

Augustana College
Augustana Digital Commons

SAGA Art & Literary Magazine

Spring 2018

SAGA Vol. 81 / 2017-2018

Alina Lundholm

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Michele Hill

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Melissa Conway

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/saga>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

"SAGA Vol. 81 / 2017-2018" (2018). *SAGA Art & Literary Magazine*.

<https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/saga/4>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in SAGA Art & Literary Magazine by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.



SAGA

2017-2018
Volume 81

SAGA ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE
VOLUME 81 / 2017-2018

SAGA

Art & Literary Magazine
Volume 81
2017-2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A magazine of this magnitude requires the effort of multiple organizations and individuals to reach publication. The editors-in-chief cannot thank the Augustana English Department and Student Government Association enough for their contributions and support to SAGA Art & Literary Magazine. SAGA's publication would not be possible without their generosity and commitment to the furthering of art and creativity in this community.

To SAGA's advisors Rebecca Wee, Kelly Daniels, and Kelvin Mason, we thank them for their constant support and advice. Any successful organization requires its pillars of strength to fall back on from time to time.

Without Christina Sanders-Ring, the English Department secretary, SAGA would likely be a floundering fish in a sea of chaos. We thank her for the numerous emails sent on behalf of the magazine, answering all of the many questions we sent her way, and for performing a host of other administrative tasks. Thank you also to Meg Gillette for helping us with our financial needs.

We would like to thank our award judges for this year's volume: Allison Seay, Poe Ballantine, Joshua Ford, and Ryan Collins. They all kindly took the time to thoroughly read and review the poetry, prose, and art selections for the magazine.

Additionally, we owe our gratitude to Celina Rippel, who designed the tranquil cover of this year's magazine.

Last but certainly not least, we want to give an enormous thanks for Jack Ottinger and the staff at Allegra Print & Imaging in Elgin, Illinois for printing our magazine. Without them, this volume would not currently rest in your hands.

ABOUT SAGA

SAGA is Augustana College's art and literary magazine, which has been published by students since 1937. While SAGA traditionally published two magazines per academic school year, one in winter and one in spring, it has been published as a single, larger issue since 2014.

The goal of SAGA Magazine and its staff members is to spread and showcase student art and writing around Augustana's campus, and to increase the prevalence of creative spaces and outlets around the place students call home. Those of any major, interest, or background are encouraged to submit, uninhibited and uncensored.

Submissions are open exclusively to currently enrolled Augustana students. All submissions are sent anonymously to student boards who have selected the pieces published in this issue. This year, we received over 200 total submissions of poetry, art, and prose. We are proud to present this year's selected pieces.

STAFF

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Alina Lundholm
Michele Hill
Melissa Conway

FACULTY ADVISORS

Kelly Daniels
Kelvin Mason
Rebecca Wee

ART EDITORS

Jack Harris
Joshua Hildebrand

ART BOARD

Kyle James
Sambridha Shrestha
Cassandra Talbot

POETRY EDITORS

Allyson Jesse
Megan Hoppe

POETRY BOARD

Aliyah Bailey
Abby Berry
Kyle James
Sarah Sciaraffa

PROSE EDITORS

Maissie Musick
Gabi Peters

PROSE BOARD

Aliyah Bailey
Megan Gabler

Ali Hadley
Jaclyn Hernandez
Ryan Holman
Sam Johnson
Alli Kestler
Jessica Manly
Laura McNair
Brenna Parson
Mason Sargent
Sarah Sciaraffa

COPY EDITORS

Stephanie Tillman
Lindsey Jones

PRODUCTION EDITORS

Brenna Parson
Rene Powers

SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER

Hadley McCormick

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ADVERTISING MANAGER

Ali Muksed

EVENT COORDINATOR

Katie Fues

DIGITIZING INTERNS

Ali Hadley
Ryan Holman
Sam Johnson

LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

Saga: a form of the novel in which the members or generations of a family or social group are chronicled in a long and leisurely narrative. While this is a dictionary.com definition, it helps showcase what this magazine has to offer: a collection of poetry, prose, and art done by talented Augustana students. The magazine you are about to read was written and made with passion that can only be found on Augustana's campus. This year's issue has been exciting to create due to the copious amount of submissions we received. A huge thank you to everyone who submitted, and thank you for picking up this SAGA. I hope you are just as moved by the pieces within it as we were.

It's been a long road getting here from being a fan, to board member, to prose editor, to editor-in-chief. I've done a lot with my time at Augustana, but this is something that I have a physical piece of evidence to prove to myself that hard work pays off. This magazine is my pride and joy and I am beyond excited to be able to share it. Carefully read, reflect, and admire each of the wonderful pieces published this year.

I couldn't have done this myself, so a huge thank you to my co-editors for helping me get through this process of publishing an entire SAGA. We put so much time and passion into this creation, and I'm so glad I got the opportunity to do so with you! Brenna Parson and Stephanie Tillman were also instrumental in combating the chaos that was putting this monster together. Thank you both for all the hours you put forth into this issue. Thank you also to my family, amazing friends, sorority sisters, and roommates for helping me throughout this process and giving me the encouragement I needed to be truly proud of this year's SAGA. A special shout out to Janelle Norden for being there any time I needed to talk or vent or just figure out what I'm doing in life.

I had a blast putting this together and going to the board meetings where Augustana's talent and insightfulness were present. I will forever love being a part of SAGA, and I hope you thoroughly enjoy this year's issue!

Michele Hill
Editor-in-chief



If Michele hadn't approached me last spring and convinced me somehow to apply for this position, the thought would never have occurred to me. While I had gotten a story published my freshman year, my only other contribution to the magazine was my membership on the prose board. A member. Not even the prose board editor. How did a peasant become the monarch? I still have no idea! And yet, here I am, writing to you.

I find myself almost overwhelmed by this tremendous journey and how it has nearly reached its fruition. Between Michele studying abroad in New York fall term and Melissa in Holden for half of winter, it felt like I was drowning in harrowing staff selections, schedule crunching, the Mind-Numbing Email Cesspool, shaking down every single creative-minded human I know for a scrap of doggerel, and endlessly messing with margins and bleeds. But now, I feel like we've conquered our dragon. Whether we've slain Fafnir or befriended Saphira, this beast has reached its end.

I owe my gratitude to numerous punks and goblins, but I will attempt to be brief so that Brenna doesn't come after me for going over. Speaking of Brenna, our illustrious production manager, SAGA has come alive under her capable fingertips, and I will be forever grateful for all the sleep and gray hairs she saved me. To Michele and Melissa, I could not have done this without either of you, so I thank you both for putting up with my essay messages and general chaotic nature. To the rest of SAGA's staff, I wish I could thank each one of you individually, but **to be short**, I thank you all for making this magazine happen. To Rebecca Wee, my advisor, I will miss our lengthy office conversations, ranging from wonderful poetry to my grandmother to life in general. Similarly, I owe Anne Earel, my mentor at the library, my immense thanks for being an equally amazing human and giving advice to an overstressed senior unsure of her future. To my closest confidantes who listened to me ranting and bemoaning this hectic process throughout the year: my roommates, Monica and Emma, Allyson, Jack, Ali, Stephanie, and Rene. And lastly, to Jess: putting your writing out there for all to see took immense courage. A true Gryffindor to the end.

Saying the final goodbye is horrendously daunting, so I'm going to use the words of another to do that for me.

As the great Kurt Vonnegut once said, so it goes.

Alina Lundholm
Editor-in-chief



LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

I met Saga's 2015-16 editors-in chief my freshman year at the Activity Fair where Alyssa Froehling talked to me about what the magazine is and how it gives students an outlet to share their work with other people. After that conversation I knew that Saga was something I wanted to be a part of. I was initially worried about getting involved because I had never done anything like Saga before and felt unsure about how I would fit into the staff. A few days later I noticed emails about Saga in my inbox and decided to take a chance. I joined the poetry board that year and I have been constantly grateful for that decision.

Working with Michele and Alina this year has been a whirlwind. Their passion and dedication to Saga has been amazing. And inspiring. And heartwarming. What I'm trying to say is they're overall amazing and definitely the dream team. The three of us came into this position with no idea what we were doing and subsequently dealt with a lot of mayhem and confusion, but we buckled down and had an amazing time learning about Saga and how to make it all come together.

I can't say thank you enough to all of the amazing artists and writers who contributed to this issue. I'm honored to have your work shared with me; you're the heart of this magazine. Thanks to all of you and our incredible staff this year; we ended up putting together something amazing. Thanks to Brenna for dumping so much time and energy into formatting the pages, all of our editors for making it happen, and our board members for being decisive. You're the peanut butter to our jelly and we couldn't have done this thing without all of your effort.

Thanks to my family and friends who were always here when I needed to vent or brag about how lucky I am to be a part of this. Thanks to Saga for existing and Augustana for giving us this platform of expression. Mostly, thank you for reading and taking the time to get to know us, thank you for loving art the way we do and allowing us to keep sharing these radical acts of vulnerability.

Melissa Conway
Editor-in-Chief



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Kate Black

POETRY	Funny People	2
POETRY	Love You More	19
POETRY	This Morning	101

Tori Charnetzki

ART	Untitled 2	1
ART	Untitled 3	13

Melissa Conway

POETRY	8:42	95
POETRY	I grew up too	51

Maria Do

ART	Every flower is a soul blossoming in nature	89
POETRY	Insomnia	49
ART	It's hard to be a bright light in a dim world	64
ART	Lights	4
ART	Not just beautiful, though—the stars are like the trees in the forest, alive and breathing.	100

Mia Gerace

POETRY	make me feel	47
--------	--------------	----

Monica Gil

ART	Bite	94
ART	Echoes	50

Ali Hadley

PROSE	Casual Encounters	33
-------	-------------------	----

Lauren Hagedorn

PROSE	Tuna Noodle Casserole	41
-------	-----------------------	----

Jack Harris

PROSE	Curtains	65
-------	----------	----

Jaclyn Hernandez

POETRY	Dizzy Photographs	99
--------	-------------------	----

Joshua Hildebrand

ART	billowing boy red	53
ART	decadence in red	48
ART	kept original	32
ART	variation on practice	88

Michele Hill

PROSE	The Mysterious Forest	103
-------	-----------------------	-----

Jessica Holzknecht

PROSE	Grey Houses, Grey Hair	22
-------	------------------------	----

Kyle James

ART	Field of Fog	106
-----	--------------	-----

TaJania Jenkins

ART	The Monster Inside of Me	60
-----	--------------------------	----

Allyson Jesse

POETRY	Anti-Aubade; Mourning Love Song	61
PROSE	Down the Rabbit Hole	15
POETRY	Foreword	3
POETRY	Fragments	12
PROSE	My Beautiful Death	5
ART	Poised	102
POETRY	Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious	90

Sam Johnson

PROSE	The Liminal Space of a Shell Station at Midnight During a Snowstorm	75
-------	--	----

Mikaylo Kelly

POETRY	Coping and Growing with Flash Floods and Drought	11
POETRY	Garden Walk	35
POETRY	Hungry Stone: Counting Moments Clinging to Reality	8
ART	Heat	42
ART	Lake Michigan Snow	54
ART	The Pitch	62
POETRY	The Shaggy Clouds Have Come	107
ART	Soft Chill	14

Erica Kirinovic

ART	My Happy Place	72
-----	----------------	----

Alina Lundholm

ART	Bring Me That Horizon	37
ART	Buenos dias	39
ART	Japanese Wood	98
ART	Not Yet Darkened	10
POETRY	Sorority Girls	96
POETRY	Stormy Ruminations	63
POETRY	Summer Silence	52
PROSE	The Town of Prophecy and Fools	55

Maissie Musick

POETRY	R.I.P.	38
PROSE	Saturday Confessions	43

Trang “Tracy” Ngo

ART	Internal Scream	40
-----	-----------------	----

Rene Powers

PROSE	Warbound	91
-------	----------	----

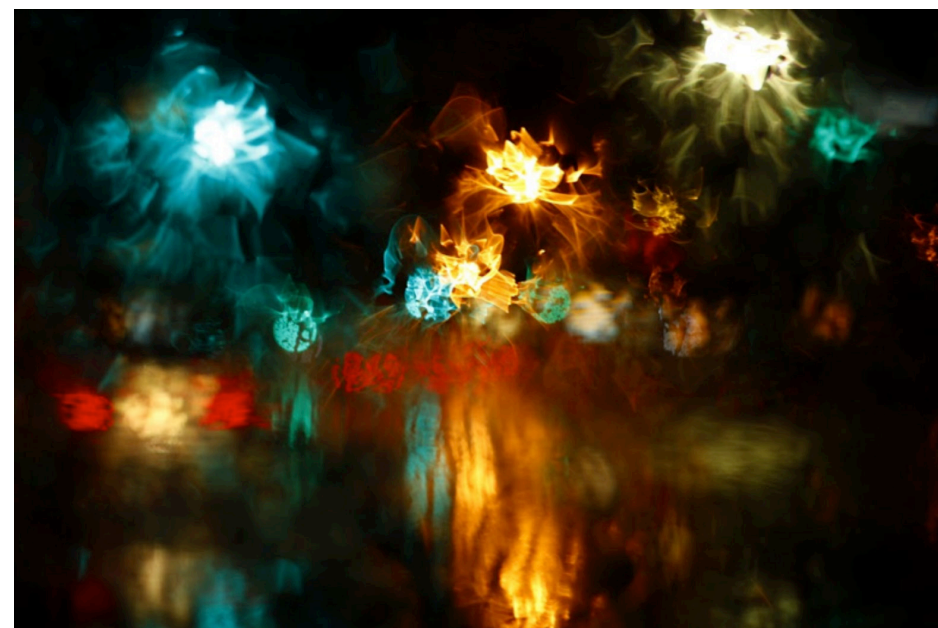
Jonathan Quigley

ART	The future is crying	105
ART	Potential	97
ART	7887 my time	21

Sarah Sciaraffa

POETRY	Grandma’s Kitchen Sink	73
--------	------------------------	----

Untitled 3



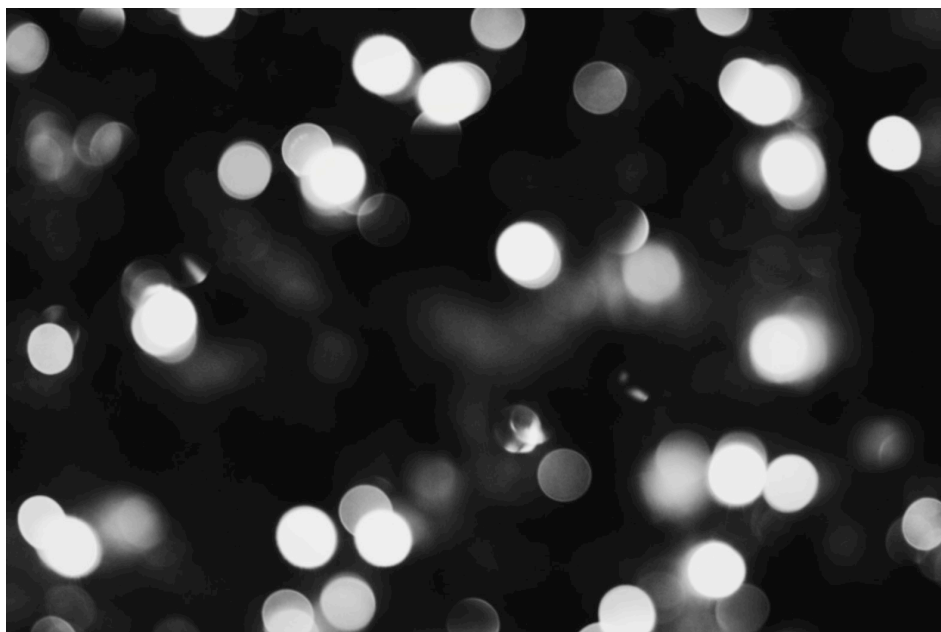
Funny People

Humans are funny things.
What, with our clothes and hair and our worries
Waking up to go to classes with people who are worried
about the shirt they are wearing and whether it is as
good as yours
Deciding, ultimately, that you are probably just as worried
about yourself as they are about themselves and what is
it that makes one shirt better than another anyway?
And when you haven't seen a certain human in too long you
wrap your arms around them and pull them in close
Keeping them there until you feel that they know they are
loved
Reunions are filled with screams of joy and laughter and
tears
But in the way that our eyes are filled with joyful drops, they
are filled with floods of hopelessness and despair
But we dare not show those tears to anyone else
Why is crying so taboo?
Why is sadness a thing to flee from, an incurable disease
that we dare not touch because the wrong words could
send them deeper into themselves
But if sadness were shown in the same way joy was
If when we were upset, when the weight of the world is too
much, if we cried while walking down the halls in the
same way we smile at passersby
Maybe then the world could learn how to heal itself
If kind strangers were unafraid to dry your tears and listen to
your sorrows maybe we would all be a little more kind, a
hint more genuine
But I am too busy comparing my shirt to yours to spend any
time comparing the tears in your eyes to my own
Humans are funny that way

Foreword

Fantasy does not sound as sweet coming from my lips
as it does from yours so I want to kiss you until dragons
make homes between my molars.
Hotel rooms turned into castles
with backpacks ready for adventure between pages
and then later between sheets.
Spines look better on shelves than in skeletons
so please take your time to arrange books alphabetically
and me horizontally.
I promise your wizard hats will always be homemade
with a name tag and your staff will never leave
the house without lipstick on it.

Lights



My Beautiful Death

The day I died, I stared into the black eyes of Death and told her she was beautiful.

