THE GREAT LAKE REVIEW
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Spring 2018

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Located at 19 W. Bridge Street in downtown Oswego, the River’s End Bookstore is GLR’s off-campus home. Every year the River’s End holds the release events for our fall and spring issues.

All of us at GLR would like to extend a special thank you to everyone at our favorite independent bookstore, especially Bill and Mindy.

THANK YOU RIVER’S END!
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You no longer drink your chocolate milk
From the spoon,
Or blow bubbles through your straw.
Instead
You chug
As if you’re trying
To flood the trenches between your organs
To stain your perfect white ribs
To drown out the beat of your heart
Until it’s gone.
I’m almost asleep next to my boyfriend when I hear a knock at the front door. He turns the screen of his iPhone off and shuffles out of bed.

“One sec,” he says before making his way through the dim, messy room.

When he’s gone, I think about him. Who is at the door? Does he not want me? We’d fought earlier today about the way he doesn’t talk to me.

He returns a few minutes later with a box of pizza. It’s Domino’s. The smell of grease seeps through the box when my boyfriend sits down on his bed. He opens it and starts to eat. My stomach growls. It’s bacon and sausage, like always.

I can’t tell whether it’s my eyes or my mouth that starts to water. Sometimes my eyes can get bigger than my stomach. Sometimes my mouth can get bigger than my eyes.

“Can I have some?” I ask, looking up.

“Well-uh,” he says, “I kinda got this for me.”

I say nothing. He eats, and I feel tense below him. My chest and throat are tight, and I don’t want to look up at him anymore. I sit up and inch my hand towards him. Then I take a slice of pizza.

“Sorry,” I say.

My boyfriend looks at me like I’m a stranger. I grin at him and bring the trophy pizza closer to my face. It glistens golden cheese.

Holding the crust, I can feel it lighten the moment the cheese falls off. I can hear my boyfriend gasp when the tomato sauce splatters over my leg and his sheets. I take a bite, and even without toppings, Domino’s tastes just fine.
Dear John
Kerri Shea

Before we were in your life,
you had a Tom Selleck mustache.
And you talked like Kenickie in Grease.
Before you wore a suit and tie,
you wore a Lynard Skynard jean jacket.
Before you became a mechanic,
you had dreams of being a teacher.
Before you had cancer,
you were on the varsity baseball team.
Before you beat cancer,
you were afraid of being a failure.
Before you succeeded,
you hated little kids.
Then one, two, three—
you loved us
Ode to a Piece of Spearmint
Nicole Ehmann

Reduced from your former sugary glory
to an unrecognizably chewed mass of tar left behind
on the sidewalk, tossed carelessly over the shoulder,
baked into the cement from the harsh glow of early July
evenings and
flattened by the regretted negligence of overeager footsteps.

Your once slim and elegant silver wrapper stuffed
forgotten into the back pocket of some worn pair of Levy’s,
crumpled and frayed, the foil run through now with wrinkles
like spice leaves hung up to dry.

The hands that once kept you cradled close reach instead for
another;
the ghost of your minty presence waiting idly on skittish lips
and
lingering on the caustic breaths of teenagers to be replaced
with the bite of bubblegum and the slow burn of red hot
cinnamon

as you lie in wait on the brittle asphalt,
darkened by smog and cityscape shadows,
watching the sky’s subtle shifts from orange
to amber
to blue
to black.
I didn’t believe Mr. Gilchriest when he told me that he would change my life on the first day of English class, but the moment that he opened the cover of *The Kite Runner*, that all changed. The next thing I knew, I was a young kid again, running through the streets of Kabul for a kite fighting competition, the glass on the string of my kite cutting into my hand as I took down my opponents with each gentle tug. Then, I was fleeing to Pakistan in a truck while trying to keep my vomit down my throat. Next, I was an adult, looking members of the Taliban in the eye and laughing until it felt like that was the only thing that I knew how to do. Finally, I was darting in between kids to feel one last kite graze my fingers as it fell from the sky. Mr Gilchriest closed the book, rushing to the next one.

The following trip went back to Vietnam War, and I was a growing soldier in *The Things They Carried*. I started out trying to abandon America’s army draft, leaving the country behind like a burnt out cigarette on a crumbling sidewalk. Then, I watched a fellow soldier’s girlfriend get swallowed by the jungle, overtaken by the welcoming air, and disappear from society’s expectations, her eyes finally aglow. I understood the feeling of killing a man, wanting to sink to your knees, knowing the outline of his inanimate face would be what his wife would only be able to imagine. Helplessly, I watched the people I once called friends fade into nothing. Their bodies were lifeless marionettes with broken strings. After much thought, I finally recalled the funeral of my first love, not knowing the countless deaths to come. We carried onto the final book.

Lastly, we took a tour of a mental hospital in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. I witnessed a new patient try to take down the institution’s most infamous nurse from the top of the hierarchical pyramid. Remaining silent, I saw the shining moments when all of the patients embarked on a group fishing trip and we had a basketball team that wouldn’t quit bouncing around the court. I could see the ward’s newest resident try to lift more than his determined body could hold. I couldn’t tear my eyes away when he failed to win the power struggle.
and squeezed his fingers around the nurse’s neck like it was a stress ball. Before fleeing the hospital, I did what the ward’s most recent victim couldn’t accomplish with the nurse and put him out of his misery, post-lobotomy. Mr. Gilchriest closed the book and we sped into the final days of the course.

I traveled across the world into previous decades without taking my feet off the classroom’s floor. Each day, I couldn’t help but dodge other students and race past them up the stairs to get to class on the second floor of the high school, wondering how my teacher was going to revolutionize my world during third period. I sat in my assigned seat next to the cabinets on the side of the room away from his desk. He had books, but before each class, the thing that I couldn’t tear my eyes away from was the flags with the names of universities that his past students had planned to attend. I didn’t know what I would be studying or where I was going to end up a year from that time after my graduation.

I didn’t realize how much Mr. Gilchriest had affected me until I checked the intended major box that said “Creative Writing” when I applied to go to college. Mr. Gilchriest had made me fall in love with the stories that he discussed in class to the point where I couldn’t imagine not wanting to create my own characters for other readers to become enamored with too. I don’t know how long he’ll keep teaching, but I hope that years from now, he’ll be in class, holding a book that I’ve written in his hands and smiling to himself because the girl from the back of the class made it and something in him always knew that she would.
A Sign From Above (The August 2018 Solar Eclipse, Nashville, TN)

Peter Wendler
I awake to trickling water.
In the corner, he is peeing.
This is not the bathroom.
INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The lights are out except for a thin strip coming from the nearly closed bathroom. The bedroom floor is covered with random items of clothing. A pair of jeans are hanging half off the bed.

From the door, a MAN, 25, leans against the frame and looks into the room. His hand is over his mouth. He's disgusted. His shoulders slump and he sighs. The Man is not surprised.

The Man glances around. He sees the empty glass liquor bottles in the trash by the dresser. On the bedside table, a shot glass is on its side. Another is right side up, resting on what could be a coaster. It's hard to see.

He steps into the room. He nudges aside vodka shooters and clothes. From the bed a WOMAN, 24, stirs.

THE HALF-HANGING JEANS FALL ON THE FLOOR.

She does not get up. The Man shakes his head. He tiptoes around to the Woman's bedside table. He carefully lifts the knocked-over shot glass. He brings it to his nose and cringes.

THE SHOT GLASS HAS A DROP LEFT.

The Man gently places the glass back onto the table. He turns towards the bed.

The Woman's hair is visible beneath a mound of blankets. The Man stares at her. His lips are pressed tightly together. His gaze wanders down the bed. One of her legs is sticking out.

He nudges her leg back under the blankets.

The Man turns back to the side table. He carefully picks up one shot glass and reaches for the other. Upon lifting it, he notices...

...THE SHOT COASTER IS HER AA SOBRIETY COIN, “6 MONTHS”.

He stares at it. He picks it up slowly. He rolls it over the tops of his knuckles before catching it in his hand. He clenches it and looks defeated.
Draped
Kaitlin Alexander
Concrete Swamp
Cate Seaman

You live in the concrete swamp—where the hum of busses and semis quivers your flesh and oil fills your moldy lungs. A mechanical spider sits atop a black-eyed Susan—dripping—its eyes blink red—yellow—green. Walk. Don’t walk. You dance over the road thinking cars can’t hurt me.

Pools of jungle juice bubble in the gutters. You drink the fizzy water and wander—dizzy—into a sweet syrup canal. Predators creep from the bushes they hide inside to harvest wallflowers. A creature made of mostly meat: you are a trick or treat to them.

Vomit glitter from last night’s dinner at the asphalt by your feet. After, walk through a screen door into an elbow-room filled with bodies, where the air is hot from breath. You find a friend to forget.

When every has-been has been had, eke screams from your team until you’ve had enough. Then stand—inside an empty cavern you call home, outside sound’s reach and away from the echoes that follow you. Leave the cave and pick queer fruit from a tree nearby. Eat the fruit and your speech turns into fractals. You share it with your friends—speak fractals with your friends. Do you understand?

At the end of the night, a lost boy from Nowhere crashes on your couch. He’s crying bullets over something you can’t understand, and your only gift is sorry. His cheeks are stained green with a rash from the road. You apply a poultice but it burns his face. Tired, you kick him out to the street, telling yourself he was drunk anyway.

You wake up the next morning to one text message that you delete before reading through. Stuck inside the concrete swamp, your lost boy is lost to sour hours and miles between.
Ripped Jeans and Hazel Eyes
Jessica Wickham

February 3rd, 1:04 a.m.
I kissed him. And he kissed me back. Shit. I stare at the palms of my hands as I sit by my bed. Idiot, idiot, idiot. I try to think about where it went wrong, though it’s hard with the high still fogging my brain and filling my hands with cotton.

February 2nd, 11:23 p.m.
The phone buzzes in my fingers, and I see Dan’s face flash across the screen. Nope, I think, swiping him away. My phone flashes to inform me that Dan has called five times already.

I hear a knock on my dorm room door. I toss my phone on my desk, stand up, and walk to the door. When I open it, hazel-blue eyes stare back at me. Shit.

“Dan,” I manage to get out. I should’ve known better than to shut him out. Dan cares too fucking much to let that slide.

He gives me a concerned look. “Vick, what’s going on?” he asks from the doorway.

“Nothing, I’m fine,” I insist. “Just a research project to work on. Super busy.”

“That paper’s not due for another two weeks.” Shit. Leave it to Dan to remember due dates. “Since when do you try to get a head start on things?” He eyes me skeptically. “Can I come in?”

I sigh. “Fine,” I nod, standing aside to let him in the room. He looks over at my empty desk.

“Homework?” he asks, a sigh in his voice. I just say nothing. What can I say? It’s obvious I’ve been avoiding him.

I sit back down in my desk chair, and he leans against the top shelf. “Victor,” he says to me. “Please, tell me. What’s going on? It’s not like you to be like this.”

“Nothing,” I answer. “I don’t want to talk about it.”


I look up at him, casually letting his weight rest on one foot as his Red Hot Chili Peppers shirt drapes across his thin form. His brown, shaggy hair falls around his ears, and I have
to resist the urge to reach up and run my fingers through it. Getting high with him? I think. Last time I did that...

I sigh. If I say no, he'll just keep worrying, I reason. “Okay,” I say. “Sure.”

**February 3rd, 12:23 a.m.**

On the walk back to the dorm from his car, I feel it start to hit me finally. My toes don’t touch the ground, and a familiar balloon fills in my chest to lift my entire body up. Just what I needed, I think.

“Don’t mention it,” Dan says. I look at him strangely.

“Did I say that out loud?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he answers. “Don’t worry about it.”

I manage to move my numb fingers enough to hold my ID to the scanner to let us into the building. We ride the elevator up seven floors, which feels like a space shuttle liftoff, and head back to my room. I put one foot in front of the other until I collapse in my bed. I roll over until I’m sitting up on its edge. Dan stands by the bed, giving me a small smile.

“I know you said you didn’t want to talk about it,” Dan says, taking a short breath. “But you’ve been acting weird for the past week. Are you okay? Can you at least tell me that?”

I only half understand his words, and I opt for a simple nod to avoid losing track of my train of thought.

“I worry about you, sometimes,” Dan says.

“Don’t worry,” I assure him. “I’m fine. Can we just talk about something fun?”

“Okay,” he reluctantly agrees. He eases himself on the bed next to me, and I feel my heart rate accelerate beyond what it was already at. I try not to move, just so he doesn’t realize how nervous I am. Calm down. “Zane’s got a new song idea.”

I nod. “You gonna go for it?” I ask.

“Not sure,” he admits. “I don’t want it to seem too cliché, you know?”

“Dan, you’re our best writer,” I tell him. “No way can you create a cliché. Our songs were never as good as they got when you came along.”

“You’re the one who recruited me,” he points out.
I remember it well. Dan used to be this kid that blended in. Somewhere along the way, other kids saw him playing guitar after school, and his popularity went way up. He just shrugged it off, though, in his casual humble way. I just knew I had to have him in my band, especially after Cole, our guitarist, moved to Nevada. Our band’s popularity has been increasing ever since.

“Yeah, because I saw how good you were,” I tell him.

“All the girls flock to you,” he tells me.

I wave his comment off. “That’s only because I’m the lead singer. Girls love the ‘bad boy’ with the green hair and ripped jeans.”

“You seem to like them, too.”

I pause. “I guess.”

“You guess?”

“They’re mostly just hookups. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know. You’ve never been one to settle down.”

“Yeah.” I look down at my hands, then up to him. I look at him, and every aspect of him seems brighter. Shit, I think. Not again. I can’t fight back the flutter in my chest, my heart beating faster at the sight of his eyes. I know it can’t be because of the high, either. “You…you’re a good friend, Dan,” I say to try to distract my thoughts.

“Thanks,” he says back, shifting his hands back and forth from his knees to his side. I watch them go back and forth, and I act before I can stop myself. I put my hand on top of his right, and he looks right at me. The thought crosses into my mind, and I lean forward.

His lips are chapped. It’s the first thing I think when I feel them on mine. But I don’t pull away, and neither does he. I grab his t-shirt with my other hand, pull him into me, and kiss him hard. I feel every wrinkle in his shirt, every crack in his lips. Everything I’ve wanted to feel for so long, all happening so fast.

He kisses me back, matching my pace. Shit, I think, but don’t stop. I move my hand until I feel the bottom of his shirt, reaching underneath to his warm, bare back. I wrap my fingers around his hip and pull him even closer, feeling my desire growing.
Dan moves his lips to kiss my chin, and I lift my head. He starts to kiss my neck, hesitant at first but soon going faster.

