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POETRY

“Mother Nature, Father Time” – By Sam Kealey

And he hadn't seen a light as bright
as the one he saw in her eyes that night.
So he held her close and he held her tight
and as he listened to her intermittent beating heart at night
and as he listened to her intermittent beating heart at night he'd write:

Oh my darling, oh my dear, rest your head, no need to fear. Close your eyes and dare to dream of
all the things that you could be. I'll bat these teardrops from your eyes like all these moments
lost to time, like all these memories in my mind, when you grow old what will you find?

Here in this hallway on the wall
there lives a frame that tells it all

A little
light
A pretty
sight
She's growing
up
She's taking
flight

She just drives on.

so she fell in love on a Saturday night,
she was waiting for the weekend,
she knew it for a while, but
my God, it just felt so right
So she took him beside the drive-in lights, held his hands, looked in his eyes
And, through star-crossed tears she said:

My dear, there in the distance I can hear the church bells ring the choir sings as all the angels
spread their wings into the skies they all will fly through shooting suns and setting nights ain't it
the tiding of all tides, ain't it the way of all the waves, ain't it the bain of every sailor to wash
ashore again someday?

So he heads home and there he lies
there with his stardust-laden eyes
he cries, he tries, he screams,
he dreams of all the things
he thought he'd be
can't find the
future
lost
the past
meant to be,
not meant to last
he packs his bags, he
loads the car, he hits the road,
he's come so far, he just drives on.

so with eyes the size of heartbeats, in a memory gone too soon, half-eaten moon, crestfallen land,
where castles crumble, turn to sand; I took your hand and down we fell, I kissed your cheek and
wished you well. We had our fun, we had our day, the curtain closes, music fades for our
hometown, a graveyard now, where all the tombstones talk of how death did them part an August
night, the story ends, they sell the rights, their final breath is up in lights, that distant drive-in,
weekend night, through scattered stardust on the sign, it read:

God bless ya, Mother Nature, Father Time!

and they drive on.

“La Oaxaqueña” – By Frida Avila

Rugged skin pressed upon seasoned huaraches.
Tired feet that yet remain undefeated,
Hoisted up by the spirits of our ancestors.
Callused hands gently laying freshly pressed masa.
The comal carries a blistering heat yet
It only ever feels like a slight kiss of warmth.
The braid that was once jet-black is now
Peppered with silver-coated strands of wisdom.
It remains tightly intertwined to not lose
the memory of The Place of the Seed.
Azteca, Maya, o Zapoteco? Ya no se sabe.
Pero ella es Oaxaqueña, y corre en nuestra sangre.

“Love and War” – By Kelly Parker

And suddenly, every heartbreak I've ever suffered slammed into me with the force of a thousand trucks, each one hitting the dam that held my tears back until it shattered, and they came running down my face. One after another after another after another. Emptying any last affection I had to offer onto my pillow in the form of my liquidized love. Certified lover girl no longer, I can't handle giving my heart away again, maybe I could if I were stronger. But I'm not and this life has led me to think my role, my place, is not in love because it isn't worth the heartbreak, the permanent dull, hollow ache in the empty chasm where a heart used to reside. It moved out a long time ago, but at least I still have my pride. I don't even want much, just a loving glance or touch. Sometimes I think it's better to be independent, to not need someone to lean on like a crutch. But I have too many letters I want to write, confessing my love about his most mundane traits. Because it's those little things that make me swoon and believe in soulmates. “True perfect love, yeah right” the cynic in me retorts in the back of my mind. How can you already forget about the heartbreak, how can you be so blind? Maybe because I feel so inclined to rent my heart out once more. Just once more, I'm sure. Once more there is heartache, the dam breaks and the tears of past lives wash up on shore. But I need to keep searching so I ask the universe, “Give it to me. What else do you have in store? Doesn't matter if it's one heartbreak or four. All's fair in love and war.”

“Digging” – By Nathalia Collazo

I search for meaning as I search for jobs.
Constantly wondering.
What will I do?
Who will I be?
Where will I be?
Who am I?
I dig and I dig, I search and I hunt,
Until...I seek something that fits.
But, nothing ever FITS.
Too far, Too demanding,
Unqualified,
qualified (no experience).

I dig through my clothes to find the perfect interview outfit.

Overdressed,
Underdressed,
Too fitted,
Too much,

What hat should I wear?
The teacher,
The writer,
The baker,
The counselor...

I'll have to keep digging.

“This Could be a Love Song” – By Kristen Giebler

Sometimes I wonder what life would have been
If I had the chance to live
Instead of healing from the love
That I had chosen

The other choices are lost in a world
That I think about quite often

This love left nothing but silence in my heart
I can't let my pen bleed the ink of
A thousand words I once wanted to say
But now, I don't feel
There is something compelling
about leaving the dagger in the wound
that it made
because it's the only way to prevent
myself from bleeding out

The other choices are lost in a world
That I think about quite often
Too often
The portrait of your existence
Is palpable to my soul
I have tasted your bitterness
Sucked in the sides of my cheeks
Closed my eyes and lived through it

But I am still determined to savor the sweetness
of our goodness, I put myself through it
I stayed gentle
In times when the world tempted to harden me

The door to the other world
Is open, greeting me, tempting me
But I will probably never end up going

“Why Don’t You Remember?” – By Kristen Giebler

Is it more important to me than you?
I find myself sitting
In locked-up files of my recollection
You have buried them
In a coffin from our past
Do you remember that time when
Your face leads me to pause
Those green eyes grow red
Slashing into my heart
As if I said something wrong
You try and catch me
I don't remember must be someone else
The rage rumbling through my ribcage
I could never mistake another soul
For yours

Pictures; a souvenir
Evidence to support
That I am
Speaking of you
Thinking of you
Recalling of us
Sweet memories now, incomplete.

“Questioning Fate” – By Maddie Conklin

Do you believe in fate?

A simple yet complex question that I think we’ve all wrapped our heads around.

Sometimes it’s an easy answer, yes.

All things that happen are planned.

But then you wonder, why do these things happen?

Everything happens for a reason;

But how could there be a reason for a broken heart,

A sudden death, an unimaginable tragedy.

Is it fate that there’s war?

Is it fate that the devil sprinkles his breath on the world through daily tragedies?

All these questions come to one wonder. Do these things happen for a reason?

Will these unfortunate events lead to the fate of peace?

How about true love? Is there such a thing as love at first sight?

Is it fate to meet that person?

Is it fate to get your heart broken to pieces so that final person can piece it back together?

You have to go through the frogs to get to the prince; right?

What is fate?

Maybe our fate is the unknown,

Maybe it’s fate for us not to understand why things happen,

Maybe fate just means to live in the present.

After all, that’s all we are capable of doing.

“Come and See” – By Aliza Leander

Come and see,
The ignoramus who just can't seem to stop a' thinkin'.
Come and see.
She used to prance around, eyes all a' twinklin'.
Come and see.
But then judgment came and left her a trippin'—
Come and see.
She came to doubt her own intuition—
Come and see.
And when she saw, at the seams, how her reality was rippin'—
Come and see.
She started to wonder if life was at all worth livin'.
Come and see. Come and see. Come and see.

She tried to fight it— screamin', fallin', kickin'.
Come and see.
Stopped sleepin' -- started beggin', bitchin'.
Come and see.
The world creaked under her, bobbin' and thrashin',
Come and see.
Demanded that she learn to dance, show more passion.
Come and see.
And she could've done it, could've kept a straight gait!
Come and see.
But, alas, the devotion demanded, she couldn't quite replicate...
Come and see. Come and see. Come and see.

She got a little taller, saw the world a little clearer,
Come and see.
But still too short-sighted, did nothing which endeared her,
Come and see.
And despite all attempts at assistance by the world, all she saw was—
Come and see.
An absence of faith, an absence of kindness, an absence of love.
Come and see. Come and see. Come and see.

The world rumbled no, and she shrunk in shame, but saw only the abyss.
Come and see.

Rather than grow, she chose to perpetuate iniquity, reason dismissed.

Come and see.

She drove the world out of its wits— felt it quake in rage!

Come and see.

And by no manner of her thinkin' could it be assuaged...

Come and see.

So she laid like a stabbed starling at the tip of the world, the bow of the ship—

Come and see.

Lied and swore like a drunken sailor before she tripped—

Come and see.

And fell into the sea.

...

Now come and see this fool who swallows salt and sand!

Come and see!

Who snarls and spits and misunderstands!

Come and see!

Who garnered pride, and envy, and lust, and hate!

Come and see!

A fool who prays but desecrates!

Come and see! Come and see! Come and see!

In truth, she leaves all souls aghast.

Come and see!

In wasted potential, she is unsurpassed—

Come and see!

An indefensible impolitic who sits and stews yet never acts—

Come and see!

A deplorable thief of time, for her every action distracts, detracts.

Come and see! Come and see! Come and see!

See the wrath of one who stares!

Come and see!

Behold the weeping of she who fails to dare!

Come and see!

Who neglects to study, to think, to grow—

Come and see!

To temper the body, letting it hit a plateau.

Come and see! Come and see! Come and see!

She who makes oaths she does not keep,
Come and see!
Who lies and fakes that she is not weak,
Come and see!
And only failure, it seems, can stay her course—
Come and see!
For she is arrogant and callous, showing no remorse.
Come and see! Come and see! Come and see!

