The Pen in the Paw:
Imagination is a Wonderful Thing to Bear

Oakdale High School's Creative Arts Magazine 2016-2017
The cover art of this year’s debut edition of *The Pen in the Paw* was drawn by freshman Claire Johnson.

The name for the magazine was submitted by an anonymous student. The Creative Writing Club chose it over ten other submissions to become the new title of our magazine. It’s playful and incorporates our bear mascot.

This magazine is important to us. Our Creative Writing club members feel that there is both a dignity and a power in imagination. Writers “who labor in obscurity...have a special throne in heaven” (Monica Wood, *The Pocket Muse*). They write as an emotional outlet, as an expression of themselves, as a way to connect with the world. They write what thrills them, what terrifies them, what tempts them, and what torments them. This year is the first edition of *The Pen in the Paw*, which showcases students in all grades and writers of all genres. Forty-four students and six teachers contributed work for publication, and this number will only grow as the Creative Writing program grows.

**Thank Yous**

- A special thank you to the art teachers for encouraging art students to submit their work
- A shout-out to English 11 students for being brave enough to share their college/personal essays
- Thank you to Ms. Owen for organizing the Young Authors Contest, from which we received several pieces for this magazine
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A Family’s Miserable Denouement as Expressed by a Funereal Misadventure

By: Brendan Hylton

A falling car
From the bridge
Broke the bar
Near the ridge.

A man at front,
Hands flying,
Head goes blunt,
Pain applying.

Child fading,
Love descending,
Deadly trading,
Somber ending.

Mysterious splash,
Water sparkles,
Other cars dash,
Life always darkles.
With my chai latte in front of me, I am ready. Across the worn oak table sits my best friend, Tess, who is there to talk about one of the seemingly catastrophic problems that we as teenagers often misinterpret as the end of the world. Little do we know that it is not the problems themselves that are life changing but the process which we take to solve them that is. Her uneasy smile and gentle laugh as well as the soft tear forming in her eye confirms why I am there. If it wasn’t Tess across from me on this winter morning, it could be three other friends, or my mom, maybe my boyfriend, or possibly my twin brother. A majority of the time my coffee date is my laptop where the conversation is within my mind where I attempt to conquer the Taylor polynomial or the leadership essay due at midnight.

The small coffee shop that draws a variety of patrons from tattooed couples to groups of bearded men arguing politics has provided a haven for me - not just somewhere I can purchase a caffeinated beverage on my thirty minute break to conquer a double shift. The cozy interior with plush chairs, a coffee bar, and the dog-friendly patio have rendered a location for me to build friendships, take on the job as a therapist for the day, act like a dignified adult, to focus, and to laugh. It has provided me the opportunity to exercise my newfound independence and build quality relationships with not only those I associate with, but with myself as well. It is in nourishing these relationships that I have identified who I am. I believe this is the key factor in maturing into the adult version and hopefully the better version of myself.

Independence often comes in correlation with growing up. It is part of the life cycle. We are born with complete dependence and as we mature independence becomes more familiar until eventually dependence is once again needed in old age. I do not believe that independence in the fullest form is attainable, but a vision for independence can be reached in stepping stones throughout life. The accomplishments made individually start small such as walking home alone from the bus stop. For me, time spent at Frederick Coffee Co. has been one of these stepping stones. Independence that I have gained can be shown through small accomplishments: parallel parking, keeping track of time in the meter and even gaining the confidence to overcome every child’s fear of eating alone at a table in public.

Neither an introvert or an extrovert, I consider myself somewhere in the middle of this scale. It is my experience that the ability to flick the switch between these contrasting personality types is where I am most comfortable. Either settled in a chair with a book or on a group breakfast date, with a coffee in front of me I am given the power to find myself on both ends of this spectrum.

On this cold winter morning I fight the temptation to get lost in watching the snowflakes meander their way down to settle onto the warm car hoods and disappear. I could easily get lost in sadness or frustration of each tiny little snowflake. But, I remind myself that there is a life crisis happening across the table from me and it is up to me to listen, to coach, to guide and to help heal. It is the corners of Tess’s mouth that finally take an upturn that tell me that the crisis has passed and her vision is now a little more clear. She leans across the table to give me a hug and I feel her wool scarf scratch against my chin before she heads out into the blustery afternoon. I’m left to take on that Taylor polynomial again.

By: Camille Gipson
Countdown

10
9
The time seems to stand still
The images of people I knew flash behind my eyes
8
Choices I’ve made, good or bad come to haunt me once again
I see the hurt looks on those who I’ve betrayed faces, I don’t regret it
7
I see this moment as well I see their face as they watch me crumble slowly in to a heap of nothing
6
I see myself screaming at my family
5
Tears falling down my face as they yell back
4
I think there’s nothing left any more
I’ve thrown away all that was good long ago
3
I slowly realize this is real and I can’t undo it
2
The dark abyss slowly circles me I smile
1
Nothing
0

By: Sarah Snyder
Dinner Date with a Familiar Stranger

By: Jessica Smith

This is not blood
But the color of that bitter wine that you fed me
Spilling
Spoiling the lace of my dress,
The one that you love
To hook your crooked fingers through.
Greedy
Hungry fingers that devour me up.
Pleasantries are shared
In your sickeningly sweet voice
Like candied nails.
Digging
Sinking into my skin
With every curve of your beautiful lips,
every click of your serpent tongue.
Deceitful,
Dishonesties dribble out masquerading as absolutes.
Filling up my fork with your fables,
So drunk off of false affection
That I can barely taste the poison.

A Food Chain of Divinity

By: Jessica Smith

I suppose the reason that humans love beautiful things
is because they believe
deep down,
that if they can simply devour
enough of it,
then they can emerge
with the same kind of softness
that hides
between the wooden frames of Picassos
and streams in sunlight through window-panes
and hits satin skins
the morning after.
Like if you can capture enough within you,
it will spill out your mouth
and seep from your pores-
a metamorphosis-
into something to be feasted on
in hopes that you too,
one day,
will be swallowed whole.
Who We Are in Six Words:
A Collection of OHS Faculty Memoirs

Inspirational Bear Family supports my life. --Ms. Graziano

Unique travel experiences enrich life forever. --Ms. Brown


Yo enseño. I teach español. Insane? --Ms. Caliskan

Never give up. Seek out possibilities. --Ms. Seaton

Not quite what I expected. Awesome! --Ms. Harold

Read, read. Read it again, again! --Ms. Isacco

Life is short. Live it well. --Ms. M. Smith

Long meeting. Good lunch. Great people. - Ms. Clabaugh

"Take the crookeds with the straights." (Quote from the movie Fences)--Ms. Parker

Plan to exceed. Enjoy the reward.
&
Take risks - fly, fail - move on! --Ms. Young

Still making mistakes, me!? an adult??! --Ms. Mulcahy

Excitement for Learning is my classroom catch phrase :-) --Ms. Gibbons

I have nothing witty to write." - Mr. Smarick

Humor, a weapon of the soul. --Mr. Frey

A hike in nature solves everything. --Ms. Owen

Counting is not my thing. --Mr. Walker

Sunshine, blue skies, sandy beaches ... RETIREMENT!! --Ms. Turowski

"Right now is the only guarantee." (Jay Long)--Ms. Gonzalez-Simmons

Love your life, live your life! --Ms. Lemon

The road less traveled is adventurous! --Ms. Buxbaum

You would never know, it's Grace. --Ms. McGraw

Instead of Google, use your brain. --Mr. Socash
The world will eventually end in oblivion, unremembered when our people moved to the distant planets far, far away from here before it’s over. In another galaxy I presume. Living in a care free world and hidden behind the stars too far out to care, where we eventually would end up. The people begin living for a good two-hundred years and eventually find that there is more to do on that small world they found. The currency wouldn’t matter anymore, it’s like the money had never existed in the first place. There will be no fees, taxes, or payments due and everything we have will just be created by the thousands of machines they had brought with them from our non-existent planet earth. It’s an insurance for them to know they would be safe standing by these machines that never seem to break down or collapse beneath themselves. I’m sure those people that are on the planet, know by a name that I shall never speak, have no work, job, or responsibility. All they ever do is focus on living life to the fullest, on the edge, where the ground could fall beneath them at any moment. For fear of the day passing to quickly away without living up to the expectation of their own greek god Dionysus. For fear of not living in the best possible way. The parties, adventures, laughing, and pure chaos of everyone doing everything. They have never been more enlightened by anything in their world of no care, then the fact of ours is gone. Out of their site and away from their carefree souls. I can’t blame them though. Here I go, telling you about their world, and yet I never did mention that it was their fault that we were destroyed, destroyed into oblivion. Sentenced to this space of defeat by the planet we tried to recreate, and now they live far away from it without worries or fears. Good for them, because I speak from a world to far for anyone to find me. Not even they would know where I sit with nobody beside me. They may party and dance and laugh, risk their lives away in the simple yet extravagant world they’ve created, but I will stay here and speak, speak about Terra Firma.

By: Sage Wann

Renounced

Renounced, Disacknowledge
Discarded and Abandoned

Forsaken, Unaided
Me, Myself, and I

Nonessential, Superfluous
Redundant, One of the undesirables

Vacant, Unsubstantial
Baseless, Blank

Unpurposed, Impractical
Dysfunctional, A scrap

Omitted, Evaded
Spurned and Scorned

An accidental, Surplus
Irrelevant, Haphazard

Neglected.

By: Sage Wann
Holocaust

By: Alyssa Garagiola

Darkness envelopes good,
Evil shreds innocence,
Light is shattered by night,
Weeping is nonexistent,
Fear brings silence,
Silence brings death.

Hope only lasts so long
before it deteriorates,
when the world is silent.
The Well of Wishes
By: Christian Due

Long ago, there was a legendary Well of Wishes. This Well was deep in the Forests of the North, where few dared to go.

One day, a knight, whose name was Percivale, strode into the clearing and came upon the Well of Wishing. Knowing the miraculous powers that the Well had, he bravely walked up and drew from the Well a bucket of water. As legend stated, there would be a silver cup that he would find. Taking it, he dumped the goblet into the water and drank.

Stranger, one wish you are owed
But from this well your wish shall be never granted
Instead the Power to make your own wish come true, I upon you bestowed
now for you to grant The wish you so fervently chanted
-The Well of Wishes

P.S.: It is now up to you to make your wish come true
By the way, tips are appreciated too

This inscription appeared upon the plaque placed on the Well’s stoney wall. The knight read this, and realized that he had to make his wish, and then the Well would give him the power to grant it himself.

"There is a dragon that plagues my hometown. I wish," he spoke, "that I could find a way to defeat him."

Percivale, feeling empowered by the power of his wish, rested through the morning in the glade, drinking water from the Well (although no more Silver Cups appeared; clearly only one wish was allowed for each person) and sleeping. When the sun reached zenith, the knight ate a lunch bread and cheese and rose to continue onwards.

He untied his white stallion and they rode off, journeying south towards the Kingdom of Soal, and hurrying through the thick vines and narrow paths, thinking always of how he could defeat the dragon. A great and terrible dragon was seen approaching his village one day, which was situated along the western border of Soal, nearest to the Wasteland.

The dragon, as the knight recalled on that fateful day, descended upon the fields of the township and, with his fiery breath, burned the farms and killed the grazing goats and cows. He then flew on to the Anvern Castle, where he claimed by destroying the men who guarded it. He then ate as many men and animals as he could, before grabbing as much wealth as he could in his scaly talons and flying off into the mountainous Waste.

Many brave knights journeyed into the Wastelands to the Dragonlair, which was a day’s ride from Anvern, and few returned. Those few knights were pale as a ghost and babbled of the ruined land, and the treacherous climb up the mountains, only come into the Dragonlair and find the dragon waiting outside, trapping them within the caverns. Most of those that escaped the dragon fell to their doom in the crags and precipices of the Waste.

When night fell, Perivale rode into a clearing and decided that he would rest and continue on at dawn. The forest was dimly lit by the rising moon, even bigger than it seemed farther south, and the glow illuminated the clearing in silver light.

He gathered fresh wood and piled it in the middle of the clearing, and then he tried to light a fire. Again and again he attempted to run the wood together to spark something, but he saw nothing at all.

Suddenly, Percivale heard a steady clop-clop of a trotting horse. He drew aside, placing a hand on his sword’s hilt; for the woods of Northerland were untamed and wild, filled with both benevolent and mischievous Fey.

A knight, bearing black armour and a silver shield, rode into the clearing on a tan mare.

"Who are you? Friend or foe?" he called to the other knight.

"Friend; I ride in peace, although in the name of the King of Soal." Percivale relaxed his grip on his sword.

"Please, sit with me. I too ride for Soal. A fellow knight is welcome to warmth and replenishment, even if there is no fire yet."

He removed his black helmet, and wavy, burgundy locks spilled out. Percivale was staring into the face of a young woman.

"Y-you’re a girl?" he sputtered.

"I am a woman," she corrected. "Why do you act so astonished?"

"It’s just... well, the Royal Army doesn’t employ women."

"That’s probably why your army keep losing fights." She grinned. "I am part of the Elite Order. Are you having trouble lighting that fire?"

"N-no, I just... was... resting."

"Ok, sure," she said, dismounting her horse in one quick motion. "Here. Put my horse next to yours. I’ll get the fire going."

Percivale took the reins and led her horse to his own, who whinnied softly and resumed nibbling the grass. He then turned around to see a large fire burning over his logs.

