

2022-2023

Unwound



Table of Contents

Creative Writing

Two Years	Renae Klassen	3-7
Strawberry Lemonade	Ellie Sheldahl	8-11
The Prison That Is My Mind	Selma Almodovar	11-16
A Hunt for Hope	Braxton Pavelko	16-19
Regular Life	Matthew Vespe	19-23
An Escape	Kayle Kunerth	26-28
The Royal Adventure	Kate Bucher	28-32
More than a Game	David Maakestad	32-35
I Found It Buried in the Woods	Johanna Petschke	35-38
One Last Ride	Audrey Drapeau	38-41
An Untypical Love Story	Ellie Plumhoff	41-46

Artwork

Image photographs taken by Brielle Vis
“Reaching Out” Katherine Lopez (Front Cover Image)
“Flower” Anaka Wede (Back Cover Image)

Steven Adams	HKee Htoo
Darrick Baartman	Angie Hurtado Rivera
Ian Barber	Kenia Jimenez
Samantha Brink	Erin Langendorfer
Daniel Castro Ramero	Katherine Lopez
Katrina Chaophasy	Jonas Molitor
Citlali Chavez Vega	Cassandra Mendez
Virgilio Cerda	Rachel Moore
Sergio Cerda Juarez	Carina Perez Garril
Taya Denroche	Chase Remme
Lizbeth Estrada	Aaliyah Schaffer
Tandia Faourous	Ellie Sheldahl
Cenaida Guzman	Sir Sola
Chastity Harris	Brielle Vis
Athaliah Htoo	Anaka Wede

Theater Production: *Mystery of Irma Vep*

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Introduction: Art and Vulnerability

Creativity is a conduit – an outlet for the range of emotions that cannot be described, only expressed. It’s a form of expression that requires an openness to the unknown. And all expressions demand risk, especially the risk of being vulnerable. Vulnerable to criticism, to misunderstanding and rejection, to the possibility of failure. In this way then, art and vulnerability are inextricably intertwined. The artist accepts, even embraces, this risk – a daunting but necessary task for creating honest works that reflect the truth. The truth of our experiences and our perceptions, the truth of us.

Ellie Sheldahl, “The Girl Who Dared to Dream”



Vulnerability requires courage because it involves facing our fears, exposing ourselves, overcoming challenges to pursue our passions and dreams. The artist must overcome the doubts and insecurities, must learn to grow from failures, from struggles and mistakes. With this understanding then, we can come to see art as an act of courage.

Because the artist knows that being vulnerable is what brings about transformation; art allows us to connect with others as they see themselves reflected in the work.

Erin Langendorfer, “Dreaming”

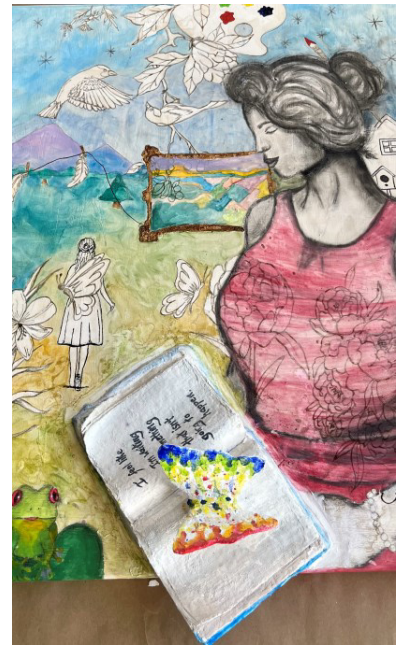
And this connection requires vulnerability as art invites others to

participate, to share in intimate experiences. Art fosters understanding, creating opportunities for empathy and compassion. It reaches out to others and inspires them to think, to feel, to act differently.

Taya Denroche, “Life and Death”



The artist knows that vulnerability is not weakness; it is strength. It is not a flaw; it is a gift. It is not a liability; it is an asset. It is not something to be avoided; it is something that must be embraced. Because vulnerability is what leads to meaningful, impactful, beautiful art. To create something meaningful, something impactful, something beautiful, artists are willing to expose their own vulnerabilities and to explore those of others.



As the poet and writer Ocean Vaughn has put it, “I’ve plagiarized my life to give you the best of me.” It is then, in the spirit of vulnerability that, through this journal, these students offer you the best of them.

Sincerely,

Gillian Singler

Gillian Singler
Creative Writing Instructor

Two Years

Rena Klassen

I toed the edge of the red roof with my leather boots, scowling down at the sleeping castle below me with my emerald eyes. The ground, far below, shimmered in the light of the moon as the summer wind shivered along the young grass and brushed through the jade leaves of the forest on the north side of the castle. On the south side, a city, wreathed with the lights of a thousand streetlamps, rose against the ebony sky. In the streets, a few lone cars meander along through the darkness as I attempt to beat back memories. Everything brings them to the surface; a picture, a word, a song from a movie I watched years ago. A tune lilts through my mind—what’s the song called? I don’t know. The words scrape through my mind painfully, leaving fresh scars in their wake. Music is supposed to be calming, I thought, not painful.

I am not a stranger to the dark.

A stranger to the dark. Ha. The dark welcomes me, embraces me, and protects me from everyone who wants to find me. If not for the friendly darkness, I’d have been found a long time ago and been dragged back to the life I burned to the ground. Idiots—they think I can go back to something that went up in smoke two years ago.

Hide away, they say:

He says. Always hiding me, wishing I wasn’t such an embarrassment. Wishing I had been a boy, or at least a more tractable girl. Now he searches, but the girl he looks for is dead, murdered by her own hand.

No one will love you as you are. . .

Don’t I know it.

I’ve learned to be ashamed of all my scars.

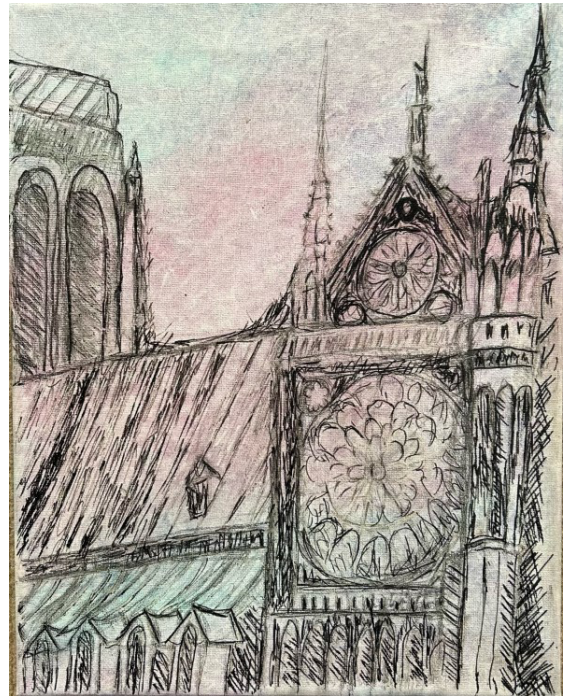
Burns, angry red scars, writhe from my jaw line to about three inches below my shoulder. A knife wound, a jagged and uneven line between my eyebrow and my hairline, perches smugly next to my eye. Countless tiny marks, left by long forgotten cuts, adorn my thin body. Visible proof of my mistakes.

Run away, they say:

Well, I did. I ran away; ran so far that only one person could drag me back, and he thinks I’m dead. I’d appreciate it if the rest of those losers would stop hunting me down. This is what they wanted, after all.

We don’t want your broken parts.

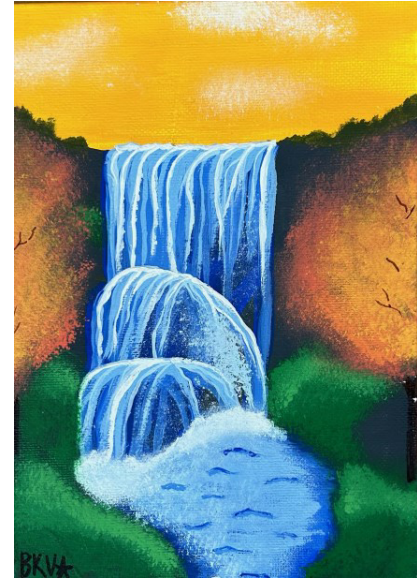
Anaka Wede, “Power of Drawing”



I closed my eyes, pain cascading behind my eyelids in waves of red and grey. So much brokenness, unspeakable brokenness— why is the world like this? No one deserves to live with the shattered pieces of the past. Their sharp edges are enough to destroy the tiny shards that are left!

A picture, taken by my mother, appears in my inner vision. She had snuck up behind Luke and me when we were in the middle of doing something that we definitely weren't supposed to do. She had cleared her throat, making both of us jump and whirl toward her, at which point she had taken the picture. In the photo, we are framed perfectly by a fancy tapestry hanging on the wall behind us, which accentuated the torch visible in Luke's hand, the smoke twisting upward from the very expensive mahogany table behind me, and the matching guilty looks that we were giving her. She loved that picture so much; she said it captured our personalities perfectly, whatever that's supposed to mean. Despite Luke's and my objections, she set that picture as the home screen of her phone and proudly showed the photo to everyone.

Brielle Vis, "Nature's Beauty"



That was five years ago, before everything fell apart.

Another song— what's it called? "In My Dreams," I think. Yes, that's it— shivers through my mind. This one doesn't leave new scars, at least, but the words open up old scars that I thought had healed.

You don't know what it's like not to know who you are,

Names. So many names: Lily, Sandra, Yelena, Lyrica, and at least four others. Which one am I? I invented Sandra Blade, thief and hacker, relative of none. I made Lily Corson, spy with attachments to no one. And I wear Yelena Therowyc, criminal inventor. I have others, too, names that belong to me but don't match who I am. All of them are me, yet I am none of them. They are all masks, charades that can be put on and taken off at will.

And Lyrica King. . . she is dead. I destroyed her myself. She, the twin sister of Lucas King and daughter of King Gregor, is no more. I destroyed her. She is gone. Dead.

To have lived in the shadows,

Searchers: looking for me, the girl that lived in the shadows. Soldiers: combing the land, searching for the missing princess. Spies: tracing webs through every net they know, searching for the stealthy spy. Kings: shouting in anger at their subordinates, searching for the secrets that disappeared into the shadows.

To have traveled this far!

Shadowed travel; I smuggle myself wherever I wish. I know this land, and it knows me. It accepts me gently, taking pity on a lone girl.

I've seen flashes of fire;

Fire, bursting from my creation. Fire, burning through stone and wood and greenery. Fire, evaporating as swiftly as it erupted, leaving the anger of the disturbed night behind it. A blaze of flames, flashing in all directions—the night turned red in the fury of that blaze.



Heard the echoes of screams!

“Get out of my castle and never come back! I have *NO DAUGHTER!*”

No, no, no, no, no. I fell to my knees, pressing my knuckles into my forehead. “Think about something else.” I muttered, my black hair falling around my face as I stared at the flat stone roof beneath my feet. “*Anything* else.” Newspaper articles from three years ago, with headlines blaring up at everyone, smirk in my vision.

HKee Htoo, “Castle Walls”

BLOOD IN THE PALACE!

Blood everywhere. An entire curtain-lined hall, drenched in the red liquid of sixteen dead individuals. It took three weeks to get rid of all that blood—and even then, the painstaking efforts of a hundred servants couldn’t remove the crimson stains from that hall.

QUEEN CATHERINE IS DEAD!

Fifteen dead guards and one dead queen, lying in pools of their own blood. They had been murdered silently; the killer (or killers) had not used guns. Luke and I had seen the bodies, even though the guards had tried to keep us away. We had needed to know the truth—if our mother really was dead, we wanted to know how she had died.

MYSTERIOUS MURDERER ESCAPES!

“He got away.” I snarled, glaring at the innocent trees below me. He lived, after killing the queen of Amoria and leaving all three of her children without a mother. The older one didn’t mind very much; he had always been too busy studying to spend any time with her anyway. But for Luke and me, it was like we were orphans at the age of sixteen.

My eyes narrowed and I clenched my fists until my knuckles turned white. Whatever monster had *ruthlessly* murdered—no. Don’t think about that. I *can’t* think about that! WHY can’t I suppress these memories? Why can’t I get them out of my head? Fury pulsed through my brain, like it does every time I think about my mother’s death. So much brokenness already existed in the world before she was murdered—does there really need to be more?

I stood up, forcing the memories to retreat for at least a second. My restless feet paced through the darkness on the edge of the roof, passing so close to the edge that my leather boots scraped against the balcony rising from the very end of the roof. The view below me was familiar; I had grown up with it, after all. Technically, I was never supposed to come back, of course, but I didn’t plan to be here long enough for anyone to find me. I was

only going to be here long enough to make sure that Luke got back safely. He always snuck out of the castle on our birthday, and there were rumors going around that someone wanted him dead.

Another memory rose up: Luke and I were scrambling up a maple tree the day after our thirteenth birthday, the spoils from our excursion safely stored in our pockets. The sky was blue and cloudless, the wind was still and calm, and everything seemed perfect. Luke, who had started climbing a second before I did, reached our favorite branch first and grinned down at me.

“Hurry up, why don’t you? Lyra! I don’t know why it’s taking you so long, but I’ve been up here so long I could take a nap!”

“Oh, shut up.” I snapped, whacking his foot out of my way. “You’ve only been up there for, like two seconds.”

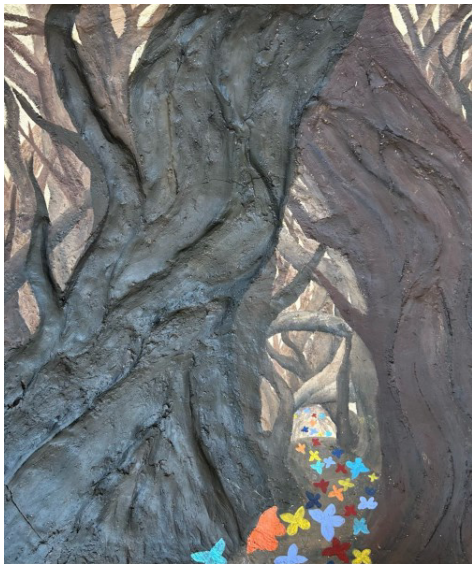
“That’s plenty long enough.” Luke agreed, scooting out so that there was room on the branch for me. “Hey, look what I got last night! I dare you to eat it.”