And from dark of night to break of dawn,
Come and see!
By her own mistakes, finds all her power, vigor, hope, is gone,
Come and see!
And so she screams unto the stars, disturbs the peace—
Come and see!
Bringing naught but anger, so all good things decrease.
Come and see! Come and see! Come and see!

She is reckless, recalcitrant, disrespectful, sad,
Come and see!
Exasperating, delusional, and simply bad.
Come and see!
But worst of all, she might yet be,
Come and see!
Knowledgeable of it all, yet choicefully blind to Thee.
Come and see! Come and see.

...

And that's all a lie.
Come again?
Or, well, actually, that's mostly untrue.
Come again?
What is life but love enduring?
Come again? Come again? Come again?

I wonder sometimes why I continue on,
Why I plow ahead,
Why I dance to life's often somber, solemn song.
Come and— Come and— Come and—

I wonder sometimes why I sit in emptiness,
Where a minute becomes an hour,
And an emotion fosters an eternity,
And I think to myself,
What have I done?
Come and— Come and— ...

I wonder sometimes why things happened,
Why I went through what I did,
Why I was born into my position,
If it was planned,
Or if I just drew a rather shitty straw.

Come and—

I wonder sometimes, what I might be,
If I succumb to anger and hate,
If I refuse to be me.
...

I wonder, sometimes, how I forget.
At how I think only of anger and hate,
Of only regret,
when there are so many great things.
For I could be grateful,
I could be bold,
I could be glad,
I could face the bitter cold!

I wonder, sometimes, at the beauty of life,
The capacity to enjoy music,
to know love,
To dare to think that even if miniscule,
You are thought of.

I wonder, sometimes, at the majesty of the world,
At birds which sing when they alight,
Or falling maple seeds which twirl,
Or the smile on a friend's face,

And suddenly, life seems so bright.

I wonder, sometimes, at what I could be,
If I take heart in humor and harmony,
If I choose to be me.

It could be my solemn promise, my echoing cry,
To reach for the stars, to aim for the sky,
To pursue the standard I'll never breach,
So that I may be perfect in His eyes.

Oh, all the wondrous, heart-wrenching things I could know,
The spectacular triumphs and humbling lows!
But best of all, I might yet be,
Knowledgeable of it all, yet choicefully turned to Thee.
Come and see.
Come and see.

“Rotisserie Chicken” – By Kristen Giebler

A long hard day after work
All you wanted was a warm meal

Something easy
I hope that you can digest

Selfish, narcissistic fool
he did not let you rest
A fossil you found
Hollowed out on the stove

Nothing to pick at
It was his to behoove
Bones so exposed
You can see all the striations

Mother couldn't believe her eyes

The raging sensation
Yet I feel guilty
I know it is picked from the breast

The rosemary skin
White meat is the best
I was too young to understand
I fear you won't forgive me
If it were up to me now,
I give you my kidney

“Concealer Contacts” – By Kristen Giebler

Born with the eyes of a man
My family shuns. Like a curse.
Firstborn always looks like the father.
It was my fate at birth.

What are you? the vague question proposed-
When someone wants to know your nationality.

My mind froze.
Hispanic? Filipino?
Nope, try again. I don't know if I should be offended.
Do they not realize that I am blended?

Cultures that clash.
German, Greek, and Indonesian
What's up with that?
Giebler tastes like a Rauchbier
A powerful tang from the night after Oktoberfest.
American at heart. I tongue close to anglo-saxon
I indulge in hamburgers.

My complexion resembles that of my grandmothers
Escaping Indonesia for a better life.
Birthing a son who hides his last name.
27 letters, what a pain.
I can keep my last name but I can change my eyes.
Hazel contacts can conceal the lies.
For a last name that can fit the face.

“This Life” – by Isabella Fabbo

It wasn't always like this
Mind sharp, knife meeting diamond
Hands in kitchen
Feet to pavement
Scoop from the outside
Of the steaming pastina
Hours under the golden chandelier
Mimicked in thick carpet beneath
Games taught, played, remembered
Play the 8 of spades for
It is wild, candy bowl filled with cough drops
Sounds and memories sharp, knife and diamond
Joints now sore, stiff
Knees buckle under the carriage
Of the produce aisle
Games forgotten
Moments fleeting, escaping
As quickly as they come
Life lived catching
Up, time felt in bones
Mind wavering, soft, fuzzy
Ripe peach
It wasn't always like this
Is this what awaits?
It wasn't always like this
Four square, concrete playground
Bare feet sink into
Wet grass, leaping, sprinklers
Familiar with the layouts
Of old friends' houses
Bells ring, school lunch
At tables in the gym
Vacations, temperature warming
Bending over backwards to
Provide life lasting memories
Memories fading, fuzzy
Gaining consciousness to
The realities of life

Finally awake, wishing
More than anything to
Fall back asleep
Will it always be like this?
Sylvia's fig tree
Broken compass
Smashed pieces, no direction
Brakes cut, attempted
Murder, nowhere to run
Will it always be like this?

“Summer Rain” – by Destiny Walton

Standing barefoot in some forlorn meadow,
Head bowed, staring at the grass between my toes
Warmest, firmest of rain washes me away little by little
Heavy clouds blanket the sky, at war with Earth, while I’m stuck in the middle

I’m getting vengeful looks from wildflowers and reverent ones from daisies
But I just close my eyes, and try and forget all who’ve forgotten me
Tilting my head up, I greet the heavens
Letting them see who exactly was against them.

This summer is endless, this summer I messed up
June has banished me here, because of my stupid bad-luck
Fallen from grace, I’ve been left to rot away
I can do no more but beg for forgiveness at heavens gates

My soul is heavy, my heart is cold,
I am so young yet I feel so old
Punished with the weight of my wrongdoings,
This age long fight might become my undoing

Soaked to the bone, my skin heavy with Earths tears,
If I am trapped in this anxious state, I will know nothing but fear
Yet, something about these wistful flowers, surrounded by trees, this glimmering grass,
Gives me the courage to ask:

“Why was I granted a mouth, if no one will listen, ears, with no one to respond?
This life, which is ever so lonely and long?
Two eyes that are permanently cast down...
Legs that will never travel, arms that could never hold someone safe and sound?”

My head lowers back towards the ground, I curse this endless summer
The sticky heat, rich sun, green day’s that cause my endless blusters
But nothing feels so good as rain pouring from the sky
That just cleanses you back to what you were on your first day

Inhaling the damp smell of forest, tasting life on my tongue,
My mind is slowly, gently coming undone
As rain pelts my face, as the breeze tickles my cheeks,

I think, I will finally be at peace.

Clouds break slightly, letting a beam of that rich sunlight through
It shines down on this meadow and everything starts to glow
The rain still pours around us, but this spot is dry
My thoughts clear up, and I can't help but cry

This is the summer I realized not who I'm not, but who I could be
This is the seemingly endless summer I was set free
This is the summer I could finally see
This is the summer I realized I'm just...me.

“An Open Book” – by Kelsey Donnelly

I opened up and I beckoned you in.
You stood on the threshold with your hands over your eyes.
Waited for me to shut the doors and
Dress the windows back up and
Stand in the street with you in the cold.
Now
The door is shut to you but
Still you linger there,
Hand raised to knock on the glass.
You're shocked, offended even
That the warmth radiating from within these walls no longer reaches
Where you stand
Your knuckles on the glass meet ice, and
You can't tell that you're the one who put it there.
My windows don't need dressing.
My shelves were not bare.
The sign above the door told you exactly what to expect.
And you waited anyway.
Let the door hang open and
Blocked the way out, the way back in.
Let so much heat out seep out into the night that
The shelves started frosting over.
The trinkets and books and pieces of a girl get stuck in time.
Still your eyes are shut and
You complain of the chill in your bones,
You ignore the layers of blankets draped over your shoulders, and
The weight of my body trying to shield your own.
I was cold, too.
But still I let the frost coat my fingertips, and
Watched my breath cloud in front of me.
I gave you every ember I could muster and
You kept your feet on the threshold.
I was cold, too.

“I Will...” – by Jenna Siuta

I will never be the person to say “no it’s fine” when someone is excited to show me something.

I will never be the person that talks shit about someone for no reason.

I will never be the person who doesn’t care enough.

I will never be the person who doesn’t love enough.

I will never be the person who gives up after one disagreement.

I will never be the person to ignore or avoid someone.

I will never be the person who stops caring.

I will never be the person to block someone for no reason.

I will never be the person who disrespects someone for something they can’t control.

I will never be you.

I will always be the person who loves too much.

I will always be the person who cares too much.

I will always be the person to listen when someone needs it.

I will always be the person to go out of their way to help others.

I will always be the person who says hi to someone in the hallway.

I will always be the person who tries to fix the unfixable

I will always be the person who thinks they’re not enough.

I will always be the person who is told “you’re too much”.

I will always be the person who doesn’t get love in return.

I will always be the person who hurts harder than most.

I will always be the person where the only one who truly cares about them is themselves.

I will always be the person who gets left behind.

I will always be the opposite of what you stand for.

“Self-Sabotage” – by Hannah Schultz

Starting is the hardest part
Thoughts immediately drain
Like holes in a bucket
Used to catch rain

Blank screen
Blinking cursor
Like a silent mocking observer

Check the time
Phone a friend
Ask them, beg them
When will thoughts descend?

