Irotas 2024

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**Recommended Citation**

Auman, Xander; Beekman, Kat; Benfield, Elizabeth; Grafe, Jessica; Nelson, Jed; Nissen, Kate; Onyx, Drake; Peachey, Alex; Rayburn, Benjamin; Schmidt, Mandie; Stelzer, Kelly; White, Kylie; Yeates, Jayde; Lopez, Larissa; Majkrzak, Alayna; Campbell, Ashleigh; Endres, Aysen; Severson, Lucy; Norman, Kiera; Bird, Samantha; Riebel, Keaton; Fleshner, Jaden; Wilson, Jaydon; McKinzie, Ian; Marzahn, Rachel; Weiler, Riker; Kabir, Mushfig; Peterson, Taya; Dukuly, Mawatta; Bowman, Mal; Guertin, Grace; Dischinger, Samantha; Lombard, Kieran; McKinzie, Ian; and Westphel, Grace, "Irotas 2024" (2024). *Irotas*. 1.  
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This periodical is available at OpenRiver: https://openriver.winona.edu/irotas/1
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iv.
Mirror of the past

Larissa Lopez
Moon’s Ode to the Werewolf

Alayna Majkrzak

Every day I regret pushing the sun down and taking the sky for myself. Every day it pushes him a day closer to needing to kill a part of himself. There’s something about the way he howls up to me.

He pleads
And
He pleads.

I see him change from a man composed Of supple skin and a sound mind into Something much worse. He is something more. More than soft skin, now composed of barred teeth and a flesh-eating grin.

He howls.
And
He howls.

He begs to see his creator in the retched tone he always Takes with me. How I long to hold him, tell him it’s alright. I watch above him with a wistful sigh, holding back my own tears. I watch each month as he pleads until his voice is hoarse and he can no longer see me.

He cries
And
He cries.

The sound of his weeping still echoes in my ears. Even as the sun cradles him through all his fears, I watch and wait as I push the sun down again and again. I wait with bated breath, waiting for the fated week to come. I watch him, he watches me.
I scream
And
I scream

Until my voice is horse with use
And thick with the cold that my light always engulfs him in.
*I’m sorry.* I’d yell, but he’d never hear--Not as his flesh and mind remake him.
Every day I regret pushing the sun down and taking the sky for myself.
Time Capsule

Ashleigh Campbell

She is working in the early morning, molding each patch to her vision, dust motes dancing with each scissor pass, house quiet as a mouse. Sunlight streaming in at an angle, a golden glow, a cool breeze through the screen door almost stirring the pieces from their places.

Years before, the same table, the same room, my great-grandmother laughing at something said, shading her eyes from the hot summer sun, sewing scraps haphazardly, carefully into a patchwork of people she loved.
Still Life 2

Alysen Endres
The world is a harsh place but not when I was 5 and went to summer camp that one year

Lucy Severson

When I was little, I knew when to ask for hugs
And how a hug should feel.
It was second nature.
Now it all feels like
A complicated math equation
That I cannot solve.
I think back to summer camp
When I was maybe 5 or 6 years old
And I asked all the camp counselors for hugs before I left.
I used to be brave enough
To step foot in that filthy lake—
Until a fish brushed by my leg
And I emerged from the murky water
Screaming
As if a murderer were chasing after me.
Now I’m not brave enough to solve this equation
That everybody else seems to understand.
Thing just get more complicated
As you get older.
I feel as though a part of me died
When I saw the change of 13 years.
So I look back on these early years of my life,
Days spent at summer camp,
Fondly.
I can picture my knees stained with dirt
And I can smell the scent of the lake
Drifting in through the open windows.
It was terrible
And nostalgic.
I remember sitting cross legged in the grass
Singing along to “We’re Going to be Friends”
While a counselor played the chords on his acoustic guitar.
I could smile at my peers
And they’d smile back.
If I were to smile at my peers now
They’d probably wonder why
And determine that I’m strange—
Not that this assumption would be incorrect.
This was a time
When I was allowed to make a mistake
Like tipping the canoe
And people would laugh
Instead of calling me an idiot
For flinching
At the sight
Of a water-spider.
When I make a mistake at age 20
I get a stern talking to
And people glare
And their eyes tell me
That I do not belong.
When I was five,
A sentence or two that I wrote
Was a sight to behold.
Now I’m five
—Plus fifteen
And everybody
Is more difficult to impress.
The world
Is a harsh place
And not anything like
Swimming in the lake
And singing songs
And roasting marshmallows
Over a fire
That smelled of restful
Summer days.
Ew

Rachel Marzahn
The Chaser of Words

Lucy Severson

For hours she stared at the blank white page.
There was no experience to describe.
Other people had more fun at her age.
Getting her to leave home would take a bribe.
A sheltered eighteen-year-old, empty mind.
Love is a language that she cannot speak.
There’s a feeling that people long to find.
She’s odd, for it’s something she doesn’t seek.
She spends her Saturday nights chasing words.
Fiction is her reality, she’s strange.
She writes about humans, lizards, and birds.
She is weird, but she doesn’t want to change.
Fiction is truly the language she loves.
So, she stands, merely watching from above.
Haechan

*Kiera Norman*
Content Warning: The following story deals with descriptions of sexual assault. Readers who may be sensitive to this content, please take note.
The Crash

Drake Onyx

Cassidy(14) Jules(15), Unclean

Under his smile, under his clothes, writhed a worm.

Pulsing. Hungry. It slithered in his pants, pressed against denim, hiding its hiss in music and motion. Cass hadn’t noticed. Instead, her eyes lingered on his rottenly handsome face, and not his slimily toxic hands. He slipped his sludge into her drink, and relished as the poison overtook her. He caught her fall,

And his handprints stained her bones.

Red and bruise green scarred her flesh, bites from a gangrenous maw ravenous for sweat and skin. And she? Subdued. Helpless. The maggot slipped from his fly. Squelching, wriggling, it burrowed into her; tainting her insides with his decay and gurgling with joy at her corruption. He sated his depravity with her purity,

And left her putrid and alone.

She still tasted the worm festering inside her. Fermenting. Famished. Carrying her corpse in the dead of night, she felt her viscera decompose under lamplight. She was rotting. Whatever she was before the tears carved duvets in her cheeks was dead. Never again would she fly, or glow.

Forever, she was marked as unclean.

Somewhere between the sobs she found herself in her room, clutching her skin and missing when it was hers. Wishing. Wanting. Needing the dark to be darker, to hide holes hollowing her insides to what could only be inhuman. She flinched at the light, whimpering at its touch. No. Not again.

Don’t Touch Don’t Touch Don’t Touch Don’t-

“Cassy...?” Jules whispered

No. Not him. Not rotten. Mismatched eyes affixed to the broken thing that was her body in horror, but not malice. There was kindness there. Safety. Something clean to hold her. She fell into Jules arms, thinking one thing, and one thing only.

“...don’t tell moms.”
Still Life

*Samantha Bird*
The Fall

*Jessica Grafe*

Air dances around her

as she descends toward the cobble,

the cracks begging for her embrace.

She looked at peace, eyes closed, with a breath

of a smile touching her lips. Her hair an ebony of death

to come. She dove headfirst off that stone tower, fluttering

in the wind, as if possessed. But as she falls, a rattling sight,

she vanishes from view, like a fleeting light. Her form dissolves,

like mist, leaving behind only whispers of despair.

In the depths of darkness, her presence lingers,

A haunting reminder of forgotten presence.

Her tale, a mystery, forever untold.
Boxed

Keaton Riebel
Survival Mode

Jaden Fleshner

You say she lies about being sexually assaulted.
Is it because you don’t like her?

You lie about having sex with her.
Is it because she never let you in?

You write obscenities on her car.
Is it because she’s your bros ex?

You call her a homewrecker.
Is it because the guy you like likes her and not you?

You treat her like she’s not human.
Does it give you the power you desperately need?

You crave my pain.
Does it give you pleasure?
Parents Drama

Samantha Bird
Get in the Water

*Jessica Grafe*

She runs with the ghost of her sisters,
dashes from her temporary home.

She runs with the desire to live,
chased by death and his disciples.

She runs with creatures of the night,
she races for sanctuary.

She runs with the wind on her back,
sprints faster toward the water.

She runs with conviction,
the water a portal to salvation.

She runs with fear,
fear for her sisters, fear for our future.

She runs.
She runs until she hits the water.

She is my sister,
one of the few that got away.

She escaped the violence
but never made it home.

Now, she floats
in the abyss of the in-between
Crucifixion

Jaydon Wilson

I wish it would be no loss for me
If you nailed me to the cross
And pierced me with your holy spear,
If you gave me your hatred,
If you gave me your rage,
The fire that burns within,
If I could die for you to set you free,
But I can’t absolve you of your sins,
And I won’t rise again in three days’ time
A glance of your lance would reveal
What the water from my wound would be:
Not the blood of a god,
But the blood of a dog
Bethlehem

Ian McKinzie

Forget what I’m about to say.
Because it’s not anything I’d like to remember anyway.
The future is the past for the me that is the last.
I’m shambling towards Golgotha,
Slouching past Bethlehem on way.

It chooses, sometimes, to stay.
The words. The page.
The love. The rage.
Fire and stones and bones and steel,
Hot bread, cold water, a loving meal.
Memories made, displayed,
Upon these filigreed bars I’ve made.

Yet still the day comes
When all journeys end.
When all things die.
When it all fades, and then
NOTHINGNESS
Remains.
For me.
For us.

But not for they.
For they are the future that will be made.
And we are the soil they will trample,
Their unmade statues, their creative clay.
It is for them we will write these poems and plays.
It is for them
That our Golgotha
Was made.

And it’s their Bethlehem
That we will slouch past, unafraid.
Alters and Hymns of my own design

Alayna Majkrzak

Tears run down my face just as rivulets
Of the Jordon ran down His.
Tears and torn skin now a sacred
Alter at which I would place an entreaty daily.

I was once told that my religious
Metaphors were superficial in
My writing.
The cursor blinking was a mocking laugh of a simple comment.

That thought made
My forearms sting,
My eyes water,
My skin tear open like the Earth that was trying to swallow me whole.

Just like it had years ago.

How could the blasphemous
Euphoria I felt when writing these hymns
Only be skin deep
When I still have the scars to prove their existence?
My Identity Will Not Be Erased
Rachel Marzahn
The Cabin Blues

Riker Weiler

August 16, 2008

Hi,

This is my first year at Camp Needlepoint and Daypoint. My therapist thought it would be a good idea to learn more about my diabetes and to meet other people like me. I struggle a lot with making friends since I’m diabetic. I still don’t know if I want to be here. I haven’t been gone from home this long before. What if I don’t make friends, and what if something bad happens? I guess everyone has been nice, but no one has really talked a lot. There is this opening bonfire where the camp counselors all do these funny shows. I can’t wait to see Mom on Wednesday when she gets me. I’m happy I don’t stay a week like the rest of the campers.