I glanced over. He had what looked like a squashed cicada in his hand and was offering it to me. “Ew, no. If you want to eat it, be my guest, but I am not putting that thing anywhere close to my mouth.” I told him, shaking my head.

He shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He tossed it into his mouth calmly, as if he was eating candy instead of what looks like a squashed bug. “I think it’s licorice,” he informed me, pulling a bag of more squashed cicadas from his pocket. “Kind of a letdown— if you’re going to make candy June bugs, why not make them out of good candy?”

I rolled my eyes. “You seriously bought bugs made of—”

Taya Denroche, “Beauty in the Dark”



“Lucas and Lyrica King! Get out of that tree right now!” Both of us jumped at the voice from below, but, fortunately, neither of us fell out of the tree. After regaining our balance, we peered down, to see who was yelling, just in case it was actually somebody that we listened to. It was just our older brother, though, so we felt free to ignore him.

“Go away, Alex!” I shouted, leaning out of the tree and hanging onto one of the surprisingly strong maple twigs. “Don’t you have some sort of tutor you should be listening to?”

“I could ask you the same thing.” Alexander called up irately, scowling. “Get down here, or I’ll tell mom that you’re climbing trees instead of studying like you’re supposed to!”

Luke glanced down at him. “I suppose he’s not lying.” He told me, shoving his bag of candy bugs into the hollow that only we knew about.

“Yeah, probably not.” I sighed. “I guess we’ll have to wait until Mr. Tattlepants isn’t around before trying this again.” I stepped towards him, hoping to make my own deposit to the First Bank of Syrup. But. . . my feet didn’t land right.

My shoes slipped on the bark, sliding across the rough branch. At the same moment, the twig tore itself from my grip, annoyed at being my support. My arms flew out, searching in vain for something to slow my fall, but there was nothing there. The twig had straightened to its original position, and nothing else was in the vicinity. There was nothing to catch hold of.

Luke glanced up and saw me slipping; his eyes widened in immediate understanding. He lunged forward, grabbing a steady branch and my wrist at the same time. His quick action saved my life that day—we were high enough in the tree that a fall could have easily killed me.

Taya Denroche, "Take to Nature"

As the memory faded, I opened my eyes and looked up at the moon. "I guess that, in spite of my best efforts, Lyrica King isn't quite dead." I admitted to the white sphere, lowering my eyes and watching as Luke emerged from the forest below and snuck towards the castle. "If she was, these memories wouldn't haunt me, and I could let Luke die without caring." My eyes followed Luke until he was safely within the castle.



"And since Lyrica King is *not* dead," I decided, "Anyone who touches Lucas King will answer to Sandra Blade, Lily Corson, and Yelena Therowyc. I will *destroy* anyone who hurts him."

I am still not a stranger to the dark; I can never be, but now I have a reason to live there. Somebody wants Luke dead? Fine. They live in the shadows, too, where I am queen. I, Lyrica King, will hunt them down like the monsters that they are, and I will make them lament even *planning* to hurt my brother. I will ruin them.



Rachel Moore, "Death at Midnight"

Fire away, but today, I won't let the shame sink in.

This is ME.

Strawberry Lemonade

Ellie Sheldahl

Erin Langendorfer "Bubble Dreams"

As the sun was setting to the west side of Florida, I sat on Cocoa Beach, facing east, amused by the beautiful rings of flamingo-pink and gold in the sky. As I looked down, I could see a cruise ship settling on the curvature of the Earth. To my right was an older couple with leathery, tan skin, enjoying the light cool breeze that followed the slow disappearance of light. On the shore, a toddler with blue, shark-printed swim shorts played with his baby sister. He would pretend to fall in the water to make her laugh and then repeat this trick. I closed



my eyes and listened to the wind brush through the sharp grass behind me, the waves, a soothing crash, and the giggles of children, elders, and friends coming together. I fluttered my eyes open, taking a deep breath of salty, humid air, viewing people starting bonfires by the pier to my left. About a fourth mile away, the pier stretched over the water to a hut in the ocean, tiki torches lighting up the dimming evening. I felt like someone was watching me, but a lot of people were out, and no one could harm me here.

Beads of water slid down the outside of the glass cup sitting on the wooden beach chair as I reached down and took a drink of my strawberry lemonade. I sat, motionless, thinking about the other day. My family and I went biking around the different parks and bridges by the ocean. We thought that there would be more trails, but there weren't. With no food or extra water, sweat beading on our foreheads, we moaned and groaned about why we decided to do it in the first place. Remembering all the jokes we made out of it, I let out a slight giggle as I closed my sleepy eyes, and everything went black.

I felt the twitch of my nose, my fingers and toes regain feeling, and a splintering pain under my back as I awakened from some kind of dream. As soon as I heard traffic, the tires rolling underneath me, a honk of a horn, and the shaking of a vehicle over a bumpy road, I woke up, wide-eyed, and in total dismay. Not only was I laying on some kind of metal tool, but my head ached with dizziness. I had to get out of here. My claustrophobia sank in, and utter fear gripped my chest. Where am I? What happened? I was in the trunk of a car in complete blackness. It felt like a box closing in on me. My body swayed left to right as I felt the vehicle chase around some fast corners. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream, but what good would that have done? I had to remain quiet and develop a plan to get out of here.

I took a couple deep breaths, looked around the dark trunk, and tried to think of how to exit. It reminded me of the time I was trapped in my friend John's dark gray Chevy Malibu the summer before.

We sat in his car, staring at the lake back home, talking about all things—maybe even too many things. John listened to me and made me feel heard in a time when I was mentally ill. Depression and grief overcame me. I tolerated some of the things he did that made me uncomfortable in exchange for companionship. He laid his hand across my thigh again, and the same intolerable feeling overcame my chest. I finally snapped, "Don't touch me!" I never made a scene about these incidents.

“Come on. It’s not that big of a deal,” he pleaded. I sat, flustered, in his car, not knowing what to say. I looked out the window to see the clouds loom over the lake. The rainy weather forecasted smelled humid and fishy with notes of sugar maple and balsam fir trees.

“Well, you need to stop doing that.” The wind was bending the trees every which direction. I looked down to see that the door was locked. Out of guilt and fear, I said, “I’m sorry. It’s fine. Just forget about it.” His car became my entrapment when I realized who he was, a scar hidden in my uncontrollable nerves.

Virgilio Cerda, “Trunk Vision”

In the trunk, I turned to face the back end. I saw a glowing button that looked like the only predictable thing to open the trunk from the inside. It didn’t sound like the car was moving too fast yet, and we couldn’t be too far from the condominium in which I stayed. I pushed it quick, vaulted out of the trunk and began to run without hesitation, my legs in numbing pain. I heard the screeching of brakes behind me, and the slam of a door. I didn’t want to look back. I couldn’t look back. All I saw in front of me was a stop sign and an endless country road, heatwaves in the distance, with nothing else in sight besides dried grass, tumbleweed, and a couple mountains to the left. There was also an old-fashioned gas station about a mile up ahead. I was still wearing my American flag bikini with no shoes on, my feet starting to scorch from the hot pavement. I heard running footsteps behind me, and as I reached for my last breath of hope, a man’s hand with a cloth wrapped around my face, holding me still as I fell back to darkness.



Who would want to hurt me? I don’t keep many (if any) friends at home, and I always try to be polite to everyone. Sure, I’ve had my battles with girls at school, but they would never kidnap me. Maybe this is all just a misunderstanding. Maybe this person doesn’t know me at all.

As my eyes started to haze open, I felt the soft linen of bedsheets on my bare body, and the morning light shined through the open window to the left of the door in front of the bed. The blue, sheer curtains blew in the soft breeze, and the bright light illuminated off the soft pink walls. If it were a dream, I wouldn’t have felt the need to wake up, but the faint memories I had of the last twenty-four hours shook my mind into a panic. I tried to get up, but my chest, hips, ankles, and wrists were strapped down under the sheets. I shook the whole bed trying to break free as I heard footsteps in the hallway outside the door. I froze, holding my breath for a glimpse second as a man walked through the door.

“Oh, hush. Hush. Hush. Did you miss me?” the man said with the same condescending smile I recognized all too well. Panic. Fear. Memories I tried to erase came flooding back. I clenched my jaw. “Well, don’t look so happy,” John said sarcastically.

“What do you want?” I muttered through my teeth. He laughed.

“Ashley, what do I want?” He pointed his hands toward himself. “You didn’t really think that you could just spend hours talking to me all summer and lead me on and then ditch me just like that, did you?” He came close to my face as I started squirming again.

“Where am I? You’re not gonna get away with this,” I said, my voice shaking.

“Oh honey, after all those times you lied to your parents and snuck away to see me, they’re going to think that you ran away. They’re going to think that you want to be here with me, or they’ll simply get sick of looking for you. But don’t you worry darling, soon enough you’ll realize that I’m doing you a favor. You’re going to love it here, because you love me, and I’ll give you everything you need.” He brushed his hand against my face.

“I will never love you,” I snapped while squirming under the tension of the straps.

“Hush!” He grabbed my jaw. “You don’t love me?” The heat of his minty breath brushed my face as his brows creased. “You really shouldn’t say things like that, Ashley,” he said through pinched lips, his nose twitching.

“All that time we spent together. Talking. You came to me for everything. I let you in my house—in my bedroom. God, the way you smiled and laughed. You looked so good laying there. You wouldn’t have come to me if you didn’t love me.”

“Let me go.” I was crying. “You disgust me!” I shouted and then started screaming, “Help!” He got angry, turned around, and quickly came back, tying a thick piece of cloth around my mouth. Then he left and slammed the door behind him.

I wailed myself to sleep, and when I woke up, the house was silent. I could hear the clock ticking above the door, my stomach growling. I hadn’t eaten in over a day. Is he going to starve me to death? I slowly pushed the cloth out of my mouth and began wiggling under the straps. I thought I might be able to slide under the strap around my chest if I squeezed into the bed enough. Right then, I heard the creaking of floorboards coming toward the door, so I laid still, fake sleeping. The door creaked open.



Erin Langendorfer, “Truth”

“Ashley? I brought you some food,” he remarked kindly. I remained unreactive. “Ashley?” He nudged my body, my eyes opening. “I brought you some food. Now, I will unstrap your hands and chest while I watch you eat, and if you think you can do anything stupid, then think again because I will put you right back to sleep.” I nodded. He set the tray of food on the nightstand, pulled the sheets down to my hands, and slowly unstrapped the buckle around my bust without caution as to where he placed his hands. God, why didn’t I put more clothes on before heading back to the beach? He unbuckled my wrists finally enabling me to bend my arms and stretch. I was stiff from holding them outstretched for so long. He sat in the rocking chair in the corner as I grabbed the tray and immediately downed the water. I hadn’t realized how thirsty I had gotten. He knew the foods I liked. Sweet potatoes, green beans, and salmon was a meal I had told him about once last summer when my parents had made it for me. I stuffed my face with all the food while he sat, watching me.

When I finished eating, I felt dizzy and drugged. “Did you put something in my food?” I asked. Things started spinning and then I sank into darkness again. I could see glimpses of him coming to the bed, grabbing my food tray, and unstrapping the rest of me. I was free and trapped, and I was sleepy and hazy. He shut the curtains, came back over to the bed, and plunged toward me. He whispered, “Ashley? What are you doing out here?”

Erin Langendorfer, "Digging up the Past"



everyone else leave without me noticing? What was in that strawberry lemonade? I'm never drinking that again.

"Ashley, what are you doing out here?" A kind voice echoed.

Right then, I woke up clenching my chest, gasping for air, heart racing. I was free. I was never happier to be awake, sitting by the ocean. God, what a nightmare that was. I looked back toward the condominium with much relief.

"Honey?" she asked in sudden worry. I was still on another planet, looking toward the ocean, back to the beach, and then again at the ocean. I grasped the thick, wooden chair arms, still breathing heavily, my mind still scarred by the things John did last summer.

"Honey? Were you out here all night?" my mom placed her hand on my shoulder as I flinched from the repressed scars in my mind.

"Uh. Yeah, I guess so," I muttered slowly as my eyes became half-moons. The water was reminiscent of the peace I felt before this nightmare. The sun was a crescent along the horizon, lighting up the beaches and vacation resorts. How could I have possibly fallen asleep out here? How did

The Prison That Is My Mind

Selma Almodovar

On a day like today, I thought the city would be quieter, people opting to stay inside as much as possible, but I forget that this is New York City. The grey clouds darkening the sky, hurling their crystal spheres of water towards the ground, stops no one from going about their business. The sidewalks are crowded with umbrellas and shuffling feet, everyone bowing their heads and pushing through the blanket of water to get to their jobs or early morning appointments.

But not me. The rain is my friend, and I tilt my head up to receive its tender caress on my face. The world moves on around me, too busy to stop and admire the rain, but I stay in place, eyes closed, allowing the rain to run down my slim frame. Suddenly, I feel the absence of the rain pelting my body, I open my eyes in confusion, and am greeted with the underside of an umbrella that has been placed over me.

Katrina Chaophasy, "Self Portrait"



“What in the world are you doing standing out here in the rain like this?!” Shouts an older, female voice.

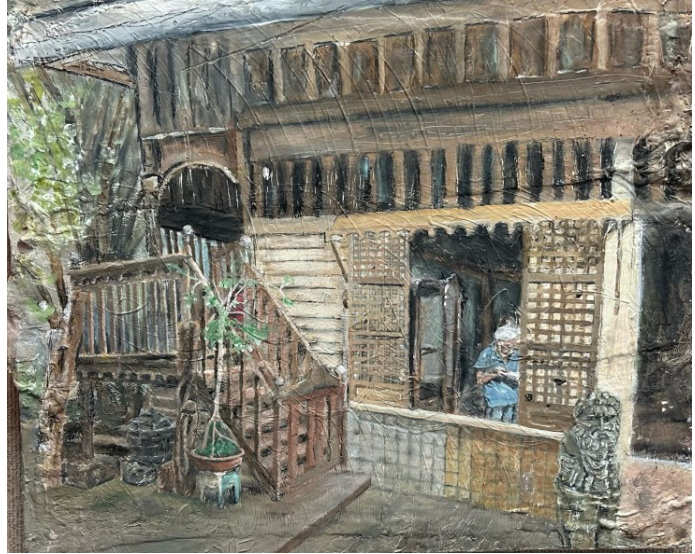
I turn and look into the fiery eyes of the umbrella owner, and a smile replaces the look of confusion.

