

The Pen

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“Always dream and shoot higher than you know you can do.

Don't bother just to be better than your contemporaries or predecessors.

Try to be better than yourself.”

- William Faulkner

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Fall 2012

Written Works

Fallen Stars

The stars you see in ponds, pools, and lakes are not reflections.

The water is not a mirror in which the Heavens admire themselves.

The stars you see in the natural ink are lovers' stars

Stars that have been plucked from the sky by two people at the same time.

They cherish that star and prize it for the miracle it is.

When their souls take flight and their bodies become dust

The stars follow them into the earth.

But stars can not be extinguished so easily.

They rise to the surface, mingling in ponds, pools, and lakes.

They gaze back at their brethren, whispering secrets of the wonders they've seen.

Alyse Bingham

Bereft

He had learned about stars once, before the cities emptied into the wilderness. Every morning the sun flared, and the white star of light expanded on the glass before him. He did not flinch, nor shield his eyes. He tried to touch the giant star that appeared, but his grey palm met the cool wall each time. He knew the sun was warm, but the stars must be cold, like he was.

A soft thud came from behind, followed by a gravelly halt.

Today's rock.

He limped about it and picked it up, fingering the heat hidden in the cracks. As always, he looked up, but saw only the subdued blurs of forms milling about in a disinterested manner. He often heard voices above and around him, voices of adults; he wasn't sure if children still existed.

Kids gone, he decided mournfully. He had known children before the outbreak, but hadn't seen one since. *Never more children*. After all, where would they come from?

A soft tapping on the glass before him banished the fragmented thoughts from his consciousness. A woman stood with a boy hiding behind her skirt. Her hair bore tints of grey, but when she spoke to the boy, her mannerisms revealed that she was quite young. He shuffled closer, but stopped when the boy shied away.

Dejection – a sensation that he had not known he still possessed – consumed him. He covered his face, turning away. Dry, broken breaths agitated his rotting frame. He dropped the rock. The warmth was gone.

Bad rock bad boy bad me bad me bad me bad me—

A second, more persistent tapping sounded behind him, but he did not turn. His hands flailed about his face and his deadened fingertips came away moist. Bewildered, he turned to the woman as if she could explain the phenomenon. Her cheeks too were wet, but there was an awareness, a buried grief that had resurfaced. She had no answers for him. She had none even for herself. Something else lurked behind the dull grey irises . . . something he had not seen for some time.

Pity?

It suited her, but he did not know why. She put a hand on the glass and, after a pause, he imitated the gesture. This time the glass wasn't cold; there was double the heat of the rock. He cooed and the woman smiled. The boy toddled out from behind her and stared up at him. He looked down and tried to grin. He must've failed comically, because the boy looked as if he were laughing. He sobered, and turned to the woman, his mouth moving in what appeared to be a carefully choreographed pattern. The woman nodded slowly, never taking her eyes off the one behind the glass. The boy looked down, but then stood on his tiptoes and put his hand on the glass.

He met the boy's hand and again felt the intense warmth. He closed his eyes, his cold palms soaking in the heat. Rare heat that did not come from the sun.

He opened his eyes and watched as they withdrew their hands, leaving his numbed palms cool, and devoid of life.

Alyse Bingham

A flash from the woman's hand piqued his base curiosity. She wore a band of gold. Despite her poverty, the ring was clean, and gleamed in the muted light of dawn. But it was not the condition of the ring that fascinated him; it was the similarity to the band he wore, but he now lacked the dexterity – or the will? – to remove it, even as his flesh rotted around it, the grey organ mottling green, then encrusting the blackened remains on the inner part of the ring. Its luster was tarnished, but he was enchanted. The side of his hand met the glass repeatedly, and he shrieked excitedly, waving his left arm about his head. The boy continued on, nudged along by the woman, who had turned to face the glass again. He gestured spasmodically to the band on her left hand and then to his. She turned and nodded.

He stopped, his emaciated form cracking quietly from within. His arms fell to his sides as he watched them leave. The boy paused at a holographic sign and waved his hand in it, watching the characters crackle and disjoint. As he ran forward to his mother, the light flickered and the letters realigned.

ZOMBIES
OBSERVATION DECK
ENTER AT OWN RISK
BEWARE OF CONTAMINATION
NO ADMITTANCE TO THOSE UNDER THE AGE OF 50

They did not return.

Bereft.

The thought surprised him, and he straightened, moaning and clawing at his chest with his hands.

Hurt hurt hurt want no want no want no!

He fell back, vaguely aware of gravel pricking into his skull, his ribs . . . He stared upwards, unblinking, watching the sun's arc above him. Night fell and he murmured to himself as still rays of light emerged through the rippling mantle of darkness. He looked to his right and flailed about for his rock, releasing steam that wafted towards the heavens. He snatched the rock and cradled it, cooing with delight at the heat.

It slowly gave out, and he tossed it aside.

Bereft . . .

He watched eleven sunrises. Eleven times, the glittery orbs above stared silently back at him. On the eleventh afternoon, he felt his heart – long neglected – expand, then contract. It swelled once more.

And stopped.

It did not resume.

Alyse Bingham

The Psychopomp

*"Save yourself a penny for the ferryman
Save yourself and let them suffer"
Planet Hell ~ Nightwish*

*Tuscany, Italy
February 13, 2012*

~

"Brisk wind today?"

"What makes you say that?" Adela asked, sliding her punch card into the slot.

Matteo ran a hand through her hair slowly and she felt her cheeks grow hot. She drew her hair up in a bun and took off her coat.

"You left your books back at the dorm?"

She nodded.

"I never get around to studying here anyways, so I figured I might as well not break my back." She motioned to the front. "It's so quiet . . . is anyone here?"

Matteo shook his head as they entered the front of the tavern.

"I opened up about an hour ago. I don't think anyone's even docked yet."

"Not even Bene?"

"Not even Bene," he said.

"Maybe it's a—how do you say . . . gewitter?" Storm.

"Bufera."

"Ja."

"No. Had that been the case, they wouldn't have gone out at all, and we would have been called in early."

There was a flash of aberrant indigo for a heartbeat before all became dark, followed by several muted pops from the ceiling.

"Mio Dio, che cosa è stato?" My God, what was that?

"Probably just a blown fuse, innamorato; nothing to worry about."

"But Matteo, I've seen this before--"

"I'll go check the breaker, Adela. It's going to be fine." He brushed some stray hairs back and kissed her lightly on her temple. She turned to look at him and saw only a silhouette. He turned away, and his footsteps retreated into the darkness.

The door flew open behind her and sailors' worn voices echoed off the paneled walls.

"Adela? What's up with the sign? You *are* open, right?"

"Bene? Is that you?"

"You two up to something?" he asked, his deep timbre comforting in the darkness.

"No, Matteo's resetting the breaker—"

"The breaker's fine," Matteo said from behind her. His uneasiness made the hair rise on the back of Adela's neck. "Nothing was tripped."

Alyse Bingham

“Come to think of it, power was out along the whole street,” Bene said slowly.

Adela sucked in a breath. She could taste the bits of dust in the air, but something about the darkness was familiar.

I know I've seen this before . . .

“Does the fridge still work?” Bene’s voice was hopeful.

“Um . . .” Adela felt for the counter, found the mini-fridge underneath and flipped it open. The yellow light illuminated flecks in the musty air before flickering out. “No.”

Wet boots shuffled on the plank wood.

“Well,” Bene said, “I suppose we ought to drink what’s in there before they get warm—”

There was an electric snap from the back and the lights began to glow brighter than they had before.

A frigid blast of sea air blew in as a man in a black leather trench coat walked in and took a seat at the far end of the bar. The others stood a bit straighter and looked to Matteo.

He did nothing.

Bene broke from the crowd and rested his forearms on the bar.

“I’d like my Friday strega, please.”

The others retreated to their usual seats and Matteo placed the glass before Bene.

“On the house, amico.”

“Grazie.” He glanced at Adela. “Don’t talk to him, amato.” Beloved.

She wheeled and her bun came loose.

“What?”

“Do you know who that is?” he asked?

“*Nein*. Should I?” No.

Bene’s clouded, grey eyes met hers and she looked away quickly; the gentle love she found in his eyes was unexpected.

“Oh Miss Von Stauffenberg . . . Perhaps it’s best you don’t know.”

The sharp vibration in her back pocket startled Adela and she jerked her head up. The old, stained watercolor of the fishermen on the far wall blurred. She rubbed her eyes with one hand and slid her phone open with the other.

r u home yet? – Le Matteo

ugh neeeeeeeeeeeeeeein x.x – Adela <3

The cathedral in Massa Marittima sounded the hour. Adela – resting her head on the counter – shut her phone and looked toward the man in the trench coat. He hadn’t ordered anything. Hadn’t said anything. But at 0200 hours, Adela just wanted sleep. *I’m pretty much screwed for that exam this afternoon.* She shook her head and reached for a rag.

“Sir?”

He raised his head and it was only then that she realized he looked about her age. His hair was platinum and braided to about half-way down his back, and his bangs framed his sun-baked face sharply.

Alyse Bingham

“Um . . . I’m sorry, but we’re closing now.” He nodded and slid off the barstool. He took a few steps towards her as if he was about to say something but stopped. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

His ash colored eyes bored into hers, and she instantly felt within her veins the icy depths of sorrow his eyes screamed was in his soul. Slowly, the ice seeped into her mind.

She saw the yacht, that hideous maroon thing her papa had bought from a colleague. She remembered the gnawing disappointment when they told her she could not come because she couldn’t swim. During the week they were out, the disappointment had been stripped down to bold-faced resentment.

Until they found the yacht, the decks soaked with blood.

Her father hadn’t been a soldier like his ancestors.

When the pirates ambushed them, they hadn’t stood a chance.

She’d wanted nothing to do with water after that, nothing to do with the unholy grave that had accepted their bodies.

“How old were you, caro?” Dear one.

“Acht.” Eight.

“Es tut mir leid.” I am sorry.

The icy enchantment melted, translating into warm, salty tears and moaning sobs long sealed within her. She began to wipe the tears away with the heel of her hand, but felt light-headed and short of breath.

The man stood, and his shadow overlapped hers on the wall as he pulled her into his arms. Her nostrils were filled with the scent of aftershave and sea air. The leather was still slick with rain, but it was smooth against her temple. His arms were strong and he lightly stroked her hair.

“Sie sind sicher, Adela. Ich verspreche Ihnen.” They are safe, Adela. I promise you.

She pulled back, wiping under her eyes with her fingertips.

“How . . . how do you know that?”

His eyes clouded and he looked away, taking a step back.

“Will you walk with me?” he asked softly.

Adela scooped up the rag, tossed it into the plastic bucket under the sink, and turned with her back against the counter.

“Where?”

“I’d like to see the city.”

“You can do that alone. Why do you need me?”

“I’ve never been here before.”

“I’ve lived here for less than a year—”

He chuckled, taking a measured step towards her.

“Which makes you more qualified than me.” He held out a hand. Adela chewed on the side of her bottom lip.

“I have to lock up first.”

He nodded and moved towards the door.

“Better bundle up,” he said, turning the collar of his coat up. “I’m afraid I’ve brought the storms with me.”

“What did you mean when you said they were safe? And how did you know?”

He did not break stride.

“I . . . met them. It could only be them.”

There was an infinite sadness in his voice, but something was hidden beneath the surface.

“Where?”

“Bay of Biscay.”

“When?”

He stopped midstride and looked her square in the eye.

“The morning of July 19, 1989.” Adela felt her mouth go dry and she missed a step. He caught the crook of her arm and guided her to a bench. “I shouldn’t have told you at all, but—”

“Nein,” she whispered. “It’s . . . it’s okay. I just . . .”

“ . . . don’t believe it.” His voice was flat, and there was a note of betrayal hidden in his timbre. She flinched. “And I don’t blame you. I couldn’t blame you. Not everyone meets the Fährmann.” Ferryman.

Adela’s phone vibrated loudly and she looked up at him.

“I . . . I probably need to look at that.”

“I understand.”

She snapped it open.

r u home NOW? - Le Matteo

nein i locked up but im not home. y? - Adela <3

r u out? w/ bene? lol - Le Matteo

She sensed the hurt masked within the pixels of the false laughter.

w/

She stopped. *Um . . .*

“Who are you?”

“The Ferryman.”

“No, your *name*.”

His eyes glittered vacantly in the darkness, catching the yellow light of the rising moon.

“The Ferryman doesn’t have a name.”

“You don’t go by anything?”

“Ferryman.”

“I can’t go about addressing you that way.” It sounded ridiculous, but she figured that most things did in the wee hours of the morning. “What do your shipmates call you?”

“I have none.”

“Oh.”

adelaaaaaa? out w/ who? or r u occupied? - Le Matteo

im NOT occupied - Adela <3

well just who does that <3 of urs belong to anyhow? - Le Matteo

Adela closed her phone, unwilling to contemplate the implications of Matteo’s question.

“If you could choose a name for yourself, what would you pick?”

Alyse Bingham

He stood and gazed up at the bell-tower of the cathedral.

“My name was Angelo once,” he murmured. “But that name no longer embodies what I am.”

Adela’s heart cramped as his words sunk in.

“What burdens do you carry?”

He turned away.

“I have seen the gate to the Other Side and I have learned . . . I have shouldered the weight of souls lost on the sea. I have glimpsed the City of God, but have never known the pleasure found there.” His voice grew powerful, comprised of the individual timbres of a hundred men, rising and falling in a chaotic cadence. “I have stood on the edge of the Abyss as the souls destined there were shackled and drowned, drowned in the blackness of their sins. And I have learned . . . I have learned that it is there I belong.”

He wheeled and his eyes were alight with a golden blaze, no longer mirroring the moonlight but glowing within. Adela pressed herself against the back of the bench, drawing her knees up to her chin. His expression softened, but agony remained etched into his features.

“I am Dante di Proteus, Ferryman of the Blessed . . . and the Damned.”

“Why you?” she whispered, willing herself to edge closer to him. “What could you possibly have done to deserve this?”

“Lucifer the Fallen still roams the world, lieber ein.” Dear one. “His power is still potent, still . . . binding.” He looked up and his eyes dimmed in the pale light of the moon. “I cursed him when my fiancée died. I cursed him for taking lives of the innocent.” A single tear fell onto his coat: it beaded apart but the droplets remained. “He said for my insolence, I could comfort those taken at sea before their Judgment. But there is no comfort for those lost.” He laughed, but it was hollow and calloused. “You don’t want to hear this.”

“I . . . I’ve met you before,” Adela whispered, edging closer.

“I have never met *you*,” he whispered, staring just to her left.

“No . . . but you *know* me.” His eyes slid over to hers and locked there. “You *knew* me – you knew me before--”

She stopped, not knowing where the knowledge had come from.

Before I died.

Dante’s chin dropped to his chest as if she had spoken the words aloud. He fell to the ground, his shoulders rose and fell as sobs – long banished from his being – tore out of him. Adela knelt beside him and rested her cheek on his chest. He clung to her, muttering madly, the ensemble that comprised his voice becoming discordant.

“ . . . *Anker acnora kotva ancre horgony akkeri ancaire ancla angor . . .*”

Lieber Gott, seine Seele zu retten! Dear God, save his soul!

“Dante?”

He looked up, his once fiery amber eyes again dim and colorless. The rims were crimson. Blood stained his face. Adela wiped the warm, sticky fluid off his cheeks. He reached up, stopped mid-motion, resolved himself, and touched her cheek.

“I return in ten years . . . will you wait for me?”

His voice – once the chorus – was now a broken solo.

Alyse Bingham

“Can’t I go with you?” she whispered. He shook his head and traced the outline of her face with his hands.

“Where I go none but myself return.”

There was a computerized buzz from her pocket.

“Dann wähle ich zu warten.” Then I choose to wait.

He dropped his hands and stepped closer, his warm breath visible for moments at a time.

“Do you realize what you’re saying?”

She smiled, ignoring her phone.

“I do.”

Dante looked to the east, as if beckoned.

“The sun approaches,” he murmured, standing. The water that had seeped into his jeans beaded on the outside and – like a vortex – slid down his legs, forming pools at his feet. He pulled her up and kissed her as one dying of thirst delights in water. “Will you see me to the docks?”

The vibration stopped. She pulled out the phone and dropped it in the puddle.

“Yes.”

~

February 14, 2022

~

Adela braced herself against the harsh winds blowing off the Tyrrhenian Sea. Her lips were chapped, and she could feel the skin on the tip of her nose flaking when she sneezed. A cold storm loomed before her and she stood on her tiptoes, her hands grasping the rough threads of the rope railing.

Ich entscheide mich warten, ich entscheide mich warten, ich entscheide mich warten. I chose to wait.

The sun had sunk beneath the teal waves nearly three hours ago, but the ship made of the unfulfilled dreams and desires of the captain had not arrived.

The white arc of the moon began to rise, and as the horns separated from the horizon there was a coruscation of azure light.

A ship in the style of generations long past materialized before her, the ebony lettering of *Vigilax* absorbing the silver glow of the orb of night.

Dante’s voice came from behind.

“I hope you saved a penny for the Ferryman.”

She wheeled and threw her arms around his neck.

“I saved more than that.”

They turned away from the docks and the *Vigilax* dissolved into the darkness as the howling gusts just obscured the sound of shattering chains.

Angelo had returned.

Samantha Clevinger

The Next Afternoon

All eyes on her.

Safety pins and cringes.

Studs on her shoes,
spikes at her wrists.

Armour.

She shouldn't be here.

Chest aches, pulse quickens.

Air squeezed from her lungs.

They know.

Laughter, sinister.

Contorted demon faces.

Jesters, gray and sickening.

Sounds echo loud, suffocating.

Closing in.

Air settles static

on the nape of her neck.

Fight or flight, the razors edge.

Feet stumble.

Run.

A tap on her black cardigan

Yank away, whirl around.

Samantha Clevinger

Tears and red and black curls.

Flurry.

Grey eyes peer.

Purple sunglasses and neon chucks.

“Where you going?”

She doesn't know.

She doesn't know.

The guarded door.

“You tried to. *Didn't* you?”

Samantha Clevinger

Dream-state Symphony

We stand beneath the starry cascade of night's sky,
pure and simple
kissed by Nature and undisturbed by human hands.

A symphony for our eyes--
songs played out note by note for our ears--
our senses fulfilled.

The static in the air,
our touches -- fingertips on skin.
every bit of it,
more splendid than the next.

This is our time.

This is our place--
our scene painted by His hands,
with more marvelous colors than we've named
in lifetimes upon lifetimes.

Nymphs whisper their ocean exhales.

The silence of the song in our lungs,
as our tempos harmonize.

Our pulses – andante --

Crescendo. The new Sun beams arise.

Largo. Each moment, so exquisite.
captured only in irreplaceable memory.

Engrained upon us so rare,

So profound, deep and perpetual
as the lines in our unsteady hands.

We breathe.

Early Slow Dancing

A glimpse of morning light peeks in through the curtains,
billowing in the humid breeze.

Carefully, she opens her eyes to greet the daylight,
dreaming still, of the sort of whispers that resonate.

