Satori 2024

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Satori /sæˈtɔːri/
An inexpressible feeling of inner enlightenment.

Winona State University’s student-run literary journal seeks to be true to its name. The attendees of Winona State University come from a diverse set of backgrounds and, as such, bring different perspectives to WSU’s campus. Satori uses its platform to elevate those students’ perspectives to be shared with others and, ideally, bring them a new form of enlightenment.
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Schwangau’s Lake
Kelly Steltzer
The Fort of the Town by the Rock

Whistling wind follows as she climbs the seashore.
The North Sea’s cold blast carry through her clothes
the more it nips, the harder she works to scale the hill.

Apprehension and uneasiness accompany the sea’s roar.
The castle’s demeanor intimidates those who dare to face this tiring walk.

All to fear is a cliff that drops
and the sea that crashes into the rock.
Wind and gravity control the tide as she controls her mind.

The castle falls to ruin as time passes, and no one can repair it in time.
Its grey walls crumble as people observe
that strong-gust wind is her biggest destroyer.

The whistling wind follows them home as they clear the way for more.
The fort of the town by the rock is crumbling away but will forever have a place to lie.

- Riker Weiler
Crumbs, Cores, and Drops
With lines taken from James Armstrong’s Empire

Swedish whisky is as good as Scottish whisky is as good as Duluth whisky,

depending on the bottle and the circumstance –

bread and cake both get the job done, don’t they?

But when we let them eat cake, it only puts on pounds,

Indulging in whiskey poisons the mind.

The original sin was not apple picking,

it was Eve’s indulgence.

She kept the cups in motion with the promise of revelation,

but when she reached the bottom divinity was nowhere to be found.

Cups turn to bottles, turn to sadness, turn to anger.

Each glass dragging her closer to damnation.

So much apologizing to keep the faith,

so many bottles kicked under the bed,

so many prayers left unanswered –

there is no longer a place for me here.

- Xander Auman
River Boat Houses
Nathan Kronbeck
Four Haikus

Murky Hallucinations
Wading through the depths
Shadowy nightmares emerge
Swallowing you whole

Dead Eyes
Cold without feelings
Tracking your every movement
The predator waits

Apex Predators
Closing the distance
Terror knows no bounds to us
The food chain persists

Shark Mindset
Your desperation
Glinting blood-stained teeth open
I understand why

- Willow Swinbank
Plums
Kaylee Nickisch

I
Plum trees bear fruit in cool-colored clusters at the tips of their branches, usually between June and September. Only mature trees bear fruit. Otherwise, their branches are too weak to hold the clusters up.

II
There is something to be said about the seasons in California. The main differentiator between winter and summer is that in summer, I have school off.

The sun smiles warmly down on us as we stand in the great expanse of their backyard. Gold grass crushes beneath my shoes. Plum tree bark is rough; the trees are stout and open, branches thin and harsh like gnarled fingers scratching at the sky. They’re easy to climb. As one of the boys scales it, I hold the idea of following him up in my hand, rolling it around in my palm like a particularly interesting stone.

The tree takes his weight easily, its sparse leaves fluttering absently in the wind, as if instead of a boy he is a rather heavy bird, resting itself on its branches. “Here,” he says to me.

“I’ve never had a plum before,” I say.

“Really? Try it.”

Round and dark, dull from the wafting, orange, dusty earth, the plum is not any more eye-catching than the squat, barely there apples hiding in the foliage of my aunt’s apple tree. I rub it on my shirt until it shines like a smooth, burgundy gem.

I take a bite.

III
She smears the color first on her lips, then on her cheeks. It stains her fingers. She looks this way and that in the mirror, and the light catches on each angle of her face. “Do I look okay?” She turns her face towards me, hair cascading down her back like a dark and shiny waterfall. It frizzes around her head, an aureole of reddish-purple hair dye.

“Yeah. Just fine.”
Plums are a good source of vitamin A, vitamin C, and fiber. They average thirty calories per fruit.

It’s not quite ripe. The flesh is tough and sour. I smile anyway.

Purple comes in flashes, quick and bright like lightning.

This must be the storm brewing, then, blowing in from the west and washing over the hills. A flash of purple catching on my cheek. The thundering crack of the DJ changing songs.

I stand on the outskirts of the dance circle, feeling the humidity of body heat and thinking of summer rain.

There is something to be said about the seasons in Minnesota.

The heatwave comes when I’m worrying about snow. I sit inside of the dining hall and pinch a plum between my fingers. My dorm doesn’t have air conditioning; I have to hide in a rotation of buildings: the library, the commons, the dining hall. Rinse and repeat.

The apples here are too soft. The pears are too hard. I don’t dare touch the bananas for fear of what I might find. The plums are alright.

Its skin glows under the wavering heat of the sun, which shines down on me through a window. Freshly washed, water pearls up on its skin and drips down in slow, purple-colored drops. I take a bite. The skin is tart, but the flesh is soft and sweet.

“Do you like it?” he asks.

“Yeah. Just fine.”
Between Scottish Highlands
Kiera Norman
Zoya’s Grandma hated the rain, yet somehow, she would always know when the rain was expected. The people of Oura, a town just outside the city, looked to her Grandma to tell them when it would rain. Secretly, before the first drops fell and the sky grew dark, Zoya’s Grandma would go to the big tree in the backyard, wearing her clothes inside out and praying to the ground just behind the big tree. Grandma would never let others go on that side of the tree. When she returned from the tree, she’d always mumble something about a thing being lost. Zoya used to follow her, asking, Grandma, why don’t you like the rain when all the other aunties say rain means luck and is a blessing? She would never reply. Each time Zoya did this, her parents would scold her for talking down to her elders. Eventually, when it did rain, Grandma would close all the windows and blinds and turn the TV volume up so loud Zoya thought she would lose her hearing.

Zoya loved the rain because of the smell and the sound. If Grandma let Zoya outside in the rain, which wasn’t often, she would climb the big tree in the backyard and watch the rain fall. It was an easy climb with its large, low branches, and sometimes, it was hard to get up, especially if Zoya wasn’t quick and the bark was already slick. One place she’d never go was the back side of the tree because the last time she did that, her Grandma yelled so loud it woke up all the neighbors. It was so embarrassing for her.

One time, close to her tenth birthday, was the first time Grandma braided long box braids into her hair. Zoya was sitting in the tree when she saw Coco, her Grandma’s dog, chewing on something small and white to the faint sound of the sitcom Velaphi coming from the house mixed with softly falling rain. Carefully, Zoya climbed down from her spot to see what he was doing. Coco loved digging holes that turned into pools of mud whenever it rained and was a spider web of cracks during the hot months of July and August.

“Coco, what are you chewing on?” Coco didn’t look up and
continued chewing. After prying the things from Coco’s jaw, Zoya examined the white things. They were small and covered in saliva but eerily reminded her of the skeleton from science class. Coco was sitting in the mud puddle watching Zoya, probably expecting her to throw the thing back to him.

“Did Grandma buy you a new bone?” But they didn’t look like the normal bones Coco was given to chew on, as they were more yellow, and Coco preferred Zoya’s toys to his own. Zoya picked up the ball next to Coco and threw it to the other side of the yard. Immediately, Coco dashed after it, trying and failing to catch it in his mouth, which caused him to roll into another puddle, turning him a deeper shade of brown.

Zoya gathered all the white things and put them, still covered in mud, into her small bucket. Then, she ran off to stop Coco from getting into more trouble.

Eventually, the muddy pair made it inside, and it was difficult to tell where the dog ended and Zoya began. The two are forced into the bath by her Dad and told to stay there until the water runs clear.

“Dad, why does Grandma love her tree?” Zoya tilts her head up only to be pushed back down so he can continue rubbing soap into her curls. “I think it comforts her.” He replied. “Auntie said the same yesterday.” Zoya crossed her arms in dissatisfaction. “Dad, do we have to move?” “Where did you hear that from, princess?” his eyes widen. “Mom said we were offered money for the house.” She said as her Dad tipped her head under the water. “It’s nothing you need to worry about.” He flicked water into Zoya’s face, starting a fit of laughter.

After cleaning them from mud, Zoya brought the tiny white things to her Dad. Sitting at the low kitchen table, he inspected them. Zoya could hear the rain outside mixed with the small television set in the conjoining room.

“Maybe they are from an animal or something,” he said. “When I was a kid, we had all sorts of animals here, so it’s probably from one of
those, but ask your Grandma. She’d know more than me.” He scratched his head, the kitchen’s overhead light casting weird shadows on his face and through his afro.

At dinner, Zoya presented her findings to the table. Grandma’s eyes widened, then looked at her son. Grandma slouched into her seat, avoiding Zoya’s questions, and continued to scoop up the fufu and dip it in the chicken soup.

“Dad said that maybe it’s from the old animals, but I think they belong to a ghost! “Zoya said triumphantly. “One of the Aunties has such good ghost stories they must be true!”

“It’s probably one of the old animals,” Grandma said to her plate. Grandma made them rebury the bones next to the big tree and told Zoya to make sure Coco didn’t touch them ever again. Her Dad built a fence to keep Coco out. Zoya watched her Grandma sit with her back against the tree, her dark hand in the soil, looking up to the sky through the leaves. While watching her Grandma, she listened to her parents.

“Omar, this is our home, and we can’t leave your mother. She wants to spend the rest of her days here.” Her mother says. “They are offering us so much money, we can’t turn them down; the city has better work opportunities and Zoya opportunities.” He pauses, “At least think about it, Alicia.”

15 years later….

“Rat-tat-tat.” Zoya shot up to a knocking sound on her front door. Or not the front door? She stared at the living room window, being pounded by rain.

“I knew I shouldn’t have slept in the living room,” she mumbled as she fumbled for the light switch, but there was that sound again. Was that a baby’s cry? A flash of light and a rumbling sound from the window made her jump. She shook her head, and still half-asleep, Zoya moved closer to the door and looked through the peephole to look into the hallway; nobody was there. Maybe she imagined the sounds. She only just managed to get her Dad to do the surgery for his cancer treatment. All the doctor’s visits and
appointments have made it hard to do anything but worry about her Dad. He was her only family after her mother and Grandma’s passing. Zoya was about to return to the couch when another round of wailing and knocking came from the door.

Zoya opened the door. She fell down and tried to kick the door closed but missed. There, on the floor, was a baby. Its gray, decaying skin hung loosely from its tiny body, and its eyes looked eerily empty. The smell was sickening, suffocating as the baby waddled into the apartment, jerky and unnatural. Zoya attempted to kick the door closed again, but it wasn’t hard enough. Still on the ground, she half crawled, half scooted away from the door. The baby just sat there staring.

“There is no way this is real; I’m hallucinating from not sleeping!” She repeated to herself.

The baby continued to waddle closer.

“Oh my god,” she wrinkled her nose and tried not to throw up when a small piece of flesh fell from the baby’s back.

She had heard stories of strange occurrences in Oura but nothing in the city. The baby didn’t squirm or move when she set it on the countertop. The only other thing it did was follow Zoya like a baby duck.

Zoya was followed around her home, and when she went to the shops the next day for groceries, the baby walked all the way there. Only a block away from home, it sat down and wailed, which caused so many people to stare. From the smell or the baby crying, she didn’t know. Zoya sits down on the curb, staring at the baby next to her; she can’t help but feel pity for the thing. The baby also reminded her of stories of ghosts from her Grandma and Aunties, but never something like this; everyone knows bad things happen when you don’t care for the dead. So she quickly scooped it into her arms and brought it home.

“What can I do with you.” Zoya pondered as she crossed her arms, “Is there a way to make you look a little more alive?”

Zoya had never been as spiritual as the Aunties around Oura, but maybe they had a point all this time. Maybe by caring for it, she can figure
out what it wants, or it will disappear. She searched her wardrobe for clothes that could cover the decaying flesh. Zoya carefully selected items that would hide the most obvious signs of its undead state. Spraying everything with perfume masked most of the smell, but the real problem was dressing it.

Zoya finally found a shirt that would cover the baby almost completely; she slipped the shirt over its head and left arm as carefully as possible. But when she goes for the right, it fell onto the counter with a soft thud.

“AH!” Zoya screamed and began dry heaving. “Oh my god- this- is- disgusting.” She started finding ways to secure the arm back in place. First, bandages, but the arm was too heavy for them. Next was duct tape and turning and twisting the arm into a sling. But the arm kept falling from the shoulder; giving up, she laid down some newspapers and let it waddle around. Zoya found some toys her Dad saved and scattered them across the room, but the thing made no move toward them.

“Not a normal baby then, huh,” Zoya sighed, walking over and picking up one of the toys, a bright red firetruck.

The baby did not move toward the toys or her as it looked around the room. It lifted its only arm and pointed at the picture on the wall. Zoya looked up and followed where it was pointing to. The photo was from when Zoya was eleven. In the background was her childhood home, and in front was Zoya, Grandma, Mom, and Dad. Zoya’s was the exact mix of her mom’s and dad’s features, with her mom’s dark skin and her Dad’s afro when not in braids, which she preferred.

