

THE DELTA VOLUME

#61



"Wavy"
by Stella
Burke

The Delta Volume #61 **Editors**

Editor-In-Chief

Eunice Koomson

Assistant Editor

Emily Wiewiorowski

Poetry Co-Editors

Antawn Amos

Kiana Naquin

Poetry staff

Nona Lea

Reegan Wolfe

Stella Burke

Fiction Co-Editors

Ashlynn Buzbee

Noah Felps

Ana Owen

Fiction Staff

Alden Ceasar

*Ashley Lavergn
Calleigh Houston
Emily Wiewiorowski
Hayden Robert
Heidi Pitre
Lizzie Vukovics
Logan Fontenot
Meagan Williams
Mike Frank
Tisheka Woodlief
Amber McKinney
Amber Lattier
Michaela O'Hanlon*

Prose Staff

*Alden Ceasar
Lizzie Vukovics*

Illustration Editor

Nona Lea

Illustration Staff

*Eunice Koomson
Amber Lattier
Ashely Lavergn
Ashlynn Buzbee
Emily Wiewiorowski
Stella Bur*

Editor's Note

Coming into Delta, I had so many goals I hoped to achieve throughout my term. Thankfully, those goals were reached and then some. Just to name a few accomplishments from this year:

- Registering the Delta as an LSU student organization;
- Hosting more creative events and fundraisers;
- Getting a HUGE number (I mean nearly 100) submissions;
- And publishing over 30 amazing authors/artists

Honestly none of this could have happened without my staff. Not only are you all so supportive and welcoming, but so dedicated. I appreciate your work ethic and willingness to step up to the plate. I've worked with many organizations and groups but the 2018-2019 Delta Staff has been the best team yet, hands down. Thank you for letting me be your leader and keeping me level-headed throughout this journey. A special shout out to the head editors for poetry, fiction, and layout/illustration. Being able to delegate tasks to you all and see them executed flawlessly made it so much easier to bring my vision to life.

I also want to thank Professor Randolph Thomas for being an amazing advisor, teacher, mentor, and friend. You always spoke positively and life into all of my endeavors whether it was Delta, classwork, or my career. You will always have a special place in my heart.

I still can't believe I was blessed with this opportunity to look over all of the in's and out's of the journal this year. My heart is so full and I cannot express my appreciation enough. I pray that I was able to be the

best leader I could for the Delta and that the next EIC and staff will continue to take Delta to even greater heights.

Of course, thank you to all the people who supported Delta financially. We couldn't do this without you all, seriously! And to the readers: Thank you for taking the time to experience Vol #61. It only gets better from here.

Eunice Koomson, Editor-In-Chief '18-'19

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Randolph Thomas, our advisor, for his unending support and for encouraging our unique vision for the Delta. His guidance is what allowed the Delta to soar. We are also grateful to the establishments that have provided us with the space we needed to share our creativity: Highland Coffees, Pop Shop Records, and Baton Rouge Gallery. We want to thank California Pizza Kitchen and Halal Guys, who supported our efforts to raise funds this year. We dearly appreciate Baton Rouge Printing, who helped us bring this collection of art to life. As always, thank you to the Matt Clark family for generously rewarding our top fiction and poetry creators each year.

The support that comes from within LSU is what keeps Delta going. We would like to express our endless appreciation for the professors and faculty members who spread the word about Delta and its events, encouraged their students to submit their works, and generously donated time, money, and resources to the journal: Dr. Joseph Kronick, who arranged for the English Department to cover a large part of our production costs; Professor Jennifer Davis, who helped provide for us the brand-new laptop with which we put this journal together; Robin Collor, our wonderful accountant; and all professors who kindly allowed our staff to visit their classes and call for submissions.

Finally, we would like to extend our gratitude and congratulations to every LSU student who shared their work with us this year. You all created Delta.

Table of Contents

Summer Acceptance	5
<i>By Kiara Warren</i>	
Sterling Styx	7
<i>By Hayden Rigby</i>	
Baton Rouge Scenery #1	9
<i>By Ashley Lavergne</i>	
Stone Gardener	10
<i>By Ray Magruder</i>	
Song of a Nightingale	11
<i>By Sydney Slater</i>	
Innocence is a Rose in a Blender	12
<i>By Nona Lea</i>	
Hold	13
<i>By Nona Lea</i>	
Bubble	14
<i>By Nona Lea</i>	
Eczema	15
<i>By Rebecca Rose Barnett</i>	
Cut Off	16
<i>By Celeste Maffei</i>	
Black Death: The Ghost Whispers of Those Who Can't Speak	17
<i>By Kiana Naquin</i>	
Ain't no Fireworks	22
<i>By Calvin Morris</i>	

Walking Back to my Dorm on the PWI's Campus	24
<i>By Calvin Morris</i>	
On Having a Faith in a Soon to Be Gentrified Neighborhood	26
<i>By Calvin Morris</i>	
I hope you had fun last night	28
<i>By James A. Smith</i>	
A Collection of Philosophical Haikus	30
<i>By Antawn Amos</i>	
The Duality of Day and Night	31
<i>By Antawn Amos</i>	
Sorry	32
<i>By Hayden Rigby</i>	
Baton Rouge Scenery #2	35
<i>By Ashley Lavergne</i>	
A Personal Journal in the #MeToo Era	36
<i>By Emily Price</i>	
I can taste the bittersweet memories colors leaving me and staining my world a hollow ebony	49
<i>By Kiara Warren</i>	
The Flow of Color	54
<i>By Angelica Cowillion</i>	
Wonderland	55
<i>By Jana K. Lee</i>	
A Walk Under the Lights	70
<i>By Dominique Riley</i>	
Ranch Dressing	71
<i>By Noah Felps</i>	

Locker 131	72
<i>By Noah Felps</i>	
Sunsets on the Levee	79
<i>By Eunice Koomson</i>	
Caesura	80
<i>By Riley McDaniel</i>	
Huang Li	85
<i>By Dominique Riley</i>	
Escapade	96
<i>By Taylor Alyse Pisanie</i>	
Bars	107
<i>By Nona Lea</i>	
The Fairytale	108
<i>By Angela Carson</i>	
The River Covenant	110
<i>By Charity Ringel</i>	
Tetanus Chair	111
<i>By Liz Haley</i>	
East State Street	113
<i>By Liz Haley</i>	
Cycles	115
<i>By Michael Frank</i>	
Persephone	117
<i>By Mallory De Lanza</i>	
Writhing	118
<i>By Stella Burke</i>	
A Conversation About Race	119
<i>By Khoi Truong</i>	

Letting Go Would Feel Sadder if it Felt Less Inevitable 122

By Khoi Truong

A Silkworm's Suicide 124

By Jennifer Kristen Cook

Open the Top 125

By Indica Mosley

Feminine Taboo 126

By Jaden Cu

Free Will 127

By Catherine Boudreaux

Summer Acceptance

By Kiara Warren

My bones are aging.

Growing stronger under the crackling rays of future hopes.

Reaching high to hold fast to children's laughter which floats
to leave their bubbling, candy floss kisses upon my childish, blooming
soul.

Before they burst under the sun because I am getting old.

I am aging.

No longer a seedling cracking the pavement of the fairgrounds.

No longer able to be dizzied by the wooshing swings that swirl me round
and round.

I am no longer amazed by the carnies boisterous crowds
because my petals seem to have wilted under Mother Nature's
populated sounds.

My soul's aging

and once sturdy limbs are cracking under adult pressures.

When did tomorrow become drowned in odd rains hard to measure.

The iridescent sky flowers aren't to come in this uncharacteristic
weather so maybe I'll expel the excess and finally pull myself together.

I'm changing.

Spreading my roots and accepting the growth in my vibrant leaves.

Allowing the lush greenery to finally set my spongy mind at ease.

6

No longer a child but a teen who's come to accept that change is happening.

My future will lift me higher while my memories will continue their nurturing.

I'm aging.

Sterling Styx

By Hayden Rigby

Slip down the B in sunburn;
Sleep in the baby bump of
this stick bug city
Watch it shed its skin & eat it
Baptize your
Bullet Holster Birthmarks
In this bittered bloodstream.

Purgatory parades backwards down River Road
When the southern stars saturnine
Soulsheep swamp the streets
Crawfish their way up the levee
A high school horn section inhales second line
A float of plastic beads is born from the headache of a black boy

Politico shuffle like chicken bone dominos
Salamoni swears innocents on the hood of a silver Sedan
Sentenced to drink from the Mississippi
He shoots back six shots of that shit
Doesn't even stutter

The flood I swam out of still daydreams of drinking me
It reminds me by rocking bottles of cheap superstition to sleep

By building cold turkey turnstiles
The city will crack your fear open like a crab
Gut you like a gar
Suck the cancer out of the constellation.
If you scrape yourself
to the other side of sanity
for a second the Styx is
stream of sterling.

A starling swims out of the water and starts to swallow
the parade.
It's swallowing the south
So humid here because I'm living in your memory's mouth.

I go to sleep every night with a mouth full of silver coins
Don't you dare leave me on this side of the Delta
I spit the coins into the river and wish a man's name spray
painted under the water would dissolve and line the clouds.

*“Baton Rouge
Scenery #1” by
Ashley Lavergne.*



Stone Gardener

By Ray Magruder

I am a keeper
For a garden of stones

*I keep watch over the sleeping
As from their beds they grow*

Granite, Concrete, faded Lime
All arranged in a grid like line
The Black fence keeps the living out
The Sharp spires too many to count

Here in this garden my body will die But
my soul will rise up high like a pine!
And tower over the stones below!
So that I may watch them
As from their beds they grow

Song of a Nightingale

By Sidney Slater

In the midst of the grim midwinter I
walked along the path of my life.
The soft snowdrifts had turned icy.
They groaned and cracked, agonized, so quietly with my every step.

With chin tucked low,
I saw only the ground and the glare And
a trickle of blood.

I paused as I came upon him,
A nightingale, toes curled to his chest, wings spread as if in flight, Dead.

Someone, a monster,
Had slit the creature's throat.
But monsters have claws Not
kitchen knives.

He lay there, cold,
Eyes open and unseeing,
With everything he had torn from his throat and weeping onto the snow,
And mouth held open in a silenced song.

Innocence is a Rose in a Blender

By Nona Lea

When the beauty turns liquid, it conforms to the shape of any cup

But a solid state is left untouched to wither its petals away.

Youngest are most sought after for harvest

Full blooms already smelled and plucked are worn socks

Mature blooms are far too intimidating for a groping hand, their strong
thorns shank unwanted touch

Hands complain their thorns would splinter their drink anyway However,

the Young are too naïve to complain,

Their thorns are malleable as dough.

Full blooms tower over the Young to keep them from harvest

But harvesters know how to peel the Young away

They tell the Mature if they were as soft and sweet they would have been
picked first

Full blooms say truly kind hands would never bleed

The hands say the full blooms' blood stains prove prudence

While the hands like wasps to grope each flower

Hands cry like an ugly thing when THEY bleed, and the blooms demand
respect

The hands are venom

Blaming the flowers for being far too beautiful to resist temptation.

For if they shed their petals as tears, the hands say they never wish to
touch them

But even those barren of any color are still cut.



*“Hold” by
Nona Lea*

*“Bubble” by
Nona Lea*



Eczema

By Rebecca Rose Barnett

His voice is a sapphire. The butterfly kisses at the nape of his neck are so delicately placed. They resemble the speckled leaves of the Amazon, sculpted and mysterious, rounded substrates. He's big and tall, maybe two fifteen for his six feet two inches Mexican blood mixed with American Dream height. I love that I gently cocoon into him, that I am fifty pounds lighter from my now deceased darkness. They told me boys don't get skin problems.

“Cut Off”
Celeste



The Black Death: The Ghost Whispers of Those Who Can't Speak

By Kiana Naquin

Ring Around The Rosies

O'Captain they're all dead! Masked in Black boils and bruises. Blood and

Pus bubbling on the surface

Drive the ship away, Now! Before it's too late...

Titter, Titter, Titter the rats are not the only eaters

Mommy something bit me, I do not feel so good

It was the summer of 1349 I lost my little Joey

Mommy, where's Joey, and what is this Bubo on my knee, it hurts

mommy, Achoo, I'm sorry

Bless you baby, let mommy see

I'll comfort you now since the reaper will be at our door in 3 to 5 days

sweetie

It's those damn foreigners, the wretched Chinese

Bringing they're diseases

My sheep have fallen

Where they grazed is now they're deathbed

Where little Susie and Cathy also lay they're heads

First start the sneezes and coughs

Then diarrhea and vomiting

Next day, early morning I was covered in Bumps and Puss
 Daddy what's wrong with thee?
 Throw the chamber pot out darling
 Great heavens, that's the third time this morning
 Unfortunate day for the paper boy downstairs, defecate was his demise
 I fell in an alley and was not found until next week
 Mum and dad were next, the neighbors keeled over, and mum wore
 they're clothes
 My dad thought nothing of it until the plague was exposed
 A Pocket Full of Posies
 20, 40, 60 bodies piled up in London's Cemetery
 Poor Saps said Delilah
 Death does not seem that scary
 TAG your it
 She fell over a strangers' foot
 A wonderer on the street
 destined for black soot
 His bumps were huge
 His face mutilated
 He coughs in the childrens' faces
 They scream and run home
 To infect they're families
 Soon to become belated
 Yersinia Pestis
 That's what the doctor said dear
 I might only have a week to live
 But darling how will we carry on

We'll do our best, the boys will support you

My husband died that night

But the fleas kept me company in bed

A kiss, a kiss, Death was my only wish

We have to bury mom and dad

Sniffles, sniffles it'll be alright Charlie

Luckily dad left you his lucky boots

Ashes, Ashes

The bodies were in the loads of thousands

Well we have to burn them

They're just isn't enough of plots

Try telling that to the priest

Last week someone took his spot

He went on and on

On why this is happening

A divine punishment

A cure for the sinners

Well now he's in the grave

So I am assuming he was no good saint either

Ha Ha cough cough

Break Time

Moving dead bodies all day is quite the chore

Let's not wash our hands

And eat the porridge my wife made

Thus was his last meal

Of all his days

Don't touch me, Don't touch me

I am royalty

You common peasants are riddled with disease

I shall pick a new whore on the other side of the city

Dust to Dust

Well hello good sir, and how are you this evening

What a ravishing dress

Thank you, it was my mother's, it was the only thing she left me

She died not too long ago

Shrouded in its' beauty

And what a coincidence

She was from the other side of the city

La pest, The Pestilence, The "Great Morality",

No, just bubonic

The plague

From rat, to flea, to dead ole me

Starts with fever, trembles, weakness

Sometimes just coughing and sneezing, quite the pneumatic quality

Hope they keep record of the giant lymph nodes under my arms and near

my groin, its painful and huge, it burst, and now we're all infected

It's an apocalyptic account for the ages

So your telling me twenty million died

That's right, just about the whole country

Wow, must be a descent place, Europe is such a sorry place to be

Actually, it just stole one-third of this forsaken country

Achoo, Achoo

My dear I'm so sorry

It's fine really, I've been surrounded in death

Do you think we can overcome this wallowing epidemic

It's too late for us

We All Fall Down

Matt Clark Poetry Award Winner
Ain't no fireworks

By Calvin Morris

the Bullet sails:
 a shooting star, christening the New Years, the
 only celestial body guarding this hood's sky.

a boy, sitting in the weeds blooming between the cracks in the side-
 walk, looks up.
 The Night points a gun at his temple.
"what you got for us, son?"

how is a child expected to make a wish?

simple.

the piercing desires does not come without collateral
 around these parts.
*a New Year's resolution. a pot of black eyed peas and a prayer. an exit
 wound.*
 are all byproducts of some desperate brown hands':
*well-intentioning. unrelenting thirst. gluttony for the bread
 crumb.*

— but back to the Bullet.

the Bullet sails,

through a window, invading
the dark bedroom. the dark flesh.
 the boy is silent.
 knees ruby red, scraping against concrete.

hands outstretched,

waiting for a wish to fall into his open palms.

the Bullet can make its presence known in many ways:
a game of Russian roulette. a suicide note. a mourning mother over a sidewalk.

all of which end in a new life.

the Bullet — revered for
the opportunity it promises. the heaven it grants. The mercy offered
when it embeds into a wall not a,
throat. —

says,

“I will pass over this boy. let him flee this egypt. float upstream to a new life. i will pass over him until he returns for his people.”

the boy returns home.
 red streaks across his knees and temple,
 after the scar tissue has been offered.

*“Boy, don’t be opening my doors or turning on my lights so late; them,
 ain’t no fireworks.
 share the bottom bunk.*

say your prayers. go to bed. sweet dreams.

i love you

Walking Back to My Dorm on the PWI's Campus

By Calvin Morris

though I walk through the valleys of the shadows of the frat house:

I shall fear no caucasian foolishness.

I practice devotion. I play Troye Sivan to warn off the
heathens. On my
person: *Sour Skittles. Watermelon Arizona Tea. Jangling
loose change.*

tequila and the careless (but “harmless”) usage of “nigga” creaks
out the front
door as they listen to Young Thug and other niggas,
attempting to put each other on to a culture

they are not a part of.

this university only let in because diversity
is in.

I pass by campus police when Officer asks, “What you
doing out...” I
say,

Trying not to be too much of a nigga. “...this late?” Trayvon.

Emmett. Tamir.

*It's never too early for your name to be what follows the slur
at the frat house. "You gone answer me or not."*

And we stare at each other. And he says, "Answer me boy!". And he starts to reach towards his waist. And I grab the coins in my pocket. And all the metal on his body melts. And I pour out the Arizona. And his car aflame, the doors off their hinges, the wheels shrink, roll to my feet. And he gasps. And he asks, "What are you?"

And I leave.

And I laugh the moon full.

And I shove a fistful of the skittles in my mouth.

And I pour out a little more of the Arizona. May this night of victory honor the utterances of all the mud brick bodies who do not survive the walk home.

