of a white tiger at the zoo, after she had given birth to a cub. There was a big celebration, and he remembers that this photo ended up in the Columbus Zoo's quarterly magazine, *ZooViews*.



According to my grandfather, “some of them [the animals], you can get pretty chummy with.” One such animal was the cheetah in this photo; he remembered her as being relatively friendly and tolerant of him being in the enclosure with her, snapping photo after photo. My grandfather spent the night in the enclosure for this particular photo, waiting for her cubs to be born. However, he wasn’t alone; besides the zookeepers waiting to make sure the babies were healthy, my grandmother was also in attendance because she wanted to watch the cheetahs be born. A dotting mother herself, her patience was rewarded because she witnessed the birth and was able to pet one of the babies soon after the birth.

Taken inside what he called the academy building, Pop happened to be walking by and noticed her walking towards him. He stopped, lifted his camera, and snapped a picture of the inquisitive elephant, her trunk raised as if waving hello.

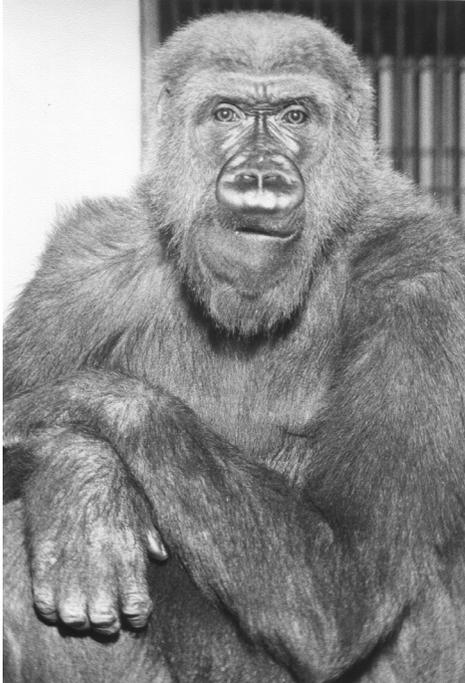




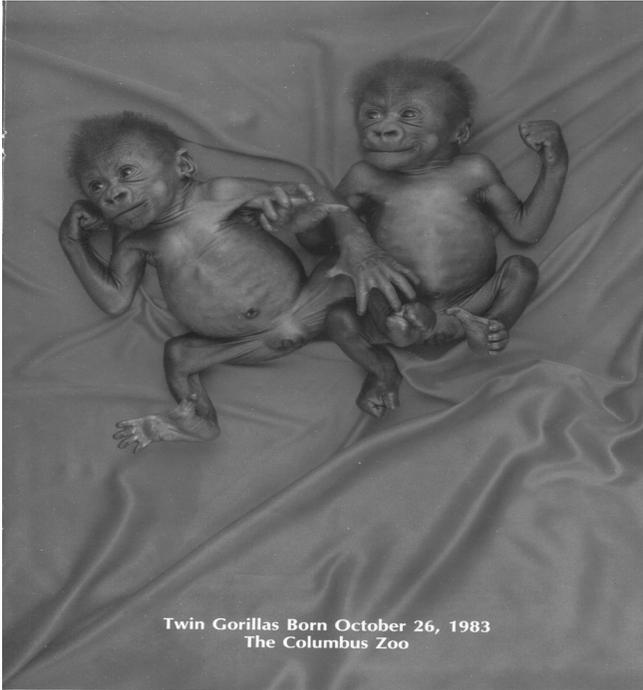
One of my grandfather's most beloved subjects, Sheba was raised at the Columbus Zoo by an old friend of my grandparents, Marsha King. They had formed a bond that transcended species; Marsha was her surrogate mother, who fed and diapered her just as she would have a human baby. Sheba turned out to be exceptionally smart; she was enrolled at Ohio State in a program where researchers attempted to teach her speech, and she had successfully learned sign language.

In addition to her bond with her caretaker Marsha, she also has a special bond with the Holbrook family; my grandparents traveled around with Marsha and Sheba, looking for a place to photograph her. Sheba was also the flower girl at the wedding of my Aunt Sheri. However, rather than holding flowers, my aunt got to hold Sheba while my uncle held a baby leopard. Their wedding was hosted at the Columbus Zoo when few events were allowed to be held at the zoo; my grandfather had managed to get special permission to hold the wedding there. Of his relationship with the zoo's director, "Jungle Jack" Hanna, Pop is characteristically modest: "I wasn't bosom buddies or anything with Jack, but we were friendly." My grandmother remembers it differently: "He liked you enough to have Sheri's wedding there! We also babysat his youngest daughter a few times." In their house, amidst various pictures of their children and grandchildren - myself included, wearing a gap-toothed grin in my preschool picture - is the picture of my aunt and uncle at their wedding, Sheba and a baby leopard in their arms.

Sheba currently resides in a chimpanzee sanctuary named Chimp Haven in Louisiana. Marsha King has left Ohio for sunny Florida but still donates yearly to the sanctuary for Sheba's birthday and makes time to visit Sheba.



If you asked my grandfather, he would say that the gorilla in this picture was the prettiest of them all; of course, he would know because he spent a lot of time photographing her for the Columbus Zoo's "Adopt-an-Animal" program. This photo is of Emmy, the daughter of the famous Colo and famous in her own right for being the offspring of the first gorilla to be born into captivity. Her father was a "big old guy named Bongo," and she was the eldest of three: Emmy, Oscar, and Toni.



