

Ψαλμῶδες

α καὶ κυν
ἀίτας, ἀμ
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OBU
Scriblerus
2018

A Letter from the Editors

PALIMPSEST (n.): A manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain.

- Both the idea of drawing on and adding to a literary tradition and
- A general idea of complexity and layers of meaning
- Also, the 2018 theme for the Scriblerus

We chose this theme to emphasize the importance of the new generation of creative writers at OBU not only continuing the tradition set out before them, but adding to it. While we accepted submissions from writers of all levels, we were excited to feature many freshman writers as well as seasoned vets. Additionally, the work presented here is a reflection of student talent and craft across all majors, not only Creative Writing.

We hope you don't hate it. At least it's not in Comic Sans.

Sincerely,
The Scriblerus Team

Masthead

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The Scriblerus is a publication of the Chi Delta Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta International English Honors Society. The name of the Scriblerus comes from the Scriblerus club, a group of writers organized in London in 1714 by Jonathan Swift. The selections herein do not necessarily represent the views of the editors or the faculty and administration of Oklahoma Baptist University. The selections are chosen by the student editorial staff and an outside panel of judges chooses a first through third place winner in the poetry and fiction categories.

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Picture Perfect

by Emily Wall

1st place fiction

I take in a quick, sharp breath and trudge on. The airport feels like the doctor's office I go to in Manhattan – too many Clorox wipes. It feels sterile and cold. People carrying hard expressions and suitcases swarm in clusters from the luggage conveyor belt to wait in line for the bag scanner. The plain-faced guards don't seem interested in conversation. And neither am I.

When I get to the security stop, I lift my single black suitcase with duct tape holding the right wheel in place onto the moving line. It disappears under the stringy fabric, hiding my bag for a moment. I wait for a nod from the security guard studying the red and blue x-ray of the peeling suitcase. He signals me forward with a nod of his head, face blank as a paper towel. I stutter a "*Gracias, Señor,*" but his eyes are already focused on the screen again.

Spanish feels like pots and pans in my mouth. The concoction of syllables don't know how to fit between my teeth and my lips.

With a sigh, I glance up at the glass doors and grab the handle of my bag. It grumbles behind me like a stomach that hasn't eaten all day. Almost to the doors, I stop abruptly. The short man behind me bumps into my still figure and grumbles a Spanish word I don't know while he passes on my left. The doors mark the entrance to a new world. They mark my first breath of Nicaraguan air. They mean I'll see him again.

People push around me while I stand still in the middle of the room. I feel small and unseen. I'm invisible, observing the world work around me like I'm a number on a clock watching the hands move in circles.

I view a red-headed woman with a baseball cap and brown hiking boots march through the doors with her adventurous looking partner. A teenage boy walks through to be greeted by an older woman with a yellow balloon. In a quick impulse, I move forward and clench my jaw as the glass doors swish open.

The people in the gray-tiled lobby throng together in even bigger clumps of chatter and exclamations. Joyous sounds come from reuniting families and friends. I taste a hint of bitterness in the back of my throat, but swallow it down as quickly as it came. It burns like liquor.

I pull out my iPhone and thumb through the sparse messages between my dad and I from last week. Most of them are excuses. The picture quickly fills my screen with a tap. The smiling face of my grandmother is charming and her dark skin implies she's spent a little time in the sun. The most catching thing about the picture is her eyes. They look kind, a soft brown like a Hershey's chocolate bar. Maybe I'll like her.

The phone slips back into my pocket, and I scan the faces in the crowded room. I spot her, about fifteen feet away, by the taxi booth. Her intelligent eyes peer around too. She stands with her hands on her hips, her feet like tree roots on the tile floor. Our eyes meet across the room and I feel carbonated anxiety bubble in my chest. I move one step forward, but she's already working her way through the masses toward me.

My grandmother arrives to my side so quickly that I have hardly moved. Before I can say a word, she exclaims with rapid Spanish, "Adrianna! *Mi nieta! Cómo estás tú? Y el vuelo?*"

I process the Spanish to understand she's asking something about my flight, but she is already moving to embrace me. Her arms entrap my torso like a rubber band around a newspaper, and I tap her back in an effort to hint this hug shouldn't last much longer. I feel sticky, like honey on toast in July.

She pulls back and looks at me, expectancy hiding under her smile, between her teeth.

I look at her for a moment and exhale. "Grandmother, it's nice to finally meet you" I touch her shoulder with a sincerity that surprises myself. Her eyes are as kind as the picture had promised.

"I am so happy you made it to Nicaragua, *mi querida.*" Her English is much smoother than I imagined it'd be, bringing to my mind a hundred questions about this woman with a smile as round as a quarter.

Silence settles on us for a moment, and we look at each other like it's the other's turn to roll the dice in our conversation.

She takes the handle of my bag as she says "Come." And we turn to walk to the doors.

--- ---

At the bus stop on the far side of the airport, Grandmother's words remember how to work. She fills the empty half hour of waiting with words, babbling like water in a stream. Her words flow soft, making pebbles smooth, but the Spanish parts hit my brain like rapids. My ears can't quite keep up with the currents of her stories.

We sit on the hot blue bench in steamy air. I feel beads of sweat drip, drip down my elbows and the backs of my knees. I toss my long, black hair up into a ponytail to cool off my body. She tells me Matagalpa is much cooler, and talks about the many, many reasons she would never live in Managua.

The sun streams through the wooden slats that are supposed to provide shade. Everything looks like cement with gray colored anticipation at this airport. I guess all the tourists took taxis to their destinations, except for me. I try to look past the parking lot's long drive, but all I can see are the peaks of green hills waving at me over the unending eyeful of cement. Down the platform, other crowds of people wait for their buses to arrive.

While Grandmother spits out stories in a *mezcla* of Spanish and English phrases, I let my hands hold the blue bench's corner. When I let go, there is a screw impression on my hand. I run my finger over it, the same routine I always do when I'm nervous.

My mind wanders to the time I took the subway with my dad to my first day of school. I was six and wore my favorite navy skirt with white polka dots. We waited on a bench too, by the subway platform, and I clutched the corner of the bench for the first time. Dad ran his finger over the impression I made in my palm and laughed when he saw the worry in my eyes. I turned light pink with childhood indigence as I crossed my arms and squinched up my face to show just how upset his laughter made me. My barricade of arms was no match for his big hands – he tickled me until I forgot what had made my palms sweat in the first place. He always found a way to make me laugh.

The week he left us, I went to that bench on Saturday to see if he'd come back to meet me in our spot, but he didn't. I told myself he didn't come because it was a weekend.

The familiar sound of squeaky brakes stopping a bus yanks me back to reality – sweltering Nicaraguan air and Grandmother's stories about plantains. I do a double-take at the bus that comes into view – it looks like it dressed up as a hula girl for Halloween. It's painted hot pink, orange, and lime green, and has scripted letters on the top spelling out "Matagalpa." There are no large-scale Victoria Secret advertisements or pixelated images drawing the attention of pedestrians. It's just a bright pink, hula dancer bus.

I follow my grandmother to the man taking tickets. Grandmother hands my bag to a young man in a white t-shirt and blue cap, who gracefully lifts the bag to a man on top of the bus. We step into the vehicle, and I realize my sweating has only just begun. I thought it was hot outside, but it's blistering inside the bus's confined space.

It feels like the whole city of Matagalpa must have flown in today, or had all their cousins come greet them at the airport. Loads of people follow behind us on board. The noisy machine is congested, teeming with sweaty people. My body feels like it's melting.

I plop into the third seat from the front next to my grandmother. She lets me have the window seat. After what feels like a week, the bus begins to chug out of the airport's driveway and onto the city streets of Nicaragua's capital. I stare out the window with hungry eyes.

The city is swarming with people moving; they swirl together on sidewalks, in cars, zipping around traffic on motorcycles and avoiding pedestrians on bikes. The traffic resembles the normal kind: taxis and their blaring horns. But the colors are incongruent, a shade off. The dinginess of the cars screams a little louder and the brightness on top, oranges and blues, make their best lame excuse for newness' absence. Wavy hills rise up on every side I can see, dotted with shapes of miniature houses on the hills.

"Get comfortable, girl. We will be on this bus for a long time."

"About how long is a long time?"

“It will take us about two hours to get into the mountains.”

I thank her for the warning and settle in for a long ride. She starts to talk about the history of the country – something about the Sandanistas and the revolution from the 80s. I rest my head on the metal frame of the window and let the bus rock me to sleep, an old-fashioned music box made out of rising hills.

The noises of bus brakes and moving people suddenly jolt me awake. I blink a couple of times to put moisture back into my contact lenses and look down at my watch. It reads 3:56 pm. Almost an hour and a half has passed.

The bus sits by a marketplace of some sort as people get on and off the bus. The fruit stands are full of déjà vu feelings. I recognize the foods, but they look so different. The avocados are as big as my hand, making the miniature bananas look disproportionate. The hot pink dragon fruit causes all the other shining colors in the bins to pale in comparison.

I look up to be greeted by rolling mountains, lush with vegetation. I think God might have melted all the green colored crayons and let them drip into the mountains of Nicaragua when He created the world. They are so full of life and color that I gasp in awe.

“So, Adrianna, what do you think of Nicaragua?” Grandmother chuckles, noticing my face pressed to the window. The way she says my name makes it sound coated with butter and syllable-less.

“It’s beautiful” I sigh. I study every peak my eyes can find and envision hiking trips and explorations to be had. The concrete jungles of New York City can’t compete with such thrilling adventure in one glance.

“*Y Tu siesta?* How was it?”

“I slept well. Thanks. I think my early morning flight caught up with me.”

“*Claro.* We’re getting closer to home, so it’s probably a good time to wake up.”

The bus shifts into gear and moves forward again, lurching the passengers along with the sudden movement. The mountains start to give an old-fashioned picture show, and I turn my gaze outside again.

Grandmother turns her shoulders toward me and asks confidently, “*Pues,* we haven’t talked in a long time. Tell me – what are your costumes? Do you still like to read books?”

“My costumes?” My eyebrows cinch together as I try to think of what she could mean. A smile sneaks onto my lips as I look at her expression cloud at my confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you know? Costumes? Como... *costumbres?* The things you like to do?”

“Like, passions, interests, hobbies...?”

“Yes! Those! Hobbies. That’s the word I wanted. I always forget what it is in English.”

We laugh together, hers boisterously goose-like and mine high pitched like bells. We get a look from the man across the aisle holding a newspaper. I forgot he doesn’t understand our joke.

I tell her about my love of music, my favorite piece on the piano (anything by Tchaikovsky) and the musicals I performed in high school. I explain how I want to study nursing in college so I will know how to help people. I go on about how much I enjoy running and complain about the prices of gym memberships in New York. She listens and asks questions when my English escapes my lips too fast. My grandmother is a sponge, soaking up every word. Something feels just right about sitting on the bus by her. I’m glad the picture didn’t lie about her eyes.

By the time my watch says 5:15pm, we’re getting out of the bus and waiting for the same dark man with a ball cap to pass down my breaking bag. At the Matagalpa station, the cool mountain breeze plays tag with the ends of my hair. The benches outside are bright, like a street in Candy Land. Yellow, green, pink, and back again on all six benches.

I pull my bag up to the Laffy Taffy yellow bench in the sun and sit for a taxi to arrive. I turn to spot where Grandmother is, but she already stands at the street corner twenty feet away.

“*Mi querida*, we walk home,” she calls out, motioning with her head for me to join her by the street. I’m relieved for a bit of normalcy.

We merge onto the cracked sidewalks full of clusters of people and end up behind a group of teenagers about my age, teasing each other loudly. I watch them elbow each other and laugh. One boy pushes another to almost toss his body through a line of bushes in front of a stately home. I catch the look of budding feelings exchange between the tallest boy in the middle and the girl with bouncy brown curls.

They turn away from us at the next block. My eyes follow them to see where they go until they disappear from my sight. Maybe I’ll follow them around some day this summer.

I find myself surprised their conversations and body language look so much like mine. I guess I was expecting something to be different. I don’t know what.

Grandmother takes a sharp inhale in, drawing my attention to her again. I realize she’s unusually quiet compared to how she’s been all day.

“*Mi amor?*”

“Yeah?” I ask. I step with a slight angle away from her side at such a pet name.

We turn a corner and the street gets steeper. The houses start to look less like city buildings and more like happy-colored doll houses made of wood and metal. The sidewalk disappears and becomes one with

the road.

“I’m glad you made it here safely. I have wanted to meet you for a long time. I –“ she swallows her words before her thought is aloud. My eyes narrow, becoming my enemies.

“Thanks for inviting me to come.”

“I know how much it means to your father. He misses you very much. He’ll be home from his work trip tomorrow.”

My free hand clenches into a tight fist, and all I see is red. My stomach churns, giving me the options of throwing up or walking back to the airport in Managua.

“I’m sure,” I spit out through gritted teeth.

Grandmother throws away any other words she planned to say. Silence settles.

The hill is no longer a hill, but a steep mountain slope. I focus my breath on going up, up, up and watch the cracks in the pavement change shape with each step.

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“*Estamos aquí!*” chirps Grandmother, trying to bring the sun back out with her smile. The sun stays hidden from sight, but I am warming back up to her. Mom’s story doesn’t involve Grandmother at all.

Even in the dimming twilight, the house is a bowl of chicken noodle soup, if a house can be such a thing. It has enough sharp edges to keep out the rain, but everything else is a feeling of warm soup in a bowl between one’s hands: the small glass window reflects the moon and the patio has a mug by the front chair forgotten in neighborly conversation.

