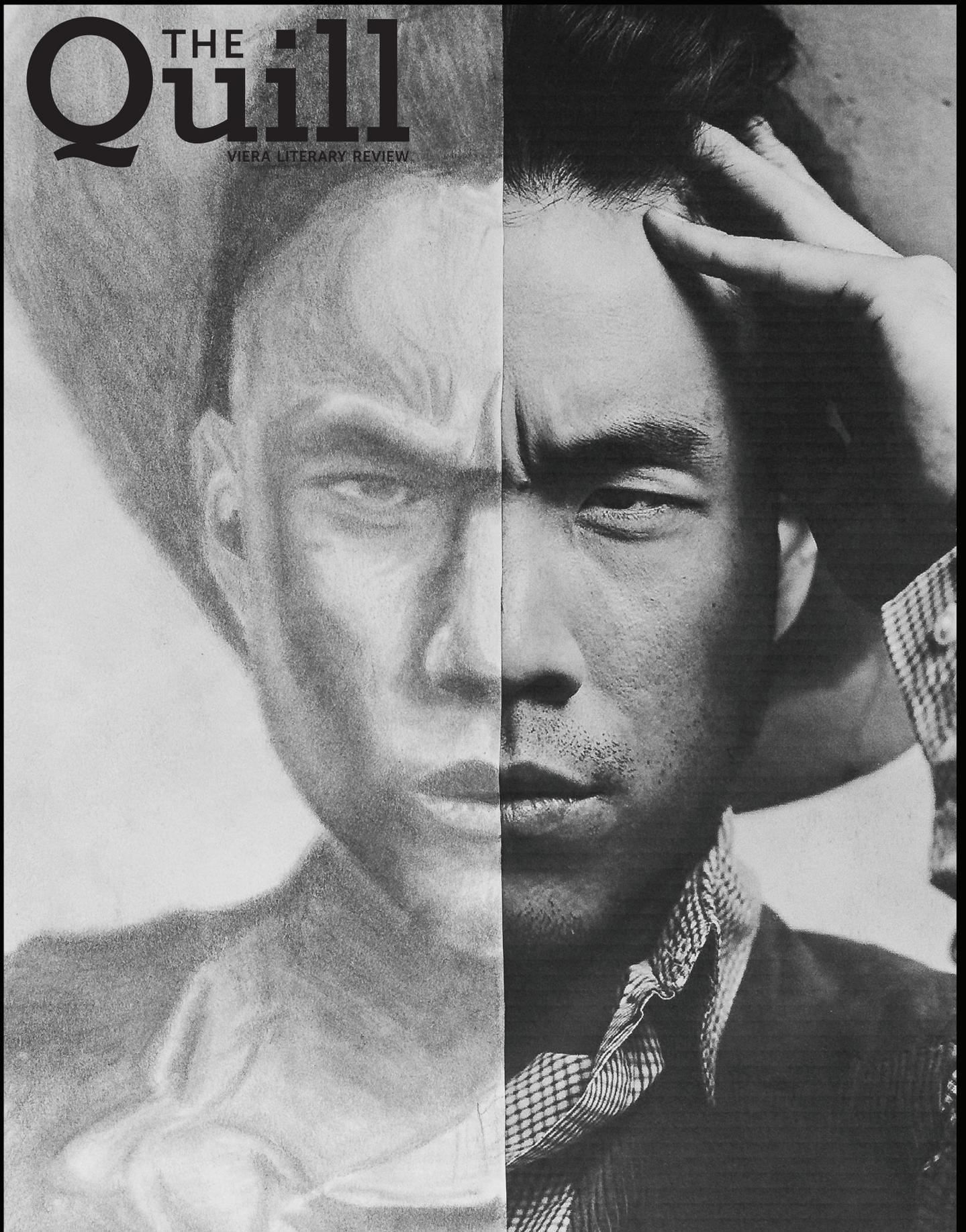


THE Quill

VIERA LITERARY REVIEW



FREEFORM THOUGHTS

ALEX DOUGHERTY



I LIKE THESE THINGS

SAGE PRUSSEL

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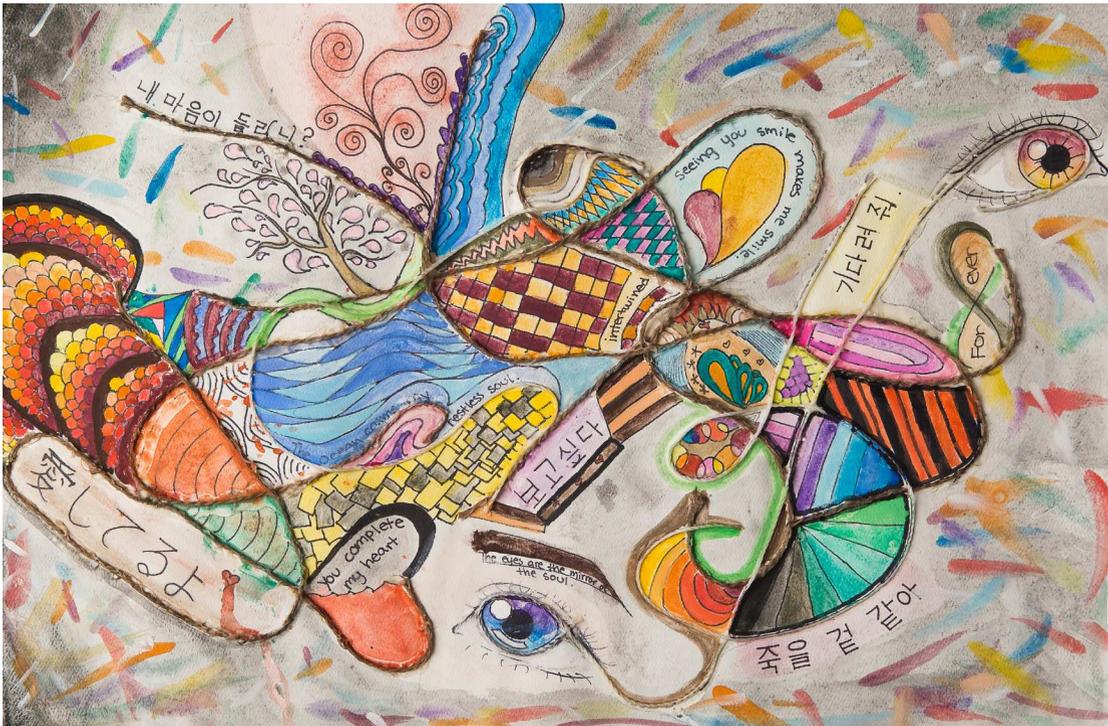
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REALITY OF THE MIND

KAITLYN BRADNEY



GARDEN DREAMS

EVA LA MANNA

WHERE I'M FROM
POEMS BASED ON "WHERE I'M FROM"
BY GEORGE ELLA LYON

I AM FROM MOVING TRUCKS

Veronica Fernandez

I am from moving trucks,
from Amazon and packing everything away.
I am from the fresh wooden boards and coated paint
(Fluorescent, smooth, the wet drops staining).
I am from the aloe vera,
the salty waves
that helped me heal my wounds.

I am from the quinceañeras and untameable hair,
from Fernandez and Pierini and Ramos.
I am from the vibrant salsa music and smoky home-cooked meals.
from Dream Big! and Beauty is Pain!
I am from my First Communion at the Catholic Church,
studying the Bible and cheerfully singing.

I'm from the Miami beaches and the cultural country of Spain,
crunchy tequeños and warm panettone.
From the vicious rip current I was vacuumed into,
the sleight-of-hand skill of getting what I wished,
and the ambulance dragging my father away after a broken bloody nose.

I am from the dusty attic, filled with old crippling furniture of my childhood,
musty torn-apart nursery books that once fastened me asleep.
I'm from my collection of games that inspired me to become a princess,
memories of the roots from my ancestors who lived long before me,
Crinkled photographs of my youth shaping me into who I am today.

WHAT HAS SHAPED MY LIFE

Selma Burke-Eddib

I am from ceiling fans,
from Barilla and Victorian wallpaper.
I am from the snowy trees and the chicken coop across the lawn of the ancient house,
towering over the road.
I am from the evergreens, the marsh
where moose and deer graze
and trek through.

I am from holiday feasts and dark eyes,
from Irene and Youseff and Kelly.
I am from the soldiers and intellectuals,
from *Who taught you that?* and *Wake up!*

I am from the moon and the stars who answer my father's prayers,
I'm from icy roads winding through old cities where witches burned,
from tajine and rotini,
from the trail of feathers on the kitchen floor,
the shadows in my sister's closet,
and the gunshot in Connecticut.

I am from the boxes in my grandmother's house,
filled with traces of the past long forgotten,
still and distant,
faded images of a young child
who I fail to recognize as myself.

SUNDAY MORNING BACON

Jaydin Gentile

I am from Publix-brand pastries,
from Under Armor and Boombah.
I am from the charming home most would call scant.
I am from the avocado tree that is yet to produce,
the oak where the swings once hung,
whose history I know as well as my own.

I am from Sunday-morning bacon and eggs and family love,
from Mom and Dad and Dominick.
I am from the nail-biters and fidgety fingers,
from *Do your best!* and *Take those earbuds out, I'm talking to you!*
I am from delighting myself in the Lord and receiving the desires of my heart.

I'm from the small house on the corner of the street,
from the only home I've ever known,
from souffles and overcooked chicken that we all pretend to love.
I am from the loud laughter of my brother,
the oldies radio station my dad loves so dearly,
and the unconditional love my mother holds for our family.

I am from the thick photo albums hidden in the drawers of the television stand,
only seeing the light of day when someone is feeling particularly nostalgic.
I am the happy faces my parents wear while reminiscing,
the laughter and giddiness we all feel while hearing the stories the albums tell.

I AM FROM KEYS

Justin Lee

I am from keys,
from Yamaha and music.
I am from the shells on a beach
(calm, peaceful, cool to the touch).
I am from the palm leaves,
the sunflowers,
swaying in whatever direction
life takes me.

I am from celebration and peace,
from Tracy and Choocho,
from manners and respect.

I am from the Savior who saves from evil,
who gave his life for a person
like me.

I'm from Florida and Korea,
beef and soup,
comforting the heart and soul.
from the stories at night from mom,
the lessons with my dad,
and the help from my sister
with life.

I am from the bookshelves,
filled with memories
good and bad,
faces that have come and gone,
different worlds from each page.
Past these pages
will be the memories of this cruel world.

I AM FROM STORY BOOKS

Sabrina Antoine

I am from story books,
From Scholastic Book Fairs and hidden library corners.
I am from the patch of grass in the front yard
(yellow and dry, it crunched underfoot).
I am from the evergreen shrubs,
The towering oak tree that still hunches over
The hard asphalt driveway.

I'm from crimson-striped mints and Ph.D.'s,
From Keanna and Renee, and Laura.

I'm from the silent strategists
And renowned gossips.
From *You kids these days!* and *When I was a child...*

I am from stiff collars and knee-high socks.
I'm from covert wrinkled notes, passed during class,
As we chorused pious phrases long before they held any meaning –
Robots of repetition.

I'm from Patterson and the Caribbean,
Sticky pholourie and spicy curry.
From the car keys my mother forgot on top of her car,
The cat ears my sister wore to school,
And the scar my brother bears from rolling off his bed.

