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VOL. 01

The Hawthorn

Osage High School Anthology of Words & Art

POETRY,
FICTION,
NONFICTION,
DRAMA,
HYBRID
EXPRESSION,
& VISUAL ART

Cover Artist:
Gillian Newell
acrylic

LAKE OZARK, MO

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Delaney Hague
acrylic

Conversation

:: poetry by noah klaus, morgan see, rhys hair

Call me early, talk without worry
Of judgments from strangers who'd
Never listen the way you do.
Vanishing from view, only the
Echo of your voice
Remains. Your presence is
Safety, and I am
Amazed again with the way we
Talk for hours on end.
Intertwined in my mind, but even an
Ocean away, I still think of you
Night and day. ♡



Addie Glover
pen and ink

The Flight

:: fiction by rogan borders

The first flight changed my perspective—I think forever.

People in this town are always so dreary, melancholic, aloof, and any other word in the English language that could be used to describe them as sad. The city itself is not much better; grey buildings drown out any sense of life among the people, plants are few and far, and the only colors present are found in advertisements for new inventions or items: appliances, new clothing, or the latest trends. They portray the smiling customers and the joys of spending money, but everything feels the same, everything feels empty, pointless—which is exactly why I don't understand how people can say they are truly happy here. Despite the gloom that seems to radiate off them like radio waves, most will say they enjoy their life and wouldn't change a thing! I think this is a lie, I can tell by their faces and the way they hesitate when speaking—sometimes.

It's inescapable at school. At least, they used to call them schools (or so my mother says), now they're called "institutions," and strictly that. I don't know why. I didn't think changing the names of buildings was a big deal, but like most things, I'm wrong. My friends tell me the name is more sophisticated and sounds more like they're preparing us for the future. They want to be here; they do not know I don't.

The institution I attend is bland as well, no color, no life, and no fun, which is very disappointing to someone like me, one who wants to actually feel like their own person and have their own goals. We wear matching uniforms: dark grey pants, dress shoes, and a white button-up to finish it off. I don't like the uniforms; I think they're uncomfortable, but dressing any differently will result in being punished. Last year, my friend Eli wore a black shirt instead of white, along with casual shoes. He was suspended for a week and kept in the correction hall. Since then, no one has complained about the uniforms.

The institution also forces us to all think the same and prepare to work in the supreme government, which I have no interest in. It's just different levels of surveillance. I could work in lower-class records, security, or transportation. All of which focus on maintaining the laws of the party throughout the nation. The adults say, "uniformity promotes society." I don't think it makes any sense, but the government really follows this saying. Similarly to the uniforms, breaking any rules or seeming a little out of the norm is questioned or punished. Those who break the laws and rules of society usually disappear, or they're kept in prison forever, like Eli.

I want to go somewhere outside of New Quebec, outside of Canada. I have many destinations in mind: America, Australia, Mexico, all the places that the institution acknowledges, but never really shows or teaches us about, but even having the thought of leaving could get me in trouble. People whisper that the officers can hear traitorous thoughts. It sounds dramatic, but whenever I pass them, I think of how much I love it here, just in case. I'm supposed to like it here, so I do my best to act like it. The thoughts in my mind are almost always traitorous, though. Mainly because I know this new invention will help me reach one of my many destinations, besides, my mother always tells me that whatever I put my mind to, I can accomplish.

Of course, I've only ever tested my invention at night, specifically above the construction site next door to our home where they're building more grey apartments. This was very important. If I attempted to fly during the day, there would be zero doubt that the troopers would catch me and shoot me down. The government does not approve of any unknown inventions, and I just know if they caught wind of me building something to escape the city they so perfectly created, I would be absolutely done for. They'd take me away, or my family, or my friends, who I collected parts from, everyone would be at risk. Keeping everyone equal and somewhat the same is their main goal. Having anything unique would raise suspicion, like my work.

Mechanical wings, that is what I built. They're a backpack-like bag that holds two aluminum wings, similar to a plane. I'm pretty good at mechanics and engineering, so this was easy for me, but of course, it was only easy after waiting months to collect all the parts. But the wait was entirely worth it. Its first flight test was outstanding. I felt like a bird looking at the city from the outside. Soon after, I began to test the wings every other week, completely addicted to the idea that I could use them to travel. Well, I was only testing them until now. This flight isn't a test, this will be the last one, and it will be the best, as I am not returning—at least, hopefully not anytime soon. My idea is becoming my reality.

It's a little past midnight, the sky is clear, and no troopers of the state can be seen in the air. It's the perfect condition to fly. I didn't bring anything with me for fear of it being too heavy since I've only ever flown my own weight. The chilly air brushes against my face as I look down from the steel skeleton of a building at the construction site. The scarce lights of the city below feel like a sea of stars, each glitter of light harboring a small amount of hope.

I take a shaky breath in, then I exhale. If all goes well, I will glide and rise into the air, heading for the horizon. If not, I will be spotted, shot at, and detained, and that will be the end for me. With a hesitant foot out, I step off the ledge of the beam and free-fall. The wings suddenly extend out and catch me on the breeze. I was now airborne, heading south.

I do always feel more like myself up here, in the air, sometimes above the crowds in the evening—which reminds me of ant colonies—befriending the clouds, and soaking in the little time that I get to let my worries and fears go. I prefer the peace and quiet that comes with being in the atmosphere, and I imagine how sad it must be to be stuck on the surface; the people don't even know it's possible to be up here!

Now I don't have that problem, and, hopefully, I won't ever again. Though as I zip through the clouds and breeze, I can stop thinking about my worst-case scenario. Would I suddenly plummet to the ground? Glide back down in the ocean? Or be caught, never to be heard from again? I suppose I am bound to find out at some point. After all, humans aren't meant to have wings, and we all know what happened to Icarus. But surely, I would be just fine. All the time I poured into preparing for this wouldn't be for naught—I am as positive about that as I am that life in the air would be superior to that on the ground.

Hearing the wind and quiet sounds of the machinery on my back does something to soothe me. It's my white noise, similar to a fan or the sound of rain—common sounds that calm most people—but unique to me alone. I want it to stay that way. So, for now, I simply soak it all in. The white, illuminated spots in the sky, the mist of the clouds, the constant hum, and the unavoidable light that's headed right towards me.

I think of my family at home. My mother will wake up to make breakfast for my father and me. At some point, she will see I have disappeared. Father will have left for work already. He won't know until he comes home at night. His lower-class record work takes up all his thoughts. I wonder what they would do, how they would react?

While being deep in thought, the light is the last thing I see before the feeling of dread and reluctant acceptance consumes me.

I suddenly plummet towards the surface of the life I just left. The sounds of a helicopter fill my ears, troopers yell something, and I realize how naive I was to think I could really pull this off. I can't figure out what they say before everything goes black. ♡



Gillian Newell
colored pencil

Luna

:: nonfiction by aala jamieson

When people see me walking my black Lab, Luna, they don't know our story. They see the short leash, the way she stays close to my leg, maybe the way I check the space around us before we pass someone. To them, she's just another dog on a walk. But they don't see the years behind it, the fear, the frustration, and everything it took for us to get here. They don't see that she isn't just my dog. She's the hardest thing I've ever had to learn how to handle.

Luna came into my life when everything was already falling apart. I got her not long after my dad died. The house felt too quiet, like even small sounds echoed longer than they should. I didn't realize how much I needed something to take care of until my mom walked in holding a tiny black puppy. Her paws tapped softly against the floor when she was set down, unsure but curious, like she already belonged there. My mom said I needed a friend. What she really gave me was something to hold onto when I didn't know how to handle anything else.

At first, I thought Luna would be easy. I grew up around Labs—friendly, calm, predictable dogs that fit into life without much effort. I imagined fetch in the yard, quiet nights on the couch, and something that would make things feel normal again.

But Luna wasn't that dog.

Around six months old, something changed. It wasn't gradual; it was like a switch flipped. She became intense, reactive, and unpredictable. Loud noises made her jump. Strangers made her stiffen instantly. If someone moved too quickly or reached toward her, she reacted before thinking.

And I didn't know how to stop it.

There were food issues. Reactions to people that made my stomach drop. Moments where I avoided training because I felt completely lost. I got frustrated. I shut down. I told myself it wasn't that serious when it clearly was. I didn't understand her, and she didn't understand me.

For a while, she wasn't a "good dog." She wasn't a sport dog. She wasn't anything close to what I thought I was getting.

She was a problem I didn't know how to fix.

One moment still stays with me. My cousin was sitting in the living room with us, the TV playing quietly in the background. Luna was lying with her head on my lap, calm enough that I almost

relaxed. Then my cousin shifted his leg.

It was small, barely anything, but Luna snapped awake instantly. Her body locked. A low growl came out before she lunged forward. I grabbed her without thinking, pulling her back just in time. The sudden tension in her body hit me harder than anything else.

Nothing had really happened. And that was the worst part.

That night, I sat beside her crate in the dim light while she lay there quietly, like nothing was wrong. I remember thinking, I don't know how to fix this. Then came the thought I didn't want to admit: What if I can't?

I thought about giving her up more than once. I thought about someone more experienced taking over, someone who wouldn't make the mistakes I was making.

But I never did.

Because I stayed.

Even when she overwhelmed me. Even when I felt like I was failing her. Even when she looked nothing like the dog I thought I would have.

At first, staying didn't make anything easier. She still needed constant management. I used a muzzle in public. I kept her on a short leash. I stayed hyperaware of everything around us,

trying to stay ahead of a world that moved too fast for her.

People stared. Some avoided us. Others judged without knowing anything about her or me.

So I stopped trying to force her into being "easy."

And I started learning *her*.

I learned the small things first—the way her ears changed before she reacted, the tension in her body when she got overwhelmed, the shift in her breathing before she lost control. I learned her triggers: fast movement, pressure, unpredictability. Most importantly, I realized her reactions weren't defiance. They were fear without direction.

So I changed how I handled her.

I stopped reacting late and started stepping in early. I became consistent instead of emotional. I stopped fighting her drive and started working with it. Training became less about forcing obedience and more about timing, awareness, and trust.

Progress didn't happen all at once. Some days felt like improvement. Others felt like starting over. But slowly, things changed.

She started recovering instead of exploding. She started checking in with me instead of shutting down. She started

trusting that I would handle things she used to think she had to manage herself.

Years passed, and Luna changed, but not into something easy.

She's still intense. Still high-drive. Still a dog that can react if too much pressure is stacked at once. She still needs structure, guidance, and awareness every time we're out.

But now she can work.

She can focus in busy places. She can stay engaged through distractions. She can do real obedience, not just basic commands. She's even working toward her BH title, something very uncommon for Labrador Retrievers. Most people don't realize how rare it is to see a Lab in protection sports at all, especially one training for titles normally dominated by breeds like German Shepherds and Malinois. My goal is to take her even further and earn her IGP1 title, which is even rarer for a Lab.

She's becoming my dream sport dog.

Not because she's easy but because she isn't. The moment that made that real didn't happen in training. It happened at a park. I had a frisbee in my hand while my best friend's little brother stood nearby watching us. He kept his distance at first because he was scared of dogs.

I asked if he wanted to throw it.

He hesitated, then nodded.

I handed him the frisbee carefully. Luna stood beside me, watching, not tense, just aware.

He threw it.

Luna sprinted after it, caught it cleanly in the air, and ran back. Instead of stopping at me, she walked up to him and dropped it at his feet, waiting.

Then she looked at him.

And he laughed.

It wasn't loud. It was simple. But it changed the moment.

Because in that second, she wasn't a problem anymore. She wasn't something I was trying to fix. She was just a dog doing exactly what she had learned to do through everything we went through together.

And all of it—the frustration, the doubt, the nights I thought I was failing, led to that.

Luna isn't perfect. She isn't finished. She isn't a dog you can ignore and trust blindly.

But she is mine.

A powerful, driven dog that only works because someone stayed long enough to

truly learn her.

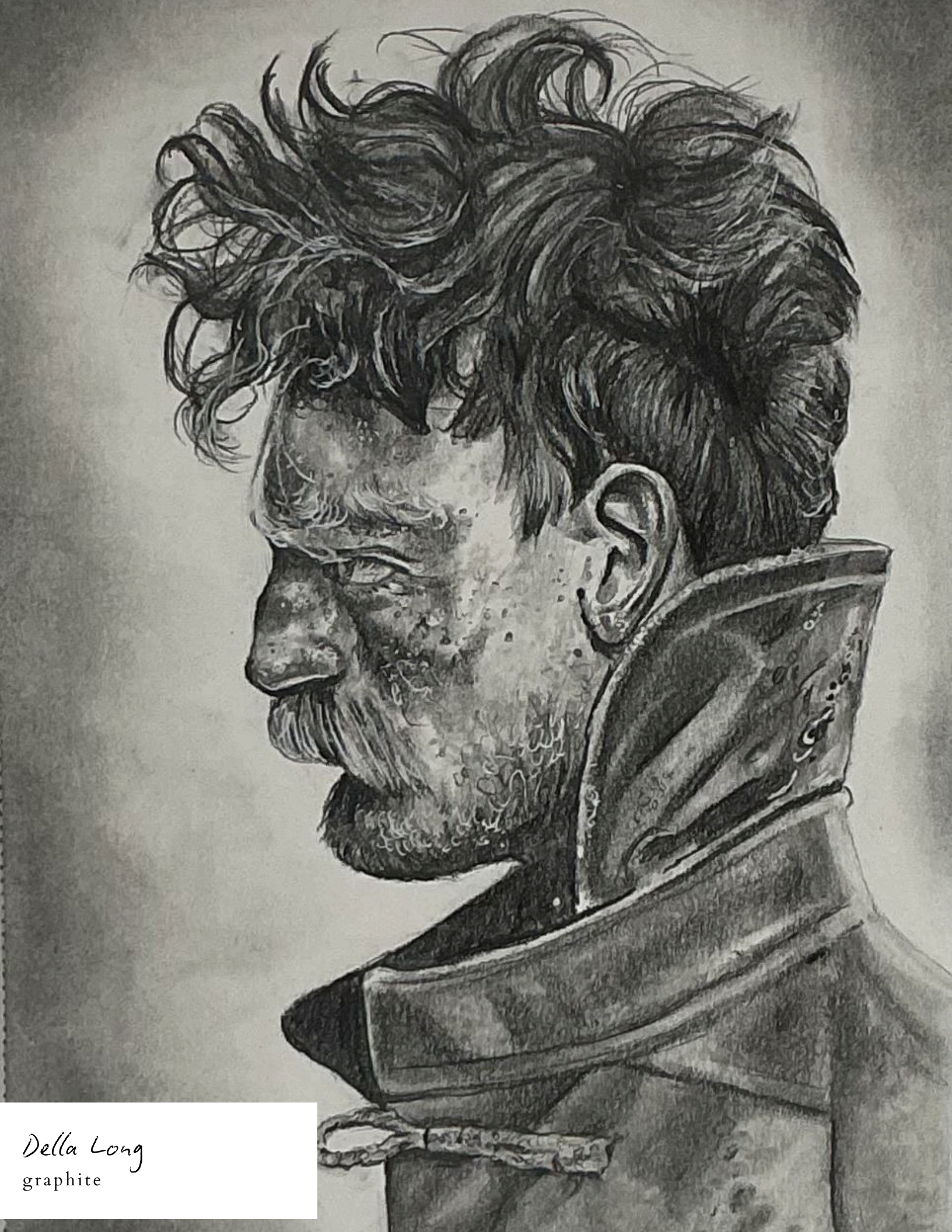
I thought I was trying to save her.