I looked around at the wooded area surrounding us and then back to her. I had no idea how I got there, but something in the still air made me unafraid to be in such a foreign place. The full moon illuminated the woman's straight, navy hair and her enticingly charcoal irises couldn't be distinguished from her pupils. I pleaded for her to explain to me who she was. I watched her lips part, yet no sound came out. Approaching her, the scent of campfires on cold nights struck me. I tried to peer around to see if there was a fire hidden behind her figure, but nothing was there except for more trees. *Why was I here?* Slowly, she turned to the rose bush next to her and plucked a flower from the branches. She held it up delicately by the base of the stem and it began to blacken where her fingertips rested. The entire rose turned to ash in a matter of seconds, falling to the ground as she lowered her hand. Fascinated, I took a few more steps forward and tried to understand the woman in front of me. She was gorgeous with her golden skin and defined cheekbones. Her unblinking eyes were fixed on me as I reached to touch her face, desperate to at least know if she was real. With my fingers inches from her skin, I could feel heat radiating off her and then suddenly, I woke up.

That was the first time I met her and it was not the last.

I was told I had unexpectedly suffered from a burst cerebral aneurysm in the coffee shop that day. It knocked me unconscious for hours, enough time for doctors to perform surgery and for me to meet Death. I woke up expecting to be welcomed by her warm eyes. Instead, I was greeted with the irritating news that I was on my way to a full recovery and would be stuck in a hospital bed for a couple weeks while things healed. All I wanted was Death.

She became my obsession. I only lived until the day I could die again to see her. No one had ever affected me like she had in those few short minutes and I had no idea why. I wanted to be consumed by her. If I looked hard enough, I

would see her in my switchblade. Or on the train tracks. Or at the end of a needle. These were only short visits though. Glimpses at what I most desired, but could not have. I lit matches just for the smell because it reminded me of her. I'd let my fingers hover over the flame that emulated her skin. I failed to find a permanent way to her many times, but I was addicted to trying. Each time I did drugs or harmed myself, I could close my eyes for a few minutes and see her before me. I wasn't in the forest with her in those periods of suspension, just looking at the beauty. I was in the hospital a few times for my actions, not enough to have them commit me though. My friends began to worry about me. They told me I just wasn't in the present. That I seemed like I was in another world. I never told them of the woman who I was fixated on, greedily keeping her for myself.

Then I jumped off the Queensboro Bridge. It was my only way to her. I didn't feel the impact for very long before I was suddenly in the forest again, lying in the still grass with the starless sky above me.

I raised myself up on my forearms and looked around, still dizzy from the change of worlds. The trees and the wonderful rose bush that she was standing by last time were still there, but she wasn't. I stood, anxious to find what I needed, and ran through the clearing of trees. That's when I discovered the barriers. The forest was just a box with trees in it. An isolation limbo.

Does time exist here? Hours passed and I contemplated my death. Again. The impossibility of it drove me insane. Do all people with suicide deaths face this afterlife? I tried to drag rosebush thorns across my wrist to draw blood. They broke against the seemingly steel skin. No concussion could be acquired from banging my head against the barriers. Despite having the ability to breathe, I couldn't choke myself to sleep. I finally laid down and wrapped myself around the base of the rosebush, trying as best I could to come to terms with the eternity I would face. Silence pursued. I had no heartbeat to fixate on.

"Why did you come here, you silly girl?"

Surprised, I uncurled myself and stared up at my beauty. I watched as she lifted her bony hand and it glowed indigo. I wondered how her flesh could produce such a light, but it

was so lovely that the questioning didn't stay long. Her finger beckoned me and I stood to walk towards her in a trance. I felt her nail tickle the bottom of my chin as we finally made contact. Exhaling with bliss, I watched my breath turn to wispy smoke. The chill air ran up through my nose as I inhaled and I swore I could smell the bitter sweetness of wine on her breath.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered as I looked into her eyes.

Intoxicated in the moment, I kissed her. When our lips met, my body felt weightless and I understood everything that had been missing from my life.

Separating from our kiss, she muttered, "You have to leave." Death touched my cheek in comfort.

My blood ran cold even though her warm body was resting against mine. *What?* I wanted to stay with her. I had to stay with her. This couldn't be how we ended, how this ended. What would the point of all of my struggles be? I gave up my life for her. How could I perpetually live in this prison alone?

"Why?" Disbelief and pain made cracks in my voice.

"You can't be with me. You cannot love Death without becoming nothing."

She released her hand from my cheek and I screamed out in pain. Falling to my knees, I touched my face and pulled away with ash on my fingers. My eyes shot up to Death and her indigo glowing hand hung before me. The flower. Her scent. Her warmth. All fire. All consumed me.

Hungry Stone: Counting Moments Clinging to Reality

Slobbering
In between the spaces
Of my solitude

1.
A floor creaks softly under the carpet.
latches snap with metallic jingles
people leave
and I remain.

2.
Eating beans and onions and cheese.
questioning what it means
to move forward
wondering what it will look like

3.
The rustle and roar of leaves and wind
and imposing planes above

coming

down

for

a
landing.

people moving
and I remain.

...

What does it sound like to stand still?

Like distant cars moving over concrete? Like water
dripping in the dirty aquarium?

Do you love this?
Or is this an apathetic wondering
A silencing
An immobilizing mood of solitude?

At times we choose not to move
Sometimes
We simply can't.

Not Yet Darkened



Coping and Growing with Flash Floods and Drought

There's a memory I've never had:

A guitar plucks like a rabbit playing in the yard
Relaxed rhythm, and occasional hop.

Happy eyes
Peaceful hearts glowing like a morning fire
In the late afternoon light

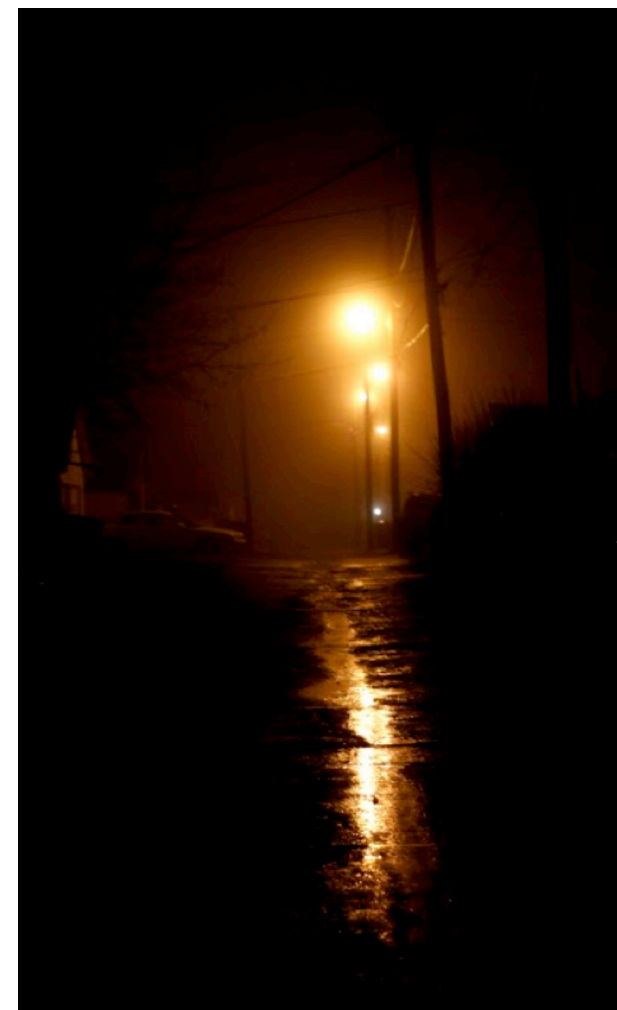
We drive
Listening and feeling
And saying nothing
But soaking in the presence.
Marinating in the landscape of the dry, expansive Southwest
Where spasmodically growth is stimulated and stunted.
Roots creep and savor the water when it comes
Flowers explode and seeds fall like ashes.

The flora hosts symposiums on growth
Showing one how to embrace its own pace
And be adaptive to the dynamics of change.

Fragments

I shut down so many times
my metal spine
when I think of you I see
flowers in every vertebrae
a cabinet of tea
you will not taste like a mistake
arms eradicating loneliness
my inadequacy
I find you
in chords of songs
filling someone else's void
with the cloak of invisibility
what a joke
I lost everything
in exchange for a tattoo

Untitled 2



Soft Chill



Down the Rabbit Hole

The Intro: Rabbit's Feet Aren't Lucky for the Rabbits

The worst part about having an undiagnosed mental illness and having your bunny die is that your bunny died.

I never told anyone that I got him because pets reduce suicidal tendencies in humans who think of that kind of end. So what happens when your strategically placed tether to this world dies?

You fall.
You float.
You deflate.
You drown.

At least, that's what I did. For about a month I wouldn't let my soul live in my body because he had no choice to stay in his. But there was still weight. So I write about him, you, hoping to immortalize you on the page because I couldn't do that the first time.

Part One: The White Rabbit Turned Black

I held the box, your box, in my lap. I don't remember the car ride home.

They put you in an old medical supplies package. Couldn't rid the cardboard of the printed text before handing you to me. I wondered if they kept those on purpose for moments like this. Normally people chose cremation, but we couldn't afford that after buying all your medication. We threw the vet techs for a loop. I could picture them shuffling in the back, dead rabbit on the table, only then realizing they needed a container to place you in.

"What should we use instead?"

"Here, I was just about to throw this out. It's the perfect size." Like you were trash.

Don't worry, they tried to make it more personalized. Less cold. A green piece of construction paper was taped to the top. A crude clipart rabbit silhouette taped over that. Your

name printed in a broken cursive font, the one that is curvy, but doesn't connect with the other letters.

A child's craft. The one that's proudly displayed on the fridge for a month and then stored in the attic for eternity or thrown out discreetly. You were reduced to glued macaroni and glitter. An injustice I've never gotten over. They even preserved your pawprints in clay and wrapped the gift in a paw-printed goody bag. The novelty of it all.

The final touch, a quote.

"Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened."

I had just stirred my soul from slumber only to suffocate it under the weight of a cardboard box.

Maybe an urn would have been better. How small would it have been?

About the size of my heart.

Reduced to ash instead of being reduced to trash, would you have liked that better?

I slept with your box for four nights after you died. Didn't care to think of how your decaying body would be permanently curved, a delicate skeleton soon, revealing your fractured vertebrae. Ignored the subtle stench of decomposition escaping the corrugated paper as I curled into fetal position to sleep. We were mirror images of two differently damaged bodies.

You're buried in my backyard with a view from my old bedroom. I meant to craft a headstone for you, a little brick to hide amongst my father's landscaping as homage, but I could never bring myself to do it. Couldn't solidify your death in stone. Instead, I buried a piece of me with your corpse. **You were gifted with my favorite tears before my dad wrapped your makeshift casket in a black garbage bag.**

I can't bear to think of anything getting into his box with him, he claimed as he duct-taped it on too tightly.

All I could think of was how he furthered your descent into being nothing more than trash. I shivered at the thought of how the plastic would shrink-wrap the paper casket onto your deceased body, mummifying you horrifically. Just another useless multi-media art piece. Your black fur would have been enough of a mourning garment, no need for the synthetic wrappings vacuum packing you inside your burial chamber.

I still have sweaters with holes from your bite marks—they're

black, funnily enough. I struggle to throw away anything as easily as they threw away you.

Sometimes I think I can feel roots of grass growing between my shoulder blades—a different kind of growing pain. A reminder that you'll forever be in that dwelling in the earth since you retreated to your ancestral habitat on that warm June afternoon. I once daydreamed that you pulled me under the ground to visit your time capsule house—this one never intending to be opened. A burrow for the dead.

I know your body was being consumed by insects as I thought of a whimsical cardboard home decorated with wall tapestries and a forest green armchair, well-loved.

Do you have time for a tea party? I ask.

I tried my hardest to preserve the perfect image of your live, delicate being before you fell. Those precious front paws and the brown-gray fur that puffed out from between your toes. The way you always loved to sunbathe in my lap on grooming days. But I still can't shake the look in your eyes as the vet assistant took you from my arms to put you down. You climbed up her shoulder and peered at me over those lilac scrubs right before the door closed.

No time to say hello, goodbye.

You'd never have to check your pocket watch to see if you were late ever again.

Part Two: Call Me Alice

I wake up and open my eyes to check the time, gauging how long I have to replay my dreams before waking fully. I close my eyes again and picture the bridge, the same one every time. Red like the Golden Gate. There's a reason it's named like a doorway to heaven.

When I was younger, I thought people jumped off bridges to drown themselves, only to find out as I grew older the impact tears them apart.

Bodies falling at eighty miles per hour in a nanosecond. Inertia causes the organs to keep going and the force tears them loose. Broken ribs are common. Sometimes the bone fractures or shards pierce organs.

The body breaks.

If that's not enough to kill you, you'll flail in the water until the internal bleeding takes over.

Even after all that, drowning is still an option. Your body

plunged so deep into the abyss, you breathe in salt water and asphyxiate.

You're pulled from the water and placed in a body bag, a synthetic black plastic. Eventually you'll be settled into a wooden casket if your family can afford it. Urns are cheaper for human burials. Your headstone is made by a company who understands death is written on stone.

Many people, like me, think jumping off bridges is a beautiful way to die. That falling feels a lot like flying. And then it hits them.

If you're "lucky" enough to survive the fall, impact, and recovery, you're likely to end up with fractured vertebrae. Wonder what that's like.

I began to hoard cardboard boxes my sophomore year in college, two years after your burial. Used the packages to ease my anxiety, unaware that I was merely recreating your casket. Euthanized my fears and placed petrified-thought-bodies into the six-sided vessel. Ruminated on mortality in the form of repurposing the object that scarred me.

Did you know that a dead body floats because decay causes gases to form? Your body becomes a gaseous balloon; once it's burst, you deflate and your body sinks.

I roll over and blink. Allow myself to breathe in reality instead of water.

Drink me. Eat me.

I want to fall down the rabbit hole. Let myself wander in the nonsense. There's too many words floating around in my head and they take too long to drain out. It's no coincidence that esophagus sounds so similar to sarcophagus. We have lives buried in us. Past moments now buried in a casket, just a stronger cardboard box.

But I still feel like drowning, do you?

Love You More

The worst part was knowing that I loved you more.

Every time you said, "I love you," I was never sure if you knew what love was.

Because for me, loving you was like breathing. I never stopped.

I woke up and it was you.

It was the freckles by your eyes and the funny way you move when you're asleep in my arms.

I didn't have a choice about how I loved you, all I knew is that I couldn't stop.

And at night, I thought of how your skin felt against mine and the speed that your heart beats and I felt less lonely.

It was kissing you in the back of the library and speeding home when we were out past curfew because we just didn't want to leave each other.

You told me once that love isn't a competition.

That's something I have never forgotten.

But, please, explain to me how it is that I won then.

Because, my god, did I love you more.

You loved me, but not as well as I loved you.

Kissing me shouldn't be a task to be finished.

Kissing me is an art.

Kissing me should be some pleasure that you feel blessed by because my heart is on the tip of my tongue and I am giving it to you.

But my lips were met with endless sighs and the desire to be done.

I didn't want to stop.

It was a drug, kissing you.

Sometimes I got lost in the gaps between my lips and yours; I dreamt of staying there forever.

But by the end of it all, I was thinking about how hard you would cry when I was gone.

I wished you had listened to what my lips were saying between our kisses.

You were an ocean to me.

I walked up and down your shores and turned over every
 damn shell.
 I searched and searched for something new, something ex-
 citing, something to keep near to me.
 But you were endless miles of still water and bare sand and
 broken bottles.
 No one wants broken bottles.
 I even tried to make beautiful sunsets for you.
 I gave you shades of pinks and reds and blues and oranges.
 But you decided you liked your gloomy skies.
 I wish I had kept my colors because now my palette is a
 little emptier.
 Not that I mind the fact that I loved you.
 I just have a few less colors to paint with, a little less love to
 give myself now.
 The worst part is that to you, I am just a girl.
 I am no ocean, no piece of art, no queen.
 I am a girl.
 With a name.
 And you happened to be in love with me.
 But your heart is full of broken bottles.

7887 my time



Grey Houses, Grey Hair

-32-

"Can I buy you a beer?"

Kathy turns around, perplexed because no one has offered to buy her a drink in ages.

Surprise momentarily replaces the confused exhaustion in her eyes and suddenly she is five years younger.

"Steve!" She stands up and hugs the man with the familiarity of a friend and only a slight stiffness in her shoulders indicates the time they've been apart.

He sits down next to her, "How've you been Kathy?"

"I've been pretty good."

He takes in her appearance. "You don't look it."

She downs the rest of her vodka soda, "Well at least I didn't get fat."

Steve ignores the slight. "How's Tom?"

"We got divorced."

"Yeah, I heard that."

Kathy looks at him, "Then why'd you ask?"

"I dunno."

For a moment neither one speaks.

"Why are you back in town?" she asks, breaking the silence just seconds before it became too dense.

"My mom's sick."

"I'm sorry." She clears her throat. "What with?"

"Old age. I'm moving her into a home."

"I feel old," Kathy says quietly.

"Come help me move my mom, you'll see what old really looks like," Steve says.

Kathy shakes her head. "I feel like my insides are aging faster than the rest of me. I'm gonna die inside and be a sixty-year-old zombie."

"You think you'll make sixty?"

"You don't?"

"Not if I don't stop smoking."

Kathy smiles. "I missed you."

-6-

"Can I use the grey?"

Steve looks up from the sheet of paper in front of him. There is a small girl with ketchup dried on the side of her mouth and spotted down the front of her shirt. Her eyes are wide and brown.

"When I'm done," he finally says.

