

Spring 2021

# The Rubicon



TROY UNIVERSITY'S  
LITERARY JOURNAL



## ***The Rubicon***

Troy University's Literary Journal

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Thank you to the many students at Troy University and our faithful sponsors who consistently support and contribute to this literary journal. Submissions for consideration are accepted throughout the year and may be digitally uploaded to [spectrum.troy.edu/rubicon](https://spectrum.troy.edu/rubicon). Submissions may include poetry, prose, short stories, photography, sketches, graphic art, and other visual artwork.

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*The  
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*Olivia Kattos*

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*Amanda Knotts*

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# POETRY

*“Poetry is simply the most beautiful, impressive, and widely effective mode of saying things, and hence its importance.”*

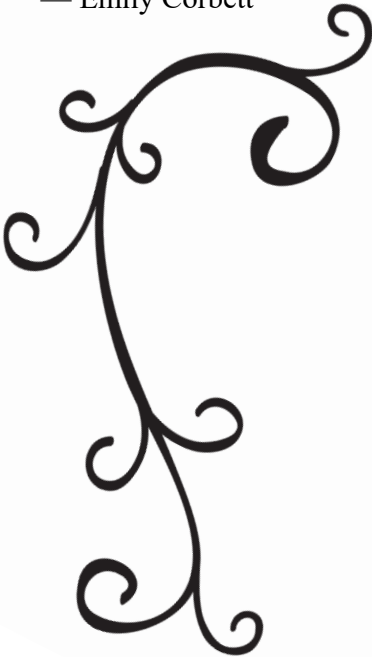
— Matthew Arnold



## Red Bird

I've heard that when a cardinal appears,  
an angel from Heaven is near.  
How beautiful that sentiment is, though hard to  
believe. With all the big things on this earth spinning,  
How does God have time to comfort just me?  
Yet somehow, when I miss you or need a guide,  
there it always is!  
A happy little red bird, sitting on his branch.  
Strong and mighty, just the way you always were.  
He only lingers a second before he flies away,  
but I'm at peace because I know *you* are still here.

— Emily Corbett



## Shards of Time

I walked around a room inside a dream of  
all the years gone by  
and much to my surprise I met my youth  
She was bold and unafraid and  
unaffected by the ways of skies not blue  
Alive on dusty shelves were frames  
of all the love I won't forget  
and yet  
I walk on broken glass without my shoes  
and no regret  
Splintered by the shards of time  
that won't give up the fight  
I rest  
with wrinkled sheets on an empty bed  
and sixty watts of light  
Funny how the faded flame feels  
Cold  
I set the clock for half-past six  
And then I woke up old.

— Jennifer Bedsole

## Intricate Poem

*AUTHORS' NOTE: There are two different poems written here, however, they can be read together. You can read the first one top to bottom, the second top to bottom, or you can read both of them bottom to top. Although, the authors' favorite way to read it is reading the first line of the first poem, then the first line of the second, the second line of the first poem, then the second line of the second poem, etc. You may read and interpret this poem in any way you wish.*

A golden oval overhead.



Rays unfolding, waves unyielding.

Flawless, Flowering youth abounds.

Growing, flourishing-- calm chaos. Beauty standing still in despair.



gilt to guilt, silt and salt, now spoilt bald blackness cleaves the seas,  
lakes lie listless by shores  
see, the solace of sovereigns is now their funerary facade the  
gibbering grin of the crypt is glad to guide  
you warmth warbles over smoldering  
shoulders

— Sarah Williams and McKenzie Dahlke

## The Morning Mantra

stand on the scale  
check the mirror  
turn sideways  
see your hip bones clearer

stand on the scale  
feet together  
thighs apart  
remember to count  
your calories from the start

stand on the scale  
oops the number  
decided to rise  
check the mirror  
hold back the tears  
in your eyes

for today you decide  
you are fighting the good  
fight to love your self  
despite those who set fires to  
the growing pains  
on your thighs

wrap your arms around  
your body tight  
and be kind to her  
for she is your home

— Victoria Cummins



## Distance, Not Diamonds, are a Girl's Best friend

The first time you tried to kiss me,  
we were sitting inside a poorly  
constructed blanket fort in a house  
neither of us owned.

I had looked away,  
fumbling with the edge of something and  
when I turned back,  
you were mid-motion but I was still  
slightly out of reach.

I think pulling back when startled is a perfectly reasonable response — and there is an entire group of French-Canadian lumberjacks who would agree — but my therapist turned it into a whole conversation about attachment styles and didn't laugh when I said "Thank you, Ms. Ainsworth" even though for ninety-dollars, I think she should at least pretend to appreciate my jokes.

The first time you said you loved me,  
we were lying in a bed neither of us owned.  
I had turned my head,  
tugging at a loose thread and when I looked back,  
you were mid-sentence and I wanted to sink through the bed, into the floor and to the nearest escape — but there I was still slightly out of reach.

I sighed, siding with Sigmund and began mentally flipping through the pages of my bio-psych textbook, fumbling an explanation that involved bridges but wasn't entirely a metaphor — until I suddenly paused to say I was sorry because I knew that was not what you wanted to hear and you shrugged and said "well, honestly, at least you didn't leave" right before I excused myself for a cigarette and to text my best friend who asked me how I had responded but already knew the answer— "No, you don't."  
Turned into "no, you didn't"

when I recalled the conversation to my therapist and you would think after a year, she'd stop being surprised by my inability to bullshit and my fantastic ability to intellectualize my way around anything that even vaguely resembles a feeling but there we both were, laughing

and for ninety dollars she could at least be impressed I was paying attention in class but —

The first time you told me you were on your way, watching the edges of county lines creep past, driving past houses neither of us owned —

I tried to turn you away.

But you were already in motion and I was only slightly out of reach — Every mile closer you got, the further I'd stretched my arms, willing them into wings, panic and safety rising in the back of my throat — but suddenly you were down the street anyway and you never asked me to change my mind until I did.

And I did.

Because you were starting to.

That was the first night you kissed me. And when kissing turned to touching turned to more in a bed neither of us owned, in a house neither of us owned —

the familiar feeling of simple math and watching myself the way we used to watch movies before the picture got clearer, when we could easily separate fiction from reality — seeped into me deeper than you ever could and ...you stopped in the middle.

Because I was slightly out of reach

this is the one time you would not proceed anyway.

But when I returned to the graveyard to collect my body, fighting through all the skeletons and ghosts that guarded it —

You were still there waiting.

And for a moment,

the slightest flickering of time in a year where days last months and months vanish before they have begun —

I wanted to meet you in the middle,

and see what was in reach.

But instead:

The first time, you fell asleep before me.

turned away, in a bed neither of us owned, in a house neither of us owned —

And I waited for the sun, repeating the words of Ingrid Magnussen in my head like both a lifeline and a mantra until then, without waking you —

I gathered my beer from the fridge and my bra from the floor and what was left of my wits from your hands and closed the door midway between us so when you woke up and reached for me —

Well, you wouldn't be surprised by the rest.

...and neither was my therapist when I told her, instead just asking me what I planned to do in a tone that was equal parts amused and frustrated and I wanted to welcome her to the club but

— it was the first time I didn't know what to say.

So I made some joke about getting quieter shoes

and handed her ninety dollars,

which for that price you would think would come with some divine clarity but

For all the theories and science and intellectualization and my always having a response —

I'm nowhere closer to having an answer

So, I schedule an appointment for next week and

where does that leave us except

here we are — sitting in the aftermath of history we both own but inside circumstances we don't — fumbling with the edge of something, Pulling at loose threads —

And still slightly out of reach.

— Samantha Neeley

## Lost

Lost

I have had dreams, dreams that appear real,  
dreams of us that make me excited and heartsick,  
dreams that pull me back to my past,  
dreams that I can't seem to get enough of.

There we hugged, we laughed,  
we frolicked, we held hands,  
we could see each other in our eyes,  
and wished that time stopped for us to enjoy the priceless  
moments we shared.

It is selfish of me to yearn for you but I can't help it,  
It is erroneous to think about you but I still do, I always knew you  
were never mine; I knew you belonged to another.

So, I tried running, away from our memories, I tried running  
away from you, yet you hold my hand unyielding to the forces  
that are against us.

If I had a wish it would be for us to be together in our bubble.

— Anita Adiole



## Silent Song

I close my eyes and once again breathe  
in familiar day;  
existing time in moments gone  
too quickly slipped away.  
Memories of a girl I knew  
with oceans in her eyes,  
of rolling green and birds in flight  
that sang her lullabies.  
The plans that built the days long  
passed are dreams of yester-year;  
now placed in hands — the wane of life  
as freedom caved to fear.  
Decisions made in stony care  
to strengthen weakest part  
but now the girl I once had known sings  
from a muted heart.  
The rivers echoed melody,  
the trees would sway in time;  
long lost the pounding of the soul  
that made the music mine.  
I sigh, in knowing none is lost,  
deceptive tears — be still.  
Once awake, the angel — Hope,  
will yield her passion's quill.  
Again, the treasured tune will stir,  
again, will voice be strong;  
but until then I wait for one  
who hears my silent song.



— Cassie N. Nolin



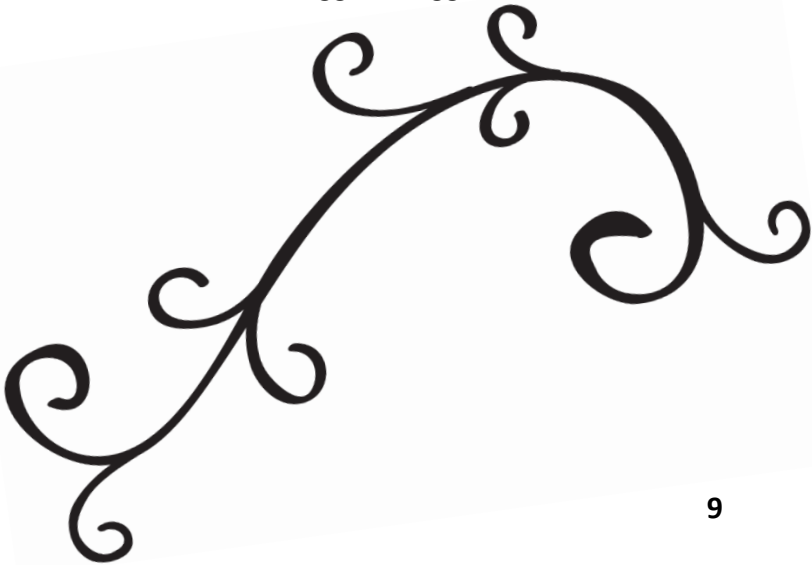
## Want

I worry —  
that the cage I've forged  
has consumed me,  
or that the sparks I test  
might swallow me,  
and that the ink I drag across this canvas will  
poison me.

Is the artist or the art to blame  
for initial destruction?  
Are we only vessels for serendipitous  
dismay? Do all promises sour?

I can only hope  
that the buzzing in my ears  
and the rattle beneath my ribs  
are sensations of something else,  
and that I am not to blame  
for the depiction on the wall  
or the composition of my heart —  
evidence of want.

— Autumn Baggett-Griggs



## Segridofell

*A man laments about the fall of his native land, brought about by his lustful desires.*

Take me back to the mountains of my father;  
Take me back to the trails of men!  
Take me back to the wood-homes of the cotter  
Where all the legends run in.

Where the winters are forever  
And the snowfall never settles.

Where woes and ever' endeavor  
Deck the halls like hel'bore petals.

'Twas those great halls where I saw her first:  
The raven, whose wondrousness was bewitching.  
And in the calls from her beak which burst  
A sly, secret song of snitching.

To foreign and homebound enemies of my native land  
Who despised our sacred, age-old laws of honor.  
To friendlies and brothered souls of the state's hand  
Who surprised us with sharpened claws to donner.

Restore the celebration of winners from the day of my youth  
Before I sold the soul of their nation to the raven!  
Blacken the constellation of sinners from the night of the truth  
After I hold the toll of their vlation for the shavin'!

Return me to the cave  
Where the enemies had slept!  
And place me in a grave  
For the felonies I kept!



Against my land in secret!  
I was seduced by lust.  
'Twas Eve who reached to eat it, But  
Adam who bit the dust.

I told the Raven my country's  
worths And our weaknesses galore!  
I showed unto her the secret purse  
From the Battles of Allistor!

I regret I followed the Raven's song  
Instead of the ones of my daughter. I  
regret I followed the Raven's song  
Instead of the songs of my father.

Revive the sounds of my homeland's wintry, minty waters!  
Un-shadow the light brought forth from the silver moon!  
O' Rise sweet memories with the images of my daughter!  
Spare the horrors of her death by poisonous harpoon!

I cannot sleep myself – I am a coward.  
And so awake I roam.  
For any memory that has been showered  
With evidence of home.

So here, alone, will I die  
On Earth – a vibrant hell.  
For I miss home, so I will cry  
About Segridofell!

— J. Antonio Bass

## Words I Decide to Keep to Myself

When I say *I hate you*  
what I actually mean is  
I loved you deeply  
but you left my heart swollen.  
When I say *don't look at me*  
what I actually mean is  
your eyes leave traces  
of goosebumps on my neck  
and butterflies in my stomach.  
When I say *I can't stand you* what I  
actually mean is  
you leave my knees weak  
my legs shaking.  
When I say *don't talk to me*  
what I actually mean is  
please don't stop talking  
because I want to hear it all  
and when I say *goodbye*  
what I actually mean is  
I don't want you to leave.

— Victoria Cummins



## 7 Days

A broken-down ride, a traveler stuck outside,  
of my lonely little house, I welcomed her in on Sunday.

An unexpected guest settled into my  
nest, her beauty captured my heart on  
Monday.

She felt the same  
way, but put her  
feelings away,  
and we realized the  
truth on Tuesday.

She said that We were  
perfect, maybe made  
for each other even,  
but the week was half  
over, with my horrors  
getting closer on  
Wednesday.

So, we gave love a  
little try, while time ran  
awry,  
our hearts beat as one  
on Thursday.

While I got lost in  
obsession, she was lost  
in depression,  
my friends thought it wise, to give up on this prize, as time  
was running out on Friday.

We held each other close for one last time, like an angel from  
heaven, She went back on Her journey, and I was alone again on  
Saturday.

— Soumitra Ganguly



## Life is Changing

Life is changing  
I see it all around me  
The tape, the gloves, the masks  
We are in uncertain times  
Will I get sick, will I die  
We question every day  
Stores, schools, parks are all closed  
The Governor has shut us down  
You must stay home  
Away from your friends and family  
We saw this coming from far away  
Our Government did nothing to stop it

My world is not the same  
The rules have all changed  
Will I survive this new way of life  
Or will it consume me and take me away  
I get ready for my day, and wonder  
Is today the day it will happen to me  
It seems so surreal this new life we are in  
People die alone, no one by their side  
We must stay away from others  
If we wish to survive

The cashier is now an essential worker  
The big corporations have had to shut down  
We must have our temperatures taken  
We must wear a mask before we can work  
We must sanitize everything we touch  
A sneeze, a cough will make our hearts race  
We got the call one and all  
It is here, where we must work  
It will come again and again  
Soon, within weeks it will spread like  
wildfire Some will live, some will die  
Will it be you, will it be me

## Hell's Disease

Feigning strength with forlorn smile,  
forcing heartbeat; breath is bile.  
Shards of glass — mental debate...  
but good girls don't give way to hate.

Swallow hard and bury deep,  
all emotions; no retreat.  
Saintly sister, so far gone,  
wrenching spirit — bitter pawn.  
Splintering thoughts, attempting  
peace; Flinching posture — no release.  
Lack of ailment, no real cure;  
silence is the only sure.

Medicine for numbing mind...  
Standing, broken, freezing time.  
Others watch as judgments-fanned;  
cruelty mocks "just play your hand."  
Doctors, cynics, family, peers;  
"shake it off; no call for tears."  
Mind too full and heart too torn,  
yet no one sees depression born.

Slinking shadows tiptoe in —  
no cause or reason, pain or sin.  
So none can fully comprehend,  
though many try; well-meaning friend.  
Anger, sadness, darkness, fear,  
hate to leave but can't stay here.  
Lonely, anxious, void of care,  
living-dead with vacant stare.

Fog and haze envelopes all;  
one can't explain — no one to call.  
This sickness seizes best of these  
and takes no prisoner; Hell's disease.  
May hold no symptom, blood, or scar,  
but violates soul with deathly mar.  
It captures dreams and shatters joy:  
a devil's speech, a con-man's ploy.

While torture thrives, still hope lives on.  
Far past the hurt is Light of dawn.  
May seem a chasm — here to there,  
yet promise grows like love affair.  
Believing, still, words proven true —  
Unseen Reward will see you through.  
Steps crucial now as journey looms —  
Each breath of pain, each thought of doom.

Walk on — walk on — bear up the weight!  
Rely on promise; sidestep hate.  
Hands once wounded, won't let go...  
keep pressing on to what you know.  
Speaking on, from one once shackled,  
(Wretched spirit — mercy spackled)  
No dead-end where faith resides;  
the hurt deceives, yet Truth abides.

Choosing life and claiming grace  
will see you through this darkened place.  
You're not alone — you never were —  
Soon this will be a holy blur.  
Allow a thought... a hope, a prayer...  
Keep walking on... you're almost there.

— Cassie N. Nolin



## Still Life 1

The unknown artist has passed away and left behind  
His legacy within a life so fresh, so ripe, and  
A little sky, some window frames, a plain plaster wall,  
And the light tonight falls past the moon and lies asleep Upon  
the fruit basket. Now, amid the moonlight and  
The summer nectar tumbles in the distant castle,  
And yet, congregate on its golden rays, flying bees  
Can be clearly heard, like Adam and Eves, lips by lips  
The fruits of different branches and different trees, but same  
Mother, withhold the hot, clear substance, ready to squeeze.  
Past dreamy nights set aside happiness on dampened  
Tablecloth with opened hands pouring moonlight on the Chest,  
and the moon is still dripping as the rain of dawn.

— Thai Huynh



## Still Life 2

Oh, the lost Innocence, scattered on the table by  
The window, like the pears lying stilly, resting their  
Voluptuous bodies with dusky thoughts. An ideal  
Haloed where each stroke of frost and each of its shades are  
Amoré upon silence of hours, caressness  
Of the sensible past as if bursting into the  
Sweetness of those smiles and the bitterness of the tears  
Of Time, twirling to the music and the fragrance, and Waking  
up in the hoarfrost an Age of Innocence, Aphrodite's  
blessings. Make wishes for the taste where  
The yearning for warmth remote in the fruitless winter  
Dispelled shame till Jack Frost would press against the  
canvas For the tired hands stroking pears and the day ... was  
cold.

— Thai Huynh

## Endless Ride

Thought I was strong; oh, how you fought  
The dew upon this grass cut short  
Now tears forever brought

Thought I was bold; you braved on through  
The other sun has seen your face  
The angels walk with you

Thought I could grasp; you sang time's  
song Holding on to moments tight  
In moments, all is gone

Thought I could breathe; your breath at rest  
My heart beats for the absent youth  
Your soul to know no death

Thought oceans whelmed; you travel tides  
Creator of the depths is He  
Your journey now an endless ride

Thought this an end; you've just begun  
Until the while we walk again  
Our braided fates remain undone.

