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Winners of the 2022-2023 English Department Awards

Belle M. Hill Creative Poetry Award

Luis Echeverria

Evan Gates

Charles H. Barrett Creative Writing Award

Abigail-Rose Schlotterer

Ali Morrison

Elsie Bock Writing Award

Lincoln Brads

Floyd H. and Rowe M. Crews Memorial Award

Michaela White

Maliyah Harris

Laura Jeter Parker Award

Jesse Wood

Abigail Lawrence

Libbie Keeton LaPrade Creative Writing Award

Jesse Wood

Kayla Zinski

Mervyn W. Williamson Award

Brandon Bates

Ali Morrison

Rona L. Adams & Brian Adams Yates Scholarship for English

Ally Crissman

Homunculus: First Steps

He didn't know who he was. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know what day or time it was, but he knew a few things for sure. It was tepid.

Not cold yet not warm enough to be notable either way. The bedroom was dark. As dark as an undisturbed bed of coals at the very depths of a pitch-black mineshaft, and yet he could see all the same. The chestnut brown hardwood floor was shiny with wax in his green tinted vision, the pungent aroma of its sweet plum custard aroma so strong that it made him feel just a little lightheaded. The walls, made of pine and patched with silvery sheets of steel, were bare; lacking in any shelves, framed photos, or childish scribbles that could make the place feel lived in.

On the furthestmost left side of the wall, a hinged door was screwed in its exterior and painted a juicy holly berry red; on the furthestmost right side of the wall another hinged door was screwed in identical in everything but color to its predecessor as this one was painted a tart juniper berry blue. Between them both, a chestnut brown gentleman's chest dresser stood. It was just as shiny as the floor and made of the same piney materials that built the structure of the bedroom.

But this article was furniture custom made with ruby and sapphire encrusted handles on each of its six drawers and a decant amethyst and silver bordered mirror delicately screwed into the cabinet.

Besides that, and the bed, no other furniture existed in his private chamber.

He liked the room. It was simple, and it ignited a fiery weightless feeling in his chest. Just the idea of decorating everything and making it "his" somehow felt right. Maybe I can start doing that now? There must be something here I can work with, right? His turquoise eyes fixated on the dresser. It was just sitting there. Surely there had to be something in it. He got up and quickly fell onto the satin patchwork mattress. He huffed, looked to his sides, whilst his forehead wrinkled like an accordion; he had no arms.

Well, that was annoying, was he missing anything else? He flopped his ears. Each smack from his twin teardrops stung his eyes.

He wagged his tail. The crescent-shaped appearance whipped around so fast he could hear the air moving in its path. He kicked his legs. Prickly barbed ankles sharply jabbed themselves into his back, drawing blue droplets of blood in the process. He smirked, his legs were strong, this would come in handy. *I wonder what else these things can do.*

It took a couple tries to get himself onto four feet. Turns out the frictionless bed was not a good standing surface. But he wouldn't let that stop him even if it risked ruffling his orange, white, and black calico fur.

He stood on his awkwardly planted legs, shutting his eyes and holding his breath as his shaking stilts struggled for a moment to keep him upright. *Don't fall, don't fall, don't fall, don't fall.* They held. He looked down giggling at his success. His legs were stable, spread way too far, as if he were trying to mimic the appearance of a saddle bar stool sure, but they were stable all the same. One foot after the other he fixed his stance until all his fuzzy thin stilts were nearly touching. *I did it!* The clipped toes on his salmon pink prehensile feet curled and dug themselves into the thin plum purple sheets as if to confirm his statement. *I did it!*

He looked back at the dresser: his travel destination. All it would take was a few steps. He began his march, puffing out his cowlicked chest. It took much longer than he thought to get to the dresser. Even after getting his footing, the plush surface of the bed made each step a wobbly sluggish chore swallowing his alarmingly

long appendages into the cushioned ground like some sort of domesticated quicksand. But, through a series of small grunts and pants and stumbles, he made it to the edge of the bed.

Yes! he thought, jumping off the bed and running for his prize at full speed. He was quite fast now that he wasn't burdened by anything.

The digits of his prehensile footed feet tapping against the floor as they rocketed him closer and closer to the dresser. The subtle rough scraps and scratches of nails on wood barely registered in his mind as the scent of sawdust and oak filled his nostrils. He stopped at the furniture.

His chest had a strange burning pain inside. It was like a hot poker was constantly prodding at his lungs. Dark sticky oily fluids leaked from his eyes and dribbled from his flushed lips, staining them with a reddish shade of rich chocolate brown. Every other minute or so he would cough and spray the slick rancid substance onto the floor in front of him. He gagged; it smelled and tasted like tuna salad marinated in rotting carcass. But still the unpleasant sensation was worth it. He had gotten to the wardrobe, and that was what mattered.

He cast his eyes up, his body shaking in anticipation of finally getting to uncover the troves of treasures that could be within the dresser. Cleaning rags, a feather duster, maybe even some cozy knickknacks to really spruce up the place. He flung open the mirrored cabinet. "Finally!" a hushed voice called out. A very identifiable foot reached out for him, and he backed away, his chest tightening and his eyes fluttering, opening and closing in utter disbelief.

"Simon! Behave yourself!" another voice hollered, scolding the previous person that tried to grab him. "I'm sorry about him, he can be quite rude. The name is Shaman."

The two doppelgangers stepped out of the cabinet; they looked exactly like him in all but dress. Turquoise eyes, furless pink snouts, twin teardrop ears, long slinky necks attaching heads to their fluffy calico furred bodies, wagging crescent shaped tails, sharp horn-like implements growing from prickly barbed ankles, skinny stilt-like legs each topped off with pink prehensile feet that were bawled up

into little fists. "Is he gonna just stand there gawking at us?" The one on his left wore nothing but a ripped tie-dyed denim vest and a black rhinestone choker.

"Oh no, I'm sorry, let me correct you. He is standing there gawking at your ugly mug. And, yes, I think he will continue to do so for quite some time." The one on his right wore a plain coffee brown hoodie that looked more like a cloak on his tiny body. For a beat, Shaman and Simon glared at each other before focusing their shared attention back in his general direction. "Sorry, we really shouldn't fight in front of you, come with us Sebastian we have much to discuss before the professor comes back."

"Sebastian? Is that seriously what we're naming him? I thought we were gonna give him something cool like Phoenix or Titan!" Simon complained, and, as the strange air that came with his befuddling situation faded, Sebastian giggled.

"Aw, no need to get your tail in a twist, I can take Phoenix as my middle name, can't I?"

The Eyes

Just feeling one piercing gaze on me will take up all of my restless thoughts. Whether they be pairs of eyes from all directions or a singular orb glaring from out of view, they never cease their watchfulness. Forever their attention is piqued by everything I am.

A cat hides in the dark, inspecting. Light sprouts from the places their eyes should be as my flashlight flashes upon those reflective, animalistic spheres. Am I their prey? Are they searching for my weaknesses, looking for the most vulnerable spots in my armor?

What do they want, to get under my skin? The predator stays perfectly still, staring into my soul, scrounging through my inner self. Piercing my mind and deciphering my thoughts, I'm scrutinized to the fullest extent. They stare, never wavering in their intense analysis of my person, forever judging what they find.

The deer, the squirrel, the prey, fixed in place assessing to figure out my next move. Am I to be feared? Must they really watch me so closely? They hope to find my intentions, but I know they will leave regardless. Focusing on my next physical action, their eyes await any flinch or change in expression. No matter what I do next something will happen, but forever will the creature remember my moves.

There they are whenever I leave times of solitude, the people who analyze all that I am. They are watchful, surrounding me, never stopping their judgmental gazes. Whether it be a wave at the wrong time, a jacket that is too large, or the many expressions the face can convey, attempts are made to decipher them all. What have I done to be scrutinized so intensely? How do I stop them, the eyes

boring into my soul? Those orbs keep dissecting my appearance and actions, attempting to link the exterior to my state of mind. Forever this personal scrutiny goes on.

All around me are too many eyes, too many gazes existing. They leave me bare to the world around me, leaving no safety from the exposure. Forever they all stare, forever they notice me.

El Viejo Español y La Cabra (The Old Spaniard and The Goat)

There sat a man on an old wooden bench, shaded by a tall, dry, twisted olive tree. The thin leaves provided some shade from the sweltering sun, but not nearly enough. Beads of sweat trickled down the side of his tanned, leathery face. He looked up at the sky squinting, creases folding over above his full cheeks. The corners of his lips drew upwards, and his cracked lips parted into a wide smile. He could see the sun through the branches of the tree, a bright golden pearl in a clear blue sea. His eyes shot back down and the muscles in his face relaxed, giving his skin some much needed relief.

