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HORIZONS

THE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF
WAUBONSEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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EDITORS' NOTE

Even with the best team on a project, you will still face challenges. This year, the Horizons staff learned this first hand. There are deadlines, last minute deadlines before them, and emergencies to take care of; these are inevitable. The best team in the world pushes through these challenges and gets the work done to the best of their ability.

The magazine you hold in your hands is not only a project done by the Creative Writing Club each year out of respect, pride, and love for Waubensee, but a passionate project of love for writing itself, and the contents within. These pages contain a piece of each of us, not only by our own writing or art, but a piece of us that is woven between the lines and words on the pages. A piece of Waubensee lingers throughout every page.

We would like to thank our advisor, Dan Portincaso, for keeping everything on the correct path and facing all the challenges with us. We thank each member on the masthead responsible for making the publication you see before you, whether it was taking time to select work during Spring Break, or mind-numbing copy-editing. We could not do this without the support of the college, our peers, and friends. Most of all, the magazine would be nothing without those that submitted their work to the magazine, and you, our readers. Dear readers, we thank you.

All our challenges this year were worth every bit of effort because this effort gave us valuable experiences and brought us new friendships along the way. Horizons will always be worth it.

Sabrina Szigeti

Nina Burns

Editors-in-Chief

A VAGUE SENSE OF UNEASE

POETRY BY GINGER SIMONS

FIRST PRIZE WINNER OF
THE WAUBONSEE CREATIVE WRITING CLUB
FALL "HAUNTINGS" WRITING CONTEST

It starts with a vague sense of unease.

Something is missing.

Or something is there.

I can feel breath on the back of my neck,

warm,

welcoming.

Fingers brush against my arm,

No body to tether them to reality.

I see your face in grocery stores and through drive-through

windows,

And at the end of hallways.

No longer do I have a shoulder on which to rest my head.

No longer a hand to hold mine.

I might as well no longer have a body.

I am rendered morosely ethereal

By a sense that my life has been sucked from my body

through my lips

Brought to life only by the thought
Of feeling you again.

And in this late hour, I cannot tell who is the ghost.
You, present only in my thoughts, a specter at the end of
the tunnel,
Or myself, an empty cavern
wandering through a world that now holds no place for me.
Clinging to a life that is no longer mine, but yours.
You, a spirit without a vessel,
Me, a vessel without a spirit.

A CHILD THEFT

POETRY BY MELISSA VARACALLI

Grab the red tattered pail and the yellow withered shovel. Grab the rusted swing chair, watch it sway, watch it sway. Dart over the scattered misshaped gravel and the concrete coated surface. Climb into the top of the green ridged slide, consisting of your weight hear it sigh hear it sigh. Leap into the sand, the brown sugar neatly packed. Take a look at the sand, an indent where she sat. The trees don't grow where the little girl once laid, the X on the map where she was taken away. Innocent and fooled, she was shoved into his car. As the wheels screeched to mutter her pleas and the engine kicked, mothers wept of the pure child not tricked. Say goodbye to her soul and the children on the block, for they picked up and left surely in shock.

A girl on the news and a child who no longer plays

A child in the ground

A body to decay

A horror story that must be addressed

An Amber Alert

A child theft.

FEAR

POETRY BY TASHA MAPES

Fear

Fear is more than skin deep

It is a black slime

That sinks in,

Below the surface.

It clogs the veins,

Thick sour sludge

Infecting the heart.

I speak, and black pus

Spills out, overflowing.

My throat is a pipeline

Nearly bursting.

How can I speak love

When fear leaks

From every pore and orifice?

The media is a circus

Of horror. It shovels

Fear upon me like dung,

Battering it down

To where it turns into

Slick oil hatred.

How can I act in love

When my limbs are heavy

With antipathy and

War mongering suspicion?

I will vomit out

This fear-hatred stink.

I will drive it

From my veins until

My arteries pump fresh.

I will build a wall

Between me and the

Purveyors of fear.

I will commit act of

Love upon love

Until love is all there is

And all I know.

THE SILENT SHADES OF CUBA

POETRY BY HAILEY VON RUDEN

The cement has grown musty
The streets all paved over
But the colors, however faded,
Still hold their color.
A town bustling quietly
With colorful people,
Holding stories made of stone
And a feeling that's peaceful.
There's rust shaping the railings,
And mildew growing on the walls,
But the character holds together
The beauty of it all.
In the sky clouds loom
Hinting at rain
This city does not notice
After all, it's still remained the same
Quiet, but vibrant
Soft, but loud
This aging town tells a story
Without even making a sound.

CACTI AND ORCHIDS

ARTWORK BY NICOLE BAKER



Acrylic on Canvas
30 x 24 in.

STICKS

ARTWORK BY SANDRA CASS



Digital Photograph
Dimension Variable

MATT DAMON

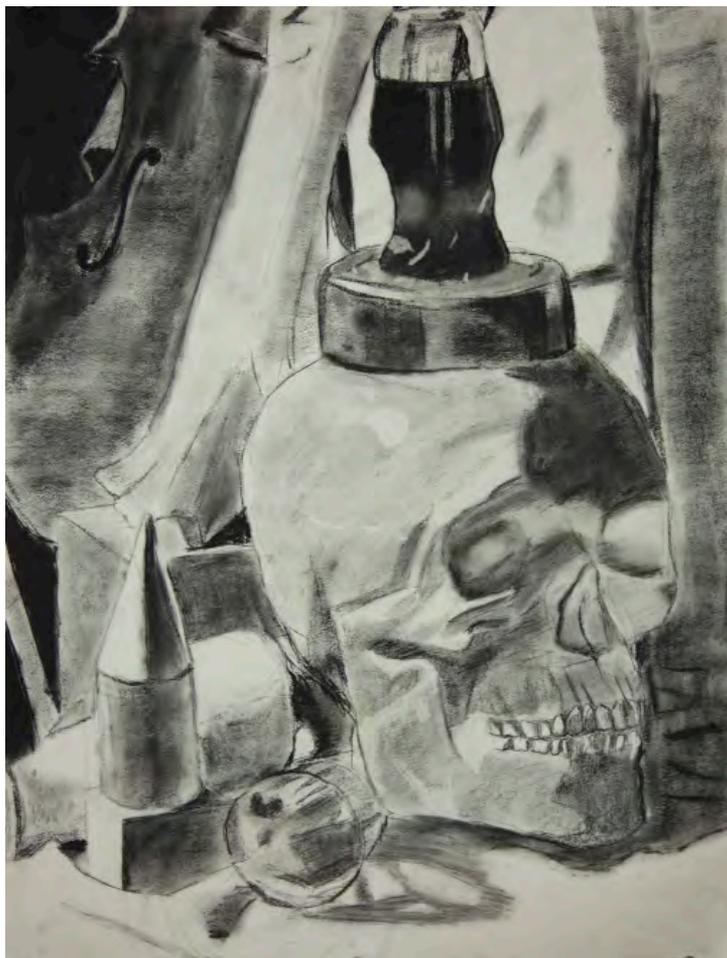
ARTWORK BY DHARTI PATEL



Pencil on Paper
8 x 7 in.

SKULL STILL-LIFE

ARTWORK BY TOMMY COSTELLO



Charcoal on Strathmore
24 x 18 in.

THE BEST FRIEND WHO REMAINS

NON-FICTION BY NINA BURNS

We sat in her garage, surrounded by boxes filled with old bolts and batteries; materials her grandparents kept for no purpose. Ruby lived with them and had no say over their clutter. “What’s this for again?” She asked, lighting a cigarette.

The garage door remained shut and allowed no fresh air to dilute the thick smoke pouring out the end of her Parliament. Ruby gawked my notepad and pen.

“It’s your story.” I said, grabbing the cigarette out of her hand. “Well, our story - I mean, most of it anyway, about how you’re still here.” I exhaled my response with the smoke.

We exchanged glances. Realization struck her eyes. She raised a brow sharply.

“Alright,” extending her arm, she snatched her cigarette back. “What’s the first question?”

Stitched into the nape of her neck, life’s disappointments threaded behind her. The color blue overlaid Ruby Goldman’s life. Childhood bliss tinted her world baby blue, due to the simplicity of a cherishable family and the companionships of pure hearted girls.

Yet, her youthfulness soon deteriorated. Upon her arrival home, screams would echo downstairs. The loss of her father’s job engendered him to wreak havoc over unimportant material.

Growing older, Ruby realized the rarity of her friend’s hearts and a familiarity to her father’s quickness when minimizing dating site tabs. Her baby blue hue smashed into actuality and bruised the light aura; ripening it to a welted mauve. Ignorance is bliss, and her bliss was stolen. Kind friends once cherished now left a distaste on her tongue. Life’s bitter truths made her stomach churn at unattainable happiness.

Charcoal dusted over Ruby's world when we first met. I circled the school halls, avoiding lunch. She stood in front of the nurse's office. A girl stroked the spine that protruded beneath Ruby's shirt. Crimson-soaked tissue pressed against Ruby's left wrist. Her chin tucked into her neck attempting to conceal her face, yet her back collapsed in hyperventilation and divulged her misery.

Ruby's depression debilitated her. Rows of cuts peeked out underneath her sweater. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes. While other students wrote Ruby off as a wreck, I envied her. She was free. She gave her angst air to breath.

Gawks from afar were the only social exchange between Ruby and I, until one Wednesday night at eight P.M. I stood inside our high school and participated in eighth grade orientation recruiting newcomers for the school's newspaper. Twelve hours prior I cracked open a bottle of 100 proof whiskey; finishing and tossing the evidence before entering the scholarly fair. I spotted Ruby a few tables away. I pranced over; full of liquid courage.

"Hey," I leaned against their unsteady booth that promoted French class.

Ruby looked up from her clipboard. "You're Felicia's friend right?"

"Yep!" I burped, slamming my hand on the table. "That's me!"

Ruby sniffed the surrounding air and cocked her head. "Have you been drinking?" Her nose pinched.

I moved my hands up and down, as if weighing pros and cons. "Ehh."

Her eye's narrowed and lips curled. "Here," she dug through her purse. "Use my perfume."

"Thank you, thank you." I sloshed back and forth, patting her shoulder in gratitude.

I opened my mouth and sprayed the sticky substance on my uvula. Ruby looked at me in horror; my ghostly skin now tinted a sickly green.

A girl leaned over to Ruby “...Did she just swallow?”

Ruby shook her head, lips pouted in acceptance. “Why yes. Yes she did.”

I lunged towards a garbage can attached to the school’s wall, vomiting the perfume’s taste. Once finished, I raised my head: a crowd of eighth graders stared back. Smoothing my shirt, I cleared my throat and flung my arm up, pinky and pointer finger flexed. “Join journalism!”

Frantic parents pushed the herd of children away, ticking their tongues at my behavior. I tossed a pile of forms in their direction.

“We got issues! Get it? ‘Cause we’re a newspaper!”

I turned and faced Ruby. She stood wide eyed, flabbergasted, disbelieving.

“So, who are you?”

I rolled my eyes. “No fucking idea.” I sighed, placing my head against the wall.

Letting out a high pitch giggle, Ruby unlaced her arms.

“Well for starters, you’re certainly a character.”

We grew close. Her father’s departure precipitated the foreclosure on a home pervaded with family memories. Only her siblings and mother remained. Awaiting the expiration date on their home, we threw weekly parties filled with thrills and frills.

For the first party, I arrived at eight to a rather peaceful household. Ruby’s Mother sipped coffee; tired bags laced under her eyes.

“How many people are coming?”

Our friend gave a devilish glare. “Hmm.” she pondered, tapping her chin. “Five and a half.”

The guest list swamped with over fifty people. By ten P.M., Ruby’s basement packed with teenagers, smoke, and an overwhelming stench of vodka.

Though the parties came to an end, our friendship continued. Mutual teenage angst bonded us, though we handled the matter differently. While I drowned myself in substances and

stayed silent, Ruby stayed away from pharmaceuticals, deeming forced smiles and attempted death more twisted than depression alone.

We continued on. Ruby's pitch-black aura crumbled and lighter colors seeped through. Happiness seemed more like a possibility rather than a simple myth. Time passed and her boyfriend Trevor and I stuck by her side.

The thought of ending a two year relationship never crossed Ruby's mind until she met Sam. Tall and lanky, pale skinned and blue eyed; Sam was a beauty with a morbid sense of humor. His disposition intrigued her. Continuing to catch her attention, she restrained and refused to act on emotion. Yet, all other feelings became secondary thoughts in comparison of his suspense. One early June morning, Ruby made a decision. She removed the what-if from her life.

From the very first moment of their togetherness, Sam didn't leave Ruby's side. They fell fast, hard and full of adrenaline. For two weeks, Ruby smiled instead of grimaced; pranced rather than crawled.

I shut my mother's car door behind me one hot summer afternoon. Ruby and Sam lay in evergreen grass that sprawled across her front yard, crippled over in laughter as I approached.

"Ah, Nina's here!" Ruby exclaimed, positioning herself upright. "Cigarette time!"

Her Gucci perfume circled beneath my nose: warm and flowery, mature yet youthful.

Avoiding direct contact with the grass, I sat on the stones surrounding her grandmother's garden.

"I like your perfume."

Ruby's face lit up but Sam spoke before her reply, flicking out his wrist and rolling his eyes. "Don't you just adore it?" His tone tore between mockery of my femininity and actual adoration.

Leaning in, Sam rubbed his nose against Ruby's neck and

caused her to squeal. Her face muscles appeared strained from smiling, yet she continued to laugh. Sam pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. The red label on the long box surprised me.

“Red 100’s. What are you, a cowboy wanting to be killed?”

He shrugged, lighting the tip of his smoke. “Something like that.”

Ruby smoked an ultra-light Camel. Airy conversation pulsed off our tongues as we puffed on our cigarettes. Halfway through his, Sam rubbed the burning ember of his cancer stick against the grass, flicked open the top of his pack and lit another. The sky was bright; a light wind grazed our skin and kept us cool, leaving his precarious reflex unnoticed.

I spent my summer with the duo. Many of men still boiled my blood, but Sam didn’t. Besides his infatuation with my best friend, I knew nothing about the boy. Yet, his mindset seemed familiar. We’d discuss the drugs we’d tried: the quantity, quality, mixtures, and horrific results.

We all sprawled on her bed. Ruby and Sam sat upright as I laid horizontally across their feet.

“Never get your wisdom teeth out,” Sam groaned, holding the back of his jaw with lanky fingers. “I went through the painkillers in two days. The rest of the week - pure hell.”

“Nina would go through it in a day, just like all her ‘fun’ pills,” Ruby poked.

Cupping his hands under his neck, Sam leaned back onto a pillow, letting out a low mhhhhh. “Painkillers.”

I rested my head against the window in agreement. Lacking sarcasm, I sighed. “Isn’t it the best not to feel?”

Sam nodded in agreement. A smug smile on his face. “The best feeling in the world.”

We sat in silence the next few moments: each of our minds stuck in a different trance.

Ruby knew the struggle inside his head. Surrounded by chalkboard walls scribbled with profanities, the two lay inter-

twined on her unmade bed.

“If you died, I’d kill myself,” she claimed.

Sam agreed with her, curling the side of his lip into a half smile. “Well, that’s that.”

Morbidity did not emerge from the conversation, but awareness: an understanding that in such a short amount of time, they had touched each other’s souls and solved one another’s complexities. They knew the near impossibility for one to live without the other. In two weeks, he’d changed her dark aura to a peachy pink. A shade not full of complete bliss, as dark horrors still rattled her skull, but a lingering hope almost too good to be true.

As the end of the second week approached, the stench of loneliness must’ve oozed from my pores.

“Let’s have a double date with my friend.” Sam tried.

“Is he tall?”

Thinking for a moment, he nodded his head. I spat out, “Yes,” before a full second passed.

Ruby loved the idea. Clapping her hands together she announced, “Let’s go to the quarry!”

We agreed. I parted my way for the night.

The next morning Ruby and I planned on going to the forest. I got ready and turned on my shower. Waiting for the water to warm up, Ruby texted me.

Buzz. “I’m happy.”

Buzz. “The happiest I’ve been in a really long time.”

I told her I knew - that I hadn’t seen her leave the house this much our entire friendship. I looked in the mirror. A pimple sprouted on my cheek.

Buzz. “I think I love him.”

I checked the water again: still too cold.

Buzz. “I almost told him last night, but it’s too soon.”

I said I think she loved him too. Not that I understood a thing about love - but if I had to guess, it was the way she drowned in his presence. The water that spouted from my

shower grew warm enough to submerge my body. Putting one foot in the tub, my phone vibrated again. I stepped out and decided to check my phone one final time:

“Sam’s dead.”

Buzz.

“He killed himself.”

Buzz.

“Come over.”

The smoke in Ruby’s garage spread everywhere.

“Why did you text me?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” innocence peaked in her voice, “You’re my best friend.”