I pull up his shirt, and he lifts his arms to let me take it off. Time speeds up and slows down all at once, and I feel his hands on my back, gripping me hard. I rip off my tank top and toss it aside. I move my lips to his neck, feeling his stubble on my tongue. His breaths are heavy in my ear, and I almost can’t believe this is happening. I had imagined it plenty of times, but I never expected it to actually happen.

I push my body against his slightly, trying to get him to lie down. His movements are slow, but he eventually repositions himself until I’m on top of him. I feel his erection against my jeans, and it only makes my heart rate quicken.

I kiss him everywhere. Every inch of him, smooth and warm. I move my hands to his jeans, and fumble with his button. His breath stops suddenly, so I stop too. I look up at him, and his eyes are terrified. My God, what have I done? I stare at him in horror and scramble off him. My body hits the floor because I can’t place my feet right, and I just let myself drop. I slowly stand up as all my adrenaline whooshes out of me.

When I look over, Dan’s sitting up on the bed, trying to get his shirt back on. He stands up off the bed and looks at me.

“Dan…” I start. “I’m sorry. I…”

He shakes his head, that look of anxiety never quite leaving his eyes. He walks past me, opens the door, and leaves without another word. I collapse against the bedframe and try in futility to stop the hot tears from escaping my eyes.

**February 2nd, 2:03 p.m.**

Come on, just do it, a part of me urges. Today is the day. Can’t it wait? the other part of me argues. What if she acts just like Dad said she would? This could devastate her. She won’t act that way. Dad was a total dick. He probably lied.

She won’t understand.

Sure she will. She has to understand. Otherwise, I can never be with him.

I take a deep breath, in, out, and push ‘dial’ on my phone.
I hold it up to my ear and listen to the dial tone sound once, twice.

“Victor!” Mom shouts from the other end. I can’t help but smile. She always loves hearing me call. “How are you? What are you doing? How’s school?”

As usual, her questions come too fast for me to answer. “Fine, everything’s fine,” I assure her. “Listen, Mom, I didn’t just call to catch up.”

Her voice noticeably drops. “What’s wrong? You’re not in trouble, are you?”

“No, nothing like that,” I tell her. I can do this, I think over and over again. “I just want to tell you something. It’s really important to me. But you have to promise not to get mad at me.”

“Sure, of course,” she says quickly. “But what is this? What’s going on?”

“I’m...” I hesitate. I’ve rehearsed this what must’ve been at least ten times before even picking up the phone, yet I can’t seem to get the words out right. “Bisexual.”

For a moment, all I can hear is my heart threatening to burst through my ribcage.

“Mom?” I call, worried she may’ve lost signal.

“What did you say?” she asks.

“Didn’t you hear me?” I ask. “I said I’m bi, Mom. Bi-sexual.”

“I don’t understand,” her voice sounds frustrated, like when she encounters an atheist by chance.

“I’m coming out to you, Mother!” I shout into the phone. Calm down. I let out my breath. “Listen, Mom, I just wanted you to know, okay? I like guys and girls. It’s not that big a deal.”

“Yes, it is a big deal,” she says back, her voice angry and raised. “I can’t believe you’ve been hiding this from me. You’re gay?”

“What? Gay?” I ask, flabbergasted. I stand up from my desk and start pacing my dorm room. I shake my head. This can’t be happening, I think in a panic. “I’m not gay, Mom!”

“How long have you known?” she asks, clearly ignoring my response.

“Since Jeremy,” I tell her.
“But Jeremy was your best friend.”

“He was my boyfriend.” Silence hangs in the air.

“I can’t believe this,” she tells me. “This isn’t you. This isn’t the Victor I raised. You need to get help.”

“Mom, I don’t need help,” I scream at her. “I need you to understand!” The line goes dead. She hung up on me! Fuck, how could I be so stupid? I raise the phone in my hand, ready to throw it at the wall. I stop myself, tossing it on the bed instead. I lift myself onto the mattress, and feel my chest fill with a sort of heaviness I haven’t felt since Dad found me with Jeremy.

**February 4th, 10:30 a.m.**

It’s been over 24 hours, I realize as I lie in bed with my hand in my hair. I check my phone once again. He hasn’t said a word to me. Maybe I should talk to him. No, bad idea. I can’t even look at his face right now.

I unlock my phone, tap for my messages, and scroll to find our conversation.

<Vick, pick up ur phone> was the last message from Dan, before he showed up at my dorm. I wince, but decide to press on.

<Dan Im really srry about what happened. I shouldntve done it.>

I stare at my phone for a solid fifteen minutes, half expecting him to never respond.

<Whyd u do it?> he messages back exactly 18 minutes after me. Shit. How do I even explain that?

<Bc I like u> I take a deep breath. <I thought maybe u would like me 2>

<Why didn’t u tell me?>

<I wanted to. I had to come out to my mom first>

<How did that go for u?>

<She didn’t take it well>

<What did u tell her?>

<Im bi>

<Just like that?>

<Yea>
Damn, Vick
I know
You could’ve told me
I know I sit up in bed. Ur not mad?
Little
Srry. It was the high. I thought u were into it
I was
Into me? I actually start to feel lighter.
No A whole 30 seconds pass. Not like that My chest sinks.
Then what was that? You kissed me back. I thought you were bi, 2
I am. Ur attractive, Vick
U think so?
Duh. And a halfway decent kisser
I can’t help but chuckle.
I was high, too he reminds me. I get horny when Im high
Hey same
Doesn’t mean I want to date u
I know I shake my head. I should’ve seen this coming.
So what happens now?
I breathe a sigh of relief. Yea ok. C u then. Thnx
Don’t mention it

February 5th, 7:18 p.m.
“You guys all set?” I ask, looking around to my bandmates. They nod. “Okay. Let’s start with...” My cellphone cuts me off. Normally, I leave it off during practice, but I forgot to today. I immediately recognize my mom’s ringtone. Why the fuck is she calling me? “Just a sec,” I say, setting down my guitar and walking into the kitchen from our drummer’s garage.
“What?” I say when I accept her call.
“Victor?” she says back. “I’m sorry I hung up on you the other day. I just wanted to call and let you know...” I hear her taking a deep breath. “I, um, looked up what you said. I still
“You don’t have to understand, Mom,” I tell her. “Just don’t hate me.”

“Of course I don’t hate you,” she assures me. “No matter what you do, I could never hate you. It’s just...this was rather sudden for me, hun. It just came out of nowhere.”

“I told you I’ve known for a while.” I try to keep the edge out of my voice.

“I know, I know,” she says hurriedly. “But why tell me now?”

“I, um...” I sigh. It all seems kind of stupid now. “Fell in love with my best friend, again.”

“Who? Danny?” she asks, the surprise clear in every word.

“Yeah,” I answer in a whisper. “Look, Mom, I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Is he your...” I can just see her wincing at home.

“Boyfriend?”

“No, Mom,” I tell her. She sighs in relief. “But that doesn’t mean I stop liking guys.” I pause, then quickly add, “or girls.”

“Alright,” she says, though it’s clear she’s trying to shut me up. “Well, um, I’m here for you. If you ever go back to what you were before, just let me know.”

Is that her way of saying this is a fucking phase? I just shake my head. Don’t get into it now.

“Sure, Mom,” I agree to agree. “I’ve got practice.”

“Okay.” She goes silent for a second. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” I say as I hang up the phone.

“Hey, Vick!” Dan shouts from the garage, his voice just loud enough for me to hear. “You coming?”

I put my phone in my back pocket, take a deep breath, and turn back toward the garage. “Yeah.”
I emerged from blood and chocolate.
Cocoa beans are the best kind of poison.
Hot breath exchanging compliments and control and cries to God ‘cause it feels so good.
Warm skin shielding cold souls and sucking the liquor off his bottom lip as if he is the only thing left to drink on the island.

Rafael and Ciriaco could never be friends, not here nor in Santiago.
They might have met each other at a bar in carajo land.

Cocoa beans are the best antidote.
Loving a man will make you a holy thing or a quiet siren or it just means you choked in darkness.
Hot breath exchanging curses and control and cries to God ‘cause he wouldn’t stop.
The bed reeked of silence.
The five fingers of ellipsism wore red nail polish to seem more pure.

“That woman sure knows how to die” China heard the gardenias say to the roses that lay on the pavement.
El que no sabe engañar no sabe gobernar, and he sure governed you to believe that dark chocolate is the kind you could never bite into.
It reduced the enchanting taste of bleach and it was not worth healing your sore throat and dared you give your heart to someone less cavalier?

Hot breath exchanging crude comments and crooked views of kinky hair.
Hot breath full of lies his lips fed you.
Hot breath like the fires of hell come to drag you home..
Suck the salt from your tears like it’s love in the 60s, when tyrant meets chocolatier.

Cocoa beans are the best heirloom.
Piano Man
Breanne Beightol

The muffled clang of piano keys echoed through the halls of the theatre as I stood against the wall waiting for my audition. My vocal coach, Mr. Wilson, had assigned me a song in a foreign language that was completely out of my range and comfort zone. I could hear his “words of wisdom” echo in the back of my mind as I looked over the crumbled sheet music. “Challenging yourself helps you grow as a singer,” he’d say. I tapped against my leg, keeping a steady beat, as I mouthed the words to this wretched, unfamiliar song.

I wasn’t nearly as prepared for this audition as I should’ve been. I didn’t even want to be there in the first place, but the pressure from Mr. Wilson to challenge myself made it seem as though there was no other option. Singing was something I’d always done for fun, but I dreaded how these auditions turned it into some type of competition. I didn’t want to be harshly graded on breathing in the correct places or using my diaphragm to support high notes. I wanted to sing to make the people listening feel something real. Most importantly and maybe selfishly, I wanted to make myself feel something real. Singing was the one thing that gave me a rush and reminded me I had a pulse.

As I checked my watch and noticed the minute hand creeping steadily toward my audition time, I longed to be in my sanctuary: alone in my car. I pictured myself driving a little faster than I should be, singing along to a Billy Joel song I knew by heart. I would roll down my windows and sing over the pounding wind as strands of hair cycloned around my face. I could let go without any fear of making mistakes. I would let my voice crack and laugh at myself when I got the harmonies wrong.

After a few minutes, a heavy-set moderator wearing too much makeup popped her head out of the door in front of me, inviting me in. Mr. Wilson was already inside sitting at the piano as he rearranged his sheet music. He smiled as I walked to the center of the room. This encouraging gaze awakened a pang of guilt in the pit of my stomach as I acknowledged how unprepared I truly was. He laid his fingers on the piano keys
and asked if I was ready.

“All set,” I lied.

The moderator plopped in the front row of empty seats and asked me to begin. The opening notes rang through the room as I took a deep breath and began singing my piece.

It wasn’t until Mr. Wilson flipped to the third page that I completely blanked on the lyrics. It was hard enough that the song was in a different language, so I couldn’t even fake my way though it by making words up.

The moderator scowled at my awkward fumble and scratched a note with her red pen on her clipboard. Desperately, I looked to Mr. Wilson to give me a clue on the words that had suddenly left my brain. He tried to come to my rescue by mouthing the lyrics, but this hardly helped as I’m terrible at reading lips. In an attempt to fill the tense silence, I hummed along to the piano as my knee shook nervously. My throat began to tighten the way it usually does right before I start to cry. Forgetting the words was embarrassing enough, so I bit my lip to make sure this moment of weakness never made its way to the surface.

Eventually I found my way back through the piece, finishing with whatever ounce of poise I had left. I quickly thanked the moderator as I avoided the defeated look in Mr. Wilson’s eyes, and left the room. I darted outside to the parking lot and unlocked my car. A sigh of relief escaped from my lungs as I slumped in the driver’s seat, eager to belt “Piano Man” on my drive home alone.
The first time I saw an ugli fruit
I think I was fifteen. This is it?
This isn’t ugly. I was expecting something more like
a durian. Now those are ugly. But this?
This is just a wrinkly orange. Is this to say
wrinkly people are ugly too?

My grandfather had unsmooth skin,
and he would have told you he was beautiful.
Ugli fruits are adorable in a grandparent-kind of way;
they’re soft and cute and you want to defend them
whenever someone says otherwise.

“Poppy, why do you eat the orange peel?”
I ask one day when I just can’t bear the curiosity
any longer. His old, decaying teeth chew the citrus skin
and I wince because it’s always tasted like
window cleaner to me. He just shrugs
and continues to peel my fruit.

I wish I had thanked him for it. I wish
I’d brought him an ugli fruit; would he even notice
the difference? Would he think it’s just
a rotten orange? Would it have been
ugly in his eyes? Maybe he would’ve just peeled it for me,
even though my hands are not too small and childish anymore,
and chewed the bitter skin as he went along. Maybe ugli skin is sweeter.
Dad’s Jeans
Cody Young

My dad was the type of man to push away problems until they bit him on the nose and when he went over to my grandma’s house one day to see her sprawled out on the couch in his favorite “relaxin” jeans, it was the equivalent of a nibble.

He let her keep the jeans. She didn’t remember absconding with them, but was adamant that they were my recently deceased grandfather’s. Why not let her stay in dreamland? The next pair didn’t stay long before they went MIA. Rinse and repeat. Each time Dad bought a fresh pair, within days they would vanish from the house.

Grandma was a geriatric Robin Hood. We tried locks and chains, but the old lassie was far too clever for that, even in her current state. She either had a vendetta against my father that involved swiping his denim or thought Grandpa was alive and storing his jeans at our home.

Dad was really bad at confrontation. You could call what he did giving into a delusion, but that didn’t matter. When he went to Costco and bought 100 pairs of their finest jeans, the only thing running through his head was the woman who raised him, and the comfort she might find.

I didn’t think Grandma was lucid enough to appreciate the gesture, but Dad kept it up, even played along sometimes, making the locks less difficult as she got worse.
Floater
Miles Petersen
Quiet Passage of the Ship
Cate Seaman

I could sing a poolside psalm
About the sleeves that hide your palms from
Early springtime goosebumps.

Fingertips
Nervous twitch—
Splayed out and downward dipped
Into the pool below.

Then up again, and
Cupped full,
You drop the water back.

The waves you make,
This pool must be a trench inside the sea
Where upturned ribs of sunken ships
Lay empty chests
To rest.

Now, both our breaths turn into fog
And wordlessly, you say:

The air is filled with water, and we will never drown.
Never drown but drift away.
Radio Silence
Leslie Ann Velez

CHARACTER NAME. BRIEF DESCRIPTION. AGE. GENDER.

DR. NORMAN Main doctor. The boss. 50’s Male
DR. MARCUS Second in command. Does most of the dirty work Late 40’s Male
RAFAEL A new patient. A lot of his dialogue includes pre-recorded narration. Late 20’s Male
HIDEO Another patient. Failed. 30’s Male
AVA The only successful patient. Early 20’s Female
The ANNOUNCER Radio speaker. N/A Male

SCENE ONE.

