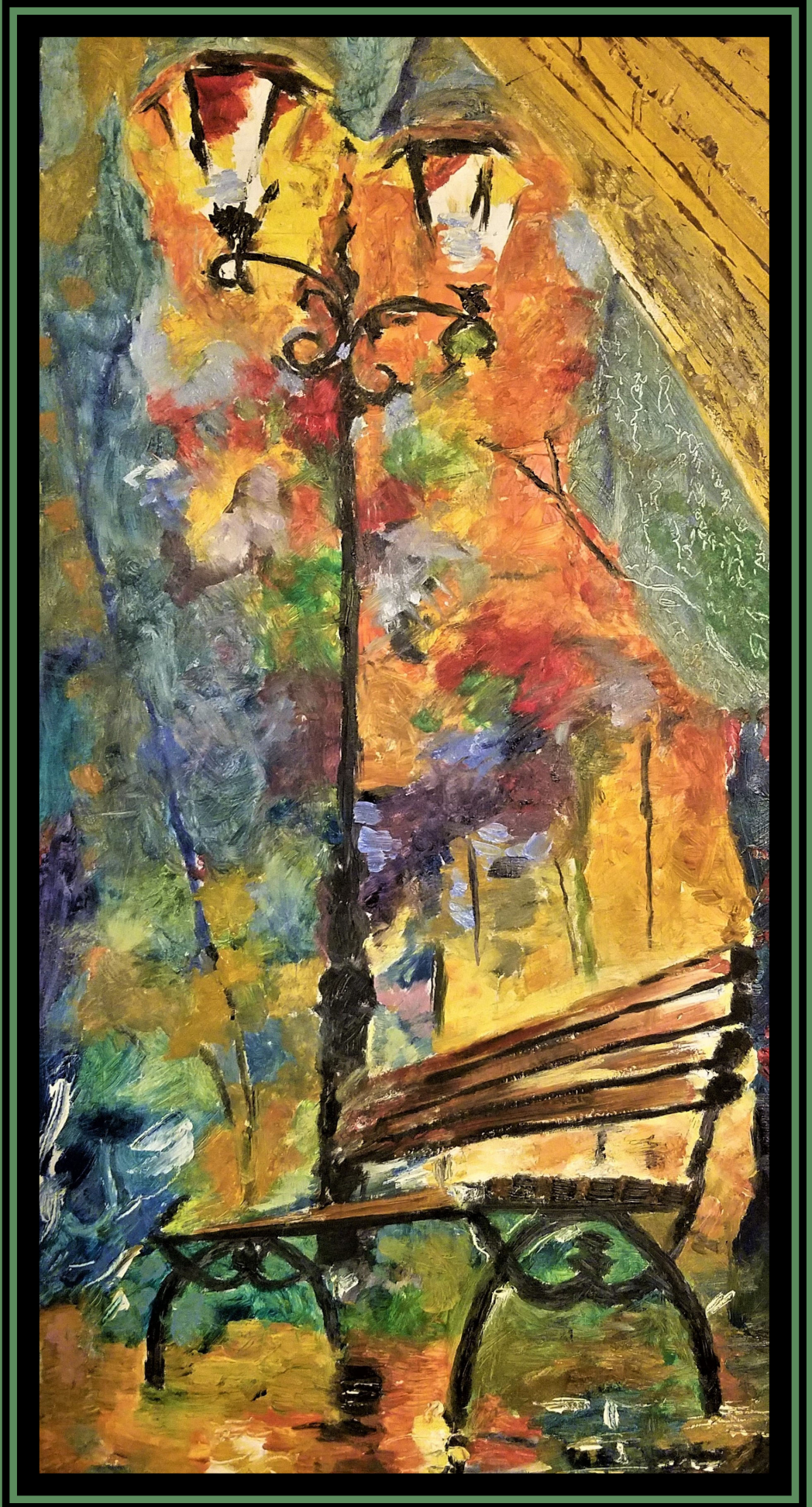


Spirit River Review 2020



Spirit River Review

2020

Spirit River Review is the annual publication of student creative writing and visual art on the Cambridge Campus of Anoka-Ramsey Community College. Our mission is to create community among student writers and artists and to showcase their work.

The 2020 issue is dedicated to the students, faculty, and staff of the Cambridge Campus, who are persevering through the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19. We look forward to full classrooms and busy hallways next year. In the meantime, keep creating!

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Cover art: "Mood" by Juliana Boner (oil on wood)
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Poetry

I'm kneeling in the dark,
striking coarse flint
to cold steel.
Or trying to.

For every hit,
three times I miss,
and strike myself with that rock,
slicing through flesh.
Let the scarlet blood flow
over my hands,
though my body should be warmed by flame.

Sparks fly, one every now and then.
A little flash.

Like those fireflies
in the blue twilight.

Can you remember?
I can't.

And still the sanguine lacerations
come, again and again as I try.
And I am rent.
My hands will be scored
with thin white scars.
Like the one that traced
the side of your left thumb.

You showed me how to do this,
once. I cut myself,
then made a fire.
But I can't remember.

I can't remember.

Was that a hint of flame?

Yes?

No?

I don't know.

If I were a steaming cup of tea
Fresh from the kettle
And you were a solid cube of ice
I'd melt you like a puddle, and we'd be one.

If I were a hot blacktop pavement
Searing from the sun
And you were a sticky piece of gum
I'd melt you like a puddle, and we'd be one.

If I were a pocket to a pair of overalls
Tumbling from the dryer
And you were a waxy crayon
I'd melt you like a puddle, and we'd be one.

But I am myself
Sizzling from your love
And you are yourself
Going in for a hug.
You melt me like a puddle, and we are one.

I struggle to strap on my snowboard
With fingers twitching in excitement.
The arctic cold gets annihilated
By adrenaline that's heating up our bodies.
We smoothly slide to the chair lift and slip onto the seat.
The creaking of the chilled metal cable
Is drowned by our whooping chants echoing over the mountain.
We huddle up on top of the highest hill.
My buddy bets he can beat me to the bottom.
Our gloves thud as we hi-five and pound our chests.
We hop and shimmy to the edge and head straight down.
I'm going so fast my face feels like it's frozen,
And my friend can barely keep up,
Or even maintain his balance.
Speed wobbles whip him like a serpent.
Then the front of his board catches,
And his whole-body crashes.
We wait while he wiggles his way to the base.
He laughs out loud with a shaky smile on his face.
He thrusts his bent hand in the air yelling,
"Bro, I think I fucking broke it!"

The moon's peeking through the trees,
casting tall dark shadows,
swaying in the clearing.
Waiting for us to come and play.
We run,
barefoot through the damp grass.
He's searching for frogs.
She's dancing in the moonlight.
Our laughter drifting away,
on a warm summer breeze.
Like a boat,
the slow current taking it away.
I see their smiles,
my heart bursts.
Like a balloon filled with too much air,
or a cup filled to the brim,
leaking all over the place.
Spilling my love onto them.
If I could I would stop time,
stay in the enchanting,
forest forever,
watching them play,
under the moonlit sky.

A thousand dying stars glow red
at the ends of sticks of incense.
Their fumes black like charcoal
bring forth the smell of death.

The blissful touch of karma upon my skin
would be the only suitable retribution
for me.
I implore to be cauterized in return.

An irrevocable fear and torture
Its precipitator: amusement.
Its documentation is forever lost,
I hope.

The smell of Pine-Sol as I cleaned,
Wondering what this concept of God could possibly mean.

Blonde hair, blue eyes I did not have.
I did not belong in their photograph.

Bad behavior from a tainted past.
How long would this “family” last?

I sweep, I dust, and I clean
For this family that is so obscene.

Their little soldier I was not
Despite the thought they could control what they bought.

His breath above me as I cried.
Push-ups again because I lied.

“Burn through the pain,”
He says again.

“No breaks ‘til you break.”
I don’t want to wake.

“No room for a quitter,”
He says as he hits her.

“Take it like a man.”
I know I can.

When does it end?
Will you just send

Me to hell
So it’ll all be well?

This earth is no better.
It just gets wetter

With tears and sweat
And tons of regret.

I lived for the pain
Of everyone's gain.

What happens when you break
Something that shouldn't awake?

A shallow hole,
An empty soul,

A pointless smile
That lingers awhile,

A broken heart
That longs to depart,

Too filled with grief,
I regret to breathe.

Memories better forgotten
Can't deny the rotten.

Better to know I'm bitter
then remember the one time I hit her.

Panic starts to spread
As she drags me out of bed,

Drugged with meds for her control.
All the abuse has taken its toll.

Self-defense is no excuse
For the one little mark of a bruise.

The officer tells me as I explain
To no avail and no gain.

So what's the point? What's the use?

What's with all of the abuse?

I'm not their blood. I have no ties.

Got to live with all the lies

That everything's okay. That we'll all be fine.

Let's all rehearse that last line.

Red like a bright red lotus
Nimbly floating in a lake.
Red like a Siamese fighting fish
Swimming gracefully through the water.

Orange like the autumn
Leaves falling slowly to the ground.
Orange like the marigold meadow
Sitting behind me.

Yellow like a new baby chick
Chirping for its mom.
Yellow like freshly shucked corn
Waiting to be charred on the grill.

Green like mint chocolate chip ice cream
Smearred all over the faces of young kids.
Green like a small dragonfly
Flying above and eating insects.

Blue like small robin eggs
Being watched over by the parents.
Blue like fresh and juicy wild blueberries
Growing on a bush.

Purple like the wild lilac
Flower patch starting to bud.
Purple like a sunset
On a warm summer day.

A small platform set for the show,
four shadows stand over a sea of faces.
The light fades followed by the silence,
and all we can hear is our beating hearts.

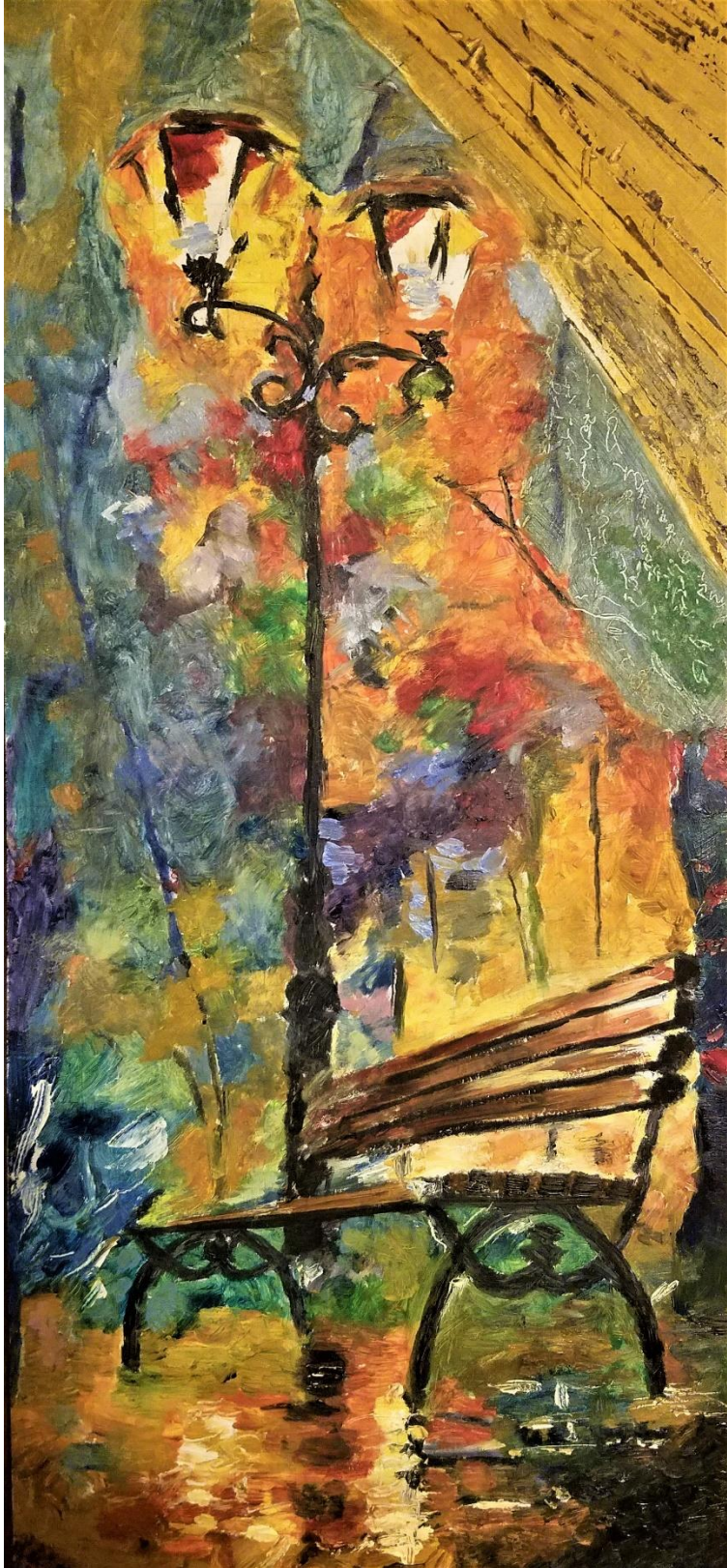
 The silence breaks.