“Sorry Linda,” I reply, “I couldn’t help it. The rain is so beautiful, and I love the feel of it on my skin.”

“The rain will wash away your skin if you keep standing out here like this,” Linda huffs. “Come inside and I’ll make you a cup of hot chocolate to warm yourself.”

Cassandra Mendez, “Hidden Treasures”

I follow Linda into the small café, my original destination before I became enraptured by the rain. The smell of coffee and spices wrap me in an embrace, like the rain had done but warmer this time. Linda gracefully weaves her way through tables and behind the counter and begins to brew her concoction as I walk to a table in a shadowy corner of the café. I shed my now soaked coat and place it in a chair, then sit in the chair next to it, crossing my legs, and leaning back to observe the rest of the customers in the café.



It must be a slow day with only a few wanderers stumbling into the hidden treasure that is the café. A man wearing a fedora and writing furiously in a small notebook sits at a booth, while a couple tables away, two high school girls swirl iced lattes and giggle about something on one of their phones. There is a woman, reading a book, with a man, wearing an expensive looking suit with gold cuffs, seeming to be in a heated conversation with someone on the phone, sitting across from her. Then there is me, a dripping mess, making puddles on the tiled floor.

At that moment, I look over at the counter and see Linda, with a steaming mug in one hand and a plate with a scone in the other, winding through the tables to make her way over to me. She carefully sets the scone and mug in front of me, then takes a seat in the chair across from me. I grab the mug and sip the hot chocolate, closing my eyes and savoring the feeling of the liquid filling all the crevices in my body to warm me.

“Thank you,” I say, as I set the mug down and smile at Linda.

“So?” she asks, tilting her head, her eyes shimmering with concern, “What did Dr. Florez say?”

“Oh, you know, just the same as always,” I reply, looking down to avoid her eyes and busy myself by stirring the hot chocolate with the fork meant for the scone. “He said I should go for walks and listen to music, or paint, do something to keep my mind busy. He’s going to up my Haloperidol prescription.”

“And how do you feel?”

I look up at her, she’s smiling, soft and open, the kind of smile that makes me believe there could truly be peace in this world.

I smile back at her and tilt my head to match her posture. “Fine.”

Linda raises her eyebrows, signaling that she doesn’t believe me, but instead of prodding me for my deepest darkest thoughts, she only shakes her head, wisps of hair that look like starlight falling and framing her face, and chuckles.

“You go shower now. Take your hot chocolate and scone up with you, and when you’re done you can come help me in the kitchen. I got some work for you to keep your mind busy.”

Linda stands, strokes my dark curls, kisses my forehead, then turns and heads back behind the counter. I watch her as she leaves, the voices in my head screaming for me to make a dash for the door back into the rain. I clench my fists, squeeze my eyes shut, and count to ten, taking deep, deep breaths like Dr. Florez instructed me. I subdue the voices away, and open my eyes, unclenching my fists. I see Linda staring at me; her expression is blank for a moment, then she smiles and nods to the stairs leading upstairs to the apartment. I stand, draping my coat over my shoulder, grab the plate and mug, and head for the stairs, praying I can make it up the steps before the voices win and I run back into the rain.

I climb the staircase and walk down the hall to my room. I throw my sopping coat on a chair as I enter, the weak-gray light from the window tints the walls and décor in shadows. I set my mug and scone on my bedside table and begin to shed my water-saturated clothes. I make my way to the attached bathroom and hop in the shower, turning the handle to its hottest setting. Cold water blasts my skin at first, but it begins to warm and then burn. I let the water soak my skin, letting it fill the deepest places of my chilled body.

When I step out of the shower, the steam-filled air welcomes me to its atmosphere. I wrap a towel around my wet but warm body and slip across the tiled floor to the mirror. I begin running my hands through my hair, wads of deep brown strands of hair coming loose and clumping in my hands.

“I have to admit,”” comes an amused voice behind me. “That lie you told Linda was well done.”

I whirl around and see a girl, no older than 17, with folded arms, leaning against the wall in the corner of the bathroom, smirking at me. Her black-dyed hair fell beyond her waist, framing her face, caked in too much foundation that didn’t match her original skin tone, her lips drenched in black lipstick, eyeliner, and mascara, nearly hiding her eyes behind their dark, ominous color. Her clothes matched her dark makeup: she wore a black t-shirt and black skinny jeans, wrapped in a belt with a skull as the buckle, spiked combat boots, a black choker, and numerous bracelets that chained her arms. She is the goth version of me.

“Hi, Beth, nice to see you too, and I didn’t lie,” I mumble, turning back to face the mirror.

Beth scoffs, “Telling a half-truth is just a way to justify lying.”

“I don’t get your point,” I say, brushing my hands through my hair again. I glance at Beth’s reflection in the mirror, and I see her roll her eyes.

“Oh please, skipping once means skipping twice, and sooner or later, Linda will find out, and then the doctors will decide you’re unstable, because you can’t be responsible enough to show up to your appointments, and then they’ll send you to a loony bin.”

“I think you’re being a bit melodramatic, don’t you?” I ask as I wrap my combed hair in a hair turban.

“And I don’t think you’re taking this seriously enough,” Beth glares at me. “If they send you away, you drag me down too, and I can’t go to a psych ward because you’re too incompetent to take care of yourself.”

“Excuse me?” I turn to look at her, rage sparking in my eyes. I shouldn’t be angry, not at Beth, but I’m in a nasty mood today.

“I’m sorry if you’re too self-absorbed to realize that there’s more at stake than your stupid mental health, and how your life sucks because you hear voices that you can just ignore,” Beth unfolds her arms and places them on her hips in defiance.

“And I’m sorry that I have to deal with an idiotic, wannabe vampire who doesn’t realize she depends on me to even exist!” My anger is about to overflow, and I know I should calm down, but my rage blocks all rational thought. Maybe it’s the steam from the shower or my imagination, but I feel hot and stifled, and suddenly it becomes hard to breathe.

“Well, that’s not my fault,” Beth straightens her shoulders and puffs out her small chest. “Maybe if you’d actually take your meds you wouldn’t have to deal with this wannabe vampire.”

“Shut up,” I snarl.

“Oh? Feeling a bit bold today? What happened to shutting your eyes and counting to ten? Maybe then I’ll go away,” Beth sings mockingly.

“I’m warning you, Beth, don’t mess with me right now.”

“Or what? You’ll take your meds and make me go away for real?”

“I said, shut up!” I scream, spinning around and slamming my fist into the mirror. Shards of glass fly in multiple directions, and I raise my arms to protect my face as I fall back, landing on the tiled floor, a shock of pain rocketing up my hip. I cry out in agony, tears streaming down my face, staying still so as not to injure myself with any of the glass shards.

I look up at where Beth was standing moments ago. She is gone. An emptiness creeps into my chest as I realize what I’ve done.

“Beth,” I whisper. “Beth? Please come back, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” My voice cracks and sobs rack my body. “Please, Beth, I need you.”

Silence, the only voice left is my sobs. All I can do is lay on the bathroom floor in pain, waiting for Linda to find me.

I watch her as she wraps gauze around my injured hand. Linda says nothing, and she hasn’t said anything since she found me lying on the bathroom floor. I wish she would yell at me and scold me for doing such a reckless action, but instead, my scolding comes from her silence. It is her way of signaling that I should reflect on my actions. However, she knows too well the scoldings I receive in my mind, and perhaps to her, that is more than enough.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur. Linda does not pause to look at me, she simply finishes tapping the gauze in place.

“I know,” she sighs, packaging away the first aid kit. She stands from her chair beside my bed and picks up the kit, then she looks at me and gives me a small smile. “Rest. You’ve had a long day.”



I watch as she moves across the room to the open door, walking through the frame and then turning back to close it. I fall back onto the covers of my bed, curling into a ball. I would cry, but I left all my tears on the bathroom floor among the glass. Instead, I reflect, reflect on the life I have lived for the past five years and the actions I took. My conclusion is that it wasn’t my fault. The action of slamming my fist into the mirror was me, but the fault lies somewhere else. The fault is not Beth either. The fault is the voices. Yes, that was it. It was the voices’ fault. In the five years that had passed, since I had started to hear the voices, I had never once thought that the voices were to blame.

Kenia Jimenez, “Sleeping Beauty”

I was 16 when I first heard *Them*. Looking back, I thought that it was normal, that this was the self-conscious era that all teenagers go through. The voices that creep up on people and say unkind things. *You are worthless, unlovable, disgusting, a failure, a mistake*, the list goes on for multiple pages. At first, I could tolerate it, I could shut *Them* out with music and sing at the top of my lungs to drown out *Their* harsh words. They would scream as loud as *They* could, but I would only increase the volume on my phone and sing louder. Unfortunately, the volume had its limit, and after a while, the voices became too loud, and I could not drown *Them* out any longer.

It was Beth who made it better. She was comforting and understanding and held me when *They* would bombard me with *Their* hateful words. Beth was the only kind voice among all the others that lived in my mind. Whenever the voices were especially nasty, Beth and I would run, run as fast as we could in no particular direction, trying to escape *Them*. Eventually, I became tired of running and learned that, try as I might, I couldn’t run from my mind. I was trapped, a prisoner in my own body, bending to the rules that my uninvited guests had made. I began to listen to *Them*, do what *They* said. They told me to hurt myself, starve myself, break my phone, and humiliate myself. I did all these things and more.

One day *They* told me to die. Some part of me wanted to live, but the truth was that more than wanting to live, I wanted to die. I would finally be free from *Them*; it was my escape. This was the last thing *They* would ever make me do. The voices that had tormented me for so long would be no more. So, I did my research and chose the way I would die.

I decided that I would climb to the roof of the tallest building I could find and jump off. I fantasized the rush of adrenaline I would feel as I fell before smacking the ground and ending all the pain and torment I had been subjected to. I wasn’t sure if I should pick a certain day such as Monday or Thursday, so instead I waited for a day when the voices were at *Their* worst. It ended up landing on a Friday night. The sky was clear, and I could see stars here and there speckled across the black abyss.

I remember standing at the edge of the building, willing myself to jump off and end it all. I had finally mustered up the courage to take the leap when I heard Beth’s voice behind me.

“I don’t want to die.”

I turned and looked at her; she was crying, and she stared at me with pleading eyes. All it took were those five words from her to make me break so easily. I ran away from the ledge and into her arms, wrapping her in a hug, both of us sobbing. It wasn’t that I was scared to die or that I didn’t want to, but it was because I realized that I wouldn’t just be killing myself, I would be bringing Beth with me. I knew that I couldn’t do that to her; she didn’t deserve to die, so I chose to live for Beth.

I knew something had to change. I could not keep living the way I had before. So, I told Linda everything that I had been battling. We went to doctor appointments and therapy sessions, and soon I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Since then I have been taking medication and seeing a therapist, trying to fight the voices that had taken over my life without asking. It was hard and I still struggled to fight them off. The medication helped, but the side effects were worse, so I stopped taking them. I knew it was wrong and I should say something, but I was scared— and now look what silent suffering had done to me.

I had promised Beth that I would live, but I wasn’t living— nor was I surviving. Surviving is what you call someone who knows that their reason for continuing is the deep knowledge that they want to live. I, on the other hand, like to call my situation “not dying.” I do not die because I must be alive for Beth, but Beth is not me. She is the defense my mind has constructed to make me feel less alone. I am grateful, but Beth is not me, she does not represent what my life is. I do not want to live in the same way someone stranded on a deserted island wants to.

Instead, it has become a game, a game of life or death. Every day I wake up, the game starts over and it does not end until the night when I enter my slumber. There is only one rule, and that is to make it through the day without dying by my own hand. I have not lost, yet. After four years of playing this game, I have grown tired; how much longer must I play? Would Beth forgive me if I decided to lose? There is much I would lose, but how much more would I win?



Ian Barber, “Gloomy Day on the Rocks”

A Hunt for Hope
Braxton Pavelko

The moon glowed over the damp, leaf-covered ground. Fog filled the marsh and crevasses of the valley that overlooked a large oak grove. Not a sound filled the crisp mourning air except the roar of a black 1972 chevy crawling down the soupy gravel road, and in it was a young man named Leo. This October morning was the final opportunity for Leo to harvest a whitetail buck he nicknamed Hope.

Katherine Lopez, “I Don’t Want to Die”



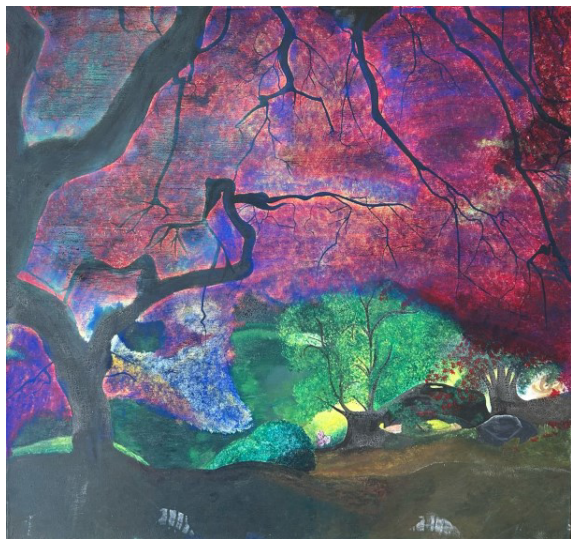
Hope had consumed Leo's mind nearly every minute of every day. Its thick, dark-chocolate rack and all sixteen of its sharpened tines were painted into Leo's memory. Leo had laid eyes on this magnificent animal only once before; although, he felt like he knew Hope like a brother. Leo passed up some great bucks throughout the season, but he stayed optimistic about getting a shot off at Hope, even on this final day of the season.

