

FICTION / CREATIVE NON-FICTION / POETRY / VISUAL ART



MARIPOSA LITERARY RE-
VIEW

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who participated and assisted in the creation of this year's Mariposa Literary Review journal. Special thanks to our creative and technical contributors.

Literary Design Winner

The Adobe Indesign students are given the challenge of creating individual designs for the issue. The committee may choose one design or combine designs to create the book. One student was selected this year for his creative and colorful design. Congratulations **Christian Vazquez**.

Mariposa Literary Review Committee: Erin Blomstrand, Analicia Buentello, Rod Freeman, Joel Arthur, Jimmy Fike, Alex Pompa, Linda Keyes

A special thank you to the instructor of the Adobe Indesign class, Jim Heinrich.

Awarding Judge Bio

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A DISTURBANCE AT SUNRISE

Ezekial Abreu

Feels as though not much time passes through here. As if I'm stuck here wasting away, while all of life passes by me, incapable of keeping up the pace of it. Time forever at a standstill at this tiny brick house. The coats of paint slowly chipping away with the movement of the hour hand. Nothing left but memories of those who once called this home and a shell of an old man, long since passed his prime. Sitting down on his once mother's favorite chair, he eats his lasagna while watching whatever late-night show is broadcasting. After that he stands washing his dishes by hand, helps pass the time on by. Fresh lemon zest soap he uses, scrubs the dishes good while giving them a sweet and sour scent. He walks roughly ten feet from the kitchen to his room, becoming somewhat of a chore to do now. There in his room he sits on the bed, causing gigantic creaking sounds, tilting the bed slightly down on its right side. Removing his glasses, setting them by the counter side, he turns off the lamp. There he lies in complete silence only broken by the whooshes of the creaky old fan above him. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, in rhythm with the blinking of his eyes as he finally dozes off.

I asked for only two scoops, but the guy gave me three saying the extra scoop was on the house. Wasn't the first time some guy did a "nice" gesture for me because of my looks. Certainly, won't be the last anytime soon. How on earth am I going to finish three scoops of rocky road, cookies and cream, and birthday cake ice cream? Maybe Donna will help me eat half of this galactic proportioned ice cream. Why on Earth did I decide to go out into town? I know absolutely nothing about this small shack of a town. Whatever doesn't matter I won't be for much longer anyways. As I'm walking through town, I notice I pass the same ice cream shop sign. The faded baby blue and sunshine yellow lettering, with a cartoon pig eating a bowl of plain chocolate ice cream. A small memento of a long-forgotten past.

Perhaps that ice cream shop is a very popular chain? Anyways can't think of that right now I got to make it back to my aunt's place before they all start to worry about me. The ice cream now spewing out of the cup like soda out of a soda fountain. Once again, I pass by the same ice cream shop sign.... perhaps I am lost. Okay, okay, no need to freak out I'm not lost I just been walking around in a circle that's all. No need to panic, I'm fine, I'm just lost in a small rink dink town I know nothing about, and I'm a 17-year-old girl.

Each further step seems more and more frantic as I watch some new girl pace around the streets. If I had to take a wild guess, I would say she is lost, most people passing by Sunrise tend to do that. I'll never understand why, with many of them being city folk. I can't imagine life in the city, now that's a place that would make sense to get lost all the time. But a small town? Now that seems farfetched, everybody here is friendly, they'd all be happy to help a visitor. Which reminds me I should go help this clueless girl.

A strange boy came to me and said, "Howdy there." There was a loud, "AH!!", screaming embarrassingly. "Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry I didn't mean to startle you like that.", the boy said kindly. Feeling bad I asked him cautiously what he wanted, "If you're here for cash I don't have any alright." Chuckling, nearly falling to his knees, "Well that's certainly a response I wasn't expecting. Is that how you treat every stranger you meet?" Playing off him, "Yeah but only the real creepy stalker types you know." Agreeing along he says, "Ah yes plenty of those around this town." Pausing, "Wait really?", with him laughing at me. "Yeah, don't worry there aren't any, well that we don't know of at least.", he commented. "The name's Nathan.", he says putting his hand out for a shake. Hesitantly

I put out my hand, "Grace, the name's Grace." Angelically he says, "Grace... now that's a real beautiful name." Slightly shocked by his blunt boldness, "Well aren't you a real smooth talker, how old are you 10?" Sarcastically he says, "Just can't help but to say what's on my mind. And I'm 16, what are you 20?" In a louder tone I say, "Twenty?! I'm hoping that's another complement, but I'm 17." Now furthering his sarcasm, "Well 17-year-old Grace, how'd you get lost?" As if he had see-through vision, "I-I am not lost... just taking a shortcut is all." Breaking down in laughter he says, "A shortcut you say, so I take it you don't need my help to show you where to go then. Well, I suppose I'll be on my way then." Slightly panicked, "Wait!", I say, "Perhaps if you were to point me in a certain direction, I would consider following your words."

Grace isn't that much smaller than I am. She must be around the ballpark of 5'7, taller height than most of the women in this town. Her tan clear skin, you'd think she was a child superstar with how she looks. Her voice being quirky and sly, think I've become addicted to the harmony of it. I tell her, "So where are you heading?", trying to be helpful. She says embarrassingly, "Well I'm trying to find my way back to my aunt's place. Jenny, Aunt Jenny, as if you couldn't tell this is my first time being here." Sarcastically, "Oh I couldn't tell. And is her name Jenny Smith?" With her shocked expression, "Yeah, she's from my mom's side of the family. How do you know that?" Surprised myself, "Coincidentally I work for her, well I work for a lot of people, but I do work for her." With a skeptical look she remarks, "And what is it you do for my aunt?" Reassuringly I say, "I tutor her middle school daughter Donna, which I guess means I tutor your cousin. Seemingly I see her shoulders relax, as she seems to become more trusting of me. She then goes on to ask gently if I could take her home. Which I happily oblige in.

It's getting close to sunset now; all the shops start their closing routines. Closing all the blinds, wiping down all the tables clean, and sweeping the dirt outside. The town tends to get quiet at night, not like a large city where traffic never stops. Time comes at a standstill between the hours of seven pm through seven am. Perhaps that's why I read in brochures that our city is considered one of the most 'boring'. Whatever that means, just goes to show the lack of imagination people have. As we're walking, I steal quick glances of her side profile, I hope I'm not coming off as a creep. I mean wow, just wow, can't even conjure up any words right now I'm genuinely struck in awe of her. Being in such a small town you get to become familiar with everyone so it's always a pleasant surprise to see a new, especially one like hers'. Crap think she noticed me staring, I mean glancing by. "Uh so what brings you to this small side of town?", I say to break the awkward ice.

Getting a better look of him I would say he wasn't terrible looking, "My mom believes I need to be with my family more. That I need to experience this side of the country before I start my senior year.", answering his question. Slightly taken a back, "So, you're a senior now?" Correcting him, "Well next month I will be one yes. What about you?" Commenting he says, "Junior, I go to Sunset High, the only high school we have here." Taken a back I ask, "Wait a minute, your school is called Sunset, in a town called Sunrise? Am I hearing you correctly?" Laughing he says, "Yeah, the founders of this town weren't all that creative I know. But the names fit. The sunrise here is truly breathtaking, its honestly all we got here. You ought to see it, even an uptown girl like yourself would agree." I laugh along, uptown girl, I think in my head. I notice his quick glances at me, he's not as clever as he thinks he is. Boys just can't help but make it obvious, but this town boy has certainly caught my attention. "I ought to see it town boy.", I say mockingly. In a reinsuring tone, "It really is something you must see no bull. You have my full honesty when it comes to that." I continue to follow the path he's taking us on, as we both talk

more to each other the gap between us begins to shrink like a shriveled up rose. Not being much taller than myself, I'd have to say he's about 5'9, perhaps even 5'10. Though I never really cared much about that sort of stuff, well to be perfectly honest I've never cared much about guys before. Though I'd be lying if I said I was thoroughly enjoying my time with Nathan. A part of me wishes we won't end up at my aunt's place. Then there I see my ticket out of that predicament.

As we're walking, I feel the slightest tug on my button up blue shirt. Turning back, I see Grace point out to the nearby swing set. The set being older than my father, I say sure why not. We walk up, I wipe off her seat and bow down as if I were bowing for a queen. She laughs along saying, "Well aren't you quite the gentleman." I say, "I have my moments now and then. You can blame it on my father he was the one who taught me all I need to know." As we start to do a snail's pace swing, she asks, "And what is your wise father doing now?" Trying my best not to bring down the mood I say hesitantly, "Not much of anything anymore. He's been gone for some time now." Noticing the slight pain in my words, "Oh I'm sorry I had no idea.", she says comfortingly. "Hey, it's nothing, it's an old wound now. I'm not my mother she's never gotten over it. You can tell, she'll never let me go that one let me tell you." I add on, "She can be overbearing sometimes but her hearts in the right place it's just that." I pause, "I just want more out of life... I want to get out of this town one day but with her she'd have a panic attack if I even bring up that thought around her." Grace puts her hand on my shoulder, "Look Nathan, no one can put that burden on anyone, especially people of our age. It's too much even for a full-grown adult." Looking down at the pointy jagged wood chips, "Thank you. Ah man I'm sorry to bring down the mood with all that. I'm sorry in putting out my dirty laundry to you." In an excited tone, "No, no, worries at all. I'm all ears Nathan, I think it's good you're letting all that out. I mean I can relate in a way, only that I feel like my mother is counting down the days till I'm out of the house." Now both of us laughing at our own ridiculous issues. This is a nice feeling I thought, for the first time I don't feel so alone.

We spent what felt like hours talking about our lives and the hopes for the future. Our connection growing stronger than steel. The sun is setting now, deep purples fill the horizon as the stark streaks of ruby red dies down. The stars light up the town, living in a city means you never get to see them this clearly. I must say they are truly breathtaking. Nathan says looking up, "The stars are truly beautiful aren't they." I turn to look at his profile, "Yes they are." As he then turns his eyes to me. We both stare deeply into one another, seeing each other's pain, both our longings. Instead of bottling them up we embrace each other. The chirps of bugs can only be heard, the quiet hummers of the few cars driving by the static of the bulbs in the streetlights. A moment frozen in time, a memory that can never be forgotten. Before anything further can happened, he stops to say, "Think it might be time to take you back home before the both of us get into any more trouble." As he gets off the swings, I quickly grab his hand. He jerks back for a moment to look at me, then his shocked expression turns into a gentle smile. He helps me off the set as our hands glue to each other. We head off to my aunt's small two-bedroom townhouse. Where all the houses in the neighborhood are one in the same. All of them being identical twins doesn't stop Nathan from knowing which one is which.

There we both come to our destination with each other. A moment that is more tragic than I would have ever dreamed it being. I ask, "So when are you going back home?", I say with slight pain. "Sadly, the end of this week I return back home", Grace says with newfound tragedy behind

her words. I pause thinking of each word I say, "How about we see each other tomorrow? I mean of course if you're not busy at all." Without much thought at all she responds, "I'd love to!", she says barely holding back her excitement. Smiling like an idiot I say, "Perfect, what time works best for you?" She thinks for a moment, "Hope does four o'clock sound to you?" Quickly I tell her, "I'll be here at four right on the dot, not a second longer." Her smile being priceless in its beauty, "You better keep your promise there town boy." Gently I say, "I won't disappoint." I look back after I walk her to the front porch, "You have a wonderful night, Grace.", I say earnestly. She runs towards me embracing me in a tight hug, "You as well, Nathan." We hold each other for what we wish was all of time. I can feel the rhythmic beat of her heart, its rushing fast, as her breath runs faster. We let go slowly, as our hands meet once more. I wave goodbye as she says, "I'll be seeing you tomorrow town boy." Giving a wink goodbye, she enters in the house as I start to walk away. With the largest grin anybody on earth has ever had.

The old man wakes back up and starts his morning routine. He gets in the steaming hot shower, painting up the mirrors. Afterwards he brushes his teeth with minty fresh toothpaste. Then starts up a cup of hot black coffee as he watches the morning news. Nothing ever happy seems to be on the news, only whatever crazy new war goes on in the streets. He butters up his golden-brown crispy toast. As he prepares to head off to work, he pauses to look at an old picture of his. The frame contains a picture of two young teenagers, embracing each other with smiles. The old man's-tired face turns that into gentle warmth, as he heads out, putting down the worn down frame on the faded cracked dresser. The picture that of Nathan and Grace's first date.



SOBRIETY

Starla Dahmen

This isn't what she thought their relationship would be in the beginning,
The man she had first met had been slowly disappearing.
She believed in him, he seemed an honest individual,
She believed their love they had was something unconditional
The decline started small, extended bathroom trips
If confronted at all he was prepared with plenty of quips.
Having no reason not to believe him, she tried to help in any way
He had her believing she was helping keep his demons away
AA no longer a point of interest for him, it was full of cliques he said
Him now thin and dirty, she found herself feeling off in her head
For their love's sake, she lived in crippling anxiety
All for his show of false sobriety
He was gone for long hours during the day
Soon she couldn't trust anything he'd say
Not a day later he'd run off with her wallet
She hated it, "I knew I should have called it"
"I'm struggling but sober,
Please don't tell me it's over"
It wasn't him though, could hardly tell it was him
She knew he was the reasons her thoughts got so grim
She was starting to weed through the lies and such
She was beginning to wiggle out of his clutch
From the bathroom she smelt his burning pill
He left black prints on the windowsill
Keeping his used tinfoil under the sink
The whole house started to stink
Whenever she tried to call him out
The two of them would fight and shout
He'd insult her intuition; and make her feel so small
It made her wonder if he ever loved her at all.