August 18, 2012

Hey,

I’m so happy to be back. I missed being here around everyone. I’m in the same group as Lizzy this year because we want to be in each other's cabin. Some people said they couldn’t find me on the list, and I must not have signed up. Becky then came over and found my name cause she knew who I was. Yesterday, I put a pump site in by myself! In a new spot! Mom usually does it for me because I was too scared, but I’ve been working on it. I put it on my lower back. It’s kinda weird, and I feel like I’ll pull it out, but anyway, I’m having a blast! I don’t want the rest to go by quickly.

August 12, 2016

This year sucks. Not only because it’s my last year as a camper, but now that I’ve been having all these panic attacks, I don’t even enjoy being here. I haven’t talked to many people, but all these girls are two years younger than me and act like I don’t exist. This is the only year I’ve felt so alone. I’ve worked on horseback riding for the last two years, and then they changed how to do the program this year. Whatever. The worst thing was last night, during one of our games, I complained to Elizabeth I felt sick. She told me just to sit and drink water. She didn’t want me to go home during my last year. I guess she was right. I need to try to wait it out.
Counting days

Lydia Domaille

one, two, i’m alive
one, two, three, four
breathing, breathing
in and out again

and three, and four
my heart, it beats
beneath my skin
i’m alive, i’m alive

i blink, the time
is gone again
i’m here, here, here
alive today
and tomorrow
i’m alive, i’m alive

i’m alive.
Jumble
Samantha Bird
Hey You,

Things get better than you realize. Those days, your mom woke you up to give you juice or reattach your pump because it got uncomfortable. Those go away.

You don’t realize how strong you’ve been. Those bullies, including Azariah, all go away. She bothers you again in junior high, but you ignore her. You enjoy Christmas with your family, and you don’t let someone ruin your state of mind.

You lose Veonna, but it’s ok; you’re two different people who help each other. You switch schools but find people who help you for the better. They push you to be smarter, have an open mind, and allow you to grow.

You have your bad days. You know there’s never an easy day.

Dad comes back. It isn’t perfect, but he tries more than when you were a kid. He doesn’t remind you that diabetes can hurt you. Your health improves, and you no longer spend all of your time away from your family and friends. You still have Leppy, by the way. She’s been with you all 22 years you’ve had her.

Sincerely,

You
fear of the bright lights

Riker Weiler

Heart racing like a train running down the tracks,
brain going a hundred miles per minute not stopping for a second,
her standing there with no will to turn as warmth turns to cold,
breath, hold still.

Eyes stare in curiosity as she steps on stage.
Fear races through her brain with hope of no judgement.
Ears listen for a sound to come from her.
Faces turn to the large stage.
Breath hold still.

Nervously speaking the part she waits for a sound,
anxiously watching her peers wondering gaze.
Breath hold still.
No sound heard—
attentive eyes follow her movement away from her spot.
As she moves from the stage with ease,
anxiety races from her body, leaving her in tranquility.
Still Life 1

Alysen Endres
Memories are unreliable. My diabetes diagnosis may be one of the things I remember best, among other things.

**One week to diagnosis:**

The Minnesota State Fair—rides that were too big and fast for me, except for the teacup rides where we could control the speed, and my sister wanted to go fast, spinning us out of control. It ended with a feeling of sickness and constant thirst. The only indication that something was wrong was my lack of wanting to ride the rides and eat all the candy and my need to chug water and use the restroom.

**Three days to diagnosis:**

My symptoms never got worse. I didn’t throw up, and I didn’t rapidly lose weight. At the time, we didn’t know that slow-healing bruises and cuts were a symptom—something that we overlooked throughout my childhood. I remember my fatigue. I was always tired, and I still am. Most interesting, I remember the yeast infections. The hardest part of dealing with diabetes is the symptoms that don’t add up. No one symptom is connected in the same way. The only thing different on this day was how tired I was. I couldn’t get out of bed and play with my sisters. I wanted to sleep and drink water.

**Day of diagnosis:**

September 7, 2005— the day before my first day of kindergarten. I had been signed up for afternoon classes, giving my mother time to take me to our pediatrician. The answer did not take long. I sat and waited. The nurse poked my tiny finger with a pricker, and I tried pulling away. The labs didn’t lie. My blood sugar was well over 800 mg/dL. I had been rushed to Children’s Hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota. I remember the hospital room. I remember the endless snacks of deli meat and cheese, the testing of my blood sugars, and the endless amounts of water. At the end of it all, I remember being released on September 10, 2005, and receiving my second gift for a hospital visit—a Build-A-Bear with a candy corn pattern and a new outlook on life.
On Being Perfect

Ashleigh Campbell

Or rather, the impossibility of being so. To be human is to be imperfect, so why did I crave it until it became the only thing making my heart beat.

A single punctuation mark missed until after the assignment turned in. A voice with disappointment nonexistent but too little enthusiasm, just enough to push my mind over the edge.

To fail is to learn, so why was each criticism like a punch to the gut, driving the air from my lungs.

It didn’t have to be that way, so why did I self-sabotage until I was stone shell encasing a kintsugi heart.
Endless Night

Kiera Norman
Here Lies My Fear

Riker Weiler

Fear in a world full of bravery. A problem that seems small compared to those who are sicker. Sickness in a world full of health and prosperity. A small reminder of what could happen if one steps out of their boundary. The words, “It could kill you!” Her parents fear encasing her own. The late nights of high blood sugar, her mother shakes her awake for a low blood sugar treatment. A child’s fear of whether the diabetes will kill her or not remains with her.

These turn into endless days of irresponsibility. A girl with a responsibility that is too much for a fourth grader. One who is too worried about school to focus on her health and feels burnout far before she should. A girl who has bullies coming after an uncontrollable disease.

A middle schooler learns more and more about her health as she navigates through puberty and how diabetes ties it all in—a girl with endless reminders that no one understands her. Friends joke that she is irresponsible when she receives no help from her mother and has a doctor who only changes her settings without giving her the tools for success—a girl whose fear of needles comes from the mistrust of others with her body.

A high schooler with more of a commitment to do better and fear of judgment from doctors. She wants more in life that she cannot achieve unless she betters this disease. She is always tired from trying to keep her health in check. She is burnt out before sixteen. By age eighteen, she gets better control with a smarter insulin pump and a continuous glucose monitor that helps her track her blood sugar better than she can.

She is a college student who has done better in the last five years than she has in the last eighteen years with her health. She became what she wanted as a child and has proved herself more than her mother thought she could do. She is a girl whose friends think she is still irresponsible, but she is a girl who cleaned up her act.
Passersby

Jaydon Wilson

The people we pass by every day
Are all unique individuals
With their own lives,
Accomplishments, careers,
Friendships, husbands, wives,
Hopes, dreams, and goals,
But when we look each other’s way,
All of that is hard to see

As passersby, we’re just people
We’re not good or bad
Not happy or sad
We’re not dark or light
We’re not dull or bright
Not ugly or neat
Not hateful or sweet
We’re none of that

We’re just people
Just some more people
Without adjectives
Hawker Hustle (2)

*Mushfiq Kabir*
You may call me stubborn.

Jaden Fleshner

When I don’t like how you do things,
when I fix what you touched,
when I get mad at you for trying to help.
You call me stubborn.
Which I may be.
But it's more than that.
It's the parasite inside my brain.
She tells me what to do and I must do exactly that.
I don’t want to risk what she might do if she gets mad at me.
I don’t want you to get hurt,
or my brother, or sister, or mom, or dad, or any of my pets, any of the people that I love!
I’m not stubborn in this way of how I like things. I am stubborn in my arguments.
I understand that you don’t get it.
This parasite isn’t in the both of us.
But please understand that when I get mad it’s not at you it’s at this thing inside my brain!
This thing no one can see, but I can feel all the time.
But this is hard to explain.
So,
you may call me stubborn.
Hawker Hustle (1)

*Mushfiq Kabir*
Live Life With Passion (or die trying)

Alayna Majkrzak

There’s something insulting about being told to have a “back-up plan” for the career you want. People in life like to say that you should be passionate about your career, but the minute you choose the path of passion you are no longer human. Suddenly, passion comes second to funds because “money is necessary to live.” A piece of paper with human-assigned value may be necessary to live, but is that to say that passion is not? I see passion in every miniscule thing in my life. I see it in the architecture of the school I attend. I see it in the sidewalk chalk of a child. I see it in the tattoos that adorn my skin. I see passion everywhere; I feel it in the air I breathe. My lungs fill with passion every waking moment I have on Earth. How could I trade my passion for money when passion wraps me in its warm arms every day, and money has never been more than a slip of a dead man with even more dead ideals about how I should live.
The Great Rescue

Taya Peterson

My fearsome enemy stood before me, beginning to look worn out. Many cuts were showing on the Cyclops, revealing how worn out and tired it was. I was breathing hard, beginning to feel worn out myself. The Cyclops began swaying before steadying itself and roaring. It spread its arms out and charged, looking ready to crush me in a big Cyclops hug. I let it come towards me before ducking under its right arm as it swung. The Cyclops stopped, obviously confused. Now behind it, I swung my sword at its back, dealing the final blow. It went down on its knees before falling forward. I raised my sword in victory.

I heard a rustle behind me and turned to see my sister as she whined, “Violet! You barely let me do anything. I wanted to kill it with my magic!” Leaves were stuck to her from her time hiding in the bushes. I said I would tell her when I was ready for her, but never told her to do anything. I wanted this to be my victory.

I sighed, annoyed that my little sister wanted everything her way. “You got to kill the last thing with your magic. It was my turn to kill the monster,” I explained, waving my sword at her.

“Stop waving your stick at me! This is serious!” Lola pushed my sword out of her face, causing it to fall to the ground. I quickly went to pick it up and put it back on my belt.

“That was mean! Don’t touch my sword,” I said, glaring at her. She always did this. “Just forget it. Now that we’ve killed the Cyclops guarding the entrance to the Dark Forest we can finally go in!” I pointed into the woods, hoping it would make her forget about the fight. We didn’t go into the woods, we weren’t often allowed to. I knew it had to be a tempting offer.

“Fine. I get to kill the next thing though,” Lola said, and marched forward as the leader. I nodded to stop the arguing. We had a quest to complete.

Walking behind Lola, I watched as she and our surroundings slowly disappeared into the darkness. I got closer to Lola so we wouldn’t lose each other. This forest was considered the most dangerous forest and for a good reason. Monsters seemed to pop up at every turn, but me and my sister knew how to get around these places.

Many times Lola and I ran into creatures we couldn’t quite make out in the
darkness. Luckily we rarely had to fight, and hiding behind trees, bushes, and in caves became a must in order to make it to our goal. I kept having to stop Lola from simply charging in, still wanting to kill the next enemy we fight herself. I reminded her that we needed to conserve our energy for the biggest enemy we were going to face.

