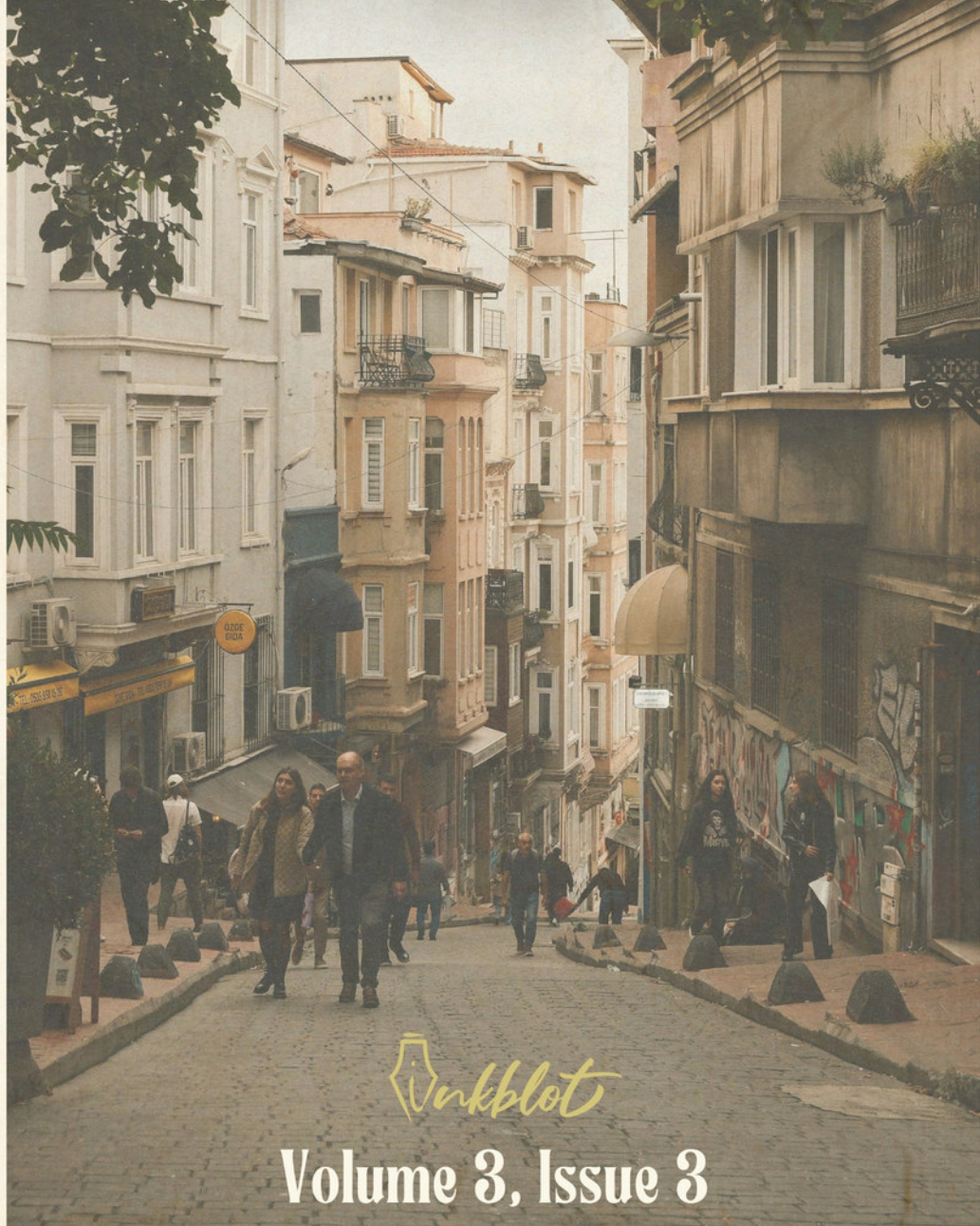


SONDER



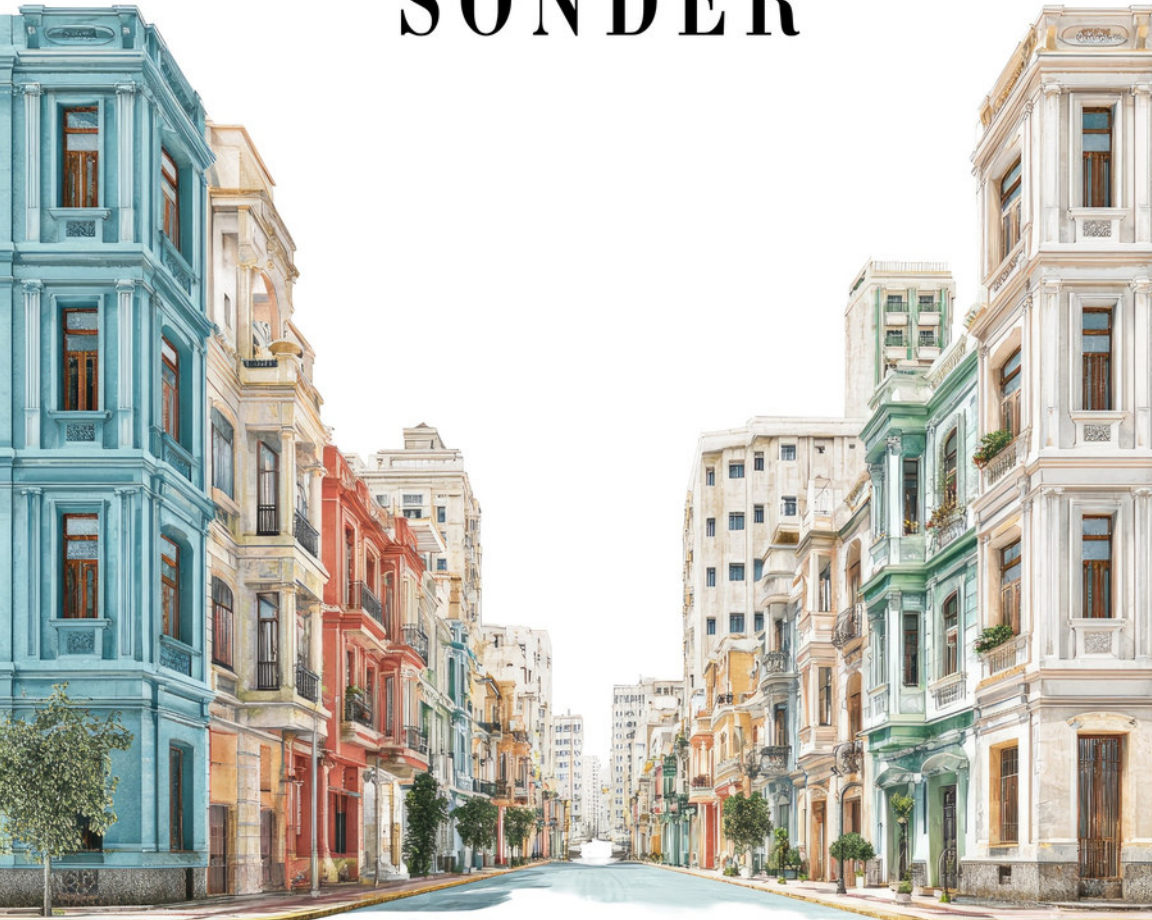
inkblot

Volume 3, Issue 3



Volume 3, Issue 3- Fall 2025

S O N D E R



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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY-IDAHO WRITING CENTER

The Brigham Young University-Idaho Writing Center provides a supportive and resource-rich environment where writers of all disciplines can enhance their writing skills, discuss revision strategies and principles of English, and increase their academic confidence and abilities. At the Writing Center, our goal is to give personalized instruction, promote independent learning, and provide a positive and comfortable learning environment where writers can receive helpful feedback on any phase of the writing process.

INKBLOT

Inkblot is BYU-Idaho Writing Center's creative publication. Our goal is to give BYU-I students an opportunity to learn more about the writing, editing, and publishing process in a productive and encouraging way. We find excitement in promoting well-written and purposeful poetry and prose written by students who share our passion for enlightening literature.

This issue of *Inkblot* is set in Times New Roman, with headings in Gloucester MT Extra Condensed.

While writers may take inspiration from their lived experiences, their written work is not always a direct reflection of reality. Unless explicitly stated otherwise by the author, the pieces presented in this anthology are works of fiction, and any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

The Writing Center strives to help students write in a manner that is rhetorically effective. For this reason, the writers published in this anthology have been granted a degree of license regarding grammar and spelling.



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FOREWORD

A Rorschach test, commonly referred to simply as an inkblot test, is a tool used by psychologists to gauge mental characteristics in a patient's personality. When presented with an abstract spattering of ink on a paper, patients are given the opportunity to share what they see. The goal is not to be correct or incorrect, but truthful. A few random splatters can become an elephant. Two clowns on a bike. A butterfly. A bat. An angry face. An omen. Each inkblot sheet is different, as is each response it gamers; individuals draw upon their lives, their struggles, and their identities to interpret the image before them. What is it that creates these differences, these vast interpretations, in which no one is quite right, and no one is quite wrong?

It starts with an inkling. An impulse. A thought, accompanied by the tiniest squinting of the eyes and the tilting of the head. A single drop of ink materializes on the tip of the proverbial fingers, to be rolled and shaped and refined into creation. This inkling inherits potential- but only that. A seed cannot grow without water, sunlight, and air. Similarly, an idea cannot be brought to life without passion, persistence, and determination. Each inkling, each spark of creation, must be fought for. Each must be earned.

When that drop of ink forms, some choose to ignore it; to allow it to sink back into the inky abyss from whence it came. Some choose to wipe their fingers clean, resistant to staining dye on their fingerprints. Others choose to seize that inkling and make it something more. The small blot of ink is rolled, smoothed, spread, scattered and eventually, transformed into a piece that is ready for consumption. This inkling, when seized with a fervor, fills pens and quill wells. It stains fingers and minds with unwoven worlds and untold stories, and creates messes that are more beautiful for having been made than not.

When finally our finished product sits before us, reflecting parts of ourselves that we didn't even know existed, we have a beautiful decision to make. Do we leave this piece in our notebook? Do we limit it to our own

eyes? No. We choose to take the leap. We choose to pursue more; we've come this far. We choose to share our hard-earned creation with the world.

We roll that inkling and create our own inkblot in the form of the written word, intended to question and be questioned, to observe and be observed. We tell stories because we know that we may be found along the way. Our words are powerful. They have the power to build, to rend, to tear apart everything we've once known and change it into something not quite real, but not entirely fake. Our words have the potential to share the blessing of laughter, the impulse of fear, the impossibility of love. Our stories have the potential to start worlds and cultures, and to refine the very definition of what it means to be human.