Last Stop

Adan Cortina

SAFETY AND FAMILY

Jessica Decker

White tiles and bright light flashed behind closed eyes, the hefty weight of the blanket above a body, tense and breathing heavily. The tiles are even and smooth and all is quiet. Small noises chased as the body glided with purpose. For a while, nothing really happens and all that is changing is the crescendo of beeping and-

Your body jerked awake, lifting just slightly and, arm reaching slowly to the end table, turn the phone and hit snooze. Silence. You let your phone drop with a small thump to the wooden table as you lie back against your pillows, letting the heavy lids flutter shut. Surely a minute or two would be fine.-

The insistent and rising tone of the annoying alarm clock saying otherwise, you huff and turn that one off shortly after, shuffling about to get ready. With a final touch of a lanyard around the neck and you slipped down the small hallway, past the long and yellow table and a reassuring pat to the old statue.

One uneventful drive later and through the sliding doors, you greet the redheaded manager with a bright smile and she sends a customer service voice hello. Down the long pathway, through the toy aisle, insert a code, put stuff down, grab the water bottle and go again before slipping to your post.

It isn't until an hour later when your smile loosens and your shoulders begin to untense. Passing customers the normal pleasantries and directing them to the right place; and short conversations between them and coworkers alike, while still organizing and placing returned clothes onto the larger cart. You'd often tell your work family that the work isn't too hard and just took up time. Christmas was coming. That was the only reason why you could understand why you had to shut the fitting rooms down but two hours into your shift? With a saddened voice you call out to those still in the fitting rooms that they had five minutes until they would close. While they were not happy about it, as you return to face the front of the store, you're met with what could only be described as the queue. Shaking your head, you walk to the boys room with febreze and wash the handles, grabbing stray hangers. It isn't for another ten minutes that you find yourself back to that first hour again, now filling crinkling bags.

At some point, your throat starts to hurt so you stop conversing and instead stay quiet except when calling the next customer.

"I'm home." You called out as you stepped through the doorway.

"Shut the damn door!" Your feet felt heavy as you shut it, stepping further into the house. As you do so, you hear them continue their conversation.

"I don't want to hear it, Ron."

"Don't you want to stay informed! I'm helping you!"

"I can't help being informed when it's all you ever talk about!"

"I never get any respect around here-"

"I don't want to-" You shut the door as silently as you could, and began taking off your boots. Shutting your eyes and sitting still as you could hear them from the thin walls.

"Hey, hey, HEY!" the masculine voice sounded with a laugh. "You can get to that later!" From one topic to another, before it all went back to the original conversation.

Finally moving, you pull out your phone and call your boyfriend.

"Not tonight." Raw and gross.

“Tomorrow?” You hated the way his voice came out.

You start picking at your arms, “Yeah, sure.” But you didn’t really know.

“No take backs?” Nodding, you whispered a hesitant promise.

“No...Take backs.”

Time went by quickly. Too quickly. So quickly you briefly forgot where you were. Then you were home, waiting for him to arrive with your parents.

...

“Hey mom, I’m going to Sage’s house. I’ll text you when I get there!” A soft smile broadened as she turned to me and wished me a safe trip. Nervously, I turned and buckled the bouquet in the passenger seat and started my gps.

A couple of turns later and I was parked in a driveway. Sitting and thinking through what I’d have to say. Climbing out from my car, I carefully held the flowers, twisting and turning them before taking a deep breath, lifting my hand. Knocking three times, I stepped back, mindful of where I stood on the porch.

I grinned as Sage opened the door halfway, “Hey!” His smile was all teeth, eyes trailing to his feet and not opening the door much further. A short glance back into my direction was sent before he refocused onto the ground again.

“Hey, uh, Calvin? Sorry that wasn’t supposed to-uh. Come in.” Pulling the door toward him, he stepped aside, holding his hand out to me. I gladly took it.

“Thanks! Here, I brought-,” My words crumbled in my throat. The walls were light brown, a couch and love seat to the side in what was their living room, a yellow table sitting across the entryway. I guess Sage’s parents were minimalists? Quickly straightening up, I tried again. “Got you some flowers.” He took them by the leaves; his lips now covering most of his teeth.

“Thank you...I was just helping set the table, so...” Giving him a hug, I let him walk me to the table and watched as he got what was needed as his mom was possibly finishing up something on the stovetop. As the chair squeaked across the floor, she turned to me.

“Oh, you must be Calvin right?” She walked over, pressing her hand out to me. After a good shake, she continued, “It’s so nice to meet one of Tiffany’s friends. We try to get her to invite them over more often, but you all always seem so busy! Really, I was worried she didn’t have any friends and was just lying to me!” Her tone rose a bit on those last six words. Weird, we’d all been busy including Sage.

“Yeah, it’s nice to finally meet you Miss! Yeah, all these holidays sure do keep us busy! I’ve been wanting to visit for a while but our schedules never seemed to match up.” Sage’s mom shook her head with a wave of her hand.

“Please, don’t call me Miss. Makes me feel older than I am, call me Laura.” She paused, “Dinner will be ready soon, please, by all means, don’t let me stop you from sitting.” She walked back into the kitchen without waiting for a response.

Plopping down into the chair, I let my eyes wander. The floorplan for the dining room, kitchen and livingroom were pretty open with a decent hallway with a china hutch on my left before reaching the front door. Still on the left of the house were the brownish loveseat and couch, a large flat screen against the wall. Noticing my right had nothing but a chair and a wall I turned my gaze to the kitchen. The counters were an orangish brown with what looked like gray marble as the countertops, a standard black fridge, a white but old looking oven, an island with the same design as the counters, a dishwasher-

er that matched the fridge, and cupboards with yellowish handles. Assured that I'd seen all that the scenery could give, I let my head rest against the cool table a moment and shut my eyes.

Sluggishly opening them after a minute, I froze. There, in the middle of the table sat something gray and solid. Lifting my head up, I studied what looked like a sculpture. The sculpture was about two feet tall and made from stone, hands stretched eerily to the cross at its back, chunks roughly taken from its stomach and arms like someone meant to deform it. In place of ears, the humanoid thing had candles with small saucers beneath it, and upon getting closer to look, saw what had to be stains of something red and clunky. Beneath the unsightly naked man draped over private parts held an inscription in latin. Say that phrase looked familiar-

"Who the hell are you?" Jumping and pushing the chair backwards a bit, I turned to face a man with a black mustache and camo hat. Gulping, I tried to force out a greeting.

"Hello, Sir. My name's Cal-" He cut me off.

"Why are you in my house." Was that supposed to be a question or is he aware and just being rude?

"Well, Sir, I'm dating ," As I start to speak I try to figure out what to call Sage with his father standing over me and settle, "Tiffany and was invited to eat dinner with you." He whirled around on Sage's mom.

"Why am I always the last one to know about things?" She didn't turn away from what she was doing.

"You didn't ask, Ron." Laura sounded jovial. Tuning out for a bit, I focus on my boyfriend. He was cutting up some tomatoes. Possibly for a salad. Over all the noise I saw it. Sage's eyes were strictly downcast, seemingly focused on the task at hand. I watched him as he set them down on the table and realized almost everything was ready. As he began to straighten up, we locked eyes. It felt like the world went completely silent then. Nothing mattered but Sage and his beautiful crying eyes, cheeks slightly pink.

Sage released me from the spell by turning away, moving to sit down as plates lifted to grab food. The voices remained loud, accusing and as sharp as the knife I used to cut into my chicken. We sat side by side together, eating. His mother sat at one end of the table, his father on the other, closest to Sage. Letting my eyes flutter to him, eyes cast to his plate, arms rigid and stiff in movement with only the soft sounds chewing coming from him.

"Tiffany It's YOUR generation that's making the world so fucked up...!" As the man turned his rage on his son, his words blended together, becoming nothing but static as I tried to keep my eyes like Sage's were, but drifted just before his dad's plate. My breathing hitched and my heart stopped. Sage kept quiet, so I did too.

On the way out, I tossed a friendly goodbye to Laura, her husband gone off to bed before most of us finished our plates. When we got outside, the heavy wooden front door shut behind us, I asked,

"Sage, are you okay?" When he finally looked up at me, allowing me a good long look at my boyfriend he was perfectly calm. Collected even.

"What do you mean?" My eyes widened.

"Babe," his voice was so even, unbothered, untouched. "What do you mean, 'what do I

mean?’

Does he always talk to you like that?” He shrugged.

“This is normal Calvin.” The cold chipped away at me, my legs heavy and heart pounding.

THAT was his normal?

“No. No Sage, it’s not normal. Parents aren’t supposed to act like that.” He shrugged again.

“It’s been like this since I was a kid, Cal.”

Annoyed, I finally pointed out, “Were those stab marks in the table always there, Sage? Those looked way too deep to have been an accident.” I watched as his jaw tightened and his adam’s apple bobbed with a gulp. “Sage, you’re old enough to leave. To get away.” My voice softened.

“But,” he looked conflicted. “I’d leave my mom alone with him.”

I shook my head. “Pack a couple of things. Your mom knew what she signed up for if she’s stayed around for twenty two years. Maybe she’s waiting for you to get out. Stay with me for a while. My parents love you.” Noticing he was still unsure, I pressed my lips to his softly, lingering. “Please Sage, I need to know you’re safe.”

“I-” His brow furrowed. “I’ll ask. My mom-I’ll ask her.”

Sage walked back inside and I shifted on my feet, nibbling on my lower lip and tried to stay out of sight of any windows. When he came back, he had a backpack over his shoulder and an anxious smile. “She said yes.” Jingling my keys with a small smile, I led him into the passenger seat and took the driver’s seat.

“Let’s get going.” Revving up the engine, I smiled as, through my peripherals, he sagged against the window, watching the lit houses as we drove by. “Call mom.” The car called and she answered. “Hey mom, can Sage crash with us? We’ll explain everything later.” The excited yes from the other end was all we needed as Sage took my hand and gave a soft squeeze.

“I love you.” Underneath a starry day

As the sun rises and the moon glows

Lies an epic known tale, that nobody knows

Two lovers who hated each other

Divorced before marrying one another

There was a full audience of zero people

The unordain priest, made it fully legal

With their eyes close they gave each other a deep stare

They vowed their lies, with truth and dare

It will last forever and tomorrow it will be over

The groom says, “I will never drink again, and I will never be sober”

The bride with her white dress as black as the night

Says, “I’m marrying the wrong one and you are just right”

Never I won’t, then comes the I do’s

They don’t have a choice, and so they choose

With lips not facing, a kiss is sealed

A no deal becomes a deal

Cheers a-roar from a crowd-less crowd

Silence takes over, because it’s so loud

LIES OF TRUTH

Arthur Rainwater

They get to their car and peddle off
Knowing exactly where they are going
They end up lost
With the divorce being final, they head to the honeymoon
What a glorious day, on a day that is doom
The ride was smooth with all the flat tires
To the penthouse suite goes these honest liars
No baby have they, and the nanny calls
"Would y'all please come get,
Your unborn son,
He's having a fit and is fast asleep
And you're out of coffee, I want some sleep!"
Their special most hated day is now finally done
They had such a miserable time, having that much fun

BRING AN UMBRELLA

Meilia Brooks

"Jolly, carry me," the man whined, his speech burdened by a number of Old Fashioned cocktails. He stumbled as the black sole of his boot caught on the doormat outside of the Nightly Blues, but a firm hand around his waist held him steady. He'd shed his patched-up leather jacket once the muggy beer-scented air and the thickening evening crowd had become suffocating, his body already warmed with alcohol.

"No Taps, you can make it to the car. Come on, it's just up the road." Jolly stepped forward, supporting the weight of his bar mate. He dragged his feet down the sidewalk, looking ahead toward the cracks in the concrete under the amber glow of the street lamps. "Think you had just a bit too much this time."

"Nonsense," Taps replied. Then, he began singing, "Never enough, never, never. Never enough, never, never."

"You're gonna feel like shit in the morning. I'll call you out of work when we get home." Sweat dripped down his forehead and over his lips, tainting his tongue with salt as he dragged Taps down the road. He still wore his bomber jacket, a second already draped over his arm. His jeans stuck to his legs and he felt them tug with each step.

"Aww... You love me. You really, really love me, huh?" Taps turned to look up toward Jolly, his movements clumsy. He leaned his head on his shoulder. "I always knew!" He shouted.

"Shh... There are people around."

"Well, the public does go out in public."

"You know what I mean. Just wait until we get in the car, please," Jolly whispered.

"Oh."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're right. I forgot." He sighed, lifting his head and rolling it to the other side. He leaned to his side, reaching to drag his fingertips along the dusty texture of the brick wall. He looked toward the sky, noting the thick thunder clouds crawling over the city. They shone a deep purple as they reflected the lights from the sleepless urban landscape. "I wish I was water."

"What?" He looked toward Taps. "Hey, watch your hands. I don't think you'd feel it if they got scraped right now." He reached out to bring Taps' arm down to his side. "What do you mean, are you thirsty? I've got water in the car, we're almost there."

"No. I mean I wish I wasn't a human. I'm only seventy percent water. I want to be only water," he slurred. The loose gravel of the asphalt crunched underfoot as he dragged his toes with each step. "A hundred percent H₂O."

"I don't think I understand." He rummaged through his jacket pocket in search of his key fob, feeling around his wallet and cell phone.

"Like, water isn't alive, right? So it doesn't think or anything. I want to be unalive."

Jolly halted his movements, looking toward Taps. He took in the glaze in his eyes as they faced the clouds. He was expressionless. He didn't blink as sweat dripped down his strong brow bone, blending into his tears.