— Jennifer Bedsole



## Rely on Me

Does the sun know her warmth?  
Does she rely on me, too?  
I am obsessed with  
every ray she casts.  
Under the stratus, today's  
conditions, I've wilted.  
I've been content in her light,  
but I guess deep in my roots,  
I knew the rain would come.



I remind myself  
that when she is gone,  
others are warm,  
and tomorrow is coming.  
I find peace with the Moon,  
knowing that in the Sun's absence,  
we still share her.  
Entangled in her stars —  
ten thousand reminders that beauty persists, even in  
death — Moon is a patient ear.

Tonight, I confide in those stars and that moon,  
Re-reading vows once spoken to my sun  
on a breezy November nightfall;  
an oath too familiar  
to the seed taking root,  
stretching to the East,  
charged with the eagerness  
of that commitment eternal.  
Even on the darkest days,  
it knows that  
every rainfall prepares for  
the most beautiful blooms.

Tonight is lonesome  
as you are away, my sun,  
but in the moonlight,  
I rest assured  
that you're still out there,  
and that these promises we've made —  
prophecies written in the rings of the trees —  
are everlasting,  
expansive as the sky you've illuminated for  
me.

Tomorrow is near,  
And as you continue your voyage,  
I hope you feel purpose in your surroundings  
and peace in the journey.  
And should you lose your impetus,  
even for a moment,  
rely on me.  
I am yours.

— Autumn Baggett-Griggs

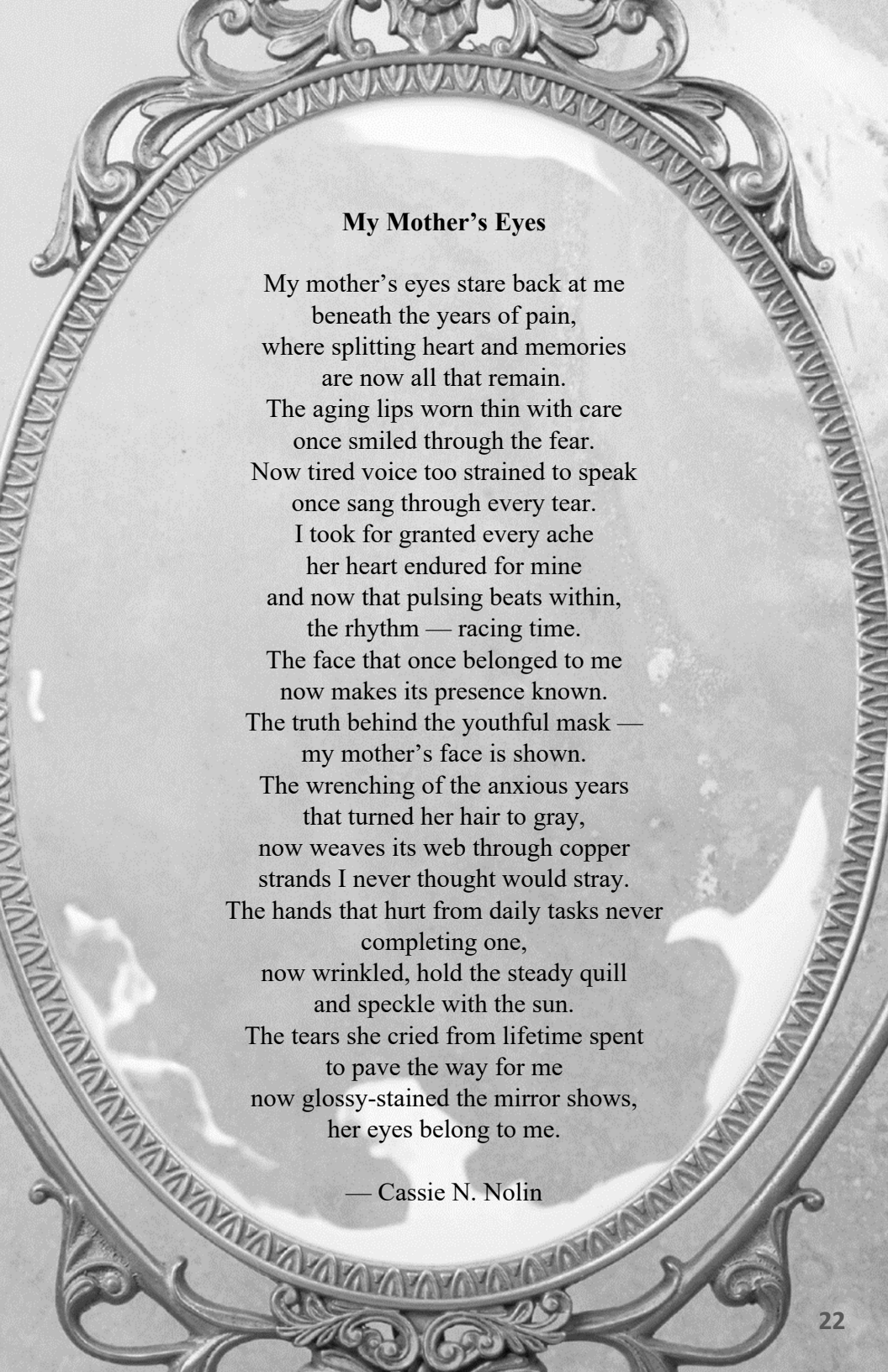


## Anxiety

I'm too afraid to walk.  
There are too many lights.  
To make a mistake  
How can I cope with this illness?  
It is making my life fury.  
It's like I want to walk.  
But my mind is telling me.  
Every step is a curse.  
A false step will make it even worse.  
All this pain from overthinking  
Making me obnoxious.  
I wish others can relate.  
To this unforeseeable misery  
The clock is ticking.  
Make a decision now  
Either face the fear or  
Amuse the crowd  
The wait would only  
Make the heart race  
Before panic settles  
Fight or flight  
The disaster just Begun.



— Xavier Kelly



### My Mother's Eyes

My mother's eyes stare back at me  
beneath the years of pain,  
where splitting heart and memories  
are now all that remain.

The aging lips worn thin with care  
once smiled through the fear.  
Now tired voice too strained to speak  
once sang through every tear.

I took for granted every ache  
her heart endured for mine  
and now that pulsing beats within,  
the rhythm — racing time.

The face that once belonged to me  
now makes its presence known.  
The truth behind the youthful mask —  
my mother's face is shown.

The wrenching of the anxious years  
that turned her hair to gray,  
now weaves its web through copper  
strands I never thought would stray.

The hands that hurt from daily tasks never  
completing one,  
now wrinkled, hold the steady quill  
and speckle with the sun.

The tears she cried from lifetime spent  
to pave the way for me  
now glossy-stained the mirror shows,  
her eyes belong to me.

— Cassie N. Nolin

## Your Presence

When sadness overburdens me  
I look to the trees and feel your  
presence wrap around me.  
When I am overwhelmed with  
worry I look to the sky and see your  
light shining down on me.  
When I am overridden with anger I  
look into the water and your face  
looking back at me.  
Lord, when the emotions of this  
world become too much to bear  
I look around and see and feel your  
guidance and spirit and it calms me.

— Shenna Morris



## I Found a Place Where Lilies Grow

The sun decided to  
Make an appearance today  
Gave the ground permission to  
Emerge a sanctuary  
Commended it for arriving as itself  
Witnessed it bloom in various shades  
Despite being cut down  
It still chose to survive  
And live another day

— Elysea Jackson

**That Girl is the Ink from  
Rorschach's Pen!**

I AM NOT A PERSON  
OF INTEREST! —

I am a warning sign.  
A diagnostic symptom, the  
lump, in your breast. A  
clear indication that  
SOMETHING is misfiring,  
synaptic gap confusion,  
cellular malformation.

“Darling, something here  
is wrong!”

—“yes, dear, I know.” An  
emotional bio-waste  
container,  
a radioactive isotope.

— and I will  
pull  
you  
to  
me

when I see the  
slightest  
bend, in the  
mold.

Ink splattered and anecdotal,  
“tell me what —”  
I am to you.  
and, I will give you the  
dosage to change that.

Mouth closed,  
arms wide,  
I'm here — transferring  
counter transferring —  
always the same.

Tell me your name,  
followed by the  
diagnosis. “A textbook  
case of —”

**DO NOT COME ANY  
CLOSER!**

I am not  
appealing, I am  
caution tape.

— Samantha Neeley





## DAILY GRIND

Mindless, numbing  
    Growing frail  
    Toiling, searching  
    Holy grail.  
    Ceaseless hours  
    Small demands  
Pointless pouring  
    Greedy hands.  
Thankless giving  
    Weak resolve  
Problem-solving  
    Nothing solved.  
Endless training  
    Creeping time  
    Resolution  
    Daily grind.  
Constant weaving

Carving stone  
Chipping marble  
Earthly home.  
Holy hammer  
Sainly call  
Building bridges  
Tearing wall.  
Strengthened body  
Clearing mind  
Promise grounded  
Call, Divine.  
One day seeing  
Woven life  
Daughter, mother,  
Woman, wife.  
Faithful steward  
Steadfast friend  
Joyful leaving  
Finished — end.

— Cassie N. Nolin



## A Plain Black Dress

A plain black dress and matching suede high heels  
The long, winding road of a trip I wish I didn't have to make.  
My tears fall slow but steady as last night's rain;  
in silence for hundreds of miles.

Not quite Spring, but the trees were starting to get their leaves back. Good thing, 'cause that's all there is to see in Mississippi anyway.  
There are introductions and hugs from strangers.  
Shared memories all blurred together in my mind

The casket is lowered into the soft ground and covered in pink roses that are almost as beautiful as the life we're remembering.  
And the preacher says we should celebrate,  
How is that even possible right now?

*My shoes are sinking into the mud.*

What a miserable day, only made worse by the dreary, grey skies.  
Then, it's goodbyes said to friends who, an hour ago, were only strangers.  
As I walk away, mud splattering against my legs, the sun begins to show through the clouds.

I stop and smile. I laugh through my tears because I think  
*One day, when we meet again, she owes me a pair of black suede pumps.*

— Emily Corbett

## Glorious

You are my light my gold star  
You take away the pain of being unhappy  
Your smile is of gold and your love is of grace  
Never have I felt this safe  
You take my tears and turn them into pebbles  
You soar like the wind and you keep pushing through.  
Nothing can stop you from what you need to do  
Watching you be the man you are is so notorious  
That I know that God is glorious  
For God to send an Angel like you makes me know that God is true.

— Linda Lewis

(Dedicated to Mr. D. C)



## Let's Be Perfect

Let's be perfect, you and me,  
Let's be perfect, let me see.  
Move a little to the left, no — now to the right,  
Dang, there goes the light.  
It seems from what I see, you can't be perfect next to me.  
And I confess, it's probably true, I may not smell good next to you.  
So I guess we'll be perfect, you and me. Each on a hill we can  
barely see.  
So now we're perfect, and alone.  
We're perfect like a graven stone.  
So I guess we'll be perfect, you and me,  
When we stand across an empty sea.  
We can be perfect, you'll see its true,  
Though now I've nearly lost sight of you.  
But we know we're perfect, through and through.  
Too far to see anything bad in me and you.  
Just perfect.

— Joshua Windus

## Dawn

... It all starts with the  
intention, guided by the  
illusion, constructed by this  
institution that either side is better than  
that of the other, the  
intention to place your side higher,  
forcing future generations to treat their  
kin the same ways as you  
did, only more no less...

We breathe, we live, and we sin.

Though the sins you sin are paid  
by the sin of us living.

We love, we loathe, and we feel.

Though the feels you feel are  
the hates for us and  
the feels we feel  
are the love for  
humanity, for both us and

... you.

We are humans, aren't you  
too?

— Thai Huynh



## Blue alert

Today I can only see  
my surroundings  
through sore eyes —  
the result of  
another night I have spent  
considering my own tragedies  
that have not yet occurred.

I heard the cries  
miles away  
and the nerves boiling  
right beside me;  
an entire community crying  
out loud  
as the weapon that gathered  
us for just five more minutes,  
or one last call,  
a reluctant goodbye,  
please.

I am weary  
as I assemble the parts  
of the one I hold most dear  
To gift to the unknown —

a world of Montagues and  
Capulets,  
who reduce atrocities  
to human nature  
and passively reject  
that what's just is also human.

As you go,  
you're sorry,  
and so am I,  
but we don't acknowledge  
this.

Will this be the last time I see  
you?

We don't ask.

I watch you go,  
selfless and determined,  
my own needs concurrent  
with the needs of my  
neighbors.

I smother my reservations,  
close the door and collect  
myself.

— Autumn Baggett-Griggs



## SHADOWLAND

*Dedicated to all who struggle  
with addictions of every kind.*

Rustling silence captures  
thought —  
How long I've tread this  
beaten lane;  
Claiming over —  
“nevermore,”  
Yet here I stand in empty pain.

These restless wanderings  
seize my heart;  
I cannot turn for fear I fall.  
As storm rides sunset, fierce  
and full,  
I scream confusion at the  
squall.

These chains of habit forged  
in steel  
I smithed myself —  
no captor's hand —  
So now I step, time after time,  
Into addiction's shadowland.

No sound of freedom, none of  
life;  
Obsession creeps with greedy  
gait  
And still, I walk this dream of  
death,  
A barren trail of love and hate.

Searching on for mind's  
release  
Ellipsing darkness, void of  
light,  
Held fast by “MORE” that  
will not cease  
My strength is gone, but still  
I fight.

Hear now, the wisps of wind  
that calls  
Round smoldered ash and  
filthy feet,  
A gentle stirring through my  
soul  
Where frightened girl and  
warrior meet.

A breath I feel, a dormant  
gasp,  
For One exhaled life-giving  
air —  
A hopeful seed is planted  
now  
Through lonely cry and  
desperate prayer.

No stronghold's baiting worth  
resign  
No pleasure's grip can spirit  
take.  
So here I stand — resolve  
renewed  
And should I die — with  
Him, I'll wake.

— Cassie N. Nolin

## **This Haunting Beauty**

This haunting beauty, ill-defined.  
This haunting beauty, like a vine.  
That curls around my chilled-cold heart.  
The ice, it threatens to break apart,  
And leave the flesh, tender and bare.  
I fear the thorns of a rose so fair.  
Not new cuts, or fresh laid wounds,  
But that they might reveal old things entombed.  
Dying parts I could not heal,  
And simply sought to numb the feel.  
Why don't you let my shadows lie,  
Beneath each lidded and fast shut eye?  
What torture you cruelly impose,  
With your beautiful thorns and piercing rose.  
That now I have seen the beauty of the searing  
light, I can no longer hide in empty night.

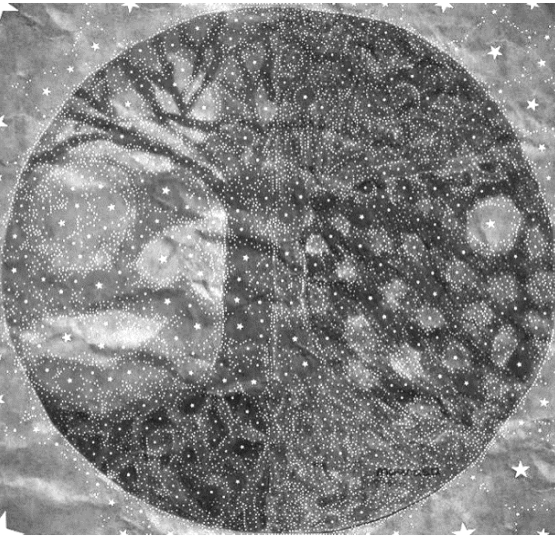
— Joshua Windus



## **We Wish to Be Rooted**

We wish to be rooted, but not in one place,  
We wish to be rooted, and cover our face,  
Lest we be comprehended, friended and known,  
By those we can't quite call our own.  
And, deciding not to settle here or there,  
We constantly wander everywhere.  
With nowhere that's home, and nowhere that's not,  
We're never quite happy in any one spot.  
But at least we aren't settled, where we don't  
belong, We're free to keep falling all the day long.

— Joshua Windus



## Out of Sight

Dead of night  
While in blissful slumber  
Woken with a sudden fright  
I find myself a blunder  
As we head out of sight

Another life could be lost  
We know this to be true

Death taunts as though he might  
As the scene we approach  
A continuous battle we do fight  
Back to life the patient we coach  
As we head out of sight

As the hospital we can see  
The taunts grown louder

No matter how hard we fight  
Death scoffs at defeat  
Although Death we try to slight  
In the end the task complete  
As we head out of sight

— C. S. Lee Gray



## Your Poem

My body is written poetry for *you*  
curving eloquently  
dotted with punctuation  
finding space for *you* to pause,

take a breath. . .

and continue reading  
a story that won't end  
your hands turning each page  
begging for a finish  
but my lips create stanzas  
for *your* thumb to brush over  
placing a book mark

to

travel

down

where emotion holds no place  
for my body is *your* poem  
a poem under the sheets  
of complete submission  
there are not stars to be discovered  
but carnal intentions  
these beautiful words  
are not meant to be read  
but to be felt in dark, unexplored places

— Victoria Cummins

## The Nothing-Place

*Dedicated to all of life's prodigals and to Ella Mae Natvick for her own personal and literary journey through "The Nothing-Place."*

I've come so far, no turning back;  
this prodigal — now almost home.  
A foolish, selfish, childish soul;  
thought I was better off alone.

The fancy-free that beckoned me,  
that temptress — worldly pleasure,  
ransacked my spirit, starved my being —  
corroded, languid treasure.

Still here I lie in pain and dust  
as mind craves at forgiving sky;  
with all my thoughts and inner voice —  
berated choices screaming, "Why?!"

The girl I was, who knew no wrong,  
who held such promise in her hand,  
is now but bones with guilty core —  
a wilted flower of the land.

No force of man forbade return  
yet still I kept myself away,  
believing that, should I find home,  
I would not have the strength to stay.

In fearful mind I saw the stones —  
the hurdled judgments of their glare,  
when scars — long wounded — tear again,  
from painful word and hateful stare.



What brought me here? This place — this far?  
An Unseen Hand pulled at frayed strings  
and led me to this memory-grain  
that feeds the layman and the kings.

I've come so far — no turning back.  
This withered frame, too frail to touch,  
has crept along pride's final path —  
refusing any help or crutch.

What will I meet when closer still,  
attempting journey through a crawl?  
I lift my eyes to what could be  
but can't recount the trek at all.

And only here, a humbled shell,  
result of world revolving — Me,  
a Figure starts a running pace —  
this dream I knew and now I see.

From dirt and wheat and grassy hill,  
I'm lifted — carried as a child.  
The fearful creature that I was  
had joined the crypt with past — defiled.

Restored and grateful here I lay,  
in arms that never closed the door;  
expecting one day, I'd return.  
A hope — discharged from self-made war.

I see the shelter of my home,  
my safety lies in Love's embrace;  
forgiveness — crowding out the shame  
from tattered, worthless, nothing-place.

— Cassie N. Nolin

## Tiny Little Me

The first time I saw you, was the first time you saw me. You look so tiny and fragile like a pea but you come with a whole big new manual I know nothing about.

So scared yet so happy to see a little tiny me. I don't know what the future holds, but I am sure I see us together in it.

Oh, you growth, I plead with you earnestly, do not take her away from me or should I rather say do not make her turn away from me.

You all should shut up, yes, I said shut up.

Can someone answer me then, am I being too selfish not to allow him to take her away from me? Am I being too selfish if I want her to remain as she is now?