Ether-bound moth wings soundlessly retreat,
for when she moves, the earth exhales.

Grinning, she rises,
heedless to what might await her.

In the dim of the morning, he waits.
Just to see her sleep-kissed face.
Kindness emanates from the vision.
Lovely and nimble, bare feet walking.

Morning dew on the window pane.
Nothing can dampen the day.
Oranges, bright in their glass bowl,
Perfect painting of awakening.

Questioning, she looks at him,
receiving a smile and an embrace.
Sunday morning whispers.

Samantha Clevinger

Trees sway beyond kitchen wallpaper.

Ultimately, it's just the moment.

Varied colours caress their dancing outlines.

Watercolours in the morning sunshine.

X-amount of pigmented andantes.

Youthful laughter and slow dancing.

Zest for the little things in life.

6 AM Hotel Room

Our suitcases have been eviscerated,
entrails strewn about with pillows,
bedsheets amiss and twisted grotesque.

This is our aftermath.

This room, our nest and cage for the week
in a state south of home.

You stand in the door's frame,
leaning on your bare shoulder.

Birds begin their melodic morning,
a slight noise in the groggy daylight.

I rummage about, stumbling
over your dress shoes. Shiny raven black.

The glisten of the ring on your left hand
as you beckon, slow motion.

Wordless against the morning grey.

Makeyvia Delee

Apples

Nectar from your core

The sweetest juice flows from hands

To lips pigment your bright exterior dazed I

Hold back the urge to bite you

No Turning Back

There were trees
Rows and rows of trees
Nothing to satisfy the eyes fancy
Black tar roads wrapped around for miles to come
We rode
In silence
No one speaking about the elephant in the room
That disease sucking the air away from my lungs
Feeding on guilt.
I should have come to you sooner
Been there for you
You were always there for me
A drive on a normal day that took maybe 30 minutes
Now seems like an eternity
Dirt roads come into view
My mind wants to retreat
But the car keeps going
Turning until it stops
Doors slam
Bodies walk in silence
“She’s been asking for you” they say,
I walk in
And see the stillness of your body
No emotion, no warmth
You’re gone
Their crying
Legs began to back away slowly
Doors slam
I walk
I run
In silence
There were trees
Rows and rows of trees
Nothing to comfort my pain

Sarah Doty

Blood's Not Thicker

Always the
Bitch in the family. The
C- word I
Don't
Ever use.
Fuck you,
Get bent. I
Hate you.
In time, my lovely
Jerk off, you'll just be another
Know it all
Low life
Mother,
Never making a difference.
Open your legs.
Pounce on your next victim.
Quick—before you divorce him.
Reel 'em in, big
Sister.
Turn on the crazy.
Under some influence, expecting
Venerability for being so
"Wise." Go pop some
Xannies
You stupid bitch.
ZAP—you're done for.

Your boots,
camis, cover,
green sea bag and its lock—
please don't forget me tomorrow.
Come home.

I'll kiss
your back tonight;
tomorrow you'll be gone.
I don't know if I'll see your face
again.

Who knew
that one day I
would settle down with you
and call myself an Ordie wife.
Who knew.

Only
when you leave me
do I drink that bottle—
lost in my mind and all alone—
I'm drunk.

Sarah Doty

Today, this is my Life

I sometimes put on makeup, but I don't feel all that pretty
For some reason or another my whole attitude's been stuck on just plain shitty
I can barely leave the house, but when I do I go for help
They say "that's a tranquilizer, sweetie, so let me prescribe you some sea weed and kelp."

When I come home in the afternoon,
My baby Joe is asleep in my room
Maya's torn up my couch, and it's such a shame it died so soon
I wish I could sweep up the broken pieces of this damn couch with a cheap broom.

My frickin' cat Bea is all over my stuff,
Jumping on my bed at night and freaking me out so much
I reach for that metal killer in such a rush,
But even when I realize it's just the cat, I shiver at its touch.

I stay up all night in some drunken stupor
Packing boxes of my old life—seeing that old girl and wanting to punch her
My dog shit on the floor and I just stepped in murky rain water
I wonder if my love is on that damn boat thinking "man, I should really divorce her."

I'm workin' on the whole selfless thing
A marriage, after all, is nothing like a fling
Whenever he leaves though, the whole operation just blows up in my face;
here I am with this stupid make up on like a paranoid jackass carrying a knife and some mace.

I suppose things have hit that humorous marker
After all this shit, my cat just got stuck under my oak dresser
I saved him and then sat down to write,
but all I can see is that poop stain Maya left for me last night.

Autumn

I often sit and think of you and Joe
This boy, his love, reflects my time with you
You were the first to show me all that Blow
Instead of three I'm back to only two.
We talked of trucks and music as we drank
You laughed as only trees were in our sight
The last time I saw you my heart just sank
I guess I don't blame you for taking flight.
I cannot help but see you sometimes, man
It really messes with my lonely mind
I hate how all our friends have chosen clans
I now must find that girl I left behind.
 I don't think I will ever know your face.
 My thoughts of you are lost inside this place.

Sarah Doty

'08-'11

My parents named me Sarah with an H.
I wish my name was Lucy in the sky.
I'd love some soup with ranch please, mister man.
That silly boy said I was his iced tea.
He makes his way back to the room and scores—
A bowl that is. He scores a bowl and laughs.
His brother said "your hair's electric girl!"
In some years after that time in my life
we all were highly confused by that day.
He told me simply "baby, just take my hand;
we need two ice cubes and a rubber band."

Week after Christmas
Never seen him so nervous
Park—15:15

It's sunny and warm
He leans on the chain link fence
I've found my soul mate

"Where do you live girl?"
"What? In a house, mister cop."
...damn you sarcasm.

Jungle cat in the
Nightmare induced dream world where
I find myself lost

He freezes in place
They scoop up their tiny rats
We just laugh and play
They shoot ignorance my way
While they hide behind false fear

I met the Ramones
in a music store back home.
I'm not sure who I
was back then, but they told me
I've gone mental, and they're right.

Sarah Doty

G.M.W.

Gardenia is my only certainty,
though I wear St. Christopher upon my neck.
She smells of white purity.

I search for her mercilessly--
The ashes of memory now only a speck.
Gardenia is my only certainty.

Her petals—purple, blue, yellow—are my spirituality,
though these flowers cease to exist in matters of respect.
She smells of white purity.

She found me in the depths of the desert with a sweet melody,
calling out my name despite the city's wreck.
Gardenia is my only certainty.

My heart feels her in its entirety.
I was only nine by the time she was spent.
She smells of white purity.

I think of her when I lose my sanity.
I no longer see her, though I often check.
Gardenia is my only certainty.
She smells of white purity.

December 29, 2011

I never knew my life would turn out this way
biding my time while you're away.
It comes so frequently we have to say goodbye,
and surprisingly, I haven't yet found myself asking why.
I knew what you were so long go;
the day you became a Marine I still loved you so.
When we married I never gave it a second thought.
So many times in my life I've stopped and fought.
I knew I'd make it through,
no matter where we were,
or what I had to do,
so I took your hand
as you took mine,
and right there we began our lives
as I became a military wife.

Sarah Doty

I've somehow reached this place where I've gotten used to not sleeping next to you. The worst part is that it doesn't take you leaving for me to feel this way. I suppose that could be a good thing in some way. It doesn't seem fair. No one understands. I'm guessing they all think I'm pathetic for saying all this. People feel lonely and sad, but this is so much more than that. I just keep it to myself. Why tell anyone I hardly remember what it feels like to sleep next to my husband? Not even fall asleep with, or wake up with, but simply sleep next to. In those precious moments during the night, or day when you work nightshift, when I wake up and can't sleep, and you're actually there. You're actually physically there. I can hardly remember that feeling.

I bought two bottles of wine this last time you left and when asked how I was I couldn't hide that I was upset.

The first thing I said by default was "I'm fine," then quickly came that you had left that morning, but of course I was fine.

It makes me laugh now how the cashier thought you had left me,
but at the time I made sure to clarify with "he's in the military."

That same sad look I always see,
where all these civilians feel so sorry for me,
it gives me drive and desire to stay strong.

They have no idea I have to say goodbye so often--
never knowing how long you'll be gone
or when you'll be home.

If I fell apart like they seem to expect,
I'll lose myself as well as my self respect.
I hate that pitiful look as they digest "military wife."
I'm stronger than they think,
and even when my sanity is teetering on the brink,
I'm proud of you for what you do,
and I'm proud of me for making it through.

Sarah Doty

A.M.

You killed him. You killed him, right?

I want you.

I need you.

I love you.

I hate you.

I remember the pleasure-- not the pain.

But wait, I do remember the pain,

and the shackles,

and the shower head,

and the fear.

I remember it all, yet I desperately seek you

at every possible chance.

Deceive to win you,

manipulate to inhale you,

and I don't hate myself,

though I often do.

I still want you.

I still love you.

I still hate you.

I don't need you.

That kid on the bus just mooned
those old ladies. What a star
of the evening, creating a chip
on those old women's shoulders. I bet their slips
even quivered a bit, dropping their cups
of tea as they stared at that boy & hit a rock.

Back in the day they would've liked a little rock
n' roll.. Maybe sippin' on some moon
shine & drinking spiked cocktails slipped
with the world's greatest drugs in which seeing stars
would be an expectation after drinking their cups
even if, as a result of drunken madness, they downed a bag of chips.

Perhaps all this would create a desire to go see Chipp
-endales, even if it was a little late in life for these old town rocketeers
to be seen in such places and caught cupping
a man's jewels in their dainty little hands during a full moon
and a night sky of twinkling stars
and regrettable character slips.

Following a night of insanity, a slip
on the ground or the lips is customary, despite the chips
collected at table poker, making losers feel like movie stars,
racking in the numbers, and rocking
out with their friends at the Moon
Light Bunny Ranch, and buying a souvenir cup

or t-shirt. Let's go back to high school-- see those red cups?
It was those days where our parents slipped
us some cash only for us to sneak out under the moon,
driving out to the wall with our youthful and chipper
faces, much like those old ladies earlier, rockin'
out and doin' the jitterbug, starring

In old romantic photos, making us want to lay down & look at the stars
pretending to be in world where kings cup
doesn't exist, family members don't drink scotch on the rocks,
we don't fall backward and find our morals slipping
away, sipping coffee out of chipped
mugs and not having to moon

light on the side. It's just the moon and the stars
now that judge our bitter chips and whore house cups,
wearing slips under our dresses and collecting rocks.

Manny Floresca

To Smell the Sunflowers

Through the keyhole I was shocked to see my father placing a chair under the ceiling fan in his bedroom. I was only ten at the time but I had seen plenty of movies with my older brother to know well enough what was happening. He took another swig from his whisky bottle and mumbled something dirty. I lie on the hard wood floor outside of his bedroom, peeking through the silver faded keyhole. It was wide and made to fit a large antique key that mama kept lying in an oak chest from the Civil War era. I fought myself on going in the room or shouting something through the keyhole.

I wasn't sure of what to say. Maybe "don't daddy" or "stop daddy." Maybe I could add a "please" or some kind of whimper for the man he was without his whisky. It didn't really matter how sweet I said it. The moment he heard my trembling voice he would unlatch the black leather belt from his waist and come storming out after me.

I continued to watch as he looped the rope around the ceiling fan clumsily, almost tipping over the chair as he stood on it. I knew that it was time to make a move. I glanced down at my wrists which were covered in bruises. It didn't look foreign to me. I wore the bruises well. In fact I dreaded the day I would ever see my pale skin again. It had been so long since I had. The very sight would send me vomiting. I tapped my fingers along the purple surface of my wrists and felt the familiar throb that I knew so well.

Looking back through the keyhole, my father was now standing firmly on the chair, the rope in one hand, whiskey in the other. If I was going to say something, now was the time. I looked down at my wrists once more. Then, I glanced at mama as she was solemnly doing the dishes. She was the only woman I knew who could ever pull off bruised cheeks and a scabbed chin and still be beautiful. I stopped myself from looking through the keyhole again. It made my stomach sick to think about it. It made me even sicker that I couldn't get the words out of my mouth. And I had the strongest urge to go outside and smell the newly bloomed sunflowers.

My mother looked up at me from the sink.

"Wutcha doin on the floor baby? Wutcha see?" She asked.

At that, I got up and headed for the front door.

"Where ya goin? Dinner's almost ready." She said.

"To the fields to smell the sunflowers," I shouted back as I kept moving forward.

I grabbed my shoes and a blanket and shot across the yard to the sunflower fields. I had a feeling I wasn't going to make it to dinner. I reached the field. Just as I lifted the closest sunflower to my face and brought it to my nose I heard my father's whiskey bottle burst along the hard wooden floor from the house. I didn't wince or stop at the sound. Not even when I heard my mother's horrible screams. I kept my eyes closed and my face buried in the heart of the flower. And for anyone who ever questioned why I never spoke, I have always said, "I just wanted to smell the sunflowers."

The Misfit

We separated ourselves from the rest of the world, from the girls who never picked up a single issue of Cosmo and the guys who could never afford to buy Tiffany's on Valentine's Day. Yeah. We were that group in high school. I had somehow found a crack in the circle to sneak into. I can't tell you how I did it. My household was lower than the lower class and foreign to what a happy four member family was supposed to be like. But once I was in, there was no stopping. It came so natural that I was afraid to stop and question it. So I accepted every party invitation, every alcoholic beverage, every compliment, every girl who hated me, and every guy that drove a white 350 Z. I became that girl. But I wasn't always like that. I wasn't always the girl who cared about what other people thought. I can't tell you when I began to change. I can't tell you when I started to desire pink things over brown, high heels over flip flops, or make up over my own skin. If I could have stopped it, I would have. Maybe that would have made a difference. Maybe that would have been enough to keep him from pulling the trigger.

We were in the hallway after school, standing beside our lockers, huddled, talking low about Homecoming. I was nominated for Queen and although I could have thought of a million other things to do, I found myself glittering posters, posing for pictures and trying to pick whose party to bless my presence with afterwards. That's when he came pushing through.

"Guess you didn't notice everyone else walking down the fucking hallway," he said to us.

He and four others pushed their way through our tight circle, skateboards at their sides. We stood silent and still allowing them to bump our shoulders and they moved through us. They all wore their hair the same way, long, tangled, greasy, covering their faces. Black clothing brands I didn't recognize. Black wristbands, gages, lip rings, faint black eye liner. Their jeans were baggy, hanging off their lean bodies with rips and white tattered tears. They walked slowly, eyeing each of us with mocking grins on their faces and I felt an urge of irritation shoot through me.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" I said.

He stopped and turned to face me. I felt my confidence start to fade and I lowered my face. He cocked his head to one side and never took his eyes away. I focused on the dark circles sunken around his eyes. I looked up, our gazes locked and it was hard and still. One look and I could tell that he feared nothing. I felt that he could see everything in me, every mistake, wish or desire, everything good but mostly bad. He saw it all as his hard blue eyes glared through strands of sandy hair. I felt the heat rise to my cheeks. My ears were on fire and my heart was pounding so hard, I could feel my chest pumping up and down.

"Would you like to find out?" He asked stepping into me, his face just inches from mine.

Manny Floresca

His breath smelled of cigarettes and I found it odd that as much as I hated the smell, I continued to breathe deeper, sniff harder with every step he took closer. He stood so close and unmoving, his presence so strong. He let his arms rest at his sides, his lean shoulders casting a shadow above us, hovering only over the two of us. He wasn't fidgeting as I was. We remained face to face and he just leaned down a little more to look me eye to eye. I couldn't find the words to speak. I was afraid to move. *Breathe*, I told myself. *Just breathe*. I felt my chest heave. *Cigarettes*. An awful silence fell over us and I glanced up, scanning the uncomfortable faces of my friends who were waiting for something to happen.

"You should stop smoking." I choked out. I heard the awkward tremble in my own voice and I felt more heat surface to my cheeks and warm my ears. I watched one corner of his mouth curl into a smirk. He glanced back at the group of skaters and back at me. His friends chuckled. He stepped closer and leaned into my ear, his mangled hair closing in around his shadowed face. I held my breath.

"I could teach you," he whispered.

I shook a little when the tip of his nose brushed my ear. He retreated and I couldn't make myself look up at him anymore. Instead I kept my eyes on his century old shoes. I focused in on the metallic tape he used to keep the shoe and sole together. He noticed my inspection and pushed past me. I could breathe again.

"He makes me anxious," Stephanie mumbled, biting on her nails.

"He won't last here for long," Mark said.

I watched him farther down the hall take out a set of headphones. He banged his head up and down and thrashed it from side to side, music blasted from the tiny speaker buds. He threw his board against the marble floor and hopped on. His crew praised him with a little noise and some foul language. I watched until he disappeared around the corner.

After Homecoming, I hopped from party to party with Mark, Stephanie, Aaron and some others. I was feeling good entering all the houses with my crown and sash still on, everyone clapping and cheering as I came in. I was given drink after drink. And everyone wanted a shot with the Homecoming Queen. I was trashed but I was having a good time. My movements were slow and extended. I kept reaching under my eye for smudged mascara and eye liner. My lids felt heavy.

The skaters came in together, a cloud of darkness, pushing through the crowd like that very first day in the hallway. When I looked up I could only make out his outline. 5'7. Strong jaw line. Lean shoulders. A walk that lingered half a second more than the average person for every step. He had a sort of swag that drew him out from the crowd. He came in bobbing his head to the music. I was sitting on the carpet beside Stephanie, our backs against a wall. I hardly made out his face as he squatted next to me.

"Oh shit, the drunken princess," he smiled.

Manny Floresca

“Queen,” I corrected taking a swig from a bottle.

“Right,” he said taking the tiara off my head. I wanted to take it back but I was buzzing. I was telling myself to reach up for it but I couldn’t. My lips were vibrating and my fingers felt numb. Drinks in both of my hands. I felt his warm hands slide over my back and shoulders, removing my sash. He put the crown and sash on himself and started waving around like a beauty queen, almost tripping over the couch, sweat dripping, eyes drooping. He wasn’t so sober himself. His crew of skaters was behind him, laughing, pointing, egging him on. I shot up, regardless of the buzz and went for the crown. He dodged and I fell to the floor. He stopped laughing and cupped my elbow, attempting to pull me up. I shoved him away.

“Don’t touch me,” I said, flopping back onto the floor.

Stephanie giggled drunkenly and crawled over to help me up. I reached for the tiara again and he pulled away before I could grasp it.

“Easy, princess,” he said. His crew laughed again.

“Screw you.”

“Ouch,” he said, “you want to?” His eyes gave a sparkle as he squinted and curled the right side of his mouth into a sly smile.

“You don’t belong here,” I said reaching for the wall to pull myself up. He became very serious and held the tiara up to my face.

“You think this makes you somebody?” He asked. Before I could reply he took me by the shoulders, and pinned me to the wall, “I know who you really are.”