The stage lights wake us from our stillness,
reincarnated by the waves of music flowing through us,
It takes over, losing ourselves with the sound
so we can unite as one within the crowd.

 Song after song.

We fail to lose energy but manage to find more.
The instruments unite, creating one sound together,
The audience unites, creating one motion together,
feeding us the experience we crave: mindless unity.

Visual Art



“Mood,” Juliana Boner (oil on wood)



“Zuzu,” Juliana Boner (oil on wood, mixed media, gelli monoprint on deli paper)



“Felix,” Veronica Marx (graphite on paper)



“Flamingo,” Veronica Marx (scratchboard)



Untitled, Mikhail Turnock (photograph)



“Circular,” Catherine McCarthy (oil)



"Beauty," Catherine McCarthy (oil)



“Lightning,” Caleb Crook (photograph)



“The Serpent’s Tongue,” Caleb Crook (photograph)

Special Section: Poetry from Residents of GracePointe Crossing

In the fall of 2019, Introduction to Creative Writing students at Anoka-Ramsey Community College worked with residents of GracePointe Crossing, an assisted-living facility in Cambridge, MN, using poetry to record impressions and memories. The following poems are a sampling of the work they did together.

Summer is waterfalls
at Gooseberry and Minnehaha,
the trees so green, the rain that freshens
everything, it's the summer breeze
on your face, buzzing mosquitos,
and finding wood ticks.

Summer is the sound of the loons
on the lake and the birds and wind
in the trees and the peacocks
screaming like women.

Summer is the smell of clover and rain
and flowers and barbeque,
the neighbor's lawnmower whining away
while you try to nap.

Summer is lightning and thunder
and the smell of freshly cut hay.

In summer,
you feel lazy,
at ease,

and free.

These hands have washed dirty dishes
And have cleaned the house.

These eyes have seen a big black bear chasing close
And a huge white rat go loose in the basement.

These ears have lost hearing from the earpiece of working as a 911 operator
And heard about emergencies and children just playing on the phone.

This nose has smelled skunks on a country road
And the smell of freshly picked produce.

This mouth has tasted a lot of dripping black cherry ice cream
And sweet strawberries from the backyard.

This heart has felt pain and loss
But overall
Feels blessed.

If I were a child again, I would investigate the endless forests,
Climbing in the old trees, so tall I could barely see to the top.
I would play on the shore catching wet, soggy frogs,
Finger nails full of sticky mud,
Smelling the wet, moldy ground,
Breathing the misty, heavy air.

If I were a child again, I would go sledding down the backyard hill,
Feeling the cool, crisp air against my cheeks.
I would build snowmen with the heavy, wet snow,
Rolling the snowball so big until I couldn't push it anymore.
I'd steal Mom's carrots and raisins to make my creation come to life.

If I were a child again, I would never let my imagination stop.

These hands have knit heavy sweaters,
Sown men's shirts, and held a newborn bunny.
These eyes have seen plants grow,
Vegetables get canned, and grandbabies be born.
These ears have heard the gentle wind, a cow's moo,
And the hum of a sewing machine.
This nose has smelled fresh baked goods,
Flowers in the spring, and the hay for animals.
This mouth has tasted lemon meringue pie,
Homemade bread, and vegetables off the vine.
This heart has felt the love of a family
And a love for life.

As I wake to face a new day,
my father is standing by the mirror,
Lathering his face with soap
and shaving it with a long, sharp razor.

And when that was done,
he'd comb his wavy auburn hair.
Calling out to me,
he'd head downstairs for breakfast.

By then, smelling so nice,
he'd arrive to find mother was ready
With breakfast for all,
and we'd sit down to eat.

At that large table, I'd sit next father,
food passed around from him.
And while I'd be served last,
it didn't matter, sitting next to father.

The Lake in the Mountains

Barbar Woster (with Andrew Johnson)

I will never forget,
The fresh scent of pines coating the landscape,
 The warm summer air sailing through the trees,
 The gentle waves reflecting the clouds in the sky
 With the sharpest mountains poking the sky.

I will never forget
Those family trips that highlighted the summers,
 The cleanest salmon caught in the clearest creeks,
 The little cabin hiding in the forest.
 Feeling the nostalgia, I dream of returning.

If I were an animal, I'd be a deer,
Free to roam around glassy lakes,
Free to stroll through golden fields
Of tall corn stalks, and wade
Into cold, clear streams.
I'd live peacefully in the forest
Alongside thick brown turkeys,
Birds chirping in the trees above,
And squirrels leaping from branch to branch.
I'd be one with nature,
From the warm, sunny days
Shining light on my back
To the torrential rainstorms
Widening the powerful rivers.

Autumn is the sun shining straight
across the sky, the vibrant orange and red
leaves, and the trees are translucent.

Autumn is the smell of burning
leaves and bonfires.

Autumn is the honking geese
flying south and the leaves
crunching under our feet.

Autumn is pumpkin spice, autumn
squash soup, and children's laughter
on Halloween.

Autumn is the beautiful breeze, the chill
in the air on frosty mornings.

The farm work is nearly done
and Thanksgiving
is coming soon.

Fiction

Whenever people get presented with the idea to build a house, they laugh and turn away from the chance. Fortunately, my family doesn't share that same mindset.

It was the beginning of summer when the farmer pounded that stake into the ground. The stake was attached to a dirty old sign, sitting on the edge of an overgrown cornfield. The farmer's name and number were spray painted black on the sign—hinting to the fact he was done with that field like a child might be done with an old toy.

Just a few weeks prior, my parents were toying with the idea of selling the house we were living in at the time. We simply were not very happy there and it never quite felt like home.

At the time, I was working a minimum wage job to pay for the upkeep of my horses. I'd been dreaming to have my horses close to home for years, and the thought of not having to pay for boarding sounded pretty good, too. As we drove past that dingy sign on the way home from church, I felt my heart squeeze. Just looking out at that field felt like home.

I begged my parents to call the number and see how much the land was going for. What can I say? I was young, and I looked at this challenge with a burning fever in my soul. I thought the process would be as easy as 1, 2, 3. My older siblings quickly shot down the idea, saying that I didn't know what I was talking about. But I didn't miss the look my parents shared. I think my dad wanted this dream just as bad as I did.

As I watched the beauty of that cornfield get lost behind the trees, my mind raced. Our house was only three minutes from that field. You might be wondering, "What's the point then? Why go through the stress of building a house when you already got one in the same area?"

The point was, the house we were living in wasn't fitting our family anymore. My siblings and I were growing up. We had lived in that house for six years, and finally it was starting to feel tight. Even when I did my best to purge my clothes and toys, it felt like more things were piling up.

When my parents did the calculations, all of the upgrades we would have had to do on the house would be expensive. The land we were on wasn't large enough to accommodate horses, or really anything my family wanted to do. These thoughts spun around and around in my head.

Later that same evening, my dad got an itch to go walk out to the field. My mom and I happily obliged while my other two siblings grumbled, but I could see the curiosity in their eyes. They ended up coming, too.

Together, we drove up there. After parking the car in the ditch, we all hopped out and stared at the challenge before us. The wild grasses and cornstalk stubble stared back: they were as tall as us.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

Before I could voice my thoughts, my dad started off into the long, tangled grass and seemed to disappear before our very eyes. He stepped around the grasses as he went, with all the care of a mother dog trying to not step on her pups. My brother followed with no care where his feet landed, his complaints about the bugs louder than his footsteps.

We traveled through the field in this fashion: my siblings complaining, my mother sharing thoughts with my dad, me lost in thought. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I could already see where my horses would go, how the freshly turned dirt would smell. As we followed the posts that marked each plot of acreage, I noticed my dad growing quieter. The thoughtfulness on his face was obvious and I could see the glimmer in his eyes as we reached the top of a hill.

Before us, the tall wild grass sprawled out like Mother Nature's blanket. Birch trees bordered the back property line, guarding the rest of the trees with their white bark. The most spectacular thing was shimmering behind the trees. A hidden treasure was noticeable behind the trunks: a pond! The water was like glass, the only ripples coming from two trumpeter swans slowly moving their way down the middle of the pond, ruffling their feathers as if they knew they were being admired from afar.

We were all speechless. I could sense it before I even knew it; this was our home now. And as I looked at my dad, I knew he felt what I was feeling. My heart could feel it, I couldn't shake the power in that moment. *This was home.* We were ready to fight for this land and for this dream, no matter what it would take.

The Vikings were piling up the twisted and mangled bodies. Dismembered body parts could only be recognized by the type of armor attached to them. A few of the knights had surrendered and were forced to line up with their knees and foreheads slumped onto the bloody stone ground. Among them was the head knight of the fortress, Sir William. A Viking named Raynor had him held captive with his sword point against his back. Coming straight toward the head knight was a tall man at least seven and half feet tall and weighing roughly three hundred fifty pounds. The Vikings dragged the corpses out of his path.

“That there is Jarl Einar Iron-skin,” said Raynor, still holding the head knight captive.

Jarl Einar was loaded from head to toe with muscle. He was wearing a tattered brown pelt over his back. It was tied onto him with a leather strap starting from under his left arm, and connecting across his body to a bear head on his right shoulder. His arms and torso were tattooed with black Nordic symbols. His blond hair and beard were both long and tied into a braid to keep out of his face. The braids were held together at the bottom with an iron ring. In his hand was a six-foot-long wooden handle with a one-sided steel axe head at the end. It was so large it shouldn't have been liftable. Einar was dragging the axe behind him, causing the cobblestone flooring of the English fort to squeal as it was split by the sharp edge of the blade.

Raynor poked the back of the knight's chainmail with his sword. “I tink he wants to talk to ya.”

Einar reached into a leather sac on his hip and pulled out a human head. He tossed the head and it rolled right in front of the knight. “I found your scout,” said Einar, with a deep and booming voice. Einar was now right in front of William, looking down at the knight intensely. William said nothing as his whole body started shaking.

“You will be smitten, you disgusting bastard! And the rest of you barbarians!” screamed William with tears swelling in his eyes.

“Perhaps” says Einar. He gripped his axe and swung it up and over himself. The tip of the axe landed straight on the top of William's head. It broke through his bones and steel armor with one swift motion. His entire body split in half and fell to either side of the axe in two gruesome heaps. “Raynor, gather whatever we can and load it on the ships.”

“What should we do wit the rest of them?” asked Raynor.

Einar looked at the remaining knights and answered, “Kill them.”

“But Einar, what if theys have family,” protested Raynor.

“Then their families will seek help from their precious dominion. And they will not have the time or money invade our land,” declared Einar.

“And what ifs they do?” Raynor asked. “We can't fight them off alone!”

“We have 300 men Raynor! We aren't alone.” Einar bellowed.

Then a faint voice started calling out, “Einar! Einar!” One of the Vikings was running full speed through the fort frantically. As he reached the others, he tripped over a shield held by a

severed hand and everyone started laughing. "Them English knights are here!" The clan all stopped laughing.

"How many?" Einar asked.

"They got the entire fort surrounded! There has got to be a thousand of em!"

Einar ripped his axe out of the stone ground in between the split sludge of William. "I hope you boys are ready for a fight." He looked around and saw his clan staring at their feet.

"I tink we should talks to them," mumbled Raynor.

"We just cleared a fort of these knights! Each of you could take on 20 men unaided!" Still none of the Vikings would rally. "Fine, we will go talk to them. Maybe they won't ambush us worse than they have already," Einar growled sarcastically. The clan followed behind Einar as they marched out the front gate toward the English.

"Jarl Einar Iron-skin?" asked one of the knights.