RAFAEL sits at a large desk waiting patiently as DR. NORMAN reads over a file sitting in front of him. There's a tripod on DR. NORMAN’S side of the desk aimed directly at RAFAEL. After a moment, DR. NORMAN clears his throat.

DR. NORMAN
So, Rafael. You passed our medical examination with flying colors. You also mentioned to Dr. Marcus that you have no history of serious illness in your family. You're young, you're fit, you are a perfect candidate for this trial.

RAFAEL
That’s great. When can I start?

DR. NORMAN
Preferably today if possible. You just have to sign a few forms before we can move you into a room.
RAFAEL nods then looks into the camera as DR. NORMAN rifles through a desk drawer. He notices RAFAEL’s slightly concerned face.

**DR. NORMAN**

Is there a problem?

**RAFAEL**

Nothing. It’s just I’m alittle bit confused as to why there’s a camera.

**DR. NORMAN**

The camera’s for your safety and mine.

**RAFAEL**

Safety?

**DR. NORMAN**

Past participants have tried to sue us so in order to avoid any future legal issues we have decided to record any and all meetings. Does it bother you?

**RAFAEL**

Not too much. I was just wondering.

**DR. NORMAN**

Alright then. Now, Rafael, have you participated in an experimental trial before?

**RAFAEL**

No.

**DR. NORMAN**

Excellent. Have you any outside responsibilities that will require your attention within the thirty-one day time frame of this trial?
RAFAEL
Like a job?

(DR. NORMAN nods)
No.

DR. NORMAN
Do you have any family and friends that will be worried about your absence?

RAFAEL shakes his head.

DR. NORMAN
Are you an avid believer in religion or the occult?

RAFAEL
(Laughs awkwardly.)
Can’t say that I am?

DR. NORMAN
Finally, do you understand the terms and conditions of this experiment? That you will be, for thirty-one days exactly, be confined to one room when not examined?

RAFAEL
I understand.

DR. NORMAN
Do you agree to be a part of this experiment?

RAFAEL
Yes.

LIGHTS FADE OUT.
SCENE TWO.

The sound of a lock being opened is heard before the lights fade back in to three rooms set up on stage, each room partitioned with a wall. A man lays in the bed of the center room while a girl lays on the floor of the last room on stage left. DR. MARCUS and RAFAEL enter from stage right into the first empty room.

**DR. MARCUS**
This is where you’ll be staying. You have a bed with fresh sheets, the dresser is filled with fresh clothes, though they are all the same.

**RAFAEL**
It’s a bit small.

**DR. MARCUS**
We do our best with what we have. Now-

(He points at the radio.)
Everyday you'll be required to listen to the broadcasts on the radio and write in the notebook provided any thoughts and analysis of said broadcast.

**RAFAEL**
(Noticing the metal shutter in the wall.)
What's that?

**DR. MARCUS**
Oh that. That is an automatic window. It will be open every morning and every night for one hour. That way you can talk to your neighbor. We understand that some people can experience cabin fever in solitary so this'll help ease some of that tension.

**RAFAEL**
I see...
DR. MARCUS
Well, I must be on my way. I'll leave you to get settled. Dinner will be served in an hour. There will be a medication with that that you must take.

DR. MARCUS leaves as RAFAEL examines the room around him. A lock is heard. He moves to sit down on the bed. A moment passes and the sound of straining metal is heard. The window is opened.

The man from the center room can be seen getting up from his bed and walking toward the window.

HIDEO
Hey, newbie.

RAFAEL
(Awkwardly.)
Hey.

HIDEO
Name’s Hideo.

RAFAEL
Rafael.

HIDEO
This is a trip, huh? What made you agree to this?

RAFAEL
I need the money.

HIDEO
Ah, yeah. Me too. Hey, do you know what happened to the guy that was in that room before you?
RAFAEL
No.

HIDEO
That’s weird. They never change rooms. The guy was a maniac, I wonder if they kicked him out of the program.

RAFAEL
How long have you been here?

HIDEO
A week maybe, can’t really tell. It’s not so bad. The only thing is the radio is kind of weird.

RAFAEL
How so?

Before HIDEO can answer, singing interrupts them.

RAFAEL
What’s that?

HIDEO
Oh. That’s Ava. She’s on my side. She’s a fucking weirdo.

RAFAEL
What do you mean?

HIDEO
Well, I don’t wanna freak you out or anything but sometimes at night I hear her talking to herself. Not in English either and it’s not some language I can recognize. I think she’s been here for too long. Any way, I’ll let you get settled in. First night’s not so fun. Nice meeting you though.
HIDEO lays back down on his bed. RAFAEL looks around the room. AVA can still be heard faintly.

LIGHTS FADE OUT.

SCENE THREE.

The stage remains dark as static can be heard.

THE ANNOUNCER

Today's broadcast starts with an armed robbery reported at a local gas station just outside the city. While no one was hurt, what makes this encounter especially bizarre is the victim’s detailed account of the crime.

Lights fade in on RAFAEL sitting at the desk, pen in hand, listening intently.

RAFAEL

(Narrating from offstage.)
The radio is my only contact to the outside world so I kind of enjoy when it comes on. One story everyday. It’s day five, I think. So far I’ve heard about fires, frauds, tax evasions. Petty things. Seems boring but-

THE ANNOUNCER

The victim, forty-two year old Edward Hill, describes the robber as pale white, wearing a dark hooded sweatshirt and leather gloves. When Hill went to open the cash register, the robber pulled a knife on him and demanded that he get on his knees and pray. It was then that Hill noticed the knife, which he describes as a very large titanium hunting knife, was already stained in blood. Hill did what he was told, fearing for his life, when the robber began to laugh and just stare at him. It had been a few moments before the robber turned and ran off, having taken nothing. Hill then is quoted as saying that the robber had black eyes, almost as if he had no eyes at all.
RAFAEL
(Cont’d)
This is new.

LIGHTS DIM.

More static before the lights come back on again. RAFAEL is now sitting on his bed with no shirt, back against the wall, notebook propped on his knees. A stack of papers sit on his desk and a half eaten food tray sits beside it.

RAFAEL
It’s day ten.

THE ANNOUNCER
A wealthy family in the suburbs awoke in the middle of the night to a shock when their home security system went off. The father was the first one to realize that someone was in their home before the system was abruptly cut off. The father quickly woke his wife and their two young children and retreated to the home’s panic room where they were able to see the intruders via the home’s CCTV system. The father is quoted saying there were three masked intruders inside with shotguns. He says they roamed the house, damaging expensive furniture and various family items. The family, being religious, had various decorative crosses hanging on their walls which the intruders took the time to turn each upside down. In the time span of half an hour, the intruders managed to cause sixteen-thousand dollars worth of damage and took nothing. One of the intruders was recorded taunting the family through one of the cameras. No leads as to who the intruders are.

RAFAEL writes in his notebook. A shadow passes by quickly on the back wall and he flinches, looking up quickly. He stares until the lights dim.
SCENE FOUR.

There is an examination table now on stage as the lights come back on. RAFAEL sits on it as DR. NORMAN checks his heart and lungs. RAFAEL looks a little paler than he was before.

**RAFAEL**

(Narrating.)
I haven’t been feeling myself lately. Can’t sleep most nights. Sometimes I get cold sweats and the room feels too hot and other times it feels too cold. Food doesn’t taste the same anymore.

DR. NORMAN takes off the stethoscope and puts it around his neck. He takes a penlight out of the pocket of white coat. He checks his eyes.

**DR. NORMAN**

Open wide.

(He checks the back of his throat.)
Close. Go ahead and put your shirt back on.

DR. NORMAN pocket’s the penlight and scribbles something on a note pad as RAFAEL slips his shirt back on.

**DR. NORMAN**

Well, I don’t see anything wrong with you. You’re completely healthy. Have you been taking the medicine with your food and sleeping well?

**RAFAEL**

(Nodding.)
I’ve been taking the pills but I haven’t exactly been sleeping well.

**DR. NORMAN**

This actually is something that happens with all of our patients around this time. The closed space takes a toll on the mind. I don’t blame you.
RAFAEL
(Sighing.)
I just feel on edge and sometimes I swear I can see things moving in the corners of my room. I can’t eat, I can’t sleep. Sometimes I feel like I can’t breathe.

DR. NORMAN
These are common side effects, as bizarre as they may seem. There is nothing you should be worried over.

RAFAEL studies the doctor’s face. After a moment, he sets his jaw and looks away.

RAFAEL
Fine.

LIGHTS FADE OUT.

SCENE FIVE.

Dark stage. Static.

THE ANNOUNCER
A freak accident closed off Kennedy Drive today on the West Side as a police van collided with a school bus in front of Saint Vitus church. The van was going a speedy ninety-miles an hour while the bus was just a little over the speed limit. Witnesses at the scene said they saw a man in a black suit walk into the street just as the van was pulling up, causing the van to swerve directly into the bus and pushing them both onto the sidewalk and nearly up the church steps while the bus was pushed onto it’s side. The drivers of both vehicles were pronounced dead on the scene. There is no sign of the man who caused the accident.

More static. Lights fade in. RAFAEL paces the room with no shirt on. He stares at the ceiling, rubbing the back of his neck
with both hands.

**RAFAEL**
I can’t remember what day it is. If it’s day fifteen, twenty, thirty, or fifty. I could have spent a year in here and I wouldn’t know...I haven’t slept...There’s a tray of untouched food on the desk that could probably grow legs and walk out of this room. I haven’t been able to keep that stuff down. I can feel my ribs through my skin and something else. Something crawls under it and I know that I am not alone...The room is growing too small and the window hardly ever opens anymore. Just for an hour at a time, it seems like only a few minutes. I need Hideo. I need him to tell me I’m not losing my fucking mind.

Metal is heard and the window slides open. RAFAEL rushes toward it. HIDEO’S side of the stage is lit and you can see how trashed his room is. There’s strange markings and writing on the wall.

**RAFAEL**
Hideo? Hideo?

HIDEO is seen on the other side of the wall crawling toward the window.

**HIDEO**
Who’s that?

**RAFAEL**
It’s me. Rafael. Talk to me, man. I’m losing my mind here.

**HIDEO**
You can’t lose what you never really had.

He looks like hell. He’s become so skinny his clothes hang off his body, his hair has grown into a mess of darkness on top of his head and covering his face. His skin is pale, eyes red, and his knuckles are stained with dried blood.
RAFAEL
Shit, man. Are you okay?

HIDEO sits with his back against the wall underneath the window.

HIDEO
Sleep awhile. You're looking tired.

RAFAEL
What are you talking about? Are you okay?

HIDEO’S eyes fix on something on the opposite wall. AVA can be seen looking at him from her window.

HIDEO
Hey Raf?

RAFAEL
Yeah?

HIDEO
I saw God today.

RAFAEL
What?

HIDEO
She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen but... Her teeth.. Her nails. Something not to be trusted. To be afraid of.

RAFAEL
Oh, Jesus. You’ve lost it, dude.

HIDEO
Might be. Stay alive, Raf. There’s nothing on the other side.
HIDEO stands and walks toward AVA'S side. She can be seen smiling widely up at him. He leans into the window and touches her cheek. RAFAEL’S window beings to close.

RAFAEL
Wait, no! Hideo!

FADE OUT.

SCENE SIX.
The stage remains dark.

RAFAEL
(Narrating.)
My human soul, no longer able to take the silence, the emptiness, the dark things creeping around in the corners. The walls swallowing the voice I no longer have. What must I look like? Alone. Afraid... I fear I'm no longer alone.

The lights begin to flicker in and out, showing RAFAEL pacing back and forth in distress. The noises begin: rattling metal, creaking wood, the sound of heavy footsteps. Slow, breathy gasps, a baby crying. Radio static, nails on chalkboard. AVA laughing in distortion. AVA praying low and fast. The noises alternate and melt together as RAFAEL begins to throw things around. Papers fly, he pulls the mattress off the bed frame. He tips over the chair. The flickering increases. He screams in agony as the radio static becomes even more intense. He grabs the radio and throws it to the ground. It shatters. The noises stop. The lights cut out.

SCENE SEVEN.
RAFAEL, now calm though incredibly disheveled, sits under the window which is now open. AVA stands over him from her side. She has now moved into HIDEO'S old room.
AVA
Pretty boy. Pretty boy...

RAFAEL
Where is he, Ava?

AVA
He’s in Hell.

RAFAEL
What happened to him?

AVA
He’s dead.

RAFAEL
He isn’t-

AVA
Such a pretty boy. Such a pretty, bad, bad boy. Gone off to Hell.

RAFAEL
Shut up.

AVA starts to laugh as she keeps repeating the same thing.

AVA
He’s in Hell! He’s in Hell! He’s in Hell!

RAFAEL
For God’s sake, shut up!

AVA
God...
RAFAEL
Please.

AVA
(Laughing.)
All of your friends are dead.

LIGHTS FADE OUT.

SCENE EIGHT.
Radio static.

RAFAEL
Oh no...

THE ANNOUNCER
Abel Nolan was known to family and friends as a loving husband and exceptional father to three children. He did his best to keep his family comfortable, working hard and dedicating time to spend time with them. So it comes as a surprise when officers received multiple distress calls at the family’s home. Abel was seen coming home late and going into the house with a twelve-gauge shotgun. Those who knew him knew his distaste for firearms. There were four shots in total. When police arrived, they found him sitting on the front steps with the gun under his chin. When approached he began muttering ‘the only me is me’ before proceeding to shoot himself. Inside, the bodies of his wife was found on the stairs, two of his children in the living room, and the youngest in a bedroom. No survivors. Authorities are baffled as to a motive on why the seemingly happy man snapped but neighbors reported seeing strange men visit the house three days in a row prior. No further information is given at this time.
RAFAEL
The only me is me. The only me is me..

LIGHTS FADE OUT.

SCENE NINE.

DR. NORMAN and DR. MARCUS enter RAFAEL’S room. RAFAEL is sitting in the corner staring straight ahead. He doesn’t seem to notice them. DR. NORMAN crouches down in front of him and examines his eyes with a penlight. RAFAEL is unfazed.

DR. MARCUS
Conclusions?

DR. NORMAN
Failed. He’s gone.

He stands.

DR. MARCUS
That was quick. I’ll administer the dosage.

DR. NORMAN
Dispose of the body. Correctly, this time.

DR. MARCUS
Of course.

DR. NORMAN exits and DR. MARCUS prepares a syringe. AVA watches. He smiles at her before he crouches and injects the needle into RAFAEL’S throat.

DR. MARCUS
(To AVA.)
How are you today, beautiful?

