

The Bottom Shelf Review

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Short Stories

DESTINY

Kirsten Bilger

Everything has changed now. My great grandmother told me stories of what life used to be like when she was a little girl and how her parents had fallen in love. It was a beautiful moment when two souls fell in love and their hearts knew that they were meant to be. Love means nothing now. Humans have become too advanced for their own good. Humans do not feel very many emotions. We feel happy and sad. Emotions get in the way of how we act. Scientists have made a shot to diminish anger and thus reducing crime. Schools teach kids at the age of five to not feel joy so that one could overpower anyone else. Scientists have even made a pill that takes away depression. The worst thing they made a change to was love.

My great grandmother told me many stories of what life was like when she was growing up. People would live their lives in search of love and happiness. Her parents had lived thirty years before they found each other, completely by accident. They had a fulfilling life after they met. My great grandmother was their only child. They showered her with tender affections and soothing voices. They could never get mad at their only daughter. When she had grown up and met her own husband, she had waited twenty-eight years. The two of them lived happily ever after. By the time my grandmother was born, the world was starting to change.

People saw love as a distraction and came to the conclusion that if people stopped looking for love and was told when they would meet their one and only, the world would become more advanced and have a more advanced society. So the experiments began. My grandmother was soon to have a son and he became the scientist's first experiment. Once he was born, they had injected him with some kind of liquid. His body started to change and glowed green. Soon the green glow was directed to his wrist and stayed. My grandmother, upon looking at her son's (my father's) wrist, noticed that the green glow had numbers shining. No matter how hard she scrubbed at his wrist when she cleaned him, it never smudged and never went away.

So the scientists continued their work and injected every newborn with this liquid. Not all had worked in their favor. Some had not worked and showed no numbers, but still had the green glow to the wrist. Over time, the scientists began to improve the liquid, but there was always a chance that the glow would be numberless.

This is how love was taken from the world. The numbers upon everyone's wrist indicated the time of when you would meet your soul mate and husband/wife. With this taken, people forgot how to love. Parents had stopped caring for their children once they were able to take care of themselves, but even while caring for them, parents kept their distance. There are some unlucky people who do not get a number upon their wrist and walk this world in isolation. Bearing no numbers sent a message to others in our world: You are incapable of loving another and cannot live a happy life.

These people are shunned from their families, as early as their birth. If their parents keep them, they do not socialize with one another. Going to school was a nightmare. Once someone saw you without numbers, you were immediately cast aside from everyone else. These are the unlucky people that wander this world, unloved and unwanted.

I am one of those unlucky people.

When I was born and was injected with the liquid, my body did not accept it. It had caused me much pain to endure having it inside me. I screamed and cried for an hour. When the worst of it was over and the glow slowly made its way to my wrist, my parents were horrified to see that I had no number. They, themselves, had numbers (once you have met your soulmate, the numbers show the date of when you met them) and were shocked that I did not accept it.

They had considered giving me up right on the spot, but something made my mother keep me. I have yet to figure out if my mother was capable of loving at that moment. They had taken me home and kept quiet about me. When family and friends called, they were told that I would meet my right guy in twenty years. When they visited, I was made to wear long sleeves or gloves so that no one could notice. They congratulated and told my parents that they were lucky to have a beautiful girl like me. My grandfather had told my mother, "With her blonde hair and big, blue eyes, she will be a beauty and have no problems with her own children's looks."

The day had come when I was to be sent to school. My parents did not worry over me. They knew what could happen. All they said to me my whole life was "Make sure no one takes your gloves

off or pulls up your sleeve.” I received no kisses on the head or tight hugs to calm me. I left my parents and tried to fit in with everyone else sitting around me. I kept my distance from them, but came to realize that everyone kept their distance. Not one person was within five feet of the other. I went through school quite easily.

As I grew up, I only had one person to truly talk to. My great grandmother showed me love, showered me with kisses, gave tight hugs to calm my nerves, and spoke to me with understanding and compassion. She was old and grew up in a different time, which was her excuse when people noticed she was too caring towards me. She stood up for me and soon she became one that I trusted. I trusted her enough that I showed her my wrist at the age of twelve. I confessed to her that I was to meet my guy in eight years according to my mother and father, but I had no one special to be looking forward to.

She had taken my wrist and pulled the sleeve of my shirt down so no one else saw. She spoke calmly to me to make sure that she did not arouse fear in me. “My dearest Chloe, I sympathize with you, but you must not show anyone else. You were not to show me at all. Yet it is done and cannot be removed from my memory. When I grew up, I had no number to tell me when I would meet your great grandfather. It was destiny that pulled us together. My dear, listen to me, those accursed numbers should not control people’s love. It has taken too much from our society. Go out and find your destiny. You will know what to do.” I lived my life by those words. I never told a soul. We pretended that it had not happened and that I was to be married soon.

On my nineteenth birthday, I received no love or cards or cake. I was asked if I was happy that I would be married in just one more year. I would smile and say, “Yes, I am happy.” I left emotion out of it. I was done with school and was expected to practice being a good wife. A good wife leaves her husband do what he wishes when he wishes. She is to cook for him and give him beautiful babies that would marry by the age of twenty-one. She is to clean up after husband and children. She is to blend in the background and only be happy.

This was not the life for me. I feared that I would be found out or that emotion would creep into my voice and give me away. Normal people learn to leave behind all emotions by the age of ten. I was not normal. Fear clenched my stomach into knots every day, panic had stricken my heart, anger held a spot on my tongue, confusion swum before my brain. How was I to operate in a world without feelings? I decided then to take my great grandmother’s advice and make my own destiny.

A year passed and my twentieth birthday came to be. I was to find my guy in just two days and become a bride in three. I was congratulated for how well I turned out to be and how beautiful I was. I took in every compliment, ignoring all faces but my mothers. She too was worried but hid it well. She knew of what was to happen in three days. The family would shun me, my parents would be made to stand with me or against me, and I would walk this world in isolation. My parents would stand against me. They could not be shunned from the whole family. I vowed that I would be gone before she had to choose to betray me. The time came to set my plan in action.

I announced that I had a sudden urge to leave. Everyone was happy with my announcement. Once a person leaves with three days on their clock, they are leaving to find their soul mate. My family handed me a small duffel bag, which included some food and water and clothes. Then I was pushed out the door and left my home to begin walking this world. I promised myself that I would find love in this world.

I walked through my society with an edge. Everywhere I looked there were happy couples or sad people who lived isolated. I looked down at the ground as I walked. Then I felt a hand on my arm and someone pull me aside. It was a boy, roughly of twenty-one. He bore a smile on his sweet face. He had beautiful brown eyes with black hair. I averted my eyes to the ground. He took hold of my wrist and I grabbed his. He looked at me, still bearing a smile.

“My dear lady, I mean no harm. My time has come and I have felt a pull here for the past day. Come and tell me that you are mine.”

Before I could stop him, he pulled down my glove and looked at my wrist. I glanced up. His smile turned into a frown and he immediately dropped my wrist. He backed away from me and took off. I pulled my glove up and went my way. It was then that I noticed another boy, staring at me. I could tell that he was an isolated person instantly. His eyes cried for attention and his body posture

was hunched. He had watched what had happened with me and the other boy. Both were sure to tell what they had seen. But this one just stared back at me. He looked around and motioned me forward. I walked to him until I was five feet from him. I looked at him. He was handsome. His brown hair was hanging in his blue eyes. His body frame showed signs of muscle and hardness, but his face was soft.

“You have no number.” It was a fact and he said it so.

“Neither do you,” I told him.

“How do you still look like you belong to society?”

I looked down at myself and cursed myself for being stupid. My clothes were society clothes, void of anything black and neon. I had an air of belonging. I would have to change that if I was going to keep to my plan. I looked back at him. His clothes were black and his shirt stretched over his muscles. He gave off a “do not notice me” look. I was sure people did not notice him anyway. He showed me his wrist. He held it out as if he were proud of not having any digits upon it. I carefully showed mine. “My parents had not given me up. I have just left on my own terms. I’m making my own destiny.”

At this he laughed at me. “That is most likely the funniest thing I have heard. You have no destiny. People with digits have their happy life while we scrounge around. We keep to ourselves and love only ourselves.”

“But for people with no digits, why not find happiness with someone like you? Why must you be alone?”

“That is how it is. Even if you are extremely lucky to find someone like yourself, no one will accept it. You think your parents would be proud if you married a no digit? They would rather you die alone than with one of your own kind.”

How could such a world be so cruel? I was truly out of my mind. Did I have a destiny? Could I find someone to love me and love them in return? I would not give up hope that I could. “If you are true, then I am already doomed, so what, may I ask, do I have to lose? I will find someone who will love me and I love them. I am not ready to abandon hope and neither should you.”

“You must be young to think like that.”

“I am twenty and have been in control of what I believe since I was ten.”

“Tell me what you think when you’ve had a couple years on your own. Like you, my parents did not give me up until the day they had to. I was kicked out of my own home immediately and called every foul name under the sun. I was shunned from my family and was made to give up my name and start anew. I was kicked out when I was eighteen. That was five years ago.”

We both went into a silence that lasted for several minutes. “Well, I cannot give up when I have not even begun. You wait and you will see. I am capable of more than to just be a wife.”

He looked at me with careful eyes. He held out his hand and took mine. “Call me Danny. I will show you something, but you must not hate what you see. Promise?”

“I am Chloe and I promise.”

With that Danny took me downtown and showed me an apartment building. It was completely ugly with its faded and missing bricks, broken windows, and graffiti. He told me that this building stood years ago when life was different. It proved to him that time may have been hard years ago, but we have lost so much since changes were made. We lost our will to love and in turn we lost ourselves completely. “For without love, we are machines,” he told me. I believed that deep down Danny still believed that the world would accept him, that he was capable of being more than he was.

I took his hand and told him, “You may speak of not hoping and not being anything, but I see in you something that I have never seen in anyone except one. You and my great grandmother are the only people who have showed me that humans are capable of love. So tell me Danny, why have you not found love?”

“It is difficult when no one thinks the way you do.” He looked down at me and I noticed that he was five inches taller than me. “When the world shuns you for long enough, you start to believe that there is no hope and no love anymore.”

I squeezed his hand. A simple sign to show that I knew how he felt. I have thought the same way since I was little. Here was someone that I could relate to, someone that I was capable of knowing freely. He gave me a new idea, a new hope. I would make my parents understand that we were

all capable of feeling. I grabbed his other hand and pulled him straight to my house. This would work. I knew it would. He stopped me before we moved three feet.

“I know what you are thinking, but trust me when I say that your family would only hurt you to know that you are talking to someone like me. Even if you are one yourself.”

“That is impossible. My family is not so harsh. My great grandmother has kept my secret and I know that she will again.”

Danny looked suspicious, but followed me anyway. I took him to my great grandmother’s house and entered quietly. I shut the door behind us and locked it. We then entered the living area and found her sitting in a rocker, reading. She looked up at us. She did not seem surprised to see me. “Welcome, my child.” She closed her book and faced us. “I was wondering if I were to see my favorite great grandchild again.”

“Dearest grandmother, you know how I feel for you. I would have come to visit you. But my family must not know. You know the danger I am in. But I have found someone who views the world as I, grandmother. He believes in love and hope.”

My great grandmother studied him and patted the chair beside her rocker. Danny walked to it quickly and sat down. She watched him as he walked and, when he sat, said to him, “You are not to repeat this conversation my dear boy. I am old and remember all too well how life was. There was no giving up children and no reason to give up hope. Times have changed and I fear that it will only get worse. You are to stay away from this family so that Chloe is not to be harmed. I have seen what has happened to those who find a mate but have no digit. It is not something I wish to see my dearest go through. Leave now and keep her safe.” She turned to me. “My dearest, I am indeed old. Remember all of the stories I have told you and tell them yourself. I believe you have a destiny.” And slowly, my great grandmother drifted away from me. I have learned that she had passed after Danny and I had left.

Danny had taken me back to the abandon building and showed me a comfortable enough room. I sat on the floor, tears spilling from my eyes and onto the dusty floor. Danny had no words to console me. When I became weary, I laid down where I was and stared at the dirty ceiling. As I stared, Danny grabbed a blanket, laid down beside me, and put the blanket over us. He took hold of my hand and held it. We laid in silence the whole night. I wondered if he had ever lost someone so dear to him. How was I supposed to make my destiny now? I had no one to fully trust and no one to guide me. As I cried silently, I felt better knowing that I was not alone.

Danny and I had spent three days together before I spoke again. I was grieving for my beloved and he gave me time to myself. “Danny, I want to see my family. I have to know for sure if they would cower away from me.”

He looked at me with a look of concern. I was getting better at reading his emotions then he was of mine. “Chloe, I know what you are going through, but knowing will not make it better. Knowing will only hurt you more.” But he knew that he could not talk me out of it. We waited until dark and made our way to my house. He assured me that if things did not look good that he was going to take me away from that house in an instant. He, too, knew of what happened when a family cowered from you.

When we arrived at my home, I knew what the family would think. Three days have passed since I left and I was to be a bride today. I opened the door and was greeted by happy family members. They welcomed Danny and I inside with open arms and congratulated us. I saw the hurt in my mother’s eyes as she saw me. I saw my father begin to retreat up the stairs. I had to tell them now, before they believed that I was a blessed child. I pulled off my glove and showed my wrist.

Screams echoed through the house. They were horrified to see me with no digits. They all quickly regained themselves, showed me a quick look of sadness, and backed away from me. Not even my mother would come to me. I had to show them that I was fine and that I was to be more than a wife, as Danny was to be more than a husband. “Please, listen to me, my family. I am still me. You have loved me as much as you people can love. But now that you know that I am not to be a bride, you cower away from me as if I have a grave illness. Do you not see how wrong that is? People are to be free to love and to care. We are to have our own destiny.”

My grandfather spoke out, "Wicked devil. Just like her great grandmother. Breaking society rules and not of us. Get out, you demon, before something bad happens."

I could feel my heart shatter and I felt Danny tense up behind me. But I shook off my broken heart. "My mother and father and great grandmother knew and had accepted me. Yet here you are, once loving and now hating. How can you not see that this is wrong?"

My aunt spoke out, "Out! Out! Someone call for help! This loon will take us into her ways! Oh, help us!"

Danny had taken my arm by now and we ran out of the house. Soon sirens were heard through the night air. We took shelter in our building. I sat in the corner, but did not cry. I knew what was to become of me. I was to die alone and afraid. I shook with quiet sobs. How quickly my family was to dismiss me! How was I to live with no one?

I stayed with Danny while I pondered where to go from here. I could start a new life, but anywhere I went I would be an outcast, shunned by all who came into contact with me. Danny had given me comfort during this miserable time. I cried myself to sleep while holding his hand every night. I spent my mornings by his side and the afternoons by telling him my great grandmother's stories. We lived, keeping each other company. Maybe this was to be my destiny? Not to find love, but to find a friend, a comforter, a helper.

I was not content with this. Many times, we had returned to my family, and each time we left with the threat of sirens behind us. This time had to be different. I would make them see that I was still me and that I deserved their love.

So that night, as Danny and I snuck to my house again, I held onto his hand. I knew that he was regretting ever letting me do this, but he stuck with me. He would smile at me and tell me that next time it might be different. He knew that I just needed assurance in my life. We arrived at my house. This time things were different.

The police were already waiting for us. Fifty of them lined the front of my house and the surround block. A few held guns, but they were never used. If they were, they were just a mild tranquilizer. I could see my family standing in front of the living area window. They watched as Danny and I took off with the police chasing us. I heard the guns being fired and quickly hastened my step. We dared not lead them to our building, but how were we to lose them?

Danny took the lead and led us through the back alleys. All of the police could not fit down there at once, causing a bit of an outburst with each alley we took. We ran like our lives depended on it. But it was too much. The police outnumbered us and soon their aim got lucky. A tranquilizer had pierced my shoulder and I went down. Danny had tried to help me, but he too was soon fired at. A tranquilizer had pierced him in his side. He fell beside me.

We were taken away from each other. I cried out inside my head that I needed him. He was my rock in this world. He was the one I could trust. I watched as Danny was taken further and further away from me. I laid on the ground with the police surrounding me. What were they going to do with me? I wanted to scream out. This is not how it could end. I was to be with Danny. I knew it at that moment to be true. I had found love and it was taken from me.

I was soon taken away from the alley and put into a prison. I was in solitude, where I was meant to be as the guards told me repeatedly. But I knew in my heart that they were lying. I had found what I believed in. I was not going to give it up so easily. I had tried to attack the guards, but this had led to me being in chains. I tried to hurt them with my chains which led to me being hung from the wall.

I had passed a month in this solitude, not speaking to anyone, hanging from a wall by chains, and holding onto a belief that I might still get away from this world. I hung my head in a silent bow when I heard a noise outside my cell. I heard several grunts and soon my door was opened. The light that poured in blinded me and took me a moment to see who was standing in my doorway. I could not believe my eyes. My mother stood in front of me, keys hanging from her hand.

