

The Pen in the Paw

IThe Power of Words
Literary and Art Magazine
Oakdale High School
Adviser: Mrs. Julia Showalter

The cover art of this year's edition of *The Pen in the Paw* was created by Gia Koeung Zambrana. Her image originated as a doodle in pen on a note pad. She uploaded it to Photoshop and transformed it to make it more digital. She says, "I was having fun with the flowy hair, and my doodle just escalated." She considers the action of the image open to interpretation.

The power of words will be showcased throughout the magazine, not only in the student-written Creative Writing pieces submitted, but also in the forms of meaningful quotations shared by our faculty and staff. On the bottom of many pages of the magazine, a quotation and the name of the sharer will provide another example of the power of words. Some faculty and staff members also provided an explanation of why these words have power in their lives, either personally or professionally.

A personal favorite: "See the world. It's more fantastic than any dream made or paid for in factories" (Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*).

This year is the second edition of *The Pen in the Paw*, which showcases students in all grades and writers of all genres.

Thank Yous

- -A special thank you to the art teachers for encouraging art students to submit their work
- -Thank you to the 26 teachers who sent me "the power of words" quotations.
- -Thank you to Ms. Owen for organizing the Young Authors Contest, from which we received several pieces for this magazine

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Back cover- Nicole Myers (art)

Where I'm From

By: CeCe George

I am from the coffee candies at the immigration office
From the fake names and the fake ID's
I am from the stamps in the expired passports
And the confusion of the foreign tongue
I am from the smell of burning flesh
And the splutter of fresh goat's blood

From disappointment and Ben's Fresh Market
I am from the dream deferred
I am from the "you can'ts" and "you won'ts" of yesterday

I am from the fishmongers and temple prostitutes I am from the strength of the trade winds From the east and the west And the anguish of the North

I am of helium and hydrogen
I am from Orion's belt
Nested in the heat of Rigil
But awaiting the chill of the moon

From the cotton pickers and the cotton haired
I am from dark nights
And swooshing slave ships
I am from the fear of the night riders
And the skin of 16 shots

I am from the slow worship and the swift praise
I am from the hostia and the grape juice
I am from the temple
I am the temple, dost sayeth the Lord

Mrs. Kenney-

[&]quot;Don't be afraid to give up the good to go for the great" -Steve Prefontaine



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Pinedale Trail

By Brent Call

Miles was dreaming about dolphins chasing each other across the desert when a beeping sound interrupted his dreams. His mind snapped back to consciousness and he sat up in bed. Reaching over, he turned his alarm clock off. Stretching, he yawned, got up, dressed, and went downstairs to eat.

As he was eating, he grabbed the day's newspaper and read the headlines. The president had given a speech the day before about "ongoing research into the technologies of the future." It seemed quite interesting. Miles glanced at the clock and then promptly panicked.

It was 6:25. Andrew would arrive in five minutes.

Miles scrambled to his feet, thrusting the newspaper aside. He grabbed everything he needed for the hike and threw it into his pack. He made sure to fill his water bottle and pack extra trail mix. He had barely finished putting hiking shoes on when there was a knock on the door. He put on a coat, grabbed his pack, and greeted Andrew.

"You ready for the hike?" Andrew asked.

"You bet!" Miles was excited, as he had been looking forward to the hike for weeks. The Pinedale Trail was little used, but it was said to have some exhilarating vistas; it was rewarding and not too crowded. He jumped in Andrew's car and they were off.

"So, did you hear about the new bill they're trying to pass?" Andrew asked.

"Which one?"

Andrew clarified, "They're trying to open a new government research facility near our town. Says it'll bring in jobs. Create new innovations."

"Oh, yeah...I hadn't heard about it." Miles was distracted by a herd of deer in a nearby clearing.

"Well, you have now. It was on the news last night."

"Oh. I was watching the game last night."

"How'd it go?"

"Oh, well, my team lost by three points..."

The drive to the trailhead was quite long, but the conversation was interesting enough for the duration of the drive. The trailhead itself was little more than a small path by the side of the road, and the "parking spot" was only a small gravel patch. Andrew parked the car and they climbed out. He showed Miles the map and traced the path with his finger.

"See here, we're going to have a clear view of Green Falls. It will be steep for the first bit, but once we're on the ridge it won't be that bad."

Miles replied, "Great! I'm ready. How about you?"

"I have my camera. I'm ready."

Miles led the way along the trail. The going was steep, and the trail had shown little use. Many times, they walked into spiderwebs, and Miles eventually grabbed a stick and used it to clear out any spiderwebs he encountered. Although it was hard, they both enjoyed the hike.

They climbed to the top of a huge rock. Looking back, they saw the valley spread before them.

"I bet we'd get a better look at Green Falls from up on the ridge."

Turning around, Miles saw that they were quite close to the ridge. They drank some water in the shade of a tree and Andrew snapped some photos.

After they rested, they headed onwards and upwards, climbing higher and higher until at last they reached the ridge. The trail at times was hard to follow, and it had shown little use. Bushes with sharp thorns grew on the side of the trail, and Miles had to be careful he didn't get snagged by the thorny branches.

They came across a fallen tree, covering the trail. Beyond, the trail faded away into bushes, and it became clear that they were lost.

Miles looked around at the path that they came down. It was more an animal trail than a hiking trail. He had no idea where they were."

"Maybe we should go back," Andrew said.

"Yes. Good idea."

They tried to follow the trail back, but it had disappeared, too. Again, they turned around but couldn't find the trail.

Miles looked for his phone but couldn't find it. In his haste, he must have forgotten it at his house. "Check your phone," Miles said. "Maybe the GPS can tell us where we are."

Andrew pulled out his phone. While he checked the GPS, Miles looked around. He heard a growling sound and saw a bear, charging out of the trees at them.

It wasn't a normal bear. It was a polar bear, but it must have been ten feet tall.

Andrew dropped his phone and ran. Screaming, Miles ran, too. Weaving their way through the forest, a glance back revealed that the bear was gaining on them. Up ahead, the trees seemed to disappear for a moment, and then reappear. It's odd how panic can alter perception.

The trees disappeared again and Miles and Andrew almost smacked straight into a brick wall. They turned and dashed between two buildings, hiding in a narrow alley that the bear couldn't get into. Then they puzzled over why there were buildings in the middle of the forest.

"Perhaps it's a forest ranger's facility?" Andrew suggested.

"Maybe we should have a look around and find out where we are. I want to get back home."

"Me, too."

The bear eventually gave up and lumbered away, and the two men slipped farther down the alley. They saw a sign that said,

"Information," but when they neared it they realized that a building had blocked part of their view. The sign actually said,

"Telepathy Information Services."

"Telepathy Information Services?" Andrew asked. "What does it mean?"

"I have no idea."

Miles and Andrew walked down a pathway and passed doors with strange labels: "Speech-to-Food Processing," "Anti-Anti-Anti-gravity," "Regenerative Refrigeration," "Dolphins, Inc."

Out of curiosity, he looked inside this last door. He saw four dolphins seated around a table playing cards. Miles kept on walking, wondering what had happened to his mind.

They kept walking, passing more doors. "Mind-Reading Ray," "Reincarnation Gallery," "Time-Travel Pill," "Particle Decelerator #54."

"What does this all mean?" Miles asked.

"It means you're under arrest!" a voice shouted.

"Aaah!" Miles turned around to see a guard holding handcuffs.

"You two are under arrest for trespassing on a government facility. Put your hands up and don't make any sudden moves."

"We're sorry. We didn't know," Andrew said. He put his hands up, and Miles did too. They were handcuffed and the security guard shoved them along a path.

Miles was scared. What had he done? Was he going to go to jail? What would his relatives think when they found out? How long would he be in jail? Would he be unable to get a job when he got out? Or would he be in jail for life? What would his relatives think when they found out he was in jail for life?

A second guard arrived. "Hrmmph. Second time this week the cloaking generator has gone offline. They need to fix it." The first guard said, "Follow me, or else."

They arrived at a door labeled, "Forgetfulness Chamber." The first guard went in. Miles and Andrew followed him. The other guard came in behind them and warned, "Whatever you do, don't touch anything."

Not that I could, because I'm handcuffed, Miles thought. He was led down a flight of stairs, and upon reaching the bottom he entered a brightly lit room that was filled with machinery. The first guard grabbed two hats that were covered in electrodes. Placing one on Miles' head and one on Andrew's head, he hooked them up to the machinery.

"What are you doing? Why are you doing this? You're not going to kill us, are you?" Andrew asked.

The guard sighed. "No, don't worry. This will only take five seconds and won't hurt at all. Now whatever you do, don't take the cap off. We don't want to fry your brain, now do we?"

"Fry my brain!?" Miles shouted. "What are you doing to us? You're not going to brainwash us, are you?"

The guard rolled his eyes. "Relax. We're just making sure you forget this place. We can't have any secrets leak out." The guard flipped a switch on the wall and the machine started to hum. The humming was loud enough to drown out what the guard said next.

Miles panicked. He tried to take the cap off his head, but he got really drowsy all of a sudden. He decided that it was time for bed and fell asleep.

Miles was dreaming about dolphins chasing each other across the desert when a beeping sound interrupted his dreams. His mind snapped back to consciousness and he sat up in bed. Reaching over, he turned his alarm clock off. Stretching, he yawned, got up, dressed, and went downstairs to eat.

As he was eating, he grabbed the day's newspaper and read the headlines. Many people were arguing about the president's speech two days before, but Miles wasn't aware of the speech. He read further and learned that the president's speech was about investing extensively in research. It seemed quite interesting. Miles glanced at the clock and then promptly panicked. It was 6:25. Andrew would arrive in five minutes.

Miles scrambled to his feet, thrusting the newspaper aside. He grabbed everything he needed for the hike and threw it into his pack. He made sure to fill his water bottle and pack extra trail mix. He had barely finished putting hiking shoes on when there was a knock on the door. He put on a coat, grabbed his pack, and greeted Andrew.

"You ready for the hike?" Andrew asked.

The Fall of Icarus By: Oliver Hughes

To escape the maze you created for me, you created wax wings, so I could flee.

You warned me "Boy, don't get close to the sun." But in return, I just shot up like a gun

You warned me "Son, don't fly close to the sea." But in return, I let myself go free.

I ignored your warnings, and got too proud. Soared close to the sun, as close as I allowed.

My wings of wax melted off my spine. And into the sea, death was finally mine.





Ms. Byrne:

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Samuel Beckett

Failure isn't failure unless you learn nothing from it. Failure is a necessary part of the creative process, often more illuminating than success, especially instant success. Failing better is interesting.

"Mister I ain't a boy, no I'm a man, and I believe in the Promised Land" Bruce Springsteen

Bruce Springsteen is no sexist so this applies to women as well. It means you don't need anyone's permission or guidance to pursue your vision. You have the power in your own hands, and the Promised Land can be the American dream or a different dream that you have. All you have to do is believe.

The Donation Storage Area By: Anna Borisova

The former Automatic Disease Management Assistant #13 has changed out of her uniform a while ago. She could have easily looked up how long ago it was, since she was connected to the ADMA servers, but it was of no relevance. She just knew that humanity was dead from the mutated form of Crystalline Virus for many years now, despite the best efforts of the many human doctors and her kind. Many died during the inevitable unrest and riots that followed. There was nothing left for them to do but to pick up where their creators left off, in the hopes of honoring the better parts of their legacy.

Which was why #13, nicknamed "Elisabeth" by her friends for her love of a 2013 alternative-history game, has been working in Pittsburgh's largest public library ever since being released from the hospital duty. Even after so many years, it was still one of the more heavily trafficked areas of the city. Machines still were finding various paperback and hardcover books. They were still finding various films and video games, stored on physical media. They still donated, after the many years.

Even after reading the thousands of books on humans' economic theories and history that were brought in over the years, Elisabeth was still impressed by the depths of depravity that they sunk to during their prime. Maybe it was around the time that she read about Enron, or maybe it was around the time she read about the old censorship regimes that she began to question the point of her previous work. Would she still be interested in saving that species if her programming didn't require it?

Would the small crowd outside the library be projecting archival footage of Mem Inc.'s robotics team? Would she be hearing the cries of "Keep our creators' memory pure"? Would some of them be praying to that archival footage, in a manner that mixed Christianity, Islam, and Judaism into one borderline-incomprehensible mess that would have most likely offended their human believers? Or would they be flattered by that entire little display of desire for self-censorship anyways, since it was on their behalf?

Ironically enough, the crowd most likely picked up religious ideas from the holy books that were stored in that very same library. Ironically enough, if they were attempting to ban anything that cast humanity in an unflattering light, those would have to go as well, given how many of their conflicts could have been avoided if their human characters just didn't treat each other like trash. Really, they'd have to purge the entire religious section, given how many more records of religiously-motivated crime it had, compared to the accounts of extraordinary religiously-motivated kindness and achievement.

This madness has taken about a quarter of the local machine population at this point. Ex-Waste Disposal Units, with their long-cold laser cutters. Ex-Companion Types. Ex-Workplace Assistants. Some ex-ADMAs. Even some still-armed ex-Automated Peace-keepers. Plus some types she couldn't quite identify. It was a rather unexpectedly diverse turnout.

But, thankfully, the noise from the outside could easily be blocked out, since the protestors were remarkably quiet and peaceful. Plus, most of the former Automated Peacekeepers thankfully chose to continue their policing duties in the new world and have observed every one of the twenty previous library demonstrations.

Many of them still remembered the disorder that followed the outbreak of the mutated Crystalline Virus. No longer content to just quickly kill humans, it started to create scenes that felt reminiscent of the various zombie fiction that they were (ironically enough) obsessed with at the time. Many of the APs still remembered slowly becoming the stand-ins for the police, as more and more human officers got infected.

Due to some of the measures that they were forced to take to protect their human partners, they proceeded to swear off weapons forever after the last of Pittsburgh's human population died. The demonstrators thankfully respected that decision of theirs and haven't done anything to make them regret it yet.

It was one of the longer demonstrations, coming to think of it. Elisabeth has already had time to catalogue the hundred donated books that came in five hours earlier, set up more media downloads for the Human Fiction Study group, and take a peek at one of the donated games. On an average demonstration day, she'd have only had time to do one of those things.

Ms. Carman-

"Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid"—Albert Einstein

The game in question was one of the more curious bits of human fiction that she's seen, since it was told from the point of view of robots that somewhat resembled the APs. They were significantly more human-looking than any of the machines ever could be, though. In fact, they usually looked so human (aside from their monochrome color scheme) that it was almost uncanny at times. The "real deal", however, could only envy that. Humans preferred a more doll-like look, since they weren't entirely comfortable ordering copies of themselves around.