His cheeks had grown thinner over the years, yet they still glistened in the light as they had when he was just a small boy. Of course, they were darker now. Years of working in the sun can be harsh on the skin, especially his. His features were soft, round cheeks like a baby. Ever since he was a young man, he covered up this fact with a beard. From the age of twenty-two, black, curled hairs sprouted from his inconspicuous chin, culminating in a point. His upper lip was adorned with a thin line of hair, contrasted by a thick head of long, black curls that poked out in every which way, almost like horns. Because of this, his friends in town called him “Diablo.”

However, this isn’t the man that stands before us now. The hair on his cheeks has grown long and unruly with gray and silver streaks lining the foliage extending from his face, glinting in the hot, summer sun. His mustache has grown thicker, while the hair atop

his head has grown shorter. His forehead, lined with ridges like a plowed field, extended for miles before it reached the dull-gray tree line of his hair. Its curls, no longer soaked in fragrant olive oil to loosen it, sat there dry and faded under his brown, knitted, sloping flat cap.

He pulled a long, green wine bottle to his pursed lips and took a swig. It was warm from being out in the sun all day but was still as sweet and bitter as it always is, and that’s all that really mattered to him. A bead of wine dribbled down from the corner of his lip and dripped onto his white shirt, adding to the countless stains he had acquired from picking oranges every day. That was his life’s work, harvesting oranges from trees that lined the arid, seaside cliffs that bordered his yellowed, concrete house. He had just come home for lunch and was resting for a while on his front porch. Of course, a while to him was much longer than for most people, he had already been sitting there cooking for three hours. He rested the bottle down on the hard tile floor beside him, a loud glass “clinking” noise reaching his ears and snapping him out of his sunstroked stupor.

He stared across with his sharp, blue eyes at the vast expanse of dried out land in front of him. Nothing much grew here except sickly shrubs and short lumps of brown grass, not to mention the orange trees near the edge of the cliff and the olive trees which surrounded his quaint house. He scanned the horizon for something, or someone.

He cleared his throat of phlegm, called out in a deep, scratchy voice “¡Oye, Cabrito!”, let out a loud whistle that pierced the air surrounding him.

A faint clapping noise could be heard from the left side of the house. He turned his gaze towards the sound, and his eyes met those of a small, white goat. Its fur was long and shaggy, perhaps a bit too shaggy for this heat. He would have to remember to cut the goat’s hair later, before the July heat really kicked into full gear. It looked up at him with its pure, golden eyes, and rubbed its short, stony-brown horns on his dark woolen pants. He reached down his hand and stroked its fur. It was stiff and coarse to the touch, but he didn’t mind. His hands were worse for the wear, skin hard and callused, yet the goat did not mind either.

“¿Cómo estás Cabrito, tienes hambre?”, he asked the goat with his trademark Spanish-lisp showing through.

The question was rhetorical; he knew the goat was hungry, and could tell he was in good spirits. He patted Cabrito on the head and stood up slowly from his seat, wobbling on his feet from the wine. He bent over to Cabrito.

“Vamos al bonito lugar junto al mar, eh,” he asked him in an endearing voice, and Cabrito started galloping off down the field.

“María, me voy al acantilado junto al mar con Cabrito,” he called out to someone inside the house, letting her know where he was going.

A voice called back to him. “No te vayas demasiado tiempo Alberto,” his wife called out, reminding him not to stay out late. By the time she had called though, he had already caught up to Cabrito.

They walked side by side over the dusty plains, the Midday sun beating down on their backs. Dust billowed with each heavy footstep he took. Cabrito, much lighter than he, tread along the path swiftly without a trace. If someone were to come by later, they would see but one set of rather large footprints in the dry, barren dirt. As they got closer and closer to the cliff, the ground became greener with fresh grasses, and a chill from the salty, fishy sea breeze filled the air around them, providing them with much needed relief from the sun. Cabrito’s sharp hooves sliced and mashed through clumps of grass, leaving green stains on the short white hairs that clothed his ankles. They had been walking for a while now; the sun slowly sailed across the sky, drawing closer and closer to the horizon. At last, they reached the seaside cliffs. There was an almost vertical drop to the deep blue Mediterranean below, with a fall line with juts sharp as knives. A fall from this height and you’d be sliced up like a paper doll and fed to the sharks. His stomach turned as this thought passed through his mind, and he made sure to walk the rest of the way far away from the edge.

The two walked past the endless rows of orange spotted trees, a faint citrus smell cutting through the fishy smell from below. A sweet, familiar scent, his nostrils welcomed the interruption. He stopped for a moment and walked towards one. He reached up and

plucked one right off the branch. It felt firm in his hand, the waxy peel warm and moist after sitting out in the sun all day. He wiped the orange on his shirt and pulled it to his mouth. He bit softly through the peel, just enough to tear a hole in its flesh. The strong, stinging taste of citric acid burned his dry lips, but he didn’t care. A little pain was worth it for the sweet nectar held by the juicy meat of the fruit. He spit out the peel from his mouth, and de-shelled the rest of the fruit. Eating it as he walked alongside Cabrito, he would every once in a while reach down and hand him a slice, which he gratefully accepted with his pink, slimy tongue. They walked a long way along the cliffside, until they reached a small patch of grass, an oasis of some sorts, protruding like a balcony over the sea. Cabrito ran to the long grass, the greenest you’ve ever seen. The freshest too; the strong smell of vegetables sought out his nose from what he remembered as a mile-and-a-half away. The goat chewed voraciously at the grass, and he laughed heartily at the site. Kneeling beside Cabrito, he wrapped an arm around his chubby potbelly, and stared contently out at the calm, flowing waters of the Mediterranean Sea. His life may not have been grand, or fancy, but he made the most out of what he had, and that was fine by him.

Peace at Last Breath

A gentle breeze travels through the window of a small room, catching the pendulum-like projection of a chime.

The sound brought to life is warm, alternating between two pleasant notes. The chime resonates and lingers, occasionally being directed differently by the wind. Delicately performing an accidental, the chime sings of a new note—an idea that brings distinct life to the two alternating pitches that the wind has great affinity towards in these moments. Another day, the chime will sing a new melody all together.

“I haven’t heard this sound in ages.” A statement, spoken in a small and solemn voice.

A soprano answers with a fraction of the melodic cadence she normally has. “I have one at home. They’ve always been there during our childhood. But the sound never loses its nostalgia.”

There is silence, save for the occasional shaky breath and the song of wind and chime.

“Would... you like me to get you one? I don’t know if you remember, but this one is Terra. It’s our favorite—mine and Papa’s.”

“I would...” The response starts out confident, but cracks and fades into a whisper. “Would like that, please...”

There are no tears yet, but loss permeates through the room.

For an hour, the two have sat side by side next to their father’s bed. He is smiling, clearly happy to be in their presence. The day is quiet, the sun shining and the clouds are slowly rolling across the sky.

The father looks through the window and speaks gently, “The day is peaceful. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me.”

One daughter reminds him adamantly, “Father, please don’t thank us for being here with you. We want to be here with you.”

A sing-song voice pipes in after her sister finishes her thought. “You’re welcome, Papa! Thank you for inviting us to talk.”

The gentle voice returns, chuckling, “You’re welcome, Ester. And Cadence, I know you two want to be here, but I must thank you all the same. It is how I show you my love.” The father smiles and then breathes deeply before continuing. “Yes, and I thank you both for coming on such short notice—these are my last moments. I know it.”

Cadence stiffens, clearly taken aback. Ester nods slowly and closes her eyes.

“I am getting on in my years. It was only a matter of time. I have lived, and have been able to see the two of you into this world. To watch you grow and interact, learn and explore. In a few short years you two have grown into tremendous people, thoughtful and confident in both of your passions.”

He pauses and then dons a sentimental visage. “At first, I was worried that you were following what I introduced you to—to make me proud. But I’ve seen the look on your faces when you studied. Cadence, I saw the wonder and curiosity in your eyes when you saw bacteria for the first time through a microscope.” He glances to his window, inspired by the object hanging in it. “Ester, I remember your bubbly laughs when you played with the Koshi chimes hanging in my office window, trying to match the notes with your voice.”

Cadence relaxes some and lets a smile escape her. Ester giggles and hums the notes of her favorite chime in ascending order; G, C, E, F, G, C, E, G. A melody ingrained into her heart. Silence fills the air after Ester’s voice fades, leaving the three to bask in the nostalgia now present in the room.

All three breathe in unison and speak over each other to bring a thought to attention. They simultaneously quiet so as to not interrupt each other. To signal, the father reaches out his hand for the two to hold. Both sisters take his hand delicately, so as to not hurt him.

“There is so much I want to talk about. How your lives have been, how the families you’ve made are. What exciting things you

have learned about science, Cadence. And about music, Ester.” He smiles and continues, “Whether or not the two of you are getting enough to eat or keeping up with friends.”

“But, there is not enough time to talk about all of these things. I apologize for my selfishness, but I need to confirm some things with you two.” He meets the eyes of Ester first, and then Cadence, silently requesting permission.