And it starts with an inkling.

Emma Brough
Editor-in-Chief
Spring 2023 - Winter 2024

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

You've felt it, but you didn't have a name for it. That feeling you get when you realize that every person around you lives a life quite similar and yet invariably different from your own. These strangers are just as deeply entrenched in their own affairs, their own desires and relationships, in their own lives, as you are in your own. Every stranger you have ever met or seen contains a depth that you will never get to understand or participate in.

I remember vividly the first time I had this experience. I was on a camping trip in Oregon, and my companions and I had stopped at a beautiful, historic lighthouse just off of Yaquina Point. As we were walking out of a gift shop, I saw a couple, perhaps middle-aged; the woman was speaking on the phone. She was trying to calm the person on the other side of the phone. "Calm down," she said, "What are you saying?" And then she stopped in her tracks, her hand flying to her heart. It was like the air left her completely, and she asked, in a voice I'm sure I will never fully be able to describe, "Who died?"

I was struck after hearing those words. My own stomach dropped like a weight, and just like her, my lungs had no room for air. We were leaving from the same place, both walking down the path out of the gift shop, and yet the intricacies of our individual lives left us with very different experiences. I didn't know this woman, but for a brief moment, I felt exactly what her life might have been like. I was experiencing loss without losing a thing. It was something I thought about for the rest of that day, and something I continue to think about now.

In 2009, John Koenig started *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* in an effort to name and give shape to those seemingly indescribable feelings.¹ That feeling I explained earlier, that experience I had at the lighthouse, and those experiences you have no doubt had yourself, are best explained by a neologism he coined: sonder. He writes, "When your life moves on to the next scene, [the stranger's] flickers in place, wrapped in a cloud of backstory and inside jokes and characters strung together with countless other stories you'll never be able to see. That you'll never know exist."²

1. Koenig, John. "About the Book." *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, <https://www.thedictionaryofobscuresorrows.com/about>. Accessed 3 December 2025.

2. Koenig, John. "Sonder." *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, <https://www.thedictionaryofobscuresorrows.com/about>. Accessed 3 December 2025.

As a human, and especially as a creative of any kind, you must make peace with the fact that you can never truly know; you can only imagine. But the act of trying, of recognizing the absurd amount of space and importance each person's life holds, will make your own life all the more enriching. I believe, just as John Koenig, that to name something is to feel it more intensely. Naming begets understanding, and understanding shapes the narrative of your life. Now that you understand, I would charge you to go out, recognize these experiences, and name them for what they are.

Begin now, as you read. It is for this reason that this edition of inkblot is dedicated to you. You will read these words, but you will never really know me, and I will never really know you, though we can both imagine. Sonder, and you will be all the better for it.

Aubrey Curtis
Editor-in-Chief
Fall 2025

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SONDER

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A SEASIDE LAMENT

Daniel Gifford

I've been walking 'long the shore
To remember those that I adore.
We used to stroll these sands together,
But now this ritual I do alone.

Solemnly, I search the horizon
For something within to lighten,
But I long for their company far too much,
So egregiously sentimental for that bunch.

This ritual I do to keep them close.
An old-time sentinel, I haunt the coast.
We were the sovereigns on this beach,
But now they're eternally out of reach.

Though our every day graced this clime,
I've lost the touch of sunshine,
So this sand is moreover coarse,
Damp and rough as dark remorse.

As I'm deep entrenched, I cannot leave,
For how could my longing be reprieve
In the ravine my footsteps have created,
All here on the shore,

All for the ones that I adore?

I am the epitome of forlorn,
Adorned with the weight of endless sorrow,
And I used to rejoice in bright tomorrow,
But all's to do is dimly wallow,

By the seaside,
Dead and hollow,

An empty man of sorrow.

FALLEN ANGEL

Bridger Roberson

Write my story, Ovid.
I'll tell you of all that I did.
I once lived with Father, and he loved me.
He presented a plan for us to leave.
I shouldered my wings and prepared to fly,
But I wanted exaltation without needing to try.
The Sun had other plans, and I was made to fall,
Plunged to the earth and banished to hell.
They called me Lucifer, but I am Icarus.
My father, God, but call him Daedalus.



BACKCOUNTRY MIYAGI

Isaac Wood

Up and down, back and forth, skins on, skins off, shuffle, shuffle, shuffle. Every move we make feels like an exercise, like ritual purification even. Every so often, a fleeting “whoosh” is heard and felt, but the promise of a “whoosh” feels like a promise made afar off more often than not; in that way, we are all Daniel-san, waiting, patiently or impatiently, for all the tedious effort to pay off. One must have faith if they really desire a “whoosh.”

Sometimes, I wish that I could take Mr. Miyagi on one of these ski trips into the backcountry. Beard Mountain looms to our south, Green Mountain faces us head-on looking eastward, and I tremble in their shadows as everyone but myself manages to get the skins off of their skis without blubbering and stumbling in the snow like an awkward fool. Surely, the sensei would give me some form of practice, some seemingly monotonous and laborious exercise that would prepare me for the motion of applying and then removing these strips of synthetic pelt, but I’ll just have to manage for now. We’re all ready, but we wait a moment. The skies are grey, but when one stands facing the mouth of a canyon with skis underfoot, the color grey is no longer a gloomy depressant; rather, it is indicative of the highest quality snow imaginable.

They tell me to send off, so I lean forward and begin to descend the slope, trying to do so with tact and poise. I don’t want to slow down and tip over in the waist-deep snow and make a big crater for other skiers to fall into, but I don’t want to squander these few intimate moments with the hill before I’m forced to re-apply the skins and do the laborious trek all over again. My turns are even, but about halfway down, I see two snow-laden trees growing close to each other. Between the two hulking, white sentries, the snow has piled high, creating a steeper incline just on the other side. I veer off course as softly as I can, line up with the trees, crouch, and leap as I pass between them. For about two and a half seconds, I’m suspended in the air. I imagine that if the Scandinavian and Chinese fathers of downhill skiing ever caught enough of a break from their immense responsibilities to

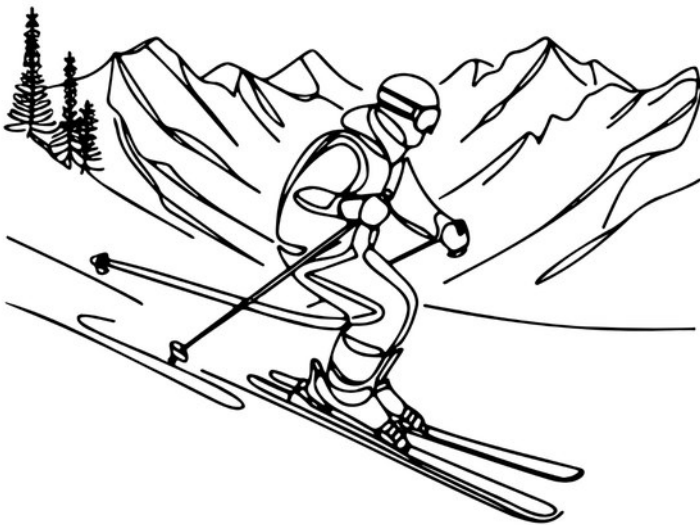
even consider the notion of skiing for recreation, they probably dreamed a little bit of moments like this one. Of course, had one of them crashed into a tree well or any such obstacle, the food they were carrying would not have reached the neighboring settlements, so no such foolishness appears to have been attempted in that age. Perhaps their hard work was part of some covenant made with the mountains, a promise that if they'd be safe and responsible, one day, we, their figurative posterity, could do this for fun. It's a blessing, but what they did was so real, so important. Their gift to us means more to me when I remember that they were probably the most real sort of people.

My face is numb by the time I reach the landing that we've been using as the base of our run. I don't much care for ski masks or balaclavas, so I always just try and push through that thirty-second period where thousands of tiny, little daggers, gleaming in whatever sunlight is available, find their way through the chinks between my helmet, goggles, and coat collar. I always reach the bottom of a hill with little to no sensation left in my face, but that's alright. I imagine the north face of a mountain is pretty numb to the cold nearly all of the time, and I at least get to experience the feeling one gets when their face warms back up and shoots little, nervous lightning bolts all through their nose and cheeks.

I realize no one followed, and for a moment, I meticulously recall all of my turns, hoping that none of them appeared foolish, when I see the three of them making their way down. They're a bit older and more seasoned, so they ski Telemark with their heels detached from the ski. They can almost get all the way down on one knee so that the snow envelops them almost entirely. They look like the ghosts of snow-covered monarchs, each of them winding their way down the mountain bearing two kingly sceptres. The three of them are so dear to me in this moment, and I'm ashamed that perhaps, for a time, I haven't thought of them in that way. Two of them always bring their kids into town when they visit from out of state, and those children are loud, too loud. They frustrate me and the rest of our family to no end, but now I feel so foolish to have been so frustrated by them. The third, who is the eldest, is a man of many opinions, opinions generally offered up upon the altar of conversation completely unsolicited. He is also a grandfather to many children and a teacher to many aspiring outdoorsmen. When he makes those turns, going down on one knee and

getting in tune with the curves and bends of the slope, it appears nearly supplicant, as if a prayer is offered there on behalf of all those he has led and taught and raised. There's no show, no pride in that sort of skiing. There's barely even a sense of indulgence as he hangs back just a little to watch his daughter and his son-in-law cross each other's tracks and ski so beautifully, just as he taught them to do.

I repent that I ever thought so foolishly of the man, that I ever thought such rude thoughts about any of them. Such minute blemishes fade, becoming as smoothed cracks upon a white, marble surface, when I see a wide ray of sunlight illuminate the surface upon which they ski. They weave in and out of each other's path, glowing in tandem with the mountain as they glide through a sea of crystalline powder, and I wonder how anyone could think ill of a person who skis like that. I smile at the realization that I do not need Mr. Miyagi to learn great and marvelous things out here in the backcountry.



PEACE ON EARTH

Peyton Anderson

The sky is blue.
The weather is fair,
And off I go
To my next adventure.

Alone, I hike for miles and miles,
Beneath the trees,
Surrounded by grass.
I press onward
With my journey,
By myself for days on end.
No soul in sight,
My only friend
Is the quiet wind
That follows me.