I am from the dusty box in the garage,
From gradually yellowing photos.
Surrounded by faces and priceless memories.
I exist as part of a whole –
A growing branch on a family tree.

I AM FROM THE LOCK BOX

Angelena Rodriguez

I am from music, from trumpets and violins.
 I am from the creatures and critters clustered in the tall grasses of my back field.
 I am from the expansive boulder range and the buttercup patches in which I would frolic
 looking for the perfect bud for my mother.

I am from bonfires and beautiful smiles, from the Winters and the Rodriguezes.
 I am from the nurturing and the strictness.
*From I'm not your friend, I'm your father and
 If anything were to happen to you,
 I'd go with you 'cause I can't be without you.*

I am from Romans 8:38-39: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,
 neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,
 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love
 of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I am from Melbourne, Florida and the middle of Puerto Rico
 And potato pancakes and pasteles.
 From the reassurance my mother provided in the hospital,
 The emotions she kept locked away to shield me.

I am from the lock box,
 Where relatives and memories hide away.
 A stash of sweet passions and broken hearts,
 Moments created before my existence, water rippled by a stone.

I AM FROM THE STORM

Cameron Cox

I am from a bowling ball,
From Storm and Roto Grip.
I am from the least aggressive
To the most aggressive.
I am from the bowling alley,
The freshly oiled lanes
That I bowl on

I am from the strikes and spares,
From Pitch Black and
Drive and Kegel.

I am from the best and the worst.
From *Strike it up* and *Spare it up*.

I am from the know-it-all pro shop.
I'm from the Storm headquarters,
Phase II and Surelock.
From the cracked Torrent, the over-aggressive
Surelock and the Black Pearl
That got stuck in the ball return.
I am from the Storm, where good frames equal good games.

THE GIRL FROM THE WEST

Nuha Haque

I am from piles of tissues
 From Converse
 And restless nights

I am from water views
 And encouragement
 From His & Her
 And She

I am from full mouths
 And hugs disguised as squeezes
 From *Eat your veggies*
 And *Do well in school*

I am from Foothills and the moon
 Must be on schedule
 Covered and protected

I'm from the Grand Canyon State
 And Pleasant Valley
 From white rice
 And Mediterranean food

From the loss of my Grandfather from his
 Battle with cancer
 From the dreams I dreamt about it
 And the other losses I've been through

I am from the walls
 The books with images of
 Many familiar faces
 In that closet and that drawer
 Hidden underneath even more
 Memories and fun
 This is who I am

DREAM CATCHER

TRINITY HENDRICKS



SHOES & STOCKINGS

NATALIE'S STORY

Jordan Wilkes

When my kids entered high school, naturally, they asked me about my own high school experience. It was the usual questions about what classes to take or what clubs to join. Then, my oldest daughter asked me, "What was, like, your craziest story from high school?"

I contemplated telling them about Bobby Jones' legendary Halloween party or the big playoff football game. But, one story kept creeping up in the back of mind. I tried to forget about it over the years. Sometimes, I was successful. Other times, all I could think about was Natalie Greene. Natalie's story wasn't something you tell your kids or even other adults.

Grant High School was small, meaning everyone knew each other and their business. Some drama that happened in the first period would reach the entire school by lunchtime. However, the school's small stature didn't diminish the significance of status and popularity for the students. Natalie Greene knew that best; she was one of the most beautiful girls on campus.

I can remember that she always smiled at everyone-didn't matter if you were her friend or not. You could hear her bubbly laugh lightly bounce throughout the halls. She talked a mile a minute. She was humble and sweet, the personification of sugar. However, her modesty about her model figure ended at her legs. They were long, even, and dainty. She always talked about her routines to keep them fresh and clean to other girls in the locker room. She wore heels and a skirt every day, not to be stylish, but to accentuate her calves. She joked about getting them insured one day, but all the kids knew that she seriously had money set aside just for that. Her legs were her prized possession, and, believe me, no one disagreed.

Senior year, Natalie was driving home from her part-time job when a semi-truck lost control and crashed into Natalie's Volkswagen. She disappeared from school for weeks in recovery. We all felt this emptiness in class. The happiness and positive energy that used to light up the room now left us in the dark. Her friends tried reaching out to her, but they never got an answer. Of course, when teenagers are left in speculation, rumors start to circulate.

"I think that she's in a coma!" suggested Sue.

"I heard that she had to get a heart transplant. Ew! I can't even imagine," whispered Tiffany.

"I know that she had a brain injury, and she has to learn to read again. It's so sad," asserted Robert.

Eventually, Natalie returned to school. She didn't have any scars, casts, or crutches. She didn't walk or talk funny. She could read and solve equations with ease. Everyone expected her to be different, a new person since the accident. But, to their delighted surprise, she was good-old perfect Natalie. No one noticed any changes. But I did.

She still wore skirts and heels, like always, but, now, she wore stockings with them. Every day, she appeared in these thick, dark stockings that covered most of her legs. I thought they were a new fashion trend, but she wore them no matter what. Even when it was boiling hot outside, she continued to sweat in them. Never took them off.

Even when she was in her gym outfit for P.E., she wore basketball shorts, bright white tennis shoes, and black stockings. Never took them off. She didn't act like she was hiding something, but she was.

In homeroom, I sat in the desk behind her. On the day of her famed return, I noticed that her perfume—a fruity vanilla scent—was stronger than normal. I didn't complain because the smell was pleasant and made me think of a romance from summer camp. However, each day after that, it seemed to only grow more potent. By the end, it was borderline intoxicating.

I also started to notice that she kept fidgeting with the stockings. Every five minutes it seemed like she was pulling them up, making extra sure they were past her knees. Every other five minutes it seemed like she was searching around for holes or tears in the coarse fabric. She was undeniably obsessed with them. Soon, I became obsessed, too.

Gradually, my curiosity transformed into an ugly craving for answers. I found myself staring at the stockings each morning in homeroom, hoping that my x-ray vision would kick in. I thought it would always remain a mystery to me, and I would go insane trying to figure it out twenty years later. I wish that I never did find out.

In mid-November, I was scribbling some notes down before the first bell rang. Natalie gracefully placed her bag next to her desk, and she slowly lowered herself into the rickety seat. I became drunk on the perfume scent, almost gagging. Before I could politely ask her to wear less perfume, the other scent hit my nose. Beneath the excessively sweet aroma was a foul, rotting stench. It was subtle, but it was definitely there. The putrid odor triggered one thought: dead animal.

For the rest of the school day, I couldn't stop thinking about that smell. It was seared into my brain. Calculus. Dead animal. Physics. Rotting flesh. English. Spoiled blood. When the final bell rang, I was more than over it.

I followed Natalie out of the school as she walked over to her car. I had a strange sense of anger. How dare she rack my brain all day?

I called out, "Hey, Natalie! Stop for a sec."

She smiled, "Hi there, Nick. What's going on?"

I paused. I didn't plan to get this far. What was I supposed to say? Why are you so crazy about your stockings? Why do you smell?

"Uh, so I just...I wanted to know...about your, you know...stockings."

I saw a glimpse of panic in her eyes.

"Oh, they are just the biggest craze in France right now," she quickly answered.

"Oh, okay."

She smiled one last time and swiveled back around, heading toward her car again. I wasn't satisfied with that answer. Something was uncomfortably wrong.

Without thinking, I took out my pocket knife. As she was occupied with putting her bag in the back seat, I came up behind her, very softly, and slashed her stockings—forceful enough to rip the seam but precise enough to avoid slicing her leg. The thick, dark fabric tore away silently and fell away from the leg, revealing the underlying secret. She flinched out of surprise. I flinched out of terror.

Her leg was a cadaver. From below the knee, all I could see was a poorly reattached lump of loose, decaying skin. A swirl of muted, distressed colors consumed the leg. Craters in the skin proudly presented degrading muscle and, in some areas, snapshots of the fractured bone. Old blood was sporadically caked on the rim of the craters and flaps of skin. The ghost of a leg seemed to cry out in misery, "Just let me die."

Her hands were shaking as her eyes traveled from her leg to my eyes. Her face was on the verge of bursting with a blur of emotions—fear, sadness, surprise, shame. Tears started to swell in the corners. She shook her head as she sobbed out, "They had to amputate my leg from the accident. They were just gonna throw it away. I wanted my beautiful leg."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything. I was stuck in a surreal state of shock. She tried to find understanding, a sign of approval, in my face. She desperately wanted me to say that she was justified and she wasn't crazy and she was brave and she was still beautiful and she was the same person before the accident, all at once.

"I just really loved my legs. I couldn't—I just couldn't bear to lose it. You understand, right?" she blubbered out.

I continued to stare, only focusing on the intense dryness of my mouth and the goosebumps on my arms. She turned away, hopped into the car, and drove away. Her desk in homeroom was empty the next day. No more perfume. No more adjusting the stockings. Her friends said that she moved away to a private school, never knowing the truth about her legs. Classes carried on like normal without her, as I carried the weight of her horrifying secret.

People will really do anything to keep the things they love.

SILENTLY SLIPPING

Emma Scheinbart

Charlotte lay in bed, staring at the ceiling until the clock read 4:00 AM. Careful not to wake her husband as he lay sprawled across the living room couch, she held her breath and crept towards the bathroom to get ready. Once safe inside the musty bathroom, she slipped on her cold nylon stockings to cover the dark black and blue bruises that shattered her thin legs. Her uniform for the local diner hung plastered against the door, mocking at her and the long day ahead. As she put on her uniform she made sure to not look in the mirror, for she was afraid of what might be reflected.

She tightly clutched her shoes and jacket in one hand as she made her way to the front door. She moved past her husband as silently as a doe, and for a second she remembered the taste of their wedding cake. Stale air from the drafty hallway crawled down her throat as she stepped into her worn shoes. Not until she had caught the 4:30 AM bus, and the monotonous humming of the bus engine drowned her thoughts, could she finally breathe.

Charlotte and George Stein were married three days before he was drafted into the Vietnam War. The wedding was small: immediate family members and a few close friends. George returned after the war a different man. Sure, he still had a thick head of hair, green eyes, and a small scar on his left arm from childhood rowdiness, but something had changed. Every day, Charlotte told herself that he would get better, that he would go back to work as a teacher and life would continue as she remembered, but the madness did not end.

So the quiet mornings lingered and Charlotte slipped on her stockings every day, enduring months and years of pain from a war she never fought in. The bulletproof vests worn by George in the war were no different than Charlotte's stockings: both served as protection from the war. Charlotte's stockings masked her from the reality of George's state, for no human can exist sanely under the conditions of absolute reality. She returned home each day drunk on the lies she had to tell herself to stay alive. George continued to fight in the unknown war as he drank his days away and infected Charlotte's soul with the same madness, pain, and fear he experienced. Each night George would say, "I am sorry; I will change," and each morning Charlotte continued to silently slip on her stockings.

STOCKINGS

Manuela Correa

BEEP BEEP BEEP. Her alarm rips her away from her dream once again. She had been dreaming of her first love, the one she fell for madly, the one she thought would last forever. Now, however, she knows the truth. Life sometimes skews from the plan.

She forces her body out of bed, fully aware that she leaves a piece of herself behind, every time. She drags her heavy feet to the shower, but not even water – the universal solvent – can dilute what clings to her skin. With her hair, face, and eyes wet, she sees the reflection in the mirror but can only focus on the dark eyes, the ones that have lost their glow. She can't even tell the difference between her cornea and iris, but it's not like anyone would pay attention to her eyes.

