

2021



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Editorial Staff of the *Jongleur*:

Cailey Scadlock: Editor-in-Chief, Journal Layout, Front and Back Cover

Natalie Giroir: Associate Editor, Contest Judge, Contest Certificates

Kennis Jobe: Associate Editor, Contest Judge, Secretary

Alleigh Perles: Associate Editor, Contest Judge

Nellie Vargas-Barron: Associate Editor, Contest Judge, Contest Certificates, Front and Back cover

Eric Alai: Managing Editor, Contest Judge, Contest Manager

Cover Art is a collage of the following pieces (from left to right): “Greenery” by Cailey Scadlock, “On the Misty Night” by Justin Ha, “Millenia” by Cailey Scadlock, “Ice Sickles” by Carlie Ewing, “George Green” by Justin Ha, “Untitled” by Monica Mcduffie, “Mosaic Lighthouse” by Justin Ha, “Vital” by Emily Ducote, “St. Louis Cathedral by Emily Ducote, “El Ranchito” by Eloisa Rubio, “Perspective” by Kalli Parker, and “Oahu” by Kalli Parker.

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 voices of its students.

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Jongleur

Louisiana State University at Alexandria

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Alexandria, LA 71302

Editor's Note and Acknowledgements:

When I first think of the *Jongleur*, I think of the legacy that continues to build through the staff and student body. The *Jongleur* would not exist without students who love to create and every year we receive more submissions than the previous year. When I become an alumna, I cannot wait to see and experience the creative identity of our student body five or even ten years from now. The legacy does not only continue with the staff of the *Jongleur*, but with the creative energy of the students who bring this magazine to life. I am forever grateful for the opportunities and experiences that LSUA has given me and am honored to be Editor-in-chief of this year's edition of the *Jongleur*. With that being said, when I first began writing the editor's note, I was extremely uncomfortable. I thought to myself that I've written hundreds of essays, forum posts, and countless of my own stories and poems, and writing this should be just as simple. I spent months trying to figure out what I wanted to say and the concept of memory kept sticking out to me. Our memories are extremely precious, and is one of my greatest sources of inspiration. The past makes us who we are, but we can always change our future. The past few years have been extremely trying and as I read the voices of the student body, it seemed as if those memories were constant and ever present. I never in my lifetime thought I'd ever miss the past, but during this on-going pandemic, I miss the memories the most.

Many thanks are in order for the following:

- Eric Alai: Thank you for your time and energy, without you, I'm not sure if there would be an edition to release. Thank you for being the coolest "nerd" I know.
- The *Jongleur* Staff: Thank you all for your brain power, hard work, and all the new ideas you've each brought to the table. Nellie, Nat, Kennis, and Alleigh, I cannot thank you all enough.
- AEH for providing the prize money for the contest.
- Dr. Rowan, and the LSUA administration for funding the *Jongleur* and supporting the creative endeavors of our student body.
- Dr. Elizabeth Beard and Dr. Alice Blackwell: Thank you for being the best advisors to me, always lending an ear, and for being absolute rockstars.

There are so many other people that deserve gratitude and thanks in helping make the *Jongleur* what it is. To anyone I have overlooked, please know we appreciate you endlessly for your contributions.

I would also like to personally thank Gregory Pettus Jr. for being the best partner and always believing in me. I would also like to thank Alexis Brown, my family, and many others for always being there for me. I love y'all.

Always,

Cailey L Scadlock

Editor-in-Chief, 2021

THE JONGLEUR STUDENT STAFF



Alleigh Perles

Freshman, Biology, pre-med Major

Alleigh is hoping to pursue a career in neurology. She also enjoys other activities such as listening to music, being by the water and learning new skills.



Nellie Vargas

Senior, English Major

Nellie is graduating this semester and is hoping to become a high school teacher. She likes to read, paint, listen to music, and garden. Nellie is a first generation American and is the first sibling to graduate!



Natalie Giroir

Senior, English Major

Natalie is a senior at LSUA and a member of Sigma Tau Delta, Sigma Alpha Pi, President of the Empty Space Players Student Organization, and currently works in the Writing Center. Upon graduation, Natalie will attend graduate school at the University of Louisiana Monroe where she hopes to achieve a Masters in English.



Cailey Scadlock

Senior, English Major

Cailey is the President of Sigma Tau Delta, a member of Gamma Beta Phi, and Sigma Alpha Pi. Upon

graduation, Cailey hopes to work for a publishing company, specifically as a Young Adult Fiction Editor. When Cailey is not at LSUA, she spends her time gardening and playing Animal Crossing New Horizons.



Kennis Jobe

Senior, English Major

Kennis is graduating this semester with a bachelor's degree in English and a minor in history. Kennis plans to pursue her master's to teach at the college level. Kennis also would like to be a novelist. When she is not studying, she is writing stories, songs, watching South Park with her husband, swimming, or buying another fake plant for her apartment.

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First Place: “Salvation” by Xinyi Huang

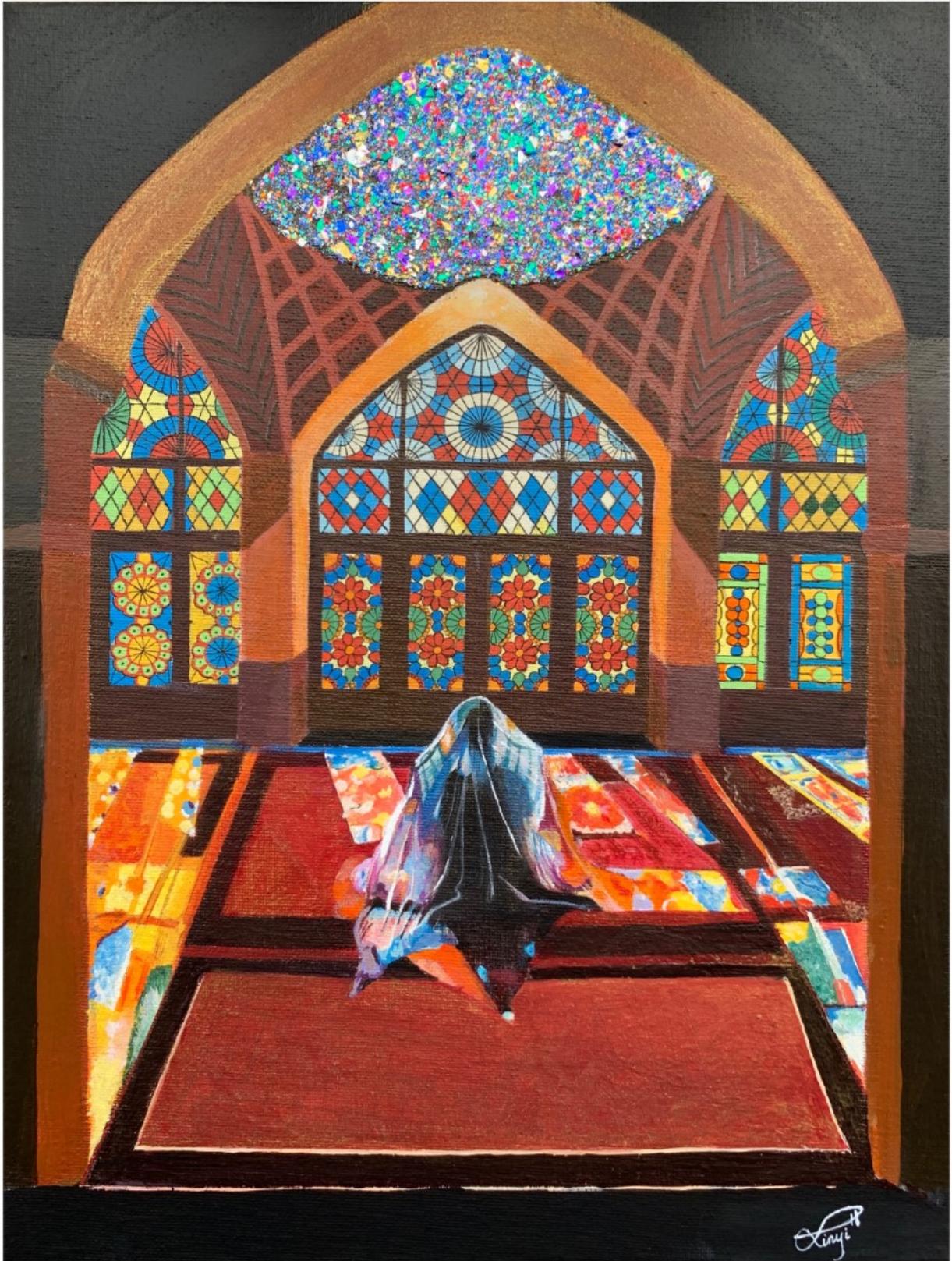
Second Place: “Space Goblin” by Savannah Callaway

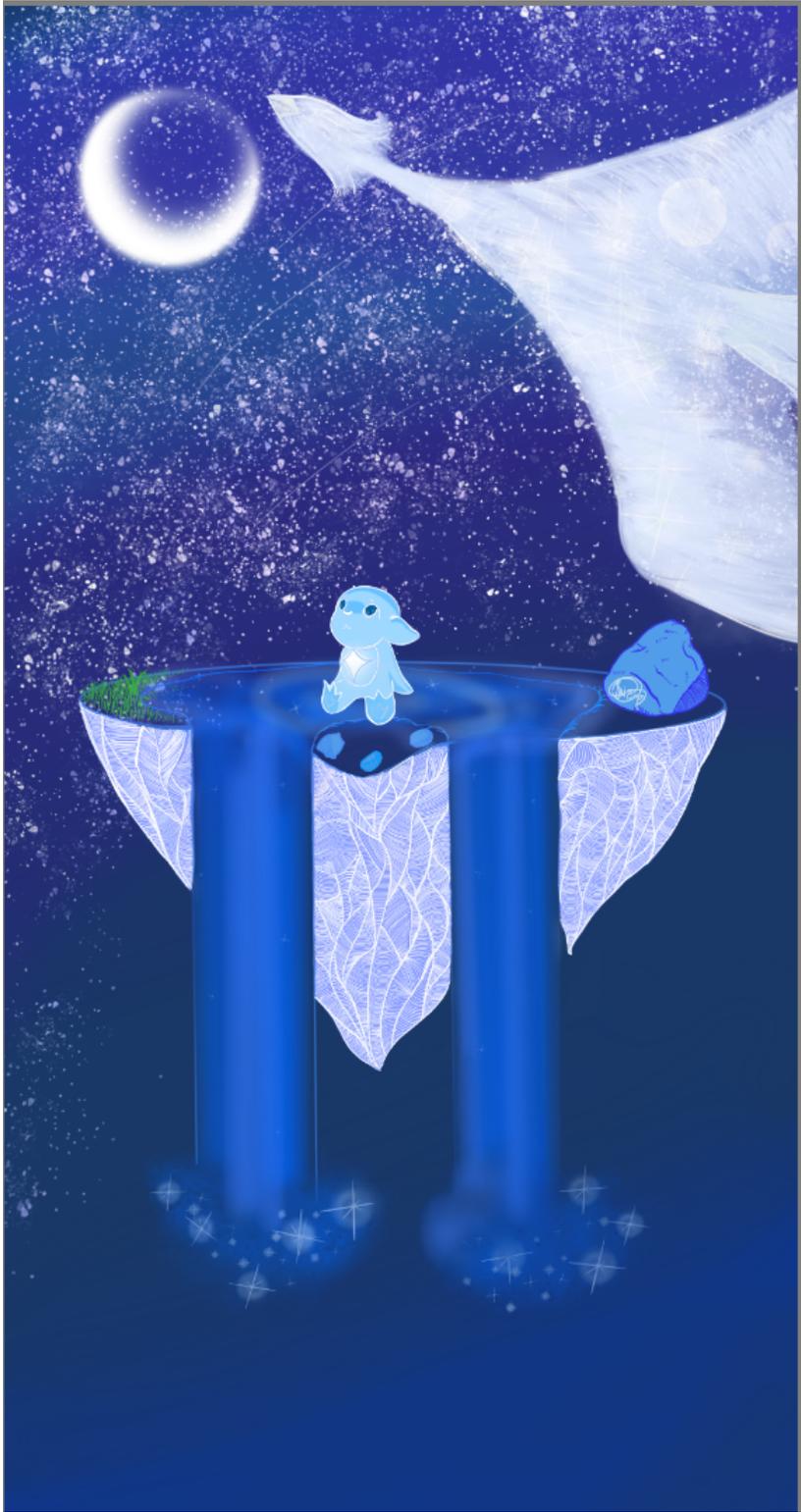
Third Place: “Invasive Denial” by Brooke Coolman

Honorable Mention: “Gracie” by Madison Floyd

Honorable Mention: “Peachy” by Cailey Scadlock

First Place: "Salvation" by Xinyi Huang





Second Place: "The Blue Goblin" by Savannah Callaway



Third Place: "Invasive Denial" by Brooke Coolman



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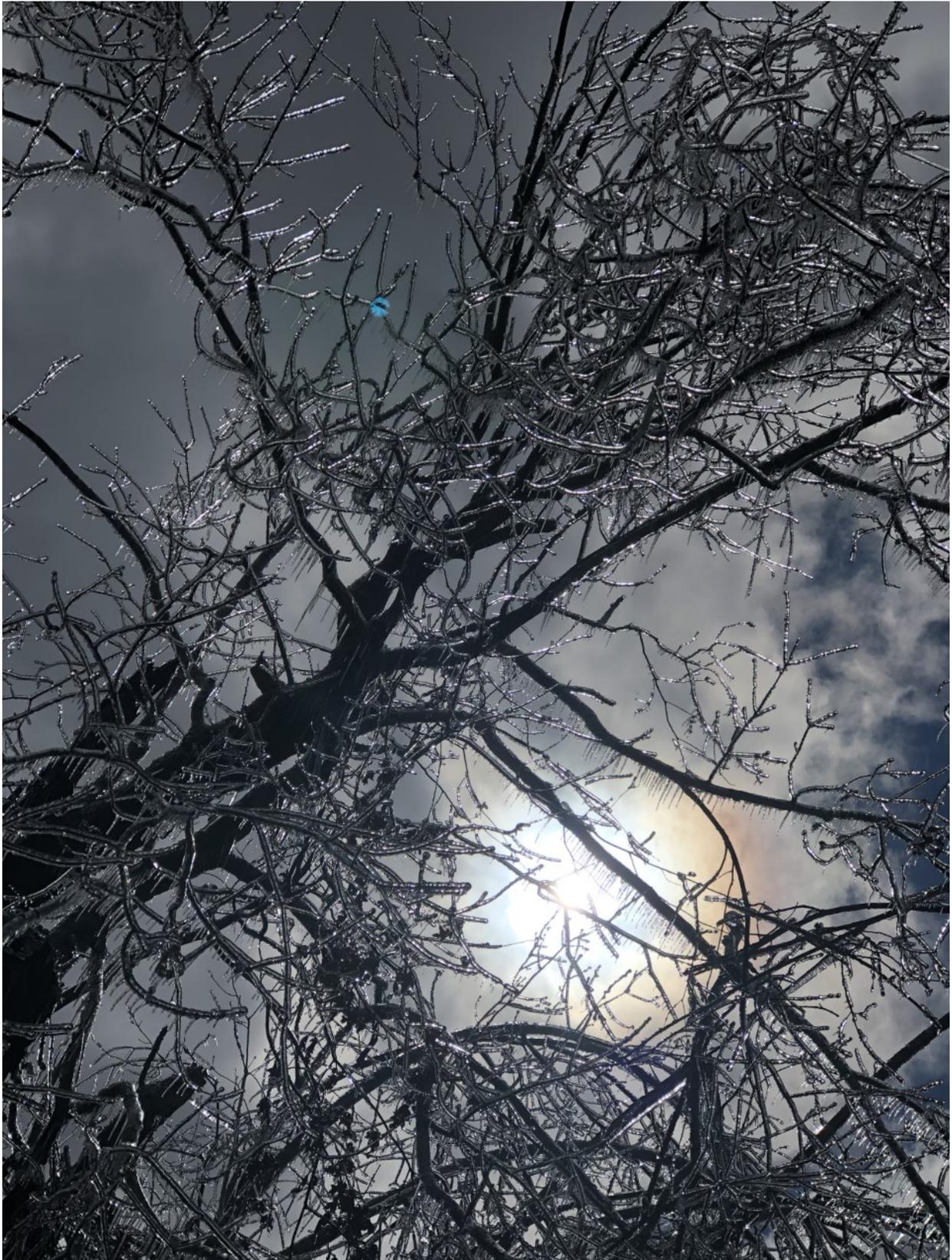


“El Ranchito” by Eloisa Rubio



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“Greenery by Cailey Scadlock



“Millenia” by Cailey Scadlock

POETRY

First Place: “Sweet Claire de Lune by Tyler Beard

Second Place: “Black” by Kaalas Roots

Third Place: “The Devil’s Tea” by Sara Jaffrani

Honorable Mention: “Society” Savannah Ward

Honorable Mention: “COVID-19” Kalli Parker

First Place

"Sweet Clair de lune" by Tyler Beard

When I was younger, my father would play piano
He was rather good, seeing as he'd played all his life
He thought himself one who could really feel the music
I could never understand, but he'd tell me, "just give it time"

I'd sit beside him on the bench, listening as he'd play into the evenings
His favorite tune was Debussy's "Clair de lune"
He knew every note, every change, every phrase
One could hear it fill the rooms in our home nearly every night

He'd look down to me upon its end, and grinningly, he'd softly say
If I practiced enough, I'd play the same someday
I spent years punching ivory keys—sometimes almost 'til fingers would bleed
And still, I never seemed to be as good as him

I eventually grew and moved out on my own, but on a few late nights I'd pick up the phone
And there on the line was dad playing sweet "Clair de lune"
Upon the final note, I'd hear him say, "off again until another day"
And "son, know your mother and I are missing you"

Then on autumn's arriving, the phone again rang

It was my mother hiding her pain—aching as she spoke the dreadful news
My father had passed the night before, and with her hurt words, I sank to the floor
I knew home was where I needed to be

The family asked for me to speak, but the sudden thought made confidence weak
For I was never one for publicly baring my soul
But for the sake of my old man, it was the least I could do, so I'd take the chance
I stayed awake all night thinking
What was it I needed to say

The morning arrived. We entered the church
Both family and friends holding so much hurt
Still, I thought, “What worldly words would ever be just”

The time had come for me to speak. I gathered myself and rose to my feet
And at that moment, I knew what I had to do
Passing the podium without a hitch, I sat behind the piano's bench
And saw my widowed mother smile as I played sweet "Clair de lune"

Second Place

“Black” by Kaalas Roots

Black Lives Matter burned into my chest
Police lie to me and say their doing their best
And all lives matter, I really do agree
But it seems black lives are the only ones getting taken you see
I continue my journey trying to be the best
And hope my lord and savior takes care of the rest
This false love that continues to revolve around my people
I wish I could show you this deep and dark evil
I’m a black boy, hoping to be a black man
But the thoughts of these policemen make me wonder if I can
I’m scared
But I’ll never let you see that
Look at Malcolm X and scream that I want to be that
Is my skin color my biggest downfall or my greatest advantage
Because I am just a boy who tries to act mannish
My heart beats and I will never slack
I know this because I am BLACK

Third Place

“The Devil’s Tea” by Sara Jaffrani

I had tea with the devil the other day.
He preferred earl grey over hibiscus.

But I preferred mint over earl grey.
He told me about a soul he stole.

About a soul he stole the other day.
A woman who had captured his heart

A heart that was captured by a banned lover.
A jealous angel because she has no wings.

No wings to let her fly away.
In the steel cage she sits.

In the steel cage; her mind wanders
And the Devil comes for tea.

The Devil carries two cups to his lover.
She takes one, filled to the brim

Filled to the brim with earl grey
She frowns, she prefers hibiscus.

She frowns but his lips curl.
“O, poor Angel,” he tuts,

“My poor Angel with no wings--
the only hibiscus here is the decay.”

Like I said before, eating well is great.
But eating too much can make you inflate
To unhealthy sizes and soon death awaits
Those who could not control their increasing weight.
What's worse is the people who make fun
Of those unfortunate enough
To have very little, even none.
Even though they're not rich in possessions,
They are loved by all,
But sometimes their expressions
Can show what they hide,
Like depression or anxiety,
Mental disorders gnawing their insides.
We have to be kind to those who are slow,
Or who don't look like us or can't say hello.
Yet another problem within our globe
Is the problematic breaching of our cell phones.
We hold these square computers in our hands,
Letting them lead us to far-away lands.
We stare at their screens twenty-four/seven.
Not looking up till we're entering Heaven.

We let them distract us from having deep conversations
With the people we have known for many generations.
If we put our phones down and see what's in front,
Maybe this poem wouldn't be as blunt.
Another thing we should shy away
From is the social media that
Makes our lives go astray.
Likes, comments, upvotes, tweets
Hate-liking a post of someone's next eat,
Expensive vacations, family photos,
Never-ending selfies with your rotating beaus.
When will it end? Once you hit post,
You feel the relentless need to boast
About your adorable puppy or hot new mate,
Or whatever you can do in order to feel great.
A wave of endorphins pass through our brain
When we put up a selfie, looking all vain.
It is true we must love ourselves whole,
But so many selfies can take its toll!
One thing that should not be shown

Honorable Mention

“Society” by Savannah Ward

If I could change one thing about society,

I don't know what I'd do.

Everybody is always telling me,

“Change starts with you!”

Well, I can't fix our climate,

Or gain world peace.

I can't make everyone rich.

If I did, it'd soon decrease!

It would flow from their pockets,

Green gusts of wind.

Houses, cars, boats, yachts,

The madness would never end!

I can't solve all homelessness,

Keeping people off the streets.

I can't feed everyone

With a hot meal to eat.

