

# The Lighter

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Volume 60

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Article 1

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## The Lighter Fall 2014

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2014  
THE LIGHTER





ISSUE

50

VOL. 1

# DEAR READER,

Halt your game of Life and live a little. (Get it?) This is a compilation of late nights and mechanical pencils, teeth gritting, knee-splitting, spontaneous instants that led to a spark of that thing called inspiration. Take a moment to take them in. Your fellow students at Valparaiso University have earned a celebratory read-through.

The Lighter Staff would like to thank Allison Schuette for her superior skills as an advisor and mentor; she has mastered the art of cultivating her students' talents and keeping them level-headed. Many thanks to Stefan Roseen for his tireless drive and his incredible vision, and to Abby Accettura for her general perfection and quick wit. To all the students who took part in the selection committees, your insight, time, and efforts are much appreciated. You did, after all, shape the issue. To all the students who submitted their work—continue to create. What you do is most valuable.

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MICHAEL MICEK  
KYLE SMART

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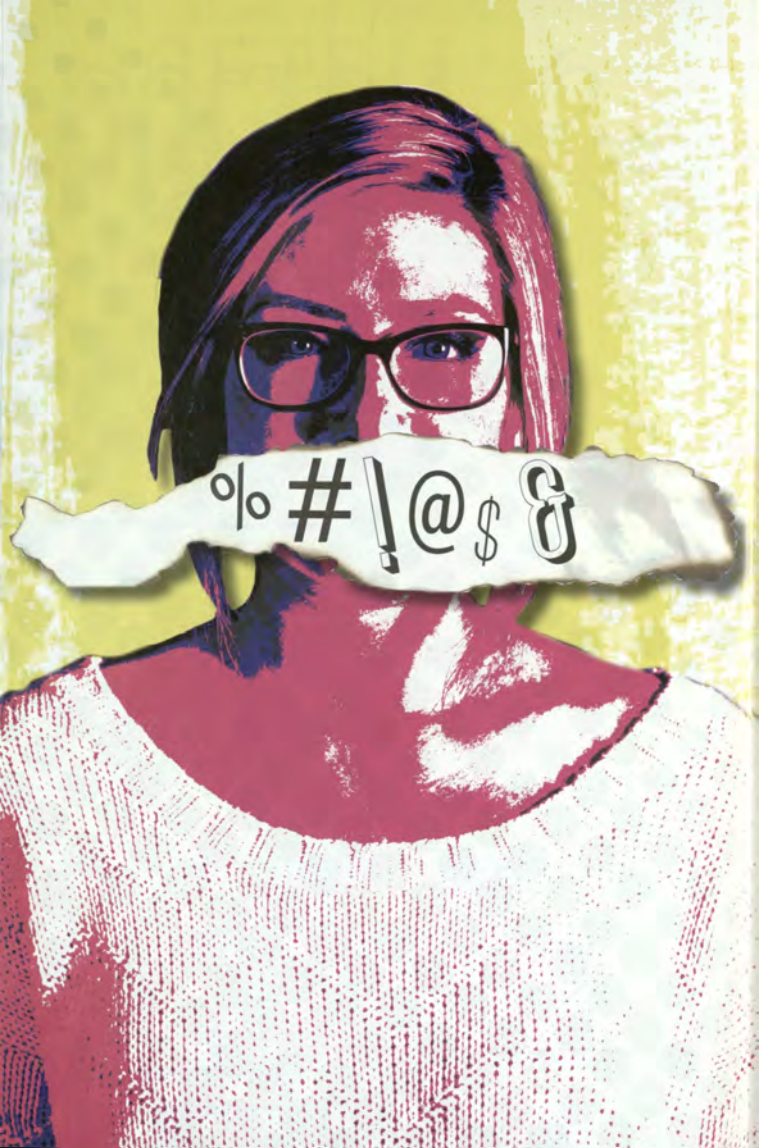
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POETRY!

POETRY!

POETRY!

POETRY!

POETRY!

POETRY!

## JUST DRIFTING- STACY MCKEIGUE

*Mr. Braddock: Ben, what are you doing?*

*Benjamin Braddock: Well, I would say that I'm just drifting. Here in the pool.*

—*The Graduate*

I can identify with Benjamin Braddock,  
awash on a raft, drifting through life.  
In a world swimming with pointlessness,  
these days I feel the same.

Awash on a raft, drifting through life.  
The water calm but suffocating.  
These days I feel the same,  
no matter where I go.

The water calm but suffocating,  
pressure just below the surface.  
No matter where I go,  
the rip tides try to drag me under.

Pressure just below the surface.  
If I put up a struggle, I'll drown.  
The rip tides try to drag me under.  
My only chance is to keep floating.

If I put up a struggle, I'll drown  
in a world swimming with pointlessness.  
My only chance is to keep floating.  
I can identify with Benjamin Braddock.

## THE EDGE- MYCHAL BRIM

Blades of dew grasp my back with tiny hands  
tickling me as I flirt with thoughts of falling.

Hand-goggle kaleidoscopes twist starry circles,  
turning oblivion into my toy.

"It's like you could just jump right in,"  
as we fathom dreams of descending upward.

Swimming towards Sirius in the meteorite river,  
a careening nova's nudge ripples us back home

Moisture lingers on my back,  
the remains of Earth's kiss goodbye.

And so we depart for a time,  
to sleep under the solace of Sunday stars.

## THE SLIP- JESSICA KOK

Outside, the downpour gets louder, stronger;  
Your arms curl in your towel  
as you inhale chlorine and salt; the screen  
on three walls makes metallic  
rattling, while you stand there pale, hugging  
a bin of pretzel rods, chomp  
off another Twizzler end,  
and just imagine a swim surrounded  
with the warm weightless falling  
of a pencil dive in your toothpaste suit.

You are now pulled down under  
your Great Aunt's underground swimming pool. Beads  
of water still as baubles  
hang over the white bumpy diving board.  
Oh sweet sick romance! Exposed  
to the bone you cling close to, you clamor  
at an excuse to stay down  
a moment longer and let the swindling  
water work you down farther  
into instinctual failing of phrase.

Ancient of days, so perpetually  
surrounded by what I need  
but impermeable and  
*What are they thinking that I am doing?*  
*What are they doing?* And here  
I am, and perhaps ashamed,  
and what they do they can do without me;  
what I do I can do with-  
out me. They say it's like slipping away—  
I'm not. I'm back up, back up

bobbing next to big bee. There are chortles  
from the poolside, petrichor's  
muddled mediocrities that smell like  
new life, but I know better.  
Now do not tell me not to  
face these things: jumping off balconies,  
kissing my lips to toxins,  
impurities? It's healthy. Now tell me  
to slip and I will, with submerging grace.

Facing the pool, glassy again, you see  
your pink raisined palm still grips  
a slippery Twizzler, coated in a film  
of saliva and water.  
The screened-in sun room suddenly becomes  
a miniature world. Cool  
gray walls and fermented gold light glimmer  
under a dimmer late-noon,  
and the Florida-floral seat cushions  
squeal as cousins settle in.

## PAPER THIN- DANIELLE STEINWART

She stole her mother's magazines  
and laid them across her bed,  
Tugging pigtails between her fingers,  
she wished for straight hair instead.

There were puckered lips and dieting tips  
and girls with ribbing skin.  
And although twice as old as she,  
that model was twice as thin.

She snuck inside her parent's bathroom  
and stared at the thing, the grail.  
She rocked on rosy toes, then stepped  
on the sleek, the skinny scale.

The numbers, they went spinning by,  
ringing round the rosie.  
Her sweaty fingers tallied the figures.  
They were vital. They were holy.

"Just *what* are you doing, here in the dark?  
You should already be in bed."  
"I'm sorry, Mom," and she left before  
anything more was said.

Her mom came in and kissed her head.  
"Goodnight my sweet, my treasure."  
Like every mother tells the child  
who's learned her beauty's measured.

## STATIC - STACY MCKEIGUE

tufts of glass  
shattering, muffled  
vintage vinyl  
ripped, torn  
velvet dresses  
clinging, unsticking  
thin plastic wrap stretched  
beyond boundaries  
of sound stitched together  
with needles scratching  
popping soft snow orchestra  
of absence hushes  
foam washing silence  
dressing darkness  
with patchy pitches  
fading into stations  
unfurling noise

## MEDUSA- BECCA GRISCHOW

I bummed a cigarette off a stranger on Ashland—  
he asked me if I lived around here;  
I asked him if I could use his lighter too.

He offered it to me with cracked knuckles,  
and I lit.

Quiet men are quick to become convenience stores  
for long-legged women  
who spider their way through their back pocket Parliaments.

I'm all long hair and pursed lips,  
they do not look me in the eye.  
Just put a smoke in my hand

and watch me burn it down.  
Never putting it to my mouth,  
letting it live and die between my fingers.

I never much cared for cigarettes.



# ETERNITY- DANIEL LOFTUS

Life begins.

Life grows.

Life slows.

Life knows.

Life will end.

All things die.

Makes you think;

"Why even try?"

Do try to love.

Do try to feel.

Try to believe

That it was real.

## WHAT I DONT HAVE- CARL COLVIN

Darkness. Darkness. The faucet  
drips, each droplet splits,

falls to the drain and never sees  
the light again. The bed creaks,

breaking under my weight,  
out of sync with the drips

that hit the ear like hammer  
on nail, reminding me all too well

of what I don't have, Light  
trickles from the sky and tries

to dry the drops on my cheek  
with effort so bleak that it never

gets past the window blinds.  
It says goodbye, like everyone

else, and leaves me behind.

## FAULT LINES- KAYLA BELEC

I.

Eyes hollowed out  
sunken sockets  
like raisins in oatmeal  
hair limp noodles  
edges shorn erratic  
like Spanish moss to the shoulders  
lips curled  
teeth bared  
taut and puckered  
around a dirty word  
spat at my face  
with a Mountain Dew bottle  
sticky and hollowed out  
heard ringing  
hurled headlong  
at my skull  
he missed  
his target but found  
his mark.

II.

Eyes searching,  
erratic beneath closed lids  
creating creases  
like fault lines  
rapidly shifting with every turn  
of Earth's axis.  
A fast-motion time lapse  
of landscapes changing  
with each headlong surge of history.  
Velvet voice muffled,  
smooth skin taut,  
measured movements squelched  
by the sticky heart of sleep,  
you cry out  
and your fingers clutch dead air.  
And I wonder  
before I wake you  
what walks  
beneath.

SLACKTOP- BECCA GRISCHOW  
(After *We Real Cool* by Gwendolyn Brooks)

We breathe bad city.  
Fast food twice a week cheap.  
We Cheetos and weed.  
We bleed  
on hand-me-downs.

We pop tab and bullet crowns.  
We know our street by gravel  
wedged between our teeth,  
run on no sleep and run  
back home when Kings come out.

We too far south for bus stops.  
We blame cops.  
We black  
top leftover from  
old school  
parking lot,  
no school  
on our block anymore.

We piss poor.  
Rock Jordans,  
sleep on floor,  
and pray.  
We okay.  
We outta here,  
someday.

## BEAUTIFULLY WORN'- JORDAN BIRES

Leaves flutter, caressing  
brown grass.  
Twin trees bend bare  
branches in the breeze,  
twisting and entwining,  
boney fingers in the sky.  
Double beats bang  
against ribs encased  
in yielding flesh. I sit  
still, the hardened  
wood of an oak bench beneath  
my fingertips, surface worn  
and iron hand rests rusted.  
Warped by rain and snow  
and sun. It remains,  
sturdy in the grass,  
no longer bright and new,  
but persistent.  
I stand, less alone.  
I move forward.

## WIRED MAN'- HEATHER MENDE

White walls of waxed shine cave closer in a dimming room. Your arms are placed pacing the keys. Distance between It and You seems small. It speculating every move like a rusted cable nut in a brand new flat screen.

Keyboard lights a restless tone,  
"Play me like an old piano dusted decades over."  
You will with pale skin reflecting off the florescent-eyes grey responding with a blink of blue.

Your mind dances in an upward roar  
as a digital clock changes far past four AM.  
Unlike the piano you are connected  
through overhead towers and sparking wires.

Before you can realize you evolve further  
into a black hole of missing melodies  
and clashing clicks, the most distrusted notes  
of all, attached, unable to close to solitude.

## AUGUST GLOAMING- JESSICA KOK

Long last,

    August leaves  
sodden and shiftless.

    Supine cupid  
is replaced by reason:  
    a nose in a book.

Orange and strange,  
    sheeted in ozone,  
the sun is in slot  
    beneath Byzantium  
and above the weightless  
    wetted ground.

And a star-topped silo  
    —how shy and strange—  
the heavy light  
    lingers on this pose!  
For the blind September  
    comes slowly and comically  
as a stagnant wind  
    persists to perish.

## MIDWEST WINTER- TAYLOR WIESE

*Unrelenting tranquilizer, instigating fits of forgetfulness.*

My mother gave me her old class ring, molded  
correctly to her finger's form. Lost, loose in the mess  
of my pockets, reappearing on washing machines,  
near the slime of my shower drain.  
We can't hold tight to everything.

For a time, I held the clean hope for consistency. Steady,  
summery burn. Kept burning fresh  
from a storehouse of pickled  
sunlight, dissuaded from sleeping late.  
Now, my unwashed dishes slow hope.

The heater gave up Saturday, and repair depends  
on next week's paycheck. July allows little  
thought to the cost of Winter. Ice infiltrates  
the softness in branches, replacing  
kind green with worn out coffee-water.

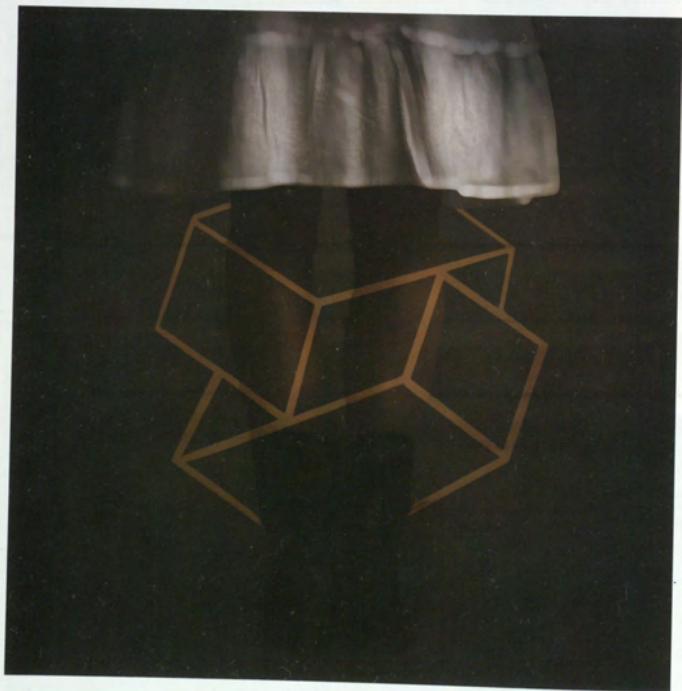
I have neglected my mug, waiting  
on the windowsill. Temperature as temporary.  
Liquid's the thing, essence, raw  
material waiting for a loving transfer of energy.  
My own body warming a place in bed.



A R T !  
A R T !  
A R T !  
A R T !  
A R T !  
A R T !



