

A Journal of Art,  
Literature & Culture

# The Quatrain

Volume 5: Spring 2021

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*The Quatrain* is managed by students at Louisiana Tech University and advised by faculty from the College of Liberal Arts. The journal is housed in George T. Madison Hall, where undergraduates collect, assess, and edit submissions from student writers and artists.

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## From the Dean

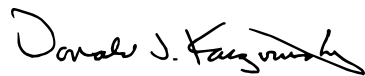


Last year, in my introduction to Volume 4 of *The Quatrain*, the university and the nation were facing an unprecedented crisis with the reality of a pandemic and lockdown. The hope at that time was that the desperate situation would last for a relatively brief time and that by fall things would be returning to normal. That didn't happen. The restrictions, though loosening, are still with us but the number of deaths from Covid-19 has now reached over 500, 000, more than double the number first predicted. What I asked, at the end of that introduction,

focusing on a photograph of a tenebrous cityscape, entitled "from 'Life,'" was whether the disc that appeared above the earth was the image of a setting or rising sun. In many ways, I still don't know. The United States, after a highly divisive election, has a new President, but not until after a contentious summer of protests calling for "social justice," more mass shootings, and an insurrection of the Capitol on Jan. 6th, which shook our country to its core.

So I turn to Volume 5 for direction from our college students, those very people who will inherit both our problems and our promise. It seems to me that the young writers and artists for this volume, all students from Louisiana Tech, are also in a questioning mood—there are no absolutes, no certainties here. They write about occupying a liminal space—no longer, as Wordsworth suggests, in "thoughtless youth," but unsure what lies ahead. Madeleine Adams for instance, in her poem, "Jenny," states: "Seasons bring the change of new life, but I remain in the meld of mourning and celebration." Or Lauren Washington, meditating about the lost childhood attractions of Neverland, finds "Neverland gave me a chance at life again/By giving me a place to which I could get away." Annie Gremillion speaks for so many of these students in her story reflecting on her childhood home: "I'm eighteen years old, and things have changed. They're not my woods anymore. I've grown, and so have they. And I can never go back." Indeed, you cannot. However, my hope is that these students will discover what the protagonist in the story by Kristyn Hardy realizes: "And for one small moment in her life, Fallin was not afraid of tomorrow."

Donald P. Kaczvinsky



Donald Kaczvinsky  
Dean, College of Liberal Arts  
Louisiana Tech University

## Letter from the Editor



This time last year, I was announcing to my family that a poem I had written was to be published in something called *The Quatrain*. Twelve months later, I am its Editor-in-Chief, and proudly presenting Volume Five to you all. In case you were wondering, yes, it does feel crazy. But at the same time, so pleasantly natural.

My life has been marked by my literary milestones. As such, reading and writing, and words in general, have been the axis on which my world spins. To be involved in this literary journal from start to finish has felt like the culmination of my life before my time as Editor and a cornerstone for my life after this volume is completed. I have had the privilege to read and experience the beautiful, engaging, funny, out-of-the-box, jaw-dropping work of some of Tech's most creative and talented students. Equally as enjoyable, if not more so, I have had the honor to work alongside some of them in the making of this journal. I would not be here, offering you such a lovely, gritty, perfect-in-itself volume had it not been for these amazing people, contributors and staff alike.

It has been such a blessing to work on and produce this fifth volume of *The Quatrain*. The artists within these pages have inspired me, opened my eyes, and reminded me of all things beautiful in this world. I hope you will see the goodness within this art as well, and maybe even find a space to create your own, in whatever form you choose.

Ever loyal be,



Kristyn Hardy  
Editor-in-Chief

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## A Poet, Pistachios, and 95 Dollars of Cigar Gift Cards

by Jenna Meadows

---

I went blues dancing on Christmas night  
 and a drunk woman with a pearl necklace  
 taught me how to win love  
 she approached me, leaning against the  
 paper towels with a winning smile  
 "let me tell you something, my father doesn't  
 love me" but she had a plan  
 she'd employ a poet she'd make him cry  
 and he'd love her, she was certain

if he didn't love her after the poems composed,  
 she'd have a second plan in motion  
 she'd give him a six dollar bag of pistachios,  
 that would win him over  
 if his heart was still not hers to squeeze, maybe  
 she'd win over his lungs with nicotine  
 she'd paid her sister, brother, and mother to  
 get her cigar gift cards for her father  
 thinking only one would come through,  
 but they all came through  
 because her father received ninety-five dollars  
 worth of gift cards to his favorite cigar shop

oh, she'd win over her father's love, that  
 woman with the pearl necklace  
 all you need is a poet, a six dollar bag of  
 pistachios, and 95 dollars worth of cigars  
 "I'm his favorite kid now," she said, grinning like  
 a great white shark, her eyes glittering  
 "if you're here next November, I'll pay you to  
 write the poems next time, doll"  
 all you need to win a father's love is a poet, a  
 bag of pistachios, and 95 dollars of cigars



**The Divine Feminine**

Stevie Iseral

### Oh Pinnochio, Call Me When You're a Real Boy

by Laura Cason

---

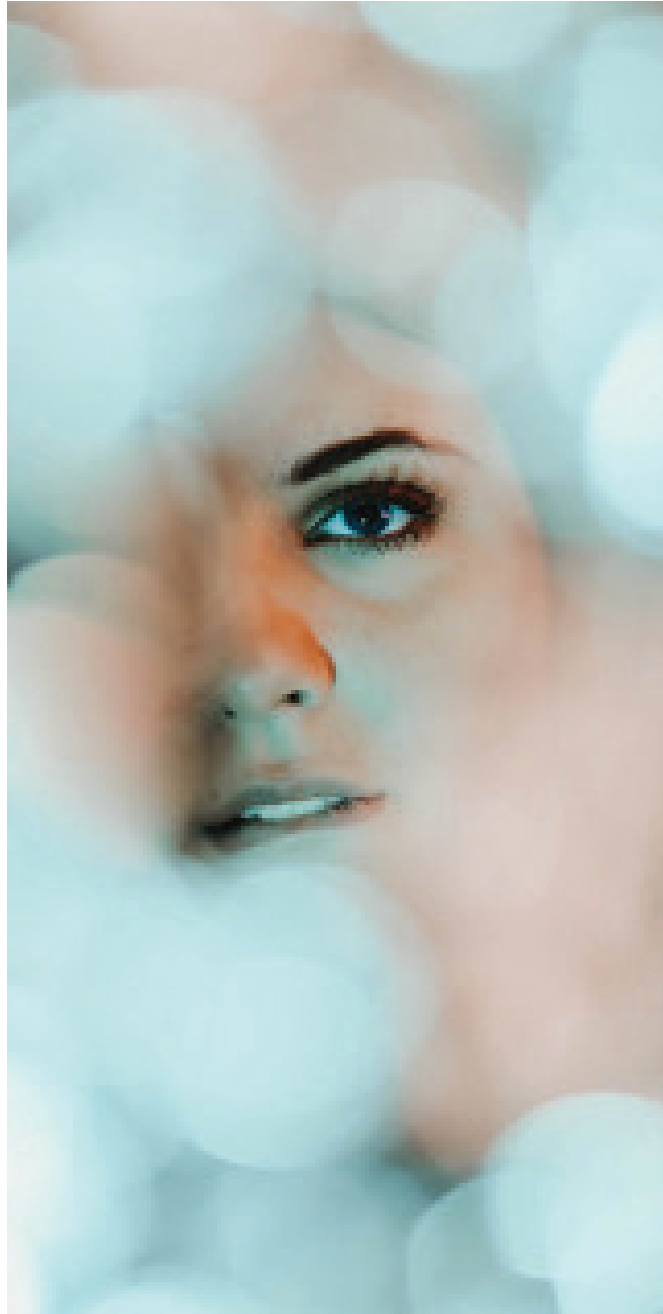
I remember when the snow melted and you smiled like the sun  
would never leave.  
I remember when the fire crackled and danced in your eyes like  
pagans on the solstice.  
I remember when the way you looked at me fluttered in my chest  
like caged moths aching to fling  
themselves into the flames.  
I remember you the way you told me to the way your tongue  
curled around my name, the way your  
tears slid down my cheeks, the way  
your head  
fell heavy on the pillow and your fingers  
skated across my back.  
  
I remember when you walked past the window and no reflection  
looked back at us.  
I remember watching you sit in the same spot for 10 hours without  
looking at me.  
I remember the hollow look in your eyes and the foreign timbre of  
your voice when you told me it had all  
been a lie.  
I remember the nausea I felt (I feel it now) knowing you meant it.  
I remember you telling me there is nothing to remember  
because you don't exist  
not yet, anyway.  
But I still remember.

### Jenny

by Madeleine Adams

---

The night is still, the dragonflies buzz with the drone of time  
The faint rustling of the wind accompanies  
the soft twinkle of the stars above  
The fog is thick and smokey, stretching for gods know how long  
  
My feet are tattered and bloody, the drum of fate beats on  
My body is my only connection to time; I can only be as I have been  
My mind, a fortress impregnable to those lacking Sight  
  
Sometimes I ponder the rusted fragility of  
emotion; they weep for my pain  
Sometimes the warm silver of moonlight catches  
their faded silhouettes as they wander  
Sometimes the truth invades, and I must tune  
into the rhythm of nature to please them  
  
He plucks sweet crying from the harp cradled in his arms  
He stirs my memories; the innocent and  
the guilty both die screaming  
He reminisces; I do as well though he  
cannot see, but my body begins  
  
Trying to hold back, I am nevertheless caught back into the dance  
Trying to keep them satisfied, memories and  
futures cascade into frenzied weeping  
Trying to pay my penance, I stay in the rubble of  
the stones being returned to the forest  
  
Seasons wax and wane, our stories are distorted then forgotten  
Seasons wash away the sin and joy, leaving  
only the opportunity for acceptance  
Seasons bring the change of new life, but I remain  
in the meld of mourning and celebration



### **I See You**

Christina Summers

### **Welcome to Neverland**

by Lauren Washington

---

It seems I was born knowing the story of Neverland,  
A place you can escape to, a place where you'll never age.  
I think Peter Pan knew that I needed him;  
He gave me his hand and pulled me through the page.

We flew through the sky all night long,  
'Second star to the right and straight on til morning.'  
Peter never let my hand go, he never let me feel alone  
I was glad that I left my home without warning.

I swam with the mermaids, I flew with the fairies,  
I lived so carefree, I could do no wrong.  
In Neverland I got to be a kid;  
At home, on the Mainland, I always had to be strong.

'I am not okay,' I told Peter,  
'I have a sickness inside that is holding me down.'  
He lent me his ear and then took me on an adventure,  
Because Peter Pan never let me frown.

I found a home, a family in Neverland  
Me, Peter, and the lost boys too.  
When I found it too hard to keep living  
They were right there, always knowing what to do.

They knew me so well in Neverland  
And they were more than okay being my second home.  
Because at my first I wanted to die every other day  
And everybody just left me all alone.

But Peter Pan was always there for me,  
He would come on a whim, knowing just what to say.  
Neverland gave me a chance at life again  
By giving me a place to which I could get away.

### **To False Promises, and Failed Healing**

by Jackson Floyd

---

When my head wasn't screwed on right,  
When the chemical imbalance demanded me dead,  
We were close.  
We laughed and we cried and we held each other tight,  
Bonded together in hardship.  
I thought a close friend in you.  
You would watch over me and I you.  
Through thick and thin, that's what you said.

Now, my head still isn't screwed on right,  
But it's on tighter than before.  
The chemicals are slightly more balanced,  
And I'm still alive,  
And you are gone.  
The barriers don't exist, you said  
We brought you home to help you, not to get rid of you,  
But I've come back to an empty room  
The fireplace, once always kept lit, dark.  
People come and people go,  
But if you're better, they don't come back.

### **Response to Donne's *Woman's Constancy***

by Kristyn Hardy

---

If ever you should find  
A rose that does not prick,  
Or a branch that does not  
burn;  
If you should once discover  
A rain cloud that does not  
pour,  
Or a sun that has yet to  
shine;  
If you could bring to me  
A child that does not squeal,  
A star that does not glow,  
A book that cannot be read;  
If ever it were proved

That even just one of these  
Existed in this world,  
Not in thought  
Nor wish nor dream,  
But truly in your hands  
One would lie;  
Then perhaps I could believe,  
Not wholly, of course,  
But I may be convinced  
That a man's heart,  
Naked and bare and stark,  
Offered up to me,  
On bended knee and

With no conditions,  
No circumstances or  
constraints;  
If ever it were proven  
That one thing such  
As these were true,  
Then, and only then,  
Could I be led to believe  
That a man's one heart,  
His professed love,  
Were something to be  
faithful to.



**Her**

by Alayna Juneau

---

She's there  
teasing me  
at the depths of my reality.  
Calling my name,  
demanding my attention.  
Her fingers intertwine  
my conscious like a weed.  
She waits in my dreams,  
painting a picture of myself  
I'd rather not see.

She sees me as a monster.  
Something that shouldn't have been born.  
Something that shouldn't still be here.  
Something dirty and crooked.

She wants me to see myself her way.

I can't, not anymore.  
Not when flowers color my world,  
and deep golden bread bakes in my oven.  
Not when warm hands clasp mine,  
and a warm body holds me close.  
Not when I can see the smile on my face,  
and feel the grass between my toes.



**Glitch**  
Kayla O'Neal

**Fractions: Perspective in Place**

by Madeleine Adams

**Can you hear me?**

As far back as I can recall, my opinions have not mattered. I am a female so my father has no need for me to say anything, unless he has asked me a question.

"Children are to be seen and not heard."

Sure, I am not a full adult, but I am 20 going on 21 and have more education than he ever will. I can never fix his perspective, but I can escape as much as possible. I go to few places with him and speak as little as I can. With headphones in and music to drown out the screaming, I have survived through avoidance. The moon checks on my mood, a parent I can never know. The empty sky is too full of possibilities, it frightens me. I stay in my space. Lyrics, my only comfort.

"Stop listening to that garbage."

Movies take me places where I can be the protagonist, instead of a background character.

"You're too young to watch that. No PG-13 until you're 18."

I sing as little as possible in front of people, unless I trust them. My father is tone-deaf, and my stepmother only caters to gain his favor.

"Wow, you really think you sound better than us?  
You're just trying to show off a talent you don't have."

After being told for years that you sound terrible and that you shouldn't make noise, you begin to mask any emotion. Why try to connect when you are polar opposites, repelling violently? I tried for too long with nothing in return. Now I have people who listen to what they've heard. They care about what I say. You know nothing of my life. Everything you believe is a lie—one you've told yourselves, one you can no longer try to force me to see. I reject your perspective. I can find my own.

**A New York State of Mind**

The first time ART ever hit me was in the MoMA. It smacked me light years away.

Far from the antiquity of Southern ideals

Far from the patriarchal constraints shackled on  
us from birth

Far from the confused and scared eyes

Of my stepmother and her friend who took me on this senior trip

Vincent Van Gogh warmed my soul

with nature through his eyes

stars swirl above a town solidified, his head in the clouds

*Feel my sky and the pain I put into it.*

"You know he was crazy, right?"

Sure, it's pretty, but the tortured artist is such a cliché."

A postcard by Yoshitomo Nara

begged me to take his sad eyes home

the green-eyed child looked resolved, calling me a  
kindred spirit

See my soul and the weight of reality.

"Why would you waste your money on that?"

At least buy something meaningful or pretty."

Frieda Kahlo's portrait

Showed me my pain,

yelled at me to work for my dreams

*Hear my anger and learn to fuel your own.*

"She was one of THOSE, a queer.

I don't see why this place would put up stuff by  
someone like that."

*How could you stay the same after our presence?*

*How could you hold off on your dreams?*

*How could you be anything other than what you are?*

As I stare at a collage of women giving birth

"Aren't you done yet?"

"I said I was only going to one of these stupid things!  
You could at least have picked the MET, not this weird stuff."

I am reminded of reality  
I can only be part of me  
I cannot be what I dream

"Life is unfair."

I will never be anything but a fraction

Their eyes haunt me,  
Bore into the back I turned on them.

I get back on the bus, headphones blasting,  
Drowning out complaints and gossip,  
Listening to those who have recovered.  
The tour tape gives me facts about this city I love.  
I get farther and farther from inspiration.  
Miles and time stretch,

I can only think of what I could have been,  
How I could be different and inspired,  
And remember what those paintings said  
to me.

### **The Truest Thing I Know**

*"All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know."-Hemingway*

I desire to be inspired and motivated by the things around me. Whether I look at the night sky and see a poem about existentialism, listen to a new song and hear a story I could paint, or watch my favorite movie and forge a song from it; I crave to carve out a new form. Without personal muses, we can have no inspiration. I love myths, dancing, and photography. But the truest thing I know is storytelling. I love music and art and writing. All of these mediums use abstract ways of getting a lesson across to readers. I cannot put my truth into one sentence. I love and hate too much, and too deeply, to compress. I have been compressing my feelings my entire life. Now, I can try to make my experiences as clear as possible.

Truth is evident. Truth is subjective.

My perspective tells me to love as much as I can, to see the unique and praise it,

the antithesis of my family.  
Truth is personalized. Truth is all about perspective.  
I have decided to learn for myself what I want things to mean. I have decided to love what I can.

Truth is a lie. Truth is bold.

Sure, I may enjoy the "unconventional": anime, kpop,  
French philosophy, women, men-- but it is all  
I can do to see my truth.

Truth is hidden. Truths are what we believe we're told.

I do not wish to dwell in hatred and conformity. I don't want to be so full of hate. I don't want to be conventional. While I'm home, I will follow their rules, but my dress, media, attitudes, perspectives are mine and mine alone

in a place removed.

I can recognize the impossibility of my situation. I am forced to be financially dependent. I must wear clothes I hate. I am a babysitter to my siblings. I am the dishwasher. I am the cleaner. I am their Cinderella. I work in the house in exchange for food and shelter. Offered tidbits of imitated emotion. Forced feelings out of a place they were hurt in the past. My memories are hazy, some clear, some as if someone else lived them. I will daydream, look to artists for inspiration, wait for the day I can overcome and move on. The paintings speak to me every day. Reminding me of hope, resilience, and drive.

Vincent

*See how nature inspires you, plants wither and bloom.  
Times are hard but surrender to your quest to happiness.*

Yoshitomo

*Hear the help of those who care.  
Your reflection is a view of the past.*

Frida

*Feel your emotions and let them bloom.  
Passion is not a crime, neither is patience.*

### **But I Could be Marble**

by Grace Miholic

---

I wish I was your muse  
In the same way, I was you  
Reflected in mirrors when I modeled your rejected clothes you  
dressed me with  
But my world is no longer romanticized to think you'd carve me  
out of marble  
I have too many jagged edges to emulate effortlessly smooth beauty



### **Epiphany** Callie Robbins



## Lamb for the Slaughter

by Annie Gremillion

---

your capricious nature,  
your love of hate,  
your wanton longing  
has fattened you up.  
your blood grown rich  
and sinew ripe for slaughter  
made god decide it was your time.  
i remember the look of sheer desperation  
in your eyes when you realized  
it was more than a shearing.  
and that was when i realized  
you were just a boy. riddled with sin  
and neurosis and fear of death no doubt,  
but a boy who deserved to be free.  
come into my arms boy, let your curls twist through my fingers.  
i will show you what tenderness is



**Minded Figure**  
Noah Blessing

## To the Practice of Both

by Addy Lindsay

---

There is an inexhaustible grief that seems to happen when I consciously miss something that I am right in the middle of. It is sort of like a tethered experience that seeks no means to an end, a discomfort in the midst of gratitude, a fear of the embodiment of deep and fulfilling joy. We, perhaps, are more familiar with the universal unfamiliarity that is sitting in our pain, but less inclined to relish in the pleasure of joy and acknowledge what it often costs us as we open ourselves up to the vulnerability of being truly seen.