But really, we were saving each other in
different ways.

And now, when I walk beside her and feel
her steady at my side, I don't think
about whom she used to be.

I think about everything it took for both
of us to become this.

And I wouldn't change it. ♡



Della Long
graphite

Monochrome Masterpiece

:: poetry by sarah morgan

On some days, such as this,
there is no lesson to be taught.
The class is filled with silence.
I have this time to myself.

From a large stack in the room,
I take a clean, white piece of paper,
and from a pocket in my bag
I grab a worn yellow pencil.

I sit down at my desk,
and from there, I begin.
Quiet sounds of scribbling are heard
as I sketch lines on a page.

Alone, they look like nonsense,
but together they form ovals and squares
before the geometry is smoothed by lead,
creating the perfect base for me to mold.

From there, I scribble further.
Many shapes, flowing or sharp.
Flipping my pencil over and over,
drawing and erasing, perfecting my lines.

Its beauty is buried in a scribbled mess,
so I erase all that is not needed
and bury the remains in grey,
all different shades and patterns.

What is left is to be refined
to add spots of shine and darkness
while I add more lines on top of what's there,
thickening them with every streak.

By the time I have finished
my hands are covered in graphite
as I look at my monochrome masterpiece,
I feel a sense of pride in my sketch. ♡



Addie Glover
mixed media

Three Monologues

:: monologue by kiaya canfield

#1 - The Pews

Author's note: File redaction = [REDACTED]

Introduction:

Rain poured down in sheets onto the stained glass, casting colorful tears on her body like home. "Welcome, my child." A priest stood in front of the altar. "Have you come to confess?" He eyed the bloody water dripping from her hands.

"I apologize for the mess, Father," [REDACTED] said.

He waved her off. "Don't be. Come, you must have something to confess. Confess."

Monologue:

She didn't move for a moment, then hunched over and placed her head in her hands. "I killed a man just now, and I've killed many before him. Anyone who's made the mistake of [REDACTED] will die by my hands."

And your fear?

"My siblings have made it to Heaven. I see them when I sleep...sometimes. But I fear that because of my crimes, I won't be able to meet them at the gates. Millions upon millions of men and women, all their blood on my hands. I don't regret it, not really. I don't regret that they're dead, but

I regret the consequences, as most people do." His lack of reaction eased her.

What consequences await your actions, my child?

She remained silent for a while. "Hell. It keeps me up at night, but I can't stand by and let these 'things' live. They aren't even worthy of the title 'person'. I wish this world were better than what it is, that there weren't things like them, but it's too late. I signed that contract when I killed for the first time. I don't mind some of the kills; others bother me. I keep thinking, what if I weren't born into this family? What if they never showed what killing was? Would I be different, in a soul sense? I don't like killing, taking a living thing's life. Sometimes I'll see pictures of them when they were little. They seem so innocent."

Mm-hm.

"I constantly wonder what drove them to do what they did, or if they were born with it. I wasn't born with the life plan of a serial killer, but after my family...I didn't know what else to do other than continue their work. They tried to keep me away, keep me distracted, but I remember my eldest brother coming home bleeding. That's when I found out. About all of it."

#2 - Home

Author's note: File redaction = [REDACTED]

Introduction:

Rain poured down in sheets onto the windows, covered by sheer curtains.

“You're still awake?”

Her eldest brother, [REDACTED], stood in the door, soaked to the bone. “Where were you?”

She stared up at him from the couch. “I was worried for you. I thought you got hurt!”

He sat next to her. “I...I did, honey. Care to help me?”

They sat on the couch, the weight of impending responsibility weighing down on her as she started cleaning her brother's wounds.

“What happened?” she asked.

Monologue:

“Well, as you know, your other brothers and sisters have jobs, as do I. We also have other jobs, ones that don't pay us, but ones that are very rewarding.”

Is it dangerous?

“Very, and if we're not careful, we could be arrested. But what we do is very important, especially to keep you safe. You're our top priority, and we'd be

damned to let anything happen to you. You see, there is a very bad disease out there. Some people are born with it; others aren't. But it's very dangerous, and our youngest brother has it. Hence, why he's no longer here. He had given in to the disease and harmed you very badly when you were born, and there are many people like him in this world; boys, girls, men, women, and they all have the same disease. Some of them are victims of the same hurtful actions.”

The same ones Jackie did to me?

“Yes, the exact same. Sometimes, they're complete strangers; other times, it's someone you are supposed to be able to trust. These infected people, whether they act or not, aren't worthy of being alive. And that's saying something with how cruel the world is. So, we refer to them as things, not people. It's our job to kill them. Bruce, Andrew, Britney, Rose, Lily, and I make it our mission to rid the earth of these things, at least the majority of them. A few days ago, I talked to them, and...” he held out a simple knife, and handed it to her, “...we think it's time you join the family business.”

#3 - I Will Make You Proud

Author's note: File redaction = [REDACTED]

Introduction:

It's still light out. She is walking quietly along the alleyways. She's hungry, tired, angry. It's been years since her siblings died, years since she first killed a man, months since she escaped the youngest brother. The youngest brother? Still breathing. She stops at the mouth of an alley, looking in it. A boy, a bit older than her, is being tossed around by a grown woman.

Could [REDACTED] happen to men, too? She didn't move for a moment, watching, waiting. The moment the woman pushed the boy down, she moved...and killed again.

Monologue:

Why did you help me?

She had gotten the boy to safety and was now helping him dress his wounds, just like she'd do with her brothers and sisters.

"Because it's happened to me, too. But I never got saved. Not after they all died."

The boy didn't ask who died, didn't need to. "I was really little when it first happened, and I don't remember it. But my siblings did, and they protected me after it happened. I remember them being there one day, and then them just...not being there. I wasn't home."

The boy nodded along. "The youngest of my brothers had taken me, and I didn't understand what he was doing. I just knew it hurt really badly. I never saw my siblings, not once. Until one day, I got out and..." she didn't finish. "I never really understood why my siblings called the people we kill 'things.' Not until just now."

The boy perked up. *Why now?*

"Well, I thought it could only happen to girls and women. I had never seen or heard of it happening to a man or boy. Not until he took me. I saw it a lot then, heard it, felt it, prevented it. I guess I didn't really believe it until I saw what was happening to you." She takes his hand. "I don't know if it's happened before to you, or if it's happened before, but it won't happen again, promise." She pulled him up, pushing him forward a bit. "You can stay with me for a bit, okay? I'll protect you from those things. I'll kill those things, and I'll make those things go extinct." Once the boy went ahead, she looked up at the sky, praying her sibling could hear her. "I'll make you proud. I promise." ♡



Dagen Borders
mixed media

A Love Story

:: fiction by lillian miller

In a small apartment in California, the sun shines through the windows almost every day. The place is cozy, with light walls, a small kitchen, and a couch that's a little too old but still comfortable. Lacey and Devyn moved in six months ago. They were happy in the beginning. They laughed while cooking together and stayed up late watching movies on the couch.

Lacey worked at a nearby coffee shop. Devyn worked from home, always on his laptop. At first, they made time for each other, but slowly, things started to change. Devyn got busier. Sarah started working longer hours. They barely had time to talk. The apartment began to feel quiet.

One day, Lacey noticed Devyn texting someone a lot. He smiled at his phone, but not at her. She asked who it was, and he just said, "A friend from work." She didn't want to seem jealous, so she let it go. But things kept feeling off.

The apartment still looked the same, but the feeling had changed. Love was still there, maybe, but something else was growing, too. Something secret. Something that could break everything. She started waking up earlier than usual to see if anything was off or different.

Seeing if he was using more cologne than usual or a better one.

The way Devyn started caring more about his clothes—not just throwing on any T-shirt, but choosing outfits. His cologne was stronger now, sharper. He shaved more often. Lacey didn't want to jump to conclusions, but her chest felt heavier every morning, like she was holding her breath without realizing it.

He was still kind. Still asked if she wanted dinner. Still kissed her cheek in the morning. But it was different. It felt like he was reading from a script. Like he was playing a part in a life he didn't want anymore.

One morning, Lacey made coffee and watched him across the room. He was on his phone again, half-smiling, fingers moving quickly. She asked again, quietly like she already knew the answer would be wrong.

"Who are you texting?"

He didn't even look up. "Just someone from work. Stop overreacting, I already told you."

She nodded, pretending it was enough. But it wasn't.

The apartment began to feel like a stranger. The couch they used to cuddle on now just held space between them. The kitchen where they danced while cooking was quiet, too quiet. Devyn worked later into the night, or so he said. Lacey started staying out later after her shifts, just to avoid walking into the silence that now filled their home.

And then one night, it happened.

She got off work early. It was raining lightly, rare for California, and she didn't text him that she was coming. She just wanted to surprise him, maybe cook something together like they used to.

The apartment was dark when she walked in, except for the glow from his laptop. But it wasn't just Devyn there.

A girl sat on the couch, her legs tucked under her, her laugh low and familiar. She wore one of Devyn's hoodies. Their hoodie.

Lacey froze in the doorway. Devyn looked up, panic flashing across his face for the first time in months. Not surprise panic.

"Oh," the girl said, standing quickly. "I should go."

Lacey didn't say anything. She couldn't. Her hands shook, but not from the cold. It felt like her heart had left her chest and was sitting on the floor in front of them. Beating out loud. Exposed.

After the door shut behind the girl, silence fell again.

"Lace," Devyn started, but she raised her hand.

"Don't. Just... don't."

She walked into the kitchen, slowly, touching the counter as if it could steady her. It didn't. Everything felt too loud — the sound of the rain, the clock ticking, even her own breathing.

"How long?" she asked, finally.

Devyn didn't answer right away. That was an answer in itself.

Lacey turned to face him. His eyes looked tired. Guilty. Maybe even sorry. But "sorry" didn't fix anything.

"A few weeks," he said.

Weeks.

All the mornings he had left early. The late-night showers. The change in cologne. The texts. The smiles meant for someone else. All of it rushed in like a wave that didn't stop crashing.

"Why?" she asked, voice smaller now.

"I don't know," he said. "It just... happened."

She nodded. Of course, it "just happened."

But love doesn't just happen. And it doesn't just disappear.

Lacey slept on the couch that night, even though it hurt more than the bed would have. She stared at the ceiling for hours, listening to the rain. The sound used to make her feel calm. Now it just felt like everything was leaking—her trust, her hope, her plans.

The apartment, once their safe place, now felt like a box holding all the lies she hadn't seen.

The next morning, she packed a small bag. Not everything, just enough. She didn't want to fight, didn't want to yell. She just wanted out.

Devyn stood by the door as she slipped on her shoes.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

She looked at him and realized she didn't recognize him anymore.

"I loved you," she said. "I would've stayed through anything. But you didn't even give me a chance."

Then she left.

Outside, the California sun had returned, bold and bright like nothing had happened. The city kept moving. People kept walking. But inside her, something had broken wide open. Not just because he cheated, but because he lied while

holding her hand. Because he smiled while breaking her heart.

Lacey didn't know what would come next. A new apartment, maybe. A couch that didn't remind her of stolen kisses and a stolen heart. A place where the walls didn't echo with old promises, laughter, and love.

But she did know one thing: she would heal.

Not all at once, and not easily. Healing wasn't some sunrise moment where everything suddenly felt okay. It was slower than that, like a bruise fading, like the way rain stops but leaves the earth damp for days.

The first week away from the apartment felt like floating. She stayed with a friend across town, sleeping on a futon in a small guest room that smelled like lavender and dust. She kept waking up too early, heart racing, forgetting where she was. Every time her phone buzzed, a part of her hoped it was him. Not because she wanted to go back, but because she wanted him to fight for her. To say it was a mistake. To say he missed her.

He didn't.

And that was another kind of answer. She deleted his number, but not the texts, not yet. Sometimes she scrolled through the old messages like they were museum pieces from a different life. A life where they joked about getting a dog, argued about pizza toppings, whispered

goodnight even from the other room, just to hear each other say it back. That version of them felt like a dream she'd woken up from too late.

Lacey went back to work after three days. The regulars at the coffee shop didn't notice anything was wrong. She still smiled, still asked about their kids, still remembered their complicated orders. But inside, she felt like a cracked mug being passed off as whole. Functional, but not the same.

Sometimes, during her break, she'd sit on the back step with her coffee and let the quiet settle around her. It was a different kind of quiet now. Not the tense silence of the apartment she'd left behind, but a stillness that asked nothing of her. A space to just be.

One evening, after her shift, she walked past a furniture shop and paused in front of a window. A mustard-yellow couch sat in the display — small, firm, and nothing like the sagging gray one she and Devyn used to nap on. She didn't go in. Not yet. But she smiled at it. Just a little.

It took time before she could talk about it. At first, her friends didn't push — they just showed up. With takeout, bad movies, and warm silence. When she finally told them, she didn't cry. She thought she might, but instead the words came out steady, like she'd already cried everything out in the nights she spent staring at the ceiling.

They told her she was strong. That she deserved better. That he didn't know what he was giving up.

Maybe they were right. Maybe not. It didn't matter anymore.

Weeks passed. The texts stopped coming. The ache didn't. But it changed. Became less sharp. Less urgent.

She started doing small things just for herself again and painted her nails in a color she used to love. Took herself to brunch. Went to the beach alone and stayed until sunset, just watching the waves and letting herself feel whatever came up.

One day, she passed by a bookstore and went in. She hadn't read in months, not really. She wandered the aisles and picked a book with a quiet, pretty cover.

Something about healing after heartbreak. It felt on-the-nose, but she bought it anyway.

That night, she curled up in bed with the book and a cup of tea. Her new bed. In her new room. It wasn't home yet, not quite, but it was hers. No ghosts in the closet. No echoes of footsteps that no longer came.

As she read, she underlined a sentence: "Sometimes, the person who breaks your heart also sets you free." She closed the book and let the words sit.

Maybe Devyn had loved her. Maybe he hadn't. Maybe both were true in different ways. But what mattered now was that she was finding herself again, not as someone's girlfriend, not as someone holding on, but as someone learning to let go.

Not to forget.

But to forgive herself for staying when it was already ending. For hoping when the signs were there. For loving him with her whole heart, even when his was drifting away.

Lacey didn't have all the answers. She didn't know when the ache would fully leave. Or if it ever would.

But she knew this: She wasn't broken. She wasn't unlovable.

And this, this moment, this pain, this new beginning, would not be the end of her story.

It was just the start of another chapter.

And this time, she'd write it all herself. ♡



Reagan Borgia
watercolor

Music on the Field

:: poetry by aerial baker

I stand still,
as still as I humanly can.
My heart beats on the downbeats
of the metronome in my head.

Hundreds of eyes
all looking at one thing—
us placed on the field.

We all break off
to our designated dots,
fingers moving
to the memorized notes.

My heart races with adrenaline.
The big moment is ahead.

I give it my all,
air flowing through my horn.

Then it's done.
The crowd stands high,
applause filling the air

My heart hangs high.
Oh, how I love this band. ♪



Peyton Gilleland
mixed media

The Ruins of the Forgotten Castle

:: fiction by brayden yeakle

The year was 1292. I was younger and a rising adventurer. Being only in my twenties, I had advantages over others because I was so much younger than they were.

I'd learn this comes with a downside, though.

I was informed of a castle far from the village, left to rot after the king went mad seeking a power he couldn't obtain. Many warned me not to go there, but my ego said otherwise.

