



ARTWORK MADE
BY EMILY KASHIRSKY

UNDER CONSTRUCTION



ISSUE 56



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Dear Reader,

It is our great pleasure to present you with this 56th Issue of *Under Construction: A Literary Magazine*.

This issue is part of a long history of publishing at NHCC. Our campus literary magazine was first conceived in 1969 through the Creative Writing Club, led by English faculty member, Vicky Lettmann. Over the course of the pandemic, our literary community—like many other communities—lost the strength and connection we’ve enjoyed for these five decades. However, this year, a group of dedicated students (some of whom were part of the Magazine Workshop class) resurrected the Creative Writing Club to support the strong literary community that used to be, making it a place of connection and inspiration once again. We were honored to have Vicky Lettman join us to celebrate this new strength at *Under Construction’s* second annual Open Mic! It was wonderful to hear some of her poems and be able share current student voices with her, voices we hope you will get to know and love in the following pages.

As the Magazine Workshop class was putting this issue together, we had many discussions about what topics and styles we wanted to share. Our guiding principle was to share the widest range of voices we could. And to let those voices stand strong on their own. We wanted to preserve the voices of NHCC students as they revealed their experiences and their dreams through their art. And we wanted to show how NHCC students’ dreams and experiences were positioned in the historical context of 2024. We wanted to show the important roles fantasy, horror, fable, romance, and realism played in the lives and minds of our student body. We wanted to show the need for truth-telling, the need for catharsis, the need for entertainment, and the need for love. We wanted this publication to represent the full community that our beautiful campus holds. We were able to do so with the help of illustrator Emily Kashirsky.

In addition to our talented student writings and illustrations, we also wanted to share some of our deep questions. In April 2024, thanks to faculty member Kelly Lundquist, we were able to host a book club event to talk about *Minor Feelings*



by Cathy Park Hong. The readers of her essay collection joined our Magazine Workshop class to discuss the major questions raised by this new book. Then, during her visit to our campus, Cathy Park Hong met with the editors of *Under Construction*. They asked her our most important questions. Her profound answers can be found here in this issue!

Finally, this year, we've had an incredible challenge of bringing our literary magazine into the 21 century and publishing it online (a process we've been working on since 2021). There were so many intricate choices that we as an editorial board worked through together as we took this first step online.

To that end, we offer our biggest "thank you" to the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Academic Foundations, Heidie Lish. It is impossible to concisely describe the complicated nature of bringing *Under Construction* online, but without a doubt, we could not have done it without her creative thinking and commitment to this project. Thank you, Heidie! Thank you so much!

We hope everyone enjoys this issue. And we hope NHCC students from Fall '24 and Spring '25 consider sharing their own creative works in *Under Construction* Issue 57 (and maybe become editors in the Magazine Workshop class) too!

Sincerely,

The *Under Construction*, Issue 56 Editorial Board:

Sam Anderson, Noah Drake, Alicia Everett, Emma Houston, Emily Kashirsky, Hanin Moussa, Wealth Ndego, Branden Sloan, Marlee Swanson, and Ben Tuffour

And Faculty Editor:

Haley Lasché



AUTHOR LIST



Sidick Bakayoko is pursuing an Accounting Transfer Pathway Degree at North Hennepin Community College. He enjoys writing in his free time and has been immersed in various types of literature since childhood, with a particular fondness for poetry. Sidick is always looking for interesting ideas and stories to write about. A fun fact about him is that he plays soccer and basketball daily.

Featured on pages 21-23 and 117-122.

Kenneth Batiste is an Ojibwe writer and student pursuing a degree in Computer Science. His real name is Nawiigezhick, meaning sunset in his people's language, Ojibwemowin. Representing his community and helping others are the goals that are most important to him. His inspiration comes from the struggle and beauty of life, but the unrequitable care that he gains from art is what motivates him to create.

Featured on pages 29, 30, 43, 49, and 105-108.

Melanie Boulka is working towards a bachelor's degree to become an art teacher. She has spent the last 13 years as a cake decorator and is rekindling some childhood passions. Two-dimensional drawing and painting pieces have been her strengths, but now she is broadening her creativity with other forms of art, including poetry. She is excited to share this passion with future students and encourage them to follow their own creativity.

Featured on pages 13-14, 24, 39, and 47-48.



Isabella Bridges is an aspiring artist born and raised in North Minneapolis, Minnesota. She is a mother of two children and takes pride in her heritage of being Afro-Latinx-indigenous. Isabella has dabbled and worked in many areas of creative expression over the past 10 years including tattooing, painting, modeling, drawing and crocheting. She is now working towards a degree to become a licensed social worker and continues to feed her creative passions by singing, writing, and crafting other various projects like scrapbooking or interior painting. She loves being in nature and caring for others.
Featured on pages 84-91.

Benjamin Brown. Featured on pages 161-174.

Weston Coklas is a music major with an interest in all forms of creativity. Weston also has a deep love for theater and performance. Their love for performance and love for writing often influence one another. Weston believes creative expression helps you understand yourself and the world around you on a much more intimate scale.
Featured on pages 74-77.

Noah J. Drake. Aspiring writer, gigantic nerd, and possible dragon in disguise. Named after a *General Hospital* character, Noah was born and raised in Minnesota. After a brief attempt at being a productive adult, Noah has decided to return to college and chase his dream of becoming the world's greatest sorcerer. He will settle for being an author and poet. Until a clandestine, magical group recognizes his potential, Noah will be attending NHCC and working towards a career where he can do what he loves every day of his life: Write.
Featured on pages 45-46.

Asiasi Feki Featured on pages 27-28, 31-32, and 40.

D. Dylan Feltz Featured on pages 41-42.



Tatum Griebenow Featured on pages 112-116.

Cathy Park Hong's New York Times bestselling book of creative nonfiction, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, was published in Spring 2020 by One World/Random House and Profile Books (UK). *Minor Feelings* was a Pulitzer Prize finalist, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for autobiography, and earned her recognition on TIME's 100 Most Influential People of 2021 list. She is also the author of poetry collections *Engine Empire*, published in 2012 by W.W. Norton, *Dance Dance Revolution*, chosen by Adrienne Rich for the Barnard Women Poets Prize, and *Translating Mo'um*. Hong is the recipient of the Windham-Campbell Prize, the Guggenheim Fellowship, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Her prose and poetry have been published in the *New York Times*, *New Republic*, the *Guardian*, *Paris Review*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. She is a full professor in English at UC Berkeley. Featured on pages 55-58.

Francis Huynh, an artist, and Twitch streamer, shares his passion for art with the people on Twitch. Recently engaged to Kelsie, he continues to create illustrations and artworks while fostering community on Twitch. His journey consists of helping others improve their art on Twitch and creating commissions under the username huynhuynh. Featured on pages 96-99.

Kaitlyn Jette Featured on pages 109-111.

Sophie Jones took PSEO here at NHCC for both her junior and senior year of high school. For Fall 2024, Sophie will be attending NHCC as a freshman to finish her AA Liberal Arts. Although her plan after NHCC isn't set yet, she is considering doing more in writing or teaching. Sophie enjoys listening to alternative rock music, creative writing, reading, and painting. Featured on pages 17, 25, and 26.



Emily Kashirsky is a young writer who majors in Creative Writing. She primarily writes romance fiction and dabbles in poetry. Her hobbies consist of drawing and reading. Emily will graduated NHCC in Spring 2024. Her hope for the future is to write books and work as a romance fiction writer.

Featured on pages 150-160.

Jenna Larsen is currently studying Elementary Education and has always enjoyed writing short stories and poetry. She aspires to teach Kindergarten-3rd grade with the end goal of becoming an Elementary School Principal. During her free time, she enjoys crafting, spending time outdoors, and making her next coffee.

Featured on pages 50-53.

Aselah Mouti Featured on pages 92-95.

Délice Mukuaya. Bonjour à tous! Her name is Délivrance Dinanga Mukuaya, but because Délivrance is too long to say or write so her parents found a short cut. Her family and friends call her Délice. When she came to NHCC she majored in pre nursing but changed to biology down the line. She is 21 years old from the Democratic Republic of Congo. She's been in the USA for 6 years since migrating with her family. She speaks French, Lingala, and English. She loves to write, read, listen to music, dance, sing, and a lot more. She loves poems since high school. Since her English teacher told her to write a poem about something she likes, she wrote one about her baby sister at the time; she was just born. Since then, she has loved poems and has written so many of them. She initially submitted those poems to get extra credit for her college writing class, but she found herself having them published which she is very thankful for, and her family is very happy too.

Featured on pages 15, 20, 44, and 54.

Azah Nde is a young woman on the verge of greatness and giving. As an accounting student at North Hennepin Community College, she did not allow herself to be defined by her past and present circumstances. She passionately believes stories must motivate others to overcome adversity. No matter what situation attempts to silence her, she persists in making sure that her words count. She is an example of a person



who does everything possible to make sure that her dreams are realized. Every setback she faced is the more reason she strived to become successful.
Featured on pages 16, 18, and 19.

Bernadette Nelson is a current student and writing tutor at North Hennepin Community College, studying Psychology. From a young age, Bernadette has enjoyed writing fiction, yet this is one of her first attempts at poetry. Bernadette was raised in Minnesota, and this poem is inspired by her experiences growing up in a Midwestern climate, incorporating things from Minnesotan weather to familial traditions. She is excited to share this work!
Featured on pages 33-38.

Estella Thorvilson is an aspiring social worker from Plymouth, Minnesota. She is currently finishing up her studies at North Hennepin Community College and plans to transfer to Metro State University in fall of 2024. She has spent time writing since she was young and enjoys being able to pursue the craft further through her formal education. She plans to graduate come 2026 and pursue her passion of social work by helping children throughout all of Minnesota.
Featured on pages 100-104.

Nyakade Tot. I'm a student at NHCC majoring in Elementary Ed with an interest in creative writing. I am the first person to immigrate to United States. I am from Upper Nile State, in South Sudan, a young nation who got their independence in July 9th 2011. I am first generation and the first female in my family to go to school after an arranged marriage which made me to come to America and later became an open door for me to go to school. I grew up with oral traditional story. My writing comes from traditional oral history. I never had any library card, but now I'm a part of the American dream. I share my voice indirectly in writing. You may not see me physically, or hear me vocally; however, you can read my writing.
Featured on pages 138-145.

Benjamin Tuffour is an aspiring author and student studying professional writing and journalism at North Hennepin Community College. He plans on attending higher education and working in publishing while writing fantasy novels in his free time when he can get away



from reading them himself, of course. He lives in Minnesota and hates the cold, ironically.
Featured on pages 124-137.

Pa Vang Featured on pages 60-69.

Elias Zibrowski Featured on pages 146-149.

Zahraa Zghair is an aspiring dental hygiene student hoping to attend Normandale Community College. She is an Iraqi American that would love to leave an impact on the world with her creativity and ambition.
Featured on pages 70-73 and 78-83.





POETRY



A DAY'S OLD FULL MOON



Melanie Boulka

A day's old full moon
Rises on September's eve
Still fully round and significant
Too small a sliver gone to grieve

Too small to notice that
A small piece of you has left
And then another will
And then another
But you have not wept

Waning in the night
Reflecting less of your light
Until you decide to take a breath



Your light didn't burn out

It has not met its death

You're making space to grow

Your waning is weeding

A new moon breathes a new perspective

Overturning your glow

Your light is waxing and succeeding

A day's old full moon

Rises near October's end

And you greet this waning era

Like a kindred friend



A FUTURE WITHOUT YOU



Délice Mukuaya

Coldness through my bones
Darkness surrounding me.
I want to scream but my voice is gone.
I tried to yell your name but can't speak.
I can't move nor run.
I'm numb from all the pain I'm going through without you.
Please come back to me
I need you to live.
I need you to survive.
because all of this is a future without you.



AUDACITY TO RISE



Azah Nde

There has been an unsaid claim that a body that has experienced setbacks should not have the audacity to set the body back to failure. This myth defines the lives of numerous potentially promising individual futures. Develop a hunger to transcend, despite a world filled with inequality and hardship. One must develop an insatiable desire to fulfill their purpose. One must be able to define themselves and not conform to conventional labeling. Come forth each day to achieve one's highest potential. Look to the earth and see that dust does not need an actual tornado to rise. The dust just needs the wind to rise. On the other hand, increasing forms the commitment to change despite drawbacks. Rising manifests with each move toward the direction of one's life ambitions. Rising comes with the audacity to dream of a more adequate world structure. Look past the privation and investigate the possibilities. This is the Audacity to Rise.



BETRAYAL



Sophie Jones

The scent of brown sugar, and
Cedarwood fills the air.
He walks with broad shoulders
A glass of bourbon in his left hand
Thick eyebrows narrow
His eyes have found mine,
He saunters his way to me
Caresses my face, and whispers,
“What have you done?”
Enunciating each word so precisely.
He steps back with a burning glare
I didn’t even realize
I’ve been holding my breath
When he finally turns his back,
Time resumes, I exhale.
He gave me his trust,
and now I have to accept
consequences.



COMPARISONS CRUMBLE



Azah Nde

Being freely and unabashedly unique is one of the most significant difficulties in this world. How we identify takes on the characteristics of our lives and shapes our destiny. Either identify with others or identify with oneself. Either carry the burden of adapting to the façade of others or develop the courage to create power from within. We could look towards others, believe that is what we want, or make us who we should be. Comparisons crumble each member of a society stuck in the unquestioned progression of life. Some simply follow, remain in the confines of their past, and refuse to look beyond other identities' ease. They are stuck in the desire to live with ease but neglect the power of utilizing their suffering for their purpose. It is not for one to decide who one is, but for us to find it. The only way one could find such is to believe that comparisons crumble.



DOMINATING CHALLENGES



Azah Nde

Going through challenges is something that every life entails. Developing the willingness to dominate them is an element that few master. As an individual being, one has the full autonomy to manufacture one's mind as they see fit. It is their decision to surrender to pressure or transfigure into a diamond. This simple conclusion is reached as pressure sculpts diamonds. Additionally, to have the courage to place one's body in demanding situations. As a starting point of escaping who one was and developing into who one should become. The possibility of dominating challenges must always seem greater than that of challenges diminishing our determination to move forward. Implant in one's mind, no matter the circumstance the soul will always prevail.



FAREWELL



Délice Mukuaya

To you I never said

Farewell

To you who always saved me.

Farewell

To you who protected me.

Farewell

To you who always made me laughed.

Farewell

To all our memories.

Farewell

To the future that will never exist.

Farewell

to my love for you

Farewell forever.



FEELINGS DICHOTOMY



Sidick Bakayoko

I am lost

I am lost

Why doesn't she love me

Why is he so bewitched by me

She looks so uninterested

He seems too engaged

Isn't she taking our relationship seriously

Does he take our relationship seriously

I am lost

I am lost

Was she lying all this time

Does he trust me at this point



Was everything we lived together a mirage

Does he overinterpret those heresies

I am lost

I am lost

Even when you are with me

I could be with you

On you

On me

In you

In me

And you still won't see me, right?

I can't see you

I am lost

I am lost

Why doesn't he understand

Why didn't I understand earlier

It is so obvious

It was so obvious



This is not real

This was not real

You were never there, were you?

I am not even here

I kiss him to pretend I'm involved

I could feel it through your kiss

But we both know

But she and I knew

We are six feet apart

we were six feet apart

Even though our bodies

Even though our souls

Could not be closer.

Could not be closer.



FLOWERS



Melanie Boulka

Some people pop up like daisies
Bright and beaming
And there are those who struggle
Against the weeds
But once they emerge
Their color is most unique

I can't tell the daisies
To seek wisdom in the weeds
I can't tell those who struggle
To beam positively
Because each have their stories
And each have their needs



HAIKU



Sophie Jones

In the timeless sky
Birds chase each other away.
Special melodies.



HEART OF GOLD



Sophie Jones

She has a heart of gold
Her eyes are kind
Her lips soft
She rests on the cold concrete
Laying still
Some might think
She is a glass statue
But by looking closely,
You can see steady shallow breaths,
And her nose twitch.
A silver tear drips
From the corner of her eye
She's been here for hours.
Days. Stuck.
Her heart of gold really, is a burden
It weighs her glass body down.
Frozen, impossible to sit up.
And if she did manage to sit up,
That heart of gold would simply
Rip out of her chest.



HOLD IT TIGHT



Asiasi Feki

You tried to save me
You could have helped yourself
From the trouble, the pain
That you got yourself immersed
When all the broken tears flooded from your eyes
One more shaken breath asking you to fight
“Fight”
Those raindrops of tears, those oceans in your eyes
Those pieces I collected was the fragments of your mind

When you’re losing all your hope, let me be your faith
When you’re in the dark, I will be your flame
When you’re in doubt, I can be your blame



All I am asking is just open up your door
Let me be the one you've been looking for
Let me hold you tight, pull you a little close
"Come closer"
Let me be the light for your darkest road
Let me be the right, for your bad and wrong



I WISH I COULD HELP



Kenneth Batiste

Jean made my phone.

It wasn't Steve Jobs or Tim Cook

Jean actually doesn't have much in common with either of them.

He's not white or rich,

or even as rich as me (and I'm not very wealthy).

His name came from France, but he was born in the Congo.

My dad knew someone from there who made his car tires.

Without either of them, it's hard for us to do anything, but at least we "have" freedom.

Jean can't say the same.

I wish I could help, but he's so far away.

#FreeJean



INFINITE STREETS



Kenneth Batiste

My whole city is a knot of Highways
I lay in a mattress and it takes me to the next day

Minutes roll away from me
I grab one and stuff it full of everything

Looking back at the moment that just passed
It laughs in my face
then Rush Hour pulls me away

The transit I live on conveys me closer to the next.
Assembling my memories
and replacing my organs with plastic that tethers me to the material world.

I'm starving for life,
and ironically
Human Nature
convinced me there's something better.



LOST



Asiasi Feki

The past was closing its walls on the present
The memory inside my head haunts me, I am helpless
Leaving me to wallow in its essence
As dark as it may be, I found solace in its presence
I couldn't look forward as I sat in this silence

On a winter night when you pulled me close
I broke apart knowing you wouldn't let go
But the fire of a lover burns you the most
When you see the wind taking away the smoke

The present and the future could not come close
To the comfort I received, be it a blessing or a curse
Now that you're gone I have no one left to hold



So I shall stay in the past, a place I'm not alone

They say that your dream waits

So look forward to the future

I see nothing

What, then, would I search for?

Day by day, I rewind to my past

Searching for your smile, forever it would last

Then why?

Why make new memories when you can live in the past

Why seek the unknown

When the known is a better path

What lies ahead, beautiful as it may be

The past I had is what truly made me

It's where I was truly happy



LOVE LETTER TO A MIDWESTERN CHILDHOOD

Bernadette Nelson

You are July.

Sticky humidity, and a blazing sun
that burns my feet to walk on.

A loud burst of colors,
while meticulously avoiding stray Pop-its.

A Ferris wheel, a tilt-a-whirl,
and a popsicle melting on my tongue,
staining my teeth in red, white, and blue.

You are a birthday party.

A pink gown with a plastic tiara,
and a play place that reeks of artificial
watermelon.



You are 2009.

A bedroom decorated in black, pink,
and zebra.

The kind of thing I'd see on Disney channel,
and dream of.

A Barbie with pink, glittery lips
sacrificed to a six-month-old shih tzu.

Chewed off hands.

An older girl,
big hair and a short skirt,
in a style I still wish I had.

You are a new baby,
visited under harsh hospital lights.

A girl with a gummy grin,
wriggling in lime green footie-pajamas.

You are Christmas.

A tiered cookie platter,
frosting that smears on your hand,
and chocolate that melts on your fingers,
leading you to lick them clean with a smile.



Rosy cheeks from the biting cold.
A toddler and a running nose,
stumbling through the fine, white glitter.
Messy, handmade Santa sculptures, and class sing-a-longs.
A cartoon ornament, a fruity smell like nothing else.
You are a mother,
swearing we need to cut back this year,
only to give as much as she has
every year before.

You are my childhood.

You are a musical theater production.
Scripts ruined in order to make them appropriate
for seventh graders to perform.
Willy Wonka, Little Women.
Floods of melodramatic pre-teens,
crying that this will be their last show with the school.
Grumbling about the length of practice,
when I'm the one who continuously chooses to sign up.
Squinting to make out the faces of my loved ones,
and the way I feel when I find them,



reminding me that, yes,
I know why I signed up after all.
You are the stage lights,
bleeding onto a ruffled Victorian wedding gown,
changing its color from white to pink.