"How did you do that so fast?" he demanded.

"I’ve been trained, obviously more than you have. We must learn magic in order to join the elite knighthood. I could start a fire
even without magic, but it would take longer."

"By the way, who are you?"

"I'm Alira," she answered. "You?"

"My name is Percivale."

While a deer that Percivale had caught was cooking, they told each other their stories then. Alira was the second daughter of the Duke of Lesene, who joined the Elite Order after she was found to be a talented warrior and mage.

"I was sent on a mission to find the Amaranthine Rose," she explained. "Its power will break a curse cast upon the Queen. I actually came to the Well to wish to find the Rose. After I made my wish, I found a helpful faun who guided me to meadow where it grows."

"Then your wish worked. My wish has yet to come into action." Then Percivale told Alira the story behind his journey and his wish.

"Why, of course!" exclaimed Alira. "The wish begins to work its magic! For I might be able to assist you, Percivale." The warrior maiden stood up, and began to speak to the trees.

"Umm... who are you talking to?" asked Percivale. Alira quieted him and began chanting.

"You called, mortal?" a saccharine voice said. Percivale and Alira turned to see a fairy fly into the clearing. She had long, bushy brown hair and giant moth wings.

"Please, O most wonderful lady, tell us how to defeat the great dragon that now has attacked Anvern Castle."

"The dragon you mention is Ilurth, son of Urlia, son of Gessair, who has lived in the Wastelands since he was driven out. For years he has hardened himself, until no blade can strike him down, and no arrow can pierce him."

"Then there is no hope?" asked the knight.

"When he was but a young fledgling, he foolishly flew into the mountains of your kingdom, and the great Wizard drove him from the land. The mage then ordered the best smith in the kingdom to fashion an Arrow to defeat a dragon as powerful, for he had only temporarily exiled him into the Waste. Even now, it seems he wouldn't dare return until he could make sure not even the Wizard could defeat him. Find this Magic Arrow, and let it fly into his heart, and no matter how hard his shell be, the Arrow will pierce his heart and kill him."

"Well, where can I find this Arrow?" asked Percivale.

"The dragon has taken it to his Lair, I suppose," she replied. "Obviously he has no fear of being defeated now, so from here, you must journey to Dragonlair and seize the Arrow. Let it fly into his heart and kill him."

"I cannot help you find the Arrow, but I will send you to the Dragonlair. Good luck," she said. With that, the world turned upside down.

Finally, Percivale was on a cliff edge. He was looking into a dark and vast cavern. Turning, he grabbed Alira and dragged her into the cavern.

She held out her hand and a ball of fire ignited. Then she threw it into the cave. The light hung near the cavern roof, spreading its dancing light over piles of gleaming gold and silver coins, armour, and jewelry.

Alira gasped. "Look at all this! This is worth certainly more than all the King's treasury."

"Don't pay attention to that. Find the Arrow." Percivale and Alira began a grueling and time consuming search. They sifted through vast masses of shining swords and ornate bows. "If your fairy friend was right, then the Magic Arrow should be the only one here."

"Aha!" cried Percivale. He held aloft in his hand an arrow like no other. It was gilded and the tip was shot with gold.

"This must be it!"

"Oh, good! Now, take a bow, and--" word: Percivale, "shouldn't the dragon have returned by now?"

"Wait," started Percivale. "I don't think we have returned yet."

They both waited in silence. "What do you mean? We came when the dragon was out.""

"That's my point," he told her. "The dragon has been out for quite a while. He could be attacking the village right now!"

"Oh no," she gasped, "we must get there now! I'll take us, let's go now!" She grabbed Percivale's hand and pulled him out into the blinding sunset. She took him all the way to the edge of the cliff, before raising her arms and chanting.

The wind howled in their ears. "Listen, we have to go now!" screamed Alira.

"But if we--"

"Trust me!" she yelled, holding out her hand. Tentatively, Percivale gripped it. Alira jumped off.

The wind rushed up from the great crag and pushed them up. The rocky terrain blurred as Alira ran, the mountains streaking past. "Run!" she bellowed back at him. Percivale started to leap, finding that he never tired.

All of a sudden, the wind became a breeze. It fanned at them as they softly landed on the dirt path. The smoke filled Percivale's lungs, obscuring his vision. The dragon flew overhead, breathing fire from its gigantic maw.

"This way!" he yelled at Alira, racing off towards the village center. Through the smoke, he saw the glittering armour of the Royal Army of Soal.

The dragon swooped down again. Percivale saw a man in gleaming gold armour, the Prince himself, come forward.

"Fire!" he ordered. A volley of arrows rained down on the dragon, but they all bounced off.
Percivale took aim at the dragon. He returned again, opening up his mouth to spew fire, this time it would burn every knight brought by the Prince.

Fire, a voice sang in Percivale’s mind. He let his silver arrow fly. It shot straight up like a shooting star, landing right where the dragon’s heart would be, where the arrow pierced the hard armour and sank in.

With a loud moan, the dragon fell to earth. The knights scattered out of the way as the dragon crashed, flattening several cabins. A great cheer arose from the army. They were finally free from the dragon!

That night, upon return to Anvern, the Prince of Soal gave Percivale a position in the Elite Knighthood. He later married Lady Alira, who also continued to fight as a warrior maiden in many wars following, and they lived out their lives happily ever after.

That night, a dryad from a nearby oak spoke to the Well of Wishes.

“How long are you planning to tell falsehood to those who drink at your waters, O jeweled Well?”

“I do not lie, O fairest among oaks. There may be nothing magical about my waters or my tin cup, but I do not say that I give them the power to make their dreams real. They have the power to do so themselves; all they need is to discover it within them.”

Past the Rabbit Hole

By: Sarah Snyder

To quote Alice in Wonderland, “I fell down the rabbit hole” would be an understatement; you see I’ve gone farther than the rabbit hole and have dug much deeper. I went past the mad hatter, past the queen of hearts, and past the Cheshire cat. It really is strange you would think that I’ve gone insane if I were to tell you that beyond wonderland is just a black lifeless desert. But it’s true once you head north just past the queen of hearts castle all that is there is darkness. Quite odd isn’t it? People always believe that Alice went insane when she hit her head in the rabbit hole but I have seen what she’s seen, I’ve lived what she’s lived, and if that makes you think that she’s insane then what I’m about to say will make you want to burn me at the stake and accuse me of witchcraft. Sure some of the things in her story were true and sure the mad hatter wasn’t really mad but you see the queen of hearts wasn’t really evil, just, let’s say misunderstood. I can tell you all about this yes I can but where’s the fun in that? How about I push you down the rabbit hole, just like Alice did to me, just so you can go through more freighting experiences than I did. You want to know what the queen told me when I met her. “Each time a person falls down the rabbit hole wonderland crumbles to dust even more and the people who live here become even more mad.” She said that then vanished to thin air. Not many people make it out of wonderland, actually between Alice and me there were 8 more people who went into the rabbit hole. We will never know their stories, well because there’s no one to tell them. Wonderland is almost gone you see. The queen’s castle is almost in ruins, the mad hatters gone insane, the white rabbits coat has turned gray, the Cheshire cat doesn’t smile, and finally Alice, she has it the worst of all. They have her in a strait jacket to make sure she doesn’t hurt herself; she’s tied to her bed because of her nightmares, and sometimes has to be gagged so we can’t hear the screams that come out of her mouth, sometimes at night I’ll sneak into her room to hear what she says. It’s not that hard really she only whispers the same thing. “Once we fall down the rabbit hole in to wonderland it’s our bodies that return not our minds.” Alice had a kinder journey in wonderland; the people were nice she had tea. What I got when I went down was insanity and blood not exactly the same thing I would say, right? Now as your reading this story about wonderland what are you thinking about, Alice, me, about wonderland? Well let me just say that if anyone else goes down the rabbit hole we will never hear anymore nice stories from that place ever again. For you see wonderland is a place that represents what your mind will become for Alice she has been affected by every single person who’s entered because she created it. Wonderland will crumble and with it Alice will to. Now take this as a warning, everyone who goes to wonderland will become just like me and Alice only each day gets worse as wonderland is slowly dying just like you and me. Our time is short but in our minds we hold the key to our own wonderland. Except it will never be the same as you heard in the stories and movies. It’s far worse.
Thin Blue Line

By: Gabrielle McCoy

Bricks flying
Through the sky.
Trash cans ignited
And hurled across streets,
Slurs spit out
For miles to hear.

Men and women,
Dressed in blue
With shields drawn.
This is not the city
It once was-
But now a civilian war zone.

Burned cars.
Looted storefronts.
Decimated jobs.
Endangered lives.
With no end
In sight.

April 27, 2015-
The Baltimore Riots.
An eruption of violence
Among civilians
That has spread
Across the nation.

“Police brutality!”
They screech.
“Black lives matter!”
They declare.
Now popular slogans
That encourage violence.

Do these “peaceful protestors” believe
All officers are racist-
All want to kill black people-
All have it out for them?
Instead of realizing their job
Is to protect the community at all costs.

These brave people
Risk their lives,
Bearing only a gun and vest
As protection,
Against the very criminals
They lock up to protect us.

And do not forget
Their families.
Parents, wives, husbands, children
Whom anxiously pace
As they watch the news
With fear carved into their faces.

My grandma is that parent.
My mother is that wife.
My brother and I are those children.
My father is that officer.
And not a day goes by
That we don’t fear for his life.
"What happened?" I said as I sat up in my bed, trying to piece together in my mind how I got there.
"You went to school, got sick, and came home," Memory responded, clearly hiding something from me.
"And what else?" I asked equally mad at Memory for not telling me and scared by what he was keeping from me.
"I could tell you but you're not going to lik-"
"Just say it!" I shot back getting very annoyed now.
Memory took a deep breathe and took his time to start talking. When he finally did speak I wished he hadn't.
"You went to school, got sick, they broke up with you, and then you went home." Memory said, hesitating to say every word. Before I could even fully process what had happened someone else cut in, interrupting my thoughts.
"Don't listen to him. It was all just a dream. You and them are still together, and you never went to school today because you were sick."
It was Deceit. Normally I know better than to trust him but I knew deep down that if I didn’t I would have to face to truth which is something that would result in a lot of pain.
"You're right. It was all just a dream."
"Don't listen to memory, he's still just processing your dreams." Deceit was being the most reassuring he had ever been making me believe him even more. "Give him some time and he will separate fantasy from reality."
Satisfied with Deceit's reasoning, I started making my way downstairs to get something to eat. I couldn't even get halfway down the stairs without being interrupted again by someone else.
"You can’t escape from the truth." Trust started taking away my comfort in the lies Deceit had told me, ”They broke up with you. Your relationship is over. That is the truth.”
I started realizing that trust was right as I got a plate out of the cupboard. I didn't even have a chance to think through what trust had said when I heard someone else start speaking to me.
"That's right you can’t escape the truth. The truth that this is all your fault. The truth that you are worthless and all you did was hurt them." Rage was trying to infuriate me and I knew it but what he was saying was still getting to me. "Now who are they going to with their issues? Their depression? Their anxiety? What is going to happen the next time they feel like killing themselves? They’ll die. And it will be your fault because you forced them to break up with you because you were hurting them and now they don’t have anyone to go to. So how does it feel? How does it feel knowing that you are going to cause the person you love to take their own life?"
"SHUT UP!" I screamed, slamming the plate on the ground shattering it to pieces.
"You might want to clean that up before anyone comes home," Logic started analyzing the situation. "Besides they did make some of your issues worse and they hurt you a lot mentally too."
"It's more complicated than that. And I'd do it all again if it meant being with them."
"I don’t think I’ll ever understand love," Logic stated disagreeing with what I had said. I swore I could still hear their voice calling to me, wanting to talk to me and make things better.
"I still love you," their voice said. "We can work things out. We can be happy. We can be together."
Their voice was so convincing. I wanted to believe it. For a second I really thought we could be together. My moment of tranquility was interrupted by my intuition.
"Give it up," he started, ruining my moment of belief and inspiration, "They broke up with you. It means they’re not interested. No doubt they’ll have moved on already. They don’t care anymore. You had your chance and you blew it."
I slowly realized he was right I started losing hope and breaking down. I realized it was all it was all my fault. I couldn’t fix what I had done.
"Don’t give up hope yet," a different voice cut it. It was creativity, also known as ambition. "There’s a dance coming up. You can be nice to them and win their love back in the coming months and then you can ask them to the dance. It will be the perfect romantic gesture to win their heart back."
"You’re right. That would be perfect!" I exclaimed with much enthusiasm. I started to get excited at the thought of getting them back.
"It won’t work," another more quiet more timid character spoke. "They left. It’s your fault. You can’t expect them to take you back."
It was depression and anxiety. They slowly started dragging me back down.
"They’ve already moved on. They’re done with you. They’ll never take you back. You’re not good enough."
I realized there was no way around it; this was the truth. I was defeated. I broke down and just fell to the floor and cry. After a while, I realized that I had to push through it.
"Cheer up," Happiness said, trying to make me feel better, "Just think of all the good memories you’ve had with them."
I did as she said and a smile crept onto my face. She was right, there were a lot of good memories I had with them.
"With courage, more of these memories can be made." Bravery reassured me that I would be okay. With all of what everyone had told me in mind, I stood up and cleaned up my mess. I continued to make my lunch. I then added their number back into my phone. After all, the recovery processes had to start somewhere.
An imagination is a wonderful thing to bear
When I was about 10 years old, my parents were viewing old family photo albums, and I was shown a photo of an older man, with most of his hair gone and wrinkled more than a dried up prune, watching a young boy, maybe around 2 years old, playing with his cane. When I was told that the old man was my great-grandfather, and the young stranger was me, I was mildly amazed.