"Yes," Einar snapped

"You have raided one of our great fortresses. You killed Sir William, a high-ranking knight, and many others. Our guild master has offered you and your clan two options. Either you can surrender or die."

Einar was trembling with rage. "No! I will gather my men and our new belongings. Then we will leave, and you may have your castle back." Einar turned around and headed back to the fort.

"You have until tomorrow to choose your fate," the knight warned.

"What are ya doin?" Raynor asked desperately.

Einar ignored him and said, "Let's go eat."

Later that night Einar was stumbling around the fort because he had consumed too much mead. He grabbed his twenty-fifth tankard of the drink and crawled on top of a table.

He drunkenly yelled, "Tomorrow morn, we are goin ta show those damn knights a real fight! They think they can come here and tells us what ta do? Who pledges theirs metal to me?" He wanted to watch everyone cheer, but he blacked out.

Einar awoke on a muddy ground wet with dew. He sat up and saw Raynor talking to the knight from the day before.

"What is going on?" he asked.

Three Vikings cut through the crowd of knights around him. They were struggling to drag Einar's axe over to him.

Raynor's voice hissed, "Take ya axe, cause we made a deal. Theys gonna let us go as long as they get you."

Einar couldn't believe what was happening. As Raynor started walking away angrily, Einar roared, "With a world so full of treachery and betrayal, fighting is needed for survival. Valhalla waits for only me!" He stood up and grabbed his axe. Raynor and the other Vikings disappeared behind the wall of metal soldiers. A horn sounded, and hundreds of the armored knights swarmed toward him. Einar started spinning his body and axe in circles. The first fifty knights were cut clean in two at the waist. He started to lose momentum and couldn't tell which of the knights were still intact. Eventually, the knights poured over the bodies of their companions and jumped on Einar. He couldn't swing his axe anymore because he must have been crushed by sixty knights. A few minutes

later, another horn sounded. The knights staggered off of Einar and backed away. Einar could barely move, but he stood up slowly with a sword punctured through his thigh.

Meanwhile, the head knight had walked up to him. "Do you have any last words barbarian?"

Einar looked up at the sky and smirked. "Death has the last word."

The knight shook his head and stabbed his long sword into Einar's heart.

“Momma said you should come to the shop, Blue.” Hazy could barely finish his sentence before Blue Baby’s excitement got the better of her.

Through a smirk, she squeaked, “Ooooooh... treasure!”

Hazy’s mom was particularly fond of Blue; she had been inviting her over every couple of months ever since she was able to stand on her own two feet and say gibberish nonsense that later turned into words. Blue had gathered quite the collection of knickknacks from these visits. Hazy had grown up under the neon, purple *PAWN* sign and never thought of the crowded floor as anything more than a hoarder’s playhouse. He detested the idea of keeping the junk clustered on the lower level of his home. However, Hazy loved his job at the shop because of the immense satisfaction he associated with selling his perceived trash for money. Blue, on the other hand, was entranced by the odd objects she found herself surrounded by every time she stepped foot in the shop. It was alien to her, but nothing compared to how alien the next couple weeks would turn out to be.

“I hope it’s another rubber duck. The ducky I got last time could use a friend.”

“She seemed really excited. It’s probably a little cooler than a duck this time.”

Blue hoisted herself up into Hazy’s truck, cautiously maneuvering around the cords and band equipment piled from the show they had just finished.

“Duct tape?”

“Glovebox.” Blue Baby found the tape and hastily patched up the holes in her drum barrel.

“I need a new drum set so bad.”

“I’m telling you, come work at the shop. You’ll be able to save up in like two months.”

“And help your mom organize the nudey magazines and XXX videos? Big pass.”

“Oh my god. Blue. I’ll work in the adult section if it’s really that big of a deal to you. And you could spend more time with me. We never get to hang outside of gigs anymore,” Hazy pleaded with her, as he had so many times before. Blue had always lived doing as little as possible to get by, and the idea of a committed job had always been terrifying to her.

“I think a duck would be pretty cool.” Blue changed the subject as Hazy rolled into the shop parking lot.

“My babies!” Suddenly, Blue and Hazy were being tackled by the surprisingly strong leather palms of a spiteful, grey-haired woman.

“What did you have to show me, Gigi?” Immediately after asking, Blue was pulled by her sleeve into the shop. In the corner of the store, poised between the adult section and the back exit, there was an electric blue drum set. The barrel of which said, “Blue Baby.”

“You’re spoiled rotten.” Hazy shook his head as he pulled out a shoe box from under his bed. Opening the box, Hazy revealed a mustard yellow bong, which he promptly packed.

“Spoiled rotten? I only made \$200 tonight. After buying the set, I have fifty bucks to my name.”

“But Mom bought it for \$800, Blue. I’m just saying. You kinda take advantage of her sometimes. She just can’t tell you no.”

“And you could have paid your cellphone bill, but let your mama do it so you could buy another bag.”

“What? That’s so different. Besides, I wouldn’t have to buy the bag if you didn’t always smoke for free.”

“But I only have \$50. And...you love me anyway.” Blue yawned and lay her head on Hazy’s lap. He passed her the bong and let out a long sigh.

“Please, I’m begging you. Work at the shop. You can’t keep living like this. It pains me to see you rip yourself into pieces. I miss you, Blue”

After a long period of silence, she simply said, “No.”

When Hazy dropped Blue off at her place. It was nearly seven a.m. They unloaded the drum set and hugged their goodbyes. With the house all to herself, she took the opportunity to test out her drums. She began drumming, and as she did so, a bubble-like wall formed around her and the drum set. A sudden jolt sent her thundering into the side of the bubble. She looked around and was suddenly surrounded by a sea of colors and light. She was floating in a circle of stars. Gravity was lost to her, but the drum set held its spot in the center of the bubble as if nothing was afflicting it. She was enticed by the beauty surrounding her. A moment ago, Blue was drumming in her living room, and now she was floating in a bubble in space. Nothing could be weirder, at least until a giant lemon-shaped vessel was charging directly towards her. As the vessel approached, Blue was able to make out some lettering on the side of it: “Transportation of Hostile Organelle Threats (T.H.O.T) Patrol”. It came to a halt in front of her bubble. She looked up at it in confusion and horror; Blue was confined in a bubble with nothing but a drum set. Within a moment, the bubble was sucked into the ship where it promptly dissipated, leaving Blue and the drum set tumbling to the floor of a peculiar room. A man stood in front of Blue. His crescent eyes appeared to have no irises and consisted of large, black pupils. They resided above his lack of nose and fangful mouth against his blue-green skin. An orange creature approached behind the man, floating above the ground with tentacle-like arms that stretched out towards her. A wave of despair coated Blue, and her eyes instinctively darted towards the drums.

“Wait, please,” the green man said, as he grabbed her arm and held her back.

“We mean no harm. Please cooperate and we can sort this out.” The man seemed sincere, but fear was boiling within her, overarching any reasonable thought. Panic struck her to sink her teeth into his arm, breaking herself free. She rushed to the drums and began senselessly banging them until the bubble reappeared and she was whisked away just as nonsensically as the first time.

Now, Blue was in an alleyway against brick and pavement. The force of her descent sent her pummeling towards the ground, scraping her knees bloody and dressing her in a layer of sidewalk chalk. She stood up, wincing in pain, and looked around. She knew this alley. It was two blocks down from Gigi’s Pawn shop. Hazy had driven past it countless times driving her home. She left the drums in the alley, and stumbled towards the shop. Upon entering the shop, she found Hazy at the counter, carrying a box of magazines towards the rear. His eyes locked with her, and the box slipped from his hands

“Blue?”

“Can you take me home?”

There was no way Hazy would understand what had happened. She didn't even understand it. Every time he tried talking about it, she shut down and started entertaining discussions of random insignificances to avert the inevitable conversation.

“So I'm thinking we should pick up a gig this weekend. I know we just did one, but you know it's not like it'd hurt and you keep saying we should be putting more effort into ourselves if we wanna be big and--”

“Blue, what the fuck? You show up all bloody, tell me I have to grab your drums from a random alley. You don't tell me why or what happened. Not like you ever do, so why should I expect that? You come around every once in a while, stay the night, fill my head with hope, and then I don't see you until our next gig. You fell asleep in my arms, but that means nothing to you. It's never going to. I'm a person, too. I've always been a person, but you act like I'm supposed to be able to go along with whatever you want, like my feelings don't exist. What do you think that you're doing to me? I— I—” Beads of salty tears dripped from Hazy's chin. He was used to this sort of thing from her, but it still hurt just as bad as the first time.

Hazy's words drifted into distortion as sobs engulfed him. He pulled into Blue's driveway, and she sat there in stunned silence. She didn't know what to do or say. Blue always slightly knew she was being selfish with Hazy, but she repressed this self-awareness. She liked living in her facade of ignorance. Blue sat silently as tears streamed down Hazy's face for the longest minute of her life.

Eventually, Hazy stopped crying. He started his car, and in a whisper, spoke, “Bye, Blue.”

Amid the chaos, Blue forgot her drums, and left them in Hazy's truck as she went towards her house.

A week had gone by, and Blue was almost starting to believe the green man with fangs and slits for nostrils was a wild hallucination. The indigestible lump of guilt hung in the pit of her stomach as she made her way to Gigi's shop. Blue had been making herself sick over what had happened and had tried about a hundred times to gather up the courage to show her face to Hazy for the wild, overdue apology she owed him. Upon entering the shop, she noticed her drums in the same position she had first discovered them, with cardboard propped against the barrel screaming, “Sold.” Hazy must've placed them out for her. As she looked at them with guilt-glazed eyes, an arm extended unto her shoulder. Blue turned expecting to see Hazy, but was met with the hideous crescent eyes of the green man.

A yelp escaped from her lips as quickly as she tried to bolt. The green man grabbed her by the hair and pulled her down so that she couldn't run this time.

“Help!” Hazy rushed around the corner to find Blue pinned to the ground in the grips of the green man.

“Remain calm. Any evidence I observe will be used against you in Galactic Court. It is by right of the federation that I detain unruly, projected threats. I am Captain—”

Hazy threw a cymbal off the drum set at the Captain's head, rendering him unconscious. Once Blue was out of the grips of the man, she looked up and noticed fuzzy handcuffs in the adult section. She darted to retrieve a pair as Hazy hoisted Captain against a shelf. Once they had handcuffed him to it, Hazy was quick to full on freak out. Blue told Hazy everything that had happened with T.H.O.T patrol.

“This isn’t real. There’s no way. You’re just casually being chased by aliens that call themselves “thot patrol”? And... that thing is like a fucking alien?” Hazy said, pale from disbelief. He didn’t have time to process the alien world unfolding before his eyes before he was swaddled into the tentacle arms of the same orange creature Blue had encountered previously. It pulled him through the back exit and promptly disappeared with Hazy, knocking over everything in its wake, sending a shelf of pornography through the glass windows. Blue chased it, but in an instant it was gone, and so was Hazy.

When Captain came to, Blue was shaking him senseless, ready to bombard him with demands.

“Where is Hazy?” Blue asked as she held the cymbal over his head as an attempted leverage to threaten him.

“Who?”

“My friend. That orange thing stole him”

“Look, I think this is all one big misunderstanding. I don’t want to be chasing two dumb teens through the galaxy. I have a wife and kids, lady. I’m less than a hundred days from retiring and you’re being a real pain in the ass.” The green man furrowed his brow and yawned.

For a moment, Blue saw him as a tired, old man instead of the scary alien that had tried to detain her moments prior. Captain explained to Hazy that her drum set is actually a teleporting vessel that was used to commit galactic terror before being ditched at the pawn shop. The ship appeared on his radar when Blue drummed herself into space. Upon observation, it was clear to him that Blue was not the notorious terrorist that they were looking for, but her reluctance to cooperate caused this whole mess. Hazy was likely detained because his team witnessed the hostility, and were trying to control the threat.

“If you unhandcuff me, we can go to the ship and retrieve your friend. This is gonna be a buttload of paperwork,” Captain said.

Blue reluctantly released him. He sat himself at the drums and extended a hand to her; she squished beside him as he began beating the drums. The bubble wall constructed itself, and once again Blue found herself floating in the stars. The lemon ship was stationed adjacent to them. Captain began communicating with it in a foreign language. The bubble was sucked into the opening of the ship, and Blue came rolling down to the same room as she had the last time, except this time she found herself face-to-face with Hazy.