She returns to her room and searches for her "uniform," rolling up the black fabric that covers her skin every day. As it clings to her leg, she feels more naked than ever: She is used to showing her bare skin, but that piece of clothing that covers her imperfections exposes her.

She has a scar on her left leg from when she was ten. She broke a glass, and a piece of it cut her childish calf. No one notices that little white mark now; it is covered by the darkness of the stockings that only come off when she returns home.

She again gazes at herself in the mirror. She asks if this is what she truly wants for herself and repeats her mantras: "Everything happens for a reason. Everything will be all right."

As she questions herself, she fixes the stockings high on her thighs as they stubbornly roll down her legs. They have faded with time, like her eyes. They have holes and pieces of seam coming out of the corners, yet they continue to rise from the wardrobe to face each day.

As she walks out the door, she promises herself that this work is temporary; she is better than this. The hours go by as she walks in the streets. The holes in the stockings seem to grow wider, and the seam lines become more apparent. She checks the cash she hides in her lingerie: not even fifty dollars. She walks home, keeping her eyes low, avoiding the judgment in people's eyes, the same look the mirrored image gave her before.

As she opens her door, she immediately takes off that nylon second skin. She cleans her face, hair, and eyes, and returns to bed. She looks at the ceiling and furrows her brows as she ponders her future. She touches the clean shaved leg that is marked with childish innocence. She falls asleep, dreaming once again of her adolescent plans and aspirations.

BEEP BEEP BEEP. Her alarm resonates. This is a nightmare she will not wake up from.

MOCCASINS

Emily Simons

When I was ten my mom got me a pair of moccasin slippers, identical to a pair she loved and wore religiously. I hated them, these ugly, fat moccasins, trying to be a mix between a flip-flop and an Ugg, with added "support." God, they were awful, but Ma seemed happy, so I took them and immediately threw them in my closet. I didn't think much about them for six years. Actually, I didn't think about them at all until the night after my mom's first stroke, when I carried her ugly, stupid moccasins to her at the hospital.

When I was young I didn't understand Ma's obsession with these shoes. All I knew was that they were her go-to, doctor-visit, Emily's-sick-again-for-the-billionth-time shoes. It seems to me now that they were her comfort shoes, like a meal you have when you are sick. She didn't put them on that night, which should have been one of the warning signs something was wrong. I didn't think much about it as I calmed her down or talked to doctors, too busy focusing on her fear and the confusion over her calling for grandma, who died nine years before. It was later, when I was watching her sleep, terrified she would be gone if I slept, that I noticed her favorite slippers were gone. The next day, after about 30 minutes of sleep, I drove home and got them. When I gave them to her I thought she would never take them off, but time passed and now she never wears them. But I do.

The slippers are old now, worn with holes of grey overcoming the black inner soles. But they don't feel worn; they feel somehow more comfortable than before. The toe of the moccasin looks almost new, and the bottom of the sole is completely intact. The fuzzy inside is gone, but the plush lining remains. They still aren't beautiful: far too clunky and structured, as there is an inserted "arch support" that doesn't give way. But although the arch support is covered there is no heel support to be found in these moccasins, no protection there at all. So in the winter the heel is too cold, and in the summer the toes are too hot.

Recently I have taken to wearing the moccasins at home with mom, though I refuse to wear them anywhere else. The moccasins are by far the most out of place thing in my room, stuck back in their little corner, exempt from the mess that surrounds them, and, perhaps most unusually, are always returned to their proper place. Ma doesn't look for them anymore, or even try to ask where they are. Nor does she notice me wearing them as I make dinner or help her clean up her room. But no matter how much I wear them, they are still, by far, the worst gift I have ever received.

FAMOUS FIRST LINES

INSPIRED WRITINGS

EQUILIBRIUM

JaVonne A. Rice

"It was a dark and stormy night." Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Paul Clifford (1830)

One late evening on a dark stormy night, a scientist by the name of Atamai Tao was working on a machine that could change the shape of the world. For eight years, Dr. Tao had worked for a company called Ingen, dedicated to the advancement of mankind. It was hard to miss the illuminated skyscraper, as it was almost the size of the Empire State Building, but Dr. Tao's small lab was the size of an orthodontist's work area. He worked with plenty of other scientists—or he used to. He kept to himself most of the time. Ever since he lost everything, he'd lost the will to interact with people.

The device he was creating could access the human brain. The machine allowed Dr. Tao to invade the mind, and by doing this he could make them do whatever he wanted. All he needed to do was to sit in his chair and put on the helmet he made, so that when a person went to sleep, Dr. Tao could access their brain through the helmet. It was easier to manipulate the mind while it was sleeping.

With the help of his machine, Dr. Tao could make people believe that their actual life was all a dream. He could make their dreams a reality. If a person appeared to him as a threat, he could make them believe they lived in another world. His intentions were not selfish or immoral; he wished only to unify all the minds of mankind to end conflict.

Great things, however, can not develop without great faults. Dr. Tao had overcome many obstacles in his life. Losing everyone he loved, for example. His mother and father were robbed, then killed in their sleep. His girlfriend was killed in a shootout in the mall with other bystanders. Dr. Tao couldn't go a day without thinking, "Why can't we all live in peace?" As he put the finishing touches on his machine, he finally figured out the answer.

"They want to prove a point," he said out loud. "They want to make their mark on the world, whether it be nonviolent or violent. As long as they make their mark, that's all that matters." Dr. Tao looked at the ground and then looked up at his glorious machine. "This will be the last mark a man will leave on this world."

He heard clapping behind him. Dr. Tao turned around to see another scientist named Sarah Goodman.

"Bravo! Bravo!" she scoffed at the madman standing before her. Dr. Tao gave her an irritated look. "Don't think for a second none of us know what's been going on in your line of work. The chairman of our company is here today, so please don't rattle on about world peace around him."

Dr. Tao looked out the window. "Hey! Hey, I'm talking to you!" Still he didn't respond. "Are you kidding me? Four years ago, and look at you now! All you do is tinker with that machine and not

talk to anyone!" Sarah looked at the rain and back at Dr.Tao. "Look, every single day you've been cooped up in your lab. It's not healthy! Everyone is worried about you ... I'm worried about you, Atamai." Dr. Tao turned and started walking towards Sarah and held her in his arms.

"You don't need to worry about anything; no one has to worry anymore." He reached inside his lab coat, pulled out a syringe half full of morphine, and stuck it in the side of her neck.

Sarah shoved Dr.Tao away from her. "Why did you do that? Are you crazy?" She stumbled towards the wall, using her hands to keep from falling to the ground.

"Why did I do that, you ask? The thing is, Sarah, as much as you care for me, I don't care for you. The thing I care most about is world peace, not being in a petty relationship with you. Understand?"

Sarah collapsed to the ground, and slowly began to fall asleep. "You! You're a heartless human being! How can you talk about peace when you can do whatever you want to any person's mind? They deserve to be free, not sent to some kind of mental prison you created!"

Dr. Tao turned away from Sarah and looked out the window at the gloomy storm. "That is not my goal. I want what's best for everyone. Think about it, Sarah. No more violence, no more war, no more world hunger. The only way to achieve that goal is if we're all united, not torn apart. And in order to achieve my goal, I put general anesthesia through the ventilation system. It'll spread throughout the building, and, when everyone falls asleep, I'll take control of their minds. Since the chairman is here, I'll be able to take over the company." He opened one of the cabinets, took out a gas mask, and put it on his face.

"In case you're wondering why I stuck that syringe in your neck, it's because the A/C is about to come on, plus you were annoying me. My plan could have backfired because of you!" He turned away from the cabinet and saw that Sarah had already fallen asleep. "I guess I was talking to myself. That's fine. I tend to do that." He put the helmet on his head.

"Today, the world will change for the better."

OPPOSITE DAY

Jayla Torres

*"It was a bright, cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."
George Orwell, 1984 (1949)*

It was a bright, cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. I took a break from typing and looked inside at the bright sun as it sank below the ground. My morning felt very peaceful until I saw the clock. It was well past thirteen.

I flew out of my seat and took my shoes off. My dog meowed and batted at the shoe strings. The dirt under my desk shifted as I stood up and walked towards my closet to find what I would wear for the night. After shuffling through several pairs of pajamas, I finally found the pair I wanted – the ones with the kittens. I hung up the shirt and jeans I was wearing before and put on my new outfit for the day.

For a bit, I forgot about the time. The sky was turning several shades darker as the morning progressed. Panic ensued as the realization came over me that I would actually be late for work.

I rushed to my desk and shut off my computer. My dog ran after me as my feet took me towards the door. I was going to be late! My boss would definitely be mad.

The door burst open as I ran inside. The moon hung under the ceiling over me during my journey to work. The door was in my view, but I was already late. I've never been late to work.

The clock showed the time – 13:59. I burst through the door straight into my boss who was waiting patiently for me.

"You're late." He said sternly. "Get to work instantly."

I sulked and did a walk of shame to my desk. I couldn't believe that I was only a minute late. How could I be such a failure?

As I walked into my office, another employee came in behind me. The clock read 14:01.

"You're early!" My boss said in delight to the person.

The trees swayed beside my bed as I entered my office.

"Time to get to work," I said, as I put on my shoes and tucked myself in.

WHO I AM

Miguel Cook

“Do I look lonely?” Brendon Urie, *“Death of a Bachelor”* (2016)

Do I look lonely?

Some say I am not; most think otherwise.

There is a saying that goes, “What you think of yourself is what others think of you.”

I know I act different. I am not like others.

I do not have an explanation, nor a reason.

I do not know what to think of myself,

So maybe others don’t know what to think of me.

It all depends on one’s view.

I can act funny, act dumb, act serious, act happy, act sad, act annoying, act exuberant.

Is there a time when I won’t need to act at all?

What happens then?

What do I do? Nothing is expected,

And nothing is required.

I keep to myself, and nothing has an influence on me.

Only then, if I am noticed, can you truly determine my state of mind.

Only then can you determine who and what I am.

So – do I look lonely?

FICTION

LINUS THE LONELY LITHIUM LLAMA

Esther Francom

In the rich land of Empirical Forms lived Linus the Lonely Lithium Llama. Besides being lonely, he was silvery-white and his favorite number was three. He tried to make friends with the Alkali Gang, but they mocked him because of the many moles that covered his body.

"You have so many moles, I bet you have more than 6.022 !" exclaimed Nancy the Salty Sodium Salamander.

Karen the Proud Potassium Pig chided, "Have you even bothered to count them?"

"He's so nearsighted, he probably doesn't even know he has them!" chuckled Robert the Rabid Rubidium Rabbit.

"I doubt anyone could love a moley beast," remarked Caesar the Self-Centered Cesium Centipede.

This was all Linus could bear, as he had an incredibly low melting point. He lowered his head shamefully.

"Come on guys, he's not even worth our time. Let's go bond with some other friends," suggested Francine the Frank Francium Ferret. With that, the group dissociated and left Linus to wallow in his self-pity.

As we all know, love can sometimes hurt, and every self-respecting chemist knows that alkali metals and water react violently when they meet

This treatment continued periodically, corroding Linus's self-esteem, until one day when he happened upon a small pool in the woods. The pool was perfectly calm and peaceful, filled with only the purest distilled water in all the land of Empirical Forms. The Lithium Llama had never seen such a site, and it filled him with awe. As he curiously approached the pool, he saw another Lithium Llama on the surface of the still water. Seeing another of his kind sent a volt of joy through his soul.