The memories of my childhood are difficult to reminisce. I do not remember my first birthday, when I first learned how to ride a bike, and most importantly, dead relatives, such as my great-grandfather. My first assumption was that he died before I was born, because I can not recall what his voice sounded like. Voices are always one of the first things I recognize when I try to think about people I have met before in my life, whether I ever see them again or not. My parents, observing that I was beginning to piece together what was happening in the photo, told me that he died when I was about 3 years old, before my sister had been born, and before I had ever started school for that matter.

This left me to interpret what kind of person my great-grandfather was during his life. There was no doubt in my mind that he was caring husband for my great-grandmother, and a loving father for my grandmother and uncle. I had always heard positive things about him from my grandmother, and especially from my father. I used to hear stories about how whenever my father needed advice or help that my grandfather could not answer, my great-grandfather was the one who gave him guidance, and also about christmases where my father would wait at the front window of his house in anticipation of his arrival. But that was about all I knew about him. My imagination ran wild about what his life was like. What were his hobbies? What was his job? Did he have any immense secrets that my family knew nothing about?

Then, only about a year or so ago, I finally learned more information about his world. This news, however, shocked me more than when I found out my great-grandfather was alive during the first three years of my life. While the thought that he was a caring father and husband was confirmed, my father also informed me that my great-grandfather was an alcoholic. He detailed to me that he would show up for family gatherings and to his own home drunk, and he had also had his license taken away from him. I never actually knew how he died. I always thought he died either of natural causes or some sort of accident. But I also got word that he fell down the stairs while he was drunk.

After getting this information, I came to a new sudden realization: My great-grandfather was not the person I thought he was. It is very unlikely that he had very many hobbies or a great job because he spent so much time drinking. This does not necessarily mean to me that he was a crummy person, because I still heard him described as a good father, husband, and grandfather by my family (although he was not there that much for them); but it still taught me that nobody is perfect. This caused me to temper my expectations for how my great-grandfather’s life was, because he was probably one of the farthest thing from perfect. But even though I never truly got to know this man, he has really helped me grow as a person, because he helped my father’s development, in that he is there for me, my sister, and my mother.

By: Bryce Krasauskis
I sat up in bed and looked at my clock. 11:40 pm. I pulled my covers up to my neck. The temperature in my room seemed to have dropped several degrees. I looked around and saw that my window was open, my sheer curtains billowing in the cold night air I got up to close it. I had my hands on the window, about to push it down, when I heard rustling coming from below. It was late November and there were a lot of dead leaves lying around in the yard, and we lived right in front of a forest. Any nocturnal woodland critter could be making the leaves crunch. I decided to poke my head out to see if maybe there was a raccoon or a skunk out there. Upon looking down, I met with a pair of horrible, piercing white eyes. I jumped in surprise not only because of the color, but also because whatever was attached to those eyes would not release my gaze. I could not will myself to look away, though I desperately wanted to, to stop the eyes from boring into me. Then, without warning, the owner of the white eyes began moving up the wall of the house towards my window.

I screamed and shut the window. In the dark, I had trouble finding my way to the door without tripping, but I refused to take my eyes off of the window. I fell backwards and landed on my back, then fumbled out into the hallway. I wanted to run to my parents but they were out with friends and probably wouldn’t be back for a few hours. So I rushed into my brother’s room only to find it empty with his bed still made. He must still be downstairs, I thought. I flew down the stairs and into the living room where my brother was passed out on the couch, still in his clothes, and clutching a pencil. I shook his shoulders and yelled for him to get up.

"Jack! Wake up. Jack please, I need you! Wake up! Jack!" I said, my voice shaking.

"Hmmm? What? What is it?" he asked, very groggy.

"Jack, there’s something outside my window." I said, my voice shaking.

"It’s probably just an owl or something." he rolled over, now facing the back of the couch.

"It was not an owl," I said through gritted teeth. "Come upstairs and I’ll show you. There was something there and it looked…evil."

"Evil?" he snorted, obviously thinking that I was being dramatic. I merely stood there, giving him an annoyed and anxious look so that he understood that I was not playing games.


He shoved himself off of the couch and I grabbed his wrist, dragging him up to my room. I was going faster than he was so Jack ended up tripping over one of my shoes and fell right in front of the window. We both put our faces up to the glass and looked down.

"Lucy, there is nothing-" he stopped.

The thing with the white eyes leapt at the window, clawing at the glass with long grotesque fingers, making Jack and I both jump back. I screamed.

"See? It was staring at me when I looked outside earlier. I don’t know what it is." I was growing more panicked and started breathing harder.

"Lucy, Lucy, calm down," he put his arms around me and stroked my hair. "Whatever it is, it can’t get inside so there’s nothing to worry about. Just calm down."

The thing leapt at the window again, sending me running out of my room. Jack stayed by the window, but at a safe distance. He hadn’t screamed or reacted quite as much as I had, but I could still tell he was scared. I stood in the hallway and stared, waiting for the thing to come at the window again, but all was calm…for now. Slowly, Jack walked to the door of my room and sat down on the left side of the door frame so I came and sat down on the right side. I stretched my nightgown over my knees and wrapped my arms around my legs. Jack sat cross-legged with his eyes fixed on the window, waiting.

More leaves crunched outside, louder this time. We could hear scratching on the wall of the house. We heard scabbling, like something that was trying to climb but couldn’t find a grip. But those noises weren’t what scared us the most. After several minutes of silence, we heard a bloodcurdling screech; a wail. It was like someone scraping their fingernails on a chalkboard. It was raspy and nightmarish, like a banshee. Jack and I cringed at the sound and clapped our hands over our ears, praying for it to stop. After about a minute of the hellish sound, the air became dead quiet. Even the humming of the insects had ceased. I took my hands away from my ears and looked at Jack. I saw he had the same expression I had; flat out frightened.

I started to crawl towards the window to see if maybe the thing had finally gone but scrambled back immediately when the thing flung itself at the window once again, this time creating a crack in the glass. Jack grabbed my hand and pulled me into the hallway. We sat along the wall, our breathing uneven and accelerated. It hit the window again and I shrieked. I put my hand over my mouth and felt hot tears roll down my cheeks. I hadn’t even realized I was crying. The thing hit the window one more time and this time…we heard glass shatter. I squeezed Jack’s hand and we bolted down the stairs as we heard the thing crashing around in my room. Jack grabbed a flashlight from the kitchen counter and started for the door.

"Wait!" I said, skidding to a halt and trying to catch my breath.

"What?" Jack asked, looking at me with confusion and fear in his eyes.
"Where are we going?"
"I don’t know. Anywhere but here."
"But it’s pitch black out there and that...thing is here."
"Yeah, that thing is in the house. In your room! Would you really prefer to stay here?"
"Good point."
I grabbed a flashlight from a drawer in the kitchen and headed out the door with my brother into the darkness.

Jack and I ran, not quite aware of where we were going exactly, but not really caring. We were a good few hundred feet away from the house when we heard the thing crash through the front door behind us. We headed into the forest, hoping the added darkness from the trees would help hide us. But the shadows of the night not only hid us, they consumed us. I couldn’t see Jack so I reached my hand out and latched onto the back of his shirt to keep from losing him. I had tripped a while back and dropped my flashlight. Jack had shone his light around to help me find it, but it was gone. We still had Jack’s, but the fog was so thick that it didn’t really matter.

We couldn’t hear the thing anymore so we decided to slow down a little in order to get our breath back. I hugged myself to try to fight off the cold and to keep myself from shaking with fear. We continued on, not daring to return to the house. We walked in silence for a little while until... Crack! It sounded like a branch had broken. We stopped and Jack shined the light in every direction, but saw nothing. A little more cautious, we carried on. CRACK! Much louder this time, closer. I wanted to scream but refrained knowing that would give us away. Jack shined the flashlight around. Again, nothing. We started to pick up the pace but stopped dead in our tracks when we heard the banshee-like wail pierce the silence of the night and echo throughout the forest. My heart jumped into my throat and I couldn’t breathe. Jack had almost dropped his flashlight and was now standing perfectly still, his body rigid. We heard claws scraping trees, more leaves crunching and more branches snapping. With every passing second the noises grew louder, closer. Just when my breath was coming back to me, I heard raspy, sighing breaths coming from directly behind me. Slowly and reluctantly, I turned around and found myself looking right into a pair of magnificently horrifying ghost white eyes.

Jack turned and ran the beam of light over the thing’s body, which looked poised to strike. It had long bony limbs and thin lengthy fingers. Its ashy, ghostly gray skin seemed to be pulled so tight over its body that it looked like it was merely paper. The ridges of its spine were visible under the tight, nearly translucent skin. It had a long bony snout with knifelike teeth that glinted in the light of Jack’s flashlight. And finally, resting in deep black sockets, were those two awful eyes that made your soul scream. I tried to tear my eyes away but couldn’t. It was the thing that finally broke contact. I was grateful until it locked eyes with Jack. I could just see little beads of sweat forming on his forehead. The thing suddenly reached out and seized Jack by the throat. Its long back legs sprung, shooting them both up into the night sky until I could no longer see them. I stood alone in the fog, screaming my brother’s name.

After what felt like an eternity waiting to see if either my brother or the thing would appear again, I heard a loud thud not too far away from me. Only several feet it sounded like. I stumbled forward and tripped over what seemed like a fallen tree. I got up onto my knees and thrust my hands forward. I connected with something. Fabric. A shirt. I found an arm and slid my hand up towards the head. I ran my fingers through Jack’s shaggy hair but pulled them away when I felt something warm and sticky. I lifted my hand to my face. It smelled like iron. I grabbed Jack’s shoulders and pulled him to me and hugged him. My shoulders shook and I realized I was sobbing.

"You’re going to be okay, Jack," I whispered the lie more for myself than Jack. "You are going to be okay."

Suddenly I was knocked sideways into a tree and all the air escaped my lungs. I saw the thing towering over me. I staggered to my feet trying to get my breath back. I could feel something wet running down my arm and touched it gingerly. I winced. The thing screamed again into the night, dropped down on all fours, and began to crawl towards me. I am going to die, I thought. Then I screamed. I screamed as the thing pounced on me and its long fingers dug into my shoulders. Its rank breath filled my nostrils. Its white eyes stared into mine, boring into me. Its horrific fangs crept towards my face until they were mere centimeters away. I shut my eyes, waiting. And then-

I woke with a start. I was drenched in sweat and my face was wet from tears. I looked around my room and then hugged my knees to my chest, thankful it had just been a nightmare. Then I felt a cool rush of wind and shivered under my covers. I looked at my window. It was wide open. I looked at my clock. It was 11:39.

By: Rachel Milne
Missing You

It’s been awhile hasn’t it?
I’ve missed you so, so much.
I’ve started to get worried a bit,
About how you’ve been doing and such.
God, if only I could see you once more
The next time we meet, we’ll be up above.
But I know we’d be dancing across the floor,
To those loud, depressing songs we love.
The thing I miss about you most is your
smile,
So uplifting, it makes me grow one, too.
So bright and friendly, I could see it from a
mile.
I wish I could turn around and only see you.
I want for us to always be together,
Please don’t leave me again, forever.

By: Amanda Schulien
Ode to Air Conditioning

Be it the scorching heat
Bone chilling cold
Or freezing wind
The weather cuts deep to my blood
Like a glove of knives
It lacerates the mind and soul
Until it appears
Air conditioning appears
And aviates my joy
It saves me from the pain of the world
It is a god - heavenly diction
It grants its me favor and its warmth or chill
Giving me peace at a simple request
Smiling down upon me from the ceiling
With great satisfaction
Enjoying its benevolence and necessity
Oh air conditioning
How you lift my spirits so
Make me relaxed again
Make me safe again
Make me healthy again

By: Brian Herman

Ode to Lamp

Oh lamp
How do you function so vividly?
Shining endlessly
As the sun
Without needing a new lightbulb
You wake me with grace
Understanding my need to rise and greet the day
Showing splendid, spectacular, and succinct spectacle
Oh lamp
How do you burn with such passion and power?
With such light as to illuminate the heavens
With your light as the moon at night
To allow functions past sunset normally impossible
And without complaint
Without disdain
Or hatred
You go to sleep during the day
Until I greet your warm and welcome light
Once the school day passes.

By: Brian Herman
Ode to the Swell Water Bottle

With an exterior so sleek
   a frozen tundra at its surface,
hidden underneath is a spring of
crystal sustenance.

Swirls of ruby-reds and Sapphire-blues
adorn its shell.
A crown jewel atop a humble pedestal,
a desk of manufactured wood.
It stands out against its dreary surroundings,
An oasis of color to the eye well-fatigued.

Under cover of cool metal,
lies a treasure so coveted and pure.
Its crystal waters demand consumption,
Offering relief to the parched.

From its rounded base, curving upward,
a smooth neck is craned towards the sky.
At its peak, a cap of silver,
a key to unlock its hidden treasure.

Once unlocked, from its depths
its treasure flows.
From its lips, an offering of gifts unsullied.
A magi in a desert ever-parched.