There has always been a perceived binary between the linking of utter despair and genuine joy, such that there is no bridge or much effort to find a soft landing place between the two. This intangible longing for the present seems to be the paradox of both grief and joy. Both seem to have the capacity to make us feel alive, to produce in us an unquenchable desire that often leaves us to hide, to disconnect, to disengage.

The essence of both grief and joy are unified by a common knowledge of something deeper that leaves behind a powerful presence we seem to not be able to escape, a gaping absence of what was that is no longer. In grief, this presence often reveals itself to be that whimsical absence, an ache for that which is not near or accessible, a knowing of better days that seem behind us. In joy, this presence is the embodiment of unregulated abundance that feels threatening or liable to be stolen from us.

The cost of both can leave us running, or it can lead us near.

There is no limit to the depth of suffering, nor is there an inhibited flow to the joy a human heart is able to contain. I tenderly hold both as I witness the vacancy of city streets, the hush that towers over my favorite supermarkets, the loneliness that threatens to drive me to despair, the wails of suppressed pain I witness from strangers who have become my greatest teachers. I, perhaps for the first time, am able to see grief personified in the essence of joy that knows no limits because it knows all

quirks and corners of suffering. This grief keeps me quiet, still, listening, curious, thoughtful, and acutely aware, while joy keeps me hopeful, inclined, relieved, teachable, and full. Both provide me with the quaintest bit of light that encourages me to take a couple more steps forward.

Maybe I am able to discern this most in the face of my neighbor, my fellow human, an attuned other whom I seek to find commonality with. Most often, it is in the deep quest of deeply knowing another that I am able to find myself. This familiar stranger often generously holds up a mirror to myself, one who welcomes me and teaches me the paradox of an overlapping reality of longing that is coupled with a deep satisfaction of mindfulness and hope. In the dark of all despair and unknown, I let both lead the way, and—after all—it is usually both that leads me home again.



## He Does the Things He Does

by Anthony Franklin

---

Papers and documents smother  
The mahogany wood of his writing desk.  
He can hear the raspy smoker voice of his witness,  
"I saw a white man", "Whiter than that paper", "No, not hispanic",  
Torturing his unsettled mind with their mocking tones.  
They too will escape with his client.

He might as well have witnessed the murder,  
For his client described his brutality in comprehensive detail,  
Painting the drug trade with those iniquitous words and that sly smile.  
In fact, he sometimes dreams he was in that alley,  
Listening to the trickle of the gutters,  
Watching the scene through the dim light of a lamppost,  
Smelling the rotting meat of garbage bins lining the walls.

The walls would loom over him, higher than he could see.  
And the concrete floor, blackened, too far away from  
The rays of light, shifted uneasily beneath his feet.  
Sometimes his client would come up behind him,  
Creeping with the shadows that floated around,  
And the client standing, seemingly absorbing  
All the light from the lamppost,  
Illuminating a bright, young  
Face full of life,  
Longing.

Other times he is his client,  
Slithering atop the uneasy floor,  
Pointing the solid black handgun,  
Pulling the immense weight of the trigger,  
Watching the victim's face turn dead and cold.

He always wakes up, jolting,  
Face sweaty and chilled,  
And he hears the constant mellow breath of his wife.  
Then he goes to see the children's eyes flutter in their sleep,  
And he is reminded why...



## Self-Portrait Within the Wallpaper

Evelyn Hinojosa



**David**  
Hunter Jones

## Here Lie the Dreams

by Samuel Cooley

---

Here lie the dreams,  
Of one little, nice boy,  
Who has grown into a man  
And given up his joy.

Here lie the dreams,  
Of one bright, happy girl,  
Who saw her mommy's bottle  
And went to give it a whirl.

Here lie the dreams,  
Of one up and coming star,  
Who saw a stranger needing help  
And jumped into their car.

Here lie the dreams,  
Of a lover kneeling down,  
Though not quite so deep  
As his dear love's frown.

Here lie the dreams,  
Of all the broken, young, and old,  
Of those the world has failed,  
Leaving their shattered dreams cold.



**what's the point** *For Brittany*

by Katelyn Swanson

---

what's the point  
of carrying on every day  
making sure my pants match my shirt  
picking up those discarded pennies on the sidewalk  
when God's got his hand wrapped around my family's throat

have you ever been angry with God?

why should i take my time  
carefully get my bread from the toaster  
instead of burning my fingers  
take each step at a time  
instead of two by two  
the mundane things in life  
were the only thing i had

why would you take that away from me?

i leave the dishes to pile in the sink  
toss my clothes anywhere but the hamper  
ignore the toothpaste that stains the bathroom sink  
let my hair clog the shower drain  
i can't sit to tie my shoes  
i don't see myself when i hurry past the bathroom mirror  
i brush past people and don't say sorry  
Mom calls my phone and i don't pick up  
because i can't lie and say i'm fine  
when our quartet is now a trio  
seventy-five cents of the dollar  
the golden girls minus Dorothy

i'm not fine

now horror movies are less than scary  
90s boy bands make my heart throb  
(in a bad way)  
i don't want no scrubs  
but i need a little TLC  
no more girls nights  
or board games and curse words and craft parties  
all the time i'd thought we'd have  
all the things i'd thought we'd do

but God decided that wasn't the plan  
so now i'm left  
to brush my teeth and comb my hair  
and carry on  
those everyday little moments  
when the world is quiet  
and my thoughts are loud

is when God tightens his grip  
on me.

### What Happened at the House on Colquitt Road

by Savannah Barker

---

An old, worn down  
White house  
Just about five  
Minutes down Colquitt,  
A road I drive down frequently  
To go to my father's house.

The setup of the home  
One you don't often see  
With a large elevated  
Back porch  
And a small elevated front one,  
Just about the right size for rocking chairs.  
The house seemingly small, but one  
I always dreamed of as being cozy.

What history does that old house  
That I often imagine myself in, hold?

I've seen cars parked outside,  
Countrymen with wide smiles  
And rolled up flannel sleeves  
Dreaming of what they could  
Make the house be  
(Like I so often do),  
Yet still year after year  
I only see the paint more chipped,  
The wood further warped and worn,  
The home less homely.

I know what draws people to it,  
But what drives people away?  
What is the hidden history of this lonely house?  
I often imagine a small family of three:  
A stay-at-home mom  
Who enjoys sitting on the porches  
And reading when the weather is nice;

A young boy  
Who loves to wander through the woods  
But knows to avoid the road  
Where the people speed  
And do not watch for wandering children;  
And a dad,  
A towering father who works a  
Nine-to-five  
Coming home often exhausted  
with only a cold drink on his mind:  
A family dynamic that used to seem comfortable  
Now known to be set up for failure.

I see the father,  
Scuff shadowing his face,  
Coming home from work on a Friday night  
Tired, aggravated, wanting a break.  
I hear the buzz of a TV clash against  
The crash of glass against the floor  
Of the kitchen tile.  
And then his boots.  
His voice louder than the disruption itself  
Shaking the crying child before him.

I see her robe move across the kitchen  
As she comes between the man  
She used to love  
And the child she would do anything for,  
And I hear the heart-breaking sound  
Of a man who doesn't know  
How to control his anger.

She's done,  
Doesn't even bother to pack a suitcase,  
Her hands immediately sweeping both  
Child from the floor  
And keys from the counter.  
I see headlights flash across the house:  
Its white paint not yet chipped,  
Its boards not yet warped to moan,  
And I hear the hum of the engine

get further and further away  
Quickly drowned out by his voice  
Echoing through the surrounding woods.

What happened after that one night  
That he made a mistake  
That changed his life?  
Did he lose his job  
And spend his days alone  
Drinking beer  
and watching clips of his  
used-to-be happy family,  
a now unfixable dream?

He left the house behind  
when he died  
to only be loved  
and pondered over in passing  
By those who try to change the past  
And those who question it  
Like me.





### Melvin

Noah Blessing

### Train Station of the Afterlife

by Alayna Juneau

"Jason?" a lady says, snapping her fingers in my face. One of the billions of souls that passed me on the way to catch their train. "Jason? Is that you?" The woman's shrill voice is too much to ignore.

"Please miss, go and catch your train," I move my hand in a shooing motion. I'd rather just sit here for a millennium or two more. That would be better than making a decision.

She grabs my hand, "Your father wandered away, and I can't seem to find him."

Her eyebrows lift in concern. All her wrinkles work to create an exaggerated expression, almost as if she were on a show that teaches toddlers their emotions. I sigh and look over to the lady. "If I help you, will you please leave me be?"

She loops her arm through mine and pulls me to my feet. Her other hand clutches the cross hanging around her neck, "I've been looking around for ages. My feet are killing me."

She must be looking for the Heaven train. I wonder if Jason's father is there waiting on her. Not that it really matters. Most souls as confused as her have been wandering around for years.

"I'm glad you decided to stop daydreaming and help your old mother," she says with a smile.

I take her through the train station, past hundreds of other souls waiting to catch their train. We pass by a small office with a dusty 'help wanted' sign.

"Who would want to work here?" the lady says.

"I'm not sure anyone works here," I say. I haven't seen anyone for as long as I've been sitting, but truth be told, I haven't exactly been looking.

The gold trim on the pearly white train catches my eye as we board the platform. "Are we going on a trip?" the lady asks, her eyes sparkling in the light from the train. The platform is covered in people. A young girl clutches the hand of a young woman. A kid is holding the leash of a golden retriever. A man stands on the platform with olive skin and shoulder length brown hair. The old lady catches sight of him and drops my arm. The doors to the train open and the crowd boards together. Not a single person pushes or rushes. Everyone smiles at each other. The young help the old. The whole scene radiates happily ever after.

When the last passenger boards, the olive-skinned man, who I can now see wears a conductor's outfit, looks at me and smiles. He raises an eyebrow and gestures toward the train, as if asking if I'm going to board. I shake my head and he shrugs. As the train pulls away, the whistle blows.

It's better to go back to my seat and think about my decision more. I can't choose Heaven. An eternity of bliss sounds great at first, but after a few eons of the same thing over and over again, I know it'll become boring. If there is never bad, how can you appreciate the good?

My shoulder crashes into another soul, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." He's a young man, not more than 18 years.

His shirt is a multitude of different colors, like a rainbow. He stands without lifting his head.

"Hey, I didn't mean to..." he doesn't finish his sentence. He walks around me into a small hallway that leads to stairs, and I follow. The stairs are damp and slimy, letting out onto a dark, crowded platform with no seats. Some souls sit on the stairs with their heads in their hands.

"What is this place?" I ask.

"Hell," an old man says, putting his arm around my shoulders. He's wearing a conductor's outfit like the olive-skinned man, but his looks torn and old. "Or the train to it anyway. Are you lost, pretty boy?"

I look over to the kid in the rainbow shirt. "No, I don't think so." Why would you choose to spend forever in hell? "Oh? Looking to save a soul?" he laughs. It's a high scratchy sound.

I shake his arm off and walk to the kid. I sit down on the dirty floor beside him.

"You can't change my mind," he says.

"About?" I ask, folding my hands in my lap so they won't touch the disgusting floor.

"I belong here," he says.

"I'm not here to change your mind," I say, "I'm just deciding on which train I should take."

"If you aren't here to stop me, then leave me alone," he says and pulls his knees up to his chest.

"I just came from the train to Heaven. It was a little bright for my tastes," I say and look over at him. He puts his head between his knees with a sigh. "But you know, with Heaven being so high up in the clouds it must be cold. Right? So I decided to check out a place a little bit warmer."

I watch through a break in his arms as the kid's face moves up a little. I know he cracked a smile. "So, tell me, before I make a permanent decision, why did you choose to go to Hell?"

The kid's smile vanishes, and he lifts his head to meet my eyes, "It's where they told me I deserved to go."

There is a deep ache in my chest. For the first time since being dead, I've felt the absence of my vital organs.

"They?" an old man asks as he hobbles over to join the conversation. "There's only one rule in this old train station: you can't let anyone else choose your eternity. Hell is all about guilt. Whatever guilt you harbored in life brought you down here in death. Sometimes people mistake their own guilt for the guilt of others."

"You can't just drop a feeling you've had for your whole life,"  
the kid says.

"Not all at once; it'll take some time to learn to accept yourself,"  
I say.

"And you can't do it down here in this shitty place, go upstairs and  
get some sunlight," the old man says. The boy nods and starts to  
stand up.

I lead him back up the stairs and into the train station's brightly lit  
halls. I pull him along until I find the biggest windows I can and sit  
him in the sun. His cheeks turn rosy, and he smiles.

"Thank you," he says.

I leave him to think and try to do some thinking myself. I should  
try to stop putting off my choice and just choose an afterlife  
already. Heaven will get boring. I don't harbor any guilt for hell.  
There are so many other choices, I can't remember them all. I  
look at the closest map and notice a small bald girl also studying  
the map.

"Do you need help?" I ask.

"I'm not allowed to talk to strangers," she says and looks away.

"Okay," I say, and continue to study the map.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch her looking at me a few more  
times before she says, "What's your name?"

I can't quite remember what I was called on Earth. How very  
strange it is to not remember your own name. What had that  
woman called me earlier? "You can call me Jason. What's yours?"

"Emma," she says then crosses her arms. "Now we aren't strangers."

"I guess that's true," I say.

"Can you read that map?" she asks quickly.

"Yes, do you need to get somewhere?" I ask.

"Yes, Mommy said that one day I'll go to sleep, and when I wake  
up, she probably won't be there," she says as her small hands  
bunch up her dress and her face turns a light shade of pink.  
"Mommy said that I could be anything that I wanted. I want to be  
a wildflower."

"Then you should go to Reincarnation," I say, pointing to the signs  
hanging from the ceiling. "There are signs."

She motions for me to bend over and whispers in my ear,  
"I can't read."

"Do you want some help getting there?" I ask.

"Yes please!" she says.

"You know I haven't chosen which train I want to get on yet." We  
start walking toward Reincarnation's train, and I ask the girl, "Why  
did you choose to be a wildflower?"

"They can grow wherever they want!" she says with a twirl, "And  
they are always beautiful."

"To be honest, I'm a little scared to choose a place to go," I say.

"Every time I had to take a shot, Mommy would grab my hand,"  
she grabs my hand, "and told me to be brave. So you just have to  
be brave and take your shot."

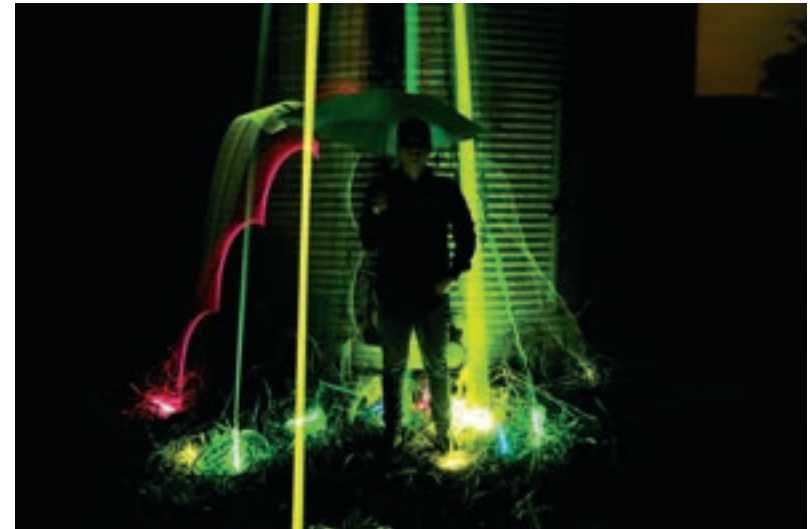
We make it to the train just before it pulls out. There is every kind  
of animal painted on its sides along with plants and trees and even  
humans that look like they are dancing.

Emma's face spreads into a big smile, but she turns and grabs my  
hand again right before she steps onto the train. "Mommy always  
told me it was important to keep yourself the happiest, and your  
choices should always make you happy, so wherever you go, make  
sure it makes you happy."

The train starts to pull away, and she heads into the car.  
Okay, it's time. I should make a decision. Why not the  
Reincarnation train? I'm already here. No. No. I may not remember  
much of my life, but the last time I was on Earth it was pretty bad,  
it can only be worse now. What about the train to Nothing? That  
just feels like giving up. And there's that 'help wanted' sign again.

Wait.

I grab the sign and blow off the dust. Maybe I'm not ready to make  
a choice. Maybe I should stay right here and help others. I slowly  
open the office door and step inside.



## Flash Flood Warning

by Jenna Meadows

floating above the chaos, second-floor safety  
 Is it chaos or is the chaos in my soul  
 the serrated sound of the warnings remind me of home  
 my home is the sea, shmucks tell me it's where I should go  
 maybe I'm the shmuck for not believing them,  
 let 'em search for the great white whale  
 I'll stay on land and wait for him to come to me

soft steps down to the first floor, looking for something  
 anything to sate my salty soul  
 lights flicker off in the hallway as my feet slosh down  
 I can stand without fear of the water taking me away  
 Ahab's hall, this hall, is the first to flood in a flash  
 It was inevitable, the sea could not be without its captain  
 so instead of his search, the sea searched for him

breeeep, breeeep, breeep  
 The national weather service in New Orleans has issued a flood  
 warning for this area

are we human or are we savages in a moment of crisis?  
 water brings out the true nature of every man, sailor  
 savor that the water came to us, bringing all its mysteries  
 up above, and cloudy-white, there's a great white whale  
 From his blowhole he summons only the greatest of storms  
 are we human or are we savages in a moment of crisis  
 Water fills the streets, the entire Gulf of Mexico came to me

Crystal little drops of rainfall, the world becomes a watery white  
 I would get an umbrella, but the sky has me entranced, so  
 beautiful  
 So white, so terrifying with the amount of power it holds  
 I hear a terrifying whale song, I forgot what the tornado sirens  
 sound like  
 It brings me to my senses, and back inside I go  
 Floating above the chaos, second-floor safety  
 I open up my Norton's copy of Moby Dick, that's enough adventure  
 for today

## I Used to Call It Home

by Annie Gremillion

I grew up a child of the woods. I let the falling leaves raise  
 me, the twisted brambles etch memories into my skinny legs as  
 I wandered through the path and wove myself through the trees.  
 This path I walked mindlessly, endlessly; the trail burned into the  
 bottoms of my bare feet. A thick layer of pine straw poked uselessly  
 at the soles, long toughened from years of claiming my territory.  
 My mother always worried when I crossed the fence, warning  
 me of snakes and West Nile Virus, but I feared nothing. After all, I  
 emerged every time unscathed, albeit with some scrapes and a few  
 mosquito bites. They were a comfort; every bump, every scratch  
 proof that I had fought my way through the woods, day after day.  
 And fight I did; the woods were my escape. I walked their long  
 path, unveiling their mysteries.

