The University of Northern Iowa and the 2020 Inner Weather staff would like to thank everyone who has helped make this magazine possible. To all those who submitted stories, worked on the magazine or supported it in any way thank you so much for all your contributions and continued support of this amazing student work.

I would like to specifically thank our Faculty Advisor Vince Gotera for his continued support, guidance and years of work with the magazine. This really wouldn’t be possible with out you! I would also like to thank our Editor’s Sarah Betz, Sue Sasek, Carrie Pint, Brady Tegeler, Kayla Lawrence and Erica Scherer for all the hard work that they put in this year. You’ve all put in a tremendous amount of work to make this magazine possible and even through the craziness that was this semester you helped to make this magazine great!

Finally, I would also like to thank everyone who came before me, all of the previous editor’s, readers, and contributors to this magazine. This magazine has a long history at UNI and each person who works on the magazine has allowed it to grow and continue to be something wonderful on campus. I can’t wait to see what the future holds for this magazine and I’m so excited to see how it will grow. To all the future editor-in-chiefs, genre editors, readers, writers and artists keep being creative and inventive; strive to be better than the last year and remember that your creativity makes this campus and the world a little brighter.

I am so grateful to have been apart of such a great student organization during my time at UNI. Working on Inner Weather has taught me so much about not just publishing but also working together with a group of diverse individuals towards one common goal. Each year I’m so impressed by how creative students on this campus can be and how willing they are to come together to make this possible.

Keep writing, designing, creating and being amazing!

-Sarah V Fluegel
Contents

Roberta S. Tamres Sci-fi Award
13 Thumper the Jumper by Hannah Wiles

Fiction
23 Priorities by Madison Foster
30 Forks and Needles by Madison Jabens
36 Alpha by Kayla Lawrence
40 Daisies Never Tell by John Mason
50 A Cloudy Sense of Direction by Alyssa Neis
56 Toxic Tom by Cory Taylor

Poetry
61 Laying of Hands by Nicholas Blake
62 Hunger Pains by Calli Brouwer
63 12:01 a.m. by Calli Brouwer
64 Double Rainbow by Cole Carolmen
66 Modernized by Eva Haube
68 Untitled by Abigail Hunt
69 Untitled by Abigail Hunt
70 In my mind, I'm an outlaw by Alyssa Minch
72 Metamorphosis (Pantoum) by Cory Taylor
73 Driving Rain by Melody Trucano
74 Briar to Bloom by Taylor Willey

Drama
79 Objectified by Emma Kossayan

Nonfiction
97 Dear Valued Customer by Jessica Drafahl
104 Forgotten Days, a Fading Memory by Neysa Klauer
110 River Dreams by Elizabeth Lovell
113 What Nobody Tells you When You Lose 25 Pound Over the Summer by Molly Magill
115 I Only Remember Not Jumping by Leah Roughton
ROBERTA S. TAMRES

SCI-FI AWARD

Winner: Thumper the Jumper
by Hannah Wiles

Judge: Vince Gotera

Vince Gotera serves as Creative Writing Coordinator in UNI’s Languages and Literatures department. He is the Editor of Star*Line, the print journal of the international Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association.
Enoch knew when he got into theoretical physics he wanted to study the idea of parallel universes, or multiverses. The latter term had seemed to pick up more steam lately in pop culture with the release of that animated Spider-Man movie, and in his twenty-five years of living on Earth, Enoch found he liked it better than parallel universes. The word was shorter, straight to the point, just like he fancied himself being. Everything about him was short, according to his ex-girlfriend: his hair, his height, his temper, his manhood... he did not like to think about the last insult she’d hurled at him as she’d broken up with him. Whether it was because she was right or not he’d never admit.

Along with theoretical physics, he’d dabbled in quantum theory and particle physics, if one could call any true study into these scientific fields dabbling. In any case, it had been enough to land him a job right out of college at a research facility studying the effects of traveling between the multiverses and ways of actually jumping between them. The team he was a part of was small, consisting only of himself, another recent college graduate named Chad, his direct supervisor, Amilia, and a young boy of fourteen with as many degrees as the team had combined. He thought the boy’s name was Martin, but he talked a mile a minute and Enoch had been too afraid to ask again. The kid was scary smart. A little difficult to work with as he was still a teenager, but overall a great scientist.

For all the renown the facility had, it seemed his area had too small of a budget. It was why they had such a small team and not as much equipment as all of them would have liked. Enoch was also sure at first the boy was paid a little less than the rest of them, but when he’d snuck a glance at the records, it turned out Martin was paid the most. It made sense, given that
That couldn't be right, but the two rabbits looked extremely similar. Enoch gripped TJ’s cage harder and ran toward the man, waving his keys and cellphone in the air with his free hand. “Hey! HEY! What are you doing to my car? Get away from there or I’ll call security on you!”

The other man turned around, scowling. “Now why would I step away from my car? This is mine, not yours, and I need to get going! This rabbit’s life is at stake!” His eyes seemed wild, even more so when shock flooded them. Enoch was sure his own face mirrored the man’s exactly. The other man looked precisely like him except for his hair being a little longer. The clothes were unquestionably Enoch’s, the same pair of jeans and plain red t-shirt he currently wore.

“I—I’m sorry, but who are you?” Enoch asked after a few moments of silence.

“Enoch Williamsby. I work in the lab here studying multiverses. Say, you look just like me!”

The other man even sounded like him in tone, though his choice of words did not match. Enoch swayed, feeling lightheaded all of a sudden. “My name is Enoch Williamsby and I work in the lab here studying multiverses…” His grip loosened on TJ’s cage and he dropped it. The other man and rabbit disappeared, and he really thought he might pass out. Where did the man go? Where did the rabbit go?

He sat down next to TJ’s cage, unlocking it and pulling the tiny beast out. He snuggled him close, stroking his fur as he stared down at the animal. “Well now, that was mighty strange, other Enoch. You just up and vanished! Poof! But now you’re back.”

“You don’t… I mean… are you me?” The question burst forth before he’d even had much time to think about it.

Martin was easily the smartest person on the team, even if such a finding was a blow to Enoch’s pride.

There had finally been a little progress that day, enough that Enoch felt his spirits lift for the first time in the eight months he’d been working there. The test subject rabbit he and Chad had affectionately dubbed Thumper the Jumper, or TJ for short, sat in their multiverse travel machine, as Chad called it. TJ had flickered in and out of existence for a solid minute before the fuse to the machine blew. Thumper the Jumper shook in his container and Enoch had pulled him out to cuddle him while Chad cursed the fuse. It had been the end of the day and they’d decided to give the rabbit a break. A few more calculations needed to be run anyway.

It was his turn to bring Thumper the Jumper home, and so he’d put the soft brown fella in his carrying crate, tucked the small container of rabbit food in his bag, and bid his coworkers goodnight and a great weekend before swiping out of the facility to drive home. Poor TJ seemed startled by every little noise they encountered, and Enoch wondered what he’d seen in his brief moments of travel. They should have attached a camera to the rabbit’s head. He’d bring that up to Amilia next week. Perhaps one of those fancy GoPro devices would work.

It wasn’t too long of a walk to his car in the employee parking lot and it wouldn’t be too long of a drive home. His affection for the little creature he had beside him had driven him to building a rather nice bunny cage and play area in his small apartment. He liked to think TJ appreciated it. He certainly seemed at home there, and it was that fact that made Enoch hope it would calm the animal down.

As he approached his old, rusting Gremlin, he stopped, his eyebrow quirking up. There was a man already there, jiggling the handle attached to the driver’s door. He couldn’t see the man’s face, but his clothes looked oddly familiar. There was a cage down by his feet with... Thumper the Jumper?
Real Enoch nodded faintly. The two sat in silence for a while, Real Enoch continuing to pet the multiverse bunny. TJ’s nose and ears twitched cutely. “Ever come across a universe where animals can talk?” he asked at length.

“Briefly. JT had an earful to give me at that point. Or, that universe’s version of JT. It’s why I decided to kidnap him and run. It’s not fair, you know?”

“No, I suppose it’s not.”

Another silence stretched between the two.

This time it was Other Enoch who broke the silence. “Say, what do you think would happen if we touched?”

Real Enoch shrugged. “I don’t know. There’s plenty of theories out there, as you know.”

“Most of them are really unpleasant.” The other man sighed almost wistfully.

“So, you’ve never touched anything else in those multiverses you’ve traveled to?”

“Yeah…” Real Enoch shook his head. “Okay, let’s just pretend for a moment we actually believe TJ and I are multiverse jumping right now. Why only to yours?”

Real Enoch nodded. “The two who sit in silence for a while, Real Enoch continuing to pet the multiverse bunny. TJ’s nose and ears twitched cutely. “Ever come across a universe where animals can talk?” he asked at length.

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“Oh, I’ve touched loads of things. Just never the other version of myself. I tend to avoid being seen. Not all of us Enochs are great scientists. One I met was a stoner. Another was a super sexy dance star. You know, like that Derek Hough guy. Is he a big dancer in your world too? I almost wish I could have been that Enoch instead.”

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Real Enoch didn’t know whether Other Enoch was kidding or not. He didn’t ask. “Yeah, Derek Hough is a dance superstar here.” He paused before hesitantly adding, “Dare we test those theories?”

His counterpart grinned. “I think we should. For science, and all that jazz. Since we’ve met and talked and all that.” His hand reached out and Real Enoch found his own doing the same. What were they doing? One part of his brain told him to stop, the other insisting he go through with it.
Their fingers came close, so close they were almost brushing. “Are you sure about this?” Real Enoch asked the other.

“Nope! Not at all.” Other Enoch kept on grinning, the wild look in his eyes back. Though, as Real Enoch thought about it, it might never have gone away. He had just been so focused on, well, the fact that multiverses really did exist.

“What theory do you think is most likely?” Real Enoch pulled his hand away just a tad.

Other Enoch closed the distance Real Enoch had created between their hands, and Real Enoch dropped his hand to his side completely. “World might explode, I reckon. Or one of us will cease to exist.” Other Enoch’s grin made it hard for Real Enoch to tell if he was joking or not once again. “Neither of those would be great options. I’m thinking maybe we actually shouldn’t test this out…” To accent his point, Real Enoch scooted further away, holding tightly to TJ.

“Now see here, Enoch from the other universe. The world needs to be destroyed. We need to be destroyed! Don’t you realize the potential of the danger in what we’re doing? And think of all the wrongs in the world! We could right them!” His voice rose as he spoke, and he lunged for Real Enoch. Real Enoch did the only thing he could think to do: he dropped TJ. The other man and rabbit flickered out of existence, and Real Enoch took a deep breath. He had to steady his nerves. A few minutes later and his trembling stopped. He glanced down at his poor rabbit who had curled up on the pavement right by his cage. “Right, well, that was exciting. But unless we want something bad to possibly happen, I’m going to have to figure out another way to get you home. Don’t worry, buddy. We’ll get you back to normal somehow. And I think I’m going to start looking for a new job…”

Thumper the Jumper just twitched his nose.
Delores was moving about her small kitchen, cooking some savory smelling chicken on the stove, when she heard her phone buzzing in the other room. She ignored the sound and grabbed a handful of peanuts from the cupboard to munch on.

Delores never answered her phone on the first call; in fact, friends of hers were surprised if she picked up at all. She was a busy person and didn’t appreciate being bothered with “silly phone calls”. She was currently making lunch and besides, she was almost certain it was her sister, Alice, wanting to get all chatty with her. Alice liked to complain about how unhappy her life was, and Delores could only listen to so much before she got tired of it. Then she’d have to give an excuse to get off the phone so she didn’t have to pretend to feel sorry for Alice any longer, and she didn’t want to go through the hassle of it all.

“No,” she thought, “I don’t have time for that today.”

Delores opened her fridge and looked in at its dimly lit contents. There wasn’t much to look at, so she made a mental note to go grocery shopping later in the day. Bending over, she grabbed a bag of shredded cheese, a week-old package of lettuce, a tomato, and salad dressing. She carried the ingredients to the kitchen counter and set them down. Pulling open a drawer, she grabbed a fork before opening the cupboard in front of her and pulling out a large white bowl. She quickly prepared a salad and sat down to eat it. The chicken on the stove sizzled as she scooted her chair closer to the table. After the salad, she’d eat a healthy amount of protein before making a much needed grocery list.

Looking at the soggy red slices of tomato scattered throughout her salad, Delores thought back to when she used to prepare salads before every
a movie that he thought was worth watching. After about fifteen minutes, he settled on the movie Blazing Saddles and leaned back into the rocking chair.

The dog laid silently on the floor next to him as Tristan drank himself into a stupor. By the time the movie was about halfway through, Tristan had gone back to the kitchen twice to get more vodka and a splash of orange juice. His dog followed him each time as Tristan sloppily and unsteadily made his way back to the rocking chair. The alcohol eventually forced him into a deep slumber, keeping him from hearing his phone as it rang on the endtable right beside him. His dog heard it and whined at his owner as the phone continued to scream. The liquid in his glass danced to the vibrations of the ringtone, but Tristan slept unmoving in his chair.

***

For Nadine, every day was stressful, but today had been an especially strenuous one. She had been busting her ass waiting tables and she still hadn’t gotten a break. Her boss wouldn’t let her have one fucking little breather. All she needed was fifteen minutes to go out back, light a cigarette, and check her phone. She was in the process of making plans with Luke, her most current sexual conquest, when she clocked in and was forced to lock her purse away in the office. She could just imagine Luke, tall and sexy as ever, beginning to lose interest because she hadn’t replied to his messages all day. Her love life was in the process of becoming non-existent, all because her boss was a dick.

