



# *The Midway Muse*

Spring 2022

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## **A Word from the Editor**

“Some people are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them” (Edward De Vere/Shake-Speare). Life has a strange way of leading people down paths they never thought they would take and putting them in a place they never thought they would be but needed to be all the same. Life is full of twists and turns much like a river. Like that river there are surprises for each person around each bend in life. Some of these surprises may be pleasant, and some may test one’s resolve and faith. Sometimes the river may experience extreme drought where the current may slow to a trickle or a great flood where the river becomes a raging, tumultuous current, full of sticks and debris. No matter the event the river remains, much like how mankind stands for what they believe in and remains resilient afterward. That is true greatness.

The famed author William Faulkner wrote, “Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all over the world... would do this, it would change the earth”. In this day and age, people are fed a seemingly endless stream of poorly written news articles where one is hard pressed to find any truth; alas, this generation has a bigger challenge ahead. This challenge is rather a battle, but not in the traditional sense with a wide array of armaments, it is a battle of a higher calling. It is the battle of truth versus lies, good versus evil, a fight towards a higher goal. Everyone around the globe will soon have to join in this battle and make a very real choice, and this choice could very well affect them for eternity. Until the day of battle, one should continue to speak out against lying and greed, and stand up for what they feel is right, being sure to read as much as possible, as if their life depends upon it, for the information garnered from their reading could, quite possibly, make the difference in this final battle.

On that note, I invite you to open the pages of this magazine, and digest the varied writing found within. Until we meet again may you continue to read and find enjoyment and solace in all aspects of the written word.

Soli Deo Gloria!

*--Alex D. Vorhaus*

### **Misinterpretation**

I smiled because I thought he'd catch me.  
He smiled at  
    the  
        way  
            I  
                fell.

### ***Eye of the Beholder***

You say that I come empty handed?  
Well it is you that must be blinded.  
For it is deep within my heart,  
That I carry my bleeding art.  
A poet's message is not carried in a bag.  
It is his voice which he professes of riches and rags.  
He has no need for paper,  
Unless his memory is the one that suffers.

### **Growing Up Full**

I tried starving myself,  
but my dad never let me go hungry.  
Every single day he'd pack a big lunch  
for me to take to school.  
What saved me was my family morals.  
We were taught to never waste food.  
Try as I might to give away all my food,  
I'd always be left with something left.  
I ate based on the moral dilemma.

### **Forcefield**

I miss him more than warm weather  
Like a bird with no feathers  
A cold night with no sweater  
An angel deceived by the sweet words of a sinner  
A growling belly but no dinner  
A war with no winner.

*--Annie Oakley*

### **Life's Lullaby**

How many deaths in the same patch of road  
before there's enough tax dollars to fix it?  
Why do we only care when it's our family affected?  
Throughout the week we look at the sunshine from our offices.  
But on the weekends, it's rain rain rain with a 90% chance of more rain.  
Maybe someday we'll get it.  
Or maybe we'll die ignorant and clueless.  
You don't always have to pay more or less for the dress.  
Is it bad to splurge when we can't take it with us when we leave this earth?  
Should I spend the money I won't have later?  
Or save all I can for my beloved daughter?  
When I'm old I hope I know where I'll go.  
My wish by then is to have lived as a good friend.  
Not entirely innocent, but enough to go up  
instead of the dreaded descent.

### **Roots**

Would you look into my eyes and tell me what you know  
Then look into my soul and tell me what you see  
A youthful seed  
Or  
A shriveled old weed

### **Bottled Message**

Her armor wasn't exterior  
Her words were never inferior  
But her voice was stronger than the ocean's currents.  
A classroom filled igniting moments  
She taught me the course  
So I shall not remorse  
For X marks the spot  
Of her treasureful heart

*--Annie Oakley*

## **A Valediction, Forbidden Mourning: A Haibun**

I wanted to love you. To tumble with abandon into your bluegrass embrace, burrow down, entangle in your deep-rooted ancestry, marrying it to my own. I wanted to come home and find it home, a place to hang my hat and all my world-wearied baggage. A permanent place for things, shelf-rooms for all the written books and to be written, first drafts and first editions. To be locked down and in, satisfied at last.

I hoped you'd love me, too. Fall unconditionally under my seasoned spell, amused, appreciative. Celebrated. Committed. Collaborative. Cohabitive. Grafted on, inked in, archived.

But never could the guard come down. The shoulder glance. The unfilled hollow behind my irregular heart, unwarmed. The ear ever cocked for sudden footfall, the second shoe. The need to wear the mask, long before and after the need to wear the mask.

Avert the eyes. Sew shut the bitten lips, gnaw raw the tongue. Stuff the disappointments with the dirty laundry, never aired. Salvage the few remaining mud-stained pearls.

I longed to love you  
love me—what's not to  
love? —But you would not.

***--Rebecca Luttrell Briley***

## Going Without

“You have to be willing to let him go,” Mom said, as we stood either side of your hospital bed. You were nearly gone already, in that coma-induced Neverland I couldn’t penetrate, couldn’t even visualize through tears that magnified my grief and all things around me these 30 years. Thirty years of patching holes, gorging, regurgitating to splurge and gorge and hoard again. Sins and sinless time and again. But now, she’s right, it seems, though God knows she wasn’t half the time we dreamed she was. So. I am finally willing to let things go. You, though it took damn near 30 years. And her. And him and her and here and there and all things carnal that suffocate my measured breathing in and out. The more valuable, the more worthless: I am letting go, letting it all go. I’ll walk down the street naked if I can rid myself of this last remaining shred of? Vanity? No. Dignity? Just come and get it, one and all. I’m letting it go for a swan’s song. A dying’s dirge. The final anthem of my selfless self. Such a deep, expelling breath of relief, and I can see clearly now, all tears dried up in the drought of Centuries. All that heaven allows. God knows it’s been a long 2000 years. Just shroud me now.

*--Rebecca Luttrell Briley*

## **My Dad Sammy**

Milkshakes and the process of making them were a big part of my childhood. Not because of the sugar rush or my undying love for chocolate, but because it was an opportunity for me to spend time with my dad. My dad is my 5'10', broad shouldered hero. He was always the person I could run to when things weren't going my way. I can vividly remember the smell of axe cologne and dove soap from the times he would cuddle me up to make me feel better. He always knew the right things to say to make the tears stop and my smile come back. A lot of times, that included making our world-famous chocolate milkshakes.

Making milkshakes had become our thing after my dad dragged me into the kitchen a few times to learn how to make them. I think he just got tired of doing all the work. We would often make them after he came home from work. He worked at a factory then and worked long hours so that would sometimes be past my bedtime. He didn't seem to care much about that fact though just as long as we got to spend time together. We would slave away, scooping ice cream and putting way too much chocolate syrup. I can remember some of that syrup ending up in my hair after my dad "slipped". My dad has a wicked sense of humor so working at creating a masterpiece while laughing was hard, but that was all part of the fun.

My dad would use these occasions to talk to me about anything and everything ranging from my day to what I want to be when I grow up. I can still see the way his eyes lit up when he got the chance to add input or give some advice. He was like my own personal therapist. He seemed to enjoy those moments with me more than he did the actual shake itself. We kept this routine alive long after I about matched him in height. Even now that my dad's dark, almost black hair has some gray peeking through and his beard is basically the color of smoke, we still take the time to make those milkshakes and I hope that's a tradition we keep forever.

***--Sarah Grimes***

## Stay Golden, Piper

It was a beautiful day like no other. The sky was clear, the birds were singing their beautiful songs, and the leaves on the branches of the trees were hinting that the crisp colors of autumn were soon to come. All appeared to be well in the land that I had become so accustomed to since the beginning of summer, or at least it appeared so to the naked eye. But there was an eeriness engulfing the grounds of the Pinkerton Orphan School. Perhaps it was the abnormal sense of calm on that perfect September day, or perhaps it was because Piper was gone, and it was all my fault.

The year began as every year does with father working for weeks at a time on the railroad and mother spending her days sewing the most beautiful dresses to sell to some of society's most profound socialites. She would sit in her nook, maneuvering her needle and thread underneath the luminescent light flickering from the tall candles that lined the shelves of her workstation. As for me, I spent most of my days reading the small bit of literature I could understand at twelve years old underneath the weeping willow in the small patch of yard behind our house. From sunup to sundown, I would be transported into different worlds, reading about the amazing people who had far more interesting lives than my own. I was entranced by stories that involved mystery and saved up all the coins I earned by trading in old glass bottles at the corner store to buy my favorite novel, "Hound of the Baskervilles;" I was convinced that my detective work was even better than that of Sherlock Holmes. These novels, stories, and characters quickly became my family, or at least more so than my actual one. Whenever I showed interest in observing my mother as she created her embroidered masterpieces, she quickly reminded me that she did not need my hovering. Perhaps she just liked to work independently, or perhaps she was still caught up on the time I accidentally tipped over a candle, setting her magnificent stitch work ablaze. So, I accepted my fate as a walking liability. Whenever father was home from the railroad, he was either asleep or working on our home, repairing leaks, reinforcing foundational issues, and adding insulation so we could make it through the last of the cold weather. They didn't have much use for me, so I always resorted to the comfort of my tree and the realm of my books. Without these stories, I was alone.

As summer was approaching, mother and father were invited to a renowned event as guests of the host, a client of my mother's seamstress business. My parents were quite traditional in their ways and beliefs, so naturally, they were not very keen on the idea of attending this stuffy event, much less travelling northbound to the city in an automobile. Nonetheless, they stuck to their word, embarking on their fancy journey to the urban metropolis once the driver and vehicle sent by the host arrived outside of our front door. Days had passed, and I was holding down the fort, reading my novels, and occupying myself inside of the house. I wasn't quite sure how long their escapade would endure, so I kept watch outside of the front door screen for their return. After a couple of days had passed and I was nearing the end of the pre-prepared meals mother had made for me to eat while they were away, a similar automobile was parked on the street, and I was so relieved to finally have some company. Not that we talked much anyways, I



was beyond ready to get back to our normal, quintessential routine. I sprung out of the screen door, my bare feet striding across the untamed grass out front, to welcome my parents back to their humble abode. I was worried the city might have gotten to them. The passenger door of the car opened and out walked a tall man holding an envelope. He made his way over to me through the rugged weeds, his crisp suit conveying no wrinkles, almost symbolic of the lack of emotion on his face. Handing me the envelope, he removed his hat from his head, bent down on his knee, and said "I am so sorry." Wondering what he was apologizing for, I ripped open the envelope to find a series of documents with words I didn't understand and a printing press clipping of a newspaper article produced in the city. My eyes scanned the headline repeatedly, the words circling rapidly through my head: "Local Couple Killed in Automobile Crash on Cumberland Bridge." My parents weren't coming home. They were dead, and I was alone.

The next few days were a blur. I woke up each morning, hoping that my reality was simply a bad dream, but my eyes were drawn to the despicable envelope that changed my entire life. I had been so reluctant to open it, but I finally mustered up just enough to examine its contents. Autopsy reports and informational pages were bound together with a metal clip as I flipped through scanning the thick, black print. While most of these pages sounded like scripted mumbo jumbo, the final page of the protocol packet caught my eye; It was a letter addressed to me from the Pinkerton Orphan School for girls. I had been issued by the state to be enrolled under their care. I guess I hadn't yet thought about what would happen to me, or the house, or mother's beautiful dresses, or my weeping willow in the backyard. It was reasonable to think that I could not just live here alone forever, even though it wouldn't be much different than when my parents were here. Attached to the letter was a ticket for the train that departed the next morning. It appeared that I had no other choice but to go, so I packed my brown suitcase with everything I held dear. My mystery books, photographs of my parents, and one of my mother's dresses were stuffed into this small case; I wasn't ready to let these things go. I grabbed a blanket and went outside to spend my last night under my weeping willow. "If only I could take you with me, too," I whispered to the tree as I laid under its draped branches.

Morning came in an instant, and I was on my way to the train station. A small crowd of people filled the boarding terminals around me, everyone on a different mission. Men wearing suits and carrying briefcases were lined single file waiting for the train, each checking their pocket watches in synchrony. When the roaring train finally arrived, the conductor stepped off and announced, "All aboard for the Pinkerton Orphan School," much to the businessmen's dismay. I looked down at my one-way ticket and read it over in my head: "Anne Raymond. Departure: 8 am. Destination: Pinkerton Orphan School." I clutched my suitcase, handed my ticket to the conductor, and stepped across the boarding threshold into the train. Scanning the cabin for a place to sit, I slowly made my way through the middle aisle to the nearest empty seat I could find. I settled in next to a girl who looked about my age. With freckles scattered across her cheeks and ginger locks falling right below her shoulders, she seemed like the most approachable of the girls who filled the train. She looked at me with a shy grin and said softly, "Hi, I'm Piper. What's your name?" "Anne," I replied in relief at our first exchange. We didn't

say much else to each other on the long ride down the rigid tracks, but for the first time in a long time, I felt at peace in Piper's presence and had an abundance of hope for my future, no matter where I would end up. With that, I closed my eyes and sunk into the somewhat-padded bench seat beneath me. When I awoke, this dreamlike whirlwind would finally become my reality.