“I hear you, Papa.” Ester answers first, repeating what her father would say when he would begin to seriously listen to her as a child. “What do you want to know?”

“I have many... emotions. For you two, in my heart. I tried to live my life in a way that would show you both just how much care and love I have for you.” He pauses and then ekes out his question. “Did I succeed?”

Cadence takes a shaky breath as she feels the vulnerability he faces when asking his question. She answers after exchanging glances with her big sister. “Even when we got frustrated with you, as children tend to get with their parents from time to time... we never considered for a moment that you did not care about or love us. No matter what happened to us, you were—you are our unwavering support.”

A breath he didn’t know he was holding escapes as a sigh. He shifts his hand, squeezing both of their fingers with the little strength he can muster. “Thank you.”

Ester speaks again, knowing how easily her father accepts responsibility for his actions “And Papa, we got frustrated at times, this is true. However, all of the mistakes you’ve made that we do and don’t know?” Both daughters pause and offer sincere nods of acknowledgment, “We recognize them and your humanity. We forgive you. Your mistakes have never kept us from loving you too.”

At this time he is the one to take a shaky breath, tears welling up in his eyes. His voice wavers as he speaks, “I had more questions. But you’ve both given me an answer where... I don’t have any more.” The daughters fight back tears, staying strong for their father as he silently weeps away the remaining doubts in himself.

Several minutes pass as the family comforts each other simply through presence. No one speaks, opting instead to listen

mindfully to each other’s breathing. The day seems to slow down as these moments of relaxation pass by. The father hums, pleased by the mindful quiet. Ester matches his pitch an octave higher and Cadence laughs.

After a few moments, he speaks with resolve. “I don’t need a formal funeral. This is my funeral. Plant a tree over my grave—use the service money to buy some materials for your research, Cadence. And for you, Ester, use the money to try out instruments you are interested in. Or use it for your families, that’s an option too!” He gives his daughters a smile, “I am ready, but before I go... Are you two ready for me to go?”

Both daughters flinch, reality starting to weigh down their hearts. What happened to the time, why is it moving so fast now? They barely exchanged words! What are they going to do n—

Seeing their panic, he gently brings them back to the present with his voice and another squeeze to their fingers. “I love you both so very much. Thank you for being my children.” Both of them look at him and whisper in response.

“We know, Papa.”

“We love you too. Thank you for being our father.”

“Can you both open the window for me? I’d like the wind to carry me.”

The daughters open the window next to his bed, allowing the warm afternoon air to diffuse into the room. They each give him a hug and hold his hand until his breath drifts off with the wind.

A gentle breeze travels through the window of a small room, catching the pendulum-like projection of a chime.

The sound brought to life is warm, alternating between two pleasant pitches. The chime resonates and lingers, occasionally being directed differently by the wind. Delicately performing an accidental, the chime sings of a new note—an idea that brings distinct life to the two alternating notes that the wind has great affinity towards in these moments. Tomorrow, the chime will sing a new melody all together.

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“I would...” The response begins confidently, but cracks and fades into a whisper. “Would like that, please...”

There are no tears yet, but loss permeates through the room.

“May you have love, may you have peace...” Ester begins the words of a loving-kindness meditation that their father taught them when they were younger.

Noticing that her sister stops midway through, Cadence finishes while holding back tears. “May you have joy and may you be well.”

Now that they don’t feel the need to be strong, a tranquil river is allowed passage. Two grieving daughters are consoled by the song of wind and chime, their heartache cradled by the love in which they know their father departed.

Madison Hoover

The Commission for Raniewood Berries

The sweet taste of Loran hit Damon’s lips, and it was as good as the locals say. The cool drink was quite refreshing on this hot day. The tavern was very stuffy, and everyone was drenched in sweat so the sweet, pink drink was certainly a life saver.

Damon swished the drink in his mouth before he swallowed it, and he muttered to himself, “I guess today is going to be another bust...” He looked down at his sword resting on his lap in defeat. After a bit of sulking, two burly men arm wrestling across from his table grabbed his attention. “It seems that watching this competition will be the highlight of my day then,” thought the young man.

After a bit of time had passed, he heard a kind voice come from behind him. “Hello, you are Damon Ardolf?” He turned around to see an old woman and a young lady with a blindfold covering her eyes. Immediately, he noticed the old woman clutching his commission flier.

With a smile, he nodded. “Why yes I am. Come sit down.” He gestured to his two empty wooden seats. “It’s quite a hot day, and you two must be exhausted.” The old woman grabbed the young lady, and she led her to the seats.

He took another sip from his drink and asked, “So what are two fine ladies doing in a place like this?” The old woman laughed quietly to herself, but the other didn’t seem too impressed by his affection.

“My name is Adira, and this is my apprentice, Lilith. We are alchemists, but there has been an accident in our lab. As you see, my

apprentice was blinded by an explosion because of poorly mixed chemicals, and we need someone to help us.”

After that statement, Damon noticed Lilith squirm a little in her seat. It was like she was embarrassed by what her teacher said. Adira then reached into her small leather satchel and pulled out a rolled up piece of paper. “This map will lead you to the Raniewood Berries which are inside of the Raniewood Forest. My apprentice must come with you because once you pluck the berries, their properties have a short life span. Her blindness should be cured after she eats at least two berries.”

“I see... That forest isn’t too far out from the village I believe. What are you willing to pay?”

“20 Gold.”

Caught off guard by that, Damon had to recuperate himself. “20 Gold? That’s a lot of money for a simple commission. Is there a catch?”

“I see that you aren’t aware of the beast that lives there then.”

“Beast? What kind of beast?”

“The beast is known as the Raniewood Beast. The people who give names aren’t very original you see, but this animal is very dangerous. It’s a black, scaly monster that walks on all fours, and its teeth are meant to puncture the skulls of its prey to eat their brains.”

“Why brains of all things?”

“They say it’s because of the fat.” Damon scratched his chin, thinking hard about this decision. Gold isn’t something to joke about, and he had never made that much from one commission ever. 20 Gold is usually the total of four or five commissions in a good week.

He cleared his throat and said, “I accept.” The old woman then grinned wide and stood up joyfully.

“Thank you! Thank you!”

“No problem, ma’am. What time do you want to start, Lilith?”

She stood up and grabbed the thick stick that she carried with her inside of the tavern. In a steady voice, she said, “I guess I am ready now. I have pretty much everything I need.”

“Wow, I didn’t expect us to start that soon, but that’s fine with me.” He chuckled. “I’m pretty much ready as well. Just let me finish

my drink, and let’s begin.” Damon then chugged the rest of the Loran and walked over to Adira to shake her hand. “I promise I won’t let anything harm your apprentice.”

“Good. I’m counting on you, adventurer.”

Lilith and Damon left Adira inside of the tavern to begin their quest. The sun was beating down on them, and the mosquitoes were showing no mercy. “Phew, this is going to be a long day,” he thought. Damon pulled the map out of his pocket and unrolled it. As he examined it, he noticed that the map detailed that the Raniewood Berries are found near a lake in the heart of the forest. After some more examinations, he felt confident about the journey.

Lilith spoke up not long after they left the tavern. “So do you know what you’re doing?”

Damon looked at the woman who was starting to trail behind him. She seemed to walk carefully using her stick to guide her.

“Yes, I know what I’m doing. I wouldn’t put a lady like you in danger if I didn’t.”

“You talk very strange for someone who sounds like they’re my age.”

“It’s my duty. That’s all.” There was silence after that statement. She seemed to be contemplating what he said.

“You’re not from here, are you? Why do you want to be an adventurer in a small place like this?”

Damon cleared his throat. “Well, um you see...” His words started to trail off, and he became stumped. “I’m from Riserim, and you... When I was younger, I read about adventurers a lot, but it actually isn’t a job that is in high demand there. It’s too focused on potions and the alchemy academy. That’s why I’m here.”

She looked up in his direction and gave a smile. “Huh, that’s pretty funny. In an ironic way I mean. I’m trying to get out of here and go to Riserim.”

“Does it have something to do with your alchemy?”

She gave a little nod, and replied, “Yeah. To me, my teacher is the best of the best, but we’re very limited in what we can do here. If I could go somewhere bigger and better, I could be one of the best alchemists ever. Adira says she has inside clicks with people in that city. I’m just waiting to hear a response from any one of them.” She ended her sentence with a sense of pride.

"Well if you do become a great alchemist, you owe me one."

"Owe you? Why? We're already paying you a great deal of gold."

"Fine. Fine. Just don't forget about me, Lilith. If you need any help, you know that you can trust me with any commission. Alright?"

She gave a small smirk as she spoke. "This commission isn't done yet. My thoughts about your service aren't set in stone, but if you do surprise me, you have my word."