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EVERLASTING - EMILY MUELLER



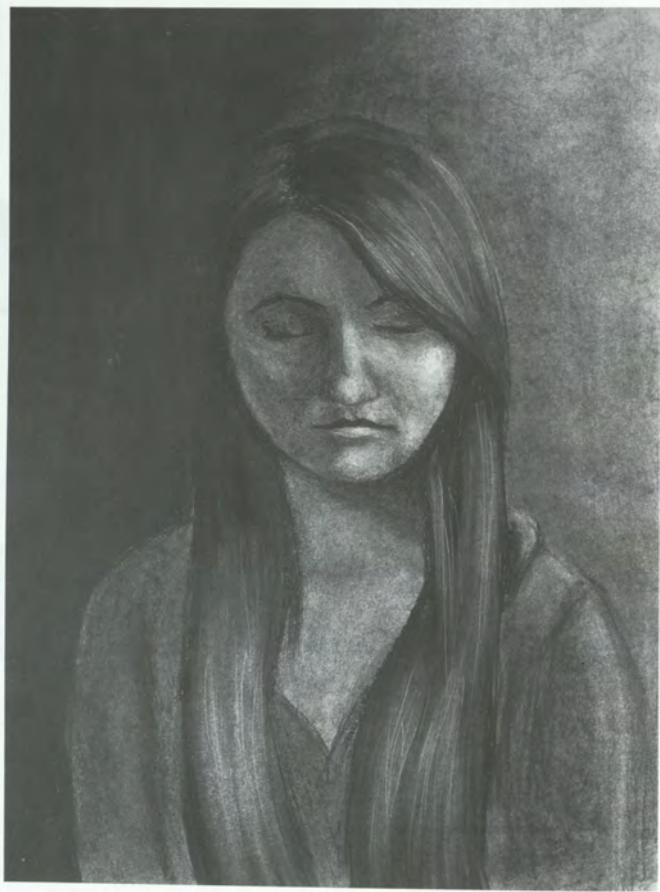
KYLE SMART- SHE WAS A VISION



SUMMER SWINGS - CORA VELTMAN



STEFAN ROSEEN- MELANCHOLY



UNTITLED - MARIANA KRAMPIEN



ALEXANDER URVGA- LEANING OUT INTO THE ABYSS





YOU'RE SO DOPE -ANNA HAYDEN-ROY



THE SUN



LIGHT HOUSE -SADDAM AL-ZUBAIDI



MIRANDA JOEBGEN- GRAFFITI ON THE WALL BETWEEN PALESTINE AND ISRAEL



THINKING - MONER ALOWKAR



STEFAN ROSEEN- SELF AND MACHINE



ASCENDING - KYLE SMART



FIRE ESCAPE





ARE YOU GOING TO AGE WITH GRACE -EMILY MUELLER



JULIE AHLERT- UNTITLED



LINGER -SADDAM AL-ZUBAIDI



MALLORY SWISHER- STEFAN



PEPPERS - CORA VELTMAN



DANIELLA TRIPODIS- STILL LIFE OF A PRIMARY SET

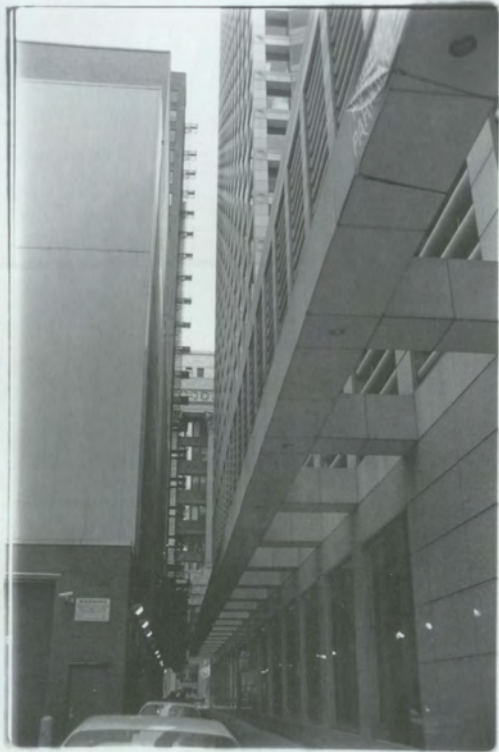


RESERVED -LAUREN SKINIOTES



EMILY MUELLER- REFRACTIONARY





AWARENESS DOWN THE ALLEY -GABBY LENIHAN



STEFAN ROSEEN- CITY



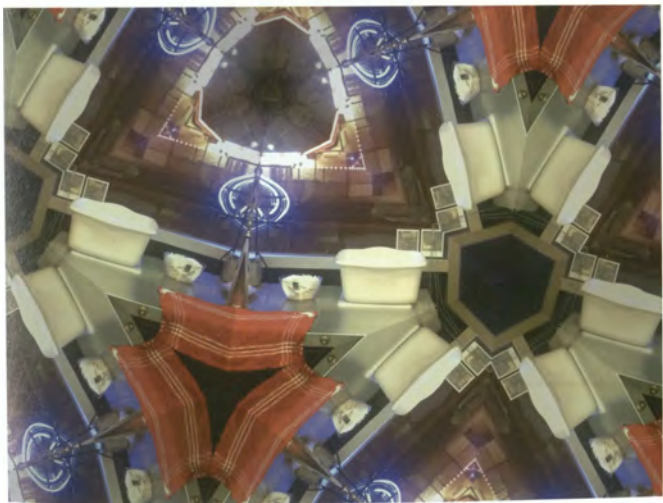
PINE FOREST - STERLING LONG



EMILY MUELLER- SCARS



LIGHTS OF SAN FRAN' -STERLING LONG



CORA VELTMAN- CLOSING JOY



LEE -SADDAM AL-ZUBAIDI



DANIELLA TRIPODIS- UNTITLED





UNTITLED - JESSICA LEWIS



KYLE SMART- THE LIGHT OF WHATS LEFT



BLIND CONTOUR -ANNA HAYDEN-ROY



LEAH BIRHANU- KASHI



ONCE I WAS MYSELF -STEFAN ROSEEN



LAUREN SKINIOTES- TURNING SKELETONS INTO GODDESSES

William Shakespeare

# MACBETH



Director: **R. Andrew White**

**Aaron James Wegner** as Macbeth

**Kayla Moon** as Lady Macbeth

**Keaton Stewart // Allison Grischow // Margaret deVeer // Andrew Mancini // Frankie Caputo // Christian Gu/tafson  
Cody Schwartz // Jilaine Heitkotter // Michael Mead // Claire Rutkowski // Kayla Belec // Becca Grischow  
Michael Kocken // Meredith McKay // Laura Whitman**

**Ashleigh Stochel // Mary Atchley // Max Hinders // Stefan Rosen // Malory Swisher // Alan D. Ernstson // Elizabeth A. Styles // Ann Kessler**

**Chris Grayson // Brandon Nelsom // Ashleigh Pepper // Derek Whitehouse // Sarah Bell // Faith Briggs // Maxine Moses // Megan McJannet // Cori-Cui // Victoria Ross  
Christina Healy // Hannah Kocan // Stepping Long // Rachel McLaughlin // Katie Ashton // Marissa Butts // Genevieve Dornemann // Renee Espartero // Anthony Mazy**

MACBETH -KYLE SMART



MALLORY SWISHER- MAKING UP





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PROSECI!

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PROSECI!

PROSECI!

PROSECI!

Dad is on the phone: "Yeah, sure. I'm just at Wal-Mart walking down the soup aisle. This clam chowder triggers memories, but back to what you asked. I didn't get a chance to tell you what was happening when I left. I was in a hurry. Oh, Kaiser rolls would be nice. Actually, I was in hostile territory. I couldn't even come back to the house. Your mother had to get a police officer to hand the divorce papers to me. I didn't see her. Your Oma and Opa were the only way to communicate to your mom. They let me stay at their house for a little while. At the time, I was travelling on business, so I guess it was good I had somewhere to go to get out of there. I still like to think of myself as a marketer. I mean, for example, look at this Jell-O. It's amazing. It probably costs them a penny to make all of these and yet they charge a dollar for four of them. Brilliant. In the meantime, I have the Jell-O, and I'm heading to the check out. I know you didn't call to hear my memories."

My Mom and I moved out of the suburbs and into the country to what we called "The Hill." It was my great-grandparents' house, which was converted from a barn. The house had been empty for at least a decade. Musky spider webs filled the wooden beams on the ceiling, and hay could still be found sticking out of the wooden walls. Ivy had consumed the west side of the house, which still had flaking burgundy paint peeling on the sides. We had a small petunia garden in the front with a patch of lamb's ear. Deer would come and sleep under the windowsills in the garden and nibble on the petals.

My room was in the attic on the west side. It overlooked a pond that was filled with muskrats and fish that had parasites, which looked like grains of rice, inside of them. In the autumn, the leaves spread an orange pastel matte over the horizon, while the sky filled with a yellow gradient. This gave a dark silhouette to the once golden leaves. My mother and I would sit on the splintering dock and watch the sunset. I would have a glass of orange juice with crushed ice and a maraschino cherry, and she would have either a martini or a glass of red wine.

In the winter, the pond would freeze over and the tracks of the muskrats could be seen from my window, converging toward the dam. A ginkgo, which my grandfather had planted as a child, stretched its limbs and scraped the side of house.

I was too little to know any difference, but we did not have any heat in the house. There was a cast iron stove in the kitchen that we kept going most of the time; however, that only heated one section of the house. There was no insulation, just bricks and wood. The roof was made out of tin, and when it hailed or rained, I would stay up for hours listening to the pattering of the water. We had another stove near my bed, but it was cracked in the basin, so it was never used. In the spring and summer, birds would make their nests in the venting pipe. When they hatched, I would wake up to their cries for food. I would get up out of bed and scrape my feet on the frigid pumice-like brick while I trudged downstairs for breakfast.

My mother dances across our living room listening to Madonna's Vogue as she vacuums her great grandmother's carpet. She just finished sweeping out our walk-in fireplace, or as I like to think of it, my stage. Almost every night before I go to bed, the living room transforms into a theatre. My audience (Mom) either enjoys a performance of Elvis' Golden Records or a monologue from Hamlet or Henry IV. I may only be nine, but each set is carefully staged and meticulously performed to the mark.

I'm sitting on our purple couch reading J.K. Rowling's The Chamber of Secrets for the third time. I haven't seen Mom this enthused for a while. It's summer, and her classes are over. Indian, our Abyssinian house cat, is curled up on the other side of the sofa with his claws adhered to the pillow and his head nuzzled into the bottom cushion.

I try to pet him, but he hisses at me, looks at the vacuum, and burrows further into the couch to hide from the chaos. Mom says he has seizures, and that is why he doesn't like to be touched by people, but I think it's because he does not like living with me. He's jealous. Mom moves in front of the television, blocking The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Mikey is trying to talk Splinter and the other turtles into getting some pizza, but all I can hear is Mom's speaker rattling Madonna's bass line.

"Can you turn...?"

"What?"

"I wanta watch my show."

"Honey, I'm cleaning. Would you take the cat out on the porch while I fix up the couch?"

I look at her and then at the cat and shake my head to suggest no. She smiles and nods in the opposite motion.

Putting my book down, I move over toward the cat and put my hands around him. He twists his head around and gives me a look that I interpret as "Touch me, and I'll kill you."

"Mom! He doesn't wanta go." She either can't hear me or is ignoring me as she pulls the vacuum's cord across the room. Seeing no other option, I quickly pick up the cat, and the pillow comes with. His front paws continue to cling to the pillow as his other two jab into my stomach.

I open the door and place him on the Santa mat on the screened-in porch. He looks around, realizes it is safe, and scurries off to sit on a rocking chair to clean himself. As I sit in the chair next to him, my mother comes outside to empty the vacuum bag.

"Indian! Come here."

"What are you doing?"

"He's going to go out and help me dump the vacuum bag." My mother opens the screen door and holds it there.

"No! He's an indoor cat. He won't know what to do out there." I run over to the door and try to keep it closed, but my effort is useless. Indian looks up from his chair and slowly walks over to the door. He stops and looks up at me, then bolts through the door and into the forest. I try to chase after him but he outruns me. Mom tells me he'll come back, but he won't. He told me he didn't like it here.

The alarm clock goes off and Dad rolls over to stop the noise. We're staying at the Travelodge just off of Interstate 65 in Columbus. It's only twenty minutes away from where Mom and I live. Dad came down from Michigan to visit me for one of his allowed weekends, which really only happened a quarter of the time that it was permitted. I put my clothes on and go to the lobby to bring back a cup of coffee with no cream or sugar for Dad. He gets dressed, and we start walking to the Denny's diner across the street.

There is a fresh layer of snow coating the ground. It is early on a Sunday morning, and no one has gotten around to plowing the parking lot. I can hear the cars passing on the interstate and a little beagle barking at a clamor of rooks in the lot. The man walking him is wearing an AgriPro hat and a ratted Pacer's jacket. He's smoking something foul, so I hold my breath and hasten my pace till we get inside. I do not see anyone in the restaurant except for an old couple seated at a table and a very large waiter with oily black hair.

"Welcome to Denny's! Y'all can sit anywhere that ya'd like."

We choose the high seats by the grill that make it look like we are at a bar. I like these the best because I can swing my feet back and forth and spin the chair. Dad orders a large biscuits and gravy and two waters. As we wait, Dad reads USA Today, while I flip over my placemat and borrow one of his ink pens. I draw a picture of Tiger Woods teeing off on a par three. I make sure to put a cloud in the sky by the sun and to show where the hole is. I write "One in Hole" on the top and give it to Dad to keep.

The food arrives and I begin to tear off pieces of the biscuits, roll them, and carefully place them on top of the bowl of gravy. There are four biscuits, and I use them all to create a spiral that leads into the center of the bowl. When I am done, Dad stirs all of the biscuit balls into the gravy and he tells me to bow my head and fold my hands for prayer.

"Komm, herr Jesus, sei unser gast, und lassen sie diese geschenke an uns gesegnet werden."  
"Amen."

We finish eating, and Dad gives me a five-dollar bill to pay the lady who seated us. I leave the change that she hands back on the counter. The man with the dog is gone, and it smells cleaner outside. The salt crushes under my sneakers as we walk off of the sidewalk. I walk behind Dad, kicking the snow as we go back to the hotel. I form a snowball with my bare hands and try to make

it as large as possible. As Dad starts to open the door to our room, I do something I have never done before.

I throw it at him. Hard. It hits on the lower right side of his back. He stops and holds the door open, not looking at me. I stand still, not knowing if I am going to get in trouble or not. He turns slowly around and looks at me. He is grinning with a look in his eye that makes me see him like one of the kids on the playground. Chuckling, he leans down and gathers snow to retaliate. I run behind the only shelter in the lot—Dad's work car. I keep throwing snowballs at him and hitting him. He keeps missing but continues to throw them at me. He never hits me once, even though we are only a car length apart.

---

"Imagine me taking you home to your mother that afternoon with a broken nose caused by me throwing a snowball at your face. Sure, that would have gone over well."

"What's the worst that could have happened? You could have at least hit me once."

"Sure, and if I did, I would have had nine-year old you defend me in court so your mother wouldn't have taken away even more of my visitation time."

"Say what you will. I definitely beat you."



I can hear the buzzing inside my head, can feel the pain rolling down my spine as I cringe at each movement the hand is making. It's becoming more bothersome than painful. The tattoo gun makes its way across my left foot, bone by bone. A blade, a needle, digging into my skin.

I cannot begin to understand this new experience of bothersome movement, my mind keeps telling me that it is hurting my body, but another part of me thinks that pain is just an obstacle. Reminding myself of this, I begin to drift off...