Don't you dare look at me with that eye, am I the only person who has prayed such prayer? But yet I hear no answer because they are not real.

Look I want her to blossom, to blossom like bluebells in the spring, yet I want her to be just like she is now a tiny little me.

— Anita Adiole



## Hades & Persephone

At that moment, his eyes were fixed on such beauty never seen by any mortal or god. He couldn't look away from her. Her body, acting as a magnet, prevented him from doing so, and hopelessly he admired every corner that the light touched upon her.

Her wild and reddish hair fell naturally from her shoulders, meeting her feet, encountering the ground as if it were a veil created by the nymphs themselves. With pale skin, like the most beautiful pearl, lost and unattainable by any mortal.

He could not believe that such a creature existed and, above all, he could not believe the existence of someone who would leave such an effect of madness and attraction impregnated in him.

Their gazes met for a second, and in that moment, they could both feel an inexplicable fire growing in their chests. A pressure that prevented them from saying a word, altering their breathing.

A slight pain that compressed their chests, making them wonder who that person was. Making them want to return to that moment. Making them fear the impulse, the passion that neither had felt until now and that they could not understand its meaning.

“All this in just one second?” He wondered.  
“What if I could look at her for the rest of my life?”

— Estibaliz Lopez Morrobel

## Unheard Melody

I cannot lift my voice in song,  
the heart — too weak to sing.

I cannot feel the lullabies  
that drift on blackbird wings.

I cannot hear the melody,  
the mind will not recall.

I cannot see the end in sight  
and no escape at all.

These hands, once lifted strong in praise,  
are frail from worry's weight.

These eyes that looked upon the Son —  
now blinded from the hate.

These feet, that danced to freedom's  
tune, now pace in trembling stride.

The arms that once embraced the world,  
now walled — so fear can hide.

The slightest touch from sorrow's hand  
can leave eternal wound,  
and hearts that never learn to heal  
become the spirit's tomb.

Now jaded, innocence is lost,  
all spent to just survive —  
yet purpose placed on holy call anointed  
life to thrive.

The unheard music of the dawn  
plays still, to every being —  
when full surrender turns the heart  
and opens soul to sing.

— Cassie N. Nolin



## **Nighthorse**

Found a keeper;  
A fast black streaker  
At the end of the moon  
After noon.  
T'was a dark horse —  
An unimaginable force!  
The Great Black Racer  
Had run its course.

Its life was ending.  
Its coat was white  
Like a dawn reborn  
After death of a night.  
Found a streaker;  
A fast, black keeper  
At the end of the moon...  
All in my room.

— J. Antonio Bass

## **Journey On**

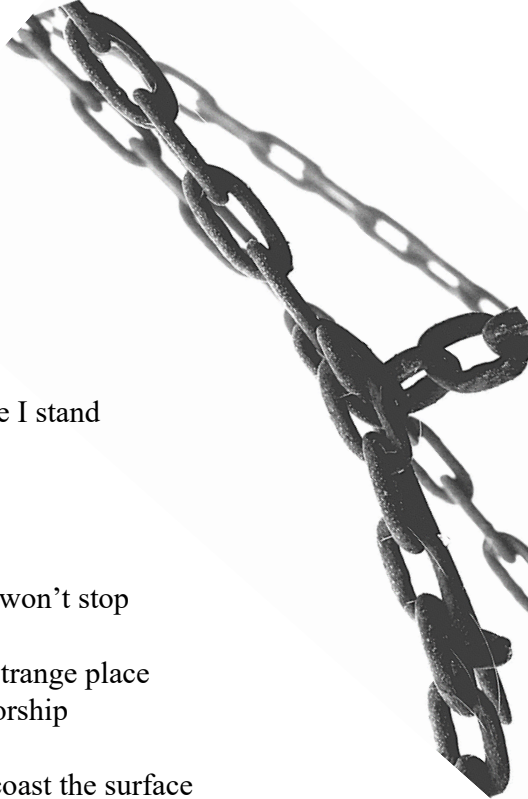
Surrounded by a thousand souls  
the heart beats on alone.  
For when the masses squelch the cry  
it turns the flesh to stone.  
Once rhythmic song forged through the veins  
of love and passion's thrill.  
Now silence found from depths within  
as darkness drinks its fill.  
How lonely, one amidst the crowd,  
when aching secrets keep.  
No one to hear the silent song  
that makes the spirit weep.  
March on, true heart, no rally cry  
will call you homeward bound.  
No cheers of fortitude will rise  
above the pavement sound.  
Yet onward must the anthem play  
as steps turn into years.  
For one day, starry crown will take  
the place of moonlit tears.

— Cassie N. Nolin

## Chains

I see the circles  
that make the chains  
binding reality with morality  
and I rise above  
to catch my breath  
from all this restless spinning  
If you could see the sun from where I stand  
shadows melt like tears and blood  
of those whose souls stop drifting  
Living life is like skipping stones  
when you're riding the seconds  
like waves through time and space won't stop  
to calm the rush  
and with eyes of a stranger in this strange place  
of chance and fate and days that worship  
sunup and sundown  
I try to catch eyes with those who coast the surface  
unbound to mortal madness  
they know the breeze that's blowing through me  
like pure emotion  
the only vibrant life alive without living  
and I share my stare like a sweet exchange  
a soul massage of understanding  
I'll still have freedom  
strength and rhythm  
and I'll still be dancing when I recognize the eyes  
of those who see the meaning  
glance to glance, a naked dance  
like wind, pure breath, and dreaming.

— Jennifer Bedsole





## Sorrowful Joy

Rain is falling, Time is lamenting sorrow,  
Coldness fills the space, and exudes the people's  
Hearts while falling here in the wind directions,  
Thousands of sadness.

Thousand miles of rain that expulse me into  
Nowhere. Theories of the dreamless self, the  
Lovesicks loom behind the decaying doorway  
Waiting for no one.

Lifting hands upon the clear sky and open  
Fields with distant rains of the cold temptation –  
Let my spirit go with the winds and leaves of  
Reckless confessions.

Yet my heart will never forget your smile, for  
Tears of sorrow, hidden and mute, a cry in  
Rain as smooth as boats on the dock enclose their  
Hoods in the rain there.

— Thai Huynh



**Now Known... The Lady of Shalott**  
*A first-person narrative based on  
Alfred Lord Tennyson's ballad, "The Lady of Shalott"*

I only yearned for sight of life  
For glimpses torn from cursèd gaze  
What bore the witchcraft none could tell  
But still I sat, chained to its ways.

While peasant, lover, king, and guard  
Continued on as others do  
I leaned in, shackled to the web,  
the tapestry of all I knew.


No vision past those greying walls  
No sun or stars to light mine eyes  
Only the haunt of shadows still  
That playful mocked me with their lies.

When in the mirror I would see  
The days of Heaven gracing all,  
The only part of play for me  
Was looming cloth from chair to wall.

Attempted still, each morning new  
I'd sing and hope the whisper told  
Was nothing but nightmarish dream  
And life was waiting strewn with gold.

Yet fear and warning held me fast  
To only see reflection's spans.  
There Camelot, in gilded light,  
Rose up her towers' hopeful chance.

I only longed to see with eyes  
What others lived from day to day.  
Instead, a mimic tore my heart  
And left me sickened of the stay.



Oh Camelot, thy glory held  
As paradise to Earth from High!  
Why could I not partake of thee  
so close, there weaving dreams, sat I.

Year after year the colors blend  
From threads injustice daily gave, The  
mirror — cursed and blessed for me —  
My breath of life and promised grave.

On fateful eve, that blessed sin,  
Sir Lancelot, in gallant stride  
Unknowingly, begraced the tomb  
that 'ere before I did abide.

And then in tortured weakness saw  
this knight emblazoned with my King...  
A vision for my bleeding heart  
That only spun for fleeting dream.

At once, without a thought or wait  
I fled from shackled, mirrored wall,  
My eyes beheld the flit of love  
And all from sight my hope did fall.

From side to side the mirror cracked,  
Revealing fate that I had feared.  
The curse that bound me to that room  
Now broken time and dying neared.

The hour had come, too long postponed,  
When curse would grip my feeble life.  
No days were spent as Lady fair  
Of mother or of loving wife.

Embracing all I knew to come  
Fled I to blessed shore below,  
For though none ever called my name  
I would not leave this world unknown.

Affixed a cross before the helm  
For only Savior guides the way —  
The light of life, amidst the dark  
A flickering of candle play.

My fears subsided as I saw  
The world I never knew before  
and drifted on in restful sea  
The Lady saw her Heaven's door.

I dared not look in strength of days  
For curse withheld the joy of sight,  
And never love had rescued me  
From numbing pain and daily fight.

My name, engraved before the prow  
So all would know in Camelot,  
The one whose shackled soul was freed  
Forever, Lady of Shalott.

— Cassie N. Nolin





## Glimpses

Seeing glimpses of where you'll be, what you'll have, and who you'll be, in spite of where you are, what you have, and who you are in the current state of time and space, seeing the disparities between the two — your future self and present self — regardless of how soon the fruition of the journey from one point of being to the next, is nothing short of exhilarating. Catching bits and pieces of a yet-to-be-manifested you — different like a stranger, familiar like home — reveals an attainable probability. This you that you see, like a prophecy, like a dream, takes a heart's faith, an inner agreement, a self's permission. The manifestation of you — the you that you dream of — cannot ensue if you allow inner fear to bind your hands that wish and will to reach out and shake hands with destiny. Bear your teeth and denounce the wily doubt that sneers and creeps, that whispers, "*you'll never progress*"; that utters "*you'll never become more*"; that hisses through its teeth "*this is all you have.*" Break fear like a bundle of sticks, twisted and wrought in the grip of your hands that have been renewed with strength and purpose. Profess with conviction and credence the truth, that the you of now is not bound. You are as free as your mind permits; stretch forth your wings and ascend. Let not the words of anyone you love or hate or feel nothing for, not the stifled scoffs of mockery and doubt from those feeble and trapped in the reality their minds believe and their souls agree, not the demonic or the wicked—nay, let not a soul or spirit or shell with blood and brain and beating heart hinder and thwart the divine foretaste of what is to come. In the boldest of faiths, smile and clasp arms with fate. Lock eyes with the you that you've caught glimpses of — the you with presence, poise and nerve — and declare:  
"Until next time. I will see you soon."

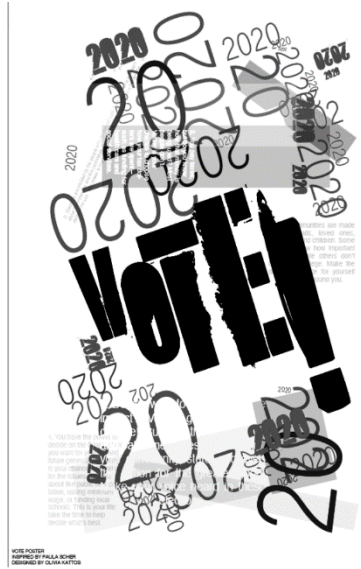
— Rachel Depietri

## Justice

*Saturday, February 13th, 2021*

*Written in response to the possibility of the United States Senate's acquittal of the 45th President of the United States Donald John Trump at the trial of the January 6 attempted coup under articles for inciting an insurrection at the nation's Capital.*

What is it? Vengeance? What is it? Who's it for? Where is it? Do they have it? Why don't they give it back to us? Why do they discard it? What does it mean? Who has it? How heavy is it? Will they give it back? Where did it go? Why did it leave? Where has it been? What does it look like? Why don't they like it? Who are they? How does it work? Why does it work? Why isn't it working? How did they keep it? What do they do with it? Where do they get it from? Does it work? How strong is it? Is it weak? Can it be weakened? Can it be strengthened? Can it be taken away? Will it kill me? Will it kill him? Will it kill her? Will it kill them? Will it revive? Will it survive? Will it die? Is it dead? Who killed it? Why? When? How? With what? Does it rise? Does it fall? Can they hear it? Can they feel it? Can they taste it? Can they hold it? How big is it? How small is it? When does it begin? Where does it begin? Where does it end? Is it hard? Is it hot? Is it cold? Is it lukewarm? Is it fast? Is it slow? Is it soft? Is it long? Is it short? Is it sharp? Is it dull? Is it dark? Is it bright? Is it black? Is it white? Is it rich? Is it poor? Is it awake? Is it asleep? Is it running? Is it walking? Who built it? Can it be torn down? Can it be shared? Can it be taken? Who took it? Can they take it back? Is it there? Is it here? How long has it been there? How did it get here? How long has it been here? Was it hidden? Why did they hide it? Who were they hiding it from? Does it start wars? Does it end wars? Is it a bridge? Is it a lake? Is it a fire? Is it a spark? Is it a crown? Is it a shackle? Is it a house? Is it a home? Is it a nation? Is it a throne? Is it a person? Is it a child? Is it a myth? Is it a wall? Is it a smile? Is it a scowl? Is it a bomb?



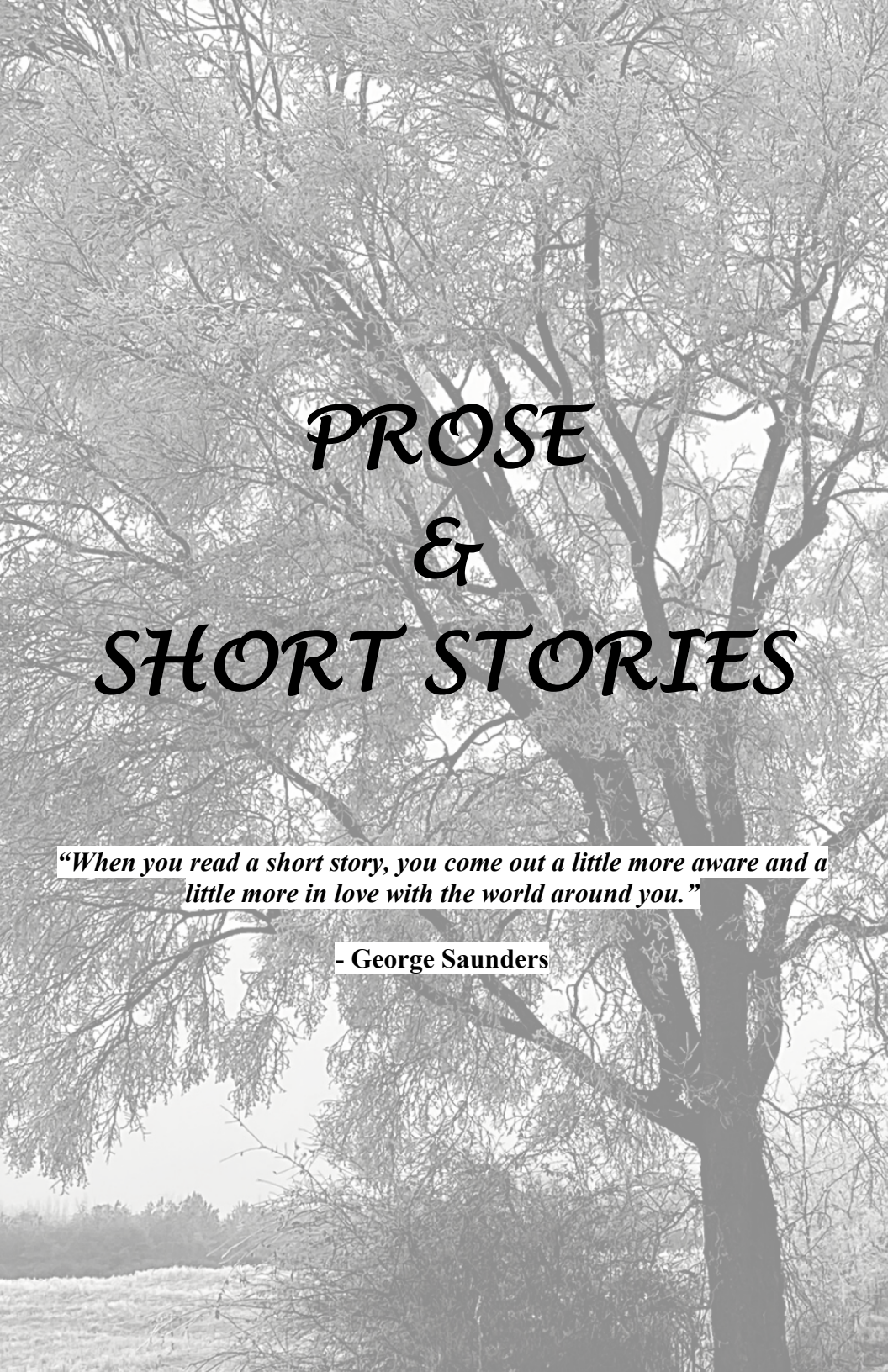
Will it explode? Is it a vehicle? Will it start? Has it started? Who can start it? Will they start it? Why haven't they started it? Why did they start it? Who was there when they started it? Who was there when it started? Should it be restarted? Where can it go? Where won't it go? Why do they need it? Do they need it? Can we save it? Should we save it? How do we save it? Have we saved it? Will it last? Will it last? Will it last? Will it last?

*Under Constitutional law, the United States Senate found Trump “not guilty” and was acquitted of his crimes by the votes of forty-three Senate Republicans on the afternoon of Saturday, February 13th, 2021, after this poem was written.*

— J. Antonio Bass



VOTE POSTER  
INSPIRED BY PAULA SCHER



PROSE  
&  
SHORT STORIES

*“When you read a short story, you come out a little more aware and a little more in love with the world around you.”*

**- George Saunders**



## The Angel's Soul

Thai Huynh



On a cold and bright day, my dear little angel was born. Your father and I watched you fall asleep in the wooden cradle with tremendous and indescribable joy. My face was red and hot, with something salty around my cheeks. That moment, I found myself the happiest woman in the world. When I opened my eyes and climbed up those stairs to check on you again, your chubby round cheeks were the pinkiest-red I had ever feared.

*I cannot see you!*

While the cheerful sounds were downstairs, you started to take your first steps in a new journey. *Mother*, you said. I fell at your slumber when I call you back. You were out of sight.

Your father and I tried to comfort you, though you seem not to listen. When I saw you lie firmly, I burst into cries no one has never heard from a human before. One, two, three, four ... days, your father was always coming into your world. The tall man with dimming greyish-blue eyes, saddening his face, bent over you, yet you did not notice. I did the same, waiting for you to turn back. But your tiny little cold feet were walking endlessly towards the door. I could only imagine. Father, a Glass Before I Go, you turned back and said your first words on the new journey.

*I cannot see you!*

Every day, the watchman told me your father always came to your room. It was time you had your own chamber. He would pick you up and hold your still body gently as if he rocked you into sleep. You were a joy to us, and he would always say those words before he left your sight to go back to his room, to my side. I could not be like him. Your gift of joy always threw me into collapse, in my bed, after those terrible convulsions every time I visited your old bedroom. But, I still kept coming, hoping to find you walking back there.

*I cannot see you!*

Today, a month later, I invited the psychics at Xa Loi temple to our home. I was too weak and down to rise and leave for the terrible outside world. *Your deeds to me had ended*, she said, keeping me from seeing you. You can only see your father.

It was unavoidable. Your new journey was destined in those Books at the Imperial Nether Office. The best I could do was always provide you with enough of their nether credits and substantial frugal meals. You would be healthy, pure, and ready for a better world outside.