"Hello my comrade! I feel as though fate has brought us together today. I'm so glad to discover that there is someone out there like me! Do they make fun of you the way they make fun of me?"

The llama in the pool stared sympathetically back at him.

"I see you understand my troubles. I feel as though they have disrupted my equilibrium. I need to find a way to reduce my mental stress. Will you help me?"

To Linus's great delight, his new friend smiled at him.

"Thank you ever so much! By the way, my name is Linus the Lonely Lithium Llama. What is your name?"

Silence met his ears.

"Oh! Do you not have a name? How horrible! Do you mind if I call you Le Chatelier?"

Silence again.

"I'll take that as a yes. Wait ... are you trapped in this pool?"

The llama peered back with an inquisitive look.

"Oh no! I will come back tomorrow so we can work on a solution for setting you free."

The next day, Linus returned with a lattice, but the llama in the pool could not climb out. He tried day after day, and spent many hours conferring with his silent yet dense friend. As time passed, Linus grew to love the mysterious llama in the crystal pool.

As we all know, love can sometimes hurt, and every self-respecting chemist knows that alkali metals and water react violently when they meet. One day, Linus the Lonely Lithium Llama decided to lean forward to get a better look at this new love. He noticed that the llama had moles on his body, a fact that he hadn't realized before due to his nearsightedness. He leaned forward even more to get a better look and recognized his own reflection. As he lost his balance, he cried,

"HOLY MOLEY!"

THE FLIGHT OF LIFE

Olivia Ramirez

Ten days. A father stood peering down at a quiet newborn. His loving gaze lingered over her new, pink skin and curled fingers. He could stand there for hours watching her lungs fill with peaceful breaths. The dimly lit room reflected meticulous preparation. The walls had been painted an inviting, pastel pink. Above the white, wooden crib and crisp bedding hung an array of delicate paper butterflies. The father removed his glasses, let out a slow sigh, then whispered tender words over the child: *"Deja que tu corazón guíe tus alas."*

Six months. Crawling on her stomach, the giddy baby explored the fascinating ground around her. Plush toys surrounded her tiny body on the living room floor. She willed her growing muscles to slowly hoist herself up to her feet. Then, hastily clutching a corner of the couch and bouncing herself up and down, she let out an accomplished squeal.

Two years. The focused toddler wore a stained smock and sat in front of a wide easel. Gripping a fat cup of diluted yellow paint, she added to the burst of colorful handprints before her. Humming lightly to a familiar tune, she continued to create with wide eyes and a happy smile.

Six years. Lining the bedspread, an audience of beaming Barbies sat politely, awaiting the show. Finally, the fashion icon herself emerged from behind the closet door. Her shimmering purple dress, chain of pearls, crooked earrings, and smudged red lipstick stunned the crowd. She confidently strutted around the perimeter of the room, giggling at the pride of her sensational fashion.

Twelve years. She was backstage a few minutes before the beginning of the Nutcracker Ballet performance. Butterflies circled her stomach as she thought of her upcoming solo. Her apprehensive eyes peeked through a crack in the curtains. Rows and rows of filled seats sat before the stage. Her dainty body was decorated with an elegant costume. A tight bun of hair, a suggestion of make-up, an itchy tutu, soft tights, and flat dance shoes. At the cue of the announcer, she smoothed her tutu one last time and made her way out to center stage.

Seventeen years. She was dolled up in a fitting black mermaid dress. A delicate bundle of flowers sat on her right wrist. She posed for an endless number of photos – some with a group of friends and others next to her dreamy, sandy-haired, "just friend" of a date. With a quick kiss on her father's cheek, she hurried off to dinner and the ever-anticipated school dance.

Twenty years. Her hair was messily wrapped up into a bun with two pencils poking through. She sat at a desk crowded with snacks and overwhelmed with art history textbooks and papers. Her dedicated eyes scanned countless pages of words and images and words. She occasionally scribbled significant notes in a journal, all for the preparation of essays and approaching exams.

Twenty-three years. Breathing in the raw scents of the Chinese land around her, she stood, a mere

speck on the engulfing sight of the Great Wall. She remained still, surveying the lush tufts of green vegetation surrounding the endless scene. Beside the rolling hills that screamed of majesty, she felt empowered and free. The ache at the soles of her feet and pressure of her oversized backpack fell away. Her ears were sharply attuned to the calm breeze. Her eyes locked into the sight of a passing flutter of vibrant blue butterflies. She closed her eyes and dreamt of keeping the memory forever.

Twenty-five years. The day that she had imagined a thousand different ways before. A magnificent, white gown with carefully designed lacework draped over her body. Behind, a river of tulle gracefully followed her fluid movements. Her hair was crafted into silky braids that fed into a bun of positioned locks. Her face held an expression of the utmost poise. She formed a modest, upward curve of one corner of her mouth at the thought of the joy that was soon to come. There was a glimmer of a tear in her eye at the touch of her father's warm hand. She longingly watched the sight of her sandy-haired love waiting at the end. The melody, the affectionate smiles, every step she took became forever imprinted in her soul.

Twenty-seven years. The floor of an empty room is covered with a drop cloth and scattered painting materials. A cracked open window lets a refreshing breeze inside. She has been hard at work for hours, and her clothes are filled with streaks of paint. She gazes at the freshly painted mural before her. A bold, beautiful butterfly. Its marvelous wings extend outward in a radiant fan. Her heart claps at a sweet memory, and a tender look spreads onto her face. She lightly lays a hand over her growing belly and whispers, "Let your heart guide your wings."

Breathing in the raw scents of the Chinese land around her, she stood, a mere speck on the engulfing sight of the Great Wall.

LAKE BENEATH A CLOUD

Justin Santos

I've never ridden a pickup truck before. Hell, I've barely ever been outside. Being trapped inside the walls takes a serious toll on one's life experience. I've read countless books and studied incessantly, but nothing could prepare me for what was really out there. So, as I lay dying beneath the shade of a calm cloud, I write the only truths that I have found: taking the first step will carry you far, following your heart will provide all you need, and life is as valuable as you make it. As cliché as it sounds, those truths, along with help from a silver truck, a stranger, and a lake, have altered my life drastically.

Taking the First Step

I never knew what an unorthodox childhood I had. I presumed my development was normal because it was all I knew.

I lived in a large room with white walls and a bed, toilet, bookshelves, and a window. The bed held white linens, the bookshelves were painted white, and the toilet was a bright porcelain. Even my caretakers wore only white coats and khaki pants. The only deviation in color came from the window. It would show brilliant shades of orange, ominous hues of gray, and terrifying tones of black. I feared the blackness because it made everything seem unknown. But one thing I knew would always be present was the big silver machine directly outside the window: its large tires, long body, silver finish, and five blank windows were a constant for me.

My interactions with other people were limited to a short time with the caretakers during lesson times. I had toys, but most of them consisted of numerals. Free time was spent reading or staring out the window. My only friends were Shakespeare, Nietzsche, Edgar Allan Poe, and Voltaire. They taught me everything I knew about love, loss, beauty, ugliness, fear, and bravery. There was still much to learn, though.

Caretakers came in at light's brightest and light's lowest. I timed my escape when the darkness swallowed the world. I took the first step towards the window, smashed the glass with a copy of Orwell's *1984*, and sprinted towards the silver machine.

A dark red fluid flowed out of my back. I was wrapped in white cloth, and needles created protrusions in my skin.

Following Your Heart

My heart pounded into my head. The silver machine had the word "Chevy" printed on it, and for a brief moment I pictured it as my Argo as I sailed into mythology.

A loud noise popped behind me, I felt a sharp pain in my back, and I collapsed.

As I awoke, I saw the face of beauty beyond description. She sat behind a wheel with her feet pressed on a pedal. She smiled a bright smile at me, but said no words. I had known love from Shakespeare, but not even his words could describe the feeling that came over me. Neither of us spoke; I would not have dared to ruin the perfection of the moment.

A dark red fluid flowed out of my back. I was wrapped in white cloth, and needles created protrusions in my skin.

The angel sat me up in my seat and let me stare out the window. We were in motion on a long stretch of road that formed a circle. A large lake was trapped in the circle of road. Its reflective surface sent me into a daydream:

I am in France with the beautiful stranger; we dine on croissants and stare at the Eiffel Tower. I have never tasted a croissant nor seen the Eiffel Tower, but I can taste the buttery bread and see the outline of the tower. I feel a rush that sends me to the Himalayas. I am among faceless men in robes, and we sit together in tranquility. I picture the Globe Theater. I sip a cup of tea as an enactment of Romeo and Juliet rolls past my eyes. My heart has guided my head to places I can only imagine.

Life is As Valuable as You Make It

The angel laid me down in a meadow. As I lay reflecting, I thought of the silver Chevy truck. It was a chariot that carried me to freedom, a dream that had always been present but also out of reach, an escape from mediocrity to possibilities previously unimagined.

As I lay reflecting, I pictured the lake. Its glassy surface reflected the beauty of the world to my eyes. It showed me a life I could have lived but did not. Its transparency revealed my inner dreams, yet also reminded me that I may not survive the journey around the water's body. As I lay reflecting, I painted the stranger's face, the face of love untainted by words and unstained by age.

I lived a life that was not lived. I had dreams that will remain dreams. I spent my time trapped within the box of fear. An unloved child who lost his parents. I was shot by a bullet. I drove miles in my Chevy. I met the love of my life but never spoke a word to her. Here I lie, an old man, the life leaking out of me, underneath a cloud.

SWEETENER

Kaitlyn Levon

Sophie loved her mom, Maria, more than anyone else in the whole world. She was caring and fun; she had dance parties with her daughter every morning to wake her up. Even at five, Sophie could tell her mom was special, that she seemed to sparkle in a way other people didn't. Sophie's mom always tucked Sophie into bed with her bear, Peaches, and kissed her on the forehead; Sophie would wipe off the lipstick and they both would laugh, then her mom would start baking in the kitchen. Maria usually made pound cake with peaches; it was her husband's favorite. He said the dish reminded him of her: "So sweet and pretty; a real simple dish," he would say.

Maria gathered her ingredients and turned up the volume on the radio. She stirred the ingredients, inhaling the vanilla as she mixed it into the batter. She slowly added flour to the mixture and frowned when little bubbles of imperfection popped up in her batter. She stirred more and more rapidly, sprinkled the remaining flour over the peaches, and folded them into the batter. She hated to leave a hot oven with nothing to warm. It was dark outside and her husband still had not arrived, but maybe that was all right. She didn't have the cake ready, anyway.

The cries from the kitchen sounded nothing like her mom, more like the incoherent sobs of the visitors at her daddy's hospital

Maria poured a vodka and cheered to herself. The floor was too cool to lie on, but, if she angled herself just right, she could watch her pretty pound cake rise in the oven. She took fiery sips, lay down on the cold floor, and then sat back up again to drink.

Maria's crying always scared Sophie at night. The cries from the kitchen sounded nothing like her mom, more like the incoherent sobs of the visitors at her daddy's hospital. Sophie always hugged Peaches tighter and wait for the oven timer to ding.