### The Beginning of the Gun

I like to think that there is a better opportunity for me in this world. To take on something greater. Injecting people with poison all day does not seem like the best way to make a living for myself but people find me very useful and they are always coming back for me. For more.

I guess you could say that my job is bizarre in its origins. I am always questioning where, when, and how I ended up here. I like the idea of providing people with what they want, but it comes at a price.

Pain.  
Suffering.  
It's actually hilarious.

A portion of my life was spent rubbing a cheap cloth over '65 Mustang convertibles. See, growing up and spending most of your life in the desert of Nevada gets you to understand the full meaning of heat. Dripping in sweat, countless hours and hours at the car wash rubbing expensive vehicles in my dirty, navy blue, disappointing uniform. The damn thing was a jumpsuit. My greased-back black hair somehow deemed me as "attractive," and the number of times I spent having women flirt with me was immense. The only perk of this job, I'd say. The tips were good sometimes too. But still...

I wanted something more. Something better.

So I did it. I created a new sense of being for myself by removing my body from earth and human form. It was simple, really. I was excited to see.

Bang. Bang.

I had been shot, intentionally, by the hand of a dark-skinned man who was unhappy. When you fall into the afterlife, you do not recall humanity or why things happened. They just are. I moved on.

Then, I was placed into something I would have never expected. I didn't really know much about it, but when I felt myself and felt the cool metal that was my new body, I knew this would make for an interesting afterlife.

Some of you might wonder if I'm even real. It's humorous, the responses I get from people seeing me for the first time. "Wait, whaaaat is that? Are you using that on me?" "Is this going to hurt?"

These are the funnier of the responses.

Then the buzzing, my heated body first hits them and they yelp and squirm uncomfortably.

I hate when they do this.

The best, "Is this going to hurt?"  
Are you serious? Of course I'm going to hurt you!

~  
My Partner

He takes such great care of me. Something I never had in my previous life.  
Someone to tuck me in to my covers when the work day is over, someone who keeps me looking polished, and someone I can count on to always be there for me.

We secretly laugh at those people who are ignorant about what we do on a daily basis.

~  
Unable to Speak.

That is one downfall of this position, though: I cannot speak with words. Ever. It is not my place.  
My thoughts wander around my silver parts as I wait for the buzzing sounds, which substitute for my voice. Then we're off!

I wish I wasn't so cynical in my past life.

Do I regret making the simple decisions in my past life? Sometimes. Maybe sometimes. Sometimes not. I could have been a better man.

Do I think I'm in love with my partner? Possibly. We are just getting used to each other still. After all, I am still new to this position.

Do I think I'll do it again? Create another new life? It is pretty exciting to see where you end up.

Nobody ever answers my questions.

~  
bzzzzzzzzzz.buzzzzz.buzzzzzz.  
OUCH!!!

"Don't be a wimp, Emily, you're just getting something small!" her tall blonde friend repeatedly tells her. Some guy is rubbing her back.

It is actually not small. Her friend has a sterile, cold way of comforting her.

Did I care? No. God, I'm just trying to get my job done..

Emily. Emily!! Stop moving Emily. You're making my body ache. This is tough work, you know.

~  
Emily's Childhood (pt. 1)

Growing up, I was an only child until age seven. The apartment complex I remember residing in was burned to pieces a few years back, after it had been abandoned for years. We lived in this small apartment building, my mother, father, and myself, for a decent amount of time before relocating to a "nicer," south suburb of Chicago—Oak Forest.

It was then I saw what was a tattoo. My young childish mind drifted to coloring books with outlines of Disney characters, in which I was going to color in the lines with my glitter Crayola crayons. Blue river was my favorite.

"Daddy, what's that stuff all over your arms?"



Stuff was one of my favorite words; it described pretty much anything.

I recall asking my father this at my 5th birthday party. We were outside playing party games and taking turns swinging at the pink, heart-shaped pinata. I had just taken (and missed) all of my swings, so my dad picked me up, put me on his shoulders and let me swing away at Pocahontas until all the candy poured out. An assortment of Charleston Chews, Twix, and Sweetarts were at my feet. As he put me down so I could get the candy into my basket, I saw his arms.

My dad, a businessman who had always dressed nicely with long-sleeved button-down shirts, had hardly ever shown his arms. Today at my birthday party, he was wearing a grey t-shirt which showed every piece of art painted onto his body.

"They're tattoos, Emily," he told me.

"Oooo what are tattoos?"

"They are pieces of art that are permanently on your skin."

"Forever?" My eyes were widening.

"Yes," he laughed. "I'll have them forever."

At the time I had thought of them as pages in a coloring book: an outline, straight and curvy lines, shapes, and then, finally, color. I had an excessive imagination for the reason why stuff worked.

Some tattoos have a story to tell, others provide something to show-off, and others have a meaning so deep to the person's life and spirit that their meaning is irrelevant to the rest of society.

My tattoo has no significant meaning. Unlike many others, I do not believe there has to be a preconceived idea behind a tattoo. I'm a fanatic for the art, the personal touch of style, and the appeal of using your body as a blank canvas for permanent artwork driven into the skin in a variety of colors and patterns.

"Hey, kid are you doing ok?" the tattoo artist asked me.

"Yeah, I'm doing fine." I can't even think straight.

"We probably have around 45 minutes left to finish the fill..."

The tattoo artist seems exhausted. I was the last customer of the night at Native Rituals, a small tattoo shop just off Cicero Avenue in Chicago, and my piece was taking longer than expected.

It's now time to take a break. My foot is bleeding way more than it's supposed to. I don't really know what is supposed to be happening. My tattoo artist tells me I should not have taken shots of Jameson before getting my tattoo.

"Did I tell you I took shots of Jameson?"

"You've only mentioned it a few times," he says jokingly.

(What NOT to do before getting tattooed: Be drunk or on pills.)

I think he told me that is why I am bleeding so much. I don't remember drinking anything. I drove here?

Apparently we've been here for a few hours. I actually cannot remember what time I arrived at the shop. I glance over at the cracked, red, plastic leather couch that's placed in the outermost corner of the room. My friend Bre has her arm draped over her face.

"Bre?" I wait for my friend's response.

Nothing comes from my friend. She is probably sleeping. Bre works at a car wash. What time is it? 11? 12? My phone and wallet are next to Bre. I feel stuck to the cracked black seat I have been sitting in.

My boyfriend is busy looking at flash-art, which are sheets of drawings tattoo artists provide as a tool for customers to decide what they want. He already started making his sleeve a few months prior. I want him to come back and rub my back because I'm sore from sitting in an awkward position for hours. He never comes and I can't find the words to ask.

I hardly remember them coming with me. I notice that Bre's digital camera sits on her lap. How embarrassing. I wonder if my friend is dreaming in her sleep, or if she is even sleeping heavily. I could wake her up if I call her name a little louder and a few more times, but I figure dreaming is better than watching me get this tattoo.

The koi pond in the lobby is making swishing sounds from the Koi swishing around. The metal cases next to the pond are full of metal, silicon, and stone gauges that reflect off the water.

Dreaming, or wandering minds can produce strange, complex images. My favorite types of dreams are daydreams. I drift into these often.

"Wandering re-establishes the original harmony which once existed between man and the universe."  
-Anatole France

The artist is back. What was around 10 minutes felt like an eternity. The familiar buzzing sound echoes through the sterile room and it's time to finish this piece. Just 45 more minutes.. "Dont be a wimp..." buzz buzz buzz.

#### Emily's Childhood (pt. 2)

When I first saw my name sprawled out in cursive along my father's shoulder, I was so excited. E, M, I, L, Y. Each letter individually wrapped around the face of an angel whose wings were spread out in white ink outlined in pure black. This was the only tattoo with meaning my father said he had. Which was fine by me.

Not long after my father's newest art piece, he added another name to the bottom of the angel, my sister Catie's. This took some time getting used to. I had been an only child for most of my youth and this was a permanent reminder that I was loved equally as another person. Now, I see this as an admirable piece.

Never get someone's name tattooed, my father had told me.

Society's standard on what you should never get tattooed on the human body,

- 1.) Names of significant others
- 2.) Infinity signs
- 3.) Feathers
- 4.) Stars strategically placed on each collarbone
- 5.) Shooting stars
- 6.) Extremely long quotations
- 7.) Tattoos on the fingers, lips, or head

Who gets to decide that one cannot have an infinity symbol placed on their wrist if they so choose?  
Who can critique someone's tattoo from their own originality?

The body is sacred. Sacredness allowing one to perform any additions that they so please. The standard of what is "normal" for the body is nowhere near the same for everyone. Without unoriginality, how can one be original?

The artist tells me we are done. It has been almost three hours.  
My boyfriend agrees to pay for half of the tattoo as a birthday present to me. I am finally the legal age of 18, meaning I can get a tattoo whenever and wherever I wanted. This is what excites me the most.

I take out my wallet to pay the remainder of the bill and leave a \$50 dollar bill behind for my tattoo artist, who seems exhausted. I'm not aware of the proper etiquette for tipping tattoo artists.

#### The Aftermath.

I am ready for this day to be over. I try wincing to warn my partner that I am tired and he needs to stop using me so much. I understand though; people need to get work done and my partner needs to make money. I once saw a full \$50 sitting on his metal table.

That would have taken me 100 cars to get tipped a total of \$50.

I don't know my partner's name. Or anything about him. Just that he and I share an interesting bond with one another. Once, before he put me away in my blue velvet case, (which was my bed) I heard him sobbing.

I asked what was wrong. Of course, he didn't hear me but he told me anyway. His life was getting hard, his girlfriend left him with their two small children, 4 and 6, and took off... He didn't want this life anymore.

I told him that he needed to follow his dreams and find something better to become in another life. He apparently agreed. Just as I had. I never saw my partner again.

Was I sad? Maybe.  
Did I want to see him again? Maybe in another life.

I don't think I'll be escaping mine anytime soon.

My blue velvet casing remains closed around my silver plated body.



## THE HOURGLASS PEOPLE -STACY MCKEIGUE

Between each tick of the clock on a wall or the watch on a wrist, there lives a little town of people for whom life is measured in sand. Large vials sit in the town square, lazily trickling granules of every color imaginable from the top half to the bottom. Gathered in a circle like a bouquet of wildflowers, they are a bizarre and colorful mix of dust, metal, and glass. With each new birth, another vial is added to the circle, contained within an extravagant stand and adorned with the name of its owner. Aware of this, the townspeople can often be found milling about the vials, transfixed by the ominous beauty. For this reason, they are called The Hourglass People.

While no one can say with any certainty from where these hourglasses come, it is thought that they are brought by the Stroke. This creature, a mechanical bird made of gears that emits a rhythmic clicking sound from its beak, is said to come only at night, when everyone is asleep. All attempts to prove the Stroke's existence have failed, however, because the eventide brings such darkness that The Hourglass People cannot see more than an inch in front of themselves, even when holding a lantern. Still, many swear to have heard the soft squeak and grind of an automaton in the night.

The place in which The Hourglass People live is, indeed a small town, with only one main cobblestone road connecting a handful of smaller side streets and alleyways. The shop buildings there are not very large—two stories at most—and they are commonly painted in varying shades of navy, grey, and brown. Many of the houses contain no staircases. A few horses trot casually up and down the streets, pulling passengers in neat black carriages, but most people prefer to walk in the daytime.

It is here, in this very village, that a mother gave birth to an unusual baby one cold and rainy evening.

\*\*\*

Mr. Wellwood, a stout and somewhat jovial fellow who lived on 42 Ender Street, had always desired to have a child. He hoped for a son to carry on the family name. Though his wife, a kindly but distant woman with brown hair consistently pinned neatly to her head, remained reserved about the subject, she was less keen on the idea. In her youth, Mrs. Wellwood had spent quite a few afternoons in the town square, watching old men and women eye the sand left in their hourglasses. She remembered all too well her first encounter with Death.

She was six years old, and she was on her way home from afternoon tea with her mother and her friend, Mrs. Porte. As she and her mother were passing through the square, they heard a shrill voice cry out. The young Mrs. Wellwood whirled her head about and spotted Mrs. Langley standing in front of her glass. The top was completely empty.

Her mother tugged at the sleeve of her dress. "Come, Vivian," she whispered. "This is not for a child."

A figure in oily black, tattered robes had appeared in the street, and was making its way slowly over to where the old woman had rooted herself into the ground.

"No!" she screamed. "Stay back. You are not welcome here!" Spittle flew from her mouth and her grey eyes were wild. "I warn you."

Still, the figure advanced. Vivian felt her clammy digits close tightly around clumps of her mother's skirt. Her heart raced. She barely heard the insistent voice in her ear commanding her to lower her gaze and make haste towards home.

Mrs. Langley had turned to face the vial. Her frail, bony fingers were wrapped around the rust-colored brass, the knuckles white, and she was howling like a feral animal. The robed entity, which the young Mrs. Wellwood took to be a strange sort of man, stopped right behind the woman. Reaching out with hands made of metal and gears, he seized Mrs. Langley by the shoulders and began to tug.

"I will not go with you! The sand is not fully gone. There must be a few grains left."

The hooded man did not speak, but gave a mighty pull. With a sickening crack and a bloodcurdling scream, the old woman's hands released the stand, her fingers limp and bent at odd angles.

"Mother!" Vivian cried. She buried her face in the material of the woman's dress, but

allowed one eye to peek out at the scene before them. The man now dragged a limp and wailing Mrs. Langley, half collapsed against his shoulder, down the street to the place where first he appeared. Upon reaching this spot, the two vanished.

The other Hourglass People lowered their heads and hurried on to where they were due, refusing to make eye contact with anyone they passed. Vivian's mother grasped her daughter's hand and directed the two of them towards home.

The next day Vivian stopped in the square as she was walking to her friend's house. Mrs. Langley's hourglass was gone.

Mrs. Wellwood never spoke of this occurrence to her husband, however, and in the end she agreed they would have a child.

\*\*\*

The pregnancy had been long and difficult for Mrs. Wellwood: the days were spent in fretful fits, and the nights were filled with horrid dreams of sand rushing through a gaping hole and small pudgy fingers growing pale and stone cold the moment she touched them. On a few occasions, she awoke just as a thunderous crack echoed through her head.

Finally, the day arrived and the baby was born. A little girl with her father's green eyes and her mother's delicate features, she appeared healthy and showed no signs of disease or ailment.

Mr. and Mrs. Wellwood named their daughter Christina.

\*\*\*

The morning after Christina's birth, Mr. Wellwood went to the town square to find her hourglass. He read each plaque carefully, but could not find one engraved with his daughter's name. "Impossible," Mrs. Wellwood sniffed when her husband told her. "Everyone has an hourglass."

"Not Christina," Mr. Wellwood whispered. "I checked three times. There is no glass."

When she was no longer bedridden, Mrs. Wellwood decided to see for herself. To her dismay, she found no trace of a vial for her daughter. She held the child a little closer to her bosom.

\*\*\*

Word of the babe born without an hourglass quickly permeated the town. There was not a single person who did not come to see the girl for himself, to lay eyes on the miracle baby; the wonder child; the one who, it was believed, could not die. The women of the town cooed over Mrs. Wellwood, asking her questions about her pregnancy and the delivery, as though that might explain away the peculiarity of the situation. The men sat with Mr. Wellwood at the pub, what-do-you-supposing until it closed. All the townspeople agreed that the child looked no different than any other baby, and yet she was different in the most significant way: she was not assigned an hourglass.