To me, collecting the king's crown was far more valuable than anything else. Warned of the skeleton army cursed to defend the place even after death, I came with a few survival supplies—bandages, materials to start a campfire, and a Portal Rune to return. I was armed with a flanged mace and buckler, simple tools, but strong against the skeletons I was warned about. It wasn't much, but I figured I was resourceful enough to manage.

Arriving at the castle at midnight, I entered through a drawbridge that oddly could be lowered from the outside and entered. I was greeted by crows that flew away, and the area I entered resembled a graveyard. Many stone coffins were enclosed by a metal gate. I stepped across a

few of the coffins and spotted one separate from the rest. This one was gilded and was inside a small, protected stone building. I was there for the king's crown, but who said I couldn't get a few goodies on my way? I approached the royal coffin slowly, eventually making my way to it. I opened it, bracing for the worst, but it was empty. I should have figured looters would have been here by now. After all, the place is very old, and this is right on the edge. This thought only encouraged me to go further in. The further I went in, the fewer people I could tell had been there. On my way, I even picked up a few silver chalices, not in terrible condition.

Running into my first skeleton went as expected. It only took two hits for it to fall back down. Even their bones weaken with age. The deeper I got into this place, the more I realized how large it truly was, larger than any castle I'd been to. Not to mention that some areas of the castle were basically little forests within it.

However, even within those little forests, it was quiet. Too quiet. No bugs, birds, no signs of life at all. It also felt like I was being watched. I shook it off as paranoia.

I eventually got to places that no one had been to, and at this point, I began to notice that even with the full moon, it was

getting darker. In the moment, I shook it off as the darkness was only slight.

Eventually, I made it into a room far different from the others. This one was much larger, almost like a royal building within the castle. Off to the left in the wall was a small door-shaped portcullis that looked like a staircase down. I paid no mind to it.

I walked into the building, and it was clear the place had royal ties. I figured this would have been the best place to find the crown I came here for. There were paintings on the walls of presumably the king that had their face torn out; clearly, even after the king's fall, people had been here for a while after.

I made it to what I presumed was the king's quarters, and only the throne remained.

"Should have figured they'd taken it," I thought out loud. I proceeded to turn around and walk out of the building. As I was on my way, I heard what sounded like a clock tower bell ringing. That was the only sound I heard the entire time, except for my own footsteps and the occasional skeleton.

I rushed outside, and it was much darker than it was last time. I looked up in the sky to notice a dark veil covering the castle like a dome, and a midnight purple-like mist coming from the ground. I needed to leave fast, but the veil was closing faster. I went forward a bit and accidentally

stepped on the purple mist coming from the ground. It burned like I stepped on a fire, taking me back, making me stumble.

I didn't have time to activate my portal rune, and I wouldn't even have been able to see it well enough. I weighed my options. As I looked around, not sure what to do, I noticed the portcullis from earlier had a red torch lighting it up, providing light in the darkness. I ran towards it, lifting up the heavy gate and going down the stairs, walking backward as the bell rang again. The darkness covered everything outside the gate and even seeped into the stairs somewhat. I quickly backed off and ran down the stairs into a lower part of the castle...

The Crypts

I got down to the bottom of the stairs. I hadn't heard of this place. I don't think anyone knew about it. It was almost like a castle made underground, but the coffins around me and the human bones and skulls said this place was a burial site. The room clearly showed even more signs of age than the first floor, but the torches on the wall were still lit.

By now, I'd figured I should use the portal rune and leave. However, I was naive, and I wanted to explore what hadn't been found, as the glory and fame it would bring me would be immense. So I decided against it—fame was far more worth it. As I traveled the hallways, the eeriness of this place was getting to me. Most of the time,

I wasn't ever scared. But with every skull I stepped on or over, it felt more peculiar. I knew the castle was odd, but I kept wondering, *How can this many have died?*

I brushed this question off, replacing it with thoughts like *This castle is old. I'm sure many people have lived here at some time.*

But something still felt off. What happened on the first floor to begin with? I soon made it to a library. There were floating books with a blue energy flowing through the air, seemingly lifting them. The room was square-shaped with a few doors in and out, but a book with a large white cover on it caught my attention.

I approached the book and lifted it. It was different from any of the books there. It was damned to catch my attention. Opening the cover, I was greeted by the title of the book: *The Chronicles of the Cursed Crown*. I sifted through the pages; the book showed age but no deterioration. It detailed the altruistic king and how his ambitions went dark as he became obsessed with immortality. He sought the Midnight Stag, hoping to gain demi-god-like powers. It also detailed the king's former court wizard, Toz. Talking about how he delved deep into the dark arts to try and satisfy the king, but only ended up dead, soon before the king. The end of the book said one simple line:

Death comes for us all one day. Is today that day?

I set the book down. I still wanted the crown, but this book alone explained everything. The skeletons and remains from Toz's dark magic, and the curse, an aftereffect of hunting the Stag. I'd only heard of it as a myth, but this place proved it was true.

I thought of leaving the crown then. At the time, I felt as if I'd lose all my reputation if I left without what I promised. But then I thought of the king, and how his quest for what is difficult to obtain got him killed.

But my naivety got the best of me.

I continued on, with the story stuck to my mind. It gave me an uneasy feeling like no other place I'd been. No other place had this type of atmosphere, and at that time, I'd already been in many places. None of the rooms were too much, many coffins and some memorials to past adventures. For the amount of remains here, there's surprisingly no living skeletons like up top.

After a while, I considered this pointless and that I should go back. But I ran into a room, much like the one up top. Royal, clearly. I figured this would be my best bet to find the crown if it was even here.

I stepped into the hallway and saw the throne ahead. This time, there was a body, more like a skeleton. I instantly recognized it by its outfit and, most importantly, the crown on top of its head. I quickly moved

towards it. As I reached for the crown, its honey hand stuck out and stopped my wrist, scaring me. I stepped back, and it said to me, desperate, "Destroy the crown... release me."

I thought about it. Could I really leave his soul stuck?

Morality won the debate as I took the crown and threw it against the ground. The crown shattered, and a blue light shot up and out of it. The skeleton of the king fell apart.

I decided I didn't want to be there much longer. I set up the portal rune and left. I arrived home, thinking about what had happened. Clearly, the king got immortality, but no eternal youth. Seems "death" had come for him that day. ♡



Layla Follett
charcoal

Untitled

:: poetry by nathen groll, gio mckenna, anthony sasser

When we travel
in light or dark,
the one to find us,
help guide us

on the path
through which we go,
hold onto us
eternally through life,
remember our
soul.

We seek those
encounters, which we enjoy

finding thee,
individuals that
nourish us and
direct us to the dark into the

light, which we seek
in others, we find through
God, who gives us
His light
to give to others. ✨



Benny Hess
mixed media

Infection of the World

:: fiction by ellie ash

Life was good. Life was normal. Being nineteen was hard, but I was thriving until August 4th.

That day was too quiet. Shivers traveled down my neck as I walked out on the hot evening, not a single person in sight. Walking over to Mrs. Grettle's house, a horrid smell hit my nose, as if an animal had rotted. This was especially strange because even though she was 80, Mrs. Grettle was always a clean person. Stepping inside the already-open door, I spotted her cat, Mittens, hiding underneath the shoe rack.

Hey, Mittens, why are you so scared under there?" I knelt down, but she quickly moved away with a terrified meow. I slowly walked into the kitchen. Nothing. I made my way towards the quiet static coming from the living area and there she was, sitting in her rocking chair in front of the TV like usual, but she was eerily still.

Hey, Mrs. Grettle, are you awake?"

No response. I tried again. No response.

When I got closer, the sound of her raspy breath froze me in place. Her hand began twitching. Then her head twisted all the way around, and a piercing screech tore through her throat. I was locked in place,

frozen in fear, just like Mittens. After a second of gathering myself, I sprinted out and across the street. From afar, my enemy and neighbor, Jake, watched me with a concerned look, but I was too scared to notice him.

I ran through my house, locking every door and window behind me. When I looked out the kitchen window, I noticed emptiness, silence. A normal day was loud and crowded. When I peered into some of my neighbors' houses, I saw small, unnatural movements, just like Grettle.

Then I understood why it was so empty on the streets. Everyone who lived in this city had turned into monsters, and I was the only one left not touched by this infection.

Months had gone by, and I truly thought I was the only survivor of this infection. The empty streets were littered with shattered store windows and rusted old cars with dead, bloodied bodies. For weeks, there was no real human interaction. It was peaceful at first, but quickly lonely, isolating. This became my new day-to-day life. Sitting in my dark, quiet place, alone and isolated, because everyone I ever knew and loved was gone. Taken over by this virus that ruined the world.

It was a normal Thursday afternoon, gun at my side, patrolling my small base, when I saw someone. It was a person, but not infected. A normal person. I raised my gun carefully, but then I heard his voice. The voice that teased me all through middle school. The voice that tormented me through high school. That voice belonged to Jake. His soft blue eyes met my piercing hazel ones. He raised his hands with a smug look as he approached.

"You're alive?" I asked, a hint of confusion, anger, and relief in my voice.

"Best believe it."

"Where did you even come from?
Everyone is infected."

"I have my ways." A smirk spread across his face as he lowered his hands into his pockets. "Why don't you put the gun down?"

"Prove to me you're not infected, and tell me why you show up now and not months ago."

Jake rolled his sleeves up slowly, revealing his bite-free arms. "Is this enough for you, princess?"

"I told you not to call me that years ago, and where did you come from, where have you been if you've been alive?"

"Somewhere I wouldn't get eaten alive, Danny, but I'm not infected so just let me in will you." It was obvious he was hiding where he had been staying, like he was embarrassed to tell me.

There was a loud, sudden screech that came from the forest, causing both of us to flinch.

"Danny, let me in! Please, I swear I'm safe."

"Fine. Open the door and get in quickly."

He shoved the door open and locked it. Jake took a few steps before adjusting his eyes to the darkness of the room. He saw scattered weapons ready to be used in case of emergencies, in case a zombie got in. Jake knew I was ready. I was prepared for anything, and I didn't care to decorate pretty. It was life or death, so best be prepared than worry about decoration.

My gun raised as I approached him, and he backed up, hands in the air, breathing heavily from adrenaline.

"Danny, come on. That's not necessary. You know I'm fine, see?" He lifted up his sleeve for a second time to show he'd never been bitten. I saw other scars, but they seemed to be from fights.

"Toss all your weapons over to me. I've never trusted you—and I never fully will." Jake complied, sliding his guns and knife to me, which I picked up and pocketed. "What do you plan on doing now that you're here, Jake?"

"Well, dearest Danny, I was hoping to at least crash here, if you'll let me."

"Where have you even been staying for

months?”

For the first time since finding me, Jake looked nervous. Almost embarrassed.

“Just the woods, or any place that wasn’t zombie-infested.” He shrugged like it almost didn’t bother him, but I could tell it did. “Can I just stay, at least tonight.... please”

“Fine, just don’t touch anything, and stay out of my stuff.”

“You got it, princess,” he said, hiding a smirk as he plopped on the couch nearby.

Later that night, as I walked past the couch, I saw him asleep with a troubled look. As I got closer, a pit formed in the bottom of my stomach. Half-hidden beneath the collar of his shirt was a deep bite mark, sunken into his shoulder.

He lied.

The veins webbed around his wound. Dark bruising covered most of his shoulder.

He wasn’t free of bites.

I grabbed the small handgun that was at my side and raised it, pointing at him, but something in me stopped from shooting.

Jake's eyes snapped open, and his breath stopped. “W...what are you doing, Danny? I thought.....I thought we were cool.”

You lied to me, about not having been bit but you have a mark on your shoulder.”

“I can explain. Just put the gun down,” he whispered, breath shaky.

“I’ll put it down when you give me a perfect reason not to kill you here and now.”

“Okay...okay...yes, I was bitten, but it was before she was turned completely. My sister started to turn into one of them, and she attacked me. And yes, she bit me, but it didn’t do anything because she wasn’t fully a zombie. This was two months ago, I swear.”

Looking into his blue eyes, I saw deep and genuine sadness that made me want to believe him.

He saw unsure doubt in my cold eyes.

I knew he cared deeply about his sister, which must have hurt him to lose her. I lowered the gun, taking my finger off the trigger.

“I’ll believe you for now, but tomorrow, I’m leaving and getting out of this place, so you either get your crap packed or you stay.”

The next morning came quickly. I grabbed the essentials I needed, and I walked away from my not-so-much-anymore home.

“Danny, you shouldn’t go by yourself. It’s crazy out there, there are thousands, millions maybe of those zombies out there.”

“Then I guess you'd better come along, Jake... if you really wanna protect me that badly.”

With a smirk, he slung his bag over his shoulder. Jake followed behind me as we disappeared beyond the city, heading towards whatever awaited us next. ♡



Grace Vogeler
oil pastels

Thank You

:: poetry by mykenzee fredrickson

One

You found me
when life was heavy,
when the days dragged

and somehow
you made me laugh again.

You remind me
that joy is not something to feel guilty about,
that even in hard seasons
people are still allowed to smile.

So promise me this:
crack your jokes
speak your mind

tell yourself
It's going to be okay, even before you believe it.
Keep an eye on Dani, too,
not because she's broken,
but because everyone needs something
to pull them back to Earth sometimes.

And please,
don't hide yourself away.
Go make memories
before the world turns into schedules and
deadlines,
into chains around your time.

You are going to do great things
I know it.

So keep laughing,
keep living loudly,
and keep becoming
the person you're meant to be. ♡

Two

You are sunlight,
one of the brightest spots
the universe could have made.

I have never known someone
so full of life
so quick to care
so easy to love.

So hear me when I say this:
You are strong.
You are wanted here.
You are deeply cared for.

Take up space.
Be louder in conversation.
Dance without shame.
Laugh with your whole chest
and never, ever stop being
exactly who you are. ♡

Three

You listen
like the world isn't rushing
like every word matters.

That's my favorite thing about you,
the way you make people feel understood
like their hearts are safe in your hands.

Meeting you this year
made me less invisible,
but I hope you know
you are seen too.

Seen in the kindness
you give so freely.
In the way you stay for people
even when life's too much.

Next year,
I hope you choose happiness
without guilt,
without
fear.
I hope you run toward things
that make your world feel free.

So show up for yourself.
Keep going,
even on the days
you don't want to.

Fill your senior year with
moments worth remembering—
late laughs, warm nights, and hallway conversations,
and every little moment
that will one day become precious. ♡



Gillian Newell
acrylic

Addiction Won

:: nonfiction by alaina dittmar

Some may say they are a victim of addiction, but I am not a victim; I'm just simply someone shaped by it. I used to come up with excuses for why my mother was absent until one day I realized my role was not to stand up for her. It was to stand up for myself. My role was to embrace what happened, and instead of letting it burn me, I found something beautiful in the flames.

The truth is that my mother chose addiction over me. I try to sympathize with the fact that she is only human and needs the necessities every other human needs and deserves.

It feels like betrayal every time I say the sentence, "My mother is an addict." She is the woman who carried me for nine months. The woman who dreamed of having a beautiful life with her family.

But somewhere along the line, drugs seemed like a fun, less stressful trip. It didn't just take her time or steal her presence—it took the mother who was supposed to teach me how to cook or bake. How to tie my shoes and match my clothes. How to be a girl and how to become a woman. It took the best friend I never got to have. The person I could ask the questions that my dad didn't have the answers to.

Instead, I was taught things through this experience. I learned to try to make an impact because you may only have a short amount of time. I learned how to accept someone who is disappearing.