"What are you saying, love?"

"Pshh. Oh, so you can say it in public but I can't."

"We're at the car. It's just us here." Jollis watched as Taps struggled to maneuver his head around to scan their surroundings. The silver sedan sat alone by a parking meter flashing green, the

spaces in the alley near it unoccupied. It seemed few people had chosen to drive for a night out drinking. "I'm sorry."

"I know. You've said."

"Will you tell me?"

"Hmm?"

"What you meant, about wanting to be like water?"

"Oh, right!" Taps tried to spin around to face his partner, but threw his arm against the car as he lost his balance. Jollis dropped the jacket as he reached out to catch him, pulling him by his waist and elbow closer. Taps buried his nose under the collar of his jacket, taking a deep inhale. "You smell expensive."

"Well, it's probably that expensive ass cologne you gave me for Christmas," he chuckled. "Come now, let's get you in the car before you hurt yourself anywhere else." They shuffled like penguins around to the passenger side. Jolly buckled the seatbelt around Taps, taking his arm to check for cuts. He kissed his wrist when he found none. He closed the door and jogged around to the driver's side, scooping up the fallen jacket.

Once he started the car, he asked, "Would you tell me, love?"

"Hmm?" Taps opened his eyes and looked at Jolly from where his head lay flopped on the headrest. "Whadya mean?"

"About wanting to be water?" He turned to look out the back window as he reversed out of the parking spot.

"Mhm. Right, yeah. The clouds. The storm clouds. They were beautiful, weren't they?"

"They were." He shifted to drive.

"You know, that's just water vapor. And then it gets cold and condenses. Then it cries all over us. And we think it's beautiful. And we need it to live."

"Right..." He glanced toward Taps at the stop sign, then pulled out onto the main road.

"But it doesn't know that, does it?"

"No?"

"Because it's just water. It's not alive. It can't know things if it's not alive," he trailed off. "I want to be that."

"You want to be... Not alive? My love, are you telling me you want to die?"

"No, no, no. Don't worry. It's not like that, baby. Don't worry, it's not like that."

"What's it like, then?"

"I just... i don't want to be alive."

The clicking of the turn signal filled the silence until Jolly admitted, "I don't think I understand the difference."

"Hmm... Do you notice when you sleep?"

"What?"

"Like, not when you dream. But like, y'know when you accidentally fall asleep watching a movie on the couch and wake up hours later. And you have pillow wrinkles on your face. And you're confused because you don't even remember falling asleep. But do you notice you slept before you wake up?" He rambled.

"I guess not?"

“No, right? I don’t either. It’s like we’re just nothing. Not even aware. Don’t even know we’re alive.”

“Okay...”

“I want to be like that. But all the time. As water.”

He turned toward Taps as he stopped at a red light. “So, you just want to be, like, nothing? But why water?” The green light highlighted the bridge of Tap’s nose and kissed the apples of his cheeks. He faced forward and pressed the accelerator.

“It’s free. It’s gotta be the freest thing out there. You know how they teach you the water cycle in like eighth grade and you learn all the places water goes.” He flung his hands around, gesturing in the air between them as he spoke. “It sees the mountains and rivers and oceans and it floats in the sky and falls on the plants and doesn’t give a shit about any of it. It just... does. It sees everything and looks at nothing. ‘Cause it’s just water. It’s not alive.”

“We’re home.” He shifted the car to park and took the keys from the ignition.

Taps looked around, raising his eyebrows in surprise. “Oh, I didn’t notice.”

“Here, wait for me, I’ll help you out.” He wiped the stray tear from his face once he stepped out of the sedan, taking long strides around it with Taps’ jacket over his shoulder. He pulled the handle, threw open the passenger door, and clicked open the buckle of the seatbelt with one hand while the other wrapped around Taps with an iron grip. “Up you go, watch your head.”

“Watch it for me,” he laughed, leaning his entire body weight against Jolly as he stood.

“Always.”

The pair stumbled up the driveway and along the sidewalk leading to the porch steps. The toes of Taps’ boots caught on the stairs repeatedly until Jolly hoisted him up in a bridal carry and climbed up the porch. He plopped his feet back down on their ‘Welcome’ mat, steadying his sway.

“See! I knew you’d carry me if I asked.”

“Of all the things you’ve already forgotten tonight, of course you remember that,” he teased. He unlocked the front door, bringing Taps inside and reaching down to untie his boots. He left their shoes and Taps’ jacket in the entryway, leading him around to their staircase. “C’mon, I’ll piggy-back you up, love.” He squatted down, barely catching Taps as he flopped over, bumping his chin on Jolly’s shoulder blade.

“Carry me! Carry me!” He chanted.

“How’s about we have a bath today? Pretty sure you’d slip in the shower.”

“Only if I can pick the bath bomb.”

“Of course you can.” He carried Taps up the flight of stairs and rounded the corner, walking directly to their en suite and setting him down on the closed toilet seat lid. He plugged the bath and turned on the faucets. “Just give me a sec, I’ll be right in. I’ll help you with your clothes when I get back,” he said.

“Where ya goin’, hmm?”

“Just gotta get you some water real quick, I’ll be right back. I promise.”

“You better be!”

Jolly stepped out of the bathroom, leaving the door open to listen for Taps. He walked down to their kitchen, pulled a reusable bottle of water from the fridge, and took his cell phone out of his jacket pocket.

“Hello, this is Jollis Harvey. I live with Tappin Davies. I’m calling to let you know he won’t be able to

make it in tomorrow.” He walked small circles around the island, dragging the water bottle along the laminate surface to see the trail of condensation glittering behind it. “He’s... not feeling so great.” He paused in his stride, looking up toward the stairs. “I think just to be safe, plan to apply sick time to the rest of the week. I’ll have him confirm when he feels up for it. Thank you, and have a good night.” He silenced his phone after leaving the message, pocketed it, and started up the stairs with the water bottle.

“You were gone for five-ever, Holly Jolly.” Taps pouted as he leaned his chin against his arm resting on the counter.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry, how can I ever be forgiven?” He feigned a tragic fainting spell. “Here, drink this.” He handed Taps the water and pulled the bottle of aspirin out of the medicine cabinet. “And take this,” he said, fishing out a pill and bringing it to his lips. “I’ll help you undress after you pick a bath bomb.”

“Oh! I forgot! Lemme choose!”

“This first.”

“Hmph.” He obliged, washing down the pill with a few gulps of water. “Now, please?”

“Sure thing.” Jolly reached into the tub, feeling the tingle of the hot water against his skin. He shut off the faucet and turned toward his partner, who was on all fours as half his body leaned into the cabinet under the sink. He couldn’t hold in his chuckle at the sight.

“This one! Apparently, there’s a ring inside a bubble or something.”

“Perfect.” He stripped out of his clothes, setting his jacket aside on the counter and tossing the rest in a pile at the edge of the bathroom. “Here, sit up for me,” he requested, as he helped Taps out of his jeans and T-shirt too. “Need help with the boxers?”

“No... But yes.”

“Cheeky.” He shimmied down his underwear and discarded it next to the rest of the pile. He held him close as they stepped over the edge of the tub, lowering them both slowly. Taps sat between his legs and dropped the bath bomb in front of them, staring as it fizzled and tinged the water orange.

“Ahhh... The water feels amazing,” Taps said as he leaned back against Jolly’s chest. He dragged his fingers through the foaming ripples. “I love water.”

“I know.” He wrapped his arms around the waist before him and tucked his chin over his shoulder. He tightened his hold as he felt Taps’ heartbeat steady below his palms. “I know.”

ERRATUM

Ryan Garner

The mailroom clerk shifts his weight from front to back as the light switches upward from button to button. Floor 17, 18, 19, 20 it reads. The elevator breaks past the 20th floor as the glass window at the back of the elevator suddenly switches from the darkness of an old brick elevator shaft to the burst of color and sunlight shining in from Chicago's metro area. The clerk spins around to take in the view. The cab crests past the 30th floor now and from 100 yards above ground level, the clerk's neck cranes upward even further as he compares the heights of Willis Tower to Trump Hotel. "The old Sears tower is ten stories taller," he muses idly.

Ding. The light stops moving and the number over the elevator cab door reads 35.

The mail clerk steps out into an empty foyer. White tiles lead the way to a frosted glass sliding door with a sign above it that reads Chicago Tribune. Old newspapers with iconic headlines are framed as art on his left and his right as he steps with pace toward the door. He walks through the door, avoiding stepping on the raised threshold as he crosses it and beelines for the newsroom.

The clerk stops at a desk.

"Package for Ethan Mahoney," he says, as he looks at a man in a white button-down with a plain black tie.

"Thanks," says Ethan. He grabs the package from the clerk and leans back in his chair, eyes gleaming a bit the way a child's does when they are handed a wrapped birthday present. He carefully slices the lip of the brown package open with a letter-opening knife he'd gotten as a gift when he completed his six-month internship.

He rifles past the coversheet of the packet, eyes bouncing from figure to figure, he licks his finger and flips pages quickly, absorbing exactly what he needs from the pages and mentally discarding the filler—a talent he picked up from doing interviews in college. You learn to glance at the papers on people's desks and read words backwards and upside down. Consider it collateral-note-taking, cause who knows, the interview may end up a dud. There's a lot of people that tongue-tie as soon as you ask if you can record a conversation.

Over the top sheet of the report, in his peripheral vision, Ethan catches the glimpse of his coworker, eyeing him intently.

"What is it?" The woman asks curiously from her adjacent desk.

"I don't know, probably a love letter?" Ethan says, edging his voice with a touch of sarcasm.

"Oh really? Got a secret admirer?" The woman flourishes a smile, accepting the game.

"Probably, I'm not sure which floor they are on, or how many of them there are though." Ethan says, abandoning modesty and pushing his bluff.

"Smug." The woman rolls her eyes while shaking her head, and Ethan senses it's time to cut to the chase.

"Ok, I jest. Thou dost protest too much, dear Clara," he relents, putting on an old English accent that he probably uses too often. Clara's skepticism melts for a moment and she visibly enjoys the accent, barely—the corners of her lips bend slightly upward into a crescent moon as her right eyelash flutters. Ethan had been at the paper a few years longer than Clara, but they had developed a quick bond after Ethan had flirted with her during her first week as an intern. Despite both agreeing not to go on a second date after a long coffee chat, it seemed that they had struck up a witty repartee.

"Seriously though, I don't know how I'm going to pull this story off," he looks at his colleague sitting

across from him at her identical maple desk. She has light brown hair up in a bun today, with a white button down and a plain black tie, the newspaper's default dress-and-attire suggestion for interns. Apparently, the default works a bit too well for Ethan as his closet is filled with duplicates and triplicates of his Calvin Klein white-collar, Bulgari black-tie combo.

Ethan puts the report down as he rolls up his sleeves to the second button on the cuff.

"I just got the reports that I needed," he says as he tightens and adjusts the new cuff-length, "and it doesn't really support the whole straw-man vibe we've been trying to build about the mayor." His voice seems unsure, hinting at frustration.

"The budget cuts and the flip-flop thing?" Clara asks seriously.

"I can't run this story like it's some kind of scoop," he says in reply, "just because the Chief wants to print a specific headline that he's dreamt up in fantasy land.

"You were at the editor's board meeting; doesn't it feel like we're putting the cart in front of the horse?" He asks her.

She half smiles, "I was at the board meeting, for like two minutes while I took coffee orders," Ethan still had his black coffee, at his desk, and he takes a cold sip, with a masked grimace. "So, what do you mean?"

"I mean, the facts in this report don't line up with the narrative." he says, gesturing to the papers now sitting on his keyboard.

"What narrative though?" she begs him, slightly curious.

"Well, we've been portraying the mayor as bad for schools, and that he's a flip-flop on tax-hikes. But last quarter the state reported upward trends in public ed funding, and it looks like he drew the funds from surpluses in highways and roads, and the department of corrections."

"Is the tax rate up?" She asks, but to no reply. Ethan instead stands up from his desk, raises his eyebrows and shakes his head as he walks toward the hallway that leads to the Editor-in-Chief's office.

Ethan reads the name engraved on the glass door with blinds closed at the end of the hallway. He knocks.

#

"Just remove the parts of the report, that don't add to the public conversation," an older, overweight man, in a brown-tweed vest sits behind a massive, mahogany desk with no computer monitor in sight.

"Tom, the public conversation isn't getting this part of the story," Ethan says emphasizing the documents in his hands.

The Editor-in-Chief of the Chicago Tribune leans in, brings his hand methodically to his chin, and pauses for several long seconds. Ethan locks eyes with the man, and a battle of conviction takes place in the fifth, sixth, and seventh seconds of this stare down.

Tom, the Chief, breaks the silence, "I want the story to be good."

"Sir, I understand that, but I'm starting to wonder if you and I have the same vision of 'good'," Ethan's hands turn palm up as he lightens the tone in his voice, apologetically. "If you mean good as in entertaining—but I'm sensing this is 'good' as in exactly what everyone wants to hear about this guy," Ethan pauses for the Chief's chance to interject, but Tom holds back, curious to hear the

passion Ethan has clearly been controlling until this moment.

Ethan takes the cue to continue, and presses Tom further, “What happened to accuracy in reporting, and journalistic non-partisanship, factchecking...”

“Forget facts Ethan,” Tom finally cuts him off, “this is about clicks.”

The air clears briefly as the modus operandi fills the room, looming over both men who love journalism. Newspapers in print circulation have become rare in the modern era, but both of these men show up every morning to keep the Tribune running. Tom has been at it for twenty-two years—his idealistic News Editor, for four. Ethan looks down at his shoes and sees that his left shoelace is loose.