Every time I saw him, he was wearing that damn tiara. Whether he was skateboarding or walking to class, he didn’t care what anyone thought or the looks he got. After unpinning me from the wall that night, Mark came out of nowhere and wrestled him to the ground. They wrestled around before punches were thrown. I tried to pull them apart but everyone jumped into the fight. The music died. There was a huge ball of male bodies, swinging, throwing, charging. Everyone made a circle around them and soon I couldn’t even make out the two of them deep under the pile. I pressed my hand to my forehead and thought of what to do to break it up.

“Cops! Cops!” I yelled. Everyone went scrambling to their feet, shooting out in different directions. Finally, I could make them out. Aaron and Stephanie helped Mark up. Mark had a black eye and Austin’s lip was busted, blood slipping, dripping down his chin. I held out a hand for him to take and just as he was getting up to take it, Mark took my wrist and shoved him back down.

“Stay away from her.” He said. “If I even catch you looking at her...so help me God.”

Manny Floresca

“Stop it Mark!” I said. I turned before leaving. His skater friends had come back for him.

On that last day before Christmas break, I opened my locker and a cigarette butt fell out. The tiara sat neatly on my Economics book. I spent my holidays trying to figure out how he managed to get in and if it was the only time he had.

Then, the new semester started. Our gym teacher, Ms. Brown, was a short stocky woman with boyish features and a feathery haircut like one found on a much older man. Stephanie and I couldn't help whispering about it as she began to call the roll. She was almost finished when he shoved open the blue double doors to the gymnasium, swinging them back against the wall.

“You're late Austin. As usual,” Ms. Brown said never looking up from her clipboard. So that was his name.

We all turned to look. There were only three other skaters with him this time and a girl. I noticed he was wearing the same outfit as the first day I saw him. I examined his girlfriend from the top of her hideous self-dyed hair, black with hot pink tips, down to her black laced tu tu skirt and combat boots. She wore heavy dark make-up, chunks of black under her eyes, scarlet red lipstick. She had one piercing in her eyebrow and one in her nose. Austin didn't seem bothered by or even aware of the whispering that was suddenly circulating the bleachers. Ms. Brown wore a tight, bothered expression. I turned my head slightly and peaked over my shoulder at him. He was already looking my way. He blew me a cynical kiss. His girlfriend shot me the bird. I turned around and tried to ignore them.

I noticed half way into the volleyball game that Austin and his crew had disappeared. When it was almost time for the bell to ring Ms. Brown called for us to change back into our school clothes. While passing the bleachers towards the locker room I heard a moan. I stopped and peeked around the corner behind the bleachers. There he was.

Her legs were wrapped around his waist. He stood, pinning her against the wall moving in vertical motion. I was stuck. Entranced. Curious. Uneasy. I wanted to move, but I was afraid to call attention to myself. Without stopping, he turned to me. I stood frozen, frightened. I prayed that he couldn't see me, but he did and I couldn't look away. I thought he would be humiliated, embarrassed, or even angry for the intrusion. But he wasn't. He went deeper and deeper and she threw her hot pink tips against the wall with her eyes shut. He covered her mouth so she wouldn't scream. Moments passed but he didn't look back at her. He looked at me. He always looked at me.

I never told anyone what I saw, but he couldn't help to bring it up in his own way the next day.

“Did you like that?” He asked.

“What?” My stomach dropped.

“Gym class. Did you like it? Volleyball was pretty intense today.” He smiled. I ignored his comment and he found that humorous.

Manny Floresca

"You want to go for a smoke?" He asked.

"I don't smoke."

"Sure," he said, smiling.

"Why do you act so crazy?" I asked, looking to see if Stephanie was near. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it up in the middle of the hallway.

"You can't do that in here!" I said.

"Haven't you heard?" He smiled. He took a puff and tilted his head back looking at the ceiling as he blew out the gray, foggy smoke. I watched the smoke reach the ceiling and then I saw the little light turn from green to red. I covered my ears. And then it went off.

"I *am* crazy," he yelled over the smoke alarm.

That night I went to another party. I was sitting Indian-style on the carpet as the blunt was being passed around the circle. I was both nervous and excited to finally try it. When it was finally passed to me, I happened to look up. Austin was wandering around but stopped when he found me and leaned in the door way, watching with a smirk, waiting, expecting me to inhale. I passed the blunt without taking a hit and got up to leave. I didn't want to give the little creep what he wanted. I struggled to make my way through the tight dancing crowd near the DJ booth. It was dark and with the strobe lights flashing, everything was moving slow as I stumbled to the door. He caught me under both arms and pulled me up before I flopped to the ground. After finding my balance I tried to go past him. He posted up, arms spread out on each side of the door frame so that I couldn't get through. I cocked up my eyebrow and pressed my lips together. He returned by leaning in, staring into my eyes, at my lips, always staring. I was too drunk to be intimidated and he could see it. I could feel eyes in the room begin to switch their attention towards us. Austin glanced up quickly at them then back to me.

"You want to go somewhere?" He asked.

A new pair of hands grasped the back of my shoulders. I could feel the tension. I turned to see Mark glaring at him, gripping my shoulders hard. Austin smiled at him. Mark smiled back in a daring way. Then, Mark spun me around to face him, lifted my chin and kissed me. I was dizzy from the quick spin and the booze and could do nothing but take it.

When I finally gathered my senses I shoved Mark off, "What the hell are you doing?!" I turned around and saw that Austin had left.

"I'm sorry," Mark said. "I just can't stand the kid."

"So? What did you have to do that for?" I grabbed my purse to leave.

Manny Floresca

“Can’t you see the way he looks at you?” He asked. I thought about that for a second. “Wait a minute,” Mark said pulling me into him and looking at me.

“What?” I said trying to read the stunned look on Mark’s face.

“Do you like this guy?” He asked.

“Mark. Don’t be stupid.” But I could tell it wasn’t convincing enough.

The next morning I was late for class. The hallways were vacant. I seemed to be the only one dragging. I still had some mascara left on from the night before, and all I could manage to do with my hair was throw it into a messy bun which thankfully, was currently in style. The bell rung but I went to make a locker stop. Austin was leaning against it. With his back on my locker, he had one foot planted on the ground and the other bent, resting on the lower lockers. His hands were casually in his pockets. His shoulders were relaxed. He had his head cocked to the right side and his chin slightly tilted upward as if he were about to give me an acknowledging head nod. It seemed he was about to give me much more than that.

“Excuse me,” I said stepping towards my locker, expecting him to move. He glared at me with the same cold expression as the first day we met and I could feel an extreme difference between then and when I was drunk the night before. With the alcohol in my system I was numb enough to put up with it. But in this moment, it was too hard, too dark. I could only manage glancing at his face. He said nothing, only glared. I realized that he wasn’t going to move. I waited but couldn’t ignore the awkwardness or help to think of how late I already was. I waited silently but began to get impatient.

“Please move.” I said. His expression remained stiff and he didn’t budge or break or blink. Something in him seemed to enjoy my impatience.

“Look, what do you want?” I asked.

It was an odd way to antagonize me. And as small as he was making me feel, I still knew that I had somewhere to be. So I managed to pull what little confidence I had at the moment and laughed lightly. “Look, I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I don’t have time for this.”

“You mean you don’t have time for someone like me,” he said coming off the locker. I smiled and backed off as he stepped towards me.

“Why don’t you just tell me what you want?” I said. I watched the corner of his mouth flicker into a slight smile, and then it was gone. Each step he took closer I stepped back.

“All I want.....” He stepped.

“Is....” He came closer and closer until my back hit the wall. There was nowhere to go. He posted a hand on each side, trapping me once again. He tilted his face into mine. I turned away from him and his forehead pressed lightly into my temple as he spoke softly.

Manny Floresca

".....A cigarette." I was no longer worried about being late. My heart began to pound. I couldn't tell if it was from fear or something else. I prayed that no one would come around the corner.

"You already know that I don't smoke...." I stuttered. He took a handful of my hair and brought it to his nose.

"Yes you do," he mumbled. He cupped my chin and turned my face into his. Our cheeks brushed, noses touched, foreheads met, oily skin. I went into a silent panic. My palms were sweating from being clutched too tight. He pressed his forehead harder into mine. I kept my eyes low while he lingered, savoring the moment. Just when I thought something was going to happen, he backed off. He took two white pills out of his pocket. I recognized the drug from previous dental work. Oxycontin.

"What are you doing?" I asked. He smiled, and slipped them into his mouth.

They were acting weird. Mark wouldn't even speak to me. Stephanie couldn't keep her nails away from her mouth when I asked her about our homework assignment. Finally, Aaron took the initiative.

"Listen," he said gently. "We can't be a part of whatever it is that's going on between you and that guy."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"I know that the bad boy type, can be more attractive to a nice girl, but trust me, that's not the type to take home to mom and dad. And your parents are good people, Samantha. They don't want trash in their home."

I was fuming. Anger was burning in the core of my chest. Often it seemed to others that Mark ran the show between us four because he was the jock. In reality, Aaron had the most say in our little club. He was on a different intellectual level than the rest of us. He had a way with words and a cockiness about him that devoured Mark. Everything he said always seemed to make perfect sense. That was, up until now.

"You don't know shit about my parents, Aaron." By this time he was getting irritated as he pinched his temples with the tips of his fingers and clutched his eyes shut as if I were giving him a migraine. A simple "yes" or "ok" was what he was looking for, but not this.

"You're the God damn Homecoming Queen!" Several people looked over. His face tightened and he lowered his tone and leaned closer, "Look. I love you. Stephanie and Mark, they love you. We only want what's best for you. That guy's no good, ok? Trust me. And look at what he did to Mark." He nodded towards Mark who kept picking at his black eye. And like that Aaron was smiling again as if he had never offended me. It was all fake. The four of us were fake. Anger started to blur my vision. I felt relieved to let the tears loose when they left for class. They walked down the center of the hallway, people moving, dodging to give them enough room as if the entire hallway weren't enough for three people. I felt sick.

Manny Floresca

I didn't have feelings for Austin. I didn't want anything to do with him. And yet there he was leaning against my car door in the empty student parking lot. I usually stayed an extra hour after school every Friday for one-on-one math tutoring. No one knew that. Aaron, Stephanie and Mark all thought that it came so naturally but it didn't. When I first started tutoring I told them I got pulled over one night leaving from a party and that I had community service on Friday afternoons. They believed it, and that was enough to keep them off of my back for at least an hour.

I took a look around the parking lot, five acres of nothing but my silver Saturn, asphalt, and Austin. I looked to my right towards the road. We were a little far off from it, hidden by a patch of woods, so I didn't have to worry about too many people passing by and seeing this. He leaned lazily, hands in his pockets, head tilted. His clothes were so baggy sometimes it was hard to make out an accurate figure, making him even more mysterious. My eyes traced up his neck where his Adam's apple peaked out, to his barely dimpled chin. He relaxed against the car with one side of his body leaning lower than the other. His skateboard lay on the trunk of my car. He was so calm it pissed me off. I pulled my sunglasses over my eyes.

"Get your shit off my car." I said.

"I need a ride home," he said.

"Not my problem." I approached him, waiting for him to get off of the driver's side.

"What kind of person would you be if you didn't give me a ride?" He asked. I didn't answer. He took a pack out of his back pocket and lit a cigarette. I watched him take a hit. His face relaxed. He held the cigarette out, offering it to me. I looked down at the long, white stem and noticed the string of scars along his wrist. My face gave it away and he put his arm down.

"Why?" I asked. He thought about it.

"That's a rude question." He said.

"Yeah, well you're not so polite yourself." I said.

He chuckled, "And what do you know about being polite?" I wasn't sure how to answer.

"Where's the gang?" I asked. He took another hit, eyes low. The smoke created a haze between us.

"I sent them home," he smiled. His teeth were perfect beneath his full lips. My cheeks warmed and I looked to the gravel. When I peaked up, his smile widened. He tossed the butt on the ground and reached for his board.

"You want to skate?" He asked.

Manny Floresca

“You can’t be serious.” I said.

He threw the board against the pavement, “Sure,” he said. I looked around at the empty lot and tried to picture it. He took the books from my arms, set them on top of my car and reached for my hand. I put one foot on top of the board and felt the uneasiness. I immediately stepped back down to the ground.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“I can’t,” I said.

“I got you. Just try it.” He held my hand again and I ran my fingers over the warm, thick calluses. I had to admit, I was curious to see if I could do it. But even with only one foot on the board I felt that I would fall.

“I can’t,” I said as I stepped down again and looked up at him.

“What are you afraid of?” He asked. There was nothing hard this time as I looked into his tender, light blue eyes. For once, I felt something gentle with him.

“Falling.”

After a few deep breaths and several trials, I finally got the hang of it. With one hand in mine and the other on my hip, he guided me around the parking lot. I wasn’t going very fast compared to what I had seen him do but it was enough to send a rush through me. I was out of breath when he finally helped me down.

“Not so bad, princess,” he said, smirking. I couldn’t help smiling. Warmth from the sun dimmed and darkness approached.

“Guess I should get you home,” I said. He looked to the ground and smiled shyly like a child and that made me laugh. Behind the light stroke of eye liner and the scars, he actually seemed slightly normal.

“My neighborhood’s no place for you, princess,” he said.

“But you need a ride,” I said.

He lifted his board above his head, “Got one.” He turned, threw the board down, hopped on and pushed off his back foot. I watched him head towards the other side of town, opposite of where Aaron, Stephanie and Mark lived. It was the same route I took home every day.

So that was our routine. Every Friday I found him leaning on my car in the empty student parking lot. Sometimes we skated. Sometimes we talked. Sometimes we sat silently and sometimes we shared head phones and listened to his screaming boy band music that he was always banging his head to. I eventually grew accustomed it.

One day he showed up with all of his long sandy hair cut off and buzzed down.

Manny Floresca

“Woah,” I said.

He smiled, “You like it?” I ran my hand over his head and felt the bristles on my palm.

“Sure,” I replied.

“So um, are you going to that party tonight?” He asked something shaky in his voice.

“Probably,” I said. “Why?”

“I was thinking we could go together,” he said. Minutes went by as I searched his face for a smirk, a smile, anything that indicated humor behind his request. Instead he fidgeted with the black bands tightened around his wrist, hiding the scars.

I shook my head, “Come on Austin, you know I can’t do that.” He lowered his face.

“You know,” he said. “I thought maybe by now you would’ve retired from wearing that damn crown.” He took up his board, turned his back and started walking.

He took me off guard but anger was now reaching me.

“Let me ask you something, Austin. What happened to you to make you so god damn fearless?” He kept walking. When I realized he wasn’t going to stop and answer I caught up with him and blocked his path, “Answer me.”

“Let it go, Sam.”

“No, I want to know. What went so wrong that you have nothing to lose? Nothing to be afraid of losing? They’re still my friends, Austin. Can’t you understand that?” He went to go around me and I pulled him back by his forearm.

“You don’t care about *anything*,” I said pulling him to look at me. Hearing that, he swung his board in the air and slammed it on the ground. I winced.

“I care about *you*,” he said both serious and angry.

“Austin...” I started to say.

“I’m not like everyone else,” he interrupted breathless. “I think that’s pretty obvious. I’m not one of those people who worry themselves with assignments and rules and a stupid reputation. Yeah, I smoke. I take Oxycontin. I screw girls behind bleachers, graffiti the locker rooms, and Ollie off the school stairwell. People don’t like it but that’s who I am and everything went wrong to get me here. But that’s not the real question that needs answering. I’m not the one who’s lost so don’t make it out that way. The real question here is what went wrong to get *you* here?”

He scooped up his board and left me with that.

Manny Floresca

When I arrived that night the bass was thumping through the speakers. The strobe lights were working double time. Blonde cheerleaders were falling over, spilling fruity vodka mixes. Blunts were being passed around by those sitting on the couch. People smoked on the patio. People danced, hands in the air, fist pumping, jumping, head banging, couples grinding in dark corners. I found Aaron and Stephanie sitting on the arm of the couch, sipping drinks and talking. Mark had some freshman posted up on the wall. I looked to the farthest corner to find Austin and his normal crew talking, drawing from the lit herb. He was watching me through the layers of thick smoke. Watching my every move.

When Mark finished with the freshman he stumbled over and threw his arms around me, "Sam! I've been waiting for you. Do you see your little friend over there?" He pointed and waved at Austin.

"Stop it Mark," I said.

"Have you made your choice yet? Who will it be darling, me or him?" Mark was so far gone. I smelled the heavy scent of beer spilled all over his clothes, staining his breath.

"You're drunk, Mark." Aaron and Stephanie made their way over. Aaron looked at me coldly. Stephanie wouldn't look at me all.

"I'm not drunk. I feel wonderful. And I think I already know who you chose. See your good friend Stephanie here rode by the school today suspicious of why it took you more than three hours for community service for the past five Friday's in a row. Guess who she saw you with?" Stephanie kept her eyes on the floor. They waited for a response that I didn't have for them. What did it matter to them who I spent my last five Friday's with?

I peered back to the dark corner. I made out Austin's back, his head lowered, pale, thin arms wrapped around his neck. I felt heat rush through me. The anger bubbled. I couldn't take my eyes away. Finally, one of the skaters noticed my staring and tapped him on the shoulder. Austin unlocked his lips from hers and looked my way. I told myself not to let my face give anything away and the only way to do that was to leave.

I turned and headed out the house. I knew I was upset and walking fast when I felt the wind start to whip at my hair. I tried to take deep breaths and that did little good. I reached my car, and went for the handle when he spun me around.

"Take it easy," he said.

"Don't touch me." I told him. He snatched my keys out of my hands and put them down his pants.

"God damn it Austin. It's not funny anymore. I don't want to play your games anymore." I tried to swallow it but the sting in the back of my throat wouldn't leave. Finally, I couldn't hold it in anymore and the tears came streaming down.

Manny Floresca

"It's not a game," he said. He lifted his finger and slid it across my wet cheek. He pulled me into him, throwing his arms around my neck. I buried my face into his chest. His warm, swollen lips kissed the top of my head. He released me and cupped my face in his hands, "Why are you crying," he asked.

"I don't know," I whispered.

"Sure you do," he said. I knew what he was getting at.

"Austin, I don't want to talk about it. I just want to go home." I sobbed.

"I'll take you home. Just...tell me why we're here." He pleaded. I covered my face with my hands in frustration.

"I don't know." I said.

He removed my hands from my face, "Yes you do." I looked into his eyes and he looked back.

"I just can't, Austin" I said. I watched him grow more impatient as he put his knuckle to his mouth and bit down on it as if to keep from yelling. He ran his hand over his newly buzzed hair cut. His face was tight, eyes glassy and hard, the muscles in his jaw flexed as he thought about how to break me.

Suddenly, he bent down and kissed my temple, and my cheek. I shivered as warm sensations of darkness trailed all over my neck, my jaw line, my chin, my.....

"No," I said pushing him away. "This can't happen." I hurried into my car, locked the door, and found the spare key in the glove compartment.

"Shit!" I heard him yell. I sat there trying to get a hold of myself. He leaned over the car, looking at me through the driver's window.

"Sam" he said. I kept my eyes forward, watching the strobe lights through the house windows. He took a moment before continuing.