For simplicity’s sake, Zoya named the thing Ade; she couldn’t keep calling it thing and it responded to the name. Zoya loaded Ade into her backpack with its mask on, and they took bus 17 to Oura. During the trip, Ade doesn’t look out the window or around at other people. It doesn’t do anything to entertain herself; the outside world matters as much to Ade as the toys Zoya bought. She placed Ade on a seat and stood before it, thinking Ade might be comfortable. However, Zoya didn’t know if Ade could be uncomfortable or if that concept even meant anything to Ade.

At first, Zoya’s effort to hide Ade’s true nature seemed to work.
People who encountered them saw nothing more than a seemingly ordinary baby. However, the bus became hotter as time passed, and the decay became more noticeable. The stench of death clung to Ade, and its limbs grew more fragile as the sun climbed the sky. A finger fell off, and she stuffed it into Ade’s hat, hoping nobody saw. Every time a new person got onto the bus, she sprayed perfume at the baby to try and mask the smell. Heat burned Zoya’s cheeks and leaned down and pulled Ade’s hat over its face. Though it’s only noon, a group of drunk men get on the bus. They wrinkled their face in disgust as they passed Zoya and Ade; one of them approached Zoya.

“Is that smell coming from that thing?” he gestured to Ade on the seat in front of Zoya.

Zoya ignored the man, but he spun her around. Everyone was watching intently; the smell of liquor mixed with the already decaying stench in her nostrils.

“Mind your own business,” Zoya told his broad nose.

The man narrowed his black eyes, seized a fist full of Zoya’s braids, and yanked so hard she lost her grip and fell, landing on her tailbone.

“Hey! What’s going on back there!” The bus driver called from the front, and the man’s friends practically dragged him away from Zoya.

“Nothing!” the group of guys yelled back.

They reached the house that used to be her family’s at around two in the afternoon. As always in summer, a heavy smell of the Kwando River and gasoline hung over us as we walked across the plaza and past the Oura hospital, where her grandmother had died; two blocks past the old field, which was now all condos. They made it to the house or the street it used to be on. Her family’s old home that her grandpa built was gone and replaced with an avenue of condos all the same style and grey coloring. Nothing was familiar to Zoya; it felt cold, though the sun beat down on her neck and head. Standing in the street, her tailbone and head ached. But what do we do now, she wondered. Even if they knew where to go, what would she say to the owners?

Ade took charge of the situation, pointing its finger in the direction
they needed to go. They didn’t need to go inside. They could peer into the backyard over the dividing wall; that was all Ade wanted—to see the backyard, right? The two of them looked in as Zoya held it up—the wall was pretty low. There, where the earthen square of our backyard used to be, was a hole for a swimming pool set into the ground. The big tree was gone, giving no protection from the harsh sun. There is no way to tell where anything would’ve been.

“Ade…” Zoya knelt down, sweating from what felt like every pore in her body. “I’m sorry.” She said quietly.

“I should’ve done something before we sold the house or when Grandma died. Was Grandma important to you?”

Ade nodded yes and put one hand on Zoya’s.

“Ade, what will you do now? Will you leave?” Zoya asked, secretly hoping Ade would leave in peace.

Ade shook its head no.

“Okay,” Zoya replied, and since Ade’s answer didn’t sit well with her, Zoya started walking fast toward the 17-bus stop. She saw the bus pull to the stop, and Zoya ran for it. Ade ran after her on her bare little feet that, rotten as they were, left Ade’s little white bones in view.
Through Her Eyes
Kiera Norman
Sky Painted Water
Kiera Norman
When I Die

When I die,
I hope
That someone starts playing jazz music.

When I die,
I hope
That the last thing I hear
Is someone’s foot
Tapping
Tappa-Tap, Scuff, Tap
On the linoleum floor.

Because when I die,
If I do,
I would rather die dancing.
Even if it’s through somebody else’s shoes

- Ian Douglas McKinzie
I Can’t Look Up at the Sky

Every day, I wake up hoping this is all a nightmare. You will be sitting on the sofa in the morning, drinking your morning coffee. I will wrap my arms around you and cry. Knowing this is all a nightmare, but it’s not. You left me, and I had to say the hardest thing I will ever do. I had to say goodbye to you. And the words of people saying, “He’s always watching over you in the skies.”

I can’t look up at the sky. If I do, I will cry because the memories of losing you will come back to me. I will never be able to hear your voice. I will never see your face in the crowd. I will never be able to talk to you about my day or my troubles. I will never get to tell you about the boy that makes my stomach turn. I will never get the chance to see you again. Above all, the hardest ‘never’ is that you will never get to be a part of future memories.

I can’t look up at the sky. It brings pain to my heart knowing you are up there and not here with me. It brings the memories of losing you. It brings me back to when you weren’t there, and I needed you to be there. Above all, it brings me back to the countless times wishing you were here with me.

I can’t look up at the sky. Because I am not strong enough to feel the pain in my heart. I am not okay with knowing you aren’t here with me. I am not okay with the fact I am forgetting your voice. I am not OK with losing a piece of my heart forever.

I can’t look up at the sky. To see the beautiful sunsets and sunrises each day. That I am longing to see one day again. Until I am strong enough again. I will continue to look for the beauty the world has to offer me. I don’t have the courage to look up at the sky yet.

-Sophia Porter
A Sip of Starlight
Draconian Onyx
Through A Grey Screen
Riker Weiler

I’ve watched her grow into something more than just that worried and scared kid. I’ve changed, too. I’ve had new models, and colors like grey, blue and purple. I’ve changed my outside, but I’ve always been here. I remember when she first got me, and she got to pick what color I was. Purple. Her favorite. We had times when I couldn’t help her to my fullest potential. They didn’t understand then what accurate carb counting was; her mom could only help so much. She really is scared. She ignores me. Then there are the breaks she takes with me. I caused her irritation and pain, so we had to stop our adventures, and I sat unused. Now, here we are, my current state. I am a small black machine that is smarter than I have ever been. She’s had me throughout college. I am her saving grace, me and her Dexcom, of course. Now, she doesn’t forget to test her blood sugar because we can track it for her and adjust everything as needed. She is more attentive to us. Here we are, at the last leg of use, and we keep having hiccups by giving her a high altitude alarm and not fixing ourselves. Maybe she’ll still give my current model a chance, or maybe we’ll change into something better.

I’ve failed her. She ended up in the hospital with the Diabetic Ketoadidosis that she feared would get her sooner or later. She flatlined twice and struggled to stay awake in the most precious hours of her fight. Others fought for her to get a better chance at a different hospital. Eventually, she was sent off to a better hospital. Now, she’s covered in the scars of those IV needles, struggling to even get her school work and life back in order. The world goes on, and thankfully, so does hers.
Driving Past a Cemetery on MN-43 at 12:00 a.m.

Radio static and a Broadway soundtrack come to blows. Each one does its best to drown the other and, at this point, I don’t care which wins, I just need enough noise to stay awake. The brights on my car are, like the rest of it, old but just strong enough to illuminate the cemetery atop the hill on my left. Headstones huddle together, a bulwark of fallen names.

Your voice in my ears: that old wives’ tale about breathing in the spirits. When I find myself thinking about you, I often find myself here, in my car, passing a cemetery, crossing a bridge, or when “Little Talks” breaks through the radio static.

You’d think I’d think of you more. Everyone wants to help you move on, but they don’t tell you the grief is just replaced by the guilt; guilt that I could not do more, guilt that I can be happy without you here. I know you’re not supposed to breathe when you pass a cemetery, but I hope others don’t. There’s a chance someone breathes you in, and you stick around long enough to see what you were not able.

The cemetery approaches

I breathe in.

- Xander Auman
I Forgave You

I forgave your actions
Just as I forgave your bald spot,
Present at age twenty:
They made me love you even more,
Perfect imperfections,
Ideal idiosyncrasies

And after a moment of silence,
I forgave you yet again
When I tore my heart out for you,
Pouring its contents out to you,
And you laughed at it,
Letting your friends laugh at it too

Even though I felt the ugly urge
To wrap my hands around your throat,
Clutching you like a bouquet of roses,
My bouquet of dying roses
And misdirected love,
I forgave you for it all instead

I forgave you, not because you deserved it
(Look me in the eyes and tell me you did)
I forgave you because I deserved it
To stop wasting my time on you,
To stop wasting my life on you,
When you don’t want me in yours

I forgive you, and I don’t hold a grudge
How can I judge what I can’t understand?
So maybe one day we’ll work things out
And see each other’s point of view,
Whether that day comes tomorrow
Or when we meet again in Hell

And maybe you’ll forgive me too

-Jaydon Wilson
A Familiar Stranger

Now you speak with a tongue
That’s dripping with venom
I refuse to believe
It’s the very same one
That once spoke with kindness,
Knew nothing but sweetness
But the honey went bad
And toxin increases

You say that name is yours
I don’t believe it’s you
The man the name described
Died many months ago
Your eyes are just as blue,
But his held no hatred
Those two sweet syllables
Now name a memory

How cruel and cold it feels
For a friend to meet death
While his body still lives,
Drawing breath to spite me,
Treating my affection,
My deep, platonic love,
As if it’s pathetic
Or something he’s above

-Jaydon Wilson
THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU BREAK A WRITER’S HEART

Celia Stern

Follow the Rules

The two of you stand side by side in the wide, bustling field, watching with mild interest as a group of rowdy guys tosses around a light-up frisbee, whooping and laughing like children; another group mingles by the bonfire they built for the evening.

The air is brisk, so you wrap your oversized jacket tighter around you and step closer to him. Neither of you have to say much.

The sky has already darkened; the stars above provide most of the night’s illumination. You can only see outlines of all the other people, but you can see him clearly, and that is enough.

A shooting star passes overhead, and you point it out to him. “Let’s make a wish,” he says, taking your hand in his. “A silent, secret wish, that we can’t say out loud if we want it to come true.”

Smiling up at him, you say, “Yeah, yeah, I know the rules.”

If only you had followed them.

Photos

Look at her, calmly peeling those photos off of her bedroom wall, one after the other.

Look at the way she scrapes the sticky putty off of the back of each photo with her fingernail.

Look at how she quickly flips the photos over as soon as they’re in her hands.

Look at the growing pile of memories that has formed on top of her desk, taking the shape of a volcano, ready to erupt.

Look at the wetness of her eyes as she holds back the tears that want to force their way out and down her face.

Look at the way her hands tremble as she continues her tedious task, fighting the impulse to abandon it.
Look at her, stuffing the heap of photos into the confines of a small drawer, their coffin.
Look at the blank space left behind after each photo has met its untimely fate.

**Not Worth It**

537 days passed before he decided that it wasn’t worth it. That—in spite of everything he had led you to believe over those 537 days—you weren’t worth it.

10 days of reflecting, and longing, and hoping, and suddenly you were worth it again. He assured you of this. Your faith was restored. You thought his was, too.

Until 30 more days crawled by, and he became absolutely certain that you couldn’t be worth it. He claimed that he loved you, that he hated hurting you, that it wasn’t because you weren’t enough.

But you saw the change. You felt that shift, deep in your bones.

There was nothing you could do about it. No way for you to prevent it. All of your efforts were destined to fail, whether or not you wanted to accept it.

You were not worth it.

**Freshman Year**

My dorm room was a prison cell. Four walls and a heavy door that boxed me in and reminded me, night after night, that I was all alone. It’s college. You should be out partying! You should be meeting new people! You should be having fun! Fun, fun, fun!

Countless weekends, indistinguishable, blended together into one hazy blur. I’d say goodbye to my roommate as she packed up her overnight things and her ID, preparing to spend the rest of my evening browsing for something tolerable to watch and holding back tears. Many nights I found myself lying in a heap on the floor, unsure of how I even got there.

Carless, I had nowhere to go. Close to friendless, I had no one to
turn to. Everyone I loved was far enough away that it did me no real good to
unload my misfortunes onto their shoulders. So, as pitiful as it was, I sat idly
by like some sort of involuntary recluse, while life went on around me.

It all felt pointless. Cruel, even. Like the universe was making some
sick, twisted joke, of which I was the defenseless target.

Poor me.

“Did you hear about the girl who lives in delusion?”

I’ve never been much of a Taylor Swift fan.

I have nothing against her, or her crazed mob of diehard listeners,
but her endless anthology of music never really struck a chord with me—
that is, until her lyrics began to sound like she had extracted them directly
from my brain.

I know that heartbreak is just about the most universal phenomenon
in existence. I understand that. I know that I’m not alone in feeling like the
world is out to get me and that I’ll never love again. I know that nearly every
single person—at one point or another—will lay sprawled out on their bed-
room floor, nose running and tears flowing, “I’ll watch your life in pictures
like I used to watch you sleep” (or something of the like) blasting through
their headphones, grieving the person that they believed would be their
forevermore.

And yet, I still have that stubborn feeling that nobody gets it. No-
body knows exactly what I am going through, no matter how ordinary of an
experience it truly is.

But Taylor knows. Her gut-wrenching instrumentals that jab at my
insides know. Her tragically beautiful words that perfectly encapsulate the
cycle of anger, hurt, and hope—they know.

So, yeah. Disregard what I said. Go ahead and call me a fan.

**Gray Couch**

Every day I sit, legs crossed, on the middle square of the three-
cushioned gray couch that borders the back wall of our living room. I alternate between typing away at my sticker-covered laptop, suffering through the Norton Critical Edition of some ancient, creaky novel, and clutching a plastic bowl of buttered noodles as I stare, in earnest, at the brightly-lit television screen.