Once they arrived at the forest, they could feel a breeze pass by. Damon wiped the sweat off of his forehead and thought, "Thank the Gods that some wind has picked up. We are making good progress." The forest was filled with trees, and Damon admired every single one of them. The bark was so dark that he mistook it for black at first glance. The leaves above them created a barrier from the sun, but sometimes rays would penetrate through the green barrier and shine onto the ground. It was very cool and refreshing there. *I wish I knew about this place sooner*, thought Damon. He pulled out the map and inspected it again.

"I'd say we are about three miles away from the heart of the forest."

"Good. I can't wait to see again."

After some more trekking through the forest, Damon noticed a river. From what he remembered, that river goes through the heart of the forest, and that's where the lake is. However, little grey fish swam in the clear water, and it charmed the adventurer. It reminded him of his pet fish when he was younger. He then checked the map again as he walked. *Hmm*, we should be close, thought Damon.

After a couple more minutes of walking, they arrived at a wall of bushes. "Hey, stop. We're in the heart. The map says that the lake is surrounded by bushes."

"So, what do we do?"

"We have to go through them."

"Are there thorns?"

"No thorns. They're just really large bushes. Hold my hand. We should go through together."

She gave a simple nod and replied, "Ok." She extended her hand, and Damon grabbed it. He then led the two of them to the

tall bushes and started to part the leaves to squeeze through. It took some finessing, but they both made it to the other side.

It looked like a sanctuary where someone would go to escape their troubles. Damon looked around and spotted berries easily. They were in a bush right next to the lake that was in the center of the enclosure.

"Huh, I expected the berries to look cooler. It seems that I was wrong."

"Are the ones you see purple?"

"Yeah, they're purple. Come." He started to walk towards the berries, and she followed along.

"Well, here they are. Do you need me to pluck them?"

"No, I can do it." She leaned forward and felt for the berries. Once her hands got a hold onto two of them, she plucked the berries and ate them immediately.

"Did they work?"

"I don't feel any different. I guess there is only one way to find out." She untied her blindfold and lowered it slowly. They both were holding their breath hoping for the best. Once she revealed her eyes, she started to grin widely.

"I can see! I can see!"

"That's splendid, Lilith!"

"Haha! Thank you, Damon! A thousand thanks!" She bounced up and down excitedly.

"Oh, you're certainly welcome. I'm happy to have assisted you. Let's get out of here."

"Before we head on, may I use the map? I just really want to do something useful with my eyes again."

"Oh, sure. Here you go."

Once the two squeezed through the wall of bushes again, Damon noticed that Lilith started looking all around them. He chuckled to himself at how happy and eager she was. This commission had turned out to be a better quest than he thought. The journey back home will be much more fun since they accomplished what they needed to do.

"Alright then, lead the way, Lilith."

After a few minutes of walking, Lilith stopped in her tracks with a look of dread on her face. She crouched next to Damon's

side and started to lower him down to crouch along with her.

“Wha-” She covered her hand over his mouth.

“Shh.” She began to point ahead of them, but Damon couldn’t see what she was referring to. There were just a bunch of dark trees.

He slowly removed her hand, and in a quiet voice, he asked, “What is it? I can’t see anything.”

“The Raniewood Beast is over there.” She led the both of them to a nearby tree to hide behind.

“That beast? Why is it here all of the sudden?”

“I don’t know. It’s supposed to be laying in the sunlight since today is such a warm day. Maybe it’s hunting or wants a drink from the river?”

“Well, for whatever reason why it’s here, we can’t get caught.” Damon unsheathed his sword and took in a deep breath. This was serious. Really serious. He peaked around the tree to get another look. The beast was walking to the river. *Huh, it seems it really was thirsty or just likes seafood*, thought Damon. He then gestured to Lilith to follow him. They both crouched and began to tread the ground carefully. He clenched his sword in his hand so hard that his knuckles turned white, but that didn’t matter. All Damon needed to do was to keep an eye on that beast.

It seemed like an eternity as they sneaked past the creature. Damon hadn’t realized it, but he had been holding his breath. The worst part of all of this was that only 10 seconds had passed, and something just terrible happened. As they were walking, they walked into an area where the sun’s rays were shining through the leaves, and it reflected off of Damon’s sword. They both stood shocked at the reflection’s path before them. It was in the beast’s peripheral vision. The two were petrified at how the situation was unfolding.

The beast’s scaly head looked in their direction, and its dark eyes were staring at them. It gave a low growl baring its long teeth. Knowing that battle was about to commence, Damon yelled at Lilith. “Lilith, you have the map! You need to go!” She looked at him with all of the color drained from her face.

“I can’t leave you here!”

“You possess no weapons or potions to attack this creature! Go!” The conflicted Lilith then began to sprint with all of her might. However, this triggered the large creature to run after its prey.

Damon felt his heart drop as the creature ran past him and barreled toward the woman.

“Lilith!” Before he knew it, he started running with all he had. He couldn’t lose Lilith.

However, he wasn’t fast enough, and her blood curdling scream could be heard across the forest.

“No! No! No! NO! NO! NO!”

As the beast stopped to feed on the soft brains of Lilith, Damon was in a blind rage. He tightened his grip on his sword as jumped on its scaly tail and ran across its back. Before it had time to react, he had already stabbed his trusty sword into the top of its head, piercing its skull. It instantly killed it, and the Raniewood Beast dropped to the ground and flopped onto its side.

As Damon pulled his sword out, he came to his senses and looked at what was left of Lilith. He put his hand to his mouth speechless. This was his fault. He had failed his commission.

Nussrat Abdallah

Innocent Victim

The phone rang; the caller ID said CUNY Columbia. I knew the call wasn't for me, but I knew it could be important. The lady on the phone said, "Hi yes, I am looking to speak to someone from your community, I am a news reporter at a university and we are doing some research. Do you mind answering a few questions?" I knew I didn't have the answers, after all, I was only a child, but I felt so responsible. I felt impressed that people wanted to write news articles about our community, and tell our story. They called me! I thought. "Sure I can give you my aunt's number," I said. I told her in my most professional voice, "I'm sure she would be more than happy to answer any of your questions." Without hesitation, I gave her my aunt's number. I told the lady my name was Lucy, and not my real name just in case she may have been fraudulent.

My family and I lived in a village of 200 Muslims. We lived in a village with beautiful green mountains, a sparkling silver lake, refreshing streams, farm animals, and many hills. We had a Mosque, school, town hall, mini shops, and even a small clinic. We were cushioned in the beautiful Catskills mountains of New York, safe and tucked away from the crime and dangers of the cities, where we were free to love, free to live, and worship. I loved my home, and all the people in it, as we were lively and free-spirited. My favorite time of year was the Holy month of Ramadhan. At this time, the village decorated as best they could, and they competed in drowning their

homes in colorful holiday lights. Ramadhan and Eid are like the Muslim version of Christmas. During Ramadhan, Muslims tried to be the best version of themselves, the most generous, and reconnect with God. We fasted during the day and broke fast at sundown. The community came together and ate almost every night. Once the call to prayer was called, everyone began to eat. People cooked their best and most creative appetizers. After the month of Ramadhan, we had a huge celebration called Eid. Colors filled the streets with everyone's beautiful outfits, kids' games, carnivals, bounce houses, cheer, and laughter everywhere. Throughout the day you would see a kid with face paint, crying to his mom because he wanted more cotton candy. Eid was a feast, a gathering, and a huge celebration. The food always smelled amazing, my community had some amazing cooks, and we often enjoyed a variety of very festive foods. However, my favorite part of the entire day was the gifts. The night before Eid, our parents laid out our gifts. When we would wake up, there would be tons of wrapped gifts sitting at the decorated fireplace. My mom would have my Eid clothes ironed and ready on the couch, with my beautiful bracelets and veil sitting beside it. My siblings and I would anxiously wake up to the music and run down the hallway and peek to see if our gifts were there. Jumping up and down with excitement, waiting to open our gifts. Ah, those were the good days. I loved my home, and everything in it. I lived in a place that was like our very own resort.

One evening, our mayor called a community meeting. We all gathered at the Town Hall, waiting to hear what the meeting entailed. The Mayor spoke about a suspicious phone call a community member received. He said a news reporter had called and asked some suspicious questions but had ulterior motives. "These people will go so low as to contact our children!" the Mayor angrily said. Then, I had an idea that they might have been talking about me. I was afraid. My face was hot and my heart was beating fast. I thought maybe I had done something wrong. I thought maybe it was my fault the reporter asked those questions. Without exposing my name, the Mayor indiscreetly mentioned the reporter called one of the children in the community. The nice lady who called me that day had written a very degrading article about

our community saying very hateful, prejudiced, and ignorant things. She called us violent and suspicious. Her judgments were based on nothing; who was this lady and why did she want to degrade us?

I remember my parents being concerned; they changed our phone numbers and we had very long conversations about safety and dangerous people. My parents told my siblings and I, “People are dangerous, some of them may hate and even fear you so they spread lies. Everyone isn’t always how they seem, and don’t ever give strangers personal information about yourself.” I shook my head, feeling very melancholy. I in some way felt responsible for that article.