Smiling, I shook my head. “No, I mean what made you choose not to follow through on the pact?”

Ruby’s lips pursed, displaying a silent oh: falling back into an old memory. “You want to know about that morning.” She unquestioningly gazed at a ripped box across her knees. Air rushed out her nostrils in painful relief. The inner corners of her lips twinged uprights. She closed her eyes. “It was a beautiful day.”

Birds chirped, swirling in uneven patterns outside the window of Ruby’s bedroom. A MacBook sat on the edge of her bed and repeated a newly discovered song. Streams of light pierced through blind slits, streaking her body that lounged diagonally across the mattress.

The clock struck eleven. Sam had yet to wake. An odd occurrence, considering he was an early riser. She texted him multiple times, discussing her newly discovered song, the bliss leaking in from the outer world, our double date, and -

A phone call interrupted her typing. Niki, Sam’s best friend, clung to the other line. Her words unclear, muffled by screams.

She broke up with her boyfriend, shit. Ruby thought. She gave her remorse, yet Niki’s screeching sobs remained consistent. Through gurgled gibberish, Ruby apprehended one word: Sam.

The phone slipped from her ear and flopped onto her bed.

The only utterance needed to comprehend the tragedy was his name.

“No,” she whispered.

A hellish shriek escaped her lungs.

“NO! NO!”

The high pitched roar rang her ears and burned the back of her throat. Bones convulsed erratically at an inability to stop the bloodcurdling screech. Green parakeet eyes traced over to her bathroom door. Underneath the sink, in the left cabinet, below a box of nail polish - old razor blades cuddled against one another and called her name.

A juncture of a twisted feat had arrived. A rather simple act: she'd stand, walk onto the cold tile floor, open the cabinet - and end it all. Priorly, she'd considered undertaking the morbid deed multiple times - and in this moment, Ruby held every right to give up; take away the pain pulsating so deeply through her veins.

“I thought shit, this is fucked up. My heart was pounding. I was thinking just do it. Just go for it, right now. Then I looked outside - and, it was a beautiful day. At that moment I thought ‘I’m going to get through this somehow, I don’t know, I have to. This is going to be a long fucking battle prepare yourself, you’re taking the long way out right now.’ I chose. It took a lot. It was the strongest thing I’ve ever done.”

My chest sinking in memory I looked back at my notes. “What was the color of your life after it happened? Black?”

Ruby firmly shut her eyes.

“Nope: never went back to black. I have been to black, and I don’t ever want it again. I did everything in my power. It wasn’t depression: it was sadness. After Sam died, months after, the color became burgundy with dark purple. Not the same bruised color... just dark, dark red. I still had hope for things. A burning fire in my heart. I knew what happiness was, but it got taken again. I was like, fuck this, what did I do wrong? I

don't deserve this. Or maybe I do and I just don't think I do." Her voice remained steady while her fingers tightened around a second cigarette.

"No one deserves that." I said.

She gazed off towards the garage door and shrugged. "I feel like a lot of people didn't view it as personally, as if it wasn't as hard of a choice."

Plopping my legs on a cardboard box, I arched my right brow in disagreement. "I don't think many consider a lovers' suicide no biggy."

She laughed: half smiling, half grimacing, continuing. "I make jokes about it, because it's the only way. Strangers are always like, 'Wow, that's so sad,' and I say just stop, I don't want to hear that. I've heard it too much. So, I make morbid jokes. That's what he would do; that's what he would've wanted. He'd be like, dammit she's so pissed I did this - and I am. I'm fucking pissed. He did it. It happened."

I open my mouth regarding another question, but Ruby persisted:

"When small people come into my life and try to hurt me, I'm like, I've been through worse than you. I have dealt with worse than what you are calling me right now. I've learned a lot in the past few years. People are so naive. That sounds so condescending, but it's true. They say 'Oh, she's so sad.' Well, life is fucking sad, and if you're not a little sad, you haven't experienced as much." Her voice raised yet she kept composure, moving a dark strand of hair out of her face.

I skimmed through my interview questions. Silence overwhelmed the garage.

"Why'd you pick me?" I looked up from the notepad; the question not listed in my notes.

Surfacing from her trance, Ruby glanced towards me. Her pupils glossed. The corners of her lips perked in a small, half smile.

"You're a special kind of human. You're the type of person you'd be lucky to meet once. You always give me something to

look forward to. Every time we talk there's 'So much you have to tell me' - there's always something happening. Why would I miss that? If I died, then I wouldn't know how you'd be. If you'd be the same. I couldn't take that from you."

A hard lump formed in the back of my throat. For a moment, I forgot about the interview. I forgot about the recorder on my lap and scribbled notes in my beaten notepad; consumed only by my gratitude for the living, breathing girl that sat across from me. Ruby flicked her hand, smiling real bright:

"I mean, you're my best friend. How could I not choose you?"

TELL ME TREE

POETRY BY JILLIAN RUNKLE

Tell me tree,
The story of me.

That I cannot tell,
For yours is a story of us and we,
From the time of earth and water,
To rock and sea.
To know the story of you,
You must know the story of me.

Then tell me tree,
The story of you.

Story of me? That I cannot do,
For mine is a story of time.
Not but a seed,
A speck in life's eyes,
Stretching leaf by leaf,
To the reflective blue skies.

Tell me tree,
The story of the sun.

Of the sun? Well there's more than one,
The star you see above your head,
Is the watcher of all living and dead.
Bursting out light and heat,
Blessing us all with food to eat.

Tell me tree,
The story of earth.

It would be folly not to mention earth,
The mother of all,
The giver of birth.
The candle upon which energy ignites,
A polar being, always in days or nights.
The world that we see most clear,
That lends us her body,
Rejuvenates us through tears.
That whispers to the moon and laughs with the sun,
The only steadiness among beings constantly on the run.

Tell me tree,
The story of man.

Well I'm really not sure if I can,
Tis' the tale of a being,
That once knew the balance of life,
To give when you take,
Rather than create with nature, tremendous strife.
They think they are now so separate,
But if only they knew,
That could not be farther from true.

Tell me tree,
The story of us all.

Life is not a story my friend,
For stories must know their end.

HALLWAY CREEPER

ARTWORK BY HOLLY FRANKINO



Inkjet Print
10 x 6.5 in.

Hallway Creeper

33

KILEY IN BLACK AND WHITE

ARTWORK BY HOLLY FRANKINO



Inkjet Print
10 x 6.5 in.

DON'T WATCH ME

ARTWORK BY ADRIAN GUTIERREZ



Inkjet Print

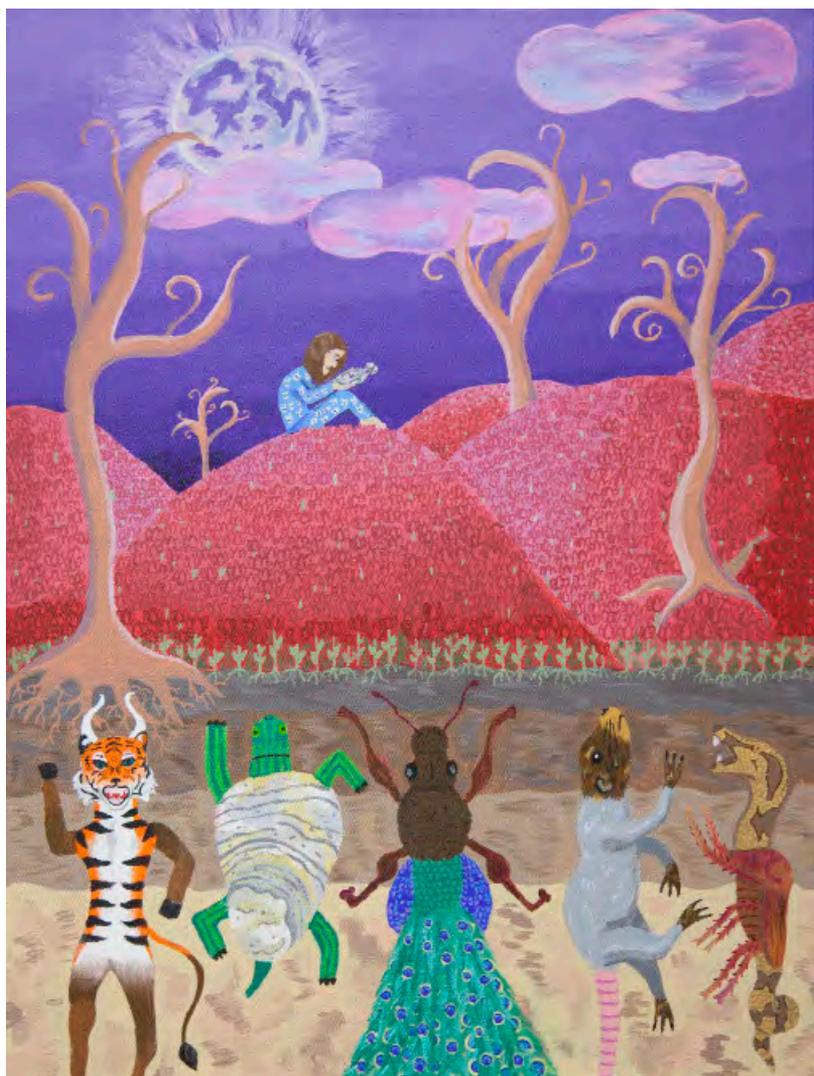
9 x 6 in.

Don't Watch Me

35

PAPER FLOWERS

ARTWORK BY SAMANTHA HARRISON



Acrylic on Canvas
24 x 18 in.

COSMIC HEART

FICTION BY M. K. PHILLIPS

Awaken.

You don't recall losing consciousness, just as you do not recall the circumstances which led you to do so. The fog of sleep clears with what little information you do have: this facility, with its stark walls of white and polished steel, is where you work and have called home for several weeks. The drills underneath the platform were aimed at an anomaly deep in the Earth's crust beneath the ocean floor, and they were meant to punch through to it at some point today. What does not come to you is what has gone wrong.

The existence of this wrongness is obvious enough. The alarms have been running for long enough to wear out the sirens and leave only the blinking red lights on each corner of the break room you now sit in, and the only other detectable sign of life is a tiny spider you spot skittering towards the door beside you. Outside, you can hear the sounds of faint footsteps. Perhaps it's a rescue worker, you reason, or at least someone who knows what happened here. You climb to your feet and push open the door.

Down the hall stands a single person, perfectly still and facing away. You recognize them from their clothing as one of your colleagues and a member of the research team, but with some sort of substance covering the back of their white coat with a deep black. You call out their name to no avail, and you approach.

Your hand sets on their shoulder just as the tiny spider climbs onto their foot. This grabs their attention, and you watch each of some twenty eyes of varying sizes track you from their place covering the creature's head. The being you once knew, if only in passing, was gone; replaced by this perversion of humanity. You turn and run, with little direct attention given to the vague sound that you detect on the edges of your mind.

The creature begins to follow, shockingly nimble despite its limping gait, and you round the corner down the hallway you know to lead to the elevators. Your attention, however, is pulled towards the bathroom to your right. Something inside is pulling you mentally towards it, and you cannot find the strength to resist. You shove the door open and lock it behind you.

Inside, you are drawn towards that which calls you so persistently: the mirror above the sink. It appears just as it always has, reflecting the room behind you with the slightest green tint. What's missing, however, is you. Your reflection is nowhere to be found, despite standing squarely in front of the polished surface. In stunned curiosity, you reach out and touch the mirror.

A loud bang rings around you the moment your fingers graze the frigid silver glass, which becomes crossed with cracks to the point of being useless. Like a gunshot, the sound rings for a few seconds before dying down, but leaves behind a foreign, distinctly recognizable sound that fills the cool and misty air that now occupies the facility. You hear it as a slow tone of a bell, or perhaps a metallic clang drawn out to flow through the empty halls with no end. You hear soft hissing or whispering intoned into the ringing, but a pair of far more present sounds draw your eyes to seek out their source.

The first is a very clear insectoid scuttling. You see a pair of abnormally large spiders climbing frantically towards the door, now barely hanging on its hinges. Their legs are thick like claws and their bodies pitch black, save for a conspicuous white abdomen striped with electric red cracks. They seem to be moving towards the source of the second noise: a set of voices. You don't hear them converse, or even seem to acknowledge one another. They each sing to a rhythmless tune in a drowned and gurgled voice. Your curiosity draws you out towards them.

What awaits you in the hall are three creatures, not entirely unlike the one you'd narrowly escaped before touching the mirror. Humanoid, stumbling, but this time covered in a mass of eyes that envelops their shoulders. They pay no mind to you,

instead marching towards the stairwell leading down to the drill maintenance deck. You can feel that they are moving towards the source of the bell tone chiming around you with no end, and you follow them quietly. Perhaps the source of this sound will let you return things to normal, perhaps your curiosity has gotten the better of you, or maybe you just want to see it for yourself.

You move more freely than they do, allowing you to get closer and closer behind them. Once you are nearly upon them, their singing is joined by another, more subtle sound. You can hear them quietly weeping through the notes pushed out through an indiscernible respiratory system, but it doesn't seem to be sorrowful. It sounds like a mix of jubilation and terror, like a mind teetering on the brink of shattering. You round the corner and smoothly glide down the stairs. You can't quite place it, but somewhere deep in your psyche, you know what these three creatures, now petrified at the sight of you, are feeling. You know they simply don't understand.

A spider crawls up the stairwell while you descend, followed by three more. Each of them seems larger and louder than the last, with the fourth pausing when you focus on it. Its abdomen rotates, and you are met with a blue iris and black pupil in the center of its white expanse. The spider stares, then scuttles away faster. You feel your breath hitch and reach the next landing on these decidedly endless steps. In the stainless steel wall, you can just make out your silhouette being reflected back at you. You still have two arms, two legs, a torso and a head; all seems to be in order. An unknown duty filling your mind, you touch the wall.

Another sharp bang is followed by deeper ringing. The wall in front of you is crossed with a thick, black fluid. The ringing you'd heard before is now deeper, stopping and starting up again every few seconds in a steady rhythm. Around you are huddled creatures, each nothing more than a mass of eyes perched on still-clothed legs. Unlike the previous, less grotesquely-malformed ones, these do not cower in fear or attack in a

primal rage. They stand in organic motion, their eyes twitching to take in your presence and trembling in their fleshy sockets. You turn.

The stairs seem to drop off into nothingness, with the low ring pulsing from deep within the abyss below. You feel each tone pull you towards the edge, and the creatures clear a path for you. Standing on the edge, you gaze, pulling your own eyes downward to pick out the very slightest of harsh, orange light twinkling from the depths. It fades and shines with each pulse of the bell—no... beat of the heart. You know it to be a heart-beat—and it swallows your stare into the endless black expanse that once held the facility's lower structure. You reach out your hand and it pulls again.

You can't remember falling or landing, but you regain yourself at the bottom of the void. Nothingness encroaches upon you and the entity which called you: an expansive orange mass slowly pulsating, making a deafening ring shake the air itself. Its surface, from what you can see, seems to be a crystalline stone, but moves and shudders like a living organ. The heart pulses while you approach, its surface shimmers and shifts. You see the clear, orange-tinted reflection, a pulsating mass of eyes, formed into a humanoid shape. Tendrils of black fluid hang from the mass like a stole draped around the neck. You lift your hand, its hand moves with it. You emit a sound, gurgled and echoing in the vast emptiness. You regard the heart fondly and set a dripping palm on its surface. Your vision shifts while the arachnid eyes climb onto it and return to their place crawling along your eye-covered body. You aren't concerned. You know the heart better than any of the others. You were chosen to become more than human. Your mind is a small price to pay.

ONE

FICTION BY HAILEY VON RUDEN

Six. Six months of training. That's all that I have to work with. This is not my forte. This was never supposed to happen. I came to this station to be a help to those in need. My position here was strictly Military Psychologist. But now I am being forced to fight for my life in a battle that I never joined, 7,000 miles away from home in the forsaken highlands of Saudi Arabia.

Five. That's how many bodies I saw drop right before my eyes, something I never in my life imagined having to have witnessed. Our base was attacked a week ago. In the dead of night, the enemy seized open-fire on us from the sky. Virtually instantaneously, there was a ground raid and every single one of us, no matter our status, were rushed into combat. There was only a small group of them, so thankfully I never had to use my gun, which is something I could never imagine myself doing. But regrettably, I witnessed a few of our men, including one of my patients, fall at the hands of the adversary before we were told the base was secured. We haven't been evacuated. We have been told that we are surrounded. The mountainous plot we have been stationed at leaves little room for relocation or escape. We are like sitting ducks, other than the hills and high ridges sheltering us. We have also been told that there is an evacuation plan under way, but that's hard to believe. When I made the decision to accept the position here, I was aware that there would be risks, but I told my parents that I would be completely safe, and I think I even convinced myself that I would be too. I was going to take the job either way, because my goal in this field was to hold an important position like this, but the only reason they okay-d it was because I told them I wouldn't be in any danger. I went through some basic training on how to use a gun and whatnot. I practiced aiming at moving objects, but shooting at people was honestly something I thought I would never have to do. I don't

know what's worse: the fact that I wasn't honest with them or the fact that I wasn't honest with myself. I assumed this would never happen. I was naïve. I mean, everyone at some point thinks that the most horrible things in life won't happen to them. I just never thought I would be handed a gun and told to fight because now, my life was on the line. Being 7,000 miles from home never felt so hopeless.

