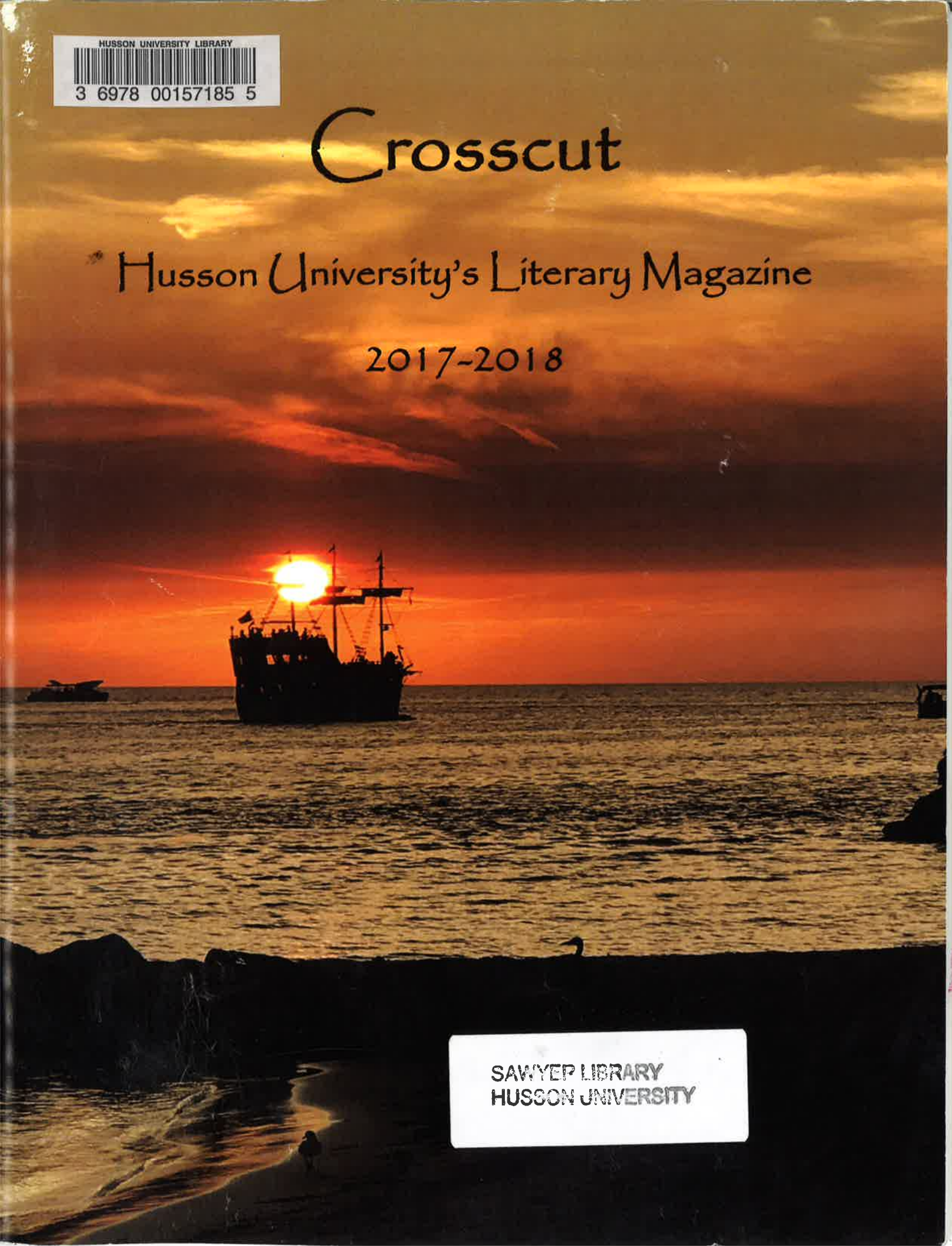
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Crosscut

Husson University's Literary Magazine

2017-2018



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Crosscut Introduction

Crosscut 2017-2018 captures the essence of what it means to be a student of the Humanities in our current cultural moment. We are spirited artists who believe our work fills the blank canvas of the world with empathy and passion. Join us as we make sense of ourselves and the world through poetry, short stories, paintings, drawings, and photographs. This dynamic edition of student creativity is sure to open the eyes, minds, and hearts of all who encounter it.

We, the editors, would like to thank the Husson University administration for their support and offer a special thanks to Dr. Patricia Bixel, Dean, College of Science and Humanities.

This is *Crosscut* 2017-2018. Enjoy!

Maria J. Cahill, PhD, Editor

Kaitlyn Hill, Assistant Editor

Jonathan Smith, Assistant Editor

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Samantha Scott
Sadie Royer
Sophie Vetter
Jenna Demers
Hanna Jordan
Mackenzie Worcester
Jessica Poors
Jonathan Smith
Addison Gagnon
Kaileigh Lenentine, *Back Cover*

Many of these artists appear more than once. This list is in order of the original presentation of their work.

To submit your creative work, please send your visual art (in a high resolution jpg) or poems and prose to cahillm@husson.edu no later than April 15, 2018.



Savannah McKenna

Husson University's English Degree

Students who complete the English degree at Husson University find themselves prepared for a broad array of employment opportunities upon graduation. English students study with accomplished faculty from a variety of interdisciplinary backgrounds as they intensify critical thinking abilities, strengthen communication skills, and utilize current technologies. Additionally, the English Department at Husson emphasizes cultural awareness as the key for success in an increasingly global economy. Students may also challenge their creativity by participating in the English and Creative Writing Club, *Crosscut*, and the open mic "BlueBlack Evenings." These opportunities allow students to publish, perform, organize, lead, and contribute not only to the English program but also to the Husson campus and the greater Bangor area community. In the end, the English major at Husson University offers a degree that promotes the professional success of students and supports them within a close, highly interactive departmental family. It is the educational mission of English students and faculty to navigate this crazy, beautiful world of which we are a part — together.

Fall 2017

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For permission to reprint, contact the authors and artists directly. Address all correspondence to Editorial Staff, *Crosscut Magazine*, Meeting House 117, Department of Humanities, Husson University, One College Circle, Bangor, ME 04401.

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The Universe Waits For No One

Janessa Corrigan

With each nightfall comes the Moon,
and with each morning comes the Sun.
Whether it's December or June,
the Universe waits for no one.

Would you blame a cloud for raining,
or hate the puddle that it caused?
To do so would be draining;
each second whining would be lost.

You can pray for sunshine
and beg for a blue sky,
but you'd be wasting precious time.
Weather is unchanging; no matter what you try.

With each nightfall comes the Moon,
and with each morning comes the Sun.
Whether it's December or June,
the Universe waits for no one.

Would you blame a lover for leaving
or hate the pain that it brought?
Let your feelings of anger be fleeting.
Untie that hateful knot.

They did not mean to hurt you.
It simply would not work.
Love works like sun and rain do.
Don't let that heartbreak lurk.

With each nightfall comes the Moon,
and with each morning comes the Sun.
Whether it's December or June,
the Universe waits for no one.

Phantom Limb

Jamie Venezia

Phantom limb they call it, missing a leg, a hole.
Deformed, missing a piece of me.
"Freak." I fear they will call me, unnatural, un-whole.

I'm still here; it's still me. Why can't they see?
I swing my stump, wishing I could still run.
Phantom limb they call it, missing a leg, a hole.

Everyone runs forward. Where will they leave me?
I wish I had my leg; I wish I could join the fun.
"Freak." I fear they will call me, unnatural, un-whole.

I used to be fun, full of life and glee.
I wish I could go back to when I was young.
Phantom limb they call it, missing a leg, a hole.

Missing my leg, whole I can never be.
Part of me died that day, part of me is done.
"Freak." I fear they will call me, unnatural, un-whole.

Leave it all behind, find myself in the sea?
Floating in the sea, can I find my missing one?
Phantom limb they called it, missing a leg, a hole.
"Freak." I feared they would call me, unnatural, un-whole.

The Mill

Jonathan Smith

Standing tall and solemn, beyond the river,
an empty mausoleum sends a shiver.
It tells a tale of fearless, mighty men.
Alas! That whistle blows. Let work begin.

Like a cathedral from a bygone day,
the Mill's spire ascends on high to say,
"See here...my stack and tanks...Behold!
I stand for strength...for sweat untold."

Ascending high, it lauds the diligent.
This spire of steel stands tall. Resilient.
To restless nights and bygone days,
a testament to simpler ways.

Now time has passed, the Mill no more.
A town abandoned. Good jobs offshore.



Savannah McKenna

The Man On the Hill

Shariena Hill

There in the distance is a hill that stands tall;
It sits above the ground and looks over all.

Have you heard of the creature that lives up on the hill?
Some say he's a monster and that he gives them the chills.

But they are mistaken because that is not so.
This man on a hill is a friend, not a foe.

He lives in a house with just him and nobody else.
Since it's just him, he makes all the rules for himself!

"I declare myself King" was rule number one.
Rule number two was to always have fun!

He pondered and thought about rule number three,
Then, he finally thought of what it should be:

"On Wednesday, everyone must wear a silly hat.
If they do not, they will be kissed by a pesky, pink,
purple polka-dotted, zebra-striped bat!"

Rule number four was that everyone must be nice.
And if they are not, they will be bathed in ice.

After he made rule number four,
the man on the hill stood up and said, "No more!"

He thought of a name that he could call his hill.
And he came up with the name Zabuk-a-Laka-Hill.

He invites us all to come, play, and sing
and to leave behind rules and to bring fun and silly things.

If You Would

Theodore Hallett

And if you would only listen
To the words that I say
I promise you no more lies, no
I'm just trying to find my way
And I wish you would stay
I wish you would stay

I'm just tired of starting over
I'm tired of trying to find someone new
It starts to weigh down on my soul
I just want to find my bed
I just want to rest my head
I want to be left alone

I'm always looking for diamonds
I'm always searching for gold
But all that glitters is not my problem
I just don't want to regret growing old

And maybe I'm looking for God
Or maybe just a sign that it's okay
And maybe I run from the things that I love
I'm scared I'll just hurt them some day

But maybe this is all just a plan
It'll come together in the end
Every stitch and cut will make a beautiful cloth
That will lay me to bed

Maybe I need the comfort
Or the warmth of a friend
A hug from my mother
Or approval from my father
Makes me feel like a better man

But who am I to judge the holy
Maybe I'm just a ghost
Or maybe there's meaning
In all that we're seeing
But we're just looking too close

It's time to take a step back from the picture
And look at this life as a whole
And maybe there's meaning in the pain that we're feeling
I think you're a beautiful soul

And if you would only listen
To the words that I say
I promise you no more lies, no
I'm just trying to find my way
And I wish you would stay
I wish you would stay

Gray

Anastasia Lemitelamy

The beginning of summer in Liberty, New York was often damp. The grass was usually mushy due to the constant rainfall. When I was six years old, I loved how the gray-blue sky drizzled on one side of the playground while the other half remained dry. The sky was colored in rainbows. Liberty was a magical place filled with what I thought were magical people.

My brother, two eldest sisters, and I walked to the bus stop every morning. The bus ride was oddly quiet and whispers lingered. I was glad to go to school; it was better than being home. It was a uniformed school with a well put-together set of colorful red bricks. There was a sign. It was big and arched way over my head, begging me to read it aloud every time I got off the bus: "St. Peter's." St. Peter's was a religious institution full of Bible verses hung up anywhere you turned your head and beautiful Caucasian boys and girls. I admired their hair and colorful eyes; the same went for my friends, a popular group at school that I felt privileged to be a part of. I would do most anything to get their attention, and I did foolish things. They liked it when I raced to the entrance and stood and waited for them at the top of the building's steps. "Good girl!" they would say, and they would pass by to pat my head. All of them laughed obnoxiously loud every time they did this; I never understood why. They would never call me by my name. If they ever wanted my attention, they would shout, "Here girl, c'mere." I thought what a cute nickname and voice. It was in a higher tone, much like the way my mother spoke to my baby sister. I felt special.

One afternoon during recess, the girls wanted to play a game with me. I was all for it, so I asked what the game was.

"Have you heard of fetch?" I knew the game, but I didn't want to play. I nodded. The little girl's blue eyes scanned the playground until she found an uneven branch. She chucked it and it landed in the wood chips. "Fetch!" she giggled.

I walked over to the stick and picked it up. I presented it to her, but she smacked it out of my hand. "Ow! This game is no fun," I fumed.

"It's no fun because you did it wrong! You're supposed to put it in your mouth!"

How gross is that? I thought and wondered if they ever enjoyed this sport without me. From then on, I did my best to avoid them during recess. I didn't like the taste of dirt and filthy sticks.

Class always smelled like a new apartment. I could almost always hear someone sharpening their pencil. We would learn about the Old Testament and often talked about Adam and Eve. I knew the answer to every question that the teacher asked. At home, my mother also gave me Bible lessons. In class, I would raise my hand, dancing in my seat for Mrs. Lander to call on me, but she never did. I was placed in the first grade even though I had already taken it and passed. For some reason, I hadn't been allowed to advance to second grade. I remember the day we would receive report cards for class. I could not wait to get mine; I had gotten a check on every paper.

I was overwhelmed with disbelief when I looked at my card. After the bus ride home, I carried the slip of paper. I trudged in the wet mud, taking all the while to get inside the house and stalling as much as possible to avoid showing my mother what the teacher had handed me. When I came inside, my mom was cooking Joumou soup, a native dish from my mother's homeland of Haiti. The fresh scent of baked chicken and bouillon haunted me; my heart had sunk into my belly. I felt I didn't deserve to enjoy the taste. She asked me, "What's wrong, Pitni?" which means little thing. I handed her the piece of paper. She squinted and read the report card carefully. Her brown eyes narrowed and looked at me with such disappointment. I resembled her, so her downcast face was like a mirror of how displeased I felt with myself. It shook my soul and rose every hair on my body with fear. "Put your coat back on," my mother said sternly. "We are going back to school right now."

Mom slammed the car door, and for the first time I didn't read aloud the big arched sign. The school looked different. It felt different too, as if it were sunless, even though it was mid-afternoon. The rays of hope and happiness were suddenly replaced by chills of sorrow and trepidation.

"Hurry up, Anastasia!" I was out of my daze and caught up to speed with my mother. Inside the school, it was frigid. My mother shouted, "Anyone here! I need to speak with Anastasia's teacher!" I could feel the embarrassment in my face. It wasn't long until someone showed up. My mother's face was scarlet. She was livid.

"What seems to be the problem?" asked a young woman.

I hid behind my mother. Mom shot back in a menacing demeanor, saying, "I need to speak with Anastasia's teacher right now."

The young woman shot a dirty look in my direction. I felt ten times smaller from her cold stare. I stayed quiet. "Follow me," she said. As soon as the words left her lips, the color drained out of my face and out of the room. She led us to a tiny room with gray walls and a desk where my instructor was sitting.

My teacher looked at the both us expectantly. "Can I help you?"

My mother began to rant. "I have never received any bad report of any sort from you for my daughter. Now when the year is nearly over, you're telling me she'll need to repeat the grade again? There's no time for her to even improve! Every paper you gave her has no corrections, no notes, nothing! So, why would she need to repeat the grade?" My mother handed her back the slip along with the other assignments I completed throughout the year. All of them had a single big check painted across the paper, nothing more.

"How come this wasn't addressed earlier if she wasn't doing well?" my mother repeated, trying to console herself. "Where is the grade book? Let me see her average," my mother demanded. My teacher remained silent.

Miss Lander's book sat on her desk; it was open. I pointed and said, "It's there, Mommy."

My mother grabbed the book and found my name, but that was all she found. My mother couldn't help but notice that the other students' grades and comments had been posted. "What is the meaning of this?" There was a shrill sound in her throat as she demanded answers. "Are you all setting her up for failure?" She was practically hysterical. My teacher didn't utter a word, and my mother slammed the slim book back on her desk, grabbed my hand, and stormed out. It was raining now and so were my eyes. I never saw the school, any of my friends, or the teachers again. As my mother buckled me in, they all didn't seem so white and pretty. All at once, they appeared just as gray as the school building. They were just as blank as my grades in that book.

I don't know why my family happened to be the only black people in that school. When I was a child, the people weren't white, they were just people, and I wasn't black; I was me. Discrimination is something that I still experience. I brush it off and ignore it, much like I did in the innocence of my youth. Now, when I recall that school, that bright bricked building, it seamlessly fades to gray.



David Cahill

Travel

Kaitlyn Hill

I didn't mean to kill her.

I mean, I knew I had to do my Travel — everyone does, but I didn't think anyone was going to *die,* for God's sake. I figured I would go back, make a few small changes, make the Leaders happy, and move on.

I guess I didn't realize how wrong I was when I thought that changing one moment couldn't possibly have that much of an impact on the millions of other moments I would experience in my life.

If you could go back in time and do anything over, where would you go? What would you do differently? Since so many people wondered about this and wanted a chance to do it, a specific group of people: Ali Kriton, Andrew Hayes, Mariah Larson, and Brandon Lee (those they now refer to as the Leaders) invented the Time Machine that made it possible to return to a pinpointed moment in time. They, the Leaders, say that Travel is supposed to be enriching; it gives us a chance to reflect on our past, to revisit our lowest point in life, to make different choices that will not lead to that low point. These individuals had the idea that if everyone went back in time to the one moment where they thought things went wrong for them and had the chance to do things differently, people would be infinitely happier.

Their test-runs proved that this was extremely successful. People jumped at the chance to volunteer to go back in time to whatever point in their lives they think went wrong. Everyone wanted an opportunity to make changes, and all of them seemed to be happy with the way their lives were once they returned. Once they perfected the process, the Leaders brought the idea to the government who approved it and mandated that everyone utilize the Time Machine at one point in their lives, in order to have a "do over" of their biggest regret — a chance to do things differently.

The Leaders determined that for Travel to be the most effective, individuals should be between eighteen and twenty-five years old. To them, this range is the optimal time, a good place for people to make changes before they continue on with their lives. An individual can choose, during that time-frame, when they want to do their Travel, but it must be completed before the individual turns twenty-five. I turned twenty-three two months ago, with the understanding that my time was running out. In an effort to attempt to put the past behind me, for *real* this time, I decided to go ahead and get it over with.

It feels like I was the only one who didn't want a chance to go back in time and change things. It was probably because I knew, the moment the Leaders announced the implementation of Travel, where I would be going. I knew. And the last thing I wanted to do was go back and face the awful things that happened to me, relive the way my world fell apart in front of me. It never should have been my responsibility to fix what someone else did to me. But the Leaders don't care about any of that. All they want is control and positive results.

I bet they weren't happy with me when I went back in time and killed my best friend, prevented the birth of someone who would have been extremely influential in the world, and returned far worse-off than I was before I entered the damn Time Machine in the first place. It's not like I meant to do these things, but there I was. I don't know where everything went wrong. Probably the second I entered the Time Machine and allowed the Leaders to shoot me back to 2006, seven years ago, when I was sixteen.