By: Madeline Verby
Beauty Overdue

Maybe beautiful things are beautiful because they have an ending. The more and more I think about it, the more I realize how true it is. Nothing lasts forever, everything dies eventually. When you’re telling your friends a story or watching a movie, it’s always the end of the movie or the story that makes it a good one. Everything beautiful has an ending, and without a tragic one, it wouldn’t be beautiful, would it?

When you break up with your first love, yes, you will remember the ending and how much it broke your heart, but you’ll spend more time thinking about all the beautiful memories the two of you shared. And I know why we didn’t work out, because we didn’t have an ending and I know this barely makes any sense, because nobody wants their relationship to end right? But I wanted our relationship to end when one of us would die of old age in our nineties, I didn’t want our relationship to end every week or month we fought. You see, we were so on and off, and yes, we did end multiple times and it was beautiful. It was so beautiful that we kept trying; we kept fighting, yelling, screaming. Every time we fought, I thought it’d be an end to us but then a week later, you’d be coming back to me. We’d make up and things would be perfect again. But whenever you left, you never truly left. We didn’t have a real ending. Relationships like ours just lose their beauty because one of us will ‘leave’ without the bond truly ending. I’d rather the love of my life just leave truly so I can appreciate how beautiful we use to be.

By: Shay Jones
“You suck,” Coach Law told me, “You’ll never start for this team.” Those words resonated with me. I didn’t know it at the time, but those words were the best thing that happened to me. It was the beginning of freshman year and I had joined the freshman football team. I was told that I was too small, I wasn’t big enough, not fast enough, they thought I would never contribute to the team. So I struggled through the season trying to work as hard as I could, but knowing in the back of my mind that I would have to work hard to get where I wanted to be. That season felt so long, every game felt like forever.

Standing on the sidelines, I felt prideless, useless, my body was there but my heart wasn’t. I needed to recapture my love for the game, but I had no idea how. I went to my Dad for advice and he told me to do what I felt was right, but that was my very problem, I couldn’t figure out what was right. I constantly thought about how I had lulled myself into a false sense of security; throughout my life I was able to obtain my goals through my natural ability. I was the starting running back on the “B” team my 8th grade year and I went from that to being told I wasn’t good enough. I contemplated in my head “Is this worth it” if I worked hard, there was still no guarantee I would get a chance.

After much consideration, I decided that I could recapture the love and desire to play the game by attempting to prove the coaches wrong. I was up early every morning and rain or shine I was working out, I had researched which areas I could improve, I focused on two keys, explosiveness and quickness. I also studied keys to look for in opponents so that when I lined up against other athletes I would be able to read them. We started “camp” which was football without pads. We had ran through the motions until it was time for full team work, when it was time for my rep, I was able to see exactly what was happening and I made an outstanding play that I know I wouldn’t have made without the work I had put in on the offseason. What I was most proud of was when Coach Law came up to me and said, “Wow, you really improved this year.” It was all worth it.

In this moment, I felt as if I had really grown up over that year. I now understood the power of confidence and perseverance. I had decided to put in work and saw the results. It taught me never to give up on my goals and that with the right mentality, anything is possible. I could look back upon all of those hours of struggle and strife and know that it was all worth it, the countless tears shed over one decision that changed my life. I spend every afternoon in the fall at football practice. I can’t imagine my life today without the camaraderie of my brothers during the season. I can look back and look back upon the boy that was struggling freshman year and look proudly upon the man that emerged. Today I feel as if I apply this newfound mentality that the harder you work, the better your results, and now I feel that any problem that I run into in my life, I will always to be able to overcome it.

By: Ryan Orzechowski
By: Anonymous

Scheduling math classes for this early in the morning really ought to be illegal.

It’s a cycle of pain.

I want to go back to sleep, despite fearing the infamous “desk drool”.

However, in order to do that, I need to do my work first so that my grades stay decent.

But I am awake by the time that I finish, which means that I can’t catch up on my sleep.

When you can’t go to sleep until one in the morning for some reason for multiple weeks, it really piles up.


Last night was a disaster, although no more than an average evening before Valentine’s Day for the last few years.

Without meaning to, I start thinking back to it.

Today was Monday, which meant that my mom was out grocery shopping. Well, homework could wait, then. (Besides, I finished a good chunk of it at lunch.) I could make valentines for all my friends and teachers, judgement-free. I took out some bland, but decent, stationery and a pen.

One for her.

One for that teacher.

That teacher was also pretty nice.

One for her, too.

Two for those two as well.

One for him, a best friend since elementary school. Mom passive-aggressively disliked him ever since he started identifying as a boy, after knowing him as a "weird girl" for years. Dad was too busy to care. I hid that one in my backpack’s front pocket.

Just in time, too. I heard the garage door open and quickly stuck the rest in a ziplock that I’ve prepared. I then opened my history textbook and half-finished notes, to pretend that I was busy.
I then headed to the living room. She was holding a grocery bag and an all-pink mug-and-chocolate set that she got for Dad. She did that every year.

"Hey. Want me to stash that in my room for you?"

"Of course. So, anyone special you’re giving presents to tomorrow?" Subtle.

"No." Might as well be honest. This stuff might as well be Greek to me.

"Come on, you can tell me. Doesn’t matter if it’s a boy or girl." I just told you. But, thanks.

"The answer is no, not really."

I headed back to my room, not interested in any further prodding.

"Show me how to lie
You’re getting better all the time…"

Spotify was back at it with oddly appropriate suggestions. And I was back to doing homework, tomorrow looming in the background. Until the memory of a similar conversation from a few years ago intruded.

"So, you giving this weird girl cookies this year as well?" Yes, of course. Why wouldn’t I?

"He goes by Leo now." Might as well rip the band-aid off now. He did it already for the school administration.

"Is she like that Gavin Grimm kid in the news?" That’s one way of looking at this, I guess.

"He told me about it about half a year ago. So, yes." I braced myself.

"I see. Will he misinterpret this gesture?"

"No, my friends and I have been exchanging cookies and sweets since elementary school."

"I see. Well, this must be a trying time for his mother." Actually, no. She’s pretty freaking chill.

I stayed silent.

"Well, don’t be like that, okay? I wouldn’t know what to do then."

"Fine, I’m not." I say through gritted teeth.

"That’s a relief. So, any normal special boys?"

"No."

"Come on, you can tell me." No, not really. It’s all Greek to me. Just like it always has been.

But, why would I tell you that? When you outright call my friend a freak, would I really trust you to not think of me like that? I mean, you complained about Mr. Robot and how many non-straight characters there were, back when I screwed up and recommended it to you. What would you think if your real-life “golden child” turned out to be asexual, and not straight (like you desperately wish)?

Actually, I don’t freaking want to know. I know Dad still wouldn’t care, as he’s busy as usual.

Thankfully, this evening was disaster-free in comparison to that one. More prodding, more homework. Despite that, I still tossed and turned. Considered telling her. Perished the thought. Closed my eyes and eventually dosed off to the sound of Halsey’s “New Americana” coming through my phone’s tinny speakers.

The next day, I passed out the cookies before first block started.

"Happy Valentine’s Day, Leo."

"You too."
A Care Bear meant only to stare
Pains beyond one’s mind can compare
Until one fateful day
Demented would say
“Your skin and bones are what I will tear”

There once was a bear named Baloo
He didn’t know what to do
He danced with Mowgli
About bare necessity
He was very childish too

There once was a bear named Yogi
He wanted to eat a hoagie
He ran around the park
Like a hungry shark
But then got stung by a bee

There once was a bear named Pooh
Who loved honey more than you
He got his head caught
In his own honey pot
But don’t fear, Piglet came through

It began with a house fire
Created by his own lights and wires
Fire danger changed to extreme
Making people scream
Smokey became someone not to admire

Paddington does light reading before bed,
Reading stories about the men in red.
Communism is fun;
Capitalism hasn’t won.
The bourgeoisie took all of his bread.
Umbral Earth &
The Girl Who Played Chess

By: Chris Boersen

I walk this umbral earth alone, a ruined wasteland of the green
and blue.
Only faint light from the shattered moon which danced on the
waters grave.
The other was the one in my hands.
I was given a name, a family, and a gift.
I was told I was born in darkness, I would die in darkness,
but would never accept it.
I would dream of stories told to me by my mother.
Dreams of a colorful world with a ball of light in the sky.
No one thought that it would end, the warmth, the color,
The Life.
The sun had died, became a legend, a story.
Then Forgotten.
But now I walk this umbral earth with a spark, a light of my
own,
A warmth of my own.
The gift I had walked with for many moons, the gift that had
died with others,
The gift of hope.
It allowed me to see through the darkness, to walk through the
darkness,
Be a light in the darkness.
I wanted to change this umbral earth,
To the one told to me by my mother.
With my gift, I could.
With Sacrifice.
I let my gift, a spark, a dream.
Become the sun she told me about.
And it was blinding.
I left that earth with a new light, a warm light,
My Burning Hope.
I never felt that warmth, never saw the color.
I did hear the sounds of children playing, men and women
crying.
Through the blinding light of the sun, I saw a figure,
and the voice of my mother calling me.
I ran to her, and told her how I missed her,
How I loved her.
She told me how proud she was.
She took my hand and led me back,
Where my brothers and sisters ran.
They hugged me, talked to me,
Cried for me.
I walked this umbral earth, only light from the shattered moon
and the one in my hands.
Now I shined for this new earth, sharing my gift to them.
Sharing my worn path to others with a gift, and with ones who
did not.
Finally I achieved my goal, to make the dream real.
I was finally home.

As I think about my journey from the umbral earth, I rocked
gently in a chair.
I remembered a girl with red hair and dull grey eyes.
She was Lonely.
I met her while wandering the barren wasteland that she called
home.
She was sad, confused.
She was Broken.
I took her by the hand and led her through the darkness, my
light guiding us.
I talked to her, helped her get back on her own feet.
Eventually I got her to smile.
She was Changing.
We wandered for days before reaching a house.
She invited me inside her home.
We talked more and more, and soon we became friends.
She would giggle at me, then would laugh with me.
Everything was beginning to change for her.
The world was becoming more bright she told me.
I never knew what attracted me to her, but I cared for her.
Began to Love.
Her name was Amber she said to me one day, and that she
loved to play chess.
She asked me to play the game with her, which I gladly ac-
cepted.
Everything was perfect to me, or so I had thought.
She was becoming weaker by the day, and I soon realized this.
She was Dying.
Her condition grew worse and worse, and all I could do was
nothing.
I sat next to her as she laid on her bed, praying to the gods she
would be saved.
I began to lose something.
Began losing Hope.
She lifted her hand to my face and told me that she loved me.
She stumbled out of her bed, which I tried to stop her.
The house was dark as the earth outside, my hope almost noth-
ing now.
She pulled something out from a little box and put it in my
hand.
She told me that if I lost hope, the world would too.
I opened my hand to see a necklace-
Her only Gift.
I felt tears go down my face as she asked me one last question:
Could we play chess?
We had played many times, and I had let her win everyone of
them.
As I let her win one last time, she whispered with her last
breath.
Thank you, for letting me win all those games.
Her body disappeared into a little ball of light that made the
necklace glow.
I gave that necklace to one of my sisters, who had red hair,
Had the shiniest grey eyes.
And who loved to play chess.
I never wanted to move anywhere nor did I ever feel like doing anything... I always feared the worst out of myself. I just wanted to meet the expectations that my family set for me. I have two siblings--I guess it’s safe to call them that--and whatever my father or mother set out for them to do they would do it using instinct and logic. It was almost automatic the way they did these things. They never took a second to think, never moved their eyes to blink, and they never even thought about not doing these things. They just wanted to move on with their lives, and they did. I was by myself, my whole entire life I had always been lonely but at least when they were around I could pass by the time in a way that made my life feel meaningful, and then they just left. I never really heard much from them, I would get some happy birthday cards and such but nothing else. They didn’t care about anyone but themselves.

It seems to me that the only thing that drives people forward is the thought that maybe karma will come around one day and hand them money and healthy relationships. That was the only reason as to why I helped other people in the first place. I was always a foolish person. After a while I didn’t really want money anymore, my grandparents would just give up their value to me whenever they thought it was their time to die. Maybe I was just ungrateful or perhaps selfish, but what I did know for sure was that I was always thinking about the future. It always seemed like there would be this big moment in my life that would guide the way that I lived. Only, it never really came, at least not at the time that I expected it to.

I was too young to understand anything really when everything started to change. I was fifteen years old, five foot seven, and never really used cell phones that often. Maybe that’s why I was lonely, because people were too addicted to their phones to realize that I was even there as a person rather than as a nobody. That’s what people thought of me, they thought that I was just faking my way through life and all of the emotions just to try to end up with the best possible outcome. They were almost right. I was diagnosed with lower spectrum autism when I was six years old. Because I was autistic I had to take this “special” little program with several other people in which we worked on our social skills. This means that on every tuesday of school during the afternoon I would go down to this room to where people worse off than myself--in an intellectual sense--were playing board games so that I could beat them at those very same board games. It was common for there to be a lot of yelling when I came in and out of the room. Those children never really grew up, at least not to my preferred knowledge on growing up.

Maybe that’s what made people hate me, I tried to grow up too fast. Whenever someone would talk I just cut them off and talked about politics or numbers. Usually people expressed signs of boredom over the way that I would deliver my sentences rather than the actual topic itself. That’s probably why I took drama, so I could play the role of an antagonist and get away from being the actual antagonist that I was in real life.

