

Jongleur

A surreal illustration featuring a vibrant green and blue fish swimming in a pool of water on a large, textured leaf. A small white sailboat is positioned on the fish's back. The scene is set against a background of a dark, stormy sky with rain falling. The overall composition is dreamlike and artistic.

2020

Editorial Staff of the *Jongleur*:

Morgan Primeaux: Editor-in-Chief, Journal Layout

Victoria Bloodworth: Associate Editor, Contest Judge, Back Cover

Cailey Scadlock: Associate Editor, Contest Judge, Secretary, Contest Certificates

Laura Campbell: Associate Editor, Contest Judge

Bernard Gallagher: Adviser, Contest Judge

Eric Alai: Managing Editor, Contest Judge, Contest Manager

Cover art is "Voyage into the Unknown" submitted by Kaitlyn Reeves

The *Jongleur* is an annual publication of student work that is formatted and edited by a student staff. It is created for both the benefit of Louisiana State University at Alexandria and the distinctive voice of its students.

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Jongleur

Louisiana State University at Alexandria

8100 Highway 71 South

Alexandria, La 71302

Editor's Letter and Acknowledgements:

When we began this journey in January, none of us could have predicted that we would be completing the journal during a global pandemic. As a graduating senior this semester, I was devastated at losing the final semester experience I had dreamed about since I began college at LSUA four years ago. Once I realized we would no longer be on campus for the remainder of the semester, I knew we had to finish this year's *Jongleur*. The creativity and uniqueness (and the number) of this year's submissions kept me motivated to put together an amazing journal that myself, the *Jongleur* staff, and all of LSUA could be excited about. Many emails and Zoom calls later, I'm proud to publish the 2020 edition of the *Jongleur*.

Heartfelt thanks are in order for the following:

- Eric Alai: without your optimism and rockstar personality, this would not have happened. You are awesome and one of the kindest people I know.
- Bernard Gallagher: thank you for your patience and persistence. Thank you for your wisdom and one-liners.
- The *Jongleur* Staff: Vic, Cailey, and Laura, you girls are hardworking, creative, and hilarious. I am so glad I've been able to work with you all this semester.
- AEH for providing the prize money for contest winners
- Dr. Rowan and LSUA administration for funding a student led journal and supporting the creativity of our students

The list of people who deserve credit for helping us complete the *Jongleur* is much longer than I can cover here. To anyone I have overlooked, please know that we appreciate your contributions. The continued success of the *Jongleur* relies on the generosity and support of so many wonderful people at LSUA.

I would also like to personally thank Carli Smith. Even states away from me, you have given me all your support and love, and I would not have finished this without you. Thank you and I love you, sweetheart.

We are stronger together,

Morgan Primeaux

Editor, 2020

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1st Place in Essays:

"To Be A Woman"

Malcolm X was a prominent figure during the Civil Rights conflict in the 1960s. He was aware of the disparity between African Americans and those who oppressed them, but he was also aware of the oppression towards women that was present in his own community. He famously stated, "The most disrespected woman in America, is the black woman. The most un-protected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America, is the black woman" (Matthews 2). This quote and the speaker existed after Zora Neale Hurston's time, but a similar sentiment is present through her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Her protagonist, Janie, is the medium through which she displays the themes regarding power imbalance and autonomy. Janie's struggle for independence and to attain her dream mirrors the sexism African American women face in society.

Zora Neale Hurston applied parts of her own personal history to Janie's narrative. Hurston was born in 1891, after slavery was abolished but African Americans were still not privy to many of the privileges of their white peers. Like Janie, her mother had passed away during her childhood and she was sent to live with another relative (Aliprandini). Her closeness to her mother likely influenced the inception of characters like Janie's grandmother, Nanny, who is a domineering but loving force in Janie's life. It is also likely the reason that Nanny's death was written as one of the catalysts for Janie's first refusal to accept subpar treatment. Hurston's own mother's death was one of the driving factors for her to leave her home and become dependent on only herself. It was a significant time in both the author and the character's lives, which were filled with excitement but the trepidation about what was to come.

Hurston's mother was not the only parental figure to lend inspiration to her novel. She was not as close to her father, who remarried shortly after her mother's death. Besides her dislike for the quickly made nuptials, her "relationship with her father, who attempted to curb her lively spirit, deteriorated" (Ayorinde). It is plausible that Joe "Jody" Starks was created to emulate the stifling nature of her father. It is noted by Janie that "There was something about Joe Starks that cowed the town" (Hurston 47). It is made clear that Jody cowed Janie into submission as well, far more than he did with the rest of the townspeople. He smothered her vivacious nature until she felt that she had to be silent to keep the peace between them. It is notable, however, that where Hurston left her father's home after similar treatment (mirroring how Janie left Logan Killicks), Janie did not leave Jody.

The most likely reason for Janie's refusal to leave Jody is because he marginally matched with her idea of the pear tree. The pear tree was a symbol of Janie's agency and her desires. To describe her view of the tree, Janie says, "That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom" (Hurston 10). The tree awakens the idea that she can forge her own path and find happiness. She does not find her happiness with Logan, who she reluctantly agreed to marry. Leaving him was feasible because she did not choose him. On the other hand, Janie chose Jody, as she felt some of the passion that she had when first witnessing the pear tree. Leaving Jody is not simple because she continually convinces herself that being with him can make her happy and that being with him was the consequence of her exercising her independence. It is unfortunate that she ends up stifling her independence with him instead.

Janie's struggle against Jody for independence is a parallel to black women's struggle against sexism in society. Black women often did not have agency afforded to them, or any agency they had was minimized. Algernon states on the matter, "Sexism is present among blacks, just as it is among other groups in the United States. Sexism and misogyny were found in slave communities" (54). This was no different for Janie, as Jody's stifling of her is a direct result of his demeaning view of women. He pushed his sexism onto Janie by essentially forcing her to maintain the role of a trophy wife. To Jody, Janie is meant to be beautiful and ornamental, but that she is altogether useless for much else. He has a passion for her beauty and her body, but he has no passion for the content of her character. This is like how society as a whole viewed black women. Minstrel characters were common and black people, especially women were only seen as viable for

entertainment value as a caricature that did not have the capability to make decisions. Janie is also a caricature to Jody, who does not view her as able to make choices and be an equal partner.

The misogyny Janie experiences with Logan is another facet of how African American women were viewed. Logan does not stifle Janie's spirit like Jody does, but he begins to only see her as a tool for labor. Janie's grandmother already knows how far this ideology has spread, when she tells Janie, "De [black] woman is de mule uh de world" (Hurstons 14). Szymanski also speaks about this, saying, "discrimination against third world people and against women serves the same function for the capitalist economy, namely the provision of a cheap and compliant menial labor force" (66). Logan was attempting to use Janie for this purpose, as well as having her do the duties of the house with the extra work. He does not look at her with admiration like he originally used to, and he does not treat her with tenderness. Where Jody reduces Janie's autonomy and only values her for the aesthetic she presents, Logan dismisses the thought of finding Janie desirable and cares only for the output of work she can produce. Neither men care about her personality or state of mind.

Janie's resistance to both of her husbands is a stand against the oppression she has been facing from them. She manages to get out of both marriages, in which she found more strength to stand up for herself. For Janie, like with many black women, her "experience of oppression based on race, gender and class leads [her] to resist race, gender, and class oppression" (Algernon 54). Janie's rejection of her husbands varies and match the situation in which her rejection was created. With Logan, who wanted to force her to be a tool for labor, she left and deprived him of her body, the tool he craved. With Jody, who made it so that Janie felt she was unable to express herself; she lets loose a barrage of emotion to let him know everything she ever felt but had to shut away. She also does this when Jody is on his deathbed and cannot have the last word. She can finally be heard without his interference. Janie's method of resistance is no coincidence. It is meant to reflect what she suffered back onto her tormentors, and her opposition makes a mockery out of their oppressive nature.

Janie's refusal to be oppressed makes her completely independent. She is unyielding to the wills of others and finally attains some of the agency she has always sought. After Jody's death, Janie "liked being lonesome for a change. This freedom feeling was fine. These men did not represent a thing she wanted to know about. She had already experienced them through Logan and Joe" (Hurstons 90). She is pursued by multiple suitors, but her relationships have made her wary of romance and marriage. At this point she would rather be alone than attempt to find a man who fits her ideal of what the pear tree represents. She accepts that her dream might not be attainable with the climate of sexism that surrounds her. For her, it would be difficult to find a partner who treats her as an equal and lets her maintain her independence, while being passionate and intimate with her like she desires. Like many black women, she is cautious so that she is never put in a place of oppression again.

Janie manages to attain her dream when she is not aiming to. She meets Verigible "Tea Cake" Woods, who, despite her initial skepticism of him, proves to be what she finds attractive in a partner. Tea Cake sums up his feelings for Janie when he says, "You got de keys to de kingdom" (Hurstons 109). He is not merely idolizing her with the statement; he is saying that she is the master of her fate and he is in awe of her. Janie recognizes that he is not trying to stifle her or force her into anything. In fact, he is open about wanting Janie to express herself and do as she desires. It is the first time Janie has romantically been with a man who is not displaying a rampant sexism towards her.

Janie's relationship with Tea Cake has moments of strife, and Janie takes a final stand that secures her independence but ends in tragedy. Though Tea Cake usually treated Janie well, he acted disrespectful to her at times, going as far as striking her. He differs from Jody and Logan in that he feels remorse for his actions and makes up for his mistakes. This changes after Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog and becomes cruel and jealous. He attempted to shoot her as "the fiend in him must kill and Janie was the only thing living he saw" (Hurstons 184). The only man who she genuinely loved was Tea Cake, and he was the only man who attempted to kill her. This resonates with the experience of black women, whose lives were often trivialized and seen as expendable. Even though he was ill, that is how Tea Cake saw Janie in that moment, as just a thing to kill to satisfy his rage. It is also fitting that Janie decides to live alone after Tea Cake's death. She is

world-weary and wants only to live on her terms and no one else's. She becomes fully independent by the end of her story.

As a black woman herself, Hurston dealt with racism and sexism throughout her life. She expressed what it is to be a black woman trying to retain agency during a time where others wish to take it away. Janie's narrative is a compelling drama but is also meant to show the themes of independence, sexuality, love, death, and personal identity. These are all concepts that black women struggle with, and Janie's story is only possible to show through the viewpoint of a black woman.

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Victoria Rice

2nd Place in Essays:

“A Rose for Emily’: An Eternal Quest to Find Love”

*I'm not ready to let go
 'Cause then I'd ever know
 What I could be missing
 — Jason Walker, “Down”*

Heartbreak is inevitable. We have all experienced the surprise of an unanticipated curved ball; and while there are many versions of heartbreak: the death of someone close to us, a dream unattained, unreciprocated love, and other life changes beyond our control — they all hurt just the same. William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” encompasses all these forms of heartbreak; it is the tale of a once regal Southern belle turned reclusive murderer. Emily Grierson, the main character, is wealthy in many ways: money, social status, a loving father, beauty, and the heart of a gentleman to whom she is expected to marry. As Emily’s life begins to spiral out of control, she becomes saddened, withdrawn, frail, and the keeper of a dark secret. Emily cracks under the overwhelming pressure of heartbreak — a parent’s death, the dismemberment of her culture, and the shunning of a lover — transforming into a monster in the wake of the recurrent insults that summon her undoing.

Harold Bloom, author of *Bloom’s How to Write About William Faulkner*, writes, “While it may be an unconventional one, ‘A Rose for Emily’ is a love story” (2). Love is undeniably peppered across the pages: Emily loves and admires her father every day of her life, memorializing him with a portrait displayed as a focal point in her home for years after his death; the love that Emily exudes for Homer Barron during their relationship is exhibited in the care she takes while picking the perfect gifts for him in preparation for marriage; Emily’s love for her family’s former plantation is undying, as she still lives the way she did years before the end of slavery and the plantocracy; even Emily’s interactions with Tobe, her manservant, illustrate a form of love (the kind of love one would have for a loyal servant turned confidante).

While love is a common theme throughout “A Rose for Emily”, tragedy is equally existent. Emily is referred to as a “fallen monument” (Faulkner 1), but she is not the only fallen monument in Jefferson: Emily’s father, the only love she has ever known, dies, leaving her behind to carry on in a world to which she cannot adapt; the dissolved love between Emily and Homer after Homer’s inability to commit to Emily leaves her seething with hurt and humiliation; the plantocracy that once so unapologetically led the South’s thriving agricultural empire is now a memory in post-Civil War America — all fallen monuments in Miss Grierson’s life, all examples of tragedy on the heels of love.

We flutter through life, setting goals and making plans, until we are coarsely reminded that we are merely passengers on this journey, in control of nothing *vis-à-vis* our path...and the truth is no different for Emily Grierson. With the death of Mr. Grierson, we are given a gander at the first heartbreak Emily endures. In the antebellum south, according to the Rapides Parish Historical Society, mourning the dead was met with many customs; some of those customs are still practiced today. Funeral practices required special preparation and placement of the body; the corpse would then be displayed at home (1-2); this custom is carried out following Mr. Grierson’s death, but in a desperate attempt to hold her impending solitude at bay, Emily takes the tradition beyond appropriate: she keeps her father’s body in her home for three days before acknowledging his passing and allowing his burial (Faulkner 3). Though the circumstances are quite different, Emily’s behavior is like that of Norman Bates, the main character in the popular television show, *Bates Motel*. Norman is unable to part with his mother after her demise, so he keeps her corpse in his home in a twisted effort to keep them together (Season 5). As with most losses, some have a hard time letting go. Regardless of the reason, the finality of burial is often too much to bear. Emily cannot withstand the reality of being left alone, as her father is her only family...and now he is no more.

Emily is left to assume her father’s position as head of the family estate: the Grierson plantation. Emily finds her footing as mistress of the manor, and “in the summer after her father’s death”, she also finds love in Homer Barron, a construction foreman in town on business (Faulkner 3). But the romance quickly fades, the relationship blossoms and wilts in a rather short time. Faulkner’s choice for Homer’s last name — Barron — is a dead giveaway (pun intended!) of the relationship’s direction. Though the spelling is different (barren), the word indicates sterility, futility, and lifelessness; but Emily misses the signs. We witness the moment when she is handed her second heartbreak. Marriage is thought to be on the horizon for the

seemingly happy couple, but Homer (a self-proclaimed bachelor) silences the chapel bells. Homer's inability to commit to matrimony — as described by Meghan Laslocky, author of *The Little Book of Heartbreak: Love Gone Wrong Through the Ages* — is an acute, piercing crush of Emily's heart (Introduction 1-2). Being accustomed to privilege and prominence, Emily cannot risk the public embarrassment of a break-up. One could also deduce that because Homer is a Yankee, additional resentment is among Emily's emotions. In moments of passion, we are often able to look beyond our differences in order to justify acting on our feelings, but at the first sign of betrayal, the true feelings we conceal become exposed. With the events surrounding the Civil War and the Reconstruction period in America, it is probable that Emily, like many southerners at this time in the United States, harbors a deep hatred of the North — a hatred that she is happy to ignore until Homer rejects her. On a quest to guard her reputation, and with her refusal to accept the completeness of a separation, Emily surrenders to the bitterness swirling within her. Homer becomes a representation of negativity, a representation of Emily's fallen empire, and a representation of the North!

For some, a disintegrated relationship is easier to except than for others; some have a much harder time letting go. According to the Cleveland Clinic, Emily experiences what is known as Broken Heart Syndrome: "In most cases, symptoms are brought on by emotional or physical stress" (2). Once Emily realizes that her willingness to overlook the differences between herself and Homer (her elevated social status to his laborer status, her southern roots to his being a Yankee, and his larger-than-life, party-boy demeanor to her settled, lady-like demeanor) is in vain — there is enough emotional stress present to cause a fracture within Emily. Laslocky further expresses that the pain associated with heartbreak is a pain that we become desperate to displace, and frantic to redirect anywhere (Introduction 1-2). Determined to displace her own pain, Emily kills Homer. In an interesting twist, Emily ultimately enforces the commitment that Homer has been so hesitant to make. In her second "Bates Motel Moment", Emily keeps Homer's decaying corpse turned nightshirt-cloaked skeleton in her bed until her own death decades later.

There is a profound connection between "A Rose for Emily" and Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights" — a connection that cannot be ignored. Heathcliff is driven to madness after losing his beloved Catherine, albeit the circumstances are different from the way Emily loses Homer, but the pain is no different. Heathcliff displays his affliction as he cries out to Catherine: "May you not rest as long as I am living! Be with me always — take any form — drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss. I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul" (168). Heathcliff's moment of utter agony mirrors Emily's exact emotions. But in Emily's case, rage and panic overshadow her better judgement; she snaps and resorts to murder. Once Homer's death is absorbed, Emily snaps again. She too cannot live without her life, her soul. Some may see an act of if-I-can't-have-you-no-one-will vengeance, others may see a woman relentlessly striving for the one thing that continuously slips from her grasp: love.

We are never directly informed whether or not Emily's murderous act is pure malice, a prideful attempt to save face, or a desperate reaction to her own loneliness, but the fascinating irony of the matter is that as a result of her supremely unorthodox effort to keep Homer, she actually accomplishes the opposite; in her madness following Homer's unwillingness to solidify their union, Emily ruins what she originally sets out to preserve.

Faulkner's description of the Grierson home is a major contributor to the overall theme of the story, and of Emily's life. Gloom and darkness hover from beginning to end, but the home had been extraordinary in its day, as was Emily. Once grand, the structure is now a decaying ghost surrounded by the newness that comes with changing times, serving as host to Emily as she exists as a mere ghost of the woman she used to be. Built in elegant fashion, the Grierson plantation had been intended to make a statement of wealth and power. The Grierson family had enjoyed the benefits of being among the esteemed — their abode had once brimmed with luxurious accommodations, hand-crafted furnishings, custom-sewn frocks, and servants to attend to every need. The home very likely had once served as the venue of choice for frequent gatherings, social get-togethers used as an excuse to enjoy the finest dining, the stoutest liquor, the most fragrant cigars, all against a backdrop of delicate tunes floating on the air, intertwining with the happy hum of multiple conversations and cackling laughter — this is the life Emily had once relished in, the life she now longs for.

As we know, Emily is not one to adapt and overcome. Emily is a ruinous waterfall of reluctance, impulsively spilling over into every facet of her life — she treats her country's reform efforts no differently. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens describes the French Revolution: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness" (1). Jason Phillips, Ph.D., assistant professor of history at Mississippi State University and author of "Reconstruction in Mississippi,

1865-1876” writes, “The same language could describe Reconstruction in Mississippi” (2). As a result of the Civil War, slavery is abolished, the plantocracy is no longer viable, and Emily’s heart is broken a third time. With the Reconstruction effort, America embarks on a journey toward positivity and change. A large number of Southern citizens, including Emily, are disinclined to view this journey as a voyage toward the betterment of the country; many Southerners are opposed to the change. Inevitably, a new way of life spreads throughout the Southern United States, but Emily holds on in white-knuckle fashion to the lifestyle she has always delighted in.

The townspeople of Jefferson take notice of Emily’s drastic evolution, a remarkable transformation as a result of the previously mentioned series of events. Emily’s appearance is in stark contrast to the Emily Grierson of years past; she is described as fat with iron-gray hair (Faulkner 1), indicating graceless aging and complete abandon of self-care. Faulkner’s purposeful depiction of Emily’s hair is rich with symbolism, and an obvious nod to her overall persona. Iron is strong, metallic, and heavy; Emily is strong-willed, bitter, and carries the heaviness of her world on her shoulders. Emily’s personality is also altered; once a besotted socialite, Emily is now a course, tax-evading, hermit. The fact that Emily refuses to pay taxes in Jefferson is a blatant clue in the discovery of her mind-set. Much like *Jane Eyre*, Emily feels as though she is no bird; no net ensnares her (Ch. 23, p. 9) — not even the net of the law. Emily clings to her upper-crust status even though her days of supremacy are long gone.

Another cleverly placed hint revealing Emily’s attitude toward those around her happens when neighbors become outdone with the stench from Homer’s rotting remains. A thick, rancid fog envelops the Grierson property for several weeks, but no one will claim the task of confronting Emily about it. Instead, a group of men not-so-stealthily visit Emily’s home in the middle of the night to sprinkle lime in hopes of neutralizing the odor. As the endeavor concludes, Emily is seen peeping through an upstairs window (3). Picturing Emily peering through a window that is at a higher level than those around her provides an unconcealed illustration of how she looks at the people of Jefferson — they are beneath her.

We are all familiar with the South’s reputation in regard to slavery. Emily’s family had been heavily involved in the agricultural industry, so it is realistic to assume that there had once been a staff of slaves on the grounds, but as time drifts on, only Tobe remains. There is no real evidence in the story that Tobe had ever actually been a slave; however, one could argue that because Tobe is an African-American man waiting on Emily’s every need — answering the door, ushering guests, gardening, and preparing food — the probability of Tobe being a leftover slave is high; Tobe’s every responsibility is indicative of slave duties.

Regardless of his past, one may question Tobe’s inclination to stay. If a free man, why is Tobe still so loyal to Emily? The answer is clear. Tobe is a witness to all that has happened behind the closed doors of the putrid tomb; Tobe witnesses the ups and downs of the relationship between Emily and Mr. Grierson; he witnesses Emily’s collapse after Mr. Grierson’s death. Tobe watches as the courtship sweetly blooms between Emily and Homer; he watches as the disbelief of Homer’s detachment gnaws at Emily; he watches Emily unfold under the weight of her failed relationship; he witnesses Emily resort to murder. One could suppose there is an element of obligation within Tobe, as he has only ever watched the monument that is Emily crumble. With his obvious care-giver conduct, one could assume that Tobe possesses a need to pick up the pieces of Emily each time she shatters.

If in fact Tobe is a former slave (now a free man) choosing to stay with Emily as her personal servant, the possibility of institutionalization lingers. As defined by *Merriam-Webster*, to be institutionalized is to be “created and controlled by an established organization; established as a common and accepted part of a system or culture” (1-2) — both definitions can be used to explain the system of slavery on a plantation. Slaves, controlled by the established organization of the plantocracy, had been considered a common and accepted part of southern culture. For slaves, and perchance Tobe, every aspect of life had been mapped out (Library of Congress, pars. 4 and 6); once free, the adjustment into society would become the issue at hand. If Tobe is institutionalized, he chooses to stay with Emily because being with Emily is familiar and comfortable. Tobe may be hesitant to, or feel incapable of, integrating into a newly reinvented society.

Saul McLeod, author of “What Is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs?”, writes, there are specific human needs that must be satisfied to reach total fulfillment. These needs are organized using a five-tier pyramid known as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. From the bottom upwards, the needs are physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (1). Sadly, Emily spends her entire life pining for the satisfaction of her needs, aching for total fulfillment, but never moving past tier two. By having a home, clothing, food and water, Emily’s physiological needs are met. With ties to her family’s resources and property, Emily’s safety needs are met, but the fulfillment stops here. An intense father-daughter

relationship, poor treatment from Homer, and the discontinuance of life as she knows it, leaves Emily desiring love, belonging, and esteem, ultimately hindering her from becoming the most she can be. With Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in mind, a viable assumption can be made with regards to Tobe: he also never moves past tier two. In fact, despite their master-servant relationship, Emily and Tobe actually have much in common; both are hindered souls, trapped and unable to reach self-actualization.

Emily's life appears to be full. On the surface, and through the eyes of the Jefferson inhabitants, Emily is beyond fortunate. The townspeople respect her as one would respect authority or royalty. Even in her latter days, Emily is intimidating, necessitating respect and acknowledgment. In truth, her existence is quite desolate; she lives a lengthy life crowded with love, loss, rejection, pride, denial and horror — an abundance of circumstances for one human, an abundance that is devastating for Emily. Emily's story is a superb illustration proving that we never truly know what happens in the privacy of one's life.

Emily shares in the anguish found within the character written into William Faulkner's "The Cobbler" — there is a common theme connecting both works. Faulkner writes, "Beyond these windows the world grows loud and passes away. I was once a part of the world, I was once a part of the rushing river of mankind; but now I am old, I have been swirled into a still backwater in a foreign land, and the river has left me behind" (*New Orleans Sketches* 8). One can imagine these words flowing directly from Emily, bleeding from her very soul as she sits in the eye of the storm, watching the winds of the world spin ferociously around her — she repeatedly wakes up in a foreign land after enduring an influx of heartbreak and tragedy. Once a distinguished part of the world around her, Emily is left on the bank as the rushing river of society leaves her behind. Emily is everlastingly unprepared to let go: she is unable to let go of her father; she is unable to let go of Homer (alive and dead); she is unable to let go of the blue-blooded nature of her existence in Jefferson. Throughout the story, and to her own soundtrack — "I'm not ready to let go, 'cause then I'd never know what I could be missing; but I'm missing way too much, so when do I give up what I've been wishing for" (Walker) — Emily is perpetually swirling in the backwater of life.

A bold supposition as it may be, one could argue healthily that Emily Grierson is William Faulkner. Created in Faulkner's masterly imagination, Emily Grierson manifests to breathe life into Faulkner's own views surrounding post-Civil War America. In her Horror fiction novel, *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley writes: "Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change" (214-215) — these words ring true for Emily, as she experiences great and sudden change throughout her years; additionally, these words ring true for William Faulkner, as he too had experienced great and sudden change in his own backyard. Being a life-long resident of the Southern United States, it is fair to say that William Faulkner had probably shared in the views of other antipathetic Southerners. During a time of rebuilding, Faulkner had been among those to witness the changes that followed the South's rise and fall — as was Emily. Foreseeing the consequences of making his position on the matter public, and for the sake of his (present and future) success, Faulkner uses Emily as a safer vessel to project his views out into the world.

Faulkner's motive for writing "A Rose for Emily" may not be clear, but what is clear is that the story is unquestionably about love. Emily pours her heart into everything she loves: her father, Homer, and her family legacy. Unfortunately, Emily lets the denial of love cloud her judgement, influencing her to take drastic measures in each significant event in her life. If we look hard enough, we will notice that love is everywhere; love is at the core of everything we strive for. Love impacts us daily: the songs we play, the foods we eat, the careers we choose, the people we spend our time with — love is even the unrelenting force at the root of our most horrific choices.

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Samantha Ray

3rd Place in Essays:

“A Juxtaposition of Tennessee Williams’ Protagonists”

Tennessee Williams is the brilliant playwright of the two emotionally beautiful plays *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *The Glass Menagerie* is a play about a family struggling to make ends meet since the original sole provider, the father, had abandoned them. The play takes a deep look into the lives of its three main characters, Amanda, Tom, and Laura; and it shows how this small family copes in a friendless world. On the other hand, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a story that examines the relationship between Stanley and Stella Kowalski, a married couple. This relationship is threatened when the wife’s sister, Blanche DuBois, comes to stay in their small home. Ultimately, this play explores various heavy topics, such as abuse, alcoholism, and rape, and addresses individual relationships between various characters. These plays, while incredibly unique, bear some remarkable resemblances. For instance, both *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* have extremely similar main characters. One cannot help but notice the various parallels between Amanda and Blanche, Laura and Stella, and Tom and Stanley. It is apparent that Amanda and Blanche both place a fair amount of importance on one’s appearance and they both have dependency issues with men as well. In Laura and Stella’s case, their submissive personalities are overtly obvious and they both fell prone to being deceived by the men that they loved. Finally, Tom and Stanley both use alcohol as a means of feeling better and they are both determined to get their own way, regardless of who has to suffer the consequences. In the end, the characters Amanda and Blanche, Laura and Stella, and Tom and Stanley bear various similarities towards their own counterpart, which shows that, even though the details of their personalities are different, Tennessee Williams cut these characters from the same cloth.