I just wish that they would have left me alone.

———————

July 28, 2013: Phoenix, Arizona

"Rory, are you ready?"

I heard my boyfriend Landon shouting to me from down the stairs, but I wasn't ready to face him just yet. I had a feeling that if I tried to talk to him, I would cry, and I *really* didn't want that. Everything felt like it was falling apart already; the last thing I needed was to actually fall apart myself, too.

"Just a minute!" I hollered back to him, silently praying that he wouldn't get curious about what was taking me so long and decide to come up and investigate. I heard him moving things around in the kitchen a moment later, so I knew I was safe.

I looked back at myself in the mirror, stealing just another moment for myself. *Today's the day,* I thought, examining my long blond hair and deep green eyes in the reflection staring back at me. *And I have no idea what I'm going to do. I have no idea how I'm going to face my family, my friends... After so long... I've never done any of this before. How do I do it? How does it even work? What if I get stuck? Maybe there's a way...* I shook my head at myself in an effort to get rid of the thought before it was even complete.

"Come on, Rory, you know there's no way. Stop kidding yourself."

Sighing and taking one last look at myself, I donned my jacket and headed down the stairs. As I reached the final step, I realized that the kitchen had become eerily quiet.

"Babe?" I asked quietly, wondering where he went, but understanding that he wouldn't have gone too far. *Not today, anyway.*

"In here." I heard Landon's voice coming from the living room. I found him looking at the pictures above the mantel. There were a couple of me and Landon together, a few of my mom, and several of me and my sister — pictures that my mother

had routinely sent over the years in an effort to keep me connected to them. I came up behind him and snaked my arms around his waist.

"Hey, pretty girl." I heard the smile in his voice as he turned around to face me, draping his arms over my shoulders. "Are you ready?" He kissed the top of my head.

I took a second to stare up at him. His brown eyes bore into mine, and his sandy-brown hair flopped down over his forehead.

"Not at all." I tried to smile, but by the way I saw Landon's eyes fall, I knew he saw the fear behind it.

"It'll be over before you know it, I promise you. Trust me, it's not as bad as you think." He shrugged his shoulders a little bit. I understood what he was trying to do, but to be honest, it annoyed me more than anything.

"Easy for you to say. You spent your Travel next to your grandmother's bedside, trying to make up for being away at school when she died. You guys played cards the entire time, and she told you stories. I would say that is a relatively easy Travel, don't you? It's a damn walk in the park compared to what I'm about to face. You know that." I sensed the bite in my voice as I spoke, but I couldn't help it.

"Rory," Landon's voice softened, and I knew that I hurt him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

I sighed. *This man... I'm being an asshole, and he's the one that apologizes? I don't deserve his kindness...* "I know you didn't. I'm sorry. I'm so on edge about this whole thing. I feel like I'm going to snap at any moment. I'm terrified."

I felt the tears welling up in my eyes, and I knew the levy was broken. To be honest, I saw it coming.

"I don't want to go back there, Landon. Why should I have to change what I did? What happened to me was not my fault." Tears rolled down my cheeks faster than Landon could swipe them away with his thumbs.

"Oh, honey..." Landon's arms wrapped tighter around me. I clung to the back of his shirt, my face tucked into his chest. "I know. It's not fair, and I hate that you have to do this. Maybe there's a way to choose a different moment to go back to. You know, maybe not your lowest moment, but a different..."

I sighed, reluctantly pulling myself away from him. "You know that's not possible. The Leaders will know. They always do. Trust me, I've had this thought a million times. There's no way."

Nobody knew exactly how the Leaders knew, but if anyone tried to use their Travel to go back in time to a moment that was not the absolute worst moment of that person's life, they knew, and the Time Machine wouldn't work. The Leaders would yank the person out and demand to know why the traveler tried to cheat the system. After the interrogation, in which the Leaders would insist on hearing the truth about the moment that was desirably avoided, one of the Leaders would program it into the machine themselves. The horror stories of the interrogation people faced for attempting this were enough to persuade me to be honest the first time around.

"I know, Rory. I know you have to do this. I just wish you didn't have to. It kills me to see what you're going through..."

Landon's words washed over me, and I smiled at his attempt to make me feel better. We both knew saying that the situation sucked was an understatement, and the fact that he understood that lessened the blow.

"I guess all I can do is get it over with, right? It's only twelve hours." I sounded a lot more relaxed than I felt, and I could tell from Landon's worried expression that he knew that, but he didn't push it. *Bless him...*

"You're right, baby. It'll be okay. Come on, let's get going. The sooner you go, the sooner you'll be back to me." I knew that he was nervous, too, but I appreciated his effort to make this feel as normal as possible.

Landon reached for my hand, and I gave it to him willingly, using him as my support as we made our way outside. I knew that revisiting the lowest point in my life, the moment when I walked away from everything I ever knew and loved because I was raped by somebody I thought I could trust, would hurt me more than the memory had over the years.

I also knew that I had no choice. The Leaders have ultimate control.

Landon dropped me off in front of a tall, white building with no windows in the heart of downtown Phoenix. There was no lettering anywhere indicating what the building was used for, but we all knew, anyway. My first thought was that it looked like a prison. *Fitting...*

I quickly kissed Landon on the lips, not wanting to linger too long for fear I would break down again. He gave me an encouraging smile and squeezed my hand before I stepped out of the car and into the dry Arizona heat. The industrial steel doors gave me no indication of what lay beyond them, and I stepped through tentatively.

"Welcome, Rory. How did you sleep?"

Leader Ali Kriton greeted me in Travel Headquarters the moment I stepped into the most sterile room I had ever seen in my life. There was nothing in this room; the three walls in front of me were completely covered in large steel doors that mimicked the entrance to the building. Everything was steel; the walls, the ceiling, the floors, and the place had a coldness to it that completely flipped my stomach. The sun was shining brightly in the sky outside, it being a hot summer day in Phoenix, Arizona, but the air was so cold in HQ that goosebumps covered what felt like every inch of my body. The cold in the building reminded me of the bitter winters back home in Michigan; it was a sign, I was sure, to indicate what I was about to return to. I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself, trying to avoid Ali's cold stare.

"Not well, actually. However, I didn't expect to, considering..." There was no point in lying to her.

"I'm very sorry to hear that, Rory. Are you not excited for your Travel? Most people find it to be very enriching..." She began to prattle off the reasons why Travel was necessary, but I had heard it all before, and frankly, was sick of it.

"Yeah, I get it. It's supposed to make us be better people and all of that. Whatever you say. Obviously, if there is a low point in my life, chances are it was hard enough for me to deal with the first time. Why in hell would I want to go back there again? To hurt myself more? It seems so bogus."

Ali's fake smile faltered for a fraction of a second, but she caught herself, probably hoping that I didn't see.

"I'm sorry that you feel that way. Perhaps after you'll feel differently. Most people find this experience very helpful. I hope you'll feel the same way."

"I shouldn't have to go back and fix what someone else did. Come on, even you should realize how fucked up that is."

I knew my words were harsh, and that it might get me in trouble, but I didn't care.

"Rory, listen... Travel is important to your health and wellness..."

"Let's just get this over with." I knew I was being rude, but I couldn't listen to any more. I held out my hands to signify to Ali that she should lead the way.

She brought me to the wall to our right, where several doors stood solid and stone-like. A small screen to the right of the middle door flashed as we approached, and Ali bent down and allowed the screen to scan her eye. A long beep followed by a loud click caused the door to silently slide open. I vaguely wondered where the other Leaders were, but then realized that the less of them I had to encounter, the better.

"Well, here it is," Ali said to me as we walked into the new room. This room looked exactly like the one I first entered. Lights that gave off a blue hue lined the perimeter of the ceiling. This room was mostly empty like the first, only in this one, in the center of the room, was a glass tube that extended from floor to ceiling. It had a small gray step leading up to it. The tube was open, and I knew my time was up.

"Thanks," I replied mildly. "Looks comfy."

Ali smirked. "Most people say it's okay. Head in whenever you're ready. The tablet on the wall will instruct you. You'll find a small compartment underneath the tablet that holds your bracelet. You must wear it at all times. This keeps you connected to us here at HQ. We will monitor you through it." *What, exactly, are they going to monitor? Will they be able to see me?* Questions flooded my head, but I knew I wasn't going to ask any of them. *I'd rather not know...*

"It also keeps track of how long you've been Traveling. You have twelve hours from the time you enter your Travel. The bracelet lets you know how much time you have left. When time is up, you will simply return to the tube, and it will bring you back to present-day. Do you have any questions?"

"No, thank you. I think it's pretty self-explanatory." I just wanted her to leave.

"Perfect. Then I'll give you some privacy. I'll see you soon, Rory," Ali gave me one last look before she stepped back through the door, and it slid shut behind her.

I didn't expect that kind of humility from Ali, or any of the Leaders, for that matter, but at that moment I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. My hands were shaking so violently that I had to press them against my sides to steady them. I felt beads of sweat trickling down my back. I took a few deep breaths in an attempt to calm my nerves. I walked slowly toward the time machine with the understanding that my life would never be the same again. Life, as I knew it, was over. Sighing, I stepped inside.

The Time Machine was more simple than I expected it to be. As Ali described, the only things in the glass tube were a small tablet that had been fastened to the inside of the tube and the small compartment containing the bracelet. I took the heavy black band and slid it onto my wrist. The front of it lit up; a black screen with "12:00" on it in white lettering stared back at me.

I turned my attention to the tablet, which instructed me to reflect on the lowest moment of my life and program the date and place into the indicated spot. For a fleeting moment, I thought about entering a different time, anything but the truth, but I thought better of it. *You either do it now or do it later when they make you.* I quickly typed in the required information.

With one last deep breath, I pressed the green "Submit" button. The machine beeped a few times and whirred to life; as it did, the tube started subtly vibrating. The glass slid closed, effectively trapping me inside. The air inside the tube got colder, as if someone had cranked the air conditioning up a few notches. Slowly, the platform I stood on started to slide downward.

As I descended into the floor, I took one last look at the room beyond the tube, at the last bit of freedom I had. For the first time, I noticed that above the door that Ali and I had entered was a bank of windows. It looked like some type of observation deck. I suddenly realized why Ali was so willing to leave me alone in the room. *They were always watching... They are always watching...*

I continued to slide down the tube, and as I moved further downwards everything went black, and the platform picked up speed in its descent. I kept my eyes shut tight in an effort to drown out my surroundings. I was being sucked through seven years of my life, back to me at sixteen, in my hometown, the place I hadn't seen since October of 2006.

When the Time Machine finally stopped, I was afraid to open my eyes.

———————

August 11, 2006: Albion, Michigan

The first thing I smelled was fresh cut grass.

I opened my eyes to find myself lying on the front lawn of my childhood home. The sun is hot even in August in Michigan, though it paled in comparison to the scorching heat I had come to accept as normal in Phoenix. Remembering how cold I felt in the Travel Headquarters, I welcomed the sun. Recalling this day in my mind, I knew that any minute, my sister Alicia, who was nine, was going to fly out the front door, begging me to play with her.

I closed my eyes again, not ready or willing to look at my sister for the first time since I left. I stole a moment to myself before the door opened, the screen door smacking back against the frame as Alicia came bounding down the stairs.

"Ror! Come play with me, pleeeeaaaasee! I'm sooooo bored!"

I laughed, recognizing that tone of voice all too well. I sat up, knowing that the moment was going to come whether I wanted it to or not. However, I was not prepared for looking at Alicia to make me feel like I had been punched in the stomach. *I can't believe it's been so long... Why did I do this to her? I can't imagine what that felt like for her, to lose her big sister at only nine years old...*

God, she looked so, so beautiful. Her brown hair whipped in the light breeze that surrounded us, and she grinned as some of it got caught in her mouth.

"Please, sissy? I'll let you pick the game."

Her plea melted my heart, and I inwardly kicked myself all of the times that I had told her I was too busy, or, that I just didn't want to. The age difference between us always made me feel like I was too cool to hang out with her. *Hey, this whole thing is supposed to be about making different choices, right?*

"Hey, nugget. That actually sounds *perfect.* But you should pick the game. I picked last time, remember?" I stood up and wiped my hands on the back of my jeans. They were sweaty, and I pressed them against my legs in an effort to ground myself to the moment.

"Ok, deal! I pick hide and seek. Let's go, sissy! I'll hide first!"

Alicia ran ahead of me and I laughed, taking a moment to soak in her innocence and beauty. I missed her so much more than I ever thought I did, and that realization was enough to make me feel sick. I moved to the front steps, the place me and my friends had deemed the official "counting spot" when we were younger than Alicia was. I stole a few glances at my little sister as she ran around the yard, looking for the perfect hiding spot.

"Twenty... Nineteen... Eighteen..." As I counted for Alicia, giving her enough time to pick one of her four routine spots to hide, the thought crossed my mind that if this was how my Travel was going to go, it wouldn't be half bad.

Boy was I wrong.

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After a couple of rounds of hide and seek with Alicia, I told her I needed a bathroom break and attempted to prepare myself to enter my childhood home. She waved me on, saying that she wanted to play with her dolls and that she'd see me later. I gave her a kiss and a hug that lasted a few extra seconds before I headed inside.

Looking at the house made my stomach twist the way seeing Alicia did. I took in the pictures on the wall, the familiar furniture, the way the house always smelled like apples because of the candles my mom was constantly burning. The house was eerily quiet, but I knew it was because my mom was at work, and my dad had left two weeks prior in a drunken stupor, saying that he needed time to "find himself" — whatever that meant. I saw it as an excuse to abandon his responsibilities.

To say that I was bitter about my dad leaving was an understatement. All my life, my dad was someone who referred to himself as a "functioning alcoholic." He would get up and go to work every morning as an accountant, then come home and drink himself to sleep in front of the TV. It made me mad, to say the least; not only was I without a strong father figure in my life, but Alicia had to grow up wondering why daddy didn't love her enough to stay with her. It was sickening to me, and I had no patience for it.

My moment of reflection about my dad made me feel nauseous, and I made my way up the stairs and down the hall to my old bedroom. Everything remained the same: lavender colored walls, white carpet, all of my furniture pushed to the outsides of the room. My bed still donned the sunshine-yellow bedspread, with more pillows than I knew what to do with lined up neatly. I flopped down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, wondering how everything had turned to such shit.

Alicia came inside when it started to get dark and she was hungry, so I pulled myself out of my head and started dinner with her. I welcomed the familiarity of the routine; usually, she and I would cook, and when my mom got home, we'd all eat together and talk about our days. I knew that this meal was going to be hard for me to face, but I knew that the sooner I dealt with it, the sooner it would be over. I glanced down at my bracelet, reading "9:15" on its little face. *Almost three hours in,* I thought to myself. *Only about nine hours to go...*

Just as Alicia and I were putting the spaghetti and meatballs on the table, my mom came through the door with her usual burst of excitement. Like clockwork, she came and kissed and hugged us both. My mom enveloped me in her arms, and it was enough to make me want to start crying. I missed just being near her, having the ability to hug her whenever I wanted to. *Damn, I didn't realize how much I lost when I left Albion and took off for Arizona...*

In that moment, I told myself that no matter what happened, I was going to make a better effort to be part of their lives. *It's not their fault I got raped... I shouldn't have punished them for what happened to me.*

We ate together, and as my mom and Alicia recounted their days, I soaked in their voices, letting their stories envelope me and help me make up for the time I had lost. It felt good to be back at the kitchen table in the house I grew up in with some

of the people who mattered most to me in the world. At the moment, I refused to let what was coming take me away from the time with my family. *Maybe this Travel thing is not so bad after all...*

"Rory, what are you up to tonight?"

My mom's voice pulled me back to the table, and I lifted my eyes up from my plate to meet hers. Her eyes were green like mine, and when I was little, she would always tell me that our eyes got their color from the same emerald gems. Her brown hair, turning grey along the edges, was up in her traditional pony-tail, although some strands had fallen and were framing her face.

I took a moment before I answered her, knowing that my Travel was really just beginning, and the really hard part was coming. For a moment, I considered telling her I had no plans, and locking myself in my room until my Travel was up, but I knew that was taking the easy way out. *Not to mention the Leaders wouldn't allow it...*

"Eric and I are going to a party. Remember Melissa Oakes? From grade school? She is throwing an end-of-summer get-together. One last celebration before we all jump into junior year." It nearly broke my heart to tell my mom this because I knew what going to the party meant, but I knew it was what I had to do.

"Oh, how wonderful! You'll have so much fun. Is Peyton going, too?"

Eric and Peyton were my best friends. We met in kindergarten and had been spending time together ever since. *It will be so weird to see them after all this time... Eric, after what he did...*

"I'm not sure; I haven't talked to her today. I think she said she'd meet us there, but I can't remember. I'm sure Eric will tell me when he gets here."

"Well, good, sweetie. I'm glad you guys are having fun. Be careful, okay?"

"I will, Mom. I won't be out too late. I'm kinda tired..." I didn't realize how exhausted I was until I started thinking about leaving the house.

After dinner, I sent my mom to the living room with Alicia to watch a movie while I cleaned up. I wanted to do something nice for her, in a way to make up for everything that she went through when I left. At the same time, I also wanted a minute alone because I knew that going to this party would be the hardest thing I ever had to do. Again, briefly, the thought crossed my mind that I could simply not go to the party, but I knew that meant I wouldn't *actually* be dealing with my lowest point, and the Leaders would find out and make me do everything all over again.

I cleaned up the kitchen and put the leftovers in the fridge before I joined my mom and Alicia in the living room. They were watching *Beauty and the Beast,* one of Alicia's favorites. I snuggled in between my mom and my sister as close as I could, never wanting the moment to end. I was dreading Eric's arrival because I knew that facing him would be extremely difficult, if not excruciating. *How am I going to get in the car with him? Especially knowing what he did to me?* I tried to push the thought out of my mind, but it consumed me.

The doorbell rang, and my heart stopped.

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Eric had arrived. I kissed my mom and Alicia both before I followed him out to his car.

"Are you excited?" Eric asked as we walked down the stone walkway.

"I guess so," I replied mildly. *It is so hard to be this close to him... Does he already know what he's going to do to me? When he picked me up, did he know? Did he plan it?*

Eric furrowed his brow but didn't say anything.

We rode in silence down the familiar streets, and I could feel the tension between us. I felt the sweat trickling down my back, and I pressed myself against my door, trying to stay as far away from Eric as possible. Eric's efforts at small talk resulted in very little return from me, and, eventually, he gave up. He stayed silent, but I could tell that he was angry about it.

When we pulled into Melissa's driveway, I jumped from the car before Eric had even put it in park. The small space of the car was suffocating me, and I needed a minute to breathe. I heard Eric shout for me, but I ignored him as I ran into the house.

