

the Tributary



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“Aeonis”

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Emily Peters

My Heart Shall Bear Fruit

I became lost today
Wandering through an orchard
Stumbling through the ancient trees
Their limbs heavy with wares I cannot reach
My feet grew heavy with each step
Without strength to continue through this fruitful realm

I stopped to rest against the cold bark
My eyes wandering from fruit to fruit
At once a treasure comes into view
Hanging on a low branch

Shining as brightly as a polished bell
Ringing out to me with it's outstanding beauty
The plump, delightful shape sends shivers down my spine
Intrigued, I lift myself up, striding towards this wonder
I reach my hand out to touch it

At first contact, my emotions melt together
Tears stream down the creases of my face
I caress the glorious sphere gently, watching it gleam in the
sunlight
My desire to break it open is entirely ravenous
Something so heavenly must bear a sickly sweet interior
Reasonable thoughts sink deep within the pit in my stomach
Only a feeling a passion haunts me so

Taking this distinguished fruit, plucking it from the vine
A sensational heat begins to form
With caution, I break open this sphere of wonder
The smell cannot be described in any words

A smell so delectable, so awe-inspiring
The aurora of the beautiful scent rushes through my nostrils and
into the swell of my mind

Instantly I levitate, a breeze of happiness surrounding me
To say I have experienced true paradise would be a gross
understatement
My fingers delve into a new experience as I gently press on the
core
Instantly there is life, there is emotion, pooling down upon my
fingers
My desires turn me into a most terrible, most greedy creature

I put my lips to the fruit, first caressing with my tongue
Then carefully lapping up the sweet nectar that flows like a river
from the center
In all my greed, I bleed the beautiful fruit of all that is good
My passion has turned my love to rot

Drying out the sweet, tender insides
As the broken sphere sits in my palm, even the shine has begun to
fade away
Feeling empty once more
I wipe my tears away with the remains
I can still smell a faint trace of what used to be
Where there was once passion to haunt me, now only guilt remains
Quietly I sit, my back pressed against a withered oak
Reflections cloud my thoughts
Oh haunting, most terrible passion!
Why resist the destruction of the most beautiful harvest?

Robert Butler

An anthology of short stories

The Search

“I don’t care if I have to go from house to house all over town,” Jim told the sheriff, his fists tightly clenched by his side, “I’m going to find her.”

“You can’t just go barging into people’s houses. You aren’t the police, and you sure don’t have a warrant. I sympathize with you, but this is our job.” The sheriff tried to wrap his arm around Jim’s shoulders to console and to calm him before Jim went off the deep end. He wasn’t having much luck though.

“Look, I adopted Jenny. She’s all that I have left now that Mary’s gone.” Jim was on the verge of a breakdown, and lack of sleep was sapping his strength and turning his nerves into raw meat. There was a visible twitch in his legs as the two men stood in the bright sunlight, trying to make sense of the senseless.

Not wanting to mouth tired, meaningless clichés, the sheriff patted his friend on the back and said nothing for a few minutes, waiting for some gem of wisdom to pop into his head. When it didn’t, he continued his soft-sell approach. “Do you think that Mary would want you to do anything rash?” he finally muttered in a low voice. It sounded like tripe to him, but it was all that his mind could assemble at the time.

Still staring into nothing, Jim replied. “No, of course not, but I can’t just stand around doing nothing.”

“We’re not doing nothing. Look, this is a small town. I only have two deputies, but they’re out searching, along with plenty of your friends. Sometimes the best things you can do are sitting and waiting. Come on in the office and sit down, rest. You haven’t slept since she disappeared yesterday.” The sheriff thought that he was finally getting through to his friend, but Jim still wouldn’t budge. “Look, if we haven’t found her by tonight, I’ll call in some more help. I promise.”

Finally, Jim released some of the tension in his body, enough to take the few steps over to the sheriff’s car. As he got inside, an audible

sigh of relief could be heard from the sheriff, who closed the door and got in himself. The drive to the courthouse where the sheriff's office was located didn't take long, but it was long enough for Jim to crawl deeper inside himself. He was close to being a zombie by the time they drove the five blocks and parked in front of the building.

The office was deserted. The sheriff led his friend into his office where there was an old sofa. "Here, lie down for a while."

"I don't want to lie down for a while. I need to look for Jenny," Jim said in a now-shaky voice. His face was contorted in pain, both from the mental anguish and the physical exhaustion of the last day's search. Jim's tank was nearly empty; no sleep and no food were taking their toll on his ability to think.

"There are plenty of people searching right now. Let's let them carry the load for just a little while. Let your battery recharge for a couple of hours. I'll get you something to eat and drink. Just sit there," urged the sheriff as he helped Jim settle onto the sofa and then left the room.

As soon as his body touched the sofa, Jim succumbed to its demand for rest. He leaned over and plopped his head on the pillow lying at one end of the sofa. In a moment, he was out. He wasn't quite asleep because his mind had not shut down, even though his body had given out. Memories of his wife and Jenny raced through his head. They weren't complete memories, only pictures of the past that flitted through his brain.

He could see the first time he'd met his wife, how beautiful she was. Their first date and their wedding flashed before him. All of the good moments and a few of the bad flooded his mind. Then there was Jenny. She had come to them as if by a miracle. A friend of a friend of a friend had told them about Jenny. When they brought her home, she was so tiny. Neither of them could understand why anyone would give away such a beautiful girl. Those long nights nursing her were hard, but they created a bond that not even Mary's death could break.

When the sheriff returned, Jim was sound asleep. "The food will have to wait. He's finally asleep. Maybe this will all be over by the time he wakes up," he thought to himself. He laid a cover over his friend and left him to recoup his spirit.

Jim's sleep was restless. Though wonderful dreams of Mary claimed most of the three hours of sleep, horrible nightmarish visions

of Jenny pushed their way into his subconscious mind. He called out to Mary and Jenny as he wrestled on the sofa. His mind kept reliving the torturous moments of his life: the loss of his beloved wife, and the disappearance of Jenny. It was at this moment that Jim was shocked back into the world of the living, of conscious reality. Suddenly he felt a clammy, wet sensation. Forcing his eyes to open, he came face to face with a beautiful, black Labrador retriever whose breath left a lot to be desired.

As he came fully alert, Jim yelled with ecstasy and embraced the animal, crying over and over, “Jenny...Jenny...Jenny...You’ve come back!”

Race Against Time

“Come on, get that hunk of junk off the road!” Logan yelled through the windshield at the driver ahead of him who was apparently the cause of the slow traffic movement in his lane. It happened quite often on his commute home, but today was different; it was an emergency. Thousands of thoughts were running through his mind as he stretched and twisted his neck, trying to find an opening into either of the lanes next to him, anything that would speed his progress home.

Suddenly all traffic stopped, then began to creep along ever so slowly. It was a scenario that Logan had envisioned in his mind many times, but really never thought that it could happen to him. As he fidgeted and squirmed in his seat, fear began to grip his stomach, causing it to churn ever so slowly. Beads of sweat began to form on his face, partly from the heat, but mostly from the anxiety of his situation.

“I’ve got to stay under control,” he kept telling himself and then wiped away a layer of sweat with his shirt sleeve. “This can’t be happening.”

Just then a gap appeared in the lane to his right, so he jerked the steering wheel and squeezed in front of the car that had just blown its radiator. Logan watched in his rear view mirror as steam poured out from under the hood of the car slowly moving away from him. Then, other cars filled in behind him; all of them abandoning the crippled car and its driver. Logan wouldn’t normally have been so callous, but this situation called for him to be selfish. Besides, someone else would stop

and help, or the driver would use his cell phone to call for assistance. Regardless, he couldn't be the good Samaritan today.

Up ahead, he spotted the sign for his exit-only one mile ahead. From there it was only another mile and a half to his house. He prayed that he would make it in time. The beads of sweat were now beginning to connect, their weight no longer able to defy the laws of gravity as they rolled down his cheeks and the sides of his face. His stomach was still churning, but now his chest was beginning to tighten. Logan's legs were now quivering from the nervous energy that he had expended. The last time his legs had felt like this was during high school after a day of sprinting on a hot day of track practice. It was not a good feeling.

"Finally, I'm off this highway. It won't be long now," he reassured himself as he barely came to a complete stop at the stop sign where he turned into the subdivision where he lived. "I work hard, pay my bills on time, work out four times a week, try to eat right, and love my family. This isn't supposed to happen to me!" he cried aloud as he sped through the neighborhood, much too fast for the time of day, much too fast for the safety of the kids playing in their front yards. He knew better, but none of that was on his mind.

"Finally!" he yelled as he turned the corner to his street. It would only be another minute. There was no room in his driveway or along the street in front of his house, so Logan screeched to a stop in front of his neighbor's house. It didn't take him long to slam the door of his car and make the short run to the kitchen door just inside the open garage door. His wife was startled when he flung open the door and entered the kitchen.