“This looks like a nice place to sleep for the night,” Lola said, poking her head into a small cave.

“Careful! What if there was a monster inside?” I asked, grabbing her shoulder to pull her away.

“I’d crush it!” Lola replied happily, making a motion with her wand as if she was casting a spell. “Besides, it’s so tiny. What could be in there?”

“Maybe a lizard that eats kids like you!” I said, grabbing both of her shoulders in a quick motion. I felt her jump and smiled at the success of scaring her. I laughed as Lola shoved me away.

“There’s nothing in there!” she said and walked inside.

I quickly lit a torch and had to agree. It was too small for anything too scary to live in here. We set to work on making a small campfire. The forest outside seemed to grow darker and darker as we worked. Soon enough we had hotdogs and s’mores before rolling out sleeping bags.

“Goodnight,” I said, and Lola mimicked me. We quickly fell asleep, hoping the forest would be brighter in the daylight.

Roaring thunder woke us up. Lola quickly huddled up to me. It was getting wet and cold in our cave without the fire. Hours must’ve passed in the time we were asleep. “The fire went out?” Lola asked, whimpering.

“We’ll just make a new one,” I said just as new thunder shrieked outside. It felt like at this rate it was never going to end. I flinched as a new wave of thunder roared but tried to keep a brave face for Lola. It wasn’t long before our fire was up and going once again. We sat there for what felt like forever before the thunder and rain finally began to settle down.

However, along with the lightening rain and thunder came pounding footsteps. One pair began to fade farther away from us. The other, however, pounded down and grew louder until it was right outside our cave. Carefully, I peeked outside to see what it was.
Despite the darkness, the massive figure was obvious. A rusty-scaled dragon. I gasped before turning towards Lola with wide eyes.

“Let’s pretend we’re sleeping!” I suggested and quickly went back into my sleeping bag right as the dragon’s snout came into the entrance of our small cave. I sneakily opened my eyes to watch it and could easily see its green eyes in the firelight. I glanced at Lola, who looked fast asleep.

The dragon spent some time watching us and sniffing. Surprisingly, after a minute or two, it went on its way. The pounding footsteps of the dragon faded into the background. Me and Lola shared a glance and sat up. We huddled together for a bit before settling back down enough to try to fall asleep for real.

Lola and I woke up, feeling cold and hungry. The fire was out again and it was a bit lighter outside now. Still a dark forest, but a little less dark now. We quickly ate before gathering our things and getting back onto our quest.

We didn’t walk long before Lola announced, “I think we’re almost there!” I looked ahead and saw nothing but more darkness and more forest.

“No, we’re not! We said the tower would take days to get to,” I argued, bringing out my map and pointed to where we were and where our destination was.

Lola pointed at two different spots on the map. “See? We’re close. I want to be at the tower.”

“Our quest just started. We left home a day ago!” I continued to argue, wanting Lola to understand what I was saying. She obviously did not understand.

“I’ll just play my own game, then!” Lola announced, charging ahead.

“Fine,” I replied and stormed off in another direction. I listened to the crunching leaves and twigs under me as I walked, and watched as the forest became lighter around me. I found a log on the ground and sat on it, swinging around my stick.

It wasn’t fun to play with Lola when she was like this. Always wanting to do what she wants, never listening to my ideas. I’m the one who came up with the idea to travel through the forest to find the tower dad was locked up in. It couldn’t be a simple quest or it wouldn’t be any fun.

I sat there pouting for a while longer before finally giving in. Lola was so stubborn it ended up with her always getting her way. I began walking in the direction that I had
seen Lola go in. “Lola?” I called out, looking around me as I kept walking. “Lola?”

“Here!” she replied cheerfully. I looked around, it sounded like it came from above me. “There’s this old treehouse here! This can be the tower!” Finally, I spotted the treehouse past some leaves and Lola’s blonde hair flowing out from a window.

“Get down, then. You’re not the one trapped, dad is,” I said, giving in to her wanting to simply be at the tower. Sometimes it wasn’t worth fighting her.

Lola seemed a little unsteady as she came down, but in the end, she got down just fine. The treehouse looked old, with rotting and broken wood in many places. I had to admit it looked cool, though. I motioned for Lola to follow me. We walked away from the treehouse until we couldn’t see it.

The woods around me grew dark and mysterious and we once again could hardly see. Pounding steps could be felt as we walked closer to what we assumed was our destination. As we got to the edge of the clearing we could see what was guarding the entrance to the large tower. The rusty-colored dragon from before. I quietly drew my sword and I saw Lola grab out her wand. It hadn’t seen us yet. I signaled for Lola to go off to the right and I went to the left.

“Dragon! You won’t stop us from entering the tower!” I yell as I jump out from the bushes. The dragon’s pacing stops and instead, it turns to stare at me. From the edge of my vision, I can see Lola casting a spell, and I begin to slowly approach the dragon for my first attack. Right as Lola’s fire spell rushed through the air right onto the dragon’s side I run up to its legs and began slashing.

The dragon roars and reared up on its hind legs. I quickly backed up before its large feet came crashing down on me. Right as that happened a large flash of light brightened up the place, blinding us. I wasn’t prepared for Lola’s spell, but my eyes recovered quicker than the dragon’s. I grabbed ahold of the dragon’s folded wing, hoping to hop up onto its back.

The dragon reared again and almost knocked me off as it spread its wings out. Somehow I managed to hold tight onto its wing and began climbing to get further on its back. The dragon continued to toss and turn, not liking me on it. Lola cast more spells, fire hitting its side and vines coming up to lock its legs in place. As the dragon began to struggle to move I was finally able to hop onto its back. I inch forward, struggling to get my
sword in my hand and stay on. Time seemed to slow down as vines wrapped further around the dragon. More spells hit the dragon, and the force of it almost knocked me off. As I reached the dragon’s neck I finally got my sword in my hand. I reached up and plunged it into the dragon’s neck. A loud roar echoed and when the dragon reared up, holding onto my sword wasn’t good enough. I felt myself flying, my fall dulled only a little by the nearby bushes. “Violet!” Lola screamed, but I felt ready to pass out. Wingbeats could be heard and a strong wind blew my clothes around.

Eventually, everything settled and Lola rushed to my side. “It ran away! We did it!” she exclaimed, shaking me. I sat up, a little dizzy. “My magic really slowed it down and scared it.”

“And now we can go into the tower and rescue Dad!” My dizziness disappeared as the realization set in. We walked slowly to the front of the large stone tower. It was taller than we could see, especially with the trees in the way. Big, rotting wooden doors with circular metal handles stood in front of us.

“Let’s do it together,” I offered, and Lola nodded enthusiastically. We both grabbed one of the metal handles and prepared to open the door. “One... two... thre-”

“Girls! Dinner!” Mom yelled. “Where did you two run off to?” Her voice sounded a bit distant and made me realize how far into the woods we had gone.

Our eyes met and we bolted towards the house. We were hardly allowed into the woods, much less this deep. We made it a decent amount of the way back by the time Mom met us. “And when are you two allowed in the woods?” she asked angrily, staring at me. I couldn’t meet her green eyes and lowered my gaze. The blame would be put onto me.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, and Lola echoed me.

“When I set rules, I expect them to be followed. If this happens again there will be consequences,” she replied. “Why did you two go into the woods anyway?” Mom began walking towards the house, and I watched as her brown, rusty-tinted hair swished around her face as she looked at us for an answer.

“We were on a journey into the Dark Forest to save Dad!” Lola replied cheerfully. I watched as her happy expression turned into a frown. “Can we go see him, please?”
“I want to see Dad too,” I said a bit quietly. I was afraid it’d make her mad. Sometimes mentioning Dad made her that way.

Mom sighed, a noise I’d begun to hear from her more and more often. No anger was heard in her voice when she said, “Girls, you know that you see him on weekends. I know it’s a change, but all of us need to get used to it.”

Lola must’ve had nothing to say to that because silence fell upon us as we walked back to the house, not even birds daring to break the silence.
Sunny day

Larissa Lopez
The day the dentist told me I had to have my tooth pulled, I was expecting it. I had been in so much pain that I knew it had to be bad. Still, it was shocking to have him suggest I get it pulled that day. I’m not a stranger to pain, but something about this terrified me, and I couldn’t pinpoint what. It wasn’t like I hadn’t had teeth pulled before.

It was a rainy day when I was nine. I had discovered I had a second tooth coming in behind my baby tooth and of course went straight to my mom. She inspected my mouth with care and hummed when she saw it. She told me we would probably have to go see the dentist and that she would make the appointment.

I hate making appointments. Something about the phone calls and feeling like I have no clue what I’m doing gets to me. Still, I was in too much pain to put it off any longer and finally I called my insurance company to set me up with someone that took my insurance. The trouble was the closest dentist that could fit me in was a hour drive away. I begrudgingly agreed because I seemed to be out of options and that was that.

The dentist my mom brought us to was about 40 minutes away from home, which was upsetting to me. I hated long car rides and this one in particular bugged me because it just drug out the terrible anticipation of seeing the dentist. My mom drove the big van at a steady speed with her eyes on the road. I always felt safe when she drove.

I felt shaky behind the wheel. My truck made loud rumbling noises as I sped up to the interstate’s speed limit. I was driving to Rochester, a town much bigger than I was comfortable driving in. As I got closer, the pit in my stomach sunk deeper. I took the exit off the highway and turned down my music to listen intently to the directions given by my maps app. I took even breaths and focused on the road ahead of me just like my therapist told me. A few turns later I was presented with a grey building and a relatively empty parking lot. I released the breath I had been holding and checked the time. I was twenty minutes early but I brought a book to read in the lobby, so I didn’t mind. As I entered the lobby, I noticed all the tooth themed decor scattered around the room and smiled a bit.

The tooth chair was the coolest thing nine-year-old me had ever seen. It was in the corner next to all the coloring supplies, and I claimed it the minute I saw it. It was
bumpy and uncomfortable but that didn’t matter in the slightest to me. My mom went to the counter to talk to the receptionist who handed her a bunch of papers. I picked out a Dora the Explorer coloring book and got to work coloring Backpack purple.

The receptionist asked me for my ID and insurance card without looking up from her computer. I scrambled to get them for her, slightly panicking that maybe I lost them even though I checked twice that I had them before I left. As soon she took them she gave me a clipboard and told me to have a seat and fill out the forms. I sat down and started to go over them. Things like these always slightly overwhelm me, usually the questions are easy enough to answer but sometimes I get caught up over technicalities like if it had been ten or eleven years since I had been to the dentist.

Nine-year-old me didn’t like people touching my mouth. I was afraid they were going to do something that would hurt but they reassured me they would warn me if it would hurt. They decided to take x-rays and I honestly thought that was a little cool, so I decided to be a little nicer to the lady helping the dentist. They brought my mom in and started to explain what they wanted to do and I didn’t really listen, too distracted by the idea that the black and white picture was supposed to be my teeth. I suddenly paid attention when they mentioned pulling out two baby teeth.