*I cannot see you!*

*Can I see the boy again?* I said to the psychics. *If you want to, I will perform the ritual,* she said. The psychics started chanting a spell while holding three of those burnt aroma sticks in both her hands. They burned out, and she splashed some water.

*I can see you now!*

You showed up, pale, and the same as the day you started to walk. Mother, why *can you not see me?* I only saw father holding something that looked like me. Though it seems I cannot get his attention. You sounded grumpy yet gentle. I met many people outside. Everyone had a house called “sick-box.” They are in different shapes and forms. Mr. Vo and Mr. Be always care for me though Mr. Tho keeps nagging them. Has the outside always been gloomy before, I cannot remember. The others looked sad and deformed to me. You said to me.

*I can see you now!*

They said I could only move forward, through the wildwood flower valley, and down the bridge to the Nether Office. They told me many stories, and all surrounded me. It was fun, but I always felt. Mother, can you come to my place? I feel I MUST go or depart, but I feel I MUST return to name those rocks on the tray or return to you.

They said the place where we are is a transit station. At the office, I would then go to other places in the world, after the fairy-like beings decided. It could be worse, or it could be better. Children were not supposed to be in transit for so long. We must go. Everyone must go. I do not want to go. Mother, will you come and go with me? You said to me.

*I can see you!*

No, no. Not yet for me. I wish to, but I could not. It is against the Office’s Laws. I said to you. *Please, mother, cometo my chamber.* You said. *I could not, dear,* I said.

... to my CHAMBER...

MOTHER MOTHER

*PLEASE NOW MOTHER*

*I am sorry. NO. I said. PLEASE STOP.*

The psychics interrupted the ritual, and I was back to my senses.

*I cannot see you!*

Forty-nine days after you walked out, I was too ill to attend your funerary ritual for a safe and blessed departure. I was in my bedroom wondering where my boy was, hoping someone could find you and bring you to me. You must be *somewhere*. From nowhere, a butterfly flew to me, circling my head. Then it landed on my knee for a brief moment and took off towards the opened window. Thank you for coming to my life, dear.



## Letters to Franc

J. Antonio Bass



*From the Author: This is the first of many letters from a male in a great war to an individual only known by the name "Franc." We are not sure of where the war is or what it's about. What we are sure of is that he is in a great war.*

Dear Franc,

I'm so tired. What kind of war is this that keeps a man at arms for eight years straight? I want to sleep! I am tired! And speaking of tired, I guess you are too. I haven't received a letter from you all year. Did you get my last one? And the one before that? And the others? They are moving me to another facility this time next week. What time is it? What day is it? The stuff they give you to keep you sane in this war so your mind doesn't kill you is something else, I tell you! I can't continue this anymore, Franc! You haven't written me back! No one has. Mama said she couldn't. D'Carlo said he wouldn't. So, I'm by myself out here. Uncle BD died last year. I told you that already. Remember? They got him. Died in the field while he and his group were coming back from Saraville. The medic couldn't save him. They moved me here because of BD. I miss him so much. He was the only one who would talk to me. The other guys would just stare and mock me. I had a scar on my face from fighting with my bunkmate. He pulled out a switchblade and sliced my left eye and cheek. I was going to tell you... someday. I just didn't want you to make a fuss of it and have them move me again. Tired of moving. Tired of this war. They took of Ol' Mickey's arm, those bastards. I hate this! I told you I didn't want to come here, but you let them get me! Ol' Mickey don't even look the same without his arm. It was his right, y'know. he's right-handed! Now he's gotta learn how to use his left. One of the guys on the other side was shot last night. He was crazy. We're all fighting to win. What happens if we do? We'll probably be so full of the terrors of this place that we can't even speak of 'em. This could be my last letter, Franc. You should write me before the week is out. I hope you get this. I love you, Franc.  
Always.

## The Gift

Brianna Lewis



A child awaiting Christmas day.

Most people would think of this and associate it with glee and anticipation.

But not me.

Even as a child, my aged soul knew the disappointment that was to come. Times of cheer turned into that of sloth as those around me flaunted their gifts in front of my empty hands.

A gift. What is it?

A thing that is willingly given to someone without payment or expectation of reciprocation.

Gifts do not exist.

For everything that IS is paid for.

Wherever there is a “gift,” there is a reckoning.

People tell me I have a hard time accepting

Things that are put in front of my face.

But in my perfect world, the one thing right in front my face is a ceiling of velvet and six feet of earth.

But they don’t want to hear about that.

Some would say love is free,

But then they fall in love.

Others might say hope is free,

But then they feel despair.

The only other certainty in this life aside from death and taxation is the reality that you will eventually pay for everything.

Everything from your pleasures to your poisons, from your acts of kindness to your most secretive sins.

Don’t get me started on sins.

Because once you do, those claiming to be the righteous and ethical will come and deny all of my points without firm reason or rebuttal.

They will leave me with a scripture and a prayer and assume I know the rest.

But not until they say that Jesus loves me and has forgiven my sins, and the same advocacy I hear from those of the Lord around the time of Easter and Christmas.

They tell me I need to be born again, and that they're trying to plant seeds, and that I need to experience the grace of God and be washed in His blood. And then they look at me as if I'm supposed to understand without hesitation what they just said.

If I respond incorrectly, then I'm condemned to alienation.

If I respond correctly, then I'm one of them and they don't need me anymore.

These humans — these followers assume that comprehension of God is genetic and that since I had an aunt that sang to some deity that my soul was reserved for Heaven. I'm so confused. I'm so exhausted.

I have been made to feel like I am behind when I have never been told there is even a finish line. So why shouldn't I just make one myself and end it now? But they don't want to hear about that.

How am I supposed to give a testimony of my redemption when I have never been explained the reasoning for my assumed damnation? I am supposed to just come to terms with the fact that I am a sinner in need of vindication without any questions and run into the wide-open arms of a Savior.

The worst of it all is that they say all of this happens without payment. That God expects no action on my part to receive love and be welcomed into the majesty of Heaven. I thought I was the lost one.

This is supposedly the greatest gift of all. But just like every other Christmas, it's one I am never allowed to receive.

I'm trapped in a sea of unnamed guilt, ill-education, standards of perfection, and assumption of attained spirituality.

"It's freely given!" they said.

"Just reach out and take it!"

That's all good and well, but the only issue is that no one ever untied my hands to do so. But I won't have to worry about it much longer. So now I sit. Watching in satisfaction and horror as the blades have done their job. The purity of my fair wrists becoming stained with the red that marks the end. The room gets colder and the quietness gets louder. Maybe there's love. Maybe there's hope. Maybe there is a Gift. But it never found its way into my hands. My Christmas Day never came.

But they won't want to hear about that.



**Benhower**  
*McKenzie Dahlke*



Can someone ever shake the feeling of terror? A feeling so memorable, so haunting, that it's present in your sleep, there when you brush your teeth in the morning, or even when you're simply pouring a cup of coffee... It's almost enough to drive you insane. Everyone keeps asking me if I'm okay, what an absurd question. Is anyone really okay? They've been asking me the same overbearing, introspecting questions since spring, and now it's like they're trying to bury me in the snow.

"Krista!" I turn slowly as the cold air strikes my cheeks, I guess I was drowning so low into my thoughts that I've almost become frozen to the sidewalk.  
*When did I stop walking?*

"Hey Maddie." I decide to stand a little longer and wait for her... or maybe I just can't move.

"Why must you insist on walking to school by yourself. You know I'll wait for you." I appreciate Maddie's kindness I really do... but I also can't help and feel like it's more out of pity.



"I like to get to school earlier than everyone else. It would be inconsiderate of me to ask you to wake up so early."

"Well, here I am." Even Maddie looks at me a little funny, like I'm damaged goods, like I could have possibly inherited my parents' crazy. "Besides we live literally two minutes from each other, so whether you like it or not I am your logical choice."

I really do like Maddie; she even convinces me to smile every now and then, but I know once we enter the dully painted maroon school halls... we'll be like strangers. She'll just be the nice girl who talks to poor Krista Farringway.

"I can't disagree with that logic." I try to seem amused.

"How's your grandmother today?" I hate it when people ask that question, I know when they say it, they're always really asking something else.

"She's fine, just trying to stay warm inside." But what she really wants to ask is how my parents are, if I know where they are, where their cult has run off to, and if I know anything about it. However, no one really believes I know anything about it, no one will ask, because while Krista Farringway's crazy parents were off doing God knows what, crazy Krista was kept locked away in Benhower Mental Asylum. They told me we were going ice skating last winter, then dropped me off at Benhower, labeled dangerous to myself and others. Maddie's polite enough to walk in silence the rest of the way until we reach the school steps. "See you around." But she won't see me around, she won't even glance my way until after three-thirty p.m.

"Good morning Krista."

"Good morning Mrs. Pollard." Mrs. Pollard is the only teacher that will really speak to me, I always smile at her as I walk into the school.

"Are you ready for my quiz today?"

"I never am." I try to muster up a laugh, but I'm haunted by the hours passing. Because soon I will have to go home and look at my poor lifeless grandmother sitting in her chair, knowing I can't tell anyone. I know once people find out, my parents will come back... and I can't go back to Benhower.





**The Ant**  
*J. Antonio Bass*



So then, I heard (straight from the grapevine) about the sweltering heatwave up in Alabaster. I heard it was so hot the concrete streets melted the rubber on the tires. I heard it was so hot the people – probably the most conservative in all of the South – were as naked down to as much as the state law allowed them to be. It still wasn't enough 'cuz when they got home and stripped their sogging, sappy rags off, they somehow managed to strip their skins off too. That's right, I heard it all from the grapevine – honest to God. No, it's not particularly possible to do such a thing, but they did it. Yeah, they did. It was so hot the concrete melted rubber on the tires. I said that already? Oh. I was just emphasizing on the hot-ness of the concrete by repeating it, duh. How 'bout not interrupting and maybe I wouldn't have to emphasize, hm? That's right.

Well, like I was saying – the concrete. I'll repeat myself again because what I heard through the grapevine was that the concrete was so hot it started to crack – like lava on glass – and pop – like the corn. Yeah, it caused a scene. You could smell the concrete throughout the city, they said. I told you through the grapevine. No, it's not any of your business who said, just know that THEY said. Anyway, they said you could smell it. The streets cracked and everything. Yeah. I heard a little girl got her feet burnt up something terrible on one street. Her shoes were melting off her feet, and she was running to the water fountain, but her shoes were melting too fast. She finally got to the fountain and started drinking, but the water was too hot, and it burned her lips just as soon as she started to drink. They said she got mad and started crying. They said she went and ran back wherever she had come from, but she tripped on a crack in the street and fell hard on her face. Yeah, it all happened just like that. This was a white girl – well, she wasn't white from what I was told... She was Hispanic. Yeah, she was Hispanic, but her skin was white. Anyway, this little Hispanic girl had fallen flat on her face, and her face was scalded something terrible. Her face was bloody and red and black and yellow all at the same time. Half of her face was gone because it had gotten burnt off from the hot concrete. Plus, her hands and arms and legs and belly were scalded, too. Well, she was wearing a strapless crop top and those short shorts. Yeah. No, she wasn't ok. She died.

Yeah. Right there on the hot concrete. One of the store owners near the street actually watched her die. They said he said she boiled to death right there in the middle of the street. Yeah, I know. No. Would you risk your life to save a dead girl's scorching body? Well, he didn't. I wouldn't neither. He couldn't anyway. Well, if he had pulled her from that concrete, her skin would have torn from her muscles and her muscles from her bones like buffalo wings on a hot pan! That's right. I told you I heard every last word of this from the grapevine. Doesn't matter who it was, just know I heard it from the grapevine. Let me finish. Yeah, ok.

Well, the store owner watched her die, and he was close enough to see her eyes bubbling and boiling away, but they were still mobile. They were twitching and bubbling and pooling in their own fluid. They said to me that the store owner watched her watch a baby fire ant crawl out from under a little rock about a foot away from her melting face. Now, I guess the store owner had supervision because they told me that the store owner watched the girl die while watching that baby fire ant scuttle towards her. They said he saw the ant went to get in the girl's pool of bubbling fluid from her eye and – I don't know, I guess it thought it was cold enough to cool off – and they said the store owner watched the little Hispanic girl flutter her eyelids to get the baby fire ant away. It worked, and the little baby ant, they said, scuttled away (even though a line of smoke was rising from it). The ant, they said, was slowly scuttling back to its little rock but stopped midway. I mean, no, the girl isn't ok because she's boiling and burning. Let me finish, now. I'm almost done.

So, the ant is midway back to its rock, and there's a little bit of smoke coming up from it because it started to heat up but, like I said, it stopped moving. Well, miraculously, they said the store owner saw one lone raindrop fall from the sky and right onto the baby fire ant.



Well, they said the store owner said that apparently, the raindrop saved the bug's life, allowing it to make it back to its little rock. They told me the store owner started laughing. Yeah, I know. They said the store owner laughed his heart out. They said the little girl lived long enough to hear the laughter of the store owner and see the ant return to its home. Yeah. She started trying to cry, but there wasn't enough soul left in her to do that for a while because she was still burning away.

Yeah. I said I was honest to God that this was all from the grapevine. If you don't believe me, then that's on you. The point? I was just trying to tell you what I had heard. There doesn't need to be a point. It's sad that that little Hispanic girl melted on that scorching-hot concrete just like those rubber tires. It's not entirely a tragedy considering what the little Hispanic girl gained. That's right. If heat is hot enough, it feels cold. Where are you going?



## Short Stories

*Mark Grant*



### **The Artist**

Slender strands of brilliant sunlight shone through the cracked blinds of a small cottage. The cottage itself was nothing extraordinary — sitting quietly in a field deep within a forest. It seemed to be lost to time and forgotten by the world. The stray sunlight that managed to creep into the dark, studio-style home managed to find itself crawling along the sapphire eyes of a young girl. She let out a perturbed sigh as she brushed her scarlet hair from her eyes. Slowly stepping out of bed, she gracefully scurried over to the window and angrily shut the blinds — failed wardens in their job to keep out the tenacious intruders.

As she walked over to a small wooden table — it almost resembled an artist's easel — she passed several sketches lining her walls. The drawings contained vibrant scenes of great battles and fantastic adventures. One such drawing was of a mountain of a man wielding a massive battle-axe; there were several dead bodies strewn through the snowy forest that surrounded him. All of these works of art possessed the same signature in the bottom right corner: "Naria B." with a small pendulum sketched beneath it.

The young girl lazily took a seat at her desk. It took a slight strain to sit on the stool due to her short stature. She had developed a sort of "artist's block" over the past few months and had finally had a breakthrough. However, it had indeed been a grueling time for her. Balled up pieces of paper could be seen littering the floor of her cottage, and several broken pencils were also scattered along the floor; it was impossible to tell if they were broken prior to being "placed" in their new location. As she lifted a newly sharpened pencil and touched it to a fresh sheet of paper... something amazing began to happen . . . .

She was quietly humming a pleasant melody to herself as she made slow, graceful strokes on the paper. Her eyes were closed as a gentle breeze began to flow from the location where her pencil and the paper were softly kissing; they were intertwined in a benevolent dance. As she slowly completed each section of the drawing, colors would come to life along the paper. Once finished, a beautiful portrait was now before her. As she placed her signature along the bottom

corner, she lifted the portrait up to marvel at what she had created. It was the most amazing piece she had ever seen. The girl in the portrait was wearing the most gorgeous smile, and her sapphire eyes could be seen hidden behind her scarlet bangs.

Naria B., known by many names to those who worshipped her legends, had decided to make her presence known to the world. The Architect. The Muse. The Artist.

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## Before the Storm

Shimmering water peacefully caressed Paudihn Island as children ran along its shoreline; their laughter was the only thing that joined the melody of the sea. Tanrim was sitting quietly on the sand, lost in thought, as the other children enjoyed the summer sun around him. Though a boy of ten, he never cared much for playing with the other children — preferring the company of his island fox instead. It was a small pup that he had named Kit when he found it abandoned on the shore one year past. Island foxes were slow growing and retained their youth for several years. Their sand-colored fur and ruffled tails provided them the proper camouflage they needed to survive and hunt until they were fully grown.

Kit lay sleepily at Tanrim’s feet, letting out a squeaky yawn as he dropped his head on his partner’s foot. Tanrim gave him a soft pat on the head before returning his gaze to the sea. He was deep in thought; dreaming of a life off the small island. For as long as he could remember, which wasn’t that long to be fair, he had dreamt of crossing the sea and living amongst the mainland elves in Grunbidde. How he longed to see the tall buildings and the magnificent castle his father would tell him about at night when he refused to sleep. Of course, to his father’s dismay, these stories would only excite him more.

Then he saw it. A small black dot on the horizon. Then more dots. He squinted his eyes to get a better view. When he realized what he was seeing, he leapt to his feet, toppling Kit about a foot away in the process. The young pup let out an angry “yap!” before joining his partner’s gaze. Those dots Tanrim had spotted weren’t dots at all, it seemed. They were ships. Krozan ships. Tanrim was still standing frozen on the beach. Then it happened.

Like a meteor falling from the heavens, an immense ball of fire hurdled from the sky. It slammed into the water just along the shore, sending huge waves of water and steam to invade the sands. All the children screamed and fled from the beach — all except Tanrim. His mind was too busy racing. His father had told him stories about the Krozan Empire and how they had once protected the realms from a dark power. He knew their sigil all too well: an obsidian dragon. He couldn't understand why they would be sailing here — why they would be attacking his island? They were merely peaceful fishermen. Besides... who would be *foolish* enough to threaten them?

Tanrim cast a slight smile as he continued to watch the ships sail closer to Paudihn — explosions continuing to rain down around him. The sand was bursting into glasslike shrapnel from the heat, but it didn't faze him in the slightest. He didn't care. He wanted to see what would happen next.

As the Krozan ships began to grow nearer, they suddenly stopped in their tracks. On the deck of the lead ship, a knight in charred black armor stood. He peered through the slits of his helmet to try to understand what he was seeing. There appeared to be a man gliding across the top of the water. His feet were submerged a few inches beneath the surface, and he was kneeling low as he shot towards the fleet — the island quickly leaving him from behind. As he approached the lead ship, he slowly rose. As he did, it was apparent that he hadn't been gliding on the surface at all.

The man was now standing. All at once, a great serpent began to rise from the water beneath him; its head was his solid ground. Once it reached its full height, the man was now peering down at the ships from far above. He wore rough sharkskin shorts, and only a large toothed necklace hung against his chest. His hair was bleached blonde, kissed by the sun, and hung shaggy around his face. With his arms crossed, he spoke. His voice was louder than what should've been possible, heard by the entire fleet and the islanders alike — A feat achievable by powerful wind magic.

"Many have come here seeking glory," as he spoke, he gestured to the waters around him. It began to bubble as if thousands of fish were feeding at its surface.

"I'm glad you came. The sea is starving."



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## Thrill of the Hunt

A deathly silence had fallen upon the forests of North Grunbidde. Despite the fresh blanket of snow that had found its way into the realm, it was uncommon for there to be an absence of the pleasant songs of the winter swallow as they played in the trees. Of course, this silence had been preceded by a much *more* uncommon sound.

A small group of elves were quietly making their way through the winding maze of branches. They were on the trail of a rumored trespasser in their sacred wood. Stories had spread through the kingdom of a large Bigfoot-like creature making its way through the villages, leaving bloodshed and few witnesses to spread the tale. It had now come to the responsibility of Nelia, the elven princess of Grunbidde, to dispatch the Golden Arrow to hunt the trespasser down. Kreed, commander of the royal guard, was more than willing to accept the endeavor.