"What?" was barely out of her mouth when he pushed past her and moved into the hallway that led to the upstairs. All she heard was "bathroom" as he disappeared. Her laughter could be heard all over the house.

Memories of Bennie

Rainy, misty mornings remind me of my most beloved, childhood pet, Bennie. His energy level surged on dark, dreary days like this; he played in the water much like a snowshoe rabbit must revel in a heavy snowfall. Splashing from puddle to puddle gave him great

pleasure; no matter how hard it rained, my pal Bennie would just shake off the water and romp around until I'd force him back into the house.

Bennie's love of water was nearly his undoing during a rather heavy downpour not long after he had joined our family. I had taken it for granted that he had sense enough to avoid playing near the creek behind our house. Whether it was curiosity or carelessness, Bennie jumped into what probably appeared to be a puddle but turned out to be a deep hole. With the current moving at a pretty good clip, Bennie found himself struggling to get his footing. Being overprotective of my new buddy, I was nearby and pulled him to safety. A five-minute berating meant little: his little face told me that he was clueless.

The neighborhood kids made fun of me because Bennie wasn't like other pets. They tortured me, saying that the oriental family who lived on the next block was going to kidnap Bennie while I was at school and eat him. I was terrified, crying until mom explained that they were just teasing. I made her promise that she'd keep Bennie in the house during school so that no one could kidnap him. After that, whenever my dad got mad at me or Bennie for playing too boisterously, he'd mention that Bennie was looking pretty tasty. Of course, I'd pick up Bennie and run for mom, who'd reassure me that dad wasn't really going to eat Bennie. I kept Bennie close whenever dad was around the house, especially when he was about to barbecue.

Now, I'm calling him a he even though I was never sure whether he was a boy or girl. Unfortunately, he wasn't around long enough to know. One afternoon he and I were playing in the yard next to the driveway when dad came home from work. Just as the car pulled up to the house, Bennie inadvertently got in front of one of the wheels. It wasn't a pretty sight, especially for a little boy. I was inconsolable until mom offered to have a funeral for Bennie and bury him in the flower garden next to the house.

The service was nice, at least for me and mom. I dug the hole, and mom and I said a few words before she covered up the box with dirt. At one end of his grave, I placed a little cross made of popsicle sticks. Dad could have been a little more sensitive to my loss. All he could say was, "No more frogs for pets. I'm not scraping any more guts off the driveway!"

Just Get Me To The Church On Time!

Tina wasn't sure if she was ready for this day, but it was moving like a snowball down a mountain. Seems like big events always move slowly at first, then things just sort of gain a life of their own, and it's too late. The church was filled with fresh flowers, and the altar was arranged just as she had requested. Food covered the dining room table with more deposited in the kitchen to take its place if needed. The limousine was parked in the long driveway outside the house, awaiting the family. Her brothers were sitting in the living room, uncomfortable in their suits, and tugging at their collars. Tina's dad was sitting out back by the pool, sipping on what he would call a "good, stiff drink." Her mother was struggling to perfect her makeup despite the tears which seemed bent on preventing her from completing that simple task. This was one of those days that tears would win out over makeup, much less attempts to "keep it together."

For twenty-two years, Tina had occupied this bedroom; it had been her sanctuary from the tribulations of daily life. She had spent hundreds of nights planning her future as she lay on her bed staring at the ceiling or sat on the window seat looking out at the stars. Those dreams she shared with her best friend, Ginger, who now sat across the room from her, staring out of the window, herself wondering about the future. They had laughed and cried together through puberty and pimples and first dates and breakups and all of the other eventful and inconsequential things that had happened in their lives. Slumber parties and birthday parties and piercing each other's ears, as well as fights over boys and competitions for cheerleader and the school paper editor's job had never come between them. They had managed to find a way to overcome all of those potentially friendship-breaking turning points in their lives. They were determined not to let this critical time in Tina's life interfere with their friendship. Ginger and Tina were no longer going to see each other every day, just as they had since they had met in second grade. This would be the greatest test that a friendship could face.

"It's time to go. Are you ready?" came the gentle voice of Ginger's mother, there to lend a hand to Tina's mother on this important day. As she spoke, she opened the door. "Come on, we don't want to keep everyone waiting."

In a few minutes, everyone was in the limousine for the short drive to the church, only a few miles from the house. The day couldn't have been more perfect. It was a warm, sunny June afternoon. A slight breeze wafted the leaves in the huge Live Oak trees that guarded the walkway to the entrance of the church. An untold number of brides had spent the first few minutes of their marriage walking, some even running, beneath the canopy created by the beautiful trees. As the car pulled up to the front of the church, the parking lot and the streets were beginning to fill. Soon the church would be full, and it would be time to begin.

Inside the church, the air was filled with anticipation of the occasion. The scent of flowers radiated throughout the sanctuary while the high ceilings were flooded with light through the stained glass. Everything was perfect, just as it was supposed to be on this benchmark day for Tina. All of her family and friends were in attendance; no one would have missed it.

When at last it was her turn, Ginger slowly walked to the front of the church, climbed the few steps, stopped, placed a single lily in the casket across Tina's folded arms, and collapsed.

Alive?

A near-freezing drizzle met Detective Ballard as he peered out of the fifth floor hotel room window. "This is NOT my idea of how to spend Monday night," he muttered aloud. "I'm supposed to be sucking down beer and pretzels and sitting in my favorite booth at Jack's right now watching Monday Night Football. That's where I'm supposed to be. Whose idea was this?" he asked, staring at the street cops all dressed in blue.

"We're just beat cops, SIR. This is a job for management," one of them replied, biting his lip. "It's one of them things that you just can't order a man to do. I don't even suggest that you do it." The other officers mumbled their agreement.

"Well, we can't just leave her out there," Hammond responded, wiping his face with one hand as his mind pondered the situation. "We're too high up for any fire ladder in town to reach her, so someone has to go out there and talk her back inside before she makes a big mess on the sidewalk."

“It’s your call, Mel,” said Captain Levi, who at that moment pushed his way into the room through the officers. “You can walk away from this, if you want to. None of us have to go out there.”

“I know,” he said and then paused. “But, I’d feel responsible if I didn’t at least try. Somebody get me a safety harness.”

As he spoke, two officers disappeared through the door. For the next few minutes, Hammond slowly, almost methodically, paced back and forth in front of the window out of which he was about to climb. The silence in the room made everyone uneasy, but no one spoke; the other officers only exchanged looks that spoke of their admiration for the officer who was about to risk his life for a stranger, a woman who could be crazy. None of them volunteered to take his place.

“Here,” offered one of the two men when they returned, bringing Hammond a safety harness and a cable to attach to it.

Hammond secured the harness around his chest and legs and hooked the cable to it.

“Keep a tight grip on this, guys,” he asked, as he yanked on the cable just to be certain that it would hold.

“Don’t worry about this end,” the Captain assured him. “We’ll take care of this end. You make sure that you take care of the other end.” He extended his hand to Hammond.

“Better get to it,” said Hammond as he shook the hand. He then turned to the window and lifted, which sent a cold, wet flow of air into the stuffy room. “Not getting any better out there, is it?” he observed before he leaned his head out of the window to once again check the location of the woman. His best guess was that she was about eight feet away, right at the corner of the building. “Here goes,” he said, as he took a deep breath, braced himself against the window frame, and stepped up and out onto the eighteen-inch ledge.

“Keep this line tight,” he shouted to the men inside the room who were now holding his life in their hands. Pressing his head and body against the outer window frame, Hammond steadied himself by placing his hands onto the wall and gripping the bricks wherever he found enough to hold onto. The cold rain fell steadily as he turned his head toward the woman and tried to gauge her condition.

The woman only a few feet from him was of average height and rather thin. She may have been attractive, but by now the rain, wind,

and cold had transformed her appearance. Her long, dark, wet hair was no longer blowing across her face; it was stuck to her face, at least clumps of hair were stuck in various positions across her face. She was dressed in a light-colored, long-sleeved blouse, a dark pair of pants, and what appeared to Hammond to be dark blue sneakers. Her clothes clung to her body, creating an almost erotic view of everything underneath. She was shivering from the cold rain, a condition which was not favorable to her remaining on the ledge for an extended period of time. She appeared to be frozen in place, almost like she had been glued to the spot.

“Hello,” Hammond called out to the woman. He then leaned down and spoke to the men inside the room. “Do we know her name?”

“Not yet,” offered one of the officers, “but we’re trying to find out.”

Hammond stood again, and cautiously moved his left foot a few inches toward the woman, just to test his footing. It felt good, so he adjusted his right foot toward the left one about the same distance. As he did, the woman turned her face in his direction slightly, enough to catch his attention. “Hello,” he repeated and then paused hoping for her to respond.

She did. “Don’t come any closer!” her wavering voice told him. “Get off the ledge before you fall. Don’t you realize it’s raining out here?” With every word, her voice became steadier.

Hammond held his ground and then spoke, “I did notice the rain. Maybe we should both get off this ledge.”