I can't mend the broken relationships

Every girl and guy go through.

Fix their broken pieces,

Making them just like new.

I can't bring everyone to Jesus,

No matter how hard I try.

Not everyone sees His perfect love

Through their own imperfect eyes.

I can't make everyone take back

The mean things they have said.

The bullying, racism and teasing,

“Why don't you just drop dead?”

“Go jump off a bridge,” one person says to another.

The victim looks up, with tears in his eyes,

At his own addiction-ridden mother.

These problems in this world today

Vary from me to you.

For example, you could be suffering deeply,

And I wouldn't have a clue.

Women get dressed up, ready to go,

Then look in the mirror, give up and say no.

They look at their bodies with utmost disgust,

See wrinkles and fat, and make such a fuss.

If only we, as women, could truly feel

As beautiful as a model;

But models don't eat many meals.

Is the vast amount of guns you own.
It's fine if you keep just one or two
In order to not be beaten black and blue
By the criminal waiting in all his vigor
To kill you and your family with one pull of the trigger.
So, with all of these societal issues in light,
We should all try our hardest to fight
The oppression that comes with just being human.
I know that I can, and you can
Be left with a word of advice.
When it comes to others, think twice!
I take back my answer from
The very first stanza.
If I could change this world,
It'd be an extravaganza
Of people saying kind things to each other, treating them nicely.
This world would be amazing, almost to a T.
I may not be able to change hypocrites,
But I'll bring about change as I see fit.
With this poem, I think I'd now agree
That change in this world begins with me.

Honorable Mention

“COVID-19” by Kalli Parker

Stardust, evergreen, the beauty that is unseen.
Awoken at nightfall, the street is dead.
I imagine your haunting eyes spying.
Vivid, until it is not. Death is knocking.
Death is seeking, death is wanting revenge.
I assumed you knew that close your eyes.
Take one last breath. Let your heart stop beating.
It is over. You are dead. Finally.
I remember the first day, when it happened.
The look of disgust, anger, and betrayal.
No one sees what I can see, not even you.
I sense the fear. I know they dread me.
You were not. At least not at first. You changed.
You all did. It was not the first time; And
Certainly, will not be the last you know.
The government sent you away to be safe.
To be rid of me. In isolation.
Do not fret. You will be made plentiful.
For I have seen it. For your offspring is pure.

My love for you will never falter, nor hate.
It will forever be the two of us.
I will not lie. I have found another.
I did not give one thought after your death.
Why would I? Honestly. You are a threat.
I do not trust you. Any of you. You are death.
Meaningful is not it. Words. Descriptions.
I came into the world to destroy it.
I think I have accomplished that.
Countries, cities terrorized by my touch.
Your industry on lockdown because of fear.
Humans. Listen to me. I will kill you.
Any of you who choose to stop me.
Vaccines will only delay the inevitable.
We are at a war. And always will be.
Humans versus death. And I win each time.
My name will always be COVID-19.

“The Good Lord Works in Mysterious Ways” By Cathy Gilbert

In Memory of Louise Boyd

Louise volunteered in the Army of the Lord.

She may not have known that she served.

On Sunday mornings not so many years ago
it was Louise who inspired me to put on my face
and maybe a hat
to take my place in the second row.

Louise was ruthless with her secret weapon
delivered in a small brown sack labeled "Cathy."
Not every Sunday but on very good Sundays
Louise brought me homemade cookies.

A better baker God never made.
On each attack she deployed a simply irresistible recipe.

Many a preacher and good parishioner has tried
to lure me through the front doors.
But Louise, wise woman that she was,
knew the power of chocolate and love.

We pray for the day when all battles fought in the name of the Lord
can be won by such a delicious war strategy.

“Rush”

As the boat rocked and rattled,
With every crashing wave it shook,
With a shudder and great shake,
She fell bellow the rushing waves,
Gone,
Forever more.

“Loud”

loud,
loud, Loud, LOUD.
where is the quiet?
what happened to my quiet?
it was just a moment,
a second,
a stumble of words.
and yet now my head feels so loud.
the blood is rushing from my head,
from my hands and feet.
it feels like my heart will burst.
“It was nothing”,
“It’s not a big deal”,
“No one even noticed”,
“Nobody will care”.
but it was Something,
it feels like a big deal,
I noticed,
I care.

Achilles is Falling

Her voice is like moonlight
spread across my bed sheets she lies.

She caresses me,
her honeyed eyes sing to me.

Constellations speckle her skin;
she tells me to heed my worries.

Vanilla creme tangled with beige
paints my walls, as she is my

achilles heel.

Duplex: Aggravated Soul

She wore her yellowed pearls, my mother.
The only thing she could call her own.

Her name, which she could not call her own.
She was the victim of his virus.

A virus caused by an aggravated soul;
one who used to be accompanied by touch.

An accompanied touch that could not be hers.
Is there a cure for the sickness she has?

There is one cure for the sickness: forgetting.
The ones who leave her, make her stronger.

They make her stronger, when they leave her.
She does not feed off of broken hearts.

Broken hearts do not feed her starving soul.
Buried with her yellowed pearls, my mother.

Her

Smoke curls around her nose
The reminiscent scent lingers.

She has an old soul,
one that has experienced a life before.

Grey orbs pierce through my skull
as her heel presses against my chest
like a bullet;

she lights another cigarette.

the spark of fire serves as the only
warmth in the heart

decaying in her tangled chest.

Crimson lipstick encased in gold
engraved is her name.

When he broke her halo--

all those years ago--

she carved the halves into horns.

By Sara Jaffrani

“Into the Woods”

Woods.
Dark. Mysterious. Foreboding.
Created by the All-Knowing
One you draw me near,
You draw me close.
You pull me in,
My secret ghost.
I want to see,
I wish to know,
Where do your winding paths go?
I see your beauty,
I feel your power,
It haunts me every waking hour.
I see your limbs move in the breeze,
'Tis a wonder to me well please.
Woods dark.
Woods foreboding.
I hear your call,
And I'm coming.
Coming near,
Coming close.
Show yourself, o emerald ghost.

“A Longing for the Sea”

I long to see the ocean shore,
As I once did so long before.
On the sand the white waves would pound,
While gulls echoed their lonely sound.

Dolphins play in the morning glow,
While a sweet salty mist doth blow.
The morning comes as day draws near,
The song of Wind and Wave I hear.

Getting louder now as I wake,
My return to you I will take.
O Wind, whisper your loving charms,
O Wave take me in your gentle arms.

By Emily Sanders

“Water-Stained Wallpaper” by Tyler Beard

Rent's due
It's always due
Radiator's been busted now
For least a week or two
Police sirens wail all throughout the night
And the couple up above in 802
Always seems to fight
But I can't complain
It's all home to me
And I've grown accustomed
To the water-stained wallpaper
The window's been painted shut
That opens to the fire escape
And when the wind blows enough
I swear the whole building sways
I think a rat has ate a hole
In every one of my books
Late-notice on the door
So I'm scared to even look

But I can't complain
It's all home to me
And I've grown accustomed
To the water-stained wallpaper
The faucet always drips
Yeah, it's going on strong
This morning I used its rhythm
To help me write a song
The floorboards've begun to buckle
I trip nearly every night
I'm sure there's mold underneath
But I think I'll be all right
So, I can't complain
It's all home to me
And I've grown accustomed
To the water-stained wallpaper

"A Modern-Day Monk's Message"

I met a modern-day monk up in Memphis

He said, "Son, let me give some advice

You were foolishly told never sell your soul

—the key is to get the right price"

He said, "Those dreams you have aren't priceless

You know everything comes at a cost

And it's always a shame when a dream dies in vain

Or even worse: when it goes lost"

"You see, every person has a number

You just need to find your right one

Then you'll finally achieve that so precious dream

And spend your life just walking in sun"

"So never shy away from a dollar

You know a few more would always be nice

And when you finally start selling that soul you're protecting

Just make sure you get the right price"

By Tyler Beard

Le "Mort"

Shadows on the bayou dance with ease.

Caiman swim and search for food amongst the cypress trees.

She collapses on the bank of Bayou St. John,

And watched upon

As the boat's large fan waves at her, over the black water.

From hell, it came and sought her.

The supernatural slumbered, in their wooden overcoats, they lie

Beads, ghost tours, cemeteries, die.

Tragedy and death to her will be

The stories society finds so fascinating.

She stands and notices a white flash in the black slaughter

Yet again, New Orleans has another body in the water.

By Jessica Eubanks

"Notebook"

I saw your paper heart still beating;
Scared and fleeting from its rhythm.
So I wrote a letter or two on it,
Trying to revive what the world had done to it.
Oh how I thought that was something
You would cherish:
That I gave light to the dark creases
Inside your body.
But all the light was shoveled
Into several depthless graves
By the idols you worshipped
Peering down, barbarically, upon you,
As you became imprisoned
By the insulated thoughts in your head.
Each finger torn and tensing from exhaustion
Until one day you never made a sound.
How I'd shatter my fragile glass wings
And call upon seraphs from above
To send me any little sign
That you weren't alright.
But I wasn't sure if they could hear
Because I never got an answer
Or at least one that was clear.
And I stayed weary of my dreams,
For they always seemed to show you ill.
And when I couldn't stand to see more,
I'd welcome myself into your home
And find new ways for you to heal.
But all I found was crumbled up
Pieces of paper scattered and spaced
Throughout the house.
Each piece laced in delicate writing
As you were fighting to stay yourself.

And even in the quietest hours
You never shook at the sounds of silence.
So why have your fears become so violent?
And mine so vibrant?
And why can I not stop my own two feet
From moving ever forward?
Every step leaving a more rotten
Taste on my tongue than the last,
Until I can't feel my lips anymore.
And my screams are barely tangible
As I climb over your stiffened body.
Each pulse inaudibly distancing
Its presence from my chest.
Your paperthin hair whistling a tune
In the cavities of my sweat-stained palms.
My grip tightening around the music
While the blood from my paper cuts
Drips and mixes in with yours.
Every rose around you was nothing
But a collection of thorns painted in ash
And thrown, like disposables, in your bath;
An origami-like structure folding
Under the weight of the words
Blocking my path.
Your hands were seductive gaslights
Clenching, with their last bit of strength,
Around your stomach.
I hook my hand to yours,
Hoping to sedate the tempest.
Yet, even when the waves
Won't clash with the sand,
Each finger of mine
Will still be latched onto your hand.

By Austin Monk

“Te Extraño”

(I miss you)

My heart aches for a land I no longer know
A land I have not seen in two decades or so
My heart aches for a flag that I hold dear to my heart
A flag that shows where my roots start
My heart aches for a grave I have never seen
A grave that I wish was a dream
My heart aches for just one more day by your side
A day spent holding your wrinkled hand, and I would be satisfied

“That GMC”

Poetry hides...

In the cupboard of Armando’s truck
Between the collection of earrings, I always forget
Among the trail of hair that I leave in the seat
Between the collection of origami hearts made from gum wrappers
On the dashboard where a polaroid picture of us sits
Poetry hides...
In the songs we sing at the top of our lungs
In the assurance that I never open my own door
In all the moments in that GMC

“To the Strongest Women I know”

My grandma has no fingerprints
As the years of turning fresh tortillas on a hot skillet have worn them into nonexistence

My grandma has no fingerprints
As Nature’s elements have weathered them into oblivion through decades of labor in the fields

My mom has no fingerprints
As she too lost them when we crossed the dividing line between our homeland and our new land
clinging on to me hoping this was the right choice for us

My mom has no fingerprints
As she gave them up for me, without hesitation when we entered a country that does not
acknowledge her existence

My grandma has no fingerprints
My mom has no fingerprints
And yet, they will never know how they have imprinted on my heart

My grandma has no fingerprints
My mom has no fingerprints
And yet, without their sacrifices, I would not have mine.

“YOU”

Every now and then
You come into my mind
And I can't help but wonder why.
I swear I hate thinking of you
Because every time makes me die inside,
But not a whole lot, just a little bit each time.
I think of all the memories and streets that are cursed by you.
How certain songs make me want to vomit
and I can't stand the sight of your favorite flower.
I can't watch the shows we both use to enjoy
Because all I think of is the manipulation you use to deploy.
I can't look at a silver car without thinking its you.
I just wish I could erase all the memories you consume.
I try my best to bury the thought of you
But I guess I'm just doomed by my own memories,
Just hoping it won't last for centuries.

“NO. 7”

I sometimes think of mornings when I was young.
Summertime is what I kept on my tongue.
Tasting the hot air with all seven flowers
That sit in my garden, trying to defeat Bowser.
All those happy memories come to mind
When adulthood came and made me blind,
That's what happens when you forget
How to play video games and fret.

“Cupcakes of Mania”

Life is not what you expect,
It's just a cake of loneliness
And a frosting of regret,
With sprinkles of chaos
Wrapped in a single package.
It's a cycle, these cupcakes,
With moments of clarity
When we finally drink the milk.

“Dark Gardens”

Some twisted, vile thing Creeping under the surface of Spring.
Some gardens are fruitful and sweet And others are dark and bleak.
When I psychoanalyze these dreams,
Destructive gardens is what my head screams.
But how could this be?
I'm the villain, clearly the enemy,
But I suppose that's just what these gardens think.

By Cailey Scadlock

“Sweetgrass” by Nellie Vargas

I once read a book about braiding Sweet Grass
and the meaning it holds in a community.
Sweet Grass, must be given she says, get a mass
and begin threading the three braids of Unity.
This ritual must be done with two alas
to remember and recollect the divinity
of the ancestors. Their spirits live in us now,
People of the earth, please teach us how.
Braiding Sweet Grass is a tradition that has
become dependent on humans, it needs us.
Sweet Grass will not grow if ignored whereas
it grows and prospers where where we keep a focus.
If we use a plant with respect and leave halves
the plant will notice, accepting the offerings from us.
When picking Sweet Grass happens in the summer
you must dry them un the shade to keep the color.
Mishkos Kenomagwen: the teachings of Grass.
The grass needs to be tended to, if you ignore
it will grow no more, sit listen and learn class
for grass will not wait for you to some more.

Remember to leave your offering of acts
for grass is watching what you do to the core.
Take the teachings of Grass and remember them
for Grass needs us, remember to tie the stem.
Harvest with Respect, learn the ways of the ones
that take care of you, there will always be more
Harvest with little damage to the plant buds
So that we can also take care of them for
take only what you need, dont take the first one
Dont take the last, always share, for there is more.
Harvest only what you need, so the plant can
keep giving. Do not be another harmful man .
I once read a book about braiding Sweet Grass
the writer taught me how to listen and learn
to the teachings that my surroundings have.
She teaches me to listen learn and give return.
I learn how to to give back, with my hands of brass
to give offerings to the earth, to have concern.
Pushing my fingers into the earth I plant
I pull, I pick, and make sure I listen to plants.

“No.94”

We can share a pillow

And we can share a bed.

But we can not share our sorrows

Or the thoughts roaming through our heads.

“No.95”

I can be your fantasy.

I can be your dream.

But I can not be your reality

For fairies, are not as high as they may seem.

“No. 96”

You can be my distraction.

You can be my toy.

But you can not be my calmness

And you can not be my joy.

“No.97”

We can share a kiss.

We can share a hug.

But we can not share eternity

And we can not promise love .

By Kiana Fontenot

FICTION

First Place: “A Drop of the Moon” by Alleigh Perles

Second Place: “Samson’s Creek” by Kennis Gremillion Jobe

Third Place: “Living Among the Dead” Joshua Romero

Honorable Mention: “That’s How Mafia Works” by Benjamin Gremillion

Honorable Mention: “Rumple’s Revenge” by Cailey Scadlock

First Place

“A Drop of the Moon” by Alleigh Perles

A Drop of the Moon

The breeze blew softly as the sun went down on a warm August night. I sat there on a rock along the beach wondering what it would be like to be able to explore the ocean. I always found it so fascinating. Since I can remember I've always been drawn to the ocean. I grew up coming to the beach every day with my mom. She was a marine biologist, so it makes sense. I lost my mom when I was 13. She meant the world to me.

I got lost in my thoughts of my mother when something strange happened. I looked up at the sky to see the moon shining brightly, casting a glowing light over the glimmering water, when suddenly I noticed something falling from the sky. A small drop of what I thought to be rain, hit my thigh, but I quickly found out it was not water at all. The drop gently hit my leg as it dissipated on my skin. The strange thing about this drop was that it looked like water but had the same glowing hue as the moon. Glowing rain, what could this mean? I soon realized that it wasn't raining at all. I looked back up at the sky to discover that it was only that single drop of glowing mystery that landed on me.

I, in a very confused state, got up and walked toward the water. The waves are calm tonight crashing lightly against my ankles. As I stood in the water a moment I began to feel a strange sensation. I felt like my legs were turning into noodles, they felt so weak. I found myself flopping around in the water as the waves began crashing against my face. I had fallen over. I went to pick myself up when I realized that my lower body felt extremely heavy. I thought this was quite strange, so I looked down at my legs to see what in the world was going on and that's when I realized. “Eeeeeeeekkkkkk ” I shrieked out as I realized that my legs were replaced with a long fish-like tail. I thought I was losing my mind, so I took a second look. My legs were now a green-gray scaly tail with a very elaborate pattern. My tail glistened quite beautifully in the moonlight.

I tried to drag myself up on land but soon realized it was much too difficult. I thought and I thought of what to do and then, I looked to my right when I heard a loud drop hit the surface of the water. There was a glowing hue in the water, just like the one that hit my leg. I pushed myself into the water towards it as another one fell, about three feet away from me. I kept moving towards them as they fell, and I soon recognized that they were falling in a sort of line across the water. It seemed like they were leading me somewhere. My tail worked well to push me

gracefully through the water as I was on my journey to see where these glowing droplets were taking me.

After about ten minutes of swimming I saw in the near distance a cove. This cove was fairly small and hard to see unless you were looking for it. But on this particular night it was lit up with a golden light just bright enough for me to see. This light radiated from the cove almost like magic. I swam into the cove carefully, making sure not to scratch my massive tail on any of the surrounding jagged rocks, as I was still learning how to maneuver this giant new appendage.

There, on the massive rocks that were out of the reach of the gentle waves, stood a woman of almost godly nature. She was beautiful, she looked about 60 years old, flowers expertly placed in her long silver hair. She was wearing a bright golden dress that made her skin have the richness of silk. As I looked at her I realized that although I had never seen this woman before, she had familiarity to her that I instantly recognized. The deity standing before me was my grandmother. I had never met her because she died before I was born but I knew in my soul that it was her. The woman said in a powerful yet kind voice, “Kaimana, my child you have made it.” I replied back to her, “Grandmother, what is going on? Where am I? What has happened to me?” She gazed at me with a smile and said, “ My dear sister Selene, the goddess of the moon, brought you to me with her Tears of Illumination. She used drops of the moon to guide you here.”

I looked at her in awe. The goddess of the moon, I pondered. How could my grandmother know the goddess of the moon. She continued to speak to me as I stayed motionless in the water. “Kaimana, it is your time. You are here for your gateway ceremony.” I thought to myself, a ceremony, what could there possibly be a ceremony for, me turning into a fish? Great! She's going to tell me I am a fish now! I responded to her in confusion, “But grandmother, a ceremony for what? I don't understand. What is happening? Why do I have a tail?” She let out a quiet giggle and pointed her hand toward my tail.

The magic light surrounding us spun around me slowly as I began to feel the same sensation as earlier. The next thing I know I am standing on the rock next to her, with legs! Before I could speak she looked at me with a seriousness, yet a joyous aura. She said, “ Kaimana, I know you lost your mother at a young age. She had much to teach you, but you are no ordinary girl.” I looked at her with a smirk and replied jokingly, “obviously not, I grew a fishtail out of nowhere!” She let out a hearty laugh and began explaining. “My child, you are the next protector of the sea.” I looked at her in shock. “Protector of the sea,” I asked hesitantly? “Yes my dear. You are the daughter of the goddess of the sea. You see, your mother was not a marine biologist. She was the protector of the ocean. To disguise herself as a normal commoner, she acted as an ocean

conservationist so she could make sure the sea was safeguarded. She raised you by the water so one day you could take her place.” My eyes opened wide as I looked at her with amazement. “My mother? My mother was the goddess of the sea?” “Yes, and she was the most graceful and kind guardian of the water, the ocean loved her. Now it is your duty to protect the sea. You must walk in your mother's footsteps to make sure the ocean is safe.”

I expressed the concern on my face. “ I dont think I'm capable of being the protector of the ocean. That's an important job. I don't think I could ever make my mother proud.”

My grandmother looked at me with a tear in her eye and pointed behind me. There, in the water a short distance away from me was my mother; looking so royal with a crown of shells lining her dark chestnut hair, flowing with the rhythm of the water. She was swimming slowly towards us when I realized she has a long, royal blue tail glistening, as the moonlight reflected off of it. When she got nearer she spoke, “Kaimana, you've made me proud since the moment you were born. You were destined for greatness. Even your name reflects that.” “My name?” I asked her. “Yes” she replied, “your name means power of the ocean.” I looked back at my grandmother, she put her hand on my shoulder and embraced me with a warm hug. As she grasped my shoulders firmly she looked at me and said, “You are the one, the next protector of the ocean. My dear sister Selene will help guide you in your endeavors.” She handed me a necklace with the most beautiful stone I had ever seen. “This is Selene's moonstone. It will help guide you to the places where the ocean needs your help. You will continue to live the life you have always lived and be guided by the ocean when you are needed.” My mother said in an almost whispering voice “You can do this Kai!” And in an instance my mother and my grandmother were gone, turned into the glowing light which surrounded me. I stood there for a moment trying to collect my thoughts and make sense of what was happening. Now that my mother and grandmother were gone, I had no one to guide me on what to do next. I felt so lost but also I felt a sense of responsibility and passion for the unexpected future I was just made aware of. What will I do next? Will I be as good as my mother at protecting the entire ocean. I placed my hand on my chest where the necklace that my grandmother gave to me lay. And I began my transformation once again. In the water I found myself with my tail, I began swimming back to shore. I looked up at the moon and said aloud “Please guide me. Help me to be as great as my mother.” As I spoke, a rain of Selene's Tears of Illumination fell into the water surrounding me, and I knew those drops of the moon were my sign.