Filling a glass full of root beer, Nadine walked over to a family consisting of a tall dark haired man, a slim light haired woman, and three children. The kids had been screaming and hitting each other since they’d walked into the diner about half an hour ago, and she couldn’t stand it.
How could people let their children be so god damn rude? she thought. Nadine let out an exasperated sigh as she slammed a glass down in front of the gentleman. It was his third refill. How could he drink so much? He was probably trying to get on her nerves. The man stared at her as she pulled a towel out of her pocket and wiped away the root beer that had splattered onto the table.

Nadine muttered a quick, “Enjoy,” under her breath before marching off towards the back office. She ignored the angry glare from the guy she’d rudely given the drink to, and wiped away the root beer that had spilled down her hand and arm before shoving the towel back into her pocket.

Turning the corner and walking up to the door of her manager’s office, Nadine made a fist and slammed on the door three times before yelling, “Mark! Seriously, I need to take a break. It’s chaos out here!” Hoping her statement wasn’t too much of an exaggeration, she turned the door handle and pushed the door inward. Mark was sitting at his desk, working on the computer, facing away from her. His remaining hair formed a U shape on the back of his head, and Nadine could see the light from the bulb in the ceiling reflecting off the bare skin of the top of his scalp. She noticed his shoulders had slumped forward as soon as she pushed the door open.

Without even turning to face her, he said, “Nadine. You’ve been here three hours and have waited on two tables. Do you really need a break already?”

“Yes, Mark, I really do!” Nadine replied as she crossed her arms and rolled her eyes, knowing Mark had no way of seeing her. He sat silently for a few moments before sighing and giving her the okay to take a five minute break. Nadine rushed forward and grabbed her purse from the hook she had hung it on three hours earlier and ran out the back door without uttering a thanks.

The cool air felt great on Nadine’s skin as she sat on the cement steps. She opened her purse and grabbed out the box of Marlboro’s and her phone. She lit a cigarette and clicked on her phone and gasped when she found no messages from Luke! She had a missed call and there was a voicemail from her mother, but Nadine didn’t have time to worry about what was probably another one of her mother’s rants about how boring her day had been. She scrolled through her contacts until she landed on Luke’s name and pressed the call button. She intended to give that boy a piece of her mind.

***

Delores looked down at the soapy water in her sink as she washed away the aftermath of her lunch with a skill that could only be learned from years of practice. She took pride in her dishes. She had been the sole dishwasher of her family her entire life, but she had never been bothered by it. After all, no one could wipe away a stubborn grease spot as fast as she could. Dirty dishes weren’t nearly as numerous nowadays, though, since time had slowly eroded the family members away from her home. Delores sighed, put the last dish up to dry in the drying rack, and drained the murky water from her sink. It was time for a cigarette.

She grabbed her phone before walking outside to get her daily dose of nicotine. Lighting a cigarette she slowly inhaled, feeling a rush of relaxation overtake her. Delores had been trying to quit this bad habit for years, but she could never seem to kick it. She never worried about the effects smoking would have on her until after her divorce. As time wore on, she only began feeling more lonely, so she’d made the decision to join a church organization, and boy, were they focused on making her see the error of her ways. At first, Delores didn’t care about the disapproving glances she’d get when she’d light up after a meeting. She’d only attended their get togethers because she wanted something she could look forward to doing with other people. She didn’t care if those people actually liked her. However, things had changed.
and she found herself wanting to impress them. Besides, smoking wasn’t good for her anyway. How hard could it really be to quit? She quickly found out that it was a lot harder than she was hoping it would be.

Though it had been tough, Delores went from smoking a pack a day to having a cigarette about every four hours. That meant she could make it through a whole meeting and get home before having to light up. In fact, the members of her church were already under the impression that she was done with smoking for good. Delores knew that wasn’t true, but she let them believe it. They were impressed with her, and she imagined that her lungs would be just as impressed once she finally did quit for good. Her children were proud of her as well, but it was hard not to smoke around them. They both smoked whenever they came to visit, which wasn’t very often, and she still hadn’t been able to resist her urge to smoke with them. If she refused to go outside with them, that was valuable time she was missing. So, she always accompanied them.

Delores took another drag of her cigarette when she felt her phone gyrating rapidly in her pocket. She’d only just realized she never checked on the call from earlier. She grabbed her phone out to find the caller to be a number she didn’t recognize. She usually didn’t pick up for unknown numbers, but decided that she would take a chance and pick up this time. After all, her youngest daughter, Nadine, had a habit of getting into trouble, and she didn’t want to risk missing what could be another call for help.

“Hello? Who is this?” Delores asked, watching the smoke slowly depart from her lungs as she exhaled.

“Hello. Is this Ms. Wright? We’ve been trying to get a hold of you.”

“Yes it is. I’m sorry! You must’ve been the call I missed earlier. Who did you say this was again?”

As the person on the other end talked, Delores slowly stopped listening. Her halfway finished cigarette slipped from between her fingers, falling to the cement below, bouncing once, and then rolling to a stop a few feet away. She felt her body, slowly slide down into a sitting position. Gradually, Delores felt warm trails down her face, which she then recognized as the path of her tears. There was a burning inside her chest, but for once it wasn’t due to the smoke she had willingly inhaled on a daily basis.

Her neighbors all came outside when they heard a woman wailing at the top of her lungs in despair, only to find it to be their quiet neighbor, Ms. Delores Wright. When they tried to talk to her, she’d only cry harder. All Delores could think about was the fact she shouldn’t have missed that phone call.

***

Emmaline Wright died in her hospital bed after a few hours of suffering alone. She was on her way to a college class that morning when she’d been involved in a head-on collision. The accident wasn’t her fault, but her vehicle was the smaller of the two, and her body was the one that suffered the damage. First responders knew as she was airlifted from the scene that she wouldn’t survive the injuries her body had sustained. Hospital staff attempted to reach family members listed in her file, but to no avail. Her mother, Delores Wright, was the first to be notified of her death. She had one sister, Nadine, whom was then contacted by their mother. Her father, Tristan Wright, has yet to be notified.
A needle pricked the withering body, causing the release of a subtle ripple of blood to flow from the newly created hole. Another one to complement the many others that trailed down the arm. Soon, a trickling of renewed purpose and energy fix the damaged soul that had experienced its fair share of a life tattered. Ticking noises echo down the halls and then entered rooms with harsh white beams of light setting the stage for patients. The nurse’s caressed an elderly man’s hand as she places it back against his body underneath the blue cotton blanket.

Frank’s eyes cracked open a sliver as the nurse disappeared. He had gotten used to being alone and in the cold. This heat from the blanket was almost too much. No one had come to visit his deteriorating body; except for the nurse who was paid to take care of him and stopped by once every hour or more if he clicked the button. However, the buttons were too small for his fingers to get a proper grip. Often, he ended up clicking the emergency button instead. Now, he’s learned to wait and be patient.

There was no one left. He didn’t want to be seen as his body failed him. Over time, he had become self-conscious of his deep-set eyes and lack of cheeks, especially now that they were just bones peeking out of his face. From years of shooting up, his arms and legs were plagued with bruised veins and others that had fallen. Frank smelt of rancid meat and acid left overnight in a barn. Flies followed him whenever he walked the halls of the hospital, so the nurse stopped letting him out when it was busy.

It had been a long time since someone came to see him voluntarily. His wife, Rosey, stopped seeing him after he woke up naked in her sister’s bed—with her husband. He doesn’t completely remember what transpired that night, but he was certain it was the first time he freebased cocaine. By the end of the week, he’d received divorce papers and termination of parental rights. Frank had found it harder to sign divorce papers than the latter. They had gone on so many adventures together, like the time they... Well, maybe they hadn’t, but he had felt betrayed by her no longer waiting for him to get better.

Frank closed his eyes again to avoid the blinding light hitting his pupils, “Could you turn off the lights?” he asked.

“I’ll do it on my way out, alright? I’ve got to change out your fluids first,” replied the nurse.

“What’s your name? I want to know who’s caring for this old ass,” Frank said.

“Sharron. Now, you just lay back and rest. You’re gonna need it after all the trauma your body has been through,” the nurse replied.

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

“I’m sure,” she said dismissively. Sharron knew he would be back again. She had heard whispers about him. Nurses gossiping “Here he comes again. Why do we still take him? Shouldn’t there be a limit? We have other patients more deserving.” She didn’t have an opinion yet and she tried to stay out of the drama, but it was hard to ignore and stay unbiased. Sharron made sure to hit the lights on the way out.

Happy to be alone, Frank’s eyes shut. His forehead crinkled as he thought about what he would do when he got out. Home is under the shade of a tree during the summer and in the winter he fights for a spot in a shelter every day at 5 PM. Once, the volunteers find his stash or catch him in the act they kick him out and someone else takes his spot. This was a cycle that repeated itself every time. How was he lucky enough to shoot up every day and survive every overdose, but never find a way home?

Across the hall, a family waited. For them, good news was imminent. At least, they hoped. This wasn’t their first time. The same splintered wooden
“What did you want me to do? Not give her a chance to correct her behavior? She hadn’t needed us before. I thought she could work it out!” said John.

Sharron headed towards the couple but turned away as soon as she heard them fighting. They could wait a few more minutes if they were going to act like that in a hospital. She wondered how long the couple could keep their dignity intact with that vengeful glare they both wore.

Her stomach rumbled with hunger from her lack of breakfast. The minute she had sat down one of her patients beeped her and then a girl in a coma-state was rushed in with her parents who were berating the ambulance drivers. Once that began, it became a never-ending cycle. She’d wait until she got home to eat.

As she passed by the rooms, Sharron caught a reflection off a door’s window of a girl sitting up in her bed, gagging from the breathing tube down her throat. Sharron rushed into the room and grabbed the girl by the shoulders and pushed her back onto the bed. Motherly instincts came over her, as she petted the girl’s head, telling her it was going to be ok and to stay calm.

“Hey! Hey! Calm down. Okay? Can you show me you understand? Try squeezing my hand, okay?” Sharron said.

Immediately, the girl latched onto Sharron’s forearm twisting the woman’s scaly skin like an anaconda trapping its prey; She understood. Fear radiated throughout the room and if it could, it would have caused the windows to vibrate and shatter. Waking up after a high and having a tube stuffed down her throat was not what Sara considered normal. Usually, it ended with her surrounded by crumbs and in one of her junky friends’ rundown shelters.

Despite this familiarity with hospitals from her stint with drugs and rebellion, she’d never actually ended up almost dying, at least from what
she remembers. She relied a lot of information from her parents, especially during trying times like these. Although, what could be expected from her mother (who was an alcoholic herself, whether or not she admitted it), half the time she's blacked out around the same time she is. Only, her mom has the control Sara doesn’t and she has her dad’s impulsivity.

As the woman hung over her, Sara smelled string cheese and its plastic wrapper, maybe she licked the wrapper for extra taste. Her body settled into the woman’s arm and goes limp. Relaxation poured over her as she listens to the woman speak and it soothed her.

“I’m going to get the doctor and we’ll talk about getting that tube out. But, I need you to stay still and relax. Move too much it’ll cause your throat to get hurt,” said Sharron.

Sara gripped her arm again. Her mind began to wander to how this all could’ve happened. She had been careful. Logically, she thought if she took the pills in moderation and not as much as she did before because that led to her last overdose, she’d be fine. Now, she’s trapped in this place with a tube in her, making her feel inhuman; a machine forcing life into her.

She’d always wondered how high she could get before it was too much and here it was: her limit. Where would she go from here? Sara was almost positive her dad was going to mention rehab, but he did the last time, too, and he didn’t enforce it then. Maybe when this tube comes out, her body will just give up. That would be for the best because she can’t imagine any other possible way out.

The door slammed open as the nurse strolled back in with a doctor that has an unfortunate handlebar mustache. “Well, I see you’re awake. Now, let’s take out that tube!” The doctor was too enthusiastic for his own good.

As they dragged the tube out, she shuddered as she felt the rigid tube against the smooth muscle of her throat. The stark contrast made her feel the need to puke and she did the second the tube escaped. A nice splatter of brown liquid and the remnants of crushed pills coated the tile floor.

“Sorry,” said Sara.

“No problem. We’ll just clean that right up!” the doctor said again, but his voice grew more serious. “We noticed this is not your first rodeo, so we’ll be frank. You are nearing 18 and after that, your parents can’t protect you from the authorities. There is an opportunity at a rehab center for minors only 30 miles from here.”

Sara’s eyes flickered back and forth between the nurse and the doctor. She didn’t know what to do. At this point, her parents should be coming in and hugging her saying We’re so glad you’re okay. Try not to do that again. There was no one to defend her or make her decisions. It was up to her.

Sharron saw the look of panic and confusion glaze over her patient’s eyes. Right now would be where she’ll make another mistake or set her life back on track. However, Sharron knew the drill because she saw the hidden message behind the eyes. The one that says I can do it on my own. I still want to chase the high. No one understands the power I feel when I’m 10 feet high. Sharron knew it all too well. She had been there before when others faced the exact same decision. The only thing she could do was treat them with respect and dignity as any other patient would deserve.

“What’s it gonna be?” asked the doctor.

“Can I think about it?” asked Sara.

And there it was, the never-ending cycle.

THE END
He wasn’t so much interested in the way the sunlight illuminated his watch or how its face threw dozens of warped, disks onto his ceiling. Nor was he interested in how those egg-shaped reflections wheeled around him overhead like vultures, when he lazily turned his wrist; no, he was merely bored. Having just arrived at his office, he had taken to blankly staring at the ceiling rather than delving into his workload. He faced an enormous amount of semi-tedious tasks mostly comprised of: placating clients, schmoozing higher-ups and appearing charming and invested to fellow executives. His job was mostly superficial, but he couldn’t deny the thrill of the psychological hunt that came with it. He possessed all the tools and characteristics of a successful executive and found it a bit curious that they were also the makings of a good huntsman. Listening, watching, and anticipating were all things people took for granted everyday; but excelling at them made him the best at what he did, although he wasn’t one to brag.