I whistle and the frat house windows shatter.

On Having Faith in a Soon to Be Gentrified Neighborhood

By Calvin Morris

the stars that fled from this poverty-stricken neighborhood?

we call them back,
tell them dance.

not like the slaves we were,

but like the prodigal son finally returning home

celebrating out of our own grief,

the empty nighttime sky the only one who sympathized with our loneliness.

"i've missed you," Mawmaw whispers from the front porch,

the stars bellow back, *"we're sorry for leaving.*

thank you for finding us."

& i, teach my little cousins,

wild bodies splayed across the lawn underneath the nighttime

sky

a step beyond *grace*:

how to make a wish.

"it's simple really," i murmur

trying not to break the reverie the night holds,

the world seemingly endless,

possibilities limitless,

the stars beacons of hope once again to these children,

of mud puddles,
 of grass stains, soft hymns,
 and mothers well wishes.
 these kids of the chemical plant's smog,
 of areas of the city long forgotten, only
 preserved in hidden crevices between ancestral devotion
 & children's imaginations,

these children dream far beyond the railroad tracks,
 beyond this neighborhood to be robbed from them and
 repackaged as some other kid's
 suburbia
 but,

the stars have returned and granted them this rare moment, of
 unrelinquished purity, and innocence,
 so i let them dream,
 as wild as their figures look underneath the illuminated sky.

"it's like praying like Pawpaw taught us," i say as they close their eyes,

enchanted by all that the nighttime heavens promise for their futures, and i
 wish only,

Come True.

I hope you had fun last night

By James A. Smith

i hope you had fun last night
i hope you danced and laughed
i hope he bought you a nice drink
i hope he acted like a nice guy
i hope you wouldn't entertain anything less
i hope you made it home safe
i hope he made sure you made it home safe
i hope he made you drink lots of water
i hope you showed him your favorite song
i hope you acted like i was never there
i hope he saw the twinkle in your eyes
i hope he told you how pretty they are
i hope you don't ever get stuck
i hope you don't ever feel trapped again
i hope he is whoever he says he is
i hope he cries if you tell him you're his
i hope you forgot about your problems
i hope you giggled them all away
i hope he told you how cute you are
i hope he made sure you knew he meant it
i hope you tried to play pool
i hope you got better
i hope he held your hand

i hope he sank the 8 ball

i hope you loved it

i hope you smirked and shook your head 4 times from side to side

i hope he smiled back

i hope he said something witty in reply

i hope you tried to order an uber

i hope you decided it was time to go

i hope he offered to pay for the ride

i hope he respected you no matter what he desired

i hope you woke up happy

i hope you woke up without regret

i hope he woke up wherever you wanted him to

i hope he made you feel safe

i hope you feel safe i hope you feel loved

i hope you had fun last night

A Collection of Philosophical Haikus

By Antawn Amos

I look to the world
And each time it is different.
That is the beauty.

The lifeless carcass Lays
still, patiently waiting
With hopes of new life.

A curious man
Ponders our
existence From the
stars above.

Crabs in a bucket.
I'm close to the top again.
They pull me back down.

A man in deep thought Is
a man who understands
That life should mean more.

The Duality of Day And Night

By Antawn Amos

The night is brimming
With life unseen by the day.
Different, but same.

The moon sits at night
Waiting and watching the Earth.
Escaping the Sun.

As the sun goes down
The stars occupy the sky
Telling lost stories.

A dark night swallows
And encompasses the day
To find the next one

Sorry

By Hayden Rigby

My grandmother hides
The choking hazard
christ
In her king cakes

Like my mother she
Makes me watch her fill
the dough with cinnamon

Draws empty butter
halos on the
parchment paper

Waits for the bread belly to breathe
Blossom

She imagines
her plastic prince
Under my
tongue like a pink
pearl

He feels
more like moon cotton
Rubbing
against my coffee teeth

I spit out the
child.

She tells me that it's my job to make the next.
Sorry

My grandfather pours salt on everything
before tasting it
His cheap communion wine blood
Drowns all my grandmother's cooking in bitter.

Carries a Jesus journal
Sends my mom religious chain emails
Sent her older sister on trips to the 7-11
For packs of Lucky Stripes

He's speeding from the West Coast
Back to New Orleans
With no glasses
Knowing Goddamn well he can't see a thing
Makes my snowglobe
still grandmother
sits shotgun scared shitless.

He only visits in the spring
So he can eat crawfish
Puts leftovers in the fridge
& cracks em open cold
Sucks the head
Stinks up the house

Horse shit on his boots
Bumping over boulders in a red Wrangler
He fills his house with turquoise
Leather dust saltlicks sudoku
Calls himself a cowboy

Rides for hours
In the snow
Pretending it's salt falling
The whole icy city a salt ring
To protect himself
From the souls he left in
The crescent city

In a house far away
From his children
He put my grandmother's voice in
A mason jar of vinegar &
Leaves it on a back shelf to pickle

*“Baton Rouge
Scenery #2” by
Ashley Lavergne.*



A Personal Journey in the #MeToo Era

By Emily Price

*Though her soul requires seeing, the culture
around her requires sightlessness.*

*Though her soul wishes to speak its truth, she is
pressured to be silent.*

– Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés

This essay focuses on sexual assault endured by women. However, I do not want to discount the sexual violence committed against men, for whom admitting the assault can be even more stigmatizing and for whom I have great sympathy. It is true that from 2010 to 2012, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that over 80% of male victims of sexual coercion were assaulted by women, assuring us that female-identifying persons are often perpetrators themselves (Smith et. al 2017). I have chosen to primarily discuss female victims and male perpetrators because of the scope of my personal experience as well as the focus of the national discourse. Because I believe similar yet separate mechanisms are at work between female and male victims, I would be hard-pressed to analyze the roots of both of these issues in this essay alone. It is for this reason that I have also chosen to focus on heterosexual relationships.

Thank you for your understanding.

For many years there were four generations of women—from my great-grandmother to myself—all living under the same roof in Louisiana, and so I had the privilege of asking advice from almost a century of my matrilineal heritage. Sexuality has never been a taboo subject to us, and sometimes I learned more about my family’s personal experiences than I wanted to when I asked for guidance. This didn’t just span my family, either; I still remember when my friends’ mothers asked my mom to give my friends the talk of the birds and the bees. I found it embarrassing then, but now I look back in amusement with a quiet pride in my mother’s uniqueness.

It was from this foundation that I embarked on my own series of discoveries as a teenager. My family is Baptist—we attended church every Sunday—but even then they believe certain small pleasures are permissible. My antics were all fairly innocent, and in total I only dated three people while attending high school. I was very picky, only going out with guys after I had thoroughly considered the pros and cons.

Imagine my surprise, considering my family’s openness about sex and my own selectivity, when I was sexually coerced [1]. There was no gun to my head, no threat whatsoever of physical violence, and nothing tangibly preventing me from leaving his bedroom that smelled hotly of cigarette smoke. My rejections were solely verbal. I told him “no” and “I don’t want to” as his hands moved about my body, indifferent to my refusals. After about ten minutes of prodding, where he’d ask for sex and I’d protest, he decided to enter me anyway, quickly, sending me into a sort of shock. I felt frozen. Immediately afterward, he apologized. I was seventeen.

The assault roused an evil voice inside my head, telling me I was responsible for it. I must have spent weeks afterward, reasoning out why *I* had let it happen. If I had only fought more, if I had walked away, if I had hit him, if I had screamed my objections rather than whispering them like a trembling mouse, I could have saved myself. This wasn’t an attack from a boy, I decided. I had failed myself, purely and simply, in a way that was so unexplainable to me. Out of shame, I didn’t tell my friends or even my family about the assault. Most of them still don’t know.

I constantly struggle to fend off this voice. Even in this age of progress, I have trouble accepting that I am not to blame for what happened to me. Objectively, I know he took advantage of me. I know he should have listened when I protested. But that evil little voice, which Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés calls “the predator” waiting patiently in women’s psyches to be unearthed by an act of trauma, tells me I should have done anything to get out of there. It tells me that, because I didn’t fight,

I must be weak and powerless. It tells me I should abandon my self-trust and self-worth because both are predicated on a lie. I lived with this voice as my guide for many years.

[1] *The CDC defines sexual coercion as “unwanted sexual penetration that occurs after a person is pressured in a nonphysical way.” Throughout this essay I will use sexual assault interchangeably with sexual coercion and rape (or “penetration through the use of physical force”).*

Though I wanted to prove this voice wrong, I didn't know where to begin. Then in October 2017, news of Harvey Weinstein's serially predatory behavior broke. It wasn't his deplorable actions that struck me; after all, I had been at the receiving end of similar treatment. What floored me was the language used by the women whom Weinstein targeted. In the *New York Times* article penned by Ronan Farrow detailing Weinstein's abuses, Lucia Evans, who was forced to give him oral sex, recounted telling Weinstein, "I don't want to do this, stop, don't." Despite these clear objections, Evans placed the blame on herself for the ensuing assault. "I tried to get away, but maybe I didn't try hard enough... I just sort of gave up," Evans said. After reading the full list of accusations, it was obvious Weinstein had knowingly assaulted Lucia Evans and many other women. What sort of person would put another human being into such a vulnerable and degrading position, especially after she has expressly communicated a lack of consent?

Then I thought of my own story, and I had to pick my jaw up off the floor. Out there was someone who understood my inner conflict, who knew it deeply, and who lived with that same evil voice in her head. Where was this community in my daily life? Had my friends, family, and co-workers fallen prey to similar circumstances and were just as ashamed to admit it? How many of us have been silently hurting? When I started to think about it, our pain never was that silent. It was just so normal, so unavoidable.

I thought of my mother, Stephanie. When she was freshly 15, a male friend offered to give her a ride from a dance to her friend's house. He unexpectedly pulled off into a field and asked if she wanted to look at the stars. My mother agreed, and as they lay in the bed of that pickup truck, the boy hiked up my mother's skirt, pinned down her arms, and raped her. My mother was helpless; all she could do was wrap her legs around him to try to prevent his thrusting. Afterward, he joked with my mother about having deflowered her and then drove her to her friend's house.

She didn't tell anyone about the assault until years later when she started having dreams about one of her male cousins molesting her. When she asked her mother about the dreams, my grandmother's face turned ghost-white. She told my mother that, when she was three, my mother had accused a cousin of touching her genitals. She had hoped my mother would forget about the incident.

The male cousin who assaulted my young mother later attended her wedding. The boy with the pickup truck now works as a youth pastor, preaching the Good Word to little Americans, and messaged my mother on Facebook a few months ago, wanting to catch up.

I thought of my friends. My best friend's boyfriend who groped my other friend's crotch while she was asleep at a party. A woman who kept saying "no" to a boy who kept pushing her into his truck. A friend who promised her boyfriend she'd have sex with him whenever he wanted so that they could stay together. A friend who would sometimes wake up to her boyfriend touching her, grinding against her unconscious body. A friend molested by her stepfather when she was 12. A friend's mother who had been raped by her own father. My mother's friend who had been raped by her own father. On three separate occasions, I personally saved drunk women from boys trying to coax them into dark rooms to use their bodies. In an under-exaggeration, we simply called them "creepy dudes" and thanked the stars on our way out that we were there to stop it. When I really thought about it, for the women with whom I've discussed such things, not one of them has gotten through life without enduring some form of sexual assault. Of all the women I've mentioned, not one of them pressed charges on their assaulters. Not one of them received any kind of institutional justice for the pain they were caused. And somehow, before the #MeToo movement began, I had never put all of these stories together and looked at them holistically. Even in my own sphere, sexual assault seemed horrifyingly common.

Once I realized how many women I personally knew who were sexually assaulted without recompense, I had a lot of emotions to process. My rage was nearly unbearable. I was angry at myself for falling prey to this unknowable subservience, angry at women for our historical complacency, and most of all angry at men for benefitting from women's silence. In truth I was blindingly livid at men. When I tried to discuss these issues, intending to calmly share my perspective on women's suffering, suddenly my vision would go red, and I would communicate no clearer message than the unexplainable severity of my rage. This anger felt unproductive; it wanted only to consume, not to create.

But this wasn't entirely true. In some ways this rage revealed paths that I hadn't been able to see before. When I gave myself over to the full emotional force of my anger, I was allowed to work through it rather than stomping it back down into the dark depths of my psyche where still it would burn. In *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes:

“Women who become socially, politically, or culturally conscious often find that they have to deal with a collective rage that seeps upward through them again and again... It is psychically sound for women to feel this anger... It is not psychologically sound for them to neutralize their anger so they will not feel, so they will therefore not press for evolution and change.” (398)

So this was my sourceless yet ubiquitous anger, the “collective rage.” A rage at once for myself and for all women who have experienced sexual violence and who, through silence, feel alone in their pain. Once I understood and accepted this anger, rather than conceal it until it burst out of me of its own volition, I began to see more clearly. It was a surprise to me. I assumed accepting the rage would lead to my undoing, but quite the opposite occurred. Kasia Urbaniak, founder of The Academy in New York where she teaches women to effectively navigate power dynamics, said:

“[After working through your rage], you have a totally renewed ability to see the apparent enemy... and see what's happening systemically. You don't need one person to be your enemy... You can see a picture that includes you, the other, and the system that created us. And you can start having new ideas about how to change all of it.”
(Coppolino interview)

Sure enough, when the fire of my rage had waned to coal embers, the truth was laid bare before me: while sexual assaulters themselves may be sick, the lack of cultural healing after the fact is also indicative of a wounded society.

I believe the “freeze” response in women is a harmful mechanism hidden in generations of human conditioning, and it explains why many women tend to shut down in moments when they need to be in control.

Additionally, it may elucidate why women are so quick to blame themselves for sexual assault, especially when they have been sexually coerced.

Kasia Urbaniak shaped my understanding of the phenomenon called the “freeze.” I have personal experience with this sensation; I felt paralyzed while being assaulted, and there were many other instances when I had frozen for smaller offenses, like when I was groped by men at bars or when my previous boss made sexually suggestive comments toward me. In each of these instances, I wanted to speak up for myself but felt incapable of uttering a single word. To Urbaniak, this has to do with where women are taught to focus their energy.

There are exceptions to the following assertions, but they help provide a general framework for understanding why many women freeze in compromising situations. In the most general terms, young boys are lauded for what they accomplish, like prowess in sports, and young girls are praised for traits they inherently possess, such as beauty or natural talent. Boys are praised for what they *do* so boys feel most accomplished when their attention is directed outward. Because girls are praised for what they *are*, cultural affirmation instructs their attention to be directed inward. This socialization ensures that a woman’s default instinct, encouraged by her culture, is to retreat inward when faced with threatening circumstances.

Urbaniak presents a solution “so simple it’s almost dumb” for women who feel frozen: ask the other person a question. In an interview with Maria Menounos, Urbaniak said, “The moment a person’s asked a question... they put their attention in.” For example, a woman may respond to an unsavory comment, “Do you realize that a statement like that might make a woman feel uncomfortable?” For just a moment, the man’s attention is forced inward, providing the woman a chance to break

the freeze and regain her voice. Urbaniak says you can ask any question under the sun, and it will have the same effect.

As an extension, I would argue men's tendency to project energy outward may help explain the language barrier between men and women when it comes to this issue. A man, reading about a woman who claims she was sexually coerced, may think, "Why didn't she run away? Why did she stay there when she claims she was being hurt?" When he asks these questions, he's likely speaking from a perspective that has rarely been encouraged to project energy inward, and so he cannot fathom how a woman might feel stuck in a compromising situation. This is where communication between men and women becomes critical, and men must often trust a woman without being able to truly understand what she has experienced. This has obviously contributed to the difficulty women have had so far in communicating their concerns to men.

Once I was able to direct my rage away from men in general, I began to see men as necessary allies in reversing the normalization of sexual violence. I wanted to address this issue first with my boyfriend Joseph. When I started having conversations about #MeToo with him, I was surprised with what I perceived to be his lack of empathy. He expressed that the #MeToo movement mostly worried him. He has always heeded a woman's "no," he told me, but what if she experienced a freeze and he unknowingly violated her? This is a good question with no easy answer, and I believe this is one of the most difficult issues we will have to reckon with as the #MeToo movement progresses.

Then he asked what should happen if a hypothetical ex-girlfriend, out of the blue, accused him of sexual assault due to some grudge, ruining his life without any presumption of innocence on his part. Once he breached this subject, I immediately saw red. I had heard this argument far too often from men I respected less, and I hated the way it sounded coming out of my boyfriend's mouth. "Should we stop putting thieves on trial because some victims of theft may be lying?" I shot back. "A mountain of victims matters more to me than a handful of wrongly accused men."

In retrospect, though my anger was honest and well-founded, I admit it did not feel productive to shame Joseph for his honesty. When he expressed concern about false accusers, he felt fearful. I realize now his

fear was an expression of a common anxiety among men at this point; he even said most men he's spoken to about this subject have shared his worry. At this moment Joseph trusted me with an honest confession he knew would be difficult for me to hear. But rather than vilifying him for this fear, I should have accepted that he was expressing a rational anxiety stemming from unprecedented social upheaval.

Should our revolution, then, be diluted in order to cater to these fears? Absolutely not. But I firmly believe in order for the #MeToo movement to be successful and lasting, we must incorporate men into the solution. Many feminists believe men need to listen to women's emotional needs more closely; I agree, but I also believe society will flourish even more if we afford men the same treatment. In reference to the apparently dramatic influence she has on men whom she dates, Erykah Badu wrote, "People always ask me, 'What are you doing to these guys to make them...' What? Grow? Change? Evolve? Here's my secret. Y'all ready? I listen to them" (21). And I believe listening will be a critical tool as we continue to navigate the nuances surrounding this issue.

I serve this statement, however, with a side of caveat. I don't believe this principle should apply to a man who is antagonistic or otherwise unreachable. Some men will be impossible to engage with concerning this issue. But for men who are open to having this difficult discussion, we should listen to them as we listen to women.