One warm summer morning my feet led me to a new  
 place, and I discovered the creek that snaked through the flora  
 and led to what seemed to be a tiny river. It was bigger and  
 wider than the creek, full of sand and places to run and play, and  
 I affectionately dubbed it "the lagoon." It became my new hiding  
 spot in the unpleasant game of hide-and-seek that would ensue  
 from my parents' oncoming divorce. The trees were a canopy for  
 my thoughts as I whispered stories to myself, hands running across  
 bark, feet steady on a path they knew better than any other. I often  
 called it my second home, but when I was sitting on a throne of  
 leaves, staring over a body of water that was so distinctly *mine*, I  
 thought of it as my first.

Until I had to leave it. My mom got remarried after  
 the divorce, and I moved into a new house, with a new family,  
 and a new life. I never stopped missing my creek, my lagoon; it  
 appeared so often in my dreams, clear as day, just as I remembered  
 it. I swore I would return, but I never thought I would have the  
 opportunity to go back until a sudden visit changed my mind.

It was last summer; I was grateful to have finished high  
 school but not quite ready to start anew with college. I was  
 spending my last hours of freedom doing what I do best, sitting  
 on the floor and playing video games, until my mom called me  
 from downstairs.

"Do you want to go to the old house?" she asked me as I



jumped off the last step, purse on her shoulder and all ready to go. I looked down; I was still in my pajamas. "Now?"

"Yeah, I have to pick up some stuff from the attic." My dad had been renting the house, and we still had storage in the attic. I had no reason to go until a realization dawned on me.

"Can I go to the creek?"

"I guess," she said, checking the time on her phone. "Just hurry up and get ready."

And hurry I did: I threw on some clothes and shoes that I wouldn't mind getting muddy, and we were on our way.

I was so excited to visit my old stomping grounds. I was walking the trail along the creek in my head the whole way there, thrilled that I still knew it by heart. I had seen it in my dreams. The very concept of it still being there, as I left it all those years ago, made my heart pound. I watched the familiar sights out the window as we approached the place I had spent one of the most formative periods of my life. And it was the perfect goodbye to my childhood, as I'd be starting college the next week.

Pulling into our old driveway invoked the strangest sense of *deja vu*. It was like a much younger Annie possessed me as I hopped out of the front seat and ran onto the backyard deck, straight into a puddle of dread.

The backyard was a mess.

Our old swing set was still there, but barely. It was a husk of what it once was, the swings tangled and seats broken. There was garbage littered throughout the grass, which was hideously overgrown.

I swallowed.

I hopped off the deck into the yard, growing more disturbed with each step: broken limbs, trash, what looked like a burn hole. Finally, I reached the edge of the woods, where I was further surprised by fallen trees and overgrown undergrowth. I had to remind myself that I shouldn't be upset by this. It had been seven years. I couldn't expect things to be the same, though I certainly wanted them to be. I pushed through the brush, making my way to the portal to my old world. I stared at that hole in the fence, anxiety gnawing at the pit of my gut. It was the same, but I knew once I was inside, things would be different. Something told me there was no going back, but still I stepped into the fence.

It was like meeting with an old friend after years of not seeing them. There's something familiar, they're still *them*, but

they've changed, they've grown up. That was how I felt walking through the ferns, remembering stories I made up, the years I spent here. It was overcast, and the trees made it only darker. My shoes crunched across a floor of long-dead leaves as I walked to the creek itself. Chills ran up my spine when I heard the familiar babble of water on stones, and I knelt down beside the source, taking a second to dip my fingers in the cold water.

"Hey," I whispered.

I stood up, wiping my hand off on my shorts and continuing on my way.

I stepped in the tiny patches of light cast through the trees until I came to a stop. The path I originally took was now blocked off by a tree that had fallen, scattering branches and leaves over the steps I knew to take. With a sigh, I started a new route. Unfortunately for me and my memory, most of the rest of my original trail was overgrown. I followed it to the side, spotting remnants of my childhood as I went. The tiny waterfall. The little group of rocks under it. The tree that used to provide a bridge had caved in, so I had to go around. As I was scavenging for a new path, I walked into something sticky.

I gasped as I felt a spider web catch in my hair. I shook and patted all over, stopping in my tracks. And thank God I did, because when I looked up, not two feet in front of me, was the biggest spider I had ever seen.

It was like a movie scene where the camera slowly focuses on the object of importance. I felt my blood run cold. It was the size of my hand, and a sickly yellowish-green. I took a step back, breathless, suddenly grateful I had walked into the first spider web. I shook as I made my way around its giant territory. There were *never* any giant spiders when I used to come here as a kid, and I would know—I'm deathly afraid of them. I shook my head to clear it. I was close to the lagoon anyway. I wouldn't have to deal with seeing my home so ravaged for much longer.

My heart pounding with every step, I continued, now on edge, fearful of any other surprises that may come my way. In my mind, I was already jumping down into the lagoon—I could even hear the little *crunch* of sand as my shoes hit it—and I was crossing the tree bridge, but I stopped before I could even get to the real thing.

I watched a snake slither just in front of my feet and down into the lagoon.

It joined two other snakes in a little pool of water below me, and even in my petrified state, I recognized them as water moccasins. I knew that the second I turned around, they were going to follow me out, bite me, squeeze me to death. I could have died here a long time ago. I'm going to die here now.

So I took off running.

My vision white with fear, I ran. Adrenaline drove me as my feet followed a path they once knew so well. The only words in my head were *Mom can never know about this, Mom can never know about this*. She was the one who always warned me about snakes.

As if on cue, I heard her call me from the house. Time changed as I stopped, and I was suddenly smaller, barefoot, a long trail of hair stuck to my neck with sweat.

And I'd never been so afraid.

When I yelled back to her that I was coming, my voice wasn't mine. I remembered that I was no longer the kid who used to explore these woods, who used to own them. Who found her happy place in nothing but running water and the sound of her own voice. I'm eighteen years old, and things have changed. They're not my woods anymore. I've grown, and so have they.

And I can never go back.



### **That One Dime**

by Anthony Franklin

---

Quarters, nickels, pennies,  
They all tended to stay inside,  
But the dime fits just right  
Into the slit on the bottom of his pocket.

The constant crashing of his feet  
Made all the coins bounce,  
And on their way down they chimed.  
Except for that one dime.

That one dime was fixed,  
Fixed in the hole of that man's pocket.  
For a moment it was stuck, hanging on,  
But with each crash it was pushed ever outward.

It slipped, slipped, and eventually writhed,  
Until the man finally pounced on his victim.  
When that happened, the dime couldn't hold,  
And so out into the world it was thrown.

That one dime couldn't see all the blood,  
It couldn't feel the soft winter grass.  
No, the dime couldn't hear her incessant shrieking,  
Or think to be afraid of that man.

So, in the patch of grass that edges the sidewalk,  
That one dime made do.  
Seven years it went by unnoticed,  
But that one little dime never knew.

Until a small boy, maybe seven years old,  
Walked along the same patch as the dime.  
The boy noticed it, picked it up,  
And said, "This little dime is mine"

### **Drained**

by Savannah Barker

---

She always set my cup of coffee  
Down with a smile  
As white as her apron.  
On the first day I met her  
I found it too apparent  
To not notice  
How neat she was—  
Leaving no counter covered  
In rings of perspiration or  
Beads of splashed drinks.  
Somehow, in this city,  
A rare picture of a perfectionist.  
She was sweet like  
The coffee she brought me  
Each morning,  
With a frothy personality,  
The kind of person  
That couldn't help  
But talk and talk,  
Yet who was so enticing  
You couldn't help  
Strain to hear every  
Phrase that escaped her lips.  
She made it seem as though  
Life could be perfect,  
But she came to prove that wrong.  
I still question it on  
Lonely drunken nights  
When I inevitably come to dream  
Of her sugar-stained lips  
And mocha-colored hair:  
What could have spoiled her?  
Every time I closed my eyes  
I could see her change—  
Her bitter matching  
The coffee she brought me,  
Her shop becoming  
Messy and stained

Much like her  
Soiled and smudged apron.  
She lost her earthiness  
No longer telling her stories,  
Or laughing,  
Going out of her way  
To avoid talking,  
A grunt, sigh, or nod  
Now her only responses.  
She grew cold  
Like the cup she set  
Before me each morning.  
And on the last day  
Before her shop closed,  
Among the counters and booths  
Only boxes and spirits  
Sat with me.

The morning comfort—  
A sweet and warm soothing thing—  
That I was too used to,  
That we all took for granted,  
Spoiled.  
Drained.



**Camera Shy**  
Trevor Blackstock

**25**

by Samuel Donn

---

Where does the air go?  
The air that leaves our lungs as we die?  
A warm, delayed breath—  
it's too loud, it's unintentionally rude.

Keep it to yourself, among the voided air, no—  
the vaulted air—  
If you breathe it, if there's no witness  
to the sucking in, are you alive?—  
Or stationary?—as moss facing  
south...

**Comfort Food**

by Isabelle Byrnes-Bartell

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I was raised on Catholic schoolgirl skirts  
pleated and fresh strawberries covered in sugar

my grandmother, waiting for me at the top  
of the stairs, full of grace, ready with a bowl

of my favorite after-school snack,  
her two-step process, cut off the tops then smother

my grandfather let the sugar blanket the fruit  
like dew, Then stick the bowl in the fridge,

give them a day of rest, take it out the next morning,  
and top it over waffles. I find it on either side of the family,

subtle but a tradition, blessed is the fruit of thy womb  
Even the sweetest things taste bitter when you spent

your entire life sugar-coated. What's life without God,  
but death? Rose-colored glasses, show me heaven

What's the point of life without reward?  
What's the point of dinner without dessert?

Now and at the hour of my death  
I've been so good with a strawberry on top



## TO ISOLATE, OR NOT TO ISOLATE

A ten-minute play by Keith Watson

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### CAST:

JEREMY: a junior at Louisiana Tech

GEORGE: another junior at Louisiana Tech

COVID: a very popular virus

### At rise:

Jeremy is in his apartment sitting on his bed. He is holding his head in his hands. His cell phone rings. He reluctantly picks his head up and places the phone to his ear.

#### JEREMY:

*(in a flat tone)*

Hello?

George is beside the main set sitting in his parked car with a single spotlight.

#### GEORGE:

*(in his usual upbeat tone)*

Hey man! Did you get your results back yet?

#### JEREMY:

*(his voice perking up a bit)*

Yeah, I just got back from the clinic. Thankfully I'm negative.

#### GEORGE:

*(punching his steering wheel with excitement)*

Awesome! Now you can still come to Rick's thing this weekend. Jeremy gets up and stares out of his bedroom window.

#### JEREMY:

Well, the nurse said I still have to quarantine until next Tuesday since I was exposed to my cousin over break.

#### GEORGE:

That's what they have to tell everybody. I swear it's all just a government hoax to control us.



### Waste

Camryn Price

**JEREMY:**

*(watching a group of friends wearing face masks walking the sidewalk)*  
Yeah, it's just...I don't want people to be avoiding me if I go.

**GEORGE:**

Dude, literally no one cares! You know that, right? Most people have either had it or have been exposed, so they have that antibody immunity I've heard about.

**JEREMY:**

Yeah, I guess. It's just—

**COVID:**

*(emerging in Jeremy's room from a puff of smoke)*

Just go to the party! Live a little!

Jeremy wheels around to see the man now standing in his bedroom.

**JEREMY:**

*(to George)*

Uhhh, something just came up. I'll call you later.

**GEORGE:**

Okay, just let me know about the par-

Jeremy hangs up and puts his phone away.

COVID is dressed in a red suit, sunglasses and spiky green hair. He is inspecting JEREMY's room. He senselessly flips through the pages of a textbook open on the desk.

**JEREMY:**

*(to Covid, in shock)*

Who are you? How did you get here?

**COVID:**

*(turning towards Jeremy and adjusting his jacket fit)*

Well, I don't get that very often. You watch the news, kid? I'm pretty famous nowadays.

**JEREMY:**

*(sarcastically)*

I'm sorry. I guess I missed last night's segment on the famous guy who randomly appears in people's houses.

**COVID:**

*(unbothered)*

It's alright. I'm in most people's houses, but not all are so fortunate to actually meet me like this. Name's Coronavirus Disease. My friends call me Covid.

His mouth forms a cheesy grin, and he extends his hand in a way a king might to a loyal subject. Jeremy takes a step back.

**JEREMY:**

*(in shock)*

Woah! How is this happening?(He tenses up and looks at the outstretched hand with contempt.) You suck! Do you know how much you've ruined in this past year?!

**COVID:**

*(retracting his hand)*

What do you mean? It's been a great year. I got out there and traveled the world. Also, I've never been more popular! Covid makes a wide gesture of grandeur with his hands.

**JEREMY:**

Well, I'm glad you've been having a great time, but it's been really crappy for everyone else.

**COVID:**

*(sticking his hands in his pockets and leaning forward)* Boo hoo! Your ancestors dealt with much worse. My numbers aren't near as good as the Bubonic Plague; although, I'm sure he is jealous of how my fame has spread further across the globe.

**JEREMY:**

*(rolling his eyes)*

Whatever. This pandemic still sucks, and now I have to worry about going out because I was exposed to someone who tested positive.

**COVID:**

Oh yeah! Your cousin, Jerry. He's a great guy and a very gracious host. He has some extra room to explore after eating all that holiday food.

He pats his stomach.

**JEREMY:**

Well, I'm sure he hasn't had a chance to work it off because he's felt so bad since you "moved in."

**COVID:**

*(dismissing JEREMY with a swish of his hand)*

Ah. I've been easy on him. Just a headache, maybe a little fever. He'll be fine in a few days.

**JEREMY:**

Alright. Well now I'm supposed to quarantine, so I don't potentially spread your "fame."

**COVID:**

Don't let me stop you from going out! I'm great at socializing. I'm practically all anyone talks about these days.

**JEREMY:**

*(glancing out the window)*

I was really looking forward to Rick's party this weekend, but I'm not sure anymore.

**COVID:**

*(seating himself at the desk)*

What's the problem? He doesn't allow potential plus ones?

**JEREMY:**

I don't want people to avoid me like I'm sick.

**COVID:**

Well, you tested negative, right? Who's gonna care?

**JEREMY:**

*(rolling his eyes and turning back towards Covid)*

Well, if I haven't been graced with your presence, then why was I told I still have to quarantine?

**COVID:**

Ever heard of being fashionably late? Sometimes I like to make my entrance a little while after you've been exposed.

**JEREMY:**

*(pacing in front of the window)*

Well, I don't want to be the reason someone gets sick.

**COVID:**

Do you actually think anyone going is worried about getting me? George didn't seem to think they would.

**JEREMY:**

No, most of them have already been exposed or even had it. They had pretty mild symptoms and enjoyed the time off from work and class.

**COVID:**

Exactly! They seem to be a bright crowd. I'm not so bad when you actually think about it. I can help you play a little hooky from work or uncomfortable family events and, let's be honest, I doubt some of you would have passed those courses had they not been online.

**JEREMY:**

Okay, sure. There have been some small benefits to quarantine, but they definitely do not outweigh the bad. I know a lot of people who lost their jobs because of you, and they are struggling to even get by. Also, a lot of others have really struggled with isolation and the feeling that they're all alone in this time of hardship.

**COVID:**

Well you can't be as successful as I am without breaking a few eggs, kid.

**JEREMY:**

Maybe I'll just wear my mask so I don't breathe on anyone to be safe.

**COVID:**

Well that sounds like a good compromise! Then you can just take it off for a quick drink or a bite to eat. And maybe, if no one



else is wearing one, you can just take it off when you stop worrying so much.

**JEREMY:**

That's how it's normally been. I just wear one at first to see if everyone is cool or in case we take a picture.

**COVID:**

Yes, of course! I personally never wear one because no one can ever hear me talking.

**JEREMY:**

Yeah, that does suck. Especially when you're trying to understand—  
*(He straightens his posture.)*  
But this time will be different. I'll definitely try to keep it on the whole time.

**COVID:**

If you say so. I don't get what you're still worried about though.

**JEREMY:**

Well what if I pass it to someone who passes it to someone at risk?  
I know a lot of people who go home pretty frequently to see their parents.

**COVID:**

Hey, I don't know what you're implying, but I'm a stand up guy. Many of my contacts have no problem bringing me home to meet their folks.

**JEREMY:**

Well you're a little more difficult on older people.  
What if they get really sick?

**COVID:**

*(in a hushed tone)*

I didn't want to have to bring this up, but my numbers aren't exactly where I want them to be. Many times I only weaken people's defenses for some other vulture disease to seal the deal, but thankfully I'm still the one getting all the buzz.

**JEREMY:**

I'm not sure I'm comfortable taking that gamble. Some people go home and see their grandparents. That could be really dangerous.

**COVID:**

*(holding his hands up towards Jeremy)*

Whoa there. You're going through all these hypotheticals, but it's not your fault if someone you possibly infect possibly infects another person. Isn't it their problem then?

**JEREMY:**

No! Well kinda. I don't know. I guess I can't control what they do, but I can control my own actions.

**COVID:**

*(crossing his arms and leaning back in the chair)*

Well I hate to say it, Jeremy, but I will still probably make it to that party whether you go or not. I've pretty much made it on every V.I.P. list this year.

**JEREMY:**

That may be true, but it's a step in the right direction. If we want things to return to normal, then it will take a lot more people making choices like this to stop the spreading.

**COVID:**

*(with a big huff)*

You still think that I am just a phase?(sitting up, with a raised voice)I'm not going anywhere! The spotlight is on me, and I am far too popular to be certain called by some loser too scared to go to a little party.

**JEREMY:**

*(standing still, directly facing Covid)*

Well this "loser" is sick of dealing with you. I'm not saying things will completely go back the way they were before, but maybe enough so we can stop living in your shadow. It's going to take a lot of "losers" taking similar precautions, but I know it can be done.

**COVID:**

*(settling back in the chair)*

Things seem fine to me! Just relax a little, kid.

**JEREMY:**

*(with an exasperated, but passionate tone)*

You still don't get it! I'm tired of the isolation. I miss seeing people's smiles, now hidden behind a mask. I miss seeing the business of campus, full of energy and hope for the future. I wan- I need to get back to that, and I'm willing to make a few small sacrifices in hopes of getting there.

Covid stands.

**COVID:**

Well then. If you're so eager to get rid of me, I think I'll take my leave.

**JEREMY:**

I think that would be best.

**COVID:**

*(looking at the ground, adjusting his jacket fit once more)* Well, I have millions of super fun parties to go to anyway. Hopefully I'll get a chance to converse with lots of the attendees. Sayonara, Jeremy. I'm sure I'll see you around.

Covid gives Jeremy a devilish grin and chuckles. He disappears in the same styled puff of smoke in which he entered. His laugh fades with the clearing vapor.

**JEREMY:**

*(standing tall)*

Not if I can help it.

Jeremy dials on his phone and places it to his ear. A spotlight appears on George standing where his car previously was. He answers his phone.

**GEORGE:**

George here!

**JEREMY:**

Hey. I won't be at Rick's this weekend.

**GEORGE:**

*(his upbeat tone falls slightly)*

Aw, man. Are you sure? It won't be as much fun without you there.

**JEREMY:**

*(confidently)*

Yeah, I'm sure. I'm going to take things more seriously, like with the quarantine and stuff. I'm ready for the spotlight to fade on COVID, and I don't feel like I've been doing a good job to make that happen.