\*\*\*

At first it was proposed that Christina may never grow any older; grow she did, however, and she was a lovely young lady. She had vibrant red hair she wore long down her back, tied at the nape of her neck with a single ribbon. Though her father was a redhead as well, his now-grey hair had been a very muddy rouge when he was young, not at all the startlingly fiery shade his daughter had inherited. In addition, she was always tall for her age. At ten, she towered over even the tallest of boys, though they caught up in due course. At twelve, she begged her mother to allow her to go about barefoot, so that she might seem shorter and less intimidating. Mrs. Wellwood would not have it.

From early on, Christina understood that she was not like all the other Hourglass People. It was so much more than merely her lack of a vial of sand. The women always smiled when they saw her out for a stroll, and inquired as to whether or not she would care to accompany them for tea the next afternoon. The men would tip their hats and stop long enough to say, "Good morning, Miss," or "How are you feeling today, dear child?" which they never did for anyone else unless they knew him personally. It seemed that the whole town wanted to be friends with Christina. Even the mayor's daughter, the young Miss Winnifred Moffatt, who spent most of her time off by herself, was known to spend hours alongside the Wellwood girl, whispering and giggling in hushed tones over their sewing, and the pair became fast friends.

For reasons Mrs. Wellwood would not care to explain, however, Christina was forbidden

to pass the hours in the town square.

"You are to come straight home," her mother would tell her if she went off by herself. "There will be no stopping in the square."

This mystery only piqued Christina's curiosity, and she took to passing by as slowly as possible. She guessed that as long as she continued moving, she was not disobeying the rules.

She adored the brief snatches of what she saw: the beautiful glass bulbs; the brass and metal, twisting and gleaming in the weak sunlight; the old men who played chess and smoked cigars, eyeing their glasses as the sand drizzled away a bit faster with each inhale. Why would anyone deem this place unfit for someone like herself?

\*\*\*

Shortly after her sixteenth birthday, Christina developed a terrible cough. She thought nothing of it, though her mother was concerned. This was not right. How could the child who could not die possibly be sick? She tried to push the thought out of her mind, but the cough would not go away, and seemed to be getting worse. When three weeks had gone by, she insisted her daughter receive a visit from the town sandman, so named because he could heal the sick and injured with medicines made using some of the afflicted's sand.

After a thorough examination of their daughter, the sandman stood in the Wellwoods' small kitchen. A teakettle whined on the range in the corner, but when Mrs. Wellwood offered him a cup, he politely declined.

"I have some very distressing news. Please, will you have a seat?"

The three took places around the table in the center of the room. Mr. Wellwood sipped at his drink, but his wife appeared to forget the tea in front of her.

"There is no easy way to say this. Mr. and Mrs. Wellwood, your daughter has fallen ill with consumption. I am terribly sorry."

Mrs. Wellwood's spine stiffened. "But...how can that be? She only had a cough."

"The cough was the first sign. She also admitted to a loss of appetite and feelings of weakness, and when I checked her temperature, she had a significant fever."

Mr. Wellwood finally spoke. "Will she live?"

"The chances, as you know, are not very good."

"It is impossible!" Mrs. Wellwood slammed a fist on the table. Her teacup rattled in its saucer, splashing a miniature tidal wave over the edge and onto the wood surface. "My daughter cannot die."

The sandman sighed heavily. "We all believed that in the beginning, yes. However, it is now clear to me that her body is just the same as yours and mine. She can become sick. And she can—"

"Please," Mrs. Wellwood whispered, her hand hovering over her mouth. "Please, do not say it."

"Is there anything we can do?"

The sandman turned to Mr. Wellwood. "Normally I could use the sand from her hourglass to help heal her, but because she has none..."

"Take mine," Mrs. Wellwood offered. "Take as much as you need. Just save my daughter."

"I am afraid that cannot be done. Only the sand belonging to the patient can help her. Yours would not change anything. I truly am sorry."

He gave Mr. and Mrs. Wellwood instructions on how to take care of their daughter. Bed rest, he said, was most important, as well as plenty of sunlight. Then he collected his bag and his coat, and he left.

\*\*\*

When word of Christina's condition made its way through town, many of The Hourglass People flocked to 42 Ender Street to visit the sick young woman. It could not be true, they said, the girl could not die. Yet there she lay upon the bed, eyes bright and limbs frail. The men left the room shaking their heads. The women traded glances, from one to the next, and muttered about shattered belief in a better world.

One woman, by the name of Mrs. Whittle, leaned over and whispered in Christina's ear,

"My dear, I had such faith in you. We all did. You were a promise, a sign that this world was changing, that someday we might all live in peace and not have to watch those bloody hourglasses counting down our lives. But you are just like the rest of us. The only exception is that you do not know when he will come for you." With that, she was gone.

Christina had been feigning sleep, as she always did now, when visitors came. The town seemed to have held her in such high regard, and now, one by one, it was turning its back on her. She began to weep silently into her pillow.

\*\*\*

Months passed, and Christina's condition worsened. She spent so much time in bed that her legs shook with atrophy when she tried to stand on them for a prolonged period of time. Her thick scarlet locks began to thin and fall out, and her complexion turned utterly translucent. She attempted to play cards with her mother, or to sew or read with Winnifred, but she was often too tired and weak to manage even the simplest of tasks.

One afternoon her friend entered the room with a solemn look on her face.

"Winnie, it is so good to see you." Christina spoke softly, drowsiness tugging at her. "You have not come for over a week. I was beginning to worry."

Winnifred kept her blue eyes fixed on the wooden floorboards and muttered something.

"Pardon me?"

"I said...that this is the last visit I shall make to see you." Her hands were clasped in front of her, but she was wringing her fingers in an attempt to keep her friend from noticing that they trembled. "My father has forbidden me from coming here."

"But we are friends. You are the only person in this whole town who dares admit an acquaintanceship with me. Surely he must know that."

"He does. That is why I am no longer allowed to come. Father says people are talking, and that they say the most malicious things. He says it is harmful to my reputation."

"What do they say?"

"Christina..."

"What do they say?"

Tears sprang into Winnifred's eyes. She tried to blink them away. "They say you are a traitor. A woman of false promises—"

"I promised nothing! I never claimed to be an idol. They made me into one!"

"Please understand, it is not my wish to forsake you."

"Winnie..."

Winnifred bowed her blonde head and whispered, "Goodbye, Christina. I beg someday you will forgive me." She turned and left the room without looking back, closing the door behind her.

\*\*\*

Christina stood alone in the town square. Barely a physical entity anymore, she floated among the hourglasses like a ghost, clinging to the brass frames for support. Rain splattered her gaunt face, cheeks sunken and hollow from the disease that was slowly dissolving her from the inside out. The nightgown she wore hung loosely from her frail body. No one knew she was not in her bed. Her father was at work at the carpentry shop, and she had managed to convince her mother to accept her friends' invitation to afternoon tea and cards.

More than anything, Christina longed for an hourglass. "It could be simple," she whispered to herself. "I would not need anything ornate, just a glass filled with sand to help ease this pain in which I live."

"You believe us to have it so easy?" A gruff, weakly masculine voice sounded from behind a vial of sand green as spring grass.

"Oh."

Mr. Brinn appeared in front of Christina, stooped in his old age and leaning heavily on a cane. "You know nothing of pain, my dear Miss Wellwood. This bum leg of mine, it troubles me constantly. But the sandman says I am too old to be healed, that if he takes any from my glass, I will die." He was stumping closer to her now, menace in his voice. "So I sit here, day after day, watching



life run out. Do you have any understanding of how maddening it is, to be able to count the days you have left on one hand? You lay quietly in your bed at night, blissfully unaware of when Death will come for you. Miss Wellwood, you have not the ability to see into your future, to conceptualize your own doom!"

Christina felt herself trembling. "You know not the fear of the unknown," she breathed. "Because I do not have a glass, I cannot so much as attempt to get well. Therefore, I am resigned to Death, but no one can tell me when he shall come."

"That is a blessing," Mr. Brinn sneered.

"It is a curse."

"These vials are curses." Without waiting for a reply, he limped off.

As Christina turned to leave, she caught the eyes of a few passersby. Harsh glares and tight-lipped frowns lashed at her. She was to be the one to live forever. They had all depended on her to prove Death could be triumphed over. Yet she had taken ill and failed everyone, proving nothing could keep him at bay.

And each day her body withered further away. Her breathing now came in sharp, ragged gasps and her chest was forever constricted. At night she lay awake, coughing up sputum and blood into a ratted, yellowing handkerchief. Her mother coaxed Christina to drink plenty of soup, but it never stayed inside her for long.

Before she knew what she was doing, she began to run. Fire ripped through her lungs and her limbs cried out from exhaustion. Even to be out of the house was a feat, and now she was calling upon herself to do more. She sprinted down the long cobblestone road, past the shops and houses and horse-drawn carriages, until she arrived at a wooden bridge. Swollen with the heavy spring rain, the river underneath rushed past, currents swirling with foam.

Without a second thought, Christina vaulted herself over the edge, careening down into the water below.

\*\*\*

Mr. and Mrs. Wellwood were seated in the parlor. Mrs. Wellwood wore a long black gown made of crepe, with a veil over her face. Her husband, seated next to her on the Chesterfield, was dressed in one of his darkest suits. The room was dimly lit by two oil lamps that cast shadows on the paintings that hung on the walls. Their daughter lay in her bed in the next room, with the appearance of Death despite his not having come for her. A gentleman who had seen Christina throw herself into the river dove in after her. He was not soon enough, however, and she had not woken up in four days.

Suddenly, there was a rap at the door. Mr. Wellwood stood to receive the visitor, but his wife cupped his elbow with her hand. Her grey eyes searched his mossy ones, and her bottom lip trembled. "It could be nothing," he tried to reassure her.

When the door opened, a robed and hooded figure loomed on the front step. Without a word, it glided into the house and made its way to Christina's room, making soft squeaks with each step. Mr. Wellwood followed, his wife clinging firmly to his arm.

Christina's skin was ashen and her eyes were closed. Her pale fingers laced together and rested just below her chest, on the new nightgown her mother had changed her into after the incident. Death reached out a single, pointed finger and touched it to her shoulder. Mrs. Wellwood let out a muffled shriek. Mr. Wellwood pulled her closer to him and allowed her to bury her head in his shoulder.

At the touch, Christina's eyelids fluttered, and then parted. She gazed up into the hood of the man standing beside her, and a smile spread across her lips.



## CHARACTERS

LAURA TAYLOR:

A 23 year old student.

RALPH ERNST:

A 68 year old man who has lived in the same apartment building for 50 years, in the same city for 60, and who has been married for 40.

JANE D:

The one you forget to remember.

THE DRUMMER:

The heart of these characters

## SETTING

Nighttime, outside an apartment with a grouping of three fire escapes. It is winter, the middle of December, on the south side of Chicago, right inside the city limits. It is an old apartment building with classic Chicago architecture. The building is constructed of bricks, fire escapes of rusted metal with a flaking layer of black paint over the top. All the surfaces are wet and icy from the fallen and falling snow. Tall windows lead out onto the deck of the escapes. In the top window, a Christmas tree peaks from behind the curtain. The bottom window is dark, black within the room. In the darkness are the sounds of Chicago at night: the low soft hum of traffic, the occasional police siren, a passing couple walking home from a bar, and a winter wind whipping through the city. Slowly, a glow from each of the windows of the apartment building appears and illuminates the darkness. The light from a street lamp on the sidewalk outside the apartment rises. It is snowing- lightly and coming to a halt. The DRUMMER sits underneath the lamp. His hands are clasped together in a praying stance. He stands and circles his allotted area, then sits back down on his stool to play percussion on his self-made drum set.

(BEAT)

LAURA opens the window to the second floor apartment. A rush and commotion and LAURA runs out from a party, leans over the side of the fire escape, and vomits.

(DRUMMING STARTS. The following monologue should be surrealistic)

LAURA

Oh God. God. God, help me?

(Inaudible whispering)

What is wrong with me? Shit. Screw it!

(BEAT)

Going to party was just a wonderful idea- holy shit. Well, what's the point in sitting around... there is none, no point. No, there is a point, the point is to sit, and feel guilty, and cry, and sit! Why do I feel guilty? I shouldn't, right? No. I only feel that way because I let it happen. Yeah? No. I was drunk... that dick.

(BEAT)

God, don't hate me? Help me! I didn't want this, I really didn't. I tried to fix it. Ben wasn't a dick, I don't know why I said that...

(PAUSE)

I said it because he is a dick, a big one. I'm drunk... you know what I mean though, right? He was scared. I didn't expect anything from him. It's not like men have been my saving grace. Why am I talking to you, anyway? You? I'm talking to air! I'm talking to fucking concrete, to ice! (LAURA dry heaves over the side. BEAT)

Sorry God. I didn't expect much. All I wanted was an ounce of support from him. I'm scared, too! He's only out for himself. Ok, I shouldn't be drinking, I know, but I am! Because I'm a selfish bitch, ok? Get over it! Go ahead, make my kid deformed, give him a droopy lip, give him an I.Q. of negative two thousand! It wouldn't change from the usual stream of luck that rains down upon me! It's never different, it's always here, it's always the same shit that never disappears!

(LAURA lets out a painful yell and grabs her stomach)

STOP IT! I don't want this kid! I don't want it! It's Ben's fault!

(Drum beat)

I expected him to help me!

(Drum beat)

I'm going to get rid of-

(Drum beat)

Lights come up on the third floor fire escape, where RALPH is sitting on one of his dining room chairs, smoking a cigarette.

-Excuse me?

RALPH

Should I get rid of it?

LAURA

(Drum beat)

Hey kid?

RALPH

Help me now.

LAURA

(Drum beat)

Drumming ends and the street lamp goes out on the last beat, leaving the DRUMMER alone in the darkness.

RALPH

HEY, you alright girl? You need me to call your parents to pick you up or someth'n?

LAURA

What?

(she studies RALPH for a bit. She raises herself up onto the the steps that lead to RALPH's fire escape, then sinks back down onto her knees)

I'm twenty three.

RALPH

Yeah? I'm sixty eight... I didn't ask for your age. You're drunk!

LAURA

Thank you. I'm twenty three.

RALPH

Congratulations!

(pause)

You don't want the yelling and disapproving talks from your dad the whole ride home, I get it- But if you ain't leaving, try and keep the vomiting to a minimum, ok? Either that or call your parents, 'cause I'd rather not listen to it.

LAURA

Hey, I get that you're old and probably can't hear shit, but again, I'm twenty fucking three years old.

RALPH

Yeah, I heard you... So you're a kid!

LAURA

My God! Tell me, what exactly is the age you reach when that switch in your wrinkled head is flipped and it's ok to call everyone who's little younger a "kid", or "girl", or "champ"? Do you really think we enjoy those condescending titles? Really, do society a favor and send a telegram out to all your other ninety-year-old friends and ask them to kindly shove it.

A long silence. RALPH throws his cigarette onto the the ground and lights another.

RALPH

It really is amazing how you can still string a sentence together.

(pause)

How are you going to get home?

LAURA

I drove.

RALPH

You're drunk.

LAURA

I'll be fine

RALPH

Nah, you have to spend the night here with... with... whoever has the place below me.

LAURA

Give me an hour, I'll be good.

RALPH

You're gonna wake your parents when you get back- they won't like that.

LAURA

They'll get over it.

RALPH

So you DO live with your parents?

(pause)

Ha, that's what I thought- girl.

(BEAT)

I've lived here for a long time now and, I have to say, I don't appreciate being spoken to like that by a stranger at my home.

LAURA

(Beat)

You have no idea who lives here!

RALPH

I know it ain't you.