We all sit and wait for the next alarm, or for the next gun to sound, signifying the next attack on us. After the initial invasion, we all got dispersed into different buildings to wait until the next big move. There have been a few attempted ground attacks, but we have our strongest men on the outside and they have been doing an exceptional job at safeguarding our base. The rest of us are just waiting to be beckoned to fill their positions if they fall. Being one of the few women in a group of mainly men, and being the least experienced, my chances of being summoned are slim. I should feel relieved by that, and I do deep down, but the main emotion I feel is powerless. I'm not trained for battle. I hardly know how to protect myself, let alone anyone else that needs protection or saving. If the enemy decided to full-on raid our base, or drop in by air and launch a full-blown attack, I don't know what I would do. I barely know how to use a gun. How could I even attempt to save other people if I can't even save myself? The thought of actually using my gun is distressing. I can't leave either, if we really are surrounded. Ultimately, the only choice I would have is to fight, and right now I just hope I gain the courage to even move when that time comes.

There have been a few generals going around relaying what they believe is the enemy's plan. They say we have some spies who got on the inside who are gaining knowledge of their next move. I don't really catch any more of what they say, and I don't think I would put my hope in whatever it is even if I did hear it. I am too busy with my own thoughts. I am afraid. My mind keeps replaying what I witnessed during the first attack. Flashes of the fallen bodies, of men who didn't deserve to die, whiz through my thoughts. I wonder if I could have done anything. I wonder if they had family back in the States waiting for them to

come home. My thoughts become too overwhelming so I get up and go into the bathroom. I turn on the cold water and splash it onto my face. I look at my reflection, at my tousled short brown hair and dirt-smearred face. My clear blue eyes seem foggy now and the fear I can see on my face disturbs me. I haven't really looked at myself the past few days. When I do now, when I really study my reflection, I feel helpless. I feel alien to this place, this room, this body. I want to convince myself that this is all just a bad dream, but I can't. I'm here. I'm here in a position I never thought I would be in; and I'm terrified, but I know I have to push myself through it. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and take a mental step back from it all so I can take it all in; so I can come to terms with my role here now. When I open my eyes again I glance at my name tag which reads "Zoe Michaels." That person seems like an old friend. So much has changed. So much has changed me. I miss my family and friends but it pains me even more to think about them. I would give anything to be home. But I can't leave. No one can leave. My only choice is to be here and prepare for imminent war.

When I sit back down I contemplate what I will do if our base gets invaded again. I am terrified of the prospect of someone pointing a gun at me and me having to choose between letting them take my life, or pointing my gun back at them and shooting. I wonder how much time I would have to decide or even move. Before I can put together a rational plan, the sound of bullets firing pierces through the air.

Everyone moves. Bodies scramble everywhere as the horns start blaring indicating we need to grab our weapons and get our asses out the door. I get up and grab my gun where it is hanging on the wall, but I don't feel like I move at all. I feel like I am stuck in molasses or watching myself from outside my body. I have no coherent thoughts. People are yelling. There is a general in the doorway ordering everyone to move, so we move. I don't know where we are going or what will greet us out there but I obey because there's nothing else for me to do.

Four. Four steps and I am outside. The air is dense and all I can make out is the sound of gunshots, grenades, and screams.

Everyone is in panic-mode. My heart is beating through my chest and my hands are so sweaty that my gun almost slips from my grasp. I hear a plane flying above us. Shit, don't be air-strikers, I think to myself. I hear another noise and this time it's the sound of what I feared it would be: a bomb dropping, fast as hell and growing louder the closer it gets to the Earth. Through the dust, I try to see where it's going to drop when I hear a loud explosion just fifty feet from where I'm standing, and I realize it already did. Everything goes white and then black in a split-second. I can't hear. Everything is muffled noise now as I try to make my way through the debris and smoke. My eyes burn as I reach a clearing in the grey and hazy commotion. I realize that I don't know where I am or where I'm going. I feel a hand on my arm and my heart stops. I get pulled behind a boulder just as a grenade rolls past where I was just standing. I look up to see who just saved my life. It's one of my patients. "God, thanks Connor. I don't even know how those things work. You saved my life." I tell him. He doesn't say anything. He just looks at me and half smiles and nods, a smile that is sympathetic and trying to be encouraging at the same time. Mostly, he seems scared, which makes me worry because he actually knows what he's doing. Before I can say anything else he leaves our spot behind the boulder, walks into the smoke, and I lose sight of him.

Three. Three more planes have flown over and I have silently prayed to a God I don't even know if I believe in, that it won't be me this time. That's what war does to a person. It causes them to put their all faith in a higher force that they think can somehow save them from death. Because when you're this close to death, you need something to believe in to keep you going. I now realize we have started running. Soldiers are sprinting past me and I can't tell if they are running away from something or towards something, but I follow them anyway because it doesn't matter. All I know is to act and stay in the pack; do anything I can at this point to survive. The sound of gunshots around me has not grown any less, and I wonder if anyone else I know has fallen to the enemy. My ears ring as I realize my group is running to a clearing in a higher area of the mountains. Suddenly, I hear a

yell behind me in a language I don't understand. The surprise of it causes me to lose my step and trip. I hit the ground hard and cringe as I hear a gun fire. I can't hear anything but the rapid beating of my heart in my ears. Again, I pray to God the next shot isn't aimed at me. Nothing happens. Again, I hear gunfire but this time it is coming from my group. They fire against the opposition and blood hits me in the face as one of them falls in front of me. I fight the urge to throw up, and wipe the blood off my face as I get up. I have been lucky so far, but the fact that I am actually a part of this fight is becoming more real to me. At this point, anything can happen; no one is truly safe. We move farther up the mountain and find a place high enough to see everything, but hidden enough where most of us are seemingly invisible to the others.

Two. Two hours have gone by since the invasion. It doesn't seem like it. We have been guarding our post and a few of our snipers have been standing on duty on the edges. I notice a sort of standoff going on a few feet down the mountainous path, and I recognize the American soldier. It's Connor. I don't remember moving, but the next thing I know I'm walking towards him. People are yelling at me to retreat but I don't. Some drive deep inside me starts guiding my actions. A Saudi Arabian soldier is pointing his gun at Connor. I can't let him die. I'm moving solely on instinct, I'm not even sure what my plan is, all I know is I have to do something. A yell travels through my throat and out my mouth, "NO. STOP!" Connor turns and looks at me in shock, his eyes wide. The soldier doesn't understand me but he turns to me anyways. His gun is pointed at me now. I look at Connor and look back at the soldier. He has evil in his eyes and I know I'm his target now, not Connor. I feel relieved for this, yet scared now for my own life, my head buzzing louder than ever. Both of our guns are aimed at each other. A foul smile spreads across his face and my whole body freezes.

One. One second is the time it takes for me to make the decision, feel the cool metal of the trigger under my fingers, and pull.

OUTCRY

POETRY BY MELISSA VARACALLI

I take my heart and I hold it within my palms

The blood squirts and splats drip dripping covering the page
and eliminating its pure white

I place my heart to the side and draw two eyes and a frown
A smudged masterpiece arranged in such a way that the public
gasps

The disturbing imagery of a petite girl carrying around an
exposed organ as though it is her purse

Slung around one shoulder, the weight transforms into
something much harder to bear

Squirt squirting a trail that's started sense birth
She can never go unnoticed, never unseen
In every society she exists within the crowd
I am that female inaudibly pleading for help

Because apparently cutting out my heart didn't resonate a
loud enough yell.

FITTING INTO CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

NON-FICTION BY JULIANNE GLOD

I am just putting the finishing touches on my makeup to get ready for the Halloween party. As I clasp my hands together in an attempt to calm myself down from excitement, I can feel my pulse through my sweaty fingers. It is my first party as a senior in high school. In a panic after looking at the time, I frantically realize I still need to pick out which shoes I am going to wear with my pirate costume that I had just bought from the Goodwill the day before. After deciding to go with my mom's black leather Harley Davidson motorcycle boots, I take one last look in the mirror before leaving to make sure my fake lip piercing looks real enough and my pony tails are tight enough. In my little pirate dress with the black boots, I look so good. I am on my way to my friend Steph's house to meet up with some other girls, whom I have not met yet, so we can all go to the party together. At this moment, I have never felt more confident. But this moment only lasts until I walk into Steph's house to see the other girls getting ready.

"Is that real!?" exclaims Steph, pointing to the accessory on my lip. I tell her not to worry and that it is just a fake piercing from Walmart. She cringes in disgust as I take the ring off my lip and slip it into my small cross body bag. Embarrassed, I start to think that maybe the lip ring is not a very good idea. Dressed as a rave girl, Steph leads me upstairs to her mom's bathroom to finish getting ready with the other girls. As I introduce myself to the others, I examine everyone's costume. One girl, wearing a black crop top and leggings with red lip stain dripping down from the corner of her lips, is going as a vampire. Another girl, wearing a black sparkly dress with pearls around her neck, is going as a flapper. Unsure of the last girl, I ask what she

is dressed as. She looks almost naked, wearing a nude colored bodysuit with beige tights and nude leg warmers. She says she is going as a “Yeezy model.” Discretely, I look it up on my phone because I have never heard of a “Yeezy model” before.

All the girls are just completing their hair and makeup before taking pictures. At this moment, I realize that girls are far too concerned with their appearance. But they cannot help it; it is just part of being a girl. Their eyes are caked with dark eyeshadow and thick eyeliner. One girl is struggling to apply her false eyelashes without allowing the glue to seep into her eyes. A guy would never have to spend this much time or put this much effort into getting ready. But this is normal for most girls because it is what being a girl means to them, so they put all their effort into their appearance in order to look the best they possibly can, so they can feel accepted by others. Being a girl is already hard enough, but we have to try at least twice as hard to feel like we fit in. That does not only mean being able to get a boy’s attention, but even more so to feel like we look good enough to other girls.

As soon as the Yeezy model finishes applying her nude lipstick, we all go downstairs to take pictures. We spend close to an hour taking pictures and retaking pictures. I am shocked to hear the vampire ask Steph to retake the same picture for the fifth time just so she can perfect her pose. She goes through each of the five pictures on her phone and finally narrows them down to two. Then she asks me which one she should post to Instagram. “My smile looks better in this one, but I look skinnier in that one,” she debates. They both look identical to me, so I pick one randomly. Even though these girls look beautiful and perfect, it is easy to see how insecure they actually feel.

“Don’t post it yet. Let me edit it first, and then I will send it to you,” says the flapper while focusing on her phone screen. She is the skinniest girl in the room, yet she still insists that she edit her pictures to make herself appear thinner. This is when I realize how important it is to some people to look a certain size, so they can feel attractive. After about thirty minutes of editing

and sending pictures, we all start to post to Instagram. They look almost fake in their overly edited pictures with their tiny waists and blown up busts. I may look larger next to them in the pictures, but at least I look like a real human being.

I am still trying to understand why this matters so much to them. Why does it matter how they look on their social media accounts? Why do they feel the need to make themselves look different on social media? Then I suddenly figure it out. “I got 50 ‘likes’ in 20 minutes!” Steph shouts with excitement. It is all about how many “likes” they can get on social media. They think that the better they look, the more “likes” they will get, and the more “likes” they get, the more confident they feel. At the end of it all, they just want to feel accepted and well-liked by others- even if that does mean they have to alter their appearances for social media. I feel so bad for these girls because they cannot see what I can see. They are trapped in a world of comparing themselves to others where they feel the need to compete with their peers to look better just so they can have that feeling of security and acceptance.

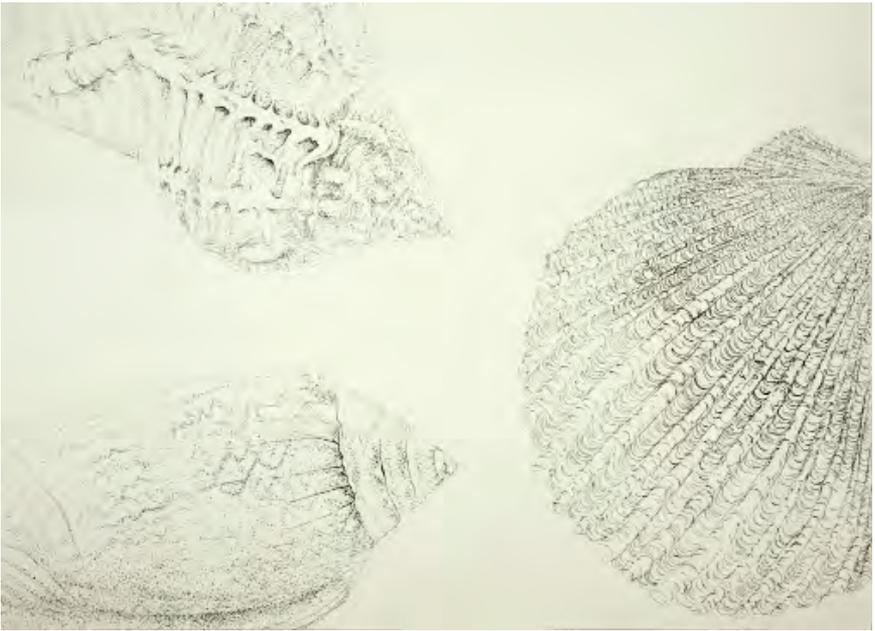
The reason girls feel they have to look a certain way for people to like them is because so much is expected of a girl in society now with the popularity of the media. There are so many “Instagram Famous” girls that seem perfect on their social media accounts. These girls get thousands of “likes” on their pictures just for being beautiful. Because of this, regular girls, like the girls I am getting ready with for the party, feel the need to be perfect just like the “Instagram Famous” girls. And if they do not feel perfect like the “Instagram Famous” girls, they feel as though they are not good enough for everyone else. We also have to compete with our peers on social media. Everyone getting ready for the party with me is in competition to get the most “likes” on their photos. If the most beautiful, popular girl in school gets at least 300 ‘likes’ on her pictures on Instagram, and a regular girl, who is still beautiful, only gets 20 ‘likes’ on each of her pictures, it can tear the self-esteem of that regular girl down.

Earlier that day when I was looking at my costume in the

mirror, I was feeling so confident and comfortable in my own skin. Then, when I walked into Steph's house and saw the other girls, I suddenly feel so out of place because these other girls are so much prettier and so much thinner than I am. They all get more likes on their Instagram photos, and they all have more friends than I do. It takes my confidence away because I know that when we arrive to the party I will look like a nobody when I stand next to these girls. Then I realize that it is not just me, but the other girls also have insecurities with their appearances, especially when it comes to the size of their body. It all sounds dumb and silly, but it is true. Girls just feel they have so much to compete with in order to feel well-liked by others. I may not fit in with these other girls, but I make it work anyway. After much deliberation, I realize that I do not care like they do. I just want to have fun.

ED, EDD, & EDDY

ARTWORK BY NATHALIE MARTINEZ



Micron Pen/Ink

16 x 22 in.

THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR

ARTWORK BY NATHALIE MARTINEZ



Charcoal
24 x 18 in.

SUIT & TIE

ARTWORK BY NATHALIE MARTINEZ



Charcoal
23.5 x 17.5 in.

HUEVINIS

ARTWORK BY NATHALIE MARTINEZ



Charcoal
18 x 24 in.

LIFE IN THE DARK

DRAMA BY LEXIE PIHERA

CHARACTERS

SHADE	Teenage girl; light scars twining around both arms (scars disappear after she wakes in the hospital)
LINK	Teenage boy; in the real world, boyfriend of Shade; he appears in Shade's dream to help her escape
JANE	Elder woman; part of Shade's subconscious
SAMUEL	Elder man; part of Shade's subconscious
VOICE	Off stage voice
THOMAS	Older man
SHADE'S MOTHER	In her forties
SHADE'S FATHER	In his forties

SCENES

Scene 1	A Hospital Room
Scene 2	Dark Tunnels
Scene 3	Forest (with boulder)
Scene 4	Farmhouse
Scene 5	Forest (with boulder)
Scene 6	Farmhouse
Scene 7	Forest (with boulder)
Scene 8	A Hospital Room

Story takes place in two different settings: a hospital room and Shade's subconscious (consisting of a dark tunnel, forest, and a farm house).

SCENE ONE

(LINK and THOMAS are in a hospital room early in the morning. SHADE lies in the bed, but her face is turned to the side.)

