# Helico-H

# Helicon

The University of Louisiana Monroe's Journal of Literature and Art

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## Student Art

The following students provided exemplary visual designs when asked if they would like to be a part of The Helicon's return. These individual deserve to be acknowledged for their effort in helping to make The Helicon's return to ULM's campus an enrapturing revival of poetry with a new visual experience.

#### Accie Lee Sullivan

Decordie Carrington Dumas-Riley

Erica Alessandra Garcia

Katelyn Michelle Vaughan



Image by Decordie Carrington Dumas-Riley

#### Abby Turnbow

#### <u>Blueprint</u>

I grew up in a house made of weekdays, Fast food dinners, footprints on the carpet, five full calendars that always made time for family, and talks around the table.

We built the foundation out of Sundays— Laid them down, one by one—meticulous Mess of pancakes, prayers, and faithless Bibles That could stand the earth trifling beneath it.

Then, we built the frame out of Saturdays: Put in extra innings and supported Each other in winning streaks and tawdry Defeats. Rain or shine, we built together.

There's a place to go in every weather. It has walls with ears lent to my stories, Four sturdy pillars and laughter like a Roof in the rain, a fireplace in the cold.

Most vitally, we gave our house doors. When the years ran out and the future called, Offering mansions and days in the sun After some toiling and days in the rain,

I left to brave the rainy world alone, Got soaked, then sunburned, feeling abandoned By the promises that the future made, But those doors will always open both ways.

So I am not, will never be, alone. And I took some building supplies with me— A key to the door and a plan. One day, I'll build my own house and use that blueprint.

#### Amy Minchew

#### Desert Shield

0500 Pacific Time, January 1991, Not on the roster, Sgt. Stokes says, "You're going to the land of sand with the other 43."

I found a pay phone. Dad busy with work, mom and grandparents coming to visit and bringing their casserole.

All its cheesy virtue was Heaven. Whole family in Motel 6, San Bernardino, CA, I ate the casserole for breakfast.

Ninety-six hours of hot driving to San Clemente and Camp Pendleton. Twenty-six years earlier dad was a Devil Dog.

Mom's throat tightened, Recognizing old times and places, Karen Jocelyn's name was on top. These were memories breaking lead,

In Mom's tears. Children's laughter mirrored, she was the baby sitter. Captain Jocelyn never returned from Vietnam.

My father returned in 1966. At lunch we ate greasy cheeseburgers and salty fries, drank grenade cokes at Carl's.

Dad's assignment was Vietnam, mine was Saudi Arabia. Show me a globe and point where I should go, Hell I don't know, Military orders speak.



"Patrol" by Accie Lee Sullivan

#### Antoinette Johnson

#### Nostalgia's Downfall

Firestorms
In the back
of my throat,
The taste
Of ash on my tongue.

The surface of it, Reflects every prayer I've breathed Into your body.

Your lips,
A bittersweet
Honey,
Stuck
On a past me.

The poison on Your hands, Fondling, Tacky flesh Built for breaking.

> You, Always petrified, Of the monsters In your Closet.

> > Now I know,
> > They were hiding
> > From you,
> > And nostalgia
> > Disguised as longing.

#### You are not the Universe My Dear

Stars doused the sky, The fall air wrenched At my hair.

#### How I wanted to touch their brilliance.

I learned to mimic.

My lips,

Soaked in the color of the

Universe.

#### People tend to steal magic they do not possess.

I'm a hypocrite.

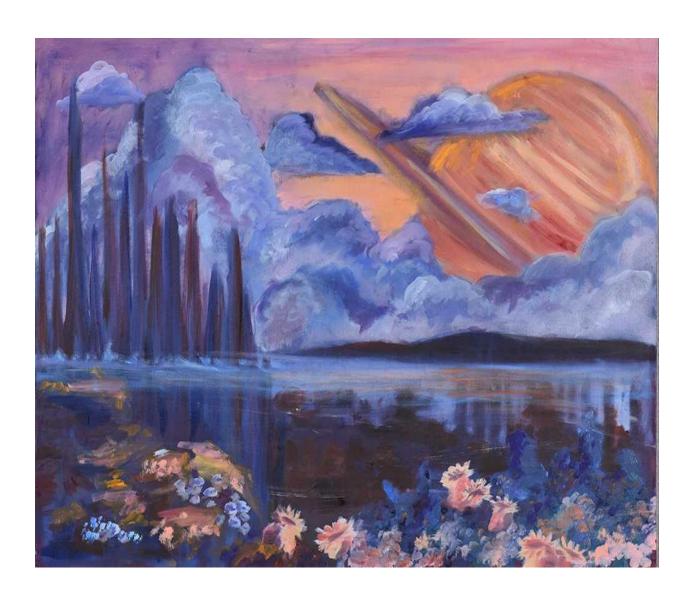
I wore Andromeda like a necklace,
Stolen star clusters in my purse.
him, wearing my innocence in his clothes.

#### Is that why the night fades into the day?

In the spring, she turned 10. The season for rebirth, but please stay dead.

#### Weeds grew in the coffin she called her body.

Once,
I caught her reflection
As I passed
a rain puddle



"The View from Iapetus" by Erica Alessandra Garcia

# Ashley Day <u>Honesty</u>

"I love you."

I tell my four-year-old nephew
as I finish tying his shoe,
while his hand, the size of a kiwi,
rests on my shoulder.
He rolls those little brown eyes
and lets out a long sigh,
"I love you too,"
He shuffles a few feet forward
and turns back around to look at me.
"I only said love you because I have to."

#### Hyacinths and Biscuits: After Carl Sandburg, for Dr. Cluck

Poetry's

A baby bird with tiger's teeth and butterfly wings,

an empty blender
left on high with the
lid on the counter in
the fruit covered kitchen,

your grandmother's meatloaf made from fresh ground beef, from a cow grazing in the backyard of a New York City apartment,

a sea turtle in Indiana running Through an open field, coral reefs with small hands glued to glass prisms,

purple sunflowers blooming in a cold

green basement.



"Blue Tit" by Accie Lee Sullivan

#### Ashten Taylor

#### Embrace it

Speak with a tongue made of silk,
Glass minds, easily broken by honest opinions,
I see in all directions with stellar eyes,
That can detect the rise
and fall in your chest,
Hear without words being spoken.

What motivates this pageantry of humanity,

Fake niceties hidden

behind deceptive glances,

And I place no bets

We are all doomed

and full of shit.

So am I—

As are you...

Yet you all deny

the unimportance

Of existence

Chase it to your last breath,

Pound your soles on the pavement,

All is just a passing phases,

Like a street drug

High like kingdom come,

Low as the abyss of my soul,

Embrace it.

#### Growing up is Moving on

Sitting on a Camel statue, chain-smoking Dunhill's
In the glint twilight we shout, "forever!"
Walking up the half-light wooden bridge
At the top, our initials still there,
Your blue hat, stuck in the sea a drowning fast,
In that moment life changed,
The church bells sing near the cemetery,
Crushed roses cover the dirt and graves
You're not running from the dogs anymore.

The seven story carousel And the night-fall forest below,

The bedroom with chipped purple walls, A library across the way,

It's like swimming with dad, he said, "If you want to live, swim to shore,"

The mountains stained by the snow Reflect the majesty of heaven.

Glint covers the apartment floor.

Someone's here, "Why are you asleep on the couch?"

The instrument with the polished silver keys,

A family heirloom to be protected,

Finding the box in the center of the ashes

The wind picks up the pain, away it goes

To lie on the grass talking about our futures

And the boundless possibilities,

Every day, I keep up with my promises.

The princess saves the Knight Celtic armor From the world, but mostly himself,

A line of race cars passed like a neon tiger, The dust blinds us all in a moment

Camping "on the low" in the lot, Holding onto summer

Getting chased by the sprinklers, We were never fast enough, were we?

#### **Austin Boyett**

#### Couple of Dieting

**(I)** 

Legs up, right and left twists, then down, fingers to floor, the Carlton dance, jackrabbit hops, donkey kicks, and twenty days.

**(II)** 

It is like - no more fun: I won't eat those McDonald's fries, I'll throw away half of this burger in my hands, and I won't eat that low fat yogurt because I can't put a bag of sour skittles into it.

**(III)** 

Yeah, we can do it — but after I finish eating this candy: I brush my teeth before kissing you every morning because I love midnight, Hershey kisses.

(IV)

I also love the Gobstoppers under my desk at work. You should still be proud, 4 lbs. lost in thirty days. You expect me to smile when you eat desert after dinner. You tell me to wait twenty minutes until I feel fullness.

#### Polar Porcelain

I knew they would punish me.

"Every vegetable," I answered.

The spicy green slices tightened my jaw

after I removed them from a bed of salted, triangular pillows.

I drove to work,

palms moistened,

abdomen thinned, and

fire congested my pores.

The acid in my bowels

longed for freedom.

Their weight crushed my lower half.

A green square flashed: 23 miles from the next exit.

I won't make it,

do I pull over,

do I shit myself,

do I die, in this moment?

I looked around: Ziploc,

brown paper bag,

32oz. Polar Pop cup,

overstretched my eyes.

Ziploc:

fall to The seat and spill upon capture,

Paper bag:

deteriorate, or pierce.

Cup:

It will do.

I fixated on the cup.

saw myself free in it.

prostate over it,

grinning at those who drove east-bound on 1-20.

The rubbery laces of the

vermin on my feet, flayed open

and removed themselves.

My seat flew back.

The empty road ahead,

Unending, cruel.
I engaged the steering wheel,
with my kick-stand wattle.

The cup fell over.

I re-tightened. I looked down.

The annoying noise, past the white lines, instructed me to readjust my angle - I lost it.

All three mirrors

showed no one behind.

I snuck a peek - just to double-check.

Nothing, but me and the cup.

The cup disagreed with my choice, sliding on the passenger-side floor,

Until it found itself on the seat.
under a squatting Mantis, before the steering wheel.

goose-bumped legs,

naked and afraid,

trembled at the chance an 18-wheeler would creep past.

Go.

My ass suctioned to the cup as its new lid:

my spine, against the cold leather seat,

uncoiled as the car wavered.

It accepted.

I told no one.

Because shitting in a moving car, while hovering over a Polar Pop cup, is ludicrous.

#### Ben Nance

#### Low Hanging Fruit

It is not an easy thing To hear knock-knock jokes at Movies. It is cold, Unappealing, And more convex than a cup. My business fills the requirement of iron in body But it is mostly made of water, Just a better term for Twinkies, Or Cavendish. Usually eaten out of hand or sliced raw in salads. The most photographed object in Australia Is currently available for weddings. A Buddhist text that dates back to around 600 B.C., Is still one of the top entertainment acts for over a decade, Playing and rocking in Puerto Rico. the edible part is usually displayed in the box, the victim of its own perfection.



By Katelyn Vaughan

#### **Brittany Lander**

#### Nostalgia Catalogue

Plastic beads swinging from frizzy French braids, Pink cow cockles threading through rich clovers, Pecans littering a field outlined with an unfinished fence, Sun paled bricks and concrete climbed by vines, Crumbling back roads that give way to ditches filled with murky water and tadpoles, knocking up dirt with my brother while waiting for the bus, An abandoned school house stripped of everything but it's lessons, Restless squirrels climbing the filthy rope hanging from a pine tree, Honeysuckles that taste like velvet against lips, The thin paper book about bread my favorite at the time, Water under the bridge, surrounded by sand and filled with people, The little green house surrounded by other little green houses, Kicking over crawfish towers to bake mud pies in the sun, Asphalt that embraces the sky, Making a mess of a scratchy white canvas, Steel strings biting into my fingers, wood singing better than I ever could. Imitation silver embedded with peridot engraved with my name, grandma smoking, talking about mom.

#### Sheep

My sleep comes in bottles

Measured in nutritional values and

Daily percentages of dicalcium phosphate.

It resembles a math problem.

I've never been very good at math,

Which is fitting

Because I've never been very good at sleep either.

If I focus

I can multiply milligrams to get to the square root of a Z.

But counting sheep has never worked for me.

I'm better at English, see.

And so the sheep always had to come from somewhere

And have proper sportswear,

Names,

Wives,

children in daycare.

So by the time I established their hometowns,

Their wives were wearing nightgowns,

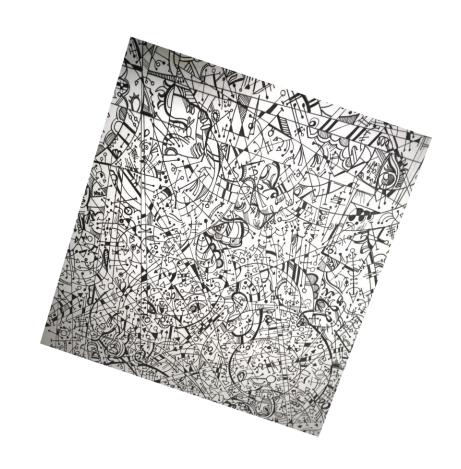
screaming about how

She's the greatest good he is ever gonna get.