One of the numerous similarities found between the two plays is how alike the various main characters are. For instance, the characters Amanda Wingfield and Blanche DuBois are extremely similar to one another. One way in which these two characters bear resemblance to each other is through their mutual dependence upon men. Michael DiSchiavi writes in an article, “In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the strangers on whose kindness Blanche DuBois has ‘always depended’ are exclusively male strangers. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda and Laura Wingfield depend on Tom for their very survival” (18). Thus, Blanche depends upon the men for kindness in regard to her poor situation, and Amanda relies upon her son, Tom, to provide for her and her daughter. To elucidate, Amanda Wingfield was a southern belle who had found herself in unfortunate circumstances. Her husband and the father of her children had abandoned her, her daughter, and her son, which caused the family to struggle to make ends meet. This resulted in both Amanda and Laura becoming entirely dependent upon Tom to keep them from destitution (Williams, *The Glass* 9-68). This is evident during the play when Amanda and Tom get into an argument about how he spends his time and his drinking habits which prompts her to say to him, “How dare you jeopardize your job? Jeopardize our security? How do you think we’d manage—?” (Williams, *The Glass* 23). Here, it is evident that Amanda and Laura depend upon Tom and his job at the warehouse to provide for them, which makes Amanda’s dependency upon a man quite clear. This is like the way that Blanche DuBois’ survival is also dependent upon men. She bounces around from man to man taking advantage of their hospitality and is quite lost without them. She even states in *A Streetcar Named Desire* that she “has always depended on the kindness of strangers” (Williams 102-03). In Blanche’s case, the kindness she depends upon seems to come predominantly from men; for example, she takes advantage of Stanley’s supposed kindness by staying at his house and attempts to court Mitch by using deceitful means (Williams, *A Streetcar* 1-103). Thus, Blanche does not depend upon women to save her because, after all, there is nothing that a woman could do for Blanche because women were not exactly in charge of their own affairs at the time. Thus, both Amanda and Blanche are completely dependent upon men, and can seemingly do nothing to fend for themselves, which only serves to increase their dependency.

Another similarity between the characters Amanda and Blanche is the importance they both place on ensuring that they appear elegant in other people’s eyes. Jordan Y. Miller writes in an article, “Amanda’s past bears small resemblance to Blanche’s sordid experiences, but Amanda’s pretensions of gentility and her struggles to uphold the semblances of elegance ring just as false” (90). Here, Miller states that while Amanda and Blanche’s pasts may not contain a plethora of similarities, they do have at least one aspect of their lives in common: their shared struggle in keeping up a false appearance of refinement. This fact is demonstrated best when Amanda tells Laura, “Now just you wait. I’m going to dress myself up. You’re going to be

astonished at your mother's appearance" (Williams, *The Glass* 43). Here, Amanda is dressing up to convince Jim, their gentleman caller, that she is a refined and elegant woman. She is desperately holding on to the person she was in the past and believes she can still be in her present state. Unfortunately for Amanda, this is nothing more than a mere fabrication of her own mind; she is not the woman she once was. Similarly to Amanda, Blanche attempts to convince others of her supposed refined grace as well. This is evident when she goes out with Mitch and pretends to be a virtuous woman by saying "It's just— well— I guess it is just that I have— old fashioned ideals!" (Williams, *A Streetcar* 65). Here, Blanche is essentially pretending to be a virgin in order to convince Mitch of her sophisticated nature, which is not even remotely close to the truth. Nevertheless, she puts on these false airs of gentility in order to convince Mitch that she is the kind of woman you marry, not mess around with. In the end, both Amanda and Blanche seem to cling to the elegance they both had in the past in order to convince other people that they are still graceful because they believe that is how they will obtain respect.

Another pair of similar characters from *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* is Laura Wingfield and Stella Kowalski, who are similar in their fragile and submissive natures. In fact, Bert Cardullo comments on the fragile nature of Laura when he writes, "The physically as well as emotionally fragile Laura escapes from her mid-twentieth-century urban predicament in Saint Louis [...] through art and music, through the beauty of her glass menagerie and through the records she plays on her Victrola, or gramophone" (33). Here, Cardullo is stating that Laura is too fragile to handle her suffocating surroundings and attempts to escape by withdrawing into herself and various art forms. Laura also has a submissive nature, which shows itself whenever her mother tells her what to do. For instance, during the scene when Jim comes over to dinner, Amanda tells Laura to go and open the door, something Laura truly does not want to do, which is revealed when Laura practically has a nervous breakdown and frantically says, "Mother, please, you go to the door!" (Williams, *The Glass* 45). Nevertheless, Laura bends to her mother's will when she finally succumbs and opens the door to let Tom and Jim inside (Williams, *The Glass* 46). This shows that Laura is easily willing to submit to her mother's commands instead of sticking up for herself, which simply serves to showcase her submissive personality. Additionally, Stella Kowalski also has a submissive personality, especially when it comes to her husband, Stanley. This is demonstrated through the way that Stella allows Stanley to get away with his temper and inappropriate behavior. After Stanley throws Stella's radio out the window and then abuses her, she simply makes excuses for him and refuses to leave him. This is evident when Blanche says that she is going to get Stella away from Stanley and Stella responds, "He didn't know what he was doing.... He was as good as a lamb when I came back and he's really very, very ashamed of himself" (Williams, *A Streetcar* 44). Here, Stella simply tries to make allowances for Stanley's inexcusable behavior, which is a clear indicator of a submissive personality. The fact that she does not stick up for herself and just allows Stanley to treat her however he desires proves that she is not a dominant person. Thus, both Laura and Stella have submissive personalities that allow other people to take advantage of them quite easily.

Furthermore, Laura Wingfield and Stella Kowalski are also similar in the way that they are both deceived by the men they view romantically. In Laura's case, she had romanticized a boy she hardly ever had any contact with, Jim O'Connor, into a person he simply was not, which allowed her to put him on a pedestal. This resulted in Laura garnering romantic feelings for Jim and even her being led to believe that he could be interested in her as well. In fact, Jim had led her on by dancing with her, complementing her, and kissing her, and then played it all off by telling her he was engaged (Williams, *The Glass* 60-64). He had deceived her into thinking that they could have been romantically linked, only to cruelly shatter any of her hopes. Jim O'Connor should have been honest with her from the beginning instead of toying with her emotions. Stella Kowalski was also deceived by her husband, Stanley. Unfortunately, Stanley's deceit had far more dire consequences than Jim's did. Stanley had raped Stella's sister, Blanche DuBois, and then denied that it had ever happened, convincing everyone that Blanche was crazy (Williams, *A Streetcar* 94-103). Stella had believed Stanley's lie because she could not bear to think that it could have ever been true. Thus, Stella was wholly and undeniably deceived by the man she had romantically linked herself to, just like Laura Wingfield. Sadly, both of their deceitful love interests caused them both pain. Jim caused Laura pain in the form of unrequited love and by giving her the hope of love and then crushing it. Stanley caused Stella pain by convincing her that her sister was both crazy and a liar, which hurt her because she loved Blanche and did not want to think that way about her. All in all, Laura and Stella had both felt the pain of another person's lies. Additionally, it can be conjectured that both women subconsciously allowed themselves to be deceived because the love that they wanted from these men was greater than any of their other desires. Laura hardly knew Jim, yet she completely allowed herself to be taken in by him. Stella knew how brutal Stanley could be

yet refused to believe her sister's accusations against him. Thus, it is quite probable that they were a part of their own deception.

Tom Wingfield and Stanley Kowalski are the final pair of similar characters from the two plays. One such similarity that can be found between the two is in the way that they both use alcohol to make themselves feel good. In Tom's case, alcohol is a substance that can be used in order to make himself feel better about his current living situation and to help ease the irritation of his overbearing mother. This is evident when Tom arrives at the apartment quite drunk after having a big disagreement with his mother about his life and the way he lives it (Williams, *The Glass* 23-25). Surely, he uses the numbing effects of alcohol in order to ease the pain he felt over the entire situation. Stanley also uses alcohol to make himself feel better; however, Stanley's alcohol use is certainly a little more dangerous than Tom's. It is apparent that Stanley enjoys drinking socially, especially during one of his poker games; unfortunately, this can cause him to be quite volatile in his actions. This is evident when Stella upsets him whilst he is drunk and he retaliates by throwing her radio out the window (Williams, *A Streetcar* 39-40). Stella responds to this action by saying to him "Drunk— drunk— animal thing, you!" (Williams, *A Streetcar* 40). Here, Stella is pointing out the obvious by saying that Stanley's impertinent actions are due to his heavy inebriation. She even explains Stanley's terrible behavior to her sister Blanche the next day by saying, "Oh. Well, it's his pleasure, like mine is movies and bridge. People have got to tolerate each other's habits, I guess" (Williams, *A Streetcar* 46). By saying this, Stella is alluding to the fact that this is certainly not the first time Stanley has completely lost his temper whilst under the influence, and it will not be the last time either. Stanley will continue to have his poker parties and drink heavily because he likes it, and Stella will have no choice but to simply tolerate it. Thus, while Stanley is unmistakably a discourteous and volatile drunk and Tom is not, both Tom and Stanley do use alcohol as a means of enjoying themselves.

Another similarity between the characters Tom and Stanley is found in the way that they are both determined to get their own way in life. For Tom, this means leaving home, and by extension abandoning his mother and sister, in order to pursue the life he wants. Near the end of the play, Tom tells Jim that he is a member of the Union of Merchant Seamen and that he paid his "dues this month, instead of the electric light bill" (Williams, *The Glass* 48). Here, it is obvious that Tom has put his own wants over the needs of his mother and sister by neglecting the light bill in order to pursue what he desires. Dr. Sneh Lata Sharma comments on this by stating "man must have his own way. Like every other male character in Williams' plays, without feeling any sense [of] guilt, he [Tom] leaves home, for he never committed himself to the familial or societal norms" (115). In other words, Tom leaves his mother and sister simply because he must have his own way, and he selfishly will not settle for anything less. This sense of entitlement is apparent in Stanley's personality as well. A prime example of this would be during the scene that he calls for Stella to come back and refuses to stop until she does. This is shown when he calls Eunice on the phone and tells her "Eunice, is my girl up there? I want my girl! I'll keep on ringin' till I talk with my baby!" (Williams, *A Streetcar* 41). Here, Stanley makes his intentions plain: he will not stop calling for Stella, and irritating everyone in the neighborhood, until he gets Stella to come back down to him. He certainly made good on his promise when he had proceeded to go outside and kept screaming Stella's name until she came back downstairs again and into Stanley's open arms, which demonstrates that Stanley got his way, as he surely expected to (Williams, *A Streetcar* 42). Thus, both Tom and Stanley were extremely determined when it came to getting what they wanted, and it is clear that they did not care about how others felt regarding their actions either.

All in all, the main characters of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* share some remarkable similarities to one another. Blanche DuBois and Amanda Wingfield both place quite a heavy significance on keeping up with their appearance, even if one does not necessarily have the means to do so. This makes it evident that the two women placed a enough importance upon the opinions of others. This is likely because they both recognized that in order to get what they want; they would have to be able to appease the people who were holding all of the cards. In their cases, the people holding the cards were often men. Surely, this is also why Blanche and Amanda were so dependent upon what a man could provide for them, because they saw that it was the only way to survive. Laura and Stella, the other two female protagonists, also shared an aspect of their personalities in that they were both submissive people. They were completely willing to bend to someone else's will, so long as they were taken care of. This shows intelligence on their part in that, just like Blanche and Amanda, they were doing what they needed to do in order to survive. Laura and Stella were both deceived by the men that they loved as well. This deception shows that Laura and Stella

Finally, Tom and Stanley had a few personality traits in common with each other as well. They both used alcohol to enjoy themselves and make themselves feel better. Also, they both were a little self-entitled, and because of this sense of entitlement, they displayed an intense sort of determination. This resulted in them insisting on getting the things that they wanted and believed they deserved, regardless of who got caught in the consequences. These similar characteristics make it apparent that Tennessee Williams had some type of basic template when it came to creating his main characters; and he did not often deviate from this template when constructing their general personalities. The character template that Williams had was likely formed by people he knew who had a heavy influence on his life, which is why all of these similarities show up in his characters throughout multiple works. This helps to add an air of authenticity to Williams' writing style because he drew upon things in his own life. As an artist, Williams was open and honest about the topics and characters presented in his plays, which is reflected in his writing style. Overall, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* are two wonderful plays with interesting, albeit similar, main characters. Surely, these plays will be beloved for years to come.

Tiffanie Brown

Honorable Mention in Essays:

“Finding My Strength”

We are all runners, in one way or another. Some people run toward relationships or material success; others run away from their past mistakes. I started running for a little bit of all these reasons. I ran because I enjoyed the thrill of adrenaline as if it were liquid health running through my veins. I ran because I envisioned a smaller dress size, clearer skin, and a firmer shape. I ran to feel the wind in my face, hear the birdsong in the air, and smell the grass and trees and all of nature with my senses. I wanted to feel more human, more alive, more a part of this planet. I ran because I could finally hear myself thinking the thoughts that I was not brave enough to admit to myself during my normal daytime routine. As I ran, I knew that it did not matter what anyone else in the world was doing at that moment—it was just little old me on a sidewalk finding my strength to face the big wide world.

Starting in my teens, running as a hobby usually took me around my neighborhood mostly during good weather. After becoming a mom in my twenties, I still ran casually here and there, sometimes to the park with my kids or to the gas station for snacks. Then in 2013, I decided to take the next bold step—I signed up to run a three-mile race for charity, a 5K on St. Patrick’s Day, so I could prove to myself that I had what it takes to “shamrock it.” Since I was in my early thirties and the prime of my life, it felt perfectly natural to pay money to run five kilometers with a local YMCA, just to have the accountability I needed to get off the couch and move forward with my life. So I chose running a 5K in lieu of moving upward in my wardrobe.

Plodding through all five kilometers of my first official “race,” I laughed to myself that it could even be called a race. It seemed ironic that in a race, people usually run to win, but I was running just to finish with enough breath left in my body to hobble back to my car. But finish I did—triumphantly! In just about thirty-nine minutes, I had found the strength to truly call myself “a runner.”

This first victory made me hungry for more, so I challenged myself to run more races that year. I earned a small handful of race shirts in bold colors and snapped a few selfies in front of a finish line, looking proud and vibrant. Every time I wore one of my race shirts, I felt like I was putting on a layer of strength that I had fought so hard to gain.

Although I had proven to myself that I could find the strength to endure a lengthy racecourse, I was not strong enough to face the challenges at home. Eventually, that hard-earned strength drained away amidst the trials of life. My glorious 5K t-shirt collection moved to the pajama drawer because I had other hardships to persevere in besides running. I now needed all my physical energy to chase toddlers around the house and all my mental energy to chase away my fears of the future. When I did sneak out of the house to go for a run, all my insecurities ran through my mind with me, and I had to admit that I could not outrun the problems in my marriage. What was the point of running a 5K when a lifelong relationship was unraveling beside me? Where would a finish line lead me when I knew I had to go back to a broken home afterward? Well, at least there was plenty of ice cream in the freezer of that broken home, so I ran back to it.

During those troubled times, I still ran on occasion, but mostly toward food. For about two years, I indulged in every high carb delight I had denied myself. If the kids wanted Oreos, then we all ate Oreos. Mostly it was either donuts or chocolate cereal. “Mom, what’s for dinner tonight?” the kids would ask. “Cereal. Grab a bowl,” I would respond in between mouthfuls. My husband was gone, and the kids never complained. Besides, they ate vegetables at school, so why not have sugar for dinner?

Inevitably, my waist started looking like the donuts I had been eating. At that point, I knew I needed to run toward something other than food. I needed to remember what it felt like to be strong. But I could not go back to what life was like before the divorce, to what *I* was like back then. No, I had to set new goals for a new season of my life. This time I would not be passed up by my own inadequacy, but I would run toward a new destiny and find a new strength.

My goal this time was not to repeat the past by running another 5K, so I signed up for a challenge twice as daunting—a 10K in April of 2017. I thought I was going crazy for attempting to run twice as much as

I ever had with only about half the time and energy. Maybe my mom could also share in the blame. After all, the event had a Wizard-of-Oz theme that year, and all my mom wanted was to relive her childhood vicariously through my participation in this yellow-brick-road mini-marathon. It sounds better when I tell people that I am not solely responsible for my ludicrous decision to attempt this strange feat.

For months I trained on a treadmill, drowning out the *swoosh-swoosh* sound of the rubber by talking myself into confidence. I ran outside when I could, planning days and times when I would not be embarrassed seeing people, I knew in case I heaved over on the sidewalk once I got past the five-mile mark. To run 6.2 miles, I knew I would have to push myself to the limit. As my muscles and my spirit gained strength, I imagined my future-self looking back and thinking, "This was all worth it."

When the long-anticipated registration day finally arrived, I had the sports-weave shirt with the race logo and my running belt ready to go. At the expo center where I had to check in the day before the race, long lines of athletic kiosks tried to lure me into buying a stick-figure car decal, but I passed them by. That could be risky if the race did not go well tomorrow. "After all," I thought, "What if people see this sticker on my car and ask me how I did, and I'm too embarrassed to tell them the truth?" I was also afraid that people might ask me when I would be running next, but my answer would be "Never again!" If I survived the race the next day, maybe then I would feel like buying some 10K swag to put my confidence on display.

On the morning of the race, I got up with bleary eyes in the wee hours to ride the bus from the parking lot to the race site. I honestly had not considered having to leave the house at 5 A.M. (the things they do not tell a novice until the day before the event). On the bumpy old school bus, I sat next to some dedicated empty-nest women who were not running this race just to prove to themselves that they could, but who wanted to improve their times! *They* did not complain about lack of sleep, joint pain, or having to find someone to watch their kids while they ran. "How nice for you," I thought, as I brushed them off as "not-my-friend type" for the day.

Even though my eyes were burning from the earliness of the awakening, I did not want to fill up on coffee at the race site. (Anyone who has ever tried to run with a stomach-full of liquid sloshing around knows why.) As it turns out, I could have chugged a venti cappuccino if I had wanted to, because the line of port-a-potties stretched on for what seemed like all ten kilometers of the route. I had never seen so many port-a-potties before, not even at outdoor concerts or state fairs. So I decided to join the line of those who were doing the smart thing before the race started.

What happened next both surprised and embarrassed me in my own mind. BOOM! BOOM! The explosion of cannons provoked my panic. "The Boston Bomber is back! Duck for cover!" is what I wanted to shout out to innocent bystanders, but instead I froze in terror rather than dodging behind a port-a-potty. I felt like such a bumpkin who had never been to a race that set off cannons to signal the runners to the starting line, but then I reminded myself that I was not here to impress anyone. As the national anthem played, I reminded myself that I was here to regain my own self-respect, so let the cannons blast forth that truth if they must.

The first 3K of the race were uneventful; for the whole two miles I was feeling strong, motivated, and determined to pace myself. I ignored the teens and twenty-somethings who flew past me, because, after all, I was nearly twice their age. I consoled myself by repeating my metaphoric mantra, "Just run forward in the race of life." I wondered who else in this race was trying to run away from a broken marriage of the past or the pressures of single parenting in the present? If there were any, I never met them.

By the time I reached the 5K mark, I was elated to make it so far. The three-mile mark was the point of no return. I would either finish this 10K or forever be humiliated. I kept scanning the sidelines to see if my mom had brought my two kids along to cheer me on, but no sign of them yet. Every time I passed a cardboard "You can do it!" sign that strangers were holding up for someone else, I would imagine that those motivational words were for me instead, mentally inserting my name into their shouts, like "Go [Mary], go! You've got this!" I tricked myself into believing that they believed in me too.

At last, around the 6K mark, I spied my funny-looking family, almost invisible underneath the blankets they were huddled in. I ran faster, partly to be able to stop to take a breath and exchange hugs and

partly to make it seem like I had been running that fast the whole time. In fact, it was reeeeeaaaaallllly hard not to jump in the car with them and go back home, but I tore myself away from their support in a desperate effort to finish the race. Oh, it was not for anything inspirational, no sense of being a good example to my kids or not letting them down. In truth, I just did not want to be embarrassed next week when people would ask me about the race and I would have to admit that I bailed out before even reaching four miles! Oh no, I would finish, for the sake of my future bragging rights.

The 7K stretch with its hills and curves was the point at which all my motivation was trying to run and hide from me. My achy joints were screaming to sort-of slowly run-walk, for “pacing myself,” I theorized. It was the sensible thing to do, but that was destined to be the moment of my chagrin. The first ones to pass me were older women sporting fluffy neon tutus and looking like a feminine posse, halfway cheering each other on and halfway dragging each other by the arms up the hill. It was amusing to see their sense of both fashion and community as they tried to achieve their goal together. Even though I would have liked to be part of a running partnership like that, for me running was a solitary event. It gave me a quiet place for my thoughts to unravel to the rhythm of my feet on the pavement. I could go as fast or slow as my emotions would allow, and I wouldn’t have to waste energy in small talk. It was one thing I could do for myself. I was happy for these women, and I rationalized that they had passed me because of their combined effort, but there was no fault in choosing a solitary path.

About a half-kilometer later, a dad pushing his two small children in a jogging stroller came up on my left and flew past me, kids screaming in delight. At this point, I was really embarrassed, but the red flush on my face could have been due to the chilly weather or my overtaxed lung capacity. I love children, and usually I am supportive of other single parents, but for the moment I just hated this dad. I barely had the strength to lurch my own body forward, and this guy was running while pushing a stroller weighed down with two small children, probably adding at least an additional one hundred pounds. He was not even out of breath or desperately searching the skies for some angelic assistance--he was running fast and loving it! The only rationale was that he was male, and by their very nature men tend to have more biological strength and muscle capacity than women. But that was not the end of it. We both got to a refreshment’s booth at about the same time, and soon I had reason to hate him even more. When a volunteer handed out free Gatorade-Goo (as I called it) to replenish our electrolytes, I downed the sticky stuff immediately, squeezing out every last bit of nourishment that the little rectangular packet could muster. But this guy casually handed it off to his kids to play with, and they dropped it on the ground. I guess *he* did not need electrolytes to finish the race. Well, God bless him and his kids anyway.

Another unsuspecting runner dealt the final blow to my self-esteem. There was just no way on earth I could rationalize this one. The cute little grandma that I had seen waving to her grandchildren a few kilometers back was now on my right, and as she zoomed past me, I guessed she must have been at least eighty years old, although it was hard to see through my sweat and tears. I double-blinked at her lavender sweat-suit just to make sure I was not seeing things, but no, there was no mistaking the fact that she was twice my age and had truly left me in the dust.

I eventually did make it to the final stretch with no bloodshed. By that time, I was no longer counting how many people passed me in the last kilometer, which might have been dozens. Despite my grumbling, I felt a strange sense of peace in knowing that we were all on the same journey, and we would all have the same blisters on our feet afterward. Even though I had chosen to run in solitude, I still felt like I was a part of this crazy group of people running a 10K in the dawn’s early light of a Saturday in spring.

When it was finally my turn to cross the finish line, I do not think I was even paying attention when the announcers called my name and time over the speakers. All I could think about was reaching the point of not having to run anymore. As other runners gave high-fives and bear hugs to their loved ones, was I sad that I had chosen to go it alone? No, because I really had to get back to that line of port-a-potties and did not want anybody in my way, for their sake. And because I had found what I was looking for—the chance to feel strong again. Was I jealous of those who had passed me and gone on to their victory several minutes (or hours) ahead of me? No, because that cleared the path for me to achieve my own victory at my own pace. I don’t know what happened to the tutu-women, the Super Dad, or the Speedy Grandma. I never saw them again, but I can imagine that they were just as proud of themselves as I was for finishing the race.

Instead of basking in the glow of my lifetime achievement, I lackadaisically retrieved my backpack and my medal and wearily slumped into a seat on the bus to go home. I was surprised that I did not feel excitement, triumph, or elation at having finished a super-major life goal; instead, I felt great hostility toward the whole thing for making me feel so miserable. I guessed that after running a 10K, I could expect emotional swings due to depleted energy stores, so I did not berate myself for feeling disconsolate. Instead, I just looked forward to the donuts and coffee that I knew my family would have waiting for me at home. *No one* was going to pass me racing toward those donuts!

In the end, I had to admit that I gained much more than a medal and a bright blue shirt that day. I had earned not only the right to purchase a car decal and brag about finishing the race, but my self-respect had risen higher than it had ever been since the divorce. I had joined in with others who were running the same race for their own various reasons, but all I was competing against was my own self-doubt. On that yellow-brick race-road in Kansas, I found strength to face the big wide world and whatever challenges life would continue to bring me. I found my way back home.

Mary Gustin

Honorable Mention in Essays:

“Vigilantism: A Result of Failed Justice and Fear”

We are taught right from wrong early in life and, for most of us, the lessons stick. We grow up and transition into the bustle of our own lives: working tirelessly in our careers, building our marriages, and nurturing our children; we become prototypical members of society. We wander through our daily routines, giving little thought to what is going on around us. The nightly news buzzes in the background — just beneath the sound of baby cries, a barking dog, and table-talk over dinner — announcing the latest in drug activity, protests, kidnappings, and murder investigations. Our homes are safe and our families are healthy, we have no complaints. We leave these situations to the police, the lawyers, and the judges. We have been programmed to assume that the men and women behind the badge, wearing their courtroom-best, or cloaked in black robes are equipped to provide appropriate justice. This idea is supported by Ben Keiser, author of “Vigilante Justice: An Oxymoron?” In his article, Keiser states: “We don’t even bat an eye when we hear about someone being killed in a gang shooting across town, we just change the channel. And whether or not criminals are punished is something we leave to other people” (1). But what happens when Utopia is invaded? Do we trust the judicial system while waiting patiently for due process? What happens when the police do not make an arrest, or a jury acquits, or a judge sentences too lightly? These are the instances in which an inadequate criminal-justice system and fear for the safety of our loved ones and community flips a switch, pushing “normal” people to take matters into their own hands, creating vigilantes on a mission to even the score.

As defined by *Merriam-Webster*, a vigilante is a watchman, a guard, a member of a volunteer committee organized to suppress and punish crime summarily as when the processes of law appear inadequate; a self-appointed doer of justice (“vigilante” 1317). The view on vigilantism varies. These self-proclaimed equalizers are seen, by some, as lawbreakers themselves, guilty and deserving of discipline; by others, these castigators are seen as real-life heroes, picking up where justice leaves off, righting the wrongs of perpetrators that go unpunished.