You are a bowling alley.
My family's business.
The perfect starter job.
Crashing pins, and kids who throw the ball
way too hard.
A walk down the lane to retrieve a stuck ball.
Again.
An attached restaurant,
with no shortage of customers,
or references to *The Big Lebowski*,
Busy open to close, every day of the week.
Pizza dough that gets caked under my fingernails,
and onions, with their foul scent that leaves its mark on my hands
for at least 24 hours.



You are my coworkers and me leaving our restaurant job,
to go buy from the taco truck across the street.
Good food,
that everyone is so sick of.

You are a horror movie.
A beautiful camp counselor,
trying to escape a grisly murder.
Strangulation with a string of pearls,
A chainsaw's roar,
Flammable jelly.
A vampire, lying in satin,
clad in an old, lace blouse stained with...
Wine?
His victim,
A regency woman,
an extra and a poor actor,
whose performance is incongruent with the dire situation.
You are a scream at a cheesy jump scare,
and the embarrassment that follows,
having reacted strongly to such a silly thing.



You are my silly, middle school years.

You are the end of a semester.

Stacks of half-finished papers,
and rejected invitations.

Required readings, viewings,
and discussion boards.

A living stuffed animal,
an interruption.

An overweight, blond dog,
whining for a meal at my feet,
though he was fed less than 20 minutes ago.

A blank face, I could never stay mad at.

A little free time.

A weekly family dinner,
and a viewing of the new *Hunger Games* movie.

You are my building excitement
at my impending break.

You are my present.



MIDNIGHT SNACK



Melanie Boulka

I left my stew simmering low, finishing on the stove. I collected the swaddled meat on the table, and I walked out into the forest grove. The light from my open door illuminated my path. Walking steadily upon the trail, until I was drenched with a moon bath. It was just after midnight; I brought a snack for my pet. She was waiting for me near the lakeshore; her name was Antoinette. The moonlight danced upon her giant wings and silvery scales. Her head lifted to my scent, and she sang with delighted wails. I offered her her treat, her eyes smiled with glee. I sat upon a boulder, and her head rested near me. We lounged in willful peace, two misunderstood creatures. Our friendship echoed in the wind; we are the midnight seekers.



AN OLD WHITE MAN DESCRIBES PHILOPHY



Asiasi Feki

Life is nothing but Power

To take what we want as ours

To be ourselves, and not others

Fight the beast and take the dagger

Because we are lost

Blinded by the expectation of others

Lost while becoming someone else

True freedom?

The Philosopher said freedom is supreme

Avoid being walking sticks

Dangling from the man's strings

A puppet show

Called morbid isolation



ONCE



D. Dylan Feltz

A driftless heart carries down stream

Creaks that swell to rivers

Life, adorned in the chaos

Embraced by swift currents

Of sweet fruits and barley.

A loveless kiss tips a soul's scale

Endorphins rush the blood stream

Passion, engulfed by the revelry

Gripped by divine scents

Of warm flesh and perfume.



A timeless memory carves into bones
Washes away with passing breaths
Regret, consumed by the numbness
Accompanied by bitter tastes
Of still spirits and stale bread.



ORIGINAL MIRRORS



Kenneth Batiste

The first humans looked at the water to see their reflection.

There were no “vanity pools”

Unpolluted water made it easy to see themselves clearly

We can still see ourselves but our water is dirty

Maybe the reflection is still just as clear

Either way our mirrors now only show a small box of life

Have you ever seen one as big as a lake?



PROMISES



Délice Mukuaya

Promise me
that you will love me.

Promise me
that you will cherish me.

Promise me
You will take care of me.

Promise me
I will never have to go through winter without you.

Promise me
You will be happy without me.

Promise me
That you will never forget me.

Promise me
That you will always smile even without me by your side.

Promise me ...



REWRITING, FOOLING, LYING



Noah J. Drake

I'm rewriting reality to spare my brother's feelings

Chosen syntax to sculpt a manicured alibi

Falsehood is mine to play with and does others a service

Innocently toying with their vision of me

Better to rewrite drafts of myself than publish honesty

I'm fooling my family as the perfect star

Shine with dim-crafted light to not cast revealing shadows

I detest my truth so much I make fools of others

Their ignorance makes mine and their bliss. In true

Jester fashion, I fool myself most of all



I'm lying too often, I've forgotten fabled remorse
Disappointing all the childhood morals missed the mark
Fake ego feeds hollow integrity building the perfect
Imagery castle to house all my pretty little [rewrites]
I lied to my brother for no good reason

I'm not afraid of the truth
I'm afraid I've forgotten how to tell it



SHE SAYS



Melanie Boulka

She says
She's trying to find herself
Like it can be done in a day
Or two
Or a year
Like there is a definite end date
But I think
That finding yourself
Is not asking a question
And receiving an answer
I think that
You already know yourself
And the act of "finding yourself"
Is really just



Seeing your own truth
And expanding on it
Like our expanding universe
Discovering what is already there
And pursuing
The never ending potential
Of progress



SOUL SEEING



Kenneth Batiste

We each looked in the other's eyes
Our universes right beneath
Seeing it myself wouldn't mean anything to me
so I'm okay with you telling me your memories.
Your pupil isn't just a black dot, it's a hole that lets light through
A needle thin enough could poke inside
I know that both of our secrets are safe behind our skin,
but when I look in your eyes
I catch a glimpse through the gap in your iris,
and I know what you're thinking.



YARN AROUND THE NEEDLE



Jenna Larsen

the aroma of maple fills the air
as I tip-toe to the living room
the chime sounds seven times

early morning sun peaks through the curtains
as I see my grandma kneeling
a rosary around her wrists

she notices me
“good morning honey”
“good morning grandma”

I wake my brother next
together, we crawl



into the bedroom
where grandpa is snoring loudly
“wake up grandpa!”
he wakes suddenly, laughing
“what are you two doing?”
“wake up grandpa!”

~~

sun beams through the kitchen now
as grandma hovers over the griddle
spatula in hand

“the fork goes on the left, Jenna”
I lay the plates down

my brother sits
grandpa presents the gallon
fills it to the brim of the glasses



a platter of golden cakes

grandma sets down

“J” shaped dough

one for me

one for my brother

~~

sun is high above now

buttery aroma fills the air

flames comforting us

underneath the stockings

grandma on one side

wool on the other

thread in my hand

my hands moving slowly

her patience comforting me



grandma's needles click-clack
motions seem like memory
knit one, purl one
needles glide under her guidance
I'm mesmerized by her craft
she teaches me her time-honored technique

~~

the sun is asleep now
mom in the foyer
“ready to go home guys?”
I turn to grandma
“what about my scarf?”
my eyes reluctant
“next time”
she smiles
and pulls me in
her arms wrap around me
the way yarn wraps around the needle



YOU MADE ME



Délice Mukuaya

You made me

The monster you hate.

You made me

The woman you can't love.

You made me

The child you can't stand.

You made

This darkness in me possible.



AN INTERVIEW WITH CATHY PARK HONG



On a rainy evening in April, award-winning poet and Pulitzer Prize finalist, Cathy Park Hong came to Brooklyn Park to have a public conversation with Su Hwang and Sun Yung Shin about Hong's collection of essays, *Minor Feelings*. Before she took the stage, Hong met with the members of the Magazine Workshop class, *Under Construction's* student editors. Inspired by *Minor Feelings*, they whittled their questions down to the five that were most pressing for writers in our NHCC community. Here are Hong's responses:

Q: Why did you want to start your book with such an emotional beginning?

A: I wanted to grab the reader's attention. I meant to start with the "Stand-Up" essay about Richard Prior, but I realized I had to start with a personal moment because the book is a personal journey. The book is a journey toward a personal decolonization. I wanted to begin from a position of being very confused and insecure and from a moment where I wanted to seek help.



In the beginning I started with the cognitive distance of my hallucination that my hemifacial spasms came back. I think what I was trying to convey was how when you are a racialized subject, you see yourself the way that other people see you. Which is the way white people see you. Which is as an apparition. And I was using the hemifacial spasms almost as a metaphor for that.

There was nothing wrong with me. I didn't have the spasm. But I was hallucinating and paranoid that I did. Because I was feeling self-conscious about my place in this country. That's why I thought it would be appropriate to start from there.

Q: Did your attitude change the further you got into this writing process?

A: Of *Minor Feelings*? Yes. There were a lot of different stages as I was working on the book. I didn't know what I was writing at first. I started with the essay about friendship, and then I realized that I wanted to write a book about race, art, and politics. I didn't think of it as a book that was specifically on being Asian American yet. I started the book in 2015, and then 2016 was when Trump got elected. This happened to a lot of writers. Everyone had this kind of crisis. Like "What am I doing? What am I working on now?"

I realized that there was so much more urgency to what I was working on. I felt like the perspective on being Asian American was missing from this whole national dialogue about race, and so it was really important for me to focus on that. Before that, I was writing from a more critical perspective, and I realized that I had to be much more personal, more vulnerable in the book so that more people would be interested in reading it. My idea of the audience also changed. When I started, I just wanted other writers of color and poets of color to read the book. And then it changed. I wanted Americans to read it. So yeah, my attitudes changed quite a lot.



Q: What compelled you to dig so deeply into the research of these essays?

A: As a writer, I always have these fixations. I don't try to explain it. I don't try to understand why. I trust my intuition that I have this obsession, and I'm just going to follow it and see where it takes me. Whether it's standup comedy, whether it's the idea of friendship, or whether it's my chip on my shoulder about Wes Anderson. I just follow that compulsion because I think that's how writing starts. You have this compulsion, and you just keep following it. You see where it leads you. Oftentimes, it just leads you back to your own core obsession whatever that may be. Whether that's love, family, war, the self, race. It's a detour into your obsession. I think as a writer, it's always important to have these different obsessions. But you can also procrastinate through research too. Sometimes you spend so much time researching, you never actually get to the writing part. You've got to put a stop to it. You've got to be like "no, I've got to start writing."

Q: How did your friends and family react to you publishing this book (specifically Erin and specifically your parents)?

A: Erin and I are still friends, surprisingly enough. I just saw her the other day. It took her a while to read the book. She was a little scared. It took her months. But then when she read it, she appreciated it. She thought I portrayed the friendship accurately. With my parents it was more complicated because my mother doesn't really read in English, which is a blessing. But my father did read it, and he was very understanding about some of the more honest parts of the book. He said it was fine; he accepted it. But then his reactions make me scratch my head because he also said, "It was a really good piece



of fiction.” That’s what he said. I don’t know if he was mixing up fiction for non-fiction. I didn’t know if it was wishful thinking or if he accidentally said that. But then he also always wanted to be a writer, so he understands that there was a degree of honesty. I told my parents that if the book just talked about how proud of them I was, then it was going to be a boring book.

Q: On page 29 you wrote: “To truthfully write against race, I almost have to write against narrative.” Can you elaborate on whether you have had to struggle against external stereotypes or fight your own internal head cannon to write against narrative?

A: A lot of racial stereotypes become internalized. For instance, if people say that Asian American women are submissive, and if you are told that enough times, you internalize that. So you feel invisible. It’s both psychological and external at the same time. And that was what I was trying to do with *Minor Feelings*, to convey to the reader the psychological experience of what it’s like to be invisible.

I think if you come from any kind of marginalized position, you’re always saying what you are not before you say what you are. And that was the impetus for me to write *Minor Feelings*. I felt like I had no control over my own narrative. I had no control over what Asian American is. And I couldn’t just ignore it. Before I was a little resistant. The Asian American identity. How do you even define it? It’s so broad and disparate; I don’t even know how to grip onto it. But I felt like I had to make an attempt because there was still a monolithic story about Asian America that did not define me. This is my correction. This is what I had to do with the book.





CREATIVE NONFICTION



BEING A MINORITY TEACHER



Pa Vang

“We brought you guys to America for a reason, and that is for you to be better than us,” said my parents. This was when we first set foot in the “land of opportunity” in June 1989. These words have been fastened to my heart, mind, and soul. So, at a very young age, my sisters and I would play “teacher.” Of course, I was the teacher. We had a little 16x20 blackboard that was nailed to the white wall in our living room. It was adjusted just at the right height for me. I used the blackboard every day to teach my sisters math because that was all I knew. By the time we were done with math, the room would be filled with chalk dust. Its smell clung onto our nose hair until we showered. Little did I know that becoming a teacher means I will be facing many obstacles.

Fast forward to January of 2004, after fulfilling all my required courses at Concordia University-St. Paul, I got the opportunity to do my Practicum/Student Teaching at an elementary school in Minneapolis, a diverse school with students from various background. The first part of my student teaching was done in a kindergarten classroom. My cooperating teacher was Mrs. Lucy. The first day I set foot into the classroom, I could feel the palm of my



hands, sweaty and warm. I was so nervous, I stuttered when I first met Mrs. Lucy. I felt so stupid, but I reminded myself to keep calm.

For the most part, my student teaching experience went well. I've applied all the skills I've learned from my college classes into my daily practices in the classroom. Unfortunately, my confidence got cut short. I had never felt so unsupported, speechless, and numbed throughout my years of learning to become a teacher until I had my last meeting with Mrs. Lucy.

The purpose of our meeting was for her to deliver feedback on the lesson I taught three days prior. Mrs. Lucy invited my college advisor, Professor Kim, to attend our meeting. The three of us sat around a small brown kidney table next to her desk. It was so low that I could feel my knees touching the bottom. I looked forward to hearing what she had to share. Unfortunately, the first sentence that came out of her mouth included the word "witness." Mrs. Lucy had called Professor Kim to join the meeting because she wanted someone from my college to "witness" our conversation. My whole body shook uncontrollably because I didn't know what I did wrong. I saw her face. I read her body language. I listened to the tone of her voice. *What does she mean witness?* I thought to myself.

Professor Kim gave Mrs. Lucy the go-ahead signal. "The lesson that Pa taught went well. She knew the content and she delivered it well but..." she said. Professor Kim and I just sat there watching her struggle through her notes. She continued and said, "There's a student that didn't learn anything from the lesson. He said he doesn't want to come to school anymore because he said he is afraid of Pa. That is why he couldn't remember what he learned." My



college advisor stopped her and asked her to elaborate more about it. We both waited patiently while she shuffled through her notes again.

There were so many mixed emotions going through my head at that moment, pondering on what else she was going to say. In what seems like an eternity, Mrs. Lucy looked at the both of us and said, “I’m sorry, I don’t know where my notes went.” I glanced at my college advisor and was so grateful she was there. She was there to witness how incompetent, unreliable and inconsiderate my cooperating teacher was. It was at that moment that I realized she never liked me from the start. I have never seen her smile at me nor ever asked how I’m doing. On most days, she didn’t even say “good morning” to me. I was just a person that was assigned to her, to complete my credentials. I took this opportunity to stand up for myself. I questioned Mrs. Lucy “So, what impression did I send off that you would agree that I’m a scary person?” Before she even got the chance to reply to my question, I added, “If that’s a true statement, how come he still responds to me? The lesson was taught 3 days ago.” I could clearly see that she was searching for answers. I felt so discouraged, crushed, and a little saddened. *Is teaching the right path for you, Pa? Aren’t experienced teachers supposed to support tomorrow’s teachers? Why did she do this? Does she not like me? Was I that bad or was I better than her?* All these questions ran through my head while we wrapped up the meeting.

A few days later, my college advisor emailed me with her feedback, and it was a relief. She explained to me that teaching is a learning experience; for me not to take it personally but to use that to uplift my passion towards teaching. She went on and said, “You can be the



change for future generations when you become a teacher yourself.” That was a relief. I felt like a load of rocks had been lifted off my shoulders. I had so much hope for the future.

The second part of my student teaching had a better outcome. I was put in a second-grade class, and the cooperating teacher, Mrs. Genny, was the total opposite of Mrs. Lucy. She cooperated, mentored, and taught me new skills. On the last day of my student teaching, we had a short conversation.

“I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart,” I said.

She replied, “Oh, for what reason dear?” She was a much older person than me.

“For showing me how to be a great teacher,” I replied.

“Oh! You shouldn’t have to thank me. I should thank you for choosing this as your career. We are getting old, we need young people like you to continue this road,” she said it with a big smile.

What I learned from her was, if you want others to gain knowledge and experience, you must give them the opportunity to. You have to offer yourself like an open book. I truly admired her. She became my inspiration.

October of 2004, I got my first teaching job offered at an elementary school, about five blocks from the school where I completed my student teaching. I was hired to teach the Hmong newcomers from Thailand. The Newcomers Program consisted of four classes, all located on the first floor. It looked almost as if we had our own little school going on inside a school building. There were only four teachers and one coordinator that ran the program. Each teacher’s class was a combination of two grade levels. One teacher taught K-1, one



taught 2nd-3rd, mine was 4th-5th, and another teacher taught 6-8th, a total of 30 or more students per class. It was not a challenge teaching them because they were all at the beginner level.

A component in the Newcomers Program was teaching Hmong Literacy. This allowed them to communicate in Hmong, and that made them felt “belonging.” I remembered when I was in middle school and our teachers would say, “Speak English only!” This limited my opportunities to seek help. Sometimes, things just make more sense when it is explained in the native tongue. *Who has time to gossip? I just need help. This person understood the content but didn’t know enough English to explain to me. Leave us alone.* I allowed them to help each other out by using their native language.

Since some of the students were already literate in their first language, they grasped onto English at a much faster pace. From time to time, I glanced over their shoulders, and I spotted them noting the meaning of the English words in Hmong. I was so dumbfounded by that. As for the parents, they looked up to me and wholeheartedly handed their children to me and insisted, “You are in charge. You can do whatever you want to make sure they learn. We don’t know anything, so we will only rely on you.” This used to be a Hmong parent’s mentality. It was a way to express that they allowed us to discipline their children when they misbehaved at school. I kindly explained to them that we have rules to follow. I felt highly respected by my students and their parents. It was the best and only year that I enjoyed teaching the most!



Although the Newcomers Program was in a corner of the school, we were still a part of the school. Our students shared the same hallways, bathrooms, specialists, lunchroom, playground, and buses with the whole school. As much as they loved coming to school, they also had something that was bothering them. They were being bullied by other students that were different from them. Our older generation parents always say, “Go to school and be good. Don’t bother anyone. If someone bothers you, just leave it. Walk away from it.” Many of the younger Hmong students went through a lot of bullying without realizing it was not acceptable. It took a few courageous students to speak up and shared it with us; through conversations, writings, and tears.

I can recall when I was in middle school, I was also bullied. When I got home, I told my parents about it, and they said the same thing. I was so naïve, I believed everything they said. That led me to being so depressed I didn’t even want to go to school anymore. There was always fear in me that I would cross path with the students again. After knowing that my students were being bullied, I used my background experiences to instruct my students to strengthen their mindset. I reminded them every day to reach out to us when they experienced negativity, mistreatment, threats or fear of someone or something. There were occasions where the Hmong teachers were treated badly by the other students too. They used their fingers to pull apart the outer corner of their eyes and mouthed the word “chink.”

There was a time when a Hmong teacher, Ms. Ngia, a kind and sweet four-foot-eight woman argued with a middle schooler that was not in the Newcomers Program about him



running. She asked the student to walk instead of dashing through the hallway because he almost ran into my class. We were heading to the lunchroom.

“Excuse me, you need to stop. Stop right now,” said Ms. Ngia.

He turned around and said, “What? What did you say shorty?”

“You do not speak to me like that!” she replied loudly.

“Well, you ain’t my teacher. I don’t need to listen to you,” he said as he ran upstairs with a smirk on his face and one hand holding on to the waist of his pants.

Ms. Ngia and I both stared at each other and shook our heads. Later that day, we sat down and discussed what we can do as teachers. We agreed to bring this up with the administrators. The aftermath of that, we don’t know what they do with it because nothing has been changed. I left the school after my first year of teaching there.

Throughout my 15 years of teaching, my job title changed every 2-3 years. I have been a Hmong Specialist teacher, a mainstream classroom teacher, an ELL teacher, a math support teacher, and a lead teacher. With each title I held, I stumbled upon different issues. I’ve encountered many situations with many uncooperative families who were too dismissive of the importance of acquiring new content, skills, strategies, concepts, etc.