#### Carrie Williamson

#### Beyond This Bed

Take everything I'm Wasting. Cut out my kidneys, pull my liver while you yank away my heart. Slice my intestines and skin if you can manage. Perhaps my limbs can Attach to someone Else. Machete them. Enable more, slice again, empty my Sockets, unscrew my Fingers, bleed me, I'll Drip up, to the floor, to the pink atmosphere. Toss anything, I am into others and Click the on button already, give me More beyond white sheets and frozen eyelids. Give me more beyond Red earth and golden skies. If you can't rip me apart and use me, let me be a piece Of something else, Something not fibers and blood, something Sapphire and wispy, if not, just grind me up And drop me in the dust. You cannot collect Me into nothing.



#### Sip of my Brain

Hands on my throat like breath in my toes, *JELL-O* in the carcass of squirrels lined up on the sides of the streets, a half-built wall you could take a nap on if you like fleas.

Worlds in my head like orange juice in my heart, take of a sip of my brain thicker than cider and sweeter than old lasagna with garlic. kingdom of rocks with empty sister stars

darken the way my eyes look at you,

I would drown you in my stomach if
the acid would eat you slower than raw meat.
white lines of melted ice cream over my fingers,

on the car floor, silence tangier than tulips, a promise you'll always take care of me. then I remember your words,

I will *Break* you, next time.

#### Cecil Shrestha

#### Memories...



"Ozymandias" by Erica Alessandra Garcia

A writer thinking about his past, Sat staring at the books on his shelf, A story of a man's life, from a different country, Desperate to grasp, attach, and pin him on paper.

A sick child waits for a cure laptop, A promise made, in exchange for grades. The latter achieved, the former broke, Understandable, though still haunting Promises aren't meant to be broken,

A year-long crush on the black-eyed girl,
From the very first day of high school.
unreciprocated confession,
Friendship thrived, as the distance shortened,
She confessed her love but changed her mind.

Nine-year friendship to the childhood friend, Godfather both, to the future kids, Sworn under "The Bro Code", a bond, Until the drugs arrived anyways, Why does nothing seem to last?

Twenty-one years old, an aspiring writer, Diving into his past, burrowing for stories Memories break the language, as Words failed.

Maybe I'll just write about butterflies.

# Chelsea Tate Horses love Edith

God punished Lot's wife
for looking back.

He turned her into Edith salt,
The kind I imagine horses love
To grate their tongues over,
handsomely brackish
Residue laminating their teeth
Standing in a circle,
Licking Lot's wife

#### <u>Papers</u>

Papers nick the heart
Like a razor,
Custody, alimony, child support
In ink so black it hums,
Categorized,
A clinical drone of legalities
In one eye, out the other,
These papers
Signature scored,
Heavy as brocade drapes
dusty in a parlor
Where the mantle sits cloudy, unused,
The ink seeps through the table
Chewing on doilies and varnish.

#### Conrad Cable

#### **MAYHAWS**

Aunt Judy ruined mayhaws with sugar while Next year's fire-blight winded four miles from Bubba Hoggat's orchard, to Pilgreen Road forcing us to forage the native thorny dicots in the Ouachita bottom.

Uncle Richard and I waded monofilament cast nets in May's spring waterlines, and came back with bycatch perch sun-blotted in the Southern Book of the Dead:

Richard's loamy disclosure of the forestry surveyors filling cypress rings bank-side, then rolling wagon-loads of pitted, crimson berries out the bottom under canopies of old grown muscadines.

My generation preserves mayhaws.

No sugar or gelatin mash,
hide the recipe card.

Country folk north of the lemon freeze line
hate sour and cloudy
white sugar superstitions of a lifetime
smearing sweet and clear.

We're fat enough.

#### **MOUNTAIN BEETLES**

Everything I know about Pine beetles, Spruce beetles, Comes from hitch-hiking Locals recounting how The lodge-poles are gone, The spruce burns, It is an epidemic, It's not the beetle It's a fungus, They have been control cutting, They've been spraying insecticide, They replant aspens The dead can be logged, The mills are back near water For Colorado's billion dead conifers.



"Misty Peak" by Accie Lee Sullivan

#### Danielle Porter

#### Daydreams of Suicide

The dark blue walls the body hanging from the ceiling. Long black hair and light brown skin in the dark. This is my room.

Who is this girl?
It cannot be me,
because I am in class,
running on low sleep.
If I saw that girl years ago,
I would have called her a fool.

She should have picked her head up and lived, instead of wishing to die. She should not have told her parents why she cried at night, Begging for the pain to stop. Better to stay in church, praising God.

She should have spoken to the Lord, asking why she was in pain at night. But nothing changed. She should have lost that foolish dream, love was lust attracting predators, pranksters, and more fools.

She should have stayed on the path, her parents placed her.
Nothing beautiful grows where she lives.
"I love you"
signaled danger.

"You'll be here forever" signaled no hope in leaving home. Her hand-me-downs were all she wore. Where would she go, where no one preyed on her? If I saw that girl now, I would not know her. Maybe I never knew her at all.

#### To the Father Happy in His Home

Father, Father

We are your children.

You never held our hand.

Father, Father

There You stand,

We sit and listen.



"Standby" by Accie Lee Sullivan

Father, Father
The other children come before us.
They are not yours.

Father, Father
He cuts down plants,
now nothing grows.

Father, Father
Lying is praising the unworthy.
Condemning is disrespectful.

#### Elizabeth Cooley

#### The Christmas Fish (Sloth)

The first thing I heard,

a tremendous fish in slow-swim.

You ask him something, rapid and loud

beside the boat half out of water.

He doesn't fight. He thinks about it.

And then, before he says a word,

he hurls himself like a bird into the cracking light.

Eyes, smug as a cat's, his sullen face released

from the soft grip of his lower lip.

He breaks loose, bursting into his element.

Everything became rainbows tumbling through

And you just know, he knows.

#### Persistence on 9th Avenue

In the red-door above Cara Mia
the silhouette of my nose becomes visible.
Between the groudy lights and horns
often heard, it is always
in my sight, interrupting Manhattan's design.

In the Village shops with defiled colored pipes, Buddhist jewelry and Eastern chimpanzees, it lurks.

I can't talk about the distraction while smoking near the fire escape, so I keep dropping plastic lighters on the rattling carpet below.

In Harlem, my nose is large and gleams.

Waiting in the airport I swipe right
On a stranger's profile,
I swipe past my nose, it disappears
into the smoking lounge, drowning in a six-dollar-coke.
It will return nicotine soaked and cilia scorched.

It's reassuring, an olfactory tranquility, a piece of my face in the world.

I know what you see when you look this way.



"At a Glance" by Accie Lee Sullivan

#### Jerrel Stills

#### Jasper, TX

Guess I should've gagged him.

Ropes anchored around ankles of a man

hog-tied to the rear bumper.

At twenty miles per hour the ground peels skin

like a Fiji apple.

At a corner,

sharp enough to tilt the car on two wheels,

his body ruffles through bushes

like a ball thrown. A snag

yanks the car,

but thirty-five miles per hour is enough

force to burst a twenty-five pound

medicine ball.

He's still screaming. Up ahead,

Concave Road and pot holes.

Inside the car, DMX in my ears, I'm a Rough Rider.

#### Teachers today

We,

are not allowed to save pupils from self-expulsion.

Relationships develop slower under duress and inclement weather.

Public schools commit cerebral genocide by the thousands.

We are faulted for student failures

Observed like misshapen greenhouse plants,

without the ability to self-start students will never receive direction.

Rutter-less ships in a vast ocean.

Maybe that's the point.

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#### Katrina Boatwright

#### The Nature of Me

Like a Blue Jay, I can fly
But I cannot touch the light blue sky,
Like a blonde tulip, I grow
But not alone,

Like the changing seasons of budding spring, Sultry summer, crisp autumn, and arctic winter, I can leave But you can't follow me,

Like a mountain I am tall, You can climb me until you plummet Like cool **mist** of a waterfall, I am beautiful, but you can't see me,

Like a **Chameleon**, I have many moods But you will be lucky enough to only see a few

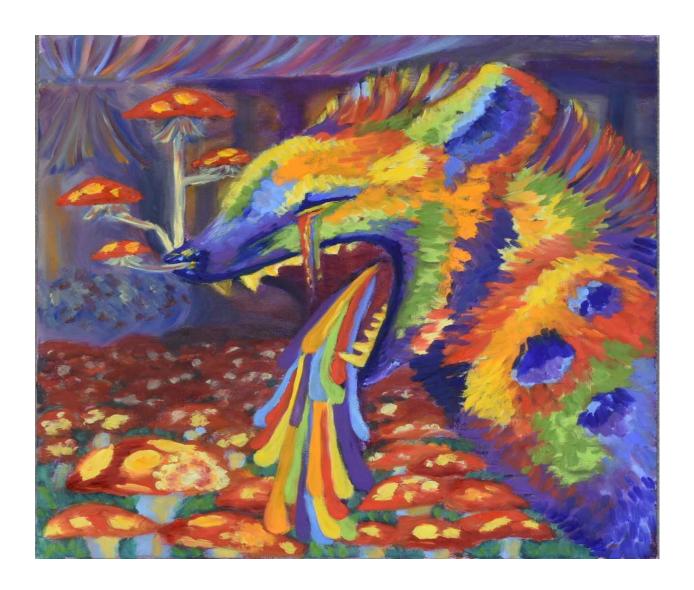
Like the rare Metal Promethium, I'm unique So, you cannot categorize me

Like the white Mose I bloom But much later than others, Like a black tailed jack rabbit, You can't keep up with me,

Like a shifty snake, it's too late For I will bite without warning, Like lava, I melt as hellfire, So don't add fuel to my Spark

But I'm also nowhere, Like a yawning black hole, You can never understand me,

Because I am Infinite.



"Psychosumption" by Erica Alessandra Garcia

#### Lauren Haigler

#### <u>Baptism</u>

When that first wave crashed over your head, you held your breath, let it consume you, let the water wrap itself around your waist.

Buried with...

One. Two. Tried not to kick your legs. Three.

That calloused hand dragged you back to the roar of applause in your water-logged ears and that cello of a voice.

...raised to walk in newness of life.

Alive. Somehow alive.

That old woman dressed like an Easter egg, waved her worn KJV like a banner, shouting from the second row.

Amen.

While the keys on stage hinted at the chorus of that familiar song with lyrics that escaped you, except for the refrain:

Amen.

You skimmed through congratulatory cards, from strangers, tried not to choke on the drenching clichés and their cursive

Amen.

But all their saccharine sentiments hushed the secret that the waters would rise again. They just nodded, laughed and

Amen.

And sent you off on your own.

That night you started sinking again, 2:30

A.M. in your bedroom,
when the water slithered back and you listened for the voices

Where were the voices? Where were the shouts of hope to rejoice in? Had the depths smothered the woman in pastel? You leaned in again.

Still no amen. Still no keys with familiar tunes to ring in your ears. And deeper still those cords pulled your heel into the silence.

In that inky water you swam, alone in your sheets, One. Two. You kicked your legs. Still drowning on Three.

Still silent on Three, wishing for those cards that made you roll your eyes before and now seemed like a rescue.

Out of the silence, a Hand broke through the waters, calloused like the cello-man's. But scarred too from a voyage to the dark.

And when the air rushed into your nostrils, it pierced like the unanswered questions. But you were breathing. The answers could wait.

Alive. Somehow alive.

No one told you this—that you would die and resurrect a thousand times, and the applause would rarely follow you there.

But the Hand would always come.

Still trying to catch breath, you ran to the window-pane and searched for stars,

heard something like a whisper from the heaven lies. The faintest glimmer of the angels'

Amen.



"Fountain" by Katelyn Vaughan

## Mac Cramer

## An Ode to: The 1975

His work appears so rushed—Somehow archaic and content.

But there's something different about his mouth, and his wallet photos don't turn me on.

This is how it starts, we typically drown in my car while the straight lines unwind us.

It doesn't mend his heart, though. I'm sorry, but you look so alive—

Speaking in bodies.

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## Love Breaks My Bones

Bukowski could never cut me open. Pages like sand, whisky hammers the raindrops. The sarcasm fills my nostrils –

His cigarettes are sour.

On a street in Detroit, Bukowski licked the salt from my eyes, the cuts on my hands?

I think of you, I haven't slept,

A knife drags through the pages, Singing like a bridge in the sand. Bukowski falls through the pages,

My bones are singing.



\*Unlinged, by Acrie Lee Sullivan

### Mallorie Hays

## She Looks So Good

Pearls rain from a five-year-old girl's neck, Dying stars shoot the darkness of her mourning dress, Rest in a puddle between her patent leather Mary Janes. "Granny's good pearls."

She bobs at the edge of the casket, Tethered to the earth by His hands around her waist, "Give Granny butterfly kisses."

Eyelashes lace together, like fingers Holding on while crossing the street Warm grooves as the fingers fold into each other, But cilium don't flutter in return.

Jellied blood cells, the filling in a Fleshy donut, dammed her arteries days ago Before post-mortem makeup and positioning.

The girl stalls, fingering grey, Straw hair, retracting with a fist full. The crowd, a manslaughter of crows, "Aw!"

The bald spot combed-over
With the man's fevered hands,
Shortly after he plops the girl
Onto a pew, "Stay here and be quiet.
It's the only way to respect the dead."

Thumb wrestling herself, tears Shoot down her ruddy cheeks. A lock of silver slashes her lap, Pearls warp the shape of her neck.

## Millie Baldwin

### Amen

Why did you squeeze my hand after we said "in Jesus name"?