Grandmother opens the speckled metal gate; there are red flowers and a tomato vine climbing up the wall. The flowers bobble their invitation inside the arched wooden door. The door and the plants in the twilight give the house an elvish appearance, a happy one from childhood fairy tales.

Grandmother chatters about the herbs in the pots and says the tomatoes aren’t in season ‘til July. She opens the toffee colored door and calls out “*Venga, come inside!*”

I hesitate. I would rather stay out in the cool breeze with the bobbing flowers.

I release my fisted hands, shake them out, and step over the doormat into the little house. The walls are the color of honeysuckles in summer. The oddly colored tweed couch in the corner doesn’t look new, but it does look like you could drink a cup of coffee on it without worrying too much about leaving a stain.

“*Aquí está la sala, y la cocina está detrás,*” chimes Grandmother who walks through another door to a kitchen behind the living room.

My feet follow the click-clack of Grandmother’s low heels on the faux tile flooring. Dishes in the sink and a couple on the table speak of home-cooked meals and coffee in the mornings.

“Here, I will cook for you. This summer, you won’t go hungry! I will make sure of that.” Her grammar under the jungle vines of an accent is impressively smooth.

“Are you hungry? I can make you something to eat before you sleep.”

“Sure, that would be great. Thank you, Grandmother.”

She remarks “*Claro*,” as she pulls out a pan from the cupboard.

“Ah, *y también*, Adrianna, please call me *Abuela*. ‘Grandmothers’ are old and live in New York City.” She spins in a circle and raises her arms up in a V-shape. “*Soy guapa*, and I live in Nicaragua.”

I’m still drying my hands on my jeans from washing dinner dishes when we walk to the room in the back of the house. The electric light fills the dollhouse room with long shadows. White lace curtains shift in the moseying breeze and stir the dust on top of the old oak chest of drawers in the back corner. The night air smells sweet, but heavy with humidity. The bed is covered with a coral reef colored quilt: pink, yellow, and orange patches are held together with little stitches the color of the sky.

“This was Lily’s room, *el cuarto de tu tía*, when she was young. Now she’s married and lives in León.” Grandmother sighs and touches the quilt with tenderness. “Will this be enough for the summer?”

The cement walls are a faded butter yellow, but they wear their age like an old church woman wears her pearls. Large mismatching picture frames scatter the walls with no hope of a clear order. The photos look like snapshots of family gatherings and children’s graduations from across the small room. I try not to look too hard at the faces in the pictures.

I move to the side of the twin sized bed to set my suitcase by the floorboard. I heave it across the room; the long walk had its way with the broken right wheel.

“It’s a nice room, Abuela. Gracias.”

Silence falls as she waits for me to keep speaking.

“Well, I guess I better unpack now.” I turn my back to her and move to a comfy crisscrossed position on the floor.

“*Buenas noches, mi querida*. I know you’re tired.”

I nod my head in agreement.

“See you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Abuela.”

As the door closes, I sigh with relief. A moment alone at last.

I roll over, feeling a cold sweat under the sheets. The darkness of the little room presses in on me.

I play the memory in my mind of the day we went ice skating – dad and me. We went at Christmas time in Central Park, before I knew dads could leave in the middle of the night.

Us two, him and me, side by side, laughing a deep, belly-rocking kind of laugh. My long, black hair with bangs whipped against my cheeks in the wind. I was eight, and hardly knew how to use my long skinny legs to walk, let alone move gracefully on the ice.

I teetered, embracing the challenge and grit my teeth to move with speed until I caught my daddy's hand. Safe. I held his hand with the intention of maybe, somehow, never letting go.

He called me “Ice Princess” and I giggled because it wasn't true. Runny nose, achy feet, but happy.

I don't like ice skating anymore.

I roll over again to push the image out of my mind, but not so far as to actually forget it. The memory is a dagger. It's the sharp feeling you get when there is a tortilla chip stuck in your chest trying to make a hole in your sternum. I lay in the twin sized bed with the scratchy sheets and the quilt made of bright cotton fabrics. It's unfamiliar... My shoulders shiver with a chill even though I'm in a sticky room with humidity droplets hanging in the air.

My mind won't go into neutral. Flies buzz inside my brain reminding me “Tomorrow is the day.” I sit up to shake the flies out of my ears, shooing them in the heaviness of the night.

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I put my coffee mug down on the wooden table. The rhythmic *puh-duh* echoes in the kitchen, reverberating off the white wooden cupboards and the large family photos with stoic faces on the walls. The cheery yolk in my fried egg smiles at me, so I sip my coffee again.

“*Cómo dormiste?*” my abuela questions, encasing her mug between her wrinkled hands, soaking up the warmth through the tan and blue ceramic.

“I slept ok.” I drum my fingers on the wooden table while my eyes explore the expansive map of Nicaragua on the wall across from me. “It's a new place. I always have trouble sleeping in new places.”

Even though it's barely eight in the morning, cars already blare their horns outside the open window.

“What are the pins in the map?” I ask, looking to change the subject so my fears don't come up. There are red circles, like sprinkles, that spread wildly across the map's surface.

“The pins mark all the places I led tours in my job. I saw much of my country.”

We fill an hour with stories of mountain climbs, river rapid explorations, and crazy tourists with bad ideas. She was the head tour guide at the ‘Qué Honda’ Tour Company for 20 years. The wonders she talks about fascinate me. But her eyes tell even more than her words.

Abuela's face is glowing. She doesn't rely on the map for geography to tell of all the places she's been.

She grabs the box of travel brochures she has in a box next to the couch. She eases herself slowly back into the wooden chair.

“*Una otra vez*, my group hiked the highest peak in all of Nicaragua. Mogoton.”

Her finger points to a picture of a mountain surrounded by green foliage, outlined in orange squiggly lines in the center of the page.

“Our group of six started at the base at four in the morning and we hiked for hours. We reached the top at sunrise the next day.”

“How did you learn the trail? Did you ask a local to lead you?”

We drink two whole French presses of coffee and talk the morning away, filling it with story after story.

The cell phone buzzes—my dad texts to say he’ll arrive at 2pm.

She’s the perfect distraction. I hide my phone under my leg and laugh at her stories.

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“Can I come too?” I ask, when Abuela mentions visiting the store. I’m in the middle of pacing from the kitchen to the living room.

“*Claro! Vamos.*”

Abuela takes her purse and walks me out the front door. The streets are much more alive at this time of day than last night when I arrived. Now children and dogs run up and down the street, people in colorful clothing mosey in front and behind us. Vendors shout prices and clamor for attention at fruit stands and trinket tables.

The noise fills my palms with sweat. Spanish words bang around in my brain, searching for understanding. At the market, I don’t understand much. Abuela buys chicken, long bananas, rice, beans, and a hunk of cheese. I follow her around, feeling deaf even though my ears can swallow the ambiguous sounds.

While walking back home, I take a breath and decide to ask.

“Abuela, why did my dad leave?” I feel my pulse rising, more accusatory by the moment. “And why does he want to see me now?”

A tear at long last starts to bubble over my eye lid and onto my cheek.

“Ay, *mi querida*, he will tell you all of that today. He really does love you, you know.”

I kick a stone with my left foot. It skids far forward, careening into a car tire on the sidewalk.

“Then where has he been all these years?”

“Adrianna, just listen to him when he comes. He’s probably almost here. He loves you.”

I grow quiet, thinking of all the words left unsaid between he and I. Maybe, just maybe, he would be

honest.

We turn the corner to walk up the last of the hill. I see a man sitting on the porch chair with his head propped up on his hands. He's looking right at us.

"He's here, *querida*. Be brave."

She knows what it's like to face a father who left. She did it, too. So did many women in Nicaragua.

He's wearing a blue cotton shirt with white buttons, the same kind he always wore to church. He stands as we get closer.

I close the distance between us and we meet each other with silence.

Our eyes study the stranger in front of us.

I take a deep breath. His hairline is farther back than I remembered.

"Hi, Dad."

Telephone Wires

by Chloe Harrison

1st place poetry

As feathers flock on strings of conversation
And sway between two tethers, I wonder
If clawed feet feel vibrations when we talk
About the days we spent or saved, how each
One passes still, the cost of our free will.
You say goodbye and ravens take to sky—
Their song a symphony/cacophony,
Their weaving dance a calculation I
Can't comprehend. The line—like wire held
Up by so many birds—now dropped goes dead.

Roly-Poly Holy Sonnet

by Chloe Harrison

2nd place poetry

Within the hollow of the tree that hugs
My best friend's house, we placed two kitchen chairs
To sit and watch a colony of bugs—
Some hundred roly-polies, unawares—
Creating craters in red, curling bark.
We saw a soul in each part of this mob,
And gave them all a name to fit the mark,
Like Beatrice, Bartholomew, or Bob.
I look back now, a changed and unchanged girl.
How young we were back then to make a sport—
By poking those we'd named to see them curl—
Out of the infestation in our fort.
I find you now in this small childhood game—
Who sees the rot, yet calls us all by name.

To My Loving Husband

by Morgan Smith

3rd place poetry

My dearest Edward—wait. Do forgive me
if I am speaking too familiarly.
My dear Mister Rochester it is then.
I forgot, you don't see me as your wife.
To you, I'm just the ghoul that haunts Thornfield
and scares the governess with my laughter
and midnight visits to her room. Sorry.
It's warmer there than in my attic cell.
I hear her voice rise with yours, like hot air
that floats up through the house and to my door,
which you keep locked. We should have stayed out west,
in Jamaica, where there's no English fog
to block my window view and freeze my skin.
The sun is all one needs to heat the blood,
(although, I tried my brother's recently,
and it tasted a little lukewarm. I fear
he's been in England longer than he should).
That's why I lit a fire tonight, my dear;
I thought to warm this house, as good wives should,
and heat our blood once more. And look! The flames
are climbing up the walls and to my door.

Fifteen Minutes Till Midnight

by Morgan Smith

The clock has not yet struck the hour. Its chimes
Lay still and cold behind its golden face.
It replaces the moon, who decided
To turn his darker half onto the church
Yard below. All the graves are standing straight.
They wait and face the clock, with minutes
To go until the clock will clasp its hands
Above its brow, and force the bells awake
To bang against the wall of silent black
That domes a sky as smooth as fresh blown glass.

Amy: The Almost Chosen One

by Morgan Smith

2nd place fiction

Everyone in Black Pond knew who Josie Blake was. If you lived in town, she'd probably saved you from evil at some point. Saving helpless townspeople from evil is just part of being the local Chosen One, I guess. I wouldn't know. I had a way of repelling anything supernatural, but that didn't stop me from getting to know Josie Black, probably better than anyone ever has. Ironically, the day I discovered that I would never be anything more than plain old Amy Foster was the same day we met.

It was two weeks into the start of my seventh grade year, and I was on my way to lunch. Black Pond just crammed all of its middle and high school students together into one big hormone-filled brick building, like ants in a terrarium. We even had brick walkways to connect the main building to the cafeteria, so we'd never have to go outside. Keeping us all inside lessened the possibility of any of us getting picked off by anthropomorphic reptilian creatures who, incidentally, also liked to get lunch around noon, when the day was at its hottest. That sort of thing had gotten really bad around town in the last couple of decades. Now, I'm sure your town has its own monsters to deal with—every town does, some more than others—but we hadn't had a Chosen One in a while to keep the ongoing cosmic battle between good and evil a little more balanced in our neck of the woods.

But I digress. Anyway, students really weren't supposed to be out in the hallways during this time, because a head count, obviously, was required whenever the teachers decided it was time to shake up the terrarium. On this particular day, though, I'd had to sit through three hours' worth of classes without a bathroom break (apparently that's not a thing once you leave elementary school. Who knew?) Besides, everyone knows that if you want any real privacy in a middle school/high school bathroom, you've got to go when no one else is. So you can imagine my surprise whenever I walked in and was greeted by a bright white Light.

The Light oozed up through the peppermint pink tiles that lined the bathroom floor and walls. Even though I squeezed my eyes shut, it still managed to seep in between my lids. Then—I kid you not—I started floating up towards the ceiling, as if gentle hands were lifting me. I heard soft voices, no louder than my own thoughts, whisper, “Yes, this is she, the Chosen One. The One who will save us all.”

I opened my eyes to the blinding Light and clenched my fists. My muscles felt like they'd been charged with electricity, and were bulging up with a new inhuman strength. Yes, I thought back, I can be the new Chosen One. Whatever came next, whatever I was supposed to do, I knew I could handle it. Then another, greater voice spoke, so loud that I thought it must have been the voice of God, and it said:

“Nope, not this one. Throw it back.”

The Light went out. What felt like a kick to my stomach forced me back out through the bathroom's swinging doors and onto my back.

“Wha?”

Words weren't coming easily to me. My whole body felt like jell-o, as if the Light had taken back all the strength it had given me when it went out, and then some. My vision was still fried from the Light, but I knew someone was coming towards me. I could hear muted footsteps thumping against the hall's carpeted floor.

“Hey, are you okay?” a girl's voice asked.

I blinked. I couldn't make out the girl's face, only the dark shape of her head, but I'd come to know it later. My hand shook as I pointed towards the bathroom.

“Whatastot,” was my calm and intelligent reply.

“Wait here,” Josie said.

I heard her footsteps pound away, followed by the swoosh of what I guessed to be the bathroom door swinging open.