One could argue that our country was essentially founded as a result of vigilantism. With certain policies in place, it is evident that our country’s origin, and present-day frame of mind, suggests that lawlessness is sometimes necessary. Paul Robinson, co-author of *Shadow Vigilantes: How Distrust in the Justice System Breeds A New Kind of Lawlessness*, discusses that vigilante behavior has been a part of our world as far back as the American Revolution, a revolt of the Colonists against British rule; additionally, Robinson states, “Given what the creation story was for the United States, it is no surprise to find some language in the Constitution that specifically seems to support and recognize the legitimacy of some forms of vigilantism” (Pagnamenta 4 and 6). The Second Amendment and (in some states) the stand-your-ground law are two examples that suggest taking matters into one’s own hands is the foundation on which America is built, and a way of thinking that remains popular today.

Most parents would admit that their single-most important job is to protect their children. It is in a mother’s nature to defend her young, but in a situation where a predator violates the law by harming her child, that mother is expected to abide by the law herself — she is to wait for the legalities to play out. For some, the processes of our justice system are lacking. For Lori Palmer, a retired police officer and mother of a pedophile victim, the weight-of-the-wait became too heavy. Palmer felt as though investigators were doing too little in her daughter’s case, so she took it upon herself to force the alleged perpetrator into confessing (Associated Press). If polled, there would be mixed opinions surrounding Palmer’s actions; it is arguable that she is just as guilty of criminal behavior as her victim, but it is also debatable that she has a fan base of other mothers who would gladly break the law in the name of defending their children. Motherhood is a daily choice to put another human’s needs and well-being before your own, to ensure their safety — that is exactly what Lori Palmer did.

When we think of our fathers, a few thoughts probably come to mind: piggy-back rides, backyard barbecues, football and fishing. Dads are the heads of the household, the men we go to for help. But how far will a father go to fulfill his duties? One dad did the only thing he felt he could do when he learned of his son’s kidnapping and sexual assault. Gary Plauche waited for the extradition of his son’s attacker, shooting him in the Baton Rouge, LA airport. Plauche pleaded innocent by reason of insanity (Associated Press, par.

14 and 18). Plauche's decision to murder the man that harmed his child is technically categorized as murder, as one life was ended at the hand of another; however, some may sympathize with this father's decision to punish a monster, ridding society of a child predator. Desperation will bring out our most savage capabilities, and in a cloudy moment of rashness, this father put his son's abuser to death.

To create the life we long for, we play by the rules. Some dream of starting a family, and others dream of becoming CEO. Some of us work hard from an early age, submitting to laborious work with minimal fruits. Others go to college, climb the corporate ladder, buy an apartment in the city, and take exotic vacations. Regardless of the path taken, with hard work comes a roof overhead, dinner on the table, and, with a little luck, a decent school-zone. These are amenities we fight to acquire; these are amenities we fight to keep. And when we are cornered, an animalistic hunger is aroused within us to protect what is ours — our children, our home, our peace-of-mind.

The American Dream differs from person to person based on various factors — one's upbringing, family dynamic, or financial circumstances — but most have a vision that looks something like this: charming streets lined with cookie-cutter houses, neighborhood block-parties where everyone knows everyone, friendly waves while collecting the morning paper, and cozy, quiet nights nestled in bed, drifting into a slumber filled with dreams as delightful as reality. Most of us enjoy some version of this storybook life, but when that comfort zone is disrupted with drug dealers and nightly crime, certain individuals make it their mission to end this activity to preserve their community. Manuel Pardo, Jr., a former cop and self-proclaimed enforcer of the law, killed drug dealers and other criminals to clean up the area he lived in — stating at his trial, “all nine victims were drug dealers who had no right to live”, viewing his own actions as a “favor to society” (Pardo v. State, p. 1). Pardo is seen as a violent serial-killer, sentenced to death for his crimes. But his town-mates might view him differently: Pardo made it safer to stroll down the streets after dark; children are able to play, uninterrupted by street-violence; citizens rest easily knowing there is a little less chance of loved ones being pulled into a life of addiction and crime. To some, Manuel Pardo, Jr. is a monster; others call him a hero.

With daily exposure to violence, and our media-enabled fly-on-the-wall presence in courtrooms, we tend to develop a jaded outlook on the tragedies that go on all around us. We possess an unrealistic that-won't-happen-to-me mentality. But the reality is that every day families lose loved ones, experiencing the impact of addiction, kidnapping, bullying, and murder. Tragedy does not discriminate — sons are carried away in body bags, daughters are beaten by their boyfriends and husbands, teenagers struggle with addiction and depression, and children are abused by people they trust. When the dust settles, those left to pick up the pieces find themselves amid the debris that is dropped charges, light sentences, lack of options for rehabilitation, and an aftermath that haunts these troubled souls for years to come. As neighbors and friends, we send our condolences, make phone calls to convey our support, and bring casseroles to the mourners. These people are our seemingly normal neighbors and acquaintances: worshippers in our congregations, shoppers at our supermarkets, members of the PTA, and dinner guests in our homes. We see these individuals as the men and women next door, never imagining them capable of extreme revenge.

To judge the individuals for their behavior will come easily for most. We point fingers, we whisper, we let our minds run away with ill thoughts. But circumstances can change our perception of right and wrong — to experience these circumstances is to understand them. Lori Palmer, Gary Plauche, and Manuel Pardo, Jr. are just like us. Each of these vigilantes began their lives as “normal” people, but the unexpected happened. In moments of catastrophe, we lose our ability to trust and our willingness to obey. Our normalcy falters, our true character emerges, and we transform into ruthless advocates for our cause. Sometimes we become monsters ourselves. We succumb to the darkness; the darkness of the cloud that looms over a mother's heart when she discovers the disgusting details of her child's stolen innocence, the darkness that fills a father's soul when he fears he has failed his son, the darkness that befalls our communities as they are overrun with turf wars and drug activity, or the darkness that steals the breath of citizens when an unexpected verdict is delivered on national television.

In all these situations, the law is broken — there is no denying that. But whether these acts of vigilantism are viewed through a legal lens or a moral one, there is one shared truth: each deed exhibits an undeniable need to protect. Humans tend to hang on to things, situations, and people long after we should have let go. And when it comes to grief, we are no different. For some, the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) are easier to live through than for others; some get stuck in the anger. For vigilantes, anger is a driving force, compelling them into making bad choices to get to — what they consider — a good place. Hopefully, compassion and understanding will be the driving forces for the on-

lookers as we try to understand we are not defined by the terrible things we do; we are defined by why we do them.

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Samantha Ray

“Lolli Lolli Lollipop”

“A flat, rounded candy on the end of a stick”, is the mere definition of a lollipop, but it is something far beyond than just a sugar-coated ball. I would describe it as a tooth-rotting joy that when eaten, brings smiles and big toothy grins to all those around. Lollipops, while just a treat to some, bring across delight with their many extensive uses and variety of pleasing looks and flavors.

There are a wide variety of flavors: sweet, sour, chocolate, fruity, and so many more that I cannot list them all. Lollipops are essential when having to quiet down a misbehaving toddler as this is a sure way to get them off someone's case, that is until the sugar rush hits. In desperate times, I have given them to my niece when she threw one of her royal tantrums. It brought peace, although fleeting, because I soon had to suffer the consequences afterward when she ran amok screaming like a great unruly beast. Even thinking about it now, sends a chill down my spine. Fleeting as it was, however, I enjoyed every second of tranquility it granted me. Even the stick of a lollipop has its uses. As a kid, I would pretend it was a cigarette which also resulted in me getting grounded. I wanted to be the “cool” kid who was on the receiving end of all the attention. I was the bad influence that the other children's parents warned them about. The stick can also be used for art projects. I used to sharpen the ends of them and shoot them through a straw. They worked well to fend off my mean older brother.

An even bigger delight was finding a hidden treat beneath the hard exterior: gum. As children, as soon as someone brought out a stick of gum, the gum-bearer had all their fellow classmates on their knees, doing their bidding. The effect was even great when it was a combination of both a lollipop and gum. Is it any wonder why children love them? Baffling, I know.

I also remember receiving these same treats at the doctor's office. He would reward me with a lollipop in repentance after impaling my arm with a needle with such belligerence that it left me in tears. I always forgave him afterward. Funnily enough, I remember the dentist doing this as well. They always advised against eating something so sweet, for fear of it rotting my teeth, yet I was rewarded with just that. Maybe that is how they stay in business?

My grandfather also has a use for lollipops other than their deliciousness. The lollipop being delicious plays a big part in it but because he often has low blood sugar, he always needs to keep them nearby. He keeps a large pack of them in the house and in the car. Even greater than that is how they remind him of his childhood. When he starts reminiscing about his childhood, he thinks about the cheap prices and nifty little candy shops. This almost always leads into a 5-hour conversation about gas prices, however, and I am always forced to listen begrudgingly with a little bit of jealousy and disbelief.

A person does not have to wrack their brain for answers as to why this sugary concoction results in such a joyous reaction out of others. From face-splitting grins from unruly children to pleasing an old man, lollipops have long since provoked wonderful reactions out of people and continue to do so with its significance. Behind all that corn-syrup and sugar lies an important part of people's lives: delight.

Tara Potter

“The fall our Human Spirit: A Fervent Response against the Rising Industrialization in Wordsworth’s
The World is Too Much with Us”

In the late 1700s, industrialization reached through England where new opportunities for trade and exchange emerged (malibrarian, 2008). The increase in production systems brought by mechanization and the new arising jobs in the cities shift the society from farming to manufacturing. Many people exchanged their jobs in the farm to work in the factories with the belief they would earn more money and better provide for their families. Having this kind of mentality, in the mid-1700s to mid-1800s, the most significant period of enclosure took place. Landowners decided to take tighter control of the lands and restrict it to the public (Cole, 1927). Rich farmers bought the lands of small farmers and privatized them to earn more profit. This in return forced more small farmers to give up farming, leave the country, and move to the cities to sustain for their families. The Enclosure Movement propagates the situation of urbanization that had caused the British Industrial Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century.

As England began a period of economic transformation, many people were afflicted with the growing pace of the economy, especially the poor laborers and farmers who had lost their jobs in the process. Because humans and animals were replaced with new inventions and technologies, there was a decline in the supply of manpower needed which means that what humans were supposed to do, machines were able to. Even the natural goods provided by Nature were substituted with products that were man-made (Stearns, 1998). Factories became the source of production that people had forgotten to see the essence of nature in their lives. Amid the prevailing industrialization, pioneers of an artistic movement emerged and William Wordsworth was one of the romantic poets who used writing to reconcile with the natural world. Known for his great love and affinity with Nature, Wordsworth’s *The World is Too Much with Us* not only portrays mankind’s lost connection with Nature but also accentuates the fall of our human spirit in the process of gaining the world.

William Wordsworth had always looked at Nature with sympathy and respect. Born in the rural areas of Cockermouth, in Cumberland, he spent his childhood close to Nature, where he wandered among the fields and the woods. He adored the natural world more than anything which in return widened his imagination. Wordsworth’s strong bond with Nature involves the fact that he was born in it and he practically grew up with it. Aside from that and the great scenery that painted the influence in his poetry (Long, 1909), the unroofed school he went to in Hawkshead had enticed him in his education more than his books. Inspired by the sight of the wildflowers that he sees every day, he did well in the grammar school where he had written his first poetry. He went to the University of Cambridge later and although he didn’t excel as he did in Hawkshead, he was able to graduate in 1790. The powerful connection he had with Nature since childhood through his growing years reflected the works he had produced later in his career (Huang, Pei, & Fu, 2014).

Wordsworth was the central figure of the Romantic Movement that turned over many long-accepted beliefs (Kelly, 2015, p. 348). Contrary to the form of poetry that mainly concentrates on logic and subjective emotions, the Romantic poets “break down the boundaries of neoclassical poetry” and moved away from didactic poetry by making nature the central theme of their works (Tilak, 2010). Romantic poets believed in creativity rather than logic. Because of the prevailing industrialization in England at that time, writers were convinced that they had to remind people of what is happening in the world and to mankind in their perspective. It was not an easy task, but the Romantic poets came along and created works in the aim to revive the spirit that was fading due to industrialization.

Wordsworth was regarded as a “prophet of nature” (Mukherjee, 2010). He understands Nature as something that should be link deep within our souls. In his point of view, “Nature is a teacher whose wisdom we can learn if we will, and without which any human life is vain and incomplete” (Kp, n.d.). This view is most apparent in his poem, *The World is Too Much with Us*. Humanity’s lost connection with Nature is most conspicuous with mankind’s obsession with money. Wordsworth illustrates that “the world is too much with us” because people are more concerned with “getting and spending” (Wordsworth, 1807) for material things in the cost of their humanity. Mankind’s greed is what is keeping them to intimately connect with Nature and with their spiritual selves (Corfman, n.d.). People are barely living in the kind of world that they deal with every day. They become less appreciative of the little things, selfish, aggressive, and have only strived to work to survive. It is as if money has dominated their lives that it became their priority even over themselves. It is

generally known that people need to eat to live, but people were not born solely to eat. Wordsworth wants to remind people that there is a bigger world out there that they are missing out as they focus all the time and energy, they have to gain these worldly things.

As people spend their time and energy earning and gaining, they forget to acknowledge the fact that the true beauty of the world is not something that they can own (Corfman, n.d.). Any material thing that can be acquired cannot last forever. Security and prosperity do not just come if people have the money. The true essence of security is when people know how to value things that matter and know how to be contented with it. People should feel safe not because they have everything, but they should still be despite having nothing. Because people pay more attention to the material world, they most often overlooked the beauty of the natural world that has been with them since the beginning. Wordsworth illustrates this in the lines, "This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon, The winds that will be howling at all hours, And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers" (Wordsworth, 1807). Wordsworth's comparison of Nature with femininity concludes the idea that he thinks of Nature as a woman. He humanizes her so people can understand how fragile and ferocious Nature is. Like a woman, Nature deserves to be appreciated, loved, and taken care of. Wordsworth's description helps people realize how it was essential to recognize what they have been neglecting as materialism dominates their lives.

Wordsworth emphasizes how humans are still not in harmony with Nature in the line, "For this, for everything, we are out of tune" (Wordsworth, 1807). This argues how the world was far from living the "Wordsworthian ideal", and it was clear that the "natural world" is his "ideal" world. People are not in tune with Nature because mankind is so caught up living their lives that there is hardly any time and place left for Nature to fit in. It is like, Nature was the one adjusting when humans should have been the one doing something to be in tune with Nature. In the following lines, "It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn; So might I, standing on this pleasant lea, Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn" (Wordsworth, 1807), the speaker displays desperation as he calls upon the great God pleading what he would rather become just to be close to Nature. At that time, no one would want or wish to be Pagan in Christian England which highlights Wordsworth's revelation on how disappointed and distressed he was seeing humankind getting estranged from Nature. He then emphasizes the lines, "Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea; Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn" (Wordsworth, 1807) the possibilities of seeing these pagan gods as something he would rather choose just to witness Nature through their power. This shows the speaker's frustration and how he sees the world as severely damaged and hopeless to wish these kinds of actions to happen. These lines indicate the turning point of the poem and how Wordsworth used his faith to make the readers grasp the seriousness of the issue on what mankind chooses to overlook in every day of their lives.

The ability to connect to both the spiritual and social worlds can build a good relationship with Nature (Editors, 2002). Wordsworth had always believed in the significant connection between Nature and humanity that explains the immense emotion he had expressed in his poem in response to the occurring industrialization in England. For Wordsworth, the world is not just too much because of the material things. The world is too much "with us" included because "ourselves" is mankind's main problem. Along with the conflict people have with Nature, there is an internal conflict going on within themselves. The struggle mankind has on the inside reflects what they do on the outside. This explains why people had been tied up to greed instead of Nature. With all the material things and innovations emerging from a variety of man-made machinery, the world is becoming too much, too full, and too crowded. It is in Wordsworth's eighth book in *The Prelude* entitled "Retrospect:—Love of Nature leading to Love of Man" (Editors, 2002) that illustrates how the experiences and memories he had in his childhood had a substantial effect on what he had become. Wordsworth explained in the book how grateful and contented he was growing up because he had Nature by his side which had led for his human spirit to prosper. He reminds everyone that if people would just initiate caring about the natural world and appreciate the little things in life, the humanity in them will somewhat come out naturally. Wordsworth insists that as people distance themselves from nature, they become more deviant, and act more immature and selfish because it is not just their minds that gets corrupted in the cities but so is their souls. Industrialization did not just ruin nature but has also ruined humanity's spirit.

What people have become does not only reflects how close they were to Nature. It also mirrors the image of what people have been doing to themselves. People sometimes treat others how they have been

treated in the past. But there is also this underlying idea where people unconsciously treat others based on how they treat themselves. This means that if men are cruel to Nature, there is a high probability that they are also cruel to themselves. But by taking good care of nature, people take good care of themselves. The spiritual development of the natural world does not just come overnight. It has to be established and it needs to lay on a good foundation. Like Wordsworth, his spiritual connection with Nature was because he had spent his childhood with it and in it. So in Wordsworth's perspective, the proverb quote "If there's a will, there's a way" is only relevant to what he is trying to teach his readers. He suggests that if people only have the will to connect with Nature, all things involved like the feeling of contentment and satisfaction will come out naturally.

Wordsworth's fervent response against the civilized and industrialized world reminds people that one does not need to lose himself to gain the world. "He reveals that very few things that people see in Nature actually belong to them" (Corfman, n.d.). People have always had the freedom to enjoy the natural world without having the risk of losing themselves. In that case, the fall of our humanity is not in anyone's hands but ours. The change Wordsworth is hoping for lies in the decision that mankind will choose between the natural world and the material world.

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Charmaine Garin

“Accentuate the Negative”

I’ve heard it said that negatively perceived events stand out in our minds the most. It makes sense. When you are corrected for something and it embarrasses you, that memory sticks out like a post-it tab. If you hit your toe on a coffee table, you try to avoid it at all costs the next time you walk by. The same could be said for the first time I was fired. Losing one’s job is a harrowing and humbling experience that can prompt a person to pick themselves up truly. I have noticed in fact that when I am upset or angry at a situation I tend to work twice as hard, and I suppose this scenario was no different. The humiliation, pain, and fear brought on by termination drove me to seek out my next chapter of life with what can only be described as fervent determination.

I had been without a job for 2 months, in a bit of a rut for lack of a better word. My best friend found an advertisement in a newspaper (of all places in 2018) for a local bank that was hiring tellers. I had no experience in a bank, but I was interested. To my surprise, I got the job, an 8-4 type of deal with benefits and weekends off. It was a wonderful place to gain some real-world experience and really delve into the public sector, and I worked there for 6 months. I particularly enjoyed that this bank would host a monthly birthday breakfast for everyone who had a birthday in whatever month it was, always a treat, especially since I used food as a coping mechanism heavily during that year. The day I got fired happened to be a birthday breakfast day. The morning felt usual and insignificant as I walked to the time clock. I was blissfully unaware of what was to come and looked forward to the birthday breakfast that lay ahead of me. Sometimes the bank would order breakfast items from a local restaurant. Other times they would simply have donuts, kolaches, and the like. This fateful breakfast included a bit of both which was about the only pleasant surprise that day.

I fixed my plate with a medley of breakfast staples, from scrambled eggs to even a chocolate filled donut from Shipley’s (an all-time favorite of mine). I took 3 or so bites from the delicious fried pastry when I was called aside quietly. I was to go to the bank manager’s office for a bit of a talk --nothing serious, I assured my troubled self. I never liked that room, even when I was in it during the hiring process. The bank manager was nowhere to be seen, just one of the loan officers who seemed a little creepy but was usually kind to me.

While telling myself to remain calm, I knew very well that I was already having trouble at the bank. There were a few days when my drawer did not balance just so. Never anything major, but enough for it to be an issue. I had been sent to another branch of this bank to undergo extra “training” to resolve the balancing errors. I try to limit my remembrance of this time as I only recall frustration, humiliation, and constant condescension from my “trainer”. After all, it was only a week that I was away from my home bank to improve on my shortcomings.

After my brief, extracurricular training at the other branch, I returned to my home bank on a probationary period. The stipulations were as follows: “For 90 days the teller must balance perfectly. If he/she is under or over even so much as \$0.03, termination will follow”. I made it through my probationary period and felt so secure in my position. Then I did something that caused the main event of this tale: I cashed a rather hefty check that was made out to a business. I didn’t think anything of it because the last name on the check was the same as that of the person cashing it. I didn’t realize that it read “Insert Surname, Inc.”. Those three letters made all the difference: INC. as in “Incorporated”. For anyone who might not know it, a check made out to a business can only be deposited, not outright cashed. Something to the account of a business not being an actual individual and the person bringing the check was most likely not the sole proprietor. It makes a lot of sense when I look back, but at the time I was still incredibly nervous with the public and more willing to be helpful even in error.

After the incident, seemingly no one gave any indication that I could lose my job over such an error. However, when I think back, I recall the head teller reacting perplexed when I had to retrieve a large sum of money from the vault. In fact, it upsets me to think of the possibility of her letting it happen to teach me a lesson considering my previous errors, but that’s just retrospective speculation. At least 2 weeks went by until I was sitting in that bank manager’s office. A million thoughts barreled through my brain. Why was I here? How had I fallen short his time? I had felt so safe.

I was informed of the gravity of the error I had made and given two choices. I could resign from the bank and still receive a good reference or be terminated and remain on good terms with the bank. Regardless of the way it was spelled out, it still read "FIRED" to me. The word joined failure, disappointment, and unemployed, a few of the adjectives I seemingly wore as a badge of dishonor. Trying not to cry, I decided to go with what seemed to be the lesser of two evils: resign.

I was told that they truly hated to see me go, which came across like something they had to say but didn't mean at all. The woman who had trained me tried to encourage me to pick myself up off my feet and go looking for another job. Confusion and humiliation radiated from my body as I logged out of all the programs that I previously had access to on my computer. I carried out a box including the few belongings that I had at my teller window; I had just gotten my nameplate, too. Nothing could humble a person more than losing a job, right before the New Year, and all while your former coworkers watched with sympathetic eyes. I collected my belongings, tears still welling in my eyes, and said a quiet goodbye to everyone I had just started to get to know.

That drive back to my parent's house felt so surreal. I couldn't fully grasp what had just happened. My brother was also still living at home and was unemployed. He met me in the driveway, confused, asking "are you okay?". That question is almost never answered in the way the inquirer would hope. I began to cry and told him I had lost my job. He sighed, "oh, I'm so sorry," and gave me a hug (a rare interaction between my brother and me). I went inside and had a good cry.

After my mini session of catharsis, I washed my face and began putting myself together as much as I could. It wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do in that instance, but I knew if I didn't, I would wallow in self-pity all week. I revised my resume, printed several copies, and set out to look for another job to fill the sudden void. If I had to guess I went to at least 10 places; not all had applications available, but I was determined to make even the smallest positive impression. One of the places I applied to that I was so hopeful to work at was a historic hotel that had recently been renovated and reopened. I had never worked at a hotel, but my love of travel and escape made it seem an irresistible position.

After my day of job searching, I decided I would like to take a short trip while I was unemployed. It may have been an irresponsible thing to do without any income, but I just needed something to keep my mind off my unemployment. I decided to visit my old roommate from college, the only true friend I had made in my short time at Louisiana Tech University. During my mini vacation, we decided to visit the Abita Brewery. On the drive to the brewery, I received a call from the owner/manager of the Shipley Donut's in Alexandria. This was the same Shipley's that supplied the donuts for the bank on the day I was fired. He had known me from working there and hired me without even interviewing me. I was ecstatic to have found employment after only being without a job for 2 weeks which paled in comparison to the 2 months that I had been unemployed before the bank job. I didn't care that it wasn't the hotel that gave me the callback, it was a job. I begin working at the donut shop only a week into the new year. Then 2-3 weeks later I received a call for an interview at the hotel I had originally wanted to work at. I decided to take on something I had never imagined I'd be doing; work 2 jobs back to back, resulting in a 13-hour workday. It was difficult, but I gained invaluable experience and perspective on life.

My termination from the bank spurred me to better myself even in the face of potential failure. I still feel paranoia about unemployment lurking around every corner, but this doesn't make me unique. Many people battle feelings of inferiority, paranoia, and general anxiety when it comes to the workforce. Alongside the exhaustion of working back to back I thought about what exactly I was doing with my life. I knew somewhere deep down that I had more potential than grinding all day at two menial jobs. Customer service is a tiresome, thankless, and taxing job that has helped me appreciate those who do it all their lives. Regardless I was determined to go back to school, now better equipped with a more positive state of mind. I only took one class at a time, but I managed to pass each one with high marks. With each class I gained the confidence to press forward and even now I am excited though I have a way to go.

Amanda Sadler

1st Place in Poetry:

“The Band Played On (A Song)”

The good old ship Titanic sank
 Just off chilly New York's bank
 Into the icy depths
 And you know the band, they say
 Calmly continued to play
 And the good ship met her death

The flowers, they all died one June
 And the nightingales still sang their tune
 And though they would be silenced soon
 The band played on

Peter Pan left Never Land
 Not a penny in his hand
 And started to grow up
 Found a house and lives on scraps
 Loose old bills and penny wraps
 From a cracked old coffee cup

The acrobat fell from his rope
 And the circus tents went up in smoke
 The crowd started to lose all hope
 But the band played on
 The nations headed off to war
 Boys dying on a foreign shore
 But we'd all seen it all before
 So, the band played on

The French queen, well, she lost her head
 As folks fought and raided for bread
 And on that day, we don't forget
 The band played on
 Rome, built strong, burned in a day
 And Atlantis sank into the waves
 And as I search for better days
 The band played on

Kennis Gremillion Jobe

2nd and 3rd Place in Poetry:

“Poetry Graveyard”

I want to be a graveyard
 For your poems that will never see
 The light of day.
 Give them to me,
 So they will not die in vain.
 Let me immortalize the thoughts
 You cannot bear
 To let the eyes of others see.

“Conduit”

There’s something intimate
 About sharing a cigarette.
 It’s like kissing you
 Through a conduit,
 A level of separation
 I could do without
 Instead of the sting of smoke,
 I want my lungs to burn
 With our shared breaths.
 I want you to crave my lips
 The way you crave the satisfaction of nicotine.
 Crush my hand like a menthol bead
 In your tender grasp,
 Burn a hole through my heart
 With the red-hot cherry,
 Flick away the ashes
 Of the shredded remnants.
 The ice of your eyes gives me a headrush
 The same dizziness from inhaling too quickly.
 That look tosses my heart to the ground
 Like the discarded filter you smoked down to.
 You stamp out the fire
 Of my feelings for you.

Morgan Primeaux

Honorable Mention in Poetry:

"A Sirens Ballad"

Waves crashed onto the small boat

she grabbed the rope in hand

Squinting through the salt in her eyes

Willing the seas to bend to her demands

Across the storm she heard a song so intoxicating

She let go of the ropes, burning her skin

Sails broke on the portside, bidden by the storm

The sirens gale blew into her head unbidden

"Grab the sails! Grab onto something!"