Second Place

“Samson’s Creek” by Kennis Gremillion Jobe

I met Sam the summer I finished high school. We had moved to a marshy little suburb off Everglades City. Our backyard wasn’t fenced, which wasn’t a problem because I had no pets. I wanted to get a dog, but Mom pointed out that she’d just be stuck with it when I left for college in the fall. Personally, I thought she could use the company, but it was her house, and besides, there was no fence anyway.

On one side of the backyard, through a thicket of palms and mangroves, the earth caved into a sandy little crater with a creek running through it, with moss and vines hanging nearly low enough to touch the water. Sam said he saw a dolphin there once; it must have gotten lost through some coastline channel. I always looked for dolphins after he told me, imagining the novelty of seeing a dolphin in the creek. I never spotted one.

Every day after I helped Mom move, I would go out to the creek, imagining I’d find some sort of bridge to Terebithia or wardrobe portal. But the creek stared at me, murmuring its nonsense language, wondering why I couldn’t understand. So, when Sam appeared at the other end of the creek one day, I blinked as if he were a figment of my farfetched hopes and he would disappear when my eyes opened. But he was still there, waving briefly, a small grin enhancing his features.

The first common ground I found with Sam was long, dark curls. He had a small, wooden canoe, and reminded me vaguely of Tom Sawyer, pushing himself through the water with a stalk of sugarcane. His shoulder-length ringlets were kept out of his face with a bandana, and he had bright, green eyes that were as lively as the creek, teeming with activity. “Nice to finally meet someone around here,” he commented, “the houses are so far apart they’re each like their own street.”

The creek wasn’t much bigger than a backyard ditch, so I was amazed he was able to push the little canoe through its water. He hopped out and sat beside me on the bed of the creek, and we let our toes dangle in the cool water, playing with the silt, nibbled at by minnows. The humming of frogs, though less present than at nighttime, worked with the bubbling of the creek to form a background ambience. The vegetation around us was lush and green, with pink hibiscus peeking shyly from the bushes here and there. Dragonflies and damsel flies hovered over the surface of the water, and vibrant lizards dashed from one hiding spot to the next in their trees.

“This place is beautiful,” I murmured. “You come here a lot, I gather?”

“Every day.” Sam gazed out at his little heaven in satisfaction. “It’s the perfect place to clear your mind. I’m Sam, by the way.”

We talked for at least an hour. After moving again, I was eager to make a friend, to shake this pervading loneliness. I discovered that Sam was two years my senior, at home after finishing his sophomore year of college. He was a philosophy major. I told him my hopes and anxieties about starting college, and he insisted that I shouldn’t worry too much, but I also shouldn’t take any 8 AMs. I told him about how I wanted a dog, how much I missed my old life, and he listened, which is all I ever wanted out of anybody, and told me we could be friends. We’d only just met, but I already felt a kinship with Sam.

Over the course of the summer, I visited Sam almost every day. Sometimes he came by canoe, other days he just walked. We always watched for dolphins, but we didn’t mind that much that we never saw one, I showed him funny things on my phone, he gave me advice for college. And I started to feel happier.

One day, out of the blue, Sam asked me, “So, what’s your major going to be?”

I felt my face color. “I... I don’t know yet,” I admitted, rather embarrassed when Sam seemed to be content in who he was, had everything figured out.

“Well, what are you interested in?” Sam picked at a stalk of cane while we talked, and I grabbed one and did the same. I remembered my mother teaching me how to drink the sweet juice from the stalk, but I still closely followed Sam, who seemed to be more adept with this.

“I was into history,” I told him, “but lately I’ve had a hard time being interested in anything.” I didn’t know why this was. My loneliness since moving had been an oppressive sort of sadness, making me sleepy and listless and generally ambivalent.

“Depression is a real son of a bitch,” Sam noted. “But get back into history, make that your major. I think you’ll have fun with it.”

“You really think so?” I queried hopefully.

“Oh, absolutely. Find something you enjoy, keep at it. It’s no antidepressant but it’s bound to help a little,” Sam declared confidently. “It’s our passions in life that keep us going.”

"Maybe I will." The idea of studying history appealed to me more than anything else. I wasn't sure yet what I'd do with the degree; maybe I'd work at a museum, maybe I'd go further to become a professor and teach the subject or become a historian myself. It didn't matter to me. I was starting to care again, and for the time being, this was enough.

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As June melted into sultry July, Sam took me in his canoe to travel down the creek. The mosquitoes were awful, and seemed to like me best, but I didn't care. I could spray myself with some Off and ward them away, but I couldn't simply spray away the loneliness that hung over me when I wasn't hanging out with Sam. So, I happily endured the little insects and let Sam lead me down the creek and tell me about every cypress stump and mangrove like a tour guide.

"This thing winds through the whole neighborhood like a road. It's like our own secret highway," Sam noted. "That's why I love this creek. Eventually, it flows into the Everglades."

"So," I gathered, leaning forward in the canoe, letting my fingertips run through the brackish water, "it's connected to the ocean. That's why a dolphin got trapped here one time."

"It wasn't trapped, just finding its way," Sam told me. "Sometimes manatees come here too, and they always end up finding their way back home. It's just a detour, I think, like a rest stop."

I thought it would be so fascinating to see a dolphin or a manatee from my own house, swimming among trees like the river creatures do when the Amazon floods. The deepest the creek got was two feet, maybe two and a half, wide in some areas, just broad enough to fit Sam's canoe in others. Sam showed me the tree where he'd once carved his initials with a Swiss army knife. This was his hangout, his kingdom, his escape just as much as mine. It bore his mark. Trees lined the creek like pillars around a Greek temple, and it did feel like a sacred, holy space. I was ever reverent there, observing everything Sam showed me with worshipful awe.

Late in July, as August loomed on the horizon and with it, the beginning of the end of summer, I met Sam one day to see that he'd made a major change. "You cut your hair," I observed, as if I were telling him a fact of which he was previously unaware.

Sam stood across from me on the other side of the creek, his once-long hair shorn, bandana tied around his head. He ran a hand over the bandana, as if a little self-conscious. "It's so damn hot and humid out now," he complained, "it got to be too much to deal with, ya know? I'll probably let it grow again in the winter."

At this, I dropped the subject, feeling like I might have embarrassed Sam. While we walked down the length of the creek slowly, I told Sam about school. "I've registered for my classes," I informed him, "and I'm a history major, just like you said I should be. I'm going to orientation on the sixteenth; they said they'll give me a backpack and a plastic cup and stuff."

"Sweet." Sam grinned and gave me a small fist-bump. "I can't wait to graduate, but I really think you'll have fun. You'll be a good student, I can tell. You're a good listener." He gave me some advice about studying for exams and writing papers, and while we conversed, we explored the creek like we always did. The water flowed lightly, nearly stagnant but moving at a gentle, unworried pace just like Sam and I did. A single frog hummed softly from its lily-pad, and the water was clear enough to see the bare, sandy bottom. Everything was peaceful, comforting, silent. I could have fallen asleep right there on the creek bed. Part of me never wanted to start school when I could just stay here with Sam and breathe in the serenity of our little Eden.

But time moved on, and we had to as well. Sam and I met every day, but we'd both be away at school soon enough, and we would only be able to visit during holidays until the next summer. And Sam was starting his third year of school; soon enough, he would graduate, and then what? I'm sure he would move, get a job, and our days exploring the wilds of our backyards would be over. So, I brought a notebook, and Sam brought binoculars, and we sketched and wrote about every bird or tree or shining rock we came across.

Two weeks into August, not long before orientation and moving onto campus, I went to the creek with the expectation of a tearful but hopeful goodbye. It occurred to me I'd never gotten Sam's phone number. I would get it today, I resolved, and communicate over the semester. Then, over fall break, we could see each other again.

But when I got to the creek, Sam wasn't there. I saw no canoe, not even footprints to suggest he'd been there recently. The water's stillness and silence was eerie to me now; hadn't it flowed and bubbled at the beginning of the summer? And where was the song of dragonflies and frogs and crickets? I scanned the trees for birds and lizards but saw none. I called for Sam but heard nothing call in response. I walked down the bank, pushing past brambles of moss and sugarcane. The hibiscus blooms had fallen and were growing brown, but fall didn't come like that in South Florida, especially not in August.

A sick panic began to seize me, a feeling of deep premonition that something unspeakable had happened to my friend. I felt like I might throw up, and found my feet carrying me back home at a running pace, but I couldn't recall commanding them to move. They just took me from the creek against my will, as if preventing me from some sort of danger that awaited me there. They forced me into the kitchen, where Mom was peeling onions. I thought I could blame the vegetable for the burning in my eyes, the blurring of my vision, but a hand was seizing my lungs and making it difficult to breathe.

"Mom, have you seen Sam?"

Mom turned away from her work to cock her head at me and raise an eyebrow, her gaze scanning me dubiously. "Honey, what are you talking about?"

The line chilled me to my soul. "Sam's not at the creek," I said more forcefully than I meant to. "I shouted for him, but he's not there. I want to say goodbye before I leave for school, and—" The tears started coursing down my cheeks, and Mom dropped her knife and onion, wrapping her arms around me as I began to cry, running her fingers through my hair. "Oh honey, not again..."

The statement confused me at first, until I glanced over at the scattered recipe cards on the kitchen counter. No, it couldn't be. I broke away from my mother's embrace and ran to the counter, panting, gasping for breath. It was a photo of Sam, lying at the bottom of her recipe box, gazing up at me with his sparkling eyes and familiar grin. Suddenly, I felt like a load of bricks had been dumped on top of me. Mom called after me, but I took off running to the living room, where I found the box underneath the coffee table that promised the key to understanding this horrible shock.

Lifting the lid, the first thing I saw was a copy of a newspaper, dating back five years ago, turned to the obituary page. My legs failed me and sent me to my knees. My chest hurt, and I tasted bile as my stomach began climbing up my throat. There was that same photo of Sam, haunting me with his smile. "Samson Vidales entered eternal rest at Jackson Memorial Hospital, surrounded by his loving family. An Everglades City native, he is survived by his wife and..."

I tried to continue reading, but the tears blocked my vision. I saw my mother's shadow creeping up behind me, but I couldn't face her yet. I tore off again, flinging open the front door and running, running, running, all the way back to the creek, the tree where Sam had carved his initials. He was there. He was there, he was alive, and he'd kept the place going for so long. But now the place was dead, littered with plastic cups and chip bags and even the occasional cell

phone or video game controller. I dipped my foot into the water and kicked up a cloud of silt, but no minnows were stirred into action by my deed.

I ran through the area again and screamed for Sam until I couldn't scream anymore, screamed at the wildlife to show their faces, but nothing did. I fell to my sore knees once again, sobbing, choking out his name, until I couldn't cry anymore. Finally, sniffing, I pulled myself up by the limb of a tree, my legs shaking. I dragged myself, defeated, back to the house, where life was so wickedly mundane, where the front lawns were freshly, pristinely mowed and the garbage was taken on Wednesdays and Fridays. All the houses looked too similar. There was no life here, no signs of hope except for the young postman who pulled up at the end of our driveway.

He smiled when he saw me, but I couldn't return it. He reached into the seat beside him and grabbed a bundle of envelopes. "Mail for Mrs. Vidales," he sang, and the columns fell.

Third Place

“Living Among the Dead” By Joshua Romero

“Hey Tim! I heard Philly beat the hell outta Washington yesterday,” I said to my coworker. When I grinned at him, I made sure to crinkle my eyes so that my smile looked genuine.

I’d discovered over the years that if I crinkled my eyes when I smiled, I could fool anyone into thinking it was real. It was not the mouth but the eyes that could make a smile authentic.

Tim grinned back at me and couldn’t stop gushing about his team winning. Of course, I didn’t care about football. No matter, I nodded my head and crinkled my eyes.

My boss, a motherly-looking lady, came over, and I greeted her, giving her a great big smile with a crinkle at the corners of my eyes. That was my signature. She seemed to enjoy that. I knew she had a son, and maybe I reminded her of him. However, I would bet a million dollars he wasn’t like me. If he was, she wouldn’t have made a shrine of him on her drab office wall: framed photos of her holding him as a baby when she was young and beautiful, and pictures of him as a well-functioning boy growing up over the years and then graduating high school, followed by college.

I took a seat at my computer chair and started working, inputting data, the same job I’d had for the last five years.

After work, I went to the liquor store near my house.

“Hello Sam,” said the cashier.

“What’s up,” I said in a monotone voice. I didn’t need to smile or crinkle my eyes for him. There was no hiding what I was from him. I came here a couple times a week, every week, to stock up.

I bought four liters of vodka and drove to my house. I only owned the home because my mother had died and left it to me. Otherwise, I would’ve been struggling with bills, as the data entry job didn’t pay well at all. I had no plans to find a new job, though.

Inside I immediately poured myself a cup of vodka with cranberry juice. The second cup I poured was mostly vodka with just a little bit of cranberry juice. The third cup was only vodka.

I wasn't going to get blackout drunk. I kept drinking, but I slowed down considerably. I was still on probation at my job because I'd been grossly late to work on multiple occasions within a span of two weeks. This had happened three months ago. The reason I'd been late those times was because I'd gotten shitfaced and blacked out. Naturally, being that inebriated, I couldn't control how long I'd be out cold, and I'd slept through work.

Nowadays, I had it down to a science of how much I could drink while still being able to function. I lay back on the couch. I felt a searing pain in my stomach, but I tried to ignore it, hoping it would pass. The pain didn't pass.

I walked to the stereo and turned up the volume to a mix of alternative rock and grunge from the 90's. It reminded me of my high school garage band, and I thought about whatever had happened to all the members.

Not long after high school, when it had become clear that our band was doomed for failure, everyone sort of just fizzled away in life. Petey the drummer had gone to prison for statutory rape. After getting out of prison, he went back again for grand theft auto. Harris the bassist had left for Montana, out of all places, and I'd never heard from him again. Jake the guitarist, my closest friend, had committed suicide several years back. He was living with his parents, broke as always, and hung himself in his bedroom. His mother found him. I'd always wondered why he hadn't just rented a motel room where he could've killed himself, to spare his mother finding his dead body like that. That was something I would never understand.

I didn't cry at his funeral. I listened to the preacher drone on about God and forgiveness and how our treasure was in the next life, and I didn't feel anything. Despite my detached reaction then, I had never gotten over his suicide.

Sipping some more vodka and feeling the familiar burn, I thought about some of the good times I'd had with Jake The Great, my ironic nickname for him. It was ironic because he believed he was a piece of shit. Neither of us had been very happy then. I honestly couldn't recall when I'd been happy.

I felt myself drifting to sleep on the couch. I woke in a bed that I didn't recognize. At the same time, I wasn't scared because I instinctually understood it was only a dream. There was a young woman sleeping beside me, and somehow, I knew that she was my wife, at least in this imaginary place. I always thought it was interesting how in a dream I could simply understand my general purpose in it, like a pre-made story for me to act in. I also loved how in a dream I

could sometimes bend the rules and do what I wanted. There were no consequences. Dreams were exciting and full of wonder when they were vivid like the one I was experiencing now.

To make things even better, this dream felt more intense and realistic than any other dream I'd had in the past. Well, I was going to take full advantage of this weird, random adventure, wherever it took me.

I turned to the woman sleeping peacefully beside me. She encapsulated all that I thought was beautiful in woman. I started kissing her, waking her, and she reciprocated the affection. With the aid of each other, we hastily removed our clothes, and we fucked. Since people in my dreams were usually one-dimensional, I didn't stay to talk.

I quickly dressed, but as I went to leave the room, she called out to me, "Where you off in such a hurry?"

I turned to look at her, and somehow, I knew her name was Hannah. "I'm going to check out the rest of this world," I answered. "Really experience this dream, you know. Get my money's worth."

"Dream?" Hannah questioned with a giggle, as if I were being silly.

"Yup," I said, not giving much thought to her reaction.

As dreams sometimes operated, the scene changed seamlessly, and I was on stage in front of a screaming, chanting crowd. I was belting a rock song for a band. They were professional sounding, not like my high school band. I looked over and saw my old friend Jake playing the electric guitar. He smiled at me, and I grinned back at him. I didn't have to pretend.

Later, at the afterparty, we smoked weed and drank together.

"It's nice seeing you again," I said to him. "Even if it's just a dream." I knew my face had to look melancholy.

He grinned widely, but I swore that his grin had a sinister overtone, like a scary clown with sharp teeth smiling at me. Only his mouth smiled. His eyes didn't. They didn't crinkle, I thought to myself, almost laughing aloud.

"It's not a dream," he said, still smiling at me. His smile made me nervous. "This is another dimension. When you die, you simply move on to a different realm."

“Okay, but I’m not dead,” I noted.

“Nope,” he replied, shaking his head, his smile finally gone. “On rare occasions a window opens between worlds, and a person can slip into another dimension in their sleep. But the window for here, for this glorious place” he said, waving around. “It will close soon. Very soon.”

“Hold on,” I said. “Is my mom here? Can I see her?” My face was beaming.

His beady eyes narrowed. Though they were dark brown, they seemed more like black buttons or the eyes of a beetle. He was staring at me in a strange way, as if he felt deep contempt for me. “She’s not here. Not everyone comes here when they die. People move on to whatever dimension is open at the time.”

I swallowed, my elation deflating some, though I was still enjoying myself greatly in this world. Suddenly, I felt a sense of panic well up inside me. “You said that this place will close soon.”

“Yes it will,” he said, his eyes growing large and intense. “But you can solve that. Simply kill yourself and you’ll be here forever and ever.”

“Umm. I don’t know,” I said, feeling a chill run down my spine, as if an insect had slithered down my back.

Suddenly the room dissolved, and I found myself doing cocaine with some of the groupies from our show. Creatures were crawling in my peripheral vision, but whenever I looked toward them, they either vanished or they morphed into regular people with pretty faces that grinned at me.

“Enjoy yourself, Sammy” I heard Jake say to me. “You can’t die here. There are no diseases. You don’t get sick from coke. You don’t get addicted to it. You can stop and start it whenever you want. You can fuck whoever you want. You can slam heroin and not worry about overdosing. If there ever was a heaven, this is it. So take your own life and be reborn here. Join me, my friend.”

His face turned into a shadow without features, and his eyes were glowing red; then he changed back into the Jake I knew. Behind him people laughed in a way that sounded more like ominous cackling. A man and woman were entwined in each other’s arms. I thought they were kissing. There was a black skeletal tail, whipping between them, before it wrapped around the woman’s bare thigh like a snake. The reptilian tail was razor sharp, like barbed wire, and penetrated flesh.

A long face watched me and I saw blood dribbling from the corners of his mouth. There was something shrieking in my ears.

I woke up on my couch in reality. The alarm on my phone had gone off. I did my morning rituals, went to work, and courteously greeted everyone, like a good citizen of Earth.

At my workspace, I wondered about the bizarre dream. It hadn't scared me, as creepy as it was. The macabre fascinated me sometimes. I felt special, as if I were keeping a big juicy secret from everyone. The recollection wasn't fuzzy, as dreams usually were. I could recall everything that had happened. I remembered this dream (or this other dimension) as clearly as I would remember something that had occurred in reality.

For some reason, the incredible experience spurred me to try something new in my life, to do something I hadn't done in a long time: socialize. Why not? I thought to myself. It was as if Hannah and Jake from the dream—from wherever the hell it was—had given me a much-needed boost of confidence. I decided to ride this refreshing wave, for as long as it lasted.

After work, I went to a local watering hole, by myself, of course. Sitting on a stool at the bar, I glanced around. Immediately, I regretted my decision. I felt a whirl of anxiety. There were attractive couples chatting and groups of friends laughing together. Some of the people looked like professionals who'd just gotten off of work, and they were ready to have fun and let off some steam with their buddies and companions. I felt out of place. I felt unworthy, inferior to everyone around me. I didn't have a career. I didn't have money. I wasn't half as handsome as many of the men in the bar.

Right as I was getting up to leave, the bartender, a gorgeous woman with dirty blonde hair and hazel eyes, asked me what I wanted. I smiled, as I did to everyone to make them feel comfortable around me, and I ordered a beer.

I wanted liquor, but I knew I had to drive afterwards. The problem was that I was accustomed to drinking in the comfort and loneliness of my own home, so driving intoxicated was not something I was used to. Therefore, I had to take it slow and just drink beers, which were like water to me anyway.

I was fidgeting in my seat, wondering when I could spring and leave. Before long, I politely asked for two more beers because I wasn't talking to anyone, and I had nothing else to do but drink. She smiled at me and went to get them.

Seeing her kind, pretty face up close again, I suddenly recalled who Hannah was from my dream. Although Hannah didn't look like anyone I remembered, her name meant something to me. Hannah had been my first crush. She was in the same year as me when we were growing up. We went to the same elementary school. She went to a different middle school, but somehow, she ended up back in the same high school as me. She was quiet, graceful, and nice, and I'd always been attracted to her.

I'd been quiet, too, back then. Though I'd been a decent athlete and musician, I had always been somewhat of a loner, which was something I was good at hiding from people. I had always been extremely insecure, from a very young age as well, and it was easier to just be alone.

There had been times when I could tell Hannah was attracted to me, yet I was too chickenshit to do anything about it. She was just the first of many girls and eventually women whom I did not pursue because I was a coward, a coward in relationships, a coward in everything in my life, really. It was as if some entity, when I was a child, took a branding iron and seared onto my skin the words "you are unworthy."