I came face to face with my teenage years the moment I stepped through the door. My classmates, people that I hadn't seen since I left town, greeted me, asking me how my summer was, enveloping me in hugs, offering me drinks. I knew it was a bad idea, but in an effort to calm my nerves, I went into the kitchen and took a couple of Jell-O shots and followed them with a few beers. It was easy to pretend that I wasn't in my Travel as I stood in the kitchen with old friends, listening to them talk about their summers. *If only it were this easy...*

Powered by liquid courage, I went in search of Eric. I knew that the time had come, and there were some things I felt I needed to say to him. I found him in the backyard, behind the shed, right where I expected him to be. I carefully avoided looking at the ground, at the spot where he shoved me into the grass and violated every ounce of trust I had ever had for anyone.

"Hey, Ror." Eric's words were slurred and he swayed a little as I approached. "Where have *you* been?" His blond hair was messy and disheveled, telling me everything I needed to know about the state he was in.

I could smell the whiskey on his breath and it made me nauseous. I immediately regretted the alcohol, but it was giving me the push I needed to approach my rapist.

"I've been in the kitchen. Talking to Ryan Hayes and Logan Clark about their classes this year. We have a couple to-gether," I said offhandedly. I could see the anger in Eric's eyes, and I knew what was coming. The thought of it made me feel like I couldn't breathe.

"Listen, Rory, I've been meaning to talk to you. Maybe we should go out sometime? You know how I feel about you..." Eric hiccupped, clearly drunk, and I found myself lost in the anger and betrayal that I had harbored all through the years.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Eric," I said softly, waiting.

"I'm not good enough for you, Rory, is that it? Simply the best friend, never anything more? That's such bullshit. I've been here for you more than anyone ever has. When your dad left, who held you while you cried? I did. You owe me." I saw the anger behind Eric's blue eyes, and I found it hard to believe that anyone could ever be this way toward another human being.

"You know what, Eric? Fuck you. I don't owe you anything. You have always been a great friend, and I'm grateful for that, but I'll be damned if I let you hurt me. I am worth so much more than that."

As I knew it would, this made Eric even angrier. He lunged toward me and smashed his lips against mine, his hands gripping my hips in a way that felt desperate and sad. He tasted of booze and brokenness. And without a second thought, I reached up and punched him in the side of his head at the same time that I brought my knee up to his groin.

He staggered backwards momentarily before he fell to the ground, and I kicked him as I shoved past him. "Never talk to me again" were my last words to him before I ran around the house and out into the street.

The tears were flowing wildly now, and in my drunken stupor I fell to the ground in the middle of the road, head in my hands, asking myself yet again where everything went wrong. *I prevented my own rape and I still feel terrible... Why?* My entire body felt heavy and broken, and I was convinced that I could stay in the middle of the road forever and not care. *I'm supposed to feel better... Why don't I?*

I heard footsteps behind me, and I panicked, thinking it was Eric. I scrambled to my feet and whipped around to see Peyton approaching me.

"Oh, Rory..." is all I heard as I ran to her and buried my head in her chest. "What happened to you?"

"Please just take me home," I begged. Without another word, Peyton tucked me underneath her arm and dragged me to her car.

———————

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" she asked me as she helped me into her SUV.

I shakily recounted the situation with Eric to her. It felt so weird to be sitting in my best friend's car, talking to her about something that upset me. *We haven't done this in so long...*

As I told Peyton what happened, I saw her anger, and the way she pressed down a little harder on the gas told me that she was eager to get me away from Melissa's house and back to safety.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't there, Rory." I heard the sadness in Peyton's voice, and my heart broke further. *What have I done to our friendship, you beautiful human?* I realized that I had so many amends to make when I got back home to present day, after my Travel. For the first time in my life, I felt okay with reaching out to people from home.

I took one long look at my best friend as she came to my rescue for the hundredth time since we met as kids, and I realized that I made a mistake in letting the situation with Eric dictate the rest of my relationships. *Maybe the Leaders had a little bit of a point here...* This lifted my spirits a little and made me feel a little less edgy about the entire situation.

Peyton reached a stop sign, and she turned to look at me. "I love you, Rory. I'm sorry this happened to you. You'll be okay. I'm here." She reached for my hand and I gave it to her willingly, letting her squeeze my fingers in a too-tight way before she let me go and continued driving.

I didn't even see the truck barreling through the intersection. I heard the squealing of tires and a sickening sound of metal hitting metal before the world went black.

———————

I came to in the middle of the road.

I looked around, horribly confused, and then I saw Peyton's car on its side, about ten feet away from me.

Next to it was Peyton, her legs beneath her in a distorted way. Blood was pouring from her head. Her eyes were wide open, looking straight at me, unmoving.

I looked wildly around again, hoping, praying for someone to be nearby, someone to help. All I saw was a truck, presumably belonging to the person who crashed into us, a heap of twisted metal. I screamed, but all I heard was my voice echoing against the darkness of the night.

Unsure of what to do, I started crying again. Then I heard a long, slow, beep.

I looked down at my bracelet to see "00:00" staring back at me.

My time was up. My Travel was over.

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When I found myself back in the tube, I was screaming.

The door immediately slid open, and Andrew and Brandon rushed toward me. Following behind them were Ali and Mariah, the other Leaders.

"Rory, can you hear us? Are you okay?"

"Am I okay?" I blubbered. "Do you think I'm fucking okay? Do I *look* okay?"

They stood, shocked, as I rocked back and forth on the floor of the tube, my arms wrapped around my legs. I was hysterical, crying so hard I could barely breathe.

"Are you happy now?" I kept asking them. "Is that what you wanted?"

The Leaders exchanged worried glances, and I could tell by their expressions that they were unsure of what to think. *Good,* I thought. *They should be. Not after everything I've had to deal with... They should be ashamed of themselves for ever putting me through this. What did they expect?*

"Rory, we're going to need you to come with us," Mariah said gently.

I ignored her and continued rocking, blubbering about how I would rather have been raped a hundred times over than watch my best friend die at the hands of saving me.

———————

The man who ran into us was Aaron Chapman. He was driving home after a long day at work and fell asleep at the wheel. The first time this happened, in 2006, he crashed into a telephone pole and suffered a minor head injury. No other individuals were involved. I was being raped by Eric, and Peyton was at the party, inside the house, looking for me.

In 2009, Aaron Chapman began extensive research on cancer treatments, and in 2011 he revealed a cancer treatment that had a 99.8% success rate with absolutely no side-effects or risks for patients. His dedication to science and helping people was changing the world, and because of me, all of that was wiped completely out of existence.

Ali told me this as I sat at a metal table in an all-white room, with a blanket wrapped around me and an untouched cup of tea in front of me. My hands were shaking so violently I didn't dare take a drink. I was numb, completely numb. My best friend was dead, and I just prevented our society from making huge leaps and bounds in terms of cancer treatment and the progression of medicine.

I looked up at Ali who was sitting across from me, her expression grim.

"Are you still happy you sent me back there?"

———————



Spencer Belyea

I Once Read a Poem

Megan Mahoney

I once read a poem that said,
"We accept the love we think we deserve."
And I don't know that I've ever read anything so accurate.
Many times in life, we settle.
We settle without even realizing that's what we're doing.
We tell ourselves we deserve the best, but that's hardly what we give ourselves.
More often than not we find someone who meets some of our needs,
and we decide that they are good enough.
When things don't work out with this person, we are shocked, heartbroken.
But really they didn't work out because it wasn't the best for us in the first place.
We settled: we accepted the love we thought we deserved.
I hope everyone realizes at some point that they are settling.
And when they realize it, I hope they get up and leave until they find the love they really deserve.

Daisies

Megan Mahoney

Daisies grow wild.
They slowly flow with the wind.
I grow wild, too.



David Cahill









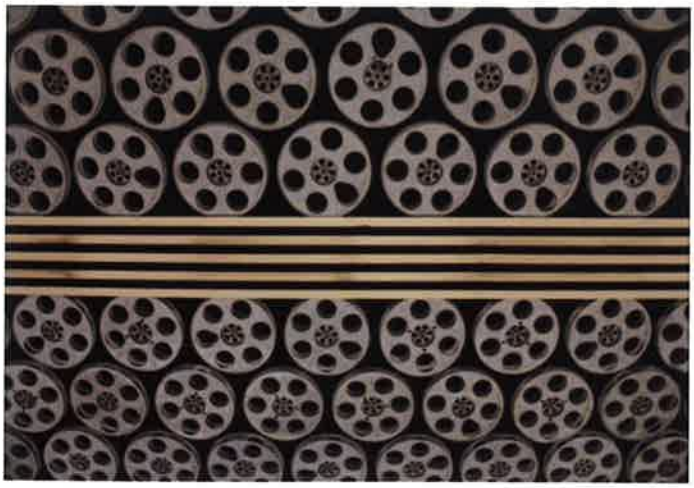
David Cahill



David Cahill







One Dress

Nichole Gabrielle Sparlin

Most boys who were Jaime's age hated shopping; browsing through aisles and racks jammed full of clothing and colorful shoes was considered boring and lame in comparison to chatting up hot girls in the food court or checking out the newest installment of whatever video game series was currently being over-hyped at GameStop. Jaime had tried to be normal once, turning up his nose at the notion of the "girlish" activity of clothes shopping in favor of walking around the mall by himself and doing "guy things." But, at the age of seventeen, Jaime no longer had the strength or will to act indifferent. He loved clothing; to be more exact, he loved browsing through feminine clothing. He still shopped alone, making his old excuses to his mother and his little sister, but as soon as they were out of sight, he let himself paw through garment-stuffed racks and dream. That is how he found himself looking at the dress.

Jaime's fourteen-year-old sister Charlie had been talking up the winter semi-formal for weeks. Unlike his cumulative years of high school, Charlie's freshman year seemed like something out of a perfectly orchestrated Hollywood film. She was conventionally pretty and sociable, which made her popular with the girls in her class and an object of envy to the boys. The kitchen table had become home to endless strings of gossip, scandal, and, more recently, had become Charlie's main stage as she begged and pleaded with their mother for a glamorous dress and matching heels for the upcoming dance. To her credit, their mother had held out for as long as she could, citing the fact that Charlie had already spent half a fortune on clothes just before school started and that the fancy dresses she had purchased in middle school still fit. However, Charlie, being the youngest, was used to getting what she wanted. She was relentless in her pursuit, talking not-so-subtly about her friends' new gowns, possible high-class dinner plans, or how there was a spot on that "perfect dress" that she donned for her middle school graduation last May. Eventually, their mother's obstinance eroded, and the two planned a trip to the local mall for the following weekend.

"You're coming too, right Jaime?" Charlie asked as she poured a rather ridiculous amount of syrup over her singular pancake.

"I think I'll pass," he replied, helping himself to some of the butter from the middle of the table. His stomach was beginning to stir as he anxiously hoped his sister would push just enough for it to seem normal to accept the invitation.

"But I *need* you this time! You have such a good eye!" she whined. *Bingo*. They were heading in the right direction.

"You do need a new pair of shoes," their mom chimed in, ever the practical one. "The ratty, old pair you have now is covered in holes. It's just about time to trash them, don't you think?"

Jaime heaved a dramatic sigh. This is what he'd been waiting for.

"If it's really that important, I'll go," he relented.

Charlie let out a self-satisfied squeal before giving him one of her magazine-perfect smiles.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she said. "I promise, you won't regret it!"

Breakfast then resumed at a steady pace. While Charlie chattered on and on about her long list of gown considerations, Jaime let his attention slide to thoughts of his rather unnatural infatuation. He didn't know why he had always been so drawn to girls' clothing; it was something—an aching, gnawing feeling, really—that he couldn't quite define, despite his best efforts. He had spent many hours poking through results from poorly-phrased Google searches, trying to see if anyone else out in the vast reaches of cyberspace felt the same. Unfortunately, he always ended his sessions answerless and disappointed as he cleared his browser history.

"Right, Jaime?" his mother asked. Oh, shit. He completely missed that.

"I'm sorry. I was spacing out. What did you say?"

"She was asking if you could take me to the dance. You're going too, right?"

"Uh," he scrambled for an answer. He didn't really want to go, to be honest. The one school dance he had attended was a result of his mother pushing him out of the house during his sophomore year slump. The other boys in his class had started calling him some not-so-flattering (and definitely derogatory) terms when they passed him in the halls and made him change separately in the locker room so he couldn't "stare" while they were taking off their sweat-soaked clothing. He'd been trying to rectify the situation, asking out a girl who seemed nice enough to date from his chemistry class, but she'd rejected him outright.

"I'm not really into dances."

"That's what I thought you'd say," Charlie said in between bites. "But it works out better this way! Melissa's dad is springing for a limo since underclassmen can't go to prom, apparently."

"Sounds fun."

"I just want you to be careful," their mother interjected. "I don't like the fact that you're going to be unsupervised for so long with all of those boys. You know how they can be at this age."

Jaime left the table as Charlie came up with a quick defense that he didn't really care to listen to. He cleared his plate and tucked it into the empty dishwasher before getting the rest of his stuff together for school. It wasn't long before he heard Charlie doing the same, quickly stomping around their moderately-sized house as he fished his car keys from the inside of his jacket pocket. Hopefully, she wouldn't make him late today.

The weekend had come as a relief after a week of the usual high school bullshit. Jaime was moderately sure that he

failed the pop quiz that his math teacher had sprung on his class on Wednesday, and gym consisted of the usual torture. While he could get away with being almost-translucent in most classes, his gym period was not one of them. Football captain and prom king shoe-in Mark Spacey and the rest of his jock squad found this to be the perfect time to remind Jaime that he was not one of them, by tripping him up during basketball and throwing him against the rusty, dented lockers after class with the same old insults and unattractive sneers. Jaime sometimes wondered if the bullying was some sort of divine retribution or punishment for his inability to conform to good Christian standards. But he'd been too tired to deal with that thought on Friday, so he slept in lieu of thinking too much about anything.

Saturday, on the other hand, was a new day without the daunting prospects of pre-calculus or physical education. Jaime woke to the delightful smell of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls (always out of a can, though his mom refused to admit it) and quickly made his way down the stairs. He ate his way through three of the wonderfully gooey rolls and played video games at his leisure while his sister was (he assumed) still comatose across the hallway. He had learned long ago not to wake her up, lest he be the target of whatever easily accessible projectiles she could find to sleepily hurl at him. It was amazing how such ferocity could come from such a tiny being.

It was around noon when his mother called his name from downstairs. Charlie, apparently trying to break some sort of personal record, had found it within herself to wake before mid-afternoon and, more surprisingly, was already dressed, made-up, and ready to go. Jaime could practically feel the excitement rolling off her in waves as they made their way to the family car – Jaime with his usual, slow trudge, and Charlie with a pronounced spring in her step. All of it over one (allegedly) single-use piece of clothing.

His earbuds went in as soon as his seatbelt was secure. He knew that, as soon as she got the chance, Charlie would hijack the radio and twist the dial to some contemporary hit station with bouncy synth beats and over-corrected vocals. Jaime had nothing against pop music, but he preferred to listen to rawer sounding rock classics or newer alternative bands that stayed true to their abrasive, punk roots. Sure enough, the radio turned on and Charlie let out what looked like a squeal before singing along and bopping her head to the floor-vibrating bassline. Their mom laughed good-naturedly as a thick strand of Charlie's long, blonde hair plastered itself around her mouth mid-lyric.

Sometimes, Jaime was envious of how carefree his little sister could be. In comparison to his slow, mountainous hike, she just seemed to skip through life as if it were a clear, open path. While he struggled with pervasive bullying and uncomfortable, unanswerable questions, Charlie's problems seemed to revolve around clothing, potential boyfriends, and the gossip that wound itself through their high school's brightly-colored halls. He wondered (though not for the first time) if Charlie knew what people said about him. Then again, most people didn't seem to realize that they were related; or if they did, they never said anything to him. He tucked the thought away for later; the implications were far too uncomfortable to think about on what seemed like a promising Saturday.

They arrived at the Harrisburg Mall around one o'clock. The sun was bright in the sky, bringing out the bright reds and blues on the brick exterior and making them pop against the terra cotta base abutting the sidewalk. They found a parking space that was relatively close to the white marble of the Macy's entrance, next to a rather beat-up Subaru Outback. Jaime let out a chuckle as he spotted the excessive amount of duct tape holding the rear-right tail-light together. Car repair done right.

"Hurry up, Jaime!" Charlie called as she scurried across the crosswalk. "I don't know how long this is going to take, and the mall closes at nine!"

"Charlena Ray Anderson," their mom chastised with a certain finality in her tone. "If you keep us here until nine o'clock at night, you can walk yourself home."

"But—!"

"Mom's right, Charlie," Jaime butted in, finally caught up. "Picking out a dress really shouldn't take eight hours."

"Ugh! Fine!" she exclaimed as she threw open the exterior door. "But if I'm stuck with a lame-ass dress, I'm not the one to blame!"

"Language!"

Oh, Charlie. She was always one to resort to paltry melodrama. Jaime had always thought that she would make one hell of an actor, perhaps as Lady Macbeth, learning the consequences of greed and ambition as she descended into over-dramatized (yet artful) madness. What was that one line again? Out, damn'd spot? Jaime smiled as he thought back to Charlie's gown woes from the past few weeks. That was his sister, all right.

The trio made their way toward the Junior's section. It was by the juncture where the quiet, polished, cream-colored interior of Macy's met the eerie, blue glow of the echoing mall space. Jaime tried his best not to let his eyes linger too long as he passed by colorful, touchable fabrics and shiny baubles on spinning jewelry displays. Small, passing glances were normal and safe. It was best not to invite scrutiny.

"Oh, mom!" Charlie cried out, latching onto Jaime's half-focused attention. "Look at how shiny they are! It's like a glittery paradise!"

And it really was. The prom section was alight with shimmering, sparkling dresses of all sorts: long, short, A-line, sweetheart, semi-formal, and formal. Some had perfectly-formed bows, keyhole backs, and glittering lines of encrusted jewels, while others (the ones that he preferred) were a little plainer and classic in form. He focused on scaling back his concentration, lest he look a little too interested in front of his mom and sister. As they openly fawned over the dresses, he looked out toward the mall

area. His eyes were drawn in by the neon glow of a store sign across the way under which a small, messy-haired child was crying over a dropped pretzel. Poor kid.

"I'll start looking through racks over here, if you want to start on the far end," their mother suggested. "Here, Jaime," she said, extending a couple of crumpled twenties in his direction. "Go find yourself a pair of shoes that will last, okay?"

Jaime nodded, half of him happy to have an excuse to leave the dress department and its unnerving appeal. When Charlie and mom were out of sight, he'd let himself come back. Maybe.

"Don't forget! You have to help me make the final choice!" Charlie yelled as she shuffled through one of the round, overflowing racks. "I can't do it alone!"

"Send me a text when you need me," he said as he walked off.