Being in the chair with a random person’s fingers in my mouth wasn’t exactly comfortable but at least the dental assistant was nice about it. She looked at my cavity and said it was time to take an x-ray. I let her put the bit of plastic in my mouth and bit down like she asked. She took it out and said she would be right back. I pondered what they were going to say about the massive cavity I had. I was prepared to have it pulled considering how much of the tooth had broken off. I hoped they would be nice about scheduling a time to pull it.

I started bawling right then and there. My mom instantly was at my side trying to calm me down but I was not having it. They wanted to take my teeth out! It was going to hurt! She told me it would be fine because they have medicine so it won’t hurt and that since they were pulling two at once the tooth fairly would pay double. This interested little me who was saving for a new DS game at the time. My mom saw me calming down and then said she would be with me the whole time.
As the dentist pointed out the dark area of the tooth saying that was the dead part, I nodded my head to show I was listening. He started to explain that it was a very large cavity and that it would be best to pull it. I nodded my head again, and just as I was about to ask about how long out that would be he said that today would probably be best. I took a deep breath. I nodded my head and told him that was fine while internally my mind was whirring. Is this going to hurt? Will they put me under? Will I be able to drive home? What about work tomorrow? The dentist smiles and says he’ll go get the stuff ready.

I was on the chair gripping my mom’s hand for dear life while the dentist held the needle with the Novocain in it. I don’t like needles now and I didn’t like needles then. I braced myself for the pain and started to tear up the minute I felt it. The dentist told me good job and said just one more. One more? What did they expect from me? I started to get nervous, but my mom squeezed my hand and the dentist quickly gave me the next shot.

The dentist came back in and said let’s do this, and asked if I was nervous. Before I could even answer he said you don’t strike me as a nervous person. I was taken aback considering my anxiety had been one of my defining traits for the last couple years of my life, but I didn’t say anything. I sat back and watched him get the Novocain ready preparing for the shot. I don’t like shots but I didn’t want to seem like a child so put on a brave face and opened my mouth. The first shot hurt, but the second shot was worse. I felt tears coming to my eyes and blinked them away, it wouldn’t look good to cry right now.

The tears were here, and I was so upset. My mom tried calming me down but I wasn’t having it. The doctor tells us we need to wait for the Novocain to start working and makes a quick exit. My mom told me about how my grandma was making soup for us that night and how she would get me lots of soft foods to eat for the next day. She talked of sweets like pudding and ice cream. She told me how proud she was of me. She brought up how maybe if I was good she would even get me a stuffed animal. The tears slowed and I calmed down taking comfort in the good things that were coming once we were done with this whole tooth fiasco.

I walked around the store with a wad of cotton stuffed in my mouth. The Novocain was starting to wear off after the long drive home. I needed to get my shit and get out, but the pharmacy told me there was going to be a wait for the pain meds the dentist prescribed. I decided to get my shopping done while I was waiting. First, I went to grab
some pudding from the bakery cooler and then to get some canned soup. I walked through the aisles feeling the throb in my cheek slowly get worse. The doctor had to push the tooth lose and it took a lot of pushing, it made sense that I was sore, but it still angered me. I thought of the horrible cracks I heard while he was pushing. It still makes me shudder. I went back to the pharmacy hoping my meds would be ready, but I was told to wait at least fifteen more minutes. I tried not to react angrily, knowing that it wasn’t their fault, but god did I want to get out of there so I could just lay in bed. I went to the back of the story to look at the books while I waited, thinking that I’d reward my perilous journey with a book. As I walked in that direction a display of Squishmellows in a large bin caught my eye. Part of me wanted to look at them, but another part of me told me I’m too old for them. I gave in to the kid in me and looked at all the assorted designs. I found one that was especially cute because it looked a little like a frog. The tag told me that its name was Dear. I don’t know why but something inside me told me that I needed this stuff animal and I decided to buy it as my reward instead.
People don’t belong to us,  
people aren’t possessions.  
We mustn’t hold on  
too tight to a gift  
given by God.  
We may crush it, suffocate it,  
ruin it. When we feel  
a relationship ending,  
our instinct is to fight  
harder, make them love  
us again, make it taste the same.

This is wrong.  
Let them go,  
take a step back.  
Lovingly release them.  
Give them to their creator,  
pray for them.  
Love must change!  
Love changes all  
the time. Through hills and valleys,  
hearts must winter and fall.  
Nothing tastes the same after a year or ten.  
Preserve the vivid image of your love at its best...  
your gift, from the creator.

We often fight to be loved,  
forever affirming that
we are hard to love.
To fear a breakup, an argument.
To fear losing someone, some job.
This fear of abandonment,
our “only” shot at love...

They are not the only person destined to love you in this life.
Final Farewell

Rachel Marzahn
Leaving

Jed Nelson

At least she was kind enough to leave a note, Parker thought. Parker clutched the note in his hand as he lay on the couch and studied the shape of the yellowed water stains on the ceiling. He felt dirty. Now more than ever. His sticky, perspired skin stuck to the couch as a slight summer breeze wafted in from the window, this was the same window his mom’s strung out boyfriend broke in the early spring of Parker’s senior year; it was covered with a taped up garbage bag for the longest time.

The breeze. The rough, crumpled good-bye note in his hand. The broken window and that strung out asshole. He can keep her, he thought. He can keep her.

The front door swung open. Jay–Parker’s ride or die best friend–entered.

“She just up and left, huh?” Jay said. He stomped about the entryway shaking his head in disgust. “I always hated that guy, you know. He slithered his way into your mom’s brain and burrowed deep.” Jay walked across the creaky wood floors into the kitchen and started pulling open drawers, cupboards.

“How do you know she left?” Parker called. “I haven’t talked to you all day.”

“Mr. Willard tracked you down this morning, right? You were at the court with the guys. I just ran into them and they told me.”

That was right. Mr. Willard saw it all go down from his porch. Parker’s mom and her boyfriend loaded up the car with suitcases and garbage bags. Once they had the car stuffed to the gills they peeled out of the driveway, not looking back. They did not even bother to close the front door. Willard must have noticed, and entered the house to find the note waiting for Parker. He went out to find the boy. He gave Parker a ride home after telling him what had happened. It was a quiet ride home. It was quiet all day, really.

Parker got up from the couch and made his way to the kitchen. Jay continued rummaging through every drawer and cupboard.

“Can I help you with something?” Parker said.

Jay whipped his freshly shaven head around and glared at Parker, “I’m looking for those cigarettes Deputy Dipshit stole from me last week.” He opened and slammed the last drawer when he saw no sign of the cigarettes. “You know, that’s another reason that guy sucked. He started policing us. He should have been the one in jail, fuckin’ junkie.”

Jay brushed past Parker and ripped open the refrigerator and said, “I’m sorry
about your mom, by the way. He turned her into what she became. Don’t for one second think it’s your fault that she wiggled out.”

Parker hopped up onto the kitchen counter still grasping the wadded up note.

“Man, I don’t know what to think right now.”

Jay closed the refrigerator softly and leaned against the cool, white plastic doors.

“Damn. I’m not sure what to say. Maybe it’s good they’re gone; let them rot. My guess is they’ll go broke and be back here before you know it.”

Parker sat expressionless, squeezing the paper in his fist.

The summer day buzzed on as the boys sat in silence.

“Hey! They didn’t take Moose, did they?” Jay asked.

If there was one thing that made this day better it was the fact they left Moose. And, for the first time all day, Parker smiled.

“Yeah, he’s running around out back.”

“Well, let’s go see what that ol’ boy is up to, shall we?” Jay said with a smile.

Jay raced through the house and burst through the back screen door. Parker matched Jay’s energy and swung the door open. He was immediately hit with a wave of that hot, sticky, Iowa summer heat. The breeze felt earlier seemed to have dwindled away.

Moose—the only good thing the boyfriend brought into their lives—rolled around the dry, golden grass, shaking the life out of his stuffed monkey chew toy.

From the top step, Parker watched as Jay ran to Moose and started their usual game of tug of war. Moose growled as Jay pulled on the other end of the taut monkey. The two have always been surprised at how long that monkey has stayed intact.

After several minutes of wearing out Moose, Jay managed to wrestle the toy away. The gray whiskered black lab bounced up and down, giddy with excitement.

“Sit!” Jay commanded.

Moose, like a statue, sat completely still waiting on Jay’s next move. In one swift motion, Jay reared back and hurled the monkey to the back corner of the yard’s chain link fence. As Moose took off, so did Jay.

He bolted for the house, the back steps. He waved his arm signaling for Parker to move out of his way. Once Jay was the proper distance away, he leapt from the base of the
stairs clearing the five steps. Like the athlete he is, he landed in a low squat position, his feet stuck strongly beneath him. He then raced into the house and called out for Parker to follow him.

Parker followed the sound of Jay’s bounding feet as he climbed the stairs. His mom was not a fan of Jay’s loose cannon behavior. Whether it was running through the halls, sprinting up the stairs, or slamming drawers; his mom would shout out that the house was about to cave in. Jay never stopped doing these things because he enjoyed getting her riled up; and more often than not Parker would join in.

This was before the drugs. See, when she raised her voice it never seemed like she meant it. She liked having Jay come over and play even if it sounded like the two were about to fall through the ceiling.

But then she did not care. Half the time she was passed out on the couch not knowing when the boys came and went. Her behavior—along with her dealer boyfriend—sucked the fun out of the house.

During Parker’s senior year of basketball, his hard-ass coach said something that put his situation into perspective: “If I’ve stopped yelling at you, then I’ve stopped caring about you.” A sad realization that the two did not want to accept. But it rang true.

Upstairs, Jay entered Parker’s bedroom and went right for the window. He unlatched it and crawled through. He stood on the roof looking out at the power lines and trees that lined the street below.

Parker followed suit and joined Jay. The two sat on the rough, deteriorated shingles.

“What a day,” Jay chuckled.

Parker sat and watched as a few cars rolled by slowly. “How long will it be until we’re the talk of the town?”

“Man, wait till the tabloids get a hold of this,” Jay said. He put on a serious face, deepened his voice, and mocked the headline, “LOCAL BOY LEFT FOR DEAD!”

The two shared a laugh. Once it subsided, Jay said, “Is it cool if I tell you something? I’ve been putting it off. You may think it’s bad timing, but it might be smart now.”
“Yeah, go for it.”
“Okay, I found a way where we could make some extra cash. You said you were looking for a job, right?”
“Yeah, I’ve been looking around.”
A smirk slowly formed on Jay’s face. “Perfect. And seeing as you have little cash, no mom, and a house to look after, I can expect you to say yes to what I’m going to say.” Annoyed, “I guess,” Parker said.
“I’ve been talking to Miles Waters recently.” Miles Waters was a classmate of theirs. He moved to town during freshman year of high school. He was not one of their friends, really.
“What’s up with him?”
“Nothing much. I ran into him a couple weeks ago. He told me he’s looking for a few extra guys to help him with a project.”
Parker showed a contemplative look. “If he’ll actually pay us then sure. What’s the project?”
“He wants to meet with you first before you commit to helping. He did the same thing to me so don’t worry. He just wants to talk.”
Parker felt the roughness of the shingles beneath him as he thought of what to say next. He watched as two squirrels chased each other on the powerlines. He wiped his stringy blonde hair out of his eyes and nodded to Jay.
“Alright.”