Some say they learned to stand tall and know when to hold a grudge. But I never could accept that what my mom did to me was wrong—I allow people to walk all over me, I am a pushover, I let anyone and everyone in my life. I'm afraid people will leave.

But why I do that is because I see through the bad things. I see the things they struggle with, I see their struggles, and I accept them. Because they still need reassurance and love. Most people with absent parents build up walls and only allow in a small number. They hold grudges and don't accept apologies. But I was never that way and never will allow myself now or in the future to be that way.

Some days I'm grateful for her absence. This punishment has taught me more than any other lesson in my life.

For years, I believed she would come back. And for years, I believed that if she came back, I would allow her right back into

my life. I would summarize all the years she missed and accept her apology as if she hadn't chosen to leave me. It took late nights of excuses running through my mind of why she chose drugs for me to finally come to my senses and become the person I am today.

I kept a box of all the things that I wanted to share with her one day. But then I realized she wasn't coming back, and if she did, she would never deserve to see or get to experience any of that with me.

She was given the title "Mother," but never earned the name Mom. She may have gone through the pain of birthing me, but it will never equal the pain I live with from her absence.

Somehow, by the grace of God, when I didn't have a mother to look up to, I was given one anyway. A woman who took the responsibility of building and raising a family when she didn't have to, but chose to.

She took the time to get to know me and the things that make me, me. She stepped into spaces she didn't create. She became my comfort place and the person who taught me to cook and bake. How to match outfits and how to tie my shoes. How to be a girl and become a woman. She answers the questions that my dad doesn't have the answers to. This woman was not only granted the name step-mom, but she earned the title. ♡



Kiaya Canfield
watercolor

Three Poems

:: poetry by reilly abell

A Different Page

I thought my story stopped at fifteen
like a book slammed shut too soon,
a final page folded in on itself,
ink running out of room.

I was sure that was the ending,
chapter 15, the last line, done,
no sequel waiting in the margins,
no rising after what I'd become.

The pages felt too heavy to turn
like they didn't belong in my hands,
like the author had given up on me,
left me out of the plans.

but something quiet kept shifting—
a sentence I didn't expect,
a comma instead of a period,
a pause I couldn't reject,

and the pages, they kept coming,
soft at first, then louder somehow
like a story refusing to finish
just because I didn't know how

chapter sixteen doesn't feel perfect.
It's stumbled, messy, and unclear,
but it's proving there's more to be written
more than that one heavy year.

Now I read back fifteen
like a plot twist I couldn't see,
not the end of the whole story,
just a chapter that shaped me,

and maybe the book isn't easy,
maybe some lines still feel too long,
but I'm still here, turning pages,
and the story keeps moving on. ♡

In the Hands of Nature

I don't pray in churches
or kneel beneath painted glass
because peace never found me there.

I found it in the woods
where the trees whispered instead of judged,
where the wind wrapped around me like it always knew my name.

Mother Gaia became my religion without ever asking me to believe.
She didn't force it onto me or tell me I had to love her or else I wouldn't be forgiven.
She made sure every day that I knew she was still there when I needed her, and healed
me slowly
through cold rivers on summer nights,
through flowers growing on broken ground like myself,
through sunsets that proved endings could still be beautiful.

When the world felt loud and cruel, Nature stayed soft.
The stars stayed awake with me and listened better than people ever did,
and the moon reminded me that it's okay to disappear sometimes and still come back
whole.
The soil beneath me caught my tears, and the wind fixed my hair.
The earth held me together when I felt like falling apart.

I think that's why I trust the forest more than anything man-made,
Because Nature never wanted perfection from me.
It just wanted me alive.

Children of our Mother aren't harsh either. They help you connect without forcing you.
They show you that you can heal without blood-stained knees.
They don't tell you you're not enough just because you made a mistake.
You don't have to prove you're worthy. Mother Gaia isn't hard to please.

And maybe that's what healing is—
letting the rain seep into my broken pieces,
and allowing vines to braid my wounds into a flower crown,
and then finally realizing I belong here, too,
in the hands of Mother Gaia. ♡

Dreaming with My Eyes Open

My mind is never really here,
even in classrooms where pencils tap against desks
and teachers keep talking,
I drift somewhere else without even noticing.

Sometimes I build entire worlds inside my head,
places softer than this one,
where nobody misunderstands me, and nothing is too heavy to carry because gravity
doesn't exist where I go.

People tell me I daydream too much,
like it's something broken inside me.
Maybe they are right sometimes,
maybe I miss too many moments,
stare out too many windows instead of paying attention.

But daydreaming feels safer than reality ever has
because in my mind, I can turn lonely afternoons into adventures,
turn random strangers into soulmates,
and ordinary skies into galaxies meant just for me.

When life gets too loud, my thoughts become a hiding place.
I disappear into them quietly, like stepping into another dimension,
somewhere my heart can finally breathe, somewhere I can be me and free.

Sometimes I imagine the person I'll become someday:
someone adventurous and glowing
someone who knows exactly where she belongs,
and even if none of it is real yet, just thinking about it keeps me going.

I know escaping too much is dangerous.
I know there are moments I should probably tap in and pay attention.
But the truth is, my imagination saved me more times than people ever did.

So if you catch me staring at the sky like I'm searching for something or someone,
I probably am.
Maybe I'm trying to find pieces of myself hidden somewhere between the clouds. ♡



Bryson Kidd
watercolor

Frostbitten

:: fiction by rhys hair

The Forge isn't a place Erynn visits often.

It's too hot, and it's usually crowded. Around twenty people a day stand outside the door in an attempt to catch even a hint of warmth, a warmth that's much more pleasant outside the Forge than it is inside. Inside, the hearth's heat is blistering. Anything inherently flammable is banned from entering for fear of a fire hazard.

He sidesteps a group of people slouched in the hall outside the Forge. He narrows his eyes at the closed doors. He can already feel the unbearable heat, and he cringes at the idea of it getting hotter.

He pushes open the door, which is as heavy as it looks. It takes a bit of effort to get it open enough to pass through. As soon as he steps inside, it slams shut with a BANG! Erynn pretends he didn't flinch.

The Forge has an uneasy atmosphere. The ominous sound of a hammer striking metal doesn't help. At the other end of the room, the Samadhi Fire blazes in the hearth, and a familiar blonde uses a hammer to flatten a heated blade.

Using the Samadhi Fire as a power source was a smart decision at the time. An inextinguishable flame that infuses the weapons it creates with fire magic, it's still

the only weapon the Compound has against demon attacks. The only downside to it is that there are exactly two people who can withstand the heat of the Samadhi Fire. Only one of them is both experienced in blacksmithing *and* willing to sweat for hours at a time.

Erynn steps into his usual persona, then starts toward said blacksmith. "Kiwi!" he calls in greeting, a smirk crossing his face.

The man in question tenses. He hits the blade lying on the anvil before him at an angle. Sparks fly off the heated metal, and he moves back a few steps.

Kuáng Xíng has been obsessed with blacksmithing as long as Erynn has known him. He was once in the Forge for thirty-two hours, and he only emerged at the insistence of Kuaile, the Compound's head cartographer. In Xíng's eyes, being in the Forge is thousands of times better than being in the freeze. Not only can he forge to his heart's content, but he can make himself useful with the weapons he crafts.

Erynn can't see Xíng's face with his back turned to him, but he can hear the impatience in the blacksmith's tone when he demands, "Get out."

"I've got a favor to ask." Erynn continues

forward, stopping only because of the Forge's blistering heat. "Y'know the lake? A buncha people are going missing around the area. I was gonna go up and look around."

Xíng sighs heavily. He turns, then walks across the room, stopping at a barrel of water. He dunks the blade into it. The metal hisses, and steam rises. "Kuaile can help you with that. Get *out*."

Erynn's tone is calm, though condescending when paired with the shit-eating grin on his face. "Kuaile's the one who suggested I come find you."

Xíng doesn't respond.

"He said you should come up with me," Erynn continues. "You need to get out more."

"Erynn."

"His words, not mine."

"Erynn," Xíng *growls*, which is something Erynn hasn't heard in a while. It's enough to startle Erynn back a step. Maybe today really isn't the day to do this.

Erynn scoffs. "Alright, whatever. But you gotta come up with me. Kuaile insisted it be you."

Xíng's more than annoyed that he understands Kuaile's wishes. He and Erynn are efficient. What he doesn't understand is why he put them together. They're

good at what they do when sent on their own. Sending them out together only causes arguments, and it always ends up in one of them getting hurt.

What pisses him off the most is that he knows Erynn will gladly use the opportunity to torment him.

After a minute of silence, Xíng yanks the blade out of the water. It's a sword. The handle has intricate engravings all down its surface, and the base of the blade is branded with Xíng's initials. He looks at the sword for a long moment. Then his shoulders slump in defeat. In a gruff voice, he says, "Give me ten minutes."

* * *

Ten minutes turns into half an hour. They could get there faster if they were able to travel above ground, but with all the recent demon attacks, taking the Tunnels is safer.

The Tunnels are a complex underground maze, dug out over the past half a decade. They cover almost half of China now, thanks to the efforts of the Compound's cartographers and explorers.

By the time they finally emerge from the Tunnels, the sun is already touching the horizon. Xíng estimates they have an hour before they need to start heading back.

Despite the lack of the blizzard, it's still well below freezing. To combat the freezing temperatures, both wear three heavy coats, two pairs of pants, bulky

hiking boots, gloves, and scarves. While Erynn uses his red scarf to cover his face from the nose down, Xíng has a black face mask embroidered with golden patterns. Reinforced snow goggles sit atop his nose, completely covering his eyes and any emotion in them. It makes him look stupid, in Erynn's humble opinion.

The lake stretches out before them, haunting, wide, and white. Erynn narrows his eyes at the surface of it. The lake would be fully frozen through if it weren't right above the Forge. The heat of the Samadhi Fire keeps the entire lake melted, save for a layer of ice that sits on the water's surface. The sheet of ice is thick enough to hold the weight of a few people. At least, that's what they've been told. All they need to do is avoid standing too close together on the ice.

Once they make it close to the lake's shore, Xíng stops. He kneels, then pushes the snow off a small black object. He holds it up for Erynn to examine.

Erynn whistles lowly. "Haven't seen a lantern in weeks. Does it work?"

Xíng feels along the bottom of the lantern. He flips a switch, and it flickers on. Erynn makes a "huh" sound as Xíng shuts it off. He sets the lantern back on the ground. "This is one of a pair," Xíng says. "We should look for the second one."

"Oh, hey."

Xíng turns his attention back to Erynn,

who's kneeling several feet behind him.

Erynn holds up a white beanie. "It's got A.C. embroidered on the inside."

Xíng straightens. "Ao Chen?"

Erynn clicks his tongue. "It's gotta be."

"His wife and daughter arrived at the Compound two days ago."

Erynn stares at the beanie a moment longer. "Poor kid."

They fall silent as they uncover more items in the snow. Shoes, half-eaten rations, jewelry, gloves, backpacks still full of supplies—Xíng takes one of these and slings it over his shoulder—sleds, and sleeping bags. Xíng estimates twenty people's worth of things scattered around, and that's on this side of the lake alone. Erynn begins to move further west, following what he thinks is the lake's shore. He returns to where Xíng is every so often, arms full of even more miscellaneous items. Almost everything has some form of name or initial. Xíng manages to guess most of the names with no help from Erynn, but a few of them go unknown.

They make their way southwest, onto the lake itself. Xíng knows they're literally treading on thin ice, but it doesn't give out. The ice merely groans under their weight. Xíng relaxes slightly. The closer they get to the center, the more items they find. Xíng figures they'll have to get a

recall team to get every item back to the Compound.

As Xíng picks up a stray boot, Erynn breaks the silence. “Still can’t believe you willingly came out here.”

Xíng tosses the boot toward the shore. “I didn’t.”

“You did.” Erynn snickers, slinging a child’s light pink coat over one arm. “With a little nudging. About time you got outta that furnace.”

“If I had the choice, I’d still be in that furnace. With you burning in the hearth.”

“How mature.”

“As if you’re any better.”

“You act as if you’re not taking orders from a kid.”

“Kuaile isn’t a child.”

“You’re thousands of years older than him.”

“I respect his authority. Unlike some people.”

Erynn tosses the coat toward the shore beside the boot. He puts one hand to his chest in offense. “I respect plenty of authority. Just not yours.”

Xíng glares. “I have no authority over

you.”

Erynn tilts his head, a smirk on his face. “I know.”

Rage boils unbidden beneath Xíng’s skin. Erynn hasn’t changed in the slightest since they were kids. The only difference now is that Erynn isn’t pretending to care.

Xíng shouldn’t care, either.

“Speechless?” Erynn remarks. He takes a few steps toward Xíng. “That’s a first.”

“Don’t push it.”

Erynn stops just in front of Xíng. “But it’s so fun.”

“Erynn.”

“Don’t get all crabby at me.”

Xíng almost jumps him. “We need to get back to work,” he says instead.

Erynn opens his mouth to retort, but a sharp CRACK cuts him off.

Both men freeze.

Xíng’s mind races as he stares at the pile. It’s further than he thought. Much further. In fact, they’re not anywhere near the shore.

The ice is too thin.

They’re too close to each other.

“Erynn,” Xíng says before he realizes, stepping back. “Get off the—!”

The ice shatters underneath Erynn’s feet, and the lake swallows him whole.

Xíng loses his footing on the ice, and he slips, falling hard onto his back. The wind gets knocked from his lungs. He gasps for breath as he uses his feet to scramble away from the still crackling ice.

For a while, Xíng stares at the hole. Erynn won’t last. He’s wearing too many layers, the water is too cold, and he’ll probably use all of his strength within minutes. If Xíng doesn’t save him now, he won’t make it.

Still, he hesitates.

So many of his problems would disappear if Erynn drowned here.

It would be so easy to leave him for dead.

Slowly, Xíng moves further from the hole. When he’s far enough from it, he stands.

Erynn deserves this, he tells himself.

He doesn’t believe it.

* * *

Cold jolts through Erynn’s body, and it feels as if he’s been hit by a train. He tries to prevent the gasp reflex, but he fails. The filthy, frigid water stings his throat, until it’s raw. It brings with it the urge to vomit. He opens his eyes to look around,

but the water burns. He can only keep them open for a second before he clenches them shut.

All training on what to do in this situation escapes him, and he starts thrashing. He reaches out for something—*anything*—but he only grasps open water. He can’t tell how deep he is. His heart races more frantically than his limbs move. He can’t tell if he’s going up or down or left or right. He stupidly tries to scream, but he only inhales more water.

He fumbles with the front of his coat in a futile attempt to get it off. Maybe if he weighs less, he can try to swim to the surface. But his fingers have gone numb. He can’t even feel the material of his coat.

In an attempt to find an exit, he opens his eyes again. The murky gray water stings and is hard to see through, but he catches a glimpse of fading sunlight. It’s not that far. He can make it.

He shuts his eyes again, then kicks toward it with all his remaining strength, hand outstretched. His fingertips brush over something smooth, but it’s not ice. He forces his eyes open for just a second, and he makes out the shape of a lantern in the darkness, identical to the one Xíng pulled out of the snow. Erynn briefly wonders how the hell it still has fuel after presumably weeks of being left on.

That quickly becomes the least of his concerns when he meets the eyes of the corpse it’s attached to.