He was, however, one to fully take advantage of the benefits of his hard work; which was how he had found himself dressed in an impeccably-made, hand-tailored suit, seated behind an enormous snakewood desk, in his very own corner office. And, as he swiveled around to face the windows positioned behind his desk, he glanced down at his watch checking the time. Normally he wouldn’t have bothered with his watch, especially when pressed for time; he strapped it to his wrist every morning merely for the sake of fashion and a statement of status. It had no markings, just two diamond hands constantly working their way around, he was unable to do anything more than roughly estimate the time. It took him a few seconds, but he decided that the hands has momentarily rested somewhere around 7:30, and he figured, not to dwell on it any longer, that was close enough.

He stood and then strode over to the windows, peering down at what lay below. His office looked down on the intersection of William and Wall Street, on the foot traffic laden with throngs of businessmen and women. Their monotonous travel reminded him of worker ants as they briskly marched off to their jobs. This never ending lines of dull, black and gray suits could almost be hypnotic.

But, hypnotic in a different way than how one woman’s hips carved out a shape in a boxy suit. Hypnotic in a completely different way, still, from how another woman’s appropriately knee-length, pencil skirt slid higher, despite her tugging, with every step. It was only every so often that his gaze would land on a woman that peaked his curiosity; his gaze would become fixed just long enough for her to proceed half way down the block before he lost interest. He supposed he was misled this way nearly a dozen times everyday before he actually found the one woman he was looking for. He also supposed that, had she been one of his clients, he need only have seen her once and would never have mistook her for any other woman again. However, under the circumstances he was understandably unable to tell the difference. At least that’s what he told himself as he dismissed yet another woman.

A couple minutes had passed when a small parting in the crowd at the end of the block caught his attention; his eyes snapped down to his watch, hardly taking note of the placement of its hands before shooting back up. As if on cue, a curly head of dark hair and a small green backpack bobbed into view. He knew without having to inspect this woman any further as she walked down the block that this was her. The color of the backpack struck him as vivid, though truthfully, it was a rather pedestrian, dark green. In any other setting it would get no passing thoughts, yet here, however, surrounded by a somber sea of suits, it isolated her. Her skin was a deep umber and he could tell even from where he stood
that it had a warm glow in the sunlight. He watched the thick black coils of her hair writhe and jump with her next few steps when he noticed the opening part in the crowd, that had announced her appearance, had not sealed itself behind her, but had grown even larger. She seemed to neither notice nor care that she was rapidly forging what could only be deemed as a private isle, adrift in the surrounding sea. It continued to grow larger still, when finally he had thought he spotted its sudden end. A bit of black had come into view trailing her by a few feet. Just moments later, however, he quickly found himself mistaken.

At first there was only one, a creature inky black from its muzzle to its tail, leaving only a tuft of white on is broad chest. And though it was massive in size, it had appeared swiftly, just barely noticeable. It slunk many paces behind her with an air of caution. More soon followed after, interweaving and overlapping each other; he let his eyes dart from one to the next as he counted eight in all. Their coats, though varying degrees of muted shades, all had a similar look of uniformity, and if not for their beastly presence they might have blended into the crowd better than the woman did.

Eight wolves in suits following a woman with a green backpack.

But then, like a dream they vanished. In the span of just under a minute the woman and her pack had appeared and disappeared at opposite ends of the city block.

He stayed there a moment more, watching as the former halves of pedestrian traffic melded back into one without so much as a change of pace. He then turned and walked back to his desk, the events of only moments ago slowly fading from his mind. He sat and tilted himself back in his chair and stared blankly at the ceiling attempting to recall what the woman had looked like; but, just as he had on every other occasion he drew a blank. This didn't trouble him, in fact he didn't care enough to concern himself with it. He knew she'd be there again the next day, and the day after. But now, it was time to get back to work.

He had lifted up his arm to see the time when sunlight had caught the face of his watch and he found himself captivated by the display of light that had been thrown onto the ceiling, once bare. He stared up at the bright reflections that had scattered across the ceiling; golden in color, the quarter-sized ovals distorted one way, then another attempting to correct themselves with his slightest movement. He rolled his wrist slowly, manipulating the light above until one perfect circle sat pinned directly overhead; its image crisp and honey colored, all except for two translucent flecks that slid around inside it, ever moving.

Kayla Lawrence
Most likely it was some glitch in the machinery, a faulty wire. After all, it had taken him more than a year of scavenging to find all the necessary parts to build the system and almost as long as that to get it up and running. He’d found and repaired a rather large antenna that gave him a reception perimeter of several miles around, and luckily for him, there was an active repeater that would get him even more range. But in all that time, he’d never heard anything but his own voice crackling out of the speakers.

In a dream I fancied you were by my side.

Foolishly, he had thought he’d find someone else out there, surviving just like he was. He knew the smart move was to remain silent, hidden from the dangers he’d left behind. But he was so far from everything he’d known, he couldn’t imagine there would be any harm. Who would even find him?

In the beginning, he’d spent a few hours a day channeling through the frequencies, finding only empty airways. He wasn’t even sure what he would have done if anyone had ever actually answered. It was naïve and he’d all but given up on hearing anything, going days on end without bothering with the machine at all.

The light shifted suddenly to blue and became solid, registering reception. Dan sat transfixed as a garbled voice filled the room. Dan realized whoever was on the other end was searching, like he used to. And they were close to his frequency.

While I gathered daisies, one long chain you tied, ’round us both I wound it, close I held you, too.

Dan focused on the words, forcing himself to breathe deeply and relax. It was an old folk song his wife would often hum whenever she was busy with something. She once told him that her mother used it as a lullaby.

Daisies never tell, dear, make that dream come true.

The melody took him back to when things were simple and even now, after so long, it calmed him. But just as Dan was finding his way out of this tangle of half-remembered terrors, he heard static cutting through the early morning silence. He rolled over into a sitting position, eyes trained on the wall opposite of his bed and the blinking green light that indicated his radio was on and functional. Maybe this was what had ripped him from his tortured slumber?

The transmission was broken and sputtering. It was caught in the sideband, one of the frequencies on either side of the current one. Dan was unsure of whether his dream was still bouncing around his mind, playing a cruel trick on him, or if there really was someone out there trying to communicate.

Daisies Never Tell

John Mason

Dan awoke with a gasp, his body clammy with sweat. Sleep was becoming ever more elusive as days passed. He was alone, secluded in the small mountain hut he had called home for nearly seven months, with nothing but ghosts of memories to keep him company.

In a dream I fancied you were by my side.

He shivered involuntarily, his mind swirling with confusion, this remnant of another nightmare flitting around the edges of his mind. It didn’t seem to matter how far he ran or how hard he tried to forget—everything he had done, all the mistakes and death, always came back.

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He fumbled underneath his bed, quickly finding his boots and sliding them on his feet. It was a frustrating precaution, and he often found himself cursing about it. But the world wasn’t the safe one he’d known in his youth. Danger was a constant threat, and there was always the possibility that he’d have to make a run for it. The first thing he’d learned was to always wear shoes.
Laces haphazardly tied, Dan bounded across the room. He didn’t want to let whoever this was slip away. They could skip over his current channel or stop before they even got to it and this chance might not come again.

Daisies never tell, dear.

He unfolded the chair that leaned against the desk, where rested the radio and all its accompanying tech: speakers, amplifiers, receptors and microphones. There was even a small computer monitor and keyboard, complete with a limited OS. Dan hurriedly did a once over, ensuring that everything was plugged in and operating correctly.

The voice rang out once more and this time much clearer. He could hear small bits of words, though he still couldn’t quite make out what was being said. From the timbre of the voice, though, he could tell it was a woman. Memories rose up, unbidden in his mind, taunting him with recollections of a life he’d never have again. His wife and family… all the people that had relied on him. All gone.

Make that dream come true.

It was only then, as he sat in a cold steel chair, lost in the mire of remembrance, index finger hovering just above the button that would allow him to call out to the woman on the other end of the radio, that he realized his mistake. The delicate tinkling of the chimes running across his porch gave way to a rousing clamor. Someone was there.

Dan shoved out from the desk, the legs of the chair cutting deep gouges in the wood floor, and he sprinted across the room. A loud thud, no doubt a foot connecting with the door, sounded as he reached the large safe beside his bed. He placed his hand on the biometric scanner, which was keyed only for him, as a second bang reverberated around the walls. He didn’t have long.

The safe swung open and Dan quickly pulled a vest of body armor over his head. There was a myriad of weapons to choose from, everything from semi-automatics to hunting knives. The best option would be a shotgun, but he didn’t want to risk a stray bullet hitting the radio and robbing him of his opportunity to talk to another person. Still though, he tucked a small caliber gun safely into the holster hidden in the back of the vest. Rule number two was a simple one: always carry.

A third kick sent the door flying from its hinges in a shower of splinters. Dan’s hands closed around the worn cloth wrapping of a baseball bat as the creature stepped over the threshold.

It smelled faintly of rot and its eyes carried the vacant stare that let him know it was not a Master. It was raised by one that had regained sentience, and, as such, was bound to another’s will and its mind kept dull to ensure subservience. It was a Thrall.

The beast rushed forward, barreling across the room with surprising speed for something so large. Dan was patient, though, and waited for it to swipe, its lumbering swing with claw-like nails outstretched. He ducked low and swung hard, connecting with a vicious shot to the side that would have knocked any man to the ground with a few broken ribs.

But this was no man and it came on again, lunging and hissing, and it was everything Dan could do to avoid being struck. He landed a couple more grazing blows, but if they had any effect at all, the creature wasn’t showing it. If anything, it seemed to be gaining momentum, crazed at being so near its prey.

Dan rolled underneath a wild strike, coming up behind and swinging with everything he had. The creature spun around, accepting the blow, even seemed to wince, but it had expected the shot and latched onto the bat. It yanked so hard Dan would have been knocked off his feet if its free hand hadn't already been waiting for him. The Thrall had twisted its torso unnaturally far, and with a strength no mortal being could have, flung him away. Dan flew across the room, crashing hard into the wall, and breaking the
Dan’s eyes widen as he turned to the shattered doorway and saw the silhouette of a figure, just outside the light that emanated from the cabin, eyes shining preternaturally. He should have realized what was happening. He knew, then, it was much too late.

While I gathered daisies, one long chain you tied.

A voice that Dan thought he’d left far behind was suddenly there, mocking him. It really had all just been a sick joke: the woman from the transmission, the Thrall, even now, glaring ominously from the shadows. Nothing but game.

‘Round us both I wound it, close I held you, too.

It stepped into the light and Dan quailed involuntarily. Time had not touched it. Its face still had that same porcelain quality and its teeth, white and sharp, gleamed out from behind its pale black skin.

Daisies never tell, dear.

It was as immaculately dressed as ever, like it was going to a five-star restaurant for an evening out and not here to commit murder. Dan steeled himself, fighting against the waves of fear and revulsion that washed over him, an effect of its presence, meant to addle and disorient.

“Make that dream come true...” The words echoed throughout the stillness of the room and it was suddenly hard to breathe. Dan clutched at his chest, trying, and failing quite spectacularly, to quell the fear bubbling up inside.

“So good to see you again, Danny Boy.” Its voice surrounded Dan, filling his mind with evil and dread.

He snarled something incomprehensible and willed away the power it was trying to exert. He knew well what it could do, and he’d be damned if he was going to be dominated so easily. Dan scrambled to his feet and lunged for the safe, only a few feet away. This thing, a Master, was far deadlier that its minion and nothing in the safe could really stop it. But still, a double tap to
flipping its safety off. It was getting closer, but he needed it to be right on top of him to have any chance at success.

“That's good. The only thing I'm going to like about you is the grease stain you make on my floor after I kill you.” All he needed was a few more steps. Dan focused on his breathing, in and out. One after another. He couldn't think about anything else but the action: roll, aim, shoot. He had to be perfect.

“That's cute. I could say the same thing about your wife. Daisy, wasn't it?” In and out. One after another. Roll. Aim. Shoot. “We killed them all, Daniel. Strung them up by their feet and flayed them. Every person that ever cared for you, whoever trusted you, died screaming. Except Daisy, she—”

The Master finished with a jumble of grunts as it slumped to the ground, staring, astonished, down at the smoking gun still pointed at it.

Dan stood and put another bullet in the creature's forehead, right next to the first, for good measure. He struggled for an instant, wanting to tie it down and inflict as much pain as possible. But he couldn't kill it, not easily, at least, or quickly. And he was sure there were more Thralls waiting out in the darkness, so even if he could finish off the Master, they'd be on him and far more than he could handle. He had to go now, while he still had the chance.

Dan flipped over his bed, grabbing a go-bag that had everything from a change of clothes to a box of ammo. He pulled on an old, worn hoodie and rushed to the solitary window, behind his radio desk. Hidden below was a tarp-covered ATV that could safely get him away and to a stash of supplies he'd set aside for just such an occasion. It was necessary to have a plan b and it was often the difference between survival and death.

“Hello? Is anyone out there?” The woman's words boomed from the speakers as Dan was halfway out the window. “Please! Anyone? I have a son, he's only six. We've run out of food. I don't know how much longer we have.”

the chest would at least slow it. Probably.

“Come now, Danny. I can't let it be that easy. What do you take me for?” The door slammed shut just before Dan reached it. Cursing under his breath, he slid behind the far side of the safe, and though it offered little protection, it gave him a moment to breathe, a chance to figure out what to do.