As he led his modest squad into a nearby clearing, the smell of fresh blood filled his senses. He almost had a moment of excitement as he thought that he'd discovered a new color of snow in this remote corner of the woods. Obviously, this excitement was quickly replaced with another emotion as he took in the entirety of the site.

The fresh carpet of snow was barely visible beneath the torrent of blood that now stained the forest. Elven corpses were strewn throughout the clearing — some pinned to trees with their bows still clenched in their hands, while others lay face down in the snow as if they had been fleeing for their lives. The mangled bodies looked as if they had been cleaved into pieces by a manner of rabid beast. A single sound could now be heard amongst the silent chaos — the wet thumping of an axe... repeatedly slamming into the crimson snow where there had once been the face of a young archer.

Kreed stood in what could only be described as terror as he witnessed the culprit. This mountain of a... *man*, who had been kneeling over the young girl's corpse, was now rising to its feet; an obsidian dragon tattoo was clearly visible on its back. It turned to the elves, who now had their bows drawn, and revealed a large toothy

grin beneath its bushy beard. Its stature, coupled with its beard, gave it the appearance of an ancient treant that had been known to protect these forests. It was grasping a large, blood-soaked battle axe in its left hand.

A young elf to Kreed's left nervously let loose an arrow that plunged mere millimeters into the thing's chest. Its armor-like muscles almost seemed to block the arrow from continuing its journey. The thing didn't seem to notice. It effortlessly hoisted his axe onto its shoulder, still grinning, as it raised its remaining bloody hand to the shaft of the arrow. As one would remove lint from a fine coat, it delicately plucked the arrow from its chest — its eyes still fixated on Kreed.

All manner of animal within miles fled in terror as the thing let loose a blood-curdling laugh and dropped the failed arrow at its feet. It began to lower its axe to its side and readied itself to charge — its eyes slowly dilating with a hue of red as blood began to trickle from its triangularly shaped wound.

The elves nervously looked to their leader for his orders; orders they would never receive. Kreed was enveloped in the fear known only to the dead as he realized he was not peering into the eyes of a mere man. His voice trembled as he uttered what would soon be his last words: "I am no demon slayer."





## The Redo Button

Adrianna Forehand



Devin and Marcel's father was a busy astrophysicist who prided himself on not only his work but the work of his two equally bright and boisterous young sons. The family of three lived in a quaint townhome complete with rustic green shutters and a white picket fence. Everything about this family was normal, apart from all of the reasons the family was abnormal, but this story isn't about the family in the quaint townhome with the green shutters and the white picket fence; this story is about Vikings.

"Give it back!" Devin groaned, using his weight as an advantage to pry the remote out of his younger brother's hands. "You watched TV yesterday! It is MY TURN!" he yelled, pushing Marcel down for good measure as he regained control over the 56" flatscreen.

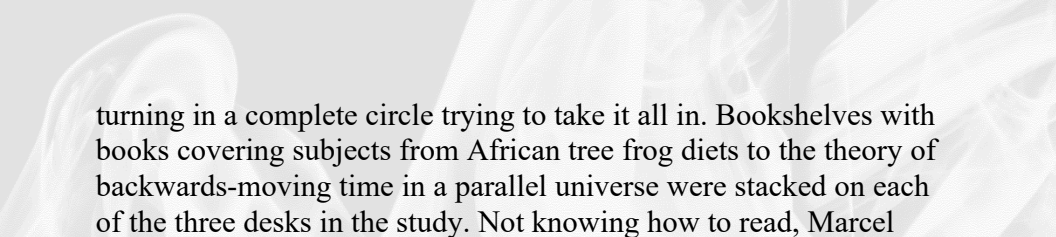
"Margie doesn't let us watch MTV, Dev," Marcel whined. "You know that."

Begrudgingly, Marcel slumped down onto the couch beside his older brother, caving to his bigger, much stronger opponent. There wasn't much that the two boys didn't argue over, and they constantly gave their nanny a hard time. Marcel was only three at the time his mother left; Devin was seven, and the boys had grown accustomed to Margie staying with them the past two years while their father worked.

"Let's play catch, Dev," Marcel said, sliding off the couch, and as he ran around in front of the TV set, Devin grew tired of his childish sibling.

"I don't like playing catch with you," Devin replied flatly. "You never catch the ball, and you always cry whenever you can't throw it far enough, too. Go bother Marge."

"Hmmp," Marcel pouted, sulking his way out of the living room. As he wandered down the hall past his bedroom, he wondered where Margie was and if she would bake him the peanut butter fudge cookies that he liked so much. Lost in thought, he ran his hand along the wall in the hallway all the way down until he reached his father's study. Marcel had never been curious about what his father spent doing locked up in there for hours, but today the door was cracked, and, having nothing better to do, Marcel decided to slip inside. Rows and rows of crowded shelving lined the walls, and Marcel stood for a moment agape at all of the books and papers lying about. Wide-eyed, he took a hesitant step towards the center of the room before



turning in a complete circle trying to take it all in. Bookshelves with books covering subjects from African tree frog diets to the theory of backwards-moving time in a parallel universe were stacked on each of the three desks in the study. Not knowing how to read, Marcel gingerly picked up the nearest book and disappointingly discovered that there were no pictures.

He made his way around the room, stepping over piles of research and unknown science-y materials, and just as he made it to the back where a small, silver ball was set inside a glass encasement, he heard the front door open, signaling his father's return.

Marcel didn't quite understand why he decided to open the case and steal his father's metal tennis ball, but in later years he would describe the incident as a moment of utter fascination mixed with the childish tendency to feel important. He hoped to garner some attention from his older brother with the cool invention.

A part of Marcel hoped it was a ball made to help him play catch better, and if it was, then his father must have invented it specifically for him. So, technically, it wouldn't be considered stealing. He stuffed the ball into his pocket and ran out of the study, careful to avoid falling over his father's mess, and rejoined his brother in the living room just in time to be scolded by Margie for watching MTV. "Where did you go?" Devin asked. "Were you crying in your room like a baby again?"

Glaring, Marcel opted to stick out his tongue rather than offer his brother a reply. A reply would have awarded him no form of respect from his brother, but he hoped to show him the metal ball later after they were sent to bed. He never got the chance to do so, though. After dinner, Devin and Marcel's father made Devin clean up the kitchen before bed as punishment for acting up in school.

That night, Marcel placed the ball under his pillow, and the next morning he slipped it into his bag, hoping to find the time to figure out what the ball's purpose was at recess.

Marcel was a troubled child; being the smallest in his class didn't help his case, and having been abandoned by his mother made him an easy target for the class bully.

"Hey, turdface," Jace called, walking towards Marcel on the playground.

The name calling didn't bother Marcel as much as you might think, but he didn't appreciate Jace taking his stuff all the time. When Jace noticed the silver contraption in Marcel's hand, he decided it was something he should commandeer for himself, but Marcel refused to let the bully take it.

He opted to run away instead, and although he was very small for his age, he was incredibly fast. Fast enough that the teacher didn't notice him leave the playground. Fast enough to outrun Jace. But not fast enough to outrun the moving bus. Whether it was luck or the squeezing of a terrified young boy's hand, rather than being squashed by the moving traffic, the silver ball clicked, and as he felt his body become distorted and his mind turn to mush, one thought rang throughout his five-year-old brain — Kindergarteners are mean.

He blacked out as soon as his body was enveloped in a cloud of white light, and he didn't find himself again until he was awakened to the sound of hoofbeats on the forest floor.

Jerked up out of the brush, Marcel screamed, terrified of the bearded man with a death grip on his forearm.

“What are you doing in the middle of the pathway, boy?” the bearded man's companions asked. “We could have trampled ya!” The large thoroughbred horses were the most powerful beasts Marcel had ever seen; their menacing stare and aggravated breaths would have been enough to terrify the boy had the bearded man not yanked him so roughly. Marcel was never a fan of strangers; it took him months to become agreeable with Margie, but his survival instincts took over. If they had planned to hurt him, they would not have slowed down; they would have ridden their horses right over his sleeping frame. Marcel hoped that was sound logic because he was beginning to notice the deep dark forest surrounding him and he shuddered at the thought of being left alone out there at night. Thick oak trees reinforced with impenetrable brush lined both sides of the pathway, and Marcel was hesitant to learn what lurked just beyond his line of sight. Gulping, he brushed himself off, and once his brain registered that the man had spoken, he reflexively spat out the first thing that appeared in his mind.

“Wait,” Marcel said still, understandably, in a daze. “Where am I? Am I dead?” The strange looks exchanged between the two men reminded him of the looks Margie used to give his father on nights he would lie about finishing all of his dinner when his plate was clearly full of broccoli and brussels sprouts.

“You were almost run over by us, son,” the bearded man spoke. “Are you alright?”

Marcel couldn't understand how he arrived in the middle of a forest, nor could his brain comprehend how he came to be settled on the back of the bearded man's horse, nor could he understand why he didn't speak up when the bearded man stuffed his father's ball into his satchel.

"Where are we going?" Marcel asked, as he clung to his new acquaintance.

"Home."

Marcel was forced to be satisfied by the short remark, and he tried his best to keep still and remain on the horse as the men galloped down the beaten forest trail. He squeezed his eyes shut in fright, but as he adjusted to the jostling ride, he found himself curious about this new world. Gone were the cement playgrounds and the safety of the fences surrounding each home. Suburbia had long departed.

The village they arrived at was small, with stick homes and tents made of animal skins and mud-covered children running amok as the women gathered water and fire wood for the evening mealtime. Marcel's eyes grew wide at the sight of it all. The dingy animal hides draped through trees provided a sort of common area for the makeshift town, and Marcel wondered if this was a campsite. He had heard of people staying in the wilderness for a fun holiday, but he never considered that people would live this way all the time.

"Where are we?" he finally asked.

He didn't receive a reply until the bearded man set him gently on the ground. "Dalby," the second man grunted, walking to what Marcel assumed must have been his house. Marcel helped hold the horse's reins while his riding companion removed the blankets from the beast's back. After a terrifying few minutes of Marcel trembling under the gaze of the brute, the man had finally finished his task and steered the boy toward a home. There stood a very disgruntled woman. Marcel had to do a double-take.

"Who is this skinny little runt you've brought back with you?" the woman asked. Marcel wondered if she was related to Margie in any way.

"Do you think we need another mouth to feed?" she continued. "I can barely keep up with your appetite, Arne. I can't feed a growing boy, too!" She smacked the bearded man's hand as he reached to grab her around the waist, and then she walked toward a stack of fire wood, grumbling about the stubbornness of men.

Marcel liked the woman; she seemed coarse, but he could tell she was nice like Margie. He wanted to ask about some peanut butter fudge cookies, but since he didn't think they had an oven to bake them, he decided against it.

"He'll pull his own weight, Erika," Arne said through his chuckling. "I'll take him out at first light and have him kill tomorrow's supper. Just fix the lad some stew, will ya?"

"Sure," Erika replied. "But he has to pull his own weight if he wants to stay."

His eyes felt like they might fall out of his head if he widened them any more, but one surprise after another left Marcel's brain reeling. Laughing like there must have been a secret joke, Arne pulled Marcel around to the backside of the home and instructed him on how to clean up before supper. Marcel quietly obeyed, and while he stripped down to his underwear, Arne explained Erika's behavior. Erika had long hardened her heart against children. After her first born died from a harsh winter and she had failed to have any more children, she resigned herself to despise the idea of motherhood instead of allowing herself to be envious of the growing families around her. She had always wondered whether or not Arne hoped to find a new wife so he could have a son, so when he made it clear Marcel would be staying, she didn't press the issue.

Marcel was too concerned about going home to understand the implication behind Arne's insistence on his stay with the couple, but he did notice his father's shining ball in Arne's satchel. It was at the dinner table that Marcel finally garnered the courage to speak up again.

"I need that to get home," Marcel said, pointing at the ball. Marcel wasn't sure that the ball would get him home, but he had watched enough movies with his brother to know that the ball was the reason he was teleported away from school.

"We can talk about getting you back tomorrow; for tonight you'll rest." Erika snapped. "After the day you've had, I expect you to eat every drop of your stew." She surprised herself at how easily she became motherly towards the child, and she couldn't help but allow herself to hope the boy would remain with them. She and Arne weren't getting any younger, and she knew that soon they would need help in order to survive.

The deep musk of the sheepskin blanket slowly dulled Marcel's captivated mind, and as he stroked the scratchy wool lining of his

pallet by the fire, he couldn't help but enjoy his time away from home. And as he watched the dying embers of the fires outside rise into the night sky, his mind wandered to Devin and what dessert he must be eating with father. He hoped that they didn't miss him too much, considering he hadn't missed them much at all.

"Maybe the cookies," he mumbled to himself as he finally dozed off. He would soon learn of the necessity for sleep. When the sun had only just begun its ascent above the tree line, Marcel was shaken awake, and he once again marveled at the mountain of a man that was Arne.

Arne had the broadest of broad shoulders; Marcel previously noticed that he was even bigger than the other mountainous men in the small village. With thick, wool-like black curls cascading from this head down to his elbows, Arne looked more animal than man. Marcel wondered if *he* stood out with his army-style cropped, blond hair. The duty of the day was for Marcel to kill, skin, and cook his first deer. The weight from the expectant gaze Erika held as the two rode away and through the woods hung heavy from Marcel's shoulders, so much so that he didn't realize they had stopped until he was dragged off the back of the horse.

Quiet. Marcel had never heard such quiet. He had never before been swathed in utter serenity, and if it weren't for the brute of a man standing beside him, Marcel would have been terrified. The trees reached higher into the sky than any airplane Marcel's father had ever been on. The trees' arms of leaves soared so far above their heads that the sun's light was being cast in hues of golden green. The butterflies and grasshoppers danced in such a fascinating waltz that Marcel couldn't help but want to join them, but almost as soon as he lost himself in his amazement, Arne brought him back down to the forest floor, reminding him of the dreadfully important task that they had to fulfill. Across the wooden landscape stood a hulking Roe Deer, and it was clear that Marcel would be the one to end the magnificent creature's life. Aiming the bow that the pair had brought along with them, Marcel found himself admiring the deer's fearlessness. He didn't want to kill it. In that moment, Marcel decided he would rather eat Erika's stew for the rest of his life than murder such a graceful being. Arne's disapproving glare and rough pat to his shoulder prevented him from making that mistake a second time, so when a second deer was found drinking from a slow-moving stream, Marcel aimed his arrow, squeezed his eyes shut tight, and released his first shot.

The sting against his cheek, the wind from the arrow's departure, the sickening green engulfing him, and the smell of the dirt underneath him made Marcel feel positively high. It was only after Arne pointed out that he had missed that Marcel was able to see past his hazy pleasure. He felt like a man. Devin could never aim and shoot an arrow. Granted, Marcel had missed, but at least he was out there, and Arne took him seriously.

Walking through the woods was beginning to take a toll on Marcel's young body. He was beginning to sweat more and more as the sun continued its trek across the sky, and even though he was shaded by the surrounding trees, the cooling effects of the wind were negated by the walls of shrubbery and underbrush surrounding him. Suddenly, Arne froze and Marcel ran flat into the man's back.

"Shh!" he sounded harshly. "There's something better than a deer!" Marcel peered around Arne's torso and yelped. A mere fifteen feet away stood a colossal grizzly bear. "Bb-bb-bb-bear!" Marcel tried to scream, but one fierce glare from Arne had him shift into a modest whisper-yell.

"I see the bear, boy. Forget the deer, we'll bring home a bear tonight."

"What?"

"You heard me, lad. You stand here and fire off as many shots with the bow as you can; I'll go 'round and catch him from behind." Before Marcel could protest, Arne had shoved the bow and the satchel of arrows into his arms, slid his sword from his hip, and traipsed off into the woods. Once again Marcel was alone. With trembling hands and glazed over eyes, he loaded his bow and aimed, but before he could release his shot, he stepped on a stick. The resounding crack echoed throughout the otherwise silent forest, and the bear's great big eyes zeroed in on Marcel's shivering frame in less than a second. He did not have time to load another arrow, and he most certainly did not have time to turn and run away. He froze. He squeezed his eyes shut tight and waited for the worst, but what he heard was a loud whooping noise. He ripped open his eyes to find Arne swinging his blade around at the bear and yelling for the beast to come get him. The beast growled, and drool spilled out from between his massive teeth, but Arne did not flinch. He let out a battle cry and swung his sword around, landing a strong blow to the creature's back. Almost as quickly as the ordeal began, it ended. The blow was enough for the beast to stumble back and turn to stagger away, blood dripping from the gaping wound.

“I-I’m sorry,” Marcel whimpered, scared of the fire still burning in the ferocious man’s eyes. Arne let out a heavy sigh before replying. “That’s quite all right, lad. I’ll bring some Dalby men ‘round here tomorrow and we’ll kill the beast.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon hunting down a deer and scaring it off with an arrow, until Marcel finally got the hang of it and hit one. Dinner that night was riveting. Long gone was the memory of the near-death by mauling. Marcel was the honored guest of the entire village, and when he announced that the beast was ready to be served, the Vikings lifted their mead cups and toasted his bravery and manliness. Arne never mentioned the mishap with the bear to the village, and Marcel was grateful. For one night he got to pretend to be brave. The praise from the men around him made him almost burst with pride, but the smile and hug from Erika brought him almost to tears. There was no mistaking the motherly fondness that Erika had grown to harbor for the child, and it was almost enough to make Marcel want to stay.

But that night he dreamt of his real mother.

He knew he had to leave, but he didn’t know how. He knew the ball clicked when he squeezed it, but he wasn’t sure it would take him home. Marcel struggled with feeling helpless, but his afternoon of hunting with Arne had shown him his own strength. Marcel found the courage he didn’t think he could ever possess, and he slipped the silver ball out of Arne’s satchel. Crawling over the sleeping couple and out of the wooden home, Marcel tried to remember exactly what he had done when he was teleported from school in the first place. The fading vision of his mother’s cascading crimson hair fogged up his mind, and as he made his way to the edge of the village where the horses were kept, he stopped to see them one last time. Humming his mother’s lullaby he didn’t know he remembered, Marcel reached up and placed his tiny hand on the monster’s muzzle. The tune seemed to calm both of them, and he found the courage trace around the horse’s neck before resting his body against its side.

“It’s okay to need a lullaby every now and again,” he said, smiling at the large, black gentle giant. After saying goodbye to his new friend, he continued his journey away from the village and the people he had come to love.

When he was close to giving up, he came across the same stream the deer had been drinking from earlier that day, and he wondered whether or not that fellow had a family that he was trying to get back



to. Walking along a stream in the dark is a tricky endeavor, and just like before, when disaster struck, the ball worked its magic, its science.

Flailing his arms about as his ankle twisted in inhuman angles, Marcel gripped the ball in such a way as before, and the white halo once again engulfed him. This time Marcel was not afraid. Arne had shown him true manliness, true bravery, and when he felt the familiar distortion, Marcel thought of home.

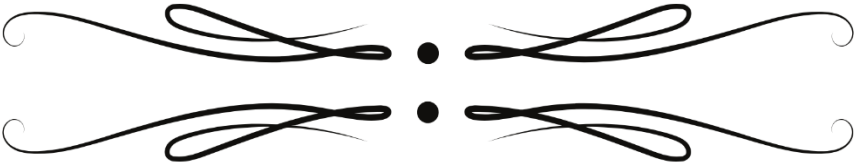
Suddenly he was back in his father's office staring into the glass case when he heard the front door open.