My job as the Hmong Specialist at a Hmong charter school in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota was to teach Hmong literacy and culture to students of all grades, whether they are Hmong or Non-Hmong. The class was established to run like any other specialist classes, such as music, art, and physical education. I cannot express how difficult it was to work with students and parents. The Hmong students didn’t try hard enough because they saw that the



Non-Hmong students were given different assignments. They weren't asked to speak or write in Hmong. They didn't have to participate in small group discussions in Hmong. The Hmong students couldn't see past the differentiated lessons.

"Well, why do we have to do this when they don't have to?" they complained.

"You must understand that they are learning at a different pace. We must start with the basics," I explained.

"That's not fair," they continued.

On the other hand, when there were disagreements with Non-Hmong students, they would bring their parents into the conversation. Often, they even pulled the race card. Many of them have said, "I will tell my parents that you said that." Some even went on and said, "Oh you're racist. You don't like me because you're talking in Hmong." I felt like a failure. It was draining the life out of me, but I didn't give up. This kind of conversation went on for years.

One time, I taught a lesson on pajntaub "*pa dao*" (a phrase literally means flower cloth, but it's actually a phrase that describes the form of arts such as tapestry, cross-stitch, sewing, etc in Hmong) to a high school class at another Hmong charter school, located in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. The lesson was that they had to use a graph paper to sketch out their pajntaub design before they can cross-stitch it onto an aida cloth. One student didn't use the grid on the graph paper to do his Xs correctly, so his design was not symmetrical. The second part of the lesson was to follow the pattern on the graph paper and cross-stitch it onto the aida cloth. This was to be done over the two weeks of winter break. For this assignment, he



received an F. He followed the pattern to the dot. His parents called the school counselor and complained that they are not happy because their son received an F. We scheduled a meeting.

On the day of the meeting, the mom pulled out the student's crumbled looking graph paper with his design out of her purse and flattened it on the surface of the table and said angrily in Hmong, "Look! Who wouldn't get a bad grade if this is how you taught my son? What kind of design is this? He was following the pattern!" The school counselor and I happened to share the same office due to the lack of space available in the building, so I went to my desk and pulled out the rubric for that assignment. I laid it out in front of the mom because she was the one doing all the talking while the dad laid back with his arms crossed in front of his chest. "Thank you for coming. I think there's some miscommunication here. Let me show you what the assignment was and here's the rubric," I explained. After five minutes of explaining and comparing her son's drawing to what was asked on the rubric, she was still not happy. She insisted that his grade needs to be changed to at least a C. All I can say to her was, "I can't change his grade for this assignment, but what I can do is give him extra credits to make up." It was another day I contemplated on whether I want to continue to teach because even Hmong parents showed no respect. *Maybe I was a young teacher? Maybe because I'm a Hmong woman?* So many thoughts went through my mind.

In 2016, I accepted the kindergarten teaching position at a different Hmong charter school. One day after recess, the class chose the book *Cinderella* to be our read-aloud book. After reading the story, a little girl, whom I am going to call Abby, pointed out that the evil stepmother wanted Cinderella to do things for them. Then another student added on and



said, “Oh like you, Ms. Pa. You always want us to do our work.” So, I said, “Yes, I do want you to do your work so you can be smart. The stepmother is evil. She wanted Cinderella to do their things for them.” The next day, the principal brought a printed copy of Abby’s mom’s email to me and questioned me about the situation. I read the email. The message she interpreted to the principal was that I see myself as the ‘evil queen’ in the classroom. She implied that I used that analogy to “scare the students so that they would listen” to me. They transferred the student out the next day. After 14 years of agonizing teaching experiences, I concluded that no matter what school you’re teaching at, if you are a minority teacher, people will treat you differently.

I have collected many great memories along my journey. There was laughter, arguments, challenges, lessons learned, lessons taught, fun and boring field trips, Fun Fridays, gradings, parent/teacher conferences, etc., but when it got to the point where it was affecting my mental health, I had to take a break. I took a step back and looked at the big picture. I told myself *it’s okay, you have made a lot of differences in many students*. I came to realize that I cannot please everyone. My time has ended.



FAMILY HISTORY



Zahraa Zghair

Looking at my family history, no one has migrated from Iraq except my family and my uncle's family. We originally wanted to move to Canada, where my uncle lives. While living in Syria, we heard the news that we got accepted into America. My father was bummed, he wanted to start a new life with his brother so we could be close with our cousins. I can only imagine how different my life would be if we had migrated to Canada instead.

I was only three years old when I came here, so I do not remember any of the struggles my parents faced from the first day they came to Minnesota. When talking to my dad, he told me many things about the challenges he faced. We stayed with some family friends at first, until we could get used to how society worked here. It is so different compared to being in Iraq and how people are there. The reason I speak about this is because I will never utterly understand the struggles my parents went through to raise us in America.

I cannot imagine how difficult and frustrating it was for my dad and mom to try and learn a new language. They had gone to a class that teaches them English, but they went



through the worst time, their teacher was racist towards them, and she would be rude when they are struggling to pronounce a certain word or sentence. Thinking about this makes me so angry and sad. Why would they employ someone who does not care about the individual they are teaching?

My father does not regret moving here because he is happy that he was able to build a life with his family and give us the best education there is. My parents could not further their education past high school, so they wanted that to be different for us. Although their high expectations for us can be very overwhelming, I know it is coming from a good place, and I am forever grateful for all the sacrifices they have made.

Coming from Iraq, society is much different here. The social norms in Iraq compared to the social norms in America are much different as well. Many things are found to be disrespectful that are not here in America, such as making dirty jokes, such humor is not appreciated in Iraq. Catcalling is so normalized in Western society rather than in Iraq, it will NOT end well for you.

In Iraq (or the Middle East in general), the concept of "honor" is based on very different values than it is in America. Iraqi males are honor-bound to their wives. It is acceptable for an Iraqi male to be a liar, a thief, a workplace cheater, and to take bribes. These requirements would not degrade or disrespect his honor. He would not feel ashamed and could walk with dignity through Baghdad's streets. The biggest insult to his honor would occur if either his wife or his daughter exposed her thighs, wore a miniskirt, or engaged in extramarital sex. He



could kill his daughter for losing her virginity and not go to jail for the crime. In America, it is different because people here are more honest. “Honor” is not tied to a woman at all. If a man's daughter were to have sex before marriage or at a young age that would be ok.

A big blessing for my family was finding a religious group to be around. Being a Shia Muslim, it is hard finding mosques that have the same beliefs as you. Thankfully, my father was introduced to Shia Mosque that we have been attending ever since we came to Minnesota. I have built so many memories, made lifelong friends, and stayed close to my religion because of my father and I am forever grateful.

I could relate to the way men honor women In Iraq. It is this way because as an Iraqi individual living in America and seeing the differences I mostly agree with how Iraqi men honor women rather than how Americans honor women. For example, my brother was taught to be tough and not vulnerable, which caused him to be very overprotective of his wife and his kids. I love that my family and most Arab households are preserved and modest which you will not see much here in America. With traveling to Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries, I saw the differences explicitly. Growing up in the United States, I saw the way women are treated here and not honored the way they should be. The American/Western perspective on women frequently emphasizes independence and autonomy more than other perspectives, which can occasionally result in a devaluation of traditional duties that are traditionally associated with women, such as homemaking and childcare. However, some Middle Eastern societies place more priority on family relationships and community values, which might result in more honor



and respect for women who carry out these tasks. The way women are portrayed in Western media and by society norms frequently emphasizes sexualization and physical attractiveness, which can lead to the idea that women are objects rather than people who should be respected and honored for the contributions they have made to society.



HOW DO I DESCRIBE THIS FEELING?



Weston Coklas

Well, it's sorta like those times outside the garage at the old cabin. You know, the one that Grandpa sold because it had too many memories? I never understood that; getting rid of something because of too many memories. Wouldn't you want to keep it? Hold it tight and never let a soul take it from you? I'm getting off topic...

What I was trying to say is, this feeling feels like those times with friends where you lose track of time and never stop laughing. You're not even saying jokes anymore. You just look at each other and laugh until your stomachs hurt. But that's not quite right. That kinda makes it seem like bliss. That's not the feeling I'm describing.

It's sorta like facing your worst fear, but everyone is cheering you on. Like when we went ziplining and my legs were shaking the entire climb up. Everyone said I could do it. And so I did! But that moment was different from the other times I faced my fears. I don't think my point is coming across...



I keep saying these happy moments, but don't get this feeling confused with childlike wonder. It's different from that. Different like a bookshelf to a school, and like a rock to a volcano. That probably doesn't make much sense. But maybe if I can just describe this correctly, you'll get my analogies.

Imagine a cowboy in a diner. Like an old wild west cowboy in a 1950s diner. Imagine how the conversation would feel between the cowboy and the cook. The difference in lingo and body movements. That's kinda how things feel nowadays. It feels a little bit... uncanny? That's not the best word to describe this, but it's *close enough*. Hopefully you kinda get what I'm saying. So, that's kinda how things feel now, right? Imagine the opposite of that. Things make sense, even if they don't. A cowboy in a diner makes sense. Why? Because why not? We're made of space dust. Is *that* supposed to make sense?

The feeling I'm trying to describe is during that point in life when you could see the entire sky refract and explode like a cosmic firework and it would make sense. When you could watch someone fly and shoot lasers from their eyes and you wouldn't ask questions. Because why wouldn't it make sense? What reference do you have for what is and isn't reality? You used to be as alive as a water bottle and now here you are. If you can exist in a world that exists, then why wouldn't people be able to fly and move things with their minds? What's crazier? What's crazy? Crazy doesn't exist.

At least not yet.



I was driving yesterday. Or was it two days ago? Well, I was driving every day of the week anyway, so it doesn't matter. I was driving. But I'm used to driving. So I just kinda zoned out. Every day I do this. Zone out and drive. Eat food and zone out. Sit at the library and zone out. Nothing is crazy. I know what to expect. I saw someone fall over on the sidewalk the other day. I've seen that happen before. People fall over. Nothing crazy. Crazy doesn't exist. The things that don't exist are what's crazy. Telekinesis and flying are crazy. Pillars of unknown material crashing upwards from the ground would be crazy. But that doesn't exist. I know what to expect.

There's a feeling I used to feel a long time ago. I'm not sure if I could really describe it. There's not a word out there that can describe exactly what I felt. But I bet you've felt it too. And I bet it's gone too. Maybe not entirely. I feel like some people held onto it more than others. But I wasn't lucky enough and I couldn't keep my grip tight.

Maybe if I make enough money, I'll stop feeling so worried and maybe that feeling will come back. Maybe if I have enough friends, I won't feel so lonely, and maybe that feeling will come back. Maybe if I accomplish my goals, I'll feel fulfilled, and maybe that feeling will come back.

Is there any way that feeling can come back? I don't think it ever can in its entirety. We make too many sacrifices. We have to to get what we want out of life.

Isn't that crazy?

You're walking on a railroad. I want you to know that this railroad and its tracks are one of the last things you remember being real. The sky is orange. The wind is calm and warm.



The sound of the town faded a mile and a half back. All you hear is the gravel beneath your feet. You try to balance on the rails of the tracks, but you keep slipping. You will take these tracks for granted one day. You look up from your feet and to the left. A wide field engulfs your vision. There are trees far in the distance, but otherwise there's nothing but tall grass.

You look forward, down the tracks. A silhouette walking towards you is far in the distance.

“WESTON!!” The sound echoes all around, and into my ears.

“JACOB!!” I scream at the top of my lungs.

We both sprint towards one another. Slowly but surely closing the distance

Oh yeah. **That** feeling.



IMMIGRANTS IN THE U.S.



Zahraa Zghair

I wanted to talk and educate people on how immigrants face a lot of public attitudes, which are mostly negative towards immigrants who are culturally less alike. Being an immigrant, myself has motivated me to write about our struggles and how society plays a role in them. I approached this project by really thinking about what is mostly tied to sociology or how I am tied to sociology. Sharing my family's experiences can help educate others about the obstacles immigrants face. We are mostly mistreated on the job, we could be threatened with deportation, denied safety equipment, and paid an unfair wage.



From One Society to Another

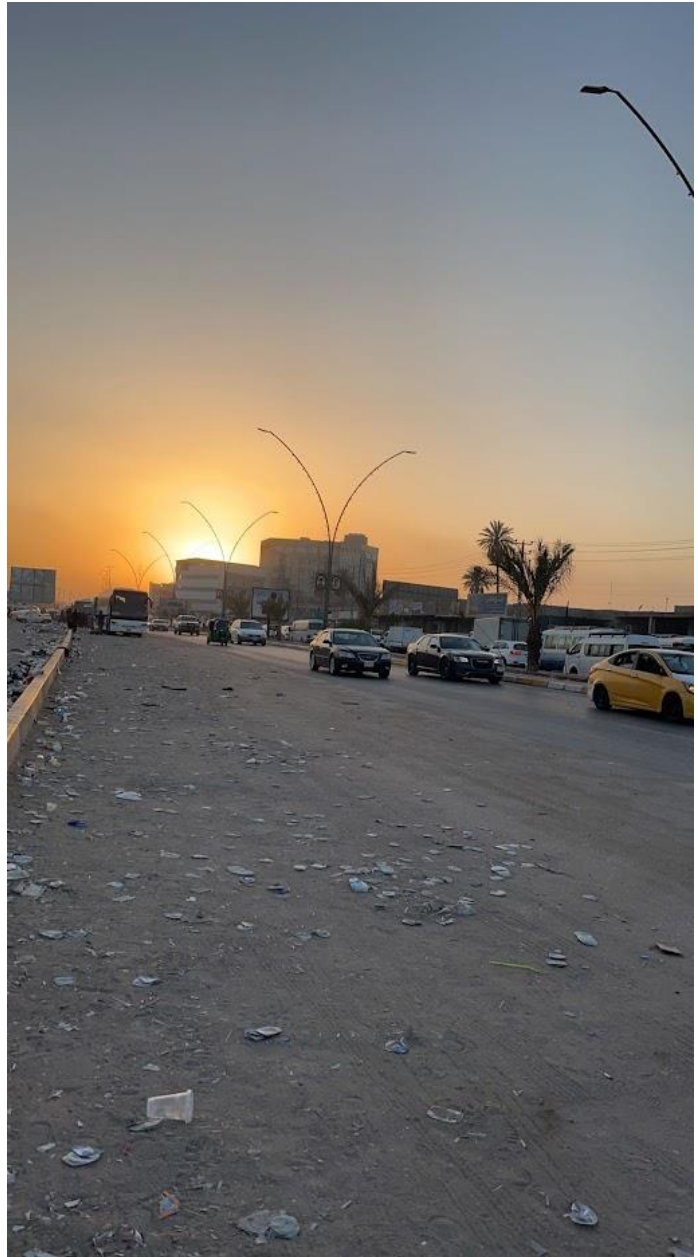
My parents went through a term called “diffusion” or “cultural diffusion.” Diffusion is, in fact, a process of social change because it is a social process by which cultural components are passed from one society or social group to another. In this photo, my father is in the middle, if he were to hang out with American friends the environment would be completely different.



Cultural Shock

After talking to my parents about what it feels like to be an immigrant and their experiences, they told me about how they felt disoriented and lost. This is called “culture shock,” it happens to most immigrants when someone encounters an unusual way of life.

My mom mentioned how the weather was a big part of the change. Living in Minnesota ever since they migrated from Iraq, was a big weather change because Iraq never has snow. As you can see in the picture Iraq usually has dry ground with litter everywhere, opposite to most places in America.





Religion

Being a Muslim and an immigrant in America hasn't always been easy for me and my family and the Muslim community. As a Muslim woman growing up in America, I've felt overwhelmed at times trying to embrace both my "Muslim" and "American" parts of my



identity. Muslims in the United States also see other significant aspects of their integration into American society. Thankfully, moving to the United States didn't affect my religion in a bad way. My parents did a great job at always keeping me educated on what Islam is. As I grew up, I also found my religion myself. I started to lean more on the people that knew most, and social media was good benefit to that as well. I know many Muslims that moved to America and lost touch with their beliefs, and it makes me sad, I try my best to help them go onto the right path of Allah.

Language Barriers

Not speaking English was my parents' toughest struggle, and they still do struggle with this language barrier. It becomes super frustrating not knowing what someone is saying and how to answer. I often must go with my parents to an appointment or store to help translate for them. Language barriers can make immigrants feel anti-social and can lead to possible depression. It's very hard trying to build relationships when there is that struggle with speaking and comprehension.





Children of Immigrants

Personally, for me, it can be very hard being a child of two immigrant parents. Our cultural connections are different, they grew up around a family that was very cultured and somewhat religious. Today, my parents and I, even my older brother, have culture clashes at school and with friends. I see the same happening when I see my nieces growing up. For example, my brother-in-law is very old school and a bit strict. My niece and her dad tend to argue about how her dad needs to learn that times have changed and stop comparing how he grew up to her childhood.



IT TAKES A VILLAGE



Isabella Bridges

“The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth.”

– African Proverb

(TRIGGER WARNING- mentions of physical abuse, substance abuse, suicide)

Abuse, addiction and abandonment describe the previous decade of my life. My mind would scramble to find a surface level response to the cliché “tell me about yourself” introduction that recurred every time I found myself in a new setting. I never did skirt on the surface; the only tip on the iceberg I saw was at the bottom. So there I sat at the bottom of the ocean, chipping away at the deep-seated glacier hoping that perhaps one day I would reach the pinnacle.

I was raised by a single mother of three in Minneapolis, I had a nice childhood. I remember the crisp fall morning towards the beginning of the school year; excitement surged through my body as I loaded onto a packed school bus that smelled of leather. It was a simpler time. My only conflict in life was deciding what snacks to buy at my older brother’s Little



League baseball game concession stand. My mother worked hard, my grandmother spent many hours raising me.

My father was married to another woman when he was with my mother. He had four children within his marriage, one child in his hometown- San Jose, Costa Rica, and two children with my mother. Some of my siblings' ages overlap, cursing my DNA with the generational trauma wounds of infidelity and dishonesty. For many years, I did not know about most of my siblings, and they did not know me. I had a stepdad who filled in the role of my father, from the time I was two until he and my mother divorced when I was 7 or 8. He taught me many things like using the computer and making books. Together we would cook, swim, golf, draw, exercise, and travel. It was fun, but more importantly he instilled discipline in me.

I was an excellent student in school from kindergarten until 5th grade when I attended a private Catholic school. We all wore the same uniforms, and we all prayed to the same God together every Friday. Around 2007, the school had closed due to embezzlement. A math and science Academy opened up in its place. I attended school there for one year. It was very different; primarily black, no uniforms, no prayer, not even textbooks. This school felt more like an experiment so I didn't take it very seriously. Skipping class became a regular habit. My last day was pure chaos. Students threw garbage cans out of windows, threw backpacks and tampons at each other. Silly string and sharpie markers were tools used to cover the lockers, stalls and walls.

For 7th grade I transferred to a large public school. Another new experience for me, but this time more exciting. I dove deeper into my sense of style and individuality. I had heard



a song three years prior to this school year, called “I Don’t Wanna Miss A Thing,” a Rock N Roll love ballad from the 1990s band Aerosmith. This song became a lifestyle for me. I never wanted to miss out on any experience: romance, Rock N Roll, and rose-colored glasses. I read books about rock stars, many of them diaries like the journals of Nikki Sixx or Kurt Cobain. I spent hours straightening my hair to lay jagged bangs swiping across my forehead. I wore checkered Vans, shiny studded belts, colorful skinny jeans full of drawings and rips, and dark colored T-shirts of metal bands like Black Veil Brides. I painted my nails black and drew tattoos onto my skin with sharpies. I was more concerned with my image and my playlist than anything school had to offer. Except one thing: boys.

I closed my locker after my 3rd period humanities class in the fall of 2010. Behind the door was a boy waiting for me. His green and hazel eyes peered at me with excitement. This was the first time I had been asked on a date. A high school football game, I couldn’t wait. My new friend from advisory walked me to her house after school where she did my makeup. I felt a whole new world open up that day. We smoked Black & Mild cigars in the alley, we met up with other students and watched the boys drink vodka stolen from their parents’ cabinets. They smoked cigarettes, rode skateboards—and like me—they loved Rock N Roll. We quickly assembled a core friend group. We used to skip school together to go smoke weed. We would hang out all day until the last after school activity bus was ready to take off. We went to firework shows together, movies, and had sleepovers all the time.