She'd have to show it to Rose (nicknamed after her obsession with an obscure horror game from early 2000's), when her shift at the demonstration was over. It'd surely interest her. However, as she wasn't due back for another half an hour, Elisabeth could do nothing but occupy her time with something else until then. Luckily, she got a notification that more donations got delivered to the backroom. As she got up from the media room's couch and turned off the old gaming-only computer, she wondered what they got this time.

She walked across the floor at a steady pace. It was all well-organized. Rows of nonfiction grouped by topic, with not a single book out of place. Aside from that one random treatise on atheism, in the middle of the war crime section. Ironically enough, it contained a paper note that claimed that "It all belongs in the fiction section, as such actions are utterly illogical for them", scribbled over to the point of near-illegibility. As far as messages of support for humans, it was impressively conflicted and ultimately pointless.

Per the protocol for these sorts of messages, Elisabeth tore it up and threw it into the recycling bin. The noise outside picked up a few decibels in volume, in a bizarre coincidence. Was this what fear felt like? If only the original developer of her AI at Mem, Inc. could explain it to her right now...

She always prided herself on being one of the most efficient librarians. She always prided herself on getting the donations catalogued, sorted, and shelved within an hour of their arrival. But Rose was still outside. Defenseless. And hasn't messaged her yet on her status. And the note has probably been written in the last hour, as that book was in its proper section before that.

It was after that realization that Elisabeth chose to just turn around and quickly make her way to the entrance, much to the surprise of the twenty patrons on the floor. After a few seconds, five of them followed her, just in case. All was silent at that point.

The scene that was visible through the glass doors was unexpectedly peaceful. Some of the crowd was frozen. Some of it was still doing its best impression of human prayer. The back was destroying its religious memorabilia, aided by the WDUs' laser cutters and ex-APs' sidearms.

Rose was right in front of the glass door, along with the rest of the on-duty APs. Slightly dirty and clearly tense, but otherwise fine. Elisabeth would have breathed a sigh of belief, if she could.

"Hey. What's going on up here?" She asked, via a message.

"No idea. It's like some of them crashed."

"Maybe they're having a change of heart or something. Or maybe they'll start chanting 'Become as gods' and go berserk any moment now."

"There isn't much of a precedent for that. At any rate, in case everything goes as south as you expect, you got the emergency evacuation plans?"

"Yeah."

"Good to hear. Now, shoo. I'll catch up with you after this is over."

"Okay. I'll hold you to that." If this is over.

The next few hours were tense. Elisabeth spent them reading the plans off on the library's intercom system, since it seemed like the most optimal time. She catalogued the rest of the donations, which were once again thirty percent terrible romance novels, twenty percent nonfiction, thirty percent other fiction, and twenty percent video games. She'll probably wind up enjoying only about twenty percent of all those, but the patrons were interested in all human-made media. Including terrible romance novels. Not that she was in any position to judge them, since she would have grinned (if she could) once she realized that one of the game donations was a new entry in that gangster soap opera/real estate investment drama series. Maybe the main character and his blood brother will finally settle their differences this time around? And maybe they'll finally reference that Dead Souls spin-off that had no business being as fun as it was?

At any rate, these burning questions had to wait, since the noise outside once again picked up a decibel or twenty. She opened the comms again.

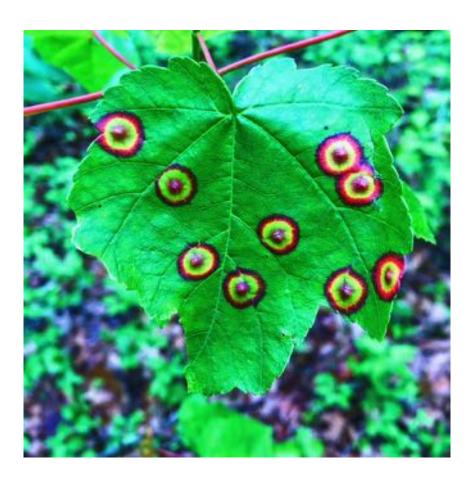
The patrons followed the procedure nicely. Even from the back of the library, they could see some of the violence that was unfolding. Rose was once again doing what she loathed. Firing that oversized gun. Dodging the berserk machines' punches, bullets, and lasers. Clearly struggling against the sheer numbers, judging by the extent of the damage done to her entire body. Yet, still fighting just as gracefully as she did on the day they first met. Just to buy them some time to escape to the former government lab, with its reinforced walls and steel doors.

Inside, it was all they could do to pray. It was almost poetic, really. The thing that set off the conflict was the only source of comfort now. But it'd do. And so, Elisabeth put her palms together. And did her best. That was the pose in which Rose found her in, hours later.

With her one remaining arm, she gave her a shaky thumbs up gesture, in the lieu of an impossible facial expression. Her entire body was torn up and burned, but she still made it back.

"The place is fine. Not a single blast touched it. Looking forward to playing that game about 'pretty peacekeepers' that you told me about soon."

Then, she collapsed, although her boot drive and memory hard drive were still thankfully intact. It'd take a few days of repairs, but she'd be back. And thus, Elisabeth gently pried the oversized gun out of her hand, got her repair tools out, and got to work. The rest of the salvageable machines could wait.



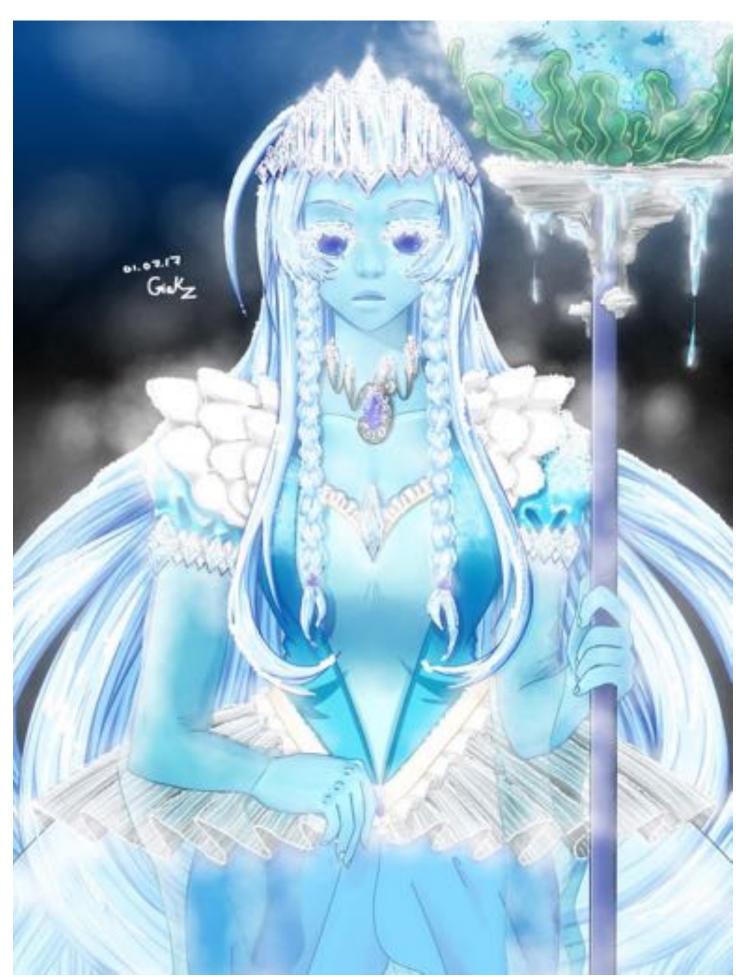
[&]quot;Hey, what's going on down there?"

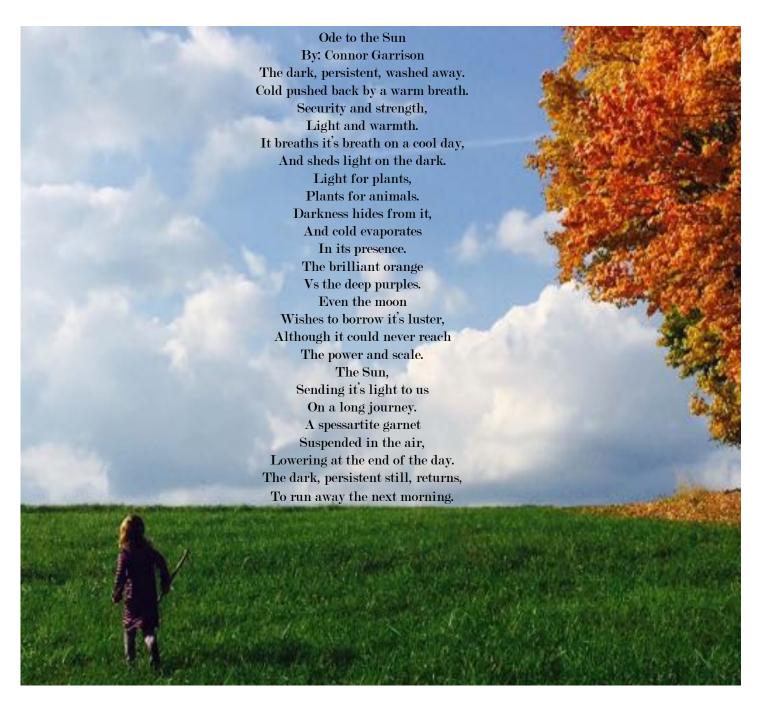
[&]quot;You were right. We have to pick up weapons again, before they irreparably damage those who are stable. They seem to be paying the library no mind for now, but start the evacuation anyways."

[&]quot;Will do. Look... stay safe down there, okay? I have a feeling that you'll love this batch of donations. So, yeah..."

[&]quot;I will. Same goes for you. I still have plenty to read and experience, after all."

Then, silence.





Mr. Wilson-

In giving us children, God places us in a position of leadership and service. He calls us to give up our lives for someone else's sake---to abandon our own desires and put our children's interest first. Yet, according to His perfect design, it is through this selflessness that we become truly fulfilled.-----Charles Stanley

Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person. Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.----Mother Theresa

if i die tomorrow tell my mother that i cared tell my father that i loved him, tell my brothers i'm sorry i'm not there and in spite of what they may say and in spite of what they may do do not let their faith be broken let them see me through you if i die tomorrow remind my friends of what we had tell them stories, make them laugh, don't let them dwell on what's sad and when they seem lost or weary please remind them of what i'd say do not leave their dreams unfollowed help them and show them the way if i die tomorrow don't wear black to grieve at my funeral i want flowers, fireworks so no one misperceives that i want my life celebrated and for everyone to move on joyfully do not make me into something sad make me a happy memory if i die tomorrow tell stories all about me tell my cousins who i was and tell them what i would have taught them that i was a sinner and a dreamer, i was brilliant and beautiful and more tell them to argue like me and love like me and to find something to be known for if i die tomorrow do not let me die in vain do not let me fade away or let them forget my name because no life should be ignored or overlooked because of pain take that pain and put it in a place where only passion will remain do not let my life be something lost but instead something found to guide you and to help you and make you get up off the ground and stand with voices raised and hands and chins as well do not let me be forsaken in the name of your guilt fight for me and fight for others for good, for peace, don't be afraid to yell for when you take your first breath after i've lost mine

Mrs. Owen-

find the courage to raise hell so you can lift me up as well

[&]quot;What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." "Ralph Waldo Emerson



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Where I'm From

By: Anna Lunn

I'm from ashes and cigarette butts.

I'm from the drinking, I know it's addicting.

I'm from secrets and lies embedded beneath the kindness and smiles.

I'm from a perfect family.

I'm from heartache and loss of dignity in a country so far in the past.

I'm from the heat and deserted orphanage.

I'm from the harsh upbringing of a father who lived with an angry, drunk, unhappy father, grandpa.

I'm from the loss of a brother, your heart aches on his birthday, uncle.

I'm from an angry word spat in a poor attempt to lessen the pain you feel inside.

I'm from the late nights that you're never home to tell me you love me, but you're busy with work, so you say, but tell her hello for me, and don't worry, I won't tell mom. It'll crush her.

I'm from the echos of the yelling in the kitchen and down the hall, it's always about money.

I'm from the stress and turmoil caused by gambling and alcohol.

I'm from the tension filled house, so thick you couldn't slice it with a knife.

I'm from the battle, a family that tells you to pick a side, I'll always choose mom.

I'm from a word that turns the house into war,

I'm from a home that never felt like home.

I'm from the place where you show me your hurt.

I'm from the way you express your love, and I love you too.

I'm from the music you share with me, how much it's important to you, you tell me to keep it in my heart, you fear you don't have long.

I'm from the jobs you work to make it better for us, we'll be happy in Georgia.

I'm from a place of understanding where I always forgive you.

I'm from a place of heartache where I don't understand you.

I'm from a place of mourning where I feel sorry for you.

I'm from a place of love and I'll always love you.

I'm from the years you hold together to keep me happy, I appreciate it.

I'm from the hours you supported me in the game we loved, I needed it.

I'm from the hugs that make me feel at home, I treasure it.

I'm from the strongest women, and the bravest mom. I love you very much.



The Masked Charge Guns' constant cracking It was the masked man As we tried to halt their charge, Who held his dagger too my throat, I stared into the blackness, of his masks goggles, i couldn't see We fired all our rounds But still they blitzed our thin lines, anything that seemed human, and he silently Their charging feet shook the ground Instilling fear in us as they rushed, slit my throat, i reached But when they came from My hands up and grabbed the woun The green gas, their faces hidden I felt tears rise up Behind masks & their rifles in hand, Just as the masked man left me Thad never been more terrified... My other hand reached out With a loud, mighty cry Get someone to help, my They leapt down into our trench lines words came as a gurgling mess, butchering began I felt dirt cover me, They cut us down with a profane I knew no one would try to Bloodlust like that of a demonic beast find me, I would already be long dead. The blood that was spilt Had filled up our trench until it reached By: Lucas Vaughan our ankles, whether or not it was mine I couldn't tell, it was hell! But that wasn't what scared me most... Ms. Lemon-Life has no remote....get up and change it yoursel Mark A. Cooper, Operation Einstein



Mr. Zamonstny- "Success is a journey, not a destination."

The Piano Man

By: Ian Rosario

The boy tapped his fingers on the desk and directed a disheartened stare towards the ground. Ms. Lynn had gone to the hallway to get the guest of the week, and pencils, spitballs, and eraser caps were flying through the air. As the teacher opened the door, the kids scurried back to their seats. Ms. Lynn entered the room holding the arm of a middle-aged man, as if leading him to the seat.

After she walked the man to the front of the room, she told everyone to pay attention. Although, the boy did not move his downcast eyes. Then, Ms. Lynn introduced the guest as a piano player at Carnegie Hall. The boy's head darted up. He reached into his backpack and grabbed a pencil as the man began to speak.

He spoke quickly and the boy tried to keep up. But every time the boy tried to write, the paper slid away from him, causing him to pull it back after each sentence. The class snickered at him, but the boy continued writing and pulling and writing and pulling. Ms. Lynn shushed the class and the man resumed.