Let's face it: our society peddles the necessity of male sexual prowess to the point of intimidation for many men. To add insult to injury, imagine you were a man who found out women may not feel totally comfortable saying "no" during sex. If you're a decent man, who has always done your best to read body language and heed a woman's refusal, you may be worrying that you yourself were an unwitting contributor to this soul-crushing business. To these men, let's talk. Let's work this out together to create a society in which men and women can safely, fully, and enthusiastically embrace our shared sexuality.

While many men may not understand, women learn early what this world has in store for them when a mother sits her daughter on her knee and reminds her to always travel in pairs while out with her friends. Or when a politician jokes, "As long as it's inevitable, you might as well lie back and enjoy it" [2]. Or when a judge lessens a prison sentence for a convicted sexual predator because "a prison sentence would have a severe impact on

[2] *Texas gubernatorial candidate Clayton Williams made this joke comparing rape to bad weather (Dunham 2008).*

him,” despite there being two witnesses to the assault and obvious injury to the victim [3].

Or that a man can withstand at least sixteen sexual misconduct allegations against his character, make light of surprising women with a firm squeeze on the genitals, and then go on to become President of the United States.

[4].

I believe a lot of women are drained by these affronts, and some men may be more inclined to misunderstand their significance for lack of personal experience.

So what about the men who exhibit intentionally predatory behavior? In an interview with Anderson Cooper, Kristin Anderson, who claims that Donald Trump touched her over her underwear in the 1990s, said, “Yeah, he stuck his hand up my skirt. Was I hurt? No. Traumatized my whole life? No! But I let it slide, and what’s the next thing that you let slide? And the next thing, and the next thing...”

I wonder if my assaulter tried to push the boundaries in less severe ways in his youth and, experiencing little pushback, decided his actions were permissible. I wonder if my mother’s rapist made jokes to his buddies about all the notches on his bedpost, and they laughed along for uncertainty of what else to do. And I wonder if many of the men feeling anxious about the #MeToo movement have good reason to be worried.

On December 3, 2017, I messaged the man who assaulted me, recounting the experience from my perspective. Admittedly I felt angry and was more concerned with expressing my pain than establishing a dialogue. He replied, “I’m truly sorry that’s how you felt. I know there’s nothing I can do now, but I’m truly sorry... I never saw it like that because I was a narrow-minded ass who didn’t bother to see your perspective... But I wasn’t some villain targeting you is what I’m getting at.”

I recognized the dishonesty in this statement; after all, didn’t he apologize instantly after the assault occurred, assuring me he understood what he had done? When my assaulter read my words and experienced this incident from my perspective, I don’t doubt he felt a twinge of pain or of regret. In fact, I hope he felt these things, but it doesn’t change the fact

[3] Judge Aaron Persky said this after sentencing Brock Turner to sixth months in prison for sexually assaulting a woman who was unconscious (Levin 2016). The possible maximum sentence for this crime was 14 years, and the prosecution had recommended 6 years behind bars for Turner (Lopez 2018).

that it happened and that other women likely suffered similar treatment by him. Still, another part of me—one that is aware of the years that have passed since this incident and the new understandings time has gifted me—believes in the sincerity of his apology. This was one of the hardest lessons that I came to terms within this journey—my assaulter was not and is not a monster. When we call assaulters “monsters” and the like, we lose our ability to find solutions that involve enlightening the men that need these teachings most. When we choose to see assaulters as human beings operating within a society that has granted them unearned privileges to female sexuality, we begin to believe that there is a path forward in redirecting the power dynamic from male dominance to mutual and enthusiastic consent. This does not mean we refuse to hold assaulters responsible for their actions. Instead, we understand this problem to be not only an individual one but a societal one. If our culture cared, we would treat sexual assault like armed robbery. Instead, we treat sexual assault like the dog poop we neglected to pick up from our neighbor’s yard; it only matters if someone accuses us of doing it. No, my assaulter isn’t a monster; that label oversimplifies him. He is just a man who valued his pleasure over my autonomy. He is just a man whose ethics have been formed within a society that stresses male sexuality over female reciprocation. He is just a man I loved who hurt me.

It’s true when I say I’m no longer angry with him. The experiences flashes through my mind every once in a while. There is still pain there, but it no longer feels recognizable. The most intense feeling I still retain from this old wound is that first moment I felt understood, when I read Lucia Evans’ testimony against Harvey Weinstein and finally knew this doesn’t have to be normal. This doesn’t have to be the reality for our future daughters as it is for our friends and family. This can and will change because I now know others are enraged as I am. Now, I see this experience as a connection I share with millions (if not billions) of women across the country and across the globe. I see it as fuel to a fire to empower more women to learn to break the freeze and use their voices when they’re needed most. It motivates me to continue talking about consent with men, encouraging them to examine their own sexual relationships more closely.

[4] *President Donald Trump has been accused by multiple women of sexual misconduct and claimed that as a famous man, he can act how he pleases toward women, even “grab them by the p*ssy” (Makela 2016).*

Most of all, it concretizes my belief that women who accuse men of assault should be heard, period. I anticipate the next generation's understanding of sexuality. I want it to be inherent that sexuality is sacred, that the body is not a toy to be used by others.

I hope it is commonplace for physical intimacy to be shared with ample reciprocity and never taken. And when our generation is laid to rest, I want those of us who have experienced sexual assault to have found healing, to be proud of having told our stories, and to be at peace with the progress we were able to initiate.

Works Referenced

- Anderson, Kristin. "CNN interview with Trump accuser Kristin Anderson: Part 1." Interviewed by Anderson Cooper, CNN, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2016/10/15/kristin-anderson-interview-part-1-sot-ac.cnn>. Accessed 15 November 2018.
- Badu, Erykah. "Erykah Badu: I Stay Woke." *Black Girls Rock!: Owing Our Magic. Rocking Our Truth*. Edited by Beverly Bond, New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2017, pp. 21-26.
- Dunham, Richard. "Texan's '90 joke about rape now PR issue for McCain." *Houston Chronicle*, 2008, <https://www.chron.com/news/nation-world/article/Texan-s-90-joke-about-rape-now-PR-issue-for-1766332.php>. Accessed 15 November 2018.
- Estés, Clarissa Pinkola, Ph.D. *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1992.
- Farrow, Ronan. "From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein's Accusers Tell Their Stories." *The New Yorker*, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/newsdesk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories>. Accessed 2 November 2018.
- Levin, Sam. "Stanford sexual assault: read the full text of the judge's controversial decision." *The Guardian*, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/14/stanford-sexual-assault-read-sentence-judge-aaron-persky>. Accessed 15 November 2018.
- Lopez, German. "Brock Turner loses appeal of sexual assault conviction." *Vox*, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/8/9/17670322/brock-turner-stanford-judge-persky-sexual-assault>. Accessed 9 December 2018.
- Makela, Mark. "Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women." *The New York Times*, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>. Accessed 15 November 2018.
- Smith, S. G., J. Chen, K. C. Basile, L. K. Gilbert, M. T. Merrick, N. Patel,

M. Walling, and A. Jain. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010-2012

State Report. Compiled by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017.

Urbaniak, Kasia. "Interview with Kasia Urbaniak." Interviewed by Eric Francis Coppelino, PlanetWaves.FM, 2018, <http://planetwaves.fm/interview-with-kasia-urbaniak/>. Accessed 3 November 2018.

Urbaniak, Kasia. "Maria Menounos Interviews Kasia Urbaniak from 'The Academy.'" Interviewed by Maria Menounos, Conversations with Maria Menounos, SiriusXM Entertainment, 2018, <https://soundcloud.com/siriusxmentertainment/maria-menounos-interviews-kasia-urbaniak-from-the-academy>. Accessed 2 November 2018.

I can taste the bittersweet memories colors leaving me and staining my world a hollow ebony

By Kiara Warren

I used to tell my momma that she tasted angry
like tarnished pennies found littering the sidewalk.
She tastes like the smell of old,
cheap jewelry that stains your fingers with sharp bitterness.
She'd laugh at me and say that I was out of my mind for being able to taste
people
and I'd always say that I couldn't stop it.
So I stopped kissing my mother's cheek because I always tasted hatred.
I tasted the sting of her condescending smile
and her heavy, shackling words.
Red.

Mother used to tell me that I was weird for tasting the stars.
She'd say I was out of my mind
for saying that they tasted like the shade of blue
that can only be found in local snowball syrups.
Things like that don't have a flavor she'd always tell me.
But my buds capture everything that surrounds
The sound of the cicadas as they sing into the darkness,
The smell of warm clothes fresh from the cleaners,
The sight of curly hair that bounces with every movement.
Orange, White, Black.
The sweetest of colors.

Oh, momma when you stumble home drunk

after dancing with regret and new father's
 looking at me with the sharp taste of pure melancholy
 that dances from your tongue and onto my lips
 call me that special name that reduces me into a pile of dirty pennies
 that even the homeless wouldn't even flex their impoverished fingers for
 fill me with the sour taste of rotting dogs and curbside escapisms
 that my father taught me was the pain relief
 when the late-night sight of roaches and schizophrenic
 neglectees singing to the moonlight is too strong
 and a delicious meal of strangers wafting into the motel
 is smooth wine that will sandpaper away the buds from my tongue
 before they bloom into another thing that will leave me behind

Maybe that's why you hate me so much...

I smell like all the men who touched you before and after my father
 but instead using them to escape
 I let them sprinkle salvation all over my tongue before
 leaving me to crawl back home

Momma

I'm sorry that I wasn't salvation.
 I'm sorry I dance in the moonlight just as you do
 before coming home to a broken promise.

I'm sorry I wasn't salvation
 but a carbon copy of the world you're trying to escape from.

I'm sorry I got to know the snowman who made snowballs taste
 sweeter by sprinkling little hints of joy up my nose
 so that my lungs can choke on the intense positivity of the day
 before the reality of your toxic upbringing punctures little holes within me
 and nothing is enough again.

Things taste different when you can't breathe
 and momma the snowman's curly black hair is the sight of hope
 that my lungs won't shrivel but
 will expand to take in his scent before he disappears again
 when I run my trembling fingers through his hair for a few hours
 momma I know
 that today isn't going to hurt as much.

Momma he tastes bitter sweet.

Like daddy did whenever i kissed him
 like I kissed You

Momma
 whenever he's around my tongue feels a sting of sour lies and illusions
 any day the snow will melt
 and I'll be alone again

Momma, do you know what loneliness tastes like?

It tastes like the mixture of all colors dancing in front of me
 directly before they fade into a deep shade of nothing that
 stains my soul a new shade of black

loneliness is the shade of white
 that my daddy used to tap dance for
 he'd crush it up and blow it into our homes
 making us run away because only
 red and blue sirens can find joy in those places

Momma

I never really had a home.
 Every place I've gone
 has been stained sour

by the scent of unwelcoming kindness.
Every time I'd close my eyes
I can sense that they were plotting against me
the vicious friends you met
on your various attempts to make more of yourself
before you'd crumble before a man
who seemed like he had a little extra to give.

do you like what you've received?

Momma, I remember that
every meal I ate wasn't satisfying
but dead weights that choked me
as they slid down my throat and burst my belly.
Momma
those places you'd drag me to because
you didn't have enough to keep a roof over our heads
were prisons
and the slop of those memories
remind me that my childhood was a blur of running
and running
and

it hurts.

Momma, I don't eat much nowadays because it hurts.

Nothing tastes sweet anymore
like it did when I was younger
and didn't understand.

Momma

The fact that I've never had anything
builds up in my throat and stings my nose

with the yellowed scent of rain that gushes from my throat
and onto my jeans
that are christened with the acid wash downpour of pain.
my misery that lingers along
forever
reflecting another tarnished thing that I can't let go of.

Momma

They were the last thing you gave me.
The last gift received
before the chalky taste took over the once moist crevice
that enjoyed the taste of everything
but never again.

Momma

everything tastes empty
like my heart, my soul
and my hope.



Flow Of Colors
Crayons on Canvas
by Angela Couvillion

Wonderland

By Jana K. Lee

“She wants to see you soon,” the maid beams, dropping the dress into my hands.

Then she turns on her heel and disappears down the hall, pushing a cart filled with toiletries, bandages, and cleaning supplies.

I shut the door and release a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. The dress is heavy in my hands. It’s soft, richly made. I’ve never put something so lavish on my body. Once I imagined myself parading around in clothes like this but now it feels wrong, unnatural, like a sheep pretending to be a wolf. I take my time with the zipper and gaze at my reflection.

A pale girl with a hollow expression stands in the mirror. She had dreams once. She was going to be a real Cinderella – from the streets to the stage. But not a trace of those childish wishes remains.

I smooth out the velvet fabric over my body and feel a lump in one of the pockets. Frowning, I take the small object out. It’s a round, pink oval wrapped in white paper. I turn it over in the light. It’s a small candy. The maids are always leaving sweets in my room as little prizes for making it back and to try to convince me the Wonderland Hotel isn’t the hellish nightmare that I know it is. My stomach writhes. I shove the candy back in my pocket and approach the door.

The golden doorknob gleams up at me, holding my distorted reflection hostage. My fists clench in an attempt to stop my hands from shaking. I take deep breaths. Tonight’s the night I get to leave.

I pull the door open and cool air rushes past me. Glittering lights blind me and gentle music floats to my ears. Pleasant aromas fill the space around me, but I crinkle my nose and gather my courage.

I walk into the lobby. Everything inside the hotel seems to sparkle. From the extravagant décor to the carpet, everything bears an ethereal shine. The chandelier suspended from the vaulted ceiling glows with warm, orange light. I march past the reception desk, passing rows of plush furniture, large, exotic plants, and more than a dozen employees. The first time I was here I was captivated by the glitz and glamor of the place. It reminded me of the casinos and upscale hotels my father spent his time in, gambling our funds away. My wide, innocent eyes drank in every detail.

I didn't know then that all the hotel's flashing lights and luxuries were only a façade.

My pace quickens as I see the hotel's staff clearing the dining hall. Plates full of the remnants of rich foods are tossed into bins. I remember the taste of the food, its juicy flavor, the excitement that came from just knowing I would be eating that night. Bile crawls up my throat when I lay my eyes on a piece of smoked ham. All I can do is drink, which is why I don't stop walking until I've reached the Blue Hookah lounge.

Inside the lounge are three figures, each hunched over the oak bar. The bartender polishes a glass, staring at nothing and offering no lighthearted conversation to his guests. I slide into a blue, plush barstool and stare at the black countertop, unable to meet the others' eyes.

"What'll it be?" the bartender's black eyes fall on my slumped frame.

"Whiskey." A glass is placed in front of me and I down the burning liquid against my better judgment.

"What a sorry lot we are," mutters the man seated next to me. His red beard has become tangled and unruly. His once bright eyes have become desolate and empty. He takes a large gulp of beer and chuckles humorlessly. "Tonight's supposed to be a celebration and here we are drowning ourselves in liquor."

He shakes his head.

"What better way to celebrate than drink," I mutter, watching the ice in my glass melt.

"Another round on the house," the bartender says in his monotone.

"Heavens no!" protests the woman at the far end of the bar.

"I couldn't possibly put that poison in my body-."

"Oh, quit the sweet and innocent act, Agatha. After everything you've done, well, you're no saint," says the third person, a man in his twenties with tanned skin, light green eyes, and dark hair.

My heart skips a beat, heat creeps into my face. Markus. I try not to let my gaze linger on him for too long. At least I won't be leaving the hotel alone. My heart races at the thought. Agatha scoffs and crosses her arms but says nothing. I stifle the urge to throw in some choice words of my own but there'd be no point. Everyone at this bar has done things they aren't proud of, myself included. But tonight, will justify all of it. The Scotsman's right. We should be celebrating.

The bartender places glasses of bitter alcohol in front of us and each of us gulps down every drop, even stubborn Agatha.

I don't know how long we sit there in silence. It feels like hours. For a moment I pretend we met on better terms, that we are old friends having a drink, reminiscing on the good times.

But that couldn't be farther from the truth. Anxiety and stifled excitement surge off each one of us.

The distant chime of the elevator wakes us from our stupor. That small sound causes a chill to run up my spine. My hands get sweaty, so I stuff them into the pockets of my dress, fiddling with the small candy, rolling it over my fingers. I keep telling myself that everything will be fine. The Scotsman is the first to stand. He straightens his dark green suit and dusts off his pants. He stretches, flexing his large muscles. I catch a glimpse of the bandages on his chest behind his unbuttoned collar. They are stained a dull scarlet. The blood drains from my face and I fix my gaze on the wall, swallowing a lump.

He's a fighter, I knew that from the beginning. A father of three daughters, he had told us while puffing out his chest. His name is Fergus, but everyone calls him the Scotsman. He is here to get money to send them to college. He just wanted to provide for his girls, to give them a future somewhere other than the rural plains of Scotland, but now he's fighting to ensure they don't become orphans.

Once the games began, his paternal instincts came out. He tried to protect everyone he could from the dangers lurking on each floor. He saved me more than once. If not for him, I'd have died a long time ago. He has been like the father I wished I had. To thank him I helped bandage his wounds every night when we were allowed to return to our rooms on the first floor. Everyone tended to avoid the giant man, despite his soft heart. They were scared he would turn on them. It would have been so easy for him to crush everyone, but that wasn't the path he chose.

The first floor became a safe haven. Most nights, all the remaining hotel guests would gather in the dining hall. We would rarely speak to each other. It was just comforting to know we weren't alone and to keep an eye on the competition. On one of the first nights, I saw him in the dining hall. Blood soaked his shirt, which he tossed to the ground. He struggled to reach a deep gash across his back. Everyone just averted their gaze and continued to brood or whisper with their allies. I balled up my fists and stood up, approaching the Scotsman slowly as if he were a bear. Without a word I took the bandages from him and helped him tend to his wound. The room seemed to go still as heads turned to see the exchange. I looked

up to find the Scotsman smiling at me despite the grievous laceration I was stitching up. I gave him a curious look as I worked.