My mother initially, like most parents of middle schoolers I knew, didn’t allow co-ed sleepovers. Until one day she dropped my boyfriend and his best friend off after we all went



to the mall together. He had given her directions leading to downtown Minneapolis and asked her to let them out on a street corner. She insisted on driving him to his door. He reluctantly showed us where he lived; she cried upon discovery that it was a homeless shelter. From then on, she didn't have strict rules about who could spend the night with me, and where I could spend the night at.

That boyfriend I first went on real dates with, and experienced mood-altering substances with, became the first boy I suffered abuse from. I had already seen the signs of manipulation and control tactics he would use, but I always gave him the benefit of doubt. Until things went too far. After a sleepover one day he randomly lashed out; he repeatedly struck me with my belt that he had taken out of my hands while I was getting dressed to leave. I rode the bus to a McDonald's and called a friend on the phone while I cried in the bathroom mirror realizing he had left bruises all over me. It wasn't until many years later that I learned I wasn't the first woman in my family to hide bruises.

His behavior trained me for a very lengthy relationship with abusive men. I didn't want to explain why I stayed. I didn't want to leave, the love was "unconditional." I didn't want to expose his unhinged behavior. I took blame for the events when he created drama between me and other girls at school. One time he even put a cigarette out on my right cheek while we were at the park, his reasoning was to instigate a fight between me and another girl. Without seeing another way out of the situation, that's exactly what happened. I found myself stuck in the vicious cycle of numbing my pain with substances and then going back to my source of pain. I searched high and low for the feelings we felt in the beginning of the relationship,



trying to wrap my head around what went wrong. Not realizing that the “love” I felt in the beginning was an abuse tactic called “love bombing.” As I desperately felt the need to escape, I was constantly in trouble.

I was sent to an alternative school in 7th grade, as well as the 2 years that followed. I had 2 hours of online schooling in person then was sent home with a stack of packets. I spent many hours focused on music and art. I began tattooing at the age of 15 because I was excellent at drawing and because the boy I liked at the time wanted new tattoos. As I continued tattooing, word got around and I made decent money. I did what I thought was an expression of love, I didn’t want to miss a single moment, miss a single feeling. I had finally detached from my first abuser solely because, well, I had met his older brother.

My ex’s older brother would stand up for me and consider my feelings. My ex never laid a hand on me again. So I liked his older brother. He introduced me to new art, new people, new music, new places, and most importantly, new substances. I burned my lungs, I numbed my tongue, I took psychedelics, I took pills, and I started having sex. For 3 years I was his safe place, he came back to me when he would fight with the mother of his first child. He used women, then left them high and dry. There I was waiting every time. Addicted once again to the highs and lows; lured by the breadcrumbs only to arrive at an empty table.

By Sophomore year I transferred to a project-based Charter School. I had an expressive outlet for my art: painting, singing and teaching for my projects. I had caring teachers, friends, and support. My favorite part was a group we formed called S.T.A.N.D. U.P (students taking action now defending underprivileged people.) We raised money to get beds in a battered



women's shelter. We advocated for victims and spread awareness about human trafficking. I fell in love with service work. For the first time in a long time I wasn't led by my need for constant stimulation and instant gratification. Joy was no longer siphoned by destination addiction. Serving other people in a community gave my life meaning.

I graduated in 2016, the same year I met the father of my son. Despite having experienced a glimpse of my life's purpose, I abused my freedom as an early adult. For 3 years I polluted the community, contributing to addiction and infidelity. I crashed cars, used and sold drugs; I danced at a club for more money than I knew how to manage. I traveled all over: Colorado, Ohio, Florida, like a stone rolling in the wind. In 2018 I found myself stuck in an abusive relationship once more. I woke up in a bathtub at a hotel in Manhattan, New York in May. I was on a vacation with that man I had stuck by since 2016. He was tapping me gently to wake me up after he choked me out "by mistake" upon discovery that he wasn't the only man I was interested in. Things got pretty blurry that summer of 2018. After nearly T-boning a family's minivan, I quit drugs cold-turkey. After 8 years of daily chemical dependency, sobriety was lethal. I was unable to eat or sleep for days at a time, psychosis soon followed. My mom had noticed my erratic behavior and drove me to the hospital, coincidentally, after a failed suicide attempt. I don't recall longing for death, but I was so delusional that I thoroughly believed I was at the hospital to do a surgery; I was a doctor. The hospital was quiet, safe. I paced circles around the psych unit lobby in blue scrubs and twisted my hair anxiously. I ate crunchy grain toast, plain oatmeal, and swallowed big, chalky potassium supplements.



One month later, I was pregnant. I stayed sober for several months before my addiction caught up with me. I was financially and emotionally bound to my abuser. I raised my son, made car payments, put food on the table, diapers on his body. I kept him healthy and happy then disappeared at night. It was 2021, I met a man that I would smoke with. I gave him rides around the city to find propane to heat his tent at night. He was homeless and he spoke life into me. “I think you’ve been doing things your whole life to get acceptance from people that should’ve rooted for you,” he said, “yet they expect you to do—and no matter how good you try at that (to-do cloud) you’re never gonna reach their expectations.” I gained deep confidence and empowerment throughout our many late-night conversations. We even worked on a landscaping project together from a local community member.

I liked design. I began a career in interior painting, I got a house and a work van. Independence was sweet, but dangerous. I drank at the bar on lunch breaks, dabbled in the face numbing residue leftover from my epileptic coworker in the bathroom, or a pill with a different coworker, leftover from my days of selling. One coworker was different, though. He had lost his company van because of alcohol. He advised me to go where he had been sentenced to...community church. Our boss happened to be a pastor who leads a recovery program that he started when he got clean about two decades ago. He runs treatment centers and a dozen sober homes in the community. As an opportunist, I wanted to get closer to this successful business owner. But what I got was much deeper. “We’re more than a church...we’re a community.” That wasn’t just a catch phrase. This community fed me,



clothed me, embraced every side of me light and dark, most importantly they loved me unconditionally.

In July of 2022, the spirit moved me to seek a sponsor from the church. She has been walking me through the 12-step recovery program ever since. Ironically, the same boy who was my first abuser is also in recovery and invited me to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting that later became my home group. This group listened to me battle inner turmoil when I ran to them after being offered my drug of choice, along with thousands of dollars. I said no to that offer because of the collective conscious connection of the people I come home to. They also sat with me in supportive silence as I grieved the death of my son's 4-year-old cousin. My community prayed, we hugged, we laughed, we cried. We spread the message of hope and a better way to live for the addict seeking recovery, our testimony. We often say, "We cannot keep what we have without sharing it with others."

Now, I am approaching my first full year clean since 2010. The poison drains slowly, but my path luminesces miraculously. I share my story, I spread my gratitude. Inspired by a pastor at the village, I left my career to go to school for social work so I can help others the way that I have been helped along the way. The power to help my community is my deepest desire.

Ezekiel 36:26 (NIV) "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."



JUST ASK



Aselah Mouti

I'm so tired and my face is cold. I've been standing outside for about ten minutes in my big coat that covers my knees and my running shoes that my coach made me buy and that Mom and Dad fought over because they were 60 dollars more than we could afford. I don't know when my teammates left but gauging by the intense stinging of the cold air hitting my cheeks, I would say about too long for an 8-year-old in the dead middle of winter. It's not the first time dad's been late picking me up from gymnastics so I'm fairly use to it, but I can't lie and say that my heart doesn't hurt when I see my teammates dads chatting happily after practice. I hear the engine of his old white work van trailing up the road and as it stopped in front of me with a harsh screech of the brakes grinding together, I hop in. I can feel the fragile tension in the air readying to shock me as soon as my lips create a sound, so I stay silent. I want to ask why he was late? Or why he's angry again? I'm consumed with confusion because last week he wasn't late once, last week he said he'd never be late again. Last week he was happy. But just as the questions bubble up trying to burn their way out of my mouth, I force them down and swallow them up with the fear of upsetting him again.



I realized my dad was different when I was just 6, when my whole family went to Disneyland, and he decided that he wanted to stay home. My six-year-old brain couldn't fathom the idea of saying no to Disneyland or staying home away from the fun, away from me. I wanted to ask him why. Was he sick? Did he not like Disney land? Ask him what was wrong. I told myself he'd change his mind; when the time came, he would pack his bag and go with us, but he didn't, not then and not ever again.

I started to convince myself it was normal at around 11 years old. I had become accustomed to seeing my dad in only one area of my life, and that was at home. It didn't matter if it was a good month or a bad one, he was always there on that couch when I left for school and on that couch as I came home. He was amazing on his good months always singing and dancing, in the living room or cooking some sort of amazing traditional Moroccan cuisine in the kitchen. Some days we would sit on the couch together watching soccer or sharing stories for hours. Those days felt magical, the house felt full of warmth, light and fragile, those days I felt no confusion at all. I never even asked why he was happy. Why he couldn't be more like this every day. Because it was so delicate, I just accepted his happiness. I knew I had to enjoy it while it was here because next month things wouldn't be so cheerful. I didn't want to ask because that's when the bad months came. Those months I realized our light house had become heavy. He had smashed our delicate house and I hated him for it. I didn't understand why it had to be this, way why his emotions affected me so much. It was so disappointing leaving for school and coming home to the bad months. Listening to him fight with Mom or drink until he passed out. I wanted the light back so badly. I wanted the dad I knew was inside



him somewhere to come back. I didn't understand how he could flip the switch so fast, and so I swore to never be like him. I wanted to be open and honest because not knowing what was wrong and not knowing how to fix it had made my life one of uncertainty and it was exhausting.

When I was 15, I started to learn what it was my father was struggling with because I also realized he'd given me the struggle too. I wasn't quite as bad as my dad but when I began to miss school and stopped hanging out with my friends, I realized that I had a problem. The sick feeling in my stomach as I thought about going to school every day caused me to avoid it. I would sit in my room stuffing the hollow feeling in my body with endless amounts of tv and fake notions about never going back. I wanted to tell someone that I felt empty, that the hollow parts of me were echoing with ideas about my lack of value. I wanted to ask someone why I felt like this? Why there was some part of me that wanted to disappear? I wanted to know why I couldn't leave my room without feeling sick to my stomach with nerves. But I didn't. Instead, I packed the questions neatly in the chest—already full of similar ones that had piled up about my dad—and locked them all away. It was then that I realized I was starting to reflect my father.

Around 17, I felt the switch get stuck. I watched as my father's bad months get longer and his mental illness crowded his life with a gray blurriness that seemed to follow him. I tried to help him out and pull at the small ropes attached to his happier months, but they were frayed and old. He snapped his ropes, and I couldn't save him with just my hands. I tried cooking and dancing, but he didn't want to sing. I tried soccer and stories, but his pain was



stronger. The last morning I left for school and came back to that couch was the day I realized I should have done the thing that scared me the most. I should have asked. Maybe then I could've helped because those questions I had stored so tightly locked away sprung out when I saw that the only person that had the answers was gone.

About one year after I found him on that couch, I started to understand him better. I realized that my pride had gotten in the way of my curiosity. That he was so scared to show his cards and to admit he didn't understand his emotions or his illness that he let it stun him. He froze still under the spotlight of judgment and let it stunt his growth. I allowed shame to eat at the parts of me that wanted to understand my dad and my mental illness because revealing that fact that I need help was terrifying. That's what happened to my father, and I will not let it happen to me. Next time I feel I need help. I'll ask.



NOTHING STAYS THE SAME

Francis Huynh

Nothing stays the same forever. This is what I would've told myself as a child. By this, I mean our relationships with our loved ones, and friends, especially the opportunities we get at certain times of our life. When I was eighteen, fresh out of high school, it was my time to go to college, to become a nurse, and to make my mother proud. That was my plan. However, plans got delayed, and the opportunities I had started to fade away. I felt as if I was being left behind by the peers I had grown up with in high school. As if I had slowed down and could see myself being dragged down by my thoughts and self-depreciation. But just as life goes on, people grow and become adults, not being who they used to be. Nothing stays the same forever.

What was initially an extended summer break became a few years. The excitement I had felt during graduation was the realization that I would have to become an adult; having an independent feeling as if I were a stallion being released into an open meadow. However, I was being left behind and becoming stagnant in an environment where I was constantly being the end of her jokes in conversations between my mother and her friends. Even with

normal conversations with strangers, I could hear myself being brought up, leaving me in this circle of resentment and depression. However, nothing stays the same forever. I was eventually able to apply for classes and continue my plans from when I graduated from high school.

Knowing what you want to do after high school is a feeling I always needed to understand. In high school, I was placed in a medical program leading me to the journey of becoming a nurse, which I had just followed along with. Experiencing AP classes, being constantly given assignments, memorizing the human body and the vocabulary that came with it. When I was finally able to go to college for nursing, I was ecstatic about being in an unfamiliar environment. It was a feeling of growth by going to classes and having a schedule to go through each day. I felt like a dog happily exploring a dog park, happily going through day-by-day life like I didn't have to worry about the future. Just focus on what's in front of me and things will come together. However, nothing lasts forever. After a year of going to class, I realized I was not even interested in nursing. I did not have any interest besides gaming and creating art. The time I had spent on classes for a major I did not really want felt like the only route I had to follow.

Throughout my life, my mother has always loved and supported me as her son. She supported me by getting me what I needed financially, what I would need for the best education, as any parent would. But the cost of doing what seemed best for her son also came with overprotectiveness as a parent: the cost of freedom as a young adult. Do I mean to be ungrateful? Of course not. But as a son who loves his mother, and who has been reminded



time and time again to succeed, it felt like I couldn't explore and make my own decisions without worrying about what my mother wants—without being criticized and demoralized for having dreams of blooming from a seed into a fully grown flower. The constant reminder that if I don't have a high-paying job, an education to make sure I don't end up a useless bum, as my mother would put it, haunts me every time.

This spiraled back into my depression of feeling behind compared to others. Disappointing, and having wasted my mother's efforts and time in bringing me into this world. I feared all my lacking efforts would amount to nothing and her sacrifices would be for nought. Even breaking down when asked the simple question "What do you want to do?" after years of being led toward this path by my school, encouraged by my mother, who had been proud that her son wanted to be in the medical field. Conflicted between my own decisions, having to worry about the future as who would take care of my mother if I didn't have a successful job, and wasting my time. I had wasted almost two years on college, not even applied to the nursing program, and time was ticking. As I grew older, it felt like an hourglass losing time, to do what I want in life while focusing on my mother and what she wanted from her son. After all, if not her own son, who else is going to take care of her when she's older? A son who doesn't have a job, education, or even have plans to support his mother who supported him throughout his entire life?

Thankfully, nothing stays the same. I met a special person, who had guided me from this path that I had struggled so much with. I met someone through a hobby that I'm passionate about. She showed me the world and what it had to offer. I had finally felt like a



person who had my own choice in life, and I could finally express myself without fear or shame of who I was before. She had taken me for who I was, understood me, and loved me despite my situation. I moved out, had my first job, and paid rent for the first time, living the life of being an adult that I had dreamed of when I had graduated from high school. The life I wanted for myself is not easy; an adult life is not without responsibilities and bills. The person I was before, the one who had no experience with jobs, social events, and not even being an adult is no longer here. The feeling of not being chained down to self-doubt, the feeling that I will never grow, and never feel caught up to everyone. But loved by the person who had been on this journey with me, like I can become my own person without the worries of disappointing others is something I never would have thought of. This is why I chose this message for my younger self because, remember, nothing stays the same forever.



POURING RAIN



Estella Thorvilson

Sometimes, when you make big choices, you end up with big consequences. Funnily enough, that is not the moral of this story. It really felt like it, though, as I stared quietly across the room at my mother crying in our pristine, white hotel room in Duluth after making the toughest decision of my life.

I was meant to start college the next morning. Well, not “start” exactly. I was supposed to let my mother leave and wait for classes to start a week later. The typical college drop off that every student who moves away from their family must go through. Mine did not go smoothly, to say the least.

My mother and I had spent the afternoon moving me into my dorm room. It was a large, mostly empty apartment-style dorm. There was a cramped bathroom, two little bedrooms—meant to be shared by two girls in each, a drab living room, and a poorly lit kitchen. Somehow, two of my roommates had moved in, and it was still dim and completely lacking character. The rough, sandpaper carpeting—probably the same kind used in the classrooms—scraped against my feet as I observed the area. It was just us. At least we had room to unpack.



So, we did. My mother and I unpacked my clothes, books, markers, computer, bedding, and everything else. Bright led bulbs shone from overhead, not at all helping the sinking feeling in my chest. In a few short hours, my mother was going to leave me here. Alone.

From birth until age nine, it was just my mother and me. We were a little team, a duo. She has been my person for my entire life. We've had our ups and downs, of course, but I can't imagine my life without her. After she got married, the dynamic shifted. I wasn't her only person anymore. I had to share her. My stepfather and I have never had the best relationship. He came into my life abruptly and I don't think he ever intended to make me his child. With that, it created a divide. My mother couldn't give her attention to both of us at once, and turns were taken. In the beginning, she moved away, and it was his turn. My turn came again eventually, but the transition from all to partial, or none, was tough and lonely. I was only nine, but I made it through. I had to. Despite everything, though, she was still my mother and nothing, no one, could change that.

This will change that, I thought to myself as I stared blankly at the dull brown walls of my new bedroom. That thought could be called irrational, but in my spiraling mind it was far from it. I said nothing, though. I got quiet, as I always did when I was upset. We had to go to Target to buy a microwave, which was a great excuse to get out of that suffocating dorm room.

The radio played softly, and the landscape whizzed by as my mother drove. The ride was nearly silent, and I knew my mother was catching onto my anxiety. She knows me better



than anyone on this planet. She can read me like an open book, and there I was. Truly, we both knew I was waiting for her to call me out. She didn't mention any of it, though.

Target was how it always is. Blaringly bright and extremely overcrowded, all of this intensified by college season. I was aggravated, to say the least. Really, I had nothing to be upset at, and it was simply a manifestation of my anxiety, which was slowly taking over and consuming my entire being. The feeling crawled along my skin. Every question asked, every suggestion made, and every aisle passed pushed me over the edge. The minute we were at the car, I braced my hands on the cool, metal car door and began to sob. There were so many words unsaid, too many problems that felt impossible to handle. The world was caving in around me and there was no air left.

We decided to get something to eat. We picked up food from a simple, somewhat grungy fast-food restaurant and went back to the hotel. Not to my dorm. The conversation that was had after dinner was long and complex. Calm words morphed into cries and screams and pleas. The room buzzed with all of the emotion and tension being let out. Everything was crumbling down, and not just for me. My mother was falling apart, and I could see it. She had bags under her eyes and all of the force and sting of her words were gone. I'd drained her.

"I can't stay here," I whispered, my voice soft like when I was young.

My mother's eyes softened, and she nodded, "I know."

The next day, we moved everything out of my dorm. The clothes, the computer, the markers and bedding. Everything went back into boxes, back into the car. My head hung low, chest aching and full of shame. Even though no questions were asked by my absent



roommates, I was still mortified. To come home with nothing accomplished except for a big waste of time, that thought killed me inside. With the trunk full, we left and stopped at a small gas station right outside of campus. The trip back would be a long one.

I stood quietly outside as my mother filled the tank, my lungs filling with the reeking smell of gasoline mixed with cool, northern air. I had cried a lot over the past twenty-four hours. My eyes ached and my head throbbed as I stared up at the crystal blue sky. My mother came round, I don't know how long I had been standing there when she did, I had gotten lost in my own head long ago. She pulled me into a warm embrace and held me in a way she really never had before. It was close, desperate, loving. Her body was soft and warm, and I melted into the feeling. My forehead rested on her shoulder, and I exhaled shaky and slow. The moment held a thousand words that could not, and needed not, be said. After we parted, the world was cold again and I longed to return to my mother's embrace, but I didn't.

"We're going to be okay," my mother assured me.

I simply nodded, "I know."

There were no tears, but it was like it had been pouring rain all day, and this was the quiet moment after the storm. A long minute went by before we both got back into the car, finally reaching a moment of peace. The storm was over, and the rain had stopped. It was finally time to go home.