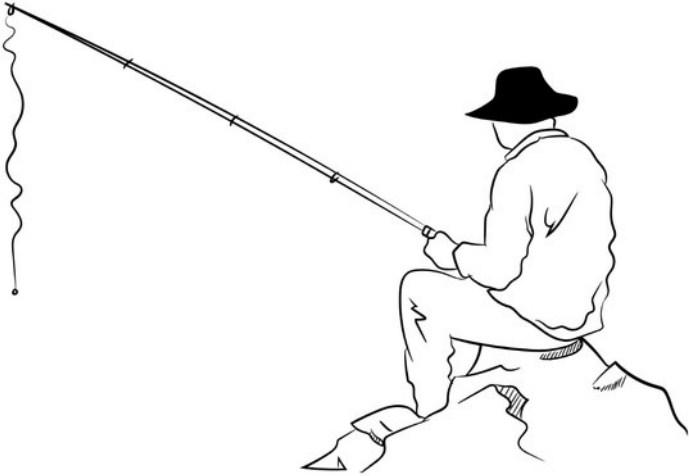
Some may say
That is terrifying,
And others may say
I'm crazy or even wild,
But I say it's peace on Earth.

To find the stillness in the air,
To walk the unknown,
To be one with nature —
That is where I find the greatest peace
I've ever known.

MORNING TIME

Troy McBride

I sit by the stream
But still no fish on my line
Mountains watch us both
The trees moving in the wind
Learning how to be patient



I, THE EMACIATED

Shelby Green

I never knew I was starving
Until I was called to a feast—
For some wild reason
I was invited for a season
And offered the finest meat.

Question:

What do the emaciated do
When sat down at the table?
You think they might
Greedily take in the sight
And eat as much as they're able?

No, not I, not these wretched bones.
For that is all I am.
I stare at the feast,
The people to meet,
And obscure my bony hands.

I'll smile and nod, making conversation
To conceal any suspicion.
I'll sit up straight,
Hide the shake,
Of my limbs from malnutrition.

I don't quite know what it is I'm gaining
By hiding my blatant state.
The shame of rejection?
Of my horrid complexion?

The fear of other's distaste?

But they've invited me into their home and hearts,
They've looked at me and observed.
They didn't stare,
They didn't care—
They saw my bones and weren't unnerved.

So with a tentative hand I reach for the food,
I unhinge my steely jaw.
I eat and wait
For a rejected fate...

But they erupt in applause.

SEAFALL

Abigail Green

Lorelei Halma had only been sixteen when she decided she'd never sail far away. She often rubbed the pricks on her finger. Five dots ran across the back of her hand, forever staining her skin a dark, inky blue. The scar, a strange aquatic green, was hidden by the stain. She should have known better, but the day had been so beautiful for sailing. The sun was high in the sky, shaded just right by the clouds. The sky the night before had been dyed fiery orange and pink by the sun, and the wind was eager, pulling at her hair and towards the docks. It should have been a wonderful day.

“Stop splashing!” Lorelei cried, ducking under the latest spray of cool, salty water. Enso, her brother, shook his head, flinging droplets violently across the deck, darkening the wood. Lorelei shied away from the puddles. In late autumn, the water was frigid, the kind of cold that sank into bone and could not be warmed by any amount of tea. One could shake and shiver for hours, if they were lucky and didn't drown. Mama said that kind of cold was unnatural; Lorelei was not sure if she agreed.

The waters near their small village were strange. They changed in ways they shouldn't, and foreign sailors often littered their shores with ruined hulls. Her mama hung lavender across the ship, hoping to frighten off those who dwelt in unseen realms. The lavender shook sharply as the ship hit another wave. Dried petals flowed off into the deep blue water before being dashed under. Their ship was far from the village now. They sailed, keeping the towering cliffs protecting their home in sight, but that was all. The dark blue stone was dangerous if one drew too near.

Lorelei climbed onto the rigging, her dark hair flung out behind her, unbound. Unbound hair was bad luck, but Lorelei did not care. She loved the way the salt dashed into it, peppering her hair and skin. Her eyes, an odd color of grey sea-glass, searched the waters. Her brother, Enso, looked much like her, though his hair was not quite as long.

“It's changed again,” Enso said. He was leaning over the side, his hand dipped into the water's edge.

“What has?”

“The algae,” Enso tugged at the sleeve of his sweater, the knit fabric

folding over his hands. "It's green. Yesterday it was red."

"Red algae. What does that one mean again?"

"Misery, pain, something like that."

Mama had a book she'd written about the different colors of algae that floated in the water, painted their boats, and covered their sand. She insisted it was part of the strangeness of their world.

"It's not purple, at least," Lorelei offered.

Enso tilted his head and hummed, inspecting the algae dripping off his hand. "It's strange, though. It reminds me of that fish Papa caught last year."

"You're just as bad as Mama," Lorelei scolded. She hopped down from her perch, boots slapping into the puddles as she plucked the string of algae from her brother's fingers and tossed it back into the ocean. It stuck to their hull instead. Normally, the slimy yet firm feeling of algae would have made her gag, but Lorelei's constitution was in good shape today.

She leaned over, trying to scrape the plant of the hull. The schooner was small, beaten, and a bit rusty, but functional. It was a good ship. Barnacles never latched on, though that seemed to be the same for most ships here. The sails, once white, were yellow and stained brown. Long, winding scratches ran their way down the length of the ships, reminders of the dangerous rocks that lurked below the surface. All the ships bore similar scars. It was a frequent occurrence for the ship to bump into something solid, and then for the sailors to hear something ripping and tearing its way across the hull.

Lorelei lifted her head. The clouds were tinged green.

"Reminds you of her necklace, doesn't it?" Enso asked.

"It does. It looks the same," Lorelei agreed. A chill crept up her spine as a gust of wind toyed gently with her curls. Enso pulled his cap tighter down his head. The boat rocked once, violently. The Halma siblings lunged, trying to stabilize the sails before they were tipped over. As their ship's movements died, the waves rippled back, as if someone had struck a drum under the surface. The waves curled in on themselves, splashing harmlessly into nothing.

"What in the great depths was that?" Enso shouted. "It almost seemed like Hiphise!"

"Hiphise? Enso, I've told you not to listen to the grandmothers.

They're superstitious. Hiphise is not a real creature. She was made up to scare off annoying, idiotic merchants."

"No, she's a warning to us," Enso countered, "We share these waters. They do not belong solely to us."

"That's stupid," Lorelei rolled her eyes. "The only things living in these waters are fish and whales."

"And clams."

"Muscles."

"Algae."

"Seaweed."

"Nereids."

"Enso, seriously," Lorelei groaned, "There are no sea nymphs patrolling these waters."

"What about the scratches on the ships?"

"Rocks," Lorelei answered, "Rocks that bash up and sink ships. Rocks that kill people."

"The water here is deep," Enso shook his head. "And on every single ship?"

Lorelei did not like the tiny prickle that ran down her spine, "I don't like talking about this, Enso. We're here to have fun, okay? I don't want to talk about fake monsters that want to murder us all."

"They want to keep us. We know too much. Why else should we never sail past the cliffs?"

"I have a stellar idea," Lorelei perked up. "Let's sail past the cliffs."

"What?" Enso jumped, staggering back. "No, we can't!" His eyes widened.

"Calm down, Enso. It'll be fun."

"No!" Enso leapt towards the helm, his hands clamping down on the wheel. "I won't let you! You'll kill—"

His face went slack. His eyes, no longer the color of sea-glass, were dull, strangely green like the algae he'd been studying. His head tilted towards the cliff face. "Do you hear that?"

"Stop it, Enso," Lorelei snapped. She felt slightly uneasy.

"It sounds like singing." Enso's eyes clouded over, and he suddenly fell. Lorelei raced over, catching him before his head hit the deck. She

gently propped him against the side of the ship, clasping his hands in hers and squeezing. They were cold, stiff from the chilly sea air.

“Enso? Enso, what’s wrong?” Lorelei shook him. He did not react. Lorelei looked around. A strange, melodic ringing echoed in her ears. She narrowed her eyes, trying to get a glimpse of the cliff face, but saw nothing.

“I’m here, Enso, I promise.” Lorelei whispered, “We’ll go home.” She fought the stinging of tears that threatened to run down her cheeks. Mama would know what to do.

The ship rocked gently in the wind. Something wet splashed against her neck. Lorelei glanced up. The clouds were beginning to gather, darker than they were before. The wind threatened to become a gale, whipping at the sails.

“Enso, please come back!” Lorelei squeezed his hands harder. Enso’s eyes were far away. She released his hands, grabbing his face. “C’mon, Enso. I know you’re in there. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

It was too late. She could see that in how slack his jaw hung, and how his hands had fallen limply into his lap. Lorelei fell back, blinking frustrated tears out of her eyes. Stupid. Of course she had to scare him into a fit just as a squall hit.

Another drop hit Lorelei’s forehead. She gently lay Enso on his side, pulling his hat more firmly on his head and rolling down the sleeves of his sweater. He would need to stay as warm as possible. She rushed back, checking that the sails and jib were attached tightly. Then she stationed herself at the helm. The waves were growing slowly, but not too badly.

White flickered down from the sky. Snow. A chilly air cut through her jacket. Lorelei shivered as the snow began to thicken. The lavender shook, dried lilac-colored petals mixing with the snowflakes. The smell prickled at her nose, but it was salty and the opposite of calming.

Lorelei glanced at the cliff and swore. They’d sailed past it. The wind had carried them farther than she expected. She turned the boat as rapidly as she dared, cresting waves slapping violently against the ship. Something shook the boat, smacking against the hull. The entire ship tilted to one side, as if caught on the edge of a fin.

The ship began to spin, half stuck on whatever thing was carrying it. Lorelei raced across the deck, throwing herself over Enso. The ship continued to spin, making even her seasoned stomach turn. Slowly, it

stopped. The snow lightened marginally.

Lorelei crawled over to the side of the ship. A huge dark shadow sat just below the boat. Dark ink spilled into the water. Lorelei could only stare. There was a strange ringing in her ears, like a bell was singing.

She tilted her head to one side, staring. The shape hovered, then slowly turned, and she saw an eye, larger than her whole body. The pupil was blue and blown, inspecting her. The ringing in her ears grew. Lorelei slowly extended her hand, and then the thing beneath her suddenly dove, huge tentacles and body disappearing fathoms below. Her hand still remained stretched over the surface of the water.

The ringing swelled, and Lorelei swore she could hear a voice. It called to her, begging her hands to touch the water. Her finger extended, breaking the surface, and suddenly a hand shot out, curled and clawed, sinking into the back of her hand. Lorelei screamed as it pulled with an unknown strength.