Then it clicks
The words start flowing
The mind is a frenzy
Of constant composing

Line after line
A clicking of keys
The mind at work
Like gears on machines

As quick as it starts
You know it will end
Take advantage of it now
Inspiration will likely not strike again

The pains of a writer
Who lives for their words
Nobody warns
Of the turmoil you'll incur

“Want” – by Wren Campise

I want to want to live

To feel the sun upon my face

And blades of grass piercing my bare feet

And countless grains of sand getting stuck between my fingers, clinging to my skin like a mother clings to her child

To know the feeling of wind beneath my wings

To feel a laugh rumble in my belly and tickle my throat as it bubbles out of me

Like the bubbles in the soda I drink every night

To bathe in the light of the moon, its gentle glow caressing the earth like a lover in bed

To scrape my knee and feel the sting of the ointment that’s applied

To feel hot tears streak down my cheeks like stars across the sky

To hear a sigh of relief

And utter one myself

To be part of the collective

But uniquely me

To try to capture the essence of living in a few measly words, never quite enough, but the reach for it expressing it better than the words ever could

I want to want all that

I want to live

I want to be

“Sonnet I” – by Miriam DaPonte

“This tape will self-destruct in five seconds,”
“What of the zeptosecond of my day,
But time spent here or there, with or without
You?” Run the race and leave the tape behind.
The picture framed and taped upon my wall
Is past destroyed and present made, a snap
Of time of hope of Florence
Just past the trees and lit by faded day
The yellow lights do leave their stain upon
The stream, its beauty hides a heart too spent,
A smiling face that wallows in the hope
Of five more sunsets on this earth with you
So to erase the “NEVER” from those lips,
“What of the Florence burning in my mind?”

“Duplex I” – by Miriam DaPonte

It takes time to see who stands in the mirror.
My ex-lover knows this heart is cold.

My next lover will know my heart is cold.
A voice mutters, “It’s not my fault.”

Their voices mutter, “It’s all her fault.”
No sword, they put up walls for shields.

Pride and pity as my sword and shield,
I go on assured my heart is safe.

It’s cold, sure, but my heart stays safe
with the one who stands in the mirror

“Duplex II” – by Miriam DaPonte

Beauty has the power to make us feel loved.
There’s no beauty in a dissatisfied heart.

There’s no beauty in our dissatisfied hearts,
We lived love as if it was overpriced,

Yet we lived, and to love we owe the price.
I think the world is in need of more beauty.

I think of people in need of more beauty,
The heart will not long for what eye has not seen.

What heart could long for what these eyes have seen?
Fear is the conscience of those who never knew care.

I fear the consequence of those who never knew care,
For the future is theirs as much as mine.

I want for their future as much as mine,
The power of beauty to make us feel loved.

FICTION

“Dawson House” – By Erin Dunn

She was not beautiful in the way all girls are at the height of their youth. Beautiful simply because their bodies are thin, and their skin has not yet learned how to wrinkle. Beautiful simply for a lack of ugly. Beautiful simply on the surface, the kind that faded into mundanity the longer you looked at it.

Aleah was...interesting. Perpetually so. Her features did not fade into a backdrop of beauty, rather each one carved out its own existence, begging for attention and praise in the way only odd things do. She was light, bleached directly from the sun itself. Her hair so white it shone silver, like the moon's glow was a constant sheen.

Consequently, he found her presence intimidating. Benignly so, like the itch of a mosquito that required little focus to forget, but still, his constant awareness of her frayed on his nerves. Her eyes floated throughout the room, dismally obtuse to how his attention snagged on her and refused to let go. The way he stared, rapt and assessing, wondering, calculating.

Was she capable of murder?

With skinny wrists handcuffed to the metal table before her, she hardly seemed the part. But from the other side of the one-way glass, under the harsh lighting of the holding cell, Rider Greene thought she looked downright beastly.

The already sharp angles of her face were thrown into gaunt, lengthy shadows. Her eyes, a blue so pale they looked gray, seemed to sink within their sockets.

She was enchanting.

Haunting.

Deadly?

Rider spared her one final glance across the expanse of the monitoring mirror before striding into the holding cell.

Aleah didn't blink at his entrance.

She gave no indication she'd marked his presence at all.

“Miss Dawson,” Rider whispered.

He should have announced himself with more dignity than a terrified whisper. But she stared off in the distance as if trapped in a trance.

It seemed unwise to startle her.

So, he approached slowly, smoothly, gently. A hunter charming his prey, taking those final steps towards a kill.

Only once he sat, straight-backed in the cold metal chair opposite her, did Aleah acknowledge him.

Those unearthly eyes snapped to him. One moment lost in the recesses of thought, the next boring into him with a newfound ferocity.

That face looked capable of murder.

“Miss Dawson,” he said again. Louder this time. With authority. “Do you know where you are?”

She cocked her head. “Do you mean the police station? Or Grotto Falls? No, our glorious state of Massachusetts? Or perhaps our godly United States of America?”

Rider fought against his urge to gulp. “The police station is fine.” God, she was unnerving. “Do you know why you’re here?”

She made a face that said do enlighten me.

“Miss Dawson, you’re here so we can ask you some questions about the deaths of Payton and Eleanor LeBrun.”

Payton LeBrun filled Aleah’s glass until the champagne overflowed.

She yelped and Payton gasped. “Oh heavens! Must stop drinking, must start thinking,” he giggled.

A grown man.

A businessman.

Giggled.

Aleah winced something akin to a smile. “Thank you for the invitation tonight, the house looks lovely.”

Lovely was perhaps the wrong word.

Around them, a party raged. Guests swiped glasses of champagne from smartly dressed waiters and picked at toothpicks of cheese and grapes. Small strings of white lights twined around each banister, complimented by great candelabras on nearly every table. So many feet pounded upon the wooden floors in a symphony of heels and dress shoes.

Truly the house looked seconds away from a call to the fire department.

“Yes, yes, lovely. All thanks to your generosity.”, ton glanced around the hall, his eyes wading through a boozy haze to fix upon his wife at the top of the stairs.

Eleanor LeBrun rapped a knife against the stem of her champagne glass. Few heads turned so she hit the glass harder. With one aggressive knock she shattered the entire base of the glass.

The crowd swiveled towards the shower of broken shards. Eleanor smoothed her soaked skirt and gave the gathered people a tipsy smile. Without so much as a word, Payton left Aleah, shoving shoulders aside to climb the stairs next to his wife.

Aleah drained her entire glass with a repressed groan.

“Welcome, welcome, our beloved family and friends!” Eleanor declared.

Payton wrapped an arm around her waist, tugging her close, pressing a kiss to her throat. “We are honored to welcome you all to our Grand Opening Fete!”

A round of polite applause from the crowd as Eleanor continued, “We won’t keep you from the festivities much longer. But we have one person we feel is owed our gratitude. Aleah? Aleah Dawson?”

Fuck. Them.

The crowd parted as if on cue, a path emerging to lead her straight to the LeBrun’s feet. As if the crowd sensed her new station.

Beneath them.

At least she'd had that champagne.

Aleah forced herself forward, step overstep, until she stood below the glittering LeBrun's.

“To Miss Dawson. For her honorable parting with Dawson House, so that it can be remade anew under our tutelage. Without Miss Dawson, our dreams would never have become a reality. To Miss Dawson and our partnership!” Payton announced, Eleanor sealed the toast with a sloppy kiss on his mouth.

The guest roared their approval, drinking and cheering to Aleah's demise, to the loss of her inheritance, to her continued humiliation under the feet of the LeBrun's.

To being used.

“The community suffers greatly from the loss,” Aleah told Rider.

Their deaths were no secret. Rider studied her face, her breathing. No change, not even a hitch at the bald discussion of death.

“But you don't believe that. Do you?” Rider dared to ask.

A breath.

Another.

“Tell me,” Rider continued. “Do you feel their deaths were a loss.”

Silence.

She blinked once, recognition flaring in her eyes.

Aleah knew the game he played; knew the questions he was going to ask. Knew why exactly they had brought her here.

If the handcuffs hadn't been a massive clue, this certainly would be. No polite dancing around the subject anymore.

So, Rider pushed.

Hard.

“Does insanity run in your family?”

The ground crunched beneath Aleah’s feet. Frost coasted the lawn, sharpening the tip of each blade of grass into a steely white point.

The black of her grandmother’s coffin shattered the serenity of the landscape.

Against the backdrop of white, three figures surrounded the construction of polished black wood.

Two tall, one small.

The preacher, the woman, and the child.

Meredith, Aleah’s closest classmate, hadn’t spoken to her all week. Her final words had come on Monday when Meredith informed Aleah that her and her family would not be present at the funeral. Due to the “bad things” Aleah’s grandmother had done to the mayor.

The “bad things” had clearly not been described to Meredith.

For Aleah knew her grandmother had done more than “bad things” to the mayor.

Terrible things.

Atrocious things.

Deadly things.

Her grandmother had picked up a butcher knife, tucked it in the lining of her coat, and walked across town to the mayor’s house.

At dusk, just as the mayor and his family were sitting down to a pleasant supper, her grandmother had rang the doorbell.

And stabbed the mayor seventeen times in the chest.

The mayor's wife had turned the corner just as her grandmother delivered the final blow and before the wife could get out a scream, her grandmother took the knife and slit her own throat.

She bled out in the mayor's foyer, right over his dead body.

