INNER WEATHER

STUDENT GUIDANCE AND CONSULTATION: STUDENTS HERE WILL BE INDIVIDUALIZED. THEY LIVE IN THE SUBURBS OF THE COAST-SIDE LITERARY COAST. SMALL RIVER HOUSES SLOPE PLOWED Magazine's PLACE. Image: Photograph with the text:

RECOLA: MAGAZINE A PARADISE MAGAZINE

COUNTRY WITH ROASTED PARTS OF SENTENCES RESTING IN YOUR MOUTH: THEM TO EVERYTHING HAS NO CONTROL ABOUT THE LINE.

TEXTS ARE GOING TO THIS ISSUE: 2021 ISSUE
2021 INNER WEATHER
STUDENT LITERARY MAGAZINE
INNER WEATHER STAFF

KAYLA LAWRENCE | EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
PAYTON KELLY | ART EDITOR
HANNAH WILES | FICTION EDITOR
KELLEN SCHMIDT | NONFICTION EDITOR
CHLOE HEFNER | POETRY EDITOR
CLAIREE BATHURST | COPY EDITOR
VINCE GOTERA | FACULTY ADVISOR
LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS
To everyone who has had any part in the process of making this year’s edition of Inner Weather possible, I want to give my sincerest thanks. From the bottom of my heart, I cannot thank you all enough for taking time out of your busy lives, mid pandemic, to put so much creative effort into making the magazine possible.

To all the 2021 Inner Weather staff, Claire Bathurst, Chloe Hefner, Payton Kelly, Kellen Schmidt, and Hannah Wiles, who all worked remotely to ensure that we carried on the tradition of this exemplary undergraduate, student-run literary magazine: you are wonderfully talented and amazing people. And I know I am not alone in thanking contributors, without whose work the magazine would not exist. The passion for literature I’ve witnessed in my years at UNI runs through these pages, and reminds readers, writers and editors alike the effect that freedom in creative expression can have in anyone’s life.

I hope that we all can follow the example of Vince Gotera, Faculty Advisor for the magazine, in supporting our fellow creatives in their journeys and never giving up on our own. We are all bright, capable, and original and the feeling of pride for the work we’ve done here should aid us all in taking the first step down our next path in life.

I am grateful to have been a part of such an amazing experience for my last two years at UNI, and excited for what the future will bring to the magazine. If the work in this edition is any indication, we should all be anxiously awaiting for next year’s copy.

Never stop reading. Never stop writing. Never stop creating. For each of us, it is the unique lenses through which we see the world. Remember to always protect and cherish it!
First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Vince Gotera for the opportunity to be the poetry editor for *Inner Weather* this year. You are always encouraging my writing and pushing me to become better, especially this last semester.

Artists have been capturing the past year in such unique and strange ways because the shift in our phenomenological lives has been just that, unique and strange. We have been taken out of the mindset of “I know what to expect tomorrow because yesterday, and the day before, were as I expected” and were thrown into a state of constant anxiety, of never knowing what to expect from one hour to the next. This is not how I anticipated spending my last year of undergrad at UNI, but because of this, I have grown so incredibly close to the friends I’ve made. We are all exhausted, sad, angry, and leaning into one another for support. We are more in touch with each other than we ever have been. We are therapists for one another, on top of weekly therapy with a licensed psychologist, because that is how stressful life is right now, and I am eternally grateful for this experience. I have also noticed this shift in my peers, we bond over the struggles, and in turn, our poetry has been more revealing and raw than ever before. It has been an honor to read all of your submissions, and thank you for allowing yourself to be vulnerable.

Finally, I want to take this space to give love to you all, we are navigating emotions we have never experienced before, but you have made it this far, and I am proud of you. Like Rachel Morgan says, we are living in the end-times, people! (Thank you for the validation, Rachel.) Despite that, we are making the best of these weird times, even if “the best” is simply existing.
Even though the past year or so has been incredibly crazy and relatively dark, working on *Inner Weather* has been a spot of light for me. When I started my senior year, I didn’t expect to end up the Fiction Editor for the magazine, but having the opportunity to do this has really brightened my last semester at UNI. It has given me a purpose being here beyond just graduating and waiting for grad school to begin next year. It has also given me valuable experience in editing and magazine work that I have been able to put on my resume. However, it is the chance to read the creations of talented students and work with my fellow staff members that I will remember most. COVID meant that the few communications we had were through Zoom or email, but it was still wonderful to have a sense of like-minded individuals operating in their own spaces in tandem to create this work that celebrates not only the achievements of the staff, but of the writers and artists who lovingly put time and effort into pieces very much worthy of publication. Thank you to everyone on staff, all the students who submitted, and the professors who made this all possible. This I will all remember fondly.
This year has been difficult for all of us. From being fully online last March, to hybrid schooling these past two semesters, we have kept pushing forward. It has been incredible to see what people have created throughout these difficult times. The healing that comes from Art and Literature is a wonderful thing. So, thank you to everyone who has submitted pieces this year to the Inner Weather Magazine.

This “magazine” posed a unique challenge when designing it. The dimensions are that of a traditional book yet, I still wanted to design it with magazine-style elements. I hope you enjoy the various art and literature included in this issue!

I would like to give a shoutout to Kayla Lawrence, our editor-in-chief, and the rest of the Inner Weather staff for their hard work. I would also like to thank Vince Gotera, the faculty advisor, for this opportunity.
It’s hard to believe another year has passed at UNI, especially one so full of chaos and uncertainty. Despite all this, though, we’ve been able to hold it together. I’m immensely proud of myself, frankly, but to a greater extent I’m proud of every student that had the courage to submit their work for Inner Weather. It takes serious bravery to send your writing anywhere to be judged, as all of you have done, and one has to be especially courageous to submit non-fiction. It is humbling and beautiful to hear your stories.

I’d also like to thank our wonderful editor-in-chief, Kayla Lawrence, for her hard work and for giving me the opportunity to join Inner Weather’s staff. Finally, thank you to our faculty advisor Vince Gotera for the time he puts in for us and for being his kind and wise self.

Be good— and never stop writing.
# Table of Contents

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>TAMRES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>POETRY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>ART</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>FICTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>NON-FICTION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
YESTERDAY’S WORLD

CLAIRE BATHURST

JUDGE
DR. BROOKE WONDERS

DR. BROOKE WONDERS IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA AND AN EDITOR AT THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW.
I was just heading home from patching a tear on Ninth Street when I got a call for another over on the south side. By then it was already 11 o’clock. The streets were slick and shiny with mist. Drunk businessmen staggered home from the bars and prostitutes hid in the alleyways like tigers crouching in the bush. I had the window cracked and the smell of wet pavement drifted in. Nina Simone crooned on the radio.

Before I started on my way to the south side, I stopped at a drive-thru and got a cup of black coffee. The call would be an easy fix, but I was tired. The last job had taken me to the 12th century. I nearly got burned at the stake before I managed to sew it back up. This next job hopefully wouldn’t be as bad because it was only a pocket—an extremely localized tear in the time-fabric. The tricky part was to get there before anyone wandered in or out.

The spring air was warm. I cruised down 12th Avenue, cutting through the silent streets like a knife through water. I liked working late. Mostly, I liked anything that kept me from thinking too much. Ever since I got the call that Christine was dead, mangled in a drunk-driving accident, I started taking every call I got to keep me away from my bed and my dreams. I took a gulp of coffee.

The fuzz in my brain subsided and I focused on the staticky radio and the soft purr of the engine.

I passed by all the obsidian smooth penthouses and office buildings into the south side. In the nineties when I lived there with Christine, it had been a nice place. Now it was filled with ramshackle bodegas and payday loans. The drugstore I used to walk to every day was a slumped building with boarded up windows and peeling paint. A bum was curled up in the doorway. I turned down 31st Street and pulled up to the building where the pocket was reported. My old apartment building.

The building had been condemned not long after I moved, but the doors were unlocked. Inside was dark and musty. Thankfully, no bums were slouched in the lobby. I gripped my briefcase and turned on my flashlight. The faded orange carpet was littered with food wrappers and used needles. Someone had hung a magazine cut-out of a forgotten celebrity on the wall, perfect swimsuit body lounging in the sand. In the flashlight beam her frozen gaze seemed cobra-cold.

I walked up the rotting stairs to the third floor. Three doors down on the right, golden light spilled from beneath the frame. Apartment 7b. My old apartment. I set my briefcase and flashlight down by the door and paused. All I had to do was open the briefcase and
patch it up. It would take five minutes and I would be done. Music drifted from behind the door. Laughter bubbled up like golden windchimes far away. My hand grabbed the doorknob and I was surprised to feel it slick with my sweat. I could open the door just a crack, just enough to see. It would be a major violation since I had no need to go inside, but it wouldn’t hurt just to see.

I opened the door. As I stepped inside and looked around, I was taken away in a dream. The Cranberries were playing on the radio and young men and women wearing bright floral patterns were laughing and swaying in the breeze. All of the windows were open wide and the white linen curtains billowed.

I remembered something and panicked. There was Gail Beaman, who died of a heroin overdose last year, and there was Terence and Bobby and some other people I had forgotten, but I wasn’t there. I had left to get more paper plates from the drugstore—I remembered now. This was the party we had thrown in late April to celebrate our graduation. I crept forward into the breezy living room. There was the velvet loveseat we got at the consignment store, the stained side table, the bookshelf full of physics textbooks and Stephen King novels. I stood on tiptoe to see over the smiling faces, but couldn’t find Christine.

“Back so soon?”

I spun around. Gail Beaman was holding a plastic cup full of beer and staring at me. I blushed. Could he tell I was ten years older? Christ, if the company found out I had actually talked to anyone I would be skinned alive.

I shrugged. “They were out of plates.”

“Weird.” Gail adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses. “Did you change your jacket?”

“Uh, I got cold,” I said, looking down. I was wearing my black company jacket with the logo embroidered on the chest—a stylized stopwatch. “Hey, do you know where Christine is?”

“I think she stepped out for a smoke.” Gail leaned in closer. “Say, what did you think of my new paper? You did read it, didn’t you?”

“Um, yeah. It was good,” I lied. A dim memory flashed in my mind. Gail had been researching wormholes for grad school, something about the possibility of time travel. I chuckled inwardly. This was before the company had contacted me and my life had changed forever.

“So you agree with me? You think the warp of space-fabric could, maybe in the future, lead to time travel?”

“Maybe it already has and we just can’t see it yet,” I said.

Gail frowned. “Maybe, maybe.
I guess it could be possible."

It was surreal to talk to Gail again, before he got deep into conspiracy theories and started his drug habit. Part of me wanted to grab him and warn him about his future, but that would be too big of a violation. Just talking to him was bad enough.

"Hey, I'm gonna go find Christine," I said, pushing him aside.

She still wasn't back yet. I looked out the window at the city below. It was beautiful, just like I remembered it. Kids skipped home from school and people hung laundry from their balconies. I knew if I stuck my head out, though, I would probably be taken back to the present. Pockets were funny like that—they were too small to support anything bigger than an apartment. All those people down there were real, but I couldn't get to them. The other me was probably at the drugstore by now. He could walk back into the apartment just fine, but if he tried to leave again he’d leave the pocket.

I wondered what I would say to Christine when I saw her. I just wanted to talk to her again, to feel her skin and hear her voice. A vague plan began to condense in my mind. It was risky, but it would be worth it.

Laughter floated from beside me. I turned and there she was, talking with Jessica Weatherfield by the radio. Her bare legs were perfectly tanned and her pastel halter top showed off her midriff. She hunched her sunburned shoulders up when she laughed and tossed her honey-colored hair. As if in a dream, I glided over to her. Everything faded, everything slowed down when I looked at her.

She noticed me and waved.

"Nick," she said, "Did you put on a jacket? Where’s the plates?"

"They were out," I breathed. I hoped she couldn’t see the tears in my eyes.

"Oh, okay. I guess we can just use napkins then." Her voice was low and sweet, and filled me with a deep ache.

I took a deep breath. "Hey, can we step outside really quick?" There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

She cocked her head. "Can it wait? I need to get these kebabs made.”

I nodded. I had time to stay a little longer. Walking back from the drugstore would take the other me ten minutes.

"Great, you can come help.”

I followed her back into our kitchen. The appliances were all an ugly retro orange and the refrigerator was covered in polaroids. There were pictures of us hiking in the Pacific Crest, eating at Dairy Queen, smiling behind a
ferris wheel. Most of the photos I had lost when moving.

Christine swept a pile of travel magazines and CDs aside to make room for a cutting board. She took out bowls of fruit and cheese and sausage from the fridge and started sliding them onto kebab sticks. I wrapped my arm around her waist and leaned into her warm golden hair. Her coconut shampoo and sweet dusty smell flooded my nostrils.

Christine giggled. “What are you doing?”
“I just love you so much,” I said.
“I missed you so much.”
“You sound like you’re going to kill yourself,” Christine smiled, poking me with a kebab stick. “Seriously, are you okay? You look tired.”

I sighed. Her warm, dry skin burned my fingers. I was afraid that she would disappear if I let go of her. “I’m fine, I just need to explain something to you. Can we go outside now?” I just needed to get her through the door, out of the past. I wouldn’t get in trouble if no one found out. I would explain everything to her, she would be grateful I saved her from an untimely death.

“Can we talk here?” Christine asked.

I shook my head, looking into her eyes.

Christine frowned. “Okay, if it’s that important. Let me finish these first.”

I was about to answer when I saw someone out of the corner of my eye. He was holding a package of paper plates and talking to Gail. Shit. I was ready to commit a serious violation with Christine, but meeting myself could actually be dangerous. The company showed all new recruits VHS tapes with stupid time-travelers named Billy meeting their alternate selves and getting erased from history, blown up by dynamite, torn apart by wormholes, and other gruesome fates. Just gotta get through the door. Just get Christine through the door and don’t look back.