In the blue, inky water, she saw a new shape. A head. A tail. Then the creature surfaced. Finned ears extended from wet, stringy hair, and eyes blinked at her. A terrible, toothy grin was stretched across the siren's face. *Hiphise*. Her head fell to one side, inspecting Lorelei, and then she began to sing.

Lorelei could not even scream, caught as she was. The voice beckoned to her, the face, fishy, scaled, once horrific, began to bubble, becoming smooth, pale blue skin. The eyes, which blinked vertically, turned a brilliant purple. Hiphise smiled at her, her teeth no longer serrated. Her singing softened, and Lorelei extended her other hand. It was fascinating.

For so long, she had doubted her mother's words, and yet here a creature like this was. How could she have been so wrong? What else was she wrong about? What knowledge did these waters hold? She did not notice blood streaming out of the back of her hand where Hiphise gripped it, the ink slowly seeping into her skin.

A splash drew her attention. Lorelei turned her head. Enso was in the water, swimming towards Hiphise, his eyes wide. The song faltered, and Lorelei screamed, jerking back. The siren yanked her into the water.

The song was deafening under the water. Ink flooded into Lorelei's eyes, and she squeezed them shut. The icy water stole her breath away, dragging her down. She struggled as it soaked into her woolen clothing.

Hands grasped at her hair and head, pulling her farther under. She could not see anything. Her breath was nonexistent, stolen away by cold and water and fear.

Lorelei struck out blindly, colliding with something. A pitched shriek, and then Lorelei was on the surface, being battered by waves. Navy ink streamed down her face; she tried to wipe it away with her hand, but it was equally stained. Half-blind, her mouth filled with the bitter sting of seawater; she blinked rapidly, and her eyesight improved. Enso was beside her, facedown.

She did not have breath to scream. Lorelei grabbed him, flipping him onto his back. His face was pale, despite all the ink. His hat had floated away. Scratches marred his face. A blue tail, darkened by the storm, splashed under the water. Hiphise was coming back.

Lorelei dragged him, her entire body shivering violently. She grabbed one rope hanging off the side of their ship and stopped. It was all she could do. Her clothes pulled her down. She could not undo her shoes, too frozen and weak to dare submerge again. Her fingers were numb anyway, lacking the needed strength.

Something soft brushed her cheek. Lorelei flinched away, grasping her brother tighter. Lavender petals flew from their ship, whirling around Lorelei and Enso. Purple became Lorelei's world.

Hiphise was invisible in the ink and petals before she came up in front of Lorelei. Her face was frightening and dangerous again, teeth placed against an uncannily wide mouth. Her hands rose, the claws stained with blood.

"P-please," Lorelei sobbed, tears mingling with the ink. "Please. We didn't mean to sail so far."

Hiphise laughed, a beautiful, bell-like tone. It was deep like the water, yet smooth and beautiful. "I do not believe you."

"Please." Lorelei could only beg. The lavender swirled around them, and Hiphise hesitated. She watched the petals, and her violet eyes narrowed. Her voice whispered, "Could it be?"

She glanced at Enso as he coughed. His eyes widened as he saw her. One coherent word escaped his mouth, "*Hiphise*."

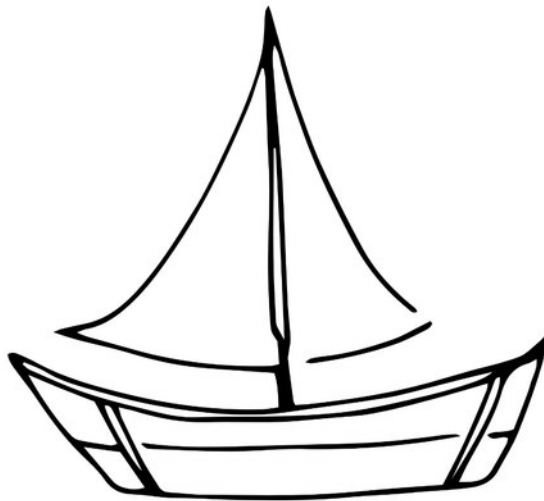
The siren blinked. She stared at them, debating. The flower petals whirled around the siblings. Hiphise reached towards the lavender, and her

eyes were suddenly wet, and not with ocean water or ink. Her tail flicked, and she zoomed towards them, her webbed hands shoving them back onto their boat with unnatural strength. She then pulled herself halfway up their ship. Hiphise glanced up as the last petal fell from the lavender plants. A strange smile mixed with a sneer crossed her face. She ripped some of the plants off the ship and dove, disappearing under the water.

Enso and Lorelei were left panting, cowering, and shivering against the side of the ship as the snow whirled around them. Enso clutched her tightly while Lorelei stared numbly at her hand. It was spattered and stained with ink, much of it buried beneath her skin and inside her blood. The same had happened to the cuts on Enso's face.

The siblings did not say anything as they staggered to their feet, still clutching one another tightly. They hardly separated for more than a moment as they sailed home. Neither remembered the stomp of feet and swirl of people worriedly ushering them back to their house.

They did not speak as they were dried off. They did not speak as they changed their clothes into something warm and dry and sat by the fireplace with thick mugs of honey tea clamped in their frozen hands. Lorelei stared at her hand and wondered if she would ever sail far again.



MY SOUR-FACED FATHER

Gwen Furniss

My father's face was sour when he saw me.

Tart!

Eyes squinted into lines, mouth set tight.

Puckered!

Do I make him sick when I trip his way?

Yellow?

Am I bile rising in his throat, pulp in his teeth, the

Seed

cracking open in his mouth? An awkward interruption?

Bitter!

My father's face was sour when he saw me,

Swallowed me,

me!

The lemon in his mouth.



TURN YOUR HEART

Hannah Jindra

That sounds troubling, don't you think?

Imagine turning a heart.

Think of it twisting on the red ropes of tendons.

Think of the harsh strain of notes played by those turned heartstrings.

Tuned too tight, it plays like the twang of stone against metal.

I have not wanted to turn my heart,

To hear such tangled notes,

To feel the torment and torture of twisted heartstrings.

I have tried to turn away from the very thought,

But part of me still thinks:

What would I turn to?

Would the tune truly sound tight?

What if my strings played like the pretty strum of dew drops on webs?

I have been trying to turn my heart,

To hear those bright drops,

To feel the repentance and salvation of tuned heartstrings.

Think of the tremendous and eternal sound of these beautiful notes.

Think of the melodious theme of chords: charity, love, and sacrifice.

Tuned to perfection, it plays like true tones of tranquility.

That no longer sounds troubling, don't you think?

Imagine turning your heart.

LEAN INTO THE WIND

Abigail Taylor

Across the horizon, beyond the ship's prow,
Far off in the distance it looms:
A menacing fortress of thundering clouds
That beat to the war chant of doom.
The dark depths gape open their maw to consume
The souls who weigh heavy as stones.
They offer a cursed gift of trenches for tombs
And crusts of sweet brine for their bones.

There's no lack of tempests for those who dare sail;
A price, in the end, must be paid.
But when roots stretch deeper than anguish can wail,
Those souls by the waves are not swayed.
The lost that, while drowning, cut ties with that hope
Have thrown their one chance to the foam.
The price is far higher for they who let go
And reach the sand only as bones.

The land left behind tried to pay without scars;
This journey is worth that and more.
No water can douse the fierce blaze of the star
That guides through to harbor and shore,
For courage ignites and its fire best thrives
When fed by the air and the storm.
The gale may rend canvas and rip away lives,
But confidence cannot be torn.

No matter the dark depths, nor murderous gale,
Nor guttural roar of the sea,
The secret to sailing the toughest of hells

Is making the choice to believe.
Command the twin forces of water and sky!
Take hold of the powers that be!
Or drift in the current and give up the fight,
Dragged down by the chains of the sea.

Defeat and despair—harass, fight, and annoy;
Deny the dark depths victory.
Lift voice in wild laughter, in wonder, in joy,
Because, through it all, you are *free*.
Scream out in defiance of all that has been;
Sing out and lean into the wind.



I THINK IT'S NICE

Kate Chandler

I think it's nice that someone out there
Liked something so much
That they decided to share it with strangers
And post their video
To talk about how much they appreciate something.

And I think it's nice
That someone comes along
Who liked something,
And so they clicked on a video
That someone else had made,
Saw it through to the end,
And then went on with their day.

I think it's nice that, a long time ago,
Someone might have seen a pretty,
Shiny little rock with special colors dappling it
Said that is a nice rock to themselves,
And then continued with their next footstep
And traveled onwards.

I think it's nice
When someone writes a book
About something they really care about,
Maybe even love,
And someone else comes to pick it up.

I think it's nice
When someone bakes something they're proud of,

And someone else nibbles
And feels warmth and love and joy.

I think it's nice
That someone else came along,
Saw a shiny, pretty little rock
With lovely coloring glinting in the light,
thought that is a nice rock to themselves,
And then went on down the trail.

I think it's nice
That someone finds a Lost teddy
And sets it where it will be found
For the other someone to come along
And hug their Found teddy all the way home.

I think it's nice
That two souls touch
And then move on,
Like a leaf kisses the water's surface
And ripples the reflections
Before being swept off by the breeze
To another spot,
Gliding along the soft, wet mirror
To be the last leaf
A mouse needs
To stuff her nest full of warmth
And hold close
During long, chilly nights.

OH TO BE A BIRD

Mia Chikuni

Fluttering in the air
Crisp and light

When a soft mutter echos
Every moment of flight

Clinging and struggling
against the glisten and sheen

The branches it is fighting
Without halting its wings

Does it understand
Just what that means?

If only I were a bird
And not a cowardly crow

I'd fly for a moment
before I must go



NO SUCH THING AS NEVERLAND

Zachary Brown

Second star to the right seems so far away;
I don't think it's possible to reach Neverland today.

Happy thoughts are needed, and they're nowhere to be found;
I tried to take the leap but only fell to the ground.

Pixie dust I'm out of—no more antidepressant pills;
Youthful optimism broken, childish dreams killed.

Time has slowly robbed me, made out like a crook;
Now when I look in the mirror, all I see is Captain Hook.

I'm the villain of my story, chasing things that I cannot have;
Part of me is missing, yet I cannot figure out which half.

In front of my therapist, I just want to let out a scream;
Slowly, ever slowly, I realize that Neverland was just a dream.