The next day, Miles picked them up in his red 1996 Honda Civic. Neither Parker nor Jay interacted with him much in high school; which was surprising as their graduating class was only 26 people. Parker never imagined he would be in the back of Miles’s car blaring Bad Religion and Dag Nasty songs. Yet here he was flying down the gravel roads outside of town; full, tall fields of corn passed by at lightning speed.
“I’m taking us out to that abandoned pig farm off of County 6,” Miles said. “I got a couple buddies there waiting for us.”
They got off the main road and started down the abandoned farm’s driveway. It
was long and led right up to a tall, faded white, dilapidated house. Every window was
busted, and the front porch steps were completely destroyed. A few marks of graffiti could
be seen on its outside, but most of it was covered now by the tall, unkempt grass that grew
around the base of the once inhabited home.

Miles parked the car underneath a large oak tree. Smart move as the cool summer
morning quickly turned into a scorching afternoon.

The three got out of the car and followed Miles towards the back of the property
where the large pig barn stood. They swatted away the tall, dry grass around them in an
attempt to walk comfortably. Birds flew and dove overhead; nameless bugs swarmed the
boys as they trekked.

Behind the barn there were two other guys Parker had never seen before. They
appeared to be older, maybe in their mid twenties. They both were husky guys with
scraggly beards and shaved heads. They sat in old plastic chairs in a cleared out area and
watched the boys approach. A torn open box of Coors Light sat in between them.

Miles waved to the two men from a distance.
Parker turned around to Jay and gave him a look.
“It’s cool. They’re cool,” Jay said.
Miles reached out to the men and slapped hands with each of them; Jay did the
same.

“Parker, this is Dean and Lewis. Boys, Parker’s interested in helping us out.”
The two burly men each reached out a hand for Parker to shake. They did not say a
word.

“Perfect. Now that we got that out of the way, let’s get down to business. Parker, follow me,” Miles said.
The two abandoned the group and walked further beyond the barn. They were
quickly swallowed by an abundance of deep, tall oak trees. For a second, Parker was
reminded of childhood; exploring, adventuring with Jay. But he was with Miles Waters. He
did not know what to expect.

Miles led them to a circular, cleared out spot. In the center, surrounded by
multiple folding chairs, was a fire pit. Large rocks of varying colors contained blackened,
charred firewood. To the right side of the clearing there was a neon green hammock,
hanging lazily. Miles approached the fire pit and sat down. He patted the chair next to him
and Parker joined him.
“I want to thank you for coming today. I heard about your mom. Sorry.”
“It is what it is. She’ll come back...hopefully.”
“Yeah but until then you’re on your own. That means you need some money in your pocket.”
“That is true.”
Miles adjusted in his chair, “I want to help you out. Say, do you know anything about my uncle?”
Parker shot Miles a confused look. “No. Should I know something about your uncle?”
“I guess not. Do you remember when those houses in Hampton got robbed?”
“I remember.”
Miles slapped Parker on the leg and gave him a wide eyed look. “That was him. He orchestrated the whole thing; planned it out perfectly, and BOOM! Pulled it off. He never got caught either. Of course he had to leave town for a few months, but still. He pulled it off.”
“What are you trying to say?” Parker asked.
Miles leaned forward in his chair. “I’m saying we can pull it off too. Pull off something bigger than just houses.”
Parker rose from his chair and called bullshit.
“Wait! Wait! Wait! Hear me out. He gave me some good information, man.”
His mom. The house. Money. Parker stopped in his tracks.
“I’m listening.”

It was going down two nights from now.
Parker thought back on the plan Miles gave him in the woods as he walked home underneath the summer night sky. He had a paper bag of groceries stuffed under his left arm. He enjoyed grocery shopping at night; it was always quiet.

He passed by all the dull houses that lined his block and peered in from afar at what his neighbors were watching on TV. He always judged them based on that.

“Hampton is a lot larger than us; no one will expect it. Officer Ron won’t be patrolling near the gas station; he’ll be out on the gravel roads. Everyone in town will be
asleep. We can’t do the bar because Schmitt stays late and keeps a shotgun behind the bar; my uncle told me that. We’ll enter the gas station from the high window in the bathroom; it won’t set off any alarms. It’s foolproof. My uncle told me that.”

Parker unlocked the front door and gave it a forceful shoulder open. The door holds a winning record over the two runaway junkies. On nights where the door stuck particularly good, the two would give up and sleep on the porch. They were so out of it.

Parker sat the paper bag on the kitchen counter and began putting away boxes of pasta and rice. When he pulled out the carton of eggs and reached for the refrigerator door, he noticed a note stuck to it. He flipped on the kitchen light to get a better look.

*Come to the courts. It’s going down tonight -Jay*

Parker’s stomach tightened and his face got hot.

Before he left, he placed the eggs in the fridge and made sure he had the black ski mask Miles gave him.

On the walk over to the courts, Parker wondered why they were not sticking to their set plan. Thoughts and anxieties swirled through his head, almost making him stop and throw up. The lump in his throat was one he could not stomach.

Parker crossed the empty street and made his way to the group. Underneath the dimly lit lights, Jay laid on the seat of a picnic table; Dean and Lewis sat opposite Jay, while Miles was up pacing and hopping about. There was an open bottle of Jack Daniel’s sitting on the picnic table; Parker’s stomach felt even hotter now. He knew what substances could do, so he steered clear of them, as did Jay. Jay liked having a cigarette here and there. But tonight he chose something different.

“I told you to wear black,” Miles spat.

Parker looked down at his plain white t-shirt and blue basketball shorts.

“What happened to sticking to the plan? Two nights from now, remember?”

“We’re doing it tonight. My uncle’s two counties south of here and swore he saw Officer Ron at the same bar he’s at,” Miles said.

“You trust him on that?” Parker asked.

“Hell yeah I trust him! And even if he’s mistaken we’re not scared of Officer Ron,” Miles held up his ski mask, “We got these, and he’s not fast enough to catch us on foot.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little early? We’ll be seen.”
“Parker! Enough of the questions. Think! We’re climbing through from the back. Through the bathroom window,” Miles said.

He walked over to Parker and placed a hand on his shoulder. The whiskey was heavy on his breath.

“It’s all under control. And if it’s not,” he lifted his shirt and revealed the handle of a Colt 45 Magnum, “I’ll take care of it.”

Jay suddenly sat up, and in a drunken, slurred state said, “I think he’s just scared. I-I think we got ourselves a big pussy!”

Jay rose from his seat and began to stagger toward Parker.

“Christ, he’s hammered. How do you expect to pull this off when you’re all drunk?” Parker asked.

“A little liquid courage is alright,” Miles said.

Jay got his legs under him and stood right in Parker’s face. “You scared?”

“No,” Parker said

“You scared?”

“No.”

“You are scared,” Jay slurred, and gave Parker a two-handed shove to the chest.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Why?” Jay delivered another shove.

“Jay…”

“What? What the hell you gonna do?”

Jay threw a swift, thunderous slap that connected on the left side of Parker’s face. The silence was so loud. The left side of Parker’s face felt like stinging static. His left eye filled with tears. Then the adrenaline hit.

Parker tackled Jay to the ground, never minding the scrapes that would be left from the cement basketball court. The two wrestled for position; Parker won that battle and straddled Jay. He looked down on his friend; grabbed hold of his shirt collar and delivered a punch to the corner of Jay’s mouth.

Parker let go of Jay’s collar and let him rest on the cracked, black cement. He laid there grimacing in pain; blood showed and smeared on his white teeth.

Parker fixed his gaze on Dean and Lewis who still occupied their seats at the
picnic table. They looked back at him with stone faces and drunken, angry eyes. He felt the Magnum’s muzzle press into his skull, behind his right ear. The gun’s hammer clicked into place.

“Get the fuck off of him or I’ll blow you away.”

Miles grabbed hold of Parker’s shirt collar and yanked him to his feet. He pushed Parker aside, gun fixed on him.

“You’re trying to screw us, man.” Miles’s voice was low and calm. “We got a job to do, and you’re out here screwin’ us.”

Jay managed to pull himself up to his knees. He rubbed his face, spat blood.

“Get outta here. We don’t need you,” Miles said. “Go on home to mommy.”

Dean and Lewis laughed. That was the first and last expression Parker heard the two make.

Parker started to walk away before he saw Jay gather himself and stand. He did not want to look back and see the mess he left him in; the blood smeared mouth and chin; his drunk eyes. He did not want to turn and see that gun still pointed at him. He thought if he turned then, and caught a glimpse of Jay, he might actually feel bad for him.

“Hey...”

Parker kept walking.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Jay said.

Parker kept walking. Because if he looked back they would have seen his tears.

–

Kathy Peterman from next door was watching the Game Show Network. She always kept her windows open; Parker had a clear view of her living room whenever he walked up the sidewalk to his front door.

His face was sore. His elbows were bloodied from the cement.

He stopped for a second and took in Ms. Peterman’s television.

“What were you up to tonight, son?”

The voice pulled Parker’s attention from the TV. It was Mr. Willard. He wore a beat up flannel that was rolled up to his elbows. His long, full goatee was completely white. He looked down at Parker from his porch with a beer in hand.

“Nothing,” Parker replied.
Mr. Willard tipped his beer to Parker. “Same here.”

Parker started for the door.

“Did I see you carry in groceries tonight?” Mr. Willard asked.

“Yeah.”

Mr. Willard’s hand went to his chin and stroked his goatee. “Mm. I usually get my groceries early in the morning. Guess I’m more of a morning person. I’ll bet it’s nice and quiet in the store at night, though.”

The house key in Parker’s hand met the lock. “Yeah, It is quiet.”

“You doing okay, son?”

Parker’s back was turned to Willard, his shoulder in place to give the door a good push. He did not want to turn to him. The tears were forming in his eyes again.

“I’ll tell you what, why don’t you come on over here and I’ll fix something up for you to eat. My treat!”

Parker blinked the tears away. With hands in pockets, he started for Willard’s. He stopped where he could see Ms. Peterman’s television. She was watching an old episode of Cops now.

