

# The Lyricist

## 2017



# Reflections



## Editor's Notes/Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to the 2017 Lyricist staff for working unremittingly in putting together this magazine. It has been a pleasure leading you through this year. The talent I've seen in the submissions this year is among the best I've witnessed during my time with the Lyricist.

Your contributions to this edition have made it unique in every way. Thank you to our faculty advisor, Nathan Salsbury. You have gone above the call of duty to ensure that this work came together. Also, thank you

Logan Allen for giving us the perfect cover photo.

For the Lyricist, this year's submissions spoke volumes to the concept of nature and everchanging seasons. The accompanying artwork we received provided us with a clear direction for this edition- a year of reflections. So find a comfortable seat, pour yourself a cup of coffee, and reflect with us. In reading this year's edition of The Lyricist, you may experience a spectrum of emotion in reading some of these works, but maybe, just maybe, that is the intent of what we did. We hope that in your reflection you find this to be cathartic and rejuvenating.

Co-editors: Taylor Mckaig & Jaimee Sharp

Assistant Editor : Olivia Briere

2017 Staff

Jordan Upton

Julia Kirl

Candace Kinney-Wood

Jacob Guthrie

Emily Stuckey

Mitchell Payne was a staff member for 2015-16, but was not listed among the staffers.

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“A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those dark, clustered houses encloses it.”  
-Charles Dickens

POETRY

# Demons and Saints

Jaimee Sharp

Far from the saintly picture that was painted on me,  
I'm just a little closer to becoming  
the monster that I've always wanted to be;  
The devil and god are raging inside of me  
and the winner is still unclear.

Thrown to the devil by those I love,  
been branded as his snake,  
yet I know not how to bite, how to tempt.  
My reputation of evil is a falsehood,  
like my reputation of good,  
made of misconceptions, my good intentions warped to ill.  
The darkness inside of me equals my light,  
damning me to a life of balancing between the two,  
light and dark, morals and desires,  
damning me to a life of humanity.

Aren't we all just snakes branded by the devil?  
Get off of your righteous throne and accept your true nature;  
There's no such thing as a demons or saints;  
There are just human beings.



Citation: The devil and god are raging inside of me(line 4) is a quote from the Brand New album of the same name

# Autumn's Rain

Ashleigh Bildeau

The lake is still beneath the morning chill.  
Confetti of fall descends, that bittersweet death  
those tender temporal breaths  
stirring ripples on the watery face.

Confetti of fall descends, that bittersweet death  
Walking alone; ghostly toes dip in,  
stirring ripples on the watery face.  
Sweet birth of spring and summer's youth have passed.

Walking alone; ghostly toes dip in  
the puddles where her face blooms.  
Sweet birth of spring and summer's youth have passed.  
She crosses Autumn's bridge.

The puddles where her face blooms  
are reflections of her mother's rose cheeks and green eyes.  
She crosses Autumn's bridge  
over that gorge: the unknown divide.

The lake is still beneath the morning chill.  
Death has sealed childish days  
those tender temporal breaths  
evaporate in the autumn rain.



## Black Dog

ELLEN LOCKE

The Black Dog comes to claim you as his hostage  
and, vanquished, to his prison you retreat.  
I reach for you through your mind's concertina  
while silent tears fall, soul-tinged, at my feet.

My line of love extends as life preserver  
but, wearied by the battle, you are weak  
and can't sustain the grasp that would unite us,  
nor reinforce shared peace we sadly seek.

How can I lift you from the darkness  
when cold apathy is keeping me at bay?  
I feel at times I lack the strength to hold you  
and, submitting to the Dog, you'll slip away.



# BLEACH BLOOD

*Anonymous*

There's blood on the floor  
There's blood on my legs  
More blood than I ever saw before  
Even more blood than I saw that night  
Saw that night  
Bleach out my brain like I do the blood  
I'm sure they'd want this as evidence  
Since the events need to be convinced  
And I'm the criminal  
'Cause I'm not a damned virgin saint  
The smell's enough to faint  
Yet I'm the feint  
Hell, can I feint this shit?  
Still, I don't want to use it  
Seems too brutal  
Bleach out the blood  
Is it something I can enjoy destroying  
Or something I can be destroyed in losing?  
I guess it's both -part devil -part me  
How can I decide?  
Just bleach it out -the blood -my brain  
Wipe it clean, burn it clean  
Nothing left but the stain on my skin  
The stain of bleach-blood seeping in

No one else peeping in  
All alone to lick my wounds and  
count my losses  
I'm staring at my empty crosses  
You can never get out the stain

# Sleeping With the Reaper

Sara Sellers

Late at night, the moon wears  
red lipstick and peeps  
in my window. I lie dreaming  
of a black cloak slumbering  
on my floor. Sheet white bones  
caress covered hips,  
sockets lock with mine.

\*This poem was missattributed in the 2016 edition, we  
are sincerely sorry



# The Story Teller

Anonymous

Mistress of words  
Killer of Knights  
Maker of kings  
Lover of light  
Look at the world  
And see on all your own  
Whisper to the wind  
The spells you have sewn  
See new colours  
Rename the moon  
Sing songs of fallen heroes  
Whose deaths came too soon  
You're the teller of stories  
Keeper of secrets and lies  
May your stories live forever  
May your words never die

# CHURCH

Julia Kirl

I once came here  
Young and naïve  
In a little back room  
I was told of Him  
But it was far from here  
Where I found Him  
Not knowing  
I would reappear  
Like a flower  
With many scars  
I returned to those doors  
Sitting in a familiar place  
I had been here before  
They knew





# Winter Storm

Ellen Locke

Beads of ice stubbornly suspend from barren branches.  
Independent snowflakes tumble from grave grey skies,  
merging quietly into a soft blanket  
that cloaks the frozen ground.  
Leaves drooping, shrubs yield without a fight  
to their icy conqueror, yet their glaze,  
reflecting every glimmer of light,  
creates an almost radiant defiance.  
Children smear peepholes on breath-fogged glass,  
gather thoughts of sledding and snowballs  
along with their boots and hats and wooly gloves,  
ready to add the echo of their laughter,  
the crystal-clear sounds of their pleasure,  
to the cold, unfriendly atmosphere,  
mocking the gloom of the silent attack  
of the winter storm.



## **Snow**

o.k.Briere

**Sitting and typing  
Staring at blank screens,  
I daydream of the world outside  
Of snow covered fields  
And stars that shine bright.  
I want to be out there in the cold.  
But here I am in hot weather,  
Staring at snow.**





Something the stars couldn't chart  
Some hidden part of my destiny  
Couldn't rest at ease. It rips  
At my breast for a recipe  
Some potion for antipathy  
Which  
Puts into motion  
A curse of devotion  
Devoid of Emotion  
And  
You're stuck shackled to a pumpkin  
Because you pluck a poison apple  
And as you grapple at the magic  
Turns out pixie dust is tragic  
And  
Life is really savage  
The pumpkin's just a cabbage  
And everything is nothing  
But he was really something  
A prince turned toad  
Stick that sword back in the stone  
Now  
You're prone to believing  
At least, in the tower, you had some power  
Let's go back to the time when  
The mirror said you're fairest  
I was so damn careless  
Instead of sitting on this terrace and  
Wishing I could truly perish  
I guess dreams really don't come true.

*Dreams Really Don't Come True*

# Warm Hearts, Cold World

*Tia Moore*

I am not merely a women or a girl  
I can't be defined by my complexion or my curls  
I can't be defined by my clothes or shoes  
But more so by the action that I choose

Not merely by how I talk but rather by how I speak  
Not merely by how I walk but rather by the knowledge I seek  
By the way that I treat my fellow young man, woman, boy or  
girl  
And by how I'm a warm heart in a cold world

Don't look at me and be turned off by my demeanor  
Just because you've looked doesn't mean you've seen her  
For everything you see- there is 8 times that underneath  
Every person is more than just a head, shoulders, knees and  
feet

I think these days it takes a trained eye to see value  
In things that don't add monetarily to you  
Nowadays, loyal, caring love are rare pearls  
Often possessed by warm hearts in a cold world



# Fairy Circle

Ashleigh Bilodeau

Rain cascades into the night  
dew twinkles on the grass 'neath the full moon  
that silver song of celestial might  
calling for the fae: the wild and free.

Dew twinkles on the grass 'neath the full moon  
magic morphs tree roots with moss  
calling for the fae: the wild and free  
starlight stirring steps, creation of a ring.

Magic morphs tree roots with moss  
mischievous fairies slide to the ground  
starlight stirring steps, creation of a ring  
fungal pearls popping from their sleep.

Mischievous fairies slide to the ground.  
They scatter enchanting dust as they dance  
Fungal pearls popping from their sleep:  
A ceremony of portal dreams complete.

They scatter enchanting dust as they dance  
stroking grass harps as they prance.  
A ceremony of portal dreams complete  
a pathway to another world at their feet.

Rain cascades into the night  
and the stars whisper with mid-summer zeal  
that silver song of celestial might  
as fairies withdraw before the ethereal light.