“I’m so sorry.”

Two weeks had come to pass, and Blue now stood behind the counter at the shop.

“If you keep working like that, you’re gonna pay your debt in a heartbeat, sweet pea.” Gigi smiled as she set up new shelves by the back exit. T.H.O.T Patrol’s escapades resulted in complete wreckage of what used to be the adult section, and Blue was working at the shop to fix the chaos she caused. Blue finished work for the day and made her way over to Hazy.

“Hazy?”

“Yeah?”

Blue paused for the briefest of moments, gathering the courage to do what she should have done so many years ago. “Would you like to go on a date with me?”

“I can’t believe he would just say something like that,” said Tate, a tall, slender kid with curly blonde hair that met his ears. “After everything that has happened, after losing Mom, he just turns his back on me.”

“Listen, man. It’s totally messed up for him to say that, but there’s no sense in him. The only thing he thinks about is his having another bottle of rum,” replied Han, an average height teenager with long wavy brown hair that ended at his jawline.

“Just tell him you’ll bring a new guy over every time he refills his bottle,” Emile added, a short chubby kid with darker skin. His ancestors were from the Caribbean, and he looked even tanner next to his pale friends.

Han and Tate both chuckled softly.

“Yeah,” replied Tate. “He’d drink to the point where we wouldn’t even notice.”

The eighteen-year-olds kept driving through the windy roads along Mt. Hood National Park. To their right was a forest of pines that grow to be up to 300 feet tall, shading the entire forest floor. To their left stood Mt. Hood, a rocky spire towering over the surrounding mountains, the only peak in sight hugged by a blanket of snow.

“Did you guys hear about that hitchhiker who went missing a few weeks ago?” asked Emile.

“No, what happened?” asked Han.

“There isn’t much information out, but a guy went missing at this park,” said Emile.

“Well, people go missing often. Who knows? He might’ve just lost his way back,” added Tate.

“Well, the investigators found his campsite, and it looked like it was robbed or something,” explained Emile.

“Could’ve been a bear attack, which would make it impossible to find the body at that point,” said Han.

“I don’t think so,” doubted Emile. “A bear would’ve left prints, and there was literally no evidence to what happened, just a messy campsite.”

“Well, whatever it was, it attacked a lone camper, and there’s three of us so I think we’re fine,” said Tate.

“No shit, Sherlock. Let’s just hope we don’t come across what he encountered,” added Emile.

Emile drove his black Jeep Liberty into a slanted parking spot connected directly to the highway. There were a dozen spaces side-by-side with a weathered trail leading further into the forest. The Jeep came to a fast halt, almost running the curb. The boys stepped out, facing the pale forest. The trees had lost their leaves, leaving pale, naked branches tangled with each other. The leaves made an orange and brown carpet that scattered across the forest floor. It was a quiet day; a thick mass of grey clouds covered the sun’s shine while a swift breeze waved through the mountains and trees. It was the final days of fall, when the sun sets early, and the sky is covered by the seasonal overcast.

Han threw on a navy-blue parka as he walked towards the trail's entrance, followed by Emile. Tate closed in behind, following the other two further into the forest. Hiking was their favorite thing to do after the long school day. It was a way to stay out of the house for Tate, and a source of relaxation for Han and Emile. It was the first time they'd been through here, so they knew little of where they were going.

"So, Han, how's the lady?" asked Emile.

"The same as always. Why ask?" replied Han.

"Oh, just wondering," sighed Emile. "Does she know?"

"Know what?" Tate added, including himself to the conversation.

"Yeah, what do you mean?" answered Han.

"Tate doesn't know either? Well, listen to this Tate: I saw Han with Samantha the other day. You know that one girl in the grade under us?" exclaimed Emile.

"Yeah, the one who's been with almost every guy in our grade?" asked Tate.

"That's the one," answered Emile.

"Shut up, you guys. Me and Mandy are going through a rough patch right now," Han mumbled.

"Why? What's up?" Tate asked.

"I don't know. I mean, I like her and all, but we just don't have the connection I'm looking for. She's really nice and I don't want to hurt her feelings. I don't know. I still need to think about it," replied Han.

"Sounds like you need to have a long talk with her," said Tate.

"Sounds like you should be single the rest of your life for even saying that, dick," added Emile.

"Yeah, well, whatever happens happens, I guess," Han sighed, ending the conversation in a tone hinting that he didn't want to talk about it. "Let's stop up there in the opening. I need to take a leak."

"Whatever you say, man. Just don't make a mess," Emile said sarcastically.

Han walked off into the bushes hidden from his friend's sight. Emile and Tate plopped down on a bench in the opening, staring at the colossal wooden giants surrounding them. The trees were so thick that only the slightest amount of light managed to creep through the branches, leaving a gloomy atmosphere in the forest underneath.

"It's a good time for a smoke. Want one?" asked Tate.

"No thanks, man. I brought a little something for myself," Emile replied.

He pulled out a small flask and unscrewed the cap, tilting it towards his mouth and slowly slurping the liquid inside.

"What's that?" asked Tate.

"Oh, just some whisky I took from the old man," replied Emile. "I'm starting to like the flavor of it."

"I didn't know you drank during the week, too," Tate remarked.

"Yeah," Emile replied. "It's been helping me feel better recently."

"Why? What's wrong?" asked Tate curiously.

“I kind of like this girl. Her name’s Tanya, but she’s way out of my league. I could never get her to talk to me,” sighed Emile. “I just don’t see it happening.”

“Have you even tried talking to her?”

“No, I’m not good enough for her. She wouldn’t want me on her happiest day,” Emile mumbled.

“Well, you’ll never know if you keep drinking that crap and let your assumptions get the best of you. You should try talking to her sometime, then you’ll know,” Tate insisted.

“Hey guys! Come take a look at this!” shouted Han, interrupting their conversation. Emile and Tate both looked at each other surprised.

“What? Does he need help pulling his pants up?” Emile remarked.

They rushed over to where Han was, down a small slope covered by shrubs and rocks managing to hold on to the hill. They walked up behind Han to see him staring at the ground.

“Look at this you guys!” Han said with excitement.

“What is it?” Tate asked.

“A trail of blood. It leads further down the slope,” answered Han.

“Oh shit,” said Emile, sounding as if something bad happened. “Do you think it could be from that one guy who went missing?”

“I’m not sure,” answered Han, “but it sure is a lot of blood.”

“We should check it out,” Emile insisted.

“We should not!” argued Tate.

“Well, whatever it is, I doubt it could hurt us!” Emile stated, slurring his words.

“How do you feel about this?” Tate asked Han.

“Whatever. If we spot anything sketchy, we’ll get out of there,” Han answered. He stood up after looking closely at the blood splatter and followed Emile. “That blood has been dry for a few hours, so we’re not in danger right now at least,” he added.

“Whatever you say, man,” replied Tate. “Hey Emile! Aren’t you driving us back?”

“Yeah but don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine by then!” Emile answered.

The boys continued to follow the blood trail. At this point, there was no walking path for them to follow. They were completely surrounded by the pine forest with no trace of human activity anywhere. If the rain were to come, they would be left completely lost, as the blood trail would wash away. They would have no trail to follow back. The trail led them to a little swamp, large puddles scattered across the flat ground, surrounded by a thick, concrete-like mud. On the other side of the marshy opening, there was a cave facing them, a dark hole in the side of a small cliff, which led further up the mountain slope, hiding behind a tree line of pines.

“Wait! Is that a cave?” asked Tate, pointing out the grim looking hole.

“I think so,” Han answered. “Must be where the trail ends.”

“Let’s check it out,” Emile said, feeding to his curiosity. They kept walking until they were standing in the entryway of the cave.

“You guys got your phones charged?” asked Han.

“Yeah,” Tate and Emile both answered

“We should probably use the flashlights,” added Han.

They each turned on their flashlights and ventured into the lightless depths of the cave. With only three flashlights from three phones, the friends struggled to continue through the cave, as darkness dominated their vision, increasing the difficulty to see clearly. They stumbled upon a large, open room littered with stalactites, large spires of minerals hanging from the ceiling, which looked like large spikes ready to fall on their victims underneath. There was a dim glow emitting from the center. The sound of wood crackling and popping grew louder as the boys walked closer. On the other side of a large boulder, a fire was burning with a carcass staked above it.

“Shit, guys. That must be the missing camper!” exclaimed Emile.

“Shut up, Emile!” Han whispered. “We should get out of here before we end up like him.”

Right as Han finished, the boys caught a glimpse of a small creature with a hunch dash across the floor just within the light’s touch, snarling as if it were struggling to breathe. It ran behind another rock and remained hidden out of sight.

“What the hell was that?” Emile said, panicking.

Nobody answered. Just as they were all ready to spring for their lives back through the cave and outside, a quiet voice came from behind the rock,

“Tate, is that you?” said the voice.

“Dad?” answered Tate, surprised. “Dad, what are you doing here?”

“I’m lost, my son, and I can’t find my way out,” Sobbed the voice.

“Something is definitely not right here,” said Han shaking. “We need to leave.”

Tate ignored him, cautiously walking closer to the source of the hidden voice. “That’s okay, Dad. You can just follow us out. We know the way.”

“Really?” asked the voice with hope. “Okay, but there is something I want to say first.”

“What’s that?” asked Tate.

There was a sudden pause, followed by a loud screech that echoed through the cave. Just then, the hunched figure leaped over the rock it used to hide and landed right on top of Tate, tackling him to the ground. It was his dad.

“I just wanted to say that I will never call you my son!” he yelled, spraying saliva all over Tate’s face. “Your mother would be disappointed to find out her son is gay!” His breath reeked of alcohol, but this wasn’t his dad. This was a deformed shapeshifter who looked like his dad, soulless eyes with white pupils with skin the shade of a zombie.

Right as Emile and Han were ready to rush over to Tate to push the creature off, another one came out of the darkness, reflecting the same appearance as Samantha.

“Oh no, Han. Good luck with that,” said Emile nervously. His attention turned to another figure who crept out of the darkness. It was Tanya!

“Hey, Han,” said the figure, slowly walking closer to him.

“Hey, Samantha. What are you doing here?” Han hesitated.

“Oh, you know, just waiting for you to arrive,” it said.

The creature looked just like the girl Han knew, long brown hair touching its shoulders, standing five and a half feet off the ground, just like Samantha. The only thing that was different was, again, the soulless white eyes and pale grey skin.

“I don’t think this is the best time or place for that, don’t you think?” asked Han.

“No, I don’t. We’re right where we should be, out of Mandy’s sight,” answered the creature.

Just as it tried to embrace him, Han thought of Mandy, and how unappreciative he had been towards her. He had been avoiding her recently, trying to find an excuse for her to not like him. He realized he had been treating her a way she shouldn’t, and talking to Samantha was a selfish excuse to get Mandy to leave him. At that moment, Han pushed the creature away, realizing that it was trying to seduce him only to feel guilt and regret it. The creature posing to be Samantha looked up at him just as it turned to dust, floating away back into the darkness from where it came.

Han ran over to Tate who was still under his dad’s imposter, held down against the cave floor. He shoved the creature off of Tate.

“You okay, man?” he asked, helping Tate up.

“Yeah, man. I’m not finished with this thing yet,” moaned Tate, filled with anger at this point.

He mounted on top of the creature, holding it down as it held him down. He began pounding on its chest and face with all of his anger, which gave him extra strength in his punches.

“I’m done being tormented by you!” yelled Tate, “You refuse to accept me for who I am, and if you can’t respect that, then I can’t respect you!”

He finished off the creature with one final blow before it turned into dust, blowing back into the darkness from where it came. Tate remained still, processing everything that had just happened. Han looked over to see Emile and the remaining creature staring at each other in complete silence.

“All you have to do is say, ‘Hi Emile!’” demanded Han. “That’s all you need to do, bud.”

Emile, trembling in fear, was locked into the creature’s eyes. It looked exactly like his crush Tanya back at school, only replaced by, again, the soulless eyes and the pale flesh. Emile was locked in place, too scared to do anything else.

“Just say, ‘Hi!’” yelled Han, hoping to get Emile’s attention this time.

Emile glanced over at Han with the widest eyes he’d ever seen. He could see the fear behind Emile’s eyes. Emile looked back at the creature, red faced as ever, and nervously gulped before asking, “Hey, Tanya, do you maybe want to go on a date sometime?”