“You remind me of my youngest,” he mused. “She wants to be a doctor. She’s always got her nose buried in a medical book and she teaches herself the techniques.”

I kept my eyes on my work, wishing I could say the same about myself. My meager medical skills were the result of my father’s tantrums. A woman across the room chuckled. A chill crept up my spine, but I shook my head. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Jessa lounging at one of the many empty tables. Her feet were kicked up on the white tablecloth. She played with her thick, black braid. She was the smartest of all of us. She led the strongest alliance. With all her wisdom, I was sure she would win.

“I’m sure she’ll make a great one,” I replied, tearing my eyes away and finishing up the bandage.

He gave me a nod and a small, hopeful smile. His gentle expression put me at ease. The knots in my stomach began to unravel.

“God. You’re both so pathetic.” Jessa peeled herself out of her chair, sauntering over to us. Her eyes were dark, calculating.

“You think you’re going to see your families again?” She shoved a chair out of her way.

“You think you deserve to win? Both of you are too soft!”

She stalked out of the room. The Scotsman shook his head and chuckled. “She is headstrong and confident like my oldest.”

I turned back to him.

“She doesn’t know how this will end. Nobody does.” He placed a hand on my shoulder. His eyes lit up with hope and I found my lips curling into a small smile.

The memory fades as the giant man fishes out a wad of cash from his pocket and places it on the bar. “I wish we could sit here forever,” he comments, sliding the barstool back under the bar.

“Perhaps your wish will be granted,” the bartender says, breaking the silence.

His eyes meet each of ours but only for a fleeting moment, then he goes back to polishing glasses. That’s when the finality of our situation sinks in. The liquor begins to crawl up my throat. I gag. A hand slips into mine. I know who it is without even looking. I grip Markus’ hand and start to stagger towards the elevator. Agatha marches ahead, passing everyone.

As we approach the elevator, the hotel staff applauds us. Each of them wears a smile. They stand in a straight line in pressed black and white uniforms. “Congratulations,” one says.

“You must be so proud,” adds another. “Untold riches await you,” someone promises.

I breathe steadily. I let their words of comfort sink in, imagining myself walking out of here with arms full of money.

The elevator emits a brilliant white light onto the velvet carpet. It beckons us closer into its cleansing light. I want to run, to go anywhere but into that claustrophobic machine, but my traitorous feet continue onward. Before taking that last step into the metal box, I glance at the lobby doors. The doors are locked. They have been since we stepped foot inside the hotel. Tonight, I’m going to walk through those doors and never return, I promise myself.

The golden elevator doors slide shut and the machine whirs. We are pulled upward for the last time. Markus’ hand tightens around mine. I take in the wide space around us. Agatha stands tall by the doors, eager to leave, while the Scottish giant has retreated to the far corner of the white box, staring at his reflection on the wall. I remember when this elevator was so packed with people that I was pressed against the wall with no wiggle room, wishing everyone would just disappear so I could breathe. Now there’s only four of us and the space around me is just as suffocating.

I watch the numbers change over the doors. 3... 4... 5. I tear my eyes away remembering everything that has happened on each floor. The blade maze on six, the crushing room on ten, Russian Roulette on eighteen. On every floor, a sadistic game waits to consume new players.

Agatha tenses as the elevator chimes for the eighth floor. The elevator seems to linger there for a moment. She breathes a sigh of relief when the number changes. I glare at the back of her head. No matter how much time passes, I’ll never forget what she did.

It was a race. A stupid footrace through the twisting hotel corridors to find a room that had a stairwell all while avoiding a creature shrouded in shadow as if terror took a form. I can still see its white, razor-like teeth gleaming at me through the white foam. Its form was constantly shifting. One moment it moved like a snake and the next it became a hulking beast. I was one of the last to reach the stairs, right before Agatha. With the door held open, I watched the shadow creature tear around the corner and race

through the hall towards Agatha and the little girl. The girl was around twelve or thirteen. She'd wandered in off the streets like me. She wasn't in it all for the money we were promised. She'd just heard about the charitable hotel owner and wanted a little food for her family. Agatha instantly took in the poor thing and cared for her. The two were inseparable.

The creature let out a throaty growl. Sweat rolled down the older woman's face and her eyes were wide, red veins popping out as they darted around. Because she was younger, the girl was faster. I held my hand out to pull her through the door.

The creature shifted into a four-legged animal and snapped at Agatha's heels. The foam from his mouth splattered on her pants. As death's jaws got closer, something changed in Agatha's eyes. With the last of her strength, she surged forward and grabbed the girl, shoving her to the floor. The girl cried out, reaching for Agatha, pleading for help. The creature's teeth locked around the girl's arm, ripping the flesh. She shrieked as it tore her to ribbons. Agatha raced past me, through the door, and down the stairs without looking back.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the girl's lifeless eyes as she lay there, a mangled mess. My resolve wavered. Suddenly returning to my father's house and enduring his abuse was more appealing.

I can almost see the girl's shredded face looking back at me in the reflection on the elevator walls. She stares past me at Agatha's back with a bitter expression.

The elevator comes to a slow stop on the twentieth floor. I meet Markus' eyes. He gazes at me, his eyes filling with so many emotions. What could he be thinking?

Markus is a beautiful enigma. He is always at the top of his game. When I first noticed him, he was in the most powerful alliance, Jessa's alliance. The women in the hotel flocked to him. He offered them comfort, acted like the hero straight out of a romance novel. I stayed far away from him for fear of getting my eyes clawed out by one of the girls he led on.

The alliance crumbled from the inside. Markus was the only one that survived its slow collapse. Jessa was furious and found herself with no one to command. She became a recluse. That was around week three when everyone was losing their grip on reality and the will to keep going. I was so lonely and lost. I just needed one reason to end it all.

The fifteenth floor was what threatened to break me. It wasn't like the other floors, it was quiet, tranquil. We were supposed to search the

rooms and find three keys to make the elevator bring us back down. The stillness of the halls made every second feel like an hour. I split off from the group, I wasn't interested in an alliance or being stabbed in the back. I went from door to door, scanning the rooms and winding through the labyrinth of corridors.

I wandered for an eternity, searching each room and finding nothing. Some of the rooms were strange. In one I found dozens of tarantulas skittering across the floor and up the walls. In another there was a clown seated on the bed, gazing up at me with a wide, toothy grin. One door led to a large, bottomless pit. I kept moving, unwilling to stop and process the things around me. The only thing that mattered was getting back into the elevator and dragging myself to the bar.

Room 1537. I swung the door open, keeping a hand on the knob. My eyes grew wide as a figure materialized in the center of the room. The air rushed out of my lungs. My knees became liquid and I fell to the floor. My father stared down at me with a scowl. The furniture around him wasn't like the other rooms. It was as if the living room from my father's house had been stitched right into the hotel.

"You left me," he growled.

I laid a hand on the white doorframe to steady myself. My throat pinched.

"You left me!" he roared.

"I'm sorry!" I cried, tears streaming down my face. "I couldn't... I couldn't-"

"You couldn't what?" He threw his hands up. "You couldn't stand to take care of your old man? You had to go chase some stupid dream because this life wasn't good enough for you! This is all your fault! I wouldn't be in this mess if you hadn't been dumped on me!" Spit sprayed from his mouth. Sobs ravaged my body. I couldn't make them stop. My father continued to yell at me, telling me I wasn't good enough, I would never amount to anything. I covered my ears and doubled over.

Someone grabbed me from behind, shaking me back to reality. "I've got you." Markus. I peered up at him through hot tears. He pointed to my father and I followed his line of sight. A golden key peeked out of his pocket, gleaming at me. I crawled towards my father. He kept shouting, spit flying everywhere. I wiped it off my face and rose on wobbly legs.

"Why did you have to leave?" I met his gaze. His eyes swam with tears. His voice was soft. "You abandoned me."

My heart ached. I shook my head, thinking of all the nights he left to gamble and didn't return for days. He always managed to guilt-trip me into staying by his side, helping him through his painful hangovers and tax evasion schemes. I just needed money to leave him for good, which led me to the Wonderland Hotel.

I tore my eyes away from his sniveling face and snatched up the key. He shouted a string of curses at my back as I dashed out the door and into Markus' arms. Markus slammed the door shut and held me. When I finally pulled away, I cracked the door open again and found the room dark, empty.

Markus stayed by my side after that. He didn't ask about what he saw in the room, he didn't pressure me to tell him. It was nice just to have someone to hold me after each game. He kept me close, kissed my tears away, helped me through the sadistic games. We exchanged stories about our lives to keep from thinking about the horrors awaiting us on the upper floors. He was from a mountain town up north. He wanted to be an actor like me. Both of us needed the money to get away from our abusive parents and jumpstart our careers. He was so similar to me and he understood me. We discovered we were both just scared, lonely souls. And I fell. Hard.

One night I asked him what he saw on the fifteenth floor. Those rooms had to be targeted at specific fears of the occupants, why else would my father – or his image – be lingering there. I wanted to know if he found the room waiting for him. He shook his head and tried to dismiss it, but I persisted.

“I saw myself leaving the hotel empty-handed,” he said.

I took his hand in mine. “We'll leave together,” I promised. “I can't make it out of this without you.”

He had smiled and stroked my hair, telling me everything was going to be okay. Reluctantly, my gaze travels from Markus to examine the other two occupants of the elevator. Agatha looks eager. She straightens her blouse. The bearded man is pale, unmoving.

“It's been...” the Scottish man clears his throat. “It's been an honor knowing all of you.”

“Really?” Agatha's voice doesn't carry the usual arrogance. “After all we've done?”

Each of us exchanges a glance. All of us guilty, all broken, all scared out of our minds. I stare at the silent, metal doors. They have seen everything, endured everything. How I wish I was made of steel; unfeeling, cold.

The golden doors slide open to reveal a large room. The room is decorated exclusively in red and gold. In the center of the room is a circle of couches and chairs. It's luxurious, warm. A woman is seated in the largest chair. It looks like a red throne. In her hand, she nurses a wine glass. She wears a white pantsuit that makes her auburn hair stand out. Her dark brown eyes meet mine and her smile is breathtaking, welcoming. She gives off a warm aura that makes you want to be near her. Like a flame to a moth. I've only seen her once before, but I've never forgotten her beautiful face and sweet voice. They haunt me in my nightmares.

"My guests!" She stands and gestures to the furniture arranged around her. "Come! Sit! We have much to discuss!"

Agatha steps out of the elevator. She keeps her head high as she enters the room. The bearded man follows, his eyes dart from one side of the room to the other. Markus inspects the cushions and stays in front of me at all times. The red woman laughs. The sharp sound makes us jump and stare at her.

"I assure you this room won't kill you," she says, sinking back into her chair.

I glance at the others. They narrow their eyes at the red woman. She sighs.

"There are no razors hidden in the seats, no scalding water in the ceiling, no guns within the walls. I swear to you, there are no weapons at all in this room." She leans forward, bracing her elbows on her knees. "Except your minds." She sips her wine, looking at each of us in turn.

"Sit," she orders.

Ever-obedient Agatha sinks into a chair first, followed by the Scotsman. Markus pats the couch cushions to ensure the red woman's words are true before sitting and beckoning me over. I catch a smirk from the woman as I smooth out my dress and settle into the couch. The woman swishes the red wine around her glass. Her red painted fingers curl around the sparkling crystal.

Her eyes rake over me.

"First, I must congratulate you all for making it this far," she says beaming. "Out of twenty-four participants you have made it to the top floor. Be proud. It is an honor to be here." I fix my eyes on the red carpet and bite my lip.

The red woman peers into my face and the impassive faces of the others. She clicks her tongue. “Come now, you are all no fun. Let’s not make this glorious moment a pity party. After all, the ones you sacrificed wouldn’t want that.” The pit in my stomach grows. I feel nauseous, but I try to keep a straight face.

Agatha flinches and fiddles with the hem of her blouse.

The red woman’s lips curl into a cruel smile. She turns her full attention on trembling Agatha. “The ruthless woman, one of my favorites.” The color in Agatha’s face drains as she gazes on the red woman.

Agatha’s lip quivers. The red woman grins. “Manipulation and betrayal at every turn. To think you coaxed people into trusting you and you led them astray, going so far as to make the smallest of them your own sacrificial lambs.”

“That’s enough!” the Scotsman booms. I jump at the sound. He gives me an apologetic look.

Undaunted, the red woman looks to the Scotsman with a playful smile. “And you, Braveheart, the hero character. You’re not so innocent either. What was it you said at the beginning of the game?” She raises a finger to her chin, pretending to think. “Oh, that’s right, ‘we have to refuse to play, then they’ll have to let us go.’” The bearded man tears his eyes away. The woman’s smile grows. “Look who’s still playing. Remember all those you promised to protect? Remember Jessa?” The Scotsman whips his head around to stare at the woman, his eyes ablaze with fury. “You called it a mercy kill. Oh please, you wanted her dead, that’s why you hung around her so much and showed her kindness. You were just waiting for an excuse. It felt good to kill her, didn’t it?”

Jessa’s unhinged smile flashes before my eyes. A shiver runs through me. Two nights ago, I was walking the halls of the first floor in a drunken stupor. I couldn’t be around the others. Their faces brought back too many painful memories. I needed to take some time and drown out the screams and memories. Markus’ kisses weren’t enough to distract me. She found me braced against a wall, hurling my guts up onto the plush carpet. She was the last person I wanted to run into. The games twisted her. The loss of her alliance and her “perfect strategy” broke her. Jessa was still one of the most dangerous players but not because of her wisdom. She was a wildcard and her humanity slipped away each day. Jessa said something to me in a mocking tone, but the sounds were jumbled. Her blurry figure grew closer and closer. Deranged laughter floated to my ears. Her hands

fiddled with her thick braid, undoing the coils. Something silver gleamed at me.

“What?” I slurred.

“It’s time for you to go,” she stated with wide, animalistic eyes. “It’s time for everyone to go. One by one until I’m the last person left.” She laughed but the sound came out as a hiss. My blood froze.

Jessa’s image sharpened as she lunged at me with a knife. The Scotsman pushed me down and leaped over me. Jessa shrieked at him. He let out a visceral roar as the knife slashed across his chest. They clashed like two vicious beasts fighting over their prey. I crawled backward until I hit a wall. My breath came in short spurts as I gazed at the pure savagery before me. Their guttural cries were cut by a dull crack as the bearded man shoved Jessa. Her body hit the floor and went limp. Her once cunning eyes stared up at the ceiling, never to close again. The Scotsman fell to his knees and began to weep. His muscular shoulders shook like an earthquake. I could only stare and tremble as he fell to pieces. Besides me, he tried his best to care for Jessa and keep her sane. And in one moment all his attempts to help her were in vain. The girl that reminded him so much of his oldest daughter was dead and he killed her with his own hands.

Finally, he turned to me with dark, bleak eyes. In those eyes, I only saw an animal. I pressed myself against the wall.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I could only nod and scuffle away back to Markus’ room, their primal expressions forever engraved in my mind.

“You broke her mind!” Veins bulge out of the man’s face, throbbing as though they will burst.

“It was amusing to watch you tirelessly work to protect the other players.” She sips her wine. “Your daughters are very lucky to have you. I wonder how they would like to know their daddy is a murderer.” Her steely eyes dare him to strike her, but he reins in his anger and grips the armrests of his chair with white knuckles.

She clicks her tongue, and her eyes settle on Markus. “Ah, the quiet one, a natural puzzle master. You were more than ready to kill for your cause, which remains a mystery.”

Markus stiffens next to me. He glares at the beautiful woman before him. “You manipulated and snuck your way right to the top. When did your selfish nature break down?” She gazes at him with a smile waiting for an answer.

“I don’t need to justify myself to you,” Markus states in a gruff tone. The red woman shrugs. “Fair enough. Though I think I already know the answer.” Her eyes fall on me. Her red lips curl.

“Alyssa,” she purrs, “the underdog, the sweet innocent one. Who would have thought you’d reach this point? You certainly didn’t! If I were in your shoes, I would have made a noose from the bedsheets a long time ago. Perhaps you are just too afraid of death.”

My heart tightens as though an invisible hand is squeezing it. Her eyes probe my face for cracks.

I meet her gaze.

“Do you have the money we were promised?” I ask.

She nods, her hair cascading over her shoulders like waterfalls of blood.

“Get on with it then.”

The red woman flings her own wine glass against a wall, making everyone jump when it bursts into glass shards. She leans forward, beaming at us, her eyes taking on a malicious glint. A chill creeps up my spine as my name rolls off her tongue.

“Here’s your final challenge. Those drinks you all had at the bar were poisoned.”

The air seems to be sucked from the room.

Agatha lets out a strangled gasp, throwing a hand over her gaping mouth. My eyes grow wide and my throat burns. Markus tenses next to me. The Scotsman swears and looks away.

“And one of you entered this room with a single dose of antidote.” My mind instantly goes to the small object hidden in my pocket. I don’t dare move or break my stare. My fingernails dig into the velvet cushions. The red woman sits back on her throne and her eyes dart back and forth, raking over each face.

“You have around two minutes,” she says, glancing at her perfect nails. The room erupts in shouts. Every voice crying how unfair this is. The red woman keeps a blank face. Black spots dance in my vision and I brace myself against the couch. The others get quiet and seem to be experiencing the same thing. My eyes fixate on the golden watch the red woman wears.

Precious seconds tick away.

Agatha is the first on her feet. Like a flash of light, she’s across the room wielding the longest glass shard she can find. I’m off the couch and

backing away while Markus and the Scotsman hold their ground. She approaches the red woman gripping the glass so tight her hand spurts blood.

“Where’s the antidote?”

The red woman scoffs. “In all honesty, I haven’t the slightest clue.” Agatha gets closer, pressing the sharp point to the woman’s neck. The red woman produces a silver pistol from behind her back. Its barrel looks up at Agatha’s heart. Her eyes dare Agatha to move against her. Agatha backs off and the red woman lowers the gun. “Which one of you has it?” she screeches. “Give it to me now!”