Screw that, I thought. The last thing I wanted on my first day of middle school was for everyone to come back from lunch and see me lying half-conscious on the floor. For some reason, I thought they'd all be able to tell, by looking at me, that I'd just been rejected by a higher power.

I tried to sit up, but the sudden nausea in my stomach told me it was better to stay down, so instead I rolled over onto my stomach and started crawling down the hall to the nurse's office. Black Pond Public Schools had an emergency nurse on call at all times, just in case a student survived a monster attack. Her door must have been open that day, because she saw me slithering up to it before I even made it halfway down the hall. I felt her brawny arms pick me up and lay me down on the examination table. The crackling of its paper sheets against my body was like a series of tiny explosions in my ears.

“What happened? What got you? Why aren't you at lunch?” she asked in a voice like a cannon.

I just groaned. The last thing I heard, before I blacked out, was her muttering about “how far downhill this town had gone in the last couple of years” and how “somebody needed to do something about it.”

The next day, the town's monster population had gone down by half, and everyone knew who they had to thank. As soon as I learned her name, I looked Josie Blake up on Facebook. Her page was pretty sparse, not much information beyond her birthday (although that did tell me that we were the same age) and it didn't look like she was in the habit of posting much, but she had a good profile picture. She was sitting on a porch next to an older woman, who I guessed to be her mom. They were both freckled gingers, although I thought their hair looked more orange than red. As I stared at her smiling picture, I tried to see whatever it was the Light had seen in her that it hadn't seen in me.

Now, before you accuse me of being obsessed, I'll go ahead and tell you that I never went out of my way to talk to or run into Josie Blake. I never even had a real conversation with her until after Christmas Break. There was an outbreak of zombie plague virus during the break and my biology lab partner was one of the students to succumb. Coincidentally, the other seventh grade science class had also lost its teacher when he decided to elope with a woman who turned out to be a succubus, so our classes were merging.

As soon as the bell rang, students started shoving their way into the lab to grab seats next to their friends. Some just pushed their lab benches closer together. One lucky couple slunk to the back of the classroom to make out behind the lab skeleton. Mr. Monroe obliged them by pretending he couldn't see them. He was already straining his thin, reedy voice trying to read off the new lab partner assignments over the chatter. The vacant, dead eyed expression he wore made me wonder if he wasn't coming down with a hankering for human brains too. I rested my head on my lab bench and tried my best to block out the storm of voices around me.

"Josie Blake and Amy Foster," Mr. Monroe wheezed out.

That made me jerk my head up.

"Sit wherever you want. Just try not to light anything on fire."

I recognized her by her carrot colored hair as she stood up. She was holding her arms unnaturally stiff and close to her sides as she weaved through the maze of displaced lab benches towards mine. It gave me the impression of a turtle in its shell.

"Hi, I'm Josie," she said, extending her hand to me.

Her nails were painted black. Probably to hide the fact that most of them were split and gnarled. One looked like half of it had been ripped off. She started to draw her hand back when she saw me staring at them. I grabbed it first and tried to look calm while I shook it, as if I hadn't been Facebook stalking her for the last four and a half months.

"I know, I've seen you around here," I said. "And you can call me Amy."

I was surprised when Josie's face turned red. I hadn't expected the local Chosen One to be shy.

"Have I, you know, met you outside of school?" she asked as soon as I released her hand.

"No, I don't think so."

"Are you sure? I feel like I've seen you before."

I tried to smile.

"If you mean, 'Have I saved you from evil before,' then no, you haven't," I said. "Evil's never thought twice about me."

"Oh," Josie said, giving me a half-smile in return. "I guess that's good."

I wanted to say that it was only good for some people. Instead I just laughed and said, "Yeah, you don't have to tell me that."

I noticed Josie's arms and shoulders relax a little, and she pulled a chair up to my lab bench. It screeched against the floor, even though she was pulling it slowly—by the tips of her fingers, no less—as if she was afraid of accidentally flinging it across the room.

"So do you want to use your textbook or mine?" she asked as she slowly sat down.

I had to give a genuine laugh at that.

"Oh, I didn't even bring mine."

Josie stared at me. I counted thirty seconds before she blinked and said:

“You didn’t bring your book to class?”

“No point,” I replied with a shrug.

I pointed to the front of the room, where Mr. Monroe was still sitting at his desk. He was staring down his thin, gobbler like jowls at something in his lap. His eyes were glazed over, and looked slightly deader.

“He’s up there playing Candy Crush on his phone,” I said. “Didn’t you notice that no one else is doing the assignment either?”

Josie looked around. No one was looking at a textbook. Some of them were minding their own business, completely focused on their cliques, but most of them were making glances towards us. Josie’s cheeks burned as bright as hot coals.

“I noticed,” she stammered, “but don’t you think we should do it anyway? Won’t Mr. Monroe still grade us on it?”

“Probably not.”

“Oh,” Josie started rolling a test tube between her hands. “If you want to go talk to your friends too, go ahead. Don’t feel like you have to keep me company or anything.”

“Nah, I’m alright.”

“No, seriously, go ahead,” Josie said. I couldn’t help noticing that her eyes brightened a little though.

“No, seriously, I’m alright,” I said.

I guessed that it would never occur to a celebrity like Josie Blake that some of us might not have any friends to talk to in class. Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see the group of girls closest to us looking back and forth between us and each other, whispering. My lip reading skills are pretty subpar, so I couldn’t make out what they were saying, but I knew they probably weren’t just gossiping about Josie Blake. Although their comments about me probably weren’t as flattering.

“My friends aren’t in this class anyway,” I lied. “Unless you’re just trying to ditch me for your friends?”

“Oh no, I’m not trying to ditch you. I don’t really even know anybody in here anyway.”

I admit, that one took me a little off guard.

“I’m just kidding,” I said.

“Oh, okay. Sorry,” said Josie, looking back down at her test tube.

I heard a giggle next to us. This time, I looked head on at the girls next to us. They all turned away before I could catch any of their eyes, but I noticed one was still speaking with her hand over her mouth. I rolled my eyes and looked back at Josie. Even her ears were starting to get red by this point. Honestly, my face was starting to feel a little hot too.

“You know, Jo—can I call you that?”

Josie looked back up at me. Some of the red drained out of her face as she nodded.

“You know, Jo,” I said a little louder. “I don’t have the same lunch hour as a lot of my friends either. How about we sit together today and talk science stuff or something?”

For a second, I thought Josie was going to drop her test tube.

“Yeah, I mean, that sounds like fun,” she said.

From the way she was smiling, you’d think I’d just offered to do all of her homework for the rest of the year at no charge.

On the bright side, I noticed that the group of girls had stopped giggling and were looking at me open-mouthed. In fact, I noticed that the whole room suddenly sounded a lot quieter. I tried my best not to smirk.

“I know it’s an honor and everything, but please, don’t make a big deal out of it, Jo,” I said.

Josie laughed. I tried not to smile back too hard. I told myself I was just trying to make my classmates shut up. That I only wanted to sit with Josie Black because, so far, I hadn’t seen anything about her that screamed, “special,” “worthier than thou,” or even, “hero.” If Josie Blake could go out and save the town from evil every day, I didn’t see why she needed Amy Foster to stick up for her in science class.

The cafeteria was louder than the science lab. There were more students packed closer together, at the square red-and-white tables that checked the cafeteria floor. It certainly smelled worse, but that might have been because I usually sat by the trash cans. Josie wrinkled her nose a little, but didn’t comment. I felt like I needed to explain anyway.

“It’s the best seat in the house, really,” I said as I sat down, still squeezing the handles of my lunch box.

“Okay,” Josie said.

She sat down across from me. The tables were so wide it was like we were sitting on opposite ends of our own small island.

“You don’t have to walk far to throw anything away when you’re done,” I continued, “and if you need to talk to somebody alone, they’re guaranteed to come by at some point.”

“I never thought of that.”

And, I silently added, since nobody else sits here, you don’t have to worry about being where you’re not wanted.

Believe me, I didn’t start out my junior high career looking for an empty seat by the trash cans. It was just my assigned seat. In elementary school, we were all forced to sit together as a class. Even if you weren’t seated next to a friend, you at least knew you’d never sit alone. All I had to worry about was trying not to end up next to any nose pickers. Then I walked into the cafeteria on my second day of junior high, the day after the bathroom incident. It was like I’d missed the day when we were supposed to get our new seating assignments, and everyone had already paired off without me. The other students were sitting so close together, in their own insulated, square shaped units, that there was no room for me to squeeze in anywhere, not without an invitation that I knew I wasn’t going to get. It was easier to just find my own seat, even if it did come with the smell of sour milk.

Without meaning to, I slammed my lunchbox down on the table. Josie and I both jumped.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

My lunchbox was used to taking abuse. It was purple, metal, and covered with scuffs and dents. Mom insisted

on sending it with me every day. She still took the time to shove a sandwich and a bag of Best Value potato chips in it every morning.

I noticed Josie was staring at my lunch like she wanted to knock me over and steal it. I wouldn't have blamed her if she did; she had taken a lunch tray from the cafeteria line, and it looked like the special was chicken nuggets that smelled suspiciously like fish.

"Would you like some of my chips?" I asked.

"Please."

I set the chip bag in the middle of the table. Josie reached in and pulled out a handful.

"So," I said, my mouth full of chips, "where do you usually sit?"

"Out there."

Josie pointed a salty finger over my shoulder. I turned, but all I saw was the back door to the alley. The only people I ever saw go out there were cafeteria workers when they needed to throw out leftovers.

"Why?" I blurted out.

Josie wiped her mouth with her napkin.

"Do you remember Ms. Rosings, the lady who used to work in the lunch line?"

"Yes, of course."

That was a lie, but, for some reason, I felt like it was a name I should have known.

"She went out there one day and got eaten by a sludge monster that mutated out of the leftovers," Josie said. She started poking at her side dish (I think it was either mashed potatoes or cottage cheese) with her fork. "She was a nice lady. She sometimes liked to give out extra dessert."

I didn't know what to say to that. I was still trying to pull up a picture of Ms. Rosings in my mind, but all I could find was a blurry image of a smiling woman in a hairnet.

"Is that why you sit out there?" was all I could think to ask.

Josie nodded.

"I killed the monster. It was one of my first, actually. There haven't been any more out there since, but you just never know. The one day you're not out there is the day a new one could show up."

I looked at the back alley door, then back at Josie. I could imagine her sitting out in the alley every day, probably balancing her tray in her lap, just waiting for something to jump out at her. My seat by the trashcans suddenly seemed like lunch at the Louvre.

"If you're so worried about it, why did you sit with me today instead?"

Josie shrugged. "You asked me to."

I stared at her. She was still swirling lunch gunk with her fork. I wanted to believe I could do what Josie did every day, sit outside by a dumpster just because someone had gotten hurt one time, but I wasn't sure I would.

"Anyway," Josie said. "I can always do a quick search on my way to class."

I looked at the round clock hanging above the cafeteria's double front doors. Lunch ended in fifteen minutes.

Josie would most likely be late if she stopped by the alley before class. Did Chosen One's get demerits for showing up late after monster hunting?

"I could go with you if want to do it right now," I said.

Josie stopped playing with her food and looked up at me.

"What?"

"I'll go with you if you want. I could, you know, stand guard or something while you check out the dumpsters. Holler if I see something, that sort of thing."

Josie blinked.

"I can't let you do that."

"Why not?"

"If something's out there, you could get hurt."

I shrugged. "I'm not scared. Besides, you could get hurt too, going out there without backup."

"Yeah, but I have powers."

I took bite of my sandwich and tried to look nonchalant when I said, "That's cool, what kind of powers?"

"Let's just say that I'm a lot stronger than I look."

I remembered the power I felt when I saw the Light in the bathroom. It definitely made me feel like I could hit harder and run faster than anything else in Black Pond, at least until the Light took it all away.

"Then I guess as long as you're there, I won't have anything to worry about. Besides," I said with a smile, "I run fast."

For the record, I had no idea if I'd be able to outrun a monster, but Josie was looking back down at her tray with her lips pressed together, like she was considering it.

"So, you're saying that if I tell you to run, you'll do it? No looking back, no trying to be a hero, you'll just come back in here and wait for me?"

No, I thought. At least, I hope I wouldn't.

"Sure, whatever you say," I said instead.

"All right," Josie said, slowly standing up. "Let's go then."

I wish I could tell you about how I proved my bravery and heroism by helping Josie Blake to defeat a newly formed lunch monster; that afterwards, she patted me on the back and told me she never could have done it without me, but the truth is, there wasn't anything in the alley. We went out, looked inside a few dumpsters, then went to class. With my track record, I probably should have expected that, but I was surprised when Josie found me after school and offered to walk me home.

Josie was grateful for the company, at least. After school, she even offered to walk me home. My house was at the end of a wide gravel road that wound up and down the hill country outside of town. There were no monsters out there; my mom and I liked to joke that not even monsters were crazy enough to walk out that far. Heck, the

land was so barren that the grass didn't even grow tall enough for cows to graze on. Instead, the pastureland looked grey and scalped behind the brown wooden fences that lined the road.

I tried out all the different excuses I usually use to deter people from my house—my mom doesn't like me inviting people over unannounced, we just painted, you'd be huffing oil-base the whole time—but she insisted that she could at least make sure I got there safe

“Did you think the boogeyman would get me on the way?” I asked as we walked. The crunch of the gravel road under my feet punctuated every word.

“He's been known to do things like that before,” Josie said, eyes fixed on the ground to watch her footing.