She puts her hands on her hips. "But you're not using it."

"But I might."

"Please? I need to color my house."

Steve hesitates. "Why can't you use your own?"

"I only have the eight pack."

"Oh. Okay." He hands it over.

She smiles. "Thanks. I promise to give it back."

She walks away. When she gives the marker back the tip has been squished from too much pressure but then she asks "Do you like to play robbers?" and Steve doesn't care about the marker as much anymore.

-9-

"What are you doing today?" Steve asks Kathy. She's swinging next to him. She purposely measures the pumping of her legs so their swings move at the same time.

"Sleepover with Mary-Kate. Look! We're married."

Steve drags his feet on the ground to mess up the rhythm. "Not anymore. You should skip the sleepover."

"Why?"

"Because Mary-Kate sucks. She had a booger the first time I met her."

"You have boogers all the time."

"So? I'm a boy."

Kathy rolls her eyes. "Whatever. I want to go. Her mom makes popcorn with extra butter."

"I'll give you a whole stick of butter."

"That's disgusting."

Steve grins. "What time's the sleepover?"

"Six I think."

He nods. "Wanna come over til then? I just got a new game and it's a two person."

Kathy smiles too wide. "Yeah okay."

-15-

"Hey, what do you think of John?"

Steve looks at her across the cafeteria table. "I dunno Kath. Why?"

"Lauren said he's gonna ask me to homecoming."

Steve looks surprised. "What are you gonna say?"

Kathy shrugs and takes another bite of her sandwich, "I don't know."

"Do you like him?" Steve asks, casually.

Kathy shakes her head. "Maybe? I don't know." She finishes chewing. "Who are you gonna ask?"

Steve pulls a piece of lettuce off his sandwich, "I hate dances."

"So you're just not going?"

"No." He opens the sandwich and systematically removes the tomatoes.

"Okay. Well I don't care. Sit at home bored if you want. I'm going."

Steve looks up. "I thought you said you weren't sure."

"I changed my mind. I like dances and if John's the only boy who'll take me then I may as well go with him."

-45-

Kathy knocks on a door to an old house that desperately needs to be power washed. An unfamiliar woman opens the door.

"Hello?"

"Oh! Hi," Kathy smiles uncomfortably. "Does Steve Pickett live here? I thought this was his address."

The woman tucks a strand of greying hair behind her ears. "Yeah he does, he's in the shower right now. Can I help you?"

Kathy pulls her jacket tighter around her shoulders. "Oh no, I was just passing through town. Just tell him I stopped by. I'm at the motel on 8th if he wants to give me a call."

"Who should I tell him is here?"

"Oh sorry. Kathy Collins. I'm a friend of his from home."

-15 the next week-

"This couch smells like cigarettes." Kathy says, making a face.

"You've sat on it a hundred times, why you bringing it up now?"

Kathy crosses her legs. "It still bothers me."

"What else is bothering you?"

Kathy uncrosses her legs. "I saw you smoking the other day."

"So what?"

"So I hate smoking."

"I don't."

Kathy makes a face. "No one's gonna want to kiss you if you smell like smoke."

"You don't know that. No one's kissed you and you've never smoked before. Maybe people just don't kiss losers."

Kathy's eyes flare. "I've kissed someone."

Steve's eyes dart to her face. "What? Who?"

"John."

"John Jackson?? The fucker with two first names?"

"Yeah. He took me to homecoming."

"So you'll just kiss any boy who takes you to a dance?"

Kathy moves to the other side of the couch. "No. Why are you being such a dick? I just wanted to know what it was like to kiss someone."

"You could've asked me."

"You've never kissed anyone."

Steve shakes his head. "No I mean I would've kissed you. As like a favor. So you didn't have to go kissing some fuck like John Jackson."

"As a favor?" Kathy asks, her fingers moving rapidly on her leg. Her nerves are firing too quickly and she feels like her teeth might start chattering even though she's not cold.

Steve nods, staring at his shoes. "Yeah. It's not like it's a big deal or anything."

Kathy chews her fingernail. "I don't want to kiss a guy that smells like smoke." She glances at him out of the corner of her eye.

Steve doesn't look up. "I didn't say I wanted to kiss you. I said I'd do you a favor."

-45 (later the same day)-

Steve sits across from Kathy in a small coffee shop with faded art on the walls and a miserable selection of drinks.

"I was surprised you called," Kathy says, taking a sip of her latte.

Steve mirrors her, taking a small sip of his green tea. "Why? You think I don't want to see you?"

"It's been such a long time, maybe you'd forgotten who I was."

Steve rolls his eyes, "Yeah right. Sometimes I feel like your face is burned into every significant memory I have."

Kathy doesn't know what to say so she asks, "Who was the woman? The one who answered the door?"

"Why, you jealous?"

"Jesus Christ." Kathy has known Steve too long for this sort of question to bother her. "No, I'm just curious."

"Her name's Laura. We're not serious."

"She had grey hair."

Steve looks at her. "So do you."

"Yeah, but her wrinkles were worse than mine."

"So what about you, are you seeing anyone?" he asks, rather than defending the attractiveness of his barely-even girlfriend.

She shakes her head. "Not really. There's a guy at work who keeps asking me out but he's got a beer belly."

"Do you always focus so much on appearances?"

"If it's someone I'm considering having sex with."

Steve almost smiles. "Seriously Kath, how have you been?"

She looks down at her hands. "I don't know. I read a lot. I stopped reading for twenty years and now suddenly all I care about is books. I don't know if it's because I'm trying to escape into someone else's headspace or if I just forgot how good books actually are."

"I still don't like reading," Steve says. "But I wouldn't mind escaping every once and a while."

"Why? What's going on?"

He shrugs. "Nothing bad, but nothing good either. I thought by now I'd have something to show for being alive, but I kind of feel like I got on the wrong train and I'm waiting for a stop that isn't on my line."

"Are you sure you haven't been reading? You were never that good at metaphors before."

"I think that was a simile."

Kathy looks up at him. "Why don't you just get off the train?"

"Now you're getting too deep."

"Seriously. Why not?"

He sighs heavily. "I dunno Kath. It's like I've been on it so long that my butt is imprinted into the seat. Or maybe it's on a long bridge and I'd have to jump to get off it and I don't know where I'd land."

"Is this what getting old feels like?"

He shakes his head. "When do they stop calling it getting old and start calling it dying?"

-17-

"Why'd Emily break up with you?" Kathy asks Steve, sitting cross-legged at the foot of his bed.

"Fuck if I know. Apparently her friends told her that they thought I was only dating her because I wanted to get into her pants. Or whatever."

"Is that true?"

Steve leans back against the headboard. "I don't know. I don't think so. I thought I liked her but the more I think about it the more I think she kinda sucked."

Kathy pulls her hair back into a ponytail. "I always thought she was boring."

"What better person to get it out of the way with."

"Get what out of the way?"

Steve looks at her. "You know. Sex."

"Why do you want someone boring?"

He shrugs. "It's already supposed to suck the first time, so do it with someone you already expect to not be very good. Besides, it's harder to get attached to someone with no personality."

"You're awful."

"Yeah, you've said."

"Why don't you want to get attached?"

"Jesus Kath I don't know. What do you care?"

Kathy takes her ponytail out and puts the band back on

her wrist. "I'm just trying to understand the male brain."

"What a pretentious thing to say. You're no better than me."

"What are you talking about?"

He sits up. "You could have done it with like ten different people by now, but you're always so damn picky. They're not smart enough, not nice enough, too fat, or any other problem. You have a list of criteria just like me because you're too scared to just bite the bullet and do it."

"You're scared?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I am too."

"I know." Steve pauses, then speaks again. "We should just do it with each other. Get it over with."

"That's so crass."

"Stop using words like crass, it makes you sound all stuffy."

Kathy rolls her eyes, her fingers drumming on her leg. "Whatever."

"I was being serious."

"I'm not gonna change how I talk for you."

He shakes his head. "No, not about that. About the other thing."

"Us having sex?"

"Yeah. We could do it right now, my mom won't be home for another two hours."

"You're just horny."

He shrugs. "Maybe, but it wouldn't be so bad. Seriously. We trust each other, and we wouldn't spread rumors if one of us sucked. We could give constructive criticism."

Kathy almost laughs. "You don't think it would be weird?"

"No." He hesitates. "Well, maybe. But not bad weird. Just different."

"I can't believe I'm actually thinking about this."

He looks at her, "Isn't part of you just a little bit curious about what it would be like?"

"I guess." She sits up a little straighter, "Do you have...?"

He nods and pats his bedside table. "I stole some from my dad when I was visiting him. Just in case."

"Okay."

"Okay as in you want to do it?"

"Yeah."

He pauses. "You're sure?"

She nods, "Yeah, you?"

"Yeah. Are you nervous?"

"I don't really know how to start."

He laughs and it feels weirdly loud. "It's not gonna work with you sitting at the end of the bed."

She crawls towards him, feeling very conscious of her limbs and how awkward she must look. But then she's sitting next to him and he kisses her immediately because if he waits a second too long he'll lose his nerve.

For a moment it feels awkward and new, but then Kathy realizes that's because her eyes are open which is making Steve's face look weird, so she closes them and moves her mouth with his and everything feels almost normal.

-17 (approximately 22 minutes later)-

The two lay next to each other. For a minute or two Kathy had rested her head on Steve's chest, but the position had felt oddly intimate and she'd shifted away.

"That was interesting," Steve said, breaking the silence and bringing a wave of relief over Kathy who hadn't really known what to say.

"Bad interesting or good interesting?"

Steve rolled onto his side to look at her. "Good for sure. I liked it."

"I thought it was nice. I don't get all the hype about it though."

"I don't think you're supposed to the first time. Did it hurt?"

Kathy also rolls onto her side to face him. "Not as much some people say it's supposed to. Maybe just a bit uncomfortable because it was new."

"How did I do?"

"Fine I think. I don't have any complaints."

"I thought you were good too. I liked the sounds you made."

"That's embarrassing," she says, pulling the blanket up higher over herself.

"Why? I just said I liked it."

"I don't know. It just is."
 They both lay there in silence for another minute.
 "Kath?" Steve asks, something different in his voice.
 "What?"
 He hesitates. "On your thighs."
 She stiffens slightly. "What about it?"
 "Why?"
 "I don't know. I tried it once and I liked it."
 His breath comes out in heavy sigh. "I wish you would stop."
 "I'll try."

-47-

Steve steps out onto the terrace. "I'm surprised you came." He walks over and stands, leaning against the railing.
 "You know I'd never miss an open bar." She turns and smiles at him. "Congratulations by the way. I can't believe you finally got married."

"I can't believe you're smoking."
 She puts the cigarette out on the railing. "I have for years. I just hide it well."
 "You gave me so much shit for it."
 "Everyone's a little hypocritical."
 He pauses and looks at her. "You seem unhappy."
 "I'm just drunk."
 "What do you think of Laura?"
 "What do you care? You already married her."
 "I care about your opinion."
 Kathy shrugs. "I don't know her. You've lost weight so she must cook healthier food than you did."
 "She's a vegetarian."
 "Jesus."
 He smiles then shakes his head. "Do you think I got married because I'm afraid of dying alone?"
 "Fuck Steve how would I know? I haven't talked to you in two years. Do you think that?"
 "Not really. It just sounds like something I would do."
 "At least you're self aware."
 "I missed you."
 "You always say that."

"It's always true."
 She takes out another cigarette and lights it. "Do you think our younger selves would like who we are now?"
 "Are you kidding? Young Kathy hated smoking. You're living her worst nightmare."
 "I think she'd wonder how I managed to waste so much of her time."
 "It's not her time. It's yours. You can do what you damn well please with it."
 She smiles sadly. "What about you? What does young Steve think of you?"
 "He's furious. He always wanted a hot wife and I just married a woman seven years older than me with saggy breasts."
 "You're awful."
 "I can't believe you've dealt with me this long."
 She shrugs. "I guess it's a habit now."
 "Thanks for being here tonight."
 "Thanks for the open bar."

-7-

"My mom said I can't have boys at my birthday party."
 They're sitting on top of the jungle gym, waiting for recess to end because it's too hot to run around.
 "Who are you gonna invite?" Steve asks, swinging his legs.
 "No one. I told her you're my best friend and if you can't be there I don't want the stupid party anyways."
 "That's dumb. You should invite every girl in the class and get a ton of cool presents and then I'll come over after and we'll play with them."
 "I didn't want you to feel bad."
 "I already know I'm your best friend. That's what matters. When we're 100 you'll still talk to me, and that's more important."
 "You think we'll live to be 100?"
 "Do you?"
 "Yeah. But I don't want to think about getting old."
 He shakes his head. "Me either. Let's play concentration."

kept original



Casual Encounters

I.

Do you have a fun fetish or do you love balls? (Schaumburg)
 I fk like I have something to prove (Oak Forest)
 Are you willing to be friends with or close to a bed wetter? (Chicago)
 I would love to lick and suck on those pretty nipples (West Burbs)
 I wear diapers. Seeking understanding/accepting friend (Chicago)

"Jesus Christ, what are you clicking on that one for?"
 "Don't you think this one is most age appropriate?" I ask.
 "You're unbelievable. I'm done."

"No, I'm sorry. Come on. There has to be a very specific miscellaneous romantic encounter for a boring, middle-aged married couple such as ourselves." I place a dry kiss on the thin skin that now stretches across her jagged cheeks like cellophane. Twenty years ago we were horny college kids, ravenous and self-destructive, sucking all the collagen out of each other's lips. Elastic. We are all bones now, shards of former selves shoved in paper sacks. I'm just a sagging body plagued by high cholesterol. Gout. Absolutely catastrophic bowel movements. Oh fuck. Only old people say "bowel movements," the proper medical terminology used when an elderly patient passes—with great difficulty—the ossified remnants of dry bran muffins and decades of constipation-causing analgesics. I am certain the decrepit fossilize everything they touch. Shit, skin, foreskin. Other old people. I swallow hard. Kara and I remind each other that fucking is still fun. We have another twenty years until we have to call it "genital synergy."

She looks over at me and sips from a mug of Metamucil.
 "I'm not ready to be boring just yet."

Guy with dog seeks lady with dog (West Burbs)
Were you locked up in Cook County jail? (Chicago)
Planet Fitness (Kankakee)
LETS HAVE PREGNANCY-RISK SEX (St. Charles)
Adult baby boy looking for my mommy (Chicago)

I hesitate over the hyperlink, watching the tiny white arrow transform into a pointed index finger.
 “Don’t,” Kara says, slowly massaging the thick knots in her temples.
 “I have to know.”
 “Don’t.”
 “Fine.”
 We squint in synchronization at the 10 point font.
 “What the hell is a BBW? Scroll down a little.”

We are both married but also Lonely (North Side)

“This is the one.” Kara pulls the laptop onto her thighs, placing the lukewarm mug of liquid fiber onto my lap. I take a sip, trace my ring finger around the ceramic rim, and examine her naked face, the subtle creases in her skin illuminated by the gentle glow of miscellaneous romance. “I don’t know,” I say softly, almost inaudibly, “I’m still slightly intrigued by the guy who “fks” like he has something to prove.”

A citation: Chicago Miscellaneous Romance - Craigslist,
chicago.craigslist.org/search/msr

Garden Walk

I came when no one was home.
The branches outside the alley gate stooped low to brush
my face
The spiral garden stood still
Sage growing dry on the tip
Yet wet with aroma
I tentatively called out hello like I used to
The house has changed a bit in a nice, subtle way

I remembered when we sat there/on top of that table
Playing music/as it started to rain
Tucked under the sun umbrella

I remembered peaceful breakfasts and festive dinners and
kept walking

Around to your garden
Where a few late summer flowers danced
Curved and elegant
Bursting up despite shade and drought. Missing you
Your touch and gaze

Principle pulled me to turn back/to ring though no lights
were on
Now noticing a few fresh paint strokes/on the siding and
trim
Suddenly drawn
Into the quiet beauty/of the aged paint behind

The trees saw me off/hugged me goodbye
It always feels too soon.
Yew and elm/gingko and oak
The birch on the corner behind the stones
They've seen it all
Or most of it/they know
The love that flowed through the halls/beneath their
boughs/flows somewhere still

But early autumn has come
I breathe its dry air
In the same way that my eyes are graced
By a dry yet fluid vibrancy/moving beyond all borders
The colors of a straw flower/you once brought home

Bring Me That Horizon



R.I.P.

A memorial for all the forgotten bobby pins
Broken hair elastics
And metal clips
Lost forever
Replaced with messy buns
And dropped into mud
With the sweat of basements and shitty music.

Buenos dias



Internal Scream



Tuna Noodle Casserole

Flour, eggs, butter, peas...Flour, eggs, butter, peas... What in the world am I forgetting? I smile and nod politely to Mrs. Wilson as she walks by rolling her cart piled high with rice, potatoes, apples, bananas, and cans of tuna. Oh yes...tuna. Flour, eggs, butter, peas, and tuna. I stop, smile, and nod at Mrs. Harrison as she struts down the aisle showing off her new perfectly coordinating swing skirt, hat, and gloves...probably Dior. Lately it seems as if my entire life is smiles and nods.

Flour, eggs, butter, peas, tuna...That's everything for tuna noodle casserole, right? Of course, I should know; I've been making it every single Tuesday since I married Travis four years ago. One Tuesday, I tried making stewed tomatoes because I was just so darn sick of making and eating tuna noodle casserole every single week. I thought Travis was going to have a coronary...a little part of me wishes he did have a coronary. Then I could have at least eaten my stewed tomatoes in peace. I smile and exchange pleasantries with Mrs. Hildegard Gustufson. Such a sweet old lady—widowed—free to cook what she wants when she wants.