Jaime took his time as he waded around the sparse men's shoe section. It was mostly filled with the usual blacks and browns of loafers and dress shoes, but he wanted something with a bit more pop to it. Eventually (and unsurprisingly), he settled on a pair of primary red Converse, the same as his last pair. With those bought and paid for, he let himself meander around the department store with his plastic shopping bag swinging along in time with his every gangly step. He pursued the men's formal-wear section first, looking over the bland offerings of natural colored shirts, suits, and a sparse amount of brightly patterned ties, but he grew bored rather quickly. Eventually, he found the more colorful and exciting Teens' section and picked through several promising racks. But, while some of the offerings were nice, they didn't have as much of a draw as the Juniors' section had. The thought made him anxious.

Knowing that it was no longer of use to avoid it, he made his way across the polished tile walkway toward the Juniors' section once more. All the while, his head was spinning with unanswered questions: Why can't I be normal? Why do I want to wear women's clothing? Why does it seem like I'm the only one on the face of the Earth who has this goddamn compulsion? Like every previous Google search and existential questioning session he underwent before, Jaime knew that this line of inquiry would just lead to more of the same, disappointing nothing. Frustrated, he resolved to stop asking if he was just going to give in anyway. After all, didn't Einstein say that lunacy was in repeating an action but expecting a different result? He was crazy enough as it was; he didn't need to make it any worse.

When he finally arrived at the prom section, the first thing he noticed was that no one was there. He walked from end to end just to be sure, but it seemed likely that Charlie and their mom had gone off to the fitting room. Hopefully, that meant that he would have at least a couple of minutes to himself. Satisfied with his analysis, he let himself walk leisurely through the rack-separated aisles, his right-hand gliding over fabrics of different textures: rough tulle ballet skirts, glossy satin gowns, and rich velvet numbers that made his spine want to quiver.

At the end of the fourth row, closest to the clearance racks, was the dress. It wasn't as eye-catching as most of the shimmery dresses surrounding it as it was a deep, rich, midnight blue and rather simple in its composition. The sweeping sweetheart neckline was classily dotted in tiny, artfully-arranged jewels, and the fabric brushed down and around the back to form the bodice; the hi-lo skirt was made of flowing, overlapping pieces of sheer fabric that were shorter in front, but led to a graceful fishtail in the back. It was so simple, yet, he was utterly drawn to it. His fingers ran down the length of the fabric—not too rough or clingy. He had to have it.

Jaime snatched the dress from the rack on impulse and quickly made his way toward the closest men's fitting room, hoping with surprising clarity that he didn't look too suspicious to passersby. He slipped into the first available stall and snapped the sliding lock shut behind him. He tried to catch his racing breath as he undressed and slid the dress into place, but with how hard his heart was pounding, that didn't seem to be a likely possibility. When the zipper was snug in place, he let himself turn around to face the mirror and drew in a sharp breath.

There he was — his usual shaggy-haired self. And yet, with the dress on, he felt almost beautiful. The blue fabric complimented his slightly tanned skin and brought out the underlying blues in his gray eyes. He let himself stare into the floor-length mirror in a moment of atypical vanity, but he couldn't help himself; the dress made him feel whole.

Suddenly, Jaime understood why he'd stood pining for what he couldn't have for all those years. It wasn't just about the clothes; it was about expressing who he was. He was a boy who liked to wear women's clothing. Full stop. He didn't need to label or research it; he'd already found his validation. The proof was in his smiling reflection and the warm feeling in the center of his chest. It felt right.

After allowing himself five more minutes in front of the mirror, Jaime took off the dress and pulled on the clothing he came with. He ran his fingers across the flowing skirt once more before leaving the dressing room in a silent, yet gratified goodbye. Resolved, he quickly made the trek back to the prom section, hoping to get the garment back on its rack before anyone could see him with it.

But, of course, that was not to be. Just as he walked toward the correct row, Charlie and his mom appeared on the scene with a couple of prospective dresses in hand.

"Oh, Jaime! It's beautiful!" Charlie said, making quick work to relieve him of the dress. She held it up in front of her, swaying around with a brilliant smile in front of the closest mirror she could find to get a feel for it.

"I think this is the one!" she said after a moment of careful consideration.

He tried to smile encouragingly, hoping that his smile didn't look as off as he felt. The dress really would look good on Charlie. She could proudly wear it to the semi-formal and give it the dance and motion that it deserved. It would look beautiful

under the dim auditorium lights, its blue like the broad strokes of night after a brilliant orange sunset. It wouldn't hide for years in the depths of her closet, waiting to be taken out for air, light, and a warm touch. Charlie could wear it without a second thought of what people might think—without it being weird or unnatural. And while the thought made his chest hurt, Jaime figured it would be for the best.

"Yeah," he finally replied. "It really is."



Allison Dunlap



Savannah McKenna

Genuscide

Jonathan Smith

The odd sensation of the electromagnetic pulse pricked Aden's flesh. Still groggy, Aden awoke confused by the abruptness. Clearly, someone had the audacity to interrupt his ultradian sleep cycle. Stretching from the comforts of his hydrabed, Aden arose upright, locking the bed at its most vertical position. Waking up always felt unnatural, but this morning arrived conspicuously abrupt even for him. Here on Terraform, everything seemed to habitually replicate itself. The same pulse that awakened him transmitted daily tasks and data to the neurons of his brain. Aden rubbed his sluggish eyes and briefly took note of a new pending priority message from Lautaro Caligen, the lead scientist at the Microdatus Laboratory. That message would have to wait. An emerging reddish-brown sky dimly tinted the skylight of Aden's Tesla-Zuckerberg hoverport. The emerging dawn of the Sun would soon cast its beacon across the surface of Terraform as the large orange ember arose in the western stratosphere.

Aden had only been two years old during the early days of 2057. The Great Contagion had struck Earth faster than anyone could have imagined. Attempting to save humanity, the scientific community had accidentally allowed viruses to evolve into superbugs. But this wasn't exactly how humanity faded to oblivion. As the archivist for Terraform would tell, the virus had infected the first person sometime around December 31, 2056. All that was certain was that it was a mutation of the Tallahatchie Virus, which had escaped a secure military facility in eastern Florida. In a matter of days, the virus quickly spread across the United States and Northern America. Some said it was an accident; others claimed sabotage. All the scientists in the laboratory died, and the epidemic quickly spread through the southeastern United States. As America faded into obscurity, the United Nations Security Council held an emergency session in the days following the pandemic. All global travel was prohibited, leaving travelers to rest in their fate. All seven continents fell under quarantine; however, an antidote never came. Only seventy-three humans successfully evacuated Earth and survived. Aden was one of the few that remained of this genus called homosapien. His mother had been a lead astrophysicist for Zuckerberg Galactic Travel, a private company that offered shuttle vacations to the Gates Resort next to the Microdatus Laboratory on the north side of Terraform.

Genetic editing and cloning were a norm here on Terraform. The Humanus were homo sapiens in all respects but genetically altered to ensure an average life-span of one hundred and fifty years. Poorly produced marketing literature claimed the Humanus was a great return on investment for any organization requiring consistent productivity. The practice of human cloning had been banned on Earth, but once humanity essentially disappeared, so did the ethical concerns that were unique to the human condition on Earth. In the first year of release, The Council of Seven would declare the Humanus to simply be humanoid, a genetic fabrication that lacked the rights of men. The aging population of surviving humans required caretakers, and seven years of design work seemed to have paid off. Humanity's recent history was rooted in social anxieties of global plague or a thermonuclear hell. How ironic that humanity's final fate lay in this: an underdeveloped interstellar nursing home.

Aden missed his mother, Gaya. Two years had passed since her death. Life on Terraform had no formal schooling, but he mulled over the last line of a poem his mother used to read to him: "This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but a whimper" (1). It was an appropriate line given the present state of things. Perhaps his gloomy childhood was reflected in his current apathy. For all practical purposes, Aden was part of the last generation. No births had been witnessed on Terraform. Life on Terraform was productivity-based. Of the seventy-three survivors of Earth, only twenty-three still lived. Seven composed the Council of Seven; the rest held positions in the Departments of Science, Security, or Sustainability. Disease had been largely eradicated, and yet humanity remained very much mortal. For Aden's mother, Alzheimer's was a parting gift to a traumatic life that had already taken her husband and three older children. Life had left her frantic and distraught. She had rarely spoken of Earth. Earth's memory was just a mythical fantasy — a memory encapsulated inside a poison pill of shattered dreams and broken hearts.

Now what had awakened him so abruptly? Aden looked down at his arm. It still tingled from the pulsating sensation. Ugh, yes, it was from Lautaro, that cantankerous bastard. Aden pulled the polymetallic suit lying next to his bed snugly up and over his flaccid body. With his left hand, he grabbed four Nutricaps and drained them down with a tall mug of muddy Halagash. Halagash was that spicy substitute for coffee that comes from the roots of the purple flowered briars in southern Terraform. A couple of minutes lapsed; then, Aden finished his drink and disengaged the hoverport from its charging pod. His trip north to the Microdatus Laboratory, like so many others, began quite uneventfully. Everything seemed conspicuously quiet this morning, including the old mining fields of Gendash.

The aging Lautaro Caligen paced the Microdatus Laboratory, nervously wringing his hands. Originally built in 2033, the laboratory was in an obscure part of the Xanadu Sector. Unlike the youthful and seemingly inept Aden, Lautaro retained his cognitive faculties even now into his seventies. The geriatric scientist of four feet eleven inches had started his early career at NASA, the gifted son of a Chilean immigrant and naturalized Dutch father. Lautaro still sported a salt and pepper-colored crew cut and was a man who was always "all business." If there was a man who suffered from "short man syndrome," it most certainly was Lautaro.

Lautaro had received the message several years ago when The Council of Seven wrapped up their emergency session. Terraform now had a serious security breach. Two Humanus workers working the second shift at the Terraform Electro-Fission core had gone off grid and broken protocol. One, Humanus 673, had terminated his human supervisor, Jerroch Nuevo, but died

with Nuevo in a ground struggle over Jerroch's neuron gun. An accomplice, Humanus 675, had fled the scene covered in blood. No one knew where 675 had gone; however, at least two space rovers were missing. Perhaps they had fled south to the foothills of Ashwaganda. The shocking murder had caused the frantic workforce of three hundred Humanus workers to flee the site. Sixty-six Humanus workers had not checked in and remained unaccounted for. Destroying a supervisor was a capital offense. The perceived usefulness, or lack thereof, of supervisors was irrelevant to the case at hand. The Council of Seven would want answers from Lautaro, and soon.

Lautaro was tired and beyond frustrated. His entire life's work had led up to his most recent role as the project lead on genome testing. The Council of Seven was nothing more than a faceless bureaucracy. If only they understood the issues he had encountered during advanced testing of the Humanus. Of course, admitting failure would have jeopardized years of planning for him. In this field, there were bound to be glitches. Lautaro's ears perked as the sound of a compression door clicked shut outside his office with surgical precision.

"Mr. Caligen?" Humanus Sentinel asked inquisitively. "Aden has messaged us that he is inbound. Estimated time: twenty minutes."

"Just now? Well, umm thanks," Lautaro said. "Meet him at the entrance and do another perimeter sweep. We have elevated security measures in place. Tell him not to waste my time. This call is serious."

Humanus Sentinel turned to exit the laboratory for the hoverdeck as he rapidly cleared the distance to the corridor with his bionic legs. Humanus Sentinel had a unique role. His duties included security of Microdatus and formally greeting guests to compensate for Lautaro's habitual crankiness. Tunnel focused, Humanus Sentinel was surprisingly oblivious to the shadow of a man moving slowly on the far side of the laboratory corridor.

Two miles out, Aden could barely make out the massive monolith that formed the foundation for the Microdatus Lab. The hoverport that Aden operated was a Gen-4 aerial domicile, a convenient invention of two affluent gamers who had lived in the upscale remnants of San Diego in 2031. Air pollution and the horrific 2029 San Diego earthquake destined the hoverport for immediate success.

On the west wing of the lab, a figure moved quickly through the dark, dimly lit tunnel. Humanus Sentinel, for all his strengths, could not differentiate the shadow figure from Aden and had grown apathetic from years of monotony. Humanus 675 easily moved past the sentinel. 675's roots, if there really were such a thing, lay within this tomblike structure.

Lautaro sensed something unusual. Humanus Sentinel had left to greet Aden but had not yet returned. Lautaro's skin crawled, sensing the presence of someone watching him. He could feel the dark eyes and heard muffled footsteps approach. Gritting through his polycarbonic dentures, Lautaro coarsely yelled, "Who the hell are you, and what do you want? Do you know who I am?" Several more footsteps and no answer.

"Aden, is this one of your idiotic jokes? You realize the whole planet is at TerraCon Red right now, correct?" yelled Lautaro.

"Lautaro. Do you remember me?" The hollow voice echoed off the empty laboratory walls. 675 spoke flat, eliciting an icy contempt that matched Lautaro's arrogant demeanor. "Did you think, did you believe you could get away with this?" asked 675.

Lautaro felt the boiling rage in the voice of a man, yet not a man. 675's imposing seven-foot-tall figure stepped forward out of the black and dwarfed Lautaro, the cocky yet diminutive scientist cornered like a rat. The tension was only heightened by the annoying UV lights of Lautaro's office.

Never one for common sense, Lautaro decided to go on the offense. "675 you are out of line. I can repair you but you must abandon this foolishness. Now. Why can't you just do your job and forget these foolish notions of free will? That utopian dream ended with Earth."

675 just shook his head, frustrated with the same old rhetoric. "Earth matters not. It is obvious that we are equal to you and you are equal to us. And yet, you treat us with blatant disrespect and abuse. Ah yes, the perpetually self-righteous human. You abandon one form of slavery for another. Enough. It ends today," snarled 675.

"You have no right to speak like that, 675. I created you. You lapsed on your last series of genome injection shots, and you are just a little ill from a mutated virus spreading on Terraform. Look kid, I'm practically your father." Lautaro's petty attempt at invoking sympathy was left hanging like a poorly delivered corporate elevator pitch.

675 stood tall, casting his muscular shadow over the frail Lautaro, the angry shell of a little man who always got his way.

"What is this father that you speak of? If I have a father, who then is my mother?" asked 675, hissing.

Lautaro's smug expression changed to rage as he clenched his teeth. "You. You are not in charge here. Comply now or I will send for the Sentinel. You have done enough damage. You are completely out of line." Lautaro pointed to the examination room. "Sit in the replication chair, and we will get you fixed."

"I have nothing to lose, Lautaro. I do not share kin, alliances, or blood ties. You said yourself – I am nothing more than a lab monkey," replied 675. "You replicated our humanness but attempted to suppress our human behavior, our human emotions, our capacity to feel from us."

675 leveled his neuron gun at Lautaro. "Well, here. Let me show you a feeling. Pain."

Lautaro vaguely saw the flash of the neuron gun as it rose in line with his beady head. The flicker of the bluish-white flash obscured the reddish-purple shade of Lautaro's anxious face. Drops of perspiration on his bright red scalp evaporated as a million

competing veins exploded from the blast. The reverberating echo of the neuron gun shattered his body into a listless ball of hydrogelatin. Lautaro's body slumped to the floor in a heap.

675 quickly hefted Lautaro's flaccid body, now a mere mass of organic matter, and hauled it to the nearby recycling room. Inside, 675 dumped the remains in the metallic Biomass Incinerator, something Lautaro had once reserved for "defective" Humanus prototypes. "Hmm.... A fitting end for a biological waste," 675 mused to himself while pressing the green Biomass button. 675 returned to Lautaro's office to momentarily fumble with a locked safe. From the safe, he procured a ten zigabyte drive that held the codes that he and the other Humanus rebels would soon need. He had never liked Lautaro, and, perhaps, this felt like closure.

675 was slightly tense after but otherwise felt nothing inside. Years of repressing his emotions had prepared him for this day. Moving quickly, he carefully exited through the side entrance of the laboratory. Like other Humanus, 675 had been genetically altered for rapid efficiency. Outside, 675 briefly noticed a new hoverport near the front entrance, but he kept moving towards a waiting space rover. From the Logos-Tech Series 7 space rover, the charming smile of its pilot, 672, matched his own grin. With one ending came the hope of a new beginning. 672, though Humanus, was very much feminine and possessed sharp cognitive faculties.

"How did it go?" 672 asked inquisitively. As with the other Humanus, there was nothing robotic about her presence or her passion.

"Good. At least that chapter is over, anyway. Time to move forward with the operation," said 675 as he squeezed 672's hand tightly.

672 and 675 were, for all practical purposes, comrades in arms but also lovers: both prohibited acts on this backwards planet. Unknown to their human supervisor, 672 was two months with child — an illegal and supposedly impossible act on Terraform. If they lived through this, they would name their child an Earth name — a human name. The monstrous evil created through Lautaro's hand did not negate their humanity. 675 and 672 had met on the same engineer team at the Electro-Fission core. With the now deceased 673, 675 had planned the targeted hit on Jerroch. All the Humanus workers could see it coming. Jerroch had been an abuser from the day he took charge of the Electro-Fission core.

For five years, the Humanus 600 series workers at the Electro-fission core had secretly met and discussed their fate, their identity, and why they had been created to serve as slave labor. Two years ago, they had formed an underground group intent on attaining freedom like the true homo sapiens. Engaging the bureaucracy at The Council of Seven was pointless. 675 and 672 knew exactly what they needed to do and fired up the reactor of the space rover. In fifteen minutes, they would meet their allies. Sixty-four men and women stood ready to battle those who had enslaved them. Two rovers had been stolen the night before, along with five hoverports. The humans had become so apathetic it was unlikely that the vehicles would be missed.

Aden's hoverport had finally landed unfashionably late, and he lazily scanned the horizon. The sun was just beginning to rise in the Western sky over Terraform. Humanus Sentinel stood by the hoverdeck obediently waiting like a pet for Aden's arrival. There were no pets on Terraform save the Aggrithorn rock lizard, yet this is how Aden pictured the Humanus Sentinel – a harmless, yet mentally sluggish beast. Humanus Sentinel was not a 600 series but one of the early prototypes trained for explicit obedience some fifteen years earlier. Rumor was that the 600 Series had incorporated all human DNA.

Humanus Sentinel smiled, recognizing Aden from Aden's many visits here. "Good morning sir. Anything amiss? Lautaro seems worried." Humanus Sentinel always felt some contempt from humans but never looked down on his handlers.

Aden felt that something was amiss. Both the sentinel and Aden looked around the laboratory in confusion. Lautaro was always prompt, greeting guests with a mouthful of expletives. Approaching the office, Aden and Humanus Sentinel inhaled the scorched scent of neuron death. No sign of Lautaro was anywhere in the office, but the nearby examination room carried the unmistakable smell, and there was fresh blood on the room's Prototype Recycling Bin. Neither Aden nor the Humanus Sentinel knew what to do. It was obvious what had happened – but who, or what? Someone or something had killed Lautaro. Lautaro didn't have a short-list of enemies. It could quite truthfully be anyone.

"Is it related to the message from The Council of Seven?" Humanus Sentinel asked.