She came to me and unlocked my chains and I fell to the floor. I was too weak to get up, but my mother was strong for me. She pulled me off the floor and dragged me out of the prison. Outside, the sun shone brightly and all I could think was, *What if someone is to see my mother helping me? What will become of her?* But it seemed to not matter to her. She pulled me along and slowly strength re-

turned to me.

She took me to mine and Danny's place. She opened up the door for me, and I felt my breath leave my body. Sitting in the corner was Danny. He looked starved and exhausted, but he smiled and came to me nonetheless. He hugged me like I have never been hugged before. It was a hug that told me I was loved and I was missed.

My mother had tears in her eyes and quickly told me what to do. "You are to leave this town, this country. They will come after you, but I could not leave my daughter to rot in solitude. I love you, my daughter. Be safe." She kissed me and fled the building.

I could not comprehend what my mother had just done for me. She had rescued Danny, freed me, and brought us together. She must have saw the love in my eyes when we had went to their house all those times. I hugged Danny, letting all my worry roll off my back. He took my hand and together we left the country.

Ten Years Later

I laid on the floor with my daughter. She was a beautiful blonde girl with diamond eyes. I had shown her love ever since I gave birth to her. She was my diamond, my love, my joy. I would keep her safe, as my mother kept me safe.

Danny and I had escaped the country and soon went into hiding again. We made a little home in a wooded area, known to be inhabited by other non-digit members of society. We were not married in society terms, but in my heart was a special place for him. Our beautiful baby girl was now three years old. Not an ounce of a green glow showed on her body.

It was strange to be accepted by non-digit people, but over time they saw how Danny and I could love each other and still be human. Soon, others began to show tiny affections towards others. It would be a long process, but I knew that we would change the world.

Danny entered the room and laid down with us. He held my hand ever so gently and kissed it. He smiled at our baby, who we had named Hope. She was our symbol for a new life, a better change. I smiled to myself as I looked at both of them.

I had control of my own destiny.

SWEET REVENGE

Kirsten Bilger

After two years Amanda Kur still woke up from her fitful sleep screaming. It was the same nightmare every night. Rubbing her eyes, Amanda rolled out of bed and crept to her mother's bathroom. She had been staying with her mother the past two years. This was Amanda's routine now. She stayed with her mother, Heather, throughout the day, tried to find work, slept fitfully at night, and then splashed cold water on her face to stay awake.

As Amanda stood in the bathroom, looking at her scarred face and mangled hair, she could not help but remember what she used to look like. Her short, blonde hair hung down to the bottom of her neck limp when it used to hang down to the middle of her back, full of waves and bouncy curls. Her blue eyes were once full of life and joy. Now they showed someone in pain, someone who was trapped. Splashing water once more into her face, she could not help but remember what happened five years ago.

###

It was just like any other day. Amanda's husband, John, was off at work and would be late getting home. He and his friends would be at the bar until who knew when, drinking and having fun, and he would make his way home eventually. Amanda did not have a job, as she recently got laid off. So while John was off working, she stayed home every day and cleaned.

Amanda and John lived in a two story house with three bedrooms. She hoped that someday another bedroom would be used. She wanted a baby, but John always refused, saying that they did not need a baby crawling around the house. Amanda recalled the time that she asked John when they could have a baby and John replied that they would never have a baby. Amanda had called her mother, crying, and told her what John had said. Her mother was very upset about that. and simply stated, "You'd be better off without that piece of trash!"

As Amanda started cleaning the house, she could not help but remember that tomorrow would be their anniversary. John would not be home for it, as usual. He got a call from work saying that they needed him to go to Boston for a few days. He had been called to Boston this time of year for the past six years. Heather would come comfort her daughter throughout the day and would tell her that John should start paying more attention to her before something bad happened.

That night, as Amanda sat in the kitchen, she felt exhausted. The house was clean, dinner was on the table, and it was getting late. It was close to midnight before John finally came home, drunk. He walked right past her without a "hello." She heard his footsteps climb the stairs, walk to their bedroom, and she knew that he would be passed out in bed. Sighing, Amanda ate a couple bites of dinner and cleaned up the leftovers. Once the food was in the fridge and the dishes were done, Amanda went up to bed to sleep.

That night Amanda dreamt of fire and choking on smoke. She coughed and wheezed, trying to get some fresh air into her lungs. The black smoke grew thicker and thicker until it swallowed her up. When she woke, she thought that she was still dreaming. Her room was filled with black smoke, making it hard for her to breath. Shaking John, she screamed, "John, wake up! I think the house is on fire!" But John never got up. She went to the door to go find where the fire was out, but the door burned her hand when she touched it. Instantly, the skin on her hand blistered. Crying from the pain, she raced back to John and tried to wake him. Still, John did not wake. She screamed out to him to wake up, shook him, and hit him, but it was no use. She knew from past experiences that once John was as drunk as he was, he was passed out cold and nothing would wake him.

Amanda, tears flowing even faster now, went to the window and pulled it open. She did not want to leave John, but she did not want to burn either. She climbed out onto the roof and jumped into the bushes below. As soon as she landed, she heard a crack and a sharp pain in her arm, but she could not worry about that now. She got up and ran to the side walk. Staring at her house, now engulfed in flames, Amanda sank to her knees. Neighbors appeared and soon so did the fire trucks and ambulance. Within thirty minutes, the flames were out. Paramedics stayed with Amanda and took her to the hospital. She watched as they drove away, knowing that her house, her life, and her husband had just been destroyed. Nothing would be the same anymore.

###

Looking in the mirror now, the tears flowed fresh down her cheeks. She lost her husband. He was far from perfect, but Amanda had loved him nonetheless. On her way to the hospital, the paramedics had to keep applying ointment so the burn on her hand and a couple on her cheeks would not bother her as much. While at the hospital, her mother had shown up and comforted her. But Amanda did not feel comfort. The fire chief had come to see her before her mother had. He told her that someone started the fire intentionally. There were many matches littering the floor. The only question that was left unanswered was who started the fire.

As Amanda was heading back to her bedroom, she noticed a faint light coming from the living room. She walked quietly in, thinking her mother had fallen asleep on the couch again. Her mother was in the living room, but from what Amanda could see, she was not sleeping. Heather was sitting on the couch, examining herself. It was the first time in a few years that Amanda saw her mother in shorts and a simple t-shirt. The last time she saw her mother like this was three years ago when she had taken her to the beach. Back then, her mother's skin was flawless. Her skin was just the right shade of tan and there were no blemishes. Tonight, however, Heather's legs and arms looked scarred, just like Amanda's face. How could that be? Was it possible that Heather was nearby the night of the fire? Impossible, thought Amanda. Right?

COCO

Jamie Burnett

Right before I was supposed to start second grade, me, my Mommy, and my Daddy had to move to a new house because of Daddy's work. I was so nervous because I have never been too good at making new friends. At my old school I didn't have any friends, except for Coco, of course, and I knew she would be my friend wherever I went. Mommy said that I was too old to think that a stuffed gorilla is my best friend, but Coco was and always had been. Daddy bought her for me before I was even born, and from what he said, I had her by my side ever since. He was surprised when I called her a girl, because most little boys would consider a gorilla to be a boy; they might name him something like George, but not me. Coco is a pretty gorilla; she has big, brown eyes that make her look so sad and she has very shiny fur that is always so soft and fluffy. For some reason, she made me feel safe, which is why I took her to school with me every day and why I had to sleep with her every night.

On my first day at the new school, I could tell that not much would change. All of the kids in my class looked at me funny. I could hear them snickering to each other as I walked by with Coco clenched tight in my arms. "It's okay, Coco," I whispered as I sat down for lunch, "at least we have each other."

Henry, a boy that sat across from me at the table, grasped his stomach as he started laughing at me. "He even talks to it!" he said to his friend, loud enough so I could hear him. I just put my head down to finish eating my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "Hey, kid, what's its name?" Henry asked me.

"Coco," I replied.

"Coco? Like hot chocolate?" he smirked to the boy next to him, "Did your mommy help you pick that name?" I just ignored him until, luckily, it was time to go back to class.

Henry never really gave up. He seemed to always try to upset me, but I never let him see me sad. I still brought Coco to school with me every day and I did my best to ignore all of Henry's mean jokes, until one day at recess. I was sitting with Coco in the grass right next to the school's playground when Henry and a couple of other boys in my class walked up to me. "Awh, look, it's baby James and his girlfriend," he laughed with his friends. This time I could feel the anger building up. I tried to just look right past them and pretend I didn't notice them there. That worked, until Henry got mad at me. He bent down next to me and snatched Coco from my grip. I jumped up from the ground as he started running away with her. I chased him for as long as I could, but before I could catch up, I saw him tugging on Coco's head. After the struggle, Henry's friend grabbed Coco's feet. Together, they pulled in opposite directions until Coco was fully ripped in half. I could not believe what I had just seen! Without thinking, I sprinted toward Henry, screaming the whole way. The other boys ran away as I tackled the jerk to the ground. Punch after punch to his face, I could see the blood start to pour out of his nose. I did not stop until the teacher yanked me off of him.

I was sent home early from school that day. When I got home, Mommy pulled the pieces of Coco out of my backpack. I begged her to fix Coco, but she was so mad at me that she threw the pieces away. I watched as she tied the trash bag up and walked it outside to the dumpster. I had never felt so alone. My only friend had been destroyed and taken away from me for good. I stayed in my room the rest of the day. When Daddy got home from work, Mommy told him what had happened. I knew that he could not punish me any more than Mommy already had, but I didn't want Daddy to be mad at me. He was always so nice and comforting, and that was just what I needed after losing my best friend. When he came into my room, he just looked at me for a minute with a sad expression on his face, "I'm sorry about Coco, James. I know how much she meant to you," he said.

"Thanks Daddy, but I don't think you really get it," I said.

His eyebrows raised as he said, "Come with me, Kiddo. I have something I want to show you."

I followed Daddy up to the attic. He began digging through a box that looked like a treasure chest. He explained to me that this is where he keeps the things that are the most meaningful to him. Eventually, he pulled out a stuffed animal, and told me that its name was Raffy. He said that when he was three years old, his Mommy bought him this monkey. He had loved Raffy almost as much as I loved Coco. Once he turned ten, his Daddy took Raffy away from him. His Daddy said that a ten year-old boy was too old to be carrying a stuffed animal around with him everywhere he goes. Apparently this made my Daddy very sad. He said that before he left home to go to college, his mom gave Raffy back to him. She knew how much the stuffed animal meant to him so she saved it all those years. Dad-

dy explained to me that he was disappointed that I reacted the way I did at school that day, but he did understand how much I loved Coco and how much she meant to me. This is why Daddy handed Raffy to me and said, “He’s all yours and I know you will take good care of him, just like you did Coco.”

Although I was still hurt that Coco was gone, Raffy made me happy. Daddy always knew how to save the day. I told Raffy all about myself and especially all about Coco. Mommy wasn’t as happy with Daddy as I was, she told me that I was not allowed to take Raffy to school with me; I didn’t want to anyway because I didn’t want anything bad to happen to him. However, I still slept with him by my side every night and I took him to the dinner table with me. We watched TV together, and I would read books to him, like I did with Coco.

During family night, Mommy got out all of the family photo albums. We all sat on the couch; Mommy sat next to Daddy and I sat on his lap, with Raffy on my lap. My parents would tell me stories about each of the photos. We turned to one of me and Daddy at the zoo. We were standing next to a bear’s cage, and Daddy was holding a box of dog biscuits. Mommy said that Daddy always snuck in some treats for that bear, because it was his favorite animal at the zoo. Daddy told me that every time we went to the zoo I would pull him towards the bear’s cage yelling “ROAR!”

The next picture was one of me sleeping. Mommy said that I was two when the picture was taken, but Daddy swore I was only one. I smiled when I saw Coco wrapped in my arms as I was all tucked in bed. Before I was done looking at the picture, Mommy said that it was time for me to go to bed. I brushed my teeth and changed into my jammies. Once I got in bed, Daddy came in to say goodnight; he kissed me on the forehead before turning off the lights. After he left, I folded my arms around Raffy as the tears came bursting through. With shame, I whispered, “I miss her so much. Sorry, Raff, but you could never be as special as Coco.”

INNOCENT

Laura Hampton

My head rested against the cool metal of the locker. With a loud sigh, I grumbled under my breath about not wanting to take my damn chemistry exam today. I had been up all night studying, but somehow, I felt less prepared than I had yesterday. Slowly, I took a step back from the locker and opened it, just as my best friend practically skipped over to my side. "Morning, Quinn!" Ava Matthews was obnoxiously perky for 7:30 in the morning. Especially on a day like today.

"Good morning, Ava." My voice held a slight tone of annoyance that the perky brunette quickly brushed off.

"So," Ava said as she opened the locker beside mine. "I heard that there is going to be someone transferring in today." I looked up from the fingernails that I had been picking at to give my best friend one of my signature eye rolls.

"Oh really?" I asked, sarcasm heavy in my voice. "And what makes this person so special compared to all the others who have transferred into Greenfield in the past year?" My eyebrow raised at Ava as I waited for her response.

"I have two words for you," Ava said, her voice lowering as she crept closer to me so that she could whisper in my ear. "Shaun Davidson." My eyebrows furrowed as I listened to the name that I was apparently supposed to have recognized. When Ava realized that I had no idea who the hell she was talking about, she grabbed my hand and yanked me by the arm, out of the hall, and behind the nearest set of stairs.

"Don't tell me you don't know what he did," Ava said, half whispering, half yelling at me.

"I honestly have no idea what you're going on about," I shot back at her. I didn't understand why Ava was making such a big deal out of some guy who was going to be transferring into our school. She placed one of her delicate hands on her hip and rose an eyebrow in my direction.

"Have you seriously never heard of *Slasher Shaun*?" Ava's voice held a tone of disbelief as I gave her a confused look.

"*Slasher Shaun*?" I asked. "What the hell kind of a name is that? What, are we in some kind of a bad horror flick? Yeah we go to a school with a bunch of mentally insane people, but what could this kid possibly have done to earn the name *Slasher Shaun*? What did he sacrifice a bunch of goats and sheep for satanic rituals or something?"

The look that Ava gave me sent shivers down my spine. "He killed his younger sister while she was sleeping," she said. Her voice became quiet, barely above a whisper. My eyes widened at the news. Shaun was the first murderer to have stepped foot in Greenfield since the 50's. Slowly, I dropped my gaze to the floor and tugged on the cuff of my long sleeve shirt.

"We should get to class before we're late...again." I gave Ava a small smile before walking out from behind the stairs and back to my locker to gather my books. She followed close behind, keeping quiet as we grabbed our supplies and walked into our first period class.

Math was my least favorite subject, so I was glad that I was able to get it out of the way. However, because it was my least favorite subject, I usually spent my time doodling in my notebook, rather than paying attention to algebra problems. I sat down in my usual seat near the back of the tiny classroom. Classes at Greenfield were relatively small, each only having no more than ten students at a time. My algebra class only had five students in it, which was nice because that meant that no one sat in the row behind me. Something that I was very particular about.

As the rest of my classmates filed into the room, I turned in my chair to look out the window. The sky was filled with fluffy clouds that made me wish that I was outside, painting, instead of listening to Ava's psycho-babble about her latest vodka stash that she had scored from some upperclassman. With a sigh, I opened my notebook and began to sketch my view from the window when suddenly there was a collective gasp from my classmates. My brows pulled together in confusion as I glanced up from my notebook.

Mr. Burner stood in front of the white boards with a guy I had never seen before at Greenfield. After a quick glance at the faces around me, I quickly realized that boy standing beside my algebra teacher was none other than Shaun Davidson, or Slasher Shaun as everyone else seemed to know him.

Shaun had sandy-blond hair that hung off his forehead in a side sweep that barely covered one of his bright blue eyes. He wore a graphic tee-shirt with the name of a band that I didn't recognize writ-

ten across the chest, and a pair of dark-wash skinny jeans. Ava turned around in her seat to give me a look as if to say “that’s him.” I gave Shaun another glance, and at first, he looked like someone who could have killed his sister: he had a blank expression and held his gaze at the back of the room. However, with a closer examination into his icy blue eyes, I didn’t see hate. I saw fear.

Shaun was scared and he obviously didn’t want to be here, and I didn’t blame him. Especially because of the heated stares his new classmates were now giving him. One of the girls, Tara, turned to her friend and whispered loudly, “Yeah, that’s him alright. *Slasher Shaun*. I heard from Jason O’Neil that he gutted his sister right in front of her best friend.” I kept my eyes on Shaun as Tara talked and saw that he had clenched his jaw slightly.

Mr. Burner cleared his throat and commanded the attention of the class with his booming voice. “Everyone, I’m sure you all know by now that Mr. Davidson shall be joining us here at Greenfield Juvenile Correctional Institution. I hope that you will offer him the same clean slate that you were all given when you first arrived. Shaun, you may take any open seat.”