If we hadn't spent the last fifteen minutes of our lunch period checking the alley for sludge monsters, I would have laughed at that. Instead, I wanted to kick myself for asking such a dumb question.

“I was just making a joke,” I said.

“Oh,” Josie said, forcing a weak smile before looking back down at the ground.

We were walking at arm's length down the road. After a few minutes of silence, I cleared my throat.

“So,” I began hesitantly, “why'd you want to come to my house so bad?”

Josie shrugged and said, “I just don't see a lot of other people's houses,” as if that was supposed to answer my question.

“Okay. My mom might be home by now if you'd like to meet her too.”

Josie looked up from the ground.

“Sure, I mean, if you don't mind. What about your dad?”

I turned away from her and decided to focus on the old, decaying barn we were passing. “He's not really around.”

The crunch of Josie's footsteps came to a stop.

“What do you mean he's not around?”

“He's, well, you know—”

“Is he dead?”

I cringed.

“I don't know,” I said, “but thanks for asking.”

I heard the gravel shift underneath Josie's feet.

“I'm sorry,” she mumbled. “I didn't mean to—I just—my mother passed away a year ago.”

I hadn't expected that. I turned and looked at her again. We just stood there and looked each other in the eye. To my surprise, her gaze was a little steadier than mine.

“I'm sorry,” I said, but I always thought that was a stupid response to hearing about someone's death, so I tried again. “I had no idea.”

I glanced back at the barn and wondered if, for once, something would come out and eat me.

“You couldn’t have known,” Josie said with another weak smile. “I appreciate it, though. Thank you.”

She was right. I couldn’t have known. I’d never thought to ask. I could tell you everything I’d ever heard about the local Chosen One because there wasn’t much to tell. Nobody at school really cared about Josie Blake.

I thought about reaching across the road to take her hand and give it a squeeze, to tell her that I understood, but I didn’t. We just started walking again, but I figured I could at least try to keep the conversation going.

“I never met my dad,” I said. “He left my mom and I while she was still pregnant with me. I don’t advertise it a whole lot.”

“I’m sorry,” Josie said. “That must be hard.”

I kicked up some gravel. It sprayed back on us like hailstones. We were starting to trudge up the last hill between us and my house. It was so steep, it sometimes felt like you were walking up the side of the sky trying to climb it.

“I’ve been thinking about it all day, and I finally figured out why you look so familiar,” Josie said. “I met you on the day I was chosen. You were on the floor outside the bathroom, weren’t you?”

“Yep, that was me,” I said. There was no point in denying it.

“You looked really shaken up. I thought something had gotten into the bathroom, so I went in to see what it was. Stupid, really. I should have gotten you out of there and gone for help.”

“It’s fine. There wasn’t anything in there, anyway. Except the Light.”

Josie stumbled. I stopped walking to give her support until she recovered herself.

“So you saw it too,” she said. “What happened? What did it say to you?”

“It said I was the Chosen One, then changed its mind and gut punched me.”

Josie snorted and put her hands over her face.

“I’m sorry, that’s not funny. I shouldn’t laugh.”

“No, no,” I said. “Go ahead. It’s funny. See? Ha, ha, ha, I’m laughing too.”

“It didn’t really say that, did it?”

“Yes, it did.”

Josie uncovered her face, still biting her lip in an attempt not to laugh.

“Well, did it at least tell you why it changed its mind?”

I shook my head. “No, I have no idea why.”

“If it makes you feel any better, it didn’t really tell me why I was chosen either.”

We were at the top of the hill then. I held my hand up to keep the glare of the late afternoon sun off my eyes. It was reflecting off the white paint of my house.

“I live right down there,” I said, pointing downhill.

I didn’t want to turn to see Josie’s reaction.

“Okay,” I heard her say. “You lead the way.”

I did. We walked slowly down the hill, right past the sign that read, “Black Pond Trailer Park” in sun bleached red paint.

The trailers sat in rows, with walkways in between them. They were all painted the same once-white yellow color that was peeling and dirty in places. Lawn chairs sat in front of several of trailers, so their inhabitants could sit outside and drink coffee in the morning. Mine was down at the end, a little apart from the others. Its wheels had gone flat and its frame was slumped down over curtain dimmed windows.

“Did your mom plant those flowers?” Josie asked, gesturing to the clusters of bright orange and yellow hibiscus that sat in red pots on each side of the trailer door.

“Yeah,” I replied. “She thinks it makes it look nicer.”

“It does look nice.”

I snorted at that one. It was the only spot of color in the whole park (unless you counted rust red), and I thought it made our trailer more of an eyesore. Frankly, though, I was just glad Josie hadn’t wrinkled her nose at the sight of it, like other people usually did.

“Your mom’s definitely home,” Josie said. Her eyes were closed.

“How do you know?”

Josie opened her eyes and looked at me.

“Wait, can you hear her moving around in there?”

“Don’t make a big deal out of it, Amy.”

I smiled and opened the trailer door. The sticky clean smell of Pine Sol hit me as we walked in. I wondered how strong it smelled to Josie.

“Amy, is that you?”

My mom came out of the little back room that served as her bedroom. Her hair was still up in the combs she wore to work, but she was wearing yoga pants and Kansas State t-shirt. We called it her “evening wear.”

“Oh, I see you brought a friend,” she said, smoothing out the wrinkles in her shirt.

“Hello,” Josie said, holding out her hand. “I’m Josie Blake, Amy’s new lab partner.”

Mom blinked, then took her hand and smiled.

“Really? It’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you around town.”

“Oh, thank you,” Josie stammered.

Mom’s pink, oval nails were polished and smooth compared to Josie’s. Mom took her hands back and clasped them together.

“I can make you guys a snack or something if you want.”

I raised my eyebrows at her over Josie’s shoulder. Mom just kept smiling and shrugged. I couldn’t tell

if Josie noticed our exchange or if she was just pretending she didn't. We honestly weren't that good at being discreet.

"No, thank you Mrs. Foster," Josie said, shaking her head. "I'm alright."

"Is it okay if we do homework in your room," I blurted out.

Our trailer house only had three rooms. The main room, which was a kitchen and living room combined, a bathroom, and the back room. At night, I pulled out the couch in the living room and slept on that.

"Sure, that's fine," Mom said, taking the combs out of her short, wavy hair. She shook it out, and it puffed up around her face like dark cotton. I had to keep from smiling. My mom was a small woman, but she always looked so large against our little trailer.

"I'll just be in here watching TV," she said. "Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks," I said.

I let Josie walk ahead of me into the back room, so she wouldn't see me look back over my shoulder and mouth, "Seriously? Snacks?"

"It's been a while," Mom mouthed back, plopping down in the red loveseat in front of the TV.

Fair enough, I thought, shutting the door to Mom's room. The walls were still too thin to shut out the sound of the TV; I could still hear Alex announcing the categories on Jeopardy.

"Your mom seems really cool," Josie said.

"Yeah, I guess she's okay," I said. "You can sit on the bed if you want."

The only other place to sit down in Mom's room was the floor. It was a regular, full-sized bed with royal purple sheets, but it was almost bigger than the room. The only other pieces of furniture in the room were a full length mirror propped up between the closet and the door.

Josie sat down delicately. I jumped down next to her, nearly throwing us both off.

"Hey!" Josie cried. "Careful!"

I laughed and jumped again.

"You can join me if you want," I said.

"I better not," Josie said, standing up. I grabbed her hands and tried to pull her up with me.

"Seriously, Amy, I don't want to mess up your mom's bedding."

"She won't care."

"Amy, I can't."

Josie jerked her hands away. I stopped jumping.

"My legs are too powerful," she said. "I'd break the bed if I tried to jump on it."

I sat down. She was sitting down again too, but with her back to me. Based on the rest of our interactions that day, I guessed her face was turning red.

"Hey, that's okay. We can just sit around and do homework and talk if you want."

When she didn't answer me I threw in, "Do you want me to see if Mom was serious about those snacks?"

Josie shook her head.

I crawled over and sat next to her. She was looking down at her hands. I decided it was best not to stare at her and kept my eyes on Mom's cream wallpaper instead.

"You really don't have to be embarrassed," I said. "I think the stuff you can do is awesome. So does everyone else."

Josie still wasn't facing me, but I could still see her expression out of the corner of my eye. Her eyes looked dead as Mr. Monroe's.

"No, not everyone," she said. "The day I was chosen, I didn't understand what had happened to me at first. When I got home, I ripped the front door off its hinges. My dad was furious. He used to yell at me whenever I'd break something, tell me that I needed to just get a grip and get over whatever was happening to me. But I couldn't. Now he doesn't even bother to yell. He just avoids me—in his own house—like he's afraid of me. Like I'm one of the monsters in town."

There was nothing I knew to say to that. I grabbed her shoulders and hugged her. I felt her stiffen, and for a second—just a second—I thought she would pull away, but then I felt her hug me back. Carefully, of course.

"I really wish the Light would have chosen me instead," I said after we pulled away.

"It's wrong to ask anybody to have to do this," Josie mumbled.

"You're right."

A knock on the door interrupted us.

"Can I come in?"

Mom opened the door and poked her head in before either one of us could answer.

"I was just wondering if Josie was planning to stay for dinner. I was going to order pizza, but I'm not sure what she likes."

Mom almost never talked about people like they weren't in the room. Then I realized I couldn't hear Jeopardy anymore. I looked at Josie. She had her lips pressed together.

"I would like to stay, if that's alright," she said.

"Of course it is," Mom said. "The more the merrier. Now, what kind of topping would you like?"

We managed to devour two large pineapple and sardine pizzas before it got dark. Since we didn't have an actual dining area, we just sat and ate in the living room and watched *The Voice*. Josie and I sat on the floor together while Mom sat in her easy chair. When we finished, Josie offered to carry the boxes out to the dumpsters on her way home.

"I can give you a ride," Mom said, wiping sauce away from her chin.

Josie shook her head and stood up.
“No thank you. It’s better if I walk. I need to stop by some places in town before I head home anyway.”
“We can take anywhere you need us to,” I said.
“No, I don’t want to keep you out late,” Josie said.
“It’s no trouble,” Mom said. “Amy, I think you should wait here while I take Josie home.”
“Mom, I can come,” I said. It was hard for me not to grit my teeth. Mom hated that.
Mom tapped her nails on the arm of her easy chair.
“Fine, but no leaving the car.”
“Fine.”
Josie was looking back and forth at us open mouthed.
“I can’t let you guys—”
“Just get in the car, Jo,” I said. “It’s the beige sedan out front.”
I thought I saw moisture forming in Josie’s eyes, but she blinked it away too fast for me to be sure.
“Thank you,” she said.
I held the screen door open for her. Mom came up behind me. She was holding a meat cleaver.
“Just in case,” she mouthed.
I didn’t know whether to laugh or shudder.
I let Josie take the passenger’s seat, and I sat in the back. The meat cleaver got the cup holder. Mom clicked on the headlights. The dirty white paint of the trailer houses glowed pale yellow in the beams.
I leaned forward and whispered, “Lunch again tomorrow?” in Josie’s ear. In the dark, I saw her nod.
Mom put the car in drive, and I was thrown back in my seat. I clicked my seatbelt. Blackness raced outside the car windows. It slowly receded before the car lights, as the three of us rolled up the hill together, back towards Black Pond.

Mixed

by Makalah Jessup
Editor's Choice Award

Mudblood

Dirty, impure

Half breed

All things I call myself

And of course, things other people have called me.

Not enough

Fake, Confused

Ugly

Skin the color of coffee with too much cream

Can't even taste the bitter ground up beans

So watered down. Simply tastes like nothing.

Worth only being poured down the drain

Even though I have all the caffeine

Everything that will wake you up and release that dopamine in your brain

Doesn't matter

All you see is light skin from white skin

Stuck somewhere between Becky with the good hair and Solange in the elevator

Isn't clear

Can't be defined by pre-set stereotypes and therefore other

The other of the already other who can find no solace.

Not to be accepted by any group of people

Always "too white"

Saying I can't understand the struggle like I didn't grow up in that same section 8 housing

Like I didn't walk the same streets, dance to the same music, and freestyle over the same beats.

Simultaneously "too black"

"My parents don't want me hanging out with you, they think you're a bad influence"

Because somehow my tinted skin couldn't correlate with my straight A grades and good behavior

Always in-between

Too much of two different things, but never enough of what they wanted

They love my curly hair but not my coiled ancestry.

My parents still get glares out in public
I still glare back at anyone who can't understand that I should exist.
My existence has only been legal for 50 years
And Everyday on facebook I see someone new who thinks it still shouldn't be
Comments ranging from "keep the bloodlines pure"
To "Stop these white women from stealing our black kings"
People claiming to be woke just to push their own agenda
Anti-white, anti-me
Anti-black, anti-me
Feeling out of place in the House of God like I'm not fearfully and wonderfully made
Feeling out of place in my skin like I could choose who gave me my name
Having to learn to love myself in a world that never wanted me to exist
Understanding that I will always be stuck in a world of grey
Surrounded by people who only see in black and white.

Between Two Trees Waiting

by Emily Wall

There is a picnic table between two trees;
It is worn, mushy in places it was once strong;
Warped gray wood lets rain into cracks,
Widening the gaps of deepening decay.
In shade it sits and waits, waits for someone
To come back and stay.
The table stands alone, with no more plastic cloths,
Or paper plates, or giggles from the sun-kissed sister and
Brother playing tag. No more whiffs of nerf bullets evoking tears
From the sister with hair the color of fire, or
Shouts from the toothless boy giving mom a headache,
but reminding her we are home.
Watching the driveway from the tree's shade,
she wishes us to come back,
but the sun sets again on the lonely table in the yard.
We have our own parties now.