AVA giggles creepily as he stands.

You should be proud. Thirteen subjects so far and you’re our only success. You’re quite special.
AVA
That pretty one’s in Hell now.

DR. M ARCUS
Yes, he is. But you’ll help us with that now, won’t you? Yes, I suspect you would.

LIGHTS FADE OUT.

Radio static.

THE ANNOUNCER
The occult is such a difficult topic. Raising the Devil is no easy feat but bringing down Heaven? Pulling God back onto Earth? It’s even harder. Hell is already up here, spilling through the cracks and rising up from sinkholes. The human body fits a demon almost too perfectly but a god? Thirteen failures and only one success. Oh yes, don’t be fooled. We have succeeded. We have found God.

The static cuts out.

END.
Crater Lake
Danielle Benincasa
Fishing
Anna Chwiejczak

Water the color of a Paraiba tourmaline gem
scintillates as waves lap
against the Hokule’a hull
sailing past the reef

Scintillates as waves lap
our island afar
sailing past the reef
to snag distinct fish

Our island afar
bone hooks on lines
to snag distinct fish
and feed the village

Bone hooks on lines
for lime colored mahimahi
and feed the village
where they meekly wait

For lime colored mahimahi
and silver ono
where they meekly wait
the surface of the open ocean

And the silver ono
against the Hokule’a hull
the surface of the open ocean
water the color of a Paraiba tourmaline gem
“You’re so pretty,” he said under his breath. It wasn’t the first time I’d heard him use a word like that. He told his wife—my best friend—she was pretty all the time. But it was different now. The words stumbled out of his mouth. He knew he wasn’t supposed to say it and he couldn’t take it back now. He said it so low that I probably wouldn’t have been able to hear it if I wasn’t lying right next to him.

“You’re drunk,” I told him. I had been drinking too, but not enough to be as honest as he was. I was drunk enough to be somewhere I shouldn’t be, but sober enough to be ashamed of what I was doing.

I felt his fingers grab mine and I didn’t stop him. In fact, I intertwined my fingers with his until we were holding hands. His hands were warm and I wondered how good it would feel if they were under my shirt, unhooking my bra.

My breathing became uneven, I let go of his hand. He finally looked over at me before sitting up on his elbow.

“Don’t go.” He reached for me. “Please.”

“We can’t.” I moved away, but pulled back too far and knocked something off of the nightstand. I was too late trying to save it. The frame had shattered all over the ground.
There’s this blonde guy with his legs crossed. He tells me he’s a real ladies man and I’m dying to smoke a joint outside.

There’s this girl with curly hair—she’s got a—-
  pocket book
  check book
  calendar
  date to make,
  and I’m dying to have a joint outside.

Ladies man tells me he’s real, man, we have no idea about the kinda girls he’s known. Girls like you can’t imagine, he says, girls you wouldn’t believe.

Curly-haired girl rolls her eyes, she rolls her fingers, crosses her legs too—
  you get the picture.

She packs her things to leave. Curly-haired girl won’t spend time with a ladies man in a two-bit bar.

Now I’m alone with ladies man. He tries his best not to see me, so I help him out and leave the room, too.
I hope you know a good day when you see one, man, you could join us for a joint outside.
The small, white car threw sand behind it as it course through the cooling desert. Forgo sat in the driver’s seat, his eyes closed and his breath steady as the car drove itself towards his destination. It had taken him three years to find it. His mother’s wish was almost complete.

He played with the three dice in his right hand, listening to them clack and clank against each other as he rubbed their coarse bodies against his hand. The car came to a stop and Forgo heard a ding.

“Destination reached,” a sweet, robotic voice said.

He opened his eyes and looked ahead. The remnants of Asylum Carnival glowed in the light of the setting sun. It looked like a trailer park mashed with a campsite: makeshift tents and vehicles attached to them. The townies had told him it’d be on the outskirts of the city, but he didn’t think it was this far out. Who would’ve thought that people didn’t want to pay those they’d ostracized to do some deadly tricks for them.

Even though it was as rundown as it could get, just the fact that it was a carnival disturbed Forgo. He hated carnivals. He hadn’t been to one in eighteen years. And I’d promised myself that I’d never go to one again, he thought. He had only been a child when he’d gone to his first one, this same one. His mother had thought that introducing him to people like them would be helpful. He knew that she regretted that decision even to the day of her death.

He scratched the dice against his palm before rolling them across the dashboard. They were six-sided and made of bone, as all fate-readers dice were. A symbol was etched onto every face of the dice in the language of their people. Every symbol stood for a word or meaning, six per die, eighteen in total, but each symbol could mean something different in the context of the situation.

“It’s like reading cards,” his mother had told him when he was a child. “Everyone’s fate is different.”

He looked down at the symbols on the dice now, the symbols for living, present, and here. He exhaled a deep breath,
put the dice in his pocket, and got out of the car. He felt his leg shake as he took his starting steps towards the carnival.

“Hello,” he practiced to himself, his voice unsure of itself, as he walked towards the carnival. “Hi, I’m Forgo Tech.” He held out his hand as if to shake someone else’s. “Forgo’s the name. I’m here to see Purivian.”

He was shaking. The closer he got, the more he felt his stomach churn and his mind yell for him to turn back. When he reached a trailer, the first vehicle of the carnival, he stopped.

“I can’t do this.” He turned around. Three years and he’d found it. You have to do this. It’s Mom’s last wish. He glanced back at the carnival – tents up high though he saw nothing but benches inside. “No,” he said. “I can’t.”

He took a few steps back towards his car when he heard someone running towards him.

“Hey! Wait up!” a voice yelled.

He turned back to see a woman, a tall hat on her head. She wore a purple suit and a beautiful smile covered her face. A wand, whether real or fake Forgo couldn’t tell, was in her hand. She reached him, out of breath, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You, uh,” she inhaled a deep breath, “you lost buddy? We could help you here. For a little fee.”

Forgo stared into her violet eyes – the eyes of a mage from the old lost land of Jaceldia – and shook his head. Her eyes eased him. Knowing that he was among gifted people like himself always helped to calm him. “No, not lost. I was searching for this place. The townies back at Cyroth told me you’d be here.”

She smiled. “My, my, I didn’t think anyone had any interest in us anymore. Please, come with me!” She put an arm around his shoulders and led him into the carnival. “We don’t have any attractions anymore, we’ve been pretty down on our luck. All we got is a stage and a whole bunch of chairs. Every once in a while, we get a rich family or two who want to show their kids the old wonders of the world, but that’s about it.”

It was empty. Sand and vehicles and tents. He saw the benches and the chairs, all in front of a small stage with a red and yellow checkered canopy over it. That was it. No food, no
animals, nothing but that. It looked nothing like it had eighteen years ago. Nothing like it had in his dreaded nightmares. He felt fear lift off of him in tiny pieces, but he still felt its uneasiness upon him.

“This is what they’ve done to you?” Forgo said.

She looked at him, wonder in her eyes. “What do you mean?”

He pulled a card from his wallet and gave it to her. “My people can fix this. You shouldn’t live in an area like this. Our kind deserves to thrive.”

Her face lit up as she took the card. She held it in both hands and read it over. “Forgotten Kings Incorporated.” She glanced up at him. “Where are you based in?”

“Kinetia,” he said.

“Oh, the land of the future.” She looked him up and down and then dropped to one knee. “I never introduced myself. I’m Canela the Great.” She took one of his hands and kissed it. “What are you? Who are you?”

Say it. Say your last name. Tech, he thought. He knew the name would bring fear to her heart and tell her exactly why he was here, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it. “Forgo. I’m a fate-reader.” Her smile became even larger and brighter, so full of hope. It pained him to look at it. It was the same smile that had been on his mother’s face that day that she had crossed over to the other side – free from her pain.

“We have a few fate-readers here, kind sir. They’d love to meet such a rich and humble man like yourself.”

Forgo chuckled. “Happens to be that that’s exactly why I’m here. To meet a man.”

“Well, we have many. There’s Harvy and Yrgos, fate-readers from the Crescent Isles—”

“No, I hadn’t come for them—”

“Well, we also have Bond the Juggling Clown. He’s amazing. He chooses a person that he’s seen and then starts to juggle his three balls. Once he drops one, that person dies. He’s been juggling for this one guy for eighteen years now, it’s real torture. Poor guy probably doesn’t even know it.”

Forgo turned away from her, a grimace on his face. He had
no care to see Bond. He knew how creatures like Bond worked. They needed no sustenance other than death. They lived off the remains of the promised lives that they had wrongfully ended.

“He’s no fate-reader. He’s one of Death’s minions. Demons like him should’ve never been created.”

“Even Death’s minions can be fate-readers.”

“Not the one I’m looking for,” Forgo told her.

“Which one are you looking for?”

He couldn’t bring himself to say the man’s real name. “The Criminal,” he settled on. It was the closest he could get with her still knowing whom he was referring to.

Her face froze. He saw a long stare in them that went nowhere other than the deep depths of darkness. “There’s no such man,” she said. “He’s wanted all over the world. Why would we have him here?”

“I’ve been searching for him for three years. I know he’s here.”

She shook her head. “No. He’s not.”

Forgo exhaled heavily. He was here. He was inside now. He’d find him. “I know he is. I want you to bring me to him or I will search for him myself.”

“You don’t want to. Every time he meets someone he rolls his dice and tells them when they’ll expire. You don’t want that do you?”

“I already know when I’m going to die. Bring me to him.”

She nodded. “Yes sir.”

She led him to a small black orb-like vehicle: an escape pod with wheels. Attached to its back was a tent. She stopped at the tent’s entrance, the closed flaps hiding its insides. “He’s in here. I still advise that you not go inside.”

“I must,” Forgo said, his eyes cast on the ground. “Call my people as soon as you can. Tell them that you spoke to me and I told you that the dice have been rolled and the ball is falling. Those exact words. They will help you all from there.”

She pulled a pad out from her back pocket and wrote down the words quickly. “Thank you, sir.”

He nodded and entered the tent.
He heard bone dice clank against a tiled mat as he entered. He looked down at a man, no older than twenty, sitting with his legs crossed on the ground. The Criminal wore tattered clothes and had muscles that brought an essence of power and strength to him. His face was chiseled and his eyes brown. His skin was like mottled leather, very similar to Forgo’s own. He was a handsome man. He looked exactly like Forgo, minus the physique; his mother had told them that they’d looked quite identical.

“Fourteen days,” the Criminal said, looking down at the dice.

“I know,” Forgo said.

His eyes moved to Forgo’s face and paused. Forgo nodded and sat down in front of him.

“Who are you?” the Criminal asked, looking him over.

“Forgo.” He didn’t need to say his last name. At least he thought he didn’t.

“Why are you here?”

“My mother told me I had to find my father. I figured you could help me with that.” He saw a look in the Criminal’s eyes, as if searching for something to say. A name, Forgo realized. Her name. All the Criminal would have to do is say Forgo’s mother’s name and, based on Forgo’s reaction, he’d know who he was. But, Forgo knew that his father was just as reluctant to face the truth as he was. His mother had told him he would be. Just say it, Purivian. Her name was Lisadelia. You know it. You loved her, you old prick.

“Do you know who I am?” the Criminal finally said.


The Criminal laughed. “Haven’t heard those last two in a while.”

“It’s about time you had.”

The Criminal nodded. “Did anyone ever educate you on why they call me those things, or were you spoon-fed lies like the rest of them?”

“Purivian Tech’s your name, of course, but they call you the Criminal because of your multiple charges for burglary
and your charge of regicide. And you’re called the Forgotten King because you were a usurper and had ruled for three days before they overthrew you. You freed Kinetia from a horrible king, and they repaid you by kicking you off the throne, placing the king’s kid on it, and forgetting about you altogether.”

“I helped them. That kid is a great king. I wasn’t planning to keep the throne. I wanted him to have it where I could be by his side advising him. I did it for him.”

“Of course you did. He was your nephew.”

The Criminal couldn’t help but to smile. “So, you have done your homework. I’m proud. How can I help you find your father?”

Forgo wanted to tell him right there, but he knew the Criminal had to know already. He’s toying with me, isn’t he? He shrugged it off and looked the man in the eyes. Maybe he is as scared of the truth as Mom said. “By doing what you do best. Answering some questions of fate.”

The Criminal swooped up his dice and shook them in his hand. “Spit away. I’m here to help.” Forgo wanted to laugh as the ridiculousness of the situation hit him once again. There was no need for any of this. They both knew who each other were. There was no reason not to accept it. Say her name, Forgo, he thought. If he won’t say it, you must.

“Come on, now,” the Criminal said. “Ask me your questions.”

“When will I meet my father,” Forgo said.

The Criminal rolled the dice. They clacked against the mat and stopped. The symbols for living, present, and here illuminated the room. “Seems like you’ll meet him here, probably soon. He’s in this camp.”

“Is he now?” Forgo said, sarcasm fluttering off of his tongue.

The Criminal nodded.

You fool. Tell him. “When will I meet him again.”

The criminal rolled. The dice landed on the symbols for death, never, and nowhere. “Never. This will be the only time.”

Forgo exhaled and nodded. “When will my father meet my grandson.”

He rolled. “Fifteen days.”
“That’s good. He’d love to meet him.”

The Criminal picked up his dice. “Is that all? I think you have a father to meet.”

A question flew into his mind. The one that he knew would break Forgo. “When will my father die?”

The Criminal rolled. “Never.” The Criminal looked up into Forgo’s eyes, uneasy.

“Sounds like someone else I know,” Forgo said. “You can’t die, can you?”

“I’m not one of Death’s minions, if that’s what you’re thinking. That religion is old and deadly. I have no part in it.”

“I didn’t ask that. You wouldn’t be foolish enough to sell your soul to him. But you would be foolish enough to sell yourself to the K’lo’Vee.”

The Criminal turned away. “They are actual gods. Souls of the lost. People like me. They help people. I can die, but when I die, I will be reborn. I have been reborn. Twice. I gave them my soul and in return I got infinite lives. If everyone was smart, they’d do that too.”

“Not everyone wants to live forever or give themselves to some absurd force of nature. Gods or not.”

The Criminal glared at him. “Why are you here?”

“You know why I’m here, Purivian.”

“I don’t have any money, and there’s no reason to kill me. You know that I’ll come—”

“Not why I’m here.” Forgo pulled his dice from his pockets and showed them to the Criminal. The Criminal’s eyes focused on them. Forgo could see fear in those brown eyes, so similar to his own.

“Ask me anything. I’m not as good as you, but I’m good enough,” Forgo demanded.

The Criminal peered down at the ground, then opened his mouth. “When will I escape this place?”

“This exact place, or the carnival itself?”

“The carnival. I want freedom from it all. When will I have it?”