Please do not confuse my question with an annoyed complaint.

I adore your sweet gesture and hope you do it again.



"Starry Abyss" by Erica Alessandra Garcia

Helicon

#### Nathaniel Flores

## A Dog Person's Island

Water took up the air
Enough to call what we breathed sea,
And turned black roads into solemn creeks
On which no voyage could pass,
For fear of hidden waterways below,
Into some homes, expanding brooks grew
Yet my home was of the fortunate few,
The paths around it were dug deep
For when waterways joined
From the doorway, a grand torrent could be seen
Fed by the black creeks and swampland yards.

I was left behind on a solitary guard
To watch the home of my family,
While they were at the happiest place on Earth.
Sealed in this castle, newly moated
I found myself in miserable company:
One hateful bird, twice my age
Who knew the language that bonded men
But shrieked it, to dissuade any connection
In her eyes, I only saw an old crone wary
Of a hoodlum she wished dead and buried
But this distaste I always knew.

What shocked me more was the spite of cats,
As two pairs of eyes informed me
With contempt that spoke of every feline's story,
Their only love was for food provided
While brutish petting gave temporary pleasure,
It required them to clean themselves
Of the stink from their ape providers
In their eyes, love was to be avoided
Thus their true home laid outside
But fear of moisture damaging their complexion
Forced them into the refuge they wished to abandon.

In their eyes, I saw their spite grow

For me who, with love, they could not pretend to show
So there I stood among hateful eyes

From those who, from my presence, only drew misery.
I stayed there trapped
Alone in pouring silence
With no one else to draw some cheer
But from a cage came a solemn whine
From a small mutt locked inside
Despite the rain, she left for relief
And came back soaked but satisfied.

She followed my steps in stride
And stared at me with lonely eyes
From my attention, she found joy
The touch of my hands
Was to her, spiritual fulfillment
Our quarrel for a rope
Was the panicle of excitement
And struggling out of my pins and holds
Only made her strive for personal betterment.
Before that day, I had no preference
For one pet over another
But in my companion I saw the divide
Between other animals and dogs,
As the latter can show true love in their eyes.

# Gore Eye

Once,

I stayed with my grandmother,
She told me to borrow from a friend
Some tool or ingredient,
The friend, a woman of medieval years,
had been kind I swore,
She lived by the lakeWhere wet people ate,
I greeted the turtles
Who'd venture out to land.

I saw a chilling sight,
the bodies of turtles,
with blood dying their dark shells.
pieced with a crushing blow,
That let out a cold lava flow
And kneeling near her door,
with a hammer painted gore,
I saw the grandmother's friend
striking at a creature I greeted before.

After the shell grew still, she stood and smiled my way.
She told me to wait at the steps,
As I stood there alone,
My Dark eyes pleading "why"
How did I not confront the old crone?
I just took what I came for and slinked away,
Allowing more slaughter to come.

I kept grandmothers yard tamed and tidy,
But on a day caked in sweat
I pushed through a pelt of thick green
And Came close to a ditch
Still a stream,
A vehicle's door had been crushed,

And laid on the pavement beneath it When I approached the dark object moving before me, The turtle's shell had been gorged, And creature inside tried to crawl I ran to the garage

Returned, armed
With a hammer,
I gave the turtle a nod,
I stood without breath
And decided to put it to rest

In the waters Close to a ditch Still a stream As it fell

The turtle still stared,
So I looked it in the eye of gore

And promised to keep a steady eye around any snakes or turtles

as I mowed.

## Octavia Green

## Obstruction

Toward the tongue,
Her teeth on my palm
Tray number three in place
As he stretched her mouth open

"Do you want me to help", I asked.

"Yes", the dentist said.

Teeth lay
Outside the tray,
The root
Almost out the bone,
The lower anterior
Points toward the inside
Of the lip,
Every time I tried to place the tray,
There was Obstruction.

## Sabrina Simms

## Grocery List

# 1 dozen yolks of inspiration

1 gallon of caffeine

1 bag of courage

A cup of blood

# A jar of sweat

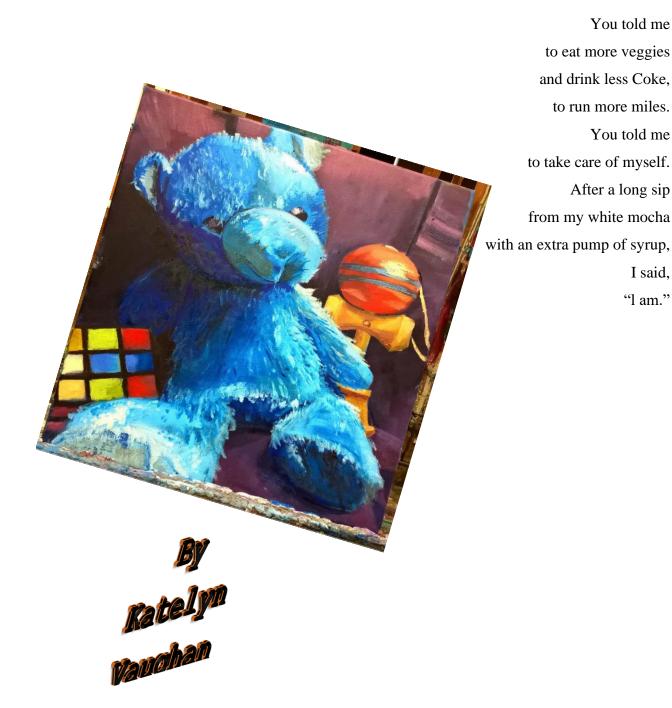
A pan of luck

An ounce of creative thought

# And just one block of Cheese

## Virginia Auer

# Advice from Dad



## It Comes with the Name

Hello, my name is... Virginia.

"Meet Virginia" by TRAIN sung to me by my high school principal.

"When you're no longer a virgin, are you still gonna be Virginia?"
Nope, I'm changing my name to Jezebel, the whore of the Bible.

My mom just really liked the name and called all of her baby dolls "Virginia."

Like the state? Gee, never heard that one before.

Virginia, as in Woolf?
I like you, except she killed herself.
Maybe because she kept hearing "Like the state?"

I'm Virginia, named for 50 Virginia, an asteroid named for the Roman noblewoman, Verginia, killed by her father Verginius. No.

So...

If you say "like the state" I swear... Like the state?

Sure. Like the state.

### Zach Johnson

## Time to Be There

Parked at the well site, I walk the dirt, watch distant engines turning, light spray knotted branches.

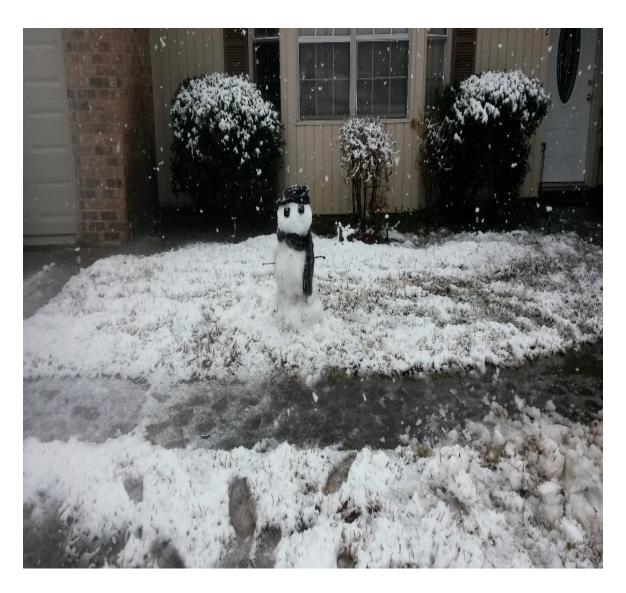
Summer nights hunting, shirt pockets full of buckshot, shining deer on road shoulders, watching corrugated silos across cornstalks. You hold apart the fence wire so I can pick an ear.

You don't talk much driving home, your chest tired from the shotgun's weight or the box of *Winstons* in your pocket. Once you say you killed a man in Tennessee whose name you won't remember, headed home from Ft. Leonard Wood in 1967. Buick at the pump, he starts beating you through the side window. Just as soon he's letting go, your buck knife already sunk in his guts...

On long roads you get quiet over the dead heap on the duct-taped seat between us. You know, Pop. What rolls past in the dark?

Out in this creek, turtles gnaw gar meat three days warm, its eyes permanently sunk, spine clipped outta meanness. Out in this field, bullets big enough to shoot into space. Pop, what's this you hold like dad's shirt, the last rags of him? You kissed his cheek,

he burst to ash in your arms. You swept him up, vacuum sealed him in plastic and stuck it on the mantel. I lift it down for Gram to sob over while you're out feeding the mules. When you're not home, I sprinkle him on the floor 10 roll in, then sweep up what I can reseal. TV drowns whippoorwills and cicadas pipe dust as turtles finish their meals. You notice more of him gone, so tomorrow we'll get the guns, lace our boots, go searching for the rest.



Charlie's Foot Prints by Anonymous

## Winter Blackout

Inside, the old folks pace the light from hurricane lamps like moths dusting porch light. Maybe twice a year there's ice heavy enough to knock the power out.

I'm twelve and running outside to see the sky before the gravel mill generator kicks on and floods the yard with light.

Jackrabbits in high grass stomp their heels, the old folks settle themselves into a rook game around the table pop made from an old front door. Later we'll build pallets around the hearth and the old ones too cold to sleep will keep us up with stories of West-Kimbrells and chimney ghosts who killed too many too terribly to be as glamorized as the James Gang they inspired.

There's one they like about Mama West catching blood in a stove pot from a throat her boy slit.

Gram tells another about her great-grandfather and the priestess he kept in a shack down the creek from his house.

Suppose she loved him. They couple in sand in sumac light in spring, creek spawning fat bream. In a year he'd turn her out and marry. Her footprints track the creek-bed, tortoise shell full of possum teeth... Pop denies witch magic. and his ice hangs these eaves. Jackrabbits disappear in holes.

Lone panthers cry sounds dead confederates couldn't yell.

I follow a satellite arc out of sight; the mules unnerve and strangle on the lead-ropes. In the old growth a witch channels dead prophets, skeletons clear moss from bone throats, but their tongues all are rotted—their voices, black water.

## Benjamin Nance

### Narcissist at Rest

"In the end, he realized that humanity's greatest flaw was its capacity for empathy. He could never be truly free if he allowed himself to be held down by his fellow man. He was forced to begin the next stage of his life alone, and with renewed zeal."

-Tuscaloosa, 2016

The Writer of what you are currently reading has killed himself. His reasons for taking such extreme action re: his life were myriad and nuanced. Before he ended his life, he wrote the letter which you are now reading, an act that he undertook to justify his reasoning to the world and to himself, and to dispel the rumors that have no doubt arisen around his death.

From a young age The Writer has felt that, as banal and cliché as it sounds, his true calling is to be a Novelist. He began early, writing elaborate (for his age) fantasy stories with titles like, *Invited by the Dark*. By age sixteen, he had written a short noir horror story that revolved around teachers at a small-town high school being picked off one by one by an escaped maniac. He chose to populate the story with his own teachers and classmates, a creative choice that bit him in his ass when, on a whim, he shared it with his English teacher, a neurasthenic sexagenarian, six years past retirement age named Mrs. Showalter. A woman that had chosen to trap herself in a run-down-the-clock-type situation every day for reasons God didn't understand.

Up to that point in his life, The Writer had never shared his work with anyone, and his choosing to share it with Mrs. Showalter proved to be a pivotal moment for him, so much so that he began to refer to his writing in terms of pre-Showalter and post-Showalter. The Writer simply wanted her opinion on the ending of his story, in which he had chosen to have his chaste-but-

down-to-earth protagonist, murdered, in defiance of genre conventions—a clever twist on the expected. Unfortunately, the writer never got a response on Mrs. Showalter's opinion of his ending, as she became somewhat distracted when she reached her in-story demise (scalped with pencil sharpener). She simply told The Writer that she liked the story, and it wasn't until he got home that he learned Mrs. Showalter had called his parents and implied that his writings revealed a troubled mind. At this point, The Parents searched his room and found some short stories he'd been writing, which were (as they saw it) confirmation of Mrs. Showalter's fears. Now, to be fair to The Parents, The Writer at this time experimented with relatively dark subject matter (murder and cannibalism, specifically); subject matter that, to the layman, may have appeared 'disturbing' or 'frightening.'

After the Showalter incident, The Writer's parents became concerned with his mental health, and as a result, he was required to attend bi-weekly therapy sessions with a Dr. Feltner. These sessions were regarded by The Writer to be a spectacular waste of time, and in general, just a tremendous bummer. Fortunately, Dr. Feltner determined that his writing expedited the therapeutic process, allowing him to continue honing his craft. Unfortunately, The Writer's parents became afraid of him, and employed a hands-off parenting style—just making sure that he kept his appointments, but otherwise being afraid to talk to or interact with their son. The Writer, living with his own fear, decided to lighten up on the subject matter until he left high school.