"Anne," Piper whispered in my ear as she nudged my shoulder to signal that we had arrived. My heavy eyelids shot open, my hazy vision revealing the cobblestone paths, hydrangea bushes, and blooming Crape Myrtles that decorated the courtyard of the Pinkerton Orphan School. Grabbing our things, Piper and I followed the rest of the newly orphaned girls from the train stop to the rounded staircase that framed the front of the towering brick building that was now our home. The front doors opened upon our arrival to the stone steps, the headmistress of the institution following suit. "Good afternoon, young women and welcome to the Pinkerton Orphan School for Girls. I am Headmistress Marrs, and I look forward to meeting all of you. Follow me into the foyer, and I will disclose your room assignments so that you can get settled in." "This woman is enchanting," I thought to myself. Tall and slender in figure, Headmistress Marrs was the most beautiful and radiant lady I had ever seen. Her sweet-as-honey voice echoed through my ears, encompassing me like a warm embrace. Oh, what I would give to have felt this way about my own mother.

We followed the poised headmistress inside to a table with pairs of keys next to beautifully crafted place cards with our names scripted on them. Before I even finished scanning the table to find my name, Piper scurried across the cluster of girls holding two keys and a card with both of our names on it. Once again, I felt relieved at the thought of having Piper around, and I felt like I finally had a friend who wasn't merely a fictional character in my novels.

Our room was small, but cozy, and had the most amazing character. The wooden floors gleamed as the sunlight that was beaming through the large window was reflected into the room. The doorways were architecturally genius in their curved, arch-like manner. I had never seen beyond the simplicity of my small home with my parents. In complete awe, Piper and I began unpacking our things and admiring our new space. We ventured into our shared washroom that connected our bedroom to another room of two girls, speechless over the thought of having the luxury of using the restroom inside. We were in heaven, or so it felt like. Piper and I spent the rest of the evening talking, giggling, and showing each other our most valuable possessions that traveled with us to this magical place. I even showed her my collection of novels that I had worked so hard to acquire. She was fascinated by the books that lined their very own shelf, touching the pages with her fingertips and carefully examining the words that lined the thick pages. She looked so mesmerized, almost as if she had never seen a book in her life. "Have you read any of these before? Would you like to borrow one?" I asked a bit reluctantly because I had never let anyone else come so close to my treasured novels. Piper turned and looked at me, a rush of paleness engulfed her previously glowing face, and said, "I don't know how." I could tell she was embarrassed about what she had just admitted. Without hesitation, I grabbed a new favorite amongst my mystery collection, sat down next to Piper, and started reading aloud "The Diary of Anne Rodway." As the words flowed off my lips, Piper's eyes lit up in anticipation. I

read chapter after chapter until finally, I looked up from the pages in front of me to find my friend fast asleep. I closed the book, set it on the nightstand that separated our beds, and blew out the candle that illuminated our now-dark room. Crawling under the covers of my new bed, I felt like I was finally home.

The summer days came and went, each one filled with a new adventure for Piper and me. We arose with the sun, getting all of our daily house chores accomplished before breakfast. Aside from our required mid-morning study block, we spent most of our time outside, running through the fields that surrounded the school, sitting underneath the trees reading our books, and imagining our very own mystery stories on the grounds of Pinkerton. We observed all the other girls and their friend circles, making up stories and trying to determine their secret lives. “Why was the tall girl with the long black hair in room 101 so quiet? Or the group of older girls who always seemed to disappear during the daytime... what were they hiding?” we contemplated from our highly qualified investigative perspectives. This campus was safe because of our detective work, and we were sure to solve every mystery, both within the pages of our next novel and in the realm of the Pinkerton grounds.

As the summer came to an end, Headmistress Marrs began separating us into groups based on our academic aptitude for the upcoming year of study. We each took a test to determine our placement as each group would cover different topics and move at a different pace. Because of my advanced reading proficiency, I was placed with girls much older than I was. While I was so excited to broaden my horizons and have the opportunity to expand my knowledge of literature, I felt a void in my heart knowing that Piper wouldn't get to experience it with me. Despite her immense improvement when it came to understanding the structures of sounds, letters, and words, Piper was still lacking in some fundamental components that hindered her reading and comprehension. Consequently, she was placed in a different course than I was which meant that our entire days would be spent apart.

After the first couple of weeks of school, we both grew fond of our new courses. Every night when we would head up to our room, Piper, full of excitement, would tell me all about her day. She would pull a random book from the shelf, flip it open, and read full paragraphs aloud to me. The power of knowledge had enhanced the spirit of my dear friend, and I was so excited to watch her shine. Because of her new accomplishments, and the fact that we did not have to wake up early for house chore rotations or morning school lessons the next day, I suggested we go on a little adventure. Grabbing a lantern and a book, Piper and I ever-so-quietly tip-toed down the stairs, creeping into the night through the open window on the ground floor. “Where are we going?” Piper exclaimed in a nervous whisper. “Just trust me, you will want to be surprised” I replied. We crossed the wide-open fields, the light from the full moon illuminating our path, and our bare feet grazing the cool ground below. The rustling winds filled the air that night, sending shudders down my spine as we embarked on the secret location. There it was. Tucked away in the furthest corner of the grounds of Pinkerton stood a garden of weeping willows, their canopies draping over a stone bridge that extended over the top of a stream, its crystal water occupying the depths below the surface.

This hideaway was pure magic. Piper and I settled on the bridge, the peaceful stream flowing in the background. We were fascinated with this water, the way it ebbed and flowed under the light of the luminescent celestial body peeking through the trees. Peeking over the edge, we saw a glimpse of our reflections staring back at us: Two best friends.

Fireflies lit up the sky, their dim lights flickering around us. I set up the lantern and handed Piper the novel we brought with us. "It's your turn to tell the story," I said. With a beaming smile, Piper began to read the first lines of "Gone with the Wind" right off the page. I knew she was over the moon, and frankly, so was I. While it couldn't possibly compare to a mystery novel, the time I spent listening to Piper narrate was golden.

The next morning, I woke up to the most remarkable sunrise I had ever seen since I had been at Pinkerton. Painted in streaks of ambient shades of orange and yellow, the sky welcomed me with its warm hue, leaving me mesmerized by its beauty. I rolled over on my small mattress to face Piper's bed so I could wake her before the sun ascended into the morning sky, only to find that she was not there. With a strange feeling in my stomach, I sprung out of bed and investigated the entire upstairs quarters but saw no sign of Piper or any of the other girls. Racing down the stairs, I heard commotion coming from the courtyard outside. As soon as I opened the door, I couldn't believe what was right in front of my eyes. I emerged through the frantic crowd of girls who were blocking my field of view. Their whispers rang through my ears, propelling me forward through the morning haze.

And there she was. My Piper. Her cold hands were clenched around my copy of "Gone with the Wind;" She never let it from her grasp.

It was a beautiful day like no other. The sky was clear, the birds were singing their beautiful songs, and the leaves on the branches of the trees were hinting that the crisp colors of autumn were soon to come. All appeared to be well in the land that I had become so accustomed to since the beginning of summer, or at least it appeared so to the naked eye. But there was an eeriness engulfing the grounds of the Pinkerton Orphan School. Perhaps it was the abnormal sense of calm on that perfect September day, or perhaps it was because Piper was gone, and it was all my fault. I couldn't bear the pain any longer. The inexplicable had been haunting me for weeks. I had to let it go. I grabbed a pad of parchment and some ink and started to write:

"My Dear Piper,

You didn't have to go so soon. There are so many books for you to learn to read. There are so many adventures we have yet to embark upon. There are so many mysteries that remain unsolved. How am I ever going to live without my source of light? How could I be so stupid? I killed you! You are dead because of me. I wish you had never met me. I wish I had never introduced you to my books or taught you to read. I should have never been so foolish to take you into a place, our hideaway, of such danger. I should have known. I should have known you would be curious, as any true detective must be. I should have known you would go back to the bridge that night without me after we had finally crawled into bed. All I wanted was to give you the world, to give you knowledge, but all I did was take it away. You were so tired that night. You had been reading all day long, yet you went back. You wanted more. You deserved more. I

hate that bridge. I hate the water that extends so far under its depths. I hate that it stripped you of your life. You never let go of our last story, and I hate that. I hate that you didn't let go. I hate that I love you more than I have ever loved anyone. Because this time, it hurts. Piper, I'm sorry."

I folded up the tear-stained parchment and held it tight between my hands. I took the familiar path through the fields towards the weeping willow bungalow that secluded our hideaway. I stepped onto the bridge, looking over the ledge into the water. The water that used to be so peaceful and translucent stared me back in the face, this time reflecting the face of death. I slowly unfolded the letter, my eyes searching for answers in my words of grief. I held it up in the air, the paper crinkling within my palm. And I let go. Gone with the wind, I watched as the memory of my friend disappeared into the horizon.

*--Abby Harris*

## **A Letter to Rose-Marie**

The letter he had sent me I held dear

I could not shake our never-ending fate

His words igniting all my frozen tears

Our love ran deep and turned to crystal hate

*The letter I sent to her broke my heart*

*My dearest whom I love forever so*

*Because of me, we have to be apart*

*My foolish ways, why did I let you go?*

He took a piece of me I want it back

*My whole and portion lies within her soul*

Just empty words to line the parchment stack

*I meant the words lined on that tear-stained scroll*

My James it's time I have to set you free

*I'll be with you again my Rose-Marie.*

***--Abby Harris***

## **Earth Day Sonnet**

Within my heart there lives a special song.  
She dances to the beat until she falls.  
The quiet tune begins and lasts so long:  
birds in the trees recite their wondrous calls.  
Beginning with the softest summer hymns  
the dainty petals falling from their stems;  
enchanted with the dancing of the limbs  
The beauty fills the forest with such whims.  
It flows with such a soothing serenity  
bewitching with a melodic rhythm.  
Fulfilling all our hopeful eternity,  
the sun casting its rays in rainbow prism.  
Give thanks to Earth for its abundant beauty.  
To keep her safe is our most sacred duty.

***--Lillian Radzikin***

## Country Angel

Like May apples that cluster in the field,  
my love for you grows deeper more and more.  
It is as strong as any soldier's shield.  
It doesn't merely fly, on wings it soars.

Like mountain laurel growing in the wood,  
My love for you stands tall, majestic, proud.  
Everything that struck it, it's withstood.  
It wraps around my life, a silken shroud.

Like flower petals in the mountain breeze,  
my love for you is graceful and as free  
as red birds taking flight, the sky to seize.  
My love for you is as your love for me.

You are my angel, my sweetest mountain flower,  
I know my love for you will never sour.

*--Dakota Hensley*



## Love Lyric

Those hazel eyes that reach my soul  
My love for you is surely whole  
As true as stars come out at night  
My love for you will take its toll

Your presence near feels so right  
Making my poor heart go tight  
I know one day you'll take your leave  
But I relish in short lived excite

Your heart I hope to soon achieve  
In true feelings I hope you believe  
Emotions as true as those I bare  
Truer than a summer's Eve

One day these feelings you may share  
We would make such a pair  
For you I will always care  
A love like ours would be quite rare

*--Sarah Grimes*

## **Dream**

I dare to think of such a dream  
Down in my heart I often scream  
I hold so tightly through the night  
This thought of mine I wholly deem

It reoccurs, a rarest sight  
I dare to travel towards its light  
I often wonder what I could be  
If I let go and could take flight

I climb and crawl the tallest tree  
Relive my blessings, count to three  
You made me feel a special way  
But after everything I'm free

My dream was ere for you to stay  
In hopes we'd make another day  
But in my room alone I lay  
I wish this dream would go away

*--Lillian Rakzinas*

## **My Sidney Starr**

“Tag! You’re it,” Sidney exclaimed as she aggressively plastered her hand into my shoulder and sprinted away into the opposite direction. Her small, but mighty, legs propelled her forward as she accelerated like a bullet through the playground courtyard. I, begrudgingly, began to chase after her, my Twinkle-Toe sneakers illuminating the shadows of my stride on the ground below me. It had been a long twenty minutes of recess when Mrs. West, ever-so-graciously, blew the whistle indicating that it was time to go inside. I scanned the crowd of fellow seven-year-olds for Sidney who, in true character, gave me “the look,” followed by an almost-gibberish regurgitation of “Last one to the line is a rotten egg!” Perspiring and in disarray as my well-tamed curls were now in a ball of frizz draped along my neck and shoulders, I followed my firecracker of a best friend to the line where I would humbly hold the title of “Rotten Egg.” Now, Sidney and I weren’t complete opposites, she had just yet to embrace her diva side, a skill I had mastered beyond proficiency. She was still stuck in her tomboy era, which I truly didn’t mind until she had me outside digging in the dirt or closely examining creepy, crawly bugs. Nonetheless, our friendship exemplified the utmost compatibility, and we were inseparable.