The words fell short from the captain's lips

Lurching her off her feet, the boat crested a wave
water enveloped her in an eclipse

She fell sideways, forward, backwards but never
down

The ocean was inside of her now, as much a part
of her

The song played ever in her mind, giving her
breath

The melody bore her up, clinging to her like a
burr

Awake did she, on the dry sun blistered deck of
her own boat

"Your hands are ruined; your hands are burned"

The words cut through her from her captain's lips

Her head was thick, her hands were churned

Looking at her hands she felt deep despair

She felt on her skin where the melody touched

Her head would not leave the song alone

She desired it, she wanted to be under its clutch

Night fell over the sea, calm now that the storm
had passed

The water reflected her like glass, she sat on the
edge

Guitar in her lap, repeating pitiful tunes,
lamenting the unoriginal

Her hands ached and chipped with every note
dredged

She sang notes she did not know, she played
dissonance

Under her fingers the guitar moaned in resistance
to her grip

"Stop this wailing! Stop this song!"

The words fell angrily from her Captain's lips

"I can't, Its lost; I can't, its mine"

She replied, the words falling from her lips

"Then go find it; Then go away from me"

The words fell harshly from her captain's lips

She gazed out to the sea where the moon met him

"Aye, I will go; Aye, I will go seek to find it"

She replied, the words falling sorrowfully from
her lips

Storing her guitar in her rowboat she acquit

She ne'er did row; only did she play and sing

Searching not the seas for her treasure

She could not sing as delicately, as purely as her
love could

Her performance paled in comparisons to the seas
descant better

She lay in that boat for days, never ceasing to
strum and hum

Until her throat was raw, her burned, churned
hands bled and peeled

Beneath the moon she realized she drifted towards
its edge

She felt his presence as he approached concealed

Her guitar fell from her hands as the siren flowed
from under the water

“I hear your song; I hear your lament”

“I say play it again; I say play it again”

The words were drawn from him, he pleaded,
discontent

“I must hear it anew; I must hear it afresh”

The words were pulled from him with desire

His doleful eyes and melodious voice filled her
with love

“Anything to hear such allure; anything to hear
such fire”

“I will play anything for you to hear your song; I
will play anything you require”

The words fell from her lips with disquietness
prolonged

“Only if you sing to me your song; Only if you sing
to me your love”

The words fell from her lips with contentedness,
with him— the siren— the song

Laura Campbell

Honorable Mention in Poetry:

"I Hope You Never Ask for Creamer"

You asked for a black coffee

So you can add creamer and sugar to it.

Because you know it is cheaper to do,

And you always look at it lookingly

When you add the creamer

You watch the magic of the black coffee and creamer

How the creamer made the black coffee into

Something sweet and light and desirable

I hope you never ask for creamer.

I hope you never try to recreate the

Magic that happens to the coffee to

Your black skin.

I hope you can ignore how the world

Calls it bitter and dark.

Ignore how the world spits you out when they take a sip

Ignore how the world calls you ugly and undesirable

Ignore how the world pressures you to add the creamer

I hope you never ask for creamer

I hope you when you look at the black coffee

You can happily only drink it as it is.

Trenee Robertson

“Autumn”

Leaves fall in the eye of the moon
 And the wind howls at the sight of you
 How could I dread something so crisp
 Or something deep, dark and red?
 Yet the air entralls me into a coma-like sleep
 Oh how wish I could bottle this moment to keep.
 My eyes are lulled by new light
 While the birds take flight
 “Tis autumn” they tell me
 As I stroll in the dead of night.
 And then I realize I will never flee
 For I love autumn, and autumn loves me.

“Gaslighting”

All I know is your smile.
 As it fades away....
 Anxiety grows in me.

“Untitled”

I'm aghast, stricken with an affliction
 That twists me up and spits me out.
 It's as exciting as murder conviction.
 I'm a guest in my own head
 watching the evil me spread
 “you might as well be dead”
 But I know that's a different part of my brain
 The part that makes me feel insane.

Cailey Scadlock

“Poem No. 3”

Is it getting hot in here or is it just me?
I know the A.C. is on but something feels strange
Playing outside, no thanks. I rather play a video game, its fine
All my parents are partying like its 1999

Ok. Someone is clearly turning up the heat
The concrete in the driveway so hot, it burns my feet
We’re already running out of water in the wells
Somebody’s calendar says we’re going down in 2012

Maybe our thermometers are just on the fritz
Because everyone keeps saying, “This is the hottest it will get.”
The birds and the bees are trying to tell us something
Even politicians are feeling it, come 2020

The new temperature is making it harder to breathe
My asthma makes my lungs cough and wheeze
We know that its real but act like it doesn’t exist
But I know the truth, from this pain in my chest

News reporters and political anchors send out cries
“What could be causing this? We don’t know why.”
While everyone else sees the big hole in the sky

Adriana Hamilton

“Palette”

Every artist was first an amateur.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

The hush of darkness enveloped the bed every night. The sheets dusted with moonlight-- like an artist waiting for an epiphany for his next Picasso. She was the inspiration for his painting. Her first touch coloured him Scarlet. A touch to fill an empty heart that could not be done by some amateur.

He was once, himself-- amaurotic, colouring another with Desire, a unique choice for a newborn love. He thought his thirst for a brushstroke would make a difference, but she wasted her time, painting someone else Lipstick. Every masterpiece has their inspiration, but he was not her everything.

Sara Jaffrani

“A Moment Between Friends”

I feel I'm seeing
something that needs to be protected,
As if my sole purpose in this moment
was to witness.
For what, I don't really know.
Maybe just to carry the proof that love
In itself
Exists, and maybe I am the person
To remind you
When words
Don't feel like they say all they need to
And the memory of hands
Are ghosts.
I am made up of your words
Your stories
Your love,
Passing through my brain and creating ripples in my day
Coming out of my breath in twisted spirals.
I am reinvented by the way you
Speak to one another.
I am realigned
By the way you trust me,
And hold me just as tightly
As I do the words that come out
So freely.

Victoria Bloodworth

“Dear Lord, talk to me”

Do you see that tree?

Yes sir I do

Do you feel how the wind blows through?

Yes sir I do

How its leaves and branch sway?

Yes sir I do

But do you notice how the base never moves?

Yes sir I do

Be that tree

Let your insecure leaves fly away

Allow your branches to sway

Be rooted in me

Be the tree that you see

Talk back to me

“Daughter”

Beautiful hair I dare to comb

Eyes of fire

Flames of love

A smile so bright

I look forward to after all the night

Intellectual being

Of sound mind

I enjoy your gift of conversation

A mirrored reflection of adoration

All of you Is important

When you share a portion

life as we know it is never the same

God is the creator to blame

Michelle Reynold

“Bird's Eye View”

It is sitting in the middle of highway 2-27.
 What must things look like from there?
 Monster squashing machines coming at you from both directions.
 It must be scared to death. I would be.

Good Grief.
 Pull over. Pop the trunk. Put on gloves. Stop traffic. Pick it up.
 Now what.

Doesn't appear to be injured.
 Just can't fly.
 I can, but only in my dreams.

Let's sit you down on this grassy spot so we can think.
 I've heard sometimes birds are just stunned from the impact.
 After you get your wits you will be okay.
 I'm like that, too. We are getting more alike all the time.

Look! Look! Look! Go! Go! Go!
 You only needed a few minutes to find your balance.
 We could all use a hand up when we are down.

Goodbye feathered friend. Fly high for me.

I wonder about the Bible verse where God watches over the sparrow.
 He surely did today.

“Point in Time”

I own this river.

Diamonds dancing on her light belong to me.

The sun sets because I am here to see.

A soft breeze whispers to my memory.

In this place the Lord hath made,

the best things in life are free.

“I’ll Be Waiting”

Don’t be sad for me because I’ve died,
Today I have a new life on the other side.
The pain in my body is no more,
It quit as soon as I walked thru that door.
Heaven is just what I thought it would be,
I can’t wait for the time when you all can see.
My Momma has yet to let go of my hand,
My Daddy can’t wait to show me the lay of the land.
My brother is coming from the fishing pond,
With a little boy on his hip.
My sisters are busy setting a table,
With teacups for us to sip.
So please look past the sorrow and the pain,
Just imagine what I had to gain.
My God was kidding,
When He said this place was great!
Until you all join me,
I’ll just sit and wait.

Brandy Leann Williams

“An Unknown Bus Stop Prophet”

Tagged there on the wall
 At stop number nine
 Were the grimy graffitied words
 “You’re going to be fine”

I don’t know who wrote ‘em
 But I surely do know
 Whoever wrote them there
 Did some time ago

They stuck there faded
 For passersby to see
 Glowing bright at night
 Under white florescent beams

Exactly what was needed
 Nothing to philosophic
 Just a quick pick-me-up
 From an unknown bus stop prophet

“The Search for A Specific Soul”

Where are the wild children of Whitman?
 Or the sons of Waldo Emerson
 Do they still exist
 Or have they forgotten sacred nature

Are brothers to Thoreau anymore
 Or have they all left Walden’s shore
 Can the cosmos still be seen?

On just a lonesome forest acre

Where are the followers of Faulkner?
 Are they hiding out in Oxford?
 Questioning their lives
 As they lay there dying

Are friends of Frost still around?
 To which diverged road are they bound?
 Tell me,
 Have they given up on life

Or are they still trying?

Tyler Beard

“Morning Wars”

Awoke from sleep by morning's wail
I ready for the war, at snail's pace,
From my room, the Siren's calling
With promises of warm embrace.
But through the liquid sand I fight,
All through the day until the night.

Michael Delonix

"Breathe"

I'm sick of feeling,
Like I'm the reason
Things are the way they are.
"But that's just not the case."
Cuz all I did
Was not enough
For you to see,
What it means to me.
"But that's just not the case."
And I'm slowly suffocating
Under your Cloud of Judgement.
"But that's just not the case."
With all this weight
On my fingertips,
It seems I forgot how to

Breathe

So use that money
That you get from
Selling yourself short.
And use it to build up
Your perfect world.
Under my Clouds of Judgement,
With all that weight
On your shoulders.
Whatever it means to you,
Was not enough for me.
"But that's just not the case."
Now all I want to do is

Breathe

(You wrapped those hands
around my throat once more
and it's too hard to let go)

Breathe

(You wrapped those claws
around my heart again
and I just can't let go)

In a moment,
It all went away.
Choked down,
By those feelings
That I cannot change.
Because I hate the way I feel,
And I hate the way you don't,
And I hate the way
That I can't change a thing.

So I locked it up inside of me,
But I puked it out for you to see.
That I can't speak and I can't breathe,
And I can't stand to even look at your face.

So I built me up inside,
Just to tear me apart again.
Just to claw at my eyes again.
Just to feel alive again.
But my creation fell,
When I woke up again.
Against all the odds,
That I still can't even.

Breathe

(You wrapped those hands
around my body but I still
can't even breathe)
Oh god please,
I can't breathe!
(You trapped yourself
inside my soul the moment
you let me see in those eyes)
Why can't I leave?

Austin Monk

Untitled

I threw away your toothbrush
 A relic of the past
 You flew away, just to land blind
 Mist hanging in the air
 Frost that won't make up its mind

"Abandoned"

How many unanswered letters
 Must fill the old mailbox
 Covered in green and dust
 Rain makes it bleed like rust
 One-way communication
 Between nobody and a ghost

When words are lost to time
 Full of love, malice, pride
 Disintegrated, left behind
 Force them out--NOW
 Before they fill your throat
 Or choke on the consequences

Intentions mean nothing
 When apathy persists
 Invades the air and makes us sick

Personification
 Pieces bent and broken
 Cannot hold their shape
 Or stay in place

Metal door swaying in the wind
 Promises and potential, unfulfilled

Jessica Schroeder

“No.103”

Mesmerized

While looking in his eyes

He captured my heart with few tries

And together we were in the skies

Forgiven for my skin

Life had meaning once again

But temptations call

And sometimes even angels fall

From love to hurt

From paradise back to Earth

Temptations call

And sometimes even angels fall

“No.104”

He once flew above the clouds

But now he flies with damaged wings

And I am attracted to him

As I am most broken things

“No.110”

Heaven smiles and sings

As an angel has gained his wings

Above he flies

While below she cries

She begs and pleads

As it breaks and bleeds

Kiana Fontenot

“Paranoia”

I see the way you look at me

I hear your vulgar opinions without moving your lips,

I cower away.

You talk to me like everything is okay

You ask why I am not the same,

You never know that it's you causing me such pain.

I say I am fine

I know better not to announce your name,

I understand that I am to blame.

You continue on your assault

You knock me down repeatedly,

You finally understand my actions.

I am trapped in my head

I am afraid of your thoughts,

I am attacked by my own mind.

Kalli Parker

“Peaceful Boredom”

His Father had been a valiant soldier
 Yet he passed on before seeing his heir
 Land ravaged by war, mother fell as well
 Hard times had wrought worthy souls
 But soul's seed grew in peace
 Same blood by nature and just as hearty
 As if handed over, the flame burned bright
 With enemies beaten, there was no test of might

The heir's blows only struck soil
 His anger and bloodlust merely left to boil
 Raised from birth by his Grandfather
 In a world built by his parent's burdens
 He cursed foes already buried
 Swung his father's sword with pointless vigor
 Grandfather watched on with held breath
 While a son wasted parent's sacrificial death

For there were things worth a look
 The smoke-free sky, or the still clear brook
 The old could see and appreciate
 Peaceful times allowed for blissful steadiness
 More and more the stress became less
 Yet slow-growing crops could never sedate
 Finally, the time came for a talk
 Two outlooks stuck in a deadlock

It began with a long list for the boy
 In it everything he had grown to enjoy
 The thick wilderness, wild animals spread afar
 His close friends and their comradery
 Even the boy's secret courtship in the village
 All that and more his father had lost to pillage
 Burned to the ground or stolen, gone for good
 And finally, the young man looked inwards and
 understood.

Justin Dixon

“Photographic Memory”

(A play on words)

Like pictures of the past

Holding significance to others

Priceless

Telling an endless story

But yet soon to be forgotten

No longer able to remember

Even the ones we say we'll never forget

Even they can drift away

The reason for having memories?

To cherish them of course

But what's the point?

Gaps

Lapses

The worst enemies to memories

The stories become fragments

Wonderful times seem dysfunctional

We can save them though

Make the most out of them

Turn them into scrapbooks

That way we can always remember

Memories are like pictures

Pictures are worth a thousand words

So save a lot of memories

That way a thousand words can become infinity

Destiny Woodall

“Stationary Progress”

The cycle repeats ever sorrowfully,
Sureness and certainty numb the pain.
Questions with answers burn within me,
Yet I still seek alternatives in vain.
Everyday melts into a single mass,
While the nights seem to exist in perpetuity.
Soon these feelings will also pass,
Eventually it won't all feel such a pity.
The cycle may never quite stagnate,
But what it covers will become clear.
Like how I've found no actual hate,
Only emotions that I'll never manage to steer.
As the surrounding fog begins to decline,
I realize that I still love you, and that is fine.

Anonymous

"The Adventurer"

The adventurer moves through the Amazonian cave
to find what's there:

A jewel that has been through the seams of time.

As he enters the jewel's realm, the adventurer begins
to bare

The notion that what he embarked on had much
rhyme.

Then again, not much in the adventurer's life

Had much rhythm in the step from the very start.

The loves of his life vanished from the blink of an
eye,

And the passion he once had destroyed from his
heart.

But he told himself as he trudged through the
cobwebs

That maybe this would be the chance to get it all
back.

*Get the jewel, and the problems fade towards the
sunset...*

Maybe the jewel can also get rid of the flack.

A dangerous date with fate later, and the jewel was
his,

Ready for a primetime audience in the northern
realms.

The problem was that the audience noticed
something was amiss:

The supposedly blue jewel was as dirty as an
American elm.

The adventurer's last chance for survival was now
gone,

But he questioned whether what he brought was
faked.

Someone must've taken the artifact on my way...

There was this one man who seemed awfully brave.

With a thick German accent and obsidian black suit,
the man tried to weasel himself into the grasp of the
jewel.

But he looked to be a man with some connections,

Connections that wouldn't mind breaking a few
rules.

The adventurer knew from his time in the movies

That this man was someone who would want
something

As precious as that jewel for his personal duties.

And so, the adventurer began his quest of hunting.

The trip towards the lands of Turkey was quite
tough,

As the adventurer nearly had to pay with his life.

A quick word from a friend cemented how tough

The foe of the hour had with a little bit of strife.

As the adventurer moves through the crowds of the
man's club,

The smoke nearly blocked his target, or rather, his
prize.

The man was carrying the jewel like it was a pup,

Surrounded with folks that were twice his size.

A quick jab and a few shots helped the adventurer
make his point

In that the jewel belonged to the right side of
history.

As the adventurer returned towards the northern
realms,

He wondered whether it was the right thing to
instigate

Such a tragic outcome for who seemed to be a bad
male.

The adventures before this one never reached a
violent rate.

But he knew that ultimately a few points had to be
made

To get the life he once had back towards a reasonable
state.

The audience this time allowed him the chance

To rejoin the echelons of at least the institution's
good taste.

Charles Charrier

1st Place in Prose

“Buttermilk Swimming Hole”

Papa was always taking the kids down to Buttermilk. He'd round up the whole gang: Emma, Reba, Elton Wayne, and Carlton— Mama wasn't born just yet— and he'd pack 'em in the car and go.

One time during a trip to Buttermilk, Emma “came up missin’”. Elton Sr. was still alive then, and he's the one that realized Emma wasn't with the rest of the rowdy bunch. He jumped up and yelled to Papa “Oh Lord, Cecil! She might've drowned!”

Papa shot into the water— Papa could swim like a fish— and started searchin' for little Emma. You have to know, Buttermilk is dark, dirty water back in the Jena hills. So Papa is swimmin' in this muddy water while the others are callin' Emma's name when that crazy girl comes over the hill and back down to the swimming hole.

Apparently, Emma had gotten chilly and climbed back to the car to warm up a bit. Papa was still underwater and hadn't realized she came back over. He was right up against the bank where the tree branches stretch over the water when he popped up. Papa was a pretty tall man, and the branches reached down far, and when Papa stood up completely, he smashed his head right through a nest of yella jackets! Poor Papa was startin' to go bald then and got a sting right on his new bald spot. He was fightin' damn mad, and that Emma was lookin' around at all the frantic faces like she couldn't figure out what was wrong with 'em.

Emma later told this same story at Papa's funeral.

I remember another story from Buttermilk that involved Papa and Jena's own Nasty Nine. Papa and the kids had rode on to Buttermilk early that afternoon and swam most of the day. A while before dark, Papa got all the kids in the car and tried to start it up, but the car was dead silent— no click or nothin'. So Papa, grumblin' all the while, pops the hood to check what was wrong with the thing 'cuz it was mighty strange for even a dead battery to be silent. Papa then discovered the whole damn battery was gone out the car.

I remember well what Papa said next cuz it was the only time that I know of Papa cussin'. He just yelled “shitfire!” and stomped back to the driver's side. He told Elton Wayne to watch the rest of the children— too many at once for that boy to look after— and walked about five miles up to the nearest house. Back then, houses were much farther apart and not right on top each other like they are now down that way. He hiked a while til he found someone to give him and the kids a ride back home.

When he got there, he recounted the story to Mama and Aunt Donnis. All the while Papa was talkin', Donnis' eyes were growin' too big on her face. She hurriedly called her husband Donny— the leader of the Nasty Nine— because she knew damn well it was his mean ole bunch of buddies that swiped the battery outta Papa's car. And it was true: they took that battery to God knows where to do God knows what with it— probably just did it to be mean.

Donny had that battery back in Papa's car fast as he could and had the car back in the drive before Papa could say a word. That's how it was with Papa, you respected the man on principle even if you were the leader of the Nasty Nine.

One of my favorite stories to hear is the one where Papa and Mawmaw got baptized in Buttermilk Swimming Hole. According to Mama, if you grew up in Jena durin' the sixties and seventies, then gettin' baptized in Buttermilk was like a rite of passage. In the peak of summer, around July, you couldn't stand to be in Buttermilk for longer than about thirty minutes 'fore you started boilin'. And in the wintertime, Buttermilk was cold as sin.

I say they were baptized in Buttermilk, but really, they were re-baptized, for Mawmaw it was her third baptism but only her second in Jesus' name. This seems unimportant but was a big deal in the family. My great aunt Estelle's bunch were all Baptist, and Mawmaw and the rest of us are Pentecostal. They went round and round over this fact. Mawmaw could sing harmonies at three-years-old, and she always fussed about Estelle's Baptist caterwaulin'. Either way, it was a beautiful day at Buttermilk.

Buttermilk had never been so crowded as it was that day. Half of Jena had shown up. That's because Papa was a real influential man in the town. His daddy, Ed was a bus driver for fifteen years, and Papa drove the bus for twenty-four. All the kids that rode his bus loved Papa; most are grown now and every once in a while, one will stop me in town to tell me how much they miss Mr. Cecil. Papa also helped build the old elementary school and the courthouse; Papa left his mark on a lot of the town.

Not too long after Papa died, the old elementary school was torn down to make way for a new one, and the courthouse was fallin' apart and needed a lot of work. And as for Buttermilk, sometime in the last twenty years, it just dried up. If you go down that way now, it's just an ole dry creek bed. If you didn't already know, you couldn't tell Buttermilk was ever there. It didn't all happen overnight but slowly over time, the same way some folks are forgetting about my Papa.

Papa once told me "Sometimes things can be one way all your life and then change and be totally different. When that happens, I reckon you might find yourself a little lost."

Morgan Primeaux

2nd Place in Prose

“The Deer”

My father and I were driving down the highway in his pickup, and I nearly gagged from his cigarette stench. He wasn't even smoking, but I could smell it permeating from his clothes, from the upholstery. It seeped out of every fiber in that rusted pickup, like the cancer it was.

The funny thing about all of this was that my ex-girlfriend had smoked cigarettes, and it had never bothered me. Sure, she smoked a different brand, but a cigarette was a cigarette. Whenever she and I had made out, I had tasted the cigarette in her saliva, mixed with spearmint or whatever flavor of gum she'd been chewing.

However, I had enjoyed those make out sessions immensely. I had always looked forward to them, hoping we'd mess around in the car after some shitty, chick flick at the movie theater. They had been the highlights of my life during that year we were together. The smell of cigarettes around my father, on the other hand, made my lip curl; it made me want to spit because I felt as if I could taste that filthiness in my mouth.

I turned on the radio and tuned it to a rock station. Not five seconds later, my father, still looking straight ahead as he drove, shook his head and shut off the radio. “Turn that shit off,” he grumbled. “Can't you young people just listen to the silence, once and a while. You always gotta have something banging in your ears.”

I experienced a rush of adrenaline, my face flushing with blood, and I glowered at the profile of his face, as if I could telekinetically make his head explode, like a watermelon dropped onto concrete. My body was tense and wild, on the verge of attacking him. I knew I wouldn't, but I felt as though I could, like a lion readying itself to pounce on a calf—in my case, a calf that smelled like cigarettes.

I felt something in my throat, like a trapped rat trying to claw free. I wanted to roar every curse word I knew at him, but I held my tongue, by a thread. Clenching my jaw and swallowing, I stayed deathly silent and stared out the window, trying to calm my nerves that were going haywire. A few minutes later, I regained my composure.

Before long, we pulled into a gas station and my dad filled up the tank.

“You want something?” my father asked, looking at me through the open driver's seat window.

At first, I was taken by surprise and didn't know how to answer him or even interpret his look. Then I suddenly blurted, “Uh— yeah, sure.”

It wasn't a normal thing for just the two of us to be taking a day trip together. In fact, not only was it not normal but it also didn't happen anymore. Ever. I couldn't remember the last time it had just been me and my dad. The last few years most of his attention had been solely spent on my two younger sisters, Mary and Jessica. Mary was twelve and Jessica thirteen. I had about three years on Jessica.

After exiting the pickup, I followed my dad across the asphalt, which shimmered in the summer heat, and we entered the gas station together. The door jingled, and I felt the rush of air conditioning whoosh over me, as if I had just stepped out of a hellish planet and into an ice cold one. My ears were filled with the loud hum of refrigeration, and then giggling girls.

I saw two teens around my age, laughing about something while they sifted through the ice creams in the freezer section. They looked like they were in high school, but I knew they didn't go to my high school. I would've noticed them at my school, a long time ago. They were both well-endowed and wearing tight shorts, which showed off their smooth, shapely legs.

Oh fuck, I thought to myself, remembering my dad was with me. If it had just been me and one of my football buddies, it would've been fine. It would've been cool. My buddy and I could've gone over and flirted with the girls or done nothing. Whatever.

But my dad was an old creeper and ruined everything. At this moment, all I wanted to do was slip out of the gas station, unseen, and avoid all the tension and uncomfortableness that I knew was going to follow.

I glanced over at my dad and expectedly, he was staring at the girls. He was like a snake catching the scent of mice. Something primal had been turned on inside him and all his energy and attention was directed at those girls, as if they were key to his survival, the sustenance to his life.

He didn't just glance, as a normal person would. A guy was just supposed to flick his eyes at an attractive girl. There was an unwritten protocol for this, a science to the objectification of the female sex. Hell, a guy could even take a couple glances, if he were so inclined. But he *wasn't* supposed to stare like some loathsome pervert.

It wasn't flattering for the girls. They were extremely uncomfortable, and I could see them practically squirming under my father's leering eyes. They weren't smiling and joking around anymore. They had become quiet. They were still sorting through the ice cream, but their wary eyes kept glancing back at my father. He wouldn't stop taking blatant ganders at them as he slithered through the store, half-heartedly searching for whatever he was going to buy. Of course, he didn't care about what he was going to buy anymore. His focus was elsewhere.

I figured if the guy checking out the girls had been a young hunk in their age group, they might've enjoyed the attention. They might've acted oblivious, then whispered something to each other with a smile. They might've relished it or at least put up with it and had fun ignoring the guy. But my father wasn't a young hunk. His face was gaunt and covered in white stubble. His unkempt, greasy hair fell out of an old dirty cap, which had never been washed and reeked of stale sweat. This acrid smell, along with the pungent odor of cigarettes, was nauseating.

If those teenage girls were alone with him, they'd feel threatened, unsafe, as if he'd rape them or something. That was the kind of impression my father gave to women and girls.

What made this all so much worse was that my father behaved like this on a regular basis even when my mom was around. She'd pretend not to notice, but she wasn't stupid or unaware, and everyone could see what was happening. I knew it had to be embarrassing and humiliating and hurtful to her. It was deeply embarrassing for me and I wasn't even his wife. It was as if he was saying to my mom, "Fuck you, old woman. No one wants you anymore. I'm a man and I can do what I want." That was how I took it. I didn't know how my mom took it. She didn't show anything. She just took it.

After five minutes of torment, my dad and I bought our snacks and left. I couldn't even look at the girls because of my dad.

In the pickup, I took a long sip from my Gatorade. I had gotten chips, too, but I wasn't hungry anymore. My dad had bought a soda, jerky, and a pack of cigarettes.

Driving out of the gas station, he started in on the jerky and I could hear the squirt of his saliva and his jaw click as he chewed. It felt like someone was slamming a sledgehammer into my head with every click of his jaw. The sound tortured me like nails on a chalkboard. It made me grimace. It made my blood boil.