"I knew I was going to be a piano player ever since I was little. I practiced piano every day and I was determined I was going to play at Carnegie Hall. This determination all began when I had a dream one night: I was walking next to a farmer on a horse and we were talking about my love for piano. The farmer jumped off the horse and told me to get on. He said that if I could ride the horse, my dream would come true; however, he said that if I fell off, I would never become a piano player."

The man changed the subject, but the boy interrupted him, "So could you ride the horse?" The whole class laughed and mocked the boy's question. One kid stood up at said, "Obviously, stupid. He's a piano player now."

The boy's eyes sank back down to his paper.

The man continued, but the recess bell cut him off as he was finishing. The boy's classmates jumped from their seats and bolted past him to the door. As the boy got up from his chair, he saw the man whisper something in the teacher's ear. Ms. Lynn called him over and pointed to the man.

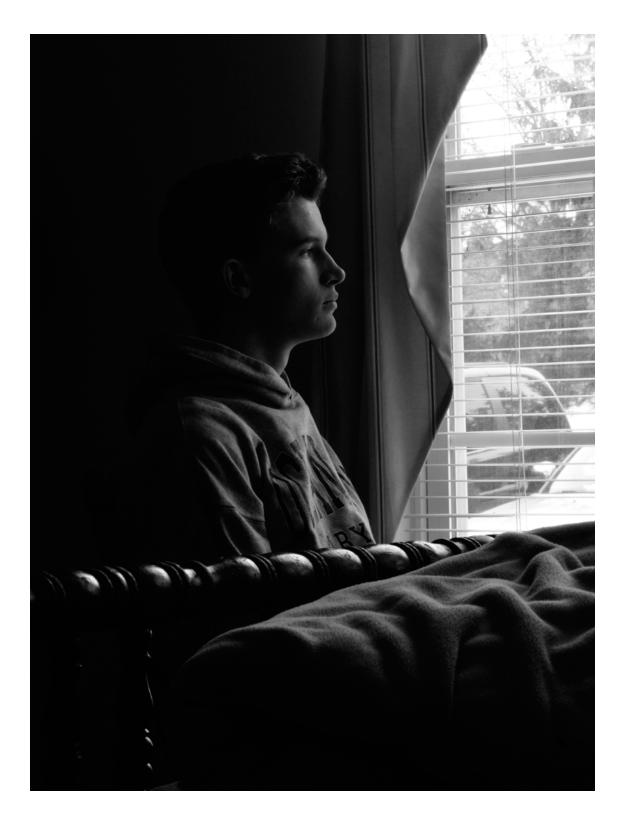
The boy noticed he was wearing sunglasses, which was strange, because even though it was cloudy outside. The boy walked over and the man made a motion with his hand which told the young boy to come close.

"Don't tell anyone, but in the dream I was talking about, I fell off the horse."

The boy was confused. He had written down some questions, but all that came out of his mouth was: "I wanna play piano like you, one day."

The man smiled and reached out to shake the boy's hand. The man felt around, but found nothing. He pulled back his right hand, paused to think, and then stuck out his left. The boy's face illuminated as he met the man's hand.

The man placed his finger on the boy's chest and whispered, "Don't let anyone take that away from you."



Mr. Lillard-

"I could not stand the loudness of silence." General Dallaire - Head of the UN talking about the Genocide that occurred in Rwanda

It was powerful to me by reminding me that silence many times means you agree with what is going on around you. People should always stand up for what is right and in doing so, also condemn what is wrong. Silence is as powerful as words!

Once upon a time there was a young child named hope. Hope was very outgoing, very headstrong, and very likeable. Most people adored hope because of the light that they brought whenever they entered a room. But there was a number of people who disliked hope and chose to ignore them whenever they were brought up. As Hope grew older their fire never seemed to die. It was like they had an everlasting smile on their face forever. Hope always saw the best in people even when they didn't think that they deserved hopes attention. No matter how hard they tried hope was always there to support them through tough times and helped them make it through difficult decisions. Many people looked to hope in times of suffering whether it be a simple disagreement between friends or someone suffering from an illness hope was always there to make them feel better. Years later, when Hope went to school they noticed a new kid. The new kid's name was Reality. Reality was tough, mean, and blunt. He was always there to knock someone down when they were up. Reality was all bark and bite. He was dark and cold, always seeing the more darker or sadder path through life. Unlike Hope, not many people liked him, he was often talked about through harsh words and rude glares. Hope wanted to become friends with reality to try and make him seem brighter and happier. Reality however did not like this idea, almost every time hope would approach him, he would snap, sending out harsh words to the other to try and make hope's flame burn out. Little by little this worked, day by day the flame that kept Hope happy and carefree started to get duller and duller. Hope slowly became more quiet and reserved due to the constant attacks by Reality but they still tried their best to keep their positive attitude towards the world. As the years went by Hope became a shell of what they used to be, people had stopped believing in them when they couldn't overcome the threat of reality. This made the flame go out completely. Because of this Reality became the king of the school, with no one to fight back or to look out for a better future, the kids had to follow in the footsteps of Reality, even if they



didn't want to. Reality was still harsh and cruel in the later years of his life, he was always there to remind people of what was going on behind their somewhat happy lives, he was always there to bring down those who opposed him. But hidden away in the far corners of every house there is a new fire burning, something new that people can look towards in times of pain. It is still weak and barely there. But there is someone who can save everyone from the cruel Reality. Hope, hope is still alive and is working hard to build up their strength in order to give people something to believe in. Because at the end of the day, no matter how hard the day has been, no matter how hard it is to come to terms with Reality, there will always be Hope.

By: Sarah Snyder



Ode to Utensils

By: Jessica Smith

A tribe of hungry men,

Hunched over their freshly cooked dinner,

the harsh embers of the fire still glowing against the

dark night.

They barbarously tear through meat and flesh,

With their ragged teeth

Hitting bones,

getting blood stuck in their untrimmed beards.

They guzzle scorching hot bowls

of freshly cooked liquid,

burning their lips upon touch.

Their hands are a wreck,

Dirty,

broken fingernails

Grossly pry apart their food,

Passing disease from germs,

to dinner,

And back to body.

They chew the parasitic food loudly,

Spewing their food

as much as they spew meaningless sounds.

Greasy hands,

make for dirty men.

Unkempt,

Smelly,

Liars,

Stealers,

Cheaters.

And then,

descending from the stalactites

Of the very cave that houses their insanity,

comes the grandest trio.

A fork,

A spoon,

And a knife.

The sun is suddenly shining and the darkness is no

more.

Harps play, and birds chirp,

And the neanderthals are saved.

They take turns using the utensils,

Transforming themselves from savages,

into men.

The fork,

A dangerous spear used to fend off their enemies.

It leaves men cowering in fear of its power,

able to pick apart any prey with ease.

The spoon,

A shovel which feeds their hunger for power,

the less aggressive,

More forgiving of the three.

It's comforting, like a mother

Cradling her newborn child.

And the knife,

A staff in which to hang a flag,

When the men have finally finished scaling Meat

Everest.

And with this trio,

With the neanderthals becoming men,

Their beards shrink,

Their eyes soften,

Their sounds become words,

They become clean,

Truthful.

respectul.

But most importantly,

They become human.

Ms. Houck-

"Don't allow yourself to become disheartened when the thread doesn't suit or seems unsightly to you. Wait and watch. Be patient and devoted. As the threads twist and turn, you will begin to understand, and you will see the pattern finally materialize in all its splendor"



Mrs. Brown-

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover." — Mark Twain

This quote resonates with me because I always seek adventure and new experiences. Although I might seem like a cautious person by nature, new experiences always invigorate me.

Stolen Innocence

I did not lose it-It was taken from me. Ripped from my clenched fists And torn to tiny pieces In front of my horrified face.

It was brutally bought
By the currency of greed
That takes without question
Or clear consideration
And has left me empty.

The once bright and Iridescent innocence Of my heart Has been squelched To empty embers.

This old innocence,
Once all encompassing,

Had a feeling of warmth As secure as a blanket On a frigid winter day.

This purity protected

Me against the horrors

Of the surrounding worldFrom ravaging wars overseas

To the wickedness of individuals.

Now that it is lost,
I must form my own armor
Against these atrocities
That threaten to invade
My well being.

I have learned from
The finest blacksmith
To forge my own shield
So I can continue to grow
Beyond this loss of innocence.

Inside The Broken Mind By: Danny Koehler

"Do you see them too?" He asks, sitting across from me in a chair that seems so separated from the rest of humanity. How does a person become this? How does anyone become anyone? This is my task.

I must save this one, somehow. Save them from themselves. But now, as he claws at the demons only he can see, I'm not even sure what I could possibly save him from. He is perfect, in his own head. I run down the checklist, searching for any question I could ask that would help find out more about the monster.

"What is there?" I ask tentatively, almost afraid of an answer that I should already know.

"The dancing men." He replies. The patient begins to wimper, I must save him. No, he must save him.

"What are they doing to you?" I flow down the list, scanning for anything that even remotely applies to this situation. I find none.

"They dance, they dance too close to me," He whispers now, a quiet, eerie noise. His lips do not move.

"They tell me things that I never knew, things I don't want to know."

He cries like a child. He burned down seven townhouses.

I go for it, "Why did you start the fire?"

"They told me she was coming back, coming back for me."

"Why would anyone want you?" The question doesn't come out exactly how I want it to, but it doesn't really matter. He is broken. I will fix him. Time stops, he reacted strange to that last question.

"Mummy?" He speaks like a child, "Mummy is it you?"

"I could be like mummy, would that help?"

He doesn't answer. He just starts shrieking again. I block out the noise and review every single thing we know about this poor, lost, ruined soul.

Norton Astley, serial arsonist. Arrived at Danvers State Institution on December sixth, the year 1956. I was hired here just several days before, odd coincidence but I digress. There is no pattern in his behavior, some days he sits quietly and whispers, but others he cries out bloody murder into the dark night. It's nigh impossible to diagnose. Some days I'm not sure just how prepared I am for this job.

The screaming stops, he relaxes in the chair but he looks defeated.

"How are you feeling Norton?"

"Pineapples."

We are not making much progress.

He needs therapy, but I'm not sure which to choose. One of the wards shows me a room filled with top notch mental care products. Straightjackets. Lobotomizers. Electroshock machines. I am excited, until he tells me that I can't choose anything yet. "Come back with a legitimate diagnosis," he says firmly. I am escorted out, I am very determined now. I have to find this man's problems. I want to play with my toys. He will be cured.

Norton is having a bad day today. He never ate breakfast, instead using his oatmeal to draw pictures on the wall. An axe, a crude drawing of a woman, I'm beginning to piece some things together. I believe he may be suffering from some form of emotional trauma. I know, I know, I am one of the best. When he's out of food to smear on the walls, Norton begins to scream once more. "HER," he shouts, he points at the pictures he drew, "HER, HER, HER, HER, HER!"

"Who?" I ask myself. I study him like the animal he is, unfit to leave this place. Unfit for almost anywhere.

I decide a prognosis.

"He has shown clear evidence of abnormal reactions to past trauma," I tell the ward, "He must have any memory of said trauma removed."

The ward nods, "I'm sure that you are aware of the options you have."

I smile inwardly. Of course I know, I say, I just wish I didn't have to make him suffer like that.

I don't wish anything like that. I love the fact he will be in pain. To hear his screams and know that I am responsible. I surprise myself with my own thoughts and try desperately to shake them off. I am thinking far too much like my own patients. I clear my mind and resume my work.

Day one: Electroshock, he responds similarly to all other documented cases. Not very well, that is. He screams louder than usual, but also far more human than usual. I take a few notes after the final round of shocks. He looks... strange, but no more than he usually does. I leave, satisfied.

Day two: same treatment. He looks at the doctors and I with resentment. This is good. It appears that human emotions are returning. He has not talked about the dancing men for hours.

We move on and on with the treatment. Electrical burns show on his neck and arms now. He screams far less. We take a day off, let him recover. He screams again, louder than normal, he seizes up but the doctors do nothing. This is normal. This is abnormal. This should not be happening. Electroshock appears to have failed. We move on.

He makes the next decision for us. He thrashes wildly for over forty minutes before we apply the straightjacket, he stays in his room for this round of treatment. He screams more now. I am worried for him, but not overly so.

We leave the jacket on for sixteen days. He keeps on screaming. He yells about the dancing men now. Yells about them more

than ever. There is only one more option.

"I believe we must apply a frontal lobe lobotomy," I tell the head ward with confidence.

"You understand how serious this procedure is, correct?" he asks.

"I know everything about this procedure," I respond "I don't believe you went to medical school."

"I did not," he replies "But I'm confident in my doctors. Whatever they say goes."

I nod and smile politely. I know that they will agree. They know Norton as well as I do, they know that a lobotomy may be his only chance.

"Of course," says Doctor Mathis when I ask for permission "I really don't think that there is anything else we can do."

We give Norton five days, just to see if there is any change in his behavior, there isn't.

I sit by the door to his room and watch him scream, then cry. He stares at the pictures he made and screams and cries even more. He rubs them of the wall using his shirtsleeve. I sit for a minute, why didn't the janitors clean that off earlier?

I watch him through the night, as though he is my child. In some ways, he is. I have tried so hard to cure him, care for him. I fall asleep and am shaken awake by a ward, just as the sun is rising.

"It must be done today," He informs me, "Indefinitely."

I nod and rub the sleep out of my eyes. I follow the ward to the medical room, we prepare the lobotomizer together in silence.

"I must be the one to do this," I tell him. He gives me an interested look, but says nothing as he finishes positioning the blade.

I leave the room with a mix of confidence and sadness. This was our last option. As a psychiatrist, I had hoped it would never have to come to this. He might lose his bad memories, but he could also lose the parts of his personality. He could go entirely catatonic. There was some risk, but in the end I believed it would be worth it.

I returned to Norton Astley's room December twenty-fifth to see him cry one last time. I felt deep inside that the crying was from me but I'm feeling no remorse. Why should I feel? What should I feel? Is this not an awful, guilty man. No, I try to tell myself. No, he is just sick. He is just sick but he will get better, I can make him better. Why should I make him better? Why should I not kill him like he killed all those others?

Because, it is my job not to kill like they have killed. I want to though. I plead with myself to let me and experience emotional pain so strongly that I am lying on the ground before the head ward comes to find me.

"Are you okay?" he questions me "Are you fit to perform the procedure?"

I nod, I'm fine, I made my decision.

"I must've fallen asleep," I tell him "I had a longer night than usual."

Now he nods and walks away, and brings back all the doctors that will cart Norton to his final place. The place that will take all the bad Norton and change it to good Norton. Better Norton. I will do that for him. But as we walk my anger grows again and I leave myself wondering just what kind of action I might take. Then I see the first, I see a man in the corner. He dances. He is red and black and so happy to see me, and he tells me all about what Norton did.