Erynn chokes on more water, kicks away from the body, then clenches his eyes shut again. Those lifeless eyes engrave themselves into Erynn's mind, and he feels so much more suffocated. That's Ao Chen. Dead. How long has he been dead? How much did he suffer before succumbing to the lake? He has a wife and daughter. No, he had a wife and daughter. They're holding out hope that he's still alive at the Compound.

Poor kid.

It's then that he notices the water is getting warmer. The deeper he sinks, the more the biting cold fades. He allows the water to take him deeper. He follows that false comfort, his consciousness fading. His limbs feel heavy. He's thoroughly soaked and chilled to the bone.

The fight leaves him.

As soon as Erynn accepts the comfort of the cold, an arm wraps around his midsection. His body is so frigid, the arm feels as if it's burning him. The weight of his outermost coat disappears, and he's yanked upwards.

A new wave of cold slams into Erynn. He suddenly yearns to be deeper in the lake, to be embraced by that warmth. He tries to let himself sink again, but he realizes he's not sinking. He's lying on solid ground. Someone is speaking. He feels nothing for a moment, then the lake water forces its way out of his lungs.

His eyes snap open as he gasps for air, then breaks into a violent coughing fit. He sits up quickly, clutching the base of his throat. He hacks up lake water, his body trembling. His head throbs. He hears words, but he can't discern what's being said. The image of that body below the ice claws its way into his mind. His stomach convulses, and he actually vomits. His chest heaves with every heavy breath.

A burning hand is placed on his back. "Breathe," someone commands. Erynn knows exactly who it is before he looks up to meet their eyes.

Xíng's face mask and goggles are gone. Erynn notes the goggles off to the side, but his face mask is completely missing. Erynn's scarf had been pulled off his neck. It's on the ground beside Xíng's goggles. Xíng's hair and clothes are soaked, and he's shaking. His expression holds more genuine concern than Erynn is prepared for.

The idiot actually saved him.

"S-sure took your... sweet time," Erynn forces out.

"Stop talking," Xíng states. Erynn chooses not to notice the tremble in his voice.

"Don't t-tell me what to do." Erynn's voice is trembling, too.

Xíng ignores the snark. He presses his hand to Erynn's forehead. It doesn't burn

as much as it did underwater, but Erynn still winces. “You’re freezing.”

Erynn raises a trembling finger toward the hole in the ice. It’s already freezing back over. “F-found Chen. Prob’ly others.”

Xíng follows Erynn’s gaze. If he realizes what he means, he doesn’t show it. Instead, he digs through the backpack he’d taken earlier. He pulls out a wool blanket, then lifts Erynn to wrap it around him. Erynn doesn’t fight. He lifts Erynn into his arms, and he slumps against Xíng’s chest. He almost has the energy to be surprised when he hears how fast Xíng’s heart is beating.

Xíng stands slowly. “Stay awake,” he commands, the trembling in his voice clearer now. “The last thing we need is you dying.”

Erynn breathes out a laugh. “Knew ya cared.”

“I don’t,” Xíng insists, but he’s running, snow crunching underneath his boots. He holds onto Erynn as if he’ll break.

Xíng shouldn’t care. But he does.

He always has. ♡



Layla Follett
watercolor

Three Poems

:: poetry by callie taylor

Seasons Don't Stay

It's strange how people leave.
Not always with goodbyes,
not always with reasons you understand.

One day they're right
beside you,
laughing until your stomach hurts,
the next, they're just a memory
you didn't know you were making.

Friendship feels permanent
when you're in it.
Like summer,
warm, endless,
untouchable.

But seasons don't stay.

Fall comes quietly.
Texts get shorter.
Plans fall through.
You start noticing
you're the only one trying.

And you wonder
when it changed.

Winter is the hardest.
Silence where there used to be noise.
Inside jokes with no one to tell them to.
Memories that feel heavier
than they should.

You replay everything.
Every laugh,
every secret,
every moment you thought
would last longer.

You ask yourself
if you did something wrong.

Spring shows up slowly.
New faces.
New conversations.
Smiles that don't feel forced.

It's not the same,
it never is,
but it's something.

And maybe that's the point.

People come and go
like the seasons,
changing you
without asking permission.

Some stay longer.
Some barely pass through.
But all of them
leave something behind.

A lesson.
A memory.
A version of you
that didn't exist before.

It still hurts sometimes,
missing people
who are still alive.

But you learn
not everything is meant to last forever.

And that doesn't make it meaningless. ♡

The Space Between

I hate feeling like the back up friend.
The one who waits quietly in the
background,
hovering just outside the frame.

It's not that you're invisible,
they see you.
They just don't reach for you first.

You notice it in the pauses.
In the unanswered texts that suddenly get
replies once everyone else is busy.
In the invites that come with *if you want*,
never, *we want you there*.

You tell yourself not to overthink it.
They care, don't they?
They laugh with you, talk to you, confide in
you.
So why does it still hurt?

It's not anger.
It's not jealousy.
It's something quieter,
a dull ache that settles in your chest
and it stays.

You want to say something.
Explain how it feels to be optional,
to be chosen last without anyone meaning to.

But what if you're wrong?
What if saying it makes you sound needy,
dramatic, ungrateful?

So you stay quiet.
You smile.
You answer when they call.
You tell yourself this is enough.

But late at night, the thought creeps back in.
If you disappeared for a day,
for even a week,
would they notice right away?

That question sits heavy.
Unanswered.
And you hate that you even have to ask it.

Because wanting to matter
shouldn't feel like asking for too much. ♡

The Pit and the Pond

I hate the feeling when you know something is wrong.
That pit in your stomach when you can sense an emotion but can't name it.
Then it hits you, you see your friends hanging out with you.

You know it's not jealousy or hate.
Is it sadness? Or maybe envy?
You don't know what it is, but you know you don't like it.
In fact, you hate it. You hate that pit.

You want to tell them, tell them how much it hurts,
how much it makes you want to cry or even yell.
You don't hate them, but you hate the feeling sitting heavy in your stomach.

Do you talk to them in person?
Text them?
Or say nothing at all?

Just suck it up and stay quiet, yeah, that always works.
But what happens when you keep it all inside,
and it bursts out at the wrong moment?
When you yell without thinking,
when the words come out all wrong,
and friendships crack because of it?

They wouldn't be friends if you weren't there.
No.
Don't think negatively.

Still, the pit doesn't go away.
It twists and turns, gnaws at you quietly,
like an animal trapped under your ribs.
You try to distract yourself with music, scrolling, anything.
Nothing works. It waits for a crack in your armor,
for a moment when your defenses are low,
so it can roar.

And maybe that's the worst part:
the uncertainty.
Not knowing how they'll respond,

not knowing if you'll regret saying anything,
not knowing if keeping quiet will destroy you from the inside.

But the pond just settled down.
You don't want to start it up again. ♡

A Dog Like Me

:: hybrid expression by madelyn jeffries



The Process of Healing

:: poetry by kaydee westbrook

Poem One

I know what it's like
To be loved by the night
To cry in the dark
To not put up a fight

I've been put up
I've been let down
But what would you see
Not a frown

I've been through hell the
But you wouldn't tell

Cause I've been alone
For many many years
And I've seen myself
Through many many tears

Poem Three

I was abandoned
I was the outcast
I was thrown aside
But I couldn't cry

But she lifted me up
And she fixed my crown
She made me feel alive
She made me feel sound

But then she was gone
Like the sun when it rains
she left just like that
when she realized my pain

Poem Two

If you want to get to know me,
you have to know my past,
you have to know my anger,
and the burdens on my back.

If you want to know my beauty,
you have to know my pain,
you have to know my fears,
and you have to know my shame.

If you want to know me as happy,
you have to know me as sad,
You have to know me as hateful,
you have to know me as bad.

For we all have our moments,
our ins, and our outs,
we all have our struggles,
And we all have our doubts

Poem Four

I keep rewriting the ending in my head
Hoping this time it works
That maybe you wouldn't leave
Just because I was hurt
That maybe you would stay
For just another month
A week
A day
But my cries fall on deafened ears
And my feelings get lost in the fray

Poem Five

I am no longer waiting at doors that never opened for me
I learned to find peace in my own company
and while I'll stumble along clumsily
I learned how to stand tall because people needed me
I learned how to keep going when I felt like falling down I learned how to carry things I
shouldn't have had to carry around
I understand now that pain is just one line
That healing just takes time
And someday
I'll find that that's okay ♡



Emily Hayes
watercolor

Life Isn't What it Seems

:: fiction by ellie burton

“Innocent until proven guilty.” What a joke. I’ve been sitting in this correctional facility for two years now, and not once did anyone give me a fair chance. I was just the easiest person to blame. In their eyes, I was the most convenient conviction, the only person who “made sense” for such a horrible crime. Sitting alone in this cell has made me wonder if maybe I was always meant for this life. With the family I grew up in, I guess it was bound to happen to one of us. Unfortunately, that person was me.

Growing up felt like walking on eggshells every single day. My mom was a stay-at-home mom because my dad believed that was how a “traditional family” should be. My father was a raging alcoholic who somehow managed to keep his construction job for over fifteen years. My little sister was only six back then, just starting kindergarten.

My whole life, I was taught to hide my emotions, obey my father, attend church, and be the “perfect daughter.” I hated pretending the abuse didn’t exist, like my father wasn’t some manipulative narcissist behind closed doors. What hurt the most was seeing people at church praise him as this amazing husband and father, while my mom and I were the ones suffering at home. They never saw him throwing hot

coffee at my mom or screaming at her until he lost his voice.

The worst part was watching him pretend to be someone he wasn’t while everyone admired him for it. Maybe that’s why ending up in this situation feels almost unavoidable.

The night everything happened still replays in my mind constantly. I keep trying to figure out where my life went wrong. Maybe it started on the first day of junior year. I always felt different from everyone else, like life was pressing down on my shoulders, waiting to crush me at any moment.

Making friends was hard, too. I was friendly with almost everyone, but nobody ever really chose me. Everyone already had their person. I wanted that more than anything: someone who saw me as their best friend, someone who understood me completely and helped carry the weight I constantly felt.

Instead, I met Ben.

He was better than anything I could’ve imagined. I would stay awake at night praying for him, hoping I’d never lose him. He always knew how to make me smile, and just thinking about him made

my stomach flip. For the first time in years, life felt bearable again, like finally taking a breath after being underwater too long.

I spent every second I could with him, loving him like he might disappear at any moment.

After six months of dating, Ben insisted on meeting my parents. The second he brought it up, panic flooded through me. My mind filled with every possible outcome, all of them bad. But somehow, I still agreed.

I never thought I would care about someone enough to let them into the life I worked so hard to hide.

The day finally came, and standing outside my front door made me want to turn around and leave. But I didn't.

The second we walked inside, the smell of alcohol hit us. It felt like a storm waiting to explode. My father stood up from his chair, obviously drunk. The second he saw Ben, anger flashed across his face so quickly it made my stomach twist.

But instead of yelling, he turned and walked into the kitchen.

No screaming. No fighting. Nothing. I felt relieved for a moment.

I quickly pulled Ben toward my room, though he still looked shaken by the

strange welcome. I was showing him around when I suddenly heard my mom scream. Usually, I was used to hearing it, but this time it felt different. The house went strangely quiet afterward.

Before I could react, I felt a cloth pressed tightly over my nose. The last thing I remember was the strong chemical smell filling my lungs.

When I woke up, I was sitting in a holding cell with a pounding headache. Everything felt blurry and disconnected. Then the memories started flooding back.

The towel.

My mom.

Ben.

Questions raced through my mind.

Where was Ben?

Where was my mom?

What happened?

Hours later, I was brought into an interrogation room with two officers. They talked and talked, but eventually their words blurred together into meaningless noise.

None of what they were saying made sense. They claimed I murdered my mom and Ben. They said I stabbed my father in

the stomach, but he survived because paramedics arrived in time.

I couldn't understand it. I would never hurt my family, especially not Ben. I tried explaining everything I remembered, but it was obvious they had already decided I was lying. Soon, I was charged with two counts of murder and one count of attempted murder.

The thought of hurting the people I loved felt impossible.

Months later, it was finally time for my trial. This was supposed to be my chance to explain the truth, to prove that I was innocent too.

But the second I walked into the courtroom, I knew it was over.

The room was packed with people staring at me like I was already guilty. Their eyes were full of disgust before I had even spoken. I told my story exactly how I had practiced it for months alone in my cell.

But when I looked at the judge, I realized something: He looked at me the same way everyone else did.

That's when it hit me.

I was already convicted in their minds. To them, I wasn't a victim. I was just another evil girl pretending to be innocent. The truth didn't matter anymore because they had already chosen the story they wanted

to believe.

I walked back to my seat with my heart pounding, already knowing how this would end.

Then my father was called to the stand. He barely looked at me before breaking into tears, telling the court how I murdered my mother and boyfriend "in cold blood."

Right there in that courtroom, my heart shattered. The man who was supposed to protect and love me was destroying me instead.

And when he finally finished speaking, he looked directly at me and smirked.

That's when everything finally clicked. ♡



Cassidy Wood
charcoal

Wrong Way Home

:: fiction by drake moore

Rain hammered against the windshield so hard it sounded like static. I squinted through the blur, following my GPS as it flickered once... then froze. The screen went completely blank.

“Seriously?” I muttered, tapping it. Nothing.

Ahead, the road disappeared into thick fog. Just as I considered turning around, a faint, flickering light appeared in the distance, like a broken streetlamp. I drove toward it slowly, tires crunching on wet gravel. But as I got closer, I realized it wasn't a streetlamp at all. It was a house number sign. Old. Rusted. Glowing faintly. My stomach dropped. The name carved into it was my last name. I'd never been here before.

I ran for the front door as the rain picked up, soaking through my hoodie. The house looked abandoned—paint peeling, windows dark—but the second I stepped inside, the door slammed shut behind me. I jumped and spun around, grabbing the handle. It wouldn't budge.

Hello?” My voice echoed down a narrow hallway. Family photos lined the walls, but something was wrong. The faces were scratched out—every single one. Except for one photo near the end. I stepped closer, my breath catching. It was me.

Not just someone who looked like me—me. Same clothes, same expression. But someone had drawn over my face in black ink, thick and messy, like they were trying to erase me.

From somewhere behind me, a chair scraped against the floor. Then a voice—quiet, almost a whisper—filled the space.

“You're late this time.” It sounded exactly like mine.

I backed into a bedroom, my heart pounding. A single bare bulb flickered overhead. Against the wall leaned a cracked mirror. I didn't want to look, but I did anyway. At first, everything seemed normal. Then I noticed something off.

The reflection behind me wasn't the room I was in. There was no bed, no light—just darkness. And standing in that darkness was a figure. It looked like me, but wrong—pale and hollow. It started moving, stepping closer to the glass. I froze. The figure raised its hand, and before I could react, I felt something press against the back of my neck—fingers, cold and firm.

I gasped and spun around, but nothing was there. When I looked back at the mirror, the figure was smiling.

That night, I locked myself in my bedroom. Closet shut. Lights on. I sat on my bed, gripping my phone like it was the only real thing left. Then it buzzed. I flinched. Incoming call—from my own number.

“No way...” I whispered. My hand shook as I answered. “Hello?”

For a moment, there was silence. Then a voice whispered, “I’m almost there.” It was my voice. At that exact moment, the lights flickered, and from the hallway outside my door, I heard slow, deliberate footsteps. Step. Step. Step. I held my breath, staring at the door as the handle twitched slightly.

I couldn’t stay. I grabbed the photo—the one with my face scribbled out—and ran for the door.