Parker turned, expecting to see Willard on his front porch. He was not there. His beer sat on the ledge, it took the spot where he stood. His house seemed quiet at night. The dim, orange porch light looked inviting; it looked warm. The front door was open; open as if the house itself offered Parker a hand.
Unknown

Samantha Bird
Cold Hands

Jaydon Wilson

My hands are so cold
I hold them to my chest,
And the chill is shocking
Why are they freezing?
I don’t even smoke

I know that it’s not just me
I’ve been told my hands are cold,
And even when they don’t say anything,
I know it’s what they’re thinking

I’ve often thought that someone warm
Could thaw me with her body,
A nice heat to melt the ice,
But then I think twice

What gives me the right
To drain her of her warmth?
To pain her with my cold?
To make her endure
My unpleasant presence?
Cold as stone, cold as death,
My bone-chilling, breathtaking grasp
Can only hurt the ones I want to hold

I walk up to the mirror
I look at my face, then my hands
I touch them to my chest again
Doing my best to warm them,
But my best isn’t good enough
I examine their every detail,
And I see a small scar
I had failed to see before
Then a thought occurs to me,
And I look to my face again
I examine its every detail,
And I see a second scar
I had failed to see before,
And it’s all a bit clearer
I can no longer ignore
That I have the hands I deserve,
And I’d do the world some good
Keeping them to myself
Winter flowers

Larissa Lopez
A Bee’s Sting

Mal Bowman

My family owned a cabin on Round Lake in McGregor, Minnesota when I was young, up until I was three or four years old. There was more yard than house, which was perfect for a kid my age, complete with a run-down swing set and a long dock leading into the lake. Inside, the cabin was cozy and cramped. The details have escaped me now, but a vivid image of plaid sofas, a bear skin rug, and a taxidermized deer head on a plaque on the wall stays prominent in my mind. Very Hicktown, Minnesota.

I got stung by a bee for the first time at that cabin. I was alone on the swing set, sad that my two cousins hadn’t come that weekend, wishing I had a sibling or anyone else my age to play with. I had been asking my parents for a sister for a long time. A sister sounded fun.

Having gotten tired of the boring, normal way of swinging, I got up and ran to the tandem swing on the end of the swing set, the kind with the footrests on the end so you could stand on them. Just before climbing onto the swing, I felt a tickle on my left ankle and looked down. I was barefoot – there was no reason to wear shoes when you were surrounded by soft grass and smooth sand – and the bee I had accidentally pissed off one way or another took full advantage of that.

I ran back to the cabin in tears, blubbering about how bad the sting hurt and how I didn’t do anything to the bee to my dad, who took the liberty to patch up my sting. My uncle, his oldest brother, helped him find the band aids. My uncle fought in the Vietnam War. At that moment, I was sure this was the worst battle wound he had ever seen. He and my dad took care of me together.

My other uncle wasn’t there that weekend. My three-year-old self didn’t think much of it. Knowing what I know now, I’m sure I was the only one who felt that way.

The next year, our family sold the cabin. It was a collective decision, my dad told me, and it just wasn’t being used enough for us to keep it. That, and it would save us more money. Once again, I didn’t think much of it. It made sense in my mind.

The sister I had always wanted was born a few years after the cabin was sold, and as both her and I grew older, the fact that she never got to experience the family cabin weighed heavier and heavier on my mind. I asked my dad if there was ever a chance of
getting the cabin back. The answer was always no, not that same one, but there was always a chance we would get a new one, just my mom, my dad, my sister, and me.

At this point, I was old enough to know why we would never get the old cabin back. The answer was simple: my other uncle didn’t consider himself part of the family anymore.

Over the years, I collected bits and pieces of the true reason why we sold the family cabin, which equated to Uncle Todd separating himself from the family. To this day, I still don’t know what caused him to step away, or if it was a list of multiple things, or if it simply was the straw that broke the camel’s back. But Uncle Todd had, essentially, renounced the Bowman name.

Compared to my childhood friends, I didn’t have a large extended family, and I always wondered if Todd’s departure was a reason for that. My mom had no siblings, and my grandparents on her side both immigrated from Europe after World War II alone, so my extended family was entirely on my dad’s side. Both of his parents had passed before I was born, but I still had a handful of uncles, aunts, cousins, second cousins, and other distantly related people I could know. Did I know them? Not really.

Every year on Christmas Day, my family would drive up to Hicktown, Duluth to celebrate at my dad’s oldest brother’s house. He was seventeen years older than my dad, which made sense why my sister and I never called him “Uncle Scott” and deemed him “Grandpa Scotty” instead. My cousins, his kids, thought it was the funniest nickname ever. I didn’t know my cousins that well, either; they were all well into their thirties and forties before I was even ten years old. At these Christmas functions, my sister and I always stuck together.

We stuck together not just on Christmas, or during other extended family gatherings, but just about at every moment we could. Abby was five years younger than me, the youngest family member by far and the youngest of all our family friends, and I made sure she never felt excluded. It wasn’t a task my parents assigned to me, or something I felt like I was forced to do, but something that I genuinely enjoyed, because I genuinely enjoyed my sister.

I could barely go a day without talking with Abby, hearing about the newest stuffed animal she wanted, or playing a game with her, watching as she tried to add up all the quarters she had in *The Allowance Game*. Even still, as I’m twenty-one and she’s
sixteen, I’ll go crazy if I don’t text her every day. I often daydream with her about getting an apartment together when she finishes with college, or buying a cabin together years down the road, somewhere both our families can find peace in, something to keep us together. She entertains me the best she can. Right now, her biggest worry is remembering which notes to play during marching band practice. She hasn’t quite started thinking of the future, and she never experienced Todd removing himself from the family.

It started to bother me more and more as I grew older. My dad hadn’t talked to his brother in more than five years. Didn’t he miss him? Didn’t he wonder what Todd was doing? Didn’t he want to give him a call, buy him a beer, and catch up about the lost years?

It wasn’t that simple; I know that now. But it was simple to me then. I couldn’t stomach the idea of leaving Abby for more than a day. Todd should’ve felt the same way about my dad.

Before Abby was born, I noticed a scar on my dad’s head while playing t-ball in the backyard. He bent down to pick up the flimsy, plastic ball we used, and I noticed a small white line on the edge of his hairline. I reached up and traced my finger over the scar.

“What happened?”

“That?” My dad felt the scar as well, as if he had forgotten it was even there. “Your uncle hit me with a baseball bat.”

I was stunned. “Grandpa Scotty?” Grandpa Scotty looked mean, sure, but this was the same man who dressed head-to-toe in the Grinch gear for Christmas, including Grinch underwear over his Grinch pajama pants. He would never hit someone with a baseball bat.

“No,” my dad clarified, “Uncle Todd.”

It was an accident, my dad assured me, but the confession still resonated with me. Accident or not, it felt strange now that Todd was... well, being Todd.

I have a scar, too. Two small ones, actually: one underneath my left eye and another in the outside corner of the same eye. They’re a result from the same accident. Abby and I shared a room for the first eight or so years of her life, and during the first year of our new living arrangement, I was trying to make her laugh by spinning around the room and jumping onto my bed, which was in the opposite corner of her crib. The dizziness caught up to me eventually, and instead of jumping onto my bed, I jumped eye-first into the corner of my dresser.

Granted, I’ll never know the context behind Todd hitting my dad in the head with a
baseball bat, but I doubt it was in an attempt to make his younger sibling laugh, as my motivation had been. The more I think about it – the baseball bat, the cabin, the falling out, everything – the more I want to crawl into his mind and make a temporary home for myself in there, just to listen to his thoughts firsthand. What made his love for his family not strong enough that he would give it all up? Is this something that I as the older sibling will feel as well? If not now, then when?

Todd trying to come back into the family was a bold move, especially after ignoring my dad, my cousin, and my aunt’s messages to visit Grandpa Scotty before his cancer killed him. Todd didn’t listen. I think he regrets it.

In between Scott’s death and his funeral, word got around that Todd was going to attend. To say there were mixed emotions around the rest of our family was an understatement. As I’m older, I can understand why people were unhappy with that decision, but as a ten-year-old, I was excited to see him again. It had been a long, long while, and my memories of him were nearly nonexistent.

“When I see Uncle Todd,” I remember telling my dad, “I’m going to give him a hug.”

My dad’s reaction is as clear as ever in my brain: “We’ll see if that actually happens.”

When I saw Todd at the funeral, I was at Dad’s side. He looked just as I remembered, and it made my breath catch in my throat. I wanted to hug him. He was my uncle, after all. I wanted to prove to my dad that I appreciated his coming back.

But I didn’t. I stayed by my dad’s side and watched the two of them look at each other for the first time in years.

They didn’t hug. They didn’t shake hands. In fact, I doubt my dad even looked him in the eye. I can’t imagine all the emotions he must have felt then – in a sense, Scott was the second brother he lost. Todd was the first. But Scott wasn’t coming back, and Todd, for some reason... did.

Both of them had lost a brother. Both of them could now gain a brother. I wondered if they would take up that challenge.

I slipped my hand into Abby’s. “C’mon,” I muttered to her. “Let’s look at some more pictures.”
Todd’s fourth wife (“Fourth that we know of,” my dad would always say – there’s a joke in there somewhere) has cancer now. I wonder if he thinks of Scott when he looks at her. I wonder how much he thinks about missing his last chance to talk to his brother. Most of all, I wonder how long he thought about returning to the family, and how much he debated it while Scott was dying in a hospice bed, too much of a coward to face his family during a moment like that.

After another good five years, plenty of awkward phone calls, and more periods of not speaking to each other, my dad and Todd patched things up for the most part. Abby actually knows who he is and what he looks like now, which is what I wished for when we were younger. My dad will still be surprised when Todd texts him, though – maybe twice or three times a year – and whenever that happens, whenever I see him stare at his phone like he’s just now remembering that Todd is back in his life, I’m hit with the stark realization that their relationship will never be like what it once was.

Hell, maybe it was never that way. Maybe Abby and I are the oddities of the Bowman family. If we’re the oddities, I pity the rest of them.

The summer in between my sophomore and junior year of college, we received an invitation to my cousin David’s wedding, Todd’s oldest kid. I had seen Todd and his fourth wife Pam a few times in between his controversial return, but I hadn’t seen David or my other cousin, Amy, since we were kids, playing at the cabin together. I had no idea what he even looked like. In my head, all I could picture was a kid with a toothy grin and those circular glasses that every kid in the early 2000s owned. Now he was getting married. I just hoped he had moved past those glasses.

At the end of July, we packed up our things and drove up to the middle of nowhere, Hicktown, Duluth, dangerously close to where we would go for Christmas celebrations at Grandpa Scotty’s house. It had been quite a few years since I had seen Todd last, but I still had a distinct image of him in my head. Dark hair and dark facial hair, and those sharp Bowman eyes that everyone seemed to have, save for my dad. Yeah, seeing Todd again might be awkward, but I would at least be able to spot him in the crowd.

The first thing we saw when we walked into the wedding venue was a group of guys in white button ups, bow ties, suspenders, and blue jeans. I almost snorted. Maybe it
was the inner city girl in me, but I had never seen a person wear jeans to a wedding, let alone a group of people, no doubt the groomsmen.