The old truck came to a halt at the end of the drive-in. Leo put the truck in park and hung his head, knowing that this hunt would end like all the others, but a slight glimmer of hope filled his heart. This hope is what drove him to hunt this very grove day after day.

Stepping down from the rusted truck, Leo stared out into the vacant morning darkness and pondered the thought of Hope staring back at him. Leo slung his hunting bag over his back, tightened the laces on his worn boots, and retrieved his bow and arrows from the bed of his truck. The morning dew had dampened the leaves on the ground, making for a quiet walk to Leo's favorite tree stand. The creatures of the night rustled about in the tall grass. Shadows crept around every corner in the empty darkness. Wide-eyed, Leo felt his way through the woods to a lone tree that overlooked the tall, swampy grass. Moving as quietly as possible, Leo climbed to his tree stand, hanging twenty feet off the ground. The tree stand creaked and groaned, making known its aging joints to any creature with able ears.

After settling into his stand, Leo nocked a special arrow that he dedicated specifically for Hope. Before the season started, he carved "Hope" onto the side of it. The razor-sharp blade at the tip hungered for a taste of Hope's blood.

After an hour of sitting in the eerie darkness, Leo began to imagine creatures coming to life on the ground beneath him; his mind played tricks on him in the dark. Every moving creature he saw had the capability of being Hope, although none even contained a pulse. Calming his breath, Leo realized that the creatures he saw were nothing more than grass swaying to the gentle morning breeze.



Cenaida Guzman, "Perched"

Cenaida Guzman, "Tree"



Light peaked over the horizon. The sun's rays began to wake the animals of the grove. The birds perched in the bare branches of the trees sang their melodic songs, and one after another, they took to the sky. With the grim cover of the night taken by the rising sun, Leo was able to see his surroundings for what they truly were. To his left, he could see a trickling spring-fed crick running along the bottom of the valley that poured into a weed-filled pond straight out from his tree. Off to his right, he could still see the morning fog hovering over the swamp, created by the overflowing pond. Behind him was the dense oak grove that cast a shadow over the prairie surrounding the forested area.

Massive abrasions were engraved in nearly every tree that Leo could see. He knew that the only animal in this area capable of causing such catastrophic destruction to the bases of these large oak trees was the animal he was here to kill. Hope was the dominant deer in this area, and he made sure to show it. With the tremendous amount of signs that Hope left behind, Leo found it hard to believe he hadn't been able to frequently see Hope, much less harvest him.

It didn't take long for Leo to spot his first group of deer. Bobbing their heads through the tall grass, a mother doe and two fawns stopped only a few feet from his stand. The mother paused, reached her snout in the air, and noticed an unfamiliar scent. The speckled fawns stared confused at each other, wondering what force had alerted their mother's behavior. The mother doe stomped her front hoof deep into the soil, released a loud high-pitch blow, and stomped again. Leo crinkled his eyebrows. "God damnit," he whispered to himself. Not knowing what the unfamiliar smell was, the doe could sense something was wrong. She took a skittish step backward, called to her fawns, and leapt back for the safety of the tall grass.

With the mother doe and her fawns out of his sight and the crisp fall breeze blowing at his face, Leo gazed at the V-shape of the migrating geese flying overhead. Their recognizable honks spilled over the land, making known their departure for warmer weather. A slight smirk filled Leo's face at the sight of the parade in the sky. Even the cackling geese couldn't distract him from thinking about Hope. He looked down at his arrow, gave a slight sigh and muttered to himself, "Where are ya, Hope?"

The sky soon filled with an ash-gray blanket of clouds, stopping the rising sun from heating the cool fall air. Becoming doubtful of Hope making an appearance, Leo questioned if he would ever see the magnificent buck again. Even if he didn't get to lay eyes on Hope again, he was thankful for the hope this deer gave him. "Maybe not today but possibly tomorrow," was a common phrase Leo found himself saying after every hunt. That's what gave Hope his name: the hope to see, chase, and eventually harvest this spectacular buck. It wasn't the animal itself that gave meaning to Leo, it was the desire to pursue and hunt this phantom of a deer he called Hope.

After the morning activity had passed, Leo began to pack up his hunting supplies. As he was packing in the stand, he heard leaves rustling about behind him in the oak grove. Certain the noise was just a squirrel, Leo slowly poked his head around the tree to confirm his assumption. The heart in Leo's body nearly stopped when he saw what was causing the commotion. The same animal that had been engraved in Leo's mind since the start of the season was standing sixty yards behind his stand. Leo gazed at Hope's large muscular body that was missing patches of fur from past battles, and his thick, meaty neck that connected his robust body to the impressive bone that branched out from the top of his skull.

Blood pumped fiercely through Leo's body; he could hear his own heartbeat. After calming his breath, he slowly moved back behind the tree to escape Hope's sight. Leo placed the back of his head against the tree, as if begging to some divine being, he whispered, "Please, please, please, c'mon, please." Leo cautiously reached for his bow, gazed down at his shaky legs, took a deep breath, and exhaled, "Let's do this."

Grunting and snorting, Hope trotted right toward Leo's stand. Leo steadied himself in his stand twenty feet off the ground, waiting for Hope to appear behind either side of the tree. Before Leo could react, Hope appeared directly under the stand. Frozen in time, Leo slowly began to position himself so he could get a shot off at Hope. With every movement he made, Leo felt a surge of blood pulsing through his body.

Hope stood only fifteen yards from the base of Leo’s tree. Trying not to stare at Hope’s mesmerizing antlers, Leo aimed his arrow’s deadly point in Hope’s direction. Leo drew his bow and steadied his aim. This exact situation had played in Leo’s mind hundreds of times; he never believed he would get to live it.

Before Leo released the bloodthirsty arrow, an opening in the clouds beamed a bright light onto the majestic creature that stood before him. A sudden relaxation spilled over Leo’s body; his tightened muscles unraveled and turned to mush. A newfound realization consumed his mind. If he killed Hope today, he would lose hope tomorrow.

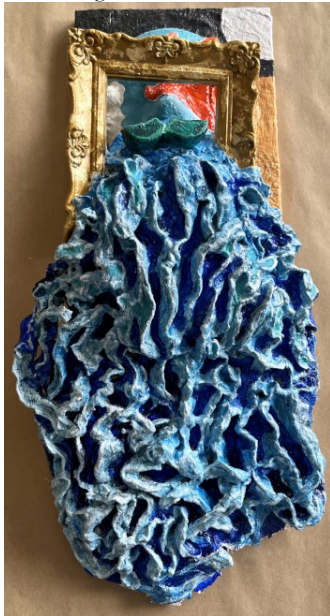
This could be the last opportunity Leo would ever have to put an end to Hope. If Leo did let his arrow fly, this would undoubtedly be the final time he would ever get to see Hope, and part of that was unsettling to him. Why was Leo questioning himself? This was the very situation he longed to be in. For the last three months, Leo’s only goal was to harvest Hope; why now, at this very point in time, did he question himself?

Blank-faced, Leo slowly let off on his bow and locked eyes with Hope. Hunter and prey stared back at each other, each recognizing the presence of the another. Hope didn’t feel he was being hunted, and Leo didn’t feel he was hunting. No words were exchanged, but much was said. This moment was more glorious than Leo ever could’ve imagined. Leo’s humbling respect for Hope was too great just to be removed. Leo watched as Hope gracefully walked off into the thick swampy grass, not blinking until he could no longer see the tips of Hope’s tall tines swaying through the grass. A tear gently hung from Leo’s eye. He rubbed his finger along Hope’s name carved in his arrow, smiled to himself, and muttered under his breath, “Thank you, Hope.”



Chastity Harris, “Hope”

Erin Langendorfer, “Beached”



Regular Life
Matthew Vespe

The beach had always been a trigger for Liz, walking down the sandy beach side streets with storefronts, ice cream parlors, bike riders, just the hustle and bustle of the beach way of life. Every time she approached the beach or seashore town, the salty smell of the ocean hitting her nostrils would send shivers down her spine. She could never refuse the beach before, how could anyone? The sunshine is so brilliant it brightens up the skin, which can awaken life itself. The ocean water is refreshing and brisk. It wakes the senses and cleanses the skin. How could Liz deny her two little boys that feeling, that feeling of life? That feeling of being alive and then being more alive. The senses are urged to give more because of the surroundings. To deny someone that would be criminal, would it not? To Liz, no one could tell her what is criminal and what is not, not the beach, not the law, not God herself.

Liz took this trip to the beach for a reason. Liz had to be here, not only for herself but for her boys. The constant thought of her sons John and Thomas, refused to

leave her. But Liz knew this day was coming; the time for running away was over. It was time for the agony to end. The sleepless nights, the twisting knots in her stomach, all of it. The pills from the doctors no longer numbed Liz's affliction. They only sunk her deeper into a torturous stupor. Not feeling anything was worse than feeling everything. The boys were no longer there to make everything worthwhile.

Liz was now meandering down the seaside street, and the mountain-like beach dunes were approaching quicker by the moment. Liz wasn't ready for the uphill battle; her heart was ready to give out at any moment. Talking to herself, she muttered repeatedly, "Just turn around and leave. . . Just turn around and leave."

Not knowing why, Liz forced herself up to the beach path. Families, crossing in constant motion back and forth, passed her. All of them filled with enthusiasm and love. Some trekking boogie boards, coolers, others holding hands and whispering as they peered at Liz. Off to the side she stood, motionless, lifeless— legs and arms white as a ghost. Her brown hair frazzled, white t-shirt wrinkled, sunglasses covering half her face. Liz was more than out of place; she was surrounded by an aura of depression and anxiety. The seashore wasn't the place for such things, but Liz didn't care.

In her head, the thought of handing out paper plates overflowing with tears and misery seemed plausible. Each smiling beachgoer could then feel what she felt. If only for an instant, they would be able to taste the bitterness and despair that had left such a bad taste within Liz.



Rachel Moore, "Sea's End"

Like a statue Liz stood, ominously, alone. With each passing moment, it was becoming harder not to think about the last time she and the boys took a trip to the beach. Looking out at the water, the people, the happiness, Liz couldn't fight the memory any longer— like a movie, playing over and over in her head. That wonderful day at the beach with Thomas and John was coming back to her.



Darrick Baartman, "Moving"

"Mom are we there yet? I can't sit in this car anymore! I'm ready to go!" John exclaimed from the back seat of the car.

"John read your book; you love that book. And yes, we are almost there, but stop screaming. You're going to wake up your brother."

John and Thomas might have been brothers, but their personalities were very different. John, being the oldest, was full of energy and spunk. He would run around for hours, his long, brown hair flowing as he smiled from ear to ear. John lived with freedom and wonder. Thomas, on the other hand, was much like their father, quiet and filled with secrecy. He kept his hair short; otherwise, he would complain about it touching his ears. Thomas was very particular, thoughtful, but, at the same time, apprehensive.

Liz parked the car, turned, and said, “John be a good brother and wake up Thomas. But be gentle! We’re finally here!”

John couldn’t help himself; he removed his seatbelt as fast as he could and shook Thomas like a rag doll.

Thomas screamed out, “Mom! Mom! Look! Look! John hit me!”

“John! Say you’re sorry right now!”

“Only if I can eat all the ice cream I want!” John replied wistfully.

“Keep it up, John! Me and Thomas will be the only ones eating ice cream, and you know what? We’ll make you watch!” Liz said smiling.

With his big, brown eyes, Thomas looked right at Liz. He started smiling, almost in a way that said, ‘I wish John wasn’t here.’ In that moment, Liz understood Thomas. This was not the usual; Liz could never tell what Thomas was thinking. He would only open up to his father, maybe for the better. Having two irrational and untamed boys running around would have been too much for anyone. Then again, Liz would take them anyway she could.

The boys had been to the beach before, but this time was different. They were a bit older; Liz could finally talk to them. She had always wanted to ask them questions about their friends and school. With so much going on, it was difficult; it would have been difficult for anyone. This day would be different; Liz had all day, just her, the boys, and a beautiful day at the beach.

Sir Sola, “Together”

Liz pulled out all the essentials from the car: a couple of towels, the sandwiches, and a few chairs. John quickly grabbed his towel as well as his favorite blue shovel. Thomas, finally fully awake, wiped his eyes and grabbed his beloved green shovel. Next, he jumped out into the parking lot and said, “It’s so sunny out! You picked the perfect day, Mom!”

Right then, Liz could have packed the car back up and went home. Who could say something so nice? “All right. . . Don’t forget anything! I have the cooler and the chairs.”

They scurried down the sidewalk towards the boardwalk, the smell of saltwater mixed with French fries and pizza filled the air. John had a giddy up in his step: it was almost a full skip; he couldn’t contain himself. Thomas, trying to imitate his older brother, almost tripped going up the boardwalk. Without hesitation, Liz giggled, and the boys cried out with laughter.

After dodging oncoming bike riders and others eating treats on the boardwalk, they finally reached the steps to the beach. The ocean, now in view, was a sight to behold: the waves crashing into the coastline, the sun beaming off the water as boats and jet skis motored by. Looking up, not a cloud in the sky. Only kites wavering effortlessly through the sea breeze as the occasional seagull flew by. Looking down at the beach, umbrellas



filled the shoreline, young men throwing a football, others tossing frisbees. The air was filled with joy and charisma.

John had seen enough, “I’m going to pick us the perfect spot, Mom!”

With a big smile, he took off into the sandy wasteland, his flip flops clicking as the sand flew up in the air behind him. Liz knew what was coming. John could never make his mind up; he just wanted to be the first one there. Thomas was next, hot on his brother’s tail. With never a chance of catching him, that never stopped him from trying. After much deliberation and a few brotherly shoves back and forth, Thomas and John finally picked a spot a few yards from the water. As if in perfect harmony both boys looked back, waved at Liz, and exclaimed, “Hurry up mom! We wanna go in the water!”

Liz again couldn’t help herself as she started to laugh, “I’m coming; I’m coming!”

With utter disregard for anything around them, the boys emptied their hands and ripped their shirts off. John shouted, “C’mon mom! You’re coming in with us whether you like it or not!”