“Calm down, lass,” the bearded man chides. He hasn’t moved from his chair. He doesn’t need to.

Agatha’s hands are shaking as she clutches the glass. “I didn’t come this far to walk away empty-handed!” She whirls on Markus and me. “Which one of you has it?”

Markus rises slowly and acts as a protective wall between Agatha and me. My back is pressed against the elevator doors. My hand slides into my pocket and my fingers wrap around the small, round object. I am holding all of their deaths in my hand.

“I don’t have it,” Markus states. Agatha swings her weapon and cuts his arm. Blood trickles onto the carpet. The red woman licks her lips.

“Liar!” She swings again and cuts Markus’ leg. She cuts him over and over. Markus can do nothing to defend himself except hold his arms in front of his face. She has us cornered. Agatha’s probing eyes land on me and drift down to my pocket.

“You,” she growls. “Give me whatever you have, or I kill your boyfriend.”

I can’t keep my body from trembling. The edges of my vision become blurry. I’m suddenly dizzy and pain shoots up my spine. I have no way to defend myself and nowhere to run. The antidote is heavy in my pocket. Can I keep this from her? If I don’t give it up, she’ll die. I’ll have killed her. But if I give it up, I’ll die. I’ll be the failure my father thinks I am. Sweat beads on my forehead.

I cower behind Markus, sobbing.

“Just stop,” I beg. I gaze up at her through hot tears. “Please.”

Agatha shoves Markus to the ground and steps over him. I take the small pill out of my pocket and hold it between us. The woman reaches out with

hungry, desperate eyes. I want to slap her hand away, but a voice reminds me that I'll be a murderer if I do. Agatha killed in cold blood. Wouldn't it be justice if I withheld the antidote? I shouldn't have to die for her crimes. Before her fingertips can even brush the antidote, before I can snatch the candy away, Agatha lets out a sharp cry as a glass shard slices through her pale neck. The Scotsman releases the glass and watches her fall. She looks up at the massive man with wide eyes. His expression is dark as he looks down on her. Agatha can only lie on the floor and watch as blood pools under her.

The Scotsman's sad eyes, devoid of all life, fix themselves on me. I shiver as I see the animal within him once more. I clutch the antidote to my chest. He doesn't attack me, and he doesn't ask for help or pity. He slumps back into one of the chairs, resigned, waiting for the poison to do its work.

Markus pulls himself up into a sitting position and gazes into my face. "Neither of us should take it." He slips his hand into mine. My limbs feel like lead. They are so numb I wonder if they are still attached to my body.

"We promised to leave this place together." He casts a venomous glance at the red woman. "If we both die, she can't declare a winner and the game will be left unfinished."

I gaze into his beautiful, intoxicating eyes. He extends his other hand to me.

"Give it to me," he says. "I'll make sure neither of us takes it."

He smiles and squeezes my hand. I hold his gaze for a moment. His eyes are desperate, loving. They flick from my face to the small pill and back. My stomach churns. He gives my hand another urgent squeeze. His face betrays nothing.

"Alyssa," he purrs.

My heart pounds against my ribs. Blood roars in my ears. I push back the sweet memories of him giving me comfort, reassuring me. I pick through the memories. He let people die. I could have easily been one of them. I could still be one of them. But I can't just kill him.

The cold hands of death creep through my body. They coax me to let go of the pill and drop it into Markus' waiting hand. A weight settles on my chest and the pressure is so immense I want to scream. I jerk my hand from his grasp, "I'm sorry." I toss the pill into my mouth and his expression falls. He can only gape at me as I rise.

"You've ruined it!" he yells. "I was going to win!"

He grips my ankle and yanks me down. I hit the ground and stars flood my vision. When they clear, Markus is over me, his hands around my neck. I gasp and sputter, hitting his chest with my small fists. He squeezes tighter. My hands search the carpet.

I plunge a piece of glass into his eye. Markus shrieks and falls off me, pressing his hands over his eye. I crawl away from him, coughing as air flows back into my lungs.

The red woman falls into a fit of laughter. She wipes tears from her eyes. "Alyssa, darling, you never cease to surprise!"

I rush to the chair where the Scotsman is slumped over. He's breathing slowly, watching me warily.

"I'm so sorry, Fergus," I say, my voice breaking. "I'm so, so sorry. I swear to you I'll make sure your daughters are taken care of. And I'll pay for their school. And-"

"Thank you, lass," he says, rising to back away from me. His eyes dart from me to Markus then to the glass in my hand.

The two minutes are long gone, and the Scotsman is still standing before me. We look to the red woman to find her eyes already on us.

"Are either of you familiar with the placebo effect?" she asks.

I blink.

"What do you mean?" the Scotsman growls.

The red woman sits back in her velvet seat. "There was never any poison. I did have something mixed into the drinks to make each of you feel a little sick but the anxiety and adrenaline did the rest." Her eyes slide to Agatha and Markus, who are pale and limp on the ground in pools of blood. There was no poison and no antidote.

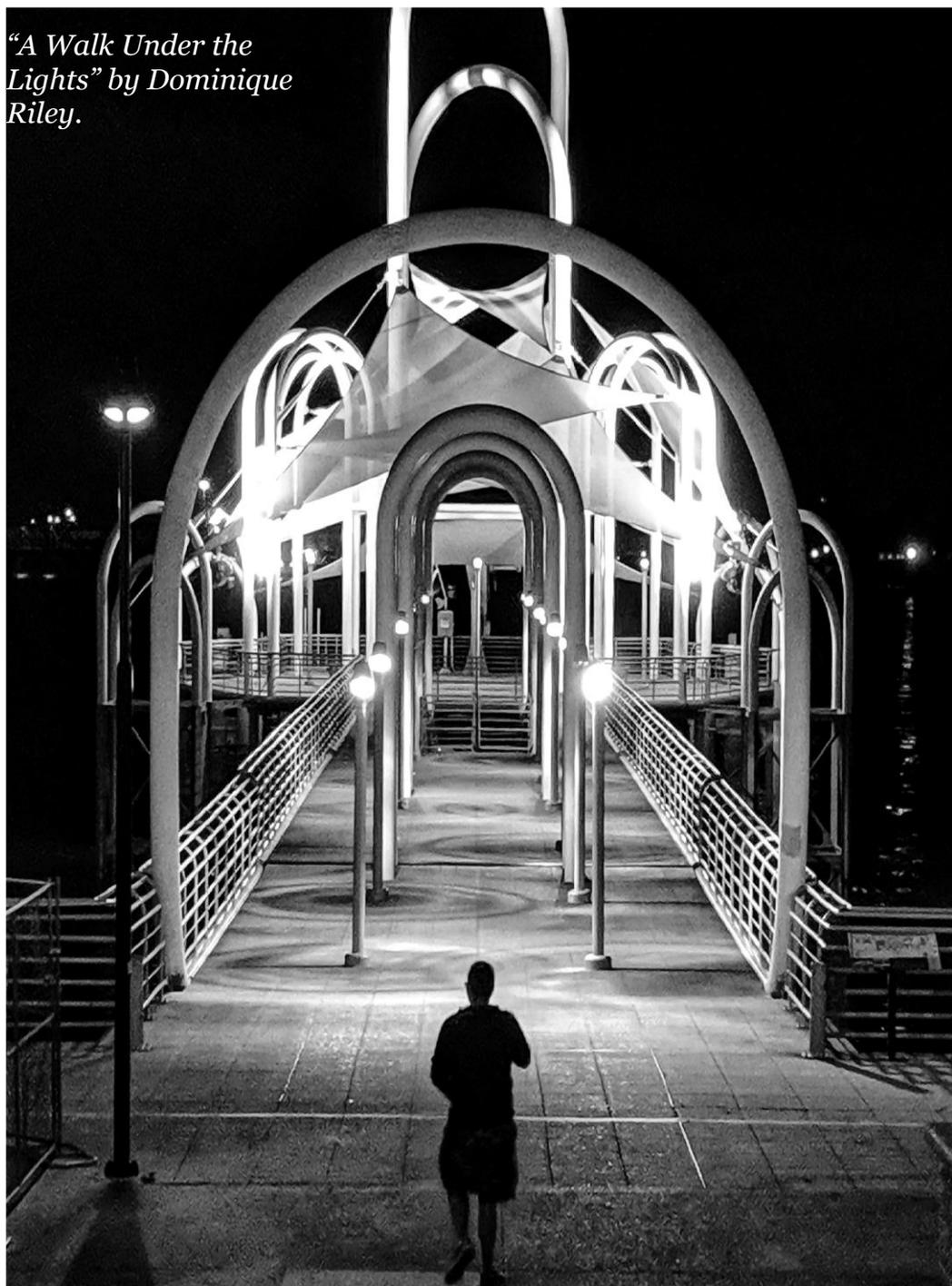
I can only stare at the red woman. "What about our freedom and the prize?"

"You'll be rewarded when there's only one of you left." She rises and strides to the elevator, pressing the golden button with one delicate finger.

The doors slide open again after a moment and a team of hotel staff come out to carry the bodies away and clean the carpet. The red woman looks to the Scotsman and me. She jerks her head towards the metal box.

"The next round awaits."

*“A Walk Under the
Lights” by Dominique
Riley.*



Ranch Dressing

By Noah Felps

After a nineteen-hour car ride,
All we wanted to do was arrive and rest.
From Baton Rouge to Boulder,
I didn't know my final destination would be a futon.
Starring at this black futon,
I notice a white stain.
A look of disbelief washes over my face.
The stain's owner notices my discomfort
And assures me that it's just ranch.

What a liar.

Matt Clark Fiction Award Winner
Locker 131

By Noah Felps

As I stare at the crudely drawn penis on my desk, done by yours truly, all I can think about is lunch. I just want to eat my ham sandwich with no mayo. God, I hate mayo. Ms. Anders is going on and on about the use of blood as a symbol in Hamlet, but all I can focus on is getting to my spot in the back-right corner of the cafeteria and dealing with Todd's shit and arguing that my sandwich isn't dry, that he just has a dry mouth. It's not my fault that I have a wet mouth and don't need the devil's favorite condiment to make my sandwich slippery enough to slide down my throat.

The loudspeaker crackles. Mrs. White chokes out, "Mr. Charles Burton, please report to the principal's office" through her dusty vocal cords. It's not that I'm against the elderly being a part of the workforce, but goddamn. When most of your job involves talking, maybe don't hire someone with six decades of chain smoking under their belt.

The class oohs in unison as I walk out of the classroom. I don't know why I'm nervous, but I am. I've been to Mr. Oliver's office a million times this year alone, but it still feels like a thousand ants are crawling through my skin, biting me a little harder with each step I take.

When I walk into the office, Mrs. White crackles at me to take a seat, assuring me Mr. Oliver will be with me shortly. He's done this before. I know he is sitting in his office, doing nothing. This is all just a psych-out technique. I'm not a fucking idiot. I see right through this shit. Whatever, the longer I'm not having Hamlet shoved up my ass, the better.

There are only two chairs in the front office, so I sit next to Dillan McDaniel. He's in here almost as much as I am, but the main difference is he never really deserves it.

I'm not saying I do, but I get it. Not everyone shares my sense of humor. If only they knew the gold they didn't even understand. When I ask Dillan what he's in for, he tells me it's the usual. There was a school

shooting threat, so they assume it's him. At least this time they have somewhat of a reason to. The threat was etched in a bathroom stall that said, "don't come to skool on Friday - DM." I know it looks fishy, but Dillan is a straight A student, so there's no way in hell he would misspell "school." The faculty knows that it isn't him. After a damn near monthly empty threat, they figured out it's just other kids fucking with him. They only bring him in for questioning to make the other parents feel good. They're so concerned with being home to the next school shooting, they don't care about one weird kid. You'd think the school would just kick Dillan out, but they don't want to deal with any lawsuit that may come up from expelling a kid for nothing.

I know it's fucked up to think about, but I wouldn't be shocked if Dillan did shoot up the school. But not because he listens to Marilyn Manson, plays Doom, and wears a black trench coat like everyone jokes. I'm just saying, if I got accused of conspiring to shoot up a school like once a month, I'd get pretty fucking close to doing it just to fuck with the people that fucked with me.

As I start to wonder if I'd be on Dillan's hypothetical hit list, Mrs. White tells me that Mr. Oliver is ready to see me. I go grab the door handle to his office, but my hand slips. My palms are too sweaty. I wipe my hands on my shirt, leaving damp marks on my stomach. He immediately makes eye contact with me and motions at the seat across from his desk. Honestly, at this point it's just a formality. I know the drill. There's no need to taunt me with those hand signals. I sit down and in a sad way it feels like home. I know every crack and crease on the leather. I can feel the scars of years of fingernails digging into the wood as I wrap my hands around the arms of the chair and wait for whatever lecture I'm about to receive. I start to think about how my ass feels slightly hugged in the seat, as if I have spent enough time in this seat for it to have molded itself to fit me perfectly. Mr. Oliver sees the drifting look in my eyes and snaps his finger three inches from my face.

"Why? Why do you do this?" He looks exhausted, four years of dealing with me making his life hell wearing down on him.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm not sure I know what you're talking about."

"Your senior bible verse."

“What? You told me I couldn’t do the one from Pulp Fiction, so I picked a different one. Habakkuk 2:7. What’s wrong with it?”

“Shall they not rise up suddenly that shall bite thee, and awake that shall vex thee, and thou shalt be for booties unto them.” His aggravated tone ruining the most holy words in the damned book.

“Mr. Oliver, I know what my verse says.” I try to stifle a laugh, forced to settle on a smirk.

“Find another one. You have until Monday. If it’s not on my desk by 8am, I’m picking the verse for you.”

I walk out of his office and all I can think is, “Jesus fucking Christ, I hate private school.” There are only a few minutes left until lunch. Fuck it, I’m starting early. Fuck Ms. Ander’s class. Fuck Hamlet. I’m going to eat my goddamn sandwich at 11:55am.

I go to my corner and eat my sandwich. It makes me think of what lunch was like before Todd transferred here in the fall. It’s kind of nice. I don’t have to defend my mayo-less sandwich. On one hand, it’s nice finally having someone to talk to. On the other hand, all we do is argue and I’m pretty tired of it. But it’s better than anything I’ve had in years, I guess. By the time lunch actually starts, I’m done eating and I’m in my own head about Todd. I guess that means I can’t argue with Todd about mayo today. Oh well, I’ll try to get it going tomorrow. Todd runs up and slams his backpack on the table. I try to act interested, but by this point I just want to go back to eating lunch alone again. I miss my “me” time. “Damn, Todd. You good?” I mutter out. Clearly missing my disinterest.

“Dude, didn’t you hear? They got the drug dogs out today. We’re fucked,” he snaps back at me, punching the table to try to make me take him seriously.

“We? No. YOU. You are fucked. Fucking dumbass. Why the fuck would I keep weed in my locker?” I ask with a flippant attitude. At least if he is gone I don’t have to deal with him harassing me about my lunch choices.

“I may or may not have put a gram in your locker...”

“Why the fuck would you do that?” I put down the sandwich that I have been looking forward to all morning. This asshole straight fucked me over.

“For your LaserDisc player! I was just trying to say sorry. You’ve been acting weird since it broke while I was using it.”

God, this shit again. Todd borrowed my LaserDisc player last month, and not just any LaserDisc player. A fucking Pioneer LaserActive CLD-A100. The only LaserDisc player that can play Sega Genesis. I shouldn’t have let him use it, but I’m a fucking loser that can’t say no. It goes for \$800 on eBay. I lucked out and found one at Goodwill for \$10. They didn’t know what it was. They thought it was like a Betamax or something, I guess. I don’t know. All I know is that I got the deal of the century and this motherfucker ruined it. He left a fucking open can of Sierra Mist on top of it and acted like it wasn’t his fault when his fucking cat knocked it over and spilled the drink all the fuck over the LaserActive and ruined the motherboard. First of all, why the fuck was he drinking Sierra Mist? Sprite is clearly the superior lemon-lime soda. Second of all, he left a goddamned open fucking can of soda on my rare ass machine that I foolishly was kind enough to let him borrow and when the can spills because of his cat, poor ‘ole Kitty Foreman, he acts like it isn’t his fault. Fucking typical. I should have expected this from a mayo loving motherfucker. We rush to my locker. They already started searching. There’s no way I can get to it without them noticing. I watch the dogs sniff out each locker, one by one. I watch as they get to mine, and the dogs keep going. I look at Todd in total disbelief. I grab his arm and excitedly whisper that we got away with it. Confused and concerned, Todd leans in asks what my locker number is.

“113... why?”

“...I put the weed in 131.” The fear of me killing him fades as guilt of destroying someone else’s life takes its place.

“Why the fuck would you do that, Todd? I’ve had the same locker all year.”

“Dude, you know I’m dyslexic. They all look the same, you don’t have to come at me like that, man.”

Relieved that I’m not about to get busted for weed that isn’t mine, I watch to see what happens next. The dogs reach locker 131 and begin to lose their minds. The cop uses his bolt cutters and gets into the locker. There it is. A bag of weed sitting on top of a crusty PE uniform. The cop

grabs the weed, makes note of the locker number and continues to check the rest of the hall.

As angry as I am at Todd for not only my LaserActive, but for putting me in this situation in general, I'm mad impressed that he fit the weed into the tiny ass locker holes. I don't know how he did it.

After enduring the most stressful moment of my life, I try to relax and just get through the rest of the day. I go home and start looking for a new bible verse. After lunch, I don't want to put any more attention on myself. I just want to pick a simple ass verse that Mr. Oliver would accept. I end up choosing Genesis 17:7. It says, "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you." It sounds good, but it's actually about circumcision. Everyone wins. Mr. Oliver gets a verse that sounds nice and normal, while I get a chuckle and some heat off my back. I get to school the next day and see locker 131 taped shut. I walk over to an underclassman sitting on the floor reading comics, I think it's Swamp Thing. The Scott Synder one, not the Allan Moore one. I ask him what happened, knowing full well what happened. I just want to know who it happened to. He tells me that during the drug search yesterday they found weed in the locker. They expelled the kid and taped up his locker. I ask if he knows who it was, he says, "Yeah. Dillan McDaniel. He was some dude in 11th grade." I know full well which Dillan he's talking about. There's only one goddamn Dillan McDaniel at this fucking school. In a moment of shock and retardation, I reply, "The trench coat club motherfucker? That Dillan?"