When the oven dinged, it woke Maria from her drunken sleep. She reached into the oven with bare hands in her stupor, gasping at the searing pain that flashed on her fingertips. It helped though; she needed her focus back. Her husband would be home soon and she still needed to glaze the cake and add candied peaches. She arranged her pretty little cake in its glass casket and covered it in jeweled peaches. She went to her room and caked her face in powder and gloss. She sliced the cake into perfect portions and smoothed the glaze on top. She slipped into satin gloves to hide the burns on her hands.

Sophie's father came home to a beautiful wife in satin gloves and a slice of pound cake with peaches. Maria's smile dazzled, and, from the dining room, Sophie's snores could be heard.

THE SPACE

Sydney Sanchez

Emily stood at the front of her class giving the speech she'd been working on all week. She'd rehearsed this topic a million times, but her fingers still traced the star-shaped hole on the necklace she never took off; the cool silver felt comforting between her fingers.

"Emily – put your hand down. Stop fidgeting," her teacher scolded. She dropped her hand from the necklace and presented the last few lines of her speech. Emily walked home that day, the cold air sharp through the holes in her sweater. She called out the usual, "I'm home," expecting the usual silence in return from her dad.

She left nothing. No phone call. No note. Only Emily and her father, left wondering.

She had found the necklace last winter with her mom. The wind had chilled them to the bones as they stumbled upon a small boutique amongst the shops that lined the river. The dainty silver necklace with the star-shaped hole caught Emily's eye. Her mom had bought it for her as an early Christmas present, and that was the last night she saw her mom. She left nothing. No phone call. No note. Only Emily and her father, left wondering. The star-shaped hole in the middle of the necklace felt empty.

That had been almost a year ago. Since the day her mom left, her dad hadn't been the same, and Emily had accepted that now. She put her backpack in her room and sat on her bed. Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she took it out; three messages from her friend appeared on the screen. Emily had promised her she would go to the new restaurant by the river and work on yet another project for their speech class. This time the speech was on westward expansion – riveting. Emily knew she could come up with a quick excuse not to go, but she sent her friend an "On my way!" text, grabbed her binder, and headed out the door.

The restaurant was nothing special to Emily – some new vegan thing her friend was into – but Emily pretended to enjoy it, and she got her speech done, anyway. Emily and her friend parted ways and she walked along the river, passing the red and green lights that reflected on the water. A brisk wind blew through Emily's hair, and she pulled her binder closer to her as she grabbed her necklace, tracing the star-shaped hole. She stopped on the boardwalk that overlooked the river and the little shops that outlined the shoreline. A gust of wind blew the outline of her speech out of her binder.

"Of course that would happen," Emily said as she ran towards the paper. It caught at the end of the boardwalk, but someone reached it before her, picking it up and reading the title.

"Wow, westward expansion, huh? Riveting," he said with a smirk. He reached out his hand toward Emily. Emily grabbed the paper and noticed something small on his arm, reflecting the light coming from the surrounding shops. A small silver star hung from the thin bracelet around his wrist. She looked up at him, and the star-shaped hole didn't seem as empty now.

LOVE ON ICE

Kylie Himebaugh

I've been waiting for this for about a week now. Jack asked me to go with him because he wanted to hang out with me. It's been a couple months since we have actually spent time together. I've been through a lot. It's been hard for me to get out of the house because my grandma passed away three months ago. Out of the blue, Jack texted me about a week ago and wanted to go ice skating. It was unusual for him to randomly ask me to go somewhere, but I was elated that he did. We are really good friends, but I've always wanted more. He doesn't know that, though.

Jack's dad died during freshman year, and it's been hard for him. This year, he has gotten a lot better. He's on the school's baseball team, and he also is out of the house more. We have almost every class together except sixth period biology. He's a really caring guy. Even though Christmas is less than two weeks away, he has volunteered his time at the children's hospital. I got to go one day with him, and I was just shocked at the way he was with the kids. I loved seeing that smile return to his face.

Now I'm rushing around because I only have thirty minutes to get ready before Jack picks me up – above all, I have nothing to wear. Great. I search my closet for something long-sleeved and cozy. I find a rosy pink, fleece sweater and some black pants to go with my boots. I race to the bathroom to do my hair. I grab the curling iron and do some bouncy curls. I quickly put my makeup on. The second I grab my purse and my knitted hat off my bed, the doorbell rings. Just in time.

When I get down the stairs, I open the door to find Jack in a navy blue sweater with jeans, his hair flipped to the right, like always. "Hey, Bella. Wow, you look great."

"Thank you," I say, blushing. "Let me go to tell my mom we're leaving." I find my mom in her office, typing away on the computer. "Mom, I'm leaving."

"Okay. Be safe. Love you," she says with a smile.

"Love you, too." I head out and slide in the passenger seat.

When we arrive, we get our skates and head onto the ice. Jack used to take lessons, so he shows off some tricks. I watch, holding onto the wall, trying to go around the rink at least once. He comes over to me and holds his hand out for me. I hesitate, then wrap my arm around his. He glides slowly while we talk. "So, I saw Daisy last weekend." His older sister went away to college last year.

"Oh, really? How is she?"

"She's good. Her grades are doing well, too." He can't look me in the eyes. I know he misses her a lot when she is away. I only got to meet her once last summer when she invited Jack and me to go to Splashtown – it was the one of the greatest times we've had. At the water park, she told me, while

Jack's dad died during freshman year, and it's been hard for him.

Jack was going to get snacks, that I had helped him through the rough times and that I have been really good for him. I smiled, thinking back at that. He's been really good for me, too.

"Listen." Our favorite song, Jingle Bell Rock, plays loud on the speakers. We laugh and sing along while holding hands. He spins me and does some tricks on his own, everyone staring at us singing off-key. We go to the snack shop for hot chocolate – it warms my cold body up. We sit at one of the tables overseeing the rink. He smiles at me with his green eyes staring into mine. "I'm glad you came, Bella."

"Me, too. I'm having so much fun." My grandma's favorite song, White Christmas, comes on. I smile, and I know she's smiling with me too.

"Do you want to go one more time around?" he asks.

"I'd love to." He grabs my hand as we head into the rink. The lights dim a little. As we skate, I think about how this night couldn't get any better. He pulls me close and wraps his arm around me as we glide side by side.

We're one of the last to leave. We walk across the street to the park. As we walk on the sidewalk, hand-in-hand, the lights above twinkle in the darkness. Christmas music plays on the speakers down the street loud enough for us to hear. We stop right under the mistletoe and the whole world seems to disappear. He looks at me and whispers, "Traditions need to be carried on." Then, we kiss. I was wrong. The night did get better.

COWARDICE

Dalton Cravens

The apartment's bleak and bland detail did little to recapture my attention. Not even the faint murmurs from the television stole a single glare. What did consume me was my heavily adorned military uniform that had hung from the handle of my closet for months now. The silver star sat squarely in the center of the left breast, as if proclaiming its self-importance. After Afghanistan, I was showered with praise and honors – none of it truly deserved. Now I sat stiffly in my wheelchair, my legs out of view.

It was a split-second event, really. My squadron was hunkered down, taking a smoke break in some hut in some unpronounceable town, when John Trace decided to get away from the confluence of dirt, smoke and dust. It was as predictable as a war movie: John stepped outside and a grenade rolled under his feet.

We all saw it and we all froze. After what I now remember as an eternity I stood up and dashed to knock John out of the blast range. I don't know what drove my actions that day – glory, honor, fear of shame? I did it, but I did it too late. Would have been cool if I had pulled it off, but instead I was still three feet away when the damn thing went off. John went up in smoke and I was blasted back, sans legs. I got the Silver Star all right. I got a silver reminder of my hesitation, of my cowardice.

Now a ray of light pierced the apartment's closed shutters, bounced off the star and landed directly on my eyes. Annoying, but I wouldn't move. I didn't need my eyes to see the truth. There are plenty of brave men who don't get medals, and plenty of cowards who do.

PLAYS

WHY WE BROKE UP

Sarah Boesken

CAST OF CHARACTERS

- JADEN & SIENNA** a recently broken-up couple trying to come to terms with why their relationship ended.
- RANON & LYRA** a teenage couple who meet at the school library. Lyra should be dressed in black and have dark hair.
- ISAIAH & SOPHIE** two camp counselors who bond over a shared fear of spiders. The larger Isaiah is, the funnier this scene becomes.
- HOLLAND & JOY** college students who meet while Holland is complaining about a recent breakup. Joy's appearance is flexible; she only has one line.
- JASMINE & NORA** A tattoo artist and a school teacher, who meet after Nora spills paints all over Jasmine's clothes. Jasmine should have very dark clothing, hair, and makeup, and ideally would have tattoos. Nora should be wearing bright colors and have light hair.
- HOLLAND'S FRIEND** A friend helping Holland cope with his feelings, who encourages him to go after Joy.

SYNOPSIS

This play is about a recently broken up couple who are coming to terms with exactly why they broke up. They discuss many other couples that they had known throughout their relationship throughout this conversation.

SETTING

This play takes place in a multitude of locations in the year 2018 such as a high school, an apartment, and a camp.

SCENE 1

The stage is bare, save for two chairs on either side of the stage. In the chair on stage right is JADEN, a young man wearing a flannel and a pair of jeans. He nurses a drink and is staring at his phone. After a long moment, he speaks.

JADEN

Screw it. I need to know.

Jaden dials and raises the phone to his ear.

SIENNA

enters stage right, wearing a large white sweater, her hair in a low pony. She is absentmindedly walking behind the chair, perhaps reading a book. When the cell phone begins to ring, she sets the book down and goes over to the chair, picking up the phone.

SIENNA Hello?

Jaden is silent. He seems hesitant.

SIENNA Uh, anyone there? Hello?

Jaden takes a deep breath and speaks.

JADEN Uh, hey, Sienna.

Sienna pauses. She looks at the phone for a moment before pressing it back to her ear.

SIENNA Jaden? Is that you?

JADEN Yeah, Si. It's, uh, it's me.

Sienna lowers herself into the chair as if to steady herself.

SIENNA Oh, wow, um ... hi?

JADEN Hey.

SIENNA So, what's up? How have you been?

Jaden pauses.

JADEN It's been hard but, uh, I'm getting by.

SIENNA That's ... that's good.

There is an awkward silence.

SIENNA *(at the same time as Jaden)* So why did you call?

JADEN So I met this girl.

SIENNA You ... you met a girl?

JADEN Yeah

SIENNA Oh. That's ... that's good. What's —

Sienna swallows thickly as if she is trying not to get choked up.

SIENNA What's her name?

JADEN Her name's Hailey.

SIENNA And what's Hailey like?

JADEN She's ... she's good. She's smart. She likes Metallica. She likes pancakes more than waffles, though.

Sienna scoffs, pulling the phone away from her ear for a second to run a hand through her hair before putting it back.

SIENNA Why did you call? Really?

JADEN I jus —

SIENNA You just called to hurt my feelings? Brag about your new girlfriend?

JADEN You broke up with me, Sienna.

SIENNA Yeah, I know! Doesn't mean it didn't hurt!

Jaden gets quiet.

JADEN So why did you do it?

SIENNA What?

JADEN That's why I called, Si. I'm trying to move on here. To not be constantly running in circles in my mind trying to figure out what I did wrong. So, I need you to tell me why we broke up.

SIENNA Why we broke up?

She laughs uncomfortably.

SIENNA Jaden, I don't even know where to begin.

JADEN The beginning would be nice.

SIENNA Right. The beginning ...