The creature tilted its head, admiring his question before fading into dust, flowing back into the dark hidden from the light. Emile let out a huge sigh of relief.

“See, now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” asked Han.

“I felt like I was going to die,” said Emile, still shaken by what had just transpired.

“Well, at least you know what to do now,” said Han jokingly as he turned back towards Tate. “Hey, man. You okay over there?”

“Yeah I’m fine,” Tate replied. “Just trying to think about what the hell just happened.”

“Me, too, buddy,” said Han in an attempt to comfort him, “but right now we need to get as far away from here as we can.” The three friends regrouped and made their way towards the cave’s exit.

“I think those things were trying to teach us something,” Han wondered.

“Like what?” asked Tate.

“I don’t know, but I think I’m going to spend more time with Mandy and forget about Samantha.”

“Wow. Something you should’ve done a long time ago,” hinted Emile.

“I know what you mean, Han,” Tate agreed. “I feel like I need to have a discussion with my father.”

“Exactly, bro,” said Han. “Like they were trying to fix problems in our lives.”

“I don’t know about all that,” Emile remarked, “but I have a date with Tanya tomorrow.”

The friends found their way out the cave and made their way back to Emile’s Jeep.

Of the many things to abruptly consume my mind at the break of dawn, the irradiating glow of the sun leaking through the window is the first to announce its arrival. Under its spotlight, my eyes had much time to adjust but I was too tired to recognize its presence. Now, they snap open like a door bursting around its hinges, revealing to me a throne of interlaced wicker upon which I slouch. An amused, wry smile pulls the muscles around my lips. I must have been too tired to get up and roll onto the bed.

As I rise from the seat, my feet sweep mournfully into a standing position, my gaze creeping up to confront the dawn. The sun's rays bathe the snow-capped rooftops outside in a warm glow, summoning me from my slumber and into my doom.

The dreams produced by the minimal sleep I allowed myself the night before did nothing to cleanse the burdens laid upon me. A cacophony of pleas, sorrows, and protests still swirl about my conscience, sending my core into disarray. At the heart of the storm in my head, I stand motionless with my chin upturned but my jaw relaxed, gaping at the hands of fate above.

I tremble as my feet press against the crudely thrown together wood floor. Snoozing softly and laid upside down on the bed is my wife. The trials of the previous day bore a heavy burden on her soul; however, it was greatly lifted by its products. At the foot of the bed in its makeshift crib lies a newborn creature. Its frame is gently harbored in the embrace of its mother, whose arm is draped over the bed like a wet towel on a hanger. A sad smile cracks my lips as I look upon her face, which is distorted by the wooden rim of the bed. She had become the talk of our small Excalibrian town, Ihelta, over the past several months, and even more so within the past few days. Such musings generally pertained to the unfortunate path ahead for the child to set foot upon. After all, much like myself, this child would not have a father.

A soft brushing against the door frame rips me from my trance. Outside, a bronze-skinned man is leaned against the side of my shack, unfazed by the frigid tendencies of the winter cold as he awaits my arrival. I watch as his crimson hair is slowly matted by a sheet of snow. For what seems like hours he waits, but I have only stood here mere seconds staring at him. We used to be brothers. Perhaps, I still consider him as such. I wonder if he does so for me. Today he is to take me to my death.

As I approach the door and rest my hand on the latch, I take one last look at my wife and child before prying the latch from its position and taking my leave into the morning light. My bare feet protest as I rest my soles on the snowy ground. The familiar stranger at my side casts me a solemn look.

"Mourning," I greet him, purposely accenting the word to imply a double meaning.

"Voidborne." His use of a generalization instead of my name is like a sting in the behind, but I shrug it off as if it were to be expected of him.

"You speak the name of my people as if they were cursed." My tone betrays a sharp edge as I try to conceal my disdain.

"Your people are cursed. You cannot further hide your eyes-of-gold people from the Apostles of Nul," he scoffs, shifting his focus from my own golden eyes to that of the road before

us. By unspoken consent, we drop the subject of my people and begin our journey, our minds lingering upon the subject: the Apostles of Nul.

“This scheme is of their design. Are you not aware that we are playing into their hands?” I force conversation.

“I am aware. They just want easy access to the boy,” he replies. “His mother will be easy to sway in the distress of your departure.”

“The cultists will not stop at simply pawning him,” I say, observing the face of a curious onlooker across the cobbled road. “They don’t want the Voidborne as a faction to rise to power. They would be a threat to their affairs”

“Then by removing you, the only free Voidborne in the world, from the equation, they can kill two birds with one stone.” Raising an eyebrow, he recites words he had planned to speak from the very beginning.

“It matters not. I will return.” Despite not looking at him, I can tell he is amused.

“Return from sacrifice to the void? I think not.” For the first time, I hear genuine concern in his voice. “You know as well as I do that no man has ever traversed the void and lived to tell the tale. What makes you think you are an exception?”

“I am no man,” I say.

“If death does not bite your tongue, I will give your family ten sheep and promise your child my daughter’s hand,” he sneers.

“I will not taste defeat.”

“For your sake, I hope defeat doesn’t have an aftertaste.”

For the remainder of our walk, we are without words, so I take the time to close my eyes and feel the world around me one last time, as this very well may be the last time I feel the cold breeze against my ears or take in the scent of manure in some human’s backyard.

They are sensations that many otherwise take for granted or perhaps even take unkindly to. But to me, they are life’s last luxuries before an infinity of nothingness. Even if I were to die in the embrace of the void, my soul would not be permitted to ascend to the heavens above. Such rights are reserved for higher beings anyway.

My fantasies are called to a close by the sight of the town square where the fountain of Nul lies in wait for my arrival. This space is used as a market square, performance arena, and most predominantly a unit of public execution. It is the only place in this town that the snow cannot touch. The floor we walk was carefully carved from marble, laced with a plating of gold, and embroidered with roughly-surfaced, thick glass that allows for the showcase of the valley below, as well as the luminous light of the foliage beneath on nights of spring. Towering above are six quartz pillars that meet at the top, creating the surface for a massive chandelier to hang down above the centerpiece of the town: the fountain of Nul.

Four arching staircases lead to the summit of the fountain where a cylindrical pavilion carved purely from quartz is reposed at the very heart of the town, overlooking the abyss. Displayed at the base on the perimeter of the building is an array of technicolor flowers. The cold dark velvet of frostborn lilacs, sanguine plantain lilies, and coral bells of varying color. Bulbous vines cling to the arched sides of the building and drape from the edge to hang down over the abyss. At its crown rests a jetting veil of water that fans out and collects on three circular platforms, redirecting as it makes contact with the smooth surfaces of each, finally collecting in a pond and flowing into shafts that send it into a garden lining the rim of the building, only for the water to be recollected and

forced out of the fountain's spout once more. Inside the building is a temporary altar in which the ritual will be taking place.

"Voidborne." The high pitched hiss of a cloaked figure before me broadcasts its disdain across the square: the Archbishop of Nulolith. His cloak is white and lined with purple. Around his neck hangs a golden pendant that glimmers even in the light of the sun. "You have come here without prodding. For that, your name will be left untainted." *As if the cultists of Nulbour would spare me my name. How foolish do they think I am to speak to me with such transparent tidings?* Although it occurs to me that perhaps the archbishop simply lacks the care to extend such efforts to a dead man, let alone a Voidborne.

Narrowing my gaze as I approach him, I reveal my wrists, which are seized by similarly cloaked figures on either side of me and clasped in chains by which they pull me, shepherding me to the fountain of Nul. When we reach the arched staircase, I turn to take a glance at my brotherly acquaintance once more. He stares back with solemn eyes and I meet his gaze accordingly, then I disregard him.

As we ascend the steps to the centerpiece, the archbishop recites fabrications to the people of Ithelta: "Of his own volition, the Katharos hereby relinquishes his right to life in service of Nulbour..."

Ritualistic words echo in his throat, but I tune him out as the people gather round. They say they don't like the sacrificial rituals and yet they never cease to attend them. Two faces among the crowd stand out, their features tamed by sorrow in my regard: the demon's eyes bared like fangs, the druid's sensitive smile like a blossoming flower.

As my shepherds anchor me to the altar at the center of the pavilion, the melody of an echoing cry pervades the square. My eyes search for the source, a bittersweet taste fostering in my mouth as I recognize its tones. Its source patters barefoot against the cold ground, softly caressing the body of a quiet baby against her bosom. Her long white hair flailing in her wake, her diamond eyes a frenzy laced with a lament for my leave and disdain for not awakening her. Tears streaming down her face, her voice is a mix of accusations against the public and myself. A fool, she is. My fate is irrevocable. She should have fled with the boy whilst she had the chance. Instead, she insists upon sullyng the peace in hopes that it would catalyze mine.

Her pleas go unrecognized as two servants of Nul suppress her. Even still, her cries do not subside. I close my line of sight to her, unable to bear the weight of her despondency—or my own, for that matter. Instead, I turn my attention to one of the cultists who have imprisoned me. His chin is upturned, blocking the view of his solemn face as his lips form words that I do not hear. As he lowers his gaze, turning and descending to the platform below, I catch a glimpse of a soft golden glow that penetrates the shroud beneath his cowl. His golden gaze meets with mine for a brief moment and my heartstrings snap and recoil into breakage under his scrutiny. I know not whether my vision blurs from the spell or tears erupting from my eyes. Not when I see the mournful face of my wife or the innocence of my son's. Not when I see the disdain of the onlookers for my Voidborne blood. It is not even the realization of my demise. It is the eyes of the man who chained me here that prophesize lament for my people: the golden eyes of a Voidborne peeking at me behind the white cowl of a cultist.

I shout as my vision fades, the world around me becoming mute. I can no longer feel my frozen ears, I cannot taste the snowy air, smell the pungency of breakfast, hear the cries of my wife, or see the crowd before me. I cannot even see the color of nothing.

All I can feel is the burning passion within my soul. It cauterizes the flesh of my core and utters my eulogy with words that are not audible. It is then that an unheard oath escapes my lips, mute to the world above, but screaming in my heart until even the voice in my head is drowned by the silence:

I will return.

I will return to this land, and when I do, my people will rise again...

Creative Nonfiction

**Winner of the 2020 Cambridge Campus English Department
Writing Award: Best Narrative Essay**

Leaving

Brittany Bailey

It swooped down, a wingspan so large it covered the entire windshield. Native Americans believe an owl is a sign of death. It's a feathery grim reaper, making an appearance on a cold rainy November day. It couldn't have made its warning any clearer, if only he had listened.

I was zoned out, watching the rain hit the windshield as I'm driving. The car reeked like alcohol and cigarettes. I hate days like these. Whenever alcohol's involved it's bad. Really bad. He was already halfway through his travel size brandy bottle.

"I mean, I feel like I've just done it all in life. I need more of a challenge. It's getting boring, you know what I mean?" he said, slurring his words. *Everything but get a job*, I think to myself. He continues rambling and I stop listening. The drive home from town is a long one. The rain's pounding on the windshield and I'm lost in my thoughts again.

"Don't you think so, Brittany?" He startles me. Shit. I wasn't listening.

"Huh?" I say. He's not happy.

"Man, you never listen. You're always so oblivious to everything around you," he says before putting the almost empty bottle to his lips again. "That's what you get for getting yourself a white girl, Vin. They always oblivious to everything," chimes in Joe from the back seat. *Who invited you anyways* I think, shooting him a dirty look in the rearview mirror.

We pull into the driveway and I hear Joe whisper something to Vince, who then asks me to drive them to their friends, two hours away. "No way," I say. He stares at me with his eyes, as black as night, just like his hair. He begs. I know it's because they want to go get high. "No, I'm not doing it," I say.

I'm on the cold tile now. My face burning like a blazing fire from his hand. I wrap my arms around my belly, protecting the baby. Please don't kick me, I think. Please walk away. I lay there in silence with the hot tears running down my burning face. He grabs my phone and the car keys.

"I'm going to the gas station. Can I at least do that?" They hop into my car and leave. I know I'm not going to see them again for hours, better sleep while I can.

It's the middle of the night and Joe comes wandering in. Alone. He's talking to Denise, Vince's older sister. I walk into the kitchen and something's just not right. They're staring at me. After what felt like an eternity, they turn to each other and start talking again. "Where's Vin?" I interrupt. They ignore me. "Joe, where's Vin?" I ask louder. Something happened. I can see it all over his face.