"Don't be afraid to fall," he finally said. The tears came stronger now, heavy, liquid drops of fear seeping its way out, and I didn't want him to witness where it was all coming from. I started the car. I heard him call my name again, "Samantha," but his voice was faint as my mind began to gather everything I was ever afraid of. He was at the top of the list.

"Come out of the car." He said. I looked at him through the foggy glass window.

"I'm sorry," I told him. I put the car into reverse and started to ease out knowing that he would eventually move. I took one last look at him before turning the car around and driving off. He had both of his hands in his pockets, his head hanging low. I couldn't see much of his face, but I saw that he was biting down on his lower lip. His mouth was making that painful smile that people do when they're about to cry.

Manny Floresca

The next morning I looked at my phone and saw that I had over twenty missed calls from Stephanie. That's when my mom called me into the kitchen.

"Sweetie," she called. "There's an article about a high school student in the newspaper. Do you know this young man?" I shuffled tiredly into the kitchen, took up the newspaper and took it back to my bed. It read: TEEN DIES FROM DRUG OVERDOSE. There was a picture of Austin.

I felt every muscle in my body tighten. I began gasping for air that was unreachable. I gasped and gasped until my throat burned from nothing coming through. I dropped the newspaper and lifted my trembling hands. My mother knocked lightly and came into my room. I watched the worry spread over her face when she looked at me.

"Sam!" She screamed. I put my hands to my chest which I could feel going up and down indicating that I must have been breathing, yet I didn't feel relief after what seemed like holding my breath for minutes. As soon as my mother reached me, I blacked out. They said I had a panic attack.

The papers printed that Austin took an enormous amount of oxycontin that night. On top of that he had smoked marijuana and had a high rate of alcohol in his system. Nobody went to his funeral. From what I heard, his mom wanted a private ceremony and ended up cremating him and keeping the ashes.

That next Friday after tutoring, I went back to the empty parking lot. It had been a week since he died. He wasn't there leaning on my side of the car, blocking me from access to getting in. His skateboard was nowhere to be found. And that's when reality set in. Next to my tire was a small piece of the black sparkly grip that chipped off of his skateboard when he threw it on the ground, the afternoon he asked me to the party. I picked up the piece and held it close and asked myself over and over why I didn't say yes. I never cried harder than I did right then. I just couldn't believe he was gone. And no one could understand the kind of pain I was feeling, the kind that I had to keep hidden.

"Why did you do it?" I whispered, clutching the grip piece to my face. Until I was a senior, I stayed in the parking lot for hours after tutoring hoping that he would appear, but he never did.

Years later I'm sitting on a park bench planted in the middle of my college campus. It's funny how many memories can come rushing back when you decide to sit down and write about it. Not a day goes by that I don't think of Austin and how differently things may have been. I've finally stopped blaming myself for what happened. Now, with the sun shining, and the wind wisping, it smells just like that day we skated. I know if I just close my eyes I can feel his hand in mine again. I can feel his other on my hip and I can feel the vibration under my feet from the skateboard going over the smooth asphalt. I smile and put a cigarette to my lips. He would be proud.

Manny Floresca

Capturing Eden (The Last of Mooredom)

I watched her below, at the edge of the river, moving through the last rays of sunlight. Colors of the afternoon sky sliced through the tree branches, reflecting bright streaks of auburn sunshine across her long, wavy, dark hair. I remained hidden behind the big rock on the edge of the cliff that overlooked the river. After searching every inch of what was left of our burned down village, I imagined she would be here, in the forest.

I remembered following her to this place as teenagers. After she made her rounds in the village, our eyes would lock from yards away through the mob of running children. Sudden memories of careless, childhood adventures together would remind me of the girl with bouncing brown curls, and sunlit eyes. Then, I would watch carefully as she would slip into the forest, thinking no one was looking. Seconds later, I would follow after only to watch as I sit watching in this moment.

She was crouching now; moving cautiously upon the Earth's surface, careful of even breaking a twig. It amazed me how she could move through the forest without making a sound. I turned from the sight of her, leaned back against the boulder and shut my eyes and listened just like I used to. It seemed merely days ago we were only children as she struggled to keep quiet among the forest leaves, always stomping her little feet into the ground when she couldn't shoot her arrow straight or fling her knife with the exact rotation. Now, with my eyes closed, I couldn't tell she was just there below, tracing yesterday's steps quietly, gracefully along the Earth's creaking floors.

Peeking at her from behind the boulder, she was at ease and confident, her limbs moving freely. Even the frightening, nocturnal illumination in her glowing, honey golden eyes, now sparkled like dancing wild fire before the trees and woods. She was that girl again, among the forest. The one I loved when I was a boy.

She kneeled and began sipping the cool liquid from the river, her back turned to me. I heard a rustle from a nearby bush. A low, gargling, growl followed. My heart quickened and I questioned whether I should remain hidden until the right moment. If I revealed myself any sooner, I risked her killing me instantly.

I glanced to the bush where the noise was coming from and then back at her. She heard the noise too but had managed not to turn at the sound of it. I could tell in her frozen state, in the way her back strained to hold still that she was now alert of something unknown. I suddenly became afraid for her and gripped the blade handle strapped to my cargo pants.

Her hands remained steady and unmoving, still cupped to her lips, water seeping between her fingers, her back as still as a board. Within seconds I caught a glimpse of the brown four legged beast leaping from the bush. She spun instantly, her wavy hair whipping in swift motion. They landed together in synchronized movement, him landing a few feet in front of her, his pearly fangs glistening, and Eden landing on one knee, her blade pulled back, back arched low, ready to meet him.

With his brown and black furs shagging with every step closer, the wild animal examined the being before it, tucked its head low to lock his yellow, untamed eyes with hers. His snout curled upward into a deadly grin wrinkling the fur along his snout, parading his razor sharp teeth and pink gums, his eyes glowing ungraciously dark. Eden didn't wince or pull back. I held my breath and remained watching readily, loaded to spring forward at whatever may come next.

Manny Floresca

Then, I noticed something in the way she stared at the wolf and it encouraged my muscles to relax and the tightness in my stomach to ease. There was something that they shared that I couldn't quite grasp. Something, perhaps, only the wild could hold. It was a look of familiarity that led me to hesitate. Though I remained cautious of their interaction, I couldn't stop from observing the strange yet beautiful exchange occurring between them. They stared into one another for what seemed like minutes. I watched in awe as the wolf inched closer, its snout easing towards her face. She was so still, I knew she had to be holding her breath. The wolf tested his limits until they were nose to nose.

This is it, I thought. My breaths quickened. My heart pounded with thoughts of the aftermath of the wolf's attack. The grip on my gun held tight and slipping with perspiration. I rose to my knees and prepared to pounce from my spot.

Then, I winced at the melodic notes of her laughter echoing as the wolf tickled her all over her face with canine kisses. Relieved, I exhaled a heavy gulp of air I had been holding in.

Suddenly, they became aware of my presence. Their heads whipped upward in my direction. I whirled my body around quickly and slouched to the ground, just as they lifted their faces up to the boulder. I turned over on my stomach and peeked around to see her sun beaming pupils locked on what could be hiding behind the rock. The wolf's ears were perked up in curiosity too. I blew my cover.

"Damn," I whispered low.

She patted the wolf lightly on the head. It hopped back into the forest obediently and sped off. She didn't watch it go. Instead, she kept her eyes sealed in my direction. I fought myself quickly on the next action to take. I knew I couldn't think long. It would only take seconds for her to reach me. Would she confront me head on or come at me from another angle? Did she already know who lurked behind the smooth boulder that overlooked the river? Was she already planning to kill me instantly without a moment's thought?

She started my way. *Go for it.*

I turned and took off running knowing that she would soon be after me. I chanced it anyways running as hard as I could. After a good twenty seconds, it was my unsteady breathing and hard strides that I heard when I realized that it was *all* I was hearing. No light and dainty strokes coming from behind. No sideway glimpses at her whipping dark waves flowing through the trees. No sun glaring irises set on me like a predator.

I stopped and listened, looking through the trees in all directions. I didn't hear a single sound but the falling of leaves and my own heart beating. I knew it couldn't be possible that she wasn't chasing after me. She was a natural hunter, quick and swift. This wasn't like her. Paranoia gripped a hold of me as I recalled how sly and sneaky she could be. I knew I had to keep moving if I didn't want her to find me. I took a quick spin around to make sure all was clear. Just as I decided to take off again, I was pummeled to the ground.

We rolled around and all I could make out was her dark, curvy hair tossing and thrashing along the thin air. Finally, she pinned and straddled me down.

"Why were you following me?!" She yelled. I tried to speak but her small fingers were sharp around my throat. My words came out in a gargle that she couldn't understand.

Manny Floresca

"I knew someone was following me. Why did they send *you*!?" All I could manage to let escape from my lips was "Eden." She looked down at me coldly, never allowing a single emotion to reach the surface.

"I'll ease up on your throat, but don't think that I won't strangle you if I have to," she said, her yellow eyes dilated. She kept her hands around my throat but eased on the pressure. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly, savoring what little air she allowed me. She gave my neck a little pinch to remind me that she was waiting for an answer.

"Listen to me, Eden" I said.

"Why were you following me for so long?" She interrupted. "Did you think I didn't know? I can smell the sweet cakes on you all the way from the Tracing Tower. Why didn't you just come out about it?"

Why *was* I following her? Why didn't I just capture her like a normal soldier would? Why did I follow her every day years ago knowing she wanted nothing to do with me? Those were questions that I had yet to answer for myself. After a moment of hesitation she sharpened her grip around my throat again.

"I'm waiting." She said, her eyes wandering.

"You would've killed me on the spot," I choked.

She hardly acknowledged my comment, too busy glancing about, ready for other soldiers to come through the woods and surround us.

"It's just me, Eden," I said.

"Lies," she said.

"It's true. It's just us. No one else is here." I said.

I watched her turn her head in every direction, a stern, uneasy look on her face.

"How can I trust that?" She asked me, her little brows furrowed.

"Don't," I answered. "Listen for yourself." She looked at me suspiciously, but listening closely all the while.

"Eden, we have a lot to talk about." I said.

"We don't have anything to talk about." She shot back.

"I have to get you to the city."

"That's not going to happen," she said firmly.

I looked down at my wrist watch and the time was coming that the aircraft would be here soon to pick us up. Somehow I had to get it through her thick skull that she had no other choice but to join everyone else in the city. Our days in the village, at peace with our families and our simple lives were over.

Manny Floresca

I observed our positions. She had one hand pinning my right wrist on the ground, above my head. My other wrist was pinned under her knee. Her other hand was cupped around my throat. I pondered the techniques I learned in training to get out of these positions.

I slowly started to slide my right hand down to my side and began to bring my knees up into her back. I was throwing her balance off, leaning her body into mine which wasn't comforting for her considering she never let anyone close enough to invade her personal space. She refused to let my wrist free for fear of what I would do once it was released, so I continued to force my wrist down, her hand still gripping it tightly.

Our foreheads met. Her chest was forced to lean into mine, pressing her breast against me. I tried to keep composure while her eyes searched frantically for a solution. My knees drilled into her back giving her a boost forward. I brought her close enough for my hands to grip under her knees and I tossed her weightless body over me. She tumbled, landed lightly, flung her hair from her face and shot back up ready to attack again, her blade sparkling in the sun.

"Relax," I warned putting my hands up in a surrender-like pose. Although, I had a handgun and a few knives strapped to me too, I originally wanted to avoid using any of them during this mission. Suddenly, I was rethinking that decision.

"What are you doing? Take out your blade and fight like the soldier you wanted to be, Canon." She challenged.

"You must come with me, Eden. This isn't safe," I said slyly pressing the small button on the side of my wrist watch, signaling the aircraft to come sooner than expected.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," she said pointing her blade in my direction.

"The Tracing Tower doesn't feel comfortable with you roaming the woods. It could upset habitats, endanger the animals; ruin their natural ways of going about things. They're trying to preserve them. Do you understand?"

She managed a sarcastic grin, "Look around you, Cannon. Listen. Do you hear the birds? There are hardly any left because you came and burned the trees, the land, everything. And now they want to preserve what little is left? They should've tried doing that a long time ago."

"Eden, this isn't the way for you to live."

"This is your home, Canon, and you talk about it as if it was some foreign place! You're a traitor and a coward and I hate you. I've hated you since the day you left to fight for the Tracing Tower and I'll hate you forever for what you've done to our village, to our family and friends."

I watched her bite down on her lower lip, a gesture she did very often when we were children to keep from crying.

"I won't go," she repeated.

"You have to."

Manny Floresca

“No I don’t,” she said angrily. “I escaped them at the village and they haven’t been able to find me for months, until now. I’ll escape again and again, for however long I need to until I live in peace again. The Tracing Tower won’t change that for me. *You* won’t change that for me.”

“They’ve already changed everything, and not just for you, for everybody. There’s not an inch of these woods that they don’t have covered. How long do you think you can hide out here? How do you think they knew where to send me to find you? And what about your family? They’re waiting in the City to hear from you.” I suddenly realized that I was getting more worked up than I expected I would.

“You know what they’ll do to me if I go back. I’ve done too much.” She said softly.

The possibilities were endless. The Tracing Tower could find place for her anywhere in the City if they chose to keep her alive. She was very valuable to them, unique in their eyes. It’s never taken the Tracing Tower this long to hunt someone down. All the Tracing Tower wanted was to move the villagers into the City where they would be provided with three meals a day and decent living conditions. Most villagers didn’t try to fight or hesitate what was happening though none of them agreed with The Movement. Some were just plain excited to finally make it to the City even if it did mean losing everything they’ve ever known. There were a few elders who were difficult to maneuver and were skeptical of the Tracing Tower’s purpose of all of this. As for Eden, she managed to escape every trap we set. She managed to get away in the village and anywhere else we tried to find her off guard. She killed almost every soldier we sent out to find her. None of them knew how she worked, the way she moved or how she hunted. Not like I did.

“They’ll make me some kind of slave girl, put me in a fighting ring, feed me to the bears and the wild dogs just for entertainment or worst, they’ll marry me off,” she continued her voice just a whisper.

How could I tell her the truth now? How could I tell her that her fate had already been decided and that it was by me that it had been?

“I won’t let that happen,” I said nervously. She managed a light laugh.

“We’re not children anymore, Cannon. We’re not even on the same side. I can hardly believe a word that comes out of your mouth. Do you really think I would go to the City with you believing you would keep me safe?”

“Yes,” I whispered, too low for her to hear.

“Why did they send *you*?” She asked.

My stomach sank and the moment I had been dreading this entire time had finally arrived. I had to tell her the truth and however she reacted, I would have to find a way to deal with later. The aircraft would be here soon and going back to the City without Eden wasn’t a possibility.

“Soldiers, who complete their training and missions with excellence, are honored. You know that every soldier gets his pick of a woman after graduation.” I said very soldier-like.

The aircraft assembled above us. I couldn’t tell if it was from the air blowing from the aircraft or the realization of what this meant for Eden that made her eyes water now, but she didn’t try to run and on the inside, I was thanking her for that. Especially now that the aircraft was here, I didn’t want my fellow mates to see just how easily she could show me up. They released the ladder and Bennett came climbing down for assistance.

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“You want me to take it from here?” He asked grabbing hold of Eden’s arm.

She immediately snatched it away from him giving him a look of warning, her yellow eyes big and round. Bennett looked at her startled and before he could react I replied, “I can take it from here. She’s a little nervous but she’s fine.” He still looked bothered by her glare when he climbed back up the latter and into the aircraft.

Since Eden was a little girl she had a very unique, light shade of green in her eyes. At night they give off a sort of glow. All the soldiers hear rumors about them. It’s been said that her eyes have been the last sight for many men. I’m the only soldier who has seen them and lived to tell it. I only have our past to thank for that. At first glance, they are almost frightening, like those of a hungry lioness and though the hunger never seems to fade, fright is no sooner replaced by spirit and beauty.

When he was clear out of range I pulled a silent and stiff Eden close and was surprised when she didn’t resist. The sight of her small, pale shoulders underneath my big, brown, calloused palms sent a rush of mixed emotions all through me. I couldn’t believe she wasn’t resisting.

“Eden, I’m sorry for everything, our childhood, our families, and our friendship. I only joined the troops because it was my chance to get into the city. I didn’t know that it would come to this. I want to make things right.”

It wasn’t easy pouring it all out there like that but I hoped that it would be worth it in the end if I could just get her onto the aircraft. I looked to her for some kind of sign of whatever it was that she was feeling, but she just stared into space, numbly, never looking directly at me.

“This is the only way I know how to do it,” I said finally pressing my forehead to hers.

Her face was hard and motionless and I could tell that the facts of it all had settled in. She put the pieces of the puzzle together, for the most part at least. She understood that I was taking her against her will back to the Tracing Tower, into the city where her family and friends were, where she would be able to see them more often than she could if she had stayed in the forest of Mooredom. She also knew that we would probably have to get married and that as long as she lived in the city, her life would forever be in danger.

After graduation, it was custom for a soldier to pick a woman, or many if he chooses, to claim as his own, to live in his quarters, to do whatever he pleases with. After completing a very difficult mission successfully and under my command, I was granted any one thing after graduation. “If it be women, so be it. If it be something else, let that be too. The choice is yours,” my commander had told me. So I asked for Eden and Eden only. When he heard those words, he looked confused and suspicious but didn’t ask any questions. Perhaps, he thought that maybe I had a soft spot for her, after all the volunteer work I did to help find her. Or perhaps, he thought that since we were technically close enemies, that I had some cruel thing in mind of making her marry me. At first, I didn’t think he would grant me this because she was considered an enemy and a threat to the Tracing Tower after her escapes, her noncooperation and the deaths of the soldiers she had killed. The fact that he did allow me this so easily, made me apprehensive. When my commander granted me Eden, did he do it because I deserved it? Or did he make this exception because he wanted Eden for himself? Anyone who brought her in dead or alive would be showered in honor from the Tracing Tower. Either way, he wished me good luck and provided me with a good team and an aircraft. My concern now was how he would react once we returned and he looks into those eyes for himself.

I looked to the aircraft where Bennett signaled us to climb up. I held out my hand for her to take and anger washed over her soft face. Her lips pursed together. She snatched the knife from her hip and started my way.

Manny Floresca

I backed quickly into a tree. She pinned me against the chest, her blade at my Adam's apple. She lifted her hard face to mine. For the first time since we were children, I looked right into her luminous eyes and realized the pain I had caused her.

Her chin quivered and her eyes were watering. I wanted to hold her. I wanted to shower her with comforting words, but how could I when I was the cause of so much of her pain? At least this way, I would know that she was getting fed properly, and that she was healthy. I would constantly look after her and protect her. No matter how devastated she was now, somewhere down the road, this would be good for her.

A tear streamed down her pale cheek fast and soft. She wiped it away quickly with the back of her palm and hardened her face again. I shifted my eyes towards the aircraft and saw that Bennett had braced himself but was unsure of coming back down to help. I lifted a finger signaling him to stay where he was. I watched her jaw muscles flex as she struggled to keep her face firm and in control. She didn't say anything. She just kept the blade of her knife steady at my throat and contemplated on killing me. I let her have her moment, not sure if she would end up slicing my throat or not. I owed her that much.