“Really, you don’t belong out here. Go back inside. I’ll be done here soon,” she replied in her soft but now firm voice.

“I don’t think either one of us belong out here. Let’s go inside and talk about whatever’s on your mind,” he ventured.

“You’re wasting your save-the-nut-on-the-ledge training. You know, strike up a conversation, open her up, get her to trust you, and then get her inside before she makes a mess on the pavement speech,” she said in a quiet, mocking tone.

“Okay,” he answered. “Would a bribe do the trick?” attempting to copy her tone and connect with her on some level.

“Go find another ledge,” came her quick, angry reply.

“Sorry. Look, I’m struggling here to help you. Give me a break,” Hammond fumbled, as his mind rebounded and sought another

approach to establish a true dialogue with the woman. As the wind picked up and the rain pelted him harder in the face, he said, “Will you at least tell me your name?” As he speaks, Hammond begins to move in the woman’s direction, so slowly that his movement is almost undetectable.

After a brief hesitation, the woman replied, “No. Do your police work after this is done?”

“You’re determined to go through with this, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing I can do to stop you?”

“No.”

Suddenly, he yells to the officers inside the room. “It’s getting real slick out here, guys. Hold that line in case I fall.”

“Go on back inside before you do fall. They’re nothing for you here.”

“What are you waiting for then?” Hammond asks out of frustration with the situation.

“You’re right. See ya,” she says and raises both hands straight out to the side of her body. Suddenly she looks up into the sky, mumbles something, and leans forward to fall.

“Stop!” he shouts as he lunges toward her falling body. Hammond grabs her right arm as he loses his balance and falls from the ledge.

The cable suddenly begins to slide away from them, but the officers inside pull all of the strength into holding it. Despite the violent jerking and their being dragged to the window, the men do hold the cable. Outside the window, however, Hammond is battling the woman’s attempt to loosen his grip on her arm. Below them the rescue team of the fire department have unfolded and deployed their inflatable rescue bag. Unfortunately, the two are swinging wildly, which, combined with the cold and the rain, makes it impossible for him to hold her very long. Hammond loses his grip, and she slams halfway onto the bag. Her legs miss the bag completely, causing them to crash into the pavement.

Before he passes out from the crack on his head caused by the struggle, Hammond looks on helplessly as the rescue team and the paramedics gather around the woman to help save her life. Slowly he is dragged back up the wall and into the room. He is limp as the EMT’s examine him until he regains consciousness. “What happened? Is she

all right?” he asks, looking up from the stretcher on which he has been strapped.

“She’ll live, Mel,” the Captain informed him, a disturbed look on his face as though he is keeping something important from Hammond, which he is.

“What aren’t you telling me?” asked Hammond, as the gurney is wheeled into the hallway for the trip to the ambulance.

“Well, she landed half on the bag and half off of it. Both her legs are broken, and they tell me her back may be broken too.”

“Well, I guess that’s something,” replied Hammond.

“Yeah. At least she’s alive. Maybe now she can get some help for whatever made her go out on that ledge.”

“Hope so. I never found out.”

“Not your job to find out. You did your job. She’s alive.”

“She may be breathing, but she’s not alive. She won’t be unless someone gets those answers,” he replied.

Adrienne Alls

Finding Isabelle

I stood still, the room felt as though it could collapse in on me or that the floor beneath me would suddenly open up and consume me at the slightest movement. I had been called into the station about an hour ago over a freak accident that had broken open a few cases from almost twenty years ago. I was usually the one who conducted interrogations and my team leader, Jonah, said he needed me to speak to the suspect.

When I joined the team a few years ago, I had taken an immense interest in the cold cases the new suspect was linked to. So here I was. In a dark, dimly lit room with only a metal table and three metal chairs. Across the table, seated in one of the cold chairs, was a sober man with a faint aroma of alcohol staining his scent. He was likely in his mid-sixties with gray hair and a beer belly that slightly protruded his shirt. He had a scar running along his hand, similar to the one on my own and another that ran along his face. He looked frighteningly familiar, but I couldn't figure out who he was.

Before walking into the room, my team briefed me on the situation. He had minor bruising but didn't sustain much else. Earlier this morning, he had hit a woman as she was walking across the road, but lost control and swerved into a ditch. It was deemed intentional, and my team said we needed to figure out his possible connections to the cold cases and any information about the victims. About my Isabelle.

The man grunted, likely from the pain of impact from the crash he had inflicted only hours ago. "You know I didn't mean to do it." He spoke up from the silence. There was no ounce of regret in his voice. It was uninterested, matter of fact.

"A woman is dead tonight because of your actions." I could feel my heart squeeze. She was like me, a young woman with long brown hair and bright blue eyes. But I couldn't let my mind be distracted. My goal was the cold cases. Isabelle.

There has always been one reason for my interest in the missing persons cases: my sister. Nobody on the team aside from Killian knows, nobody except for him was there. I was a young girl at the time, nine to be precise. My younger sister, Isabelle, ran up to me one day, begging me to take her to the park a couple streets over. I knew we weren't supposed to leave the house without our mother or father, but she was persistent, and our mother had just laid down for a nap. "Adaline, come on! I wanna play." I could remember her sweet voice pleading to go. To this day I question how I could have been so stupid. We should have stayed inside. Stayed where our mother could find us. Where it was safe.

I quickly ran to my father's room and reached into his coat pocket. The one he always kept his small pocketknife inside of. It would be my only condition to leaving the house this late in the afternoon, but I didn't tell Isabelle I had it. It was my own little secret.

"Fine, we can go, but we have to be back before the sun sets. Promise?" I had stuck my pinkie finger out to her and she excitedly gripped hers around mine.

"Promise!" Her smile was engraved into my memories. Her sweet, innocent smile. She could light up a whole room with it.

I needed to focus. I pulled my attention back to the flickering lights above and the quizzical man across the table. "Sir, I understand that you have already spoken about this matter with some of my colleagues, but I was brought here to discuss something different." His face hosted a glimpse of recognition then hardened.

"What else is there to speak about?" The metal of his cuffs clinked against the metal table as he poked at his hands, unamused.

"Twenty years ago, there were a few unsolved cases. I was wondering if you had any insight into them." I was trying to figure anything I could out while his prints were being tested. I'm not entirely sure how they caught it, I was one of the main witnesses and didn't catch the resemblance, but he does seem to favor the eyewitness portraits of the perpetrator. Just not quite as lean and with more wrinkles than I thought a man his age should have.

"Twenty years ago, huh? Well, that's been a long while. Why the sudden interest?"

"As I said earlier sir, this is the only reason I am here. Answer the question. Do you know anything about the cases?"

"At the time, I suppose I was with my late wife, before she tried to divorce me, that is..."

"Sir, I'm not looking for a life's story. I..."

A cracked voice sounded from the speakers, "Adaline, we need you to come out here."

I looked back at the man as I opened the door. For a split second, his face hosted a smirk that sent a chill down my spine. It was gone just as quickly as it had appeared.

"What's going on?" I walked into the small viewing room where the rest of my team had been watching.

Killian, one of my childhood friends, spoke up first, placing a hand on my shoulder. "The results came in. They match. It's him"

My mind felt fuzzy as the memories rushed back to me. I was suddenly back at the park, carefree and enjoying the nice fall breeze. We were on the swings when I noticed him. A lean man, standing just near the tree line. He didn't approach us, but remained there. Watching. He only came near when I took my sister's hand and began leading her back to our neighborhood. By that time, I had forgotten about his watchful eye.

"Hi girls, how are you this evening?" He was suddenly behind us and spoke in a cheerful voice, one many children would have felt comfortable with. Not me though, my mother had told me about people like this. Those who would make you feel comfortable then take everything you had. My gut was screaming for us to run, leave the man and get back home. But we didn't. I couldn't move.

"I'm amazing. We're on our way home now!" My sister answered before I could even finish my thoughts. Always the conversationalist.

"Well, would you girls like a ride? It would be no trouble." The man seemed nice enough, but there was a pit in my stomach and the ground felt like quicksand keeping me in place. I could have fallen over from fear at any second. This man was not a friend. Isabelle released my hand and began to walk toward the man.

"Isabella, what are you doing?" I quickly grabbed for her hand, but she was already out of reach, and I couldn't force my legs to move. The man quickly clutched her wrist, turned, and reached for mine. I quickly pulled out the pocketknife and slashed his hand and face. He screeched in pain but hulled my sister over his shoulder and retreated to his car.

I let out an ear-piercing scream. Who knew I was capable of it. Many of the neighbors ran out of their homes and toward the park. A woman and her son reached me first, grabbing my shoulders. The boy reached his hand over mine, claspng it over the knife's blade that had begun to dig into my own hand.

Isabelle was gone, the man had already gotten away with her and I couldn't even remember his face. The doctors said it was likely a trauma response, but now that I was standing face to face with the possibility of vengeance. It was unbearable.

"Adaline," Morgan, one of my colleagues, nudged my shoulder and nodded toward the pieces of paper in Killian's hand.