After school, we both hopped into Sidney’s mom’s minivan and went back to their beautiful two-story suburban home. Sidney led me to her bedroom, painted entirely blue with green accents, where we plopped onto her bean bags and engaged in our regularly scheduled, after-school programming of the newest “iCarly” episode. We giggled and chatted throughout the entire episode, getting into character and carrying on our own version of the plot during the commercials. We never had to discuss who was who. The resemblance and personalities of us in relation to our designated characters was cunning. Sidney’s long blonde hair that was natural in its tangled texture, her radiant, bold, and energetic persona, and her tendency to wear plaid, Bermuda cargo shorts when it obviously wasn’t the most fashionable choice had, iCarly character Sam, written all over it. Instigating our daily antics, Sidney did most of the talking anywhere we went. Never meeting a stranger, she made sure to let any and everyone know that we were twin sisters any time we went out in public. Always providing, sometimes relevant, commentary, Sidney was sure to give feedback or sound effects for a little flare in every conversation.

Fearless by nature, she was a true leader. On field trips, she was always our teacher’s right-hand man helping with head counts, buddy system pairs, and rounding up our wild classmates when it was time to go. Team captain of our soccer team, she led our misfit group of girls in cleats to victory with her fierce leadership and unmatched athleticism. She cheered me on as I learned to ride my bike, taught me how to swing a golf club at her dad’s driving range, and how to open my eyes underwater without my goggles. In my eyes, Sidney was a true Renaissance woman with wisdom and skill far beyond her years. The light that radiated within her was far brighter than the sun. She was my soulmate, my leader, and my greatest inspiration. She taught me how to be bold, showed me what it looked like to be fearless, and provided me

with the most genuine source of love. She equipped me with all of these things in perfect time, so I had these tangible qualities to take with me when I moved away. However, this didn't make the aftermath of "goodbye" any easier. Sometimes I wonder if she knew we would be separated. Perhaps she was my guardian angel, placed in my life to prepare me for the world that I would soon have to embrace on my own. Like a shooting star, Sidney was a once-in-a-lifetime best friend that one could only fathom in the realm of their most treasured wishes. And like a shooting star, she came and went from my life in what seemed like an instant. But I know she is always with me in the depths of my heart as I see little pieces of her in everything I do. She was a shooting star, my Sidney Starr.

*--Abby Harris*

## Teardrops in the Winter Wind

Snow fell as Vicky Osborne sat on a bench in the middle of an old city long past its prime, watching all the happy couples pass by. She wanted to retreat to a den of bedsheets and pillows. She knew all she'd find were needles and razor blades and the bears strewn out. Besides, someone expected her.

Coming up on the sidewalk was Brittany Sizemore in a pink chesterfield, white sweater and wool pants. She had on a grayish toboggan with strands of beige blonde hair peeking out. One of those Wild West stars that sheriffs wear was pinned on her hat but this one was felt. She waved a pink-gloved hand at the chocolate-colored haired girl shivering on a park bench. The two hugged and kissed each other on the cheek.

"How have you been, Vicky? You sounded so sad on the phone," Brittany said in her non-accent.

"Brad broke up with me," Vicky replied in her Appalachian trailer park accent. "Only a few days till Christmas and now I got to deal with this shit," Vicky replied, her voice breaking. Tears streamed down her face. She held it in for as long as possible. She didn't care. She needed this. She looked big and tough but her closest friends knew that she was nothing more than a kitten with a mean look on her face.

Brittany knew Vicky hadn't been this heartbroken since sophomore year. Most of the time her relationships were brief events that lasted only a few days at most and she always broke up with them. This one lasted a few weeks and Vicky was now the one with a broken heart. Brittany held her best friend close, kissing her on the forehead. "Don't cry. We'll spend the whole day together. You'll forget all about him."

Vicky sniffled. "Yeah...yeah, who needs him?"

Brittany stilled, shaking both hands in excitement. "This will be a great day. I'm sure of it." They walked to the mall a few blocks down as the streetlights began coming on. The parking lot was empty apart from a few dozen cars. The shops looked almost abandoned and some of them were. Vicky's green eyes darted toward the only place with the lights still on, Goodwill. It was old and not that good of a place but it was open at this hour.

"How much money you got? I got, like, twenty bucks."

"I got a fifty, a ten, some ones. Oh, wait, I have some pennies and dimes," Brittany said as she looked through her heart-shaped wallet.

"Let's see here. Alright, we got a hundred dollars. You take half and I'll take half. You can have whatever we don't spend. Deal?"

"Deal."

Vicky took her half and went straight to the adult men section. It was a place filled with faded leather jackets and torn jeans and t-shirts for bands no one remembers. Brittany went to the section for teen girls. That section was an ocean of pink with islands of purple and scraps of other colors. Some had a touch of glitter.

Vicky picked out a few old t-shirts and a leather jacket to add to her ever-growing closet of them. Most of them were at Brittany's house. Vicky always dressed like an old dad. "That always made Brad angry," she thought. "He wanted - no, no. I'm finally getting past him."

She noticed Brittany across the store, having wandered over to the teen boys section. She focused on it like she was taking a test. "She found something Western," Vicky thought. "I love how much she loves that stuff. It's cute."

She went over and tapped Brittany on the shoulder. It was the only way to get her out of her hyperfocus. It was like her brain decided to shut down her ears and focus all that power to her mind.

Brittany looked back. "Oh, Vicky, I didn't see you there. Listen, I found the cutest shirt. It's a pic of James Dean from *East of Eden*. It's one of my favorite movies and James is the cutest. Do you like it?"

"Yeah, it'll look great on you. Listen, can we get out of here soon? This place is reminding me of him."

"Sure. I'll take this and go."

They went up to the glass box filled with various knick knacks and used jewelry that was the store counter. The cashier greeted them with that fake store smile and started ringing them up.

Her eyes narrowed in recognition. She asked in a Southern Belle accent, "Have I seen y'all before?" before saying, "Wait, wait...y'all are cheerleaders, aren't you?"

Averting the cashier's black-eyed gaze, Brittany stammered, "Uh, y-yeah. Harlan County High School." She never did well with strangers.

"Y'all've been winning some of those championships, ain't ya?"

"Yep. Three state, three regional, and three national. Hopefully, we'll be able to go to Worlds this year," Vicky chimed in. "We've tried so hard to win a spot and we never get in."

"Ain't this your last year?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, it is," Vicky replied.

"Aw, that's too bad. The team's gonna suck without y'all. Well, I'll be praying for you. That'll be \$63.80."

"What the fuck? We only bought four things," Vicky whispered.

With their items in plastic bags, they went off into the winter wonderland. It was ten now. The air grew colder. An incomplete silence filled the air, broken up by the quick roar of passing cars.

"Where now?" asked Vicky.

"How about the ice rink? We can skate on our socks."

The ice rink was a new addition to this Appalachian town, intended to bring some fun to the region. It was in the middle of the mall's parking lot, right off the highway. It was a popular place to create memories or to relive old ones.

A tall, dark-skinned Indian girl stood at the rink, watching the cars on the highway. She wore a nice white winter coat with some winter pants and brown Uggs. Her dark, wavy hair was

tied back in a long ponytail. She was a familiar sight to the two, one of their closest friends. Her name was Krishna Sundar but everyone called her Kris. Her father was a surgeon and a Dalit and her mother was an OBGYN and a Brahmin, both Christians from Tamil Nadu.

"Kris?" asked Vicky.

Kris turned around and beamed. "What are y'all doing here?" she asked, her accent a linguistic masala. It was Appalachian with a teaspoon of Tenglish and a pinch of Indian English.

"We could ask you the same question," Brittany said. She and Vicky hugged their fellow cheerleader and close friend.

"Well, *amma* sent me out here to buy ham before Christmas. She was like 'Krishna, the ham expires tomorrow. Go and buy some. We're expecting the family,'" she said, imitating her mother's accent. "And y'all know how big an Indian family is, especially mine, and half of them are already at my house. So I bought, like, fifty dollars worth of ham and decided to play hookey for a bit to get away from all the noise."

"Well, Brittany here's trying to cheer me up. Me and Brad broke up. Shit, I can't even say it without tearing up."

Kris hugged Vicky tight, resting her chin on her head. "Aww, I'm so sorry."

"Hopefully, the ice rink will help her forget."

"I love it. I can't skate for shit but it's fun."

Vicky laughed. "It's even better when it's free. I'm as graceful as an elephant. I can do cheer and that's as graceful as I can be. Come on. I want to spend the night on the ice with my two best friends."

"Well, this is our last winter together," Kris said. "Let's make it count."

The three tried to balance themselves on the ice. Brittany stilled, shaking one hand in anxiety. Kris tried to balance herself like she was on a tightrope. She plummeted several times. Vicky seemed to be the only one who could stand upright. She did collide with the wall several times, though.

"Maybe we should treat this like a cheer routine," Brittany suggested. "Because right now my heart is about to come out of my throat. I need a backspot and a base."

"I second that," Kris huffed as she got off the ice. "If I fall again, I'll shatter my ass."

Vicky laughed. "Why? I love watching y'all fall."

Brittany and Kris grabbed Vicky's hands and managed to balance themselves. They couldn't do anything impressive but they could function as something worthy enough to be on the ice. They stopped after their feet were as cold as ice, realizing that skating on socks was not the most brilliant idea, and the soreness from falling started setting in.

"If only Paris and Alex were here," Vicky mused. "Paris is pretty great at ice skating from what I remember from that trip we took to Quebec we took last year and Alex is pretty caring. He's a great listener too. You can talk to him for hours."

"Well, Paris was doing church stuff. She probably roped Alex in somehow. I sometimes envy their friendship," Kris mentioned. "Like we're all close friends but those two are like brother and sister."

"Our friendship is like that," Brittany said, gesturing to her and Vicky. "We're practically sisters. Hey, what time is it?"

"Oh, fuck, it's 10:30," Kris screeched. "Mom expected me home an hour ago."

She laughed. "Fuck, she's gonna kill me. Love y'all." She had only enough time for a hug and kiss as she picked up her shoes and raced to her mother's Mercedes SUV and sped off.

"Well, I guess we should get home."

Vicky sighed. "Yeah. Let's take our time."

"Something bothering you? It's not him, is it?"

"Who? Oh. Oh, no. No, it feels like it should be. To be honest, I kind of forgot about him." She smiled a somber smile before continuing. "I guess your treatment worked. But it's not him. I don't know what it is. I guess with Kris going and with you going soon, I'm going to be all alone."

"You know," Vicky began, "until I got held back in seventh grade and put in your class, I had no friends. I was that weird girl whose parents was junkies but no one wanted to mention it. I was the bad girl with the bad grades who was too masculine for the girls and not masculine enough for the boys. My life sucked. I hated myself. One day, I failed English and got held back and this real bitch of a teacher, Ms. Samuels, decided I needed a tutor. So she stuck me with this weird autistic girl and - fuck I'm crying again - and that was the best thing that ever happened to me."

The tears flowed like melted snow. Brittany hugged her friend close. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me too. Until Ms. Samuels paired me up with you, I had no one. All the kids thought I was some alien or something. They didn't treat me like a normal person. It was like there was one way they talked to their friends and one way they talked to me. They talked to me like I was a lil' kid. It was like I was some outsider. When I met you, I finally had someone who treated me like a normal person. That gave me so much confidence. That's why I became a cheerleader freshman year..."

"And the day after you got in you ran up to me in the hall shaking your hands and begging me to be a cheerleader. I wasn't into that shit but I could see how excited you was so I agreed to try out." Vicky wiped the tears from her eyes and smiled. "Now, I have more friends than I can count."

"I've been considering going to Southeast with you."

"No, don't give up your dreams for me."

"Not at all. I can get my first two years here and then go off to Louisville. I've heard that a lot of people got degrees for free there. My mom has been worrying about the cost anyway. Besides," Brittany began with a slight smile, "I don't know if I can be away from you and Kris and Paris and Alex. I'd miss you guys too much."

Still crying, Vicky smiled. "That's a relief. Can I stay at your place tonight?"

"Of course. Now, come on. It's getting late."

Vicky sniffled. "Thanks. I love you."



"Love you, too," Brittany said with a smile.

***--Dakota Hensley***

### **Life of the Streets**

As I walked down the busy street  
I saw a homeless man  
He was tired, eyes heavy  
Life was not his fan

I took a seat next to him  
And asked about his plans  
Just how he'd ended up like this  
He looked down at his hands

He spoke of unimaginable sorrows  
From drugs, deceit, and abuse  
He never seemed to gain his footing  
He never found his use

Bad habits had become his crutch  
He'd given all he had  
To feed his endless addictions  
But in that moment he was glad

He said he had a family  
One he barely knew  
A wife and daughter both alive  
But their disdain just grew

They didn't like the man he was  
For they expected more  
Out of a husband and a father  
Titles he no longer bore

He hoped one day he'd leave the streets  
And dreamed of making good  
A life he could be prouder of  
He would do all he could.