“We’re not getting enough of the news that we need to make informed judgement as citizens,” Ethan says to his Chief as he sets the documents on the far end of his boss’ desk. He then kneels down and reties his waxed shoelace, this time putting it in a double knot.

“Print the headline and run it like we talked about...” Tom says insistently.

“It’s wrong.” Ethan firmly cuts him off.

“I don’t care,” the Chief says frankly, “we’ll run a correction in the Monday edition.”

“Then I don’t want my name on the byline.” Ethan impulsively says, like a knee-jerk reaction.

“Okay, Cronkite,” the Chief says, his thick Chicagoan accent in full mocking tone, “I’m taking you off this story.” Ethan’s eyes widen in surprise and then it sinks in. He wishes he could reach out and grab the documents and run; run to the shredder, run to another newspaper and freelance the scoop, but instead he stands, silently, wondering how the world functions with this much dysfunction built into the success models.

“You’re dismissed.”

#

“At least you still have your job.” Clara forks a bite from her fried egg as Ethan sits across from her at the diner, two blocks down the street from the Tribune. Ethan’s coffee is warm, and he sips it with a masked grimace as he flips to page A2 in the Monday paper.

He reads it aloud to Clara: “A news article by Michael Whiting with contributions from staff writers which appeared in Sunday’s edition, contains errors.” He looks her in the eye with a wry grin, exclaiming in aside, “staff writers!” and continues, “Because no correspondence for the source of materials used in the article’s research can be found, we are not able to identify the source of the errors, which may be miscalculations or the result of typos that eluded the proofreader. These inaccuracies were brought to our attention and have been corrected.”

It’s raining outside, the yoke of her egg is visible on her plate, and her toast is buttered. Clara’s jaw is wide open in disbelief, she takes another bite of egg and adds, “you still have your job and your dignity.” she says with her mouth full, chewing on the egg.

“I wonder if you can keep both?” Ethan says as he uncharacteristically dumps a packet of sugar into his coffee, chasing it with some creamer. He stirs, smiling at Clara, and entertains the idea of asking her on another ‘first date.’ He takes a sip, grimace free, and pockets his phone as he focuses eyes with her. “How’s the dating advice column for the opinion section goin?”

“Hrrrm, well,” Clara hesitates, “to be honest, I stopped working on that cause it felt like I was

writing a cliffhanger and I wasn't sure if there was going to be a second date."
"Would you settle for an employed man with strong moral convictions?" Ethan asks, impersonating a Duke of England.

Redact:

1. The censoring or obscuring of part of a text for legal or security purposes.
2. to select or adapt (as by obscuring or removing sensitive information) for publication or release broadly: edit
3. to obscure or remove (text) from a document prior to publication or release.

DEPLETED

Alicia Cardoza

Scuffing the toe of my tattered boots over my mother's kitchen tile, I find myself unable to take my eyes off of my laces. They're worn down; the material pushed to it's brink of existence. Yet, for the strangest reason I can't bring myself to get new ones. No, to replace these laces that have stuck with me through countless memories, experiences, ups and many downs. After all they've done for me, how am I supposed to just throw them away? Discard them into a damnation where they will never be touched, worn, tied, used ever again? Just sentenced to an eternity in a landfill...

"Anna! Are you even listening to me? I'm sitting here pouring my heart out to you. Telling you how scared I am for you. Just to get nothing?" My mother's sharp voice cuts through my wandering thoughts. Jerking my head up I make eye contact with her for the first time in who knows how long. Her deep crows feet cling to her tired eyes, full of worry. The crease between her brows deepens as she awaits my response.

"Of course I'm listening!" I spit out. "You know you don't have to do this right? Sit there and rant about how you're worried about me. I'm fine, I'm not a little girl." I need to shut up but I can't stop the river of words pouring from my mouth. "I'm not some teenager living under your roof! You don't get to sit there and judge me. Go on and fucking on about how worried you are, I promise I get it." I see my words slice right into her already bleeding heart. I know she's hurting too, I just can't bring myself to care.

I've been struggling lately, with many things. One of the more noticeable things I've become aware of are my emotions, or the lack of them. I feel numb, not the numb where you go to a dentist and they stick a needle in your gums. Not the numb where you're at a piercing shop getting a cream massaged over your nipples before they get impaled and then some shiny jewelry shoved in. This numbness isn't physical, but you can still feel it in your body which is the weird thing. It started in my chest, an empty feeling. Like when your stomach is yearning for something to fill it, except it was my heart. Yes, the emptiness started in my heart... an overwhelming feeling of numbness spreading throughout my body. Since that moment, the first time I felt it, it hasn't gone away. I often daydream about taking a gas canister and dousing every inch of my body with it. Then after I'm soaked in the liquid I'll light a match. Anything to feel something other than this numbness.

"Anna please look at me!" She's shouting now, my head snaps up again. "You need help baby, please. It's like you're not even there. You're sitting right in front of me but you're just an empty shell. Where have you gone? You need help, real help, professional help!" The words claw their way out of her mouth, tears sliding down her cheeks. Glossing streaky marks over her cheap blush. I feel nothing.

What's wrong with me? My mother is sobbing in front of me and you would think nothing was going on at all with the way I'm just sitting here. I want to feel something, I want to give her a hug. Reach over this table to take her hands into mine and tell her everything is going to be okay, but I can't. Instead I stand up and walk out of the door. She said something to me on the way out but I didn't hear it. I just keep walking.

I can feel the hot tears burning over my skin, my vision blurring as I storm to my car. I need to get out of here. I buckle my seatbelt and quickly back out of my mom's driveway. She lives very near to the freeway so it's only a few minutes before I'm on the roads that lead to my own home. I can't get this goddamn feeling out of my chest, no matter how hard I try. It's like a plague, an illness. It grabbed hold of me, dug it's claws into me. Its venom seeped into my skin,

poured into my veins, and now it's got me. It has poisoned every bit of my flesh. I wish I could take a knife and carve it out like a parasite.

I need to calm down, I need to gather my thoughts. When's the last time I looked at the road? I notice my eyes are back to my laces. I bring my eyes up and slam onto my brakes. The traffic in front of me has slowed. Whatever, I'm fine that's all that matters. I can't stop staring at my laces, my left boot has become untied.

Why is my head no longer mine? When will it change? How many therapy sessions, how many "we're so worried" talks? If it's not my mom it's my best friend or my boyfriend. Everyone is so fucking concerned! Why are you like this, Anna? You were so happy, so sweet. A ray of fucking sunshine. Well if any of them used two goddamn brain cells they'd see that the reason is right out in the fucking open. The tears are back. I can hardly see but I don't care. How can they expect me to be okay? How dare they try to rush me to move on. How the fuck does someone move on from that? They all need to come to terms with the reality that is sitting right in front of— Oh fuck!

The car in front of me has suddenly braked again, I see a little girl staring at me through the back window. Her eyes, they're wide open, full of fear. I can't stop in time, there's no way. I jerk my wheel to the right and just miss them. My car skids sideways into the next lane and before I have time to react I see a semi truck heading straight towards my passenger side and then I see nothing.

My eyes flutter open and realize that my car is on it's side in some sort of ditch. Sudden pain shoots through my torso and I'm mortified when I look down. A metal pipe is impaling my stomach and I realize that I'm screaming and crying those hot sticky tears yet again. This time it's different. I want my mom, I want someone, anyone. I don't want to be alone. Where did this pipe come from? I look around and that's when I see it. Many, many signs, all saying construction zone. So that's why we were breaking our cars.

I feel the numbness in my chest grow to worry. My mom? Is she going to be okay? This will destroy her. My head hurts, I can hardly think. I feel a chill run down my spine as I realize something, it doesn't hurt anymore. Isn't it supposed to hurt? Why doesn't my body hurt anymore? The thought just makes more tears come.

So many thoughts I can't form. Well, just one. I remember what my mom said to me as I left. She said she loved me. I stare at my laces one last time before I remember something else. I didn't say it back.

Shadyside funeral homes does a lovely job. I just wish I didn't have to use them again. I stare at the picture of my sweet Anna. She's smiling, I don't know when the last time I saw her smile in person was. Yet, there it is: her smiling face. In fine print above her head, In Loving Memory Of Anna Courston 2000-2022. Only twenty two, too young. They both were.

"Hi Ms. Courston, sorry to bother you I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am. She was my best friend. Even though things got rocky in the end, I'll love her forever." The words leave Anna's childhood best friend, Lily's, mouth. I didn't even see her come up. Now I know where Anna got it from.

“Thank you Lily, that means a lot to me.” I smile and nod. That’s what you’re supposed to do right? Smile and nod? We walk up to her casket together. She lays there, so still yet so familiar. It looks like she’s sleeping.

“She wore those boots all the time.” Lily mentions. Yes, she always did.

“She started wearing them last year, after her older sister - oh, you knew Erica. After Erica passed she started wearing them. They were hers.” I utter.



PHILOPHOBIA

Annalisa Cabrales

I AM BROKEN! For such a word describing such intense emotion.
To validate me as more sorrow can imagine.
Why shall I seek such approval? It's silly to think what greatness can hold. I AM NOT NORMAL!
I am not confined to what the world expects of me.
Rather I am unique and vulnerable.

When the first water drop falls on the ground.
I've already lived in my own reality.
I stare into the window late at night and I visualized myself dying alone.
I DON'T BELONG HERE!

In the beginning, the roses looked beautiful, and in the end, the thorns made me bleed.
I secretly suffer from anxiety and depression.
I feel things that I shouldn't be feeling.
I was a target to those who took an advantage of me.
My deepest condolences to the grave with my name written: "She lies still from her fear of love that was taken so young."

No key can hide the pain. Until I'm no longer faced with struggles.
THIS WAR WILL NOT END! Deep dives. With shallow water.
The horizon's peak will surround me.
In harmony, the glass will break. The shattered glass will cut me. Until I am no more.

BREATHE!
The good never left, it was always there. The sky just got cloudy and the news spread like wild-fires until the good news was replaced by the bad doings.

NO! NO! NOOO!!!!
I AM BROKEN!
I AM CORRUPT AND AGONIZING!

I grew up in a depressing home hoping that someone will save me, but I was wrong.
I was beaten over this perfect version of me.
Overwhelmed by the pressure that collides into me.
I'm scared of what the future holds, yet it is absurd to judge me.
For you do not know me. Make no mistake, I will not be shaken.
If I fall into a bottomless pit. Will you save me?
When selfish needs become people's greatest desires. When will it end? Does the good suddenly outweigh all the bad?

It's simple but wrong. I reject what I do not show on.
I'm the kid you find in the back of the classroom who does not speak until called on.

I am filled with scratches and scars that cannot be removed.
I am permanent to the memories that strike me as a victim.
I'm no longer the "victim" but a survivor.
I will flee from the dangers that harmed me.
I was captivated by your lovely personality.
I AM NOT A FOOL! YOU MANIPULATED ME!
You tricked me into becoming somebody that will destroy me.

Feel the beat of my dead rose. I got no more wounds to sew.
All these feelings are floating.
I'm confused. I'm hurting.
Feeling helpless and alone. Wanting to scream. But yet....
You hushed me.
If I cannot be seen through your eyes then I am sorry.
How can you deny me?

My friend, you're hurting. All that you thought I was. Was only the half of me.
You're screaming in silence. And I hear you.
You want someone to notice. And I feel you.
When doubt and misery fill's your mind.
I can still see the silence you try to hide.
For the happy face is not only a sign. It's a cry.
I'm traumatized.



TOLL IN BLOOD

Jason Robinson

Rain drips swiftly off the leaves, pittering, pooling in perfect puddles upon the brick porch. Fresh pine needles fill the air with an earthy aroma. A lone flicker interrupts the damp sky. The light bobs, illuminating the shack resting at the edge of the village; the light, penetrating the thick of the night. The back door opens, emitting large yellow rays, showering the forest in its majesty. Shadow casts over the center in the shape of a girl, hooded and cloaked. Quietly she closes the door behind her and tiptoes down the stairs. The ground at her feet is dry, covered by a thatch awning. Breathing deeply, she blows out the candle and leaps forward, into the rain. Thunder and lightning crash overhead, flashing the pitch-black sky, lighting the girl momentarily in its brightness. She sprints full ahead, gripping on to every tree, slipping in the mud and needles. Frantically she flails her arms about, mindlessly running, faster and faster through the woods. Howls cry out, followed by breaking branches and twigs. The girl quickly rubs her eyes, clearing them of water and tears that were obstructing her vision. Panting, she continues forward, stumbling, falling, but never ceasing to move forward. Behind her, lights suddenly blaze to life and shouting voices ring in the twilight.

“Find her!”, a voice cries out.

“One has escaped! After her!”

The girl skids to a stop, falling as her leg gets caught on a stray log. Swiftly she covers her mouth, biting down on her fingers in an attempt not to scream. Tears stream down her cheeks as she examines her leg, twisted, and mangled in the fallen trunk. Yanking and clawing, like a wolf caught in a trapper’s trap, she tries to free herself from nature’s snare. She grunts and gnashes her teeth, writhing in pain. Rustling bushes echo around her, closing in closer and closer until a torch light appears in front of her. Several figures close in, shouting and commanding in criss-crossing dialogues and orders.

One figure demands, “Grab her! Don’t let her get out!” As he moves to grab the girl, the air suddenly becomes scorching hot, contacting the rain drops and boiling them away. Flames form in a circle around her and begin to grow larger as she screams violently towards her pursuers. The man is caught in the flames and begins to burn, yelling and running, unable to speak or think. The flames grow larger and then, are suddenly quenched as all goes dim once again. The girl lies unconscious on the forest floor, surrounded by black scorch marks and waning flames flickering here and there. Atop her, stands a woman with damp ginger locks, waving about in the wind. She bends over and picks up the girl and disappears as quickly as she appeared into the dark.