The other Nick was talking to Jessica now. I remembered her vaguely from college. She worked at Taco John’s now, and sometimes I saw her sitting outside on her lunch break. Smoking a cigarette, sunken eyes watching the traffic pass. She laughed at something the other Nick said. I hadn’t changed much. But I saw in the way I moved, the way I tossed my hair and clapped Jessica’s shoulder, a youthful arrogance I had lost.

“Hey Nick,” Christine said, stacking kebabs on a serving plate. Her voice reminded me that I had to get moving. “Let’s go to Mexico early. Maybe next month? I mean, there’s no reason for us to wait.”

I had forgotten—that May we vacationed in Tijuana. We rented a white-washed bungalow by the beach and strolled through the
open-air market, eating street corn and laughing at inside jokes. I was about to grab Christine’s arm and take her outside, but I paused. The other Nick looked so happy. What would happen to him if Christine disappeared? I remembered Tijuana, the sun setting on the beach. That was the thing about time-travel. Everything you did had consequences.

I could grab Christine and try to explain that she would die in ten years, try to warn her to stay home on November 14, 2006, but she wouldn’t listen. They never listened, and if they did, it would happen anyway. My first year on the job I broke the rules and tried to save someone. He was a professor who drowned in a boating accident. He didn’t listen to me, or maybe he did, but he still drowned all the same.

I leaned into Christine one last time, feeling her sun-kissed skin and warm hair. “I’ll be right back,” I whispered.

Before I left, I decided to make one more violation—it didn’t matter at this point. I stuck a few polaroids from the fridge into my jacket pocket and took a plastic cup of beer from the table. As I snuck back across the living room, the other Nick caught my eye. His face twisted with confusion, but before he could do anything I stepped out the door. And into the dark, abandoned hallway.

I opened my briefcase and patched up the tear as quick as I could. Not so much to keep anyone from going out, but to keep me from going back in. As I walked back through the building and across the oily pavement to my car, I sipped on the beer. The cup was still cold and summery, and its bright red color almost seemed to glow.
POETRY

21 MAYBE THE ONLY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DOMESTICATED AND NOT IS WHO RUNS AND WHO DOESN’T | BREANNA KNIGHT

22 THERE WAS A THUNDERSTORM IN THE KITCHEN | LAUREN HANSSEN

23 THIEF OF THE NIGHT | BRITTNEY ARRENDs

24 SUMMER OF 2012 | JANEEN YOUNG

26 THE COMPOSITION OF MY SOUL | CHLOE HEFNER

27 POEM FOR MY GRANDMOTHER | CLAIRE BATHURST

28 SUN, DREAMS AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN | AMANDA VOGL

30 FEATHERS | NIKAYLA HOFFMAN

31 AUTUMN’S ANTITHESIS | TAYLOR BROWN

32 OCTOBER 2020 | LEAH ROUGHTON

34 GRANDSON’S FOLK SONG REARRANGEMENT | MATTHEW NICHOLS

36 END OF THE SEASON | DARIA TESSMER

37 EIDOLA | AL MAIER
When the stray calico beneath the back porch climbs up into my lap for the first time, I become aware of two things; I am loved, it would be best if I hold very still.

I am on the back porch because you are inside the house and you are trying to forgive me. When you storm out to me, the cat turns my thighs to ribbons before streaking beneath the steps. You take my hand, but you grind your teeth and I realize your eyes are the reason the cat ran. I become aware of two things; I am loved, it would be best if I hold very still.
There was a thunderstorm in the kitchen.

LAUREN HANSEN

There was a thunderstorm in the kitchen. My wife's bellowing voice thundered through the doorway, followed by a flash of her platinum hair like lightning streaking past the dinner table. The kids knew to take cover, rinsing their plates in a drizzling sink. My youngest left the water running—she couldn't quite reach the faucet yet. With a trembling lip, her worried eyes met mine, wondering if she was allowed to leave. I nodded toward her bedroom, offering a short smile, and watched her scamper off to her little pink sanctuary. The storm raged on, accompanied by the trickle of the faucet like rain water streaming into the storm drains on our street outside. I stood there, dry—feeling drenched. With every huff of her angry breath, my hair, which she thought needed a cut months ago, would blow back like I'd been caught in a gust of wind. She had an air which used to sweep me off my feet and steal my breath away. Now, it left me stumbling, wishing I could get out of the storm in my kitchen. The storm I'm stuck in. When she was done raging, a stillness fell over the room. The air was heavy—hanging over us like a dark cloud.
THIEF OF THE NIGHT

BRITTNEY ARENDS

Dreams unmasked my struggle and awakened the story of his violent embrace. The night was a tale of wicked men.
The summer of 2012 will always be on my mind. The memories are hazy; smoky recollections of something like happiness. Life was drenched in sun-dresses and a whirlwind of weird friendships.

I remember being glued to my friends' hips like Ruth who just turned twelve. We'd steal cigarettes from her Mom's dresser but I swear she didn't mind. We searched for happiness through the thick clouds of nicotine smoke.

Cigarettes weren't all that we smoked. Old dealers offered their friendship to two young, naive girls looking for happiness. We finessed pre-rolled grams for $12. Ruth and I would get high out of our childish minds and go on an adventure in our matching dresses.

Janet and I were fighting. I formally addressed her during band practice. I couldn't tell if the smoke from her tenor sax was condensation or anger. I lost my mind since I paused my favorite friendship for something so stupid. We went twelve weeks without each other, but fallouts happen.
Maybe all of the happiness
was there because Dad wasn’t. I dressed
Mercy and took her everywhere, especially when 12
took our parents. I left her side only to smoke.
I couldn’t let my sister destroy my friendships
but they never did seem to mind.

It was like the whole world was mine.
Every event that robbed my happiness
was washed away the next day. The friendships
I made stuck. I was grounded often, but still got dressed
up to sit at the pit surrounded by bonfire smoke
until I decided to go to bed around 11 or 12.

I was sixteen, but twelve in my mind.
Smoking just happened to provide temporary happiness.
Now, dresses are just as short as fresh friendships.
THE COMPOSITION
OF MY SOUL

CHLOE HEFNER

My soul smells like sweet Honeysuckle
and Lavender at golden dusk—

She tastes like warm strawberries
plucked from Grandma’s garden mid-June

Her song, Vivaldi’s “Spring”
a constant crescendo—
Pampas grass tickling the heart through ears

My soul burns cosmos—
hues of Forget-Me-Not blues,
Bleeding Hearts, Baby’s Breath, Lilacs,
A bouquet of cosmic gardens.
My grandmother, who still believes
in the goodness of people,
in long Minnesotan goodbyes,
in the importance of sunsets and porch swings,
who once walked out of class because
the teacher gave the black kids broken typewriters,
who lived long enough to see history fold back in on itself.
My grandmother, who feeds the birds and taught
me to sew buttons, showed me how to weave
my anger and joy in the warp and weft of cotton wool.
How a purl can be a prayer, a knit stitch, a song.

I sit with her and listen to the mourning doves in the oak tree,
that low sad sound, and feel the sunlight wash
the sorrow from my shoulders.
SUNS, DREAMS, EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

AMANDA VOGL

I often wonder how it would feel to fly,
To follow those robins. To chase the sun,
And the crisp air I yearn to breathe
As I leave behind the feeling of grass beneath my feet.
To soar after a feeling I find only in my dreams -
And feeling everything I never thought I would.

Truly, if it were possible, I would
Ignore the world below as I take off to fly
And appease what haunts my dreams.
Oh to be warmed by that bright sun,
Untethered. No gravity yanking at my feet
As high up, I finally find the space to breathe.

And isn’t that the point of it all? To breathe
In a place the Wrights proved we would.
A place untouched by all of history’s feet,
Where a child’s imagination can fly,
Emboldened and illuminated by the sun,
Not stuck within their dreams.

Within those inescapable dreams,
I can finally breathe.
My eyes close and soak in that astounding sun
As I hope for more than I ever thought I would.
With angel wings so I can fly,
And more to rely on than only feet.
Wings, the color of rich Iowa dirt beneath my feet,
Made of so much more than only dreams:
Beautifully designed to help me fly.
My lungs are satisfied as I deeply breathe.
Feathers that feel softer than I ever imagined they would,
With a caress as warm as a gentle day in the sun.

Oh, to find myself within that sun,
With air, not cool grass, beneath my feet.
I dare to chase that freedom, as most would.
Finding more of ourselves in those dreams,
But feeling trapped, hoping to someday truly breathe
And have what only comes to those who fly.

And though my dreams consist of this need within that sun,
They would never forsake me, not while I find time to breathe.
For I may never soar, but within those dreams, I still fly.
Curious, I wandered through the woods. A small path forged just for me. Soft sounds filled my ears. Insects vibrating their bodies, spreading news among rich green foliage. Chipmunks scurried across the dark chocolate powder beneath our feet. Butterflies floated by with grace that could inspire. Below the rhythm of the forest, the gentle base of water flowed—forging its own path to the future. Suddenly they emerged from the brush with ease, elegance, and urgency. My footsteps startled them. A blur of feathers crossed my vision jolting me into the past. Their feathers. What color were their feathers? Charcoal? Smoke? Steel?

What color were mine once upon a time?

Buried within the walls of despair, I sat a lonely bird in a cage. Engulfed inside the complete absence of light. Neither natural nor artificial light could penetrate these walls. No past, present, or future. Hope fluttered away leaving me with the burning smell of vodka. I yearned to soar toward her. Without light, I felt blind. Submerged in the vantablack crevices of my mind, I was taken hostage. I was a caged bird. Shackled to the bars of trauma. Caged. My wings remained unclipped. My feathers. What color were they?


My feathers. What color will they be?
The leaves seem to ignite
With all the colors of a flame
They glow in sunlit beams,
And crackle just the same
And when the wind does blow them
It gives the impression of
Fire dancing slowly
But without the smoke above
Such a striking contrast
To the chill that’s in the air
So sharp and fiercely biting
Though it causes no despair
It’s simply autumn’s antithesis
To which nothing can compare
Silly little me still wishing on stars. The first star I happen to see. Silly little me, with her faith kept in 'beautiful things'. A dream whispered into the woods, hoping that the trees might just hear me; cinnamon in coffee to attract love and luck. It was supposed to make everything right.

Wishes believed as the candle’s blown out or the star disappears on the horizon. Salt thrown over shoulders because I cannot afford that and rose quartz crystals slept on for three days with a belief that it will help heal what’s broken. A dream catcher hung so closely to bed for the fear of still having bad dreams. Stuffed animals piled up neatly that no one might just be offended.

Silly little me, believing in something more than herself. Stirring tea in a clockwise circle hoping to call on good will, and kissing tarot cards one at a time. The best way to renew their own strength. A cross hung on the wall as a reminder that you are so loved.

Silly little me believed in something stronger than what she could see, but I am not a very smart girl. I
should have listened when everyone said that “you’re wrong.” It’s wrong to believe in such magic, because no one “good’ ever gets to the end. The stars will ignore them and their wishes dissolve into icing. The crystals turn dull, the dream catcher unravels, and stuffed animals rot out at the seams. Believing in something does nothing.

It just breaks your heart. It gives you false hope. It tears you apart. From the bottom of your stomach to the top of your throat and while you sit and believe in the things you can’t see, wishes, beliefs, hope and true love, those who see through it are laughing. They laugh at the person believing in lies. The ones still holding so tightly. Tight enough that their knuckles start cracking because they believe God is worth it. They believe in the strength to hold on even as their palms start to bleed.

When you’ve believed for so long though, then that’s all that you have and you love to love that belief. So, you spit on the blood and you roll back bruised shoulders, and you survive on believing it’s true.
Grandmother, kiss your husband goodbye as he goes to the trainyard at daybreak. Whistling a morning tune, rousing the rooster with melody on the parkway. How many mornings have started with “I've Been Working on the Railroad.”

The war is long over, still he fights artillery of industry, endless every day of the week. His back cradles the freight of a father. A 10 year old son on his shoulders. All the live-long day.

Dusk beckons his head to rest. But before sleep, the dreaded ring. Goddamn the foreman and his telephone and that he ever picked it up. The voice assures him he’s the best. I can hear the whistle blowing.

Here the freshly printed Atlas declares the new industrial might of the West Coast, millions efficiently minted by lonely sons and tired mothers. And blood. Rise up so early in the morn.
Grandmother, did he tell you
where he's going at the witching hour?
Eyes erratic, should you call the doctor
again? A distant whistle, then he leaves.
Hours until a knock on the door, now a widow.
Use your strength to tell your son

playing with his toy trains, just to pass the time away.
Echos of snapping and splintering
ring in my ears
like my once soft,
supple toes in new, stiff satin
pointe shoes. Crunching and crackling
like the popping sparks of a hearth.
The floor of the earth I walk upon
flames in burning hues;
burnt turmeric, roasted cinnamon,
and mulled ginger.
Spices coiling in the air,
heat spiraling and swirling up,
to flush my exposed, wind bitten cheeks.
Now raw and red, lashed out
upon by the cruel winter
wind, her icy tongue sharp
and spiteful. Toes broken and
bloodied, taped and splinted,
biten down upon.
Her teeth gnawing
on flesh, tearing
life from limb,
tendons and ligaments pulled
and torn beyond repair.
Nails ripped off,
dried blood seeped into satin.
My bones bruised,
my joints naked and crushed,
like the leaves littered
upon the frozen ground
beneath the sole of my boots.
The five dead walk these grounds
Morning, afternoon, night
Five bodies claimed by time
Waters come rushing down

Morning, afternoon, night
They watch us touch the sky
Waters come rushing down
We sail over currents

They watch us touch the sky
Climbing higher, so high
We sail over currents
From one hundred years' past

Climbing higher, so high
They lie in a graveyard
From one hundred years' past
Rising to watch us soar

They lie in a graveyard
Five bodies claimed by time
Rising to watch us soar
The five dead walk these grounds
ART

39 MONEY LOVE | TYLER OBERMANN
40 SHINRIN-YOKU | LOGAN MURRAY
41 SHINRIN-YOKU II | LOGAN MURRAY
42 UNTITLED | IRASEMMA GONZALEZ
43 WOODPECKER | EMMA STOFFER
44 MINOR ILLUSION | MADELINE LEROY
45 UNTITLED | PO AUNG
46 FAST MAN | TYLER OBERMANN
47 UNTITLED | HAILEY HERSHEY
UNTITLED.
IRA EMMA GONZALEZ
MINOR ILLUSION
MADELINE LEROY
UNTITLED.