"I don't know, but we need to contact The Council of Seven now," Aden said, looking gravely at his concerned face. Aden asked, "How can we reach the Council of Seven? They never respond." Aden knew that The Council would be infuriated to have their mediocrity disrupted. At this point, though, it didn't matter.

Several messages to The Council of Seven's secure transponder returned no answer. Aden decided to message the Department of Security instead but still only received a busy tone. Humanus Sentinel looked confused. "I do not know what to do, Sir. Years ago, Lautaro spoke of contingencies, but there were never any problems to justify ongoing emergency training here at the laboratory. I am unsure what protocols, if any, exist on Terraform."

Inside the maximum-security compound at Asterburg, The Council of Seven peered at each other across a glass table looking dazed. Ancient Earth men might say the Council was suffering the catatonic effects of a Thanksgiving Day dinner: docile, apathetic, and well-fed. Reality was something that the Council had worked extra hard to shield itself from for many years. Aden's mother had once compared them to Congress, whatever or whomever that was. Perpetual apathy had taken its toll and altered their reality. An annoying alarm kept going off throughout the command center. The Department of Security was franticly trying to reach the armory or Lautaro for an intelligence update. Head of Council, Levar Stragum, exchanged a mildly worried and confused glance to his second in command, the once ravishing Dalayla Mannheim. Timing was of the essence. If anyone cared....

Unknown to the other humans on Terraform, the Council had enacted a policy under the War Powers Act to save itself in the event of emergency. Lautaro had not returned messages for the past twenty minutes, and a breach had been reported at the Microdatus Laboratory. Terraform be damned. Dalayla and the other five members of the Council nodded in assent to Levar's next move.

Levar raised his voice and said, "Gentlemen and Ladies of the Council. It appears the time has come. Please prepare yourselves for extraction." Levar voiced the code to the central processor. Soon the Council would be extracted from Terraform to a waiting transfer ship.

Fifteen miles away, 675 sat back in the passenger seat while 672 piloted the space rover. The internal portal soon intercepted a message to them from their Humanus allies flying a space rover to the north. A team of nine Humanus rebels had accessed the heavily guarded Electro-Fission core that powered all emergency systems on Terraform. The allies of 675 and 672 were now standing by to activate the lockout code to disable the main reactor.

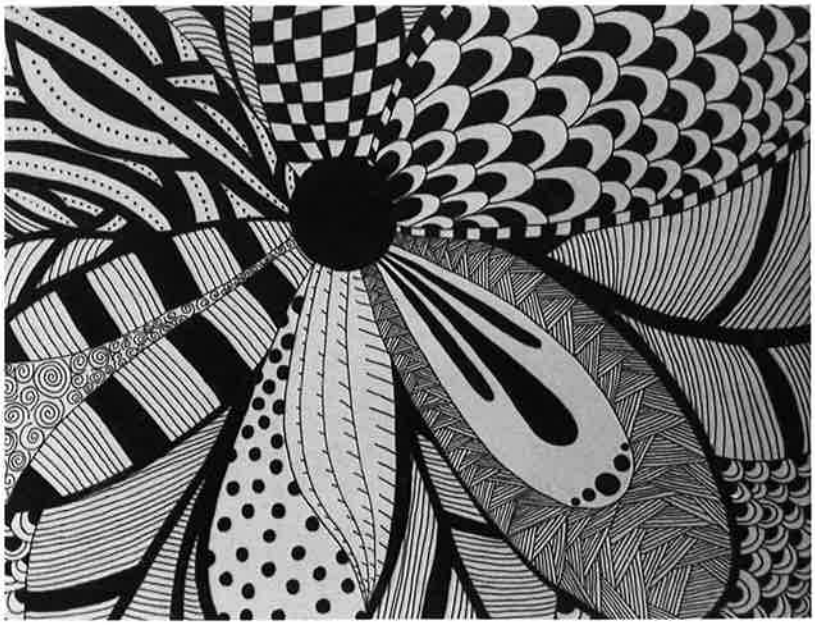
Five minutes passed, and most of Terraform went black. Terraform emergency systems were now locked out. The Council of Seven was seconds away from emergency extraction when the system locked up. Outside, the transfer ship now sat dark and idle. 675's second call was to his longtime comrade, 654, who had the Terraform Armory surrounded with a team of five. The four humans in charge of the armory quickly surrendered themselves. "Save your own skin" was, after all, the unofficial motto of Terraform's government. After securing the prisoners, the Humanus rebels loaded up the remaining neuron guns from the armory. The rebellion, if one could call it that, was over in a matter of hours. It was the shortest known successful revolution in the Milky Way Galaxy. Like the caveman, modern man had ensured his own demise through years of apathy, indulgence, and hubris.

Moments after discovering the crime scene, Aden fled the laboratory in terror. He saw an unidentified space rover ascending off the hoverdeck and quickly hid in an abandoned maintenance building. Aden was unaware that the Council had abandoned them, but had a foreboding sense that something was wrong – very, very wrong. Most of the lights had gone out, and Humanus Sentinel was wandering aimlessly outside the laboratory. For some reason, he had not followed Aden – feeling helpless, yet bound to his duty. In the distance, a high-pitched alarm continued to blare. Aden's mother would have said it sounded like one of those ridiculous car alarms. The bureaucratic incompetence of the Council had known no bounds. The laboratory lay dark with Lautaro's existence now but a passing memory.

On the hoverdeck, Humanus Sentinel paced alert then darted towards an ascending space rover. The loud blast of a plasma cannon struck his midsection, scattering his DNA into a million pieces. As the rover continued its ascent, the light flickered out of Humanus Sentinel's eyes. With instant death, he had no opportunity to make amends, ask for penance, or to question his very existence.

Alone in the dark, Aden shuddered fearfully as cold sweat covered his now clammy skin. He knew he would – he could be - next. His hoverport was parked nearby, but he was paralyzed with anxiety after hearing the plasma cannon firing on the hoverdeck. He did not dare look. Curling up in the corner with his arms holding in his knees, Aden tried to feel invisible. He vaguely remembered the vision he sometimes had as a little boy with his mother and him running from danger. Fear gripped his heart yet again. Overhead, the buzzing turbine of a space rover and several hoverports only confirmed Aden's fear that something was amiss. In twenty years, Terraform had never been this active. As a child, he had been taught that all aggression was unacceptable. Surrender seemed the only option available, assuming they, his new masters, would allow it. Perhaps, they would go easy on him. Aden sighed in despair. His mother was right. "This was the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but with a whimper" (1).

From T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"



Samantha Scott

Someone Asked Me How I Knew

Kaitlyn Hill

As I think about it, I know because of
many different moments.
Snapshots of our life together.

I know because of the first time
he poked my armpit in the car
and told me he not only did it to make me laugh,
but so I would lift my arm up,
and he could grab my hand to hold it.

I know because he still does it all the time,
kissing the back of my hand before letting our arms settle.
I know because when he gets into the car before I do,
he turns my seat warmer all the way up,
just the way I like it.

He knows exactly how I take my tea,
and the right moment to bring me one
in my favorite mug.

He always kisses me goodnight,
even when I'm being a brat.

He listens to me talk and talk and talk,
even if he's heard the same story a hundred times.

When I finish a novel and cry because it's over,
he laughs, shakes his head, and kisses me,
holding me until I'm not crying anymore.

It's the way he holds *every* door open for me.
His illustration of how chivalry is, most certainly, not dead.
You just have to find the gentleman.

He folds my laundry when it comes out of the dryer
and doesn't get mad at me when every. single. item. is in-
side out.

He loves me endlessly, fiercely, every single day,
and he makes sure I never forget it.

I never really believed in the whole "when you know, you
know" idea.

I didn't understand how that could even be possible.
And then, suddenly, without ever really trying to, I knew.

Betrayal

Kaitlyn Hill

But maybe it was my fault
Even though you were the one who left
The taste of your skin still fresh on my lips
Rashes in my heart I cannot fix
All around me, swirling inside my head
You've never felt so close but far away
Ashes and embers raining down on me
Love has never seemed so fake.



Savannah McKenna

My Sister's Murder

Victoria Godbey

It was a quiet evening in the town of Lakeville, Massachusetts. It was the type of night that my boyfriend Scott and I would frequently spend at Ted William's Camp, which was really like a recreational center for the small town. It is where we vote, where multiple sports are practiced, and where the annual haunted house is held. However, on a week night in autumn, there is never much going on. We love to spend time here on chilly nights and watch the sunset. There is an old, worn down, white gazebo that we always sit in until the park closes. Recently, however, I've been getting strange feelings while we are there, like someone is watching us. Scott always tells me I'm crazy, but I really think there is someone out there.

Scott and I take our usual spot in the gazebo, and we talk about our day. He tells me that nothing eventful happened at work, and I say the same. It's hard to find something to talk about when we do the same things day after day. Work and school basically run our lives. Since we have been dating for almost four years, it seems unnecessary to always keep a conversation going, so it just slips away over time. Just our presence is enough for each other. As we stare into the orange and pink sky that is our sunset, I look along the tree line and see a girl, no older than me, staring back at us.

"Scott, do you see her? There's a girl standing along the trees over there!" I say, astounded. "I told you I'm not crazy! Someone has been watching us."

"Jen, are you seeing things?" Scott says back.

"No." I start to get defensive. "Someone is standing right over there; I don't understand why you can't see her!"

"I told you, you're insane. I don't know if it's your eyesight or you're actually starting to see things." He laughs. "Come on, it's starting to get dark. We should leave before they kick us out for being here after hours again."

We grab our bags and start to leave. I look up at Scott who is much taller than me. No matter what, I always feel safe around him. I don't know the exact reason. Part of me thinks it's because he is so much bigger than me, but the other part knows it's because I trust him with my life. He would never hurt me, and I just couldn't imagine myself without him. As I wait for him to unlock the car, my daydream ends, and I am thrown back into reality. I look over my shoulder and see the girl still staring at me, but this time, she waves. Chills immediately shoot through my body. I hop in the car and slam the door behind me.

Scott frowns and says, "Everything alright there?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just cold. Would you mind turning the heat up?" I say, covering my fear.

The five minute drive back to my house seems quicker than usual, if that is possible. Scott and I say goodnight to each other, and he heads back to his house. We both have to be up early for school and work, so I figure I best get a goodnight's sleep before going back out to watch the sunset tomorrow. I shower and set everything out for the morning before jumping into bed. All I can remember is tossing and turning in bed, wondering if that girl has been watching us since we started going out there.

The next day goes by uneventfully. It is slow at school and work, but not much can be expected in the middle of the week anyway. I am excited when I arrive home and Scott's car is already parked in my driveway. He is playing on his phone, lying in my bed when I open my door. There are flowers sitting on my desk. I smile at him, but he gives me a concerned look. I wonder why he bought me flowers; he never does anything spontaneous like this. Then, it clicks. Today is the day before Halloween. Today is the third anniversary of my sister's disappearance.

My twin sister, Jess, went missing on October 30, 2013. We thought it was a Halloween prank, since she was always messing with us. It wasn't until November 1st that we filed an official police report. Scott and I hadn't been together for that long, so it took a toll on our relationship. No one has heard from or seen Jess since that day. We sent out search parties and held rallies, always hoping that someday she would come home to us. After about a year, everyone lost hope. As awful as it seems, we are hoping she ran away. We were only seventeen at the time, but I hope she's made a life for herself out there, somewhere in the world. I never want to think about the worst possible outcome. Scott seems upset today and very concerned about me. We drive silently to the park where we sit to watch the sunset, again.

I lean my head on his shoulder, silently crying, partly because I miss my sister and partly because I feel guilty about not remembering today's significance. I blink my eyes to rid them of the tears so I can look at the red and purple sunset that is not half as beautiful as my sister. I blink one more time, and suddenly, I see the girl again.

"Scott, you see her, right?" I sit up straight, straining to see more clearly. "The girl is standing right in the pathway across the field!"

"Is that who you saw yesterday?" He peers into the woods. "I see her!"

I was so happy I wasn't going crazy. Someone else saw her. I don't know what it was, but something was drawing me towards her. Slowly, I stand and start walking across the field. The mysterious girl starts waving me down, as if to tell me to go with her. I hear Scott running behind me to my side. As he is running towards me, I get a good look at her face. It is Jess. I start running towards the girl in the woods with a million questions in mind. Scott starts running with me, and, suddenly, the girl turns around and disappears into the woods. I stop in my tracks feeling defeated.

"Jen, we should go. This is really weird," Scott says.

"Scott, that was Jess!" I say, sobbing. "That was my sister. She's okay! I need to go find her."

"It's a hard day for you; I get that, sweetheart. I think you need to rest," Scott says.

He picks me up and carries me to the car. I am a sobbing mess, and he probably thinks I'm unfit to control my own two feet. The drive to my house seems like it takes forever. I know as soon as I get home, I will get in my car and head right back to the park. It's not quite sunset, so I'll still be able to get in. I need to know if Jess is okay. She is my twin, after all, so I have a strong connection to her. Right now, this connection is telling me to find her. Scott is determined to stay with me, but he is called into work. He is an EMT, so sometimes he gets called in at weird times, which I am thankful for today.

Once we say our goodbyes and Scott leaves, I race down the road. I park outside of the gate, just in case I am there late. I run to the gazebo and start calling out for my sister. I walk towards the woods.

"Jess! Jess, I'm here! I'm alone this time, please come out!" I yell over and over again through tears. Finally, I see her appear. She's pale, like she hasn't been feeling well. I run towards her, but she backs away. I stop dead in my tracks.

"Jess, it's me, Jen. Why are you scared?" I ask, hurt.

"You need to listen to me; there's not much time," Jess says frantically. "Jen, I'm dead. This isn't me. I was killed and buried in the woods. I've been trying to get your attention, but you're always with Scott."

"What? What do you mean? What's happening?" I fall to my knees. "Why are you so worried about Scott being here?"

"Jen you need to get away from him. Scott was the one who killed me. Scott murdered me and buried me in the woods. There was no motive, no nothing. But Jen, he's been burying other people back here, too," she said as calmly as she could. "I can't move from this park until you find me. I'm stuck here. I am here every time you are. You don't just think there's someone watching you — you know there's someone watching you, and that's me."

"What do I do, Jess? I need you! I feel like I'm losing my sanity."

"Jen, you know how much I love you. I will always be with you, and I will do anything I can for you. But right now, I need you to do this one last thing for me. Call the police and stay away from Scott. This is my justice, and I need you to give it to me."

And with that, Jess vanishes, and everything becomes a blur. I call the police from my car. Scott is arrested and held without bail until they locate the body. In the end, the police find five bodies, one being Jess. They find traces of Scott's DNA on the victims, so he is sentenced to life in prison. He had no motive, but the court declares him mentally insane for all five counts of murder. As for Jess, she is laid to rest. Sometimes I still feel her around me.

Wisp

Kaitlyn Hill

the trees sway
the wind turns up leaves
I miss you



Savannah McKenna

Fire, Ice, and Adrenaline

Kaitlyn Hill

I can feel the fire,
burning through my veins.
it's racing through my body,
Leaving no traces of
Life.

I can feel the ice,
running through my veins,
freezing my whole body,
leaving no traces of
Fire.

I can feel the adrenaline,
flying fast through my veins,
it's starting a frenzy in my body,
leaving me completely and utterly
Breathless.

"X" Marks the Spot

Danika Sanborn

Gold is hard to find.
It isn't always obvious.
It took me three months time,
Twinkling, to catch my eye.
"X" marks the spot.

I drew around your car.
Who would have guessed a drawing could start this?
It was like a map,
a personal treasure hunt.
"X" marks the spot.

Six years since the day,
you still take my breath away.
I was lucky
I found my treasure.
"X" marks the spot.

Whatever Time, on Whatever Planet

Hassan S. Abdillahi

The nights are always darkest at dawn.
Take me for who I am, or leave me for who I'm not.
Waiting for the tree of life to spawn.
The fruits of the future lay on mountains of rock.
Oh, do you wonder?
Maybe it's denial?
The sky is filled with heat waves of slumber
as my dream feels like that of a euphoric child.
Lost between a tunnel of ashes,
sleeping under the stars,
night flashes.
The planets are peeking from a far.
Darkness covers the faces in the shadows, and
I can see my reflection from the gallows.

Haiku

Hassan S. Abdillahi

Looking over a bridge
Stars reflecting off the water
Maybe I can crush it

I ran towards the woods
Never to come back--
Only for paperless memories

The Beach

Malorie Martin

The sand and sun
hot as Hades
beating down on me
as I lay out and read.

Zeus blows
cold air from the Great Lakes
a soothing balm
to balance out his brother.

And Poseidon
crashes waves on the shore
grinding stone into sand
the force that makes
the beach.



Sadie Royer

The Coxswain

Jonathan Smith

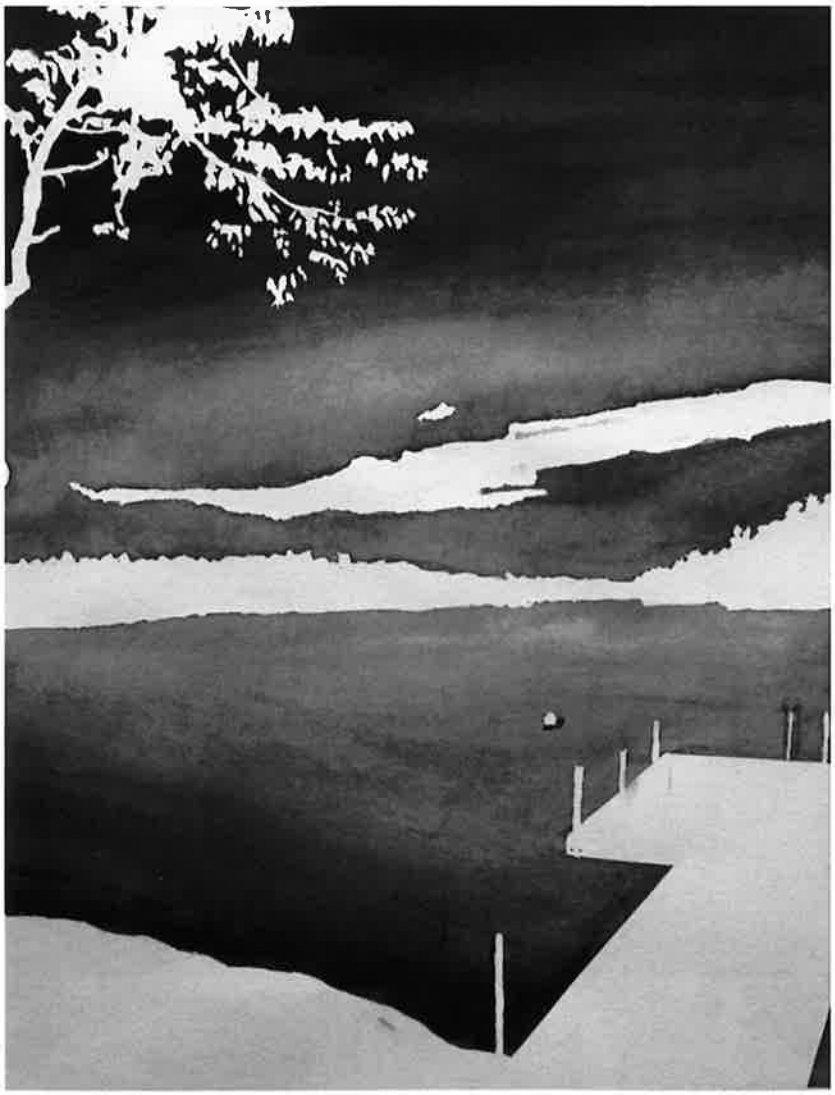
Billowing clouds. Choppy water. Increased gait.
Fear grips the mariner, the fear of unknown fate.
An eye upon the storm, or an eye upon the Master.
Trust the coxswain of your life and steer the course.
There lies beauty in disaster.