Perhaps it looks like I’m waiting for something. Like I’m merely passing the time as I await the profound, life-changing experience that is creeping toward me inexorably. But I’m not.

I honestly don’t know what I’m doing. I suppose that maybe I’m trying to ease the sharp, relentless feeling that is constantly scratching at the lining of my stomach like a gnawing hunger that won’t go away no matter how much I feed it. Or maybe I’m just coping with the dizzying fact that I’ve never been so goddamn lonely in my life.

Actually, it’s probably that.

**Hey Celia**

“Hey, Celia,” say my roommates, as they step, shivering, through the front doorway and hang up their coats. “Hey, Celia,” say my roommates, as they come bounding down the carpeted staircase to make their dinner. “Hey, Celia,” say my roommates, as they return, giddy and buzzing, from a wild night out.

“Hey,” I say back.

“Hey,” says the couch. I stretch out my legs.

Then I turn on the TV. “Hey,” says the TV.

And my night carries on.

**Serious Inquiries Only**

How do you get rid of the cold, hollow feeling that resides in your chest, free of charge, constantly tormenting the rest of your body? I’ve been wondering about this for quite some time.

I would call it a gaping wound, only you can’t see it. It’s hidden pretty deeply in there. Maybe someone could try to dig it out with a spade, or
or something. But they probably wouldn’t find anything, besides my heart, still pumping out all of that blood somehow. She is overworked. I wish I could give her a break.

I would like a break, too. You know, from fighting that haunting emptiness that permeates every little part of me, waging battle after battle, day after day. I am exhausted.

I guess I could use some more sleep. I’m not really sure how to achieve that, though. Closing my eyes and thinking, Go to sleep! usually doesn’t provide me very much assistance. In fact, I find it necessary to drown out the noise of my blabbering brain—also overworked—with a more soothing source of sound. Well, if you’d consider a podcast about NBC’s The Office soothing. Which I do, by the way.

Anyhow, if anybody has an answer to that initial question, please let me know.

Serious inquiries only.

2 hr 25 min (134 mi) Fastest route now due to traffic conditions

That drive back to my college house after a weekend at home is brutal. Chilly Sunday evenings, the sky already dimming at 4:00 pm, the homework I brought with me but didn’t touch sitting in my backpack on the passenger’s seat. My eight-hour breakup playlist on shuffle. The knowledge that I’m about to face another identical week.

I tap my foot to the beat; cruise control has been on for about an hour now. My stomach grumbles angrily, like it knows I have no food in the pantry. Deal with it, I want to snarl. But I just sing along, imagining that I can send the lyrics as a telepathic message. I force a smile onto my face even though I’m alone in the car. “You’ve got this. You’re fine,” I say aloud.

Do I believe it? I don’t know. Don’t ask me that stupid question.

Lego Flowers

I have a vase of Lego flowers sitting on top of my dresser. My roommate told me that maybe it’s time to get rid of them. I told her, “Never.”
he love may have died, but they won’t. They’re plastic.

**December 21st**

The car is cold when you climb in through the driver’s side door; the frigid leather seat sends a trail of goosebumps down your legs. You watch as your key slowly turns in the ignition, as if with a mind of its own. You can’t feel your arms.

The car begins to move, creeping backwards into the dark neighborhood street. No music accompanies the sound of your newly-installed winter tires rolling down the empty road. You still can’t feel your arms.

Your gaze is locked directly ahead of you as you pull onto the main road, eyes glued in place by some invisible adhesive. A truck speeds past you in the other direction, going 55 in a 40. You don’t care.

You take shallow breaths, attempting to keep your airway clear as your chest rises and falls, the panic within swelling and fading, swelling and fading. The stoplight is green. Bright, bright green, such a pretty green. You cruise right through it. You still can’t feel your arms.

You hardly notice the traffic around you. You are indifferent. An unidentified weight rests at the pit of your stomach, twisting your gut with casual cruelty. Your heart beats against your chest like it’s trying to escape. Maybe you should let it.

You pull into the Lowe’s parking lot—a neutral place—and shift your car into park.

You wait.
I Met My Grandma’s Best Friend

Cerulean sleep gown she wore, flowered neckline. 
Grandma, I met your best friend.

Stories of your youth.  
Short-lived -- you’d braid her hair then she’d braid yours.

Two young girls, 
two towns, not a strand away.  
Walking each other home, walking each other home 
back and forth until your mothers 
called you in. Grandma, I met your best friend today. Tender tone, her 
tongue lifted to 
speak of you. 
I wonder if grief still holds her firmly in his arms.

I grieve a loss that was never mine. 
My eyes cry tears for a woman she never saw, my heart longs for a woman 
she never knew.

I truly wish I could’ve met you. 
She described you as: tall and slender, dark skinned, long hair. 

She said I resembled you: 
your complexion, your smile, your demeanor. Truly, the highest of comple-
ments.

I wonder how Kpelle sounded on your mother’s tongue.

-Muwatta Dukuly
Still Life 3
Alysen Endres
Reading on Steps That No Longer Exist

The cold stone bites into her legs through denim. It’s not as distracting as the other children screaming and laughing on the playground. Their bodies melding into one mass of movement, a movie playing out before her. An invisible screen separating her from them. She looks back down to the book on her lap —

Hunger Games, Harry Potter, Artemis Fowl, Narnia, it doesn’t matter.

The playground blurs into those fantastical worlds, her mind consuming them one after another, never satisfied. Years later those stone steps she once sat on are gone, and she moves through throngs easily as breathing but inside she is still that little girl ready at a moments notice to escape to a far-off land.

-Ashleigh Campbell
Forgotten Child

Perfect little houses
lining the street,
tinsel on the trees
in the front lawns,

the full moon glinting off
stained glass
of a darkened

church, impenetrable
but for a decrepit wall with a hole

full of silky spiderwebs

hanging low
to brush against
the face

peeking out
pale as frost
on frozen windowpanes.

- Ashleigh Campbell
Schoolgirls
Draconian Onyx
Inheritance
*Allen Wedekind*

If you make the trek down into the basement of our ancestral home, you will see boxes. Whole rooms, covered from wall to ceiling: in piles, in tidy rows, in precarious stacks. They range in content from clothing that doesn’t fit anymore (and some that never did), to water-damaged photographs of unidentifiable smiling families, to collectibles making the slow march through time to become antiques. Four generations have lived in this home, and if you look, you can see remnants of every person who resided between these walls.

The light will sputter, and the droning of the decades-old sump pump will chime in when you least expect it.

Be not afraid.

This is your destiny: to collect, and to salvage, and to keep safe. There are miracles down here, and there are horrors, too. You will find missives sent to congratulate your great-grandfather on the birth of his first child, a son, and you will find confessionals, and sometimes they will be within the same letter. You will sit among the boxes, and you will weep for what has been lost, and you will weep for what you have found. Most importantly, you will never, ever, throw anything away.

***

Sometimes, when I can’t sleep, I sneak open our bedroom door and watch you sit in the living room. Most nights, you are playing some video game in a desperate attempt to quell the voices in your head. Tonight, though, you are watching a TV show on the History Channel, and I am desperate to sit by your side. I listen to the man with the crazy hair talk about the aliens that built the pyramids in Egypt, and I watch you. You nod along, occasionally murmuring to yourself words I can’t quite make out. You don’t look sad, for the first time in a long time. You don’t look happy, either. I never know what you are feeling during this nightly ritual of ours, which is exactly why I hide in the doorway. I wonder what it is you think of this man.
and what he is saying. You look like you understand more than I do.

***

I had known you had a problem for a long time. Mom had let it slip one night, and I had filed that information away for later use, just like you taught me to. I didn’t believe it for a long time, though. I kept telling myself that you were coping, that what you were doing was your way of staying sane in a world that had fallen apart around you. You were my dad, how could any of this be your fault? Everyone drinks a couple of beers in the afternoon, everyone drinks a few more after dinner. That’s just what people do, and how could I blame you for doing something openly that everyone else hid?

***

Within the medical community, there exists a debate over whether addiction is primarily caused by nature or nurture. Genetics, many postulate, predispose some to addiction. Many genes, including GABRA2 and CHRM2, have been linked to addiction, particularly to alcohol. Environmental factors, too, are also considered extremely important to the development of addiction. Exposure to adverse early life experiences, such as neglect, abuse, or witnessing domestic violence, can impact brain structures affecting behaviors relating to addiction. Family factors, such as poor role modeling, parental rejection, and parental substance use also greatly increase the chances a child will grow up to form an addiction. Psychiatric factors, however, are said to be the greatest predictor of addiction.

***

Michael, my father, was the youngest of the three children of Terry and Barb Wedekind. Michael’s eldest brother, named after their dad, was excommunicated long before I was born, and I have never met the man. My uncle’s only son is yet another Terry, and like his grandfather before him, served in the Navy. I’ve met this cousin twice, as he, too, has forsaken his father.

Between the births of Terry and Michael, the two prodigal sons, my grandparents had a daughter. Marie has two children. Her eldest, Robin,
has hair dyed the color of cognac, and, like her mother, smells of cigarettes and futility. When I was eleven years old, a bottle of my Adderall went missing after she visited. Marie has a son, too. Christopher once taught me how to never lose a game of tic-tac-toe between surreptitious drags off a blunt in my mother’s living room.

***

Grandpa is coughing again. His hacking is a horrible, piercing sound, and when he forgets that I’m in the room, sometimes he lets out a little moan. His memory is going, too, everything that makes him him is disappearing before our eyes. He calls me Robin, sometimes Chris, sometimes my father’s name. I don’t fault him for not remembering.

***

The trick is to control the corners. “Most people,” it turns out, “want to place their mark in the center.” Instead, he draws an X in the upper right, then one in the lower left. “But if you play like this, they’ll have no choice but to go on the defensive. You have them trapped.” He draws the final X with a flourish in the upper left corner. “See? Now, there’s no escape. No matter what they do, they’ll always lose.”

***

You are forgetting, now, too. Or maybe you’re pretending you are. There’s no way to know, now. You called me your sister’s name the other day. “Marie, set the table, would you?” I don’t know if this was a slip of the tongue or a warning sign.

I saw a post-it-note, shockingly blue compared to the background of stacks of manilla folders and incoherent documents on your desk, and I picked it up. It’s your social security number, written in permanent marker bold enough you can see it without your glasses. You probably misplaced them again.

***

The first time I drank, I was with a girl I thought I might grow to love, given time. We drank hard lemonade and wine until the wee hours of the morning, and I dreamt of my father.
Would you be proud of me?

You don’t know that I had my first kiss, years ago now, in a Taco Bell parking lot, my girlfriend pulling me close over the center console of my first car. There was a time when you would have been the first person I told, a time when you would have kissed the bruise the gearstick made on my stomach and made it all better.

You don’t know that I switched my major last semester. I’m an English major now. You always said that I’d grow up to be a writer, an artist, a mirror image of you and all that you wish you could have been.

You don’t know that I am writing this about you now. When I told Mom about it, she said I should mail it to you when I finish. I won’t do that.

There are so many things I know about you, Dad, and so few things you know about me. But still, I wonder.

Would you be proud of me?

More than half of long-term alcoholics will develop memory loss, delusions, and other symptoms of alcoholic dementia. These symptoms include hallucinations, reduced awareness of surroundings, difficulty understanding abstract concepts, poor decision-making skills, confusion, disorientation, and poor vision.

Fortunately, unlike the Alzheimer’s disease my grandfather suffered, alcohol-related dementia does not inherently get worse over time if the patient complies with treatment.

Unfortunately, that treatment is only effective if the patient stops drinking.

The winter after I got my license, I wrecked my car. We were running late to school, and I forgot what my father had taught me: the road is a dangerous thing, hun. I hit a patch of ice and spun out, and no matter what I tried, I could not regain control. My brother screamed, and I put my hand on his knee. My life flashed before my eyes, and I remembered.
Dad was a volunteer driving instructor for amateur racing. He took us up to see the races one winter evening, and on the way, a deer flew in front of us, seconds too late. My dad did not slam on his brakes. While he wouldn’t have passed the breathalyzer placed in his car that summer, he still had enough wherewithal to swerve instead of break, and the ice on the country road took the black-and-white Camaro my father had bought with his child support. He remained calm, frighteningly calm. He pulled his wheel ever-so-gently to the left, and, as suddenly as it began, it was over.

“The road is a dangerous thing, hun.”

***

The last time I saw my father, he swore he hadn’t drank in months.

I could smell the Heineken on his breath, acridly sweet and all-too-familiar.

I told him I was proud of him anyway.

***

If you believe everything you read, my grandfather was a good man. He loved Elvis, football, and Star Trek, and placated my grandmother by watching crime dramas instead. He hated them, he once confided in me, “but Barb likes ‘em, and that’s good enough fer me.” After she died, he continued to put on episodes of Blue Bloods every Friday night.

***

After the divorce, my father moved back into his parents’ house. Our new home was forty-five minutes away from the house I would come to consider a refuge. Situated along the banks of the Yahara River, a winding, polluted, beautiful thing, the house had been in my family for generations. After pulling into the long gravel driveway, my dad would unload his two-door Camaro, his children no more important than the cargo he had picked up at a local liquor store on the way.