LINK: What if I can bring her back?

THOMAS: What you're talking about doing is close to sorcery, boy.

LINK: Getting inside a person's head isn't sorcery. Not anymore. You do it for a living!

THOMAS: I'm a psychologist. I study the way the mind works – why we do what we do. I don't literally get inside a person's head!

LINK: But what if we could go inside her head? Help her back out!

THOMAS: Her mind is repairing, Link. Give her time. She needs to come out of this on her own. Tampering with her mind could make things worse.

LINK: But she's in trouble – I know it; I can feel it! She needs help.

THOMAS: Fine. Let's say, for instance, this plan of yours is possible. What then?

LINK: I find her and I wake her up.

THOMAS: But how? If she's lost in her subconscious, how will you find her? You may get lost in there as well. There's no telling what could happen.

LINK: That's why you're here, to help me.

THOMAS: If you think I'm getting into that young girl's head, think again.

LINK: No, no, of course not. You just need to get me inside. Tell me how to get us both out again. I know you must have some ideas. Your book is all about exploring the subconscious

– well, now you have a chance to test your ideas!

THOMAS: (*hesitantly*) There is something I've been wondering about – about human connections. You know the saying 'true love transcends lifetimes.' Well, perhaps it's a deep mental connection that goes past the physical to the spiritual. I've never been able to test this, so I'm not sure if it's a valid assumption. But...

LINK: This... idea might let me help her?

THOMAS: Well... I'm not making any guarantees. It's more of a personal fascination than a professional study. It's not exactly something you can test on just anyone.

LINK: I'll do it. I'd do anything for her. I just can't lose her.

THOMAS: Yes, I know you're willing. But is she willing?

LINK: (*looking towards Shade*) She always loved romance stories. This is sort of the same, I suppose. I think she'd want me to help her. I know I'd want her to help me if our places were reversed. What better way to wake up than by seeing the face of someone you love?

THOMAS: Very well. Come with me, but you have to do everything I say.

LINK: Of course. It's not like you're gonna make me kill someone, right?

THOMAS: I'm not saying 'yes,' but I'm not saying 'no,' either. (*beat*) This will take time. Follow me.

(*THOMAS leads LINK off stage.*)

(*Blackout.*)

SCENE TWO

(*Lights half up on a dark tunnel. SHADE, frantic, runs onto the stage.*)

VOICE (O.S.): I know you're out there! You can't escape, you know.

(*SHADE stumbles, searching her way around with her hands.*)

VOICE (O.S.): I'm only protecting you, my dear, dear Shade. The world is evil; they will devour you, betray you, kill you!

SHADE: No.

(VOICE snarls. SHADE freezes where she is and nervously looks around for the Voice. SHADE slowly continues moving about the stage, searching until she comes to the end of the tunnel. SHADE collapses, shaking.)

VOICE (O.S.): There you are, my sweet. I was so worried.

SHADE: Get away from me!

VOICE (O.S.): Tut, tut. So ungrateful, so naïve... But so determined. It's a shame really.

(Two actors, dressed completely in black, come on stage and tie ropes, leading backstage, around SHADE'S wrists. The ropes are pulled taut and the light goes red. SHADE strains against the ropes and screams in agony. She then shuts her mouth and determinedly remains silent. The red lights dim and the half-lights fade back in. SHADE collapses to the ground.)

VOICE: That's it, my dear. Rest. Banish thoughts of escape from your mind.

SHADE: Never.

(There is a loud, low rumble. SHADE looks up at the ceiling. The lights flicker slightly and small stones fall from above. She begins frantically pulling at the ropes. After several attempts, the ropes come free. SHADE crawls away from the wall, protecting herself from falling debris.)

VOICE (O.S.): *(growing distant)* No! This is impossible!
(The rumbling and flickering lights gradually stop. SHADE looks around at the rubble, then down at herself. A bright light illuminates SHADE from behind.)

SHADE: Light!

(SHADE turns, in search of the light source, coming from a hole in the walls that previously secured her. SHADE rushes to the light, frantically moving the rubble to widen the hole. She periodically looks back, as if expecting the Voice to stop her. The

*hole widens just enough for her to squeeze through and she escapes
off stage.)
(Blackout.)*

SCENE THREE

(Noon in the forest. A large boulder sits at the base of a mountainous backdrop, and trees spread across the stage. SHADE enters through a gap that she opens in the boulder. The gap closes once she exits. She looks around, fascinated by the world around her. Unnoticed by SHADE, LINK enters opposite the boulder and pauses when he sees SHADE.)

SHADE: Who are you?

(SHADE whirls around, startled by the new voice. She stares at him, fascinated. LINK, upon seeing her face, is startled.)

LINK: Who are you? Are – are you...?*(shakes head to clear thoughts before continuing)* I think I asked you first.

SHADE: Shade. I think my name's Shade.

LINK: *(beat)* Well, I'm Link. Say, have we met? Do you live around here?

SHADE: I... I'm not really sure. I can't remember.

LINK: Huh. Well, if you want, you can come with me and I'll help you find your way home. You can get cleaned up too if you want.

SHADE: *(glancing down at her clothes)* Yeah, that'd be great.

LINK: *(begins walking off stage)* This way. Are you sure we've never met?

SHADE: I'm sorry. I'm really not sure. Maybe.

LINK: Strange. I feel like I know you.

*(LINK and SHADE exit off stage.)
(Blackout.)*

SCENE FOUR

(Inside a little farmhouse with two rooms – a kitchen and a bedroom. JANE and SAMUEL are inside the house. LINK comes on stage, just outside the house, followed by SHADE.)

LINK: Let's see if anyone's home.

(LINK knocks on the door. JANE answers the door.)

JANE: Link? You're back! *(beat)* And you brought a friend!

SAMUEL: *(raises eyebrows)* A girl.

LINK: I'm just helping her out. She's just a little lost.

JANE: Oh, you poor girl! Come with me, dear. Let's get you cleaned up, then we can sort this mess out. You know, Link showed up here one day out of the blue. He was a mess!

(JANE leads SHADE out the front door and off stage. LINK and SAMUEL are left in the kitchen.)

SAMUEL: Where did you find that girl? Looks like she's been in the Underworld.

LINK: Up near the mountains. She crawled her way out of the earth – or at least I think she did. The hole disappeared when I got closer. It was strange.

SAMUEL: She crawled out of the earth? Think she's in some sort of trouble?

LINK: I don't know. She doesn't seem to know much of anything. She's like how I was, but worse. More... lost. And for a moment... I felt like I've been looking for her – like that's why I keep traveling. I was supposed to find her – whoever she is. It gives me a headache just thinking about it, but then my heart is saying I have to bring her home.

(SAMUEL sits down heavily.)

LINK: Sam?

SAMUEL: Do you remember when you came to us?

LINK: *(sitting next to Samuel)* Yeah. I was a complete mess – covered in dirt and sweat. Jane said I acted crazy. That I kept going on about a different world – a different life. It drove her crazy.

SAMUEL: That girl looks like you did, but more worn. What are the odds of something so strange happening twice? It makes me wonder... maybe your story is true.

LINK: The world I spoke of isn't real. I've been looking for it. And nothing.

(JANE walks back into the house and to the bedroom. She grabs a dress from the closet in the bedroom, then leaves the house and goes off stage. LINK and SAMUEL pause in their conversation when she enters the kitchen and keep their voices lowered until she leaves the house again.)

SAMUEL: But this young girl makes me think otherwise. She has no memory of who she is, where she came from – like you, but you had a faint inkling of what that world was. She has nothing. Maybe something took her memories? And the scars on her arm. Did you see them?

LINK: No.

SAMUEL: They're there. I tell you, when she comes back, all nice and clean, then you'll be able to see them. There's a story about scars like those. Legends say those scars keep the soul trapped in this world – a world their soul doesn't belong in.

LINK: You're not making any sense. Everyone I've spoken with, even you and Jane, you've all said there's only this world and the world we go to after death. How can there be another world? Ugh! *(clutching his head; softly)* A... a hospital?

SAMUEL: What was that, boy?

LINK: I... I saw a room. In a... hospital... I think... I remember now... Oh my god.

SAMUEL: What's wrong, boy?

(LINK and SAMUEL continue the conversation, but without audibly speaking. The lights dim over the kitchen, but remain lit outside the house. JANE and SHADE walk back on stage. SHADE lingers behind as they near the house.)

JANE: Come on, dear. You look beautiful.

SHADE: Thank you for the dress, ma'am.

JANE: You're welcome. It just makes me so happy to see Link with such a nice young girl. He's been so lonely since he came to us a while back. He's like a son to us, though he hardly stays here. He likes to wander around, seems to be missing something. I think it's his family. He must miss the gentle sound of

his mother's voice. I remember my mother; she had the loveliest voice. But, most mothers have a lovely voice, don't you think?

SHADE: I actually don't know.

JANE: What?

SHADE: I don't have a mother, or if I did... I don't remember her.

JANE: Oh, you poor girl! Didn't you have anyone to love you?

SHADE: I don't know.

JANE: Oh, my dear, love is the strongest thing in all the worlds. Nothing can break it. It ties families together, you know. And we'll find yours, I promise.

SHADE: Thank you – for everything. You don't know how much this means to me.

JANE: I'm sure you're right. I've never not had a family to love. *(beat)* How would you like to be a part of our family? Until we find yours and even after that, maybe?

SHADE: I'd like that, ma'am.

JANE: Wonderful. And there's no need for all this 'ma'am' nonsense. Jane's just fine.

(LINK rushes out of the house.)

JANE: What's the matter, Link?

LINK: (to SHADE) How... uh... How are you holding up? Do you feel alright?

(JANE looks between Link and Shade, then enters the house, closing the door behind her.)

SHADE: Compared to where you found me, this place is like a dream.

LINK: But do you feel like something's missing? Or that you don't belong here? Even though this place is amazing... your mind... er... the mind can create such wonderful places. I almost don't want to leave.

SHADE: Are you alright? You're acting sort of strange.

LINK: I've never been better. And I'm going to do everything I can to get you back home, I promise. I won't rest until I do.

SHADE: It's alright, really. Honestly, I don't think my family's

here. It's a weird feeling, but I feel like they're worlds away.

LINK: This may sound strange to ask, but what happened to you – in the tunnels? Do you remember anything?

SHADE: (*rubbing scars absently*) It was like a nightmare. There was this voice. I never saw who it was – or even if it was a person. But whoever it was, they tortured me. The entire time I was down there... I can still hear that voice... taunting me...

LINK: Don't worry, you don't have to tell me everything if it's too painful.

(*SHADE nods.*)

LINK: Do you trust me?

SHADE: Strangely, yes. Though I'm starting to think you might be a bit crazy.

LINK: But will you trust that what I tell you is the truth?

SHADE: It depends on what you're telling me, but, in general, I'd say yes.

LINK: Ok. Well, there's this legend that Samuel's obsessed with. It's about trapped souls, caught in this world. They have no recollection of where they came from or who they are. And Sam said that scars – just like yours – bind the souls to this world.

SHADE: You think I'm one of those souls?

LINK: I don't think you are; I know you are. I know who you really are.

SHADE: What? How?

LINK: Because I came here to find you – to bring you back. But... now that I'm here... why don't we just stay here? It's nice here – beautiful. So much better than back home. We don't have to worry about anything.

SHADE: Link... I... I need to know who I am. I can't do that here. I have to go back, back to where I came from, at least for a little while, then... maybe...

LINK: I don't think you get it. We can't come back here once we leave. When we leave, it's for good.

SHADE: I want to stay... I really do. It's just I have... there's this emptiness inside me. And I just can't fill it. If I know who

I am, where I belong... but I can't do that. Not here.

LINK: But I can tell you who you are.

SHADE: No. I need to find that out myself. Please, Link, take me home.

LINK: I'm not sure how. I didn't know if I'd be able to find you. But I know someone who can help us. I just need to find a way to contact him. *(beat)* And I think I might know how.

(LINK runs off stage.)

(Blackout.)

SCENE FIVE

(A bright light shines on THOMAS, wearing all white and sitting in the forest near the boulder that SHADE entered through earlier, and reading a book. LINK enters.)

LINK: Thomas!

THOMAS: *(looking up from his book)* Link, how are you, my boy? Is the search going well?

LINK: I think I got lost myself for a while, but I'm back. *(beat)* I thought you said you weren't getting inside her head?

THOMAS: I'm not. Not like you are. I'm here because you wanted me here. Now, why am I here?

LINK: How do I pull her out of this world?

THOMAS: Link, we've been over this again and again. You need to find the lair first. But it's impossible. It'll be deep in her subconscious. And then you have to pull her out, which is even more difficult. You need to move on. She's gone. It's time for you to leave.

LINK: I found her, Thomas.

THOMAS: *(stunned)* How?

LINK: She came out of the mountain – that boulder over there actually. But, I was really wondering... what happens if she – if we – stay here?

THOMAS: We can't exist in two worlds, Link. You especially

can't stay here. You don't belong here. Two minds cannot exist in one body. It will tear the host body apart and both souls will be lost. When she goes, so will you. You already know what to do. You're just scared to do it.

LINK: There's no other way?

(THOMAS shakes his head.)

(Blackout.)

SCENE SIX

(In the farm house. JANE is cleaning the house. SHADE is sitting near the window, looking out. LINK enters on stage. SHADE hurries to the front door and opens it as LINK approaches. LINK appears slightly sullen; he keeps his eyes on SHADE.)

JANE: How was your trip?

LINK: *(beat)* Informative.

(JANE looks between LINK and SHADE.)

JANE: I think I'll go out in the barn. Samuel's out there fixing the wagon's wheel again. Holler if you need anything.

(JANE exits.)

LINK: *(taking SHADE'S hand)* Come on.

SHADE: Is everything alright, Link? Did you figure out how to get home?

LINK: Later.

(LINK and SHADE exit offstage.)

(Blackout.)

SCENE SEVEN

(The forest near the boulder. LINK and SHADE enter.)

SHADE: What are we doing here?

LINK: Just trust me, ok?

(LINK and SHADE sit down.)

LINK: I want to help you, Shade. You know that, right?

SHADE: Of course.

LINK: I... I feel like we're meant to be together.

SHADE: So do I. It's a strange feeling. Like a memory partially coming back – only the emotion is there though, not the actual memory. But you remember everything?

LINK: Yes... Do you trust me?

SHADE: Yes.

LINK: I wouldn't – I won't – do anything to harm you, I swear. Everything I've done – everything – is to protect you.

SHADE: I know. I don't know why, but I know I can trust you.

LINK: I don't want to let you go. I wish we could stay here forever.

SHADE: We can if you really want to. I'm sure I'll remember everything eventually. I can already feel some of the memories coming back. And I kind of like it here, too. Maybe we could stay, at least for a little while.

LINK: No. No, we can't. You can't. You have to go home. It's dangerous for you here. And it's dangerous if we both stay. We need to leave. Or... we'll never be the same.

SHADE: But what if I don't want to go yet?

(LINK kisses SHADE. As they kiss, LINK slips a knife through SHADE'S ribs. LINK, beginning to sob, breaks off the kiss.)

SHADE: looks down at the knife in LINK'S hand.)

SHADE:*(shaking)* W-why?

LINK: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It was the only way to save you. I'm sorry.

(SHADE slowly loses consciousness. LINK cradles Shade in his arms.)

LINK: I'll see you again, I promise. Death cannot conquer love. I love you, Shade. Please, remember that. I love you.

(Blackout.)

SCENE EIGHT

(In the hospital room. SHADE'S MOTHER is sitting in a chair beside SHADE'S bed. SHADE'S FATHER is standing nearby.)

They look towards her as SHADE opens her eyes.)

SHADE'S FATHER: How are you feeling, kiddo?

SHADE: Who are you? Where am I? What's going on?

SHADE'S FATHER: We're your family. You're in the hospital. You've been here for almost a month now. You were in an accident, remember? You were riding your bike and there was this truck--

SHADE'S MOTHER: *(embracing SHADE)* Oh, I'm just glad you're awake!

(SHADE'S FATHER joins in the hug. SHADE does not hug her parents back. Her eyes drift towards the hospital room's entrance. LINK is standing there; he smiles at her. SHADE looks desperately towards him, silently asking if everything was real. LINK nods.

SHADE closes her eyes, smiles, and hugs her family.

Lights down.)

THE END

IT'S BEEN FIVE YEARS

NON-FICTION BY KATHLEEN CARUSO-HICKS

Wow! Time really flies by, doesn't it? It has been five years today since my mom passed away. I feel like I never will forget the day's entirety. My mom had suffered from cancer for many years on and off. I have no clue how she did it. I cannot imagine her pain and suffering as I am not her. The Thursday just before Memorial Day, my mom went in to see her oncologist. I went with her. We both knew inside that it was the last time. We even spoke about it. He admitted her for more tests and all the logistics he needed to do to see where he could go with a Stage 4 Lung Cancer patient.