# PERPECTIVE

**Stephanie Yun**

It was only for that one drunk night  
For you  
And I told myself this every night, but  
Sometimes things that show are here to  
stay  
Otherwise it wouldn't hurt so badly.  
The fear was still there, but  
Perhaps, I thought, it was real this time  
around.  
You're not like the others...  
You wouldn't leave me, right?  
I thought to myself  
As you held my hand, and  
You promised me forever,  
So, I'll never forget that one drunk night.

Note: now read from the bottom line up for a different  
"Perspective".

The Sea is low,  
But my Spirits lower  
As I swim through the currents  
And to the reefs I then cower.

My reflections I evade,  
Surrounded with bodies  
That swim just fine  
With no commodities.

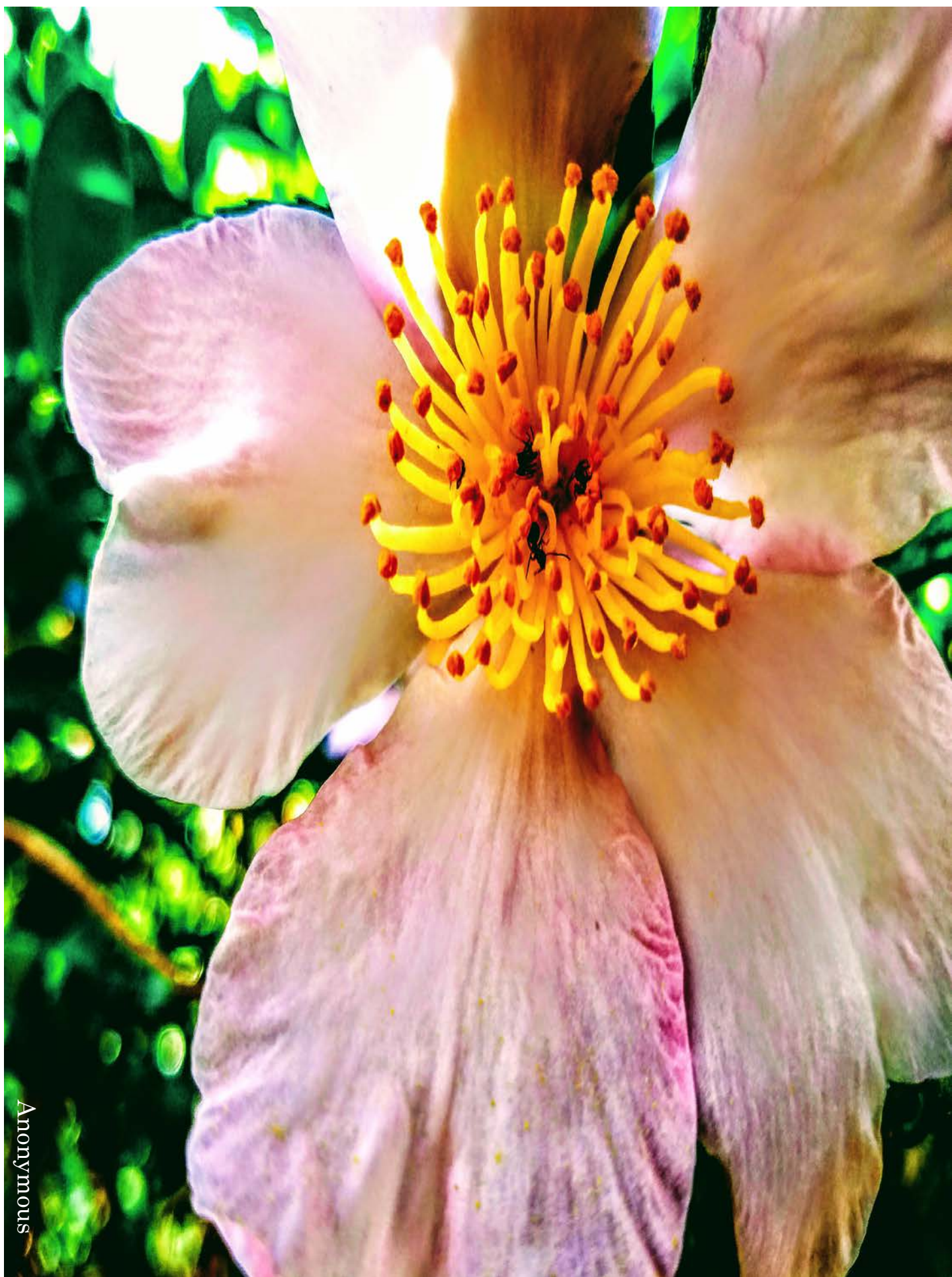
Yet, here I squirm  
Through the Ocean blue—  
To match the color  
Of my mood.

Now , I am but  
A small, unabled body  
With permanent scars  
To showcase my hobby.

So if I fall now  
Down the fiery abyss,  
We shall both rest assured  
This fish will not be missed;

For the true saying goes:  
There are plenty of fish in the Sea.

FIN  
Stephanie Yun



Anonymous

# Meditation

Nadine Johnson

Fell into the ocean,  
Immersed my spirit.

I say to you: I'm here now. Words no longer necessary.

You know. Always have we been together.

I feel myself, the water makes me weightless.  
Warm and perfect, no borders between us.

I'm home.

And you embrace me.





# **I AM SOMEBODY**

Tia Moore

I am somebody, many friends or few,  
Whether my circle is old or new  
Taken for granted or appreciated  
When it's over, I will cream "I made it"  
Because I am somebody

When my so called friends walk away  
Whether tears or smiles end my day  
Whether I'm happy or whether I'm sad  
Feeling lonely or with the best thing I never had  
I am somebody

When I can't seem to hold my head up  
When the tears flow with my mouth shut  
When I put effort to love everyone else  
Just to be left all by myself  
I am still somebody

When the cares of the world weigh me down  
And I can't sleep or eat but only wear a frown  
When the turbulence of life is like the eye of the  
storm  
And I feel like Dorothy- a long way from home  
I am still somebody

Sometimes I have to beg and plead  
And ask God, why me?  
He just says stand through the pain  
And praise through the rain  
Because I'm teaching you "you are somebody"

Twenty years and still learning who I am  
I know for my life, God has a plan  
But in my desire for accomplishment, I succumb to  
haste  
And jump over steps God wants me to take  
But regardless to the consequence I am somebody

So to my brothers and sisters who listen or read  
Don't feel like you are less because of someone else's  
greed

Don't think less of self if you are taken for granted  
Many don't know how to appreciate the blessings  
they're handed

Regardless, everyday  
Remind yourself and say

*I am somebody*

## A Gust Of Wind

Carrington Davis

As The Air Fans My Face Rapidly  
I Feel Lighter Than Ever Before  
The Hurt, The Shame,  
The Heartache & Pain,  
Relinquishes itself from me,  
For I Will Not Feel The Same Anymore.

As My Fingertips Cut Through the Open Air  
I Stare In The Blanks of the Forest Trees  
No Longer In Envy, For I Am Free.

No longer Weighed Down  
By The Gravity of Tribulation  
But Made New Through the baptism  
Of This Fresh Air.  
Blowing Through My Fro,  
I Am A New Me.

Not Feeling Depressed,  
I have Surpassed That  
In Fact, I Am Gone With The Wind  
As They Would Say,  
Letting The Breeze Intercede,  
Purging Anything That Is Unclean Within Me.  
A Gust Of Wind Has Saved Me.

# Something

O.k Briere

Give me something with **color**.  
Something that will make me believe,  
**In rainbows and unicorns,**  
A world with no disease.