Lights on center stage. Sienna sighs, shifting in her chair to get comfortable.

SIENNA Jay, do you remember our sophomore year of high school?

JADEN You kiddin'? How could I ever forget a place like Valehog Central High?

SIENNA Yeah, yeah, you remember that friend of yours? Ranon Stark?

Jaden frowns.

JADEN Uh, yeah... what does Ranon have to do with any of this?

SIENNA You remember his girlfriend, Lyra? The real pretty one, with the dark hair?

JADEN Yes.

SIENNA Well, they're married now. They met the same year we did, and now they're married. Do you remember how they met?

JADEN No, actually. Why does this matter?

Sienna ignores him.

SIENNA They met in the library the week after school started.

SCENE 2

Enter LYRA stage left, her nose buried in a book. She takes a seat and continues reading. Enter RANON stage right, carrying a backpack. He takes the seat next to Lyra and pulls the same book out of his backpack. He slowly realizes that that is the same book.

SIENNA He was so instantly smitten with her.

RANON Uh, great book, right?

Lyra looks up at him, then looks back down at her book.

RANON You read Charles Boo-cow-sky a lot?

Lyra rolls her eyes and sighs, sinking lower in her seat.

RANON I love Boo-cow-sky

Seeing Lyra is not feeling it, he starts packing up to leave. He gets up and begins to exit stage right.

LYRA It's Bukowski.

Ranon stops and turns around.

RANON What?

LYRA It's Charles Bukowski, not Boo-cow-sky. Y'know, the author of the book you're reading? Love is a Dog from Hell?

Ranon sits back down next to Lyra. She shifts to look at him.

LYRA And he sucks.

RANON Does he really?

LYRA I dunno; you tell me since you're the one who loves him.

Ranon looks at the book, back at Lyra, then back at the book.

RANON I haven't even read it.

LYRA Shocker.

RANON Does it suck that bad?

LYRA It's the suckiest suck to ever suck a suck.

RANON Say suck one more time.

LYRA Suck.

Lyra and Ranon look at each other for a long time.

LYRA I'm Lyra, by the way.

RANON I'm Ranon. So ... you come to the library to complain about poetry to strangers often?

LYRA Only the cute ones.

RANON Cute libraries?

LYRA I prefer cute coffee shops. Want to go find one now?

Lights switch back to Sienna and Jaden. We see Lyra and Ranon get up and leave together stage right, holding hands.

SIENNA They were so in love from the get-go. It's been ten years now and they still keep a copy of Love is a Dog from Hell on their wall.

JADEN Okay ...

SIENNA Do you understand what I'm saying?

JADEN No, not at all. What do Ranon and Lyra have to do with anything, Si?

Sienna, again, ignores this question.

SIENNA What about summer camp before senior year? What was it called again?

JADEN You mean Camp Freebird?

SIENNA Yeah. Freebird. Stupid-ass name for a stupid-ass place.

JADEN What about it?

SIENNA You remember Isaiah and Sophie? The counselors?

JADEN The ones who both dressed up as Spider-Man on costume day.

SIENNA Those would be the ones.

JADEN Sienna, seriously. What do they have to do with my question?

SIENNA You know how they met?

JADEN Sienna –

SIENNA He was being a giant wuss, that's how.

SCENE 3

ISAIAH, dressed in pajamas, sprints on stage from stage right. He skids to a stop in front of a door center stage and begins knocking frantically.

ISAIAH Help! Hey, I need some help out here! There's an emergency!

SIENNA And Sophie was so not having it.

SOPHIE *also in pajamas, enters stage left hurriedly and rushes to the door, rubbing her eyes groggily. She looks bewildered and panicked as she hears his cries for help.*

SOPHIE What's wrong?!? Is somebody hurt?!

Isaiah is clearly winded and out of breath. He bends over, hands on his knees, yet still wailing.

ISAIAH Appeared out of nowhere...biggest I've ever seen...terrorizing the entire camp...

SOPHIE Who was it?? Is there an intruder on the grounds?!

ISAIAH *(immediately after Sophie)* So many eyes ... so many legs ...

SOPHIE Eyes and legs? What?

ISAIAH *(screaming)* SPIDER!

Sophie freezes. She straightens up, pulling her robe tighter around herself.

SOPHIE You're here because of a ... a spider?

ISAIAH It's so huge; you have to come kill it! It's terrifying! I can't sleep with it in there!

SOPHIE You woke me up ...

ISAIAH *(immediately after)* It's horrific!

SOPHIE At three in the morning ...

ISAIAH It has so many legs! It's not natural!

SOPHIE On a MONDAY ...

ISAIAH I've been cursed!

SOPHIE BECAUSE OF A SPIDER?

ISAIAH It's going to eat me!

Sophie snaps.

SOPHIE YOU'RE A GROWN MAN!

They both get quiet. Sophie is staring Isaiah down. He looks down sheepishly. After a long moment

ISAIAH Please, I'm — I'm sorry I woke you up, really. I'm just ... I'm really scared of spiders, okay? Please.

Sophie stares at him. For a moment, it seems she might slam the door in his face. Finally, she sighs.

SOPHIE I'm not going to kill the spider.
Isaiah looks defeated.

SOPHIE They're goddamn creepy and I hate all their little eyes. We'll get one of my campers to do it in the morning.

ISAIAH Your campers are thirteen.

SOPHIE You ever met a thirteen-year-old girl? The spider will be so scared we won't even have to kill it because it'll be out of there so fast.

ISAIAH So ... where should I sleep?
Sophie looks over her shoulder, then back to Isaiah.

SOPHIE All my bunks are full ... sorry.

ISAIAH It's fine ... I ... I guess I'll grab a blanket and sleep in the meal hall.
Isaiah begins to leave. Seeing him retreat, Sophie calls out.

SOPHIE Wait!
Isaiah turns.

SOPHIE I guess ... I guess you can share mine. But no funny business.
She holds her hand out. Isaiah comes and takes it, following her off stage left.

ISAIAH Trust me, I'm the least funny guy I know.

SIENNA You get it now?

JADEN I mean, I get why they dressed up like Spider-Man. But not what you're trying to tell me, or what they have to do with my question.

SIENNA They were perfect for each other.

JADEN And we weren't?

SIENNA I didn't say that.

JADEN You insinuated it.

SIENNA I insinuated no such thing.

JADEN Sienna, please answer my question. It's killing me.

SIENNA I wish I could.
Jaden groans, putting the phone out for a moment before putting it back to his ear.

JADEN What is that supposed to mean?

Sienna puts the phone in her lap and stares at it. She frowns, trying to think.

JADEN Hello?

Sienna raises the phone to her ear.

JADEN Sienna, you ther —

SIENNA Second semester of college. Joy and Holland. You remember them?

JADEN Sienna, I don't want to hear about any more of our old friends.

SIENNA But do you remember them?

Jaden sighs, clearly growing frustrated.

JADEN Yeah, yeah. I do. Holland and I still meet up for beers sometimes.

SIENNA Do you remember the story of how they met?

JADEN Yeah, actually, I do.

SIENNA Care to remind me?

Jaden almost laughs.

SCENE 4

JADEN He was an RA. Talking to one of his buddies about his most recent breakup.

HOLLAND & FRIEND *enter stage right, chatting as they make their way to the chairs center stage. They both carry backpacks like college students.*

HOLLAND I dunno, man. I think I'm really broken.

FRIEND You're hurt that bad over the breakup? She's just a chick, man.

HOLLAND No, not — not broken like sad. I'm fine. I'm perfectly fine.

FRIEND Well, that's good.

HOLLAND No, it's not. That's why I'm broken. I don't feel bad at all. She was crying and yelling and asking me why, asking if she wasn't pretty enough or funny enough, and I didn't feel bad at all. She said she was in love with me, and it just made me sad because I'm not in love with her.

FRIEND You're not broken; you just didn't have feelings for her, man.

HOLLAND Right.

FRIEND Or you're a sociopath

Holland slumps over in his chair and groans loudly.

HOLLAND God dammit! I'm broken! I can't fall in love!

FRIEND That's not true; you just have to find the right girl.

HOLLAND Every girl is too shy to say what they really want.

JOY begins to enter stage left

FRIEND You're not wrong there, man. They're never forward enough. It's like trying to decipher a dead language.

HOLLAND Screw this. Screw my life. Screw me.

As Holland says this, Joy is walking by.

JOY I mean, sure, baby, but you got to buy me dinner first.

Holland and his friend, clearly stunned, stare at her as she continues to walk away.

FRIEND She called you "baby."

HOLLAND She did.

FRIEND And she was incredibly forward.

HOLLAND She was.

Holland and his friend exchange a long look. Finally, Holland shoots to his feet and takes off after where Joy exited stage right. This leaves the friend on stage.

SIENNA Of course that's how you remember it.

Jaden is staring off into space. The friend is flipping casually through a book.

SIENNA Hello? Jaden?

Jaden shakes his head, seeming to snap back to reality.

JADEN Crap, sorry. Right.

The friend takes his bag and walks off stage right.

SIENNA They're married now.

JADEN Yeah. They have a baby.

Sienna does not answer.

JADEN We could have been married (*pause*). We could have had a baby.

Sienna puts the phone down, seeming to wipe away tears silently as she covers the receiver. She sniffs, then returns the phone to her ear.

SIENNA So now that you've told one, you understand, right? You see the point I'm trying to make?

JADEN Honestly? No. Not at all.

SIENNA Okay, so do you remember —

JADEN Sienna, please, no more.

SIENNA Last one. I promise. Please?

JADEN Fine. Go ahead.

SIENNA Jasmine and Nora.

JADEN That couple we lived across from last year?

SIENNA Yeah. They came to our housewarming party with their son. We babysat for them a few times.

Jaden is quiet.

SIENNA Jasmine was a tattoo artist, and Nora taught kindergarten. They met a few years before we knew them.

SCENE 5

NORA enters stage left, hauling a large box full of jars of paint. She is a tiny woman; the box should obscure her sight. JASMINE enters stage right, texting, with a basket full of laundry. Naturally, the two crash into each other. The paint goes all over Jasmine's laundry.

NORA Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry!

Jasmine groans from where she was knocked to the floor.

JASMINE Oh, God, my head ...

NORA The box was just so heavy, and I was in such a rush to get home from class, and I wasn't paying attention to where I was going, and I guess I just ...

Jasmine sits up as she notices that her all black clothes are now covered in color.

NORA Oh, gosh, your clothes! I'm so sorry! Do you need me to wash them for you?! I can do that!

JASMINE God, my boss is going to kill me. This is my work uniform.

NORA Geez, I sure am so sorry.

Jasmine tries to scrub at the shirt to get out the paint, to no avail.

JASMINE What kind of paint is this?! Tattoo ink comes out easier than this does!

NORA Well, it's, uhm ... it's face paint.
Jasmine scoffs and throws down her clothes, still not having looked at Nora.

JASMINE Jesus goddamn Christ, face paint? How old are you, twelve?
Jasmine makes eye contact with Nora, who is practically on the verge of tears.

NORA I really am sorry.
Jasmine blinks and scurries to her feet, gathering all the laundry back into the basket and lifting it up. She then lifts Nora's box of paints effortlessly.

JASMINE Hey, don't worry about it. I'm sorry for acting like a jackass; I was just frustrated, it's not your fault. It was damn stupid of me not to look where I was going.

NORA Sorry for spilling my paint all over you. It was silly of me not to watch where I was going, too.