The next day he said, "It is time for Hospice."

Mom knew that and yet he still needed to say that. She needed his formal statement. My daughters came to the hospital after school that day. I told them what was happening. They asked,

"Hasn't Grandma been dying for years?"

Well this was a bit more formal now. It was set in stone, time to plan the funeral per se.

My mom said, "Discharge me now!"

Of course she should be. What the heck are the meds going to do via IV fluids to help her? You see, my mom suffered this cancer for many years. So, mom came home that night and, within a week, Hospice came and we began about 6 months of a new life.

She lived about 6 months with this horrendous disease that takes over your body. I worked home care jobs as a CNA so I could be around for my mom's last moments. It helped me be there for the kids to deal with this. She did not live her last 6 months sitting down. No sir! My mom was always a fighter but she deserved to live her last days "ALIVE!" She did what she could when she could. We had friends and family

visit at times. Her last couple months of life, you knew it was happening, but it was hard to accept.

My mom's last meal was Portillo's ribs! Bless her heart, she tried her best to eat them. As time went on it was hard for mom to eat anything. My neighbor's little girls across the street were such a blessing. I was so blessed for them to be there. I remember two days before she died. It was a Wednesday afternoon and Lucy was over making my mom laugh! It was so inspiring. She loved to hear her stories. She loved to talk with Maya, such an intelligent little girl my mom always said.

October 14, 2011: my daughters head off to school. Stephanie was a senior and Elizabeth was a sophomore. Dad said to me, "It doesn't look good." The look in his eyes I will never forget. I have tears in my eyes right now feeling like it was then. I will never understand how my dad went through this since I am not him.

I told my mom, "I love you mommy."

And her last words to me were, "I love you."

Why I said "Mommy," I never really understood until years later. I never had a mommy most my life. I was kidnapped at age 7 and recovered at age 15. And there I was, at age 41, losing her.

The Hospice nurse came and said, "Anytime now."

She told me to call the school and get the girls home so they can spend their last moments with their Grandma. I know the nurse had a tear in her eye. How can you not have her job and not be affected? She and my mom had so many similarities. They would have a blast. They were the same age. I would join them and have a great time. We all needed it.

The Chaplain from Hospice came and said she will not make it through the night. I knew it inside my heart. You see mom did not want to die in the dark of night. My mom's best friends and family came over as soon as they could. My mom's youngest brother drove his truck over. Moments later she passed. Mom was waiting for him.

My mom died at 5pm on October 14, 2011.

God knew what he was doing. My daughters were cheerleaders in high school. Normally they cheer on Friday night. How ironic that they ended up playing an away game on Saturday morning at a field that does not have lights? God always has a plan. Even though we hurt with this horrible loss. I was so sad and could not sleep. I felt my right toe, the big one, getting touched the night she died when I was in bed. It was like her way of saying goodbye but looking and feeling healthy.

I will never forget that day as I will love my mom forever, no matter the fights we had. But we always made up for those fights. I would go back and say, "You know mom, you are right." Or even she has admitted, "I was wrong, maybe we should do this." Sometimes when we love someone we get all crazy and goofy and say things we do not mean. Why, I honestly do not know. We just want what is best for our loved ones. We just want our children to make the best decisions ever. Usually, because in our past we have made poor choices.

October 14 will always be a day dedicated to my mom. Now she has my dad up in Heaven with her, and her brother, and her mom. She went up to Heaven to see her daddy. The things God does for us. I don't think my mom could have handled my Uncle's sudden passing, along with my dad's illness, and Grandma's sudden illness. God planned this for her. Just like he did for Grandpa. I know, easier said than done.

Every day is a gift and I am going to enjoy it!

PRETEND

FICTION BY JILLIAN RUNKLE

It started with one. Well, I guess it was actually two. If you would like to count the buttons, that is. Two dusty buttons that were hiding in a jar of coins. They were purple, you see, that is important. For the color reminded me of Ma's garden, full of lilac, lavender, bellflowers, and catmint. These were her eyes, you see. As soon as I plucked the first button from the jar, I knew they belonged to her. Somedays, I pondered over whether she doted on those flowers more than me.

She was beautiful, you see. In her own words, she was as, "Pretty and prickly as a rosebush". I could see her right then as she tended the garden. She paused whenever I look up from my desk. The sad truth is that I do most of the gardening these days. Mama has become much frailer and it pains her so to bend down. So I just let her pretend.

From the corner of my eye, I see my baby boy crawling on the carpet. Grasped in his powder white hand is a plastic rattle. There is so little strength in his arm that he can just barely shake the toy. He doesn't mind though, you see. A sweet little smirk remains always faithfully upon his face.

"You having a good time, sweet boy?" I giggle to him. As always, he mirrors me with his little smile. I let him pretend.

Without seeing out the door, I can describe all that is occurring in the little town. Mrs. Ableton is writing letters on the board of the ancient grade school. Behind her sits five rosy-cheeked students, posed in anticipation with raised hands. They do not know that most of the school is gone, burned down years ago, or that their own room is no more than those five desks, and the chalkboard wall. Nevertheless, we let them pretend.

Along the bank of the Rose River, sits Old Ken. He wears the same grey baseball hat, and holds the same old fishing

pole. No one bothers waving to him, for he is far too busy. One of these days, he's convinced that he will once again catch a fish. But there are no fish. Not since the plant exploded. If you knew Old Ken, you see, you also would let him pretend.

In the chair, next to me, my papa sleeps. His wrinkled face lays back in relaxation, his mouth open in mid-snore. Tony, my husband, is reading the newspaper in the chair beside me. The date upon it never changes, but he does not mind. I give them both a kiss on the head, and let them pretend.

Turning my gaze out the window, I absorb the presence of all the people around me. The little babes of my past classmates to the crinkled friends of my parents. I see all of them, even the ones outside my sight. They bustle about in the currents of everyday life. But really, they stay still. Still as the buttons that are their eyes. Still as the day I reimagined them in the form of dolls.

I let them pretend.
And in turn,
they let me pretend.

NOTES

POETRY BY MELISSA VARACALLI

They put me down, showing little mercy, and laugh at
how I chose to fall. It's a possibility that once the devil calls,
my melody will play on.

For every heart creates a bass.

For every cry creates a note.

For every embrace creates a string.

For every smile creates vocals.

For every breath comes a symphony.

The orchestra of wings that speak a common truth
called love. I may no longer exist as a tangible object, but
my soul will continue to produce a never ending verse. I'll
continue to sing, allowing for my parted lips to act as a portal
to the angels. To rescue and preserve the music boxes within
children who remain faithful.

For every song that feels like they are coming to an end,
you're just a beautiful playlist that one cannot comprehend.

GLIMMERS

NON-FICTION BY HAILEY VON RUDEN

I was hearing words, but I wasn't processing them. My mom's voice was a dull echo in the caverns of my ears, blocked out by new unnerving thoughts whizzing through my mind. Death was always something that I was aware of, but never had personal experience with. Death was something that I would try to wrap my mind around while lying in bed at night, with thoughts like 'how was the universe created?' running through my mind. But I would always end up freaking myself out and feeling like my brain would explode if I thought any deeper... we've all been there. Anyways, I never imagined I would know someone with a timer on their life, and I never thought it would be the person who was virtually a second mother to me.

Since the day we found out Mrs. Zak had stage four pancreatic cancer, I had attempted at all costs to convince myself that this day would never come; telling myself there was no way I was ever going to see a day without her in it. But alas, life is not fair, and cancer doesn't care who you are or what you mean to anyone. I knew this, yet the thought of losing her was too much for me to comprehend. And, I didn't want to have to comprehend it. I didn't think I should. I refused to accept that something so awful could happen to someone so selfless and good. The prospect of having to live a life without her in it scared the hell out of me.

It had been a few months since she started getting really bad, so it wasn't like we didn't see this coming. We just avoided thinking about it. But now, there were no more options left for her, and she had been sent home to "be comfortable." We all knew what that meant, but we were still praying for some miracle to happen. My mom had gone to see her while I was at school, and when I got home I knew something was wrong. Basically, I had to go see Mrs. Zak right then and there or else I might not ever

see her again. We were walking on thin ice. After thinking we could avoid the inevitable for so long, none of us were ready for this day to come. The warnings my mom gave me about the type of state she was in just went right over my head. There was no way I could prepare myself for what I was going to witness this day. I knew that no matter how scared I was about seeing her, or losing her, she would want to see me, and that's all that mattered to me in that moment. I didn't have time to think twice about it. So, I slipped my shoes on without worrying about tying them, jumped in the car, and didn't look back.

When we got to her house, it was eerily quiet. The type of quiet that is filled with forced small talk and anxious tension. Her family and a few friends were sitting in the family room, some with red eyes, tissues clenched tightly in their fists, and others, making an uncomfortably obvious effort to hold in tears while consoling one another. Before I could begin to talk to anyone, her husband came down the stairs and gestured for me to follow him. I inhaled a deep breath and tried to ignore the sound of my heart beating out of my chest. I took each step feeling as if my feet were a hundred pounds heavier than usual, my hands shaking as I gripped the railing. Before I knew it, we were at the top of the stairs. My head was pounding. I was scared. He pointed towards their bedroom, signaling me to go in. I took the last few steps remaining between me and their room, opening my mouth to talk, but no words came out.

She was in a state I never imagined I would ever see her in. The last time I saw her she still had some hair, but there was no trace of it now. All of the brightness I remember in her eyes was gone. Instead, her face was sunken in like a skeleton and dark circles shaded the hollow sockets of her eyes. As she lay in the bed, she was barely recognizable; it was as if her body had receded back into a child-like state. She was skin and bones; smaller and frailer than I had ever seen her before. Looking at her now felt like an injustice. It felt wrong. I wanted to remember her strong attitude, her crazy laugh, and her selflessness. The cancer had finally destroyed her, and after three years of fighting

it; it was finally going to win. I looked at her and wished on everything that I could help her, but instead I felt more helpless than ever.

I realized she was in and out of consciousness, and not even aware yet that I was there. I was also aware that she couldn't talk other than a few 'yea's' or 'okay's'. It scared me how far gone she was. But, the second she came to, and looked up at me, a huge smile spread across her face as she registered who I was. After a while I decided to sing to her. Whether it was to take my mind off the timer on her life slowly ticking down, or to try to console her, it just felt like the right thing to do.

I started singing "Lean on Me" by Bill Withers and after a while I stopped because she just wasn't paying attention. She wasn't there. I looked around the room a bit and suddenly I heard a quiet voice. I turned and felt like I could pass out due to shock. She was singing. This woman who barely even knew where she was or who she was or what was happening to her. This woman who could barely talk or stay conscious for more than a few minutes, let alone remember the lines to some song, was singing. The fact that she remembered the lyrics to some stupid song, let alone singing it out loud when she was barely coherent, was a miracle to me. I couldn't believe my ears. All of my worries seemed to fade away after that moment. For some reason, I felt like Mrs. Zak was letting me know that she was okay, that she was ready and I shouldn't be so worried. This feeling rushed over me like a wave; a feeling like everything that was happening was supposed to happen. I felt like everything was alright. Even if it wasn't, I still knew that I had to accept that I had no control. Nature was going to take its course and the only way I was going to make it out alive was if I accepted it, instead of trying to convince myself I could change fate. For me, that moment changed my frame of mind in ways I can't even explain, for the better.

I was one of the last people to see her. Mrs. Zak died that night.

They say when someone has a terminal illness, they can

choose when they are going to die; by hours or minutes. I truly believe Mrs. Zak was waiting to have that moment with me. No one else could believe what had happened, but that's okay. I was glad I had that miracle of a moment with her because, even though it wasn't the miracle we were all praying for, it was still life-changing to me. It is a moment I will never forget for as long as I live. I realized even in someone's last moments, no matter how bad things get, there are always little glimmers of hope; of beauty. Even if those glimmers don't last very long, they still shine in our memory forever. They make us realize that even though life may not be fair, it is experiences like this, when life and death seem so close, that change how we look at the world. I realized that maybe I spent too much time worrying about her dying, and not enough time paying attention to her living. For me, going through this experience helped me to understand that life is full of stages, and it is better to live it up during each one than to fear the next.

NEVADA

FICTION BY GRACE HENRY

The smell of alcohol traversed the air like particles of dust—aimless and suffocating, the gravity of its existence only visible in the harshest flashes of the strobed lights. All the bar’s tables had been banished to the furthest corners of the room, and lost beneath layers of abandoned jackets and empty glasses. The remaining space had been fostered as a makeshift dancefloor, and was now occupied by a swirling mass of swaying bodies. The room pulsed with the cacophonous concord of loud music and shouted conversations.

She sat in the corner of the room, perched on a barstool, empty glass in shaking hand. Small and glassy-eyed, she absent-mindedly gnawed on the straw as her eyes skimmed the surface of the room. To her, the world was hazy and lurid, like a stop-light viewed through a rain-drenched windshield.

“Hey.” The voice came from her left. She swiveled on her stool to face the speaker, grinning as her eyes settled on a familiar figure.

“Hey you!” she slurred, extending her arms for a clumsy embrace.

“How are you?” he gently plucking the empty glass from her hand. She looked up at him in a halfhearted protest, and saw a face brimming with adoration and concern.

“Great!” she answered, thrusting her fist into the air, thumb raised.

“Okay,” he hesitated for a moment, forcing the worry from his face. “Want to dance?”

“I need to pee,” was her tactless reply. Grabbing his arm for support, she slid down from the barstool, and paused to straightened the hem of her dress. “Meet you back here in five minutes?”

“Sounds good,” she heard him reply as she wandered off.

On her way to the restroom, she caught a glimpse of her re-

flection in the darkened glass of a window. She was taken aback by disheveled appearance; hair both frizzy and flat, wayward mascara smudged beneath sleepy eyes, body slumped and trembling.

She paused, her emotions suddenly surfacing in fervent bouts, like waves crashing on the shore. First came the adoration, for the man waiting for her a few yards back. Next came the self-loathing, a crippling abhorrence for the dizzy world to which she had subscribed. And then, she simply felt overwhelmed; the glowing scenery was suddenly beautiful and terrifying, and she felt an abrupt urge to disappear.

She turned towards the door, her feet finding a sudden concord with gravity. Her strides towards the exit were oddly stable, as if steadied by the promise of an escape.

She glanced over her shoulder, at the figure waiting for her return. He was beautiful, but like the strobed lights, the notion of his existence had also become frightening.

I want to stay, she thought, hearing the heavy door slam shut behind her. It sounded muted, as if she were underwater.

Outside, it was snowing. The white world was tranquil and vacant, as if the bar had swallowed the sum of mankind. She took a jagged breath in, gasping as icy air infiltrated her lungs. She exhaled, and watching in awe as a cloud flooded from her chapped lips.

She inhaled again, this breath kinder than the last. She stepped off the bar's front porch, wincing as her sandaled feet sunk into a snowbank.

Across the street, a row of houses was buried beneath snow, and illuminated by the soft glow of porchlights. They also struck her as beautiful and horrific; they resembled babies dressed for baptism, innocuous and pure, too young to sin. And they appeared to be dead, like corpses beneath bleached sheets, too lifeless for absolution. Her world had suddenly become both a church and a mass grave, and she shook with confusion and terror.

PONDER OVER SONDER

POETRY BY JILLIAN RUNKLE

Of sonder,
How I wander,
Amidst all the eyes in which I ponder.

How every eye flickers with a story.
An emotional, plentiful, and vivid inventory.

And while in my story, I am the protagonist,
In others I am naught, but a passerby in the mist.

For there are billions of stories, resting on the air.
Tucked beneath each breath, drumming in each stare.

Never fully known, but never fully lost.
Tied together, braided, and utterly crisscrossed.

And it's frightening, indeed, to know such a library.
But in time you'll see, it's beautiful not scary.

In time, you will notice every passerby,
And you will feel and appreciate the story in each eye.

You'll inhale a million tales, hopes, and fears.
And picture all that they've seen through the years.

Soon you'll realize, that you are merely one song.
I'm an endless symphony to which we all belong.

And no moment is solely yours any longer.
Every second belongs to the Epoch of Sonder.

MUSINGS OF THE MIDWEST

POETRY BY GINGER SIMONS

No stranger am I to venturing past my own small patch of the broad, sweeping quilt of Illinois.

Seconds tick by in sync with the road markings, arteries pulsing with automotive cells caged in by telephone lines.

I wonder to myself how pockets of civilization can be separated to such a degree that hours can pass between Walgreens stores. Islands of life amongst a boundless infinity scream out for radio signals, telegrams, messengers on horseback.

As urban melts into rural, and familiar fades into a quaint uncanny valley, towns become vignettes frozen in time.

Quiet motorcycle bars deadened by the light of day, neon signs rendered morose and dirty by the waking reality of 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

Gas stations sitting alone on strange intersections, an oasis stranded in a desert, visited sparsely by weary travelers looking for a pack of cigarettes and a parking lot in which to sleep off drifting eyes.