It has been a little over six months since I left Duluth. I had to put my dreams on hold and reassess what I really wanted. I worked at an office job for three months, longing to find what I wanted to do with my life. I learned a lot from that experience, and one of those things



was that I didn't want that job to be what my life looked like for the next several years. I wanted more. So, I applied to North Hennepin Community College to pursue my dream of becoming a social worker, the dream I went all the way to Duluth for in the first place. My dreams, goals, and aspirations didn't have to come in one way, shape, or form. I could take them anywhere with me. So, I brought them to the place I would be most comfortable as a quiet, anxious nineteen-year-old girl. I still have a lot of growing up that I need to do, and I am doing that in a place where I can be my best self.

When you look at your next step in life and question yourself, you have to do what is best for you. The only person who knows you best is you. Even if it feels like a mistake or it may seem easier to tough it out, you have to listen to your heart. If something doesn't feel right for you, then it probably isn't. Always make the best decision for you, and that way you won't have any regrets.



REMEMBER HOW WE GOT HERE



Kenneth Batiste

The Native American Catholic Church on the Lower Sioux Community sent people to sing Dakota hymns. An older woman in their group told a story about her niece, who asked her why we gave up all the medicine from before the white men came. She explained that it was because we loved Jesus, we saw that he fasted like us, and helped those in need, so we gave up all our teachings that were passed down for hundreds of generations. In reality, not all of us gave up our medicine, and many who did were forced to; it wasn't out of love. My grandpa was kidnapped from his family, alongside his siblings, and they were sent to abusive foster parents who beat them for praying in Ojibwe. Historically, conversion to Christianity was used to erase the culture of thousands of Native Americans in boarding schools across the United States. If I could convince myself that we willfully chose Jesus, then maybe I'd be able to reconcile with myself, for giving up my culture and submitting to assimilation.

We were at my cousin's funeral. After the hymns, the Padre gave his own speech. It was about the relationship between a father and his son, and our relationship to our "Father." My uncle Tony lost his son Atreyu. The Padre explained that this father-son relationship is at



the center of everything. My aunt Elaine also lost her son. It made me think about how there is no mother in the Holy Trinity. My cousin was baptized as a child, but he always talked about Gitchimanidoo, our creator, not God. It disgusted me that the church used our vulnerability as another opportunity to impose their beliefs on our injured community. In Ojibwe teachings, the Earth is our mother, and our faith is inextricably tied to the Earth. Traditional Native American “Churches” exist on the same patriarchal spectrum as Catholic ones, but the principles of certain central morals are incompatible.

I don’t think that Christianity is evil. I see how faith empowers people, and I recognize that Christianity is an effective medium for people to understand their spirituality, even though I don’t think religious institutions have made a net positive affect. I’m aware of how my experience as a Native American has painted Christianity as an evil force. When I was in elementary school, people didn’t accept my beliefs as a religion. The Christians in my class didn’t think it existed on the same level. I almost thought they were right.

When my dad was young, they had to do ceremonies and powwows in secret. Deep in the woods, all the Natives would meet to share stories, dance, and sing, but it had to be quiet. Him and his cousins would be by the road, waiting for a car to pass so they could flash a light signaling everyone to stop, and when they were sure it wasn’t a cop, they would let them know to continue. If you were Christian, you didn’t have to hide. It wasn’t until 1975 that we had religious freedom, and even after that we still had to keep our traditions a secret. Ironically, one of my aunts told me about a Christian pastor who would let them skip their mandatory Catholic prayers so they could sneak in the back and pray in Ojibwe.



You can be a Christian and a Native American. You can live by the values of our traditions and be Catholic, but you risk obscuring the wisdom of our ancestors. I was grateful that they had a Big Drum at the funeral. An invention of the Ojibwe or Dakota, depending on which elder you asked. Many songs on the Big Drum derive from ancient chants originally performed with rattles and have no other form but in our ancestor's language. In my eyes, the hymns are a superficial connection to our culture compared to the songs passed down through generations of genocide. I admire the resolve of my ancestors to hold onto those traditions, but many were still lost and need to be found.

It's common for things to go missing in Native American life. I have multiple cousins who went missing when I was younger, and some of their names I can't even remember, almost like that's lost too. I remind myself that I was never close with them, but I'm still ashamed. I'm desperate to not lose more, and it makes me angry that some people would let the world take away so much of our identity without fighting back.

Still, I understand how hard it is to live without a sense of community. The colonization of America, and the reservation system, destroyed our ability to unite. The United States installed their own Churches, outlawed our gatherings, and monopolized control over our faith. These churches still exist today, and for many Native Americans, are the only reliable option to consistently find community. I can sympathize with the conflict from seeking refuge with an enemy, which might have existed in the heart of the woman who spoke before the hymns, but it's hard for me to forgive her for imposing an incorrect consolation on the audience of my cousin's funeral.



I'm asking myself if this is what they wanted when they forced us to convert. Did they plan for me to have these thoughts? I feel manipulated into resenting my own people, and I wonder if the woman who sang the hymns felt this too. There is already so much division in Native society. Since the colonizers arrived, we were separated from our families, and today there is a clear division between the life of Natives on the reservation and in the city. I don't want them to succeed dividing us, so I have to accept our connection to Christianity, but in order to overcome history we have to remember it. Forgetting why we gave up our medicine won't heal our loss.



THE RAIN



Kaitlyn Jette

October was knocking on my front door twiddling its orange peeled thumbs and wiping at its flushed face from the chill that mixed with the leftover heat. It blushed at first when I answered then asked to be let in with its soggy water-filled boots splashing along my floor, melting into the wood like fog. I couldn't just let it stand outside. I knew it wouldn't go away anytime soon, and it was fogging up my windowpane with its raggedy breathing pressing cold mildew across the glass.

When October comes, it does so quietly, timidly even. It knocks softly as it did on my front door, unlike November, who will most likely break it down just like last year. The air is getting colder, but not cold enough for snow. Instead there is just rain. Buckets of rain. This week it came pouring down in droves, minute after minute, hour after hour like the world was squeezing out the remaining moisture from its pockets before everything froze to shards. It's the one gift October brings where the sky tumbles into gray cloth and the wind blows back and forth through the trees as the darkness creeps over the horizon. October smiles real shyly as it comes with cold and crushing pressure, and all the rain comes barreling down in one last



effort to reach the earth before it turns to snow. I worked seven hours the day that it came. I would glance back as it grew darker outside just to watch the clouds roll in. Soon enough big dollops of water collided into the windows and I listened to the music of them barreling down from thousands of feet above just to crash into the pavement outside. The drops grew bigger and more of them trailed down the length of the glass as oceans dripped from the sky.

I would like to imagine that the rain in October is the world's last stitch effort to revive itself before the seasons set in. It's not warm enough to return to summer, but it's not cold enough to turn the water to ice. It's just this awkward stage in the middle where nothing is bad or good. It's just raining.

I paced in front of the windows for the last few hours while ringing customers up at the register. Their eyes would grow big watching the storm outside pour down on the cars, and they would look at all their new bags they had to carry, then back out to the wind and the rain that my store sheltered them from. People who came in groups sent out alone, victim to bring their cars around. I would smile and wait at the windows while the strangers took turns sprinting out to safety. Most covered their faces and ran out into the puddles and the forming rivers of the parking lot while others walked as slowly as they could.

When it was my turn to leave, I stood in the doorway with the tips of my shoes sticking out into the splattering mayhem of the rain. October was standing behind me with its chin sitting on my shoulder and told me with apple cider breath that the water wasn't that cold. It wasn't warm either. It was just rain. I took a step out with my face up in the sky and let it



drench over my clothes and meld my hair to the sides of my face. It came pouring over my eyes and grabbing my limbs with the weight of autumn as I walked ever so slowly to my car. I spun once, then twice, then dipped my foot into a puddle. October was swallowing me whole and it wasn't bad, or good, just something in between, and still, the rain has never felt this good.



TWO GRANDPAS AND A DOG



Tatum Griebenow

I remember standing in the living room with my sister as the white car pulled into the driveway of our house in May of 2019. A clenching pain overwhelmed my stomach, and my eyes began to well. I looked at my sister, blurry through the tears. Her eyes were reddening as she covered her mouth with her hand. It was becoming too real. We had talked about it all week, but it wasn't real until then. Our dog, Buddy, sat at our feet, looking up at us in confusion. I never thought about how much I would miss his curly white fur or the clicking sound his claws would make on the hardwood floor.

My family crowded together as the veterinarian entered our home. She had kind eyes and dark hair that was pulled back into a slick bun. She wore an understanding smile on her face, one that made me feel warm inside. I knew she was going to end his suffering, yet I wondered how she could smile like that when she was about to take away my dog. My dog who comforted me when I was sad and slept under my bed when he was scared. My dog who had been in my life for as long as I could remember.

The vet entered our living room and took out her supplies. My senses were



overwhelmed by tears and a longing to snatch up our dog and run away. My head pounded as I clenched my teeth as hard as I could, trying to ignore the massive needle the vet held in her hand.

“Well, now I can get new carpet,” my mom joked. I looked at her, incredulously, but she wasn’t smiling. She turned and saw me staring, recognizing the horror in my face. Her expression softened and she began to cry. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t say that. I’m sorry.” This was how she coped. She was uncomfortable and sad. Her kids were upset, and she didn’t know how to console them. She didn’t know how to console *herself*.

It’s not like Buddy didn’t have a good long life. He did. He was an old dog, and his time had come like we always knew it was going to. But as we watched the vet pick up Buddy’s vessel, carry him to the white car, and drive away, I felt my heart start to crack like a thin sheet of ice. Nothing could have prepared me for the crushing pain I was feeling.

Less than a year later, I lost my grandpa on my dad’s side, “Grandpa Grieb.” He was a Cold War Vet who loved chocolate and golf. He wasn’t scared of death, which I admired but couldn’t understand. He didn’t suffer for very long, and he was 85 years old. He even got to see his kids one last time. That being said, it didn’t make it easier. I had never seen my dad cry like that before. My sister was the last grandchild to see him before he passed. I didn’t want to visit him, because I wanted to remember my grandpa when he was himself, not hooked up to tubes and wires. I still wonder if I made the right choice.

Two years later, I lost my grandpa on my mom’s side, “Papa Toot.” He attended



countless horrible band concerts and rooted for us at every softball game he could make it to. He was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer and died 4 months after his diagnosis. He missed my sister's graduation and his 76th birthday. My mom took care of him often while he was dying. She came home exhausted one night and told us that he said to her, "I wasn't done yet."

A pit slowly formed my gut as my family and I experienced these losses. I realized that I could lose anyone I loved at any given moment. I had these important figures present in my life since I was little, and I assumed they would always be there. I felt like my sense of safety, control, and stability had been stripped away from me, replaced by panic and fear. I would wake up for school in 7th grade with a terrible stomachache every morning without fail. My mother had to tell my teachers that I would be absent for the first and second hour until my stomachache went away.

I found myself lying awake at night, mind spinning like a whirlpool, thinking about death, fearing death, worrying about death. I had always been anxious, but I used to fear the dark, or worry about my grades...not spin out about death. I would wonder what I would do if I lost my mom, or sister, or dad. I would create this image in my mind that felt so real, I would sit up drenched in sweat, tears trickling down my face and trying to muffle my cries so I wouldn't wake anyone up.

My mom asked me if I wanted to see a therapist. I refused and refused every time she asked me after that. I didn't want to go to therapy. That meant something was wrong.



After my second grandpa died, I didn't give myself time to cry. I told myself I was too busy. I shoved my emotions deep down inside myself where I wouldn't have to acknowledge them. One day I sat down on the couch with my mom, and we started talking about Papa Toot. My eyes started to well, but I blinked the tears away. My mom noticed.

"You can cry," she told me. "It's okay to cry."

And I did. I sobbed so hard for so long that I couldn't breathe.

And it felt *good*. Like a glass bottle being thrown down on a sidewalk and bursting open. All the emotions I had stuffed down came pouring out. I felt an unfamiliar sense of relief, like a dam in my chest had finally broken after being under pressure for too long. It didn't fix anything, but it helped.

Feeling some of the same anxiety that prevented me from going to school in 7th grade, I went to a stress support group in high school. One of the counselors who led the group asked me if I wanted to start private therapy sessions. I agreed. I was ready to get therapy. Being able to unload everything I had cooped up in my mind onto someone who was there to listen to me felt amazing and horrible at the same time, but that pit in my gut was slowly shrinking in size.

My dad once told me that Grandpa Grieb had come close to death much earlier in his life but recovered. Grandpa told my dad that he left his body and got to see what it was like after death. What he saw was beautiful. That's why he wasn't afraid to die. That was immensely comforting. It was like a new door was opened. Maybe I didn't need to fear death.



When Buddy was sick, Mom told me about the dogs she had growing up, and how every time one of them passed, she felt like she lost a piece of herself. She lost an even bigger piece when her grandmother died.

“There will be a hole in your heart that will never be filled.” She looked at me and smiled while her eyes brimmed with tears. “But it gets easier. I promise it will get easier. It just takes time.”

Sometimes I would find her red-eyed after looking at photos of her grandma, and she would quickly wipe her face and tell me how silly it was for her to cry about someone who died so many years ago. *I* thought it was silly that she felt like she couldn’t mourn her loved ones long after they were gone, especially after she told me about the holes in my heart that would never be filled.

Experiencing loss and grief are extremely painful things, but I learned through those experiences how to cope and be resilient. I learned that death is a part of life and that I don’t have to fear it. I learned that change is constant, and everyone copes differently. I learned how to feel what I need to feel and that it helps to talk to someone about it. If you give yourself time to grieve and heal, it does get easier. My anxiety is the most managed it has ever been, and I wouldn’t be where I am if I didn’t have these experiences.



THE WISTFUL BEAUTY OF SUMMER



Sidick Bakayoko

June 20th, 6 p.m. As the soft tendrils of dawn gently caressed my room, signaling the arrival of the first day of summer in Abidjan, I stirred from my slumber. The room was bathed in a warm glow, casting an optimistic aura over what seemed to be an ordinary Tuesday, the last day of school. The mundane predictability of the day lined up perfectly with my routine and created a reassuring sense of normalcy.

In the haze of excitement for the upcoming vacation, my thoughts were consumed by visions of new destinations, vibrant cultures, and the warmth of shared laughter. France awaited us, and my mother, an ardent lover of travel, was particularly thrilled. As she busied herself packing our bags alone, her gestures and attitude implicitly asked for some help, but I found myself engrossed in laying on the living room couch, cell phone in my hands, pretending not to see anything, reminiscing through the pictures of our previous trips. Indeed, each year, our family explored different countries—France, Italy, Morocco, and Dubai were our last



destinations—immersing ourselves in diverse landscapes and traditions. This time, however, the script took an unexpected turn.

Three days later, we were in a small French town, called Angers, located in the western part of France, and our vacation began. We chose to start our trip there because it was a good occasion for us to see my aunt, who is living with her husband, and my three cousins. As she always does, she awaited us with a banquet in our honor and a full touristic planning to help us find new activities. It's been over a decade since we have had this vacation ritual, but my aunt always managed to find exciting new activities for us.

After an interminable night, disturbed by excitement, I woke up the next morning, eager for the exploration that awaited, only to be greeted by the sight of my mother's right eye, now a vivid shade of scarlet. Even though her eye gave me the feeling that it was trying to do a “Gossamer” cosplay, she did not seem to feel any pain. We moved on and decided to ignore it, to continue our daily plans.

As the day progressed, so did the troubling transformation in my mother's eye. What had initially seemed like a minor aberration now demanded attention. The urgency grew as her vision began to deteriorate. The once vibrant aura of adventure was now shrouded in uncertainty. Our pursuit of exploration came to a grinding halt, replaced by an urgent quest for medical intervention. The scent of the hospital, sterile and heavy with anxiety, invaded my senses as we rushed to the nearest medical facility. Little did I know that this journey would soon take us two hundred miles away, directly in the heart of Paris, seeking the expertise of a specialist.



As I waited in the sterile waiting room of one of the best Parisian clinics, my discomfort increased. Hospitals had never been a place where I felt at ease. The walls seemed to reverberate with collective anxiety as the scent of antiseptic hung in the air. As I sat, stress clung to me like an unwelcome companion near my belly button. As each second passed, the minutes stretched into hours, and the hours, like drops of water descending along the veins of a leaf, explored the veins of time in infinite detail.

The ongoing examination seemed interminable. My mother's vulnerability hung heavily in the air, and the hole in my gut grew deeper with each passing instant. Days blurred into a bizarre voyage through the hospital halls, a purgatory in which time lost its traditional meaning.

Four agonizing days after the initial examination, we stood on the precipice of revelation. As the doctor delivered the verdict, tears and sobs awaited us. He explained the seriousness of my mother's eye infection. In fact, the stage for our summer saga was set by an unexpected antagonist—amoebic keratitis, an infection my mother contracted from the contact lenses she wore daily. The routine of lens-wearing, seemingly innocuous, cast a shadow over our idyllic plans.

I will always remember my mom leaving the doctor's office in tears, crying at a point where qualifying that as crying would only have been a euphemism, those cries were so powerful that they seemed inaudible to me, her face darkened by the incessant flow of mascara running down her cheeks was just screaming for help. The weather forecast



announced a sublime sunny summer day, but June 30, 2017 was definitely the rainiest day of my life.

We now had two options: try everything to save her eye via a corneal transplant which was absurdly expensive and had very little chance of completely restoring sight or do nothing, patiently wait for the total loss of her right eyesight, and use a cosmetic prosthesis to replace it. For my mom, the second option was not even an option. The consequences of this decision transform what was initially supposed to be a vacation, into a role-play of a *Grey's Anatomy* character. The fact that my father, confined to our homeland, Côte d'Ivoire, by the demands of his profession could only provide support from afar contributed to this tense situation.

We were forced to endure this moment together and find an Airbnb in Paris because she needed some preparation before the surgery. At the age of thirteen, I realized that I was the only rock my mother could rely on. I understood that I did not have the right to cry in front of her and that I had to be strong. Finally, I resolved to strive to be an inexhaustible source of motivation for her. That's how I decided to do everything in my power to facilitate her current life.

My mom and I used to watch a movie each Friday with a plate of lasagna, and I knew that even if she was having a hard time, conserving this intimate moment with me made her feel better. So, I did. My mom and I used to have some talk about how I never helped her with household chores and cooking. So, I did. My mom and I used to confront each other about how I was always on my phone, and I was no longer enjoying life properly. She wanted me to



reduce my screen time. So I did, I did, I did. Every action that I could have done to take some pressure off her shoulders was for me a step toward her recovery.

Two months had passed since the ominous day when amoebic keratitis first cast its shadow over our summer dreams. As the calendar turned to September, a sense of foreboding hung in the air—the day of my mother's surgery had arrived. In an attempt to shield me from the stress of the operating block, my mother insisted I stay with her cousins in Nice. It was a reluctant departure, leaving my grandmother as the vigilant guardian by my mother's side. The night before the surgery, sleep eluded me, and my phone became an extension of my anxieties, a lifeline awaiting updates from my grandmother. Time, once again, lost its familiar cadence.

The day of the operation unfolded like a fragile symphony, delicately composed on the edge of anticipation. Each moment weighed heavily, and the constant waiting felt like a suspended reality. My grandmother's calls were my only connection to the unfolding drama in the operating room.

And then, the awaited call came. The operation was a success. Relief washed over me, a tide of emotion breaking the dam of anxiety that had built up over the past months. My mother, slowly but surely, began to recover her sight. It was a triumph—a glimpse of hope after a summer filled with unforeseen challenges. As my mother recuperated, the curtain fell on the unique vacation that had tested our resilience. Despite the hardships, the difficulties had forged an unbreakable bond between us. Though marred by adversity, the summer had given birth to a newfound understanding and connection with my mother. Now, as we



prepared to return to Côte d'Ivoire, exactly two months after our arrival, the echoes of the summer linger. The journey back symbolized not just a return home but a culmination of lessons learned, resilience discovered, and bonds strengthened.

September 20th, 6 p.m., Abidjan. The shy sunrise, whose rays seemed to dance on my glass roof signaled the end of summer abruptly pulling me from my sleep and waking me up for this particular Tuesday, which marked the first day of school. As I walked my way to school, I took some time to appreciate the fabulous panorama unfolding before my eyes. The infinite sky tinted with a gorgeous vermillion plunged me into deep thought. I remembered my mom saying that we lived in the same house, but we weren't truly living together. Initially, I didn't fully grasp the deeper meaning of her words, but in hindsight, I can now say that she was absolutely right. We were six feet apart, but our bodies, our souls, could not be closer.