***

He used to love Elvis. Grandma collected little ceramic bobbleheads of him, and my dad tells me that they used to go dancing every weekend. I try to picture that. My memory of my grandmother is already beginning to
fade, and I tell myself that’s okay. She wouldn’t have wanted me to remember her like she was toward the end. I try not to think about how the same would be true for Grandpa now.

***

Elvis Presley died from a heart attack due to long-term opioid abuse on his bathroom floor on August 16th, 1977. He was forty-two years old.

***

There’s a photo I used to keep in my phone case, the edges worn to nubs by my tendency to slide it back and forth during class. It’s a black-and-white picture of the early days, when you hadn’t yet lost your job, just after Liam was born. I, at three or four years old, sit on your knee, and you have an arm wrapped around your wife. She’s cradling my newborn brother and has her other arm busy, trying to get me to sit still for five damn minutes. I’m wearing pigtails, a heart t-shirt, and a smile so large it rivals only yours. Your goatee is more well-manicured than I’ve ever seen it, and your porter-ale-colored hair hasn’t yet begun to gray.

***

Being a family descended from the German duchy of the 1600s, the Wedekinds have their own coat of arms, with a Latin motto to match.

Nil Differre, as my dad so succinctly explained, means “never differ,” a phrase passed down from generation to generation, ever-present, attached to the name we share as inextricably as our genes. I never knew whether it should be read as a warning or a promise.

***

Once, he told me that the greatest achievement in his life was having children. He told me about the excitement he felt sitting in the delivery room, and he told me how, as soon as he picked me up, he knew that his life was perfect. “You,” he said, “are the reason I was born.”

***

You swear you will never become your father.
Genetics promise you that you already are.
One day, in the not-so-distant future, I will receive a call.

They will inform me of the funeral, and I will go.

I will spit in your casket, and I will hug your cold corpse, and I will beg for you to come back. I will plead with you to forgive me, and I will play you that Elvis song, and I will remember.

“Is your heart filled with pain / shall I come back again? / Tell me dear, are you lonesome tonight?”

I know all of this, as surely as if it happened yesterday.

I will go to the never-empty house, and I will drink one of the beers you keep in the fridge as I sort your life into piles:

*Keep. Donate. Toss.*

I will listen to rock-and-roll and shout the lyrics you taught me at the top of my lungs as I throw all I have left of you into boxes:

*Keep. Donate. Keep.*

I will not cry as I package up all the things you ever were and all the things you never could have been:


I will scream, comforted by the fact that only you can hear me. I will sit, tearless, on the mattress you inherited from your father. I will finally be free, and I will never escape. I will be alone, and you will be alone, and we will be alone together. I will try to remember the last time we spoke, and I won’t be able to. I will sit by the river and look at the stars. I will never leave.

One day, in the not-so-distant future, I will begin to forget you.
Hope

I hope Allah
reunites us all. If
not here then
in Jannah. Either
way, my heart
still loves you,
still seeks you,
wishes you experience the
joy of accomplishing goals,
surpassing milestones. The
simple pleasures of life, the
aging, the signs of maturity on your mind, the ease of knowing...
certain that some people
will always love you.
I know I messed up, I know
I made mistakes, so did you.
But I hope we realize
that we were just kids,
Unknowing of how to hold love safely, Bound to our insecurities,
and ways of thinking,
blinded by rage.
I hope that one day
I can see you.
Joke with you like
we did in 2023.
And realize
how much we’ve missed each other.
And hold each other tight, and
smile as tears brim our eyes.
Just before I die, I’d like to
experience that.
Just before I die.

- Muwatta Dukuly
The Two Friends
Keaton Riebel

SATORI | 52
It was the only time I wished I had been carrying a gun. The wait for the police to show up was agonizing for me, I can’t imagine what it was like for him. I wish I was able to put him out of his misery sooner. The only thing I could do was drag him by his antlers into the ditch.

I don’t know if I would’ve been able to do it even if I had a gun. I’ve never hunted before for that reason; I don’t think I can kill something. I’ve been fishing, but that’s different. Fish don’t look at you with their big brown eyes, I guess. I’ve never been the one to gut them either, that helps too. It’s easy enough to detach from what’s on your plate if you’re not the one that put it there. But when it’s staring at you, moaning, trembling; that’s different.

I could barely get him to the ditch. Deer are heavy, and it’s not like I spend much time in the gym. The pain of whiplash finally appeared as I got him off the road; the endorphins were wearing off. We both sat in the ditch shivering for the fifteen minutes it took for the cops to arrive. I guess I did it to give him some company? I don’t know. I doubt he cared either way. I have never been relieved to see the flashing lights of a squad car illuminate a dark country road, but I was then. The officer dealt with the deer shortly after he arrived.

***

I came out of the accident with minor injuries, but my car was not as lucky. I enter the mechanic’s and walk towards the counter. It’s empty. Rows of shelves containing car parts extend to the wall. A corkboard peppered with hastily written notes and invoices covers the back wall; the smell of motor oil hangs in the air. I notice a bell on the counter and ring it.

It’s not a new observation that mechanics tend to talk to women like they know nothing about cars, but the inverse is also true. Which is a problem for me, considering I can’t even change my own oil filter.

“We can get the windshield and frame taken care of, it’ll just take a little while,” the mechanic says to me as he wipes his hands off with an oil covered rag. “Only thing left after that will be installing new headlights. We can get the parts in for you. You could do it yourself if you want; it’d definitely be cheaper.”
I swear every mechanic thinks I rebuilt a Honda CR V when I was sixteen. I just don’t have the heart to tell them otherwise. “Um, I think I’ll just let you guys take care of it with everything else,” I say. “I’ve been pretty busy lately; I don’t think I’ll have the time to get to it on my own.”

“Alright, we’ll call you when we get it done. I’ll get you a quote before you leave,” the mechanic says.

Within ten minutes I am back in my rental car with a substantial bill. Of course, this happens just a few months after I dropped my car’s coverage to collision. I carefully put the car in reverse and make for the same country road I hit the deer on just a day before.

***

I pull into the parking lot of Winter’s Bone Nursing Home. With the pain of my whiplash still throbbing in the back of my head, I walk up the steps and hit the buzzer outside the building. Within minutes, I am let through the large set of double doors. The woman who let me in, Janet is her name I think, welcomes me inside and already knows I’m heading to the memory ward. I’m fairly certain I know every aid who works here by now, and they know me. Janet punches the security code into the entrance of the memory ward and lets me inside. I hold the door open with my elbow, and as I hear the door shut and lock behind me, I become uneasy. I don’t like being locked in here.

I don’t know why I make such a big deal out of going every day; it’s not like Nanna would know if I skipped. I just find it a sad that a woman who had so many children is spending the last years of her life alone in a nursing home. She only sees her children a few times this year at this point; I’m the only family she has left in the area. Everyone else spread out, Mom was the only one who stayed close.

I do think Nanna would be living with my mother if she were still around, but that isn’t a reasonable option. A dead woman can’t help much. No one else was willing to take her in. Each afflicted with children or demanding jobs they declined the notion one after another until Winter’s Bone was the only option left. When each of them relocated, their obligation to our family seemed to crumble. I haven’t seen any of my aunts or uncles in what feels like ages. They all outgrew their hometown and moved on to “bigger and better” things, leaving me to take care of their mother. I guess I’m not “taking care of her.” I could’ve, but I turned her down too. My studio barely fits me, let alone me and her, so she was off to the nursing home.
I mean, Winter’s Bone is a decent nursing home, all things considered. The staff seems friendly, Nanna gets along with the other guests, and I’ve never worried she isn’t getting the medical treatment she needs. Not that she requires much anymore, she was placed on a DNR two months ago. She’s only expected to make it to December of this year.

I walk past the other residents’ rooms on my way to Nanna’s. Photos of happy families adorn the doors, all of whom seem to be absent now. Aside from the occasional birthday party, I often find myself being the only visitor here when I visit. I reach the end of the hall and enter the door with the plaque reading “Charlotte Robinson.”

“Hi Nanna,” I say taking off my coat and placing it on the rack behind the door. “What are you up to?”

No answer. I see Nanna propped up in bed on top of an ice pack asleep. We moved past the ability to hold a conversation months ago, and I don’t think I’ve seen her open her eyes since then. When she first came here, we’d talk just fine. After a while there was some confusion. Maybe she thought I was my father or even her father, but she was still happy to talk to whoever was there. Now we’re here.

I sit next to her for about a half hour, which leaves me plenty of time to stare at the “Do Not Call 911, Call Hospice” sign taped to Nanna’s fridge. Eventually, Nanna’s aid, Jett, pops her head in the door for a med pass.

“Oh, you’re back. How’re you doing?” she says as she approaches Nanna’s bed.

“Oh, pretty good,” I lie. I can still feel the whiplash in the back of my head. “How’s she doing?”

“Not bad all things considered,” Jett says as she begins to prop Nanna up further. “That last fall was just really nasty, she’s been staying in bed most of the time since then.” Her attention turns to Nanna. “Charlotte, I’m here to give you your meds, can you open your mouth for me?” After a bit of coaxing Nanna opens her mouth. Jett drops the pills into Nanna’s mouth and closes it. “Okay Charlotte, I need you to keep that under your tongue till it goes away, alright?” she says as she makes for the door.

“She been talking much?” I ask.

“No – not much that makes sense, anyway. I think her collarbone still hurts.”
Nanna had a tendency to overestimate herself. Her first few falls resulted in scrapes and bruises, but a few months ago she broke her collarbone. Those don’t heal easy, especially if you’re in your late eighties.

Silence falls over the room.

“I know it looks bleak,” Jett says. “But she’s surprised us before, she can always do it again.” She sidesteps out the door on her way to her next resident.

I wait just a few more minutes before leaving the room. I get up, say goodbye to Nanna, and ring the buzzer to signal to the aids I want out. I hate this feeling, depending on them to be able to leave. I can’t imagine how this place feels for Nanna.

Before too long one of them appears and punches in the code, letting me back into the lobby. The familiar sound of the door locking clicks behind me as I exit.

***

As I enter my rental car, the nerves hit me much harder than they did on the drive here. I guess I just needed to be going the same way on the road to make it really sink in. Driving a rental car already makes me nervous enough, especially since I didn’t shell out for the good insurance, (I really need to stop doing that) but when a one-in-a-hundred thing like hitting the deer happens, I find myself dwelling on the fact it could happen again.

As I pass the stretch of road where I collided with the deer, I feel the endorphins rise once again. The dull pain in my head momentarily relieved as I frantically scan the sides of the road for deer; the image of the one I hit still firm in my mind. All I see is the remanence of the crash: dark blood smeared on the road leading to the ditch. Before I know it, I pass the stretch of road and my blood pressure falls. Now I just have to make the same trip again tomorrow.

***

The next day, I go through the motions again: ring the bell, walk into the lobby, greet the receptionist, and then she lets me into the memory ward – door locking me in like always. It’s almost Thanksgiving, and the nurses are helping the more able patients make decorations: hand turkeys and buckled hats made out of construction paper. Nanna is not with them.
I find Nanna’s room again and she looks like she hasn’t moved since I left yesterday. I greet her like I always do, and I get the expected response: nothing. I pull a chair up to the side of her bed and get a good look at her face. She’s become almost unrecognizable now. The half-eaten dinner on the counter and the way her clothes fit her tell me she isn’t eating much. She was always a small woman, but she looks even smaller when she’s just skin and bones all curled up in bed. I can see the curvatures of her skull hovering underneath her face, each groove cutting deeper into her visage and altering it.

I continue sitting with her in silence, there’s not much else I can do. I must have been sitting here for a half hour. The sun is going down. I should leave before it gets dark; I hate driving in the dark. I begin to push the chair back to its rightful place when I hear a groan from Nanna’s bed. I turn around.

“What’s up, Nanna? Everything okay?”

“H-how much time is left?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“On the calendar. How much time is left?” She opens her eyes. Big brown disks stare back at me expectantly.

My heart sinks. I know what she’s talking about. I look at the calendar. Its November 16th – almost December. I walk over to the side of Nanna’s bed and put my hand on her shoulder. “Let’s go back to bed, Nanna. You don’t need to worry about it right now.”

“I’m worried.”

“I know.”

Within a few seconds she puts her head back down and closes her eyes. I pat her shoulder and finish putting the chair back. It’s time for me to go.

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This time the ride home isn’t as nerve-wracking as the last. The road is only illuminated by the yellow hues of the sun setting above the road. It is only dimly lit, which would usually make me nervous, but I feel just fine. My heart rate is steady as I approach the stretch where I hit the deer. This time, when I get there, I’m not staring at the blood. All I can see is a set of eyes.
Large, coffee-colored saucers staring at me, begging for help; confused, scared. I just can’t tell if they’re the deer’s or Nanna’s.
McKinney 3
Noelle McKinney
Companion

You were there when I was made
Climbed within and clung to me
Grabbed my stick-thin wrists at birth
Whispered can I keep you and
can I break you

You were there to watch me grow
Leading, tripping me through years
Pushing me until I cried
Made me feel like I could fly
Truly knew me

All the time I spent distressed
Wishing you away from me
You refused to let me free
Forced me forward through my tears
I despised you

You will hold my hand in death
Fade from me and leave a void
Empty shell, a corpse to burn
did you break; did I break you?
You, Life, leave me.