Before Liz could take her sundress off, John and Thomas were dragging her towards the water. Liz didn’t care, she was exactly where she was supposed to be. She was with her boys enjoying the beach and the brisk, crisp ocean water. They kicked and splashed, laughing uncontrollably. Thomas was throwing seaweed and sand. John was diving through the waves, swimming underneath Thomas and grabbing his legs. Both boys pull Liz deeper, deeper into life as well as the ocean. Inside, Liz felt something warm. As if the bright sunshine had beamed through her chest and reached her heart. In her mind, she wanted time to stop. This was a moment in life you never forget, and for good reason. Liz was where she was supposed to be.



Carina Perez Garril, “Time Together”

As Liz stood on the path, she was bumped into. This was no longer a dream. Liz was back to reality and all by herself. The thought of seeing her two little boys, John holding a bright blue shovel and Thomas holding a bright green shovel, the two boys acting as if the surrounding beauty meant nothing, was enough to send the strongest down a long, hollow path. What does it matter if they are here or not? The beach, the beauty is for everyone. Who’s to say they are not here right now playing in the water, splashing, and laughing uncontrollably? Who is to say they are not here?

Liz scoffed, and mumbled to herself, “Me, God damnit! That’s who!”

As she walked on the beach, the warm sand flowed between her toes. The beach air whistled around her neck, into and through her hair. All this seemed like amazing things anyone should want to experience, but, for Liz, it was different. Setting her bright, turquoise beach blanket down on the golden sand seemed normal, but it could never be. Something was missing and that feeling would never leave her.

Laying down on the blanket, Liz took her sunglasses off. Looking across the ocean gave most a sense of freedom and beauty. But Liz can no longer feel those amazing feelings because they had been ripped from her. Her husband, lover, forever soulmate, took Thomas and John. Where? Liz didn't know; no one knew.



As Liz looked across the ocean, she asked herself, “why can I no longer feel this beauty?” The clouds quickly shifted and covered the sun. Everyone around the beach let out a collective sigh but not Liz. She knew that feeling all too well. Liz had been living with that feeling for so long it consumed her heart and soul. The heart is meant to love. It is meant to treasure moments like these, on the beach surrounded by loved ones. Liz tickling her boys into submission; Thomas feeding the seagulls when he's been told not to ten times. Those memories didn't matter to Liz anymore, just photos in an album to look back on and wonder about. The feeling of feeling had been dormant inside Liz, and it refused to rise. But Liz abstained from crying; that would be obnoxious and juvenile. At least to her it would be.

If the sun could only disappear completely or, for Liz, maybe most of the time. Then other people would be able to feel what she felt— to have that pain overcome them, just like the pain that overcomes Liz every day.

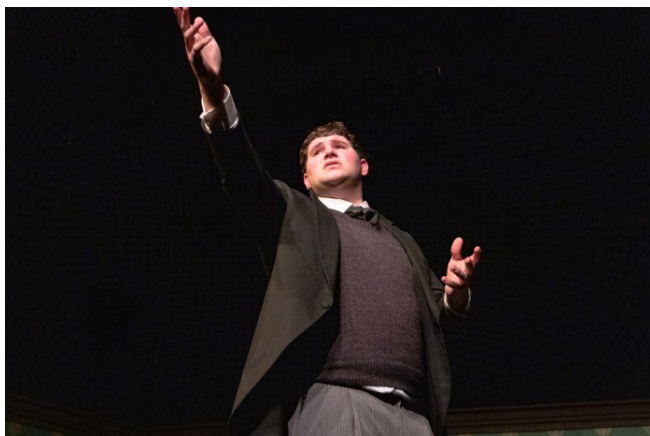
Kenia Jimenez, “Emotions”

But the beach doesn't fill you with suffering; it does the opposite. It gives you a sense of life and hope. It fills your heart with happiness and freedom. Maybe this is what Liz would need to snap out of it. She did not come to the beach with her family, her beautiful Thomas and John, like everyone else around her did. Liz came to the beach for a reason; she had a purpose to be here. Liz is only searching for purpose now; regular life has been gone for some time.

Minnesota West Theater Production
Mystery of Irma Vep
Written by Charles Ludlam
Directed by Eric Parrish
Photographs taken by Marie Johnson

Performers and Crew

Kalen Brands	Michael Schnieder
Mistica Chapa	Danny Van Westen
ThanThan Kyaw	Sam Van Westen





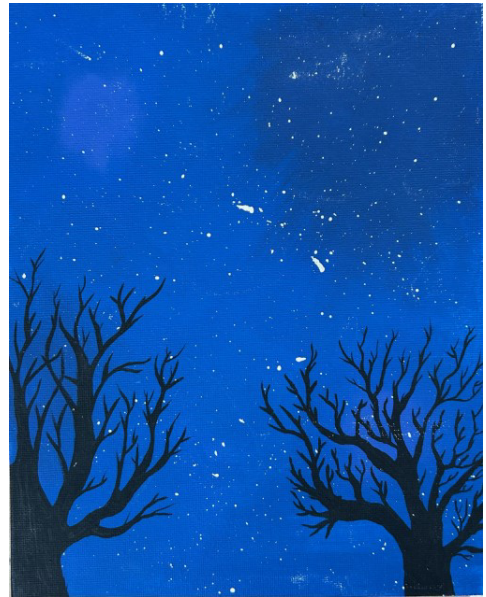
An Escape

Kayle Kunerth

As the leaves start to change to blazing orange and yellow signaling the arrival of the fall season, my heart beats with anticipation and excitement. For me, this time of year means one thing: it is time for my annual hunting trip. I begin by packing my bow, broadheads, and all my hunting equipment, including my release. While packing my hunting clothing, which I carefully chose to ensure that I blend in with the fall foliage, I think to myself that I have never had an unpleasant experience on my trip.

I keep thinking about why I enjoy hunting so much while I pack everything into the truck. Not only is the thrill of the chase important but also the tranquil seclusion and sense of connection to nature that it brings. Hunting is a getaway for me, and I am able to forget the problems I have in life. A sense of peace that is difficult to find in our hectic modern world is evoked by the crisp fall air, the crunch of leaves underfoot and the sounds of animals when they begin to move in the morning. Just before the sun begins to rise, the chill of the morning air seeps through the open windows of my 1994 Chevy truck. With a turn of the key, the engine roars to life, the deep rumble echoing through the quiet street. The smell of gasoline and oil fills the air as the truck idles, the sound of metal creaking and groaning as it warms up. The dashboard lights flicker to life, casting an eerie glow over the worn interior. The steering wheel feels cold to the touch, but the rough texture of the worn leather brings a sense of comfort and familiarity to my hands. As the engine warms up, the truck begins to shake and vibrate, ready to make the trek to my favorite place on earth.

I feel the cool morning air brush against my skin as I step out into the darkness, sending shivers down my spine. When I ascend the hill, the moon is no more than a sliver in the sky, barely illuminating my path. I feel a sensation of anticipation growing as I hold the bow. I sit down in the grass as I approach the top of the hill and feel the blades tickle my skin. Only the occasional hoot of an owl or the rustle of leaves in the wind can be heard, breaking the silence. The sun has not yet risen, I draw in the crisp morning air and feel my senses come alive in the darkness.



Brielle Vis, "Dark Night"

As I sit, the day draws on. I watch many different animals filter through my field of view and heavy clouds begin to take away the bright blue sky. My attention is suddenly drawn to motion, and I watch as a herd of deer come out of the forest's edge. Their outlines are scarcely discernible in the moonlight as they dance smoothly. As I wait for the ideal opportunity to pull my bowstring backward, my heart begins to beat faster. I maintain a steady breathing pattern as the deer draw near and fix my gaze on the biggest buck among them. I carefully await his approach while keeping an eye on him. I draw back my bow with a steady hand as the strain in my muscles increases. My world slows.

Adrenaline floods my body as I sit atop my favorite hill after just letting an arrow fly at a huge whitetail. The possibility of killing such a huge deer leaves me with a mix of emotions, this being the biggest buck I had ever seen.

As I settle down, I realize that my night is far from over as I peer at the orange sunset. Long shadows spread across the horizon as the sun begins to fall. While tracking the buck, I lose track of time and now I am much farther from my campground than I had anticipated. I don't want to abandon my prized kill, but I also realize that I have to start heading home before it becomes too dark.

I finally find my deer after following the blood trail a few miles. Briskly, I started field dressing the buck. I gather some of my equipment along with the meat and antlers of my trophy kill. My backpack straps leave imprints on my shoulders from the abundance of weight they held. I begin my journey across the vast landscape and through the thick forest. Rugged mountainous terrain, as well as dense underbrush and downed trees, make my walk hell. I travel cautiously to avoid tripping over myself or becoming lost in the maze of trees and vegetation.

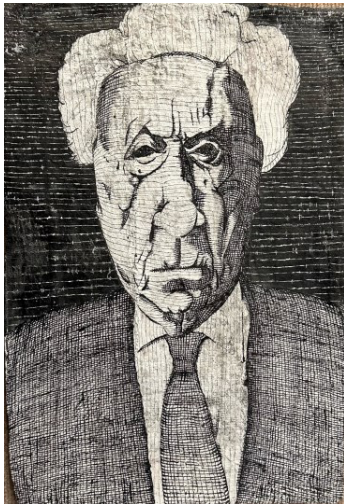


Rachel Moore, "Shroom"

I can feel my muscle fibers tear as I hike. My feet blister from my wet boots. The sky darkens quickly as the sun sinks. I had hoped to get back to camp before sundown, but I realize I just might have to navigate my way through the dark. My stomach sinks as I hear thunder rumble throughout the sky. An unexpected thunderstorm starts moving in. As the wind gathers up, it howls through the trees blowing branches and leaves into the air. To weather the storm, I take cover under a large walnut tree while waiting for the storm to pass. It appears to worsen instead. Within minutes, my clothing is completely drenched as the rain begins to fall in torrents, the lightning striking closer and closer, the thunder deafening. I am in the thickest part of the woods without a clear trail or destination in sight, and I know I must find refuge. I get to my feet during a brief break in the sheeting rain, searching for any indications of where I am or how I can get back to my vehicle. I, however, can hardly see my own hand in front of my face as the storm picks up. I feel scared, confused, and lost.

Aaliyah Schaffer, "Cat House"

My situation is a nightmare as I trudge my way through the mud and rain. Disoriented, a dark feeling sweeps over me. I realize I am lost, hungry, and exhausted. But then, through the trees, I catch a glimpse of light. Although it's weak, it gives me hope. I stumble forward despite my



Jonas Molitor, "Bent Crooked"

discomfort and weariness and soon find myself in front of a small cabin. A faint smell of burning wood looms in the air. My teeth are jittering from the cold as I knock on the door.

The door is opened by an old man who gives me a tired stare. I am covered in mud with scratches on my arms and face.

The old man speaks, his voice rough, "Lost?"

My teeth are grating as I mutter, "Yes, I was caught in the storm while out hunting. Is there any chance I could crash here tonight?"

The man looks me up and down as he hesitates for a moment. He eventually sighs and begins nodding.



The oak cabin features a wood stove in the back corner and some of the old man's taxidermy creatures. Hank, as the elderly man introduced himself, offers me a cup of steaming coffee.

While I took sips of the coffee, I notice an odd sense of uneasiness settling in the pit of my stomach. I feel uneasy just by the way Hank's eyes shined with a certain gloom. I get the impression that something is odd about him as we are talking. His descriptions of hunting and capturing animals come across as a little too gory, and I begin to fear for my safety. I try to convince myself that I'm just becoming paranoid and as the night goes on, I settle down. But when I stand up to go to the bathroom, I see something startling. I notice a collection of hunting mementos that include some items resembling human remains. Goosebumps cover my entire body as I remember years ago the story of a mass murderer who escaped while being transferred to a maximum-security prison only about 50 miles away. My blood runs cold when I realize Hank is a killer. My face turns white.

Lizbeth Estrada, "Bathroom"



I am in the bathroom for a few minutes panicking as Hank mummurs only inches from the door, "is everything alright in there, buddy?"

"Uhm yeah just finishing up, I'll be out in a second." I have to escape. My eyes dart around as I look to the window: it's too small; I could not climb through it. I turn the old knob and the bathroom creaks open. I decide I have to play it cool. If there is any chance, I will get out of this alive.

Making my way to the recliner, I hear the metal-on-metal sound of sharpening knives. The pitter pater of rain hitting the tin roof subsides. I have a small chance to break for the door and set off into the pitch-black night.

As I run, my ears know no sound, everything seems to slow; I can only hear my deep exhalation and the thump of my chest. I have no direction, just running into the night with pure instincts. With every stride, the feeling of cold mud between my toes. I can hear tires on the pavement ahead of me, I run faster. Bursting through the trees I ran up the ditch leading to the small roadway. I sit down alongside the road on the muddy gravel, awaiting a passing car to rescue me. Two dim headlights appear in the distance, I rise to my feet and begin flailing my arms, shouting for help. The truck screeches to a stop. Walking to the window, I hear a revolver click; I freeze, my face turning ghostlike. I know it is Hank.

Rachel Moore, "Snowy Remembrance"

The Royal Adventure

Kate Bucher

The bright, glistening lights set a yellow hue across the gray, stone-brick walls, which were frigid to the touch. I stood facing the window, longing for the days of warmth that faded away many years ago. Only stories of a time when there were many seasons filled my clouded head. However, I felt comfortable adjusting to the never-ending winter my homelands have been in for centuries. I found a sense of steady comfort from the unchanging gray clouds that hung in the sky, always on the verge of breaking down with snowfall. There were many



challenges in the days of change that my ancestors had to face. My thin dark brows drew together as I imagined what it had been like to face those difficulties, when everyone was valued on what they could contribute to the community and not how beautiful they looked. I was taken out of my gloomy thoughts as a strong gust of frozen air hit against the windowpanes rattling the fragile glass.

The smooth, elegant music seemed to bounce off the walls, which made the noise of the crowd ring in my ears. The clicking of heels and glasses, and the clutter of silverware became background noise to the laughter of a select group of women that stood not even four yards to my right. There were four of them standing in a herd. Each woman was wearing a different colored ball gown that floated just an inch above the ground, showing only the slightest sliver of her heeled shoe. They seem to want to look like a group but separate from one another. While one had glowing, golden accessories, another had silver; one was wearing several bracelets, and one wore none. Though they all had one thing in common, which became very apparent as the music changed pace, bringing new life into the room. As the music quickened in pace, more instruments screamed out together sculpting a symphony of sounds that were pleasing to the ear. Men all around the large room began to move toward their beloved, grabbing the women by their hands and dragging them to the dance floor. The room became abundant with multicolored people twirling, dipping, turning, and swaying to the music.