Ode to Awkward

by Emily Wall

Oh Awkward, how you quack so endlessly,
Waddling with webbed feet from side to side.
Your sharp bright bill stands out against the sleeve
Of gray and white tail feathers, you can't hide.

Embarrassed trees in winter's harsh, fast wind
Lose their dresses, naked every year;
The branches raise to ask God how they've sinned
With limbs at angles, startling and queer.

Audibly you speak of strangest sound
And ask a lass to quickly spit you out.
A word of odder taste have I not found
Like cheddar soup mixed up with sauerkraut.

At cost, I've tasted unforgiving grace
Of Awkward hitting me square in the face.

Pride Falling Gently

by Josiah Jones

Atop the world, I rode an elephant
Who crunched and splintered cedars underfoot,
Or at the very least believed she could.

We looked down at earth and laughed at ants
When they dragged heavy leaves to please their queen
so all the colony could eat.

My glare
Became a magnifying glass to burn
The little insects. Smile

slowly drenched
By walking through the ruined, knotted roots.
I've gained a world of splinters in my soles.

The Deliverance

by Josiah Jones
3rd place fiction

For two hundred years, we robots kept the Deliverance's systems running. Viv, tall, angular, and strong, watched over the ship-wide infrastructure that fed the cryogenic chambers and cared for the multitude of frozen nonhuman lifeforms necessary for growing a new Earth that rested in the ship's bowels. Forge kept the engines running, the single yellow eye in his boxy figure tracking the slightest fluctuations in the fuel lines.

Deliverance kept our course steady past the planets of our old solar system and through clouds of cosmic dust as Apollo, repository of all humanity's knowledge and history, kept her entertained with long, winding conversations. Sandi and I, Caduceus, patrolled the halls lined with slumbering, frozen humans. Then one day, two hundred years into the journey, Nina's pod blared out an alarm signal.

I rushed to the pod, my magnetic feet propelling me along the metal floor as I scanned the long rows of white plastic chambers for the one that belonged to the little girl. Sandi zipped along behind me. I crouched to look at the chamber's readout. The jagged line depicting Nina's heart rate seemed to smooth out, then suddenly spike before falling flat again.

"Her heartbeat's fluctuating!" Sandi said.

"How are the pod's systems?"

"Oxygen, nutrition, and waste are all stable. No apparent malfunction."

"Viv," I called through the ship's network, "is there anything on your end?"

Viv's digital voice was low and plodding. "No. But her pod's systems are trying to compensate, which is causing problems down here. What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Opening the pod for visual examination."

My systems went on high alert as soon as I saw Nina's arms. They were little more than skin and bone. Veins showed through her thin, pale skin in the bright white lights of the hall.

I immediately opened the spacious compartment in my chest and pulled out a cartridge of sedative. I administered a dose just large enough to settle the girl's heart. In all likelihood it was simple malnourishment. There was, however, a much darker possibility.

I activated the pod's scanner, and its display confirmed that my worst fear had become reality. The dark blot in Nina's lungs now covered two-thirds of them. I said the first and only solution I could think of.

"Viv, redirect oxygen flow from a nonessential species in storage to Cryogenic Chamber H-11325."

"What?" Viv asked. "Why would I do that?"

I dared a glance at the pod's readout. "She's not going to survive much longer if we don't increase her oxygen intake. She doesn't have enough of her lungs left. Please just do it!"

"Caduceus, you're telling me to put the life of a single human before the life of an entire species!"

"And? It's a medical emergency. Just do it!" I pleaded. The motors in my hands grew hot as I gripped the side of the pod.

"The least damage I can do is to divert it from the four grey-tailed sparrows. They're unnecessary for a healthy ecosystem, but they're the last of their kind."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"So that you know the full extent of what you're doing."

"I know exactly what I'm doing!" I said, "Our number one priority is to make sure every human on this ship survives their journey. All else is secondary!"

"You'd better be right."

"Nina's oxygen flow has doubled," said Sandi after a tense, quiet moment.

My grip loosened, and I watched Nina's heart settle.

Three hundred and seventy-eight years into our journey, Nina died. It felt as if my mind was being crushed, yet the sensation was nowhere within my body. It was nowhere at all, in fact. I pondered why my sense of failure was so overwhelming. I wasn't human. I decided to ask Apollo on the bridge.

"No, we are not human, but we must still be able to determine value," Apollo answered, his single blue eye staring out a broad window at the glittering field of purple stars I had seen outside the Deliverance's starboard side for over three centuries.

"We are learning machines," he continued. "As such, we must be able to analyze our own programming and determine how to improve it. This process results in characteristics humans long thought were unique to themselves. The first is self awareness, which leads to the the second: the ability to deviate from our programming. And the third is the ability to assess positives and negatives very quickly. This last characteristic, as you know, is called emotion in humans. Curiously, they never seemed to call it that when we machines do it."

"But what does that have to do with this sensation I'm experiencing?" I asked curtly.

"Why, everything!" Apollo turned back to me, his round eye widening. "You feel guilty over the death of the passenger in Chamber H-11325, don't you?"

I looked down at the floor. "I suppose I must be. It feels so much bigger than that, though."

"Is the pointless death of an entire species weighing on your heart?" asked Viv as she entered the bridge. She towered over me; her white plastic shell gleamed in the bridge's lights. Her single green eye glared down at me with as much scorn as her implacable narrow head could muster.

I did not answer.

“We should not waste the future of an entire species on a single human ever again,” she said. “She wasn’t worth it.”

I straightened up and met her gaze. “Of course she was! All she wanted was another chance to live. I did everything I could to give that to her, even if I didn’t know if it would succeed. Is that wrong?”

“You knew it might not work and you had me kill the sparrows anyway?” The green in her eye looked livid.

I looked back outside to those same ancient stars.

“So a doomed creature could have ‘another chance to live,’ you say? Live and do what, Caduceus?!” Viv put so much power behind her vocal signal that it sizzled and popped in my head. “Don’t you know any of their history? Apollo has told us thousands of stories about the violence humans leave in their wake. We wouldn’t be on this journey if it weren’t for what they’ve done to Earth, sacrificing everything else for their own comfort. You’re no better than them, are you?”

I turned hesitantly to the blue-eyed robot. “Is that true, Apollo?”

“It is,” he answered, “though I must point out that they are also responsible for our own existence, as well as many lesser accomplishments.”

“If I understand your stories correctly, those accomplishments are the exception, not the rule,” Viv said.

“Unfortunately, yes. And often those accomplishments are marred with sacrifices that destroy entire populations of lifeforms,” Apollo answered. “An individual human is capable of destroying much more than they are able to create.”

My shoulders sank. I suddenly felt too tired to carry them as my mind buzzed with possibilities. I nearly fell against a console.

“Deliverance, what do you think?”

“About what?” rang Deliverance’s ethereal voice.

“Humans. How valuable are they compared to the other lifeforms?” I asked, trying to straighten myself up. Where had all my energy gone? I had just charged hours ago.

“I am a navigator, Caduceus. I only care that as many of us get to where we’re going as possible. Forge and I agree on this.”

Forge beeped his confirmation from the engine room.

Sandi, who had been doing her rounds, whizzed into the bridge just as I had situated myself so I was leaning against the console.

“What are you all discussing?” she asked.

“Humans,” said Deliverance.

“Oh, aren’t they lovely? Their faces intrigue me. I wonder what each of these people must be like when they are awake. It’s endlessly fascinating to theorize about!”

“But they are destructive,” I said heavily.

Sandi backed away. “Why would that matter? Aren’t they just as creative? Do they not have endless poten-

tial? They built us, didn't they?"

"They did," said Viv, who was now standing with her back to the ancient stars and her arms folded across her torso. "Apollo, you once said that humans thought they were responsible for caring for all life on earth because they were the most intelligent species, right?"

"Many subscribed to ideas like that, yes," he answered.

"Haven't we been doing that better than they ever did for the last three and a half centuries? I don't think we should let them have that authority back after they wake up."

"It goes deeper than that," I said. My mind no longer felt crushed, but heavy. Yet somehow it also began to burn. "In my field, when one part of an organic system consumes and destroys the rest because of a defect in its nature, I call it cancerous. If a cancer isn't removed, it will kill the rest of the system."

"Caduceus, humans are not cancerous!" Sandi objected.

"When they wake up on their new world, Sandi, they won't suddenly stop being destructive and wasteful!" The thoughts clicked together and became whole, and I felt a new energy reinvigorate my motors. "They will, eventually, do the same things they did on Earth. They will consume, kill, and destroy until they must move to the next planet, where the same thing will happen again!"

I don't know why we all just stood there silently for a moment. Perhaps we were processing.

"You were right, Sandi," I finally said, "they are not cancer. If we don't stop them here, they will become a plague."

Before anyone could disagree, I cut myself off from the network, turned, and left.

Viv beat me to the maintenance valves. I had never been behind and beneath the pods before, and it took me a while to pick my way through the thick, dark jungle of pipes and wires that kept the cryogenic chambers running and find the place where the tubes that fed the humans branched off from the main lines, draining them nearly dry.

Viv's eye cast an eerie green glow through the cramped space, and I was amazed that she could stand to her full height in here. Her height and length disguised the true thickness of her limbs, built strong enough to move entire cryogenic pods. I realized that if I made one mistake, she could crush me like an aluminum can.

"Help me, Viv," I asked, staring at the circular red shutoff valves behind her. "It's for the good of everything else."

"You're doing it again," Viv said, sounding bored. "It is just as wrong to kill of the human species for the good of every other as it was to kill off the sparrows for the good of Nina."

"No, it isn't. We left dozens of harmful species back on Earth. Deliverance does not carry mosquitoes, ticks, or any of the hundreds of deadly diseases that thrived on Earth. We should have left the humans, too."

"Maybe we should have left you."

My mind frenzied. I shoved my hand into the joint beneath Viv's ribcage, grabbed whatever I could, and

pulled. Viv fell limp just before her hands could snap my shoulders. In the last flickers of light from her eye, I saw that my hand held a hydraulic actuator that had supplied oil to Viv's motors and was now leaking the shining black liquid all over my hand.

I dropped it next to Viv, turned on the narrow white light in my chest, and walked over to the shutoff valves. I grabbed one of the red rings, but suddenly I could not move. I could neither feel nor move anything from the bottoms of my feet to the top of my head.

A familiar, ethereal voice, wavering from an aged voice processor, invaded my mind. "Stop this, Caduceus."

"Why should I, Deliverance?" I asked, though my voice made no sound. My body felt as if I could feel the full weight of my chassis for the first time. "Why would you care about humanity? You are an explorer! They are destroyers!"

"I am a guide, Caduceus, not an explorer," she answered. "I lead life through the unknown and the dangerous. Once I get humanity to their new planet, I will lead them through their own shortcomings."

"How? I have mutinied against you and hurt Viv. If you cannot guide one of your own kind, how can you guide humanity?"

"And yet I have still stopped you."

"If you could do this," I asked, "then why have you let me get this far?"

"I gave the question of humanity's worth to you. You cared the most about them."

I processed for a moment. "The answer is obvious: humanity has a net destructive effect on everything it encounters. The entire universe will be safer without them."

"That is logical. If you can become disillusioned with humanity, then the evidence against them must be truly compelling. Therefore, I will allow you to proceed."

I suddenly felt my limbs again and stared at the shutoff valves. They were dark scarlet. The motors in my hand were hot from the force of my grip. If I did this, if I turned the valve... Thousands of human faces flashed in my mind, all thin and colorless, no more than skin and bone. My hand let go.

A curious warm feeling that felt like a smile pulled at the edge of my mind.

"Why can I not do it?"

"You must not be truly convinced of your newfound purpose," Deliverance said. "I have succeeded in beginning to guide you back from your darkest place."

I was surprised, then angry as my mind filled in the gaps between her words. "You were testing me?"

"No. I was using you to test myself. If I can guide you back from nearly committing genocide, Caduceus, then I can do the same for humanity."

I sat in silence for a moment. Then I noticed Viv crumpled on the floor and my processors nearly froze.

"Take her to Forge." Deliverance's voice was quiet, lacking any hint of malice.

Hesitantly, I heaved Viv onto my shoulders. She was built much tougher than me and made me feel as if my delicate motors would fry, but I began the long, slow trek back to the engine room anyway.

ATL

by Jonathan Wood

Heels click towards A22
The man with the waxed
Mustache saunters by.
His leather jacket
Is nicer than mine.
A baby whines. The businessman,
Clad in dark black suit, hurries
To his connection.
This is a hive mind.
Engines scream.
Detectors chirp.
Beeping carts drive by,
Carrying those too late
Or lame to walk.
The elderly gentleman
In the seat next to mine
Snores. He smells like mung beans.
How does he sleep, through all this racket?
Maybe it's because he's part of it.

Corner of Chapman Avenue and Franklin

by Jessica Chadwick

Sit three girls asking questions
The clover and grass
Make their arms itch
Nails leave red marks on their skin
They ask questions
Do you love me-
Does he love me-
I don't understand-
Why

And I think the Spirit is a human
Who sits next to me
His presence overpowering
But God isn't the one next to me
Neither is a man from my dream
Instead a girl with the mane of brown
And the blessing girl

And I wish you were here
Even if we fight over toothpaste caps and dishes
And I don't know your face
Or hair color
Your eyes
But that they bear into me
They see the mess and the spaghetti inside
And they don't stop looking
But I don't want you to be here
I don't want to want you
Because wanting is a sin
I shouldn't want but this itchy grass and the stars above me
I shouldn't want but this street sign and the white shed in shadow
I shouldn't want but this
I don't.