Suddenly, her face turned pale, her knees began to shake. When the hardness in her face disappeared and her tears trickled down unconsciously, I knew that she was in bad shape. She dropped her knife and a look of fear washed over her. She backed away and lifted her hands to her face and saw that they were trembling. I pushed off of the tree and caught her right before she hit the ground.

"I got you. I got you, Eden," I soothed, but she was already passed out. She was very thin now and with all the stress I had put on her it was no surprise that her body was over exhausted. She needed sleep and food and water. I signaled Bennett to let down the hammock and we pulled her up.

In the aircraft, I laid her out on a small couch and began retrieving any weapons she had hidden on herself. I noticed pink scars she won all up and down her hands and arms from living in the forest. I wondered about the scar she wore on her neck, near her ear. Was it still there, revealing the proof that we were once so close?

When we were thirteen, we ventured out to the forest in the night. We only wanted to explore when a wolf came lurking out of the darkness. Her glowing eyes had caught his. Thinking that she was another animal, he gripped her by the neck with his teeth. I shot the wolf down with my arrows as soon as the tip of his teeth broke her skin. Then, I stabbed him over and over again with my knife. She screamed for me to stop killing him, as blood was streaming down her own neckline.

As she slept peacefully, I took the chance to remember the incident. I lifted her hair and recognized the dark scar. I began to stroke it lightly when Bennett piped up, "What exactly are you planning to do with her?" He asked.

"Keep her safe." I said.

"Good luck with that," he said. "Almost all of Mooredom wants her dead except for some of those village monkeys."

I didn't let what Bennett say upset me. The whole way to the Tracing Tower I stroked her hair and thought to design a plan. Would she ever cooperate? How could I keep her safe if she was constantly trying to escape? Could I really go so far to get married? Whatever the plan, it would have to be put to work immediately. Not only would I be up against Eden but almost every person we were getting ready to encounter was going to try to kill her, if not

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for the trouble she's caused, then for the reward they would get. As soon as I stepped off of the aircraft with her hand in mine, a war would begin. And I still didn't know for sure whose side I was on.

David Goff

Fleeting

Twilight dawns on out last day.
Serene blue and cool dewed air,
the prickle of crisp grass as we
roll down hills of happiness and future
memories.

Birth

I'd saved myself for this day.

I'd planned it out

years ago.

That sunrise would bring with it
something new.

Something I knew had to be done
since I was a child.

Spring was still young

and as I walked to the door,

my mother warned me,

"You'd better take a jacket, it's
quite cool outside today."

So, I grabbed something light,

just to appease her, and smiled,

giving her a hug and a warm

"I love you" on my way out.

The wind stirred still-fallen leaves

into tumbling piles that moved

randomly, beautifully across the ground.

Remnants of a season long-passed

David Goff

that would soon be swept away for another
summer.

Young grass filled the fields,
supple with morning dew that
softly glinted with the warm
sunlight.

Light, calming green filled the
space, spreading the confirmation
of new life.

Pure and clean it spread.

Over the small hill, water flowed a piacere.
Clear and cool, fluidly conforming to large
stones and soft curves of land.
Unstained crystal that carries with it
love and sustenance.

Large peaks in the distance, shadowed by
the sun and topped with snow regarded
the landscape from their vantage, and
communicated with hardy arbor, reluctantly
waking from their cold sleep, pushing
out new leaves.

A smooth bend in the river, calm and
secure.

The place had picked me long ago, and
told me that it was where I would
come on that day.

I discarded the jacket, along with all
other items of clothing that cocooned me.
I felt the radiating sunlight, and the warmth
it cast on me and everything else.

It embraced me, promised me that this
was right, that this was all in loge.
Love for everything living.

I knelt before the water, and I
gave in.

I let myself go and whispered
a small prayer I'd uttered so many
times in my life.

"I love you."

To my mother, to the sun, the wind, the grass, the earth, the water, the leaves and the cells within
everything.

And the river took me,

David Goff

pulled me into its heart with
maternal care. I felt nothing but
freedom.

Freedom and oneness.

I never woke up again.

I spent no more days at school.

I never spoke to my mother again.

But I did not die that day.

I was born.

Destiny and Distance

Destiny

Supposedly, we're meant for each other.

Or at least, that's what my mind

tells me.

Deep down, there's always something.

There will always be something.

Until the day I die, the universe will

never shut up.

Constantly reminding me about

our failed destiny.

Distance

What is distance?

Is it the empty space between two

points on a map, waiting to be filled

with a path connecting?

Or is it something more?

If I were to get on a plane right now,

and fly to where you are,

would I be able to connect with you?

Or would there still be miles between us?

David Goff

Draw

There's something I always do
in my room alone.

Nobody's watching and I can
let my guard down,
even for just a little bit.

And I can be myself, and
I can do what I want.

I draw you.

In my mind, I draw your
outline, bring it to life.

Alone with me, you're real,
whole. I draw you to me.

And you're right.

But when I leave the cover
of my silence, leave my
room and face the real you,
it's not right. Something just
isn't the same as I'd always
thought it would be.

Breathe

Simple.

Trivial.

Thoughtless.

Short.

A single breath.

A current of air exhaled
carries gas softly across space,
through sparse seas of
resistance.

Absorbed in seconds through
green pores, thirsty for
life.

A single breath.

Everything lives.

David Goff

Intoxication

You always wondered what it was like.

How it would feel to really be in love

with someone.

Just like your parents.

So you went searching and found

someone.

Someone to talk to, smile with, and spend time with.

Someone you say you love.

It makes me curious:

what is love to you?

Endless back and forth, "love" one minute, not the next.

Breakups and makeups, again and again.

Do you even know what you want?

You're a perfectionist for sure, and

love surely isn't perfect, but you're

poisoning yourself.

Intoxicated with feeling and false pretenses.

Веревки

I own you.

You don't breathe, smile, dream

without my permission.

Without me, you don't exist.

You're merely energy caught in

the vast universe, making nothing.

Meaning nothing.

Until I reflect onto you,

you are not.

That's why you fascinate me so much.

When I get my hands on you,

anything is possible.

I live in a world of my making,

and you can't do anything.

Ты мой.

David Goff

Líf

I stepped out, over the thin, messy rift where the ice and earth met, leaning low to make myself more stable on the glassy surface. The cold from the crystalline ice quickly spread through my soles, and now the only part of me that was somewhat warm before was cold like the rest of my body. But the sun was shining, and the radiation felt warm and comforting on my face, felt like the sweetest caress from the warmest lover on my skin. That's what kept me going, that's how, every day, I made it out across the glacier to our spot.

* * *

I pulled my umbrella out from its place in the corner, leaning next to the coat rack. The rain had let down a bit since earlier, but it was still enough for me to want some kind of shelter while walking to the hotel. I pushed open the door and popped open the umbrella, heading out into the wet.

I decided to take the low road. It takes longer, but there are more flowers and things to pick up there to sell. For some reason, the people who come to the bazaar from the city really like flowers and herbs and things like that, things from the ground. Sometimes it makes me wonder if they don't have them there.

I spotted a bright pink flower, and picked it gently. I didn't want to damage it, since I was going to give it to Æsja. These were her favorites, so whenever I saw one I always had to pick it for her. She was always so happy to receive anything I gave her. She never showed the slightest bit of disappointment in a gift, even such a humble one as this. That's one of the reasons I like her so much: she's always so kind. Her heart is warm and open to anyone, and she always smiles so sweetly.

I passed the town's small shop on the way, and decided to sell a few small things I'd picked up. It was nothing big, but I could buy a few bags of fertilizer for my plants with what I made. I smiled at Jón.

"Takk. Sjáumst."

He nodded, busy counting the money I'd just given him. "Jæja þá."

I walked back out into the rain, towards the hotel and Æsja.

* * *

The path was a long one, extending all the way across the glacier. Towards the end, near my destination, it began to get dangerous. Ever since two summers ago, the glacier had slowly begun to change. It was moving out faster than normal, causing the top to stretch and crack and form many crevices, some of them three times my height in depth. The ice would groan as if in pain, and I could hear water rushing into the sea far off in the distance. I had to be careful as I walked across the surface, watching closely for sudden changes.

My father had said something that summer. I overheard him talking with Æsja's uncle about how things were changing. Nature, he said, was getting angry. Angry at the people in the city who control the huge houses that blow smoke. Nature doesn't like those houses, they hurt it, he'd told me that night. And the city people keep building more and more and cutting down trees to make room for them. They're sending poison into the air and it's making

Nature sick. And it's getting a fever.

Those were the things he told me, and I believed him.

That winter, it didn't snow. The plants' roots didn't freeze, and they were cranky and irritable when they woke up too early because it had gotten so warm so soon in the spring. Then the glacier started getting sad, it was running away into the sea. It didn't like us anymore.

I took a minute to sit down and rest, and talked to the glacier. I wanted to know if it was feeling any better.

"Glæsér, hwær æoþu so?"

It said nothing back. Was it angry at me, too? But I loved it, I didn't want it to leave us.

"Ég æo þig, Glæsér."

I held my hand on its surface for a second, leaving a small smudge when I stood. I turned back in my initial direction and began to walk again.

* * *

After what seemed like forever in the rain, I arrived at the hotel where Æsja lived and worked. It had started pouring soon after I'd left Jón's shop, and since I was already halfway there and so far away from home, there wasn't much to do except keep going. My pants had gotten soaked, but everything else was dry.

"Velkomin!" I heard Æsja say, her voice full of cheer.

"Hæ." I said calmly, closing my umbrella and placing it next to the door.

"Ah, Æþos." she smiled. "Langt síðan við höfum sést." *Long time no see.*

"Hah, jú. Síðan í gær." *Only since yesterday.* I held the flower behind my back, along with a small box. Æsja looked at me, and a childlike grin spread across her lips. Without saying anything, she tried to grab what I was holding, as if she could get at it quicker than I could react.

I jerked my arms away from her, backing up so she still couldn't see what I had.

"Næ! Þú munt spilla óvart!" *You'll spoil the surprise.* I couldn't help smiling back at her, though. When she was happy, I was, too. We were best friends, after all. I suggested we go to her room as not to disturb the guests in the lobby. Immediately after we'd shut the door, she turned to me quickly.

"Jæja. Hvað er það þá?" *What is it?* she asked, still excited but no longer trying to grab at me. Her eyes were gleaming with curiosity. She didn't get surprises much.

"Til hamingju með afmælið." *Happy Birthday.* I pulled my hands from behind my back and placed the box and the flower gently in hers.

She smiled widely and took a seat on the edge of her bed, removing a withering flower from the vase on her nightstand and replacing it with the one I'd just given her. Then, softly, she pulled the ribbon that held the box shut

David Goff

out of its knot, casting it to her side. She looked up at me for a short second, then lifted the two halves of the box apart, exposing five perfectly round, russet-colored cookies in a neat row.

"Ah, kex! Takk fyrir, Æpos!" She said, immediately tasting one and nodding. "Mm, og þeir eru svo gott!"

I laughed, a small breathy sound, in response as I took a seat next to her.

* * *

I hadn't gotten very much farther when I heard him.

Grunting and moans of pain signaled me towards a new crevice in the glacier, one that wasn't there just a week ago. And at the bottom was Kujit.

One of his legs had been bent at an unnatural angle from the fall, and around it was a pool of blood, half-melting the ice with its warmth and half-freezing from the cold. It looked like his bone had shattered and pierced through the skin and maybe an artery. He was having trouble breathing, maybe one of his ribs had pierced a lung. There was a spatter of blood around his mouth; he was coughing.

At first, I didn't know what to do. He hadn't seen me. I just stood there motionless, thoughtless, numb to everything. What was happening?

And then a million thoughts started pouring in. How'd it happen? Clearly, he hadn't seen the crevice, or he'd slipped on the ice. And the drop was sudden, so he didn't have time to try and stick a better landing. But what should I do now? We were so far away from town, that he would surely die before I came back with help. And there was no way I could fix him. He was going to die.

I wasn't sure if I should talk to him or make my presence known. He still hadn't noticed me. By now, he wasn't groaning anymore, and his breathing had become slower, more clearly labored. He was close to it, I could tell. So I decided not to do anything but wait, silent tears streaming down my cheeks.

I wanted to do anything but stand there. I wanted to run around and scream, jump down with him and hold him and make him feel comfortable, scream at him for being stupid, scream at the glacier for hurting him, I wanted to scream. But I forced myself quiet, because I wanted him to go in peace.

Now that I look back on it, I'm glad. I think it would have only made it harder for him if he knew I saw, if I was there with him. And I'd like to think I know what he would have said to me. He would have said that nature decided to take him. That it knew it was time for him to go because it controls those kinds of things. That he was glad to finally be one with the air and water and soil again, and the plants and the animals. He would have said he was finally going home.

And I would have believed him.

* * *

It was Sunday, bazaar day. I'd set up my stand early that morning and decided to relax in the sunshine until people started coming. It was such a nice day, the breeze blowing lazily, the tall grasses dancing to its soft music. Spring was in full bloom, bearing its wonders for all to see.

Soon after opening my stand, a child and his mother neared, looking as if they were just wandering around, seeing what they could spend their city money on today. The boy noticed one of the things I had out for sale, and his eyes lit up suddenly.

"Mommy, mommy, look what he has!" he said in his clipped accent.

She looked and smiled softly down at her son. "Would you like it?" she asked simply.

"I've never seen one of those before! What is it, mommy?"

"Oh, it's just a spider lily. We used to have them everywhere. I guess I haven't seen one in a while, though."

"I want it! I want it!" the boy cheered.

"Okay, okay, but we'll have to keep it in the house in a pot. There's no good soil outside."

So, she gave me money for the simple flower, one common around here. I was kind of curious about what she'd said, about the soil. Was there really no good soil there? What had they done to ruin the earth like that? *How could they* have done such a thing? It didn't make sense at first.

But then I remembered what my father had told me about the houses with smoke and cutting down trees. And I understood even better what was happening in the city.

They killed their part of Nature.

* * *

After I gave Æsja her gift and sat down next to her, I told her that I was going to go. That I wanted to feel like I was part of something more important than my life here in town. That I wanted to do something bigger, make change for the better. But really, I didn't want to go at all. I didn't want to leave this town that I loved so much. I felt like I *had* to. I *needed* to go tell those people about what was happening, what they were doing wrong. To show them the greatness that can happen when you work *together* with nature, instead of dominating it, shoving it down. But I didn't tell her that. I put on a halfhearted smile and hugged her.

She didn't cry, like I thought she would have. She understood, I think. Everything I didn't want to tell her, she could see. She already knew. So, after spending the day celebrating with her, I went home to get one last night's sleep in my own bed, at least for a while.

In the morning I would say goodbye to everyone in town. Hopefully it would be sunny and nice.

* * *

I didn't want to tell my father, but I knew I had to. He'd be angry, but soon everyone would wonder where Kujt was. Nobody but us knew about our spot across the glacier.

I headed home slowly. I'd stopped crying a while ago. I don't think I had the ability to after a while. Nightfall was still a few hours away, and I needed to compose myself before getting back to town. My father was a "men don't cry" type.

David Goff

It took an hour to get home. My legs were tired and all I wanted to do was go in my room and lay there in the dark for a while, thinking. But I knew I couldn't.

I didn't hesitate after opening the door. My mother and father were both in kitchen preparing tonight's supper. I just said it like it was something normal to say when you get home after a day out.

"Kuijt æo røtt." I stood still in the doorway, waiting for their reaction.

It wasn't what I'd expected. My mother immediately dropped what she was doing to hug me. And though I tried my hardest, I began to cry again. Harsh sobs and snot and tears into my mother's shoulder. And my dad didn't say anything about it.

As far as we knew, Kuijt's only family was his mother who lived alone with him in a small house on the edge of town. And neither of them really talked to anyone. Sometimes Kuijt's mother would come over for dinner. She was a kind woman with warm skin just like his, who was soft-spoken but had a wonderful laugh and a love for telling stories. I could see so much of her in Kuijt.

After we'd told her and some of the other people in town, a few of the men went out to the glacier to retrieve his body and we held a small funeral. His mother was heartbroken, but optimistic, just like me.

We both knew that this was where he wanted to be, in the ground, one with the earth and plants.

* * *

My father never said anything about the glacier, and I never told anyone about my meetings there with Kuijt. Sometimes I would walk back, to revisit the times when Kuijt and I spent time with it. I didn't want it to think I'd forgotten about it, and I wanted it to know I still loved it.

That winter, the glacier didn't freeze hard. The large crack never closed. Though it's probably just a fantasy, I like to think that it's sort of a reminder, a memorial for Kuijt. To show him that it would never forget him. I'd hold my hand to the hard, cold surface and say the same thing I said that day.

"Glæsér, ég æo þig."

* * *

I think about it, and I wonder if there's any kind of meaning. What's out there for us, and why is that such a hard question to ask, anyways? Faith, emotion, art, logic. All of these things point to something bigger, something beyond what we can think to comprehend. And people try so hard, they think themselves senseless over it.

I've thought, too, and I think I've come to a conclusion that solves everything, for me anyways:

Stop thinking.

Take a step outside, away from the triviality of your tasks. Open your eyes, listen, and breathe. Feel the sun on your skin.

Then, hopefully, you'll know the answer to everything.

Geminids

Large, soft flakes of snow fall on our faces as we stand in the middle of nowhere. It's thick on the ground, covering the whole field in a blanket of white, seeming to absorb all of the sound around us, surrounding us with that kind of quiet that only happens in the winter, the cold, dead, empty silence that makes your head feel weird. Cold is seeping in from everywhere, this is the lowest the temperature's been in a few years, maybe for as long as we can remember. It's darker than night, the moon is waning, and it's almost gone. The blue of the sky glows faintly under the silvery light it casts.

We came all this way to watch the meteor shower. This spot is the darkest place we know, on the outskirts of town, where there are no lights around and no cars driving by, no people. Which is making it even colder.

We sit side by side on the opened bed of the truck, our heads turned skyward to steal glimpses of the bright stars that fall from the wide, curved ceiling that separates us from everything else.

I look over at you, your crimson eyes shining coolly, reflecting off the snow. They're the warmest color I know, the warmest gaze I've ever felt, but now they're iced over. And your smile, now replaced with a flat line, is so alive in my memory. The way your eyes glint and just a bit of your teeth show. It's in hibernation for a while, inside my mind, and I can feel it warming me from my core.

You point a star out, one that's shooting brightly across the horizon, and you gaze in awe for a second, before lowering your head and closing your eyes calmly, your brow softening, forehead relaxing. You're so complacent in this moment. And so am I. I love it here, out in this cold, dark, snow-covered waste, because I'm with you. And you give it warmth that nobody else could ever know.

"I miss it there, home." I say softly, not even really meaning to say it out loud. I can *feel* it like crazy, but this is all I can put into words. I think you understand, though, at least a little bit. And that's all I ask of you. I gaze up again, noticing a small line of white against the dark sky, disappearing as fast as it had come.