One of them started walking toward us, and with a jolt that felt similar to a punch in the gut, I realized that it was Todd.

He looked absolutely nothing like I had pictured. His hair was long and pulled back in a low ponytail, grays streaking through the strands. His beard was equally gray and looked more like a goatee. He, too, was wearing blue jeans. When he reached us, he stopped next to my dad and nodded in greeting. They exchanged a few words, but that was it – no handshake, no hug, no anything.

“I didn’t even recognize him,” I muttered to my dad as we went to find our seats for the ceremony.

“I didn’t, either,” my dad said back.

Abby sat on one side of me, and I found myself studying her as we waited for the ceremony to begin. Would I, too, not be able to recognize her one day? Would we get so sucked into our lives as adults and become too busy for each other, or let petty arguments split us apart for years on end? I didn’t think we had that kind of relationship. Then again, I doubted my dad suspected that he and Todd would have a falling out when he was my age.

The ceremony went on, and I saw my cousin David for the first time in ten or so years – wearing jeans as well, because of course he was – as well as my cousin Amy, who was a bridesmaid. I spoke to Amy a handful of times that night. She just finished her senior year at college and was now looking into pharmaceutical school, and we bonded over talk of grad school in both of our futures. She pulled me to dance with her as well. It felt nice to have her, even only for those few short moments. I hoped my dad was feeling the same about Todd.

I looked around the venue to find him – he wasn’t at the open bar, nor was he at the table with my mom and Abby, so I went over there instead, plopping down next to Abby. “Do you know where Dad is?”

Abby just shrugged. She wasn’t having the best night – the curse of being the youngest struck again, and she had never been interested in dancing. Not knowing any extended family was a big factor in her mood as well, I assumed.

“He’s talking with Todd,” my mom answered from across the table.
“Where?”

“They’re in the hall.” There was a look on my mom’s face that told me she knew exactly where their conversation would go: south. She had most likely seen it before. She was there when Todd left.

Nearly twenty minutes later, I spotted my dad and Todd walk back into the room. Todd was stumbling slightly. My dad had been drinking as well, I had seen him, but he knew how to handle his alcohol, and his spine was as straight at the flagpole at our family cabin. Todd walked back to the open bar and my dad headed back to our table, sitting next to me.

“Are you good?” I asked.

My dad chuckled, a small smile present on his face. I knew that smile. It was the same smile he wore when I did something bad as a kid and he lectured me. It was the same smile he wore while teaching and expressing disappointment when his students didn’t turn in their homework. He reached for a glass of water sitting on the table.

“Bullshit,” was all he said.

My dad rarely swore in front of me. When he did, I knew it was because he genuinely could not find a better word to describe the situation. This was also one of the few moments where my mom didn’t chastise him for cursing.

I looked at Abby, who was already looking at me. I knew we were both thinking the same thing: Yikes.

Abby turned away, but I kept looking at her. A sudden wave of emotion crashed down on me; the primal need to protect, to shield her away from this pathetic excuse of brotherhood. I wanted to take her to that cabin we had daydreamed about and shut her in, trap her and keep her there where she would never have to witness a brother walking away from a brother, a sibling walking away from a sibling. I wanted it to be just her and me, playing bocce ball in the long grass and jumping off the dock into the lake, everything I got to witness at the family cabin, everything she never got to witness because of Todd’s stupidity.

Our family cabin was my safe haven as a kid, where my only concerns were when I could get back in the lake and if I could watch *SpongeBob Squarepants* after dinner. The worst thing to ever happen to me at that cabin was that bee sting. Maybe my dad felt the
same way. Maybe Todd’s leaving was his own personal bee sting. Perhaps it evolved, with Todd coming to Scott’s funeral akin to a hornet’s bite, then this constant back-and-forth they went through nothing less than a wasp’s attack.

We may not have a cabin, but there definitely are bee stings still out there, waiting for their next victim. I won’t let Abby even get close to them.

“Dance with me,” I told her, getting up from my seat.

“Huh?” Abby glanced at the dance floor, then looked away. “No.”

“Come on. We can see if they take requests.”

That piqued her interest, if only a little bit. “Like ‘Suddenly Seymour’ –”

“No, you nerd, not that.”

She laughed and allowed me to drag her to the dance floor, where Bruno Mars’ “Marry You” was appropriately playing. I completed my older sister duties of spinning her around and singing along loudly, effectively embarrassing her, but she still stayed. That was the difference – she stayed.
Fluttering into the Unknown

Grace Guertin
What happened?

Riker Weiler

This was not how I envisioned us turning out to be,
with days of bad jokes turning into a yelling match when the joke goes too far.
Where nights watching our favorite shows
turned into days with nothing but silenced voices and recorded video,
and there were no longer exchanges of laughter filling the rooms.

I wanted this to change.
Maybe all I wanted was for you to hear my side,
but my feelings were left behind as you sailed onto what you wanted.
What I saw us becoming was not how I envisioned it all,
and my heart could no longer take what was never fixed.

Our fears guided us to have walls built, starting the downfall.
Where we could no longer put aside faults that we thought would pass.
I think we knew it couldn’t last forever,
and nothing can change that we are not what we used to be.
When I was younger, I slept in a giant purple house-shaped bunk bed. It matched my pastel purple walls and my purple pillows. There were handholds and footholds to climb up the end. There was a little window on the front that I could peek out, which was where my parents would stand every night and sing “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” to help me fall asleep. Now, when I say that was when I was younger, I mean that I slept in that bed until I was in middle school. That was the age, largely agreed upon by society, that little girls become big girls and don’t sleep in giant purple house-shaped bunk beds anymore. But I still did.

Every time I visited friends and had sleepovers in their brightly walled rooms with their colorful non-bunked beds I felt a pang of shame, but I never really wanted to get rid of my bed. When I couldn’t sleep at night, I liked to carry all my stuffed animals up into the loft and make my pillows into houses for them. Really quietly I would build worlds for them to escape into and they would take me along with them.

I had roots burrowed into this house. Both the giant purple one and the one that stood on Bataan Street. There was a parking lot across the street where my siblings and my friends and I would all meet up to ride on our scooters. There was a window where I could watch perfectly to see if the bus was on its way to come pick me up in the mornings for school. There was the “Dino” park and the “Fishy” park all within a short family bike ride from our front step.

That was why, when my parents told us that we were moving, I felt as though my world was being uprooted. I was not just losing my house; I was losing my home. I was not just losing the four walls that surrounded me; I was losing the world that I was a part of, the world that I had built. On top of it all I was losing my giant purple house-shaped bunk bed.

Once my parents had sold the bed on craigslist I slept on the floor of my purple room on a plain mattress, no bed frame, no box spring. My parents told me, “It’s too soon before we move to find another bed,” so I slept on the floor and wept myself to sleep.

Shortly after moving into our new house, I struggled to make a home out of Van Buren Street. My parents were excited because one of my friends, Bailey, lived down the
street. But what they failed to recognize was that I was a middle school girl, in the phase of my life where super close childhood friends sometimes fade into people you just know. During this process of becoming people that we just knew, Bailey and I were pushed together out of convenience.

“Bailey will be on the bus. At least there will be a friendly face,” my parents would say to reassure me because even though it was the same school, a new bus is a whole different world.

But Bailey wasn’t on the bus. That first morning, as I stepped on, I searched for familiar faces, or even just friendly ones. Instead, I was only met with the bleary deadened morning eyes of about 40 pre-teens. Sliding into the first available seat, I did not take my eyes off the cushion directly in front of me, never having felt more uprooted in my life. My only savior was that I was the last stop to be picked up in the mornings and the bumpy bus ride was short.

Later that day, getting onto the bus to take me home, I slid into my own window seat. I watched the faces of each and every person who climbed those stairs, waiting and hoping for someone I knew; waiting for someone to sit with. But such a person never came. Bailey never got on. So, I rode the bus home alone, again feeling very out of place, feeling uprooted.

Later that night, on a family walk around the neighborhood we passed Bailey and his family.

Feeling a little awkward still, I asked, “Why weren’t you on the bus?”

He laughed and told me that he and some other friends from the neighborhood walked to school. He offered to show me the route and to walk with me the next morning.

The very next morning we met at what would have been the bus stop and headed out to walk to the school. The air was crisp as we walked through a park, over the bridge above the highway, and past the large library windows. In total, the walk to the school was about 20 minutes long and by the time we got there my cheeks were flushed and my nose was pink.

I felt refreshed. I had explored parts of my new neighborhood that I would have never otherwise seen. The sunrise view from the bridge was one that to this day I have never quite found a formidable match. The morning air had cleared my head and I felt
more awake than I had ever been for the start of my first period math.

That first day was the last time that I ever rode the bus to or from Westwood Middle School. Even when there was a blizzard and we were released before the paths had been plowed, I walked. Even when it was so hot that a bird’s egg literally fried on the bridge, I walked. Even when there was no one to walk with me, I walked. I had found my ritual, I had found my peace, I had replanted my roots.

My room at this new house was not purple. Purple, I had come to realize, was an old version of myself. Now my room was teal and coral. A new and more grown-up palate. I had picked the shades out myself in the store and I loved them. They represented my new life, my new beginnings, even though I was still reluctant to give up what had made me so comfortable.

Once my room was painted and all set up, however, I fell in love. I had curtains instead of a closet door, just like I wanted. I had a trundle bed, perfect for sleepovers, just like I wanted. I had a sliding barn door, just like I wanted. Everything in my room felt more grown up, it felt more like the new me, just like I wanted.

But after about a year and a half when I moved to high school I began to fall out of love with my room. Everyone around me had white walled rooms with plain queen-sized beds. I still had brightly colored walls and a tiny twin sized bed. I felt that same pang of shame that I had felt about my giant purple house-shaped bunk bed, but I chose to ignore it. The colors of my walls did not make me, only I made me.

As I made my way through high school, I stopped having my friends over for sleepovers in my room. But this time it was not because I was hiding my room from the world, it was because I was hiding from the world in my room. Despite the still teal and coral walls I had found solace within them. My room had become my safe place. When I graduated from high school and began taking online college classes I attended each Zoom lecture and took every D2L quiz from my desk in that room. When I was having a good day or a bad day or any sort of day, I could count on my room. Soon my purple room and my giant purple house-shaped bunk bed became a distant memory. I scolded myself for how childish I had been to sleep in that bed for so long and then I promptly put it out of my mind.

I built a home of that room, and I built a home of that house on Van Buren Street, but I very quickly realized, as I thought ahead to my future, that this room was too small
for me. My closet soon could no longer hold all of my clothes. My trundle was removed to make extra storage space. My desk could not hold all of my hopes and plans for the future, and neither could my room.

Transferring to Winona State University meant a return to my purple roots, but it also meant uprooting my life again. I had planted myself in my home and in my new room. Just as I began to feel truly comfortable, I again felt a tearing of my roots. My friends, my family, my neighborhood, and my home were being ripped away.