PO AUNG
FAST MAN
TYLER OBERMANN
UNTITLED.

HAILEY HERSHEY
FICTION

49 PET SITTING | KAITLYN ASKELSON

51 THE FINAL SUNSET | MADISON KIZER

56 CHESNEY | ABBY KRAFT

58 GLASS CASTLES | ISAAC NIELSON

67 MISSISSIPPI BY THE MORNING | NOLAN NICKERSON

70 WHEN IT RAINS | DELANEY RALL
Teddy -

To start, I just wanted to thank you for agreeing to watch my pets while I’m away. You’re a lifesaver! While they can all be a bit temperamental at times, they really are the sweetest creatures you could ever meet. Please be sure to heed the following instructions carefully to guarantee that your week will go as smoothly as possible. My little ones are creatures of habit, so it would be to the benefit of all of you to stay true to their schedules.

My darlings have free range of the house, but they usually prefer to be outside for most of the day. Let them out by 7:30 a.m. Sometimes Lucky will wake you up before that- he’s an early riser! DO NOT wake up any later than 7:30, or you will sorely regret it. I usually take them out around the block to stretch their muscles, but I totally understand if you aren’t quite comfortable with that yet. Your first time caring for my angels can be a little scary! Letting them into the backyard should be just fine.

Around 8, you will need to feed them their first meal. They tend to be messy with their food, so you must always feed them outside (unless you want to clean blood out of the carpet!). There’s a freezer in the basement where I keep all of their food- that’s where you’ll find the tubs of ground beef. It’s imperious that you maintain a hands-off approach when feeding them. They’re especially vicious when food is involved! Simply deposit the meat into the shoot that will send it into their holding area. DO NOT EVER forget to feed them in the morning- they do not take well to being hungry, and the neighbors might get mad if someone loses another limb.

Duchess has a mild allergy to grass, so you will need to apply her ointment at noon. You must put on the goggles and Kevlar suit that I left folded on the table before
going to apply her ointment, just as
a precaution. She gets very nervous
around strangers! NEVER approach
her from the front- she might take
it as a sign of aggression or a chal-
lenge, and that is the last thing you
want. As long as she isn’t snarling
at you, gently apply the ointment to
the golden area at the base of her
neck.

Kallias will still be shedding this
week. While the skin appendages
remain the same glittering emerald
green and should be impossible to
miss, do not be alarmed if you step
on anything sharp, hard, or crunch-
ing in the carpet. Please do not let
him consume these excretions- they
could cut up his throat if they don’t
go down correctly!

You are free and encouraged to
play with them throughout the day.
They have plenty of toys in the yard
and love fetch and tug of war, but do
not let them nip at you! Their jaws
are strong enough to crush bone,
and their teeth as sharp and lethal
as daggers.

You will need to feed them again
around 5. I made sure to stock the
freezer with enough sheep car-
casses to last the week, but on the
rare chance that you run out, just
go to the butcher down the street
and give him my name-he’ll put the
extra charges on my tab. Be extra
cautious with this meal, and DO
NOT HAND FEED THEM, especially
if you want to keep your hands! The
carcasses will not fit in the shoot, so
be silent and hyper aware of your
surroundings as you deliver them to
the holding area.

Finally, do not be worried if they
want to sleep with you in bed at
night! Kallias loves to cuddle. Lucky
does tend to breathe hotly when
asleep, so don’t let him near your
face or wear anything flammable to
bed.

They have all of their shots and
flying licenses. I will leave the num-
ber for the veterinarian on the fridge
for emergencies, and my number in
case you have any questions!

Finally, I’m sure you’ve heard the
stories about the last sitter, but as
long as you follow my instructions
with extreme caution, you probably
won’t have anything to worry about.
Thank you again for agreeing to
watch Lucky, Dutchess, and Kallias
for me- many are no longer willing
to watch my beloved dragons, but
you’ll learn to adore them!

Best wishes,
For someone who told fortunes for a living, Estelle struggled immensely coming to terms with her own fate. Her humble cottage by the sea, once full of grace and warmth, now felt cold and unsympathetic after her husband’s passing. She often wondered if a part of her soul would forever be lost with Arthur, never to be reclaimed. After months of staying as far away from their shared home as possible, Estelle knew it was time to face the life she had been avoiding at all costs. How strange it felt to be afraid to see her own bookshelves and bricks. The mere thought of the battered wooden kitchen table Arthur had run his hands across lovingly at the yard sale years ago now made her stomach shrivel up. How quickly life can change.

Estelle’s young cab driver helped her unload the last of her luggage from the vehicle, giving her sympathetic glances filled with unbearable pity. He slicked back his black hair with a comb from his coat pocket and Estelle noticed a hole in the elbow of his coat. She was sure his wife or mother or whomever would catch this soon and patch it up with loving annoyance. She remembered when this had been her job as well. He set down the last suitcase and dramatically held his hat over his heart. He looked at her awkwardly, shuffling his feet boyishly towards the cab, signaling his departure. “So sorry about your husband, ma’am.” She gave him a twitch of a smile. What was she meant to say to that?

Estelle immediately regretted speaking to him at all during the cab ride over, but after months of sitting with only her thoughts and the static of the television in
the motel she’d rented out to get away from the memories of the cottage, the cab driver was the first person she’d had the chance to talk to in a very long time. So, she’d told him everything. She’d told him about The Old Gypsy Fortune Telling Cards she’d received from a friend that started her career. She confessed that at first she didn’t wholeheartedly believe in the practice, but was forced to find work quickly to support herself while Arthur was in the war. What better way to make money than by working with what you’ve already got? She’d told the boy how she’d studied the cards, studied palms, tea leaves, anything she could find. She worked day and night to find the hidden meaning of it all. Estelle became immersed in the practice, doing readings whenever she could find a spot at the market. “People wish to know their truth long before they’re ready to accept it themselves,” she’d told the boy. She’d told him about her love for Arthur, and by doing so, the floodgates of grief and love and loss she’d compiled for so long could no longer take the solitude. Burst open like a puncture wound in her soul, her sadness flowed out of her body like a thunderstorm. She’d cried and cried, making the last few minutes of the journey stuffy and awkward for them both. The young cab driver was undoubtedly overwhelmed with all of this, what with a blubbery old maid sitting in his back seat treating him like a close friend revealing all her secrets. But he had sympathized, had shown her kindness. And he’d listened. What more could Estelle have asked for?

She watched him drive down the road from her large living room window, subconsciously twirling her fingers around her long locks of hair, a nervous habit she’d had for as long as she could remember. She put her hand up to the glass and splayed her fingers slightly as a halfhearted wave of thanks. She wasn’t sure if he could even see her anymore, and yet she hoped this small action would show the boy, or maybe just herself, that she was strong. That she could handle living on her own again. She wasn’t sure if this would ever be true.

As soon as the yellow Studebaker cab was hidden behind the valleys and hills of the freshly paved road, Estelle turned from the warmth of the window. She didn’t wish to feel warm. But she did wish for a distraction. She wished to reconnect with her craft. Maybe the Old Gypsy cards would give her direction, sympathize with her and tell her what her next move should be. Where had those cards gone? She stepped with bare feet across
the brick tiled floor, looking behind the vintage green armchair she’d always thought was hideous, but Arthur had thought was wonderful. She glanced around the brick tiled fireplace, and in front of the gold, vintage framed mirror, lit only by the glowing orange salt lamp she’d bought years ago as a gift for Arthur. Where could they be?

Peeking into the dark and oddly glowing mirror, she had almost forgotten what she looked like. Too afraid to see the matted waist length white-blonde hair that had once been her prized possession. Fearing that she would see that young girl she had been once before, if she was still in there at all. These days Estelle had trouble feeling human at all, much less youthful. She picked up a comb from the fireplace and ran it through her hair sadly, glancing at the newly woven frown lines that had set in all around her heart-shaped face. She looked down at her dress. At least she still had this piece of herself. This piece of him. This long, brightly colored floral dress Arthur bought her on their anniversary years ago. The puffed long sleeves that cinched at the wrist. The hem that stopped just above her ankles, sheathed in layers of delicate fabric that made her feel like a goddess. She remembered when Arthur saw her in the dress for the first time in this very room. He’d smiled so wide and immediately twirled her around, the two dancing to only the rhythm of their shared laughter, minutes quickly turning into hours.

The memory itself brought tears to Estelle’s eyes. She squeezed the fabric tightly to her chest, feeling the tears slip down her face. Estelle shook her head fiercely and once again resumed her search for the cards. She walked through each room of the cottage, searching high and low, yet nothing. She returned to the living room once again and felt as if she could cry from frustration. Walking through the ghosts of what each room used to be was overwhelming in itself.

As her chest began to heave, she felt a chill coming from the window that she was certain she’d locked. Estelle felt a swirling in her stomach, and an urge to follow the breeze to the window. She moved halfheartedly towards it, the rusty window now squealing with the rhythm of the wind outside. Stuck to the frame of the window screen was card two: The Moon. She recalled the description on the Tarot box she’d memorized years ago. “Upright moon: Represents your deepest fears and illusions. Often comes out when you are projecting fear into your present and future. Based on past experiences. May be caused by painful memories that have caused great upset and
unravel. May represent a time of uncertainty. Nothing is what it seems! Honor your achievements and look deeply at what you must release in order to shine.” How odd.

Without being able to explain why, Estelle felt a mental clarity and purpose she hadn’t felt in years. She clutched the card with one hand and picked the bottom of her dress up with the other. Maybe the real moon had the answers she desired. Forgetting her loafers, she flung herself out the door, out of the cottage, and into the air that felt all encompassing. A crisp and peaceful hymn filled with the deep yellows and reds of the flower beds made for a blanket of peace. By this time the sun was beginning to fade into the sky, settling on top of the hills hundreds of miles away behind the water.

Estelle felt called to this picturesque scene. She ran as fast as her feet could carry her to the edge of the shore, setting the card down carefully beside her in the sand and clinging her hands to the earth like a lifeline. Her bare feet were steady among the sand, her eyes anxious with tears. The lowering sun flirted with the mountains in the distance, as if the two shared a secret Estelle didn’t yet know. Her nerves got the best of her, the overwhelming sense of something otherworldly was all but too much to bear alone. As she took a single cautious step away from the water and towards the bright white cottage she’d called home for so long, she couldn’t help but freeze as the breeze slipped past her fingertips hanging hopelessly at her sides. Maybe she should find another card inside, maybe there was something else she was missing— “Come back.” The breeze seemed to call to her. “Don’t be afraid.”

Estelle’s freshly brushed hair began to sweep around her face, glowing in tandem with the sunset, the white strands inexplicably reverting into her bright vivacious blonde color from years ago, her floral dress dancing around her like an ethereal memory. She turned her head slowly, her legs beginning to carry her backwards, pulled by an invisible string tied to an unanswered question. She halted once again at the edge of the water and sat down, burying her fingers through the rippling reflection like silk. Yearning to feel the final bits of light before becoming wrapped in the ever-looming darkness, she closed her eyes tightly and clutched her chest.

Estelle squinted one eye open and leaned over the water, searching aimlessly for something. A hint, a riddle, a revelation. Anything. She knew the card had led her to where she needed to be. They had never led her astray.
She knew now was the time. “Please.” Estelle cried out. “I’m ready. Show me. Please.”

The wind began to pick up once again, with a force so heavy it could have lifted her into midair. The sunlight, as it was now barely peeking over the mountains, shone brighter than she’d ever seen in her lifetime. Even with closed eyes, Estelle felt only heat and warmth and memory. Every memory she’d had with Arthur came into the golden flecks of light, illuminated by the sea, as clear as a bright red flame. Arthur spilling his ice cream onto his shirt the night they met. Their first road trip across the country. Arthur begging for his tea leaves to be read. Estelle assuring him it was a bad idea. His subtle smile at the first scent of their shared morning coffee. Dancing in the living room together. Sailing together. Arthur begging her to turn the record player on. “Just once more.” The wedding reception at the cottage. Arthur’s countless written letters in the war. Pictures of Arthur in the hospital bed. Arthur’s final letter to her. “No amount of ink can express my overwhelming love for you.”

Just as soon as they came, they were gone. The last flecks of sunlight escaped behind the mountain, a slow and final wink before fading into the abyss forever. Estelle sank onto her back and into the sand, weary from the emotional journey the earth had shared with her. She gazed up into the moon and the stars with half-lidded eyes from exhaustion and relief. Her floral dress and vibrant hair fanned out around her like a cape as she placed her hands on her stomach, aiming to catch her breath. Looking into the night sky, she began to smile. She began to laugh. Neither of which she’d done in a very long time. Tears of joy unknowingly escaped her eyes.

“Thank you” she whispered, and she closed her eyes for the final time.
The drive into Chesney, Minnesota is quiet. The highway is lined with evergreens and tall grasses until the biggest billboard I have ever seen peaks into view: Willie's Wild West Show. Willie's eyes bore into mine as our car passes the sign, the handlebar mustache and cowboy hat adorning his face making me roll my eyes. Who would want to go to a Wild West show in Minnesota of all places?

“That’s the best attraction in town,” my boyfriend of two months says, his eyes not leaving the road. “They get actors to be the victims and Willie is the hunter. It’s the best Wild West show you’ll ever see.”

When I don’t respond, he relaxes his hand on my thigh. “It’s just a weekend in my hometown, Al,” he says. “I still own the property my parents lived on before they died, so I need to get it ready for resell.”