And with that, Mr. Burner turned towards the whiteboard and began writing an algebraic equation. Shaun looked around the room, searching for a place to sit, but all he found were angry glares staring back at him. I don’t know why, but this made me furious. At that moment, Shaun’s eyes found mine and I froze. Shivers shot down my spine as he slowly walked to the back of the classroom and sat in the empty seat behind me.

As soon as he sat down, I dropped my gaze to my sketch and held my breath. I could feel Shaun’s eyes boring into my back and after a few seconds, I felt his warm breath tickling the nape of my neck. In a low voice, he whispered, “I didn’t do it.”

RED

Kimberly Maske-Mertz

For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.

1 Thessalonians 5:3

All I see is red.

As I gaze out the window at the alien landscape, my heart races as memories flash in quick succession—my hands, my blouse, and the well-worn knees of my favorite jeans, stained with crimson fingers that grasp for something I have no dispensation to bestow. They beg. No, they pray. Pray to a god that does not exist. That cannot exist.

A dozen hands reach for me, pulling. They pull me incessantly, this way and that. I don't have the strength to fight anymore. I don't think I ever did. My limbs feel numb. My mind, a darkened cavern of unrealized possibility. I know that there is something I should do. Something I'm supposed to do. I can feel the synapses fire in every nerve, urging me to clasp my hands together and plead for forgiveness. My muscles burn as my thoughts scatter.

Get up. You have to move. You have to scream and run and fight.

I don't recognize the voice in my head. The heaviness of words descends upon me, squeezing something out of me that resists release. I hold on to it tightly. I swallow it down, feeling the burn in my chest like the fire of a thousand newborn stars.

And then, a paralyzing cold washes over me. I shiver as a shrill cry pierces the darkness. It surrounds me, penetrating my mind only to burst forth from within. I feel its power, too strong to harness. It consumes me as it brings me back into myself with the force of a supernova.

Let go.

Let go? No. No. Nonono...I can't let go. I won't let go. Like a selfish child, I cling to what is mine. I staked my claim long ago, and I refuse its repossession.

Bright lights burst above, raining fire in a moonless sky.

###

A warm summer breeze teases the hair on my shoulder as I lounge on a blanket gazing at the stars. They form familiar patterns and I reach toward the sky, yearning to touch them. The smell of sulfur and sea envelop me as I watch green, blue, and gold cascade across the heavens. Lazy fingers graze my hand, my wrist—soft as a whisper they drift upon me. They inscribe unspoken words into my skin. My body trembles as he moves closer.

Closer, closer, closer. My heart beats in rhythmic staccato. Soft lips caress my neck, my cheek, my mouth. Our bodies entwine, connecting as one. Blood sears through my veins, setting my soul ablaze.

I burn.

I burn for him.

###

Heat penetrates my skin as scalding water cascades over my shame, awakening my senses to the hell into which I've descended. I grip the wall as images flicker behind my eyelids like an old home movie. I am forced to the ground. My body becomes a shield, fiercely protective as I fight against a primal urge to survive. With everything left within me, I shove it away. The fear. The chaos. The blare of sirens that shriek through my mind. None of it exists. Nothing exists in that moment but him. Me. Us.

His ice blue gaze cuts into me like shards of glass.

His phantom voice utters, "You have to go."

###

"You have to go," he says, his eyes narrowed insistently as he places the letter on the table. "You will go."

Excitement and fear congeal into a single, foreign emotion. He was not among the chosen, and my heart seizes with the realization of what this means. With trembling hands, I push it away—everything I had once hoped for immortalized in Times New Roman, black on white. The printed words and official Chi Rho have lost their meaning. Four months, two weeks, five days, and life has plotted a new course.

"No." My voice, barely a whisper, seals my fate.

I will not go.

I will not leave.

"I won't leave you." I choke on the words, fearing their truth. My head and my heart wage war upon one another as a tiny flutter proclaims its distress, pulling me back to the present and demanding my compliance with its wishes.

"For him," he utters as his fingers caress the swell of my abdomen. "For Elijah."

He leans in to kiss me, the name carried upon his sweet breath as it warms my dampened cheek. Elijah, destined to be carried unto heaven on a chariot of fire.

My eyes drift to the crisp, black uniform hanging in the hall. My call to service. My penance. My cilice.

###

I stare at the console, my eyes fixated on the blue lights that blink back at me. They hold no emotion and yet they stir up a deep-seated ache within my chest that will not subside. My fingers drift over cold, dead keys, generating words that hold no significance. A voice to my right utters a command. I mechanically nod my compliance as I continue the assigned task.

Initiate landing sequence 2214.

Sequence confirmed. Estimated time to landing: 15 minutes. Stand by.

Fifteen minutes. It was all the warning we had.

###

"You can still make it to the transport," he says as I shove items into a duffle bag.

I ignore his words. I focus on the task at hand. He grasps my arms tightly, turning me to face him. His fingers press hard into my flesh. His eyes, menacing in their intensity, slice through my defenses.

"They're waiting outside," he says, his tone steeped with finality.

"I won't go," I say. The words have become my covenant. They voice my fear, my doubt, my love. "I won't leave you behind."

"This isn't about me anymore," he says, releasing his hold on me. He turns and paces the room. He runs his hand through his jet black hair, tussled from a restless sleep. "Elijah..."

Elijah. A sharp jab pierces my side, reminding me of the life I carry within. Like a parasite, it consumes my resolve. It claws and kicks and demands escape. Elijah—a stark reminder of a life that will never come to pass.

The earth convulses beneath our feet as glass and stone shatter around us. Sirens sound, heralding that the end has come.

###

The hull shudders as the vessel makes contact with the ground below. Cheers of the faithful breach the silence, tearing through my thoughts. I resent their jubilation.

Have they forgotten so soon the tribulations that have forced them here?

Have they forgotten the sacrifices they have made?

A hand rests on my shoulder. A voice softly utters praise for a job well done. I close my eyes as the chasm inside me widens. I am empty. Hollow. My purpose complete, I rise and excuse myself though no excuse seems adequate for my sins.

###

"Push," she demands as a primal sound tears from within me. My body spasms, resisting my control. Sweat coats my brow. I cannot breathe.

He should be here. A son should know his father.

A single cry follows a rush of relief. I fall back. I smile. I sob. The nurse wipes my face.

The medics become silent as a cleric utters last rites. I attempt to rise as a hand falls to my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," the midwife whispers, her eyes distant and full of an emotion I cannot name.

I scream. I fight against the hands that restrain me.

Elijah. My son. My only connection to a life I abandoned.

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!

"Bring him to me," I say. "I need to hold my son."

The nurse moves from my side. She gathers the bundle gently and lowers it to me. His body, still warm, molds perfectly in my arms. His pale, plump cheeks yearn to be pinched. His eyes remain open. I

note their color, and a tear runs down my face.

He is his father's son.

###

I shuffle past the remnant as they gaze through the windows to the alien world outside. Their sanctuary. A rose-red Petra, awaiting their possession.

I descend the stairs slowly. I count my steps in time with the beats of my heart. One for the love I lost. One for my son who drew in his first and last breath in unison. One for myself...for a life that no longer holds meaning.

The door slides open, and I step inside my tomb. Cold, stale air penetrates my lungs. I hold it in. I hold everything in. My hand reaches for the keypad on the wall and my steady fingers enter the code.

His eyes...*their eyes*...flash behind my eyelids. They are my cross to bear. A sense of calm washes over me as the door slides closed behind me. The air thins, and I expel the demons that inhabit my soul in a single, ephemeral breath.

The hatch opens.

I let go.

And all I see is red.

CHANGES

Meagan Miller

Moonlight gleamed upon the snow engulfed forest. The trees seemed to throb with tension as though fearfully awaiting a fiery explosion that would incinerate them in its path. Dark rumors circulated among this part of the woods, rumors of a shadowy figure, half animal, half monster, with eyes that shone eerily through the darkness.

“Mama! Mama! I saw something!”

A dappled mare’s ears perked up as the shrill sound of her foal’s voice wafted towards her. She trotted over to where he was standing at the edge of the meadow. A breeze carried a strange scent her direction, and nostrils flaring, she placed her body between her foal’s exposed side and the forest, nudging him back to the safety of the herd. The mare remembered hearing the older horses tell stories about one of their own who had loved unwisely, and had ended up paying a horrific price.

“You wandered too far,” his mother told him disapprovingly. “We need to leave this place. Otherwise, she will get you.”

“She?” the foal’s voice rose in pitch as he repeated his question. “She? Who’s She? Mama? MAMA!”

She had always been a loner. After her mother had disappeared alongside the lead stallion, the Alpha mare who took charge bullied the orphan tirelessly. To escape, she would wander off by herself and spend hours in isolation. She grew up an outcast and when surrounded by the herd, she seemed to disappear into the background. With her austere, apathetic demeanor, the others found it difficult to relate to her. So they let her alone. Her eyes, an unusual pale icy blue seemed to reach into their being, revealing their secrets to her. The others began to fear her. No one tried to include her in conversations and when she came near, the others started whispering and would turn their backs. Even the foals, with their exuberance and willingness to befriend everyone, stayed away. Her existence was defined by the rising and setting of the sun.

One evening, when the whispers grew too loud, she wandered beyond the herd’s normal territory. The silence seemed to call her, and longing to feel some solace, she answered. The call took her far from the safety of the herd and led to the silent, expansive wilderness beyond. For many nights thereafter she would leave the herd to explore. The moon added an aura of mystery to the landscape, turning leaves silver, and transforming steam rising from small ponds into swirling, undulating forms. One particularly cold evening, she heard faint snuffling sounds coming from inside a cave. Venturing into its farthest recesses, she stumbled across the body of a gray wolf. Burrowed against the body in a vain attempt to find warmth, a pair of pups lay shivering. Their snarls, rather than scaring her, instead seemed to melt a piece of her frigid interior. Realizing that without food they’d die, she left the cave, coming back minutes later with the remains of an unfortunate beaver who had succumbed to the slumbering death of winter. Every evening she would leave the herd and for many months repeated this procedure.

This nightly recurrence soon captured the attention of the Alpha mare, and calling her most trusted adviser to her side, she had the outcast followed. Watching from the shadows, the adviser stared in horror as out of a cave came two pups who welcomed her with undisguised delight. She gamboled and cavorted with the pups without her normal reserve. The adviser’s horror quickly ballooned, turning to repulsion when she left them, returning later dragging behind her a carcass. It bore a striking resemblance to a member of the neighboring herd who had gone missing days before. As the pups tore into their meal, the adviser, trying not to faint with revulsion, chaotic visions of blood on her muzzle swirling through their mind, rushed back to the leader relaying all that had been witnessed. When she returned home, the Alpha called a meeting. All members of the herd circled round and the unsuspecting mare was called into the center. With a contemptuous curl of her lip, the Alpha started speaking of a creature that fraternized with the enemy, one who willingly chose to sympathize with cold blooded killers. Elaborating on the fevered visions of the adviser, adding bloodshed that had never occurred, the Alpha banished the mare from the herd. As the circle closed its collective shoulder, this time forever, the tension she felt melted away leaving relief in its wake.

Returning to the cave, she almost didn’t notice the giant paw prints in the snow surrounding the entrance. She almost didn’t hear the tormented squeals of her pups. Almost. When she did, all the instincts she never felt toward the foals in the herd she had lived with came to the fore. Charging into

the dark inkiness of the cave, eyes scorching with anger, she attacked the huge wolves that were lifting their bloodstained muzzles to stare at her. Before their having time to react, her ruthless hooves crashed into one wolf's head, killing him instantly. Turning toward the other, she looked at him with loathing. The shallow breaths of the remaining pup's death rattle enraged her further and with the sound ringing in her ears, she stalked toward the remaining wolf. His enormous body seemed unnatural, as though some unearthly being had twisted it to suit their own depraved needs. He stood almost as tall as she and instead of walking on all fours, stood on his hind legs. His claws came to wicked points and his teeth were sharpened blades, but she paid them no heed. As she advanced ever closer, he snarled, spittle flying. Blood dripped from his muzzle and, as though to provoke her, he licked at it and sneered.

Boiling with grief and rage, her blood coursed violently through her. As the ground stained dark with blood over the spot he was standing, she could only stare. When the realization struck that the only creatures she had ever loved would never greet her again, and that the monster standing before her exulted in their deaths, the emotions she felt overwhelmed her. She charged him, death in her heart.

The close confines of the cave, the bodies ripped asunder and lying under hoof and paw, made fighting difficult. Forcing the wolf into a clearing just beyond the mouth of the cave, her rage amplified and she found a new level of resolve. As the battle waged long and hard, the two combatants were starting to show wear. Pieces of her hide were hanging in fragments from her side. The wolf was missing an ear; a bloody stump where it should have been, his front paws dangling limply. Not wanting to admit defeat, but quickly being drained of energy, his remaining ear perked forward as though a voice had whispered to him. Seeing her falter, he bared his teeth, growled, and made to bite at her vulnerable throat. At the last minute he feinted to the right and sank his teeth into her shoulder. Unable to strike with her hooves, she dropped to her side and rolled. Regaining her feet, she reared to stomp the wolf's head into the hard ground, only to discover he had mysteriously vanished. Stumbling into the cave to be near the bodies of those who first filled her heart with love, a burning sensation started where his fangs had sunk deep. Fire raced through her veins and uncontrollable tremors wracked her body. As the pain swelled, as blood loss and the will to live suddenly left her, the world went black.

The question voiced by the foal seemed to hang on the tree branches. As the moonlight shone down on the forest floor, a shadow fell upon the snow. Mist swirled around the figure who had stepped out of the trees, as though to hide her from prying eyes. Her eyes, now seeming even more icy and otherworldly, followed the retreating figures. Her raspy, whispered reply caught a gentle breeze and disappeared into the trees as quickly as she did.

“My name...is Timber.”

PRONOUNCED

Caitlyn Minelli
Winner of the
Joanne Harrison Hopkins Prize

Mavis slammed her head against the steering wheel of her black VW bug. “I so don’t want to go in there,” she groaned. When she pulled into the long gravel drive of her family’s mansion she immediately wanted to turn around. Ashby Hall was a white, three-story dwelling with ionic pillars that only reached the second story. There were two porches, one on the first and another on the second floor, which wrapped around the entirety of the building. The black shutters had been freshly painted and shone in the sunlight. The antebellum monstrosity had sat here for hundreds of years with her family as permanent residents. Literally. They had had a private mausoleum built in the back left corner of the sweeping grounds and gardens behind the house. It might have looked magnificent, but Mavis would have given anything to be anywhere else. She knew what her aunt had left for her in the parlor.

She sighed. Mavis was already in a bad mood. Knowing what awaited her made it all the worse. It was after all a Friday. Earlier she had received a D- on her classics exam which pretty much translated as an F. Her professor must have been in good spirits—like the kind out of a bottle—and decided not to completely crush her sense of self-worth. She had to remind her twenty-one year old self that she only had one semester left, a measly little four months, and then her ass was out of here. She would soon be starting a permanent position at an editing firm in New York. No more classes. No more text books. No more of Aunt Dolores’s dirty looks. The old bitch was always trying to set her up with the grandsons and nephews of her socialite sidekicks. Dolores wanted grandchildren. Lots of grandchildren. And since she had no offspring to speak of she relied solely upon Mavis and Mavis’s older sisters to provide them. Mavis hadn’t wanted any of it. As much as she loved her nieces and nephews, she didn’t want children of her own at this point in her life. Her biological clock had yet to tick or tock and she didn’t feel like resetting it.

She had to get out of the car soon. Effie, her aunt’s maid slash lap dog, had probably already alerted the entire household of her arrival. She grabbed her bag from the front seat and stepped out of the car. The front door opened before she had even made it to the front porch steps. “Miss Mavis, the Madame has ordered me to convey that you have a visitor in the parlor,” said an elderly butler as he held the door open for her. His name was Hénry. Not Henry. Not Hank. *Hénry*. It sounded a lot like ornery, which he could be whenever he was in an especially persnickety mood. He was the poster boy for butlers everywhere with his black tail coat and pressed trousers. A thin bronze chain attached to his lapels led to a watch that lived in the left breast pocket.

“I’ll bet I do,” Mavis sighed, “And you can call me Mavis, Hénry. No need to waste propriety on me.”

“Quite,” Hénry said as he shut the door with a click. His monocle gleamed from the overhead chandelier which cast little rainbows on the marble floor. Mavis gave him a glare over her shoulder.