Yet, I didn't move. No one had come to grab my hand and take me to the dance floor. I have always felt out of place during these events. Being the only female guard on the royal staff leaves me alone in many instances. No man wants to approach me, every woman scoffs when I enter a room, especially now when I must play dress up for the royal family. I long for the comfort of my armor and the weight of my sword hanging from my side. The noise in the room grew as everyone enjoyed themselves, but I couldn't even bring myself to pretend to smile. The room was large, extremely large, completely open, with only four large pillars lining each side of the room, and a raised stage-like area on the back of the room, where the royal family sat in a line. These were the people who never had to step outside the walls of their castle and into the cold, to feel their toes turn numb from standing in the snow for hours on end, staring into the blank nothingness as the wind made the snow dance before your eyes. It was times like these that I grew to have a dislike for the royal family; yet, my loyalty would never waver from their sides.

The shouts of my fellow soldiers just outside the doors drew my attention, as well as many of the dancing highborns. The doors burst open, and everything fell silent. Several people in dark cloaks with masks covering their faces barged into the room. They said nothing as they began to tear through the room, pulling out different weapons as they went and killing anyone who got in the way. My legs were moving before my brain as I sprinted to the royal family, my duty to protect them taking up every part of my brain.

"My King and Queen, we need to get you out of here!" I yelled as I tried to get them to follow me.

"No, you need to take my son and get him to my brother!" the queen demanded.

The prince was about to argue, however, an arrow flew past my face and lodged itself into the queen's stomach.

"Please, get him to my brother. He lives by the sea beyond the great wall of ice." She fell as her last words rang in my ears. The prince had fallen with his mother trying to save her, but I knew it was too late. The king grabbed his son by the shoulders.

Samantha Brink, "Castle"



"Go! Go with her! She will keep you safe. There are tunnels that lead outside the castle and straight to the southern gates." The king shoved his son into my arms. I didn't wait for him to agree, I began to pull him into the tunnels his father had spoken of.

Steven Adams, "Fled"

I guess the prince is going to get used to the snow quickly; otherwise, we are both going to be dead.



It had only been three days since we fled the kingdom, and if it hadn't been for the queen's dying wish to keep her son safe, I think I would have killed him myself by now. The nearly adult princeling knew nothing about the real world. Along with his next-to-nothing knowledge, he was constantly complaining about the cold. Yet, this was the mildest winter we had had in nearly six years. But as the sky somehow managed to get even darker than it already was, I knew that the pain in my ass prince wouldn't make it through the night traveling.

"This is where we'll set up camp." I started, leaving no room for arguments.

"Finally. My legs are so tired I almost had to have you carry me." He huffed as he fell into a large pile of white powdered snow at the base of a large pine tree.

"I will go find us some food. Why don't you start collecting some fallen branches for a fire." I started to move to a small group of bushes with small frozen berries barely hanging onto them. I knew from a previous trip that they were good to eat, but it would take a large amount to feel full of them.

"Umm. . . Sorry, but gathering wood seems like something a prince shouldn't have to do. Isn't this why my parents ordered you to take care of me?" The amount of attitude come from his royal highness was not needed as a highly stressful day full of traveling by foot. My temper was flaring red, and my patience was wearing thin. "Oh, but of course, Your Highness. I should have known better. Of course someone as sheltered as you would have no idea how to chop wood or make a solid shelter. How stupid of me." I knew the sarcasm in my voice was full, but the prince had never been back-talked before. He scoffed at the notion of not being able to do something.

"Don't be silly. I know how to chop wood. It is merely just at a standard that I wish to not lower myself to." He raised his nose into the air.

"Well, I mean of course; though, if someone as smart and strong and daring as yourself were to hand chopping the wood for our fire, then you know that it was gathered by only the best, correct?" I knew I was pushing my luck, but this spoiled pain in my back needed to learn that if he wanted to survive in this world he was going to have to contribute to the cause.

“You are correct. Give your sword and I will get to it then.” he stated as he held his hand out. I smirked knowing that I had him right where I wanted him.

“Yes! Yes!” I said in a high-pitched voice trying to sound like a damsel in distress as I slowly made my way back over to him. He kept his head high, not bothering to look at me. This was a trait that many men have which has led to their death by my blade.

However, I didn’t draw my sword like he asked of me; instead, I forcefully shoved my axe into his chest. “But as you probably already knew, you chop wood with an axe not a sword.” I laughed as he hunched over gasping for air.



Rachel Moore, “Reimagined”

It was not even thirty minutes later when I took pity on the young prince. I spent the next ten minutes showing him and teaching him the ways to cut wood. We then built a small fire, large enough to keep us warm through the night, but small enough to not draw the attention of unwanted eyes. I stayed watch for most of the night until the prince naturally woke early in the morning, which allowed me to rest for a couple of hours before I taught him how to cover our tracks, and we left heading to the great wall of ice.



This became the habit for the next week, me teaching the prince valuable survival lessons: what is and isn’t good to eat and how to wield a weapon. As we grew closer to our destination, I learned more about the prince and found him to be a quick learner. It was eight long days after fleeing from the castle that the prince formed his first ever callous.

Athaliah Htoo, “Flow”

The journey to the wall has taken us nearly three weeks. During that time, the prince and I have grown closer. I would even consider us friends, something I have never had before. The great wall came into view three days ago, and it has only grown larger the closer we come. The prince has even started to ask more about his kingdom: how the people in his village lived; the problems that his citizens had to face. I can see that change in him as if I was seeing the sun shine for the first time in my life. He is no longer the snotty, annoying brat of a prince; he is growing into a knowledgeable, caring, and devoted king. One that I would be okay spending the rest of my life guarding.

“Thank you,” he suddenly said out of the blue as we walked.

“For what?” I cocked my head to the side giving him a slightly confused smile.

“For taking care of me. You could have left me all alone in the woods, and I know that you only did it because my parents ordered you to, but I would be dead without you.” He paused, taking a deep breath before

continuing. “I have learned so much about you and the world, not only that but my kingdom and the way of my own people from you.”

“Yes, it is my job; however, I have grown to be very fond of you.” My hands started to shake a bit as my brain tried to process a way to explain the way my heart felt for this man. I have never had feelings for anyone, not even my parents. I was always alone for as long as I can remember. I have never let anyone in; yet, here I am trying to express how much I have grown to love the very prince I have sworn to protect. “Even if your parents hadn’t ordered me to take care of you, I would have. I know that one day, probably not tomorrow or even the next, you will reclaim your throne and be an amazing ruler. I just hope that I am there by your side when that happens.” I felt the walls that I have been building to protect myself from being hurt start to crumble as the prince paused his steps and faced me.

“Of course, you will be by my side.” His smile warmed my heart, and his eyes seemed to sparkle in the light of the day. “You will be sitting on the throne to my right.” He started to lean in as my eyes traveled to his lips. We learned in and for just a moment everything else left my mind and it was only us, standing in the middle of the forest in each other’s arms as we kissed with the sun shining down on us.

After breaking apart to catch our breath, it was only then that I noticed something truly magical. The sun was finally shining.



Citlali Chavez Vega, “In our Hands”

More than a Game

David Maakestad

Walking into the light with my arms intertwined between my brothers’ is a feeling that is almost indescribable to those who have not experienced it. I step out of the school on a calm Friday afternoon, the sun shining down on me like a star from above. We walk, silently, like an army marching into a battlefield. The focus is on us and only us. We are the only show in town. We take a left into our meeting place, join hands, and say a

prayer. We stand tall while our coach lectures us on what is needed to succeed. I take my first step onto the green grass of Mahoney field. The combination of freshly cut green grass, newly painted yard markers, the roar of the crowd, and the bright lights give me a feeling of incredible energy. It is as if every nerve ending in my body is on high alert. A feeling of focus, my mind is completely focused on the game. Everything else from the outside world is blocked out for the next 48 minutes. I feel immense pride in myself, my team, and the community that has come out to support us. I will not disappoint them. A feeling of satisfaction. I have put in so many hours of hard work to get to this point. It is finally time to show everyone that all the early mornings weight-room sessions, two-a-day workouts, and bumps and bruises have paid off.



Ellie Sheldahl, “Heart Break in a Thousand Pieces”

The date is Friday, September 15, 2022. It is our home opener on Mahoney Field. A conference game against Jordan High School. Going into this game, we aren't expected to win. Jordan is undefeated, and we are 0 and 2. It is our third game of the season. Having played two games with this team, and from many practices, I know we have what it takes to win. The Friday night lights shine down on Mahoney field like we are performers on stage; it is what everybody cares about in the small town of Fairmont, MN. It is a perfect night for Football: 65 degrees, no wind, and the sky is painted purple and orange like a picture out of a magazine. The home stands are packed with fans wearing red and white, the school colors. There is not a seat left in the house.

Accordingly, the fans are standing all around the fence line. It is almost time for the game to start. Everyone in the stadium stands tall and focuses on the flag, waving in the distance, while the band plays the National Anthem. Then it is game time.

We win the coin toss and elect to start on offense. On the first three possessions of our offensive drive, we gain a few yards to move the ball down the field. On the fourth play of our drive, the quarterback runs swiftly into the huddle to share the play that would be the narrative for the remainder of the night. All I hear as I break the huddle is "Back Side Post." I know the ball is coming to me.

I run to the line, eager to make the first big play of the game. I hear the quarterback growl, "set, go" as the offensive line works hard to keep the him untouched. I break into a sprint to the outside of the hashmark, trying to gain an inch of separation from my defender. I cut right, digging the spikes of my cleats into the soft fresh grass of Mahoney Field. I see the football floating in the air towards me, like a bird flying to its nest. I extend my arms, and the ball falls perfectly into my outstretched hands. I bring the ball to my chest, secure it with both arms, and sprint past the defender to the bright yellow goal line.

As I cross the goal line, I look back to see my teammates sprinting towards me. They are grinning from ear to ear and cheering; the crowd is celebrating. I just scored the first touchdown of the year on Mahoney Field. I run back to the sideline to celebrate with the coaches and my teammates. The band starts to play the school song, something that I have not heard in a very long time. It is going to be a great night.

I am back on the field playing defense. I run quickly onto the defensive side of the ball and take my position. I watch intently as the quarterback takes his spot and the player in front of me lines up. After three plays and no action, my mind starts to lose focus. I have a pain in my leg and can't tell if it is cramp or something more serious. I tell myself to "focus on the game." The pain is making me uncomfortable, and I'm wondering if I should sub. myself. I always feel confident on the field, so this is something I have not experienced. I feel like something is wrong. Movement from the quarterback catches my attention, and I refocus on the game. I watch as he slowly bends down and yells, "set, go." I take a step towards the receiver that I am defending. He jabs left, and I see the ball coming to him. I stay a half step behind him. He breaks left and catches the ball. I catch up to him and go for the tackle. I wrap him around the legs, and we fall to the ground.

Then I hear a sound that I never expected to hear; a sound that is rarely heard on the playing field but quickly understood. It is as if a tree branch snapped in half. It is so loud; yet my mind seems to quiet. I am in so much pain. Not only physical pain but mental pain because I know it is serious and will impact the rest of my senior year.

Tandia Faourous, "Emerged"



I open my eyes, drowsy and confused. I am in the hospital. I remember the tackle and arriving at the hospital. "How bad is it?" I anxiously ask as I look down to see my leg covered in bandages.

"A completely broken fibula," the doctor quickly answers. I close my eyes. I want to cry, thinking of all the preparation and excitement for this football season. None of it matters anymore. The season is over because of one play.

I want answers, and keep asking "why me?" Was everything I did to prepare for the season a complete waste of time? My parents can see the concern and emotions flowing through me.

"It is going to be okay. Your leg will heal quickly, and you will be back to normal in no time," they reassure me.

The doctor informs me that I have undergone a complete fibula repair and will be walking and running after 12-16 weeks. None of that matters to me. I cannot believe it. It is my senior year, and my high school sport season is over. Why did this have to happen?



Chase Remme, "Journey"

A week has passed, I am just starting to come to terms with my injury. As I lay in bed unable to sleep, I think of my old routine. I used to go to school, football practice, hang out with friends, and look forward to Friday night games. Things are different now; I have not done any of these things for a week. I am unable to walk without crutches. I have trouble sleeping. I struggle to do everything that used to seem so easy and routine. I want my "old life" back. However, I have no choice in changing my current reality. Negativity and depression are preventing me from recovering quickly. I must get back to my old self. It is going to be a long tough journey, but I know I can do it. I finally fall asleep.

It seems like I have been asleep for only a few minutes when my alarm startles me awake. I look over at the clock and see 6:30 am. This time of the day is unfamiliar to me. It is the beginning of my journey to recovery.

I start slowly, using resistance bands to help build strength back into my leg. I perform the exercises the physical therapist gave me. I find it difficult and need breaks between each rep. I do this every day, slowly gaining the ability to increase resistance. I am gaining confidence and motivation with the slow process of recovery.

It is Friday, and I am attending the game tonight. I have mixed emotions. I know it will not be the same, but it will be good to be back together with my coaches and teammates. I crave a sense of normalcy during a time of confusion and unfamiliarity.

Cassandra Mendez, "Trouble Sleeping"

It is seven weeks post-surgery. I am beginning to walk on my own again. It is not easy. The medical staff told me it was unlikely, but I am determined to prove them wrong. I want



to get back to normal and desperately want to walk without crutches. The alarm rings at 6:30am, the early wakeup call no longer affecting me.

My strength is increasing rapidly. I am now able to do complete leg extensions, and I am starting to increase the amount of weight I put on my injured leg. During this long road of recovery, I have learned many lessons. I must trust and be patient. Recovery is not quick or easy, and I must trust the process. My leg will not heal in a day but by following the doctor's orders and performing the recommended exercises, my leg is healing quickly. I trust that eventually my leg will be back to normal. I learn to be grateful for what I have because it can be taken away from me at any moment.