That was not the only odd event that happened. Sometime later all of a sudden, loud cars and gravel swooshed down the one road, and dust kicked into a cloud up behind the cars as the cars moved very quickly down the road. The commotion was so alarming and out of the ordinary; we stopped our game to see what may have been going on. As we all alarmingly walked to the road, two cop cars drove by. The cops had come rushing in to ensure our safety, and they came to warn us of an imminent threat.

My heart was pounding. We knew something was wrong. I will never forget this day. The community had called an emergency meeting, and people came rushing to the town hall. The community town council stood up. Their faces were blank and serious. The mayor said, “Today we were notified by law enforcement of an extremely dangerous planned and attempted attack on our community.” My heart just dropped and there was pin-drop silence in the building. The air was filled with fear and shock. The Mayor continued, “We don’t have much information,” but he said the man responsible had been arrested and in custody. “However, he has many accomplices that are still out there.” I can recall everyone’s faces being so afraid and concerned. Anxious mothers were holding and patting their babies, and elders were holding their chests, all in disbelief. The police had warned us not to go out unnecessarily, and to be vigilant and contact them on any suspicious encounters. They told us to be very careful because they were not yet fully aware of what and who the threat truly was.

Robert Daggart was a former congressional candidate from Tennessee. His name will always be associated with terror, nightmares, and panic. Robert Daggart was the terrorist and mastermind behind this deadly threat. He threatened to burn and blow up our Mosque, school, and cafeteria. He also said he’d shoot anyone who would try to stop him, and that the children would just be “collateral damage.” During this tragic time, the police visited us regularly, checking in and ensuring we were safe. This day changed my life and hundreds of lives forever. Like most children, I always looked at the world in a positive light, but somehow the world all of a sudden just seemed so scary, dangerous, and dark. I felt unsafe everywhere I went. This tragedy stayed with us everywhere. The death threat to our community brought a lot of attention from the press. Weekly we had the press visiting our school and interviewing us or our parents.

Soon enough, Daggart was tried in court for his heinous plan to kill a community of 200 innocent Muslims. The trial was held in Tennessee by a judge named Collier. Judge Collier was kind and just. During the trial, he requested we write him letters telling him our personal experiences with this threat. I remember my mom’s face when the judge read her letter during the trial. She was thrilled. Our community was very relieved, and after so much trouble, our cries were being heard. Our needs were addressed and our justice was being fought for. Days of deliberation went on. However, justice won! Only God knows the feeling we felt when we won the trial and Daggart was sentenced to 20 years in prison. The relief was unimaginable; we celebrated with songs, wrote poems, and rejoiced at justice being served.

How To Be a Teenage Cancer Patient

Smile politely and say “It’s okay, it happens” when the shock catches their face. Don’t let them know how much you wish you were moving into your college dorm room instead of a hospital room. Accept the prayers and gifts from friends, family, and people who claim to know you but you swear you have never seen before in your life. Hold your tongue when the older folks look at the sick, bald, eighteen year old and say “God has a reason for everything, He will heal you.”

When your teenage self stares at the MRI scan for the first time, with your boss and best friend by your side because your parents were in a different country and couldn’t be the ones to hold your hand, there are only a few things that cross your mind. Don’t cry. Be strong. Ask questions. Make sure you understand what you have to do to survive. You still have so much to see, this can’t be it.

Try not to listen to your childhood best friend’s sniffles. Don’t eavesdrop on your boss calling your parents... Or at least try not to. “You have to come home, this isn’t good.” Pretend like you can’t hear the faint scream from your mom when she hears the words “cancer” come through the phone. Swallow it down. No one can know how terrified you are. No one.

Cinda drops everything and takes you shopping instead of back to work. She gives time for the house to become filled with anyone who is available to come. Your boyfriend, friends, and family from different states... Some camp outside, some squeeze onto the furniture you have available. You still haven’t cried.

Pack your bags. Dig out the childhood stuffed animals you never thought would bring you comfort again. Make sure you drink a gallon of water a day. Don’t drink caffeine, don’t eat red meats, don’t eat salty foods, don’t go to the barn... You think you might cry when you realize you won’t be able to go to the barn. Keep taking notes of all the rules, stay focused. Don’t have flowers in your room, don’t travel, keep track of your temperature... Let your parents take all the notes while you listen. It’s been nothing but non-stop overwhelming information, you dissociate and stare at the disgustingly clean walls.

Snap back to reality. “Most patients prefer to shave their hair before they lose it, makes it feel like it’s their choice.” You decide to stay strong, you don’t want anyone to worry about you. Listen to the buzz of the clippers as they take away the one and only feature about yourself you like. You had only cried in private, up until now. Look at yourself. Try to recognize yourself... you can’t. Finally, let the tears go, they have held on long enough. Cry. Scream. Let yourself have this moment.

Say goodbye to the teenager you once were. She is gone. Learn the new features, you will come to appreciate them in time. Yes, the old you is gone, it’s hard to let go. But the new you, she is a badass. Appreciate her. Love her. Let her fight this battle and win.

How to Watch Your Grandmother Age

1. **Notice the little changes.** She lets mail pile up on her previously pristine kitchen table. She doesn't visit her sisters anymore. She doesn't take pictures of everything on her cell phone. She doesn't send you texts. (Your mom was right, you do miss them now that they're gone). Grocery store trips are an outing to her. Going to the next town over is a whole day event. Notice how small she is. Notice how you can see clearly over her head. Notice how slow she walks, how she holds her back but will never complain about the pain, how she asks you to go downstairs and grab something forgotten instead of going herself. Notice how she is becoming less and less of her.
2. **Be mad.** Be mad at Covid for changing the world. Be mad at Covid for changing your grandmother. She didn't even have Covid, she has Alzheimer's, but Covid is a good scapegoat, so you blame it anyway. Be mad that you can't be at home to help her more. Be mad that you feel guilty for missing her "good" days. Be mad that the joy of moving away from home is lessened by the pang of sadness that comes from knowing you'll be further away from her. Be mad that the best days of your life may be coinciding with the worst days of hers, and there is nothing you can do to stop it. Be mad that the doctors can't fix it. Be mad the scientists haven't cured it. Be mad at God for allowing it. Be mad that this is your life now. Be so incredibly mad that you scream in your car when you're alone.
3. **Question your own mortality.** What is life really about and is it all worth the work if it ends like this? Will your life ever be as meaningful as hers? Will you be able to live up to the standards you've set for yourself? Three years of undergrad have flown by, will the rest of your life be this fast? How will you figure it all out in time? Will you have time to figure it all out?
4. **Cry.** Cry because you're mourning the loss of the person she was. Cry because the woman you've idolized your entire life is fading into a shadow of herself before your eyes. Cry because you're getting older, too. Cry because there will be no more youthful summers spent at Grandma's house with your cousins eating peanut butter and banana sandwiches and playing beneath the trees in her backyard. Cry because you don't know what you're going to do without her. Cry because you don't know what you're going to do with her. Cry because she deserves more than this. Cry because you'd give anything to help her, to fix this, to have Grandma back, but no such thing exists. Cry because crying is the only thing in this situation you can control. Cry because this is your life now.
5. **Take in the little moments.** Be fully present in the moments that seem mundane. Let her show you pictures that you've seen a million times. Notice, truly notice, how beautiful she was on her wedding day. Let her show you how to cook pasta. Let her show you clothes from her younger years. Take home the little things she gives you, even if you will never wear them. Listen to her stories about when she was in high school and a nickel would pay for her fun all weekend. Learn about life and its hardships. Learn about love and making it work. Appreciate her more now than ever. Realize how great of a gift grandmothers truly are. Be present in the moments you have with her, taking in every passing second of your time together, while you still can.

Margo

I walk, not myself in physical form, but an ethereal one. Gilded in white, covered in dark ink, with clear skin glowing as if fresh out of the lake of youth. My hair is gray and whispers stories as it blows in the breeze. My feet softly tread barefoot on a carpet of moss. With each placement, Mother Nature surges through my blood and sustains my very breath with her life. Shrouded in the mist, I enter a glass greenhouse. From one perspective this is a large house, with many sides and rooms, the far-away sun still reaching every corner softly through the mist. In another, it is a perfectly square, predictable four-walled sanctuary. Which form it takes depends on my mindset, for this, this space is where I am sustained. Plants of all shapes and sizes tangle their way throughout the greenhouse, and they thrive. Ivy, monstera, lilies, orchids, Zinnias...yes a whole bed specifically for Zinnias. Small glass balls neatly lay around comfortably in the moss. These spheres hold memories; once peered upon the memories play. I can interact as I please. I sustain this space, and it sustains me. I care for the plants, water them, and in turn, they feed me and purify the air and my soul. I can bring friends here, family, and lovers. Together our laughter mixes with the air as new glass balls form, sometimes mixing with musical notes of various vinyls. I tend to their needs with my garden, my home, or simply create fellowship. I can bathe in the streams or gather jugs of clear water to swirl with colors into masterpieces of tangible emotion. No harm, no pain. Occasionally meteorites fire down attempting to crack the glass, my demons. My form shifts into a dark-fanged creature and each siren-like screech sends the pain reeling. I will protect this space with my life if need be. At a

moment's notice, they're gone, and the light returns with aromas of bergamot, spices, dark coffee, and pine. The laughter resumes, and life goes on. Some guests linger longer than others, some can only peer inside, some were removed never to reenter, and some will always remain frequent visitors welcomed with warm embraces. For inside those glass panes is a fierce fire for passers-by to observe but not rule, for I alone carry the keys.