The branches of road spread kind fingers past hundreds of shabby, square restaurants, each with their regulars, their specials of the day, their moms and their pops. A part of me wishes I could visit them all, knowing well that I would find nothing extraordinary.

Only sometimes are there buildings huddled close enough together to form alleyways, a safe place for those who are made claustrophobic by miles and miles of empty space.

And though there is rain, the dust prevails.
And though there is snow, the stifling dryness of a Sunday afternoon leaves its mark on cracked shutters and faded paint.
And though the leaves change colors and fall into the streets, there never were many trees to begin with. Here, there are merely desperate twigs sprinkled along the white picket fences, a false illusion that nature thrives under the suffocating grasp of suburbia.

I always told myself that I would go down with this ship.
I would plant my house firmly, and let its roots find a home deep in the Earth.
I would drive through the vast emptiness, feeling trapped by the freedom that vast emptiness brings.

In the summer, the dust will settle in my lungs, coating them with dated nostalgia for a snapshot of life that I never lived.
In autumn, the crisp breath of what is to come will fall daintily on my neck, ethereal and unwelcoming.
In the winter, the ice would harden the roads and age my hands and let a draft in through big wooden doors that were never prepared to keep out the pervasive changing of the seasons, or the imminent passage of time.

However, in my bolder moments,
I daydream of what it would be like
to pick up stakes and search the far corners of the world
for somewhere
where it is always spring.

COLLABORATION

ARTWORK BY MARISA ORLAND



Wallpaper Collage
13 x 7 in.

PORTRAIT

ARTWORK BY LINSEY LUANGRATH



Acrylic on Canvas
30 x 24 in.

PLANTS

ARTWORK BY LINSEY LUANGRATH



Acrylic on Canvas
30 x 24 in.

CORNER STORE

ARTWORK BY MARK HEDBORN



Digital Photograph
Dimensions Variable

PUSHED TO THE LIMIT

FICTION BY SEDONA HEDGER

I've got a secret, don't tell my mother. I stopped taking my meds about two month ago, but you would never know. I was taken to St. Anne's home for the criminally insane. The problem is: I'm not a criminal and I'm not insane. Everyone just thinks I am.

You do a burial for a dog, and everyone thinks you killed your brother who has been missing for three days. It's like people don't even know how bodies decay or anything like that. The dog had been sick and instead of burying the dog, I thought burning it would be a bit better, to release its soul and what not. After that, everything went downhill.

The cops came because some nosy nancy couldn't stay out of my life, and they automatically started reading me my rights. My mother started crying, pacing frantically through the house. The officers sat me on the couch then headed into the kitchen. They leave me and I can't help but laugh inside. They totally think I killed my brother and was burning his body, not the dog's. Once my mother has calmed down, she promises to pay bail as soon as she can. I gave her a slight nod as the police shut the squad car door.

After they enter my prints, take my mug shots, and finally offer me a glass of water, they remove the cuffs and abandon me in a jail cell, alone. I overheard the cops talking about me. One made mention that the main reason why they thought I was a suspect was because he and I had argued, quite loudly, the day before he went missing. Once again, my laughter gets the best of me, but I pull the ultimate string and mix my laughter with tears. I frantically beat on the walls and the door, crying for my brother. I even act like I can see him there trying to drag me into the light, or whatever you want to call it. The cops on the night shift were so confused they tossed me back

into the squad car, and that's how I ended up at St. Anne's.

I actually enjoyed it at St. Anne's. I got to do whatever I wanted, since I was never pronounced criminally insane. They did have to give me some kind of medication while I was there, so they gave me a cup filled with three placebo pills. They didn't know I knew that.

The nurses felt bad for me, since I was so young. They let me have free reign of the grounds as long as I was back in the building on time, which was never a problem. I would snag some seeds from the kitchen and feed the birds. Of course, no one ever noticed when I took a knife with me either. Of course, it was for practical uses, I only used it on something if I had a reason to.

My "roommates" at St. Anne's didn't care for me all that much. Granted they were all old and crazy, and then there was me: only eighteen years young. They told the nurses that I was mean and violent. Some even had the audacity to claim that I was cutting them, but I couldn't have done it. We were never allowed anything sharp, unless it was for a meal. They argued that I would hurt them outside while I was working with animals. The nurses explained to them that I'm just territorial of my animals and that when I'm working with them that I need space. Then they would scold the old coots on self-harm and how that's gonna push back their release date.

They called me the animal whisperer. They could bring me any animal and I could get them calm and taken care of. I got really good at cleaning blood off of light colored clothing. They would bring me squirrels with broken legs, birds with broken wings, and one time we had found a pregnant cat and I helped with the delivery. The nurses and doctors at St. Anne's couldn't understand why I was the main suspect for my brother's case. They talked to the judge about it and they got the case dropped.

And here I am, back at home with my mother. Just the two of us like it always should have been. We talk and reminisce about him, and I don't think I can hold my fake smile

on my face much longer. My brother and I had been fighting the day before he went missing. It's just sometimes you can only hold in your thoughts and emotions for so long before you explode.

My brother was an accident. He was three years younger than I was, and he was born almost a year after my father passed away. I don't remember him well, but I do remember him enough. My brother and I look similar, but not the same. My father was kind and encouraged my animal tendencies, while my brother was destructive of it. He abused my animals and used them as a toy. I forgave him the first time, but the second and the third were unforgivable. What he did to the dog pushed me over the limit. I had almost brought the dog back to full health when he tied the dog up and he and his friends threw rocks at it while I was gone for a school event. It was the final straw!

My brother and his friends took all my hard work and tossed it in the trash. This dog was special and almost back to having a normal life, and they took it away from her. So, since I can only really interact with my brother, I followed the 'Golden Rule': treat others the way you'd like to be treated. He took her life away. I would have done more to him if I could.

I've got a secret, I really do, but please don't tell my mother. I was burning a sick dog that day, some bloody clothes, and my brother.

SMALL CHAIRS, TALL CHAIRS

NON-FICTION BY KARLI VASS

In a small café in New Orleans, a waitress delivered our freshly made beignets to our table. My sister and I decided to do an early brunch on our last day in Louisiana before starting our next adventure. The café was busy, as it was summer time on Bourbon Street, with a constant hum of cars and coffee machines filling the air. We chose a table in the corner; we were not intentionally secluding ourselves, but after three weeks of dozens of people surrounding us, the quiet seemed nice. Surrounding the courtyard was a black metal fence with the tips of every spike worn just a little to show the silver underneath, resembling the rest of the French Quarter with its rustic and aged aesthetic. The tables in the café were cool to the touch, refreshing in the southern heat.

Everything seemed messily organized with tables spread about in no particular pattern, and an overflowing bus bin in the doorway of the patio. Each chair in the café was different: some small, some tall, some wood, some metal. They seemed to show the different types of people who came into the café: each different and unique with just a little bit of wear to show their history. My sister, who resembles my father with her fair skin, blue eyes and incredible height, made a comment about the breeze and how it seemed to cut through each metal bar in the gate with intensity.

The conversation started out with talking about frivolous things: the trees (or lack thereof), Mardi Gras, the old couple sitting next to us. Then, an overwhelming feeling of anxiety came over me like a wave over a small, half broken sand castle, almost entirely pummeling the individual weak grains of sand that clung to each other.

I had to tell her. I had a secret she didn't know and, as sisters, we were always open. The thought never even crossed my mind until that second. One moment we were discussing airplanes and napkins and the next, I had what seemed like a confession to be made. My little 15-year-old sister said I looked nervous and asked what was wrong.

"Nothing, I just have something to tell you." I didn't know how to say it.

This was such a weird topic to have to tell people. Why did my sexuality concern someone else? But alas, that is how society had trained me. From birth, I had been shown a man and a woman on top of a glistening white cake. The groom always stands at the alter waiting for his bride. What if there is no groom? So many thoughts ran through my mind. It will be me waiting at that alter for my bride. I am gay. The words could not come out. It seemed so simple.

Just say it, Karli, I thought. A car honked. A waitress brought around more coffee for the two tired, worried teenagers in the corner.

"Kyra," I said faintly, as if I was trying to tell her a secret that I didn't want to let go.

She leaned in.

"I don't like boys; I broke up with my boyfriend because I am as gay as a rainbow."

She instantly smiled and said, "I know, Karli, you wear flannels every day and talk about Star Wars more than any boy I have ever met."

Fighting off tears, I let out a high pitched chuckle. I guess you never realize what unconditional love is until you're forced into a situation like this one. The weight off my shoulders was tremendous. I felt like one of the crows that soared around the café: free and comfortable. Everyone around just envies the crows, wishing they could be as free as the floating black specks in the sky.

Through the rest of brunch, I explained how I had struggled to accept myself and how I could never be comfortable.

This was a hard thing to deal with at an early adolescent stage but I knew many kids had it worse. My parents had told me from the beginning that they never cared if I brought a boy or a girl home, just as long as that person loved me as much as they did.

My sister was the first person I came out to and I don't know why. Everyone around me is loving and accepting, or at least, I know this now. I guess I knew it then but it wasn't on my mind you. don't really think about the good things when you're in a moment of panic. Only the worries shine through: how you're going to tell someone you're different and that you're showing them your vulnerability, not that they love you and don't care about your sexuality. This setting made it seem a little more bearable. After a few more cups of coffee and a couple 'I love you's, we left the restaurant like nothing out of the ordinary had happened: we were just a couple of sisters walking down Bourbon Street.

TICKING CLOCK BED

FICTION BY SABRINA SZIGETI

The hospital bed was the most uncomfortable of performance stages. Dad needed me to show I was gonna make it, all while the bells and whistles attached to me disagree, doctors and nurses doing their best to hide their true expressions. I don't think he wanted to notice. The scent of the sickening cleanliness of the hospital room made it hard not to grimace, so I usually blamed any harsh faces on that. Any time they wanted me to eat, even when I wanted to eat, the smell filled me, trying to make me as clean as it was, trying to invade my filth. I longed for our dirty apartment; I longed for home.

Dad was trying not to cry whenever I saw him. His chin was always stiff like he was holding himself back from shouting. Whenever he came back from his breaks, his beard would be coated in salt, his depression coping method of choice. The smell of McDonalds clashed with the cleanly smell, and in a way comforted me. But the way he looked at me took every comfort away. He looked at me in my sorry bed the same way he looked at mom just before she left. He knew there was nothing he could do, nothing she could do, and nothing I could do.

We usually sat in silence. It was easier on me than I let on; I would say my white lies that I was okay to talk, holding back another face. My lungs ached with each word. I kept pushing.

Everyone felt incredibly useless and nauseated. I didn't want to die, but I was so tired all the same.

When the doctor came in to tell us that the next surgery, a lung transplant, had a low survival rate, so low that she didn't want to even say the percentage, my dad still smiled. There was a chance, still enough that they would try. I couldn't look him in the eye when I nodded that I wanted it. I needed to try because he needed me to.

When I opened my eyes after the procedures, I thought I was waking up in my small bed at home. I could hear dad's snoring from outside the walls, the window cracked enough to let a breeze through. I heard birds for the first time in what felt like years in the early morning. I took a light breath inward at my silly realization and my eyes widened when it didn't ache. My room was different, surrounded by flowers. The sickening clean was overwhelmed by the scent of flora.

MONOTONE MELODY

POETRY BY GINGER SIMONS

A long, slow drag

Is the daily routine.

Taking my body by the ropes and hauling it through Wednesday.

Through the gravel and dirt of whining, fluorescent lights and sharp tongues.

To ache so dearly for things that don't exist.

Things that never happened.

Nostalgic for a past that is not my own,

Perhaps not anybody's.

To be explosively bored,

Passionately dead,

Absolutely bursting at the seams with apathy.

To fill Thursday's midnight with silent, breathless whimpers
because a part of you is lost at sea.

Living in a small cardboard box with holes poked through
the top,
Just enough to struggle for breath.
Not enough to see outside.
Not enough light beaming inward for me to see my own
hands in front of me.

Monday rears its head, and begs me to look at the trees and
see something new,
To taste something different in my coffee,
To whistle “Thank for you calling, how may I help you?” like
a favorite tune.

But instead, with a click of the thumb,
A flicker of sloth,
And a deep inhale,
I take a long, slow drag.

YOU SAY THAT YOU WANT TO WRITE POETRY

POETRY BY GINGER SIMONS

You say that you want to write poetry.
Your words fill the negative space, thick and woven and
sweet.
You speak of all of the things you want to do, want to be.
How much you want to be appreciated, to be loved.

You say that you want to write poetry.
You want to do wonderful things, make yourself known,
without realizing that the fluorescents glow brighter when
you are in the room,
without realizing that the cadence of your voice could melt
the icecaps and send the polar bears into the sea,
and they would thank you for it.

You say that you want to write poetry.
While every blip of text you breathe over the electronic
airwaves is music to my ears, a symphony in a silent, lonely
room.
A haiku in chunks of 153 characters, a pixelated carrier
pigeon,
chirping about your day, asking about mine.

You say that you want to write poetry.
But your absence is met with rave reviews
about the way you truly listen when people speak,
the phrases you've uttered that have stuck in peoples' minds,
the hugs you give when someone looks like they need it.
Your absence is met with a sense that something is missing,
an underlying, "This would be better if he were here."
And I concur, deeply.

You Say That You Want to Write Poetry

You say that you want to write poetry.
Somehow, you make the one-liners from old films sound better.
Jokes from bad sitcoms sound like the gospel when they come from between your lips.
The folk songs sound sweeter sung by you, strummed by you, hummed by you.
You haven't read me the phone book yet, but maybe someday you'll indulge me.

You say that you want to write poetry.
But from across the room, your every move plays like a silent film,
and I feel like I'm living in the early 20th century,
watching *Le Voyage dans la Lune* grace the screen for the first time.
But Georges Méliès and Edwin S. Porter and Auguste and Louis Lumière
could have only ever dreamed of creating something as beautiful and inspired as you.

You say that you want to write poetry.
But breathing in the cotton of your shirt as we lay intertwined
is the closest thing that I'll ever come to knowing poetry.
Feeling poetry.
Living poetry.
Perhaps Frost and Whitman and Shakespeare and Brecht,
could have learned something from putting their head against your chest,
and listening to the faint rustling of leaves that you exhale when you sleep.

You say that you want to write poetry.
But darling, everything that you are is poetry.

THERE'S NO MYSTERY TO ME

POETRY BY CLAIRE HANSEN

I'm not a glittering nightclub
With pounding bass and shimmering dancers
I'm not the dark alleyway next to it
Where the full moon likes to play
I'm not a darkened storm cloud
Or the thunder and lightning that comes with it
I'm not a whirlwind or a hurricane

I'm not a misty enchantress
Or a foggy night on a boardwalk
I'm not a witch that can put you under a spell
With just the wink of an eye
And my darkness isn't poetic
Though I wish it could be
There's no mystery to me

I'm just a single cloud floating by
A field of flowers blowing in the wind
I try to be dark and intimidating
I just trip over my own feet

I just fall on my face and laugh about it

It's endearing, no doubt

But there's no mystery to falling down and smudging your
lipstick

Everyone does that

I can't just be endearing if I want you

But there's nothing I can do

Cute is fine, but you need a mystery

And I'm sorry I can't give you one

WREATHS IN THE MAKING

ARTWORK BY TAYLOR LUTZ



Digital Photograph
Dimensions Variable

UNTITLED

ARTWORK BY ARIEL RANDLE-OCHOA



Gelatin Silver Print on Satin Paper
5.75 x 9 in.

VON OHLEN HALLWAY

ARTWORK BY SAMANTHA HARRISON



Colored Pencil
12 x 18 in.

CONTOUR LINE STILL-LIFE

ARTWORK BY ZACH SCHULZ



Charcoal
24 x 18 in.

A COLLECTION OF ONE PAGE PLAYS

DRAMA BY LENORA MURPHY

AT THE END OF A NEW YEAR

CHARACTERS:

ALLISON- 18 years old

DANIELLE- 24 years old

BEGIN SCENE:

(The scene is set in ALLISON'S Livingroom. She and DANIELLE are sitting on a sofa placed center stage. DANIELLE is gazing off into the audience while ALLISON is nursing her newborn on her lap.)

ALLISON: Can you feel it?

DANIELLE: No.

ALLISON: Can you stop it?

DANIELLE: No.

ALLISON: Why not?

DANIELLE: Because that's not how cancer works.

END SCENE

BREAK FAILURE

CHARACTERS:

QUINN- 41 years old

OLIVIA- 54 years old

BEGIN SCENE

(OLIVIA stands on a set of train tracks down stage center.

Upstage left is the door to the lobby of a train station.

There is the sound of heavy rain and strong winds.

*QUINN steps out of the train station and calls to OLIVIA,
whose eyes are closed.)*

QUINN: Hey! Are you waiting for someone Miss?