**GEORGE:**

Oh, I understand. Well since you aren't coming, I probably won't even stay that long. And you know what? Maybe I could wear my mask so I won't have to smell Dillon's horrible beer breath when he gets too close.

They share a laugh.

**JEREMY:**

That sounds like a good plan. You wanna grab lunch Tuesday or something?

**GEORGE:**

Yeah! That sounds good. I'll see you then.

**JEREMY:**

Alright, awesome. Stay safe, and I'll talk to you later.

**GEORGE:**

Will do. Bye.

Dial tone. Black out. End of play.



**Silhouette**  
Brennan Hilliard

## Alien

by Alayna Juneau

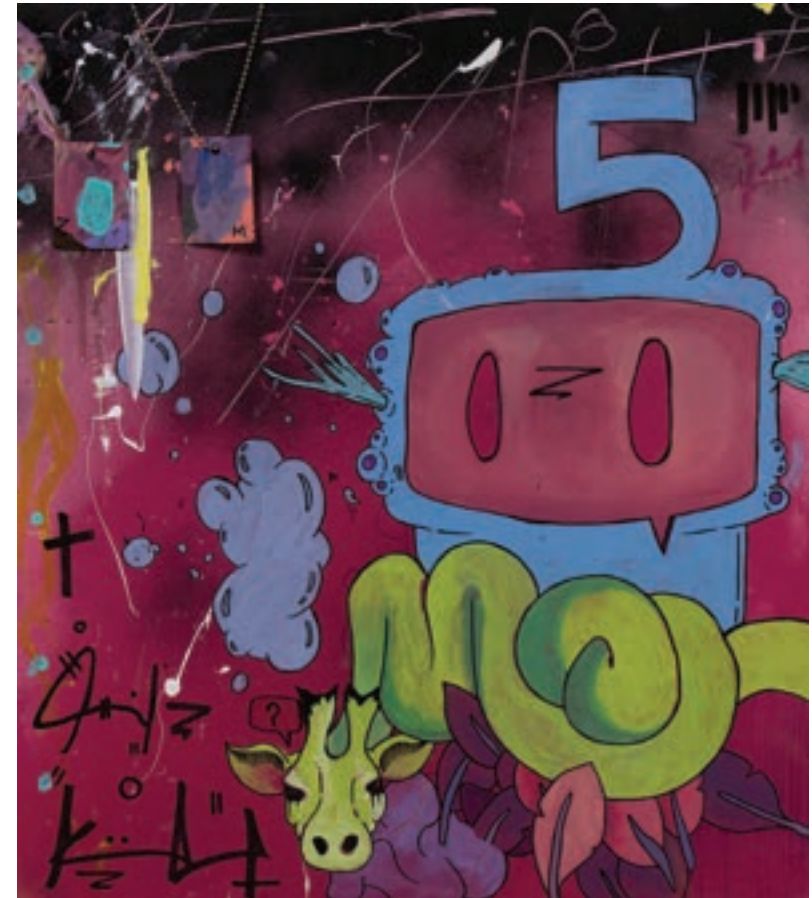
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My fingers run over my face  
falling into misshapen craters  
and traveling across lopsided features  
They escape through my hair  
only to find a strange planet  
navigating through craters and mountains

The person standing in the mirror  
she's a hideous alien  
traveled here from the depths of space  
But you look at my misshapen body  
with a smile on your face  
and love in your eyes

There was a time  
when we first met  
I thought you were pretending  
Then you showed me  
all of your scars  
inside and out  
each of your imperfections  
more perfect than the last  
secrets, just between us

Dreams of  
alien like ancestors  
harassing me no more  
Your love tethering me to the earth  
and  
Your arms keeping me human





**Praying Mantis: The One-Night Stand**

Evelyn Hinojosa

**Hives**

by Isabelle Byrnes-Bartell

---

Medusa's snakes kiss my neck          and she whispers into my ear  
   that beauty is a sin like any other  
   meant to be committed                  with an audience  
 knowing your worth          comes with just as many prejudices  
   as it does praise  
 damned if you let them look          damned if you stare them down  
   it makes you itch, clawing at your skin          don't be rash  
   I write down her advice          and use your head as a paperweight  
 sticks and stones,          sticks to stones          it gets harder          to pretend  
 your words don't sting          little bees          buzz buzz buzzing your  
   honey pot isn't here  
 dipped in your fingertips,          watched it drip, then licked up from  
   your palm  
   now, I refuse to get my hands dirty when I play with my food  
 so I wear gloves          when I wash dishes, the soap suds swarm  
   and stick  
 so I rinse twice          and let the nats overlook the vinegar  
   then drown                  in the honey.





**Fibro Frog**  
Kayla O'Neal

## The Proving

by Noah Weatherly

Her hand tensed and wilted by her sword, hesitant to release *Sezja* from her sheath. She'd been taught that the *Kono-Kon* were merciless beasts that basked in bloodshed, that paraded throatless corpses through their camps like war-trophies. The solemn moment before her, swathed in serenity, unmoving like the beckoning depths of the pools before the *Kono*—it reflected none of the harrowing stories she'd been spun.

Kalu's attention sprung free from her inner ramblings when the *Kono* flipped the urn in her hands, its contents wisping out into the night air like rose petals on the wayward wind. The ash, tinged silver and glinting with sapphire streaks, hissed into the awaiting waters of onyx. A ripple pulsed from where the *Kono* emptied the urn, rolling over the water's surface as a harmony over the strings of a harp.

The few seconds it took to empty the urn felt like a dozen lifetimes, a bead of sweat dotting Kalu's temple despite the cold that nipped at her tingling fingertips. Nothing about it felt...right. She'd expected elation, even thunderous excitement when she first laid eyes upon her star-crossed kill. But she felt out of place, like an intruder, watching something unmeant for onlookers.

Once the last of the ashes had sifted into the folded sieves of sand, the *Kono* twisted the lid back onto the lovely urn, placing it on the ground beside her slender, pale feet. She cast her gaze out into the dusk-shrouded distance, rolling her shoulders as she released a lengthy breath.

"Have you come to kill me?" she asked, the words rolling from her mouth like rainfall from a sagging leaf.

A jagged flash of cold cleaved through Kalu's chest, her breath hitching in her throat. In one fluid motion, her sword sang out into the silverish moonlight, brandished before her like she was facing down a feral beast.

The *Kono* turned, hanging in the air like a marionette, her strings fluttering in the breeze behind her. When her eyes finally rested on Kalu, the hunter resisted a flinch.

She was more beautiful than any woman Kalu had ever seen. Her eyes were drawn first to the markings that adorned her exposed neck and collarbone, peeking from the tattered collar of her grayish tunic. The tattoos were blacker than a nightmare,

winding and waving into runes Kalu didn't recognize, ending at succinct points beneath her rounded chin. Her high cheekbones and swooping jaw were chiseled from marble, the work of a seasoned craftsman. The *Kono* almost appeared regal to Kalu, her hooded eyelids calculating but impassive, roving from her boots to the tip of the blue steel that trembled ever-so-slightly in her cloth-swathed hands. The skin beneath her eyes sagged and rolled, the soothing fingers of sleep foreign to the purpled wrinkles there.

Kalu knew she'd made a mistake the moment she met the creature's eyes—depthless, ebony pools twinkled back, beckoning her to take a step closer, to pad within striking distance. There was no pupil, no cornea. Only the promise of a swift death.

"I asked you a question," The *Kono* said, her full lips the same pale white as her milky skin. Her voice was a melody Kalu was unfit to hear, every syllable coaxing her mouth apart an inch. The creature rested a hand on her hip, her other hand trailing to one of the swords strapped to her shoulders. "Think carefully. Your next words may be your last."

Kalu seemed to remember her tongue, lying dormant in her parched mouth. "I have to." She managed.

"Wrong." The *Kono* spat. "You want to. You want the glory, the revelry, the approval of some beer-bellied old man who thinks no more of you than he does his mug of mead."

"You know nothing of my father." Kalu shot back, sliding a booted foot through the sand, a makeshift barrier between her and her opponent.

"No?" The *Kono* said, bored eyes shifting from Kalu's boots to the wrinkle on the bridge of her freckled nose. She bared her teeth. "I know he put a blade through my mate's back." Her eyes drifted to the urn at her feet, a wince flickering beneath her cheek.

"Liar."

"I know he's a coward, like every other Cecisen hunter who treks out to our watering hole." She spat the title like a curse, her face twisting into a scowl. "I know he makes sport out of slaughtering my kin like fauna. I know he sent a little girl to my ancestral waters, expecting her to come back with a head in hand or not at all."

Kalu could feel rage bubbling within her, battling against the surging tide of shame that washed over her shoulders. The *Kono* spoke with a vicar's vindication, her sermon loud and dignified as she paced along the shoreline, toes careful not to disturb the glimmering ash that dotted the sand. The creature was

trying to rile her, and she'd nearly succeeded.

"I'm no little girl." Kalu said, her tone measured. "Once I kill you, I'll be a true hunter."

"Nothing about your hunt is true." The *Kono* sighed. Her righteous demeanor seemed to slouch, the hand she'd rested against the hilt of her sword moving minutely. "Alas, if it's death you seek, I will be its handmaiden."

Steel hissed against sheath as the *Kono* drew one of her swords, the wicked-looking weapon flashing white in the moonlight. Its blade coiled and curved like a serpent's scales, the edge hued a fluorescent lavender, glowing with the crackle of otherworldly power. It was thin and reedy, unlike the fat, flat edge of *Sezja*.

Kalu tensed, flipping her own sword once, testing its weight. Familiar and balanced, it hummed near her ear, the luted harmony of death. The *Kono* seemed amused, a faint, subdued smile wrinkling her nose.

"Are you afraid?" she asked, the malice replaced with intrigue.

"Yes." Kalu answered, seeing no use in lying.

"Don't be. I've seen the face of the Mother. You've nothing to fear."

"Our gods are not the same."

The *Kono* chuckled, a bitter sound that scraped. "I'd wager they are, in some ways." She cocked her head at an angle, like a hawk eyeing a field mouse. "I like you, girl. What do they call you?"

"Does it matter?"

"No." The word echoed into the empty space, racing over the surface of the pond behind the *Kono*. "But I'd like to know all the same. Consider it a parting pleasantry to your prey—a token of respect."

*As if you have respect for me.* Kalu thought, but she raised an eyebrow, willing herself to speak despite the apprehension that nearly buckled her knees. "Kalu. My name is Kalu."

"Kalu." The *Kono* swished the name between her cheeks, testing its consonants between her tongue and teeth.

"A fine name."

"And you?" Kalu asked, her mouth overrunning her mind, surprising even her.

"I have many names, Kalu." She considered, flipping her blade into an underhanded grip. "My mate called me Asja."

Kalu was nearly floored when Asja sketched a bow, bending at the hip and closing her eyes. The hunter didn't return the favor, too enamored with the gesture to fully comprehend its implications. Once Asja stood upright again, she tucked her sword behind her back, extending a hand before her and turning her knuckles towards Kalu.

"Your move, little hunter."

A frigid breath trailed through Kalu's teeth, filling her chest with the crisp night air. A second passed, and then another, her heart pattering against her ribcage like rainfall against the roof of their cottage. She closed her eyes, settling into the calm of combat, willing her fingers to cease their shaking, a plea brushing her lips and slicing through the silence.

"By Fell's breath, I am made." She began, releasing the pent in breath with a roll of her neck.

Her eyes shot open, honed and alert. Gripping her sword in two hands, she charged Asja, kicking up plumes of ebony sand in her wake.

Asja's sword swung out in front of her, halving her face in a fencer's stance. Kalu cried out, bringing her blade around in a mighty horizontal stroke, aiming to sever the *Kono* at the midsection.

Steel met steel with a deafening clang as Asja parried with ease, sidestepping Kalu and watching as the warrior nearly lost her footing. Kalu whirled, blood welling beneath her cheeks, her breath frothing into the brisk cold of the night air.

"Sloppy," Asja chided, her laughter lighting into the breeze.

Kalu huffed, launching another offensive, her movements more thoughtful and thorough this time around. Her sword blurred through the moonlight, Asja's blade meeting hers mid-stroke. The hunter feinted left, spinning right once the *Kono's* guard had clicked into place.

But she'd been the one baited. Asja whipped her sword into position on the left side of her torso, catching Kalu's hefty strike without so much as a grunt. The hunter's hands trembled with tremendous effort as she pushed down with both arms, whilst the *Kono's* stance didn't shift or quake, not an inkling of struggle thrumming through her fingertips.

She pushed Kalu's blade away, twirling the ebony cloth-wrapped hilt of her sword about her silken fingertips, her bottomless, black eyes wide with the thrill of combat. "You aren't horrible, little hunter," she purred. Kalu scowled, widening her



stance and holding her sword before her in a defensive position. Asja's smile widened, creasing her cheeks. "I suppose it's my turn."

Asja pounced into a flurry, the lilting light of the two moons overhead glinting off her glossy blade. Kalu's eyes didn't falter, her sword hand true as she parried the *Kono's* first strike. Her eyes widened a hair's breadth at the power behind the stroke—her hands were already beginning to ache, and they'd been fighting for no more than a few seconds.

But Asja was still coming. She parried another strike, and another, the *Kono's* movements like those of a wildcat, feral and flashing. A shallow gash opened on Kalu's hip as her guard whipped into place an instant too late, another ribbon of blood split on her cheek as she narrowly weaved beneath a throat-carving swing. The difference between their training was apparent—she'd been trained flatfooted, circling her reluctant father on their bearskin rug, a wooden sword in hand. There'd been no threat of injury, no promise of a gory, grunting death if her footing wasn't flawless.

Asja had been birthed by the stars, mothered by the trees, and hardened by the mountains.

Kalu's breathing was growing raspy after a minute had passed, her boots filled with lead as she slid through the sand. Asja moved like the clap of thunder, sudden and jarring, dancing across the sodden shoreline like it were her stage. They were classes apart. Leagues separated them.

"*Watch for the ticks, mejha.*" Her father's voice rang out in her mind, the low, gravelly crawl nearly shrouded by the sound of steel meeting steel. "*If they're stronger, you have to be faster. If they're faster, you have to be smarter.*"

"*And if they're stronger, faster, and smarter than me?*" She'd asked.

That had given him pause, and after a tense blip of silence, he'd shrugged.

"*Then you picked the wrong fight.*"

But she hadn't picked this fight. He had. He'd done it for her. And she'd be gods-damned if she were piled beneath the dirt before she had the chance to pick her next one.

The pair clashed, sweat dotting Kalu's brow as her chest rose and fell with vigor, Asja's demented smile bright over the entwined tremble of their blades. "You aren't ready."

"Shut up," Kalu ground out.

Asja pressed down harder, Kalu taking two retreating steps as her heels sunk into the sand. "Don't you hate them for this? Do

you know how many of your kind I've killed—simply because they were deceived into opposing me?"

"I said, shut up."

Kalu hefted the clash over to her side. Asja surged forward a foot with the sudden break. The hunter saw her opening, spinning and clipping the *Kono's* jaw with the heel of her boot, the creature stumbling backward a step as her head rocked back.

Asja's hand drifted to her face, her fingers feathering over the bleating would-be bruise that had surfaced on the underside of her sleek jawline. Her attention rolled back toward Kalu, her movements predatory as her hand lilted from her cheek to the second sword jutting from one of her sheaths. She drew the weapon, the lengthy sound of steel against sheath like a flat note scraped by a violin's bow. Asja spun both swords, crouching low like a leopard.

Kalu gulped, shifting her own stance, placing the flat of her blade on her forearm defensively.

"I'll give you one last chance." Her tongue slid over each syllable, the sound of her voice like bitter birdsong. "Go back to your village. Be their failure for a time, perhaps grow strong enough to challenge me again some day."

She paused. Kalu shifted, her fingers drumming on the hilt of her sword.

"Or?"

Asja crossed her swords. "Or die."

Creeping cold leaked into Kalu's bloodstream. She knew the *Kono* wasn't bluffing. But she wouldn't go back to that village. Not as a welp. Not as a defenseless child, unfit to bear the legacy of her ancestors.

She squeezed her eyes shut, air whistling into her lungs as she filled her ribcage with the crisp essence of the watering hole. Asja awaited her decision patiently, poised to strike, eyes flicking from Kalu's hands to the tip of her blade.

Her eyes opened slowly, the burnt honey glaze of her gaze steady and unmoving. "I have to do this."

Asja sighed, her expression wilting like the frost-crusting petals of a violet. "I thought you might be different from the others." Her eyes narrowed. She slid one foot back, the muscles of her calves tensing. "But you're as foolish as you are brave, little one."

Kalu was ready when she charged. Their swords met with a flash, violet sparks trailing from the serpentine twists of Asja's

blades. She cried out as she deflected the two-handed strike, her sword heavy in her heaving arms, trailing a blueish silver strand through the air as she launched a counterattack.

And so they danced. A whirlwind of steel, waltzing up and down the shoreline like a practiced choreography. The waters watched in silence, an unbiased audience, as the reflections of the women clashed, weaved, and struck, stretched by the impassive surface of the pond. Kalu's blade nicked Asja's shoulder when the *Kono* fell for one of the hunter's many feints. Another gash opened on Kalu's stomach as she leapt backwards, avoiding a whirling strike that encircled Asja's body. They stepped to the rhythm of death, tiptoeing its sinister promise, ebbing and flowing with its simmers and swells.

Asja brought one of her blades around in a lethal arc, the invisible line of her sword aimed for Kalu's neck. The hunter weaved to the side, clanging the lethal blow away from her with a practiced stroke. Her pupils slanted as Asja's torso was exposed, open and vulnerable.

Kalu attempted to riposte, lunging for the *Kono's* heart, a piercing attack that would slip between her ribs and nip the bud of her existence.

Asja disappeared, blurring between seconds, her movement faster than Kalu could perceive. One moment, the hunter's aim was true, the battle certainly within her grasp. The next, the world was slanted, a crippling kick landing behind her knee cap as she crumpled into the sand.

Despite its plush appearance, the ebony sand was unforgiving. Kalu's breath shot from her lungs as her spine connected with the damp blackness below, her eyes widening as she heaved. Asja stood over her, head shaking softly, her face obscured by the long shadows of twilight.

Kalu attempted a feeble swing, her sword acting as her lifeline, as her hope. But Asja blocked the strike with ease, her foot slamming down on the hunter's wrist with a crunch. A small, broken whimper sounded from deep within Kalu's throat, her vision hazing.

The tip of one of the *Kono's* swords lighted beneath Kalu's chin, tilting her face up so her eyes met Asja's. She glared on in defiant silence, whereas Asja's shoulders sagged, her expression resigned. Asja sported no indication of triumph.

"Why do you hunt us?" she asked, cocking her head inquisitively. "What do your elders tell you about my people?"

"That you're monsters," Kalu hissed, her throat bobbing against cool steel. "That you'd just as soon cut the throats of our children as look at us."

"How ironic." Her words were clipped, bitter. "You are the ones that raid our camps, slaughter our younglings. Your kin put my mate in that urn." She jerked her head behind her, the brass urn sitting as a resolute spectator. "You fear us. And so you hunt us, herd us like cattle."