With a toss of her long ebony locks she headed down the hall towards the parlor. Paintings of all her family members lined the walls. Whenever she reached her aunt’s portrait she had to fight the urge to draw inappropriate pictures on it. Mavis paused as she reached the ornate entrance of the parlor. Carvings of little woodland animals and flowers adorned the double doors. *I hate Fridays*, she thought before flinging them open. A man, complete with Italian leather shoes, tailored suit with silk under-shirt and a silk tie, sat on one of the chaises when she entered the room. *Well, aren’t you pretty*, she thought snidely when she saw his face. His hair was perfectly coifed and a platinum blonde that would make even Marilyn Monroe jealous. Baby blues that were accentuated by his blue tie sat above a nose that was slightly upturned and full lips that made him look pouty. He fulfilled all of her aunt’s minimum requirements. The man stood up to greet her with a smile that revealed teeth that were bleached beyond reason. Mavis had the urge to grab her sunglasses to protect her eyes from the glare.

“You must be Mavis. It’s nice to finally make your acquaintance,” he said walking over to her and placing a kiss on her hand. “You are more beautiful than I was led to believe. For a moment I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Now I see that I’m very much alive, and heaven has been brought to me for your beauty makes the morning sun look like the dull glimmer of the moon,” he recited as he smoothed back his hair, looking pleased with himself.

Damn, what a putz.

“Wow, you’re just so full of nice things to say,” Mavis smiled as she wiped the back of her hand on her black dress, “Which is going to make this question all the more awkward. Who are you?”

“Excuse my rudeness. My name is Roland Beaumont. I’m your fiancé.”

“Are you? I didn’t know I was dating anybody. Was I drunk the entire relationship?”

“Oh, no, no. We’ve never met before this.”

“Oh. That’s good. I would have felt like a schmuck if I had forgotten our first date, and you know, the rest of our relationship. Anyway, how about we call off this engagement and just be friends.”

“I couldn’t do that!” Roland exclaimed aghast as if the idea was pure insanity.

“You’re right. That would be moving too fast. Let’s start out as acquaintances,” Mavis suggested patting his shoulder.

“It’s expected of both of us to get married. And I will honor the commitment I’ve made to you and your family,” Mr. Bleached Teeth said trying to look sincere, although he didn’t look particularly pleased with the idea. “We will have beautiful children together.”

“Obviously sarcasm is a not a deterrent. So, what’s it gonna take to get you out of here in a way that doesn’t involve a body bag?” Mavis said all joking aside, poking at his chest. “Or you can take my suggestion to be friends and have a very long distant relationship that only involves us keeping in touch once a year when we send out Christmas cards.”

“I suppose starting out as friends would be acceptable if that’s what it would take to make you comfortable,” Roland sighed not happy with the way things were turning out, “I will come by every day until you’ve changed your mind,” he grinned, eyes lighting up.

Ah, shit. Wrong turn, wrong turn, Mavis panicked.

“You know what? I’m starting to think friendship is a bad idea. I value our acquaintanceship too much to ruin it by taking things to the next level. You know what they say: familiarity breeds contempt. And the more I get to know you the more my contempt grows,” Mavis grinned back. She grabbed the man’s hand and started dragging him towards the front doors.

“If we aren’t getting married then what am I supposed to do?” Roland whined as Mavis had shoved him out the door.

“I heard Disney’s always looking for a new Prince Charming,” she grinned as she slammed the door in his face. Mavis rubbed her temples thinking of the hell she’d have to pay later for rejecting yet another man. She needed a nap. No, she needed a beer.

The desire for alcohol won out so she headed towards the kitchen. Once there she made a beeline for the fridge. She opened the door and found two six-packs of Mikes Lemonade. Black Cherry flavor. *There is a god!* She thought as she grabbed two bottles. Priscilla, her second oldest sister, must be visiting and stocked the fridge. Their aunt would never get such a lowly excuse for booze. Mavis popped the top off of one of the bottles and as she was about to take a sip someone behind her coughed. *Don’t look, don’t look.* She turned around and saw her aunt standing behind the counter in all her Old Southern glory. The woman was dressed in peach. Peach skirt, peach blouse, peach shoes. Even her heavily applied makeup was peach. Not a good color for an elderly woman. However, every piece of jewelry was old, gold, and gaudy. It’s only purpose to show off the wealth of the owner. There wasn’t a gray strand out of place in her hair that was piled high and bound on her head.

The wrinkles in her forehead deepened as she frowned at the bottle in Mavis’s hand. “Well? Where is he?”

“He who?” Mavis asked innocently, fluttering her eyelashes.

“Roland Beaumont. The man who *will* be your fiancé,” Aunt Dolores huffed, crossing her bony arms.

“Oh, him. He said something about doing more with his life. You know like ending world hunger, entering the Peace Corps, saving kittens from trees...”

“This is quite enough, Mavis Louise Ashby. You will go back to that young man on your hands and knees and beg him to forgive your rudeness and to continue with the engagement,” her aunt demanded with flashing blue eyes.

Mavis sighed. There wasn’t enough booze in the world let alone the fridge to deal with this right now. “Auntie, I don’t really want to talk about this right now,” she said turning to leave through the back kitchen door, “And, despite what we talk about, I’m not getting married.”

“You are twenty-one years old and single. It is high time you found someone to settle down with

and have children,” Dolores huffed.

“Come on, Auntie. I understand potentially having this conversation when I’m thirty. But at twenty-one? That’s like telling a two year old they’d better start applying to college,” Mavis complained, taking a swig from her bottle.

“I have been lenient with you. More lenient than with any of your sisters. I expect cooperation in return,” Dolores demanded, snatching the bottle from Mavis’s hand.

“Hey –” Mavis protested, trying to grab the bottle back.

“Enough. I let you have your circle of ruffian friends. I let you have your part-time jobs. I let you attend college. But not anymore.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” Dolores smirked. “I will not pay next semester’s tuition if you do not continue with the engagement I have set up.”

“You can’t do that!” Mavis yelled.

“Yes I can. It’s my money.”

“Then I’ll use the money mom and dad left for me,” Mavis said.

“You are only allotted that money when you turn twenty-five or if I deem you responsible enough to receive it. Which do you think will come first?” Dolores asked, crossing her arms.

“You’re a crazy old bitch!” Mavis shrieked as she ran out the back door. She dashed into the back yard, following the paths to the back of the garden. The sun had set and the little lanterns on the ground lit her way around the winding stones. After what felt like running for an eternity Mavis stopped to catch her breath. She reached out, her fingers touching something cold, and realized it was one of the stone pillars that marked the entrance to her family’s mausoleum. They were covered in vines of ivy and cracks that spoke volumes of the cemetery’s age. She heard footsteps behind her. *Probably from one of the staff ordered to haul my ass back*, she contemplated as she bolted into the plot. Her high-heeled sandals sunk deep into the soft earth and caused her to fall flat on her face. A crow cackled at her from a low hanging branch from above her head. *I should have known this day was going to get worse*, she thought as she kicked off her shoes and dashed barefoot past headstones and statues, her dress fanning out behind her.

Mavis skidded to a halt in front of one of the larger crypts, her long hair swirling around her. She paused as she eyed the likeness of the Grim Reaper that rested above the grated doors of the crypt. She heard more footsteps behind her, decided to get cozy with the dead people, and slipped inside. *I should have just said yes*, Mavis thought angrily, shutting the doors. *So what if he was a creep? I’d rather be stuck with a creep than stuck in a crypt*. Had she’d known that little exchange was going to land her here of all places she would have just said “I do.” Now she was surrounded by dead people on a Friday night. Proof that bad things came in three’s. Whoever it was got closer until they stopped in front of the crypt. A shadow passed through the grates in the door. Mavis held her breath.

“Do you think she could be in there?” asked someone.

“No way. No one’s allowed in there. It’s always locked,” another answered.

“Let’s look over there.”

The voices receded and she let out a relieved sigh. Moonlight passed through the windows and rested on the rows of caskets that were placed in the wall. She noticed a single red rose resting on a stone table at the end of the room. Mavis walked toward it, picked it up, and twirled it. While roses were cliché they were her favorite.

“Don’t touch that!” yelled a voice from behind her.

She twirled around but didn’t see anyone. “Holy shit. I’m losing it. It must be because I’m in a graveyard,” Mavis said to herself.

“Oh, sure. Blame the graveyard. It couldn’t be because you’re already crazy,” grumbled the voice.

Mavis looked about the room. There was no one but her. Anyone alive that is. It wasn’t until she noticed one of the coffin lids had been shifted to the side and a pair of yellow eyes looking at her.

“Oh my God!” Mavis screamed and fell backwards.

“Oh, shut up,” said the eyes rolling.

“What...is...you...are,” Mavis sputtered, unable to get a grip.

“If you keep making noise they’ll come back, you know. Whoever they are.” There was a moment of awkward silence. “Unless you want them to come back. I can’t imagine why since you went to all that trouble to hide,” the eyes chastised, peering at her curiously. Mavis shook her head slowly.

“Didn’t think so,” the eyes stated. Mavis heard grating sounds and the top lid of the coffin toppled to the ground creating an earth shattering racket. A skeletal hand emerged and grabbed the edge of the box accompanied by grunting sounds as the corpse hauled itself out.

It wasn’t much taller than Mavis. The clothing that covered its deteriorating frame included a pair of buckled shoes, leggings, black pants that bunched at the knee, a brown vest, and a white shirt with puffy sleeves that billowed when it moved. However, the face is what kept her attention. Time had not been good to this creature. The skull was akin to a dried apple, the skin pulled taut. The thing had no lips, eyebrows, or nostrils and the eyeballs rolled around in their sockets with no ligaments to hold them.

“What *are* you staring at?” the corpse asked adjusting its vest.

“You,” Mavis answered. “Who else would I be staring at?”

“Well it’s rude,” the thing said indignant.

“I’m sorry?”

“Apology not accepted.”

Mavis bristled. “And you think I’m rude? Fuck you.”

The corpse chuckled. “It’s no wonder your aunt doesn’t like you. Too much of a spit fire.”

“How do you know my aunt doesn’t like me?”

“I have friends in high places,” the corpse said gesturing to the window. A crow cawed at them from its perch.

“Is that the crow from...?” Mavis asked pointing to the window.

“When you fell?” the creature filled in. “Yes.”

Mavis shook her head. “I’m so confused. First off, how can you walk and talk? And second, who are you?”

The corpse looked at her, trying to figure out the best way to answer. “My name is Thomas Filch. I was a stable hand at the mansion.”

“Stable hand? Then why were you buried in my family’s plot?” Mavis asked skeptically.

“Servants were buried on the premises, you idiot. Especially those who didn’t have any relatives, like me,” Thomas said glaring at her.

“Oh.”

“As for why I can walk and talk, that’s a long story,” he muttered taking a seat on the ground. The crow fluttered to his shoulder and he stroked its feathers. “Well sit down. This is a long story,” he said throwing his arms up.

“Okay, okay. Jeez,” Mavis said settling against the wall on the opposite side of the crypt.

Thomas shrugged unconcerned. “I was employed here when I was about ten years old,” he began. “My family’s farm had been devastated by the war between the North and South. Both my mother and father took ill and died, leaving me alone. Amos Ashby, the owner of Ashby Hall at that time, found me collapsed on the side of the road. He took me back to the manor, cleaned me up, and gave me a job.”

“Well, that’s really sad. But what does that have to do with you being undead?”

“I’m getting there. Haven’t you ever heard of narrative progression?” Thomas growled.

“Alright. Sorry,” Mavis said.

“Amos Ashby had a daughter,” he continued.

“They always do,” Mavis rolled her eyes.

“Shut up. As I was saying, Ashby had a daughter. Her name was Celia and she was the prettiest thing on this side of the Mississippi. Golden hair, cornflower blue eyes, beautiful singing voice...”

Mavis watched him. “Do you need a moment?” she smirked.

Thomas glared at her. “It’s no wonder your aunt has to go find you men to marry. No one in their right mind would want to marry a shrew like you.”

“Hey! I don’t know why you’re so hung up on her anyway. She sounds just like any other run of the mill Southern Belle,” she said indignantly.

“Now I was just a stable boy and she was the daughter of the head of the mansion,” he continued ignoring her. “While it makes for good trashy romance novels, it wasn’t in the cards. When we were teens a boy named Billy Thornton called on her quite regularly. Needless to say I was distraught. So I did the only thing I could think of.”

“What was that?”

“I asked her to marry me.”

Mavis giggled. “Oh? And what did she say to that?”

“She laughed and slammed the front door in my face,” Thomas chuckled. “But I didn’t care. All I knew was that she was my world,” he sighed. “So I hatched another plan. I went down to the local witchdoctor. He lived deep in the swamp and I about died on the way there. Anyway he gave me magic words to say over a rhododendron –”

“If he said ooh-ee-ooh-ah-ah-ting-tang-walla-walla-bing-bang I’m out of here,” Mavis said crossing her arms.

“You are just so caustic. The chant went:

‘Of low birth he may be,

Stable boy whose love may never see

A girl so pretty.

By the power vested in me

Let neither rest until he marries the daughter of Ashby.”

“That sounds corny,” Mavis complained. “I could think of something better than that.”

“Well, it was pretty effective for being corny,” Thomas said eyeing her. “I gave her the flower and she fell head over heels in love with me. It took me forever to convince her father to agree. But after two years he gave his consent. I was ecstatic...”

“But?” Mavis prodded.

“She came down with the pox and died rather quickly,” he sighed. “I was so distraught that I hung myself from the rafters of the stable. I guess they put me in here afterwards. It was quite a shock to wake up in a box.”

“Wait, you woke up in a box?” Mavis asked confused.

“Yes. My own grave. Of course I was somewhat disoriented so I wasn’t aware. And when I walked back to the mansion it caused quite a commotion.”

“I’ll bet,” Mavis snorted.

“They shot me three times. Scared the hell out of them when I didn’t go down. Then they brought out the torches and pitchforks. So I ran into the woods to hide and eventually made my way back to the tomb. The next night the shaman came by and told me of his mistake. Apparently ‘Let neither rest until he marries the daughter of Ashby’ was taken literally by his buddies on the other side. That’s what I get for hiring an amateur. So now I’m stuck here and I’m allowed to walk and talk. Until the day I marry an Ashby,” Thomas finished looking at his crow.

“Wow. That’s a bad day. Doesn’t it get lonely?” Mavis asked quietly.

“I have this guy,” Thomas said pointing at his crow. “He gives me updates whenever I wake up on all the things that go on in the world.” He paused. “Do women really wear pants?”

The innocent question made Mavis laugh. “Yes, they wear pants.” She paused. “Men wear skirts too.”

“Really?” he asked perplexed. “How do you differentiate between the sexes?”

Mavis giggled. “Sometimes it’s hard. My friend Delany was dating her boyfriend for three months before she realized he was a she. She didn’t care though and now they’re getting married this May.”

“Hmm...” There was a moment of silence as Thomas looked out the window and Mavis was content to watch him. Then she perked up.

“I have an idea,” she said smiling.

Mavis barged through the doors of Ashby Hall. “Miss Mavis, where have you been?” Hénry demanded.

“Stuff it, you old goat,” she said as she swept passed him and headed toward the dining room.

Her aunt was finishing dinner when Mavis entered.

“Mavis, where on earth did you go?” Dolores demanded.

“Around,” Mavis said as she took a seat across from her aunt.

“Well, I hope you took the time to think about what I said,” Dolores said wiping her face on a napkin.

“I have actually. And I’d like to discuss it more in depth. Let’s take a walk,” Mavis smiled and grabbed her aunt’s hand.

“Walk where?” Dolores asked perplexed.

“You’ll see.”

“I hardly think this is the place to talk Mavis Louise,” Dolores said hugging herself as she looked about the grave yard.

“It’s not as bad as you think, Auntie,” Mavis said as she opened the door to the crypt. “The dead are a real scream.”

“That’s not funny and I’m not going in there,” Dolores said panicking now.

“It’s fine Auntie. Just a quiet place to chat,” Mavis said grabbing her aunt’s hand and pulling her through the door.

Mavis looked around the room. Thomas wasn’t anywhere to be seen. *Good*. “Auntie, I was thinking about what you said about the whole marriage thing,” Mavis continued. “And while I was thinking it over I was wondering why *you* never married.”

Dolores sputtered. “I hardly think this is the time to be discussing my affairs, Mavis Louise.”

“I just found it curious. I mean, if you wanted kids so badly you could have gone out and found someone to help you out regardless if you were married or not,” Mavis said as she walked toward the table with the rose.

“What a thing to say,” Dolores huffed affronted.

Mavis pushed the mechanism that Thomas showed her earlier and stepped back. The table moved back into the wall to reveal a staircase leading into the ground. Her aunt gasped. “What on earth is that?” her aunt panicked backing away.

Mavis lunged and grabbed her again. “We’re going to have that chat, Auntie,” she said as she shoved her aunt down the stairs. The top closed and everything went dark until their eyes adjusted to the light of a single candle sitting on an altar in the middle of the room.

“You had best tell me what’s going on now, Mavis Louise Ashby,” Dolores demanded. Thomas picked that time to come out from the shadows of the altar. Dolores shrieked. “What is that thing?” she screamed.