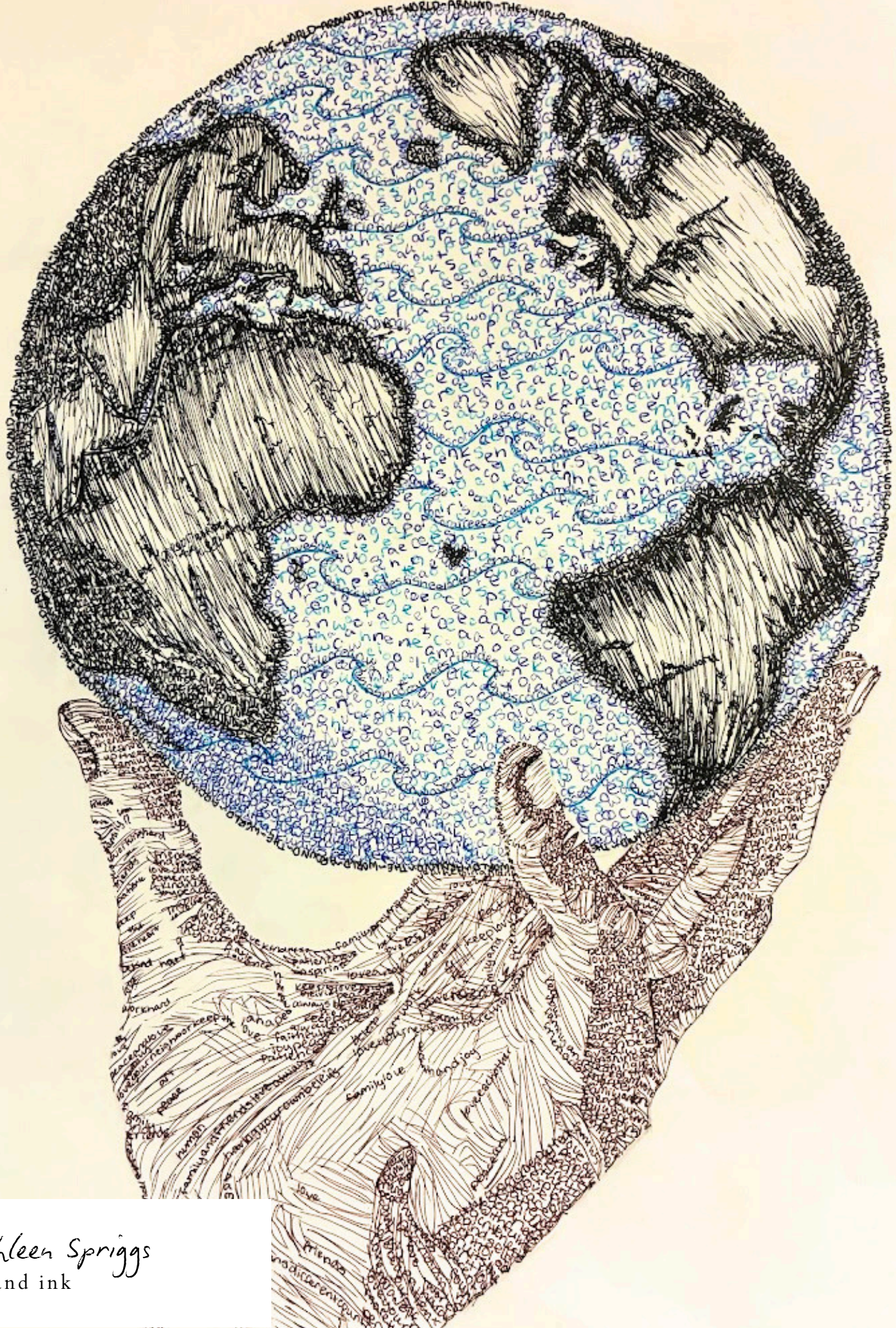
When I yanked it open, I stopped dead. This wasn’t my house. The hallway stretched on forever, long and warped, the walls peeling. The wallpaper matched the house from before—the one my phone had called the Dead End House.

“No, no, no, no...” I whispered.

At the far end of the hallway, something stood there—the pale figure, clear now, solid. It lifted its hand slowly, as if beckoning me forward. My phone buzzed again. I looked down. The map had turned back on. Location: Dead End House. The call timer from my own number was still running.

When I looked back up, the figure was closer. Way closer. It tilted its head, smiling wider than I thought possible.

“I said,” it whispered, its voice echoing from everywhere at once, “I’m almost there.” The lights went out. ♡



Kathleen Spriggs
pen and ink

Wonbongo

:: fiction by katelinn frymire

In the year 2066, our planet has become overpopulated. The USS Destiny and her crew of five are on a six-year mission to explore a new, unknown galaxy called Cryton, in search of a new Earth. While exploring Cryton, they find a solar system similar to ours with only three planets: The first planet is a solid sphere of ice with no atmosphere and is also the furthest from the sun; the second planet is all liquified with a toxic atmosphere; the third planet seems to have an earthly atmosphere and appears to be habitable...

We are going to land for further studies. Our crew: Captain Valentina Martinez, age 40, pilot; her husband, Santiago Martinez, age 39, second in command and science officer; Lisa Stokes, age 35, doctor; Joshua Martin, age 23, engineer; and finally, Doug Lee, age 31, communications.

We landed on Wonbongo (that's what we named the planet) on September 17 after two years of drifting in the endless void of space. The planet was exactly like Earth, except it was pink.

“Santiago, you should get a sample of this grass and dirt!” hollered Valentina.

Santiago held up a little glass tube. “Got it.”

The crew stood around and looked at the vast sunny pinkness that surrounded them: They were all mesmerized. Then they all heard a clicking sound. Joshua, the youngest and least experienced, was about to take his helmet off.

“What are you doing!” yelled Doug.

Everyone looked over at Joshua. Santiago started running towards him. It was too late—Joshua already had his helmet off.

“G-guys, I-I can't b-breathe—” Joshua muttered, holding his throat.

Lisa ran over to Joshua and was on top of him.

“Ha! I got you all. I can breathe perfectly fine here.” Joshua said, laughing.

“You can't do that crap to us, make us think you're dying!” Lisa exclaimed.

“Aww, so you do care about me, sweetheart?” Joshua snickered.

Lisa got up, rolled her eyes, and walked off.

“Hey, before we get too far, Doug, can you try to contact Earth?” Valentina said.

“Sure thing,” Doug responded. He went back inside the ship to the Comms room.

“Hello, USS Destiny to Earth, does anyone copy?” Doug said in a stern voice.

No answer: static.

Doug repeated himself, “Hello, USS Destiny to Earth, does anyone copy?”

Again, no answer.

“No comms!” exclaimed Doug. He walked back out from the ship, “There wasn’t a signal at all, just static.”

“Well, I guess we’re on our own,” said Valentina.

The crew decided to go further with their exploration. Joshua, despite his arrogance, had whipped up a little drivable shuttle. The crew gathered some food and a tent and set out on their exploration. Valentina began driving, but she was getting exhausted, so Lisa decided to take over.

After three hours, it was still just as sunny as it was before. They saw something glistening in the distance.

“Hey guys, am I the only one seeing that in the distance?” Santiago asked, pointing towards the horizon.

“Uh, nope,” Joshua said, confused.

So, the crew kept driving for about

another half hour until they got close enough to make out what it was. A liquid: water perhaps?

“Hey guys, I think that’s a liquid,” Lisa said, baffled.

Santiago got out of the shuttle immediately to test and find out this... substance. After a couple of minutes of rummaging around with his flask and science equipment, the other crew members grew impatient.

“Well, what is it. Do you know?” Joshua said, annoyingly.

“You know, you have no patience, do you? Hold on a moment, would you?” Santiago said, aggravated.

After a few more moments, the computer analysis says it’s plain old water—no toxins, no poisons, no nothing.

The crew was relieved and started drinking a ton. (After all, they had been driving for hours.) They gathered some water in a few of Santiago’s science flasks for later on.

Then they began again.

Doug drove this time. They drove for another good hour, and it was still just as sunny as when they started.

Hey, what time does it say on your watch, Doug?” Valentina asked curiously.

“Eleven o’clock. Why?”

“Have you guys realized that we’ve been out here for a couple of hours now, and it’s still just as sunny as when we got here?” Valentina said, perplexed.

The crew all agreed, and they went on their way.

They switched drivers, and Joshua now drove. He drove for about four hours. The sun was now starting to set, finally. They then saw something in the distance, glistening from the setting sun behind it.

“Uh, hey, guys, there’s something up ahead,” Joshua said, worryingly.

Everyone turned around to look at what it was. They couldn’t make it out yet.

“It looks like some sort of structure,” said Lisa.

They kept driving until they could make out what it was.

“What the heck is that?” Santiago said.

“It looks like a... ship, maybe,” Doug replied.

They got closer, and it was indeed a ship. Not only a ship, but a *crashed ship*.

It was finally dark out. The crew decided to park a little way from the ship to set up camp.

Joshua started to set up the tent, and Lisa started getting food out and ready to eat.

“Hey, sweetheart, that food for me?” Joshua asked with a smirk.

“You know it's for everyone, Joshua. Don't be dumb,” Lisa replied.

“Oh, come on, Lisa, let me have fun,” Joshua said, beggingly.

Lisa rolled her eyes and ignored him; she went back to setting up the food for everyone.

After about ten minutes, the tent and food were ready. The crew all ate and slept.

Lisa was the first one to wake. She looked at her watch and noticed she had slept about six hours. It was sunny out already, which was weird because the sun was still out at eleven at night. That's when Lisa came to the conclusion that days were longer than nights on Wonbongo.

After about twenty minutes, the rest of the crew all woke up. They ate a little and then packed up camp.

“So are we going to that crashed ship?” asked Joshua.

“No, duh, we’re here to explore. We didn’t come here for nothing,” Lisa exclaimed.

Doug decided to drive the shuttle closer to the ship. Once there, everyone got their things ready to go. First, they examined the outside of the ship. Santiago found something strange.

"Uh, hey, guys, take a look at this." Santiago said, pointing at part of the ship.

Towards the bottom of the ship, covered in dirt and dust, Santiago could make out something that said *Cygnus Express*.

"What does that mean? *Cygnus Express*? Is that some kind of name?" Valentina asked.

"I'm assuming the name of the ship," Doug said hopefully.

Valentina took a picture of the name with her camera, and they went on their way.

Valentina held a flashlight and went into the ship first; the rest of the crew followed her.

"Whoa, this isn't a normal ship at all," Doug said, mesmerized.

The ship was filled with many mechanical and intellectual parts. It was all black and blue: glowing. Everything was glowing a soft, pale blue, slowly fading in and out.

The crew was mesmerized by this phenomenon; they had never seen anything like it before.

"Should we gather some of these parts or whatever these are?" Lisa asked as she held

one of them in her hand.

"We probably should, just so we can experiment with it and find out what it is, or what it's used for," Valentina replied.

The crew was gathering some of the parts, except Joshua. He was nowhere to be found.

"Hey, guys...you should all come take a look at this!" Joshua hollered from another room on the other side of the ship.

The rest of the crew all piled into the room that Joshua was in. The room looked like it was the control room. It had a huge window in the front that appeared to have a cover on it, making the room pitch black. The only thing the crew could make out was a bright blue glowing orb that was spinning. It was attached to the control panel.

"What is that?!" Joshua exclaimed.

"It looks like maybe the control center," said Doug, perplexed.

They all walked up to the glowing orb. Joshua, of course, touched it. The whole window lit up, revealing the pink planet. Then, the orb started flickering and dinging.

"What the heck is happening?" Doug asked in a panicked voice.

After a couple of seconds, the dinging stopped, and the window closed again.

“Should we take it with us?” Santiago asked.

“Definitely,” Valentina replied.

There was a long wait of silence and no movement.

“Well? Go on, Joshua, you’re our engineer.” Valentina said impatiently.

“Alright, alright, I’m going,” Joshua replied, aggravated.

Joshua got out his bag with all his tools and started working on getting the orb out. He was struggling and seemed lost.

“Do you have any idea of what you’re even doing?” Lisa exclaimed.

“Well, not exactly. I’ve never seen a component like this before, but I think I’ve almost got it,” Joshua replied. He struggled with the component for about another six minutes until he finally got the orb out. It was still glowing and, surprisingly, still spinning.

The crew thought that was enough exploring after they found the orb. They went back to their shuttle and decided to head back to their ship. Lisa started off with driving first.

After about nine and a half hours, they made it back to their ship. They decided to board and load everything on.

Joshua attached the spinning orb to their

control panel. He managed to somehow attach the orb quickly, despite how long it took him to detach it back at the alien ship.

The crew all got buckled in, but the ship started to act a bit weird, presumably because of the orb. They managed to get into space without a problem, though.

They were heading back to our galaxy, and they were about five minutes in before disaster struck. The orb started acting weird.

The orb made a static sound and said, “T-THIS I-I-IS C-CYGNUS SPEAKING. W-WE A-A-ARE F-FLYING? T-THATS O-O-ODD, WE C-CRASHED F-FIFTEEN Y-YEARS AGO. WE D-DETECT W-WE A-ARE ON A D-DIFFERENT SH-SHIP. W-WE A-A-ARE S-SELF D-DESTRUCTING I-IN T-T-TWO M-MINUTES.”

“What the heck was that? What just happened?” Santiago asked.

So, let me get this straight—we’re all going to die?” Joshua defeatedly said.

“Not necessarily. There is a life pod in the support area,” Lisa said optimistically.

“Well, what are we waiting for? We have less than two minutes!” Doug said, relieved.

One thing about this plan: the life pod’s capacity is one person. Not all of us can

go,” Valentina said.

Well, who’s going to go, then?” Doug asked.

“I have no clue, but we need to decide quickly. After all, we have,” Lisa looked down at her watch, “thirty seconds!!”

The crew could not decide. They all started running for the life pod, pushing and shoving each other all the way.

Santiago was the first in the pod. Everyone was trying to grab and tug him out of the pod, but he was able to hit the button to close the door. He sat down at the seat, crying. He could hear the banging of his crew members and his wife behind him at the door. He felt bad, but knew someone had to survive. He pressed the escape button to launch the pod. The pod launched, and he was on his own.

Right after he launched, the ship exploded, and his crew was gone. His wife was gone.

Santiago was now alone, floating in space. He kept floating for over a year. He finally saw Earth, and he directed the pod toward it. After about a day, he landed in the North Atlantic Ocean. Satellites managed to catch him on their cameras and reported it to the NASA space center. They were quick to get to him and rescue him.

To be continued... ♡



Gage Tournear
chalk pastels

Project Sunburst

:: fiction by mikey st. jacques

Chapter 1: The Beginning

My name is Jaxon Pears, and I was born and raised in the Brotherhood. My goal is to become a knight, fight on the front lines, and protect technology. The brotherhood is the remnants of the past US. Military, and we fight to protect humanity while fending off ghouls, super mutants, and any other wasteland abominations.

Currently, I am studying mechanics to repair and maintain the Brotherhood of Steel power armor, all while I am learning basic tactics of war and battle at the Fortified Regional Headquarters (or before the war, a place called the Pentagon). Now, I'm stationed at Outpost Golf, located in the Mohave, which was largely unaffected by the nuclear fallout. The worst thing about the dessert is the heat. Our protective armor weighs at least 25 pounds, and by mid-day, we're all sweaty and cranky. Having been sent to study the way we gather intelligence, and send out recon teams.