Forgo rolled the dice. “Seven days. You will move back to
Kinetia and get out of this place forever.”

“When have dice been able to tell you all of that?”

“I know more things than they do,” Forgo said. “Next question.”

“When will I see my wife again?”

Forgo hesitated before he rolled. He knew that he shouldn’t, but he did anyway. He already knew what the answer was going to be. “Never. She’s dead.”

A weakness struck the strong man, a weakness that even unsettled Forgo. He saw a tear come to the Criminal’s eye.

“She said that you told her you’d be back one day. The farther you ran, the more lost from each other you two got. You were a wanted man, and you couldn’t go to her in your state. I wager that after several years you found this place with the other fiends of nature. No one would mess with you here with so many of Death’s minions around you. All immortal and deadly, able to kill anyone else without hesitation. This is your safe haven, yet it’s the only place you never wanted to be in.”

The Criminal looked up at him. “How do you know all of this?”

“Don’t avoid the facts anymore, Purivian. You know the truth. Don’t neglect to see it.”

He couldn’t look at Forgo. “One last question.”

“No more questions—”

“One last question!” The Criminal shook, whether with anger or fear Forgo didn’t know. “When will I meet my son?”

“Why are you so scared to believe that I’m—”

“Just roll the damn dice!”

Forgo threw the dice onto the ground. Purivian read them himself and then looked at Forgo.

“I’m sorry...” He turned away from Forgo. “How long have you known?”

Forgo found his father’s glance and stared deep into his eyes. “Always. Your wife, my mother, Lisadelia, had always shared her great love for you with me. She wanted me to find you. It’s just considerably hard to search the entire world for one lost, wanted man.”
The Criminal stared at Forgo, speechless.

“She had named me after you was, but your name brought too much negative connotation with it everywhere we went. I changed it to Forgo, short for Forgotten. Forgo Tech. It’s a much better tribute to your name, don’t you think? I believe that we all are our own forgotten kings.”

He stayed silent, his eyes on his son’s face.

“Say something, you fool! Accept me! Why are you so scared to see the truth? I’m your son. Your and my mother’s genetic material. I’m not here to kill or chastise you or ask you for money! I just wanted to meet you before I perished and could no longer complete my mother’s dying desire for me to meet you.” He took a few breaths and calmed down. “Purivian, I want my wife to meet you. I want my son to meet you.”

The Criminal rose from his seat. Forgo did the same.

“I’m not afraid. I just, it’s alarming. To have you see me like this in the worst state of my life. It’d be much easier if you were some guy who was just looking for his father. Not my blood. To have my son know that I’ve been nothing but a failure to him as a father and his mother as a husband—”

“She loved you.”

“Well, I wasn’t there to love her back.” Tears were crawling down his face. “Forgo, I’m sorry for never being there. I’m sorry for—”

“Don’t apologize to me. All I wanted was to meet you.”

The Criminal nodded. He gazed off past Forgo for a second. “Do you know how you’re going to die?”

“Death will take me like he had so many before him. Sometimes, people’s hands get tired and they have to just let go of a ball or two.”

The Criminal exhaled. Forgo knew that he understood without him having to say more. Silence enveloped the tent. The two stared at each other for what seemed like minutes. Forgo finally looked away. The future was in his father’s hands. He hated that he’d have to miss it. Of all the moments in life, he wished he could see the moment where his son met his father.

Forgo looked at the ground. The time had come. He’d met his father, and his three-year journey had finally come to an
end. His mother would be proud. “It was nice meeting you, Purivian, but I need to go now.”

The Criminal reached out and grabbed Forgo’s arm. “Take me with you.”

“Breaking fate would harm us both. We’d be caught. I can’t risk putting my family in danger because of you.”

“You can’t just leave me here.”

“Don’t fret. You’ll be out of this place in a week. I need to go see my son and wife before my end.”

“What about me?”

“I’ll work on clearing your name as soon as I get back. I’ll try as hard as I can to get you allowed back into Kinetia. My people will protect you, if no one else. You’ll just have to be careful, as always.”

The Criminal nodded. “Thank you.” The two hugged and separated.

“I look forward to you meeting my son. He’s going to love you.”

Forgo turned to leave.

“Will I ever see you again?” The Criminal asked.

“You know the answer to that.”

He opened the tent flap.

“Son, your dice.”

Forgo didn’t bother to turn around to look at them – left on the ground in front of the Criminal where he had thrown them. “Give them to my son. Say they’re from you. He’ll like that. I already gave him my childhood pair. Getting dice from both his former king grandfather who’d been a king will be much more treasured than his foolish father’s. Oh, and tell him to never to go to a carnival. They’ll end his life.”

He left his father there, inside of the makeshift tent that had been his prison for longer than Forgo wanted to imagine. He walked out of the empty carnival back to his car. He got inside and shut his eyes, closing the door behind him. “Take me home,” he said. It started and drove off, throwing sand behind it as the sun finished setting off in the distance.
Wings
Alexandra Borowsky

They rustled like branches on a windy day; they smelled as if those trees were rotting from the inside out. They skittered and multiplied, as fast as lightning, and when I talked about them, they created thunder. Booming roars of distaste, questions which always ended in “why?” They were foul, malodorous, nauseating, repugnant, unpleasant, and I loved them. I loved their controversy; I loved their smell. I loved their rapid procreation; I loved their beady little eyes. I loved the squeals of the disgusted; I reveled in the grotesque. And grotesque they were. Roaches. Bins and bins of different species. Lobster roaches, dubious roaches, and discoid roaches. Under their shells, they possessed flightless wings. Their backs were shiny, brown, patterned and insectoid. Their legs were hairy and carried their bodies with electric quickness.

I ran with energy, unlike the other kids. It was an incessant fervor, one which out-casted me, which set me aside. I was a wisp of a child, one who played with worms and dirt and jumped off tree branches. My stumpy legs carried me farther and farther into myself; blonde tufty shocks of hair stuck to the sweat that collected on my cheeks. I ran in circles, I ran around trees, I jumped and sang and didn’t pick up on the whispers of my peers as they judged me. I went to summer camp, designed for smiles and sunshine and pools and sticky ice-pops…Sure, I was weird. I used mud and water fountains to make tribal paint, I drew from my imagination; I couldn’t understand the lemmings around me, sounding the same, being the same, dressing the same, telling the same rumors, laughing in the same cadence.

My father was a tall, thin, balding inventor with a revitalizing sense of childlike wonder. His eyes gleamed with the intent to grasp; he was a starving man, one ravenous for knowledge and new experiences. My father was just like me. Running where the wind carried him, a weirdo. Small. Dirty. Happy. Look Alexandra, we got the roaches! From inside a cardboard box he was holding, came a stirring sound of promise. I couldn’t wait to open it! From under the sliced duct
tape emanated the smell of life. Thick, rank, and reeking of life alright; at least for the ones that weren’t slated as reptile food. Growing to love them even more, I wished to show them off. It would be a great idea to take one to camp with me!

My feet padded excitedly into my parent’s room, I had a big question! It would be great, everybody would be so interested! My head swirled as I held the playtime bug cage in my petite hand. The dawn was just cracking through the blinds, almost an hour before the camp bus would whisk me away. Lazily my parents stirred as they detected their loud child’s intrusive steps. They were elephant’s feet; stomping up the strategically carpeted stairs, through the doorway, all the way up to my father’s side of the bed. My father, the unresponsive leaden sleeper, snored and rolled over. No good. No good at all. I sighed. I breathed heavily. I stared right at his little bald patch... maybe it was true... maybe he did have eyes on the back of his head! I stared and stared and my eyes started to water. I squeezed the handle on my little cage; it was lined with purple ribbon. The bugs had to be happy... they needed some décor! I sighed a second time; I directed my breathing right on his little bald patch. It would get cold, he would feel it! No avail. Not fair! I knew he would be mad if I woke him up, but it just couldn’t wait. I falsified a stumble. Whoops! His belt buckle made a metallic clink on the floor as I “fell” over it; he woke.

Daddy? I have a reeeeaallllyy important question for you. He grumbled and groaned, and then seemingly emerging from hibernation, he stumbled out of his sleep to help me. The room where we kept the roaches served as a home office, a gym, a zoo, and a shooting range. A computer desk held a gargantuan monitor, with tangled up wires, external hard drives, and tons and tons of mechanical pencils. Legal pads held my father’s fervent scribblings, the ideas he spilled from his brain. They were incomprehensible to anybody but him. The wall had weights hanging from it, little octagonal barbells... from five pounds to thirty. They were too heavy for me. Above the barbells hung rifles, way too high for me to reach. He would teach me to shoot them out the window, aiming at a little target in the backyard. My mother’s protest would be to wear headphones because of the blasts. The bullets were stored in little plastic drawers with desiccant to keep them dry and fresh... right next to the bearded dragon enclosure.
Darwin, her name was. She preceded Edison, the frilled lizard, and Newton, the leopard gecko. Lizards are reptiles! My dad told me. They aren’t like mammals; they are cold blooded. So we need to take extra special care of them by giving them heat, rocks to climb, and live food. Darwin refused to eat the roaches, however… so did Edison, and Newton was too small to fit them in his mouth. I think secretly, we were all relieved. On the other side of the enclosure… were the roaches. They were kept in plastic bins. He had cut holes in the top of them, and hot-glued wire mesh under the lid to keep the roaches from climbing through. My mom complained; the smell was noxious. What breed do you think will be best? he asked me. Of course, I chose the largest one… the discoid. He helped me open the lid, where the colony of hundreds of discoids were milling about, weaving in and out of their egg cartons, drinking from the squishy water crystals we provided them. Picking up the egg carton, I chose the largest one that I could find. He just fit through the door of my decorative cage, his antennae wavering up and down, side to side. His little eyes glistened; I thought he looked intelligent. He didn’t run, he just stared at me, complacent. We placed the water crystals and a little food into the cage, and I closed the door. He was going to come on an adventure with me!

The short camp bus belched angrily when it parked in front of my house. I was armed with my little blue backpack, my muddy white sneakers, and my discoid roach in a cage decorated with purple ribbon. Always the first on the bus, I sat in the back… I could look out the window and watch the trees and cars and the road and pretend there was a little man running after the bus… he would never catch up, but he would try! He would do flips and twirl imaginary ribbons and hop on people’s cars; the little man’s legs never tired. That day however, that day I didn’t watch the little man. I watched my roach. I watched as he climbed up the side of the cage, I watched as he jostled with every bump of the bus, I watched his hairy legs very close, I saw how they attached themselves to the walls… I wondered what it would be like to have six legs. It would be pretty hard to walk! We pulled into camp.

The kids hated my roach. Megan hated it the most. Kids are cruel you see, and Megan, well, she was the cruelest. They called him gross, they called him diseased. I guess I should
have known... they would yell at me for digging for worms, and swimming to the deep end of the pool to save drowning Japanese beetles, their little legs struggling futilely above the nine feet of water. Once safe on the edge of the pool, I’d watch as their slow debilitated movements gave way to the spreading of waterlogged wings, a slight green sheen to their transparency. They’d shake them off, and eventually, fly to a safe place. My satisfaction was a shell around me... I saved a life. They would give me strange looks when I painted pictures of mice that were rainbow and glittery, that I chose the things they did not.

My counselor’s face curled up in detestation. Megan. Her pin-straight blonde hair framed her scowl perfectly; her blue eyes oozed hatred for me. I knew she didn’t like me much; I was looking forward to her displeasure. Her legs were shiny and hairless, her head constantly turned toward the male counselors instead of us. She carried herself like a flamingo, stalking around, using her assets for her advantage. What is that thing?! Her dainty voice flung acid at me. An obscene grin began to form on my face, the gap between my front two teeth displayed with glory. The other kids took notice, they practically surrounded me, and I thought it was hilarious. They squealed and yelled and ran away, and I stood there and laughed. (I laughed at their sheer ridiculousness, they were at summer camp!)

I shouldn’t have been surprised at all by Megan and the children’s reaction. My grandmother and my mother and everybody in-between despised the roaches. Why? They would ask. Why are you letting vermin live in your house? I never understood that word, vermin. What was its definition? They weren’t causing any harm... they just lived their lives in big blue bins. They were happy, they did their roachy things, they bred, they made more roaches, and they died. Isn’t that what all-living things did? That was the question I had asked as my grandparents came over for a visit. One day they sat on our green couch... complaining. It’s too cold in here, why won’t you let me smoke inside the house? Can I dim the light? I want to watch a different channel. Will those roaches ever escape? If I find one in my suitcase when I go back home and end up with an infestation I’ll be very mad. They directed their attention at my mother. Her kind eyes balked at their comments. Why do you
let your husband and especially your daughter play with those vermin anyway? It’s disgusting. Are you sure they won’t escape? Please don’t let them escape.

We cringed through the slew of grandparent complaints, the sickly smell of my grandfather’s tobacco stench, and the onslaught of disapproval for our roaches. All of a sudden, the first roach to ever escape glided with its flightless wings down the stairwell. The silence was deafening. My grandfather’s labored breathing stopped, my grandmother looked up from her magazine, and my mother’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. My father’s hand reached out sideways and snatched the roach out of the air.

I exploded. My laughter pierced the room, and suddenly... everybody was laughing. My mother’s tea dribbled down her chin, my grandfather’s smoker’s rasp gave way to cackles that seemed to rock the house.

My father’s loose fist still held the renegade insect. Chortles and snickers followed him as he took the stairs two by two, away from the scene. Stretching my legs to the point of pain, I also took the stairs, two by two, right behind him.

I found my father sitting cross-legged by the bin, staring intently through his impossibly thick glasses. The roach was staring back too, a discoid. He was a huge specimen, one of the largest. His eyes gleamed with a naughtiness that I thought appeared intelligent. Different than the rest. His antennae wavered up and down, side to side; he was returning from an adventure! And in that moment I felt certain this wasn’t his first.
Any summer day, Speedy's voice echoes for blocks--"Crab legs!" as he pushes that rusty shopping cart with a simmering tub inside it.

Arrow couldn't quit the herb for a drug test, so he took to K2 instead. Shit fried his brain so bad I don't think he recognizes me; he's still real friendly though. His smile, crusted and yellowed by the spice turned drug, still shines beneath the crud.

Barabuchi survived brain cancer--Twice!-- and he's still kicking; nigger still plays softball every weekend & my lazy ass won't go for a run.

Miriam was another mother at one point. At any party she grabbed me & swung me around, showering me in Corona & Kisses. To her daughter, though, she was no mother; she sold her virginity & Snorted the Profit.

The library groans from loneliness. Possible visitors deterred by the flashy brothas trapping out front.