"Man, he just went crazy, so my friend kicked him out and he left. I thought he would be here by now." *Oh wonderful*, I think to myself. Typical Vince, stealing my shit and not coming back. I go back to bed.

I wake up expecting to see my car in the driveway but it's not. I'm fuming with anger. I have to be to work in an hour and now I have to catch a ride. *He's really outdoing himself this time*, I think. The ride to work isn't too long, which I'm thankful for because my coworker is rambling, and I can't take another minute of it. We pull up to the casino. It always looks so pretty with all of the lights. Unfortunately, this place of happiness for some seems like my own personal prison.

I try to just forget about Vince and my car and focus on work, but it's almost impossible. Each passing moment I'm getting angrier and angrier. Even the loud music of the slot machines can't take my mind off it. This is going to be the longest day ever.

"Hey, baby girl," a voice calls from behind me. I turn around and see the familiar long blonde hair and blue eyes. It's my mother and I feel a wave of relief come over my body. I knew she was coming to town, but she's early. I want so badly to tell her everything, but I don't. She has this terrible habit of making everything about her and I don't need that drama. I'm sure Vince is home now. The last thing I want to do is see him, so I decide to stay at my mom's hotel room. The room smells of old cigarette smoke, but the beds are comfy, so I don't care. The minute my head hits the pillow I'm out.

At this point I can't help but wonder why I'm with someone like Vince. I wonder this a lot actually. He does nothing but make my life miserable. We had been together off and on since we were sixteen. We both had a really hard childhood, and I found comfort in being with someone who could relate. I thought maybe we could fix each other. When he would hit me, I would tell myself I was strong. I was strong to love and try to fix a broken man. We're twenty-three now. Maybe it's time I realize some people can't be fixed.

I wake up to the sound of my mom getting ready in the bathroom. Her laptop's laying on her bed, so I decide to check my Facebook. I see Denise had messaged me to tell me Vince still wasn't home. I take my mom's phone and try to call mine. It's dead. It's been two days and I'm starting to get nervous. *He's probably just got himself arrested like an idiot*, I tell myself. Check the jail roster, nothing. I pull up Google and I type in "2006 silver Ford Focus, Garrison, Minnesota" into the search bar. I scroll a bit, and something catches my eye. An article says, "Hinckley man critically injured in car accident." *There's no way this is him*, I tell myself. I'm scared to click on the link, so I just stare at it for a moment. I finally get brave enough and open it.

As I'm reading it, the room spins around me like a whirlwind. All the air leaves my lungs. I'm shaking, speechless. I feel as though the bed is quicksand and I'm sinking deeper and deeper. I can't move. It was him. I'm frozen, staring at the screen for what feels like a lifetime. I go to talk but all that comes out is a blood curdling scream. My mom comes running and all I can manage to say is, "It's him, it's him." She gives me a look of confusion until she realizes the article on the screen. She hugs me. I'm entirely numb.

After what seemed like hours of searching, we finally found what hospital he was transferred to. I called but they couldn't tell me much, other than he was unable to talk on the phone. The ride down was a silent one. I didn't have the words, and she didn't either. Not knowing what we were going to find at the hospital made me sick. I kept saying, "Please be alive. Please be okay." I wanted it so bad to be a nightmare I would soon wake up from.

Would I be able to do this on my own? Raise our son alone? I can't help but think of the worst scenario right away, all of the bad things he has done to me no longer in my mind. Focusing on only the good times, I get an overwhelming feeling of love and longing for him to be alive. I would do anything for him to be okay, to have my family as I always pictured it. Our son Damien was due to arrive in a few short months. As long as he is alive, we will get through it. I will love him through whatever it is until he is better.

We walk into the ICU and its cold. All I can hear is the sound of machines beeping. All the doors to the rooms are open just a crack so I can't tell which one is his. It didn't take long for a nurse to spot us and bring me to his room. I touch the door. I don't want to open it. I'm scared what's on the other side. I start to feel hot and woozy. *Okay, if you're going to do this, you have to do it now before you pass out*, I tell myself. I gently push the door open. To my surprise he looks nothing like I expected. A huge wave of relief washes over my body. I step inside. He has a small scratch on his face but that's all I can see. He opens his eyes and I see the familiar black. Don't cry. *You can't let him see you cry*, I tell myself.

"Are you okay?" I ask him. He laughs. I can tell he's in pain.

"Just a few broken ribs and hurt my back. I'll be alright though," he says with a smile on his face. My mom walks into the room and says we have to go.

"What, why would I leave him? I can't leave him here alone," I say confused. She storms out. This is that part when I said she tends to make everything about herself. She manages to convince me to leave, saying we'll be back right away in the morning. We leave, but I don't want to.

We walk into the hospital the next morning to see some of his family in the waiting room. I knew he had surgery today, but I was hoping we would be there in time. I decide to use the restroom before making my way over to them. As I was washing my hands his aunt came in. She informs me he's just about done with surgery.

"Oh, awesome. So how long do they think until he can be up and walking around and stuff?" I ask. Her face washes over with both confusion and sadness.

"Brittany..." She paused for a moment before saying, "...he's never going to walk again. He's paralyzed." I collapsed to the floor, sobbing and shaking uncontrollably.

How could he not tell me? How did I not notice? Then the question that would weigh on my mind for years to come: why didn't I stop him? The next thought to cross my mind I am not proud of. Would this be enough to make him change? Is it a blessing in disguise?

The weeks seemingly blend together into what honestly feels like one very, very, long day. I'm learning how to help him adjust to his new life. Meanwhile, my growing belly keeps getting bigger and bigger. My grandparents are visiting us and it's so nice to see a familiar face. Being stuck in the hospital for days on end is exhausting. We're eating lunch when I hear, "Hey, bitch, grab me a pop." I glance at my grandparents and the look on their faces breaks my heart.

"He's just having a hard time right now. He's never like that," I lie to them. They pretend to buy it, but I know they know better.

We're out of the hospital now, but things have only gotten worse between us. I'm helping him get dressed and to do so I must roll him, kind of like a log. I'm six months pregnant and he is

one hundred and sixty pounds, so this is no easy task. I'm struggling a bit and I lean down. At this moment. I hear my ear ringing and the familiar burning on my face. I look at him confused.

"You know why I do this, Brittany? Because you're a weak person. You're never going to do shit about it," he said looking at me, those black eyes cutting so deep they reach my soul. My child deserves better than this, I know it.

An hour later, my bags were packed. I found my strength that day and being a weak person was not who I was. I knew the life I wanted for my son wasn't here, with him. As I was driving away down the long winding driveway, I didn't look back, and I never have.

Who would have thought that the symbol of death, the feathery grim reaper I saw so long ago would hold a different meaning in my life? On that cold November night when it swooped down as a warning to him, it was a sign of strength for me. The strength I was about to gain to do what I should have done so long ago. The strength to finally be free.

“I tell you what, man.” My uncle, Tom, thrust the narrow blade of his shovel into the late-summer sod.

“What?”

“This is something you’re gonna tell your kids. I don’t know a lotta people who have done this.”

“Well, yeah.”

“I mean,” he nodded to my grandfather, “he’s eighty and he hasn’t done this. I’m forty and I haven’t done this. You’re twenty.”

Nineteen years. Not enough time.

Grandpa came up behind, sunglasses hiding his eyes. He plunked down his worn lawn chair and sank into it. He folded calloused hands over the girth of his belly, his hoary chin dipping a little as an aching, over-used back settled against its rest.

I plunged my shovel into the dirt with a crunching noise as it grated against the grit of the soil. There was a ripple of wind in the oak trees overhead. *Mom would’ve loved those.* Just a couple feet to the left was the dark green stone where my great grandparents—her grandparents—rested. On the day of my great grandmother’s funeral, I rested a hand on her coffin, in a reverie. An acorn fell, *thumped* off the casket, and broke the spell. *Move on,* it said for her. I kept it.

The day was overcast, and the stupid church put a stupid fountain in the pond in the background. It marred the natural beauty.

But there was beauty in the oak trees. In the pond, despite its stupid fountain.

Mom, paralyzed and mute in bed, would widen her eyes approvingly at a beautiful day beyond the windows, and the emerald of our pond beneath the trees.

I blinked, stabbed the earth. Let it jar me.

“So how deep does it have to be?” Tom tipped another shovel-full onto the pile.

“Two feet by two feet, and...oh, about three deep.” Grandpa looked right, to his parents’ grave, rather than his daughters’.

“We should get a tarp. For the dirt.” I leaned on the long haft of my shovel, staring at the impression on the earth’s quiet face. The hole was only going to get deeper, and come the next day, it would need to be re-filled.

“Go and get one out of the back of my car.” Grandpa’s voice was distant as a foreman’s and hard as a tomb.

I ran back to his maroon van, pulled out a battered green tarp, and ran back.

“Now move the pile while Tom digs.”

No. She was Tom’s sister-in-law. She was MY mother. *Unacceptable.* But I didn’t want to make a fuss, of course. Things were too fragile. Dad should’ve been there; we should’ve waited for him. But he had to settle business with the funeral home.

Things were too fragile.

My back burned as I scooped into the pile that Tom kept renewing. I tried to keep resentful eyes off him. He just wanted to help. And he was stronger. But it should've been me spearing through that dirt, that clay, that gravel.

"Now, Axel, think about what you're doing." Grandpa hauled himself up like a bear rearing in frustration at the antics of a squirrel. "You're digging on that side and carrying it around to the tarp. You should be standing right here." He seized the shovel, standing between the dirt pile and the tarp. "That way you can just turn."

I watched him move load after load of dirt as though he needed to not only make his point, but underline it, highlight it, and draw arrows pointing to it. He grunted and puffed as his back surely twinged. This was his idea. We could've hired someone. But no, it wasn't a bad idea. *Cathartic*. It had to be.

But I should've been digging.

He handed me back the shovel, concern under his gruffness.

"See, you gotta learn to be efficient."

Tom's white t-shirt darkened with sweat as he reached ever deeper, shifting loads of craggy earth and larger rocks to the pile.

"Do you want me to take over?" I stepped towards the edge.

"Nah, I'm fine."

"Okay. I just...want to do my part."

He stared at me, just for a second. Grandpa's eyes bored into my back.

"I'll let you take over when we get to the last few inches. Do you think we're getting pretty close, Danny?"

"Oh, we're getting there."

My stomach knotted, each layer of soil bringing me closer. My heart burned to be part of digging it out and laying it bare, pounded at the thought of *not* doing those things.

Tom towed out another rock, sent it tumbling onto the mound we crafted.

He stepped aside.

I had to get on my knees to keep digging. The sun's writ, grey through the clouds, wouldn't extend into the hole. It was shaded by its square walls, the *demesne* of Hades, not Zeus. A muscle twitched tight somewhere by my right eye. But no. My jaw tightened. *Decorum. Composure.*

"That's deep enough." Grandpa's voice was full of hairline fractures. "Now jump down in there and make the bottom flat."

It was the sensible thing to do. I took a breath for the dive and swung myself down.

It was only waist-deep, or thereabouts, but I drowned in those black depths, packing the dry earth down with decisive stomping. The cold of the grave settled in, cold as she was the night she died. Bile rose in my throat, choking, bitter fingers.

I heaved myself out. Grandpa's eyes remained hidden by their black veil.

"Now go and get the vault. We'll see if it fits."

I trotted back to his van, slid open one of the doors. There it sat, seat-belted in so it wouldn't fall, a hollow, lidded prism of copper, forged by the old man's mighty paws. Someday, we'd need to dig up the urn so we could mix Dad in with Mom. What better way to guard her ashes from the ravages of time than to seal them in copper her father wrought?

We lowered the vault in, as we would do the next day.

Grandpa's tape measure clacked against it, searching for the distance between the lid and the surface.

"That's good, guys."

We folded the dirt-covered tarp over itself. Tom carried away a couple of the shovels. Grandpa carried away his chair. I stood by the hole, looking to the trees and the pond with its stupid fountain.

Reality's gaping jaws gnawed with more vigor at the corners of my consciousness.

Dead and going in that hole.

Dead and gone.

Mom left me behind.

The sun was gone behind the blanket of clouds.

But it was still there.

I smiled at the pond and the trees, how she'd love them and share my annoyance at that tacky fountain. How she'd agree that the sum of everything was beautiful.

Tomorrow, then. But still I leaned on the haft of the shovel. For a long minute, there was no sound, as though every hawk and dove and even the martlets of the mind were sleeping.