The crazy thing was— in the same way that cigarettes associated with my ex-girlfriend had never bothered me— my sisters' jaws clicked sometimes when they chewed and strangely, it had never affected me. Most of the time I didn't even notice the muffled clicking noise when my sisters ate. It was as if it didn't exist with them, but it was definitely there.

Staring out at the highway, feeling the wind blowing against my face, I reminded myself of why I was here, why I was sitting in this truck with my dad. First off, my father had only asked me to come along because his bum friends had blown him off, and he was too insecure to be alone. I would have to do. His loser friends had probably gone on a bender at the strip club and were still sleeping it off. I had only agreed to come with him because I had been meaning to tell him something. Something important. Something beyond important. Something I'd been meaning to tell him for a while now. I needed him alone, though. He couldn't be around my sisters or my mom. It had to be just me and him, and I needed to gauge his reaction when I said it. I needed to know the truth. I didn't even know what I was going to say to him. I figured I'd come up with something when the time was right.

Thinking about what I was going to say, I also thought about how it had all come to this. Had it always been so horrible between my father and me? Why couldn't I have had a relationship with my dad the way some of my friends had had it with their dads? I knew they loved their fathers and their fathers loved them and I was

jealous of that. They had these wonderful childhood memories of their dads, like fishing together, just like those corny commercials where the father is sporting a bucket hat and grinning down at his young smiling son who is wearing glasses, and they're sitting on a scenic bank, catching trout together. Then again, maybe I'd simply imagined this ideal bond my friends supposedly had had with their fathers. Maybe no sons had memories like that with their fathers. Maybe commercials like that were fucking bullshit.

Well, the earliest memory of my father was of him half naked, thundering toward me like a massive demon, an inhuman fury burning in his bulging eyes.

For as long as I could remember, my father had always slept in just his underwear. Back when my sisters and I had been young kids, if we'd committed the grave offense of being too noisy and woken my father from his slumber, he'd storm out of the bedroom like the hound of hell. He'd rush at us and I'd shrink away from him, as a cockroach flees the boot. His face looked like a snarling dog, and he was so much bigger than I was, this great raging monster. There was something primitive, animalistic about him when he was practically naked like that. Even if I had done nothing to wake this terrifying *thing* that was my father, I desperately tried to become invisible, keeping quiet as a ghost and hiding my eyes from him, lest I incur his wrath. My mere presence was enough to provoke him.

As I'd gotten older, I also got a lot bigger, bigger than even my father, and my fear of him grew into hatred. I no longer was afraid of him; I opposed him. I butted heads with him. Screamed at him when he screamed at me. I knew he wouldn't do anything because he couldn't physically overpower me anymore. Despite this change in my behavior toward my father over the years, recalling the image of his hulking body almost nude in his underwear and the terror that I'd felt as a little boy because of it still made me anxious to this day.

The sight of his black leather belt still made me anxious. He was wearing one right now. My sisters and I had become well acquainted with that belt as young kids. I could never forget how he'd yank down our pants and beat our bare asses with it. A couple times in elementary school, I'd gone to school with a limp (deep bruises had covered my butt and the entire back of my upper legs, as if I'd been in a car wreck) and I had had to sit awkwardly at my desk. Even taking a shit had been difficult during those times because it was so painful to sit on a toilet seat. I'd told the few concerned teachers that I'd just gotten hurt playing football. My father had told me to say that. The teachers never questioned my answer, but they hadn't seen the bruises and welts under my pants.

I had always thought that when children came of a certain age, their parents shouldn't see them naked anymore. It was just a natural step in a child's life, a universal understanding between child and parent. My father had stopped using the belt years ago, but back when he'd still been using it, my sisters had long passed that age— that age when a man shouldn't see them naked— and yet my father hadn't respected that boundary and he had still wrenched down their pants and taken his belt to them.

Presently, sitting in the hot pickup, I twisted in my seat as I felt a surge of anger at the thought of the beatings. I glanced at my dad; whose face was glued on the road. He didn't need to talk. But I'd make him say something later on, when I'd bring up the secret. It wasn't even a fucking secret.

Was there at least one good thing I shared with my father? No, I thought to myself. Wait. Yeah, football. Then again, that commonality had been forced on me as a kid.

When I'd been seven years old, I'd wanted to play soccer. My father wouldn't allow it. He'd said to me, "Soccer is for pussies. Real American boys play football."

I was devastated, as any child would be. All I had wanted to do was play soccer, and I was frightened of football. It didn't matter. It wasn't my choice.

In the beginning, I was too scared to tackle and block and would avoid as much physical contact as possible with the other children, whose padding and helmets made them look goofy to an adult, like munchkins with oversized heads tripping and falling about, their motor skills not quite fully developed yet. But to a kid like me, the other children looked horrifying and seemed gigantic with their equipment on. During the games my father would scream at me for not doing my part, the veins in his neck ready to burst. On many occasions the refs had to warn him to cool it or he'd have to leave. Even some of the other fathers tried to calm my dad down sometimes. They were gentle about it. Not surprisingly, there were several matches where my dad was ejected.

Driving home from those football games, my father berated me the whole time, telling me how he was embarrassed that I was his son and that I was playing like a little fucking girl. He continued berating me throughout the week, up until the next game, and the process started all over again.

Finally, I wasn't scared of football anymore. It was as if one day I just decided to flip on a switch. I didn't know what that switch was, but I turned it on (I hadn't switched it off since). The more I played football as boy, the more vicious I became on the field. I hit the other kids like I wanted to hit my father.

When I was thirteen, I tackled a boy and drove him into the ground like a pile driver. Afterwards, he lay perfectly still in the grass, as if he were dead, as if I'd broken his neck. His mother rushed onto the field. Her face was contorted in sheer terror. She crouched by her son with the coaches and refs. Then for a second, she turned and looked straight at me and gave me the most seathing look I'd ever seen, as if I were the antichrist. I could see tears on her pained face, which reflected only hatred, for me.

I didn't shrink away from her glare. I stared back into her scornful blue irises, which were pale as death, and I didn't bat my eyes. I remembered thinking— so what? Yeah, so what?

An ambulance came and the boy had to be carefully lifted onto a stretcher. Later I found out I'd broken his collarbone. He wasn't maimed for life. It wasn't a big fucking deal.

Nowadays, I didn't just play football aggressively; I played with reckless violence. By the end of a game, the opposing running backs and receivers would fall before I actually hit them, or they'd run out of bounds before I got to them. Sometimes I still hit them out of bounds if I thought I could get away with it— I'd slam my shoulder into them so hard I'd knock the wind right out of them or I'd give them a push that would send them flailing and tumbling far beyond the sidelines. A few times, when I shoved them, they crashed into their teammates or they flew like errant cannon balls at the cheerleaders, and once a player demolished the table with the water jugs. Even the linemen, who all had fifty pounds on me and more, were afraid to block me by the end of the match. They had this fear in their eyes, as if they saw me as some crazed animal.

I'd made varsity my freshman year in high school and had been a starter, too. My sophomore year I had been top defensive player in the region. It was summer now, and my junior year would start soon. College recruiters were already circling me like vultures around a fresh carcass.

At last my father's truck turned off the highway. We weren't far from our destination. We continued driving on a winding road through dense woods. The pavement was very old, with grass and weeds sprouting from the cracks and potholes. In several places, the road wasn't much more than rubble. After twenty minutes, we came to a small gravel parking lot, if you could even call it that. It was empty. We parked and got out. My dad hopped onto the truck bed and scrounged through the metal storage box. He pulled out two orange vests. He threw me one, which I slipped on, and he wore the other one. Then he pulled out a rifle and ammunition. Once he'd loaded the weapon, he got down from the truck bed and held out the rifle to me.

"What? I don't want that," I said, squinting my eyes at him, as if I were confused.

I'd shot my fair share of rifles, shotguns, and pistols at the firing range with my buddies since I'd been old enough to hold a rifle. In fact, I was a damn good shot. But I'd never gone hunting with my friends. Well, I'd tagged along with them a few times when a couple of hot country girls had joined them in the hunt. But even then, I hadn't killed anything. I had been there for emotional support, for the country girls, who'd had no trouble putting gaping holes in Bambi with high-powered assault rifles.

I'd be the first person to chomp into a big juicy burger, but I had no desire to kill for sport, for thrill. I needed a better reason than that to take a life.

"You're gonna kill something today," said my father.

"I didn't agree to this," I retorted.

"Why did you even come then?"

"I don't know! To keep you company," I growled. I had to make that up on the spot. He'd find out the real reason why I'd come soon enough.

He held out the rifle again. I didn't take it.

"Take the damn rifle, Bruce!" he said, glaring at me.

I glared back at him, making my stand known, before I finally resigned to his will and walked forward to grab the rifle from him.

As always, he'd gotten his way. We moved into the brush, a scowl burning on my face. The humidity was suffocating, like swimming in an oven. We walked past tall thorny bushes and several of them clutched at my face like skeletal hands and drew lines of blood. But I didn't care. I could hardly feel the thorns tearing at my skin anyway. My mind was miles away. At times my vision was blurry because so much sweat was pouring into them. I had to keep rubbing at my stinging eyes, but it hardly seemed to make a difference. Everything I did seemed pointless.

As we strode farther into the forest, I broke through several spiderwebs and I violently rubbed them off my face and out of my hair. I'd come out here for one reason and one reason only: to speak to my dad about something horrible and I didn't even know how to bring it up, let alone what to say. Now I had to worry and stress about killing a helpless deer on top of that.

For a few moments, I started stoking a burning hope that maybe I wouldn't see a deer today. That was possible, right? Then my stomach churned like a rickety washing machine, my insides swishing and flailing around. I suddenly remembered how in class last year, my pompous science teacher had proclaimed to us, as if he were standing on Mount Sinai, that deer were an invasive species, that they were a kind of pestilence, and it was our duty to kill them. There was a surplus of them. If he'd been telling the truth, I was bound to see a deer today. There was no escaping it.

I'd always hated how he'd called them an invasive species, though, as if deer didn't belong here. I could say the same thing about humans. If there ever was an *invasive* species, it was people. Anytime I'd ever seen a brood of deer, they made me smile. I'd gape in awe at the majestic buck, at the strong, lean doe, and at the small, gentle fawns. If I accidentally got too close (because I wanted to reach out and touch them), they'd run away. And they'd run together, as a family. As one.

The thought of killing one of these beautiful creatures made vomit surge up in my throat, just a little bit, and I had to consciously swallow the bitter taste and keep myself from puking, right then and there.

My father and I pushed through the woods while my shirt, pants, boxers, and socks grew heavy with sweat. I was soaked through and through, dripping as if I'd jumped into a pool fully clothed.

Then, lo and behold, she stood before us in a clearing. A doe. Gorgeous with spots like snowflakes, her coat a combination of different warm shades of brown; at the same time, her underbelly and parts of her were snow-white.

She'd stopped us in our footsteps, as if we were looking at something not of this Earth, as if we were facing the glory of God and she was it. In my peripheral vision, I could see my father watching me. Without acknowledging him, I raised the rifle at the deer and peered into the scope.

The crosshair lay on her face. Her head was turned toward me and she seemed to be staring right at me, into my eyes, into the darkest recesses of my soul. There was nothing wrong with her. There was something wrong with me. With my father. But there was nothing wrong with her. She was pure. She was innocent. I raised the crosshair three feet above her head and fired. The gunshot rang loudly in the quiet of the forest.

She shot off, galloping into a thicket of trees, unscathed, and leapt from view. She was free and far away from us. I felt a rush of relief and joy that was so powerful, I almost smiled and cried at that moment.

"Goddamn you, Bruce! Goddamn you, you little shit! How could you miss that? You did it on purpose," he said through clenched teeth.

I lowered the rifle and turned to my father. "Yeah I did. I wasn't going to kill that deer. I would never kill that deer, for you." I paused for several long moments as I gazed at my father calmly.

I knew now that I didn't need to ask him any questions to find out the truth—the thing I'd come out here to seek. I already knew the truth. Maybe I'd always known the truth, but I hadn't been able to accept it until this moment.

I thought about everything I'd seen. Everything I'd witnessed over the years. How when my sister Jessica had been eight, my father had pulled her onto his lap when they were on the couch. He laughed but the laugh had been mirthless, a cover, and he had a glint in his eye. I was eleven then, lounging on a chair in the corner, playing a Gameboy, and I looked up at them, with a grin, thinking they were just playing. But my grin fell away after I kept watching. Jessica tried to pull herself away from him, but he gripped her like a vice, squeezing her, his hand touching her thigh, discreetly roaming her. He chuckled as if he were just being playful, yet there was nothing playful about it. He was caressing her. My sister just froze, her terrified eyes looking straight ahead...And I did nothing. I made myself believe it wasn't what I thought it was, at eleven years old.

When I was fourteen, my sister Mary came to me one night, before our bedtime. I had my own room while she and Jessica had to share a room. I was lying on my bed, frantically texting my first girlfriend, *ex-girlfriend*, who'd dumped me and was ignoring me. My sister crept into my room. I angrily looked over at Mary. She was wearing pink pajamas with flowers on them, yet her face looked ghostly. I didn't know why and I didn't care.

"What?" I scoffed.

"Can I sleep here tonight?" she asked.

"Huh? What are you talking about? No. Stop being weird. Get out!"

"Please," she pleaded, her eyes glassy, as if she were on the verge of sobbing.

My anger swiftly subsided and I felt a chill. My sister was frightening me. "What's wrong Mary?"

"Mary!" came my father's booming voice from out in the hallway. "Your brother's got a big game tomorrow. Don't be keeping him up. Get on outta there, sweet pea."

My sister jumped at my father's voice. She peered straight into my eyes, cutting all the way to the bone marrow in me, and I felt goosebumps rise on my back. Then she looked away from me, like a cowed animal, and slipped out of my room.

Two nights later, I woke up in the middle of the night to get a drink of water, and as I walked into the hallway, using my phone as a flashlight, I saw my father's shadowy form leaving my sisters' bedroom. He was silently shutting their door. He winced at the cellphone's light blinding his eyes in the darkness, but he said nothing. He acted as if nothing strange had just occurred. Meanwhile, I simply stood there, like a statue, and he walked past me, without even looking at me, as if he couldn't care less what I was thinking at that moment. I didn't matter to him.

Standing in this hellish forest in the present and remembering all those things I'd witnessed, I spoke at last.

"How could you do it, dad?"

"What? Do what? What the fuck are you talking about?" he snapped, shaking his head furiously.

"To your own daughters," I said. Tears now flowed down my face, but my voice was firm and clear.

His eyes instantly grew wide and intense at those words, as if I'd said something terrifying to him.

"You're sounding crazy, Bruce," my father said, without much emotion.

"Shut up!" I roared. "Just shut the fuck up! You can't go back home. You can't ever see Jessica or Mary again. You can't see mom. If I ever see you again, you're dead. I'm gonna put you in the ground. Don't worry about your things. I'll pack them up for you and I'll drop them off."

"Give me the rifle, Bruce," he said, holding out his palm and beckoning to me with his fingers. I didn't say anything. I just kept looking at him. He took a tentative step toward me and reached for the rifle. I quickly retreated several steps and shook my head. My heart was throbbing.

It suddenly dawned on me that if he was evil enough to do those things to my sisters, he was more than capable of murdering his own son out in the middle of nowhere, with no witnesses, and calling it a hunting accident. Then nothing would be in the way of him and my sisters.

“Admit it,” I said. “Admit what you’ve done!” I shouted.

He straightened up for a moment, simply watching me, as if contemplating his next move. Then a smile crept on his wormy lips, but his eyes were cold as ever, and I felt that familiar fear of him, that same freezing fear I’d experienced so much as a young kid.

He lunged forward and grasped at the rifle. We were both tugging at it, grunting like two animals. Then he suddenly released his grip and threw a left hook into my jaw, knocking me sideways. The rifle fell free from my fingers and hit the ground as I stumbled away.

I felt a rush of horror, knowing he’d pick it up. Right when he was bending to snatch up the rifle, I’d recovered from his punch and I darted at him, kicking him in the skull with my steel toed hiking boot. The impact sent him onto his back with a thud. I fell on top of him and pummeled his face with my fists. I felt his nose break and blood spurted from his nostrils. My knuckles bashed his teeth in.

“Ahhhhhhh!” I screamed like a crazy man. He wasn’t moving under me. His eyes were in a daze and were already swelling from the beating he’d taken. There were lacerations on his face now and contusions were beginning to form.

Breathing hard, I climbed off his body and stood up. I walked off, almost falling over I was so exhausted. I looked down at my trembling hand and brought it closer to my face. I saw shards of his teeth embedded in my skin. Wincing, I started plucking them out of the back of my fingers.

I heard a long raspy groan and something moving behind me. I turned around in disbelief and saw him lurching toward me like a zombie. Blood covered his swollen face, which made him look inhuman. Half of his front teeth were gone and sheets of blood were running down his mouth and throat.

He swung his hunting knife at me and I jumped back in the nick of time. Again, he staggered forward and slashed at me. This time, I threw up my arm to protect myself and the blade sliced into my flesh with ease, like slicing into butter.

With a cry, I dashed toward the rifle. I could hear him close behind me. I grabbed the rifle and fell at the same time. I rolled onto my back, the rifle pointed up towards my father, and I squeezed the trigger.

He flew back, as if some invisible train had crashed into him. He lay there, motionless. I rose to my feet and sauntered over to him, still holding the rifle. He was alive, his breathing labored. His shirt around his stomach was drenched in crimson, which kept growing even as I watched, and the blood was soon creeping into his pants.

I heard a little titter and I looked above him. There was a squirrel on a branch, and it was standing on its hind legs, like a tiny person, its itty-bitty fingers exploring a chestnut that it was holding. He looked almost human the way he was handling the chestnut. He was completely oblivious to the violence that had occurred just moments ago. I didn’t know if the delicate critter, with its big blameless eyes, was a he or a she, but at that moment I thought of it as a he. I envied him. I ached for his life. I wanted to wake up in the mornings, scrounge for nuts to eat, avoid a few predators, chase my friends up trees, get a restful sleep at night, and then start the cycle all over again. I yearned for that simple life. I wanted to switch places with him. I wanted him to slip into my worn sneakers, and I would slip into his furry little feet, and I would live out the rest of my days in ignorant bliss, frolicking in the forest with my squirrel kin. I knew squirrels only mated twice a year, but I would be okay with that.

The reality was that I would never switch places with the adorable fluffy rodent. I was human, and I’d just shot my father in the stomach. My life had changed, and it would never be the same. I wouldn’t be going to college after high school. I wouldn’t be playing Division 1 football at Alabama or USC. I was going to prison in the near future. I couldn’t prove that my father had tried to kill me. To anyone, especially to a jury, it simply looked as though I’d shot my father in cold blood after savagely beating him. My sisters, despite what my father had done to them, would probably never forgive me, nor would my mother.

I laid down the rifle and picked up the hunting knife from a bed of pine needles. I didn't know if I had done all of this for my sisters, or if I just wanted to kill my father.

Tears were streaming down my face again. I finally spoke, and my own voice surprised me. The words that flowed from my tongue were steady and there was no tremble in my voice.

"You once told me that when you shoot a deer and it's still alive, cutting its throat is merciful."

He didn't respond. He was dying, staring at the foliage above, shafts of light peeking through the canopy of leaves.

"I'm gonna be merciful to you," I said.

I walked over to him, positioned myself behind his head, and crouched. I grabbed his hair, as I might grab the scruff of a dog, and I held his head in place. Then I pressed the blade to his neck and I slit his throat from ear to ear.

Josh Romero

3rd Place in Prose

“Better Off Dead”
A Play

Characters

WOMAN, college student, wears sweatpants and shirt.

VOICE, a disembodied female voice off stage

Setting

A room with vintage yellow wallpaper and a door. A mirror hangs on the wall. A photo album that says “Past Life” on it, alcohol, and a shot glass sits on a table. A dirty party dress lays on the floor.

The lights come on. Only WOMAN and the door have lights on them. WOMAN is asleep on the floor. She suddenly wakes up frightened and confused.

WOMAN: Where am I? (*looks around*) Hello, anyone there? Shit, I should’ve stayed in my dorm last night. (*sees the door*) I could just leave.

WOMAN tries to open the door but fails.

WOMAN: No. No. No. I can’t be trapped in here. Breathe. I know I can call someone to come and get me. (*looks for phone*) Where’s my phone? If anyone is there, this isn’t funny. Let me out; I swear I won’t call the police and I will pretend this never happened.

The lights reveal the table.

WOMAN: What is that?

She walks towards the table.

WOMAN: (*sarcastic*) Thanks for the drink, I guess.

She picks up the photo album and studies it.

WOMAN: These are all photos of me. This was my first dance recital when I was like 7. This me dressed for career day. I told everyone that I was going to be a professional dancer. This is my scholarship letter to be on the college dance line. This is me moving into my dorm. This is the selfie I took last night. And that’s it. That’s it? This seems useless. And “Past Life”? What does that even mean? Am I dead?

WOMAN feels for a pulse.

WOMAN: I’m alive, so what is this place? Maybe Selena decided to put me into an escape room as a prank. That would be something she would do to me, and I’m gonna kill her when I get out of here. That means I have to find the key. Pictures of me, “Past Life”, and liquor. What does that all add up to?

The light reveals the party dress. WOMAN looks at the photo album.

WOMAN: Is that the dress I wore last night?

WOMAN walks to dress and picks it up. The dress is covered in dirt and a bit of blood. WOMAN screams.

WOMAN: Okay! This isn’t funny anymore! Get me out! Get me out! Why does my dress look like that? Who undressed me?

WOMAN looks at the table and then the dress. She realizes something.

WOMAN: No! No! That can't be true.

WOMAN goes to the table and picks up the photo album. She studies the photo carefully and looks terrified. She looks at the alcohol and starts to cry.

WOMAN: Who the hell put me here? Tell me.

The lights reveal the mirror on the wall. WOMAN walks towards it and looks into it.

WOMAN: I did.

VOICE: You did.

WOMAN turns around and looks at the alcohol. She makes herself a drink. The lights fades. The light comes back. WOMAN is sadly humming to herself as she dances with the alcohol bottle. She stops dancing and looks at the table.

WOMAN: I should have seen it.

VOICE: You should have seen it. It was obvious.

WOMAN: It was. He was in my selfie.

VOICE: He was watching you all night.

WOMAN: And I kept drinking.

VOICE: Like a fool

WOMAN: Yea. Like a fool. And he followed me until I was alone.

VOICE: And he told you he wanted to show you something

WOMAN: And I followed him.

VOICE: Like a fool.

WOMAN: Like a fool. Like a fool. It's all my fault.

VOICE: **Your** fault.

WOMAN violently starts to tear out the pages of the photo album. While screaming,

WOMAN: My fault.

VOICE: Your fault.

WOMAN: I could have stopped it.

VOICE: You could've fought him.

WOMAN: I could've screamed loudly for someone to hear.

VOICE: You wore the sluttiest dress.

WOMAN: I did.

VOICE: You kept drinking even after blacking out.

WOMAN: I did.

VOICE: You probably wanted it.

WOMAN: I didn't.

VOICE: You **did**.

WOMAN: Yea. I did.

VOICE: You're a whore. You slept with someone you barely even knew.

WOMAN: I am. I am dirty. I am a used Band-Aid.

WOMAN falls to the ground.

VOICE: Death is better than this.

WOMAN: I'm better off dead. I wish this was death. I wish he had killed me. My god, why do I have to feel like this? Why am I stuck here?

VOICE doesn't reply to her question.

WOMAN: I'm tired. (*picks up the selfie photo and looks at it*) I should have seen it. The signs were all there.

VOICE: It was obvious. He followed you.

WOMAN: And I followed him.

VOICE: You drank-

WOMAN: A lot.

VOICE: You obviously-

WOMAN: wanted it.

VOICE: You could-

WOMAN: Had screamed. God, why didn't I scream? Why didn't -

VOICE: You try to fight back?

WOMAN: I don't know.

VOICE: You could have fought him off if you really wanted to.

WOMAN: But I didn't want him to hurt me any worse than he was already doing

VOICE: Because.

WOMAN: He should have never done that to me. Why do I have to suffer for trying to have a good night out?

VOICE: Why did you get hurt?

WOMAN: Because of him.

VOICE: Because of him.

WOMAN: I rarely dance anymore.

VOICE: Because of him.

WOMAN: I dropped out of school.

VOICE: Because of him.

WOMAN: I'm too scared to go out anymore.

VOICE: Because of him.

WOMAN: I trapped myself here. I stopped living my life and started living in limbo. That man gets to go out and live his life. He will be the one who graduates college. He will be the one who gets a good job. That monster gets to live out his best years while I'm stuck here. That wolf that makes his sheep costume so convincing that I know no one would believe me when I cry wolf. I know that the judge will pity him. I know the sentence before I even go to the courthouse. I know the police will put me back into this room. I know complete strangers will put me back into this room. I know he will put me back into this room, but at least now I have the key.

VOICE: The key. You are -

WOMAN: Strong.

VOICE: You are -

WOMAN: Capable.

VOICE: It's not -

WOMAN: My fault.

BOTH: I didn't put myself here.

WOMAN takes the alcohol bottle and breaks the mirror. She finds the key within the mirror.

WOMAN: I can start over. I can live my life.

*WOMAN grabs the photo album. She takes a deep breath and opens the door. Lights fades.
End of Play.*

Honorable Mention in Prose

"Pilar's Dollar"

A door slams.

"Honey, I'm home."

Pilar Estrada fumbles with the heavy bags of groceries knowing her husband will be angry.

"It's late! Do you know what time it is? Where were you?"

"I know. I'm sorry. I did the shopping and then I stopped at the flea market. I guess I just lost track of the time. I'll have dinner in a few minutes."

"How can you have dinner in a few minutes?"

"I started it this morning. It was in the crock pot." Pilar walks back into the living room carrying a large book.

"More books! Always more books! How much this time?"

"I bought just three. Only three dollars." Pilar holds up three fingers.

"Only three dollars! Only three dollars wasted!"

"This one I bought for you. You like sports." She drops the book onto his lap and the impending fight begins to fade away.

"Hola, Pablo. Como Esta? You stay?"

Pablo was Pilar and Miguel's best man and now a frequent dinner guest. He too has sensed a coming marital spat and shifted uncomfortably in his chair, but a free meal was still a free meal.

Pilar is washing the dishes. Pablo is drinking his third beer while watching Raheem Mostert score his fourth touchdown and irritated that he had his money on the wrong team. Miguel had guessed right and was looking to make some money but hardly gave the game much attention. Since dinner, his last beer remained barely touched, his nose planted in the book Pilar had gotten him.

"Pablo, who won Super Bowl 51?"

"New England over Atlanta, thirty-four, twenty-eight. Why?"

"Fifty-two?" Ignoring the question.

"Philadelphia over New England. Forty-one, thirty-three."

"Fifty-three?"

"Come on! I'm watching me loose fifty dollars. New England beat the Rams, thirteen, three."

"And Fifty-four?"

"How the hell should I know. The game isn't until February."

"According to this," looking over the top of the book, "The Chiefs will beat the 49ers in a come from behind victory thirty-one to twenty."

"How can that be?"

Miguel closes the book on his lap.