-Lydia Domaille
The Disappearance of Curly-Haired Girl

Dorothy Moore

It is Thanksgiving Day of the twenty-second year of the century.

The five-month-old granddaughter is rocking in her crib, unbeknownst to the world around her.

Grandmom is pouring herself a glass of wine, to the brim this time- the first instance in which she has overpoured in a while.

Granddad on the other end of the corridor. His eyes are doing that thing again. The freeze, look, freeze. The darting of the eyes everybody has become accustomed to.

The siblings (Grandbabies aunts and uncles), all five of them in the same room except for the middle daughter. Grandbabies middle auntie. Known as the Curly-Haired child, the caesarean section infant that indeed almost took the life of her poor mother at birth.

She has been casted away. Thrown into a dark realm: a closet full of chemicals and cleaning agents.

It is as if that Curly-Haired Girl went missing, for she has.

Grandmom was the first to be summoned when Curly Hair went missing; Then Grandad was summoned. Older siblings of curly haired girl were called into the interrogation room last.

The officers handed over their badges and let the family know they’re starting an investigation. Grandmom, Grandad, The Brother, The Sister-were all to be questioned. For this was out of legal fingertips, as the DNA evidence was washed away by Curly-Haired Girl in a cool tub of bath water and shame during her departure.

The Families kitchen transforms into a court room. Rooster décor lines the windowsills. Mommy Chicken with her eggs printed on the old curtains. Curly-Haired Girl loved those curtains.

The proceedings begin.
Brother tells the jury volunteers that he is busy with his science fair project; he must not partake in the duties at this time. His project consists of choosing three household items to conduct research on; to examine the impact on the human DNA when encountering different compounds. He chose vinegar for his Dad to drink, water for his Mom to drink and suggested the chemical bleach. But who would drink the Bleach? The potent agent used to purify, to make clean and shiny, all while destroying bacteria. A burning sensation that when ingested leads to tissue death, swelling of the throat, and delirium. He jokingly asked for volunteers from the jury, which was met with a lack of participation. Granddad muttered slyly that maybe Curly-Haired Girl would volunteer for the job if she returned; For no pure soul would be robbed in the manner that caused her departure.

Second sister makes her appeal to the juries when her time comes about. The Jury asks questions about the last known whereabouts of Curly-Haired Girl. What occurred that Halloween night baby girl’s soul cracked?

Sister played coy. The Juries pressed her. They pleaded for the context of the telephone call between Curly Girl and Sister that night. For a relaying of the unanswered text messages Curly Girl sent to sister that night. Sister refused to recall any such information, for Sister felt weird speaking on it all. Sister was fidgety and non-compliant, she just had too much on her plate and did not contain the strength to continue. But who is going to recall the timeline of events if Sister does not acknowledge them?

At last, Grandad is called onto the stand. Grandad plays the role of interrogator yet also on the defense line for his Curly-Haired baby girl’s case. Grandad sympathizes with Curly baby girls missing and fractured soul, but Grandad is mad at his Curly-Haired Girl.

Why did Curly-Hair not protect herself from the soul snatchers that impersonate human beings? Why did she imprudently sip on the potions the soul snatcher offered her? Did the Curly-Haired Girl even attempt to protect her innocence? Did she learn anything from the sinful story of the Garden of Eden? Did she recall how Eve doomed society through the coercion of Satan? Finally- Why did Curly-Haired Girl douse herself in the river that lonesome night if she knew the manner of crime committed against her?

Suddenly, a high frequency cry breaks the silence in the kitchen. Infant Granddaughter is upset, she has observed this all and cannot help but shriek.

She does not understand her Grandmom’s slurring words, or her Grandad’s hushed tense voice.
She doesn’t understand the interrogation of her missing aunt or the avoidance toward speaking of the situation at bay.

The revelation of what her future was destined to be when “female” was printed in neat letters on her birth certificate; is beginning to form though. The sense of her role as a girl who will grow into a woman someday. The dangers and gamble of fate that she will face due to her sex in this society.

Grandmom swaddles the infant and through hellish shrieks, infant grandbaby attempts to communicate that she is afraid to take on the contractual agreement of womanhood.

Granddaughter doesn’t want to experience what Curly-Haired girl has; She does not want her livelihood to be snatched away by the force of a man’s “needs”, she does not want to have to rinse the soul assailters DNA off her body in the water that once baptized her, she does not want to take the blame a murderer should, when she is the victim; and she does not want to have to drink bleach to purify her soul- the bleach that would shut her up about that hazy Halloween night when she was twenty years old.

The bleach that Granddad so badly wanted his daughter to drink, for he could not come to terms with the cruelty his own sex imposed upon his creation.
Bloody Handprints

Feeling big emotions is all I know.

I came out of the womb screaming.

And while most children stop—Still I scream.

I scream until my lungs bleed.

My blood pours out-- onto my own pristine white shoes.

It never dries, scuffs of soft crimson caresses everything I’ve ever loved.

With the same bloody hands I use to hold myself together

I reach for people, hands clasping like a vice.

My bloody fingerprints unique and unyielding on a lovers pale skin.

Feeling big emotions is all I know.

Love is crimson like my blood. Smears of love and crimson stain their skin as they walk away from me.

Do they taste the copper blood on their tongue when they think of me?

- Alayna Majkrzak
Phantom Dance

The ballroom echoes conversations
doing days of old, words lost to time. Whispers
of arguments, agony, and atrocities once transpired, heard
centuries later.

Apparitions of dresses and suits dyed red,
twirl in ethereal grace, a spectral ballet.
With each turn, they tell their tale of blood and gore,
of love and loss, of whispers and wails.

Their movements speak of a bygone age.
Dancing, spinning—fading—to songs
lost to winds of age.

-Jessica Grafe
Gold
Eleysia Beynon
An Open Letter to Kafka

Maybe you should’ve spoken to your father.
Y’know, the rest of us don’t have it so good.
At least you could trust your mother.
And at least you found it in you to be honest.

I think you could’ve fixed it.
I think you could’ve put your own head back on straight,
And I think you could’ve ignored everything he did to you.

You didn’t have to hate him, you know.
Your sisters got away,
You could’ve too.

Maybe you should’ve spoken to your father.
Maybe you shouldn’t have trusted your mother.
Maybe if you knew
How good you had it,

Your dad might have loved you too.

-Alex Peachey
Beyond Time
Samantha Bird
Anamnesis

She rocks the chair,
    porch wood creaking
       like her bones, like
    struts of the highest
    rollercoaster, each
groan sending shrieks
    soaring through
the air, lost forever

to a setting sun.
The mug of tea warming
    her hands
reminds her of another
    pair
    shaking from laughter,
leading her to the next thrill,
    fingers slipping from hers

once the night had past.
    A gentle breeze
trickles goosebumps down
    her arms, casting back
her mind to a faint echo —

wind whipping
her hair, screams
of excitement,
cacophony of color
as she spins and spins —
    as quickly as they
arrive, they’re gone.
She can’t quite grasp
the feelings or
images worn
from age. Faces
indistinct, veiled,
their voices turned to
    murmurs.

-Ashleigh Campbell
Smiles Sold Separately
Mushfiq Kabir
Fiji Shark Dive 5
Willow Swinbank
bananas

All around people laugh,
Their shrieks echo forever
Piercing my heart-
No one understands,
How shattering it feels
To be called banana-
When will they learn,
Will I forever feel this pain?
There’s nothing left to gain-
Yellow on the outside,
White in the middle
It’s the cruelest riddle-
Who knew a piece
of fruit could
do so much harm-

-Grace Guertin
Sincerely, A Mouse

Lights in apartment windows,
Lives being lived.
Searching for scraps,
Of something,
Anything,
In trash cans.
Shoes and boots,
Large and small,
Passing by,
On their way,
To something greater.
I wish that I could take the scraps,
And write out the words,
In piles and arrangements,
To tell them,
That I want to be somebody.
I want to know the feeling,
Of wearing a cozy sweater when it’s cold out,
Or the taste of a fresh popsicle on a hot, summer afternoon.
To look out a plane window and pass right through a cloud,
And feel on top of the world.
I want to know love,
To know when somebody else’s hand fits in mine like a puzzle piece,
To know when I smile at them,
They’ll smile back.
Instead,
Sewers, swimming in muck, starving.

Sincerely,

A mouse

-Lucy Severson
Can Opener
Jackie Velishek
WINONA PRIZE WINNERS
Winona Prize Poetry Winner
Jack Mulvaney

Winona Prize Fiction Winner
Sydney Porter

Winona Prize Fiction Winner
Alex Peachey
Airing Out My Poetry

Life can be the steps between the washer and dryer, painstakingly miserable.

When I open that chest of soggy shirts and still brown socks

I find my goddamn wallet, making the shocking realization

nobody taught the Founding Fathers to swim. It’s not like Benjamin Franklin went down in the wreckage of my pristine leather,

I’m mainly talking Washingtons.

The heave-ho of those now clean clothes to a clank-driven dryer is never easy.

If there were any chance I could get lost I’d follow the trail of once-white shirts now turned red from a pen

I strategically forgot in my pocket. Which pants, you ask?

The ones with the goddamn ink blot in the thigh. Pants a costume designer in a Tarantino movie would stab me in the leg for.

Throw out the lint after using the dryer. That goes without saying, I thought.

Is it that time-consuming? Unless it was me, then it was because

I was running late, AND I DIDN’T HAVE TIME.

(goddamn)
Those steps between the washer and the dryer will always be miserable.

Yet I write this poem in clean socks and a lavender-scented sweater.

-Jack Mulvaney, Winona Prize Poetry Winner
Austin concentrated even harder as he advanced to the next level of Super Mario Run. After not being able to play at all during his day at work, he was determined to crank out some progress during the car ride home. As he jumped up to grab more coins, he bit his tongue to focus himself, pressing down harder on the screen.

“Hey, weren’t those kids in your class?”

Malia’s question forced Austin’s focus to shift away from the game on his phone, but not before he paused it. His sister drove with one hand and with the other she pointed past him, out the passenger side window, where a group of teenage boys was coming out of Mabel’s Malt Shoppe. Each of them wore swim trunks with cutoff shirts and sipped chocolate milkshakes as they walked out of the storefront and towards the beach downtown. Since school got out a couple weeks earlier, the small town’s streets had a constant flow of families and teenagers looking for something else to do. Although he didn’t love the tightness of the town, Austin loved living in Minnesota because he got to experience all the seasons, even if he never admitted that to anyone, including himself. June was his favorite time of year because school was out, and it was warm enough for lake days but still without the intense heat that July brought. Too much heat meant too much sweat, which meant that was not his kind of weather.

As he watched people walking along the sidewalk, it seemed that everyone was still on the high of early summertime, including the shake-sipping boys who he knew were enjoying it extra because they had also just completed their final year at Lakeview High School.

“Yes,” he said, looking back towards his paused game, “yeah I think that’s Riley and Hunter and, uh, some of their other friends.”

“Riley Johnson? And Hunter Smith?” Malia glanced over at Austin. He continued to play his game but gave her a quick nod to appease her. She paused before saying, “Ya know, Mr. Backman told Mom at parent-teacher conferences that those two had been mean to you towards the end of the year. Is that true?”
He didn’t see the point in lifting his head from his game just to shake it, so he did it while collecting more coins.

_Shtiiiiing. Glup, glup._

“Well,” Malia said, “he said that they made fun of you sometimes. Did they do that?”

Groaning, Austin paused his game again because his sister was relentless when it came to her insistent questioning in the car. He thought back on it, but all he could think of was that Mr. Backman was always extra nice to him whenever Riley or Hunter talked to him before art class started. He never knew why, but now it made sense, if he thought Austin was being picked on.

He sighed and leaned his head back on the headrest. “No, no they’re just being funny. They think it’s fun to joke around and stuff. They joke with everyone.” He didn’t know what they joked about with other people, but they liked to joke about his weight every few days and about he couldn’t pass his permit test, but it didn’t bother him all that much. They laughed at and teased all their friends. “And it doesn’t matter now ‘cause—we’re graduated.”

“Okay, I believe you.”

After a few seconds of silence, Austin bent his head down to play his game again. As he reached for the play button, Malia blurted out, “Isn’t it just gorgeous?”

He sighed, looking back up again. She never let him have any fun. “Yes, yes, just so nice.” He hoped that would be enough to satisfy his sister’s desire for conversation.

“This seems like a day for Grandma Annie’s cabin, doesn’t it?”

Breathing deep, Austin put his phone down. The sun shone, and as they drove by the beach, the lake surface sparkled an inviting blue. “Yes, it does.”

But today, they couldn’t go to her cabin up north, which hurt more than any potential teasing he encountered. Every summer before, on a typical simmering day like this, Malia would pick up Austin from work and drive thirty minutes to their grandma’s lake cabin. Their grandma spent every summer weekend there, so each time they arrived, Grandma Annie was always waiting for them, her permanent smile glinting in the bright light of the sun,
offering them freshly squeezed lemonade. While Malia would read and tan, Austin and Grandma Annie would bake cookies, or she would watch him swim. Even though Grandma Annie was their next-door neighbor every other day of the year, the times at the cabin were uninterrupted by responsibilities, and most importantly, there were no nagging parents to tell Austin to come home, like there were at Grandma Annie’s year-round home, which sat in Austin and Malia’s backyard.