Julio Sr. is rarely sighted when he isn't glued to a monitor. His fridge is empty, but his World of Warcraft character has an uber legendary sword, courtesy of VISA. Beer, cigarettes & the game are priorities, But his kids never were.
Janette, his wife, still tries. She brushes that lengthy brown river until it shines, Julio prefers the computer’s glare. She swallows pride, for both of them, like a sandy pill when she has to ask friends for a handout. I admire her.

Neon signs shine noisily. “Hey, over here! We Buy & Sell Gold!”-- cries out to fill the void. Folks’ll pawn their souls if the price was right.

Blanca, a Russian turned Ghetto, gets down with the best of em. She slams her dominoes with such gusto that even the old cats say “dios mio.”

Rebecca went to Coachella one year & thinks herself a flower child. After a handful of mushrooms she preaches “how shit works.” You’re 20, Becca, shut the fuck up.

Eddie walked down the wrong street with the wrong colors, stumbled into its inhabitants. He wouldn’t run. After quite the beating, he walks with a cane, to this day. He “still isn’t pussy” though.

Me? I came here with an accent thicker than cornbread & molasses-- that went first. Curiosity was next, on account of the cat. Trust & Sensitivity closely followed.

The block & the people don’t really change, but to adapt, I had to.
Before the War (1941 Buick Special, Oneonta, Ny)
Peter Wendler
Wayne, Nebraska. That’s the farthest South I’ve ever been, back when I attended Wayne State. Yes, this is an actual school. No, it wasn’t my first choice. I didn’t want to go to college at all, but my father forced me. He always had this way of getting what he wanted.

At freshman orientation, we had to introduce ourselves to the other kids in the wing of our residence hall. I sat in a circle with students that would be living on my floor, and our RA made us tell two truths and one lie about ourselves.

So around we went. We found out that Sally could sing, Mason was adopted, and Nate was a vegetarian. Then I was up. I was never all that great at speaking in front of others, but before I knew it, the words were pouring out of my mouth.

“Alright. One, I was born in Alaska. Two, my dad killed my mom when I was three. Three, I have a pet lizard.”

An eerie silence followed before Sally quietly answered: “Two’s the lie.”

I only realized my mistake when my classmates started whispering to one another.

“Oh! Sorry, I forgot. My name’s Taylor.”

An uncomfortable laughter ran through the group, and for the first time since I arrived, the 70-degree weather started to get to me. As I sat there, sweating in silence, I wondered how cold Calgary had been on the night I was born. My mother would have known.
We pay homage to the natives
by naming our buildings after them,
erected on their holy land.
The dorms where ignorant college
kids puke and piss and shit.
By filling their rivers with concrete
and by stabbing the ground with
green street signs, might as well be
driving a stake through their hearts.
Half-assed talks of putting one of
their faces on a paper bill,
backed up by the precious metals
we stole from their tribes.
Oh what progress we’ve made.
White Knight of Old (1939 Ghram, Northeastern Car Museum, Norwich, NY)
Peter Wendler
FADE IN:

INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - MR. PETER’S CLASS-ROOM - DAY

There are twenty children sitting in rows of desks in an average looking class room. The children are looking at a double-sided chalkboard and giggling.

MR. PETERS (56) stands at his desk emptying his satchel.

MR. PETERS
Today you’ll be expanding your vocabularies. Take out your textbooks.

The class erupts with laughter.

MR. PETERS
Settle down you hooligans! Remember you are at school, not at home.

The class goes silent. Mr. Peters opens a desk drawer and takes out a box of chalk.

The students giggle.

MR. PETERS
And what is so funny?!

Mr. Peters turns around. “Mr. Peters likes big weiner’s!” is written boldly on the chalkboard.

Mr. Peters frantically searches for an eraser, but can’t find one. He attempts to wipe it off with his hand but is unsuccessful. The students laugh.

MR. PETERS
You think this is funny?
The class goes silent.

**MR. PETERS**
Who did it? Hmmm?

SILENCE.

**MR. PETERS**
Are you scared to confess because of your poor grammar? Hmmm?

Mr. Peters takes out a piece of chalk. He crosses out the word “weiner’s” and writes weiners.

**MR. PETERS**
Because there’s no freaking apostrophe!

Mr. Peters slams the chalk on the chalkboard then takes a deep breath.

**MR. PETERS**
We will deal with this issue later. For now I will review basic grammar concepts, because apparently you delinquents are illiterate.

Mr. Peters flips the chalkboard to the other side. There is an extremely well drawn penis and a poorly drawn stick figure giving a thumbs up. The face is smiling and “Mr. Peters” is written above it with an arrow pointing down.

The class roars with laughter.

**MR. PETERS**
(yells)
Quiet! Anyone who continues to laugh will be sent to the god damn principal’s office!

SILENCE.

**MR. PETERS**
Which one of you prepubescent little shits did it? Hmm?
No response from the class.

**MR. PETERS**
I know it’s one of you. You might think you’re safe if you keep quite. But I swear to you, none of you are safe. And I will find out who did it.

Mr. Peters turns his back to the class as he attempts to erase the drawing. TOMMY (11) and BILLY (10) exchange glances and giggle.

Mr. Peters swiftly turns around and looks at Tommy.

**MR. PETERS**
It was you wasn’t it?

**TOMMY**
Wasn’t me.

The class laughs.

**MR. PETERS**
Tommy, get your ass to the principals office!

**TOMMY**
But I didn’t do anything!

**MR. PETERS**
(points to the board and yells)
You call this nothing?

Billy raises his hand.

**MR. PETERS**
What, Billy?

**BILLY**
Well actually the correct name for that is a penis, sir. We learned about the reproductive system in science class.
MOLLY (11) and SARAH (11) giggle. MR. PETERS turns red.

**MR. PETERS**
That’s it! The four of you to the principals office. Now.

Billy, Tommy, Sarah, and Molly get up and exit.

**MR. PETERS**
The rest of you are to sit here quietly until I return. Is that understood?

**THE CLASS**
Yes Mr. Peters.

Mr. Peters drags the chalkboard as he exits.

**INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL – PRINCIPAL LARRY’S OFFICE**

There is a desk with a name plate that reads, “PRINCIPAL LARRY”. PRINCIPAL LARRY (26) is sitting at her desk. The four students enter. A moment later Mr. Peters enters, out of breath, with the chalkboard.

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
Hello everyone! What seems to be the issue Mr. Peters?

Mr. Peters points at the chalkboard. Principal Larry examines the board and covers her mouth as she giggles.

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
Well this is...creative?

**MR. PETERS**
It’s juvenile! And someone has to be punished!
PRINCIPAL LARRY
Calm down Mr. Peters. The person who wrote this could be saying you enjoy hot dogs. I don’t think this is as bad as you think it is.

MR. PETERS flips the chalkboard and reveals the drawing.

PRINCIPAL LARRY
Oh. Well...ok then. This is quite a situation.

MR. PETERS
I want someone to be punished for this, Larry!

PRINCIPAL LARRY
This is a very inappropriate picture, and there will be consequences for the person responsible.

MR. PETERS
There better be!

PRINCIPAL LARRY
Kids, this is a very serious offense. If you did do this...drawing, please step forward so that we can deal with this and move on with our day.

None of the kids respond.

PRINCIPAL LARRY
If no one speaks now we’re going to have to call your parents and speak with them.

Still no response. Mr. Peters gets frustrated.

MR. PETERS
One of you little nose pickers had to have done it and there will be serious consequences for all of you if no one confesses!
PRINCIPAL LARRY
I can take it from here Mr. Peters. Why don’t you go back to your class?

Mr. Peters exits.

TOMMY
Thank you.

PRINCIPAL LARRY
Now that he’s gone, can you please tell me who did it?

MOLLY
Well I didn’t do it obviously, so can I go now?

TOMMY
How is it obvious, Molly?

Molly glares at Tommy.

MOLLY
Because I’m not gross...like some people.

TOMMY
Well I didn’t do it either. And I’m NOT gross!

PRINCIPAL LARRY
Hey, settle down. Let’s calmly figure this out, Ok?

BILLY
Principal Larry, I didn’t do it. I wouldn’t do something so stupid.

SARAH
It’s not me, I don’t even know what a pen-is looks like.
Tommy points to the chalkboard.

**TOMMY**
It looks like that.

Billy giggles and Molly rolls her eyes.

**MOLLY**
It had to have been a boy. Girls don’t do gross things like that principal Larry.

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
Let’s talk one on one. Billy you sit down, the rest of you go sit in the hall.

Molly, Tommy, and Sarah all exit. Billy sits.

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
Billy, I know you’re a bright kid.

**BILLY**
Thank you.

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
Did you- do you know who wrote this stuff on the chalkboard?

**BILLY**
I don’t know who did it. But I do know that if Mr. Peters did like weiners it would be ok, because gay marriage is legal so he can get married.

Principal Larry smiles while trying to hold in her laughter.

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
That’s right, Billy... you can go back to class now. Can you tell Molly to come in please?
Billy exits and Molly enters.

BILLY
Ok.

PRINCIPAL LARRY
Molly, can you tell me about the chalkboard?

MOLLY
Yeah, I didn’t do it.

PRINCIPAL LARRY
Do you know who did?

MOLLY
No. But it was probably Tommy, he’s a gross boy.

PRINCIPAL LARRY
Well...you know it isn’t nice to call others “gross”.

MOLLY
But it’s the truth and my daddy told me to always tell the truth.

PRINCIPAL LARRY
That’s true, but sometimes it’s just better to not say anything.

MOLLY
Whatever, can I go now?

PRINCIPAL LARRY
Yes, you can go. Tell Tommy it’s his turn.

MOLLY
Fine.
Molly exits and Tommy enters.

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
Tommy you’re the funny kid in your class, everyone knows that. And if you drew on the board it’s ok to tell me.

**TOMMY**
Principal Larry, I know I’m the class clown but as funny as that is, I didn’t do it.

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
Tommy, if you drew the penis just tell me so we can get this over with.

**TOMMY**
I didn’t do it, I promise. You wanna know why it wasn’t me?

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
Why?

**TOMMY**
It’s so funny that if I did it I would admit it, because I would be proud of how hilarious it is.

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
I guess that’s true...and since there’s no evidence to prove you did it- just go back to class Tommy.

Tommy exits and Sarah enters.

**PRINCIPAL LARRY**
Hello, Sarah.

**SARAH**
(quietly)
Hi.
PRINCIPAL LARRY
Do you know who drew the picture?

SARAH
No principal Larry. It was on the board when we came into the class this morning.

PRINCIPAL LARRY
What?

SARAH
It was already there when we got to the class room in the morning.

INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - JANITORS CLOSET - DAY

JANITOR ONE (20’s) is standing and vaping as JANITOR TWO (20’s) sits on a bucket playing with his phone.

JANITOR TWO
Thank’s for covering my shift last night. I owe you one.

JANITOR ONE
Dude.

Janitor one exhales the smoke from his vape.

JANITOR ONE
Working the night shift is awesome.

Janitor one takes a hit of his vape then exhales.

JANITOR ONE
I got so baked before I came in, you’ll never guess what I did.

THE END.
My too tiny legs dangled from a too high chair as I traced the elaborate grain with my too little fingers. Mesmerized. Amazed that human hands carved the patterns into the table (they didn’t). Human hands did make & set the meals I took for granted the way only kids can. The table was where I played, until my father, sharpened by the days labors, would give me only a glance that said Rally your plastic troops and go. The kitchen table was a refuge; when the sky grew dark & angry, hollering for the entire world to hear, I would crawl between the tall oaks for pegs, & hold my knees to my chest. One storm gave way to another; his grip on her arm tighter than the tabletop gripped its legs to stay afloat, miles above my head. The screen door groaned as he pushed her against it. The storm argued in Spanish, so Angie & I couldn’t understand it. Dejame, Luis, ir me voy. No me importa, pero se quedan aquí. It’s a wonder they didn’t see me below the table, but then again, I was a hide & seek veteran. I waited out the storm, tracing the grain with my too little fingers, wondering how human hands carved the pattern into the wood (they didn’t).
The karaoke bar rumbled with each beat of the song. Ria sat on a bar stool and sipped on a martini. She watched her friend sing and dance to one of Ria’s own songs on stage. She glared at her friend. *How dare she steal all of the attention?*

“Woo! Go Maggie!” Andrea yelled at the top of her lungs. She sipped her own martini beside Ria and pumped her fist into the air along with the beat of the song. Everyone in the bar cheered, enjoying themselves as they lounged in chairs around the stage.

Andrea turned to Ria. “She’s doing amazing.”

“Yeah…better than me... if that’s even possible. I mean, ugh, look at those dance moves!” They watched as Maggie air-guitared vigorously, throwing her head back and forth and letting her long brown hair cascade towards the floor then back up at the heavens repeatedly. Ria wanted to puke in disgust. “Don’t you remember when I used to do that? That was my move.”

“That’s everyone’s move, Ree.”

“Go Maggie!” a guy beside them yelled. He sat on the other side of Andrea, chugging down a beer. He was a handsome man, chiseled as if out of a statue, muscular like an Olympian. *How dare he like Maggie more than me? I’m ten times more beautiful.*

Andrea laughed and turned back to Ria who couldn’t take her eyes off of the man. “Don’t you love it, though? People are giving Maggie more attention than you. I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“I expected opposite. I’m the famous popstar here and they are loving her more than me, though she’s singing one of my songs.”

“The night is dedicated to you. Everyone here’s singing your songs. Besides, don’t act like you’re hot shit. You’re only 22 and still new to the game.”

“I am hot shit, Drea. You should know that. Every girl loves
me and every teenage boy wants me. I am the hot shit.”

Andrea rolled her eyes. “Fine. Don’t get your panties in a bunch.”

“Joke’s on you, I’m not wearing any.” Ria eyed Maggie as she reached the end of the song. “I can’t wait for this to be over with. I just want my money.”

“I thought you wanted to get laid.”

“I do, but right now...ugh, I just wanna leave. I hate this place. Reeks of B.O.”

“Oh, shut up and enjoy yourself. You were perfectly fine before Maggie got on stage,” Andrea said. Ria rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to the man beside Andrea staring idly at...Ria. He wasn’t looking at Maggie anymore. He was staring at Ria and Ria only. Her cheeks flushed red. Finally, someone’s interested in me. She smiled at him, and he smiled back, his eyes scanning her body.

“Maybe I will get laid tonight,” she whispered to Andrea, pushing her breasts forward.

“By who? If they heard your mouth just a second ago they’d surely think again.”

Ria darted her eyes from Andrea to the man beside her back to Andrea.

“I think he’s into me.”

“You said it yourself, you’re the hot shit. A steaming pile of it.”

An applause shook the room. Maggie bowed as the music stopped.

“Thank you, thank you!” she said. She stepped off the stage and ran to her friends. “That was awesome!”