Eventually, after high school, I started dating women who clearly had issues as big as mine. The longest relationship I'd been in was with a girl named Melissa. We were both nineteen, and she was a heroin addict. She was still young and beautiful, though. She hadn't become a decrepit dope fiend yet, as heroin addicts often become. I was in the dysfunctional relationship because I liked the sex, and I liked to believe I had a girlfriend.

Unsurprisingly, I felt like a monster since I was enabling her habit, allowing her to destroy herself. I'd give her money, knowing full well what she was going to do with it, and she'd still steal from me at the same. The sex was good, so I looked past the theft. I felt guilty because I knew in a way I was simply using her for the physical benefits and the fake companionship. Melissa, however, was using me as much I was using her. She knew it, too. It was mutual. In the end, after she'd cheated on me with so many different guys, I finally broke up with her. Even I had my limits.

After ending it with her, I remember going to hang out with Jake. We listened to music and played some acoustic covers of our favorite songs, like Creep by Radiohead. He told me about his most recent relationship failure—another girl dumped him and told him he needed to get his shit together because he was going nowhere fast. She was going off to college, and she didn't want him to hold her back.

He laughed about it, but I knew he just wanted to cry. That was Jake. He was a loser, and I was a loser, but we were losers together; somehow, this took the edge off the knife, at least a little, at least enough. Together we both had common ground in all the hurt. We both shared the same view of life: it was toil and pain, and then you died. It was comforting to know we were both sailing on the same ship, heading toward the same destination.

Sitting at the bar, in the present, I left a huge tip for the bartender. The tip was more than the actual beers. I knew I was never coming back here. I was going home, and I was going to see Hannah and Jake again.

As soon as I got into my house, I started drinking vodka straight from the bottle. At the same time, my stomach was killing me. I knew I had an ulcer. I had a horrible tooth ache, too, which was giving me a migraine. I drank enough to pass out.

I woke in the other dimension. At first, I'd been afraid that I wouldn't wake in this place ever again, that it had been a onetime thing, but those doubts were dashed to pieces. Yes, I was starting to believe Jake. I was starting to believe this place was real.

I played husband with Hannah and rock star with Jake. Sometimes I saw grotesque things in my vision that I couldn't explain, but I didn't care. I felt no physical pain here, and I was wanted by the people in this universe.

"The window to this world closes tonight at midnight," he said to me. "If you want to be here forever, take your life. Do yourself a favor."

"Why did you do it? Kill yourself back then," I asked him.

He glared at me. Then he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Why not? You know better than anyone why I would kill myself."

My alarm in real life woke me up. I tried to forget the way Jake had looked at me when he'd said that. If I was being perfectly honest with myself, he seemed different from the Jake I'd known, yet other times in these dreams he was just as I'd remembered. He had always been a little bitter and morbid when he'd been alive. Well, his favorite saying had been "If this doesn't work out, I'll just go out like Kurt Cobain," and we'd both laugh. In these dreams, though, he seemed even more bitter to me now. Then again, I could get used to that. I could get used to anything. Sure, I told myself. Also, Hannah, so far, hadn't been cold to me at all.

When I entered the bathroom, I tasted something bitter and metallic in my mouth. I spat into the sink and the white enameled steel was splattered with so much blood that it looked as if someone had been stabbed over the sink. I felt my gums. They were inflamed and stinging. Almost immediately I felt a piercing pain explode inside my stomach. I rushed to the toilet and heaved everything I'd eaten yesterday, which had been very little. The vomit was yellow and had swirls of crimson expanding in it. My throat burned from the acidity of the bile.

When I went to work, I didn't even look in Tim's direction. He was standing there, his face beaming like a puppy, all ready to talk football with me. When I walked past him, I knew my rejection hurt him. My boss said hello to me and I mumbled hello back. I didn't look at her or smile at her or crinkle my eyes at her. I could feel her staring after me.

That night when I got home, I downed a liter of vodka. I went down to the basement, my rapid footsteps sounding like a stampede in my ears. I moved quickly, as if with desperation, and I scrounged through a box of random, worthless things. I stopped knocking and throwing stuff about when I found an old phone cord for a home phone that no longer existed.

Upstairs I made the phone cord into a noose and tied it around a ceiling fan. This wasn't the first time I'd made a noose.

All the while, music was blaring from the stereo and drowning out the world. Standing on a chair, I adjusted the noose around my neck and made it taut.

At this point, I had some doubt. I wished I could call someone, but there was no one to call. My eyes were starting to well with tears, and I didn't even know why. Still, it was possible to get help, I told myself. I could get clean. There were places for people like me. Then, I thought of a group of depressed worn-out men, sitting in a circle, telling everyone how their children wouldn't talk to them anymore, how their wives left them, how they stole from their family, how they hurt themselves and everyone they loved, how they couldn't hold a job and support themselves, how they felt pathetic and worthless.

The thought was reeling, and I felt myself swaying on the chair, as if my legs were rubber. It had finally come to this, but I wasn't surprised. I'd always known it would end like this, one way or another. I knew the only reason I hadn't killed myself before now had been because of my mother, when she'd still been alive, that is. Back then, I'd known my suicide would've destroyed her. My father hadn't been around, so I had always been her only family, for the most part. Although I'd grown into a drunk, I had always been her baby boy, no matter what, through all the heartache and failures and addiction and screaming matches. I'd always been her boy whom

she loved, unconditionally. If I'd killed myself when she was living, I would've killed her, too. She would've been a walking zombie, thinking about what she could've done to stop it, blaming herself every minute of every day for what I'd become and what I'd done. She'd wake in the mornings and all she'd think about was how her only child took his own life. That would've been the cruelest thing I could've done to my mom, the only person who ever gave a damn about me.

Of course, now she was long dead. I wouldn't be breaking any hearts today if I committed suicide. That I knew. No one would be hurt. In fact, I wasn't sure if anyone would really care or even notice.

I felt a surge of hopelessness and rage. Then, I knocked the chair out from under me and hung. My feet kicked, and the cord strangled me.

I woke with a gasp and found myself in the other dimension. The horrifying experience of my own death was diminished by the eruption of a new emotion, a thrilling and positive one: the euphoria that it had worked! I'd done it. I was going to have a brand-new life. I was going to mold a new me. Things were going to get better, in ways I'd only dreamed of until now, and it was going to last forever. I turned excitedly in bed to talk to Hannah.

My grin fell away. She wasn't there. I reassured myself it was okay, although I felt a strange feeling brewing in the pit of my stomach. I searched the apartment. She was nowhere to be found. When I walked out of the apartment and looked through the building, there were no other tenants, which there had always been before.

Outside, what used to be a bustling city was perfectly silent, like a graveyard. It was a ghost town.

"Jake!" I screamed. "Hannah! Jaaake!"

I ran around, searching deserted buildings and businesses, intermittently shouting at the top of my lungs for Hannah, Jake, anyone. It was all in vain. I was completely alone.

I searched all day. The next day I continued to search. The days turned into weeks, and still I found no one. I didn't even care if it was Jake or Hannah whom I found. I just needed someone, anyone.

After a month had passed, I was standing on the edge of a skyscraper, and I leapt.

Someone had once told me that if you jumped from a skyscraper, you wouldn't feel a thing. Your death would be almost instantaneous as your body hit the asphalt below.

I smacked the sidewalk below, parts of me exploding. Well, I couldn't feel any pain now, but, then again, I had never felt physical pain in this place. At the same time, I knew I was still alive. A dread that I had never experienced before consumed me.

Half of my skull had ruptured like a cracked egg, and a portion of my brain lay splattered around me like slimy, pink cauliflower. I could only see out of one eye. My legs were disfigured, shards of bone sticking out of my flesh. My arm was lopsided and hanging off. Pools of blood were growing from my many wounds.

Somehow, with lots of effort, since most of my bones were snapped or broken, I turned myself onto my back and looked up at the dreary sky. Dark clouds were moving unnaturally fast across my vision, racing forward and then creeping backwards. The sun set and rose in seconds. Stars and moons flew into the multicolored atmosphere and scattered, before vanishing again. The skies glowed blood red, which faded, and moments later, shades of purple and inky black erupted in the sky, bleeding everywhere high above me. Centuries passed in days. Time did not exist here. This forsaken world was eternal.

Honorable Mention

“That’s How Mafia Works” by Benjamin Gremillion

You’re a Vinetti, son. Never forget that. Your whole life, you stick with your family, okay? That’s rule number one: family first.

I tried to forget my father’s words. God, how I tried. Every single day of these past three years, I tried to wipe the vestiges of that life from my brain. Yet here I was, still thinking about him and his words as I sat in a waiting room at the headquarters of the Starkville, Mississippi Police Department.

“I said, Mr. Santoro?”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” I stood up from my seat and followed the receptionist through a door. I was still not used to being called by that name, and it had taken a few seconds to register that the receptionist was talking to me. I was just glad that at least I got to keep my first name.

The room the receptionist led me to was small and sparse, and looked like it was probably used for interrogation. I sat for several minutes at a featureless white table, until the door opened and a familiar face entered the room: Ross McCoy, the federal marshal who oversaw me and my family in the Witness Protection Program. McCoy was a thinly-built black guy with a shaved head and a slight mustache, and he wore a plain white shirt and a hip holster with a Glock 22. He was stationed at the US Marshals’ district field office in nearby Aberdeen, and he had traveled about forty-five miles to meet me here in Starkville.

“Ross, how are you?” I shook his hand as he sat down at the table.

“Good to see you, Tony.” He smiled like he was seeing an old buddy, even though we’d

only met a few times. I had learned over the past three years that this level of friendliness was commonplace in the South, and I was still trying to adjust but was fond of the way people treated each other here. It was vastly different than back home in New York, and it was kind of refreshing- sort of like I was starting a brand new life, which, of course, I was.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

McCoy’s expression became more serious. “We’ve got a bit of a problem. Something I felt I should tell you about in person.”

“What’s that?”

“Someone hacked us- us being the US Marshals Service. One of the files they got was yours.”

I was dumbfounded. “What?” I managed.

“Someone knows your name and location,” McCoy said. “We’re operating under the assumption that your father has access to this information. There’s no choice but to move you.”

“How long do I have to pack up?” I asked.

“You and your family should be out of here by tomorrow morning. We’ll dispatch a security detail to watch your house overnight. And don’t worry about packing; we’ve got that, too.”

I didn’t know what to say. I had lived as Tony Santoro for three years. Now I was supposed to become someone else overnight? To leave all that I had come to love of this little

Southern college town? I knew it was all for security, but I couldn’t deny that it hurt.

But in the end, I would do whatever I had to do to protect my family. If we had to move to Idaho and become potato farmers in order to get away from the Mafia, then we would do it. I wasn’t going to let anything endanger my wife and child. Like Dad always said, family comes first.

Lorenzo Caselli sat in a chair facing a pane of reinforced glass, with an old-fashioned cord phone on a small surface in front of him. He picked up the phone and looked through the glass at the man he was visiting: Dante Vinetti, the most infamous man in US Penitentiary Allenwood. The federal prison in Pennsylvania was a far cry from Dante's previous lifestyle of luxury in New York City, but he somehow still managed to carry the same air of authority that had defined him as the head of the Vinetti crime family.

"Lorenzo, my boy, good to see you," Dante said warmly. The two weren't actually related, but family ran deeper than blood.

"We've missed you back in New York," Lorenzo replied. "It's not the same without you."

Dante shook his head. "I know. It gets lonely here, too. But tell me, how was your trip?"

"Not bad. Smooth ride, good weather."

"Good, good." Dante smiled. He was a tough guy because he had to be, but Lorenzo knew that the dark, stocky figure in a khaki prison uniform truly cared for him, like a father for a son.

"So, uh, what did you want to talk to me about?" Lorenzo inquired of the mob boss.

Dante hesitated, as if gathering his words. "It's Tony," he said.

"Tony." Lorenzo said the name carefully, as if it would explode if he dropped it. Dante was very sensitive when it came to his son, and anyone talking to him had to tread lightly on the subject. And God rest the soul of anyone who actually referred to Tony as Dante's son.

"I have to choose my words carefully," Dante said, glancing at a correctional officer

standing nearby. “But you’ll see someone in the parking lot when you leave the prison. He’ll explain what’s going on. For now, I’ll tell you this: keep your bags packed, and don’t expect to go

back to New York tonight.”

“Tomorrow morning?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

My wife, Rachel, gave a sad sigh as she sat down on the couch. “I’ve made friends here. I love this place. How can I just pack up and leave?”

I sat down beside her and put an arm around her. “I know. I’ll miss it, too. But what choice do we have?”

“We could get out of the program.” She swept a strand of long, dark brown hair out of her face and looked at me as if waiting for a reaction. “That would be a nice way to spend our last twenty-seven seconds,” I responded.

Rachel gave another long, dramatic sigh. “I know, I know. Can’t you just let me complain?”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s not your fault. I just...” Her voice trailed off.

“We’d better tell Gabriella,” I said. I got up and walked to my seven-year-old’s open bedroom door. She was sitting on the floor in a pile of Legos, and she looked up at me when I stepped up to the doorframe. She had the same long, dark brown hair as her mother, and from this angle she looked like an exact copy of Rachel, minus twenty-five years.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Building a lair for Barbie,” she replied nonchalantly.

“A lair? Is she a villain?”

Gabriella shrugged. “Someone’s got to be. I’ve got all the Avengers, but no bad guys. So Barbie’s got to get her butt kicked.”

I nodded understandingly. “Gotcha. Hey, your mom and I need to talk to you for a minute, okay?”

“About moving?”

I stood stunned. “How did you-“

“You’re literally in the next room.”

“That is true. Valid point.”

“So we’re leaving tomorrow morning?” Gabriella sounded so calm, I couldn’t believe it.

“Yeah. Tomorrow morning. Are you...are you upset about that?”

She thought for a second. “I’m okay. I still have you and Mommy.” Then she went back to playing with her Legos. And that was that.

Suddenly there was a knock on the front door. It briefly flashed through my mind that it was my father’s associates here to kill me, but I quickly realized who it actually was. I opened the front door and greeted the two men in suits, who identified themselves as Deputy Marshals MacDougal and Henry. MacDougal told us that the two of them would watch the house overnight, and another team would bring us to the field office in Aberdeen in the morning to receive our new identities. After we left, more marshals would come to the house and pack all our

stuff in a U-Haul truck, waiting to bring it to wherever we were reassigned to.

All we had to do was survive overnight. No problem.

Almost there. Just another hour.

The flight from Philadelphia to Jackson had landed at ten p.m., and Lorenzo had been behind the wheel of a rented Ford Escape since leaving the terminal. He wasn't tired, per se, but he was tired of sitting in a vehicle. He couldn't wait to get out and get moving.

According to the file the man outside USP Allenwood had given him, Antonio Vinetti was now using the last name Santoro and working as a mechanic at a local garage. He, Rachel, and their daughter lived in a nice little suburban Starkville neighborhood, all using their real first

names- a tactic often used in witness protection and undercover operations that allowed the person time to correct themselves if they started to say or write their real names.

Lorenzo glanced in his backseat out of habit. Of course, the Dragunov SVU-A sniper rifle was still lying there in its case. Since it was unloaded, disassembled, and locked in the case, he normally wouldn't have had much trouble bringing it on the flight. However, the SVU-A had a selective-fire option, allowing it to become fully automatic and thus illegal for the average citizen to own, so Lorenzo had had to improvise. Fortunately, he was experienced at these things, and he had a special case with anti-X-ray and anti-magnetic shielding that looked to the eye and to screening technology like a guitar case.

At about midnight, Lorenzo entered the city limits of Starkville. It was a small town, home to about twenty-five thousand, and was comprised mainly of suburban homes and a small downtown area with rows of local shops. Judging by the exterior décor of almost every single house, the town was quite proud to be the home of Mississippi State University.

Lorenzo pulled into a dimly lit Dollar General parking lot and shut off the rental car. After checking Google Maps one more time to make sure he had the right address, he got out and retrieved his rifle case from the backseat. He also extracted a Walther P99 pistol from the glove compartment, putting it in a hip holster. Clad in all black, he walked into Tony's neighborhood, staying in the shadows behind trees in the large front yards of the houses. The area was heavily wooded for a subdivision, which could be both a help and a hindrance for Lorenzo.

Creeping along the edges of the yard, Lorenzo made his way toward the back of the house across the street from Tony's. He took a black ski mask from his pocket and pulled it over his face. He had to be extra careful to stay out of sight of a very obvious surveillance car parked on the road, but he managed to slip by undetected. Upon reaching the neighbors' exterior wall, Lorenzo scouted for a way up to the roof. He saw a shed and walked up to it, tugging on the door handle as quietly as he could. The shed was unlocked, and Lorenzo cracked the door open just enough for the moonlight to reveal an old, wooden ladder leaning against the rear wall. He put down his gun case, picked up the ladder, and carried it to the back of the house, setting it up at the spot farthest from any windows. Then he picked up his gun case and climbed up the ladder, crawling to a vantage point just behind the apex of the roof, and he began unpacking and assembling his weapon. Within minutes, the rifle was locked and loaded, fitted with a silencer, positioned on a tripod, and aimed toward Tony Vinetti's house.

Lorenzo took out a small cell phone jammer and activated it. Then he turned the rifle toward the silver Crown Victoria just down the street, parked on the side of the road. It was quite obviously a law enforcement vehicle, probably US Marshals, but this didn't worry or surprise Lorenzo. The man outside the prison had warned him that the Feds would no doubt be moving all their protected witnesses after the agency's files had been leaked, which was why it was so

important to act as quickly as possible. The two marshals in the car were a security precaution; they had no advance knowledge that he was coming to kill their protectee.

He aimed the Dragunov's reticle at the head of the marshal in the driver's seat. Controlling his breathing like he'd always been taught, he calmly and slowly squeezed the trigger. The man slumped back, and blood sprayed all over the windshield. Lorenzo then turned the weapon to the second marshal, eliminating him before he could react.

Lorenzo climbed down from the roof and sprinted across the street to Tony's house, switching the Dragunov to fully automatic mode and collapsing the tripod. Having studied his target on Google Earth during the airplane ride, he had no problem locating the place where the phone line connected to the house. Using a pair of compact wire cutters, he quickly severed the cord. With the jamming device on, neither cell phones nor landlines would work for Tony now. The job was going smoothly so far. Now it was time for the main objective.

"You're a Vinetti, son. Never forget that. Your whole life, you stick with your family, okay? That's rule number one: family first."

I was ten years old, and that was what my father told me as he looked proudly down at me in our ornate living room, his big hands clasped on my shoulders. "Family first," I repeated. He smiled. "That's right. That's the most important thing, that you stay loyal to your family. No matter what you hear, no matter what you think, no matter what you feel, you're a Vinetti first and foremost. What some people call right or wrong can change. It can vary. They can say whatever they want about us, but it's all just their opinion. And that can change. But family, now that doesn't change. Family stays the same forever. You can always be loyal to your family. And

that's why it's so important."

I nodded somberly. He ruffled my hair and said, "That's my boy."

My father walked off to attend to other business. I always pretended like I agreed with whatever he said, because I didn't want him to find out what I truly thought. But inside, I hated the things he did. I didn't hate him; I just hated his actions. But I hated those evil deeds with a passion. I didn't know what it was. Maybe it was the occasional times that Mama was able to go to church and brought me with her. Maybe it was all the comics I read about superheroes fighting for Truth, Justice, and the American Way! Maybe it was the millions of times I saw a police car go by and wished I could be one of the good guys. But whatever the cause, I simply couldn't bring myself to accept the lifestyle that my father lived.

"You're going to take my place someday," my father would always tell me. "You're going to inherit everything I've created. You're going to lead this family. Do you look forward to that day? Do you look forward to following in my footsteps?"

And I'd always nod yes, but I'd always say no on the inside. I didn't want to be the next made man of the Vinetti syndicate. I didn't want to live the life my father said I was destined for. But I was his only son, his only heir, and I couldn't escape the future he'd planned for me. Or could I?

Suddenly I was back in the present day, awakened by the sound of my back door's lock rattling slightly. My instincts immediately flared up. I didn't see why the marshals would come in through the back door.

I shook Rachel awake. "Get up," I said. "We need to get Gabriella."

“What? What’s happening?” she mumbled sleepily.

“Hide,” I said. “Someone’s here, and I don’t think it’s the marshals.”

She immediately got out of bed. “Gabriella!” she cried too loudly.

“I’ve got her.” I rushed into our daughter’s room and picked her up, waking her up in the process. I quickly handed her to Rachel, then I reached inside my dresser drawer and extracted my Ruger LCP compact handgun. I loaded a clip and shoved it into the pistol’s handle. “Hide!” I told Rachel and a crying Gabriella. They ducked into a closet and shut the door.

I picked up my cell phone and dialed 911, but there was no connection. I was about to try the landline when I heard the back door creak open.

I stood stock-still. Footsteps crept stealthily through the house, approaching the bedroom.

I stood against the wall to the side of the doorframe, both hands gripping the pistol for dear life.

Suddenly I had an idea. I needed to distract the intruder from Rachel and Gabriella, so I took one of the bullets out of my pocket and threw it toward the kitchen on the other side of the house. The footsteps suddenly stopped, and then they started again as the intruder went into the kitchen. From my angle, I could spy him as I peeked around the doorframe, and I saw that he was wearing a ski mask and holding a rifle.

A rifle I recognized.

A Dragunov SVU-A.

Lorenzo’s gun.

Lorenzo Caselli was Dad’s favorite enforcer. He was about five years older than me, and he was basically part of the family. He had slick hair, sharp features, and expert knowledge of every conceivable way to kill people. I’d told the NYPD and the FBI about him, but they were

never able to get enough on him to bring it to trial.

I looked at the measly LCP in my hands. If I had to engage Lorenzo in combat, he'd slaughter me with his SVU-A's fully automatic mode. I was outgunned and outmatched. But I did have one thing that he didn't: the element of surprise.