I Found It Buried in The Woods

Johanna Petschke

It was midnight. It was cold. The wind was blowing, making the shutters on our house crash against the siding. There was a storm. It was pouring rain with thunder crashing and lightning strikes every minute.

I lay in my bed waiting to fall asleep. My eyes get heavy, and I drift off to sleep. The image of me running through the woods not too far away from our house pops into my head. It was almost like I was running away from something or running to something. It felt so real.



I get deeper into the woods and stop at this old, big tree, so tall when I look up that it's never ending. I see the dead branches swaying in the wind, branches look like they could snap any minute. The tree is located right in the middle of the woods. The tree has something carved into the trunk: the initials SL. Those are my initials, Sarah Larson. I carved my initials in that tree when I was a young, little girl. Next to the tree is a pile of dirt with a shovel next to it. I grab the shovel and dig until I hit something. I brush away the dirt to find a bloody ax. I try to scream, but I can't seem to find my voice. Then I hear something in the bushes next to me; I walk behind them, but there is nothing there.

Anaka Wede, "Voices"

I woke up sweating and immediately sat up in my bed, still shocked from the dream. I head downstairs for some breakfast and find my mom sitting at the kitchen table with no breakfast.

"Mom, what's going on?" I asked.

"Where were you last night?"

"I was in my bed sleeping like I usually am at night," I told her, confused.

"Don't lie to me, Sarah. I know you left this house last night."

"Mom, I didn't. There was a storm last night, so why would I go outside?"

“Then explain to me why there’s a trail of muddy shoes coming to the kitchen here.”

“What?” I asked. I go over to the other side of the kitchen and am horrified to find my wet shoes, fresh with mud, lying there on the kitchen floor.

“Sarah, go to your room, and we will discuss this later.”

I ran upstairs to my room to think about what had just happened. That was a dream, right? I tried to think about the dream I thought I had last night, tried to remember what I was wearing. I looked over and found clothes sitting on my floor in a pile. They were all wet and had mud stains all over them. I needed to find a way to get to that tree, the one with my initials on it, but I couldn’t leave my room. I go over to my window to find that it is already open. I thought to myself that maybe it wasn’t a dream last night, and I really did go out into the woods. This can’t be real. Did I really find a murder weapon? I needed to go back to those woods and find out the truth.



I climbed out of the window and sprinted towards the woods near my house.

Rachel Moore, “Letting Nature In”

I looked for footprints, but all the rain we got last night must have washed them up. I headed towards the tree with my initials on it. I got to the tree, or at least where the tree was. I stared at the place in shock to see where the tree was. All that was left of the tree was a small stump, with no trace of the tree, or where the weapon was buried. Just then I got a phone call.

I picked up the phone and answered it. “Hello?”

“Hello, Sarah,” the unknown voice said back. “I know what you did.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t do anything,” I frantically responded.

Then the voice said back, “I know what you found buried in the woods.”

“I don’t— ” and the stranger hung up before I could say anything back.

I looked around to see if anyone was watching me, but there was no one in sight. I decide it’s time I go back to my room before I get caught out here in the woods; I can’t be in any more trouble than I already am in. I turned around to head back, but something caught my eye in the bushes. I look in the bushes to find the bloody ax. I quickly grab it and start digging, I need to get rid of this before anyone sees me out here with this. I drop the weapon in the hole I’ve dug with my bare hands and cover it up as best as I can until the ax is no longer visible.

I raced back to my room and managed to make it back to my room without my mom catching me. I found these words in this bright red color, which I hope isn’t blood, written on my wall. It read,

I know what you found buried in the woods.



Angie Hurtado Rivera, "Bedroom"

I screamed and looked out my window to see if there was any trace of anyone who could've broken into my room, but there was nothing. No sign of anyone entering my room. I quickly go to the bathroom and get a towel and some cleaner and try to scrub this off my wall. As I'm scrubbing my mom comes barging in my room and pauses for a second and asks in a firm voice, "Sarah, what is going on?"

I stared at her in shock, not knowing what to say. Then I burst into tears and ran into her arms crying. "Mom, I don't know what to do, I think I did something really bad, but I don't know what I did."

She stays silent and just hugs me tighter and we stay silent for the next few minutes. She tucks me into bed and tells me goodnight and to get some sleep. She tells me that everything is going to be all right, and I drift off to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up to my mom pulling the blankets off and opening the curtains. She says, "Good morning, sweetheart. How did you sleep?"

I stared at her confused. I say to her, "Why are you in such a good mood? Do you not remember what happened last night? What you saw, and you're not mad?"

"I don't remember anything, honey," she said.

"But Mom, the writing and the footprints."

She then raised her voice and said, "Sarah, you will not speak of last night, or anything about what you think may have happened." I didn't say a word after that. I was so confused. Did she know something I didn't know?

I went on with my life, went to school and came home. I did this for two weeks with my life being completely normal. I completely forgot about what happened that night. It was a Friday morning and I went to the table for breakfast. My mom was already there with the news on drinking a cup of coffee like she normally does. I was eating my cereal and listening in on the news, when all the sudden I heard on the tv, "Breaking News! Man missing and found dead in the woods with body parts missing. Suspicion that the murder weapon is a large knife or ax of some sort. More information to come. If you know who may have done this or have any information, call immediately."

I dropped my spoon as soon as I heard this and looked over at my mom, but this information didn't seem to faze her; she continued drinking her coffee. I knew something was up with her. I knew she knew something about that night, what was she trying to hide?

I decided I was going to skip school that day and see what I could find out, see if I could get to the bottom of this. I waited for my mom to leave for work and gave her a hug goodbye. As soon as she left, I went straight to her room and looked around. I looked under her bed and found nothing; I looked through her drawers and also found nothing. I then walked over to the closet and tore through her whole closet and still found nothing. Disappointed, I walked back downstairs and went to the living room, found the remote, sat on the couch and

turned on the TV. I was freezing, so I got up to start a fire in the fireplace. I grabbed pieces of wood next to the fireplace and threw them in. I lit a match and just as I was about to throw the match in the fireplace, I noticed something on the wood. I blew out the match and took a closer look, turning the log around to see a carving on the piece of wood.

It was my initials that were carved into it. I stared at it in utter shock because I knew exactly where this piece of wood came from. Then it all suddenly hits me: the tree in the woods, the bloody ax, the noise in the bush, the muddy footprints. That wasn't me. It was my mom. My mom is a murderer. You think you know someone. But in the end, it's ourselves, on our own, against the world.

I started for the door but heard a car pull up in the driveway. It was my mom; she must've gotten off work early. I had to get out of this house fast before my mom could find me, or before she discovered that I knew. I ran to the back door of the house to escape but stumbled over a loose board right by the door. I pry it open and look down into the floor but don't see anything. It was too dark. I turned my flashlight on my phone and flashed it down onto the floor and there it was. There lies the murder weapon. The bloody ax.

I left the house and got in my mom's car and started it as fast as I could. The police station is only a few miles away. I should get there in no time. As I backed out of the driveway, the last thing I saw was my mom opening the door; she tried to chase after me yelling my name, but I didn't stop. I can't stop for her, not after what she did.

I got to the police station and raced inside to tell them what I knew. I went over to find the nearest police officer and I rambled on and told him what happened and how my mom was responsible for the murder of the missing man. They asked me where she could be found so I told them my address. The police officer said something into his walkie talkie and told me to wait right here. The police officer and a few other officers followed right behind them, and I watched them get into their police cars, turn their sirens on, and speed away.

This was the longest wait of my life. Later, the officers came into the room I was in and told me they found my mother and they would be locking her up. They told me to go home and get some rest after this long crazy day.

I get home and go to my room. I sit on my bed and think to myself, this all doesn't add up. Who wrote that message on my wall? Who was trying to frame me? Who else was out in those woods that night? Maybe there's more to this mystery than I thought. Maybe my mother isn't really the murderer after all.

One Last Ride Audrey Drapeau

Blake, my best friend, always talked about his stepfather loving him like he was his real son. I was there when he got his first pair of Jordans, the 'Win like 96' retro 11's, and he wore them to the core. He still has them put away in his closet. We would watch the top NBA player's highlights together and pretend we were them on his mini hoop. He even took me to watch our first NBA game live, The Golden State Warriors versus The Heat;

Erin Langendorfer, "Forest"



he was a big Stephen Curry fan then. I was there when he got Kobe Bryant's autograph. He made me take a picture with him because he knew I wanted to be like him when I grew up.

We played together for years, and we talked about everything. His first heartbreak was in the sixth grade; we talked about when he got his first college scholarship and when ESPN reached out to him. I remember when LeBron James Jr. wanted him on his travel-ball team. He even shared how his dad would call him "Cinksi," meaning son in Lakota. In Lakota culture, kinship terms and the language are sacred.

I dreamt of my father treating me like that, but he was just too busy working long nights in the housing authority, ensuring all the community tenants had a sense of safety and security. He'd come home late with tired eyes and the weight of the day on his shoulders and without the energy to listen and ask me how my day was. I don't think he ever actually heard my reply, but as Blake and I would always joke, "Basketball is always there for me!"

Just like every Tuesday, we rolled up to basketball practice, ready to be the next big thing. But today, Blake's vibes were nowhere near becoming a star.

As Blake walked into the gym slowly, I noticed three things off: his shoulders drooped low, his head hung low, and his eyes refused to meet those of anyone on the court, including mine. I tried to hug him, but he responded with just one of those half hugs, where they placed their arm on you for one second and let go. He took his time tying his shoes. Normally, he would throw his bag, hurry up, and get on the court. Once he was ready, he didn't do our warm-up routine.

Shrugging my shoulders, I figured it was no big deal. I spent the rest of the practice just observing him. Usually, Blake is communicating, hyping up the other teammates, and encouraging us after we miss a shot. Today, his body language told a story that he was hurting on the inside. The summer prior, Blake and I worked on our shot forms every hour before every workout. Today, he threw the ball with apathy and passed the ball when he was wide open. Blake's defense is where he got most of his points, always stealing the ball and driving to the hoop, but I watched our team's star defender stiff and unable to get low on defense, playing timidly. I got him water when I got myself some because he would sit down, away from us all, and wait for the next drill. Before we got started for the next drill, I told him a funny joke.

"What's the difference between LeBron James and a tree?"

He said, "I don't know. The tree is taller."

I said, "No, silly, it has more rings."

He couldn't fake it. He rolled his eyes, turned his head, and covered his mouth to hold back the giggle. I finally got him to laugh. I felt good about myself because he's my best friend. Seeing him sad is the last thing I want to witness, but it wasn't enough. I felt terrible for him. Blake threw brick after brick—the basketball went over the hoop; the coach called a turnover. It was like he had never played the game before. Blake was playing so poorly that even I had more minutes of game time than him. Every little mistake at this point was building up, and you could see his sadness turn to madness.

We had to get into groups of two to work on free throws. He ran over to me and smiled. This was our favorite drill because we would turn it into a competition. The first one to make all ten in a row got a dollar or whatever the other could offer. In this drill, we were just in our world. It felt like it was just him and I in the gym. Time

stopped, and for a moment, nothing was rushed. We were just two best friends enjoying the journey of where basketball could take us. Perfecting our free throws has been our goal since we were kids. He thought if he could be one hundred percent at the free throw line, he could be just like Curry. We rotated, taking shot after shot, and like a prayer, the ritual of shooting free throws turned into a practice of repetition, focus, and presence. In that ritual, the truth always came out in conversation. After a few minutes of only hearing the ball's dribble and the net's swoosh, Blake suddenly spoke about the long nights his dad had been staying at work.

“Jake, it’s been going on for a week. He doesn’t come home until everyone is asleep.”

Erin Langendorfer, “Two Faces”

“I understand, Bro, and I’m here for you.”

“Jake, I think something is going on. I even found him on the couch one morning.”

“Was he drunk? Did he have work clothes on?”

“No, he had his sweater and shorts on. But get this. He smelt like a girl’s perfume.”

“Maybe he just accidentally sprayed your mom’s perfume on him.”

“I don’t know, Jake. He has been different lately.”

The practice was almost over, and when his grandma walked in, the color on his face disappeared. I knew his anxiety had risen to the top. He didn’t even say goodbye to me. He ran over to his bag and took off his shoes, throwing his practice jersey on the ground. He didn’t even put his coat on. He just stuffed it in his bag and left.

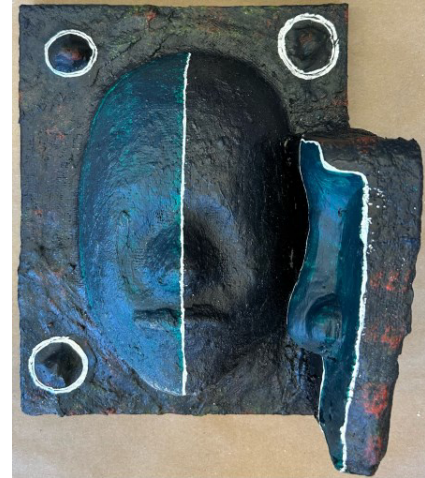
My dad didn’t come until thirty minutes later because he had forgotten about me. I’ve never realized that wound that was there until now. Am I always going to be second best? Blake might be losing his dad, and I never notice that my dad has always been absent. He wouldn’t even take Blake with us to a basketball camp. But Blake’s father also treated me like I was a part of their family. Especially during the summer when Blake and I would play travel ball. I couldn’t help but worry for Blake.

Once I got home, I grabbed my phone. A text was waiting for me from Blake.

“Jake, I was right. The night my dad had the smell of perfume on him was the night my mom caught him with another woman. That is why he was sleeping on the couch. My mom is making me pack all my bags, and we are MOVING. Jake, I don’t want to leave you, Bud. You’re my best friend, and today at practice, you were more helpful than you know. I am an emotional wreck. I will text you when I make it to my grandma’s.”

Halfway through reading the message, a tear rolled down my face, and it broke my heart at the end, when I saw him say he was moving. The pounding in my heart went faint, I lost my balance, and my face met the floor. Blake was my best friend. He made me forget my struggles. I couldn’t imagine his feelings, but I was torn to pieces by all of it.