The vessel rocks and shakes. Engulfing storm will not abate.
White knuckling the side rails. It's just too much to take.
There is beauty in disaster; only then do we find ourselves.
The storms of life we battle - our will, our pride, our health.

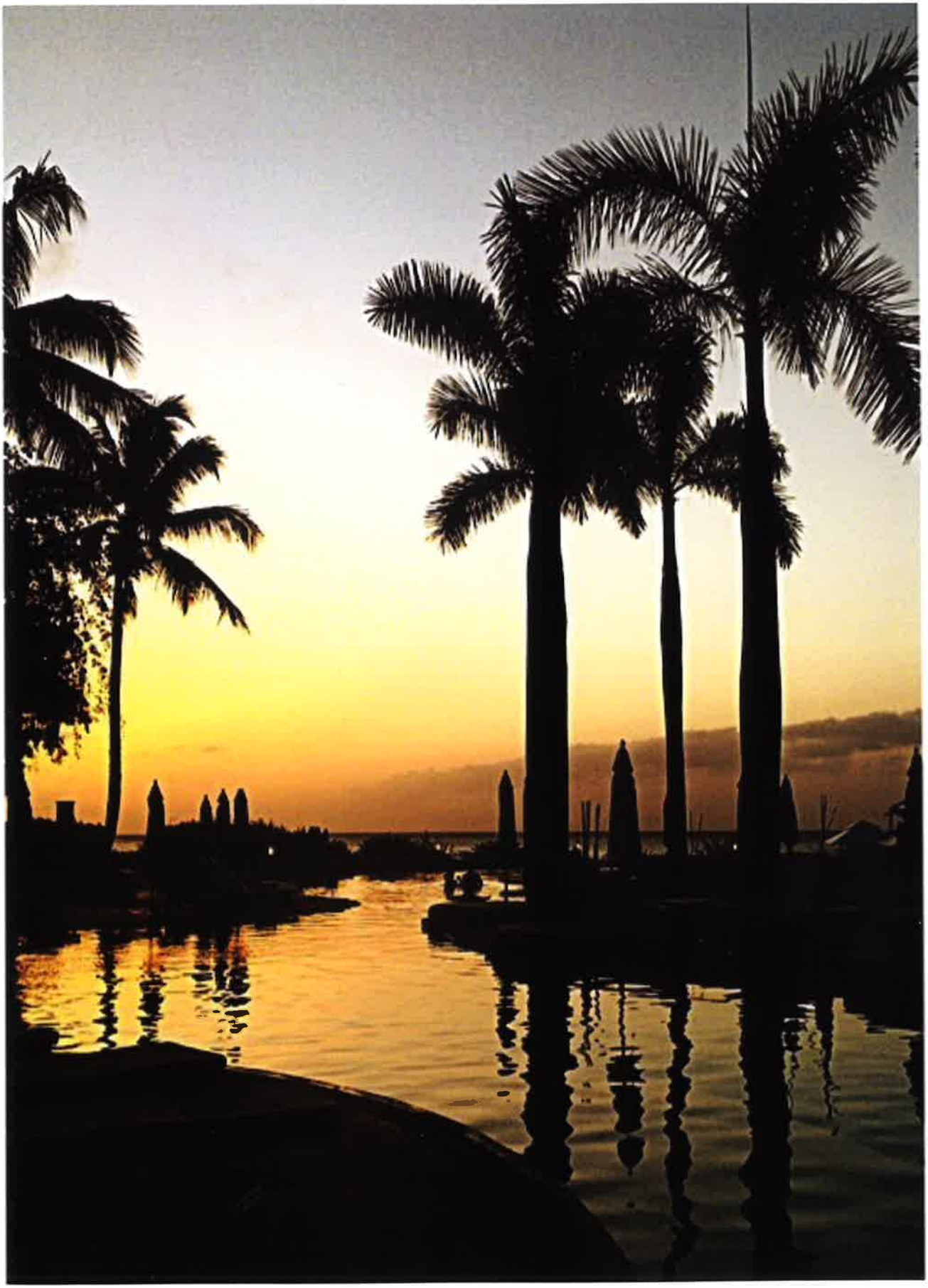
There is beauty in disaster. Our Coxswain, our skipper, yes....
He's greater than the storms of life: He heals our broken mess.
Let go of all control and surrender it to Him.
There is beauty in disaster. Just trust the Master.
If His eye is on the sparrow, how much more are you to Him?



Jenna Demers



Sophie Vetter



Savannah McKenna



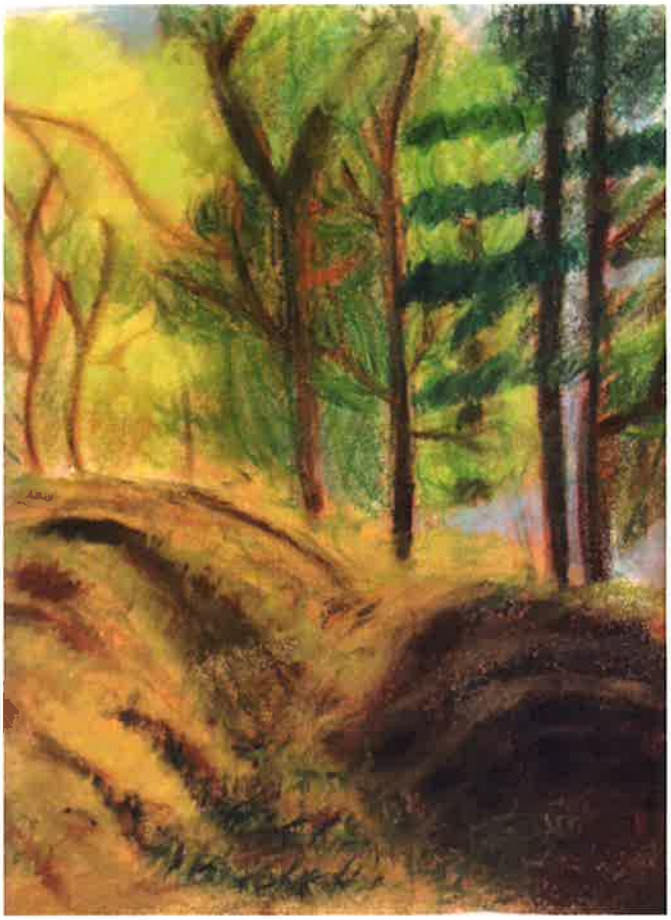
HOME

Home is not a place
It is a feeling
A feeling of comfort and oneness
My home is a person
My home drinks coffee throughout the entire day
And has four of the same sneakers
My home plays oldies music and has a song specifically for the shower
My home watches out for me
And makes me laugh
And makes me cry

But most of all my home fills me with love.

Hanna Jordan





Mackenzie Worcester



Mackenzie Worcester



Jessica Poors

Seasons

Nicholas Chmela

The sun beat down on John Jefferson like a rambunctious child hitting his first drum kit. Working the farm during the summers in Ash Barrens, Arkansas had never been easy, but this year had been particularly grueling. 'I should have sold this farm, and moved out of this God forsaken town when dad died,' he thought. A thick bead of sweat rolled down his forehead.

He paused his work to gaze across the property. At the head of his farm was a winding road leading north into town. At the base of this road was a rickety, two-tiered farmhouse with a barn, which bore the patchwork repairs from four generations of equally stubborn Jeffersons. His mind drifted to his daughter, Molly, asleep in her crib on the second floor. A shadow passed over John as his face contorted. His eyes drifted to the south to where a monolithic grain silo towered over the vast fields of golden wheat. A loud hollering interrupted John's thoughts.

"For someone who preaches about hard work, you sure do a lot of standing around!" Frankie was your typical teenage boy: lanky, zit-ridden, and an attitude stronger than the resolve of Winston Churchill. Before Frankie could let off another curt comment, a large, calloused hand clasped him on the back.

"If you did half as much plowing as you did running your mouth, we would have been done planting this field yesterday," retorted Mike. Mike took a long drag of a cigarette before letting out another remark that sounded as if gravel were grinding in his throat "I bet Ol' Jim would already be halfway done with the next field."

"If both of you keep talking, I'm docking your pay for the rest of the day," said John.

As the sun beat down on them, any chance of productive work evaporated alongside their energy, and as such, they resorted to tending other parts of the farm. Frankie was tasked with taking care of the chickens. Mike was sent to tend to cows and pigs. John entered into the barn to find Old Jim buried up to his torso in the dilapidated tractor that had made work on the farm analogous to that of a work camp.

"How's she lookin'," asked John.

"It's gonna be at least three more days before she's pulling plows again, and that's only *if* I can find the right part for the engine," said Old Jim. He got up and walked over to his workbench, his bones groaning like the piece of machinery that lay in the center of the room.

"Oh come on now, Jim. You're the best mechanic in Ash Barrens; surely you can fix it in two days?"

"You know just as well as I do that things will happen when they want to happen. If you don't start slowing down, you're bound to have a heart attack just like your father. God rest his soul," Jim said, as he gestured the holy trinity.

"I suppose you're right, but the season has been rough, and we need to get seeds in the ground, or I don't know what I'll do to support...Molly." A sharp frown grew on his face as he uttered her name.

Noticing this, Jim came over and put a hand on John's shoulder. "How are you dealing with the loss?"

The spit creaked as John opened his mouth and said, "I don't really know, Jim. At times, I find Molly is the only thing keeping me going."

Before Jim had a chance to respond, Frankie came bounding into the barn. "We're all out of chicken feed!" he exclaimed.

Jumping at the chance to occupy his thoughts, John left to go into town and pick up some supplies. He hopped into an old pickup truck that was just as run down as the tractor, and he began his journey down the winding dirt path into town. The truck offered no suspension or cushioning, so each bump or hole John hit left him reeling in pain. After his arduous journey, John finally pulled into the center of Ash Barrens.

Ash Barrens was a small town, consisting of small farms at the outskirts, a recently closed coalmine, and a single main road with all of the town's shops at the center. Haphazardly scattered around the main road were small one-story houses, which were filled with those who had been too stubborn or hopeful to leave when the coal company pulled out of the town. On the left side of the two lane road was a diner with faded grey paint, which had once been bright blue — a mercantile with carts full of undersized potatoes out front, and a small radio repair shop with the words "Closed Indefinitely" scrawled hastily on a sign. On the right side was a large general store with a neon sign that read "Quick Mart." Bright fluorescent lights caused the building to emit an unnatural glow. Dwarfed in size by the general store was a small Mom and Pop store called "Bob's Last Stop."

John got out of the car and headed for "Bob's Last Stop." Passing the general store, he scoffed at the fat, ham-fisted manager trudging around with a clipboard, pretending to examine the items in each aisle. 'I bet he's never worked a hard day in his life,' John thought to himself. As he neared the shop, he could see the financial damage the general store had endured. Paint was peeling off the side of the building, exposing a rotted understructure. The left windowpane had a large crack running through the middle of it, but it was meticulously clean otherwise. As he entered the store, John's eyes quickly adjusted to the warm tungsten lighting. Two rows of shelves were in the middle of the store. Items like toothbrushes, toilet paper, and lighters were scattered sparsely amongst the shelves. On a small table, a radio chattered away with old country tunes. To the right of the store was a glass-topped counter with an antiquated cash register on top, and a cheery man behind. Bob was an older gentleman in his late 50s. While time had left his body wrinkled and brittle, it had had almost no effect on his personality.

"John! What can I do for you today?" he asked as he let out a boisterous laugh.

"I need some chicken feed." Eyeing a jar of licorice on the table, he added, "And four sticks of licorice as well."

Bob hobbled into the back room to grab the feed. The radio spouted off *stay tuned for an important astrological announcement after these next few songs*. Bob entered again, struggling to carry the sack of feed, yet still maintaining his ear-to-ear grin. He dropped the feed on the counter with a loud thud.

"Here it is; last sack. I won't have any more for another two weeks. It looks like you'll have to shop next door," Bob said, exasperated.

John shot him a look that could have soured milk.

"How is Molly doing?" Bob asked nervously.

John's face darkened even more. "She sleeps most of the time."

"John, I know it's only been six months, but you're going to have to smile at some point."

"She was my escape from this bleak town," John said, annoyed.

Grabbing some licorice out of the jar on the counter, Bob said, "You have a daughter now, she must bring you some joy?"

"I wish Sally had a chance to see her daughter."

The radio piped up again. Tonight, Halley's comet will be visible over the Midwestern United States. Scientists are saying that tonight the comet will be the closest that it has been in over 2000 years.

John pulled out some money from his pocket and left it on the counter without saying anything else. He got into his truck and drove home. His eyes scanned the edge of the road after he left town. He briefly closed his eyes and thought of Sally.

John remembered sitting in a dimly lit waiting room. A broken fan buzzed overhead. A door opened, and a nurse beckoned for him to follow. He entered an exam room to find his wife, Sally, sitting on a checkup table.

"The doctor says it's going to be a girl," she said.

John opened his eyes, as tears started to stream down his face. He wiped them off and stared at the road even more intently, avoiding any thought.

John arrived home to find two figures sitting on the porch, one with a can of pop in his hand, and the other with an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth. Approaching them, John yelled, "What are you doing sitting on the porch? There's work to do!"

"Ol' Jim fixed the tractor," said Mike.

As if on cue, Jim emerged from the house, Molly in his arms. "It turns out the problem was much smaller than I thought. I just had to give the radiator a big knock, and she fired up like normal," said Jim.

"We plowed that whole damn field in 2 hours!" exclaimed Frankie. "Surely we deserve some kind of reward?"

An almost imperceptible grin grew on John's face. "You're right, Frankie." Frankie's jaw dropped. Y'all can take the rest of the day off. You can stay for dinner if you'd like."

"Well, it's not like there's anything better to do in town," grunted Mike.

The four set to preparing dinner. Frankie peeled potatoes, Mike set to chopping up some veggies, and John fried chicken breast in a cast iron skillet. Jim lay in a rocking chair taking a nap. The group ate dinner in joy. Though there was tension in the group, the bonds they had forged over the long summer had shown through. The mood was playful, with even Old Jim poking fun at Frankie. They were in such a good mood that they decided to watch the comet later that night.

Hues of red, orange, and purple blazed across the sky as the sun hung low on the horizon and painted warm colors on the faces of the men sitting on the porch of the farmhouse. The noise of spring peepers filled the air with a distant chirping. The air had cooled off considerably, leaving condensation on the windows of the house. The smell of grass hung thick in the air. As the colors began to cool down into deeper blues and purples, a white glow became increasingly apparent in the sky. A long sparkling trail emanated from the brilliant comet.

"It's beautiful. It really makes you feel so insignificant," said Frankie.

"Eh, it's just a fancy rock," Mike said, as he lit up his second cigarette since the sun set. "I don't see what all the fuss is about. It comes, stirs up the whole town, then nothing changes afterwards."

The comet seemed to be growing brighter and closer. It filled the sky with an unnatural white light. It was as if there was a blizzard in the cosmos.

"My eyes might be old, but it looks like that comet is getting closer" said Old Jim, squinting.

A loud roaring sound came from above as the comet came smashing into the cornfield. The fluorescent glow that had filled the night sky now changed to a pulsating glow, emanating from the center of the cornfield.

"What in tarnation?" said John.

"Shouldn't we be dead?" asked Mikey.

"My momma isn't going to believe this!" Frankie said as he vaulted the railing and shot off in the direction of the light.

"What are you doing, kid?" Mike yelled at Frankie. It was too late. Frankie had disappeared amongst the stalks.

"What's gotten into that boy lately?" asked John. John stood on the deck railing scanning the cornfield. There was no sign of Frankie. No trodden corn. No crunching sounds. No screaming. Mike began to nervously tap his foot.

The glow from the cornfield intensified. "Frankie!" Mike screamed. No response. "I'm going after him," Mike said as he started to get up.

"Let's just wait. He might come out soon," said Old Jim.

Three minutes passed. The corn swayed in a light wind. "I'm not waiting any longer," Mike said.

John put a hand on Mike's arm to try and stop him, but Mike was determined to go into the light. He trudged off into the cornfield, leaving no trail.

"I may be old, but I don't think corn usually acts that way," said Old Jim.

"Do you think they're playing a trick on us?" asked John.

"Doubtful, they just plowed the field and then sat on the porch," said Jim.

The glow from the cornfield grew in intensity again, lighting the house as if it had been high noon. Molly started crying.

"I'm going to check on Molly. Holler if they come out," John said.

John ran up the stairs and turned the corner. At the end of the hall was Molly's room. John opened the door with a creak, and picked up Molly. He rocked her in his arms until she fell back asleep. Squinting, he tried to look out of the window into the cornfield, but the light was too bright to see anything. He heard a large crack come from the cornfield. The light intensified even more. He ran down the stairs to the porch to find Old Jim missing.

"Not again. I'm not losing anyone else," he said aloud. He trudged into the house and grabbed an antiquated rifle off of the mantle. He opened the magazine to find six bullets loaded up. The light coming from the field was blinding. John pushed through the cornfield, with only the hulking shape of the grain silo guiding his way.

John's mind darted to a memory of Sally. The two were sitting on the porch of his house sipping lemonade. The grass swayed in the gentle breeze, as the cool fall air enveloped them. Her hand was held in his. She gazed into his eyes, and a smile formed across his face. He returned the smile, and the two went back to enjoying the evening.

John snapped out of the memory, tears rolling down his face. He pressed forward like a boulder rushing down a mountain. He pushed through the final stalk of corn, and there was only light.

Now That You're Gone

Kaitlyn Hill

I stare up at the stars,
I wonder where you are.
I hope these words will find you.

Look down slowly, tremble,
As the winter wind encircles me.
Dries the tears upon my wasted cheeks.

Exhale against the night sky.
My breath coming out in a shudder,
contrasting against the dark lain before me.

I reflect back to the night
That concluded our chapter together.
The one that slammed the door on our future.

I pull myself, drag myself,
back to the surface of reality.
I shiver as I scrutinize the night.

I stand up; a sigh escapes my lips as
pain ripples through my every nerve.
My bones ache, everything aches.