“This is Thomas. He’s going to be your fiancé,” Mavis grinned.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, it’s like this, Auntie. Thomas has a little problem. When he was alive he liked one of our ancestors so he asked a shaman to whip up some mojo for him to get her to be his. Good news is it worked. Bad news is she died before they got married, and now he’s prevented from truly dying. Until he marries an Ashby girl, that is.”

Dolores looked like she was about to faint. When Thomas came closer she shrieked. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” he asked, eyeing Dolores.

“Sure it is,” Mavis whispered. “You get eternal rest and my aunt lays off the marriage thing for the rest of my life.”

“I can’t believe it,” Dolores muttered. “I can’t believe you were down here this whole time. I would have given anything to get my hands on you and strangle you myself for what you did to me!” she yelled as she lunged for Thomas.

“Auntie! What are you doing?” Mavis asked.

“After you gave me that flower I started feeling strange. I felt hazy. Words came out of my mouth that I never meant. Every time you touched me I wanted to pull away but couldn’t. I woke up attending my own funeral!”

“Celia?” Thomas asked in shock.

“What?” Mavis asked in astonishment. “She couldn’t be. She looks nothing like a decaying body.”

“CoverGirl is a wonderful thing,” Dolores sniffed. “Regular baths in salt helped, too. Unfortunately that wasn’t enough. I had to use formaldehyde.”

“How were you able to live without anyone noticing?”

“After I woke up in my coffin my father quickly took me to my room. He thought that I had just gone into a coma due to the severity of my illness.” Dolores paused. “But when the doctor came to check on me he couldn’t find a pulse.” She glared at the corpse.

“How did you keep people from finding out?” Mavis asked. “It’s not like you hid in a cemetery like Thomas.”

“My father had to pay a huge stipend in order to keep that doctor quiet and had to fire all the staff. Only certain family members were allowed to know and I wasn’t allowed to go outside. Decades later when everyone forgot about Amos Ashby’s daughter, was I able to leave. I was wrinkled enough that no one would have recognized me. I introduced myself as a distant relative from Mississippi and changed my name. By then my brother had had several children and a good number of grandchildren. A right that was taken from me,” Dolores explained as she continued to glare at Thomas.

“We could have had a beautiful family, Celia,” Thomas said reaching for her.

“Like I would have ever married someone like you,” Dolores shrieked, slapping his hand away. “You had no family and worked in a stable. I was going to marry into the prosperous Thornton family. You should have seen the look on Billy’s face when I sent him away.”

“Hang on a sec,” Mavis moved in between them. “You’re saying that you’ve been dead for pretty much forever? And you’ve been pushing the whole get married and have lots of kids thing on me because you couldn’t have any?”

“I promised my brother on his deathbed to never let what happened to me happen to any of his children. I arranged each and every marriage to be sure nothing was left to chance.”

Someone coughed behind them. They turned to see the crow shuffling its feet. “I can’t help but feel this is my fault,” it said looking sheepish.

Dolores shrieked again. “Will someone get her to stop screaming?” it asked covering its ears.

“You can talk?” Mavis asked covering her aunt’s mouth with her hand.

“Yes. Luckily that skill wasn’t taken from me when that transformation spell backfired.”

“I’m guessing that you’re the shaman,” Mavis surmised.

“Yes,” it said as it hopped closer. “I was very confused when I couldn’t find your body after I found the spell had backfired. I looked everywhere for a private grave,” it said looking at Dolores who looked like she was going to really lose it.

“Thomas said all he had to do was marry someone from the Ashby line. It didn’t have to be Celia,” Mavis said confused.

The crow coughed again. “Well, I might have fibbed a little.”

“Excuse me?” Thomas asked indignantly.

“I didn’t want you to get even more upset. If you found out that we needed her specifically,” he said gesturing to Dolores, “I knew you’d go on a rampage to find her and I couldn’t have you scaring the locals.”

“So, all we need to do is pronounce these two newly-deads and the spell will be broken?” Mavis asked.

“Yep,” said the crow. Then he paused. “At least that’s what *should* happen. This whole situation has been full of shoulds that haven’t happened.”

“What are we waiting for then?” Mavis demanded. “Auntie, you should totally...Auntie?” Mavis looked about the room. There was no sign of her aunt. “Ah, shit.”

She booked it up the stairs after her aunt. Mavis caught sight of Dolores running out the door into the cemetery. “For a dead person, she runs fast,” Mavis gasped as she took off again after her aunt. She was able to tackle and pin her aunt just inside the entrance of the graveyard. “Just...put...this...on,” Mavis gasped, pulling a ring out of her pocket and trying to place it on Dolores’s finger.

“Not on your life, Mavis Louise Ashby,” Dolores screamed, clawing at her niece’s face. Thomas and his crow came running up to the pair. The crow pecked at Dolores’s face. Thomas hauled her up

from the ground and pinned Dolores's arms behind her. "Celia, is the thought of marrying me that horrendous?" he asked.

Dolores blew a piece of hair out of her face. "I'll never marry you," she hissed.

"Get to it, already," Mavis snapped at the crow.

"Oh, yeah," it said. He cleared his throat before reciting, "Do you, Thomas Filch, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do," Thomas grunted as Dolores elbowed him in the stomach.

"Very good. Do you, Celia Ashby, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I would nev—" Dolores started before her niece slapped a hand across her mouth.

"—ver be more honored," Mavis finished for her.

"Will you please present the rings?" the crow asked Mavis.

Mavis shoved the band onto Dolores's finger and handed Thomas his.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," he finished.

There was a rumbling sound as the earth shook. Roots of an enormous oak tree slithered out from the ground and wound their way around Thomas and Dolores. Mavis covered her face from the barrage of splinters as the roots rushed back into the ground, pulling the two corpses back in to the earth.

"Until death do you part," Mavis said as she collapsed to the ground.

FATE'S DESIGN

Christie Munson

Casey Pierce walks through the cereal aisle in a grocery store. Selecting a box of Raisin Bran, she turns and notices a child sitting in the front seat of a shopping cart. He's licking a red lollipop that is almost the size of his face, while tugging on his mother's sleeve to try and get her attention. His mother is busy talking on her phone, completely ignoring her son's pleas to buy him an overly sugary cereal with a goofy cartoon on the box. Casey starts to move toward the front of the store, but is almost run over by a man. He's middle-aged, with round spectacles resting on the tip of his nose.

He apologizes, "Excuse me, miss, I wasn't watching where I was going."

She smiles at him, "It's fine, I'm sorry!"

Heading toward the checkout, Casey goes through her list. *Let's see, cereal, milk, peanut butter, jelly, bread. That should do for now. Living on my own isn't so bad! I'm doing pretty well for myself. Although I do miss Mom's homemade lasagna.* Casey's thoughts are interrupted when a loud bang sounds behind her. The sound came from the door slamming against the wall after someone had thrown it open. Startled, she turns to see a very tall man wearing a ski mask. "THIS IS A ROBBERY!" He raises his right hand to reveal a gun, and fires a shot into the ceiling. He seems surprised by the knock-back, but wanting to gain control, he quickly advances toward Casey. So taken aback, she hesitates a moment too long. Just as she drops her basket and turns around to run, the robber grabs her by the collar. He pulls her close to him in a chokehold, with the barrel of the gun pressed against her temple. The metal of the gun felt warm after having just been fired. Tears form in Casey's eyes as he drags her closer to the cashier, who has a wide-eyed, deer-in-the-headlights expression. His shaking hands were raised, giving the impression of antlers and furthering the idea of him being a deer ready for slaughter. Casey felt the robber's nervousness through his unsteady hold on the gun. He kept flexing and retracting his trigger finger. When the robber speaks again, his voice isn't as confident as when he first bursted into the store, "G-give me all the m-money you have or I swear, I'll shoot!" The cashier slowly lowers his arms to open the register. "Don't even think of tryin' anything funn-" the rest of the robber's sentence is cut off as he accidentally pulls the trigger. Screams are heard all throughout the store, and Casey's body drops to the floor.

Casey bolts upright in bed with a loud exhale of breath. "Holy shit!" she says aloud as she feels around her head for blood or bullet punctures. She sighs once reality kicks in and reminds her that she's in her room, in bed. It was only a dream. *A very scary, very realistic dream.* She throws off her covers and plants her bare feet on the cold, wooden floor. She gets up and walks the ten paces across her small apartment to get to the bathroom. Trying to shake off her nerves, she splashes water onto her face and lets the faucet run. She scolds herself, *Get a hold of yourself, Casey. Next, you'll have yourself afraid of closet monsters and goblins under the bed.* Leaning against the sink and glancing at the mirror, she smirks at how silly she's being. She turns off the faucet and heads back to bed. It takes her a while to get back to sleep, and when she does it's restless.

The next morning, Casey wakes up feeling groggy. She yawns and lazily stretches her arms. Her eyes widen when she remembers her nightmare. She tries to push it out of her head as she gets ready for the day. In the kitchen, which is really just a stove, sink, and fridge with the smallest counter imaginable all stuffed into a corner, Casey prepares breakfast. She begins to pour some Raisin Bran into a bowl, but comes up short when not much more than crumbs tumble from the box. *Oh, great,* she thinks as she opens the fridge, *and look, no milk, either.* She forgot that she actually had planned to go grocery shopping today. Anxiety creeps up on her; she's still haunted by the dream. In a strange way, it almost felt like a premonition. *You know what? No. You can't get out of doing things just because of a stupid dream. You're an adult, so act like one.* The self-degrading pep talk is enough to persuade Casey to walk downtown to the store.

She ends up at her usual place, Roger's Market, although the second 'r' in the sign has long since fallen off. Now it advertises "Roge 's Market." As Casey goes through the aisles she practically laughs at herself. *I can't believe I almost let that dream stop me from buying food to sustain myself, as if I even had a choice.* She drops a jar of peanut butter into her basket. *Casey Pierce: Certified Badass. She's able to go shopping like a normal human being.* She rounds the corner and stops dead in her tracks. Further down the aisle—the cereal aisle—she sees a mother and child. She watches the scene unfold: kid sitting in a cart, huge red lollipop, mother yapping on the phone. *No way, this isn't happening.*

Casey rushes down the aisle and smacks into someone. “Excuse me, miss, I wasn't watching where I was going,” the bespectacled man from the dream makes an appearance. Casey is only able to give him a nervous smile and spit out something that sounds a little like “sorry.” *I have to get out of here before I have a panic attack!* She almost heads for the exit, but thinks better of it. Instead, she quickly goes toward the back of the store.

Shortly after, she hears the “BANG!” of the door. Her blood runs cold. Wide-eyed, Casey mouths the words along with the robber, as if it were a script she memorized, “This is a robbery!” *Oh, no. Oh, shit shit shit. Uh-uh, nope. I'm dreaming again, right?* She peeks around the corner of the aisle. The tall man in the ski mask advances to the cashier. He doesn't have a hostage within reach this time. He points the gun directly at the cashier. He delivers his next line, “G-give me all the m-money you have or I swear, I'll shoot your s-sorry ass!” Colorful language this time, but he still looks trigger happy with his finger spasms. Lowering his hands to the register, the cashier must have twitched in just the wrong way in order to make the gunman feel threatened. BAM! The gun is fired. Casey puts her hand to her mouth to stifle a cry and quickly hides back behind the aisle just as she witnesses the blood spraying from the cashier's head and his body falling to the floor.

From the storefront, Casey can hear the killer lamenting to himself, “Oh, God. Oh, shit.” He continues to mumble as he races to the exit and turns right down the street. The store's patrons start to convene. The mother clutches her crying child as she phones the police. The bespectacled man yells for someone named Laura. Casey's head is spinning, *I have to leave. I can't be here.* She stumbles out of the store and onto the sidewalk. Making sure to go the opposite way of the killer, she takes a left. Dazed, she fishes her phone from her pocket and calls her mom. *C'mon, pick up!* After the fourth ring, she does.

“Hey, Hon-”

“MOM! Mom, I had a dream and it came true! But it wasn't a dream, it was a nightmare. And I died, but this time someone else died. It actually happened. He's dead. It's all my fault, it was supposed to me! I should be dead right now. WHAT DO I DO?”

Casey's mom tries to calm her down so she can figure out what was making her daughter so frantic. But Casey won't listen; she can't listen. Her mind is a beehive. Thoughts, concerns, worries, doubts. They're all buzzing around, forming one loud hum that keeps growing. She quickly takes a turn down the next street. A man on a bicycle almost collides into her, “watch where you're going!” he shouts. Casey doesn't hear him. She's vaguely aware of her mother's growing concern as she turns street corners in a desperate attempt to find her way home.

“Honey, I think you need to take a deep breath. I'm sure everything will be fine, you just need to give yourself time to stop and think.”

Her mother's words do not register. Casey starts to run. She notices the green traffic light, but does not consider the consequences. *I have to get out of here,* her mind insists. In her blind sprint, she crosses the street, just in time to hear a blaring horn and the screeching of brakes.

THE WOODS

Samantha Schlegel

The sky was clear, the moon lighting the only path that twisted through the trees. The crickets were chirping while an owl hooted in the distance. The wind blew, whistling its way through the trees, sharp and cold. I pulled my jacket closer around me, silently cursing my friend who led the way in front of me. Our feet crunched over the dead leaves laying on the ground as we moved further into the woods. I could be in my bedroom right now, wrapped up in a blanket and enjoying a good book. Instead, I was being dragged out here to some party in the middle of the woods. I'm all for parties but I preferred them to be indoors and not in the middle of the creepy woods.

"I can hear you pouting from up here! Stop being so pessimistic," Carissa called over her shoulder. I rolled my eyes at her back. Sometimes I couldn't take her overly happy and bubbly personality. She was, what some people would call, the life of the party. If there was one happening within a twenty mile radius you could probably bet on her being there, and generally with me in tow. "We're not going to let a little cold weather stop us from having some fun. It's a Friday night, after all," she said as she stopped and turned to me.

I looked around nervously at all of the trees, which were just bare skeletons. The season had claimed their leaves. I couldn't see the fire that signaled the party was close. "Having fun is great and all, but do you even know where you're going? We've been walking for forever and I have yet to even hear music or see a fire."

She rolled her eyes at me, "Oh my God, Olivia, stop worrying so much. I know exactly where we're going." She flipped her long blonde hair over her shoulder and continued forward. I glared at her and followed, praying that the night would just be over already. A snap of a stick to our left caught my attention and I stopped to peer into the darkness. I couldn't see anything but the hairs on the back of my neck were standing on end. "Olivia! Let's go!" Carissa called from a few feet up the path. With one more glance I hurried my way towards her.

We walked for another ten minutes without coming across so much as a rabbit running through the trees. I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched since the stick incident had occurred. If I wasn't afraid of being attacked by a serial killer, I probably would have turned around and left her dumb ass out here on her own. "Look Carissa, I'm highly doubting your directional skills and I just want to go home. There will be more parties that aren't in the middle of the woods." I cast an anxious glance over my shoulder, a wave of irritation flowing through me. This time Carissa didn't reply. I turned back, prepared to yell at her, but I came up short when I realized that Carissa was no longer in front of me. I turned a circle, yelling out her name. "Look, this isn't funny anymore! Carissa! I want to go home!" I yelled at the trees, but there was no reply. I began to back down the path that we had just come up. Something wasn't right.

Another stick cracked to my left and I turned quickly towards the sound. I couldn't see anything but I could hear leaves rustling. I backed against a tree, attempting to control my breathing. Where the hell had Carissa gone, and how had I lost her? I looked back towards the way we had come. I could possibly find my way back out, or I might get myself hopelessly lost. I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket, dialing Carissa's number. It cut right to her voicemail. Cursing her again, I called both of my parents, neither answered. They were probably fast asleep.

I suddenly realized that the rustling of leaves was no longer coming from in front of me. It was coming from behind the tree. I pressed against the tree and closed my eyes, trying to silence my heavy breathing. The sounds were too loud to be a rabbit, perhaps it was a bear and it would just leave me alone. The sounds came closer, the footsteps becoming clearer and clearer. No, it couldn't be a bear. It was something with two legs. "Carissa?" It came out as barely a whisper, but the footsteps stopped.

I opened my eyes slowly, feeling breath on my ear and then a whisper, "I have you now." Suddenly I was running back down the path, tripping over stones and branches as I went. The only thing I could think of was getting the hell out of these woods. I didn't even know where I was going but adrenaline and my flight response were carrying me away from whoever was back there. I was distinctly aware that there was a second set of footsteps to match mine and I could hear soft cackles growing louder. They were closing in. Was it Carissa playing a cruel joke on me? Or was she already dead and the person was coming for me next?

I could barely breathe but I knew I couldn't stop. I thought I could just distinguish the tree line

in front of me. With the small bit of relief it brought, it cleared my mind enough to realize that my steps were the only ones echoing off the trees. I slowed a bit, attempting to catch my breath but still jogging towards the trees. I would not be one of those idiots in the horror films who ended up dying anyway. I could hear the cars passing by on the road now. This was stupid, it definitely was a joke Carissa had planned. I was going to kill her when I talked to her next.