LAURA

(laughing)

You've lived here for so long, you don't even know! Funny... really that's a good one.

(pause)

Please, leave me alone.

RALPH

It's James!

(long silence- waiting for LAURA's response)

Got you there!... It's James, no?

LAURA

What?

RALPH

The place below me, the guy who's having the party, his name's James right? He's about thirty-five, forty?

LAURA

If by "James" you mean Chrissie and by "forty" you mean twenty five, thennn... spot on!

RALPH

Huh.

(he leans into his chair. He starts coughing, deeply- he gathers himself and returns to stare at LAURA)

No, I've seen him! All the time I see him. I've walked in behind him a bunch. Took the elevator with him! He's got short brown hair!

LAURA

Noooooooooo... she has short brown hair!

RALPH

That's a woman? Huh... Well, short hair ain't very flattering on the girl.

LAURA

Oh my God. Hi, I'm reality... in case you didn't know, it's the twenty first century! Women actually don't wear their hair in just buns, braids, and perms anymore.

LAURA gasps sarcastically. RALPH leans back in his chair, confused. A police siren sounds in the distance, coming closer and eventually passing the apartment. The street lamp flickers on again. The DRUMMER is still sitting underneath, warming his hands.

RALPH

Well! We just had an awful introduction didn't we? Let's try again!

LAURA

We've met.

RALPH

I've never seen you.

LAURA

Your name is Ralph. We've met at least three times now. Hate to break it to you, but the last time we had our casual introductions was last month.

RALPH

No. That can't be! Really?

(laughing)

Jesus, where am I?

LAURA

I'm Laura. Remember it- I will not be repeating it.

RALPH continues to laugh at his absent-mindedness and slowly simmers down, indulging in his cigarette. The DRUMMER starts a slow rhythm by hitting the two drum sticks together.

RALPH

Since, apparently, we are old friends, I think it would be a dishonor to not say that I heard what you were saying... or praying... or whatever.

LAURA

Yeah? Cool.

RALPH

Don't do it.

LAURA

Thanks for your wisdom.

RALPH

You're welcome.

(BEAT)

It's amazing to me- people. It's always a quick fix. Don't like something, change it. Mess something up, erase it. We have all become brilliant magicians, yeah?

(he chuckles)

But Jesus, now it even affects those who have nothing to do with anything. It's easy, isn't it? Those mistakes that are quiet, who don't have a voice- they're the easiest to sweep away. The ones that are silent can't fight.

(pause)

Really, Lauren, don't kill the kid.

LAURA

(Quietly)

Fuck off.

RALPH

Now that's unfair.

(BEAT)

Ridiculous, how we justify it now- you don't want a kid? Well, fine. The problem is we're letting kids be the executioners! Babies... What would your boy say, anyways? If that was my kid's life you had the privilege of carting around, I'd-

LAURA

The next morning, he went out to get coffee and came back with some 7/11 shit and a "Morning After" pill and said "Text me if you need me."

(pause)

I don't think he cares.

RALPH

I was attempting to make a point.

(pause)

How he cares about it doesn't matter, but... but come now! Ya really wanna argue about this? It's no different from me deciding whether I wanna end you... ya feel funny about that? Huh? You don't get it though. You don't get what it's like to have a hammer dangling over your head- being held by a thing that doesn't care at all for you.

(BEAT. Throughout the rest of RALPH's monologue the rhythm from the DRUMMER gets faster and more intense)

No matter how hard you try, it's just inevitable. You can't escape it. Our lives are so contrived- we're puppets with someone's hand controlling us. Just... moving us through!

JANE crawls from her apartment- on the ground floor. The light from her window slowly burns out as she looks around for the culprits of the noise. JANE holds one arm tightly and in the other hand holds a large mug of tea. She is wearing a black turtle neck and black pants. Every time JANE speaks the feverish rhythm of the DRUMMER halts.

RALPH (Cont.)

I feel like I'm predestined for everything. Nothing is truly a surprise... it's all somewhat planned out for us. You get your Ma and Pa, or... whoever it is that makes ya think that everything is going to be great, if ya work at it. "Try, work, keep to the values you know and whatever happens-



you can be satisfied." How can you be satisfied with something out of your control? Content maybe, but satisfied? Nah. I would give anything to feel safe... to feel control. But now I'm just a bag ready to be recycled.

JANE

(Quietly to RALPH and LAURA)  
Would you mind keeping quiet?

LAURA

(to RALPH)  
Something wrong with you?

RALPH

(to LAURA)  
Lung cancer.  
(RALPH reaches for another cigarette)

JANE

(Quietly to RALPH and LAURA)  
Can you please be silent-

LAURA

-Are you dying?

RALPH

Girl, I've been "dying" for the past three years now... Still haven't found a way to knock me off- damn meds.

JANE

YOU need to STOP!

The DRUMMER stops the ticking rhythm. He slowly raises his head up to the illuminated lamp above- it goes out. Silence.

LAURA

You're such a hypocrite!

RALPH

And how's that?

LAURA

You're sitting up there in your tower complaining to me about how to treat my body... and in the meantime you're puffing on your cigarettes- filling your lungs up!

RALPH

What I do with my body is no one's concern but my own. I don't understand why you say "hypocrite"- last I checked I wasn't knocked up.

LAURA

(BEAT)  
My decision about my baby isn't the issue with you... You're just resentful because I'm the one holding the hammer above my kid's head.

RALPH

(pause)  
It really could be terrifying.

RALPH takes one long drag of his cigarette and blows it up into the air. He lets out a deep, wet cough and it pervades the silence in the city. LAURA picks herself up and sits on the railing of her fire escape. JANE stands on her window ledge motionless and in dim light unnoticed. BEAT.

LAURA

You want to die?  
(pause)  
You want to die!

RALPH

No I... well, yes... I guess I do.

RALPH takes another drag.

LAURA

Then... why don't you? Why go and pump yourself full of medicine and then engulf yourself in soot? You're kinda just evening the score.  
(pause)  
You're afraid.

JANE

(to RALPH and LAURA)  
Can you not hear me?

RALPH

No!  
(chuckling)  
I'm not afraid of dying... I will never experience it, so why should I fear it?

JANE

(to RALPH and LAURA)  
Look at me!

LAURA

You aren't Jesus- and even he died so... WHAT?

RALPH

Yeah? I'm not saying I'm immortal, I'm saying that... well... You're never going to know when you're dead. Think about it. You're dead- there is nothing to feel anymore. What is there to be afraid of? There is nothing to experience to be afraid of.

JANE

(aside)  
What the hell?

RALPH

The way I see it is, it just goes black.

The street lamp turns on suddenly once again. The DRUMMER is standing, staring at JANE with his

drum under his arm. Her light is now risen. She is still grasping her arm with dedication.

JANE

(to RALPH and LAURA)

Excuse me? Yeah, hi- do you mind keeping your voice down a bit. Thank you!

JANE turns to leave, back into her apartment.

RALPH

Who are you?

JANE

What's that?

RALPH

You with her?

(pointing at LAURA)

You one of her drunk friends?

JANE

Ummm no. My name is-

(loud DRUM BEAT- it should cancel out her name)

I live downstairs, first floor.

RALPH

(chuckling)

Well, welcome to our little Christmas party-

(DRUM BEAT)

-glad you could join us!

JANE

Oh! Well!...

(she stands staring at RALPH- there is an awkward silence mixed with the uncomfortable breathy laughs from JANE. She turns to start going back into her apartment)

Ok, well, happy Christmas!

RALPH

So! Why not weigh in our friendly banter? What say you? How do you feel about her?

RALPH points at LAURA.

LAURA-

No no no no- you are not throwing everything back onto me.

(to JANE)

You hear us? Ok... so, what about that sack up there,

(she points at RALPH)

You hear him?! He's only on my ass because he feels the need to- oh I don't know- save something else because he CAN'T SAVE HIMSELF!

JANE

Yeah, I don't know you-

RALPH

(to LAURA)

Wrong again kid! Once again, ya prove that ya really don't know how to handle situations that actually matter. Or rather, actually affect more than one person!

LAURA

More than one person?! Did your drugs make you stupid or something? No one cares about the kid... Hell, you're the only one who knows about it! Well you and-

(DRUM BEAT)

-over here...

JANE

(aside)

I wasn't really listening to be honest.

LAURA

...Same goes for you, you bastard! How is you letting yourself die going to matter to anyone? I'm sure that anyone who would've ever cared is long buried.

RALPH

I'm pretty certain my wife cares.

LAURA

You're married?

RALPH

Yes.

LAURA

I'm sorry.

RALPH

Ok.

Silence. RALPH and LAURA stand motionless. The DRUMMER walks back around in a circular motion and sits down on the ground. He lifts up the drum sticks and starts to play a rhythm with the song "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," which is echoing out of the second floor window.

JANE

Oh... I like this song.

(she sits on the edge of her window sill. She takes her hand away from her arm. Her hand is stained red with her blood)

It feels like I'm home... I'm in my bed- my mother is washing dishes, the sound of my father watching TV. The light is warm and it makes me feel-home. And it makes me feel... It makes me-? It's warm.

(BEAT)

I don't understand how something so alive, so thick, so powerful can come out of someone so weak, so lost. I don't care anymore. I really don't. I smile and laugh and people think I am happiness. It's really funny- I don't feel anymore because I don't want to feel anymore. Feeling is hurting. Emotions are evil. Hurt should be dictated- not the dictator.

(the song stops playing. The DRUMMER stops playing his drum and looks up to the light and closes his eyes. JANE continues to RALPH)

You didn't tell your wife you're dying, did you?

RALPH

Who are you? No one is talking to you, dear.

LAURA

Shit! You're joking me- right?

RALPH

What I say and what I do shouldn't matter to you.

LAURA

Well since "we are old friends I think it would be a dishonor to not say..." You are the biggest- not just big-but biggest hypocrite I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. Thank you, Ralph, yet another thing I can mark off my bucket list.

RALPH

No. We don't talk about me.

LAURA

How is that fair?

RALPH

It's not.

JANE

Come again?

RALPH

(to JANE)

Shut up!

JANE

Ok.

LAURA

Stop it! Goddamn stop!

JANE

(to LAURA)

It's fine. Really, I don't give a rat's-

LAURA

(to JANE)

I'm not talking about you.

(to RALPH)

You! I'm talking to you. You tell me all of this crap about how what I'm doing is affecting someone else- yeah, no shit- but turn the mirror around, Gramps... come on... Your wife? You haven't told your wife?!

RALPH

I will not be asking for sympathy. I have been given cancer and I won't wallow around, coughing, choking on my blood asking for people to feel sorry for me while my wife is pushed to the side, forgotten. I will play the part of the "cancer patient" with unselfish grace and beauty.

LAURA

That's a little overdramatic don't you think? I'm fairly certain being pushed to the side isn't the worst thing that could happen-

JANE

Maybe not.

LAURA

-I don't know, being lied to by my husband may top the list!

RALPH

Because you know how spouses function? Do tell me, how would she feel?

JANE speaks as the voice of RALPH's wife through the following lines. As the lines grow in intensity, the DRUMMER's funeral dirge-like rhythm grows in intensity.

JANE

Forgotten... by you.

RALPH

Why?

JANE

You don't care. You just- don't care. You didn't tell me.

RALPH

I didn't tell you because I care

JANE

It wouldn't matter Ralph.

RALPH

You just said that it did...

JANE

I said it hurt.

(BEAT)

You don't think I know? You think that little of me that I can't put two and two together?

RALPH

So you know? So you know!

JANE

Yes.

RALPH

Why don't you say anything?

JANE

Ralph...

RALPH

What?

JANE

We've been married for 40 years. I know when you're lying to me...

RALPH

Lying about what?

JANE

I've been here through everything. I've watched you, Ralph... I've watched you. You don't love me anymore.

RALPH

Oh, come on!

JANE

You don't! I know! I should know! I am your "second half," after all. Your significant other!

RALPH

You are! I'm sorry.

JANE

No, you aren't.

RALPH

Yes, I am!

JANE

You're going to die. You're going to die and leave me knowing that you don't love me anymore.

RALPH

Stop.

JANE

You're going to go away... and I'm going to feel forgotten. Ignored by the one who committed his life to me! Commitment...that's nothing!

RALPH

I love you.

JANE

(JANE takes her hands and holds them up to RALPH for him to see the blood)

This is from you. You don't think you affect someone's life?! I guess you're right.

RALPH

(BEAT)

How you feel, what you think, isn't my concern. I... no.

The DRUMMER stops the dirge and JANE takes her form again. RALPH tears up a bit. He throws down the butt of his cigarette and tries to light another- the lighter refuses to retain a flame.

RALPH

(Quietly)

Why would you do it?

LAURA

Because I needed to!

RALPH

But why take someone's life away just so you don't have to deal with it.

LAURA

That is not my reason. You don't know!

RALPH

You don't know! The importance of living- it's a waste to you!

LAURA

Fuck you.

Drum BEAT.

RALPH

You are wasting a chance for someone to be! You can't do anything without changing something.

LAURA

You have no idea what I go through.

RALPH

You have no idea what it's like! DON'T. DO IT!

LAURA

I already did.

LAURA wails out in agony. She grasps the side of the fire escape and falls to her knees again. The DRUMMER pounds the drum louder than he has yet. The street lamp light rises in intensity. LAURA cries. RALPH rises from his chair and leans against the railing. The DRUMMER gets quieter, and eventually stops. Snow starts to lightly fall again.

RALPH

Ok.

(pause)

I used to think that- knowing I'd eventually be older is what makes being young so great. You can get away with a lot. Breaking a bone when you're a teenager, or... hell, in your twenties is- nothing. You're repaired. But you're a horse with a busted leg if ya do that at my age... Useless.

(pause)

I shudder to think what my life would have been like if my life shook out the way I thought. I guess not all things mend. Sometimes things just stay broken. Merry Christmas, Lauren. If only you were in charge of my life- I wouldn't have to concern myself about the smoke- I'd be dead already.

RALPH EXITS into the apartment. LAURA stays on the deck of the fire escape holding her head- she isn't crying. JANE holds her hand out to catch the snow- She turns and EXITS into the apartment.



"Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" starts to play again and the DRUMMER taps his drum along to the rhythm.

LAURA

We're fine.

(pause)

I'm fine.

LAURA rises up and looks out to the city- she turns around and EXITS into the apartment. The DRUMMER stops and looks up to the light above him. BLACKOUT

(END)



The warm shadows effortlessly slipped through the grasp of the branches. Slowly, they snaked through the trees, breaching every crevice and hiding place like an omnipotent army storming an enemy castle with ease and precision. The trickle of rain leaked through the faulty barriers of leaves like the intermittent tick of an old grandfather clock.

The boy and girl stood at the entrance of this place. Hands held. Shivering.

Tick. Tock. Tick Tock.

The rain spoke and the children did not reply.

As the school bus rolled away, the boy and the girl were no longer children with too-big backpacks, messy hair, and marker-stained hands, but creatures of the night because the shadows did not see inexperience or age. The girl squeezed the boy's hand. The boy looked over at her and nodded. One foot in front of another, they went into the forest, therefore entering the place. The leaves housed fairies. The grass welcomed their feet with gracious arms. The ogres came out to play. The dragon hummed in the wind. The trees whispered the foreign tales from castles far beyond. The stars laughed, and the children saw and understood what they could not during the day. The children were infinite in this untouched place.

Tick. Tock. Tick Tock.

The rain spoke and the children did not reply.