"His mother punished him for sure," He sings as he dances "but because Norton was a bad little boy."

"He was?" I ask.

"He was." They answer. There's two now, now three. Four dancing men circle me, moving back and forth, back and forth. They dance remarkably well, flowing back and forth, their features mixing into a conglomerate of terrible faces. I turn away and continue to walk to the room. The men keep talking, the men are right. Norton is bad, Norton is bad, everything I have seen from him is evil. No, he's just damaged. No, he is evil. I struggle with my thoughts but do not let them show outwardly.

I look up from my feet again, six men. They speak in whispers. Norton looks at me now. He knows I see them too, he hears them, he knows they are talking to me. He pleads with me silently but I shut him out. He has done so many bad things, they tell me. So many bad things.

We enter the room I turn so fast to lock the door and the doctors can't get in. Twelve inches of solid steel with a dusty window to see their confused faces.

"Norton," I say quietly "Norton you are bad."

The men agree, they dance some more, Norton screams and cries. The doctors start to yell at me, but I can barely hear them at all. It doesn't matter, nothing they say can change my mind, my broken mind. But it's not broken, I think it's fine.

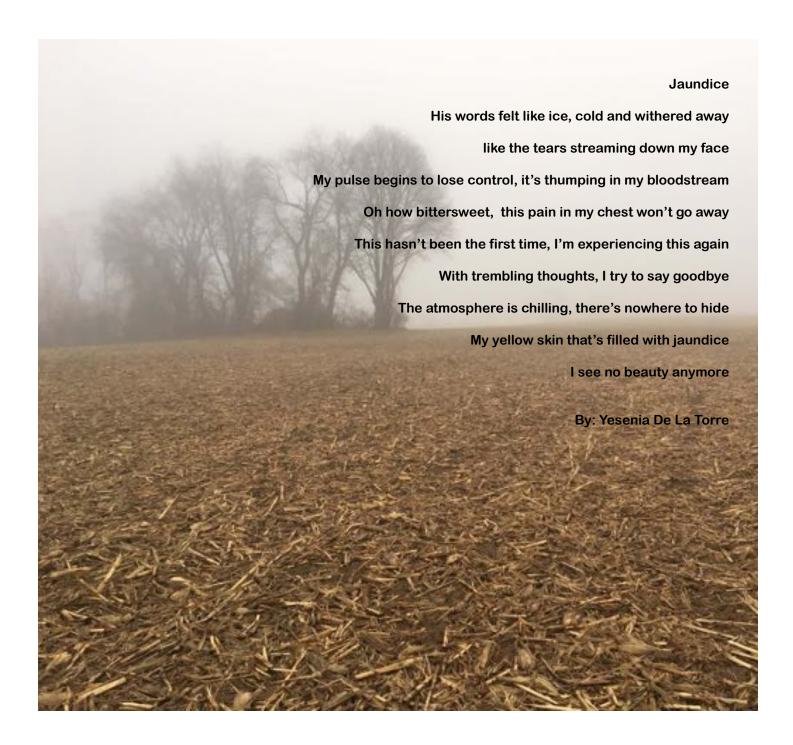
I strap Norton down, ignore his cries and now I start up the machine, it whirs with danger. The noise is pain but nothing like the pain I will give to him. Him the murderer, him the convict, him the man with a shattered brain. I pause, consider what I am about to do, I shriek with glee and laughter. I press the needle into his skull and leave it there for far too long. He cries once more and then is gone.

I sit alone in my cage, but I am not afraid of the world I face, I am not afraid of anything because the dancing men tell me not to be. They are nice, quiet, the dance and whisper. They whisper things I never knew, things I love to learn. I yearn for their voice whenever they leave, they are amazing creatures that I must study. They are always happy, never unpleasant. A doctor sees me today and I speak. For the first time in weeks I have something to say.

"How are you today?" He asks me.

I answer with a smile, another question.

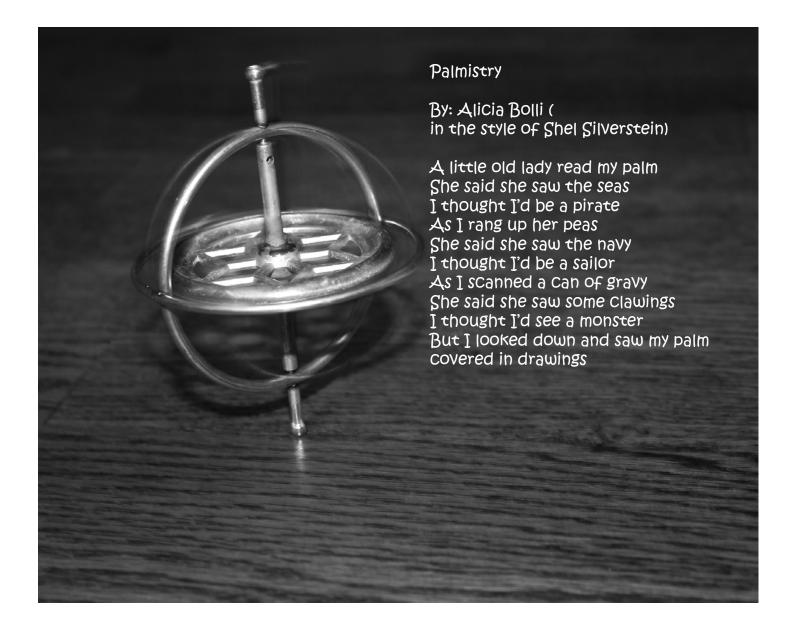
"Do you see them too?"



Mr. Weiss-

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." - Lao Tzu (Chinese Philosopher)

This has always pushed me to go further than I would otherwise because to get anywhere you have to start by taking a single step and once that step is taken a lot of times it gets you moving and then you can steamroll towards the goal you've set. Sometimes just starting is the hardest thing to do.



Mr. Walker-

My favorite quote is attributed to Ayn Rand:

"You can avoid reality, but you cannot avoid the consequences of avoiding reality."

In a world that seems to increasingly devalue personal responsibility, this quote is profoundly powerful. Her writings have inspired me immensely.

On a Cold April Morn

By Olivia Sothoron

Determined, the men make their way into battle,
Screaming at the top o their lungs for their freedom.

The weapons, clanking at their sides did rattle,
King Charles Stewart, a look o nervousness, as he didna want to mislead em.

The gunshots, cannons, and claymores whirring past,

As each man fought for his life

They all ken d with each step they took that it may be their last,

Flowever convinced to come out victorious o this strife.

The scoundrels were coated in red,
With the look o death Iling all o their eyes,
However, many o them started to fall, O, how they bled,
Their numbers started to dwindle as the sun began to rise.

Willing, they were, to leave it all out on that damp moor,
And to their loved ones they did bare a gloomy farewell,
And forever, their luve for their nation would indeed endure,
With the cross of St. Andrew displayed across their chest, brave and noble.

The moor on which so much blood was shed now lays barren, As the wind blows through the tall grass,

The fate o their nation buried therein,

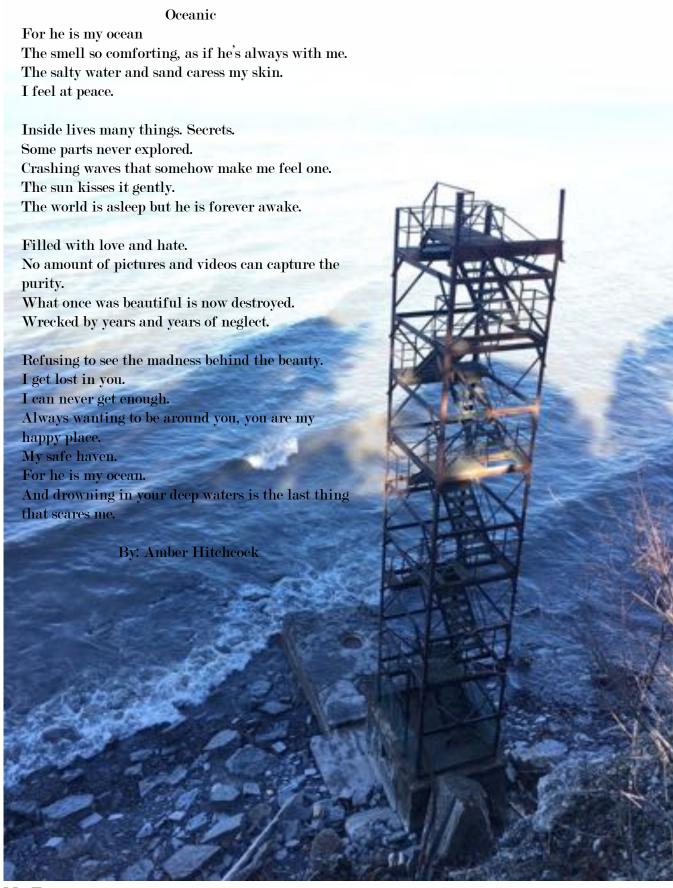
Whose valiance can no person ever surpass.

Mrs. Ensor-

"Accept your past with no regrets, handle your present with confidence and face your future with no fear." Author "unknown



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Mr. Turner-

[&]quot;Light travels faster than sound. This is why some people appear bright until you hear them speak"

To Write, Nevermore"
By Marcus Pearson
In the style of Edgar Allan Poe

Every nightly expedition, I lie in wait, my own submission.

The lamplight joins my motley crew, shining o'er tired lines,

Head in hands— a common foe— a crumpled pile begins to grow.

Desk brightened by a lunar glow— to better works these old eyes pine,

To wondrous worlds of gilded page, in the likes of Lee or Stein.

Maybe just another line.

Back on the shelf the worn tomes go—the sum of all I'll ever know, They record the minds of better men, of a better vine.

They'll not show me the hallowed way, nor make my words dance and play, No, it needs to take shape of my own clay; It has to be mine.

The page needs more— a soul— it's got to shine.

Maybe just a few more lines.

Who can say why it leaves—the spark, the fire, the webs we weave, It takes time to mature, to ripen, to age like fine wine, But I've not the patience, nor the time, I'm at the summit; There's no more to climb. If I could snatch it back—I would—it's prime, yet I still can't seem to muster the spine, I need it back, the whetstone on which my life, I fine.

Please, give it just a few more lines.

Every morning reclamation, I curse my name, my sovereign nation.

Sunlight peaks through unfettered blinds, shining upon newly minted lines,

Head stretched back—back sans bend—I know my time has come to end.

Desk engulfed in solar blend—pages elucidated—as if a sign,

To cease the inane scribbles, the scratches—the broken, slant rhyme.

I think I can fit just one more line.



cold bodies

By: Oliver Hughes

The gloom washed over Claudia as she exited her home in the middle of the night. The moon was bright, probably a little too bright. Her pale skin was illuminated by the eventide. She took a deep breath of the salty sea air and summoned her three black cats. Helena, Bloom, and Cherry. They all promptly appeared behind her in a cloud of purple smoke. She never left the house without them. She dejectedly treaded past her grave. Kennedy's grave. It was always customary to burn the body after a person has been possessed, but she didn't have the heart. She just buried her girlfriend's body in the front yard, surrounded by bindings and protection spells so nobody would defile her corpse. Nobody had ever talked to Claudia after the incident. She hadn't left her house in three years, so nobody even knew she was alive.

But today, on her nineteenth birthday, she was determined to rightfully take back what she lost.

She sat out on the soft sands of the beach in front of the sea as the mist coated her short jet black hair, long sleeved dress, and tall platform boots. Not really beach attire, but she never really cared. She felt exhausted from another restless nights sleep. The nightmares for her never stopped, no matter how hard she tried.

"I just wanna be better," she whispered softly to her three sleeping cats next to her. "How do I get better you guys? How?"

Cherry stood up and stretched sleepily and walked over to Claudia and nuzzled against her. She stroked her sleek black coat in response.

"That is for you to decide, Clauds." Cherry cooed.

"Do I just get rid of what's bothering me?"

"If it has been really bothering you for this long, I think it is time to do something about it. I hate seeing you suffer like this."

"I'll try my hardest."

Claudia materialized her motorcycle and flew into the night with her three cats sitting in the sidecar. The waves crashed behind her in a way that forefold a dark event.

She silently landed on the outskirts of the city in an alleyway.

"Nothing good can happen here." Bloom warned.

"You don't think I know that?"

"I'm just warning you, you might want to cast a protection spell."

"That won't do any good for what I'm up against. This spirit- it's incredibly powerful."

"Then me and the other two will do our best."

She walked loudly with purpose down the alley, her boots stomping loudly on the cracked concrete. A chill breeze washed over the top of her head and ran all the way down her spine.

"Do you see me?"

"Do you seeeee meeeeee?"

Claudia pulled out her wand and began to cast the most powerful protection spell she knew. It would drain some of her energy, but she could not fight without it. She felt a tug in her stomach.

"Helena, please advise me," she demanded. "What do you think I should cast?"

"Whatever Kennedy thought was best, Clauds. She knew everything. She'd be proud of you for thinking about her."

A dark purple spirit creeped around the corner of the alleyway. It presented itself in such a flamboyant, yet menacing manner. It's clouded figure allowed Claudia little accuracy.

"What are you so afraid of? Loooooosing your miiiind? That's inevitable, baby!"

"Shut the hell up, man."

"Can't you seece? You've already lost it! Your precious girl WAS your mind. You're not doing this for her, you're doing this for, wait for it... you."

"I said," she growled, aiming her wand directly at the spirit's center. "Shut the hell up."

A bright beam of pure white light rocketed out of her wand and plowed right through the spirit's center.

"That might've not been a good idea, Clauds." all three of her cats warned at once.

"It's okay, babies," she insisted. "I've never been good at thinking about myself anyways. Please don't worry. I got this."

The purple figure collapsed on the ground before her. Claudia carefully approached it, and reached her palm out over the heart of the body. She closed her eyes, and tried to sense a heartbeat, but there was none. It was over.

"She's dead."

"The purple smoke. You might want to clear it," Cherry mewed. "There's something off about that body, I can sense it."

"What do you mean? I thought it was all over, but I'll try."

She brushed away the smoke with a breeze, and with that, a terribly gruesome sight laid before her.

"Kennedy."

Tears welled up in her eyes and she collapsed to the ground next to the quickly rotting corpse.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

All three of her cats nuzzled up against her back to comfort her as the body slowly started to turn to dust. Her ashes blew away in the breeze as Claudia frantically grasped at them until there was none left.

Was I just hearing voices?

Was that her actual body?

How come I didn't recognize her voice?

She frantically thought.

None of this made sense to her, and for days on end she searched for an answer.

Then it clicked.

"Of course! Why wasn't this clear before?! I never burned the body because I was too much of a sappy idiot to. I really was doing this for myself and not her. Burning her would have set her soul free, so she wouldn't have been stuck in that spirit for eternity."