I was about twenty feet from the road when I stopped. I could just make out a dark figure standing between me and the road. Whoever it was raised a hand to wave at me. "Carissa, is that you? I hate you so much right now. Let's get the hell out of here." I started towards the figure, but it didn't move. "Carissa!" I called again, irritation plain in my voice. Then I saw the metallic gleam of something in the other hand of the figure and my breath caught. This wasn't a joke, and I was going to die. I turned to run but before I had a chance to even take a step a force hit me from behind and sent me sprawling across the ground, sticks and rocks tearing at my skin. A hand closed around my ankle and a scream ripped from my mouth. I clawed at the ground as I was dragged backwards. "Leave me alone! You can't do this!" I yelled, kicking out with my free foot until it collided with something and I heard a soft grunt and my other foot was released.

I scrambled to my feet, attempting to locate the road once again but all I could see was darkness. I had no sense of direction and my confusion slowed me down. I felt a hand grab the back of my jacket and haul me off my feet, throwing me to the ground. Before I could kick or swing a fist she was on top of me, her blonde hair hanging out of the hood of her coat. I could see her smiling and she laughed softly. "Finally, I have my revenge." The moon glinted off of the blade as it swung through the air and I screamed.

I sat straight up in my bed, gasping for breath and sweating. I looked around wildly. I was safe in my bed with my laptop open next to me. A glance at my clock told me it was only 9 P.M. I took a deep breath and ran a hand through my hair. I must have fallen asleep while catching up on my favorite TV show. I picked up my cell phone, seeing that I had a text from Carissa. 'Party in the woods, you up for it?'

A NEVER ENDING
DREAM

Caroline Wilson

Waking in the midst of an endless whimsical reverie wasn't at all as refreshing as it may have been, knowing today was the day where sorrow lingered, because a dear friend and angel has moved away. This dear friend of mine's name is Rosie Magee, and like the famous Dutch and German comedian Kristen Schaal, she easily reminded me of her sweet nectar demeanor and witty, charming ways. She was more than just this bubbly Irish woman full of spirit and vigor, she was the Chaplain of Wilson College who will always capture the hearts and lives of many. Little does she know how distraught I truly am for her departure back near her home country Scotland, Iona, (close by to Northern Ireland [330 miles away]—her homeland) where she left me and many other's behind. It's as if she has vanished through crystal thin air, and I only long for her to reappear once more to say goodbye. I certainly won't forget her blessing of a smile or her amusing, gleeful cachinnation. She simply was a being from out of this world, divine in every sense of the word.

Yawning, I stumbled awake. It was a cold, brisk, and hazy morning. Nothing seemed right with the world because the one person who mattered most to me was gone. Struggling to see the good in all of this frustration, the only thing I could think of was, "well, at least she's back at her homeland; the land she's most fond of and where they need her most." And at that very thought, I felt chills run down my spine as I decided to get up to get primped for the day.

"So what if Rosie is gone?" I thought to myself while staring into my hamster's cobalt blue cage. "That doesn't necessarily mean I can't still have fun with being a Curran scholar or while doing other school activities because now everything can be done in her memory!" I sighed with a breath of relief. I kept telling myself over and over that everything was going to be "A-Okay" and it would be. Getting a hold of myself and gathering my thoughts, I quickly got dressed and applied makeup, then left for class within mere minutes, taking my book bag in one hand and a cup of steaming hot green tea in the other. Nothing could ruin this day except more cascading, trickling negative thoughts. But like the positive and optimistic person that I am, I refused to let that shatter me, protruding my very soul. Rosie was still here and her presence remained in my heart, mind, and soul.

Later that day, I tumbled back into bed exhausted. Feeling the weight of the world come down on my shoulders, I had trouble getting a hold of myself. Rosie really was gone and realizing this every waking minute, if not second, of the day was really taking its toll on me. Sure, she may be off someplace else, but I need to stay strong and happy for her (and I was happy deep down in my heart)! Waking up from the depths of a cold reality was painstaking and even worse, a nightmare. But I reassured myself that no matter how awful this profound dream may seem, it was only a dream. A never ending (nightmare-like) dream.

As I collected my dusty, ragged thoughts that were scattering all around me, I realized that what Rosie left me with was the gift of wisdom and kindness, for she gave them to me from the moment we first met. Remembering Rosie was like a blissful daydream. She gave unto me and many others these potent and exponential gifts such as wisdom, courage, faith, and kindness. I was just so grateful for having such a celestial being in my life. Sometimes I wondered what I would do without her spiritual being and cherub self.

I remembered moments in time, fragments, really, of what felt like ages and moons of gracious time spent with her. Every moment was more captivating than the last. For instance, when we first met, she had the most charming beam of a smile and the accent to accompany it. She was gentle and kind and full of this admirable, breathtaking energy like a divine messenger from God whose chakra points were all in line and in unification—to create this magnificently radiant hominid. She helped all of those in need and better yet, taught her Curran scholars the ways of giving thanks and praise.

Many road trips spent with her going to Carlisle to help those in need at food pantries such as Project Share were honestly the best thing that has ever happened to me. Because of Rosie, I was able to fight my inner demons and retrieve sanity when it felt like all was lost. Other times, she was like a caring, listening mother who understood my pains and frustrations. Not only was she there for me to listen when I needed her most, but she was also very benevolent and altruistic in every way, shape, and form. Her advice struck me like a heart of gold. She was compassionate and more notably caring than most other beings I have ever had the blessing to encounter.

What Rosie was to me, and probably to many other people, was a Saint full of the wisdom of an

aging owl, one that has lived for over a thousand years. Waking from this slumber of a daydream was depleting and draining. I may miss her spirit and vision of the world, but at least I know now in all my heart and chasmal soul that she will always remain a Wilson Chaplain and laudable living being. She may be on the other side of the world but her fiery ardor carries on.

STOLEN KISSES

Darah Wolf

1. Michael

We sat in the corner of the sandbox, hidden by the shadow of the tall red brick walls that stood behind us. The Florida sun beat down on our foreheads as we laid our heads on a black garbage bag full of sandbox toys, our backs on the dirty white sand.

“How was your day at work, dear?” I asked, turning my head upon what felt like a plastic sand bucket underneath the sticky garbage bag so that he and I were face to face.

“Good. Busy,” my kindergarten classmate, Michael, responded, following up with a tight-lipped peck on my lips. We knew we weren’t really supposed to kiss, but children tend to imitate their parents’ behavior. If our parents did it, why couldn’t we?

When we played house, Michael was the dad and I was the mom. He would pretend to come home from work and walk through the imaginary front door of our elementary school sandbox and say, “Okay, let’s go to bed!” So we made our way to the bag of toys that no one ever played with, not caring about the sand we got all over our clothes, and we’d lie there under that hot sun, kissing in the corner of the sandbox.

2. Kevin

I had butterflies in my stomach when I saw Kevin sitting on the curb in front of the theater, his dark hair cupping his head in a bowl cut, his glasses reflecting what little sunlight escaped from between the gray Wisconsin clouds. Maggie, my seventh-grade best friend, and I ducked our way out of my mom’s two-door Cavalier and slowly made our way toward Kevin and his friend Brian, Maggie’s boyfriend.

“But what do I do if he doesn’t kiss me or even want to?” I asked her, looking up at my friend through the glasses that covered half of my face as we walked through the parking lot. Maggie had always been the prettier one of us, standing 5’5”, with dirty blond hair and big green eyes. Because of her experience with so many boys and the fact that she was one of the only girls in seventh grade with boobs, I always looked to her for boy advice.

“Don’t worry. In the middle of the movie you lean forward and tell Brian to kiss me if he hasn’t yet, and then I’ll lean behind you and tell Kevin to kiss you,” she responded. I looked back toward Kevin and smiled as he stood up to take my hand and lead me into the movie theater.

The tickets for *Virus* had been bought, snacks had been distributed, seats had been carefully chosen to help us carry out our plan, and the middle of the movie was slowly creeping up on me. I saw Maggie getting ready to lean over to say something in my ear. Jamie Lee Curtis was becoming suspicious of some kind of robot force killing people on her spaceship and I was dreading what Maggie was planning to say to me. She leaned over and whispered,

“Ready? Okay, go.”

Quickly, I moved forward to whisper to Brian on the other side of Maggie, “Hey, you should kiss Maggie.” And I felt Maggie’s hand on my back as she leaned over to Kevin to tell him to kiss me. As soon as I sat back, stiff in my chair, I looked sideways at Kevin and realized he was staring at me. I turned my head, looked down at his smooth lips, sucked up my courage, and planted a big wet kiss on his lips. My first real kiss was far from perfect, and I was glad when it was over. After a quick moment, I sat back in my seat, knowing that Kevin was still looking at me. I pretended to be interested in the movie while my heart fluttered frantically.

3. Matt

I had always been a little grossed out when I saw movies of people French kissing. Maybe I was being a typical thirteen-year-old or maybe my knowledge of normal sexual behavior wasn’t up to par. Wouldn’t you get spit all over your face? What if one of you accidentally drooled? And how did you get your faces not to look so weird when it seemed as if people were trying to swallow each other’s heads? It was a mystery to me, but one that was solved when I met Matt in eighth grade.

Maggie, once again, was two steps ahead of me in the dating game. While Matt and I sat on his tacky yellow couch covered in brown and purple flowers, Maggie straddled her boyfriend, Tucker, in a nearby brown corduroy recliner, making out with him. On one occasion, Maggie took a breather and turned around to look at Matt and me as we sat on the couch, his arm around my shoulders, me leaning against him, embracing my legs with my arms. She asked, “Why don’t you guys ever make out?” I was

mortified and instead of looking at Matt to hear his response, I stared back at the skateboard show we were watching on TV, feeling my face turn bright red.

A few weeks later, I found myself lying in a bottom bunk bed with Matt. My mom was working late that night, and Maggie and her boyfriend had claimed the top bunk. Matt just laid there as I played with his spiky black hair, neither of us really knowing what we were supposed to be doing. All we could hear was Maggie and Tucker making their uncomfortable and unattractive kissing noises as pieces of clothing dripped down the side of the bed. First a shirt, then another, then a bra. I panicked. I hoped that Matt wasn't expecting me to take off my bra, let alone my shirt, but I had to stop being chicken, I thought to myself. I had to prove to Maggie that I was as daring as she was. Matt might tell his friends that I was a boring girlfriend.

I shifted around to my side, halfway on top of Matt, leaning over his face. His eyes got big as I moved closer to him, his heart pounding beneath my body weight. I closed my eyes and moved my lips slowly toward his. He lay there, unmoving, and our lips met. A feeling of relief came over me as I made contact with the warm smoothness of his mouth, but I had to pause for a moment. What do I do now? How do I start a French kiss? But it was only a brief moment later that Matt peeked his tongue out from between the fleshy cliffs of his face and brushed my upper lip with a cold wetness. Slowly I let my lips part and allowed his tongue access to my mouth. I admit it was no Elizabeth-Taylor-meets-Richard-Burton-kiss as we moved our heads from side to side, but luckily we didn't drool all over each other.

4. Josh

It had already been an awkward evening, especially the part where my date, Josh, decided to sit on the other side of the room from me while we watched a movie in his dark basement. My friends had pushed me into going on a date with him and while he was cute with his dark brown hair, killer tan, and little rectangle glasses, the only thing that really intrigued me about him was his artwork.

He drove me back to my house in his green Jetta as soon as the movie was over. I was tired, I told him. It was my first real date since moving to a different school, so I didn't know what expectations the boys in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania had for first dates. He parked in my driveway, which was surprising because I had always just been dropped off in front of my house. But Josh was a gentleman and said that he would walk me to my door. As nicely as possible I said, "You don't have to. I'm going through the garage door anyway." It was only a few extra feet from where we stood, and I knew that I wouldn't to go on another date with Josh. He just wasn't my type, but I didn't want to be rude and just leave him standing out in the cold with a casual goodbye, so I stepped toward him and gave him a hug, but when I pulled back to look up into his face to thank him, my arms still wrapped around his waist, he leaned down and gave me a quick peck on the lips.

I was surprised. Josh quickly tried to make up for his apparently unwelcome move by giving me a hug, but the hug never quite made it to a comfortable embrace. Instead, his left cheek glued itself to my right cheek and we just stayed there, wrapped in an awkward hug, with our faces pressed against each other's. After our embarrassing interaction, I waved goodbye as I stepped inside my house.

5. Taylor

I had just fallen off the couch in my drunken stupor. My friend Sara was pissed at me because I'd knocked over a bottle of beer on my way down and it spilled onto her white carpet.

"Just use bleach," I slurred. Sara's parents had gone out of town for the weekend, so she'd decided to have a little get-together at her house. It was the first time I had been drunk without my parents' supervision and I was obviously not handling it very well.

"All right, Darah, why don't we just go in the other room," said Taylor, a guy I was casually seeing at the time. While Sara continued to complain about the mess, Taylor picked me up from the floor and carried me into another room. He sat on the couch with me across his lap. I felt like a small child, a drunk small child actually, and he let me rest my head on his shoulder. I remember his curly brown hair smelled like pot.

I was so excited to be lying in his arms. He looked down at my face; my eyes slit from the drowsy effects of alcohol, leaned his head forward, and gave me a kiss. I could only lie there because intoxication had relaxed my body completely. I couldn't even return his kiss. I licked my lips and tried to lift up my head, but gravity had a way of pulling my head back down. I smiled, eyes halfway closed. He

laughed at me and propped my drooping head back onto his shoulder.

“You’re so sweet,” I said and patted my hands against his whiskered cheeks, not knowing that I was slapping more than patting. Then I let them drop onto his chest as he held me while I slept.

6. Adam

We decided on Mystic River, a good choice because it wasn’t romantic or sexual so I had no reason to feel awkward. Adam sat next to me on the green couch in my basement, his arm around my neck and my head resting on his muscular shoulder. My pink shirt scooped under my neck and the occasional brush of his thumb against my clavicle sent a chill down my spine. I always felt comfortable in Adam’s company, but our intimacy was minimal. I wasn’t sure if I loved him enough to get that close to him. He got irritated by my lack of closeness, but I was already satisfied with our relationship. Why did I need more if I was already happy? We shared a few pecks on the lips once in a while, but that, holding hands, and my sitting on his lap every so often out in public was the extent of our physical contact.

So there we were, my head resting on his shoulder as I slowly fell asleep during the movie, feeling him move his fingers across my shoulder, up my neck and over my cheek. Adam had been waiting for this moment, but I dreaded allowing myself to become completely vulnerable to him. I opened my eyes and looked up at him. He flexed his neck and leaned forward to give me a kiss. I moved my head away before he made contact and continued to watch the movie. I couldn’t give him the kiss he’d been waiting for.

7. Jake

Every morning, I woke up to the Romanesque structure of his face. His broad forehead, sculpted jaw line, and sunlit cream skin filled me with a sense of happiness that I had never felt before. I didn’t want to ever be any farther from Jake than I was at the moment, leaning over his sleeping face, moving my hand through his mousy brown hair. I crossed my legs over his and nuzzled my cold feet between his socked ones; both of us underneath my white down comforter, then situated myself comfortably with my head against his bare chest to hear his heart beat.

Every kiss meant something. I kissed his eyelids and the graze of my lips whispered a soft “I love you” into his thoughts. I kissed his nose, then his chin, his forehead, and those kisses professed my love with every inch of my body with only the slightest contact of skin. And I thought to myself that all of those kisses, any boy before this one, never allowed me to indulge in the most romantic of moments because my moment was in this one. I looked at Jake, seeing that he was now awake, and I moved my head to the pillow and rested my face across from his. He looked at me with his blue eyes and smiled, and with a slight lift of my chin, we kissed. A real Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton kiss.

ACCIDENTAL
WOUNDS

Nicole Zuleger

Wound healing is a dynamic process. For the healing process to begin, there first has to be a wound. Purposeful and accidental wounds must be treated differently. A Purposeful wound, like a surgical incision or the random girl in the library calling me a bitch for being upset that she sexted my boyfriend, do not hold as big of a concern as accidental wounds. Those are the wounds caused by a car or a text or a word. They were never meant to cause so much harm, yet these are the killer wounds.

Almost immediately after a wound occurs it begins bleeding. The blood acts as a natural flushing agent to clean the affected area. The tears that rolled down my cheeks were my defense system's attempts to flush all emotions from my body. After every fight, every text telling me *I'm* a horrible friend and *I'm* the reason everything is going wrong and *I'm* never happy enough and how you're going to move or stop talking to me or kill yourself, I cried. My sobs were always silent, just as blood rolls from a wound without so much as a whisper. My tears had to remain quiet to prevent another lecture from my parents about our toxic friendship.