OLIVIA: Yes, I am.

QUINN: Wouldn't you like to wait inside?

OLIVIA: No.

QUINN: Miss, you don't understand. You don't wait for a train while standing on the tracks. Who are you waiting for anyway?

(Pause)

OLIVIA: God.

END SCENE

MRS. SLIDORSKI'S PEARLS

CHARACTERS:

BEN- 24 years old

EMMETT- 17 years old

BEGIN SCENE

(It is night. BEN and EMMETT are dressed in all black. BEN carries a shovel and EMMETT carries a wrench and a towel over his shoulder.)

(The two men walk from down stage right to upstage left. EMMETT drags his feet and stumbles as he walks)

BEN: Would you at least try to be quiet?

EMMETT: Why? No one's around.

BEN: Yes, but you're walking like a dog with three legs. You'll wake people up.

EMMETT: If someone asks what we're doing, we can just tell them we got lost.

BEN: Grave robbing is a profession, not a hobby. Take it seriously.

END SCENE

PACT FROM THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR

CHARACTERS:

WILLIAM- 25 years old

KRISTA- 25 years old

BEGIN SCENE

*(WILLIAM and KRISTA are laying side by side
down stage center.)*

*(As the lights rise, they both sit
upright looking hurt, tired and in defeat.)
(WILLIAM rubs his eyes with his palms.)*

WILLIAM: What now?

KRISTA: I don't know. I thought the jump would kill us.

WILLIAM: We could try it again.

KRISTA: I can't stand with my leg twisted like this.

WILLIAM: Then what can we do?

(Pause)

KRISTA: Lie here and wait until we get what we wanted.

END SCENE

RABBITS AND HAY

FICTION BY JILLIAN RUNKLE

In April, my mother turned to find her glimmering blue earring and set me upon the shimmering green ground. She knelt to the ground beside me, lacing her fingers amongst the damp blades of grass. As she cursed the piercing white streams of light hitting her irises, she continued to pat her hands upon the ground. Searching and searching for an earring she had never worn. An elegant blur of pale gold drew my unfocused gaze. As mama's dark amber eyes and pale freckled hands remained entranced amid the grass, I softly pattered towards my enchanter.

Amongst these blindingly fast and bright Aprils of my life, mama was a constant inconsistency. Her arrays of crudely stitched clothes and choppily arranged hairstyles were as tumultuously shifting as her attention. The flickering lights above the creaking stairs awakened only for a moment each morning as mama flew haphazardly down. She moved like an injured beast, flopping and stomping her bright yellow heels slightly sideways. Her soft sentences were unbecoming of her. They languidly rose and settled upon the air, slow and seemingly contemplated. But their message was sensible as often as it was not.

The rising stalks of living yellow hay came before my stubby frame. Above me they swayed, dancing to a rhythm whispered solely to them upon the wind. Soft feathery seeds at the top waved carelessly against each other. So adapted were they that worries escaped them. Winds that could topple or wear down stockier beings were ineffective against them. The harsh air currents came, and they simply swayed along. Their fragility was there stability.

Mother used to read me stories. Not from books though. Tucked beneath my blue Star Wars blanket and the ghostly moonlight, mama would read. Each time she pulled out

the same tattered edition of Peter Rabbit. Juggling the book and her tea, mama would always spill as she tried opening the book. The tea, scolding hot from excessive warming, would puddle upon the title page. With a curse, the tea would be set upon the ground, and she'd resume the process. The title page, now bearing another pale beige blotch, would reluctantly allow itself to be flipped aside. After a self-satisfied smile, mother's chapped lips would start to form the first six words upon the page. But that was when the book became obsolete. "Once upon a time there were..." The following words were spun from tea-stained pages within her own head. Unaware that they were no longer required, her eyes steadily remained gazed upon the words of Peter Rabbit. Each time a thought ended, her slender fingers flicked to the next page.

A mighty gust of wind kicked my heels aside and landed me upon my bottom. Placing my chubby toddler hands upon the rough dirt, I balanced myself back to standing. As this happened, I collided with a stalk of hay in mid-sway. The stalk stumbled back momentarily at the small rush of wind I created. I pinched the stem between my thumb and index finger, feeling the smooth skin. Curious to see, I dug my dirt-encrusted fingernails against the plant. After a few tugs and twists, the top section billowed to the ground. With a little cheer, I picked the piece up and poked around. Once my curiosity was fulfilled, I placed it upon the standing portion. The two did not reconnect, but rather repeatedly fell away from each other. So strong against the beating torrents of wind, yet so weak within a child's hand.

As a teenager, mother was an enigma. Her mystifying and tumbling ways were no longer entrancing to me. Her cracked hands that expertly shelved items at work, placed milk in the dishware cabinets at night. Her mind could handle the most damaging torrents of life. But that same mind couldn't bear the guilt of stepping on a cricket. And

those amber eyes that sometimes seemed to study my face so exceptionally, at other times seemed to see nothing at all. Still, each night at exactly eight o'clock, she would softly enter my bedroom with her Peter-Rabbit book.

"Mama," I would whisper softly as she perched upon the bed's edge. Her head swiveled slightly towards me, but her eyes remained unfocused. Bending her head down, she would fumble with the book cover and inadvertently spill her tea. The title page, now speckled with all hues of gold and beige, crinkled as it was turned.

"Mother," I repeated, noting the exhausted edge in my voice. Her eyes flickered to the wall above my head, and then returned to her book.

"Once upon a time there were..."

"Mom!" I emphasized the word loudly and clearly. I was ready to finally make her understand the ridiculousness of this ritual. Teenage boys did not need bedtime stories. Nor did they need to endure day to day life with a single confused parent.

But as her eyes finally rested intently upon mine, I watched the gold and amber flecks dance around.

My mouth parted and I whispered, "What happened next?"

MY MOTHER'S MOTHER

FICTION BY LA' SHANDA SMITH

The smell of fried chicken and homemade macaroni and cheese teased my taste buds and drew me closer to the kitchen. The aroma and the warmth of the oven encircled me and made me feel like someone was hugging me. A familiar person I haven't seen in a long time. A warm voice, soft and thick like molasses told me to come in and keep her company. As I walked into the room, my heart jumped with eagerness and my eyes could not stop looking at a woman who resembled so much of the special person I hold dear, my mother. This is what I imagined it would be like, if I had the opportunity, to meet my mother's mom.

I imagined that she would look just like my mom. Petite in frame, weighing about 135 pounds wet, five feet in height and long black flowing hair that's silky to the touch. Her skin would be the color of mocha that has been kissed by the sun more than once. The touch of her hands would be gentle, but rough at the same time due to hard labor. She would be funny and would love to laugh. Her laughter would generate deep within her soul. The vibration of her laughter would fill the room and would make everyone else laugh even if they didn't know what was being said. Her face would still look young and full of anticipation, like a child at Christmas, but her eyes would be deep and show the grief that she tried to conceal.

There would be so many questions that I would want to ask her, but I would choose the ones that I felt needed answers. I would ask her why she risked her life to have another child after the doctors told her that her heart was not in good condition? I was told as a young girl that she

had heart problems as a child, and that when she had my mother's two sisters, she was told not to have any more. I would ask her if she had a feeling that she was going to die? I was told she died ten days after she had my mom. Relatives told me that she wanted a baby boy so desperately, that she was willing to risk her life and try anyway. Well, the third child was my mother, so I would ask her if she was disappointed, or was she happy because she birthed a healthy baby?

I feel that she would have questions for me as well. Questions that she wished she had answers to that she could bury and hide untold within her heart. Questions like, does my daughter like to dance? What's her favorite food and color? Does she enjoy thunderstorms, sit in the dark, and listen to the rain? What makes her happy or what makes her sad? I would tell her she always stated her children are what brings her happiness and so much joy, but what makes her sad, is thinking of you. She always wished for you. I would tell her how she hates her birthday, which is July 4th, because everyone else celebrating on this day, but to her, that day is the saddest.

I imagined she would look at me with eyes so dark that they appeared black. We both knew that we still had so much to say and still so many questions to ask, but there was no more time. She would open her arms towards me and the opening would smother me inside. I would hug her tight, trying to rub off a piece of her on me. I would submerge deep within me her scent and the music her heart played against my chest. I would let go knowing that this is something I would carry with me forever. This is how I imagine it would be like, if I got a chance to meet my mother's mom, my grandmother.

WHAT IT MEANS

FICTION BY MARISA ORLAND

Life is complicated. So very complicated. The more you grow up, the less and less you understand. Isn't that funny? I remember being a kid and dreaming of being older. I looked forward to discovering the world and its mysteries. It excited me.

But now all I can do is question things. I keep asking why, why, why? I've started to understand that the universe doesn't, and will never, have an answer for me. Because it doesn't need to give one.

I have experienced tragedy, loss, and destruction. I have seen my best friend die, right before my eyes. I spent years asking why it wasn't me. What the hell did I do in my life that the all mighty universe dubbed me worthy of keeping it? What did Ed not do to have his taken away?

These questions will run around your head forever. But why do we ask it? Do we truly believe that the world has a reason? That it cares?

It doesn't.

I mean, why should it? Nothing in the world truly has a rhyme or reason behind it. It just happens. That's it. But why do we not accept that? Why do we torture ourselves with these pointless questions?

Why do I?

I guess it's the same reason people need a purpose. A reason for living. Because it drives us on. It answers our questions. It gives us peace. It is just so damn hard to say "Okay that happened," and walk away.

But I've got to, or I will be in turmoil for the rest of my life. We need to stop asking questions that we know we'll never get an answer for.

Tragedy happens. People die. There is no fault or an

all powerful answer behind it. But that's what gets to me, and to people who go through pain like this. We want it to mean something because it means so much to us.

Maybe we can give it meaning ourselves. By remembering, by caring, by talking. In the world, things just happen, it doesn't have any point. But we can give it one. We can remember those we've lost, and what they meant to us.

We have the power to give things a reason.

SAD CACTUS (TRISTE NOPAL)

POETRY BY LOUIE FLORES

Sad cactus here it stood,
very depressed and misunderstood.
Though lonely the cactus may be,
we can all agree he's better than a tree
So as this sad cactus stands up high,
he knows in three weeks he's gon' die.

TRISTE NOPAL

Triste nopal aquí estuvo,
muy incomprendido y abatido.
Aunque solo el nopal estuvo,
él es más mejor que un arbusto.
Tál como el nopal estuvo de pié,
“En três semanas me moriré”

Translated by
Derian Gutierrez

POETICS OF PLACE #2

ARTWORK BY MARIUSZ WARTALOWICZ



Inkjet Print
6 x 9 in.

POETICS OF PLACE #3

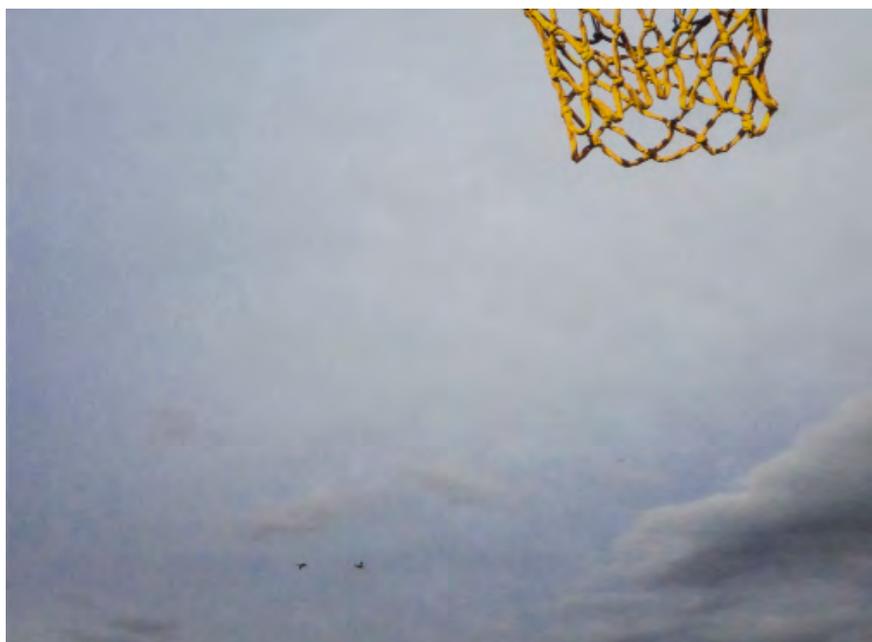
ARTWORK BY MARIUSZ WARTALOWICZ



Inkjet Print
6 x 9 in.

POETICS OF PLACE #4

ARTWORK BY MARIUSZ WARTALOWICZ



Inkjet Print
6.75 x 9 in.

POETICS OF PLACE #5

ARTWORK BY MARIUSZ WARTALOWICZ



Inkjet Print
7 x 9 in.

THE PURSUIT OF...

POETRY BY JARED FORTH

Many lights shine through the chaos
But the sound of silence surrounds and drowns the hollow
hearts of
those whose revelations are black holes as bottomless as the
coffers that will never be filled with enough gold
To create comfort in the numbness

Carpe Diem - Seize the day
But there's always one day more to pursue that specter of
a white whale that will supposedly bring fulfillment and
meaning
Until there's not
And is holding the starlight in your arms worth the sun-
burn from the fires that consume the sacrifice on the altar
of the unattainable?
Either striving for stars too distant to reach or groveling in
the dirt too universal to escape
And when the color fades, do those same distant stars bring
back hope with the light or do they merely illuminate the
filth?

Sins outweigh the tragedies written by the masses
As they stagger through what can be scarcely called living
Numbed by the opiates taken to ensure they remain in
blissful ignorance
Filling the empty spaces with an illusion

And the frigid wind whistles past the whitewashed walls of
cities that look noble
But are filled with corpses
The lamb lying on Broadway is not asleep
Its blood slowly creeps corrupting the crumbling stones

that had been the city's foundation
The yellow submarine has sprung a leak

And it turns out the Lucy you've been chasing through dia-
mond filled skies isn't all you had hoped for
And while the diamonds in her eyes match the sparkle in
the skies
Fools gold shines in the same way, and distance isn't just
measured in lightyears
So we say goodbye to the blue skies
As they fade to gray

Darkness envelopes the chaos
But the silence had been replaced by a heartbeat that
beats to a syncopated rhythm that matches the broken
clock, skipping its way through the hours that have almost
run out
Lost in the pursuit of...

BURNING

FICTION BY DULCE CARMONA

Burning. Everything is burning. Every inch of my skin, every muscle, every cell, all of my hopes and dreams, all burning right before my eyes. I could scream for help but who can hear me? I was only 18 when my life was torn away. One moment I was my parent's pride and joy, my brother's bratty little sister. I was an honor student. I was someone's best friend. I was someone's first love! But now? I am just burning cloth and a smell in the air. I am nothing. My name is Jensen and I was killed on October 17, 2016. I don't know who my killer is, but since I'm stuck here on Earth, I might as well find out.

-4 Months Before-

When I was younger, I always wondered what characters in TV shows or books were like before the story, before the show began, before the book was written. Their lives began when the writers created them, but before that they were nonexistent. My story begins when I turned 18 in June. I had just graduated high school and I was celebrating in a small restaurant near downtown Austin, Texas with my family. We were walking out of the restaurant laughing and talking about God knows what. I heard footsteps behind me and someone's hand on my shoulder. A young man around my age smiled as he tried to catch his breath. He said his name was Matt and he was just giving me my phone back. I guess I had forgotten it at the table due to all the excitement. He was tall, with eyes the color of honey and a smile to match it. As we exchanged numbers I realized that something or someone was watching me. I looked around and just brushed it off as my family being nosy. But from that day forward no matter what I did, no matter

where I went, no matter who I was with, the feeling never left.

I had started talking to Matt the day after we met. We had gotten close so fast. In just a few weeks he knew me better than I knew myself. One of my happiest memories was when we went to see *Lights Out* at the Highland 10. The movie was absolutely terrible, but it was our first date. How could I not be happy? I never get scared during movies but I pretended to be just so he would hold my hand. I thought he was absolutely perfect for me because my family loved him. He was smart, and on a clear path to medical school. My favorite thing about him was that he always kept such an easy smile on his face, and he always noticed the little things. Everything was like a Nicholas Spark story and I was falling fast for him. Everything would have been perfect if that feeling would just go away.

It was around mid-August when Matt started to change. He started avoiding me and making up excuses when I asked him to spend time with me. And when he finally did spend time with me, he was jittery and constantly looking behind him as if...as if he felt like he was being watched. Did he get the feeling too? I tried to make eye contact with him but he did everything to avoid it. Suddenly the feeling of being watched was stronger than ever. We were sitting on top of Castle Hill one night, the glow that came from the sorority cast a yellow hue on the grass. I could hear the homeless and the hippies at the bottom bragging about their new bracelets. Everything seemed right, but at the same time it was wrong. I felt something at my back, as if someone was standing right behind us. And from Matt's uncomfortable shifting, I could tell that he felt it too.