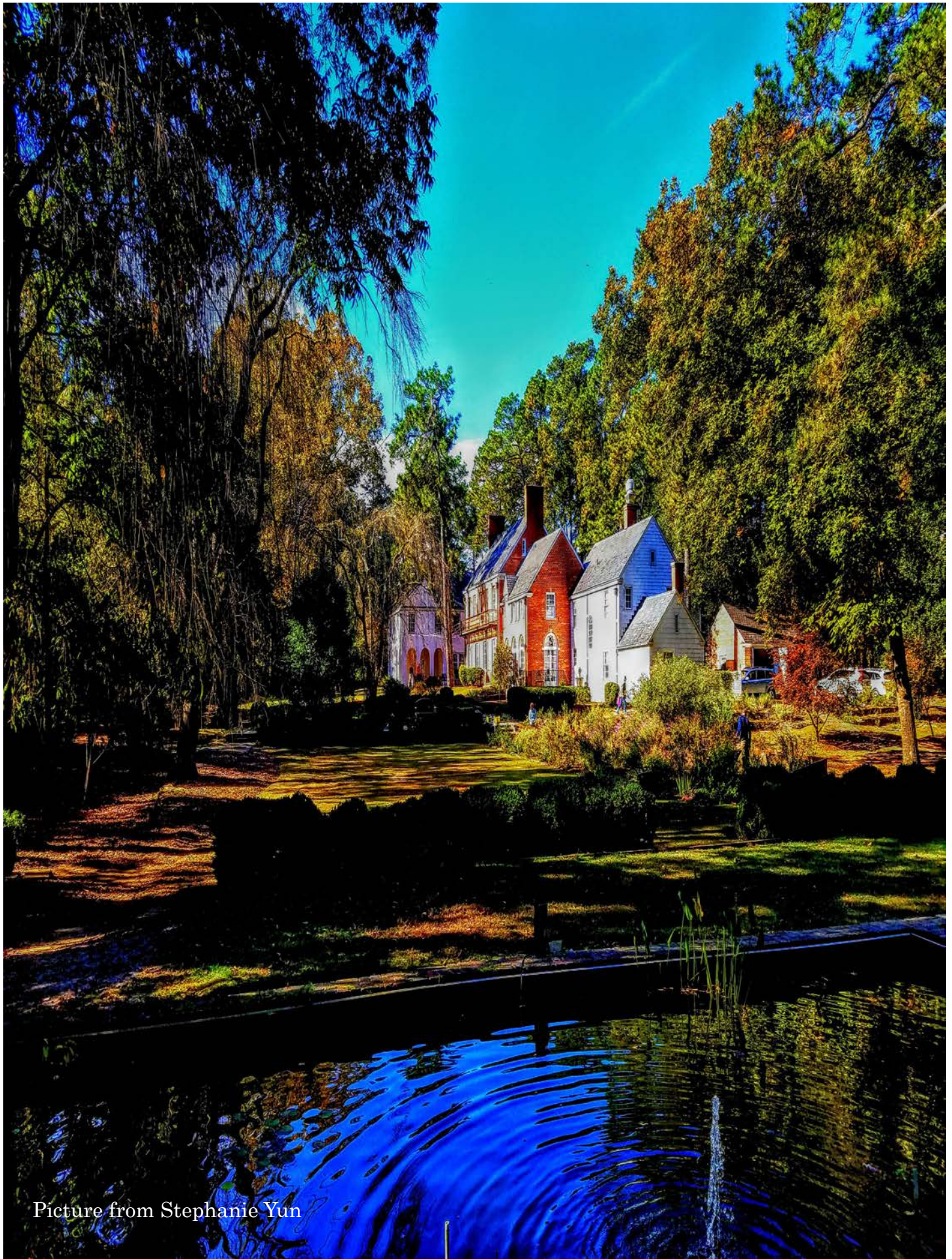
Give me something with **style**  
To make me feel alive.  
To remind me I am pretty  
And so I may smile all the time.

Give me something silver  
For I will never ask for gold.  
It will remind me of the stars at night  
And make me yearn for home.

Give me something brilliant,  
Something subtle,  
One of a kind.

Give me some resilience  
So I may also speak my mind.  
Give me something fragile  
So I can hold it up on high.  
To remind me of the little things  
I never more shall see.





Picture from Stephanie Yun



# Untitled Haiku

Ellen Locke



# Freckles

Chris West

From the tip of your nose to the edge of that,  
Crooked little smile that somehow drives me wild.  
Your skin is painted with cute little freckles,  
Like a constellation in the night sky.

I'm mesmerized by that diagonal line that,  
Stretches across your illuminating face.  
That smile! It is like the brightest star in the night sky,  
that could lead shepherds and wise men to the feet of Christ.

True beauty is the only way one could describe your eyes,  
For, oh my, what a dazzling shine.  
Like shooting stars that flash across the most magnificent of skies,  
Those eyes brighten up my day on the darkest of nights.



picture from Julia Kni



# “Timeless”

Pledger, Niyah

Time is inevitable, the hour is impeccable and with every minute you must in it and if you're not in it then you're out and if you're then your time was wasted. Time is money and its not to be wasted but with the lack of sleep I've been getting the sweet ever green I should've been tasted, but no that's not the case so I must not be on time.

So I'm stuck being late trying to reciprocate the day of yesterday, which bleed on to my today and is starting to look a lot like tomorrow. Playing catch up with the sands of time hoping to see a glimpse of yesterday.

But, that bus already left and I'll probably miss the next one coming because no matter how hard I pray there's still only 24 hours in a day.

Now imagine if time stopped there will be no watches, no alarms and no coo-coo clocks. Just the moon and the sun setting and rising as they please letting us know the difference between night and day, but the actual hour there's no need.

Now call me crazy but this is my world of perfection, no recollection, no question and no obsession with the hour.

Now that non worry some feeling that's your true power because father time is a simple reminder not the revolution of our day.

What time is it? It doesn't matter because I am timeless in every way.



Prose



# **A Photographer Without Her Camera**

**Chris West**

For never had I an encounter so tragic as a photographer without her camera. What a tragedy for such a fleeting moment to occur without the focus lens focused in on the moment that fades away forever.

If a tree falls in a forest yet no camera captures its immaculate beauty, did that tree ever stand so proud at all? What a horrible thing to have happen, that such an image was to stand proud in its single moment in the pond of time, yet gone the next day without regret or significance. How ironic that such a magnificent frame is not captured or encapsulated by an equally picturesque moment. For something to have lived so strong and wild with nothing to record the occasion. A fall without a winter. A frame without its' picture.

The beauty of life is captured in a single blurry photo without a filter. The true second of conception that wastes away into the gray and black tints of nothing in the most private corridors of our memories. Unparalleled in its spectacular gust of existence. Such a travesty has occurred when a breathtaking skyline just evaporates through the sight of your eye's plight. Further into our memories diminished light. That such a beautiful hue of color would be skewed to fit such an unsettling view as that of our fading mind that is forever made anew.

When even the most amazing frame with the brightest of shades is to depart with no name. As though the parade has come to a final close. What a shame. The door is shut and blinds are drawn. The final seed is sown. The masquerade evades into the dark withdraws of history with nothing to remember that perfect moment. What a shame. That all is lost with no way to redraw it, least not in the picturesque moment or frame. No for this moment will never be the same. What a shame.



For I have never had an encounter so tragic as a photographer without her camera.

# THE BOY WHO LEFT TRICKLETREE -A FAIRY TALE-

Austin Maynor

Holland had always lived in the small village of Trickle tree. As a child, he showed great interest in arithmetic and debate, and his future was promising. As Holland grew, he discovered his ability to think, love, and have faith. One warm afternoon in the middle of May, many of the children his age waded into the pond at the base of the river while all the adults watched from the shore. Grinning widely, all of the children giggled with delight as they splashed each other with the cool, clear water. Eventually, a tall, pleasant woman everyone called Mother Meredith followed them into the pond while balancing a large clay pot on top of her head. The children kept splashing each other as well as Mother Meredith, and Mother Meredith smiled sweetly.

"Come, lovely children!," called Mother Meredith through her wide smile, showing a broad array of teeth as white as cow's milk. "Come deeper into the pond, and join me." Just then, she took the large bucket from atop her head, and dropped it into the water long enough to fill it to the brim. Lifting it up out of the water, Mother Meredith traveled around to each of the children, pouring the cool water over their heads and torsos until it met the water now standing at their wastes. When she finished, she placed the bucket back on her head and wiped the water from their eyelids. As she did this, she said, "Child of God, you are loved. You are accepted. You are cherished. Go forth from this clear water into gracious care." At the end, Mother Meredith came to Holland's side. He closed his eyes, breathed in the air, and listened joyfully as his faith was affirmed, declaring him to be beloved. Then he stood still as he felt the water fall down around his body. When all of this was finished, the children joined the adults for a

feast of bread and wine.

Year after year, Holland continued to grow taller and smarter, eventually becoming taller than his own father. With this growth, he realized that he had become uninterested in Trickle tree. To him, everything about it was lifeless, boring, and stale. One morning, Holland awoke and knew that he had experienced enough; it was time to leave. He packed a small bag and stepped out the front door of his childhood home right as the sun began to peek over the mountains. His walk out the door quickly evolved into a sprint up the hill that led into the mysterious Azlethorne Forest.

Almost out of breath, Holland entered a small opening in the forest, and began maneuvering himself through sharp thorns and dried thistle. The path eventually became easier, and though it was getting very dark under the pine canopy, Holland's speed had increased to a slow jog until he slipped on a sheet of hazelnuts and began to slide down a long ravine. His fall lasted for what felt like several minutes until it ended abruptly when it was stopped by an enormous stump. The ground surrounding the stump was littered with fallen leaves and decaying tree bark. He lie there for a moment catching his breath. He stared up into the heavy branches above his head, wondering where he was.

"Where am I?" he asked himself. "What am I going to do? What is my purpose? What am I supposed to become? Who am I?"

After he asked himself these questions, Holland became dizzy and disheartened. He wondered where he would go and how he would survive in his new life. Just then, he heard a rustle in the bushes. Something was moving. Something - now somebody - was talking. He had heard these words throughout his childhood. The voice was deep and dramatic. I cried out,

"But now thus says the Lord,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
'Fear not, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.'"