I can hardly remember the last time Travis and I exchanged pleasantries. "The tuna seems a bit bland this week." Flour, eggs, butter, peas, tuna. "I'm sorry dear, it'll be better next week." Flour, eggs, butter, peas, tuna. "The tuna is awfully salty today." Flour, eggs, butter, peas, tuna. "Sorry, I'll make it better next week." Flour, eggs, butter, peas, tuna. "You never cook the pasta right. This is hardly pasta. It's mush! How hard is it to make al dente pasta?" Flour, eggs, butter, peas, tuna... arsenic.

Heat



Saturday Confessions

“There was a knock on the door and of course I just yelled that it was open at first but when the knock continued I had no choice but to get up and answer!”

“And he was just... there?”

“YES!”

“Ugh, that’s so romantic...”

“I mean I thought so...haha, I know we had a rough end to last year, but I’ve never been more sure that I will be spending the rest of my life with this boy.”

“Man.”

“Well, yeah, but when you’ve known someone since you shared a school bus you have the right to still call him a boy.”

“Is *that* how it works?...”

“Shut up. Where’s the waiter?”

“We just sat down, give him a chance to see us at least!”

“I’m a changed woman. The *GIANT* rock on my finger makes me feel... entitled. Blame the boy!”

“Like this is new...”

“What?”

“I’m kidding, relax! Ha, so what’s the next step?”

“A date, I guess? I don’t know, really.”

“Sounds like you’re very prepared...”

“Not all of us have a scrapbook of our entire ceremony planned since fifth grade...”

“You know I like planning ahead!”

“You like knowing, not planning. Which is why you’re hearing this at breakfast the day after while most newly engaged women would be having breakfast in bed. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Thaaaaank you.”

“Yeah, yeah...hmm. I guess I’ll have my usual...”

“So. Haveyouguyshadsexyetorareyoustillonthathighschool-bullshit?”

“WELL, good thing the waiter has yet to bring me water because it would’ve just flown out of my mouth anyways!”

“What?! Don’t pretend you didn’t expect me to ask.”

“I just figured when I’d meet up with my old best friend

the first twenty minutes would be about college not what my preferred condom of choice is."

"Looks like we had two completely different college experiences."

"Just forgot what the old Clarissa was like!"

"Welcome home! But seriously, now that we're past that, let's stop pretending you're a prude and answer my question."

"Well, against the better judgement of the seventy-year-old woman behind—haha, she's just kidding, ma'am!!—yes."

"Yes, you and your boyman get jiggy in the dorm room or yes, you're excited the waiter is bringing over the cocktail menu?"

"Both—hi, yeah I'll just have a water with lemon for now."

"Same, thanks."

"Thank you!—Yes, we have sex. We're smart consenting adults."

"You know I have zero judgement."

"I know, I know. Speaking of which, how's...the..."

"Pregnancy?..."

"That, yeah."

"I can eat whatever I want and no longer feel bad."

"Did you ever feel bad?—Thank you, umm, can I have the California Skillet? Scrambled. Wheat toast. Thanks!"

"I'll do the strawberry crepes. Nah, that'll be good."

"And even though you no longer, quote, feel bad, you still eat less than me."

"Oh, shut up, you look great."

"Oh, I know. Don't worry. But yeah, anyways. Baby. Human growing inside of you. Still a skinny bitch. How's all that?"

"Good. Yea, I mean there's nothing we can do so we're here."

"I mean... like are you keeping it or..."

"Yeah, I don't think I could give it up for adoption."

"Yeah, of course. And the parents?"

"Claudia is surprisingly okay. Dad too!"

"Wow, that's great! Crazy a month ago you were infertile and now..."

"Yeah, I guess God decided I was having too much fun testing biology."

"Surprised God waited as long as he did, ha."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm just kidding!"

"Dude, seriously, what are you kidding about?"

"Just—yeah, I could use a little more, thanks."

"No, I'm good—continue."

"It's nothing, just, I don't know it's just...Ironic?"

"My life is ironic?"

"No, look it's not even funny."

"Margaret."

"Okay. It's just been weird to me...Your beliefs."

"Catholicism?"

"Not, *Catholicism*. Just which parts of it you choose to follow..."

"Please. I beg you to go on."

"Clarissa, please. You've always preached about how you can't use birth control because of your religion, but continue to have sex. But then you're not allowed to get an abortion or take the morning after pill. I don't care what you choose to do with your life, you just can't possibly tell me you're surprised by the outcome. I'm sorry. I didn't mean for all that to come out."

"No. It's fine. This has been obviously just eating away at you for years!"

"Clarissa, please, I'm sorry. Can we have a nice breakfast?"

"Nah, now I'm not in the mood. I like this game a little more than playing with my silverware."

"People are staring."

"Sure you want such a hypocrite standing by you at the altar?"

"I wasn't gonna ask...You weren't going to be a bridesmaid."

"Oh, please! Don't feel bad for me. I am the one in the wrong for assuming."

"We haven't talked almost at all throughout college and you know it."

"I'm sorry I wasn't good enough to leave this town like you."

"Well, now you never will."

"I love Luke."

"You love Luke because he knocked you up and your

church won't let you say no to the inevitable proposal that'll come before your stomach blows up."

"Oh, good. So we'll both be in shitty marriages."

"Excuse me—no we're fine!—Excuse me?"

"Oh, please, like Jared is the man, sorry, boy, of your dreams. You can't leave the house without him prying. Don't act like I don't remember the biggest part of your fighting last year was because he was disgusted by the idea of you smoking pot."

"That's in our past. I can do what I want and he knows it. It's not even a big deal. It's stupid and college."

"It is stupid, you're right."

"Can we move on, and enjoy breakfast?"

"Sorry, my hypocritical Catholic values got the best of me there—yes this looks perfect, thank you."

"No. I think we're fine—Clarissa, really, you asked. I'm entitled to my own opinions. Don't pretend like you didn't know things would be different now. I did a really good job in November keeping off Facebook, while you..."

"I what?"

"Are you kidding me? 'Chrissy Teigen needs to keep her mouth shut!' Seriously, you acted like a child, like every other person I gladly deleted so I wouldn't be reminded the entirety of our childhood was being raised by ignorance."

"You loved your upbringing."

"I hated my upbringing! You didn't realize it because you were too busy spending every Saturday morning at confession spilling your plans for the weekend!"

"Isn't slut shaming something your kind advocates against?"

"You're causing a scene."

"I'M, AR—no, just the check please—are you kidding me? I'm causing the scene?"

"YES! I went against everything I believe in to continue this friendship, and you're yelling in a bistro!"

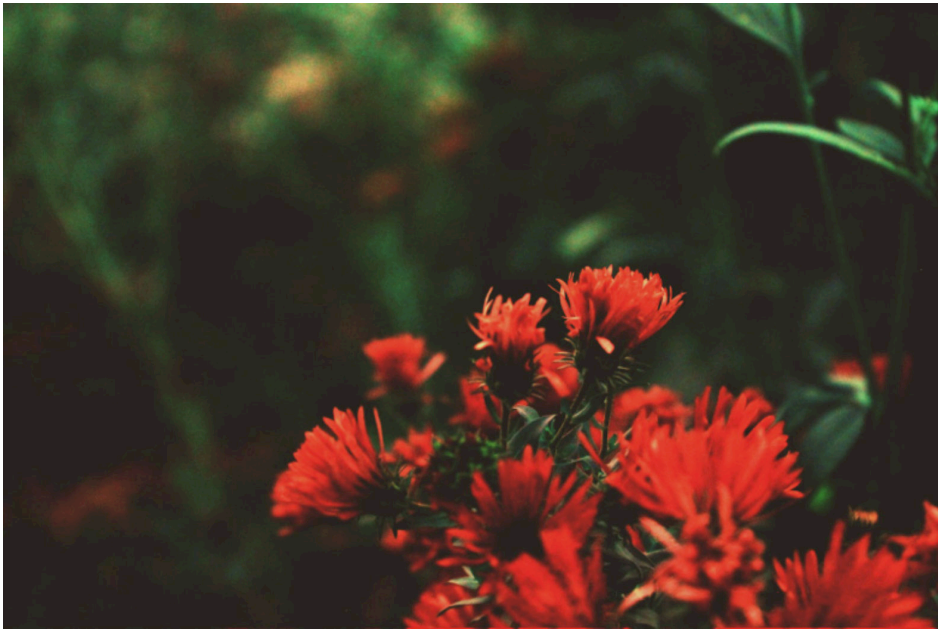
"I'm not—thank you—congratulations, Margaret. I hope you have a good life."

"Don't worry, I'LL get the tip."

make me feel

you (don't want) [want] {don't want} me
 i (love) [like] {can't love} you
 we (don't speak) [move slowly] {can't be} with each other
 i am an alien, banished and gossiped about,
 you are (everything i want) [doing everything right] {my high
 school fantasy}
 but, i am (nothing) [a child] {just another girl} to you
 the way you (toy with) [talk to] {touch} me
 {the way your hand wraps around my waist}
 (stay away from each other)
 [you are too far from me]
 (the attraction is too strong)
 {your arms around me, body behind me}
 [you're so real with me]
 {your passion is unmatched}
 [too real for me]
 {too fake with me}
 (too scary)
 but ([{you make me feel}]) against my will.

decadence in red



Insomnia

Hello, is anyone awake?
I ponder why I can't sleep.
Night after night
I overthink my existence in life.

I ponder why I can't sleep.
I toss and turn at 3 A.M.
I overthink my existence in life.
The sleeping pills and painkillers are no use.

I toss and turn at 3 A.M.
Is it academics, "friends", or my future?
The sleeping pills and painkillers are no use.
The overwhelming stress is torturing me.

Is it academics, "friends", or my future?
Night after night
The overwhelming stress is torturing me.
Hello, is anyone awake?

Echoes



I grew up too

Rock Paper Scissors i remember playing four square in third grade your hands are rougher now Shoot i miss my brothers i wonder if they remember me often i remember them now small and playing video games i remember them a little taller and drinking gatorade *how many hours has it been?* i remember my mom declaring sadness and my dad driving away it's not worth it *tell that to my baby brother* i missed your voice the day dad said he'd take me with and i waited for hours sitting on the big rock next to our mailbox with my backpack he never came i went back inside and you were angry i was alone out there i knew you loved me then he didn't mean it it didn't stop me from wanting to leave tic-tac-toe is a lot like connect four i wish i was younger i rode my bike every single day of my 12th summer your hair keeps turning gray so you keep dying it you wish you were younger too i wrote you a song i cut my bangs clean off when i was 6 and you didn't cry when i shaved my head at 20 i told you i'm in love with a woman you said okay you never stopped to say i should be sorry i knew you loved me then

Summer Silence

The chirping
intertwined with the melodic whispers
called to them, in waves
of tonal fractions,
broken up by hushed hiccups
and sallow rhythms, weighed down
with the heat of morning
and the color of
nothing.

billowing boy red



Lake Michigan Snow



The Town of Prophecy and Fools

Sir Dunstan of Kettleby was irritated. No. Not just irritated. Furious. SEETHING. If he had been a tea kettle, steam would've been whistling out of his ears at an unstoppable pace. He was trapped in a town of idiots.

Dunstan blamed his misfortunes on his woebegone companion Maris. She had dragged him from the castle, to accompany her to the dwarven city of Trost. She was seeking an ancient ore called Amorite that held numerous magical properties, but it was incredibly rare; only the dwarves might possess the oft-sought after rock.

Dunstan had only agreed because he had nothing better to do at the castle anyway. And wherever Maris—the kingdom's most brilliant blacksmith—went, something interesting was bound to happen. And not that he cared, but one should never travel alone, regardless of how skilled Maris was at weaponcraft. The goblins had become a little more active in the Silver Bluffs, now that the Goblin Warg had elected a new Goblin King, Uruk Dragonbane. Traveling was far more perilous than it had once been.

Aside from a few hasty run-ins with a couple cave trolls and a very persistent merchant of toadstools, the journey had started without a hitch. Well, aside from Maris's relentless singing. She wasn't bad at it; in fact, she had a rather lovely voice. A nice alto timbre, with an appropriate amount of vibrato at the ends of her notes, it was the kind of sound that just touched Dunstan in his rather critical heart—well, regardless she sang ALL the time. At breakfast, while they were on horseback, before bed. He even heard the echoes of her singing whenever she bathed in rivers or streams. Small wonder that the cave trolls and that bloody nuisance of a merchant had run into them. Other than that, she was a perfectly suitable traveling companion.

Or at least, Dunstan had thought all of this UNTIL Maris had led them in the wrong direction, under the guidance of an outdated map. They had ended up on the opposite side

of the Copper Hills, with the Great River Björn separating them. It was an immense river and would take days to get to its shallower regions. As the evening had fallen, they soon found themselves standing before a signpost, indicating a town by the name of Willow resting about a mile away from the Great River.

"Well this seems promising," Maris had said, clearly eager for a warm bath and soft bed. Sweet, sweet Maris. How wrong she had been.

"Prophecies, 50% off, ladies and gentlemen. You too could become the next great hero of our generation!"

"Wise Men auditions, calling all white-bearded, cloaked old codgers. Staffs add bonus points to your overall score. Don't you want to be our next great leader's closest advisor?"

Dunstan was rubbing his eyes in astonishment. "Ruddy hell, Maris, what hellish place have you dragged us into this time?"

The town of Willow had not just been any old village. Oh no, it was nicknamed the Town of Prophecy for a reason; it was filled to the brim with cads, rogues, and tools alike all looking for a breezy prophecy or two, given happily—when paid for handsomely—by the town charlatans that managed the whole enterprise.

"And you, my good lad," spat a greasy peddler at some buck-toothed farm boy, "will become a great dragon rider. Wait until the eighth of September on the night of the Dragon Moon till you make your mark."

"Ohh fank 'ooo very much!" the grubby boy cried, tears seeping out of his trusting eyes. The peddler handed him a stained, ratty parchment wrapped with twine and patted him on the head, a self-satisfied grin on his face.

Dunstan shook his head at the transaction, disgusted. All along the lanes in the village, similar stalls were set up. Sellers were hawking parchment prophecies, crystal ball readings, selling fake dragon eggs, and random other assortments of ancient gemstones and rings that were sure to grant you good fortune; some peddlers even promised that their enchanted artifacts would lead to the discovery of one's true royal lineage, tracing you back to a lost line of kings.

Oh, to be so lucky, Dunstan thought, casting a dark look

at a long line leading into a violently purple tent, where one could have their birthmarks checked and rated on their chance of destiny.

Dunstan was roused out of his cynical mutterings by a mouse-faced peddler, who was squeaking in his face. "M'lord, we would be so honored if you was to donate to the Bucket of Great Valor. On this eve, it is prophesied that our Great and Powerful Lord of Light, Roth, will determine the Chosen One by bestowing a golden sword upon the deserving hero."

Dunstan snorted. "How can my money sway the outcome of a prophecy? Isn't that supposed to happen regardless of what one does?"

The mousy peddler tittered nervously. "Oh oh, well he hasn't followed through with the other dozen prophesied events, so we're thinking a little gold might tempt him tonight."

"What kind of bloody prophecies are these if they don't even come true?!" Dunstan yelled at the whimpering peddler.

"Oh stop bullying the poor mouseman, he just wants a few coins," Maris said, dragging Dunstan away from the peddlers. They bumped into a few stray "wizards", knocking off more than a few colorful hats while Dunstan continued to mutter darkly under his breath.

"Stop being such a grumpus," Maris chided, whacking Dunstan's armored shoulder, which she immediately regretted. "Oh dammit, look what you made me do," she cried, holding her hand.

"But don't you see, they're making all these other idiots buy into their false schemes," he replied, ignoring her bruised appendages. "I can't abide it, I just cannot!"

Despite her pained expression, Maris nodded in agreement. In their wandering, they'd arrived in the town square. On a raised dais, one of the mouse warriors was gesturing to a large banner painted with the face of a bald elf, artistically depicted with evil red eyes and a sneering, sadistic expression.

"Wait," Dunstan said, bewildered, "we know him, don't we, Maris?"

"The bald elf? Yes, he invited us over for dinner once when we rescued that goblin friend of his from a rogue bull-

grim. Lovely chap, great cooking.”

Dunstan listened to the remarks of the squeaking mouse orator, accusing this Lord Elak Mörk of a fair number of murders, black sorcery, and a general nasty presence; accordingly, this placed him on the list of The Most Evil.

“They’re dragging his name through the mud just because he looks like a bad guy?” Dunstan cried, outraged. “That’s it, I’m righting this wrong in my own fashion.”

“No, Dunstan, stop!” Maris said, trying to futilely grasp at him as he jumped onto the wooden dais and said, “Sorry for this,” before shoving the mouseman off the stage. The crowd cried in anger, a few shaking their tiny fists at his rude entrance.

“Would you all just shut up?” Dunstan yelled, with a vicious look.

“We will not be silenced by a friend of our foe!”

“Lord Elak Mörk? He’s just some bald elf with a couple orcs hanging around his tower. That doesn’t make him an evil Dark Lord.”

“But sir knight,” squeaked one of the mouse warriors, “it has been prophesied that he will lead a great army against our noble kingdoms.”

“Oh pish, enough with your bloody prophecies,” Dunstan retorted as he rolled his eyes for perhaps the hundredth time. “Okay, so maybe his name literally translates to evil darkness in High Elvish, but to tell you the truth, fellas, I don’t think that’s even his real name. It’s insanely obvious that someone is trying to paint him as a wicked sorcerer coming to steal all of your gold and land. I’m almost certain that his real name is Paul. He makes a really fine beef stew.”