"Matty?" I asked trying to break the silence. He gave me a small "hm" in reply. "Do you ever feel like... you're being watched?" He turned to look at me.

"Honestly, yes. I have. At first I felt like I was going crazy, but then I realized I only felt like this when I'm near you."

“Just around me?”

“Yeah, like, I don’t feel like this if I’m around someone else or if I’m alone, but as soon as I see you, I feel like there’s someone watching me.”

I thought about this for a second and sighed. What was going on? I felt like I was trapped in a story. Matt stood up and wiped the dirt from his jeans.

“It’s getting late” he said “I have to get home but I’ll call you.” I nodded and watched him walk off. I was alone with my thoughts now. Well, alone with my thoughts and whatever was constantly watching me. Where were Sam and Dean when I needed them? I groaned and hugged my knees so I could rest my chin on them. I heard someone walk up the steep side of the hill but I was too scared to look. What if I was finally going to meet the one that was watching me? I gathered my courage and looked up. A man, around my age approached me. He had short light brown hair, a handsome jawline, and deep brown eyes. He suddenly stopped and looked around with a concerned look on his face.

“Hey, is there anyone else up here?” He called out

“No” I replied. So he felt it too. He kept walking towards me and sat down.

“My names Aidan. I saw you up here alone and decided to check on you.”

I snorted and laughed, “You sure that you just wanted to check on me?”

He grinned and raised his eyebrows at me “I don’t know maybe I wanted to come and lure you to my non-existent van”. We stayed on top of the hill talking for hours until the sun rose.

Days passed and Matt started to get jealous of my friendship with Aidan. It didn’t matter how much I assured him that he did not see me that way, he refused to believe me. If I was with Aidan he would spam my phone until I answered. One night, I came home from watching a movie with him and noticed Matt’s ‘07 Mustang sitting in my

driveway. Matt was leaning against it with a cigarette hanging from his mouth. His eyes flickered towards me as I approached him. "Jensen," he called out. Even feet away from him I could smell the alcohol.

"Matt, you're drunk. Why?" I stood in front of him and crossed my arms over my chest.

"You were with Aidan," he slurred.

"Yes, and?"

"You are to stay away from him. I can't believe I allowed you to be friends with him. But I'm cutting it off. Stay away from him."

I gritted my teeth and glared at him. "You cannot tell me who I can or cannot hang with."

"You're mine. I can tell you who's not good for you, Jensen!"

I shook my head and walked off as he shouted after me.

"Jensen! Jensen! It's either me or him!" I turned around as I unlocked the door and flicked him off.

"Leave me alone!" I shouted and slammed the door. I quickly dialed Aidan and told him everything that happened. He promised to be over as soon as he could. I lay down under the covers after hanging up and instantly fell asleep.

I was woken up by loud knocking on the door. I stood up still half asleep and shuffled to the door. The knocking became more intense and desperate. "I'm coming!" I shouted as I struggled to find the light switch. I grabbed the hair tie around my wrist and attempted to fix the red mess that was my hair. I looked through the small glass window beside the door to see who was knocking at such late hour and saw Matt. He knocked again, this time louder, and shouted at me to open the door. That's when I heard Aidan's car pull into the driveway. I felt my heart drop and the blood drain from my face. Oh no, what if Matt hurts him? I ran to the garage that was connected to the small house and slammed on the button to open the garage. I walked towards the opening and signaled for him to go

through the garage. Matt was too drunk and distracted to notice the car. Aidan nodded and slowly closed his door and made his way to me. He quickly got inside and I closed the garage door.

Matt was kicking the door so hard the house was shaking and panic started to set in. I looked over at Aidan with wide eyes.

Aidan approached the front door and signaled for me to stay hidden. He opened the front door and glared at Matt.

“It is 12:26 am, why are you kicking the door? What do you want?” He growled at Matt.

“I want to talk to my girlfriend,” Matt got closer.

“From what I heard you two aren’t together anymore.”

Matt shoved Aidan and continued to press forward. Aidan quickly regained his posture and shoved Matt back.

“You need to leave.”

The feeling of being watched was stronger than ever. The intensity was at an all time high, but I still could not find the source. I suddenly heard glass shatter and my first reaction was to scream. I ran to the living room and saw Aidan holding a piece of broken glass. Matt was holding his arm, his teeth gritted.

“I will end both of you!” he shouted as he backed away and out the door. Aidan slammed the door after him and I ran to Aidan frantically asking what happened. He explained that Matt attempted to push him away and ended up shoving him into the stand besides the sofa. The force of the impact caused a vase to fall over. And he had picked up one of the broken pieces in order to protect himself.

September turned into October and I had not heard from Matt since that night. But the feeling always stayed. I was puppet to an invisible audience that were just waiting for the next episode of drama to keep them entertained.

One night as I walked home from a night out with friends, the intense feeling was back. I laughed to myself, “My audience has returned and they were hungry for

more.” I noticed a shadow following me and quickly sped up. The figure matched my pace and within seconds, it was right behind me. I screamed as it reached for me but no one was near. It held on very tightly and no matter what I did, I could not break away. I sobbed as I realized that this was it. The figure held on tighter and leaned in. He spoke in a hushed voice, excitement dripping in his tone as he whispered, “You’re mine.”

-Present-

Even after my death the feeling stayed. I needed to find out why. Why me? Who was my killer? Who was constantly watching? Whenever things in my life finally calmed down, something else came along and messed it up. As if my life was a story that needed constant drama.

I watched as the smoke rose up as my body burned. I breathed deeply and approached the figure standing in front of my body. I gathered myself once more and stood in back of the figure.

“Hey!” I shouted and the figure’s head shot up. I glanced at my body once more and took another breath. I was more than a smell in the air. I was once human and I deserved to know. I deserved to live, but that dream was dead. The figure slowly turned and I braced myself to see Matt, but I wasn’t prepared for what I saw. I stumbled backwards and struggled to grasp what I was seeing. It all made sense. The feeling of being watched, the constant drama in my life, only remembering snippets of my life before meeting Matt, my friends and family only feeling like they were being watched when they were near me... this was a story, this was all a story created to entertain, to win, to capture the reader’s attention and the killer... the killer was you.

THROUGH THE FOG

DRAMA BY WIL SWISHER

Intro: This story is about a psychological breakdown of a young man named Eric, who has conversations with what he is led to believe is a ghost. This ghost however is only a figment of his imagination. Eric's grief and overall distress has led him into a state of unknown insanity. This has been going on for a few weeks now and this is just another one of their many conversations as Eric tries to consult the spirit once more.

(The spirit walks in and sits down next to ERIC, saying nothing as ERIC seems to just stare off into space.)

SPIRIT: I am sorry I am late, but traffic was just terrible, you see, and you are so far away.

ERIC: You're dead. Dead people don't get caught up in traffic.

SPIRIT: How would you know? You're alive, you don't know what the dead are up to.

ERIC: Are you saying that the story of the dead crossing a river on a ferryboat is true?

SPIRIT: Is that what you believe happens when people die? They board some ferry or monorail like they're going to the Magic Kingdom at Disney World?

ERIC: I used to believe that when you die you would come back as something else, but you have obviously disputed that claim.

SPIRIT: How so?

ERIC: You're a ghost. If reincarnation was real, you would have come back as another person, or a tree or something.

SPIRIT: What are you talking about? I am reincarnated, it just so happens that when it was my turn to pick my next life out of a hat, I drew ghost, and so here I am talking to you.

ERIC: You're messing with me, aren't you?

SPIRIT: Well if I don't, then the conversations tend to get dreary and depressing. Not because of the sad situations you get yourself into, but the fact that I have been reduced to being your armchair psychiatrist makes it that way.

ERIC: So why do you involve yourself in my affairs?

SPIRIT: Because a loser in the land of the living is still a loser in the land of the dead, and I am seen as a loser by my peers, even in death.

ERIC: And I'm depressing?

SPIRIT: Yes, but you're alive, so work on that while you have the time.

ERIC: So why are you considered a loser?

SPIRIT: Oh, we're talking about me now? I was under the impression this was all about you. I suppose it started with the fact that I am rather lazy and don't take anything serious at least that's what the big man says, and his word law and blah blah blah...

ERIC: You mean in death you work for God?

SPIRIT: Well I wouldn't say work. Work is a very strong word when it comes to me, I hate that word. Work isn't fun.

ERIC: So, he assigns you tasks, and your task was to help me?

SPIRIT: Who the hell do you think you are?

ERIC: What?

SPIRIT: You actually think I am here because God sent me? No, I am here because I just happen to be minding my own business and you just happened to be able to see me. There is nothing more to it than that. Honestly, humanity and it's divine intervention theories make me sick. If you want someone to go tell you that you are special, then go talk to your mother.

ERIC: I seem to have hit a sore spot with you spirit, I'm sorry.

SPIRIT: You're not sorry, these past few weeks I have gotten to know you well, and I know you well enough to say

that you don't feel any sort of real sympathy for others. The only person you're sorry for is yourself.

ERIC: Yes, you're right. I guess there lies the problem. Lately, I've lacked empathy for others.

SPIRIT: No, your problem is that you, like so many men, don't realize a good thing when you have it. You squander the gifts that fall into your lap, and are amazed when you try pursuing more out of greed and it backfires. You should consider yourself lucky she talked to you at all. I know if I was still alive I wouldn't have ever had a single conversation with you.

ERIC: Why is that? I thought we had become friends?

SPIRIT: If I knew what I know about you now, and I was among the living, I wouldn't have talked to you because well... you're an asshole.

ERIC: I could say the same about you.

SPIRIT: But you won't because you think I am all you've got and you are of this naive notion that speaking ill of the dead is this grave sin.

ERIC: I just did.

SPIRIT: And now you are going to hell for it, congratulations.

ERIC: I am pretty sure I am going there already.

SPIRIT: Because you killed her?

ERIC: I didn't kill her... not physically anyway... I caged her, when she wished to fly, I broke her, when she wished to love, I killed her soul.

SPIRIT: You haven't learned a thing these last few weeks have you?

ERIC: What are you talking about?

SPIRIT: I mean you still haven't figured it out.

ERIC: Figured what out?

SPIRIT: You are not special. You are no different than everyone else.

ERIC: If I'm no different than everyone else, how do you explain me being able to see you?

SPIRIT: Well you got me there. Although, if you knew the

truth you'd wish you were like everyone else.

ERIC: How so?

SPIRIT: C'mon, you do not for one second believe that you have some sort of supernatural ability to see the dead do you?

ERIC: I can see, you can't I?

SPIRIT: Yes, but I am the only dead person you see. If you truly were able to see dead people you'd see every dead person, not just me. Yet it seems I am the only one you in fact do see. Meaning you are not Haley Joel Osment, you don't have a sixth sense. You're not Jennifer Love Hewitt, you're not a Ghost Whisperer, and you most certainly are not John Edwards, who in my opinion is just a cross country con-artist.

ERIC: Well if I am not able to see dead people, and I am the only one that can see you, what are you then?

SPIRIT: I am a figment of your imagination.

ERIC: What does that mean?

SPIRIT: It means you're insane.

ERIC: Excuse me?

SPIRIT: Mad, crazy, bonkers, not in your right mind, a flight risk.

ERIC: Is this just another one of your attempts to mess with me?

SPIRIT: Oh no, I am afraid this is in fact incredibly real, which is ironic because I'm not real. Therefore, I guess the argument could be made that it's kind of a joke, though irony is such an anti-humorous choice for a laugh in my opinion.

ERIC: Will you shut up?!

SPIRIT: Hey, you asked.

ERIC: How could this have happened?! I'm crazy... Why am I crazy?...

SPIRIT: Well, I believe the root cause is that you're slowly losing your mind. Otherwise known as a lack of a grip on reality.

ERIC: It was a rhetorical question.

SPIRIT: Technically, all of your questions are rhetorical. You've been talking to yourself this entire time, and therefore asking yourself all of these questions, which in fact makes them rhetorical since nobody is there to answer them.

ERIC: If you're not real, then go away!

SPIRIT: Fine, just make me disappear.

ERIC: (*waves spirit away with his hand*) Disappear.

SPIRIT: Well, that was highly ineffective Houdini, care to try another method?

ERIC: Look! I don't care whether you're a ghost or a figment of my imagination, just help me regain my sanity.

SPIRIT: Well wouldn't you just be helping yourself then?

ERIC: What?

SPIRIT: I mean me being a figment of your imagination means that in reality you're just helping yourself. Someone who isn't real can't help you.

ERIC: Stop being technical!

SPIRIT: Fine, but it just seems to me that someone who wants to regain their sanity ought to pay attention to the finer details of the situation.

ERIC: I simply need to figure all this out. It's like finding lost car keys, I just need to retrace my steps.

SPIRIT: I am afraid that you're missing more than just the keys to this proverbial automobile. A few cylinders have dropped in that engine of yours as well.

ERIC: Okay, no more car metaphors. What was I doing before I started talking to you?

SPIRIT: Feeling sorry for yourself. I think we've been over this before.

ERIC: That's why it is called retracing your steps.

SPIRIT: Hmm... I've always wondered, how does one retrace their steps when they've fallen off a cliff?

ERIC: It's just an expression. All my problems started with loss.

SPIRIT: I'll say.

ERIC: Stop that, don't keep pointing out that I am crazy!

It's driving me crazy.

(SPIRIT gives ERIC a curious look, seemingly perplexed by the strange statement he had made.)

ERIC: Don't say anything.

SPIRIT: *(smiles slyly)* I wasn't going to.

ERIC: Now, I have to assume that everything else is real. The only thing abnormal about me is that I just happened to imagine someone that I talk to on a regular basis.

SPIRIT: Is it?

ERIC: *(replies in a shaken tone)* Is what?

SPIRIT: Am I seemingly the only obstacle you face in curing your insanity? Your problem is that you don't know how deep you've fallen. How do you definitively know that any of this is real? What if none of it is real? What if everything you've ever lived was a lie? What if you've been living in a world made up entirely of your creation? Trapped in a labyrinth of your fears, and your desires.

ERIC: No... no... That's not true... I couldn't have made all of this up? All of it feels so real. What about the things I've done? What about the things I've put her through? You're telling me I've been grieving for nothing!

SPIRIT: And who is she Eric?...

ERIC: *(pause)* I... I... don't remember... NO! I must remember! I can't forget her! She's too important!

SPIRIT: If she was truly important, you'd remember... but she isn't important, so you don't, and you don't because she isn't real.

ERIC: She is real! She must be! She's the key, the cure to my madness. I have to find her.

SPIRIT: You look tired Eric. You ought to lie down.

ERIC: *(fearful)* What if I don't wake up?

SPIRIT: Do you want to wake up?

ERIC: *(pauses)* No... no, I don't.

SPIRIT: I thought so.

(The scene shifts to a much different setting. A man is sitting down watching a security camera along with various monitors. The monitor shows ERIC asleep in a hospital bed. And

AIDE comes up behind him.)

AIDE: His vitals are fading.

DOCTOR RHODES: I know, isn't it magnificent?

AIDE: It'll change the world. The military applications for this serum alone will generate billions. Manipulating the parietal and temporal lobes of the brain in such a way as to induce the body to shut down, it's incredible.

DOCTOR RHODES: Memory implantation is not an easy task. To get the brain to essentially believe that certain events occurred, and then to pull the rug out from under it at the right possible moment. It takes a master puppeteer.

AIDE: Well, the first human test subject was a success. Although, why did you choose Eric, Doctor?

DOCTOR RHODES: Because Eric's sister recently was diagnosed with a rare condition called Fields disease. A disease so incredibly rare that it does not in fact have a proper medical classification. Field's disease causes muscle deterioration to the point where the person literally cannot move and eventually loses all their motor skills, not because their mind can't perform them, but because the muscles in their body lack the strength to do so. Eric volunteered for the program in exchange for a cure to save his sister.

AIDE: So, shall I make the arrangements to uphold our end of the bargain?

DOCTOR RHODES: No, that won't be necessary.

AIDE: Why?

DOCTOR RHODES: Because Fields Disease is incurable. Which is why she is the second human trial. The applications for this trial will be of a medical benefit however. She'll be locked away in her own world, free of the burdens of reality. Away from heartache, and the pain of her condition. Reality will be what she makes it.

THE END



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TAYLOR LUTZ
TASHA MAPES
NATHALIE MARTINEZ
LENORA MURPHY
MARISA ORLAND
DHARTI PATEL
M.K. PHILLIPS
LEXIE PIHERA
JILLIAN RUNKLE
ARIEL RANDLE-OCHOA
ZACH SCHULZ
GINGER SIMONS
LA'SHANDA SMITH
WIL SWISHER
SABRINA SZIGETI
MELISSA VARACALLI
KARLI VASS
HAILEY VON RUDEN
MARIUSZ WARTALOWICZ