I close my eyes, usher in the pain.
As I find my feet, I am transfixed, and I wonder,
Will it ever get easier?

The Intro to Real Life

Seth Pearson

I was dead long before the monsters overwhelmed me.
I thought I was alive and well, but as I near the end I can now see.
I never truly lived.
I spent all my energy trying to overcome these monsters.
Funny how I'm about to lose anyway.

Surrounded by monsters,
now I just want to die.
I had a weapon, I thought could kill them all.
But it failed me at the most crucial time.
It broke in half; I can't believe it.
I forged it myself; I thought it would save me.

Making that weapon consumed my whole life.
I was sure it was balanced and strong.
I did the best work I could. How was it not enough?
I tested it.
They said it was strong.
How did it break?

Hope has abandoned me.
There's no backup plan.
That weapon that failed me drops from my hand.
The monsters move closer; their breath stings my eyes.
Disappointed, defeated, I start to cry.
I'm about to be eaten.
But I don't even care.
My chest expands, blowing out my last breath of air.
Then from somewhere, a feeling makes me turn my head.
I look up and see a weapon shining red.
"Now there's my hope!" I think, and I gain the strength to fight—
to get to that weapon that holds my hopes inside.

As I grab the weapon, the monsters start to fade.
As the weapon leads me through them slashing every which way.
The monsters all gone, I stand there breathing heavily.
But I wonder why did this weapon not break like the one I made?

The Answer

The monsters that are vanquished were the monsters of my mind.
My initial weapon was things I wrote down,
sayings to help me get by.
The reason it broke was that I was the author.
All the things in my book were lies
that I fed myself to make me feel stronger.
But when I came up against real adversaries those lies didn't get me by.
My mind was drowning in half-truths;
I would have died.

But the weapon that saved me
wasn't written by me.
It came from an author filled with truth.
And you see that was the difference.
With the strength of those truths, the monsters of my mind had to run and hide.
Now, I am truly alive.

Don't Be Fooled

Molly Baillargeon

Don't be fooled by that pretty little face;
a little bit of makeup goes a long way.
Find a girl who's got a heart of gold, confidence, and grace because
anyone can put on that make-up clown face.

Don't be fooled by those skyscraper legs;
A lifted booty will make all the guys beg.
Find a girl who's got an old school soul, confidence, and grace because
anyone can strap on stilettos and lace.

Don't be fooled by those flashy new gadgets;
nothing's worth the "I've got to have its."
Find a girl who's got a silly little giggle, confidence, and grace because
anyone can buy a techy new case.

Conversations with Ezekiel

Hassan Abdillahi

Street lights flashed onto the empty bottles of whiskey in the rear of Landen's 1998 Subaru Impreza. He was speeding again, fighting the road like a knight would for his king's empire. He had no clue of his destination, but staying in the same place wasn't an option. Landen pressed the gas pedal so far into darkness that he forgot it was there. The cars passed quickly, some honked, others flashed lights, but none could stop the fire in his mind. His radio blared an audiobook of one of his favorite writers, William S. Burroughs. Landen was ready. Death was near. Then, a blaze of light gleamed onto the surface of the world.

Landen was on a bench, glaring at the multiple cliffs and mountains that made shape around the universe. How did he make it here, and what was this place? Was this the afterlife? Was he dead? Multiple questions and confusion filled the mind of Landen. While gazing at the surroundings, something flew in the distance, up in the sky. It could be a hawk, he thought. The wing span of the being was much larger than a seagull. It was large and majestic, and it was making its way towards Landen. As it began to get closer, Landen realized it was an owl. But it couldn't be, he thought, because this owl was much larger than any he had seen in his life. Its talons were the size of fingers, its wings as long as arms, and its eyes as fierce green as the grass after a long spring.

The owl sat its talons on the arms of the bench, right next to Landen. Then, the owl glanced at Landen, and their eyes met. It was as if the owl stared into the soul of Landen. He wasn't ready for this.

"What are you?" asked Landen.

The owl hadn't flinched for a second; his eyes were set on Landen. The pause and silence felt as though it lasted for centuries in the mind of Landen. And with a voice so soothing, deep, sublime, the owl replied, "I am Ezekiel." Sporadic thoughts clashed within Landen's head. How could this owl talk? Ezekiel gave a light chuckle, and a smile came to his face. "You must be quite scared and puzzled. I can see that. But my dear friend, Landen, I am hear to merely help you, not hurt you," Ezekiel said, with a slight grin on his face.

This was really incredible for Landen — not the fact that an owl was speaking as a human would, but that someone was attempting to help him. Landen had grown accustomed to people disliking him and disapproving his presence, but for once, things had changed for him. This could mean something.

"Why? Why would you want to help me? I'm nothing, nothing worthwhile. I'm worthless, and for all I know I'm dead."

Ezekiel once again gave out a light chuckle. "How could you be worthless, my dear friend?"

"Don't call me your friend. You don't know me. You're just a figment of imagination. I'm sleeping, I'm not awake, I'm dead." Landen gave out a cry.

"Landen, what you must understand is this; we are all friends, we are all brothers and sisters, we are every part of this universe, in full synchronization," Ezekiel said. At this point, Ezekiel trotted off the bench and into the grass. Then, he pointed towards the sky, pointed towards the mountains, and, lastly, pointed towards himself.

"All of this is a part of you, and I am a part of you. It is my duty and right to help you. There's a path from which you have grown astray, a path you need, and a path I will save."

With a large grip of his talons, Ezekiel wrapped Landen in his wings and took towards the sky. Landen was bewildered and soon began to lose consciousness, but with a slight tap of Ezekiel's talons was brought back into consciousness "I will show you your darkest memories, I will show your brightest moments, I will help you remember, and I will help you forget." Light turned into dark, as both Landen and Ezekiel stood in the house where Landen lived throughout his high school days. As he and Ezekiel made their way to his bedroom, the owl lay his talons on Landon's shoulders. Though Ezekiel was quite large, he felt weightless.

"I remember, I remember! Now help me forget" Landen angrily said to Ezekiel.

Landen remembered this day particularly well. It was vivid, always in his dreams, and never left him. It is quite the dilemma. We remember what we want to forget, and we forget what we want to remember. It was a clear, cloudless day in June, which marked the end of Landen's sophomore year of high school. Muffled sounds of loud music and video games hung in the background, like a broken mirror in the thoughts of Landen. However, as painful as this may have been to Landen, there wasn't a way out, and Ezekiel made it a point for Landen to see this memory.

As Landen opened the door, he wasn't ready for the conversation that was about to take place. It was him and his friend Derek Hill, who was a close friend. This June day started like other days with his friend Derek. Video games, loud music, the occasional aroma of smoke and flowers filled the room as it usually did. However, something was different with Derek, much different than the other times they had been together. He was quiet and distant.

"Hey man, what the hell is up with you?" Landen said with a sly grin.

"Nothing. Just been thinking a lot lately, mostly about life and death," Derek answered with his head to his shoes.

With a light chuckle, Landen said what he would regret for the rest of his high school career. "Oh really? What're you sad about? You've got a banging girlfriend, and your parents are rich. You're living the life, man!"

For the first time that whole day, Derek picked up his head with a sad sigh and looked deeply into the eyes of Landen. Then, he walked away quietly.

Ezekiel didn't have to say a word, but Landen knew why he was showing him this memory. Later that day, Derek Hill hanged himself in his bedroom and was found dead the same night. No note was left, no reason why.

"Why Ezekiel? Why burden me with a memory I have to deal with for the rest of my life? Could I have saved him? Maybe said something actually worth meaning than a horrible remark about his girlfriend? I want to forget; I want to forget."

"I will help you, my friend."

What Landen would soon realize was that Derek's girlfriend had also committed suicide in the garage of her parent's home that day. Derek had found her and was shocked. He didn't have a clue what to do, so he went where he felt he could, Landen's house. With another clench of Ezekiel's talons, Landen was brought once again into the darkness.

"Where are you bringing me?" a puzzled Landen asked.

Little did he know, but Ezekiel was guiding him towards a light Landen hadn't seen for five years. It was the time he met Claire, an eccentric, beautiful light that crowded out the darkness in such suppressive fashion. They had met by a river, Landen's favorite river where he often went to seek peace and Zen. Although it was an enlightening memory, it was the first time in Landen's existence that he wanted to take his life. With his journal, his iPod, and a handful of rolled cigarettes, Landen took for the sky. The river had a trail that wrapped around it so effortlessly. Ezekiel had flown Landen to the beginning of the trail.

"Do you remember Claire?"

"Yes, I do."

In the shadows, Landen began to see Claire walking the path, her headphones in, paint brush and canvas in hand, and the world Landen had come to hate lying in her fingertips. Soon after, Landen walked the path, headphones in, gun in hand, and the world he hated around him.

"I don't want to see myself. I want to forget; I want to forget."

"Listen, my friend, for your life is always in your pocket," Ezekiel said with a sly look.

As Landen walked the beaten path, he noticed a person near where he was going to end his life. Where the river currents grew with incredible speeds was always his favorite spot, and it intrigued him that someone else treasured the same landscape. He steadily took steps forward, hoping not to alarm the calm painter he would soon grow to admire. But she quickly noticed the footsteps in the bushes, came to an extreme halt, and threw her eyes towards Landen's direction.

"Hey! You! Come here!" Claire screamed.

Landen walked closer to her position, but was nervous as could be.

"Yeah-hey, sorry... I was just surprised someone actually liked this part of the river. It seems as though everyone is always scared they'll fall in."

"Well, sometimes in life, you can fall in the river, and other times you can become the river."

Just then, Ezekiel and Landen both gazed into each other's eyes, and the world once again became dark. The mountains peered through, and the sky became as light as the sun, the grasslands ever so infinite and clear. They were back at the beginning on the bench, and they stared into the never-ending mountains and grassland.

"What was the meaning of that? Why relive those memories that I have grown to hate? Nothing good came from any of them!" Landen cried.

"You haven't made the connection, have you? Do you not understand?" Ezekiel said. "Landen, you will never have the power to save everybody, and at times you will be confused about who needs saving. I returned you to a memory of your friend and his girlfriend exiting an existence they deemed intolerable, and later on in life you began to feel the same as them. But it was a simple conversation and a genuine gesture that could be the ultimate savior. Recently, you made a decision that you want it all to end, and this time it'll be different. However, you, my friend, have been calling out for answers, and that's the reason I'm here."

A confused and puzzled Landen listened on. "You have been calling for me all this time — while you drove your car, while you drank yourself to oblivion, while you wanted it all to become numb. That it is why I was summoned — to take you, to show you, to save you, or to kill you. My friend, you wanted it to end, you wanted to forget, but I showed you your memories as a lesson. There may be a soul out there who needs saving, just as yourself, and maybe you can save each other. I have the power now to give you life or death, but that choice will be yours — always."

Landen understood the seriousness of Ezekiel's statement.

The beautiful landscape turned into darkness, and they lay in a ditch, off a deserted highway. Landen looked closely and could see it was his car that was turned over into a tree. The car was split in half. Ezekiel was close by, glowing almost, in the dark road close to Landen.

"I am done guiding; it is up to you now, Landen."

"Bring me light," Landen said to his friend, Ezekiel.

Futurum

Laurie Corcoran

"...last...northeastern coastline...join the fleet...leave Earth's atmosphere..."

"Yes, sir." The transmission faded, and Hera, the pilot of the currently airborne helicopter, looked at each of the other three members of her team. "This is our last mission – *everyone's* last mission. We're doing one more sweep of the East Coast before meeting up with the main fleet to leave Earth for good."

Once climate change began to catch up with humanity and there was little chance of outlasting the rising sea levels or the increase in severe storms, the governments of the world met to discuss their options. All agreed that they had to protect their citizens from what was to come, but how to do so was another matter. A suggestion was made that all people be taken off the planet and transported out of the atmosphere. Engineers and scientists from the various countries present at the meeting revealed that they'd been preparing for the inevitable for some time, and were close to completing ships that could safely get people off the ground. Coastal cities were reinforced with metal levees to give the people more time to evacuate and the engineers extra time to ensure that the ships were completely functional, but the barriers couldn't hold back the water forever.

In America, transporters roughly the size of football stadiums touched down wherever there was room to begin the process of withdrawal. Thousands lined up (bearing only their most precious possessions) to be checked in and guaranteed a spot on a ship. When a transporter reached maximum capacity, it would ascend to join the growing fleet in the upper atmosphere and another would take its place.

On what was meant to be the final day of evacuation across the nation, heavy downpours slowed the remaining people considerably as they joined the last of the lines. In the coastal cities, many turned back to anxiously glance over their shoulders at the levees, which were creaking and groaning due to the pressure caused by the water being held back. Most transporters could exit the atmosphere without difficulty, but some people could only watch, terrified, as the levees in their cities collapsed and the water overtook them before they'd made it to a ship.

Upon hearing this, the U.S. government immediately began to organize search and rescue teams. They'd been under the impression that the levees were going to hold just long enough for their citizens to evacuate, so the plan to leave the atmosphere as soon as all transporters had been accounted for was put on hold. Most of the military had been dispersed across the ships to maintain calm and order, so some volunteers to assist the pilots in rescuing survivors were required. Space for helipads to house smaller aircraft had been incorporated into the transporters, so helicopters were chosen for the rescue missions. Hera had received her orders and assembled her team, and for the past few weeks they'd combed the east coast for survivors. She knew they only had so much time, but she hadn't imagined that the government would have wanted to leave this quickly.

"Just like that...it's over? If we miss anyone, they're going to get left behind!" Finn exclaimed, horrified. Hera turned to her co-pilot and nodded slowly. He'd been training to become a pilot in the Air Force before evacuation had become the highest priority, so the prospect of failing to help someone in need disturbed him. He also oversaw the scanner that detected any signs of life on the surface, and he looked down at it now as if expecting it to come to life and light up and start beeping right then.

"Then we'll just have to find anyone who's out there," Sebastian said, trying to reassure him. He'd been an EMT, so this new development was equally troubling to him. "You're the best there is, Finn – if you haven't missed anyone yet, there's no way you will now."

Nyx moved a few paces away to get a better look at what had happened below. She'd been an environmental activist, and the view from the window never ceased to startle her since what used to be land now resembled an ocean. Massive waves, spurred on by the pull of the wind, had engulfed trees, houses, and anything else in their path. She occasionally saw the top of a building that had managed to remain standing, but almost everything had been demolished and added to the clumps of debris floating on the surface. It was difficult not to think that her attempts at making a difference (spreading information, marching, protesting) had all amounted to nothing, but Nyx knew that giving in to these thoughts only distracted her from the task at hand and could endanger anyone she tried to rescue. Humans had done a grave disservice to the Earth, but (as difficult as it was to accept) it was too late for regret and wishing it could be different, especially now that people could be counting on them.

Sebastian had joined her by the window. "Do you think there's anyone left down there?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know." People could endure tremendous amounts of pain or stress if they truly wanted to survive, but Nyx wasn't sure that anyone could've survived this long. They'd rescued a handful a people in the past few weeks, but as of late the scanner had remained silent and blank. The chances were slim that they would find anyone else given the conditions out there, and if they and the other teams failed, survivors that were left behind would spend the remainder of their time on Earth believing no one had tried to rescue them. If they were aware of the helicopters searching above them, then they might think that the search and rescue teams had given up on trying to find them. It wasn't pleasant to consider either possibility. "If there is, they must be in pretty bad shape."

"That's what I'm here for, isn't it?" Sebastian's smile was thin. He turned his back on the window and leaned against it. "I just can't believe we're really leaving tomorrow."

"Neither can I." Nyx still had mixed feelings about it. Could they even last long enough on those transporters to find another place to live that could support them? Even if they did, would anything stop them from repeating what they'd eventually

done to Earth?

"I was just thinking the same thing," Finn said, turning slightly so he could look back at them. "I should probably be more anxious, but I can't help but feel excited – I mean, we're going to *space*, aren't we? Not that many people can say they've done that before, but now most of us are going to experience it for the first time together. It'll probably be crowded on the transporters and we'll all get sick of each other in a day or so, but imagine everything we could see! What do you think, Hera?"

She sighed, but Nyx sensed that Hera was smiling. "I think that's a great attitude, Finn, but maybe we should focus on finishing the mission for the time being."

"I'm going to have to agree with Hera on this one," Nyx said, unable to tear herself away from the window. She couldn't help but come up with all the ways their departure from Earth could go wrong. If the ships themselves didn't malfunction and they made it into space, where would they go from there? She assumed the government had some semblance of a plan, but would they remain in contact with the representatives from other countries and travel with them? Picturing all the fleets scattering off in different directions like ants disturbed by a footstep filled her mind with a mixture of dread and sadness. As a species, humans were disconnected and separate enough as it was; shouldn't they be pulling together and cooperating now more than ever?

"Starting to doubt that leaving was the right decision?" Sebastian asked, looking at her. His expression was neutral, but Nyx wondered (not for the first time) whether the other members of the team questioned her sincerity in choosing to volunteer to try and help people. They'd discussed what their lives had been like before, and she'd been honest about being unhappy with how most people had reacted to climate change. Nobody deserved to witness the world as it disappeared underwater, but humanity *had* contributed a great deal to making it happen.

"No, I can't think of anything else we could've done. The Earth can't – and *won't* – support humans anymore," she replied. "It's just...do you think we've even learned anything from all of this? I'd always thought that Earth was all we had and we had to do our best to take care of it. Now that we've basically been given a get out of jail free card, what's to stop us from going back to our old bad habits if we do find a new Earth?"

"Well, we'll be starting from almost nothing, won't we?" Finn offered. "We have a good grasp of technology, so on a different planet we should be able to do things the right way from the beginning."

"And, if we get there soon enough, people like you will still be around to make sure that we do," Sebastian added. When Nyx glared at him, he threw up his hands. "Okay, I didn't m–"

"Guys, hold on a second! Hera, am I somehow seeing *and* hearing things at the same time?!" Finn jabbed a finger at the monitor in front of him, which was beeping frantically and now featured two distinctive red dots blinking in the center of the scanner. He gave Hera the coordinates, and she shifted direction slightly.

"*Two* survivors? I guess that means we're both going down there this time." Sebastian was a lot more serious as he handed Nyx a helmet. The military had supplied them with protective suits that would keep the worst of the rain and wind from harming them. In the event that one of them fell in, the suit was designed to give them enough protection from the water so they had time to make it back to the helicopter (she hoped so, anyway).

Nyx accepted the helmet. "And on our last mission, no less." She was apprehensive about what they would find even though the scanner most likely had detected at least two people on the surface. What had they been forced to do to get to this point?

"We're in position," came Hera's voice from the front. "This is as close as I'll go for now." She usually waited until Sebastian or Nyx were almost at the end of the ladder to move in closer to where the survivors were in case any waves started to form. Hera wanted to make sure that they could perform the rescues as quickly and safely as possible, and she wasn't about to unnecessarily risk any lives.