Holland watched the tall weeds and gooseberry bushes down the ravine start to shift, as if they were being moved by someone's hand. He concluded that the hand that must belong to the voice. Then he could see the cattails move, and he knew that this prophetic voice was getting closer. The voice continued,

"When you pass through the waters, I will  
be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be  
burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.  
Because you are precious in my eyes,  
and honored, and I love you,  
I give men in return for you,  
peoples in exchange for your life."

The voice was closer than ever before. He could see the cattails shifting again, and he watched as the thorns near his feet got pushed to the side. Still, he could not see the embodiment of the voice. It kept on,

"Fear not, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you.  
I will say to the north, Give up,  
and to the south, Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from afar  
and my daughters from the end of the  
earth,  
everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.

As he finished his last sentence, the voice finally appeared, crawling out from underneath a Rhododendron leaf. There, on the moist soil, a small earwig stood on his hind feet. The earwig was elaborately dressed in a red robe with a golden stole. Out from under the robe rose his mighty, curved forceps. The preaching earwig peered up at Holland curiously.

"Greetings, fair creature!", said the insect. "I am Eustace. I am vicar of Earthen Cathedral across Golden Pond at the east end of Azzlethorne Forest. Who are you?"

"I am Holland. I am from - no, I'm not. I'm - I've just left Trickle-tree Village. I've lived there for my entire life, but I have grown weary, Eustace. I dream of success, intelligence, and prestige. My people - or, I should say, those people, - are tied up in memories and mundane life. I found no place with them anymore, so I left."

Eustace did not say anything. Instead, he stood on the soil with his small head leaned to the right side, listening thoughtfully.

"I'm staring into an unknown future", the boy continued. "I just don't know what I'll do. I want to belong. I long to find myself in a field without so many thorns, but finding that field frightens me. Tomorrow morning, when I stare into my reflection as I bend across the pool to wash my face, I

want to recognize the face staring back at me. I don't know who he is anymore, Eustace."

Eustace cleared his throat. Holland could see Eustace's small eyes gazing into his own like small pieces of shining onyx. He knew that Eustace had something important to say, so Holland stooped to the ground and listened closely.

"Consider your life, my boy", admonished the earwig. "Consider yourself through Another's eyes. Consider your place through Another's perspective. You will not find yourself in the midst of all these trees. The question remains, young Holland. Who... Are... You?"

Holland stood to his feet and stared down at the bug doubtfully. Eustace reminded him of the simple superstition and the musty anti-intellectualism that hung over Trickle-tree. He needed to find the trail. He had to go. As Holland turned away from Eustace, he heard the earwig gasp.

"Look up, brother!", Eustace shouted, pointing his small finger to the sky.

Just then, Holland quickly turned his head upward to notice a large water drop falling straight toward his head. Closing his eyes tightly, he felt it splash against his forehead and slide across his eyelids. It cascaded down his hair and trickled onto his shoulders, dripping down his body until he was drenched. Holland stood still, remembering the pond and Mother Meredith. He recalled the joy that flowed like warm honey into his heart. The water gradually stopped running down his eyelids, and Holland opened his eyes. He looked down to the soil where Eustace stood with head bowed. As his small head lifted, Holland noticed that Eustace was smiling.

"Child of God," Eustace began, "You are loved. You are accepted. You are cher-

ished. Go from this clear water into gracious care."

At that moment, Holland watched as the decayed leaves and tree bark beneath his feet were transformed into bright wildflowers. Taking Eustace's blessing, he ran back out of the woods by the same route, dancing excitedly as he went. With surprising energy, he sped up the ravine, trampling hazelnuts as he ran. As he ran back through the Azzlethorne Forest, Holland noticed that the woods were now filled with red roses. Growing in between trees and flourishing in streams, the red roses had bloomed until each one was ten feet wide. The sea of crimson stretched for miles and miles until Holland could see no more.

When Holland reached the end of the forest, he poked through the hedge and stepped back into Trickle-tree. He watched as the garden gnomes picked cabbages and collard greens from the back fields of town, one of them stopping his work to look out at the figure who had just emerged from the forest. Holland waved and kept walking. As he walked, he noticed that most of his childhood friends had grown up to become candlestick makers, bakers, undertakers, and farmers. He did not know how much longer he would stay in Trickle-tree. He did know, however, that he loved these people. They were his community, and here, he found gracious care.

When Holland got back to his childhood home, he touched the door knob, still wet from the morning dew. The dew reminded him of the promise that had followed him for so long. Child of God, you are loved. You are accepted. You are cherished. Go forth from this clear water into gracious care. He remembered Mother Meredith and Eustace. He remembered their love, and he smiled.

Holland opened the door and met the

warm embrace of his aging parents. They sat him down to a dinner of boiled cranberries, roasted chicken, red wine, and a delicious loaf of hot bread encrusted with herbs and dipped in olive oil. There at that table, he fed on the divine promise in his heart. Holland was never so thankful in all his life.

As he ate, Holland watched raindrops begin to splatter against the dining room window. Outside, the florist hurriedly cut off the prettiest lilacs from the bushes and the farmhands hastily moved the hay bales into the barn to keep them from getting wet. Holland watched them and remembered all that he had learned. They, too, lived under the watery promise. But in the end, they are the ones who ultimately must choose for themselves whether they, too, will dance in the rain.

Inspired by Lewis Carroll

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# Children of Prey

Catie Godbold

The wolves are knocking on the door, and part of Lightfoot, knowing full well they will eat her alive, wants to open the door. Their knocks reverberate throughout the ranch house and no other sound answers back, only Lightfoot and her pack of strays are in the house. She paces back and forth in front of the door, occasionally ruffling her hair in an attempt at self-comfort. Realistically, she knows she shouldn't open the door for the sake of her own mind but, being a being of human perversity, she struggles with the desire to just let the wolves in to devour her whole. There is always a sense of peace that comes with submitting to pack mentality, and Lightfoot secretly yearns for it.

Eventually however, her indecision is met with a blessing: the knocking ceases. Lightfoot chokes at the newfound silence and shakily wipes away the sweat accumulating on her forehead with the sleeve of her flannel, repeating the action on her slickened glasses. She struggles to regain her calm, breathing uneven and sweat not stopping, but does successfully leave the doorway. All of her strays, a pack of five dogs, lay on the floor in front of the fireplace's warmth. Aside from the eldest, a graying brown retriever who stares straight ahead at the dwindling red-gold embers within the fireplace, their heads are lifted and watching their master. When Lightfoot sits on the couch, their heads drop back down but some ears stay pricked and some eyes continue observing should they be needed.

As she sits, she remembers the yearning to open her home to the wolves, immediately recognizing the attraction of the self-destructiveness, and is ashamed for even considering such an option. A mixture of burning embarrassment and roiling disgust boil hot and heavy in the pits of her stomach, finally causing her to vomit half-digested rabbit stew and beer across the wooden flooring. She has to press her palms against the sides of her head to hold back some of her hair and keep her glasses

on as she leans forward until everything inside her completely bottoms out.

It's not long until she starts to cry over the mess she has made.

-

Maria gently knocks on the door of the ranch house again before shoving her hand back into the warm

"I did not sign up for this," she complains, her breath churning white in the cold air, as she shivers and rubs her hands against fabric for warmth. She's standing on the porch and, while she can appreciate the rustic log cabin aesthetic, she'd much rather be back home curled up on her couch beneath multiple fleece blankets. A request from her adviser had landed her here, far from the familiarity of the city.

Right as she contemplates the visit being a lost cause, she hears barking from deeper in the forest to her right, and turns away from the door just in time to see a dog break through the barrier of trees around the ranch. As it moves closer, Maria isn't so sure it's a dog so much as an ugly, misshapen beast. There are large patches of fur missing on its body, showing pale discolored skin on almost half its head and side. Much to her chagrin, the beast immediately notices her presence and heads straight for her. Maria yelps and clambers on top of the porch railing, desperate to get away and utterly failing as the dog reaches her and successfully licks one of her hands clinging to the wood. "Down!" She yells, but the dog just leans upright with its front paws against the banister and looks up at her with a perpetually lopsided smile, revealing more teeth than natural because some skin along with fur is missing on one side of its face. She utterly shrieks when the dog tries to nuzzle her with the side of its head and she feels the shredded nub of a mostly-missing ear rub against her. Her heart feels ready to burst out of her chest, pounding against her ribcage, and she thinks, 'I'm going to have a goddamn panic attack. Right here, right now.'

Then she hears a low laugh followed by the familiar sound of a catcall whistle, and the scarred dog abandons her, bounding away and down the porch steps to its master, a woman with disheveled curly hair, thick-rimmed black glasses, and copper skin. There are three more dogs now, Maria notes with disdain, and only one of them is cute and small. The dogs surround their master, occasionally barking, but mostly sniffing at one another and leaving Maria alone.

With the sudden and unwanted attention diverted off her, Maria tries to right her breathing and continues clutching to the railing as her heart

slows and the shivering lessens. Part of her wishes she could make herself recover quickly just for the chance to get down and smack the smile off the other woman's face. Maria knows she couldn't stand straight right now even if she tried, and this woman is smiling down at the dog with its ugly mug of a face and lovingly petting it on the head right beside the misshapen ear Maria had touched earlier.