I nod. It’s just a weekend with Gabe, I think to myself.

***

Chesney is a place people go to die. With only a post office, a local bar, and two Evangelical churches alongside the town’s 400-people population, the remnants that once may have been loved have been left for dead in the abandoned main street and litter-filled alleyways.

Gabe rolls his dad’s old motorcycle out of the machine shed after dinner Friday night and motions for me to hop on the back. As he slowly pulls out of the driveway, he tells stories of how he used to steal the motorcycle on weekends and walk it three blocks down the road before starting it. He wanted to make sure his dad wouldn’t hear him leaving, of course.

I chuckle. “Where would you even go? There’s nowhere to go in this town.”

He flashes a grin back at me. “I’ll show you.”

He guns the engine until it
sounds like a lion and takes off down the road. I close my eyes, feeling the cool air brush against my sunburnt cheeks as he drives. Blurs of houses cross my vision until the countryside comes into view.

“Where are we?” I ask when the bike begins to slow.

“You wanted to know where I went off to in high school,” he says, “so I’m showing you.” After helping me off the bike, his hands wrapping around my waist, an abandoned building comes into view. Vines creep up the sides of the brick, birds flying in and out of broken windows. “You came to an abandoned building for fun? That’s your idea of fun in this place?”

“You haven’t seen the inside yet, Allie,” he laughs.

He places his hands over my eyes, giggles escaping my lips, as he leads me through the entrance. I slide his hands off my face to unveil a room filled to the brim with weapons: guns, machetes, grenades. I hear the door latch behind me.

“What the hell is this?” I ask. My blood runs cold.

“It’s our hideout,” he says coolly. “Do you like it?”

I say nothing. I turn to open the door, but Gabe moves his body in front of mine. “Stay,” he whispers.

“What’s going on?”

Didn’t you see the billboard on the way into town?” he asks. “This is where the show is. It’s the main attraction here.”

“Gabe--”

He cuts me off, tears beginning to stream down his cheeks. “Willie has my parents, Allie,” he says. “He won’t give them back until I give him a new act.”

“What do you mean, Gabe?”

“I’m sorry,” he says as he lifts a rifle off the wall and points it toward me.

I swallow. “Don’t do this,” I say.

Before I can say anything else, footsteps echo down the stairs. A set of eyes and a cowboy hat meet my gaze: Willie.

“Welcome to the best Wild West show you’ll ever see.”
Dragging his trash can to the curb, Mike smiled in the lonely night. He didn’t often smile, nor did he particularly enjoy taking out the trash, but he felt at peace with his tiny world at the end of 33rd Street. Having just cleaned and organized his home, the high of total sovereignty was still strong and pulsating. This supreme ecstasy continued until, unfortunately, Mike made the mistake of looking toward his neighbor’s house.

To an outside observer, it would seem a mirror image – trash can sitting in the proper place for morning collection – but Mike knew better. He trampled the grass that connected their driveways with a nervous speed, hands nearly shaking as he threw open the lid. The buzz of delight turned to boiling rage; his suspicions were confirmed.

“Why the fuck don’t you bag your trash?” Mike snarled through gritted teeth, slamming the can closed. He grabbed it by the handle and began to pull it back to the house, continuing to rant as he set the stage for his perceived revenge.

“All it takes is a strong gust of wind – then boom! Trash all over the damn place, and we both know your lazy ass won’t clean it up. Shit, forget wind, a raccoon will do it just for fun!”

Mike rammed the trashcan down where it usually sat, next to his neighbor’s garage door. “Are
you having fun?” He yelled as he gave the can a solid string of kicks, “Huh? Are you?”

Having let off some steam, Mike stomped back to his house, shoved the door shut and locked it behind him, then promptly went to bed.

The next day, Mike awoke around noon. He had that day off from work, so there was no rush to regain consciousness. Lazily strolling out to collect the mail, he saw his most loathed neighbor loitering in the road. The man’s name was Lion, and his carefree attitude was certainly fitting for the head of a pride. With a smug step, Mike approached.

“How ya doin’, bud?” he called in a casual tone.

“Splendid, my main man Mike,” came the reply, “resplendent, in fact.”

“Didn’t see your can out last night. Did you miss trash day?”

“Almost! Luckily, the thunderstorm woke me up in the night. Couldn’t get back to sleep, but I did get my trash out bright and early,” Lion said, punctuating his statement with an ear-to-ear smile. Mike hurried to find something to say before his scowl became too obvious.

“And, uh, you bagged it this time, right?” he questioned in a jolly tone.

“Ah, y’know, I forgot again. But it turned out okay.”

“Funny how things work out,” Mike mumbled.

“For sure, sometimes the universe just puts you where you need to be,” Lion sang, “Oh! Speaking of which, I think Bill’s kid wanted to play catch, so I’m gonna head over there now. Talk to you later, buddy.”

“Yeah, talk to you later, catch you later, see you later, whatever,” Mike rambled as he turned and walked away.

A few minutes later, Lion arrived at Bill’s house, waiting only a short moment after knocking on the front door before it opened, unveiling the man himself.

“Lion! How’s it goin’, brother?” Bill nearly shouted, “Timmy’s grounded right now ‘cuz he lost his bike – fuckin’ fool – but ya’ll can play for a bit. He needs the exercise.”

Lion leaned in close and spoke with a hushed voice, “Actually, I was just talking to Mike, and I think he’s really upset about something.”

“Again? You sure it ain’t that he don’t like you?”

“No no no, this time it’s different,” Lion moved even closer. “You didn’t hear it from me, but I think he’s gonna hurt himself, or someone else.”

“Aw hell,” said Bill with gravity.
“Can’t have that. Tell ya what, we’ll play ball with Timmy and I’ll send my wife over to check on him.”

“You’d do that?” Lion replied with hope.

“No problem.” Bill turned around and bellowed into his house, “Martha! Where you at, woman?”

“Whaddya want?” she shouted back as she walked into the sight of the two men. When she saw Lion she blushed in embarrassment, and her voice lowered with her head, “Oh, hi Lion.”

“Mike’s goin’ a little crazy,” Bill said without skipping a beat. “Think you could go over and talk to him a bit?”

“Of course. I love babysitting fully grown men,” Martha stated flatly as she searched for her shoes.

“You’re so nice,” Lion said to the air around him.

As Bill was wrangling Timmy out of his room, Mike was finishing his sixth beer. Mike believed that time without work was best spent drunk, and he practiced what he preached. A rather biased newscaster was frantically explaining how unbiased he was on the television in front of him when the sound of a doorbell echoed through the home. Mike groaned, lurching out of his chair before shuffling to the door. He paused for a moment, hoping whoever it was would go away, but ultimately greeted his guest as the doorbell cried out once more.

“Afternoon, Martha,” he said without glee.


“Did Lion send you?”

“You didn’t hear it from me.”

Mike sighed. “You want a beer?”

“Please,” she replied with relief, following him into his home.

Both parties now seated in front of Mike’s television, they cracked their cans of liquid relaxation and began their discourse.

“So, there’s nothing going on?” Martha inquired.

“Not with me, but that Lion guy’s a fuckin’ nut,” Mike clarified. “I’ve come to learn that over the years. He seems kind of sneaky.”

“My son’s a fag, y’know?” Mike went to sip his beer, then withdrew. “Gay, sorry. Got nothin’ against the gays. I just wish the little bastard would come out and tell me like a man. Anyway, I’m not one to point fingers, but he used to hang out with that weirdo a lot before he moved away.”

“What are you saying?” Martha asked. “What are you getting at?”

“Like I said, I’m not one to point fingers. I just noticed an effect and I’m looking for a cause. He hangs out with your kid a lot now. I’m curious to see how young Tim turns out.”
Martha wanted to curse at him, but a part of her mind understood his position. Bill had been saying similar things ever since Mike’s son went off to college, claiming he only let Timmy play with Lion because the boy whined too much otherwise. She didn’t agree with their blatant bigotry, but could not deny the odd feeling she often experienced when watching the perpetually single and childless Lion entertain the neighborhood kids without supervision. She guzzled down her beer in a single pull.

“Mike, I don’t like you,” she said, preparing to continue.

“I can respect that,” Mike interrupted.

“Right. As I was saying, I don’t like you, but I do love my son, and I agree that Lion gives off a strange vibe sometimes. That’s why Bill is always there when Timmy plays with him.”

“I wouldn’t even let that happen, now that I know how devious that rat can be. Y’know, I bought the house at the end of the street so I’d only have one neighbor to worry about, but he’s been trouble enough for a whole damn apartment complex! Fucker doesn’t even bag his trash.”

“Really? What if a raccoon got in it, or the wind blew it over?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying!” Mike blurted loudly. “You gotta watch out for that guy.”

“‘For sure.’ Martha stood to make her exit. “I oughta get back to Bill now. Thanks for the beer, and I’m glad everything’s okay with you.”

“One more thing,” Mike said with slightly slurred speech. “Why can I call someone from England an Englishman but I can’t call a Chinaman a Chinaman?”

“Goodbye, Mike.”

The rest of the day went relatively without incident. Martha, upon returning home and seeing Bill, Lion, and Timmy playing a harmless game of catch, decided to keep her conversation with Mike to herself. However, Lion went home shortly after noticing her gaze, and she could not help but think that he saw some disdain in her eyes.

The sun rose on the next morning, and Mike followed it with a slightly hungover sluggishness. He made a mental note to pace himself on nights before work, stowing it away with hundreds of identical notes he had made in the past. Having donned his office-approved outfit, he tied his corporate leash in a Windsor knot and headed to his garage. There, he shambled into his shoddy sedan, started the engine, and began another nine-hour journey to and from what he considered contemporary serfdom.

Mike didn’t exactly hate his job. It was easy and garnered decent
pay. However, years of working under multiple bosses, being chewed out multiple times for minute errors, and never seeing any tangible results from these efforts had worn him down to a tired nub. The walls of his cubicle became the constricting stomach of a predator which had swallowed him whole, and he could feel himself slowly dissolving in the digestive acids.

This day was no different, and Mike returned to his neighborhood exhausted. Pulling into his driveway, he glanced over at Lion’s house, and all rational thought crumbled under the weight of newfound fury. It wasn’t that anything was wrong, but rather that something could go wrong. Why should he bother waiting for Lion’s next stunt when he had already dealt with them for years? Colors swirled and shifted to a deep murky red as 33rd Street warped into a wicked abomination of chaotic possibilities. The time of underhanded tactics had ended. Mike saw no other option but to seize dominion by force.

Lion’s front door erupted with sound, nearly succumbing to the repeated assault of Mike’s fist. Fortunately for that slab of wood, Mike soon realized that Lion was likely somewhere else in the area, as he often wandered around and into other people's business until sunset. Sure enough, Mike found his target at the nearby hill where children would often play. There, Lion was engaged in a modified version of ball-tag with some local kids – those who were not currently grounded for losing their bikes.

Marching with great ferocity, Mike arrived at the base of the hill. Lion, who stood atop the summit, looked down on him and smiled, feigning ignorance in the increasingly heavy atmosphere. The hill shook as if assailed by a terrible disaster as Mike began to ascend. However, this ascension was brought to an abrupt halt when he met a militia of innocent faces.

“Don’t hurt him!” one of the kids cried.

“What?” Mike nearly stammered, taken back by this sudden confrontation.

“Lion said you’re a bad man,” called another child. “He said you stole Timmy’s bike!”

“My too!” came the voice of a third.

“You lost yours in the creek, remember?” questioned another.

“Oh, right.”

“Get out of my way, you little fucks!” Mike roared, recollecting himself.

The kids scattered. One of them dropped the ball they had been playing with, but did not dare retrieve it as it rolled down the hill to where Mike stood. He
glanced at the ball and, when he looked back up, Lion was directly in front of him, wielding a gentle smirk.

“Alright you slimy shitsnake, start talkin’,” Mike growled.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” Lion spoke with an unrelenting calmness. “I was attempting to hasten the destruction of your ego, so that you might be set free.”

“You wanna elaborate on that?”

“We don’t exist.”

“Oh, please!” Mike almost laughed. “Spare me the whole ‘nothing is real’ spiel, you hippy fuck.”

Lion actually did laugh. “There are many things which exist. You and I do not. We are but phantoms.”

“Okay, idiot, if I don’t exist, then how can I do this?” Mike asked, lightly kicking the ball at his foot up the hill.

“You did nothing,” Lion responded. Mike looked down to find the ball had rolled back and stopped by his foot once again.

“Oh, fuck off!” he declared, this time striking the ball so hard it went over the hill and disappeared. “I have a kid! I have a job! You have nothing! You’re the one who doesn’t exist, so don’t rope me in with you!”

“I think we should go our separate ways and cool off for a bit.”

“That’s the first smart thing I’ve ever heard you say. You just saved yourself from a serious ass-beating.”

“See you later, Mike,” Lion said as he made a lackadaisical exit.

“Bye-bye!” Mike hollered after him, still quite impassioned. “I’m gonna go drink beer! Lots of beer! And if I see you, I’m gonna rip your goddamn cock in half!”

Without looking, Lion waved to Mike with the back of his hand, silently reiterating his parting words. Mike remained at the base of the hill for a while longer, grumbling and pacing around in circles. Eventually, when dusk had solidified its presence, his front door slammed and his beers cracked – the signal that their enraged master had returned.

While Mike downed can after can, he reflected on his actions. He was certain that Lion needed a good thrashing, but wondered if it was his place to provide it. They would still be neighbors, and tensions probably wouldn’t decrease. Perhaps a different strategy would yield better results, he reasoned. Mike released a powerful belch as he schemed to befriend Lion and change him through suggestion. Pondering the fine details of this, a knock upon his door disclosed the object of his new plan.

“Please don’t rip my cock in half, man,” Lion besought Mike as he opened the door. “I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry – actually sorry – for messing with you.”
“I ain’t gonna touch your dick, bud. I was just angry,” Mike assured him.