JASMINE Hey, want to make it up to me?

NORA How?

JASMINE Let me buy you a coffee and we'll call it even.
Nora grins sheepishly

NORA Only if you let me get the paint off your shirt.
Jasmine smirks.

JASMINE Only if you're the one taking it off me.
Jasmine exits stage right. Momentarily stunned, Nora soon grins and chases after her.

SIENNA They're still together.

JADEN I know. I saw them down at the Grill-In Diner a few weeks ago. You remember that place?

SIENNA Of course I do. I could never forget our first date, Jay.

JADEN Doesn't feel that way.

SIENNA Jaden, I still care about you.

JADEN So why are you telling me all of these stories instead of just answering my question?

SIENNA Jay ...

JADEN No, Sienna. No more. I've been on the phone with you for an hour listening to you talk about everyone we've ever known who's ever been in love, everyone other than us. I've known you for ten years, Sienna; I don't want to hear about the hundreds of couples we've encountered over all that time. I just want to hear about us.

SIENNA There's no "us" anymore, Jaden.

Jaden is clearly hurt by this. He sinks back down.

SIENNA They were all so in love. Right from the start. They never questioned it ... they just took one look at the other person and knew; they just knew that was who they were meant to be with. That's what it's supposed to be like. Love, I mean. You just know.

JADEN Sienna?

SIENNA Yeah?

JADEN You missed a couple.

Sienna frowns.

SIENNA Who?

JADEN Us.

SCENE 6

Jaden stands, setting down the phone on his chair and crossing to center stage. Confused, Sienna follows suit.

JADEN We met in the summer.

SIENNA Jaden, I don't think ...

JADEN Dammit, Sienna, please. Just let me do this.

Sienna silently nods.

JADEN We met in the summer. We were fifteen; just about to start sophomore year. It was registration day. You were wearing a yellow dress, and you let your hair down, back before you started wearing it in a ponytail all the time. You were incredible. Are incredible.

Sienna's entire demeanor has changed. She has shed her large white sweater to reveal a yellow dress underneath and taken out her ponytail.

SIENNA Hi, I'm sorry to bother you but I couldn't help but notice your shirt.
Jaden looks down at his shirt, having shed his flannel. It is a Metallica t-shirt.

JADEN You have a problem with Metallica?

SIENNA What? No, not at all. I love them, actually. Better music than anything that's been coming out lately.
Jaden looks her up and down.

JADEN You like Metallica? Favorite song?

SIENNA Master of Puppets, but One has the best guitar solo to come out of rock music in the last fifty years.

JADEN I have to disagree there; "More than a Feeling" by Boston has the better solo by just the tiniest bit.

SIENNA Oh, please ...

JADEN After that, we were best friends for years. We knew everything about each other.
Jaden and Sienna sit down on the center stage chairs, joined by Ranon, Lyra, and a few extra friends.

LYRA You guys coming over tomorrow morning after the party?

RANON Ly here makes the best pancakes; you have to try them.
Jaden and Sienna snort in unison and share a look before they start laughing. Their friends look on, confused.

JADEN Sorry, Ranon. Nothing you said. We just don't do pancakes.

SIENNA We established a long time ago that between pancakes and waffles, waffles are clearly the superior breakfast food. Since then, we've been boycotting pancakes. But Jay here makes the most bomb waffles, and I'm sure he'd be more than happy to make some after the party.
Lyra wiggles her eyebrows.

LYRA Oooh, since when are you two a "we"?

Lyra, Ranon and friends exit stage right.

JADEN By the time we graduated high school, we had watched all our friends fall in and out of love like a horrible movie on repeat. It was terrifying for you to watch, knowing that might happen to you someday. But not soon after that ... not soon after that I found the courage to ask you to be mine, and I was blessed enough that you said yes. And when you told me you loved me, I swear I felt like I was dying of thirst, but you

said those words, and it was like drinking my first glass of water in years. You asked me to move in with you, and I thought I might never know pain again because surely a love this good, a love this real, is impossible to beat. When you told me you would marry me, I knew it was forever. And you're looking at me now, telling me all these months after breaking my heart, that love has to be instantaneous. That you have to just know. And I'm telling you, Sienna Grace Mueller, I'm telling you that it was. I have been in love with you since the moment I saw you standing there in that registration hall in that yellow dress, with all that hair and all that attitude. I've known since the moment I first saw you that I would spend the rest of my life being so irrevocably, unequivocally in love with you, and that is why I need you to tell me right here, right now, the real reason why we broke up. Because I can't spend the rest of my life thinking it was all because I didn't love you enough in time.

Sienna is quiet for a long time. She finally pulls away from Jaden, going back to stand by her chair. She picks up the phone, pressing it to her ear. Jaden does the same.

SCENE 7

JADEN

Please.

Sienna finally answers, after wiping away tears.

SIENNA

We broke up because I'm a wuss.

JADEN

What?

SIENNA

Yeah. I'm a giant wuss. You remember when Eddie Fiedermeister knocked on my window at Camp Freebird?

JADEN

Of course I do. Guy was a jackass. You couldn't sleep alone for weeks.

SIENNA

Yeah. I'm a wuss, Jaden. I wuss out of stuff. When things get too intense or too real, I leave. I told you I would marry you, and I had every intention to. But then I got into my own head and did that thing I do where I think too much about one thing and end up screwing myself over, and I did that for the millionth time, only this time instead of facing that fear I ran away like the wuss-ass coward I am. I'm so in love with you, and it's terrifying. I don't know what to do with myself. I love you so much, and it makes me sick. I feel like when you're in love you should be in control, you should be behind the wheel, but I'm not in the driver's seat. I'm locked in the trunk, and I can't get out. We broke up because I was running out of room to breathe back there, and I thought I might die. I needed to go. I needed to get out of the car; I just didn't think I'd miss the ride so much.

There is a long silence. Jaden and Sienna are staring at each other from across the stage, although they are still on the phone.

JADEN You said, "I am."

SIENNA What?

JADEN You didn't say "I was." You said, "I am."

SIENNA Oh. Did I?

JADEN Sienna?

SIENNA Yes?

JADEN Come get waffles with me tomorrow morning.

SIENNA What about Hailey?

JADEN There is no Hailey. I just needed to hear your voice.

SIENNA I have been craving waffles ... (pause). Hey, Jaden?

JADEN Yeah?

SIENNA I really hate Metallica. I just thought you were cute and remembered the names of some songs I saw on a poster.

Jaden begins to giggle. Then, he completely cracks up. Sienna begins to laugh too, the two of them completely erupting in laughter on stage for a good 10 to 15 seconds. Finally, they stop.

JADEN This is insane, isn't it?

Sienna smiles.

SIENNA All the best love stories are.

END.

BANKROBBER

Sebastian Griffin

Interior: adobe home. Day. A man, WILLIAM MCCORMACK, and his wife, FRANCES, are sitting at the dining room table in their small, cramped house. They are draped in late 19th-century attire. He is holding her hand while comforting her. There are pictures of their family on the wall.

WILLIAM Don't you worry, darling. I promise this time we can finally leave this place, all right? One last job, and we'll have enough; okay, honey? I promise.

FRANCES You promise, Bill. Because I'm real tired of having to drop everything and run away every time you and your idiot buddies are wanted for causing chaos in some city. Please tell me you actually mean it this time.

WILLIAM I promise.

FRANCES I hope so.

A whistle is heard outside.

WILLIAM Looks like I need to go.

(Beat.) Jonathan!

A young boy comes out of a room.

WILLIAM I love you, boy.

JONATHAN Love you too, pa.

They hug, WILLIAM now looking towards FRANCES.

WILLIAM I love you.

FRANCES I love you.

WILLIAM exits the house. A group of five men on horses are there waiting. They start to ride off together. FRANCES swings open the window on the front of the house. WILLIAM looks back at her.

FRANCES *Yelling.* Stay safe! I'm waiting for you!

Interior: Sheriff's office. Day. A BOUNTY HUNTER in a duster jacket and a holstered revolver looks over at the bulletins. He observes a poster that says "WANTED: DEAD OR ALIVE" at the top and "WILLIAM MCCORMACK" at the bottom with a picture of William on it with a bounty price of \$750. The man takes it and leaves.

Interior: Adobe house. Later in the day. FRANCES is outside the window putting the lantern up.

JONATHAN

Mom, where's pa?

FRANCES

Pa's at work, honey; he won't be back till night time.

She comes back in.

JONATHAN

I don't like it when you leave the window open for Pa. My feet get too cold and the howls scare me.

FRANCES

Don't you worry. Mama will keep you safe, okay, sweetie?

Exterior: Bank. Later in the day. WILLIAM and the men hitch their horses, put on bandanas, and give each other a look and a nod. They pull their guns and walk into the bank.

Exterior: Adobe home, evening. The BOUNTY HUNTER looks at the wanted poster and puts it in his satchel. He looks at the home; there is a lantern hanging in front of the door. The window is open from before. He sneaks in through the window and closes it.

FRANCES

From the other room: William? I'm glad you're h—

The BOUNTY HUNTER points his revolver at her and motions the gun at her to leave the house. She pauses and charges. He knocks her out and ties her up.

JONATHAN

Mama? Pa?

The BOUNTY HUNTER looks at him. JONATHAN goes back to his room. The BOUNTY HUNTER sits at the dining room table with his gun pointed at the door.

Exterior: Adobe home. Later. WILLIAM is riding back with a sack of cash by his side and nears the house. He notices that the window is closed. He looks defeated. He looks back at the empty horizon. He accepts his responsibility and rides to his home. He walks in with his hands up.

WILLIAM

Please just take me in, sir. I'm probably worth more to you alive than I am dead.

The BOUNTY HUNTER underlines the phrase "DEAD OR ALIVE" with his revolver.

WILLIAM

Can you at the very least give this to my family? Please.

WILLIAM holds up the sack of cash. The BOUNTY HUNTER nods his head yes. He shoots WILLIAM and drags his body out and stows it on his horse. He rides off back into town to collect his bounty. JONATHAN stares through the open door as the man rides off.

NATURAL
SAGE PRUSSEL



NONFICTION

DEAN-O

Karen DiMeo

Once upon a time, there was a young girl. She was, for the most part, happy and content with her life, and relatively unexposed to the extent of the pain the world could offer. The young girl's story takes place near the Jersey Shore, right outside of Atlantic City, in her childhood home.

Why is Mommy crying? Well, she received heartbreaking news.

One summer morning, the newly minted nine-year-old made sure to wake up early enough to catch the animated show *Jem and the Holograms*, which she so dearly adored, for its appearance on television was a rare one. With a bowl of cereal in one hand and a spoon in the other, young Karen stared transfixed at the scene before her: the Misfits were singing about their latest attempt to sabotage Jem and her friends once again. In the middle of the musical number, the little girl heard her mother call for her. Ignoring her mother's voice, determined to continue watching until the song was finished, Karen watched her

show, believing her mother could surely wait another minute. The persistent calls of Karen's mother, however, continued to pester the child, until finally she went to see what her mother wanted. When she was met with the scene before her, Karen's mind became a blur of jumbled thoughts.

Why is Mommy crying? Well, she received heartbreaking news. *What is wrong?* Something bad, Karen. *What happened?* Something that will rip your heart apart, that is, if you can still feel it once you know. *I lost something. I know it.* You are right. You did. *What did I lose?* Wrong question, Karen. *Who did I lose?* Your mother knows. Ask her.