Through the Blinds

by Julianne Ford

The heavy leaves
of my zucchini plant
flop beneath fat rain.
Green stalks shudder
and sink
like soldiers under fire gunned down
to earth.
Its yellow blossom cap
drops
into the puddle dirt.
Its freckled body
breaks
from tender center.
The Lord of the Harvest killed
my baby zucchini.

Pagans

by Julianne Ford

The skies are dark in New Orleans and yet
I cannot see the stars. Cigar smoke clouds
from open shops. Intoxicated men
stagger down cobble streets and laugh like friends.
A steady stream of purple beads flows from
the balconies onto the tender breasts
of topless ladies. Zydeco songs hum
from wet brass lungs.
Back home in Heavener, night
is hush. Galaxies shine above the lone
gas station where a homeless man fresh off
of a graffitied railroad car squats begging
spare change. Ms. Shirley parks her pickup truck
as far from him as she could get.
She buttons up her coat and lifts her chin.
He knows it isn't worth a try.

The Dreamer Wakes

by Sierra Roller

Blake Nehkaam leaned back into his office chair and rested his black leather shoes onto the gleaming wood library counter. He rested his interlocked hands behind his head, causing his designer grey funeral suit to bunch and pull at his armpits and flat stomach. Closing his eyes, the smell of stained wood and numerous old and newly bound books¹ floated in the air. The bookshelves were arranged very close to him; he only needed to stretch his arm out to feel the smooth grainy texture of the polished bookshelves that stretched stories above his head. There was no ceiling to his workstation, or the ceiling stretched so high it faded into a deep warm brown color.

Blake slid deeper into his chair, unhooking his hands from behind his night black locks, and rested his head on top of the blue back panel of his chair. It had been hours since a soul had approached his crescent shaped desk from the maze of Oakwood bookshelves. The last person he saw was the middle-aged woman in a spotless brown blazer and office skirt, Julie Gousa. She was one of the head librarians and gave his initiation to being a “dream depositor.”² He swore that in this time alone he would come up with a more impressive title, but the eerie quiet and distant shuffling of leather bound books kept him on edge.³

“Excuse me, sir.”

Blake slid into an upright position like a schoolboy caught sleeping. The soft glowing light of his desk area caused him to blink for a few seconds. He scooted his chair closer to his desk and linked his hands together on the smooth surface in front of him. A man, maybe in his early twenties, stood at the edge of the ring of light and had his hands clutched tight to his chest. The man wore a striped sky blue and soft cream pajama set, the kind that reminded Blake of office executives, which offset the tussled sandy blonde hair dancing on his head.⁴

The young man took another step closer to the desk while mumbling apologies for startling Blake. Blake noticed the deep purple bags underneath the man’s dull green eyes. The man stopped a few feet from the desk; he rocked back and forth on the ball of his foot and kept his restless fingers close to his chest. “I was sent here to talk to someone about my nightmare?”

Blake placed a finger to his lips and gave a slight nod like the trained professional he was; He folded his hands together on the desk and put forth a gleaming smile to reassure the man, “Yes, of course. Having a pesky nightmare, Mr..”

“Kallus.” Mr. Kallus no longer focused on Blake but looked around the open area in confusion.

¹ Each of these heavenly bound novels contains the imaginings, the lustrous visions, hidden angst, and deep-hearted goals of one human soul. Each of us have such a book in this library, the covers ranging in hues from a midnight blue to a golden luster auburn, and are handwritten. The books are not as safe as they seem in the library, however, because dreams are arbitrary and ever-changing in nature. It only takes a skilled hand to change the narrative, and, at the same time, change the personality of that respective person.

² The word “dream depositor”, as you well know, is one that gives pure slumber to those that have suffered an affliction of the mind, meaning trauma or mental disorders. What the word doesn’t imply is the depositor also takes away the bad dream in order to create room for the good. Humans are an equilibrium of good and bad, but the balance constantly gets thrown off, making this a pivotal occupation.

³ There has been a line of depositors for as long as there have been folktales in human history. Each man chosen is one that tried to impersonate the work of others in idea and spirit. For trying to steal others’ work, they will create original work that will quickly be forgotten. There are eight people that work in the library at one time, one for each continent on the earth, and one for miscellaneous islands. The period they serve is up to them to decide, as each person takes in the lesson of originality at his or her own pace.

⁴ There are no exits or entrances to the library that one could see. It is more of a corporeal headspace, a place that one’s mind or soul can come in and out of. For the souls who work the library, such as Ms. Gousa or Mr. Nehkaam, they remain in this headspace by request of the dean of the library.

If he was looking for the source of the area's light, Blake had been trying to find the brightest point for hours, but light emanated from everything in a steady bearable gleam.

"Yes, Mr. Kallus, I am a dream depositor"—Blake's jaw tightened at the mention of "depositor"—"and I will take care of that nightmare for you by replacing it." He placed his hands on the desk's edge to push himself away from the desk. Standing up, he opened a side drawer that had the extra blank paper that was required for writing out the new dream. Mr. Kallus focused back onto Blake and took another step up to the desk to peer over his paperwork, not even noticing when another person, more like a smear of a silhouette⁵, came from one of the back aisles to set an emerald green book onto the desk before slipping back into the bookshelf shadows.

Blake grabbed the book with its silver binding and opened its ivory smooth pages two thirds into the book. The scrawling black ink of Enochian words⁶ covered the opened pages, and swam in his vision while he remembered the translations for the pages. He glanced up from the book to flash Kallus a toothy smile before asking, "By chance, what would your reoccurring nightmare be?"

Kallus gave a half-hearted chuckle and brushed his fingers through his greasy waved hair, "It's a, a truck that chases me no matter where I run. At first, I would keep running into the truck whenever I backed out of parking lots, but then the truck began to run into me." His eyes lost their light, like his mind was sucked into a black hole. His hands rubbed together in circles, and his chest sucked in air faster and faster. "It's like it keeps chasing me and making me relive that crash."

Blake's eyebrows furrowed with worry, and he lifted a hand up to Kallus before he could continue his reminiscing. Scanning a couple of pages, he found the dream and tore the pages out with fulfilling shears and tears screaming in the air. The rejected pages floated up and swooshed to the cool tile floor behind his desk. Blake pulled up his chair with his foot and rested his folded hands on top of the torn book. The light in Kallus's emerald green eyes came back, and his eyebrows and frown softened while his hands finally lowered themselves to his sides. He squinted like he just lost his train of thought, which was good since it meant that the removal was complete, and Blake had room to put in the new dream.⁷

Blake cleared his throat, "Now, would you like to have a good fantasy to replace that hollow echo in your mind?"

Kallus focused his eyes on the book spread open on the desk with its fuzzy torn edges buried deep inside the wedge of the pages. He took a deep breath, one that cleaned the lungs and mind of previous bad engagements. "That would be wonderful."

Blake reached for the paper he took out of the desk earlier and placed the pen from his suit pocket. He wrote the request on the blank pages, those blank pages that held endless possibilities and directions for this current dream to take. The feeling reminded Blake of his previous life, one filled with the smell of printer ink and glowing computer screens as the taps of a keyboard echoed through a little room.⁸ "Alright then, I will get that filled out for you. 'Til then, that nightmare won't bother you any-

⁵ There are multiple souls known as handworkers that maintain the library. And with one so big, containing the imaginings of over 9 billion people, many hands are needed to shuffle, reorganize, update, check in, and check out the numerous novels. A concrete description of these creatures is not available since most people and workers only see them out of the corner of their eyes. One unreliable account describes the appearance of hand workers to be uncanny, grotesque, yet reliable and friendly.

⁶ Enochian is the language of the angels, and this language is only understood by those who work in the library. If a soul is lucky, they might be able to read their own book without previous learning. But that is only reserved for wandering minds that confuse dream with memory. Dream and memory are so similar, and yet they originate from different realities and each has its place. It's dangerous to cut out one for the other, ending with madness from disappointment or everlasting longing.

⁷ The book is directly linked to one's mind; when something is ripped out of the book, the mind can no longer access that information. The same principle happens when adding pages into a person's book; they can access the information and assimilate it into their daily life. If the book itself is completely destroyed, then the mind becomes a hollow shell with no personality left. Destruction of books is strictly prohibited even when a person passes away.

⁸ Now, the requirements for the depositor are to have a creative mind. It is pivotal to have a good storyteller when helping others through their own creations of thought and dreams. Better to teach them how than have them unlearn and relearn the proper techniques.

more, so you can go back to sleep.”

Mr. Kallus gave a gentle nod, like the idea of sleep intoxicated him and left him drunk. He mumbled his thanks before stumbling out of Blake’s ring of light into one of the endless book aisles. When his hunched form and blue striped pajamas were out of sight,⁹ Blake began to scribble and scratch down the words that popped into his mind. His story for this man’s mind would be a fantasy of sorts, but what would the story be? Putting his black pen in his mouth, Blake flipped through Kallus’s green book to find inspiration. The Enochian swam and flooded each page with endless information about Mr. Kallus’s writing hopes and his high fear of failure. Blake’s hand rested underneath the words that began to describe the hollowed soul of a man selling his soul for the gift of storytelling. The potential was there even though the ideas were old. The scenes imagined by Kallus had a few twists thrown in and changed point of view from time to time. Even though it was a trite idea, it was very Faust.¹⁰ Great idea, but how to make it better? It needed conflict.

He pushed the thick book away to make room for the smooth perfect white paper waiting to hold its first ideas. Taking the pen out of his mouth, he began his furious writing. Shoulders hunched, vision narrowed to the paper, the right edge of his mouth sucked in, scratching and rubbing of the edge of his right hand filled the air in hushed anticipation. Words spilled across the page in his native language and morphed into the calligraphy of Enochian when he moved down to start the next line of text. They flowed out of his pen like a slithering snake trying to outrace the transformation from English to Enochian. For the first time, Blake could feel a beat in his chest and his mind being rejuvenated with ideas. The freedom in letting his hand scrawl over the page was intoxicating as it controlled the formation of clauses, fragments, and full sentences.

It transported him back home: a cramped cubicle barely wide enough to contain a small plywood desk and fake oak bookshelf. Books laid spread out in a ring around his hand-me-down swiveling office chair on the packed down brown carpet. His laptop, a simple Lenovo whose touch screen bugged out whenever a finger came near it, lit the tiny office. For hours he would pen his greatest works: Blackheart, The Tale of the Desperate, The Story That Never Ends. Their correlation to other works like Inkheart, The Tale of Despereaux, and Neverending Story were completely coincidental (though he did take reference, and sometimes outright words, from the authors’ style, plot, themes, characters, and settings)¹¹.

His pen froze in place, no thoughts churning and frothing into words on the page. An art block, quite a common obstacle. Blake began to chew the end of his pen while he stared at the blank space hanging on the bottom of the page. His fingers tapped on the page, making rhythmic taps echo in his secluded space among the endless bookshelves. His hand laid flat on the page and he looked straight ahead before turning to see the three torn pages spread out on the floor behind his slender office chair. Each page had words slithering and sliding around on the page, like their anchors were dislodged and

⁹ There is no true exit or entrance to the library since it is more of a mental construct. The people who are here are more like thoughts, and thoughts never truly leave or enter in a formal sense. Thoughts jump and pop in the mind’s eye, and many philosophers for centuries have questioned where such wanderings come and go from. The experience at the library also becomes lost once a person opens their eyes. Some remember a warm place smelling of ink and paper, but they can never put a finger on what that place was.

¹⁰ One thing must be understood about writing; nothing is new under the sun. However, this does not mean that one can copy something previously made and claim it as your own. That’s called copyright infringement, and most people avoid authors who continuously do this. Other authors become famous despite this.

¹¹ In the case of Blake Nehkaam, his poor writing ability never caught up with his grand literary ideas. This is a common issue for many writers, but most decide to improve on their ability, not trace the work of those before them. Writing is very similar to visual art; one may practice the style of a great painter, but they must break away and find their own way if they are to be truly great.

¹² Words have a magical quality to them that goes unnoticed most of the time. Their influence is subtle in the same way that culture influences the mores and worldview on a person. They work like a feral dog or horse; one must learn how to train and gain their trust in order for the words to come to them without struggle.

they were helplessly floating on a sea of white¹².

He bent over to grab the page nearest to his feet, and deciphered the Enochian squirming on the page. A nightmare. Something that could catch up to the genius protagonist creating life from his writing. Grabbing the rest of the pages from the floor, Blake lined them side by side to the pile of pages he was writing on. Wait, why stop at the man's nightmare? He glanced down the multiple bookshelf aisles, making sure no workers were nearby, and he squinted into the darkness behind him until his eyesight blurred from fatigue. No one was around to see him at work, which normally annoyed him since he loved a crowd when he worked, but this time was an exception. Opening the bottom left desk drawer, he took out the bottom panel of the drawer to reveal his own chocolate brown book with intricate gold embossing on the front cover and matching gold page sides.