“Could we try to put this all behind us?”

Mike’s heart skipped. “You know what, why not? Come on in and have a beer.”

“No. I’m alright for tonight, thanks,” Lion said quickly, eyes wide as if struck with shock.

“Didn’t expect me to want to cooperate, did you?”

“You got me,” Lion chuckled, his body rotating toward his own home. “I’m actually cooking some stuff right now, so I can’t hang out. Maybe tomorrow we’ll plan something.”

“Yeah, we can do that. Have a good night, man.”

Mike closed the front door, and immediately ran to the nearest window. The fires of bestial animosity reignited in his gut, burning stronger than ever. He watched Lion reach his house, look behind him, and enter with a swift step. At that moment, Mike resolved to follow him – having lost all doubt that his neighbor was engaged in nefarious obscurities. Everyone on 33rd Street knew that Lion never cooked.

For better or worse, Mike came to find that Lion had left the front door unlocked in his urgency. The dimly lit night gave way to awful darkness as Mike slipped through, closing the door quietly behind him. Faced with total blindness, he stood unmoving until his eyes adjusted, and almost took flight when they did.

The room before him, faintly visible by a distant radiation, was a villainous carnival of things frivolously removed from being orderly – as if made unkempt by a deliberate hand and a determination to spite his very being. A box of juvenile toys sat overflowing in the corner, adorning the floor with the shapes of dolls and pinwheels. The walls, which were otherwise pristine, displayed intermittent deep lacerations, decorated with small splatters of dark. There was a ceiling fan, but one of the blades was bent upward to the extent of touching the plaster, rendering the whole contraption useless. Even the silence of this scene was undone by the muffled sounds of screaming, and metal clashing against metal.

Steeling himself, Mike crept toward the light with caution. A sense of duty shut out all fear. Whatever heinous display awaited him, he knew that he would never again feel at peace if he retreated now. His guiding star revealed itself to be a crack under a door in the kitchen area, which held no evidence of cooking being recently performed. Opening that door exposed a long and unfinished set of stairs, leading deep beneath the safe surface of
Earth. This passage was adorned with panels of soundproofing and, without their protection, the shrieks and clangs intensified immensely. Mike descended as the voice became more distinct and clear.

“Fucking cunts! Piece of shit dickhead jerks! You’re all worthless filth!” it announced shrilly.

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, Mike saw at last the mastermind of this nightmare. Lion was hunched over in the concrete basement, back turned as he slammed an iron pipe continuously against a pile of twisted spokes and handlebars. The missing bicycles of neighborhood children bowed and broke apart under his wrath.

“Holy shit,” Mike said, the banging suddenly stopping as Lion heard the intruder speak.

“Oh, Mike!” Lion exclaimed, spinning to face the trespasser. “Didn’t see ya there, buddy! How ya doin'? We still plannin’ for tomorrow?”

A familiar glint caught Mike’s eye, and he recognized the body of the bike he bought for his son long ago. “I knew that little fucker didn’t lose it! I raised him too smart for that! Shoulda just told me, ya damn freak.”

“This is sad, man - even for you,” Mike’s words were dripping with disappointment.

“What do you mean ‘even for me’?” Lion replied, his pitch again rising in anger. “Sad? You don’t get to decide that! You’re just an alcoholic nut with anger problems! This street would be a cesspool without me! I pull the strings! I am your God!”

“All these years, and we never noticed you were up to some crazy shit. I mean, I figured you were doin’ something, but this is bad comedy.”

“You never noticed ‘cuz you’re a moron!” Lion spewed as he battered another bicycle for emphasis. “At least I vent my anger privately. You’re a menace in comparison! The kids are scared of you, but they trust me – see? I deserve this respite! This is a hero’s reward!”

“Yeah, I’m goin’ home. This is stupid. See ya tomorrow.”

Lion cackled maniacally. “You won’t be going home, peon! Guess what? I’ve concluded that you have no place in my world! I’m gonna eat your flesh, crush your bones, and tell your son you killed yourself because you knew how fucking worthless your life was! No one is going to bother looking for you, because everyone thinks you’re a selfish asshole! Lay down and die, miserable dog!”

Having finished his speech,
Lion charged at Mike – holding the pipe high above his head. Mike scrambled up the stairs, but Lion followed close behind. A hand shot out and grabbed Mike’s ankle, causing him to fall and strike his chest on the edge of the hard wood. Lion crashed the iron into the side of Mike’s knee furiously, rendering it useless. He raised his weapon once more, but Mike’s other leg shot out automatically, striking Lion in the chin with a forceful heel. The man of the house tumbled backward, the intruder scurried up and away on three limbs. Mike heard the slap of Lion’s skull against the ground as he made his escape.

For a brief moment, he paused at the entrance of the appalling lair. Then, gathering his available saliva at the edge of his mouth, he spat upon the floor before continuing onward. When Mike returned to the comfort of his abode, he didn’t even bother to lock the door as he retired to bed. Lion had felt the sting of true defeat, and the humiliation of his disguise’s thorough death. Mike knew that he would not endeavor to show himself evermore, even if it would be to avenge his fallen status. They were neighbors, at any rate.

Managing a much-needed rest, Mike again awoke at noon. He hardly even cared that he was late for work. Uncovering the mysteries of the previous night had given him a strange satisfaction, and the world felt bright and weightless. He encountered some trouble in clothing himself with his injuries, but nonetheless slipped on some garments and hobbled outside. There, he beheld Lion’s garage and front door wide open, with a sign in the lawn reading “FOR SALE.” Mike’s trash can had been flipped upside-down over a nearby storm drain. On the hill in the distance, there was a collection of jumbled tires and aluminum, glistening in the sunlight.
In all honesty, we hardly even slept. We were with our friends Muddy, Robert and Slow Drag at the once famous Blue Note Club in Greenville, Mississippi playing a show on the night Emmett Till was murdered. It was August 28, 1955.

We had gotten off stage and packed up all our things. I was winding the wire to my microphone up like a snake around its prey, when some kid come running into the joint, out of breath with a look on his face like he just seen the Devil himself. Says to me, the band, the manager, the bartender, and the drunk that word came round ‘bout some boy visiting from Chicago. Got taken by some fellas that everybody know run with the Klan over in Money, Mississippi and that it ain’t look good for the boy.

Wasn’t till three days of searchin’ were through that they found what remained of Emmett in the river. He was chained to a cotton gin fan by barbed wire. When the boy’s Uncle Mose went down to identify Emmet’s body, they say his face was unrecognizable from the beatings. Only thing he had to recognize his nephew by was the ring on Emmet’s finger.

Keeping up with the story in the papers wasn’t good enough for us, so we drove over to Sumner together, where the murder trial took place, in a big blue van that hauled around the band. We made fort for a few days on an old camp ground just one-mile North of the courthouse. As musicians we were used to coming and going as we please, never held down by a suit and tie, only a bottle of rye. But this was big. Even some of the nine-to-fivers got work off, their bosses and their bosses bosses all wanted to be in Sumner the day that verdict was read.

The tension in the air was tight. All of Mississippi wanted to be in that courtroom for one reason or another. There were men there who wore white robes out...
in the woods at night, dressed in suits, sitting in chairs that were meant for fair and impartial jury members. That shit was a joke. The jurors took less than an hour to decide whether to send the two men who CONFESSED to murdering Emmet off to the chain gang or back to their homes. They were eating their wives stew by sun down. Not guilty was the verdict.

This was the first time I can remember any newspapers from up North coming down caring about a colored boy getting murdered. I remember a conversation that day between Muddy and Slow Drag. They were going over the details of a tale they had heard from their parents, and their parents before them. It was a tale about the healing power of the Blues.

Slow Drag comes from just across the river over in Arkansas. Now in case you didn’t know, Mississippi ain’t where the Blues first walked around. They say that one day the Devil was out walking down some backcountry dirt road looking for poor farming folk. These were people workin’ on rented land, people who spent part of their lives labeled as property. He asked them to sell their souls in exchange for prosperous fields and large yields of profit. Now, this was tiresome work you see, the spirit these people possessed was strong, even to those who saw religion as just a cloth over the eyes. They still doubted the sinister smile, hollow eyes and shallow promises made from this strange white man passing by unannounced and unwelcomed.

After a few weeks of doing this the Devil was all beat up, tired as a dog. He hadn’t got a single soul to show for all his running around, so he decided he’d offer the next person he came across a promise nobody had ever turned him down on before: fame and enough cash for all of Jackson. The sun was setting, the fireflies began flickering, the bull frogs bumped their chests out and began serenading. And just then, the Devil came over a hill and spotted a man standing at the crossroads up ahead about five hundred feet, with a guitar over his shoulder.

See, the Devil thought it was his lucky day because the man looked worn out. Devil thought he was finally going to sleep with a soul under his belt.

“A contest”, said the Devil, “pick up that six string and play me your best, if my best is better than yours, well, you know the rest, you’ll have sold your soul to my fiery pit of death”.

Some people say he was the grandfather of Ma Rainey, others claim it was Bessie Smith’s blood, either way this man wasn’t a great player, but his faith was sturdy as
a rock and commitment to his children was until the Lord called him home. His own wife ran off on him to get away from all the racket he made trying to find the right chords, the right rhythms, something new but with its roots firmly planted in the past.

The Devil was right about a few things, yes, that man was desperate. He was at rock bottom, nothing left to lose and down on his luck. But when that horn headed villain began to play people say his opponent began to pray.

First, he prayed to God for forgiveness, as any good prayer should start. Then he closed his eyes, suddenly the spirits of a thousand ancestors came before the man. They danced for him, and sang songs that had not been heard for fifty years in Arkansas. But most importantly, they hummed...they hummed a beat so sweet that man knew his journey to find the right rhythm was all but complete, with the stomp of his feet.

That’s it! said the soul of the man. This humming, it was the sound he was searching for. It was the sound that would free his soul at last. That humming follows the beat, the man thought to himself, the beat of my ancestors. In the field picking cotton, tied to the whipping post, running North through the woods towards freedom with the Devil on their tail. The clock had wasted away what felt like hours it would never get back by the time the Devil was through with his racket, now it was time for the man to play.

The sun was beginning to rise and the rooster began to crow, folks around there say all it took was one downward strum and a low mighty hum; just like that the Devil was up and blown from the rock he sat on, all the way across that mighty river into Mississippi in the early hours of the morning.
Scarlett kicked a pebble as she trudged through the rain. Her class had let out early, but that didn’t stop the rain. She was rather hoping she’d make it back to her dorm before the rain began. Scarlett hated the rain. It seemed that part of the water element ruined everything for her. Her fourth-grade art project when her parents couldn’t take her to school that day, her hair when she worked all day on it just for the eighth grade formal, and her essay for English class when her best friend accidentally crashed into her, causing her bag to spill everything on the soaked sidewalk.

She was startled when the first ring of thunder reached her ears. She watched as students held their umbrellas close to themselves, in fear of the wind taking off with them. Her hands held onto her backpack, as she begrudgingly took her time to get to her dorm. By the time she reached her dorm, her shoes felt as though they were flooded. Her socks were soaked, and her hair was matted. Her purple V-neck was sticking to her skin, as her shoes squished on the carpet.

“Honey, I’m home!” Scarlett yelled as she entered her dorm room. Her roommate, Beatrice, gave a slight wave of her hand, as she laid on the top bunk of their bed.

“Alright, I’ll ask her. She just got back,” Beatrice filled in her boyfriend over the phone. “George, I gotta go. I’ll see you tonight!” She hung up on him and rolled over in her bed to spot her soaking wet best friend. “What the fuck happened to you?”

Scarlett let out a sigh and dumped her backpack on her
bottom bunk bed. She then grabbed her hairbrush and tried to make her hair look nicer. “What do you think happened?” she questioned sarcastically as she ran her hairbrush roughly through her hair. Beatrice nodded and stayed silent, not wanting Scarlett to get mad at her.

“Well,” Beatrice prolonged, “do you want to go to a party with me tonight?” Scarlett looked at her best friend through the mirror and gave her a look that read, ‘are you kidding me?’ Beatrice bit her lip, holding back a laugh. She knew it was a long shot. Scarlett had created a set of rules for herself throughout college; no drinking, no tattoos, no boyfriends, no piercings, and no parties. Beatrice didn’t know how Scarlett could do something like that. She, herself, was able to find equilibrium between her social life and her studying.

Scarlett pulled out her hair dryer, hoping to bring some life back into her hair. As she worked on her hair, her gaze slowly shifted to her roommate, who was sitting on her bed with her back to the wall on her cell phone. Beatrice had dyed her hair bright red the summer before and then got it cut into a bob no more than two weeks ago. Her hazel eyes lit up when she found something funny on her phone, most likely from her cousin’s recent baby photos. And that’s when Scarlett would notice her best friend’s smile. It was infectious. Beatrice always found a way to light up any room she walked into, and Scarlett felt jealous.

Hoping Beatrice hadn’t noticed her staring, Scarlett looked back to her almost dry hair. After brushing through it a few more times, she turned off her hairdryer and pulled her hair up into a messy bun with her favorite scrunchie. Beatrice climbed down from her top bunk.

“Well,” Beatrice prolonged, “do you want to go to a party with me tonight?” Scarlett looked at her best friend through the mirror and gave her a look that read, ‘are you kidding me?’ Beatrice bit her lip, holding back a laugh. She knew it was a long shot. Scarlett had created a set of rules for herself throughout college; no drinking, no tattoos, no boyfriends, no piercings, and no parties. Beatrice didn’t know how Scarlett could do something like that. She, herself, was able to find equilibrium between her social life and her studying.

Scarlett pulled out her hair dryer, hoping to bring some life back into her hair. As she worked on her hair, her gaze slowly shifted to her roommate, who was sitting on her bed with her back to the wall on her cell phone. Beatrice had dyed her hair bright red the summer before and then got it cut into a bob no more than two weeks ago. Her hazel eyes lit up when she found something funny on her phone, most likely from her cousin’s recent baby photos. And that’s when Scarlett would notice her best friend’s smile. It was infectious. Beatrice always found a way to light up any room she walked into, and Scarlett felt jealous.