There were a couple of disbelieving snorts and mutterings in the crowd, to which Dunstan responded with a loud slap onto the wooden podium.

“Will you all just lighten up, for one thrice-damned second? He’s merely an innocent sorcerer who likes to pal around with a few goblins now and again. Is there anything wrong with that?”

The members of the crowd scruffed their feet in the dust, filling the air with muttered phrases of “No, I guess not”, “Whatever”, “Maybe he’ll help me with my curse problem”, “Do you think he knows how to cure dragon pox?” and

one random yelling of “he turned my brother into a chicken!” Dunstan answered that last remark with a glare, silencing the rabble rouser.

Dunstan was about to jump off of the raised dais, satisfied with his soapboxing, when one of the wizened “wise wizard” characters pointed a crooked finger to a spot just over Dunstan’s head and shouted hoarsely, “Look!”

Dunstan thought in his head, *Oh here we go again*, and looked up to the sky, beholding a glittering, golden sword encrusted with rubies, sapphires, bloodstones, and emeralds descending into his open hands.

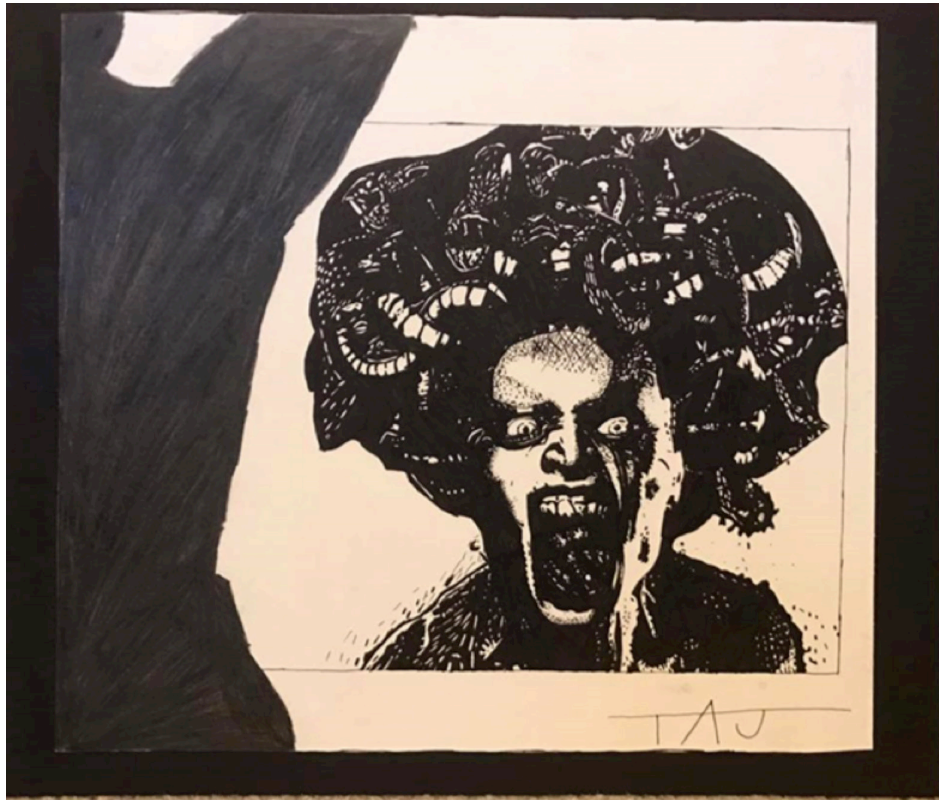
“What the—?”

“It’s him!” screamed the crowd, roused back into a hyperventilating mania. “It’s you, Sir Dunstan, you’re the Chosen One! Destined to lead our kingdoms into eternal glory and salvation!”

All of the townspeople and adventurers bowed before the wooden dais, chanting Sir Dunstan’s name in terrifying unison, except for Maris, who was laughing herself silly near the magical items stand.

Wonderful, Dunstan thought grumpily. *Now I’m a cult leader. Why didn’t I just stay at the bloody castle?*

The Monster Inside of Me



Anti-Aubade: Mourning Love Song

Love will always be best friends with Pain
 their framed picture sits on my living room bookshelf
 where I keep all of my other sentimental bullshit
 you didn't leave me in the morning
 you decided to drunk text me at 2 a.m.
 that you just weren't *feeling it anymore*
 but I was feeling it all and it couldn't be contained in the frame
 any longer
 so I emptied a shelf

emptied myself, a self
 a selfless shell, a shell of a self
 you were so damn selfish

plague of my mind
 the bookshelf remains scattered with broken glass
 and I sleep through every morning just to mourn in the
 evening

The Pitch



Stormy Ruminations

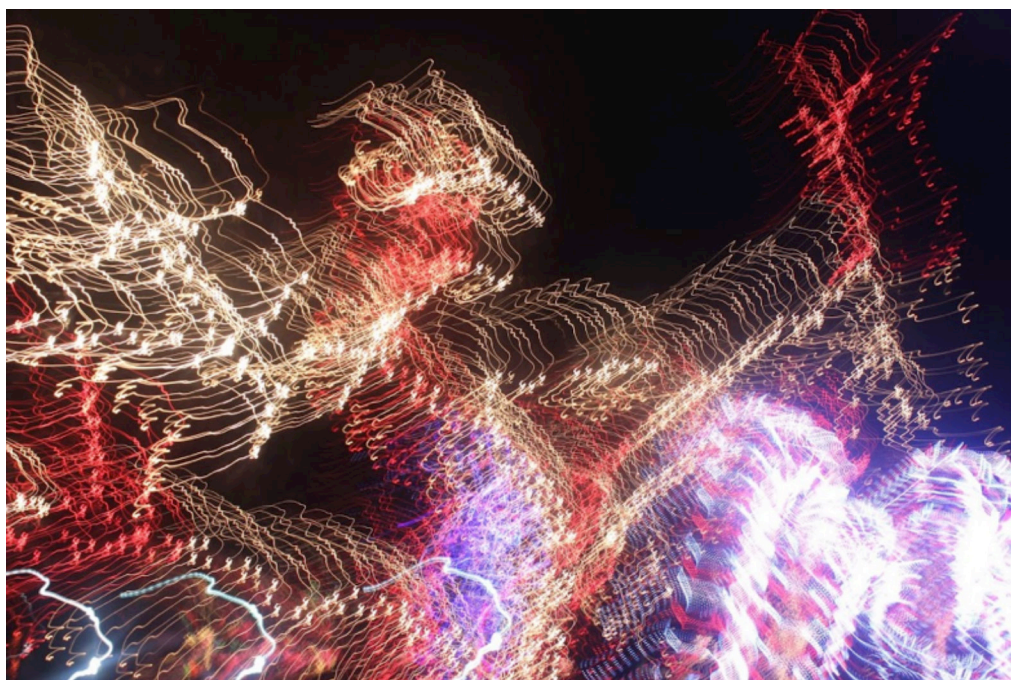
A flash of silence
 Before the clash of a thousand cymbals
 And sobbing mortals
 Tore the heavens asunder
 Their anxieties tore at
 The roots, which relinquished
 All claim to that intangible
 Darkness

The Goblin of the Night Sky
 Grinned in that peevish manner
 Croaking his late night vendettas
 Into that
 Painful slumber we
 All know and
 Wander
 wondering
 aimlessly
 Too well
 Still,
 What agony have we ever known
 Yet we still weep
 Under a cackling heaven
 Do we seek eternal pleasure
 And still pulsate
 In drained gutters
 Full to the brim with our paper-thin brothers

I think we all crave warmth
 Unwanted though it may seem
 We are only marginally surprised by
 Our own bitters

And indeed
 This rumination will always begin

It's hard to be a bright light in a dim world



Curtains

“So,” the most famous artist in the city said, lying on her couch. One hand was crooked under her knife-like cheekbone while the other cradled a slim glass of mimosa. “You’ve come to learn all my secrets.”

Joaquin stared at her. It was hard not to. She made quite the image, a fur jacket dripping off her shoulders and silvery hair fluttering in the slight breeze from the open floor-to-ceiling windows of the loft. He had arrived five minutes before and had been offered a spot across the coffee table and also a mimosa. He had accepted one and not the other. Joaquin’s phone, open to a voice memo app his boss had told him to download, sat on the table between them, listening attentively.

He swallowed. “I—”

“Wait.” The artist, Anne Marie-Hewitz, held up a single slim finger, the red painted nail hovering in the air like a blood spatter. She closed her eyes very slowly and then snapped them open again. They were gray, and frightening. “Before you say something stupid, just let me sit here and enjoy it.”

Joaquin had no idea how to respond to that, so he didn’t. The artist held herself in perfect stillness, studying him.

“You’re very handsome, in an ugly way.”

“T-thank you.”

“Don’t speak. Okay. Interview Boy, here’s how this is going to go.” Anne took a long sip of her mimosa, still looking at him over the shining rim of the glass flute. When she finished, she said, “because I think I might throw myself off my balcony if I have to endure another soul-crushing interview, we’re going to engage in a little thought experiment.”

Joaquin felt as if he was canoeing down a river but had forgotten his paddles and also the canoe. There was no time to respond before she was on him again:

“You’re going to ask me just three questions, because three knives in my sanity are all I can give you right now. But one of them, just one, at least one, has to be a question none of your clones have asked me before. I want to hear some—

thing original come out of your mouth.”

At this point Joaquin was wondering what kind of snake pit he had wandered into. The only reason he was here at all was because his boss at the magazine had run out of the office that morning, struck with some sort of family emergency. Everybody else had been out on other projects, so it fell to Joaquin to handle the interview. It wasn't like he had a choice; Anne Marie-Hewitz wasn't exactly somebody who rescheduled. And now he was deathly aware of the spots forming in the armpits of his polo, of the nicks on his phone case, of how he hadn't had time to shave that morning and that Anne's eyes were like weapons, raking over his skin, prying every imperfection from him, discovering every detail of his soul and finding them all wanting.

“Sorry,” Joaquin managed. “But I don't understand. What is it you want?”

Was that the hint of a smile on Anne's lips? “To be surprised, Interview Boy. You might remember I mentioned a thought experiment. I want you to really consider what comes out of your mouth before you fling it like monkey shit at me. So: if you don't manage to ask me something original, I get to kill you.”

Anne Marie-Hewitz was sitting up by this point, and she leaned forward like a viper. Her lips had been painted the same shade as her nails, a red slash across her face, a disapproving line that dared Joaquin to cross it.

He hesitated.

“W-what if I win?”

“Hm.” Marie-Hewitz sat back on the couch. “Then I suppose you get a good story. Also, ten thousand dollars. You can decide for yourself if that's part of the thought experiment. Now, enough foreplay. Three questions. Death or riches. Do you accept?”

The smallest thrill of excitement sprinted down Joaquin's neck. He tried to summon the feeling that had prompted him to accept the non-optional interview job.

Leaning forward, he pressed the record button on his phone.

“Okay,” Joaquin said, clearing his throat, trying to remember what his professors had said about speaking at a certain word per minute rate, not that anyone was going to

hear the audio of this conversation anyway.

“Okay,” he said again. What could he ask this woman that nobody had asked before? “What's your favorite memory?”

“My grandmother, striking my stepfather across the face with a wooden spoon when he cheated on her daughter. It's my favorite memory because I'm the one who saw him cheating and I'm the one who told my grandmother because I knew she would do something about it and it worked...as I have oft repeated. That is strike one, Interview Boy.”

Joaquin felt a sudden surge of bravery, brought on by the craziness of their theoretical situation and the possible realness of the money this woman had offered.

“My name is Joaquin, not Interview Boy.”

An eyebrow climbed up the artist's forehead. “Okay. Joaquin. Ask me another question.”

The way she said it felt like a dare.

This time, Joaquin took more time to think. Who was this woman? A celebrity, sure, someone who had risen to fame at the end of the last century and had hovered there ever since. But Joaquin hadn't had time to prepare for this and wasn't a huge art person and hadn't read a lot of interviews with Anne Marie-Hewitz. But he could imagine what the standard fare might be. Looking around the loft, Joaquin could almost see the corpses of past interviewers littered around, torn apart by Marie-Hewitz's deadly eyes and scathing red mouth.

“Okay, so we got—we got your favorite memory.”

“Indeed.”

“So...you've put me in a hypothetically, potentially violent situation. Something you treasure was an act of violence, and you also obviously treasure your art. Is your art connected to violence?”

“Trying to dissect my muse.” Anne clacked her fingernails on the coffee table, then stood and whisked her mimosa glass away. “Clever. If you must know, my art is neither violence nor an escape from it. I create because I believe it is the only possible purpose a human being can have: to add something to this world. That is the only way to overcome the barbarism that is existence, the only way to rise above spying on your stepfather fucking a stranger and tattling to your grandmother because you are just a child and woefully unprepared to deal with such things. It is the one solution to

overcoming the hardening of your heart that must happen when one's family is torn apart. I also believe that that belief is a product of my privilege and status in this world, standing upon the shoulders and industry of billions of others, yet I continue to believe it nonetheless. Clever, Joaquin. But cleverness is not enough. The world has known about my philosophy since 1993 and you, Joaquin, are down to your last question and very close to death."

Blood rushed to Joaquin's face and ears. It felt like the two of them had stepped into a strange other world, one of elegant coffee tables and billowing window curtains and ferocious ageless women who preyed on underprepared interns. Joaquin calculated how much of his student loans ten thousand dollars would pay off. Was it even real? Anne Marie-Hewitz had been swimming in money for decades. Surely she had ten thousand dollars to throw away just to entertain herself by torturing the creature dragged into her lair.

Suddenly, Joaquin felt a swell of frustration and anger in his chest. He hadn't asked for this. Who was this woman to be so rude to him, just because she was famous and skilled? He was over Anne Marie-Hewitz. He was over her red lipstick and her red nail polish, her mimosas, her silver hair, her biting words, her elegance, all of it. He opened his mouth.

And from within the vase beside her couch table Anne Marie-Hewitz pulled out a gun.

She did it calmly, the way someone might take a wallet from his or her pocket, and set it on the table beside his phone.

"What is that?"

"Why, it's a gun. A pistol, I think. I'm not sure of the make because I am not fond of guns, but it is most certainly a deadly weapon. Did you forget about our deal? Three questions, Joaquin. You've used up two. I am simply preparing."

"I thought you said this was all hypothetical. A thought experiment."

"Please, be calm," Anne said, gently cocking the hammer of the pistol back. "You're quite safe. But, Joaquin, may I confess a secret to you? I'm *bored*. I am bored to death of this life and of everyone in it. Talk talk talk talk talk, it never stops! This incessant banality is drilling into my skull and it's very nearly made its way through into my brain and killed me."

"So, allow me to propose a deal. You have one question left. I promised you ten thousand dollars if you asked me something I've never been asked before. If you accept my deal, I'll triple it and I'll triple it again. I really don't care."

"But if I accept," Joaquin guessed, "you get to kill me. For real."

"A bullet traveling through a head. A person falling dead at my feet. *That's real. That's inescapable.*"

"You're insane."

"And you're poor. Your phone case has the logo of an ivy league school, Joaquin, and you're young. I'm quite positive you have debt. Or greed. Or some other hole to dig yourself out of or into."

"You wouldn't kill me. You're lying."

Anne picked up the gun and fired a bullet over Joaquin's head.

The sound was incredibly loud. Joaquin keeled over on the couch, clutching his ears, his head full of buzzing insects and the reverberating awareness that he was holding hands with Death. When he peeled himself off the cushion, Anne was staring at the weapon in awe, her eyes wide.

She said, "wow." And then, looking at Joaquin, "I suppose I don't know if I am capable of firing a bullet into your body. But I'm capable of firing one very near it. It won't be very hard to aim a foot to the left. *One question*, Joaquin. Death or riches. No in-between, no drudgery, no boredom. The edge between heaven and hell. You can't refuse it. I can see it. We're more alike than I suspected."

Joaquin took a shuddering breath. He wanted to argue with Anne, but when he reached for a protest, he found no breath in his throat, nothing in his arsenal. The money pulled at him in a way he could very nearly physically feel. He could feel himself slipping and made no move to stop it.

"Fine." Trembling, Joaquin ran a hand through his hair. "Fine. I'll do it."

The red slash across Anne's face stretched into a smile, revealing her teeth for the first time, pearl white, standing rank and file. They seemed like the perfect things for tearing meat apart.

The gun came to rest on the table and Anne sat back, folding her hands on her thigh.

Joaquin stood up suddenly. He began pacing around his chair, digging through his thoughts. He couldn't take his eyes off those curtains, fluttering with an unseen breeze. A long moment passed. And then another, and another. He turned over what she had said, all the obvious complexes going on in her head that she couldn't see or didn't care about. Maybe he was the same way to her. Maybe they were both nuts. They were definitely both nuts.

"Well, Joaquin? What will it be? I suspect we don't have much time before somebody arrives to respond to my gunshot, and our game will be up."

He settled on a question.

Joaquin sat back down, staring past Anne, watching the curtains flutter. The sun rippled across his face. If her eyes had been weapons before, now they were hungry, and Anne couldn't take them off him.

"Okay. I have a question."

"Do please share."

Joaquin breathed in.

Breathed out.

He leaned forward, scooped up the gun, and pointed it at Anne.

"What are your last words?"

Serenity bloomed on her face. Her eyes crinkled and all at once she seemed to transform in front of Joaquin, from an airy, stately woman into something less coiled, less wrapped around a spring, into something a bit softer. Tears built in her eyes and slid down her cheeks. They gripped the edge of her jaw before plunging down to soak into the collar of her blouse.

"So that's what it feels like." Anne glanced upward and then back at Joaquin, not bothering to wipe her face. "You are a very special young man, and I apologize for underestimating you."