"Yeah! The guy who wore a trench coat every day," he says. Oh shit. This might be the last straw. I wouldn't be shocked we were the next Columbine. At least I'm not on his shit list. No, I shouldn't think like that. He's a good guy, he's just weird. God, he got fucked. I hope he's doing okay. No, wait. No. I shouldn't be the one worrying. Todd caused all this shit. This is on him. I'm innocent. I didn't do a goddamn thing.

At lunch, I sit in my corner and wait for Todd to show up. God, I wish there was someone else to sit with. I want to sit with a real friend, not some fake ass motherfucker that blames his cat for shit that's obviously his fault. He finally shows up and starts eating a sandwich with a

disgusting amount of mayo. Not just to my standards, but to any sane person with reasonable taste buds. He eats it with a dumb ass smirk on his face and I can't help but stare him down with a condescending scowl. For the mayo, the LaserActive, for Dillan, for all that shit.

“Dude, Charlie, what's got your panties in a bunch?”

“Are you fucking kidding me, dude? You're just going to let that kid Dillan take the fall?”

“Uh, hell yeah. Better him than us.” I grab my shit and leave the table.

“I have to turn in my senior bible verse. I'll see you later.” I walk into Mr. Oliver's office and hand him my bible verse. He seems impressed by my selection. He reads it out loud in a weirdly proud and cheerful voice. I think he's just happy he doesn't have to deal with me anymore. I hold in my chuckle; he really doesn't know it's about dicks getting cut up. I notice that Mr. Oliver is wearing a tie with a shark on it, and it sends me down a rabbit hole in my own head. It makes me think of Jaws, which makes me think of my Jaws LaserDisc, which makes me think of my LaserActive, which makes me think about Todd.

I toss around the idea of selling him out in my head. On one hand, fuck Todd. Even if he was actually a good enough person to acknowledge that he fucked up and buy me a new LaserActive, he only works part time at a grocery store as a bagboy. It would take forever for him to afford that. On the other hand, if I sell him out, I would have to eat lunch alone again. Even in all my complaints of wanting to eat alone again, I can't help but think that I'm just romanticizing the days when my LaserActive was Sierra Mist-less. It has been nice eating with someone. But then again, he eats mayo like every goddamn day. Maybe getting rid of him wouldn't be so bad after all.

“Hey, Mr. Oliver...there's something I think you should know about the weed that was found in locker 131 yesterday...”

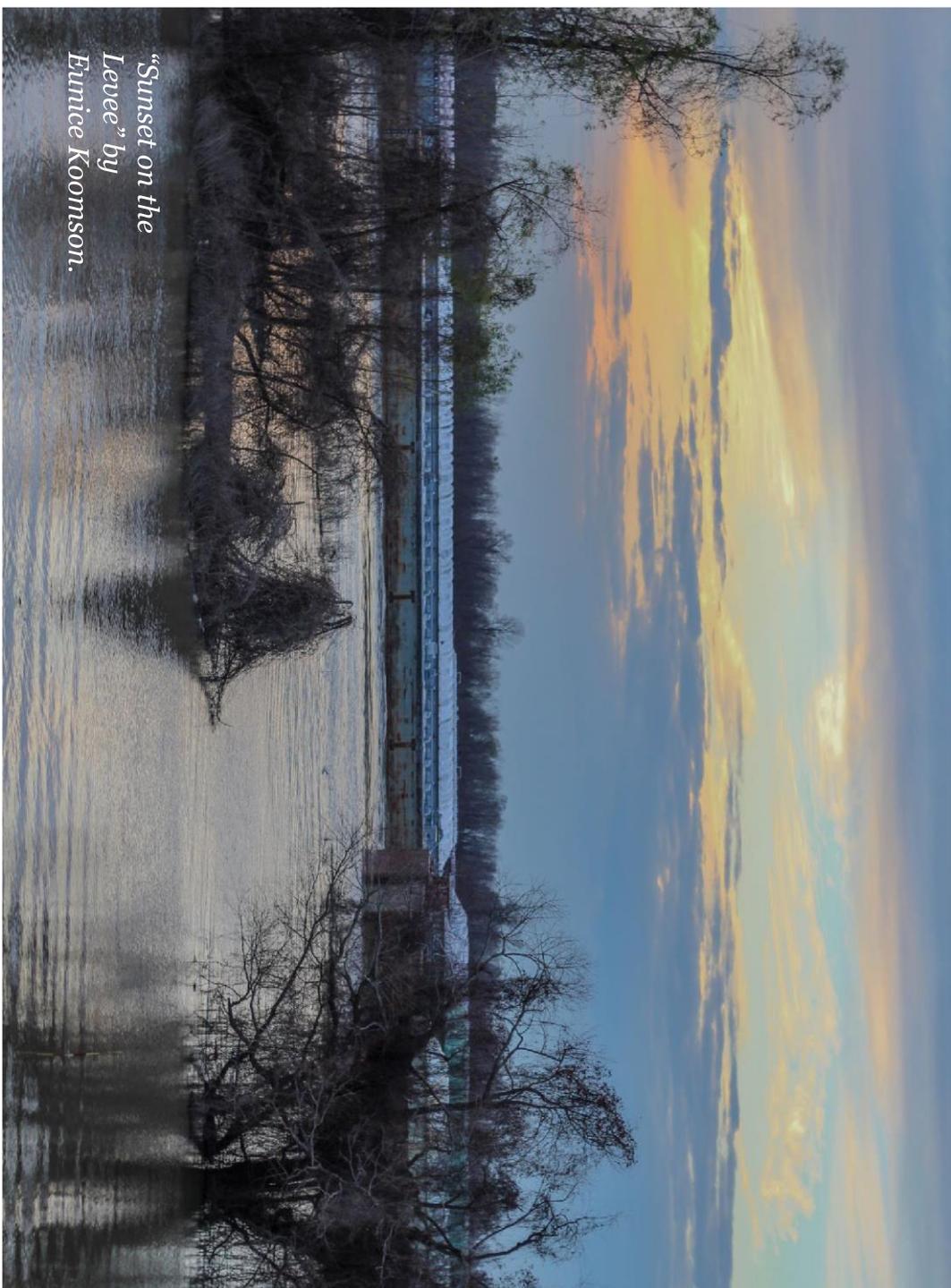
From this point, I don't even know what I'm saying. Words are just spewing out of my mouth faster than I can ever process them. I'm probably cursing, God I hope I'm not cursing. I don't want to deal with that shit.

“So, you're saying Todd Coleman planted the marijuana in Dillan's locker?”

“Uh, yes sir, he planted it.”

“Thank you for coming to me about this, Mr. Charles. I’m sure it wasn’t easy. Now, if you’d excuse me, I need to speak with Mr. Todd about this.”

I leave his office, weirdly relieved. I start to feel proud of myself for helping Dillan, but that doesn’t last long. After just a moment of thinking about it, I realize I did this for me. I don’t really care about Dillan. I just care about fucking over Todd for wrecking my LaserActive. I can’t say fucking him over is as satisfying as watching Jaws on LaserDisc, but goddamn it, it sure comes pretty fucking close.



*“Sunset on the
Levee” by
Eunice Koomson.*

Caesura

By Riley McDaniel

Libbie Setembrini was the unspoken object of pity within the school band room, and Vernon Wheeler wondered if she knew that was the case. People spoke to her differently than they had with her older sister Cadence. They spoke to her more.

Afterschool marching practice was cut short by an unexpected storm. Libbie talked with two girls from the clarinet section while they huddled beneath the awning of the band hall. Cadence had also played the clarinet.

Vernon sat close by on his saxophone case and watched rainwater rush out the building's gutter. Libbie held her flute case at her side. When the two girls left, Libbie reviewed the sheets of music in her flip folder, maintaining a neutral distance from Vernon.

"No one pointed it out, but you kept marching on the wrong foot today," Vernon said, taking care to make himself heard above the natural white noise that washed over the school grounds. "If you pick up bad habits, it'll hurt the rest of the band in competition."

"I did?" Libbie startled at his frankness. She stared down at her sneakers, scuffling them together. Pretty soon they'd be dyed with grass stains. Her pinstriped socks, too. They would leave a wicked farmer's tan if she kept wearing them to practice. Just like the ones sis had, she thought. "I'll try not to do it as much."

"You should try to not do it at all."

"You never marched on the wrong foot your freshman year?" Vernon flattened his lips and nodded. He realized asking her to be perfect at something she was still learning would be unrealistic. He watched the parking lot in anticipation for his mother's beaten up Tahoe.

"Do you not have your own car?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "Epilepsy makes that a non-option."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have—I didn't realize."

"What are you freaking out about? Like you said, you

didn't know." Vernon rubbed his hands together. He found her reaction to learning about his condition disappointing. He was open about it with her because he thought she would not succumb to curbing her behavior. Libbie resisted the urge to apologize again. She didn't know what else to say. Words came to mind, but they were all half-hearted consolations, and it wasn't like she knew him well enough for her sympathy to mean much of anything. Libbie wrinkled the bottom hem of her shirt between her fingers.

"My first impression is that you're really not at all like her." "My sister?" Libbie didn't understand why she was being brought up.

"Yes, I would say you're practically opposites, which explains a lot." Vernon stalled on a long yawn before giving Libbie a sideways glance. She did the same. She was on guard now.

"Were you her friend, Vernon?" She rapped a finger against the scratchy plastic exterior of her flute case.

"Did she tell you we were?"

Libbie nodded. Vernon rubbed the back of his neck.

"Yeah, figures she'd feel that way. Truth be told, most of our interactions were pretty one-sided. She would chatter off whatever was on her mind, even if I didn't talk back. And she was always sticking close to me." Vernon checked again for his mom's car.

"In the end, I was just someone she annoyed because I never became her friend like she wanted. So, I don't think that I was her friend." Vernon turned to Libbie. She had closed the gap between them. She left enough space that Vernon didn't feel uncomfortable, which he found considerate of her. With a flushed face, she looked down at Vernon.

"That upset you." That wasn't his intent. It was just how he felt.

"If Cadence had heard me saying stuff like that about you, she would have said 'Shut your mouth, Wheeler' and then pummel me with her case." Vernon felt sure he wouldn't have to worry about Libbie doing something like that, though he wished she might take a swing at him whenever he went too far.

"I heard a lot about you, you know?" he kept on. "Nothing but praise. I think she hoped someone would do the same for her. A person

that would say ‘You’re amazing’ and mean it.” Vernon smoothed one of his thumbs over the other. “Anyway, she admired you.”

“She talked about you a lot, too,” Libbie muttered.

The conversation dissipated some with that phrase. Libbie was faintly shaking; it had nothing to do with the chill rain. Vernon felt there wasn’t much else he could say to make her feel better. It wasn’t like he knew her well enough to spout off about how things will get better. He couldn’t even fully believe that sentiment.

Vernon cupped his hands over his ears. The sound of rain was swallowed up and replaced by a soothing hum that tingled the back of his neck. At a rhythm, Vernon covered and uncovered his ears to the tune of ‘Scarborough Fair.’ It really didn’t sound anything like the actual song, he realized. Cadence had always done this on rainy days. Vernon wondered if the songs she played on the rain sounded more like they would on a real instrument.

“She showed you that?” Libbie asked, wiping her face on the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

“Yeah. I always thought it was weird, but I sort of get why she did it now. Blocking out noise to only hear the things you want.” Vernon hung his head, resting it on one of his hands.

“I liked your sister. I didn’t always like the way she’d sometimes talk too much—or how she would invade my personal space—but I liked her.” He wasn’t sure if he had sincerely said those words to Cadence herself, so he wanted someone to hear them.

“But you weren’t friends?”

“Saying we were would just be selfish.” Vernon fiddled with the latch on his saxophone case. “There were strong reservations between us. There were things I couldn’t tell her, and there were apparently things she couldn’t tell me. I don’t think we could be considered as having been friends.”

Vernon never told Cadence about his Epilepsy. There was a chance she still knew in the end, though. He suffered an attack at school one winter day during last year, so there might have been gossip surrounding him that day. If it had reached Cadence, that was something he could never confirm. Asking would have resulted in him outing himself. Of course, it was possible she never heard anything about it. Cadence didn’t

have other friends, far as he knew. It was also possible no one cared that it happened to him enough for something like gossip to spread.

“We only interacted because we happened to be in the same place,” Vernon insisted to himself. “We never exchanged phone numbers, so the only times we spoke were at school.”

“But you spoke to her.” Libbie hid her hands and case behind her back. “You might think that doesn’t mean much, but she never talked about anyone else from school.”

“What about you?” Vernon asked, not wanting to dwell on Libbie’s words. “Are people treating you alright?”

“Everyone is very considerate of me.” Libbie swallowed, fiddling with a page corner on her flipbook. Even though she wasn’t playing an instrument, the rain made her mouth taste like metal. “But it makes me wonder if I would have been able to make friends on my own. I feel like sis made them for me.”

“What about friends from middle school?”

“I think they aren’t sure how to deal with me. I don’t understand it, honestly. Nothing happened to me, just around me.”

“Right, well, there are lots of people in school who didn’t know your sister. Make friends with those people,” he suggested. “I think people had a hard time understanding Cadence, but you seem simple by comparison.”

Libbie scratched the back of her leg with her foot.

“Did you just call me an idiot?”

“That’s not how I meant it. All I was trying to say is that some people stayed away from Cadence because of how weird she could be, so you should be fine since you’re more plain.”

“Plain?”

“No, like, normal.” Vernon stifled a groan by dragging a hand down his face.

Despite Vernon’s doubts about their relationship, Libbie felt calmer knowing there was at least one person who got along with her sister. He was just as awkward as Cadence had always been.

Vernon stood up and opened his saxophone case, suddenly assembling his instrument. He felt like playing. He didn’t feel like talking anymore; he wasn’t good at it. He stuck a reed in his mouth to wet it.

Libbie eyed his meticulous work. Her body chilled by the rain, she squatted and hugged herself.

“You want me to be your friend?” he asked, gauging her potential response.

“Depends. Do you feel sorry for me?”

“No. If anything, I’m feeling sorry for myself.”

“I’m not looking for that kind of friendship.”

“Good,” Vernon said and huffed a hot breath into his mouthpiece. Vernon began playing a piece he memorized on his saxophone.

It was the clarinet etude from last year’s All-State tryouts. Libbie recognized the melody. She had heard her sister practice it so much that she anticipated the notes. She hummed in accompaniment. The alto sax let out a mournful squeak. The cold rain made the notes run flat, but Vernon didn’t mind. The timbre of his instrument today was flawed but earnest. It reminded them both of Cadence.

The rests between notes provided Vernon with relief. Libbie felt it, too. The absence of sound filled their ears and made them relish the moments when sound emerged in unexpected ways, flowing to the sky’s pouring metronome.

Huang Li

by Dominique Riley

Remember this, young one: people will sell their entire being—body and soul—if they believe it will get them a better life. They will betray, lie, throw the great Middle Kingdom into darkness if they believe this. The greed of man is equal to his insatiable bloodlust for war. It is unending, painful, and permanent, unlike one's memory.

Your name was Huang Li before everything happened. You had a brother, Huang Cho. While he worked odd jobs on the outskirts of the capital, Chang'an, you worked as a servant at the Mandate's luxurious Rear Palace. You were just twenty-five and a faithful servant of the Mandate, Emperor Tang Xuanzong of China. You rather liked your position assisting the Mandate with the smaller details of life. You made sure he had fresh robes and warm tea every morning. You oversaw the delivery of his meals at sunrise and sunset. You most enjoyed being among the other servants, as you all were treated better compared to the servants of rival noble homes. Unlike other young girls, you all were given much freedom to roam around the Rear Palace as you pleased between tasks; the only rule was that you must not cause a disturbance to the Mandate's sacred work. You all were compensated heavily as well, yet none of you were treated as well as Yang Guifei.

Yang Guifei, the concubine of the Mandate Emperor Tang Xuanzong, was the most cherished being under the rule of the Tang. Unlike the rest of you, whose hair was bound in messy and unbecoming braids and whose clothes were often stained with the result of one's chores, Yang Guifei strolled around the Rear Palace in the finest and most pristine silks. Brooches bejeweled with precious gems decorated her hair and neck, and they shimmered in the sunlight wherever she went. Rumors spoke that Yang Guifei, if she chose to, could have the whole Middle Kingdom under her rule. Everyone saw how much the Mandate was blinded by her beauty. On a night like this, where he threw extravagant feasts, he didn't hesitate to show her off to his many rich and powerful guests. You, Huang Li, were stationed in the kitchens while he made her dance for the dinner guests that night. You, along with the rest

of the servant girls, watched with mixed emotions as Yang Guifei twirled around the candlelit room, dancing to the music that played. The thin silks that hung from her body floated around her like an enchanting mist. The other girls around you grumbled in jealousy. They, unlike you, wanted to be in her place and to be the center of so many powerful gazes. They wanted to have that power over the men around them, and they spoke in heated whispers as they cleaned the many filthy porcelain plates. "...and I hear that she sleeps with the Turk general, An Lushan," one hissed.

"That's how he got his position in the North, you know," another replied.

"And who knows, maybe that Yang Guifei will try to get An Lushan more power!" they all moaned as dishes clattered around the kitchen. Why didn't you envy Yang Guifei like the others, Huang Li? Look at how they bond over their jealousy of the old Mandate's concubine. Why did you not partake in it? Was it that you saw not the pleasures she flaunted as she moved her hips in slow circles around the dinner guests, but the pains that seemed to shackle her to them? To be forced to provide entertainment until she is no longer young and beautiful, thought you, would feel more of a prison than a pleasure. You shook your head and carried on with your duties. You cleared the table of plates when called for and scrubbed them diligently, dismissing every rumor of An Lushan's supposed talk of rebellion that came to your ears.