I’ve always speculated on many things about my life but I know I really should stop doing that, it bores people very much to have to listen to someone do that without fully understanding what the person is talking about. Conclusively, the biggest problem I ever had was being in love. I was too distracted by the concept of love to even bother with making friends. The girl that I had a crush on loved to act, at least I think she did, otherwise she wouldn’t have been taking drama class with me and twenty other people. I talked to her and we had conversations, she laughed sometimes at the dumb things I said. We were both very silly people who actually loved to act, at least I think she did, otherwise she wouldn’t have been taking drama class with me and twenty other people. I talked to her and we had conversations, she laughed sometimes at the dumb things I said. We were both very silly people who actually understood each other. Talking to her was the most fun I ever had at that point in my life.

I seriously thought that she would fall in love with me and that we would have a mutual relationship of understanding and kindness. Then one night, I went to a middle school dance. It was for the 8th graders and back then people were already taking each other out on dates. I guess I could’ve asked her out beforehand but I didn’t bother. I never understood why I did anything, I just thought I didn’t do it because I was too young to go out on a date in the first place. I thought that maybe I understood myself for once at least in that regard until I saw her there. She was gorgeous, it wasn’t just the brown hair and the pretty dress that did it for me though, I just thought that she was gorgeous as a human being. I never got the chance to find out why I felt that way about her.

When I walked towards her I began to see that someone was next to her holding her hand. I pivoted to the right towards the coca-colas and recollected my thoughts. I hadn’t seen her all night and I had to go to the bathroom right then. The bathroom was empty when I got there, and after I took care of my business I saw myself in the mirror above the sink and I started bawling. It’s not a good memory for me to keep but I still remember that image of me twisting my face and squinting my eyes as my glasses got foggy. The paleness in my face was highlighted by the tears streaming down it to make it seem pinker. I was just gasping for air without speaking a word, the lights would just flicker a little bit. I turned my head towards the door after I was finished and left, keeping the things that happened in that room a secret. I don’t look at a lot of mirrors nowadays.
I never thought about her again for a while, at least not in the way that I used to. I just gave up on the concept I created for myself, it was just too foolish for me to keep the thought of her and me together bearing down on my shoulder. I thought my life wouldn’t be worth anything if we didn’t become something so I just cut her off. All I cared about was success and hard work from that point forward, nothing else. I didn’t bother trying to make friends with anyone anymore and the only people that I bothered talking to were the teachers, my fellow actors, and my parents. It’s funny to me that at that point in my life the people who had been taking me to play these board games finally let me go because they just saw no point in trying to tutor a child that’s always been intelligent. I didn’t need help anymore.

They were distracting me anyway, they were only there to stop me from realizing my full potential. I was good at acting but I wanted to be good at something else which at that time was writing. In this day and age it’s not hard to be better than most kids at writing stories, because most of the ones I meet can’t even write correctly nor can they even comprehend the meaning of the word “grammar.” Although I knew that I was good at writing, people told me that whenever I wrote a short story it didn’t make a lot of sense. Maybe they were right, I was becoming very introspective with myself in a way that would make me introverted from society as a whole. I didn’t think about it that way however, at least not when I needed to.

I always wrote stories about myself, and I would always talk about my failures in life and how I came to them, hoping to make other people understand how much I changed as a person. I ended up writing over 100 pages worth of poems and short stories, all of them were carefully crafted and inspired by the experiences I had in my own life. I printed them all out, it took months but eventually I got enough paper to do it. Everyday I would just be in the hallways asking if anyone wanted my “collection” as I named it. I would walk around constantly yelling out things such as, ”These stories won’t just confuse you, they’ll make you think about the developments in your own life.” I figured that I should be straightforward. Honesty wasn’t the answer.

For weeks I was struggling to move my feet back and forth in the hallways when I tried to tell people about all of the hard work I put into making the collection. Most of them didn’t even look, and for those who did, they just glanced. I was slipping further away from reality and towards what I would consider depression. After I got home from school I would just bang my head against the wall until I felt dizzy, then I promised myself to never do it again and the very next day I would.

My mindset at the time was awful, I didn’t care about the fact that I had parents who cared for me because nothing harms me more than my own personal state of mind. After two weeks had passed I was still trying to give out the collection to no avail, and then someone came up from behind me. I turned around to see who it was... it was her. It was a complete shock for me to see her, then she casually asked me for the collection with a smile on her face. I handed it to her with sputtering hands and when went to walk away she started reading it, her friends starting asking for it too, and then soon it was... everyone, I did it. People were reading the collection and telling other people to read it too, even the teachers ended up asking for it. My parents were proud of me for once. I honestly couldn’t describe how happy I was at the time.

Of course, since most of the stories I wrote didn’t make much sense to begin with, they would always come to me to ask me questions about them. I thought that I was prepared to answer these questions, that I had been working my whole life to answer them. This was the big moment. Then someone asked me ”What is your book about?” I just froze. I spent months writing all of these stories and I didn’t even know what they were about, what the main idea was. No one understood my stories after all... it was pointless.

It just went through my head over and over again how badly I messed up, my depression was on repeat. Nothing was changing. I was still just the same outcast in the corner of the hallway. I was just staring at my lunchbox when the girl I had a crush on walked up to me and told me that I never put a title on the collection. "The Cone of the Brain and its Music." When she gave that title to me I finally realized how wrong I was. Someone did understand. It only took a moment for me to blurt out, "Do you want to go out?"
"...all my friends are heathens, take it slow..."

> Alarm off.
> Connect smart lenses to unlock implant first.
> "...please don’t make any sudden moves..."

At that point, she opened her eyes. She then reached for her smart lenses' case, somewhat annoyed by the "disconnected" dings still coming from her neural implant. She’s gone through this every day for the past few years or so, but she couldn’t disable that special type of nuisance. It’s not like she could forget the lenses since she was practically blind without them though.

> HDVision enabled.
> OK. Headlines?
> CNN: The Democratic candidate’s campaign promises include better funding for medical implant research, stricter implant user privacy regulations
> I thought I asked you to mute this source yesterday?
> Source muted.
> Washington Post: Republican candidate promises better medical implants for disabled vets, paid leave for medical implant operations
> WSJ: Samsung Connection S1 implant is to be released on December 24th
> ImplantMag: NeurOS 2.033 Delta causes stability issues and bugs in vision, hearing implant, machine translation software
> NBC: NeuroSoft share prices fall 15% following the 11/11/99 hack
> ArsTechnica: Major security issue discovered in Dron OS, BotCo is working on a fix
> NYT: NeuroSoft’s new King 3.33 implant recalled following numerous reports of potentially dangerous malfunctions while linked to SpiCo’s spinal implants
> NeuroMag: NeurOS 2.033 Delta update has native support for Glitter Again Shell, some Dron-like visual changes, security and bug fixes
> ImplantMag: NeurOS 2.033 Delta finally fixes the News app’s "breaking news" notification bug
> IGN: Quentin Tarantino’s granddaughter to make her directorial debut with Fall Out Toy Works film later this year

"So, just another 2099 day, then," she thought as the world slowly but surely snapped into focus and filled with the messages she received overnight. Her friend sent her yet another album of kitten pictures and there was a school function that needed volunteers. Also, spam and aggressive college letters.

After brushing her teeth and taking the shower, she grabbed a random pair of pants and a ratty old Batman shirt. Then she headed to the kitchen.

> Kettle on.
> Kettle on.
> Postponed. Restarting for the NeurOS 2.033 Delta update.
> Postpone to 15:45 or later
> No, includes "Important security fixes, GAS native support"

Then the emails disappeared and her vision once again went blurry. The nonprescription "smart" lenses that she had were completely useless when the implant was off or the HDVision program crashed, which was a frequent issue with NeurOS 2.0. That being said, this unpleasant experience usually didn’t last longer than five minutes. So she put her hand on a nearby wall and cautiously walked towards the usual location of the kitchen. She had a cinnamon crunch bagel to eat, after all.
Once she got there, she quickly checked whether or not the pot-kettle had water in it. It did. So she pushed the power button, which has seen much more use than one expects from a "smart" teapot-kettle hybrid’s power button. It was primarily a backup option for those with obscure and implant manufacturer-specific incompatible versions of Dron and it was unlikely to go away anytime soon. BotCo did not particularly care about the fragmentation problems plaguing their OS, much to the displeasure of her mom and some of her friends.

› Install complete. HDVision enabled.

The blurry outline in her hand slowly became a half-eaten bagel. Then the pink blobs on her mom’s tablecloth turned into roses. The squares on the beige wall opposite the table turned into family photos. The hemisphere on the table turned into a nearly empty fruit bowl. The rectangular object next to it turned into a pair of pink glasses. Then the message flood and the notification sound cacophony began, almost drowning out the sound of the boiling potkettle.

› SweetBagel is inviting you to play League at 15:30 today. Accept? –Games
› "Your glasses are on the kitchen table. Carry them with you at all times today since Neurosoft’s QA department hasn’t exactly been on the roll lately." --Mom
› Wear a hoodie this morning since it’s going to be around 17℃! The afternoon will be fairly pleasant, being very sunny and around 25℃ though! –Weather
› This update includes...
› OK
› You have an essay due Monday in English and a quiz in Biology today! –Classroom
› Student government messages: “Please stop using your implants to browse the net during the meetings. While we can’t confiscate them smartphone-style without resorting to some traumatic impromptu brain surgery, we can still temporarily ban them from the school network. This has been the final warning regarding the issue.”

And so on, while she waited for the tea to brew. Unbelievably enough, it was actually significantly worse back when she first got the implant, primarily due to the News app’s habit of marking almost every other article as "breaking news". So she got updates on everything from the debates regarding implant users’ privacy and legality of the anti-terror program to celebrity social media spats and poor fashion decisions. Needless to say, notifications for that app were disabled about five hours after the implant’s activation.

› Your tea is ready! –Teapot

So she took a sip out of her cup, noticing that it snapped in and out of focus for a couple of seconds. Then the roses on her mom’s tablecloth turned into red blobs for a couple of seconds before turning back. The photos on the (now green) wall opposite of her seemingly blinked in and out of existence. The table has seemingly disappeared, but it was definitely still there, so it looked as if the fruit bowl and the glasses were floating in midair.

Great, this was update 2.0 all over again, but with color problems. And here she thought that they finally started testing those after the problems skipped 2.011 and 2.022.

› Disable HDVision

Everything turned back into a blur and the table blinked back into visible existence. There were squares on the wall opposite of her once again. The blobs on the table cloth were pink once again.

So she reached towards the fruit bowl, remembering the approximate location of her glasses, and put them on. Everything snapped into focus once again, except for the objects in her peripheral vision. Either way, it looked like she had to resort to the old-fashioned fix once again. She was going to miss the zoom function.

› To Mom: “Yep, you were right again. Thanks.”

She then grabbed her bag and headed out.

By: Anna Borisova
“The world is but a canvas to the imagination.”

-Henry David Thoreau
Obstacles

By: Alyssa Garagiola

You’re always told to make an effort and refrain from excuses. Life will never be smooth sailing; there will always be a tremendous wave getting in your way. Waters will be rough and at times grim, but as people say, that’s no reason to give up, lose confidence in yourself, or lose sight of the happiness in life. People can give advice with regards to how one should go about life, but it’s one thing to say what not to do and it’s a completely different thing to not let harsh circumstances and overwhelming obstacles affect you.

I used to look at the world through an innocent minded lens, not realizing the tragic events that could actually happen. I never realized it was possible for the heavy weight of constant sadness to overburden and drown me wave after wave in the salty crashing darkness of life’s obstacles. All in one year, my life took a spontaneous turn through uncharted waters, changing forever, as tragedy after tragedy threw punches at me, clobbering me at every turn. Upon entering sixth grade, I became best friends with a guy who I thought I would have a rapport relationship with, lasting forever. We did everything together, until one day when he turned his back on me in betrayal. Shortly after, another one of my good friends was murdered by his ruthless stepfather. A couple of months later, my cat died a week before Christmas and then my parents got a divorce several days after what was supposed to be “the most wonderful time of the year.”

The candle light that was my happiness burned out, amounting to almost nothing but absolute darkness. It was almost as if someone stomped on my world until it shattered into millions of pieces, never to be whole again. I grew very vitriolic and confused as to why of all people obstacle after obstacle slammed into me, never letting me come up for air. I wanted to give up on happiness, believing it was not for me. I lost sight of the good times, before the tragedies struck. I lost confidence in my ability to persevere through life, conquering whatever obstacle came my way, as a result of the overwhelming immensity of the recent ones.

Due to the harsh circumstances I have encountered throughout life, I have come to the realization that every song ends some day, but that’s no reason to not enjoy the music. Happiness will come and go, but that’s no excuse to not enjoy the temporary exhilaration while it lasts. Life is difficult and nothing will ever be a walk in the park, but dwelling on what could have been or the “what ifs” of situations had the obstacle not crashed into you doesn’t resolve any issue. As life progressed, so did my knowledge. I learned every obstacle encountered is a lesson in some shape or form, everything happens for a reason.