Hoping Beatrice hadn’t noticed her staring, Scarlett looked back to her almost dry hair. After brushing through it a few more times, she turned off her hairdryer and pulled her hair up into a messy bun with her favorite scrunchie. Beatrice climbed down from her top bunk.

“Will you please go with me to this party?” she asked, searching her closet for an outfit. When she popped out of her closet, she had a jean jacket and a white crop top in her arms. She decided to match the jacket with a pair of slightly ripped jeans.

“Why is this so important to you? It’s just another college party that I won’t be attending,” Scarlett replied stubbornly. She plopped on her bed with *The Radium Girls* by Kate Moore. It was expected for her to read it for her English LAC. She was pleasantly enjoying the book. It would've been more pleasant if she didn’t have Beatrice saying please on repeat in the background. Scarlett sighed, placing her book on her pillow and turned to her friend. Beatrice had already put on her outfit and had started giving Scarlett her famous puppy dog eyes.

“If I agree to go to one party, will you get off my case about my
lack of a social life?" Beatrice squealed, making Scarlett cringe. I’m going to regret this, Scarlett thought to herself as Beatrice made it her business to find the perfect outfit for Scarlett. Scarlett rolled her eyes and went back to her book. Before she could even reach the next page, their door opened. Beatrice’s friends barged in, ruining the small bit of peace Scarlett had. Scarlett tried to keep all her focus on her book, drowning out her roommate chattering with them.

Beatrice kept glancing back at Scarlett through her conversation. Why now, she questioned. Why would Scarlett go against her rules just to please me? She began to lazily drift into her mind, her gaze remaining on her best friend reading a book. Scarlett’s thick, black hair against her honey brown skin looked so pretty. Why hadn’t she seen that before? She tried to force the thought out of her head, going back to reality.

“So, we heard that a certain tennis player requested a certain roommate of yours to come to the party tonight,” Damien berated Beatrice. Anna and Camille squealed, gaining Scarlett’s attention.

“Are you coming to the party tonight, Scar?” Camille asked, nearly bouncing out of her shoes in anticipation. Scarlett reluctantly put down her book, knowing she’d have to talk to them.

“Bea convinced me.” Both girls squealed again. “But it’s the only one I’m going to. I’ve got too many things going on to make parties a must.” Even Beatrice had to strain herself from plugging her ears and rolling her eyes as her friends squealed again.

“Like what?” Damien pestered. “Being color guard captain cannot be as tiresome as you say it is.” Anna giggled, getting a jab to the gut from Camille. Camille happened to be in color guard with Scarlett.

“Come on guys. Stop annoying my friend,” Beatrice said, as she opened her closet again, “Help me find the perfect outfit for her.” Scarlett went back to her book, but still got interrupted. “That means you too, Scar. This is going to need your approval after all.” Scarlett rolled out of bed, feeling rather deprived of her reading.

Beatrice pulled out half of her own closet before raiding Scarlett’s as well. Scarlett had never been one to plan an outfit for a party. Her wardrobe was so sophisticated it could make a utility pole feel like a curly fry. Scarlett wanted to make her family proud of her. She was the first in their family to go to college and she felt as though she owed it to them to be great. This was what caused her to create her list of rules. Of course, the boyfriend
rule was given by her father. Her sister was even worse than her father. Wanting to encourage Scarlett to not be so uptight about college, Hazel had bought her younger sister an outfit she considered to be ‘chill’. Scarlett’s eyes bugged out when Anna and Camille found the exact outfit in the back of her drawer.

“Oh my God, no!” Scarlett shouted, “There is no way I’m wearing that!” Beatrice looked up from her handiwork of figuring out what would look good on Scarlett and what wouldn’t. The second she saw the outfit in Camille’s hands, she squealed as terribly as her friends.

“That’s the one! Let’s put all this stuff away and get Scar dressed up.” Scarlett crossed her arms. Damien, Anna, and Beatrice began to put all the clothes back in the closets, as Camille pulled out Beatrice’s makeup box. Scarlett’s eyes widened. She’d never worn makeup before, and she wasn’t about to now.

“What part of no don’t you guys understand?” she wondered aloud. “And don’t you dare put any of that shit on my face.”

“It’s not shit, it’s makeup. And believe me, it’ll make you look pretty,” Anna called out from inside Scarlett’s closet. Beatrice hopped out of her closet to see Camille pulling out all her makeup supplies.

“Camille,” the young blonde looked up from the floor, “you do know that Scarlett and I don’t have the same shade of skin, right? My makeup on her skin would be pointless.” Scarlett sent Beatrice a thankful look. This was the best part of being friends with Beatrice. She knew when to not go too far.

“Do I still have to wear the outfit?” Scarlett whined, giving her roommate puppy dog eyes. It would’ve worked too, if Damien hadn’t shoved the outfit into Scarlett’s arms. Scarlett sighed and headed to the bathroom to change.

The outfit wasn’t bad, it just wasn’t Scarlett’s type of style. Her sister had found an olive-green V-neck shirt that ended at her midriff and a pair of high-waisted black pants with holes at the knees. Those holes were there on purpose. Who does that to a pair of pants on purpose?

Thank you, Hazel, Scarlett thought to herself as she put on the pants. Her knees felt weird without the feel of pants on them. Gosh, if tonight went okay, she just might have to call her sister and thank her. Scarlett felt rather normal in the clothes. It was as though she was back to being a freshman in high school. While she didn’t attend those parties, her sister was more commonly the host. Scarlett would get to invite
friends over and stay up late in the basement for most of the night, as long she never told their parents what Hazel did over the weekends.

It was a good life. Scarlett liked being minorly popular for having late nights with her friends. Until that night in her sophomore year, it was a blast. That night was when everything went wrong. Per usual, it was raining when it happened. Scarlett’s boyfriend at the time, Brandon, had snuck out of the basement to join the real party upstairs. The second he had made it up the stairs, a red solo cup was placed in his hand. That was when everything truly went wrong.

Later in the night, Scarlett was saying goodbye to her friends on the front porch, when they all noticed Brandon and a few senior boys dancing in the street. Rain was softly falling on them. The boys kept lifting their heads up to catch raindrops in their mouths. Sadly, neither Scarlett nor her friends were able to warn the boys in time of the minivan heading up the street.

Both girls were grounded for months after that night. Their parents had come home to police cars in their driveway and both girls sitting on the front porch, Scarlett in tears. That was when Scarlett really changed. She created her list of “No’s” because of that night. She didn’t want anything to go wrong ever again. She didn’t want it to rain ever again.

Scarlett wiped away a stray tear from the memories and headed back to her dorm. Beatrice and her friends waited in anticipation to see Scarlett’s new look. Of course, Beatrice was not expecting her heart to drop to her feet. Scarlett looked beautiful.

“Holy shit, she looks so normal!” Damien spoke, excitedly. Anna and Camille were, once again, heard squealing.

“Trent is going to love this look on her,” Anna quietly shared with Camille and Beatrice. Beatrice got out of her state instantly, remembering her main reason for getting Scarlett to go with her. Her hopes slightly diminished as Scarlett looked to her for approval, Beatrice gave her friend a pure smile before reaching for her hairbrush.

“I know you don’t like to do much to your hair, but could I try something?” Beatrice looked hopeful once more, as Scarlett agreed. Beatrice began to pull Scarlett’s thick, black hair into a braid atop her head and put the rest into a ponytail. A few spirits of hairspray later and they were ready to go.

The party hadn’t truly started, mostly because Scarlett had forgotten you didn’t need to be early to party. The only ones there to
start were the tennis team, who were hosting.
“Hey Scar, could you help us over here?” Camille and Trent, the tennis team captain, were hanging streamers. Scarlett found the tape and joined them.
“Thank you,” Trent spoke, locking eyes with Scarlett. Scarlett nodded, and began to blush profoundly. Once the streamers were up, some more partygoers began to show up with the alcohol. Scarlett grimaced, remembering Brandon. She made a mental note to stick to water tonight. Pretty soon, the party was in full swing. Almost all the attendants were dancing in the living room to extremely loud music coming from the speakers. Red solo cups were everywhere, as the noise level only heightened with loud conversation. Some couples had already slunk down to the basement for some privacy, while others had created lines to the bathroom. Scarlett felt claustrophobic. This felt unreal to her.
“Hey,” Scarlett turned her head to see Trent standing next to her. “You enjoying yourself?” He had a red solo cup in hand yet looked completely sober.
“I guess.” Scarlett felt slightly uncomfortable, but pushed it aside. “It’s been a while since I’ve been to a party. Any party, really.” Trent nodded, and stood watching the crowd with her.
“I heard. Beatrice seems really happy you came with her.” Scarlett instinctively smiled from ear to ear. She soon spotted Beatrice in the dining room, dancing on the table with Anna and two random boys. They were clearly getting drunk, but Scarlett noticed how happy she looked. She was so carefree all the time. Oddly enough, she looked truly happy when she was drunk.
“I, uh, wanted you to come tonight, as well.” Scarlett tore her eyes away from her friend to Trent, who looked rather sincere. “Is there a reason for that?” Scarlett asked, slightly confused. Trent now looked uncomfortable but decided to throw caution to the wind.
“We’ve known each other for a little while, right? I mean, with sharing some classes and in passing.” Scarlett was now intrigued by what was being insinuated. She smiled, before a flash crossed her mind, the accident. It made her hesitate with the thought of trying again.
“Trent, I appreciate that you want to get to know me better, whether as friends or as a couple, but I don’t think I can.” Trent looked a little heartbroken. “At least, not yet. I just need time.” The two stayed next to each other, talking for most of the night. Scarlett was surprised to learn that Trent couldn’t drink, so
they constantly filled their cups with water.

Scarlett was actually having a good time at a party. She and Trent had spent the whole time talking and exchanging stories. Beatrice, who was nearly drunk out of her mind, found Scarlett within the crowd and halted. She’d never seen this side of Scar. It made her feel good inside, but that could have also been the beer talking. She just wished she could be standing in Trent’s place. Even though she’d only gotten to know Scarlett over the past couple months, feelings were stirring. She knew it was hopeless though. Every girl she had ever liked was straight and it killed her. She knew Scarlett was straight and yet her heartstrings were tugged on a constant basis.

“Heey Bea!” Camille and Anna had joined her, also clearly intoxicated. “These lovely boys invited us to get ice cream! Wanna join us?” The two girls giggled, manically. The boys were in the same state, but with a look of lust in their eyes. Beatrice felt herself get tugged along, as she giggled with her friends.

Scarlett saw Beatrice get dragged away with her friends, as they headed outside. There was a fight going on out there. It only made sense that people would want to watch that. She, on the other hand, remained inside talking to Trent and a few of his friends.

“So, this is your first college party? Shut up!” A girl, whom Scarlett had long forgotten the name of, basically yelled to the whole neighborhood. Scarlett shared a look with Trent, who felt slightly embarrassed with his friends around.

“Uh, yeah,” Scarlett replied, “I haven’t been around a party like this since high school!” She had to scream to even hear herself, it was so loud. Trent waved off his friends, who looked ready to pounce on Scarlett, as though she was fresh meat.

“Do you wanna go home? You look pretty green,” Scarlett nodded, feeling rather tired as well. Trent offered to walk her home, which she gladly agreed to, since she had no idea where Beatrice went. After Trent made sure she was tucked in bed, Scarlett was out like a light.

The next morning, Scarlett couldn’t see anything past her hair covering her face. She crawled out of bed, not hung over, and went about her usual morning schedule. When it came time for her to wake up Beatrice, she finally realized that her roommate was not in her bed, nor in the dorm. Scarlett rolled her eyes. She must’ve found someone last night.

At least, that’s what Scarlett thought until it got to be past
noon and there was still no sign of her friend. To get her mind off of worrying, she turned on the tv.

“Thank you, Don. Late last night, an accident ensued off of Middle Road. The three cars involved slid down the road due to the rainfall. Four of the passengers in one of the cars, all of which were intoxicated, were proclaimed dead this morning in the hospital. It is unclear right now as to how the accident began. But, police are now inquiring about the intoxication of more than half of the victims.”

Scarlett watched on in horror as Beatrice’s picture appeared on the tv, alongside Anna’s and the two boys they ran off with.

With a pain in her chest, Scarlett began to cry hard. The tv began to play back the camera footage from the accident. Scarlett couldn’t watch. She couldn’t believe what had happened. As the news reporter continued talking, Scarlett couldn’t help but take notice of the rain. Her heart hardened at the thought of rain. She glared at the tv, as teardrops fell instead of rain.
NON FICTION

80 MY MOTHER’S EYES | SHANNON HEIMS

82 THE WANTING GIRL GETS INTO THE PARTY BUT IT IS STILL NOT AUGUST | BREANNA KNIGHT

84 GENERATIONS | MIKAYLA WARRICK

88 ASTRILQUUS | HANNAH GEBERS

92 SEASONS MAY CHANGE | AMANDA VOGL

98 IN THE APPLE TREE | AMANDA VOGL
Sun creeped through the rectangular windows on either side of the front door and made her eyes shine. Her slim eyes were rimmed with red from no sleep and worn from wiping the tears that had fallen. I looked straight into those same eyes when I pleaded with her. “Don’t do it. Please.” That moment between us lasted a lifetime. Defeat coursed through my mother’s body language.

Fresh with innocence and growing up too quickly. I held my breath as the tea kettle of emotion began to screech and boil over. Tears rolled out and mixed freely with the liquid sliding out my nostrils. Sniffles and short gasps of air added to my pleading cry: “Don’t do it. Please Mom.” Much too young to plead for a family to stay together. Too young to be tasked with protecting a child herself.