This was the strange beginning of something novel; a query of knowledge struck the hearts of the children. Was this place true? That thought was pushed to the back of their minds because, in that moment, the place was their truth and escape. That was enough for the boy and the girl. They did not need names. They did not need reality. This was their story.

The forest permitted them to dance with the shadows, to make-believe, to inspire their imagination into thinking that the forest's obscurity was freedom for their itinerant minds.

A light flickered and fluttered past the breaks in the trees. This unadulterated light proved to be a fantastical beauty, yet it did not shatter the amorphous shadows that tiptoed around the children. They could feel the warmth emanate from the shadows' existence and they felt safe. For fear was not coherently understood in this place. A void began to grow within the boy and girl as they galloped and skipped between the tendrils of the trees and the tendrils of their imagination. The divide between mind and wood was becoming increasingly harder to depict, as the long hunched fingers of the trees pulled, whispered, and sang. This is where they came to live. To breathe. To be.

Tick Tock. Tick Tock.

The rain spoke and the children did not reply.

As the rusty taxicab rolled away, the old souls were no longer innocent children. Their bodies too frail to carry any more burdens than themselves, their hair thinning, and their hands marked with age.

John and the Martha stood at the entrance of the place. Hands held. Shivering.

Martha squeezed John's hand. John looked over at her and nodded. One foot after another, they went into the forest. As they walked among the trees, they saw nothing but leaves, grass, and wood. The wind brushed past them, yet they felt nothing. Both seemed to remember a nameless memory, a nameless place, and a nameless person of before. That was all gone now. They did not stay long, for it was just a place.

They left hand in hand. As Martha was about to leave the entrance of the forest, she turned because she thought she heard a pleading whisper, but then decided that it was nothing.

I am on the precipice, teetering on the brink, about to fall in. The infinitely dark Pit of depression has sunk its teeth in my heel and is slowly dragging me down to the depths. I know with certainty that I will not be able to climb out of the chasm this time. An overwhelming sense of doom hovers over my head, a vast and teeming black swarm possessed with a mind of its own.

The horde eclipses me, buzzing loudly with anger and hatred, a soul-crushing and omnipresent reminder of my fate. It is impossible to escape. It follows me home, to class, to chapel—there is no respite. The faint angry buzzing escalates to a terrible cacophony, grating voices screaming and shouting unintelligibly. It swells in size every day, eventually growing so big that I cannot see the ends; the darkness seems to stretch endlessly from horizon to horizon. The swarm begins to curl and churn, coming ever closer, to swallow me in one torturously slow gulp.

I am no longer able to function; my humanity has been violently ripped away. I am nothing more than a shell of my former self, quaking under the constant torment hurled down by the writhing mass above. It's more than my battered and fragile soul can handle. My body folds in on itself like origami, a futile effort to shield itself from the overbearing cloud viciously pelting me. The darkness begins to infiltrate my thoughts, worming its way deep into my psyche. As the brutal onslaught continues, there's a sharp spike in my adrenaline. My breath comes quickly in uneven and ragged gasps; my body wracked with uncontrollable shudders. I cower in the corner, completely and utterly petrified. My arms hug my body in a straightjacket-vise, my body rocks back and forth of its own accord. I am unable to control my own actions; my brain is too far gone to send any instruction to my neurons other than "*panic!*" as the swarm begins to infiltrate my mental defenses.

A terrible war rages inside my mind and I'm losing the battle. Light and dark are fighting for dominance; they cannot coexist in harmony. My mind is stuck in an endless loop, a cycle that's impossible to break. Even as I try to convince my body to move, to go get help, the hoard seethes in resistance within me. It fills me with hateful, spiteful, abusive thoughts. I cannot move under the weight of the sadistic swarm crashing down on my head. It takes a full twenty minutes before I'm able to dodge the insults and cruelty raining down long enough to dart into my mentor's office and desperately cry out for help.

He tries soothing me like one would a frightened and cornered animal, speaking slowly and softly. I recoil from his comforting words deep into the corner of the blood-red couch, every miniscule fiber of my being screaming at me to leave. It is impossible to form complete or coherent sentences; I'm cemented to where I sit with terror. My nails claw cruelly at my skin and my fingers yank desperately at my hair. He looks me straight in the eye and tells me that he cares about me, and I am unable to believe it. Any previous faint glimmer, the possibility of any light at all is gone. I cave and finally accept what has been inevitable all along. The demons in my head are too strong, too numerous; their voices drown out any chance of hope.

My name is Legion, for they are many.

## BETWEEN THE LINES - KAVLA BELEC

Three o'clock in the morning, my dad's truck winds through the sleeping hills that began growing once we neared the Kentucky border. Now we are almost to Tennessee. The interior is hushed, conversations and debates leaving only their silhouettes behind. There are those and the humming of the engine, the passing of tires over pavement, my brother's breathy snores, a faint country song lilting itself into a stupor from the radio. Sometimes I like the quiet the most, I think. I rest my head on the cool window and look up, creating my own constellations. The green light of the dashboard reflects off of my dad's face and my mom's sleepy head; it fills the cab with a hazy, gentle kind of light. We're passing through the night unseen and unheard in an alternate reality. Imagine that, I say to myself. We are getting close to the state border, my dad tells me.

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The door opens and Lily blusters in like a hailstorm, all thudding feet and jangling keys. "Hello!"

"Hey," Sal answers nonchalantly from her post on the couch. I can't see her eyes; the glow from her laptop is reflecting off of her glasses.

"What's up, hot stuff?" I lisp.

Lily drops her backpack to the ground and begins slipping off her rain boots. "Not much," she pants. Lily always sounds winded when she gets home. "I had a really good voice lesson today, so that's good. Anne said I've improved a lot since last week. Did I tell you how she asked me if I wanted to postpone my performance?" Boots hit the kitchen floor.

"Lily, use the doormat," Sal says. "I didn't just buy that to look nice in the doorway."

"Oh yeah, sorry." A scudding indicates the boots have been moved to the doormat. "Anyway, she asked if I wanted to postpone my performance. Did I tell you that already?"

"Yeah, you mentioned it to me last week," I say.

"I thought I might have. That's right, I did! Anyway, it just crushed me." Lily has approached the common area and is pressing her palm against her chest to indicate that this really did something to her heart. Her voice rises to the octave she uses when she's expressing exasperated humor to make sure we stay interested. She continues for a few minutes more, her eyes flicking toward Sal's aloof slouch every now and then, until the whole ordeal has been purged from her system. Then she takes a breath. "So I'm really proud of myself for getting through it!"

"Good for you!" I say.

"Thanks so much, girl!" Lily blows a kiss in my direction, then decides to run over and give me a real kiss on the cheek. I smile and pat her back. She goes to fill up her water bottle. "Anyway, how are you guys?"

"Good," Sal says. She scrolls; I catch glimpses of Benedict Cumberbatch in her lenses.

"Oh, you know, I'm alright," I say. "I watched this really cool silent movie in class today..."

"Really? Hey, guys, whose dishes are all of these?" Lily is looking at the tower of pots, pans, mugs, silverware, and plates teetering over the sink. "I put all of mine in the dishwasher before my lesson."

"Not mine. I wash all of mine as soon as I use them," I say, an echo of the last several times we've had this conversation.

"They're mine," Sal doesn't look up from her laptop. "I'm doing them before I go to bed."

Lily releases the laugh she uses for confrontations. Her sentences are laced with intentional awkwardness to take away the sting. "Sal-ly. We talked about this. Just wash them right away so they don't build up."

Sal says nothing.

"Do you promise you'll wash them before you go to bed?" Lily asks.

A pause. "Yep."

"Okay." Lily laughs again and puts her hands on her hips, looking at me and shaking her head. What are we going to do with her? I raise my eyebrows and mimic her headshaking. The dish problem never gets resolved.

Lily trots down the hallway to her room, talking to us about an assignment even as her voice becomes harder and harder to hear. Sal waits a moment, then glances over to me, rolls her eyes and mouths, "Kill me."

I nod and roll my eyes back at her. Lily can be such a control freak.

"What's even happening right now?" Melanie gripes.

"Shhhh." Alex hisses, glancing up from her *Seventeen* magazine. "Maybe if you'd stop talking and paid attention you'd know."

"All I know is, Henry the VIII was not that attractive," I inform them. "That's a historical inaccuracy."

From the oak paneled corner in Alex's basement, the TV breaks up the dimness with *The Other Boleyn Girl*. Henry VIII, played by brooding, dark-eyed Eric Bana, is in the process of stripping the Other Boleyn Girl of her undergarments. Since we—we being mostly Melanie—have been talking this whole time, we have no idea how the king has ended up in bed with Anne Boleyn's sister, and the movie is only in its first half hour.

"Well, geez, Jill, would you want to be watching an old fat guy do this scene?" Melanie asks.

"I wasn't complaining. I'm just saying."

"They wouldn't have this scene if the actor was an old fat guy," Alex says in her characteristic dry tone.

"Or they would have the scene, but they'd have Eric Bana come in as a stunt double." I laugh at my own joke, and Alex and Melanie join in.

"The casting directors are just like, 'No one will know the difference,'" Melanie says. She rolls onto her back and laughs more, her hot pink shirt riding up to reveal her fleshy belly. She pulls it down quickly, still laughing.

One of the things that's endearing about Melanie is that her clothes are always falling off—not in an inappropriate way, more like a child that still hasn't learned how to dress herself. She's forever combining things that are two sizes too large or three sizes too small with an outlandish amount of accessories—hats, stacks of bracelets, flower hair pins, six to ten rings,

leggings, always-always flip flops, and massive earrings. She wears these getups without batting a bedazzled eyelash, and casts a disdainful glance toward anyone who naysays it as if *he* is the one wearing a sunhat in the middle of February. One night, a group of us girls went on a top secret excursion that involved covering a certain choir teacher's house in toilet paper, and while we were making our getaway we were held up by a yelping Melanie tripping over her flip flops and pants, toppling over and baring her backside to the darkened world.

The three of us continue on the thread of fat historical figures and their possible stunt doubles for some time until Alex's sister, Brittney, descends the stairs. "What's so funny?"

Melanie and I try to tame our guffaws into more sophisticated, sarcastic chuckles. Brittney is a senior and is much cooler than we are. She watches what is now a rather raunchy love scene on the TV and remains impassive. She probably thinks we're laughing at the scene, immature sophomores that we are. Alex explains the joke and Brittney emits a small, "Ha," and says, "You guys are really funny."

"What do you want?" Alex snaps. "We're busy."

"Oh yeah, you look really busy."

"Brittney. What do you want?"

Alex and her family have a system of communication that is beyond my comprehension. The ways in which they retort and passively address one another—I'm always waiting for one of them to break into a grin. But a grin never materializes.

"Mom wanted me to ask you something," Brittney continues.

"Like what?"

Brittney watches the movie. "She just wanted to know if you guys wanted to go with her."

"Go *where* with her?"

"Downtown."

"Why would we want to do that?"

"To see the flood." Brittney adjusts her ponytail. "They say Wisconsin Street Bridge got flooded. Cars are stuck on there and everything."

The rainstorms we suffered over the weekend have left the whole town drenched and confused. We're supposed to be in school right now, but we were blessed with the miracle of floodwaters barring our entrance. *Eureka*, each student cried, when they heard the automated message on their machines that morning. All hail the 2008 Lake County Flood.

"I don't know, maybe," Alex says, annoyed. "What do you guys wanna do?"

Melanie is studying phone as though someone has sent her a riveting message. "I don't care, let's go."

Alex groans. "Jill, what do you want to do?"

I shrug, my cheeks heating up as everyone looks at me. "I don't care," I begin. Then the words just start spilling out. "We can do whatever, I'm sure the flood looks cool, but also, I'm fine with doing this. But I'm sure it'd be cool to see the flood, too. But I'm really up for anything. Sort of. You know. It's up to you guys. But. Yeah."

In the brief silence that follows, I gather that I've spoken too much. The taxidermy porcupine mounted on the wall to my left is leering at me. I stare a hole into the TV screen. Alex sighs and uncrosses her gazelle legs. "I guess we could go with her. It would make her happy. Mom always complains when we don't do stuff with her." Decision made.

Once we are standing at the edge of the flooded bridge near Alex's house, shoes dampened from the undulating water, we see that cars are indeed stuck in the middle of the bridge, looking like mini U-boats giving themselves away. Alex's mom snaps several pictures on her fancy digital camera. Brittney hovers nearby, arms folded and chomping gum, laughing every now and then at something her mom says. Alex hops onto the just barely exposed guardrail, her slender arms thrown out for balance. Melanie watches her. As if from a distance, I hear her say, "I wish I looked like Alex."

"Me, too," I say reflexively. Alex is willowy, all limbs. I feel like a tree trunk next to her.

"I at least wish I carried my weight the way that Brittney does. She's curvy, but she doesn't make it so noticeable somehow. I'm just...fat."

I open my mouth to speak and then close it. It's the first time I've heard Melanie acknowledge her body whatsoever, and I cannot find any words. Why, why is it that I could spout off a collection of nonsense earlier, but I cannot produce one coherent assurance now? "You're not fat," I tell her finally. We say nothing more, and watch the lake rise to bathe the houses waiting on its banks.

Our reflections stretch out in front of us, the wind stirring the water until our likeness is an Impressionist smear, one distorted ripple.

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"I might quit, find another job," he says. "Or at least go back to school, you know, go to community college like your brother."

"That's good," I say. "Those are both good options."

"Yeah, I just don't want to do Stracks forever. I don't want that to become me, you know?"

"I know."

We are lying in the backseat of his car, his arm resting lazily around my shoulders. My house stands by, windows darkened with sleep. We take turns checking to make sure that the lights remain off. The neighborhood always looks spooky at this time of night: The only movement is the wind stirring tree branches; the leaves hiss against one another.

He plays with my hair. "I'm glad you understand. You understand me so well. More than anyone else."

I say nothing; shyness and a smidgen of discomfort rob me of my voice.

He frowns and strokes my forehead. "Hey. What are you thinking about?"

I swallow. "Nothing much."

"What?" he presses. He ducks his head so that he is peering right into my eyes. He does this when he thinks I'm waning. It usually works.

"Nothing. Really." I smile.



"Remember when that raccoon scared the crap out of you the one time I was here?" He laughs.

I laugh, too. "How could I forget? That thing was huge."

"What did we name him?"

"Fran."

"Of course. Fran! Fran, Fran, Frannie boy," he pretends to call.

Snickering, I clap my hand over his mouth and glance at my house, worried we could be heard somehow. "Remember that first night, when the paper truck came by and we thought it was someone harassing us?"

"Yeah," he laughs. I like his laugh. "We followed it around for an hour, so you could try to figure out what the guy was up to. Remember that?"

I groan and throw my head back, then smile at the memory of him reaching over and grazing my hand. He smiles along with me, and I wonder if he's remembering that part, too, or if he's just amused at my stupidity—I didn't know the newspaper truck came around at 4 every morning, but he was perfectly aware of the fact.

We share a few other memories, including the time my brother almost slugged him with a baseball bat when he caught him outside of my window one night, and I realize that our brief relationship consists of these moments of fear that we rehash in order to feel the relief of overcoming them.

At one point, he calls me by his girlfriend's name. Not directly to my face, but more in passing; he is pretending to be Fran the raccoon calling my name, only he accidentally calls hers. His hand flies over his mouth. The car abruptly falls silent, the kind that causes your skin to itch and makes you wish you could turn a page. I stiffen and look out the window. He says nothing. It's so silent that my ears ache.

"We should stop doing this," I say finally, locking my arms in front of my choir tee shirt. "I don't know if you're thinking of me or..."