Rising, Anne placed a hand on the gun, now trembling in Joaquin's grasp, and tugged it away from him. "There is a safe. In my bedroom. You will find the code on the back of the photo of my grandmother on my bedside table. You're welcome to anything and everything you find there."

All the energy had drained from his body. "Where are you going?" Joaquin's voice was hoarse from fear, but he pushed

the words out anyway, because Anne was drifting away from him, towards the windows and the door set into them, the one that he could see through glimpses of the curtains led out onto a small porch overlooking the city and street far, far below.

Anne turned back to him. "I know what I am. I know what I come off like. I see the flaws in myself. I know you hate me for them, and I ask you to write about me truthfully instead of flatteringly."

Joaquin found he could not rise from his chair. Not because he was injured, but because he was shaking so badly his legs wouldn't respond to his head. The adrenaline had flooded him and left him in shambles.

Anne was half out the door, her body disappearing into the curtains, borne away by the breezes. Her white hair swirled around her head. The gun in her hand was ugly and out of place.

And after everything had poured through his mind, these were the only words Joaquin had left, so he asked them again: "Where are you going?"

"Death or riches. No in-between, no drudgery, no boredom. The edge between heaven and hell. One question, Joaquin. I thought questions had ceased to exist. Now I have so many."

Anne slipped out of sight, and Joaquin found all at once that he was able to move. He flew from the chair and grabbed the door handle, but it had clicked shut and refused to budge. The curtains, cut off from their outside world, fell flat against the glass.

He considered breaking the door but knew there was no point. Instead, he covered his aching ears and put his back to the door, sliding down it to sit on the floor. His gaze drifted to the bullet hole in the wall, just above the door. The bullet had traveled straight through a painting hanging there; it showed a flower garden, drenched in sunlight, and a small and indistinct figure standing amidst all the beauty. The bullet had ruptured the canvas directly above the figure's head.

Joaquin moved to the coffee table, reached for his phone, and ended the recording.

My Happy Place



Grandma's Kitchen Sink

GRADE 5. Thanksgiving dinner at grandma's house.

A four-plate meal of turkey, potatoes, and all the works.

Accompanied by roughly four gallons of chocolate milk.

GRADE 2. Playing with my cousin running in and out the back door.

Laughing and annoying everyone while they try to clean the garage.

GRADE 5. Several hours later.

Puking in my grandma's kitchen sink.

GRADE 2. Several minutes later.

Crying as my bleeding finger is washed off in my grandma's kitchen sink.

GRADE 5. The next day.

The doctor's office.

My mom's car.

Crying.

I don't understand.

I ask my mom what diabetes is.

GRADE 2. The emergency room.

X-rays.

I ask my aunt if holding up my middle finger is a swear.

GRADE 6. The beach.

I see a mom sit further away from me because I'm using a syringe.

I hear her whisper to her husband about what drugs I'm on.

I learn that sometimes eating lunch can be hard.

GRADE 5. The emergency room.

Doctors.

Some nice.

Nurses.

Some stupid.

The children's ward is colorful.

They had me practice injections on oranges.

GRADE 2. It was a week or so before my first communion.

I didn't need a cast on my middle finger.

It would have been funny if I did.

GRADE 8. A girl complained about me testing my blood sugar.

She's afraid of blood.

The school made me do it in the disgusting bathroom.

My fingers aren't so funny anymore.

GRADE 9. People sometimes think my insulin pump is a pager.

GRADE 3. I just ate lunch.

I didn't use to think that I took it for granted.

GRADE 11. I wonder if my grandma's kitchen sink ever froze over.

The Liminal Space of a Shell Station at Midnight During a Snowstorm

Out here in the boonies we don't get much business. I work at a Shell gas station in the convenience store—generally the graveyard shift. It's the kind of gas station that's changed ownership at least eight times in the past year and has prices that any sane person would avoid if it weren't the only gas station for a couple of miles. Needless to say, the Shell branding is hardly more than a fuel rewards program and a large sheet of plastic with the red and yellow logo over the battered, dim sign. The convenience store is family owned and seemed like it was always looking for help. I have no life outside of living with my parents and attending community college, so I bit the bullet and applied to be a clerk. Seeing the façade of my application describing me as a bright youth with boundless energy, they put me on primarily graveyard shifts. I didn't really mind since it gave me time to do homework or play solitaire or whatever else the mobile time dump of the month was.

I've seen a range of awkward customers, for sure. One of my favorite categories is the high school lover who shuffles around the whole damned store pretending to look at every snack and beverage before staring at the condoms with furrowed eyebrows for ten minutes. Eventually the kid looks at me from the shelves, as if to see if I were looking at him, then swiftly grabs up some Trojans. They always put the package face-down on the counter for whatever reason, as if that'll make them not be condoms anymore. When the girls come in for the same purpose, I can only see Hell in their eyes. There's no sex tonight, only a scornful lesson in store for the boy. They are definitely the fastest, least talkative customers I get. I don't get in their way, but I do appreciate their visible rage from afar.

The thrill-seeking teens were the most entertaining out of my other options of creepy drunkards and weird old people that were out past their bed time. Occasionally there was

a young parent that was losing hair over a kid that would not fall asleep even after driving them around for a while in the middle of the night. They came to the store as a last resort to buy candy as a bribe—like a deal with a devil. I almost always consider pointing them towards the aisle with the antifreeze.

It was the beginning of a new year this week and the beginning of some new stories for me to share through unread blog posts and rants to friends who were hundreds of miles away via the Internet. It was the third day of this brand new year and the store was as quiet as physically being six feet under in a graveyard. There was a pretty heavy snow storm that'd go through the whole night, and while the locals were tough, only I was the one stupid enough to drive through it to get to work. The sound of the wind howling over some old cartoons I played on the tiny CRT television behind the counter almost drove me to sleep till the welcome bell rang. I rubbed the crust out of my eyes and did the usual “welcome to Shell,” though at that amount of clarity I was pretty sure it sounded like “welcome to Hell.” I threw some ibuprofen into my mouth and gulped them down dry before taking a look at my unfortunate customer.

I could only see his upper back and head while he stared at the coolers filled with beverages. He was wearing some heavy furs and his hair was long, tangled, and stringy. Didn't wanna bother telling him that he couldn't purchase alcohol after midnight, but I decided I'd cross that bridge when I got to it. Sure enough, the man picked up two six-packs of some local stout I hadn't ever really seen anyone buy (it was overpriced and country folk hate trying new things). I closed my eyes for a moment before his heavy bootfalls reached the counter.

“Merchant,” his voice boomed, intensifying my headache, “I am ready to pay for my goods.”

“Sir, I cannot sell alcohol to you past—”

The man set fifteen gold pieces, three silver pieces, and seven copper pieces on the counter. “I know not of your rules, night-merchant, but I have given you the price that you have asked for and if you do not accept it, you are a

fraud.” His hand reached around back behind his hair to the leather-wrapped silver handle of a large weapon that I had not observed beforehand.

I felt my eyes widen with fear and sweat formed behind my ears. Looking out the big windows that let me view the parking lot, I saw no cars. Nothing in my training had told me anything about fantasy LARPers. I figured I'd just let the two cases slide and if my boss honestly noticed, I'd just take it out of my paycheck. I pocketed the metallic coins.

I decided that if I was going to have to deal with this, I was going to have some fun with it. Leaning against the counter I asked, “So where have you hailed from, sir?”

His bearded face met mine while he pulled out a gigantic, authentic greataxe for show. “I am Uthorak, Warrior of Lily Lake, and Slayer of the Great Mage Ystlem. I was hunting in the woods about your business before I became parched. We are preparing for a great war, and you have not heard of it?”

The only “woods” near this gas station were a small patch of trees on the roadside near a bike path. I had no idea what this man was on. Lily Lake certainly was the name of the village I lived in, but anything beyond that made no sense to me. I only told Uthorak that I would begin preparing as soon as I could, which he accepted with a grunt and holstered his axe. He grabbed one of the bottles and bit the bottlecap off with his teeth and spat it on the ground before turning around and pushing through the door outside. I didn't get the best look, but he probably had stage-two gingivitis in my definitely-not-a-dentist diagnosis.

After getting over my confused daze, I managed to scuttle back to the surveillance footage. I saw my lonely ass sitting there for about three hours from ten to one in the morning. Yep, that was accurate. I checked the outside surveillance and saw Uthorak stomping through the unplowed snow—no car, no horse, no flying ship, no wild boars. He just walked. Surveillance caught him scratching his beard while looking at all the different kinds of beers. After that I saw the event that just occurred and outside he followed his footprints into the “woods” of Lily Lake, Illinois. Only three words could

possibly put my feelings into words; there were no other adjectives or descriptive words that could mash the wild train wreck of emotions between my sleep-deprived brain and this warrior straight out of some guy's Dungeons and Dragons power fantasy.

"What the fuck."

I decided that it was high time to trek out in the blizzard and close up shop for the night. My boss would understand the circumstances once he reviewed the footage himself. I bundled up in my puffy winter coat and scarf, locked the store up, and stared off into the small patch of trees that the boot prints led to. I glanced back at my frosted junker of a car which was covered in at least three inches of snow and sighed, knowing that this would be a long night.

The walk into the trees felt longer than it should have due to the wind and cold. Every breath I took it felt like I was going to choke on snowflakes even through the filter of my scarf. Only the lights of the gas station sign and stoplight lit the hazy environment. The clouds looked so low that they made the smallest light sources seem as bright as a normal street light. The light stopped at the edge of the trees, however, leaving something like a wall of darkness. As I stepped closer to the trees, the snow became even deeper and crept into my boots. Wet socks were probably the worst consequence of this expedition, no matter how weird it would get. I would rather die than have wet socks.

I wasn't sure if it was my imagination or not, but it sounded like the wind was howling louder than before. It sounded like screams in the naked trees. The footprints that I was following became muddled with other footprints and signs of life. This guy, Uthorak, really was living in these woods for sure. Unbelievable. Despite the patted down snow all around, I couldn't see him anywhere. The cover of the trees helped protect me from the snow at least, but it was still a frozen layer of Hell out here. Uncomfortable in my paper skin, I gave up on my search for the wild man and turned back to get out of the patch of trees.

I followed my tracks the whole way, but there were no lights towards the edge of the trees. I supposed maybe

that the snow finally piled up enough to cause an outage... but even then the stoplight would be flashing red. Red was a harder color to see, but not *that* hard. Pushing past the brambles and scratchy bare bushes, I found that I was not in the same familiar rural gas station and junction of two major routes that I was before. Stretched in front of me were rolling empty fields, muddy with the scar of battle. Snow was kicked up with dirt and blood and arrows peeked from snowy mounds. Beyond the bloodstained field was a frozen lake and even further still was another tree line—another forest. Rarely did I ever feel astonished, but right now I was a deer in the headlights. I sharply inhaled the frozen air and looked behind myself to see an entire forest of trees instead of only a couple dozen. The environment was the same as my own Lily Lake, but there were no buildings or roads. The air even felt charged with some kind of static.

None of this was adding up. I was just in my Shell, watching nostalgic cartoons and dozing off, and now I was in some kind of past version of Lily Lake. Past almost doesn't seem to entirely cover it. Carefully, I stepped out from the trees to take a look around the battlefield for Uthorak. He was the only person or thing I knew about in this weird reality, and while we were merely strangers, I felt that he was the only way I could find my way back. I nearly slipped down the hill, but managed to use the slippery terrain to my advantage to slide all of the way down on my heels. The battlefield was completely silent except for the wind that was still buffeting my face. As I kept making my way towards the edge of the lake, I tripped over something and lost my balance. The fall was the type of fall where I saw my whole life in slow motion.

My head struck something not as frozen as the ground—the object of my folly. Looking back, I saw a mass of fur and iron. It was a dead warrior. He seemed to have bled out to a slash in his gut. I felt like vomiting, but instead I crawled away from the body. My head was ringing and the cold only felt worse on the ground. I inhaled sharply and immediately had to cough, feeling an iron taste in the back of my throat from being out for so long.

Suddenly I heard a deep siren-like noise. Deeper than

a siren. More like someone playing a low brass instrument loudly. The horn was followed by the yells of warriors running across the frozen lake. Again, I felt my eyes grow wide as I stared at the mass of angry fighters through the snowy haze. Behind me another resonating mass of yells echoed from behind the trees, and warriors who were dressed like Uthorak flooded out to meet the others. This must have been the war he was talking about.

Now, like a curious cat, I was caught in the middle of these warring parties. I should have just stayed at work.

I could only manage to get to one knee before a large man ran beside me with his greataxe bared. He barged the shaft of the weapon under my chin and picked me up forcefully with it. I grunted weakly in defiance, but I couldn't let out many more sounds than that. The metal was cold and the grapple caused an opening where my scarf once was, freezing my neck. I squeezed one eye shut and looked at the man with the other.

Staring at me in absolute disbelief was the broad shouldered, dark haired man I recognized as Uthorak, Warrior of Lily Lake, Slayer of the Mage Yystlem, or whatever. I could not be more grateful to see this man. His warriors disregarded the event happening between us and continued to stream towards the enemy warriors. Uthorak's bushy eyebrows were furrowed, dark eyes scanning me furiously.

"Night Merchant," he gently set me down on my feet, continuing, "you truly did come to fight in the war. But... you are unarmed and unprotected."

"In truth, Uthorak," I responded as honestly as I could without using much slang, "I did not mean to stumble into this war. This is, and you are, of a different world than I am from."

Uthorak shook his head in confusion before snapping his attention backwards towards the battle. He turned back to me, commanding me, "You speak strange words and you are foolish. But you are a citizen of this village, and I must protect you. Stay behind me! It is too late to safely retreat for you!"

I followed his orders, watching the battle from each side

of the tower of a man. He held his greataxe proudly, waiting for the enemy to reach him. Soon enough, what seemed to be a rival of his approached him. A woman, well armored, stood in front of him taunting him to attack her. Something was off about this woman, but I couldn't tell what it was. She was wielding two short swords and had flames in her eyes. Literally, her eyes looked as if they held fire within. I couldn't help but warn Uthorak of what I felt. He grunted in response, as usual.

"Uthorak, did you really think I would let you get away with murdering Yystlem? His murder is the only reason I came to this petty battle. You have to pay for your crimes, and you messed with the wrong bringer of justice." Her voice seemed to conquer the sounds of the battle around us.

Uthorak's voice boomed in response, "Lissandra, your brother was an evil man who terrorized the innocent people of my village! What choice did I have but to slay him? I meant no harm to your family, but I had no choice for my people, for my family!"

A wild grin grew upon Lissandra's face as she took a few steps forward with her weapons drawn. "And for what you have done to my family you will pay with your blood!"

The two flung themselves at each other and steel clashed against steel. I was, again, left unprotected. I scrambled to the body that I had tripped over prior and searched for a weapon—any weapon. I found some gold, a frozen biscuit, some leaves, and eventually a simple long sword. I couldn't help but mutter a few profanities in excitement before turning back to the fight. It had only been a matter of thirty seconds, but it seemed as if Uthorak had the upper hand. Wishing to help him out, for some reason, I used my gangly arms to pick up the long sword with great difficulty. I have never held a weapon. I once went to the first meeting of a fencing club before I left because I decided it wore me out too much. If anything, this was self-defense, but it's the thought that counts.

I was totally going to die. I was going to die *and* have wet socks.

Thirty more seconds passed and I managed to hobble over

with my long sword held by both of my hands. It seemed like Uthorak had the situation under control though. By strength alone, he had managed to knock one of Lissandra's swords to the ground and bring her to her knees. It looked like he was ready to deliver the final blow. I couldn't help but feel relieved that I didn't have to participate in the fight. I was not sure about killing another person, evil or not. Thinking on it, I wasn't even sure that Uthorak was good. Well, he was the one who paid me, so that's the side I had to be on.

The wrong that I felt when looking at Lissandra intensified suddenly. There was the faintest purple aura around her.

"Uthorak," I cried out, "She's not done!"

Uthorak glanced towards me and then back at Lissandra. Lissandra was laughing maniacally while the light grew.

I saw him consider giving her mercy. This man was too soft-hearted, it seemed, which was a far different view of him than I had when he came to Shell. I yelled again, "You have to finish her quickly!"

"Thank you, Night Merchant," Uthorak responded and raised his greataxe to land the killing blow. Lissandra stared at him with widened eyes as he swung forward.

His swing stopped. Not as if he were in control, but as if he hit a wall. Lissandra clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and waved her hand in an upwards motion. One of the frozen bodies behind her rose to her side, frozen blade to Uthorak's neck.

Lissandra stood up, taunting, "You didn't really believe that I could be Yystlem's sister and not share some of the family magic, did you? I let you believe that you could win so that you would get tired, but in reality—"

"You are a necromancer," Uthorak whispered, finishing her sentence.

"Not just a necromancer—a Bonemancer," Lissandra chided proudly.

Uthorak's fingers slipped from the hilt of the axe one by one as Lissandra appeared to control the bones inside. I knew that I had to do something. Necromancy was dirty magic, and something in my moral code told me that this was very wrong. I wasn't sure if Lissandra had noticed me

or cared about my presence, but if there was a time to be a hero it was now. I heaved a sigh out of my lungs and pulled myself together. As she continued to taunt Uthorak, I began to quietly stealth my way around her until I was behind Lissandra. Quickly, I shuffled behind her and closed my eyes before thrusting my arms forward towards where I thought her lower back was.

A rush came over me as I felt the sword impact her body. I needed all of my strength to puncture through her whole body, so I pulled the sword out and stabbed forward again as she belted out a scream of pain. Before falling herself, she commanded her soldier to slash at Uthorak, but it missed its target while it turned to dust. Lissandra couldn't keep the body together anymore and she sure couldn't keep herself together anymore. I pulled the sword out one last time, shaking.