“Sure was.” Ria rolled her eyes again. Someone else, a man, got on stage and began the next song, one of Ria’s first she ever made.

“You were amazing, Maggie. Don’t let Ree’s attitude bring you down,” Andrea said.

“Believe me, Drea, I’ve been around her attitude so much that it doesn’t affect me in the slightest anymore.”

The man beside Andrea rose from the bar stool and walked to Maggie. He stood beside Ria, letting her bask in his glory as
his eyes focused on her friend.

“Hi,” he greeted. “I heard your name was Maggie. The name’s Todd.” He stuck out his hand and she shook it daintily, her face flushed red.

“Hi, nice to meet you.”

Ria rolled her eyes once again and tried to push her body forward to intrude in the conversation. I thought he liked me, she thought through slit eyes.

Andrea read her face and shrugged. “Sorry,” she mouthed. “I was just wondering if you’d like a drink, on me of course.”

“Oh! Well, thank you, but no. I get free drinks here anyway on account of Ria.”

Todd looked down at the popstar and grinned. There was a twinkle in his eye that made her melt inside. “Do you, now?” He stuck out his hand to Ria then. “Todd, nice to meet you. Never thought I’d meet a celebrity in my life.” Ria shook his hand, her mind full of confusion. What does he want? Who does he want? Me? Maggie? Both of us?

“Nice to meet you, too,” she said.

He paid no attention to Andrea, only turning back to Maggie. “Your singing was great, beautiful.”

“Mine is better!” Ria blurted.

“I’m aware,” Todd said, not even turning to look at her. “And your dancing, Maggie, it was just great—”

“—Those were my moves!” Ria yelled.

“Those are everyone’s moves,” Todd said, “but Maggie pulled them off expertly.”

Maggie’s face was redder than a tomato. “Thank you.” The man smiled at her. “Now, with all that out of the way—”

“I’m not free tonight, sorry. I’m going to be spending it with my two best friends.” She motioned to Ria and Andrea.

“Oh,” Todd said. “Well, when are you free? Can I get your number?”

Maggie smiled but shook her head. “No, I’m sorry. I’m only going to be in town with my friends for the next couple days. I don’t live here. Only came to have fun with these two.”

Todd grinned and put his hands into his pockets. “It’s
alright, I understand. Thanks for being nice about it.” He turned and tripped over Ria’s foot. The trip almost seemed planned, how he fell and his hand grabbed for Ria as if he was trying to grope her. He missed, completely, and grabbed the top of her drink. The liquid lurched, bubbled and sizzled under his hand. He caught himself and stood up, releasing her drink. “I’m so sorry about that. I’ll buy you a new drink. I hadn’t meant that...”

“No, it’s fine,” Ria said. She picked up her martini and took a sip. “See, fine. You didn’t ruin a thing.”

Todd smiled and chuckled. “Yeah, not a thing. I’m sorry about that. It was great to meet you two. You’re both so beautiful.” He turned away and began to walk awkwardly back to his seat.

“He was sweet,” Maggie said.

Andrea rolled her eyes and looked at Ria’s drink. “You should’ve ordered a new one. Now all of his pervy juices are on yours.”

“Pervy juices? No. He was not a—”

“—He was into both of you and overtly showed it.”

“I never turned him down.”

“Yeah, but Maggie did, and her answer was sufficient enough to take both of you off of the table.”

Ria glared at Maggie. “Not me.” She rose and looked at her friends. “I’m getting laid tonight.”

“Just spend time with us,” Maggie said. “You don’t have to—”

“No, I do. I haven’t had a break like this. I might as well use it.” She walked to Todd with a smile across her face. She stumbled a little with each step. She shook her head, trying to rid of the buzz that had overcome her. “Hey.”

He smiled back. “Hey. What’s up?”

“I’m free tonight. I’ll take you up on your offer.”
Wrapped in Piano Strings
Yenifer Garcia

I saw your stillness break the walls,
Tear the wallpaper and sink the floor.

I saw your eyes search for love
In the place where it was not sown
And your lungs got tainted with
The warrior’s brutality,
You made a sidewalk out of their bodies.

I saw my fingers pull the trigger,
Watched your being jolt to a stop.
I waited for the sound of the bullet striking your chest
your remains turned gray and cascaded down the drain.

I saw your body crash down with the sun rise,
You shook the ground with the force of a feather.
You made the sky split in half, made a spotlight on your arms
The thorns on your wrist demanded to bleed, you obeyed and
turned your arms and hands pink.
I saw the seraphims come down
They wrapped their wings around your torso
Claimed your veins as their roof for their home.

I saw them drill bore into your precious head
And watched them cut your sockets,
They had marked you, it was too late
They wanted to taste the chemicals that you created.
I saw you reaching out, for me
I couldn’t reach you, I was wrapped in piano strings

I saw the airplane crash down two feet away from me,
The crows bombed the earth with sour voices,
You were in the air,
Up and away.
I saw the creatures bathing in soil.

I saw your voice exhume all, place the wallpaper back where it belongs.
Skin cream was a luxury to him. It was something he never even considered buying before, but now he found himself visiting the drug store on a daily basis just to get his fix. It was a nicety he could scarcely afford, but goddamn he needed it.

The pain was always there. Shooting pulses that danced along his nervous system, rendering him incapable of speech or mobility for hours on end. Why had the fire taken everything but left the nerves perfectly intact? Were they so far buried beneath his skin that the flames wouldn’t even touch them?

He saw the looks they gave him. People trying to mask their disgust with a faint layer of sympathy. The layers of clothing could only mask so much, and they always seemed to know just where to look in order to catch a peek at his charred skin. It didn’t matter what his story was or how he got there, a first impression is sometimes the only impression.

The story of it never factors in. There isn’t a line of questioning for him to answer, to describe how it happened. Even if there was, he’s not sure he would respond. How do you describe to someone the choice made in an instant, the decision to run into a fire as opposed to away from it? The simple answer: you don’t.

The pig skin grafts never matched up just right. Jagged pieces of flesh haplessly clinging to the contours of his face, leaving him resembling a poor man’s Humpty Dumpty. Every visit to the doctors’ bringing more and more rejection. This donor wasn’t a match, this skin tone was a tad off, more pig skin it is.

He was the hero of 42nd Street. When he was in the hospital, cards and flowers filled the room, from thankful parents to local businesses proud to call him a customer. He had run into that fire with little regard for his own well-being, not as a hero, but as a citizen.

The fame was brief, less than 15 minutes. The medical bills piled and continued to pile until they had a suffocating effect. He couldn’t afford the mortgage, barely afford to eat. Sometimes he wished that he hadn’t run into the fire, maybe avoid his mutilation, or at the very least prolong it. The cream soaked into his skin, offering a reprieve, just for a few moments.
I Won’t Fret  
Mary McIntyre

My first guitar teacher, Kyle, had dark, thick, almost square-like sideburns. His wavy hair was always combed to perfection. I used to think it made him look like a rockstar, which he basically was, but his appearance said everything about him that anyone needed to know. His clean shaven face had no hair out of place. Kyle’s glasses weren’t too thick or thin, just the right amount to see out of. His outfits never had stains or holes in them. If his shoes had laces, they would be neatly tied, resting on the spotless leather. I could still see him in my mind as I was sitting at one of the chairs in the local Applebee’s, huddled over a glass of frozen lemonade.

The walls were covered with pictures of people that I had never met. Waitresses and waiters bustled around the tables, disappearing into the kitchen every now and then. The place wasn’t packed, but the infrequent roars of noise made up for it. My mom sat across from me and my sister on my right. Usually, we split a chocolate lava cake, dividing it down the center. It was a few days before when Kyle had said he was leaving. One of his friends stopped to say goodbye during my lesson, so he stepped out for a minute. I sat there, practicing for the end of the year recital while my leg bounced up and down with impatience. He came back in and it all spilled out of him. He was going to California with his wife; they had just been offered an opportunity that just couldn’t be passed up. Kyle must have thought that I had overheard him. So, the teardrops in my eyes probably let him know that I was oblivious to the conversation outside the door. Kyle sat there; a blur through it all. Through the clarity of my tears.

“It’s not like I’m dead, Mary.”

I know that, but it doesn’t make it any better because you still won’t be here.

I told him that I understood. I didn’t understand.

“Do you want to stop playing?”

We started the song again. This time, the song had new sound effects. My inconsistent sniffles had a small part in between his strumming and my frantic plucking at the frets.

My mother’s voice brought me back to Earth. She began to ask me how I was doing. I gave short answers while stirring my
lemonade with a flimsy straw.

“Honey, why are you so upset over this?”

My eyebrows raised with disbelief. Kyle was my hero. The person that taught me to treasure music. He named the chord exercises that he wrote after me. He saw me start as a ten-year-old that could barely fit my guitar in my lap and eventually grow to be sixteen. He taught me guitar solos and songs that I never thought I could play. Kyle wasn’t just my guitar teacher. Kyle was who I wanted to be like when I was older. He would never get to see that. He would never see me grow again.

“Mom, people are supposed to make music with the people that they care about. I can’t ever make music with him again,” I told her while looking down at my cake. After we divided it, I began to shovel it into my mouth.

“You can still try to do lessons with him on video chats,” she reasoned.

I don’t want to do video chats; I want him here in Liverpool. You know that I hate change.

“Yeah, I guess we could,” I said in between bites. “If not, then I don’t ever want to play again.”

“Mary, you can’t do that. That would make him feel terrible. He wouldn’t want you to stop playing after he leaves.”

I want him to feel terrible. I want him to realize that this is going to change the rest of my life.

“Mom, I don’t want to play without him.”

“Honey, I know. Do you want to talk to him again before the recital? I can call him right now,” she said.

“No, I don’t want to.”

Kyle said that he wasn’t dead, but it sure felt like it. I had never mourned the loss of someone who was still alive. It seemed like he was already gone. His sights were set on the beaches of California, the vast coast and all the beauty that was included in it. His feet were still on the ground, but his mind was on boarding the plane, putting the “for sale” sign in front of the house, and trading the snow for the ocean breeze.

My mom stopped talking and let the noise of the restaurant take over the conversation. I excused myself to the bathroom.

On the day of the recital, I showed up and it was mostly like usual. I had to tell my grandma that she couldn’t sing along
during the show. The stage had two chairs. Kyle counted me off. I only messed up a little bit. This year, the program director handed him a bouquet of grilling utensils as a parting gift. After everyone congratulated me, Kyle and I took pictures together and he told me to book some lessons for the summer. His wife said that she would miss the way that I would nod my head and feel the music that I was playing. They went on to talk to other students and friends. I handed my guitar to my dad and walked out the door; my family crowding around me. That was the last time that I ever saw him. He never called us back about the lessons. He never said goodbye.

After a few months, my friend referred me to a teacher that had a music studio. Finally, I agreed. I was itching to play, but I didn’t want to move on.

My new teacher didn’t have prominent sideburns. He wore jeans and a button down shirt. Billy's glasses were made to look stylish, which he was. His studio was filled with guitars, ukuleles, drum kits, and a piano. Bob Marley posters hung on the blue walls. He wasn’t similar to Kyle apart from the love for music. I knew it was just what I needed. A change.

Occasionally, I wondered how my life would have gone if Kyle hadn’t left. He taught me so many things about how to be a musician. Sometimes I wished that he had stayed, but then I remembered all of the things that came from Kyle’s departure. I remembered when my new teacher taught me how to play the ukulele. I recalled the day when I heard our first song recording. Most of all, I remembered our last recital together. It was normal. There was one chair. My grandma wasn’t there, but she wouldn't have known any Bob Marley songs to sing along with anyway. Thankfully, I didn’t hit any of the wrong strings.

I’d like to think that everything happens for a reason. In the moment, I couldn’t see that everyone has to do what’s best for them. It always hurts, but you move on. I can’t see the future, but there’s one thing that I know for sure. When my new teacher gets his big break and leaves, I’ll be sad, but I’ll pick myself up. I’m going to keep playing my music because it can only get better. The change will be hard, but otherwise, I know I won’t fret.
Ode to Son Hop
Ashley Kirkland

As a young man of color trying make it in this world is impossible. You’re already doubted by many, almost all. You just trying to survive; My young strong brother. Years of oppression will try to suppress you. Get next to you. Flex on you. Mess with you. Say the they “F witchu”. Get in bed with you. I get the attitude. I was once you. I’m all you. I’m every you. I flex in you. My fingers hold what you keep. Love: your culture, The Team, Mi Familia, the tribe; all your souls keeps. I am your fuck the racist white man hatred, in your words punching beats. See I get the restless night sleeps. You got to make it stick your head down; push your shoulders through streets and pull on the concrete. Count your mornings, because death is near as you pray your soul to keep. But I keep. While you keep taking to the beat for rest on nights your spirit weeps. May these beats assure your mind, soul, and body rests in peace.

~ Your Mother Hip.
The Greatest Risk
Emily Shaben

The Golden Gate Bridge is approximately 1.7 miles long, ninety feet wide, and 750 feet high. It takes thirty minutes to get to the center and only 4.2 seconds to hit the San Francisco Bay water below. I’m not saying that I’ve calculated, but I’ve calculated.

Now here I am, sweating through my off-white t-shirt and pressing my hands into the rust colored railings of the bridge. I may have actually miscalculated; I can feel the pounding of my heart and the heat on my skin. I must have made the walk in at least twenty-five minutes. I inhale sharply and the brisk, forty-four degree air stings my nose and sits heavily in my lungs. Even though the minutes pass, my heart doesn’t slow. The view of the bay doesn’t soothe me as much as I hoped it would.

I lean precariously over the railing to get a better look below me, watching the churning water and waves smack against one another. Strands of my hair cut across my eyes, the wind picking and pulling at my weak attempt at a braid. I didn’t put that much effort into it anyway. I never put much effort into anything.

Except risks, I put a lot of effort into risks. I love cutting across busy traffic when I’m twenty feet from a crosswalk, or picking bar fights with drinkers who are six whiskeys deep and looking for trouble. My favorite pastime is seeing how many cigarettes I can chain smoke before throwing up. I like to ask myself, how close can I get to the edge before teetering over? How many times can I sidestep away from cars before letting one run me down?

But this, I don’t even know if I would call this a risk. Standing here on this bridge with its $1.5 billion dollar funding and its 1,600 ghosts, I don’t think I’ve felt any less empty. I press my hands even harder into the railing where the parts have begun to deteriorate. My palms slip and I notice it’s the raw and bloodiness of my own broken callouses that make me lose my grip.

I convince myself that now would be a good time to improve my view. If I stood up a little taller, sat a little higher, maybe I could see something on the horizon line I couldn’t see now. I suck in another deep breath, hold it, and hoist myself up onto the rail. I tremble to keep my balance, the slickness of my hands making me falter, but only for a second until I settle myself. My legs feel weightless dangling beneath me; why won’t my heart stop pounding?