A GALLERY OF GRAVES

Aliandra Yorgason

In the Great British Museum,
I laughed and talked and coughed
with all my friends in tow,
watching the ancient, stolen pillars rise till
—Look, it's the mummies!
And I, having never seen more than dry bovine bones
strewn across the pasture,
wondered at it all.
My friend, sick to her stomach, said
—let's go!
And no more than a glimpse of ancient bodies
before we carried our fresh flesh to Asia
to stare at the Samurai armor.

And now, alone in an Idaho cemetery,
freshly fallen leaves cradle the damp grass floor.
The caretakers rake them up, as if pretending there is no
death—
only green grass and blooming flowers.
But walking here is a conversation that I will have
for the rest of my life.
Unfinished.
Unrefined.
Like clay, before God forms it into man—
like a rib, before God forms it into woman—
like a body, before worms forge it into clay.



EXILE

Ady Gasser

Conversation halts as soon as I walk through the door.
I know they were talking about me because
Of the guilty looks on their faces,
The way their eyes look everywhere
but at my face that I have spent
Years honing into a perfect mask.

I have become a pariah in my own home.
Ignored for some greater “moral good,” and
It wouldn’t hurt that bad except
I don’t even know what I did.
These were the people closest to me,
But now, my mere mortality is omitted.

I spend my days buried
In homework, in work, in writing, in a book,
Anything to escape the banishment awaiting me
In between the four walls of my own home—
An outsider, unwelcome to be there,
And yet, unable to be anywhere but.

I made it a full ten minutes being downstairs
When everyone got home.
Ten minutes were spent watching
Eyes looking over me, strangers looking through me,
Ten minutes
Before I was forced into the confines of my room.

I’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop,
For them to realize that this isn’t worth

The pain, the tears, the tension, the anger.
Each day passes and nothing changes;
Nothing is different. It's always, simply,
Nothing.

Ostracism.

It's a feeling worse than death,
Worse than loneliness.
It's the worst feeling I've ever felt, but somehow,
I have yet to fully
Feel.

I've become an outcast, and
It gets easier, or at least,
I think it does.
These days it feels easier to live
With the forced
Rejection.

I've been fighting this feeling, unsure
Of what exactly to call it.
But as I've been thinking and wondering,
The name comes to mind.
It's a feeling I've heard of; it feels like
Exile.

Now, I don't know if exile will ever get better
Or if they will ever look at me again.
I don't know if I even want them to, because
This has taught me one thing
One simple lesson that
I can never forget, because

Exile

Is not as bad as it seems because in

Exile

There are people around who are in

Exile

With you.

CORRECTION

Kye Sellers

Etten's throne was too big for him. He would, each day, try not to sink into the plush chair, yet under the weight of the crown, it was hard to move. His robes were itchy, and the throne room hot, but he was happy. To complain was unbecoming of a king.

Though Etten couldn't move, his servants moved for him in fearful frenzy. If they heard his stomach so much as grunt, they scrambled like ants to bring food, their clicking shoes like hail against polished granite.

Dente, a thin man with sunken black eyes, slithered around the throne, bending down to the young king's level.

"Shall we begin, your Majesty?" he whispered under the cumbersome brim of the crown, his voice like honeyed slime.

Etten pushed the crown up and out of his eyes and beamed. He nodded with excited vigor, jostling the crown back into his eyes.

Dente's thin lips split into a grin that reached for his ears. "This is your favorite part, right?"

Etten held his crown in place as he nodded. "This is my favorite part," he repeated, the practiced words smoothly sliding off his tongue.

The willowy man's inkblot eyes narrowed approvingly. "And it always will be."

Etten's wide, sky blue eyes gleamed up at Dente. The barren tree of a man seemed to like this part, so Etten played along. He wanted everyone to be happy.

Dente's grin fell. "Splendid." He unfolded himself and stood up straight, waving to the servants. "Send the first in."

The servants bowed and rushed to obey, feet like stones scattered against marble. They heaved open a set of ornate doors for a weeping woman bound in chains. When she saw him, her silent sobs turned to wails.

The sparkle in Etten's eyes died, yet he kept beaming. Why were they all afraid of him?

The shrieking woman tugged desperately against her chains, earning a blow to the head from the large servant pulling her along.

Etten winced and held out a hand. “Don’t hurt her!” he called out. The servant obeyed. Etten was, after all, king.

Dente slid a scroll from his robe cuffs. The sleeves looked like curtains over his bone-thin wrists.

“The accused stands in contempt for egregious theft-” Dente began, but was interrupted by the woman’s terrified shout.

“It was only a loaf of bread, my king! Nothing more, I swe—” another blow from her captor silenced her.

Etten clenched his fists against the armrests, too high to rest his arms. He used to rest his arms in his lap, but Dente had discouraged that. It’s about your image, my Liege, he would say.

“Theft, loitering after hours,” Dente continued when the woman had quieted, “and speaking out of turn to the king.” His eyes flicked like the tongue of a snake to Etten. “Quite the trouble maker, your Excellence.”

Etten frowned ponderously. In truth, he was still trying to remember what the word loitering meant, but he’d asked too many times before.

“What say you, Grand King?” Dente pushed, thin fingers twitching on the scroll, eager.

“She’s hungry, right?” Etten said. The woman nodded furiously, not daring to speak. Etten smiled. “Get her some food,” he continued, “I’m not that hungry, so maybe some of mine.”

Dente nodded slowly. “Of course, Magnificence. We will make sure she never hungers again. But, does she not need to be taught better? Stealing is no small crime.”

Etten adjusted his crown. “Stealing is pretty bad, I guess. Maybe she could be taught.”

“Taught, my lord.”

“Taught.”

Dente loomed closer to Etten. “Are you saying she should be corrected?”

Etten nodded, the wild hunger growing in Dente’s sunken eyes.

“Say the word,” he breathed.

“Correction,” Etten decreed. Dente plunged his hand into his other sleeve, swiftly producing a stamp. He pressed it emphatically against the part of the scroll with the woman’s name. Dente slid the scroll back into his

sleeve with the same finality as a sword to its scabbard. The woman would be taken and taught a better way of life. It made Etten happy to help the people instead of punishing them, but—

The woman erupted in shrill peals of despair. Her legs collapsed underneath her as she was dragged out by her chains. Etten softly whined as he watched the harsh treatment, hiding his feelings from Dente.

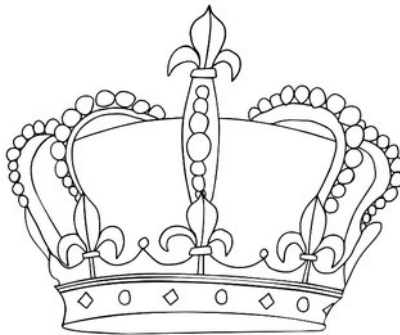
“Remember to give her food,” he said when the echoes of the grand doors subsided.

Dente slid his hand over the youth’s shoulder, still holding the stamp fondly. “You needn’t worry, Magnanimous King. She will never hunger again.”

Etten stared blankly at the doors, imagining the woman being taken to the Correction Hall. “Do you think...” he began, almost to himself, “I could see her when she’s all done?”

Dente withdrew the scroll again. “Shall we continue, O Grand Regal? Many still need your correction.”

Etten slumped into his tremendous throne. He nodded slowly, his burdensome crown sinking deeper down his scalp. Someday, Dente would answer.



THE FUNERAL

Anya Taylor

Late nights, small talks, hoping to find love
We sat together, opening up our hearts
Breakups, hiccups, forcing yourself to move on
I stayed and tried to keep you from falling apart

Moon changes, snow falls, the sun grows closer
It didn't take long for a smile to form across your face
First exchanges, a boyish smile, slow walks back home
You started to find your heart another home

First dates, playful knocks, little gift exchanges
He was becoming the man for you
Ice melts, flowers bloom, things become real
If only back then I knew what this would come to

Lies form, truth appears, her name becomes clear
Neither of us expected this from him
Flowers swarm, gifts grow, he becomes soft
I watched your light begin to dim

Second chances, love confessions, hiding from the pain
I fought so hard to be your support
Time moves on, dependency grows, eyes grow blind
I watched as your life became one you sought to distort

Constant arguments, reaching a breaking point, all that's left is silence
All that remained of us was a fight
Watching from afar, morphing into something gray, praying someday he'll change
His change wasn't anywhere in sight

The list grows bigger, the girls become more, apologies are accepted
You were just another victim on his list
Intimacy broken, hearts shattered, he only provided the relief
No matter what, he was always the one you could never resist

Friendships mended, truth spoken, trying to make amends
Still, nothing seemed to matter compared to him
Tearful nights, words of warning, hugs of pleading
My begging became our hymn

Leaves changed, power grew, nothing left of you
I didn't expect our friendship to have a funeral
Connection lost, help refused, what am I to do?
Now I'm waiting till you become a statistic

Prays to the sky, lies upon lies, I hope your cycle ends
I'll be waiting until you finally leave
Peeks of hope, streaks of light, futures to hold
In the end, I'll always be the thing for you to cleave

INHERITANCE

Avery Ricks

Ghosts haunt every country.
Each town breathes someone's memory.
From wind-swept steppes and heather moors,
To sleepless cities and dim-lit suburbs,
They cling to iron, bones, and stone.

An arrowhead buried at Agincourt,
A wedding ring, cast in battered bronze,
A trampled doll, pressed into the soil of Babi Yar,
Now sealed in glass, tagged and forgotten.

A Tsar's portrait, gilded in gold,
Watching a child take a selfie in its frame,
Eyes alive three centuries ago,
Unblinking beyond the grave.

Lips, brows, eyes, and dimples—
Passed from child to cherished child,
From the Hundred Years' War,
To the girl with the smartphone in her pocket.

The click-clack of heeled shoes in the ballrooms of Versailles;
Ghosts pirouette in clouds of silk and lace.
The strings of a fiddle echo in an abandoned barn
As ghosts in denim and dirt
Tip their hats and extend a hand, offering a dance.

The screams of the murdered,
The prayers of the devout,
The sighs of the lovers,

The hopes of the children—

Billions of voices,

Billions of names,

Billions of lives.

All of it hums beneath our feet—

Joy and grief,

The echo of breath.

THINGS AI WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO TELL YOU

Madison Wright

AI will never tell you that grief feels like gutting a fish—
rainbow scales clinging to your hands.

Days later, you still find them on your clothes,
shimmering reminders of what you lost.

AI has never had to leave my mother's embrace,
to drive down the driveway
knowing I won't see her for another year.

It has never heard my father's laugh on Christmas morning,
guiding us in a line with eyes tightly closed,
the air thick with cinnamon and surprise.