She shudders at the memory.

"You're one of Dr. Trussel's teaching assistants, right?" The woman asks, finally looking back up at Maria.

"Yes," Maria answers, breathy from her earlier fear and the exasperation she now feels regarding her supposed mentor who put her in this situation in the first place.

"You probably murdered a cat in your past life to wind up that unlucky," The woman says, and walks up onto the porch, opening the front door and letting the dogs run inside. Maria feels the warmth the interior of the house exudes, but she doesn't dare move from her safe perch just yet, waiting for the threat of danger to be gone and dogs to be safely locked away.

Not all of the canines seem to be satisfied with leaving Maria alone however. The runt of the pack, the small and cutely curled dog, plops down between the two women, expectantly looking up at Maria. Initially, she glares at the little dog, but it seems oblivious to her wariness.

"Do little ones bother you?" The dog-master asks, still holding the door ajar for the dog. "She won't jump if you hold her. Might lick though." Maria glares more at the beast, but ultimately gives in, grumbling to herself about the rabid monstrosities, and slides off the porch railing. The dog immediately scoots across the floor and paws at her leg, wanting to be held. Maria looks down at it and clicks her tongue but still decides to kneel down and, somewhat shakily, scoop the little dog into her arms. It's black all over except for a patch of white on its chest. "I wouldn'ta laughed at you earlier when I was coming up if I had known dogs in general made you anxious. Hades in there tends to freak people out in general, so I try to just get a good laugh out of it." Maria doesn't know whether to blush at the consideration of the first statement or blanch at the frankness of the latter. In the end, she settles for slight bewilderment regarding...well, everything.

"Does random grad students showing up on your doorstep not bother you?" The woman shuts the door to her house and leans back against it, shrugging.

"It's not as uncommon an occurrence as you might think. I normally just don't answer the door," she says the last bit with a smile to her voice as she walks away from the door, moving beside Maria but looking out across the snow-covered yard rather than at her. "You caught me just as I was coming back from walking the dogs."

"Dr. Trussel said you canceled classes for the week. And weren't answering her calls. Or responding to emails." Maria tightened her arms around the dog, holding it closer in an attempt at more warmth for the both of them. "She was getting concerned. How do you keep your job if this has happened before?" Maria knew there were sporadic professors who would cancel class on a whim, but being known for canceling classes and hiding out from colleagues to the point where they send grad students after you clearly didn't look good on a resume.

"By never missing enough that it causes problems for the entire semester and making sure the students are happy enough to leave good reviews at the end of the year."

"Then why even bother to send me?" Maria asks, turning to the side and looking at the other woman's portrait. The copper skin and messy dark hair are a stark contrast to the white of snow and dark green of trees behind her, and, for a moment, Maria is a little in awe at how pretty the woman looks despite wearing enough flannel to be mistaken for a fucking lumberjack. If it wasn't for the glasses on her face and messy hair, Maria would never expect her to be a professor. (Maria has found that, over the years, professors tend to either not have hair or have it in a constantly disheveled state. She aimed to not be one of those professors, but she found it to be true nonetheless.) The more she gazes at the other woman though, the more she questions how large their age difference is. Even this close, she didn't really see many lines in the woman's face.

"I...have been cutting it a little close. She's just trying to keep an eye on me. I did my assistantship under her, so she still feels somewhat responsible for my well-being."

"Oh." The cogs in Maria's mind finally click into place, and the clockwork starts piecing together stories Maria has heard Dr. Trussel tell about former students, specifically stories revolving around a student who had a nasty habit of skipping class when finals season hit—not because of procrastination, but because their social anxiety shot through the roof with the added stress—and how they practically went into hiding when it came time to finish their big thesis for the Masters program.

"You wouldn't happen to be, uh, different would you?" Maria asks, and the professor finally turns, directly facing her with an eyebrow raised.

"How did you not realize that while you were driving at least thirty minutes away from civilization to a ranch where the only thing around for miles is forest all to go visit a professor who, you know, has been mysteriously missing in action all week?"

"Well, Trussel said she was pretty sure you were alive and missing class willingly—possibly down with a cold—and, honestly, I didn't ask too many questions. You know that woman. This is not the most unorthodox thing I have ever been asked to do. By. far."

"Did you even ask my name?" Maria made a little affronted noise at the question.

"Your name is Miss Eve Lightfoot and I am personally offended you thought less of me." Lightfoot, at least, has the decency to look down, but there's no hiding the slight smile playing on her lips. "I bet you don't even know my name!" Maria says, not sure if she's motivated more by her own indignation at the other woman's claim or if it's just her personal inclination for the melodramatic flaring up.

"Not true," Lightfoot says with a smirk and looks back at Maria. "Maria. Del Mar. Got your undergrad at Berkley. Last I heard, you were trying to figure out how to work your love for puns into your thesis."

"Ya know, when I was coming up here, I was worried you may have been murdered. Clearly, I should have been more worried you were a murderer. Any bodies belonging to Dr. Trussel's previous grad students buried out here?" The joke earns her a laugh, and now Maria is torn between being absolutely elated that she made an older, beautiful woman laugh or that her mentor is unashamed enough to actually talk about her in public. Either way, she's momentarily dazed and almost misses Lightfoot's answer.

"Nah. You just came up in one or two department meetings. Adjunct or not, I get stuck hearing these things."

Maria has to give herself a mental slap to the head. 'Right. Department meetings. Professor. School things. Superior. Here on a mission,' she thinks and reminds herself to get back on topic before she starts unashamedly checking out a professor.

"So, you're alive and will in fact be holding your classes next week?" At the question, the small dog in arms barks and Maria almost drops it, having temporarily forgotten she was holding it. Lightfoot makes the



move to rush forward and catch it, but stops herself when she realizes Maria has regained her bearings.

"Primrose, I just saw your life flash before my eyes." Lightfoot scratches the dog, who is back to being comfortably seated in Maria's arms, behind the ears and leans against the railing once more. Maria actually snorts at the name, which is a stark difference to the aforementioned Hades. "You are free to report back to Trussel that I am very much so alive and well, and will be holding classes next week."

"Alright. Will definitely do. Though I've got one more question. Why did you cancel classes this week in the first place?" Maria asks, and there is such a pregnant pause Maria questions if she even spoke in the first place. She realizes it was probably a loaded question, especially if Lightfoot is the student with the anxiety Trussel has mentioned in the past, but then Maria makes eye contact with Lightfoot and knows for a fact the question has already been asked. She doesn't try to take the question back, genuinely curious at this point and somewhat confident enough that she'll get some kind of answer if she's patient, and scratches Primrose behind the ear like Lightfoot had done earlier. The action immensely pleases the little dog, who licks at Maria's hand while it's in reach. Of course by proxy, in the way owners and their pets are in tuned, it pleases Lightfoot as well. Enough that she answers, in fact.

"I started applying for Ph.D programs recently." Maria notices the way the woman's hand grips the railing tighter. "Caused my anxiety levels to fucking explode. It got bad enough that I caved and decided to cancel for the week. It won't happen again," Lightfoot says, and Maria isn't sure if Lightfoot is trying to reassure her that or herself.

Apparently, Maria's face gives her thoughts away, and Lightfoot sighs before adding with the wave of a hand for emphasis, "It won't happen again this semester. No matter what. You can tell Trussel that." Maria softly smiles out of sympathy, wondering how Lightfoot has dealt with the anxiety in the past or if she's ever had a panic attack as well. She wonders how many people Lightfoot has told.

She wonders if Dr. Trussel sent her here on purpose.

Part of Maria thinks the entire situation is incredibly cruel if Trussel knew, and her stomach clenches uncomfortably. She fuckin' hates talking about her own problems. She supposes she probably deserves this for asking Lightfoot the question in the first place since she already had a good idea what was going on.

She hates talking about her own problems, her old problems, her cur-

rent problems, but she sees Lightfoot actually fidgeting in front of her after the statement she made and decides maybe it's worth resurfacing some bad memories if it'll help someone.

Maybe.

"I...medicate," she finally gets out and makes just enough eye contact with Lightfoot to know she heard her, to know she's listening. Lightfoot nods her head, and Maria continues on. "It gets me through the school year pretty well. I had to do a lot of exposure therapy when I was younger though. Had a counselor who would go out with me in controlled situations until I was comfortable enough to do stuff on my own. Still can't go to parties with a lot of strangers though. Always end up puking in the bathroom before the night is out and my heart feels like it's about to explode." Primrose actually snuggles closer to her chest as she continues, but an uneasy floating feeling still starts to form. It's as though heavy lead butterflies are fluttering within her stomach but occasionally deciding they just want to stop and dip low, making the discomfort worsen. The entire thing is all oddly reminiscent to the feeling one gets right as the chair you're in starts to tip over, but on a smaller scale and unending.