*--Sarah Grimes*

## Crazy Hat Day

I walked into my 1st-grade classroom greeting all my friends, giggling as we exchanged our funny morning jokes, and wondering who the new boy was. In the corner of our class library stood this mystery boy, his hair buzzed to resemble the fuzz on a sweet Georgia peach, his oversized jacket swallowing his frame and stature, and his arms uneasily crossed over one another. I was intrigued by this human that I was observing because his presence felt strangely familiar. I decided that approaching him and introducing myself would be my best option since he seemed nervous and was all alone. As my little stride covered the ABC carpet below me, and my eyes were set on the reading nook, the boy turned around, exposing his face to where it was visible enough to recognize. I immediately came to a halt because I could not fathom what I had just seen.

Several weeks before this occurrence, our first-grade class hosted a school-wide spirit week. All grades of North Lee Elementary decked the halls in their spirited gear; Even the teachers were participating! From crazy hair day, to pajama day, to blue and red day, every student went all out in their effort to ensure their grade level won the school-wide spirit stick. As reigning champions, our class wanted more than anything to hold this title again, so on Friday, crazy hat day, we went out harder than ever. Hats were brought in from all over the place. Hats with crazy animal heads on top, sombreros, pom-pom beanies, and cowboy hats lied on the bobbing heads of all the other students in my class. We designed accessories out of classroom supplies and made extravagant butcher paper backgrounds to fit the theme of our hat costume. We all swapped and traded different looks to make sure everyone looked just right for the final pep rally. And by an overwhelming landslide, our class brought home the gold for the second year in a row. We spent the rest of the day celebrating, playing, and trading costumes even more so that everyone had a turn with their most desired hat look. By the end of the school day, we were all exhausted and ready to go home, but feeling bittersweet as the best day of the year had already come to an end. We turned all our beloved hats back in, threw away some of our paper creations, and headed towards our designated dismissal areas. That morning, we walked in as a bunch of 1<sup>st</sup> graders wearing silly hats, but that afternoon, we walked out as proud champions. There was absolutely nothing that could kick us off our high horse, we were sure of it.

That had all come to fruition over the weekend, that was until my mom got a phone call from my teacher. I could tell by her mannerisms that my germophobe of a mother was internally freaking out as Mrs. West relayed the news through my mom's Blackberry. Lo and behold, there was indeed something that could kick us off our high horse, and that something was lice. The best day of the year had been absolutely tarnished by the little critters that were being transferred from scalp to scalp. Almost every one of my classmates had gotten lice from our hat swapping escapade, knocking out almost the entire class of 2009. My mom was in complete disarray, stripping my bed, bagging up all my furry stuffed animals, and tugging on strands of my hair with her rubber gloves to see if I too had fallen victim to the outbreak. After lots of scalp examinations, special shampoo washes, and several loads of my things through the washer,

thankfully no form of lice was found on my head. While I was all clear, the rest of my class was not. The spread was so bad that our class was excused from school for almost an entire week.

Once our school's administration was notified that every student had been all clear for 24 hours, we were all granted to return to school. We were all so excited to see one another, but a little reluctant to get close to each other like we once did. Nonetheless, I walked into the classroom greeting all my friends, giggled as we exchanged our funny morning jokes, but wondered who the new boy was. I was shocked that we had a new student in our midst, especially after the events that had just occurred the week prior. I observed the back of his buzzed head that resembled the fuzz on a Georgia peach, examined his oversized jacket that swallowed his stature, and noticed how he crossed his arms in a way that made him look uneasy. Walking over to welcome him to the class, my feet crossing the ABC carpet, he turned around just enough to where his face was visible to me. Stopping in my tracks, I was shocked at who was looking at me. It wasn't a new student. In fact, it wasn't even a boy. It was Rebecca, a girl who had been in my class all year long. She was easily recognized by her long, luscious, dark brown locks of hair. Her beautiful kinky curls that extended well beyond her back were gone. The same girl who was singing and dancing with us the week before with a crazy pom pom hat atop her head was now standing in the corner of such a familiar room looking like a stranger. Her eyes looked sad, her head hung low, but to me, she never looked more beautiful.

I had never really seen her face that clearly since her thick mane framed it intensely. I had never noticed the subtle pink undertones in her cheeks or her beautifully long eyelashes. I had never noticed how her chin, her jawline, and her little nose were so perfect, resembling that of a doll. She looked delicate with her porcelain skin, yet she had the most incandescent glow. It was almost as if the most radiant beams of the sun were glistening down right over my friend Rebecca. I had never recognized such beauty while also sensing such a significant amount of shame and embarrassment. I could tell she was ashamed and nervous about what the other kids in our class would say. I could also tell that her hair was her security blanket, the one thing that made her feel safe. I knew that I couldn't replace her long curls or restore her from the traumatic lice incident that cost her most treasured feature, but I did know that now, more than ever, Rebecca needed a friend. I began moving my feet again and approached the corner where she was standing. Going against all my previous reluctance, I wrapped my arms around her, gave her the biggest hug, and whispered confidently, "You look so pretty today." I could feel her face shrivel as she smiled with her chin rested on my shoulder. I had never met anyone stronger than my friend Rebecca, and I had never been more grateful for the little white bugs that brought me one of my best friends.

*--Abby Harris*

## Forever Home

Waking up to 17 different alarms all going off all at once, I lay in my extra firm twin XL size bed, one of my roommates with a very unexpected guest in hers, I struggle to take my morning hike to the communal showers in my flip flops, thinking to myself, “why on earth am I at college” The thought of waking up to the morning Chickadees song and the strong smell of freshly brewed black coffee is something I will always hold dear to my heart. The freeing feeling of running through winding dew-covered trails barefooted with my two furry best friends, leading my way. Spending hours and hours laying in my rope swing hammock, reading to my brother while we both enjoy the cool breeze. Many people often say that college will be the best years of your life, but oh Contraire, I beg to differ. I had always pictured myself as a Laura Ingalls Wilder kind of young girl, berry picking, spending time in my “Pa’s” garden, naming the animals that dwell across our 40 acres of forest, as I met them. I never would have imagined myself in a dorm room, where I willingly swapped Chickadees for screaming alarms and a very invasive train.

I never realized how growing up in a very secluded area would impact me later in life. In my mind my childhood was very quiet, the rustling of trees, songbirds singing their orchestrated tune with their friends, and the occasional deer prancing across the yard. The loudest thing on our property was me, I would spend my days creating fairy houses within the limbs of lifeless deteriorating trees, a couple of mushrooms from our garden, and acorn caps for the woodland creatures to use as hats if they ever felt so inclined. The trails would have me searching for my lost prince, who probably needed saving amongst our impenetrable abundance of woods. I knew every trail like the back of my hand, every twist and turn, every fork in the path was a new adventure ready to be discovered. My favorite spot to spend the 70 degree days was under the towering apple tree in our orchard, I would bring so many sketchbooks with me just to draw my surroundings and “live in the moment”, even though I spent every day under my favorite tree. My mom would bring me a pacific cooler Capri sun and a sleeve of peanut butter crackers as a snack and would even bring her own book and would read with me sometimes. I cherish those moments now because my family is so far away. I close my eyes and imagine the breeze, the feeling of it blowing through my hair, the smell of decaying leaves, and freshly turned soil, the sound of wood being split, my dogs barking at squirrels, it all felt so fresh. My deeply rooted connection to the earth will always bring me back home to my own little fairytale life.

I still have the scars from when my brothers and I climbed trees, a scraped knee or elbow was always magically healed with some essential oil and a kiss from my mom, we shot arrows from our tiny bows, and my dad even taught me how to wield an ax, he then used it to his advantage as I became old enough to chop wood for the wintertime. We were seldom ever sick, our air was so clear, and our water was so pure, it’s almost as if our well was a special enchanted one with the finest waters that could cure any ailment ever imagined. With my dad's handiwork and architectural skills, he built us a massive wooden pirate ship where my brothers and I would

camp out overnight because we would refuse to leave it. With our twenty-dollar telescope from the science store in refined awe, we memorized every constellation and name of every twinkling star that we could remember. It has since grown old with us and lies in our backyard with overgrown brush and consists of a pile of broken boards. Every time I see Cassiopeia or Orion's Belt I think of those cool nights outside in our pirate ship where we would study until we could no longer keep our eyes open.

Now I find myself driving over two hours in my trusty Subaru Opal to the Red River Gorge to feel the slightest bit of nostalgia that makes me feel at home. I have nothing against this beautiful bluegrass state. The white fences, the charming horses, and the bourbon are a huge part of my life now, but nothing will compete with my forever home in Wisconsin where I know every turn and every pass like the back of my hand.

*--Lillian Radzikinas*

### **Just 10 Minutes**

The ambulance sirens are barely audible and their blue and red flashing lights blur as I focus my attention on the pavement. I feel my body involuntarily drop making my knees crash onto the hard ground. I'm unable to speak or move as the events of the last several minutes are on a repeating loop in my mind. In moments like these, time seems to be at a standstill, moving in slow motion. I wonder why it's the bad moments that are drawn out. The ones you wish you could erase. I had just made the biggest mistake of my life and my best friend was the one paying the price.

The rap music that played over the speakers thumped heavily in the room making me feel it throughout my entire body. I wasn't able to make out the lyrics as the chatter of my classmates and the occasional "Chug! Chug! Chug!" sound as a jock tries to shotgun a beer. Beer had never been my drink of choice. I preferred the fruity stuff that tastes less like alcohol and more like candy. I wasn't much of a drinker but the few times I have had sips I preferred to not gag while drinking it. The main lights of the room were dimmed with a colorful strobe light making the room light up in quick flashes of yellow, pink and green. Around the room I was able to make out smiling faces, an intense beer pong game, and people kissing who are likely to forget each other's names by the morning. Somehow in the first thirty minutes of my being there I had lost Sage, my best friend who had dragged me to this party kicking and screaming. Parties aren't typically my scene, but seeing as it's the last party of senior year, why not? Or at least that's the attitude I tried to have about my current situation. Sage on the other hand is your run of the mill party girl. She's always been one for crowded places with people who are less than sober. We are opposites in that affect, but we come together when it comes to romance movies and our love for chocolate ice cream. We met in 6<sup>th</sup> grade after the elementary schools blended into one. We hit it off almost immediately. Her extroverted nature pulled me out of my shell and put me into situations like this one and my calmness brought her back down to earth when she stepped too far out of bounds. Sage was petite making our hugs more of me engulfing her and her attempting to wrap her short arms around my torso. She stood at about 4'11 on a good day while I was about 5'7. She had platinum blonde hair that contrasted my dark brown, almost black hair. Although we were opposites in many ways, we never let that bother us. We chose to see it as a challenge rather than a setback.

As I made my way through the crowded living room I'm bumped, shoved, and some drunken guys even tried to dance with me. Yuck. I tried my best to keep my composure and find Sage as quickly as possible as my confidence was wearing thin. I finally broke through the mound of people and found myself inside a small, modern kitchen. Its marble counter tops were littered with various alcoholic beverages and red solo cups. I took it upon myself to take one of those cups and fill it with the first thing I grabbed seeing as getting through tonight may take a little liquid courage. I sipped my drink, slowly taking in my surroundings. There is a plant in desperate need of water sitting on the window seal above the stainless-steel sink. It made me sad to think about how its owners have disregarded its need to flourish. As we sat there drinking to our hearts' content, it wilts unable to thrive in these conditions. Plants have become a passion of

mine. I had recently convinced my parents to let me turn our sunroom into a type of plant sanctuary. It took some convincing but after an ample amount of begging they let me. I was broken out of my thoughts as I came face to face with the warm, hazel eyes of my best friend as she yelled “Ella! Where’ve you been? I’ve wasted fifteen perfectly good minutes searching for you instead of dancing with cute boys and that’s an issue.” “Oh, the same cute boys you ditched me for the second we came in?” I replied with a knowing smirk. She froze for a moment then we both busted into a fit of laughter. She may be a little boy crazed, but she means well. “Let’s just forget the boys and go dance!” Sage said as she grabbed my wrist and pulled me out of the kitchen and back into the cramped living room. She pulled us into the center of the floor so that we were surrounded with no way of escaping, much to my dismay. I followed her lead as she started moving along with the music. I’ve never been much of a dancer, but I was going to try my best. I felt awkward as my movements were rigged and forced. As I watched Sage, it seemed to come natural as her body flowed effortlessly with the music. I could hear Sage yell “You’re overthinking it! Just sway on beat!” With that in mind I allowed myself to let loose or let as loose as I possibly could. As we danced, I was occasionally passed a solo cup filled with God knows what, but in an attempt to follow Sage’s advice of getting out of my own head, I drank them. All of them. Needless to say, I was beginning to feel it.