Aleah's mother didn't believe in sugarcoating things to an eight-year-old.

"What sort of question is that." She wasn't asking.

This close to her, Rider could see the veins spiderwebbing under her skin. Two particularly potent branches framed her eyes, a mimicry of a mask.

Like she was feigning being human.

"There hasn't been a murder in town in years. Funny that the last one was committed by a member of the Dawson House," Rider noted. Aleah's eye twitched at the implied as was this one.

Rider watched her swallow. A long slow movement.

"Dawson House no longer belongs to me," she whispered.

That news was the talk of the town.

After a long and storied tenure as the estate of the Dawson family, with extensive grounds forming the backbone of the Massachusetts floral industry, the house at 17 Rosewood Lane, commonly referred to as Dawson House, was sold to Payton and Eleanor LeBrun. The LeBrun's expressed their great interest in opening a Bed and Breakfast to capitalize on the quaint New England scenery and continue the legacy of Dawson Florals.

The ink was still glistening on the contract when the LeBrun's had announced their Grand Opening fête and invited over half the town to celebrate.

What had made Aleah Dawson sell?

Or, perhaps more importantly...

What was she willing to kill to get back?

"As I understand," Rider began. "Dawson House now belongs to Everly LeBrun."

Aleah's nose wrinkled, her lip curling.

“Is Everly next, Miss Dawson? She stands as the only obstacle between you and your inheritance.”

People crowded the cemetery to the fences, muddied boot prints tracking along gravel pathways. Rain poured down overhead. The deluge mingled with the tears on each guest's face.

Aleah lingered several steps behind the people.

The preacher struggled through his sermon, the crowd sniffled or outright bawled. Hugs were doled out between strangers, tissues passed from umbrella to umbrella, comfort within community.

Aleah could name every face.

Yet no one had come years before. When it was her family standing before a gravesite.

Her eyes remained dry.

When it was time, the grave men lowered the caskets. Twin monstrosities of mahogany covered in white roses. At their head stood a small blond figure, drowning in her dress and her sorrow.

Everly LeBrun watched the bodies of her parents drop into the earth. A torn piece of paper, scribbles scrawled sideways along the lines, was clutched in her tiny fist. She couldn't have been more than thirteen years old.

Life didn't believe in sugarcoating things to her either.

Aleah wanted to speak to her, needed to. One kindred spirit to another, one broken soul to its twin.

Everly cleared her throat and began her poem.

“Do not stand at my grave and weep.”

A thudding echoed. The caskets reaching their final resting place.

“I am not there. I do not sleep.”

Shovelfuls of dirt, showering down, spraying the coffins in muddied, sopping, grit.

“I am a thousand winds that blow.”

Her voice cracked, choking off with a sudden rasp.

“Do not stand at my grave and cry.”

“I am not there.”

“I did not die.”

She crushed the paper between her palms and released, letting it drop the distance into the grave.

A crumpled shred of white amidst the darkness.

A moment. Another.

The dirt swallowed the poem whole.

Buried beneath the weight of bloody graves.

Everly stood, captain of her sinking ship, until every guest had shuffled their way out.

Every guest except Aleah.

From the pathway, across an expanse of submerged grass, riddled with headstones and freshly packed graves, the two faced each other.

Everly glanced up from the grave, meeting Aleah’s eyes through curtains of rain.

Aleah opened her mouth to say something, anything, to tell Everly she understood, she knew that pain in her very bones.

A single shake of Everly’s head cut her off. The small girl surveyed Aleah with gut-wrenching disdain.

Her face said she knew who Aleah was.

She knew what Aleah’s family had done.

Everly LeBrun called through the storm.

“You’ll never get it back. Atone all you like. They’re still dead. And Dawson House is still mine.”

“You have no idea who-” Aleah bit off her words.

Rider watched her temples flicker as she clenched her jaw. A fury bordering on animalistic flickered in her eyes.

He wondered, perhaps it should have been his first thought, what Aleah Dawson might do to him.

The chain linking her to the desk was meant to stop her from simply escaping. He sat well within its reach.

“I renounced my inheritance. But they defiled it.”

The room ricocheted her hiss back at them.

It was one thing to assume, but to see how broken she looked, her eyes fracturing behind the statement.

“If it means that much to you, why would you sell it?” Rider asked. The question that had been haunting them all.

His entire department could not come up with a plausible answer. The Dawsons were not struggling for money. The LeBrunns had begged Aleah to stay on as a partner in the business, to manage the monstrosity of an estate they purchased.

If she didn’t need the money, why sell Dawson House at all?

Why go through the effort of killing the LeBrunns just to regain the house she could have had all along?

Aleah simply tsked, head turning away.

She was done answering questions.

And he was no closer to the truth.

So he left her with one final remark.

“I don’t think you did this at all, Miss Dawson. It may be characteristic for your family but anyone in town would know that. I think someone tried to take advantage of your particular history.”

Rider rose, chair legs screeching across the cement floor.

“I think you know precisely who I’m talking about, Miss Dawson. You’re protecting someone, aren’t you. Someone is hiding behind that Dawson reputation to get away with murder.”

Blood gushed from Eleanor LeBrun’s throat. The throat Payton had kissed no more than an hour before.

Aleah froze at the door to the office.

The body lay crumpled against the base of a bookcase. Blood cascaded in a sluggish drip down her party dress, the pinkish stains spreading across the gold fabric like ink through water. Her face was scrunched in surprise, like the ghost of a scream might still appear from her stiff lips.

A fist rose from behind the desk, a gloved hand brandishing a knife.

No, not gloved.

Coated.

Blood glistened from wrist to fingertip, rolling down the handle of the blade, dripping off the serrated edge, thrown into sharp relief from the lamp directly next to it.

A grunt, then an unmistakable squelch.

Oh.

Fuck.

The fist rose again, accompanied by a slender body, gazing downwards. The head of Payton LeBrun rolled into view, severed completely from his body.

Holly Hart turned at the sound of Aleah's gasp.

A slow smile spread across her blood-spattered face. Freckles of red dusting her cheeks and forehead. Holly wiped her brow, smearing the blood of her godparents across her forehead like a fucked-up halo.

"It's mine," she whispered.

Aleah stood, horrified. She knew exactly what she meant.

The legacy of Dawson House had always been steeped in death. She could never escape it.

Holly pulled the massive chair out from the desk, its legs shoving aside the lifeless limbs of its previous owner with terrible thuds.

Everything she touched was blessed with blood.

Christened with a crown of death.

"What did you do?" Aleah breathed. Rage thundered through her.

Holly stabbed the knife into the desk as she sat. Her fingers ran lovingly over every inch of its surface, touching papers, the lampshade, a small crystal paperweight in the shape of a rose blossom.

"I claimed my prize."

Aleah could only shake her head, lips pressed tightly. "It is not your prize to claim."

It had never been. Aleah had not wanted to live under the House's reputation, but at its heart, Dawson House was hers and hers alone.

The head of Eleanor LeBrun smacked against the bookshelf in agreement.

That devil of a smile faded as Holly hissed, "What do you mean."

Aleah regretted it the moment she said it, realizing she had damned her to a fate worse than her parents. "The house goes to Everly. Not to you."

Never to her.

Holly Hart stared from the seat of her former godparents. Dead at her hands.

Her hand wrapped around the knife handle, yanking it from the wood with an ear-splitting screech.

“Not for long,” she promised.

She crossed the room in a heartbeat, leveling the blade at Aleah’s throat so close Aleah didn’t dare breathe too deeply.

“Will you be next?”

Aleah knew what she asked.

Silence.

In exchange for her life.

Like the coward she was, Aleah accepted.

If Dawson House wanted to breed killers, Aleah would be no force to stop it.

“A Thursday Night in January” – By Megan Agrillo

Ricky Myers stood leaning against his bathroom doorframe as he watched water from the sink faucet drip into the toothpaste-spotted basin in slow, precise drops. It had been dripping like that for a week now, not that he cared. His bare shoulder ached from the awkward positioning of his body. He realized he had been gone for too long, he forgot why he walked into the hallway in the first place.

The floorboards groaned beneath him as he walked back to his bedroom. Melaney Ward lay naked in his bed, she encased her body in a toga of his wrinkled white sheets. Light from the half-opened blinds illuminated her, putting her under an unwanted spotlight. She looked like an actress who forgot her lines on stage. She pulled the sheets tighter around her breasts as Ricky walked back into the room. She had a fine body, her belly protruded a little when she sat upright and her arms inflated when she wrapped them flush around her knees like she was doing now, but he liked her just fine and didn't see any issue with her appearance. She lacked the confidence that experience gave a girl. He guessed that's why she was here though, so next time, next guy, it wouldn't be so stiff.

He took note of her discomfort and pulled the slit in the shades shut and flicked on his lamp, pointedly ignoring the face-down picture frame whose presence burned a hole in his nightstand. He should have put the picture in a drawer by now, but he didn't want to touch it. He plopped himself down on the edge of his bed.

“I was wondering where you went off to,”

Ricky tousled his hair and threw her a lazy grin.

“Just had to go to the bathroom.”

He moved up toward his headboard and laid back down next to her, her white-knuckle grip on the sheets eased, but didn't completely let up. Ricky put a hand on her knee and made lazy circles with his index finger on her pale skin.

“What are you thinking about?” She asked him.

“Nothing too much really,”

Something shifted in her expression, and he wondered if that was the wrong answer.