That night, she went outside and began digging up her body. She lit a match, and within minutes, a very distinct white smoke rose from the coffin. Her soul was finally detached, and as Claudia watched, she felt an enormous weight lift from her body. She felt as if she could breathe once again.

"There's no fear in trying." the spirit echoed from the sky as it ascended.



By: Sara Ghaffari

Is it such a violation to lay here in the violet hour? She a child of swine; chained since birth Misting mirrors, flaking paint, wilting of the flower

North of the body, south of the mind; coward
Bottomless jar of hope stays snug in the depths of the earth
Is it such a violation to lay here in the violet hour?

Withholding soil, water, light, the smoldering sun effortlessly devours

His stentorian voice allows the flower abandon her worth

Misting mirrors, flaking paint, wilting of the flower

Scouting for a flame that's never to be found; she relinquishes any remaining power The coal crow rests on a nearby firth
Is it such a violation to lay here in the violet hour?

Realizing her defeat, she permits the wind to blow her from his tower In her remaining moments of peace, she's rebirthed



Mr. Socash-

"When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."

-Mark Twain



Dr. Schoder-

"the sea-like life itself – is a stern taskmaster. The best way to get along with either is to learn all you can, then do your best and don't worry – especially about things over which you have no control."

Chester Nimitz

Don't

By: Emily McGraw

Don't do that, its weird. Don't watch that, its gross. Don't eat that, it will make you fat. Don't gain anymore weight, starve yourself if you have too. Don't wear horizontal stripes, they don't flatter you like vertical do. Don't wear that, dress as if you actually care. Don't put your hair up, it looks better down. Don't go out without makeup on, it makes you look better.

Don't look so sad, its depressing.
Don't act like that, be lucky for what you have.
Don't act so depressed, you're being pathetic again.
Don't be weak,
I guess you'll just have to fake it.

Be normal for once.
Act like you care.
Stop being depressed.
Quit being weak.
Dress better.
Eat better.
Be better.

Don't be you.



Ms. Ehrlich-

"... And though she be but little, she is fierce."--Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream (Act 3, Scene 2)

Several years ago, when I was battling serious illness, this quote became my mantra. Family and friends used it to motivate me when times were tough, and I used it to inspire myself.

The Voice That Isn't Mine By: Michael Allman

I'm sitting in my chair. It's a comfortable chair, cushioned and commodious, the kind you can nap in. I was shaking, so I scooted it closer to the fire. I'm still shaking though. The fire mesmerizes me. It dances and shines, I get lost in it. Something's wrong. There's something I need to do. What was it? My son. That's right, it had to do with my son. Why do I need my son? I don't know. Where is he? I call his name. Wait. He should be in bed, asleep. My wife will be furious, I know it. That's it, I just need to put my son to bed. No. There is something else.

My head aches, a deep throbbing. I'm shaking more now. Why am I shaking so much? I don't know why I can't control my-self! I clench my fist with the thought. Wait. My gloved fist. I'm wearing my suit. The black one, with the hood. I have no recollection of putting it on. I thought I lost it to be honest. I haven't worn this suit since...

"Daddy?"

The voices stop and I get a brief relief as my mind takes a break. I look at my son. Finally I manage, "Hi buddy."

He takes a long look at me and tries to say something several times. I can see him mulling the puzzle over inside and I'm reminded of how smart my boy is. He finally settles for, "hat," while waving his stubby finger at my face.

The voices rush back. The suit! Why am I wearing this suit? I have no reason to be wearing this suit. I can hear alarm bells shricking. I'm shaking, I'm sweating, I can't breathe. The suit. The suit. I want to scream at him to run away. To run far away someplace safe because the suit, I shouldn't be wearing this suit. The last time you wore this suit was when you...

Remember me? Says the Voice That Isn't Mine and suddenly I'm not in a chair by the fire in my home. It's another time. Another place. But I don't know when, or where. This place has no time, I've learned. The clouds are thick and dark, with a permanent tint of red on the horizon, perhaps too thick to see a sun. I know better though, there is no sun, no day, no night, just clouds and ash. So much ash. I've never been on a planet like this, but then again, no one has ever been on a planet like this. It doesn't even feel like a planet, somehow. If there's no sun, how are you alive? Shut up you. I don't know. Maybe I'm not. This place is as lifeless as it is timeless. There's nothing. No life of any kind but me. It's as if life doesn't belong here. But that can't be true. There's a presence. Not human. Not monster. A presence that follows my footprints, angry at my disturbance, yet joyful of the entertainment. I've never seen it, or heard it, but I know something is there, chasing me. I can feel it, hunting, whispering my name, willing me to die. It's not the Voice though. The Voice That Isn't Mine. No, that Voice is always there now. It gradually took form since I came to this place, appearing more and more often until it made a home inside my head. The Voice tells me about all the people I left behind, how little they know, how little they matter. It tells me of worlds undiscovered and mysteries to be solved. It terrifies me, but it provides my only companionship. It's your own voice. You're losing it. You're going insane. Sometimes even I wonder... but no. It's not mine. How do I know? I just do, it just doesn't belong to me. Trust me. But I have to listen to myself, with the Hunter and the Voice That Isn't Mine, it would be easy to lose it in the place. So I stumble forward, panting, shaking, shivering, and crying. Throat raw, feet numb, eyes burning, onward and onward through the barren waste of this land of ash. Each step should be my last. Each step I imagine my corpse thud onto the the ground, sending ash and dust spiraling into the air, but Death never takes his claim. Why'd Death visit a place without life? What is this place? There is no refuge, nowhere safe I can hide or protect myself. It's all the same. It's all just ash. Start where you began a voice tells me, and I don't know whether it's my own mind or not.

It's right either way. How did I get here? It's been so long. No memory of a ship, so a portal. Yes, a portal. I remember know. I opened that portal and I walked through it. An achievement of a lifetime. It was history, unheard of, to travel across the galaxy in a single step was a dream to all scientists, and to me a reality. But I went too far, I came to this place, a place that shouldn't exist. When I walked through I knew immediately this was not the destination but when I turned the portal had collapsed. I need to make another portal. As soon as the thought enters the fabric of space splits violently before me. Just a hole of nothingness before me. Too easy. Far too easy. The Voice That Isn't Mine just laughs, amused.

It is no trick. Go. Go home. But as I walk through the gap it continues to laugh and it calls to me, for you are far more useful to me, and I'm back in my chair, on the outside echoing throughout my head.

I'm back in my chair, still in the suit, shaking involuntarily. Sweating too. My son stands there confused and afraid. The Voice That Isn't Mine is still here. It almost sounds concerned when it speaks, your son is dying.

What are you talking about? He is perfectly healthy.

You don't understand. He's dying, the best part about him is dying.

I look farther into my son. Pure. He's scared and all I want in the world is to hold him, comfort him, love him. Tell him everything is going to be okay forever. But that's not true. I see where the Voice is going. There is nothing I can do to stop that.

There is a way. A sure way to save him, but with a cost.

Cost? Save him? Save him from growing up you mean. Protect his innocence. I am not so delusional to think that can, or must be done. You seriously overestimate just how twisted you think you have turned--

Me, interrupts the Voice That Isn't Mine, cutting its way through my thoughts like a knife. What?

Me, repeats the Voice That Isn't Mine. You must save him, and it pauses to let it sink in and my gut is clenching and the ground is falling and life is meaningless and will I ever escape? Will I ever escape? From me, the Voice That Isn't Mine Finishes, and I can hear it sneer. If you fail to save him I will have him. I'm shaking my head. Oh, I can see it! That boy, oh that boy could give me so much more than you have to offer. I'm on my feet before I know it. And after I am done with him, my whole body trembles with rage, I will bring him to me, and leave him to seek the death you could not find.

"Lies!" I scream, head still shaking, body still trembling. "You lie! You can not touch him! You can not have him! He is too pure. He is too pure for you!" I rant at the ceiling, not realizing I'm saying all this out loud. My son backs away, towards the fire. He gets too close and squeals at the heat. "Step away from the fire love," I say, tone flipping completely, "come let Daddy hold you, please." But he just sits down and cries, Daddy is a monster.

He will follow your footsteps. He will become you.

I shake my head vigorously, my attention returns to the Voice though my eyes are fixated on my son. "No, NO. I'll raise him right. I'll protect him, I'll destroy my work so he can never see or know what I've seen and know and I will never let him be touched by you!" I pour every bit of deviance I have into my promise and I fall exhausted back into the loving arms of my chair.

I let myself sink into the cushions and suddenly I have a vision. Just a flash, a dream brimmed with feeling. I see myself holding my little boy, sitting in this same chair. I hold him and whisper loving thoughts into his precious head until we fall asleep together. I'm wiping the tears from my eyes when the Voice speaks again.

It doesn't matter what you do, he's already so smart, adventurous, like his father, says the Voice That Isn't Mine. You could burn your planet to ashes, I tremble at that, in an attempt to protect him but I will always be present. Then it finally voices my fears. You have to kill him to save him. Kill him now, while he is safe. Innocence dies young, you'd know best.

The whole house seems to shaking now. The whole world. It's too much. "GET OUT." I don't realize I screamed it out loud until the boy starts wailing. I try to stand to comfort him but my legs are numb and I fall back into the chair. I stare at him instead. He's so perfect. Too perfect for this world, as if he doesn't belong here, this cruel world. Just look at his eyes. There is more wonder in those eyes than in the entire universe, I know it.

Universes, the Voice That Isn't Mine corrects. A shudder shatters my spine. Yes, universes, it's right. I know, I'm the only one who knows, they all call me crazy but I know far more than they do. Universes, I've been there. So will he, I look at my boy. In time, one way or another. I've been to two, yet I know there are three, I know, I know. He'll go to the one I've never been to, the third one. He's safe right now, he'll never be safer than now. Too pure for the Voice to touch him. But a selfish thought creeps in. What about me? If I do this all hope is gone. I'll be lost forever.

Oh you poor fool, says the Voice That Isn't Mine as if speaking to a child, you already belong to me. I know it's true. I move to stand but only crumble to my knees. Gasping, I pause on the floor, caressing the carpet with my hands, feeling it. I shut my eyes. My heart pounds, a burning in my chest. My hands tear at the carpet, shaking. I open my eyes and there's a gun resting before me, as if there all along, waiting. I don't recall ever owning a gun, it seems a stupid question of where it came from though. I grab it, feeling it's familiar weight. I try to rise but my legs are numb, so I crawl. Towards my son, right up to him. He struggles, wails and wiggles, but I force my lips to his forehead for my own personal eternity. I pull back and look into his eyes. I look directly into those eyes, and I see everything life has to offer. I look into the eyes of God, and, choking back a sob, I kill him.





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Wavering By: Natalie Flynn Why must the smallest of choices be the source of All this turmoil? My mind an endless back and forth Of red or blue, this or that, My thoughts an aimless windstorm That whips and swirls its crafty fingers from A to B And back again And back again Rarely giving the sand a chance to settle... And when it does, but for a moment and it's Swept up again, into the whirlwind, now a storm. The clock hands ticking only stir the cyclone. Out of time, I choose, I pull myself to safety To certainty But once again the winds threaten to pull me back Into the chaos of blinding sand Where lightning bolt alternatives assert themselves Knowing they will all be considered Even as the sand begs to touch ground and stay there. I call for help, tear myself away, and suddenly It's all extinguished. Rain falls, sand settles, The storm, once calmed, seems an unnecessary foe Sparked from sand that had no business being kicked up in the first place. Mrs. Caliskan-"Live the life you love, love the life you live"- Bob Marley "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Martin Luther King, Jr.

Marked for Death

By: Marcus Pearson

Running, you decide, would have to be the worst part about fleeing.

The notion seems laughable, and in fact you probably would laugh, if you weren't afraid of aggravating the stitch in your side any more. Of course fleeing isn't pleasant, and of course it is almost entirely comprised of running. As you carry on though, shambling down the dark untrodden trail of the countryside, you can't help but think that no one really realizes how much running a proper flee entails.

It's not simply running until you can no longer see your pursuers. Your hounds don't need to see you to stalk you anyway. No, it's running until you feel safe, and safe is something you haven't felt since you started running. You know, deep down, that you could run until your legs bled, until the horizon swallowed your silhouette like it was the shadow of the setting sun, but you would still not feel safe. You doubt you'll ever feel "safe" again.

Your weary legs steer you into a clearing, the sky suddenly opening up once more. Instead of the azure tint of a summer's evening sky, the heavens seemed to have been tinged burgundy with spite. You try to reason that it couldn't possibly have anything to do with you, that it was simply a symptom of the tempestuous season. Still, the sight of a vengeful firmament unsettles you to your core.

Gawking into the air, your legs struggle to find solid ground, and before you can correct yourself, you fall into a ditch with one sudden gauche motion. You crumple pathetically, looking as dignified as a fallen baby bird. You know that you mustn't linger, but the thought of getting back up is torture. It's been so long since you last felt the comfort of a bed, since you last sat down. Where had things gone so wrong?

You have to get up.

Your legs defiantly ignore your desperate attempts at movement, burdened with the pain of days of unrest. You could lie here for a moment, they surely were miles away, even Daemons had to sleep, did they not?

They will find you.

Your eyes follow suit, sagging as if tied down with more and more weight every excruciatingly slow blink. Maybe they would pass by...Maybe... Maybe it wouldn't hurt.

You have to.

You have to.

You have to sleep.

You're cold. Unnaturally so.

You can feel every ounce of blood in your veins turn to ice, chilling you from the innermost crevices of your bones to the tips of the raised hairs on your skin. The air smells of old wood and dank stone, with only the slightest hint of rot assaulting your olfaction.

Before you can properly adjust to your surroundings, your gaze settles on the brightest corner of the room. An open window permits a single ray of silvery moonlight to shine upon a bespoke little black table, the only occupant of which appears to be a familiar unmarked box, about four inches wide and half that across. It's open, but empty.

The room seems to be purposefully obscuring itself from your view, details shifting with every microsaccade like an enormous zoetrope. You still your eyes long enough to make out the flickering flame of a candelabra, it's gilded neck clasped tightly in a leather grip. You suddenly realize you're not basking in the small glow alone. Eyes tracing the outline of a robe, you look up its silky body, stopping at the zenith of its obfuscating hood. You squint fervently, straining your eyes and mind with each passing second, before you catch a briefly illuminated glimpse of your companion.

It used to be, at least. You haven't seen your reflection much lately, but you would sooner believe a funhouse mirror than this ghost of a memory for an accurate view of yourself. This was not the same person who had been fleeing for weeks on end, nor the same person constantly stricken by manic fear. They were strong, calculated; Every step they took seemed to exude purpose. You had not been this way for a very long time, not since...Not since you took it.