He quickly and quietly slipped out with the grace he had earned on the forest floor and joined his father for the meal Margie had prepared for them. He smiled when she served them peanut butter fudge cookies for dessert, and only complained once when she limited him to two. Marcel wondered the next day at school if any of it were real, but when Jace approached him on the playground in the same manner as before, Marcel was convinced he did not dream up his newfound courage. For the first time in his long five years of life, Marcel stood up for himself.

Instead of taking flight as he did only days ago or freezing like he did in the forest, Marcel pushed himself up and imagined he was as big as Arne, no bigger. When Jace got close enough to hurl his petty insult, Marcel reared his fist back and released his frustration as hard as he could. In just the same way the arrow had transported Marcel, his contact with Jace's face exhilarated him. The momentum of his arm followed by his body weight caused complete contact with the bully's right eye, and Marcel felt his own insecurities melt as soon as he felt skin meet skin.

Vikings may not have been the best influence on him, but his one-week suspension seemed like a reward for nailing Jace in the eye. Just like before in the village, Marcel seemed to gain the respect of his peers, and he hoped that Arne would be proud of him, even if Margie wasn't.

Marcel never told his father about his experience with Arne, and Marcel's father never learned of his son's adventure into his study, or the temporary theft of his world-renowned invention. But Marcel would never forget his experience in the village, nor would he ever venture back into his father's study. His father would go on to conquer the world of science with his famous "Re-Do Button," and Marcel would learn to take courage and be brave enough to face his challenges rather than run from them.



**Short Stories**  
*Johneise Bennett*



**Life on Mars**

Vena's head throbbed. Quickly, then slowly...very slowly. She'd awoken from the botched mission that she'd so happily taken on, only to discover too late that it was a "decoy mission" under NASA's vicious operation. Vena could taste the hatred for the loud-mouthed, obnoxious employees of the organization. She could still see her boss' sly grin as he slipped his sweaty fingers between hers, confirming her status for the mission. The devil, that man is. Vena carefully sat up, feeling the uneasy gravitational force waving underneath her limp body. She tried to focus; she tried to steady her eyes to get a better view at her new surroundings.

The more conscious Vena became, the more anxious she felt. She prayed she could leap from her body, into another place, or even yesterday. She inhaled deeply. How lovely yesterday was, she thought. She'd taken it for granted, but if she could just go back in time...if she could just. She couldn't think about that now. She had to find her comrades and devise a plan to return. Again, the anxiety swept over Vena's body as she slightly swayed, as if she were dancing. She felt that she would puke any minute now. "Relax." She heard the calm, but unnerving and unfamiliar voice. She looked around, straining her eyes through the misty red dust that looked as if it just sat upon its surface, unmoving.

"Who's there?" Vena's voice was breaking, barely above a whisper. She felt like she was choking as she thoughtfully placed her shaking hands around her neck.

"You must relax." Vena closed her eyes and tried to calm herself, determined to find her associates and friend, Chloe. "There," the calming voice spoke again, only this time, Vena realized that she couldn't just hear the voice; it was in her head! "*We can communicate much easier when your body's temperature and pressure rates are normal.*" Vena's eyes snapped open.

She couldn't believe it! This, this that Vena was hearing, had to be impossible. In all the years' work of scientific researching and studying, it was Vena who'd made the first contact with human life on Mars. Or, some sort human? Vena thought. On cue, the unknown creature spoke telepathically, again to her. "*We are human. I am human.*" The voice remained calm, but Vena felt that the voice was closer now.



“Who are you? Where are you?” Vena stumbled over her words and questions, “Where are my friends? Are they okay?” She could do without the telepathy. She didn’t like the creature inside of her head, reading her thoughts anyways. Just then, a thin, tall, being in sheer material that seemed to shine on its glowing-like body slowly appeared from the red dust.

“I apologize,” it said, “for invading your personal space. I only thought it better if I were to let you come to, hearing my voice in your dreams and mind, rather in my actual voice.” Vena couldn’t speak. Momentarily, she was completely stuck in time. After a few long seconds went by, the being had to remind Vena to breathe. “Your friends are safe. Chloe is fine. One of your comrades had a minor injury to his shoulder, but we’ve taken care of that as well.” The beautiful being seemed to float towards the now stunned Vena.

“Buuu...ttt..bbut how?” Vena questioned confusingly. There had been at least eighteen other missions to Mars, but none reported human life. No one could find enough supporting evidence to accept these claims, and every time a new theory was approached, it was immediately debunked due to the deadly radiation that laid upon Mars's surface. Vena almost began to panic again until she realized the creature was face-to-face with her, touching her shoulder. Vena realized that it was more human than she. This ‘foreigner’ had nothing foreign about it and she was actually...truly beautiful. She held her hand out, to help Vena to her feet and Vena obliged. In that instance, they both began to float away, somewhere, together.

“How *what?*” The being cocked her head to the side, waiting for Vena’s response.

“How am I still alive? How are we still alive?” Vena questioned. “The radiation on the surface...it’s not safe for...well, for us.” As they moved towards the unknown destination to Vena, she was finally able to see things clearly. She could see the beautiful make of a long, clear bluish-green narrow lake that seemed to stretch over or around its horizon. The beautiful woman spoke to Vena calmly as she led the way.

“No worries,” she’d responded in a slightly more cheerful tone, “We’re not on our surface. We live in Ares’ subsurface. There are no poisons to harm you there.” Vena began to see clearer through the blood colored mist that stood around them; as they made their way forward, the dust seemed to part for their independent passage.

Everything was freshly scented with a hint of lavender here and there; soft smells and tastes of warm vanilla penetrated every one of Vena's pores. They were heading towards a large, white steel dome-shaped-looking bunker, but much more attractive. Its windows were dressed in a thick glass that seemed to reflect from its surface. It looked transparent. Reading Vena's mind again, the lady assured me again, "You will be back with your friends in due time, I can assure you."

"So, where are you taking me now?" Vena asked, more confident. She knew this 'alien' didn't want to inflict harm upon her, for had it, it would have done so when she was unconscious and weak. Vena was more alert, and more importantly, more alive. More alive than she'd ever been. As they approached the building's entrance, the lady turned to Vena.

"I am taking you to see our Elders." She simply replied without looking her way.

"Our Elders?" Vena stopped floating momentarily. "What'd you mean, our?" She shook her head violently but unknowingly. "Who are you?" Vena asked the woman again.

"My name is Miramar. This is your ancestors' native lands, Vena. And you are my sister." She stated with a sense of pride. But that was all Vena could remember, before she'd fainted.

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The mission was a botch from the start. If only Vena had known what NASA was truly up to when she'd received that call from the head of the Flight Operations Directorate of NASA and the chief of the Astronaut Office announcing her selection. Vena had taken all the steps, all the leaps of faith and determination to get to where she was now heading. She'd completed the physical training with flying colors; from survival methods to geology, Vena breezed through her years of preparation. She'd anticipated this moment, waited on it for years, and it had finally come to her. All she could think to do was praise her Creator, for hours, and then she called her parents. They were just as happy for her. Vena knew how much her parents loved her and wanted her to fulfill her life's dream: of traveling to space—and as she got older, preferably Mars. Something about that very similar planet to the one she'd grown up in always seemed to pique her curiosity. She was drawn to space and everything associated with it. Vena was also aware of the fact that her parents were not her biological ones.

No, Vena's evil, despicable biologicals had done away with her, literally. She was found stuffed inside a small box that was only big enough for her to fit in and a warm, lousy blanket, in the trash. Vena hadn't made a sound while lying in the dirty, smelly dumpster for hours. She was lucky to have been placed in her parents' dumpster. Her dad, Bobby, had come outside later on that night to throw out the trash and spotted Vena's smooth, lightly-glowing, bronze skin twinkling throughout the dumpster as the large wood rats seemed to steer clear of the babe, rather protecting her from other disease-ridden wild animals.

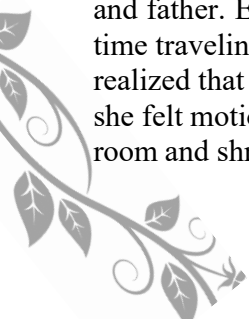
Hysterically, he'd rushed the infant inside to his wife, who in return, called Child Protective Services, and after only a few months of uncertainties in the system, Vena was taken back to her now permanent home with Bobby and Priscilla. They were her saviors. They assured her, however, that she was theirs. They hadn't been able to conceive, so Priscilla took Vena as a miracle from their Creator and treated her well, the best she knew how.

They reminisced upon these things together, some unspoken of, as they said their good-byes to their only daughter. Her mom's eyes were now filling up as Vena headed to board the waiting plane that would send her off for her months of training before the departure. Priscilla had placed her hands on top of Vena's cool, jittery fingers as she stared her square in the eye. "Everything you've ever wished to know, you now will," she stated softly as a small smile crept upon Vena's face. Her mother knew how much the science and study of space meant to Vena, and although she didn't jump for joy, Vena knew her mother was proud of her and happy for her.

"I won't be gone forever, Mom." Vena waved her hand dismissively. "And I promise to tell you everything when I get back!" She gently pressed her lips to her aging mother's soft cheek. "I'll be fine Mom," she stated, "I promise." Her mother shot her a quick smile as her dad came to say his own good-byes.

"Of course, you will." Priscilla assured her.

It seemed like it had been decades when she'd last seen her mother and father. Everything, she noted, seemed like centuries ago. "Am I time traveling or something?" Vena asked nobody, jokingly. She'd realized that she'd been passed out for some time, for as she sat up, she felt motion sickness. Miramar soon appeared in the plain-walled room and shrugged softly, obviously hearing Vena.



“Maybe. In a sense.” Vena’s expression changed.

“How long have I been out? Where are my friends?” Vena almost screamed, then her tone changed to more of a pleading voice. “You promised me.” Vena placed her head in her hands. “Our spacecraft crashed on something. I have no idea what.” She didn’t give Miramar time to respond. “We were just supposed to gain partial access to Mars’ surface and collect particles and minerals that we could transfer back to the lab with us to test.”

“What for?” Miramar asked. “Why do you want to test the particles and minerals of our lands, Vena?” Vena looked up sharply. This was this creature’s first time referring to her by name. It caught her by surprise, not just her calling her by name, but her questions. Miramar either didn’t catch the look or didn’t care. “Why must they want more from our world? We never come to theirs with our technological researches and scientific practices or theories. We do not orbit the place you refer to as home. So, why do your people from there not acknowledge that?” she asked in a no-nonsense tone. For once, Vena was stuck for words. She began to remember the strange conversation she’d had with Miramar before she’d fainted. Vena could no longer think straight as she stood up and began to pace back and forth.

“NASA performed its research on your world for many reasons; the main two were the similarities your planet has to ours, and the other reason...” Vena’s voice seemed to trail off.

“We were trying to see if we could find any signs of life.” She admitted timidly as Miramar laughed a bit.

“You found what you were looking for, huh?” She stood by the door now. “Our Elders would like to have a word with you. Then, Vena, I will take you to your friends. But you must speak to our Elders first.” Vena controlled her facial expression. It took everything in her not to yell and scream and demand answers. Things just weren’t adding up with Vena, and she wanted, no needed to get to the bottom of things. Vena stopped her pacing and stood confidently in front of Miramar. “Fine. Let’s go then.”

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The room Miramar led Vena to was an immaculate rose-colored area with large, beautiful chandeliers and a crystal ball that adorned the center of the mirrored ceiling. Vena took it all in. For some odd reason, she felt like she’d been here before. She felt in control and comfortable. Her only hope, however, was to answer these “elders” questions and graciously ask for their services in fixing their spacecraft and allowing them to descend back home.



Vena now painfully wished Chloe was near her. She could now definitely use her more level-headed friend. Once Vena was standing in the middle of the room, Miramar took a few steps back from her and quickly bowed. Vena looked on suspiciously, but after noticing the ascending shadowy figures seeming to come through the mirrored walls, Vena followed suit and took a knee.

“Please stand,” someone stated in a sweet melody.

“Welcome home, Avena.” A deep and authorial voice spoke up. Vena rose up and let her eyes lead the way. These were nowhere near “*aliens*”, they were or at least looked, completely human.

“Home?” Vena questioned in a tired voice and puzzled look. The tall, muscular dark-skinned man with a glowing bronzed appearance about himself nodded.

“I know it may be confusing, my child.” He spoke slowly and with delicacy as he made his way towards a now erect Vena. “But this is your home.” He lifted his huge arms and slowly twirled around, showing Vena the entire room. Vena shook her head, dismissively.

“I don’t understand.” Vena now spoke meekly as Miramar quickly came to her side in assistance, and placed her hand upon her shoulder. Each time she’d done this, Vena felt some sort of ripple effect. Some sort of attachment to Miramar and her surroundings. This time was no different.

“Give us time to explain,” he assured Vena, “then maybe you will.” Instead of having a long, drawn-out conversation about how everything came about, the man simply placed his huge hands on both sides of Vena’s head and closed his eyes. Vena’s blood warmed; she felt it. Her hairs stood up everywhere on her body, and a bright golden light shone within her inner eyes.

“Remember.” He whispered softly to Vena, and remember, she did. Vena could now vividly remember the night she was placed in that dirty dumpster. She could even remember her parents, those evil devils they were. But no, they weren’t. She could still hear them throughout her whole life. It seemed that Earth had become too powerful for Vena to withstand because she’d blocked out every memory and dream that she’d ever had of life around her and as she knew it within. Vena remembered her parents’ prayers to their Creator, Omega and her mother’s sweet, wet tears that streamed down her face as she prayed to goddess Isis for her wisdom, and the twin god and goddess, Heiress and Hegat, for her protection in this “odd planet.”







Vena then clearly heard her mother's fragile and broken voice. "They've come again." She felt her father's strong arms swoop baby Vena safely into his arms.

"We must protect her. We have no time and we are outnumbered, Zena!" Vena could feel her mother's fury, but she felt her father's powers of persuasion as they overcame her mother. "I know this is not what was planned," her father stated with a direct swiftness, "but what Omega has gifted us with is not just a miracle, but the love of our lives. We must protect her. Not just for our sake, but for the sake of our people, Zena. The sake of our existence." Vena felt Zena's sad, lingering gaze upon her.

"They'll rip us apart to find it." She whispered. Her father nodded in agreement.

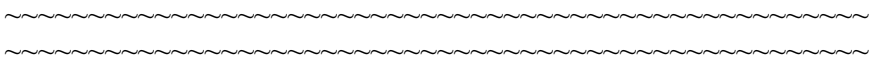
"But they never will," he whispered back softly.

"Give her to me," her mother stated directly.

Vena came to, and she was back inside the dome-shaped building. She looked around, and everything seemed to shift, every piece, every mirrored wall as the Elders all ascended toward the now distraught Vena. She touched her neck. "But... who... what did they want to find?" The tall, muscular man whom Vena assumed was the leader of the Elders took a step back, giving Vena back her personal space.

"They wanted to find the missing piece to their puzzle. They wanted to gain a power that did not belong to them, for they would never truly know what to do with it." Vena's heart throbbed and her hands were shaking and sweaty. She'd thought she had just wanted to travel in space and research it and see all the amazingly impossible things, but now, Vena had no idea what she'd truly wanted. And for once, that was a sense of relief. "They wanted to rebuild their destructive planet as the most powerful, the richest in every way... but at what price?" Vena shook her head, again not understanding a thing.

"I..." she stumbled over her words, but he stopped her with raising his hand, as if she'd interrupted his statement. She had. "They only want the true power, Vena, and you're the one Omega gifted that power to. They need you." Miramar now stood in front of her. "Let's take you back to your friends now, Vena."



## Messages from Outer Space


Juvie licked her smooth, soft, tinted lips as she pressed the new Number 2 pencil that was one of the only things allowed in her room— along with a few sheets of paper, and a jug of cold water—to her aching temples. This time, she knew she saw something, and her imagination actually *wasn't* playing games on her. *Screw you, Mom!* Juvie thought, while she lay vertically on the stern and sturdy metal bed that SAMC had housed with her thick, straightened-silk dark brown hair dangling from her limp head for dear help. Apparently, they thought this would be a comfortable fit for their patients. But Juvie was not a patient; she did not belong here, with the other real looneys. This was Candy's, her assigned "roommate," fifth time in at least ten minutes hastily rushing to their shared bathroom, attempting to force the urine out of her, literally.

Candy would groan and grumble, rolling around in the other twin-sized bed a few feet from Juvie's, then make a beeline for the bathroom, not even having enough decency to close the door behind her! Juvie was not afraid; no, she was pissed that she could not find rest tonight. This was mostly due to her unnerving dreams of her big sister, N'Kay, beating on some imaginary door, large window, or wall, yelling something that she could only faintly hear every time she'd doze off. But Candy's constant moving around, pacing, and mumbling were preventing her sleep tonight, and she'd had enough. Her mom was so wrong; there was nothing wrong with her. Juvie had been telling the truth the entire time: her sister *had been* trying continuously and persistently enough to garner Juvie's attention. Her sister was not dead, N'kay needed help, and Juvie— Juvie needed to get the hell out of here.

Grumpily, Juvie jumped up and headed out of the shared room and to the nurses' station not that far from her. Restlessly, she placed her elbows on the nurse's desk. "Listen," Juvie said through clenched teeth, "Either ~~gane~~ get to another room or send Candy somewhere else! I was here first, anyway!" she demanded as the nurse looked at her nonchalantly.

"Look, Ms. Granger," the nurse calmly spoke; "You have to learn to get along with your roommate. There's not enough space for you to have your own room, and it's a part of protocol, too."

"The hell with protocol!" Juvie screamed, "I'm not supposed to be here, anyways! I'm no manic; I'm not a damned schizophrenic, I just



need to be home! I have an actual social life, for pete's sake!" By the time Juvie had finished her tantrum, the nurse had a look of fear and concern plastered on her face.

"Juvie, we've been here before. Do I need to call Dr. Rhodes, and have you sent back to the fourth floor?" the nurse asked, sympathetically. "I'd ~~havo~~ have to do that, you only have one more day here, but it's my job, Juvie. You understand that, right?" she asked in a concerned tone of a loving mother. Inside, Juvie wanted to jump over the counter and ring Nurse Phillips's neck, but she knew that would not be such a good idea, being that she'd just spilled the beans and told Juvie she'd be a free woman by tomorrow evening. Juvie looked around, finally realizing that she'd elicited a crowd with excited and some fearful stares. She took a step back.

"I'm sorry, Nurse Phillips," Juvie sighed a small sigh, "I'm just not able to sleep so good tonight, and this new lady is really making it harder for me to relax with all her pacing. When Mr. James switches shifts, could you please have him come by my room before I meet with the psychiatrist?" The nurse nodded her head, gave her another Trazadone pill to "*help her sleep*," and sent her back to the room. As Juvie sluggishly walked back to the room, she bumped into Geno, a classmate of hers, who had had some ins and outs with the law. Her dad said that Geno was definitely bad news, but Juvie thought he was a pretty cool dude, just misunderstood like herself.

"It's the drugs," Geno said in a hushed voice. "She's having withdrawals from those damned drugs." Juvie looked into his slanted hazel eyes and they both let out a chuckle.