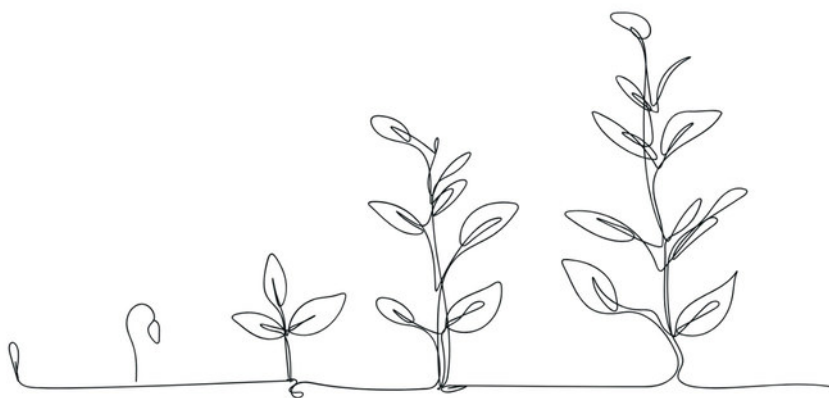
It cannot tell me how my home smells,
or understand when I say it smells like sleep, and soap, and sawdust—
like everything safe that built me.

AI has never felt a rainstorm,
the heavy quiet before the first drop,
the way the trees and air hold their breath,
then the rush of water that soaks you through
and makes you laugh anyway.

AI has never planted a garden,
waited weeks for the first green sprouts to appear,
only to marvel that something so small became something alive.

It has never gone on a first date,
or held its breath in that fragile silence before a kiss,
hands clumsily finding one another in the dark.

AI can learn the words for all of this—
but it will never know the weight of them.



GARDENS OVERGROWN

Alex Turner

Feverish memory,
clarity dismays,
senses diminish.

All that is beautiful is true,
a gaze adrift, abashed,
the infectious, missing clue.

Gardens overgrown,
raging of a losing battle,
the way ahead seems alone.

Silent dusk comes early,
the final moments of lucid recall;
the past echoes distant and pearly.

Empty defeat begging
from a tormenting cavernous chaos.
Forget forgetting.

Free from mind webbing,
we meet again at refuge,
in a place of no forgetting.

STRANGERS IN THE GARDEN

Tavo Scholes

I saw you as you walked through the garden,
and your gaze met mine a moment after.
And even though it seemed your eyes hardened,
I found that I wished I knew you better.

I went on a journey of memories
to the times our roads had come together—
when I had seen you or had you near me,
but neither of us spoke to the other.

I do not really know you, nor you me.
That said, I hope that I have your pardon
when I say I would like more than to be
barely less than strangers in the garden.

You walk to where I can no longer see,
but I wonder if you wish you knew me.

GROWING OLD

Leah Anderson

I like to imagine
Somewhere in Ohio,
Where my brain is tired,
And your body is frail,
Where we sit on a porch swing
And listen to an audiobook,
With nothing left to do
But love each other.
We could collect postcards,
Spoil our grandkids,
Do crosswords at the kitchen counter,
And go to a breakfast diner
On the weekends.
But every good memory
I hope I can have
Has you by my side,
Because I need you when I'm eighty
As much as I need you now.
So please,
Don't grow old with someone else.

ALL BEAUTIFUL THINGS

Owen Romeril

Constance swiftly picked a seat and tried in vain to forget the last few hours.

She took a cursory glance at her surroundings. The passengers were sparse, a benefit of taking the two o'clock bus. Of the few that were there, most of them far away from her, no one else was wearing all black. This made sense. No one else had left the funeral early.

The man sitting closest to her loudly zipped up his coat, breaking her train of thought. She shot him an irritated glance, but her irritability soon morphed into confusion.

He was wearing three coats, all of them oversized and hooded. Under the hoods were an ill-fitting cowboy hat, comically large sunglasses, and a face mask. His gloved hands held onto an oddly big guitar case. It was a sunny, seventy-five-degree day outside. Constance decided the man was either crazy or hiding something.

The door closed, and the bus started moving. Constance watched the city disappear into the distance and tried to think about nothing, but she quickly learned that was impossible. Just as memories of flowers and distant relatives and the eulogy threatened to creep around the corner of her mind, the strangely dressed man moved in her peripheral vision.

She turned her head to face him. He had started rhythmically tapping on his guitar case. Letting her curiosity push the rest of her thoughts away, Constance stood and casually switched to the seat next to his, then waited.

He kept tapping on the guitar case as if nothing had happened. If he had noticed her, Constance couldn't tell. His sunglasses and mask hid every potential giveaway.

"So," Constance finally said, giving him a pointed look. His head slightly turned in her direction, but he said nothing.

A wave of uncertainty crashed against Constance's already war-torn emotional state. What if this wasn't just a weird guy? What if he was a murderer? Or an undercover agent for a foreign government? Or a bounty hunter?

“You don’t have to be afraid of me,” said the man suddenly.
“Though, many are anyway.”

Constance froze. “Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t—I mean—how did you know what I was thinking?”

The man hesitated for a few frightening seconds. “I know a lot of things. Most people aren’t even supposed to see me, you know. But I think I know why you can.”

Constance let her curiosity win yet again and stayed in her seat.
“What do you mean?”

“I’m not a person,” said the man.

Constance waited and couldn’t help but chuckle when he didn’t elaborate. “What’s that supposed to imply? That you’re a robot? An alien? Maybe two people on stilts?”

“No,” said the man, shaking his head. “What I meant to say was that I’m not like you. I’m not from here.” He paused. “Sorry, I’m not used to this. Most strangers can’t see me. My words may not be the best way to convey what I’m trying to say. Maybe this will help.” He slowly reached for his sunglasses and took them off.

Very few things in Constance’s life had managed to completely stun her. She had expected the dollhouse under the Christmas tree when she was five. She had known Jack was going to ask her to prom when she was sixteen. Even finding out her best friend Nora was getting married last year had come with a sense of inevitability.

This was different. Constance had expected the man’s face to be strange. She had assumed he had a scar, or a deformity, or that maybe he was just shy. She had not expected to see a skull staring back at her, if skulls could stare. She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing happened. She tried again. Nothing.

“Now you see what I mean,” said the man. “And I’m not just any old skeleton either. Not that there are many of those around anyway. Look.” He unzipped the guitar case, revealing a clean, curved blade that caught a glint of sunlight as it passed through the window. A scythe.

When Constance was much younger, she had developed an irrational fear of the Grim Reaper. The pile of clothes in her room at three in the morning had always looked suspiciously like his skeletal frame, waiting for just the right moment to jump out and steal her soul. Every sound

coming from outside her window at night had sounded like the dark footsteps of a supernatural intruder. Instead of asking her parents to look for monsters under the bed, she had asked them to check for the Grim Reaper in the backyard. She had mostly grown out of the fear in her teen years, though the sight of a hooded skeleton in a movie or Halloween store still occasionally made her stomach twist.

Seven-year-old Constance probably would have fainted after seeing the scythe in the guitar case. Twenty-year-old Constance had no clue what to think. She stared at the skeleton next to her for an awkwardly long period of time, hoping he would say something. Maybe he would take off his mask and reveal that he was wearing high-quality prosthetics the whole time. Maybe he would tell her this was all a dream, and she would wake up. The wish for this whole day to have been a dream gnawed at her more with every passing second, like a wild dog tired of its leash.

“Have you tried for the staring world record?” the Reaper asked dryly. “I think you should. You’re very talented.”

Constance blinked, then blinked harder. He was still there. “Sorry,” she said, “I’m just processing...this.” She gestured vaguely to his now exposed skull.

The Reaper nodded. “I understand. Most people don’t see me before their time comes, so I don’t usually see reactions like yours either. It’s safe to say you’re more rattled than I am, though. My apologies for the shock.”

The muscles in Constance’s arms relaxed somewhat. Even though the Grim Reaper sat next to her, he wasn’t doing anything remotely threatening—though his apologetic and calm demeanor was a little scary in its own way.

“Well,” said the Reaper, zipping his guitar case closed again, “I think introductions would be nice. I’m the Grim Reaper, though most people just call me Reaper. The ‘grim’ part is more like an unofficial nickname, anyway. Those who know me do not consider me grim. And you are?”

Constance nodded. “I’m Constance. Constance Merriweather. Do you have a name?”

“Yes,” said the Reaper, sliding his sunglasses back on and making Constance wonder how they stayed there if he didn’t have any ears. “It’s

Mike.”

Constance prepared herself to wake up from whatever dream this had to be. Despite all logic, nothing happened, and she realized for the second time that she really was awake. “Mike,” she said in the most skeptical tone she could muster.

“Yes,” said the Reaper. “I chose it just now. Do you like it?”

Constance swung her arms up in a gesture of exasperated surrender. “What is even happening right now? You’re the Grim Reaper, and you’re making stupid jokes.”

“My favorite kind.” The Reaper chuckled. “Humor is a nutrient, you know. Not for the body, but the soul.” He hesitated, and when he spoke again his voice lowered. “I know this day has been difficult for you. In fact, ‘difficult’ has to be an understatement. Don’t assume my stupid jokes come packaged with ignorance. Let me know if you’d like to ask me about her.”

For the past few hours, Constance had been steadily building a mental dam to block the emotional tidal wave chasing her down. The Reaper’s grave tone shift destroyed it all in an instant. Constance’s fists clenched, and tears ran down her face with violent spontaneity. “Just say her name,” she said, her voice trembling. Her face quickly grew warm, and with it came the childlike urge to run and hide. Embarrassment, grief, and even anger mixed together in a maelstrom of pain and exhaustion. But there was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

“Ellen,” said the Reaper, extracting a clean handkerchief from one of his many coat pockets and tenderly touching it to Constance’s face. “Your beloved great-grandmother. You knew the day was coming, but you weren’t ready. That’s okay, child. No one ever is.”

Constance’s tears seemed to have taken the Reaper’s gesture as a challenge, rushing from her eyes with an increasingly steady pace. He continued to wipe them away, and Constance let him do it. Her words had left her again, but so had her will to speak them. Her vision blurring with tears and her shoulders shaking, she sat and sobbed for what felt like far too long. The Reaper used his handkerchief to absorb her tears until the fabric was nearly wet through. Soon, the emotional storm had run its course, and a sense of stability returned to Constance, though she still wasn’t sure if she would be able to speak.

The Reaper put the damp handkerchief back in his pocket and tilted his head slightly. “Do you have any questions for me?”