Thump.

There lay an acorn next to me on the emerald grass. I stooped, picked it up, turned it in my fingers. The smile came again.

I slipped it into my pocket, and walked away.

Cassandra carefully positions the skateboard at the top of the hill. It's a hot summer day, the kind near the end of August where autumn almost feels tangible. Small droplets of perspiration collect on her forehead. My palms are sweaty, too. I wipe them on my pants as Cassandra squints into the sunlight to assess her chosen angle. Her hair sticks to her forehead with the moist heat.

The hill has a gentle decline, but at the end of it is a large curb, and over the large curb is the street that connects to my driveway. It's unlikely a car will come by, but it's imperative that Cassie gets this right. She knows I'll stop helping if she falls. She's too cool for a helmet, so I told her she's not allowed to fall.

I hold out my arms and she grabs onto them, her fingernails digging gently into my skin. The board wobbles as she steps onto it. I feel a small pressure as she adjusts her weight, but she hardly needs my help. After watching a few YouTube videos, she knows exactly how to stand.

"Ready?" I ask apprehensively when she seems to be situated. A slow smile stretches across her face. It makes her freckles bunch together like some sort of constellation, which makes me forget to be nervous for a second. Then she gives me her nod of approval, and I remember that I'm not exactly thrilled to be doing this.

She starts rolling slowly down the hill as I jog by her side in case she needs someone to lean on. She stops exactly where she's supposed to, beaming from ear to ear. I know this means we'll have to start again, so I pick up the skateboard and walk with her to the top of the hill once more. This time, she grabs my hands to balance herself, her fingers slipping between mine. I try not to think about this, but my heart leaps into action anyway.

The truth is that I don't want her to be good at skateboarding. It's our last day before she moves off to college and she already feels so different. Maybe it's the new t-shirt she's wearing, purple with checkered sleeves. Or maybe it's the way she stands now, with her feet pointed away from me. I can't decide what it is, but she already feels far away. What if she goes off to college and changes completely? What if, when she comes back, she's like the stoner skater boys who live across the street? Or worse, what if she impresses some stoner skater boy with long hair and dark nail polish and totally forgets about me? I can't compete with that.

I also can't get over the way she's holding my hands. She has no idea what this means to me. For as well as we know each other, Cassie is very good at missing the obvious. I have a bad habit of nearly outing myself by telling stupid jokes, but she seems to always miss the punchlines.

Cassandra gets bored after a few more rounds on the hill so we decide to take things to the sidewalk. There's no momentum for her to get going here and the gaps between the concrete will only slow her down. Our plan is that I will pull her until she figures out how to move by herself.

It's smooth at first, but the sidewalk is uneven. We hit a few rough patches along the way and there's one section of concrete that is more elevated than the rest. It catches the wheels of the skateboard so that no matter how hard I pull, I can't move her forward. Cassandra can't help but frown at my fight against this immovable barrier. This twists her freckles, too, pulling them down with her lips. Eventually, she's forced to step off the board and move it herself.

Sometimes I worry that's how our friendship works, that I'm pulling as hard as I can and Cassandra is just along for the ride. I pull her past clusters of neighborhood kids and dogs that are

on the path. Sometimes, a large tree will offer us a sweet section of shade, but it never lasts. I manage to drag her all the way up another bigger hill where there is no danger of going into the road. My calves start to burn from all of the running. I'm glad when we get to pause at the top of this hill. Cassie considers the descent for a moment, but she is undaunted by how steep it looks. She asks me to push her again and I oblige.

Here, she gathers momentum faster than I can run. My breath comes in quick bursts, warm and heavy. It's like I can't fill my lungs fast enough and I have no choice but to let her go. I put my hands on my knees and watch her curve away from me. Her golden blond hair flies wildly behind her until she runs out of velocity and comes to a slow stop several yards away.

"Too fast!" she shouts at me once the board halts. She doesn't seem to care about the other people on the trail who look towards the sound of her voice. I laugh breathlessly at her, moving slowly to the spot where she stopped.

"That was awesome!" she shouts maniacally and I am forced to agree. I'm starting to see the appeal of this whole skateboarding thing. Cassie studies me as if finally noticing the way my shirt sticks to my body and the exerted red color of my skin. A conspiratorial expression lights up her face as we slowly meander back to the top of the hill. "Do you want to try?"

When I step onto the skateboard, it feels wobbly and I am overwhelmed with uncertainty in myself. My filthy sneakers stand out against the shiny new surface. Cassie holds out her hands just as I did for her. I take them willingly, ready to begin this with her.

The sun is starting to set on our last day together. I already miss her, even if she's three feet away from me, but I'm not scared anymore. All afternoon I've been making up some false distance between us, but now I trust we're going to be okay. I understand that I will always be here to steady Cassie. And, when it matters, she'll be there for me too.

I awoke with the all too common aroma of nervous stress-sweat. Birthdays are supposed to be a day of celebration that are filled with excitement, but that was far from reality for me as they were usually filled with fear and pain. My mind swimming with dread, I forced my newly 9-year-old body out of bed like a soap from its statue mold. Would today lead to another bloody nose for speaking out of turn like last year? Would the day be spent cleaning up the household after my brothers, consuming all my time so I would have no time for just me?

I haunted the hallways upstairs that held memories of bipolar times before today. Dreading going downstairs and facing whatever the day held for me, I lurked upstairs making sure I didn't step on the soft spots of the house announcing where I was. The eerie Kansas air was pierced with my parents' home phone ringer. A bit of hope crossed my mind, wishing it was someone inviting themselves over, as I eavesdropped on the other side of the landline. That feeling was quickly diminished by my mother's expression when she handed my father the phone. "Turn the fucking TV on!" is all I heard as I quickly hung up. My parents scrambled to turn on the television and forgot my existence as they glued themselves to the twin towers' demise.

After an hour of waiting for them to remember my presence, I decided they weren't going anywhere. I felt an impish glee as I snuck into the forbidden library room that was my major escape from the reality I faced daily. I waited with fear in my heart for them to notice I was not around, and I was somewhere I wasn't allowed to be without their explicit permission. Still no sounds other than the television's almost monotone newscaster downstairs. Even though my parents were consumed with whatever was going on, I almost felt special as my mother had remembered my favorite birthday snack. I sneaked the plate of juicy, red, cut-up bell peppers off the ledge and rebelliously slipped them into the library room. With a devilish feeling, I rejoiced in their sweet crunch as I chose my two favorite books off the shelf and let their stories swallow me whole. The snack in the library room was almost as good as my guilty pleasure of escaping reality. I entered Prohibition times and struggled to finally get the courage to stand up against my father's will. I switched to Civil War times where everything was bleak and dry, but I learned to survive despite all my family being killed or dead. As I made myself more comfortable, I slipped into the warm sun and reveled in the solitude I had in my favorite room full of escapes from my present reality. They were all beckoning me to open their pages and inhale not only their faint musty aroma, but also their stories over and over and over. Only God knows how many of those stories I've flipped through and revisited time and again. The taste of peppers lingered on my tongue as my skin drank up the rays of warmth and the cardinals sang of their freedom outside my windowsill.

My body shakes in the remembrance of the unparalleled peace I reveled in and the memory of the happiest day of my entire childhood. I may have been raped of my childhood, but I had my rare moments of rebellion that brought me snippets of happiness like chuckles at a dirty innuendo in a kid's movie you didn't catch when you were younger. Although the day is recalled by most as a day of tragedy, it is not a day of loss and pain for me. It is a day of remembrance, remembrance that there were happy times in the midst of the turmoil.

Two hours a day, six days a week, seven years of my life. This accumulates to roughly 4,368 hours or 182 days that I have dedicated my time to hockey. Whether I'm working out, stick handling, shooting pucks, practicing, or playing games, everything is to improve skills to become a better player.

Inhale. I wake up. After a week at camp, today is the day I find out if I am one of the top 31 girls' hockey players in the country under the age of eighteen. I can't decide what to wear. I dig through my suitcase to try and find an outfit. Simple tasks are made difficult when my mind is going in every direction. What shirt will be ruined forever with the memory of rejection? What shorts will be a constant reminder that I am not good enough?

I cannot eat anything under these circumstances. My stomach is unsettled. I am on a roller coaster and I cannot get off. Up, down. Up, down. I decide on a French vanilla macchiato, thinking it is a good idea to drink caffeine when I am already on edge.

I sit at a table with my friends.

"There's a lake two minutes from my house," Rory says to a girl from Pittsburgh.

"Are you serious? The closest lake to my house is two hours away," Katherine says in awe.

"You should move to Minnesota when you're older since you love fishing," Rory suggests.

I sit silently listening to their conversation while drinking the macchiato. I don't understand how they can have such a casual conversation at a stressful time like this.

We're walking to the gymnasium for a team-building activity and my eyes are glued to the floor. I'm trying not to think about the selection meeting, so I start counting my steps. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. It's time for the camp challenge.

The first task of team building is to complete a puzzle, but the pieces that you touch belong to you and no one else can touch them; otherwise, the puzzle must start over. I understand the concept of this task and the meaning behind it. Every individual has a role and when I fulfill my role, it allows for someone else to fulfill their role until every role is fulfilled and the final product is a team working together. I finish my puzzle pieces and let everyone else put their pieces into place.

The second task is 1,500 squats, 1,000 burpees, and 2,000 pushups. Each person must do at least 100 squats, 50 burpees, and 100 pushups but only five people can be doing an exercise at a time. I realize that this task is to identify leaders in the group. Great leaders make a world of difference on a team. I do what I'm told, and we quickly finish the exercises.

The third task is telephone. Repeat a phrase through everyone and the final person must have the same phrase we started with. This task is all about communication. My team does it three times because, apparently, we are not good at communicating.

Our final task is to drop a penny in a bucket of water and make a wish. As the penny leaves my hand, I wish for the ability to accept. I hope I can be content and accept either outcome: I advance, or I get cut.

I suddenly realize during those four tasks I was not thinking about the selection. My mind was at ease, but the stress has returned in a wave of anxiety.

We walk to the meeting room but must wait outside. No one is talking. Everyone is thinking and doubting. My leg won't stop shaking and my palms are sweating. I anxiously crack my fingers, a habit that I cannot break. I try to focus on something else. Nothing is working. After a lifetime of waiting, we are finally allowed into the room.

I sit in the front row so no one will see me crying when my name isn't displayed on the screen because I will be too embarrassed to face anyone.

The head coach of the USA U-18 team walks to the podium.

Doubts are racing through my mind. Every critique I have ever received is the first thing on my mind. I am not strong enough. I have a bad shot. I am not fast enough. I will never make it. I have no chance.

"The list of names moving on will appear by team, one by one, in alphabetical order. There are four teams. I will start with red then blue, then gold, and finally white. So, let's begin" Coach Crowell says. I am on gold.

Red. Danielle Bergen. Mia Biotti. Emma Gentry. Lyndie Lobdell.

I have a bad shot. They wouldn't pick someone with a bad shot.

Clara Van Wieren.

I'm not strong enough. I didn't spend enough time working out.

Blue. Kathryn Davis. Ella Huber.

I'm slow. I should've done more sprints and box jumps.

Callie Shanahan. Makenna Webster.

Gold. Rory Guilday. Vivian Jungels. Sadie Lindsay.

This is it. I can't look, but I have to. The next slide appears.

Jamie Nelson.

I can't believe it. I made it.

The rest of the names are presented, but I don't pay attention. Relief overcomes me and a weight is lifted off my shoulders. The players who did not make it leave the room and the players who made it embrace each other, hugging everyone they know. I will remember this moment for the rest of my life. Pure joy and excitement. I felt like I was holding my breath the whole time in anticipation. I am one of the top thirty-one players in the country under the age of eighteen. I did it. Exhale.

I remember the countless times throughout my life that I have wanted to give up. I always wondered if things would work out and if I would amount to anything. I had so many doubts, but today I have been given recognition for the accumulated 182 days of work I dedicated to this sport. I proved to myself and everyone around me that I am good enough. I am strong enough. I have a good shot. I am fast enough. I made it.

Now, I have to prepare for the next stage. The work is never over, but at least now I can relax, take a deep breath, and just breathe.