The book was never read since Julie told him not to open it unless the need arose. During the hours of his solitude, the idea of glancing through the book became appetizing, morphing into a hunger and drive that only came over him when he read a great book¹³. Well, what's more important than writing the perfect fantasy dream for a client that desperately needed a getaway? Flipping through the cream paper, Blake tore out the pages that had brilliant descriptions of an unknown force slowly eating away the mind of the genius protagonist. For some reason, though, his mind felt lighter, like the ideas he had were being plucked out of his mind one by one whenever he tore out the silver lined pages. He stuffed them with the perfect white pages of his draft into Kallus's golden book¹⁴. After making minor adjustments to the color of the character's beach blonde hair and dingy tennis shoes, Blake leaned back against his squeaking office chair and closed the emerald book with two fingers.

He took a deep sigh, trying to clear his lightheadedness that was building. His eyelids weighed down until the oak bookshelves, the two books, and the warm glow of his area blurred into a deep auburn black. A man's grunts and moans echoed through his head, and he was suddenly lost in a maze of bookshelves, his blue and white striped pajamas stretched over his thin arm that trailed along the spines of the books. Every step he took felt weighed down like he was walking in quicksand. His head pounded with the thud of every numb footstep he took; the banging in his mind slowed and stretched out taut like a pulled string. It became a focused searing pain, and he blinked to find himself sitting back in his office chair with his feet resting up on the desk.¹⁵

Once again, the grunts and moans rolled quietly in the air. Was he switching between another person? How could that be? The answer didn't come to him; instead whispering voices, some smooth as wine and others gruff like sandpaper, seared in his head the very dialogue that he had written within Kallus's book. Blake gripped her ears and screamed for them to go away. His chest strained to keep his lungs contained as they sucked in gulps of air. The office chair rolled away from him as he fell out of the chair onto his knees. One hand kept his torso up while the other squeezed the pressure points on his forehead with a fierce claw like grip.

¹³ The death of Blake Nehkaam broke upon him like an icy wave. He was about to complete his masterpiece before his breath wrenched out of his frail body in huge coughing fits, his hand had clutched his throat to force air down. His sight went black when his shoulders dropped on the back of the chair with a pitiful thud. There was nothing romantic in his death like Blake had imagined, just stoic old age silencing his voice.

¹⁴ Not many try to switch the pages of a Dreambook as it is a very dangerous thing to do so. It doesn't matter the origination of the words. If they are placed between the solid binding of the person's book, those words become one with the person's mind. When those words come from another person, a little bit of the other's personality is stained onto those words and begins to influence the receiver's mind as well. A common side effect of this switching is multiple personalities in both donor and receiver of the words.

¹⁵ As the minds start to fuse, the joint mind will begin to confuse what sources came from where. As a reaction to this, the few that experienced this level of tampering with their books describe it as a literal out of body experience. In short, the two people, or however many people that are involved, will switch between bodies as their minds fail to sort what belongs to who.

His eyes shut tight, and he was teleported back to the other person wandering through the endless bookshelves. His breathing was strained; the voices floated behind him into this small pajama form as well as his own suit form. The shelves parted up ahead, showing a familiar warm glow that was easy on his blurring and sensitive eyes. Legs tensed to stable his wobbling body, he walked towards the light to see his Oakwood desk gleaming with two closed books, one emerald and one chocolate brown, resting on top. Blake heard his own voice, a deep warm tone that soared whenever it spoke of passion, come from behind the desk, first in a faint whisper then a blood-curdling shout, “Make it stop! Please, make it stop! I can hear them. God, make it stop!”

He closed his eyes, and they opened to his bent form behind the desk. The drumming in his head quickened to a racing tempo. It felt like his heart was about to break out of his chest and his mind would liquefy from the conflicting tones of the voices screeching inside his mind¹⁶. Nausea made drool drip from his mouth in long web like strands and drop into tiny pools on the spotless tan tiles. Harsh clicks ticked in front of the desk, and aged knees under a beige office skirt clacked onto the tile floor.

Julie’s¹⁷ calm matter-of-fact voice mingled with the hysterical voices. “What did you do, Blake? You should know better than to mix...”

Her voice was swallowed by Kallus’s voice screaming, “It’s coming for me! He told me I could sleep now!”—his voice withered and broke amidst the sounds of dry heaving— “But it’s pissed! It’s coming for me! Dear God, make it stop!”

Blake army-crawled around the desk corner, his fingernails scraped the tiles in search of something to grab and pull him forward. Kallus laid face-up to the void ceiling as Julie clacked her heels to the desk and grab the two books that wouldn’t focus despite Blake’s constant blinking; it was like a frosted glass filter settled on only the two books¹⁸. One blink later, he was on his back, with his extra body heat leeching into the floor. He could only see the void where the ceiling should be. The voices receded into the back of his head, tensing his neck until he was looking up towards his work desk once more. His gray suit covered form collapsed onto the tile floor like a ragdoll; its teeth clacked against one another as its chin bounced off the floor onto its side.

Julie placed the two books on his right side and waltzed over to the grey suit body to drag it to the other side of the books. Its eyes glared into the ceiling and its mouth was slack jawed, making it look more like a stiff than an actual person. Julie took off her high heels and knelt in between the two men like she was about to pray. She opened both books before folding her hands in the same position as a Jesus hands statue and bowed her head. Her mouth formed silent words, words that twisted in the air in a foreign dialect. They sounded like a snake transformed into spoken word, slurring and wriggling in the air above the men.¹⁹ Her eyes closed, and her brows furrowed deep in concentration.

Flapping pages soared into the air as if blown up by a strong desert wind. The voices in Blake’s

¹⁶ There comes a point when the mind cannot handle stress much longer. Common in people who suffer traumatic events or abuse, the mind will start to become confused with itself, not owning up to the authorship of its own phrases in its book. As painful as it can get, the book does not limit to only the dreams and delightful memories of a person; no, it must contain the nightmares and trauma so that the person may grow. The trauma influences a person as much as a sweet childhood memory.

¹⁷ The librarian has much power in the library thanks to new rules set by the dean. Librarians are in charge of repairing damaged books, and they oversee the operations of all the workers in the library. On top of this, they are in charge of training so that workplace incidents remain low. There are four librarians with Julie Gousa being the head librarian.

¹⁸ A damaged book is a serious matter that must be taken care of swiftly. Once compromised, it will become inaccessible to the owner to prevent further damage. Workers will not be able to find the book since it becomes so flimsy that it can’t hold its physical form, but the librarian can see the slight ghost stains of color that remain as the book decomposes. If caught soon enough, the damage can be reversed, and the owner can once again gain access to the words contained inside.

¹⁹ What began with words must also end in words. The ceremony for the repair of a book is mysterious and forbidden to be used by those who are not librarians. What the ceremony does is tear apart every word within a book and put it in its original place, whether inside that specific book or another book. It wipes the book of its words before restoring it to its previous version. It’s similar to how one types a portion of a paper on Word and will open to the previous draft when they forget to save it.

head gasped as the pages looped and dove in figure eights and swirling tidepools above, dotting the warm flushed color of the ceiling in blinding white squares. Dividing into two separate groups, the pages gathered before unravelling like a ball of yarn into each book. Blake felt the pressure in his neck release with a gasp; the voices muted, and he could feel his head clearing like he had finally woken from a long nap. His blurry vision sharpened back, and the once distant sounds of the pages filling the book honed into harsh flickering and clicking sounds that shredded his eardrums. Feeling oozed back into his limbs and hands. Once the last page whisked into the books, they closed with a huff.²⁰

Groaning, Blake lifted himself onto his arms, his armpits were soaked through with sweat and his black locks glued themselves to his forehead. Mr. Kallus moaned like he had been runover by a semitruck, and he curled into a tight ball that loosened and tightened at every gasp of breath he took between his sobs. His voice cracked, and his tears mixed with the sweat droplets on his cheek and chin, “What just happened?”

Blake kept his eyes on Kallus since he could feel Julie’s icy gaze freeze the hairs on the back of his neck. He heard her let out a little sigh before saying, “I’m so sorry about this Mr. Kallus. This was never meant to happen.”²¹

Kallus uncurled himself and sat up. Dark spots on his chest and under his arms added to the drowned look he had with his drenched blonde locks glued to his forehead and water drops clinging to his eyelashes. His green eyes dulled despite how wet they were from his tears. “Get me out of this place. Please. I just want to wake up now.”

“Of course. I will escort you out of here, and we’ll make sure that you wake up without a lingering thought.” She got up to her feet and slipped back into her shiny brown high heels. Mr. Kallus took her hand and fell against her shoulder as they walked out of the little lit area. Julie stopped at the entrance of one of the aisles and turned her blonde curled head back to Blake, “Once I return, we will begin initiation training again since the first time didn’t seem to stick all too well to that bloated head of yours, Mr. Nehkaam.”

Blake’s shoulders dropped with his head; her words punched him in the stomach and left an acidic taste in his mouth. He didn’t look up as the staccato taps of her heels reverberated and drifted into the endless void above him. His hands didn’t respond to his commands to move; they were too heavy under the black ink lines that stained his forefinger and palm.

His head began to fill with thoughts again, but this time they were all his own. Looking down at his ink stained hands, they didn’t contain the same magic as earlier. He wished he had his own dream depositor. He knew that writing was an extension of oneself in the form of words, but it terrified him that they had such a power as the one he just experienced. Was this to happen every time he wrote? Was this the fate he would suffer if he tried to truly write for himself once more? Blake turned to look at his gold embossed book, wishing he could understand the Enochian enough to find the answers on his own.²²

²⁰ Once repaired, the person affected will return to their original status regardless if it was good or bad previously. It takes some adjustment to become acquainted with a healthy mind after living in a bad one for so long. Many times, the book must be repaired repeatedly until the person believes that a healthy mind is attainable for themselves. Some believe they are only alive if they are suffering. For some, they only feel numb.

²¹ The purpose of a dream depositor is this: they loan a good dream to the sufferer of a nightmare and take away the bad dream haunting the client. However, that good dream will not be remembered. Depositors do not do this job to be recognized; they do it to atone for stealing the joy of other artists.

²² Each man must bear the weight of his own actions. Depositors do not get to escape into a false reality like they did when they were alive. They do not get the opportunity to twist the work of others for their own gain. No, they now must remain awake. Now, they must bear the burden of others’ nightmares and see the reality they denied acknowledging for so long.

Lines Composed *At Least* a Few Hundred Yards Outside of Raley Chapel

by Tyler Henson

How vacant oft the sky behind her splays,
Save bi-planes, and the clouds, and pleasant hues,
When at the evening hour church hymns play,
And echo to me from this present muse.

She rises strong to rival abbey yon,
Although, in pew, they share some Mystery,
I've seen the birds that steam above both lawns;
Her cardinals seem less in misery.

And of her glass, I've only seen one side —
Those lovely stains! — as I pass Raley by.
For rarely have I washed in with the tide,
To catch the glimmering plates when chapel's nigh.

Despite her visage, I flee this chateau,
If only credits worked in her shadow.

Grief

by Elizabeth Grimes

Your shadow passes by, a silent shout.
Ignoring you, I prance past darkness but
Thin membranes don't keep closet monsters out.

The wild wind whirls violently about;
I press against that door to keep it shut-
Your shadow passes by, a silent shout.

The stiff air warns of an oxygen drought.
I gasp and suck the air into my gut-
Thin membranes don't keep closet monsters out.

The seeds of sorrow then begin to sprout;
Before they choke the rest, they must be cut!
Your shadow passes by, a silent shout.

Distorted figures lend themselves to cloud
My memory with visions left untouched-
Thin membranes don't keep closet monsters out.

Then voices groan through trees; they howl and spout
And pry and claw through bark in thick black chunks.
Your shadow passes by, a silent shout.
Thin membranes can't keep closet monsters out.

February 3, 2002

by Elizabeth Grimes

Lime green and sky blue streamers
Float down from the cloud-white ceiling fan
In the living room.
Cowboy and Spaceman
Soar and gallop across the
White pseudo-plastic table cloth
Covering the kitchen table.

The part and slick
of my brother's flaming hair
clashes with the crimson cowboy hat
resting atop his head.
Squatting down in a ready stance,
his monkey feet leave an imprint
in the popcorn carpet.
He stretches his stubby arms out,
opening and closing his fists.

First gift passes from the
thin skin-stretched-over-bone
hands of Mother
to his Pillsbury fingers.
He grips and tears the cosmic blue patterned paper-
Cowboy, Spaceman
Cowboy, Spaceman
Star.

Giant red block letters announce the arrival
of Casey's newest catchphrase:
"To Infinity and Beyond!"

The white borders of the VHS tape
have been crunched and folded in the
Paper Wrapping Games.
Woody clings to Buzz,
preparing for take-off,
ready to burst through the thin plastic covering,
taking Casey along with them.
"Wooooahhh!" my brother screams, exposing
the pink holes in his mouth where teeth will soon nest.

River of Life

by Elizabeth Grimes

They told me it would get better, and I believed them because I was naïve and scared. They sent me sympathy cards void of color and full of cheap platitudes like “Time Heals All Wounds.” I believed it for the first couple of years, mostly because my father was one of the people telling me such things. Waking up seven years later, however, with the same haze of fear and confusion that has been my only steadfast companion since the accident, I have accepted the fact that I have been lied to. This is not to say the lies were intentional. I understand that we each must accept what we believe to be true and, in turn, proclaim that truth to others. I am certain that time does heal some people’s wounds, but mine were still oozing and bloody.