“How did you find me?” He needed to keep it talking. He’d learned early on that Masters were nothing if not braggarts.

“I confess, it has been a long and vexing journey.” It said, an uncharacteristic edge to its tone. Years ago, after the society fell apart, Dan had tried to save people, tried to be a leader. All he succeeded in doing was getting a lot of good folks killed and pissing off a lot of monsters.

So, he ran. And his exodus didn’t stem from fear, but, rather, because if he’d stayed, more and more people would have been killed as the monsters tried to get at him. There were enough deaths on his conscience, so when no one was looking, he fled the refuge that he’d helped found. His hope had been that an exile would save those who stood by him, and that he’d be able to live the remainder of his likely short days in peace.

The safe began to shudder unexpectedly and Dan dove to his side just as it toppled, barely escaping its crushing weight. The creature inched forward, smirking as Dan cut across the room and ducked behind the desk. If he could get in close, he could overpower it, Masters tended to be frail, but there was no likelihood of that happening. No, the bat wouldn’t be any help. All he had otherwise was the gun and that would be about as effective as throwing stones at an angry bear. If he wanted to get out alive, he had to be smart.

“Well, I’d say I’m sorry for the trouble, but well, fuck yourself.” Still, if he could get a shot off clean before it realized what was happening, he might daze it long enough to get away. All he needed was a minute.

“Such a smart mouth, Danny Boy. I always liked that about you.” Dan wrapped his fingers around the handle of the gun, pulling it slowing out and
“Damn,” Dan sighed, climbing back inside. He couldn’t leave, not with that woman out there, vulnerable. The Master would find her. Dan couldn’t allow that. His most important rule was also the only one he’d ever broken: never leave someone behind.

“I hear you.”

“Oh thank God. Please, we—”

“There isn’t time. You have to go. Run, now.”

“We can’t. My son, he’s sick. We haven’t eaten in days. Please, hel—”

“I’ll find you. But it isn’t safe. Go, before they come for you.”

Dan wanted to say more, to direct her to a cache of food he had stored near the town at the foot of the mountain where he could meet her, but he’d taken too long. He felt as if hands were clasped around his throat. He was forced around, face to face with the Master, digging the bullets out of its temple with long, pointed fingers.

“That,” it hissed, leaning close, putrid spittle hot on Dan’s face. “Did not feel GOOD!”

It slammed Dan’s back against the edge of the desk, sending a shock of pain running up his spine. Dan started to flail with every limb he had, even tried to bite the creature’s hands which now replaced the invisible ones that had been throttling his mind.

“I’m not going to kill you. Not yet,” the Master said, malice twisting its face. “No, that would be too easy. I’m going to find that woman, Danny Boy. And you are going to watch as we force her to spill every little secret she’s ever kept, listen to her every scream, until she’s begging for death. Just like I did to your Daisy.”

And then Dan began to laugh, a raucous sound that racked his body and pushed passed the increasing pressure on his throat. When Dan had turned back from that window, he knew that he was finished. That kind of clarity gives a man strength.

It gives a man purpose.

The radio began to click. Slowly at first. The green light shifted once again, but this time to red, and it began furiously flashing. The Master realized what was happening, a second too late. So consumed in the moment, it didn’t realize Dan’s right hand wasn’t actually flailing. While the rest of the man’s efforts was a great show of fear and wild movement, giving the Master exactly what it wanted, his right hand had been steadily typing a code into the keyboard of the radio system that was so much more.

Dan coughed for air after the hands that had held him released. The Master turned, intending to run, but they both were close enough now, and Dan was stronger. He could hold it in place, at least for the few seconds that he’d need. The Master growled, a deep guttural noise that sent a wave of panic through Dan. But it wasn’t enough to stop the man’s arms locking around it.

“Daisies never tell.” Dan sneered as the explosions began. They started in the screen and spread throughout the system, each element bursting with its own blast. He held fast as the Master struggled weakly, the flames already searing through its flesh. He’d once heard that fire was one of the few things that could truly hurt a Master, and if it was weak enough, even kill it. He didn’t know if it was true until that moment. Even so, death likely wouldn’t be the case here, but Dan hoped it would be enough to send the monster into a deep, dark hole to recuperate for quite a long time. Years, perhaps.

The final charge, placed in the speaker, was the strongest, and the concussive blast was enough to finally break Dan’s hold, hurling him back and through the open window. He bounced off the ATV and landed roughly on the ground. He needed to get back inside, and finish the job, but neither his legs nor his arms would obey. Shadows flitted about the corners of his vision and the last thing he saw before the world went black was the Master, flames dancing all around its body, fleeing into the woods.
A Cloudy Sense of Direction

Alyssa Neis

It was 2:00 in the afternoon with two hours left to travel on the highway. Carla glanced in the rearview mirror to see the three kids in the back: two sleeping, one intent on her smartphone with her earbuds in. Every so often, Carla had noticed, that her teenager would look up from her phone to stare out the window.

Outside, dense fog had set in. It had been a trip of clear skies so far, the fog then came like a pollutant. It was so dense that water began to collect on the windshield and it was now accompanied by the occasional whish of the windshield’s wipers.

Glancing again in the rearview, she noticed her teenager resting her head back on the seat, eyes closed. But Carla knew she wasn’t sleeping. At the slight ping of her phone, she lifted her head back up and attended to it.

The golden beams of other vehicles that came into view only seconds before they passed by were the only company Carla had on the road. The air was now finally warming up after a long winter, evaporating the snow that now lingered.

Her daughter’s phone pinged again. “Who ya talking to, Livvie?”
“Don’t call me that.”
“What? Not?”
“I don’t like it.”
“Okay, Olivia. Watchya up to?”
“I don’t like Olivia either.”
“Well what then?”
“My friends call me Liv.”
“Since when?”
Olivia snickered. “Uh...like...always.”

Carla sighed and turned her attention back to the road. She wondered when the fog would dissipate as she passed signs, one that showed 62 miles to the next city... then 45... then 21... then 10... and then there would be a countdown for a different city.

“Do you remember when you were like five, Liv, and you would sit right back there and tell me all about your day at school, and how Dylan was pickin’ on you again, and how ‘that flower outside looks so pretty, Mom!??”
“No.”
“You were such a fun passenger.”
Olivia shrugged. “I’m not five anymore.”
“No.” She paused, “How is Dylan now?”
“Good.”
“Is he taking you out to dinner tonight?”
“Maybe if we ever get back.”

Carla could still clearly remember the sunset at the picnic. She smiled at the way her young daughter had pranced about among the dandelions, bringing back bouquets of wildflowers as gifts. Carla had rested her head on Sean’s shoulder and traced her fingers down his arm, finally resting on his hand, the cold metal of his ring sticking out among the warmth of his skin. The metal that she would hold in her palm, only months later, as she had watched his casket lowered into the ground. The ring that now hung on a chain around her neck, next to her heart. She hadn’t been on a picnic since then.

“Mooooooooom! Are we there yet?” her 4-year-old whimpered as he tilted his head back in his car seat.
“Not yet, Tommy.”
“How much looonnnnggeerrr?”
“About an hour. Do you wanna play a car game? Like I Spy?” Carla saw Olivia roll her eyes in the backseat.
“Nooooo! I wanna go home!” His little body was squirming around in his car seat.

“I’m sorry, buddy, it won’t be too much longer. Here,” Carla carefully reached into her purse sitting on the seat next to her and pulled out her phone, “Play some games to pass the time.”

Olivia had been the first to love Matthew, his charismatic smile making his way into her heart after fixing the leak in Carla’s kitchen sink. At eleven years old, Olivia had been entranced with the idea of having a father again, chasing the idea of a picture-perfect happy family. The truth was, Carla wasn’t ready to love again, even though she fell for Matthew’s charm and easy-going nature. Merely a beam of light passing by, the charm hadn’t lasted long. Harsh words and forceful blows had replaced kind promises and soft touches. Maybe she should have left him, maybe she should’ve seen the signs. But she had needed the income, and she wanted Olivia to have her wish. Matthew had left them on a Saturday afternoon, after finding out Carla was pregnant with their second child. “I told you to take care of it.” Out the door he went, never to return again. Olivia’s eyes had burned into Carla’s back, as her daughter buried herself deep within, blaming Carla for the vaporization of her fantasy.

Whish whish. The windshield wipers seemed to clear away the memory. Carla glanced in the rearview mirror once again. James was somehow still asleep, and although she knew that would mean disaster for bedtime that night, she couldn’t bring herself to disrupt his peaceful dozing. Tommy had focused his attention on the phone screen, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. And Olivia hadn’t taken her attention away from her cell phone for the past hour.

“Liv?”

“Yes, Mom?” She didn’t look up from her phone screen.

“How are you doing? How’s school?”

Olivia’s eyes moved up to look at Carla, but her head stayed tilted down, creating a look somewhere between a scowl and utter disgust. “It’s a Saturday, Mom. I don’t want to think about school.”

“That bad, huh? You used to love school!”

Olivia rolled her eyes in response.

“You did! You used to come home excited about your coloring sheets and telling me all about the friends you played with that day.”

Olivia didn’t even look up.

“And I remember when you used to ask me on Saturday mornings if you could go to school today.”

Olivia glanced up but didn’t respond.

“And don’t you remember when your dad used to-”

“Enough with the ‘you used to’s, Mom!” Olivia threw up her hands in exasperation and let them flop back down on her lap.

Carla sat back, stunned, “Okay, Olivia, I’m sorry. I just-”

“Liv.”

“What?”

“I go by Liv.”

“Oh, right. Well, Liv, I’m sorry. I just thought maybe you’d remember...” Olivia snickered. “Mom, stop living in the past. I’m not ever going to be five again, and Dad isn’t coming back. So you might as well move on like the rest of us.”

The sting of her words surfaced tears in Carla’s eyes, but she blinked them away. This wasn’t about her.

“I’m sorry, Olivia. I had hoped things would have worked out better for you.”

Olivia rolled her eyes and shoved the earbuds farther into her ears. “I don’t want your sympathy. We can go on sympathy trips to grandma’s, fine. If that makes you feel better. But I don’t want sympathy talks on the way home.”
“This isn’t a sympathy talk, Olivia. I just wanted to talk. Is there something else you want to talk about?”

“Nope.” Olivia held her phone up to show Carla how her finger was pressing the ‘volume up’ button on her phone. She was almost as stubborn and stand-offish as her father had been when he got angry.

Carla knew the way home like the back of her hand, even though the fog tried to block her vision. But when it came to Olivia, somewhere along the way Carla had gotten lost. How did she let this fog disorient her and blur her vision of her quickly growing daughter?

It was true, Carla realized; she clung to the memory of Sean the same way his ring clung to the chain around her neck. That memory froze Olivia at five years old.

The fog began to clear as they pulled into town and everything came back into focus. They passed by the library and city hall, both brick buildings that seemed to groan under the weight of passing time. Years of rain and weathering had washed away their bright red color leaving them dull and faded. Pieces of paint had been chipped away so the lettering on the buildings could only be made out through the engraving above the doorway. Each passing second seemed to only add more strain to the old buildings. And just before turning left onto Baker Avenue to arrive home, they passed by the little park in the center of the town which Carla had avoided since the day of Sean’s diagnosis. Small wisps of fog still curled around the trees but the sun had begun to peak through the branches. Olivia was right. Clinging to the past had been preventing her from living, now.

Carla pulled the van into the driveway and shut off the engine. As Olivia helped the boys out of their car seats, Carla walked to the side of the house and stood before the old oak tree. Their tree. She brushed her hand across the rough bark where Sean had carved their names into a heart. “You know I’ll always love you.” She retrieved a garden shovel from the shed in her backyard and bent down in front of their tree. Unclasping the chain from her neck and sliding the metal off of her own finger, she buried both rings at the foot of the tree. Holding her hand on top of the soil a moment longer, she whispered, “But forever can only last so long.” Walking back to the front of the house, she smiled and said, “You know what? I think tomorrow would be the perfect day for a picnic.”
Toxic Tom
Cory Taylor

One wheel on the mop bucket does a wiggle dance as I push it toward the lunchroom. Corn dogs are on the menu again, so things are probably getting out of hand. There’s always one freshman who wants to impress his friends by horking down a dozen corn dogs. Mrs. Sanders glares as I walk by her classroom. She’s probably thinking, “There goes Toxic Tom.” I didn’t come up with that. It’s a nickname the teachers throw around. They don’t hide it very well, since I’m always around the teacher’s lounge. I know why they say it. Two DUI’s since graduation is a quick ticket to a custodial gig at your old high school.

They don’t know I’ve been clean since I started working here. Not a drop. Still, I know my presence doesn’t put anyone at ease. Coach Kahill got me the job. I remember we were huddled in his office, surrounded by photos of him on bass fishing trips and signed footballs from old players that had made it big.

“I’m happy to do this for you, Tommy. This might be a one-shot deal, so you gotta meet me halfway. No fumbles, okay?” he had said through his salt and pepper mustache.

“Okay.”

Now, the hallways I walk through are lined with the pictures of past football stars. Mine is mounted outside the lunchroom. Tom Wysocki, 1st Team All-State, Halfback. I’ve got a hell of a shiner in that picture. I had told coach I got it during practice, but really it was Frank. Mom had been holding ice to her lip when I got home that day, and I knew he had done it again. So, I went after him. I put my shoulder down, just like Coach taught me. Sure, I was strong, but he was bigger. Laid me out with one punch. The next day she finally filed a restraining order and we left.