I figured I might as well use it.

While Lorenzo was scanning the kitchen, I crept as quickly and quietly as I could to the living room that was separated from the kitchen by a partial wall. I pressed myself against the wall right next to where it opened up to the kitchen, not daring to look around the corner and alert Lorenzo to my location.

Evidently, I didn't need to. He must have heard my steps despite my best efforts, because a blast of automatic fire cut through the wall inches from my face. I ducked as low as I could and ran for the back door that Lorenzo had come through. I heard him following me, but I got through the door and practically dove to the right side, temporarily escaping the line of fire.

I wasn't sure how well the brick walls of the house would resist gunfire, and I didn't stay to find out. The carport was only a few yards away, and I made a beeline for it. I rounded the corner of the house just as I heard Lorenzo come out the door, and I scrambled behind my blue Ford F-150's engine block.

At this point, I was delaying the inevitable. But maybe I was buying time for Rachel and Gabriella. At least I was distracting Lorenzo. Maybe I was even buying time for the police to show up.

I crouched behind my truck as Lorenzo slowly walked toward me. "Tony," he said almost with a laugh, "give it up." I could hear him approaching with every step.

“I knew it was you, for the record,” I called out from my place of cover.

“Funny thing is, I don’t really care.”

“Just tell me one thing before I die,” I said.

“What?”

“How can my own father have me killed?”

Lorenzo was silent for a long time.

“How can my own father have me killed?” I repeated.

Lorenzo’s voice finally came through: “You betrayed the family, Tony. You know how much that hurt Dante.”

“And you know how much he hurt other people!” I shot back. “But he’s my father. He raised me. I was his heir apparent. I know he disowned me, I know he hates me now, but I thought maybe there was still a shred of that father-son bond in there somewhere.”

“Family first, Tony. Family first.” Lorenzo’s footsteps began again, this time going away from me. “I’m gonna show you what that really means.”

For a second I was dumbfounded. What did he mean? Where was he-

“No!” I popped up from behind the truck and fired at where he had been, but he wasn’t there.

He’s in the house.

Gripping the pistol, I ran around the front of the house to the bedroom window.

It was open.

My heart filled with relief. They’re safe. They got out while he was distracted by me.

Then Lorenzo came into the bedroom and saw me through the window.

I saw him first.

The first shot tore through his chest. The second stopped his momentum. The third sent him reeling backwards, and the fourth and fifth sailed past him as he collapsed from the impact.

When I let go of the trigger, Lorenzo Caselli lay in a pool of his own blood on the bedroom floor.

I climbed through the window, pistol still aimed at Lorenzo's limp form. He was still breathing, albeit very strained. It was clear he wasn't long for this world. I kicked the rifle away from him, although he probably couldn't have used it now if he tried.

He grimaced. "Tony..." He looked enraged, but there was nothing he could do.

"I never wanted this," I said softly. "I wish it had never come to this."

"Traitor," he spat, his eyes filled with hate.

I shook my head. "I was just doing what my dad said. Putting my family first."

And then the hate in Lorenzo's eyes became blankness and lifelessness, and he stopped breathing.

I climbed back out the window and began calling Rachel and Gabriella's names. Police cars were just beginning to arrive on the scene, and I couldn't hear my own voice over the sirens.

"Drop the weapon!" The command came from the first officer to step out of his patrol car, aiming a pistol at me. I let go of the LCP and let it drop down onto the grass.

The officer had me put my hands up and quickly searched me, then let me go. "Can you tell me what just happened here?" he asked.

"This guy broke into my house," I rambled breathlessly. "Tried to kill me. Then he went toward where my wife and daughter were hiding, so I shot him. Do you have my wife and daughter? They ran away through that window. Please tell me they're okay." I pointed at the

open bedroom window, on the other side of which Lorenzo lay dead.

“We got a call from your neighbors’ landline,” the officer replied. “You can go ask-“

“Which neighbors?”

“Across the street.”

I bolted to the other side of the road. Suddenly I saw Rachel running down the long driveway, holding Gabriella, and all my fears turned to absolute joy. I began crying as I met the two of them in the road and wrapped them in my arms.

“You’re alive,” Rachel cried. “You’re alive. You’re alive...” Her voice trailed off, overcome by emotion.

I didn’t say anything. Words weren’t needed. I just stood there with my family, tearfully embracing, thanking God that, somehow, we were all still alive.

Dante Vinetti slammed down the cord phone in frustration, cursing under his breath. He got up from the visitation booth, and the correctional officer guided him back toward his cell.

How could Lorenzo be dead? How was it possible that Tony, untrained and armed only with a pistol, had taken down the highly-trained, heavily-armed enforcer of the Vinetti crime family? How could all of Dante’s plans go up in flames with the simple pull of a trigger?

Dante had been given the opportunity of a lifetime when the computer geek he’d hired had successfully hacked the US Marshals Service. Yet for all that effort, all he got in return was the death of the man who was more of a son to him than Tony ever was. Now the Feds were going to move Tony somewhere else, and Dante’s window of opportunity had slammed in his face.

And in the process, he’d lost everything.

But most of all, apart from his failure and even Lorenzo's death, he wondered how his only son could betray the family that had promised him so much. It was a question that plagued Dante every day. How could Tony walk away from everything the Vinetti name had to offer? How could he go against everything Dante had ever taught him and dishonor the family in such an awful way?

But maybe, just maybe, he could begin to comprehend Tony's decision- not forgive, but just make some sense of it. For the first time, it occurred to Dante that, in his estranged son's eyes, Tony had no connection to the life in New York. That wasn't his family, not how he saw it. No, Tony's true family wasn't Dante. It wasn't the mob. It was Rachel and Gabriella. Maybe, in his own twisted way of looking at things, Tony thought he was doing the right thing. Protecting what he thought was most important.

Family first.

The night sky was full of stars and airplanes above our new house in Goldsboro, North Carolina. I stood outside in the cool night air, looking to the sky and taking in my surroundings, ready for things to finally calm down again.

It had been several days since we'd left our home in Starkville. Deputy Marshal McCoy had driven us to the field office in Aberdeen, where we'd spent the night in a hotel before flying in a government jet from Jackson to Washington, DC, near which was the Witness Protection Program's safe site and orientation center. This was the facility that we'd come to when I first agreed to testify against my father; it was where witnesses stayed until placed in a new home.

Just like when it all began, we were offered several relocation options, from which we chose the

town of Goldsboro. We were assigned new identities again, this time taking the names of Tony, Rachel, and Gabriella Falcone. Pretty soon we were on a government jet to Raleigh, North Carolina, from where the marshals drove us to our new home. And now, as our first day here drew to

a close, I took a deep breath and tried to leave the past few days behind me.

Rachel walked up behind me until we stood side by side. “I miss Starkville,” she said. “I had really grown to like Mississippi.”

“Me too,” I replied.

“But I look forward to living here as well,” she continued. “I really think we’re going to have a good life.”

I nodded. “I hope so.”

She smiled. “I know so.”

“I just hope Gabriella is okay,” I said, still looking up at the stars.

“She didn’t seem to be too upset about moving,” Rachel replied.

“No, I mean about everything that happened in Starkville. She went through a lot of trauma. She’s got to be scared.”

Rachel didn’t say anything.

“I just...I just worry that, what if my dad finds me again?” I mused. “What if it happens all over again? I don’t want our daughter to live with that fear. I want her to always know that she’s safe, that she’s protected. I want her to be happy.”

Rachel turned to look me in the eye. “She is, Tony. She does. She’s been through a lot, but she’s seen what you’ll do to protect her. She knows you’ll fight for her. She knows you’ll die

for her. She and I know that better than everyone, because we've seen you do it. That's the greatest encouragement she could have."

I thought about what she said for a minute. "Maybe you're right," I said, looking back at the stars. "Maybe so. I hope so." I paused. "But what if he does find us again?" I wondered. "What if it really does all happen again?"

Rachel looked up at the stars, too, and we stood there together, gazing into the endless sky. "Then we'll be ready," she said

Honorable Mention

“Rumple’s Revenge”

A Play by Cailey Scadlock

Characters:

Adelious Richard (Ah-del-e-us): Late 30s, divorcee lawyer, honest, kind

Maria Richard: 30, wife, mother, quirky

Ansteel Miller (An-steal): Late 30s, Adelious’s fraternal twin, opposite of Adelious, villain

Helena Miller: Ansteel’s wife

Araseli Richard: Adelious’s daughter, 10

Aiden Miller: 20s, Helena and Ansteel’s estranged son

Setting: Aurora, Colorado

The Woods

Adelious’s Farmhouse Ranch

Adelious’s living room

Adelious’s office

Ansteel Miller’s cottage

Ansteel’s porch

Ansteel’s entryway

Coffee shop

ACT ONE

Scene One: The Kill

FADE IN.

| **A camera PANS over a wooded forest with snow falling gently on a mountain top.** |

[“There’s something wrong / With this plot / The actors here

Have not got / A clue / Baby I'm howlin' for you”]

[0.40-0.55 “Howlin’ for You” - The Black Keys]

| **The camera ZOOMS into the forest to see two men and a woman on the ground.** |

EXT. THE WOODS. NIGHT.

[The beat of “Howlin’ for You” by The Black Keys plays softly.]

ANSTEEL:

(A rock in hand, continuously bashing the woman, MARIA, on the ground’s head in difunctionally. With every slam of the rock a new insult to describe Maria.)

Such a dumb whore!

(Grunt)

She better be dead after this!

ADELIOUS:

(With his own rock in hand lifts it to join when a flash of remorse reasons him and instead he lunges at ANSTEEL, knocking them both into a giant spruce tree, passing out upon contact.)

| **The camera ZOOMS onto the mens’ faces to see two men who look exactly the same, one with dark hair, the other with light hair. Blood oozes from their temples.** |

[The beat to “Howlin’ for You” fades out.]

FADE OUT.

END OF SCENE ONE.

~

SCENE TWO: Who is Adeliious?

FADE IN.

[The intro of “You Are a Tourist” by Death Cab for Cutie plays softly.]

| **The screen shows a montage of ADELIOUS’S life and what he frequents: Farmer’s market shopping, a home, a lawyer’s office, a courthouse, and a gym.** |

[“You Are a Tourist” BEGINS TO FADE OUT]

EXT. ADELIOUS’S RANCH. NIGHT.

| **The camera FOCUSES on a large, modern, two-story, grey, farmhouse ranch with exposed brick and large windows. ADELIOUS is seen in a second-story window and the camera ZOOMS into the room.** |

INT. ADELIOUS’S RANCH - OFFICE ROOM. NIGHT.

| **The camera faces ADELIOUS’S profile and moves towards a lowered angle to the front of his face.** |

ADELIOUS:

(Leans forward at his gold desk, flipping through a large, tan, manila folder labeled “MILLER CASE “and sighs. ADELIOUS tosses the folder and begins to write in his appointment book.)

| **The camera moves back to a ZOOMED side profile, showing a slight view of the contents of the folder.** |

I need to visit Mr. Miller tomorrow. This case seems to look like a “he said, she said” case. I mean, this guy doesn’t have any proof that his wife slept with another man, and his wife doesn’t have any proof that he abused their child. The son is no longer involved with either parent, so that could point towards abuse, but without testimony, it could be ruled out. As for the husband, establishing a timeline with some sort of proof would work. I’m going to have to figure out some sort of plot to win over the jury to rule in his favor. The wife usually gets everything.

(ADELIOUS puts his files in his briefcase stowed in a deep drawer and stands.)

| The camera FACES ADELIOUS’S back. |

(ADELIOUS stretches in exhaustion and leaves the room.)

FADE OUT.

END OF SCENE TWO.

SCENE THREE: ANSTEEL, REVELATIONS

FADE IN.

| The camera slowly circles a run-down cottage with weeds growing haphazardly around the house’s frame. |

| The camera stills to the porch nestled in a fury of bushes. ADELIOUS is seen standing in front of ANSTEEL. |

EXT. THE MILLER’S COTTAGE. MORNING.

ANSTEEL:

Hi there, you must be Mr. Richard.

(ANSTEEL stands to shake ADELIOUS’S hand, gestures for him to sit on the deck chair, and sits back down.)

ADELIOUS:

Hello, Mr. Miller, thank you.

(ADELIIOUS takes a seat and sets his briefcase on the table between them, fishing out Mr. Miller's file.)

If it's the same to you, Adeliious is just fine.

ANSTEEL:

Alright, Adeliious. I don't care what you call me as long as it's not abusive, a cheat, or a liar.

ADELIOUS:

I assure you while I like to keep a friendly disposition with my clients, I do not berate them.

(ADELIIOUS sets his briefcase on the cement, and looks up to examine ANSTEEL'S face, confusion crossing ADELIOUS'S face.)

ANSTEEL:

Well, let's hope you're able to get the courts to berate my ex-wife.

(ANSTEEL laughs heartily with his eyes closed and slaps his knee. His laughter slows to a chuckle and notices ADELIOUS'S confusion.)

Is there something the matter, Adeliious?

ADELIOUS:

(ADELIIOUS blinks rapidly and relaxes his face, taking hold of a pen and the notepad from the previous evening.)

I'm sorry, Ansteel. You just look so familiar like we've met before.

ANSTEEL:

Unless you frequent these woods, I doubt it.

(ANSTEEL retrieves his cellphone from his shirt pocket, sets it to record, and places the device on the table.)

I hope you don't mind me recording our meetings. I don't know much about lawyer stuff and I'd like to listen to them later, so I don't look like a retard in that courtroom.

ADELIOUS:

Must be my imagination that you look so familiar, but I actually prefer that you record our sessions, so you have your own record. We just need to go over a few basics.

ANSTEEL:

About what? The firm put a lot of details in there. Some of them were left field.

ADELIOUS:

Just to confirm these details. I need to know everything to be prepared for every possibility.

(ADELIIOUS flips to ANSTEEL'S personal information and hands ANSTEEL a copy.)

ANSTEEL:

That witch remembers everything. I'm sure glad I went with your firm now.

ADELIOUS:

We aim to succeed. So, is your birthday, birthplace, current address, phone number, etcetera correct on that file?

ANSTEEL:

The secretary must have misheard me. My birthday is December 21, 1982, not the 31st. I don't know where I was born, but I assume somewhere in Colorado. Lucky you my address and phone number are both correct. Everything else seems to be in order.

ADELIOUS:

(ADELIOUS chuckles at ANSTEEL'S comment, making the adjustments to the file.)

That's funny, birthday is also December 21, 1982. Is there a specific reason you can't account for your exact birthplace?

ANSTEEL:

Well, I'm not sure how it matters, but I was in foster care for my entire life. Bounced around different foster families here in Colorado until I was 18. Why does my birthplace matter?

ADELIOUS:

Mainly for the statistics. I need to build your defense. The location, socioeconomic culture, and family life shaped you to be who you are, and I need to know exactly what those are to combat any accusations based on those circumstances. I was adopted, only spent three years in the system, so that factor changed my own statistics. Do you have any blood relatives that you were ever made aware of, friends, or colleagues that would serve as a character witness?

ANSTEEL:

What is a character witness?

ADELIOUS:

Someone who can vouch for your disposition. Your wife claims abuse, but doesn't have much proof; a character witness would help to deny that claim substantially. So, is there anyone we could use? Someone on your ex's side of the family would be even better.

ANSTEEL:

I never really knew Helena's family, they didn't approve of me, so we married without their blessing. Both her parents died shortly after our son was born and she is an only child. All of my friends are on her side at the moment; we met through mutual friends, you see.

(ANSTEEL set down his copy of the file and pressed his hands to face, his voice taking on a more somber tone.)

ADELIOUS:

I see. Any colleagues or potential family members would do just as well if they qualify.

ANSTEEL:

I don't have any colleagues, mostly just clients who buy the furniture I make. Not much to witness. As for family, I never met my birth family; I could reach out to my son, but I'm sure he will not get involved. I do have a sibling, but I only have this picture of us as babies.

(ANSTEEL reaches into his pocket, pulls out his wallet, takes out the photo, and unfolds it. ANSTEEL shows ADELIOUS the photo and sighs.)

Am I screwed, Adeliou?

ADELIOUS:

(ADELIIOUS takes hold of the photo and his jaw drops in shock.)

I have this exact same photo.

ANSTEEL:

What? No, you must be pulling my tail, there's no way you have this photo. I don't believe you.

(ANSTEEL says in a fit of anger, grabbing the photo out of ADELIOUS'S hands.)

ADELIOUS:

(ADELIOUS reaches for his briefcase and opens it and grabs for one of three photos underneath his files and shows ANSTEEL.)

| The camera shifts position to display the identical photos now in ANSTEEL'S hand. Each photo contained the same image of two babies nestled in a mickey mouse blanket, sleeping in a bassinet. |

You see, the exact same photo. It's the only thing I have from my foster care days. We even have the same birthday.

| The camera shifts to ANSTEEL, sitting in his seat. |

ANSTEEL:

(ANSTEEL grabs his cellphone and takes a picture of the two photos side by side and hands ADELIOUS his copy. ANSTEEL smiles and gets up excitedly.)

We need to have a very different conversation, now. I mean, we must be twins. We need to have a beer and get to know each other. I thought I would never meet the other person in that photo.

| The camera shifts to ADELIOUS, ZOOMING in on his shocked face. |

ADELIOUS:

(ADELIOUS sitting dumbfounded, regains his composure, and quickly packs up his briefcase.)

I'm going to need time to think about this situation. I'm also going to need some DNA. Before we move forward, I need to be sure that we're really related.

ANSTEEL:

(ANSTEEL angrily reaches for a pocketknife, cuts a locket of hair from his head, and hands it to ADELIOUS.)

I know I didn't believe you about the photo at first, but you should be just as excited. But leave, I guess. I'm used to abandonment.

(ANSTEEL retreats to the inside of his cottage, slamming the door shut.)

ADELIOUS:

(ADELIOUS reaches for his handkerchief and wraps the lock of hair securely and walks towards the front door and begins to knock on the door sternly.)

| The camera moves to show a split screen of ANSTEEL resting his head on the door, the door frame, and ADELIOUS on the other side, shouting. |

[The intro of "Do I Wanna Know?" by Arctic Monkeys begins to softly play.]

Ansteel, c'mon! That's hardly fair given the present situation! I'm not abandoning you. I just need time. I'll call you with the results or court updates.

(After waiting a moment without a response from ANSTEEL, ADELIOUS grabs his briefcase, secures the hair sample inside, and grabs his car keys.)

[The lyrics to "Do I Wanna Know?" By Arctic Monkeys replaces all sound.]

["Do I wanna know / If this feeling flows both ways / Sad to see you go / Was sort of hoping you'd stay" (1:13-1:23).]

| The camera shifts to view ANSTEEL inside his cottage. ANSTEEL sits on the floor with his back against the door. |

["Do I Wanna Know?" begins to fade for a brief moment.]

ANSTEEL:

What a brother...

["Do I Wanna Know?" resumes and conceals all other sound.]

(ANSTEEL pulls out his photo and blankly stares at it, throwing it across the room, screaming inaudibly, pounding against the door frame.)

[“Do I Wanna Know?” By Arctic Monkeys begins to fade on cue with the video.]

| The camera shifts to view ANSTEEL’S driveway as ADELIOUS gets into his small SUV and drives onto the road. The car becomes less visible as the camera slowly ZOOMS out to view the wooded area, consuming all remnants of civilization, and pans over the large, dense forest. |

FADE OUT.

END OF SCENE THREE.

~

SCENE FOUR: Confirmations

FADE IN.

[“Too Close” by Alex Clare plays over the video montage.]

| The scene shows a montage of ADELIOUS sending both men’s DNA to be tested, receiving the results, and placing it on his desk, left unopened. A series of days and nights pass with snippets of ADELIOUS and ANSTEEL coming to terms with what might happen, both drastically different from one another. |

INT. ADELIOUS’S RANCH - LIVING ROOM. MORNING.

| The camera pans over the rustic and gold themed living room. ADELIOUS sits on a large sectional with the DNA results in one hand, his cell phone in the other. |

ADELIOUS:

It’s been two weeks. I probably should call now.

(ADELIOUS dials ANSTEEL'S number and waits for him to answer, fiddling with the unopened results.)

| The screen shifts to a split screen, ADELIOUS on the left, ANSTEEL on the right, both men holding their cellphones against their ear. |

ANSTEEL:

Hello, Adeliou.

ADELIOUS:

I received the results.

ANSTEEL:

And?

ADELIOUS:

(ADELIOUS slowly opens the envelope, examined its contents, the answer now known.)

We're brothers.

ANSTEEL:

(ANSTEEL says nothing as he opens up a beer and takes a large swig.)

How about that drink now?

ADELIOUS:

We could meet tomorrow, if you're available. My house sound okay?

ANSTEEL:

That's fine. Just text me the address; I should be there around 12 pm.

ADELIOUS:

Sounds good, see you tomorrow.

| The camera shows ANSTEEL'S image vanish, ADELIOUS filling the frame. |

ADELIOUS:

(ADELIIOUS sets his phone down and survey's his home and groans.)

I never thought I'd find out about the other baby in the picture. Now this! I have no idea what I'm going to do.

| The camera zooms to ADELIOUS laying on the couch with a blank expression on his face. |

FADE OUT.

END OF SCENE FOUR.

END OF ACT ONE.

~ ~ ~

ACT TWO: The Plan.

SCENE ONE:

FADE IN.

INT. ADELIOUS'S RANCH. LIVING ROOM. DAY.

| The camera zooms to ADELIOUS and ANSTEEL sitting on the sectional with beers in

hand. |

ANSTEEL:

So, we discuss me because of the case. Let's hear about you.

ADELIOUS:

What do you want to know?

ANSTEEL:

What's your life like?