This time it hurt even worse because I was doing it to myself. I didn’t have my parents to blame for not being able to afford our house; I was the one who was inflicting this upon myself. I was the one that was, hand over fist, uprooting myself yet again.

As I sit in my white walled dorm room, with my plain colored bed, I see my reflection again within the four walls of my room. The posters and maps that I have hung around the space look more like me. The string of lights that give off a warm glow look more like me. The many blankets and pillows strewn over my bed and chair look more like me. I have built myself into a haven for the good days and the bad, both of which there are many.

I see myself, but not the younger versions of myself that I left behind. Not the pastel giant purple house-shaped bunk bed Samantha, nor the teal and coral trundle bed barn door Samantha, but a new one. She is larger now. Her roots have been torn and she has been damaged in transport, but all for her own growth. Because in moving she has found new versions of herself that she would not have been able to before. She has not simply been uprooted; she has been repotted. With new surroundings and new soil, with a new and larger pot she is able to grow and expand. She is able to stretch to new feats and to flower into herself.

I do not believe that she will be able to remain within this pot forever. Even now the town of Winona is beginning to feel enclosed and confining, but I trust that when she needs it most, she will find herself again uprooted, replanted, and continuing to grow.
Her Favorite Place to Play

Samantha Dischinger

The morning was quiet and still. The wind running about the meadow broke the silence and the sun rearing its head cut the dark. Slowly, one by one, the birds began to call out their morning song. The soft breath of the grass exhaled across the field and rushed back in through the leaves of the towering oak tree. The sound of a brook’s babble and hum could be heard somewhere off in the trees nearby. The sky was vast and blue and was a blanket covering the meadow and all of the world that surrounded it. Down the hill and over another lay a small murky pond. The water shown in the fresh morning light and the breath of the grass created small ripples across the surface. The small fish swimming in the water darted around, with nowhere to go but back around again.

Overhead a large crow swooped through the trees of the nearby forest and took a perch on the towering oak tree. The sudden appearance of the crow startled a group of songbirds who took careless flight and fluttered down to the pond. The crow surveyed the scene and let out a loud belting cry. Within seconds two more crows emerged out of the trees of the grove. They perched on the oak and as soon as they saw the reason the first crow had called they also let out piercing cries.

More crows emerged from across the field and out of the trees. They came to perch on the vast expanse of branches or around on the ground. Their cries slashed the chilled morning air and the breathing of the wind seemed to vanish. The cheerful songs of the birds were replaced with the morose song of mourning.

It is not well understood why crows have funerals such as these. It may be to learn of threats or to teach their young what to be wary of. But in this case any passerby could see the remorse and loss on the faces of these birds. While most often these ceremonies are held for fellow birds, this one was for something even more special to the crows.

This wake was for a girl. A human girl.
No more than five, she loved to run through the fields and swing from the branches of the massive oak. She would sing with the birds and swim with the fish. The crows had come to love the girl and they protected her. They swung with her in the branches and flew with her through the grass. They listened as she sang and kept a watchful eye as she swam.

The girl decided that she was going to sleep in the arms of the restful oak under the sky blanketed with stars. A bitter wind sliced through that October night, however, and it proved to be too cold for the frail little child. The chilled breath of death carried the girl away on its wings and into the night, leaving only her body, cold and stiff. Two gentle and caring hands now frozen. Two lips, once so full of life, now blue. And two precious small braids for the crows to discover when the sun arose.
Couple of lovers

Larissa Lopez
Northfield

*Kieran Lombard*

Small town, many bridges
Go on over to the shops.
Little park, oils and vinegars,
Quaint fare and tea.
Brick streets, hiking trails,
Watch the water from the river sail
Along the bend
Into the brain,
Goes the knowledge.
Two colleges,
Both prestigious
Walkable,
Rich houses
Far off in the distance.
River, Parks, Target and Cub
A place that encapsulates the state,
All in one.
The heart is a spider.

Ian McKinzie

The heart is a spider. It weaves its web around, in a corkscrew and clockwise fashion. It starts weaving when you’re young, still inside your mother, placing its very first, tenuous but sturdy bridge between your heart and hers, synchronizing itself, tuning its vibration to her heartbeat, very first sound you hear. Then, when you’re born, it finds someone else, perhaps your father, perhaps an uncle, perhaps someone who doesn’t even exist, someone who doesn’t even know you exist, but it finds them, and, hanging on a new loop, extends down, down, down towards a new connection, and places the link. Others soon arrive, and then your heart really gets going. Teachers, friends, neighbors, pets, enemies, it rattles from person to person, attaching web after web from the small, nigh-invisible spinnerets located on your left and right aortas, clicking its fangs in wondrous attention to detail. Sometimes, it jumps, propelling itself with the hydraulic power of a thousand wishes and dreams, with no regard for structural stability or geometric grace, a single, lone line behind it as it tries to stick the landing. Most often, though, as it gets older, it retraces its own steps, starting from the inside and working out, then following its own trail back, fixing any breaks or tears along the way.

The reason for this is simple; the web breaks. Silk, though stronger than steel, is a thin, wiry substance, and it’s already begun fraying the moment the heart looks away. Move too fast, or don’t tend it enough, and it breaks, waving in the wind, a lone, gossamer wisp of something that could have been. The heart can repair it, especially if there’s another one on the other end of the line, but it takes effort. Break too many, too quickly, and the web collapses, and the heart becomes entrapped, tangled in its own snares, weaving and breaking and spinning and fraying all at once, moving faster and faster as it seeks to regain its home before it all blows away. And after a certain point, hearts stop moving. They freeze, afraid of every jolt and jostle, afraid that another core strand, another important filament, is going to shatter, another connection will break, if they even put a single toe of one of their eight feet on the line. They freeze, the web breaks, and everything stops.
Then, slowly, it reaches out. Touches something new. Maybe it’s something old in a different way. And, slow, cautious, like the nocturnal ambush hunter it is, the lonely heart begins to weave its web.

Again.
A poem about a place where I go to think

*Lucy Severson*

Rivers green, waters glean, branches lean, critters keen, wonders unseen.
Yellow sands drift the lands, and birds land, white clouds band, as minds expand.
Mountains gold, brushes old, streams not cold, trees behold, secrets untold.
Grey winter, stock glimmers, men skinter, beasts slimmer, air is thinner.
Leaves endless, motiveless, motionless, humorless, characterless.
Raccoons sprint, dogs imprint, creatures squint, deer impaint, the sunrise quaint.
Sun creeping, temps leaping, warmth steeping, buds peeping, Spring is peaking.
There’s a path, near a bath, felt boy’s wrath, made a swath, beneath the leaves.
Been walked, and stamped, also tread, trampled, a path battered.
A pool shines, while leaves brine, sun inclines, branches twine, visions align.
Large trees loom, buds in bloom, open room, no blare of booms, no sign of gloom.
Ash pile, been awhile, warm smile, peaceful isle.
Fire wore, ashes more, the site yores, a past galore.
Stumps are there, the site where, past is everywhere.
Time does pass, swim do the bass, oblivious to time as mass, somewhat crass.
The past gone, time stands alone, but a new story is shown.
Young Oak

Ian McKinzie

My hands unfurl like branches,
Wrapping like nests around migratory birds
Under a full moon unbound from the clouds.

My shoulders
Brace
In the cold wind of a winter’s night.
The limbs of a young, growing tree,
They quake in the moon’s blue light,
Bend, but do not break, in the frigid breeze.

Covered in new bark,
My skin thickens.
My trunk grows wide with the wood of memory.
My trunk grows strong with the heartwood of memory.

Barren, I will wait.
Bereft of leaf and flower.
Waiting, in the midnight hour.

Waiting, for Spring to come again.
Nature is listening

Keaton Riebel
evolution

Grace Westphel

waiting for summer // “things just cannot grow beneath the winter snow”
She used to hate snow. Snow meant that winter was coming, and nothing good came from winter. The days get shorter, colder, darker. Winter meant icy roads that prevented travel, air that hurt to breathe, being stuck inside. She kicked apart every clump of snow she could find, willing it to melt faster, waiting for summer time.

faded fabric // “fading with time”
No matter how carefully something is preserved, it cannot stay the same forever. The sun will always find a way to take what you love and fade it, the once bright fabric dimming under the ultraviolet rays through the glass. The sun doesn’t care how much work and love was put into a quilt being passed down from a grandmother to a granddaughter. It still changes the colors.

snowflakes // “frosted window panes”
She used to hate snow. But as she grew up, she gained new friends—friends from places without snow. Friends who would make her send videos of the snow falling to the ground, who would get excited for her to go outside. Now, when she saw the small flakes drift down to the ground, she would smile instead of cry.

november // “falling down like autumn leaves”
Nothing can prevent the seasons from changing. The leaves drop every September, the snow falls, then melts. You wait patiently for your favorite time of year to come around—spring, summer. You bathe in the sunlight and wade in the weeds at the edge of the water, hurrying to finish your ice cream before it melts. You smile up at the sky, eyes closing. When your eyes open, the water is frozen over, the sun gone. The leaves have long since fallen to the ground, no longer suspended in the air by thin branches. Nothing is meant to last forever, certainly not the leaves on trees.

frank snowman // “I still remember the first fall of snow and how it glistened as it fell”
Halfway through her senior year, snow plagued the world. The news called it “the third-snowiest winter in city history.” Before, this would have been the worst news she could have received. But
this year, it meant days off of school, making snowmen with her friends, drinking hot chocolate, and curling up in piles of blankets.

**noticing // “and so I fall in love just a little, oh, a little bit every day with someone new”**

I am the girl who falls in love with everything, and everyone, just a little more every day. The kids in my class—the girl with the purple streaks in her hair, barely noticeable. The kid with the charming smile. The boy with the patterned, mismatched socks. The girl with the pretty bows in her long, brown hair. The people I see as I go about my day—the kid in the dining hall reading the newspaper while they wait in line for a sandwich. A group of boys passing by, shouting “snowball fight” to snowmen makers. A foreign exchange student taking a picture with their flag on display. The people I aspire to be—all the strong dancers at the competitions, actors passionately putting everything into their role. The athletes that give their heart and soul into their sport. The girl obsessed with old style music. The girl who falls in love, a little more, every day.

**wool gloves // “I love the winter weather”**

Now she waits patiently for winter to come, bides her time until she can go outside and make snow sculptures.

She steps outside, hands bundled up in orange wool gloves, and smiles.
The Stars

Lucy Severson

Maybe we could write about the stars
That create a band of light
Above our heads
Covered in hats
And beanies
And earmuffs
On a clear winter’s night.

We could write about the stars
From eons ago
Lighting up the sky
Reminding us
The world had a long history before
us
And will have one after us.

We could write about stars
Arranged in patterns
That form constellations
That inspire
And provoke
And dazzle
What would be an endless black sky
Without them.
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