FICTION



SILENCE AND FLAME



Benjamin Tuffour

The snow beneath him gave way, making more noise than he'd liked as he trudged along. His joints and muscles protested with every step as he pulled his limbs through knee-deep snow. He wore leathers and cloth closely tightened to his person overlaid by a small breastplate and bracers with a simple helm to match. Each of them particularly chosen to silence his approach, oiled, and checked over for wear almost every night. Too little, he thought. The concept poked his mind each time he saw his lightly clad arms reach forward and plant his walking stick in the snow ahead of him. Each step.

It wasn't cold enough to hurt him. His shield arm grew heavy. He'd noticed his buckler more and more every passing minute. It felt like an eternity even if they had only been "walking" for a few hours. *We should rest soon*, he thought. Stopping in his tracks, he leaned on his walking stick, a spear, a war trident technically for it had small prongs to aid in disarming adversaries. Alas, he used it, for the most part, like a spear. He thought of it as a spear and so he called it a spear. He looked up searching for the sun; he wanted to know what time it was,



and only then did he notice it had begun snowing. “We should rest soon!” he called out to his companion, not bothering to turn around.

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“We should rest soon!” her partner called out. She was a brand-new priestess barely intermediate in the use of her gifts. She had never even left Hayle, the capital city, crown jewel, and namesake of her Sovereign. Why would she? What need had she for the cold and dark of the inner lands? None.

“Finally!” she called back, losing her staff in the snow as she collapsed. Her heavy plate armor pulling her to the ground quieted only by the numerous furs keeping her warm. It seemed to her many times more than the warden wore and many times louder.

“Get back up,” her partner said without turning.

“What?”

“Get. Back. Up,” he said, irritation tinging the edge of his words.

She glared at his back. The wind picked up and made itself known between them. She sat like that for a short time. He turned his head to the side to look back at her. She doubted he could even see her through that helmet. “Are you cold?” he asked, turning fully around to address her.

Her glare hardened.

Silence.

“I said we should rest soon, not now, not here. If you're too cold or tired I need to know now; otherwise, we have to keep moving.”



“I’m fine,” she said.

“Then get up,” he said as he started walking again. She searched the snow for her fallen staff and pulled herself up by it, bracing herself for more walking. Then she followed. She had wished to be a gold priest, to live a cushy life deep within the warmed walls and grand halls of Hayle, delivering divine commands and enacting the will of her Sovereign. She could see herself in a position of authority, as her father had been. Instead, she was a green priest. Sentenced to live the rest of her days healing the unfortunate masses. A redundancy, assigned to a warden whose gifts already included healing. However special preparations were made for her, armor warding to protect her from moderate heat and cold.

They’d traveled a week, and she’d yet to see him sleep or doff his armor, light as it was. She tried to sneak a peak of him when he snuck off to eat at sundown three days ago, but she was caught, given away by her armor as far as she could tell. She was sure he was angry when he refused to speak the next day. If the cold didn’t kill her, she imagined he would. No one was around to stop him. If he wanted to, he could tie her up in a cave and torture her, force her to heal herself until she was too tired, and then do it all over again with his own healing gifts, until he had enough blood to drown her in it.

If she had thought of it surely, he had too. So, she shut up. She followed the lead of a man who couldn’t be more than a few years older than her. Kept her backtalk to a glare, when she could help it, and didn’t call him out on his behavior toward a priest, a superior. For priests were always superior to wardens, an official decree of her Sovereign’s theocracy.

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*We've made good time*, he thought, *the forest should be upon us any minute now*. The girl was walking again. That was good. It meant she wasn't freezing and they were making progress. He couldn't believe they'd paired him with someone so inexperienced. If they wouldn't let him take on a complementary partner, he shouldn't have to take on one at all. Alas, she was paired with him, and according to his tenets, he was honor-bound to protect her. So, he would to the best of his ability, but he was told some troubling things surrounding this one. Her matrons thought her gifted, but they suspected her loose moral inclinations would prove problematic. He'd asked around and explanations had a great degree of variability. One priest had said it meant she got too many answers. One recounted her taking to their persuasion training a little too well, picking up healing quicker than she'd ever seen just to prolong them.

As far as he could tell, she was a nosy young brat whose curiosity would get her killed, but he supposed he expected too much from trainees. He himself had sworn incredibly early, even by the standards of Hayle, a kingdom that had little scruples for age. The tree line dawned on the horizon. It rose and fell behind them as they entered the woods. They walked perhaps another hour into the woods until they came upon the old tower. Only it was rubble. A small wooden tower reduced to ashes.

"Is this it?" the priestess asked.

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"It was," he said, followed by a long ominous pause as he stared at the rubble. She didn't like the way it sounded. "Aelfir. But this far south?" he spoke out loud as if it would make the answers any more apparent.



“They don’t come this far?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Sylphs roam the woods by and large, and they don’t generally share. With Aelfir at least.”

“Aren’t they the same?” she asked genuinely.

“No, not even close,” he scoffed in return.

“They’re both elven though?”

“Yes, but it's like comparing apples to god damn pumpkins,” he said, irritation tinging his voice again. “Aelfir control fire; the forge spires are their doing. Have you ever heard of children being turned into forest monsters years later as they come of age?”

“Yes?”

“Those are Sylphs. They control nature. Aelfir don’t turn, they don’t even sweat. They’re hardly the same creatures.

“They really didn’t tell you anything?” he asked.

“... No,” she responded.

“That could be problematic,” he said, sighing as he continued. “I swore Vengeance, I’m honor-bound to protect you. Fourth tenet of my oath. Restitution. I can no more let you die than kill you myself if I still want my gifts for the journey back.”

Silence. She didn’t quite know what to say.

“Did you prepare the sense magic ritual I asked you to last night?” he asked, not looking her way as he bent down to feel the ashes.

She looked at him sideways, “Yes.”





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Damien leaned against a tree watching her as she performed the ritual.

“Evocation magic, most likely pyromancy, a small amount though, and I only sensed one source,” she called as she grabbed her staff from beside her and stood up from her kneel.

*At least she’s useful.* He had picked up tracks a couple minutes ago, but he didn’t want to interrupt her ritual.

“The tower was an old landmark, I was informed it was nearby, and your ritual lines up with that. I picked up tracks while you were busy. Keep your guard up,” he said. He tensed and began following the tracks.

Two hours passed, in which time the sun still hidden by gray overcast had begun to fall from the sky, so too its blessing of warmth. The tracks led into a cave. There were scorch marks around if you knew how to look for them, but the biggest tell was the temperature. Where Firebloods resided, they’d consistently let off enough heat to make the area warmer. They’d melt snow during their great blasts and leave marks upon the ground. They were in the right spot. So, they got comfortable on a nearby hill looking down on the opening to its cave. A hole in the ground on the side of a hill, like an inviting coffin, easy to miss if you weren’t looking.

The warden watched while the priest rested; she was tired even if she wouldn’t show or say. She would need her energy for the fight to come, and he needed time to observe the enemy. As the temperature fell further, Damien watched and waited. It was much colder.



Firebloods have a hard time using low consistent burns like the normal ones. It'll need to come out soon to raise its body heat.

Aelfir were naturally good at pyromancy, but some among them were born and bred for it. Firebloods they called them. Where normal Aelfir looked like ghosts with odd ears, tall with skin and hair white as snow, Firebloods had red hair. Where an Aelfir shot a blast of fire that knocked a man to his knees, a Fireblood knocked down towers. They used them to power forges. However, Aelfir's pyromancy functioned on body heat; it took the cold from their bones and turned it into firepower, only Aelfir didn't sweat. They didn't have any means of cooling themselves off; it was why they lived in the North. He swore vengeance against these creatures. Today would be a small victory.

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"Wake up." Something was shaking her. She opened her eyes. The warden crouched down beside her; she could hardly make him out in the dark that had fallen. *How long was I asleep?* she thought.

"Wake up," he said again.

"I'm up. I'm up," she yawned.

"It came out a few minutes ago. It's been letting off blasts in that clearing over there," he pointed in its direction. She followed his arm and saw a faint light glow in the distance. It was only then that she noticed the sound, a distant whooshing like wind shooting fire through a tube. It was quieter than she expected.

"Are they always that quiet?"



“No,” he replied. “Use your gifts to create water above us. It’ll be cold, but the damp will help with the fire. Shield yourself when you’re done.”

She did as ordered and a blob of water collected above them, then fell as the incantation ended. She held in a gasp as she was shocked properly awake by the sudden splash of cold water. Then she shielded herself, a thin bubble of dim white light appeared around her for a second before becoming invisible, only appearing when the warden touched the air where it should’ve been.

“Your armor is too loud; it’ll give away our approach, so I’ll go in first. Stay as far away as you can within effective range, use the trees as cover, and don’t draw attention to yourself. It can see in the dark but only in grays and not while it sees by the light of its own fire, so stay still and quiet. Only move if you heal me and only heal me if I look like I’m about to get hit. If I die, you’re probably screwed, but prioritize yourself since I have my own healing. I’m gonna focus on attacking it. It’ll bleed out or overheat; either way we win,” he said. “Repeat it.”

“You go in first, stick to the trees to abuse its dark sight, only heal you if you look bad, and wait it out,” she repeated earnestly. He looked back at her and stared for a moment before shaking his head.

“Don’t die on me, Amber,” he said, his tone somber as he walked toward the hillside.

He looked over the slope he would slide down before looking back one last time, “I’m just beginning to like you.” Then, he took another step and disappeared over the edge, sliding down the leftover slush on the hill.

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The extra heat there made the snow lighter to begin with, much of it caught in the broad needled branches of the redwoods towering above. He slid down the hill with just enough cushion to stop quietly at the bottom entering a low stance and creeping forward. From there he crept directly toward the light source, not from tree to tree like he had ordered Amber, though he tried to keep them in between him and the creature to minimize the line of sight.

It would be hard for it to see or hear much besides the blasts it was letting off. He leaned against a tree for cover and to block the light while he waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark once more. When they finally did, he looked back and saw the silhouette of the priest finally beginning to follow after keeping her distance. She had waited too long, and she crept clumsily from tree to tree. He would have to teach her much, but he imagined it wouldn't take long with this one. It would be fine once she got closer to the light, but it would take longer than he expected. He crept and crept till it felt like his heart would leap out of his chest and his head would explode, but he took deep quiet breaths and kept going, nothing would get between him and his work.

He continued until he could make out the creature's humanoid figure a silhouette against its brilliant flares. It stood, legs apart, dug into the ground bracing itself against its own power. Shooting fire in a wide cone in front of itself from an outstretched hand. Steam came off it like smoke from a chimney, clouds shooting out of its mouth like sacks of flour exploding in periodic breaths it had been trained to hold for visibility's sake. *It'll be done any second. I don't have time.*



She leaned against a tree staff in hand and tried desperately to calm and slow the beating of her heart to no avail. She felt like a child stumbling through the dark with an unbearable bomb in her chest. She looked over toward where she last saw Damien, but he wasn't there. She looked back toward the warm glow distorting the distance and saw another light go up nearby; it was Damien's spear. He had somehow lit it on fire.

So that's how he plans on getting it to overheat, she thought. She looked back, and he was sprinting—shield ahead of him, spear in hand—directly at the creature. *He didn't even give me a warning. I'm nowhere near close enough.* She stumbled ahead trying to get closer to the fight. The light disappeared, and she froze listening for the sounds of fighting.

Silence.

A long blast of fire. A clang rang out. A series of blasts interrupted by sporadic clanking and yelling in a language she didn't understand. She tripped ever closer making double progress by every flare looking for a line of sight on Damien. She ran until she was almost at the clearing. Then, she realized, the sounds of fighting had stopped.

Silence.

She waited there in the open for a second until she saw someone walking towards her. They were steaming. They had a shield, a buckler, Damien's buckler. The shield was glowing orange, a handprint marking where someone had grabbed and began superheating it.

"Damien?" she called out.

They continued walking towards her. They made a motion with their hand—their eyes beginning to glow a dull orange like lava—and summoned a fire within it revealing itself and



the girl in front of it. The creature made her pale skin look almost vibrant in comparison. It was white as snow with hair redder than hers. Its bright orange wounds steamed and bled equally, orange blood melting the snow it contacted and scalding whatever ground it dripped upon.

It wore ornate thin red cloth and bore silver jewelry. Black Chains hung from its wrists, dragging through the snow. She stepped back tripping on a root, and the creature drew closer towering over her. As the light enveloped her, it took her in. Its ears drooped and its face softened the way one's face might soften when one found a stray puppy in the wild. It spoke softly in a smooth voice and said something in a language she couldn't understand. A knocking sound like something being lodged into a tree beside them reverberated out. They both looked over.

A mass lunged at the creature from the other side. Damien's spear made a connection. He yanked the spear back and out of the creature. Scalding orange blood exploded over her, burning her skin where it made contact. She screamed, clawing at her face frantically wiping the scalding fluid away. Damien tackled the creature as it keeled over. His wet clothes steamed as he wrestled it. She could feel their warmth from here, radiating like a fireplace on a cold night. He began wrapping it in the dark metal chains hanging from its wrists. Damian turned the creature over; it was rasping words in a language she still didn't understand while bleeding out.



She remembered his earlier words, “If I die, you're probably screwed, but prioritize yourself since I have my own healing.” She held a glowing hand out and began fixing her face; it was always harder to focus on healing when you were injured yourself.

“Impressive. You’re as good a healer as they say. I shouldn’t have got it on you in the first place though. I’ll do better. Use your gifts to create light when you're done.”

She sighed as she finished healing. The pain subsiding. The exhaustion of using her gifts taking hold, before hurrying to provide light in the absence of the monster’s manifested flame.

Damien knelt beside the creature and began healing its wounds; he was bleeding himself. Their blood trickled down into a pool where the snow had melted away and mud hadn’t taken root. It mixed, swirling together in an orange tie-dye, the creature’s a bright orange and his a dark orange closer to red.

Her eyes went wide.

“Y-Y-Your-a,” she stammered as she crawled back in fear.

He stood up and finished healing the creature. “Sorry, he grabbed my shield and grappled me. Bastard got me with that knife,” he nodded towards the knife in the tree he’d used as distraction.

He noticed her expression and followed her gaze to the pool of blood then his wound. He grabbed his side, hands glowing, and sealed the wound with a sigh. His demeanor changed, and he leveled his helm to meet her gaze. She still couldn’t see into it. She finally realized that was intentional.



“Stand up. Squealing on the ground is unbecoming of a priest.”

She slowly climbed to her feet and began backing up until she almost tripped on the same tree as before, planting her back against it. Her staff in both hands held across her like she was about to fend off a wolf and needed it to jam between its snapping maw, but the look of fear in her eyes was beyond what any wolf could inspire.

He removed his helm and looked her in the eyes. His eyes began to glow a dull orange like lava. He looked young, no older than twenty-five in her estimates, but Aelfir didn't age the same. His skin was a human shade beige—no Aelfir had ever been seen any color except that of snow—and his hair was neither white nor red. It was gray, done up in neat braids pinned with small beads. He planted his spear in the ground beside him. She flinched at the notion. He looked up clearly annoyed by her reactions and by being forced to make the display he was making. He doffed his shield and dropped it. While pulling the bracer off his left arm. The tenets of his oath glowed dully against his skin.

“This is what they usually tell you beforehand.”

Silence.

She still stared at him, holding her staff like her only saving grace.

He's a warden sure as sun... but an Aelfir too?

She shifted uneasily in her place; he hadn't picked up his weapon yet, a miniscule reassurance.

“I'm honor-bound to protect you so long as you aren't a danger to me. I cannot kill you, and I cannot let you die,” he repeated plainly like it was all that mattered.



“Are you a danger to me, Amber?”

She shook her head.

“What’s my fourth tenet?”

“...Restitution.”

“Repeat it.”

“So long as I’m not a danger to you. You cannot kill me, and you cannot let me die.”

“Good,” he smiled. “Now quit cowering; we have a job to do.”

He began donning his armor once more. Slowly she crept back towards him, keeping twelve paces back still. He gave her a side-eye still clearly annoyed, but he said no more of it. “It probably escaped from a forgespire. These chains are dark metal; they’ll hold,” he said, yanking on the chains holding the creature. “I’m told you’re especially fond of torture.”

She froze. She hadn’t even thought about him asking around after her, or her inclinations.

“I’m...trained in...persuasion...if that’s what you mean,” she said, trying to speak carefully.

“Then drag it to the cave with me. Persuade it. Heal it. And persuade it again. Until it’s told us everything it knows. Until we paint that cave orange with its blood.” A smile crept along her face, the first genuine one he’d seen, maybe the first genuine her he’d seen. Heroism and healing didn’t interest her, but this? This she could do gladly. He donned his helmet once more, “I have a feeling we’re gonna get along just fine.”



SON CALL BROTHER



Nyakade Tot

Once upon a summer, a brother decided to visit his motherland after two decades. All his family was in the village, except for his dad, who was a soldier and had died in the war that made Brother leave the village. Brother was disafforested, living in Kansas City. While he looked forward to visiting his motherland, he imagined that he would see the home he knew the way he left it for America, seeing the places he used to go play unsupervised.

Brother caught his flight in the early morning when the grass looked green and beautiful, the sky blue with clouds. The breeze in the morning sunrise felt warm and with red-orange clouds rising with sunshine, the light glowing on them perfectly over the long-distance travel to the African continent. While the travelers waited for the sun to finish its journey, while the grass was still wet enough to wash their feet with fresh natural water made by the moon and stars overnight, he travelled from sunrise to sunset. It was not too hot for skin in the breezy air.

It was raining on his arrival back in Nasir. Brother was received by his family members, dancing and rejoicing. Even his absent dad came for the celebration to receive Brother.



Women ululated, except they were not singing for church. The artists performed out of their lungs the song of a martyr who had been physically absent but spiritually present, and there was no time when someone was not around him.

Brother had a big family of twelve siblings, twenty-six cousins from his father's side, nineteen cousins from his mother's side, and too many nieces and nephews that Brother lost count. Brother also had uncles, aunties, grandparents, in-laws, neighbors, and his childhood friends. They all come to visit him since he had left for two decades. Coming back to his family was joyful, and spending time with new family members who wanted to meet Brother turned it into a family reunion.

No one worried about where the meals came from. Young men went out, some for hunting and some for fishing, so the food came in two ways. For the ladies, their daily routine was to get the water from the wells and to get branches from trees for cooking. They ground corn and wheat into the flour and started cooking so that Brother would not spend any of his money to buy food for guests or even his parents. Brother did not spend anything since everyone worked as a team. They all knew what to do without talking about it. Meanwhile, the eldest family members joined in playing games under the palm tree while telling jokes and stories.

Children were playing kids' games and getting to know each other's shared histories. They kept checking on Brother, who was "Uncle" to them now. They said how he looked different from the rest of the family members since he wore clothes and fancy shoes that the children had never seen in their lives. They told each other that Brother was born in and lived



up in a blue sky; that was why he looked too clean. And he was also wrapped with plastic that never got into the dust. They said that Brother had been living in a cage since he was born. While the children talked, they wanted to touch his soft body that looked quite different from them theirs.

It seemed like everyone was busy with their own activities and got to know how they were related to each other since they had never been all together as part of the family before. The family usually did not gather like this except for weddings or funerals, but the children would not come to the weddings, only adults since they would have to walk long distances to get there. But the moment Brother came back home was such a big deal to all of his relatives and friends. That made everyone get together to be a big happy family.

Brother coming home was a blessing. It was enjoyable how the family came together. At night, though, the village had no electricity, no transportation, no television, or even newspapers to get information about what is going on in the city, so Brother got to see new drama from his family when in a place where everything had live audiences and anything was possible.

On the first day of Brother arriving at the village, he had a crush on a girl right away. Brother felt that was something very important but was not sure why. However, he saw that his grandfather from his father's side was sitting inside the hut (Luak), which is where usually only the men sit. Brother was six feet tall and the Luak (made with dead Tzhear) was built by hand. In the short time that he sat with his grandpa, he noted that the outside clouds were turning grey, and soon the clouds covered the sun in a big thunderstorm. Lightning appeared



in the grey sky. The trees started shaking while the wind blew and whipped, calling Brother to come out and meet with his deceased father. Brother heard the call, but his grandpa did not hear any voices while the wind came in from all directions. Brother followed the order without hesitating. He did not take off his navy blue pants and grey T-shirt. He had his shoes on when went out to the rain.