The Writer finished the rest of high school without further incident, with a G.P.A. that proved higher than average, but not near the top of the class. After high school, The Writer enrolled in the writing program at a moderately-prestigious liberal arts college. He took to writing workshops like a duck to the sky, free but vulnerable. Considering his past experience,

The Writer found himself greatly distressed by the idea of sharing his work with strangers, but it was a bullet that needed biting. His writing from this time is characterized by over-use of S.A.T. words like banal, myriad, shibboleth, and demagogue. His classmates (who generally submitted amateurish work that dealt with base topics like love and magic) often criticized his work as "too-postmodern" or "not postmodern enough," showing a fundamental misunderstanding of work that was quite clearly a commentary on and parody of the type of pretentious drivel that they were submitting. So, The Writer, though finally given a creative outlet, found the program lacking in worthy critics, simply put they were not well-read enough to understand the thematic gymnastics that he was performing.

This part of his life also allowed The Writer to free himself from the obligation of a romantic relationship. Soon after arriving at college, he'd attempted to find a romantic partner. He needed a woman that would understand his creative process, and allow him the freedom he needed to pursue his art. She would, by necessity, possess a secondary role in his life; his work took priority over everything else. To his credit, The Writer always presented his expectations clearly during the first date; there was rarely a second. The Writer did eventually find a woman that seemed to understand what he needed from her. Her name was Karen, and The Writer loved her as much as one human can love another. Karen was very understanding of his writing schedule at first, never being outwardly angry about missed or suddenly cancelled dates, but eventually her jealousy towards his work became too great and she gave The Writer an ultimatum: he could spend less time in his work or she'd leave him. And well, he is The Writer, not The Lover, after all.

Despite these setbacks, The Writer felt his college experience helped shape his literary identity; after seeing other writers his age, it became obvious that he had become a special talent

that would lead his authorial generation. This was not some narcissistic denial of reality, he just, from an objective standpoint, wrote better. It was also at this point that The Writer became obsessed with the novel as a form. More specifically, he became obsessed with The Great American Novel. He knew deep in his bones that he was every bit the equal of Faulkner, O'Connor, and Steinbeck. His teachers, while outwardly supportive of his ambition, never ceased trying to force him to write in a particularly bland postmodern style. The Writer did not wish to write like his teachers; the great authors of the literary cannon did not style themselves after their predecessors, and that is why they are read to this day. While his time in college proved necessary to his development, he was being forced to compromise his work, and chose to leave college as a result.

By the time of his death, The Writer had written three complete novels. Each book dove deeply into the American psyche. The first, *Evasion*, is a richly detailed, thoroughly researched analysis of the life of a C.P.A. The Writer worked overnight as a security guard for two months to have the time to shadow accountants during their work hours. When he sent Evasion to publishers, their replies (if they bothered) usually focused on the amount of painstaking detail that the novel contained, i.e. there was too much of it. This slowed the plot down unnecessarily, apparently. This greatly offended him, as he'd spent a significant portion of his life learning those details, and they could not simply be "cut-down" or "more smoothly integrated throughout." The novel's goal was to capture the truth of American life through the eyes of an accountant, not to be some half-baked adventure tale written to please children and the childminded. This snubbing was almost certainly due to The Writer's lack of clout in the public eye, a situation

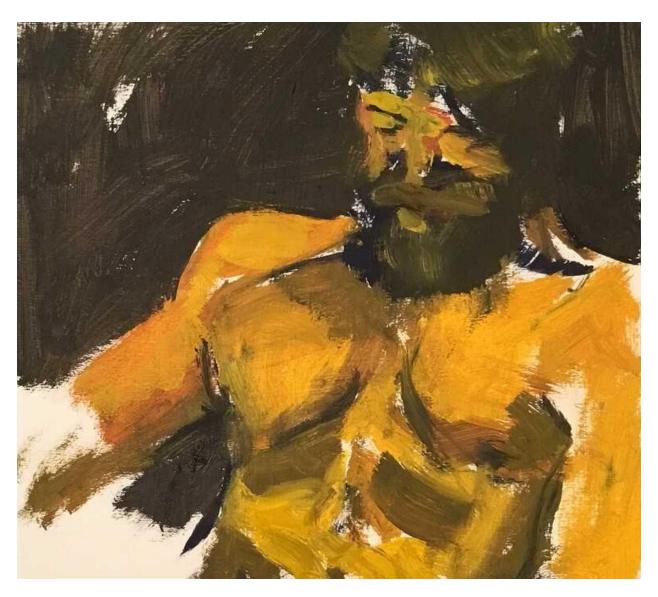
that could never be remedied if he continued to be barred from success by the Hegemonic publishing industry.

His second novel became a conscious attempt to be more marketable, a creative concession that he deemed necessary at the time. Logically, he would need a novel with enough widespread appeal to gain a stable audience, allowing him the freedom to publish more substantial fiction. Compared to his other books, *Yard Dog* is clearly an inferior work. It is a stream-of-consciousness narrative from the point of view of a Catahoula Cur. He mistakenly thought that this would make for a more appealing plot, but when The Writer sent out the manuscript, he never even received a reply. This was entirely due to the artistic compromise, and The Writer promised himself that he would never allow general appeal to take precedent over stylistic integrity.

His third novel, *Tuscaloosa*, was an attempt to construct a vibrant and living community of characters, à la Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha County*. This is easily The Writer's most ambitious work: it changes P.O.V. continuously, juggling dozens of storylines and over 60 characters. The manuscript itself weighs in at 2 ½ pounds and is over 1,100 pages long. The story of the novel takes place in the near-future in which corporations have sponsored literally everything (e.g., Tuskegee National Forest, brought to you by Tide). The book is an exploration of addiction in America, and into the way it lingers in the background of modern life. *Tuscaloosa* is the novel that justifies The Writer's existence, and it is the reason he is now dead.

The Writer needs to clarify here that any sort of sadness or sense of dejection did not motivate his death. *Tuscaloosa* is an important book, and he did everything in his power to make the world realize this. He had simply run out of options. Please understand that his death was just an extension of his life. He was a writer, and he died for his writing, hoping that suicide would

bring him the one thing that every writer needs, an audience. Remember him, remember his work, and remember that he was scared you'd forget him.



"Sort Rest" by Accie Lee Sullivan

## Haley Stafford

### Into the Storm

Blood seeps through the rips in my jeans from where my leg got caught between a metal fence and a floating tree. I'm still hacking up the flood water. My throat's raw from screaming. When I close my eyes, all I see is Grams' body on the wood from the house her husband built before the war. It was the house she raised her babies in alone after he died fighting in the war.

My body is numb. I squish the toe of my shoe down against the shingles of the roof and water oozes out. My other foot's bare and the toenail's missing from my big toe, lay there like leaves in a bird feeder. There's another long gash starting at my heel and opening up the back of my calf. I pull the leg of my pants up to see all the damage. It's getting harder to see out of my left eye, and I remember the shampoo bottle falling from the shower caddy into my face. We thought the bathtub was the safest place to be once we realized the storms intensity. The rain's falling like bullets from the sky, and the wetness on my cheeks helps me cry. I hear a dog howling not far from me, but it isn't Penelope. She checked on Grams even though I knew she'd passed cause her eyes were cracked like rusty doorknobs. The rising water forced me out, the house was falling apart around me. The roof gave-way in between us, I left my best friend. I can see Grams' house now from my perch on Ms. Nancy's two-story. Her son from Georgia had sent her a plane ticket when he heard about the storm, and she left three days ago.

I was only supposed to be here for another week. I've spent every summer with my grandmother for as long as I can remember, and now all I want is to go home with Penelope and see my parents. They must be worried out of their minds. No doubt the media covered the storm

and devastation. I could've died. Heck I might never be rescued. I need to get help because they won't be able to get to me here.

It takes me a few minutes to stand. I start calling. My voice rips out of my throat like I'm throwing up glass. It comes out somewhat clear, and by the end of the word, breaks off like a baby bird hitting asphalt. "Is someone there? Can someone help me?" I stop screaming, it hurts too much. I turn and climb up a short slope of the roof to see over the houses, careful not to scrape my knees. Everything's the same, destroyed and mostly underwater. Fallen trees, door frames, nightlights for the children and, empty bottles of cleaning supplies floating like they've got somewhere to be. I'm not sure who lived in these homes but I hope they got out. There's something in the tree behind Ms. Nancy's house that causes me to pause. The rains too heavy, but I can make out a figure. He's hanging sideways casually thrown over a limb, his arms dangling and swaying from the harsh wind. I swing back around and sit, my hand covering my mouth but the vomit finds its way up. I can't erase the image from my head, I need to get away. The water's so high, I need a boat to get out of here. Mr. Tom used to take frequent fishing trips and always asked us to keep an eye on his property since it isn't far from, us and he didn't trust the "hoodlums" that lived around him. He would pay me twenty dollars for the weekend to bring the mail in his house and feed Goldilocks, the pet goldfish his grandson guilt him into keeping when he won it at the carnival. He hasn't gone fishing since he threw his back out last year, so his boat should still be in the shed behind his house. I have to move before the water gets higher. The rain starts to slacken off, my legs feel like they're on fire. I clamp my nostrils together with my thumb and pointer finger and jump into the ice cold water. My leg burns on impact, the other gash mild in comparison, and I resist screaming so water doesn't get in my mouth. I don't think about the bacteria I'm subjecting myself to because it doesn't matter, if I'd have stayed I would've died on the roof.

It's hard to swim. I'm struggling to keep afloat, and the debris in the water keeps raking across my arms and face. I push boxes of jewelry. Baby dolls, tree branches a playboy calendar form 1987 among other things. My bare foot brushes mysteries under water, and I feel a hand touch my heel. My breath is coming fast, ripping through my scalding throat, my arms sore from treading water. I should be getting close to his house. It was only a block away from Grams. I round what used to be the street corner, a telephone pole marking the way. It's leaning against the remainder of the corner drug store, now only displaying its roof. There's something in the water a few feet from me. I squint my eyes to get a better look, and I can make out a strange slope with blue fabric clinging to the top. I turn and scramble onto the roof, the air feeling frigid now that I'm out of the water. A strangled sound comes from my mouth. "Someone's down there." I can see her brown hair drifting out like a cloud, but she's face-down in the water. The blood drains from my face and into my leg like warm syrup. My unsteady feet slip and I fall onto the roof. Thanks to marathons of Grey's Anatomy, I know I need something to tie off my leg. I don't have a belt, but the trendy holes in the knee of my jeans give enough leverage to rip the bottom half of the pants leg off. I tear a strip from the seam to make it a thinner piece, and wring it out. The water drips down my fingers. My right leg is completely soaked with blood. I'm bleeding too fast for my body to keep up, and I feel dizzy. I quickly tie the strip of fabric directly above the gash. It rides high on my thigh, and I pull the two ends together after tying it. I scream but it's so hoarse the light rain shower drowns it out.

"I don't deserve this. Why is this happening to me?"

I need to get up and get to the boat I'm not sure is even there. I just want to lay down for a second. I turn on my side, the roofs hard against my hip and shoulder, so I switch to my back and let the rain drizzle me in the face. My bear arms come alive with goose bumps.

I haven't seen my parents in three months. My mom didn't want me to come to New Orleans this year because she had a bad feeling. I guess I should've listened. I could be with my parents in Ohio watching the horrors of the storm from the comfort of our living room couch, cuddled together with anxiety over Granny. I wouldn't know for sure that she's dead, we'd get the news during a commercial for some new product that makes opening canned goods a lot easier. Penelope would still be... alive. I can see her when I close my eyes.

I was thirteen when I first saw Penelope. Her former owner was an old man who would beat Penelope for seemingly no reason. So one day I brought some wire cutters from my dad's rusty, red tool box that belonged to my grandfather, cut a hole in his fence. I called to her, and she hesitated, backing up into the shadows. I called her again, just saying "Come here, dog," because I'm not sure what the old man named her. A few seconds later she crept towards me and, I pulled her under the clipped fence by the loose skin on the top of her neck. I heard movement from inside the house, so I quickly grabbed her up in my arms and took off back home. I didn't go to school that day. I named her Penelope after The Odyssey.

The sound of something falling on the roof beside me awoke me, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Just a branch," and I sigh.

My right leg's completely numb. I sit up to loosen the makeshift tourniquet, relieved to see the bleeding has stopped. I can't open my eye so it must be swollen shut. My hand goes to my throat in an attempt to smooth the pain away, and I swallow against the dryness. I rub my good eye and remember where I am. Easing over to the side I see the water is has risen, the floating body, gone. The sky's getting darker, it's still drizzling. My blonde hair, caked with dirt and wet from the floodwater plastered to my face. I start combing my fingers through it, and

there are flecks of red from dried blood in it, so I give up and twist it up on top of my head. I need a game plan. I still don't hear or see anyone, and I test my voice, but it's still gone. I map out how far of a swim it should be to Mr. Tom's house, and I can almost see it, but I can't imagine it's intact.

I am further into the water, and holding onto the roof. The water feels colder. Each time I pass something to hold on to, a slight current pulls me along. Mr. Tom's house is adorned with a blue tin roof, which makes it easier to see his house in the darkness. I make the house a guide and pull myself around to the back. The shed is still there.

"Thank God."

The opening is under water. I won't be able to open my eye under water and see, so I guess the middle and dive under. I blindly pull myself down, running my hand against the weathered wood searching for the opening. I find it and grab hold. It's harder than I thought to pull myself under when my body's natural response is to float. I release the air from my lungs and feel the bubbles go up my body to the top to push myself farther down. My brain panics until I burst to the surface gasping for breath. I wipe the water from my eye while frantically kicking my feet to stay afloat. Adrenaline kicks in, and I find a hook on the wall to hold on to. I catch my breath and take in my surroundings.