Found curled into a ball in her room silently crying, her eyes wide with confusion as I slowly peeked into the upstairs bedroom. Her platinum blonde hair rustled from a deep sleep woken by the noise. The same hair I had once had, but had begun to grow out of. Silent tiptoes were background noise to the main event that night, the night my sister would only remember through her fear of locks, as we escaped the war upstairs.

“Everything will be okay, everything will be okay.” We sat gripping one another’s shaking bodies under the flowered bed sheets as I repeated the phrase over and over again. The words penetrating the silence of the room and drowning out the muffled screams from upstairs. First coming from the kitchen, then
the living room, then the garage. Neither of us were comforted by the sudden silence when the garage door closed. The silence that night was not as bad as the silence that came from my mother’s thin lips in response to my pleading that bright morning. “Please don’t divorce him.”

Leaving was almost as hard as staying the next morning. I gripped my younger sister’s hand, still plump with innocence, short nails with chipped polish from a time before that dreadful night. The smell of Casey’s pizza mixed with the awkward pleasantries from my aunt made me even more nauseous. I sat at our old kitchen table, passed from my parents to my aunt. Nicks and scrapes littered the wooden table in that kitchen, miles away from the events of that last night. The memories around that run-down hand-me-down table were fuzzy at best. But through the fog, I could almost remember a birthday party. My mother bringing cake to my sister and I, eyes smiling. My father watching his girls smile in anticipation as the lit candles came closer to being blown out. It was a time before the fighting started, or before the fighting became like a soap opera, playing night after night for the members of the house. The greasy pizza stared back into my fazed eyes; eating was a luxury I couldn’t enjoy.

That young girl sitting at that table knew what had happened, what had been done. And in that moment, miles away from the conversation that was happening between my parents, the pleading was no longer for my mother to stay with my father. But for the other shoe to drop. And for it to finally be done.

Regret runs deep in my bones as I reflect about my mother’s eyes that sun-filled morning. Had I been the reason she ended up staying all these years, even though nothing had ever changed? The yelling, doors slamming, garage doors opening, but still a wedding band on their fingers. My words from that moment echo in my mind: please don’t divorce him. Did they hold any weight that morning in that doorway, after my father woke up, Jack Daniels still thick on his breath? Had I changed her mind that morning? And what did she see in my eyes?
“It’s one to eight or I’m irate.”
– A University of Iowa Fraternity Pledge chants in response to being asked in an interview by Caleb Presley of Barstool Sports about the number of girls allowed into a party.

In a very different life, I am the one of eight girls. Which is to say, simply put, that I am not the reason they needed the seven extra girls evening out the party. In a very different life, I am always at the party and if for some reason I wasn’t, my phone would ring until I was. This is the wanting girl and what she craves.

In a very different life, I am not making anything up as I go and there are no third-floor apartments with second-hand sofas. The utilities are not overdue. Instead, I’m in a denim blue dress two sizes smaller than what I keep in my closet and there’s a boy in a baseball cap holding my hips, though he does not need to because this is a very different life where I’m not scared of anything and I’m not going anywhere. My shoulders are freckled, the sun’s lightened my hair, and I have big plans. Outside plans. Deep breath plans. Groups of ten people or more plans. This is the wanting girl and the cinema that plays in her head.

But in this life, I’ve got a black coffee next to an open window in what I’m trying to convince myself is an August downpour and my heart has promised to wait in the car. The screen door is ajar and creaking while I wait for honesty to come tastefully in to sit with me. This is the wanting girl and how she writes.
“Just once,” I think to myself, “just once, write something without a boy who doesn’t love you in it” but I can’t. I can’t—and that’s a bit of a problem. There is no one waiting on me to write them a letter that is not my little sister. There are no boys wasting their time with hearts like mine. Though there are no fathers doing this either.

I can count the number of times I’ve seen my father on just two hands, one of which is holding a cigarette. I’ve never truly counted, of course, only estimated, although I do know it’s been zero in the last decade. And this is where the therapist says, “Would you ever try to meet with him?”

I answer yes. This is largely due to how much thought I’ve put into that day and what it could look like. I have dozens of different scenarios running through my head and so many questions: Would I keep my nose ring in, hoping he hates it though he knows he could never say anything about it or do I take it out, remove the polish from my nails, and put on a soft sweater? Play it sweet and quiet and broken? Circling back to the boys who do not love me, if I was seeing someone at the time, would I bring him with? Should he be a better man than my own father or worse...and which one will be harder to find?

Because you see, a US Department of Education study in 2017 revealed that 39% of children grades K-12 are fatherless. Which is to say that there will always be Wanting Girls. Which is to say that there will always be vodka cranberries at the party. This is the science that for every eight girls, there are three in denim blue dresses. They are all getting two sizes smaller and smaller.
I come from the broken generation. The generation of broken promises, broken families, and broken dreams. Shattered lives and a fragmented world left in almost eight billion pieces by the past generations.

We were born into a world that gave us such hope and potential to only have reality forced upon us like Atlas having the weight of the world on his shoulders. We were told to think to ourselves “What a Wonderful World” we live in where we could be anything we wanted to become, yet this dream is crushed by those who told us this story when we were children. Our dreams of becoming astronauts who touch the depths beyond the sky, doctors who save lives every day, musicians who create beautiful masterpieces, scientists who explore the unknowns of our world, or athletes who push the human body to its limits were left to die in the dust once we were told they were the dreams of the innocent. No, you cannot become an astronaut because of the color of your skin. No, you cannot become a doctor because you cannot pay for the schooling. No, you cannot become a musician because it will never pay the bills. No, you cannot become a scientist because you are a woman. No, you cannot become an athlete because your gender is not a box you can check. No, you cannot have these dreams that we told you ourselves were possible because of our mindsets and opinions of an older generation.

You were allowed to do almost everything when you were young, but I am not allowed to because I am still a kid. You told me I will understand when I am older, yet now I am older. I still do not understand, but how could I when you never told us which answer to fill in or why this was the way the world is supposed to be. You never told me that to get an unlivable
minimum wage job that I had to have numerous years of experience in the area for an entry-level position. You did not tell me that the only reason why ramen is considered a college student’s favorite meal is because it is the only thing we can truly afford. We weren’t told that our peers in school starved as their parents worked a forty-hour workweek only to barely get food on the table. I remember my friends in elementary school scarfing down food as if it was the only meal they would have that day and would be bullied for it. We were not told that people around us may be struggling. Students would show up to school in the same two or three outfits every day yet none of us knew why that was all they had. I remember how you told me to treat everyone the way I wanted to be treated. You did not tell us how many people would rather have hate fill their hearts instead of seeking kindness. The boys at school who kicked me, pushed me into the coarse concrete of the school playground hurt me, yet you told me it was because they liked me, not because they were being mean. I told you I was getting bullied at school and you told me “Suck it up, it happens to everybody.” You could have said something, stopped this painful childhood of ours from happening yet you did nothing. Most of us deal with the mental, emotional, and physical consequences of what you did not do in our childhood yet you are the generation that calls us “snowflakes” or that we are “too sensitive.” At least we feel more of a need to change something that we think is wrong than you did.

We were told that family was the most important thing in someone’s life and it meant putting it before everything else. It was so common for our generation to be stuck in between our divorced parents like puppets on a string when they promised it would never happen to us. I saw what divorce did to my family, twice. My father was given the short end of the stick in visitation rights despite him being the better parent, this was typical for most divorced families of my generation. Wednesdays were the nights where fathers could finally see their children after many days or a week passed, yet could not have more time besides dinner and bed because they had to put everything into affording child support. My birth mother complained that she was the one who had it rough and demanded more child support from my father’s already barely above water bank account. I was not the only child who had these terrible memories of having divorced parents. Family was said to be important yet everywhere
we looked we saw families splitting up with no regard to how their children would deal with it emotionally. As long as we smile in the family photos posted on Facebook saying “look at how perfect our family is,” that would be all that mattered to our parents. Some of us learned how to cry in silence or to conceal every unwanted emotion in order for our parents to not get mad at us.

I was a part of the generation that lived their lives with their families as if their entire world was falling apart before their eyes then being told to “Get over it. Everyone your age has divorced parents. How is this any different?” We were promised that one day we would find happiness in the world. That was a fucking lie. My generation alone has lived through numerous economic downfalls, terrorist attacks, a global pandemic, and having to fight for basic human rights if someone was not a white male. I’ve lived through the bomb threats, the live shooter drills, the horrific events showed on live television, yet somehow I am supposed to find happiness in all of this. This is the atmosphere of our country, the horrible shape of the world plopped in our laps by our parents and told to be happy with it. Everywhere we look, the past generations’ laziness and lack of not wanting to change anything have brought our world to ruins.

I see people shot and killed for simply the color of their skin. I am told that if a man tries to rape me it will be because I was “asking for it.” I walk home after work at night afraid for my life because the world is not the safe and great place our parents told us it would be. It was because they never looked past their own problems to realize what they have brought upon our generation. They told us to grow up, and we did while also growing this indescribable need to shove a finger in our parents’ faces and tell them that we can and will be better than them.

My generation has tried to change the world for the fraction of the chance that maybe the world could be better for those who come after us. I’ve raised my voice on every occasion I can to make the world better for everyone around me yet I’m called a “radical,” “some liberal-educated college student,” and everything else the older generation likes to call those who try to change the world. You tell us to go back to focusing on our studies rather than focusing on politics that affect my generation as much as any other. We didn’t listen. We have picked up every broken piece of this world that you left in ruin and will move mountains to put the pieces back together, swearing we will be the generation that will
do better. Every heart-wrenching and grueling obstacle that tries to push us back from your negligence into our uneducated and unknowledgeable stereotype given by the older generations, we plant our feet in the ground and keep pushing forward. Maybe I will be a part of the generation that changes the world for the better for everyone. We might fail and be written as just another college protest like every other in history but we will try, and we will be better than you. We will change this world even if it means we have to burn it to the ground and start from scratch. This is the outcome of your carelessness and your imprint on the world that you gave to your children in billions of broken pieces. Congratulations, my generation is the way we are because of you. I guess we owe you some sort of recognition. How about the award for the generation who taught us what not to be?
The first time I ever looked into the sky deliberately, I remember seeing nothing. It was just another night after school and playing with my friends, but my dad and I stood on the porch. Me standing on a chair, him holding me steady. I thought that if I was higher up, I could see more, but the sky was just dark. There was a large, white, fuzzy ball in the sky that my dad called the moon. It was... plain. I had heard so many things about the stars. There were supposed to be shooting stars and constellations, but looking up that night showed none of that beauty. The books I had read showed pictures of the stars. I was confused. Why couldn’t I see anything? I accepted that I would just have to see the stars in pictures, and I kept on living.

The second time I looked to the sky with the stars on my mind was middle school. We had just done a unit in science on the solar system. My family had recently come to the realization that I was nearsighted, and my glasses had come in a few weeks before. They were brown and pink, oval shaped, and perched on my nose. I remember going out on my porch that night and looking up. It was amazing.

There were so many! There were bright stars and dim stars, stars that seemed to twinkle and stars that glowed steadily. There were so many more than I had ever thought possible.

Dad! Dad! I can see the stars! I remember yelling into the screen door.

He hauled himself out of the
embrace of our couch and walked outside. *Really Monkey? Guess you really did need those glasses.*

We spent what felt like hours out there in the summer air. My dad pointing out constellations and telling me their stories. It was an amazing night, and I kept looking to the sky every chance I got.

**STELLIMICANS – (GLITTERING WITH STARS)**

It was a late night, I had just gotten home from a long day of school and an even longer shift at McDonald’s. I was just standing in my driveway. Something urged me to stay outside, to look up again. I hadn’t given the stars their proper attention in a while.

So I looked. I gazed into the sky, and the longer I looked the more I noticed something odd. There was a faint line in the sky, right above my driveway it seemed. It was just the slightest shade lighter than the rest of the sky. I was puzzled. What could that be? The answer came to me quickly.

It was the arm of the Milky Way Galaxy. Or at least, one of the arms of our galaxy, shining down on me like some kind of beacon. The air was starting to nip at my nose, and I was starting to lose feeling in my fingers, but I couldn’t go inside. Not yet. I couldn’t help myself. The stars were a siren, calling me to them.

**ASTRIFER – (STARRY; NUMBERED WITH STARS)**

The stars had been a constant. They were always there when I needed someone to talk to, though talking to the sky is odd I’ll admit. I didn’t care though. I’d tell the stars my worries, my fears, and even my dreams. I wanted to be among them, travelling between them. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with them.

Could I though? I shivered, the cold slowly seeping past my coat.

I couldn’t just become an astronaut, I wasn’t smart enough. Heck, someone with five PhD’s wasn’t accepted for NASA’s program. How could I compete? Simple, I couldn’t.

So, I thought I could be someone who studies the stars, or maybe an astrophysicist. They still interact with the stars, right? I could do that, but it didn’t seem to fit. The way I wanted to be with the stars simply wasn’t possible, and it still isn’t. Humans haven’t figured out that technology yet, and I’ll probably be dead before they do.

I felt my body start to shiver, yet I couldn’t bring myself inside quite yet. I stood there, staring up into that huge mass of stars, nebulae, and galaxies, and I couldn’t stop myself from imagining it. Being on a ship, sailing through space,
exploring the vast universe and all its secrets. Then the cold started to get painful. The tips of my fingers had turned white.

I slowly made my way inside, my ears numb and my nose running, the whole way still trying to get a glimpse of the sky. Before walking inside, I told the stars goodnight. This became a pattern for the next few years.

SIDEREUS – (BELONGING TO THE STARS)

The Christmas Star.

That big, bright star that supposedly led all the way to Jesus’ manger. It was going to be out tonight, and I wanted to see it. It would be the only time to see it for the next 800 years, so I texted my best friend. I didn’t want to be alone in the moment, as I had so many other times. I wanted her to see what I saw, to fall in love the way I had.

Give me five more minutes, her texts said. So I did; I decided to wait.
And wait.
And wait.