"Let him know we have the evidence and will be taking him into custody soon." Killian handed off the paper to Morgan and walked me out of the room. He wiped the tear that threatened to drop from my chin and gave me a quick hug. He always knew how to make me feel better and was always the one who stuck around. The matching scars on our hands just proved our never-ending bond.

"Dry your tears, Ada. You don't have to go back in there." Killian's brow twitched at the knowledge of my pain.

"No, I have to do this." I met his gaze. "Don't tell the others about Isabelle. Please."

"I knew you were going to say that." With a sigh, he stepped to the side, allowing my reentry. "Go find your sister." He opened the door and with a nod I walked back to the team.

A few minutes later, I walked back into the interrogation room. The man looked at me with a sinister gaze. He remembered me, I could tell. My stomach did somersaults and my throat threatened to close up. This man took her, destroyed not only my family but the families of all the other victims, and is now sitting here in front of me with all the answers I could have ever asked for.

I cleared my throat. "I understand that you have already been informed of the fingerprint test we ran and the results."

"Yes." He stated, glowering at me. His focus shifted from me to the door and back. He didn't care that he had been caught. He didn't even try to feign guilt. His body was relaxed and fear never met the sinister gaze in his eyes.

"Good, I see you're not afraid." I continued, but his gaze didn't shift. "I need you to answer some simple questions." I flipped through

the files on the table and pulled out a picture of my sister, placing it in front of him. "Do you recognize this girl? She was at the park with her sister during late fall."

"I don't remember too much; it's been years and I suppose there have been quite a few... incidents."

Incidents. That's what he calls this. He murdered or sold all of these children and he just calls them incidents. Taking a deep breath, I subconsciously tell myself to 'Keep your composure.' He's trying to get under my skin.

"What about that scar? It looks like it was a pretty nasty cut." He rubbed his hands together as if remembering it then glanced down at my exposed palm. The one with the scar. "Why don't you tell me more about that?"

"Ah, I remember you." He wasn't angry or afraid. "You were the girl who fought back." His gaze turned to sinister pleasure. He snickered. "The one who got away."

A chill ran down my spine. There must not have been many to escape him and leave such a nasty impact for him to refer to me as the 'girl who fought back.'

"Your sister was a sweet girl, very quiet." He leaned back in his chair as if speaking about a casual acquaintance. "She cried a lot though. Seemed she always missed her big sister. Of course, if you were to have come with me that day, she would have felt much more at home."

"Don't you dare-" My tears threatened to fall and I couldn't seem to catch my breath. "I still remember her screams," His eyes met mine. "They were music to my ears."

"You're a sick man." The disgust got the better of me. "Tell me where my sister is!" I could feel myself growing more agitated. He was just dragging this along. Toying with me.

"I suppose I could tell you, but where's the fun in that." He snickered, looking past me at the one-way window.

Jonah's stern voice came over the speaker, "Adaline, get out of there. Now."

I stood, knowing I would be reprimanded for continuing the investigation. For not telling anyone about Isabelle.

I put my hand on the handle when I heard the man shift in his chair. "She's back where you left her." I turned back at the sound of his

voice. "Although, probably much less human looking than you may remember." His smirk was sinister, and his eyes were cold.

"What?" It was all I could force out before Killian grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the interrogation room.

She was dead. It was all my mind could muster up. I always knew there was a higher chance of it, but it was more painful knowing. Seeing the man who did it. If he was telling the truth, then she would be at the park. The place I left her. Or, at least, what used to be the park.

...

"I can't let you finish this case. It's too personal for you." Jonah spoke, but I knew it pained him to cut me off from it.

"She's already come this far. What's the harm." Morgan spoke up from outside the room. "It's against protocol." He sighed and lowered his head.

"Who cares about protocol, you know you would be doing the same thing if it were your daughter somewhere out there." Morgan was now standing in the doorway. She looked over at Killian and nodded. "You two go find her sister."

Killian and I quickly walked out to his truck and took the long drive back to our childhood neighborhood. After I left, I was told that the man was escorted to his cell and wouldn't be leaving anytime soon.

"I'm sorry for sending you in there. I shouldn't have let you go alone." Killian was focused on the road, but I could hear the sincerity in his voice.

"You know you wouldn't have been able to stop me." His face hosted a sullen smile. "Plus, you suck at investigations."

He chuckled, "I still wish you didn't have to go through that. He was... something." I smiled at his worry for me. He's always been like this.

We entered the street where Killian and his mother had run across to my aid on that fateful day. To the side, where the park once stood, was a run-down supermarket. I remembered the day they tore down the park and began building it. It was bitter-sweet. I no longer had that reminder of her absence, but sometimes I felt like I needed it. It was the last time we were happy together.

He parked the truck and, for a while, we sat there in silence. Looking at the place that was once my last memory with Isabelle.

"Morgan said she would put in a request for equipment to be brought down here sometime next week. They'll do a full search for her." Killian spoke up, interrupting the silence.

My throat was closing up. This place looked nothing like it did that day, but the tree line was the same. The cave of the beast who took her.

"We'll find her." Killian put a hand around my shoulders and started the truck once again. We'll find her.

...

A week later, the equipment came in and the crew members began their search. The X-ray equipment looked through the cement parking lot and through to the soil beneath. If anything would find her, it would be this.

I waited anxiously with Killian, my mother, and the rest of my team at the edge of the parking lot. I was afraid of what they would find. Knowing for so many years that Isabella has been right here this entire time. My stomach flipped and flopped.

"We've found something. Over here." One of the crew members yelled over to his boss and a few of them, those who weren't searching, rushed over to get a look.

The boss announced that they would begin excavation as soon as possible.

"Sir! I found something else." One of the other men called from the other side of the parking lot. Not long later, a couple other men yelled for assistance.

"Another?" I whispered. My breath hitched and I couldn't bear to stay any longer. It wasn't just Isabelle. This was the beasts' dumping grounds.

I spent the next few days waiting for the bodies to be uncovered and for the bone DNA testing to end. It was grueling, not knowing whether they had actually found my sister or if it was someone else gripped my heart. She deserved rest, they all did.

Monday morning was the fateful day I got a call from the forensics department. They found her. Killian was by my side for the rest of the day as we went to make sure the paperwork was true and during the long ride home. Killian's mother visited my mother and I often. I had a few days leave from work and Killian and my team had a day off for the official funeral.

There were many tears and the pastor told us to 'rejoice, God's children have finally been found and put to rest!' I believed him. She... they could now be free from this cursed world.

...

The fall breeze brushed my hair aside as I sat on the still slightly green grass. The orange, yellow, and occasional purple trees littered the area and the birds chirped from up above. I took in a deep breath, enjoying the outdoors. Isabelle's grave was green and decorated in beautiful arrays of flowers and bouquets. It's been three years and there is still so much life around her.

I twisted the year-old engagement ring around my finger a couple times before standing back up. Killian was waiting a distance behind, slouched against the back of his truck with his eyes trained on me. Isabelle would have loved him. She always wanted a brother.

"I'll come visit you again soon." I whispered. "There's still so much I want to tell you about."

I turned from my sister and walked back to Killian, leaving a small note and pocketknife at the foot of her grave.

Although everything around me was no longer in bloom, there was always a radiant beauty in death.

Cademon Larmoyeux

His Journal

Leo sat down in his chair, finally ready to embark on the task his therapist assigned him. She had told him to start writing down things he wanted to accomplish; supposedly putting his goals in writing would make them easier to achieve. Leo remembered that his grandfather left him a journal after he died, so he rummaged through the attic until he found it. The journal was leather-bound and a beautiful black color, and the fantastic quality made Leo wonder why his grandfather never used it.

Leo opened the journal to the first page and contemplated what he wanted to write about. His therapist told him not to overthink it, so he jotted down the first thing that came to mind, 'I wish Kaitlyn was my girlfriend.' Upon reading back the short sentence, Leo wondered how writing it down was supposed to make it more achievable, and decided he would rather have another beer than continue this exercise. Without another thought, he closed the journal, but as he did something happened; his vision blurred and a strange sensation washed over him. His vision recovered as quickly as it left him. Leo's confusion turned to alarm as he realized he was no longer sitting in his comfortable chair. Rather, he seemed to be in an upscale restaurant, sitting across from...

"Kaitlyn?!"

"Yes dear?" Kaitlyn responded. "Is something wrong?"

"What's going on?" Leo asked. "Where are we?"

"I knew you shouldn't have drunk so many bottles of wine. You're practically an alcoholic at this point!" Kaitlyn laughed at her own joke but quickly became serious as she noticed Leo's panicked expression. "Seriously, are you ok?"

"I don't know what's happening and I need to leave!" Leo said. Immediately his vision became clouded once again and just like that, he was back in his house. Leo sat completely still for a minute or two and tried to figure out what happened. Just a moment ago he and Kaitlyn were on what seemed to be a date in a fancy restaurant. Whatever he experienced was unlike anything he had ever witnessed. Was it possible

that writing in the journal made that happen? It didn't seem likely, and after some thought Leo decided he must have just fallen asleep. But if it was a dream, how come he remembered it so vividly? Something was off, and he couldn't shake the feeling that maybe, just maybe, it was the journal after all. So, he decided to try writing again and opened the journal back to the first page.