"It is my duty--"

"*It is your delusion!*" Kalu flinched when Asja's scream echoed across the pond, a ripple rolling across its surface. "You call us savages—but your tribe is backwards. Your god is unjust."

"You have no right to speak of Fel."

"Fel?" She scoffed. "If Fel is the reason my linens are cold in the night, that my daughter will never see her father's smile—then Fel be damned, along with all of his petty, worthless little subjects."

The words carved a pit into Kalu's stomach, her mind emptying as she envisioned what the *Kono* described.

*My linens are cold.*

*My daughter.*

*Her father's smile.*

The *Kono* weren't meant to have families. They were long-fanged creatures of legend, their souls as bleak as their faces, their fingers and lips painted with blood. Kalu's mind was unraveling at the seams, her conscience a conspirator, crying out against every teaching her forefathers had spun through the generations of Cecise.

Kalu's mind snapped back to the peril at hand as Asja lifted one of her swords into the air, poisoning it to deliver the blow that ended her, the blow that subdued her nerves and quieted her mind, the blow that would send her adrift into the unknown, her paddle lost in the vehement rapids, her will estranged and torn.

"If you've any prayer you want to offer to your couthless god, now is the time, Kalu."

The hunter cast her gaze to the stars once more. She hoped her fate was among them. Her fingers longed to delve into their belts of celestial beauty. Her mind yearned for the texture of space, for the feeling of nothingness, her soul adrift in the boundless expanse of the universe. Perhaps she would find peace with no direction—perhaps aimlessness was the only absolute she could be afforded.

"By Fel's breath I am made, and by his hand I am guided."

Asja hesitated, but shook her head, scowling down at Kalu. "His hand guided you to your death," she muttered, tensing her shoulder to deliver the stroke that would end the Cecisan's hunt.

Both Kalu and Asja started when sand crunched behind the *Kono*, giving away the approach of someone far heavier than either of them.

Asja abandoned Kalu, spinning around and catching the massive brunt of a broadsword, one of her swords splintering with the impact. She leapt to the side, revealing a shadow that dwarfed Kalu, his salt-gray beard and hair shining the silver of a direwolf.

Her father cast his gaze on her, emotions she couldn't identify warring within the warm, dark brown depths she peered into.

"You said you wouldn't interfere," Kalu breathed.

"And you said you wouldn't fail me," he shot back. A pang of guilt lighted beneath Kalu's chest.

"It wasn't her who failed you, old man." Both father and daughter turned to the seething *Kono*, watching as Asja tossed her broken sword into the sand. "It was you who failed her."

"How dare you lecture me, filth?" Kalu's father spat.

"You're right," Asja conceded, flipping her sword into an underhanded grip once more. "Words would never be enough to sway someone as simpleminded as you, Cecisan."

Kalu's eyes widened with horror as the *Kono* pounced at her father, teeth bared and ebony eyes wide with bloodlust. He absorbed the blow without moving his feet, his sword an extension of his arms, slicing through the night air like a butcher's cleaver through the calf of a lamb.

She watched in horror as their battle commenced, the sparks of steel casting lengthy shadows over the shoreline, two seasoned combatants waging a war far beyond Kalu's level of skill. It took only a few seconds for Kalu to decide who she'd wager to win—her father was past his prime, and Asja was too swift, too determined. Her hatred reverberated through each clang of steel, warbling into the trees and disturbing the creatures laying dormant there.

"Did you kill my mate?" Asja asked, her breathing hardly disturbed as she danced circles around the grizzled warrior.

"I don't know," her father snarled. "Your faces aren't worth remembering."

Asja's shout was deafening at that, her blade flashing with lethal precision as she cut the tendon behind his knees. Kalu attempted to pull herself upright, but found her strength wavering, the blood that had been saturating the sand around her evidently sapping what energy she could muster.

Her father was faltering, his sword slowing with each swing. Asja was making sport out of it, darting in and out with surgical precision, slicing and serrating the tendons and chords that cobbled him together.

"His name was J'asa." She spat into the sand as the warrior fell to a knee. "Say it."

"No," he growled, lunging for the *Kono*. She backpedaled out of reach as he flopped into the sand, blood dripping from the dozens of cuts she'd opened on his thighs and arms.

Kalu fought against the surging darkness that threatened to pull her beneath its surface. If she passed out, she would die. There would be no mourners, no funeral—only the vultures, pecking her eyes free from her skull, pulling her entrails from her gut.

"Say it, and I'll spare your girl." Her father perked up at that, his beard hueing crimson as he coughed blood into the sand. "J'asa. He was more of a man than you ever could have claimed to be, coward. Say his name."

Asja stopped circling Kalu's father, the *Kono*'s back to the hunter as she crouched. Her father could scarcely move, his back rising unevenly with his wet breath. Kalu managed to pull herself into a sitting position as the creature placed her sword over the old man's breast, her palm on the bottom of the pommel as she balanced it against his skin.

"You're a liar," he rasped. "You'll kill us both, no matter what I say."

Asja clicked her tongue, pushing the blade in an inch with practiced precision. Kalu's breathing was frantic as she reached for her belt of knives with her left arm, her dominant hand lying limp and broken in the sand.

"Kalu is an innocent. I have no reason to kill her other than her intent to kill me." She cooed, sounding almost as if she were lecturing a toddler. "But you, old man? If it wasn't you who put a sword through my mate's back, it was one of your spineless comrades. I feel I'm owed a life debt—one you will pay in full. But your daughter—she is your daughter, isn't she?—doesn't have to die."

"Savage piece of—"

He wheezed as the sword slid deeper into his chest. "I want no words from you if they aren't the name of my mate. This can be quick for you. Or it can be slow, agonizingly so. Is that something you want her to see?"

His eyes drifted to Kalu, their aging sharpness dulled into a resignation she'd never known from him. The darkness there was half-glossed, blood trickling from his lips like sap from a tree, matting his beard and staining his wolfskin. Kalu shook her head, her hand fumbling for Aste, the beaded hilt of the throwing knife sliding between her knuckles.

Her father turned back to Asja, his mouth curling into a knowing smile. His stare dropped to the steel protruding from his chest, and he seemed to sag with relief as he placed two hands around the curving blade. His weary eyes returned to the *Kono's* face, peaceful, lacking the hammered steel Kalu had known from him all her life.

"*J'asa.*" He said.

Asja seemed to balk at the admittance of defeat, but she'd made the graying hunter a promise. Without another moment's thought, she pushed the blade deeper, bloodstained tip jutting from his back as it tore a hole in his tunic.

"No!" Kalu's scream ripped from her throat, a raw sob that shook her shoulders. She freed Aste from her sheath, flipping the blade into her fingertips, her aim honed and unfaltering as she drew the dagger back over her shoulder.

She didn't throw knives with her left hand. Her right was dominant, and it was easily her more coordinated hand. But she had no use of it. The bones of her wrist floated freely beneath her skin, leaving her with nothing but her left hand to rely upon. And thus, she relied on it, flinging the knife, every prayer she'd muttered guiding its arc as it hurtled end-over-end toward the back of Asja's neck. Her aim was true. Her breath hitched as the dagger traveled its course, her vengeance promised by its flight, sworn to be delivered into her awaiting arms.

The *Kono's* tattoos flared an iridescent violet, her pointed ears seeming to twitch at the ends. Asja's hand shot out, swifter than the strike of a cobra, the blade coming to a shuddering halt between her fingers.

Kalu's hand dangled uselessly in the air, her mouth agape, a sob hitching her breath as her father slumped over, Asja's blade still planted in his heart. The *Kono* stood, dropping the dagger into

the sand and planting a bare foot on Kalu's father, wrenching her sword free with a grunt. She used the folds of his garb to clean his blood from the twisting blade, her face mirthless in the grim deed.

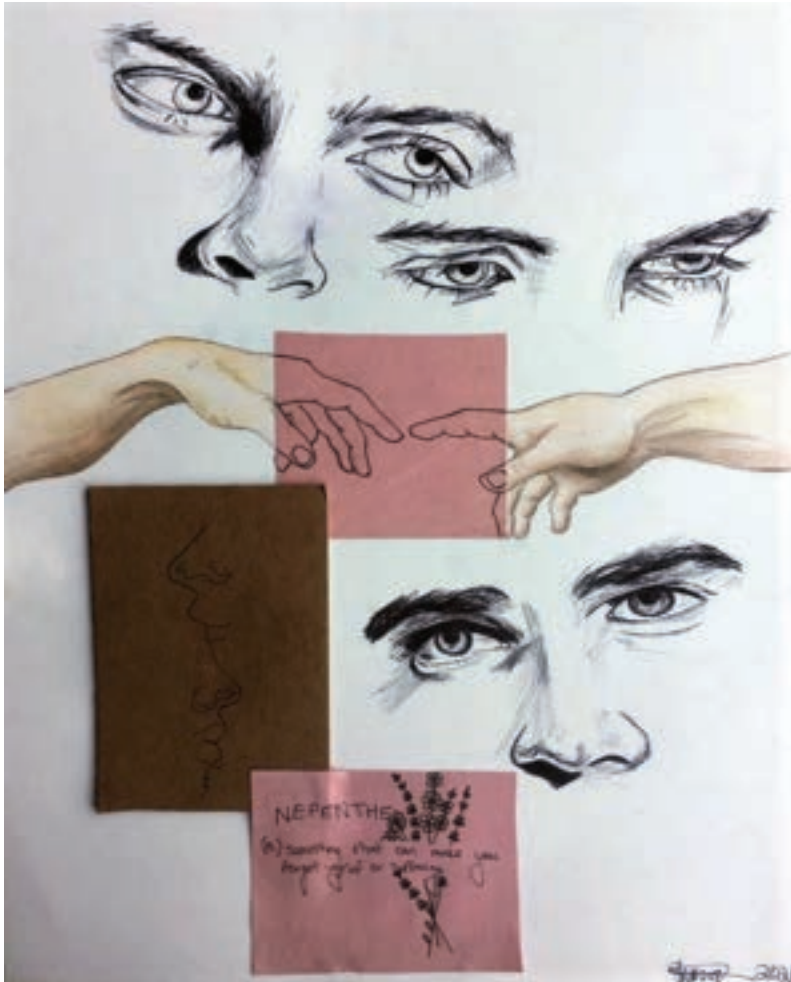
"You monster," Kalu breathed. She twisted, Sezja within her grasp, but fell face first into the sand, granules crunching between her teeth. Another sob racked her shoulders, her entire body quivering as she reached out pointlessly for her sword. "I'll kill you—I swear, I'll kill you—"

Asja appeared beside her, kicking the sword further out of her reach. She sheathed her sword on her back, her eyes trailing from the urn behind the pair to the starlit surface of the pond, her posture curling an inch as she sighed. "I gifted him a better death than he gave my *J'asa*," Asja whispered. She glanced at Kalu, tenderness shimmering beneath the cold, distant black of her gaze. "I thought killing him would make me whole again."

"Rotting bitch—" Kalu heaved, a wretched wail cutting off whatever curses she wanted to hurl at the *Kono-Kon*.

"Hear me, little one," Asja said, her voice ginger and coaxing. "Do not hate me for what I've done. It will fester. It will rot you from within, seizing every sunrise you see and warping it into something wretched and ugly. Your life was his final gift to you. Do not waste it pursuing me."

Kalu bared her teeth at the *Kono*, her lungs alight with ragged wheezing as she growled, the sound like that of a cornered animal. Her tears flowed freely as she shouted at the *Kono*, her voice steeped in resentment. "I will hunt you until I draw my last breath, Asja. You will know no peace so long as I live. This is my promise to you, a promise I make on the dying breaths of my father."



**Permanence. Anxiety. Acceptance.**

Christi Kruger

**82**

by Samuel Donn

---

You weren't hurt, were you?  
 when you hit my glass ceiling? the one  
 covering the assumption that others  
 have skin of paper, like me?  
 Does my glass ceiling assume and then offend almost  
 every sensitivity?  
 I'm glad it didn't hurt.

A slammed door hurts me mostly  
 because I hear so well.  
 A look of disdain hurts as well,  
 no matter how blind I am, I can feel it.

But you weren't hurt, were you?  
 I didn't touch your image.  
 I never left a mark on you that you didn't want.  
 Not in theory or—in practice  
 Mrs. Skin-like-Steel, Mrs. Heart-like-Ice.

### **A Sonnet to Adonis**

by Zachary Biggs

---

My Dear Friends, coyness is not so, nor such.  
Now heed my words and ye men shall gain much.  
So take Venus down from her bloodstained throne.  
For powerless she becomes as yours alone.

So flee Adonis and be now untamed.  
Become like the vilest beast with no name.  
Venus does not desire a gentle lamb.  
That Wench wants to make the Beast into man.

Foremost, O Man, love yourself above all,  
And it shall be this goddess you enthrall.  
Be Kings, Hunters, Warriors, Bards and Poets.  
She loves the Beasts, heroic, who least know it.

But Woe to those scoundrels who feed her fire.  
Do anything you must to escape her ire.





## Firsts

by Kristyn Hardy

---

There are the firsts just before the hangover  
With breath like toxins. There is the first one  
After labor and her skin is slick and sweaty.  
There are the first ones back and the firsts  
Leaving. A first for the school days and the firsts  
For the heartbreaks. A first good luck. A first  
Goodbye.

Every once in a while, there is the last  
First one. The last first of the ones not  
Anticipated. The last first on the long  
Road of others. Here there will be the firsts  
Coming home and the firsts after dinner.  
The firsts during the grueling long nights.  
The firsts to slow the too-fast years.  
The firsts in the noise to usher the quiet.  
The firsts after harsh fights and the firsts after  
Long flights. The first looks and the first  
Waking up.

I imagine some regret that last first. The one  
They wouldn't have known to remember.  
I imagine they spend their days hoping  
To pinpoint the bar or the date or the glass  
They drank from. I imagine they cling to it,  
Whether they have the specifics or not.  
I wonder if they sit in waiting rooms wishing  
For one last one, for the first time truly meaning  
It. Are there tally marks scratched into the walls  
Of their beings, each one a heartbeat of a  
Moment that tracks their life with that last first.  
Do they plead for another, even if it aches  
To add to the count, so long as this time,  
They know to prepare. This time  
Not for the first, but for the last.

## Loving Winds

by Samuel Cooley

---

My love is like the wind,  
Ever-changing, ever-shifting.  
It will blow forevermore,  
Never fading, never rifting.

My love is like the breeze,  
Slowly caressing your heart.  
My love is like a tornado,  
Swiftly tearing us apart.

My love is wild and fast,  
But also smooth and slow.  
It can travel any distance.  
It can conquer any foe.

But you make me want to change!  
For I can only fly alone.  
You make this heart of wind  
Wish to be made of stone.

## **Snowmelt**

by Ashley Palmer

---

after a week of white and blue and gray, the dull greens and soft browns and gentle yellows are vivid as neon. a cloudless midday that would have been unbearably bright a mere eight days ago is now a revelation in color. for so long you have been blinking away teals when you return to artificial light. for so long you've been holding your hand to your eyebrows in vain.

it leaves behind slush in the shadows and piles of mud in the ditches. the air is saturated with the smell of rain, trapped in ice for seven long days. spring rain. it smells like spring, even though the white snow lingers in the places the sun doesn't touch.

more than the little wildflowers, dead and buried under four inches of snow and ice, this is spring. this is an awakening. gentle, slow. but persistent. you can hear it in the leftover rain dripping from the trees in the forest. you can see it in the discarded evergreens in your neighbor's trash can.

maybe the mockingbird your sister fed blueberries and banana pieces when the ice was thick will have a nest and a couple eggs next time you see it.

maybe you have room for hope after all.



### Life on the Farm

by Laura Cason

---

In the misty morning, maybe I'll find you  
When the piney air envelops naked flesh  
When the silent stars rain down on moon swept skin  
When Peace brings me back to life with her lips tightly on mine  
When I am awakened by the rustling of leaf thin pages  
And feel adrift in the glow of well-worn hearts  
Maybe then I'll find you.



### Asia Sunset

Tiffany Clinton





## Keeny Hall

Linh Nguyen

## Jackson

by Lauren Washington

---

The buzzer goes off, signaling the end of the game. Jackson's classmates sit on the home side and go crazy, cheering for their boys as they go down to meet them on the court. People dressed in red and white flood the floor, fans meeting players, while the losing team makes their way back to the locker room. Jackson stands a few feet from the center of the court, his white and red jersey making a stark contrast against his dark brown skin. He looks around, taking in the excitement that fills the basketball court. Three years Jackson has spent playing for this team, yet the celebrations just don't have the same effect on him as they do on everyone else.

When his mom moved Jackson and his two younger siblings to Texas from Louisiana for her new job, there wasn't much for Jackson besides basketball. He put his all into the game and didn't focus on things like relationships too much. Jackson learned early on that people always come and go. But between him, his family, and the game, he had all he needed.

The celebration around Jackson continues, and he starts to head back towards the locker room, alone. All the love and praise he could get came from just playing his heart out and seeing the team win the game; he didn't need the celebration because it just seemed extra. The true reward was being able to play on the court. Just when Jackson makes it out of the large crowd of people, he hears his name, causing him to turn around.

A large, dark-skin man stands in front of him, dressed in khakis, an athletic polo, a hat, and carrying a notebook.

"Jackson Starks, right?" asks the man.

"Yes sir," Jackson says, looking slightly confused at being approached by this stranger.

The two stand eye level at about 6'. The man extends his

hand, a hint of a smile playing on his face. "My name is Bryan Parker. I'm the head coach over at Ruston College. I wanted to come introduce myself cause, man, you had quite a game out there. Congratulations, kid."

Jackson takes the coach's hand, matching the slight smile on his face. "Thank you, sir."

"I was just wondering," begins the coach, "if you've ever thought about playing college ball? I mean, I'm sure you've got some offers. But me and my boys at Ruston could really use someone like you playing for us."

Jackson feels his heart starting to beat a million miles a minute as he sees the coach reach in his jacket and pull out a card. He takes a deep breath to slow down his heart rate.

"Really, I'd love to have you on my team. And we'll take care of you, of everything, no questions asked." The coach hands Jackson the card and puts his hand on Jackson's shoulder, looking him straight in the eye. "My information is on this card," he tells Jackson. "Think about what I've said. I really hope to hear from you soon." The coach starts to walk away, then turns back for a final comment. "I can tell you've got heart, Jackson. You're dedicated. We could really use someone like you." With that, he leaves.

Jackson watches the coach turn and walk away, then he takes a moment to catch his own breath. An offer. A full offer. All expenses paid just for him to be able to play college basketball. He looks down at the card. *Ruston College*. In Louisiana. Back home. The happiness that typically evades Jackson after the games hits him with full force. This is the chance he needs. A fresh start. A full ride to play basketball. And getting a chance to go back to where he's from.

Jackson starts again towards the locker room, but with more hope than he's felt in a long time.

He's on his way back home.

Jackson starts heading home, excitement pulsing through his veins. *A full offer*. He still couldn't believe it. Life had never been picture perfect for Jackson. After his family's move out to Texas, it felt like life would not let Jackson catch a break. His biological dad was long gone; Jackson couldn't remember the last time he had even seen his father. And the man his mom married may as well be gone too. He was the father of his siblings, but he was no father to Jackson. Not anymore. All Jackson ever truly had was his mom for support and basketball to keep his heart beating. That was his pure focus in Texas.