"I don't know but who would go through all the trouble to make this up? This," rapping the book with his knuckles, "is an almanac of all the sports scores from 2010 through 2030. Point spreads, everything."

Pablo let out a long whistle and shook his head.

"I don't know but I have an idea."

"So do I. Super Bowl is in two weeks."

Pilar is sitting on the couch reading when Miguel and Pablo burst in laughing, dancing and hugging each other. Miguel pulls Pilar off the couch and starts dancing an impromptu merengue with her around the room.

"Have both of you gone crazy?" She pulled herself out of her husband's arms,

"Crazy rich!". Miguel snatched the paper bag from Pablo hands and pours a pile of cash onto the table. "Fifty-four thousand, five hundred forty-two dollars. Half is ours."

"How?"

"From the book you bought. It told who would win the Super Bowl and by how much. It was right."

"Miguel, I'm afraid." Pilar gives a worried glance at the book.

"Afraid of what? Being rich." Miguel kisses the book with an exaggerated smack.

Pilar is sitting on the couch watching her favorite soap when a knock comes at the door. She unlatched the door chain lock and unlocked the dead bolt. It was too early to expect her husband. In the dim hallway, the super still had failed to replace the bulb, stood a tall, dark complexioned man with a vaguely oriental cast wearing a three-piece suit that seemed a decade out of style and improbably topped with a fedora. In his right hand he carried a cane with a round crystal knob.

She peered through the three inches of open space ready to slam the door shut if need be.

"Yes, can I help you."

"Good afternoon." He tipped his hat with his left hand and smiled. "I'm looking for Miguel Estrada."

"Well, you found him. I'm his wife, Pilar. He's not home from work yet."

"May I come in and wait for him?"

Pilar shook her head and took a step back. The man smiled again and brought the knob shoulder high. She heard a high pitched, rhythmic hum in her head, and she smiled.

"Yes, of course. Please come in." Pilar unlatched the door and ushered him in.

"Would you like something to drink? Some iced tea?"

"That would be nice, thank you."

Pilar hands him the glass suddenly realizing she has let this stranger into the house against her husband's strictest instructions and doesn't really remember doing it. He will be furious with her when he finds out.

"That is a very pretty cane you have. Where did you buy it?" She starts a conversation trying to break the awkward silence.

“My dear Mrs. Estrada. This is a walking stick. A cane is for old, sick people.” He smiles as he takes another sip just as Miguel enters the apartment and gives his wife an angry glare. The man places the glass on the coffee table and stands and walks toward Miguel.

“Miguel Estrada.” The greeting is stated not as a question.

“Yes. And you are?”

“You can call me ah. Mr. Smith”

“Well, Mr. Smith.” His tone is disbelieving, stressing the “Mr. Smith” “What do you want?”

“I’m here about the book.”

Pilar jumps to her feet almost spilling her drink.

“What book?”

“I think you know what book I mean. The sports almanac you and Pablo used to win fifty-four thousand, five hundred forty-two dollars betting on the Super Bowl.

“Are you from the government?” His tone is wary.

“No.” He gives an amused chuckle and shakes his head. “I’m not from the government.”

“Then where are you from, Mr. Smith?”

Mr. Smith gives a short, thoughtful sigh before responding. “Mr. Estrada, if I tried to explain that to you would neither understand nor believe me.

“Try me.”

“Alright. The simplest but still incorrect answer is that I’m from the year 2058.”

“And you traveled back in time just to talk with me? Do I look stupid?” Miguel draws his index finger across his forehead. “Do you see STUPID written here?”

“No, Mr. Estrada. I don’t think you’re stupid. But if I’m not what I say, how would I know about the book, or the money, down to the dollar, or Pablo.

“I don’t know.”

“Would you like me to name the four bookies you made the bets with?”

“You said that was the incorrect answer. What is the right answer?” Pilar sits down with her legs crossed beneath her. She feels unaccountably relaxed.

A fair question.” Mr. Smith goes to the couch and sits down letting out a long breath. Pilar stays at the other end of the couch away from him. Miguel takes a chair, turns it around and sits down.

“I’ll try. It is not possible to travel through time, as such, because time as you understand it, doesn’t exist. It is only your perception of the universe. But there exist an infinite number of universes that run parallel to each other, twisting and turning together through the time-space continuum. Some call it a multiverse. It is possible to travel across these.

“That’s insane!”

“No, Mr. Estrada. It’s been proven even in your time”.

“How?” Pilar asks when her husband doesn’t respond.

"I'd have to get into general relativity and quantum mechanics and string theory to answer that. Well," Mr. Smith shrugs. "If you darken this room and take a large piece of poster board, cut a small rectangle in it and shine a light at it, what will show on the wall?"

"One rectangle." Miguel holds up one finger and answers in derisive tone.

"Correct. And if I cut two rectangles?"

"Two." He answers like it was a stupid question, tiring of the game

"No. Many rectangles. I read that somewhere."

"Quite correct, Mrs. Estrada. Alternate bands of light and dark. And four?"

"I don't know." Miguel answers in an irritated tone. His wife merely shrugs.

"The number of white rectangles is cut in half. Why? All energy, all matter is composed of particles. Light particles we call photons and they behave like particles but also like waves. So why?"

"Because those photons bump into each other?"

"As good an explanation as any, for our purposes, Mr. Estrada, but if you use a very weak light source, only one photon at a time, you see the same patterns emerge. Those bumping photons are somewhere, but not in this universe. What we do is travel in space, from one orthogonal multiverse coordinate to another."

"Orthogonal? I don't understand."

"It refers to a series of right angles, like in a crystal. To find a location in any three-dimensional object requires six coordinates. The seventh is your destination – here." He gestures with his hands. "That's the best I can do."

He glances with raised eyebrows at Miguel. "I said you would neither understand nor believe me. But I digress. I am here to return the book to where it belongs."

"And what if I don't want to give it to you. Do you think you can take it away from me?" Miguel jumps to his feet, angry and defensive.

Mr. Smith remains seated and calm but raises his walking stick slightly.

"In point of fact, Mr. Estrada, I could take it from you quite easily. But I'll not. What you do will be of your own free will. But what would you use it for? Do you think you could go on winning like that and nobody would notice? Steal from people? You're no more a thief than you are a drug dealer."

"Miguel?" Her voice raises in concern. Money is very tight and she hopes he has not done something foolish.

"Your good friend Pablo got the harebrained idea to take his winnings and make a big drug score. Fortunately, your husband had the good sense not to become involved. Even as we speak Pablo is face down in a gutter in Dallas with a bullet in his brain and his money gone." Pilar gasps. "Is this the example you would set for your son?"

"Son! I have no son." Looking at his wife, he stammers. "Pilar?"

"I didn't tell you." She looks down into her lap.

"Why?"

"Because I was afraid you would leave us if you knew."

"You could think that of me?"

"Yes" Pilar responded with an edge to her voice.

“Mr. and Mrs. Estrada. My time is short.” He stands.

“Miguel. Give him the book.”

“Why? Why should I? Why should we. This could make our future.” His tone is angry and pleading at the same time.

“Because he’s right. It doesn’t belong here, and it will bring us no good.” Pilar stands, and her voice rises in anger.

“Pablo is dead because of it.” Her voice softens. “We are not thieves. We will raise our son with what we earn not what we can steal using that.” Pilar points at the book on the table. “Please. Give him back the book.

“Is that what you want?”

“It is.”

Miguel grimaces and shakes his head at the lost possibilities for a better future knowing his wife is probably right. She usually was.

“What will you give me for it?” Miguel asks with a sigh of resignation.

“The dollar your wife paid for it.”

He nods his head.

“A 2058 dollar?” Pilar steps beside her husband, putting her arm around his waist.

“I’m afraid that’s all I have on me.”

Miguel takes the book off the table. He hands it to his wife, and she hands it to Mr. Smith who tucks it under his arm. He takes the dollar from his pocket and hands it to Pilar.

“Thank you and goodbye.”

“Will we ever see you again?” He turns to her at the door for a moment.

“Perhaps. No man’s future is chiseled in granite. Only his past.” He exits and Miguel sits heavily on the couch.

“I am such a fool.” Miguel sits heavily on the couch, each word is stressed separately, his tone is angry.

She sits beside her husband and takes his hand in hers

“No, you’re not. We did the right thing.”

“The right thing!” He spits out the words bitterly. “The right thing is for white people.”

“No. Miguel. Please tell me you don’t mean that.”

“No.” He sighs, caressing the back of her head with his hand.

“At least we have something to show our grandchildren.” She looks at the dollar, smiling broadly and suddenly her face drops.

“Miguel. Miguel! Mira! Look.” She so excited she’s shaking, holding the dollar out for him, but her hand is shaking so much he can’t grab it.

“Look at what?”

“The name.”

“What name? What are you talking about?”

“The name! The, the, the signature. Look” She stammers starting to cry. “The signature. The Secretary of the Treasury. Miguel Estrada.”

Miguel takes the dollar from her hand, stares at it in disbelief. He looks at her and then out into space. Pilar takes his hand and places her head on his shoulder.

Joseph Kutch

*Honorable Mention in Prose**“What Do You Need Right Now?”*

Daelos lurched up in the bed, trembling and drenched in sweat. He clamped a hand over his mouth to keep a ragged sound from escaping. He took a few deep breaths to try and calm himself, running his other hand through his messy dark hair. He blinked away the after images of his dream— of blood, pain, and despair— and looked over to his right. Kusek was still slumbering peacefully, sprawled across his side of the bed, their shared blanket slung low over his bare back.

Trying to hold down his nausea, Daelos let his eyes trace the lines of Kusek’s face. The strong features softened by sleep, the already normally disheveled hair made messier, pushed up awkwardly by his pillow, strands of red, brown, and gold glinting in the dim firelight from the hearth.

It has been some time since he had last had a nightmare. Daelos wished he could forget the feeling. Taking another breath in a vain attempt to settle himself, Daelos quietly eased himself from the bed, taking care not to disturb his partner.

He padded over to the worn couch that sat in front of the hearth on bare feet, taking the spare blanket that lay on its arm and pulling it around his shoulders. Sitting on the couch, he pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them. He watched the dying embers in the hearth, letting the quiet crackle of the coals push away his solemn thoughts.

Kusek stretched, reaching an arm out towards Daelos, pausing when he felt that the bed was empty and cold. He cracked open a stormy blue eye, blinking both open when he discovered that the bed was, in fact, empty. He pushed himself up on an elbow, casting his gaze blearily around the room, spotting a raven-haired head just peeking over the top of the couch. His brow immediately lowered in concern.

After giving himself a moment to fully wake up, the Nord climbed out of bed, walking over to sit beside the curled-up elf.

Daelos was staring absently at the dying fire with his head resting on his knees, his ice-blue eyes glassy and dull.

“Hey, are you alright, Dae?” Kusek asked quietly.

It took a long moment for Daelos to tear his gaze away from the hearth and look at him. He nodded mutely.

“Are you sure?”

A pause. Daelos shook his head, looking back to the fire.

“What’s wrong, my heart-thief?”

Daelos was quiet for so long that Kusek thought that he had decided to ignore him. Then he muttered, “Nightmares.”

Of course it was nightmares, Kusek thought sadly. His poor little elf never got any rest it seemed.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Kusek wanted to reach out and touch Daelos, but he hesitated. He didn’t know if Daelos would welcome his touch right now, or if he would lash out against it. He was often unpredictable when he got like this. The elf was prone to bite, so to speak.

Daelos shook his head again.

Kusek bit back a sigh and let the silence spread between them.

After a few minutes, he tried again, “Do you need anything, Daelos?”

Surprisingly, the elf spoke this time, “No. I am fine.”

Kusek closed his eyes briefly in frustration. He slowly reached out, consequences be damned, giving Daelos a chance to pull away. When he didn't, Kusek placed a hand against his cheek, his thumb softly tracing the scar that traveled from the corner of his lips to his high cheekbone. He gently turned Daelos's head so that he was facing him.

"No." When Daelos blinked at him, he continued. "Don't shut me out, Dae. What do you need right now?" Kusek knew there wasn't much he could do about the things that plagued his mind, but the gods help him, he would try.

Daelos swallowed thickly, averting his eyes. He was quiet for a long moment before he sniffed, rather pitifully, returning his gaze to Kusek's. "A hug would be nice..."

Kusek smiled softly at him. "That, love, I can do. C'mon." He pulled Daelos against his side and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Daelos pressed his face against the curve of his neck, wrapping his arms around his waist, his legs draping across his own.

Kusek combed his fingers through Daelos's long hair, a thumb tracing the shell of a pointed ear, Daelos leaning into the gentle touch, and waited until his breathing slowly deepened into that of sleep. Then, with a small grunt of complaint from Daelos, he carefully maneuvered them so that they were both lying flat on the couch, Daelos half sprawled across his chest.

"Rest well, my heart-thief." Kusek pressed a kiss to the top of the elf's head before succumbing to sleep himself.

Fallenghost (Archive of Our Own)

“Agent Umbrella: A Rogue’s Story”

Another solemn night in Munlit City, once again in solitude. It was three years ago this day that I witnessed the cold-blooded murder of my brother, Sunshade. Even worse, it was my very own partner, Pretty Parasol, who was the killer. Pretty Parasol had a very feminine outfit and lots of makeup, it looked like she came straight out of the 1940s. Parasol and I were best friends and even better crime-stoppers. I had worked with her and my brother at Canopy Corp., the most well-known agency in the whole city. Munlit City has a bad case of criminals of all shapes and sizes, so Canopy Corp. was created to stop these bad guys in various creative ways. One of their first ways was making gadgets out of household objects, this included umbrellas. I, Agent Umbrella, was one of their first agents, along with my brother and Pretty Parasol. I was one of their top agents, able to stop crime anywhere at any time and any way possible. I was given the name Umbrella because I had one that contained a lot of gadgets. In fact, I still have it today. You can thank Visor for that, an ingenious old man with an oversized umbrella hat, he’s the lead engineer of Canopy.

Now back to where I was and what led up to my brother’s murder. For the past few months before his death, he had warned me that Canopy Corp. was behind the crimes in Munlit City. The first red flag was that they fund and are funded by these underground corporations that many of our bad guys come from. That’s probably why they’re able to do just about anything with the amount of money they have. In return for getting these huge sums of money, Canopy Corp. makes most of these crimes happen, which gains notoriety from everyone in the city. They hire these villains in secret and plan out multiple incidents with these criminals. What’s worse is that once a crime is stopped, they get rewarded by the city and the government for doing their job correctly. While they’re secretly partnered with the bad guys, they’re getting more money than the other corporations do, they steal from the city and the villains. It sickened me when I first found out, my whole career and self-image were shattered. Me, my brother, Parasol, the agents, we were all puppets playing into some sick game.

Sunshade and I both had enough, and we set out on a personal mission to expose Canopy Corp. from the ground up. I tried to explain this to Parasol and Visor, our leading engineer, but neither would help us. Both Parasol and Visor feared losing their jobs and their income. My brother and I had to do it alone, and all went well when we intercepted our first crime. Strongarm, the arms on this man can kill at least ten people in one fell swoop. He was on his way to rob an art museum, a strange crime for such a large man. We met him at one of the bars, playing poker, luckily for us, he didn’t hurt anyone before we got to him. The bar was owned by one of Canopy’s only good associates: Paul’s Barstool. Some heavy interrogation went down, but he confirmed my brother’s findings quickly. Turns out he’s not a big fan of it either, he then gave us a few tips if we wanted to go through with taking Canopy down. We need to cut off crimes before they happen, the more we do that, the less money Canopy gets. We stopped Jet Fueller, Crazy Mill, The Un-Lifeguard, and Axis. All notorious villains connected to Canopy. On the night of his death, our little operation was busted by Strongarm and Parasol, he looked at me with sorry eyes as he punched down the door to one of the Paul’s Barstool bars: it had been converted into a base of operations for my brother and I. Strongarm looked like he was doing this against his will, and Parasol came for me first.

“Oh you, Umbrella, always getting ahead of yourself! You’ve dug far enough into our business affairs, this ends here!” She had an insane smile on her face, I never knew she could look that crazy. Parasol managed to fend me off, and Strongarm was ordered to hold me down as she went for my brother, who put up a good fight. They had an intense umbrella fight, too. The umbrellas could fire bullets, shoot out a grappling hook, be used as a shield, could be charged with electricity, and can be used to fly, just to name a few uses. Parasol broke Sunshade’s umbrella, and all it took was one fatal shot. Strongarm was ordered to take care of me next, and he threw me around like a ragdoll, slamming me against tables and chairs, he made sure I would be unconscious by the end of it. When I woke up, the bar was torn apart, and I was left a broken mess. I was down, but certainly not out, no one was there to help me but myself. One way or another, I ended up in the guest bedroom of an apartment high rise, and in the room with me was Visor, the lead engineer.

“Don’t worry.” He told me, “I won’t hurt you.”

“How do I know you’re not gonna kill me?” I asked in fear, unsure if he was going to betray me like Parasol

did.

“Well, I did bring you into my good friend’s home, her name is Mrs. Clark.” Mrs. Clark was a kind old widow that lived alone in her apartment, she would be looking after me from then on. “I don’t have much time, but I’ll meet you again soon, don’t give up, okay?” He smiled, turning to face the window. He leapt out, using his umbrella hat to glide away. We would occasionally meet up at the top of the Spears Tower, the largest one in the city. We had discussed ideas and plans to take down the corporation, our first step was to get Strongarm back without losing any more lives. I will never look at Pretty Parasol or Canopy Corp. the same way ever again. I swear on my life, Sunshade, I’ll avenge you one day.

Jacob Chagnard

“Et Tu, Brute?”

A nudge on my shoulder distracts me from the turmoil in my stomach, in my mind, and in my rapidly thumping heart. I turn to see Marcellus, a servant of mine, and hiss out a whisper. "What is it, Marcellus? The Senate is about to convene and Caesar will be here shortly."

Acknowledging this alone causes a shiver to afflict the back of my neck, even as I feel fresh sweat trickle down the side of my face. Marcellus looks concerned. "Your wife wants word that you are well, dominus. She worries for you."

"Tell her I am well," I order, although I am far from it. I glance over at Cassius, seated beside me, and try to ignore the terrible feeling in my stomach.

Cassius pats me on the shoulder as Marcellus leaves. "For the republic," he says, meeting my eyes in a gaze that makes me shudder. He is serious, cold and solid as marble, his green eyes revealing nothing but sheer determination. My own, I know, only reveal my fear, my misgivings.

Decimus is here. So are the Casca brothers and Tillius Cimber, and all the other Liberatores. Mark Antony, according to plan, should be detained outside by several other conspirators. It is happening.

"For the republic," I reply half-heartedly.

And then Caesar walks in, taking his seat on the throne that faces us. For a man the Senate has just declared Dictator in Perpetuity, he looks tired and vulnerable, and old. The shadows beneath his eyes lead me to believe he's received about as much sleep as I have in recent weeks. The crown of laurel leaves perched on his head does not do enough to conceal his receding hairline. What makes it harder for me is that I remember when he was young and strong and showed me how to make little wooden boats to float in puddles.

"Senators." Caesar clears his throat. His voice, clear and high, projects as well as always, but it is dulled with a hint of fatigue.

"We have many things to discuss today," he continues. "What should come first?"

"Requests!" Cassius blurts, and Decimus shoots him a venomous glare. Cassius is a brilliant plotter, but his impulsivity might get the better of us all.

Caesar raises an eyebrow. "Well, Cassius is certainly ready to get this meeting over with," he chuckles. "Gentlemen, should we get requests answered first?"

All of us Liberatores shout our agreement, and since the rest of the Senate has their own self-serving agendas, most of them do as well. After we sit down again, I scan the crowd and notice Cicero is not here. It would be like him to disappear when it is time to get our hands dirty. Cicero, the one who talked me into this insanity.

Cimber speaks up. "I would like to request the release of my brother, who has been exiled."

Caesar frowns. "You just made that very same request, I shall need more time to consider it."

We knew this would be his answer, and this is our cue. Cimber leaps from his seat, drawing shocked eyes from those not part of the conspiracy. We feign shock as well, but I do not have to try hard. My heart is racing enough as it is, and I feel my toga cling to me with sickly, nervous sweat.

Cimber falls to his knees, grasping at Caesar's sleeve. Caesar looks uncomfortable, unsure how to handle the situation. I have known the man all my life, and rarely have I seen him like this. "Sit down," he says, "I told you I would consider the request."

In response, Cimber yanks down Caesar's sleeve, tearing the fabric at the shoulder. He pulls hard enough that when he is done, he has removed the whole sleeve, and he reaches for the knife hidden in the folds of his toga praetexta.

"This is violence!" Caesar cries, his eyes widening like that of a cornered animal, and I think he can see the knife.

Cassius locks eyes with me, and I feel my stomach turn to water, my knees beginning to shake. The next few minutes are a blur. Servilius Casca stabs him first, and then we are all on him, descending like sharks on a bleeding fish. I feel myself begin to cry. I hear a scream and realize it is my own. A sharp pain tears through my leg as, in their confusion, one of the assassins stabs me instead.

I want to stop it all. Images flash through my mind in a matter of seconds. I see Cassius, and Cicero, telling me that Caesar plans to make himself king, that it is my destiny to take part in the plot because tyrannicide is in my blood. I see Porcia, bleeding from the thigh where she cut herself with a razor to prove she could withstand torture, begging to be in on the conspiracy. *Caesar's ongoing battle with my father caused his suicide*, she told me, her eyes stony, unafraid. I remember the fear I held that she might do something worse to herself if I did not agree.

But then, when the other conspirators have fled, and Caesar is lying soaked in his own blood, he looks at me, and I know how wrong it all was. He is shaking, grabbing onto his torn toga to wipe the blood from his lips, and his eyes are filled with tears. When our gazes meet, I have never seen anyone look so wounded.

I only saw Caesar cry once before, when he received the news of his daughter Julia's death. But I have heard him, from across a tent, yell out in his sleep, haunted by the faces of dying Gauls, weeping for his Julia, weeping even for Pompey, his enemy, because he trusted him once. This is the man who made orders that I was not to be harmed, even when I surrendered after fighting on Pompey's side. *Protect Brutus*, I would hear him say. *No one is to hurt Brutus. Good, noble little Brutus. You couldn't hurt a single soul.*

I choke on a sardonic laugh at the irony. I was the one he loved like a son since my boyhood. I've heard the rumors that he fathered me in his youth, and even now in his eyes I see fragments of my own. I fall to my knees beside him, unable to stand any longer, and grasp my dagger. I am the only one who did not make a blow yet.

Caesar is dying, and he is in agony. The anguish on his face, both physical and emotional, as he writhes about on the floor, is more than I can bear. I can never atone for this now; it is far too late for that. All I can do is put him out of his misery. Closing my eyes, shaking with the tears that I allow to flow down my cheeks in little rivulets, I plunge my dagger through his chest, and remove it just as quickly. I want to vomit. But the deed is done.

Too weak to even cry out in pain, Caesar gasps, his breath shaky and rattling. He looks at me again, the same fond way he's looked at me when I was a boy, except with a sadness greater than anything I've ever seen before. He addresses me in Greek, which he used to help me practice in my youth. The words confirm all the rumors I grew up with, but more than that, they pierce my soul with a devastation I could never fully articulate. Four words, and then he covers his face with his toga: "You too, my child?"

Kennis Gremillion Jobe

“Change of Heart”

Daamen Rourke woke up this morning and stared at the ceiling. As the light of morning beamed through his window, he covered his eyes because they were overly sensitive. He rolled out of bed, almost slipping on the loose bottles of Seagram Escapes before sliding them out of his path. He groggily managed his way to the window before closing the curtain.

Taking a moment to inspect his room, he realized it was in absolute disarray. The bottles from the last few nights were littered all about, his clean clothes were strewn about in his relaxing chair, and the dirty clothes were everywhere. It had been a rough time at the Manchester Memoir, the newspaper he worked at, and it was starting to wear on him. With the surplus of work piling up, interviewees being uncooperative, sources becoming unreliable, and his name being slandered, things seemed exasperating to him. Insults of old played back in his mind as he trudged his way to the bathroom.

"You know, maybe you weren't cut out for this."

"Why go for this profession? It's so hard to get in to."

"You'll be alright, just man up."

As he looked up, he parted his hair to see that he was visually worse for wear: bedraggled hair, unkempt stubble, yellowing teeth. He looked into his eyes and saw the good times he had bowling with friends, playing video games with friends, supporting his family, the people who were inspiring him to keep pushing, as few of them as there were. They believed with all their hearts, and he refused to let them down.

He cupped a handful of water before throwing it in his face to get off all the shaving cream. He looked into the mirror once more and felt a glimmer of rejuvenation. He smirked to himself and said, "Little by little, things will be alright."

Jarvares Pierre-Louis

“Words to Live By”

Enjoy today.

I may be young but I do know this; life passes by quickly. Appreciate the moments with the people you love. Take time to enjoy the day. Smile often, laugh more, and stay positive. Try everything you want to try. See everything you want to see. Life is too short to wait.

Allow yourself to love strongly and passionately; do not fear feelings. Instead of having anxiety about what could go wrong, think about what could go right. Do not be afraid of loving too much, and do not be scared of being loved in return.

Stop trying to make everyone else happy if you are not. Find your own happiness, and when you do, do not let anyone take it from you. Put yourself first.

Read more. Go on social media less.

Exercise.

Keep the people you love in your life close to you. Rid yourself of the negative ones.

Paint.

Live simply and do not compare yourself to others.

If you do not enjoy the job you have, stop doing it. Life is too short to spend it doing something you do not like. Find what you are passionate about.

Stop holding on to your regrets. The past is the past, so move on.

Care about the kind of person you are. Always treat everyone, no matter how young or old, with kindness and respect. People may not remember what you said to them, but they will always remember how you made them feel.

Be patient. The best things in life happen unexpectedly. Remember that good things take time.

Do not shy away from a challenge. Dig deep down and find a way to conquer it. Do not let the fear of failure stop you from achieving your goals.

Even if you have a busy life, make time for your family. The time you spend together is precious.

Try new things. Get out of your comfort zone.

Be yourself. Do not change.

Listen to what other people have to say. Be curious and show an interest in what they are expressing to you. Learn from others and pass on your knowledge as well.

Remember that money cannot buy happiness.

Never take the shortcut in life just because it is easier. The right path is not always the easiest, but it can be the most rewarding. Enjoy today.

Sophie Borhi

“A Prologue”

He awoke to the ordinary sounds of dawn. The wind was only slightly blowing, the birds were already singing, and creatures of all sorts had begun their day. Despite nature's chorus, Finn kept his eyes tightly shut. The melodious sounds seemed a mockery to him as he knew what lay around him. The smell of blood attacked his nose and he grew faint.

‘Why can a monster feel quaint at the smell of blood?’ he thought to himself.

Finn curled into the fetal position without ever taking in his surroundings. It was always like this for him and he had long grown tired of it. He had no family, no friends, and no life to speak of. The faces of every poor soul who had ever helped him swam in his mind. All they ever saw was a sickly orphan in need of help. Despite his protests they always brought him in and tried to nurse him back into shape.

Oftentimes he was too sickly to put up any resistance. They would help him and eventually he would drift into sleep. A sleep that he had always woken up from completely alone.