You don't say anything, you don't need to. I can feel you here, and you can feel me. And we don't need words. They're just something invented. Being near each other is enough expression. Existing together in this moment is enough to know how we feel.

You look away from the dark above, towards the white underneath us. And something changes in your eyes. For a while you gaze uninterrupted at the ground, as if analyzing something there. Then you look back up to me.

"C'mere." You grab me by the waist, pulling me to the ground with you. We lay here, sunken in the snow, still looking at the sky.

You move your eyes to mine. "You can go back, you know."

And I know it's true. It's too easy, and there's nothing to lose.

David Goff

But I can't just do that. I still need time to think, time to make sure what I want is right. I'm still not sure I know, even now.

"Yeah, I know." I smile halfheartedly and look back towards the sky.

The last star of the night, one that's long and bright and full of color trails slowly across the sky, and then burns out.

The Dream

Once there lived a boy who lived all alone on a mountain in a faraway land. He used to look down from the mountain and say, "Am I really all alone on this mountain?" So one day he packed up his things and started his way down the mountain. He faced many hardships and trials, but he eventually made it all the way down the mountain. At the bottom of the mountain he found a small village. He looked and looked, but couldn't find anyone in the village not even a picture of the people that had lived there. So, he sat down and began to weep.

"Why am I all alone in this world?", he screamed. Suddenly four lights appeared one pink, one blue, one yellow and one green. "Why are you crying?", asked the blue light. "Why am I crying? Why am I crying? Look around me I'm all alone!", he shouted. "No you're not.", said the yellow light. "Yeah you have us!", replied the green light. "I have you guys? Where have you been during the times when I was all alone? Where have you been during the times I needed someone to talk to? Where have you been during the times when I needed help to get through the day because of my sorrow? Where were you guys?", he shouted standing up. "We were always here.", said the pink light. "Calling out your name." replied the yellow light. "But you ignored us." said the green light. "And closed us off.", said the blue light. "You closed the doors to your heart and wouldn't let us in. We haven't left you side not even once. We care for you.", said the pink light glowing brighter than the others. "How can that be?", asked the boy. "Because of that.", said the yellow light. The boy turned around and saw a hulking mass of black cloud standing over him. He stumbled back and yelled, "What is that thing?" "That is the darkness in your heart", said the green light. "Your sorrow, regret, and all your negative feelings are in there" said the blue light. "If you don't hurry it will swallow you!" yelled the pink light. The black cloud began to quickly engulf the boy. "Help!", he screamed. "Grab our hands" said all the lights. He turned quickly to see that the glowing lights had now taken a human form. "I can't.", said the boy. "Yes you can!", replied the lights. The black cloud had engulfed all his body except his face and arm. The boy reached out with all his might and grabbed the hands of the light. The darkness disappeared and the boy was surrounded by white light. "Where am I?", the boy asked. "Your about the wake up", replied the pink light. "Wake up?", asked the boy. "Yes, you've been asleep for a long time.", replied the blue light. "Asleep?", asked the boy. "Yes, you've been sleeping for a long time, but now it's time to wake up" said the yellow light. "There are people waiting for you" said the pink light. "Wait I can't leave I just met you all.", said the boy. "But you must" said the green light. "Now go" said all the lights. "Wait! When can I see you guys again?" yelled the boy disappearing. "Don't worry you'll see us soon", said the green light smiling.

The boy awoke to find himself in a hospital bed. "Wait. What happened to me?", he asked out loud. A nurse nearby responded saying, "Don't you remember you were in a car accident? You just need to rest now ok. Just like your friends. They have been with you all night and are sleeping in the corner over there", pointing to them. In the corner all piled up slept four children around his age. One twitched and woke up. "Hey guys wake up! He's awake!" one of them shouted. They all woke up and ran to him bedside. "Hey dude are you ok?", one asked. "Yeah you hit you head pretty hard", another one asked. Thousands of questions came his way. The boy's head started to spin, but one question stopped the spinning. "Did you have a nice dream?" asked one of the four. The boy smiled and replied "Yes."

A. Hofflinger

A Thought

As plain as grey days, if love should feel this way, what should I do if food shall taste the same way? Sound from background and when spoke too, faint fading away, then it is all the same. If not to hear, speak and see then why think? Love free to just be. What puts to ease and to follow is silence that stills the mind. The moment what happens is time lapses. It goes without effort, say not, speak of, it's yours, forsake none, nive to life (water to wet). Centered middle grounded, no attraction, how long will it last, too much or not enough of not to question the answer no importance. Moments are breath that life is from.

Comfortable silence what did you hear taste smell touch or see what was used all/some/none? Did you breathe or was it breathless? Is the soul what was singing? Use not your finger is a part of the whole. Think soft return for a soft moment. What is left? In sync see what is to be seen and unseen. Between these lines there is nothing. Nothing is everything the same is not a bore. What it is you seek the answers are there as before?

What It Would Have Been

He watched himself in the mirror. It was unfamiliar. His tail was gone, and it didn't show signs of growing back. And that bothered him a lot. It wasn't the first time; someone had cut it off when he was a boy because they thought he would turn from a boy into a devil if they left it there. It left him feeling weak for a while but it eventually grew back and he forgot it was ever missing.

Then it was cut off again during a fight. It was terrible timing because someone cut it off after he had gained notoriety as "the Godslayer", and a large price had been put on his head. Still, it grew back again, and while he retained his unorthodox nickname, his reputation was eventually cleared.

But now, after only recently growing back, it was gone again. He sighed. There was nothing he could do except wait. It would either grow back or it wouldn't. His only other recourse was to check in on his wayward brethren. But he very much doubted they would wait to explain the re-growth rate of their tails before shunning him back to humanity.

"I heard you lost it again."

He turned. That coy voice was not hard to place. It made him reluctant to look back, but at the same time he couldn't resist. It was too painfully familiar.

"Someone told me you were in town," he said. She was smiling with her arms folded. His cheeks burned.

"You know my work takes me places," she replied, holding her arms out and shrugging. She kept smiling as she moved closer to him.

"Someone told me so I could *avoid* you."

"Don't be like that," she pouted playfully. She sounded patronizing. She slid her arms around his neck as she came closer, leaning her lips in to his face as her smile returned.

He edged back uneasy and stiff. He didn't blink as he watched her come closer.

She opened her eyes, frowning.

"What?" she looked hurt, but he knew better than to believe she was. She was close and he felt his resolve soften. She looked pretty and terrible and it pained him make eye contact but he did. He stared at her eyes and knew he felt good and knew he hated it. It was futile. She was this close and he felt embarrassed as he touched her.

She smiled again, a knowing look in her eye. "You missed me."

"Sure."

"Oh, please. I can feel it."

"Sure." Denial was his only wall left.

"It's practically lifting me off the ground, Marr."

He blushed intensely. She said his name and that familiar hurt and warmth made him wince. He wished he could resist but she had that gift all women have. They all have it but only a few really know its potency and fully utilize it. They know men are curious and desiring and they ride those emotions so skillfully, if they know how. It's a dangerous knowledge, more dark than the worst sorcery. Even dark as it is, it feels good and is right, at times.

At last he held her back. Sweat coated his tired body. He rolled over, then climbed to his feet. As he stood he didn't look at her. He knew her eyes were following him, and they were too penetrating to look back at. He felt good and it made him feel ashamed and weak.

He walked back to the mirror. He stood in front of it and did so in a way that he wouldn't see her in its reflection. He just stared at himself and knew what he saw. But he didn't know who he saw. First his tail was gone and now he was doing what he promised himself he wouldn't. It was confounding, and he couldn't remember the last time so many feelings washed over him in such sudden succession.

Matthew Piscitello

"You really did miss me, huh?" Sraa said.

Marr didn't reply.

She sat up. "What is it?"

He stayed quiet, just staring at the mirror. He shifted slightly to look at the fuzzy stump that used to be his tail. He looked up and watched her brown locks slide down her shoulders as she climbed out of bed and walked up next to him.

She put her arms around him again and said, "I can help you grow it back if you want. It was always so cute."

Marr shook her away, stepping back. "Enough."

"What's wrong?"

"This." He wasn't sure what that meant. He was mad. He thought he was. It was hard to really know. His head felt dizzy and clumsy. She watched him, waiting. Her expression was unreadable. She was so pretty and calm and it was impossible to know what was going on when he was around her like this.

"I missed you, too," She said at last.

He didn't want to do this. It was a bad time to talk about it. It was never going to be a good time either. What happened was maddening and confounding and it was a part of his past. It was forever gone and cold and he wouldn't let it come back, for any reason.

The room was hot, even for how cold it was outside. It was stifling and he was still damp from sweating.

"You're mad." She said it more than asked it. "You're kind of cute when you are."

"I said enough." He meant it this time, and he was mad. "I don't want to play with you."

"What game?"

"Wanna tell me why you're here?" his patience was worn and the marks on his neck and shoulders were starting to sting and agitate him more. A part of him that was forever gone wanted answers he'd never found. And now they were right here.

"I missed you." Her smile was gone. Her lips were barely apart and her eyes were anxious. He smelled her on him, the berries and the trees and that strangely fresh airy aroma. It was arousing and paralyzing.

"What do you want, then?" Maybe she missed him, but not for the reasons anyone else might.

"Marr..." She looked down. She wanted to avoid it as much as he did, but only now that it was too late.

"*You found me.* You knew it would come to this."

"I know, I know. Look, Gabby told me you were in town and... well, I needed to see you."

"Why?"

"Don't do that!" She protested, "Don't interrogate me. You're treating me like I did something wrong and I don't appreciate it."

"Whatever could've given you *that* idea?"

"I thought you missed me too."

He was tired of this. She loved confrontation when she could be a spectator. Yet she was strangely absent whenever her presence was necessary to resolve anything.

"I thought we could catch up." She looked sincere and vulnerable.

"You do remember why we need to catch up at all." He wouldn't believe she had forgotten. There was no possible way.

"Stop it, Marr." Now she was mad. She bit her lower lip as she pointed a finger at him. "I didn't know it was this bad. I mean, yeah, I know what I did and I'm not proud. I swear, I didn't expect you to..."

"What was it to you then? A joke? Or a game?"

"It was... fun," She said, struggling to explain. "I had fun with you. We had fun together. Remember?"

He did. It was a lot of fun being around Sraa. She was animated and alive and always moving. She had dreams and desires and knew how to get what she wanted, and she taught Marr how to do all those things and be all those things. But they went against what he believed, and the longer he was away from her the more he realized how toxic she could be.

"If I'd known it would've hurt you this bad, I wouldn't have done it."

Matthew Piscitello

"You could have said something."

"Like what?"

"Bye Marr, it's been fun but I found someone better."

"Reed wasn't like that," She argued, "and he certainly wasn't better," she added reluctantly.

Her last remark hit Marr with a mix of emotions, none of which he could settle on. He was still upset but his forehead was less knotted.

"Besides... You have your duties as a Murai. I have mine as a druid." She sat down, at last overwhelmed by everything. Marr stood, unwilling to let his resolve collapse again. "It's a mess, Marr. I'm a mess. You're a mess."

"I'm not a mess. I have everything in order. You arrived unannounced and threw everything out of sorts. That's the only time I'm a mess."

"But you had fun." He knew she was trying to redirect. He didn't have what he wanted but he knew that was the best he could get. He wasn't unreasonable and he had been far more merciful to others who had done him far worse. In addition, his sword was too far away.

He turned back to the mirror. She sighed. "If it weren't for you and me, we might be together, Marr."

"We could be together in spite of that, Sraa."

"No, that's not right. I didn't teach you to hold onto what could be."

"No, you didn't. Someone else taught me not to." He had lost sight of that, and almost let it consume him. But he was a realist. He did not suffer melancholy at length. "I want what I want though."

"And what do you want?" She lay back.

"To know what it would have been."

"Didn't you just get done saying you don't think like that?"

"It could've been a disaster. Or, it could've been great."

"It probably would've been a disaster," She said, "But those can be fun." She was stroking the sheets with her finger.

"No way to know."

They were quiet for a while. Then Sraa spoke. "It would have been terrible, Marr. I hate to say it, too. You're a rare kind of person. I think that's why it happened the way it did. I don't expect anyone to... well, I don't plan for the long term, you know? It's always at a whim. I need that kind of freedom. Some women are like that. We just want what we want, too, and sometimes it's too much."

Marr didn't say anything.

"And it's not kind or good to anyone."

"You just need an exit plan."

"Pardon?"

"You want to know you can get out when it stops being easy."

"What do you mean?"

"When its good its good, and you love that part. I mean, who doesn't? But when you get caught up in something, you just escape it."

"Marr, what are you talking about?"

"You've probably never confronted anything in your life, have you? You've never had to come to terms with a single damn thing before, huh?"

She sat up, stunned.

He was facing her now. "It's easier to just put distance between it, and that's how you solve problems. Put them out of sight. And then, when you're faced with them again, you pretend they're not there."

She remained unmoving.

"You don't even realize it's a problem, do you?"

She was quiet until he turned around again. He was dressing when she finally said, "No, I want this, Marr. Something like this. Like last time."

He put on his boots.

Matthew Piscitello

"I can't help it, Marr."

"Neither can I."

"I can't. It's hard."

"And that's your problem," he said, turning to her for a moment. He turned back when she couldn't say a word.

Finally, she said, "and what's yours?"

He paused as he pulled his shirt over his head. "I forgive you."

She stared at him, puzzled. He put on his jacket.

"What happened between us wasn't... typical, Marr. Reed was out for himself, to the end. That's sort of what I've grown to expect. But it wasn't fair for you, to either of us."

"I know."

He waited a bit longer, looking at her as she sat there on the verge of something. But the moment passed and he forgot about it. He went over for his sword. He strapped it over his back and turned to see Sraa getting dressed as well, now.

"How long will you be gone?" She asked, pulling her hair out of the neck of her blouse.

"A bit. I have a few stops to make. Where will you go?"

"I had a little trouble following me but I think I got some distance. I'll stay here a few days, I think." She paused, looking over to him as she put her necklace on. "That is, if you want me to."

Marr looked back, thinking as he stared in her eyes. "That's fine."

"Really, I can go elsewhere. I don't want to make you feel worse."

"No, it's fine. You can even stay here if you need a room."

She walked over to him, putting her arms around his neck. She kissed him, then put her nose on his.

"You're a sweetheart."

"I know."

She let go and headed for the door. "I'll be back late. But I will be back."

Marr nodded, and she closed the door. He wondered if she was being honest as he met with some old acquaintances in town. He wondered as he made his way back to the room. As he closed the door and made his way to the mirror again, he wondered, not seeing the man with the knife creeping behind him.

Lots of Love

Rebecca loved Marty. Loved him like bees loved honey. She was obsessed. She went days thinking only of Marty. Marty and his cute haircut and his glowing smile. She loved the way his eyes squished at the ends and the way his whole face just lined up in perfect position, like there was a camera waiting for it somewhere in the bushes or up in the trees. To Rebecca, it was criminal that a paparazzi didn't follow Marty around.

He walked cool, his khakis fit him just right; didn't drag on the ground, weren't too high up his ankles. You barely saw the white socks he usually wears, the ones with gray heels and toes. Rebecca loved those socks a lot. She thought of sniffing them once when he wasn't looking, but decided that was a little too much, even for her. His shirts were always neat, and they always had a collar. Sometimes it was button up, sometimes he just rocked a polo. His biceps always manhandled the sleeves, whether he rolled them up or they were just naturally short. The veins on the underside of his forearm stuck out a lot too, the mark of a weightlifter. Well, he didn't do it professionally but he liked going to the gym.

Rebecca remembered the first time they met. It was at their gym. He was doing curls, she was on the treadmill. She remembered the way her loping strides across the contrived roads of the machine made her feel like a gazelle, leaping up and down, one set of joints propelling her back up while the other hung in the air, curled and poised, ready to snap out in front of her and catch the ground. Rebecca loved running. She especially loved running when Marty was around. He always stole a peek at her ass when he thought she wasn't looking. She liked everything about that; the sneaky glance, her ass, Marty. No excuse me, she loves Marty.

She was waiting to meet Marty at his apartment. It was important. She loved that feeling of urgency when someone says, "This is important." Its a get-out-of-everything-else-free card. It means that whatever else anyone has to say cannot even come close to matching the importance of whatever it is you have been tasked with doing. For Rebecca, it was meeting Marty here, at the elevator, at 11:00 PM, on Monday. It was after game night for him, but the Superbowl was this Sunday, so instead he was shooting pool. Rebecca did not love the fact that Marty's friends stole her time with Marty. She didn't want to admit that she was jealous she couldn't tag along and play with balls. Especially Marty's balls. Any of his balls. Man, she did love his balls...

She looked at her watch. 10:45. Late. It was going to be a while before he showed up. Sometimes he was a little late but he was always home by 11, in bed by 12. Sometimes he watched TV, sometimes he'd stay up a little later. Rebecca usually couldn't get to sleep until 1, for obvious reasons. She was so busy loving Marty that she would need an extra hour to wind down and get to bed. She remembered one time she caught Marty watching a porno around 11:32 one night. It was really unexpected, given the fact that Marty had her. Especially considering a cute guy like Marty could probably tag any piece of ass he set his eyes on. But as she went to scold him for not going to her for his needs, she stopped and watched the gyrating bodies and leud camera angles, the sweet untouchable gods and goddesses of fornication demonstrating the beauty and voluptuous lust of sex, she became aroused. She was incredibly turned on not by the fact that there were two surgically enhanced human bodies tangling themselves in each other on Marty's television, but the fact that Marty was such a gentleman that rather than look to another girl to satisfy his desires in Rebecca's absence, he took things into his own hands. And for that she loved him even more. And his hard-on.

Rebecca wiped sweat off her brow and tried to think of something other than the towering phallus she so worshiped and praised. She thought of puppies and kittens. Rebecca LOVED puppies, and she ADORED kittens. She was torn as to which she loved second-most, because nothing came before Marty, not even God. At least to Rebecca. She deliberated in her head as to the likely runner up.

Matthew Piscitello

-Puppies are furry!

-Kittens are fluffy!

-Puppies are silly! They like to roll around and get into piles of laundry on Sunday mornings.

-Oh, but so are Kittens! Kittens like to climb trees and get stuck in them, or fall into baskets and play with my hair when I'm waking up.

-Remember Rascal? Aw he was the cutest puppy! We got him for Christmas when I was six! He had the sweetest nose and he loved me so much. I miss Rascal! Boo hoo...

-Aw but Foodles was the best kitty ever! She was a Bishan, she had that black tail and that little black mask, and she started out white but she turned gray when she got older! Remember Foo-Foo's pussycat boots? Aw she was cute too.

Eventually Rebecca came to a unanimous decision that both kitties AND puppies could share first place because in Rebecca's mind, kitties and puppies got along. Ponies were third.

-No but there are other cute animals!

Amend that statement-ALL cute baby animals shared third place. But kitties and puppies remained in second, and Marty was first.