Now, he wondered what would happen to that cabin. He hoped he could still swim there.

Except it wouldn’t be the same without his grandma there, but before he could think too much about that, he took out his phone to put on some music.

“So, I know you already told me no, but this is your last chance,” Malia said as they turned away from the lake, interrupting him yet again. Her knuckles were white as they gripped the steering wheel, her gaze intent on the road in front of her. “Are you sure you don’t want to speak at all today?”

Before she even finished asking the question, Austin said, “Yes—I am, like, absolutely sure. I do not want to.”

“Okay, okay, fine.” She sighed. There was a second of silence as she tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “But I could still add something else into my speech if you had something you wanted to say.”

What is she not understanding? This was clearly not his thing, so he tried not to roll his eyes at his sister’s annoyingness. He let out a big breath before saying, “Well, do I have to add something?”

“Well, no, it’s just that you—”

“Then no.”

“You could say something about cooking and baking with her or the cabin or your daily visits—”

“I already said no.” He turned his attention outside the window while another small sigh escaped Malia’s lips. After a few seconds, once he was sure she would not keep talking, Austin took out his phone and turned on the theme music of Mario Party 4. He closed his eyes as he held the phone’s speaker up to his right ear and let the music brush away everything else in
his mind.

When he thought of their destination, he tried not to cringe. The image of teary-eyed people in his head was enough to make him squirm and fidget with whatever was close to him. The past week had been filled with so many tears from his family, he had locked himself in his room with his video games and only come out to bag groceries at Suncrest. He wished he could have done that alone too, but without his license, he was forced to spend time with someone as they drove him to work. Now that his sister was home from college, it was normally her responsibility.

The only thing he did not like about her chaperoning him around was her music. She always had some song about God on, or some cheesy love song. Nothing that he liked, so he always listened to his own. As his music played now in his ear, his heart rate slowed, and he began to rock back and forth with the rhythm, letting it drown out that small twisting feeling he had had in his gut from the mental image of tears again. With each movement and rhythmic note, he pushed that now-constant twisting feeling lower and lower.

Through his left ear, he heard Malia flip through a few radio stations. She listened to each for a couple seconds before switching to the next until she ended up turning the radio off. In all their rides together, she never shut off her music. Every time she brought him to or from work, she always sang along to whatever she had on, so it was strange to just have his video game music filling the space in between them.

As they drove into a small neighborhood on the outskirts of town, Malia’s phone lit up from the center console to display a message. Her gaze didn’t stray from the road, but she tightened her grip on the wheel. “Was that Dad? What did he say?”

Picking up the phone, Austin looked at the text message and started to roll his eyes before he even read the whole message. “Yeah—yeah it was Dad.” He slipped in a groan before repeating the text which read, Help Austin put his tie on before you get here. Mom wants you to make sure he looks decent before leaving Jenny’s. We are already at the funeral home. See you soon.

“Ugh,” Austin grunted as soon as he finished reading the message, slamming the back of his head against the headrest. “Dad doesn’t even think I know how to put on that—that stupid tie by myself? God, he thinks I’m so dumb.”

“Don’t use the Lord’s name in vain,” Malia said, shooting her icy blue stare at him. But she softened her gaze before she continued, “And he’s just
making sure I know you may need some help. You haven’t worn a tie since Auntie Jenny’s wedding when you were like, what, ten? So, it’s been several years. You may not remember how to put one on.”

He rolled his eyes big enough for her to see. “Just wait and see, I’ll show you how I can figure it out myself. And also, I can say whatever words I want. I’m eighteen. And it’s none of your business.”

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It did not take long for Austin to give up on the tie, and he refused to look at Malia as she finished straightening it.

“All right, all ready to go.” She stood up from her bent-over position and stretched out her back. Austin sat in the passenger seat of her Chevy Malibu with his feet hanging out the side onto the painted lines of one of the funeral home’s parking spaces. At their Aunt Jenny’s house, he had changed out of his work uniform from the grocery store and into khaki dress pants with a light blue dress shirt and a navy checkered tie. His mom had bought and packed the outfit for him, claiming it was going to look great on him and be perfect for the occasion. She had not, however, considered how stifling hot it was going to be, so he felt suffocated by the thick collared shirt as soon as he put it on. It was the same shade of blue as the pattern on Malia’s dress, which, as she said in the car, did not match her hair color that was, according to her, strawberry blonde. They had the same hair color, which he thought of as orange, so he assumed his shirt did not match his hair either, but he couldn’t tell as he looked in the car’s side mirror before stepping out of the car and slamming the door shut.

The car’s lock beeped as he followed his sister to the front door. Malia’s heels clicked a rhythm against the concrete and made her look almost as tall as him, which was funny for him to see because she had been shorter than him for almost three years now, despite being a few years older.

As they crossed the parking lot, heat waves shimmered off the asphalt. The tie choked him, and he couldn’t help but pull it away from his neck. Sweat already beaded all over his neck and face, which made his skin crawl, and he wished he would have packed extra deodorant in his work bag that morning. And a whole different shirt.

He pulled at his collar as he walked into the lobby of the funeral home behind Malia. As soon as the door shut behind him, his mother swooped in like a vulture about to pick apart her prey. He sighed and shut his eyes to
avoid looking at her.

“Stop doing that,” her hushed voice was by his left shoulder before he even saw her face. “Why are you pulling at your shirt?”

Austin’s loud groan cut above the quiet voices of the dozens of people inside. Her eyes widened at the sound, but he started talking before she could reprimand him. “Because I’m sweating, Mom. This shirt is so thick—it’s smothering me. I can’t breathe. Why couldn’t I have worn something else?”

“I don’t think it’s smothering you, but I’m sorry, buddy, I—”

“Myer.” Austin stopped pulling at his shirt to point at her as he narrowed his eyes. “Do not call me buddy.”

“Oh, yes, I forgot. I’m sorry,” she said, waving her hands in surrender. The baby blue shawl wrapped around her shoulders wiggled with the movement. His mother did not get dressed up often, so he was not sure how he felt about her attire yet. Blue did not seem like her color, and her hair wasn’t even strawberry blonde or whatever Malia called it.

His mother’s gaze searched his outfit, looking for anything she did not approve of. But instead of nagging him like she always did, she nodded and said, “You look nice, Austin. You’ll have to tell me about your day at work later. I have to go talk to your dad’s cousin Darrin and his new girlfriend.”

Before he could complain once more about the shirt, his mother had stepped around him to hug Malia before going to find other people to annoy. He was relieved she had not hugged him. Most types of physical touch sent a panicked heat through his body, so he did not want anyone too near him when he already felt this warm. To try to cool down, he untucked his shirt and started to flap the bottom of it to generate some ventilation. He wished he could have stayed in his work outfit since that shirt was thinner. Oh boy, how long is this service supposed to last?

He whispered his next thought to the empty pocket of space around him, “Oh, God, let this be short.” The flapping of his shirt helped him cool down, and although he could see his mother shooting him a death glare from across the room, he avoided her gaze and continued to let the air circulate onto his sticky skin. It helped for a few brief moments until a stout, round woman broke off from a group of people mingling by the guest book to approach Austin, and before he could focus enough on the person to see who it was, she had enfolded him in a hug.
The smell of dust and strong perfume filled his nostrils, causing him to cough. As he glanced down at the top of her head as she held on, he recognized his great aunt Beth’s short lock of dark hair. Beth did not relent her grip, so he ended up patting her back to give his stiff arms something to do.

“Oh, Austin,” she said, pulling back to look at his face, “how are you, dear?”

The tears sparkling in her eyes made him look away. “Well, uh, I’m fine,” Austin said, an uncomfortable laugh escaping his throat as he started to pull at his collar again.

“What have you been up to? Have you been getting hours behind the wheel? Your grandma Annie always said you were so excited to drive.”

“I, um, still don’t have my permit.” Now Austin’s gaze skimmed the speckled white ceiling tiles.

“Oh, that’s all right!” Beth’s voice was high-pitched. “You have plenty of time for that. Do you know what you’re doing in the fall?”

“Not really.” His reply was met with silence as he continued to flick his gaze above the crowds of people, so he kept going. “But probably just still working at the supermarket.”

“Good plan.” He looked back down to see Beth give him a small smile. She gestured towards the doors leading to another room. Several people walked in and out of them, mingling and sipping small cups of water and lemonade that the funeral home provided. “Have you been inside the room where we’re having the service? All the flowers are in there, and they are so gorgeous. And that cute picture-video is playing. Oh, did you see which picture they chose to put on the program?”

She held out a copy of the program for Austin to see. Beth’s voice was distant as she said, “It’s the one your dad took at your graduation party last week.”

From the front of the program, Grandma Annie smiled up at him. Her short, white hair had a fresh perm for his party, her wire-rimmed glasses cleaned spotless for the occasion.

Her voice echoed in his head as it sounded on that day. I wouldn’t have missed this for the world. She must have said that over a dozen times at the graduation ceremony and his party afterward. It had made him smile every
time, and a small smile worked its way to his face thinking about it as he looked at the program.

When he looked up, Beth stared at him with her lips pursed together in a half-smile as she patted his shoulder. “Don’t you just miss her like crazy? Gosh, I already feel like it’s been too long without her.”

He let out another small uncomfortable laugh. “Yeah, yeah I do.” Wiping sweat from his neck, Austin let his gaze shoot everywhere else around the room, searching for somewhere else to go, maybe by Malia, but he couldn’t see her.

Nodding, Beth looked around Austin and broke into a grin. “Oh, your sister is here!” She clapped and looked back at him. “My goodness, I never got a chance to talk to her at your party. I have to go say hi.”

The air felt cooler once Beth had walked towards Malia. Austin couldn’t help but feel a little bad for his sister as all their family members lined up to talk to her. So many sweaty hugs. But they all wanted to hear about her latest year of college life. She went to a university in Florida during the year, so she was sporting a golden tan, a rarity in a family of pale, freckled skin. He had been so happy she had flown back to Minnesota just in time for his graduation, but also—unbeknownst to them then—their grandma’s death.

As Austin watched Malia show pictures of some beach to Aunt Beth, he chuckled to himself. Grandma Annie had loved to see Malia’s pictures, but when his sister wasn’t there, his grandma would start with all the questions.

It was always the same, and he could hear her voice play out in his mind. Now, why did she have to go to school all the way down there? We have plenty of good schools a few miles down the road.

She would often bring it up while she and Austin were playing cards as their brownies baked in the oven. I don’t know, he would reply, but she always said she wanted more sunshine and less snow. And she says she has lots of friends there from all over the country.

To that, Grandma Annie would wave her hand and shake her head. Nonsense. We have perfect weather right here, don’t we? And how can people enjoy good, warm meals when it’s always so hot down there? How could you live without our hotdishes?

Each time she raved about some horrible part of Florida, Austin would
chuckle and play his next card.

As several other family members approached Austin to talk, he noticed most of them came by him after they finished speaking with Malia. It seemed like after they talked to her, they remembered she had a brother and maybe they should see how he was doing too. Everyone seemed to be interviewing him with how many questions they asked. He did not ask many back because he couldn’t think of any, and he could not even remember the names of most of the people, let alone what to ask them about. It was easy to answer their questions, though, because they were all the same.

“So, have you gotten your license yet?” No.

“Are you going to get it soon?” I still need my permit.

“Are you happy Malia is home?” Eh, a little.

“Are you going to college in the fall?” No.

“What will you be doing?” Working. And if questioned further, I’ll probably keep bagging groceries at Suncrest Supermarket in town.

“Do you miss Grandma Annie?”

This question made him pause each time. Why do you care, he wanted to ask. It had only been a week, but still each day he found himself ready to make his daily walk to her house before remembering she would not be there. But none of his other family members would understand. None of them were ever her neighbor as he was—they didn’t even visit her at all. How could they talk about missing someone they never made an effort to see?

The more conversations that went on, the harder it was for Austin to focus, and his eyes traveled all around the room. He recognized a few people but stopped looking at faces when he saw more and more tears starting to flow. The tremor in his hands increased with each tear he saw. In between people questioning him, he would try to migrate to a quiet corner of the room. It never worked.

“Austin!”

At hearing his name called, Austin turned toward the middle of the room. His older cousin Layla and her fiancé Jack were walking in his direction.
As soon as they got to him, Jack held out his hand for a fist bump, saying, “Hey buddy!”

A small laugh came out as Austin returned the gesture. He tried to smile but his mind snagged on the word buddy, but he was relieved to see no current tears in their eyes.

Layla beamed at him as she said, “Wow, your hair is getting so long, it’s curling. It looks just like your sister’s!”

Trying to pat it down, Austin cursed his ginger hair. He heard that comment all the time. And each time he heard it, it made him want to cut his hair.

“I love your shirt! What a nice color on you,” Layla said as she smoothed the sleeve on Austin’s shoulder, making him strain his muscles to avoid jerking away at the touch.

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “I mean—thank you.” He ran his hand through his hair again, making sure it didn’t look too curly.