Dancing became less forced as my movements loosened up and the floor seemed to sway beneath me. I don’t know that I have ever actually been drunk before but I think it’s safe to say this classified. I looked up to see the blurrier version of my best friend smiling and drinking her own concoction. After she downed the entire cup, she looked at me laughing “Having fun yet?” To be honest, I was. I didn’t feel the same amount of constraint I had originally. It was like I was a different, more Sage-like person and I was enjoying it. I laughed as Sage grabbed my hands and waved them around in an effort to dance with me. It probably didn’t look much like dancing, but in that moment that didn’t matter. I was just happy to be there and be drunk enough to like it.

Minutes turned into hours as we became sweaty heaps of the girls we came to this party as. I was in desperate need of something to drink and probably a few ibuprofen tablets to subside the soreness I knew I would feel tomorrow from the dancing and the hangover. I eagerly dragged Sage off the dance floor in search of a drink and somewhere to sit down but seeing as most the couches were taken by people too drunk to stand and couples that are in desperate need of a room, a drink would have to come first. “You tired already? C’mon El we’re wasting perfectly good party time!” Sage whined from behind me. Ignoring her, I brought us back into the kitchen. It was almost as if we had entered a different world. The music didn’t seem to be as overwhelming, and the number of people was at a more manageable number. I spotted a few familiar faces one being Jackson Ackerman, big time hottie and full-time player. He has been at the top of my “do not associate” list since he hit puberty. Something about his newfound testosterone and a decent hair cut turned him into a complete jerk. Deciding that I should probably keep my distance, I looked around the room for a bottle of water, juice, really anything that wasn’t going to make my head spin. I opened the fridge, only finding a half-eaten package of Bologna and a single slice of cheese. Who lives here? A starving bachelor? I closed the fridge



back and turned around to find Sage sitting atop the island. "Sage, I can't find a drink and it is getting late. You ready to head out?" I reluctantly asked. Sage was typically a stay all night and crash on the couch kind of girl but sleeping at a random person's house who doesn't even have a loaf of bread to their name doesn't sound like a good time. She looked back at me as if she were contemplating her options. After about a minute of her giving me her "I'm thinking face", she said "Fine, BUT only if we stop for ice-cream. " That was a deal I was willing to make. With that plan in mind, Sage and I headed back through the crowd and out to my car. I opened the door to my Chevy Malibu as Sage asked "You sure you're okay to drive? If not, then we're stuck because I for one can't drive right now unless you feel like doing a little off roading." I felt pretty much okay I thought. I could at least get us to the store for ice cream and back to my place which would be about 10 minutes away. Surely, I could handle that. "Yeah. I'm good. Don't worry!" I replied. "Good because my life is in your hands El and I plan on living a long, LONG life." We both giggled at that.

My knees hit the hard pavement as I felt my world go numb. I was surrounded by shards of glass that once fit perfectly together to form my windshield. I was unable to process the flashing lights of the ambulance or the sound of the body bag holding my friend being zipped. I thought I could make it. I thought I could make it just 10 minutes down the road. How could I be so stupid? I'm the smart one. I'm the one who thinks things through so how did I let this happen? I could feel someone grip on my arm as they pulled me away from my intrusive thoughts. I look up into the brown eyes of a paramedic. "C'mon. We need to get you to the hospital to make sure you're alright." He said with the most compassion he could muster into his voice. "Maybe I don't want to be alright." I mumble as he pulls me into a standing position and supports me against his side as he walked me towards the ambulance. I looked over to see my gray Malibu almost entirely cut in half by a light post. The windshield was busted through on the passenger side where Sage had sat. "Here, take my hand." the paramedic said with an outstretched hand. I turn my attention back to him and slowly grasp my hand around his larger one as he hoists me into the large vehicle. He had me lay down on a stretcher as he began placing a blood pressure cuff onto my left arm. As he does so, a cop steps into the ambulance placing a breathalyzer into my mouth. As it beeps, he glances at the result and scoffs. I guess he is as disappointed in me as I am in myself. My attention eventually left him and focused itself on the white ceiling of the ambulance. Sage had trusted me, and I killed her. I'm a murderer.

I slowly walked to the grave that held my best friend's now decaying body. I put my hands up to my face as I took in her headstone, the handcuffs wrapped tightly around my wrists dug into me at the movement. Death to me had always been an afterthought, at least it used to be. I was too young or too busy to bore my mind with a fate I would one day face whether I worried about it or not. I guess it had never occurred to me that I wasn't the only one that was doomed to die in this life. My friends, family, and even Jackson Ackerman and all his testosterone were all destined to be buried six feet in the ground at some point or another. I hadn't imagined that I would play a significant role in that destiny though, especially not when it came to Sage. One drunken mistake took away my best friend and what will be years of my life. I deserved my

punishment though. I broke a friend's trust in the most brutal way and for that, I deserve what I get. I could feel the cop's presence behind me as if subtly asking me to hurry up. I acknowledged his presence with a slight nod. As I bent down to where I was eye level with Sages headstone and I read it aloud, "Sage Carson. Free spirit, beloved daughter, and friend. September 17, 2000-May 3, 2018." Tears welled in my eyes, but I closed them to prevent the tears from falling. She wouldn't want me to mourn her in that way. She would prefer I spend the rest of my life pursuing guys and going on trips, that way she can live vicariously through me. Maybe in a few years I will do that for her. "I'm sorry Sage. I'm really, really sorry. Can you try to forgive me? I could finally get you that chocolate ice cream if that would help." I said as I let out a sad chuckle. I placed my hand atop the hard headstone and rose to my full height. I faced the cop that had been impatiently waiting for me and soon felt his hard grip upon my arm as we walked towards his blue and white cop car. Once we had reached the vehicle, I took one more deep breath of the fresh air and spare a last glance at Sages grave as I ducked my head into the car and entered my new reality.

*--Sarah Grimes*

## Mom

My mom, conscious as ever  
Worries about how her face sits  
My mom stares in the mirror  
Looking between my backside and hers  
Wondering why hers looks much different  
She examines the rest of her body  
Her body, that's birthed four children  
Her body, that's been married for sixteen years  
Her body, that's prepared meals for her family  
Her body, that's cared for sick children  
As itself fights through the same illness  
Her body, that's spent hours driving her children around  
Her body, that's sat at a desk doing our taxes for days  
Her body, that's sleep deprived and continues pushing through  
I hope only one day, that I could have her body

*--Leanna Peterzell*

## Dad

The pain he's caused  
To us, to him, to me  
Every snap of the top of a can  
The crack and fizz heard after  
Cutting deeper and deeper  
The sharp words coming from his tongue  
Seem to be aimed for my heart  
How could he turn so fast  
Just after one, no two, maybe three  
It's quite unbelievable that just liquid  
Stale, nasty liquid in those cans  
Created this wounding man  
Out from my once loving father  
Please come back, Dad  
Sincerely, your hurt daughter

*--Leanna Peterzell*

## **Consider the Lily**

There's something you should know about me  
I love lilies  
Tall, pure, filled with sunshine  
Dressed in beauty and splendor  
Radiant from the core  
Even the dew cannot tarnish their beauty

Unscathed by evil and untouched by human fingers  
They blossom from their familiar bud  
and open themselves to the world

Provided beams from the sun  
and companions in the field, they flourish  
Don't you worry, they are told  
and they trust it

They live in righteousness, yet are humbled  
as their integrity withers with the world  
Their luminance fades as the clouds roll in  
and darkness leaves fingerprints on their petals

But without labor or spin  
They are clothed  
They are clothed with strength and dignity  
and the promise of eternity

Dressed in beautiful imperfections  
after 18 seasons in the field  
I am a lily  
And I sing at my opportunity  
to blossom from a new bud once more  
Oh, how much more will I be clothed?

***--Abby Harris***

## Gabe's Place

October 17th, the most heart-shattering day of my career, the fall breeze and crisp leaves have now created such a painful memory for me. The music starts, and I listen for the starting note and proceed to sing, I watch patiently as the wedding party enters down the aisle covered with the most beautiful dusty colored flowers, the muted neutral tones have always been my favorite, “ugh this bride has great taste,” I think to myself. I look up from my secluded corner of the chapel standing next to the incredible violinist, I choke on every lyric that I have practiced for countless hours, the words are trapped in my throat unable to come out. I am in so much shock I cannot even breathe, to my disbelief it's him, proudly walking down the aisle on the happiest day of his life.

October 17th used to be my favorite day of the year, the smell of fall, the crunching of leaves, and the sweater weather aesthetic. It now haunts me and the thought of that day looms over me like a stormy cloud. I woke up to a cool breeze, made myself a Pumpkin Chai latte, and started my day. The long brunette curls I had to tame. This only happens a few times during the year because it is such a problematic hassle and without fail, I have the urge to shave my head every single time when I attempt to do my hair. I have never been a girly girl which is why my appearance somewhat resembles a prepubescent teenage boy who just so happens to have great hair. I struggle to put on a decent-looking face of makeup and resist the urge to crawl back in bed and continue my dream about Robert Pattison convincing me to run away with him and open a mini goat bakery. Tragic that this is a dream and not the life I'm currently living.

Instead today I am performing at someone's wedding. I am a vocal artist who will take random jobs performing at weddings, funerals, and even the occasional bar mitzvah. At this point, I've been taking random gigs not because I love sitting through weddings but because I need to pay my rent.

August 17th, I met someone who changed my life forever. It was my senior year at Julliard. I had just come back from summer break, ready to move into my new apartment. It was only 10 minutes from my campus and had a beautiful view of the city. I had worked as a vocal coach for my town's elementary school summer program. The kids had so much fun and I had even more fun teaching them. I have always loved kids and would want nothing more than to start a family in the future. I wouldn't really consider myself a hopeless romantic, I have never been in a relationship and I often fall in love with everyone and no one at the same time. I like to observe people's relationships and like to imagine what their life is like with that person. Do they grow old together and have kids? Do they travel the world together saving endangered animals? Will they break up next week? It's all so interesting to me and keeps me entertained as I have no romance in my life whatsoever. After I had finished unpacking everything into my apartment

with my roommate and best friend Willow, we went to get coffee at the new corner coffee shop right by our apartment. Willow was one of the only people that really stuck around with me through everything since freshman year. She was the tiniest person I had ever met, if she wasn't careful you'd think one gust of wind would sweep her away and she'd be gone forever. She had blonde hair that she would dye extravagant colors every other month, it framed her slender face all the way down her back and graced her almost skeleton-like figure. She had the prettiest hazel eyes that often changed to green depending on the day. Willow was a ballet dancer and it was her dream to be a principal dancer at the ABT. I, on the other hand, was built to survive the famine and bear 16 children by the age of 26. If only my Irish ancestors could see me now, they would be pissed.

Willow and I met in an introductory class and have shared our love of music, boys, and sushi ever since. We arrive at the coffee shop, absolutely exhausted from moving boxes and hauling tubs up three flights of stairs all day. I proceed to order myself an iced matcha and Willow orders an iced vanilla chai. I take a glance around the coffee shop and start examining the people I see. An older woman sits in the corner reading a hefty book, ah *50 Shades of Gray*, definitely a classic... A couple shares a blueberry muffin a few seats down from us staring into each other's souls like demons, they've probably been dating no longer than 3 weeks, ew.

I look up from my lap and see a stranger sitting on the coffee shop counter, his lanky legs hanging from the countertop and ending in Chelsea boots. He drinks a black hot cup of coffee; his mustache hides his crooked front tooth and healed lip piercing. He's the kind of boy you want to spend your life with because you think it'll be adventurous and fun, but are too afraid to introduce him to your parents because his patchwork tattoos seem to be never-ending and you know they would never approve.

I kick Willow's shin from underneath the table, which probably wasn't a good idea because she will bruise instantly and also cause a very dramatic scene. I give her the eyes, **THEE EYES**. "Look at that beautiful man discreetly without causing a scene and look back at me with the same look of enchantment". Those eyes. At this point, I had already planned out our entire life together in my head. He looked like every other dirty cigarette boy in New York. I was in complete awe trying to drink my matcha when the condensation turned on me, my cup slid out of my hand and I literally dropped it on the floor.

My mysterious dirty coffee-boy looks at me and smiles, he scrambles behind the counter and grabs a towel to help me clean it up. "Good job," he said sarcastically, I physically could not speak, in response, I said, "yes, mustache man". Willow is sitting across from me, jaw on the table "trying" her best to keep it cool. I am beyond embarrassed, how could I possibly be this bad at existing? I now realize why I've never had a boyfriend. As I sit at the table questioning every single minor occurrence that has ever happened to me, I look up to see "dirty mustache coffee man" slouching his insanely tall figure over me, a replacement drink in hand the other stuck out

in invitation. At this very moment, I realize that I need to get my shit together and compose myself immediately.