She stared forward for a few moments without reply, then began combing through her knotted yellow hair with lilac-painted fingernails.

“That was my first time you know,” she said anxiously. Redness burned through her cheeks as she looked down at the strand of hair she toyed with.

“Yeah, Mel I know, you told me,” he said softly.

He looped an arm around her shoulder and gave her a light squeeze. It felt like a coach comforting a player after they made a mistake, don’t worry kid, you got the next play.

“It’s okay, I had a great time,” He smiled down at her and her black makeup smudged eyes.

“Me too,” she said, her cheeks calming a bit. “I’m glad it was with you Ricky.”

Ricky smiled at her again. “Yeah, me too,” he said.

They both remained frozen in that moment for a minute longer. Melaney, now a changed woman, and Ricky, absent from almost all emotion.

“Ricky,” she said cautiously, “do you love me?”

Now it was his turn to have red cheeks. One thing Melaney would need to learn before leaving for college next fall was that love making didn’t require any love at all.

“Melaney,” he started “how could anyone not love you?”

She smiled and stared ahead at his closed blinds but there was a soft sadness in her eyes.

He squeezed her shoulders again and kissed her cheek.

“I should get you home, my brother will be back soon.”

He stood up and threw on a dirty tee shirt and began to put on sweatpants.

“How has he been doing?” She stared at her lap, “I mean, how have you all been doing?”

Ricky stopped with one leg in his pants and stared at her, she rubbed her shoulders nervously like suddenly the room had gone cold.

“He’s been alright, yeah. It’s uh, been alright, you know?” She nodded slowly and stared at her polished nails. He finished dressing, turning his back to her to give her some privacy as she did so herself.

“I just need to use the bathroom,” she told him.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll wait for you downstairs.”

The drive back to Melaney's house was mostly quiet. She had come downstairs with her hair in a ponytail and the makeup from under her eyes washed away, but there was a slight shift in her posture as she walked now, she stood a little straighter. Ricky made sure to leave the door unlocked behind them.

As Ricky drove her home, she alternated between staring out of the passenger and front window as they mindlessly listened to music. The houses on this side of town all stood in patriotic uniform as they drove down the street lined with leafless pin trees, there wasn’t a porch without a flag. Not like his porch, which didn’t have any flags, or Adirondack chairs, or signs that anyone lived there at all. Here the porches had signs that read things like Life’s better with a porch! He thought this street probably looked really nice in the spring.

“Have you applied to any colleges yet?”

“A few yeah, a few,” He turned the music down a notch. “What about you?”

“A couple of different ones, but I think I’m going to early decision for Michigan State.”

“Wow, good for you,” he said genuinely although he no longer cared to talk about college.

Melaney, unaware, drummed her fingers against her thighs to the beat of the radio.

“Stephen did his first year at Michigan State right?”

“Uh-huh,” he said, turning the radio back up. She laced her fingers together in her lap and squeezed.

He thought about the big white envelope that came in the mail last week and how it was a ticket. A real-life Get out of jail free! card. Except his jail was more like Alcatraz than Monopoly and the Warden was suffocating guilt. He needed more than an acceptance letter to break him free.

When they turned down her street Melaney asked him to drop her off a few houses before hers in case her parents were home. He did as she asked and kissed her before she got out of the car. Ricky waited until she was close enough to her house and then did a three-point turn and drove off.

He wasn't listening to the music he was playing, just driving. He would need gas soon but didn't have the money. His mind was moving too fast for him to have a single coherent thought. He

rolled down the windows and let the cold air shock his brain back into focus. He thought about Melaney, about how he took her virginity. Well technically he didn't take it he was given it. Still, he would forever be the thief of her innocence.

Losing your virginity didn't need to be the big ceremonial display of love some people made it out to be. Harper Connelly wasn't a virgin when Ricky gave his virginity to her. She must have been before him though. She gave hers to Stephen.

Melaney was a pretty girl, a nice girl, and he did like her. But he didn't think about her the way he thought about Harper, and it wasn't her fault. Harper was beautiful, full of life and independence.

At least that's how she was before. He hadn't seen her since the funeral, and he doubted that he would ever see her again.

Instead of turning down his street he made a left and kept on for a little bit. These roads weren't like Melaney's. They were sadder, and bleaker, like someone had used too much water painting with watercolors. Colors were faded on this side of town.

Melaney had asked him if he loved her. He knew she didn't mean it, it's not like she loved him. They just sat next to each other in American History, she didn't want to go to college a virgin and he made it easy for her.

He had loved Harper though. In his own f---ed up, everything is intense teeny-bop way. He loved her ever since her family moved into the house behind theirs and he saw her through his bedroom window. He was only ten then, and her family had since moved away to a house closer to where Melaney was probably showering now, mindlessly using hot water, washing away any remaining remnants of him. His family would never get off the shit street they lived on, especially not now. Maybe they could have had a chance before, but not now.

He stuck his arm out the window and felt the cold wind dance through his fingers. He didn't wanna live in that house anymore. He didn't wanna deal with Thomas anymore or with their mother.

He thought about the envelope, how it had become a living thing to him, a heartbeat hidden in his closet torturing him to decide. He didn't mean to think of Stephen, but he couldn't help it when he thought of Harper and college.

He remembered when Stephen cheated on Harper when they first started dating Ricky's sophomore year of high school. It was during a big house party on Melaneys side of town. He was only at that party in the first place because Stephen had let him tag along. It was hard to be the youngest of three boys, but Stephen had always tried to make him feel somewhat seen when he wasn't busy focusing on himself, that was. He was sixteen at the time and was drinking vodka he and Stephen had stolen from their mother's stash she kept in an old shoebox on the top shelf of her closet. She used to only break into the stash around the anniversary their father left them, but these days the stash was never stocked.

He had found Harper in the sitting on the bathroom floor crying. He sat down next to her and told her it was okay, that Stephen was an a--hole. She said that he looked like Stephen, but nicer. He remembered how she started to kiss him, how the alcohol made everything seem like it was okay, and how he gave her his virginity on that dirty bathroom floor. It was quick.

At school the following Monday she cornered him at his locker and begged him not to tell anyone, especially Stephen. She didn't want him to find out, he could never find out, she had said. He promised her he wouldn't tell anyone. He remembered watching her walk away and feeling his heart break apart and crumble into his stomach.

She and Stephen got back together a week later, and he never found out. They were still together when he died. Ricky became a background character in their relationship, present through all the big moments a teenager can have, prom, graduation, they even went to the same college, but it was their relationship, not his. She didn't look at him once during the funeral.

He was jealous of Stephen. Of how Stephen had gotten out for a little while, he was free. But then he came home, and this town killed him. Jealous of your dead brother, that's good, he thought.

Ricky pulled over and put his car in park, suddenly feeling sick. He stared out the front window at a telephone pole grounded ahead of him. He unbuckled his seatbelt and stared. He just wanted to escape this town, the taunting memory of his dead brother, and the strangling presence of his other, living brother and alcoholic mother. The embrace of the telephone pole seemed more

comforting than his own home. He stared at it and considered driving his car into it as fast as he could.

He suddenly wondered how often Harper thought about him, if she ever did at all, and how often she thought about Stephen. He thought about the envelope in his closet and its beating heart.

He would get out of this town, the right way. I deserve that much, right?

He turned his car around and headed home.

Thomas' beat-up Ford was in the driveway when he pulled in. It was dark now; he didn't realize how long he had been driving.

F---

He parked his car beside his brothers and fixed his shirt before walking inside.

Thomas was sitting at the kitchen island when he came in, his back faced the front door and he sat with his shoulders hunched forward toward the table.

"Where were you," Thomas didn't turn to face him.

Ricky walked into the kitchen and pulled a Coke out of the fridge. He took a big swig that burned his throat as he swallowed. He was tired. Thomas' right hand held an open Coors. The only sound in the room was the fizzing of bubbles as they rose to the top of the can and popped. Ricky turned to leave.

"Did you not hear me?"

Ricky sighed, "I went out for a drive, is that alright with you?"

"No, Richard, and you know why. You're supposed to stay home until I get off work in case Mom comes back." Thomas stood up to face him.

His grip tightened on his can, Thomas had been calling him by his full name since the accident and it made Ricky's blood boil. He never liked his name. He refused to be called Dick and Richey left a weird taste in his mouth. As a kid back when things were better, he used to stay up with his mom at night and watch I Love Lucy reruns with her. She had said that Ricky Riccardo was a real man. Somewhere along the way he started going by Ricky and it stuck.

Thomas was all business. He had been away at military school for a few years when the accident happened. He liked Thomas better back then, when he was Tommy, and would come to Ricky's baseball games in his military uniform and flirt with his teammate's older sisters. He missed everything from back then. Since he came home, Tommy had been Thomas and Ricky had been Richard and it was all work and no play. Ricky was sick of it.

"But she isn't back yet, is she?" Ricky dramatically waved around the room, "She's never back till late, never, not since, so what fucking difference does it make?"

"Watch your mouth kid," Thomas barked at him.

Ricky puffed out a laugh. Things were always tense with Thomas. Military school made him think he needed to act like there was a stick up his a-- at all times. Because military school turns boys into men! Didn't you know?

Ricky stared at his brother, them both standing now, "What if she did get home, huh Thomas? What then?" He thought about the telephone pole, and slammed his can down on the counter, "It wouldn't have mattered! She would have marched right up to her room just like that zombie has been doing every night for the past seven months."