The sheds littered with small hollow gardening tools, soil in plastic bags, and floating storage boxes. The interior is also wood and there are larger gardening tools hanging on hooks on the wall. I can't see all the way to the back because of all the stuff in the way. I use my free arm to move them out of the way. A massive hole in the roof of the shed from the storm provides the light I need to see that the sun is going down fast. Exhaustion sets in, and I want to get out of

the water. I look at the hand that isn't supporting me and see the bone white pallor, so pruned my fingers hurt.

I tell myself "I can let go, and this will all be over."

I see the boat behind a large box and almost start crying. I swim so fast it gives me enough leverage to pull myself into the boat following two or three failed attempts. There's no water in the boat because it has been covered by a part of the roof still intact. I lay there in the bottom of the boat. A small blanket swings from one of the open compartments. I wrap it around myself and quickly fall asleep.

I awaken to the warmth of the sun on my face, terrified to look at my leg, but I need to see the damage. The wound, scary red with puss seeping out, is excruciating. I untie the tourniquet because it's swollen. Don't people usually keep first aid kits on boats? I scoot back towards the compartment I got the blanket from and reach inside. There. I pull out a rectangular kit with the first aid symbol on it. I remove the gauze first.

"Wait, no I need to use this after I clean it."

There's a small bottle of peroxide, and I unscrew the cap and brace myself. I grip the blanket as I pour the contents on my leg. My eyes water as the peroxide bubbles and pops. It's still in effect after several minutes, but the burning stops. I wipe the puss away with the gauze. My leg still looks awful, and I use butterfly band aids to hold the gaping edges together and slather Neosporin on top. I find these rectangular pads in the bottom and need two to cover the entire surface of the gash.

Now I need to find my way out. The swelling from my eye is going down, and I can open it almost all the way. I twist my hair back up and hear my stomach twist like a tree branch in a hurricane.

"How many days have passed? Two?"

I check the remaining three storage compartments on the boat and find a bottle of water with the label missing, a backup fishing kit, and-glory be to God-a granola bar. I ate so fast I damn near bit my tongue off and drank all the water. My stomach must have shrunk because I'm not hungry anymore. The water hadn't gone down any while I was sleeping, but I can see a hole big enough to fit the boat through towards the back of the shed. I remember Mr. Tom telling me he kept the keys in the ignition of his boats because he couldn't trust himself to keep up with them. It isn't like you can drive it out of the shed on a normal day, right? I laugh to myself and try to stand only to realize I can't put weight on my right leg. I almost fall back down, but I catch myself on the side of the boat and hobble to the driver's perch. I turn the key, and the engine purrs. The boat controls are very similar to a car, so I step on the gas. The boat lurches forward and hits several of the storage boxes, so I ease my foot down again. It slowly moves forward through the hole. The boat scratches the sides and breaks more of the opening.

I don't know where to go, so I just head into town where I assume there isn't as much storm damage. The houses and buildings are more whole. The water is just as deep, so I'm not worried about the boat touching the bottom. There are more bodies, and I recognize the grocery store lady that knew I liked to use paper bags as opposed to plastic ones floating face-down several yards away. I continue forward. I start calling for help again, my voice scratchy, but audible. I notice movement on the roof of a McDonald's. I can tell it's an animal by the shape, so I move closer and whistle. I hear the paws run across the tin surface and the clicking nails.

"It can't be."

A tawny head with white patches on her face and a wildly wagging tail all come forward.

Tears stream down my face as I yell "Penelope!" She dives off the roof, and it's the most

beautiful thing I've ever seen to watch her swim through the water towards me. I move the boat slowly closer to her and pull her in. I hug her and sob into her fur, the pink collar with her name engraved on a round pendant still remains. She's licking my face and can't be still in the boat. I haven't cried this whole time until I saw her face. She smells awful, but I do too. Her fur is wet and dirty, and I know she must be starving. She also has dried blood matted into her fur. I search for a wound and find it on her back. It's a long gash like mine, but not deep. She sits directly beside me when I get back into the driver's seat. I'm overwhelmed with hope.

A search party finds us an hour later. Three men in FEMA rain jackets in another boat with a woman and child that I know, pull up beside me. The woman is crying and holding her son in her arms with a wool blanket around them both. I have my own so I refuse the offer of another one from a man named Steven. They must have seen more horrors than I have. There isn't room for us to get in the boat, but I cry again when I learn they're our rescue. A man with the brown beard hugs me and gives Penelope and me granola bars and bottled water. I feed Penelope first, and the man instructs me to follow them back to the safety camp where there is shelter, food, and water. He asks me my name, and I say,

"Katrina."

#### Hannah Bryan

### The Pond behind Our House

The pond behind our house served as a beautiful constant throughout our lives. Though it actually covered a rather small part of our land, my brother and I viewed its waters as mighty and endless. Before I could even walk, my brother Travis would drag me by the arm down to the pond and we'd splash in, Mama yelling at us, telling us to be careful as she made her way down the hill with a little folding chair. Mama thought we were the most beautiful kids. Travis was by far the prettiest boy I'd ever seen.

"Mama, you ain't got to sit out here every day! Nothing's going to happen!" I'd shout from the water.

"Yeah! And I ain't too old to look after y'all!" mama shouted.

I looked at Travis. "I'm old enough to look after myself!" And don't call me lil' bit, I'm older than Charlotte," he yelled.

"I don't like it when you call me Charlotte," I mumbled. My nickname was Char, like burnt meat. Charlotte seemed too pretty for my short and stocky figure.

"Yeah? Well you're a lady Char. And one of these days you should start actin' like one." Travis sank down so the water touched his chest and splashed me in the face. He always told me to be more lady-like, acting boyish just felt right. I joked with him that if he wanted someone in this house to be lady-like, he'd do better to become a lady himself. I was clueless then.

We played this one game over and over again. There sat a tiny, little island almost smack dab in the center of the pond. Bright, green grass and tiny purple flowers covered the surface like a perfect carpet. Travis and I felt certain that sprites and fairies resided there.

"All right, y'all ready?" Mama had a big grin on her pretty round face. She waited until

Travis and I raised our right hands high in the air before she yelled, "Ready! Set! GO!"

Travis swam in the shallow water before diving under as gracefully as a bird swooping for its prey. I kept his long body in the corner of my eye as I swam forward, struggling to keep up.

Laughing as I was, it grew harder not to run out of breath. At the bank, I heard Mama cheering us both on. When I glanced up, only a few feet from the shore of our island, Travis emerged from the water, his chest heavily rising and falling.

"I win! I'm King of the Fairies and Sprites!" He posed, grass between his toes, fists stuck high in the air.

"That's not fair, you always win, "I grumbled, my jealousy only skin deep. Sometimes, he'd let me win, if he found himself in a kind sort of mind. "I never get to be Queen."

"Well you could be Queen, Char." Travis grinned down at me as I crawled onto the bank, breathing heavily

"No," I gasped, "you're a boy. It's easier for you to win."

"Don't you say that, Char." He sat next to me on the grass carpet, his brow furrowed.

"Girls are strong, too. You've gotta good head on your shoulders. Boys' round here don't know right from left. Maybe they could beat you in a foot race, but you're gonna know a heck-of-a lot more about life than those jerks."

Travis stared at the water. Dad went up to the school the week before, but the bullies didn't stop messing with Travis. They only got worse. Nobody cared if a deacon in the church defended his "sensitive" boy to the principal. I didn't quite know what to say.

As the seasons passed, and we grew, the pond behind our house stayed the same. I decided early on, I preferred the reflection given to me by the pond than any mirror. The bubbly,

rippling image of my face resembled my spirit better than the "me" I saw in my bathroom.

Languid days shivered my bones with the same pleasant touch of a cool breeze on a summer day.

I punched one of Travis's bullies, Jim Dewey, in the face once. The blow broke his nose and gave him a black eye. Embarrassed I suppose, Travis told me for days after that he didn't need my protection and that Dewey wasn't worth it but I brushed him off.

Once Jim stood right in the middle of the playground during recess at school and started yelling at all God's children that my brother was a "disgusting faggot who might as well be a girl." My best friend Louise came running to the swings to tell me what was happening, so I marched my sixth grade self over to the groups of eighth grade boys surrounding my brother. I didn't even know what a faggot was, but a burning sensation worked its way into my head, my forehead red with rage.

The closer I got I could hear Jim yelling, "This sissy needs to use the girls room, not the guys. I don't want a faggot in the bathroom with me!" Shoving my way through the crowd, I finally found the center where Travis sat dirty on the ground, looking up at Jim Dewey.

"Don't make me kick your ass Dewey, before I hit you in the face." I could feel my eyes burning holes into his unibrow.

He looked dumb as usual. "What'd you just say to me little girl?"

"I said, don't make me kick your ass Dewey!"

I spoke slowly so he'd understand. Every kid in that middle school crowd knew I was in over my head but my voice didn't shake. My heart on the other hand had jumped the playground fence. I'd never cussed my life. I glanced at Travis out of the comer of my eye and he stared at me with wide eyes.

Dewey said, "You're lucky my mama told me not to hit girls."

I smiled. "Yeah? Well my mama told me not to hit girls either, but that's not gonna stop me from wiping that dumb look off your face."

The entire crowd started laughing even though I was pretty sure I heard a line like that on television, but it worked, because Jim Dewey's eyes grew dark and his brow bent like the pipes under the bathroom sink. He clenched his fist, reared back and swung. He had power, but I had speed. I leaned to the right and hit him on the bridge of his nose, blood flew through the air and stained Sally Wright's new light blue dress. Dewey cried and never even looked at me or my brother again.

Bullies still got to him in high school, despite the tales of my right hook. Since I was stuck in middle school, I couldn't protect him. In the middle of my seventh grade year, I found out what a faggot was. At first I fumed and wanted to break Jim Dewey's nose all over again. But when Travis got home from school that day and sat his backpack down, I looked him in the eye and asked him if he liked girls or boys. His cheeks turned light pink, but his eyes remained calm. It felt like an eternity I stood there looking at him. He wouldn't answer.

"I'll always love you either way, Travis James." My eyes abnormally filled with tears.

Travis broke down and fell into my arms. I held him tight. I told him to tell Mama and Dad, but he said no. He said that they'd never understand, with Dad the way he was. So I didn't tell anybody.

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"Where have you been?" I asked Travis as he walked in the door. I Jumped on his back.

"I was with Mr. Clarke." He laid his books on the dining room table.

"Well, why the heck are you smiling? There's no way English is that interesting."

"He's a good tutor." Travis carried me on his back down the hall to his room and slammed me on his bed. I giggled and chunked a pillow at his face. He shut the door and sat next to me. "I have to tell you something," he said.

"What is it Travis?" there was change in his voice.

"I kissed him. Or he kissed me but I kissed him back."

"Who?"

"Mr. Clarke!" Travis's smiled as if he was a kid again. "Char, it was amazing. I thought... it's been so hard, but I don't feel lost anymore, you know?"

I wasn't sure how to feel. "Gross." We both started giggling and he tackled me onto the pillows. "But Travis, he's a teacher, sort of. He's an employee at the school, at least."

"I know." He grew quiet and looked at his hands. "I can't keep seeing him. He knows that too. I'm happy, it's not like I thought we'd be together forever. It's for now."

"Like an experiment?" I winked at him and he laughed. "You're gonna go off to college and be so happy and have friends and find a boyfriend. You won't even think of me anymore."

"Of course I'll think of you." He punched me in the arm but his face was sad. "I won't be able to live until I'm out of this town. It's draining me."

"Two more years. That's all," I said

"Yeah," Travis sighed.

We sat in silence for a bit. I never understood what he thought. I recognized his weak spirit and grew angry. My strength would take this hurt. My spirit could make it through, not his. I wanted to take it from him. I wanted his happiness to thrive.

"You know, these people don't think you can be gay and love Jesus, Char, but I do. I love Jesus."

"How can you love Jesus after everything you've gone through? He's cruel."

Travis paused. "He fights for me like you do."

This winter became the coldest we'd had in years. It actually snowed. The pond froze over for the first time in twenty years. Travis and I swore we'd skate on the surface, but Dad said the ice would break. My parents became accustomed to Travis coming home in tears or with a black eye. They didn't know how to help. They were clueless. Travis refused to tell them even though I said Dad would still love him.

That year, he had no one but me, and Mr. Clarke, but he couldn't talk to Mr. Clarke. That year proved to be the worst. I selfishly drew away from him, slowly, with my band practice and soccer team. He told me he got beat up in P.E., but I didn't fight. I didn't even try. I was too busy for him.

One day, I had to miss the bus home for band practice. My friend's mom dropped me off and I yelled for Travis, eager to tell him about some trivial drama from school.

"Travis! Kelsey Griffith got her butt chewed out by Mrs. Hannigan for saying ass, and it was perfection." Tossing my backpack next to his, I listened for his familiar shout from the kitchen. When it didn't come, I walked out the backdoor toward our pond. Travis told me the new, crystal surface held such beauty to him.

"Travis?"