He introduces himself, “I’m Gabriel, and this is my shop so take it easy on us we’re still kinda new.” At that very moment, my brain exploded into 70 billion little pieces, “Why is he talking to me after I called him “mustache man” to his face,” I thought to myself.

Willow then jumps in and introduces us, “Hi I’m Willow and this is my friend Stevi,”

He looks at me and asks “Stevi like “Nicks” ?

“Yeah without the “E” though,” I said in response. He smiled, wished us a great rest of our night and said it was time for him to get back to work.

After our little encounter with Gabriel, Willow and I returned to the apartment, she started lecturing me on how I need to start talking to boys like they're humans instead of 4 headed aliens. I find it extremely hard though because that is exactly how I see them. After a few weeks of settling into our apartment, I started making daily coffee runs just to see my mustache man. Week after week I would stop in every morning before classes. At this point, my caffeine addiction was at an all-time high. I would walk into the coffee shop and Gabriel would already have my drink halfway done, almost as if he knew that I would be coming in that morning; it was routine at that point, and I even got the loyal customer discount and the occasional day old freebie muffin. Willow and I had talked about Gabriel and his beautiful shop full of beautiful barista boyfriends every day for weeks.

One day while we were thrifting I stumbled upon this really cool vintage belt buckle shaped like a coffee cup. I have never in my life felt the need to buy a nasty-looking piece of brass so quickly in my life. I took it home, polished it up a little bit, made it look presentable, which was probably counterproductive considering Gabriel would’ve liked the grungy dirtiness about it, but I wanted it to look nice. The next morning, October 17th, I woke up extra early, put on my favorite pair of overalls, and a turtleneck, my hair in messy buns because it’s easy, and made my way down to the coffee shop. The butterflies migrated back to my stomach and I could not contain my jitters, (maybe it was all the caffeine in my system). I arrived at the coffee shop, opened the door, Gabriel sitting on the counter, legs dangling as usual. He had not started making my drink yet because I was 10 minutes ahead of our morning routine. He rushed behind the counter and started pulling shots like a mad man. I had a whole speech prepared but was so nervous, that I fumbled on the words and just set his gift on the counter.

“What’s this?” he said in confusion.

I forgot how to speak and just said, “It’s for you”, he traded me his gift for a cup of coffee and opened it. The look of awe on his face was so innocent and pure, almost as if no one in his life had ever given him a gift. He skipped around from behind the counter and gave me a hug, not a single word was spoken. I embraced that hug like it was my last, even though it was our very first. It was like hugging a telephone pole, my arms wrapped around him 4 times. My butterflies flew away and at that moment I felt so safe, like we were the only ones in that coffee shop, aside from Grandpa Jim in the corner drinking his 4th cup and reading his newspaper. He was so touched that a stranger would give him something, just because. Gabriel thanked me for being so kind and asked me for my phone number. At that moment angels came down from the heavens belting hallelujah at the top of their lungs. I gave him my number, with coffee in hand, and was beyond ready to start my day.

I immediately called Willow, who usually starts her day around 11:00, after the 4th call, half asleep, she finally answered. “GUESS WHO JUST GAVE THEIR NUMBER TO GABRIELL?!?!?” “THIS BITCH RIGHT HERE”. Willow lets out an exhausted and groggy “Whoop Whoop” and hangs up on me. The feeling of Gabriel's hug lingered on my skin all day long, it’s all I could think of, and I couldn't help but replay our interaction in my head, at the end of the day It felt like a broken record. I returned to my apartment after my night class, still in awe of what had happened that morning. I finished my nightly routine, put on my rattiest and oldest pajamas, and as I was crawling into bed I heard my phone ding. I about had a seizure trying to get out from underneath my weighted blanket, reaching for my phone.

“Hey Steve, thanks again for the buckle :)”

“Wydrn, I wanna show you something?”

SHEER PANIC is in my eyes. I am in my middle school footie pajamas, no make-up, hair in a plop, what on earth would he want to show me RIGHT NOW. I replied: “I’m glad you like it :) I’m reading” (I do not read). Why, what do you want to show me?”

He replied within seconds, “Meet me on the roof in 10 min :)”

Now, I know what you’re thinking, serial killer, ax murderer, this is a horrible idea, but I only had 10 minutes to get ready, and if this is how I’m meant to go then so be it. I threw on some mascara, ripped the plop off of my head, put on some sweats, and booked it to the roof like my escape helicopter was waiting and my life depended on it. I made it to the roof where Gabriel was waiting with a blanket, a very cheap bottle of Moscato, and a very expensive telescope. Donning his new belt buckle he welcomed me with another hug, which I gladly obliged.

Although it was freezing, we stargazed for hours, shivering on top of my building laughing, talking about our childhoods, he even made me a playlist of songs he hears while



working that reminded him of me. We stood together wrapped in that blanket observing every star trying to avoid going back to our separate lives. By about 2:00 am Gabriel and I decided it was time to part ways. He hugged me one more time, the kind of hug I will never get tired of, kissed my forehead, then walked me back to my apartment and said goodnight. I immediately sprinted to Willow's room, I leaped onto her bed since she was still awake and reenacted everything from memory. I was so excited I could barely sleep that night, and before I knew it, we were inseparable.

Gabriel and I did everything together: movie nights in the apartment, flower shop dates, walks around central park, and of course, indulged in many cups of coffee. Gabriel and I were soulmates, twin flames, we had the most perfect relationship one could ever hope for. We barely fought, and if we did it was always over who got to pick the next movie or over the last slice of pizza, he was always so kind and selfless, insisting I have the last piece of pizza and always willing to sit through the notebook with me for the 700th time while I bawled my eyes out. Gabriel made me feel so safe, I had a built-in best friend as well as someone I could kiss whenever I wanted to. He even ordered my favorite, impossible-to-find, special kind of lavender syrup for me and kept it hidden at the coffee shop only to use in my drinks. To my surprise even my parents were smitten, the patchwork tattoos, piercings, crippling caffeine addiction, none of it mattered because their little girl was finally happy and couldn't ask for anything more.

Until when I would talk about our future. Gabriel avoided every question, I would bring up my notes app and add names to my baby name list that I've had since the sixth grade, when I would talk to him about it he would just shrug and change the subject. Gabriel was a "live in the moment" kind of person, not a care in the world about the future, which is the complete opposite of me. Opposites attract though right? I have had my life planned out since I was little. I always knew I wanted to be on Broadway, singing my heart out, pretending to be anyone else because who wouldn't want that. I knew that Julliard was where I wanted to be, and I worked hard for it. Gabriel's dream was always to have his own coffee shop, but that was his only dream, he has what he wants, what more could he possibly ask for?

I will always remember this day because it is ingrained into my mind forever. October 17th, 4 years later, I had put my dreams on pause to help Gabriel run his coffee shop, sure we were happy, but I knew that wasn't my dream, it was his. My mom kept pestering me about engagement rings, trying to help me find one that I liked, something vintage and timeless. I remember my grandma had a beautiful ring that she would taunt me with when I was young. I told my mom something similar to that would be perfect, something simple yet so stunning. That afternoon Gabriel had used my phone to make a call, he came back looking pale and ghostly, his palms were sweaty when he handed me back my phone.

"What's wrong, are you ok?" I asked.

No one was in the coffee shop at the time; he looked down at me, directly in my eyes with the straightest face and said, “I will never get married.”

My jaw dropped and I froze, “What do you mean?” I asked with utter confusion.

“We’re never getting married Stevi.” he said sternly.

I have never in my years of knowing him seen him like this, and to be completely honest I was afraid of him. I could feel my posture slowly crumbling as if I had just been shot in the heart. “I love you so much Stevi, I will always love you, but I’m not the marrying type, and I never will be.” His words floated in one ear and out the other, a ringing played so loudly in my head I could barely hear. The shop door opened, and it was Willow, almost as if she knew that I had been stabbed in the heart and was here to my rescue. A single tear ran down my cheek, I grabbed my coat, ran out the door, and fell into Willow's arms outside the coffee shop, nearly taking her to the ground as Gabriel watched from inside. Willow had no words but foul ones, I had to beg her not to go back inside and beat him up even though she was more than a foot shorter than him.

For months I felt empty, like a piece of me had died, I never looked at the stars, just my feet, and I hardly ever smiled. I stayed in my room and Willow was always there to cheer me up. A few months had passed and Willow was performing in ABT’s production of the Nutcracker, she had reserved two seats in advance, one for me and one for Gabriel. The evening of her performance came, and I struggled to get ready. My mom had found the most beautiful gown at an estate sale and sent it to me to wear. I cried getting ready because all I could think of was how I had given up on my dream to help Gabriel live out his and now I’m here, struggling to put on a dress to go support my best friend who has been here for me through it all. I faked a smile and zipped up this absolutely gorgeous velvet green floor-length gown. The best part was that this dress had pockets. I reached my hands deep into the pockets and pulled out a tiny silver box, in it was my grandmother's ring, and a note that read, “Stevi, you are more precious than anything in this world, and I am so proud to have raised such a strong, and fearless woman, I have been saving this ring for you ever since your grandmother passed and It matches this gown perfectly, I love you so much, Mom.” I sat on my bed holding back tears, trying not to ruin my half-assed, semi-decent makeup. I remembered everything my mom had told me about love and loss and everything in between, then made my way to the arts center to see Willow perform.

Willow was absolutely transcendent, the most graceful human being on this planet, and I had the privilege of calling her my best friend. Every leap, turn, even her bow was breathtaking. I met with her in the lobby after her performance to greet her with a massive, overly priced bouquet and we went home to celebrate with a bottle of wine and some rerun episodes of *Friends*. Willow had inspired me to follow my dream again, I started taking opportunities to sing at gatherings and even had some small understudy and ensemble roles in a few Broadway

shows. It felt so good to be myself again and I was so happy to be doing what I loved. Willow was so proud of me, for finally getting back to what I loved most.

We had spent that summer performing to our heart's content until the weather started to get cooler and it was sweater season once again. Some of Willow's dancer friends had invited us out for drinks one night to celebrate the incoming fall season. I was finally at a place in my life where I could willingly accept an invitation to get drinks with friends and not feel guilty about it. I met some of Willow's friends, one awfully distraught woman, I believe her name is Delia, who appeared to be stressed, pissed off, and sad all at once was sitting with us. I couldn't help but ask her what was wrong and if she was ok. She started to cry.

"I'm getting married this weekend and my performer is in the hospital with pneumonia, the biggest day of my life is ruined and all I want to do is walk down the aisle with someone singing this beautiful Italian piece, and now I have no one."

Willow piped up, "STEVI WILL DO IT, STEVI SINGS, SHE'LL DO IT!" I paused and looked down at our new friend Delia who looked up at me with such hope in her eyes, "Will you please! You are a lifesaver!" She then texted me the song, the venue, the color scheme, and the rest of the details.

October 17th, the day of the wedding, I woke up to a cool breeze, made myself a Pumpkin Chai latte, and started my day. I decided to wear the green velvet gown my mother had given me the year before, it was quite possibly the nicest thing I owned and just so happened to go along with the color scheme. I arrived at the venue, ready to sing for this happy couple, hoping one day I'll be the one in the white gown and not the one singing.

The music begins, and I listen for the starting note and proceed to sing, I watch patiently as the wedding party enters down the aisle covered with the most beautiful dusty colored flowers. I look up from my sheet music in my secluded corner of the chapel standing next to the incredible violinist. I stopped singing, to see ... him.

It was HIM. I could not believe my eyes, I thought for a second, I was dreaming to make myself feel better about being single at a wedding. But I wasn't dreaming, this was real life. I regained my focus and kept singing, like nothing happened, "I am a professional" I thought to myself. "Wasn't the marrying type, my ass", "it's only been a year since we broke up and surely, he's talked about me?" I glanced back over at him and sure as shit, the utter audacity had me speechless: he was wearing the belt buckle I got him on October 17th, five years ago to the day.