The sun rolls overhead and birds chirp, singing their hopeful songs, greeting the morning light. The village bell rings aloud while all go about their business, resonating off the cobblestone buildings. The streets are busy but not bustling, a common sight for this small forgotten place. A light fog blankets the town, clouding vision slightly and adding a pleasant stickiness to the air.

A single drop of water falls off the wooden beams and onto the girl’s forehead, jolting her awake and upright, hitting her head on the way up. Flinching from the pain, she sits up and looks around, finding herself back upon a familiar porch, bandages around her head, left leg, and both arms.

Huh? Lili questions.

“Lili!”, a high voice squeals, “You are finally awake! Thank the gods! I prayed to them like you taught me and they answered me. See? I told you they were real.”

Lili stretches her arm out and pats the small one on the head and cracks a smile.

“I am glad you are happy to see me, Melue. Did you take care of me all by yourself?”

Melue pushes her sister’s hand upward and looks up. Her face lights up with excitement and she says,

“No. Mother helped me too. She was so worried about you.”

Lili looks down at her foot, kicking the bedpost softly, annoyed at the sentiment. Grabbing around her arm, she retorts, “Oh.. She came to visit last night, did she?”

Melue shakes her head in agreement and jumps up, grabbing at Lili’s arm.

“She is here right now, isn’t she?”, Lili probes, averting her gaze to the door.

“Yes sissy, yes! She came by to see how you were doing; now get up! You need to look good for Mother.”

Melue runs inside, leaving the back door ajar. Lili shakes her head at her little sister's carelessness and inhales deeply, looking upward at the awning that covers her. A subtle breeze shifts through the trees, clamoring through the windchimes, producing a soft metallic chorus. Leaves fall, shaken from their trees and land at her feet. Lili closes her eyes and exhales, attempting to gather and recompose herself from the feeling of dread.

“Hello Mother.”

A woman steps out from the doorway, left open by Melue and closes it behind her. She is clothed in a simple robe of dark blue. Her hair, draped ornately over the front.

“Lili.”, she responds, “Had a little adventure last night, did we?”

“You know what I was doing, Mother.”

The Mother sighs and retorts, “I will tell you Lili as I have told you many times before, you are safe and cared for here. There is no need to go elsewhere.”

“But I want to. I don’t belong here. I want to be out there, living my own life. Not yours.”

“That feeling you have inside Lili, it is temptation. Evil drawing you away, leading you astray. Don’t fall as your Father did.”

“Don’t mention him! You have no right to speak about my Father! None!”

“Lili, your Father was a twisted man. He only cared for you out of his own self-interest. He never loved you like I have.”

“Love.”, Lili scoffs, closing her eyes and shaking her head, “Knocking me out and dragging me back to this prison sure is a funny way of showing that.”

Mother draws closer towards Lili, gracefully stepping in perfect rhythm. Lili scampers backwards and trips, landing on the ground and bumping her head against the bed frame, causing blood to trickle through her otherwise immaculate bandaging. The Mother reaches her and bends down, eye to eye with the helpless, scared little girl.

“Daughter, you have broken your oath. You know what that means. But I will give you a chance.”, the Mother states as she outstretches her hand to Lili’s bleeding head. Bringing her fingers together, she lifts her hand away from Lili and the stream of blood draws out, like a loose hair pulled from the scalp. The small pool gently forms a ball in the Mother’s hand.

Lili recoils and shoves her Mother off of her.

Kill her.

Shut up. Not now.

“Name it and I will see it done.”, Lili states after a slight delay

She extends her hand out to Lili, solid crimson orb in her palm. “You must enter a fight to the death. The prize of your victory will be your freedom.”

“Yeah. I’ll kill whoever you want me to”, Lili retorts shortly and full of attitude, swiping at the orb. “Just as long as Melue comes with me.”

Her Mother quickly recoils her arm back and displays the orb between her two fingers. “Today, at sundown, the center of town, be ready.”

At that, the Mother draws away, leaving Lili alone once more upon the porch. She collapses on the porch steps. Just the sky and her.

The rest of the day, Lili toils, training, preparing for her one chance at freedom. Hacking at the straw training dummy stationed in the back with her dagger. Over and over, she gouges a chasm into its chest. Flashes of her encounter earlier rush through her mind. I don’t care who she throws at me or what she does to me. I will get out of here. Melue will get out of here. Lili reflects. Faster and faster, she drives the blade deep into the straw, weaving kicks and blows into her fatal tapestry.

Little sister is holding us back

No she isn’t. She’s my sister. I have to protect her. It’s all I have

You left her yesterday.

I was going to come back...I swear.

Lili plunges the blade deep into the mannequin’s chest and falls to the ground on her back. The blade, still stuck deep inside the hay figure, reflects a ray of sunlight directly into her eyes, forcing her to get up.

“Sissy! Don’t tire yourself. Drink this! It will be good for you!”

Lili looks up, moving her soaked blond strands aside and sees Melue with a small earthen cup outstretched. A sweet, warm scent billows around it as she lifts the lid, releasing the steam. Lili chuckles weakly, replaces the lid on the cup, and staggers over to the steps.

“Where did you get that?”, Lili asks laughing and wincing from exhaustion.

“I found it under your bed and thought it would make a good tea.”

“Oh Melue. That is Dlyna root. I don’t take that unless it is an emergency.”

“But it is an emergency sissy! You have your big fight really soon and you are all sleepy. Besides, I saw you eat some last night.”

Lili peaks over at her little sister and takes the cup. The warm, steaming green liquid feels good, warming her body from head to toe. Slowly, she feels more energized, more alert, and a bit antsy. Putting down the cup, she reaches over and grabs her sister, wrapping her arms around her tightly.

“You are squishing me.”

“What are you gonna do about it?”, Lili pesters.

Through her sister's arms, Melue croaks, “I’ll beat you up.” She fails around in Lili’s arms and screams her faint war cry. Smiling, Lili tosses her out onto the lawn.

“I’m going to drop you this time!”

“Oh, is that so Mel?” Lili gets up, walks over to her, and slowly falls on top of her sister. Melue puffs her hair out of her face. Annoyed, she whines, “Heyyyy! That’s not fair! Get off of me!”

“I can’t. My bones... They are..melting.”, Lili states dramatically.

“No, they aren’t you idiot!”, Melue belts out, bursting into laughter. Lili rolls off and lies next to her sister. The pair stare into the sky and laugh.

Soon. Soon, Lili thinks as she looks at her little sister.

The night sky is clear. The faint chirping of birds settling in for the night invites the blanket of stars to roll overhead and wrap the valley in slumber. All except the village where Lili lies in wait. Many have assembled, surrounding her in a circle, all hooded and robed in ceremonial blue garbs. Lili herself is clothed in a similar outfit but instead of flowing robes, a simple blue tunic and leather pants, partnered with the same cape as the rest. Torches line the center street, leading a path to the Mother’s dwelling. Lili jumps about from side to side, swinging her blade to and fro. Drums resound through the village, drawing louder and louder. From around the corner, an entourage led by lantern bearers and others holding burning incense appear. Following suit, two rows of servants, ropes tied around their wrists and the long end, held in both hands in the center, walks The Mother, adorned in a long flowing cape, embroidered in golden scroll work and ancient symbols. Upon her head, she bears a golden wreath of needles and roses, dug into her head, blood, dripping perfectly to her alabaster complexion. Her Copper hair, glistens brilliantly off the torch lights and almost seems to glow. The circle parts and her servants are released into lines as she approaches Lili.

“Sister Lili comes before us to unmake the mark of her oath. Do you submit her to the trial?”

The members of the circle chant in unison, “Omni trae oprvi vod nasir”

“So be it. Sister Lili, extend your hands.” Lili does as commanded and extends her hands together to the Mother. She places ropes around Lili’s wrists and ties it tightly, cuffing her hands together. Gracefully, she then draws a curved dagger and slits Lili’s forearm. Her blood pours out of her veins, soaking the bonds crimson. The Mother then places her hands upon the blood-stained rope and chants deeply, her head, swaying back and forth, eyes rolling back. She snaps back, looking Lili directly in the eyes,

“Her vows have been broken. The blood payed. Bring forth the contestant.” At that, the drums begin to beat once again, faster and more dramatic than before. The Mother steps aside and flourishes her arm to reveal Lili’s opponent.

“Noo!”, Lili screams. “Nooo!”

Quietly walking, escorted by guards is Melue, a small tiara of flowers upon her head. Her hair, twisted and braided, held together by a thin blue ribbon. Lili drops to her knees and slams her fists to the ground. She crawls to her Mother’s feet.

“Mother please. Not her. Please! I’ll fight anyone else. Just please! You promised she would go with me.” Lili begs through a cracking voice and rolling tears. The mother stands stoically, eyes fixed upon Melue, smirking.

“I never said any such thing. I simply told you to be here and here you are.”

The Mother kicks away the groveling Lili, cutting her face with her sharp heel, cutting her arms and the rope around her wrists. The guards shove her in and the circle closes, leaving the two sisters

motionless in the center.

Melue runs through the hole in the circle to Lili, smiling and says, "Look Sissy! They did my hair pretty for your ceremony. I told them I wanted to look pretty like you but I didn't know how to do it, so they helped me. Don't you think it looks nice?" Melue does a quick spin, showing off her new look. Lili does not look up, lying face down on the ground. A small puddle of blood pools round her hair, mixing with the still damp mud. Why her? I can't. I can't kill my sister.

But you can. You have to. Kill her and you are free.

Shut up. She is my sister

Nothing but an obstacle. KILL HER!

Shut up! No one asked you!

Kill! Kill! KILL HER NOW AND BE FREE!

A quiet chuckle resounds from Lili, muffled by the ground. Melue looks upon her sister concerned and leans closer.

"Sister? Are yo.."

She gasps and looks down. A bright steel blade pierces her chest, her bright reflection shining at her. The blade is tarnished as she coughs up a thick slurry of blood and spit. She looks down at her assailant and sees her sister, eyes trained upon her, bloodshot and crazed.

"Lili?..", Melue mutters, falling to the ground. Lili lets go of her blade and stands, looking down upon her sister. The cut upon her cheek sizzles and glows like a red-hot ember. She breathes heavily and quickly as her eyes return to normal. Upon the ground, she beholds her sister, doubled over her sword, deeply embedded in her chest.

"No No No No! Melue!!", Lili screams, bending down and pulling her sister close. Sitting her upright, she exams Melue though her pouring tears. The blade runs completely through her, streaked in crimson. "Stay with me. Please, stay with me. Sissy is here. I'm here." She sits her sister up across from her, rocking her back and forth. Melue gasps for breath, coughing and gurgling up blood. She manages to lean on Lili's head, nose to nose and says,

"Bring back a lily for me.." Her head goes limp and heavy.

"No! Noooo! Please! I didn't mean to! Please.", Lili screams and hollers, coughing as she chokes. She slumps over next to her sister's corpse and writhes in the mud, her hands upon her head, clenching and pulling her hair in pure fury. Over and over she smashes her head into the ground, screaming, crying, and laughing. Fire flares to life around her, burning away her bonds around her hands. Looking up, she spots the Mother who tilts her head and states,

"So desperate you were for freedom, that you killed your own sister. You are evil Lili. Nothing but darkness smothering your sister's brilliance." Lili laughs maniacally but stops and states,

"Shut up, you liar!" She struts past her sister, picks up her blade and hoists it to her shoulder. "Yeah, I am evil. I'm beyond evil darling."

The orange glow of fire intensifies, and the roaring of flames breaks out. Lili's arms tremble, still looking into the Mother's eyes.

"Darling? Who are you calling darling? Maybe I went too far and broke you. Guess you weren't as selfish as I thought." The Mother extends her hands, and her servants leap forward,

lunging uncontrollably at Lili.

“Don’t you dare talk about HER!”

A blazing inferno overtakes them and the buildings, not stopping, reaching out like a octopus strangling its prey until all life is snuffed out. The pillars of fiery rage overtake the town until naught is left but Lili is surrounded in ash and flames, laughing, giggling, to the sky. At her feet, rests her shimmering scimitar, now magically capped with a large Ruby. Upon the blade, is etched a small lily blossom, reflecting the maniacal cackling and tears of its golden headed wielder, wreathed in flame.

“You are a plague, and you will always be a plague.”

Lili scans the burning rubble, attempting to locate the ominous voice. Ahead of her, the flames part and between them, stands the Mother, hovering slightly off the ground. Bloody streams run from the bodies strewn around her, now shriveled and devoid of pigment. Her once ginger hair has turned a deep red, flowing like a calm brook.

“My my you are hard to kill.”, Lili sighs, biting the spine of her sword.

“You won’t get past me you little devil.”

“Aww. Thanks mommy. I like that name.” Lili extends her hand and fingers and tightens her grip. The mother falls to the ground and contracts inward, twitching.

“How did you learn that? I never taught you that!”

Lili just stands there, tilting her head and laughing and begins to sing,

“Dear old Mother walks in the cold. Oh, just how far will she go? To reach her blossom, crying and alone.” She clenches her fingers into a fist and the Mother curls up, blood spraying from her veins.

“Lili, you’ll kill me. Stop.”

“Haha, yeah.”

“ Only if she knew, her blossom loved her so.”, Lili sings, accompanied by piercing screams.