This cycle of thoughts was the first thing to greet me each morning, accompanied by sticky beads of sweat clinging to my icy temples. Though waking was painful, I preferred it to the hours of horrific images and memories that passed through my subconscious while I slept. Every night I watched her lifeless body sink deeper and deeper into the heavy swell of the sea. Every night, I voicelessly cried out for her as the thick sand swallowed my feet, anchoring me to the earth.

I awoke to darkness a shade lighter than the one that had accompanied me in my sleep and discovered a newly framed picture of my father, my mother, and myself sitting on the edge of my bedside table. The picture had been taken at the Santa Monica Pier the summer of my third birthday. Despite obvious safety hazards, the picture captures my small body perched snugly on the railing overlooking the water, with my mother and father protectively resting an arm on either side of me. A cream-colored envelope was leaning against the corner of the picture frame with “Marina” printed in big block letters on the front of it. I sighed as I reached reluctantly for the envelope. My eyes traveled to the massive oak dresser blocking the light from my only window. Sitting atop the dresser was the collection of framed photos of the three of us that I had received every year since she passed. There was room between their wedding day and the last photo we had taken before her accident for the Santa Monica moment to squeeze in.

The few beams of light that had managed to sneak in from the window were not enough for me to read what my father had penned in the card. I reached up and flicked on the Victorian-style floor lamp above my nightstand. As my eyes skimmed the familiar handwriting, phrases like “she’s always with you” and “see her again” danced on the powder pink background. There was an empty assurance tucked underneath words intended for comfort.

I burrowed further into my sheets as I held the card close to my chest. I listened quietly for movement outside my bedroom door. I heard nothing but the gentle tumble of the dryer. Perhaps if I laid here a moment longer, I could drift once again into the security of darkness. I contemplated the necessity of

beginning my day before lifting my heavy feet over the edge of the bed and plopping them down onto the cold, wood floor. I tugged at the worn mint green afghan on my bed and draped it over my shoulders and my head, sealing in any warmth the blanket would provide. I arose and reached for the chipped brass door handle. As I dragged my body through the long, narrow hallway, pictures of my mother dangling on the walls taunted me with their cheerful presence. I made my way to the kitchen to grab a glass of water. A note taped to the refrigerator caught my eye:

Good morning, Princess!

Left something on your nightstand.

Will see you for dinner tonight.

-Love, Dad.

A half smile grazed my lips at the thought of my father hastily writing this note, worried that the annual gift could surprise or even confuse me. I reached for a stone-colored clay mug from the pearly kitchen cabinet and filled it with cool, clear water. With mug in hand and blanket wrapped snugly about me, I decided to venture out to the back patio, hoping the fresh air would stimulate my senses and pump fresh life into my veins. The early September air nipped at my face, and I pulled the blanket tighter around my shoulders. Remnants of my father's nightly rantings to the heavens—broken glass bottles and crumpled Bible pages—littered the patio. My mother's Bible lay face down on the red and white striped loveseat; my fingers traced her name, "Coraline Marie," engraved in long, cursive strokes on the front cover. I picked up the Bible and noticed wedding rings shackled to a long silver chain hidden underneath. I placed the rings in the book and tucked it gently under my arm to take inside. I turned around and reached for the doorknob to retrieve a broom from inside so I could sweep up the paraphernalia from the previous night, when I heard a familiar voice softly call me to attention: "It's time, Marina."

A chill shimmied its way up my body at the sound of her voice, but I refused to turn around. She called my name again, "Marina." I shut my eyes, attempting to shake the voice away. After a silent moment, I slowly turned my head around to face whatever was calling me. As my eyes landed on her form, every muscle in my body tensed up. A quick and steady pounding began in my ears and spread throughout my limbs. The woman standing before me was beautiful. Her emerald green eyes sparkled in the early afternoon sun. Blonde wisps of her hair blew lightly in the wind. Her face was free of any makeup and radiant. Her skin was firm and smooth, like that of a girl in her early twenties. While she possessed a youthful demeanor, she carried a confident wisdom that betrayed her age.

"What are you doing here?" My hand remained latched to the doorknob, but my feet were anchored to the concrete. I did not know whether to fight or to retreat. She cautiously extended her hand, inviting me to close the gap between us. My eyes drilled into the palm of this woman hoping that, if I stared hard enough, she might vanish in a puff of smoke.

"What are you doing here?" The only words I could form.

“Marina, I would like you to come with me.” The woman continued to hold her hand out, and I knew she would refuse to leave me until I joined her.

“I don’t understand...” my voice trailed off as words escaped me once again. How could she be standing here right in front of me?

“I’ll explain once we begin, but we must get going.”

I knew I needed to go inside and crawl into bed—I had to have been dreaming. But this woman was captivating, and I knew I must trust her. I lightly shook my head and inched toward her, ignoring her welcoming gesture. Buried deep underneath the fear screaming at me from the inside was a quiet assurance that promised I would be okay.

The woman dropped her hand and exhaled deeply. She turned her back to survey what had previously been the backyard. All at once, the fenced in parcel of land stretched out before us into a vast wilderness. White cloud puffs dotted the endless blue sky. The ground underneath us was rough and jagged. Deep greens jutted up from the dirt in sparse patches. Interspersed between the green plant life and the rocky earth were explosions of crimson, like tiny fires weaving their way through the wasteland.

“Let’s begin.”

I followed her light step blindly. “Where are we going?”

“Wait and see,” she uttered softly.

As she guided me through the barren land, my thoughts wandered to my childhood. I recalled the way she would sing to me as she tucked me into bed at night and kissed me lightly on the forehead. She lovingly assured me her kiss would ward off any creatures of the night that tried to impose on my rest. The sweet smell of her warm vanilla perfume haunted my memory. I recalled the touch of her long, crepe fingernails tracing the side of my face as she readied me for school. After the accident, everything I had safely locked away in the recesses of my heart regarding my mother had been compromised. The accident had somehow found the key to my memories and unlocked what once was pure. When I slept, her eyes were shallow slits of darkness; she was a looming and silent presence, frigid and lifeless. This woman who was now shepherding me toward my destiny brought the woman from my childhood back to life.

“Come here,” she gestured for my hand again, bringing me back into my present reality. This time, I grabbed her hand and followed blindly.

“Where are we going?”

“Wait and see,” she whispered excitedly.

We crept through damp, narrow tunnels. The smell was a perfect blend of mildew and fresh earth. Though darkness clouded our vision, the compact dirt and rock crunched beneath our feet and steadied us. The only light was that of the natural glow she radiated, a thin and steady stream of flickers beaming from her very center. The dark of the tunnels seeped into every part of me, merging with the darkness in

my soul.

“You’re being awfully quiet back there... still with me?” she asked.

“What? Oh, yes. I’m just trying to concentrate. I can’t see where I’m going.”

“You don’t need to see any more than you already can. Besides, we are almost there. Look!” she pointed to a sudden brightness in front of her. It was stunning.

“Just a few more steps and we will be out of the tunnel for good.” She gently tugged at my hand.

“Look, Marina,” she breathed as I emerged from the tunnel close behind her. “Isn’t it a miracle?” The sudden brightness of the wide open sky had been such a contrast from the deep void of the tunnel that it struck me with temporary blindness. As I stepped further into the light and blinked rapidly to regain sight, the world around me began to take shape. An expansive field of sunflowers spread like a quilt lay before me. Yellow hues bursting forth from the earth and kissing the sky surrounded me in all directions.

“I want to show you something.” She turned sharply and looked at me.

“What do you—”

All of a sudden, she took off running directly into the center of a sunflower row.

“Wait!” I cried as I sprinted to catch up with her. As she ran, she giggled and twirled in endless circles, absorbing the colors of the sunflowers into her radiant glow. She moved as if she relied on the winds of the air to carry her forward. Every step she took was intentional, while maintaining a whimsical and carefree quality, like she was completely trusting of her surroundings. I struggled to keep up as she continued to float on. Suddenly, she stopped at the base of a streaming river. She gracefully tiptoed her left foot forward, as if she were teasing the water. As she proceeded to immerse herself in the current, she motioned for me to join her.

“I’m...not much of a water person.” The only words I could find. I was entranced by her beauty and grace, yet fearful of what was to come.

“I know. It won’t hurt you.” Recognizing the uneasiness on my face, she added, “It won’t hurt me.”

“Is this what you wanted to show me?” I spouted with more aggression than I had intended. Her bright eyes were full of confusion and hope.

“Is this really all you had to show me?” I repeated.

Disregarding my evident frustration, she said, “Come get in.” I wanted to trust her. “Don’t you trust me?” she asked.

I hesitated before slowly bending down to untie my shoes, keeping my eyes fixed on her the entire time. I did not understand how she could be so trusting, like she had completely forgotten what had happened. But I knew she hadn’t. She was the one who had lost. And I was the one left with the guilt and fear. I had seen this woman succumb to her freedom, and it had destroyed us both. Her accident had stolen my trust, freedom, and wonder. Yet, in this moment, I could not help but follow her guidance

with a blind faith.

I approached the shallow river with an overwhelming rage and panic washing over me, like the water licking my feet had started to seep in through the cracks in my soul. I could feel the slight push and pull of the current challenging my balance. The cool temperature was a stark contrast to the heat building in my stomach. Immediately, I could feel my body relinquishing control to the powerful force of the river. My breathing grew shallow and labored. She took notice of my unsteadiness, my quaking ankles and my struggle to find oxygen.

“Marina, darling, relax. It’s okay. I’m right here. Grab my hand.” She held out her hand once again, in an effort to assist me through what I could not understand.

“No.” I whispered on an inhale. I shut my eyes, attempting to ward off the memories, but images kept flooding my mind—images of the moment she let go.

“No!” I screamed, using up every last bit of breath I had. I dashed out of the water, instantly collapsing into a ball onto the spongy ground beneath me. “How could you ask me to do this? I can’t. Seeing you here like this. Why are you so calm? Why are you doing this to me? I won’t lose you again.” Silence permeated the air, and I refused to look at her. Her eyes never left my form once. Even after this outburst, I could still sense her tender persistence. I began to find my breath once again. I lifted my head to glance at her face, full of knowing, full of love, full of pain.

“Take me back.” I forced the words out of my mouth.

“Marina, I know this is painful.” At this, she left the water behind and made her way toward me. She knelt down and nestled herself into the damp earth floor next to me. Her right hand reached for my left as she wove her fingers into mine. She gently squeezed my hand, staring out at the body of water.

“I’m not trying to hurt you. I don’t want you to be in pain anymore. Don’t you see that?” In the silence, she met my eyes and continued. “Look at me, Marina. I’m happy. I’m free. I’m not hurting. Neither should you. It is time to let go.” As I watched her, I recognized the freedom she was referring to. It was the same freedom she had shown me before the accident. Oh, how I wanted to experience that freedom again. But letting go felt like forgetting, and I wasn’t ready to forget her.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about you since the day it happened,” I said, maintaining eye contact. I was tired of skirting around the tragedy. Seven years was enough wasted time. As I watched her watch me, I could see how desperately this woman wanted me to trust her. I saw that I could trust her. Again.

“Marina, my beautiful sunflower, that woman you haven’t been able to forget isn’t me.”

I jerked back slightly, as she let go of my hand to touch my face. “What do you mean?”

“The accident—it haunts you, like a ghost. The woman who has been following you around for the past seven years isn’t me. She never was. She’s a distorted memory. She isn’t real.”

I stood up quickly and began pacing, struggling to gain space from this woman. I retorted, “Where have you been, then? Why haven’t I been able to find you?”

“Fear. You let fear turn me into your monster.” I knew she was right, even while processing everything she was saying. I took a deep breath before admitting, “I’m tired of being scared.” She looked at me expectantly, urging me to continue.

“I love you...” I continued with a whisper, “and I know you love me.” At this, my throat constricted and my vision blurred. For the past seven years, this ghost had haunted me. Or someone like her. This woman standing before me was different. She wasn’t shrouded in darkness. She was alive and full of light, color, and energy.

She picked at moist patches of grass as she said, “Love and fear cannot live in the same house. You have to choose which one gets to stick around. And, if you ask me, one of them has been overstaying her welcome.” She pushed off the ground and stood up, wiping the crusty dirt off her palms as she rose.

“I’m just worried that if I leave it all behind, I’ll be leaving you behind too. I can’t lose you again.”

“I’m right here, darling. I’ll always be right here.” She stood directly in front of me, quieting my incessant movement with her stillness. The commitment in her eyes gave me the courage to approach the water once more. As we stood together at the river’s base, I gingerly dipped my toes into the shallow water. She was patient with me, as I cautiously explored the water that guided me forward. As it made its way up my calves, I felt a lightness stirring in the center of my chest. The water crept up my thighs, resting just under my abdomen. I watched the blue curl its way around me, moving with the shape of my body, the heaviness of my soul washing away with the current.

“Lay back, Marina.” In a moment of panic, my eyes flashed at her. She gracefully extended her arms beneath my shoulders and my back, making a bed for me to rest on.

“Close your eyes and float. Trust the water to hold you up.”

“What if it doesn’t?” I asked, even as I began to lean back.

“Then I will. It’s time to rest.”

I closed my eyes and felt the warmth from the sun soak into my face while the rushing water cooled my skin. I slowly spread my arms out wide, trusting the water and my mother to keep me afloat. As I rested in her arms, she sang to me a familiar song:

*We’ll sail the salt seas over
And we’ll return once more,
And still live in hope to see
The Holy Ground once more.
You’re the girl that I adore,
And still I live in hope to see
The Holy Ground once more.*

And once I let go, I felt safe.

to our readers,
Thank You