*--Lillian Radzikinas*

## **Dreaming of Me**

I toss and turn dreaming, manifesting the girl I want to be  
Someone with long, blonde hair that cascades down their back like waves crashing upon an  
ocean shore  
With brown freckles that take on every inch of a pale face like a jigsaw puzzle waiting to be put  
together  
A girl with a slim waist that connects to wide hips like a mountain meeting a curved valley  
Someone with blue eyes that still see the world for the goodness and humanity it holds  
A heart that pounds for a romance as deep as the ones found on a television screen  
Someone with a soul yearning, pleading to make its mark on this Earth  
A woman who willingly and unconditionally places her faith in a higher power  
A force of nature who is unapologetically herself  
As I put together these pieces in my head, forming my perfect person I realize it's me  
I am who I want to be

***--Sarah Grimes***

## Sandwiches with Strangers

*This trip wasn't supposed to be like this. It wasn't supposed to change my life forever. I'm not made to be the headliner on the front page of every newspaper on any given stand. I don't think I can ever make that walk from the chair next to the woman who is paid to convince those people who sit together, scowling at me, all the way to the man who holds my fate wrapped around his tongue. Motionless, numb, weak in every single body part I can still feel, I realize I might feel this way every single day from now on. I don't understand! It was just a winter break trip to Miami! How could falling into three pairs of legs turn into this? I need to know from God himself whose fault is it? Mine? Or his for not moving the single bullet into a different path of trajectory? She'd still be here if He would've just done what Gods do best--control.*

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The smell of that sweet overripe coconut mixed with maybe a fresh banana floods my nostrils, filling every cavity and attaching to each hair follicle. As I lie under the large, burning ball of fire we call the sun, the world starts to spin around and around reminding me of my decision about 45 minutes earlier to show my friends how to really chase a mouthful of fermented agave juice, from Mr. Jose Cuervo himself, by chugging some sort of fruity and much too bubbly refreshment. I begin to wonder maybe it wasn't such a good idea to have precisely half of a one-day-old pizza crust as the main and only course of my breakfast, maybe I should've added at least a handful of goldfish. To put things into perspective though, would I rather be drunk, actively raising my chances of melanoma with loud music blasting in my ears in January, anywhere other than Miami Beach? The answer to that is hell no, especially with my two new best friends, it seemed as if nothing could keep me from my dreams, like I was meant to keep traveling, following my heart to whatever destination I wake up and decide. I really can't think of a better way to celebrate my first semester of college than this, the view of a blue body of water with the waves reaching up onto its rival and being pulled back each time as it desperately grasps a hold of the sand each time, with the other part of the view being multiple bodies of red-tinted flesh with a thick layer of shining sweat, almost glistening so much that I could manage to see my reflection off of some middle-aged father's swollen bicep. Wow, what...a...view.

"Earth to Erica! Woah, dude, she's gone, absolutely demolished! She can't even speak bro!" followed by a self-approving chuckle comes from one of the two sun-soaked young ladies around me. I can't tell which one exactly the remark came from any more than I could try to tell the difference between my hand and a starfish.

"Yes? Can I help you?" I reply with a certain tone of frustration with a hint of confusion directly from the fact that it was so hard to focus on listening to each syllable being tossed at my ear while the other ear was preoccupied with some atrocious song if you could even call it that. I

gather the energy to prop my head up using my arm, trying to make direct eye contact with whoever is behind my right shoulder. I focus on her lips to at least try to make out the words I am waiting on arrival for.

I'm awake now! Conscious? Maybe not so much. "What's wrong?" I ask wondering what my consciousness is wanted for.

"Bro, you just looked weird, you keep zoning out, looking all majestic, or some shit...ya know? I was just checking on you," she ends with a sweet smile, the kind that makes your heart all squishy and warm and you can't help but just smile back, thinking of the perfect response taking too much effort.

"Hmm, majestic you say? That's a new one! Maybe I was just thinking about how much I really want a lime to join this cold Corona in my hand or a nice sandwich with lettuce! And mayonnaise! Oh, what I would do for a homemade sandwich!"

I could lie here forever, maybe literally because of how sweat covered I am. I don't feel the best, or even mediocre at all. My stomach feels as if it's shrunk to a third of its normal size, and whatever that's in there won't be in there much longer. God, my skin! I think I can actually hear it sizzling, baking, as if I'm stuck in a giant oven I never consented to. My head, my neck, my eyes all aching, throbbing, every wave pulling me more and more to unconsciousness. I can't be the only one feeling like this. Cindy and Jenn! I snap my neck as fast as I can; even with gravity actively pulling me back to the solid ground my body longs for. Leaping unsteadily to my feet with my head continuously spinning me around, I take a second for a couple of deep breaths and align my vision the best I can. I look down, and there I meet eyes with Jenn first, but her eyes are wider, more concerned maybe. Wait! She's scared. Turning my head slightly to the left, still trying to focus on balancing on this spinning terrain, I see Cindy's small body sprawled over a black and pink beach towel, and I see her lungs expand slowly, then drop as if they're imitating one of those rides that rise and suddenly drop over and over.

"Why is she breathing like that?" Jenn peeps out in her trembling voice. I recognize her skin looks as blistered and covered in an angry rash as mine. No, worse! I think I can see it actively pursuing up her neck.

"Not good," is about all I can manage from my uncooperative vocal cords. "Wait, I'll be right back! Roni's has cold water I'm sure!" Fear fuels my legs to work together and propel me forward, using every muscle fiber in my legs. Approaching the dredged sand path that lead to the boardwalk, I try sending the necessary neural impulses to my legs, turn, turn. TURN! Coming around the corner, my right ankle disconnects with the received signals and slides into the sand causing my upper body to launch forward, falling into the traffic of the oncoming legs. Opening my eyes and realizing that I'm at the foot of three men, with eyes as wide as saucers, delays the original thought that propelled me, but quickly remembering the cause for the rushing, I spring to my feet, forgetting every single ache or wave of nausea.

"Ay, *princessa!* Why the rush? Are you okay?" the tallest one of the three towering over me exclaims.

“Help, do you have water? My friend is sick, I don’t know what’s wrong but she’s showing signs of overheating I think.”

“Hey Gabe, we packed well today, didn’t we?” this tall, tattoo-covered man says after throwing over his head to look at his friend. He smiles, turns back, meets my eyes, not caring about the strain in his neck from tilting his head so far down, and continues to smile a smile I need to see that instantly relaxes me. “Where is the *amiga*?” I dart forward, looked back to check to see if these men really are following to help out this random, short, white girl. Extending my arm in poor Cindy’s direction, I shout, “Over here! Quicker!”

I collapse to my knees beside her and turn around to meet the men who have kept up with my pace. “Water!” I snatch the bottle out of someone’s hand, eager to spread the liquid over her body, especially on her neck in desperation to cool down her bloodstream. After a couple of minutes of leaving cold things all over her body from their cooler, her eyes flutter open, and her deep, dark brown eyes search until she finds mine.

“Hey, I don’t feel so good,” she squeezes out of her under-functioning body.

“Hey, Gabe, grab her. Let’s take her to our car and cool her down, I just added more freon this morning,” the still-unnamed tattooed man orders. I turn to Jenn, checking to see that she doesn’t look near as red as before. She has water and a small bag of pretzels clutched in her hands, which I guess Gabe must have shared from their snack bag.

“Can you walk?” I ask Jenn.

“Yeah, I’m okay, I feel a lot better, but I don’t know if going to a car is really needed,” she expresses. Her wide eyes signal her concern to me about the current situation.

“Cindy needs it, you can stay if you want, I’m going.” I make sure she understands this is out of concern only for Cindy’s current wellbeing. I grab her an oversized white t-shirt just in case, but somehow forget to grab one for me. Gabe scoops her up and looks at me to tell me to follow them to their car. By the time we arrive at their car, I have managed to finish my water bottle and two snack packs of pretzels and the world had stopped spinning. The aches have started to fade, but the blistering has not, and they make sure I don’t forget they are there.

The men’s car is actually a white van, maybe ten years old, with paint that could use some touch up with the countless scratches. It starts up just fine, so tattoo man, with the bleached hair, opens the sliding door so Gabe can take Cindy in and lay her down on the padded bench. With the van’s impressive exterior, you wouldn’t expect much from the interior but it is actually clean and updated with wood trim. While I continue to take in the vibes from the van, Cindy sits up looking a little faded and dazed. Quickly my eyes meet with hers and she just smiles.

“What’s that grin for bro?” I ask.

“Erica, where are we?” she chuckles nervously.

“Just in our new friend’s van. They are the ones you might owe your life to. They shared their water, pretzel packs, and AC! Be grateful, silly.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. I am very grateful! Wait, where’s Jenn?”

“She chose not to join us.”

“She’s right outside with all of your stuff,” chimed in the bleached hair man. Maybe I should learn his name.

“Let’s go get her!” I exclaim, excited to see her now that we both feel so much better due to the kindness of strangers. I open the door, and to my surprise, she is bent over the small concrete wall with the middle guy in height holding her hair.

“Jenn? Are you okay? Want some water? Pretzels? AC?” Cindy says in her mom-like voice.

Jenn wipes her mouth and turns around, showing all of the blisters around her face, the patches filled in by a rash.

“Oh no, Mother Nature got you too?” I let her know my empathy.

“Well, I have an offer for you,” bleach-haired man says. “You don’t have to accept but seeing the state that you and your *amigas* are in, we have more ice packs, medicine, and ingredients for like sandwiches or—“ Before he can finish, I jump in.

“Woah, what kind of sandwiches sir?” I ask with excitement, realizing my previous dreams might just be filled.

“Guess you’ll have to wait and see,” he replies and winks at me. What a charming guy, I think. If he hadn’t helped us, we might as well be dead, and they also helped without asking for anything in return and just kept offering more. They couldn’t possibly be of much harm. I turned to look at Jenn and Cindy’s blistered faces, to see if they approve.

“It’d only be for a couple of hours, just enough to eat, talk and sit in the AC!” I try to convince them.

“Well, we already checked out of our rooms, so we don’t have many other choices for AC,” Cindy points out.

About ten minutes later we pull up to a baby blue-colored duplex decorated with cigarette butts and Corona beer caps all around the front yard, but I guess they say never judge a house by its front yard? The three men lead us in through a front door that looks like it was originally white underneath the layer of dirt.

“Well this is it! Oh, let me show you the other ones that live here!” says bleached hair man. I really need to just ask his name.

All three of us ladies look at each other in confusion wondering how any more people could fit into this master bedroom-sized apartment. After hearing the squeak of a door opening and the rhythm of nails running across the concrete floors, two black noses followed by a tail going approximately a hundred miles an hour come dashing around the fold-out chairs used as the primary furniture.

“Wow! Pitbull’s! Aww” I exclaim, my heart melting as I lay my eyes on these two new furry friends. “Did you rescue them?”

“Yes I did. Animals just have a very special place in my life, and I believe every animal deserves a chance at a happy life.”

“That’s so sweet! What are their names?” I ask, bending down to touch the thrashing bodies of the hyperactive dogs.



“The black one there is Destiny and the one with brown spots is Faith,” he replies. Then before he could continue, Gabe interrupts to ask how everyone is feeling.

“I just have a headache and want nothing more than a nap and a sandwich,” says Cindy. Jenn just agrees with a nod.

“I think you’re absolutely right! What a wonderful idea! And maybe some ibuprofen for our headaches?” I say with a charming smile.

“I think we can make that work, right, King?”

King? That can’t possibly be his name. Why King?

“Three ham and mayonnaise sandwiches coming. I figured you all want the same thing? I’ll go get the ibuprofen.”

“Thanks, Gabe! You’re great!”

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Opening my eyes is a struggle. God, my head pounding. What time is it? Where are Cindy and Jenn? How could I have let them out of my sight? I roll over in this soft bed that’s completely bare except for a gray, wrinkled top sheet and two imprinted pillows. I don’t know why but I’m so warm, my body might be literally sweating bullets. I guess it’s just the aftereffects of sun poisoning from my skin. I pull my body up, trying to orient my head, hoping to gain some vision to calculate distance; I can barely see my toes. Why do my legs look like this, bruised like the surface of peaches thrown against a wall?

Never mind that, I know I must push through this veil of fogginess and find my friends. I jump down from the tall bed, landing on that cold concrete that my feet have always loathed, the kind you see in a basement of a horror movie. I turn from one side to the other to try to take in everything around me to understand where exactly I am. On a large chest of drawers, separating two beds, there are water bottles, rolled up dollar bills, gift cards, and a couple of used needles. I step forward to examine more of the paraphernalia, and my toes brush against something with rough edges, sometime cold and hard. I bend down to uncover it from the large white t-shirt covering it. Smith and Wesson were wonderful guys I’ve heard. Maybe our friends are just collectors of their artwork?

I begin to think about how this might be a moment I will remember for the rest of my life. I look over in the other bed and there is Cindy, stripped of all of her elegance, bruised up as the other man who I never got familiar with lies next to her with his hands disrespecting her. I hear the running water in the next room over and realize what exactly is going on: Jenn left us to pursue her desires and was now with Gabe or King. I hear heavy footsteps coming down the hall leading to this room, and I panic. I tuck the weapon into the back of my pants and turn towards the man that must be King or Gabe.

“Oh, good morning, *princessa*. How did you sleep?” King opens, as if I clearly didn’t understand the situation here. My head burns with anger, knowing the one I care so much about is lying in that bed against her choice, the other one leaving us for these two men.

“Step back, now. Where am I?” I threaten, careful to not be too loud.

“Hmm, well you are in my house that you walked into, and I just figured after finishing those sandwiches, you and Cindy would want to enjoy some time with us.”

The man who is wrapped around Cindy starts to wake up; he turns to look at us to ask us to leave them. I scream.

“Get her out!” the new man says.

King quickly wipes the smug look off of his face and storms towards me. Knowing I only have one choice of defense, I let my anger get the best of me, thinking about my best friend lying there, sinned against who knows how many times. I pull the trigger, once.