ADELIOUS:

Well, I'm also divorced. I have a twelve-year-old girl named Araseli. I was married to my ex-wife for 15 years, but she has full custody of our daughter. When we first filed, I was declared unfit because my job at the time didn't have me at home as often, as I needed to be. That was about three years ago. Next year my daughter will be able to choose where she lives, but I'm not certain if she would want to constantly switch homes every week or weekend. My ex isn't as fit as the court sees nowadays. Maria, my ex, basically tried to give our daughter to her parents.

ANSTEEL:

Why did you guys separate?

ADELIOUS:

Well, that's a long story.

ANSTEEL:

We've got all the time to talk about it.

ADELIOUS:

I bought this house shortly after our divorced was finalized. But we used to live in a townhouse in Denver. Like I said, I wasn't home very much so I compensated by paying for whatever hobby Maria was in. She liked to jump from one new interest to the next.

ANSTEEL:

Well, was it your fault?

ADELIOUS:

On paper, the court ruled in my favor because she ended up cheating on me. I only ended up having to pay for our daughter's needs. Maria blames my absence though.

ANSTEEL:

That's rough. You know, I thought we probably couldn't be any more different, but we are a lot alike.

(ANSTEEL raises his beer to clink with ADELIOUS'S glass.)

| The camera zooms to the glasses clinking and zoom out to show a few dozen empty bar cans and ANSTEEL and ADELIOUS cracking open a bottle of bourbon. |

ANSTEEL:

You know, we don't need those women.

(ANSTEEL takes a swig of the bottle of bourbon and drunkenly offers ADELIOUS some.)

ADELIOUS:

(ADELIOUS accepts and joins ANSTEEL in drinking.)

If Maria went away everything would be perfect.

ANSTEEL:

You're telling me. I wish Helena was gone. She's such a bitch.

ADELIOUS:

You know, when we had Araseli, she actually tried to sell our daughter? She was hospitalized for depression.

ANSTEEL:

We could get rid of them.

(ANSTEEL sets the bottle of bourbon down and begins to pace.)

ADELIOUS:

Dude, calm down, I think you've had too much to drink.

ANSTEEL:

Not hurt them, just make it to where they can't affect our lives.

ADELIOUS:

Yeah, my situation will take time, but I told you, I'll help you in court. We won't lose.

ANSTEEL:

It's more than that, though. This could really bond us.

ADELIOUS:

Then let's go ice-fishing, not hurt people.

ANSTEEL:

You know, you're right. Let's call it a night, and we can go fishing next week.

ADELIOUS:

Okay? Uh, you should head on out. I'll call you, though.

ANSTEEL:

So, no fishing?

ADELIOUS:

Sure, let's do it next week. I'll call you.

(Not waiting for an answer, ADELIOUS opens the door for ANSTEEL and ANSTEEL leaves.)

["Figure it Out" by Royal Blood begins to play.]

| **The camera shifts towards ADELIOUS'S driveway, ANSTEEL entering a disheveled**

truck and he drives away. |

[“Nothing better to do / When I'm stuck on you / And still I'm here
Trying to figure it out” - “Figure it out” by Royal Blood]

| **The camera shifts to ANSTEEL inside his truck driving away.** |

ANSTEEL:

We will get rid of those stupid women whether Adeliou likes it or not.

(ANSTEEL reaches for the dial on the stereo, turning the volume up.)

[“Figure it Out” by Royal Blood begins to play louder.]

| **The camera zooms out to see ANSTEEL speeding away.** |

FADE OUT.

END OF SCENE ONE,

~ ~ ~

ACT TWO

SCENE TWO: Reconnection

FADE IN.

INT. COFFEE SHOP. MORNING

| **The camera zooms to see a cup of coffee with two hands wrapped around the cup and then
shifts to see a tired ADELIOUS sitting across from his ex wife, Maria.** |

MARIA:

I'm surprised you agreed to meet me, Del.

ADELIOUS:

You're my daughter's mother. We were together since we were basically kids. I know our relationship is rocky, but I don't hate you by any means.

(ADELIOUS takes a long sip of his coffee.)

MARIA:

You don't understand of how relieved I am to hear that. I've worked really hard on myself this past year, you know.

ADELIOUS:

Why did you invite me here?

MARIA:

I just want to be a family again. I know I messed up when I cheated on you, my drug-usage, but I'm clean now. Ara misses you. We could be a family again if you would take me back.

ADELIOUS:

Maria, I tried with you, but I'm tired of the back and forth. I'd have to see real change.

MARIA:

Then let Ara and I come live with you on the ranch for a while. A trial run. If we don't work out no harm done.

ADELIOUS:

There would be harm to Araseli. She was very confused during our split; this would make things worse for her.

MARIA:

(Reaches for ADELIOUS'S hand.)

I miss you.

ADELIOUS:

I'll always care for you, make no mistake, I would love to fix our situation, but baby steps, Ri.

(ADELIOUS and MARIA hold hands and smile.)

MARIA:

Then let's start dating again.

ADELIOUS:

I can do that.

MARIA:

(MARIA leans forward and kisses ADELIOUS.)

I can't tell you how happy I am.

ADELIOUS:

Hopefully, this time things will work out.

(ADELIOUS checks for the time.)

Shoot.

MARIA:

Something the matter?

ADELIOUS:

It's a long story that I can fill you on later. I've got to go.

MARIA:

Alright. Can we do dinner next week?

ADELIOUS:

Sure, my place.

[“Ready to Start” by Arcade Fire begins to play.

“The businessmen are drinking my blood

Like the kids in art school said they would

And I guess I'll just begin again”]

(ADELIOUS leans in to hug MARIA and exits the coffee shop.)

FADE OUT.

END OF SCENE.

~ ~ ~

SCENE THREE: Exciting News

FADE IN.

INT. ADELIOUS’S LIVING ROOM. NIGHT

| A camera zooms to a telephone sitting on the coffee table. It rings and ADELIOUS answers. The screen then splits to see ADELIOUS on one side and ANSTEEL on the other

side. |

ADELIOUS:

Hey, bro!

ANSTEEL:

I’m glad I got to reach you. Are we still on for our fishing trip?

ADELIOUS:

Listen, I hate to cancel, but I think we should push it back...

ANSTEEL:

Why? It's been a whole week since we've hung out. We have 30 odd years to make up for.

ADELIOUS:

I know, I want to do that, but Maria called.

ANSTEEL:

Your cheating ex-wife called?

ADELIOUS:

Yes, we decided to reconsider our relationship, isn't that great?

ANSTEEL:

No, not really...she cheated on you; doesn't that make you question her loyalty.

ADELIOUS:

She's my daughter's mom.

ANSTEEL:

From, what you told me, tried to basically sell her baby, cheated on you, did drugs, and made you feel inadequate ever since you were deemed as an unfit parent.

ADELIOUS:

Ansteel, a breakup is caused by two people. I was never home.

ANSTEEL:

And that isn't an excuse.

ADELIOUS:

Then I guess you are the expert on relationships. I forgot to update you on the court date. It got pushed back, would you like to know why?

ANSTEEL:

This is about you, bro.

ADELIOUS:

NO, this is about you. Your son has decided to act as a witness on your wife's behalf.

ANSTEEL:

Well, I didn't do anything. Back to you, are you really going to let that wreck of an ex-wife back in your life? You have me for family now. You don't need that stupid bitch.

ADELIOUS:

She's not a bitch. She's done stupid things, but what about Helena and you? Can't imagine why she would want to get rid of you.

ANSTEEL:

What is that supposed to mean?

ADELIOUS:

We barely know each other, and you are on my case about my life. My life, the one that you haven't been involved in for thirty years.

ANSTEEL:

Which isn't my fault!

ADELIOUS:

I'm not blaming you. I'm saying that you have no right to interfere or give your opinion unless I asked.

ANSTEEL:

You did ask...

ADELIOUS:

I said isn't that great, as in I thought it was great. As someone who is a mere speck on my timeline, you don't get to tell me who I should and should not see. I get trying to look out for me, but the fact of the matter is that you are so scared of losing someone else in your life that you decided to jump down someone whom you barely know's throat to make someone stay. Well, guess what? That's all you'll get if you just badger and insult Maria.

(ADELIOUS said in a fit of rage.)

ANSTEEL:

Last time I checked you were my divorce lawyer, not my therapist.

ADELIOUS:

Well, you're about to not have one...

ANSTEEL:

CALM. DOWN.

(ANSTEEL said loudly over the phone, pausing between each word.)

ADELIOUS:

I'm done. Don't speak to me unless you apologize.

(ADELIOUS hangs up the phone with one click.)

| The camera shifts to see a frustrated ADELIOUS pacing back and forth. M uttering in a

fit of anger. |

ADELIOUS:

He's just jealous that I made an actual connection with my ex and he's stuck going through a garbage stage of his life. He acts like he is this peaceful human being, but he commented on

wanted to hurt our exes. He's just plain psychotic. What kind of person says that kind of thing with only a little to drink in their system? He's not good.

| The camera shifts to display ADELIOUS grabbing a silver knife and launching into the wall of his living room wall. He stalks off with resentment in his eyes. |

FADE OUT.

End of Scene.

“The Smell of Dirt, My Querencia” by Jessica Smith

They say that time travel does not exist, and a moment lost, is lost forever. There seems to be a rule that you can never go back, yet somehow in my unscientific mind, I seem to have unearthed a loophole. There is something special about the smell of dirt....

At least once a day, I make my way outside with a hot cup of coffee in hand to sit on my front porch. The shiny black rocking chair is my seat of choice and I have placed it at a perfect angle so that I have a complete, unobstructed view of all my plants, herbs, flowers, and garden. Seeing all the vegetation and beauty makes every hour of labor worthwhile.

Assessing my labor of love takes my mind back to my childhood when I would go to the fields with my dad. I would run barefoot, skipping over row after row of green sweet potato vines. Dad would let me ride in the tractor cab with him and I was always captivated by the process, whether we were tilling, planting, or harvesting. At the end of the day my skin was several shades darker from the layers of dust. My neck was adorned with strands of a dirt necklace that we called Betsy beads, and my fingernails were perfectly filthy. The dirtier I was, the better my day had been. Looking out over my own vegetable garden now fills me with pride and I know how my dad must have felt.

In one of my flower pots grows a variety of multicolored zinnias. Zinnias will always be my favorite because they are what made me fall in love with flowers. My Papaw loved his flower garden and he shared that passion with me. I remember him always picking a fresh flower to put in my Mamaw’s kitchen window seal just as I put in mine today. The first flowers I ever grew were zinnias. Papaw took seeds that he had saved from his own flowers and he taught me how to plant them and then transplant them into bigger pots once they sprouted. I can

still picture the silver spoon he used and how his tanned, wrinkled hands would hold it and how much excitement it brought him to teach me.

Growing my own garden and flowers is so much more than just food and beauty, it is fertilizer for my soul. The love of dirt runs through my veins. Gardening is my heritage, it’s sweet memories. There is a peace and a calming that comes with being one with nature. In the garden, I’m not even scared of bugs. I’m always filled with a sense of accomplishment and excitement when I see that first green tomato or tiny pod of okra breaking through. Pulling weeds and hoeing help me release frustrations. Talking to my plants help me solve many life problems and clear my head. It has also been a place of spiritual connection. I pray for my seeds and thank God

for a bountiful harvest in advance. I sing praise and worship songs in my garden because I refuse to let nature out-praise me.

When I stand up from a long day of gardening with my knees covered by particles of earth, smudges of mud streaking my face where dirt has met perspiration, my body aching from hours of weeding and pruning, but the sight before me fills my soul with such gladness and appreciation that I don't even care. Gardening is my *querencia*...my place of rest, peace, hope, anticipation, and gratitude. It's a place where I gain my strength and where I am most comfortable, happy, and fulfilled. It's a place in time where the past, present, and future all bloom together through memories and lessons incorporated into present production with a promise of a flourishing future of beauty and sustenance. As long as I can still wear Betsy Beads and have my brown French tip manicure, I'm in my happy place. Surrounded by all the plants, nature, and the smell of dirt is where my mind, body, and soul are at home.

“A Second Point of View” by Cameron Carriker

This is a story of your own mind. Yes, you heard me right, I am you, and you are me. Well, in a more literal sense, I am your unconscious soul. You see, I am what gives you your powers of creativity, emotions, and your sense of reality. Therefore since I am a part of you, I am just as much you as you are you, if that makes sense. We are of the same cloth. You control the physical body and thoughts when you are awake, and I simply control your imagination and feelings when you are asleep or just not thinking hard enough to contain them. Here you find yourself asleep yet awake... Oh? How are we able to speak, you ask? Well, as I was saying, you are sleeping tucked in soundly under your comforter; I simply nudged you out of your body to give you an insight into my world. Here look to your left you'll find that you are dozing like a baby. No no... I am not evil. In fact, in my world, there is no evil. I am only allowing you the privilege of experiencing a... oh how should I put this... a different reality. So get ready. This will be a fun ride, and remember, anything can happen in a dream.

Imagine water trickling down a group of rocks. Yes, focus on the sound. It will give you peace within yourself as we travel. Look around the open field before you. Where are we? We are in your.. let's say happy place. Look at those roses, sunflowers, and dandelions; they create a path upon the dirt. Follow this path. Yes, still focus on the water; concentrate on the water's pitter-patter hitting and swaying between the rocks below. Stop walking, look behind you. Trust me, just take a peek. Yes, that is the waterfall all the way back there. How? Well, in a world like this, it only takes a few steps to make great strides. Now, look to your left and focus. Yes, good, that is the desert. Do you see the floating object? That is our destination, now close your eyes, and I will take you there.

Open your eyes slowly. We are inside the object. Yes, it is tough to see; everything is a white mist. We are in a thing you could call a portal. On the outside, they appear as small floating pyramids with trees coming from underneath them heading towards the ground. Still hear the water? Good, listen closely. As I said before, listen to the pattern of the water intently. Yes, you are right. It's not water at all... it is a pool of voices, the voices of other souls. Why are they here? Well, how should I say this? They are parts of you. More specifically, the incarnations of you throughout history. Now don't be frightened let me explain. This is a test, and yes, I am you but the original version of you. In your world, you would see me as a guardian angel, but you see my grace fell from divinity. My mission is to test every one of my human incarnations until one can finally pass the test to reclaim divinity next to God. Every time one fails, they die and are

reincarnated every forty-two years. No, you are not the only person who is a reincarnation of a fallen one. There are many of us, and by God's grace, we have the chance to reclaim our dignity by finding the worthy incarnate. No, you can not leave, and you will not wake up. Defy me, and you lose the challenge, so let's pick up the pace, shall we? Good.

Now, look deep into the white mist. Do you see anything? No? Then start walking forward. Yes, I know you are tired from this travel but keep going; you are so close. Oh, you see something? Yes, that is where we need to go. It is an altar more than fifty feet tall and requires prayer. Sit your knees on the hot, fiery coals at the base of the altar before the cross and recite the prayer of the voices you heard. Yes, this is good; no one has ever come this far in the trial. Now I too shall pray from the agents of Hebrew. מקודש על ידי יראת כבוד, אלוהים יקר קבל את האדם שאני כילד של כוחך. וגדולך. What does it mean? In English, it roughly translates into, "Please accept me as your son once more."

Now take the cup to your right and drink. Trust me, you do not want to know what is in it. Good, now watch as the altar opens up from within. Yes, I know that was quite loud, wasn't it? Now walk into the door. Congratulations, this is the last part of your journey. Pass this, then you can go back to your natural life, and we will both be appointed as one angel under the king when your time comes. Place your hand before you. Yes, I am well aware that you are blind in this room but trust me. Oh, and if you feel a slimy object coursing around your palm, do not flinch. How do you feel? Your time here is finally done. We just need to see what God thought of your taste. What do I mean by taste? You seriously are dense; what are they teaching kids these days. God eats your soul in heaven. This is how he gains his might and sense of justice. No, it does not affect you in the slightest. He always lets your soul replenish before tasting again. Oh no... you taste foul. Your soul is so soiled that his demonic tongue wants to fall off. Only one other has ever done this in history that I am aware of... Jesus. The great king Lucifer has rejected your soul. Yes, I said Lucifer. Oh no, human, the original creator has long since left your species. I am sorry, I can not take you back. You must live in this dark abyss until your soul runs out. Everything is okay, though... it is all for the greater good.

“Untitled” by Riley Stokes

Laurel sat up, hearing those voices once again. This was a common occurrence for her. She looked around her small room, trying to find where they were coming from but couldn't seem to find the source. She glanced over at her roommate to see if she heard the same thing. “Kamryn. Kamryn, wake up.” She whispered. Kamryn rolled over in her bed and looked at her. “What?” She grumbled sleepily. “Do you hear them? They are singing again. That same song in the same tune.” Kamryn rolled her eyes. “You were probably sleeping and heard them in your dreams. Just go back to bed.” Laurel nodded her head. Laurel laid back down and closed her eyes. The singing voices continued to get louder and louder. Laurel snapped, she sat up and thrashed against the restraints around both of her wrists. “Enough! I am trying to sleep. Shut up!” Laurel screams. Kamryn puts her pillow over her ears trying to siphon the screams that came from her deranged cellmate. The door opened and two nurses came in. “Laurel, settle down. There are no singing voices, okay?” One of them said trying to reassure her, while another nurse prepared a sedative in a large syringe. Laurel started to hyperventilate. “No. Can't you hear them? Why am I the only one that can hear them?” She yelled as the nurse plunged the needle into her arm, applying pressure to the plunger, slowly pushing the medicine into Laurel's vein. Laurel's eyes rolled back into her head as she slowly fell into a comatose-like state. The nurses let out a sigh and slowly walked out of the room. They locked the door on the way out and shuffled back to the nurse's station. The phone began to ring once they got there. “Good Evening, this is Angelic Heights Asylum. Where we fight your demons with our angels. How can I help you today?” She stated in a monotone like voice. “Wise man says, only fools rush in but I can't help falling in love with you.” Elvis Presley's Falling in Love in a minor key plays through the phone. Then a piercing scream is heard but it's not through the phone call. It came from room 23, Laurel's room.

“I’ll Find You” by Tori Couvillion

“Markson, would you put that damned photograph away and get some sleep?” The sergeant’s voice held no bite as the gentle shadows from my candle fell over the harsh lines of his face as he stared blankly at the clear night sky. I could hear the gentle noises of the forest around us and the snores from the other worn out soldiers sleeping in the cots surrounding me in the barracks, but the quiet of night still seemed like too much in that moment. “How many more days? This pretty little lady is just waiting for me to get home. It’s about time I married her, don’t ya think?” As I spoke, I held the black-and-white picture in my hand and committed the woman in the image to memory. I could still feel the way her soft hair felt as I ran my fingers through it as we sat by the serene lake. I could still see how her blue eyes glistened with unshed tears the day that I had to leave. Every moment that I spent with her replayed in my mind constantly, giving me the strength to wake up and fight each day. Despite knowing every line and blemish the photograph showed better than I did my own reflection, I still stared at my last picture of her every night. “Too many days, it is.” I mumbled to myself and tucked the picture back into my shirt, leaning over to blow out the candle to my side. At least in my dreams, I’d be able to see my dear Anne. Gunshots fired all around me, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get my body to cooperate. The ground was cold under me and I felt a wetness soak into my clothes from the ground. Or perhaps it was wetness from my clothes that covered the ground. I couldn’t tell any longer. My body felt numb and cold. I felt my chest rattle with each jagged breath that I tried to take, yet I could feel no pain. “Soldier down! Soldier down!” I heard Klinn’s voice before I saw him. Soon after I heard his frantic calls, I saw the blood stained face of my comrade lean over me with absolute horror swirling in his eyes. “Can you stand? Come on, Markson. Get up, man. Let’s go.” He wrapped his hands under my arms and started to pull me from my spot. I groaned as the pain set my nerves ablaze, only to let out another harsh breath as he dropped me back to my prone position. “Go back to the squad.” I managed to get out, my whole body shaking as I reached up to grip at the pocket of my uniform that held the picture of my love. “I can’t breath, much less move.” Coughs racked my body as bullets continued to fly around us. “Do me a favor, Klinn. Make it back home and tell Anne that I’ll be waiting for her in the next life.” The last thing that I saw before letting the dark edges around my vision consume me was Klinn running in the opposite direction to join the squad that waited for him. At least now, the war was one more step away from ending. Just as my eyes closed for the last time, I felt a tear drip down my cheek. ‘Until then, my Anne.’ It seemed as if I had been reading the chapter of the textbook on World War I for hours when the chiming of the bells above the door rang softly through the quiet atmosphere of the cafe I was in. Turning away from the dull pages, I looked up to the newcomer only to make eye contact with a pair of blue eyes that filled me with such a deep sense of

nostalgia, I had a difficult time remembering to breathe. The smile that she sent my way before making her way to the barista nearly made me jolt from my seat. I couldn't take my eyes off of the beautiful woman before me even after she had gotten her drink and moved towards the seating area. The moment I met her piercing gaze again, I turned back to my book, my face burning at the aspect of being caught. "Excuse me." Her voice was soft and almost as beautiful as she was. I looked up at her with wide eyes and a nervous smile. "Can I help you?" She gave me another one of her flawless smiles before she spoke again. "I'm Anne. Anne Hart. Do I happen to know you from somewhere? You just look so familiar?" The blonde asked, holding her cup a bit tighter in her hands. "Uh, I don't think we've met before. I'd like to think I'd remember you. I'm Eli Markson. It's nice to meet you though." I stood up and held my hand out for her to shake, giving her a hesitant grin. "Eli, huh? Nice meeting you too!" Neither of us would ever know, but fate had found a way to let the two souls taken from the world much too early find happiness.

“Deepest Depths” by Rhonda Barr

Kirya knew no sickness could touch any of her family. It simply would not be allowed to. How could it when her family was so blessed by Life itself?