What a dumb question, Constance thought as a million things she could ask all appeared at the same time in her mind, running into each other and exacerbating her slight headache. She settled on one and tried to talk. Though her voice had weakened, she found herself able to speak. “Why did you take her away from me?”

The Reaper shook his head. “I do not initiate any of my meetings. I receive word that they are standing by the door to the next world, and I come to open it for them. Pinning fault on another will not help you, Constance, no matter how satisfying it may feel. The road from grief to hate is both enticing and slippery, but it leads to dark places.”

Constance sighed. “Stop being so wise when I just want to be mad. You’re making too much sense, and it’s stupid. Just like your jokes.” Her shoulders shook, but this time, inexplicably, with laughter.

The Reaper gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder. “What did I tell you? Nutritional humor. It’s a real thing.”

Constance took thirty seconds longer than she expected to stop laughing. “That wasn’t even that funny,” she murmured. “I think I’m losing it.”

“Your body is using humor to reset itself,” said the Reaper, nodding slowly. “Even very stupid humor works wonders at times. I’m still open to anything else you wish to ask.”

Constance thought back to before her sudden laughing fit. “What did you mean,” she said, “when you mentioned the door to the next world? Is she... is my great-grandma still out there?”

“Of course she is,” said the Reaper without hesitation. “To think that something as beautiful and real and true as a human life could be extinguished forever is to think the sun will one day dip below the horizon and never return. I cannot tell you much more than this. There are many things you must discover on your own. But she lives on, and so does everyone else who passes through my door. I do not guide them to the end. I guide them to a new beginning.”

Constance took a moment to ponder this. The hole her great-grandmother had left still gaped wide, still hurt her. Despite this, the image

of the rising sun on the horizon brought with it a funny new feeling. She almost dared to call it hope. “I want what you’re saying to be true,” she said finally, staring into his sunglasses. She wondered what he was thinking behind his ridiculous disguise.

“Then you’re in luck,” the Reaper said with a shrug, “because I’m not a liar. I’m just a skeleton with a job to do. Most of the time, I meet with those you mortals call ‘dead’ to introduce them to the new world. Sometimes, apparently, my job involves talking to those who are still progressing through *this* world. It seems even old dinosaurs like me can learn new things. It’s been a pleasure, Miss Merriweather.” He held out his hand for her to shake.

Constance reached out and took it. He shook her hand firmly, but gently at the same time. It was the best handshake she had ever experienced, though the knowledge that there were only bones underneath his glove also gave it an odd quality. “Why are we shaking hands?” she asked. “Are you leaving?”

As if on cue, the bus slowed to a stop, the brakes piercing the air with a loud screech. The Reaper pointed at the window behind him with his thumb. “This is my stop.” He swung the guitar case over one of his shoulders and stood.

“Wait!” Constance exclaimed. She stood too. “There’s still so much I don’t know. What you told me helped a little. But it still hurts.”

The Reaper nodded. “It will continue to hurt. The grief won’t leave you, but it will transform. As time passes, you’ll find yourself growing stronger. I’ve found, through centuries of observing humanity, that there is one key fact about the human spirit. It’s indomitable in every sense of the word. You can choose to keep moving every day, and the more you choose hope, the more you will feel it. You control your fate, Constance Merriweather. Never forget it. Remember what I told you. Humor is a nutrient. Life continues on. The sun rises again, and so do all beautiful things.” He turned and walked down the aisle in the direction of the exit.

Constance scrambled after him, almost tripping over herself, but she didn’t care. She had to ask one last question.

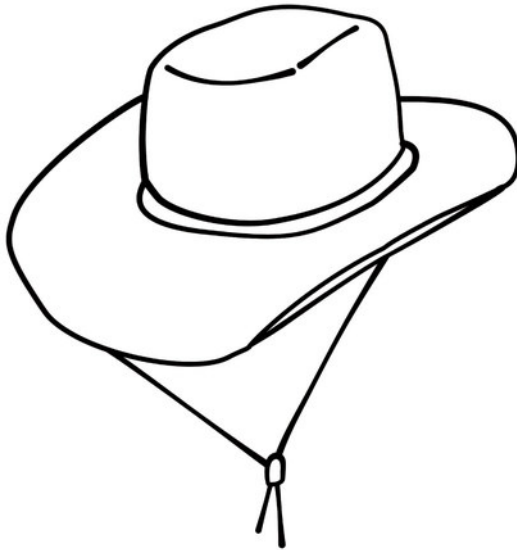
Just as the Reaper reached the door, she grabbed his shoulder. “One last thing,” she said with a purposeful stare.

He turned around. “I don’t have much time. But please, I’d love to hear it.”

She took a deep breath and then she let it out. “When will I see you again?”

The Reaper chuckled. “Not for a long while. But when you’re ready, you’ll knock on my door. You won’t find it on your own. It will come to you. I will answer. And when the sun rises that day, you’ll find yourself rising with it.”

The bus door swung open, and before Constance could reply, the Reaper stepped outside. “Till we meet again,” he said with a wave, and then the door closed and he vanished from sight.



EAST FORK

Jordynn Hunt-Davidson

The creek skips past, cheerily racing over the pebbles in the little ravine. A distant mooing signals the return of a stray ranch cow. Mom stands in the middle of the creek, holding a box to her chest as Dad pierces a little island in the creek's heart with a shovel.

The metal head of the tool crunches against the rocks as he digs, gradually sinking into a modest hole. The dark soil is damp, something that would normally make my father wince. He loves wood, and anyone who knows anything about wood knows that water will only invite decay.

The box in mom's arms is beautiful. The finish the woodworker chose highlights woodgrains which once ran in a current of their own, carrying nutrients through a strong and sturdy trunk. I try to imagine that tree and what it might have looked like in its prime, but the image evades me.

All I can think of is the box with its metal hinges and the bronze clasp binding it shut. It is a box begging to be opened. But, I know that by the time anyone found it, the box would be bloated and swelled in the earth. They would have no need to open it, for the contents inside would have already been swept away by the rushing creek.

The creek is icy as it seeps its way through the sides of my shoes and into the soles. The current, steady and swift, tugs against the rocks beneath me.

I find a strange solace in knowing that if I were ever to come here again, there would be no marker, no stone or plaque signaling what is happening here. I would have to rely on the image before me if I were to return.

It isn't that we want this place to be forgotten or that we have no reverence for the dead. It's that we want grandpa's memory to live on in the rocks and pebbles, the grass, the ground, the water, the trees, and the brush. We want him to be free, to sink into the deep luscious earth, or to sail on the current, or to do both if he pleases.

That had been his only request.

Though he'd gone suddenly, without warning, that one request had

always been clear. Where he'd been stuck for so long in life, six feet under demons and spirits and judgments, it only seems fair that he is not consigned to them now. So, we are here to bury his ashes in a shallow, watery hole. We'll settle him in the very place he came to as a boy to wash away the torments of his life.

I wonder if he had had this place throughout all the years if things would have turned out differently. Maybe he wouldn't have tried to drown out his sorrows in alcohol. I think of the bundles of hand-drawn cartoons he sent to my mother while she was expecting. I remember the strong pine scent of his cologne as he embraced me in a warm hug and told me he was proud of me on my baptism day. Maybe he would have been like that more. Maybe he can be now.

Dad stops shoveling and leans against the handle.

"Is that good?" He asks.

Mom observes the hole, nods, and gently lowers the box from her arms, setting her father and all the bittersweet memories of him into the creek's embrace. We all take part, reverently scooping the extracted pile of soil and rocks over the beautiful box, knowing that, soon, our vision of him will be rushing with the creek, light and free.

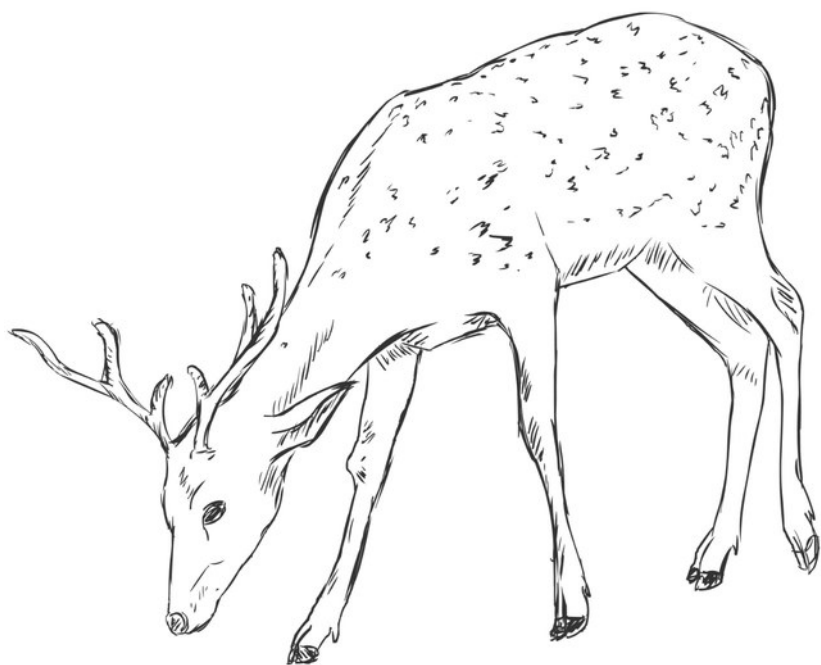


FOR RHONDA

If She Asks Herself, "Who Are You?"

Miriam Erickson

She is the fawn—
tender, wild, reposed.
Alive like water,
under the thinness of her skin.
She is a feral thing,
tame once—tamed once,
but no more.
Methinks she burns beneath her skin,
beautiful and strange in her own dance:
land bird, ladybird.
If words were wings,
she would have them,
but would she let them fly?
She is dawn sun
on the moor.
She is silvery rain
in spruce forests.
Why does she avert her eyes
in the hallways she sings through,
slips through,
breathes through,
slides through,
like mercury,
like moonlight?
She is a nomadic nightingale,
singing out into darkness.



MY FATHER'S LOVE IS

Brittnia Coley

My father's love is holding a crying baby to give Mom a break. It's working late nights and early mornings.
It's somehow still finding time for family.