Death, betrayal, and divorce can in the moment feel like daggers to your heart, but in the end shape the person they’ve affected most. I am who I am today because of the obstacles I have struggled with. For example, if it weren’t for my parents’ divorce, I wouldn’t be as independent, nor as adaptable to situations. If it weren’t for my best friend’s betrayal I wouldn’t be as contemplative and forgiving. And if it weren’t for my cat and my good friend’s deaths, I wouldn’t be as courageous even when times are grim and the odds are against the favorable outcome. Above all, my character, strength, and knowledge evolved due to the obstacles I faced throughout life.

I have learned to enjoy each moment as it comes, accepting change as it appears. Life is a vast sea, obstacles coming and going, wave after wave, which at times may seem rough and overwhelming, but that’s what makes life such a great adventure.
I always hated being me. I always hated being that super-dark-skinned girl with the gap between her two front teeth. The gap always prevented me from smiling because it felt like people could look down my esophagus through the gap. I hated having an African accent that I had to force into an American one every time I got to school. As much as I hated being me, I grew to hate not being me. I taught myself not to show emotion, not to show weakness and not to be hurt before I hurt. I always have had a guard up which prevented people from talking to me. Showing emotions and caring made me vulnerable, and I cannot afford to be vulnerable. I shut that part of me off. I always imagined how it would feel to not be me, how it would feel to not have so much anger.

One experience that changed my perspective of life is when I could not clean the kitchen on time due to homework, and my mom screamed from the top of the stairwell, the light from her room piercing the darkness as she awakened me from my sleep at 1 am to go back to clean the kitchen. The phrase “I will make your life so miserable, you wouldn’t know whether to hang yourself or not” rings in my mind every single day. I grew up with an emotionally abusive father, but I never expected to hear those words escape from the lips of my mother and engrave themselves into my memory. My mother and I never had a close relationship; we were two different people with way different personalities and only found a commonality in our genes. I remember being a very skinny seven year old with a huge head and always going to sleep hoping that in the morning my real mother would come take me away, but she is my real mother.

I want to have the opportunity to face her and tell her that I’m actually successful because she made me who I am.

Now I feel different about being me. My skin got darker and my gap got wider. I still hate the gap, and will pay to have it closed as soon as I can afford it. I love being me, and I am good at being myself and will never change my past or identity. I forgive my mother, but I will never forget. No one forgets those words, especially when they come from their mother. I hate that I wasn’t bold enough to use my African accent, I hate that I hated the gap in my two front teeth. I hate that I ever hated my dark skin and I hate that I ever hated being me.

By: CeCe George
Surrender

Scared-
As helpless as a newborn baby.
Feeling more alone
Than you ever thought possible.

Everyday forced to fight the same battle
And not knowing how to stop it.
Every morning fearing the day ahead,
Every night dreading the next.

Trying to stay strong,
To smile through it all.
But a person can’t struggle perennially-
Eventually the fight goes out of you.

You fall.
You crash.
Becoming weaker every day-
Losing yourself.

Not knowing who to trust,
Who can help.
Everyone around you
Takes on the appearance of a threat.

But something has to be done-
No person should be forced
To live in a place
Resembling a dungeon.

You find the strength
And solve the problem
That has been haunting
You for months.

The fear still remains,
But the support is new
And a blessing well needed
To move on.

Everyday having strength,
Ready to take on the day.
Every morning a fresh breath,
Every night sleeping soundly.

By: Gabrielle McCoy
Stellan Lacey leaned back on his heels and stared up at the jewelry salesman, waiting for his chance. It was four-fifteen, and the store was otherwise empty of customers save an old woman near the front and what looked like a college student browsing the display cases. The salesman himself wasn’t particularly memorable. He could have been anywhere from forty-five to sixty, average height, average brown overcomb, average face, and he stared back with the furrowed eyebrows of someone who’d be wondering what a twelve-year-old would want with an engagement ring or a silver-plated watch.

"How can I help you?"

"I would like five of those diamond engagement rings please, and two gold watches." Stellan said quickly, with a pleasant smile, making sure to open his eyes wide—it seemed to work better that way.

The salesman stared at him for a moment before blinking. An expression crossed his face that could be described as anywhere between thoroughly drugged and almost about to fall asleep. The man moved sluggishly to the counter, fumbling with a key before pulling the glass open. He gazed back, momentarily confused, before turning back to the job at hand, slowly pulling out the first engagement ring, and examining it before placing it on the glass table in front of him.

Stellan frowned, glancing down at the beat-up antique watch strapped to his wrist. They always moved so slowly for some reason—he couldn’t understand why. Of course, they’d gotten faster over time but it seemed as though the lady in the back was already starting to notice what Stellan was doing as she examined a gold plated necklace.

Still moving at this painfully sluggish pace, the salesman retrieved a second ring, and then a third. Casting a wary glance back at the situation at the counter, the old woman left the store, but now the college student was watching him. Maybe he’d been watching Stellan the whole time. Stellan’s heart pattered a nervous rhythm against his ribcage as the fourth ring was placed on the countertop, followed after awhile by the fifth. Now the salesman reached for the watches as Stellan tapped his foot impatiently.

"Changed my mind," Stellan said hurriedly, locking back into the man’s watery gaze, "Only one of the watches. Thank you."

The man blearily nodded, moving to slide the items to the checkout counter. Stellan panicked as he realized he hadn’t specified that he wasn’t planning on buying.

He maneuvered over to the counter, noticing that the college student had subtly moved closer to him. Maybe he found the situation interesting. Of course he did, it wasn’t every day you saw a kid trying to buy five engagement rings.

Nevertheless, Stellan leaned over the counter facing the middle-aged man, "I don’t think I’ll be buying these."

"I’ll just be taking them, I mean if that’s alright with you."

The man looked back sleepily, "You won’t?"

"I'll just be taking them, I mean if that's alright with you."

The man didn’t say anything, he just smiled agreeably and nodded. Finally, Stellan thought to himself, his heartbeat slowing slightly. He shoveled the merchandise into the pocket of his hoodie in one swift movement, and made for the door.

Beeeeeeeeeeep. Beeeeeeeeeeep.

The alarm ripped through the store. Stellan jumped about a foot in the air, glancing frantically to his sides. Sensors. They flanked the doorway, mocking him. Idiot! Why, why hadn’t he noticed them?

As the alarm continued to cut through the store like a knife, a swift glance back behind him told Stellan that the sound had broken the spell. For the briefest instant, Mr.-average-salesman was stuck in that where am I zone, and then his eyes cleared. He heard the alarm. He knew what it meant. He saw the twelve-year-old kid frozen at the doorway, pocket bulging with unpaid-for merchandise. The phone was at his ear before Stellan could blink.

"911? My store’s been robbed…"

And Stellan couldn’t move. Run, you idiot! He opened his mouth and no sound came out. Then the switchflipped, and he regained the man’s eye contact,

"Drop the phone!"

It clattered to the countertop in an instant.

"You never saw me!"

The salesman’s gaze went blank, but Stellan knew it was too late. The wail of a siren could already be made out over the ceaseless beep of the store alarm. Now he had to run. In a panic, Stellan whirled, just as a squad car pulled up in front of the store. Too late. Then there was a blur of motion as someone grabbed him, and he was being half-dragged out of the store, to the left, down the sidewalk, into the pedestrian crowd. There was the sound of a car door being wrenched open just behind him. Stellan’s legs flailed; he struggled to find his footing as he was pulled along at what felt like a full-on sprint. The hand that grasped his was cold, dry, though the person attached to it should have been sweating. Stellan’s watch slipped down his wrist—it never quite fit, no matter what he did.
Everything was a blur of motion. Breathing hard, he flicked his hair out of his eyes. He stumbled, fell, scraping his knee, but the person didn’t stop. Stellan scrambled to his feet, heart pounding, knee stinging, as his arm was pulled forwards at the same relentless pace, never slowing. How many blocks had it been? He didn’t know. He couldn’t see whoever was dragging him, and he couldn’t do anything about it. He forced his aching legs to move faster in an attempt to keep up. Faster. His heartbeat was one long sickening blur.

And then everything slowed to a halt— they were walking. Stellan stumbled again at the sudden change in speed, but caught his footing in time. Blood trickled down his leg.

"Just play along," a young man’s voice said briskly, and Stellan blinked. They were walking up to the door of that coffee shop down on West 36th Street, hands still clasped together. Dazed, Stellan glanced at the printer-paper sign in the window, proclaiming in red Sharpie, "Now hiring." The young man pulled open the door in one quick motion, bell jingling cheerfully, and Stellan realized suddenly that it was the college student from the jewelry store, in black jeans and a Hollister t-shirt. His dirty-blond hair was hardly even disheveled. He wasn’t breathing heavily. He hadn’t even appeared to have broken a sweat.

"How can I help you?" A woman at the counter asked, as College student brought Stellan up to the counter. Disoriented, he stared at the tattoo of a dragon inked in green on her neck, as College student cleared his throat.

"Yes, I was wondering if you had any band-aids. My brother skinned his knee."

The green dragon lady smiled back at them, "Of course! Why don’t you two have a seat, I’ll be right over."

College student dragged Stellan over to a booth facing the window, sitting in a chair opposite. This effectively trapped him in the booth and Stellan had no doubt the older kid could probably beat him up if he tried to escape. He glanced out the window, thoroughly surprised by his surroundings— if what he was seeing was true, they’d have had to gone passed Roosevelt park to get to the cafe, and that would’ve made their five-minute dash around a mile.

Stellan turned back around and stared at the college student, who seemed to be examining Stellan with a certain degree of curiosity.

"Listen," he started, "I know what your deal is."

"I don’t really care what you have to say. I do what I need to do, and I’m not going to stop because you tell me to."

College student leaned closer to him, over the table, "I know you’re virtuous, and you shouldn’t be using your powers like that."

Stellan opened his mouth but before he could say anything, Green Dragon Lady had returned with a band aid and coffee. Again, his eyes strayed, this time to the word decaf scribbled across the side of the paper cup.

"Here you are, Nathan." She said, handing him the coffee, then, turning to Stellan, "I hope your cut heals," and giving him the band aid.

Stellan frowned, he didn’t need a band aid. Band aids were for wimps. He glanced down at the scuff on his knee, and changed his mind, reaching for a napkin off the container sitting on the table and using it to dab some of the blood off, wincing as it soaked through. Nathan—that was his name— was still staring at him.

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen." said Stellan.

"How old are you really?"

Stellan glanced up at him, eyes narrowed, "Twelve." And a half, he wanted to add, but knew it would only make him seem younger for doing so.

Nathan sipped his coffee, looking at him over the edge of his cup with furrowed eyebrows, "That had to be first-degree hypnosis, which makes you an honest-to-god tier one. Why the hell aren’t you at the ESP?"

"None of your business." Stellan muttered, peeling the backing off the band aid with a scowl.

"And why is a twelve-year-old abusing his abilities to rob a jewelry store?"

"And why?" Stellan peeled off the other side.

"I’m not letting you leave until you tell me."
Golden Beast

A tear from a boy with a golden heart
A grain of sand from the Red Sea’s part
The dead grass from the farthest forest
A drop of blood from the poorest
A charred flower grown on volcanic soil
Mix these together and bring to a boil
A quantity isn’t needed, most or least
It depends how long you wish to speak with the beast
Ingest the mixture slowly but with belief
Then recite these words and soon you will see:

Beast of dormant belligerence
Come forth and show your innocence
Beast of undisturbed purity
Come forth and cleanse my obscurity

And he shall show his true form
The beast of light once again reborn
Shine of gold and bright of light
He will stand before you in all his might
But no fear is needed in his presence
As you have summoned the one of comforting essence
And secrets he will reveal to you from milleniums ago
Sends you back to reality
Feeling alive with a newfound mentality
But he stays within you and speaks with freedom
As he warns you of the consequences of treason
A universal law that will stay beyond your lifespan
And he will share his knowledge with the boy, soon to
be a man
The law will change soon after your body is blown
As the world is ready now, for the truth to be shown

By: Coby Silcott
When I step up onto a stage, I immediately light up. The lights are warm on my skin and it refracts off of the gems on my costume. My hair is slicked back and my costume fits onto my body perfectly. I cannot help but smile. This is where I belong, this is what I’m meant to do. I feel joyous as I float across the stage. All I feel is the music and the energy of the people around me. It is one of the most amazing feelings ever and a euphoria nearly impossible to describe.

Through dance I have developed immensely as a person. My confidence has grown and my work ethic and time management have evolved into something to be proud of. The confidence I have developed has translated into my everyday life. I have found new skills and become a more outgoing person because of dance. I began at the age of six, and that is when I fell in love with the art form. Starting in middle school I began assisting in dance classes for younger children at my studio. This helped me to find a love for teaching as well. From here I have started teaching in a preschool program and now work at a local daycare. In order to teach children, one needs confidence. If you try to teach somebody something and you are not confident in yourself, they are less likely to believe you and less likely to pay attention and listen.

In dance if you are not confident in your movement then you are boring to watch. Confidence helps a person to stand up for themself and what they believe in, and that is an important part of life. Confidence is a major key to success and a skill I am grateful to have developed.

At dance I am constantly striving to better myself in order to be the best dancer I can be. Seeing the talent around me pushes me to work as hard as possible in order to achieve my goals. This work ethic has transferred into every aspect of my life. At school I am constantly working hard in order to obtain and maintain good grades. Although perfection is impossible, that is my ultimate goal, and that goal helps me to always work harder and to continue developing my work ethic. Doing so much and striving to achieve many different goals can create issues with time management. My commitment to dance and school work has helped me to develop good time management skills. It is very difficult to balance dance, school, work, and time for family or myself. Most days after spending a full day at school, I go straight to dance or work, and immediately afterwards I come home and do my homework. By this time it is late and time for me to go to sleep. This constant back and forth has helped me to develop good time management.