But life was finally looking up. Everything seemed to be falling into place. Coach's offer was the only one Jackson had received so far, but Jackson knew he wouldn't give any other offer the time of day. Ruston College was it. It was home. It was a full ride. It was another chance at the game. It was everything he could ever want.

"MOM!" Jackson walks into the house, putting his basketball bag down at the door. After not hearing a response, he yells again. "MOM!"

"I'm in the kitchen, Jackson," his mom calls. "Quit all that yelling in my house and act like you got some sense!" Jackson follows his mom's voice, running up behind her to hug her when he sees her standing at the counter. He waves to his siblings Haley and David sitting at the table.

"I guess y'all had a good game, then?" his mom asks, noting his uplifted demeanor.

"Well, we won, of course," Jackson tells her as he takes a seat at the table. "But that's not all. Actually ... here," Jackson motions for his mom to come closer, and he gives her the coach's card. He talks to her as she reads it. "A full offer, Mom. The coach came up to me after the game. He said they could use someone like me, and it was just his first time seeing me play." Jackson's mom finishes looking at the card, and their eyes meet. "I want

to take the offer, Mom. I want to commit," Jackson pauses for a moment, then continues. "Everything I am is back in Louisiana. I want to go back home."

His mom looks him deep in the eyes, then back down at the card. A slight frown is growing on her face, causing Jackson to develop one too. "Aren't you happy?" he asks, confused. "A full offer, Mom. A full offer like, no money, no worries." Jackson's own frown deepens. "Most moms are through the roof when their kids get offers. What's wrong?"

Jackson's mom sighs, putting the card on the table and looking up at him. "I am happy, Jackson. Of course I'm happy. This is your dream, and I'll always support you. It's just...". She sighs again. "This is the school Terry coaches at, Jackson."

Jackson stares at his mom for a moment, all emotion draining from his body. He hadn't cared to hear Terry's name ever since they moved to Texas. In Louisiana, Terry was his mom's husband and the father of his two younger siblings, and they were a family. However, after his mom moved them to Texas, Jackson never heard from Terry. He focused on his own kids, and that was all. Terry decided that he had his family; it just didn't include Jackson anymore. Suddenly, emotion fills Jackson again.

"So this was all him then, huh?" He questions his mother. "I'm not good enough to be his son, but I'm good enough to play on his team? Is that what this is?" Jackson's voice starts to rise with his anger. "Or what, is it some type of *reconciliation*? He thinks he can make things okay with an offer? I don't *need anything* from him. I don't want ANYTHING that *came* from him." Jackson seethes, looking at his mom only to see her concern etched across her face. "Or did it come from you?" he asks her, his tone calming a bit. "My first offer just happens to come from your husband. Your husband that stopped acting like I existed. The same husband that I mean nothing to anymore. Did you tell him to get me an offer?" Jackson's eyes brim with tears.

Jackson's mom sighs again, shaking her head. "Jackson, I swear I had nothing to do with this. That coach gave *you* an offer because *you* deserve it. Not because of me, or Terry. Because of *you*." She reaches across the table, putting Jackson's hands in hers. "I promise, Jackson." All of Jackson's emotions run rampant. He feels nothing, but everything at the same time. What he knows now is that he needs to get out of the house to clear his mind.

"I'm going out," Jackson says roughly, removing his hands from his mom's and heading to get his bag by the door.

"Out?" his mom questions. When Jackson doesn't respond, she asks again. "Jackson! Where do you think you're going? Jackson!"

Jackson's mom opens her mouth to yell again, but Jackson has already grabbed his bag and is walking out the door.

There's only one place he can go to get his mind back right, to feel some sort of semblance of sanity: the basketball court.

Jackson reaches the court, throwing his bag on the ground. He just can't wrap his head around everything that had happened. He spent his whole high school career perfecting his craft, just to finally get an offer that was possibly from a man that doesn't want anything to do with him. Jackson picks up a basketball, rolling it around a few times in his hands. *This is everything I have ever wanted, though*, thinks Jackson. He shoots a couple of free throws, takes the ball back in his hands, and takes a deep breath. Jackson rubs his hands against the rough exterior of the ball.

*An offer is still an offer*, he thinks, starting to dribble the basketball. Jackson hadn't received any college offers until Coach Parker showed up to his game, and as the season continues, offers will be harder to come by. Finally getting his first offer, and from



the college that is in his hometown, fills Jackson with hope for the future. Even if it did come from Terry, a chance to play basketball at the college level is huge. And if it didn't come from Terry, if it was real, then ... Jackson dribbles towards the goal, making a layup. He turns, looking at the empty stands.

*These would be filled. Every single week.*

Jackson makes his way down the court, faking out imaginary opponents as he starts dribbling.

*The crowd would know my number, know my name. This would be bigger than high school. Way bigger.*

Jackson fakes out another opponent, circling around to run up to the net.

*This offer could really change things for me.*

*It could change everything.*

Suddenly, the scene becomes vivid for Jackson. It's a Saturday night. The crowd is going crazy. Seconds are ticking by on the clock as the game comes to an end. It's tied, and the only thing between Jackson and the net is the last opponent standing in front of him. The energy in the stands flows into Jackson's hands. He sees the goal behind the player, and his feet move on their own accord. *Right, left, boom.* The player stumbles, giving Jackson enough time to run around him. *Step one, two...* Jackson's in the air. His right arm sails over his head, basketball in tow and then...

He makes the dunk. The buzzer goes off. The crowd races onto the court, and all of the fans surround Jackson. The energy, the support, the love. He can literally feel it. Jackson takes a moment, catching his breath. He looks around the stadium once again, then down at the basketball.

*I can have everything I've ever wanted.*

*This would just be the beginning.*

He heads back to his bag, picking up his cellphone. After sending a quick message to his mom, saying he was at the basketball court, Jackson finds himself sending another text; a text

that feels as right as his next breath.

*This is Jackson Starks. I was wondering when would be a good time to talk with you?*

Almost as soon as the text has been sent, Jackson's phone starts to ring.

"Hello?"

"Jackson Starks," Coach Parker chuckles lightly. "I'm completely on your time, kid. All you have to do is say the word, and we can get this ball rolling." He takes a pause, then starts again. "So, are you saying the word?"

Jackson closes his eyes, taking a moment. He speaks once he's opened them again. "Yes, sir," he says, the calmness in his voice masking the beating of his heart. "Of course, my mom will have some questions about the program, and I know we would like to come tour the facilities. But Ruston College is it for me; I can feel it. I'd like to commit." The coach's smile is almost audible through the phone.

"We will do everything we can to show you this is where you belong. I'll start working to get a tour set up for you and have some information sent your way." Jackson smiles and tells the coach thank you, feeling an end to their conversation until Coach Parker speaks again.

"Welcome to the team, son." A pause. "Or should I say, 'Welcome home?'"

Jackson starts making his way back home again, feeling more uplifted than he has in a long time. Working through his emotions on the court gave him clarity on his situation, and again he feels hopeful about his future. A full college offer just isn't something you turn down. And even if his stepdad was the reason for the offer, Jackson was determined to show them he had his own talents to bring to the table. He never needed a handout. He was going to prove himself by any means.

Jackson gets ready to open the front door, but his mom beats him to it. The look on her face says everything he expected. "I'm sorry," he mumbles, eyes downcast. His mother stares daggers at Jackson before speaking.

"I'm sorry, my butt. Get in the house, NOW." Jackson's mom moves out of the way, letting him pass into the threshold. As Jackson makes his way back into his room, he hears his mom sigh. "Wait, Jackson." He stops and turns to face her.

"I know things have been rough on you lately. Between family issues, moving, I get it, really." She reaches out to grab his hand. "Just... work with me Jackson, please. I promise I'm always going to be in your corner," Jackson squeezes his mom's hand. "I know, Mom. And I'm really sorry about earlier. I wasn't trying to be rude. I just wasn't in the right headspace."

Jackson releases his mom's hand and takes a deep breath. "I did some thinking, though. I'm taking the offer. I'm going to commit." Jackson's mom's eyes start to well up with tears. His eyes rolling, Jackson laughs at his mom. "Please don't start crying. It's not that big of a deal." Jackson's mom makes an exaggerated gasp. "NOT that big of a deal? Boy." She wraps her arm around Jackson's neck, putting him in a playful chokehold. "My son is on his way to going pro. I'm gonna make the biggest deal out of this." She runs her hands over Jackson's coily hair before releasing him, both of them laughing. "I'm proud of you, Jackson." Jackson chuckles, hugs his mom goodnight, then heads to his room. He steps inside and takes a look at the posters on his wall. LeBron. Kobe. Wade. All of the greats surround him, and he feels their eyes on him.

*I'm on my way up there with y'all. This is just the beginning.*



**American Soldier**

by Kylee Armstrong

I say thank you for your service  
 but you feel like it isn't justified  
 because how can they say thank you  
 when you weren't one of the ones to go fight?  
 How can you be depressed and distressed  
 when you were the one sending young soldiers to die?  
 Twenty years of your life  
 and you were dismissed on an injury you sustained on American soil.  
 You sent others in your spot to Afghanistan  
 and now thinking of those men leave your head in disorder.

How can you explain to your little girl  
 that sometimes you just want to give up  
 and that mom locks up your medicine  
 because sometimes you feel like life is too tough?  
 You don't want to be honored for your service  
 because you feel as if it doesn't add up.  
 How can they call you a disabled veteran  
 when the injuries you sustained were just a matter of misluck?

Maybe one day when you look back,  
 you'll realize that your service  
 and your injuries are still those of an honorable airman.  
 Your achievements in the military are still valid,  
 even if they never involved a war.  
 Maybe one day the PTSD will pass,  
 you will realize how much your little girl looks up to your  
 accomplishments  
 because in my eyes you will always be a hero.



### **The View**

by Katelyn Swanson

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The slow ascension of the sunrise  
Casts a wash of yellowed light across the grass  
Squirrels scurry across the damp ground  
The sun sends a warm beam of light through my window  
I pull the blinds away so I can see

Gray and moldy headstones line the lawn  
Some weathered, many long forgotten  
Once monumental obelisks  
Now lay sprawled akin the breathing earth  
Giant crosses and towering pillars  
Are all that's left of a thousand lifetimes  
Marble markers for the young and the old  
Tiny stones for the tiniest souls  
Whose life ended before it began  
Many nameless, faceless  
Both in their time,  
And ours

I can't help but yearn  
For the people and their time I never knew  
Yearn to know their names  
And their faces  
Their fears, their passions, their dreams  
Yearn for memories  
Of birthdays and holidays and celebrations  
I feel sorry for them  
That there's no one left to tell their stories  
No one left to remember their names

The iron fence that separates us,  
The living from the dead,  
Is mangled and rusted  
My pain for them grows  
As quickly as the vines wrapped around their headstones  
With every stolen glance out my window  
Along with my urge  
To resurrect their stories



### Cloud Watching

Maryam El-Awadi

### Fallin

by Kristyn Hardy

"See, Fallin. Can you find them?"

Her mother's whispered words flitted through her head. Her mother held her hand, guided her eyes with the other. In the shade of the tall trees, with sunlight dappling through the highest branches, she searched. Her mother caressed the braid that fell down Fallin's back. A breeze fluttered the leaves at her feet and the wisps of hair that had fallen from her braid.

"You're focused on too much, child. Take a breath, and look again."

She closed her eyes. She inhaled the salt from the river, the sap from the trees. Her mother stroked her head. Fallin took another breath. She opened her eyes.

Their wings glimmered in the morning's light; every shade of winter reflected throughout the forest. Some looked like fresh snow while others glittered the blues of an icy sea. Some were darker than night, some the hues of a pale sunrise at winter's first awakening. One had wings of polished silver and held the hand of a child with wings of solid granite, like the mountain at their back. Little ones chased each other through low branches, creating the breeze that rustled through the small clearing. Above her, in the higher branches sat others, creating the shade she had formerly assumed the trees themselves were responsible for. An older one, with wings of burnished brass, stood leaning against a tree, smiling faintly at her. Her shining hair, the color of polished silver, hung to her waist and her tan face was creased with laughter. She held her hand out, then turned away. Fallin, almost in a daze, followed. The others smiled as she passed. Warm smiles, as though they were welcoming her home. Fallin followed the older one to a small clearing. She sat on the ground beside her in the midst of tall grasses that swayed with their hair. Her mother lingered a small stretch away, her hand brushing the swollen bump of her belly.

"You are Fallin," the older one said.

She blinked. "I am."

"I am Saphina. This is my family, my clan." She gestured around her, to the dozens of wings that glittered between the trees. "You, my dear, are one of us."

Fallin looked over her shoulder to her mother, then back to Saphina. "But I don't have wings."

Saphina laughed, the sound so soft it was barely more than the rustle of the leaves around them. "Ah, my darling, it is not our wings that make us who we are. For some of us, it is the blood we share. But for all, it is our hearts. And you, sweet child, have both." Fallin cocked her head. "Our blood flows through your mother's veins. And, so, it flows through yours."

"And my heart?"

Saphina touched Fallin's cheek, her forehead. Her green eyes were so pale they were almost white, and they studied her, the eyes tender. "Where do you feel at peace, child? What calms your pulse, steadies your breathing?" Fallin thought for a moment. Her eyes traced the cliff's edge at the end of the forest. "It is here, is it not? Where the wind whispers your name and the stars tell you their stories; where the river's laughter reverberates and the mountains protect you?"

"I do feel...better out here," Fallin answered. Again, her eyes took in the world around her. The towering trees that climbed up the mountainsides and disappeared into the clouds. The river that rushed several hundred yards below them but echoed through the cliffs. A boom rushed through the woods as two figures rose towards the sky. The wind off their wings pulled more hair from her braid, and the grass around her danced.

"Of course, you do, love. This place, this hidden world of ours, it answers every question of our soul before we even know to ask. It holds us and frees us. It carries us home."

Fallin's brow creased. "I don't understand."

Saphina stroked Fallin's cheek. "I know you don't."

But in time, you will."

"And until I do?"

"Until you do, we will walk with you. Each of us. We will teach you to hear. We will train you to use your gifts. We will show you your home."

Fallin thought for a moment. She gazed down at her hands, the dirt beneath her nails. "My gifts?" she asked, her voice soft.

"Yes, your gifts. Many gifts. Each more remarkable than the last.

And it is my prayer that you embrace them. That you thrive."

"And you can help me?"

"I can show you all that I know. They," she looked to the ones that had begun to gather at the edge of the clearing, "will show you all that they know. We each possess a unique knowledge, a special way of understanding. And we wish to share it with you."

Fallin looked around, at the others. Some were warm, with wings glittering reds, golds, pinks. Some were cooler, their wings icy blues and whites and silvers. And then there were those in between. But they all looked on her with a sense of loyalty, as if she had belonged to them long before that moment. Fallin turned back to Saphina.

"Did you teach my mother?" she asked.

Saphina's bright eyes shadowed. She looked over Fallin's shoulder to where her mother stood. "Your mother was kept from us. We tried to reach her, to aid her as she grew. But her mother did not approve of our kind. She was under the impression that we were not of this world. In reality, she is quite wrong. We are the first. The first to step onto this plane, to lay claim to this world. But your mother's mother..." She sighed, years of regret clouding her face. "She could not be convinced of her daughter's need for us. But your mother understood. She sought us out after her mother passed. She brought us each of your brothers, but it was you in whom we saw our light shine brightest."



"So, my gifts. Do you know what they are?"

Saphina shook her head, strands of her silvery hair falling across her forehead. "That is for the gods to ordain. And for you to discover."

"But you said they are remarkable. How do you know that if you do not know my gifts?" Fallin asked.

"Ah. You're a curious one, aren't you?" Saphina chuckled. "That is good. That is very good indeed." She brushed aside the hair from her forehead. "I can sense your nature. The layers you carry within yourself. It is a gift we all carry, and you will one day understand it for yourself. So, that is why I know the greatness you carry inside you."

Fallin breathed in this new world. Her mother's world. She slipped her fingers between the stalks around her and let them twine between her fingertips. The light shifted above the trees, the sun setting. The sky faded to pink. "You said you would walk with me. Then what?"

Saphina smiled. "Then we soar."

"Haylin, find the Lord! Someone take Fallin away!" her mother's midwife—Marabale—called. Healers and servants rushed around, scrambling to prepare for the baby. Fallin's governess, Georgia, hurried her out of the room. She looked back to see her mother, two women supporting her, double over. Her moans of pain filled the air.

"Come on, now, Fallin. Let's give the stork her space," Georgia said. Her tone was soothing, but worry lined every inch of her face.

"But, Mama- "

"Your mother will be fine. Don't you worry about her," Georgia assured her.

Fallin looked back as the door was swinging shut. Her mother was leaning on her bed, her elbows propped on the mattress. A hand

held a damp rag to her face. Another rubbed her back. And then the door slammed.

Georgia held her hand as they walked through the manor. Most of the windows were propped open to allow the almost crisp breezes of autumn in. Her father hated when they did that. He said the stone walls kept the rooms cold enough without continuous drafts. Fallin liked it—she thought the fresh air brought much needed life to those gray halls.

At the end of one of those halls, her father sped around a corner, running towards them. His boots left footprints of clay behind him. He reached them, his eyes shifting and hands shaking. "Where is she? What's happening?" he asked.

"She's in the bedchamber, my lord. They're doing all that they can," Georgia answered. "It's so early, sir, but the midwife still seems optimistic."

Her father nodded, but Fallin didn't know if he had heard Georgia's words.

"Papa?"

He knelt and took her hands in his. "Yes, Fallin?"

"Papa, I'm scared for Mama." Fallin's lip trembled.

"Oh, my girl, your mother is going to be just fine. It just seems your brother wanted to meet you sooner than we had planned. But he and your mother are going to be perfectly fine." He tweaked her chin. "Stay with Georgia. She'll take care of you. You'll meet your brother very soon."

And with that, he was gone. Fallin followed Georgia as they climbed the staircases to her rooms. For hours, they stayed there. Fallin traced letters on a page and worked through spelling words as Georgia told her stories of when she was a young girl, playing with her sister and working their family's farm. Finally, her bedroom door creaked open. But it wasn't her father, with news of the birth, who poked his head in. It was Carsyn.

"Carsyn Chambers, what are you doing?" Georgia asked, an eyebrow raised.

Her brother grinned. Fallin giggled at the gap that showed every time he smiled. He had knocked that tooth out just a few days ago. "Georgia, can we please take Fallin outside?"

Fallin jumped up and hurried to the door. She looked back at Georgia with wide, pleading eyes. The woman wrestled her wide hips out of the old rocking chair in the corner of the room—that was her place in Fallin's room. It was where she had rocked her to sleep when she was a baby. Georgia stopped in front of Fallin, hands on her hips, and looked at Carsyn.

"We?" She nudged the door open. Waiting in the entryway behind Carsyn were Fallin's other brothers, Mickeal and Rhealan.

"Oh, please, Georgia. I'm so bored in here," Fallin whined. Georgia looked between the four of them. She pursed her lips and let out a grunt. "I suppose it couldn't hurt to get some fresh air." She rolled her eyes as Fallin hugged her thighs, but she patted her back nonetheless. "All right, then, let's go."

"Sir, lower your voice. Your wife has been through enough," the midwife said.