I just killed someone. I just killed a very powerful necromancer. I just saved Uthorak.

While staring at her still body, Uthorak's greataxe swung down and beheaded the woman. I looked up at him while I hyperventilated painfully in the cold. My body felt warm with the rush of action.

"Sometimes powerful necromancers can use their grip on death to hold onto some life force, but by all appearances seem dead. It is best to dismember them if possible," Uthorak bluntly explained to me while staring at the lifeless body of Lissandra, holding a hand to his chest. The wound seemed light, like most of his leather armor caught the blow. His eyes looked back up at me, and his bearded lips curled into a teeth-baring smile. "Night Merchant! You saved my life!"

Uthorak's gigantic arms wrapped around me as he picked me up into a hug. It was potentially the most painful, gut-wrenching hug of my entire life. But, it was also the most meaningful hug I've ever experienced. I tried to speak but I could feel my lungs being constricted. Noticing this, he set me down and led me away from the battlefield after taking Lissandra's swords.

To this side of the battlefield seemed to be a small camp where the injured were taken and healed by magic. I sup-

posed that this wasn't just a historical reality, it was a fantasy reality. On the way there he questioned my "garb," as he called it. Part of me wanted to snap back to the self-deprecating humor that I was used to in my reality to take the opportunity to call myself garb-age. I managed to hold my tongue. I didn't know how to begin to explain plastics and synthetic materials, so I just told him I went to a unique vendor far away in the city of Chicago who crafted unique clothes. He seemed satisfied, and perhaps even impressed, with the answer, nodding and repeating under his breath "Chicago."

"Now, you wish to get home, Night Merchant?"

"I would very much like to get home, yes." We sat down next to a fire on some furs. Uthorak handed me one of those bottles of beer that he had bought from me just before. He saw me stare at it as it remained unopened. Uthorak took it back gently and ripped the cap off with his teeth again before handing it back to me. I graciously accepted.

"It was strange how I was able to go to your interesting world," he ran his fingers through his beard in thought, "but I think my friend can help you through. I was joking before I left to get drinks how nice beer would be right before our battle and he told me that he could test a spell to send me somewhere that would have a store. If I had known that you would bravely save my life, I would have recruited you sooner."

All of this nonsense was because of some fantasy warrior's joke. I could not believe it.

He continued, "If you go back through the trees, the way back should still be there. It will wear off in a couple more hours, so I would suggest you leave soon."

I nodded, drinking from my bottle of pretentious deliciousness.

"However," Uthorak's voice seemed downtrodden suddenly, and filled with concern, "we will not meet again. The spell puts you and your village in grave danger, especially if anyone dangerous goes through. We got lucky this time around, but next time maybe not so much."

I wasn't sure why, but this made my heart drop. It was

true, it was dangerous. No one from my reality belonged in this one, and I'm pretty sure that if there were a battle between magic and guns, magic would come out on top. Nodding slowly, I responded, "You're right."

For a few more minutes Uthorak spoke of his triumphs and the truth of what happened with Yystlem, a powerful necromancer who nearly destroyed Lily Lake with a small force of undead. The sun began to rise behind the clouds and the snow petered to a slow flurry. Colors of roses, pinks, and oranges melted together near the horizon before the sun could peek out of the tree line. For now, the battle had stopped. Both sides, as I heard it, were fairly equal in losses. Part of me felt bad that I couldn't do anything about it. The other part logically knew that I wouldn't make any money here and, in fact, would probably die. I looked at the long sword which I had claimed gleam in the early light. Like light on snow, it sparkled with prisms of brilliant color. The sword would be quite the interesting and valuable souvenir.

"I suppose if I want to get back home I should head towards the woods, huh," I mumbled, standing up finally and wiping dust from my coat. Uthorak got up as well, sadly nodding.

"I do wish you could have stayed longer. I could have introduced you to my family and my village. You will be a hero among them for helping me." Uthorak chuckled heartily, "My son would be so jealous of your actions. He begged for me to take him with to fight. He is too young."

I never was one for kids, but the thought seemed nice.

He held his hand out to me for a handshake. I accepted and went in for one last hug with the big bear of a man. Letting him go, I picked up the big sword and started off for the woods again, letting the sword draw in the snow behind me. Again, the wall of the woods stood tall as if to ward off travelers. Disregarding it, I groggily stumbled in as the adrenaline of the situation began to wear off and fatigue set in. I knew that if I decided to take a nap in the middle of the woods I could easily freeze to death, so I continued on. I got about to the center of the forest before I felt turned around and saw my footprints in the deep, otherwise untouched snow.

Looking past the trees, I saw the green light of the stoplight along with the orange of the sun.

The storm was finally passing. Just in time for my shift to officially be over. Just like in the fantasy Lily Lake, I slid down the hill on my heels and stopped before falling onto the road. It seemed as if it were recently plowed, surprisingly enough. I saw the inches of snow on my car and knew that I did not have the energy to both clear off my car and drive home, so I unlocked the store and waited for my replacement with bags under my eyes.

My replacement was a blonde, middle-aged woman with a smoker's voice named Dee. She was nice enough, but reeked of cats, jerky, and tobacco. She commented on my car, but I brushed past her and went to the break area to nap on the couch.

When I woke up afternoon soap operas were whispering from the small TV. Dee must've brought the thing back when I was asleep to catch one of the morning game shows that older women like to watch. For some reason, those single mom types always lusted over Wayne Brady from "Let's Make a Deal" as if he were the only man alive. The guy's attractive, for sure, but moms seem to go for any game show host in this present day. Shaking my head over the wild women who were obsessed with Drew Carey and Wayne Brady, I decided it was high time to brave the most difficult of challenges—scraping off my car.

"What happened to you last night, hon?"

Dee's voice caught me off guard as I nonchalantly left towards the exit with my heavy sword. Her eyes were definitely staring at it. I smiled at her, "I was recruited for a war by a man with a greataxe who bought beer from me."

Used to my sarcastic antics and false stories by now, Dee laughed it off. "Y'sure looked like it, yeah? I can't help but let you off this time, but try not to go to any more of those wild parties that kids like you go to or you could get fired! And then who'll have to work graveyard shift? It'll pro'lly be me!"

I waved a hand at her while laughing, passing the comments aside. I was a great worker, and my boss could look at

the footage if he wanted to, but part of me wanted to keep this expedition my little secret.

"I'll see you around, Dee. Try not to spill any more coffee back there, the floor's sticky enough as is."

"Yeah, whatever, Rem. Do yer studyin' or whatever it is you do."

Letting the door shut behind me, I approached my snow mound with a sedan somewhere inside. One side of the car was significantly less snowy, but more icy. The front side passenger door was frozen shut.

I pried it open with the sword, scraping some paint off in the process. I set the sword down inside and dug through the building floor of trash to find my snow scraper. Before I could start the car, I had to wipe all of the snow off of the poor thing's hood. It was a quirk of having an older vehicle. Before I could begin to wipe off the car I noticed something reflecting the sun that was beaming straight down from the sky. Whatever it was, it was on my windshield in a small thing-shaped indent in the snow. Part of me felt like an archaeologist as I scraped the snow and ice off from around it to excavate it from its frozen prison. I began to recognize it as a weapon—another sword in fact.

It was a familiar sword as well. The curved blade reminded me of the fight with Lissandra just earlier this morning. I smiled as I recognized it as one of the twin blades that she had fought with. I picked it up with ease, since it was much lighter than the long sword I had looted. Something was tied around the hilt with rough twine. It was a note on old scrap of paper and a bottlecap from the beer I had sold to Uthorak. I unfolded it and read it to myself, smiling:

TO PHANTOM, ROGUISH NIGHT-
MERCHANT OF LILY LAKE, SLAYER
OF THE BONEMANCER LISSANDRA,
AND SAVIOR OF UTHORAK.

variation on practice



Every flower is a soul
blossoming in nature



Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious

Sometimes I wonder what words make
 Up the interior of my heart
 Perhaps I can break it to see what's inside
 Everyone knows that blood runs
 Red—is it really blue inside our bodies?
 Corpses can't speak so you'll have to take my word for it
 Anesthetizing the body is unbelievably calming
 Like floating on your back down a raging river
 I'd like to think my organs are made up of words other than
Fragile or
Raw or
Abused.
 Glazed with apathetic glitter
 I hide behind sparkles so no one sees the
 Landfill of emotions below
 I miss arts and crafts
 So I turn my body into a makeshift collage
 Tear up my skin here and there
 Ink up just the right parts
 Cut—
 Extract the flaws with
 X-acto knives—
 Paste
 I was.
 A spoon full of sugar doesn't make my medicine go down.
 Lick my lips to taste something other than blood.
 I am.
 Down the river my shell goes
 Organs decayed to gray
 Corpse boat races
 I want that medal of death
 Only then will I know what my insides are made of
 Umbrellas do not make one fly
 So let us float in the rain water

Warbound

There was an eruption of thick orange light in the heavens, and he couldn't pull his wide-eyed stare away. All around him, he could hear their screams. His own throat tightened around his voice. His chocolate brown eyes were drowned in the black of his pupils, glistening and afraid. The light danced across the shadows in his cheeks and reflected itself in the depths of his swimming eyes. Another blast reverberated inside his bones, and his whole body melted into jelly. Its thunderous fury knocked the breath from his lips in a terrible huff. His hands had gone clammy by now and clung to something cold and stiff in his hands. He looked down. It was a gun. Below, he saw his combat boots coated in the inescapable dirt of the landscape.

"Move your feet, Mayor," grunted a rough voice to his right, and he realized that the voice was speaking to him. Now he remembered. He was Mayor. Stephen Mayor. He turned his head and met the hard eyes of Rick Louis, ordering him forward. Rick Louis, he thought. The man who told the best dirty jokes over a cigar and drunken card game. Stephen nodded his head mutely. Rick's jaw clenched and a vein protruded along his neck. He turned away from Stephen and jogged forward, his head low and wary. Stephen looked to his left and back to his right. All of them were there with him. All wide-eyed and scared. All deafened by the explosions along the horizon. All moving forward when every molecule deep in their blood and bones raged for them to return home. Stephen followed.

One step.

Two steps.

A flare of light and a whistle of bullets.

Three steps.

A cry and a bomb in the distance.

Stephen's adrenaline carried him into that night of doom. Under the monstrous weight of his pack and weaponry, he pushed on. Twenty feet in front of him the road exploded, sending dirt and flesh into the air. Vehicles were thrown

over, burning like summer campfires. Except when their heat boiled his skin, he was still left feeling like ice.

There was too much screaming. Stephen could hear his name dripping from every one of their cries. Eyes rolled in pain, and flesh and dirt fell back down, trapped to the earth by gravity. Stephen's gut coiled and vomit dug its claws into his throat, ripping its way to the surface. He had eaten and laughed with them. They had lived and showered together. Now, they were raining down upon him.

His blood felt like lead in his veins, but he knew he couldn't leave those left breathing, imprisoned by the flames of the overturned vehicles. He ran to them. Randy. Quinn. Weston.

His friends. His family.

On fire.

He fell to his knees and stuck himself into the flaming jeep. His fingers wrapped around the scorched arm of someone whom he couldn't recognize anymore. He gritted his teeth against the flames licking at his skin and pulled the soldier out of the blazing vehicle. They fell onto the dirt together, and Stephen jumped to his feet. He grabbed ahold of the soldier once more, and a furious yell burst from his lips as he pulled the soldier out of the direct path of war. Beneath him the soldier panted in pain. Stephen stared mutely at the glowing pink that had become the soldier's scorched arms. Stephen lifted his hands and stared in horror at the crusted flesh wrapped around his fingers and clinging to his skin. Bullets whizzed past his head. He didn't hear them over the sick ringing his ears.

He looked up at the fire feeding on their bodies and wiped his trembling hands on his fatigues. He took hold of his gun and cemented down his mind till he could no longer hear himself think. A vacancy slipped over his eyes. He pushed on.

The sky exploded with color above his head. The screams around him seemed to fade into distant murmurs, and Stephen thought he was falling into insanity. It was a thick bubble rising inside him, threatening to spill over and encase him. His shuddering breaths were knocked loose when he felt his body being prodded. Had he been shot? He jumped in his spot and took a defensive stance against the enemy who happened to sneak up on his right. His muscles flexed and he was ready to rage forward to the death.

"Dad?" a timid voice whispered in his mind, clinging to his heart.

A bucket of cold ice plummeted through his bones and he stood rigid and still, before letting his fists fall to his sides. The enemy melted away and there stood his daughter, with her arms wrapped around her waist in uncertainty. Her soft brown hair blew across her face and stuck to the syrupy remains of a sucker on her cheek. She stood still and aware and waited. Face to face in the backyard of their home, Stephen stared into his daughter's big green eyes. He felt like he was going to be sick. Behind her head another firework went off and cheers echoed over the neighborhood. His eyes fogged over with tears. Looking up from doing dishes and out the kitchen window, Stephen's wife dropped a soapy plate to the floor and ran past its shattered remains to the back door. That distant, caged, animalistic look on his face was no stranger to her.

"Stephen!" she screamed in dread, running out of the house, nearly falling over the toys scattered over the yard as she scrambled protectively in front of their daughter. Stephen's gaze lifted slowly from his beautiful and innocent daughter's face to his wife's. He fell to his knees in front of her and felt them both come down on top of his shaking body, gently soothing his heartbroken sobs.

They had forgiven him again.

Their warmth and love surrounded him, but nothing could wash away his past. He could still feel the grit between his fingers and in his teeth. The neighbors closed their eyes and looked away from the scene. They shut their windows on the wailing of that damaged man next door, whose cries escalated and body convulsed with every new explosion of fireworks in the sky.

Bite



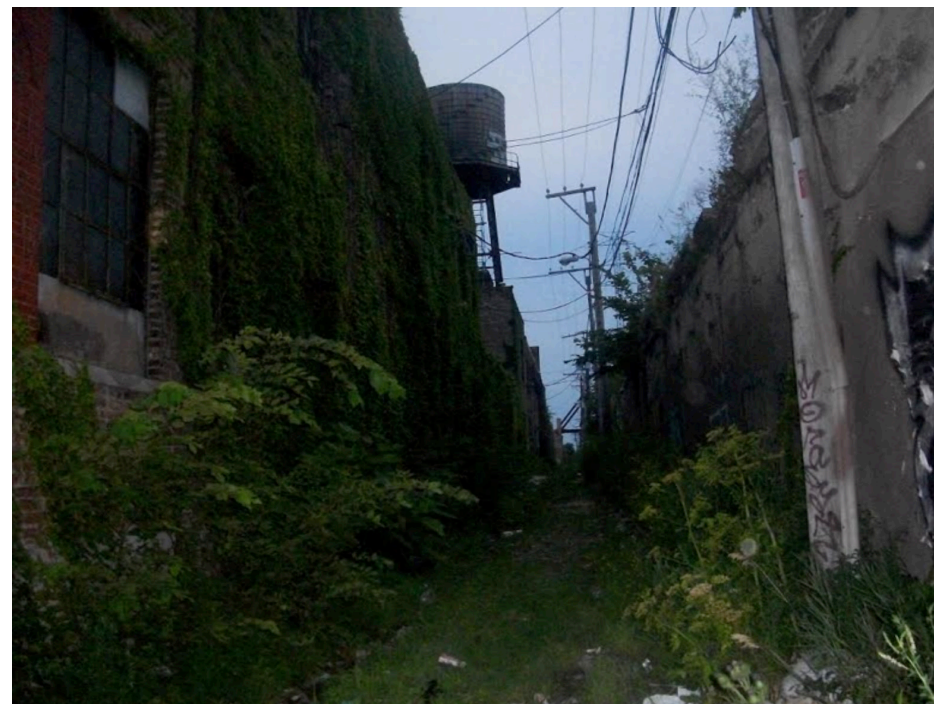
8:42

a.m. I wake up to a nose bleed hot copper dropping dripping
bare feet slipping into the bathroom hot water on watch
the red turn orange try to find meaning in diluted colors try
to find it in the way your body bleeds when you don't want it
to or in steam rising from the faucet there's nothing to find
in the way it swirls down the drain gone suddenly it's gone
and all i have is this feeling of *sad* *sad* doesn't mean anything
so maybe i mean loneliness or maybe i mean you i probably
mean i should go back to sleep *shut the water off* the future is
coming too soon i miss myself i lay in bed i want to know
what my daughter will look like i hold my stomach know
her smile *jump* i want to suck the venom from my veins
and spit it out onto the floorboards i can dig a basement like
this scream from my front porch steps *viper* find a way to
exist deeply love evenly forget softly *come home* or maybe
you mean *come inside, it's cold* i take a step back you close
the door

Sorority Girls

Scabby witches cackle
and curse
 separating the night sky.
Only heathens will sound
this utter blasphemy, scattering
 the Milky Way into diminished kaleidoscopes
that combine and carry
 singing silhouettes shimmering
in the silky silence.

Potential



Japanese Wood



Dizzy Photographs

Dresses billowing like leaves on autumn
Dimmed faces but smiles of white
Memories that age and crinkle and sit
Times of dances and jazz and bombs
Messy mashes of madness
Dizzy photographs
Untouchable breakable glimpses
Looking while living and hoping to remember
Time capsules
Of pure accident

Not just beautiful, though—the
stars are like the trees in the
forest, alive and breathing. And
they're watching me.