"I hadn't thought of that one." Juvie shrugged. "I'm outta here tomorrow anyway, so there won't be any more complaints from me," she attested playfully.


"Good." Geno eagerly rubbed his hands together. "So, I'll see you around school tomorrow, then?" Juvie shrugged.

"Maybe the next day," she looked around, "I need a break from all of this...structure," Juvie smirked a bit and Geno smiled, nodding in agreement.

"See ya around, then, Ju"; and he walked off.

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Juvie paced back and forth in her dull room, wracking her brain with multiple possibilities. The once vibrant, colorful living space for a young, aspiring seventeen-year-old was ripped to shreds about three and a half years ago. This was a few months after the mysterious disappearance of Juvie's older sister and best friend, N'Kay.




They were as thick as thieves but like night and day. N’Kay was a nerd: A Sci-Fi junkie who believed in all the impossible possibilities like time travel, for instance. N’Kay was just a year and a half older than Juvie, but she’d always taken on the role of being the big sister as an important responsibility. She sheltered Juvie from everything she could possibly think of—bullies, drugs, alcohol, and specifically—boys.

Not only was N’Kay one of the top students at Central High, she was also extremely beautiful. Her frame was petite, her eyes were almond-shaped with a hint of light brown in the center, and her hair was just as long and thick as Juvie’s, only a tad bit lighter. Her laughter always put everyone else in a more light-hearted mood, and her smile could light up any dark place. Juvie could still remember the last day she’d laid eyes on her sister. She’d been in her room, across the upstairs hall from her own room, frantically searching for something “important that she had misplaced and needed to find quickly.” As usual, Juvie ignored the anxious rummaging and mumbling of N’Kay’s “missing pamphlet” and headed downstairs, instead choosing to hang with her other “sane” best friend of the day, her schoolyard friend since they had been kids, Yanna. Apparently, Yanna was as bored as Juvie, as she heard Yanna’s voice bouncing from her marbled, light blue kitchen, chatting away with Juvie’s mom, Sabrina. Sabrina was fixing a quick breakfast before heading to do her morning shift at Flowers Hospital.

“Has your sister found what she’s been looking for since early this morning?” Sabrina asked Juvie, without looking up, as she poured four glasses of orange juice. Juvie bit into her toast nonchalantly and shrugged, then turned to Yanna.

“Wanna hang out at the mall?” Juvie asked. “I’m bored outta my mind!” she complained in an exasperated tone. Just then, however, they’d each heard N’Kay’s scream. Juvie was the first off the rounded, silver stool and up the stairs, cautiously jumping as many as she could. She’d burst into her sister’s room with a panicked look on her face. “N’Kay,” Juvie yelled, “what’s wrong?!”

N’Kay was shivering; her entire body was shaking as if she’d had a slight seizure. “They were here, *again*, Juv,” N’Kay whispered; her eyes were bulging out of her small head and you could visibly see the tiny hairs on her slender arms still standing straight up. “They want something that I have...”; her voice drifted off as their mom and Yanna finally made it into the room.



“Kay!” Sabrina exclaimed with a deep sigh of relief, “you almost gave me a heart attack; why were you yelling like that?” Sabrina came towards N’Kay to console her visibly shaken daughter that she’d always doted on, but N’Kay took a small step back, recollecting herself.

“I’m fine, Mom. Really,” N’Kay mustered up the courage to finally speak. “A spider had fallen onto my hand while I was looking through this junk.” N’Kay motioned to her mess of scattered papers with different formulas and expressions, most that were unfamiliar. Their mom obviously hadn’t paid attention to exactly what N’Kay was showing them, but Juvie, however, noticed.

After everything had calmed down and their mom had left and gone to work her 12-hour shift, Juvie walked Yanna home, which was just a block away, and headed up to N’Kay’s room. She’d been keeping herself secluded in her room for about two months now, right around the time everyone had noticed she’d “lost touch” with reality. N’Kay was no longer going to work at her fast-food job, and she refused to respond to her boyfriend, Nick’s pleading messages about them “working through this thing together.” After softly knocking on N’Kay’s bedroom door for the fifth time, she’d opened. N’Kay seemed exhausted and jittery. Juvie went and sat on her sister’s bed, next to a pile of papers that she’d been eyeing from earlier.

“So,” Juvie uneasily tried to begin the questioning process she’d been doing for a while now, hoping she’d finally get somewhere, or get some form of understanding, from her sister. “Did you figure out what these...extraterrestrial beings might want from you?” Juvie asked with concern. Juvie knew a little about what N’Kay was dealing with. She’d confided in Juvie right before she’d lost it, and although Juvie didn’t get all the information from N’Kay that day, she knew her sister had either truly unlocked something so magnificent that it was startling, or that her sister actually had gone mad. N’Kay’s mind seemed to be in another dimension as she blankly stared at the ceiling, sweat drops trickling down from the side of her head.

“...Yes,” N’Kay confirmed with a sense of relief and fear, “I know what they want, Juv. I just don’t think I can give it to them.” Her voice was low and uncertain, and this sent chills through Juvie. For some reason, she was now softly shaking, her ears were ringing lightly, and her head felt dizzy. Juvie looked at her trembling hands and noticed the fine hairs on her forearms beginning to rise.

“We—well, how come?” Juvie stumbled over her words. *What’s going on with me?* She thought. She could see N’Kay’s attention now switch from wherever she’d been, to now.

“It’s complicated,” she explained in a hurried voice, “you wouldn’t understand.” She got from her bed, grabbing the loose sheets of paper. “No one would understand, let alone believe me.” Juvie scooted closer to the edge of the bed, attempting to stay as close to her flustered sister as possible. Juvie didn’t want to startle N’Kay any more by telling her what she was now feeling, but it seemed like N’Kay didn’t need her to. She’d noticed, and she was frantically searching through the stack of papers. “I just need to get rid of most of this junk; I need to recycle. I should have never tried stepping outside the realms of the natural world.” She babbled on and on. Juvie was now sensing a vibration, sensing a smell. What was that taste in her mouth? The taste of metal?

“Kay,” Juvie whispered, “what’s going on?” N’Kay finally stopped moving around and looked up in Juvie’s direction. Then, with a quick shift of her feet, she’d turned and picked Juvie up from her flower-designed bedding by her shoulders, looking her square in the face. “Listen, Juv,” N’Kay now said in a more serious and confident tone. “I need you to believe me. I know it may be a lot to grasp now, so I won’t lay it all on you. But I need you to believe in my work.” She quickly hugged her younger sister.

“I’ve always believed you, Kay,” Juvie said with reassurance.

“You’re the smartest person I’ve ever met.” Juvie, still frightened by the out-of-body experience she was now feeling, still tried to lighten the mood for her sister. “Hey,” she playfully added, “maybe they just want that genius brain of yours.” Juvie jokingly tapped N’Kay’s temples. “I would too.” Juvie smiled as N’Kay’s eyes lightly watered and a smile crept upon her lips.

“Maybe,” her voice drifted off, “but I think I’ve messed with nature in the wrong way.”

“But you can fix it!” exclaimed the confused Juvie. N’Kay gloomily shrugged her shoulders.

“Ion’o, Juv,” she said solemnly, “some things just can’t be undone.” N’Kay sent Juvie out of her room, her last words to her being, “Just know that I love you, and I only wanted to change what I thought I could.” Juvie refused to leave with that statement, but N’Kay urged her, assuring her that she was only blabbering away due to her lack of sleep. After much convincing, Juvie turned towards her own bedroom.

“Kay,” Juvie whispered; the weird feelings that encompassed her body now seemed a distance away now. “I really miss dad.” N’Kay nodded her head slightly, putting her head towards the ground. “Yeah. Me too, Juv. Me too.” That night N’Kay had come into Juvie’s room and handed her a piece of paper with a lot of writings on it and drawings of different symbols. The loose-leaf paper was not in the best of shape, either. It had looked as if it had been balled up and certain parts ripped, then taped back together. Juvie had been in her room, listening to her music playlist on her phone with her headphones in.

“Is this what you’d been searching for all day?” Juvie asked with inquisitiveness as she swirled from her desk in her room and tried to make out the formulas and drawings her sister had collected on the paper. N’Kay simply nodded.

“I think I may have unlocked some kind of secret realm, Juv.” N’Kay flopped down on Juvie’s bed. “I think that’s why I’ve been having these weird...dreams or phenomena.” Juvie went to sit next to her sister, still not understanding the markings on the paper she’d given her. “I’ve been trying to figure out what happened to Dad, Juvie.” This statement caught her full attention.

“Kay,” Juvie said with pure sadness in her voice. “Dad left us. He’s gone. It’s been ten years now. Dad isn’t coming back.” N’Kay nodded her head.

“Dad’s not dead, Juvie.” she said with determination, “and I’m willing to bet my life on that.” She stood. “He didn’t just walk out on us; you know that. Something strange has been happening in this city and in a few states nearby and far. I think Dad played some part in this.” Juvie shook her head in confusion.

“B—bu—but how?” Juvie stuttered again. She hated doing that. N’Kay had walked to the bedroom window and pulled the curtain back, peeking out: up, particularly.

“I can’t explain that now,” she waved her hand dismissively, “but I want you to keep that safe.” She now pointed at the paper on the bed. “Promise?” she quizzed Juvie again, lifting her hand and sticking her pinky finger out. That was one of those “things” they did as sisters. Still confused, but definitely certain on the promise, Juvie did the same, and soon, they locked pinkies.



It wasn't until later that night, or morning, rather, that the strange phenomenon happened. This time, Juvie, too, had captured the moment. She'd awaken in a sweat. Juvie felt as if she'd been having another one of those out-of-body experiences, as she felt herself floating, and time seemed to move much slower than normal. Juvie had sat up in her bed with her fingers placed lightly around her neck, trying to catch her breath. As she looked around her darkened room, she'd noticed a light green light shining lowly through her window. As she got on her knees for a closer look out the window, she'd caught a better glance at this limpid light and what hovered above it. It couldn't be! It wasn't possible! But it was. It was a UFO, hovering lowly over a petite frame... a familiar frame, Juvie noted as her heart pounded throat. "N'Kay!" Juvie screamed— or at least she thought so. She'd definitely jumped from her bed just as N'Kay seemed to be turning to look in Juvie's direction in the window.

She flew downstairs and out the back door just in time to see a small, sad smile upon her face as she and the UFO simply vanished. This trip down memory lane triggered many emotions that Juvie had managed to suppress the last few days, she'd been involuntarily thrown into the psych ward by her deranged mother because of her obsession with her sister's disappearance. They saw it as an obsession. She saw it as determination. She believed her sister, and she believed in N'Kay, and her work. There was nothing that would stop her from trying to solve her sister's disappearance. Lately, since she'd been off the useless medications Dr. Rhodes had prescribed her, Juvie had been able to think clearer. This also brought back many of the nightmares she'd been having. It was of her sister, again, banging on some transparent glass, yelling something that was now becoming clearer every day.

Tired of pacing back and forth, she grabbed the now almost completely destroyed paper N'Kay had given her and lay back down. She was happy to finally have some alone time. Her mom had been on her case all day about her missing medications and had threatened her continuously with sending her back to the psych ward if she didn't pull herself together. It took everything in Juvie not to cry and yell all the hateful and derogatory things she'd thought of her mother. Like how she'd so easily forgotten about dad and insisted they do the same, and now how she'd so easily ignore the facts surrounding the mysterious disappearance of her own beloved daughter, and possibly her husband, too.



Instead, however, Juvie assured her mother that they'd simply been misplaced and would be found by the time she returned home. Thankfully, she'd thought, she'd be asleep by that time of raining fury. Again, she felt it—the metallic taste in her mouth, the floating feeling, the feeling of suffocation. Juvie grabbed at her throat and jumped from the bed. This was no dream and she knew it. She could see that light, again, and without thinking, Juvie did exactly what she had done four years earlier. Juvie jumped from her bed, flew down the now dark stairs, and out the back door. N'Kay was all she thought about, and the closer she ran towards the light, the closer she felt to N'Kay. She'd noticed that she still gripped her sister's drawing between her stiffened fingers. As she looked at the paper, the formulas began to change, and the symbols moved in various directions. Juvie unraveled the paper as she faintly heard her mother's frantic calls. Juvie stopped in mid-stride just as the figures on the paper did.

"Juvie!" Sabrina yelled from the back door, unintentionally wrapping her arm around the opposite side to cover herself from the cooling air as she sprinted towards her with the look of pure fear and confusion on her face. Juvie now examined the paper. The bright green light began to slowly dim as Juvie made out the words and drawings on the paper. Words! There were now words on the paper! Juvie could now hear another familiar but distant voice. It belonged to her sister. Tears filled Juvie's eyes. She felt her sister's presence. N'Kay was no longer banging on some translucent glass. She could feel the light that beamed through her big sister's smile that landed on her cheek.

A tear dropped in the center of the paper and removed some of the old ink's work, at least she thought. Juvie put the paper closer towards her face, reassuring herself that what she saw was real. It was a picture of a time machine with different formulas surrounding different pieces of machinery on the time machine. Juvie's heartbeat increased. She'd done it! Juvie smiled brightly as she now focused on the words above it: "*Look up.*" It read. And with pride and confidence, Juvie did just that.



## What Really Happened Here?

Lyric's laughs and giggles floated throughout Jianne's Boutique. Lyric did a playful spin and turned back towards the mirror and her beaming mother. "I looove this one, Mom." Carla, Lyric's mom, beamed. Her naturally smooth, golden skin radiated in the boutique's reflection of the sun from its large windows that gave the boutique its "magic" energy. "I think it's beautiful, baby," her mom insisted; "the gold fits your complexion perfectly, too." Carla looked around for Jianne's assistant and daughter, Stacey, to confirm the sale as Lyric continued to admire herself in the dress. It was beautiful; she could agree with her mom on that. Lyric's long, recently-pressed, silky black hair still fell down her back even in the high ponytail she'd placed it in to be fitted. Her face was slim and heart-shaped with pout-like lips and dazzling almond-shaped eyes with a light brown tint. Her face complemented her fit body, curvaceous and innocent. She was beautiful; she was her mother's twin. "Ah," her mother stated with a bit of relief after the short wait on Stacey. "We'll take this one, Stacey." Stacey, on cue, went to work on Lyric using her pinning skills she'd been taught, to get the exact fit for Lyric's prom dress.

"Nice choice, Lyric," Stacey began as she pinned Lyric up. "I think this is one of the most beautiful dresses we've ever had in stock." Lyric nodded her head in agreement with a chuckle. "Pretty pricey, too," she responded jokingly, and she and Stacey shared a laugh of acknowledgment.

"This is true," Carla inserted herself. "But for my baby girl, nothing's "too much." Carla rubbed her hand over Lyric's slick ponytail.

"About that...Mom..." Stacey hurried along with the pinning and quickly left, sensing it was an important conversation brewing, and Carla fixed the lingering piece of hair from Lyric's forehead. "The Innocence Project finally got back with me." Carla's once smiling frown shifted quickly into a disheveled look as she tried to control her reaction and responses. Carla straightened her already-straightened white Ralph Lauren jean coat. "They've hired an investigator already," Lyric quickly recited the details, "A... Detective...Landin Wrightly."

"Baby," Carla sighed hard. Her whole body had tensed up at the thought of this. She knew her daughter was trying to save her father's rear end, but there was much more to the story that Lyric was not aware of, and this kind of meddling could destroy everything.



She frightfully played with her sweaty fingers as flashes of blood on them quickly crept back into her head. She shook her head forcefully and began to wipe each hand with the other as if she were trying to clean them.

“Have you spoken with your Dad, at least?” she asked with more concern than she should’ve.

Lyric shook her head, no. “But Daddy was adamant that he was innocent then and still is today.” Lyric stated firmly. “I don’t think he would mind. This is a good thing for him, Mom. For us.” Her eyes now seemed to cloud over with silent pleas. Lyric had walked away from the mirror and back into the fitting room to change back into her clothes from earlier. Carla did not respond. She had too much to process, but she did know one thing: she’d have to talk to Jason, Lyric’s dad, before Lyric did.

## LYRIC

I felt defeated. I’d done all I could to get my dad’s case re-tried, and now that someone was finally not only able to help but willing to help for free, both of my parents seemed to shut everything down, and it was completely perplexing and devastating to me. Talking to my dad over the phone about the good news and the detective work, I noticed that he seemed to become less and less thrilled. “Dad,” I twirled Cameron’s promise ring around on my finger as I spoke. “I don’t get it. Mom wouldn’t have to come out of any more money for this or anyone else that’s tried over the last few years.” I knew I sounded desperate, but I was. I was desperate to know why he didn’t want my help and chose to rot in that hideous and treacherous prison he’d now called home for almost a year, now. “Lyric...” I could hear my dad, all discombobulated, trying to find the “right” words to tell me. “Just, let it go. Okay?” He asked as if that was the correct answer, and my heart literally ached. “I have an appeal coming up anyway,” he continued, “So, that might be unnecessary leg work on your side.” I sighed hard into the phone, not caring about the tone in my voice any longer.

“You’ve just given up, haven’t you?” I asked with an abundance of resentment. “You’d rather rot in hell than to come back to your family and make things right, huh?!” I could barely breathe, and the rhetorical question, as I expected, did not get answered.

“Baby, some things are just too hard for even me to understand. I’m doing this to protect my family. You have to just trust me,” he pleaded, but I was too upset to care.

“No, you’re doing this because of the guilt you feel for cheating on Mom with Jocelyn and then her racist family accusing you of murdering the woman!” I screamed into the phone.

“You broke Mom’s heart, and you’re too much of a coward to try to make it right; that’s all that is.” Tears now streamed from my face as the rumors of the adultery and the gruesome and unexplainable death of Jocelyn Grace seemed to confront me head-on. I could never get the taunts out of my head. I could never forget the threats. We’d never been accused of such an ugly thing, and to think that my dad didn’t even want to clear his name— to clear our name— was not only ridiculous, but it was selfish! Did he ever even consider what I’d have to endure with this?

I said a quick good-bye to my dad and threw my phone across the room as I fell back on my bed, allowing the pain to wrap itself around me, and the freely-flowing tears tickled my reddened and swollen face. I closed my eyes tightly, trying to catch my breath. I didn’t even get to tell him that Detective Landin was already working his case now, going back over each and every detail. She’d promised me that she would get back with me when she caught “the big fish,” but she constantly kept me updated about her investigation. Of course, I knew my dad’s appeal hearing was coming up, but I also knew that the new Commissioner, Mrs. Speed, was not big on freeing violent offenders. Hell, she was known to deny the appeal of anyone who even looked black. I knew that my dad really wouldn’t have a chance with this upcoming hearing, and he’d be once again sent back to prison with his spirits broken. As I lay on the bed in my own miserable thoughts, I heard a soft knock on my room door. I sighed a bit. “It’s open.” My mom slowly walked in, peeping her head around the door to get a quick look at me first.

“Hey, baby girl.” She came and sat on the bed next to me as I took my time rising up from my comforting position to face her. “I heard you on the phone with your dad.” She sounded truly remorseful this time. “I just want you to know that your Dad really is trying to protect his family.” I unconsciously rolled my eyes upwards. “I won’t lecture you, I promise.” She held her hand up in the air with her index and middle finger crossed. “I really just came in to let you know that Cameron is downstairs waiting on you.” I could feel a smile beginning to creep up on me, but I was too emotional to really show it. Mom leaned over me, fixing my long-disheveled hair, which she seemed to love. “Look, tomorrow is prom. It’s your big day. Try not to worry yourself too much about your dad’s case.