There is a group of us, my buddy Josh and a few other initiates. Josh and I have been friends since childhood, but lately I've come to question his loyalty to the Brotherhood. He has been making odd and kind of suspicious comments toward the way the Brotherhood leads, but I

haven't confronted him about it, so it's been kind of awkward.

We are heading to see what the recent recon team has found. They were sent out on a mission to scout for ammo and resources and find possible positions to have squads hold for longer-duration missions. Before we could reach the building, however, several rounds went off, piercing through the building and kicking up sand and dust.

Paladin Banch comes sprinting over in his T-45 power armor, making the ground shake from the sheer weight. He busts through the door, and all we could hear was yelling. I could only make out a few words: *how could you, betrayed, trusted*. Paladin Banch commanded the person to stand down, only to be met by another burst of gunfire that hit his armor and zipped by us. I tried to get closer while everyone else took cover, only to feel a sharp pain in my ear as I was grazed, causing me to fall back. From the small glimpse I got, it was just a singular knight, but I could barely make it out as Paladin Banch reared back and slammed his fist into him with a deafening crunch. We all sat in silence. *What just happened, everything was fine not even a second ago, why did that knight shoot, and what happened to the rest of his squad?*

Quickly, medics begin taking care of the wounded while the rest of us are still in bewilderment. Initiates are quickly rushed away and told nothing as the paladins and knights start to discuss. We all sit for hours waiting for anything, only to be sent to our quarters and told to stay until further notice.

The next day, we are told that the man had been planning a mutiny. While we are in the chow line, Josh walks up.

“Don’t you think it’s weird that they just said it was someone revolting? I mean, it’s not like it can’t happen, but it was the returning recon team. If they wanted to start a mutiny, wouldn’t they have waited?”

I chirp back, “Well, I don’t know, and from what we saw, it was just one person who was yelling.”

Josh ponders this. “Doesn’t the elder send them out in groups of seven to eight, which consists of at least one paladin and the rest knights? But it looked like it was just a singular knight that came back, seeing as they weren’t in power armor.”

“Josh, why are you thinking so deeply about this? It was nothing more than just someone revolting.”

“Do you really believe that, or are you just falling in line with the rest?”

Slightly annoyed, I respond, “Whatever, man. You’re thinking too much about it.” I walk away.

Later, when we are going over past reports, I overhear a conversation between some of the knights. They’re speaking about how the recent recon team was demolished by an unknown force, which only left one knight alive. The knight was too erratic to comprehend. He started going haywire and started firing his sidearm. They said it left a gap in how many squads they need in order to keep the outpost open.

I wonder if they will take volunteers. I might be able to get an early promotion to knight or scribe. I keep quiet for a bit, waiting for them to make an announcement.

The next day, knights were doing roll call, but before they could finish, they made the announcement: “We are making an exception for initiates to join the Recon team. You can prove yourself and earn an early rank. Now, who is up for the task?” I raise my hand along with a few others, and surprisingly, they immediately took us up. They brought us over to a separate room and introduced us to our paladin. From the look of it, he seemed to have just come in from a promotion because he didn’t even have a scratch or dent on his armor yet. He makes us all stand at attention, having us state our names before introducing himself.

“I am paladin Voss. I will be leading this patrol as well as supervising you and giving you orders. At approximately 14:00 tomorrow, you will be fit for gear and given a basic physical. Be sharp and don’t be late.”

Chapter 2: The Patrol

I get ready the next morning, going through my usual routine, but halfway through, Josh stops me.

“Hey, man, I heard you volunteered to be a part of a recon squad.”

“What about it?” I ask, annoyed.

“Oh, come on, don’t be that way. I know I was getting on your nerves, but it doesn’t mean I can’t congratulate you.”

I shrug him off and continue on my way. Once time comes, I get to my platoon and fall in line. Our paladin comes in and gives us our briefing on what gear we will receive. He lists our basics such as armor, clothes, survival gear, and our firearm. I receive a standard pistol while the rest are issued rifles. When I ask why, they tell me I am going to be the one who carries the repair tools and extra weapons for the paladin and his armor. I begrudgingly accept it as my duty and start putting on all the gear, and the heavy ruck sack full of all the tools and weapons I will be carrying.

Paladin Voss immediately starts putting us to work; he has us running laps around the outpost, doing fire watch, almost never having a break, and making us do all sorts of workouts. This is such a pain. I didn’t think he would go this hard on us. I think this is his first taste of power, and he is using it to do whatever he wants.

After a month goes by, he rallies us up

after one of his grueling exercises, and tells us, “We have a recon mission assigned to us. We will be scouting out an area where there is supposedly a schematic for an old headlamp for the T-45 power armor. I am counting on you to not mess this up and stick to the orders and listen to me at all times.”

We all responded with a bit of nervousness, “Understood.”

Paladin Voss says, “We will be deployed in two days at 15:00. You will be expected to be in full combat gear and at the ready an hour before our deployment”. We all reply with another half-hearted, “Understood.” He then dismisses us.

On my way to the barracks, I come across Josh, who I quickly speed walk up to tell him the news. “I’m going on my first mission, and I’m kind of nervous about it.”

Josh says, “Well, isn’t that normal? I mean, most of us won’t even get to have our own gear in two years.”

I nervously respond. “I mean, yes, but I was a bit rash trying to get through the ranks, and this should give me at least the rank of knight... if we can get the schematic we are going to be sent to retrieve. My only concern is what happens if we run into danger.”

Josh says, “You have a paladin with you. Just listen to him, and you should be ok even if you get into some sort of conflict.”

I feel slightly relieved. “I guess you’re right, but I still think I’ll have that hint of nervousness. Thanks anyway, man, I’ll be leaving in two days, so I’ll see you soon after that.”

During the days until the expedition, Voss had us polishing, doing maintenance, small amounts of cardio, and running through drills and scenarios.

Finally, at 14:00, we are in line, fully geared up and ready for the recon expedition, where in the following hour, we were given the rundown. “You are going to be going into an old warehouse that used to store power armor until it was raided a long time ago. Supposedly, there is a schematic for the T-45 headlamp. This will be your first mission, which means you must stay sharp, listen to your paladin no matter what, or else you will be marked as a deserter and be swiftly dealt with. Understood?”

We respond with a disciplined “Understood.”

We do our final prep, double-checking supplies, ammo, armor, and for my job, I do a once-over on the Paladin’s power armor, checking for any shorts in the electronics and cracks. I also check the power armor’s microfusion cell battery to make sure nothing was failing or could cause later issues. When I’m done, Voss does a once-over before getting in and testing before giving a thumbs up.

We swiftly set off to the old factory. This is my first time ever really going outside

of walls into the wasteland. I’ve only heard stories of bands of raiders and the monster creatures out here.

We’re currently following a weathered and cracked road with pre-war utility poles either fallen over or halfway broken and still stuck in the ground. The Mohave desert stretches on for ages with hills and mountains in the distance, with the same old yellowish tint that the sand gives everything. Sometimes the odd scout fire ant. After hours of walking in silence—besides the ambient noises—we see the factory. *I just don’t understand why they would send out a recon squad to retrieve a schematic, and something not as important as a schematic for the T-45 headlamp. We are risking our lives for something so minuscule in value.*

Before I can continue my thoughts, Paladin Voss stops us and gives us one last pep talk. “Listen up. Be prepared for anything. Jaxon, you’re with me. We’ll search for the schematic. The rest of you will set up a perimeter. Stick to your training. If anything goes awry, come find us if you can’t handle it yourself.”

In unison, we reply, “Understood.”

We continue marching until we reach the fallen-over gate, observing around, looking at the cracked foundation, rusty walls, and old military vehicles. The other initiates make a small perimeter around the building, checking for any signs of disturbance. They give us the all-good, and Paladin Voss and I head into the building.

The smell hits me—old dusty books and sheet metal. Paladin Voss quickly looks around before moving, Decades of dust following him shortly behind.

We entered a large room, almost the size of a warehouse, with power armor stands lining every inch of the room, with scrap metal and ancient pieces of power armor strewn about. Paladin Voss commands me to start searching for the schematics. I quickly start sifting through all the dust and debris, going over all of the papers that I can find.

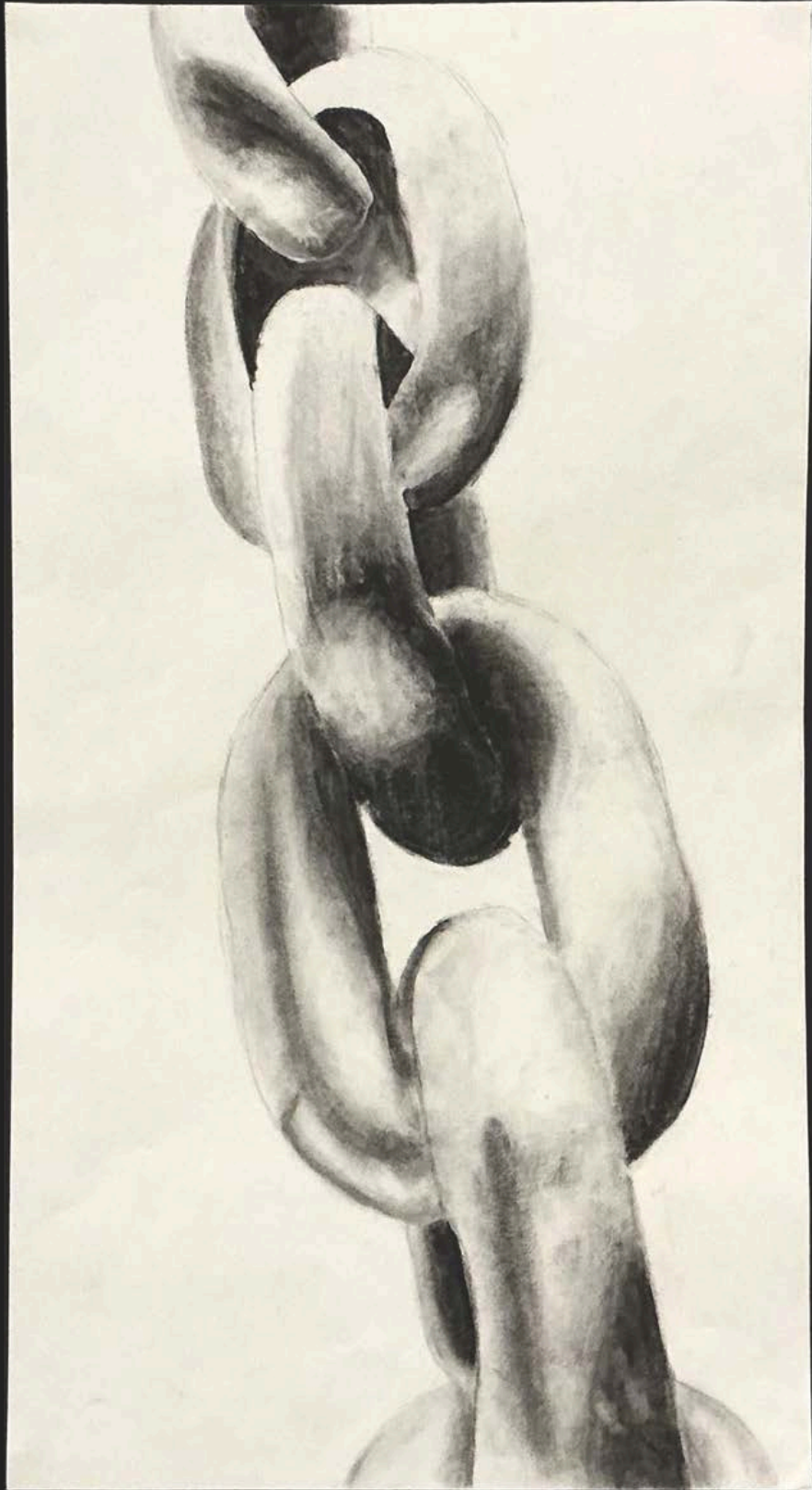
After a couple of hours of searching, we skimmed over the entire room, which led us to a safe under one of the workbenches. I call Paladin Voss over to have him take a look.

“How can we open this?” I ask.

Paladin Voss tells me to step back as he steps on the floor safe, causing it to creak and shear open, giving me just enough room to reach in and grab the papers, brushing aside the bottle caps and ammo.

I take it out and examine it. I smile. “We found it!”

Paladin Voss looks down. “Great job.” ✧



Benny Hess
charcoal

07/10/72

:: screenplay by luke cost

FADE IN:

INT: GYM, CLEAN AND SILENT. CUT TO MAN WALKING IN

ITS DAWN AND EARLY

(JONESY SHUFFLES IN AND HANGS UP HIS JACKET AND WALKS TO THE TREADMILL. HE STARTS IT UP BUT SUDDENLY GET OFF, HE REMOVES AN EARBUD.)

JONESY:

HELLO?

(JONESY IS CONFUSED BUT CONTINUES ANYWAY. HE STARTS RUNNING AGAIN, AND ONCE AGAIN, HE TAKES OUT AN EARBUD.)

JONESY: (CONT'D)

IS SOMEONE THERE?

(JONESY TAPS HIS EAR, SUDDENLY THERE IS A LOW RADIO PITCH, AND THEN, A VOICE.)

THE VOICE:

HELLO? (FOLLOWED BY A BEEP)

(THE VOICE IS LOW BUT CASUAL SOUNDING. JONESY GETS UP AND RUNS TO THE BATHROOM AND TURNS ON THE WATER AND LOOKS INTO THE MIRROR.)

THE VOICE: (CONT'D)

YOU CAN HEAR ME, CORRECT?

(JONESY STARTS SPLASHING WATER INTO HIS FACE AND EARS.)

JONESY:

THIS IS THE LAST TIME I GO TO THE GYM LATER THAN SIX. I CANT BE HEARING VOICES. I CANT BE.

(JONESY RUBS HIS FACE AND GRABS A PAPER TOWEL. HE WIPES HIS FACE AND EXITS THE GYM DISTRAUGHT.)

EXT. JONESY ENTERS HIS CAR AND STARTS IT, STILL DAWN.

(JONESY CHECKS ALL HIS MIRRORS AND EASES HIMSELF)

THE VOICE:

JONESYYYYY. (WITH BEEP)

(JONESY FREAKS OUT AND STARTS SEARCHING HIS CAR, FLIPPING THROUGH THE GLOVE BOX, BACK SEATS, AND EVEN SEARCHES HIS PHONE. JONESY THEN LOOKS INTO HIS WATER BOTTLE AND DUMPS IT.)

JONESY:
IT MUST BE SOMETHING I'VE BEEN
DRINKING.

EXT/INT. JONESY DRIVES HOME AND GOES INTO HIS BATHROOM,
THROUGH THE LIVING ROOM, VERY REGULAR

(JONESY CLOSES THE GARAGE DOOR AND WALKS INTO HIS BATHROOM.)

JONESY:
IF YOU REALLY ARE A VOICE IN MY
HEAD, THEN HOW ABOUT YOU PROVE
YOU'RE NOT SOME MENTAL ILLNESS I
JUST ACQUIRED.

(JONESY PICKS UP A SHAMPOO BOTTLE.)

JONESY:
WHAT AM I HOLDING?

(A MOMENT GOES BY, AND THEN...)

THE VOICE:
LOOKS LIKE A SHAMPOO BOTTLE TO
ME. HOW ABOUT YOU DO SOMETHING
FOR ME AND I'LL GIVE YOU MY NAME?
(BEEP)

(JONESY LOOKS OUTSIDE AND SEES NO CARS OR PEOPLE.)