The sun falls low over the rolling hills of the plains, casting an orange hue across the verdant landscape. A slight breeze passes through as Lili, wrapped in a ragged cloak, as she walks against it. The chill of the winter has seen it’s last as the first warm howl of spring makes an appearance. She walks slowly, looking around at the flowing grass and bobbing wildflowers until she casts her gaze upon a singular one.

Even here, she thinks, In this field of Dahlia’s, a lily still finds a way... She falls, weeping and screaming.

She lied. She left us.

I left her.

Liar...

ROYAL RUNAWAYS

Aurora Norlund

"I can't believe you!"

"Kirana, please, be reasonable."

"Be reasonable? You're giving my life away to a complete stranger!"

"It's for the good of the kingdom, we need this alliance to—"

"You promised." The words hung like ice in the air as the princess stormed out of the room, leaving her father to sputter behind her. With tears streaming down her face, she ran for her bedroom, slamming the wooden door shut behind her and crumpling to the ground.

She felt childlike, sitting there with her arms wrapped around her legs, sniffing and burying her face in her knees. It was entirely un-princess-like, but she couldn't help herself. She had been preparing to be the queen her whole life, but now she was being told that her little brother, who wanted nothing more than to be the head of the royal navy, would become the heir to the throne and she would be married off to someone she had never even met. All her dreams of choosing her own king to rule with as equals and working to make her kingdom a better place were slipping away, and there seemed to be nothing she could do.

Kirana wiped at her face and crossed the room to her balcony, stepping out into the cool air. The fresh air filled her lungs, clearing her mind as she looked out on the horizon. The lush forest sprawled out before her eyes, the nearest village just a speck in the distance. The view made something click in her mind. She didn't need to be a queen to make the kingdom a better place. Her father hardly went out into the villages, preferring to let the citizens bring their problems to him. Monarchs were so disconnected from their subjects; maybe joining them would be more useful. Her heart pounded in her chest at the thought, and with a new excitement she rushed to pack her bag.

A sharp knock on the door made her jump. "Your majesty?" the voice of a maid called. "Are you in there?"

Kirana stayed as quiet as she could as she rushed to finish packing. The maid pounded on the door again. "Princess Kirana, your father wants to speak to you in the throne room."

A flash of anger shot through her chest at the mention of her father, and she began stripping her bed and tying the sheets together. The maid outside fell quiet, presumably leaving to look for her elsewhere. Kirana glanced out the window again. The sun was beginning to sink in the sky; she would have to hurry if she wanted to make it to the nearest town before dark. She tied the last sheet to the chain and anchored it to the balcony, praying nobody would see her as she carefully let herself down the wall. Twice, her grip slipped, but she caught herself and finally dropped the rest of the way to the grass. Taking one last look at the castle, she turned and ran for the woods.

Kirana ran until her legs burned and all she could see behind her were trees before she let herself slow to a walk and catch her breath. The sun hadn't fully set yet, but the woods were already quite dark, and the night-time insects were beginning to sing. She thought for a moment about turning back, but remembered the sting of her father's betrayal and pushed forward. Her progress slowed as it grew darker, and soon Kirana found herself almost entirely unable to see where she was stepping. She was feeling her way around a particularly large tree trunk when her foot caught on some unseen object and she found herself being pulled upward in a net.

"Hey Calix, we caught something!" a voice called. Something shuffled in the trees around her, and a glowing lamp came into view, drawing closer and closer until it stopped just in front of her face. Dark brown eyes studied her closely accompanied by bright red hair that seemed to be on fire

in the warm light.

“Well this is new,” Calix said. He looked and sounded much younger than she expected; he couldn’t have been more than a year or so older than her. “You don’t belong out here.”

“According to who?” Kirana retorted. “This forest belongs to the king.”

The whole forest seemed to laugh at that, and Kirana tried to twist around to get a look at her unseen audience.

“Ah, a runaway princess,” the boy in front of her mused. “What’s your name, princess?”

She paused. “Kirana.”

“Well then Princess Kirana, why don’t you come with us?” He pulled out a small knife and cut through the netting, allowing her to awkwardly climb out of it.

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“I don’t think you have much of a choice. You don’t exactly seem familiar with these woods.” The boy offered his arm to her and she took it hesitantly, feeling with her other hand to ensure her dagger was still on her belt. The plants beside them rustled, and she heard a few sets of footsteps begin to follow them as he led her through the trees. “So, princess, what brings you all the way out here?”

“What does it matter to you? And how did you know I was a princess?”

“Only royals truly believe this forest belongs to the king.” Kirana tilted her head curiously, but he didn’t elaborate. “And you’re clearly not here for fun.”

She sighed. “If you must know, I’m escaping an arranged marriage.”

“Oh? Was he that terrible?”

“I hadn’t even met him, which is almost worse. I just... couldn’t take it.”

“You felt like your life was slipping through your fingers and you couldn’t do a thing about it besides run?”

Kirana studied his face, but he kept looking forward, not meeting her eyes. “Exactly.”

They fell silent for a while, Kirana trying to keep up with Calix’s purposeful footsteps. “Who are you guys, anyways?”

He paused. “No one important.”

Before Kirana could ask for more, they emerged into a clearing. A warm, inviting fire glowed in the center and tents dotted the surrounding area. Men and women of all ages and appearances moved in between, some sharpening tools, others gathering kindling.

“Serina is staying in town tonight, so you can stay in her tent. You can grab some stew before bed. Someone will help you find your way in the morning.”

Kirana wanted to argue. She wanted to push him for more answers, ask all the questions swirling around in her head, figure out just who exactly these people were, but the mention of food made her stomach growl and she was suddenly made aware of the aching in her feet. She nodded, and a man near the fire offered a bowl of stew that smelled of lamb and cloves which she gratefully accepted. The moment she finished eating another woman showed her to the tent, and she fell asleep as soon as she lay down.

She awoke early the next morning and found Calix a ways off from the camp, untying a horse and preparing to ride. “Where are you going?”

“To town.” He swung himself on top of the horse. “A big storm hit a few days ago. I’m going to

help with the rebuilding efforts.”

Kirana wrinkled her brow. She hadn't heard of any storm before she left. "Take me with you."

Calix raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you have some important plans to get to?"

"Actually, that was my plan. I want to help my people."

Calix shrugged and gestured to the space behind him on the saddle and she gracefully settled in behind him.

The town was a bigger mess than she had imagined. Pieces of roofs scattered the pathways between houses, trees and other plants were uprooted everywhere, and a few houses had been almost entirely destroyed. Some upset townsfolk informed her that the king hadn't sent any assistance, to which Calix threw her a sympathetic look.

"It's not your fault," he said. Kirana ignored him and went to work.

They worked for hours. Every now and then, Calix would jump in with whatever she was doing and check in on her.

"Miss the castle yet, princess?"

Kirana glanced up from her work and rolled her eyes. "No way. I actually feel like I'm doing something useful for once."

"I get the feeling."

Kirana hesitated. "So, how long have you been doing this kind of thing?"

"Only a couple of months, actually," he said. "I got into a fight with my father one day, and decided to leave home. I found this group and it felt like I fit right in."

"Do you ever miss home?"

"Sometimes. I had a few friends there. But I think I like doing this a lot better." Calix grabbed a piece of debris and hoisted it onto a wagon. "What about you? What's home like?"

"Nothing special. I mean, being a royal is great and all, but I feel so isolated from everyone else."

Calix nodded thoughtfully. "No one understands the troubles of having to fight the endless hordes of potential suitors?"

Kirana shook her head and laughed. "Hardly."

"Oh really? I find that quite hard to believe. Maybe we'll have to fix that." Calix gave her a wink and set off to help elsewhere, leaving Kirana to stand there, her face growing hot.

They continued that way, passing by each other every so often and bantering back and forth. Calix was more charming than Kirana had expected, and by the time the sun had set, she had forgotten she only just met him.

"...And he fell into the lake."

Kirana giggled. "It sounds like you had an exciting childhood."

"Maybe a little." They walked over to where the townspeople had set up some tables with plates of food and sat down for dinner. "So, what did you think?"

"It was incredible. I feel like I've accomplished more in the past twelve hours than I have in my entire life."

The smile Calix gave her at that made her stomach do flips. "I'm glad to hear it. There's still more work to be done if you'd like to stay with us."

"I'd love to."

It took a full month to finish rebuilding the town, and in that time, Kirana found herself more

and more drawn to Calix. They were good friends now, but he remained frustratingly vague about who he was or where he was from, and she found that she wanted nothing more than to unravel all his mysteries.

One morning, as their crew had finished packing up and were getting ready to move on to the next town in need of help, one of the men came riding into camp in a rush.

“The king has assembled his army east of the forest. He’s preparing for war.”

Kirana and Calix shared a look, and soon they were riding off towards the battlefield. Kirana dismantled quickly, not sparing Calix so much as a look as she weaved through the camp, looking for the king’s tent.

“Kirana?” Her father rushed toward her as she pushed through the opening of the tent and pulled her into a hug.

“Father, what’s happening?” she asked, leaning back to look up at him.

The king let her go and turned away from her, looking down at the table behind him where a map of the battlefield sat. “When King Evarius heard we wouldn’t be fulfilling the marriage, he declared war on us.”

Kirana’s heart sank. Someone put a warm hand on her shoulder, and she glanced over to see Calix standing behind her.

The king looked up again. “Who is this?”

“This is Calix; he’s a friend of mine,” she replied. Calix gave a small wave.

The king stared at him for a moment, then stepped forward and grabbed the small satchel that hung off Calix’s waist. “You’re a member of King Evarius’ court,” he said, running his fingers over the seal engraved into the leather. “Seize him.”

The two guards standing by the door moved forward and grabbed Calix’s arms.

“Father, no!” Kirana shouted, and the king fixed her with a stern stare.

“Haven’t you done enough, Kirana?” He turned away and gestured to the guards. “Take him to the battlefield.”

Kirana watched helplessly as Calix was pushed out of the tent. The king followed, barely noticing Kirana trailing along behind. Their small procession made its way across the battlefield until they could see King Evarius’ tent. The opposing soldiers caught sight of them and froze in their preparations, whispering frantically to each other. One soldier ducked into King Evarius’ tent, and a moment later, both he and King Evarius exited.

King Evarius was a tall, imposing man with bright red hair quite similar to Calix’s, and Kirana wondered if they could be related.

“Calix,” King Evarius said when he arrived, barely even glancing at the others.

“Your highness,” Calix spat, staring at the man coldly. The guards holding him looked at each other curiously.

“Come now, child. Bitterness is not becoming of a prince,” King Evarius said calmly.

“And deception is not becoming of a king,” Calix retorted.

Kirana’s father stared at the two. “This is your heir?”

King Evarius looked up at him. “Unfortunately. You’re quite lucky. I’ll call off my armies.”

“You weren’t able to fulfill the marriage either,” Kirana blurted.

“Precisely. That’s why I declared war the moment I got word the princess had run away. I

had to do what was best for my people.”

Kirana’s father stared at King Evarius, his face growing red with anger. “This war is not over.”

King Evarius scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous. We have both parties now. The marriage can still happen.”

“I see now that an alliance with your kingdom would be a mistake. I must do what is best for my people,” he replied.

Kirana gaped at her father. “How do you know what’s good for your people?”

The king turned to look at her. “Excuse me?”

“I just spent the last month helping a town rebuild from a storm because you wouldn’t help them. You don’t know a thing about your people. And now you’re going to take everything they have to pay for this stupid war because you’re a prideful old man. You don’t deserve to be king.”

Everyone fell silent. Her father opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, but was cut off by King Evarius.

“It seems your daughter is as much of a petulant brat as my son. Perhaps they really were meant for each other.”

Kirana whirled around to face him. “Excuse me?” she snapped. “Your son has been traveling through every kingdom on this continent helping people at his own expense. Calix is twice the man you could ever hope to be.”

Calix grinned over at her, but King Evarius scowled at them both. “It seems a war is still in order after all.”

“I don’t think so,” Calix said. He yanked his arms from the guards and drew his sword, pointing it directly at his father’s throat. “You are going to talk this through like a real king.”

Kirana nodded and drew her sword as well, pointing it at her own father. “You both will.”

The two guards that had held Calix captive began to advance on her, but the king waved them aside. “Very well then.”

The negotiations lasted much longer than Kirana would have liked, and she was grateful Calix was there helping her supervise. The two kings quickly learned they had more in common than they realized, and so their conversations frequently drifted off track. The sun was high in the sky by the time they left, and Kirana’s father had invited King Evarius and Calix to a celebratory feast.

“Perhaps I underestimated you,” he said as they began the journey home. “It seems you are becoming a very wise leader. It’s clear you can protect this kingdom without marriage alliances. I’m sorry.”

Kirana looked down. “I shouldn’t have run away like that either. I’m sorry too.” They fell quiet for a moment before she spoke again. “Do you think Calix will be alright with his father? King Evarius doesn’t seem to like him very much.”

“King Evarius doesn’t realize how lucky he is to have such a worthy heir to the throne. We can only hope he will one day see that,” the king replied. “You and Calix are an extraordinary pair. I hope I am right in saying there is still a marriage in our future after all.”

“Father.”

Someone behind her laughed. “I must say, Your Highness, I’m not entirely opposed to the idea.” Kirana blushed as she turned to face Calix, who smirked.

“Maybe,” she said, trying her best to sound stern, but reached out to grab his hand. “I think there’s a lot of work to be done first.”