"Shut your mouth, Richard. Just go in your room." Thomas snapped.

"HA! Go in my room!?! What are you in charge now? How about go f--- yourself."

It was Thomas' turn to slam his drink down now, except his bottle was made of glass. It shattered, cutting Thomas' knuckles, and creating an explosion of beer, blood, and glass, just like Stephen's death had been.

"JESUS" Thomas yelled, "Why can't you ever just do what you're told huh?! Why can't you just be a little more f---ing responsible?"

Ricky huffed out a psychotically raged laugh. He was really gonna snap this time. Thomas never knew when to stop pushing, and Thomas kept on.

"If you were just a little more responsible none of us would even be in this position." Thomas spewed, "All you had to do was pick up the phone."

"Oh, I see where this is going," Ricky didn't know if he was seeing stars or if he was seeing red, they blurred together.

“I would have picked up the phone,” Thomas said.

Ricky laughed. It’s easy to say you would’ve or should’ve done something after it’s too late, that’s how regrets are born.

“BUT YOU DIDN’T! You know why? Because you weren’t here! You were gone! You left us here right after Dad left. You’re no better than him.”

Thomas’ face grew more sinister. Ricky took a beat to catch his breath but neither of them was finished, both fueled by anger and grief and guilt. Both furious at each other for being alive, and both furious at God for deciding their lives needed to be harder.

“You realize this is his fault, right?” Ricky got in Thomas’ face, “It’s his fault he got in that car and drove it. You’d think he wasn’t so God-damn stupid, but he was! He was so f--ing stupid.”

“Enough, Rich-”

“It’s his fault he wrapped himself around that telephone pole. And now you sit here and point the finger at me while you let Mom piss all our money into a bottle every night-”

“Enough-”

“-when we both know one of these days, she’s gonna end up just like Stephen and we’ll both be better off for it!”

Without hesitation, Thomas knocked his arm back and punched Ricky in the face. His bloody fist collided with his little brother’s nose before Ricky could react to it and before Thomas could regret it. Ricky brought his hands up to his face, blood painted his chin, and seeped into his mouth coating his tongue in iron, a mixture of his own and his brothers. He felt tears sting his eyes. Neither of them spoke, their silence echoing the unspoken pain of the past seven months.

Then Ricky laughed, belly laughed, he wasn’t sure he was in control of it. Thomas’ fist was still clenched and bloody. Ricky turned and stormed out of the house, slamming the front door behind him. He paced back and forth for a minute before sitting down on the steps of their front porch. The porch that was not like Melaney’s, a porch that wasn’t attached to a home. Hot blood streamed down his face, but he made no move to wipe it.

He fished a pack of smokes out of his pocket and lit one, mixing blood and tobacco in his mouth, a demented potion for depression.

His mind found Harper Connelly again. He thought about how stupid Stephen was to leave her behind. How stupid he was to do everything he did to their family. How he hated him. How he hated it here.

He wondered if Harper ever loved him, but he knew she didn't, and neither did Melaney.

He finished his first cigarette and lit another. He wondered if the way Stephen had gotten out had really been all so bad in the end.

He shook his head. No. He would get out of this house, he would use the envelope he hid in his closet, and he would finally have a chance. And he would stay gone.

Headlights bobbed over him as a car pulled into the driveway. He watched silently as his mother got out of the passenger seat and stumbled her way toward the front door. At least she didn't drive tonight. The car retreated down the road, leaving the mother and her youngest son alone in the sharp cold air of the January night.

He was a freakish sight on the steps covered in blood and unmoving. She walked right past him without notice, shutting the front door as she went.

Ricky dropped his head in his hands and cried.

“The Caretaker and the Child” – By Camille Vail

“Darian, where did you go?” The young girl maneuvered her wheelchair through the aisles of the library room, irritation staining her pale features. The spring sun danced across the floor, cut into beams of light through the slats of oak bookshelves. The girl squinted as sun hit her eyes, about to call once again when a silhouette stepped out from behind the shelf, greeting her with a friendly salute.

“Right here, Madeline.” The nearly-nineteen-year-old greeted her, eyes crinkling in a smile as he reshelved a novel.

“I am tired of reading.” Madeline announced with all the authority of a nine-year-old.

“Where are the friends who are coming today? Papa said they would be here by twelve, and it is nearly one.” She glared at the grandfather clock settled against the far wall declaring the time was indeed a quarter to one, as if accusing it of lying to her. Darian’s fumble with the book he was holding went unnoticed as he scrambled for a reply.

“Ah, there was a minor setback, I’m afraid.” He cleared his throat, leaning against the shelf in an attempt to feign nonchalance.

“What do you mean, minor setback?” Madeline’s attention snapped towards him, expressing the full force of a lonely child’s displeasure. This experience was something Darian had become accustomed to during his three years of working with the head's daughter, despite his repeated efforts to brighten her mood.

“The friends seem to have been... busy today.” He cleared his throat and offered an apologetic smile, knowing full well it wouldn’t be accepted. “Your Papa says that he has something better planned.” The upbeat reassurance was offset by the scuffing of shoes as he shifted his weight uncomfortably. This was not missed by Madeline, who wheeled her chair sharply to turn her back on him and return to the front of the library.

“Everyone is always busy! No one ever comes to play with me anymore.” Despondent, she refused to acknowledge the boy trailing after her.

Vail 2

“And what am I, a stuffed toy?” He peered over her shoulder with a bright grin, as if the momentary unease from earlier was simply a fluke.

“You don’t count, you are supposed to play with me. It’s your job.” Madeline scrunched her nose, stopping sharply in front of the large oak doors to look up at him. Her caretaker let out a sigh, straightening up and running a hand through sandy hair in search for a reply. He knew what was to come, yet uncertainty had made its home in his gut. If all went well, neither of them would have to worry about what plans Madeline’s “Papa” had for her future. Even so, they were going to be cutting it fairly close. As he finally began to speak, a brisk knock cut him off, the voice of a Brother coming from the other side.

“Miss Bellace, The Father requests your presence in the Lavender Room.” At this, Madeline’s frown deepened into a glare, almost accusatory of Darian.

“Why would Papa call me to the Lavender Room? That is only for Cousins.” She

demanded. Darian raised an eyebrow but didn't reply, instead inclining his head towards the door in invitation. Showtime. Receiving only a huff in reply, he stepped forward to take the handles of Madeline's chair and lead it out of the library only to be swatted away indignantly.

"I can do it myself, thank you!" She snapped. He obliged, holding the door open for her as she wheeled herself out.

The child and her caretaker made their way through the halls, only stopping for Darian to hook her chair into the lift at the staircase, then unhook it once at the bottom. The pair arrived at the doors to the Lavender Room, greeted by two Brothers who bowed their heads when they opened the doors for them.

The Lavender Room had been named after its decor. Sisters and Brothers added fresh lavender in the flower pots daily, sustaining the thick scent which hung in the air. The walls were painted the same shade as the flower, the trim of the walls accented in white. Everything was meticulously arranged, the polished wooden table perfectly centered, the eight chairs perfectly even all the way around. Even the few Nieces and Nephews who stood by the walls were alternating in a perfect pattern, specially trained to remain as still as statues. The overbearing

Vail 3 emphasis on perfection hung heavy, a guillotine in waiting over the pair's head. For while the room was as pristine as a meeting room for Aunts and Uncles, the carefully crafted presentation only highlighted the darker undertones of its use. At each seating place, excluding the head of the table, a simple pair of iron cuffs were attached to the flat wooden surface. The headboards of the chairs were stained a dark, flaky red color, the sole surfaces that had not been diligently cleaned. A reminder of what it meant to fail. This room was meant for the Cousins. Those who made mistakes they could not repair. Mistakes necessary to clean from the Family's tree. Yet Madeline, a Daughter who had never caused a blemish to the Family name, was now being called to this room, all for a demonstration of her recently discovered talent.

The Father sat at the head of the table, waiting patiently as Madeline entered, Darian silently trailing in after her.

"Hello, Papa." Madeline greeted the Father, who nodded in reply.

"Hello, Madeline. Please, take your place." He gestured to his right and Madeline wheeled herself to his side, Darian taking his rightful place behind her own right shoulder. Madeline looked up to the Father, all traces of irritation vanished. Instead, her face resembled that of a porcelain doll, entirely blank except for her eyes, both admiration and fear dancing within them. Although outwardly Darian kept calm, he teetered on the brink of terror, witnessing how easily the Father could have such an effect on the young girl. Not long now, and that will no longer be a worry. The reminder sat in his mind, reassuring.

"Do you know why I have called you here today?" The Father intoned. Madeline shook her head.

"No, Papa."

Darian cut back a sharp inhale as the Father gestured for the doors to be open, a Brother and Sister— no, Cousins now — escorted in. Their faces were bruised, eyes on the floor as their

Godparents led them to their seats. Madeline's porcelain face twisted into confusion as she looked between the Father and Cousins.

"I... Do not understand." She spoke hesitantly, a tone Darian had prayed he would never have to hear. The Father sighed, placing a hand on her shoulder almost affectionately.

Vail 4

"Your Competence is quite strong now, is it not?" He asked. Madeline's eyes widened, hands tightening her grip on her chair as if she wanted to protest.