The corn dog clean-up was bad. The puker ate at least ten before he upchucked. After mopping up, I go to the janitor’s closet to wash out the bucket. Little hot dog chunks got stuck in the wash basin drain, so I wrap my boot in a plastic bag and waffle-stomp them down. I don’t get grossed out by it anymore. I’ve woken up covered in my own puke, so I think I’ve become desensitized to the whole thing. I open a jug of floor cleaner and pour a thin layer into the bottom of the empty mop bucket. It smells like bourbon and lemon juice.

As I fill the bucket, I hear a bang from the hallway. It sounded like a textbook falling flat on the floor. Another bang, this time louder and closer. Not a book. Another bang with shattering glass. It’s coming from the main entrance. I turn off the tap and peek out of the closet.

A guy dressed all in black steps through shattered glass by the front doors. He has a long, black rifle pressed to his shoulder.

He’s walking toward the lunchroom.

Oh fuck. Oh Christ. What do I . . .?

Before I know it, my feet carry me down the hallway as fast as they can. His back is towards me, and I watch the barrel of the rifle as it sweeps the hallway.

Please. Please no.

My boots slap against the linoleum as I close in. Twenty feet from him. Fifteen. He’s in the lunchroom doorway now. He hears me and starts to turn around.

Keep your shoulder down, Tommy!

He lifts the barrel and shoots as we collide. As I drive him to the floor, I feel my strength leave me. His head hits the floor with a wet crack, and he stays still. We lay there together for a minute before Coach Kahill flips me on my back. He presses both hands on my chest. Each breath I take makes a terrible sucking noise.

Two strangers,  
Insignificant to the world,  
Can find significant in each other.

Momma said,  
“The laying of hands is a truly spiritual experience.”  
And I found she was right.  
Even at the cost of fifty dollars an hour.

Laying of Hands
Nicholas Blake

Let Him Out

Let Me In
Performance Stills
Alex Hutchins
Hunger Pains

Calli Brouwer

I've got hunger pains
for the smell of your skin,
for the way you touch me when it's still
light out
and how your eyes crinkle when you smile
that brilliant smile of yours

12:01 a.m.

Calli Brouwer

The sky cried with me tonight
And I screamed at a whisper in the dark
"I don't understand...I don't understand."
And I stretched my heart out to you
As if you could touch it.
Stupid
stupid
girl.

Double Rainbow

Cole Carolmen

When the sky's eyes open to rain
Two types of rainbows the world sustains
The usual one, painted upon the clouds
And a liquid one from the human crowds
One a shimmering promise from one high
The other, a complicit murder that we deny
We may not all end due to a flood
But a man-made end flows into our mud
For the ease of a quicker end to our trip
We yoke the Earth and lash her with our whip
Down concrete cheeks. Nature's tears wend
Stained with rainbows that hasten her end
Perhaps it would have been for the best
If men missed the boat, to save the rest
Step Off the Edge

Eva Haube

At the end of the world,
One could take a step
Into eternity and choose
To float on the clouds—
If only the earth were flat.
With no one left
I opened my box—

All my friends
Immediately appeared.
And I voiced my concerns:
“Am I losing myself
To this screen,
Am I, too,
Silent like the sky and the moon?”

They laughed, I think.
It’s too hard to tell.

As darkness settled
I had a sad thought:
“Isn’t it strange,”
I said to the sky,
“That my comfort
And joy and identity
Come from a bright
Glowing screen?”
Sadly the sky,
As it usually tends to be,
Was silent
And offered no response.

Still, I was wondering,
So I turned to the moon:
“What do you think,”
I started once more,
“About this box
That commands and
Contains me?”
But the moon,
High in the sky,
Too in love with the stars,
Was too far
Away from
My fingers and voice.
Untitled

Abigail Hunt

Every day is a bucket of cold water over my head.
Some new horrible thing that you did.
My heart is punctured and deflates with every new revelation
While you stroll around with no reservation.
My tears are blood, my insides are mud,
And you, my dear, you were just a dud.

Untitled

Abigail Hunt

Today I thought of you,
as I always do.
But today it was something
new.
The flash of a thought
Something I wanted to tell
you
Has slipped from my mind.
It has left another small
hole, in a heart
riddled with buckshots.
Your shots.
Today I thought of you
and my heart fell apart.
In my mind, I’m an outlaw

Alyssa Minch

—a gunslinger far from home,
heels stained brown from
heavy leather boots and a
pistol strapped at the hip.
—a criminal in white barred black,
gripping edge-torn photographs
between hard callused fingerprints
with no hope for redemption.
—a child in the corner,
salted streams rolling down
round pink swollen cheeks,
insistent of innocence.
—a girl at the precipice,
rubber tipped soles creak at the edge,
running, clouding up dust and debris
one step from descension.

Pissed About A Lot of Shit But Mostly
Just Prisons

Sean Berg
Metamorphosis (Pantoum)
Cory Taylor

I want to reincorporate—
To lie, limbs spread, where the branches part.
My body will flatten and resorb the bark.
The weight of life is pushing me out.

So I lie, limbs spread, where the branches part.
Young green wood adopts my flesh, growing
as the weight of my life is pushed out.
My body’s runoff nourishes the grass.

Young, green wood is my flesh, tethering
What’s left of me inside this knotted frame.
My body’s runoff nourishes the grass
below, where wildflowers and mushrooms grow.

What’s left of me inside this knotted frame,
misses the warmth of the souls that loved me.
Below where wildflowers and mushrooms grow,
gnarled roots scrape across rock and bone.

Missing the warmth of the souls that loved me,
I scream at the thought of their loss.
Gnarled roots scrape across rock and bone,
and my cries are lost in the fricative canopy.

I moan knowing all that I’ve lost.

Driving Rain
Melody Trucano

My body is flat, I’m one with the bark.
My cries are lost in the indifferent canopy—
I wanted to reincorporate.
I drive.
Without thinking,
Without planning,
To him.

The storm rages around me.
Trees bow down to the howling wind,
The flashbulb snap of lightning
Streaks across the darkened sky, followed by the
Timpani crash of thunder that
Reverberates in my chest.

I can barely see the road,
And yet I forage on in this moment of
Helplessness, because
The storm reminded me that
Life and death are uncontrollable.
Our choices are the only thing we can control, and that is why

I drive.
Without thinking,
Without planning,
To him.
“Happiness will find you,” they had said,
“And you will go from briar to bloom.”
As full of lies it seemed, soon she would see their words rang true.
Though she had been torn apart by her own thoughts,
Left in fragments of shattered courage, hope, and faith,
Like all things with time, she began to heal.
Dusk became dawn, death rose again to life,
A thicket of briars came to bloom.
Colors so bright—blue, pink, and all in between—
She became everything the darkness sought to destroy.
She was a flower abloom, a warrior victorious,
A phoenix rising from the ashes of the past.
She was stronger, she was a survivor,
And she would not be broken.

TRIGGER WARNING: Mental illness

An avidity worn thin and brittle as a butterfly’s wings,
Like glass, a soul shattered from calamities unending.
A harrowed heart, broken and bleeding.
The voices in her head carried the same ferocity
As the most lethal poison known to man.
Sorrow spreads within like a thicket of briars,
Despair like thorns burrow deeper still,
Misery, like paint of the most melancholic crimson,
In the white snow left a bloodied stain.
Her heart, mind, and soul—her existence itself—
Had become nothing but a prison from which she sought release.
She remained trapped in a cage of her mind’s own making,
Day after day, year after year, in darkness never-ending.
DRAMA
Cast of Characters:

**Griselda Gorgon:** Young and beautiful. Innocent and shy.

**Poseidon:** Incredibly handsome, darker features. Tall and strong. The evil side of power. The typical “man of power.”

**Athena:** A goddess. Powerful and strong.

**Medusa:** Tendril snake hair. Beauty turned dark. Broken.

**Perseus:** Young and strong. Proud, yet still innocent.

**Time:** Ancient Greece.

**Setting:** The steps of Athena’s Temple and the surrounding area.

**Author’s Note:**

We have all heard of the woman with snakes for hair and eyes that turn people to stone. But have we heard her true story? While I took some creative liberties, I wanted to tell the story of a woman who was silenced. Medusa was raped. She was called a monster. This is the story of what happens when The Monster Within enters without consent.

*Lights up on GRISELDA, on the stairs of the Temple. She is holding a small bunch of flowers.*

**GRISELDA**

*(Timidly:) Athena, I pray to you. I seek your help, Goddess of wisdom and courage.*

---

**Down Time in Dream Space**

*Found Pens*

*Sean Berg*
GRISELDA takes one flower out. Extends it to the Temple doors.

I pray for strength. I have traveled far to--

Ocean waves crash loudly interrupting her. She stops and turns toward the offstage sound. She seems entranced by the water. POSEIDON struts onstage toward GRISELDA.

POSEIDON
(Charming, flirtatious.) I know you were calling to my niece, but I couldn’t help overhearing your prayers. Beautiful maiden, what is your name?

GRISELDA
(In shock.) P... P... Poseidon?

POSEIDON
(Laughing.) Silly woman, my name is Poseidon. God of the Sea. It would be a mighty coincidence if that was your title as well.

GRISELDA
(Awkwardly laughing back.) Ha... no, sorry. My name is Griselda Gorgon of Sarpedon.

She kneels before him. POSEIDON moves toward her.

POSEIDON
Griselda. A beautiful name. Suited for a beautiful girl. What does it mean?

GRISELDA
stands back up but keeps her face lowered and eyes down.

GRISELDA
It means “dark battle.” This is why I have come to the Temple of Athena, goddess of strategy. I hope she can help me--

POSEIDON cuts her off by putting his finger on her lips, moving her head toward him. He gets very close to her, GRISELDA sucks in her breath.

POSEIDON
A woman who is as ravishing as you will never have to go through any battle. Are these flowers for the goddess?

GRISELDA
(nods.)

POSEIDON
rips one flower off the stem and puts it behind her ear. He runs his fingers through her hair.

I wish you would get on your knees and pray to me.

GRISELDA
steps back.

GRISELDA
(Very uncomfortable.) I pray to all the gods, I look to you all for strength and answers. The world is full of things I do not understand, so I seek guidance from those who rule it.

POSEIDON
Have you ever swam in my seas?

GRISELDA
No. While I admire the beauty of the ocean, it also holds the most secrets beneath.
The moment they go offstage, it is silent. There is a long, slow, and silent moment. **BEAT.**

**POSEIDON** struts onstage, proud and happy.

**POSEIDON** stops crying. The world is not that scary of a place. And besides, you got to swim where most mortals never get the chance to.

**POSEIDON** laughs and exits the way he came. In loud ocean waves. **BEAT.**

**GRISELDA** stumbles out of the Temple. Her dress is torn, hair is tangled, face wet. She falls on the top step, crying out.

**GRISELDA** Athena, my goddess. I... I am... sorry. I defiled your sacred Temple. I shouldn't even be here on your hallowed ground.

**GRISELDA** looks over at the flowers sitting by her. She picks them up and holds them. She weeps. **BEAT.** **ATHENA** enters from her Temple. **GRISELDA** does not notice over her crying.

**ATHENA** What are you doing on the steps of my Temple?

**GRISELDA** (Embarrassed.) P... Poseidon... P... p-please... I do not feel comfortable with this, not on the steps of Athena's Temple.

**POSEIDON** freezes for a moment. He smiles devilishly. In one motion, he pulls her hair forcing her to look at him and pulls her closer to him. She lets out a small cry of pain.

**POSEIDON** takes a step towards her.

**POSEIDON** Has anyone swam in your seas?

**GRISELDA** looks confused. **POSEIDON** puts his hand on her shoulder, then he trails his fingers towards her chest.

**POSEIDON** Cont.

What secrets do you hold beneath?

**GRISELDA** jumps back and hugs herself uncomfortably.

**GRISELDA** (Embarrassed.) P... Poseidon... P... p-please... I do not feel comfortable with this, not on the steps of Athena's Temple.

**POSEIDON** freezes for a moment. He smiles devilishly. In one motion, he pulls her hair forcing her to look at him and pulls her closer to him. She lets out a small cry of pain.

**POSEIDON** pulls her onto the steps and continues pulling her toward inside the Temple [offstage.] **GRISELDA** cries "no" and begs for help. She drops the bunch of flowers on the top step.

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**POSEIDON** pulls her onto the steps and continues pulling her toward inside the Temple [offstage.] **GRISELDA** cries "no" and begs for help. She drops the bunch of flowers on the top step.
Oh, Goddess Athena. I... I do not even deserve to be in your presence. I desecrated your Temple. My sin deserves punishment.

GRISELDA looks down at the flowers in her hands.

GRISELDA Cont.
I brought these flowers as an offering for you. They looked better in the ground. I shouldn't have picked them. Flowers die as soon as they are taken from their home in the dirt. They are dead now; I killed them. Ha, I was going to give the Goddess of Wisdom some dead leaves. (Pause.) Instead, I took from you.

ATHENA
You took from me?

GRISELDA
I took advantage of your Temple. I shouldn't have worn this dress. I shouldn't have tempted him. This is my fault.

GRISELDA stands up slowly, bowing her head as she continues.

Goddess, I came to ask for answers, but I now ask you to destroy this body that I do not deserve to have. (Pause. Slowly and weakly.) I... I don't want it anymore. My soul feels like it is trapped inside of a cage, tied down in chains. My lungs feel like they are filling with saltwater, and it burns when I try to catch my breath. My body sinned. I teased the mystery of the sea, and he came to dive within me to examine my depths. I have brought shame to my family. Shame to their name. I do not deserve to go back home. My body is no longer holy, and I polluted this ground where people come to pray. (Long pause.) Punish me, Goddess. I deserve only that.

GRISELDA kneels down at ATHENA's feet, waiting.

ATHENA
Griselda Gorgon of Sarpedon. You came to ask me about the dark battle your name warned you of. I am sorry you had to endure the fight within my walls. Stand, my follower.