I aimed at King. The other man looks at me as he lies between Cindy and me. I shoot him, dead in the chest; he does not deserve to live. Cindy sits up, making eye contact with me, praising me with that sweet smile of hers, the one that I love the most. Then she looks down, and back up at me with eyes as wide as saucers, and her face goes pale. Her finger traces the entrance of the bullet that saved her, that had now entered her upper ribs.

“Cindy, what happened? Why is the bullet in you?” I cry. “I’m so sorry, I was just--“

Jenn bursts into the room, looking at me with the gun in my hand as if I am some sort of serial killer, the three lifeless bodies surrounding me. The rest is black.

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She testified against me, and the only reason in my head that made sense is that she was embarrassed. Instead of being with her two friends, she chose to follow her passion. Instead of eating the sandwich and taking ibuprofen, or whatever it was that one took Cindy and me into unconsciousness, she took other things from Gabe. Now I waited, sitting on this stand to hear everyone’s opinions of me.

*“It was her choices that led to Cindy being killed!”*

*“She protected Cindy to the best of her abilities, but it wasn’t enough.”*

*“How could you sleep at night, knowing you killed your best friend because you’re careless and selfish?”*

All of these things I heard over and over, and I just wanted time to think about it all. But now? Now I have the rest of my life to think.

***--Leanna Peterzell***

## **Her Cub**

So lucky I am to have my Mother Bear  
Forever by my side, she will protect  
Eyes brown like firewood burning among an amber flare  
My savior from the beginning, she will hibernate

Destined to be the Mother Bear, for it was her fate  
She waited for the season's change  
Night and day, she grew stronger  
Breaking free from her internal cage

Morning light, shrieking winds, nature starts to dance  
For the Mother Bear welcomes her forest daughter  
Silence filled the air, Mother Bear in an amazed trance  
She nurtures the innocence newly brought into existence

As snowflakes elegantly fell and leaves flew in the distance  
Baby Cub grew up, learning of the world's infinities  
Mother Bear would eventually have to let her go...  
But she knew her cub would come back, just like every season's breeze

***--Bella Robinson***

## **Enigma of Mind**

My mind is like an endless enigma  
And there's nothing I can do to contain it

My mind is like an endless enigma  
Everything is always out of reach, a concept

My mind is an endless enigma  
Waiting for the day I can make sense of the chaos

My mind is an endless enigma  
Never remembering what it is that I've lost

My mind is an endless enigma  
Wanting to be understood, not judged for my entirety  
My mind is an enigma  
Waiting for the day I unlock my full potential, immeasurably

My mind is an enigma  
And there's nothing I can do to express it

***--Bella Robinson***

## Rebirth

The rain washes off the windows to the soul,  
And It is clean,  
Clawing Its way up as if from the yolk of an egg,  
A seed in the soil,  
Or the bottom of a grave--

Out from the murk of ponds where the frogs and peepers

Scented of loam and petrichor,  
The blood in Its veins runs as gold, hot from the forge,  
As It paws at the ground where Its heart is buried,  
And It puts the pulsing thing back where it belongs  
The only way It knows how,  
Devouring life like a ravening beast--  
And never has It tasted anything as nourishing  
As the meat and milk of the Earth,  
As the taste of dirt incites the metals in Its veins  
To sing of kinship and rejoice.

*--Cait A. Smith*

## **She Snuck Me Sips of Coffee**

Rose syrup stickies the memory so it cannot be parted from me;  
The grocery store doesn't look the same anymore,  
But maybe the bones of its walls still carry the bittersweet taste of coffee in a Styrofoam cup,  
The featherlightness of florals beckoning souls through the doorway and beyond,  
The freshly fallen mist over the vegetable aisle,  
Perfumed of youth and age; the green of comfort, and the bite of radishes.  
Maybe under the gloss and sheen lies the same dust that settled there between the cracks of the  
dull patterned tile,  
Warming in the peachy glow now dissipated by the hum of white fluorescents,  
Now evaporated into the expansive, empty space stuffed with bustling noise and noiseless,  
empty things;  
The chill of too-brightness and too-bigness in a world that used to feel small.  
Maybe here rests the ghost of the video store, nestled dimly under the buzzing lights,  
And I am sitting outside it, eating Bottlecaps and wondering at the fizz it leaves behind.

***--Cait A. Smith***

## **In the Strawberry Field**

Something about the smell of early summer dazes the part of the brain that remembers the burden of years on this Earth,

And the warmth melts the day into a haze of sunlight so bright it balls up like a sun in the belly of the chest and emanates outward,

Out into the berry fields where the dogs and the bees hover in time as if suspended in this honey-soaked day,

And the butter of the Earth sustains but a moment and recalls what it is to be light, to be whole.

***--Cait Smith***

## What Is

A silver car drives by sounding like an ice-cream truck;  
Sunshowers bless the front step through the eye of a prism,  
Splitting logic and thought with magic and wonder  
The way lightning splits a tree and frogsong calls down thunder;  
A penny tucked in your pocket as a token of luck; awestruck  
By well-water like nectar, with treasure in its throat; the mysticism  
Of reason beyond all belief shattering under  
The weight of what you knew you thought, torn asunder.

*--Cait A. Smith*



## Hypercarnivore

Lay me down in the creek-bed where you found me;  
Time is not finished wearing me smooth.  
There are cave etchings of creatures you've never seen before,  
Fingerprints smudged where dust used to be;  
They remember a life your ancestors knew;  
Lament the things we once knew but forgot.  
The forest whispers as a mother to a babe;  
How do I tell the duty of my soul I want to tend to other things?  
Honey seeps from the wounds of the heart and pools in the stomach,  
Where it nourishes and sustains.  
I plant the tulips knowing the ones I buried with my mother as a child  
Still come back year after year;  
I pluck a dandelion puff from the yard of my childhood home  
And carry it tenderly to blow a wish over mine.  
I lap the blood and salt from the dirt  
As the sun laps me clean from within,  
And it makes me as human as the beasts without names  
Who burrow their homes and bury their muzzles  
Smeared with the blood of berries and the ichor of bees,  
And they know what it is to be free,  
Here where the rivers run watercolor and gallop,  
Snorting froth and salmon over the mass graves of pebbles  
And souls, all worn smoother than bone.

*--Cait A. Smith*

## A Full Plate

Once my stomach growled for the fourth time, I did the math: two and a half hours since lunch, maybe another three until dinner. Both numbers felt forever to my teenage stomach, so I lowered my book and gaged Grandma Jackie. Shiny sewing needle rose and fell as she rocked rhythmically, her button-up cream sweater and teal slacks matching the décor of the Southwestern style living room. I hesitated to impose. After all, this was my first visit to the rocky, red land of southern Arizona and the first time in nearly a decade since I'd spent time alone—just me without any cousins or aunts or uncles or dad—with this paternal set of silver-haired grandparents. Knowing, however, that my familiar fridge-and-pantry hunting grounds were in a bluegrass state 1,800 miles away, I had little choice.

“Grandma, I’m hungry,” I whimpered, more-like a preschooler than a college student.

Her rocking chair stopped. Needle and thimble paused. Through her round bifocals, Grandma peered into the afternoon’s atmosphere as a rollcall of snack options marched into the living room one by one. Within seconds I’d made my choice: grilled cheese.

As Grandma’s svelte frame shuffled into the sun-drenched kitchen, *The Sound and the Fury* flopped over onto my thighs, and the golden memory of a Grandma Jackie grilled cheese started to melt and ooze into the cracks and crevices of my mind. I hadn’t eaten one of her sandwiches in...years. Divorce and opposite sides of the Mississippi will do that to grilled cheese. But now that we’d been reunited, the image of buttered wheat bread—which wasn’t used at home—turning golden brown on an electric skillet—which wasn’t used at home—with thickly sliced Velveeta—which wasn’t at home—seeped down the sides of my imagination and conjured an overabundance of saliva in the corners of my mouth.

A metallic hum rang from the kitchen as the skillet grazed the side of the cabinet on its way into the afternoon light. The fridge peeled open, sucked shut. A knife clinked against the glass butter dish. I felt a fool for not visiting sooner. I looked over at Grandma’s husband of 55 years, sitting in his black leather chair, unfolded newspaper stretched wide and blocking any view of his wrinkled face. Somehow, in some unfathomable attitude of ho-hummmness, that man remained unfazed by the everyday miracle happening in his kitchen.

I sank back into both the overstuffed leather couch and into my memory-activated mind. How long had it been since Grandma made me a grilled cheese? Despite not arriving at a

satisfactory answer, the attempted calculation oiled some interior hinges. Doors of dusty memories flew open to reveal a scene long buried by its brand of simple unremarkability: *In Grandma's kitchen. When it was mere minutes away. White wallpaper, striped by rows of blue-petaled, yellow-pistoled Van Gogh-like flowers. A dash of green to separate the rows. Me, at the round wooden table, large box of crayons unlidged at my side. Grandma, same neat silver hair, same round bifocals, stirring a steamy pot. She cooked. I colored. Both chatting and laughing. The moment smelling so delicious, so naturally complete.*

The aroma of melting butter and toasting bread knifed through my reverie. Water whooshed from the sink. The fridge peeled and sucked again. Oh, how much longer? A drawer slid open, shut. Surely 5 million minutes had been long enough. I contemplated battling impatience through action: walking into the kitchen, perhaps inquiring from the living room. Silverware clinked. The smell of toast thickened. Grandpa turned the page.

Then, just as began wondering if I should've left Grandma to her sewing, not bothered her and realized that time touches all things appreciably, my name gracefully rounded the corner in the familiar lilt of American-made Italian heritage. I erupted from the couch.

In the kitchen, the immense sunlight of the Sonoran Desert blasted through the tall windows, bounced off the light countertops, the white cabinets, the cream ceramic floor. It was difficult to hone in on my assigned spot at the round table. I squinted through the brightness, found my seat, and froze.

Along the smiling curve of gleaming white porcelain sat the most perfect grilled cheese. The bread was golden and freckled with the first vestiges of baked brown. A solid layer of melty Velveeta snuggled between two pieces of browned wheat bread, which were halved diagonally—the way any professional sandwich is divided. But there was more. Nestled next to the steaming snack were four long carrot sticks, bursting orange with a few drops of watery shine. A row of Granny Smith apple slices were splayed along the plate's upper curve, adding a light green color to the snack's muted palette. A handful of salty Fritos filled the plate's remaining space. Alongside the snack, a glass of ice-cold milk stood sentinel on the left while a folded red napkin sunbathed on the right.

I stared for a moment. It looked so good, so flawless. I turned and looked at Grandma. She was at the kitchen sink, already washing utensils, already returning the kitchen back to its

customary tidiness. Her back was to me, her head up, her eyes settled upon the horizon's burgundy hills of rock.

I wanted to say something. I wanted to tell her about all the things I was remembering just a few minutes ago: the flowered wallpaper and the large box of crayons, her simmering spaghetti sauce and staccato-ed laugh. I wanted to tell her how much I'd missed her, how sweet it was to be back in *her* kitchen. But I couldn't. Because I was 18 and still so preoccupied with growing up, I hadn't realized just how much I'd missed her. Now, sitting before that perfect plate, sitting in that gleaming kitchen miles and years away from crayons and weekly visits to Grandma's house, my throat closed up.

So instead of saying anything, I just sat and stared. At her, at the plate, back to her. I watched her wash the skillet and the spatula. I watched her hum, softly, some little tune that seemed to seep as much from her entirety as it did from her mouth. I felt it while she dried each dish, while she returned each to its appointed home. When she was done, when the kitchen had been returned to spotless and before she could catch me, I turned back to my plate. And even though I was no longer hungry, I consumed every crumb of my snack.

***--Clint Martin***

**D-Day 2022**

*For my father on the day of his dying*

On this D-stands-for  
Determination  
Dawn of a new day to find my new normal

Invitations arrive  
Come, Embrace the new normal of life  
Now's many faceted Gifts  
Release  
Yesterday's worn stories, happy and sad

Opportunities present  
a string of mystic pearls  
some still hidden within the darkness  
of the sea's mystery, or perhaps, my night

So many ways  
to remember you  
dancing and singing  
opening Heart space  
for me, you, We

Letting Love go  
Rippling vibrations, frequencies of  
astoundingly healing Grace

*--Tonya Stephens*

## **A Rendition of Frost**

Whose house is this I might just know.  
Her house was once a mighty foe.  
She will not see me stopping here,  
To watch her house fill up with woe.

My boxer dog must think it queer  
To stop without a dog park near.  
Between the post which used to stake  
The mighty family of yesteryear.

She looks at me for goodness sake  
As though to ask if there's mistake.  
The only other sound's the weep,  
Of tears streaming down to make.

The house is stately cool and steep,  
But I have appointments to keep.  
And miles to go before I weep,  
And miles to go before I weep.

*--Alex D. Vorhaus*