While he was in the rain facing east, he saw his father and his father said, “Welcome home. You have been gone for a long time.”

Brother started running to greet his father. His father said, “You are a big man now.”

“Yes, I know, Father,” Brother said with deep voice.

“Just to let you know, we will fly back together when you return,” said Father.

Grandpa thought he was alone in his Luak and said to himself *You still like to be in the rain like when you were a kid.* Grandpa was sitting and wiggling his toe and kept staring at Brother out of curiosity.

“Oh, this boy is still doing what he used to do? Playing in the rain like when he was kiddo?” a voice asked.

Grandpa said, “Well, he is like my daddy.”

Jal, who was four years old, sat next to Grandpa enjoying the fire while it was raining.

“Grandpa, do you have a daddy and a mommy?”

Grandpa smiled and turned his head to Jal, “Well, yes, I do have father.”

“Hey guys, Grandpa had a mommy and daddy!” shouted Jal. “Do the big people really have parents? Where do they live and why are you not living with your parents like I do?”



“They lived live and work up in the blue sky.”

“What do they look like?” Jal thought that Grandpa had hair like Uncle Brother’s. “Why do I never see your daddy?”

“You look like him, just like Uncle Brother,” said Grandpa.

“Yay!!! I look like Uncle Brother!” shouted Jal. “When I grow up, I will be living up in the blue sky with your daddy, and I’ll fly up in the sky with airplanes like Uncle Brother. I will be living in a cage and never play in the dust when I grow up.”

Jal was jumping up and down. “I can play in rain like your daddy and Uncle Brother.”

Jal clapped his hands and tripped and fell and bumped his head. “I want to go with Uncle Brother and live with your daddy! I want to go! I want to go.”

“Growing up does not mean that everything you had as child will leave. My father used to bite his nails since he was child and continued through adulthood and into his old age. A grandson, like his grandfather, will joke.”

Brother enjoyed talking to his father while the trees were dancing. The leaves were too plentiful to rest, and the music was too loud not to resist. Beautiful music was made by the wind dancing and heading to the river. They were all slowly flooded with the water from the sky that joined the party in the river with fishes. The wind music that DJ Thunderstorm played nonstop made the neighbor trees that lived by the river also join the party. Leaves danced on their own, and fish went their own way as lightning flashed colors like the rainbow. As the fish jumped up and down. They used the leaves as cannons, and some of the other fish used leaves as skateboards in the river.



As soon as the rain stopped, all the left-over water weaved like melting snow moving back to the North Pole in spring. All the waters were parting and running so fast that no one would ever catch them. All the water returned home and lived forever after. Brother was looking at the grey and blue sky where his dad stood tall. Across the distance they both shouted. Father told his son to go back and rest since the celebration was over, and the sun was going down to sleep. Brother's heart fell! This was his dad that had left the earth when Brother was a little boy, and now they had met as men. Brother asked his dad if he could stay a little bit longer; however, his dad told him that he lived with sun and had to visit another country while Brother was having good time with the rest of the family, and as the father left, the rainbows appeared in the clear sky as the sun went down to sleep until the next day.

Brother came back to the luak where he had left his grandfather, and Grandfather told him, "Since you are cold, come here and sit next to the fire, and I will tell you a story." While water was dripping from Brother's clothes, he got warm. Grandpa said, "In manhood, the man has to be named after one of his cattle, and this name is to be used in songs."

"But I'm not a singer, Grandpa," said Brother.

Grandpa shrugged and looked up directly into Brother's eyes. "Someone else can sing and add your name. They can make you popular in generations to come."

Brother sat next to the fire with his head down, thinking about his father and talking to himself. "Will my dad ever come back before I leave the village? What if I left and he came to be in the airplane while I was flying so that I could spend time with him, and he could see where I live?"



A short while later, it was time for food: biscuits, fried fish, rice, and avocado juice mixed with milk. The food was delivered by Sister Rose and, traditionally, she knelt down, walking on her knees until she reached the front, giving food as a sign of respect since Brother was a special guest. Then she turned back to Tukul, where usually women stayed. Four other men from the neighborhood joined Brother and Grandfather, and they ate and were loud enough to be heard from the outside while they were sitting down in the circle and using their hands to eat. While they were eating, it was dark outside, and Brother heard the music. It was mosquitos singing an opera. The mosquitos were working at night and were about to start their shift that would traditionally last until sunrise. Meanwhile, it was time to go to Tukul where Brother would sleep; however, Grandpa got the fire and told his grandson to go in front of him while he held the fire up higher so that Grandson can could see his way to Tukul. Brother was sleeping in Tukul with his first cousin, Jack. Soon, Brother changed his wet clothes and went right to sleep. Brother fell asleep before Cousin Jack did, and Brother started dreaming. Brother was happy in his dream and met the girl that he had had a crush on earlier that day.

“What is your name?” Brother asked in his dream.

The girl said, “I didn’t don’t have a name.”

“Please, tell me your name. I love you. I have oxen; I’ll marry you with it.”

“You don’t marry oxen, damn it,” said Cousin Jack from outside of his dream.

Brother jumped and hit the wall with his forehead as he was trying to kiss the girl, but the girl ran out, and he had bumped his lip and was bleeding.

“Why are you trying to kiss the girl when your eyes are closed?” asked Jack.



“I love her!” shouted Brother, and he pushed Jack to the wall. He opened his eyes and there was no girl. Brother felt so embarrassed that he was talking to himself in his dream.

He never met the girl again. The countdown began for Brother’s farewell. The elders gathered, washing Brother’s feet as part of a blessing for his coming and returning to where he came from. Grandpa got up and washed Brother’s feet with water as part of a blessing to also both leave blessings and take blessings with him. Brother took pictures and recorded videos of individuals and the group. It was the best part of his journey.

This time the women were not ululating, they were crying with happy tears because they would miss Brother. Children gathered around Uncle Brother and looked at their pictures to be taken far away and past the blue sky that meant they would live with the Uncle Brother forever. Living in the house that was built with dead Tzhear, without electricity or running water was the best, although special living in two different worlds was also great since both families had their own experiences, and you could learning something new from both sides.

One morning Brother had to end his journey; he got onto the airplane with his belongings, including traditional gifts he had received. The airplane got up and blew the wind while the people were leaving, facing the blue sky until it disappeared in white and blue clouds. Then music by R. Kelly played in the airplane: (“I believe I can fly / I believe I can touch the sky / I think about it every night and day / spread my wings and fly away / I believe I can fly.”) That was when Brother knew that he was going back to his second home in America.



THE MOON'S INITIATE



Elias Zibrowski

“Do remember to behave yourself while we are here, Virim. This is not a field trip,” the elf says as she walks across the bridge to a city sitting on the coast. Her ornate purple robes were emblazoned with silver symbols of the Lunar College. The elf’s long, brown hair is tied neatly into a ponytail, revealing her pointed elven ears.

“O-Ok, but are you sure we can’t sightsee at least a little? It’s not every day I get to see the surface...” Virim says as he follows. He was like a massive lumbering mantis shrimp on two legs, his tail dragging behind him. His arms end in crude clubs, while a second, much skinnier set of arms with actual hands protrudes from his chest. A blue ring wraps around one of his fingers. The Gordian’s eyes swivel around on their stalks, taking in his unfamiliar surroundings. A purple cloth, also decorated in the silver embroidery of the Lunar College, is draped over his back.

“... Perhaps,” the elf replies. “Should your initiation go well, I suppose that would be cause for celebration. But that does not mean you’re getting out of your studies later today!”



“C’mon, Cecilia. Your student is becoming a proper lunar mage and all you can think about is the next lesson?” Virim says, chuckling to himself a little.

“I only train you so rigorously because I see your potential. You have what it takes to be a great mage, but without proper training your talent will go to waste,” Cecilia says, not turning to face Virim as the both of them walk across the bridge leading to the city gate. Once there, they are stopped by the gate guards.

“Halt. State your business,” the guard on the right says in a curt manner.

“What? Why are you stopping us? I’ve been through this gate hundreds of times!” Cecilia protests.

“You’re a long way from home, Gordian,” the left guard says. “They say your people can smash down brick walls with a single punch. Is that true?”

“W-Well, yea. I’ve smashed the shells of dire crabs before, but why are you asking me this?” Virim says, puzzled by the guard’s inquiry.

“Then you will do well to keep those clubs to yourself. The buildings in this city are some of the oldest in Igmos. If you so much as crack one of the walls, you’re spending time in prison. Are we clear?” the right guard growls.

“Y-Yes sir, of course. I-I-I would never do that!” Virim squeaks, cowering behind Cecilia between him and the threatening guards, even though he is a foot taller than her.

“All right. You may enter. Stay out of trouble,” the left guard says as they both move out of the way and open the gates. Cecilia walks in with Virim close behind her. He avoids



making any eye contact with the two guards as he passes. Cecilia, however, makes sure to give them both disappointed glances as they enter.

The two mages walk through the grey stone streets of Thei-Ithrin. The buildings of this city are all resplendent and ancient, from the wealthy banks to the residential homes. Their architecture is like a glance into elven history, with white stone and tall arched roofs being the style of choice of the elves that lived in Igmos hundreds of years ago. Even now, the streets are populated mostly by elves with the occasional human or orc.

“What was wrong with those guards at the gate?! I swear, the nerve of some people!” Cecilia says, fuming with indignation.

“Well... they just wanted to protect the city, right?” Virim says meekly. “I can punch with enough force to smash rocks to bits. This city is very pretty, I would be worried too.”

“Whatever, it’s nothing anyway,” Cecilia says, sighing. “We just need to go to the local Lunar College in this city. There will be an archmage there that will assess you.”

Cecilia eventually noticed that there were many people on the streets staring at them. Despite the proximity to the sea, most people here are unfamiliar with Gordians having only ever heard of them. Virim pretends not to notice this fact as he nervously fidgets with the ring on his finger.

Eventually the two of them make it to the Lunar College in Thei-Ithrin. The building is massive, sporting round arches like the rest of the buildings in the city. Above the entrance is a stained-glass window shaped like a crescent moon.

“I-It’s huge...” Virim says in awe of this grand building.



“Indeed. This is one of the oldest magical colleges in all of Igmos! I studied here myself when I was younger,” Cecilia says, beaming with pride.

The two of them entered the building’s main lobby, which was as resplendent as the outside. Cecilia pointed to a row of chairs where some other pupils were waiting.

“Stay there for a moment. I will go find the archmage,” Cecilia says. Virim nods and awkwardly sits down in one of the chairs, slightly too large to fit comfortably within it. Cecilia walks away, further into the college. She is struck with a sense of nostalgia as she traverses the hallways, remembering her younger days fondly. Relying purely on her old memories alone, she navigates the twisting corridors and halls until she finds the office of the archmage. She wonders for a moment if the same archmage from when she used to attend is still there before knocking on the door. After a moment, a familiar voice beckons her in. She enters the room but is met with an unfamiliar sight.

The office itself, much like the rest of the building, is grand. The room is lit up by a miniature moon floating in place of a chandelier near the ceiling. The pale moonlight washes over the rest of the room.



THE WANDERER



Emily Kashirsky

Was it a gift or a curse?

The wanderer sat by an apple tree and pondered that question for the thousandth time. The apple tree rested atop a grassy hill with a sprawling emerald forest nearby. There was a bustling village from afar that he never wanted to enter.

His limbs ached from relentless traveling. He adjusted his worn brown cloak and pulled the hood over his dark curls. Then he slumbered for a long time until a gentle touch upon his neck disturbed him. His eyes flew wide open as his hand gripped a slender wrist tightly.

The slender wrist belonged to a young peasant woman who crouched in front of him. She was too lovely with eyes as blue as the sky peering into his own.

“Oh good! You’re not dead,” she said with a smile.

He stared at her and let go of her wrist. The peasant girl rubbed her wrist and picked up a straw basket that was near her feet before rising. Her brown braid fell over her shoulder as she gazed at him with gleaming curiosity.



“I’ve never seen you around the village so you must be a wanderer.” She laughed and held out her free hand, “I’m called Mira, and you are?”

The wanderer kept his mouth shut.

“You’re a quiet man,” Mira blinked.

He simply did not want to talk to anyone. A conversation could lead to another conversation. Another conversation could lead to more conversations. More conversations could lead to friendship. Friendship could lead to laughter and then eventually heartache.

Mira began plucking gleaming apples from their tree branches. The apples slid into her straw basket. “I’m the only one who ever comes to this apple tree. The villagers prefer staying in the village. If you wander into the village, you’ll be welcomed because we love visitors.”

He knew that a village could be welcoming, but they would not be so welcoming if he lived there for years and they noticed that something was strange.

The peasant girl handed him an apple from her basket. He held the apple that was as red as blood. She was already skipping away with the basket and waving her hand in the air, still smiling.

“I’ll be back for more apples!”

The wanderer lived in the forest for quite some time after Mira departed. He was accustomed to living in the wilderness. Though he always had a craving for apples and kept visiting the tree from time to time.

Mira arrived at the apple tree one morning and kept her promise. He glimpsed her making her way up the hill with joyful footsteps. The wanderer quickly hid behind the tree.



Sadly, she found him behind the tree and tugged on his cloak.

“Why hello my dear wanderer! Did you miss me?”

The wanderer was silent.

“I can tell by your brooding expression that you missed me dearly,” she beamed up at him and let go of his cloak.

The wanderer helped her pluck apples from dangling branches. He didn’t understand why he felt a flicker of something akin to happiness that she was here. Perhaps loneliness wasn’t always his favorite companion.

She took his silence as an invitation every time to speak. Her voice was oddly pleasant to listen to. Mira would turn to him after finishing a tale from the village and tell him with a teasing tone, “You’re such a good listener, Wanderer!”

He found himself waiting atop that hill many mornings as Mira made it a habit to return. A smile was always on her face, and she always had more tales to regale him with.

Mira informed him about events in the village that he couldn’t care less about. Even brought up fellow villagers and her family. She was the only child in her family.

“Do you have any family?” Mira asked him once.

The wanderer shook his head.

He had a family once.

She kept returning even when the tree bore no fruit. And he was eager to catch a glimpse of her bounding up the hill to him with a brown braid flying behind her.



Sometimes she brought presents in her straw basket. The presents were simple things like a loaf of bread or a pair of mittens. In return, he'd give her dead rabbits or squirrels he caught in the forest.

She was never his friend, just simply his Mira.

His heart began to pound during her visits. The wanderer enjoyed counting how many freckles truly dotted her round face. He saw that her smile held dimples in the corners. And her laugh made him smile.

Occasionally, she seemed to enjoy flustering him with her blunt compliments, "You have such pretty green eyes, Wanderer." She brushed a stray curl away from his eyes, "No one else in the village has eyes like yours."

The wanderer silently cursed his cheeks for turning as red as apples.

The sky wept when Mira came back with no smile for the first time. He stood beside the tree as she approached with loose brown hair.

"I've never danced with anyone. Have you?" Mira asked softly.

The wanderer gently grabbed her hands. She seemed to be holding her breath for a moment when their fingers intertwined. Their bodies swayed as they began to dance together. Her blue gown swished against his brown cloak.

They danced and danced as the rain poured and poured. Mira wrapped her arms around his neck. The wind blew his hood down, and he lifted her up into his arms. He wanted to see her smile as he spun around in circles. She broke into a fit of giggles. A smile finally appeared on her lips.



Her smile fell as the spinning ceased and she whispered, “My wedding is tomorrow. I wanted my first dance with someone to be with you and not my future husband.”

Tomorrow? His Mira was getting married?

He let her wipe the rain droplets off his cheeks as he gazed at her with an aching heart. Mira turned her head away and gazed down.

“The baker proposed, and so my parents accepted. I told you once that I am the only daughter. We hold no riches, and we can barely keep a roof over our heads.”

The wanderer kept his gaze on her face and spoke for the first time to her before he could stop himself, “What do you truly want?”

A startled expression appeared on her face as her mouth opened and closed several times, but no words slipped out.

Mira said with a shaky breath, “I do not want to marry him, but I have no choice unless someone offers me a different one.”

She lifted her head up slowly and stared into his eyes almost as if she was pleading for something. His heart wanted to reply to her imploring gaze, and yet he stopped himself. He knew that he could never give her the answer she wanted.

Moments of silence passed, and she touched his face with her hands. Mira leaned forward and pressed her lips softly to his.

The wanderer froze, and she pulled away. “Please...” she whispered softly, and he desperately wanted to accept happiness even if it would be fleeting. “I truly want you.”

Cruel silence was his answer.



He set her down on her feet as tears and rain droplets slid down her cheeks. Mira cried and buried her face in her hands as she turned away. The wanderer watched her flee then clenched his fist tightly with a bowed head.

She did not return until a child was in her arms. The child was swaddled in a thick cloth as she sat on the hill. He held his breath and looked at the child with the stranger's blond hair and brown eyes.

"His name is Thomas," Mira told him with a weary voice.

They did not speak more, and the only sounds heard were the boy child with the stranger's eyes fussing.

It became a ritual for Mira to return with a new child. After five years, she had five children, but none of them with her sky eyes and brown hair. She presented the children to him when they were babies, and they returned with her when they could walk and talk.

During one such occasion as they both watched the children play and tug at blades of grass, he asked her a single question.

"Are you happy?"

A faint smile tugged at her lips, but her eyes barely held any light in them. "My children give me happiness."

The children ceased their visits with her when they became much older, and it was just him and Mira again. Mira's hair was turning greyer, and wrinkles creased around her eyes and once smiling mouth.



“My children find me odd for continuing these visits, but they don’t dare tell their father.”

She plucked apples from a tree branch with her calloused hands like she did so many years ago. The wanderer’s glance flicked to his own hands that held not a single wrinkle or crease.

“Your husband doesn’t know?” The wanderer’s tone filled with surprise though the word “husband” tasted bitter in his mouth.

“Of course not, he would throw a fit,” Mira laughed, and her laugh still held traces of youth. “He throws fits over many things.”

A sense of sorrow filled the pit of his stomach, and for a moment, he dreamed of a different life for her.

Her in a wedding gown and dancing beside the apple tree with their hands interlaced and their hearts full. Children with her brown hair and sky eyes. A cottage by the apple tree. That life would never come to be.

“You never loved him,” he murmured out loud.

A sigh left her lips, “I never did.”

Her words gave him relief and dread at the same time.

Her husband eventually passed when the children started their own families. Mira never remarried, and she shared tales of her grandchildren with him. She even brought a few of her grandchildren to see him when they were as little as her children had been.

Still even the grandchildren never had her looks.



Her visits became less and less until she came in the spring with a head of snow-white hair and could barely ascend the hill. The wanderer gripped her fragile arms and helped her sit beside the apple tree.

Mira breathed heavily as he sat beside her. He shed his worn brown cloak and settled it on her shoulders. Her wrinkled hands grasped the cloak around herself, and her sky eyes became wistful.

“You still look twenty,” she whispered.

He flinched despite the truth.

“You still look twenty too,” he told her which made her let out a hoarse laugh.

“How is this possible?”

The wanderer decided to tell her a tale for once, “I was twenty, and I had a habit of exploring the forest near my home. I stumbled upon an apple tree I had never seen before, and a strange man sitting beside it. He had a mischievous look and told me to eat an apple. I refused but he told me that I would never leave the forest again if I didn’t.”

He remembered how he didn’t heed the mischievous man’s words and kept trying to leave the forest. The wanderer always found himself back at the apple tree.

“I finally devoured an apple and he laughed and told me that I would appreciate this gift. Mortals would envy me forever, and he would no longer be bored. He disappeared and the apple tree withered when he did.”

Mira listened as he told her how time seemed to stop for him altogether. How horrifying it was to see his family grow old when he remained forever young. How his family



had to lie over time and tell others that he was a visiting relative until one day he packed up his things and left.

“I used to think that my eyes were playing tricks on me when I never saw you with a single strand of grey hair,” she murmured. “You are cursed, and the apple tree from your forest gave you that curse yet you still kept visiting mine.”

“Our apple tree wasn’t a curse like that one. It brought me a gift and that gift was you.”