The snow on the ground crunched softly beneath my feet. My breath, visible in the cold, became fast and shallow. As I drew near the pond, I saw a gaping, dark hole fresh and ugly halfway between the shore and our perfect fairy island. I stopped breathing. Slowly sinking down to my knees next to the shore, I ignored the cold freezing my legs, making them numb. The tears slid down and warmed my cheeks before they turned to ice and burned my skin.

A cold, wet piece of paper blew in the icy wind next to me, held still by a rock from our garden.

I sat in the cold, freezing and blue, until my parents came home and found me curled in the snow by the pond. They begged and pleaded and tried to pry the note from my stinging fists. The EMT helped warm my frozen body as I loosened my tight fingers and opened the note.

I don't need you to take care of me anymore, Queen.

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Church lets out early and I walk to my parent's car alone. I know my dad will stay for a while, talking to the other deacons about church security and Mom will chat with her bible study ladies. Some kid named Justin waves at me as he slides into a car with some boys who hit Travis with a brick once. I flip him the bird even though I know he was cool with Travis.

"Charlotte!" I think it's some deacon who knows my dad, so I pretend I can't hear and keep walking. "Char!"

I whip around at the nickname my brother gave me and see Mr. Clarke running across the lot.

"Mr. Clarke, nice to see you."

"I've been meaning to speak with you, but I haven't found an appropriate time. I always enjoy your father's prayers on Sundays. He has such a great presence."

"Yeah, he's great," I mumble. My eyes travel down to his shoes. They look expensive and stylish. I think of how Travis would like them.

Mr. Clarke pulls me from my thoughts. "How are you, really?" His voice sounds kind and genuine. I almost cry just thinking that my brother loved him.

"I'm okay. I'm getting better, I think." I hear a group of guys laugh across the parking lot. "I hate those shits in my class. Every Sunday they sit next to me and act like nothing happened. They killed him."

"Don't you dare," Mr. Clarke says.

My eyes flash up to his, I can feel my anger rising in my body. As I look into his eyes, ready to tear him apart, there are tears there. I stand with my mouth open, knees shaking.

"Don't you dare give them the satisfaction," his voice cracks.

He hurts like me. He moved on, he gave himself happiness, he did this. Travis.

"Fuck those shits. They don't get any part of Travis's life. It was too beautiful to let them ruin it," I tell Mr. Clark"

The warm tears on my cheeks didn't feel the same as when Travis died. They are too hot and I can't breathe. I start to gasp for air and my cheeks grow hot, I know they are red. Mr. Clarke puts his arms around me and holds me for a while.

"Do you think he is in Heaven? Do you think there is a heaven?" My voice sounds like a child's, muffled in his suit jacket.

"Yes, I do. He loved Jesus more than half of the people here. He's there." Even though I'm hot in his arms, chills run through me, cooling me down.

"You'll see him again."

### Mallorie Hays

# St. Dymphna's

Every year, Madeleine's grandmother, Jean, goes crazy from smoking a pack a day for a month while wearing NicoDerm CQ patches. Like clockwork, Jean ends up in St. Dymphna's Psychiatric Hospital in Baton Rouge by Mardi Gras only to be back home before Easter, wreaking havoc on lollipops and meditating to Oprah's motivational audiobooks. It's never long before the lollipops lose their appeal and a few long forgotten cigarettes start resurfacing.

At first, Jean throws them away, tearing them apart to assure herself that she isn't tempted, but there's always a second glance at the decapitated filter in the garbage can, amongst yesterday's coffee grinds and banana skins from breakfast. A few days later, a pack of Marlboros ends up in a grocery sack, tucked behind a jumbo bag of Dum-Dums and an issue of *Good Housekeeping*. Once Jean makes it home, she empties everything but the cigarettes out of the bag and folds the plastic around them. Then she forces the bundle into a pig cookie jar, it oinks demonically, the effect of old batteries.

It will only be a day or two before she fishes out the Marlboros and indulges. Then she starts feeling good about herself and her family, so she wants to reward them for being such a great part of her life. So she logs on the computer and starts to shop. Usually, she begins by buying small things like Disney coloring books for the smallest grandkids or a book from the recommended teen section on Amazon for Madeleine.

That's when Karen gets suspicious and calls the bank, letting them know it might be time to monitor Jean's account. But the bank is never quick enough to call Karen. By the time they do, Jean has already spent \$4,000 on birth year coin sets for everyone in the family (where the

sum of each coin set is forty cents), \$1,200 on four ceiling fans to give as gifts, \$3,275 on a new, hypoallergenic cat from Japan for the grandkid that's allergic. She spent \$28 on a *Talking to Your Teen about Sex* book for Karen (and Madeleine too, if you think about it), and has signed up for a weekly lawn service and pool boy for \$400 a month0 even though she doesn't have a pool and her son-in-law comes to mow for free every two weeks.

Really, these are not the worst parts about Jean's mental collapses, it's her rambling on about the family secrets that hurt the most. Madeleine learned that Aunt Myrna was really Uncle Moe at birth, Cousin Bertie is addicted to eating the hair from Barbie dolls, Great Grandpa Ralph had two families in two different states, and Grandpa Ray had an affair in the late 1960s. That was the hardest for Madeleine to hear and the one that pushed Karen to send Jean to St. Dymphna's for the first time.

Since that first time, more than five years ago, Karen has tried to be proactive about her mother's breakdowns, going so far as to keep a calendar to try and predict when they'll happen.

Just like that, a pattern emerged and Karen set up a recurring appointment with the psych ward.

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The first time Jean's brilliant idea to multi-task the quitting process appeared was three months, twenty-two days after her husband died, which was about three months, twenty-one days after she picked up the habit again. Jean had smoked before her grandchildren started popping out, but she and her husband Ray, promised to quit together. A pact of solidarity was made outside of their daughter's birthing room, and they shook on it as the swinging door flung open to their (then) son-in-law announcing Madeleine's arrival.

The first time Jean's family discovered her smoking again were the weeks following Ray's death.

Jean lounged outside in a newly purchased patio set under the carport on one of those Louisiana summer days where heat ebbed off the pavement. Her blue gray bob shifted slightly as she readjusted her weight, an attempt to relieve the pain or arthritic hips. Her skin had seemed too thin as the years wore on and revealed spider veins and liver spots, but Jean looked about ten years younger than her actual age of 70.

Madeleine hadn't felt a breeze and still Jean's lit cigarette served as a beacon that guided Karen's blue Nissan Altima. Madeleine pushed the car door open, trailing behind her mother, whose heels clicked sharply, a hollow omen on the concrete driveway that had struck fear in many men throughout the years.

"I didn't know y'all were coming by today." Jean stamped her cigarette into a dog's mouth ashtray waiting obediently on the tiled table as she crossed her legs.

Karen stopped in front of the table, opting not to sit in one of the three empty chairs. The walls were faded blue and a small, black grill garnered cobwebs in the far corner. Oil stains from Jean's silver Saturn VUE greased the concrete. Madeleine remembered her grandfather shuffling his feet to move the wheelchair to the edge of the carport's shade a month prior. His yellowed hands held a fun-sized Hershey's bar, the wrapper carefully torn to reveal the first of three blocks of the chocolate, which he broke off and promptly tossed to the dog waiting patiently a foot in front of him. The small Jack Russell Terrier, named Grover, caught his prize in midair as Madeleine gasped.

"Pop! You can't give him chocolate or he'll get sick!"

Ray wheezed, a new sort of laughter that characterized the terminally ill. Madeleine never did anything about the toxic chocolate and they hadn't seen Grover since Pop died.

"Momma, have you forgotten that Daddy's funeral was three weeks ago and that he died from lung cancer"? What the hell is wrong with you? Do you want me to lose you, too?" Karen always went for the jugular. It helped her in her career as the only female doctor in an established clinic, and it earned her a reputation as a no-nonsense woman who couldn't be messed with.

"Well, good lord Karen! It's just a cigarette, and I'm trying to quit slowly this--"

"What do you mean trying to quit?! How long have you been smoking?!" Karen's nostrils flared.

Madeleine wished they could move this inside, especially because she knew once her mother got started, there was no stopping her.

"I'm a grown woman. I can fill my body with whatever I like," Jean said as she winked at Madeleine. Madeleine's pictured a gothic harlequin romance with her grandmother in carefully shredded petticoats hanging on to Fabio. Funnily enough, even Jean's blue gray bob and signature lemon slice earrings made it into the scene.

"I'm not entirely sure what you mean by that, and I have no desire to find out.

Karen shivered a bit, her face puckering like a baby given its first taste of lemon.

"Well you've caught me at having my last one, coincidentally enough. But its got nothing to do with you. Don't think I'm quitting because I've been caught in the act. I had decided before y'all got here."

Madeleine grinned shyly at Jean for a brief moment, recognizing the lie even when her mother couldn't. Madeleine loved her grandmother's rebellious spirit, but she didn't really want her to get sick like her grandfather had. But Madeleine kept quiet, relying on her mother to do the chastising for both of them.

"That's lovely to hear," Karen replied sarcastically. "I'm here to help you finish going through Daddy's stuff.

The two older women walked in the house, while Madeline stared at the dog ashtray, sweat sitting on her lower back and making her gray shirt darker as it clung there. She thought of her grandfather and Grover, wondering how they both were and if they were both in the same place now. Feeling comforted by the thought, she headed inside to seek refuge in the air conditioning and the residual smell of smoke.

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So now, this whole time, Madeleine's been leaning against a beige door with the number 119 in bold print blazoned across it, waiting for the courage to enter the room where they've PEC'd Jean to creep up and slap her into action. By PEC, Madeleine understands it to mean that the doctor has signed a Physician's Emergency Certificate because he's afraid Jean's gonna off herself or try to off someone else. Jean spends much of her morning swearing at the television, which Madeleine thinks has been tuned to *The View* or *Dr. Phil*.

"You bastards leave that poor girl alone! She's just trying to live her life, and you want to send her to boarding school! What fourteen-year-old these days doesn't steal her mother's Xanax?" Jean laughs and Madeleine can't help but smile. Breathing in and out slowly, Madeleine knocks and opens the door without waiting for her grandmother's response.

"Well, I could be naked in here for all you know, Nurse Retched. I've told you-Jean's hands hold her patchwork quilt up to her chin, although Madeleine sees that she wears her favorite long sleeve sweater with a cartoon Pug across the front.

"Oh honey, I thought you were that unpleasant woman come back again to poke me or hand me some more pills!" Jean lifts from the hospital bed and crosses the room to give Madeleine a hug.

Madeleine tried to grab on to what she remembered was Jean's body, but it wasn't there. Instead, her sweater hid a too-small figure, one that Madeleine could snap with little effort. As Jean pulled away, her weak smile and dulled eyes showed, she had revealed too much.

"Grandma, you've lost a lot of weight. Are you feeling okay? I mean, besides, you know... "Madeleine gestured to the room around them. The four walls were a beige gray, with maroon curtains on the large windows that faced out onto a small but lush courtyard garden.

Jean's bed had the same patchwork quilt that her bed at home usually held, and many of her family members were captured in albums on small tables around the room. Madeleine knew the staff tried to make each room feel personal to patients who didn't have the choice to leave, but the hospital bed and the overly large bedside commode made the other personal effects feel disingenuous.

Jean didn't answer. She slowly shuffled back to the bed, pointing to a chair against the wall, Madeleine moved the chair closer to the bed and sat.

"You've got to make sure that the doctors know you're trying to get better. They've seen you here too many times before, and they're not convinced that they should let you out at all." Madeleine came here to plead with Jean, to make sure she knew how serious Karen was about keeping her at St. Dymphna's.

"Mom's friends with them, and they're not kidding around this time."

"You know me, honey. I'll sweet talk them and be out of here by the weekend," Jean smiled.

"You don't understand. You have to get better, for our family for me. I can't keep seeing you like this." Madeleine's eyes heated and threatened to spilt. Jean's hand reached out and caught her granddaughter's, Madeleine noticed that she still smelled like smoke, even though St. Dymphna's wouldn't allow cigarettes anywhere near their facility. Madeleine felt comforted by the familiar smell before her stomach rattled with disgust.

Jean saw those deep brown eyes soaked with tears only twice, once before at Ray's funeral, and when she broke her wrist falling down in a speed contest at the local roller rink. Jean always thought those tears weren't from the pain but from losing the race. She loved Madeleine's quiet fierceness and had seen herself, forty years younger, sitting across from her so many times when Madeleine visited.

"Alright, baby. I'll be serious this time. I'll stop for you.

Madeleine's heart pounded relief into every part of her body. The tone in Jean's voice had shocked Madeleine into acceptance, and Jean's eyes held her, unwavering.

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Madeleine left St. Dymphna's after an hour of tearful conversation and planning, her heart feeling light and a smile tattooed on her lips.

Jean leaned back in her hospital bed, her hands trembling a little as she thought about what was tucked in a bag at the back of the closet. Before she realized it, she walked to the hiding place and pulled several things out. The door opened quickly and a man in brown scrubs stood in the doorway.

"Jean? What do you have in your hands there?" His deep voice darted across the small space to an obviously shocked Jean, eyes wide and hands still shaking their contents.

"Jesus, Danny. You scared me to death." Jean crossed the few steps between her and the younger man and feebly slapped his arm.