When it is possible I try to get things done early. If I am not procrastinating it is easier for me to stay on top of all of my work and get more accomplished. I believe that good time management is essential to life and an important skill to develop.

As I move across the stage, I feel happy. That is a goal that every person should have. Happiness can be a difficult thing to find. If you find something that makes you happy, you should reach out and grab it, and hold on to it with all that you have. Being happy and finding different things that make you and the people around you happy is what life is about. I have found happiness in dance, and it has shaped me into the person that I have become today, and I hope that it continues to shape me and make me happy for the rest of my life.

By: Julia Lemick
Family is defined as a basic social unit consisting of parents and their children, considered as a group, whether dwelling together or not. For the first years of my childhood that definition had been my belief of what a family is, or at least what it should be. I lived in a suburban home with my two parents and three younger siblings, each two years apart in age. We had a dog, we ate meals together, and we even had a playground which was my favorite. We were a traditional family, content with life.

Soon after my youngest brother was born my parents divorced, leaving the four of us confused and feeling alone. In the beginning it was difficult, not only for us but also my parents, never before had we been separated. We had to pack half of our belongings for Dad’s house and leave the other half for Mom’s. Driving back and forth between houses, day after day began to become somewhat of a routine. For my siblings too young to comprehend the magnitude of what was happening around them, were just pleasantly surprised with having two houses. They could find the joy in the rigorous situation that they found themselves in daily.

The years passed, and the going back and forth between houses grew familiar. As life got more casual, our parents introduced new people into our lives, in hopes of creating or at least the feeling of a family. After years of these people working their way into our routine, everything felt almost regular again, and it was beginning to feel considerably like a family again. And just as it had happened the first time, the feeling and hopes of family were ripped away. Now that we were all older, we could understand what was happening. Another divorce, with the only intention of filling us up with resentment, hatred, and hopelessness. Everything that had seemed to be finally going so well, was taken away out of my control. In these events I was loaded with an animosity for family. All of these negative events had caused me to hate the idea of a family, because no matter what I did, it was out of my reach.

With all of the bottled up emotions I had from my tattered past, I began to channel this passion into things that were in my control. School and sports were two activities that I began to excel at. I hated the feeling of anything being out of my control, so anything I could control, I had to do my best at it. In doing this, I began to forget about the previous events that had occurred to me and my siblings. I had found satisfaction in academics and athletics, which for me, was more important than any recognition or justification of a family.

My previous belief of what a family should be, was shattered and resculpted into something more than what I ever could have known on my own. A family isn’t always who you live with, who’s in your life, or where you live. But the realization I have come to is that a family is the people that stick with you and support you in what you do. And because of my past, I live my life everyday by taking pride in what I and do, and making sure it’s to the best of my ability. I take pride in all that I do because you never know when something will change. I give my best at whatever task I am challenged by in order to prove to myself that I can excel in all aspects of my life.

By: Jared Boonshaft
crooked claws scrape down my chest
they rush and rake with never a rest
choking me til i gasp for breath
wishing me to a silent death

a ghastly gaze searches and scans
dearthly and dark it plots and plans
forcing me to avert my eyes
filling me up with tear-down lies

bitter cold breath pervades the room
reaching in frozen tendrils of doom
it chills and chips at my now-blue lips
pinning for pain it gnashes and rips

this specter sulks in silent spaces
in lilting lulls in worn-out places
it garishly grins with teeth like knives
ready and waiting to eat me alive

never it ceases and never it dies
the mutters the murmurs the bullet-crack cries
and always i hate and always i dread
the panicked monster inside my head

By: m.k. meyers
I remember the first time I saw an alpaca. I was seven years old. My best friend had been working with them for a couple months and had left the 4-H club that we were in to join an alpaca-oriented one. She kept talking about alpacas and how I should join this 4-H club too. I was so nervous, I never had pets growing up and I didn’t know what to expect. She finally convinced me to come out to the farm and give it a try. That first day I was so scared of these creatures, most of them being a few feet taller than me. I remember being so in awe of how exotic these animals are. They are so different from any other animal I had seen and they come in so many different colors. I love how unique they are. I knew a lot people who worked with goats or horses but nobody else I knew worked with alpacas, and I loved that.

Showing alpacas didn’t come easy to me at first. I was afraid of them and being kicked. I went to every practice for months in preparation of my first show. The first alpaca I had was older and already well trained. I was so confident that we would do great at this show, and I was so excited. I even told some of my competitors that I expected to do well. Once we got to the show we went into showmanship first. I was so nervous, and my animal became nervous to and started fidgeting. This hadn’t happened at the practices and it made me angry that he wasn’t performing as well as he did then. My alpaca could tell that I was nervous, angry, and frustrated and that only made things worst. This show was one of the worst shows I’ve ever done. After the show I was angry. I hadn’t failed to this extreme before, I was a straight A student, and everything had come easy to me. I didn’t understand why my animal was unable to do all of the things we had found easy at the farm.

I continued to work with alpacas anyway. As I worked with them more my understanding of these animals increased exponentially. I began to understand that every animal has a different personality, and how good they are at reading our emotions. I was no longer afraid of them, in part because I had been kicked enough times that it didn’t bother me anymore, and I knew what behaviors to expect from them.

After a couple years I was paired with an alpaca named Allstar. He and I worked perfectly together at practices and I was excited to go to shows. I could tell I had bonded with him more than any alpaca I had worked with previously. When we went to Nationals together we placed first in all shows and grand champions overall. Going into that show, while I was nervous, I knew that the worst I could do was last and if I placed last that it was okay. I wanted to win, but I didn’t need to win. To this day the best shows I have ever done was with him.

I have had a lot of leadership positions in my 4-H club, I’ve been historian, reporter, secretary, vice president, and president. Currently I am showing, and training, a baby alpaca. While I love him, he isn’t an Allstar, and I know that. Abednego is lazy, doesn’t like to run or jump, stubborn, and he jumps up when he’s annoyed. But we are both works in progress and will continue to grow together. Since I’ve started showing alpacas I have changed as a person. I am no longer afraid of them or frantic to win. I show alpacas, and push myself to do better, because it is something I truly enjoy.

By: Emma Borgsmiller
I feel as if I am alone
there is nobody by my side
nobody would want to be with me
though it seems I hurt everybody around me.

Though I see color through my eyes
all I feel is blackness like a hole inside of me
I am unworthy of any kind of attention
But it only seem like the thing I seek the most.

Can’t you hear the scream clawing through me wanting to escape,
Can’t you see the tears running down my face from all the heartache,
Can’t you feel the vibrations on the surface from me shaking so violently,
Can’t you taste the bitter sweetness which I’m dredging in.

I’m drowning in my own thought’s and emotions
somebody , anybody , can you hear me ?
I am plummeting , everything around me is getting bigger by the second
I’m trying to open my eyes to see the bigger picture but I am blinded by another light.

It’s so bright yet dim , I’m so close to it
I can almost touch it with my hands
As I reach out for it , it only seem to move further away from me
so I shall sit here and wait for it to come back to me .

I’ll wait for as long as I need to
Nothing else matters , nobody can change my mind
Empowerment ; one thing people seek for
But I’m seeking out a journey to find the fire burning within me;
the sparkling of the stars dancing across the sky;
to feel the cool sweeping of the wind
across my skin ;
an awakening from this nightmare .

It seem like I have been asleep for a while
as if i was in a coma most of my life
but I have finally awakened
but only though I’m not
the same person I used to be

By: Mariah Lawton
Sleep is not the answer nor will it aid you in finding answers to life,

Sleep is the absence of life while we are still alive,

And yet answers may seem to slip away to disappear,

Especially when we look closer to try and make them clear,

Sleep is our deepest fears, most hidden secrets, and most blissful realities,

It is where we ourselves get trapped in our own mind and are victim to our brutalities,

dreams are a form of sleep they fire in our head for what seems like a life time is only really seconds,

But that distorts time, and maybe that’s good, those are the expectants,

However where does it stop?

When does one dream flip to the next plot?

When you try to remember one dream it’s as if all your dreams are in a clot,

But then who would want to open themselves up enough to remember a dream,

Just close your eyes and let them pass cause some are not what they seem,

Some seem like you’re staring into black space,

While others set you in a specific place or displace the absence of interspace,

where only you and your mind are playing a giant game of chess,

And only you can press to deal with the stress,

of you fighting your own mind on a battle field only you can see,

And only when you wake are you truly free

By: Kaitlyn Murray
The Coats

To them it was a simple gift
An act of kindness
To her it was a marvelous gift
Compassionate giving
Those winter months were so much better
For her and her child
The coats of warmth that calmed each night
Into peaceful sleep

Without the coats they would
Have been miserable
But after the kind gesture
They were overflowing with gratitude
The other family thought it would be
A good gift to give
They never realized
The impact of their kindness

By: Brent Call
I counted everything from the number of steps I took in the hallways to the number of times I used the word "the" on an assignment. I counted the number of times teachers called on me and how many times I made eye contact with someone. I needed to count everything. If I did not count, I would miss something. If I missed something, I would do it wrong. If I did something wrong, I would make myself look like a fool, and if I looked like a fool, I would not be liked.

As a child, I always wanted to be the best. I strived to be the smartest, the best athlete, and the most well liked I could be. I was bullied because this is how I thought it should be. They called me "Egghead", "Goody two shoes", and "OCD". As petty as these may seem, they were extraordinarily degrading to seven year old me. Beginning in the first grade, I was isolated by my peers. I wanted, strived, needed to be liked. They did not like the way I acted, so I stopped participating in games and even speaking for a majority of the time at school. I was caught up in the need to be perfect.

When I got older, I began to realize the severity of all this. My childhood sources of joy were no longer appealing, and the transition into public school most certainly did not help. It is extraordinarily intimidating to jump from a 76 person class to one of around 200. I forced myself to be social. If I do not please my peers, I am worthless.

For some reason, I felt that being good at math would attract the "right" crowd. I never really enjoyed math, but I needed to be good at it. In seventh grade, I sat down at my desk for a math test, and I began to shake. My hands grew clammy, and my breaths shortened. I could hear my own heartbeat in my ears. I thought to myself "What if everyone can hear my heartbeat? If I’m the reason they don’t do well on this, then everyone is going to hate me." The room started to spin. The numbers on my paper swarmed into a singular gray blob. My vision went red. I regurgitated, but not the information that I needed.

High school came. My grades needed to be flawless. I acquainted myself with people who had nearly no common interests with me. I thought they would get me the farthest. They were so much smarter than me and it damaged my self esteem. I stayed up later, did extra problems, and worked until three in the morning in the dark to be the absolute best. It was not enough. The only products of my freshman year were an even more damaged ego, friends I did not trust, and a coffee addiction. I continued having anxiety attacks like the one I had years ago. They were increasing in magnitude, frequency, and duration. There is something wrong with me that could not be fixed. My 504 special needs plan provided a small escape, but they just moved from during tests and quizzes to homework, practices, track meets, and even sitting in class taking notes. My next step is medication, but that is for crazy people. I am not crazy. I am definitely not that bad. I do not need medication, but there is no relief.

Looking to the future, I now understand how my body responds. I am pushing my limits, and I am nearing the edge. I will never cease to push myself, but now, I will be pushing myself to be who I was intended to be instead of the pristine and flawless version I thought I needed to be. I know it is much easier said than done, but with age comes new perspective.

By: Katie Raumann
In the Gardens

By: Alyson Flora

Too often we are left to wonder how many secrets we can keep before they all come spilling out. We can hide them in the back of our minds, in boxes under the bed, even other people, if we dare. But sooner or later, no matter how hard we try, all is revealed, and the mask we once wore cannot be replaced. But what happens once we’re seen, exposed for all we truly are? I suppose it all depends on who looks behind the mask.

Footsteps crept into the house, quiet as the August air that trickled in behind them. Cold hands, clutching roses, pushed the door shut, allowing the sound to echo throughout the house. From an upstairs bedroom, Julia stirred at the familiar sound.

“Dad?” she called, prying herself from the midst of a dream. “Is that you?” Sliding out of bed, she ran to the balcony, and spied her father down below. He looked tired, as he often did, but smiled all the same at the sound of her voice.

“Good morning,” he laughed, opening his arms as she rushed down the stairs, “sorry I was gone so long.”

“I thought I told you not to spend all night out there,” she sighed, falling into his embrace. Julia had decided long ago that the time he spent in their gardens was getting to be ridiculous. They were, in all fairness, beautifully maintained, especially considering how sizable they were. But despite their success, they were certainly not worth losing sleep over. Pulling away from the hug, she noticed something red peeking out from the corner of her eye; roses.

“They finally bloomed!” she exclaimed, delicately plucking them from her father’s grasp. “Hmm, but there aren’t nearly enough for a centerpiece...” she observed, “do you think I could go pick more? Please?” She crossed her fingers behind her back, praying he’d say yes, as he was rather strict when it came to the gardens. “I promise I won’t mess anything up,” she continued, “I’ll be super careful, I swear.” Her father just shook his head.