"I've looked into it some. Tried types of therapy in the past, but none that worked well for long," the other woman says, gazing out across her front yard and seeing the paw prints her dogs left out in the snow and the white blanket beginning to cover Maria's parked car. "I literally just got on some decent insurance at the beginning of the month—it would cover me, I've checked—but the thought of taking meds to get through the day freaks me out. Addiction problems run in the family and—" she stops for a moment before adding, in a smaller voice that makes Maria's heart hurt, "I'm not sure it won't make me worse." She sounds unsure and sad, and it all makes Maria just feel so very sorry. Sorry that when they're out with friends they don't feel safe, sorry that they're not even safe within their own heads at night. Maria hopes the dogs help Lightfoot. She has to keep close friends on speed dial for the particularly bad nights.

"It might," Maria replies. "There's always that risk. We don't really get a go-to answer." There's never a definite fix when the thing that's broken is your own mind and everyone's is supposed to be different, never a definite solution when the process to get better requires you sit in a room with a wolf who wants to poke and prod your brain to see how it works. Then, there are moments where you're sitting in a room with

friends and then someone says something and suddenly you've never felt more alone and on display in your entire life, like an animal of prey trapped in a room of predators only the predators themselves may not even realize what it is they're doing that hurts you. You realize you're different and, once you start to figure out what it is that works differently, you never really can go back without lying to yourself. It's the feeling that people who society was originally made for will never have to experience.

Maria hates it, she's lost friends over it.

Lightfoot hates it, she's lost opportunities over it.

They'd both rather not think about it, but they can't because it's their thinking, the very act of being that no one can really undo or stop.

Sometimes you're trapped in your head at night and alone, and then other times you're trapped in a room filled with people and thinking HOW DOES NONE OF THIS BOTHER YOU. A lot of times Lightfoot will be standing in a room and wondering if she's alone or if the rest of them are just better at faking it than her. She's never been sure which one would comfort her more: to be alone or to be the only one not lying.

The former implies none of them understand and may never be able to understand, while the latter leaves her dealing with the fact that they may all just be able to ignore everything wrong with themselves.

She knows she can't live ignoring everything wrong with her and, either way, she wants to cry.

Whenever it gets to be too much and night comes, she normally clutches onto one of her strays for comfort until everything feels a little bit okay enough to sleep. Over the years, she has gradually rounded up the dogs from a variety of places and all of them had to be rehabilitated to some extent after the original states she found them in. Hades, who had lost half his face and fur after a bear had mauled him and deemed him either lucky or unlucky enough to be left alone alive, had been in the worst physical state she'd ever seen. When she had first seen him and got him to a vet, she remembered thinking he looked like her, looked like how her heart felt most days. Some nights Lightfoot will hold onto Hades and wait for a bad moment to pass, be it the nightmare she saw in her sleep or the one she woke up to, but, in the end, strays, human and animal alike, cling to one another in the darkness. They'll take care of one another when the rest of the world doesn't have time to fix them. It's Social Darwinism, not karma, that's the real bitch at the end of the day. One of them eats up the different and unprivileged, the ones un-

lucky enough to be born into a society that either doesn't value them or ignores them or sets them up for failure, while the other just dishes out what you deserve. Sometimes Lightfoot wishes she had done something bad to deserve being born with a bad brain and red-brown skin. At least then she could blame herself. Part of her wants to, even though she knows it's not true.

For the most part, she hates it all and she knows it's not necessarily something the normal people will have to understand.

The world they're living in isn't trying to eat them alive. From the outside and the inside.

"I'm going to tell Dr. Trussel you're fine," Maria ultimately decides.

"Alive and all that. Still up and going to be teaching by the beginning of the next week." She shifts the weight of the dog in her arms, momentarily looking down at the ground and then back at Lightfoot.

"Um, take Prim from me. I have no idea what I'm doing. This is almost as bad as me having to deal with children."

Lightfoot laughs, and Maria's heart lightens in a good way.

"Cat person?"

"No, an adult human being person. If it can't take care of itself, I'm not entirely sure it's meant to be entrusted to my care."

"Truly wise words to live by," Lightfoot says as she takes Primrose from Maria, who's actually starting to miss the steady weight of the dog in her arms once she's returned to her master and beginning to doubt whether or not she is an adult human being person. Could she take care of a dog? Maybe not one as young as Primrose, and definitely not one as large or...energetic as Hades. Maria watches Lightfoot gently cradling the dog in her arms and wonders what people besides Dr. Trussel probably worry about her at night.

"I may visit the adjunct office in the future," Maria says, momentarily tensing afterwards and watching for the reaction she gets. "Might just stop by. Say hi. Nothing too fancy."

"Gonna start calling me or sending out emails if I go missing?" Lightfoot asks, raising a skeptical brow but still keeping the moment light-hearted. She thinks she'd be okay with a couple visits and check-ins to keep her sane.

"Nah," Maria says and laughs. "I'm just gonna show up at your fucking house."

-

After the lamb's first visit, the wolves stop coming and Lightfoot finally

feels safe in her own home once again. With no more unwanted visitors and the knocking ceased, her heart can settle in her chest, beating slow and steady for the first time in days. Occasionally, the sick, sinking unease returns whenever she accidentally thinks about standing in front of a room filled with wolves wearing human skin. The feeling hangs low in the pit of her stomach, makes her contemplate running back into the bathroom and just puking.

She ends up sitting down on the edge of couch, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. Her breaths are deep, in and out, trying to calm herself. The sweating needs to not happen. She is already in her pantsuit and dressed for a day of classes. The first day back after a break is always the worst, she reminds herself. Tomorrow will be better. That's what she tells herself at least.

The graying retriever seated in front of the fireplace moves, changing her normal routine and deciding to tend to her master. She licks gently at Lightfoot's hands, slides between the woman's knees, and presses her muzzle into the woman's belly. It is a warm and ticklish sensation that lessens her dread of the day. Her heart feels less horrible inside from the gesture and, after pressing a kiss to the top of the retriever's head, she stands up. She grabs her bag for the day, seated on the coffee table beside a therapist recommendation the grad student left, and moves towards the doorway, momentarily lingering in the threshold.

For a moment, she thinks she hears howls and the worry almost returns full force, but then she realizes it is the sound of blood rushing through her ears and Lightfoot thinks—just maybe—she's going to be alright after all.

Lightfoot stands in front of the door, hand on the knob, and twists, opening the door out of a desire to survive rather than be eaten.





# The Storm

o.k.Briere

She laid on the couch. Her hand drifting gently off the edge, fingers skimming the honey colored wood floors. Careless to the cold she lay there with a book on her chest in a holey t-shirt that was splattered with multi-colored paint. Her other arm was draped over her stomach holding her page in the book. The sky was grey and her body looked dead, but her eyes were alive. They were searching for something in the falling snow. There wasn't anything that could be seen beyond the flakes. The birds had all flown home to their roosts, protected from the falling white world outside. Snuggled up dry and warm they waited out the storm.

She was also waiting. The old windows let the cold seep into the warm room. As she lay there unmoving, she could smell the cold it was sharp and mixed with the scent of old wood and metal from the sill. The windows were those old pulley windows from the '50's original to the house itself. The varnish was coming off the dark wooden edges of the sill making them seem older than they were. The couch she was on was twice as old as the windows, but the clear coated varnish hadn't started to chip or wear. It just stayed where it was, worn in.

The snow tapped against the panes, and the trees shuddered and creaked with the wind. The room was calm and felt alive. The fire twisted its flaming tongues back and forth devouring the wood inside, causing it to split with a loud popping crack. She moved her head to look at the fire. Eyes skimming the

deep gold color of the couch skipping over the ginkgo leaf patterned material that the cats had torn up in their spare time. Her eyes watched the sparks fly towards the flue disappearing into the burnt brick chimney.

She studied the hearth still unmoving. The flue was an iron door that neither her nor her father had cleaned since the spring. It had been seasoned over many seasons of use. She had scrubbed the back bricks in her father's old army greens. He saw no purpose in them. They'd never fit him again, unless he was skinnier when he was dead he joked. She recalled her mother coming home to her wearing them. Her face was shocked by the fact her daughter was fully decked out in clothe k soot that covered them. They had pulled seven dead squirrels and several bats out of the chimney while cleaning it. They were skeletal and all stuck in a big nest that was made up of leaves, various grasses, as well as boughs from trees that must have been from the neighbors farm. Her father wouldn't let her keep them and insisted they be buried under the new trees he was planting in their yard. The fireplace had been scrubbed clean after the bones had been removed. In front of the fire lay a slab of marble that was deep green with flecks of silver and blue glinting in the fire light. There were a few tiny clumps of dried wax that dotted the hearthstone. She would later go and pick off the little clumps in an attempt to shine the marble.