GRISELDA slowly stands, with awe and confusion.

GRISELDA
Goddess, I am sorry, but I don't understand.

ATHENA
Olympus is a man's club. While there are goddesses there, the gods get the glory, the power, and an ego to match. Trust in me that I understand how you feel. You took nothing from me, Griselda. You are the one that was violated here today.

GRISELDA
(Quietly, more to herself.) ... So much was taken...

ATHENA
Yes. And because the God of the Sea came on land to not only hurt you but me and every woman who follows me, I want to give to you what you seek.
GRISELDA
What I seek?

ATHENA
Your purpose in life. What the fates have planned for you. You came to ask me for my wisdom.

GRISELDA
... I feel even more unsure now than when I came.

ATHENA
I have a plan for you my dear.

ATHENA opens her arms to GRISELDA. After a moment, GRISELDA jumps into the goddess's embrace and quietly weeps. ATHENA holds her as she continues.

Even with my strength and power, your story will be lost. This world gives no power to women like you who have endured what you have. The gods are the ones who write and tell the story, leaving you voiceless and empty. Poseidon is mighty, but he is not the god of strategy. No, that is my title. My child, what do you wish for?

GRISELDA
(Softly.) To not be seen.

ATHENA
I can give you that. I can not give back to you what was taken, but I can give you some strength to help you feel whole again. I can not change the story of Griselda Gorgon. Her story ends in these moments. But together we can write a new story. I want you to walk in my Temple as a victim. You will walk out as a warrior fighting the dark battle within.

ATHENA holds GRISELDA for a moment, then opens her arms. GRISELDA takes a deep breath and lets it go. She walks up to the steps and exits into the Temple [offstage]. A bright light flashes. BEAT.

MEDUSA walks from the Temple. She looks down at her hands and her dress. She is now a new woman.

ATHENA
(Looking away.) Come, my child.

MEDUSA
(To the steps. She stands behind ATHENA who is still turned away from her.)

MEDUSA walks down the steps. She stands behind ATHENA who is still turned away from her.

MEDUSA
I am new. Who... what am I?

ATHENA
I have given you a gift. When anyone looks into your eyes, they will instantly turn to stone. No man will ever see you, no more gazes that cut into you, the kind that made you feel naked. The tables will be turned. Your dark beauty will entice them into your trap. When they try to look, they will be the ones to freeze.

MEDUSA walks forward, looking front. She stands tall. ATHENA's voice crescendos, growing distant.
ATHENA Cont.
Go, your purpose, your fate, starts today. They will say I cursed you for the things they think you did. Your legend will reverberate throughout the land. The woman with snakes for hair turns men into stone with one glance. They will whisper your name with fear. They will call you a monster.

MEDUSA bows her head to ATHENA. Exits.

(To the audience.) My Medusa. She raised hell. Hades got a kick out of that. She shook the world with terror and reverence. Any man with the intentions of causing pain for their own pleasure became fossilized instantaneously when she matched their gaze.

Sudden waves crash. POSEIDON rushes on stage towards ATHENA. Visibly angry.

POSEIDON

ATHENA
(Coldly.) You're asking me what I did?

POSEIDON
Athena, you overstepped your bounds!

ATHENA
My bounds?

POSEIDON
You made a monster! Just because we had sex in your Temple!...Envious much?

ATHENA
You and I both know what happened. And we both know that I am not the one who created a monster. No, no. I unleashed her.

POSEIDON
(Dramatic and ridiculously.) I have no idea what you are saying! Women are uncontrollable! So emotional.

POSEIDON stomps offstage. BEAT. ATHENA laughs to herself and goes back up the steps of her Temple.

ATHENA
Yes, I am the emotional one. At least I use the brain in my head to think.

ATHENA exits.

A moment passes.

TIME JUMP- MEDUSA saunters onstage.

MEDUSA
Perseus, just come out. I am not in the mood to play hide and seek. (Pause.) Perseus! I know you have been sent to kill me. That is a really pretty shield you have. Shiny gold! You can see me in the reflection. Creative! (Pause.) Ugh, fine. I’ll turn my back.
MEDUSA turns upstage. PERSEUS slowly walks out, his shield held up to block his face from her.

PERSEUS
(A forced confidence.) So my quest has even spread to you. I am surprised you can hear over the snakes hissing in your ears, you hag!

MEDUSA
Oh, there is no need for name calling! How do you know I am a hag? Hmm? You haven’t looked at me! What if I was the most beautiful maiden in the land? Want to sneak a peek?

MEDUSA jumps to spook him. PERSEUS flinches and shakily holds his shield tighter and closer to his face. She laughs.

PERSEUS
With the havoc that you have caused? All the souls? Lapidified where they stood. Your tyranny comes to an end today.

PERSEUS lunges at MEDUSA. It looks like he is about to slay her with his sword, but MEDUSA whips around and grabs his shield. PERSEUS clamps his eyes shut, dropping his sword.

MEDUSA
Lapidified. A great word for such a brave warrior. What other secrets rest behind your eyes, can I look and see?

PERSEUS
I will never open my eyes, you monster. I will not be petrified.

MEDUSA
Again with the name calling and big words. You have no idea what it means to be a monster. You have no idea what it means to be truly petrified. Frozen with fear, the fear etched into the face. Eyes like icy fog, trying to look far away, to follow the soul that has hid.

PERSEUS
What are you trying to say?

MEDUSA
You have no idea what my story is, boy.

PERSEUS
Then tell me if it is so scary.

MEDUSA
(Taken back.) No one has ever asked that... Well, as you wish.

MEDUSA leans to his ear and whispers. PERSEUS winces and starts to shake as she continues her story. His face is frozen with fear. After a while, PERSEUS falls to his knees and weeps into the ground.

(Broken but strongly.) I was left on the stone ground, trembling. He asked me if I liked it.

PERSEUS
(Sobbing.) I am so sorry. Why did Athena curse you with this fate?
MEDUSA
Athena didn't curse me, the legend doesn't tell the full story. Nor will it ever.

PERSEUS
Then how did you become... Medusa?

MEDUSA
Athena asked me what I wanted. I told her I never wanted to be seen again.
Nothing good ever happens when I am caught in the male gaze. She gave
me this gift: my gaze is now stronger than theirs. Now they are the ones
that turn to stone, frozen with the face of fear... just like... me. Objectified.
(Pause.) When you kill me, please take me to my goddess.

PERSEUS
When I kill you?

MEDUSA
You have a purpose, so did I. My eyes turn flesh into fossils. My blood is
angry boiling lava. It burns when it beats through my heart. Athena gave me
the power to harden others as I was. It hurts so bad every time I make a new
statue. My soul is in pieces... I just want peace.

MEDUSA kneels, head down. PERSEUS stands and slowly grabs his sword.

PERSEUS
Is there... anything else I can do? I do not want to hurt you.

MEDUSA
To hurt, one needs to feel pain. After what I went through, no more pain can
be added. I am full. Hero Perseus, slay this monster within me.

MEDUSA takes one long and last breath. In a quick movement, PERSEUS
slays her. BEAT.

PERSEUS
I am... so sorry. I thought you were the monster, I never imagined a god
could be the true monster instead.

PERSEUS picks up MEDUSA's body and takes her to the Temple. He lays her
on the top step. He drapes a cloth over her face. ATHENA comes out of the
Temple. PERSEUS kneels before her.

She asked me to bring her to you, my goddess. I did not know my quest
would be... this... painful.

ATHENA
Thank you, Perseus. Your heroics in the face of fear will not go unnoticed. I
will forge her into a shield for you, so she can continue turning evil men into
stone in your own dark battles.

PERSEUS
goddess, why do I feel so... empty?

ATHENA
This is how the women in this man's world feel. Our bodies are entitled to
men; our voices are silenced. Our stories... rewritten or even erased. Go on.
Tell your story, how you met the true monster... within men.

Lights down.
Reflecting Realities
Performance Still
Alex Hutchins
Dear Valued Customer
Jessica Drafahl

From: Gene Biology <no-reply@genbio.com>
To: Jessica Drafahl
Received: September 17, 1998, 4:47 PM (7694 days ago)
Subject: Your Order #10182017

Dear Valued Customer,

Thank you for your order! Your confirmation number is 10182017. We have received your order and will be billing your account for the purchase of one (1) undiagnosed mental illness. Because of the nature of our business, we will be assigning you a mental illness that runs in your family. We have chosen your mother, who shares the same mental illness, although she doesn't believe in mental illnesses herself. You will struggle trying to explain anything to your mother, since she will assume that the illness is a completely normal part of life.

Based upon your genetics, we will be assigning you undiagnosed obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). OCD is characterized as having compulsions or obsessions that, if not acted upon, will cause anxiety. Some obsessions and compulsions include a fear of germs, a need to have things in order, excessive cleaning, and a need to repeatedly check on things. Surely you will notice your need to check on your car, your faucet, and your oven. But you will think that it is just because you are particular, and that it is a normal part of your personality.

You will notice that you have this mental illness for most of your life, but you will never have a name or reason for the things you do. You will have heard people saying that they like to have things in a particular way,
and that they are, “so OCD.” Your middle school math teacher will be the
one person that you think has OCD, and his actions will define the illness
for you all the way through high school. He will have a particular spot that
he will like to keep his tissue box flush with the divide between chalkboards
on the North side of the wall. You will not care about such things, because
you won’t have a need to keep things in order. He will tell your class that he
is particular about this tissue box on the first day of class, and he will tell
your class that it bothers him when students move it in an attempt to get a
reaction out of him. However, this will not stop your peers from moving the
box. Because you will be the first class that he teaches for the day, it will be
easy for them to move the box without him noticing since he will be out of
the room. During class, it will be obvious that it bothers him. He will stop
his lecture momentarily to move the box back to the spot where he wants
it. You will find this funny, along with your fellow classmates that moved it.
This will be your impression of how people look at mental disorders such as
OCD, and it will cause you to think twice before sharing any information
about yourself. You will not tell your doctor that you think you have OCD
because you won’t even know what it is yet.

Once you are more cognitive of your responsibilities in the world, you
will become more anxious about them. You will have no idea or even suspect
that this is because of a mental illness. If anything, you will almost wish
that you had OCD, because in your mind you will think that OCD makes
you a “neat freak.” According to your mother’s laments, she will wish that
you would clean your room and car more often. She will be right. You will
continue to live in a state of constantly filthy surroundings. Your mother
will assume that your are just a messy person, but this will not be the case.
You will be very aware of how messy your surroundings are, and you will
hate your inability to clean your room. You will tell yourself that you will
clean your room when it is the right time. Although that time won’t arrive
without someone else pushing you to do it. You will say that you will clean
your room over the weekend, when you’re not busy. That day will come and
pass, and your room will be no cleaner. You will put off the cleaning for so
long that the disorganization spreads through the room. You keep telling
yourself that you will do it later when you don’t have anything else to do.
Your mother will tell you that you need to clean your room, and she will tell
you this during your planned session of doing nothing. You will clean your
room, but not without an attitude.

“Don’t you think this is so much better? You can’t possibly enjoy your
room being so messy,” your mother will say, proud of the newly organized
room. You will agree and tell her that you do hate when it is messy, you just
couldn’t push yourself to start doing it because it never felt like it was the
right time. She will purse her lips and chide you for this. She won’t under-
stand what you’re trying to tell her. You will think that this is the way that
you are, that you just cannot find it in you to clean your room. And you will
not be aware that this is another sign of mental illness.

During high school, you will notice that you have some strange quirks.
When you park your car, you will notice that you must lock it a particu-
lar number of times. Three beeps. You will have no reason to choose this
number, but it will stick with you. Everytime you lock your car, you will
count the number of beeps the car makes until three. Sometimes you will
do more. You will recognize how strange this is, and that it only takes one
beep to know that the car is locked. You will know this, but you won’t be
able to stop yourself. If you do not lock the car at least three times, you will
feel uncomfortable and desire to check if the car is really locked. If your
friend is driving, and you come close to your car, you will lock it— just in
case. When you will park your car in the R lot at UNI, you will think about
your car every day. Even on the days that it is freezing cold outside, you
will think about making the trip to check on your old, silver Impala. You
will know that nobody would take the car or steal from it, even if the doors were unlocked, but you will be unable to stop yourself from thinking these thoughts. In the end, your natural ineptitude for exercise and hatred of the cold will win the physical battle. Nonetheless, your mind will not stop thinking, and you will never be satisfied. Even a trip out with friends will be joined with the constant anxiety about your car.

You will also be worried about your home. In high school, it will feel impossible to leave your home if you are the last to leave. You will sometimes worry if your brother is the last to leave because he has been known to accidentally leave the door open. But you would rather not be the one responsible if something like that ever occurred. Sometimes, when you are trying to leave the house, you will think of something that you might have left on. Usually you will think that you left the faucet on. If you cook something before you leave, you will think that you left the stove or oven on. If you open the refrigerator, you will think that you left the door open. If you had the fireplace on, you will think that you left the flames on. If you have done none of these, you will always worry that you left the door open or unlocked. Sometimes, when you leave the house and are driving down the road, you will have to turn your car around to check the house again. Luckily, you will also be anxious about arriving to a place early, so you will never be late. Even after you do these things, you will still not suspect that you have a mental illness. You will only know that OCD is a disorder that makes people have a particular order in which they put things.