'I wish I was petting a cute dog.' Nothing happened. The tense feeling he had faded away as he was now convinced he simply dozed off and experienced some kind of lucid dream. With a sigh of relief, he closed the journal and WHOA! Leo was in an empty room with nothing but... a puppy! Leo stared in shock at the adorable golden retriever pup sitting in front of him as he tried to rationalize his way through the situation. He wrote something he wanted in the journal, and when he closed the cover he experienced what he wrote. He couldn't believe it! Leo laughed in excitement and spent the next few hours playing with the dog. He hadn't had the energy to take care of a dog in his adult life, so this made him very happy. When he was done, he yelled out to no one in particular "I'm ready to leave!" Lo and behold, he was back in his chair.

A smile crept across Leo's face as he looked at his new journal with a fresh perspective. This was the discovery of a lifetime, something science probably couldn't explain yet. He debated on whether or not he should tell someone, but eventually he decided against it; no one would believe him, and he didn't have close friends that he trusted to use it. This would be his secret, and he planned to enjoy it to the fullest. That would have to wait though, because he had to get up early tomorrow for work. Leo had trouble sleeping that night, stuck thinking of all the things he wanted to write about and experience.

The thought of his journal was all Leo could focus on during work the next day. His job consisted of monotonous paperwork, a constant stream of financial forms. Today was as dreary as ever, but Leo felt energized by the anticipation of using his journal later. During his lunch break, he decided to see whether or not his journal was one of a kind, and drove to the nearest dollar store to buy another one. Once back in his car, he immediately started writing to see if it possessed the same properties as his journal at home. It did not, and Leo felt an immense wave of disappointment, as he would have to wait

to get back home. His anticipation turned to impatience and he spent the rest of the workday in an agitated state. His coworkers seemed to notice, but he wasn't close with anyone there so they left him alone.

That evening, he decided to forgo sleep in favor of living the night as a pirate on a ship. To ensure that he would have time to make it to work the next morning, he specifically wrote down that he would be in possession of a watch. When he saw eight hours had passed, he called it quits. However, he awoke to find that he was only within the journal for mere minutes! This new revelation sparked a fury of stories and experiences Leo would thrust himself into. The next few days were a blur as Leo began spending more and more time with his journal, and it easily became his favorite pastime. When the weekend rolled around he nearly cried of joy, and spent as much time as possible living in worlds he created for himself.

On Monday, Leo grudgingly dragged himself to work, resigned to the fact that he had to go another workday without his journal. He sat down at his desk and began his day, each bit of paperwork much more of a chore than it used to be. Kaitlyn, his supervisor, came over a couple of hours later to check up on him.

"How was your weekend?" Kaitlyn asked cheerily.

"Would have been better if I didn't have to work on Monday." Leo mumbled apathetically. "Well, we all have to have a job and I like it better here than other places I've worked!" Kaitlyn said, smiling at Leo's unamused stare.

"Guess you just don't have anything better in your life than this cesspit of joy." Leo remarked sarcastically. This Kaitlyn just didn't get it. Kaitlyn's smile became a frown as she looked down on Leo. "That's not a very nice thing to say. You know I do my best to make working here fun."

"This is your idea of fun? I can't take this anymore, I'm done. I'm quitting. You can do this paperwork yourself if it's so fun."

Leo stood up and stormed out of the office, ignoring Kaitlyn's hurt and baffled expression. As he drove back home way over the speed limit, his anger gave way to a sense of giddiness. He had enough money saved to live for at least a few months, and now that he quit his job he would have enough free time to truly appreciate his journal for all that it was worth. He would figure out another job later, but at the moment this was far more important.

The next day Leo got a call from his therapist; it seems he missed this week's appointment. Leo picked up the phone and without a greeting proclaimed "Your advice to write in a journal was all I needed. I won't be coming in anymore." Without missing a beat, he threw his phone toward the couch and got back to writing. After all this time, he finally found something worth living for.

His Journal consumed him. Who needed food when he could dream of the most delicious dishes he could never afford otherwise? Who needed companionship when he could talk to anyone he wanted about anything he desired, and they would listen? It was with this mindset that Leo's life transformed into something far better than anyone could possibly hope for, and all it took was writing a few simple words. He had a better version of Kaitlyn as his girlfriend, friends who genuinely cared about him, and even the massive mansion he always wanted!

But as time passed, a growing sense of dread crept into Leo's mind. He refused to acknowledge the thought for so long, but eventually he was forced to admit that his Journal was limited. There were only so many pages to write on, and each letter he wrote took up valuable space. Panic began to set in as Leo witnessed his Journal slowly fill up, every word inching closer toward the back cover. Desperation fueled his writing. Leo wrote smaller, cramming as many adventures as he could onto each page. He poured his heart and soul into his Journal, pleading for an eternity of bliss. Leo became a legendary explorer, inserted himself as the main protagonist in his favorite movies, and stood atop Mount Everest. The visions came one after another, each beautiful but fleeting. Leo's obsession led him through lifetimes of experiences, but each one took its toll.

One day it happened. Leo looked down at his Journal and realized he had reached the final page. Leo knew he couldn't draw out the end any longer, but he wasn't ready to go back to his old life. Each time he wrote he witnessed the decay of his body and living conditions; his life was worth nothing. He was unsatisfied with how that story went, and he didn't want to think about how it would end. But Leo knew he could define his own ending, not limited by his physical surroundings. He reached down with his withered fingers and picked up his worn pen. With a trembling hand, he wrote his final tale.

'There once was a king of a magnificent realm. The realm was a place of endless adventure, beauty, and joy, and the king went on countless quests. He could be compared to King Arthur of Camelot, Charlemagne, and Solomon, known for his great deeds and extreme wisdom. He had many friends who supported him and helped him to live a perfect life free of hardship. The king was blessed with the gift of longevity and ruled for centuries over subjects who admired him. The king knew that eventually his time would come, and he would have to give up his perfect kingdom. When the time finally came, the king was surrounded by people who loved him, and he died happy. I wish to become that king.'

As he finished writing, Leo was overcome with a profound sense of peace. He had thrown everything he ever was into his Journal, and with nothing left, he was content to spend the rest of his life within it. Leo closed his Journal and felt calm as the blur washed over his eyes one last time. Leo took his final breath within his imagination. He died happy, with a heart full of memories and a smile on his face; but he died alone. Weeks later Leo's body was found, holding a book full of dreams and aspirations that he never accomplished.

Caroline Cherry Averitt

Finding Alaska

If you were to pick up my personal copy of "Looking For Alaska" by John Green and begin reading, within the first few pages you would find a section highlighted in purple. The narrator, Miles, is telling his parents why he wants to go off to boarding school. His answer was based on the last words of a French poet, François Rabelais: "I go to seek the Great Perhaps."

My parents and I visited my brother and his wife at their new house in Knoxville, Tennessee just before I started my senior year of college. They had a cute little two-story townhouse that was tucked away from the traffic and crowds of the city. After they were married, just less than a year before, they lived in a cramped apartment in the middle of Birmingham, Alabama; so this was their first real house.

In my eyes, they had it all figured out. They were married, had a house, and were taking steps in their careers. My brother, Graham, was settling into his job as a private school teacher and my sister-in-law, Merrin, was starting a job assisting an orthodontist while working on dental school applications.

During that trip, however, I found out they felt out of control. My brother stayed up for hours reading student essays and preparing for his lessons. Merrin was applying to schools all over the country, which meant they might have to move to Washington or Kentucky. Depending on which schools accepted her would determine where they would live for the next four years. I was in that limbo myself. I was months away from graduating and the questions of what I would do, where I would go, and who I would be after graduation remained unanswered.

That weekend, Merrin and Graham got an orange tabby kitten. He was the runt of the litter and almost fit in the palm of my hand. He had squinty eyes and a wealth of energy. Even though I lived far away and would hardly see this cat, I felt determined to bond with him. While my brother was planning his lessons, Merrin was getting ready for bed, and my parents were watching TV, I laid down on the twin

mattress that had been set up for me on the floor of the guest room, holding a sleeping Ron on my chest. I found something deeply comforting about holding him like that. I didn't want to let him go, but eventually, Merrin came to get him from me so they could go to sleep.

I had been wanting a cat for a long time, but there always seemed to be a reason why I shouldn't. I lost track of how many times I said, "I want a cat so bad," that day, but each time I was met with a list of reasons why I wasn't allowed by my parents. But after Ron was taken away from me, I went downstairs to take my makeup off in the bathroom. By the time I returned, the sentiment had changed. My mom was sitting up on the guest bed, dimly illuminated by the light of her phone.

"Caroline," she said from the darkness, "we decided you can get a cat."