"I- Papa, I do not believe I can-"

"You do not believe it? My dear Madeline, do you not recall the policy regarding belief?"

"If there is a remote possibility that an event should take place, one must believe in such a possibility." The young girl recited, expression shuttering back to her imitation of a porcelain doll. The Father nodded, satisfied.

"You know, then, what must be done." He replied. Madeline nodded stiffly; eyes trained blankly forward. Darian flicked his gaze to the clock above the door, heart making its way to his throat. The Father turned his attention to the Cousins now seated at the table, hands firmly placed inside the cuffs. Their Godparents took their place by the doors silently, watching with little interest. "My children, you have failed us in a grave manner. You recognize the mistake you have made and are willing to accept the consequences. Thus, we shall proceed—"

The Father's address was cut off by the lights going out, the underlying buzz of electricity that remains present in the awareness of the subconscious succumbing to an uneasy silence. The room fell silent as everyone waited for the backup generator to kick in.

It did not

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

“A Letter Back” – By Mollie Lewis

When I was a freshman in highschool I wrote myself a letter to open four years later. My senior year I opened the envelope feeling like so much had changed... without anything really changing at all. I was older, and I'd be graduating soon. But I felt the same. I had the same friends and the same teammates. The same home and the same love. I always felt happy even if days were bad. But after I opened the letter in January of 2020, It felt like everything was changing. If I could write a second letter for my past self, I would apologize. For the things she had to go through. And the things she still carries with her.

I'm so

sorry, That you have to leave school like this. A pandemic that's killing. It feels wrong to feel sad. About having to leave school. Something most kids would beg for. But it feels unfair to leave like this. Without a graduation, A Real One. Not one where you drive by, Isolated from your friends. Only waving to them from a distance... The first time you've seen them in months. A real graduation, With a cap And gown Where everyone's smiling, Because they're actually happy. Where you get to shake your teachers hands And pose for pictures With classmates you won't see for a while For normal reasons. Not the-world-is-ending-everyone-is-sick-and-sad-isolate-in-your-house reasons. I know your sad, That there is no prom Because you rarely dress up But when you do you feel beautiful And you feel like everyone deserves to see you feeling beautiful. But there is no dress Or dress shopping No corsage Or sleepover afterwards. There's no senior night. With prizes and gift cards And friends And a photo booth. And a dj to dance to. Just headphones in my bedroom with Frank Ocean. No last band concert. Or golf season. And I'm so sorry. That I made you stay with him, As long as you did. He was so disrespectful. And careless with your feelings. It wasn't a magical first love. It was draining. And made me sick to my stomach. From crying so hard. All the time. And, I'm so sorry. And I know you won't believe, That you and Emily aren't friends. It was more her choice. Though I know you won't reach out to repair it. Please don't blame yourself. Because needing a friend is nothing to be ashamed about. Needing a friend should be the minimum expectation. I'm so sorry that you were so insecure about your body. Because sometimes it felt like eating was the only thing I seemed to enjoy. And it feels like you're no longer an athlete. I promise you'll find a passion soon, Though it feels like everyone knows what they want to do with their future but you. And I know how awkward it is When another family member asks "What are your plans for school?" When you have no idea what to say. I promise you're not disappointing anyone. And I know it feels so discouraging That your parents are paying for a school That you don't even enjoy being at Because you haven't made any friends And it feels like you won't any time soon Because everyone seems so different than they do from home. They party And drink so much While you lay in your bed, Because you don't want to get anyone sick. Especially your family Because you go home every weekend. You'll cry at night,

hoping your roommates don't hear your sniffles. Or your mom won't see all the tissues in the trash. And you'll wake up at noon wishing you slept longer. And Adam's a good friend for a while. He hates Kyle. And disagrees with Emily. You guys make each other laugh. And then you'll kiss a few times. But you'll still just be friends. Until he gets a girlfriend. And you can't talk anymore. And all your other friends from home are busy. Abi's making new friends and studying to be an OT. Morgan's in the military so she's stationed in Turkey. And Emily just doesn't want to talk. I'm so sorry you felt like you had no one to talk to. But I know how you're feeling. That the world is crashing in On one that you once knew.

But I'm
so proud of you.

For making new friends, even if it's only a few good ones.

Forcing yourself to travel out of the country, even though being without your family on another continent seems wrong.

And I'm proud of you

For allowing yourself to be loved again And to love again.

I appreciate you taking care of me.

For showering and brushing my teeth

For doing my homework. wYou'll become a Division I athlete, without even anticipating to be.

You'll learn about things you care about

And your professors will give you opportunities

Like traveling to Portugal,

Or offering internships For being a good student and using my mind for good.

I'm so proud of you.

“I Love You So Much, It Hurts” – By Kaylee Shindel

My mother is a Pharmaceutical representative. She sells all kinds of medications. Some for allergies. Some pain killers, those ones could make your head spin. She is your average tooth fairy. She drops in when you need her. She takes your boo boo's and bandages them. She drops a reward on your pillow. She wears purple wings with fine edges. They are symmetrical.

Don't forget to read the backside of the bottle. It might tell you that these pills make your mouth itchy and dry. Some tickle the back of your throat. Some grow lumps where the sun does not shine. Some spell out the word “death.” But the letters are typed in a faded print. Her magic lies in the underestimated label.

But she carries the treatments on her restless back. To reach you.

Like the medication labels, she teaches me about the side effects of love.

My heart feels like my mother. It beats when she instills her medical background within me. She nags me to stay hydrated. I often think of water. Drink a lot of water, she'll tell me. It steadies your body temperature. It helps your food go down the right track. It hydrates you. It allows your muscles to function. It's necessary to swallow those pills.

What she won't tell me is that water can drown your kidneys. It floods the salt in your blood. Sometimes when you chug a cold bottle of it, your body doesn't even retain its assumed lifeline. The speed causes your body to believe that the water is unnecessary. It expels the water from your begging muscles. She hides the ramifications from me. She shields me from the pain.

She warned me about my first love. “That one's a drug. It's the kind of love that looks like a freckled face. The infatuation will mold to your skin.” She was right. Now his shadow grips onto my tainted white dress. She tried to protect me from the kind of love that would hurt me, ensuring that her love would never bite.

She told me that love can feel like a song that I haven't heard in awhile. Maybe I haven't played it because it reminds me of the time that the patient monitor screamed when his vital signs plummeted. She held my pinky as we walked out of the hospital with our heads pointed down. She promised that with love, comes loss. She reminds me that I can still appreciate the beat of the song.

She even gives love the benefit of the doubt. She says that my heart can be as beautiful as a detour. I'm late for class because the avenue is under construction. I turn left to retrace my designated path. I slam my hands onto the wheel of my Nissan Altima and fling the day old

coffee cup that has caused my car to smell sour. After my tantrum, I turn up the radio. My windshield beholds a field that I never noticed. The playground has a bright yellow slide. A mom waits for her toddler at the bottom. I roll my window down. The air informs me that spring is coming.

She informs me that my heart can feel sensitive, like my pale blue eyes. The sun shines down on my fair skin. It fills the void that the clouds never could. I look in its direction only to feel it sizzle my pupils.

She compares love to the taste of pineapples. They are always sweet and juicy. Their vibrant yellow complexion draws me closer to them. Reggae tunes echo in my ear drums when the fruit touches my lips. I dance alongside my tastebuds. If you eat a bunch of those smooth criminals, they sting the speckles on your tongue. The irritated glands scratch the roof of your mouth. I bleed sometimes. She enlightened me that something sweet can turn sour.

She even embraces me during the worst heartaches. It pained me to hear that he didn't love me. I knew that was a lie. I laid on the crusted carpet, with my begging palms pointed toward him. Eventually my hands rose above my head. I surrendered to the love that continued to puncture me. She placed a bandaid over each wound.

She gifted the younger me, a Minnie Mouse stuffed animal. I matched her in a pink ruffled top. Her cotton muffs slipped from my fingertips. She fell onto the mulch covered grass. Her pink ruffled top held these stains. The stains of worry that we might not always be together. Her clothes will not always match mine. But I grabbed her back from the mulch that ripped her from me. Only to have that love fade. I'm too old for a stuffed animal now. She taught me that love comes with growing pains.

After all the bleeding and aching, I crave the feeling. I see the ache when I look at her curled hair that stays intact while it rains. The wet ringlets curl up toward her jaw and stay stationary in the wind. Somehow her bangs are straight. They stretch down to point to her beating heart.

I can feel the beating with every breath I take. It slams against my chest.

“Migraine” – By R.J. Railton-Jones

I walk into my egg yolk yellow bathroom. The colors melt off the walls as butter. Sizzle against my retinas. Blinking doesn't keep it at bay for long. The lights above the sink burn into my vision, and everywhere I look there are bright blue imprints.

Two sluggish orbs within my head struggle to keep up as I drive to work. An afterimage of traffic light still overlaps the traffic ahead on the highway. The line of cars lights up like a glowing red snake, and I try not to focus on it.

I know how to ration my words when it comes on because it twists my tongue into knots. It makes me forget how to spell and how to move my mouth right to sound it out. Still, I speak and make a fool of myself.

My vision tilts and spins without any movement from my head. I smile at the person sitting across from me in my office. They did not notice. I repeat myself in a loop three times, the same words, a different order. Surely, they must notice that. I place my fingertips to my temples, cold against my hot head, a brief relief. I laugh out an apology. I say it's been a long day already, though I had a premonition when I woke up.