Karla, Karen's mother, was the picture of devastation and shock. Red and puffy eyelids, tears falling down her cheeks, chest rising and falling unevenly, paralyzing disbelief painted upon her red-tinted face, already contorted into an unappealing expression from trying to hold back the sobs she didn't want her daughter to witness. "Karen," her mother wheezed with effort.

"Yes, Mommy?" Karen questioned uncomfortably, as dread quickly started consuming her body; the child's young heart silently knowing it would break with the information Karla knew.

"Baby, I'm sorry," Karla cried. "I-it's your cousin. There was an accident. Karen ... Dean-o died. He died this morning, Kar-Kar." With those words, Karen's mind blanked and transitioned to the backseat while her body automatically went on autopilot. With shattering hearts, mother and daughter collapsed into each other's embrace and together mourned the loss of their beloved nephew and cousin.

After that moment, all Karen's memories of the week following her cousin's death seemed to disappear, except for a few brief memories that play like scenes in a movie. From her mother's arms, Karen was transported a few minutes into the future. The young girl was on the landline crying with her father, both sharing their grief, who stated that both he and Karen's brother were going to be on the first flight back home. That memory fades into the next, and Karen, taking pride

in the fact she hasn't cried yet, is in a car pulling up the long path to her aunt's house. The car finally came to a stop and Karen slowly exited. Karen then looked up further down the endless driveway and froze as her eyes connect with her Uncle Chris's; it was then that the dam Karen had built to temporarily hold back her tears quickly crumbled as feet propelled the grieving cousin into her uncle's waiting arms. The two clinging together in shared heartbreak. The next memory seamlessly takes over and Karen is waiting to see her cousin for the last time. Finally reaching her cousin's coffin, she places a kiss on his forehead as her last tearful goodbye and silently turns to face the church. Taking in the crowd of people that are overflowing the building and outside, Karen sees everything, but nothing at the same time. Time skips ahead to her last memory; Karen, sitting in a car at the church parking lot prepared to leave the funeral, is silently staring at the drops of water clinging

to the car window. It was raining that day; Karen could not help but think it made sense. The sky was crying for her cousin, too.

Dean Robert Khoury died on August 20th, 2011 three weeks before his 16th birthday on September 11th. After finishing up football practice at around 11 a.m., Dean and 7 of his teammates gathered into a car that was not equipped to handle that number of passengers. Dean, along with three of his close friends, died that day, as well.

Over the years, I have come to understand and learn a few things about my older cousin's accident. First off, I learned that Dean wasn't wearing a seatbelt and he died because of it. I have come to understand that the accident could have easily been avoided in many ways had the boys chosen to make better decisions. Choices that would have meant my cousin would've gotten to live his life, graduate high school,

move into the dorms on his first day of college, fall in love, and grow old and grey with a bunch of crazy grandchildren running circles around him. Choices that meant I would still have my big cousin, that my cousins would still have their brother, and my aunt and uncle would still have their son.

My cousin has taught me many things since that fateful day. I believe, in many ways, I have become the person I am today because of him. Dean has taught me to love harder, because he let me experience true heart-break. He taught me to be smarter, to be wiser, because it cost him his life the one time he wasn't. He taught me to enjoy life and not stress, because life is so short to worry about yesterday. My cousin continues to teach me how to be a better version of myself everyday and it is in his lessons that I know he will always be by my side, silently encouraging me the whole way, throughout life.

I have come to understand that the accident could have easily been avoided in many ways had the boys chosen to make better decisions.

L'APPEL DU VIDE

Daniel Thew

I don't cry very often. Emotional movies, book scenes, those sad commercials that PETA shows every now and then – they never really seem to do it for me. Sometimes, I feel bad because of it. When my grandfather passed away, I felt worthless because I couldn't trigger this basic physiological response, even though I was in deep personal mourning. It hurts when I sit next to family without the ability to weep alongside them.

But there was a time – and I remember it solely because of how rarely I'm so affected – that I did cry. This one time was the closest I've ever come to crying in public, a feat even rarer than a private bawling session. This one time enhanced to a greater degree than I've ever experienced the ominous sensation of *l'appel du vide* – the call of the void, the sense one gets, when looking over a bridge, to suddenly jump.

This one time, a flashbulb memory now permanently ingrained in the ridges of my brain, began as inauspiciously as any other event in my life. In April of 2018, I was at a

local pub with my extended family, celebrating my brother's eighteenth birthday – I wasn't drinking, of course, which somewhat undermines the purpose of a pub, but nevertheless it involved food, so I didn't mind. There were over a dozen of us, grandparents and aunts

interested in my younger cousin's game of mobile Fortnite, I figured I'd watch to assuage my boredom.

And assuage my boredom it did, for the moment my eyes met the dim glow of the screen I saw, in crimson red, words that, for all intents

I don't cry very often. Emotional movies, book scenes, those sad commercials that PETA shows every now and then – they never really seem to do it for me.

and uncles and cousins, all gathered at several tables that had been pushed up against one another to compensate for their small size, all talking and laughing and smiling as if nothing could ruin the evening. I was nestled on the inside of the table, sitting on an extended booth and squished between two people whose names or identities I cannot presently recall. Across from me, raised to the point of nearly touching the ceiling, was a small television, no larger than twelve inches across, playing the news. I would not have noticed it otherwise, but since the food was taking so long and I didn't feel particularly

and purposes, amounted to "Several Dead in Texas School Shooting." Now, I've been raised in an era where these happenings, these "tragedies" have become commonplace. And God, do I hate the word! Tragedy, as if it couldn't have been avoided. Alas, the vernacular seems to be the sole comfort in these events, and thus I cannot fault its use. I will add that this shooting came only weeks, maybe a couple months, after Parkland, a geographically closer event, but which had very little personal impact. However, upon viewing the scenes from this Texas shooting, I descended into a state of manic depression,

a shift that jarred me and left me in what amounted to miniature shock. I no longer had an appetite and was fervently praying that my food would remain in my stomach; I had the urge to roll into a ball, to hide from the world. I felt cold. I felt deadened. And yet, my trauma was irrelevant to my family, who treated my sudden change as a novelty before returning to their buoyant laughter and voracious consumption of what now seemed but cheap delicacies, greasy burgers, and frozen seafood. My solitude in witnessing this act was only exacerbated by the news itself, which proved to only be covering the shooting as a secondary story. Their main coverage was instead devoted to the royal wedding. To see a dozen deaths treated with less dignity than a marketed union between people of another land, being analyzed by middle-aged, upper-class women in prim dresses and dainty hats, was almost too much to bear. It

felt like a comic, some sort of twisted irony, but no. This was real. This was happening.

The hours crawled by until each of the blissfully unaware around me was finished. We arrived home, and I staggered to my room before finally bursting into tears. I hate that phrase as well, the whole “bursting into tears” cliché. It makes it seem as if I had emitted single droplets at a time, as if it were a beautiful symphony of sadness. It was not. I curled up beneath my blankets on my bed and bawled in the dark, my breath wracked by sobs and by my attempts to silence my mourning. I did not want my family to see me in such a state, in all honesty, I did not want to see myself in such a state. I felt ashamed of what I viewed as irrationality, of the tears I was shedding for people I had never met, in a place I had never been. Of course, my efforts to hide were in vain, and my mother comforted me for an

hour while I cooled down. In this disjointed mentality, I ascertained a conclusion that I maintain today, despite its manic origins: I was not without reason when I came to tears. I was sad because lives that I had never known, people just like me that I had never met, would remain just that: people I’ll never know, people I’ll never meet, people forever trapped in a stasis of youth and in the permanence of death.

And so, I’ve come to reuse that conclusion: I weep not for losing what is known to me, but for losing what is unknown. I’ve come to learn that crying isn’t something to be forced, or to be used to mesh with those around you: crying is something that indicates who you are and how – and for what – you care. So, I still don’t cry very often, that’s true; however, I know that, when I do, it is not without justification.

THE MOON

Nicole Blanchard

The navy blue sky, lit up by a myriad of sprinkled stars, was the first thing that caught my attention that night. One by one, the white specks winked at me, as if trying to start a conversation; I smiled at the thought of communicating with a distant celestial body. There was a transparency in the air, like the feeling of Christmastime, when one can feel the joy and happiness all around.

I tried to slow the motion of the fast-moving trees as we drove by, but, as it turns out, squinting doesn't do much except make your eyes hurt. Instead, I imagined that, like a camera, every blink permanently captured the moment. The moving images embedded themselves in my mind, retrievable if I ever wanted to remember.

And then, from the corner of my eye, I glimpsed it. I angled my head up and there it was: Beautiful. Infinite. Perfect. It glistened without rays, floated without strings, and powered the tide without violence.

How could something so serene be so strong and so bright, yet cratered in dullness? I caught myself midthought: the moon wasn't perfect. It was never meant to be. It radiates in the shadows with the sun's support, the stars' guidance, and the Earth's leadership. The moon lives in celestial harmony.

POETRY

A HAIKU FOR EVERY CLASS I'M TAKING RIGHT NOW

Keven Luciano

AP Capstone

A research paper
Stuffed with claims and evidence
Useful for college

AP Gov

So many outlines
Tons of questions to answer
And so little time

AP Chemistry

Tough material
More a math class than science
And tests don't have curves

Web Design

Pretty easy class
With too many vocab words
Should have done AP

Band

Fun class to be in
Marching time can be stressful
Glad to be in band

AP Calculus

A funny teacher
Who's addicted to lemurs
Makes sense in context

AP Language

Tougher class for sure
With many essays to write
Never surrender!

WITHOUT YOU

Morgan Ciliberti

Sometimes I feel the disconnect of independence.
I allow it to move my mind to ideas of away.
Places where the strongest branches can't reach,
Where loyalty chains break.

I etched on my skin with your love,
As a reminder to stay where your compassion can reach.
A flurry of needle pricking in the bigger picture.
Bonds forged by time, then forged onto me in the physical realm.

My walls are a map to the truth, your framed faces guiding me
there.
It's not the same this way,
but I thought the memories would help.

After all of the moments, I reminded myself ...
It is sadly strange that I find myself at the isolated edge of the
universe.

TITELIST PRO V1

Briana Gabe

Trembling palms and a racing heart,
here comes the difficult part.
A three-foot putt to secure the lead,
goes right around the cup, makes me fall to my knees.

Everyone says it is just a game,
but how could a game bring so much pain?
Disappointment and loss surround me now.
Am I ever going to figure this out?

College coaches awaiting just one good round
to give us something to talk about.
My entire future in the palm of a hand,
a small white ball with dimples and a brand.

All at once,
my mood is reversed,
for I made a birdie
that put me in first.

Cheers all around me,
support from my fans.
I guess that this time
I love golf again.

SCHOOL EXCUSES

Jensen Thurman, Jaydin Gentile, Julian Delvalle, Jillian Loretoni,
Morgan Ciliberti, Adiv Ahsan, Kensley Fowler, Noah Lambert

I can't come to school today because ...

the President wanted a rematch.

my mom's wannabe Frankenstein escaped.

I have Ms. Kelly for English, and I didn't do my homework.

the alien triumvirate claimed me as the heir to the throne.

Timmy got inside the shed again, and I have to round up some bread crumbs and a taser.

drinking spoiled milk does more than make you sick.

my house is filled with narwhals.

Area 51 is acting up again.