“Wouldn’t she love all this blue?” Layla glanced around the room full of people wearing every shade of blue imaginable. The navy color Layla and Jack both wore on their shirts was one of the darkest shades, while the color of Austin’s own shirt was the opposite. Layla seemed to enjoy it as she gestured to his outfit with her glass of lemonade. “I bet she would love that light blue on you best of all.”

“Oh, of course,” Jack added.

“Yeah,” Austin said, running his hands down his shirt, “yeah, maybe.”

A light tap on his shoulder made him start.

Malia spoke before his heart slowed back down. “I think everyone is heading in to find seats now. Let’s go find Mom and Dad.”

Before they had a chance to sit down by their parents, one of their uncles approached their family and guided the four of them to the front row, right in front of the floral display surrounding the urn. As they all took their seats, his mother passed out tissues to his father and Malia. No one offered Austin any.

As the service began, the chair’s fabric scratched his legs through his khakis.
And everyone being in one room now drove the temperature up even more. The stench of all the flowers was overpowering and their distinct branding of a funeral smell burned his nose.

The pastor spoke in big words and most of the audience seemed to have some script of responses to say that Austin did not have. After a few prayers, which went in one of his ears and out the other, the pastor invited anyone who wished to come to the front to speak about Grandma Annie. He looked to his left to where Malia sat. Her hands shook as she took a piece of paper out of her purse before going up to the podium.

No one made a sound as she smoothed out her paper. “Most people know this already,” she said, already wiping at her eyes and trying to steady her voice, “but Grandma Annie lived in our backyard. And the path between our houses has been well worn out over the past twenty years by me and my brother. And for the past several years, Austin has made that trip every single morning and night she was there, through rain and snow and sun, on foot and bike and four-wheeler.”

His cheeks heated as Malia kept talking, going over memories of their childhood with their grandma. Although no tears came to his eyes, he chuckled along with everyone else at the funny parts of Malia’s stories and smiled on the joy each memory held. He looked at the ceiling to avoid looking at the tears in his sister’s eyes and everyone else around him. Everyone in the crowd seemed to be crying by the time she finished, so he did not let his gaze linger on anyone.

The tears and sniffles of those around him kept coming with all the speeches that followed. He shifted in his seat during each one and looked between the floor and the ceiling and his hands. While he didn’t watch the speakers, he listened to them, and as more family members spoke, he realized each speech had one thing in common: him.

“And every time I talked to Annie, she would tell me about how Austin had just been up there visiting her,” one of his grandma’s cousins said during her time. “He was always the highlight of her day. She would tell me which card game they had played and which of her favorite game shows from the eighties they had watched.”

At the mention of his name, Austin’s dad would pat him on the back, and Austin tried not to buckle under the touch. He knew his dad was grieving, so he didn’t want to make him upset by avoiding his show of affection.
“Grandma Annie loved to cook,” Layla said in the next speech, “and every time she would bring a dish or dessert to our house, she would proudly tell us Austin had helped her make it. She was so happy to cook for those she loved, but even happier to cook with those she loved.”

His uncle also mentioned him. “Everyone in this room knows how much she loved to talk on the phone. Any time my mom had a problem with her TV, she would call me, but only to tell me Austin was on his way to come help her fix it. So, I didn’t need to worry about her.”

Each mention of his name brought a flush to his cheeks and a sense of pride to his heart.

After the speeches and the rest of the service ended, a crowd of people came up to Austin to offer their sympathies, most with tears in their eyes. He nodded at each person and offered to shake their hand before they could try to give him a hug. In between people, he tugged at his shirt collar.

The presence of so many crying people made him restless, and his hands could not stay still.

“What was your favorite thing to do with her?” One of his distant relatives asked. He thought her name was Mary-Ann or Mary-Beth or something like that.

“Uh, probably cook. Especially her tater tot hotdish. Or her homemade brownies.”

She grabbed his hands with her dry, wrinkled ones. “Oh, that’s just lovely. I bet she loved doing that with you. You’ll have to keep on cooking now, won’t you? Carry on her recipes.”

Austin nodded. He couldn’t imagine not cooking. But he also couldn’t imagine cooking without her constant advice and direction.

This is how you drain the grease, Austin, watch me, she would say. You have to know this for when you make it without me.

But he had never made anything without her.

His throat tightened, and his face stung. She would never be able to show him a cooking technique ever again. His heart seemed to clench at the thought, but he turned his attention back to the people around him to shut
out the thoughts trying to take him under.

“Oh, Austin dear, what are you going to do without her?” Someone cried, clutching his hands. He couldn’t tell who anyone was anymore, and he could not stop blinking, trying to clear away the blurriness and black spots. What was he going to do without her? He didn’t know. He had never lived without her. Had never gone more than a few days without her. What would he do when he needed to get away from his parents? He couldn’t drive anywhere. His only safe place was her house. And now she wouldn’t be there. Not at her cabin. Not at her house. Not in her kitchen. Nowhere.

What was he going to do?

He rubbed his hands on his face and looked around the room with everything blurring in his vision. His breath came in shorts rasps, and he felt someone’s hands on his shoulders. Soon, the withered hands on his were gently removed before someone guided him towards the doors. He saw the light blue of Malia’s dress and the brightness of her hair in the corner of his eye. She kept a light touch on his shoulder as she led him to her car. She sat him down and closed the door, and as Austin stared at the ceiling of her car, Malia drove them home without the radio on.

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The funeral service at his grandma’s big and fancy Catholic church the next day went the same as the prayer service, at least in Austin’s mind. He didn’t see the point in repeating some of the same songs and prayers. The main difference in the service was someone had to carry the urn down the aisle at the church, and the family selected him to do it. The wooden box, handmade by his father, felt heavy in his hands as he carried it between the rows of onlooking people as they sang along to “Amazing Grace.” Tears filled every eye he passed, but he did not understand why as he averted his gaze to the urn’s destination. It was just a heavy blue box. Only a select number of people knew there were a few handwritten notes at the bottom, from Malia and his father and a couple other of those closest to his grandma. He had not written one. What would be the point?

It felt heavier when he picked it back up after the service and brought it to his mother’s car to transport it to the cemetery for the burial. Malia offered to hold it in the car, and she and their parents cried the whole drive. He looked out the window, his fingers tapping out a rhythm on the armrest as he rocked back and forth. He hummed to himself to drown out the sniffles of his family.
At the grave site, Malia and their father helped lay the box of ashes in the deep hole in the ground. Austin was the first to throw a blue rose on top of the urn. He could not make out which was his as the pile of blue roses, all already beginning to wilt from the sun, grew with each one thrown in.

After all the flowers were gone, people began to depart. But his eyes did not wander as everyone around him began to walk away. They remained focused on where the box had once been but was now out of sight. The sounds of soft footsteps on the grass grew gradually quieter until nothing but a nearby bird song broke the silence.

Austin did not break his gaze away from the hole until Malia gently pulled on his arm and guided him back to their mother’s car.

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The date of her passing had already been etched into the headstone for a year by the time Austin came back to the cemetery. If it were up to him, he would not have come back. The stillness of all the cold stones sent a shiver down his spine as he and Malia walked beneath the iron arch at the entrance. The autumn air seemed to cut even deeper the farther they walked, causing him to rub his hands together for warmth and cover his exposed ears.

“Did you grab it?” Malia asked him, stepping off the paved path and onto the grass.

Austin followed her, nodding in response when she looked back at him and holding up his plastic shopping bag. All he could focus on was the crunch of leaves beneath their feet, each harsh, sharp sound sending a jolt through him.

Malia hugged her dark orange sweater closer to her body as she stepped around some stone grave markers overrun by grass and covered with decaying leaves. “It will be good to show Grandma Annie what you’ve been up to.”

He followed Malia, going slower to avoid stepping on any crunchy leaves. “Well, I thought you said she was always watching over us. So, why do I have to come here to show her if she already knows?”

He thought the question would bother her, but she just shrugged. “Well, it’s true, she already knows, but I still think it’s good to visit her here and remind
her we still think of her.” Malia stopped at the sight of a small granite head-
stone, engraved with Grandma Annie’s name. “And here she is.”

No sign of roses or urn remained from the burial. Grass had grown in and
now the plot matched every other in the whole cemetery. Except now, this
gravestone was getting fresh flowers. After running her hand along the
stone’s etchings, Malia placed a small bouquet of blue irises at its base. The
color looked out of place among the reds and oranges and yellows of the
leaves dancing and piling up throughout the graveyard.

“Hey, Grandma Annie,” Malia said, crouching to face her name. She spoke
to the gravestone with many small pauses. “We sure miss you down here. It’s
weird without you. All your kids and grandkids are sharing your lake cabin,
and we put more pictures of you up on the walls. And dad is helping me
fix up your farmhouse ‘cause I’m moving in there as soon as I start my first
big-girl job at the hospital. And who knows, maybe Austin will come live
with me to get away from Mom and Dad.” She turned around to wink at
him and laughed at his eye roll in return. She turned back around. “Well, I
could talk to you forever, but we came here for Austin. Show her what you
brought, bud.”

He still did not understand the point of this, talking to a slab of stone, but it
seemed to make Malia happy. He drew the book out of his bag and pointed
it towards the headstone. “I guess I made this. It’s what I have been up to
for a long time, now.” He looked over at Malia and raised his eyebrows to
question if he could be done.

“Tell her the title,” she urged.

Austin groaned, but said, “I named it Austin and Annie’s Specialties. I made
it for people like me, so it has easy instructions for anyone to understand.
Malia helped me.” He turned back to his sister. “Now is that good enough?”

She beamed at him. “Perfect.”

Then her attention turned to the grave. “Oh, grandma, I wish you could see
it. He perfected all your recipes, knew them all by heart, along with all your
secret tricks! Now he’s in demand for all the parties I host and every family
holiday. He even makes all those Scandinavian dishes you were trying to get
us all to try.”

Malia went on about more things going on in their lives like her new boy-
friend and their new baby cousin Anna. Austin was content listening to her
talk, and he didn’t even squirm when she gushed about how he had started to take a few college classes that semester.

When Malia was done, she bid their grandma farewell and turned to walk back to the car. Before she got too far away, she yelled at the sky, “And I hope you like the flowers I brought you!”

Before Austin turned to follow her, he took a step closer to the headstone, looking at the blue petals. “I promise I’ll still keep your secret.”

He would never tell anyone the words she would say when it was just the two of them together after her birthday or a holiday. Each time, she would be surrounded by an assortment of items, all different shades of blue—teal socks, a navy cardigan, an indigo purse, anything her family knew she would love.

But surrounded by the items, she would shake her head at Austin. Where did they all get this idea that I love blue so much? My goodness, I swear none of my kids or grandkids buy me any other color anymore. I said I liked one blue sweater your dad got me, one time!

Well, he said back, every time they say they know it’s your favorite, why don’t you tell them it’s actually not?

Oh, sweetheart, she held his face between her hands, when you get older, you’ll realize it’s hard to break down people’s expectations of you, no matter what they are. Even if it’s just them not knowing what your favorite color is. Promise me you won’t tell anyone. Ever. I don’t want them thinking they did me any wrong. And promise you won’t be like me. You break every expectation people have of you.

The memory brought a smile to his face as he shoved the orange cookbook back in his bag. When he said he wanted to make the cover orange, everyone asked why he didn’t choose blue. He never gave them a reason, but he was the only one who needed to know that Grandma Annie’s favorite color was actually orange because her favorite grandchildren had wild orange hair like she used to.

Out of his bag, Austin grabbed a small orange pumpkin and set it by the flowers. He began to turn back towards the parking lot but stopped himself. “Oh, and grandma, you’ll never guess what happened.” He looked to the empty gravel parking lot where Malia was hopping into the passenger seat of a small orange Subaru covered in mud.
“I got my license.”

He smiled and walked to the parking lot, careful not to step on any leaves that might crunch under his foot.
The marshmallows were roasted to the point that they would melt in your mouth, but not burnt in the slightest. They had that caramelized crust, the smoky burnt sugar, and the soft yet still intact core. The way my dad made them, because that’s how his dad made them, and how my sister and I make them.

“So Alex, do you wanna go to college?” My cousin asked across the fire. He was on vacation, too, from his freelancing as an artist/programmer/VR guy. The family’s pride and joy, because Jerad didn’t have a college degree. But still got a job right out of high school as an IT tech and learned how to code on the side.

“Yeah, I think so. I want to go into biomolecular physics, I think maybe. Cancer cells, stuff like that.” My dad was silent in the chair beside me, staring into the fire.

“Fancy stuff. Where do you think you want to go?” Jerad asked.

“I’m not really sure. I toured Drexel. I want to move out west, though. Maybe to California,” I said. I’d already toured a couple more colleges at that point.

“Well, that’ll be good. Just know it doesn’t matter where you are, put the education first.” Jerad said. I didn’t take his word for it. Jerad had a different specialty than I ever planned on getting.

My dad finally cut in, “Yeah, as long as you go for somethin’ that’ll support ya. Your mom and I’ll cover some, long as it’s not English or Philosophy or somethin’ dumb.”

I looked down at the fire. The heat radiated onto my face, like a sunny day atop a mountain where the atmosphere is thinner and the rays permeate your skin. My hands were cold from the night chill, but the fire burned my fingertips.