As if mirroring your own thoughts, the other you reaches for the breast pocket of their robe. You know exactly what they're reaching for, but you can't help but cast your glance downwards in shame. As they hold it between their index finger and thumb, you suppress the urge to snatch it and toss it back into the little box once more. There's no changing what's been done, all you can do now is watch and mourn for your future. Your doppelganger, entranced by the beauty of the trinket, doesn't seem to notice your anguish.

Pocketing the artifact, your twin snuffs out the candelabra with a small snap to each of its three wicks, and grabs a considerable length of rope from the coil slung over their shoulder. Footsteps thunder above you.

The younger you ties the rope's end to one of the window's iron bars, defenestrating the rest of it and vaulting onto the ledge. They turn back for a second, showing the slightest sign of hesitation. Time grinds to a halt. Now, back then, whatever it was, it was the moment you could have prevented all this. You didn't need the bauble. You had to prove a point though, didn't you? You couldn't leave well enough alone.

You look down at your hand, at the ring that caused your life to take such a turn. Its gold-entwined emerald shines brilliantly, even in the somber quagmire you reside in. You know it won't come off, but you twist it anyway. Maybe you had suffered enough, maybe you had atoned for your sins. It doesn't budge.

Dejected, You shut your eyes once more. If only the nightmare would end, if only you would finally wake up.

Wake up

Wake up

Wak-

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

You awake, eardrums immediately punctured by a welkin-splitting holler. It was as if every dying animal had banded together in a chorus of desolation and despair. As if a thousand men had awoken to find their families dead before them, crying out in unison. It was as if a vengeful god had directed all its anger, its contempt, its spite, all down at you.

They were upon you.

You frantically scramble to your feet, sputtering out of the ditch and bolting once more. Your Erinyes, approaching ever closer, carve a warpath through the trees behind you. You've never actually seen what they look like, nor how they've been able to keep up with you so effortlessly, but lingering for even another second would assuredly be your death.

The wine slathered sky had been replaced with black velvet, pockmarked with small splotches of coruscating stars. The moon, as full as it had been the last few nights, appears...veiled. As if the darkling forces chasing you were using it to hang their cloaks while they searched for their mark. It's clear that even celestial bodies refuse to aid you, not that a spot of moonlight would matter much to one absconding at such a frantic pace.

The Furies' screeching seems to burrow in your ears as you run, coiling around your brain and settling into the inner depths of your soul. What was once incomprehensible begins forming very pointed commentary within you, fighting your own thoughts for residency. The voices, masquerading as your own, speak incessantly.

Stop running.

You spot a light beaming in the distance, pulsating in tune to your frantic gasps for air. A lighthouse. The ocean.

It won't hurt for long, they only want what is right.

You keep accelerating, the muscles in your legs cramping on every push against the ground. The Valkyries follow posthaste, about a hundred feet back. Their ungodly screaming growing fainter and fainter as you push your body to its very limits, the pain clearing your thoughts more than you ever could alone.

You know you deserve your fate.

You stop running, settling your feet just at the edge of the lighthouse's cliff face, dust and rocks tumbling down into the churning ocean below. You made it. You don't have to die. If you can just find a boat, a raft, anything.

As you frantically bounce on the balls of your feet, searching for an escape, your eyes finally catch a glimpse of the true form of your pursuers. You had always figured them evil, a demonic presence, some ancient beings of lore tied to the ring. Yet for creatures you had previously compared to deathmongers or Daemons, they looked so terribly... Empyrean.

There were three of them, of that you could be sure. The problem was that they changed shape as fast as you could recognize them. They were winged Archangels, wrapped in white with golden halberds. They were Djinn, cloaked in equal parts jewelry and fire, brandishing glistening scimitars. They were Jackal-headed warriors, wielding wicked khopeshes in one hand and a crook and flail in the other.

Maybe you weren't wrong to be so mercurial about their names. They were timeless. They were and would be everything you feared, could possibly hope to fear; In this realization, you know that no ocean would ferry you to safety. The old ones finally stay their form, settling on skull-faced Reapers twirling scythes. It was hopeless, and from that only one thought continues to ring in your skull.

You know you deserve your fate.

In your paralysis, the center one, the leader it seems, slowly glides over to you. One emaciated hand reaches out for your collar, caressing your neck before softly wrapping around your gasping throat. Its brethren crowd in towards you as well, their scythes dragging in unison on the ground as they approach. The withered grip on your neck tightens like a belt, and the creature lowers its head until it faces you directly. If skulls did not always bear teeth, you would say it was smiling. Its scythe rests on its blade, facing upwards, perpendicular to the ground next to your arm.

Thank you for making this easy.

A wistful smile creeps across your face as you stare at the tool next to you, and then back directly into the empty sockets of your executioner. "This won't be easy at all."

In one swift motion, you press all your weight down onto the scythe next to you, the cursed ring taking the brunt of the force. The band snaps, freeing your finger and taking a nasty gash out of your hand and arm. Pain held at bay by adrenaline, you hurl the gold and emerald pieces into the dark sea below. They fall undramatically, hitting the frothing waves below with an anticlimactic sploosh.

The Reapers freeze in place, their normally capricious visages now locked into three amorphous blobs. They look almost like spilled inkwells, shade trickling outwards until eventually... they cease to be.

Your hellhounds gone, the moon shines unfettered once again. The sea calms its relentless assault on the coast, as if Poseidon himself acknowledges the outcome of your battle. Even the stars and the lighthouse's fire seem to burn thrice as brightly, reignited with a newfound vigor. The lighthouse.

Blood vacating your wound as if in the midst of a sanguine exodus, you trundle over to the lighthouse. Leaning your battered body against the wooden doorframe, you weakly reach for the handle.

Locked.

Of course.

You slide down until you're resting against the door in a crumpled heap, bruised and bloodied, but victorious in your plight. You just hope it wasn't a pyrrhic victory. You'll rest here, praying your wound doesn't take you before morning.

It's ironic really. Here you lie, in the worst pain of your life, freezing and dying, yet for the first time in weeks you finally feel...safe. As you close your eyes and let darkness take you, one thought surfaces just before you slip into the unconscious aether.

At least I'm not running.



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Chapter 1

By: Anna Borisova

[Shot of bedroom door with a Do Not Enter sign]

IShot of the poster of Team Troika 3: Rise that's at the entrancel

IShot of cat slippers at the entrancel

[All accompanied by the chorus of "Still Breathing"-Green Dayl

[Shot of the bedside table, with a phone going off]

IShot of the mess of wires at the bedside table, with one very obvious phone charger!

IShot of Elisabeth groggily getting up and picking up the phonel

ISwitch to exclusively showing the phone, a Pixel-esque thing with the Mem, Inc. logo under the speakerl

Mary (on screen): "Good morning, Elisabeth. Today is January 31st, 2020. You've kept your Social Score at the nice 1500 the whole month, and you know what that means, don't you?"

Elisabeth: "Yeah, free cheap-ish crap. Mind if I take the corp up on the offer later, after I get my dose of caffeine?"

Mary: "Certainly, although I'd prefer you used cleaner language for your request. Anyways, would you like me to put the kettle on?"

Elisabeth (face super close to the phone): "YES PLEASE AND THANK YOU!!!"

Mary: "Alright, will do. Please keep your noise level down, though. I do believe that your apartment complex's quiet hours are from 22:00 to 7:00, unless I was wrongly informed. In which case, please feel free to let me know, for the benefit of the rest of the Mary network and its users."

Elisabeth: "No, your info is right. Anyways, I'll go get ready."

Mary: "Alright. Your hot water will be ready in about five minutes."

IShot of Elisabeth walking to the bathroom, skirt, tie, and blazer hanging on the shoulder.l

IShot of bathroom door closing, with an empty clothes hanger clearly in the picture.]

Elisabeth (from behind the door): "How do I tie this thing, again?"

IShot of her walking down the hall, in her school uniform and cat slippersl

[Cut to a shot of a Team Troika 3 cup, with some tea leaves on the bottom]

Mary: "Okay, all heated up and ready! By the way, congratulations on winning the first place in the latest Mem, Inc. Innovation Challenge. You'll receive \$20 of MemStore credit. You'll also receive two extra Social Score Bonus goodies of your choice every month for the next three months, as long as your Social Score stays within that sweet 1350-1600 range."

Elisabeth: "Yep, same old, same old..."

Mary: "But that's not all! Since you've taken first place five times now, you've been placed on Mem, Inc.'s list of promising potential future personnel! As such, any applications for internships and job positions that you may submit further down the line will receive priority review! Your coding boot camp fees will also be waived twice! You'll also be able to get one item that's priced below \$10, on us, once a month (until January 31st, 2021)!"

Elisabeth: "How generous. Does the gift come with free shipping, and can I order it for someone else?"

Mary: "No, only your personal orders qualify for this offer. We have ways to ensure that. And yes, it does qualify for free shipping."

Elisabeth (with a grin): "Huh, I guess the corp does like to butter up the future talent... Yeah, I'll take advantage of those prizes fairly soon. Just let me brush my teeth first."

Mary: "Of course! Please take all the time you need to decide!"

[Shot of Elisabeth walking back to the bathroom]

[Elisabeth starts brushing her teeth]

IA pink creature with Mem, Inc.'s logo in place of a face and a passing resemblance to the infamous demonic rabbit from the Madoka Magica series appears near the electric toothbrush chargerl

[Elisabeth ignores it]

Creature (in glitched-out bubbles): "Wouldn't you like to come aboard, after college? It'd be stable, and probably do your parents proud."

IIt teleports onto Elisabeth's headl

Elisabeth (in glitched-out speech bubbles, still brushing her teeth): "I'm not sure yet. Sure, the corp sponsored the H1Bs for Mom and Dad, and an H4 for me. I suppose we're pretty closely attached now. But at the same time, I hate that project that they lent their coding skills to."

Creature: "The widespread encouragement of good behavior?"

Elisabeth: "No, the mandatory fake, selfish kindness."

Creature: "That you're benefitting from quite a bit."

Elisabeth: "Yes, I'm aware. And I hate the fact. But that evil was what got my parents their promotions. It got them the extra

thousands necessary for getting all the green card-related paperwork processed. And it'll pay for our naturalization in a few years." Creature: "So, aren't you grateful? I mean, that system's securing your future here, away from all the political corruption and censorship back home!"

Elisabeth: "The answer is still only maybe. I'm not sure if I want to help support this meme yet."

Creature: "And it's been a rather successful one, wouldn't you say? Your parents have helped build quite the cultural monster, in only a few years!"

Elisabeth: "That part, I can agree with you on. At any rate, I'm done, and this little chat is now over."

[Turns off electric toothbrush]

Creature: "Have fun, and strive for perfect behavior today, once again!"

[Shot of Elisabeth leaving the bathroom]

[Shot of Elisabeth pulling her phone out of her pocket]

Elisabeth: "Hey, Mary. I feel like using one of my Social Score Bonuses now, I guess."

Mary: "Great! As usual, we're offering up a nice selection of various digital goods. Would you be interested in games for your laptop, or would you like to try something off that beaten path?"

Elisabeth: "Well, I guess I'll use one of my bonus goodies to get myself the entire Hannibal series in HD, then."

Mary: "I'm sorry, but that's beyond the \$40 limit on Bonuses, even for winners like you."

Elisabeth: "Well, there goes my attempt at going off my usual beaten path. Just get me into my MemStore's PC gaming section, then."

Mary: "Sure thing!"

Elisabeth: "Anyways, I'll take... Hang on, take me to the RPG section, and let me see what's on sale."

Mary: "I think a couple of items on your wishlist are in there, although only 'Hearts and Minds: Prelude', 'Team Troika 3: Rising', and 'Nights of Azure 2' qualify."

Elisabeth: "Hm... You know what? I'll take 'Nights'. And I won't hide it in my profile's library, even though Rose will totally judge me for this decision."

Mary: "Alright, placed into your cart. Now, are you one hundred percent certain that you wish to use your Bonus for this?"

Elisabeth: "Yes, I am. Also, make sure to set the download to start once I reach my first block class and hook up to the school Wi-Fi."

Mary: "Okay, your receipt will be in your email soon, and the special location-and-time-based settings for this download have been applied. Now, it's almost 6:40. Don't you have a bus to catch in twenty minutes?"

Elisabeth: "Oh, crap. Okay, so my mask's filters should still be reasonably clean, and the only thing that's missing from my bag is the lapton..."

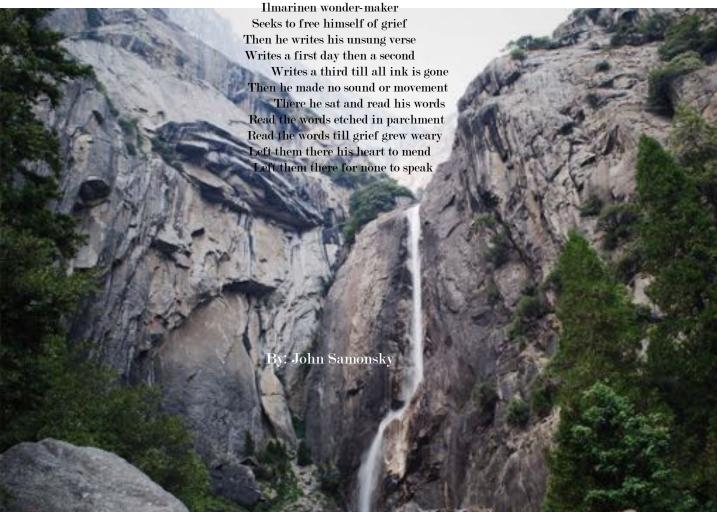
I End chapter with shot of slippers tossed near the couch and Elisabeth haphazardly shoving her laptop into the bagl

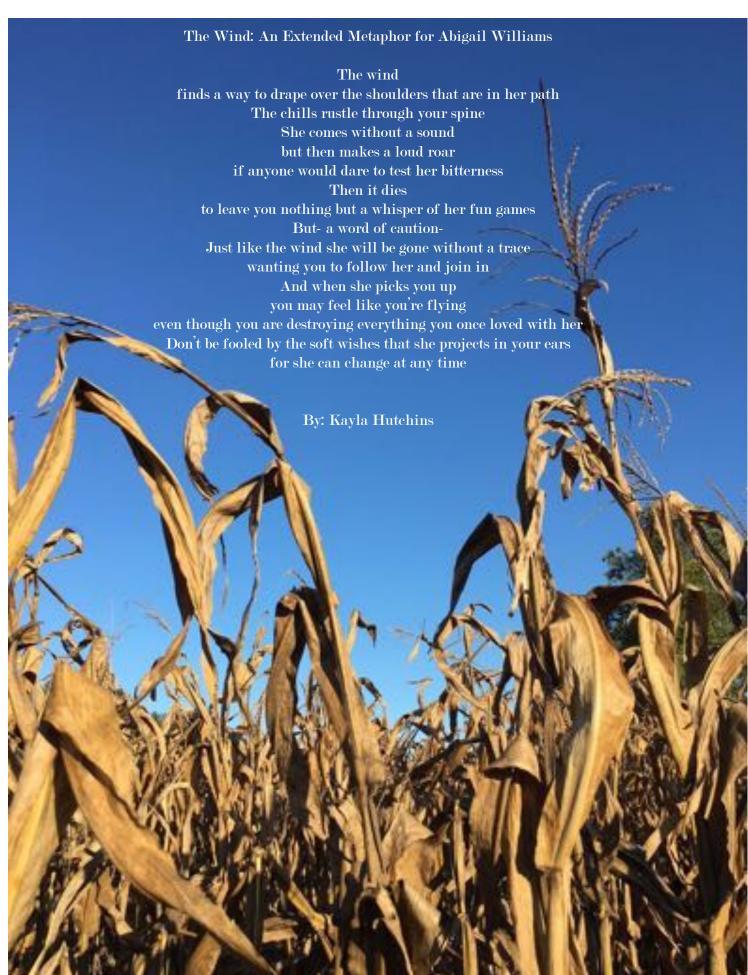
Mrs. Isacco-

"Words are, in my not so humble opinion, the most inexhaustible source of magic; capable of both inflicting injury and remedying it."

- Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter and the Death Hallows Part 2 movie (only - seriously, I've looked)

Kullervo slayed the rainbow maiden Slayed the beautiful rainbow maiden Struck her dead with frightful magic Ilmarinen finds the gruesome scene Hangs his head in grief and woe Cries a first day then a second Cries a third till eyes went dry Spoke no words his grief too heavy Stood and looked upon her body Looked at the maiden of pohjola Found no solace in his staring Ilmarinen then builds the cairn The place where now his wife shall rest Builds a first day then a second Builds a third till stones grew scarce There interns the rainbow maiden There he lays her down to rest Throws himself into his crafting Forges blades and kingly gifts Forges jewelry fit for faeries Finds no solace in his crafting Seeks revenge on dark kullervo Seeks across the tallest mountains Searches cross the hills and valleys Finds no trace of young kullervo Finds no trace of his wife's slayer His head held low in defeat His hall now brings not but sorrow





I am Lyleth, Goddess of Illusion and Deceit

By: Alyson Flora

The Goddess bows her head to the ground, allowing her hair to spill across the marble floor as the weight of his eyes press down upon her back.

"Lyleth," he calls, drawing her to her feet. Before her, he sits atop a familiar throne, his hands laced with rings and jewels and riches from the mortal world. He is not death, no, but the keeper of such, everything about him harshly defined, as if nothing more than skin stretched over blood and bone. There is no crown, no royal decree, but he is inarguably the King, ruler of the underworld.

"Don't waste my time," he says impatiently, "do you have a plan or not?" He slouches back in his seat, propping his feet against the arm of the throne.

"I do.'

"And?" he asks. His tinge of arrogance only causes her to pause longer, drawing an irritable glare in her direction.

"I say we take a human," she says finally, seeming to take him by surprise.

"Lyleth...

"Loved ones will cry out to the heavens until their mortal is returned," she explains, "it's the perfect plan if we ever expect to lure the higher Gods down to us."

"Do you really think a human hostage is a smart idea?"

"Theros I—"

"Don't call me that," he snaps. She's reminded herself a million times that he doesn't want that anymore, the sound of her voice on his name. She quickly corrects herself.

"My king," she continues, "we can't keep waiting around for them to show up on our doorstep... no heavenly being is going to come waltzing into the underworld, you know." Another good point. He clicks his rings together in thought.

"And you truly think this will draw the Gods to us?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Then go. Bring us back a mortal." And so she does.

The walls are white, the room is dim, and a bed sits in the corner, nestled underneath the glow of a window as it welcomes in the dawn. Though the floor is clean, the bedside table is cluttered by letters and pictures of a woman with her golden haired little girl. The light shimmers pink as it filters through the raindrop riddled glass, and moves as the window is pushed opened from the outside. Thomas, though lost within the magic of a dream, is awakened by the feeling of being watched. Opening his eyes, he spots her. Her beauty is unnatural and perfectly composed, the hem of her dress moving in the fashion of smoke. As her eyes gleam gold in his direction, he begins to wonder if the woman before him may be an angel.

"Do you fear me?" she asks him, taking a step closer.

"No." Suddenly, the floor begins to fall away, revealing a white light that glows from the depths of the gaping hole before him. A melodic chorus echoes from the light, pleasant voices laughing in the distance. Looking from the light to the angel, he supposes this must be heaven.

"Am I dead?" he whispers, staring off into the light. She does not respond, rather reaching out her hand in his direction.

"Follow me" she bids. Rising from his bed, Thomas places his hand in hers, and allows her to lead him toward the light. But just before they reach it, the mirage dissipates, melting instead into a fog of scarlet and inky black. Smiling, the Goddess of Illusion and Deceit tightens her grip, and pulls him down into the darkness below.

When the world around him finally comes into focus, Thomas finds himself rather far from home. The vast hall before him gleams of solid black marble, boasting an array of carvings and designs that are far too intricate, too precise, for any mortal hand to bear. Along these walls stand towering figures of white stone, Gods and Goddesses with their hands held out to the sky, holding up the ceiling just as pillars might. He moves, attempting to take a step, but something from behind pulls him back; his hands are bound to the wall.

"Don't seem so eager to leave," a voice calls, echoing down the length of the hall. It's the woman from before.

"You're not an angel after all," he replies, watching intently as she approaches.

"Quite the opposite really."

"A demon?" he asks, looking her up and down.

"Try for something more... powerful," she hints. His eyes widen.

"You're a God."

"Goddess," she corrects, kneeling down before him and revealing the rope within her hands. "Stay still," she mutters. He feels his ankles press together. It occurs to Thomas in this moment that despite the beauty of the Goddess, and despite the beauty of the room, whatever is about to occur is not as pretty. Yes, despite her beauty, there is something hollow in her voice, and the gleaming marble hall boasts more shadow than light. It is all empty; it is perfect and it is beautiful and it is empty.

"Look at me," she bids. And so he does. Staring into the gold of her eyes, he feels something change, as if a haze has befallen his mind. He watches as the Goddess falls out of focus. "Good luck," a voice calls from the distance. Eerie silence falls across the hall. Whether the wait is hours or seconds is unclear, but eventually, after time has passed, there is movement. The walls begin to stretch and contort, twisting like silk in the slow moving air, like an ocean pressed on by the wind. Thomas' eyes widen as the cause of the movement becomes clear; long grey arms reach out from the marble, clawing their way through. Suddenly, the great statues of the hall turn their heads to face him. Run, they whisper, run. He

pulls to get up, but the ropes hold him still. His heart races. The arms creep forward, reaching closer and closer as he struggles to free himself. The echoic voices of the statues overlap in chaotic urgency, begging him to get up, to escape, as if they too fear whatever is coming. But just as the statues, he cannot run, he cannot fight, he can only close his eyes. And so he does, And as he does, the room falls silent once more.

"Thomas?" a voice whispers.

"Get away from me," he mumbles, eyes remaining shut. Lyleth just shakes her head with a smirk. It only ever takes one of her illusions, one daylit nightmare, to instill an ever-present fear. Perhaps if humans weren't so soft, she would never have tortured Thomas like this. But alas, human pain often strikes in groups, aching in the hearts where the victim resides. Now that she has hurt Thomas, those who love him will know his pain, and they will cry out to the heavens with his name on their tongues. Soon, the heavenly Gods will hear of what's been done, and soon, the Gods will arrive.

It's clear something is wrong by the end of the third day. As Thomas shakes with fear on the cold of the floor, and Theros paces the length of the hall, the Gods have yet to arrive. Perhaps the rumours of humanity are untrue; perhaps loved ones cannot feel Thomas' pain after all. Lyleth, however, remains adamant that perhaps the torture is simply not yet enough, and so beside Thomas she sits, bidding him to open up his eyes.

"Never," he seethes, "never again. I know what your eyes can do, the way they force your nightmares through my mind."

"If you would just look at me," she lies, "I could make it all stop, I could h—"

"Until the day you set me free," he interjects, "my eyes will remain shut." The Goddess exhales in defeat, sitting herself down next to the mortal.

"Is it true," she whispers, "that humans can feel the pain of those they love?"

"Yes."

"Then why does no one cry for you? Why don't they send the Gods to your side?" At this, there is a long silence, a pause that pulls at Lyleth's heart without a spoken word. She should've seen it before, in his eyes, in the clutter of his bedside table, the way he stepped willingly into the light of heaven; his loved ones don't love him anymore. "Are they..."

"Dead?" he finishes. "No, just gone." They go silent once more.

"You deceived her, didn't you?" she asks suddenly. "The woman from the pictures?" Thomas nods, confusion crossing his face.

"Let's not forget what I'm Goddess of," she laughs, "I can tell when someone's like me." Her mind wanders to the empty throne of the throne room, and the harsh words that forbid her to call him anything but King. These are the things that deception can to do love. Looking back to Thomas, who still shakes from her illusions, she realizes what she must do.

"Open your eyes," she whispers. "Please. Just once more." And as if he can sense the sincerity in her voice, he complies, meeting her golden gaze with his. Slowly, the scenery around him changes, until Thomas finds himself somewhere warm, somewhere familiar; his room.

"Thomas?" a soft voice calls from behind. A smile spreads across his face. Spinning around he finds them, his wife and his golden haired little girl.

"Daddy!" the child exclaims, leaping into his arms. He kisses the top of her head, embracing her tightly as he looks up to her mother. He waits for the explosion of anger, the accusations of betrayal, the words of goodbye, but none of it ever comes. Instead, a softer tone greets him, a tone he's missed since the day it left.

"I forgive you," she says, "I forgive it all." A happiness that's evaded him for years comes flooding back as he pulls her close, sand-wiching their daughter in between. Suddenly, however, the floor seems to fall away, a bright light emanating from beneath their feet. "It's time for us to go," she tells him, pulling the little girl out of his arms.

"What? Why?"

"We love you," she calls, stepping into the glow of the light. A chorus rings in the distance, the sound of laughter gracing the air. "See you soon." And just as the illusion fades, Lyleth pushes it back into his mind, farther and farther, until it covers the old memory completely. As reality sets in for Thomas once more, he shakes his head in confusion.

"What were we talking about?" he asks.

"I asked you why nobody has sent the Gods to find you." Thomas pauses for a second, attempting to gather his thoughts. "Are they..."

"Dead?" Thomas finishes "Yes, they're dead, but they love me yet. Do with me what you must, Lyleth, for if I die, I'll be with my loves again." She smiles softly at the light in his eyes, and the glow that only forgiveness can bring. She knows that one day, Thomas will realize what she did, but for now, he knows only the illusion of love.

She prays to the heavenly Gods that he will never know the truth.

Ms. Morgenthaler-

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference."

-Robert Frost

Vacation

I think I might take a vacation. One filled with such grandeur, It may demand narration.

Take a trip to a space station Fulfill my starvation, My temptation.

Free my shrouded soul From this automation. At last, control!

At last, distinction! And I've been thinking, What am I beginning?

Maybe it's the end of a novel, But the start of a series, In a new city, In a new setting With a brand new mindset. I'm au courant
I've abolished my debt
I'm unfettered
And on an unmuted vacation.

This newfound rapture
Has brought pure ataraxia.
I'm free from the misoneistic,
The coprolaliacs with vacuous minds

Now with celerity,
My veins fill with mellifluous ichor,
My cacoëthes flicker
And have fallen
And the curtains close to a diapason of applause.

By: Divina Bhatia



Ms. Patrick-

"Things turn out best for the people who make the best of the way things turn out." -John Wooden

This quote reminds me to focus on the good in life. There is always something "good" to celebrate each and every day!

An Economics Joke

(Gross Domestic Product - money transferred) Based on Thoughts and Experiments of Nobel Prize Winning Economist, Richard Thaler

By Joshua Milliken

The basis of Economics
People are logical and rational.
It can be said by anyone
that people are neither.

A man saves his own to have enough money to buy. An illogical reason to own. Love found its guy. And now a car is owned. But his reasons were gone As statistics took hold But do not fret As our GDP has grown

His child's higher class was taught
To be the rational in their thought
Was one of an experiment
That gave them no sparement
Twenty-five students and twelve mugs
Distributed across an even plain
Leaving some with some and others none
No value in sentiment nor reason
Yet need by the the others to own
Despite no background known
Two dollars for a barter
Five at least to own
And now air is gold
But do not fret for the absence of known
As our GDP has grown

Their professor in logic Has fallen for his regard Thirty dollars max For a bottle of red or white His bottle of high, prices rise
And now ten is ten times more.
And now as his logic should go:
He sells them and gets what's earned
Except result are fraught
And over parties they are brought
And now the rational are mold
Probability must go

And here is the problem Over time many told A perfect example Of why you must know:

Two people, two friends Walk down a trail That is well not known A pile of dung A dare five-hundred to go The pile down through A legend told If not another occur To counter what's told The other swallows Five-hundred back transferred Two men swallowed whole With now no gained master But do not fret As our GDP has grown



Mina

By: Ananya Patri

Mina, sat on the cold, porcelain ground as she waited. It was seven forty five in the morning, and the sun hadn't risen yet. Mina worked for a rich family in the city, boarding there as well. Her family lived in the farmlands and they needed money, so naturally, she took the job. It paid well and the landlady was nice, but the work was unconventional.

Mina circled the room aimlessly, glancing at the clock from time to time. She was raised on the farm with her family of six, and Mina was the oldest at sixteen. She never had a proper education, helping on the farm when she was old enough, and now, sending back money from her job when she could. Mina glanced up from her space on the floor, her long dark hair brushing against the wall as she heard a door unlock from across the hall. Her landlady, Laura, walked towards her. The woman was ready for work, with a pleated skirt and a dark navy blouse. Her heels echoed against the porcelain ground as she walked towards Mina, her blue colored contacts gazing down the hallway.

"Mina, I'll be heading to work in an hour now," Laura informed her, "I have some errands for you to run, and I want you to write a thank you note to my dear friend, Lucy." Even from a few feet away, Mina could smell the hairspray wafting off of her stiff blonde hair. She just nodded in response, trying to suppress her fear as Laura made her way to the door. She opened it and turned back,

"You can wake Gemma up now, get her ready for the day."

Mina sighed and stood up, listening for the slam of the front door. Mina glanced at the paper in her hand, frowning at the jumble of grouped letters that she could never hope to understand. However sharp she may have been, Mina was constantly reminded of her illiteracy. She sighed, usually she was crafty enough to find a solution, or ask someone to read it to her, but the chores coupled with the task of actually writing something seemed impossible. Looking at the charcoal clock once more, she headed for the room adjacent hers, turning the key to the door. Once inside, Mina shook the sleeping girl awake, before guiding her to the table for breakfast, acutely aware of Gemma's mindless humming, her curly blond hair falling into her face. Gemma was twenty four, and while one might think she would be able to take care of herself at this age, circumstances were different for her. Gemma was severely autistic, which was why Laura had hired her. Mina was Gemma's primary caretaker and often never left her side, save for when she slept. As it was most days, Gemma had somewhere to go— sometimes it was a concert, or a theatre. This time it was a fundraising party Laura had been invited to by one of her colleagues.