Her eyes stayed on the flames and she started

to mouth a word. The word itself turned into a name, her name. Sarah. She let her name roll around her mouth for a few minutes. There was nothing strange about her name. It was normal and dull. It didn't reflect the fire in the hearth or the snow falling from the sky. What was the meaning behind a name that didn't hold any emotion or fire. It was a soft pink name. Meant for a girl. She was a girl. Sarah didn't match her dull brown hair, or her green eyes. It didn't match her lanky limbs or the freckles that dotted them. Nothing much matched her besides her couch and maybe her green button up shirt that was lost in the depths of her closet.

The wind rattled the gutters and the snow fell faster. Sarah could hear the wind coming down the chimney. It pushed on the fire causing it to go down for a minute then back up again. The whole town knew that it was going to be a bad winter. It had started early that year in mid-November. They had already canceled several days of school due to the inclement weather conditions. Sarah didn't mind the cancellation. It just meant she had more time to read and daydream.

In her 19 years of living and staring into the unknown to find something that wasn't there, she was still searching. She was waiting for something to show up and nothing ever seemed to want to show itself. Sometimes Sarah would see figures dancing in the snow or the fire and when no one was around she'd mimic their movements. Swaying to and fro, spinning and twirling, bending and straightening like a ballerina would. Sometimes someone would catch her spacing out and dancing they'd always look at her weird before walking away. She didn't mind it. So what if they think I'm weird, she thought, it's not like they're normal.

No one was normal. Everyone has their own tiny quirks like pursing their lips when trying

to conceal a lie or talking to themselves. Now that was weird. Sarah would talk to the figures and the sky from time to time, that was normal. But people who just talk to themselves? What's the point in that? No one would respond and if somebody did, they would probably be terrified that someone talked back to them. That would be strange, she thought.

The snow tinked against the glass drawing her attention away from her thoughts. Sarah slowly got up from her resting place remembering her page number, 76. She closed her book, careful not to damage the pages. The red cover and the gilded edging shined in the pale light that drifted in from the windows. Sarah grabbed her coat off the coat rack that was tucked into the corner near the piano.

She needed to go outside. To stand in the storm and feel the power from it. The heavy oak door resisted her tugs, but eventually it gave way opening to a glass door fit for the season. The cold radiated into her body it wasn't strong enough to reach her bones. Though it wouldn't take long from standing outside for it to reach that far into her. Sarah stared through the glass pane of the outer door. The snow was dancing, waltzing in front of her. She pushed open the door, stepping out. Her boots immediately buried in the drifts of snow. Sarah walked into the storm to stare at the world around her.

The smoke drifted out of the chimney melting the snowflakes that tried to invade its mighty tower. Higher up, where the smoke was cooler, it took up the flakes twirling them in a fast dance that only ended when the smoke vanished into the air. The storm raged on as Sarah walked forward. The snow twirling around her involving her in its dance tempting her to go further into the storm.



As I sat in my bedroom contemplating how to extinguish my uncomfortable boredom, I felt the sudden urge to leave the man-made structure of my currently suffocating little bedroom that normally served as a private oasis in which I loved to spend hours quietly by myself. At this moment, I found it stifling and my mind and body required a location more expansive but where

I could still be by myself. I unconsciously followed the urge out of my bedroom down, down the stairs,

# The Forest Floor

## Anonymous

and into the bright sunshine of the open air. The urge was not yet satisfied because I detected whispers of pervading civilization in my populated suburb, and I needed to find an area to commune with nature in solitary bliss. My feet carried me forward as if they were sniffing out the untouched earth my soul desired. They seemed to hover over the pavement rather than suffer the hot and black symbol of arbitrary human constructs. They were even less sympathetic towards the manicured and assaulted lawns of my prim neighbors. Somehow, my feet found a forest-trail, and my sneakers became suddenly unbearable. I ripped them off leaving them at the edge of the trailhead and sunk my naked feet into the deep and healing earth of the forest. My nostrils inhaled the fresh and lush smell of plant life. Although there were pebbles and sticks pervading almost every square inch of the forest floor, my feet somehow sought out a velvety path of soft ferns and plush

dirt. As I floated through the forest, I heard the deep baritone of bullfrogs and the sweet soprano of small birds. I felt as if I was encompassed in cool, refreshing water full of life and energy as my liquid-like surroundings absorbed into my every molecule.

Eventually, my wanderings brought me to what I supposed to be the very heart of the forest. I stumbled upon a circular opening defined by a ring of empty bushes. As I entered the circle, I noticed a sudden flurry of activity and color from the surrounding bushes. In front of my astonished eyes, thousands of roses were blooming on the previously solid green shrubs, and the shrubs themselves were growing and filling up the spaces of the broken circle conforming to their environment like a vibrant fluid. I stood motionless overwhelmed by the oddly quivering and pulsating air surrounding me. But was it really air? I attempted to raise my arm to touch one of the fragrant buds, but my arm was met with resistance from the strangely thick, energetic air. The pulsing was moving

into my body through my pores and lungs. It raced through my veins illuminating every path throughout my body. One path seemed to be brighter than the others. It felt like a fiery, humming string marking the path from my heart to my right pointer finger. The vibrating grew stronger and stronger until it transformed into a reverberating pain. I brought my finger to my face to try and discover the source of my discomfort, and a tiny rose burst through the tip. The new bud was quivering but remained tightly closed. I was waiting in anticipation for the bloom growing more and more fearful that it would open to reveal something unsatisfactory. My fear mounted until I did not want it to open at all. This fear quickly morphed into the fear that I'd be forever in a state of unknowingness and longing. As I allowed my fears to morph and peak, I felt an odd sense of tranquility and surety. I realized that I wanted to know the secrets of the flower and bring it to maturity. Hesitantly, I stroked the silky outer petals, and it responded by opening slightly. I slowly grew more comfortable experimenting with speed and motion. After some time, I was awarded with almost a full bloom. I explored the interior petals and the flower opened fully to reveal a miniscule beating heart. I was strangely unsurprised by what I found. It seemed entirely natural. My own heart quickly met its own hummingbird speed, and my body reacted knowingly, unconsciously. Icy fire travelled from the elfin heart through

my finger spreading fanlike to the far reaches of my body and mind. I wanted the feeling to end yet last forever, and this conflict kept me in a state of heightened sensitivity and oblivion until it finally peaked and plateaued.

After a few moments, I slowly returned to a state of sleepy consciousness at which time I noticed a small songbird replaced the previously beating heart or perhaps encompassed it. We shared a moment of unspoken communication, and it flew off into a seemingly arbitrary direction. But was it arbitrary? I paid more attention as it propelled bullet like at a nearby tree. It cut through the sturdy branches and leafy curtains when suddenly a hearty exclamation of surprise pervaded the viscous air. A large masculine figure fell backwards out of the limbs landing in a particularly thorny rose bush. My heart stopped. I hesitated in silent and motionless fear for a moment. Then, all the roses fell including the one on my finger with a sharp sting, and I ran.

## Chapter Two

Although I had returned to my mundane square of a bedroom, I found myself daydreaming of icy flames licking and consuming my body while exploring those intoxicating petals. I longed to return to that magical ring to fully grasp the unique and secret pleasure of the rosebud. Though, my thoughts and desires were pervaded and



tainted by fear and frustration. I believe that the bird was trying to warn me of the man's presence to protect me, and I am extremely thankful for its protection and love. I only wish it would have warned me sooner. I feel violated. He should not have been in that part of the forest with his staring eyes and wagging tongue.

I understand the need of balance between feminine energy and masculine energy but do those energies have to manifest themselves in their respective genders? Can I not balance the feminine and masculine within myself without the inclusion of a man? Can I not satisfy my own needs by myself if I so desire? I suppose that I cannot answer these questions without more experience.

However, I can answer these question: Do I not have power, control, and the ultimate authority over my body and mind? Yes, I do. Should I be able to give consent or revoke consent in any situation involving what someone does or does not do to my body? Yes, I should. Am I not entitled to my privacy if I so desire it? Yes, I am.

Did I give consent to that man in the tree to ogle at me during one of the most sensual experiences of my life? No, I did not.

And yet, am I passing judgement too quickly? I do not know why he was there. I did not give him time to apologize or explain. I did not check to see if he was injured from the fall. Should I feel guilty? Regretful? Apologetic? No. I was afraid and violated in that moment. It is perfectly easy in my safe, small room so far removed from the looming, masculine figure spying in a tree for me to feel guilty that I did not give this man

the chance to explain himself or that I did not check to make sure he did not need medical help, but in that moment, I made the right decision.

### Chapter 3

I walked to my new beginning: Hemlock County Community College. I reminded myself that though this was only a small lily pad to pause and grow, I should not allow any judgements to hinder my forever budding and blooming mind. Before my mind could form anymore droplets of doubt and negativity, I focused on my senses. The light, warm breeze caressed my skin, and the sunshine warmed my cool cheeks. The morning dew clung to my hair and mouth. I licked the droplets forming on lips and tasted the sweet relief of moisture on a thirsting tongue. The diluted smell of honey suckle and jasmine coalescing in my lungs and escaping in my breath. My sure footsteps worked in tandem with the sturdy, hard ground to propel me to my destination while my airy fingers cast a delicate shadow on the glistening grass.