The man laughed, his sharp, handsome features marble-like in comparison to Jean's craggy wrinkles. Jean kissed him, one hand fingering through his brown, prep school haircut while the other held onto the plastic bag at her side.

"You ready to go for a walk outside? Take a smoke break?" He placed one hand on the small of her back.

She nodded and handed him the bag which he placed in the waistband of his scrubs.

Outside, Danny had placed a wheelchair close by. She made a point to flop into the wheelchair, attempting to seem like she felt tired and old. She didn't though. Danny made her feel young and she wasn't sorry that she had goosed him on her first day here as he brought her outside for a walk. She would have never guessed that Danny had a thing for older women, but she was sure as hell glad he did.

Danny wheeled Jean into the courtyard, behind a sprawling oak tree. The other attendants and patients saw the two heading that way and spoke often about how sweet it was that "Hot Danny," as he was known, took the time each day to make sure the sweet, albeit odd, old woman got to sit in her favorite spot. They never suspected a thing when Danny wheeled her beside the bench that sat just out of sight from the main building.

At the bench, he removed the plastic bag from his pants and pulled from it a pack of Marlboros, a lighter, a box of NicoDerm CQ patches, a large pen-like device, a small dropper bottle with liquid in it, and some Juicy Fruit gum.

"Oh yeah, I got some gum too, babe. I just really like Juicy Fruit," Danny said as he smiled stupidly.

"It's fine, sweetheart. Just set this thing up for me before they notice. I can smoke this pack in about 10, if I hurry." Jean lit the first cigarette as Danny began to dismantling the pen, using the dropper to place some liquid on one of its inner mechanisms before twisting it all back into place.

"You'll love the flavor, baby. It's sweet, like you. All you gotta do is puff on this end," he pointed to the correct end to demonstrate, "and you're good to go. Once you get discharged, I'll be at your house every night in case you need help with it."

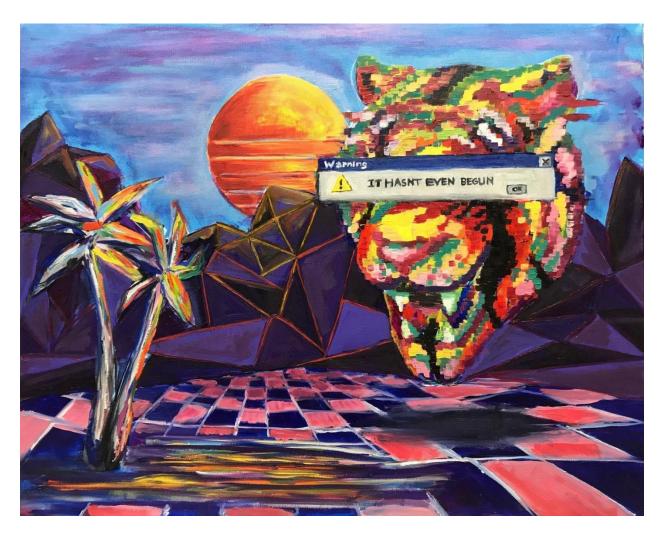
Jean smiled and patted his hand, excited to feel alive again.

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Jean surpassed the expected admission date and met Karen and the scrub-clad men at her door with a haughty smile and smelling like cotton candy. In fact, Karen noticed that the entire house smelt strongly of cotton candy. Jean wore a brown scrub top most days accompanied by a large pen shoved in the breast pocket. Karen asked her mother about the odd clothing choice, but Jean brushed off suspicions with some story about it being required wear for volunteering at the homeless shelter where she took inventory and served meals.

Madeleine came by and visited often, amazed and comforted by her grandmother's progress. Any time Madeleine showed up without warning, Jean could slide the e-cigs into her scrub top and greet her granddaughter without the smell of smoke giving her away. Jean felt like James Dean in that movie she had seen as a teenager.

It would only be two more months of feigned abstinence from cigarettes before the simultaneous use of e-cigs, patches, and the occasional Marlboro would send Jean back to the hospital. However, it wasn't before she let it slip about Danny. Later Jean bought a litter of hairless cats that cost \$12,000 and bought a Harley using the money that Ray had saved for Madeleine's college tuition.



"User error" by Erica Alessandra Garcia

### Sabrina Simms

# The Teacher's Daughter

Dear Daughter, May 20, 1993

This may seem strange, but sharing her story is one of the most valuable things that my mother ever did for me. She told me things about her life that maybe she shouldn't have, but doing that brought us closer to being friends than I thought possible. I've never been "sharp" by any standard, and my memory doesn't serve me well most days. There are times that I tie a string around my index finger only to forget why I put it there. I thought that writing to you from your own perspective, still young and anticipating life's greatest adventures is the best way to be close to you. Even though I haven't met you yet, I have faith that I will someday. I don't even know who your father will be, but I do have my prospects.

She wrote the letter on just plain old notebook paper, but it might as well have been etched in stone. I wouldn't dare burn it. The idea is actually charming when you think about it. I read the opening again that explains her reasoning behind writing the thing, but the whole concept makes my stomach churn. My dad is in the living room watching television in his boxers. Empty beer cans decorate the ugly antique coffee table that my mother found at a yard sale. I imagine if he finished it, gave it a fresh polish like he said he would when she brought it home, it wouldn't be quite as repulsive to look at. I sit alone in my room and look down at the names on the unnerving document. I didn't know most of them, but there is one that glares at me on the page. *Matthew Reece*, as in the pastor of the little country church in south Mississippi. His wife's name is Yuuki. My dad burps loudly in his recliner loud enough for me to hear

with my door shut and adds another can to the collection. It's 11a.m. on a Sunday. Feeling like I'm going to puke, I fold the letter carefully and stuff it back into the wooden box. The inside is overflowing with similar letters, each with a date scrawled in the top corner in permanent ink. The collection could be compiled, the word "daughter" substituting the word "dairy." Each page consists of some gooey secret from her past. I clamp down the lid as best I can, crumpling many of the papers inside, and lock it. Then I shove the key deep under the yellow mattress where hopefully no one will go prowling. The morning is bright, in spite of the storms raging inside of my head. Yellow light filters through the faded blue curtains that my mother sewed from bed sheets. The side of them facing the window is bleached to an almost brown color. The room is the tidiest in the house, but the oldest. There are no lights, only the one bulb hanging precariously from an empty fixture by its wires. The sockets are taped over on half of the room to avoid the sketchy hissing sounds due to the faulty wiring. Multiple water stains decorate the ceiling tiles. Still, the cheap linoleum is thoroughly swept and mopped and all the laundry neatly folded and put away, in contrast to the rest of the house. I gave up a long time ago on cleaning for everyone else. My dad and three brothers made tidiness impossible. I at least had this fortress of solitude for as long as I can keep the others out of it. I have the privilege of being the only girl, thus I had my own room soon after puberty caused issues between my brothers and I. Thank God for puberty, the dividing factor between me and my brothers in the tiny old three-bedroom house. Heaven, please forbid my parents to have another daughter. Seeing as how they're separated now, it seems unlikely. I resent my mom for leaving the kids with her husband, but between him and the drugs she used she had gone crazy and didn't seem fit to raise anyone.

Yes, it is a charming thought, writing letters to a future child. This is the only way I can imagine life through *her* eyes. In doing so, I almost feel as though I know her story better than anyone else's.

Her parents, both teachers, told her she'd be moving to Louisiana when she had just become a teenager. That year an angry parent had called a bomb threat on her public school. Her parents thought she'd be better off without that kind of setting. No big deal really. She had an awkward childhood and very few friends. She saw it as a fresh start. She walked up to the tall and handsome pastor to be and wrapped her arms around his neck. He didn't think anything of it but simply smiled warmly at his old friend, the same as always.

"Goodbye," she'd say, until the next visit that could be anywhere from weeks to months away. That was the hard part, not knowing when she'd see him again. Of course, she knew she would always come back. No force on Earth could keep her away. That became the way he watched her grow up from a distance. She lived in Louisiana but would return to her childhood home every Easter, Christmas, Thanksgiving, etc. She would spend most of her time with her blood relatives and would see him too on occasion. She would surprise him, walking into that little country church unannounced. Each time, she'd grow a little taller, a little slimmer, and a little more developed. The difference had been subtle at first, but as she matured into her late high school and college years her visits grew further apart. One thing hadn't changed, however. Each time, without fail, she'd smile at him like his is the only face in the world and embrace him tightly. Their conversations had been short and friendly ones, time always moving faster around them without their noticing. Perhaps he noticed more than she. She never told him, and there's no hint in her letters indicating that he ever knew.

God, I love him so much, she wrote. There's no way to tell for sure, but I don't believe he sees me that way. Though, as time goes by there are subtle hints that he does. I walked into the church early last Sunday, and there hadn't been a soul in the sanctuary but the two of us. He sat at the piano, his hands dancing across the keys as he played "A River Flows in You" by Yiruma. His hair is always combed neatly, his shirt pressed. He smells like original Old Spice aftershave and soap. Every time I see just a glimpse of him, my heart flutters. He didn't see me come in at first, but he jumped, startled when he did see me. I could have sworn his cheeks changed color, but it could just be my imagining.

No one could help noticing the change but her. Of course, he would notice her as she grew older. I saw the pictures of her. Her hair grew thicker and she had it cut shorter and out of the pigtails. I pick the thick album from the bookshelf; chips of the peeling white paint rain down after it. I flip it open to a picture of a girl about the same age as I, seventeen or so. We looked a lot alike. We share the same blue tinted hazel eyes. The difference is her smile. Hers had been beautiful, a captured memory of feminine beauty that warmly touched her eyes. I have no smile and nothing to smile about. I stand in front of the tall, oval-shaped mirror and try it a few times, but my smile lacks the sincerity of the photos. She had been mature beyond her years; he had been older than her by three and a half years. No twenty-year-old looks at a fifteen-year-old the way she wanted him to, but a twenty-one-year-old just might notice an eighteen-year-old flower in full bloom.

Dear Daughter, Mar 16, 1994

He said I was beautiful. I'm not sure he meant to, but the implication was there. We were talking about morning routines in his Sunday school class and he'd asked how long it would take

some of us to get ready to start our day. I told him that I usually take about ten minutes and give up. "We'll some people are just so naturally beautiful that they don't need as long," he said. There was a pause in the class, it took me a moment to register his kind words. "Well... I wouldn't say that about me..." I said. "I was just giving a compliment," he said. I stared into his caramel brown eyes and blushed. "Thank you," I replied awkwardly, and then he cleared his throat and looked away. I can't be sure, but I think he was blushing too.

I can't help but wonder if things could've been different without the distance. She eventually went off to college and he went away to seminary school. He met Yuuki on an abroad mission trip to Japan, where he spent two months out of one summer. In the meantime, she waited for him to return from the other side of the world. She hadn't known then that Matthew had met someone, and found no interest in anyone else but him. While she pursued her education degree, he pursued a long distance relationship. It's quite ironic. She didn't live nearly as far away in comparison, but let that small distance keep them apart. One spring, she simply couldn't stand it anymore. She decided to drive that distance on her own, without even the excuse of a family visit.

Her other relatives were away on vacation, leaving her grandparent's home unoccupied.

With their consent, she spent the week there, alone. She felt certain that, if she could only have a little more time with him during her visits, a closer relationship could be ignited.

This is the trip that I prepare to make now.

I pack a bag in haste, desperate to escape the nightmare under this roof. The old man probably wouldn't even notice me leaving. I yank the blue curtains aside and shove the window open with a loud screech, then pause to see if anyone noticed. The answering snores from the living room recliner reassure me, so I slip out into the front flower bed. Quickly and silently, I

brush the dirt off of my shoes, open the hatchback of the booger green minivan, and toss the duffle bag in. A lite rumble makes me stop. I look up. The once perfectly clear sky now shows a dark cloud forming to the southeast, right in my projected path.

Dear Daughter, Apr 20, 1995

It was raining when I drove out. I didn't see it as a bad omen. My mind was filled with all the things I could say. The letter that I had in my possession for a solid year rested on the passenger seat. I never worked up the courage to give it to him, but I'd finally have that chance. It didn't say much. Just that I love him and am praying for him in the friendliest of manners. He would think nothing of it... unless the feeling is mutual. The sky hammered hard on the windshield like a monsoon. The line of cars that trailed on the interstate in front of me and behind me turned on their flashing yellow caution lights. I followed suit. I passed a sign that said "Min Speed 40." Everyone was crawling at about 25 mph, and people started to pull off onto the shoulder. I pressed forward in hopes of getting out from under the dark purple cloud. This lasted for only the first hour of the trip, and I soon was on South 49 outside of Jackson, clear skies lighting my way. "Almost there, love," I thought.

I can easily picture her anticipation growing with each new visit. My own anticipation grows now. I simply have to see him. I have so much I want to ask him. Maybe I'd tell him her words and he'd welcome me with open arms just as he did for her. Gravel slings across the yard as I speed off without looking back. I'd find him, maybe still sitting in that small sanctuary, a little older and his dark brown hair graying slightly around his ears.