Manuela Amouzou

Liberatio

In the middle of the sea is where you'll find me
Not stranded, but swimming with a purpose, swimming towards a
land foretold.

Swimming for my whole life, I have seen mirages, sweet images
with the delusions of the enemy lurking underneath.

I have never seen the others swimming beside me, but nowadays I
see them in the distance all around me.

They are so close I can feel it,
and once we are one we will crash upon the promised land.

Lacuna

No light
Save the moon
Stretching tree limbs
Across open earth

Bare branches
Like fingers, like claws
Dead leaves crackle
And strike me
With excitement

Only a fallen walnut
Only gravity
Only leaves, dirt, wood
Empty
The night is
Tame as day

Slowing heart
I wait
Afraid to find nothing

And wonder why
I return here
Desperate
Still
Searching
For monsters

Declan Austin

9:53 PM

Some nights
I get back late
And stand in the street
Beside our home
Staring at where
The mountain should be
Drowning in black sky

A train-horn
Murmurs
Reminding me that somewhere
Far
A great creature roams

And I scurry inside
As if it will jump the tracks
And destroy offices, gas stations,
Grocery stores
As it crosses town
To run me through

But behind four walls
Pressed to the window
I listen for the train

To whisper
Across the distance
Like a lover
In my ear

Things I Need to Forget

One: a fragmented face.
Your eyes, nose, smile.
I picked them up
to carry them with me
like drugstore souvenirs
from endless what ifs.
Yet still wondering why
I couldn't let you go.

Two: the glass reflections.
Your shadow in the mirror,
even when you'd gone.
You asked me
to shatter myself;
give you peace.
When I turned around,
were you ever there at all?

Three: these handwritten letters.
The dried ink lies
now ash in the fire;
I smoked you from my skin.
Break your promises,
and don't come back.
The sting of closure
and the flush of sleep.

Four: your selfish prospects.
Throw me away;
you didn't need me anymore.
The realization:
you were your own sun.
You revolve and revolute,
leaving me
drifting with Andromeda.

Five: my crazed expectations.
The things I should've known
people never change,
so why should I?
Still drawn to the flame,
still desperate for the hurt,
still searching for you
in everyone I meet.

Six: you.
Forever and always,
you.

Things I Want to Remember

One: November 5, 2015.
Back-to-back, a full-sized bed,
you said, “I love you”
with morning denials.
My unspoken response,
“I love you too”
The words unsurfaced,
but I still meant them.

Two: those sweated nights.
Dancing in a bedroom,
sleeves past fingertips.
The Neighbourhood,
only background music
to the movie we wanted to be:
a coming-of-age kind of story,
where we become known.

Three: 2018 Halloween costumes.
A cartoon character in a red-striped shirt,
a broken porcelain doll:
those fit us all too well.
The balance between
childhood innocence
and shattered minds.
You had always made the best Calvin.

Four: our midnight talks.
A mattress on the floor.
(Do you remember how that happened?)
Dim lights still flicker.
Life, love, loss:
things we didn’t know yet.
Are you afraid?
Answers of always.

Five: August 10, 2019.
A lingering embrace
before your door closed on Virginia.
This isn’t goodbye,
that promise in your eyes,
but just in case,
I said, “I love you,”
like I should have before.

Change

I try to sleep but the shroud tugs gently
I can't control where it wants to take me

A crimson three my clock glares
Quietly I reach the stairs

Down into the winter I follow
The night pulls and I feel it swallow

Through empty streets I feel the Moon's cold whistle
An hour I walk to where I was little

A lone bench where our bus used to stop
The rain and wind made it rough with rot

Electrical boxes where my friends would lay
Dead vines reclaim rusting bright green to off gray

The playground where my confession was spoken
Now left abandoned with a chain swing broken

A frozen pond where I used to fish
Reflects the stars whom I share a wish

A wish I know is fake
They know I have no faith

Before I return I stop and feel strange
I am different, but the Moon stayed the same.

The Road

There was a road where I grew up.

It wasn't any road for cars,
not really a road for people at all.

It was mostly a road for tadpoles and frogs.
And it was also a road for snakes and fish.

A road for things that hibernate,
and a road for things that can't breathe air and
a road for orange things with black feet
whose screams frightened me.

I've seen, in that road, homes made out of waterlogged
twigs and branches.

And, in that same road, I've seen the brown furry
things that live in those houses.

But I decided to take that strange road anyway.

I planted a little sapling there beside the road and watched it for
a few years.

Eventually we moved and I couldn't visit the road anymore.

Many years passed and I forgot about the road and the little
tree I'd left behind.

As an adult I returned to visit my family near the road,
and at once my memory of the road returned.

The road was just as it was when I'd
left.

I traveled the road to where the sapling was
planted,

but I could not find it anywhere along the road.

I wondered if a storm had blown it down and the road carried it
away

Maybe it never left the side of the road but grew to blend in
with the other trees.

And wasn't that the whole point?

Picture Remains

Removing pictures. What does that signify? The picture is removed from my wall but the memories will remain in my head. The picture is a moment captured in time but in time I still love you. With time, the love will fade and then I'll say I used to love you. It's still love though. No hard feelings. But your picture is gone.

A picture is worth a thousand words, what about a thousand truths? Words cannot convey the love I have for you. The harmony of your laugh, the softness of your skin, the angel's touch of your kiss, and the hands you selflessly lend. Now your picture is gone.

You still echo in my head. So why did I remove the picture? It is not too much to bear. To see you on my wall or close my eyes and see you there. Our picture is gone.

I say gone, however, I only removed it from the wall. It has been sitting next to me as I write this all. The, yours, ours, whose person does the picture belong? Am I even talking about a picture at all?

Collecting Pages

There is something about the way
The pages once untouched now collect in the front.
It's like unlocking the map on a video game
Traveling from land to land, word to word
Things become more clear, familiar
You look at a book you've read and say,
"I've been there before"
You're halfway done
The book fits equally in both hands
You have reached equilibrium
You're so much closer to the end.
Your eyes glide on the page
Soaking up human creation
This is pleasurable.
You have not thought about the time
Nor do you feel guilty when you check
You are feeding your mind.
You have reached the end.
Eyes have become tired.
Excited about the new land you've acquired.
You have grown.
You are more patient.
More knowledgeable.
No longer in the unknown.
Except you realize one thing.
There's so much you don't know.
So you pick up another book
And collect more pages.

Ticks Away from Tragedy

How would reality taste
Over a serving of surprise
Without your flavor in my grin
Or your laughter in my eyes
How cold is a grave with your name
As I sit in the field miles from light
Where clouds cover your view of my face
And crows block the echo of my cries
Memories of how you've watched me grow
My tears save me from our last goodbye
From the first watering of my limbs
You've seen me soar throughout the sky
Without your love I bottle up my words
I protect the world from the scars of my heart
I hold its hand to escape Death's curse
Its head on my shoulder as I leave your sacred yard
I remember the day I watched you die
No longer a virgin to the darkness of life
Your soul now a pile of dust inside
The urn never small enough to hide
I've walked back to our empty house
Silence is shouting at me to drive
The old gravel road that was once ours
Yet, all alone you are now alive

Shades of Life

Driving under canopies of Oak and Maple
leaves straddle the curb
Piles sit beside broken crinkles of brown and beige
Fiery, bursting reds
Granny Smith greens
Squash yellows
Exhaust smoking from my engine flusters the collection
Colors explode into autumnal air,
the old and the new,
all drawn from the same branch

To You, Dearest Stranger

To You, I am a stranger
A nameless face and voice

To me, You are a stranger
A precious life yet known

A life with thoughts,
One life with feelings
Radiant life, invaluable life
A life well worth living

To You, I am a stranger
A formless mind and body

To me, You are a stranger
A light that shines so bright!

A light with expression,
One light with varied hue
Brilliant light, beloved light
A light I recognize with my own

To You, I am a stranger
To me, You are a stranger
Let my life, my light, gift to You—
May You have love,

May You be happy
May You have peace,
May You be well

To You, I am a stranger
To me, I am You

I accept You
I hear You
I love You,
Dearest Stranger

Thank you for being You

Although I Never Saw It Like That

We are everything
Yet nothing that we say we are.
Thought I came from Sunday dinner
And fixin things and smellin like
Outside and exhaust.