“I know you're awake, kid.”

The deep voice of a man put Finn into a panic. His eyes shot open and he sprang into a crouched stance ready to be struck. He was forced to finally take in his surroundings.

The man seemed to notice the panicked boy's confusion, “They're gone. They'll return once we fix the place back up. I made it before you hurt them too badly. Only blood spilled here was your own.” He gestured towards two shovels propped up on a nearby tree. “You made a right mess of this place. Even trampled their garden.”

“Who are you?” Finn's voice cracked and gave away his fear.

“There will be time for pleasantries later. We have work to do.” There was a snap to the stranger's voice that hadn't been there before.

Finn wanted to flee but something told him he wouldn't be able to get away. No one had ever stayed a night with him until now, this man did not seem normal. He looked like an old vagabond with torn clothes and messy hair. A scraggly black beard that only a commoner would wear hid his expressions. Yet the man stood with pose and moved with a noble grace.

A shovel was forcefully put into Finn's hands. The two of them went around to the back of the cottage where he observed the bulk of his actions. The elderly couple living there, had found him collapsed not far from their home and took him in. They had fed and cared for him, yet this was how they were repaid.

The man began to work without even a troubled look on his face. Finn's hands trembled so badly that he dropped his shovel, he fell to his knees not long after.

“Get to work.” The order came nonchalantly.

“They were only trying to help me.”

“I know.”

“They didn't deserve this.”

“I know.”

“I hurt them.”

“I know.” The man's tone didn't change at all. His shovel steadily throwing dirt over his shoulder.

Finn couldn't handle it anymore and began to try to run away. He had taken his second step when he heard the man's words. "You're drowning." His voice was no longer silky smooth. His composure had cracked. It stopped Finn in his tracks.

"You've never been normal. Wherever you've gone since birth you have been shunned and cast away. Tossed from caretaker to caretaker who all eventually dumped you to another. But the nightmares began when you were maybe ten years old. Not long after you began to lose control as you've done here. In your waking hours you feel it, something fighting to suck you under. When you sleep it engulfs you and when you wake, you find scenes like this." The man had stopped working and now looked Finn in the eyes. The hard lines on his face gave away how much turmoil he had seen.

"You're right. I'm a monster." Finn looked couldn't hold the man's piercing gaze and looked at the ground. "Just kill me."

"I don't see a monster. I see a boy. These were not marked by claws or teeth." He pointed at a piece of the house that had been damaged from the swing of some tool.

It all began to be too much for him to bear. Finn felt the all too familiar feeling of waves crashing over his head. They sucked him under, and a black veil seemed to cover his eyes. With the darkness of the waves came only malice.

His voice now distorted he began to yell, "I only bring pain and destruction onto people. I am just a monster acting like a person. You'll never understand!"

It was then that the veil seemed to blow off his eyes. He was no longer fighting to stay afloat within his mind. The pressure he felt instead came from outside of him and Finn collapsed under the weight of it. Eventually he found it in him to look up. What he saw was the man gazing at him with all black eyes. It was as if the man's pupil had dilated to cover even the whites of his eyes.

"Fool. I am the only one who could understand." Somehow, just for a moment, those black eyes showed sadness.

"Who are you?" Finn asked with wonder instead of fear.

The question was answered this time, "You may call me Terick. What shall I call you?" He seemed younger now.

"Finn."

Terick's eyes returned to normal. He smiled a melancholy smile and the strange pressure lifted, "Grab a shovel, Finn."

Justin Dixon

“Bright Eyes”

The beast stood before Aegis and reached out his hand. His armor was battered-scratched and dented in various places to the point where any more could start to provide him difficulty in moving. Aegis would stay on his back, still breathing in shock and horror at the sights of the battlefield. The beast would rip his helmet from his misshapen head before discarding it.

“ON YOUR FEET BOY, we must move!” He croaked out with a tone dissimilar from any time before and unlike a human entirely. His stiff lips were parted to bare his dagger teeth. The situation was dire, and Aegis’s fear-frozen body would leave he or his knight to their deaths. The beast known as Qath lunged forward, grabbing the petrified child by the shirt and tossing him back. “RUN! They cannot catch you!”

The words appeared to ring true in Aegis’s mind, the beast could feel, snapping him from his trance of fear and slowing his breathing. He’d stutter backwards and prepare to run, yet not prepare for what would happen next.

One of the green monsters, this one much darker and faded in color, had come up the hillside without notice. As Qath would turn to face the creature, he would be struck in the side of the head and thrown to the side by its fist. It was an exceptionally large one that towered even over the half-dragon’s stature by nearly the height of his own head and bore the orc frame just as well.

The orc looked at Aegis, who’d tripped and fallen, and laid its maul into his empty second hand, that which struck the half-dragon. He would then yell at the boy as he tried to get up and begin to run. Knowing of its slow nature, most likely, the monster lifted its maul above his head and kicked out its foot, readying a mighty throw.

It was unclear to the scaled being whether or not the monster’s throw would have connected with Aegis, but nonetheless, his life was not worth risking to gain an advantage. The half-dragon Qath drug himself up from the ground and unsheathed his darkly sword before springing at the monster and slicing at its right wrist, causing it to drop the maul behind his back and scream out in pain. With the uncanny weight of the sword and the fine bevel, the tip carried itself clean through the orc’s wrist, leaving a gaping wound that reached down to the bone along the bottom of its connection. By the way it waggled and swayed in the direction of every movement, it may have scraped away at the very joint, or even severed bone.

Never had the elder-to-human beast seen an orc shed tears, not in sadness nor anger, but anger mixed with pain changed that quickly.

The green-skin brute rasped through his teeth and stifled a snuffle for a moment until he regained his, rageful, composure. “You little lizard!” He growled out with pain still in his eyes whilst he held the half-hanging appendage. It oozed its life onto the grass with a thick, audible ‘plip...plip...plip’ like a leaky faucet.

The knight both clad in steel and scale rose to his feet, blade and kite raised.

“Hah...aah...hagh” were the noises that hissed out. He let slip the grip on his shield’s handle and allowed it to dangle by the strap. Reaching up, he found his triangular jaw hanging limp. His own pain was great from this, but he rectified that pain in grasping his jaw and forcing it true with a shrill hiss and a wet suction as his jawline popped back into property. His legs would wobble for a moment before he looked back into the orc’s face and reaffirmed faculty with his kite. Through slit eyes, he could not only see anger and pain in that green face, but he could feel it in his mind, along with unfamiliar fear.

“What fool takes their eyes away from an enemy? You did not think I would simply disappear after you struck me, did you? You’re either too big for your age...or too stupid for it...” the beast gargled at his gawking opponent, who reached for his hammer in favor of holding his wrist.

The orc raised his hammer and begrudgingly choked his grip up the haft, until only the head was above his large fist. “The mighty rule all...and you are not mightier than me...” it spoke dully, pointing the double bitted hammer at Qath. The orc brought his arm up with clenched teeth and slipped it into his belt to stay. A wise choice from an unwise monster the half-dragon would think.

No quicker than it could suck in a breath did the brute rush towards Qath! His hammer was raised and pulled behind his shoulder for a bone breaking strike. CRACK! The forward head of the hammer punched itself into the tree at Qath's back, a duck to the left saving him from injury and only allowing the haft's butt cap to strike at his knee! In the brute's blind spot he punched at its elbow with his kite and brought his blade down towards the joint, though only connecting with a large pauldron as the orc shimmied away in self-preservation after his elbow being nearly bowed by the smaller beast's kite. He would kick out at the steel-clad lizard, connecting with his shield and repelling him backwards long enough to barge the tree and rip free his hammer before backing away in a manner hasty for his species' bulk.

Qath would realize that though this monster was dull, it could indeed fight just as formidably, if not more-so, as the rest of his kind. He'd raise his shield to his chest and ready his dark blade at his shoulder, at the ready for another exchange.

"At my age, boy, you will not overcome me with sheer might. Dull like a club, you are only fit for wild strength and beating against the wall" Qath would say with as much of a grin his inhuman, swollen jaws could make.

The orc did not respond and chose only to stare panting with his hammer still raised.

The feeling the Qath sensed within him was complicated at the time, but through the passage of time, he would realize the feeling he sensed was the feeling of a man who knew the right decision, but refused to make that decision. The orc knew well and had seen the half-dragon willing to respectfully take surrendering men prisoner. He knew his opponent would not kill him unless need be, but he refused to surrender.

The orc took in and released a large breath of air and steadied himself before he hefted his hammer up 'til his hand gripped the centermost region of its handle. A cold look was carried on his face. He raised his hammer onto his shoulder, and Qath would give him a nod, a similar stare in his scaled face.

With a roaring yell and a shrill scream, the two advanced on one another. The orc brought his hammer down without falter, and Qath would raise his shield. The scaled knight angled his shield, causing the hammer to slide over its metal face before the orc was run through at the heart. The very same moment his hammer buried itself in the dirt...still clutched in his hand.

Unsheathing his sword from the orc's body, Qath would wipe away the blood on his enemy's back, now facing up to the sky. His attention was not on that though, as the sounds of fury and death from both man and monster continued at the foot of the hill and far in the field, obscured and echoed by the dense wood between them. Qath removed his adversary's tusks and steadied his heart for the trials ahead.

The battle was yet to end.

(Passages omitted. Several hours later, now past nightfall)

The silence was troubling to myself and all seen by Qath. So much pain and screaming...and death. But now...now all was as silent as the stars above them. Aside from the fire that is. Aegis sat closest to the fire, his knees at his chest and arms wrapped around them in turn. The boy watched the embers jump and the wood crack. Sverd, the prince that he was, kept as quiet and paid more attention to honing the edge of his own side sword. After which he would wipe it down and oil it, time after time. The men left in their battalion drank themselves sober of gallantry, and more-over attempted to drink away the horror in their hearts. That was the new and the young at least, for only they were the ones who came with one and left with the other, if they managed to survive. Some of them even vomited yet had nothing to heave up to begin with other than that horror embedded into them.

What they had all witnessed was not exclusively the horror of battle, even though small in scale, but along with it the horror of battle with the non-man. A soldier seeing their mates' armor serve no purpose, but to crush the wearer inside when one of those monsters smashed their weapons into them. A soldier seeing that, even with exceptional skill and bravery, their weaponry be little but a scratching against the skin of those monsters. A soldier could not fight them like other men. For they are not men, and the abilities of men are but naught to them. They cannot be treated as a simple combatant, but as an obstacle, and fought like the

woodsman overcomes the ironwood. With cunning, faith, and determination. They, after all, were the only men left alive by the end of the day. The brave only served to be a point of learning.

The half-breed was the quietest, though. Like the prince, he spent his time caring for his equipment. He did not lapse into repetitive motion like he, but into tedious work in all aspects. He looked over his dark sword, inspecting its fitting, the peen, the edge for dull spots, rolls, and chips. All was good with it, and no imperfections were to be found on the hard and sturdy metal. Then he repealed his armor from his body, leaving his thick-skinned and callous scaled body to the wind which made his cold-blood shiver in him. He inspected the plate for dents in all places, his mail for broken rings that may be irritating to replace, and his gambeson for tears. There were several dents in the thick plate, not irreparable by any means but still more than noticeable, and he could only spot two-no three busted rings throughout all segments of mail with his dilated slit eyes. The gambeson bore no destruction. The first soldier of the night to smile, in admiration for the one whom sewed the linen jack for him. His shield, however, as expected, had taken quite a battering through the day, and may require repair or complete replacement since the grain was beginning to crack.

For another first, he spoke above the silence. "I lost my bow in the battle...has one seen it?"

He did not look around, but he heard the jostling of dirt beneath attentive, but not frantic feet along with gentle muttering. Sverd, sitting across from him, would point past his shoulder without word. Qath would look back to see Dylan holding his bow in both hands.

"Nicholas found it up in the northern tree line. 'Thinks the orcs might'a thrown it there. 'E couldn't find the string, and we couldn't restring it...if we could find one sturdy 'nough anyway. Our apologies sir..." the growing man spoke meekly as he presented the stringless bow like a gift.

The bow was tall, and thick, and reached end-to-end a larger height than Dylan himself along with most men.

Qath sighed through his long and thin nostrils and took the bow gingerly then again with his mouth, bringing a hiss of pain. He rubbed his jaw and nodded to Dylan. "Good man. You need not worry, I will care for it another time. Ironwood is no easy material to work with."

"Thank you, sir," Dylan almost sighed out and turned on his heel before returning to his silent group of survivors, but not before letting out a "-and good morrow to you your highness."

Sverd, unassuming as he was, simply nodded in acknowledgement of the man already turned 'round and returned to his blade work for whatever number he was at by now. Luckily, he was using the leather strap after the first repetition.

All went back as it was, yet Aegis had yet to budge one bit. A child his age, such silence and lack of energy tended to be an omen to the internal struggle faced by all men alike, young and old. Yet to mention the stark difference in effect it tends to have on either.

Qath saw fit to address the issue at hand with the child, of only eleven years after all, and raised himself off his makeshift seat to approach him. He knelt behind Aegis and placed his hand on the boy's head. Seeing such a thing was a spectacle. The half-breed was so large-a full head and shoulders taller than the largest of soldier-and his tridactyl hand easily held the child's entire head, like an apple in a large man's hand. The boy sighed in response and appeared to relax.

"Is this the life you thought you wanted, boy? To protect your home from those greater than man?" Qath gurgled down to Aegis, his thumb rubbing at the back of his neck much the same as done by adults to children.

Aegis drew in a long, hitching breath and sighed once more. Qath leaned himself forward and crowed his neck a tad to see the boy's face. Lined wetly and with red splotches was his face covered.

Quietly, he must have been crying that whole time. His hand touching the boy, even at that time, he could feel the depth of Aegis' sadness and distress-even fear. Qath pet the boy's head as tenderly as such a large hand could and released it.

“Many have made you aware...of that which is the terrors in the realm you wish to venture. A knight of any kingdom, soldiers too, must be ready for war, death, loss, fear, and all that will change them to the soul for all time” Qath’s voice, lacking in the sound of humanity, droned out with solemnity akin to the pastor of the last rights. Aegis stared at him, and Qath knew well he was staring at the way his face, neck, and all moved as he spoke, just as much as he was listening to his words. The three-fingered hand was placed back on Aegis, this time on his shoulder with a firmer grip. His claws flexed outward from the grip, but not enough to stick the boy, as the grip was still in earnest ginger. “The life of a knight is personified in pain, in equal value to the glory given to them by their deeds and their vows. Selflessness in whole leads to a knight’s doom. The doom of a knight brings others to bare their glory, and thus in turn bestowing vengeance and further selflessness from their protégés and those that idolized them, even if their ideals were not carried in tow. Knighthood is as the story of the wolf. No one is the full making. As one the knight cannot complete their work. As one the knight cannot save and protect that which they love. Seeking glory as one is to seek your end and inspire others to do the very same!” Qath’s voice had raised to a degree his words echoed and his throat jump to and fro.

Aegis shut his eyes and drew in a snuffle, letting out a sob in return. Even then could the half-breed feel the boy’s own dreams-his ideals and his aspirations-crumbling before him! His soul felt pain, no pain which the flesh could ever experience in fruition. A deep, burying pain that no mind could describe in sound words! The boy’s pain transcended that which was felt by the brutish green-skin who was born to destroy yet could not save his own life with word or welt! He could not contain his lips from splitting open with the sound of hearted sorrow, ramming his face to his knees and releasing all of his pent-up inner agony.

The hand on his shoulder would squeeze tighter and shake him, stifling his pitiful sounds for a moment.

“But...a knight in tow of brothers, and sisters, is the one to complete their vows. Alone you will perish. Even in death, with your comrades, you can never fail to uphold your mission. Alone you are none, but in solidarity, you may succeed as one.”

Bryce Bordelon

“Nature’s Song”

The sunrise wakes me with its gentle hello, and while Kit soundly snuggles my feet, Koda comes to greet me a good morning. Koda and I often watch the sunrise together this way; simply observing the forest come to life on the other side of the glass. As light pours across the treetops, birds begin to sing their songs outside of our home. We watch as a gentle breeze blows through the trees, carrying the night’s fallen leaves to their new home.

Today is an ideal day for a hike to our favorite hidden spot up the hill. There, we can spend our day relaxing and enjoying one another’s company. While Koda and I wait for Kit to wake from his beauty sleep, we head to the kitchen where I begin packing my bag with plenty of water and snacks for the day. Koda seems to know what I’m planning because when I look down, he has brought me his pack as well. His intelligence still shocks me at times. Doing as he asked, I fill his pack with plenty of treats and some power bars designed for hiking trips. Just as I finish adjusting Koda’s dog pack to fit him comfortably, Kit prances around the corner, finally gracing us with his presence. It doesn’t take long to get his harness on and clip them onto the double leash before we’re off to seek out the day’s adventure.

Stepping outside feels exactly as it should on a day like this one. The mighty sun warms my skin, accompanied by a gentle breeze that distributes the musky aroma of the forest. Squirrels rush through the tree branches to gather food for the coming winter; it takes some convincing to keep Koda from chasing them, but he knows better than to try that when he’s on the leash. Shaking his head at the squirrels as if they’re not worth his trouble today, he gains control and walks on, ready to begin our journey.

It’s roughly a two-mile hike to our hideaway, which is almost as incredible as the destination itself. Nature is constantly evolving, with slight changes noticeable each day. While yesterday the leaves were a dull green, today there are specks of yellow and orange scattered throughout. More animals move about today as they prepare for the inevitable winter months to come. However, they tend to keep their distance when my pups are out. The only constant on this trail is the path itself, worn down over years of our pack’s travels. Looking closely, I can see several wildlife trails through the woods, as well as a few others that we have more recently begun to develop. As we reach the point of incline, the path narrows and we instinctively fall in line: Koda, Kit, and then me. Flora and fauna form a tunnel around us as we ascend on our journey; the sun lights them from behind, creating an iridescent glow of green, orange, and white. After hiking here for three years, I am still in awe of the landscape’s natural wonder. Ever changing, morphing into something unimaginable each day, this organism never ceases to amaze me.

Nearing the end of the tunnel, I decide to take a break before reaching our hideaway because Kit and Koda will need their energy once we’re there. They lap up water one at a time, then I give them each a doggie power bar. We only need a few minutes of rest before the anticipation of what’s ahead drives us to continue on. One at a time, we emerge from the forest to a familiar, yet extraordinary, view of our meadow surrounded by wild berry bushes.

As the wind blows through each individual strand of my hair, I know what true bliss feels like. Never have I gazed upon a majestic sight such as this one (such thoughts cross my mind every time we visit). The delicate wildflowers sway with each note of the breeze, performing as their conductor wishes, while bees dance between them. Birds begin to chirp along with this peaceful melody as they fly here and fro, never missing a beat.

Kit and Koda have kept calm during our hike up this wondrous hill, but now that we have reached the top, they begin to get impatient. I understand their feeling, for I am struggling to contain my excitement as well. Once the leash is off and they’re released to play, Koda instantly goes for a dip in the spring. Kit observes his brother for a moment until satisfied that Koda is safe, then he begins to prance through the meadow, chasing dragonflies and sniffing wildflowers. What wonderful companions they are!

After the excitement dies down a bit, I find myself resting on the edge of the spring with Kit in my lap as we watch Koda glide through the water. I have never met another dog who can swim for fifteen minutes without a break, but he makes it seem effortless. Kit nuzzles closer; poor guy is all tuckered out from our hike. Together, we listen for the sound of music again. This time, nature reveals a more upbeat tune. By the time the

melody reaches its peak, Koda is out of the pool and we are all dancing through the flora without a care in the world. Koda stands on his hind legs, “May I have this dance,” he seems to say. With his paws in my grasp, we sway to the beat and once he’s stable, we are able to add in a few simple steps. Side, side, back. Side, forward, side. He is still learning, so our dance comes to an end after only a few minutes.

Next, it is Kit’s turn to dance with his Mama. We have been practicing longer than Koda and me, so it’s not as strenuous. As he rests his paws on my palms, we dance to our favorite tune. After a moment, I let go for him to twirl on his back legs, then I scoop him up and we dance with his head on my chest. This moment reminds me of when I first found him and he rested against my chest this way, pure love flowing between us.

Abigail Pittman

“Reaching Out”

I twisted around in my seat and patted Peter’s leg reassuringly as it dangled from his car seat. With a stuck out lower lip and his eyes glistening with tears, he was studying his hurt finger intensely, almost as if by staring at it he could make the hurt go away. I followed his gaze and made sure his little, three-year-old finger was still only slightly red from where he had jammed it before we loaded in the car to head to my future in-laws’ house. His twin brother, Patrick, sat happily in his car seat next to him staring at the trees and houses whizzing by his window.

“Shah, baby! It will stop hurting soon, and I bet Grandma will give you an ice bag to make it feel better,” I said, and turned back around to face the highway.

My gaze shifted to Mike in the driver’s seat just as his eyes darted back to the road from stealing a glance at Peter in the rearview mirror. He was such a loving and nurturing father, which is one of the many things that made me fall for the single father of twin boys. I had never been around children much, especially little boys, but Mike’s relaxed, patient manner made it easy for me to pick up his seemingly effortless parenting skills. Balancing just the right amount of discipline with loving displays of affection, he made sure to include enough silly, horseplay amongst the tender, quiet times and reassuring hugs after the punishments. His calm collected approach to the calamities the boys frequently found themselves in was inspiring to me, whose natural tendency was to panic and let my mind run wild with potential scenarios all ending in disaster.

I was still new to the parenting game and trying to figure out how to don the weighty title of “step-mom.” In the beginning of our relationship, I instinctively let Mike make all the decisions and hesitated to make even small suggestions regarding the boys. Now, with our wedding imminent and more than a year of mothering under my belt, I sometimes felt like I had the parenting thing all figured out. However, often, I felt dwarfed by the expertise and ease at which I perceived other mothers fulfilling their duties while I had so many questions and doubts. Mike was a great teacher, but why did I still feel sometimes like a second-rate parent making rookie mistakes?

Maybe I should have stopped and grabbed a bag of ice for him before we left, I thought. Maybe I’m over-pampering him and should just ignore his teary eyes, so he will forget about his injury.

I snapped out of my worrying thoughts as we pulled into the driveway. I got out and began unfastening Patrick’s car seat buckles as Mike unstrapped Peter from his. Both boys scrambled out of their seats and darted past us, racing to their grandparent’s backdoor. Each one wanted to beat the other to ringing the doorbell.

As Mike and I approached the door behind the boys, the door swung open and Mike’s parents’ eyes fell on their two young grandsons filling the doorway – one all smiles and hugs; the other with a frowning, scrunched up face spotted with tears.

Still a few steps away, we heard their grandmother ask, “Peter, what’s wrong?” Peter immediately swung his little fist up with only his hurt finger pointing to the sky and proceeded to give his grandparents “the finger.”

Caught off-guard by their grandson’s gesture, they spontaneously doubled over with laughter as we tried to stifle our smiles quickly. A three-year-old wail sliced through the hilarity, and the boys’ grandparents immediately realized their gaffe. Completely oblivious to the unintentional humor his extended middle finger was causing, Peter thought his grandparents were laughing at his pain.

His grandfather instantly bent down and scooped Peter up in his arms. But Peter wasn’t ready to forgive him quite yet. With outstretched arms, he leaned his little body towards me. I gathered him in my arms and comforted him with quiet words. His crying turned into a soft whimper, and I felt his body relax into mine as I drank in the momentous event.

From the start, Patrick had unabashedly given me his whole heart and trust. He clung to me whenever he had the chance. Mike liked to joke that he was my other boyfriend, always squeezing between Mike and me to be a part of any hug given in his presence. Peter, on the other hand, was the reserved, careful one. While Patrick jumped in my arms from almost the moment, I met him, Peter hung back and quietly observed. Over time, I could tell I had gained ground with Peter and began collecting plenty of unprompted hugs and kisses from him too; but, if Peter had a choice in a crisis moment, he would choose his dad’s arms for comfort and protection every time. Until this moment.

Those little arms reaching out to me communicated volumes. Mike was standing right next to me, but Peter chose to trust me with his sadness and pain. As the conversation moved to other topics and everyone

drifted into the living room, I knew I was probably the only one in the room who grasped the significance of that moment. They perhaps thought I was over-indulging Peter by holding him for as long as he wanted that day and icing his unnoticeably hurt finger, but I knew the huge expanse that those little reaching arms had covered. Finally, the last piece had fallen into place. This was what I had been praying for – an invitation into Peter's small circle of trust. I had two little boys who trusted me to be their comforter and protector, and I was not going to let them down. How could I? I was now truly their mother.