My dad didn’t know I had been writing stories and plots in a journal in my nightstand at home. That when I was little, I made up stories that had action and romance. He didn’t know that I acted them out as one-man plays in my room. That I didn’t have an imaginary friend not because I wasn’t creative enough to make one up, but because they were written.
When I was 11, I opened my report card on the way home from school. I ripped the manilla folder, excited to brag to all of my friends that I got all A’s, yet again. The teacher’s comments would be glowing, I was a pleasure to have in class, I contributed to class discussions, and I was their favorite student. I slipped the card out of the folder, English – A, History – A, Math – B, Science – A.

I stared and stared and stared at that one misshapen letter like it would change shape if I looked hard enough. My eyes burned, tears pooled beneath them. How could I have gotten a B? Was I that stupid? I thought back to all of the tests, quizzes, homework, everything that I could have done wrong in that class. There was no comment next to the letter. Just a stark B, glaring me in the face.

My friend turned around in her seat and asked, “What’d you get?” I looked up at her with tears in my eyes and said, “My mom’s gonna kill me.” I handed her the card.

“You’ll be fine. You’ve never gotten a B before?” she said. I started crying.

“N, no. She’s going to, I don’t even know.” I said. My eyes hurt from the tears. I kept thinking about what my mom was going to do. Ground me, yell at me, tell my dad, shame me, tell all of my family I cried, I didn’t know.

I shoved the card back in the folder. Maybe she would forget it was report card day, maybe I could hide it and get away with it, maybe I could change the letter. It was like the end of the world if she knew about this B.

I got home at 3. She would be home in 2 hours, and I had until then to hide and make it look like I hadn’t cried.

I heard the door open and the tv go on. That was dad. An hour later, the door opened again followed by the click-clack of heels hitting the floor. That was mom. My head pounded and I tried not to cry.

“Alex? You in there?” My mom said from outside my door.

“Did you get your report card? Did your teacher send it home with you?” She looked in the mirror and fixed her hair.

I nodded and ran down the stairs. Took the report card out and set it on the kitchen island and backed away.
She took a look at it and said, “A B? In math? You’re good at math,” she looked at me and a tear ran down my cheek.

“I don’t know. I’m sorry,” I said.

“Let me talk to your dad about this,” she said and went into the living room.

I stood there in the kitchen and heard murmurs from the other room.

“B in math?” My dad said. I went into the living room to see how disappointed he looked.

“I know. Okay, so what we’re gonna do about this is,” my mom said, looking at me from the couch, “no phone for a week. No computer for a week. You’re gonna spend all that time doing homework, okay. You can do better than this, Alex.”

I nodded and only started crying harder. I ran up to my room and slammed the door. I knew I deserved the punishment, but by age 11, I had all the consequences of unsupervised internet access. I had friends on my phone, people I shouldn’t be talking to, but I did anyways, and they would think I died in the week I was gone. So I threw things. I was angry. Not at my parents, but at myself, and angry that I couldn’t even tell my friends goodbye.

My parents stopped punishing me for my grades as I got older. I got a couple of B’s, and I always yelled at myself for them. I hid my laptop so I could study better, I cut off online friends when the end of the year came around and I got a B in Social Studies.

I missed the first two weeks of my sophomore year of high school. My parents paid off their mortgage, so we went on a family trip to Iceland. I got notes from friends in my classes, and teachers sent me lesson plans, but it wasn’t enough to keep up the grades I knew I could get. That year, I was taking two AP courses. Because of those two weeks that I wasn’t in the classroom, I got a C first semester of AP Government and Politics.

Second semester, I worked myself to the bone. I read the entire textbook, spent an hour studying every night, asked the teacher relentless questions, and then, March 13, 2020 came around, and we got to do school from home. My grades skyrocketed. I could take pages and pages of notes, anxiety was no longer an issue, and I emailed my teacher all of my questions. I got near 100% that second semester.
But the school was considering discounting the grades from the semester we were required to be at home. Everyone was failing, and it was for conditions out of their hands. My entire grade relied on that second semester. If they just didn’t count it, I would get my first ever finalized C.

They didn’t count the second semester. I saw the announcement, and I told my mom it was bullshit. She said it was bullshit. My dad said it was bullshit. But when I went back my senior year, I learned that it saved a lot of people’s grades. People really suffered with quarantine. Being home with little siblings, not having enough space, suffering mental health. So it worked out for others in the end, even if I hated it.

Later, in Summer that year, my dad and I got in our only fight to date. Antifa was the big buzzword for right-leaning news networks, which my dad watched heavily. It got so bad, I stopped going downstairs because he almost always had FOX News on.

I was making dinner one afternoon when he was home. He had the news on. I went out to talk with him about his day, how work was going, small talk. The TV was branded with those pictures of burning buildings.

“This antifa, they’re ruining this country, yknow?” He said.

My heart pounded. I knew I had to say something. It was one of those things I just couldn’t let be. I felt like my brain was on fire, I didn’t know what I was going to say next.

“Anti-fa stands for anti-fascism. Being against fascism sounds pretty good,” I said.

He turned to look at me confused. That was the only time I ever said anything out loud against something he believed.

“Do you know what fascism means?” He said smugly.

“I know it’s that thing that Hitler did.”

“Fascism is the American Dream. It’s what this country stands for.”

I stood there for a moment, shocked. He smirked and looked away, like he had won. I went to the kitchen, finished cooking dinner, and went up to my room. It felt like my soul was burning. How could he say that? How could he believe that? He will never see that he’s wrong? Maybe I was wrong, I
I Googled “what does fascism mean” once I got to safety in my room. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “fascism is a mass political movement that emphasizes extreme nationalism, militarism, and the supremacy of both the nation and the single, powerful leader over the individual citizen.”

From that day on, my dad and I didn’t talk unless it was necessary and formal. It’s hard to believe one five-minute conversation could drive family apart like that. Every time I thought about the conversation, I got more disgusted with him. I told my friends, I told my sister. The damage was done. But it was far from over.

I thought that when I moved away, there would be some connection re-established. That distance was what we needed, and once I got away, he could talk to me again. I could stand to be near him again, maybe, if it was only for a day.

COVID went around. My dad got it twice, my mom got it three times, I got it once. In September 2022, my dad got it for his second time, and his twin brother got it on the same day in the same meeting room. My uncle was hospitalized on a Saturday, my dad that Sunday. My uncle was immediately sedated and ventilated, his lungs were filled with blood clots. He died on Sunday, October 3rd. My mom said I shouldn’t go to school the following day, but I did. There was no good to being home.

I was in Chemistry class when she texted.

I raised my hand to call over the teacher. Anxiety, that was all I could feel.

“My mom just texted, I have to leave in ten minutes,” I said.

“Okay, just head down when it’s time. It’ll be okay,” Mr. Dougherty assured me. His dad had passed from cancer the previous year. He knew what it was like.

My mom hugged me as soon as she saw me. I was still in panic.

“Your dad is on a ventilator. I’m sorry.”

They thought I should be home with them for the day. They said it didn’t feel right for me to still be at school. I felt like there was no good to missing
school. I wasn’t crying, he wasn’t dead, there was nothing happening. We did puzzles, my mom cried, we called the hospital at five. That was every day for over two weeks.

“Your dad’s lungs are like balloons. They’re normally rubbery, flexible, they can inflate really easily and they do what they need to do. Right now, his lungs are 75% fibrotic. That means that that 75%, it’s like this table,” the doctor knocked on the plastic table, “and 25% is still squishy and flexible. That’s why he’s ventilated. That’s why we’re here,” she explained it like I was a child.

We filled out his DNR. He didn’t want any transplant, any assistance. Being on a ventilator was already more than he wanted.

He got better, he got worse, then he finally got the worst.

The doctor called on a Thursday afternoon. We had all day Friday, we could tell them when to pull his plug, then he was gone.

People were in and out his hospital room all day. Family members, friends, doctors, nurses. He was in a comatose state, supposed to help the machines help him.

At five, it was just me, my mom, my sister, and my brother-in-law left. We sang, told stories, told jokes. Cried the whole time. I ordered grief journals on Amazon, special ones for each of us. The playlist ended, the nurse said he was stable enough that it was up to us when he would come off of life support.

He died that night. October 22, 2021.

The next day, I felt relief. I left my door open when I wasn’t in my room. I hung out with everyone in the living room. We cried, we planned the funeral, but October 23 was the most relieved I had felt in two years.

I don’t remember the funeral. The struggle doesn’t really start until after the service. We all had to start therapy after that.

Despite the grief, I felt free, my shoulders were lighter. I felt like I could actually be myself for the first time. Except I felt horrible for feeling better.
These feelings never really left, but in November 2021, I was accepted to all 10 colleges I applied to as a computer science major.

There were a couple reasons I chose Winona. My dad would’ve loved it here. It was the farthest away from home on my list. It was one of the smallest schools I applied to. It felt right. But an issue inevitably came up.

I met with my therapist one afternoon, and before we got into everything else going on, I told her,

“I don’t think I want to go into computer science anymore.”

“Okay,” she said, “what do you want to do then?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always been really good at English. I think I want to do that. Maybe teaching. But dad always said I shouldn’t,”

“Do it. He’s not around anymore. You should do it,” she said. She knew I loved my English classes, my English teachers, that writing was a big thing for me. No one had ever told me I should do English before.

After that session, I got on my computer and went to switch majors at Winona State. I set up a meeting, and later that week, I talked to a lady and got new classes picked out, along with a new major. That was it. I was an English major.

I felt elated, relieved, amazed at my future. I had always thought of a career as a means to an end, a way to earn money so that the rest of my life would be supported. I never thought of a career as something to enjoy or love.

I had to figure out how to tell my mom. She would inevitably catch on, but it would be better to just avoid that confusion when she thought I was a computer science major but all my assignments were essays.

I was nervous. There were so many things going through my head. Would she tell me it was a bad idea? That I shouldn’t have switched? Maybe she would tell me that she wasn’t paying for any of it anymore. That would be okay. I could work with that. It would suck, but it could work.

On the other hand, she might not care. She might say, “do what makes you happy,” she had changed a lot after dad died, anyway. She thought of happiness in her own career. Left jobs that didn’t make her happy. Why would mine be any different? Why should it? I want to be happy, I want to do
something that inspires me, something that has an affect on people. I can’t just sit in a lab or an office all day and get by and make money, I thought.

“Hey, so I’m thinking about switching my major,” I said in the silence.

“Yeah? Why?” she said. She always asked that question first, why would I do that?

“I think I want to do English.”

“Okay. You’ve always been good at English.”

And that was it. We had a conversation about what my career would be like, whether teaching was the right thing to go for. I told her about my major program, some of the classes, how exciting it was for me, and how sciences never felt like that. She was happy for me. That was all I needed.
Xander Auman is an English Writing major from Peterson, Minnesota. He is on the Satori poetry committee. He is excited to garner experience in publishing through working on Satori.

Kat Beekman is a Communication Arts and Literature (Teaching) major from Woodbury, Minnesota. She is on the Satori poetry committee. She is excited to see all the poetry and stories that everyone has written for the Satori.

Elizabeth Benfield is a Spanish and English Literature and Language major from La Crescent, Minnesota. She is on the Satori fiction/non-fiction committee. She is excited to learn about publishing and create collaborative work through the Satori.

Jessica Grafe is an English Writing major from Grand Meadow, Minnesota. She is on the Satori art and photography committee. She is excited to work with other students to create a makeshift publishing house through the Satori.

Jed Nelson is an English Writing major from Lyle, Minnesota. He is on the Satori fiction/non-fiction committee. He is excited to see all the stories, poems, and photographs that are submitted.

Kate Nissen is an English Literature and Language major from Hopkins, Minnesota. She is on the Satori fiction/non-fiction committee. She is excited to read and view the different submissions from all the talented students at WSU.

Draconian Onyx is a Technical Writing and Studio Arts major from Rochester, Minnesota. They are on the Satori art and photography committee. They are excited to work on the design of the Satori and see all the artwork created by WSU students.

Alex Peachey is a Communication Arts and Literature (Teaching) major from Mount Joy, Pennsylvania. They are on the Satori poetry committee. They are excited to get experience in publishing through the Satori.
Benjamin Rayburn is an English Writing major from San Diego, California. He is on the Satori art and photography committee. He is excited to see all the student submissions and discover other WSU students’ work.

Mandie Schmidt is an English Literature and Language major from Brain-erd, Minnesota. She is on the Satori fiction/non-fiction committee. She is excited to learn about the process of publishing through working on the Satori.

Kelly Stelzer is an English Literature and Language major from Morgan, Minnesota. She is on the Satori poetry committee. She is excited to work with a great team of people to make something they can all be proud of.

Kylie White is an English Writing major from Burnsville, Minnesota. She is on the Satori fiction/non-fiction committee. She is excited for the chance to see the other side of the publishing process through the Satori.

Jayde Yeates is a Communication Arts and Literature (Teaching) major from Crystal Lake, Illinois. She is on the Satori fiction/non-fiction committee. She is excited to work on the Satori as it gives her an open door into the world of publishing.
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<th>Authors &amp; Artists</th>
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<tr>
<td>Xander Auman</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Benfield</td>
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