The fish are calling. My paddle dips through the clear glassy water, disrupting the smooth surface. I watch as each stroke makes a mini tornado, which swirls past my paddle and the side of my canoe. The morning air is a crisp and cool cucumber I can almost taste. The sky is an artwork of color in the morning light, as if some great painter was stroking bright vibrant colors from side to side above the treetops. The canoe leaps forward, sliding across the peaceful lake, blurring the reflection like too many scratches on a mirror, only to clear up again behind me. We cast our fishing lines into the deep water.

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. We are here because, well, this is where the fish are. We are prepared with five fishing rods between the two of us, hoping to catch and eat many, many fish. The lake has an echoing silent sound with not a soul in sight. In fact, we have not seen a single person for two days. There are miles of forest in all directions as far as we can see. The birds sing in the trees and we see the occasional fish jump. As we paddle through the water, a loon pops up close by our boat and calls. It is fishing, too.

On the map the Fish Rating is very high for this lake. We cast and reel in our fishing lines again. We see in our minds the hundreds of fish swimming around under the surface of the water just waiting for us.

After many hours of fishing we come back to our campsite rather dejected from not catching anything. We climb into the tent, a plan already forming in our minds to fish the other side of the lake bright and early the next morning.

Our canoe pulls away from our campsite, packed with fishing rods and tackle. We head to the left of our campsite to fish that side of the lake. We fish all day, like two wolves stalking their prey. We fish back and forth across the lake, only to return to our tent that night not wanting to talk about our failure to catch anything. With the stubbornness of a couple goats, we decide to stay on the lake and keep fishing until we starve or until the fish wake up and start biting. We look at the map to come up with a plan of action. On the map we see a small stream coming into the lake on the far side where we have not ventured yet. We plan to go there the next day.

For this last attempt we arm ourselves with the fifty-pound test line. We are taking no chances of a fish getting away. We troll all the way across the lake to the small stream without a single bite. The small stream empties into a section of the lake that is only 4-5 feet deep for many dozens of yards.

We cast our silver-orange spoons towards a submerged log. I watch them glimmer and sparkle as they spin through the air to land with a barely audible splash in the distance. Instantly, I hear a shout break the stillness of the air. My brother's line is bent double as he starts to reel. He grins. The tension and excitement build as we imagine the monster on the end of his line. He reels in, keeping the line taut, only to have it peel out, as whatever is on the other end fights with a fury that surprises us. My brother reels slowly but steadily, his hands and knuckles white, keeping a death grip on the fishing rod. I can feel the tension and concentration between him and his opponent.

We hold our breath as the mysterious shape underneath the shimmering water draws near. A huge black shape flickers into view, and then is off again, like an arrow from a bow, away from our canoe. The line screeches away again like a squeaky door hinge.

The sun climbs across the sky. As the battle continues, I grip the net in one hand. I feel it will not be adequate for whatever is still fighting at the end of his line. The water ripples a dozen feet off to the side and our gazes lock on that position. Then a splash sprays water all over us, erupting from barely five feet away. We watch, oblivious to all else around us, as a shape appears in the water before us—monstrous in size and rather dangerous-looking.

A Northern Pike, sleek and massive in length, glistens in the dying light. I look in awe at its mouth, large enough to fit my whole hand past the wrist, with room to spare, into its dragon-sized mouth. I eye the formidable armament of half inch-long razor-sharp teeth. It thrashes, desperately trying to get away, splashing us both again with cold water. My brother brings it close to the canoe, and with a heave, he hauls the heavy fish into the boat. We look with a new respect at this creature, its eyes unblinking. I wonder what it has seen in its lifetime. I look at my brother and he looks at me. He gets the pliers out of his fishing kit and takes the hook out. He grips the fish with both hands and hauls it out of the canoe. It makes a splash and swims off.

We grin as we paddle back to our campsite. As we go about the camp chores, we talk about our fish encounter. My brother makes a fire and I get out the stove to cook the ramen noodles for our evening meal.

I kick the ball. It travels a slow six feet until it's intercepted by another person kicking it the opposite way. I run after it, trying my hardest not to pant like an animal. I can feel my weight bearing down on me with every step I take.

Suddenly, I'm on the ground. My ankle twists and I grimace. People come rushing over to see if I'm okay and I brush them off cheerfully and stand up. I can tell they pity me. My chubby self, running across the field must look so comical to them. But it's torture for me.

I sit at home, wrapping my ankle. I tuck in the end of the wrap and stand, wincing in pain. This is my life.

Every time I run, I fall. Every time I jump, something cracks.

This is the life of being fat.

I can tell it affects my family and friends. Do I care? Obviously. But apparently not enough to change anything. My weight makes me so depressed I don't even have the motivation to try and stop it from getting worse.

My family gives me subtle hints, telling me that if I lost a little weight and ate healthier, I would get hurt less. I brush it off and walk away. I see them getting more and more worried as my health rapidly declines, but instead of doing anything, I shove more and more food into my mouth and try to eat away the pain.

One day, I get home from band and my dad calls me over.

"You've got to stop this, sweetie."

I burst into tears. He hugs me and we stand there for a couple minutes, silent. We separate, I wipe my eyes, and he walks away. I silently vow, right then and there, not to let my weight control me ever again.

After weeks of trying to eat better, I realize that in order to lose the weight, I need more activity in my life. As a homeschooler, there was no P.E., so I always instituted my own workout regimen. I eventually got sick and tired of working out; it felt like I was doing the same thing every day. My mom notices my increasing sadness and suggests that we look through the community ed pamphlet to see if there were any sports lessons I would enjoy. She points to the tennis section. I shrug. She starts reading the information, and I remember that my brother-in-law plays tennis. She asks if it sounds interesting.

"Yeah, I guess."

After band one day, I get in my mom's car. She tells me to look in the Walmart grocery bag in the backseat. I open the bag and pull out a neon green tennis racket. I smile and thank her for it. I silently dread the first day of tennis lessons.

The first few times I hit with my dad were miserable. The ball would never go where I wanted it to, I couldn't run very fast or far, and I was convinced that I was the worst tennis player on the planet, but my dad told me to just keep practicing.

So, I did.

At lessons, I gained the basics. I played a couple matches but never competitively. I was still unable to do much, but I was determined to keep going.

After tennis lessons were over, my mom asks me if I want to join the middle school tennis team. I didn't even think I was good enough to join, but I said yes to make my parents happy.

In middle school, I finally learned how to hit forehands, backhands, slices, spins, and countless other strokes that I never even knew about. I learned how to serve and how to place myself to where the opponent would hit the ball. My love for tennis kept growing and growing until one day, I realized I was consistently excited to go to tennis and just hit a tennis ball. Playing was becoming fun, and I was one of the best on my team.

After a while, my little neon green racket got pretty beat up. The shape was warped, the paint was chipped, and I realized that this wasn't what a racket was supposed to sound like when you hit a ball. Mom and I started to research new tennis rackets.

At a visit to an old family friend's house, my sister and her husband hand me a box. Inside the box was a Gushers box. I start smiling because I love Gushers. But once I open the Gushers box, a blue Babolat racket stares back at me. I stand there, speechless. Laughter bubbles up inside of me and, before I can stop it, erupts into uncontrollable giggles. I run over and give them both hugs, thanking them.

The next morning, they take me out to play with my new racket. It takes a while to get used to, but soon enough I'm hitting with more power than I ever could with my old racket.

Then came high school.

My mom drives me to the courts, and I sit in the passenger seat, feeling sick. How will I do? Will they think I'm dragging down the team? Will they laugh when they see me play? Questions race through my mind and the trip seems to go by in seconds.

My mom parks and I sit there, gathering myself. She gestures for me to go and I grimace. Grabbing my gear, I head down to the courts. I see all my middle school friends and I instantly relax. Practice goes by quickly, and even though I'm not the best, I have fun. My skills increase at a rapid rate and my love for tennis grows even faster.

A couple of years go by and I'm doing homework. I start to procrastinate as usual and I stumble upon old pictures. My eyebrows knit together as I try to recognize the chubby face staring back at me. A sudden realization hits me between the eyes and I rush to a mirror.

Is this... me?

The face staring back at me looks completely different. I look at the mirror, then back to the picture.

Mirror, picture, mirror, picture.

I've lost so much weight my face looks completely different. Happiness wells up inside of me and tears start to form in my eyes. I rush to the bathroom and step onto the scale. The number makes me laugh, so I step off and step back on. The same number shines confidently into my face. Shocked, I stand there, trying to formulate my thoughts.

I sit back down and try to remember what my life was like a couple years ago. I remember not considering myself an athlete. I remember the rolled ankles I would get every time I tried to do something active. I remember a scared, unconfident, self-conscious little girl and then I smile.

Now, I find myself initiating conversation with strangers. I find myself walking with confidence and genuinely thinking that I look pretty. I can run and enjoy it.

Then another realization hits like a wave.

It's because of tennis.

Tennis has changed my life in the subtlest of ways. Days of constant activity have helped me lose the weight. Being around friends who care about me has increased my positivity. The change has given me confidence to be who I truly want to be, without the barrier of my own brain telling me I can't.

I look in the mirror, smile, and realize that my future has changed completely for the better. I will strive to continue loving tennis and constantly getting better. I couldn't be more thankful. I wipe away a tear and then continue my work.

It was the spring of 2017. My family and I were taking a trip to Colorado to learn more about the government's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the wild horses that reside there. I have loved horses since an early age, especially Mustangs. Mustangs have something unique and powerful about them that I have always admired. Each one is mysterious in their own way and has their own story to tell.

It was my first morning in Colorado. The air was crisp and invigorating. I sat there with a slight breeze blowing on my face. The smell of wildflowers and nature consumed me. There's something spectacular about sitting peacefully, taking everything in, connecting with yourself, and just being present.

As I sat there, a herd of wild horses had appeared in the near distance. They gave off a powerful energy, one that I have never experienced before. I watched them interact with one another. Foals running around together, learning their boundaries. Mares grazing while a protective stallion watches over everyone. I began to realize that they live in full harmony. No regret of the past, and no worry about the future. Just living in the moment.

I returned to this spot every day while in Colorado. I loved watching the wild horses as I loved their sense of freedom and ability to be wild. They live each day in the present.

One morning as I sat there, there was a faint chopping sound in the distance. The horses began to become alert—raising their heads, ears moving to find the source of the sound, flaring their nostrils.

As the chopping got louder and louder, the ground began to shake. A helicopter showed around the mountain. This helicopter wasn't up in the air. Instead, it was low to the ground, heading straight for the horses.

I immediately knew what was happening. The wild horses were being rounded up by the BLM. A common way to reduce the population of these horses on public land.

I jumped into my car and drove around the mountain to where the helicopter had come from. I got out, ran over, and stood where we were allowed to view the gather. I wasn't the only one. There were other people watching. There wasn't anything we could do but watch these beautiful creatures be run down.

I watched the cloud of dust grow as the horses got closer. The thundering of their hooves echoed in the distance. The fear and panic of the horses filled the air and depleted us all.

As the horses were pushed through the pens, mares and foals were run one way, and stallions were pushed a separate way. They called out to one another, frantically looking for their families. Many tried jumping over the panels to escape, only to end up being tangled in them.

After they had all of the horses in pens, it was time to load them onto trailers to transport them to holding facilities. This was done with flags and four-wheelers, to once again frighten the horses. All of the horses were loaded. All but one.

I remember seeing the terror in their eyes as they peered out of the slats in the trailer. All you could hear was loud pounding of their hooves against the trailer floor and their calls for help.

The horse that was not loaded onto the trailer was soon released back into the wild. We later found out that he was deemed “too dangerous” and “psychotic.”

Freedom and wildness was all they have ever known. And just like that, it had been stripped from them. They were left with nothing but the memory of their independence. Now they must learn how to adapt and live their new lives, yet they still seemed to live in the moment.

Experiencing these mustangs in their natural lives helped me realize that there's something wild and untamed within us all, and I have to be courageous enough to embrace it to live my life to the fullest.

Over the past couple of years I have competed in the Extreme Mustang Makeover, an event to help promote mustangs. Being able to be a part of several mustangs' lives has been a dream. With each new mustang I learn something new about myself or about different perspectives on life.

It's easy to get caught up in the business of life and forget what is really important to us. Wild horses live their lives each day at a time, only worrying about life essentials and their families. I think there is something to learn from that.

We have full control over how we live our lives. We get to choose if we want to live to our full potential. It is up to us if we want to find our inner wild side and take a full swing at it. The possibility to live with no regrets from the past and to not worry about the future is endless. To just live in the moment is one of the best things we can do for ourselves.



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