He is my only friend, and I would do anything for him.





Cassandra Mendez, "Friendship Lost"

"Blake, I can't imagine what you are going through. It would be best if you didn't leave as much as it hurts me. Our memories on the basketball court will forever be in my heart. The NBA games you took me to, how can I ever forget? Blake, I want you to know that your fire for the game helps me strive to be who I am today. Blake, you made me a better person by loving me as you do. You are forever going, my greatest friend! You don't know the countless times I prayed for your strength and greatness. Every morning and night. You are my hero!"

It was the following day, and Blake still needed to respond. *Should I text him first? Did he make it to his grandma's?* I was pacing back in forth in my room. Time couldn't go any slower. *If I was in his shoes, what would I do?* Then it hit me. He is probably at the gym. He always says, "basketball is always there for me. Then I wondered, *how do I go on at the gym without Blake?* It would never be the same without him. *Who am I without him?*

Blake, if you ever see this, please come back to me.

An Untypical Love Story

Ellie Plumhoff

I looked over at Lexi lying in the seat next to me. Her lifeless body full of blood from the shattered glass covering every inch of the scene. "Lex, wake up!" I yelled, trying to reach for her neck to see if I can feel her pulse, but the gravity of the dash and steering wheel has me pinned down.

"You okay in there? Help is on the way," said an unknown voice off in the distance. At this moment, I felt a sense of hope and knew Lexi and I were getting help.

Lexi was my girlfriend of five years and tonight I was planning on proposing to her. We planned on going to dinner and then walking on the beach. We got into the car. I watched Lexi's small lean body crawl into my passenger seat and put her seat belt on. She was always so direct about that because she hated the thought of dying in a car accident. We set off to our favorite restaurant. It was about a ten-minute drive. We were on the blacktop highway when suddenly, out of nowhere, a dump truck carrying about one hundred pounds of cement blocks was turning into us.

Sergio Cerda Juarez, "Car"





Daniel Castro Ramero, "Fragment"

I looked at Lex as the car was flipping and said, "I love you, Lex." I didn't think I was going to survive this. Cement blocks were flying in every direction, hitting my car and shattering on the road. The glass from every window shattered, covering both Lexi and I in the remnants. We stopped flipping and ended up in the ditch parallel to the highway.

The ambulance arrived at the scene, and Lexi was still unconscious. Since our car was flipped upside down, they had to secure us in place before removing us from the vehicle. The EMTs decided to start with Lexi since she was in worse condition. "Hi, I'm Derek," said the EMT. He was very tall with dark brown hair. I felt as if I needed to know everything about this man because my world was in his hands.

"I'm Alex, and that's Lexi," I spoke for Lexi because she was still unconscious, so she couldn't speak for herself. "Is she breathing? I need to know," I asked Derek.

"Yes, but barely. We are going to get you both out safely," said Derek. I trusted Derek. I could tell in his calming voice that he was going to live up to his word and get us out. I watched as they removed Lexi from the vehicle; there was no reaction in her body as they moved her to the gurney.

"You're next, Alex," said Derek. I wasn't ready for this moment. I thought that if they unpinned me that my legs would be numb and that I would end up paralyzed. The EMTs started to unpin me. I was scared for my life. The adrenaline from this whole experience had built up and I was shaking incessantly. Derek grabbed me from under both my armpits and pulled me out of the wrecked car. As I was being pulled on the stretcher to the ambulance, lit up with red and blue flashing lights, I saw the remnants of my car. The bumper was still in the road from when we started flipping and the rest remained in the ditch.

When I got into the ambulance, I asked Derek, "Where's Lex? Where is Lexi, Derek?"

"She's already on her way to the hospital. She is in critical condition."

It was all my fault. The love of my life could be dead because of me. I needed to see Lexi. On my way to the hospital, I asked Derek how long the ambulance ride would be.

"About 15 minutes." I kept checking my watch, at least what was left of it. Every time I checked, only 30 seconds went by.

When I arrived at the hospital, I got a glimpse of Lexi's bloody body being rushed into a trauma room.

"She's coding!" screamed a nurse. My heart dropped. I didn't know much about medical terminology, but from movies and shows I'd watched with Lexi, I knew that coding meant someone going into cardiac arrest.

"We're taking Lexi to the OR," said a nurse. I wasn't a religious person, but I knew I had to pray. It's what my mother and father told me.

When the nurse came in for about the fourth time, she told me Lex was in recovery.

“When can I see her?” I asked.

“Soon. Let her wake up first,” she said. A few minutes passed and the hospital staff wheeled Lex into my room.

“Alex?” she asked.

“Hi Lex, it’s me,” I replied. I reached for her hand and grabbed it. I was okay. Me and Lex were okay and safe.

“What happened, Alex? Where am I?” Lexi asked.

“We were in a car accident. But we’re both okay” I answered.

“I love you, Alex,” she said.

“I love you too Lex” I replied.

I got up from my bed and went to the bathroom. When I walked into the small bathroom with stone tile and beige walls, I realized I still had the ring in my pocket. The ring I was going to propose to Lexi with. “Why should I wait?” I asked myself. I shouldn’t wait to do this. This has been my dream since I met Lexi. I knew I wanted to make this special for both of us but after tonight. I didn’t want to wait anymore.

Erin Langendorfer, “Housed”

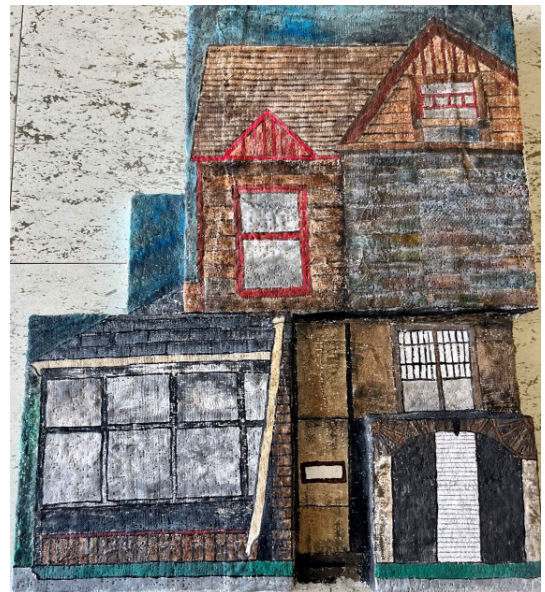
I walked out of the bathroom and looked Lex in the eyes and started tearing up. I dropped to one knee and asked, “Lexi, I love you to the moon and back, and I wouldn’t want to spend my life with anyone else. Will you marry me?”

“Yes! Of course!” she said. And suddenly I was engaged to my best friend.

The next morning, I woke up and Lexi was with the doctors. I was still tired from the accident, and I was hungry because I never got to eat since the accident happened on the way to dinner. I was starting to sit up in bed when a police officer entered my hospital room and sat down on the maroon swivel chair next to my bed.

“Hi, Alex. I’m Officer Hall. I am going to have to ask you some questions.” When he said this, I had a gut feeling that this couldn’t be good. Officer Hall started talking and I couldn’t listen to him. I was worrying so much about where Lexi was and why in the world a police officer was asking me questions like something was wrong.

I was still struggling to listen to Officer Hall until he said, “We think this wasn’t an accident.” When I heard those words leave his mouth all of the other thoughts that were taking up my mind disappeared.



“How in the world would someone do this to us?” I asked myself. “Why do you think that officer?” I asked.

“When we were reviewing multiple witness statements there were similarities in a lot of them, but one thing stood out to us,” he said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Witnesses say that when the truck hit you, instead of slowing down, it seemed the truck sped up,” he said. I was shocked, why would someone want to hurt Lexi and me?

“Does Lexi know?” I asked.

“Well, Alex, we think Lexi may be involved.” he said. There’s no way Lexi would be involved. Why would she be involved? So many questions ran through my mind, and I just wanted answers.

“When can I speak to Lexi?” I asked.

“When we have answers,” Officer Hall stated.

I sat in my hospital room for hours looking at the wall. I would have been pacing but because of my limited leg movement. The only thing I could think of was how Lexi would be involved and where she was so I could talk to her. I needed to talk to her.

When my nurse left, I got out of bed and grabbed my walker, making it seem like I was going to walk to the cafeteria. Once I made it to the elevator, I pressed the button that said ICU. Once the shiny reflective doors slowly opened, I knew I had to be sneaky if I wanted to see Lexi. As I turned right around a corner, I saw two police officers and an investigator leave room 416— Lexi’s room. I waited a few minutes, and I then walked up to the door of room 416 and stood there until Lexi and I made eye contact.

“Alex, what are you doing here? You shouldn’t be here,” she said.

“I have questions,” I said. I wanted to ask her everything, but I knew I had limited time before someone came in here and escorted me out to another room. Lexi was right; I shouldn’t be there, but I needed to see her. I sat down on the couch in her room because before I hugged her, I needed to know if what the officers were saying was true.

“Officers are saying you were involved in the accident, Lex,” I told her. She was silent; nothing came out of her mouth. At this point, I wanted her to speak because her not speaking was proving her more guilty than her making up a fake story to prove her innocence.

“I don’t know what to say, Alex” she stuttered.



Cassandra Mendez, "Time Apart" when I said yes. It was a mistake," she said. I couldn't believe what I just heard.

"Someone get a cop in here!" I screamed.

"Alex, what are you doing?" Lexi yelled.

"I'm getting my answers."

A few minutes passed and suddenly a cop and investigator slammed through the doors.

"What are you doing here?" an officer asked me.

"I need to know what's going on," I said.

"Well, Lexi, tell him what you told us," the investigator said.

"I tried to kill you, Alex," she said. As I listened to her story, the only thing I could put together is that she hired a guy to drive a cement truck into us in hopes that I die.

"How did you know that guy?" I asked Lexi.

"I was in love with him," she said. I was shocked. It felt as if my whole world just flipped around. I was speechless. Lexi then went on to say that she met this guy at the coffee shop she worked at and he started to become a regular. "

I started falling in love with him," Lexi said. I just sat there and listened because my mouth could not form any words. "We wanted to run away together, but we needed money. And the only way I could get money without working was from Alex," said Lexi. She started telling the officers that she didn't want to take my money because she thought she would get caught. And she knew that I put her as my sole beneficiary to receive my money when I died, and she knew that if I was dead, she would have the money she needed to run away with this guy.

"Lexi, were you involved!" I cried as loudly as I could without screaming.

"I can't talk to you unless there's a cop here," she said.

"What do you mean, Lex? You are my fiancé. You can tell me anything," I replied. As I sat there staring at Lexi, she looked down at her hand as if she had no idea I asked her to marry me last night and that she'd said yes.

"Since when were we engaged?" She asked.

"Lexi, I proposed to you last night and you said *yes*, remember?" I said.

"No. No. No. I can't marry you. I was still on anesthesia when I said yes. It was a mistake," she said. I couldn't believe what I just heard.

“Alex?” she asked as she looked at me.

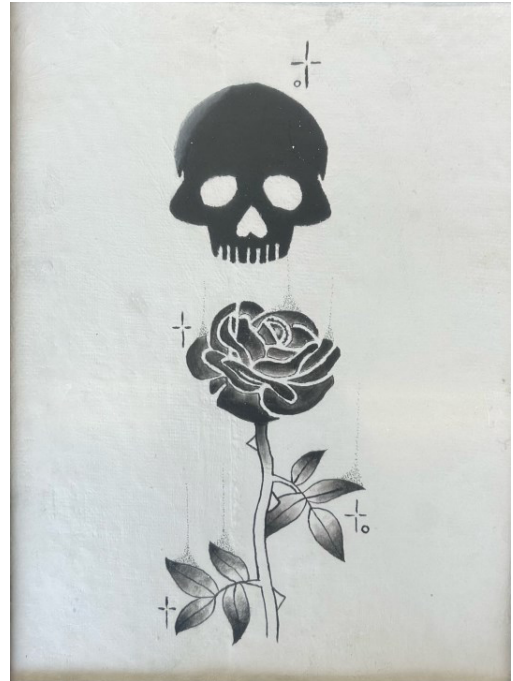
“I loved you, Lexi,” I said crying.

“I’m sorry,” she said. I got up to leave her room because I got the answers I needed.

“Can I have my ring back?” I asked her before I left. After she gave me the ring, I walked away and didn’t look back because after that I never wanted to see her again.

It had been two weeks since I left the hospital when I heard a voice on my television say my name. I walked to my living room couch to sit down as I heard the news lady say they arrested Lexi for attempted murder. As I got up to put my empty coffee mug in the sink, I noticed Lexi’s sweatshirt draped over the back of the recliner. I can’t help but find the rest of Lexi’s belongings around my house. I took all her things out back to my fire pit and poured gasoline over it. I took a match and threw it on the gasoline-soaked things and watched it as it lit up and burned. I felt a sense of relief as I sat there and watched the ashes float up into the sky and everything left that would remind me of Lexi disappeared.

Rachel Moore, “The Beautiful Death”



Minnesota West Community and Technical College's Humanities and Fine Arts Programs

The English Transfer Pathway AA offers students a powerful option: the opportunity to complete an Associate of Arts degree with course credits that directly transfer to designated English bachelor's degree programs at Minnesota State universities. The curriculum has been specifically designed so that students completing this pathway degree and transferring to one of the seven Minnesota State universities* enter the university with junior-year status. All courses in the Transfer Pathway associate degree will directly transfer and apply to the designated bachelor's degree programs in a related field.

*Universities within the Minnesota State system include Bemidji State University; Metropolitan State University; Minnesota State University, Mankato; Minnesota State University Moorhead; Southwest Minnesota State University; St. Cloud State University; and Winona State University.

The Liberal Arts Program leads to a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree. This program provides students an opportunity to test several occupational areas before making a final decision by acquainting them with all the basic fields of human knowledge. The program meets the requirements for the Associate of Arts Degree and Minnesota Transfer Curriculum (MnTC).

The Associate of Arts degree can be used to fulfill the freshman-sophomore general education requirements at all state universities and most four-year colleges and universities in other states. The degree is the basic graduation award toward which most students will work if they intend to transfer. It emphasizes a broad general education.



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