One thing about Miles from "Looking for Alaska" is that he has a fascination with famous last words. He only reads the end of biographies to know what their final thoughts were and could conjure any president's last words on demand. He didn't read the poetry of François Rabelais, but he knew how his story ended. He cared more about the finale than the climax.

I had a friend when I was in junior high who would look up the endings of movies as she was watching them. This always bothered me because I wanted her to experience the story in the way it was created to be watched. I wanted her to invest in the characters, get lost in the plot, and let the twists and turns of the story carry her to the end. I didn't understand why she would spoil the endings on purpose.

The truth is: I would look up spoilers to my life if I could. I don't like movies to be spoiled, but I know the resolution will come within a couple of hours. If I could google where I will be in five years, or find out if I will be successful, I would. But unlike movies, my life doesn't have an IMDb page. The only way to find out how my story ends is to live.

I think the reason Miles is obsessed with last words is because he wants to know how their lives ended. He wants to dissect the resolution of successful and famous people to pursue closure in his own life. It's not just their words he's obsessed with, it's their ending. I relate to this feeling. I often feel aimless, like each day of my life is a trek through the wilderness with no end in sight. But you can't know the ending of your story until it ends.

As soon as my mom said she would get me a cat, I rushed to the humane society's website to see what cats they had. I found a few cats I liked, but I kept going back to the same one over and over. Her name was Mimsy and she was a tiny gray and white kitten with big eyes. I hoped and prayed she wouldn't be gone by the time I got an appointment. It took about a week, but the day finally came when I could go pick out my cat.

This humane society was bursting at the stitches. It was a small facility situated between farmland and factories on the outskirts of town but was packed wall-to-wall with dogs and cats. The barking and meows swirled together into a symphony of lonely and abandoned animals.

"You're here to see the cats?" the employee in the lobby asked me. I nodded and smiled so wide, my lips felt like they were bound to crack open. She motioned for me and my mom, who went with me, to follow her as she took us to a room with cats in cages stacked from floor to ceiling on three walls.

I looked around. I saw full-grown cats in all of the cages. I looked at the faces of each and every one, searching for that gray and white kitten I saw on the website.

"Where's Mimsy?" my mom asked on my behalf, knowing who I was really looking for.

"Oh?" the employee replied, "You want to see Mimsy? She's in the surgery room." She led us to a different room which held only a couple of cats. I stood with my mom outside the door while the employee scooped Mimsy up from her little corner of the room.

The age-old question: Do you believe in love at first sight? This was answered for me. I looked into those little eyes and I knew she would be the one I took home with me.

"Now, she's going to need to get her leg amputated," the employee said, handing her over to me. She then explained how she was found on the side of the road after being attacked by an animal.

"Are you sure you want this one?" my mom asked.

I looked back at the eyes of the kitten whom I held in my arms. She was looking back at me, saying with her eyes that we were a match made in heaven and she was ready to go home with me. Maybe she didn't say that, but that's what it felt like to me, and I acted as such.

I think I nodded or said yes or something, but my response must have been clear from the way I was hugging this kitten. The employees of the humane society gathered around to see my visible love for this poor, injured baby.

“If I could bottle that, I would give it out to everyone,” one of them said.

In “Looking for Alaska,” Alaska doesn’t refer to the icy state, but a girl. She actually tells a story during the novel about why that’s her name. Most people are named by their parents; she, however, named herself. She was called Mary until she picked out what she wanted to be called. She saw Alaska on a map- deep and vast, off on its own, and far away from her life in Alabama- and felt so connected to it, that she chose it as her name.

Despite the title of the book, Miles isn’t looking for her. The “Alaska” he is looking for is that big far away place that will fix all his problems. He wants to run from his parents, from his home, to find his “Great Perhaps”- the answer to his questions about life. But when he gets to his new school, he doesn’t find answers, but more questions. In his search for his Great Perhaps, he begins another search for his Alaska.

Much later, I brought that kitten home. I filled my apartment with toys and put away every breakable. We started to settle into a routine of living together. It was a Saturday afternoon. I had finished my homework and I was waiting to meet a friend for dinner. I sat next to the scratching post shaped like a flower, which my new kitten was sitting in. I had brought her home a couple of weeks before and decided her new name would be Alaska.

The scratching post stands beside the floor-to-ceiling window in my apartment. The sun was glowing through the glass and Alaska had situated herself in such a way that the sunlight shone directly on her. I picked up a toy she likes. It’s an orange stick with two strips of felt on the end of it that has a bell that jingles as you shake it. She liked to chase it around, grabbing the felt with her teeth or her claws.

Her purring was loud, almost a roar. I saw how content she was. How happy she was to feel the sun on her face, how happy she was to play with me, how happy she was to sit in a giant flower. Her leg had been attacked and then cut off, but she was happy. She was joyous.

Before I took Alaska home, I was so afraid, I was so alone. I was living a life of endless summer days that reminded me of the looming future that felt so infinite while so indefinite. I wanted to stop feeling aimless and find my purpose; I wanted to know how my story ended. Alaska doesn't worry about the future. She feels the sun and knows it's good. She finds joy in jingling toys and finds comfort in falling asleep on my chest.

I could never say I no longer worry about the future. Of course, I do. But now, I wake up every morning, instead of to the pounding of my alarm, to the movement in my bed of a stirring Alaska. I say goodbye to her when I leave for classes, and I'm greeted by her when I come home.

I wanted to be like her. I wanted to live my life unafraid and unencumbered. I wanted to enjoy the simple things and fall in love with the little details of life.

What is the Great Perhaps? I don't think it's anything science, philosophy, or even religion can address. Those things answer questions. The Great Perhaps is the inexplicable yearning in your stomach that can't be answered by anything because it's that question within your soul you don't even know how to ask. It's that desire for an understanding of the future you can't touch yet.

So what is the Great Perhaps?

I thought about taking time out of every day to sit in the sun. Or find my own version of playing with a jingle bell. I thought about mimicking this cat; she seemed to have it all figured out.

But I now step back. I now look back at that Saturday afternoon and how enamored I was with Alaska's outlook on life. How I yearned to find something that would give me a fraction of her joy. But I had already found it.

I'm not sure if I will ever find that "Great Perhaps" Rabelais and Miles spoke about. But despite not finding my Great Perhaps, I did find my Alaska.

Anna Cox

Late at Night

Late at night

The Sun melts into the ground,
beginning her sleep underneath the Earth.

The yellow harshness of the day
Gives way to the softness of night

The Moon floats into the sky
late at night: illuminating the sky with her silver rays.

The Stars begin to rise as well,
decorating the sky like flecks of gold in a deep ocean.

The Stars light intertwines with the Moon's.
Companions, lovers maybe.

I watch your head rest, your chest rises and falls
and the details of your face are barely illuminated in the planetary
light.

My eyes strain to see you.
Making out details only I will ever see.

The Moon and her stars give me their combined light
Late at night, when I'm with you.

Icing

BEEP BEEP BEEP

Ruby awoke with a start. She sat up, heart beating fast, quickly turned and clicked the alarm off. The fear of possibly waking up Chuck flowed in her veins. Ruby slipped out of the bed quietly, and slid her feet into her worn, purple slippers. They had been soft years ago, but work had rubbed the fluff away. She covered herself with her robe and walked into the kitchen. The oven read 5:00 a.m. She sighed and then proceeded to pull out the ingredients to make Chuck a hearty breakfast for the day ahead. The taste of their fight was still bitter on her tongue, but she still had to make him breakfast. He was to set out on a hiking trip today, he would only be staying for one night so she was excited to get a break from his watchful eye.

Humming, she cracked the egg on the skillet, pouring out the yolk onto the bacon already popping and sizzling. As the egg landed and touched the fat, the oil popped back onto her arms, burning her enough for a yelp to escape her mouth. Ruby quickly slapped a hand to her mouth, praying her noise did not wake her husband. When she didn't hear any movement, she went back to flipping the bacon. Burnt to a crisp, per her husband's preference.

An hour passes and the smell of bacon wafts through the house as Chuck awoke to the gentle alarm his wife had set for him. The calming sounds of Frédéric Chopin gently pushed sleep away. Chuck turned over slowly, turning the alarm off. He sat up, smelt the bacon, eggs, and cinnamon rolls—a full breakfast curated by his wife just for him. He had married his wife because of her beauty, which had left her years ago, but she can still cook. Getting up, he pushed his feet into his soft brown slippers, purchased yearly by his wife when she saw that his shoes got just a little worn-out. Instead of going into the kitchen to greet Ruby, he went into the bathroom.