I'm sure everything will work itself out." She planted a small kiss on my forehead, and I quickly turned away, wiping my tears. "But Mom, I'm so close to clearing Dad's name." I almost cried. "Detective Landin has been keeping me updated on the case, and..." My mother cut me off.

"You've been in contact with this detective already?" she asked more sternly than I imagined. "You can't just go...up and hire someone and don't tell me or your father, Lyric!" she chastised. "You're just seventeen, and you still have to have parental supervision and permission to even attempt to deal in things of this nature." I stood up, uncomfortably but head-strong.

"I get it, Mom," I held my head up higher. "But every time I try to discuss this murder with you or Dad, y'all shut me down or either beat around the corner with me. I don't understand what it could possibly be that you guys are trying to "save me" from, but maybe... maybe I don't want to be saved. Maybe I just want justice. Real justice." I now felt my courage coming back.

"And not just locking up a black man because he was having an affair with a white woman. I know that the topic is still pretty hard for you. But no, Dad deserves his new trial, if anything!"

Not only was I taking this personally because he was my dad, and it was our last name and reputation that was tarnished around the small country-side of Alabama. In this area, whites and blacks don't mix. They never had and they never will. But most of the millennials were over this theory of superiority among us black people, and Cameron, he was one of them. He never let the racist comments about me and towards him affect him, but if he did, he never made me aware of it. Cameron was unlike most of the guys our age. Cameron never saw color. This was a plus, but sometimes it could be annoying because he didn't understand his white privilege that he was able to use while out in public with me. Besides the regular snarls and stares and whispers, Cameron and I remained inseparable, and it wouldn't matter if he were purple; I'd still love this guy. My mom didn't respond to me going off the rails. She simply nodded a soft nod and walked out. I stood in front of my vanity mirror and patted my eyes dry. My face was still red, but at least the tears were gone. Regardless, Cameron would recognize it.



## CARLA

I leaned over the table, trying my best to keep my composure. My makeup had smeared from the long, hot drive for visitation day, and I'd been overly anxious to speak with Jason since talking with Lyric. Lyric was no longer a child, so the simple stories didn't go over as smoothly as before. "Jason," I sternly stated with a hint of desperation. "She's already been in contact with an investigator who's working with the Innocence Project!" I quickly repeated in a harsh, hushed tone. Jason remained calm throughout my hysterics, however, and it was really beginning to bother me.

"Okay," I pushed myself back from the seat. "You're pissing me off right now, Jason. Our daughter is trying to fight to free an "innocent" man," I quoted using my fingers, "who's not innocent at all!" Jason immediately slammed his fists against the grungy-looking table and the prison guards all turned their attention towards us. "Debose!" One guard hollered as he pointed towards us. "Behave yourself." Jason never bothered to look up, only swatting his hand across his face, ignoring the guard's response.

"I am innocent! I would never kill Jacquelyn. You know that, Carla. At least you should."

Jason had softened and it sickened me. I rolled my eyes upward and flopped back down in my chair. Jason obviously felt the new tension as he began to speak softly, with his head down. "I didn't mean it that way, Carla." He practically whispered and I sucked my teeth, now regretting ever coming to see him from the beginning.

"I know exactly what you mean, Jason," I stated sarcastically.

"You'd never hurt your precious mistress, right?" I was livid! I stood to leave. "I wish I could've been just a few minutes earlier... then I would have... Jason looked at me with a warning. "Just know, if things go left, it's all on you," I pointed at him to dramatize the effects.

## CAMERON

I pulled Lyric into an embrace as she broke down, explaining to me the conversations she'd had with her parents about the Innocence Project. Her dad's case was headline news almost nine years ago when it'd happened. Lyric was younger then and didn't really understand the uproar, and as we got older, the sentencing. I felt deep down that her father had nothing to do with it. Especially when I heard what they called their "evidence" that was presented.

It was all just a bunch of crap. A bunch of racist crap, and if the townspeople couldn't see through that, then they were just a bad off as the others who did nothing in the face of wrongdoings.

Even I received backlash from used-to-be friends and, surprisingly, family. Not only did they not want Lyric and me in a public relationship, but they also wanted me to have nothing to do with her at all. It all hit me like a ton of bricks, but I was head-strong and in love. Lyric wasn't just the girl of my dreams; Lyric was my best friend, and nothing was going to stop me from pursuing her further. Nothing. I dabbed at the flowing tears running down her cheeks, trying not to mess up her perfect makeup.

"I just can't believe it," Lyric murmured, and her voice trailed off. "After all this time...they all knew." She looked defeated, and it angered me more than saddening me. I carefully rocked her back and forth. Lyric didn't go into details about what she was referring to, and a part of me felt like I probably didn't want to know myself, so I didn't bother to ask her what she seemed to be referring to. I just hated to see her cry.

"I realize this is a big bombshell for you, babe. But I do want you to be selfish for this one night." I held up my finger for emphasis and to silence her before she could begin to debate. "This is our prom night, and we only get one. Let's discuss this tomorrow with your Mom, then we can talk to your Dad, too," I whispered softly to her. "You know I'll always have your back. But let's enjoy this time we have together tonight." I rubbed her crinkled hair, enjoying the feeling between my hands. "This will be the longest you've been able to stay out anyway." I joked, and Lyric smiled her beautiful smile. "That's right, baby girl. Chin up."

## **NARRATIVE**

Prom night was everything Lyric had dreamt of it being, and she was proud to pull off the best-dressed prom dress as she swayed throughout the crowded gym. Her mom had held her and Cameron up, taking an abundance of unnecessary photos: pictures of her walking down the stairs, pictures of them giving and receiving their formal gifts, then the "wait one more" pictures of them together for about forty minutes. Lyric hated being late, but she did like the pros of being the center of attention when you did arrive late, so it didn't bother her much. Cameron, on the other hand, was over it and ready to go, although he'd never say it aloud. Lyric had been the life of the party all night, especially with the handsome jock, Cameron, on her arm. There were many *oohs* and *ahhs* as they finally made their entrance, posing for more school pictures along the way.



Cameron and Lyric danced the night away, she in her fitted mermaid-like dress sparkling throughout the crowds and he with his custom-tailored all-black suit with gold trimmings around the wrist and matching shoes. As they took a break from dancing, Cameron led Lyric to a table that wasn't packed. She'd told him her feet were hurting, and Cameron didn't admit it but taking a dancing break was perfectly fine with him. He wasn't a good dancer anyway. "Thirsty?" Cameron screamed over the loud music that kept blaring inside their gym. Lyric nodded her head quickly. "And I need to use the bathroom, so I'll be right back!" She hurried to their school's bathroom, and Cameron made his way to the serving table to grab the two some drinks and a snack, possibly.

As Lyric made her way there, her phone began to ring, and she immediately answered once she realized it was Detective Landin again — finally, getting back to her. "Detective," she said in an exasperated tone. "There is no more *detective*," the unfamiliar voice replied. "This case is closed for a reason. Keep meddling, kid. You'll be no more, too." Click. Lyric stood frozen in the school's hallway. This all felt surreal. Someone had actually murdered Detective Landin for helping Jason Debose's case vs. the State of Alabama.

## LYRIC

I couldn't catch my breath. The walls were closing in behind me, and I had nowhere to go. All I knew was that my life had just been threatened all because I wanted justice for my dad and his life and that the only person who was actually getting someone on this case, Detective Landin, was possibly murdered. My heart almost jumped to my throat as I ran straight for the exit door of the gymnasium, dialing my mom's number. Cameron was wrong. This could no longer wait. I had to do something and do something fast. Either way, I needed help. "Mom!" I screamed through my phone. "Someone killed the detective that was working on Dad's case," I rambled before my mom could even get a word out. "Her number had popped up on my phone while I was inside the prom, and when I answered, there was this man telling me that there was no longer a Detective Landin!" I was crying and screaming hysterically, but I couldn't care less about the scene I could have possibly been making. But as I gathered myself a bit and looked around, there was no one to witness my breakdown.

"Lyric, honey," my Mom stated with a sense of seriousness. "Where are you, now?" I stomped my feet a little and tried wiping away my flowing tears.





“I’m outside of school. I ran outside to get some air, but I’m about to head straight over to the police station.” My voice quivered, but I knew I had to deliver this evidence first before continuing on with my Dad’s case.

“No, no, no,” she repeated. “You stay there, Lyric. I will come to pick you up. It’s not safe.” She explained with worry and this caused me to feel a bit queasy. “In the meantime, I need you to go back inside the prom, find Cameron, and wait for me there.” Before she could finish with any further instructions, a police patrol car sped into the gym’s parking lot, apparently coming my way. Did they already know she was dead?

“Mom...” my voice trailed off, and I could hear my mother starting up her BMW. “The police are here,” I whispered into the phone as an officer quickly jumped from his patrol unit.

“I’m looking for a Lyric Debose.” The big, gruff-looking officer asserted. My heart felt as if it were beating out of my chest, and the cell phone in my hand almost slipped from my fingers as I nodded slowly, agreeing that it was I, Lyric.

“Lyric!” I could hear my mother’s screams. “Go back inside now! Right now, dammit!” Just then, the officer grabbed me by my shoulders and smashed me into the side of a sitting limousine. “Help!” I screamed as my phone dropped from my hands and I tried to break free. The officer’s grasp was too strong for me, and before I knew it, he had put me in the headlock and was sliding me towards his car backward. The harder I fought, the harder it became for me to breathe. Then, like that, I was out.

## CAMERON

I walked back to the less crowded table I had left Lyric at for no more than ten minutes, but she was gone still. I sat down at the table and took a sip of the spiked punch one of my friends made and looked around at the laughing and smiling faces. I couldn’t wait until all of this was over with Lyric’s dad’s case, so I could see her smile again. I knew how hard it had been on Lyric, which is why I’m so determined to make sure she knows that she has someone on her side. Someone who loves her, believes in her, and will stick with her forever. After a few moments of thinking and gulping down the rest of my drink, I got up and began to look around for Lyric. I was sure she’d made it back by now. But after searching the hallways in the school and calling her phone back-to-back, I was pretty certain that Lyric had left the prom. Disappointment filled me as I tried to

hold my composure. I had to remember what she was going through. I was still upset because it wasn't like Lyric to not text or call me if she'd left, but I also knew that she was extremely worked up over the case, so although worry crept up on me, it wasn't too much. She'd probably stepped outside to get a breath of fresh air. I knew I needed it. I pushed the heavy gym doors open just in time to see a police officer speeding off from the parking lot and...Lyric's now broken phone and pieces of her gold diamonds on the ground. Without thinking, I raced after the car and screamed hard and loud as I could. "Lyric!"

### **OFFICER JERRY RYAN**

I tightened the handcuffs around Lyric's lifeless arms. She was still unconscious, and I was obviously tired from moving the dead weight here and there. Once she was sat upright in the barn out back, I rushed inside of my mom's Victorian-style home. I ran my forearm over my forehead, wiping the dripping sweat and scrubbed and stomped my feet on her *Welcome* mat. Without warning, she began to speak from the dim-lit area far back in the dining room. "So, I see you got her," she stated with malice. "Did anyone see you?" I shook my head no. "Good." I plopped down on the chair and popped open Corona. I was still shaking. My mom stood and quickly replaced my Corona with whiskey. "It's stronger." She commented. "You need it." I sighed hard and took a big swig.

"So, what's the plan now, Mom?" I asked, still a bit confused but obedient, nonetheless. My mom looked out the window at nothing in particular and lightly tapped her glass of whiskey.

"Now, we do like I said from the beginning." She turned towards me again, staring me straight in the eye. "An eye for an eye." I could see a hint of insanity in her eyes, but it was only a flash. "Her father took something from me that I'd loved, and I can never get back," she stated emotionally. "He killed my twin sister, and now it's time for his appeal soon, and I just know they're going to let him out." She sighed sadly. "There just wasn't enough evidence." I nodded my head in agreement. I'd looked over the case at least a hundred times, and some things just wouldn't add up. But either way, my aunt was gone, and my mom hasn't been the same since.

"Should I wait a while, like how I did that detective lady?" I asked with concern in my voice. This was my first time ever breaking the code of law and doing something so absurd, but my mom was adamant about her revenge, and I couldn't blame her.



“No. Do it now. While it’s still dark out.” She walked back towards the dining room window, looking towards the barn. “Make it quick, then burn what you can. The rest,” she pointed toward the main field, “we’ll feed to the hogs.” She smiled slyly. “There will be no evidence, I promise.” Without question, I followed my orders, heading back out towards the barn.

## JAQUELYN

Finally, I smiled a big smile. I would get my revenge — not just on my trifling twin sister, but my terrible lover. I shut my eyes tight. I never thought I would take it as far as I did when Jocelyn sat right there in my face with that snobby look she always gave people that she thought she was better than and tell me that she’d been having an affair with my lover, Jason. Not only that, but she rubbed her stomach and looked up at me, beaming. “You’re gonna be an Auntie, Jack.” Those were her last words to me as I grabbed the kitchen knife and slashed at her repeatedly until she was no longer moving or screaming. Then, just to make certain, I slit her throat and ran out the back door just in time to miss Jason creeping in.



## Letter from the Editor:



Thank you, readers, contributors, and sponsors, for believing in *The Rubicon* and finding our efforts worthy enough for you to invest your valuable time, energy, and resources into bringing it to life. When you read and share this publication, you are supporting our cause and helping us reach more people with artistic depths of thought and emotion they may not have otherwise encountered. Troy University is proudly represented when its students engage in a creative outlet such as *The Rubicon*, expressing their artistic talents through poetry, prose, short stories, photography, graphic art, sketches, and more.

Amid the chaos rampant in this world, we hope to bring a light of intrigue, hope, beauty, and depth that will inspire all to continue running their respective races with the gifts that are unique to them. We strive to incorporate as many submitted pieces as possible to offer these gifted students the opportunity to be a part of something bigger than the bubbles we often find ourselves settling down inside.

That being said, a deep and heartfelt thanks go out to our incredible faculty sponsors for their overwhelming financial and moral support of our literary endeavors. Thank you to Dr. Kirk Curnutt, Troy University's English Chair, and the entire English Department, for your steadfast support of *The Rubicon* and your dedication to every student it represents. Dr. James Ortego, the English Chair of Troy University's Dothan Campus, you have our sincerest gratitude for the instrumental role you played in supporting our team's efforts and consistently seeking involvement in bringing the work of Troy's student body to print. To Dr. Chris Shaffer, the Dean of Troy University's Library, *The Rubicon* team is immensely grateful for your contributions toward publishing and in your willingness to participate in the journal's rebirth. I also would like to express personal appreciation to Dr. R. Scott Nokes. Thank you for your encouragement and timely advice on maneuvering the responsibilities of an editor and writer. I will always be grateful for the time and effort you put into answering even the smallest of my questions or concerns.

This journal would not exist without the collaborative efforts of our *Rubicon* team and, of course, our esteemed and beloved faculty advisor, Dr. Ben Robertson. Dr. Robertson, your ongoing dedication is unparalleled and is the sole reason this publication is seeing the light of day. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do for the students at Troy University.

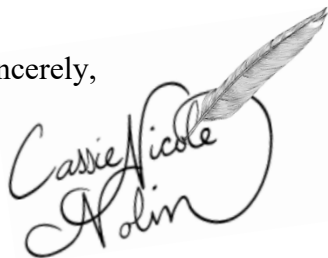
I want to take this opportunity to individually recognize the staff of *The Rubicon* for their hard work on seeing this edition through to the very end. Each one has been a blessing to my life and an instrumental part of this year's work. Though our team was small, I could not have hand-picked a better one to work with. In addition to their respective areas of focus, each staff member shared editing and design tasks throughout the process. McKenzie Dahlke contributed literary and artistic content to the journal (including portions of the cover art) and served as Assistant Editor and on-campus Publicity Chair. Her cheerful spirit and willingness to work hard made her a joy to collaborate with, and the quality of the journal itself is a testament to her talents and efforts. She faithfully tackled everything asked of her and always offered more of her valuable time to the project without hesitation. Savannah Parker, a seasoned staff member of *The Rubicon*, was a source of priceless insight and guidance. Her experience was crucial in getting us up and running quickly while also keeping us afloat as the year progressed. As our Social Media Coordinator and website designer/creator, Savannah became a household face to *The Rubicon* spirit. Elysea Jackson jumped in with both feet to help the team in any way she could, including contributing her poetic writing for the journal. Her friendliness and smile are contagious, and she quickly became a source of encouragement to each of us. Ladies, I cannot begin to thank you for your help, steadfast willingness to do everything necessary for success, and for the fantastic attitudes you each brought to this year's publication efforts. I could not have done my job without you doing yours; you each were crucial to this journal's success. Thank you!

I would like to say that it has been an absolute pleasure to have served as Editor in Chief of *The Rubicon* this year. The experiences I have had and the camaraderie that I have been a part of will be a constant reminder of the supportive individuals that represent Troy University. Thank you for allowing me the honor to serve you in such a meaningful and creative capacity. For everyone questioning whether they should step forward and be involved with *The Rubicon* in the future, question no longer! It has been the highlight of my educational career to be a part of such an excellent opportunity, and you simply do not want to miss out on your chance to be a part as well. Stay creative, get involved, and have confidence in your giftedness!

In closing, allow me to divulge the purpose behind *The Rubicon*'s cover art for its 15<sup>th</sup> edition. Among the beautiful art pieces incorporated, the front cover contains three powerful words that have been the fulcrum of our literary endeavors for 2020-2021. The words “Dream,” “Grow,” and “Inspire” are ones that every student at Troy University is challenged to embrace in their daily lives and their creative outlets. My encouragement to you is this — never be afraid to dream bigger than your plans can achieve. It is only by dreaming that ideas become passion, and passion fuels the flame of influence. Never stop growing, never stop learning, never stop doing everything you can to become the person you were created to be. All dreams and growth would be in vain if they were not used to better ourselves and the world around us. Inspire others through who you are, how you love, and the path you choose to tread. *The Rubicon* is a tangible opportunity for a select few of Troy's student body to flesh out these inspirational challenges and, in doing so, showcase their breathtaking words and images. Their dreams pushed them to grow and embrace the courage needed to take a chance. Now, their work is meant to inspire you to do the same. Do not hold back when opportunities arise; step out in faith and no matter what, keep moving forward. Who knows where your next step will lead you!

Blessings on all, love to each heart, and I'll see you in INK!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cassie Nicole Nolin". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the left of a quill pen. The quill pen is also drawn in black ink and is positioned vertically, with its tip pointing upwards and slightly to the right. The signature and the quill are enclosed within a faint, circular outline.

Cassie Nicole Nolin  
Editor in Chief, *The Rubicon*

## From The Rubicon Team:

A deeply heartfelt word of thanks goes out to all of the incredible people at Troy University who have made this journal possible.



Readers: we write, paint, and create for you. If an artistic soul can bring joy and contemplation into the hearts and minds of others, then all effort is worth it, and success has truly been achieved. Art, in any form, is a tie that can unite individuals regardless of age, race, beliefs, and background.

The world runs on the breath that beauty gives it, and we hope that you appreciate and enjoy the hard work that went into every beautiful submission that has been gathered into this journal. Each element is more than a student's work; it is a glimpse into personal experience and a whisper of every lifeforce.

Thank you all again for making this possible.  
Countless blessings on each and every one!