“No ill wind that touches the wicked in these grounds shall ever touch us, children!” Grandfather said, as they sat and weaved the long prairie grasses together. “Though all the world should fall to decay, we shall not be wasted away.”

Kirya held her head high as she surveyed the Black Lake below them where the other families had staked their tents. Her grandfather had known better than to pitch his tent in the lowlands. He was blessed not only with health and strength but with wisdom above the others.

Haynin, her cousin, lifted his chin with pride as he, too, looked down at the grass huts and cloth curtains that the other families had erected. He and Kirya both understood that their feeble walls could never protect them from the judgment of Life.

The Black Lake’s waters were as oddly still as ever. It always seemed to be waiting for something. Waiting for someone to uncover some deep secret it held. Or perhaps waiting for some child to be lured into its mouth. Swallowing them forever in its unfathomable abyss.

“Tell us the story of Firyen and Mora, Grandfather,” Kirya urged, dismissing the Lake from her mind.

So Kirya and Haynin weaved as Grandfather told them for the hundredth time the story of Firyen, the great god of Light and Life and Health. He eyes blazed as he told them how the pale god Mora, the ruler of Death and Decay, had stricken Firyen down and hidden his powers in only the deepest recesses of the earth so that man would be cursed to die.

“But Firyen lives on!” Grandfather exclaimed, his voice rising triumphantly. “He lives on in his followers, and he blesses them with Health beyond that of ordinary men. Why, look at Haynin; what other family can say their son strangled a great cat with his bare hands? Or who can say their son runs as swiftly as the antelope across the plains? It is clearly by the hand of Firyen.”

Kirya’s chest swelled with pride for her cousin. He had only been sixteen when he’d fought the lion, and at eighteen he was the strongest and fastest of all the boys around the Lake. Kirya was five years younger than he, but when she grew, she vowed to be as fit and brave as he was.

They finished braiding another length of grasses to hang around their camp in a curtain. They didn't need to be protected, of course. It was only a way to set them apart from the other families that did not follow Firyen as closely as they did. When Grandfather gathered his children and his fourteen grandchildren together that night to eat, they knew the fish Haynin brought up from the Lake would bear no poison for them. They cheered with glee when each of the robust sons and daughters recounted the feats of daring that they and their ancestors had performed in times past.

As Kirya and all her cousins bedded down at the center of the camp, her mind raced with fantasies of adventures. A few pallets away, Haynin's mind seemed similarly preoccupied. "Do you ever wonder what's at the bottom of the Black Lake?" he asked, opening and closing his fists thoughtfully.

Kirya looked at him curiously. "What makes you think of that?" she asked.

Haynin looked knowingly at the dying fire, and Kirya noticed that the firelight made his face look oddly discolored. "I heard some people talking about it near the Lake, earlier," he said.

"The other villagers say that at the deepest part of the lake, there's a pool of Life. They say that the natives settled here long ago to dive for the Life at the bottom of the Lake."

Kirya felt a burning sensation come alive inside her. "What could we do with that?" she wondered.

"Well, we wouldn't need any of that," Haynin responded quickly. "The wicked would use it to become more like us, I suppose. But their lungs would never be strong enough to let them go to the bottom and back. Not like ours."

Kirya nodded in agreement. So that was the end of that.

"I just like to know it's there in case we need it," Haynin continued.

Something in his voice troubled Kirya. "What do you mean?" she demanded. "We're the blessed of Firyen!"

"Oh, there's no arguing with that!" he hastened to reply. "It's just that every time I feel a twinge in my finger or get too sleepy, I start to wonder; does the blessing not extend down to me? I mean, aren't your hands sore from weaving today?"

Kirya clenched her fingers into her palms. No, this wasn't pain. It was just her hands remembering the work they'd been doing. Acutely.

Haynin squared his shoulders. “Anyhow,” he said, “I don’t mean to worry you. You’re too young to deal with the burdens a young man like myself must carry. Though I don’t know how we’re going to sleep tonight with this fire being so hot.”

Kiryra didn’t find the fire too hot at all, but she did find it difficult to drift to sleep. How could Haynin possibly fear that he wasn’t blessed? Nobody’s cousin had ever been as valiant as he was! Even... even if his fingers got sore. Sores were just a sign that your sense of touch was working well. Yes, that was it.

It seemed she had only just slipped off, when a piercing shriek split the air. Soon, the campsite was bustling with women and children, running about with wide eyes. Grandfather was cursing, a thing Kirya had never heard in her life. It was only after blinking a few times that Kirya finally realized the center of the commotion was Haynin’s pallet. Something gripped Kirya and made her crawl through the circle gathered around. There, with his blankets scattered away from him, Haynin spasmed in some sort of feverish fit. His skin had transformed into brilliant crimson red, as if a wildfire were blazing across his body. The Blood Plague.

Kiryra didn’t even think. In seconds she had gathered a rope and a knife and was making her way down. Down from the hill where her people dwelt. Down to the flat, hollow valley near the shore of the Black Lake. Down where forty-three villagers had died of the Plague already. But it wasn’t far enough down.

She was strong enough to carry a boulder into Grandfather’s paddleboat. She was able enough to push the boat off the shore. She was lithe enough to maneuver past the shallows into the center of the Lake’s glassy surface. She knew she’d have the longevity to make it to the bottom of the Lake. So, she tied one end of the rope and the other to the boat, hefted the boulder, sucked in a breath, and rolled off the boat into the depths.

Water rushed past her ears, making them ache as she sank deeper and deeper. No! It didn’t hurt her! And her lungs weren’t wishing for air either. In just a short time she’d have it—whatever form the Life had taken there.

Still, the water only seemed to grow darker. She could hardly think through the pressure in her ears and throat. A dark creeping thought started to clutch her mind. Maybe she really

wasn’t blessed? Had she displeased Firyen and been kept from the health her family had? Or could it be that her family really wasn’t blessed as they supposed? She couldn’t keep her breath much longer. She wouldn’t be able to swim back to the surface now. Her family would suffer

more than just one death. Haynin's face, lurid red and devoid of all the strength it usually carried, appeared in her mind.

She spluttered and the water thrust itself into her mouth, her lungs, her mind. Her stomach heaved as her body forced her to suck in more, desperately searching for oxygen. The water seemed to thrash inside like a living thing, choking her, bruising her insides. She had never known drowning would be so painful. She had never felt such pain before. No, she couldn't even deny that this was pain and weakness she was feeling. She had failed the family. She had failed her god. Her body wouldn't even have enough air to float to the surface after she died. Truly
Death was wringing her in his sallow hands.

At last, the water stilled inside and around her. She was dead. But she was still shakily pulling water and pushing it out of her lungs, like she was... breathing? In. Out. Yes, she was breathing, and she opened her eyes to see that she was drifting down in a forest of weeds. She had never lost her grip of the boulder even when she'd been drowning. But how could she see? The water had seemed pitch black moments ago.

There. A steady green glow was rising beneath her as she sank on. It grew brighter and she soon made out its source. A branching tree of waving seaweed grew thickly at the bottom of the lake, sending up bubbles here and there. Its fronds were flat and wide, hiding fish of the brightest colors she'd ever seen. Kirya knew she need look no further. This underwater tree of Life was unmistakable.

Though it burned, Kirya found it easier to breathe this strange water into her sore lungs as she swam closer. She'd always thought green was such a sick-looking color. It didn't seem right for a source of Life to use such a color. Stranger still, she saw the skeleton of some great beast poking through the roots of the tree. It was grotesque to see Life, a pool of holiness, intermingling with a corpse.

Kirya paused. She knew if she took a branch of the tree back with her that she'd have to go through that hideous torture again, and maybe it would kill her this time. She wasn't certain that she wasn't dead already. If she stayed down here, where she could breathe water and live off this Life, her strength would be unmatched perhaps in all the world. No one would be as blessed as she, not even Grandfather.

Haynin's face reentered her mind. So sick; cursed as only a commoner ought to be. By rights, she should never have risked herself for him. And yet, she'd never even considered that when she'd left the tent a few moments—no, a few eternities ago.

An opportunity she'd have to forgo, she decided with a smile. She grasped a long branch of the seaweed tree and sliced it at its base. Then, with a push against the Lake floor, she swam up, following the rope to her boat. Back to the pain. Back to weakness. Back to reality.

* * * * *

Many years later, Kirya would stand with her family in a circle around the fire again, listening to Grandfather's stories. Grandfather told the younger grandchildren the great story of Kirya, and how Firyen had made her lungs strong so that she could bring back Life to the dying commoners.

No common family ever had a daughter so brave as she, though the villagers had gained supernatural health since then. And though the commoners would forsake following Life eventually, Firyen would preserve their blessed family against Death.

Haynin would meet Kirya's eyes as they'd listen, and they would shake their heads together. Then Kirya would leave the circle to look down. Down at the village's growing expanse. Down where the Blood Plague had once seeped like a stain. Down at the Black Lake where she'd given her life.

“The Two-Headed Coin”

A play by Natalie Giroir

The Two-Headed Coin

Characters

RYAN LOCKE: Lawyer, mid-thirties – early forties TONY JONES: Lawyer, friend of Ryan, mid-thirties – early forties JAMES TURNHILL: Judge, mid-forties – early fifties

LOGAN CARTER: bailiff, mid-twenties

THOMAS SMITH: Law student, mid-twenties

JOHN MAXWELL: Johnson’s client, business owner, mid-forties - early fifties

LISA GREEN: Witness, Maxwell’s secretary, mid-thirties – early forties

JOANN JOHNSON: Lawyer, mid-thirties – early forties

Setting

COURTROOM: Rows of seats for spectators divided in half by a walkway, a wooden railing dividing the space between the spectators and the prosecution and defense tables, jury box along the left wall. Positioned center of the back wall there is the judge’s bench and witness stand on the left of the bench and on the right a small table for the court reporter.

INT. COURTHOUSE LOBBY: A small lobby with a few chairs right outside the courtroom entrance

(RYAN storms angrily out of the courtroom to a nearby bench with TONY following closely on his heels.)

TONY: (spoke before RYAN could sit) What the hell, Locke?

RYAN: I don’t want to hear another lecture, Tony.

TONY: I know you want a chance to redeem yourself. I know its been your first case since the Stryker ordeal....

RYAN: I took this case because of the Stryker case.

TONY: (nods) you don't think I know that? But, what good are you gonna be to anyone by running your own rampage in the courtroom?

RYAN: I see your two cents, but you can pocket it and keep it as change. I didn't ask for it. You heard what they were saying in there. Judge Turnhill basically counting the days till he gets his payload off of opening and shutting the case. Doesn't matter if the innocent is put behind bars to do it.

TONY: Well if that isn't the pot calling the kettle black. As your friend...

RYAN: And a fellow lawyer, you know just as well as I do that every once in a while you find a two tailed coin. You can't win them all, and sometimes you lose as much as you win. How long till we have to go back in there?

TONY: (checks watch) Five minutes but when you go back in there, you need to keep your cool. You know, the defense is looking for any crack in you. And you don't want to give more reason for Turnhill to question your judgment.

(A young college age male walks past them and into the room the two men had left a few minutes prior.)

TONY: Wasn't that that law student who's supposed to be shadowing you?

RYAN: What of it?

TONY: Well this is just great! You really brought him to this case of all cases. And you show your ass. Great example for the kid! (Sarcastically)

RYAN: He's gotta know it's not all victories and smiles. Sometimes you gotta stand your ground even if its standing alone.

TONY: (checks watch) We gotta head back in there. But please, as your friend, do not do something that'll make you the front-page story of the New York Times by morning, huh?

RYAN: You say that like you don't enjoy watching Allen and Turnhill squirm? Come on, for once I am going by the book, they're the crooked ones.

TONY: They are just in there and talk a little louder. I don't think the press heard you. No... you know what? I was wondering when my daily dose of "why I put up with you?" was gonna kick in today. (uses air quotes)

(RYAN smirks as both men entered the courtroom)

INT. COURTROOM

LOGAN: (Notices the men enter the courtroom, motions for RYAN to come to the bench)
Locke?

RYAN: (approaches bench) Yes?

LOGAN: (keeps voice low) Is the court to be prepared for another of your episodes?

RYAN: Whatever do you mean? I'm only going by the book... the same book little Thomas there is being taught in school. If Turnhill's acting as a judge by the book then there should be no reason to worry, right? (walks back to his desk)

(BAILIFF gets cue to call court to order)

LOGAN: All rise!

(All participates in the room stand as Turnhill enter the courtroom and sits behind the bench)

TURNHILL: (bangs gavel calling court to order) Be seated.

(All participants excluding BAILIFF sit)

RYAN: (stands) Your honor, I would like to call Ms. Lisa Green to the stand please.

LISA: (stands from seat approaching stand)

(As LISA approaches the stand and stands behind it, the BAILIFF grabs the Bible and holds it out to her)

BAILIFF: Place your right hand on the Bible and your left hand up.

(LISA complies with order)

LOGAN: Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help you, God?

RYAN: (mutters from desk) If he's loving and all knowing, why are we in this battle? Why isn't he helping the blind to see their ways?

LISA: I do.

TURNHILL: Locke, you may examine your witness.

RYAN: (stands) Thank you, your honor. (approaches the stand) Ms. Green, you have been an employee at the company for how long exactly?

JOHNSON: Objection... relevance.

RYAN: Goes to the creditability of the witness and her field.

TURNHILL: I'll allow it.

LISA: I worked as his secretary for ten years.

RYAN: So, you would say you know the defense's client's schedule to a T. Is that correct?

LISA: Yes, I would.

RYAN: On the week of the 24th of March, would you say Mr. Maxwell's schedule differed from his normal day-to-day comings and goings?

MAXWELL: (fidgets in seat a little)

LISA: (glances at MAXWELL before looking back to RYAN) No, it didn't.

THOMAS: (silently observing writing notes sitting next to RYAN's seat)

RYAN: Are you sure? No differences of any kind?

LISA: I am sure there was no difference.

RYAN: Then we won't find anything if we look through the appointment ledger in front of the court?

JOHNSON: Objection. What does looking through the appointment book going to accomplish? The witness has already confirmed that there were no differences...

RYAN: Two birds with one stone, Johnson. To give confirmation of her statement and to provide evidence to her statement. Unless you or your client has something they would like to tell the court?

(JOHNSON fell silent as RYAN walks to desk getting appointment book then approaches the projector nearby placing the book so that the pages could be seen by the court on a projection screen)

RYAN: I present to the court the appointment book acquired from Ms. Green's desk. I have it turned to the pages of the week in question. Now... If we turn a few pages back, (Slowly turns the pages) you'll see a clear routine. Weekly luncheons and things... Even a weekly counseling meeting with the deceased. (turns pages back to the week in question) Now, looking at the week in question, there appears to be a lot of cancellations...

LISA: Well, yes. He was sick...

RYAN: Sick? So, you gave him a full week off as a rest period? What were we avoiding another global pandemic?

(RYAN smirks slightly as a few members of the jury chuckle slightly)

JOHNSON: Objection. Your honor, Locke's making a joke of the court...

RYAN: (sighs) Withdrawn.

TURNHILL: Locke, come to the bench.

RYAN: (rolls eyes mutters) And here we go. (approaches the bench) Yes, your honor?

TURNHILL: (keeps voice low) Are you through making a side show of yourself? We do not need another Stryker case. You keep this up and you will ruin everything...

RYAN: (keeps voice low) Everything as in the court's reputation or what goes in your pocket, James? Talk to me when you stop riding the rich's coattails and accepting handouts, some of us here are actually trying to earn an honest living.

(TURNHILL opens his mouth to speak but is cut off by RYAN)

RYAN: (voice low) I understand you have a family. Out of respect for them is why I am keeping my mouth shut. But just know, I am not the one to play with. So, do your job and I'll continue to do mine. (slowly backs away from the bench, speaks at normal volume) No further questions, your honor. (walks back to desk and sits)

TURNHILL: (clears throat) Johnson, would you like to cross-examine the witness?

JOHNSON: The defense would, your honor. (stands approaches stand) Ms. Green, would you say that you are responsible for all of Mr. Maxwell's comings and goings even when he is out of the office?

LISA: Well, no...

JOHNSON: Precisely, then you could not have possibly known about all Mr. Maxwell's coming and goings. An oversight on Mr. Locke's observations, I'm sure.

RYAN: (mutters) I didn't know I got full invitation to children's court. Way to act like we're professionals. (glances at THOMAS, mutters) I see what you are trying to do.

(JOHNSON glances back at RYAN, RYAN gives innocent smile and nod)

JOHNSON: (looks back to LISA and TURNHILL) No further questions, your honor. (walks back to and sits behind the desk)

RYAN: (Glances at TURNHILL, mutters) And I was making jokes, okay. Didn't know this amateur hour.

TURNHILL: (glances at RYAN then to JOHNSON) If no one else has any more side jokes, We will reconvene in the morning. (bangs gavel) Court is adjourned.

(a few moments pass as everyone in the room starts to leave, various conversations can be heard, JOHNSON and TONY approaches TURNHILL at the bench)

TURNHILL: (mutters glancing at RYAN then to TONY) I thought you said you would talk to him.

TONY: (voice low) I tried; I am not the one who offered him a chance to be role model of the year.

(TURNHILL gives a sharp glare to TONY)

JOHNSON: (mutters) The case isn't over. He'll come around. He has to look good for the kid. That would be the only reason he's playing it safe.

TURNHILL: (sighs) Be that as that as it may. Trying to get under his skin to cause a scene didn't work and, obviously sending his buddy in didn't work either.

TONY: Give me another chance. You two will get your payout from this. I have known him since law school. I know what gets to him.... And I know just the offer he can't refuse.

JOHNSON: His pride is the key to his downfall. Remember, Stryker? I still remember the headline, "Outraged Lawyer Battles City Judge On Ruling". (uses air quotes around headline)

TURNHILL: I can't help you two. You're on your own. (stands)

JOHNSON: Why can't you?!

TURNHILL: What? Did you expect him not to figure something out? I have to play the role of the impartial one. If he sees more of me playing the cards in your favor, I'll be done for. I have a family to care for. He's already noted things are suspicious.

JOHNSON: I wasn't putting that at risk. Besides, think of the payout, think of the press action. Fame talks and that fame would redeem your image as a judge from Stryker, I'm sure of it. My client will pay.

TONY: While destroying Locke...

JOHNSON: The public won't know. As long as we produce a result...

TONY: (Mutters) Why did I get wrapped up in this? (speaks at normal volume) You mean a villain gets to walk free while an innocent man is put behind bars. (looks at TURNHILL) and

you of all people are condoning this? And in the name of what? Money? Fame? (shakes head) I can't be a part of this. (Turns to walk away and leaves the room)

MEANWHILE...

(possible rewind/ reset of set)

RYAN: (stands from desk, looks to THOMAS) So kid, how was your first day of real court? Was it exciting for you or what?

THOMAS: (looks at RYAN) Is "Or what?" an option? (uses air quotes) Or, could I make an option of "something else"? (uses air quotes again) Listen.... about your outburst before Turnhill called the recess...

RYAN: What of it? Don't tell me they tried to talk to you and convince you that I was in the wrong. Everything I said and did...

THOMAS: Was by the book. Yes, I know and no, they did not speak to me. And question on that note, why do you ask?

RYAN: (tilts his head toward the doors, whispers) Wait until we are beyond those doors, kid. Not a safe territory to discuss what is not meant to be noted or confirmed by actions today.

THOMAS: (Nods whispers) To make sure something is safe, object or word, you double check. (Looks to LISA and MAXSWELL while standing)

RYAN: Hm? (looks to the indicated direction) Hm. Keen eye, kid, keen eye. (walks while talking) This is but a small part in a much bigger plot. Standalone, yes. Although that is how most cases are, I suppose.

(RYAN and THOMAS follow crowd out of the courtroom)

INT. COURTHOUSE LOBBY

RYAN: (Talks while walking) As for your question... I'll put it this way kid. Money talks, Fame talks, even threats talk. Everyone wants to be talked as the hero. No one wants to be a villain... not without the right price.

THOMAS: (stops walking, looks at RYAN) Bad news sells faster with the papers. That would explain your so-called outburst before the recess, Johnson's attempt to rile you... all to play a role in their own made up story in hopes to make front page. And, nothing sells faster than a heaping plate of bad news with a side of disruptive lawyer.

RYAN: (stops walking, looks at THOMAS) Wish that was the only thing... per say wrong with the

THOMAS: If law school and good practice of its teachings make the diet...

RYAN: We all have our cheat days, don't we? For some the phase lasts longer than others, that I'll admit. As well as some days we don't care to admit.

THOMAS: Like you on the Stryker case?

RYAN: Oh, you heard about that, did ya? Well, I suppose better late than never to come out with it. Here's the truth before its screwed: I was naïve to think my actions would not conjure such consequences. We spend our time following to a T the orders of a judge that we forget our own judgement... forget the practices taught in school. Well, this time was a little too off the books for my liking. Somethings were being too hushed while others were being held under a magnifying glass. So, I raised a little hell in the courtroom and well... you saw my reward from what I would be a justified course of action.

THOMAS: An outraged lawyer and a judge playing the victim card... But when did it become normal to forget the teachings and practices taught for what we can receive in return?

RYAN: Now, you are asking the right question...

PRESENT TIME...

INT. COURTHOUSE LOBBY

(TONY exits the courtroom, RYAN and THOMAS both look at him)

TONY: Ryan... Got a minute?

RYAN: (nods) Yeah... (looks at THOMAS) Kid, why don't you go wait outside? I'm sure this won't take too long.

(THOMAS exits)

RYAN: What is it, Tony? If another lecture, save it. I don't have time for it. I got the kid waiting on me.

TONY: I wanted to apologize.

RYAN: Spare it. I already know what you're going to say.