By the time I arrived, I felt strangely serene without a trace of first day jitters. The room was clinical and sterile. Each small chair was filled with either sleepy or nervous bodies. Each small chair. A seed of discomfort attached in my stomach and began to sprout. I circled the room with no space to land. Everyone avoided my silent plea for aid, not wanting to be the one without a space. I felt too large in the cramped space. The sprout soon turned to vines urging to escape from their confines. I bolted for the door intending to never return when I collided into something solid in the open doorway.

"Oh!" I expected to fall back from the impact, but something hard and strong pulled me forward instead. My face clumsily connected to something firm but not entirely unyielding. It smelled warm and spicy, like cinnamon. Intoxicating, I thought as inhaled. My thoughts went fuzzy and my knees liquefied momentarily.

"Alright there?" He asked in a concerned, but deep and silky voice. I looked up shyly through the fringe of my eyelashes. A flicker of recognition, then disbelief crossed his face. His black pupils encroached on his deep, dark irises. "Your-" He hesitated clearing his throat. He continued, "You're not injured?"

"No." I whispered. "I-I'll just be going." I stepped around him and again attempted to exit the room.

"Wait, miss!" I turned to answer his call and waited expectantly. "Is this your schedule?" He presented a piece of paper with my handwritten class schedule in forest green ink. He glanced down at the list. I gently took the paper from his large hand. "This is Intro to Environmental Science, so if it is your schedule, you found the right place." He said gently, almost as if he was frightened that his normal voice could shatter me into glass pieces. He examined me curiously, unbelievable. Adoringly? "Is this your schedule?" He prompted.

"Oh, yes sir." I replied.

"Great, now which of you wants to find, Miss -, "He looked questioningly at me.

"Finn, Brenna Finn." I hastily supplied.

"Which of you wants to find Ms. Finn a chair?" He asked addressing

the class of interested spectators. No one stirred. He silently handed me his brown, worn leather backpack. It still radiated his powerful body heat. I held it away from my body to distance myself from the sheer heat of its owner. I attempted to regain my clarity, but there was no cool breeze to clear the scent of his warming, disorienting presence. I swayed slightly as my cheeks burned. I wanted to flee, but my body remained planted soaking in the jittery atmosphere of the room.

When he reentered, he carried both a heavy wooden chair and large desk. This was in stark contrast to the light, plastic aesthetic of the room. He handled them effortlessly. His tall, muscular frame supported their weight as if they made of the plastic skeletons of the other small desks in the room. He set both down with controlled ease. I watched in fascinated awe of his sheer strength and mastery of his body. As I gazed at his form, I unconsciously hugged his soft pack to my body.

"Well, I hope this will satisfy your needs for today, Ms. Finn." He held out his dark arm for his bag, which was now wrapped securely in my arms and resting gently against the curves of my chest and stomach. I held the pack out and he relieved the burden from my shaky arms. "You may have a seat." He said with a kind, inviting smile. I slipped onto the smooth wood seat silently. It was too large for my petite frame, but the size did not hinder the practicality of the learning apparatus. Once I was settled, he spoke.

"Good morning everyone. As I said a few moments ago, this is Intro to En-

vironmental Science. My name is Sebastian Ryder. I will be covering Dr. Sylvia's classes until she returns from her trip to the Amazon. I am a graduate student at Duke University, and I was Dr. Sylvia's TA for most of my undergraduate education. Dr. Sylvia regrets that she will not be available for the first half of the semester. However, I assure you that she is a brilliant professor and well worth the wait. In the meantime, I will be teaching you about the origin of the Earth and some of the first forms of life on our planet..." I stopped paying attention to his words and listened to the unique cadence of his voice. I noted how his supple lips formed around each word. I tried to escape the heady, enclosed space surrounding and penetrating my body and mind by trying to recall lush green foliage and blue-green crashing waves, but the images evaporated in the heat of the room with fiery sparks and enticing smoke. Finally, the noise of shuffling paper and squeaking chairs alerted me that class had ended. I collected my bag and schedule in a stupor. I was the last person to float towards the door.

"Ms. Finn?" I turned at the sound of my name.

"Yes, Mr. Ryder?" I replied in a whisper. He appraised my face not saying a word for what seemed like a century. I did not understand the strange intensity in the room or why he was staring at me with such wonder. I needed to find a place with hydration to regain clarity and control of my mind.

"I'd like you to call me Sebastian." He said simply with a smile. My body trembled, and I tried to will it to stop.

"Er... I don't think that would be appropriate seeing as you are my professor." I carefully stated. I had to exert extra effort to pronounce each word correctly. He seemed confused as if he had ascended out of the mundane room and lifted our conversation into some fiery plane meant only for the two of us, and I could see him falling back to Earth.

"Oh, well, it's okay because I had asked the whole class to do so as well." He said. Oh. I should have paid more attention. Blood rushed to my already flushed cheeks. I had misunderstood him.

"Yes, sorry. You may call me Brenna." I said awkwardly. He nodded. I waited. He stared. I stared. No one spoke.

"I think...we need to talk." He said. I did not want to misinterpret his words again, so I waited for more. "I think, um, well, I – God this is awkward." My mind flurried with activity, but never came up with anything useful to explain what he said. A student walked into the classroom.

"Oh! Sorry to interrupt." The young man said as he started to retreat.

"No, no! That's okay. We were just leaving." Sebastian said as he grabbed his pack. The student entered the room further and chose one of the plastic seats in the middle of the room. I followed Sebastian into the narrow hallway. I knew he wanted to walk beside me, but I chose to trail just slightly behind him. I refused to be too close to his intoxicating aura. He kept glancing over his muscular shoulders as if he was afraid I would suddenly disappear. He led me down an even smaller hallway with closed doors on both sides and to

one of the wooden doors. This door was covered in fake orange, red, and yellow leaves. He stuck his shiny key in the keyhole, and it swung open easily. Rather than going in ahead of me, he held the door open and stood aside for me to pass.

The office was small with well-stocked book shelves. There were potted plants littering the room, and they created a purifying effect. I breathed in their natural scent, and felt instantly stronger and clearer. I could not help but gently caress one of the soft ferns.

“Please make yourself comfortable.” Sebastian gestured to one of the two large leather chairs then gently shut the door with a quiet click. I sunk down into the well-worn chair, and he walked around the large, impressive mahogany desk. He sat down and looked at me. I waited feeling nervous, slightly panicky. He cleared his throat.

“Brenna, do you...do you ever hike in secluded parts of the forest?” he asked blushing.

My stomach clenched. I didn’t answer.

“Um, I only ask because the other day I was observing a bird’s nest – I’ve been waiting for the eggs to hatch – for one of my grad school classes, and I think I saw a girl that resembled you. I’m sorry if I was mistaken... but... was it you?” I sprinted out the door barely hearing the tail-end of his statement.

#### Chapter 4

All the heat had left me and

what was left was fear freezing my veins. The fear melted into the sludge of disgust. I cannot believe my body reacted with blatant attraction to him! I felt polluted and deceived. I never even considered the possibility of encountering that man again. His scent had fused into my hair and fibers of my clothes. I walked straight into the forest without thinking. I could smell the cool scent of water in the air, more than just rain.

As if the forest could penetrate my mind, it led me to a glorious, gleaming lake. My hands tore at my tainted clothing until every inch of my body was exposed. I dove into the still, waiting water. The cold stung at first, but it quickly numbed my skin like a sweet anesthetic. I floated to the top slowly. My hair and limbs spread out on the surface. My head, breasts, and toes breached the surface and the air now seemed cooler than the water. Eventually, I lost my body in the lake until I became the cerulean blues, aquamarines, and algae greens. I became the ripples spreading out into nothingness. I felt the lily pads floating lightly on my surface. I was contracting and releasing, swelling and dwindling. I learned all the animals and plants that ever touched me from the newborn fawn to the fallen maple leaf. Memories of the day evaporated into mist and floated high into the sky forming dark,



rain clouds. The dark clouds swelled and swelled until they could hold no more and released in a pure shower pricking my surface and reaching deep within me. A roll of thunder vibrated the lake revealing my solid body, and I could feel every single drop of rain nip my stimulated skin. I waited until the storm ceased.

I emerged from the lake renewed and clean. I ignored my clothes. They would still smell of him. I shivered slightly. I walked a little further into the forest finding a small meadow filled with soft grasses and wildflowers. I collected and weaved nature's bounty into a short dress and a flower crown. It was a long process, but the work was therapeutic, distracting.

I walked home barefoot and quietly. I met no one on my way home. Once I was in my bedroom, I went to bed and did not dream. s that were previously hanging in the cellar laundry room, waiting for the day that their owner would claim them. Her mother's iron hair wisped around her face, her brown eyes dull with tiredness. She had always from her daughter's memories had tired eyes. She supposed they hadn't been lively since before her daughter's birth. Her mother and father then proceeded to have a fight about their daughter cleaning the chimney in old military clothes. The state of the chimney didn't change that much from the scrubbing. The bricks showed an angry red through the black