"You will not tell me how to speak to my own wife," her father growled. Fallin flinched in the shadows of the foyer. Georgia had put her to bed nearly an hour ago, but she hadn't been able to rest. She was searching the halls in hopes of finding something to get into when she had heard the yelling in her parents' chambers. Everyone was distracted and contained to the bedroom, so they hadn't noticed as she crept in.

"She is still losing blood. Your tone is making things even more difficult." Fallin hadn't been around the midwife much, but she recognized her tone. It was the same one Georgia got with her when she was being ornery and selfish.

"Wren knew how dangerous another pregnancy would be. This is her fault."

The midwife turned to her father, her hands in fists at her sides. "How dare you blame her for this. Perhaps if you truly cared about her wellbeing more than your own selfish desire to mount her every other night, she wouldn't be fighting for her life right now." Fallin had never seen her father speechless. The tips of his ears, his neck and face were splotched red.

"Get out," the midwife said, flicking her hand toward the door. "I have a patient to tend to."

Fallin held her breath as her father stormed from the room. She tried to disappear into the shadows, to sink into the stone. Her father didn't notice her as he tore the doors open, nearly tearing them from their hinges. She waited until she could no longer hear his footsteps. She crept to the threshold of the bedroom, clinging to the doorframe. The midwife had disappeared into the bathing chamber as soon as her father had left, so Fallin padded across the tile and thick rug to her mother's side. She grasped her hand. It was hot, sweaty. Her mother's chest rose unevenly. Her eyes fluttered between opened and closed.

"Mama," Fallin whimpered. "Mama, it's Fallin. Look at me, Mama, please."

Her mother didn't seem to hear her. Every few breaths she let out a weak groan. Fallin pressed her face against her mother's arm, the sleeve of nightgown soon soaked through with tears Fallin hadn't realized were falling. The door to the bathing chamber swung open, and the midwife emerged, carrying towels and linens. She draped them over the arm of a chair near the bed and dunked an already damp rag in a bucket of water on the floor. After ringing it out, she turned to Fallin's mother. Fallin had to dodge the woman's purposeful steps as she neared the bed. The midwife never noticed. In the corner, a different kind of sound chimed. Fallin inched towards the bassinette, shocked, for some reason, to find a baby resting within. It slept soundly, cooing every so often. It was smaller than she thought it should be. Its eyelashes fluttered. One of its hands wiggled free of its blankets. She reached her hand over the edge of the cradle, wanting to touch the tiny fingers, but across the room the midwife cursed softly.

Fallin jerked her hand back and whipped her head to the bed. The midwife held bloodied cloths in one hand. She held a damp towel in the other, wiping it along the inside of her mother's legs. It came away bloodier after each swab.

Fallin stumbled back, towards the door. She backed into the wall and yelped, but the midwife was too busy to notice. Fallin ran from the room, swiping at the streams from her eyes and nose as she turned down hallways and staircases. She reached the kitchens and found the door, stretching her arm until her fingertips grasped the handle. Pushing it open, she fell into one of the side gardens. She ran for the forest at the edge of the property, tripping over her nightgown as she went. The bottoms of her feet stung from the rocky paths through the garden. At the tree line, she paused long enough to gulp down breath. She wiped her nose with her sleeve. She tottered deeper into the forest until she could no longer see the lights of the manor. Burrs and briars snatched at her nightgown and tore at its hem. A root caught her foot and she fell, leaves and sticks crunching beneath her. Fallin pushed her hair from her face, more tears falling.

"Phina!" she cried. She huddled against the base of a tree. "Phina!" she tried again.

She called her name over and over, praying that one of the song birds or snakes or toads would hear and wake Saphina. After an eternity, the wind shifted. The leaves rustled above Fallin's head and a mighty boom sounded, getting closer. Then she landed. Her wings of brass looked milky in the moonlight. Her silver hair was braided back. Her pale green eyes searched the forest floor frantically. Fallin jumped to her feet and sprinted to her, clutching the woman's legs.

"Phina," she sobbed.

Saphina clutched at Fallin's back, her head, her arms. "Fallin? Fallin, what is happening?"

"My mama, 'Phina! You have to help her, please!" she pleaded.

"All right, all right, my child. Shh, shh. You must calm down." Saphina's hands found Fallin's face and she crouched on the

ground. "Fallin, listen. I can't see you."  
Fallin sniffled. "Wh-what? I'm standing right here," she said.

"I know, dear. I can feel you, but I can't see you."

Fallin's breath quickened. She grabbed at her arms, at Saphina's wrists.

"Shh, shh. I believe it's just your powers trying to protect you. They sensed your fear, and you allowed them to take over," Saphina explained.

"What do I do?" She wiped her nose again.

"You have to relax. You have to calm down."

"But how?"

"I will carry you back to our mountain. Let the wind whisper to you. Give your worries to the treetops, your tears to the sunrise. Do you understand?" Fallin nodded and then remembered she was invisible.

"Yes," she peeped.

Saphina nodded once before gathering Fallin into her arms. Fallin wrapped her arms around her neck, her legs around her waist. Saphina pressed a kiss to Fallin's head and stretched out her wings. Within a few seconds they were airborne, Saphina carrying them high above the tops of the trees. Fallin nestled her head in Saphina's neck. The wind whipped her and sang past her ears. The horizon was just turning to a deep violet. The crisp smell of pine filled Fallin's lungs. By the time Saphina touched on the plateau, Fallin knew she was fully visible again. "There, now. You just needed some fresh air, hmm?" Saphina asked, stroking her cheek once. "Let's get you warmed up and we'll talk about your mother."

Fallin hadn't realized it, but she was shivering. She nodded, and Saphina took her hand. They neared the mountainside, and Fallin almost smiled. With a smile over her shoulder, Saphina disappeared into the granite. Fallin ran after her.

Saphina sat on the bed, her mother asleep in her lap. Four others crowded the chamber. Their wings pressed to their backs, their size making the chamber look impossibly small. One of them, Tril, perched on the edge of the bed. Her cobalt wings shimmered in the candlelight. She touched her fingertips to seemingly random parts of the unconscious woman's body—her forehead, her wrists, her stomach, her knees. At every touch, a soft glow pulsed. Georgia held Fallin to her, a hand on her shoulder. The midwife stood to the side, wringing her hands and chewing on her bottom lip. Her father sat in a chair with an ankle resting on his knee. His brow was creased, but it wasn't worry Fallin saw in his eyes. It was discomfort and annoyance. That these creatures, as he called them, were in his house, inserting themselves in his business. At last, Tril cupped her mother's face in one hand, rested the other just above her heart. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath.

And then she began to sing.

Saphina's voice joined, as did the others'. It was an ancient song, sung in a forgotten language remembered only by the Fae and few others. Its words had the timbre of an army's march; strong and undeniable. They were words that were not so much heard, but felt in the chests and bones of those near them. When they sang, the world seemed to pause. As though the winds and the waters stilled to listen to their words, their voices. Even the flames of the candles stopped flickering.

Fallin had heard them sing it only one other time, several weeks ago, when a baby had fallen sick. Saphina had explained that it was a ritual prayer to the gods, to Rys and Belladonna specifically. It pleaded for healing for whomever it was sung over. And if healing could not be granted, then it asked for peace as the beloved faded. Fallin whispered her own prayer that the gods would be kind, that they would heal her mother.

The song ended, and Tril kissed her thumb and pressed it to the hollow in her mother's throat, sliding it down her sternum. That soft glow trailed in her finger's wake. She sat back and Fallin noticed the sweat gleaming on her forehead. She slid from the bed on shaking legs. Saphina stroked her mother's hair as she slept. Tril walked to the cradle, where the baby also slept, and gently picked it up. She swayed as she stood, humming and whispering soft

words. She repeated the process of touching her fingertips to its skin—its ears, the back of its head, its throat. She sang another song, quieter this time, in the old language. The others didn't join her this time. Fallin had never heard that one before. Tril laid the baby back in the cradle, fussing over its blankets, before straightening. She turned her attention back to the rest of the room.

"Well?" her father asked.

Tril placed a finger to her mouth and, after glancing back at the baby, motioned to the door. They all followed her to the small sitting area just off the foyer. Her father leaned against the mantle, arms crossed. Tril sat on the sofa, with Saphina standing protectively over her.

"Other than his small size and low weight, your son seems unaffected by the premature birth." Tril glanced to the other Fae.

"What?" her father snapped. "Is there something else?"

"It's his ears."

"What about them? He has two."

"It is not the quantity of the ears that is the problem. It is the quality." Fallin could almost see Tril's patience wearing thinner by the second.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that because of how difficult this birth was, your son suffered some damage to his skull. He has no hearing."

"You mean he's deaf?" her father clarified. Tril nodded. "Well, for how long?"

"Permanently. Forever."

"That is unacceptable," her father huffed. "Fix him."

The Fae tensed at the order before Tril snapped, "Accept it. And I cannot fix him. The mind is delicate. There is nothing we can or

will do. He will grow up just fine as he is."

"Fine," her father ground out. "And Wren?" he asked, almost impatiently.

"I was able to stop the bleeding," Tril breathed.  
"So, she's going to be fine?"

Tril winced. "Your wife will recover physically, yes."  
"What's that supposed to mean?"

Fallin thought she saw anger flash across Tril's face, but a blink and it was gone. "I was able to heal her body, but I have no powers over a being's soul. Her body is able to sustain life, yes, but if Wren does not have a desire to remain in this world...that is something beyond even our control."

"Why are you talking about this as though it's a possibility? Why would Wren want to die?" her father asked.

"Your wife is broken, Lord Chambers. I saw it as I healed her. Her heart is fragile, her mind is tired. She would not be returning to a life she loves," Tril explained.

"That's ridiculous. She's a mother," her father argued.

"And her children were the only light I could see inside her. But she is also the daughter of a woman who didn't understand her, who resented her. She is the wife of a man who fears her. Is that a life you would wish to return to?"

Her father trembled on the other side of the low table. "I do not fear anyone, let alone my wife." His voice was low, and Fallin wished she could hide under Georgia's skirts. Tril did not seem too bothered by his tone, though, as she went on.

"You do, Lord Chambers. You fear her power, her lineage, her heart. And I think you will prove me right very soon." Tril stood then. She cast one more wary look to the now closed bedroom door and then the five Fae made for the door.

Her father pushed off the mantle then. "That's it?" he demanded.

The Fae turned back. Saphina's eyebrows were raised, but it was Tril who answered. "We saved her life. Your healers can handle the rest."

As they left, Saphina turned back, her attention on Fallin. "You coming?" she asked.

Fallin grinned and wrenched free of Georgia's hand. Her father yelled after her, but she ignored him as she ran and was gathered into Saphina's arms. Down the hall, one of the larger windows had been pushed open. The other Fae stood around it. One by one, they leaped from the sill, their wings snapping open as they began to fall.

Saphina whispered in Fallin's ear, "Do you want to fly?"

Fallin's smile was wide as she nodded, and Saphina whistled. One of the Fae, a male named Ryhlin, turned back and hovered by the window.

"Catch her," Saphina said. And then she hurtled Fallin out the window.

Fallin shrieked and laughed as she fell, arms and legs flailing. Ryhlin's indigo wings shot past her and then she was sailing upwards, nestled comfortably in his arms. He grinned down at her as they shot across the countryside.

Below her, the manor sat nestled in one of the smaller mountainsides, its dark stones more foreboding than the mountain itself. Its tall iron gates and strictly hewn gardens were a stark contrast to the territory it ruled over. Even the town, which was growing smaller with every beat of Ryhlin's wings, was lively and beautiful. Every building was painted a different color, from pale yellows to bright pinks to royal blues. The old stories say the town painted itself so that even the most weary of travelers would be able to recognize it in the midst of the mountain range. Because unlike the manor, the town was a place of refuge, a sanctuary. The winds carried the scents of the town: fresh bread from the bakery, petals from the flower market, spices from the artisan district. Blessing bells clinked in a breeze and a somber song reverberated through the avenues and around the rooftops.

It was a song of hope; it was a song for her mother and her baby brother. But Fallin's attention was soon pulled away from the town beneath her to the world around her.

The massive trees reached for her toes, their needles stretching and dancing in the wind of the Fae's wings. It was nearly winter now, and only the heartiest would hold on to their green. To her right, the mountains stood their guard, protecting her small piece of perfection from the borders to their north and west. Their snow-covered peaks glistened in the afternoon sunlight and Fallin strained to hear the waterfalls their ice usually gave way to. There was only a gurgle to be heard—most were already frozen. Beyond the town, the forests gave way to fields of amber. The late crops were near ripe and then the people would begin their last harvest of the year. The light wove through the stalks like a stream through fingers, but Fallin knew from experience that it offered plenty of shadows as well, perfect for hiding in.

Everything Fallin had ever wanted was within her reach, within her family's borders. She had never understood why her father always seemed so unsatisfied.

"Remember, Fallin: your abilities are yours," Saphina said. She paced along the edge of Fallin's vision, her silver hair pulled into a single braid down her back. "You are not theirs. You control them, wield them. They are yours."

Along a row of hedges, Fallin's mother sat on a stone bench. Her hands clasped together and resting on her knees. Her face was bright. Eager. Fallin focused on that as she closed her eyes. Her mind quieted until it was only that animal inside her. She stood before it, hands braced on her hips, shoulders back. *Dominant*, Saphina had told her. *You must learn to be the dominant one.* The animal's head cocked. Its ears perked. It prowled to her, no longer curious, but familiar. Fallin recognized the playful glint in its eyes. It nuzzled up to her leg, twining between her ankles. It was no bigger than a pup, though Saphina claimed it would grow as her power did. She ran her hand down its back. She scratched its ears and kissed its head. *Come on*, she whispered to it.

Fallin opened her eyes. Around her, the frost melted from the grass. The closed buds on the shrubs opened, blooms bursting from their winter sleep. The small trees that dotted the garden regrew their leaves. On her bench, her mother looked around the garden in awe. This close to winter, a garden full of anything but ice was a stark contrast.

"Fallin..." her mother breathed. She rose and walked to her daughter, turning in slow circles to take it all in. "Fallin, this is incredible." She knelt in front of Fallin, in the fresh grass. She held her hands. "You are incredible. I cannot wait to see what all you grow to do."

Fallin beamed and looked to Saphina, who smiled and nodded in agreement. Fallin flung her arms around her mother. Since Aarum's birth, she had become painfully thankful for every day with her. And though Fallin wouldn't know of this for years, from one of the highest windows above the garden, her father stood in his study, overlooking this moment. And it was then that he decided to take his daughter's life into his own hands.

"Can you hear anything?" Mickeal whispered.

Rhealan's face scrunched in concentration as he pressed his ear to the window, his golden hair catching the afternoon's light. For ten minutes now, Fallin had crouched with her brothers outside the lowest window of her father's study. They had woken her up from her nap, saying that Saphina had flown to one of the inner gardens, landing so hard one of the fountains cracked. She had stormed into the study without a glance at anyone. A thrust of her wings had sent the doors slamming behind her.

"Shush. I can't focus," Rhealan muttered, shifting to watch the scene inside.

"I can hear them."

Fallin's brothers whipped their heads to her. "You can what?"

Rhealan hissed. She shrugged. "I can hear them," she repeated.



"Well, what are they saying?" Carsyn urged.

She scooted closer to the window, Rhealan moving aside. They could see what was happening: Saphina and her father on either side of the study, faces flushed and chests heaving. Through the pane, Fallin heard Saphina's voice rising, her father's along with it. Fallin had never heard Saphina yell.

"You are keeping her from us!" Saphina pleaded.

"She is too weak to travel anyway," her father countered. Even at its volume, her father's voice sounded bored. "Wren is not going anywhere."

Saphina's voice was suddenly low, like boots on gravel. "You know as well as I do that it is less than twenty minutes up the mountain by flight. Wren would have no problem making it, even in her weakened state." Her father didn't reply, but Fallin could almost feel the glare he leveled at Saphina.

"Why is it that Wren has taken such a downward turn, Johnson?" Saphina asked. Fallin sucked in a breath at her father's first name, used so casually and in such a spiteful tone.

"What is it?" Rhealan pried. Fallin waved his question away. Saphina prowled across the study. "She was healing wonderfully after Tril's work. Your healers have worked tirelessly these past three months to restore her health. So, what happened?"

Again, silence.

"This is what I think," Saphina continued, stopping just in front of the lord. "I think your wife's room holds the lingering scent of iron. I think her lips are coated with it, along with the empty vials of tonic on her bedside tables. After some inspection, however, I learned that the healers do not use iron when tending to your wife. But I also learned that you insist on personally coaxing that tonic down your wife's throat. So, here is my question: how is it that the tonic leaves the healers' quarters free of iron, but somehow, once it is handed over to you, Lord Chambers" — Saphina's emphasis on the title was mocking— "contains no less than a thimble full of crushed iron. Can you explain this *miraculous*

occurrence to me?"

"You've never been one to beat around the bush, Saphina," Fallin's father ground out. At his sides, his fingers twitched. "Why don't you just say whatever it is you're insinuating?"

"Tell me why you are poisoning Wren."

Her father bristled. "That's preposterous."

"Is it? Because iron is the only substance capable of truly harming our kind. And while Wren may not have Settled the way full-bloods do, she has retained her youth and will for much longer, if given the chance. But iron..." Saphina's words broke. "Iron kills us, Johnson. You know this. If it is capable of killing a full-blooded Fae, what do you think it will do to your wife? She has our blood. And you are killing her." Saphina's voice cracked on the last sentence. Her words were thick, like her throat was catching on every syllable.

"I do know the effects iron has on your kind. I also know that your kind holds to the belief of allowing nature to run its course. Perhaps my wife's state is simply that: a tragedy of nature." Fallin's eyes stung at the words. Her father only shrugged.

"There is nothing natural about poison," Saphina spat. "Just tell me why. What has Wren ever done other than be faithful to you? Nurture your children and be an excellent mother and wife? Why are you doing this to her? Is it because of Aarum's hearing? Are you holding that against her?"

"I do not know why my wife's health is declining. And no, I am not holding my son's deficiency"—Saphina's jaw feathered at the word—"against her. But I do know that she is nothing but dangerous when it comes to our children. Their resemblance to her is more than enough. So perhaps her passing would be...beneficial to the children. It would be best if they received nothing else from their mother."

Saphina stepped closer to Fallin's father. "Wren would never hurt her children."

"Oh, but she already has, hasn't she? Just look at Fallin. Barely five years old and performing magic tricks in the garden while her mother encourages her to push her power to uncontrollable depths. No child of mine will fall prey to the monster inside them." "Your children are not monsters," Saphina snapped.

"Perhaps not yet," her father stated, very matter-of-factly. "But they will be, should they be left unchecked."

"And this is your means of checking them? Murdering their mother? I suppose you are going to keep them from us too, then?"

"The boys can receive plenty of training here, at the manor," her father said.

"And Fallin?" Saphina asked. Her words were thick again.

"That is none of your concern."

"It absolutely is my concern! Fallin- "

"Fallin is my daughter. And as her father, I am afraid that it is up to no one but myself what her future should hold. Now, do see yourself out, Saphina. I am a busy man."

Fallin fell from her crouch onto the grass at her feet.

"Well?" Mickeal asked. "What happened?"

She knew her brothers were eager for information, but her mouth was like sandpaper. She tried to speak, only to fail. Her eyes darted around the courtyard, from the stone wall at her back to her brothers' faces to the flowering hedges surrounding them.