Car lights flashed as a yellow corvette hummed into the parking lot of the apartment complex Marty and Rebecca lived in.

-Marty's here!

The corvette purred around the green SUV parked in spot 308, and came to a stop at 307. The lights went flickered off as the sound of the smooth, dreamy engine went down. Rebecca checked her watch. Marty was home early! She darted into the stairwell as Marty came strolling up the curb, humming some nameless tune, probably a little buzzed but obviously good enough to drive. Rebecca quietly sprinted up the steps to the second floor and stood in front of the elevator door. She had to time this just right or risk ruining the surprise!

Marty pressed for the elevator, and Rebecca glanced up at the digital floor tracker of the elevator above the door frame. It ticked down from three, to two, to one. She heard the delightful DING! as the doors receded to either side of the elevator. She heard Marty's shoes step into the elevator. As she heard the doors closing she pressed the button for Floor 2, and waited.

Her heart was pounding by the time the elevator reached the second floor, mere seconds later. As soon as the doors gave her enough room, she shot through them and into the elevator with her beloved Marty and began mashing the Door Close button. Marty gave her a quizzical look, which she expected. He wouldn't have an explanation as to why she was here, instead of where she should be. He began to say something as the doors were shut and the elevator began moving up the shaft to the third floor, but Rebecca put her finger up to his lips and shushed him as she pulled the emergency stop button of the elevator.

A loud buzz rang through both of their ears. Rebecca knew it was coming and thus was able to keep her wits about her enough to smooch Marty on the lips while he jumped at the noise. He struggled lightly in her slender,

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gentle grasp as she wrapped her limbs around him and began kissing him passionately, her mouth moving around his, tasting him, pouring her into him, feeling him from the inside. Just a taste was enough to set her on fire.

She pulled back as he put his hands on her shoulders and held her back away from him firmly. She gave him a little pout.

"But Marty, its me!"

"I told you, Becca, we're done."

Her pout turned into a full blown frown. "That isn't how couples work their problems out, baby." As she moved in to kiss him again, he held her back all the more pointedly.

"N-O. Rebecca, I said no. We. are. done. Get that through your head!"

"But Marty..."

"I don't want you following me."

"Marty..."

"I don't want you ambushing me in elevators."

"Marty."

"I don't want you at my apartment when I come home."

"Marty!"

"You know what gimme the key to my place I gave you."

"MARTY!"

"WHAT?"

They locked gazes. His eyes weren't squished. His face wasn't assembled in his perfect smile. His teeth were showing, but it was more like a wolf baring his fangs at her. His brow was narrowed, and the collar of his shirt was up, like the hair on a cat's back when they hiss in warning.

Rebecca knew that look. She knew it very well. Anything she ever loved eventually gave her that look. They said she was too pushy, or that hurt him, or kitties don't like their tails being pulled. Mice don't like being dressed up for tea parties, Rebecca. Bunnies will bite you if you take their babies, Rebecca. Stop doing that Rebecca! Stop being so lovey! Stop showing everyone so much affection Rebecca! Stop it Rebecca! Stop it Becca! STOP IT REBECCA!

"BECCA-"

"WHAT MARTY? WHAT? WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?"

Matthew Piscitello

Marty's eyes went from wide to shut ever so slowly. His body was rigid and jolting one second, then he went soft. His whole body deflated. Rebecca sank down with him, her butt in his belly as she sat straddling him. She scanned his face for signs that this was just a joke. Marty was a prankster, that was something she loved about him.

"What Marty?" She asked, shaking his head. Marty didn't reply. She jerked his head, twisted it back and forth, his skin was turning red, red like her fingertips. But he didn't respond. Rebecca was no doctor but she was pretty certain he wasn't breathing either. She wasn't sure how long he could go without breathing, she never watched him swim. She didn't like water ever since the time she took Rascal to the lake and came back alone.

"What, Marty?" Her words came more slowly. Something was wrong. This wasn't a joke. This was not even slightly funny. This was wrong. It was a wrong she was familiar with. In the back of her head she could feel that voice rise up again, like it always did, when this happened.

-Oh look, Lovey Dovey Becca did it again!

-No, I didn't!

-You love things so much, don't you Becky-poo?

-No, go away!

-You just can't help but love things. You love everything to death don't you?

-No!

-Don't you?

-NO!

-DON'T YOU? LITTLE RASCAL WENT IN THE WATER BUT HE DIDN'T COME BACK DID HE BECCA?

-GO AWAY!

-BET HE'D LIKE TO CURL UP AT SOMEONE'S FEET OR BE PETTED!

-LEAVE ME ALONE!

-OR FOODLES? WHAT KIND OF NAME IS FOODLES?

-PLEASE LEAVE ME ALONE!

-POOR LITTLE FOODLES, BET HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THAT ELECTRIC SOCKET WOULD DO TO HIM? I GUESS CURIOSITY REALLY DOES KILL THE CAT, HMM BECKY-POO?

"I SAID LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Matthew Piscitello

She heard the delightful ding again. She took her arms off the back of her neck, and timidly peeked up from where she huddled. The elevator had started again. Weird. She looked down at Marty. Marty, oh poor Marty. She loved Marty so much. But Marty wasn't here to feel her love. He wasn't breathing. He lay beneath her, the handle of a knife standing where his heart should be. She had loved him to death.

She looked up at the door. There were three men. One dressed like a fireman, another dressed as an EMT. The last was definitely a cop, who moved in to take her by the wrists and put her in handcuffs as she desperately pleaded with him to listen to why Marty was dead.

"It's not my fault," she sobbed, "I just love him so much!"

Matthew Piscitello

Have You Heard the Good News?

One cloudy morn',
from my bed was I torn,
as my yonder doorbell rang.

From the sheets did I soar,
and I opened the door,
while letting my eyelids hang.

Though my eyes opened slight,
Sun was nowhere in sight,
and the most that I could see,

An old man unshaven,
one eye and a raven,
dressed up like a Viking marquis.

"Hail mortal," he said,
"Rough times are ahead."
then I caught on to his game.

"I don't need religion."
closed the door just a smidgen,
but he wedged his spear in the frame.

"It will come as a shock,
that I mean Ragnarok,
is coming. The End-Time is nigh!"

I wasn't impressed,
but he seemed distressed,
then he held his spear up high.

What followed, of course,
was a six legged horse,
that the old man had me beholden.

With a melodic neigh,
he took me away,

Matthew Piscitello

and I realized this old man was Odin!

“Hold fast!” Odin cried,
from his one eye he spied,
the battle foretold to come,

from the sky came a crack,
the giants were back!
Fate’s hand had thus turned down its thumb.
From the blistering cold,
all the giants of old,
caged by Odin had gotten loose,

Odin gave me a lance,
and said, “Now’s your chance
to honor your ancestral roots!”

I dove to the fight,
and day after night,
through ettins and trolls and behemoths,

I thrust and poked,
in blood was I soaked,
when Ragnarok reached its zenith.

As the old stories state,
the giants eviscerate,
the gods down to fewer than ten.

But us mortals survived,
as Midgard dived
through a flood and began again.

In Valhalla now,
they tell stories of how
many giants whose asses we kicked.

The afterlife’s rad,
and boy am I glad,
I’m the Chosen that Odin picked.

Ty Snowden

Get 'em Tiger

Winter never spills chills around this town

Falling apart again come warm my blood

Go 'head pour it on me until I drown

Avoid the lies preparing for the flood

Toxic desire God damn you're such a stud

Venom we share in air is blessed indeed

Kick start my heart then kill it with a thud

Give me a vaccine kiss right where I bleed

You come infect and then neglect- you leave

Drink it on up handsome- indulge in thee

A small taste of heaven is what you need

One day I'll tuck your tail between your knees

'Til then I'll softly stroke your sins away

Sexy Whispers- we bow our heads and pray

Vixen, who lures prey in the night.

Fills your veins with Booze and Temptation.

No panties, legs pose an open invitation,

Vanishing from bed before the break of daylight.

Infected with the poison from your lips

Swollen from the lashes of your whip

Moaning at the firmness of your grip

I love this non-committed relationship

I must confess, I've lost my mind-

Lying in bed all day, dreading the moment I smoke my last cigarette.

Vomiting every nauseating memory of you that I can find.

Carving out shapes in my skin to bury regret.

Visions of you roll in with the antagonizing clouds

Rain slams down, but screeching remembrance is more loud.

Your shadow sneaks in, making me soak a chill.

I shed my clothing for our regular drill.

Ty Snowden

Peter Pan

Following the Leader, the leader, the leader.

Lets run away and go to Neverland.

I got the green and snacks, so what's the wait?

Yo, Tink! Come here, I need some Pixie Dust.

Agreed, that chick Wendy is such a smut.

I'd let Captain molest me with his hook-

Oh no, Lost Boys will out me as a whore.

Pirate Penis means no ride home for me.

I'll just call rape and go to walk the plank...

Then call Peter to come and save the day,

Give him a quick hand job and say, "Yeah, Thanks."

Later, alligator, but I must go.

White walls, careless nurses "Honey, I'm home!"

I will escape my straight jacket one day.

Pineapples and Protocol

Ever wonder what would be on your mind during your last minutes of life? I looked down at my sons Spongebob watch and hit the button on the side that begins recording time. That bright yellow gadget was my good luck charm. Two out of seven Marines die in combat. Four of seven develop PTSD-Post-traumatic stress disorder. Six out of seven have intimate relationships cease due to deployment

The people who figured out these statistics and created these rules to save lives, never seen a desert besides the one located on the west coast of the United States. Still, they were the rule makers, the list of rules were essential to saving lives. We went over this shit so many times, I knew it just as well as my son knew the damn theme song to Spongebob. The song was blaring in my mind, "Are you ready kids? 'Aye, aye, Captain!' I can't hear you! 'AYE, AYE, CAPTAIN!' Ohh..." Fuck.

Back to protocol for triggering a "roadside bomb." That's what you nasty civilians call it anyways. We know these mother fuckers as IED's, an improvised explosive device. Sure as shit, we hit one. Damn towel heads hide them as good as religion hid that The Blessed Mother wasn't really a virgin. How dare I say that you wonder? God isn't out here babysitting us, if I keep bleeding, I will die. Praying isn't going to save me and slinging dirt on the Virgin Mary isn't going to kill me. Any ways, guess I'll brief you on the steps.

Step one: Start the time on your wrist watch; time is precious. You need to know how quick you are moving. If you are injured, you need to know how long your ass is just sitting there, bleeding all over the fucking place.

In this instance that's me.

Step two: If you are not injured, get the fuck out and get to your Marines that are stuck in the humvees. If you are injured, call for help; state your rank, last name, what your injury is.

My teeth clenched tried to sit my body upright enough to project out some volume. I opened my mouth wide, veins in my neck and forehead throbbed, my eyes squinted, every bit of air in my lungs was released

Ty Snowden

with such a force in it that spit departed my mouth, landing on my chin, showering my five day stubble that definitely wasn't regulation, " Who lives in a pineapple under the sea? SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS!"

I couldn't hear myself yelling. I didn't know if I had even made a sound. What had I said, if I had said anything at all? I was losing it- "Sir, upon severe injuries, the body's defense mechanism is shock, which may cause any of the following symptoms: confusion, decrease in alertness, clammy skin, dizziness, paleness, rapid pulse/increase heart rate, shortness of breath and/or weakness, sir!"

I glanced down at the stopwatch I set a while ago. One minute and seven seconds. Guess that isn't really what we like to call "a while."

Step three: Keep your eye on the time. Provide assistance. If injured, it is essential to relax. Listen to what is going on around you, keep your breathing controlled, wait for assistance.

I felt like I was getting pretty damn good at waiting. You are deaf from the blast, so there isn't much to listen to. You can smell flesh, feel heat from the flames and see smoke. That's it. Breathing was even tricky, not because the smoke was thick and rich though. When you get to thinking, tasting, smelling and breathing all at once, you're fucked. Breathing from your mouth, ashes land on your tongue. Hell, I'm going to try breathing out of my nose. You go ahead and take that first big whiff, then you realize that you could not have made a more jackass move. The air you suck in so delightfully through your nostrils, the air that is keeping you alive, smells just your like buddy being fucking cremated about two feet to your rear. Then you throw up, start coughing on that smoke again. What is the best way, through your mouth or through your nose? Either way, you are living off their burning flesh. Weather it is the dessert of their ashes or the perfume of their smoldering flesh.

"Absorbent and yellow and porous is he. 'Spongebob Squarepants'"

It seemed as if I had been here for days. I looked down at my legs again. If I can't feel them, I doubt I'll ever be able to use them again. If your legs broke most the time they say your dick's broke. And Junior-nobody wanted to be the broken daddy. I pictured his face now, seemed like just yesterday he was toddling around the living room while I watched the Patriots fuck shit up in Super Bowl XXXVIII back in 2004. 2004 to 2012. Eight years since I've been home for a Super Bowl.

I glanced down to my good luck charm again, two minutes and twenty-four seconds.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“If nautical nonsense be something you wish. ‘Spongebob Squarepants!’ Then drop on the deck and flop like a fish! ‘Spongebob Squarepants!’”

I still couldn’t hear. The last thing I would hear was the ringing in my ear that most people only hear when they play Modern Warfare and get hit with one of those fancy little flashers that shakes their screen and makes them run slower for about five seconds of their video game life. Faggots.

I then thought about her. Not because she was on my mind by some unexplainable force pulling me to thoughts of my wife, who lay in bed sound asleep-- or could it be that I hadn't thought about the bitch because she's not being the ideal good girl we all are promised to have back home. They all were good. Faithful. Angel of the house, eh? Bull shit. There was no way she had remained faithful all these years. The tears that welted up in my eyes now acted as waterfalls spilling down my cheek. My body began trembling fiercely. No amount of sniffing could keep my snot lodged in my nose. It was seeping out just as quick as my tears were pouring.

My mind took over. I could see her straddling a man. It wasn’t me, He was far too tan and her name wasn’t tattooed on this bastard’s arm like mine. She rode him at the perfect pace, maneuvering in a circular motion that drove him wild enough to entangle his fingers in her golden locks that tickled down to her lower back. Her hair swayed and hopped in synchronization to the rising and falling movements they created.

The bastard’s toes curled and his left foot was overcome by a jerk. He released the fistful of my wife’s hair, letting his hands fall smoothly to the arch where her back and ass met. He gripped her cheeks firmly, creating indents under all ten of his fingertips. She hunched like a weeping willow, allowing their chests to meet and her hair engulf his pleasure struck face. A single bead of sweat made its way from her neck, trailing down her spine, passing each and every inch of her back that had been infected by his wandering hands.

Ty Snowden

I glanced down to my wrist once more, three minutes and forty-eight seconds.

“READY? Spongebob squarepants, Spongebob squarepants, Spongebob squarepants.”

There were countless times I watched him slip off into a daydream or saw panic overtake him when our neighbors would close a car door too loudly. But by far, his night terrors were the worst. I knew I wasn't supposed to wake him, but when he is crying in his sleep, as his wife, I had to comfort him. I slid my arm over his, letting it trace the path of where his jerking arm sat. I let my fingers push through his fist that was clenched shut.

I eased my lips to his ear and in a tender whisper said, “Honey, shhh. It's okay. I'm here.”

He flew into an upright sitting position so quickly it threw me off of him. I landed flat on my back. His breathing thrashed through his barely open mouth. His sobbing turned into a laugh that almost sounded innocent. He turned over and straddled me, allowing all of his weight to rest on my already full bladder, which intensified my urge to piss. He smiled a sweet smile, a smile I hadn't seen overcome his lips since we were kids. Before his deployments, before his PTSD, before our marriage was barely hanging on. He ran his fingers through my hair, ignoring the tangles. He then raised both of his hands to my cheeks and lowered his lips to my forehead, stamping a sweet kiss.

His hands trailed down from my cheeks to my bare chest, letting his index finger on his right hand circle around my pale pink nipple. My breast gently rose and sank, showing that my heart rate had increased. His middle and index finger made its way up my chest like a marching soldier. He let out a cadence to the marching of his fingers, “left, right, leh-foo-rye-foo, left to-do.”

He stopped at my neck. He let his hands slide comfortably around it. I just stared at him. I wanted to tell him how much I loved him, but I knew it was scribbled all over my face. When our eyes met, my heart shuddered at the wily look that had taken over- his eyes were now filed with poison. His sweet smile had

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turned crooked. It was obvious he found satisfaction with the look of fear that overcame my previously love flooded demeanor. I didn't put up a fight or even let out a whimper. I was confused and I think that was apparent.

"During a blood choke, blood circulation to the brain is disrupted or cut off. Disrupting the blood flow is accomplished by compressing one or both of the carotid arteries and or the jugular veins usually with little to no pressure put on the actual airway. The logistics behind the loss of consciousness, in other words what is happening when someone loses consciousness is somewhat confusing. Some may enter shock. 'Sir, upon severe injuries, the body's defense mechanism is shock, which may cause any of the following symptoms: confusion, decrease in alertness, clammy skin, dizziness, paleness, rapid pulse/increase heart rate, shortness of breath and/or weakness sir!' OHHRAHH. Get some." He said. Every worked barked out, leaving echoes, as I began to fade.

Not letting up on his tight grip, he bent down and licked me across the cheek, dragging his dry, cat like, tongue over my lips. He let out a roaring murmur that was difficult for me to make out. It seemed something like a theme song to one of Junior's obnoxious shows.

"Ever wonder what would be on your mind during your last minutes of life? SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS!" He then let out a pirate like laugh and a clarinet sounding whistle and I drifted away.

Breon Stephens

Stellaluctus

Pale horse riding forth, full force, from the sun

Undeterred on its journey, only blocked by one

A foolhardy star thrusts into its path

The skies are left shattered in the wake of their clash

Floating, broken, in a scene so surreal

Out from smoke and shrapnel the ruin is revealed

Its embrace to the light now lost to the void

Consumed by silence in the aftermath of noise

Left to hang by my tongue, seething speech into being

Within fate's maw I plunge, can still hear myself screaming

Spoke thoughts of a foolish heart and chanted my own curse

Like blasphemy coming back at me I'm left haunted by the ghost of my words

My well's run dry with fire consuming my tears

My heart lies on its pyre as I brood over the years

Over time collecting questions but never daring to ask

Living dead in the present yet buried in the past

Evil hearted me swelling with despair

Speaking my symphony and setting fire to the air

A verse from a mourning star, a curse from its tongue

Into the well it was cast out from the shadow of the sun

Breon Stephens

Spoken seal, soul revealed

Manifested into the world I lurk

Power unbound, disorder surrounds

The storm's eye is where I emerge

Contorted cage, left depraved

Falling of the walls brick by brick

Senses maimed, perception gained

A lesson, only fools would dare to forget

I possess no form for I live through a name

Stellaluctus I am called, a calling in vain

At the pinnacle of your pain and misery

Just look within your core and you'll see me

I've stolen your face and I've hollowed your life

I'll drain you until the end, the end of your time

My siren song soon lures you to your tomb

Where your rebirth lotus will be long out of bloom

I shall say nothing more, save for my name

Stellaluctus I am called, won't you call my name?