AN ENDEAVOR ANEW

Cole Parkhurst

The deafening scream of alarms and dim emergency lights flooded the room, ripping Luke out of his peaceful slumber. He shot upright in a panic, still confused and groggy he sat for an instant listening to the outcry and yelling outside his door. As he stood up from his bed he felt a sharp pain in his abdomen, running all the way up to his neck. Luke glanced down as he winced from the pain to see the lower half of his torso wrapped completely in bandages. This all seemed familiar, Luke had been here before but he couldn't place where or when. He stumbled towards the door barefoot and half-dressed, the door to his room slid open to the side as he approached. As soon as the door opened the sounds of alarms and panic filled his head even louder than before, small groups of men and women wearing a variety of office clothing and lab coats ran in every direction of the hallways outside Luke's room. A red glow filled these hallways as the emergency lights overpowered the normal soft lighting of the facility. Luke tried repeatedly to ask members of these passing groups for help or information, but everytime he attempted to speak his mouth couldn't produce any sound. Luke started to wander the facility, slowly limping down the hallways he was time and again stumbled into and ignored by the frenzied people running about. As he walked around the facility he remembered more about it, though he didn't know what exactly it was. He came to an intersection in the hallway, to the right he knew was the cafeteria, and to the left was the infirmary. Further down the hall at another intersection there were walkways that lead to an exercise center and the office building. All of these hallways had people running in and out of them, unable to find an exit. As he continued walking he noticed all of these divisions had people in them, all but the hallway to the research laboratory. Something in Luke's mind pushed him towards this hallway, despite the dangerous calm of this area his gut was screaming at him to walk towards the laboratory. Luke staggered down the hallway and reached the double doors to the lab. The biometric scanner in the hallway opened the automatic doors, when the path forward opened Luke witnessed walls dotted with blood and the floor littered with human bodies. Luke briefly looked away in shock but as he turned he saw one of the bloodied bodies wheezing for air on the floor. Luke's gut once again urged him to move forward and gather more information. As Luke approached the dying man he once again knew more of his surroundings. The man on the floor was Doctor Hayes, though Luke didn't know why he knew that or what this man did for work. The doctor looked up at Luke, his face immediately welling with a mix of anger and sadness. "This was all your fault, Luke." uttered Dr. Hayes. "You didn't help us, this is all because of you." whispered the slouched man with his final breath. Confused and anxious Luke's breathing became panicked as he looked at the man on the ground in front of him. Just as Luke reached the climax of his dread a door further down the laboratory hallway was torn open and thrown against the wall. As an otherworldly screech overpowered the alarms Luke once again woke up, this time to a brisk morning air and the rustling of trees.

Luke sat up in his hammock, the large scar running through his abdomen and up the side of his body ached with the pain of memory. Luke had become accustomed to reliving that day in his dreams, he would have this nightmare every few days. As he became more alert Luke's heart rate slowed and the memories of his life and the past once again became clear. Luke let out a quick, gentle whistle, and at a nearby pair of trees two ears perked up from another hammock. "Come on girl, time to get up." Luke called to the hammock. The head of a black German Shepherd popped out from the hammock and let out a yawn. Luke hopped out of his hammock and stood under the dog's. "Alright Sage, hop out I'll catch you." said Luke to his dog. This process was messy at first, after all it's not easy for a human to just jump out of a hammock, let alone a dog. It took many messy falls and lucky saves but

eventually these two figured it out. Luke caught Sage and gently placed her down on the ground. "Okay you stay here real quick while I go grab some breakfast." said Luke to his dog, who seemed to understand the word "breakfast" and was happily wagging her tail. Luke climbed the tree his hammock was attached to, untied his bag, and brought it down to the ground. He kneeled in the dirt next to Sage and opened up his bag, both of them examining the canned goods inside. "Hmm okay so it looks like we've got some carrots, pineapple, peas, and a few types of beans. Which one do you want?" Luke asked Sage. The dog looked at each can briefly, and after a moment she pushed her nose up against the canned carrots. Luke wasn't sure if she knew the difference but he liked giving her the choice anyway. "Okay you eat up and I'll pack up our stuff." said Luke as he opened up the can with a knife and left it on the ground for Sage to eat. Luke spent a few minutes climbing trees and bringing down their hammocks, he rolled them up and placed them into his bag. Luke grabbed a can of kidney beans as he sealed the bag. Around the same time as Luke finished packing up their stuff, Sage had finished her meal. "All ready?" Luke said to the dog as she stood there wagging her tail at him. Luke pulled out a map and kneeled down so Sage could look. "Alright. So we're gonna need more medical supplies and it wouldn't hurt to stock up on some more food. Luckily we're just a few miles east of San Diego-" Luke stopped himself before he finished his sentence. Luke looked over at Sage, who turned to look back at him while wagging her tail. Luke scratched the side of her head, worried about what they might go through. "We really need to stop by the city, but it will most likely be filled with howlers." Luke said quietly to himself. He knew they only had a few more meals left and should either of them get injured it would end badly, they needed those supplies. Luke let out a long breath and started folding up his map, they might as well start moving now. The two walked out of their clearing in the trees, the sun had just begun to break over the horizon. Luke and Sage turned their backs to the rising sun, towards the city.

The outer confines of cities were often barren, with their buildings completely ransacked and streets empty. Luke didn't bother to stop at any overgrown supermarkets or defiled convenience stores, he knew everything left in this city would be in the heart of it. As Luke and Sage snuck through the city they once again became familiar with the ghastly wailing and sobbing that accompanied these places. As many times as he'd seen them and killed them, the sight of howlers always filled Luke with horror. The outbreak caused those infected to become disfigured, some looked similar to regular humans but many were changed dramatically. Some mutated to have freakishly long arms with wrists that dragged at the ground. Some became hulking monsters standing at 10 or more feet tall. Some had changes to smaller parts of their bodies like those with grotesquely long tongues that hung out of their mouths, or a head covered in blinking eyes. The one thing every single howler had in common were the noises they made. These things were no longer human, and they weren't even really alive, but they all wailed and cried at the top of their lungs. They never spoke any words, they never showed any signs of intelligence, these creatures were fiends that would kill any type of regular life. Luckily Sage knew to be quiet, though Luke wasn't sure if this was out of fear, awareness, or both. It had been many months since the outbreak and Luke had become quite skilled at evading large groups of howlers. Luke and Sage moved low and slow through the city, fortunately once they reached an old store the howlers wouldn't be able to hear them over their own sounds. Eventually Luke and Sage reached an old grocery store, the shelves were about one-third full, a very lucky find for the two of them. The two of them headed inside quietly shutting the door

behind them so as to not alert any howlers. Luke went to all of the usual spots, first he checked the non-perishables, then the pharmaceutical section, and then to other mundane items such as fuel or water purification tablets. Luke and Sage managed to gather about one week's worth of food, Sage couldn't eat some of the food but they both still picked their favorites. Luke packed up their stuff and walked out of the store. This was a very fortunate find for the both of them and they would be able to live comfortably and travel for the next week or so. Luke once again carefully shut the front door to the market and started walking away from the large group of howlers. The boy and his dog walked for a few minutes when they suddenly heard a shrill scream. Both Luke and Sage stopped in their tracks, this scream was different, this scream was intentional. Just as Luke thought this the same scream cried out in words, the first words Luke had heard other than his own in months. "Help me, please somebody help me!" cried out the voice of a woman. Upon hearing this Luke's mind went wild with the thoughts of seeing another human, of finally speaking to a living human being rather than himself or his dog. Luke stood there for only a few seconds considering this, the memory of Dr Hayes and his dying words flooded his brain. Luke dropped his bag on the ground, grabbed a knife, and ran as fast as he could towards the voice of the woman. Sage immediately followed Luke, the two of them sprinting towards their demise, or their redemption.



FINE PRINT

Briyon Dogan

The saccharine scent of artificial cherries permeated the air. “You’re awfully adorable, aren’t you?” A lilting voice crooned. Looking up to see where the voice came from, I met eyes with what appeared to be a demon. Six agonizingly long seconds passed by as I was stunned into silence by their presence.

“What do you want from me?” I managed to choke out, trying to process what the hell was happening. Having vivid dreams wasn’t out of the ordinary for me, and I figured that this was another one of those instances. Surely, they couldn’t be real, right? As if reading my mind, they gave me an impish smirk. For a moment, they took the heart-shaped lollipop out of their mouth and met eyes with me. “Nothing of astounding importance,” they replied smoothly. “But my desires are subject to change depending on the circumstances.” After they finished speaking, I glanced at them once more. They could pass as human, if not for their vermilion eyes, razor-sharp teeth, and small horns that protruded from their forehead. Their pupils were distinctively heart-shaped, and the end of their tail had curled up into the same shape.

“What are you? Who are you?”. Overcome with a sudden chill from the frosty late-January air, I wrapped my comforter around my body.

“Would you prefer a brief introduction or a more in-depth synopsis?” Their tone was a blend of effortless formality and genuine relaxation. In my case, my anxiety was kicked into overdrive.

“A brief introduction would be nice.” My voice shook slightly. “You aren’t going to reap my soul, are you? Or sentence me to eternal damnation?” I was by no means a religious person, but the brutal complexities of demonic machinations were something that I didn’t want to experience firsthand.

“You needn’t worry about that.” Waving their hand dismissively, they finished the remnants of their lollipop and curled it into the palm of their hand. Seconds later, the lollipop’s white stick dematerialized. “Those tasks are allocated to my higher-ups, and so far, you haven’t done anything on your end to incense them.”

“My apologies! Sorry for dragging this conversation on. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Aere, a love demon.” That explained their somewhat uncanny resemblance to Cupid. Vibrant red curls enveloped their cherubic cheeks.

“So, you’re a succubus?” I asked incredulously. I was too enveloped in my own curiosity to know whether this question was rude. But this question didn’t appear to anger them. Rather, Aere merely chuckled in response.

“Not exactly,” Aere smiled. “I assist humans and other entities in advancing within the rudimentary tenets of romance. As for the carnal aspects of relationships, those are usually set aside until both parties are comfortable with one another.” Nodding, I took in the newfound information as I relaxed into my comforter. It was a relief that they didn’t want to kill me. But why would they choose me specifically, out of all people?

“What’s so special about me?” I verbalized out loud, awaiting their response. Aere held my gaze again, considering their next words.

“For starters, your name is Valentine.” Since my birthday coincided with Valentine’s Day, it was only natural for my parents to give me the name.

As if sensing the painful irony of my current predicament, Aere continued. “Despite this, you don’t seem to have much luck with relationships.” Being that I was a very shy person overall, I was never able to muster up the courage to pursue people romantically. During the rare instances in which

others acknowledged my presence, I was always tongue-tied. While others went out on lavish dates and gifted one another with expensive roses on the 14th, I found comfort in my loneliness. Or at least I tried to. “Luckily for you, I can provide you with an abundance of help.” Aere promised, lending me a reassuring smile. I smiled in return, appreciating the gesture. “But there’s no guarantee that everything will fall into place overnight. There must also be some effort placed on your end as well.” If I were able to have less anxiety surrounding romance, I didn’t care how long this process would take.

“Some instances of this process can be very tedious as well. I’m aware of the fact that humans don’t always partake in the most rational decisions when they’re in love with another person.” As Aere found a comfortable position on the beanbag chair adjacent to my bed, they unearthed what appeared to be a contract of some sort.

“I thought you told me that you weren’t going to sell my soul,” I joked, briefly skimming the contract. After a few seconds I signed the bottom, dotting the ‘l’s’ with hearts. Giving the signed contract to Aere, I got out of bed and greeted my pet cat, who was curiously sniffing Aere’s right hand.

“Who’s this lovely creature?” cooed Aere, petting the cat. My cat, letting out a satisfied trill, leapt onto Aere’s lap, demanding more attention.

“His name is Gizmo,” I replied, watching as the calico wrapped his tail around Aere’s arm. I started to notice that I felt a little different. It felt as if my senses were heightened. I didn’t think too much of it until I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My fingernails had been replaced with claws, and small horns were beginning to sprout from the top of my head. There was also a slight pain in my canine teeth.

“I hope that you’ll enjoy being my assistant.” Aere chirped pleasantly. “I assume it’s a far more desirable alternative than being tethered to a mortal vessel.” With that, they handed me a heart-shaped lollipop.

“So, what happens now?” Judging by how comfortable Aere had made themselves, I didn’t think they’d planned on making a hasty exit anytime soon.

“We find more assistants.” Aere said simply. We walked into the living room, with Gizmo trailing behind us. A ravenous hunger coursed through my body. I remembered the box of cupcakes that I’d purchased the night prior, so I sprinted into the kitchen and swung the refrigerator’s door open. Merely a few minutes had passed before I’d devoured them all with reckless abandon. It was the last thing I remembered before abruptly falling asleep.

Several hours had passed, and I’d awakened from my brief slumber. However, the environment around me was unfamiliar. Billowing clouds of burning brimstone wafted into my nostrils, and countless demons milled about.

“Didn’t you read the fine print?” Aere looked down at me, baring their teeth as they greeted me with a toothy grin. Had I been tricked? Either way, I was indebted to them for eternity.

PICTURE PERFECT

Starla Dalmen

"I do."

They said together, she stared into the deep blue hues of the man she felt the most love from. He was sweet, he made her feel important and cared for, her parents had no fear that he couldn't keep them afloat, she would live the life she always wanted. Getting the permission from the Judge, they kissed. James snatched the purple bouquet from her and playfully chucked it into the crowd of witnesses so Becca could grasp his face with both hands, she knew he wanted that, and she was all too happy to oblige. A beautiful picture was snapped, him smirking while biting her smiling lip, the couple was shamelessly in love, having known each other a year this step would have shocked most but anyone who knew them, knew their love was huge; It would reverberate throughout mountains.