JONESY:
WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?

THE VOICE:
I WANT YOU TO GO TO THE KITCHEN
AND GRAB AN APPLE.

JONESY:
THAT'S IT?

THE VOICE:
THAT'S IT.

(JONESY EXITS THE BATHROOM AND GOES INTO THE KITCHEN. HE THEN
PICKS UP AN APPLE AND LOOKS AT IT.)

THE VOICE: (CONT'D)
WHAT DO YOU SEE?

JONESY LOOKS AT THE APPLE FOR A LITTLE WHILE AND THEN SAYS
WHAT HE SEES.)

JONESY:
WELL ITS REGULAR, AND A LITTLE
CUT AT THE BOTTOM OF IT. MUST'VE
BEEN FROM WHEN I DROPPED THEM A
WHILE BACK.

(JONESY PUTS DOWN THE APPLE AND SITS DOWN.)

JONESY: (CONT'D)
YOU PROMISED ME YOUR NAME.

THE VOICE:
RIGHT. MY NAME IS SIDNEY. I AM
GOING TO ASK YOU A FEW MORE
QUESTIONS. JUST RESPOND YES OR
NO.

(JONESY LOOKS AROUND, AND SLUMBS IN A CHAIR)

JONESY:
ALRIGHT, FINE. BUT I WANT THIS TO
END SOON IF THATS OK. OR IF I
HAVE A CHOICE.

SIDENY:
YOU DON'T HAVE A CHOICE, BUT, WE
WILL END SOON. THE NEXT QUESTION
FOR YOU IS IF YOU TRUST YOUR
GOVERNMENT.

(JONESY GETS UP AND LOOKS OUTSIDE AGAIN. STILL NO ONE.)

JONESY:
I CAN'T REALLY SAY SIDNEY. I'D
LIKE TO BUT ALL THE STUFF THAT'S
BEEN HAPPENING, IT'S HARD TO SAY
YES.

(JONESY SITS DOWN ON A COUCH, AND LOOKS AT THE REFLECTION OF
HIMSELF ON THE TURNED OFF T.V.)

SIDENY:
JUST A FEW MORE FOR YOU. DO YOU
SEE THAT BOOK?

(JONESY LOOKED AROUND AND PEERED AT THE MINIATURE LIBRARY)

JONESY:
WHICH ONE? I'VE GOT A LOT.

SIDENY:
THAT GREEN ONE.

(JONESY LOOKS AROUND AND DOESN'T UNDERSTAND.)

JONESY:
SORRY SIDNEY, BUT I DONT KNOW
WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT.

SIDENY:
THAT'S WHAT WE THOUGHT. WE WANT
YOU TO CLOSE YOUR EYES AND COUNT
TO FIVE AND THEN YOU CAN OPEN
YOUR EYES AND THEN TELL ME IF YOU
SEE IT. (BEEP)

JONESY:
ALRIGHT SIDNEY, I'LL GIVE IT A
GO.

(JONESY TAKES A DEEP EXHALE OF AIR AND WAITED FIVE SECONDS.
HE OPENS HIS EYES AND SEES A BOOK ON THE GROUND.)

JONESY:
THAT WASN'T THERE BEFORE! SIDNEY,
DID YOU DO THAT?

(JONESY GETS UP AND WALKS TO THE BOOK ON THE GROUND)

SIDNEY:
WE'RE GLAD YOU SEE IT NOW. GO
AHEAD AND PICK IT UP AND FLIP
THROUGH THE PAGES. (BEEP)

(JONESY LOOKS THROUGH IT AND SEES ONLY NAMES)

JONESY:
WHAT IS THIS SIDNEY, A NAME BOOK?

(JONESY READS SOME OF THE NAMES OUT LOUD)

JONESY: (CONT'D)
FRANK OLSON, THEODORE KACZYNSKI,
JAMES BULGAR...

SIDNEY:
NOW WHAT DO YOU SEE?

JONESY LOOKED AROUND AND SAW A MAN IN THE SHADOWS OF A CORNER
OF THE ROOM)

JONESY:
SIDNEY THERE'S A MAN THERE, HE
LOOKS SCARY. CAN YOU MAKE HIM GO
AWAY?

(SUDDENLY THE BOOK THAT JONESY WAS HOLDING DISAPPEARED AND SO
DID THE MAN.)

JONESY: (CONT'D)
SIDNEY, HOW'D YOU DO THAT?
SIDNEY?

(SUDDENLY JONESY WAS IN THE GYM AGAIN, IN THE BATHROOM ON THE FLOOR.)

CUT TO: GYM

INT. GYM, BRIGHT LIGHTING

(JONESY SHOOTS UP FROM THE FLOOR AND RUNS TO THE DOOR HANDLE AND IS SHOCKED BACK INTO THE BATHROOM IN HIS HOUSE)

CUT TO: HOUSE

INT. BATHROOM, NIGHTTIME

JONESY:
OW! SIDENY, WHAT'D I Do?

(JONESY IS ON THE BRINK OF TEARS ON HIS FLOOR, HAND BURNT FROM THE SHOCK, BEEP)

SIDNEY:
YOU ONLY DO WHAT WE TELL YOU, AND WHEN TO DO IT. (BEEP)

(JONESY RISES AND SLOWLY OPENS THE DOOR.)

JONESY:
WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?

SIDNEY:
I WANT YOU TO GET YOUR PHONE AND CALL THE FIRST PERSON WHO COMES TO MIND. TELL THEM THAT YOU ENJOY TOMATO SOUP. (BEEP)

(JONESY GRABS HIS PHONE AND DIALS THE NUMBERS.)

JONESY:
THAT'S IT? CAN I PLEASE JUST BE LET GO?

(JONESY'S PHONE RINGS AND HE ANSWERS IT.)

JONESY: (CONT'D)
HEY MOM, ITS ME. I JUST WANTED TO TELL YOU I LIKE TOMATO SOUP.

(JONESY LOOKS AROUND AGAIN)

JONESY: (CONT'D)
AND THAT THEY HAVE BEEN HURTING
ME. PLEASE MOM GET SOME-

(JONESYS PHONE SUDDENLY SPARKED AND BURST INTO FLAMES. JONESY
WATCHES IN HORROR.)

SIDNEY:
I TOLD YOU TO DO WHAT WE ASKED. (
BEEP) IF YOU MISBEHAVE AGAIN THEN
SOMETHING WORSE WILL HAPPEN.

(JONESY FEELS THE BACK OF HIS HEAD AND REACHES FOR THE RAZOR
AND YANKS OUT THE BLADE, AND LOOKS HIMSELF IN THE MIRROR.)

SIDNEY: (CONT'D)
DONT. (BEEP)

(JONESY CUTS INTO HIS HEAD AND TRIES TO PULL OUT SOMETHING IN
HIS HEAD. INSTEAD, COINS START FALLING OUT, MIXED WITH BLOOD.
JONESY WIPES HIS FACE AND THE RAZOR AND COINS DISAPPEAR. HE
SLUMPS TO THE GROUND MENTALLY DONE.)

SIDNEY: (CONT'D)
YOU'RE DONE. WHEN WE SAY YOU'RE
DONE. (BEEP)

JONESY:
CAN I GET SOME WATER PLEASE?

SIDNEY:
YES. (BEEP)

(JONESY WALKS TO THE KITCHEN, GRABS A WATER BOTTLE AND SITS
ON THE STOVE, NEAR THE MICROWAVE.)

JONESY:
WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?

(JONESY LAYS HIS HEAD BACK ON THE MICROWAVE AND TURNS IN ON.
RADIO STATIC IS HEARD AND IT PSYCHICALLY HURTS HIS EARS. HE
DROPS TO THE FLOOR IN PAIN, THE STATIC STOPS.)

JONESY: (CONT'D)
SIDNEY?

(THERE IS NO RESPONSE.)

JONESY: (CONT'D)
SIDNEY?

(JONESY LOOKS INTO THE BATHROOM AND SEES NO DAMAGE TO ANYTHING, NO BLOOD, AND HIS PHONE IS FINE. HE HEARS SHOUTS AND LOOKS THROUGH THE WINDOW TO SEE PEOPLE IN ALL WHITE RUNNING AWAY. A BLACK S.U.V SCREECHES INTO THE DRIVEWAY AND DRIVES OFF.)

EXT. NIGHT, FRONT AND BACK YARD.

(JONESY WALKS OUTSIDE AND FOLLOWS THE TRAIL THE PEOPLE CAME FROM. HE WALKS TO THE BASEMENT, THE DOOR IS SLIGHTLY OPEN. HE PEERS IN AND SEES THOUSANDS OF PAPERS EVERYWHERE, ALONG WITH A RADIO AND RADIO PARTS. JONESY LOOKS AROUND AND PICKS UP A PAPER WITH HIS NAME ON IT. IT READS " SUBJECT 11875 IS READY FOR TAKE OVER. PLANT DURING 0500. REPORT BACK ASAP."

(SUDDENLY, JONESY HEARS FOOTSTEPS AND TURNS AROUND. BEHIND HIM THERE ARE TWO MEN IN FULL BLACK, WITH GASOLINE AND A LIGHT IN THEIR HANDS.)

(CLOSE UP TO LIGHTER.)

CUT TO: BLACK.

THE END



Janessa Hall
watercolor

Rough Waves

:: fiction by niklos ladd

It was a hot summer day in San Francisco. “Cowabunga, dudeee.” Johnny Parker shreds a gigantic wave in front of his rival, Jake.

“Bruh, Johnny, slow down.”

“Nah, dude, you just suck.”

A huge wave smokes Johnny and knocks him off his board, and he falls into the ocean. The board goes under Jake’s board and sends him flying. He splashes into the water

“Johnny, are you good?” Jake asks.

Johnny splashes out of the water. “Yeah, bro, I’m good.” Red water starts appearing around Johnny. “Well, maybe I’m not fine.” Johnny lifts up his leg and sees a huge gash in his calf.

“Johnny, man, we have to get you to a hospital or at least to shore.”

“Find our boards then, Jake.” Jake looks around for the boards and finds them about 20 yards away.

“I’ll go get them. Wait here, Johnny.” Jake swims over to the boards and gets on his and pulls Johnny’s behind him. “Here you go, man, get on.”

Johnny gets on his board and paddles behind Jake. “Dude, why is it actually starting to hurt?”

“Bro, you’re good. We’re almost there.” Jake says. They look up at the shoreline in the distance.

“Let’s go, man, we are close,” Johnny says. They reach the shore.

Johnny shoots up from bed. “What the hell?”

His girlfriend, Taylor, wakes up. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

“Ugh, same dream again,” Johnny says.

Taylor scoots closer. “It’s okay, baby, you have me.” She snuggles in his arms. Johnny relaxes a bit. “I love you,” he says.

“I love you, too,” she says.

“Taylor, we have to get prepared for the competition today. It starts in four hours,” Johnny says. He picks her up out of bed and puts her in front of her vanity. “It takes you at least four hours to do your makeup and hair.”

“Nuh uh, it only takes me like 30 minutes.”

“It still takes forever, baby.”

They give each other a kiss, and Johnny goes to make breakfast while Taylor stays and gets ready. He makes her a favorite breakfast. “A cheese and bacon omelet. She's amazing,” Johnny says to himself. He puts her breakfast on a plate and puts it on the kitchen island. She walks into the kitchen.

“Well, hello, beautiful,” Johnny says.

“Thank you, handsome,” she says. She eats her breakfast while Johnny gets ready. He comes out with his surfing outfit.

“Let's get going, Taylor,” he says.

They get in her car and head to the beach, which is packed with spectators. “The stands are already filled,” Johnny says. He parks in the surfers' area in the parking lot, where his older brother and his parents, who are oddly silent, are waiting.

“Hey, Jack,” Taylor says.

Johnny gets out of the car. “Hey, big bro,” he says to Jack. They dab each other up. “We all should head in,” Johnny says. They walk in, and the cameras start flashing, mostly focused on Johnny. He waves, and they walk to where the surfers are getting ready. Then, there they see him.

“Jake...” Taylor says.

“I haven't seen him in a year,” Johnny says. He starts getting goosebumps.

“Last time we were here, we both flipped off our boards, and I ended up in the hospital with a coma for a couple of weeks,” he says.

“I think you should stay away, bro,” Jack says to Johnny.

“Yeah, Jack is right, baby,” Taylor says.

“I put your board on the rack,” Jack says.

“Thanks, man, I appreciate it,” Johnny says.

Johnny takes his shirt off and starts walking towards the water. He grabs his board off the rack. “Here goes nothing,” he says. He looks at who he's going against. It's Jake. What happened a year ago replays in Johnny's head.

“Hey, man. It's been a bit,” a familiar voice says behind Johnny. Johnny shakes but turns around. “Oh, hey, Jake,” he says. They shake hands.

“Are you ready, man?” Jake asks.

“Yeah, how about you?” Johnny asks.

“Dude, hell yeah,” he says.

“Well, I wish you luck,” Johnny says.

They head out to the starting line. The race starter comes out with the green flag. “Best of luck to you boys in the first round of this tournament. May the best man win,” he says.

Johnny looks over at the shore and sees his brother and Taylor cheering. The starter starts yelling. "Ready, set, go." The green flag waves, and Jake and Johnny take off. Johnny gets off to an early lead with Jake right behind. *I have to beat him. I have to.* Johnny thinks in his head.

Jake inches a little closer by the first checkpoint. They stay side by side until the second checkpoint, when Jake hits a rough wave and falls back a decent distance. "Shoot, no," Jake yells.

Johnny starts celebrating in his head because he can see the finish line. "Finally, I'm gonna beat him, yes," he says.

Then it happens again. A huge wave knocks Johnny off his board. The board flies up, and Johnny disappears under the waves. Jake, unlike last time, was able to dodge the board and continue on. The audience explodes into screams and cries.

"It happened again, no!" Taylor screams. Jake passes through the finish line, and instead of celebrating, he has a look of agony on his face. "Johnny, no," he says.

The coast guard starts coming in with their boats. Blood starts appearing where Johnny went under. "No, no, come on," Jack says. Two members of the coast guard dive off the boat and into the water. Taylor stands on the shore, shaking, holding on to Jack. The divers pop out of the water with Johnny wrapped around them. "Yes!" Taylor and Jack yell. They climb onto the boat and put Johnny on a stretcher. There is a huge gash on his right

side. The Coast Guard members clean up his wound and start stitching it up. Johnny wakes up. "What the hell?" he says.

The crowd cheers.

"You're on a Coast Guard boat," a member says. "Why?" Johnny asks. "A huge wave hit you, Johnny," a member says.

"I'm gonna lie back down."

Johnny wakes up in his bed late at night. "Where is everyone?" he asks. Then he sees a note on his nightstand: *Baby, I went out to dinner with your parents and your brother. I love you, Taylor.*

"Why, just why, would she leave me alone?" he mutters to himself.

He reaches under his bed and pulls out a cooler disguised as a box. "Finally," he says. He pulls out cans and glass bottles of alcohol. He drinks and drinks. The beer spills a bit on the floor. "Why did Jake beat me? Why did the waves hit me again?" He gets up and walks to the living room with a beer in hand. "Ugh, Taylor is gonna kill me," he says to himself. Then the front door opens. Taylor and his parents walk in.

"Oh, no," Johnny says.

They all gasp. "I'm disappointed in you, son," his parents say.

Taylor speaks eventually. "It's over, Johnny, this is the end." ♡



Gillian Newell
mixed media



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