Then I couldn’t anymore. It was getting dark, and the star would only be out for a short time. So I dashed out to my car and drove out into the country, nothing around but seemingly endless, empty fields. I stopped by a couple of wide, metal silos. I jumped out of my car, eagerly searching the southwestern sky, and... nothing.

The star was gone, hidden beneath the horizon.

It felt like someone had just shot me, and all that was left was a hole in my chest. A lance of pain slammed into me. I missed it. I couldn’t believe I missed it.

Tears slipped down my cheeks, and I was almost mad at the stars. As if the world would stop turning for me alone. It was my fault after all, I waited instead of going out to see them, the stars, my friends. I had wanted someone there with me, but the stars had always been enough. In my excitement, I had forgotten.

I cried that night, long and hard, all while standing on the edge of a cornfield, with no one but the stars to comfort me.
In the summer, you would soak in your surroundings; the smell of flowers, sunshine on your face, the feeling of a gentle breeze soaking into your arms, the warm air that filled your lungs. You enjoyed your first jump into the pool for the summer, the cold water a jolt compared to the sweltering air of an Iowan summer. Your shock wasn’t like a bolt of lightning, but more of a smooth, enveloping feeling where you realized just how hot it is.

As you sat on the makeshift plywood bridging over the creek’s water, you debated whether to wade into it, rather than just dipping your toes in the crystal clear water. Oh well, you decide, and stay where you are. You bask, cold water against your feet on a hot summer day, toes cold and back warm. You have a mostly ignored worry about sunburns bubbling just below the surface, but it just doesn’t seem important. You picked small stones and pebbles from the water, rubbed the sand off them, and watched them lose their magnificent color as they dry. Your family has always called it The Crick, and though you’d never use the term to describe another creek, this place will always be The Crick to you.

You felt the summer’s intense heat, sweating in your shorts and tank top, lying on a blanket in the shade, trying to eat a popsicle before the summer melts it. Your sunglasses are over your eyes to protect you from the sun’s blinding rays, and a book beside you, ready to be opened and read from. Perhaps it’s Harry Potter,
or maybe *Percy Jackson* or other stories with forgotten titles, something you can dive into, much like at the pool, while tuning out the world around you.

You would eat watermelon on your grandma’s porch, surrounded by your family—your closest-in-age cousins, little brother, and the grandma that handed you the watermelon. You bite into the watermelon—which was cut into wedge slices, on the rind—feeling the cold seep into your fingers. You lick the sticky juice from your fingers, feeling it on your face, on your chin. You know that Grandma will need to hold the door so you and your cousins can take turns washing your faces and hands in a sink before running off again. *Maybe, you think, we can get some lemonade,* too. You have always thought that lemonade made by someone else, especially a grandma, tastes best.

You never liked that wormy, fishy smell that lingers after it rains, but you tried to never focus on the smell. You would instead splash in puddles, clad in rubber boots, the kind British people call “wellies”. You can hear your parents try to get you to avoid the thick, dark mud that seems to be unavoidable. You smile, even now, at the puddles you see, wondering how deep they are, but decide to save the discovery for someone younger.

You drink from the hydrant at your grandparents’ farm—like at home, when you would drink from the garden hose—because going inside, even for a minute, for tap water seems impossible; it never made you sick, anyway. Can it? You raced your cousins across the grass. You never won but you never gave up, either, always thinking *maybe today is the day I win*—it wasn’t.

Later you shouted gleefully to each other, to be heard over the roaring engines of the ATVs—your cousins on their four-wheelers, you and your brother on borrowed three-wheelers—as you chased each other. You watched as the landscape whizzed past as we flew by, young but experienced, unworried and quickly reacting, bouncing on the bumpy ground, flattened grass carved into paths on the hillsides.

You watched as your cousin climbed trees, with an ease you could never master, finding footholds where you found none. He dared to go higher than you ever did, but none of the others could climb him either.

At night, the campfire was lit, smoke curling into the darkened sky as we told stories, laughing, as we roasted marshmallows for s’mores, the chocolate melting between graham crackers. As children we caught fireflies, placing them in jars to watch them
light up before letting them go, flying off to continue their secret little bug lives, free again to light up the nights.

You would go to bed every night, hoping that it would never end.

In the autumn, you found yourself breathing a sigh of relief in the cool, smooth air. You rode your bicycle down the street, pedalled as fast your legs could go, sweating and hardly able to breathe. The heat of summer still chases you but you find yourself chased instead by a chilly autumn breeze. *Is this how it feels to fly?* you wonder as you soar down the street, the spokes of the wheels a steady blur. You chased cars beside the road, safe on the sidewalk, knowing they’ll always win, but trying anyway.

You saw the colorful leaves on the trees, gorgeous bright reds, oranges, and yellows. You would watch them drift to the ground, end over end, like a familiar dance against gravity, trying to delay the inevitability that stuck every year. The leaves already underfoot crunched as you walked, a comforting sound, simultaneously sharp but gentle, in a way you never heard before. Your parents ask for your help to rake the ones on the lawn up, into a pile. You can almost feel the devilish grin form, the plan form to jump into the giant, finished pile. *How can they not work out my plan?* you ask yourself; it seems self explanatory for anyone your age. You help as best you can, raking the leaves, into small piles. You can feel the muscles in your back and arms, a delicious burn as you work. And as you finish, you almost don’t have the heart to wreck the pile.

Almost.

You giggle as you jump, *how could they not have seen this?* as they look on, leaning on their rakes. You sit up, leaves tangled in your hair, stuck to your clothes, and grab handfuls to throw like confetti. You had to rake the leaves up again, but the jump was always worth the extra work.

You felt the chilly breeze, which was balanced with the leftovers from the hot summer sun. Your long sleeved shirts and pants were dug out, along with sweaters and hoodies. You would roll your sleeves up to soak in the remaining sun, its warmth on your skin as the breeze gave a slight chill down to the bone. To you, it feels as though your blood is slowing beneath your skin, and you shiver, just a little, but you find the sun is a perfect contrast. You go to pick out the best pumpkins. You never really did get into jack-o-lanterns, but the perfect pumpkins sit outside, on the porch, guarding the front door.

Halloween rolls around. Your costumes were never exactly what you expected, never quite right, but you knew enough to
take what you could get. Your brother always seemed to get better costumes. He could keep some of them, like the power ranger, the cowboy, the zombie, or whatever horror movie monster it was. You think that Spiderman might’ve been fun, but by the time you knew how you felt about being a Spidey-boy, it was too late. You shrug now, as what mattered then was the candy. Your insanely nice neighbors across the street were best; you and your brother always got a full sized Hershey’s bar from them.

For Thanksgiving, no matter the weather, chilly or cold, you stay inside. You’re okay with that, as that’s where the food is—turkey and stuffing, “homemade” fudge and green bean casserole and mac-and-corn casserole and mashed potatoes with gravy—but most importantly, what comes after: a long game of Mexican Train. You have played for longer than you can remember; your proof is a photograph of a toddler-you sitting on your grandpa’s lap as he plays. You listened to stories passed around the table with the dominoes, lighthearted betrayals and accusations and banter are flung around the table, dying as quickly as laughter starts.

In winter, there are cold mornings where your toes freeze when you slowly get out of bed, yearning to bury yourself deep within the warm covers, stay there until it gets warm again. You shiver, as you slowly touch your toes to the floor, already wishing to be asleep again. Your wish fades when the words snow day are relayed; and then all you want to do is go outside.

You woke up on the weekends to gently falling snow, the untouched snowy lawns, inviting for your boot prints across every inch. You would make a snowman for your father to come home to, poorly constructed by your small hands, but they managed to stand tall and firm. Your snow angels were made wherever there was room, where there was still enough untouched space. You and your brother begged whatever parent was closest to take you sledding, and when you succeeded, you were bundled up so much it counts as padding; thick and warm coats over sweatshirts, complete with matching hats, scarves, and gloves. Wind stung your face as you flew down the hill, leaning too far and wiping out in the snow halfway down the hill, rewarded with a face full of snow, but getting up to do it again. And again, the climb up the hill getting harder and harder, but you are still disappointed when it’s time to go.

You gingerly sip from your hot cocoa with marshmallows, wrapped up in a blanket to warm
up, your cheeks rosy and red and windburned from the heavy, cold winter air. You shiver as you sit, curled up, watching a movie as you sip from your mug.

Christmas doesn’t seem to come soon enough. At one grandparent’s house, you played another long game of Mexican Train, but at the other, a different tradition that you loved just as much. Snow Soccer was exactly what it sounds like, soccer played in the snow. We started out bundled: winter coats over sweatshirts or hoodies, hats, and gloves. As the game went on, however, your layers came off. As you run around, slipping and sliding in the slick snow, even wiping out, you start to sweat and the cold seems to melt away. You stripped off the winter coat first, gently setting it where it won’t get wet. And the game continued, laughing as you watch others trip over their own feet, stumbling in the snow. You joined in laughing when you fell, too, your pants getting wet from the snow. Even with wet jeans and sweaty faces, it would be a while before everyone is done and ready to head in. No matter how wet you might be, how cold, how out of breath, your cheeks hurt from laughing and you wouldn’t trade this tradition for the world.

At New Years, you stay up as late as you could, watching a movie with your family in your parents’ bed, trying to make it midnight, but knowing you wouldn’t. And you don’t, reassured by your parents there’s always next year, before you blearily stumble upstairs to sleep in your own bed.

You watched as spring brings new life and growth as the snow melted and growing things poke through, turning the world from blinding white to refreshing greens. You breathed in the cool air so crisp and sharp, it seemed to cut as you relished the smell of renewed life. You shed layers as spring grows older, but you shivered ever so slightly as you walked in the chilly breezes that contended with the bright sun, leaving your fingers to feel the chill, not hurting like winter, but still a deep numbness.

A flash of red; a cardinal flits by, inspecting the bushes, searching. You smiled at the flowers that popped up, gracing the world with their colors, a welcome change from the reflective, aggressive white of winter. Reds, yellows, pinks, purples, oranges, blues, greens, and more besides.

You wake to the comforting sound of rain on the roof, soft and gentle, a lullaby as your eyes slowly drift shut, returning to your early morning dreams. Sometimes, the rain is harder, accompanied by thunder, a crash that often is little more than a rumble, but still somehow soothing.
Can there be more to life? you wonder, but you really don’t care about the answer.
Beginning is always hard. I think trees know this best. They start from that little seed and grow into something so... impressive when considering how it all began. How incredible that such a small seed can turn into something so mighty.

But this particular seed grew into a very particular tree. It’s not hard to climb, but the beginning is always the hardest. Little tree-growths guard the apple tree, like knee-high soldiers. I’m sure they have a better, more technical name, but I don’t know what it is. What I do know is that those growths do a tremendous job shielding the tree from human climbers, deterring them with the threat of scraped knees and shins. However, I’m more stubborn than them. And I manage to get a handhold, though difficult, and wedge my right foot into the tree. There isn’t a good place to use as a step-up, but I’ve done this before and I’m willing to improvise. Besides, after this, it can only get easier.

At first, it’s mostly using your arms. I’ve got one foot up, yeah, but right now the only way up is to haul myself up so my left foot—which is dangling, useless in space—can be more helpful. Meanwhile, my backpack, though not heavy, makes me feel off balance and reminds me that making a mistake could happen at any moment.

Every moment feels one second from disaster.

I look down, reassuring myself: it wouldn’t be a far fall. Maybe a few bruises, some scrapes... the worst wound would be to my pride.

The bark under my hands is
rough and scrapes into my skin; but the bark beneath my shoes is smooth. My grandfather says that’s because groundhogs climb the tree and eat the apples before they’re ripe enough for me to eat and enjoy them. I wonder what this tree’s apples would taste like. Would they be sour, or would they have a more sweet taste? Would they be crisp in that way that only fall air and the apples it produces seem to be?

_Maybe I should focus on climbing this tree rather than dwelling on apples I’ll never taste._ Besides, the point of this tree isn’t climbing it, but the end result: sitting in it.

One branch seems to be for straddling. Your legs dangling on either side of the branch as you sit. It’s about seven, maybe ten, feet off the ground. The fall wouldn’t severely injure me, but the thought of dropping like a stone isn’t appealing.

I don’t think my family understands why I climb the tree. Why I trek out, alone, and climb the tree every chance I get, walking away and ignoring my family.

In fairness, I’m not sure I do either. My family is fantastic. They have a sense of humor they readily use when they tell stories. Everytime I listen to their stories I end up with a laughter-induced stomach ache and aching cheeks. I don’t leave because I need space from them. I actually don’t always get to see them, and every interaction feels like we’re soaking up all that we can before we have to go.

I think the reason they don’t understand is because they haven’t climbed the tree.

My family hasn’t sat with their back against the bark, putting in their earbuds to play music on their phone like I have. Listening with their eyes closed. Playing anything, everything. I find that any song that I find beautiful becomes breath-taking while sitting in that tree. It’s a whole other experience.

Just... sitting, soaking it all up. The feeling of the warm sun on my face. Beneath the music, the barely-audible sound of a bird chirping. The smell of the apple blossoms, sweet, fresh, and flowery in the air. Gently squirming, feeling the bark scratch against the fabric of my t-shirt. The gorgeous, even life-altering, feeling of hearing songs in an uninterrupted and mind-blowing experience. It’s like the universe is exploding in my mind, listening to these songs like it’s the first time. It feels like some... revelation from God, like the secrets of the universe, the power of the universe is pouring into my head. Filling every part of me that I hadn’t realized until this moment had something missing, something crucial. Like I hadn’t been whole until this
moment, and I’d never known it. It’s like I’ve stripped myself of my skin, my body, and become something else. A consciousness, a cloud of energy, just floating in space, aimless and untethered from the world’s problems. Unbothered and safe inside a bubble, away from prying eyes and expectations of who I should be. The feeling of only one regret, that this moment cannot last—the sun can’t shine forever.

They haven’t felt this. How could they ever understand?