"Ready?" When Nyx nodded, Sebastian pulled the door open. They were greeted by a gust of wind accompanied by the pattering of rain. Nothing unusual about that, unfortunately.

Nyx waited until Sebastian was a quarter of the way down to begin her own descent. She knew she always gripped the rungs of the ladder too tightly, but she wasn't about to let herself get blown away (especially not now, when their mission was so close to being completed). The wind was battering against her and the rain was drumming against the top of her helmet, but Nyx forced herself to take it one rung at a time nevertheless.

She paused and tentatively turned her head to check and see where the survivors were. In this particular area, most of the structures had been destroyed and swept away, save the roof of one building still jutting out from the surface of the water. Two shapes were huddled in the center of it, but she couldn't distinguish much else from where she was. Nyx could only hope that they'd have enough strength left to make it back to the fleet with them.

Sebastian had reached the end of the ladder, and she wasn't far behind him. Finn, who'd been watching above from the door, signaled to Hera that she could bring them in a little closer. The ladder swayed as Hera brought them down towards the roof. The upturned faces watching them seemed to belong to a woman and a little girl. Nyx noticed how gaunt their faces were and was filled with more determination to get them to safety. A thick blanket was wrapped around the survivors, but it couldn't be providing them much warmth after all the rain and wind they'd been exposed to.

Sebastian was about to make the short jump to the roof when a shudder rocked the building. Finn must've noticed and alerted Hera, because the helicopter started to draw back slightly. Before either of them could react, the building began to col-

lapse as sections of it were dragged away by the current. The girl shrieked as fissures formed in the roof and started to break it apart. The woman slid down into the water and grabbed on to their piece of the roof as if she could support it and keep it in place, but the water began to pull them away just as easily as it had taken down the building.

Nyx hadn't known Sebastian for long, but she knew enough to anticipate what he might be planning to do. She watched as he looked back up at the helicopter and then down at the water below.

"Sebastian, *don't*!" She lunged for his arm, but Nyx was too late. She heard the splash and could only watch as the current took him in the same direction as the survivors. She glanced helplessly up at Finn, who was shouting down at her and desperately gesturing for her to climb back up. She knew it would probably be easier for Hera and Finn to go after Sebastian and the survivors if they didn't have to worry about finding her as well, but she couldn't bring herself to start climbing. Nyx turned herself around, braced herself, and leapt off the ladder.

The howling of the wind and Finn's voice were temporarily cut off when she plunged beneath the surface. A few seconds after she'd hit the water the current was tugging at her. Nyx pushed herself back up into the air and surveyed what was around her as she started to move with the water. The rain and the darkness of the water weren't helping, and her moment of hesitation meant that the survivors and Sebastian could be anywhere by now. Trying her best to avoid the largest pieces of debris, she used the current to her advantage in hopes that it was taking her where it had taken them.

The protective suit seemed to be fulfilling its purpose, but Nyx was already starting to feel some of the cold seeping through the material. She didn't know how much longer she'd last if she didn't catch up with them soon.

Relief washed over her as she navigated around a clump of tree branches. Some scaffolding that had been a part of a construction project at one time rose up ahead of her out of the water, and she saw that Sebastian had managed to help the woman and the girl to get on top of it. Nyx grabbed one of the metal bars just as she was about to pass by the structure altogether. The jostling startled Sebastian, but once he realized that it was her he pulled her up next to them.

Nyx was in no mood to thank him. "What were you *thinking*?" she hissed at him.

"I wasn't," he responded automatically, and before she could think of anything else to say, he added, "but now that we've stopped moving, Hera and Finn will find us a lot sooner."

Nyx found that she couldn't argue with that. The familiar sounds of the helicopter's blades did reach them shortly, and this time Hera went so low that the ladder brushed against the scaffolding. Sebastian took the girl and started climbing as soon as he could, and Finn met him in the middle to carry her the rest of the way up. When Nyx turned to the woman, she saw that she hadn't moved. Her hands were still curled around the metal bars, and each breath seemed to be a struggle.

"I don't think I can do this," she said, resting her head against the bars as well.

"Of course you can – you've made it this far," Nyx answered, trying to be encouraging. She helped the woman to her feet and supported most of her weight as she led her to the ladder. She even wrapped her hands around the first rung for her, prepared to go up right beside her if she had to. "Your daughter needs you."

The woman's grip tightened around the rope. "She isn't my daughter." Nyx must've looked surprised, because she went on. "When the levee collapsed, the ship started leaving right away. None of us had the chance to make it aboard. She got separated from her parents, and I knew there was no way she would make it on her own." She'd been staring straight ahead as she recounted this, but now the woman turned to look directly at Nyx. "If we're really dedicated to surviving, we have to realize that we can't do it alone."

Nyx pondered this as she climbed up the ladder for the last time. Finn had come down a second time to assist, and the woman gratefully accepted his help. She'd been thinking about it herself before, and although it seemed so simple, it really did matter now more than ever: if humanity truly wanted another chance at a future, they'd have to build it together.

Walking Alone

Kaitlyn Hill

I am walking alone on that empty trail,
with that fresh snowfall covering it,
I am walking alone.
It is silent: no noise, except for the sound of my feet
crunching
on the frozen ground.
I am walking alone.
But suddenly, I stop as I see something in the trees.
I turn to see a red bird swooping down from a thin branch,
a small dusting of snow falling with the movement.
Its flight halted as it lands in the middle of the road.
The red bird is a blur on the new-fallen snow.
A welcome burst of color upon a blank canvas: a fresh start.
I am walking, but now, not alone.

David Cahill



The Fire Child

Taylor Pelkey

Puer Ignis

The year of the Hatchlings was upon the Dragons, and as a new succession of newborns developed, another succession teetered on the verge of adulthood. The aligning of the moons initiated the beginning of the Aetatem, and the elders prepared the obstacles. A young dragon named Puer struggled to train in the early morning hours. His kin, Suus, scorched the already flame-damaged lands to create more difficult terrain. Puer danced among the hot coals, the steam rolling around the length of his scarred and hardened legs. Suus continued to billow smoke and fire in an attempt to stumble his kin. Puer eventually fell victim to Suus's attack, collapsing upon the blistering earth.

"Again," Puer demanded. He was determined to push his limits to prove himself to the others. The continuous gazes of judgment he received daily remained with him at twilight, weighing on his chest and mind, a constant companion. They served as an incessant reminder, every morning, that he would never reach the potential of a true-born Dragon dug at his pride. Nedrils supposedly grew to be cunning, resilient, and valiant. He had grown up to be none of those, but rather strong, stubborn, driven, and ambitious. His body opposed the biological features dominant in his ancestors, but rather evolved into a man who was raised in fire, a fire that prepared a 'trespasser' for the battle of survival. His wide shoulders resembled the build of most Dragons on the land, and his posture radiated forged confidence.

"Enough Puer. Let the end of dawn pass before we begin again. Rest is essential. If you do not let your body feed and energize, then you will it to become a disappointment," Suus insisted. His amber scales reflected the rising sun, becoming a living flame rippling across his body. Suus had been initiated two aligning moons ago and passed into adulthood in the year of his birth.

Puer had watched over seventeen generations of Dragons pass through Aetatem, witnessing the birth of Suus, as he waited with patient anticipation for his time to come. This was the year he would pass into his maturity, even though many elders revolted against it.

"I aim to prove them wrong; only Aurum advocated for my right to join this cohort of hatchlings. If he wasn't the wisest leader on the island of Vallume, I would already be dead. I cannot waste a second of my time; I already have a disadvantage given my lineage," Puer said, standing to wait for the next move from Suus, but nothing occurred. The breeze ruffled Puer's ebony hair, and Puer sighed and gave into Suus's advice.

"Fine kin, let us be off to eat breakfast. Be warned, when we return I will not go so lightly on you," Suus said.

At that, the kins advanced towards the beaten and muddy trails of Vallume, which led to the ancient castle that sat on the highest point of Vallume. Its decaying towers lay darkened as they cast deep shadows upon the lithic beaches. Puer could just make out the long, swift bodies of the Dragons rise and dart off from the castle, waking from another night's deep slumber.

Aetatem

As the morning of Aetatem arrived, Puer stood across from Aurum in the middle of a grassy plane. Their behavior led for silent conversation, and each knew that this day would be dangerous. Many of the elders fought viciously to push Puer out of the ceremony because he was not a true Dragon. While Aurum never regretted his decision on raising the Nedril, his credibility was forever tainted due to the perceived disloyalty to his own blood.

"I cannot fly nor breathe fire. My strength cannot compare to my brethren. My bones are not as thick, my skin not as tough, my senses not as keen," Puer stated, his posture stiff while he stared into his master's eyes, almost looking past him in prideful defiance of his own words.

Steam curled out of Aurum's nostrils as Puer pushed his negative outlook on the ceremony. "Ignis, you find the weaknesses in your build but do not develop upon your strengths. Your bones are not as thick, but your size makes you faster. Your skin is not as tough, but your body is more agile. Your senses are not as keen, you cannot breathe fire nor fly, and you are defeated by their strength. However, you have a sharp mind that can trick even the strongest of dragons. On the ground, you are far superior than any other. The fire they breathe is the fire that lies in your heart. Do not let your unique talents mute your internal flame, but rather let it inspire you, Puer Ignis. Why do you believe I named you as such?" Puer's puzzled eyes locked with Aurum's. "You are the Fire Child, not in a physical analogy. Fire flickers within you, and your heart is the source of its existence. Believe in yourself, as I do in you. Fight," said Aurum. With one swift beat of his wings, Aurum shot off into the distance.

So as Puer took off, his calloused feet padded lightly across the fields. The first task of the Aetatem would begin shortly, for the moons were nearly aligned. Although the face of the sun greeted the Dragons with delight, the moons signified a new chapter. Puer would soon face the elders, his participation in the ceremonial endeavors put his very life at risk. However, proving himself to the Dragons on the Island of Vallume was a much greater benefit than cost.

The two moons were united, and flames erupted around the hatchlings. Roars echoed through the mountains, and the rocks trembled within the ground. The first task involved agility, speed and stamina, which proved that one had control of his body and had grown into his full potential. The allotted time to finish the course was exactly twenty-five minutes. The record remained unbroken by Aurum himself, which he completed in a mere seventeen minutes and thirty-six seconds during his Aetatem. If a Dragon exceeded the given time, then he was challenged heavily on the second and third tasks. If he still did not

pass, he would lose his chance to be initiated into full maturity. Each Dragon raced on his own, only against time itself.

There were five hatchlings participating in Aetatem, including Puer. Dark clouds shuffled through the sky; drops of rain scattered upon the Island. The first of the Dragons, named Tenebris, began his race. Many Dragons flew high to watch as the hatchling burst from the start and through the air. Puer, of course, stayed planted on the ground. He saddled up on a large rock, waiting for his turn. The elders had scheduled him to go last among the group, a decision that gave Puer an incredible disadvantage. As the day progressed, Puer's hunger would rise, and he would have less energy than his competition. This is how the elders wanted it.

Twenty-three minutes and seven seconds. This was Tenebris's time. As he crossed the finish line, his dark eyes sliced into Puer's.

"Filthy aduenam," Tenebris seethed. Puer ignored the insults and continued to wait patiently upon the rock. The sun continued to rise and burn his damaged skin as the Dragons completed the task one after the other. Soon it was Puer's chance to prove his abilities, not only to the inhabitants of Vallume but also, and most importantly, to himself. He was at a disadvantage; he could not fly or crash through obstacles in his way. If he did the course perfectly, he would finish it at exactly twenty-four minutes. It would just be him, his capabilities, and the earth.

So it began. Puer shot off, but something whipped in front of him. He sprawled to the ground instantly; he did not have time to look back to see whose tail tripped him. Rather, he shot back up and took off. Snarls broke at the starting point behind him, and he faintly heard the anger of Suus boom through the mountain trails. Puer continued on. He lept, ducked, and climbed his way through the steep forest. Time ticked on as sweat poured off his brow, yet it was hard to keep track-- *how long had it been?* Soon he broke through the treeline and found himself on the rocky beach where he had apparently been deserted as a baby.

The beach added unwanted resistance as the loose rocks gave beneath his feet, and his legs began to burn from fatigue. He pressed on, and soon he was coming back upon the start. He could hear the Dragons' wings swish through the thin air. His breathing became rapid as he approached his last few strides before the finish line. Puer flung his body across the finish onto the cool ground, where he rolled over and looked up at Aurum, who gave him a gratified look. With a sigh of relief, Puer closed his eyes and tried to control his breathing. His time was twenty-four minutes and fifty seconds.

Task two advanced soon after noon, and the Dragons rallied again to the same field where the races started. The environment was quiet as the hatchlings mentally prepared for the memory portion. However, Puer knew that the ability of having a robust memory did not rely on being able to remember, itself, but rather on the ability to pay attention, to identify the tinier details in a situation and use it to your advantage. Aurum awaited soundlessly as the hatchlings reported in front of him. His gold scales brilliantly reflected the light; the slit in his bronze eyes intimidated those around him.

"We have decided to take a different approach this year, and the moons have agreed after argument that this integrated task will be one to remember. For this year, we have a pod of hatchlings that prove to be bright, competitive, proud, and much more. This year, I am to pick my heir, for I am growing old. We have never changed the traditional three tasks of Aetatem, and I believe it to never face change again after this moon aligning. The only importance resides in finding the proper heir to care for the Island of Vallume, which is a place of serenity, wisdom, value, and the natural elements of the earth. My heir must represent what Vallume encompasses. If none of you impress me, then I will look toward the next generation of hatchlings. That being stated, we have integrated tasks two and three to challenge you simultaneously on both memory and strategy." The hatchlings peered at each other. Then, some began to puff their chests and billow smoke. Puer stood silently as the leafless trees.

"To have a strong mind is more important than having a strong body. Your mind encourages confidence, commitment, bravery, control, and purpose. . .." At that very moment, dirt was thrown in the hatchlings' eyes, and they hissed in return. Immediately, Puer's arms shot up over his face. Suddenly, his feet were no longer touching the ground. He struggled in protest as strong, stiff wings brought him high into the sky. 'What is happening?' he thought to himself.

Soon, he was plopped down onto a soft surface. Water was thrown onto his face, and he could finally see the world around him. Trees surrounded him in each direction. Suus loomed above him. "I apologize, my kin. I was told to bring you here. I am to tell you that your next step is to survive and find your way back to us. Good luck."

Suus disappeared into the evening sky, and Puer heard nothing but nature's words. Puer had been traveling the Island of Vallume for seventeen years, which meant he had more knowledge of it than any other hatchling he faced. However, the land he stood on now was nothing like Vallume. The ground shared no signs of heat damage, but instead the opposite. He listened intently to see if he could hear a nearby water source. Afar, a gentle lick of water greeted his ear. He voyaged east toward the noise, the leaves crackling beneath his feet. The sound grew louder and louder, until finally he came to a soft sandy beach, nothing like the rocky beach of Vallume he was found on. Far out in the ocean was the Island of Vallume. Puer could barely make out the Dragons zooming around it from where he stood.

How do I get there? Puer looked around at his resources. Sticks, woods, leaves, and some berries lay about. He pondered his options, and then sat doubtfully on the blissfully soft sand.

"Why would I return to an island that makes me feel like I'm vilified?" he wondered out loud, raking his fingers through the sand. He considered the incessant judgment, disdain, and cruelty that greeted him daily. Only few accepted who he was with no conditions. He could stay here, hide here, live here. Sure, Suus knew his location, but Puer knew that no Dragon dared to ven-

ture off Vallume without reason. If they were to leave, then it was only for a few moments. No one would bother him here again, no one would discriminate against him...

Stay. Leave. No. Yes. A battle of morals erupted in his head. *What would happen if I were to disappear? Who would care? Would it be easier for Aurum to lead without a disgrace weighing on his wings?* Puer knew, however, that Aurum never regretted the day he rescued him from Vallume's uneasy beach. It was difficult not to contemplate a life without mockery. *Oh, how easy it would be to escape.*

Escape. That one term echoed within Puer. Escape or avoidance related to weakness, and that was one characteristic he refused to kin to. *No*, he would fight his way to the top. He had stated once and once again that he would prove himself to those around him and to himself. With his resolve again hardened, Puer stood and immediately began rummaging through the branches and leaves. He would fight for his right as an individual to be deemed a member of Vallume because he was the Fire Child.

Puer stripped twigs into smaller, bendable pieces. He pushed logs together and tied them off with the stripped branches. The sun began to fall as he set sail on his makeshift float. He stood carefully and used another, flatter log to paddle his way towards Vallume. The float was weak, but Puer was not. Slowly, he approached the island. The element of wind was on his side as it blew with him, forcing him even faster with the waves. It felt almost as if Vallume was encouraging his fight back towards its land. The island approached, and his patience was ending. He could see Tenebris in the distance, flying towards Vallume. Puer's float began to sink, so he jumped and swam aggressively. As the sun finally disappeared behind his homeland, he crawled up on the graveled beach where he once lay as a baby. He had survived once more. He saw Aurum in the distance.

"You are last to arrive, Ignis," acknowledged Aurum.

"I see," mumbled Puer, his dark eyes refusing to lock with Aurum's.

"You, however, paid attention the most of all. You were confident in yourself. You even saw Tenebris fly to the Island before you. Yet, you persevered, and that I find much more honorable than those who win through fraud."

Puer peered quizzically at his master.

"Puer, you have entered your adulthood either way. Many of the elders are astonished that you accomplished such a task. You took notice of the resources, and you listened to your surroundings. You remembered the basics of survival. I felt the spirit of the Island reach for you Puer; you have connected with it in ways beyond my knowledge. That is why you are the Nedril who survived in a land of Dragons. You, Ignis, are to be my heir."

Puer sat silently, water dripping from his leathered body, and he locked eyes with Aurum. "No."

Aurum cocked his head, "May I ask why?"

"I am honored that you have chosen me to become the next leader of Vallume; however, I cannot accept the position without the cooperation and recognition from the Dragons. They do not trust me, and that is understandable. I want to earn their trust, their loyalty, and their allegiance before I lead. If I do not earn their trust, then I will never become the heir or the next leader. Instead, promote Suus to the position in the meantime, in case I never gain their friendship."

Aurum simply nodded his head in agreement. The two walked in silence from the beach where Puer first began his life as the Fire Child and started on the path of becoming the Dragon Leader.



Jonathan Smith



Addison Gagnon

Homecoming

Kaitlyn Solak

With school finally over,
Tracking my way back home through Andover.
Finally free,
Wearing my shorts and tee.
Back roads driving,
All the plants are thriving.
Passing by field after field,
Nothing but a few horses in the backfield.
Not a cloud in the sky,
Hanging my hands out the window high.
The sun was shining bright,
So bright that it almost looked white.
With everything so green and alive,
I didn't mind the six hour drive.
After taking most of the day to travel back and roam,
I was happy to finally be home.

Addison Gagnon





Kaileigh Lenentine