You, foolishly, worked with this diligence until that day, those many years ago.

You were standing outside of the Mandate's quarters with his midday meal and tea when the shouts erupted. You pressed your ear against the dark cherry door and could hear the Mandate yelling at his advisors. You couldn't make out all the word through the thick wooden doors, but you heard a few. You heard enough. He spoke of spies and attacks near the Rear Palace, fear accenting the concern in his voice. He worried that things were growing unsafe with An Lushan's growing forces. Hearing his words unsettled you, as they reminded you of the rumors the servants indulged in. You heard shuffling and footsteps approaching the door, and you walked away before you could be found

out. You tried to forget the words you heard, but they did not disappear as easily.

Soon after that moment, you were all gathered in front of the Mandate's advisor.

"The Mandate has decreed that servants are to stay indoors at all times," he said. "If you go out, say for food from the palace kitchens, then you are to report to me."

The servants were dismissive of the order, some continuing to venture out into the night. You were a good and humble servant, so you did as you were told, no? You stayed indoors always—not as if you worked outside much, anyway. You didn't question the root of the orders. Others did; they thought that it was too harsh. Some wondered why. None of you would find answers, at least not from the Palace. You all found answers from those outside of the palace walls. The ones who saw the Middle Kingdom in its crudest form. You, Huang Li, found answers from Huang Cho. He had made his way into the heart of Chang'an to say goodbye.

Dressed in rags, he crouched in the shadows of the Rear Palace. He steadied a patch-covered bag on his shoulder.

"An Lushan is plotting a rebellion against Xuanzong," he said in hurried whispers, "and I intend to fight for him."

He looked guilty when you called him an idiot and a traitor. An Lushan was a plague crippling the entire Middle Kingdom, thought you, and yet here your brother was, running off to join him instead of defending the Mandate.

"Sure, here you have gold, riches, and everything under the sun. But out there, people are starving." He pointed to you, then out into the night. "Xuanzong has been neglecting his people, Huang Li, and I want to stop him."

Look at his anger, Huang Li. Memorize his passion, and the way it roars behind his eyes like a fire no one should dare put out. You won't be able to talk him out of this notion. You will be forced to watch him go. Watch him disappear into the night. Remember his face; it will be the last time you see it unscathed.

The palace changed after that night as worry tricked down the halls. Rumors spread like fever, and gradually, life inside the Rear Palace became more restricting and more repressive. The Mandate ordered for

himself and his concubine to be guarded. No one was to talk ill of himself or Yang Guifei, though they all still partook in secret. Among the shadows, rumors spread like fire through an ill-kept forest: An Lushan was forcing his way closer. These whispers made the Mandate grow antsy. As attacks sprouted closer to the Chang'an, he stopped talking altogether. He ignored even you, the bringer of his morning meal and cup of tea, which were discarded outside of his door. Still, you ignored these warnings. You made excuses for the Mandate's lost appetite. You made excuses for many of the Mandate's foolish mistakes.

Remember that night, those years ago, when he grew so angry with you that he threw his bowl of noodles at your head? Remember the servants' faces? They snickered at you. They whispered about you and howled with wicked laughter as the Mandate's faithful ewe wiped oil from her rags. Yet even then, you defended him. You told the others that you deserved it. It was rude of you to impose on the Mandate's privacy, especially when there was so much to attend to. Pride pulled your head high and it blinded you. As you continued to make the trip to the Mandate's quarters, you continued to return with noodle and egg on your face. You rebuilt yourself as a woman of faith in the Mandate and his plans. The egg on your face becoming the holy robes of your service to him. The other servants did not share your devotion, and their faithlessness begot doubts and suspicions. They spread rumors surrounding the Rear Palace and Yang Guifei. The concubine remained unbothered by the talk of an encroaching war. She remained reserved as she roamed the Palace, free of her duties. Even so, she chose to spend her time beside the Emperor, settling into her self-given role of a mute songbird in all his meeting and appointments with advisors and nobles. Though you dared not admit it aloud, you saw the agitated faces of the Mandate's guests when they spotted his concubine playing her harp in the corner. They, like the servants, began to resent the privilege she bolstered, though they dared not speak of it to the Mandate himself.

"He's obsessed," your brother's letter fumed one evening, "obsessed with that whore. He values her over the lives of his own people of the Middle Kingdom. An Lushan talks of how he neglects even his advisors." Aside from this, Huang Cho spoke about his life in the rebel garrison, though you didn't care much, did you? Did he not work for An

Lushan, the Middle Kingdom's most respected dignitary turned demon in disguise? Did that not now make him a traitor of the Middle Kingdom? Even so, you still pitied your brother and threw the letter into a nearby boiler instead of taking it to a guard. You watched your brother burn to ashes, and after that night, it seemed others too had grown tired of war gossip. No one talked of the growing rebellion surrounding the Rear Palace. No one until one of the servants fell dead one day. Poisoned.

The poisoning threw the palace into chaos. The Mandate demanded that every able body search for the assassin. You servant girls were squeezed into a closet as everyone searched, forced to watch the foam fall from the mouth of the dead girl from between the closet shutters. Her face held no glow now, and the rosy tint had left her cheeks. Do not forget her face, Huang Li. Do not forget what she died for, although the Mandate later did. For him, her face was only a brief reminder of the empire he had forgotten outside his golden palace walls. When you saw him weep, know that he did not weep for her, for the loss of his dutiful servant, but for the loss of his mirage of happiness and safety. Although you would not understand this until it was much too late.

"An Lushan brags about the death of the servant girl," said Huang Cho several weeks later in another letter.

You had to be more careful this time because no servant was left to herself as easily anymore. You were all followed now. The Mandate had wasted nothing on protecting himself and his concubine, who had become more prized and envied overnight. The constant supervision by guards and advisors forced you onto the roof of one of the palace sheds, cloaked under the leaves of a broad cherry tree.

"An Lushan says we soon will be free of the Mandate's corruption," Huang Cho's letter continued. "Soon, when An Lushan reaches the Rear Palace and does away with that fool, we will all be the kings!"

The darkness of the night felt more oppressive as the words of your brother echoed in your mind. An Lushan was coming to the Rear Palace, and he was doing it through conquering one helpless village at a time. Huang Cho failed to see that an innocent girl had died for his "rebellion." The bonds of blood did not save him from these crimes. You went to find Yang Guifei, for she could bring it to the Mandate quickly. You thought

you were doing the most just thing, as the humble servant you were back then.

You climbed down from the shed and tiptoed through the palace corridors, careful not to attract the attention of the guards that patrolled about. It was easy, though, considering that most of them ignored your presence anyway. You were a good servant, they thought. One not worth keeping a close eye on. Soon, you stood in front of the ornate screen door of Yang Guifei's quarters. Her room was lit and laughter trickled out. Her voice sounded slurred. You peeked inside to find her alone and giggling on her pile of pillows.

"Huang Li, come join me!" She held up a large bottle of wine, almost falling over as she did so.

"I have something that might be of use to the Mandate." You took a seat beside her and refused the drink. She giggled at the mention of the Mandate.

"That old pile of dust!" she snickered. "Got him under my thumb like a beetle."

You nodded as you sat beside her, not really paying attention. It was only natural that she would say such things, was it not? She knew she was his prized concubine, after all. Such honors gave her the right to these feelings of entitlement.

"...and when he does, An Lushan will make me empress. Me! Empress of the Middle Kingdom!"

Her statement brought back your attention.

"The rebel traitor? What about him?" you asked.

She laughed, hysteria trickling into her voice. "The only traitor here is Xuanzong and everyone knows it!" She took a drink from the bottle of wine. "He is too proud. Too brash. Only cares about his gold and his prized who—"

You interrupted her self-deprecating rant. "What are you talking about? You make no sense."

She went into details then. Details too clear to simply be a product of the wine in her hands. She related to you her plot. She talked about how An Lushan received his position in the North. Do you see now how the rumors were true, Huang Li? Do you see now how she seduced the Mandate and persuaded him to move An Lushan to lead three northern

garrisons? It was all a ploy to place him in command of troops upset with the Mandate's treatment of the Middle Kingdom. You listened, swallowing disgust like bile back down your throat as you smiled. She told you every detail of her plan and how she intended to beg the Mandate to remain here at the Rear Palace.

"The fool," she told you, "wants to flee east away from Chang'an." You wanted to believe that it was all an elaborate tale created by the alcohol roaring through her veins. Deep down, you knew that every bit of her story was true. The only traitors here were her and An Lushan. You balled up Cho's letter and got up to leave.

"Huang Li, remember! This is our secret!" She threw her arms around your waist.

"Aye."

You untangled yourself from her, praying that she did not remember anything come morning. To your dismay, she did.

You knew this the moment she summoned you to have breakfast with her. Yang Guifei shared breakfast with no one. You wondered what she knew as you opened the screen to her quarters, allowing the morning sunlight to invade the room.

"Shut that damn door," she hissed as you closed the screen.

"Good morning," you replied.

"Quit the formalities. What do you know?" She glared at you, then began to inspect her food for poison.

"I know nothing—"

"You know everything!" she snapped, then grew quiet. She smiled as she took a bite of her bread. "Though I may not remember everything that occurred last night, I remember that you were there."

She waited for you to acknowledge her statement, and you remained silent.

"I simply want to know what I did. You're such a good person, Huang Li, can't you help me?" Her smile grew softer and her eyes watered. At that moment, her lies seemed perfect. She had mastered the art of innocence. She was prepared to even shed a tear if need be. How would you be able to lie to her? Certainly, she would notice a story that was completely false. A snake can recognize its kin even in the tallest grasses. You thought about telling her half-truths.

“You did giggle quite a bit, and talked much about being the future empress of the ‘Red’ Palace,” you responded.

Her innocent act fell, and she asked you for more details. She wanted to know what she said and how she acted. She wanted to know every detail and you gave them to her. They were all wrapped in half-truths that left your mouth bitter tasting. The sun rested at the top of the sky before she released you. You felt accomplished, in a way; you had escaped unscathed. Though had you really escaped her? She did not let on her incredulity, but deep down, you knew that the storm still brewed on the horizon. Guards now followed you everywhere you went. You no longer had privacy. They reported everything you did to Yang Guifei, most likely, thought you.

An Lushan continued to creep toward the Rear Palace and the Mandate grew more terrified. He ordered preparations to be made for his trip east. Yang Guifei no longer smiled as even she became restricted by the Mandate’s rules. She walked around the palace with a frigid air, like a mountain cat pacing behind the bars of a bejeweled cage. She rejected all her meals and spoke to no one.

A few days passed and the Mandate called you all together to embark on a trip east. He only chose a precious few servants to accompany him, leaving the rest to maintain the palace while he was away. Weren’t you grateful he chose you to join him, Huang Li? You and a few other servants were privileged to sit in the back of a crowded and unmarked caravan in front of the Mandate and Yang Guifei as the driver prodded his way through the busy morning roads. Guards dressed in plain clothes sat front of the caravan with its driver. The caravan had left the Rear Palace at the earliest light of dawn and had been traveling through the busy streets of Chang’an without ordering the people to part ways. In the Mandate’s effort to remain unnoticed, progress was slow and tedious. By midday, the caravan broke through the crowded city and into the quiet outskirts and countryside. As you looked out of the small windows, you saw farmers working in vast fields of champa rice. The quiet beauty of the rice fields quickly became the only thing worth admiring as the caravan covered the land. Soon, the fields gave way to lush forests surrounding low-lying mountains.

People appeared then. First, there was a woman dressed in hole-riddled rags and coated in splotches of dried mud. She ran along the side of the caravan and screeched while she pounded against the sides. She ran beside the cart until the Mandate ordered it to stop and dispatched guards to confront her. Do you see now how that was just what the woman wanted, Huang Li? Just as the caravan stopped, a small army of people emerged from the forest. They forced you all from the caravan and chaos erupted. Servants ran into the forest as the rebels attacked the guards. People were moving far too quickly for you to keep track. Men yelled at each other. Someone demanded for the Mandate to relinquish his concubine. They referred to her as “the war mother,” a phrase Huang Cho had used in his letters. The Mandate refused to give the men Yang Guifei, even after they threatened to kill one of his servants. You watched from between the trees as the servant’s body fell at the Mandate’s feet, yet he still did not dare to give them Yang Guifei.

Seeing the poor girl’s body changed something in you, didn’t it? Rage burned in your throat—not at the men who had murdered the girl, but at the Mandate for valuing Yang Guifei over a pure life. Had he no heart? No compassion for the servants who worked tirelessly for him? The rebel men demanded for the war mother again, and you silently agreed with them.

You spotted Yang Guifei running deeper into the brush. This was your chance, Huang Li, but would you take it? Revenge stirred in you, whispering to bring justice to the one who had caused this massacre. Did you act?

You followed her, watching her figure dance between the trees while screams echoed around you. You recognized some of them, but they seemed foreign among the chaos. Yang Guifei ran until she clutched her side and breathed heavily. You were both walking now. Yang Guifei for she was riddled with exhaustion, like a deer running away from its prey, and you for you were her stalker. In silence, you closed the distance between you. You were soon close enough to hear her muttering curses to herself. Then, you pounced. You grabbed her, and she lost balance, causing both of you to tumble down the steep forest hill. You fell into the brush after rolling several feet.

Yang Guifei screamed in pain, a thick branch protruding from her thigh. Her eyes recognized you, and she whimpered your name. She clung to you desperately. Large tears rolled down her face. She looked almost pitiful.

“Huang Li, please help me,” she wept, clawing at your arms in an attempt to help herself up.

You did not reply. In the distance, voices shouted, “Down with the whore” and “Down with the war mother” as soldiers moved through the trees, accompanied by the thunder of footsteps.

Hearing their shouts, Yang Guifei grew more upset. Her nails dug into your arms, leaving long red gashes. She begged for you to help her, to save her from her fate. Did you assist her? Here lay the war mother. The one who birthed this fight and killed innocent servant girls. You stared at her unmoving as her shaking hands clawed at you. You gripped the branch protruding from her leg tightly before twisting it and driving it deeper into her flesh.

“Down with the war mother!” You struck her face and ripped yourself away from her shrieking frame. “She’s here. I found her!” you yelled before running off into the forest.

You blocked out her screams as the men dragged her back to the road. You kept running and told yourself to keep going when guilt began to gnaw at your kind heart. You told yourself to put one foot in front of the other and create space between yourself and the havoc in the distance. You let the thunder of your footfalls mask Yang Guifei’s lightning-like shrieks as you raced deeper into the mountainside.

Your brother, however, seemed happy in his garrison across the continent. Word had spread to the rebellion of the destruction of the caravan and the troops celebrated well into the night. It was not until morning that he thought of you, his poor servant sister. With last night’s ale still in his veins, Huang Cho bumbled through the camp, to the tent of An Lushan and his advisors.

“General,” he said, “did all the servants die when the caravan was attacked?”

An Lushan put down his quill and turned to the young man, chuckling. “Why? Are you thinking that we should go bounty hunting?”

“N-No! There should be survivors to spread the word of the war mother’s death.” He watched the general flinch at the mention of Yang Guifei’s murder. It would be a while before he, too, realized the relationship between An Lushan and the Mandate’s prized concubine. “Well,” started An Lushan, “be comforted to know that three escaped.” He took a sip of tea. “And of that, one avoided being hunted down and killed.”

“Huang Li?” Your brother’s mouth spat out your name before he could make up a lie.

The general raised an eyebrow.

“I know not the exact names, only the numbers provided to me by my scouts.” Huang Cho nodded as An Lushan continued, “Say, why do you ask?”

“She was just... the gossip of my village. If she lived, then the tale would spread like fire through a forest,” Huang Cho lied.

He was allowed to get to the entrance of the tent before An Lushan spoke again.

“Say, what be your name, soldier?”

The young man replied with a popular name from his home village and exited the tent.

After that, Huang Li, I haven’t the knowledge of what happened. Your brother has yet to be found. Some say that Huang Cho died on the battlefield; others say that he left the war to search for you, his runaway sister. Do you see now, Huang Li, that greed changes people? Do you see now?

Escapade

By Taylor Alyse Pisanie

EXT. ELLE'S OLD HOUSE-NIGHT

A small house in southern Louisiana sits on flat land with overgrown grass.

The wind HOWLS. Crickets CHIRP. Moss hangs from a nearby tree.

The sound of GLASS BREAKING comes from inside of the house. INT. HALLWAY OF ELLE'S OLD HOUSE-NIGHT The house is dark.

A girl rounds the corner, covered in blood and holding a knife at her side. She is ELLE THOMAS, beautiful, 20s. Holding her breath, Elle slips into a bathroom.

INT. BATHROOM OF ELLE'S OLD HOUSE-NIGHT

Elle shuts the door behind her, making sure to be quiet.

She stumbles to the sink and turns the water on, dropping the knife into it and thrusting her bloody hands under the water.

She scrubs at her skin harshly, tears beginning to fall from her eyes.

An OWL COOS outside. Elle jumps, jerking her head toward the closed door.

She turns the water off and leaves the knife in the sink. She stares at herself in the mirror. Her body trembles.

Elle takes a deep breath and closes her eyes before turning back to the door.

She opens the door with care and tiptoes back into the hallway.

INT. GRAND CENTRAL, 42ND STREET STATION, UPPER LEVEL-DAY

The loud screeching of metal on metal fills the air of the dingy subway station.

The station is crowded and loud. People rush to catch their trains.

A ROBOTIC FEMALE VOICE struggles to be heard over the commotion of the station.

VOICE OVER

The six train to Pelham Bay Park has been delayed. For alternate routes, please view the map or ask information VOICE OVER (CONT'D) services. The six train to Pelham Bay Park has been delayed-

The Voice is drowned out by loud music blaring from a STREET PERFORMER.