"Fallin?" Carsyn's voice was soft, his amber eyes tender. The curiosity had vanished from her brothers' mind. Worry now filled their faces instead.

She shook her head and stood. Her legs trembled, and she reached for the wall. Just then, the doors to the courtyard were flung open, Saphina appearing. All four children froze. Saphina's face usually held the glow and wildness of nature, but in that moment, it was

warped with frenzied anger. She stopped at the sight of them, and when her eyes met Fallin's, her face faltered in realization. "Fallin, wait," she tried.

But Fallin began shaking her head again. Her thoughts fell apart in her head, none of them making sense. Saphina took a step towards her, and that was all it took. Fallin turned and ran from the courtyard. From her brothers who knew nothing of what was happening to their own mother. From Saphina who knew the truth but not the solution. And from her father, who for all his worry about the monsters within his children, couldn't recognize the one in his own mirror.

The priestess' voice was a monotonous drone in Fallin's ears. She sat between Mickeal and Georgia, who rocked Aarum in her arms. Rhealan held Carsyn to his chest as tears rained down his cheeks. Mickeal gripped Fallin's hand fiercely. She barely felt it. At the other end of the row, beside Rhealan, their father sat. His stoic demeanor had yet to crack. In the row in front of them, the King and Queen sat with their young son, along with another man and woman and two small children with hair as black as the priestess' veil. Behind Fallin and her brothers, hundreds had gathered. Some noble, some villagers. All people with hearts that mourned her mother.

Because it was her mother who lay in the decadent box just behind the priestess. Not two weeks after Saphina's confrontation with her father, her mother had faded completely. Fallin had been there. Holding her hand. Telling her stories of the latest things Saphina had shown her. She had watched her mother's eyes close for the last time. Had watched her fingers slip from her hand. In the trees that lined the edge of the courtyard, if one of the visitors looked close enough, Fallin knew they would find birds that glimmered a bit unnaturally. And if they looked a little closer, they might realize that those were, in fact, not birds. They might notice the bare feet and wispy fabric that made up pieces of clothing. Because, perched in the highest branches, the Fae watched and wept as one of their own was unfairly and untimely grieved.

Around them, a light breeze whistled through the air. Sunlight glittered down through the outer branches. Birds sang to one another. Hellebores and jasmine swayed at the edge of the forest. The sky was a perfect blue, with sparse clouds of cotton ambling along. Somewhere beyond the trees, water trickled down stones and through a worn creek bed; the world was warm enough to melt the smallest of streams, it seems.

It was a beautiful day. Disgracefully so, Fallin thought. The sky was too unbothered to bury her mother. The breeze was too playful, the birds too lively to bury her mother.

Though perhaps the world was not disregarding her mother's death. Perhaps the rustling of the trees, the uncommon warmth of the sun in the midst of winter, was the world's way of singing goodbye. The world was fortunate that way. As was everyone else who had gathered that morning. Because their goodbyes would last only a day. Maybe less.

Fallin's would take a lifetime.

It was cool the morning Rhealan and Mickeal left. Shipped off, actually, if Fallin was being honest. They had been arguing about it for weeks now. Just last night, Carsyn had made a comment over dinner that flared into another argument. It wasn't the leaving that they had an issue with—it was common for children their age to head to the battle camps—but the five of them had grown into something more than siblings in the three years since their mother had died. It was them against their father. And losing the two oldest brothers felt like losing one's limbs.

"Carsyn," her father's voice echoed across the grounds. Fallin turned to see him crossing the pathway with Carsyn on his heels. "Your brothers are leaving in a matter of minutes. Now, you will not bring this up again or else I will send you off with them." Carsyn glared at their father a moment longer before storming off. With a satisfied look, their father turned to the wagons at the top of the drive. There were two, one for each of the boys. They were heading to separate camps, as if sending them away from their family, away from Fallin and each other was the only thing that would satisfy their father. Mickeal was rearranging and fidgeting

with the packs on his wagon. He hadn't been able to sit still since their father announced they would be leaving. Near the other wagon, Rhealan bounced Aarum on his hip. The youngest was already three and nearly too big to be on someone's hip, but his oldest brother was never far from him. Fallin knew that would be Rhealan's hardest goodbye.

Carsyn stomped up to her side. "He can't just send them away," he huffed.

"He is. You are all going to camp sooner or later." Fallin shrugged.

"Well, I'm not. I'm staying with you."

"That's what Mickeal and Rhealan said too."

Carsyn looked at her then. She saw in his eyes that as much as he wanted to mean it, as much as he wanted to be able to stay, in a couple of years he would pack his own wagon and ride off to wherever the King decided he should go.

She wedged herself under her brother's arm. He wrapped the other one around her and held her tight, resting his chin on her head. Fallin hoped that if she held on long enough, she wouldn't have to watch them all ride away. Without her.

Fallin barely registered the stinging of her cheek. Her breaths quickened more. Her mind grew dizzier. She reached for the wall with one hand, her cheek with the other. She jerked away at the stickiness. Her chest clenched. Her neck, her palms, her forehead grew damp.

She saw Carsyn move towards their father. His limbs looked as though they moved through water. Her brother's body shook as a guard wrenched him away.

Her father's ring shone red.

The light through the windows was too bright. She choked on her air. Her knees gave and the scene tilted.

Carsyn lunged again, this time for her. But he was too far away. Something popped in her wrist as she caught herself. Carsyn pulled her head into his lap, whispering words she couldn't hear. Georgia appeared, Aarum trotting behind her. Her eyes grew big and then she was holding Fallin, Carsyn shielding Aarum.

They had kept her attacks a secret for over a year now. But this one...Fallin hadn't known this one was coming. She usually does. She can usually hear when the ticking begins in her head, about two minutes before her lungs clench.

This one had no warning.

Rhealan and Mickeal weren't coming home this month. Sometime next year, probably, her father had said.

"How long have you kept this from me, Fallin?" Her father's words slurred. His voice was dim, as if he were yelling through a wall. "How long?" he repeated.

He lifted his hand again and Carsyn moved. This time, there was no guard to intercept him as he threw his weight at his father. The man was so top heavy that that was all it took to send him to the ground. Carsyn was already back on his feet by the time their father managed to roll over. Carsyn placed himself between the man and Fallin as the guards helped their father to his feet. His face resembled an unripe blackberry.

"This is not finished." He smoothed his sleeves and turned on his heel, pulling a kerchief from his jacket. As he walked away, he wiped his ring clean, the kerchief turning redder with every swipe of his daughter's blood it picked up.

"Fallin. Wake up, Fallin."

She peeled her eyes open at the voice. Her curtains had been pulled back—something that rarely happened before noon on any given day—and the morning sun's light was rather abrasive. She blinked several times and yawned before the voice registered. She jumped upright.

On the edge of her bed, Rhealan, Mickeal, and Carsyn sat with the largest grins she had ever seen. Aarum was clinging to Rhealan's side, beaming up at his brothers. Fallin squealed and managed to tackle all three of them at the same time, Aarum jumping onto the bed to ensure he was part of the commotion. Her brothers laughed as they held her to them and by the time they all let one another go, Fallin wasn't sure if she was laughing or crying.

"What are you doing here?" she squealed.

The older brothers glanced at one another.

"We convinced our commanders to give us leave for Moonrise," Carsyn answered.

"We haven't celebrated all together since Mickeal and I first left for our camps." Rhealan smiled before continuing. "And we wanted to surprise you."

"We couldn't miss our sister's fifteenth birthday," Mickeal said. Fallin tackled her brothers once more. This time, all of them were wiping at their eyes when they let go. After a few moments, Georgia brought in a cart piled high with sugar-dusted tarts, puffs filled with jellies and creams, and at least a dozen other breakfast pastries. Georgia kissed the boys and straightened their collars.

"These brothers of yours scared me near to death when they walked into those kitchens this morning," she lamented to Fallin. "It's so good to have you boys home." She kissed all of them again before leaving, dabbing at her cheeks with her pinafore.

Before the door had shut, Mickeal's hands were already full of pastries. Carsyn was next, though he filled a plate and handed it to Fallin. Aarum grabbed a tray of powder-dusted tarts and plopped onto the rug, not bothering to look to his siblings for approval. Each of them stared at him—Mickeal's mouth was half-open—before meeting each other's eyes. Their laughter reverberated around the room as they took up spots around the youngest, each one grabbing another tray and placing it in the middle of them.

"Fallin, let's go! We're going to be late!" Carsyn called from down the hall.

Fallin finished painting her lips. She cleaned the deep garnet stain from her fingertips, looked over herself once more, and turned on her heels.

Her brothers were waiting at the top of the staircase, all of them in some type of traditional costume. Loose pants that were tapered at the ankles, shirts that were cut into low Vs or not sewn together at all. Other pieces of fabric were tied around their waists or necks or heads, depending on the brother.

"For your information, Carsyn, you cannot be late to something when you're the guest of honor," she explained as she neared them.

"I see your charming sass has only grown since the last time we saw you," Mickeal noted.

"Well, you know what they say...nourish your gifts and whatnot." Fallin tossed her hair over her shoulder. She stopped as she noticed Rhealan's face had fallen into an almost sadness.

"Rhea?" she asked. "What is it?"

"You just...you look like Mother."

For the second time that day, Fallin's eyes stung. She folded herself into her brother's arms. Rhealan pulled away after a long moment and brushed his thumb under her eyes.

Mickeal clapped them both on the back. "This is a touching moment, really. And Fallin, you do look beautiful. But there is a celebration just outside."

"And where there's a celebration," Carsyn began, his grin wicked, "There's trouble."

Rhealan looked back at Fallin. "Well, then what are we doing in here?"

"Last one to steal a kiss, buys a round," she said, winking. Her brothers' grins matched her own as they answered her bet with loud hollering that rang through the manor's entryway. She slipped her hand into Aarum's.

*Your brothers are ridiculous*, she signed to him.

He smiled dryly back up at her. *I know*, he answered.

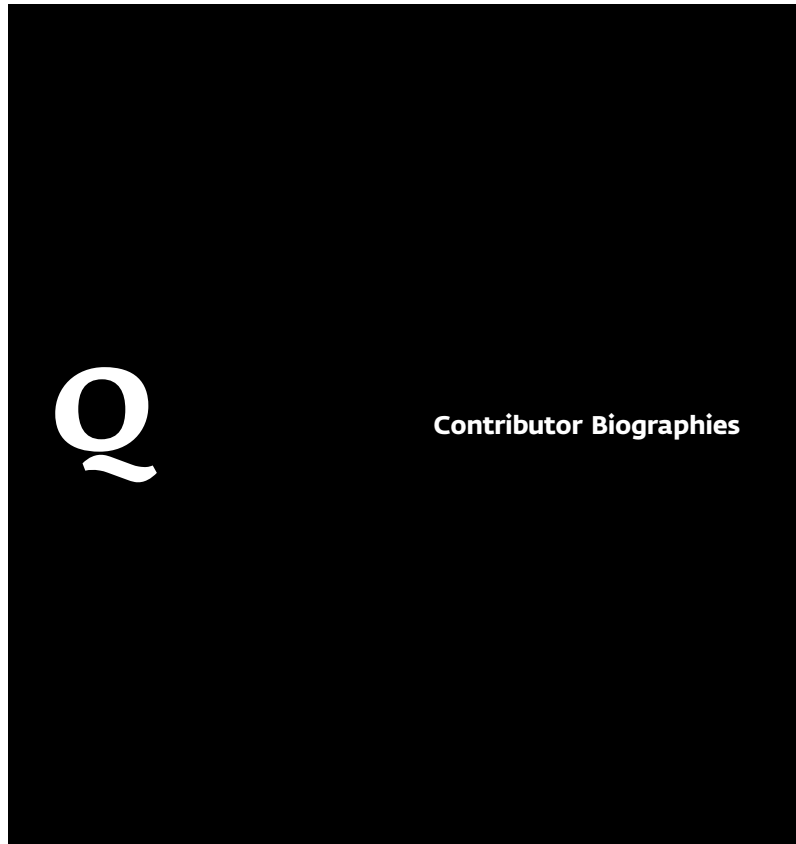
Fallin laughed and pulled her youngest brother to her, the other boys running ahead, Mickeal sliding down the wide banister beside them. The guards at the front doors heaved them open ahead of them, and the five of them were met with deafening cheers from the townspeople. Rhealan lifted Aarum onto his shoulders. Carsyn grabbed Fallin's hand and pulled her along down the cobblestones that led to the town as Mickeal seized the attention of the crowd to somersault down the street.

And for one small moment in her life, Fallin was not afraid of tomorrow.



An Ethereal Afternoon  
Stevie Iseral





**Madeleine Adams** is from Walker, Louisiana. She graduated from Louisiana Tech University on March 6th, 2020, with her Bachelor of Arts in English with a concentration in literature. She is currently pursuing her Master of Arts in English with concentration in post-1660s British literature. Madeleine is interested in modern retellings of myths/folklore and the effects of storytelling on literature. She is the current dual enrollment Graduate Assistant, and she tutors at the writing center. She likes to paint, read, sew, and write poetry when she gets the chance. She wants to go into publishing/editing books after graduating.

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**Laura Cason** is currently enrolled part time in the creative writing program at Louisiana Tech. In 2018, she earned her Bachelor's of Science in biology from Tech before deciding to pursue a career in a field she actually enjoys. In her free time, Laura enjoys watching anything that could be labelled as 'oddly satisfying', perfecting her skin care routine, and educating her coworkers in the CoLA office on 21st century slang. She is survived by the spawn of Satan himself, her cat Zorra.

**Tiffany Clinton** is a sophomore, majoring in graphic design and minoring in studio art. Making art has always been a passion as well as a stress reliever for Tiffany. Her favorite mediums are acrylic paint and colored pencil.

**Samuel Cooley** is 19 years old and from Vidalia, Louisiana, where he graduated from Vidalia High School. He is currently majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing. He hopes to one day become a published author. Samuel enjoys learning and attempting to replicate new styles of poetry. He is also a member of the Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity at Louisiana Tech University.

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**Kristyn Hardy** is an English major at Louisiana Tech University with a concentration in creative writing. She was raised in a home surrounded by books, wit, and love, making the three somewhat

synonymous to her. It has only been in the last couple years that she has considered dedicating her life to writing, but she loves it and cannot wait to see where it takes her.

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**Stevie Iseral** is a senior interdisciplinary studies major with concentrations in sociology, history, and marketing. She began practicing photography 7 years ago and still feels joy each time she picks up her camera. Stevie loves photography because it creates a space for her to document the beauty of life.

**Hunter Jones** is majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing. In his free time, he enjoys practicing photography and videography.

**Alayna Juneau** is a senior in interdisciplinary studies at Louisiana Tech University. She is passionate about telling stories through any medium. Her favorite things to do are pet cats, take naps, and play video games. She hopes to one day be a game developer, a writer, or a crazy cat lady.

**Christi Kruger** is originally from South Africa but moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana, in 2014. Being a first-year biomedical engineering student at Louisiana Tech University, schoolwork consumes most of her time, however that doesn't stop her from exercising her passion for drawing and painting. She especially tries to capture the intricacies of nature and animals, as it allows her to focus on such small, intimate details.

**Addy Lindsay** is a second year student at Louisiana Tech University. She is studying psychology with a minor in sociology and a minor in family and child studies. She hopes to become a clinical trauma therapist in the future. Addy enjoys drinking coffee with friends, listening to podcasts, writing, and learning new things.

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**Kayla O'Neal** is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree in studio art with an emphasis in drawing and illustration at Louisiana Tech University. After completing her undergraduate degree, Kayla interned as a photographer through the Disney College Program. Her photographs have also been displayed in several galleries, including the LoosenArts Gallery based in Rome, Italy.

**Ashley Palmer** is a computer science and English double major at Louisiana Tech University. She wrote her first story at the age of 3 and hasn't stopped since, currently working on edits for her own novel. When she's not writing or working on schoolwork, one can find Ashley sketching and painting digitally, designing stage and concert lighting for her church, or hiking through the Ozarks at her grandparents' cabin.

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**Callie Robbins** is a senior studio art major and English minor at Louisiana Tech University. She graduated from Leesville High School in 2017. She is a poet, sculptor, traveler, and cat mom. Callie is the host of a podcast of three seasons called "Girl Uninspired," where she interviews creatives about their processes and resolutions. She has also published her own poetry book and hopes to write many more. She loves iced coffee, bright colors, and forming connections with others.

**Christina Summers** is a sophomore in business management at Louisiana Tech University. She has been doing photography since her junior year of high school, and her photography has progressed beyond being just a hobby. Her goal is to become a wedding photographer and to capture raw moments between people. She is currently getting a business degree in order to take her photography skills to a more mature and professional level.

**Katelyn Swanson** is a sophomore at Louisiana Tech University studying English with a concentration in creative writing. Katelyn has goals of becoming a published author. She fell in love with writing in high school, and the rest has been history. She loves

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## Acknowledgments

Without a host of wonderful people working on it, rooting for it, and believing in it, this fifth volume would not exist. First, monumental thank you to our administrative advocates who allowed this production process to become a course. Dr. Susan Roach, thank you for believing that dreams and goals can also pay the bills—or in this case earn credits. An eternal thank you is owed to Tom Futrell, who taught us what it means to compile a manuscript and then offered his time and expertise to make our vision a reality. To Dr. Donald Kaczvinsky, who first had the idea for a school literary journal and has continued to fund *The Quatrain's* existence. To Dr. Ernest Ruffeth, who laid the foundation on which we continue to build. Thank you both for having a vision, and for trusting us to make it our own.

To our bold and caring leader, Anna Kelley, who allowed this volume to be truly ours. Thank you for pushing us through tight deadlines and crammed schedules, tough decisions and friendly debates. You offered us a voice and a space to create something that is wholly our own. For this lifetime and a hundred after, thank you. And to this incredible staff: thank you for trusting me to lead you. Thank you for working tirelessly. Thank you for caring. To my Associate Editors, Cammie Ardoin, Hunter Jones, and Katelyn Swanson, thank you for holding onto our vision. Thank you for wanting the very best for this volume. To my Managing Editor, Katelyn Swanson, thank you for finding the details I couldn't. Thank you for seeing the bigger picture, when I was so often focused on the day-to-day.

And finally, to our contributors: we quite literally would not be here without you. Thank you for being bold and creative. Thank you for sharing that with all of us, and thank you for trusting us to share it through this journal. So, here's to you! May you always be bold. May you always be creative. And may you always find the faith to share these pieces of yourself with the world.

Kristyn Hardy,  
Editor-in-Chief

*Several of our contributors were also on our staff this year, and as such, they are listed within our masthead and as contributors. Our staff wants to assure all of our readers that every submission, regardless of the contributor, underwent an extensive review and selection process. For those of us on staff whose pieces were up for consideration, this process was conducted anonymously and in an unbiased forum. Staff contributors were not involved in the selection of their own work. Our staff had lengthy conversations as to how the final selection of works could remain fair and we hope we were able to present this journal justly.*

# Q

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*The Quatrain* is a print and electronic project for people who value quality undergraduate writing and art. Full-dress researched, academic essays and scholarly explorations; photography; life-writing; sculpture; cultural criticism; work that has a reflective, autobiographical style; and creative writing in all its forms: We simply seek to display samples of the interesting, original, and quality work being produced by gifted students and emerging talents.

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