We were sitting in my room after the football game. Somehow we'd gone from my boyfriend issues to your family. "...she calls me fat and tells me she wishes she never had me...That I'm a disgrace and a mistake...She gave me this bruise because I got a C." I had never heard of a mother hating her child so much. I'd never thought much about divorce. I knew what abuse was, but never had one of my friends gone through it. I wanted to help, but what could I do? I was a kid a much as you were.

The first step of visible healing is the formation of a scab. The blood forms a clot that contracts and dehydrates to make a scab. This scab acts as a natural band aid to prevent infection from seeping in. If the scab reopens the wound begins to bleed and clot all over again. I would always think I was done crying. My tears had scabbed against my cheeks. I would take a deep breath and look at the phone I had shut off because I could not handle any more abuse. Then slowly, hesitantly, I would turn back on the wretched technology and the words would come flashing in like bullets. The tears would start to flow again as the scab was torn.

Debridement starts after a scab is formed. This is the act of white blood cells moving into the area and removing foreign material, bacterial infection, and necrotic tissue. We spent hours on the phone, trying in vain to work out our issues. This was after the texting. After the blows you dealt with your jagged words. I refused to let you hide behind your phone anymore and we would pick through our issues in person. You could hear the tears in my voice as we spoke. You had to see the blood that your harsh words spilled. And once we both had bled out our souls we tried to reform our friendship.

"No one would care if I died anyways."

"I would care. I would care so much. You can't just leave me."

"You'd be fine. You're better off without me anyways."

A wound begins to shrink after about a week and by three weeks it starts maturation and eventually fades away. This can take years. I still ache from the pain you caused me. I cannot trust my friends not to hurt me like you did. Every time they text me I start to think this must be it. This is the text that will start the abuse again and send me crawling into a corner for the rest of the night. This is the text that will tell me how horrible I am and how perfect they are. How I am a screw up and they are angels walking the earth. It never is that text though. They are not like you. They are not looking for a punching bag to release their anger. Despite my friend's good intentions, I am not through with the maturation stage. My wounds have lasting effects. It will be years after your assaults for me to trust that my friends truly love me. That they will not become my worst enemy in a blink of an eye as you did.

"I'm just sick of always hanging out with you. I want a break. You can't be seriously upset that I invited the others and not you. I'm allowed to do things without you!"

My hands shake as I type out, "Yes, I am upset you invited all of our friends. I am upset that you invited my best friend I've known since I was six and you've known maybe six weeks. I am upset that you're 'sick of always hanging out with me' but when I don't invite you to something I never hear the end of it. I have been talking about wanting a group of friends to go with to the fair for forever and then you set up a group and leave me out. I am allowed to be upset and you have no right to tell me my emotions are wrong!" But before I can hit send my fingers press the delete button and type out the new message, "Whatever...have fun at the fair."

There is a chain effect of healing that doctors never talk about. They give out casts and Band-Aids and shots and medicine in hopes to heal physical wounds, but what about the mental injuries? Medicine can only reach in and fix physical symptoms of the pain. It never really takes all the pain away. The mental trauma lingers under the wound. The medicine masks the hurt only for a moment.

You, *my dear friend*, chose to alleviate this pain on the person closest to you. I do not think you ever meant to cause so much pain. You could not help yourself. These were the accidental wounds you inflicted. You made me believe everything I did was wrong. I could only be your friend and no one else's, but it was perfectly okay for *you* to have different friends. It was okay for you to throw parties without ever inviting me. It was okay for *you* to invite all of our mutual friends to the fair and leave me out because *you* needed a break from hanging out with me. I understand that you were hurting back then. You had your mother hating you and your father drinking too much and the weight of keeping your family alive on your shoulders. I understand you were in pain...but how does that give you the right to hurt me? Your parents feel pain. Your parents hurt you. You hurt me. I hurt myself. This is the chain effect doctors cannot heal and yet these wounds are more fatal than if we were hit by a car.

Pick up the phone. Damn it! PICK UP YOUR PHONE! "Hello, you've reached-"I throw the phone onto the bed in anger. You won't pick up. You left this note. This terrible note about how you couldn't handle life anymore and you were going to end it all. Now you won't answer you phone and the panic is crawling into my chest and I can't breathe. There's a buzz and I dive for my phone, answering before it can even fully ring. "Do you know how much I've been panicking?!" I shout, tears streaming down my pale cheeks.

"Don't yell at me! This is your fault anyways!" you start and I bleed deeper.

I stopped the chain of pain. I could not let it spread on to anyone else. I am not that selfish. For awhile, I would let the pain consume me. I drowned in it, my limbs thrashing around as I silently screamed for help. Rescue never came. As that pain became physically damaging to my health I knew there had to be a better outlet than hurting someone. Some way to stop the chain without me just absorbing this terrible burden. So I fought it out. Never with a person. I fought with a wall. With my pillow. With the punching bag in Tae Kwon Do class. I fought inanimate objects, letting them be the end of the chain so they could absorb all the pain. People hurt you. You hurt me. I punch the wall when no one is looking. Parents hurt you. You hurt me. I scream into my pillow until my voice is hoarse. Someone hurts you. You hurt me. I stay after class and attack that punching bag like it is the manifestation of pain itself.

I am not sure you ever really cared about how I transferred the hurt I received. It did not matter to you, as long as I received it and you were freed. The only time you pretended to care was in Tae Kwon Do after one of your more brutal attacks. You were not on the sparring team, so typically we did not have the last session together, but the day's schedule had been rearranged and somehow we were stuck together. You could not look me in the eye, that is how wounded we were. When the gong rang to end class I hung back like normal and waited for the rest of the class to leave before moving to the red and black bag.

"I can't believe he asked if you were upset about not placing. I was the one who couldn't even compete because of my knee!" You give me a look; because it is my fault your knee is broken. I delivered that accidental blow in training. Our instructor had warned you that you were holding the pad wrong, but you didn't listen. You are angry he asked you how I was taking my low placing at the competition rather than how you were healing. In your jealousy that someone could possibly care about me more than you, you begin to tell our Latin teacher why you are on crutches. I have bared you telling this story a million times today as I help you carry your books through the halls. You pretend not to notice the tears about to spill.

After a deep breath my fist connects. Another deep breath, my leg smacks the leather. Another breath and another, all followed by a violent movement of my body. My pace increases as I lose control. Attack the bag, my animalistic instincts taking over. Once I am calm, once the aggression has finally left my body, I back away from the bag and wipe the tears that started falling who knows when. Out of the corner of my eye I see you hiding in the doorways. One direct stare and you snake away to the locker rooms.

Wounds heal. Slowly, quickly, easily, it does not matter. They heal or you die. Your Emotional wounds nearly killed me. The healing process started for me when I chose to see a doctor who understands the chain effect of emotional trauma. He prescribed blocking you from my life. Slowly I was able to stop my bleeding wounds. Now there are only scars left where your friendship once was.

Poetry

I AM FROM

Amanda Kenney

I am from acres,
from riding mowers, and grassy groves.
I am from the sawdust's scent.
I am from the giant oak,
the lilac bush aside the house.
I am from rare Christmas trees
and fair skin,
from my parents—
from that unnamed.
I am from the loud laughter
and loud yelling.
From be yourself and
be quiet.
I am from Love the Lord,
don't hold hands,
save face in the public eye.
I am from the East,
from broken families,
coffee in teacups and
spaghetti again.
From the child my mother gave up,
the histories told and untold,
and the quiet of the outside at night.
I am from lost photographs, a crooked shoe,
a rock to sit and think.
A heavy heart, a book to read,
paper and ink.

MY MORNING GLORY

Amanda Kenney

The sun shines through the window and
quiets my mind.
Our bare feet brush throws while
you sit with me.
This is best and better yet.

You wrap your tiny fingers through mine,
calming my spirit.
You heal in ways and
this is all I need.

“Mother,” you say and tickle my sides.
“Son,” I say and tear with laughter.
This is happiness and
you are my constant.

Just outside our door the
flowers are blooming.
They turn toward the sun and
grow and grow.
My love for you grows and grows.

WISDOM SPEAKS

Amanda Kenney

I remain quiet
and patient.
I see my age in the lines along my skin,
yet each day is new.

Shh . . .
listen.
Wisdom tells stories.

I am strong.
The lines on my forehead are unmistakable,
but my laugh lines run deep.
Stories are told within these creases.

Quiet.
Wait.
Wisdom speaks.

ANIMAL HEART

Ashleen McCullough

My heart is too fierce for the cage I keep it in. It bangs and threatens to break the bars of bone that hold it back. Each heartbeat is like an earthquake, rocking my body to the core. Everything is left just a bit out of place and there's no time to fix it before it's moved again.

My body quakes with passion and pain, an animal rocking its cage in its best attempt to escape. Escape the world, escape the experience, escape life. Nobody wants to die but certainly no one wants to live like this – body at odds with mind and heart at odds with society. Nothing makes sense - thoughts whirling, mind racing, heart beating, beating in my chest, beating my chest. It's as though I am King Kong taking on the human race in an effort to be myself or to be by myself. In or out, ups and downs, swings that never stop, only get bigger the more I pump my legs, no matter how much I drag my feet. The merry go round is no longer merry but merely going round... and round... and round, and round and round and round androundandroundandround STOP. Stop the ride. Stop the world. I want off. I want to cease motion, cease moving, cease this horrible circle of inclusion and exclusion. Cease life, cease death, cease playing a game that stopped being fun once I learned all the rules. I thought I knew the rules. The rules are changing. The game is changing. I am changing. You are changing. Life is changing, never stopping. I only want to stop. We can never stop. The animal in my chest won't let me stop.

There is a reason our ribs are cages, but that does not mean it can contain our wild animals that drive our lives forward, never allowing us to stop. I only want to stop.

BEST FRIEND

Ashlee Sunderland

Dear best friend
I remember when we met
All those months ago yesterday
We've been hanging out forever
Or so it seems

We're mirror images, you and me
Almost like we are related in some way
I tell you all my secrets and I know all of yours
And when one of us is hurting the other is there

Though we may fight from time to time
We still have each other's back
Sometimes we do stupid things but that's okay
Because neither of us judges the other

We may act like kids sometimes
And get into no end of trouble
But if one of us went to jail
The other would bail them out

That's the beauty of our friendship
It has no limits, because we aren't just friends
We are sisters and that's how it should be
And that's how it always will be

We are trouble in every sense of the word
But we are the most loyal people
Especially to each other
And that's why you are my best friend

A GIRL
Breana Wilde

There are many girls in the world, but
this one is different. She hides
her pain and emotions from everyone
so people don't worry about her. She takes
care of everyone else and worries about them, but
she doesn't want them to worry about her.
She learns to cry when no one is around because
she wants to be strong for everyone else. This girl
learns how to deal with her problems behind
closed doors.

Only a few people can get through those
doors.
She has been hurt so much she has put up layers
of walls.

Only a few people will be able to break
down these walls,
brick by brick.

This girl knows how to wake up and put on a smile
and act
like everything is alright when everything is not.

Only a few people know that her heart
is breaking.
She knows that holding her
emotions in
is not healthy

but she is too scared to let anyone in.
Too scared to let anyone know the pain
that is breaking her soul. The emotions and fears
run like busy bees through her mind.

The girl feels alone but she knows she is not. .

She will get over all this, And break free from all
those walls
Brick By Brick.

SOMETIMES
I JUST THINK TOO MUCH
Darah Wolf

Having ridden this black traffic wave
of ethanol and fumes,
this bad habit, following me,
of never being in the moment,
I still don't understand why some of the prettiest
towns
have some of the ugliest names.
Or why we don't find shapes in the trees,
like we do for the clouds.
Or why the night just feels so much better than
the day
when you're walking,
but when we're driving with the windows down
and
the warm wind blowing against our arms,
things just seem so true.

I can't say why I'm a thinker like,
living for a thought is what I'm best at.
I can't say why a candle's orange and blue flicker-
ing flame
melts away my resilience and hesitation for love.
Or why the moonlight veils the worst part of my
existence.
Or why the swirling, slow burning smoke of a
cigarette
awakens the deepest, most hidden parts of me.
Or why, at times, when you feel cornered and
pinned down,
surrounded with no chance,
you still feel like everything in this world is beau-
tiful
and you're right where you're supposed to be.

BELIZE

Christiana Bredbenner

I pine
for the warm sun on my shoulders
in a whole new place
different from any I've ever known
as an adventure opens up before me.
For stepping into unfamiliar trees
and hearing a lilting language
different from any I've ever heard
as new creatures swing, call, and crawl around
me.
I pine
for the sound of wildlife in the night
and rain on the rooftop
as I lay in the top bunk of a bunk bed
excited to see a new day in the morning.
For climbing steep stone steps with no railing
up and up, don't look down
until you can see the view from 131 feet up
and can see for miles.
I pine
for the feeling of stepping into another world
beautiful and wondrous
as a sacred hush surrounds me
and the stone walls silently breathe and grow.
For the smell of sweetly perfumed night air
from the scent of beautiful flowers growing
and stars burning beautifully overhead
glowing brightly in the sky.
I pine
for mud sliding under my feet
and a steep trail leading up
to a beautiful pool where a waterfall cascades
and the water is azul blue.
For the rush of gliding through the trees
my gloved hand sliding on the line behind me
and I let out a yell of joy
because I might be flying.
I pine
for the feel of cool paint between my fingers
as I smear it into the wood board
literally painting by hand
wondering how many people will see these signs.

For the sweat pouring down my face
as we hike another steep trail
and reach the top of four kilometers
to gaze out over beautiful mountains.
I pine
for a bumpy boat ride to an island
and I can't stop laughing for joy
as spray leaps up and around us
and the wind whips my hair off my face.
For stepping onto a sandy shore
with rustic buildings and tropical palm trees
with the sky so blue above
and realizing I've stepped into paradise.
I pine
for the gentle breeze on my back
the sounds of laughter as a ball soars over a net
the taste of warm coffee and cold fruit juice
and the sweetness of a tropical fruit spread in the
morning.
For the strain of my muscles
pushing against a paddle
as we kayak out to discover
a new underwater world.
I pine
for the feeling of water over my body
as I dive down to the submerged city
gazing around at its surreal beauty
and swimming amongst a school of little fish.
For the shared jokes, laughing, joking around
the quiet moments shared
between new friends and old
as we kick back on island time.
I pine
for the feel of my hair being tightly braided
the sound of drums, and dancing
as we all come together to learn about a culture
and for one night are all bound as one family.
For the sight of a burning sky
deep red, tangerine orange, bright yellow
as the fiery ball sinks behind a distant shore
so quickly, and all at once.
I pine
for the place that has stolen my heart.

THE STAR
Edgar Degas

I think I know what she's feeling,
divertissement
arabesque en arriere
leaning out toward
a dream of herself
and not caring
if anyone is watching.
She dances alone,
skirts fluttering,
toes sore,
only a beautiful mess
of blended colors.
A man steps out
from behind the stage,
pas seul
from behind the shadows,
intentions unknown.
But I notice
that her foot is not quite pointed
somehow, from loss of concentration,
but her ribbons still stream
through
pas de bourree
pirouette
tour en l'air
perfected
by the stillness
in her eyes.

LESS FRIEND
Gia Hickey

Dear Stranger,
Soft whispers,
A shaky voice.
A wish to disappear from class.
My heart breaks for you.

Dear acquaintance,
Still so timid.
Chocolate eyes always down.
What fears are locked in your mind?
My heart is intrigued by you.

Dear Friend,
Shared songs in the summer sun and
Sleepovers lacking sleep.
Laughter lingers like a strong perfume.
My heart is lifted by you

Dear Sister,
My loving second home,
Never leaving my side.
Me and you against the world.
My heart is becoming you.

Dear Friend,
High School separation,
People doubt us but
I still hear your voice every day.
My heart is hopeful for us.

Dear acquaintance,
Vacant seats next to me.
Days of absent text messages.
Tornadoes of doubt rip through my mind.
My heart worries for us.

Dear stranger,
A year has passed since we've last spoken.
Scenarios race through my mind.
Was is something I've done?
My heart is broken for us.

**I WOKE UP AND YOU WERE
GONE**
Emma Miller

Wake me up from this dream.
She can't be gone.
Pleading, begging, tossing and turning,
rest drained me as much as the events of the day.

How quickly warm Breath of life flies home
and cold Death creeps in,
wielding a blunt knife
sliding straight into my gut.

That night, it was only hours before
I held her heavy head in my lap.
Kissing her soft muzzle, running my fingers
through her dusty mane.

Trying to keep her cool under the shade
to be more comfortable.
She labored in the heat.
Shooing the flies away from her mouth.

Death is ugly, surreal.
Burial with large machinery and chill soil.
Years are said to blur the sharp memories.
They don't.

They don't remove pain. Pictures still hang every-
where I look
and her saddle sits in the house.
Piles of blankets that smell of her
sit useless on the tack box.

Some days are filled with remembrances.
Bright days we stood together in the sun,
cold days I buried my face in her long coat and
warmed my hands under her blanket.

Some nights I relive the day
I lost my horse,
the morning I put her to rest,
and every moment of painful loss thereafter.