While Chuck slowly showered, Ruby was in the kitchen, creating the final batch of icing for her cinnamon rolls. She looked at the first batch, in a pink ceramic bowl, “Elina’s” she thought and returned to the empty blue bowl in front of her. Ruby scooped out just enough from the pink bowl into the blue one, only enough icing for a few cinnamon rolls but that's all Chuck needed. Slowly she reached

down into a spice drawer that was beside her, picked up the new ingredient she had gotten a few days before. As she unraveled it from the brown paper, Ruby paused and rubbed the pad of her thumb over the parchment that was on the small glass bottle. She mulled over the ingredient debating whether to add it or not, finally she thought of Chuck: the late night phone calls he received, the raised fists, the faint smell of perfume on his collar, and she poured it in. She began to stir the icing, slowly at first as if there was a hint of regret, but as she continued her train of thought the counter-clockwise turn of her arm began to get faster and faster, and soon it was so out of control icing splattered onto her face. Carefully, she wiped it off of her, but then she paused and licked her lips to taste the icing. It was far too bitter so she added sugar and cinnamon. Now, her special breakfast was ready. She swirled a final dose of icing on the cinnamon rolls before returning them into the oven for a few more minutes: just until the icing is melted and gooey. Ruby took off her baking mitts, they were new, a gift from her husband last Christmas. They were also blue, which is Ruby's least favorite color, but it was Chuck's favorite, so that's what really matters. She turned on the sink, put soap onto the dishes, and filled the pots and pans with hot water. The sponge was hot on Ruby's hands, which practically burned her for the sake of cleanliness. Chuck liked things to be clean though, so she scrubbed and scrubbed, burning her hands to the bone for her husband.

The shower turned off. Ruby shut off the sink, dried her hands, and headed into the bedroom. She had around 15 minutes until Chuck would be sliding into his seat, wanting his plate of food the second his butt hits the seat. However, Ruby always made their bed and with a few minutes to spare she began to pull back the linens, straightening the bedsheet, then the cover, and right before Ruby is able to grab the comforter Chuck's phone awakes with messages. At first, Ruby ignored it as she just thought it was work, however, the messages began to be calls, then texts, then calls, and then she couldn't take it anymore. She fluffed the last pillow and began to make her way to the other side of the bed. Just as Ruby reached her hand out for the phone, the screen now dark, Chuck opened the door, towel hanging around his waist, eyes wide, soaked to the bone.

"Oh, are you okay?" Ruby paused, arm retreating back to her body as if in defense to his oncoming words.

"Yes, of course. I just need to grab my phone." Chuck straightened up and walked to the bedside table, glaring at his wife as if she had done something wrong. She took another step back from him.

"I-I'm sorry. It's just that it kept going off and I thought it might be important." Another step back and her mouth opened and closed a little, searching for words to excuse her now deemed bad actions. Chuck thought she looked like a fish.

"Close your mouth. Also, haven't I told you that if my work calls let it go to voicemail? It's not like you would understand all the information anyway." He taps on the phone, 3 missed calls and 10 messages from Kitty.

Chuck concealed his smile by clearing his throat. He looked back at his wife, a somber look on his face, "And honestly honey, maybe you should put a little makeup on in the morning. You are as white as a ghost." Ruby's eyes fell to the ground, and she mumbled some sort of excuse. Chuck just looked at her, his mouth tightened into a line as he turned on his heel back into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Ruby returned to the kitchen, silently plating the food for her other family members. She makes her daughter's first, Elina, knowing that she will wake up any second. Ruby finished the plate, setting it onto a tray with a glass of orange juice and silverware. Ruby took delicate and silent steps up the stairs, where she then waited until she heard the gentle sound of the alarm going off before she made a noise. She opened the door when she finally heard the alarm turn off.

"Good morning Elina, did you sleep well?" Ruby sets the tray down on the bedside table. She smiles sweetly at her daughter even though a deep hollow feeling has made its way into her heart. Elina was too tired to give much of a response, rather she just waved and mumbled a quick thank you to her mom. Ruby gave a weak smile and left the room. As she floated down the stairs, she heard her husband whispering harshly into his phone.

"You cannot call or text or do *anything* to contact me when I am at home. How many times can I tell you this before you understand?" Ruby paused near the top of the stairs and she felt a feeling she had never felt before. Rage, disappointment: her heart broke up into a mix of anger and sadness. Her blood turned hot and cold at the same time. She knew Chuck thought she was stupid-stupid enough to not see an

affair. For him to speak about it so openly in their house was the last blow Ruby needed to no longer feel guilty about her breakfast. She took a deep breath, resetting her body to prepare to face him. Her feet landed heavily on the stairs, giving Chuck ample time to end the call before Ruby even got near the room.

"I need to pack up soon to go on my hike, where's my breakfast?" Chuck slid into the chair, waiting for his wife to place the plate in front of him. Ruby returned to her place in front of the counter, dutifully making his plate, her body tense and rigid. She slathered another layer of icing on top of his cinnamon roll for extra measure, pushing the liquid in every crevice of the rolled up dough, making sure to get as much on there as possible. It was almost sickening.

"Here you go sweetie," Ruby planted a kiss on his cheek, only getting a grunt back. As Ruby started the task of returning the kitchen to its original form, Chuck ate greedily, like a pig, practically licking his plate.

"This is amazing, did you do anything new?" Chuck brought her the plate, a gesture he hadn't done for her in years.

"No, just reread my grandmother's recipe, I must have been missing a few ingredients the last few times I made it."

"Well, I'm glad for the change you made." With that, Chuck turned back into their bedroom, finishing up his packing as Ruby finished up her cleaning. It did not take Chuck long to return to the kitchen, his two bags in hand. Elina came down from her room, ready for school and both daughter and father muttered quick goodbyes and left Ruby alone in the house to do her daily chores. Ruby was happy during this time when it was just her. Since it was still so early, and Ruby was already so tired, she decided to lie down. The weight of what she had heard and done was pulling her very soul to the ground. She wrapped herself up in a blanket. Their little white dog, Leeland, jumped up with her, pushing his nose under the blanket asking if he could be let in.

She lifted up the blanket and pulled him in close to her. She fell asleep fast, her mind too tired to keep running.

As Ruby slept, Chuck made his way to the Butterfield hiking trail. A little 15-mile jog that is difficult for most but Chuck had been doing this for years. His confidence overshadowed any fear he had for this hike, even if it started in a place named Devil's Den. It would only

take him about a day to finish it, but he had decided that he was going to come home late, so he could visit Kitty. He rang her, deciding that he should apologize for the harsh words he gave her this morning. Chuck found her contact and called, it rang a few times, a habit he had picked up on that she did with everyone, Chuck has begun to assume that she does this to feel important: really she was just slow at picking up the phone.

"Yes?" Kitty finally picked up, her voice annoyed and showed clear signs of anger.

"I'm sorry, okay, I don't need to be that rude to you. But, you know, you can't call me at home, Ruby will-"

"I know, okay, I know. You just don't respond ever, it makes me upset," Kitty practically whines the last part. Chuck felt a pang of guilt, but he was clear when he said that he couldn't talk to her when he was at home.

"Listen, Kit, I'll be over tomorrow and I'll make it up to you." Chuck turns onto another road, getting closer to his destination, "Okay I'm about to be at the entrance so I'll call you tonight, is that okay?" Kitty sighs on the other end of the line, muttering a brief yes and exchanging 'I love yous' with Chuck. Within a few minutes, Chuck took another turn onto a gravel path, arriving at a parking lot for fellow hikers. He saw a few cars, which made him feel good. He liked the alone time that came with hiking, but being completely alone was a bit daunting. Of course, he would never admit this to either Kitty or Ruby, but he did get cold feet when the cars were sparse. Chuck grabbed his bag, situated it on his shoulders, double-knotted his shoes and he was off. The crunch of gravel soon turned into the sound of sucking wet mud mixed with dead leaves. There was nothing that Chuck loved more than the sound of dead leaves beneath his feet, or the smell of the earth that was only truly there in these hiking trails.

Ruby woke up a considerable time later, checking her phone to see that Chuck had texted her an hour ago saying he had arrived at the trail. She checked the time, 12 p.m., Leeland had started to wake up and had started to scratch at the door wanting out. Ruby rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, retying her robe and sliding on her slippers. When she finally opened the sliding back door, Leeland bolted outside, and the sun overwhelmed her eyes, which were not accustomed to the bright lights yet. She stretched and yawned, feeling the heat of the sun

on a cold day. The air was crisp and the leaves were crunchy. Leeland was soon ready to go back inside. As he climbed back onto the couch, settling in for another nap, Ruby locked the door and opened the living room curtains. She then went through all of the rooms, except her daughters, and opened the curtains for light to shine inside. This was the best way for her to clean as she could see the dust that had been accumulating on the furniture and decor. Ruby changed her clothes, put her hair up, and set off to clean the rest of the house.