When you start college, you will take a Spanish class. Since you will have taken four years of the language in high school, you will assume that you should continue this education in college. When you start the class, you will realize how much you don't want to continue with the class. There will be something about the environment, the homework, the constant onslaught of vocabulary that doesn't settle right with you. You will get frustrated, and you will lose interest in the class by the end of the first week. You will feel like you are stuck, itching to do something different with your time. You will then realize that you can drop the class and pick up a new one, so you will email your advisor and ask to switch classes. You only have a few options, and so you will choose to take a psychology class. You'll need this class as an elective, so you'll decide that it's better than Spanish. The class will be boring, but it's a necessary credit. Finally, near the end of the semester, you will learn about mental illnesses. You will have never thought about mental illnesses before. On one mid-October day, you will have a lesson about OCD. You will stare in awe at the videos that the professor shows the class. Suddenly, like a key in a lock, you will realize that you have some of the symptoms of OCD. At first you will refuse to believe that you have a mental illness. You'll think that you won't ever be seen the same way by your peers again. You'll think that you won't ever see yourself in the same way again.

After some consideration, you will finally come to terms with the fact that you have OCD. Once you have a name for your mannerisms, you will feel relief. You will realize that your actions and thoughts throughout the years weren't part of your personality. And you will realize that you did certain things because of OCD. Once you come to terms with your own illness, you will wonder why you act the way you do. You will know, because of your psychology class, that mental illness is usually hereditary. You will assume that this came from your father's side, because those family members are the strangest of your genetic pool. Instead, you will find the same mannerisms in your mother. Throughout high school, she will call you from work or from her car asking whether she unplugged her curling iron or closed the garage doors. You will realize that even though she's never left the iron on, or left the door open, she still worries about it. You will tell her that she probably has OCD. And while she will agree with you, she will refuse to believe that some of your own, unique mannerisms are part of your OCD.
Later in college, you will become more comfortable with yourself. Your best friend will get diagnosed with anxiety and depression, and your other friend will tell you that she has bipolar. While you know that you have OCD, you will feel as though your symptoms are not serious. You will hear about their panic attacks and comfort them through their rough spots, and because of that, you will not think that you should get your illness diagnosed. Even when you are aware that you should talk to your doctor about it, you won't want to bother anybody with your concerns. Instead, you and your roommates will joke about your mental illnesses.

"Wait, maybe you should have the painting on the other side of the window, since it would be symmetrical with the painting on the left side," you will say to your roommate.

"You and your OCD ass," she will reply with a roll of her eyes. You will not mind, because as much as she makes fun of your OCD, you will make fun of her bipolar and mania. Humor is something that you will both find to be a relief from this, as it makes the illness not feel as real. You will not know any alternative coping mechanisms. You will assume that humor is all that you need. You will still not talk about this to your doctor, even when you're sure that you have OCD.

In some ways you will think that OCD is useful. Because you will be so particular about things, such as checking multiple times whether or not you grabbed your laptop before class, you will think that OCD is the reason that you remember to bring everything. Everytime your roommate will lock her keys in her car, you will be grateful that you always check you have your keys before you lock anything. You will wonder why other people do not adopt the same practices that you do.

While thinking these thoughts, you will forget why OCD is considered a mental illness. You will forget the constant anxiety you feel about leaving the house. You will forget the crippling fear that you will feel when you wonder if you forgot to close the front door of your best friend’s house. You will forget your inability to clean your room. Instead, you will compare yourself to your friends and convince yourself that you don't really have a problem. You will tell yourself that you can live with it, and that you couldn't possibly need a therapist. You will doubt yourself as you write, because you will think that people will doubt whether or not you actually have OCD.

You will doubt it yourself.

Now that you know about your mental illness, we are happy to tell you that your order was delivered on September 17, 1998. The day of your birth. Unfortunately, we still have to charge you for shipping costs, and we will not take responsibility for any damages you might cause to yourself. You will not find a phone number for our company, because we do not have any customer service. We fully expect you to figure out how to deal with your illness on your own. We absolutely will not accept any returns. Consider the illness as a gift. You will still need to pay for it, however.

We look forward to no future correspondence with you. If any issues do arise, you will need to contact your local therapist. Even if you don’t think you need to go.

Thank you again for your order,

Gene Biology
Director of Mental Affairs, Your Brain
1-(800)-DNT-CALL
www.youareonyourown.com

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At what point does a human being lose who and what they are? Do they ever truly lose their identity, or do they morph into a whole new person? Does the loss of a limb or an organ result in the loss of self? “Not one,” many say. But what if it’s multiple?

We see all the time in media quadriplegics that have lost four limbs and are unable to walk and move about on their own; yet, there’s no doubt in anyone’s mind that that person is still that person. If someone’s brain is damaged from a stroke, there’s still a belief that the victim is still the same person. Though perhaps “not all there”, as is often the case.

At what point does a loss of memories result in a new identity? How many memories can a person lose before they become an entirely different person? Or does that ever happen?

Does losing two years of my life mean I’m not the person I say I am? I call it a “gap”. A “blackout”. But it’s more like a “haze”.

Things that happened and events I went to are there, yes, but I am missing so, so very much. And I know it probably sounds like it’s just normal memory decay, but this is very different. At least it feels like it is. It’s like I’m sitting there trying desperately to remember what classes I took, and I can come up with about five that I took the last two years of high school, but I can remember my exact schedule from freshman year. It’s weird, yeah. I’ve never understood how my brain just wiped a solid two years of my life. I can remember the frustration of trying to remember what happened last year and only being met with the same mini montage of scenes time after time.

Of course one of the few things that survived my memory wipe was my ex. Of course it had to be him that survived. Of course I had to be blessed with him gracing my memory every once in a while in passive thoughts where I’m not thinking. And then suddenly I’m remembering sobbing and wanting to die, coupled with making out with the guy I knew wasn’t good for me but wanted so desperately. Of course I had to live with the memory of him and everything he did to me. Of course I had to.

Of course all I can remember is that I cried for all of my junior prom. Wanting the night to be over, and walking away with my first (and thankfully only) migraine ever. And that’s all I can recall, other than the reason I had been crying was that my ex had told me that he’d gotten back together with his ex girlfriend. Except we were together. So I don’t know what happened or what went wrong or anything. I just know that I kept crying and it wouldn’t stop.

Of course all I can remember is being around him all the time and always wanting to be around him all the time. Always so happy around him, content to be close to him and be held by him every once in a while, when he’d let me. How happy I was on the rare instances when I could just lay in his arms and not be asked to do anything in return.

Of course all I can remember is him stealing my stuff and telling me I had to “earn” it back. The way I “earned” something varied depending on the day and his mood. Some days it was just making out. Other days it was something I hated doing. And other days it was a thirty minute long argument about having sex just to get my thing back. To be clear, he wouldn’t give me my item back until I slept with him. And it was always me asking to not have to do that and eventually begging to not have to and then writing off the thing as lost forever. And then, him giving it back to me right as I’d go to leave because he had no use for my belonging since it wasn’t getting him what he wanted.

Of course all I remember is going to my senior year prom with my friend, Kyle, and having a lot of fun. And my teeth chattering because our after prom was in the ice rink.
Of course all I remember is going to graduation in heels because the school had explicitly said not to.

Of course all I remember is my computer course where I first learned to code. But, see, the problem is that that’s one of the only courses I can remember from my junior and senior year. That and pre calc. But that’s really it. And I can only remember pre calc because I had a fun teacher that did D&D and ran the D&D club at school.

What else have I lost? I really don’t know. Well, obviously I don’t know; I wouldn’t be talking about this haze, blackout, whatever the hell it is if I knew what I had lost. All I really know is that the two years I have “lost” were so traumatic to me that I can’t remember the vast majority of it all. And I know it has to do with my ex.

I was lethargic. It didn’t matter if I had gotten one hour of sleep or twenty. I would be just as spacey, just as exhausted, just as fatigued as if I hadn’t slept at all. And please don’t be like “lol same.” Because ninety percent of the people that do, don’t understand what I mean. I literally couldn’t function. It was like I walked around high off my ass everyday of my life. Well, I can’t accurately say that. I’ve never been high. But it was like my body was there. I was vaguely aware of my surroundings; enough to get me from class to class and drive places more or less safely. Kind of. I was involved in two accidents within my first year of driving that were my fault. But my head was off somewhere else. Permanently shut off. I don’t even know if I was thinking or not, I was just kind of halfway between conscious and not.

Things that brought me happiness and made me, me, were no longer things I enjoyed. Gaming was hard. Kingdom Hearts was the hardest. It’s how I’d met him, after all. It was hardest of all to get back into something I had so desperately loved even before I met him and before my haze. It took me sitting down and forcing myself to play. And play. And recondition myself to dissociate the games from him. I couldn’t lose that part of myself, as my games were a part of my identity. I had already lost my memories, my innocence, and (what seemed like) a large portion of my sanity to the whole fiasco. I just couldn’t bear to lose this too.

I don’t think this haze really bothered me until last year, though, when I had to write a paper on how I dealt with my mom’s diagnosis. Let me tell you, I don’t remember a damn thing. I remember my mom telling me that it was a possibility that the tumor they had removed from her head was malignant. It was supposed to be fat. Not cancer. My mom tells me I laughed, and I can vaguely remember that. I wasn’t laughing at her. Or the diagnosis. I can’t remember what it was though. Don’t worry, my mom’s okay now. Well, as okay as she can be. She still has the diagnosis: lymphoma, and it won’t ever go away or go into recession or anything like that. But she is doing as best as humanly possible with the treatments (which stopped last December because she did so well) and everything possible to treat this specific type of cancer.

This haze was mostly through my junior and senior year of high school, yes. But it did follow me slightly through my freshman and sophomore years here at UNI. It wasn’t as severe there. Faces and names? Impossible. I still have people that I guess I must’ve met my freshman year that come up to me and talk to me and I’m standing there going who the actual hell is this I have never met this human being before in my life but they somehow know my face and name and please dear God send help. I’ve gotten rather good at the smile and nod routine and then making up an excuse to leave after a few moments. I know it was because I put no effort into learning anyone’s names or associating their faces with their name, but now I’m trying to put effort into remembering the identity of people who stop and talk to me and I can’t figure out how. It’s like I’ve forgotten how to remember and learn.

I realize now that this was a result of pretty bad depression and anxiety. But, despite the belief that I wasn’t going to “make it” past my first year of college, I never regarded it as such. I always thought I was whining, and that
so many people had it harder than me. My parents even fed into that a little. It wasn’t their fault, I promise. I was just good at hiding the majority of my swings and symptoms. And, what I couldn’t hide could very easily be written off as moody teenage behavior.

I also was not affected by depression in ways that you always hear about. I still ate healthfully. I still got mostly seven or eight hours of sleep. I only had restless nights once in a blue moon, which is pretty normal. So I couldn’t and didn’t understand what could be causing this haze. I wrote the fatigue off as the normal exhaustion from a school day. Especially since I’m not a morning person, and school is largely a morning thing. On weekends I’d sleep til about ten. But here was the problem: I’d remain in bed till twelve, one, sometimes later. I’d lay in bed for 2 or more hours staring at my ceiling.

Get up.
Get up.
Get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up
GET UP!


But no. Nothing.

My mom is always asking me things about my senior year of high school. My applications, my scholarships I tried to get, graduation process... everything. Mostly so she knows what to do with my younger brother and how best to help him get his college life set up. But I just...I can’t remember. I barely paid attention to the application. I didn’t attempt for scholarships because I logicked out that I wasn’t making it super far past high school graduation. I was screaming, falling, but even I couldn’t hear or see me.

I can tell you things are okay now. I don’t have my memories, no. I only have that same montage of scenes that I get. I can see other windows into my life through things I wrote over the course of that time, but that almost feels surreal. Like I’m watching a movie of myself living my life and I don’t know what’s coming next, but I’m sure there’s something next. I’m still here after all.

Finally one.
I had a dream once where my dad drove me and my family into a river. He and my mom were in the front seats, my sister and I were in the back. There’s a river near my house, one we drive over every day to get to the nearest town. There used to be crop fields around it, but ever since the river started flooding in the summers they’ve been baren. When the summer rains come, the banks can’t hold the water in. It goes up to the road, sometimes. All the side roads have to close. The water is almost black, almost all year round, polluted with dirt and fertilizer. Dead fish aren’t an uncommon sight. The stench of death seems to have sunk into the pores of the concrete bridge.

In my dream, my dad was angry. And when my dad is angry, he tends to yell. A lot. It’s like he thinks the louder he is, the more right he is. Even if every word that spills out of his rotting mouth is untrue. But in my dream, he was quiet. Silent. My mom was trying to talk to him, saying “David? David are you okay?” But he wouldn’t respond, and he just stared straight ahead as we came around the bend in the road. The one we drive on every single day. I don’t remember what made him upset. It could have been anything. All I knew in that moment was that the air was thick and heavy, and something was truly, terribly wrong.

I remember that the road seemed to go on forever. Dreams are like that, aren’t they? The straightaway before the river on that road only lasts for thirty seconds before you go over the bridge and you’re safe. But in my dream, it almost seemed like we were moving without going anywhere at all. I can remember the exact look on my dad’s face. Staring straight ahead. It scared me— it was so uncharacteristic, so unlike him. His mouth was pulled tight, his lips almost nonexistent. His black eyes were glassy. Maybe he was already dead in my dream. His hands wouldn’t let go of the wheel because they couldn’t. Because there was no life left in him. It makes it a little easier to think that maybe, just maybe, he didn’t mean to drown us all in the river with him.

The moment the wheel jerked off of the road and we started driving on the field is when everything started to move in double time. My mom was screaming, my sister was screaming, I was screaming, but my dad, he was still silent. The hours that we had been driving on that road caught up to us all at once and the whiplash threw us into the river. Our red Jeep hit the water. The moment plays over and over and over again in my head whenever I get behind the wheel of a car. We hit the water and I was yelling at everyone to unbuckle, to stay calm, to please stay alive. My sister was crying, I’m sure. She cries a lot. And my dad was staring straight ahead. Silent. But I swear, in that one moment before I knew we were all going to die in the disgusting Iowa river water, he was smiling.