As famous as their grandmother, Macombo II and Masuba were the first gorilla twins to be born into captivity. Their father is Oscar, the younger brother of Emmy and the only son of Colo. Like Sheba, Marsha King also cared for the twin gorillas, and she helped set this picture up late one night, which was used on the front cover of the next *ZooViews* edition.



This deer was not a zoo animal, but my grandfather had first learned of it from other zoo workers because they often saw it from their house. It was attracted by the food people would toss. On one of these occasions, Pop was able to take this picture of the deer staring back at him from across a pond. Outside of his volunteering for the zoo, he was fond of snapping pictures of nearly anything that caught his interest, including this deer; every week, the *Columbus Dispatch* would run a contest for the best photo. The first picture he ever won with was an impulsive snap of a horse grazing in a pasture, and he then proceeded to win the photo contest every week until the *Dispatch* stopped hosting it.



The final thing you should know about my grandfather is that he is incredibly supportive. As a horse-crazy four-year-old, I hopped up on his lap and asked him for “a horse and a place to put it,” and he agreed. He delivered on his promise seven years later when he and my grandmother bought a small ranch out in Sunbury, Ohio. Within two years, I had two horses and a pony; framed pictures of my horses and I are still hanging in places of pride around their house. Around this time, I also tried my hand at photography. I was not as good as my grandfather and mostly took pictures of cool sunsets, but I had a knack for timing and snapped a picture of my horse nuzzling one of the barn cats. It later ended up framed in my grandparents’ house, right alongside the other photos of the horses and family.

Although he does not take photos very often anymore, Pop still keeps totes full of his photographs, both from the zoo and outside of it; to write this article, I had the opportunity to go digging through his totes and unearthing treasures that I had not seen in years, such as the picture of Walleia. This last picture is a culmination of everything that he entrusted me with, and it is thanks to his unconditional support that my idea to write about his time at the zoo was able to become a reality. *

CONTRIBUTORS

AMBER ALEXANDER | Amber Alexander is a '22 spring graduate from Ohio State (B.A. in English with research distinction). She plans to pursue graduate studies for Creative Writing and/or Literature. This year she was unofficially voted most likely to quietly take over the world, least likely to survive *The Hunger Games* (second year in a row), and moderately likely to continue the same debate with Tarantino from the year before. She would like to thank the surrealist movement but most importantly the English department for their support and mentorship the past five years; it's been an honor to learn from you.

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DOM BERTKE | Just your friendly neighborhood white rapper. Just playing. In all seriousness though, I grew up loving rap and R&B from a very young age. I began rapping on my own near the end of high school and only close friends ever knew about it. My music career continues to grow and I can only pray it gets better from here. Enjoy, and as always, thank you and God bless.

KENDRA FARLEE | I am a Psychology major, and English minor here at OSUM. I absolutely love to read and write, and do it in my everyday life. I love all the characters I read about so I finally decided to make some of my own!

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ALEX HARRIS | is an aspiring author, part-time poet, also known as an English major with a focus in Creative Writing. Those who know him have described him as 'an Agent of Chaos,' 'that weird guy,' and 'a menace to himself, to those around him, and to himself. Yeah, I know I said it twice.' When asked about his greatest aspiration, he stated he wanted to someday publish a novel. When asked about his plans for the future, he gave a mumbled grunt and a half-hearted shrug.

ALEXIS HAYDEN | is a first-year English Major with a focus in creative writing. She aspires to move people with her words while confusing them simultaneously; kind of like telekinesis. Her goal is to one day publish a line of poetry books and open a Japanese cuisine inspired bakery. In her free-time she enjoys drinking boba tea, traveling, people-watching, and writing poetry (duh).

SARAH HOLBROOK | is a third-year English major specializing in Creative Writing. When she's not busy re-reading her favorite books for the umpteenth time or working on various writing and research projects, she is usually racking up hours in World of Warcraft, testing out new baking recipes, or creating new characters for D&D campaigns that don't exist (yet). After graduation, she hopes to attend law school.

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DARLENE SLACK | Senior lecturer in English, resides in Cardington, enjoys hiking, biking, cross country skiing, photography, travel. The poem "Bullfrog's Song" was inspired by a need for mindfulness and a need to write, both encouraged by the late David Citino, professor and one of the founders of the MFA program for the Ohio State University.

CASEY SCHEPPER | Casey was once born at a young age and destined for nerdiness from the start. He thrives on genres based around fantasy and sci-fi and will eagerly both write and argue over many-a-verse based around these two topics.

COLLIN G. THACKER | I am a senior at OSUM, and I love to express how I feel through writing, mostly through poetry. I come from a very small town called Caledonia. My dream is to become an English professor with an MFA in creative writing.

COLOPHON

This issue of the *Cornfield Review* is printed using a combination of **Georgia**, **IMPACT LABEL** and **A Habesha's Typewriter** fonts. The layout was handled in Adobe InDesign. The interior artwork and photographs, as well as the cover design, were all edited using a combination of Adobe Photoshop, Photo-Pea, and GIMP. The cover concept was developed collaboratively by the Editorial Board, and designed by Christyne Horton.



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Come and join **Kapow!**, the Ohio State Marion campus creative writing club. Organized by Stuart Lishan, all versions of creative writing are encouraged to be shared! Feel free to come participate and hang out. Contact Stuart Lishan (lishan.1@osu.edu) for more details.