My steps are deliberate as I descend the stairs on unsteady legs. The world is unreliable with the colors bleeding into each other, boundaries undefined. The ground could give at any moment, and I could fall straight through reality. So, I hold on to the railing as the others pass me, fluid and spry.

Sitting back at my computer, I am not prepared. The email client neon blue, the internet browser zesty orange and electric aquamarine. They pulsate with colors that I can only see at this time. Colors that perhaps wouldn't exist without the pressure on the eyeballs. What was it that I had to do today? It passes by like a shadow.

There is not a chance that I have no work to do. The list has been running for what feels like a decade. Yet, my mind is blank, dripped off with the last of the cyans.

I drink water until I am bursting. Someone always says hydration is the key. As if the water could oil my tired joints, or calm whatever swells within the head to melt the world within my eyes.

It's getting late, and dark. The darkness, which must be soothing on its own, is my enemy on the way home. Bright reds and white, each a pin prick of pain. Each is its own carrier of agony and a stain upon the dark world. Cacophony of light.

A trial before I am home. A daily miracle. I move as an automaton. There is no sense to make about the source of energy that lets me move. My spouse greets me. I rub my face out of its pained numbness.

“Migraine?”

“Migraine.”

My son runs up and hugs me around my hips. I try my best not to shatter within his willow arms. He pulls me after him.

“Play! Play!”

“I can’t.”

But there are tears, dew drops, in his eyes already.

“Of course. Let’s play.”



- "Prima Colore" – Sharon Zozo Brzozowski

“Thanksgiving After” – By Kelsey Donnelly

I miss your hands. Your fingers, though gnarled and twisted with arthritis, were always soft. Gentle. Mothering hands, grandmothering hands.

They taught me how to whisk. Held my hand around measuring cups and sifted flour out of the bag.

Those hands, scarred, were capable only of love.

They held a potato in one and an old-fashioned peeler in the other, the words “and you must watch the blade,” carrying over the sizzle of water on the stove and the whirr of the ancient mixer in my mother’s hand.

They wrote in short, slanted script, Happy Birthday! Merry Christmas! Love, Grandma and Grandpa.

They typed recipes from memory onto lined index cards and tucked them away.

Those hands cracked open the dusty book and one crooked finger tapped on the page. We, the grandchildren, followed as best we could the picturesque tablescape you showed us. I don’t think you would have minded either way.

Your hands would whisk pancake batter and scramble eggs before anyone else was awake, before spending the next five, six hours, more, making dinner, dessert, appetizers.

I miss the knotted whorls on the table, smoothed and lacquered into the wood.

I miss the snow on the fence posts, the roof of the barn. I miss the ice on the skylight when I opened my eyes.

I miss the sound of my father’s snores on the couch and the smell of my mother’s perfume from where she slept a few feet away. I miss the springs of the mattress on the floor digging into my back and the three of us packed under one blanket.

I miss walking past the windows, past the drying boots and gloves by the door and listening for a car in the driveway, for the cousins to arrive.

I miss Grandpa’s hands. How they would hold one of mine in both and slip a dollar bill between my fingers with a kiss on my cheek.

Miss America...

I miss the smell of the woodstove, my father sniffing and griping about the dry heat.

I miss the sound of the chimes on the ceiling fan and the rattle of the kitchen floor as socked feet ran across it.

I miss a lot of things. Your cooking. Mom’s cooking. Your laugh, rare and quiet as it was.

Grandpa’s smile, his dimples, the snores echoing from his recliner in the corner. I miss the house, the fields, the barn. I miss the drive home, spinning the dials on the dashboard, sifting through the static for a radio station playing Christmas carols.

I miss a lot of things.

FLASH FICTION

“My Skin” – By Wren Campise

My skin is so pale that it's see-through, a translucent curtain.

The people observe my bones, how they clank and crackle and pop. They look at them like they want them to break and snap like the raw carrots they ate as a child. Breaking those carrots makes them manageable. If they finish them off, they get to relish in a sweet dessert.

The dogs fixate on my lungs. They expand and contract like their squeaker toys, the ones that wheeze as their jaws close around them. Contorted faces lean towards me, necks tugging against their leashes, as they imagine tearing me open to get to my squeaker organs. My blood will run like the stuffing of their playthings.

The birds prey on my heart. It pumps and beats and skips and writhes like a worm. They imagine their sharp beaks tearing into it, carrying it off, feeding it to their young. Muscles and tendons snap apart as they clamor for their share. Delicious, delicious, delicious.

The god focuses on my being. An anomaly. A performance. He picks it apart and redirects it and builds me up and tears me down and does it all again. Entranced by the way my insides roil. His face is blushed at the fantasy of me falling to my knees and shattering. He lusts after the sight of everything breaking beneath my skin, but it can't get out. The debris hits against each other and piles up and cuts me open from the inside, but it is snagged and will not gush out.

The self focuses on my brain. It thinks, it feels, but it does not speak. I revile it and curse it for its evil deeds.

My skin is so pale that it's see-through. A glass prison. A one-way mirror. A flimsy excuse for a barricade.

“Where to Gogh from Here” – By Bryce Gensinger

I envision the blank pale black sky lit up with the dancing of thousands of...No that's not right. In the dark abyss of unknowing that is our heavens there are twinkles of millions...

No, something is off about this. Why can't I think straight? Is it because my face is unbalanced and is messing with my train of thought? Not possible! Maybe I should take the other side to even the symmetry. However I can't leave the light of sound behind me for then my closest beings would depart. I have faith in those around me however. I know this to be true as my rabbit companion would never leave me. Always dressed to the nines he was, in his spiffy tailored three piece suit, with his embroidered leather hat, and that tie, oh that tie was quite stupendous. The way that silk, lifeless deep black came to exist all thanks to the satellites of sparkles...Oh!

I finally see how this lifeless night, no, perhaps it is much more of an ocean than an endless dark that exists above us, all can only be illuminated by the burning clusters of flame and that glowing crescent that calls out to me like a mother to her curious child. The crashing cosmos that peered down on all creation began to take the shape of rolling tides stretching galaxies in width. This vast body of water seems to claim most, yet those tiny freckles of emotion all lead to the eternal beacon that provides guidance in the night. There was a certain redamancy of that lantern that breathed life into all that existed on this plane. Well I guess not flora but that's besides the point. Wait...I need flora.

“That's an excellent idea my extraordinary friend”

“Blessed you in that wonderful suit”

Sprouting from the ground and growing into the heavens to touch hands with God, just as we progress through this meager existence to eventually dine in the kingdom of the lord, such as “The Creation of Adam”. Now is this a focal point or one that should be inferred through deep conscious thought? Inferred through thought...No, the focal point that stands its ground against that infinite abyss that lies ahead. This Yggdrasil stretches from the shallows of mud to the Valhalla that calls to us all. Connecting the almighty with his inadequate creations. This vegetation yearns to be the life giving spire and bridge the space between natural and human creation. Unsure what shape to take, be it closer to the instinctive development of life, or the architectural meticulously crafted steeples of old. How could I forget the steeples that bless this existence with gracious open arms, and welcome all sinners alike such as myself, and my well dressed associate?

“Not just a steeple but a whole borough teeming with a thriving community”

“What would I do without you? I would never be able to finish such a creation and straighten my thoughts to this work, be it not for your ingenious mind and impeccable sense of style.”

Yes, yes this high-spirited echelon of the one above all's creation must be filled to the brim with animation. A cottage here, a lodge there...no. This must be a well conceived conception that correlates with the dancing ocean of light and the tower that reaches for creation. In tandem with the spire of nature that pierces the heavens, stands a lonely steeple in the shadow of nature that would hope to comment that even though this is of man's creation, that man is the creation of all things holy from nature, just as god willed us to be his greatest fabrication. We must invoke his attention with the monuments we build in his name, therefore this place of worship must get equal attention to his seedling of connection. This centerpoint of the community must extend above all else to show our commitment to the savior. Hence if it looks over the town it can protect the many creatures that coexist in the sanctuary such as rabbits and homosapians. But what settlement consists of only one structure, why would there be a steeple with nothing to preside over? It is my duty to breathe life into these many cottages and cabins, each with their own story to hold, and it is up to the viewer to birth these narrative tales of this bussing night-time burghs. Maybe there's a version of this exact creation that I danced to life within the homes of this design. Or maybe not.

“I do believe something is missing however.”

“My ear?”

“Besides that. Possibly something to catch the eye.”

“Of Course! The astounding tie must really get your mind flowing I do say.”

How could I have forgotten color? This entire time I created without a thought of the emotion that brilliant hues could invite to one's soul. I must have the most eye opening mystic blues to whirl the night sky into this unforgiving sea. It's essential to have a neon blonde tinge to accentuate the magnificent stars and the eternal glow of that beautiful crescent moon. Not to forget the deep earth toned browns and verdant green to express the beauty of natural life. And finally finish it off with an array of expressive colors that bring life to this seamlessly lifeless town. Scratch that last part, the town must have monotone colors not to take away from the brilliance that is God's creation, on permitting the steeple to have some semblance of color to show graciousness to our creator. Man must try to not outshine the lord. The community is brought to life by its collective stories and hardships that overflow our shared cultures.

“Excellent, excellent! What a masterpiece that you have bestowed upon us.”

“You're too kind my dear companion. I only create what's in my mind.”