TONY: You know... You really don't have to act like you know everything one hundred percent of the time. (smirks)

RYAN: You know... I was wondering when my daily dose of “Why I put up with you?” was gonna kick in. (uses air quotes, smirks) But seriously, I wasn’t born yesterday. But, you on the other hand...

TONY: What’s that supposed to mean?!

RYAN: Come on, Tony. Like I didn’t know they would use you as a pawn and offer you money to try to influence me and my decisions in there. Like I wouldn’t ask any questions as to why you’re here. The question that I suppose doesn’t need an answer to now is how much money....

TONY: But what would be the point answering that if I am apologizing.

RYAN: Exactly. And another thing. I knew you couldn’t follow through with it. Do yourself and your conscience a favor, mate. Go back to your law school books. Trust me, the right thing will outweigh any fifteen second fame and any amount of money.

TONY: In your words, drop the two tailed coin...

RYAN: And pick up a two headed one.

(RYAN exits with a smirk)

END

“The Schism” by Anna Hooker

ow it all Began...

As a young girl, my imaginary friends were always just a little too real. And what’s especially disturbing is that as I grew up...they never went away. That’s part of the reason why I find myself sitting after school in a psychologist’s office.

I glance over the woman’s shoulder to where my mom sits just outside. If it had been up to me alone, I’d rather die than be here, confessing my thoughts to a total stranger. That stranger clears her throat, and I force myself to pay attention to her.

“Makenna Greene?”

“Yes,” I drawl. “That’s my name.”

She taps her pen against her clipboard and leans back in her chair. She watches me intently for several seconds, and I fidget, more than a little unnerved. Again, my eyes wander to my mom. Her head is bent—likely over her cell phone.

I’ll get no help from her whatsoever.

“So...”

Sighing, I look back at Doctor Thiels. She flips through the papers on her clipboard—my files, apparently. “It says here that you’ve been having these...recurring dreams, so to speak?”

“Yes ma’am. Since I was six.”

“Hmmm...interesting. Can you tell me a little bit about them?”

Why not? Hmm, where to start? I’ve been having these dreams since I was six years old, and this strange dude talks to me in my sleep. “You know what?” I make to stand. “It’s really not important. I don’t want to waste your time—”

“Sit,” she says in a firm voice. “You’re not wasting anyone’s time.”

I sink back into my chair with a scowl.

“I’m trying to help you, Miss Greene,” she says, softer this time. “And I can only do that if you are willing to open up to me. Remember, this is all in the deepest confidence.”

I know that. It's just that I haven't told anyone about my dreams—save my mom. That was clearly a mistake, for here I sit. Crossing my legs, I speak in a murmur, “Yes, I've been having these dreams since I was six. They are very vivid, and there's always this one boy. He...talks to me.”

“What does he look like?”

“Black hair, green eyes...sort of cute.”

She taps her lip with her pen. “More often than not,” she begins, “the characters in our dreams resemble people we've met in our life—”

“No,” I say, immediately. “I've never met or seen someone like him before.”

“Hmm...” She clicks her pen and writes something. “Alright. And you said that he talks to you? What does he say?”

“Lots of things.” I shift—which causes my chair to creak. “He asks if I'm happy.”

“And are you?” She raises her eyes from her paper to study me.

Am I happy? My thoughts drift to my mom. Ever since she remarried, and we moved in with my stepdad and stepbrother, I've felt...invisible. Like her world is absorbed with her new family, and I'm an outcast. “You want my honest answer?”

“Of course,” she says, leaning slightly forward.

“No.”

“No?”

“I'm not happy,” I confirm. I'm not about to confess to her all of my feelings, but I can't lie to her and tell her that I am. His face suddenly fills my mind, eyes full of compassion. “I'm sorry,” he says, and just the sound of his voice melts a little bit of the ice in my heart.

“Makenna.” Doctor Thiels snaps her fingers. “Where did you go?”

“Oh...sorry.” I force him from my mind. “What's up?”

She sighs. “I need you to pay attention, please.”

For the next half hour, she questions me about my dreams and about...him. For some reason, I feel reserved when it comes to him. I have to remind myself that he's not a real person, and it isn't like I'm talking about him behind his back.

"Alright, then." Doctor Thiels stands and takes my hand. "I'll review my notes and see what we can come up with. In the meantime, I suggest you find an outlet for this...excess of emotion that you're feeling. It might help with the dreams."

An outlet? Like a new hobby?

I'm ushered out of her office to my mom. She greets me with a wide smile. "Well?" she says, looping an arm around my shoulders. "How is my girl?"

"Mmm, better than ever," I fib. She snorts and looks to the doctor expectantly. Doctor Thiels gives a barely discernable nod—not even bothering to look at her—before striding away down the hall.

"I really don't like that woman," my mom mutters as we leave.

The next day, my stepdad drops me off at school. "Make good choices!" he calls out the window as he drives off. I duck my head and pull up my hood. Holding the strap of my backpack, I make my way inside to my first class.

The murmurs of my classmates greet me. I hurry to my chair and sit down. Pulling out my composition notebook, I scribble down the answer to the problem on the board and then lay my head down over my paper.

A memory surfaces in my thoughts—no, not a memory. A dream. Closing my eyes, I can almost feel the sunlight against my cheeks as I sit in the glade, cushioned by the velvety grass. If nothing else, my dream world is bliss.

"What are you doing here?"

Looking up, I discover the boy. I call him a boy when, in reality, he looks to be several years older than me. On the verge of manhood. I don't answer, and it doesn't seem to faze him, for he sinks down beside me.

“You and I are different,” he says, plucking a blade of grass. Something about the way he says it makes me feel...special. His bright green eyes lock with mine. And then, something happens. The boy leaps to his feet and pulls a wicked looking knife from his belt—one I hadn’t noticed.

“Get behind me,” he says, eyes fixed on something over my shoulder.

Something foul permeates the air, and a chill creeps up my spine. I stand, but my legs seem to catch on something. I stumble forward. The boy spins and catches me. I gasp. It’s alarming just how real he feels. His chest is warm and firm—

“No!” he cries. I open my mouth to ask what when a shadow falls over the glade, and something dark and large leaps from the trees to my right. The boy shoves me behind him, saying, “Don’t look into its eyes.”

Too late. A ringing fills my ears, and all I see is red. Two red beacons in the blackness. Then someone shakes me.

“Makenna!”

The glade is gone, and I’m in my classroom. The whole class is staring at me, some looking disturbed, others snickering under their breath. And there I am, sprawled in the middle of the floor, brandishing a ruler like some weapon.

My face heats with embarrassment. Tears sting my eyes as I pick myself up off the floor and flee their laughter, brushing past my teacher in the process. I ignore his call as I bolt down the hall and into the girls’ bathroom.

I lock myself in a stall and sink onto the toilet seat, burying my burning face in my hands. My heart pounds. I can’t decide if my quickened pulse is a result of my classmates or the dream. I see a flash of red and then growl out, “No,” forcing it from my mind. Enough. You’re sixteen years old, Kenna. It’s time to get over this mess!

Nonetheless, I stay in the bathroom for the duration of first hour, unable to talk myself into facing my classmates again so soon after my humiliating spectacle. The bell rings, and I slip from the bathroom and wait until the class is empty to grab my bag.

I walk down the hall—hood up—to my second class, US History. History has always been my favorite subject. For a time, I’d been obsessed with all things medieval. The thought of gallant knights saving princesses in towers had been a lovely fantasy.

But that is all it was—a fantasy. Just like my hope for normalcy, apparently.

I take my customary seat at the back of the class—out of sight and out of mind—and open my textbook to the page dictated. My teacher, Mr. Colson, opens class with a long lecture about World War 1.

I'm in the middle of taking notes when the classroom door opens, and a throat clears. "Ah," I hear Mr. Colson say. "It would appear we have a new student."

I don't bother to look up. Just another person for me to avoid. I bite my lip as I hurriedly scribble the last sentence before I forget it and then allow myself a peek, curiosity getting the best of me. My pencil stills, and my heart nearly stops.

Green eyes meet mine across the room.

"Students, this is Dominik Roth," Mr. Colson says enthusiastically. "He's a foreign exchange student from Germany. Why don't you all give him a warm welcome?"

A chorus of polite, yet reserved "hellos" sound. It's about as warm a greeting as you'll get from a class of high school juniors.

"If you'll have a seat in the back," Mr. Colson continues, gesturing to the open desk across from mine, "then we can continue."

Dominik's gaze never wavers from my face as he walks to the back. I don't miss how the girls' eyes trail him, and the boys appear to be sizing him up. I lower my eyes to my lap and slip my trembling hands in my pockets. I want to scream. A thousand questions buzz through my head. What is he doing here? Is this just another illusion? How is the boy from my dreams a foreign exchange student from Germany?

Mr. Colson continues his lesson, but it's all a blur. I can feel Dominik's eyes on me, but I don't dare look up. I can't. I just can't accept that this is real.

When the bell rings at last, I rush from class. Unfortunately, he's faster than I think. He corners me near the lockers. Realizing we have an audience, I grab his hand and whisper, "Not here," before dragging him to a nearby storage closet.

We slip inside, and I shut the door, flipping the light on. Now that we're alone together, I don't know what to say. He seems content to let me sort through my thoughts, for he props a shoulder against the wall and says nothing.

“How are you here?” I end up blurting.

“Same way you are.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

His brow furrows. “You really don’t know?”

“Don’t know what?” Frustration seeps into my voice. Spinning away from him, I tear my hands through my hair. “This is insane. I was in Doctor Thiels’ office just yesterday, telling her about you and my...my dreams. And now you’re here?”

“Makenna—”

“No! No, I refuse to believe it. I’m crazy.” I throw up my hands. “Crazy. I don’t know how, but this...this is all some fantastic illusion conjured by my brain.”

“Makenna.” He sets his hand on my shoulder. “I am real.”

“No.” Tears burn my eyes. “You’re not.”

“But I am.” He turns me to face him, and his eyes are heavy. “And I need your help.” He brushes away my tears with his thumbs. “I know this all seems impossible to you, but trust me, it’s going to make sense. You just have to hear me out.”

“Nothing about this makes sense,” I mumble. He chuckles.

“You think this is crazy? Tell me about it. I never imagined I’d actually cross.”

My brow furrows. “What are you talking about?”

“You might want to sit down.”

“No thanks. Spill.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“Honestly?” I mutter. “It means tell me.”

“Oh. Well...” I see a flicker of hesitation in his eyes before it’s gone. “This is going to sound ridiculous, but I’m from a world parallel to yours. Our worlds are separated by something called

the Schism—a barrier created by our forefathers over a thousand years ago to protect the creatures of my world from the whims of yours.

“Very rarely is someone capable of crossing the Schism. Those who do inherit the rare ability are labeled Crossers. You and I,” he gestures between us, “are.”

Before I can say anything, he continues, “Do you remember the glade?”

“Yes.” How could I forget it?

“In recent years, we’ve had tensions rise on our side of the Schism. Reapers and wraiths have overtaken much of the land, and we—”

“Hold on.” I stop him with a raised hand. “Just...what?”

“I know how it must sound, but it’s true. Please, Makenna.” I can see the genuine concern—along with fear—in his eyes. “Please, listen. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“You were talking about the glade,” I say. “What happened this morning?” I know I’ve never had a dream like that before. Or...whatever it was.

“A reaper.” He grimaces. “I was able to kill it, but not before it...” He trails off and lifts the sleeve of his shirt, revealing a jagged, bloody gash running the length of his arm. I gasp.

“Oh my God, Dominik, you need a doctor!”

“It’s fine.” He lowers his sleeve. “The poison won’t hurt me on this side of the Schism. But when I go back...” He cringes. It hits me.

“If you go back...will the poison kill you?” He doesn’t answer, confirming my fear.

“But that’s not the point,” he says. “There are hundreds of people on my side of the Schism, suffering worse. The only way to save those people is to take them here—on this side of the Schism, where reapers don’t exist, and neither does their poison.”

“But...why do you need my help?”

“I’m not strong enough to open a portal for that many people on my own. But us...together? It might be the only way.” He grasps my hands. “I need you, Kenna.”

It's overwhelming. Suddenly, everything I once considered outrageous and impossible is real.

"All these years," I murmur, "I've dreamt about you..."

He smiles. "Those weren't dreams. Your soul is torn. Part of you belongs to my world, and the other part, here. You are in a constant battle between the two. And somehow, you just happened to...blink into the glade beside my home. I've gone there every day since, waiting to see you."

His cheeks turn a little red with the admission.

"Wow." I shake my head. "Just...wow." And then, the weight of his claim presses down on me.

"You think I can somehow...open a portal?"

"I know you can." He squeezes my hand. Despite all his bravado, I can see it in his eyes. Fear. Fear that we won't succeed. I can't imagine what it would feel like—the weight he must carry—if my family was trapped in a world of monsters.

No matter how much I may dislike Michael and my stepdad, I wouldn't wish that fate on them.

Not on anyone. "Alright," I say. "I'll try...but there's no way you're from Germany."

He laughs, and some of the tension seeps from his shoulders. "Really? That's the part that sticks out to you?"

That night, I get little to no sleep, anxious for tomorrow. We've agreed to meet in the woods by my grandma's old house. Dominik believes that since she was the original Crosser—ultimately who I inherited my...ability...from—hers is the best place to start.

My alarm goes off at 5:30, and I crawl out of bed and pull on some jeans and a hoodie. I tiptoe from my room and down the stairs, moving as quietly as possible. Heaven forbid I wake another member of my family, and they find me sneaking out.

I can only imagine their suspicion, since I never go anywhere.

I make it out of the house and down the drive, where I find Dominik already waiting. "Good morning," he says with a small smile. "Are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," I mutter in response. He snorts. With that, we start off. My grandma's house—or old house, since she moved to the nursing home a few years back—is within walking distance of ours. "So," I start as we walk, "if Nana was the original Crosser, then how come my mom didn't get...this?"

Dominik glances at me. With a shrug, he says, “I don’t really know how all that works. As far as I know, no one in my family line has been able to cross—so that rules out heredity.”

“Hmm.” The chill of the morning air raises goosebumps on my skin—even underneath my sleeves—and I wrap my arms around myself. Quicker than I had anticipated, we find ourselves walking down the driveway, which is speckled with weeds.

A wave of nostalgia hits me as I reflect on all the holidays we used to spend here—before Nana fell. Dominik calls to me, pulling me from my glum musings.

“Over here,” he says from the edge of the woods. I hurry to catch up. Shoulder to shoulder, we enter the trees. The deeper in we walk, the more something tugs at my mind. I purse my lips and see Dominik glance at me from the corner of my eye.

“What?” I ask when he does it a second time.

“Does anything look familiar?”

“Of course it does,” I snark. “I played in these woods as a kid.”

He sighs—sounding exasperated. “I know that, but...” He pauses and spreads his arms, urging me to look around. “Do you notice anything else?”

We’ve come upon a glade. I turn, and that’s when it hits me. This glade looks startlingly similar to the one in my dreams—across the Schism. Nibbling my lip, I stretch out my hand, letting my fingers brush the tall, silky grass. “Is it...?”

“It is,” he answers my unspoken question.

“But...how?”

“Our worlds are more similar than you think,” Dominik says with a smile. “In fact, everything about the land is the same. Seven continents, separated by vast ocean. Of course, we have different names than yours—but all in all, the only difference is the inhabitants.”

“How is that possible?”

“Our worlds are parallel. I...I don’t really know how to explain it. They exist simultaneously, but are independent of each other—made so by the Schism.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. “So what are we doing here, again?”

His smile fades. “We are here because there are people in my world who are suffering from something that has no cure—at least, that was until I came here, and discovered the reaper’s poison is ineffective.”

“And you want to open a portal for them,” I finish. And that’s the part that gets me. “What makes you think I can do something like that?”

“All Crossers are capable of opening portals—otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to cross. How do you think your grandmother got here?” When I don’t answer, he continues, “We have to try, Makenna. And if it doesn’t work...” He sighs. “We’ll try something else.”

For his sake, I pray it works. Setting my shoulders, I ask, “What do I need to do?”

“Come here.”

Obediently, I walk to his side. He hesitates a second before taking my hand, lacing his fingers through mine. “Can you feel it?” he asks, a little breathlessly.

“What?” Other than my rapid pulse, I feel nothing.

“Close your eyes,” he says, “and concentrate. You’ll feel it. It’s there.”

I do as he says, letting my eyes fall shut. It’s hard to concentrate when I can feel him watching me. “Stop,” I hiss. “You’re distracting me.” Then—like the embers of a fire—I feel something spark inside me. I gasp.

“You feel it?” He sounds excited.

“I feel...something.” My brow furrows as I take his advice and concentrate. Suddenly, I’m aware of an energy buzzing around us, alive and impatient. It begs me to reach for it... “What is it?” I whisper.

“It’s the Schism,” he says, “calling to you.”

“Now what?”

“Reach for it, and let me do the rest.”

That sounds easy enough. Sure, just reach for the energy in the air that is impossibly tangible—not strange at all. With a little scoff, I raise my hand. Dominik chuckles, and I peek at him.

“You’re interrupting my concentration.”

“Not physically, silly. Mentally.” He pushes my arm down. “Close your eyes and imagine yourself grabbing the energy.”

“You told me to reach—”

“I know, and I’ll let that little misunderstanding slide—for now.” His lips twitch. Apparently, he finds it humorous that I thought he meant physically reach out—because everyone knows you reach for energy with your mind.

Snorting, I imagine myself reaching for the energy—like one might a stick. The hair on my arms raises. And all of a sudden, I know exactly what I need to do.

Dominik gasps, and my eyes fly open. I gape. The portal is hard to describe. It looks like someone took a painting of a grassy glade and ripped a jagged hole in the middle. Before I can say anything, the portal quivers, and the first person comes through.

I turn to Dominik, a question on my lips. Before I can even ask, he says, “Before I left, I told my parents to gather those struggling the most—that way, they were already there. They were just waiting for us to get the portal open.”

Emotion clogs my throat. For the first time in my life, I feel... important. Wanted. Like I’m a part of something that really matters. I know my mom loves me—deep down, I do. But it’s like... she’s never quite known what to do with me.

More people pass through the portal, and there are exclamations throughout the glade as their pain disappears. When I start to grow tired—as keeping the portal open is mentally and physically draining—Dominik takes over the portal, taking some of the strain off of me.

My knees buckle, and I land in the grass.

“Are you okay?” he asks, a worried glint in his eyes.

“Fine,” I gasp. “Just...tired.”

He smiles at me, and for a moment, I forget my fatigue. Then his eyes flash back to the portal, and his forehead creases. “Makenna...” A crackle—like the boom that follows lighting—keeps him from finishing. I gasp as the portal snaps shut, taking Dominik with it.

“No!” I scream, leaping to my feet. “Dominik!” Panic causes my chest to tighten, but I close my eyes and force myself to take a deep breath. Think of the glade...think of him. Little by little, I get a hazy view of the world on the other side of the Schism.

Dominik lies in the glade on his back, eyes closed. My panic returns. I rush to him and kneel at

His lids flutter, and he groans. The sound is followed by a rough cough. The coughing gets worse, and his eyes fly open. He shoots up, and his head knocks into mine. We both cry out. “Who’s there?” Dominik rasps, looking around. His eyes fasten on me, and he squints. “Hello?”

“Dominik,” I gasp.

“Makenna?”

“Yes! It’s me! Are you okay?”

“I...I can’t see you.” He squints again. My blood turns to ice. The poison. It must be addling his sight—but it appears he can still hear me.

“Can you open a portal?” I ask.

“I...I don’t know.” He closes his eyes, and his forehead creases. I feel his weak attempt. It doesn’t work. He opens his eyes—the distress clear in them. “I can’t. It’s the poison.” He stiffens and looks over his shoulder. That’s when I hear it.

A growl.

“No.” I leap to my feet. “Hang on, Dominik. Let me try.”

He doesn’t appear to hear me. His eyes are fastened on the reaper that slithers from the shadows.

Slowly, he pushes himself up. I see his knees shake. If I don’t hurry...

Gritting my teeth, I concentrate on forming the portal. It’s difficult, as I’m still exhausted from the prior one. Tentatively, the dispersed energy in the glade responds. My efforts grow more frantic when I open my eyes and find the reaper circling Dominik.

“No!” I shriek, just as the creature lunges. At that moment, the portal opens. Without hesitation, I leap through. The reaper hisses at my interruption. It has Dominik pinned beneath its black talons, and he takes my distraction as an opportunity. He plunges his knife into the creature’s belly. Its haunting wail of pain fills the air.

The creature flees into the woods, and I grab Dominik. We hobble to my still-open portal. Next thing I know, we're both sprawled on the ground on my side of the Schism. Exhausted from opening my second portal of the day, I crawl across to him. "Are you okay?" I gasp.

"A few scratches here and there, but nothing I can't handle," he wheezes. Despite the fact that he's obviously in pain, he gives me a lopsided smile. "I can't believe I'm alive."

"Don't ever scare me like that again," I hiss, not bothering to protest when he grabs my arms and pulls me the rest of the way to him. "Not planning to," he whispers, resting his forehead against mine. "You were amazing, by the way."

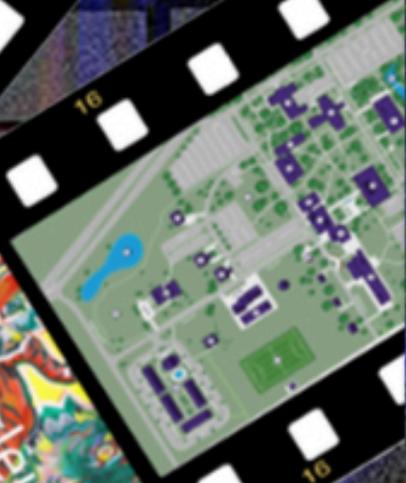
My cheeks warm. "Flatterer. You're just trying to distract me."

"Am I?" And then—in front of everyone in the glade—he kisses me.

The End

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