Mira’s eyes watered and her hands shook as they grasped his face and their foreheads touched. “Why didn’t you let us be happy?”

“You know the answer,” the wanderer replied. “I am immortal, and you are mortal. You will wither and die, but I never will. Would you have been truly happy with an undying man?”

“At least I never would have had regrets,” she admitted. “And you could have had happy memories.”

“I never wanted just memories I wanted a life that ends with you,” he admitted in reply.

Her aged hands slid from his face and grabbed his hands. “Will you make me a promise, my wanderer?”

“Anything.”

“When I am gone, I want you to march right into the village and make a friend or two. Don’t stay in that forest forever, and once you make some friends then you will march into



more villages and make more friends. Do not ever be alone, understand?” Mira rushed out the words and closed her eyes, “Promise me.”

The wanderer swallowed, “I promise.”

She stood with his help and returned the cloak to him, “Will you ever tell me your name, wanderer?”

A foreboding feeling crept into his heart. The man bent his head close to her ear and whispered his name.

Her lips curved into a smile as she turned away.

And his Mira never returned.

He’d found an answer to that question he’d pondered many years ago.

Immortality was a curse. A curse for the fact that everyone he ever knew and loved would perish before his very eyes. He would remain unchanging while the world changed around him.

The wanderer soon realized that Mira left their world.

The nightmare became even more true when Thomas came to the apple tree as a grown man. He no longer had chubby cheeks like his child self did, but there was nothing of Mira in his tall stature and broad frame.

“My mother passed away in her sleep,” Mira’s eldest son said. “I thought you would like to know since you’re the person whose held my mother’s heart all these years.” He blinked. “You still look the same just like she said you would.”



Thomas left and grief plagued him for ages. He would never see her face or hear her laugh ever again.

Her last words and the promise he made to her still echoed in his mind.

The wanderer lifted his gaze to that distant village that Mira had called her home. The village that was breathing with life.

Was it right to try to make friends even after losing the one he cared for the most?

Making new friends would mean that he would lose them like he lost Mira. But perhaps their memories could remain with him. Perhaps it would be better to have created happy memories than to have not created any at all.

Regret already seeped into his very bones and soul. Regret for the life that he could have had with Mira.

When I am gone, I want you to march right into the village and make a friend or two.

He made his way down the hill and reached the entrance of the village. The wanderer took one last look at the hill beyond.

The memory danced in front of his eyes of an immortal man dancing with the girl who held his heart forever.



WHEN THE MAN COMES AROUND



Benjamin Brown

The Man tromped across the cemetery, a long duffle bag in his left hand and a shovel held loosely over his right shoulder. As he walked, he swung his head left to right slowly, eyes and ears alert. Through his black Caterpillar work boots, he could feel the ground tremble as he walked. A smile split The Man's face, his white teeth glinting in the midday sun. He was just in time; his calloused right hand gripped the wooden haft of the shovel with glee.

The Man set the duffle bag down. Then with a well-practiced move, swung the shovel off his shoulder and into a wide arc ending its parabola by sinking into the ground spade first. He took a moment to survey the cemetery. His old military habits had him moving his whole head rather than just his eyes as he took in the gravestones. Having had a good look around and seeing no danger, he closed his eyes to better feel the rumble of the earth under his boots.

Three years and thirty cemeteries ago The Man would have taken this rumbling as a sign that a surfacing was seconds away. The anxiety of the perceived equation would have



The Man rush through his preparation. Thanks to a combination of experience and modern science, The Man had left those pre-eruption jitters behind him. He opened his eyes and pulled his phone out to check his app, the USGS had finally pulled its head out of its ass and realized that yes, it did have the technology to detect the movement of zombies in the ground. With the help of Canada, the US, Mexico, and the Central American/Caribbean Alliance, seismic sensors had been placed from Barrow, Alaska to the Darien Gap in Panama.

The sensors had been placed specifically to detect the movements of the hordes of undead when they came close to larger cities, but they could not detect the rumblings of the restless dead out in the boondocks where the number of people under the ground outnumbered the ones above. With the police and military still stretched to keep civil order, independent contractors like The Man were sent out to deal with the local infestations in the vast emptiness that makes up most of the US before they moved from being a nuisance to a problem. The pay as an independent exterminator was about equal to what a pre-ZA Uber driver made. It was not enough to live on but the income was just right for someone like The Man who was looking to supplement his war pension as well as scratch that adrenaline itch that he had gotten addicted to after years of fighting the undead. The Man grunted as his phone connected to the local ground sensor network, and according to his app he still had a few minutes before show time.

The Man begun to use this time to check his tools: first his shovels. He ran his practiced eye up and down the hickory haft. Finding nothing visually wrong with the smoothed wood, he continued his inspection with the shovel's blade. The steel of the spade shone dully under



its cover of dirt; The Man ran a hand over the blade checking to make sure its edge was still keen from last night's sharpening.

Satisfied with its condition, The Man flipped it to inspect the haft cap. The solid brass ball that provided both grip and a great skull cracker was intact, as were the four screws securing it to the haft. The Man stuck the shovel back into the ground and turned to the duffle bag he had left behind him. Opening it, he began to pull out items one at a time and set them on the now visibly heaving ground.

The first items out were three more shovels just like the one he had just stuck in the ground. His past adventures had shown him to have backups on everything. He still remembered one job where his shovel haft had broken when the blade had clanged off a metal plate in someone's skull. After that, he made sure that he had extras just in case.

The next two items he took from the bag were a pair of sawn-off Mossberg 500s. The Man checked over the two tried and true firearms; he made sure the guns were unloaded, the barrels were clear, and the coat of CLR he had applied this morning hadn't acquired any dust or dirt. After racking the slides a few times to check the action, he then ran his eyes and hands over the custom hickory stocks as if he was caressing the hip of a lover. Finding no cracks or other defects, he pulled the trigger of each weapon. Satisfied with the crisp clicks of the firing pin falling on an empty chamber, he pulled a bandolier of shells out from his bag and sinched it around his waist. The Man grunted in satisfaction as he checked over the first twelve rounds and found them serviceable.



As he had been preparing, the ground had begun to heave like a storm-tossed sea by this time, but The Man knew he still had a little bit before the eruption, and he would not be rushed. With his weapons secured, he reached back into the bag and pulled out the last three items.

The arm and leg armor that The Man pulled on were originally used for animal control, the long, Kevlar gloves covered his hands and reached up to his elbows while the leg guards covered him from the top of his steel toed work boots to knee.

With his armor snugly in place, he took a quick minute to stretch his body out before he dug his cell phone from his pocket and double checked his app. It was almost showtime. He exited the app, and then thumbed to his music before turning his attention to the third object from his bag. The Blue Tooth speaker gave a happy little chirp as he powered it up and it connected to The Man's phone. With the device paired, he queued up his "Clear the Cemetery" playlist as the first rotted hand erupted from the earth.

As the opening sting of Mickle Jackson's "Thriller" shattered the calm fall day, The Man pulled a shovel from the ground and strewed forward. With brutal efficiency, he swatted the grasping claws away before using the momentum of the swing to bring the pummel of the shovel over his left shoulder. He held it ready as the ghoul's head thrust its way face first, its oversized jaws working as it chewed at the soil.

The Man brought the shovel down upon the creature's rotted face. The blade bit home, cleaving cleanly through the weakened and decayed skull. The blade passed through



the creature's head. With a grunt of satisfaction, The Man pulled the shovel back and out as the zombie slumped to the side, its un-life ended before it had even begun.

Of all the ways to clear a cemetery, this method of attacking the undead before they even got out of the grave was his favorite. While other, younger exterminators saw what had been dubbed the "Smashing Pumpkins Method" as lazy, safe, and un-sportsman like, he loved the efficiency and low impact as well as the ease of body disposal it offered. On the rare occasion that he worked a larger op with other exterminators, he would always rebuff their comments about his methods by saying that he didn't have to spend four hours clearing body parts and then waste a week's ration of gasoline on burning them. All he had to do was push the bodies back in their graves, avoiding the inevitable torn rotator cuffs and thrown out backs the flasher methods of clearing usually lead to.

The Man spent the next few songs working his way around the cemetery, the ground had stopped heaving when he was about three fourths done with the rows of graves. The Man scowled and grumbled to himself as he pulled the shovel up. He looked over the cemetery, his eyes landing on one of the brass star shaped stakes used to mark a veteran's grave. With a muttered apology, he pulled it from the ground and began to strike the star against his shovel blade.

"ZOMMBIES... .ZA ZA ZOMBIES!" The Man called out between the bell like clanging of the star hitting his shovel. "HERE ZOMBIE ZOMBIE ZOMBIE ZOMBIE! FRESH FAT MEAT, COME AND GET IT!"



The Man's zombie calling could have won a blue ribbon at the state fair. The twenty-five or so ghouls that had managed to pull themselves from their graves while The Man had been clearing the rest of the cemetery had been massing around his Bluetooth speaker, the loud music had covered up his near silent clearing operation. The sound of a live voice and clanging metal pulled the creatures' attentions from sounds of the speaker to the live meat making a racket loud enough to wake the dead. The ghouls begun shuffled across the uneven ground towards The Man as he flipped his shovel up into a two-handed grip.

As the first creature came within shovel distance, its arms raised, teeth gnashing, The Man used technique known to all marshal artists practitioners the world over, he imagined that his target wasn't the zombie's head or neck, but a bullseye located behind the creature's head. He planted his feet shoulder width apart, lifted his shovel then using his left hand to aim, he shot the shovel forward with his right in a short jab as if he was wielding a pool cue.

The Man expertly put enough force into the blow to hit that imaginary bullseye through the zombie's putrefied mug. As the shovel slid through the corrupted flesh and bone of the zombie's skull, he imagined the shovel's blade popping out the back of the creature's skull and smacking the bullseye. As the blade parted the last bit of stinking sinew and bone from the top of the skull from the eyes up from the rest of the body, the zombie hit the ground with a dry thump. The Man took half a second to reorientate himself before he spun his shovel in his hand, the top of ghoul's head flying from the shovel's blade.

He kept imagining the bullseye as he thrust and gave ground, his back foot lifting off the gravel while he dragged his front foot through the dirt in like a boxer in a ring. On his



Bluetooth speaker, Victorious's "Astral Assassin Shark Attack" ended as he felled his eighth zombie, its final power metal chord melting almost perfectly into the wood wind whistling of Mr. Mister's "Kyrie." The 80's ballad was oddly out of place among the wailing power metal guitars and techno beats that made up the Man's playlist, but The Man liked to use the power ballad with its breathy singing and long pauses as a breathing exercise.

As the song begun to wind up, the remainder of the zombies had begun to bunch up as they slogged their way towards The Man. This was another time where the rotten pus bags got dangerous, for unlike in the movies or video game depictions, zombies were not polite. They didn't wait their turn, they didn't attack you one at a time, and they didn't take one polite bite out of you then back up for you to take your turn hitting them. The undead bastards swarmed, surrounding their victim in a tightening circle gnashing teeth and grabbing limbs, attacking from all sides all at once. The Man had always thought that to be quite rude.

It had been this swarm and circle response that had him skipping from one side of the cemetery to another, always with his back to the gate. The side-to-side movement always made him feel like he was in a demented game of Space Invaders, but it slowed the hoard down as the undead tripped over or walked right into larger head stones. It didn't stop them from attempting to surround him, but it left gaps in the circle of teeth for a quick escape. The Man did a quick headcount and confirming there where only five of the creatures left. He chose his spot and waited.

The zombies staggering his way were nothing more than skeletons wrapped in paper thin flesh, the bodies so decayed they were one step above dust, their physical conditions



caused these five to lag behind the rest of the hoard. Now these Army of Darkness extras were all that stood between him and a nice fat paycheck. He waited for another thirty seconds before sighing in impatience and brought the fight to them.

The first two ghouls he reached where hung up on waist high headstones; The Man barely slowed as he speared their craniums. The third was in a tough spot between some gravestones and an oak tree with no room to get his shovel up. Without missing a beat, he shifted his shovel to his left hand then grabbed the uncoordinated corpse's neck with his right and with a swift motion, bashed its head against the tree until the skull split. He dropped the now fully dead zombie, shifted his shovel back to his right hand, and casually tipped a leaning grave marker onto the head of the fourth which had tripped in a hole.

He locked his eyes on the final zombie and a rictus-like grin began to spread across his face, his vision narrowing to pinpoints as he let the adrenaline rush of the fight take him. He took his time walking up to the corpse, his shovel reversed so he could use the cracker ball haft cap on the end. As The Man drew closer, he felt a sudden pressure and a sharp tug on his left leg, the tug sent him sprawling face first into ground. As he fell, his years of training kicked in and he threw his right arm out to slap the ground with a flat palm to break his fall.

While the move had indeed saved him from having the wind knocked out of him, it had also sent his shovel flying like a javelin, its flight carrying it several meters away before he heard metal on metal bong as the brass cracker clanged off the nameplate of a gravestone. He quickly attempted to scramble to his feet, but his efforts were thwarted by the pressure



that was now bearing down even harder on his leg. Rolling onto his right side, he saw what had tripped him up.

A gray hand had emerged from the ground as he had moved towards what he had thought was his last target. Had he not been so focused, he would have seen the thing flailing in the air as he moved forward. Cursing himself, he began to flop like a landed fish, kicking his leg back and forth to free himself. His frantic efforts were not only fruitless, but his spasmodic movements helped pull the head of the zombie with its teeth embedded in his armor, up out of the ground like a turnup. With its head free, the corpse began to pull the rest of itself up out of the shallow grave it had been buried in with its other hand.

“Mother fuck!” The Man yelled as he scabbled with his left hand to draw one of his shotguns, his shock numbed fingers scrabbling over the smooth wood until they closed around the neck of the stock. With the ripping sound of Velcro tearing, he pulled the weapon out of the quick release scabbard and swung it around.

The sound had caused the zombie to drop his leg and turn its face towards the ripping of Velcro. The split second before The Man shoved the shorten barrel of his shotgun into the zombie’s mouth, he recognized the creature and his rictus grin returned. With the enemy literally eating the barrel, The Man didn’t do any of the proper trigger squeeze, or controlled breathing, he just yanked the trigger for all it was worth. The weapon fired, its normal eardrum shattering boom somewhat muffled by the monster’s head.

Under the combined assault of supersonic lead and hot chamber gasses, the zombie’s head exploded like an overripe pumpkin dropped from a second story window. The zombie’s



grip tightened for a brief second on the man's leg before going corpse slack. With a disgusted grunt, The Man pulled his leg from the flaccid hand and rolled to his feet in one move. He looked down at the corpse for a second before he took a long inhale of breath through his nose and used it to hock up a wad of snot from deep in his throat, he spat his mouthful of phlegm on the corpse.

The loogie hit the monster in the sternum, right next to the three small bullet holes in its chest. The corpse was fresh, maybe two days old by The Man reckoning, his practiced eye flitting from pre-mortem injury to pre-mortem injury that riddled the body at his feet. Besides the bullet wounds that had ended its life, the body was covered in numerous smaller injuries ranging from shallow knife cuts to the small perfect circles of cigarette burns. Moving to the twice dead monster's lower body, The Man noticed that the corpse's genitals were missing, the melted and charged flesh indicating that they had been removed with a strong acid or base and then cauterized with signs of the wound healing death.

It was clear the creature before him had meet with a gruesome end, one that The Man knew it deserved. In that second before he had squeezed his weapon's trigger, he had recognized the face of Mervin Kesler, aka Pervin Mervin. Pervin Mervin had been the local small-town pervert, and he had been suspected of everything from flashing to child molestation. He only stayed out prison because he was clever enough to only prey on the small community of migrant workers that came and went with the harvests. In this isolated community of transients, throwing a few thousand of dollars from his father's trust fund and the threat of blackballing from any future work was enough to silence any complaints.



With no charges ever sticking, all anyone could do was keep their kids away from him and make sure their curtains were closed. Now it seems that he must have crossed some kind of line and ended up in a shallow grave in the one place no one would look for dead bodies, a cemetery. How it was Marvin had met justice and whoever had delivered it, The Man didn't care, he was not the law, and he wasn't shedding any tears over the dead nonce. Brushing himself off, he racked the shotgun's slide before holstering it. Then he retrieved his thrown shovel and the spent shotgun shell before he returned his attention back to the zombie still stuck in the bush.

The creature had been several years dead, but the miracle of embalming had kept the creature intact enough for it to rise with the rest. Still, the ravages of time and dirt had not left the creature unmarked. Its ears, nose, and lips were gone along with the tips of the fingers. Carefully this time, he approached the zombie. Despite its mangled appearance, there was just enough left for him for what he needed.

The Man lunged forward and reversed his shovel in one quick movement. With short, economic jabs, The Man struck the dry corpse first the shoulders, then in the knees, his grin widening as the zombie's knees and clavicles shattered into power with dry pops. With the corpse's support gone, the writhing torso of the zombie hit the ground with a muffled thump. His quarry disabled; he walked two laps of the cemetery checking to make sure he didn't miss any other zombies, fresh or otherwise.

The Man collected the remains of the zombies on the hard gravel of the cemetery's road and using several balls of pine tar from his bag, he started a merry bonfire of the dead.



As the paper-thin body parts smoked and cracked, he turned his attention to the still wiggling corpse. Taking two nine-foot-long metal fence posts from his Jeep, he used several zip ties also from his duffle bag to tie the fence posts together to make a cross. He set the cross down next to the pyre and carefully placed the still writhing corpse of the last zombie on it.

This done, The Man carefully lifted the wriggling zombie before zip tying it into place. He stepped back, checking his work before he stuck the haft of his shovel in the creature's mouth and ripped its mandible free with the bass ball. The zombie, disarmed and crucified as it was, could only thrash weakly.

An outside observer might think of the whole process as a religious ritual. From the crucifixion to the firelight dancing off the writhing corpse, it did look like look like a passion play straight from the Book of Revelations. However, to The Man, there was no intention to offer this damned creature to the heavens or to take a knee and give thanks for another cemetery cleared, to him the action was purely practical.

Besides paying a two-hundred-dollar fee to obtain a license and being placed on a list that gets circulated to towns and cities, there are few regulations to the zombie exterminator business. An exterminator can use whatever training, equipment, or weapons they see fit to get the job done within reason. The only rules of the company that The Man contracted with were don't destroy property unnecessary, be careful with your weapons, follow the contract, and mark the kills. The last was the most important. Every job an exterminator does must be marked as complete, not only on the app, but in the location cleared as well.



Much like a cattle man's brand, each mark is individual to the exterminator and cannot be copied by another. An exterminator registers his or her mark when they get a license, or soon as they find one that fits them. Some are very simple and tasteful like a sign that says, "this graveyard cleared by S and Son's Extermination", or a blue flag flown on a cemetery flagpole. Others, like The Man's can be downright grizzly.

He'd had chosen a live, jawless zombie staked out like Jesus next to a pile of burnt remains just because it had felt right to him: It was simple, it was symbolic, and its message was clear no matter what language you spoke. With his mark made, The Man stood silently for a while, his brain turned to static as he listened to his music. Eventually, the fire died down to embers. The Man heaved a sigh, hefted his shovel, and begun to beat out the remaining fire.

The ground beating served a two-fold purpose: to break up the bones the fire had left and to put out any lingering flames. The sun was about under the horizon as The Man, satisfied with the cleanup of the cemetery, removed his phone from his pocket. He snapped a few pictures with the last rays of sunlight, then sent them off to the county councilman who had hired him with a brief message:

"Hey Bob, the job's done, but you wouldn't believe who I met out here! I didn't know PERVIN MERVIN was still LIVING here. He looked kind of rough when I saw him, like someone had put the boots to him, not that he didn't deserve it. Anyway, he didn't stop to talk; he LOST HIS HEAD when he saw me coming and took off. ANY TIPS in case I see him again?



The Man tried to make his message obvious but not too blatant. He remembered Bob from high school where Bob had been a B average student with a bad habit of failing to grasp subtle hints. He sent the message. A minute later as he was gathering his tools up, his phone made a cheerful dinging noise.

Checking it, the man was pleased to see the five grand payment along with three months of gas rations had come through his app. He was also surprised to see that Bob had gotten the message, and a thirty percent tip had been added. Whistling as he walked to his car, the man packed his gear and got in. As darkness closed in, The Man started his car and drove off, his taillights painting the cemetery a ghostly red.