Sometimes I remember the love
and warm breath blowing on my cheek.
Those soft brown eyes, her muzzle resting on my
forehead.
She's not gone. But I still haven't woken up.

OURS
Marybeth Richards
Poetry Contest Winner

I hope by the time our lives are over
we can

look
back
at years gone by and say
we lived more of our lives
together
than we ever did
apart.

I hope we can conjure memories between the
two of us

that maybe
one of us
had forgotten,
because then it would not have been
forgotten
but instead
entrusted to the other
for safekeeping.

I hope we see

-the moment-

we were eclipsed by each other and how instanta-
neously
we understood how surely the sun gives light
to the moon.

THE GUN
Trisha Grove

You heard the bang, you smell the powder,
As you get closer, the screams get louder.

You catch a glimpse in a mirror's view,
And see a man you never knew.

His hair is brown, his eyes are blue.
It's then you realize...

The killers you.

SOMETHING
Patricia Ardery

i am surrounded by people
and yet i feel so alone
there are so many voices
and yet i hear only silence
it is warm all around
and yet i tremble from the cold
this world is confusing
and yet i understand it completely

THIS PAIN
Rebecca House

I'm dying inside.
I can no longer hide
The monster, that I've strung,
Though this pain has only begun.

No one's to blame,
For the tears that came,
But the people whom I love,
And let them shove,
This poor broken heart,
Which they've torn apart.
And so my dear,
It's the start of a new year,
Which I thought would be good
Like everyone dreams it should,
With love and grace
In a magical place.

But it's not
It's dripping slimy snot.
A yucky mess
And no one can guess
How I feel
Oh if only this wasn't real!

DEAR "DAD"
Ashleen McCullough

Dear "Dad," I haven't had much to say about you but, I do now.
Dear "Dad," did you know I'm 21 this year? I bet you didn't.
Dear "Dad," did you know I'm a year away from getting my degree?
Dear "Dad," did you know I grew up strong and independent with strong ties to my family?
Dear "Dad," did you know I learned how to be me without you?
Dear "Dad," did you know I never felt like I was missing anything?
Dear "Dad," did you know that I feel weird saying "dad" and I can't call anyone that, even though he's been a father figure and I love him dearly?
Dear "Dad," did you know that I have several male role models in my life, and you're not one of them?
Dear "Dad," did you know that people tell me that they're **sorry** when I say I never knew you?
Dear "Dad," did you know I always reply, "*I'm not.*"

LOST
Jamie Burnett
Poetry Contest Winner

Stumbling upon a rigid road
 Cracked but still intact
Progressing pace after pace
 Fear hidden behind ignorant eyes
Seeking an idealistic destination
 Fabricated with innocence

Approaching a sudden bifurcation
 Blinded by the turbid distance
Following a stubborn impulsion
 To stray from the right
Focusing solely on the presence
 Of that prospective journey

Pondering such hasty determination
 Time to rewind
Searching for reason to justify
 To gain a perception of pride
Doubting where the road may lead
 And conscious of the crumbling gravel

Backtracking to a familiar scene
 Home or maybe just a dream
Conceiving what was once to be
 Secure pavement under those feet
Accepting guidance from signals
That were formerly ignored

Realizing the route that I should have taken
Noticing the reality that I was mistaken

Yes, I am lost, but the feeling is divine;
trust me, friend, I am going to be fine.

TAKE A STEP BACK
FROM THE LEDGE
Lauren Hampton

Take a step back from the ledge.
It's not your time to fall over the edge.
Close your eyes and take a deep breath.
You know only minutes are left.

Turn away from the pain you are feeling.
Wonder instead how you are dealing.
The doubt creeps in, you take a step closer.
Realizing the battle is not yet over.

Bits of memories flash before your eyes.
All happiness has turned to lies.
It sears and tears at your soul.
As you await the tears you know will flow.

Streaming silently, they slip down your cheek.
You brush them away, believing you are weak.
A look down at the darkness below.
Perhaps what awaits is no longer your foe.

Take a step back from the ledge.
It's not your time to fall over the edge.
Close your eyes and take a deep breath.
You know only seconds are left.

Somewhere in the back of your mind,
You hear voices that have always been kind.
A face with warm brown eyes appears.
You see the familiar features through your tears.

Warm arms enfold round your form,
And together you begin to mourn.
You cry for what you almost had done,
Shedding tears, and then none.

The familiar face offers you a small smile,
You feel as if you had come many miles.
Relief washes over you,
You know you will be okay, too.

Take a step back from the ledge.
It's not your time to fall over the edge.
Close your eyes and take a deep breath.
You know there are many years left.

REMEMBER
Kirsten Bilger

Do you remember
when you last told your mother
that you appreciated everything
that she has ever done for you?

Do you remember
when you last told your father
that you loved him
and that he was the best father?

How about the last time
when you hugged your sister
and did not give her attitude
even when you wanted to?

How about the time
when your grandmother spoiled you
and kept giving you money just in case
even when you refuse to take it?

Another time
when your grandfather picks on you
and you pick back until he backs down
and turns into a funny battle that lasts for minutes?

Do you remember
when you thought of someone
besides yourself and actually
did something to make a difference in their life?

I can remember all of these
and they all give me happy memories
that make me smile
even when there is nothing to smile about.

So why is it hard to remember
those who have passed on
and hard to remember what we did
to create memories?

LOVE
Jessica Miller

The night is eerie.
No moon sliver to be found.
Walk with purpose.
Know what must be done.

Sirens wail,
Signaling the potential fate.
Shake off the worries
Breathe in the darkness.

There she waits
Her dark hair,
Her dark eyes.
My father's hair,
My father's eyes.
My mother's nothing.

Cold metal.
Trembling hands,
Wielding death.
Closing in on her.

The blade slices through her skin,
Deep into her heart.
Revenge.
Satisfaction.

Heart racing,
Thumping in my chest.
Trying to free itself from its latest deed.
My brain kicks into overdrive.
Shut down all emotion.

Silence.
No more screams.
No more whimpers.
No more gasps for last breath.
I grip the knife
Twist.

SCORCHING BLACK

Joseph Allen

Long and lustful
Her hair scented
A faint air of rain
She looks so fine
In scorching black
And in a timid lace
An angel's face

Her wings divine
Outstretched and poised
Feathered and dusted with grace
She comes before me
In all her radiance returning back
She is an ivory angel
Adorn in the deepest scorching black

And as the ashes fall,
From above and up from beneath
I open my mouth
To taste of the fragments
The tensions and the slack
I consume her remnants
The pallid salty remainder
Of the pale angel
Ascending from the scorching black

USE THE VENUS BREEZE

Joseph Allen

Oh silken ivory
Calm our noble seas
Wipe the clouds away
Use the Venus breeze
Show your mighty force
By way of storm and crest
Defend the artist's muse
Awake the raptor's nest
Oh purest dove
Thy ashen angel wing
Pluck your dream-strung harp
Let divinity shine and sing

WE UNDER LEAF AND ELIXIR

Joseph Allen

Sanity and boredom is for the commoners
Lucid dreaming and artistry will remain for me
Poured over me like the colors of my tempers and
skin
I can freely wallow in the debaucheries of my own
creations
no matter how criminal

Though equally I may be redeemed
Upon sincere request, I may be delivered
Though, for now I remain drenched in the mysti-
cisms
I mix potions for my consumption as well as the
consumption of my closest friends
And some days I live at home
And some days I live in the trees

So please, if you find yourself in my wood
Harken my call
Look up and into the leaves
Begin to see with unvarnished eyes
Call my name and I shall descend
To meet you on the forest floor with my potions in
hand
And we shall sip and swallow
And with new strengths we shall then equally
ascend
Up and into the trees

For only a moment or a day or two
To live with the freest and purest of reasons
Celebrate what is real and balanced with tran-
sient vision

We under leaf and elixir
Pass this day in the canopy of leaves
Residing with avian friends
As we bask in the flickering sun at the top of the
ancient tree

ACT UP

Nicole Zuleger

First recital,
Looking straight ahead,
Mind blank as a page.
Crowd drops deadly silent.
She covers her eyes.
This cannot be happening.

A moment of silence please for our fallen actress,
Frozen in her grave.
Cheer her off stage anyways.
She will be okay.
It is just a play.
No consequences...
No strings attached...

They say life is a production.
That is a blatant lie.
Productions come with manuals.
Life comes with mistakes that never end.
Enough string to hang yourself.
You cannot cover your eyes and be clapped away.
Mess up on the stage of life?
The show does not go on.

Life is like this.
You are thrown onto a stage you do not want to be on.
Everyone is staring.
You were not given a script or rehearsal schedule.
The lights are on.
Curtains up.
Dancers twirl.
Trumpet blares.
The crowd stares.

Waiting.
Expecting the performance of your life.
Blank as a page
Covered eyes
Silence.
Fading lights.
Hold on tight.

This is not their performance.
Reach down deep.
Fight for your night.
Fuck the consequences.
Cut the strings.

If life is truly a production,
You are the damn lead.
Dancers leap for you.
Music lifts you.
Lights reveal you.
The crowd claps for you!
Act like it.

TENDER WARFARE

Nicole Zuleger

We assemble in stubborn silence.
Neither ready to surrender.
An unsolvable impasse.
There will be no survivors.

One day we are a romance novel,
the next we march to battle.
All is fair in Love and War.
I wish this was not our struggle.

The war drums beat inside my chest
when you whisper in my ear.
I taste the blood of the fallen
with every kiss you steal.

Adrenaline pumps as my soldier advances.
To fight for our love and stay, or
to flee in fear of injury.
I stand frozen in my spot,
too in love to flee.
Too afraid to fight.

Basic training cannot prepare for a shattered heart.
Call the medics. Call for backup. Quick, she's fading
fast!
Pull the pieces together. Stitch up with a smile.
Friendly fire always triggers the most grief.

I stand in sorrowed silence.
Stars and stripes are draped across you.
Twenty-one guns infiltrate my thoughts.
If only our love was not a battlefield.
If only I had not lost.

TOY STORY

Shawn Price

As kids, boys were taught to play with their toys,
Girls were taught how to become them.
They learned that “perfect” was Barbie,
And they should dress and be played with, like the
rest of them.

Getting all dolled up to be like models in commer-
cials,

Being programmed to stay quiet when neglected,
Ready to act at the push of a button,
And they are made to believe that “boys will be
boys.”

“Boys are supposed to play rough, play boss, and
take what they want.”

But then they find out what boys take might, may
never be given back,

Or they see the terrible fact that boys break old
toys,

And get new ones without feeling a thing.

These girls have fantasies of Ken buying a ring
and a dream house

But all these girls get are bed, slow jams, and
handcuffs for their playset.

Being placed back in that box, and sent away after
bed time,

Quickly getting tired of these boys playing pre-
tend with their hearts

But they learn to go with the games and keep that
pretty painted smile,

Because “boys will be boys,”

And although toys fall hard, dolls come apart, and
plastic skin never heals,

They go with the pain.

They go with the pain, because toys are lifeless
without games.

They go with the pain, so these boys will always
remind them,

But only as toys.

TRUTH ABOUT TREES

Meagan Miller

Pine trees whisper of one who is grace.

The oak spreads the news to others as
Maples marvel at their beauty and
Poplars herald their demise.

Enter the willow, standing supreme.

Swaying gracefully in time with the wind.
Roots searching shallowly forward,
Not deep enough to prevent death.

Poplars herald the truth.

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

Ashleen McCullough

Ignorance is bliss,

how did we wind up like this?

I would rather not know
if it means you won't go.

But knowledge is power
and baby I'm glowing.

Looking back now

I'm better off knowing.

You were fire,

you burnt me

even as you learnt me.

Consume me.

Exhume me.

Confuse me.

Excuse me if I don't understand.

What I thought was a flaw

was actually a fault

and now I'm shaking apart.

A LETTER TO A JUMPER

Shawn Price
Poetry Contest Winner

For every kid two steps too close to the edge,
Stay still.
It's better to ground with hell in your mind,
Then to be in hell with the ground on fire;
Stay here,
Because I love you;
And I know you don't hear it enough,
But you should know it as fact...

I remember when you called me,
I missed the first 3 attempts but luckily woke up on a second ring.
I picked up the phone to silence,
No greetings, just deep breaths and sniffles,
"Why are you crying?"
And after a few times of you trying to deny it,
You finally decided to confide in me.
I asked "What's wrong?"
So you told me that "It's all bad"
I tried to tell you to see a brighter vision,
But you said "it's all bad"
You told me that your sight on God was getting as narrow as this path you're on.
You don't want to leave things behind, but you're tired of Satan's whispers,
He's telling you to end it all.
So I know this cliff looks like the gateway to your paradise,
But you're far greater than another news report
And your life is far greater than being loss for lost causes.
But finding a break through with you wasn't stable, you just cried to me,
You told me it's too hard,
I know his whispers are getting louder by every minute and tough time.
He's telling you to end it all,
And you told me that you're thinking of being obedient.
I told you "No"
I said "My friend, you will not die tonight!
Not by your own hand"
You told me it was the only way to stop the pain,
But that's just what demons want you to think,
But the only light at the end of this tunnel are flames,
"There's always a better way."
And I told you to take my hand and squeeze it when it hurts,
And you went along for the time being...

Now it seems we must reach this peak again,
But this jump won't catch your hopes, but my arms are out and open.
I'm writing to say "My friend, you will not die tonight!"
I'm writing to say "I love you"
So please just take my hand,
And you can squeeze it lifeless when life uses too much.
I just need you to stay here a little while longer,
I don't want to have to miss you too.

You'd be taking away more than your life...

ROSES

Shawn Price

Her life spells out rough time, pain, and abuse,
So in her eyes everyone is out to get her...

Since hurt is all she knows
One day I brought her a rose,
And in full delight,
She embraced and gripped it tight,
Then as she bled from arms and cried a red sea,
She looked at me and asked "Why would you use these thorns to hurt me?"
My sweet jester turned to an ironic weapon,
Her misguided view on life caused her to miss my message,
That life ain't so rough because there are a lot of things here almost as gorgeous as her
But the sounds of tears splashing stopped her from hearing a word...

I never meant to hurt her,
Neither did the rose...

The next week I saw her again,
With news roses at hand,
She said "Your gift helped soften the cold heart that has hardened,
And your rose let me start a garden"...

STRANGE FRUIT

Shawn Price

"Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze"

I see strange fruit,
That dropped from the trees,
Rolling to ally gutters and street corners,
And I see where bites were taken. ..

These fruits of many shades,
Have no shade in the sun,
Just blood on kids laces,
And blood on the pavement,
Shells painted red on play grounds,
And bodies rotting across the street,
Funerals around the way,

Mothers running pastors,
And it's a shame,
Because the pastor doesn't even know who to pray
to anymore,

The smell of the fruit breaks his concentration,
So now all he can do is ask his congregation,
"Can someone please stop the madness?"
"Why aren't we stopping the mad men?"
"What makes a police officer so mad, when he
decides,
'Forget an arrest', and puts a young boy to rest?"
"Why are we waiting to be our maddest, to make a
different?"

"Are we not tired of having cold bodies, on our hot
summer days?"

THE SHADE

Shawn Price

I feel that,
Even though I've never really fulfilled your wishes,
I can at least fill your shoes one day.
I mean, only if I ever get from under your shadow to find them.

I see you every day in the mirror,
But still lost on whether I'm your son or dark side.
I'm still in the middle of being your biggest success or greatest failure,
I'm just lacking some pieces of you in me.
I mean, I have eyes just like yours,
I try to smile, talk, walk, and pray like you,
I've even gotten your laugh down,
But I still don't seem to be half the man.
I mean, I can look you at eye to eye now,
My handshake is just as firm today,
I learn to gain strength and try to fight life like you,
But nothing seems to be enough.

Pops, I need you.
I get my fire and drive from you,
I stay connected to God through you,
I always seem to see the light with you,
And still get little in the dark without you,
But I know one day, I'll need to stop being Demetrius.

My only prayer is that you leak your secrets on living,
So I can feel victory outside of your shade...

THE SWEETEST MELODY

Shawn Price

I know this child is not my daughter,
But I mean, so what?
She just needs someone to hug and teach her what love is,
So "I'm here now..."

I'm not her Father,
But I'll show her the world and why The Father brought her to me,
So we're here now.
Sharing "I love you," held hands, and a good view,
Laughing to her favorite songs, a loud "papa bear," sneaking candy,
And playing Lion King with Simba,
Teaching her to roar like Mufasa did,
Staying up later than Mommy says,
Watching her do her best with prayers,
Then laying with her when a night light doesn't do her justice,
I whisper "Don't worry, I'm here now" and she whispers her secrets,
And although I wasn't always near to hear them,
"I'm here now..."

I know this child is not my daughter,
She is my sweetest Melody,
She brings the purest shine to my dark mind,
And she lift my spirits when a sunrise doesn't do me justice,
So "I'm here now,"