Standing near the subway map is Elle, dressed in business attire, and clearly distressed. A LARGE MAN with a ruddy face brushes past her.

ELLE

Sir, excuse me.

The Large Man continues walking.

A WOMAN with a baby stroller approaches.

ELLE (CONT'D)

Hi, ma'am. I just moved here and-

The Woman doesn't spare Elle a glance and continues walking.

Elle pushes her hands through her hair before looking around the station, frantic. She turns back to the map, biting her lower lip to keep herself from crying.

ELLE (CONT'D)

(to herself)

Why did I ever think I could do this? Should've just stayed in Louisiana to rot.

SOMEONE stumbles into Elle, pushing her into the map. They don't apologize.

Elle rights herself, just to be knocked into again without an apology.

ELLE (CONT'D)

(to herself)

Asshole!

Elle puts a finger to the map, trying to follow the subway line to the Financial District from where she boarded the train in Brooklyn. She shakes her head in frustration.

ELLE (CONT'D)

(to herself)

How the hell did I end up here?
Jesus.

Yet ANOTHER PERSON stumbles into her, sneering at her as if it's her fault.

Elle presses the heels of her hands into her eyes, attempting to suppress her tears. It doesn't work.

OLIVER CLARKE, mid-twenties, devastatingly handsome, business attire, British stands beside her.

OLIVER
You alright, love?

Elle, sniffing, takes her hands away from her eyes.

OLIVER (CONT'D)
Looks like you're having a
bit of a rough morning.

Elle laughs, but there is no humor behind it.

ELLE
That's the understatement of the
century.

Oliver smiles. Elle relaxes, some of the tension leaving her body.

ELLE (CONT'D)
I just moved here and it's my first
day at my new job and I can't figure
out how to get there. I don't even
know how I ended up here when it
should have been a straight shot
from Brooklyn, but now I'm going to
be late and-

Oliver laughs, the sound cutting Elle off and causing her to take a breath.

OLIVER

Listen, it's alright. Everyone struggles a bit at first. I'll help you out. Where are you going?

ELLE

Chambers Street.

Oliver raises his eyebrows.

OLIVER

It must be your lucky day. That's where I'm headed.

ELLE

Seriously?

OLIVER

Yeah.

(pause)

Come on, I'll let you tag along with me.

Elle smiles.

INT. GRAND CENTRAL, 42ND STREET STATION, LOWER LEVEL-DAY

The 7 train to 34th Street Hudson Yards barrels into the station, the wind blowing Elle's hair back from her face. Oliver leans in close to Elle in order to be heard.

OLIVER

This is us! We'll get off at Times
Square and catch the 1, 2, or 3.
Whichever comes first!

Elle nods as the sound of the pressure being released echoes throughout the station, the doors to the train car in front of her opening.

People pour out of the train car, all of them stepping around Elle and Oliver so they don't knock into them.

OLIVER (CONT'D)

After you.

Elle boards the train car, finding two empty seats next to each other. Oliver follows behind her. They both sit down.

ELLE I don't think I ever got your name?

OLIVER I'm

Oliver. Oliver Clarke.

ELLE

Elle Thomas.

The train doors close. Oliver and Elle smile at each other. EXT. CHAMBERS STREET-DAY

Five lanes of traffic on a three lane street. The street is loud, busy, dirty. People of all different kinds rush past each other, pushing and shoving.

BUSINESS MAN walks by yelling into his phone.

A STREET VENDOR yells at a cab driver. A car horn BLARES in response.

Elle and Oliver emerge from the stairs of the subway station. Elle sighs and runs her hands through her hair.

ELLE

Thank you so much. I don't think I would have made it here without you.

Oliver nods, not really paying attention to Elle. He looks around, eyes focused on a MAN in a trench coat across the street.

ELLE (CONT'D)

Hey, are you okay?

Oliver glances at Elle. He grabs her arm. Elle jerks her arm back in shock, but Oliver's grip doesn't loosen.

ELLE (CONT'D)

What are you doing?

OLIVER

We have to go.

ELLE

I'm sorry, what? I don't even know you. Let me go!

Elle jerks her arm again to no avail.

ELLE (CONT'D)

Seriously, let go of me.

OLIVER

Can you trust me?

Elle's eyes widen. She looks at the people passing by, trying to catch their attention. She looks back to Oliver and lowers her voice.

ELLE

Are you insane? I just met
you.

Oliver lets go of Elle's arm for a second. She doesn't run.

OLIVER

Don't look now, but do you see the man
across the street?

Elle pauses for a moment before looking at the Man.

ELLE

Trench coat?

OLIVER

Yes.

ELLE

What about him?

Before Oliver can answer, the Man starts to walk across the street. He heads toward Oliver and Elle. As he gets closer, Elle gets a better look at his face. Her eyes widen and she gasps, frozen in place.

Oliver wraps his fingers around Elle's wrist, breaking into a run and dragging her behind him. The pair weave through the throngs of people, Oliver glancing over his shoulder as they turn a corner. They continue to run. Elle plants her feet in the

ground, jerking Oliver to a stop. Oliver lets go of her wrist.

ELLE (CONT'D) (out of breath)
Wait, wait. Who are you? How did you find me?

OLIVER We don't have time for that now.

ELLE
Well, make time or I'm not going any further.

It is obvious that the chain of events have caused Oliver's demeanor to be shaken. He sighs.

OLIVER
God, you're stubborn. They didn't tell me you were this difficult.

Elle crosses her arms over her chest.

ELLE
Difficult? And who didn't tell you? Who are you?

OLIVER
Yes, difficult. Your mum hired me to follow you here and protect you from your ex-boyfriend. You know, the wanker you stabbed? Is that enough?

Elle flinches at the name. Oliver's eyes widen as he looks past Elle. She follows his gaze, noticing the Man looking around. The Man spots them.

Elle turns back to Oliver.

ELLE

For now.

Oliver and Elle run. Oliver waves his hand out in the street. A cab stops.

Oliver yanks the door open, ushering Elle inside.

OLIVER

Hurry up! Bloody hell!

Elle scrambles into the cab. Oliver climbs in behind her, slamming the door. INT. BACKSEAT OF CAB-DAY The CAB DRIVER looks in the rearview mirror.

CAB DRIVER

Where to?

OLIVER

Just drive.

Elle looks at Oliver.

Oliver looks at Elle.

OLIVER (CONT'D)

So.

ELLE

How did he find me?

OLIVER You

didn't make it too hard. You
are very easy to find.

Elle groans, letting her head hit the dirty seat.

ELLE

Now what?

OLIVER

Now, you trust me.

FADE TO BLACK.

Bars
By Nona Lea



The Fairytale

By Angela Carson

The wolf came to me in my dreams again.
As she howled, I began to feel my mind cling closer and closer. The
eyes the wolf carried in it's mouth were mine. Blue like the deep
sea. Grey like lost anger.
I reached for my heart, only to find it was gone also.
The blood. Red like hell. All the blood dripping from my arms, my
veins releasing everything.
Cleansing of my body is what it felt like.
This is the end of everything, I thought to myself.
The wolf, she stood across from me.
My eye balls locked between her massive teeth.
I'll never see the light again, I thought to myself.
Like an out of body experience, I slowly offered my bleeding arms to the
wolf.
I was thanking her. I was thanking her for taking all of me.
Down of my knees. Calm like I had planned all of this.
The black wolf began to drink from my veins. Taking all that's left
undone.
The moment was still... nothing moving, making noise.
My head tilts back as I enjoy my blood draining.
Golden leaves slip away from the trees all around me. It's fall here in my
dreams.
It's almost a dream from a fairytale.
I find myself crawling away from the wolf. I cannot stand, walk, or feel.
I am at peace in this moment.
This world is beautiful I thought to myself. My fairytale.
I begin to vomit, and this pauses my crawling.

Human hearts. Human hearts pass through my throat.
I still feel calm as I vomit human hearts. Looking back at the wolf, I notice she is sitting tall like a statue.
Proud, she is proud I have released these three human hearts from inside myself.
I find the will to stand. I can feel the monster rumbling from within me. He is strong, angry, and thirsty.
The wolf howls as I rip open the scar where my heart once was to make room for the monster to grow.
Like magic, new eyes are given to me. They are large. Black in color. I glance at myself in the wolf's wild eyes. I am a nightmare in a child's dream.
My eyes are black... every inch of them. My skin is paper white. Blood drips over my body. But this time it is not mine.
The wolf walks slowly to my side. She drops her head low to the forest ground. Showing me she is now mine to rule over.
As if I have lived in this world before, I let out a howl and three black wolfs appear from the shadows.
They stand at my side licking the blood that drips from my nails. Wonderland has never looked this way to me before, but it is in fact the same wonderland.

The River Covenant

By Charity Ringel

Labor the eye-teeth plains of lore, Golden sentinels charge these sunless
dawns And I, edged in frost-lit frizz, half-hinged on rime husks Wander
towards emerald-laced land.

I seek out multitudes, but none attend Grate stalks for tinder, grind seeds
for spark Light effigies in my likeness, Still night falls stiff, pale raven.
Trekking damned tributaries, capped in glass My drift fells all, tracing
new meanders. Mackinaw, Spoon, Salt, carved horizons Rouge maple
fogs sediment.

I sleep in mouthed boulders, moss blankets.

Bosom my oak heart open, I pray Til' buoyant verdant takes its place. Til'
lukewarm southern winds comb muddy eddies Til' dark murk turns tan
merth, sunsets catch in thick vines Fetal fronds sing unseasoned growth
Til' Gorged roots gather bare beds

hollow-wholed fruits --

Jordan, I yield, christen my brow

Renounced

Promised basins and boundaries, I stagger Past paradise, knowl edge
asunder my Branch-blocked shine Still, I consume no light Sunk in
blood clay clouded silt.

It's just as well in the water:

twisted up with the dead leaves below the surface silently
sinking deeper into the mud.

I know it's there because I saw Cal throw it:

a sacrifice
on the first day of that summer
to save anyone else scratches
on the backs of their legs

or maybe a time capsule.

I know it's still there because I saw the weeds growing through the seat
the following year,

because why would anyone wade into a dirty lake
to save a broken chair?

And I believe it's there still, but I can't see it.

East State Street

By Liz Haley

My burnout friends ask how to get rid of the flies in their living room.

I say pour bleach down the kitchen sink, leave out vinegar, do the dishes, throw away any old food, take the trash out.

My burnout friends ask for help cleaning their apartment,
say they don't know where to start or
where to put things. They don't know how

it got so dirty, don't know when the flies took over
their living room.

I say point me to your cleaning supplies.

They say they have plenty of cleaning supplies,

just no
bleach, no
vinegar.

They say they'll buy bleach and vinegar

tomorrow

They'll get rid of the flies tomorrow

but
they
won't.

They'll blame the leaky pipe
and suddenly warm weather,
the broken window and standing water,

throw away any rotting food,
wash the mold from the dirty dishes,

Light a candle to cover the smell of weed and take the trash out.
mildew. Call their landlord.

Blame their landlord.

He'll eventually fix the pipe
and the window.

And when the flies still won't leave,

they'll buy bleach or

vinegar or they'll

move or they'll plan to

move

but won't.

Take more Xanax.

Sell enough to buy more.

Buy more. Take more.

Take more.

Take more.

I watch

from the couch, high enough to tune out the hum as a fly lands on my
ankle.

Cycles

By Michael Frank

Others label you a miracle after birth, placenta
Attached to the world, only moments away
From their own sloppy births, but you
Like a fish drenched in air, a fist in form,
Look into yourself to find a God, that ever elusive morsel.

They remove themselves from you to
elude Empathy. It is much easier to hide
Than to seek connection.
So you close your eyes and forget
That there is more, a larger life than the institutions you become.
A sore limb wounded with arthritic pangs,
The body moves you. Compliance for fear of entanglement.

But the stories end the same.
Your kids, your spouse, cover you with rocks and clippings, Naming
you a good person
A flushed fish, a good pet. Trapped in flesh for all and none.
None but yourself.

As you are lowered into the scarred dust,
We greet you and return to woken
slumbers. The version from before Your
divine projections.
When we welcome you back, your skin sheds like an
Ephemeral snake exiting its physical mesh
Connected in beauty

We are the leaves

And the grass under your toddler's feet
When he had just learned to walk
When you lifted him up after his tears streamed
We watch ourselves grow and decompose
With the grace of a parent at a bedroom door
And life flows through us
And if there ever was a God

Will be

We are

Inside the smallest ant
Carrying a breadcrumb to his queen
The settled raindrop smelling of nickel and clay
The wind caresses the hair of a crying form
Her head dips low
A whisper tells her she is a miracle
And she will return soon
What the body forgets
The rivers and the clouds always
Remember

Persephone

By Mallory De Lanza

Marbled stone staring low Never
glancing away.

A heart here frozen still,
Wed to time and then and now.
As He took you astray,
The King made to foe Pawn
advanced a space.
Queen.

Not a goddess but a mortal like me. Life as a series of set choices.
Choices.

Pygmalion- felt my breast
I am here still
My heart encased in a seed
Tear me open and my juice is red.

Something about you stood out to me, taking those decisions with
gallant step. I see you as a hero. I need to tell you something
more.

I am who I love. Not who love me.

Writhing

By Stella Burke

This worm on the ground reminds me of you
I'm sitting here
Watching this worm writhe on the raw earth
And all I can think of is you

Maybe you're more like this worm than I realized
It's being eaten alive by ants on the boiling concrete
Witnessing its own consumption while silently convulsing
Inaudible panic with no way to articulate

We three are alike in more ways than one, I suppose
So maybe I'm not crazy
When I look through the smudges in my mirror
And see your glazed eyes gaping back

But through austerity, I've learned to manipulate my anxiety into fuel
To use my dying strength to scream
I no longer watch myself disappear behind the fear
That once choked my words and locked them in my skull

The distinction between my flesh and
Your glassy face locked in my reflection
Is the freedom my words have given me
The ability to shout my thoughts as loud as I can

Your mouth hangs open, grasping at words
You can't quite catch onto
Wishing you could express yourself
Instead of allowing your words to eat your brain like maggots

which is why when you mentioned my culture I pictured America

and all those banks and the people

who have no choice but to owe them and

when you eventually stop mentioning my culture

find another body to leach or suck dry

I will be left

in an imitation house

filled with

all the imitation calendars we could afford and a bookshelf filled

with translated stories

our shoes are still left outside

and the rain still
falls heavy as it did back home

My home features my father unafraid to yell

at me in front of my friends

in Vietnamese

knowing it made them
uncomfortable

if you are still interested in my culture

I can tell you what

he's saying

I was born with my father's debts

I never had a

chance to meet him

as was he

and

as are you

and that is why this is my inheritance?

I raised you

we are born with our country's debt

I was born with two

we are raised in their homes

some people aren't
so lucky

when they mention (y)our culture son

you will think of mine

picture this house I've lent for you

how it looks like mine
but feels like nowhere

you remind me *debts aren't meant to*
me *be paid but carried*

like you've given
time to forget

you were born to carry us with you

the least you could do is
ask

The Letting Go Would Feel Sadder if it Felt Less Inevitable

By Khoi Truong

Hands weren't made to hold water

that's what my eyes are for

that's what my mouth is for

I will/can only hold your hand at night

As you fall asleep beside me

before me

oblivious to you as you are to it

the sweat from our palms reminds me how hard the holding is supposed
to be

There were the days where it was abundantly clear how hard I am

to love and there were the days you reminded me

There were the nights where I realized that falling out of love with

you felt like forgetting Vietnamese again and there were the days

where I decided to keep practicing for (y)our sake

I hold your hand

Tonight

And while you dream

I dread

The night

When I fall asleep first and you wonder where the holding went

The Silkworm's Suicide

By Jennifer Kristen Cook

Pale knuckles brush against the hilt,
Fingers curl around the handle,
And with the dagger firmly in grasp
She stabs her mind
Plunging the blade through the flesh
Slicing at her subconscious
To skewer fleeting thoughts
The gushing blood becomes ink on her quill
Her breaths become uneven
And as her vision begins to blur,
She proceeds to stain the parchment with writings
Praying that she creates a masterpiece.

Open the Top

By Indica Mosley

twinkles and pings come out of the box
the “golden girl”
watch her give us a twirl
wind the key in her back
she’s crackerjack
ready to be played put on display
wholesome shiny and new the
perfect example of what to do
don’t have sex until you’re grown
if you have a baby, you’re on your own
always scared but mainly smart
counting lifeless lives on exhibit like art
they are examples of what not to do
you can’t hang around them you’ll be like them too
lost
foolish
stranded with no clue
when you play too early you run out of moves

Feminine Taboo

By Jaden Cuti

Not very
 becoming
of a young
lady to voice her
opinions so
 loudly!

How rude of her
to defy sitting
with posture and
politely crossing
her pretty little
ankles.

What audacity
she must have
to grow vast
forests beneath
her arms and
ripe gardens
between her
legs.

Have she no respect for
herself?

Utterly shameful—
to expose the
natural bodies,
temples,
we've been taught
are abominable.

Free Will

By Catherine Boudreaux

You are the
 roots that ground me
 My branches reach toward the sun
 You are there when the work is done
 My leaves quiver in the light of new experience
 You are still there with no difference
 I grow in all contorted directions
 You still hold me like there is no infection
 Infection of indifference, infection of coldness
 Infection of nativity, infection of inconsistency
 The roots that hold me firm
 My apologies for the ways in which my branches grow the way my lips
 make love to a glass of wine sometimes rather than to you.
 I do not mean for them to grow up, further from you
 Notice how they curve down to you, bowing
 My apologies
 for the manner and time and place in which my leaves fall But
 nevertheless there you are
 Under the ground, never asking for redemption, never expecting
 compensation. Inseparable
 You didn't choose for me to grow away from you
 And the people pick fruit from me without plan
 I stand here, my roots lacing through the soil, clinging to my stability
 and sanity and sanctity.
 Don't give me free will, I don't deserve it.

Unwavering
Unfaltering
Undeviating
Unshakable
You