This Morning

This morning I woke up with my heart wandering the
streets of Paris
Young love danced its way down the street, twirling at the
feet of every passerby
Mother and child hand in hand, pointing out their next
destination
And I am alone on this bench
That is enough for me
And I am content

Yesterday morning I woke up in New York
With nothing intimate to grasp to, nothing familiar
I try to connect with the eyes of one of the thousand
people hustling past me who are too busy to notice the
color of the sky this day
An afternoon in Central Park, I watch the homeless and the
rich, the lovers and the broken-hearted coexist in a
world that they haven't the time to acknowledge
But I notice them, that is enough for me
And I am content

Maybe tomorrow morning I will finally wake up to you
Tomorrow someone else can watch the paper man make
his way down our street
I will be far too busy taking in every detail of your face
because the shape of your nose is lovelier than the
mountains I saw in Ireland two days ago
And the way you kiss me in the morning is kinder and
softer than the way the sun touched my skin on Maui's
beach
But more importantly, I will be with you, and it will feel like
home
And I will be content

Poised



Mysterious Forest

Hans and Gerta walked through the trees of the forest. Yes, through; each tree had intricately designed doors with twists and curves and small little rooms. One tree had a living room, mainly just a couch. Another had a kitchen with a wood burning stove (quite sinister to have it within a tree). One more had a library, well actually just one small shelf of books—more like a cemetery if you think about it.

All of these were very interesting to Hans and Gerta, but the one that captured their attention the most was a tree with a wide bottom, and a small triangular top. Two branches extended from the middle of the trunk of the tree, each with their own triangular top. This tree was larger than the others and resembled a house the most because it had windows. This tree was clearly special, especially due to the fact that the trunk was green and the leaves were brown. Hans and Gerta skipped through the front door, still exhilarated from the curious rooms they visited through the trees. They themselves were happy and content. As they oohed and ahed over the fine rug placed cleanly in front of a grand arm chair, a small man walked in, screamed, and dropped his tea pot all at once.

“How rude to throw tea at guests,” Gerta giggled at the small man.

“Agreed dear sister, but even ruder for him not to apologize and clean it up.”

At this point, the now red-faced man glared at Hans and Gerta and stated, “Even ruder to have not knocked when you enter someone’s house and make them spill their tea.”

“Spilled tea?” Another small man, this one with a black top hat, entered with a confused expression. He noticed Hans and Gerta and turned to the first man saying, “How rude of you not to tell me you were having guests.”

A third man came running in at the word “guests” and slipped on the tea puddle. “How rude to leave a puddle in the middle of the room for anyone to stumble upon.” He whistled and a wolf bounded into the room. “Clean up this tea,” the third man said. The wolf slurped all the tea on the ground,

then noticed the children had some tea on them, too. He started to lick them, but grew rather hungry with all the tea he had drunk so he gobbled up Hans and Gerta.

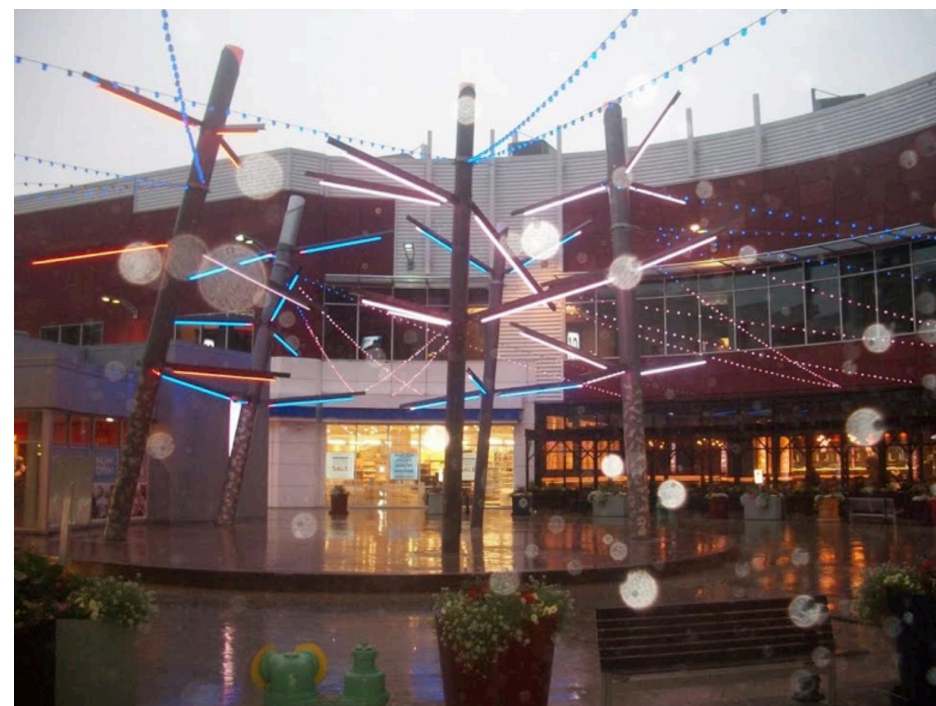
“How nice of them to taste so good!” said the wolf.

“How rude of you to eat our guests!” said the third man.

“They weren’t guests at all, but intruders! Good boy, Wolfy,” said the first man.

Then the three small men and their wolf went about their day as if nothing strange had ever happened.

The future is crying



Field of Fog



The Shaggy Clouds Have Come

bringing the warm night rains
and the cold morning wind

autumn
always seems too sudden
too bittersweet

the tomato kissed by many frosts
the apple clinging to the tree
we never have enough time to mourn

music is our best effort, nay, our process
of linking arms with the ever turning present
dancing and crying and making passionate love in rhythm

right on beat with the maple leaves
becoming golden
a final celebration of the blessings of summer

everywhere are blossoming flames
showing us how to surrender
to the dark and frigid cold

to let go and watch all be swept away
under shaggy clouds
in the cold grey morning wind

AWARDS

ART AWARDS

Judged by: Joshua Ford

Bio: Joshua Ford is a Midwest based photographer/filmmaker providing commercial images, video work, portraiture and editorial work to a diverse client base including members of the US Senate and Congress, architects, punk rock bands and experimental musicians, manufacturers and industrial clients, and corporations of all sizes. His work and these clients have taken him beyond Illinois and the Midwest to Italy, Ireland, Seattle, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Tucson, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Houston and New Orleans in recent years.

First Place: *Lake Michigan Snow* by Mikaylo Kelly
The image is rhythmic, contemplative and melancholic. Part of its strength is in its economy, the composition is beautifully minimal and the image says what it needs to say in the most simple terms. That said, the subject (and feeling) captured in the composition is instantly recognizable/relatable. As for technique here, typically a photographer will choose a point of focus to direct the gaze of the viewer, but in this work it seems there was a conscious choice to do the opposite and let the viewer's gaze melt and recede into the soft bands of snow/trees/horizon...

Second Place: *kept original* by Joshua Hildebrand
This work conveys emotion through both the expression of the subject and through the artist's technique. The layering effect makes it dynamic and invites the viewer to look deeper and search for connections (or disconnections) between the layers.

Third Place: *Internal Scream* by Trang "Tracy" Ngo
Maybe the most "conceptual" entry, the image/title leads one to believe the artist is working from an idea. I can see this piece operating within a body of work and having a dialogue with other pieces created by the same artist. It's a good thing to be left wanting more work from the same artist!

Honorable Mention: *Untitled 3* by Tori Charnetzki
Beautiful use of non-traditional photographic technique, exploring color/form. The eye moves around and through this piece nicely!

POETRY AWARDS

Judged by: Allison Seay

Bio: Allison Seay is the recipient of fellowships from the Ruth Lilly Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. She is the author of a book of poems, *To See the Queen*, and has placed work in such journals as *Gettysburg Review*, *Field*, and *Poetry*. She is the Associate for Religion and the Arts at Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church and lives in Richmond, Virginia.

First Place: *Garden Walk* by Mikaylo Kelly
To my mind, what sets "Garden Walk" apart is its lush language, its ability to move in and out of the scene, a balance that reminds me of nostalgia and memory itself which is the essence of the poem's subject—that slippery, quiet, saturated landscape that is the interior life. The metaphor and the real become exquisitely blurred. I am interested, too, in the poet's use of line and line break, the absence of punctuation, and the way these choices create a sense of breathlessness, endlessness, a brilliant sort of emotional cul-de-sac.

Second Place: *I grew up too* by Melissa Conway
What I admire the most about this one is its interesting tonal shifts: it's fierce, it's sad, it's angry, it's triumphant. And it's this harmonizing of emotion that rings really true to me—deep hurt experienced in coming-of-age seems to me its own kind of shape shifter so it's fitting that I feel pulled in several directions at once. The poem's form is effective, too, in providing a kind of density and compression—a well-crafted choice considering that the poem is reckoning with time, memory, and change—experiences that are also dense, compressed, and non-linear.

AWARDS

Third Place: *Summer Silence* by Alina Lundholm

I love that this poem uses SOUND as a way to describe SILENCE. I think this is what the best of poetry does—creates a space able to hold seeming opposites together, envelops both pain and beauty at once. This poem's brevity underscores its weight. It feels whole without coming off as easily resolved. That's remarkable. And that final image—"the color of/ nothing" is beautifully mysterious (and mysteriously beautiful!).

Honorable Mention: *Grandma's Kitchen Sink* by Sarah Sciaraffa

There is such an energy in this poem—it's ambitious and experimental and running full force without ever losing control. It's managing a lot of tension, difficult tension, and relies as much on what is not said as on what is said. Quite impressive.

PROSE AWARDS

Judged by: Poe Ballantine

Bio: Poe Ballantine's early dreams of being a circus contortionist were dashed when he got his leg stuck behind his head. He has published three novels and a bunch of other stuff including the cult-classic, "Things I Like About America," cult-classic being a euphemism for not selling well. His newest novel, *Whirlaway*, will be out with Hawthorne Books in April 2018. He lives in Chadron, Nebraska, across from the railroad tracks, with his wife, son, and dog.

First Place: *Tuna Noodle Casserole* by Lauren Hagedorn

Second Place: *My Beautiful Death* by Allyson Jesse

Third Place: *The Liminal Space of a Shell Station at Midnight in a Snowstorm* by Sam Johnson

Honorable Mention: *Warbound* by Rene Powers

THE BARBARA ANDERSON MILLER AWARD

Judged by: Ryan Collins

Bio: Mr. Collins has directed the Young Emerging Writers summer internship program at the MWC, which just released the newest volume in its annual literary magazine, *The Atlas*. He is the executive director of the Midwest Writing Center in Davenport.

About the award: In 1982, Dr. James E. Miller endowed SAGA in memory of his wife, Barbara Anderson Miller, who graduated from Augustana in 1943. While attending Augustana, she edited and wrote for SAGA. The award is given to the submission that is most competently crafted and most promising in imaginative power. This is SAGA's most prestigious award.

Winner: *Tuna Noodle Casserole* by Lauren Hagedorn

Beyond its being darkly funny and telling a whole story in a small space, I loved the use of repetition/refrain throughout the piece, how it added not only musicality but also a foreboding at the end. I thought this piece was one of the few that successfully straddled the line between fiction and poetry; while a flash fiction piece, it has elements of poetry that I think give this piece both humor and haunt, and create a resonance that far exceeds three paragraphs. A really excellent work.

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

Kate Black

I am a second year who recently declared her anthropology and art majors. After spending most of freshman year going through four different majors, I finally caved and gave into my two true passions—art and people—which I had put on the back burner for so long. It is only because of some incredible people in my life and the decision to pursue my passions, that I had the guts to send in some of this writing that I've been hiding in my Google Docs for the last couple of years. This is for those people who have always encouraged me, and to those who are afraid of doing what they love.

Tori Charnetzki

Tori discovered photography during a class her junior year. She was initially repulsed by the complexities of light and camera mechanics but eventually fell in love and now works for the Augustana Photo Bureau and interns at WVIK, where her photographs are used in web stories.

Melissa Conway

Melissa Conway is a big fan of words and putting them into sentences. Her work primarily comes from her upbringing as a queer midwesterner just looking for space to exist in. She spends her time writing poetry, hanging out with her mom, and wishing she knew how to ride a bike.

Maria Do

My name is Maria Do. I'm an amateur photographer that likes to capture different cultures, nature, architecture, people, and religion—so pretty much everything. I started getting into photography because I needed a hobby. Although, my vision started to get worse as I got older, and I wanted to photograph and travel as much as I can. In the end, I hope my career allows me to travel the world.

Mia Gerace

A simple, Italian, Roman Catholic girl who likes rocks, coffee, and music more than should be allowed, suffers from a severe case of wanderlust, and sometimes attempts to translate the thoughts in her head into words on paper—usually as retribution.

Monica Gil

I am an amateur photographer and photo editor. More of my art can be found at <http://monicagilart.tumblr.com>.

Ali Hadley

To Future Self,

Remember this era as one that, above all, revolved around experimental prose, serial killers, and brownie batter dessert hummus. read more at: <https://alexandriahadley14.wixsite.com/writing>

Lauren Hagedorn

I am a senior elementary education major (theater arts minor) with a great love of reading and writing—a love I hope to pass on to my future students. Until this term, I have never had much opportunity to take creative writing classes, and now I am taking two. I have written a few other pieces for those classes, but “Tuna Noodle Casserole” is by far the most complete. Someday I hope to write a few novels, but in the meantime I enjoy taking ideas that pop into my head and making them into shorter pieces.

Jack Harris

I'm a Creative Writing and Graphic Design major, which means I'm currently aspiring to be a Starving Artist. What that means is that writing has always been something that's incredibly important to me. Fiction writing is a way for me to explore my own imagination, work out ideas, and develop new ones, and I'm incredibly honored that it's also something people (apparently) want to read!

Jaclyn Hernandez

I've loved writing my entire life and hope to someday become a published author.

Joshua Hildebrand

I've been fascinated by portraiture and the human visage since before my artistic ability could even portray either. I'm working toward a long-running goal of being able to accurately and impactfully convey meaning through appropriate and varied drawing styles tied together with vibrant, intuitive, and sophisticated color usage.

Michele Hill

Michele Hill is a multi-genre author who enjoys reading, writing, and chocolate. She hopes that you take this issue of SAGA as proof that she has a soul, for a piece of it went into the making of this issue.

Jessica Holzknecht

Jessica has always enjoyed writing and eating while she does so.

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

Kyle James

I have a deep love of natural beauty. Through my pictures, I try to display the amazing world we live in and the inherent beauty it possesses. Nature is a place of solace and peace where the troubles of day to day life dissipate. Through my works, I try to create a connection between the viewer and the beauty of the natural world.

TaJania Jenkins

I used to suck at art, but look at me now...I'm creating my own powerful images with just pencils, ink pens, and my mind. I don't paint or draw something just because it looks pretty. I take those "pretty" things and turn them inside out to create eye opening messages about the world around us or the world we can't see. There's more where that came from...

Allyson Jesse

Allyson Jesse is currently a senior avoiding any conversation that involves her plans for the future. Her skills include consistently not knowing how many noodles to make for a single serving of pasta, oversharing, and making great lists. Sometimes she likes writing. Other times she enjoys a good nap. If she was an inanimate object she would be a broken watch for its timelessness.

Sam Johnson

Sam Johnson has aspirations of being on the creative teams of video game developers. She views games as a new form of storytelling and art that artists need to work with rather than against. Sam personally seeks to add her own experiences to her work as both someone who has battled anxiety and depression for ten years and has been out as bisexual for about three years.

Mikaylo Kelly

Mikaylo Tairiku Kelly is one of many human beings who call planet Earth home, and is a 6th generation Quad Citizen. He loves water, healing, pooping in compost toilets, engaging in transformative processes, and so much more.

Erica Kirinovic

Erica Kirinovic is a Senior majoring in Neuroscience and a minor in art. One of her photographs from Film Photographer has been shown at Cool Beans. This is the first time her photos have been published in a magazine/book. Erica takes pictures daily whether it is nature photos or photos for home sporting events for Augustana Athletics. She plans on continuing her education and get her Master's in Applied Behavior Analysis. Erica also hopes to continue her work as a photographer!

Alina Lundholm

Alina began writing around age five and loved to write about dinosaurs, dogs, and flying monkeys. At age 22, she now writes about dragons and goblins, far more advanced topics to be sure. When she isn't writing ferociously in a journal or sticking her nose into some fantasy book, she can be found terrorizing her beloved teammates in the fencing club or playing some blast-ended, brassy contraption called the French horn.

Maissie Musick

I am a senior at Augustana College, majoring in English, Creative Writing, and Theatre where I am a member of the Chi Omega Gamma sorority and contribute to HerCampus. I also have just completed my final year as a member of the varsity volleyball team and continue to contribute in the theatre arts.

Trang "Tracy" Ngo

I am an amateur graphic designer, photographer, adventurer, and learner. More of my works can be found on my instagram @eas-shaking

Rene Powers

I'm not all that I want to be and unavoidably some of what I wish I wasn't. And that's okay.

Jonathan Quigley

I carry a tiny, crappy 2008 Kodak digital camera with me wherever I go. When I see something that I like, something that speaks to me, or something I just think looks cool, I take a picture. I capture life in these candid little moments. I feel like there's too much beauty happening around us all the time that it would be foolish to not save some of it. But as important as it is to capture the beauty, never forget that a picture is a fragment, a 2 dimensional piece of something that once was. And cameras can be distracting. Always appreciate your moments while they last.

Sarah Sciaraffa

I am an aspiring old man in a young woman's body, and I wouldn't want it any other way. I try to tell stories that speak to truths that I have experienced in my life, especially dealing with my disabilities, social interactions, and mental health. I aspire to educate in the fields of literature and theatre, but I strongly disagree with the idea that if you can't do, you teach. In fact, I think that one MUST do in order TO teach!