But I was from every black woman
Who ever sang loudly on the porch
Moving their hips and soaking greens
From the sky all the way to Johnson mountain road.

We are everything yet nothing
That we say we are
I'm from generational cursive,
The house we meet at for fireworks in July
Cuz nobody lives there.

I'm from accents only showin up when I leave town and "god
don't like ugly"
But I'm from gatherin in the road and pickin up people as I go-
I thought I was from home.

I thought I was from home.
But home is where growth is stunted.
Home is where the mustang should be but isn't.

Home is where a bachelors or making it past 18 with no kids
make you a genius somehow-
Or it made you too good to walk around barefoot
Switching in and out of English and some other language I
picked up that makes me sound white to the neighbors.

I forgot that home was home. Because I never saw it like that.

Bed and Beyond

I dart past the alcove that
we once sat in
grinning crazily tipsy on tequila and the threads of love
We had left.
Our wedding registry mostly full of things for the cat
and a robot vacuum
Don't forget the robot vacuum

I'm here now for new sheets
because I hate sleeping in the bed I slept in with you
and I can't afford a new mattress
to smother the memory
in foam
and down

I had forgotten the last time I was here
I was skipping down the aisles
with a scan gun
and a hair trigger
knowing full well there would never be a wedding
but maybe I could manifest it
if I scanned enough fanciful
kitchen towels and napkin rings

Skin

Please know that,
when I say I am comfortable in my own skin
I don't mean I like the body I live in.
It merely means I am uncomfortable
leaving the small world I have built, just below my epidermis.

Please know that,
when I say I want to lose weight
I don't mean I want to be thin and pretty.
I mean I wish my world was smaller
so that I may feel the empty space within.

Please know that,
when I withdraw from you
I don't dislike you.
I just don't want to leave the safety of my skin.
I don't want to peel back the layers of tissue and let you look
inside
and I definitely don't want to make room in my skin for you.

Please know that,
if you are under my skin,
it took time and trust for me to place you there.
I expanded my world a little bit more for you
and it left stretch marks on my skin.

Please know that,
my skin is my shield.
Inside hides a little girl,
6 or 7,
with big blue eyes and wild copper hair.

Please know that,
she hid there long ago when she realized the world was much too
big
and much too cruel for her.
And if you share space under my skin with her,
I must trust you not to hurt her.

Please know that,
part of me wants to reintegrate this girl with my skin,
convince her that the world is not all bad and sad.
But then I turn on the news and she shrinks back again
into the tiny world beneath my skin

Please know that,
I want to hide her away beneath my skin
and protect her from experiencing a world unworthy of her.
But then you smile,
and she is coaxed back to the surface again.

Claire King

Jacob, Lilly, and Gabe

My siblings
Please know
You are my muse
Every step I take
Your hand in mine
We heal together
Peace with time
My siblings
You are strong
Please sing the song
Of our family blues
Love determined forever
I will sit at the top of the steps
For you
My blessings
I will raise you and I
To the top of the mountain
We go

Brokenness

Trying to be what everyone expects you to be
Is exhausting.
Putting on a brave face for them
Knowing that they will never know
About what you never show
The guilt you bear,
The overall feeling you refuse to share.
You can't go to anyone
To talk about anything that's been done.
You are backed into a corner
Feeling alone, like it is over.
Your mind races through your head
To find the thoughts
Knowing there's lots
Of brokenness and despair
That hides unspoken and unshared.

Without You

I never imagined the day
I would have to say goodbye.
I never imagined the way
I would have to watch you die

Everything about that day
Is still in my head.
Everything about that way
Is why it's sometimes hard to go to bed.

I think about you
Every chance I get.
I think about you
And there is no way I will forget.

The kindness, the smiles, and the memories
Will never fade away.
Because you were exemplary
In each and every single way.

Now it is time for you
To get what you deserve.
Now it is time for something new
For which you can observe.

But always remember this
When you are up there
And we are down here trying to find bliss
What we have can never be taken — we are rare.

This is why
We miss you here everyday
We miss you now, we missed you before,
But we will always miss you forevermore.

Margaret Rolf

Beauty in Death

There is something so childishly innocent about the change of seasons. All natural beauty that once surrounded us is replaced with death. The first frost, the jagged crystal killer. Yet, a sense of comfort hangs in the air. Humans start bundling up in soft textures and warm hues. Walking around like tiny bears in winter coats, we clutching warm drinks, breathing like dragons. Almost as if we find comfort in the death surrounding us, as if it relaxes us to a natural state of existence. Kill or be killed. We snap a photo of dead foliage and point out the squirrels burying nuts. To us, this is comical, captionable, cute. Mother Nature must scoff, our turn will come, she must think. Reprimand for our treatment of her. One day, this cycle of death that entertains will no longer rebloom, but lie forever dormant. That. That is a curse ignored by mankind bustling around in their scarves drinking tea...such childlike ignorance.

Healing of a Friend

Golden sunflower skin dotted with soft brown freckles of sadness
Lately, those smiles are returning my dear.
No longer has your soul been aching
The daylight is returning to your eyes.
For so long the coals in your amber eyes dwindled
No more my friend.
The fire has returned rekindling that laugh that softens souls
Life is not fair
Neither is love, we both know that too well.
Like an angel hurt but not broken you are
Resting as you deserve.
Time is healing, watching my eyes now twinkle with yours
Now we hold hands dry of tears, and skip, saying bring it on.

Ode to Sad Eyes

Dear Sad Eyes,
do you see me? Do you know me?
When I see into you,
I want to know how you see me.
They say eyes are the windows to the soul,
so when you look into mine, with yours,
do you see the same thing?
A reflection of your own?

Dear Sad Eyes,
is it your softness,
or your dark, cloudiness
that calms me?
Shadows lie behind them, but they are aware.
Those eyes are capable of great kindness,
and great despair.
I feel drawn to those eyes.
As I try and sleep, I imagine them looking at me,
and knowing something about me
that I have yet to learn.

Dear Sad Eyes,
why have you captured me? I want to know
what makes your eyes so dark.
They are clear blue naturally, but
there is something else that darkens them.

The lines deepen
every time I see you.
Long eyelashes frame the crystals behind them,
and perhaps it is that they are long,
that they clump together and appear damp with tears.
Now that I know you better,
these eyes seem less a product of your mind
and more of your anatomy.
Will they ever seem happy?

Dear Sad Eyes, I want to see
the flicker of light behind them
when a smile illuminates your face.
I have seen it before, and now it is a drug to me.
It was a treasure
you must guard,
because that is all you know how to do.
I want the world to see
the beautiful light behind those sad eyes.

Stevie Rosser

I Was A Coal Miner Long Before I Met You

I can still remember the squeak of the cart's wheels trailing behind us as we dug deeper into the vast earth. The deeper we would go, the darker it got. My eyes had become used to the darkness, but one day, I met you. I saw your shadow at the entrance, far before my eyes could adapt. A small blur against the bright light of the outside world. As I approached the exit to the cave, it became clear. The brightest light is not the surface after a long dig, but you.

I never wanted to enter the mine again.

Conflicting

Out of life and into the fire
Heat unbearably touching my skin
It reminds me of her touch
So sweet but forgotten
The person I've wanted but never been

Emotions weaving through my mind
Webs of undeniable complexity
They are conflicting in direction
Similes in meaning
The lines of trials yet unseen

Mid-October Game of Catch

The boys push and shove as the leaves float down from above,
Fragile as stained glass.
Straining,
Leaping,
Grasping,
They reach out to the sky with open hands,
Pleading to get the first of autumn's gifts.

What good is my heart

if it does not beat
yes, the blood flows through my veins
and yes, air breathes through my lungs
but my heart is solitary
it does not beat

even these filthy mice,
who make love in the trash
who live in their shit
who carry disease like a newborn
even they feel something like love

my heart does not beat
it shudders and it convulses in my chest
scraping against my ribs
but there is no drummer to match
if there is no love in my heart
then what is it good for?

so let the mice breed
in the space below my ribs
their little lungs expanding and shrinking
in the grave of my heart.
if i cannot find a use for it,
at least the creatures will

Ponderings on the Death of a Corpse

I always thought that embalming was a bit blasphemous. I don't look forwards to death, but I do look forwards to what happens after. The thought of my body becoming one with the Earth is peaceful and calming. Knowing that the result of my life's effort can break down into bits of nutrients in the soil gives me peace of mind. If I achieved nothing else in life, at least I can do that. But embalming takes all of that away. It slows down the process, leaving the reaper staring at the body and checking the pulse like he's not sure if he fucked up and stole the wrong soul. I could venture into a cemetery and dig up a grave from the last year, and they might still be laying there perfectly preserved, and at any time they could open their eyes and be staring at me. It feels like I could accidentally disturb their eternal rest and wake them from their dreams of heaven and hell, like I'd apologize and shut the coffin and think about it for the rest of my life.