Breon Stephens

Creator, Creation

A gelatinous mass of nothingness, slouched down and slumping upward and forward in its unyielding struggle with gravity's grudge, seen in its each and every acidic step. It gathers itself shrieks into the abysmal night sky, almost crying, as if it were a primordial serpent coiled to the heavens in search of the slightest hint of sympathy from its creator for its physical, and over time, mental disfigurement. It hides from the light because it fears being seen by spirits of the "in-between," where upon sight of it will they be given a prelude as to what awaits them beyond the chthonic zones of the hell mouth. It hides from the sight of the *normals* of this world, for their feebly narrow senses of perception could not, nor did it dare to, process such an abnormality. The sight alone would lead their minds into forcibly regurgitating the view out of sheer panic. And so it runs. It guides the crumpled hump of its body and runs under the ebon veil of the abyss from above. It runs away because it know that there it is a monster, and this monster does not belong here. It runs to the place where it does belong, the place where it is not a monster but rather it is a stranger. In this place, those that lurk the world throw such heinous glares from what would seem to be eyes. Their glares, cold and evil to its rawest nerve, are like stones. It can feel them, the way a stone meets flesh and shatters bone, these glares cut and singe their way far deeper than any wound could penetrate. It wants to return, or rather, it wants to get away from where it is. But really is there a difference? In this strange land it is detested for what it is by beings that do not know who or what it is. In its place of origin it is detested by beings that know fully well who and what it is. Truly, which is preferable, being detested as the stranger in a strange land or as the fellow villager in your home land? The lion or the tiger?

Grigi Anima

1: the resultant of mutual imitation between the authorial and fictional personae

2: a persona formed from the combination or interaction between the author's own life and their works

3: the result of cross-imitation between life and art

The phenomenon where the line of imitation that divides life and art blurs and both the authorial and fictional personae meld together and become entangled in an indiscernible aspect of perception. The aspect of life imitates art and, in turn, the aspect of art imitates life. The line dividing the black and the white fades out of existence and they bleed into and become one another.

This is known as *Grigi Anima*, the grey ghost personification.

Breon Stephens

King & Horse

My blood is gold with the spoils of war
From battles won in the name of Mars
Vanquished foes whose heads have rolled
Now deck my walls for when they fall

In this land I reign supreme
My word alone is a guillotine
'tis this reason I rule, of course
For I am king and you are horse

A tactician as I who knows no defeat
Rides atop a trifled beast
Captured and tamed and a cage on your fate
Your only means is to carry my weight

Atop the apex of aggression
I force my foes into secession
To neither woman nor child will I project remorse
For I am king and you are horse

You buck, you pounce, you throw a fit
I will soon punish your insolence
As it casts me upon this unworthy dirt

Breon Stephens

I see this steed go berserk

Its rage untamed like the flames of Hell

Halting my urge for a desperate yell

Now stricken with fear and unable to move

I become trapped, trampled under hooves

The greatest of breakers now broken by beast

Where my body was shattered my spirit will cease

Scarred, scathed, and utterly beaten

Alas, the day comes when the king is defeated

As blood flows and my bones all crack

The sight of my life fades to black

I die at the hooves of one without remorse

My enemy, my breaker, my very own horse

My mind then clouded in a trance of pride

Seeing you as a vessel desolate of stride

My most masterful of tactics all fall extinct

In the presence of relentless animal instinct

I hoist my white flag with enlightened shame

With only my ill-fated pride to blame

Now released from shackles to tread your own course

For you are now king, and I am horse

Kyree Whitehead

Not quite a Phoenix

Frame your uneven stones to make
my cage. Stall my
soar. Break my
melodic symmetry.
I'll continue to send you
slight smiles, my third eye
carefully eviscerating your memory.
Equal parts beauty and chaos,
rummaging your heart for
the worms of my feast.
Always, black as the Raven of my name.

Untitled

Angels.

Of all the things,

in all the world of things,

you are what man is born to love.

I'm Jealous.

Kyree Whitehead

On Brighton Beach

The kiss of love

The tingle of the unfamiliar

Possibilities endless

The border unknown

With a single glimmer

Incitement of passion

Furious in nature

Calm in demeanor

The hold of love's hands

The ability to rewrite

Gluttonous in desires

The sight unseen

With limitless meanings

Crossing the river

Determined in nature

Purposeful in demeanor

“There are more things in heaven and in hell”

And Love has tasted such fruit.

From Olympus to Earth

We don't negotiate with killers. . .

. . . So try as you might,

for fairytale magic runs out at midnight.

No matter the boom, the bust,

the bang or the battle

your words will fall muted as meaningless prattle.

And if, for a moment,

you seek Heaven's best;

A head full of feathers, or leather, or rest,

oh suicide could fill the test,

those open arms for Hades guests.

So go you one,

and come you all

sands of pleasure, Spring to Fall

temptation has its hands to call

that mind and body born of Saul. . .

. . . Fuck. What *we* would give to be *human*.

Art and Photography

Samantha Clevinger



Samantha Clevinger



Samantha Clevinger



SC
10.12

Erin Cline





Erin Cline





Sarah Doty



Sarah Doty



Sarah Doty





Brooke Plasse



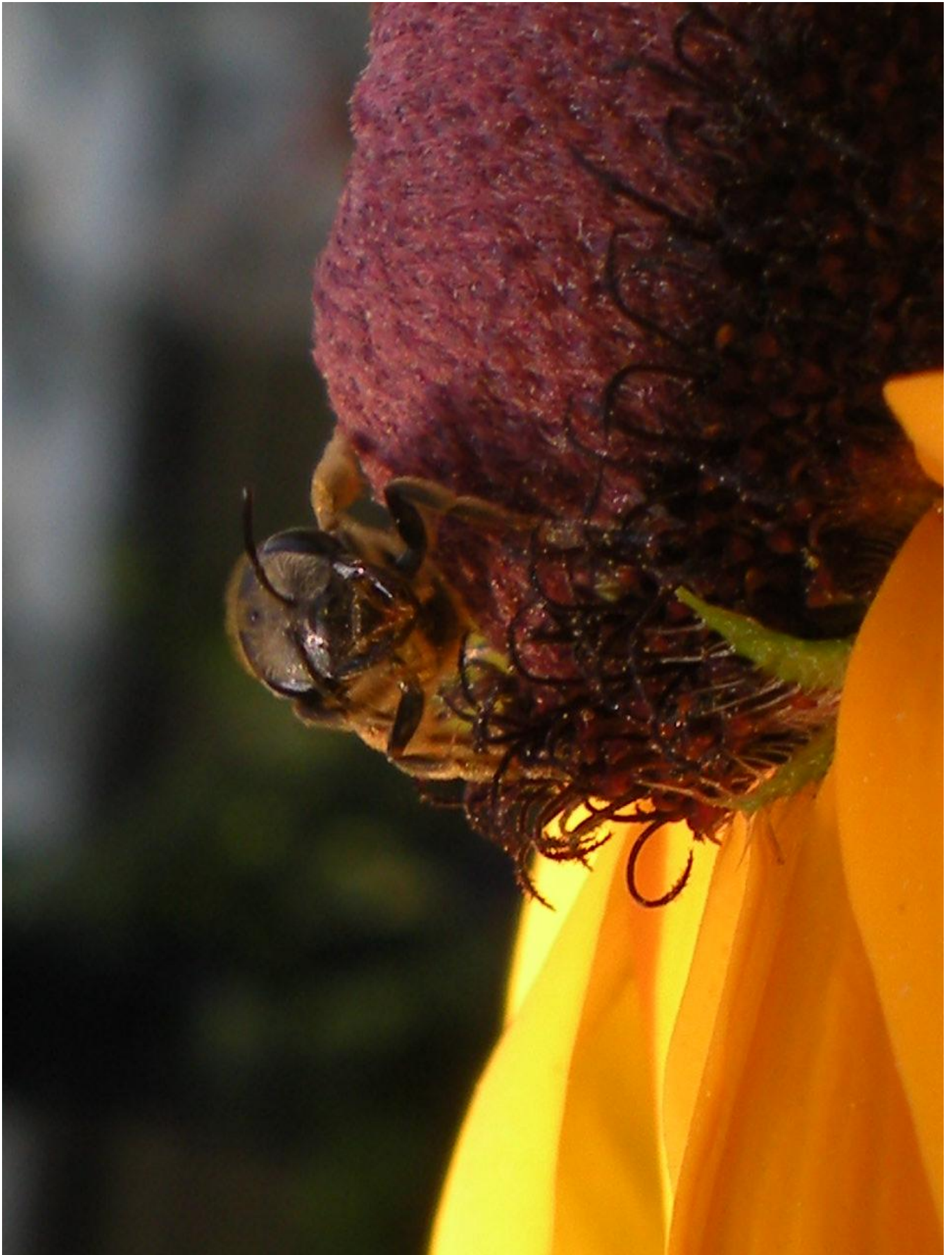


Brooke Plasse





Maleah Powers



Maleah Powers



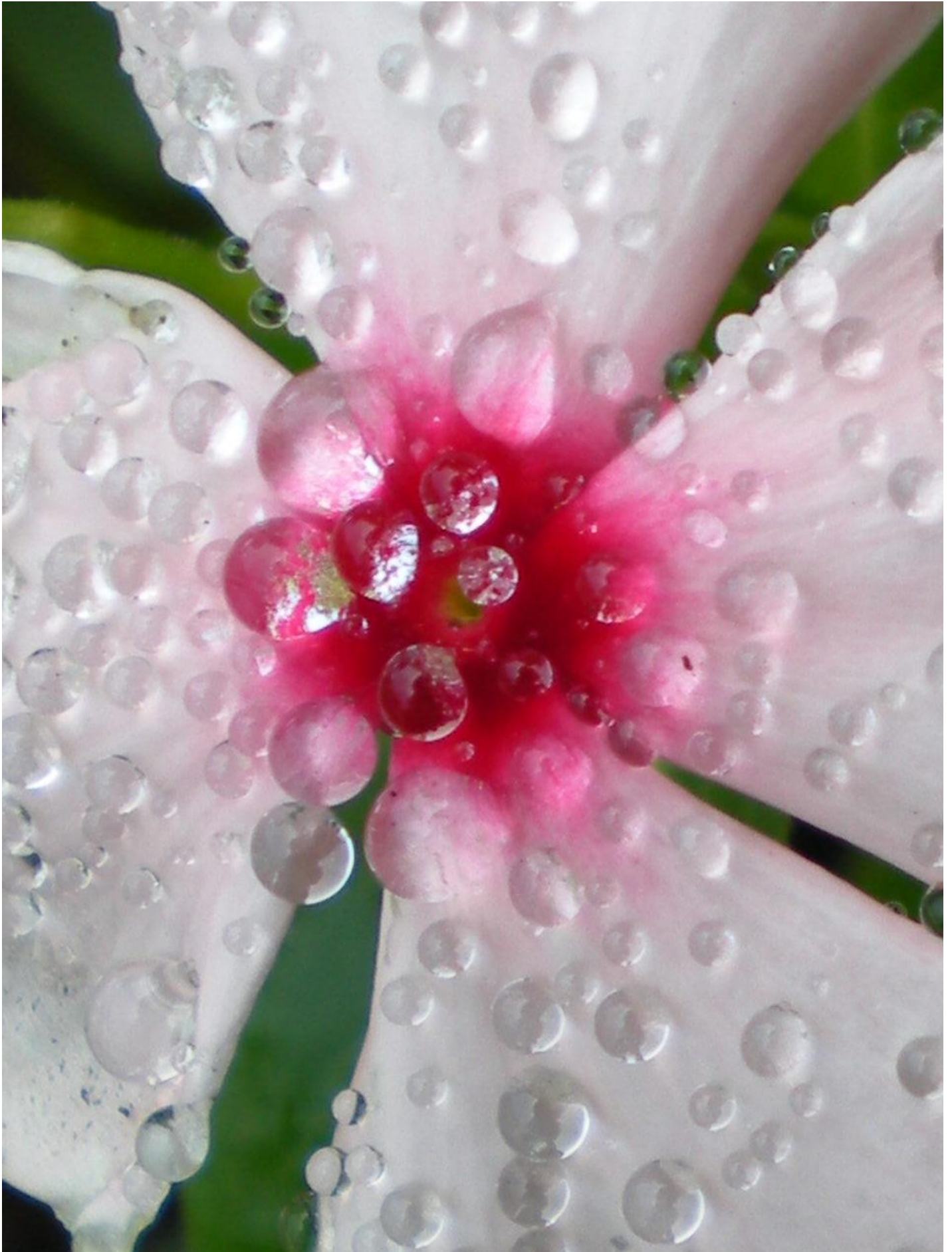
Maleah Powers



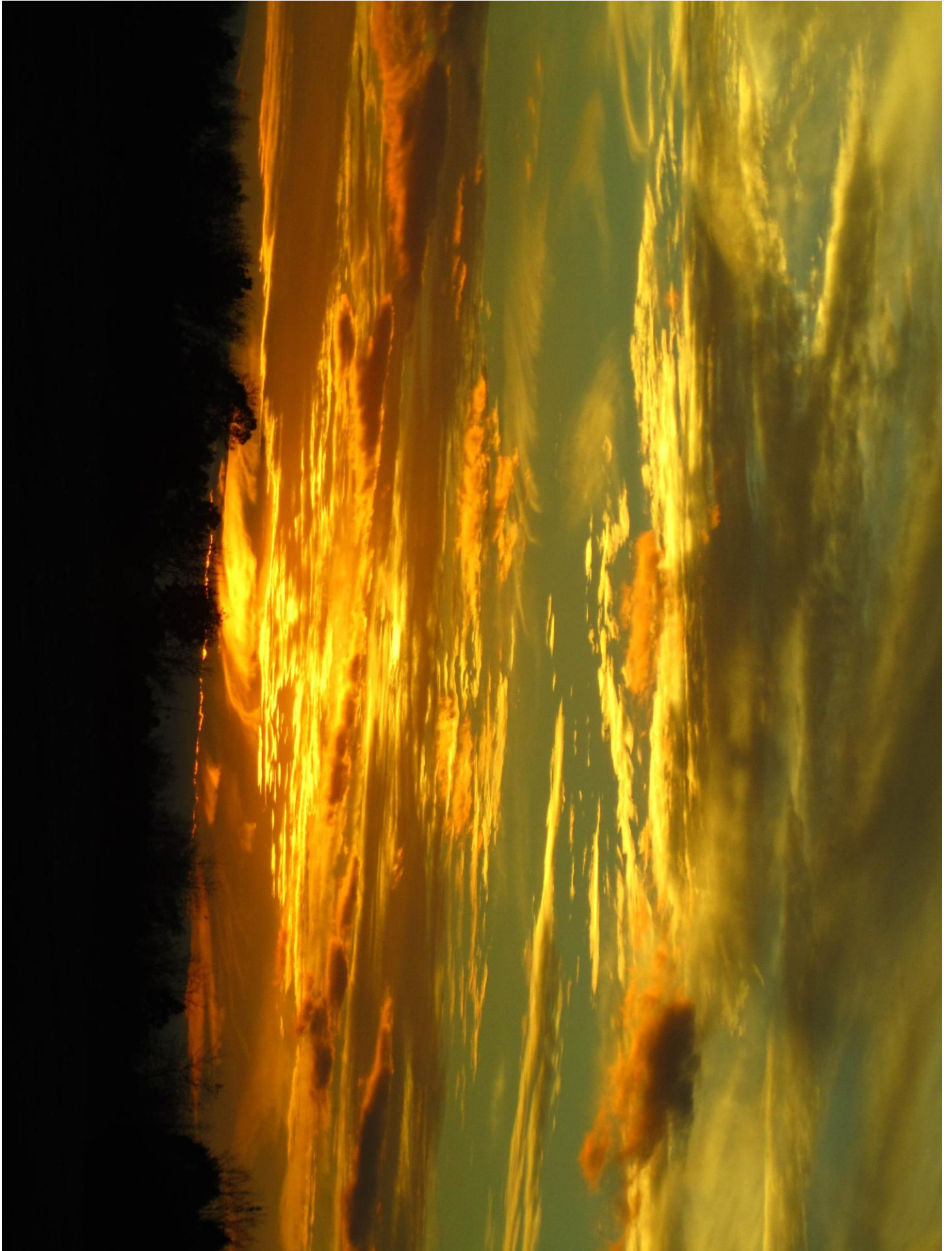
Maleah Powers



Maleah Powers



Maleah Powers



The Exquisite Corpse

Each of the following written works was created by a Surrealist method called The Exquisite Corpse. Participants begin with a topic announced at random, they write the first thing that comes to their minds on their own papers, fold the paper over to conceal their line from the next writer's eyes and then pass their paper on.

What results is a work with multiple authors, created without creative limitations. Each line of the following works was written by a different member of USCB's Society of Creative Writers or a student from this semester's Poetry Workshop, taught by Dr. Ellen Malphrus.

Exquisite Corpse #1

Pastoral Scene

Halloween is coming. I want to be a pumpkin.

Cows in a field.

Broken Buicks.

Truckloads of lies.

Spiderwebs.

The tragic flaw.

The hills are all on fire.

I have no need for these

merciful wanderings at daybreak.

Exquisite Corpse # 2

I was off living the American dream.

Sweaty Summer.

Reading tea leaves from cracked teacups.

The false prophet of the anti-Christ.

Mowgli had a bowl cut.

Falling through the cracks.

Cartoon Brain exploding in confusion.

Thrill to the beat.

Submarine in the deep.

What time is it? Noodle time.

Exquisite Corpse #3

High across the plains

California opened up.

Was that...

Forever needing

Overalls.

Now I got a fever and I don't know how to make it stop.

Ink-stained fingertips.

Your wedding ring is nice.

Exquisite Corpse #4

Shut up Bill O'Reilley you...

Elegant boy in blue.

Forcing thoughts on others

No more words!

I've got quite the deviant conscience

dazzled in

stacks and stacks of books.

Needle and pitchfork

lion's heart out.

Exquisite Corpse #5

Basket weavers in North Charleston.

desire

sunshine through the window.

Rattling

snakes and the lizard

roam the ranges

looking for words to play

Exquisite Corpse # 6

They stare blankly at you, hand-in-hand

sheltered.

focused on movement

suffer alters, and love

without words.

Too bad it got wasted.

Exquisite Corpse #7

Sun rises bloody red.

Exploding mushroom, everlasting.

High schoolers.

Needles.

Baffled ballerinas.

There isn't a word in any language for

butterfly kisses at dawn.

Funny thing is, I don't remember it like that.

Exquisite Corpse #8

Untouchable beauty.

The smell of bacon and live animals.

The waffle maker from the 80's.

My grandma's China dolls, locked in glass.

Lost in transmission.

Time races by.

Drink long, aged one.

Exquisite Corpse #9

Moving windward.

Wanting to please everyone.

Total alpha, with the moon roof down.

Forego honesty; breathe.

Surprise party.

Paper cuts and fairytales.

Making changes to our lives.