He cuts me off by cupping my face in his hands. "Jill." He kisses me. I am about to graduate from high school. Prior to this year, I have never snuck out of my house.

He pulls back and smiles, eyes hooded. "No one understands me like you do."

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When my brother gets home from wherever he goes each night and my dad is up waiting, and the accusations accompany the sound of a fresh can being opened, and my mother's face crumples into a helpless grimace, and my brother's voice grows in barely disguised frustration, and my father's voice undercuts with a ready maliciousness, that is when I speak.

"Guys, guys. Shut up, my God, I'm trying to flex over here. Come on, let's not act like little kids tonight. Look at this blossoming bicep." I pretend to be a body builder.

It's part of my role. I'll step into the kitchen and change the subject, crack a joke, ask if I can show them a video I found online. Just to prevent the resentment that has poisoned the careful, arm's length closeness of my father and his son, to disguise the toxic excess that has built up with the aging of this home.

My dad will tug the sleeve of his worn-out ISU sweatshirt farther down his wrists and

shake his head, a distracted smile playing on his lips. He'll laugh and say something like, "Got a call from the school again saying Rich has cut classes four times this month. What do you think of that, Jill? Think that was the right thing to do?"

And Rich says, throwing his hands up, "Oh, don't bring her into this. It's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal?" Dad scoffs. "Is that how you treat your education, your future? I'll tell you what, you want some respect, you won't get any."

Rich opens the fridge door again and pulls out a beer. Again, the sound of the can opening echoes in the kitchen. "Stop being an asshole."

My dad sucks in his breath, exaggerating his surprise. "I'm an asshole? You hear what he called me?" He throws his voice out into the living room. "You hear what he called me, Sue? Did he learn that disrespect from you? Sure as hell didn't from me. I would have never, not in a million years, talked to my father that way."

I see Rich's mouth pucker with a rebuke and decide to cut him off for the night, saying to Dad, "Oh, you can't let that get to you. He's just all worked up. Take a chill pill, dude."

Dad shakes his head and mutters, "Well, I'm just pointing things out that need to be fixed, dude."

"Sassy, all so sassy tonight," I say. Please, don't hate me, you two. "Remember that time our car broke down in the middle of God's Country, Indiana?"

And just maybe, if I'm lucky, the argument will wind down for now, substituted with a memory in place of the action boiling at the surface. Always, always better to relate over a shared experience, rehearsed in order to feel the relief of overcoming it once more, than to address what's happening now. We sure overcame that one instance, didn't we?

And my father will raise the can to his lips and swallow and I will hate him for it. And my brother will do the same and I will hate him, too. But then they will laugh at something together and I will forget, for now. Don't hate me, too. "Choose your words wisely," I tell them both, separately, later. "Just choose them wisely and don't push things."

I am prideful of this knack I have for smoothing things over. But the weight of that responsibility leaves me gasping for air at night, worrying that the words I choose aren't really wise at all. They fix things, but only temporarily, like stopping up a leak in a boat. Or maybe the temporary lies in the biting words, and my deflections are the ones that last.

Or is there more to be said in the impression of my brother's knuckles in the plaster of his bedroom wall? In the sound of my mother's hand striking the bathroom counter?

"Jill, look."

My eyes flutter open and all I see is the color green. A hazy sort of green, like when a pear is just starting to bruise. I'm disoriented and I blink a few times before I realize I'm in my dad's truck. We are on our way to the Smokey Mountains, winding through endless narrow roads that must have lulled me to sleep. My forehead is cold and sore from where it had been resting on the window. I rub it and take in the forms of my sleeping brother and mom, both with their heads slouched forward and jostling gently with the motion of the truck.

"Look, Jill," my dad says again. "Isn't that pretty?"

In my half-conscious state I think for a moment he's talking about Mom and Rich, but then a beam of sunlight tickles my eyelashes and I squint into it, watching its gradual reveal as we

circle a mountain.

That's it then, the green I saw when I woke up. The day is breaking on the treetops. I catch my breath. "Wow," I say to my dad. "Look at that."

The sun sheds its waking light on all of the trees and the rock faces and the creek that I can just make out slithering its way through the branches. Even the dullness of the winding pavement looks different in this light, glistening like mosaic pieces. All of the colors of the universe are outside of my window, and I think my dad sees them, too. I think about waking up Mom and Rich, but their brows are so smooth and their breathing is so soft that I don't dare.

My dad says, "A customer of mine told me that his buddy told him he woke up to a huge sound one morning and he looked and saw something weird on the horizon. So Jim, my customer says, 'What was it, the break of day?' jokingly, and his buddy said, 'No, it was the butt-crack of dawn.'"

I laugh, as he knew I would. He laughs, too. "Ho ho ho," he hams it up.

Then I tell him a joke, and we laugh some more, and then we exchange a few others. I let him have the last word, because I know he'll keep coming up with more.

For a while, we just sit, letting the silence rest comfortably between us like another passenger. The sun hikes a bit higher, now, and the colors shift and blend. After a while, my dad says, "Hey, you should wake Rich up in a bit so he can take the next shift."

"Okay," I say.

But we wait another moment or two. Then I stir Rich gently as my dad pulls into a gas station. His eyes open without hesitation, and he stretches, mapping out the same disorientation I experienced.

My dad jumps down from his seat with a groan, and the slam of his door wakes my mom. We follow my dad's lead and step down from the truck for a stretch. None of us says anything; we just shake our limbs and reach skyward. I hum to myself. Rich walks to the convenience store and buys a pop, Dad pumps gas, Mom uses the bathroom, and I hum and find shapes in the clouds.

When Rich and Mom emerge, Rich passes by my dad and holds out his hand for the keys. My dad passes them to him, and without one word an exchange is made. We get back into the truck, my brother behind the wheel this time, my dad in the passenger seat, my mother beside me. Once more, the quiet is a comfortable fifth wheel.

I pull my legs up to my chest and I listen for it.



Every moment of every day, he felt a weight bearing down on him. The effort to move his limbs was extensive. Sometimes, he didn't even think it was worth it. But, other times, when he wasn't thinking about it, he would find himself somewhere without ever remembering getting up. He accepted that on a daily basis he would come out of his thoughts and be in totally different places. Rarely did he give it much consideration anymore.

Most days, random parts of his body would ache and he spent dreadful hours wondering if he was going to die. On this particular day, it was a deep ache in his right arm. That arm was a frequent location for his phantom pains. He wouldn't bother taking notes today.

This morning, he woke before his alarm went off and pulled on a grey shirt that matched his pants. He sat back down to pull his socks on, and when he looked up he was in front of the mirror. He watched his reflection for a moment, then reached for his toothbrush. He made sure not to blink just in case he was teleporting without realizing. He was never quite sure.

Focusing on moving, though, caused him to take a while to leave the house. It was an effort for him to move each leg forward. He wondered if that was because he teleported too often. He paused after every few steps, thinking about it.

When he got to the bus, he pulled himself up the steps and to his normal seat. No one sat next to him. Rarely were the seats around him occupied. He assumed this was because of him. In actuality, not many people took that bus. He didn't live in a kid friendly area.

At school he glided down the halls. It was eerily quiet. He wondered if he had been mistaken and there wasn't school today, but then he looked up at the clock and it was time for lunch and he was moving through the hall with a mass of others. As he slid through the halls, he couldn't remember lifting his feet. Suddenly worrying about that, he stopped. A kid slammed into his shoulder and shouted something at him, but he didn't notice. He started moving again, looking at the walls. He felt like he could fall through them if he leaned on them. He reached out to touch the wall, but thought better of it. He didn't want to know. Plus, that arm hurt.

He didn't remember getting back on the bus, but stood up from his seat and stepped out onto the road. It took him a long time to walk back to his house, but when he finally did he found the note on the counter telling him dinner was in the fridge. He ate it cold and sat down in front of the TV to do his homework.

It was still light out when he decided to go to bed. He sat at the edge of his bed for a long while, wondering if he was about to wake up instead of go to sleep. "If this is a dream," he muttered to himself, "then I should be able to do anything." He never noticed, but he thought aloud quite often.

He lifted his head to look at the window in his room. In front of it sat a bookcase, and on that bookcase a plant had appeared some time ago. It felt like a very long time ago to him, but it was still standing tall in its little vase.

Staring at it, he whispered, "Shouldn't it be dead already?" Then, as he watched, the flower began to droop. As the petals floated down, they looked pink, not gray. Which he found strange, but didn't mind because the weight on his chest was finally lifting and he breathed in a deep breath for the first time in a long time. He let out a happy sigh as the color from the flower spread throughout that side of his room.

He could see the vivid hues of the molten sunset outside the window. The wall was a soft green. The books on his bookcase weren't all shades of grey, but a rainbow of colors. He looked around him and realized that it wasn't the side of the room that had become colorful. His eyes had. The color followed everywhere he looked. Amazed, he laid back onto bed and fell asleep.

The next morning, the alarm shocked him awake. He shot up, flailing to turn off the abrasive noise. He sat at the edge of his bed, his feet resting on the floor. He stared down at them for a moment. He didn't like his toes. They were too pudgy. He reached for a grey shirt to go with his grey pants. After he was dressed he was too exhausted to deal with brushing his teeth or finding something to eat. He wasn't really hungry anyway. He focused on making it to the bus stop.

The bus took forever to reach his stop, but he barely noticed. He hummed to himself, trying not to think about how fragile the world felt. He was nervous that if he took a misstep, reality would rip and he would get trapped in utter darkness. But, he made it onto the bus fine.

In first period, he realized nothing was hurting today. He began to wonder if his whole body was going numb. Even more worrying, he realized he never remembered telling his limbs to move. He wasn't sure if he was in charge of moving himself at all. As if to support that theory, he looked up to see he was in the lunch room. He couldn't remember if he had gotten food and eaten already or not, so he sat at his table and waited for lunch to end.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" The words took a moment to reach him. He lifted his head to see a person hovering at the other side of the table. He shook his head no and watched her sit and begin eating.

As he did, he began to feel lighter, yet solid. He wiggled his fingers and looked at them, amazed. They were his fingers.

He looked back at the girl. Her eyelids began to droop. She massaged her temple, then shook her head. He realized that her hair was now a golden blonde and that the light was shining right on it from outside, causing it to shimmer. His stomach growled. "I must not have eaten," he mumbled and went to get in line.

When he got back she was gone. His pizza turned tasteless halfway through eating it and he dropped it back on his tray, unfinished. He looked around for the gold-haired girl, but everyone had gone back to looking the same. He dropped his head and began to wonder if she had tripped into the darkness, because the world was starting to feel very fragile again.

He wished he hadn't, though, because he stood up and he was rising from the couch in his living room. He checked the fridge to see if he ate. There wasn't anything there. The note was on the counter. He wondered if he really did eat or if she had just forgotten to leave food for him.

The next morning, he felt even worse. He had to struggle to wake up and drag himself out of bed. The alarm had gone off multiple times, he remembered, but as he went to his dresser to find his grey shirt he saw the alarm shattered on the ground. It caused him to pause for a moment. If his alarm was gone, would he never wake up again after this morning? In the back on his mind, he hoped that was true.

At school, just in case it was his last day, he looked for the golden haired girl. In fourth period, people were giving presentations. The first person was a girl and he wondered if he had found her. He watched her as she spoke, hoping to catch even a bit of gold when she tilted her head or looked up. But, as he stared, he realized it was brown. It stood out nicely against the green chalkboard behind her.

There was a bit of a ruckus as she suddenly collapsed, but he was too busy marveling at how easy it was to breathe to notice. He looked up as the teacher hurried past him to the front of the room, and he realized that she was very pretty. He looked around and saw that everyone seemed rather nice. It was strange. They were all standing, trying to get a better look at the girl from before, and they were talking. Their voices were making a soft rumble throughout the classroom.

"Liz, go get the nurse," the teacher said.

He turned to watch a girl near the door hurriedly rise from her desk and start toward the door. Sadly, when she got to it, she grasped the door frame tightly and slouched against it. He watched her slowly slide to floor.

At the urging of another student, the teacher looked over to see Liz on the ground. She ran over to Liz's side, then back to her desk. He was smiling slightly, following the teacher with his eyes. When she got to her desk, she sat down heavily in her chair and rubbed her eyes before reaching for the phone. It slipped from her fingers, though, as she lifted it to her ear. Her arm dropped and head fell back. The other kids began to shout and surround their teacher as he stood to continue to watching her. The color in her cheeks was fading and her chest was slowing. It was in that moment that he realized that he was wearing a red shirt, and that he was why the teacher couldn't breathe. Not only that, but the world was bright because of it.

The other girls were conscious again. Another person shouted for someone to get the nurse, but the girls kept repeating that they were ok. "Mrs. Zoe isn't," some other person retorted, causing them to shut up.

He pushed his way to the teacher's desk and leaned against it, fascinated as she faded back to gray. She looked so out of place amongst all the vibrancy around her.

"Would you stop staring," the girl next to him snapped, elbowing him in the side. "It's creepy." He stepped backwards away from the crowd, holding his side and almost laughing.

He was excited. That had hurt in such a different way than the phantom aches. This was his pain for sure. He had felt it. He also found it funny how none of them seemed to realize she was dead.

He left the room, rapping his knuckles against the lockers as he went. It wasn't his lunch period, but he was starving and first period lunch was going on. He walked into the cafeteria and got a decent piece of pizza. He sat at his usual table. There was already a person there.

The guy glanced at him, but didn't say anything and soon just ignored him. He ate his pizza slowly, savoring each bite as he stared at the guy. He smirked and sat back as the guy's fork full of spaghetti dropped from his hand and he began rubbing his eyes.

In an email that Mary receives, the pastor writes that we will be worshipping outside this Wednesday. The weather has finally started getting warmer, he explains, and we'll all be going our separate ways as the year comes to a close. Why not sing our praises around a little campfire right outside of the chapel?

That does sound really nice, though it makes little difference to me. I'm doing this as a favor. Mary has asked me to come—she's led the contemporary church service every Wednesday night for the past nine months, a nice opportunity for a sophomore, and since this is the last service of the year, she wants to go out with a bang.

"Does this sound stupid?" she asked me earlier today while she was composing the weekly prayer. "I'm just pulling stuff out of my ass."

A rather contradictory phrase to use in terms of religion, but I refrained from teasing her about it because she looked genuinely flustered.

"It sounds great," I assured her. "Perfect."

"Then you'd better be there tonight to actually pray it out," she says.

"I'll be there," I say.

At 10 o'clock, I make good on my promise. I walk over to the chapel and find that a swell of students is already swaying to a popular Christian rock song. I half expect to find baskets of bread and fish strewn about. The lyrics to the song are projected on a screen. Some kids stand with their hands clasped in front of them, their eyes squeezed shut, singing what they know by heart. Others barely move their lips as they murmur the words. The lyrics all sound similar to me—*God is great, Jesus died for our sins, we have love in our lives*. I've never cared much for the modern church music. I like traditional hymns. But when I scout out Mary's waving arms and join the thicket of rocking bodies, I fumble through the words and try my best to feel the same stirring in my stomach that I feel during the Christmas Eve service in my own church back home.

I continue to observe the peers gathered around me. I recognize a lot of them, though I can't put any names to their faces. The campus is small enough that you can glance at just about any person and it will register that you've seen them before at some point. I see one girl that is in my Geomorphology class. She is laughing through her singing and pulling her long, straw-blond hair into a ponytail. In class, she will talk loudly and concisely about her accomplishments: how many miles she ran this morning, "another" merit award she received for her grades, a compliment a professor paid her, the picnic her "amazing" fiancé took her on. Then she has the audacity to pretend that she's interested in the material we're learning: "Guys, guys, I remember this one! This is an *igneous* formation." Now she's pretending to be a first-rate Christian, as well. I shake my head.