Nature, thankfully, encourages things to rot. Unless an animal creeps into a bog or is frozen solid in the cold, it can take as little as two months for it to be reduced to nothing but bones and cloth and remnants of hair. The main event in the decomposition process is the insects, especially maggots, who are born and live and reproduce on a single corpse with their life's work only to feast on it. Often, scavengers will stop by, too; they'll decide to

take up a career as an undertaker and have a quick snack at the same time. It's not my life's dream to be eaten by an animal, but it would bring me great joy to know that I could nourish these creatures when they have meant so much to me. A pound of flesh is a small price to pay.

{ *Elsie Bock First Year Writing Award* }

Lincoln Brads

Sign Language: How Deaf Children Suffer Without It

There is often not much thought given to the deaf community by hearing people. In fact, few people are even aware of the controversies surrounding the deaf such as the form of communication they wish to use. Certain members of the deaf community believe they should be taught and use sign language and that cochlear implants (CIs) are unnecessary as they should not have to hear and speak. One child in every 1,000 is born deaf and many of these children are born to hearing parents. Because of this, many deaf children are being deprived of accessibility needs. Many of them have a disorder known as Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) making it hard to read, write, and even speak. Even children with CIs are susceptible to these issues as they are typically not taught sign language, and many parents fail to realize this. Rather than relying on cochlear implants, deaf children should be taught sign language because it prevents the possibility of DLD, allows them to develop critical language and social skills, and provides them with a wider variety of accessibility options in school.

Deaf children are at a greater risk of having DLD even if they have cochlear implants. This is a serious disorder that affects reading, writing, math, and most importantly communication skills. Some children with CIs still struggle in school despite being able to hear more with the implants than without. As Miriam Shadi writes with regards to phonological awareness, “compared to their peers without hearing loss, and despite the fact that they commonly attend mainstream schools, many CI children are still delayed in literacy acquisition” (1). CIs do not ensure a deaf child will be able to learn and verbally communicate well enough to be able to read and write due to DLD, and, therefore, should not be relied on. Dorothy Bishop, a psychologist specializing in the disorder, found that “children with DLD have major problems in learning to talk, despite showing normal development in all other areas” (2). Like Bishop, Kelly Kasulis, a journalist and author, noted that “about 80% of children born deaf in the developed world will get a cochlear implant later on, but the problem is that their brains may not be equipped to understand the complex notion of language by the time that happens” (2). The risk of language deprivation is especially great for children who were born deaf and then later received CIs. This proves that verbal communication is not a reliable option for deaf children with or without the device. According to Lian van Berkel-van Hoof expert on Developmental Language Disorder, research has shown that children who have DLD benefit immensely from using sign language to communicate rather than verbally speaking (1). Deaf people must have a solid language that they understand and can communicate with and even though CIs provide certain people with the ability to hear and speak, it is not always the most effective form of communication as they tend to be underdeveloped in their language development. With all of this in mind, it is easy to see how sign language is the best option for deaf children as their main form of communication, as CIs are not one hundred percent effective.

When deaf children are only able to communicate via speaking and reading lips, it can be challenging to develop social skills.

Obviously the deaf cannot hear what they are saying and oftentimes it may be hard for others to understand them. Researcher and author of “Parents and their Deaf Children”, Kathryn Meadow-Orlans, states “still, some parents describe a sense of relief when they believe that their child’s speech has improved to the point where they do not need sign language to communicate” (16). Even though parents can communicate with their deaf children by speaking well enough to understand them, it does not mean that everyone else can. A person who cannot communicate fluently enough with another person tends to become frustrated and move on. The chances of deaf children being left out in social situations increases as their hearing peers have different abilities than them. Barry A. Couch, author and Professor at Gallaudet University, discovered that “underlying the divisive argument over method was the premise that language had much to do with the socialization of children and therefore determined what their status in society would eventually become” (72). Therefore, deaf children who have underdeveloped social skills will be affected by it all their life. Throughout the years these children will find it harder to maintain and develop relationships or even complete simple daily tasks that involve interaction with others, including having a job. By learning sign language, deaf children can communicate with other deaf children and feel more comfortable and less like an outsider. They will also have the assurance that the person they are signing with can understand them. Deaf children will prosper in life socially and have an easier time interacting with other people by learning sign language.

Deaf people have certain accommodation and accessibility needs. Schools for the deaf are specifically for deaf people. The teachers know and use sign language and all students are deaf and communicate in this way. These schools are great for deaf children because students can always be sure that they can communicate with someone if needed, especially in an emergency. There is also no need for the use of cochlear implants in these available schools because sign language is the only language used amongst the students and faculty. Deaf kids who attend a school in which

the students are primarily hearing are left with fewer accessibility options. This can make it harder to learn and get around.

Researchers at the University of East Anglia noted that “Many deaf children born to hearing parents experience a reduced access to language and start school with poorer language skills and learning outcomes compared to their hearing peers.” (University,

1) Similarly, Orlans found that most of the time, parents fail to see that their deaf child is not receiving proper education and support from mainstream schools (Meadow-Orlans, 12). This is because deaf children who attend primarily hearing schools are not being accommodated academically and are less equipped with proper language abilities than their hearing peers. Deaf children who learn sign language are presented with a wider variety of accessibility options such as schools for the deaf. These schools are designed to meet the needs of deaf children to ensure they are getting the proper education they need. Deaf children can learn in an effective way by using sign language. They can have their own language to communicate with and not have to rely on reading lips.

Parents with deaf children have a hard decision to make regarding the communication method they wish to instruct their children.

Orlans pointed out that “Many parents emphasize a desire for their children to be able to communicate with both hearing and non-hearing people” (16). Some parents believe that if their deaf child can speak and understand a spoken language, they would succeed better since there are few accommodations made for deaf people. Knowing how to speak as a deaf person would also be important because not every person is going to know sign language, and knowing how to speak means that a deaf person can still communicate with a hearing person when needed. This is where cochlear implants come into play. CIs allow some deaf people to hear which can be needed in society as the world is primarily hearing. With this device, parents imagine their deaf babies or children hearing their voices for the first time, and hearing things they would otherwise have been unable to if not for the use of this technology. Though these are emotional things

parents want to see in their child, it does not mean it is the best option. Parents do not consider the developmental effects this has on their child when they decide to have their children implanted with CIs. Though a child might be able to hear with the help of cochlear implants, the likelihood that they would fall behind drastically on the learning scale increases significantly. The ability for a person to hear does not do them any good if they cannot properly form sentences or read due to having DLD. Some people argue that the deaf can even write what they want to say when conversing with a non-signing person, but as mentioned previously the effects of DLD can alter a person’s ability to write properly. Sign language is extraordinarily effective for children with this disorder, making it the safer route of communication for the deaf. There is not much time for a parent to decide if they want their child to use sign language. Kasulis found that the critical age at which children begin to develop language is age 5, if a deaf child is not taught sign language by then, they may never fluently learn the language. If they decide later in life that they wish to communicate this way it would be extremely difficult (1). Parents should instruct their deaf children to use sign language to ensure that their child will have a solid language that they can effectively communicate with and avoid learning disorders such as DLD (Meadow-Orlans, Edition 1).

Some parents will not allow their kids to use sign language as they believe they need to adjust to a “hearing world.” This has proven controversial amongst the deaf community as many deaf people do not believe they should have to be able to hear and speak to get through life. Alexander Graham Bell is believed to play a significant role in this notion that the deaf should learn how to speak. At conference held in 1880 in Milan is where Bell insinuated that sign language should no longer be taught in schools, and by the end of the conference it was decided (Kasulis, Edition 1). Since then, sign language has been criticized by many as they believe the deaf should accommodate the hearing. Companies that produce CIs make billions of dollars from the

deaf by trying to turn them into hearing people when being deaf is not a death sentence. Stuart Blume who writes about deaf culture says, “For many people the cochlear implant when first developed was revolutionary success, but for the deaf they felt as though it was another way to oppress the deaf community and actually protested the item” (Blume, Volume 1). The deaf community wants people to understand this and allow them to be deaf instead of trying to make them hear and speak.

How parents choose to approach their child’s deafness, whether it is with sign language or CIs, plays a vital role in their child’s brain development. A lack in language acquisition in deaf children can lead to multiple negative effects such as delayed reading and speaking abilities that could very well affect them for the rest of their lives. Devices such as CIs may seem like they would prevent this problem, however they do not prevent learning disorders in deaf children. The cochlear implant industry is a large one and they have been marketing off the deaf community for years. This has led to an uproar in the form of protests and advocacy from the deaf, as they stand for the right to let deaf people be deaf. Rather than implanting deaf children with CIs, they instead should be taught to use sign language as it ensures they will develop the proper language and social skills needed throughout life and will be given more accessibility options in schools.

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