The picture hung perfectly in their living room for all to see, just above the TV. Months passed and neither felt any differently about each other, their love still disgusted anyone seeing the two together. It was undeniable, they were perfect for each other. Becca did most of the housework while James paid the bills, they had a perfect system, Becca had no reason to have any distrust and remained confident in her decisions with him though he had been a bit strange ever since moving in together.

Becca's signature hair in a bandana was one of James's favorites, he said she was the perfect sixties housewife with just enough 'hood' to not take shit from anyone and this always gave Becca a confidence boost. While James was planted in front of the TV, feet up, beer in hand while watching the basketball game, his perfect modern day sixties wife was turning the clothes out, checking pockets and such in preparation them for the wash. Nothing out of the ordinary. She grabbed the last pair of pants and shook the legs out, a small Ziplock with a white powdery substance flew up and plopped to the ground. Becca's heart sank, unsure of what it was but knowing exactly what it was.

Her stomach flipped; butterflies ate away at her insides while she wrestled with the idea of bringing it up to her beloved. She took the time to finish loading the washer while her cheeks became rosier and hotter. She hit start, snatched the baggy off the floor and found herself standing before James.

"What's this? Is this why you're coming home late? Is this why we needed help with bills?" She questioned as he shifted left and right to see the game around her frame. "It's nothing babe, fuckin' move, you're in the way." Becca blinked a few times, unsure about what she'd just heard, he never spoke to her that way. "Answer me!" She shrieked as she reached behind the TV, unplugging it not caring what part of the game he was at.

"What the fuck?!" Roamed James as he stood, frantically making his way over to her he pushed her back, snatched the cable and jammed it back into the wall. Becca landed with a thud, pain shot into her buttocks, she didn't have much padding not to mention the shock of being pushed by the one person she thought truly loved her. She stood and emptied the contents on to the carpet. "Fuck you." She snapped, tears welling up in her eyes she unplugged the tv again just when he sat down and watched the powder float about on its way down. Rage overtook James, his fist crunched against her cheek, the sting immediately took her breath away and once he got this reaction he punched her other cheek, both eyes blacking and swelling. Her version went in and out,

she seen spots flowing about the room through her tears. She sobbed and his eyes widened having realized what he'd just done, the pupils so large she could hardly see the beautiful blue they should be. Tears streamed down his own face as he crawled on the floor to her, his sobs just as loud as hers "Why'd you make me do that?" He sobbed out, almost unable to get the words out. Becca's tears instantly dried up, wondering how this was her fault. "I'll never do that again, I promise! I'm so sorry. I got scared you'd leave me, and I just love you, love makes you do crazy shit. You know that!" He said, burrowing his face into her chest she took in a shaky breath, cradling his head like a baby she held him while he sobbed into her blouse. Blood trickled down her cheek, tickling her sensitive skin before it splatted on his forehead. She believed him. He would never do this, he's just sick, he needs help, and she would be the one to give it to him. Had he been sober, he'd have never hit her, not twice. She gently stroked his soft beard and kissed the blood from his forehead in hopes he wouldn't see it later in the mirror and bring the memories back to him staring at the picture above the TV. She was going to her happy place.

Weeks passed and her blackened eyes were slowly healing. She kept herself in the house, not wanting to leave in fear someone would question her bruises and she'd have to defend her love. She sat on the sofa, softly strumming her guitar and humming to herself. James walked in, took his normal seat on the recliner in front of the TV. His side eye while she strummed made her smile, he always looked at her like that while she played. Her music was typically a little depressing. James had a complex today. The slow strumming was upsetting, his pupils were nearly taking over his iris, the same look in his eyes she seen the night he beat her. She stopped strumming.

"Are... you... ok?" She asked him in a soft tone, terror raced through her body, her hands quivered so she laid her guitar across her lap to clasp her hands, James didn't like seeing her fear him. She swallowed hard waiting for his response. "You know I love your playing. You're good and your singing voice is beautiful... I just can't help but notice how you're writing super sad shit. Obviously, you're unhappy with me." He snapped; her heart sank. "No! No, not at all. I love you; I've never been happier." She forced a smile though she knew he was high, this was terrifying. "Fucking liar!" He stood snatching her guitar from her lap and in the same fluid movement slammed in into the coffee table, knocking her song book to the floor, her guitar split in two at the neck. Her mouth gaping open in shock she frantically shook her head and without thinking about it she tried to grab the guitar from him.

"Don't write shit about me!" He slammed the guitar down again, now only being held together by the strings. He dropped the guitar and spit at her. "I thought we'd always be honest with each other!" He mocked at her, grinning at the sight of Becca on her hands and knees picking up shards of wood from her guitar, a quiet sob escaped her lips. The guitar had been what was getting her through her time at home. "I am honest!" She sat on her knees, her hands rested at her sides, flat on the floor. He laughed an obvious fake laugh, lifted his leg, and sent his boot down on her right hand. Her fingers broke under the immense pressure and a cry of pain forced its way from her mouth, a hard slap busted her lip. "Talentless now." He smirked walking away to the bedroom.

This abuse continued, she justified what he did to her with 'at least it wasn't my face this time' and convincing herself that she did upset him enough to make him hurt her. She told herself it would get better if she got better, if her got better. It was the drugs, it was the way she carried herself, it was too much stress at work, she didn't finish her chores, anything but it being his fault.

She endured blows to her stomach, back, her legs and stayed with him, partially in fear that he'd find

her and finish the job, another part of her was worried that he'd return to his normal, loving, funny self and when he did, she'd want him back. She chose to stick it out and endure whatever she needed until the bad guy left and the good one came back to James' surface.

Becca's cast finally came off, she was doing dishes, singing along to the music that played on her radio, 'When I was your man' by Bruno Mars came on, unable to change the song she decided to hum the tune. James snuck up behind her, wrapped his strong tattooed arms around her waist and nestled his face into her neck, inhaling her floral scent and smiled against her soft skin. She couldn't help but smile, it had been so long since he showed her affection and it had been just as long since she gave in to him. She leaned her head against his, her hands slowly lowered the glass plate when suddenly the mood shifted.

"Are you trying to sing this shit to me?" His whisper sent chills throughout her body, her heart sunk, and butterflies had a buffet in her stomach. She shook her head, stayed silent and didn't dare hum any longer. "You're so fucking fake!" He yelled, tickling her ear drum and before she was able to respond, her head was in the soapy water. His bear paw held her brown locks, suds popped in her ear, arms flailing as she tried to fight to get the smallest bit of air in her lungs. She choked on the water; she couldn't make out what he was yelling at her while she was drowning. He teased her with life, allowing her to take in just enough air so he could slam her back into the dishwater again. She audibly gasped each time she was able to get the slightest amount of air. Water burnt her nostrils, her hands bloody from trying to get away from the sink. Her fight started to slow, James finally ripped her back out of the water by her hair and swung her head back as he let go. Becca slammed down on the kitchen floor, her hair stuck to her face while she coughed, puking out water she inhaled feeling it was impossible to catch her breath but was happy to be alive.

Becca couldn't take it anymore, this would be the last time he did this, this was too far. She cried, screaming with fear, she couldn't believe she was alive. Shooting her dagger eyes his lips curved into a disgust. "Clean yourself up. Then finish the fucking dishes-you have us living like fuckin' pigs." Water drained from her nose, she stared at the picture above the TV, finding her happy place like she always did. The man in the picture, that was the man she was fighting for.

Becca complied with any request, stopped singing entirely whether it was her song or not, she wouldn't risk it. She knew what she had to do, she knew she'd never leave him, and she knew 'the good guy' wasn't coming back to her. She waited for him to leave for work, found James' shotgun, the ammo and set it all up to point directly at her front door. She wrapped a small rope around to squeeze the trigger when ever the door would open. She sat in James' recliner, staring at the picture until she heard the knob starting to turn.

Fear and excitement coursed through her, she watched with anticipation. James opened the door, Becca jumped at the sound of the shotgun. The aim was perfect. James' tall body slammed to the floor. Blood pooled around his body; a smile crept on her lips at such a site. The monster that made her life miserable was finally done for. He wouldn't be back to hurt her again or anyone else for that matter. She stood from the couch to tower of her abuser.

"Just know. I thought you were going to leave me... Love makes you do some crazy shit..." She smirked, sirens already in earshot she reached in James' pocket, pulled out his cigarettes and lit one up. She left the door open and sat in his recliner again, staring at the picture of the once happy, picture perfect, beautiful couple.

MY WORDS

Natalie Elizondo

Poetry is a complicated form of art
Words that flow well together
In my hands
Become a sort of offender
Like missing with a dart

Flowery words, with no end
And complicated riddles
Under this pressure
How do I not dwindle
And follow the artist's terrible trend

Being creative with familiar words
to be original
Past the point of other's works
Even those that are digital
I am less than a third


Oh, to be like Shakespeare
Whose language knew no bounds
Compared to me
How can I hold my ground
Against the words of a spear

The words that come naturally
Have no meaning
And
It seems a little demeaning
And the feeling grows gradually

I am not an artist
Or a poet
Or a linguist
I don't think anything rhymes with poet
Which just proves how far I am from the smartest

Many who write
Do not try to rhyme
Because it's complicated
And don't have the time
To do something that won't take flight





My own repeating words
Often can't be understood
And don't follow a good flow
But who said poetry had to be good
As long as it's better than the nerds

The work I put in for a grade
Hardly stands up to the potential
That I've always tried to display
It's always felt essential
As if it would mean I would get paid

Poems written when I was a child
Sometimes seem better than what I spit out now
Lost to the grasp of time
How can I live up to that vow
When it has only become more wild

TO TRAIN OUR CHILDREN

Brianna Lopez

Education

Learning frenzy

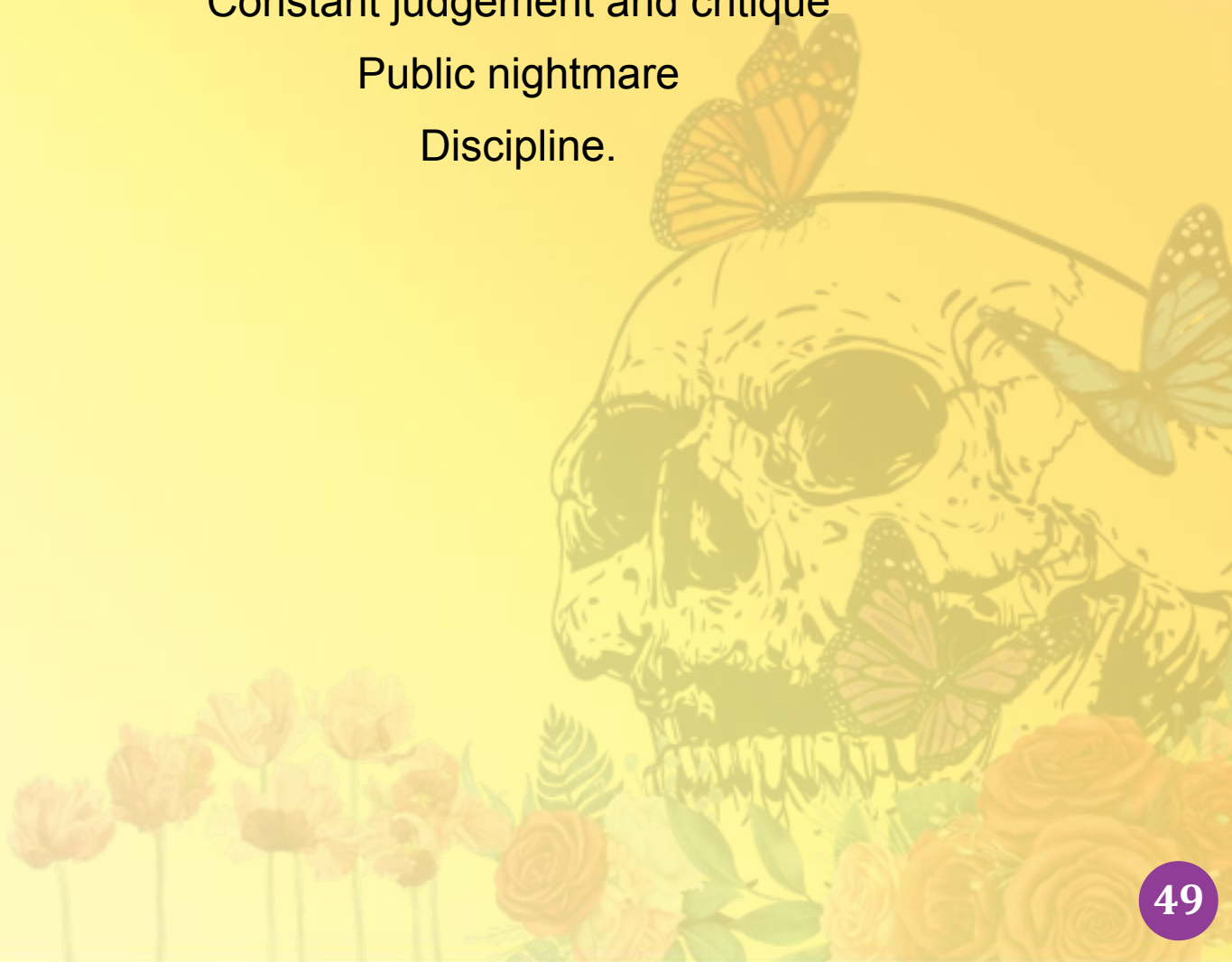
Socializing, friendly encounters

Six hours a day

Constant judgement and critique

Public nightmare

Discipline.





MARIPOSA

LITERARY REVIEW

Spring 2023



**ESTRELLA MOUNTAIN
COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

A MARICOPA COMMUNITY COLLEGE