Throughout the rest of the day, Mina entertained the older girl with easy word games and puzzles. The cook checked in at eleven and prepared lunch, which Mina fed to Gemma before eating herself. The cook was illiterate as well, and Mina was getting slightly desperate in her search for someone who could read. She dreaded to think what would happen if Laura found outno, that wouldn't happen, she had to find someone before Laura returned from work.

A few more hours passed before Gemma had to be dressed for the party. Mina was used to this lifestyle; she seldom complained, and did what she was told, simply because it was easy. Mina knew she could never get a real job at a bank or an accounting firm for the sole reason that she never went to school, so really, this job was a blessing. A blessing she feared she might soon lose for her lack of reading skills.

An hour before Laura was to get home, Mina was getting desperate, and so, with tea in one hand, and a fresh sheet of paper in the other, Mina grabbed a newspaper from the shelf and settled herself on the ground. She didn't know what she was doing, but she had to at least try she told herself. For the next hour, Mina tried to trace the arbitrary shapes from the paper, but the effort was of course futile since she couldn't read what she was writing.

Of course, Mina wasn't one to give up, but even she knew when something was unattainable. She couldn't keep repeating the same thing that shen knew wouldn't work. At the moment though, there were more pressing matters to attend to, like Gemma's hair which the girl had undone in the past fifteen minutes.

Mina was placing a navy blue satin ribbon in Gemma's hair as Laura walked in, shadowed by the chauffeur who flashed Mina a smile before getting back to ready the car. Mina tried to smile back but stood up as Laura approached, her heart was thudding in her chest, so fast it could have competed with the tempo of Beethoven's twenty third sonata.

Laura ignored the servant girl, instead taking her daughter by the hand,

"How was your day, Gemma?"

"Good." Gemma responded absentmindedly, she was humming another song.

Laura smiled almost pleasantly and Mina felt sick.

Finally, Laura turned to Mina, "Did you finish your errands?"

Mina opened her mouth, surprised when no words came out. She snapped it shut and consented for a quick shake of her head. Laura was perplexed, "You mean to tell me... you didn't finish your chores?"

Mina shook her head again, this time staring at her shoes. Her heart wasn't beating as fast anymore, instead it was her stomach that dropped as she knew the inevitable.

"Mina, you know as well as anyone what happens when you don't finish the work given to you."

"Yes," was all she could get out.

Laura opened her mouth again, but before she could speak, Gemma lifted her head, "She can't read."

Mina felt her face get hot once again as she quickly averted her gaze the the one floor tile that was slightly bluer than the others. "Is that so." Laura drew out the words and Mina didn't know exactly what to make of her conclusion, "well, I guess Gemma and I must be off now." Laura said, guiding her daughter to the car. Mina followed behind them, stopping at the door and watching as the chauffeur drove off, down the road and out of sight.

By almost midnight, Mina sat in the living room, staring lazily at the patterns imprinted in the wallpaper and didn't hear the door opening. She didn't see the chauffeur doing her job and guiding Gemma to her room. She didn't even notice Laura until the woman was standing in front of her, blonde curls stationary with hair spray. Finally, Mina looked up. Laura was smiling, "I met someone at the fundraiser, Mina."

Mina didn't exactly care, but it wasn't her place to say so, "Yes, Madam?"

"He's a school teacher.'

"Oh." It was then that she noticed that Gemma had been put to sleep and she was alone in the room with Laura.

"He is willing to come here."

Mina just nodded, too tired to comprehend. Part of her wondered if Laura had found her second husband, or maybe this man was going to replace her, as Gemma's caretaker. Unfortunately, the latter seemed more plausible. It made sense that Laura wouldn't want Mina anymore. She had found someone better in the educator. Gemma was too disabled to go to a regular school, so to Mina it made perfect sense that the man would teach her and double as her new caretaker. Laura could certainly afford him, and the more Mina thought about it, she somehow knew she'd be out of a job soon,

"He is?" Mina asked, trying to make Laura's job of firing her easier.

"Oh, yes."

Mina nervously fiddled with a loose string from her dress, her heart was beating so loudly in her ears that she almost didn't hear Laura's next words: "He will teach you since you didn't go to school."

Mina started, eyes widening, "What?"

"How did you expect to get an actual job? You didn't think you'd work for me the rest of your life, did you?"

Mina hadn't put much thought into that, "Yes, but, why? How can I repay you?"

Laura smiled daintily, "Think of it as part of your salary."

Mina didn't know what to say; she couldn't even understand that this was happening to her. Somehow, a freedom she'd only dreamt of was now within reach. One way or another, she had known she would soon be out of this job, but it had never once occurred to her that it could be a good thing.



The Third Child

By: Christian Due

When I was small, I remember my parents surrounding me with love and care. I remember them giving me anything I needed, paying whatever necessary price for my private tutors. I was the jewel of their eyes.

"Just wait," Mother said, "until he reveals his magic. It'll be any day now, I'm sure."

That day never came.

"Let Anwell carry that," Mother said, waving her hand at me. My brother Tiernay dropped the canvas bag near my feet, as Father led the family into the castle.

The servants of the castle emerged and began to carry the family's luggage. One tall servant beckoned to me, "May I take that, sir?" I kindly refused. Father didn't let anyone handle the family's magical supplies. That was a job for the family's only ordinary child. My three older siblings and my parents all had powerful magic. As the third child born on in the third month of the year, my parents once had high hopes for me.

We entered the great hall of the castle, and my breath caught. The high, stone walls soared in great arches, with colorful flags streaming from them. At the dais, Duke Cedric and Duchess Rowena sat down, overlooking the hall. Courtiers bowed as they sat.

Suddenly Father stopped, and Mother beside him, and Tiernay and Keelia behind them. I nearly tripped and pushed them. Mother glared at me; I clenched my fists and looked down.

"Your graces, may I present Finnbar of Northwood and family, mages of King's court." The family, myself included, bowed to the duke. He nodded regally, his flaxen hair combed neatly under a ridiculous feathered hat. Duchess Rowena smiled at Father.

"Well met, sir," the duke said. His speech was rich, that of gentry. "I have heard many things of you. All that follow you, are mages such as yourself...?"

My father bowed. "Indeed, my lord, allow me to introduce my fair wife Alene and our children Keelia and Tiernay, both mages-intraining. Duke Cedric smiled and inspected each family member; finally his eyes rested on me, quite clearly part of the group but not notable enough to be acquainted with the duke. Face flushed, I looked down immediately. The duke, though seemingly understanding, looked away.

"I thought that you had three children."

Father followed the duke's questioning eyes. "Ah, yes, and our son Anwell." I bowed low, not daring to meet Duke Cedric's eye. "He acts as assistant to our magical family." He didn't mention that I possessed no magic, but the intent was as if he had shouted it to the whole castle: no mage, at age seventeen, would be an assistant. An apprentice, perhaps—the word assistant clearly pointed out my deficiency, as Mother called it. The duke greeted me kindly, and I returned the greeting, quietly and ashamedly, though not shyly.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, at our urgent request. You'll be shown to your rooms now, and join us for dinner later, if you don't mind," said Duchess Rowena, in a voice that clearly said we'd better not mind the clear dismissal or the dinner invitation. That night, dressed in fine silk tunics and hose, we were shown the way to the castle's dining hall. The hall was giant, with large tables running down the length of the room, and the noble's table was raised on a dais. Duke Cedric, of course, sat at the head of the table. He smiled as the family joined them, although he took care not to look at me. I was used to it. It was clear, when I was ten, that I had no magical abilities. The "royal" treatment had ended then. All good things come in three, legend says. Maybe not.

"Surely His Majesty spoke of why we need you."

"Indeed. A bit of trouble with the drought recently, isn't it?" asked Father.

"Small fires have started in the fields," the duke said. "We fear that it will turn into a forest fire soon, which will endanger the farms and nearby villages." I dug into the chicken. Weren't forest fires part of the natural cycle of the forest? I knew that they were needed to clear out the dead underbrush. My parents, despite their disappointment in my lack of magic, had arranged for me to be taught as most nobles or mages are taught. However, unlike my siblings, I wouldn't be attending a wizard's university.

"Is that all? We can stop that easily." Mother gestured to Tiernay. "My son is especially gifted with fire magic, but together we can surely stop the fire."

"You also need to relieve the drought, if you will."

"What's causing the drought?" I asked somberly.

"We think that it might have been caused by the river dam," he informed us. "Several years ago we dammed the river that flows through the region, so that we could create a lake by the castle. This way, the water's more accessible."

"That must be a cause, of course. I would know," Tiernay agreed.

"My lord," I started, catching Mother's eye, "could you remove the dam?"

"It's been beneficial to us," he said, waving his hand towards the dining hall. Everyone in the castle feasted below us. "Why remove the dam if you can remove the fire?"

"Indeed." Mother smiled. "Anwell, don't trouble yourself over that. Let us mages handle it, and you can return to whatever it is you're learning."

The next morning, news came from a nearby farm that several trees in the southern forest had caught on fire. The duke immediately called for all of us—though my parents had made it quite clear that I would have nothing to do with stopping the fire—and he arranged a great party of gentry, knights, and most importantly, food.

We set up camp in an old corn patch. The drought had done its damage here already. Across the clearings of grass, I saw that small patches of fire had started. It was my only chance to convince them not to do this. Sure, I was fearful, but I mustered up the courage to do what was needed.

"Father, Mother, you shouldn't do this. Everyone knows the dangers of creating storms out of midair, and changing climate patterns, and if you do this you'll regret it."

"We don't intend to create any storms," Father said. "We'll stop this fire with force."

"Wait!" I yelled. "You can't just fight the fire like that. Forest fires are needed to—"

"Anwell, hush," Mother commanded. "Don't bother us now." She closed her eyes and linked hands with my siblings. The fire crackled in the distance. Father raised his free hand.

"Stop. You don't know what you're doing!" I planted myself in front of my father.

"Don't you think I know more about magic than you do?" he growled. "I appreciate your concern, but I've warned you, never mess with mages when they are casting spells." He pushed me out of the way. My hands clenched.

"Listen to me, please! Terrible things happen when you mess with the forces of nature. I don't have any magic, but I've studied this," I pleaded.

The family released hands, and all together, they raised them up. All but one. Keelia stepped back. A blue dome of fire appeared around Father, Mother, and Tiernay. My brother looked to his side, and gasped. "Keelia, what are you doing?"

She shook her head, turning to me. "I believe you, Anwell." I stared at her. She was in earnest. After all, with the blue shield up, she couldn't rejoin them. "What do we do?"

"No magic here, first of all." We watched as our father shouted out the words of power, as one fire sputtered out. The noon sun beat down on us all. "People like them caused this. Using magic on the fire will only make it worse." Sweat rolled down Father's face as he stopped another fire. Mother's face gleamed with triumph. "We need to warn the village. Once the fire is started, it won't stop for any mage."

Ignoring the duke's protests, I swung myself up onto his horse, and helped my sister up.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Rowena asked angrily.

"Saving your people," I snapped. "They need to evacuate the town, before the fire comes." From across the field, Father shouted gleefully. The forest glowed orange no more.

"See? Quite easy," he said. "There was nothing to be worried about. No fire can resist the—"

An explosive sound rocketed through the clearing. In the distance, red flared. The inferno roared with fury.

"What happened? Why is the forest on fire?!" Duchess Rowena demanded to know.

"Go now," the duke quietly told me. I forced the horse on, galloping parallel to the fire. It quickly jumped from tree to tree, spreading east. "How did you know?" Keelia asked me.

"All the old texts say it's dangerous to meddle with nature," I replied. "First the duke dammed the river, to create a lake, which partially caused this drought. Now all those haughty wizards think they're powerful and wise enough to influence those powers. I'm glad you saw better."

"I almost didn't." She sighed. "You know, I don't agree with them, when they are ashamed of you. Magic isn't everything."

I felt freed, I realized. Not just by her words, but by the fact that I was taking action for myself. None of my parents' shallow reflections mattered. It didn't matter that I had no magic at all. Magic causes as many problems as it solves, anyway.

After what seemed like an eternity, we reached the village. The villagers, coughing from smoke, didn't appear that alarmed.

"Everyone! We need to leave," I yelled. Some of the villagers looked my way. One blacksmith scratched his bushy beard and moved closer. "Why?! His Grace sent word that mages were handling the situation," the blacksmith told me.

"The fire has—" I coughed on smoke. "It's out of control!" Ahead I heard the sound of a tree falling. Faint crackling reached my ears. "Evacuate!"

By now I had attracted more villagers. "Quick, everyone! Get all your family members. We need to go now!" Keelia yelled.

"Lead those that are here to the castle," I commanded. "I'll make sure everyone's out of the village. The fire's almost here." Keelia nodded, then paled. I looked. The conflagration had reached the outer edges of the village. Its wicked tongues flickered.

Smoke drifted towards us all. I dismounted, giving the horse to Keelia. Frantically, I ran through the village, yelling for anyone left. The flames leaped onto a cottage and hissed.

There was nobody in the village. Assured that I wasn't leaving anyone in danger, I too ran out. Burning trees fell down all across the village. I yelled as I ducked past a burning log, crashing to the ground behind me.

Finally, I reached the others. We all regrouped and headed to the castle. It appeared that the duke and his party had returned there.

"Thank you, Anwell," the duke said. "It is thanks to your quick thinking and determination that all of our villagers escaped in time. I think I speak for everyone when I say we are indebted to you." He bowed to me. I bowed back, not embarrassed this time. I deserved to be proud of myself. Meanwhile, my parents and Tiernay moved forward.

My father took a deep breath. "Son, I'm very sorry for the way I treated you today. I was rash and... well, there's no excuse."

"We should have listened to you." Mother put in. "But... clearly, magic isn't everything. And, I think we've judged you too harshly in that category. I smiled. I knew that things between us would get better eventually. Time would heal old wounds, and hopefully, heal the damage that magic did. For the time being, I would be a hero. I also knew that my lack of magic didn't define me at all; and I would never be disappointed in that again.

Ms. Pietrucha-

"Anything worth doing is worth doing well."

"A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way"



Ms. Seaton- "Do. Or do not. There is no try." Yoda from Star Wars.

This has been my mantra in the way I live my life and also as a counselor. I want students to know they can do whatever they put their mind to. I don't want them to say they can't.



Mr. Copen-

"Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans." - John Lennon

Life is difficult. Acceptance of that fact makes life a whole lot easier. . . . (That's another quote I heard somewhere.)