Lauren Soileau LaBoeuf

1st Place in Art



Xinyi Huang

2nd Place in Art

"Creation"



Kamryn Colson

Kamryn Colson

3rd Place in Art

"Stan Lee Sketch"



Andrew Armand
11-12-18

Andrew Armand

Honorable Mention in Art

“Under the Oak”



Alvaro Jenkins

Honorable Mention in Art

“Simmesport Bridge in Motion”

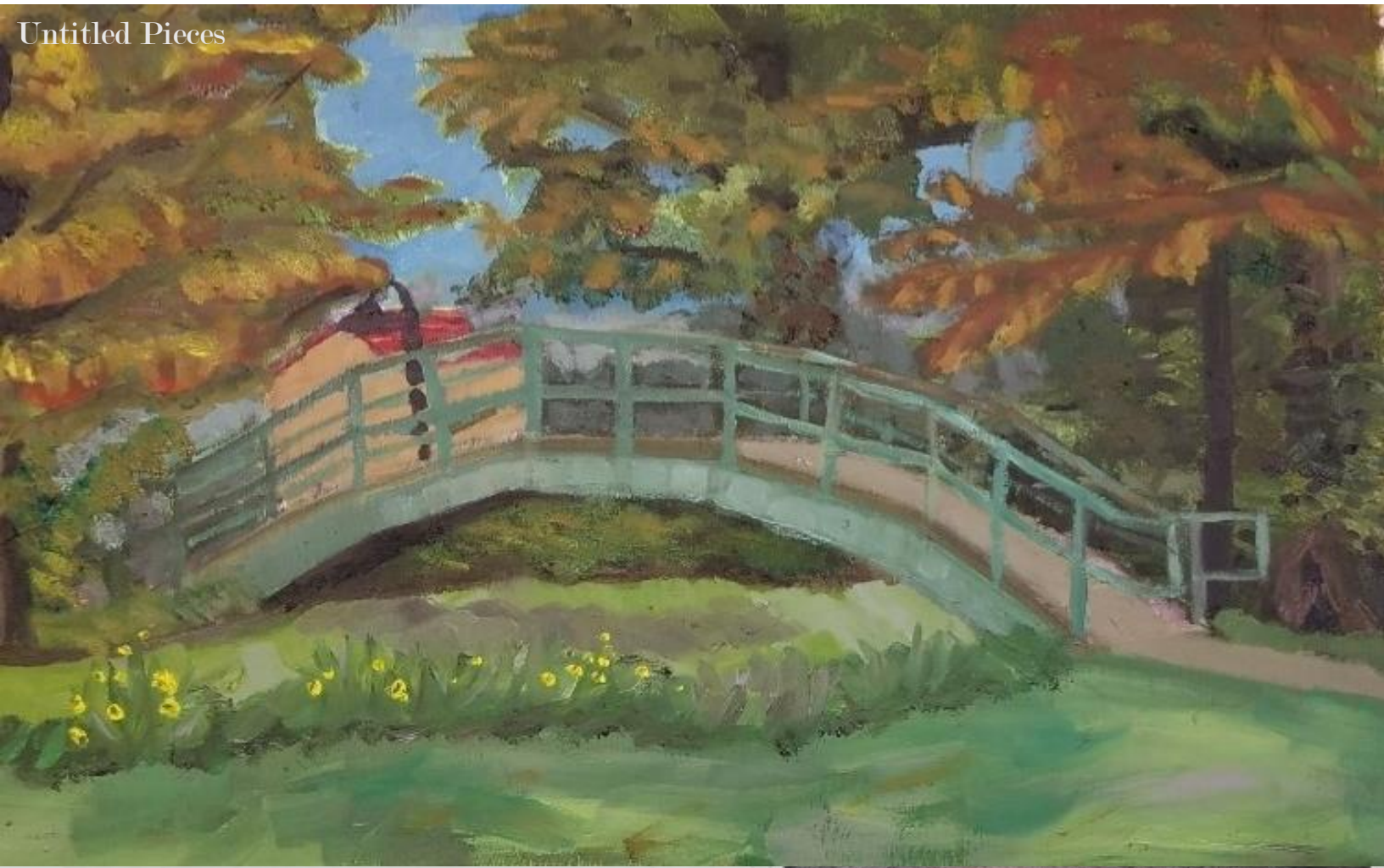


Jessica Schroeder

“Voyage into the Unknown”



Kaitlyn Reeves



Gavin B

“Happiness”



“Sadness”



Andrew Armand

“Mulder Hall”



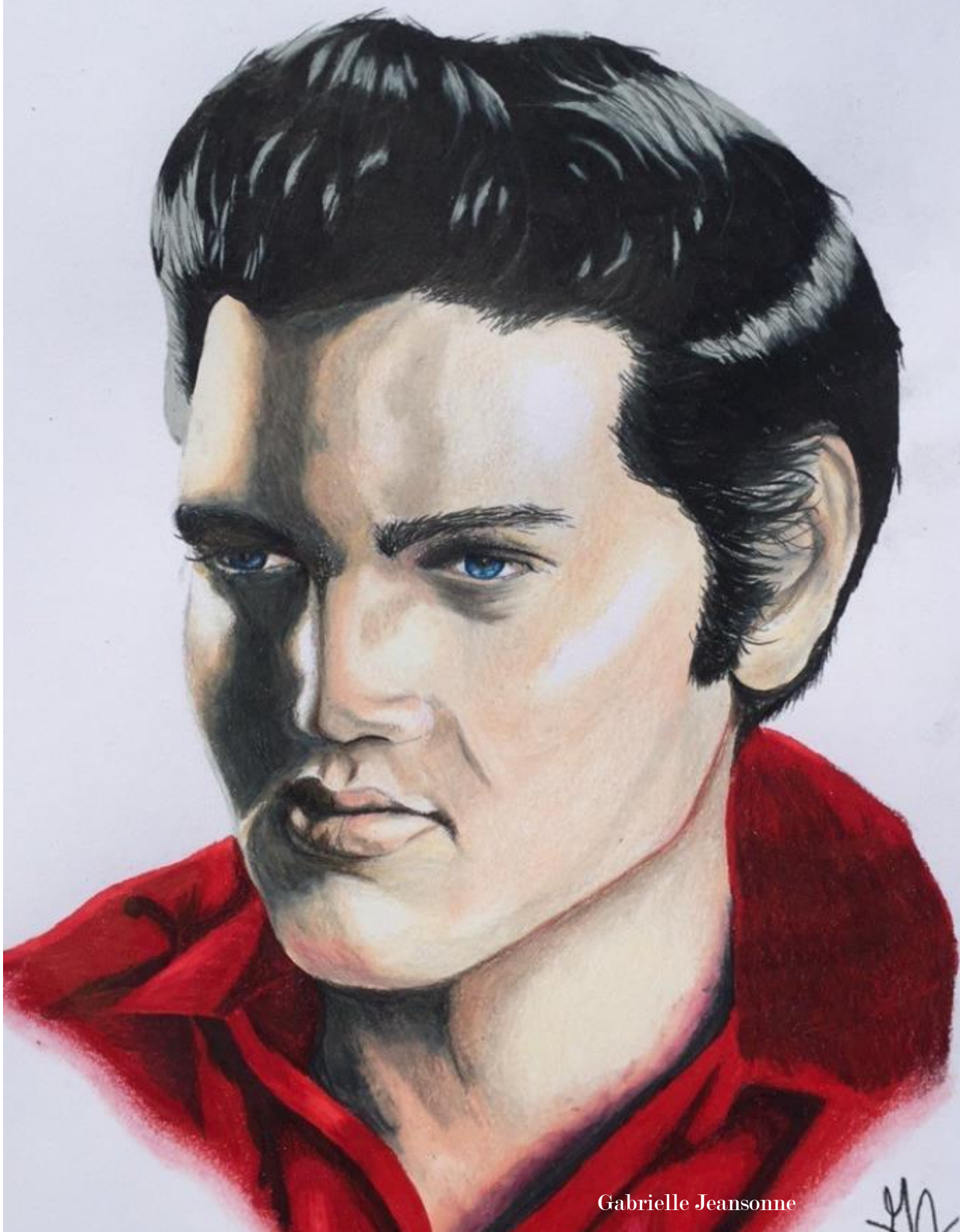
Alvaro Jenkins

“Ed Sheeran Portrait”



Maddie Bordelon

“Elvis Portrait”



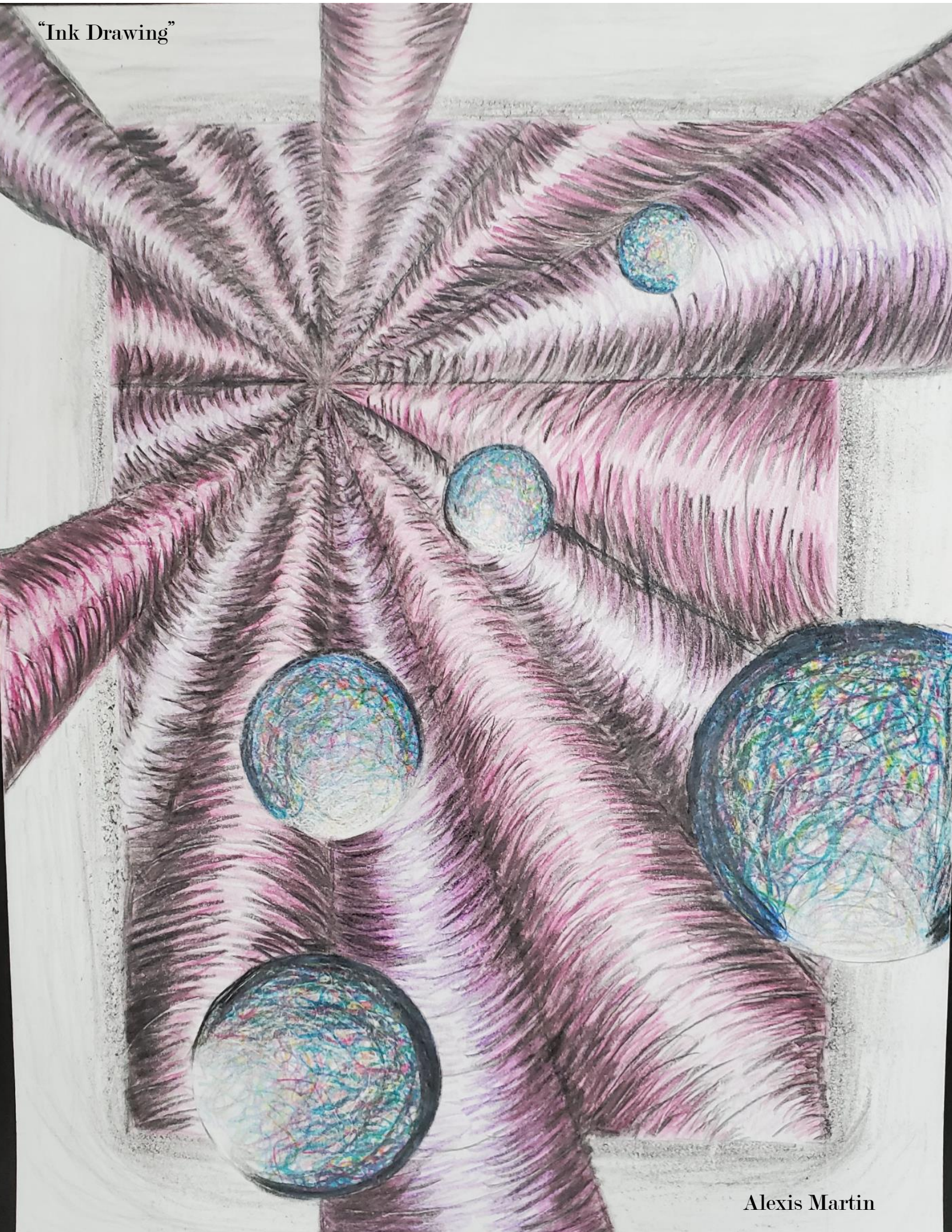
Gabrielle Jeansonne

“Scenic View”



Emily Ducote

"Ink Drawing"



Alexis Martin

“Leo”



Samantha Ray

“Colorful Designs”



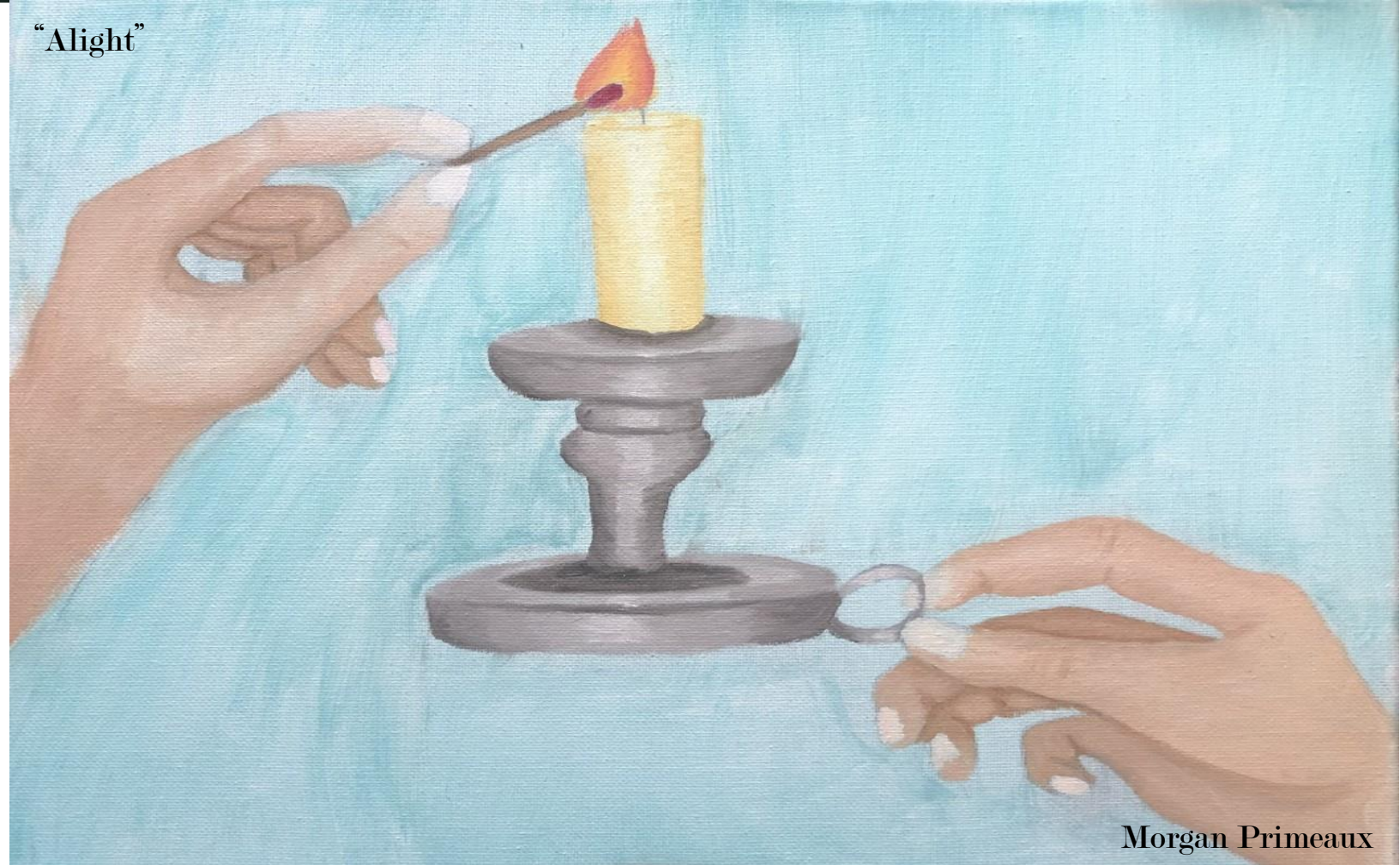
Duaa Khawaldeh

“Otter Stack”



Jessica Schroeder

“Alight”



Morgan Primeaux

“Stained Glass Spiral”



“Aged”



Joseph Kutch

“The Roses Meeting Now and Soon”



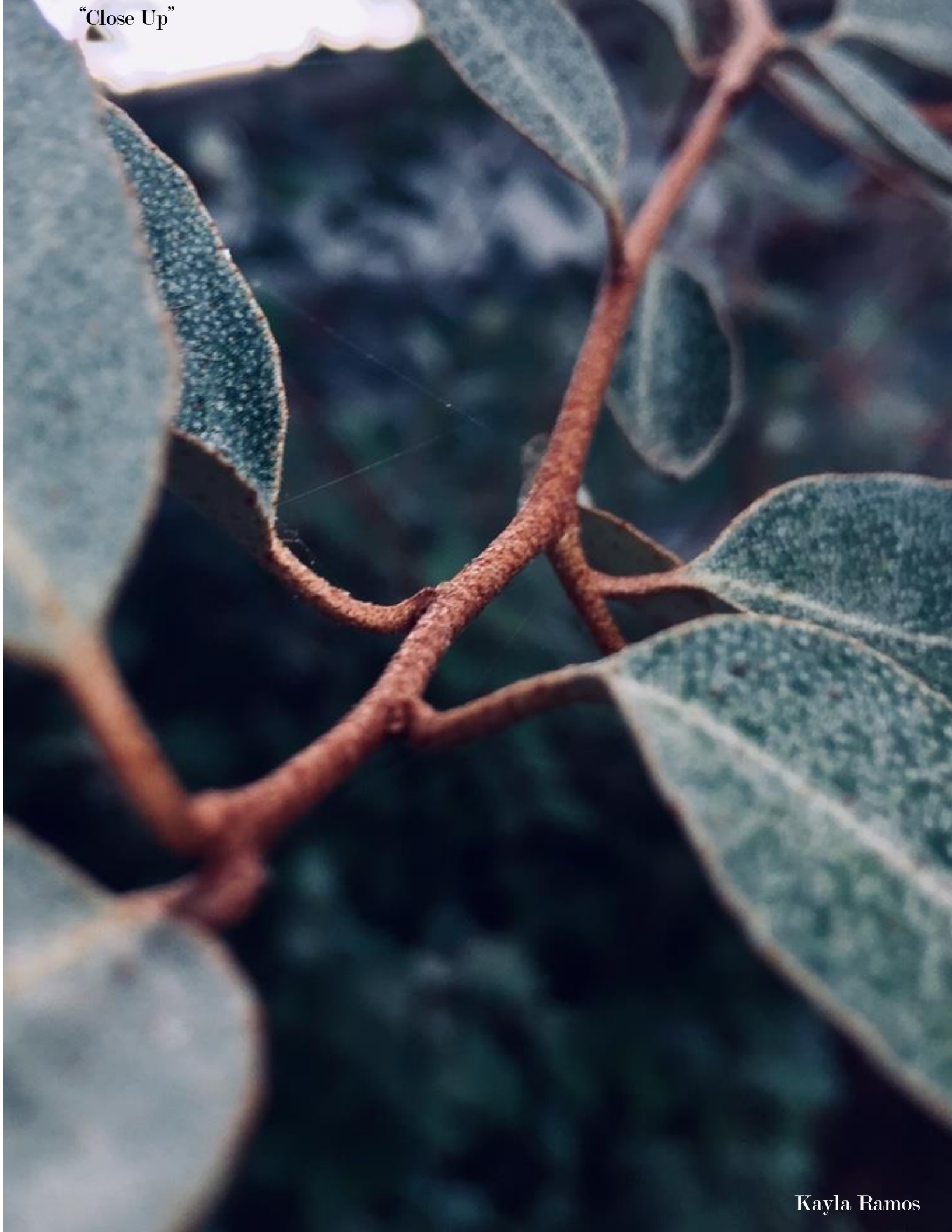
Xuejiao Xie

“A Portrait Arose”



Tiffanie Brown

“Close Up”



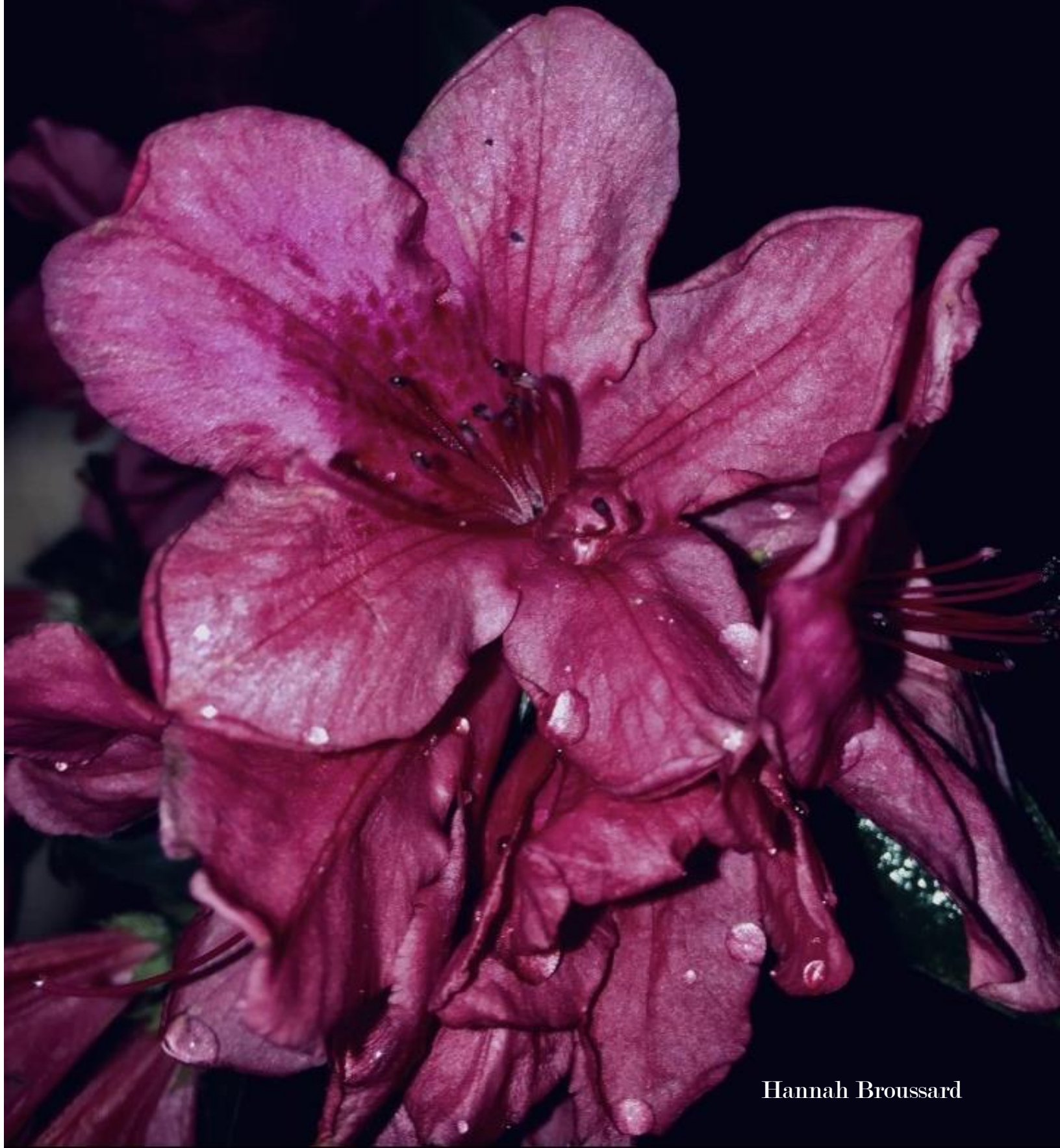
Kayla Ramos

“Mamba”



Kamryn Colson

“Pink Flowers”



Hannah Broussard

"Lost"



Cindy Nguyen

"Winter Scene"



Madison Floyd

Madison Floyd

“Untitled”

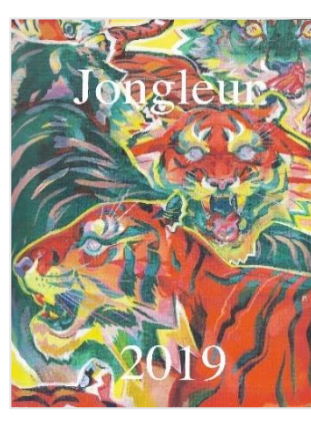
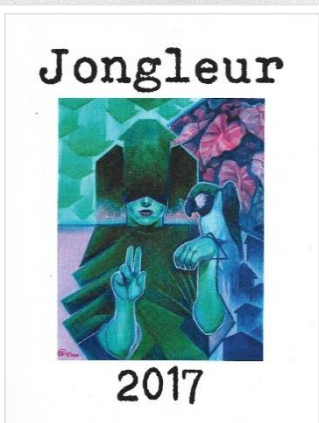
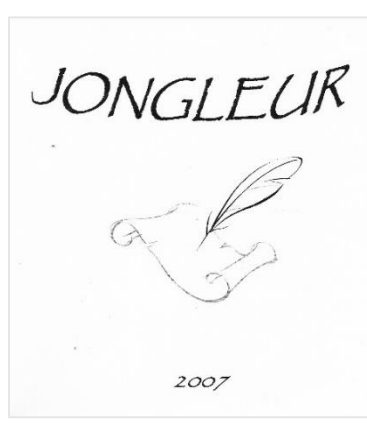
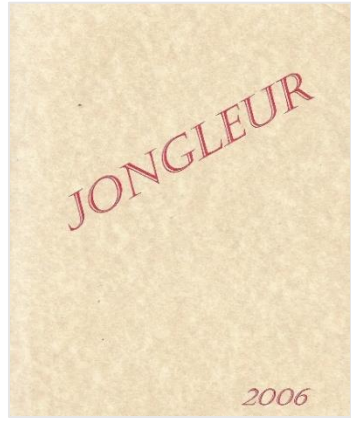
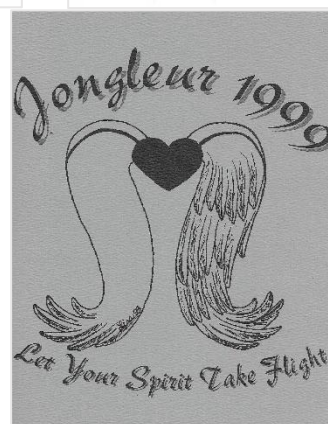
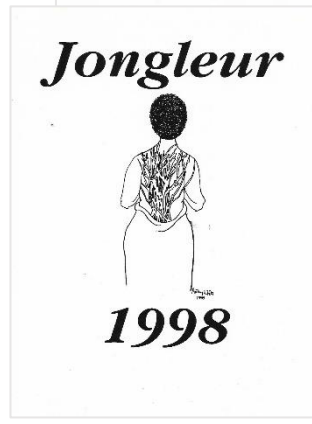
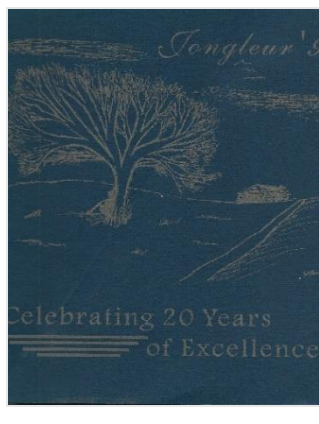
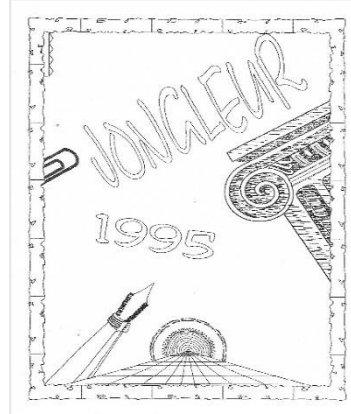
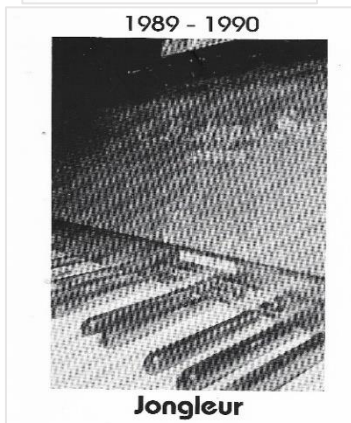
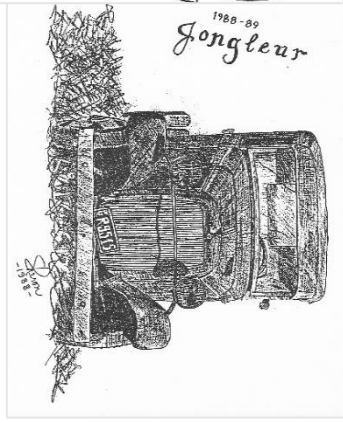
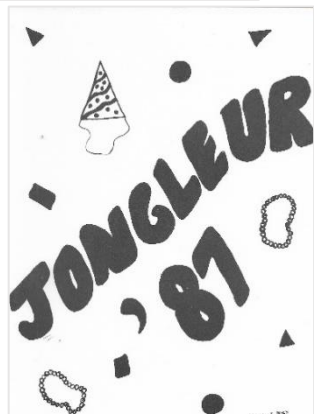
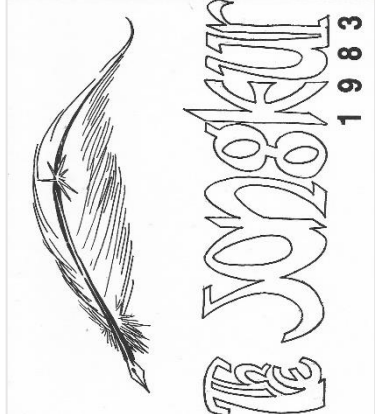


Carly McIntosh

Untitled



Nellie Vargas



44 Years of the Jongleur