The pastor gives a sermon in which he compares the large robot in *The Iron Giant* to Christ. I find this humorous, and I look around to see if anyone is smirking. Smiles and nods, all sincere. I wipe the smirk off my face, feeling the insecurity of a child caught misbehaving during the service. A clip is shown from the movie. The robot sacrifices himself for the town, which is about to be demolished by a nuclear bomb. He launches up to meet the bomb and the screen is flooded with light. The town mourns the loss of a hero. The last scene shows the scattered parts of the robot rolling around obstacles and patchy terrain to reconnect into a whole, each little cog signaling the other until some semblance of the robot can be distinguished. The robot's eyes burn to life just before the credits begin rolling.

Following the sermon is communion. I have not taken communion in quite some time, and I forget how to cup my hands just so to receive the body and the blood. I chew and swallow, disappointed in myself for some reason I can't name. The people around me give and take with ease. They smile at one another comfortably, even blissfully, not concerned if someone's hand brushes against theirs accidentally, not minding that the artists singing these songs repeat themselves over and over and over.

Mary gets up and speaks the prayer she pulled out of her ass earlier today. It doesn't sound thrown together whatsoever, though. Rather it sounds poetic, moving, hallowed, even. Heads bowed, hands clasped, a few noses sniffing, the people around Mary have faith in her, and that is what gives her words their weight. It's when I can no longer make out the little smiling suns I painted on my toenails that

I realize I'm crying. I brush away a few errant tears quickly, glancing around, embarrassed because I don't know why I'm shedding them.

Mary concludes her prayer and invites everyone to offer up their prayers to God. We stand in a brief silence that is broken only by the cars on the highway and the wind stirring the trees. Then, one by one, people begin to speak. They are praying out loud, I realize, and I'm at once struck by both the intimacy of hearing strangers talk to God and my fear at the thought of doing so myself. I imagine starting to speak; I actually try to encapsulate the sensation of speech bubbling in my throat before the sounds pour out and become words, audible, tangible, meaningful. I can't even get the thought of the words past my throat—just thinking of doing so leaves me gagging on them as though they're a hunk of bread caught in my tonsils.

I'm so preoccupied with this thought that I'm not actually praying at all, I feel like an imposter. Here I am surrounded by all of these heartfelt prayers being lifted up to God, and I'm busy contemplating the art of praying out loud and how I'd be no good at it. If God is up there watching this, I must stand out like a big red X. I squeeze my eyes tighter shut and try to come up with a prayer—for Mary's and God's sakes.

*Dear Lord... Help me with...* Help me with what? I can't say finals. That's too trivial. *Help me with...* I can't say changing the world, either, because that would be completely out of self-righteousness inspired by some bizarre notion of impressing God. *Help me with...* I think of all of the people in my life that I want to help, myself included, all of the problems I wish I could erase, but I don't know how to ask God to help me with any of this. I can't even ask why I keep crying. It seems that cupping my hands just so during communion isn't the only thing that I've forgotten how to do.

When the spoken prayers begin to dwindle down and a proper lull has taken place, Mary tells us that we are free to visit the contemplate space during these last few hymns to continue lifting our prayers up. The contemplate space is usually in a smaller chapel room beneath the chapel itself—a sort of Russian nesting doll chapel. But tonight they've moved the space over to the little valley next to the chapel, beneath a giant, ancient tree that we affectionately call Merlin. Some students begin to trek over there now I decide to follow them, not out of any desire to continue struggling with my prayer skills or lack thereof, but out of a need to escape from what has suddenly become a claustrophobic setting.

The music fades to a dull hum as I get closer to Merlin. My footsteps make soft pitter-patters in the wet grass. Some students are gathered around the tree, others stand apart and farther away, either in small groups or alone. Bowls of sand sprouting skinny white candles nestle around the trunk of the tree, and a couple of tiki torches glow hypnotically. One girl nimbly selects a candle, tilts it into the flame of a tiki torch, then burrows the candle back into the sand. I wait until she moves aside, then reach down to do the same. Anything to feel purposeful.

Before I relinquish the candle, I play with the wax, letting it drip onto my fingertips and palms, enjoying the sting of the heat giving way to a dull ache that hardens into something I can pick off, remove from my skin. I watch the tiny flame sway and waver in the breeze, its brightness seeming to undulate with each small gust. Not wanting to see the flame lose to the wind, I thrust the candle hard into the sand. It tilts to the side, so I retrieve it, find a spot where the sand is thicker, and root it there instead. There, now it looks as though it will remain upright.

I hear another pitter-patter in the grass and see that the obnoxious girl from Geomorphology is approaching. I hurry away from the candle shrine, not wanting her to spoil the little peace I've found. At a loss for what to do next, I stand dumbly staring at the students who are still praying. They kneel in the grass, looking like shepherds, like saints, like paintings of the Madonna being annunciated to. One student throws his arms skyward, stretches them out on either side of him, then brings them up over his face.

Geomorphology Girl enters my line of vision. She moves slowly, without her usual swagger, and lowers herself to the ground. She pulls her legs up in front of her, her knees jutting upward. I have time to see her face twist into an anguished sob before she buries it in her lap and murmurs quiet, seeking words.

The chapel stands watch, its slant of a roof casting a warm shadow over us, the crown points above the stained glass scratching the sky, pointing to stars. I feel it then, not the clarity of a voice in my ear, but a stirring within.



The church steeple glistened in the morning sun as Leah walked in with her family, trying not to look too hungover. Bombarded by the chatter of those gathered in the narthex, she quickly volunteered to find them all a seat inside and darted for the sanctuary. The stiff rustle of her newly-ironed dress reminded her of last night's bed sheets, and her head ached.

Leah almost passed him. She skidded into a pew behind him on the other side of the sanctuary. A good view.

*He wasn't at Ethan's last night*, she thought, noticing his tamed copper hair and his crisp crimson button down. Her fingers caught on her tangles as she ran them through her hair. Her parents and sister soon came, rosy from feigned laughter, and settled beside Leah as the acolytes walked down the aisle. The full church stood as one and began to sing a popular hymn.

"Open our Eyes Lord"

We want to see Jesus..."

Singing the rest by memory, she looked up from her hymnal and saw one of the acolytes had forgotten to light an altar candle. Her eyes flitted to him, his lips moving lightly to the organ's music. *Soft lips, too, I bet.* Everyone sat down. A small man rose to read the lessons as Leah ruminated on her chances. *Ethan mentioned last night that Jake and his girlfriend broke up a few days ago.*

"Our New Testament lesson for today comes from the book of Matthew, the seventh chapter..."

*I wonder what happened. I knew they were going to break up eventually.*

"...And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye..."

*She was never right for him.*

"...when you have a log in your own?"

*She was Roman Catholic. They have completely different ideals than Lutherans. He needs someone with the same values as him.*

"Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye." This ends the reading."

"Thanks be to God," Leah recited with the rest.

After the congregation rose for the gospel lesson and two songs, the pastor motioned for them to sit down, cleared his throat at the pulpit, and began the sermon. Leah sank into her seat and let her mind muffle the surrounding noise. Her eyes rested on Jake's profile. Straight-backed and smiling slightly, he was watching the pastor's grand gesticulations. His smile turned into a full laugh as he and many others in the church showed appreciation for a joke the pastor had apparently just cracked. Leah laughed along.

*God, that smile. Why does he never come to parties? The only guys that ever seem to show up are gross. Only attractive once everyone is totally smashed.*

"Psalm 119 says, 'Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path.' Therefore..."

*Then again, I'm pretty sure I flirted with a lamp last night, so that's really not saying much.*

"...have to let Christ's light shine within us, so He can reveal to us our divine purpose..."

*Oh, God. What if Jake somehow finds out about what happened last night. I was drunk and I seriously don't even remember talking to Ethan before we—*

"KEEP WATCH, folks!"

This booming imperative made Leah jump. Her thoughts blurred, so she was suddenly looking at her pastor, involuntarily thinking of him with his wife under stirring bed sheets. Shaking her head as if the thoughts would come tumbling out, she turned away from both Jake and her pastor. Leah concentrated on the unlit candle on the altar. Charred and slightly frayed, the candle's wick sagged as though exempt from duty.

*What's the point of all these candles, anyway? If I were a candle, I'd want to be that unlit one, finally relieved from the burden of holding a flickering flame that does nothing but slowly melt you. Re-hardened into a lumpy mess, forced to light whenever the burning wick of the acolyte's candle lighter strikes you. Why have a purpose when it's imposed upon you?*

"...and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen."

Offering was taken, followed by more songs. All rose for prayer. Leah tapped her foot and sneaked one-eyed glances at Jake's bowed head.

*After church, I'll go up to him and show him I'm so cool and relaxed that I couldn't possibly be "easy" or constantly hungover.*

"Bless the sick and the downtrodden. Especially be with Marcie Grafe, who lost her husband to a long battle with cancer..."

*I'll make him realize I'm down to earth, a great listener, and can be really deep if I want. Then even if he does hear about what happened last night, he won't believe it. If he did, my life would be just about over.*

"...and all those who are mourning the loss of loved ones who fought overseas. In Your name, Amen."

"Amen."

The congregation sat down for Communion. Leah watched Jake walk to the altar with his family. He was taller than she remembered. As she stood with her family to go receive Communion, Leah thought of all the collective sitting and standing and, eyeing the Common Cup, couldn't help thinking, *Don't drink the Kool-Aid.*

"Take and eat. This is Christ's body given to you."

She ate.

"Take and drink. This is Christ's blood shed for you."

She pressed her lips to the cup and forced down the wine, having had enough alcohol last night.

Communion came to a close, and the pastor raised his hands to his sides, signaling everyone to rise for the blessing and final song. The acolytes extinguished the candles' flames, and Leah saw that the acolyte still put the snuffer over the unlit candle, for good show. As the congregation turned toward the cross as it was carried down the aisle, Leah caught Jake's eye and quickly looked away, though not before seeing a small smile begin to form on his face.

As soon as the organ played its final note, chitchat saturated the air as people slowly shuffled out of the sanctuary. Leah spotted him in the narthex, recycling his bulletin.

*Just put on a big smile and walk up to him.*

"Hey, Jake!"

He turned to look at her. A slight smile jerked at his mouth, and he pointed to his lips.

"Um, you have the Body of Christ in your teeth."



**SADDAM AL-ZUBAIDI:** I'm a Fulbright scholar from Iraq with ten years of media production experience. I'm currently enrolled in Valparaiso University's Master of Science in Digital Media program. My passion towards photography, videography, and storytelling brought me to the United States and has kept me exploring cities and towns across the country. Also, my fascination in motion graphics and animation led me to try many different art forms and techniques and that ultimately shaped me as versatile digital artist. My current project with collaborators Liz Wuerffel and Sarhang Sherwani is a documentary film about the Syrian Refugees camp in Kurdistan-Iraq.

**JORDAN BIRES:** As a poetry writer in my novice period, I'm grateful that the selection committee found my poem worthy of publication in such a fine literary journal. It is an honor. I hope to share more of my work as I continue my journey at Valparaiso University. I also send thanks to my parents and extended family for supporting me throughout my 21 years of life, especially in my decision to be an English major. Here's to the future and all that it holds.

*KAYLA BELEC still votes for Pedro.*

**MYCHAL TOO MANY NICKNAMES BRIM:** Sings spontaneously because there is a part in my soul, and everyone's invited.

**ALI DASHITI:** As an international students in the United States I love to travel to all the cities in America. One of the cities that I most loved is San Francisco in California. The city with beautiful historical buildings and bridges and the world-famous prison. Also, the amazing marina where you can see the whales and seals. San Francisco was the center of the movement Hippies against the American tradition that began in the sixties with what is known as the summer of love, and where many homosexuals from across America run to for a freedom and rights. One of the most famous marks of San Francisco is the streets levels, and this picture is of one of the most beautiful streets, descending a high degree with slalom way down, while you watch the sea with the San Francisco Bridge which was built in 1936 and one of the most important marks is the city along with the Golden Gate Bridge.

EMILY DOHERTY is a junior undergraduate, a future Public Relations professional, and a creative writing maven. She is the Opinions Editor at The Torch and a fashion/lifestyle intern at Zapwater Communications, a boutique public relations agency in her beloved city, Chicago. There is something about literature, and writing in particular that interests her, especially writing focused on her personal experiences. Her creative non-fiction work is what she is most proud of, but she also enjoys poetry and fiction. Emily is inspired by the creativity and optimism of others, as well as vintage design, indie music and large, bustling cities. She wants to give thanks to The Lighter and is looking forward to writing new pieces soon (stay tuned....)

MIRANDA JOEBGEN: This is a photo of part of the wall separating Palestine and Israel. The Palestine side, as shown in the photo, is heavily decorated with graffiti, most of which has to do with love and peace.

BECCA GRISCHOW is a poet, hula hooper, and rap fan. She likes coffee and Diet Sierra Mist Cranberry Splash and hates olives. She likes to think that her aesthetic is "sexy 90's lesbian."

HANNAH KAITSCHUK: Panic attacks... they suck. I wouldn't wish them on my worst enemy. Unless you've experienced one, you can't really understand how terrible they are, so I tried to convey my first panic attack through my piece so that some people might understand them better. Here's to hoping you never understand what a panic attack is like!

My name is KENDALL KARTALY and I am a freshman studying English and Secondary Education. Writing is like a breath of fresh air; it renews me. I am an avid coffee drinker, early morning riser, and adventuring enthusiast. My favorite book usually is the last one I read.

DANIEL LOFTUS is a junior with a professional writing major and a general communications minor. I write the way I think, which means that I free-write about whatever goes through my mind. The method to my madness is to write short and simple about long and detailed subjects. In addition, I enjoy thinking globally and viewing things from different perspectives.

STACY McKEIGUE is a junior digital media major with a creative writing minor. Occasionally she manages to get some writing done between watching Netflix and taking coffee breaks. If you ever catch her talking to herself, don't interrupt! Chances are, she's working on a new piece and you might scare her back to binge watching her favorite TV shows.

My name is EMILY MUELLER, I'm a freshman English and Art major. I enjoy reading and writing poetry and taking photos is my passion.

HEATHER MENDE is a Public Relations and Creative Writing double major from St. Charles, IL. She is a lover of Diet Coke and all things caffeine. The way to her heart is through intense book discussion, Cheerios and The Catcher in the Rye. She writes mostly fiction and creative non-fiction but has enjoyed experimenting with poetry.

DANIELLE STEINWART, junior, enjoys telling crude jokes.

KYLE SMART: So many times when you go to write this note, you want to be funny, prolific, deep, or dramatic. It seems to be in that very vein, if you try too hard, nothing good goes to print. I sort of like that struggle. I like being pushed to the point where you must be creative. I like the stress of a deadline, I like to feel the pressure to produce. Somehow, the product gets out, the quality is what it is, and you look back and smile, because you accomplished a goal. May it be small or large, you made something, and it is entirely your own.

STEFAN ROSEEN will now provide another list of some things he likes to do:

- 1.) Sleep
- 2.) Sit
- 3.)

(FUN! fill in the blank.)

ALEXANDER URYGA: Sometimes we all,  
lean out into the abyss.  
Isn't life a ball,  
on the precipice?

TAYLOR WIESE hopes to be brave.

SUBMIT!!!  
SUBMIT!!!

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