Ten years ago, when I was fourteen, at least thirty-five
people jumped to their deaths from the Golden Gate Bridge. That same year I learned that a pack of smokes was $5 and the best place to cry was in the shower. It’s weird how lives parallel themselves like that; so many people took the leap the same time my life did. I wonder if it took them ten years to get here too, from when they first realized they were falling.

The tug of gravity on my legs is comforting, soothing. I swing my feet a little and watch my loose shoelaces trace zeroes in the empty space. I wonder if I kicked one sneaker off, maybe some hobo would find it washed up and muddy on some distant, unkempt shore. They’ll probably end up tossing it in the trash, or kicking it back to where it came from.

I wonder if the headline tomorrow will read, “WOMAN JUMPS FROM GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE, SEARCH BEGINS FOR MISSING SHOE”. I wonder if people will actually look for it.

I don’t hear the shrieking breaks behind me or the sound of the car door. Someone clears their throat, but I don’t bother giving them any attention. Will they judge me tomorrow if they notice my shoes are off-brand Sketchers? I perk up at the sound of speaking, at the sound of him speaking.

“—you’re not gonna like the outcome, kid,” he says. “Don’t take the risk.”

I smile, but I know he can’t see it; I can’t pull my eyes away from the great expanse of freedom below me. He says something again as a gust of wind hits me, carrying his words along with it. His stare is drilling a hole into the back of my neck and I can sense he’s afraid to approach me, or maybe he’s just simply afraid.

“This isn’t a risk,” I say, mostly to myself and for myself.

I jump from the railing, my feet hitting the cool pavement. My knees wobble and blood rushes to my head, making it spin. I take a step forward and steady myself on a nearby light post. The air tastes different now, almost sweet, and not as cold as it was before. When I look at the stranger, I realize he’s slouching against his car with his face in his hands. For a moment, I feel everything.

The greatest risk is to choose to live, and I did.
From the grass, the rocks below look covered in barnacles. Do those live in freshwater? I wonder if the tides are caused by the wind that blows faster than the local speed limit, or if the Great Lakes are big enough to be affected by the moon's gravity. Down the slope, on the shore, those are not crustaceans at all. Thousands of elongated, spotted beetles dot the shoreline. I scoop them into my hand and bring them to my face, watching as they scurry in a disturbed frenzy. They squirm down my throat, and their wings get stuck in my teeth like popcorn kernels. I wonder—because I've seen a ladybug before, this is not what they're supposed to look like—if it's the wind that makes them so long?
INT. HYBRID - NIGHT

JANE (28) is a fairly attractive blonde despite being visibly jumpy. She scans the dark stretch of road ahead of her as she listens to the radio.

RADIO HOST
-and a solemn hello to any of those just joining us. We have an update on the string of disappearances plaguing our fine county as of late-

INT. RED PICK-UP TRUCK - NIGHT

BILLY (43), a gruff looking middle aged man, lights a cigarette as he listens to the same radio program.

RADIO HOST
A trusted source says that the person behind these disappearances poses as an emergency service officer to put his victims at ease.

FOCUS ON PARAMEDIC JACKET RESTING ON BILLY’S PASSENGER SEAT.

SPLIT VIEW OF INT. OF BOTH CARS

JANE & BILLY
Fucking psycho.

RADIO HOST
It’s scary to think we have to be wary with those who are here to protect and serve. We’ll be back at the top of the hour with any updates on the story. Stay safe out there.
INT. HYBRID - NIGHT

Jane scoffs in disgust and changes the station. Paul McCartney & The Wings’ “Let Him In” plays loudly in the background.

JANE
Ok Jane, let’s not freak ourself out right now.

She takes several deep breaths and leans back in her chair. She starts bopping her head in tune with the song.

INT. RED PICK-UP TRUCK - NIGHT

Billy is almost finished with his cigarette and looks vexed.

CLOSE UP ON BLOOD STAIN ON THE SLEEVE OF HIS SHIRT.

He lowers the window and tries to flick the cigarette out, but the wind blows it back in.

BILLY
God Damn it!

The cigarette lands on his lap while still embered. He frantically swipes at his crotch trying to put it out.

INT. HYBRID - NIGHT

Jane has really gotten into the song and is enthusiastically swinging her head back and forth. She doesn’t notice the red pick up truck that has swerved into her lane.

SIDE VIEW OF THE TWO CARS COLLIDING HEAD ON

EXT. CAR WRECK - NIGHT (CONT.)

Jane has her head pressed on the steering wheel, her forehead pressed into the horn. She slowly lifts her head up and touches a gash on her forehead.

BILLY
(shouts from car)
Don’t move! You can have whiplash!
Billy looks dazed and slowly assesses the situation. He reaches into the back seat and takes out a first aid kit. He gingerly steps out of the truck and limps toward Jane’s car.

BILLY (CONT’D)
(whispers to himself)
What the fuck?! What the fuck?!

Jane is gathering her bearings when she sees a strange man walking to her car with a small case. She begins to hyperventilate.

JANE
(startled)
No, no, no. I’m fine. Really.

Billy knocks on her window and motions for her to lower it.

BILLY
Don’t worry, I’m trained for this. I’m a paramedic.

Janes eyes widen at the news. She double checks that the door is locked.

JANE
Honestly, I think I’m ok. You can just leave your insurance information on my windshield.

BILLY
Mam, I’d be doing you a disservice if I don’t at least check you out.

Billy tries his best to flash a friendly smile, but it comes across as creepy.

JANE
Listen man, I’m telling you I’m OK. I’m ok to drive. I just need to catch my breath.

Billy looks taken aback.
BILLY
You are in no condition to drive. If you’d just unlock your door, I can make sure you’re not concussed or hemorrhaging.

JANE
Some ID?

BILLY
What?

JANE
Can you provide documentation proving that you’re a paramedic.

BILLY
My wallets in my truck. I’m just trying to help here, lady.

HEADLIGHTS SLOWLY GROWING BRIGHTER AS A CAR PULLS UP ON THEM.

AS THE CAR GETS CLOSER, YOU CAN SEE IT’S POLICE CRUISER.

OFFICER
Someone called in an accident?

Jane visibly relaxes at the sight of the officer. Her eyes dart at the cruiser, then at Billy, then back to the cruiser. She slowly lowers her window.

BILLY
Officer, I’m a paramedic and this woman refuses medical attention.

OFFICER
That’s sadly understandable. People have been going missing in these parts lately.
BILLY
She clearly needs, first aid. I think she’s concussed and-

OFFICER
That’ll be all, sir. Mam, will you be needing a ride tonight?

Jane considers his offer for a beat and meekly nods. She unlocks the door and staggers out. Billy tries to help her get to her feet, but she reels away from him. She makes her way to the passenger seat of the cruiser and collapses in it.

OFFICER (CONT’D)
(smugly to Billy)
Now you have a good night.

Billy staggers to his truck and sits down. He lights a cigarette when suddenly the radio broadcast cuts back on.

RADIO HOST
We’re back with an update on the missing persons case. Apparently, the abductor has been posing as a partnerless police officer. Please take care and have a good night.

BILLY’S POV: THE CRUISER MAKING ITS WAY DOWN THE DARK STRETCH OF ROAD.

Billy squints and sees a leg sticking out of the trunk.

BILLY
Who called in the accident?

Paul McCartney’s “LET HIM IN” fades back in.

CUT TO: CREDITS
Gerald
Benjamin Greco

Gerald woke up at four in the morning with a terrible headache and a ringing in his ears.
He took an aspirin and went back to sleep.
When he woke up at seven for work, his hearing was completely gone.
He tried to think:
Had he eaten anything unusual recently?
Was he using a new laundry detergent?
He’d been taking good care of himself, so he figured this temporary deafness would eventually just sort itself out.
He got into the shower. The water warmed the back of his neck and he watched the droplets falling silently to the floor. It was very peaceful.
I could get used to this, he thought.

He dried off and put on a pot of coffee. While fixing his tie, he thought to himself:
Maybe it’s not my hearing. Maybe the world just stopped making noise.
He finished getting dressed, then went into the kitchen poured a cup of coffee. He sat down by the window in a patch of sunlight. It warmed his face. He sipped his coffee and felt its heat flowing down into his stomach.
All in complete silence.
He smiled and closed his eyes.
When he finished the coffee, he picked up his briefcase and walked out to his car. It was a beautiful day. The sun was out, and he imagined all the birds must have been chirping.
He got in his car and drove off. He went slow, taking his time. Four different people honked at him to go faster, but he didn’t hear them.
He walked into the office and sat down in his cubicle. Some new papers were waiting there for him. He skimmed them, and figured he’d be spending his workday filing quarterly
reports and firing off emails to people who hadn’t submitted their inputs yet.

In the corner of his eye, he saw his boss Beverly ambling up to his desk. He turned to face her. Her mouth opened and closed.

It kept opening and closing for about two minutes. Gerald nodded the whole time, smiling. When her mouth stopped opening, he gave her a thumbs up and turned back toward his desk. She walked away.

Without all the distractions of sound, Gerald finished filing all his reports before two o’clock. He spent the remaining three hours of his workday relaxing and looking at the coffee table book that was kept in the lobby for visitors. Beverly was out meeting with a client and all of his co-workers were in their cubicles, so no one was around to bother him.

He flipped casually through the book. It was filled with large, glossy pictures of pretty places in France.

Gerald flipped silently through photos of mountains, rolling green fields, and sandy seaside’s. He saw magnificent old churches, twisty cobblestone roads, and medieval split timber houses.

None of the pictures interested him very much, until, near the very back of the book, he saw a pristine little footbridge built over a culvert, with a stream of dirty water running underneath. The image wasn’t very striking, but he found himself staring at it for several minutes.

A huge droplet of water plonked onto the stream, and Gerald realized that he was crying. He closed up the book, wiped his eyes, and walked back to his cubicle.

On his drive home, six cars honked at him.

While he ate dinner, his phone rang three times.

In total silence, he sank into his mattress underneath freshly washed sheets.

What a fantastic day, he thought.

Within minutes, he was asleep.
1. 
*Le marché aux puces:*
Sunday crutch of ripe peaches
and soft morning air;
a thrifty alley cat’s prime
while the sun is late to work.

2. 
Docked behind buoyant,
sweet neighborly bulletin,
the man is solus.
His tongue is not the product –
the fruit buys his family.
The Craft of Staying Dry

June 22
12:03am
I wish I could say
I don't need an umbrella
To swing over my head
At the first sign of a shower.
But here I am,
Here it is,
Always open, always hovering
An inch above my head.
I'll always find a reason-
I've just done my hair
Or my makeup will run,
It's just not a good time.
And you'll just nod
Maybe roll your eyes:
"It's always something."
But even I
Who must stay dry
Peek out between
(Surely)
Acid drops
And I wonder what it's like
To put the umbrella back
In the attic
And stick my tongue out.

The Art of Getting Wet

August 16
11:57pm
I can finally say
The umbrella is gone
Packed in the attic
To sleep under soft sawdust.
And here I am,
Here's the rain,
And I feel it
Drip down my spine.
I have no more reason-
My hair clings to my neck,
I don't wear makeup anymore,
It's finally a damn good time.
And you'll just grin
Maybe kiss my nose:
"You're really something."
And even I
Who've just stayed dry
Raise my face to the
(Surely)
Sunlit drops
And I know what it's like
To put the umbrella back
In the attic
And finally feel the rain.
Catherine picked up the telephone and dialed the number for the suicide hotline. It rang a few times before greeting her with a familiar message:

“Hello, welcome to the Assisted Suicide Hotline. Unfortunately, all our representatives are currently occupied. Please hold on for as long as you can.”

The phone then started to play Gary Jules’ “Mad World.” Catherine sighed and laid down on her bed. She slowly sunk into the memory foam mattress, curling up into the same old, tired shape. She stared at the ceiling, trying to make sense of the bumps and swirls in the plaster.

“Hi, my name is Benjamin, and welcome to the Assisted Suicide Hotline. I apologize for the delay,” a voice said.

Startled, Catherine dropped the phone and stared at it.

“… Hello?” Benjamin asked.

“Sorry,” Catherine said. “This is the first time anyone’s ever answered.”

“Oh,” said Benjamin. “We’re usually very busy. Did you want to request our services? I have other customers on hold right now. Don’t want to keep them waiting.”

“Yes,” she said. “I don’t feel anything. I don’t want to live anyore, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Alright, classic situation,” Benjamin said. “I’ll just get out an APTH form and we can start the paperwork.”

Catherine listened to shuffling papers in the background as the man hummed a tune.

“Name?”

“Catherine Murphy.”

“Age?”

“37.”

“How would you like to die?”

“I… don’t know. How does this work?”

“You give us your preferred method of death, and if it’s
within our means, we will accommodate you.”

Catherine thought for a moment, and then asked:
“Can you burn my house down, with me in it?”
“We sure can! Give me your address and I’ll send our
Firemen over as soon as possible.”

She told the man on the phone her address, gave him her
credit card information to pay for the services, and hung up.
Catherine lay in bed, hands clasped together against her chest,
and waited. Eventually, she fell asleep.

~

Catherine awoke to the sound of liquid splashing all
around her. Three men in thick, heavy, grey hazmat suits were
pouring kerosene everywhere. When they finished, one of the
men gave Catherine a document for her to sign. At the bottom,
it read:

“I, ___________________, hereby relinquish
the rights to my life to the Assisted Suicide Hotline. I am of
sound body and mind, and make this decision willingly and
conscientiously.”

Catherine signed, and returned the paper to the man. He
nodded and motioned to his colleagues that it was time to go.
He struck a match, and held it in the air, gazing at the flame
for a few seconds. He hesitated for a moment and looked
Catherine in the eye. Then he dropped it, setting the room on
fire. They quickly left, leaving the house to burn.

Smoke started to fill her lungs, and as the flames crept
closer, Catherine began to feel the heat against her skin. She
felt herself slowly becoming ash.
I was never the big man on campus
never aspired to be.
I pack to go home for the last time;
skim through the drawers.

Loose change mingle with expired condoms,
but here’s to hoping.
A mason jar filled with...
something non-incriminating.

Ear plugs to combat my roommate’s snoring.
Band-aids to stop the bleeding.
Beaded bracelets to cover these bony wrists,
A shitty flask to dull my [supposed] wit.

Chamomile tea brought sleep, but not rest,
Beer koozies to hug my drink, and remind it,
“Everything’ll be okay.”
Half used chapsticks that couldn’t
Ever cover this liars lips.

No.
I was never the big man on campus,
But maybe I wanted to be.
We’re Nice People