I managed to save my sister in that dream. We broke a window. I grabbed her arm. And we swam towards the surface. A few other cars had pulled over to try and help us, but everyone knew that it was probably useless. I jumped back in the water with only the thought of *I need to find my mom; I need to find my mom; I need to find my mom*; replaying in my mind. I always tell people that I’ve never had the misfortune of dealing with a death in my family, but I always feel a little like I’m lying. The truth is, I felt my mom die that night. By some dream logic, I was underwater with her in the car as I watched her take her last, rattling breath, a scream still caught in her throat. I watched my mom die in my dreams, and as I looked around, I couldn’t find the one responsible. My dad was gone, and the thought that he escaped and my mom didn’t, made me so unreasonably furious. I gripped the steering wheel so tight in my hands my knuckles burst open, but no blood spilled out. There was just bone. My skin peeled away, but I didn’t feel any pain. I watched in wonder as I saw myself decaying, trapped in a car, in a river, in...
the middle-of-nowhere Iowa. My skin turned to ash that floated away on the current. My veins unwound. My fat bubbled up and got washed away. My muscles turned black and shriveled until all that was left were my bones, glowing the purest shade of white. A blank page. I turned my head, felt my newly uncovered bones grind in my neck. My mom was still next to me. Her face frozen, her mouth twisted as she tried to scream for help. In that moment, I realized that I was sitting in the driver’s seat.

It’s with that realization that I woke up. All I could think about all day was the dream that I’d had. I called my mom and my sister and nearly cried when I heard their voices. Alive. I ordered an emergency escape tool for my car, and one for the red Jeep that had carried us into the river in my dream. I racked my brain all day for what it could mean, because a dream like that had to mean something. Should I stay away from rivers for the foreseeable future? Should I just stay out of cars altogether? Or, the one thought that wouldn’t leave my mind no matter how much I tried to drown it— was my brains fucked up way of telling me that no matter what I do, no matter how much I try to escape that sinking car, I’ll always end up in the exact same place as my dad.

I sit in the family room and hug my knees to my chest. Tighter. I rest my chin on them, thighs flush against my body. Hold me tight. I use my thumb to spin the ring on my pointer finger. I stretch out my legs and wrap my arms around myself. Make sure I’m still all there. My hands run up my arms and feel my collarbones. They stick out. I rub them until they blush. Across the room, a friend looks at me, eyes narrowed in confusion, and I stop. Instead I choose to loop my thumb and finger around my wrist and wring it out, like a dirty rag. The knuckles on my hand stick out, I run my fingers over them...

“Aren’t you just so happy?”

The blue, bubble text from my mom stares at me. It dares me to admit that this is not enough. Can I eat the pumpkin bar? I do the math, calculating calories I’ve memorized. I wanted a donut earlier, so I got one. A near-threatening reminder echoes in the recess of my psyche— I have to treat myself sometimes. If I don’t have ice cream at work today, I can have a pumpkin bar. Well, I’ll eat half a pumpkin bar. I shove it in my mouth and head out the door. I eat ice cream at work anyway, and chips when I get home. I’m disappointed in my lack of self-control and I think about what Mom would say. But the sodium soothes the headache that crawled into my brain. Tomorrow, I’ll eat better, and I’ll go for a run, and it’ll be okay.

My grandparents come to visit me at school. Grammy takes me shopping. She wants to spoil me as she insists grandparents are meant to, she claims it’s a privilege. It makes me remember desserts after dinner, during sleepovers at my grandparent’s house, when I was too little to count calories.
“Now, Molly, don’t tell your mom,” Grammy would say, and patted my hand while I grinned over a chocolate ice cream cone the size of my face.

Now in the store, all grown up, I try on a tight, gray, mid-length skirt. I smooth the soft material over my hips. She looks me up and down, oohs and aahs appropriately and says, “You could have never worn that before, Molly, you had too many lumps.” One rises in my throat, but I push a smile onto my face and nod silently.

I study myself in the mirror, clad only in my underwear. Starting with my butt, I turn to look at my stomach. My hands trace up my chest until my arms cross and my hands reach my collarbones where they trace over them, once, twice, three times. I used to avoid mirrors like the plague, now this is a part of my sacred ritual. Out of my desk comes the yellow tape measure, and I shiver against the cold plastic as I wrap it around my waist. I am Prometheus, this tape measure pecks at me each day. I pinch the cold metal end to the line ticking the measurement, another half an inch off since last week. Worship at the altar of the tracking app used to chart my progress. I look back at my reflection, trace my hands around my waist. For a moment, I am allowed to be numb.

Numbers don’t lie. I remind myself. Even when you cannot remember what’s true.

A dirty rag, I wring myself out.

I Only Remember Not Jumping

Leah Roughton

They’d miss you.
The vibration of wind ripped through the bridge. “No they won’t” Water foamed below me, caught in shadows by the moon.
It would kill your mother, you know.
“She would be fine...”
A train’s call from a mile. A group of friends laughed in the distance ...It would hurt your whole family. They cannot lose you tonight.

......
“They wouldn’t even know I was gone...”

The tenth leading cause of death in the United States; and, before 2015 I had never understood suicide. Before that year, I would have never thought it’d be me. I had never understood the pain that would drive someone to that choice. That permanent choice you could never take back and would haunt your family for years. The choice that would ultimately kill them along with yourself. I had never understood the attraction. And then I turned fifteen.

My mother had been fired after twenty-five years. She was a radio disk jockey and one month away from a twenty-thousand dollar raise. The station did not want to pay this.

She sent out resumes, spoke to old friends and made so many different connections. Stations then called her back. She attended interviews; she went to dinners, and talks. She had thought them all over, finally settling between a tied two. Illinois and Minnesota. My family had never seen either. She and my father took a plane ride to both and returned with a plan all laid out. My mother went to Minnesota before us, leaving my brother, father,
and myself in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Three months later, I was ripped from my home, and the place I had lived since the age of two. I had my friends, and my school, and my life; I had known just who I was. Now in Moorhead, Minnesota, a small town on the edge of North Dakota, my parents told me I was home.

It was a place too big for a village and a world too small for a city. I once described it as being forced to breathe through a plastic bag. There was a small hole you just couldn't quite find. It was difficult, but as long as you could breathe you assumed you'd be fine.

When we moved, I had lost everyone I'd known. I was forced to solidify who I once was. I had gone from the person who laughed way too loud, to the one who sat alone in the hallways. The theatrical girl with a laugh at the ready became the loner with nothing to lose. I never once ate in the lunchroom. Two years in Minnesota, three-hundred-sixty days in high school and I never once purchased a meal. 12:45, every day at lunch break, I would purchase my snack from the vending machine and curl up against the hallway wall. I would slide my bag up to my knees, pull out my headphones, and open a book. I focused then on nothing but words. I read words of understanding and love and a passion, and the characters became friends I had lost. I had Holden, and Alex and Dorian Gray which meant I wouldn't need anyone else.

My headphones would calm my heartbeat and tell me that I was okay. James Bay, and Black Veil Brides, and every other band in between. I had pretzels, and music, and a book, and myself. I created a world I understood. A year or so later, I began to eat lunch in a classroom. I would rant to my favorite English teacher and wait for him to rant back, and we would talk about my literary family. We spoke about books and of life and discussed why Caribou was better than Starbucks.

That same year I stood on a bridge.

It was an old metal bridge painted white, and it creaked wherever you stepped. It was stretched tight over the Red River; a river that had always ran backwards, and it was the spot in Minnesota I loved. The bridge and I were alike, at least that's what I felt in the moment. This walkway was chipped at all edges. At two in the morning it was lit by a spotlight, only showing its beautiful parts. The light left out the damaged and the broken and worn. It showed the public only what the city deemed worthy.

I placed both hands on the edge, the vibration of the river in my palms. My breath turned like smoke in the moonlight. A straightedge cigarette in the dark. The voices I had come with were fading. The small group of people I had met through those years had continued to walk on while I stopped. They were friends that I felt for but couldn't quite love. It had taken me two years to find them. They pursued one another on the race to leave, not wanting to be on the bridge any longer. The bridge that I loved had scared them. It was creaking and old and fingerprints lingered, marked by the others that crossed. There were chains on the cross bars and trash plastered to corners, and it echoed the drum of the train tracks. Half a mile away, the constant roar of coal trains rumbled through the metal of the bridge.

I threw a look to the left and watched as they walked, never once looking behind them. Their laughter disappeared in the distance as the bodies grew smaller and smaller. Minnesota wind tore across me. It ripped at my hands and slashed at my arms. I never once moved them away. I allowed frozen air to wrap around me, hugging me tighter against it. I stiffened my grip on the chipped, metal edge and lowered my gaze to the river. Black water was thrown against rocks, thinning itself to fit through the narrow twists. I could do it.

The thought whispered itself through my mind. It repeated itself once again. I could do it right now. It echoed itself becoming a chant, as if willing
itself into existence. Darkness swirled further below me, a hundred or so feet over water. If the impact failed, the cold would succeed. It was ten degrees in Minnesota, which meant the water would be negative numbers. Once in the water, I’d lose my breath. I wouldn’t be able to swim. It would knock out the air and stun the system and the temperature would do all the rest. The sentence whispered again.

Do it.

I watched as the water swirled around itself, spinning again over and over. Everything I blocked out had rushed back. After moving away, I would go back and forth, knowing that it might all be okay. I would listen to music and long for my books and then see my real friends through their photos. They would post outings and parties, tagging each other with hearts. They posted photos of a school trip, sharing memories of the zoo in Chicago. I had paid for the trip and moved a month prior. I watched them all love and laugh through small screens. My own posts had stopped all together. The only things I had to say were about books and conversations with teachers. In Minnesota all things were different. Coupons became gold because Minnesotans flew in the fruit, unable to grow any in snow. Coupons were the savior of shopping. Trains interrupted deep sleep, shaking our rental as it passed at four in the morning. Autumn had become non-existent. I waited all year for those leaves to change colors, and for pumpkins to sit on the porch. Minnesota had spring and then winter; it went from seventy to negative twelve. For three years I never had fall.

I had a bitter winter and a summer that felt like spring. I had been forcing myself to wake up and crying every day after school. I looked forward to going to sleep, and not having to talk to my family. I looked forward to books and leaning in too close beside trains. I looked forward to standing on bridges.

Frost melted under my boots, and I imagined just what it would feel like. I knew it wouldn’t last very long; and I imagined everything afterward.

I saw my family, and my friends and my dog. I could see the news the day after. “Local teenager committed suicide this morning on the Red River Bridge”. No one would even know who I was. They’d say, “I saw that girl once, she had an x by her eye,” or, “She used to sit alone in the hallway.” They would pretend we were friends once and sob through fake tears for the public. They would earn the crowds sympathy through the act. I couldn’t give them that shot. I couldn’t give them the chance to earn that, or for their fifteen seconds of fame. They did not deserve to have that, and they did not deserve to have me. I remembered reading somewhere that someone kills themself every twelve minutes. Maybe it was even eleven. One minutes difference and I couldn’t remember. Was it every eleven or twelve? I realized I would be a statistic. I would be considered “too frail”.

I stared down at the water, palms pressed to the metal; cracked paint tearing fragile frostbitten skin. This option would give me control. It would repair being ripped from my high school and lonely when surrounded by crowds. I had lived in a world with no options. My mind dictated the day and a depression told me I was nothing. I broke when I’d get off the bus and in my bedroom that came without lights. My bedroom had been built without light switches. It was a forced kind of darkness, and it echoed the rest of the state.

I could forget everything if I did this. I could forget the crowds laughing in classrooms at the girl that read by herself, curled up to the knees with her music.

The vibration of water hummed through my boots which were torn at the toes from their wear. They had been with me longer than friends. These boots that I wore had seen darkness and sunlight, and the stained hallway tile of schools. As I balanced myself, a line from a film came to mind. “A man can’t even wear his own boots?” Shaun Penn asked the question while standing before an electrified chair. At least this way I could wear my own shoes.
I stared down again at the darkening river. I wondered if the group would turn back. Would the group I had come with continue to walk? How long would it be until they noticed? "Most suicidal people give off suicidal warnings." I couldn’t remember if I had. I had become a master of hiding. I laughed at nice jokes and spoke to my family, reading off the script I had written. I kept it all, of course in my head, but I knew every stage direction. Laugh here, smile there, and keep all your tears to yourself. In my time I had learned to fool people.

The new skill I acquired was lying.

I lied to my mother, I lied to my dad, I lied to my brother and the friends I still had through the phone. "It was the cat, of course I’m okay, I swear it’s just ‘cause I’m tired.”

I was honest with only myself. I would remind myself of horrible things. All the reasons I didn’t deserve them. My family was better than me, and they would be much better off. I would repeat the facts over and over. And I listened until I stood on the bridge.

I don’t remember how I left. I only remember not jumping.

I remember my bed that night and climbing in with all the covers. I kept four or five on my bed. I would wrap myself up until I felt safe and pull my teddy bear to my chest. I had stopped checking my cell phone because I felt better the quicker I slept. I did not remember leaving the bridge. I did not remember it then, and I do not remember it now. I remember how it felt on the bridge and seeing my breath through the darkness. I remember my puppy as I walked back in the front door and the way she looked up at me. I remember knowing I loved her. On the bridge, I recall the sting of the weather, and the caress of the wind on my neck. I do not remember the names of my friends, or if they ever looked back. I can still hear the train, a mile or so off in the distance, and I can see the books on my shelf. I remember how much I’d miss them.
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