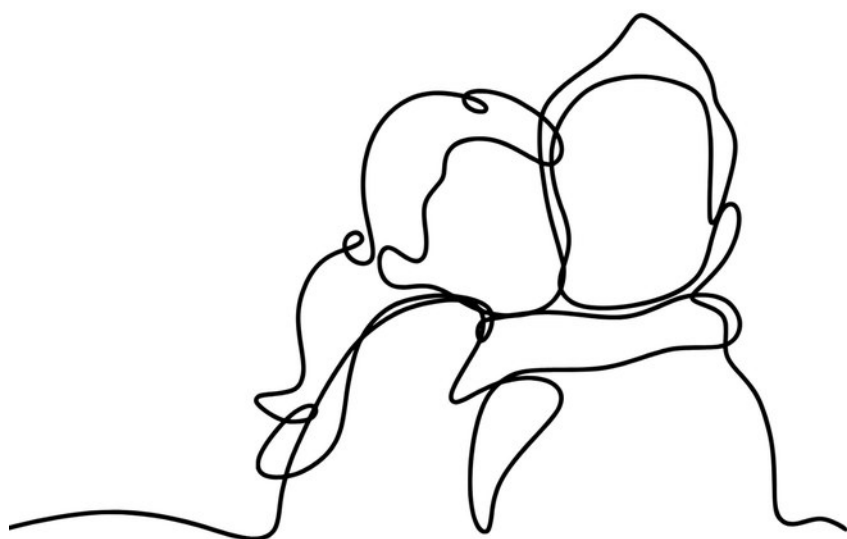
My father's love is teaching me how to drive.
It's showing me how to take care of my car.
It's fixing the big things I can't do on my own.

My father's love is taking me on my first date,
so I'll know how a boy should treat me.
It's holding me while I cry
when one I thought would treat me right doesn't.

My father's love is packing the car with eighteen boxes to take me to college for my first semester.
It's carrying most of them himself,
while I stop to talk with friends.

My father's love is driving four hours
to take me to the MTC.
It's holding me as we cry
over eighteen months apart.

My love for my father
is realizing how much he's done for me
and how little I've done for him.
It's realizing he has held me
through every trial in my life—
It's realizing he always will.



HE, THE HOUSE, AND I

CLAIRE BENNION

Winter

November. That's what we decided on.

Both families complained. Mine about the upcoming holidays and his about the distance.

An uncle said all our pictures would be brown and gray. He laughed.

We told him, "So what?"

Nothing else had to be said.

Eventually, November came.

My party dress was orange and gold, and we had Costco pumpkin pie instead of cake. Then we were gone, just as the first snow blew in behind us.

The first winter. It came in perfect and wild.

The windows in our house were single-paned, and the door was unleveled by rusty hinges that no amount of oil could fix. A draft always came slipping through the bottom, so we stuffed old socks in the crack to keep out the chill.

At night, late, when it really started to get dark, when the gray clouds would catch the dull haze from the city, we'd turn the lights off and hurry to the front window. Sneaking on tiptoes, without a word passing between us, and we'd watch. He, the house, and I.

I'd dig my shoulder in close to his, and he'd pull close to mine, wrap a blanket around us, and we'd kneel.

We'd kneel at the window. We, with our flushed arms on the icy pane, our cheeks close, and our eyes wide, watching, waiting.

The wind would pick up and whistle through the trees, and then it would vanish. And shake itself apart, leaving only the stillness of the storm. Sweet, awed silence.

That was when the furnace would turn on— the only welcome sound because it was part of the spell. Heat coming up through metal vents in the floor, humming, breathing alongside us.

And we would wait, leaning on each other. Huddling together,

listening, watching for the flakes.

He, the house, and I.

They would come slow at first, one, two, three hundred.

Lifetimes of them. Piling up in flat, feathery layers on the driveway and road, the grass, the trees, the streetlights.

I always liked the matted look of light through snow.

The way the white bricked up on the glass and softened the color to the dull glow of a fairy house. We watched and watched, wonder-filled eyes reaching out to savor the cold, our noses kissed by the subtle frost on the windowsill.

The storm knew us. It knew we were watching.

If we spoke to each other, he, the house, and I, it would be through delicate whispers and stolen glances. Grins. Fingers tracing patterns on the glass. A kiss, maybe two, then settling back on our knees to watch and watch and watch as the night darkened against the dull white.

Sometimes the clouds would turn pink. Sometimes it wouldn't get all the way dark, and those were the best nights.

Our chins would slip down to our arms, our heads would tilt with sleepy wonder like we were children, and our eyes would get heavy, but we never stopped watching. Never moved, never broke the sacredness of the silence, except to let the house breathe and us breathe.

Every second spent that way was bottled carefully inside us. And we would stay there until the small hours came and went. And came and went.

We could've spent forever like that. I know.

And when we couldn't keep our eyes open anymore.

We'd squeeze hands. And we'd toddle off to bed.

Without a word, still, but satisfied as we went.

And the snow would continue outside, soft and soundless in the blissful dark while we slept within our covers and dreamed.

He, the house, and I.

Summer

This place looks like a blank circus tent from the inside. High, white swaths of colorless walls and ceilings splashed with vases of sun-faded silk flowers. But some were real. Wilting in the heat.

I guess it's better to be shaded, but every second I sit here with my quiet head, I feel more parched and lifeless than I would outside. Even water burns like salt on the way down, and I briefly wonder how hard I would have to squeeze the glass cup in my hand to break it.

I set the glass atop the white tablecloth, and the fabric holds it, pristine, silent and smooth. The hem cascades, perfectly starched, over the rounded edge of the table and gathers in my lap. It's the only beautiful thing here, really. It reminds me of all those winter nights we bottled.

I didn't think I'd need to drink them so soon.

Just one night, that's all I want— a cold, and crisp, and pale, still night. Rain would do fine. Thunder rumbling beneath my heels. I'd take a single cloud. Anything to save me from this intolerably hot, sticky, suffocating July I'm trapped in.

Anything.

July turned my dress black, then added insult to injury by dampening it with sweat. Winter wouldn't have done that to me, but it's half a year away now, so there isn't any breeze, any breath of relief. Only a choked room full of blotchy faces attached to names I hadn't cared to learn before today. Each time I catch a gaze, it's snapped away, or forcing a smile.

Better a forced smile than no smile at all, or worse, an empty word. Chatter is a stiff trick. It says it knows and feels the way I do, but how could it? What could it possibly know that I don't?

I long for reverent, kind silence. Humble, dedicated, unremarkable silence broken only by the steady hum of breathing.

I can't stand to be looked at anymore, not even by the little girls with undone pigtails, or the old women with kind eyes and the strings of silver around their necks that they wore last November. I wish I could look at them, but what would they say if I smiled? If I said I wished it would snow?

"Poor Joan," is what they'd say, what they've been saying, what I can't bear to hear anymore—no matter how well they mean it. And I know they mean it because they're here, aren't they? But they're acting like I'm the only *"poor Joan"* in the room.

Like I'm the only one who loved him.

"She's so young."

Was I? Twenty-seven didn't feel young. Not when in one year, I had

lived an entire lifetime.

Especially when that life was so happy. The life we spent together. *They* were all acting as if that life didn't happen. But the house knew.

It knew, and it was there.

So, when this is over, I'll go home, and I'll set the table. I'll settle by the window. And I'll watch the months flicker on and let life flicker on, business as usual with me in it.

I will. I have to, because the house and I, we had to stick together. In a few months, the seasons will change again, and those storms will be expecting us. We have to be there.

"Poor Joan, and no kids either-"

I lift myself from the table to make my escape, to spirit away for one moment—just one. I can't have another voice catch me. Not now. The tablecloth slides from my lap in a sweeping avalanche, and before my shoes can click twice against the marble tiles, my ring catches a thread.

Glass shatters.

And that hot talk? It was blanketed, smothered by a cool, heavy quiet.

The iciness of it kisses my ears and sends the gift of a shiver across my skin, the rush of a winter night spent at the window. There is air in my lungs, breathing— warm and lovely life.

The chatter continues to snuff out, but I don't watch it go. I don't watch to see who turns to look because I don't care. My eyes squint shut, and before I can help it, I smile. And a single, breathless, giddy laugh escapes me.

Clear, and crisp, and unrestrained. Real.

The giggle at a funeral.

Every other face is pale and still with the terrible shock of, *"how could she?"* and, *"at a time like this? Poor Joan."*

But I know it's what he would have wanted.

For me to drink those moments we bottled.

For me to go home and set the table.

And to wait by the window for the storms like always.

Delighting in the perfect clumsiness of it all.

For he, the house, and I.



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Daniel Gifford is an English education major from Burlington, Kansas. He loves to spend time with his wife and baby. He is an avid poet and is working on his first novel.

Bridger Roberson is a blue-eyed chap who is unfortunately losing his hairline. He likes a variety of things and has mediocre knowledge in an assortment of areas. His favorite book is *TV* and he likes kicking it back with a select number of people.

Isaac Wood is an English major from Rexburg, Idaho. He loves to enjoy the outdoors with family and friends. Isaac enjoys a broad array of literature, particularly medieval British and American Renaissance writing. He is passionate about the written word.

Peyton Anderson is wanting to go into healthcare in some type of way. He loves being outdoors, especially going backpack camping. He also loves to bake. He really enjoyed writing his poem, which was a fun, new experience.

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Avery Conn is a biology major from Fort Mill, South Carolina. She has a passion for marine biology and pizza making, but she enjoys writing as an art form and emotional outlet. She is inspired by Hayley Williams and Albert Camus. If you want to say hi you can email her at averyconn71107@gmail.com

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Tavo Scholes is an English major who moved around a lot growing up. As a result, he came to prefer books to people. He enjoys reading fantasy, working out, and daydreaming in his free time. His favorite book is *The Hobbit* by J.R.R Tolkien.

Leah Anderson is a physics student at BYU-I with an all-encompassing love for stars and couch naps. She has worked at The Writing Center for over a year, and her passion for writing rivals an English major.

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Miriam Erickson is an interdisciplinary major studying professional writing and horticulture through BYU-I. She can often be found with a pen or a trowel in hand and is happiest with a bit of good soil under her nails. She lives with her husband, two cats, and a rotating cast of adult children.

Brittnia Coley is an exercise physiology major from Twin Falls, Idaho. She loves being outside and spending time with friends, family, and boyfriend. She also has an unhealthy obsession with Deseret Book proper romances and donuts.

Claire Bennion is an English major, published poet, and aspiring author who loves nothing more than a good story. Her writing centers around the minute, but impactful, and often overlooked moments of life to provide a new and thought provoking perspective for middle grade, young adult, and adult readers, whom she loves so dearly. Writing is one of the greatest joys of her life, along with a good book, a good thunderstorm, and even better company.



POSTCARD



[sohn-dehrr] - noun

The realization that
every random passerby
is living a life as vivid and
complex as your own.



Wish you
were
here!

to you,
with love