“Not today, Julia,” he replied, trying not to notice the disappointment in her eyes. “I could really use some sleep, and you know I don’t like you going out there alone. How about I take you out tomorrow, and we’ll pick some together?” Julia nodded solemnly in false acceptance of the plan, as a trip to the gardens was a promise he often made, but seldom kept. She would just have to prove that she was perfectly capable on her own, even if it took a slight bending of the rules to do so.

It was nearing eight by the time Julia finally snuck out of the house. She had allowed herself just enough time to ensure that her father was sound asleep before heading to the gardens, for the last thing she wanted to do was wake him. Stepping outside, it was the cool morning air that hit her first, dancing with the trim of her nightgown as it skinned across the ground. As she followed the cobblestone path around the house, she thought back to the last time she’d been allowed to come this way. It had been at least two years, maybe three, for time had a funny habit of slipping away. She remembered walking through the gate, mid spring, as a birthday present of sorts, for a walk through the gardens was the only thing she had asked for. It had taken a lot of begging, but by the time her birthday finally came around, she found herself wandering the paths with her father at her heels, searching for the perfect flower to take back with her.

“This plant is called lavender,” her father had said, pointing at the pale purple flowers near the edge of the path, “and over here is where I’m growing the butterfly bush.” One by one, he had taught her the names of all the plants, until they eventually came to the Tiger Lilies. She remembered how enthralled
she had been with their bright orange radiance, and the tiny dashes of brown that littered the petals. That was the flower she’d taken home.

Shaking herself from her daydream, Julia found she was finally at the gates that she’d entered once before. The gate itself was black, towering over her head with intricate swirls and designs that hinted at the world they contained. The gate was then connected to a large stone wall that encompassed the gardens, hiding them from passersby who never knew to look. The sweet smell of flowers floated out of the gate, luring her in, calling her home. And so, quietly as she could, Julia slipped past the gate and into her father’s hidden wonderland. It was even more beautiful than she remembered! The leaves of the trees and vines overhead filtered the sunlight into a warm, golden glow, highlighting the leaves of the foliage below. All around her, flowers of every color bloomed. Honeysuckle draped itself across the walls with patches of white aster and lavender lining the paths. Large flowering bushes sectioned everything off, so finding the roses would be no simple task. With every corner she turned, Julia felt farther and farther from the roses, but despite her confusion, she was never lost, for she was perfectly content no matter which way she turned.

Eventually, as she wandered farther down the path, the sound of running water met her ears. Curiosity growing, she began to follow the noise, trying and failing to recall seeing a source of water during her last visit. Turn after turn, the noise grew, until finally, the culprit was revealed; it was a stone fountain, water shimmering past the brilliantly carved figures emerging from the stone. Her favorite part of the fountain, however, was not the fountain itself, but rather the circle of red and white roses that bloomed around the base, climbing the sides so that their leaves skimmed the water and scattered tiny petals across the surface. Pulling her sleeves over her hands to protect them from the thorns, she leaned down, and reached for the stem of the fullest white rose she could find. But as she grew closer, something farther down caught her eye, hiding beneath the soil of the flower bed. Delicately brushing the dirt aside, she extracted what appeared to be a ring of some sort, dulled by mud that had dried across its face. Careful not to lose it, she dipped the ring into the fountain, rubbing away the grime with her thumbs, and revealing a small teardrop diamond. It shone like a tiny galaxy in her hand, refracting every ounce of golden light into a million stars throughout the body of the gem.

“What on earth are you doing back here?” a voice exclaimed suddenly, nearly causing Julia to drop the ring. It was her father.

“Dad I’m sorry, I just—”

“Did I not tell you to wait until tomorrow!?” he exploded, words dripping with a rage that Julia had never before seen in him. Watching wordlessly, she clutched the ring in her hand, as if holding it tightly may transport her back to the safety of her own room. "It’s not safe to come out here all alone, Julia,” he continued, cooling down a bit, "Just go back inside, okay? And don’t let me ever catch you out here again.” And with that, she fled the garden, past the roses, past the vibrant blooms and twisted vines and golden rays of light spilling across the walls, running and running until she was finally back inside.

It was days after the garden incident, and Julia was still trying her best to avoid her father. This was partly due to her frustration with his pointless rules, and partly so that she could proudly wear the ring around the house without him ever knowing; after all, it was her treasure to keep, not his. With this onset of silence in the household, however, came a growing need for human interaction, which is why one rainy Sunday morning when the doorbell rang, Julia jumped at the chance to answer it.

“How can I help you?” she asked with enthusiasm, smiling sweetly at the man and woman at the door. Noticing the solemn expression on the faces staring back at her, she immediately regretted her tone. Before her stood an older woman, makeup smudged around her eyes, and a photograph held within her shaky grip. On her shoulder, a comforting hand rested, belonging to the police officer that seemed to be escorting her around. He was a younger man whose eyes reflected the sincerest of empathy, though the rest of his face appeared unfazed.
“Miss,” he began, focus shifting to Julia, “have you seen this person before?” He gestured toward the photograph the woman was holding. It depicted a blonde girl with rosy cheeks smiling at the camera, mid-twenties at the most.

“Her name is Jennifer,” the woman whispered, trying not to cry.

“I’m sorry,” responded Julia, shaking her head, “I’ve never seen her before.” The woman sighed, grim acceptance crossing her face.

“Please contact the local police department if anything turns up,” the officer added, forcing a smile.

“I will,” replied Julia, and with that, she began to push the door shut.

“Wait!” a voice cried, prying the door back opened. It was the woman, eyes locked on Julia’s left hand. “That ring,” she exclaimed, voice trembling as she spoke, “that’s Jessica’s ring! Her wedding ring!” The woman lunged for the diamond, struggling to pull it off of Julia’s finger.

“Mrs. Green, please,” the officer yelled, pulling the woman back from Julia. “Miss,” he continued, speaking to Julia this time, “where did you get that ring?” Her heart began to race a million miles a minute.

“Just in my back garden,” she stuttered, “I found it on the ground... I swear I didn’t steal it sir.” The officer nodded, requesting instead to speak to the owner of the home. Naturally, she complied, calling for her father, and finally breaking the silence that had overcome the house.

“Glad to see someone’s finally talking,” he called back with a laugh, joining them at the door. Mid-approach, however, he froze, eyes resting on the officer, who was now holding the ring in the palm of his hand. The officer’s eyes stared him down accusingly.

“Sir,” the officer spoke sharply, “I sure hope you’ve got a good reason for storing a missing girl’s jewelry in that garden of yours.” Her father said nothing, praying the silence might hide his guilt, but it didn’t matter, not anymore, for Julia could finally see through the act.

“Don’t lie,” she whispered, looking up at her father. “Not again. Not anymore.” And though her words were weak, they pierced through his silence, and with with a final breath, he removed his mask.

Too often, we are left to wonder how many secrets we can keep before they all come spilling out. We can hide them in the back of our minds, in boxes under the bed, even buried in the garden, if we dare. My father wore a mask of flowers, and I believed him, for his words were made of daisies and his head was filled with roses and he hid all of his secrets in the roots of pretty things. But he hid his truth in shallow graves, and buried deep his flesh and bone, so when I looked behind his mask, nothing did remain.
Once there was a small village where nothing had changed for years and years. The men stayed gruff and the women stayed gossipy and everyone was so stubbornly stuck in their ways that the slightest glimmer of differentness was to be feared. I lived in this village and was mostly ordinary. Well, on the outside at least.

In my mind, though, I was desperate for something different, something more. This, of course, was never articulated to anyone I knew, because I probably would have been labeled the village mad girl. I wanted to go to interesting places and meet people different from myself. However, I had basically resigned myself to the fact that my life would never change.

The day it did change started ordinary as the rest. Weather, as downtrodden and apathetic as those she controlled, never quite made up her mind. Days were warm-cloudy-cool-clear with a chance of rain and a certainty of muddled monotony in the future. I, having escaped chores, was talking with my friends Meg and Catherine. We spoke of inconsequential matters like frock colors and courtship. To me, our ‘friendship’ was only a way to forget the omnipresence of growing old and marrying. Every woman in the village had gone from gay to gray upon saying “I do”, and I for one was not looking forward to it. I really never liked them, but in our small village it was only with them that I vaguely fit in.

They soon turned to gossip as I stared ahead blankly.

“I heard everyone with magic is being rounded up. Just started last week in the city.” Catherine spoke coolly, as if she was in on a secret. This had, in fact, been common knowledge for nearly a month.

“Won’t be long before they get Mrs. McGrady!” Meg tittered. Mrs. McGrady was as boring as the rest of us, save for the fact that she had a mole on her chin. Meg is a ninny.

Of course, neither of them had laid eyes on a magical person. How typical. Well, neither had I, but at least I had the sense not to broadcast my ignorance. God, I really detested them.

Mumbling an excuse, I got up and walked away. They didn’t protest, as I’d maybe said three words in the last hour. Before getting to the town square I veered left, not wanting to meet up with one of the many village busybodies. In retrospect, it was odd that I went Meg and Catherine for escapism, as every adult I knew acted just like them. That thought made me so revolted that I kept walking. I knew I didn’t fit well with the villagers—their attitudes could be downright vile—and didn’t even want to lay eyes on them. I am not one of them, I thought. Give me something different.

As if my pleas were answered, a cottage entered my line of vision. It was unbearably quaint—thatched roof and intricate trim and stepping stones abounded. Also, a tree out front was growing about a foot per second.

Dumbly, I stared at it slack-jawed for nearly a minute. Only then did I notice a small boy, jumping around the tree and squealing with glee. Everything about him looked bright and full, from his sparkling brown eyes to fuzzy dark hair.

“Hello!” he shouted, “I’m Apollo! I did that!” It dawned on me that it was magic. I’d never seen it before, but those back home must know a different kind of magic. This looked harmless.

“Do you want to play hide and seek?” he asked, standing by the tree. Did I really have anything to lose? I wasn’t expected back at home for hours, and Apollo seemed nice.

“What followed was perhaps the best afternoon of my life. It was just hide and seek, right? Nothing special? Yet somehow it was untouchably real. I’d hide behind a tree, actually excited for Apollo’s grinning face to poke around. Whenever I caught him in a bush, he’d squeal “you found me!” We traipsed through the grounds and I felt exultant. Never had I been so free. Hours passed, and soon we were just talking.

“Magic is great! It makes everything better! You know that tree, she had this blue aura. She was sad she was small. Well I made her big and happy with magic!”

“You’re my best friend, Margery. People don’t come here very often. You’re the first one who’s played with me!” His face lit up. “Tonight! When the moon’s awake! Watch for magic!”

I got up, waved goodbye, smiled at the last comment, and left.
That evening passed quickly, and soon enough I was getting into bed with my five sisters. They were normal townsfolk, boring, and hardly spoke as they got into bed. I didn’t either, but kept one eye open. Minutes passed. Nearly an hour. The sky was a deep, secret-keeping indigo.

Suddenly, a pop. All of us sat up in bed.

The sky was then flooded with color, but that could not describe it. This was visceral, alive, saturating the very air we breathed. It was as if we sat inside a rainbow, the scintillating hues dancing ’round our heads. I had never seen a red so red, and green so raw. Every inch of us was awash in it, as if the color was water. My sisters and I looked at each other and grinned, hardly having the focus to question such a miracle.

Another pop.

The colors were swirling, mixing, catching us up in a vortex, a tornado of veritable speed. All around us the rainbow twirled and ricocheted and was the most inexplicably wonderful thing I had ever seen. Watching the spectacle in awe, I barely heard my father rise and leave.

The next morning, I felt a heady mix of wonder from last night and slight peculiarity. Something was amiss, as if all of the furniture had been shrunk an inch. Nevertheless, I bounded downstairs, eager to visit Apollo again. I met Mother there tending the fire, a mournful look on her face.

"I’m so sorry Margery." she murmured

"Pardon?" Mother was usually never this outspoken. She was practically just a servant who had a kid like clockwork every couple years. It was my father, the great dense brute, who controlled the household. He must have put these ideas in her head.

"You should not have been subjected to such danger last night."

"Pardon-" oh wait. The colors. She was worried about the colors. As if they were dangerous. As if Apollo was dangerous. The sentiment was practically laughable.

"Oh all right Mother, a little light sorcery is perilous. Your mind is so closed I’m surprised there’s no lock on your forehead." Her doughy face contorted into a look of pure shock.

"You-don’t even...listen!" she sputtered, as I headed out the door. Perhaps it was Apollo, or my own emergence, that caused me to be so flippant. I liked it though.

Leisurely I strolled the same way I had yesterday, away from the fools and to the only thing true. I rounded the last corner. Cottage, tree, Jasper would all be waiting.

Cottage a pile of rubble.
Tree small and signed.
No Apollo.
My father leaving the scene.
Ducking behind a bush, I tried to fathom it. Maybe the magic last night was so powerful that it destroyed the cottage?

That must be it, had to be it. Then why is Father there with a torch, my mind taunted. I knew, even as I hated to admit it.

Apollo was gone.
I wanted to wake
and scream
and forget
and fight.

I wanted to fight.
I would fight, against the fear. I would fight against the rising, bilious tide of hate and casual prejudice. I would go to the city, do whatever it took. I would fight.

But first, I let myself weep. For what might have been. For my one true friend.

After many minutes I emerged from my hiding spot and started walking, away from the village and towards my purpose, wherever it would take me.

"Thank you Apollo", I whispered to the summery air, "you found me."
木の花