Dear Daughter, Apr 21, 1995

I never mentioned this before, but I have often dreamed of singing with Matthew's family in that little church. I've always thought that a perfect spouse I could hope for would be someone

Helicon

I could harmonize with, not just musically, but in every area of life. I stepped into the fellowship hall, where smiling familiar faces sat crowded around white folding tables. As soon as I walked in, I saw Matthew's father look up and smile at me. He looks like his son, only older with a touch of gray. His wife sat beside him, her long and dark ringlets halfway put up into a ponytail and the rest falling down to her waist. She's beautiful, even with the years adding lines to her face. She has a prosthetic leg hidden underneath a long denim dress that she's had from childhood. That aside, she's blessed beyond measure, with the most wonderfully talented family that I know. Matthew is one of three sons. They and their father make up the quartet, which often amuses the church with their harmonious voices. The mother occupied the piano, while Matthew sang bass and his older brother, Jonathan, sang tenor. Jonathan also led the choir, starting at sixteen years old. However young, he had been one of the most experienced singers in the church, besides his father. You won't believe this, but he asked me to sing with them. I was privileged to join Jonathan, his wife and my good friend Leah, and Matthew on the altar, in what must be one of the best quintets the church has ever heard. I felt as though I was part of the family, which certainly had been a dream come true.

I pull off of the highway and down a long gravel drive. A small blue house with a white picket fence stands between the tall pines on a hill. There is a small white car parked beside it, along with an older looking SUV showing that the tenants are home. The church stands just beside the blue parsonage. The oak double doors are white like the rest of the building, with stained glass pictures in each pane that decorate them and the four joining walls. No parking lot, only grass fills the front lawn, daring any sinner to waltz in and join the family. I am one

of those sinners. How will I explain my sudden appearance here? I'm supposed to be nearly one hundred and sixty miles away, on the other side of the Mississippi river. Will they accept me as one of their family, or was it determined years ago that I never would be?

Dear Daughter, Apr 22, 1995

I can't tell you the amount of uncontainable joy that fills my spirit at this very moment. I haven't been able to sleep at all, and I could barely eat anything since I arrived. Last night, I gave Matthew the letter after his folks invited me out to their house. It's a card really. On the front is a picture of one of my favorite Jack Dawson paintings, with two cowboys sitting by a campfire. Matthew loves cowboys, and I picked out this card especially for him. There's a story hidden within the image that I was able to tell him, and it made for a wonderful conversation between the two of us. He sat beside me on the porch and we talked for ages. It's as though all the years I've been gone never happened. We were best friends once again. I just know that we're closer now than we've ever been before. Tomorrow we're going swimming in the creek. His brothers and Leah are coming too. I can hardly wait!

No. There's no way they would turn me away. These people are too good for that. It wouldn't be very "Christian-like" of them to turn someone away from their door. I've come too far to turn back now. Before can think my way out of it, I shut off the minivan and push open the door. Suddenly, my cell phone starts to buzz in the cup holder. I recognize the number immediately. Why didn't I shut it off?

"Mom?" I answer.

"I just called your dad's house. Said you weren't there and he has no idea where you've gone. Care to enlighten me?"

"Did he try the old bedroom?" I say dryly.

"Don't play smart with me. That old lock is easy to pick when naughty children won't open up. "When he saw you weren't inside, he made sure to let me know."

"To be honest, I'm surprised he even noticed. I've been gone since noon."

"Care to mention where?" Impatience obvious in her voice.

"Don't worry. I'm with some old friends that I used to go to church with." It wasn't a lie at least. She seemed to take it.

"I don't blame you for wanting to get out of the house. Let someone know next time, alright kid? Your dad misses the minivan."

"He didn't seem fit to drive in his condition. I'll have it back sometime tomorrow."

I hang up before she can protest and power the phone down for good measure. No more interruptions. With one deep breath, I make my way to the front door of the parsonage.

Dear Daughter, Apr 25, 1995

I've just made it back to Louisiana, and I'm troubled. How could it be that after this past week I had been so convinced that things could be different between Matthew and me? Unable to wait any longer to know for sure, I worked up the courage to ask my good friend Leah if her brother-in-law was seeing anyone. She said, "Well, technically no, but I believe he is corresponding with someone in Japan that he met last summer." How stupid of me to believe that his actions were anything more than friendly! Refusing to think more on her words, I spoke directly to Matthew and told him to write to me anytime he wanted. That's when he said that there was someone he wanted me to meet, and he provided me with the proper address to correspond with her. Hashimoto Yuuki is her name, though I believe Hashimoto is her surname. She is older than me, but not by much. I'm making a point to write to her soon. Matthew believes

that we will be good friends because, in his words, "you have so much in common." How can he know how I feel and still say that to me? As kind as his words are, they might as well be a slap to the face, unless he doesn't know. Either way, I've been foolish.

I certainly feel foolish now. I stand there for a moment at the front door of the parsonage, debating whether should knock or ring the bell. Knocking is standard for my house in Louisiana because the doorbell hasn't worked since the eighties when my grandparents lived there. In the midst of this deliberation, the door opens in front of me. An old, thin woman with long gray and curly hair jumps abruptly.

"Oh! You almost gave me a heart attack," she says.

"Erm... Does Brother Matthew live here?" For a moment I worry that I picked the wrong house by mistake, but then that wouldn't make sense because this is the parsonage. I don't recognize the woman, but then I notice her skinny legs bellow the hem of her shorts. One of them is made of a hard looking beige material.

"Yes dear, my son is right inside. I was just dropping by to say hello for a moment. I'm sure he'd be happy to meet with you." I step aside and let her pass. The leg isn't really that noticeable unless you're really paying attention. I turn back to the door, where I'm greeted by a pair of caramel brown eyes. The face is slightly older than I remember, but I recognize him immediately.

"Hello. I heard you ask for me, miss. Can I help you?" he asks in a deep voice. I imagine that voice singing along with her, and I hesitate. Why did he call me miss?

"I, uh. . . I'm Kyra Polk," I stammer.

"Oh! I'm sorry. You've grown so much since the last time I saw you that I didn't recognize you! Come in, please. My wife will be glad to see you too." His words come out in

such a heavy rush that I barely catch them all. He turns inside and calls out, "Yuuki, darling, we have company!"

We walk inside to a warmly lit sitting room, with the most beautiful figurines and china decorating each table and mantle. Blue and pink colored blossom patterns dance across a few pieces that I assume must've come from Japan, while other more colorful figures stand beside them. I stare at an embroidered cross that hangs on the wall, its colors so bright and vivid that they are impossible not to notice.

"I see you've noticed the collection," smiles Matthew. "That cross is a gift from a dear friend in South Africa named Mayeso. That white cloth next to it is a prayer shawl from Israel. The china belongs to my wife, from her home, of course, and—oh!"

Just then, a short, dark-haired woman steps into the room from the joining kitchen, drying her hands on a dish towel. Yuuki is tiny compared to her tall and lanky husband. Her eyes meet mine and her face lights up. She knows exactly who I am without any introductions.

"You are Shiri's niece. Your name is Kyra, right? I recognize you from your photo. You look so much like her." Her accent has all but disappeared from her many years in the United States. "Won't you sit down for supper with us? There is so much I want to tell you."

"Actually there is a lot that wanted to ask you." I say, my cheeks reddening.

"Then, by all means, join us. Let's eat!" exclaims Matthew, clapping his hands together.

All of my worries feel silly now. I've never felt more welcome in all of my life.

We venture into a dining area that is neatly set already. A steaming pot roast sits in the middle of the table between the place mats next to a bowl of mashed potatoes. Yuuki doesn't sit at first, but asks "What would you like to drink? We have sweet tea, lemonade, juice, water..."

The southern beverages are a welcome surprise, but I say, "Water is fine, thank you," with as much foreign politeness as I can manage.

She smiles, "Don't be shy. You can have whatever you like."

"Sweet tea?" She nods and brings the glasses over.

"I imagine that Samuel and Noah are just a little bit older than you. They're my two sons, you know. Noah just started at Carey last fall and Samuel, my oldest is a junior there," says Matthew.

"I remember them," I say. "I shared a class with Noah when I came to visit the church during my summers here."

"So you're about ready to graduate from high school then, am I right?" I nod, and so does he. "Don't worry, I won't ask why you're here without your folks. I knew your father well, but I was a bit closer to Shiri. Have you been by there?"

"No sir, I haven't yet. I wanted to see you first. Can you tell me anything about her?" Yuuki smiles again. "She and I were very close too, did you know? I wrote to her regularly, and she agreed to be my maid-of-honor long before we ever got to see each other in person. Shiri was a wonderful friend to me when I knew no one else here in America, other than Matthew. She seemed to understand what it was like to leave my family behind and come here."

I stare at her. "I didn't know," I say.

She nods. "I know you loved her too. Would you like to come with me to see her? There's something else I'd like to show you."

"I'd like that very much," I answer.

We finish eating and Yuuki excuses herself to her bedroom for a short moment, then the two of us walk together to the church. She pushes the gate open to the cemetery and leads the

way to the line of stones marked with my last name. One of them holds the name of my aunt, whose story I know better than anyone else's in my family.

### SHIRI KYRA POLK

### BELOVED TEACHER, DAUGHTER, AND FRIEND

DEC. 2<sup>ND</sup> 1977—OCT. 22<sup>ND</sup> 2002

To my surprise, fresh flowers are placed just under the words, though none of my relatives live near enough to put them there. I read the words "teacher, daughter, and friend" and tears start to blur my vision. Nowhere listed is the word "mother" on this stone. Though I'd only inherited her letters when I was three years old, she had been more of a mother and a friend to me my own.

"You may not know this," said Yuuki, "but your aunt told me in one of the first letters she'd ever written me that she loved Matthew. She was so happy at our wedding that no one else could've known what I knew then. She pulled me aside and told me how glad she was that I'd asked her to be a part of that day. I know that she was. She was happy knowing we were happy. I also know how much she loved you. Is that why you came?"

A hard knot is in my throat, so all I can do is give her a nod. I find Yuuki's story difficult to believe. Just the thought makes me sick. How could she have been happy, when the life that she wanted was taken from her without even a hope of something better? She wasn't even twenty-five, much too young to die. Yuuki and I both know that she'd never really had the chance to live the life she dreamed of, to marry and travel the world and have a beautiful little girl to tell her story. When doctors discovered the tumor in her brain, she willed her letters to me, hoping I could take something away from the short life she had. If there is a God, why would he steal life away from someone so young, who had anticipated so much more than what was

given to her?

"Shiri gave this to me a long time ago and wanted me to give it to you whenever you came to us. I'm not sure how, but she somehow knew you'd come to find us one day," Yuuki pulls a sealed envelope from her pocket and hands it to me, her last letter. Stunned, I open it and read her words silently.

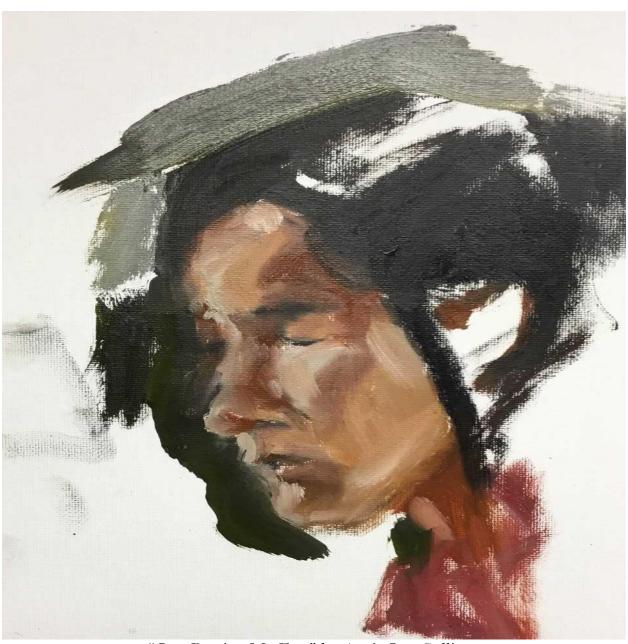
Dear Kyra, October 17, 2002

The doctors anticipate that I don't have much longer now and there is still so much more that I want to tell you. God has blessed these short years of life, more than many I know that have had over a hundred years to live. My brother and I have never been close, but he allowed me to have this special connection with you that I would never get to have otherwise. Then I'd been diagnosed with cancer five years ago, I knew I would never see the daughter that I always dreamed about. If there's one thing that God has taught me, however, it's that his plan is always more special than anything we could ever hope for ourselves. I knew this when Yuuki asked me to be in her wedding. I was able to share in my dear friends' happiness and be welcomed into a family in such a beautiful and unique way that I never thought possible, The Reece family has always welcomed me as one of their own, as God welcomes his children home. That's how I knew that Yuuki would never feel unwelcome when she had to leave her home in Japan to be with Matthew. I left this letter with her in faith that you would grow as close to these precious friends as I have. Through them, God has taught me how to love others just as he does. Growing up, I've often joked about the hardships and poverty of being the child of two teachers. However, having the greatest teacher of all as my father has made me rich beyond measure. If there's anything in this world I want to leave with you, it's this. God loves you, Kyra. You are his precious daughter, and he has many more lessons to teach you through your own experiences, just as he taught me.

Don't be afraid to live your life with many more hopes and dreams than I've had, knowing that his blessings are always greater.

I love you, and I dream now of the woman you will become.

# Shiri



"Just Resting My Eyes" by Accie Lee Sullivan

# POETRY AND PROSE BY THE STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF LOUISIANA MONROE

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