Chuck had made steady progress in his hike, pausing occasionally to rest or to look at the nature around him. He was happy to finally be alone; he loved Kitty but she did become a little immature after a while. The trail was pretty enough, running along a stream for the majority of the time, which gave Chuck some ambient noise apart from the regular wildlife noise. However, as the sun sank lower and lower, the temperature also began a steady decline. The crisp autumn air gradually became sharper and sharper against his airways. Chuck checked the time, 4 p.m., he decided that it was late enough to make a camp and not freeze to death in the process. He had checked the weather beforehand and packed all of his winter gear. This was a short hike after all and he wasn't expecting it to dip below freezing. He unpacked his backpack, laid out his equipment for his tent, and began hammering the nails in place. In only a matter of minutes he had a tent, Chuck felt some pride after being able to do this in such a short amount of time. However, he was starting to feel the exhaustion creep into him after a long day of hiking. It hit him suddenly and almost out of nowhere. If he hadn't been hiking all day, he would have been suspicious of this fatigue. Chuck decided to simply eat what his wife had packed for him; he had snacked on homemade snacks all day and was sure she had packed some dinner for him: she always did. He crawled into the tent and took out the container of food with a sticky note that labeled it, "Dinner." Opening it, he saw that it was what he had for breakfast, two eggs, 5 strips of bacon, and a large cinnamon roll that dripped in icing. There was so much it had covered the whole bottom of the container. Chuck cursed his wife, muttering about how lazy she must be for not only repackaging breakfast for him but putting so much icing that it contaminated all of the other food. He called Kitty and ate his dinner, telling her about all of his adventures when his voice just stopped.

Kitty heard a sound, like tin hitting the earth, and a thud. The phone went silent.

Ruby had finished her cleaning and was on to dinner. She planned to make Elina's favorite meal, alfredo. Elina always claimed her mother could make the best just because everything was made from scratch. The noodles were homemade and so was the sauce. It was a long process but Ruby had enough time to do it since Chuck would not be home demanding other chores to be done. Elina returned home soon, catching a ride with one of her friends. The noodles boiled on the stove and the sauce was heating up to just the perfect temperature.

"Oh, hi Elina," Ruby yells from over the kitchen sink, straining the noodles, hot water burning her arms as it splashes back out of the sink, "How was your day at school?"

Elina drops her bag on the barstool, "Are you making alfredo?" She was practically salivating trying to look into all the pots to determine if her nose was lying or not.

"Yes." Ruby places the pot on the stove, putting the heat on low and giving the sauce a final stir before presenting it to her daughter, "I hadn't made it in a while and thought you might like it. You know dad doesn't like it, so I have to make it when he isn't here."

"You are my favorite parent," Elina lunged at her mom, almost tackling her. Ruby stumbled and returned the hug to her daughter. Elina quickly grabbed a bowl and fork that were already laid out on the table, quickly piling in as much noodles and sauce as she could fit without it all spilling out onto the floor. Ruby smiled, as she basked in the feeling of achievement she got from making her daughter happy. Ruby made up her own bowl as her daughter grabbed them both drinks and napkins. They both quickly sat down at the table, and slurped down their noodles like it was the first meal they had in years.

"So you never answered," Ruby gasped in between bites, "my question: how was your day?" Elina was a little sad she would have to set down the fork to answer but did so to please her mother.

"It was good, how was your day?" Their conversation continued, Ruby listing off the chores she had done that day, and Elina telling her mother all the high school drama that had gone down that day. Their conversation ended when a few hard knocks went through the house.

Chuck's body fell against the Earth with a hard thud. He could hear Kitty yelling on the other line, screaming and pleading for Chuck to respond. Chuck could not, his whole body was stiff, all he could do was watch the sun slowly set on the horizon. The shadows slowly grew and the wind picked up, making the cold feel sharper and sharper against his skin. Dark clouds brewed above him and a feeling of dread began to trickle through his body. He felt one drop, then another, and another, and another, and soon it was a downpour. Chuck had fallen backwards out of his tent, onto his back. Leaving everything but his feet out for the rain to assault. His skin started to feel as if it was being ripped apart by tiny daggers. He was soaked, the rain felt as if it was hitting his bones, as if all his skin had been torn away leaving only pain behind. Slowly Chuck felt tears well behind his eyes, a building pressure that threatened to explode at any second. Finally, it did, and his tears soon spilled out from his eyes, he missed Kitty: he even missed Ruby. He missed her food, her warmth, smile, personality, everything. Kitty was beautiful but bland, Ruby was bright but timid. She was warm, so warm, so warm. He missed her. He closed his eyes, squeezing out the last warm tears. They rolled out of the corners of his eyes, following the path already carved out by previous tears to the Earth. They went onto his ear, sliding down to the very bottom, just barely off the ground. One last strangled breath, one last movement of his chest, and his last tears landed on the Earth.

Ruby's eyes looked from her daughter to the door and back, noodles swung off the fork that hung in the air. Placing the fork down, Ruby rose from her chair, heading to the front door to see who was at the door. The first thing she could see were the blue uniforms. She opened her mouth first, greeting the officers and making small talk before the officers glanced at each other and interrupted her.

"Are you Mrs. Clifton?" Elina joined them at the door, eyes darting between the somber officers and her worried mother. She felt the fear radiating off of her mother as she responded with a small yes.

The officer took off his hat and started with the words Elina was worried might come from their mouth, "I'm sorry-" Elina fell to the ground first. First, she went to her knees, then her palms, and then her head was resting atop her hands. She was screaming, wailing, the words out of her mouth unintelligible. Ruby was stiff, hand over her heart as she watched her daughter break in slow motion onto the floor.

She too fell onto the floor, pulling her daughter up onto her lap. At first, tears fell from both of them, knuckles white as they both clutched each other: one in heartbreak and the other in fear.

"We don't know what happened yet, but we got a call in from someone named Kitty, saying they were on the phone when he suddenly went silent." The officer was waiting for the two women's reaction and it so far remained the same, "She heard a thud and thought something had hit his head, but when we finally got to him, he was simply," he paused, not knowing how to phrase the next words out of his mouth, "frozen." Ruby paused her screaming for just a moment, red-eyed and looking at the officer in confusion. If he was truly analyzing her, he would have noticed that her eye twitched at the mention of Kitty.

Then she broke, and she laughed.

At first, it was only a small giggle. Then it gradually grew bigger and bigger, heartier, and with her whole body. It came to a point where it sounded maniacal. She began to shake and cry. Her sobs broke the laughter and her breath was always out of her reach. The officers thought this was simply a woman who broke from her husband's death. Truly, it was the laugh of a woman who knew she was free and safe.

The officer cleared his throat, "The cause of death has been determined as hypothermia, although he seemed to have something that was making him unable to move. We don't know what caused that, but we think he may have hit his head." Ruby's cries had begun to quiet down, leaving only her daughter who shook like a leaf at this nose. However, Ruby slowly began to rise from the ground, pulled her daughter up with her and gestured for the officers to follow her inside.

"Even in times of grief I must be a good host," and with shaky hands Ruby opened the fridge door, "I made these this morning for my dear daughter Elina, she didn't eat them all so here." Ruby laid out a pink plate of leftover cinnamon rolls, removing the notecard that had "Elina" on it, "Please have some." The officers started to decline at first, but the strong smell of cinnamon and sugar was too alluring for both of them and they were soon devouring the sweet treat.

Winston Busselle

Hummingbirds and Tomatoes

The July sun kissed gently against the slow eating Jersey cow. Her tail whipping flies off her back as if to set a bass to the rhythm to which the busy hummingbirds danced. The yellowing mowed grass bounced gently away with the breeze, finding rest against the lone tree standing amidst the yard. The shade of the tree seemed to be a blockade against the summer bliss. Its cool aura left everything under it silent and emotionless. Even the chickens seemed to be muted as they scratched the manure pile in the corner of a feebly grown tomato garden. Only one chicken remained outside the tree's shade. Her name was Pricilla; she once belonged to a wonderful old woman.

A wonderful old woman who only married once and did it young. Many doubted her when she married him. He was not easy to love. Made a child soldier in a hated war, he slept on the rifle deep into his life. The sun brought whispers of voices he was the last to hear, and he too often blew smoke at the moon. He was a broken man from an evil jungle. She did not care about any of that. She loved him. Their farm was not big, and They never saw a profit, yet their love never stopped—like the hummingbirds of Their tomato garden. Home meals flavored the air every night as Their family gathered to pray. He never stopped praying for her.

He stood up, snuffing out His last cigarette, and headed back inside to grab another beer. He wouldn't drink tomorrow; He never did on Sunday. She always loved that about Him. His metal chair creaked as he sat back down. The only sound that seemed to be capable under the tree's shade. Its cry for help echoed through the summer silence. It had long been rusted by the Arkansas weather. There is no point in bringing it inside though. He sits there everyday, morning till evening, listening to Her hummingbirds and watching His tomatoes grow.

The scared boy who survived the jungle; a lonesome man left in a garden.

She loved Him; He loves Her

Traffic Stops of Diablo County, October Thirty-First

Do you believe we are alone?

Most do.

To believe such is humanity's most blissful lie.

I suppose ignorance remains for the best.

No one deserves a life with that kind of knowledge.

The public panic would lead to mass devastation.

Millions of people would die.

The horrible truth is the deaths would not be the worst outcome.

To some of us, death is a privilege we do not receive

Death is a luxury reserved only for mortals.

I lost that luxury long ago.

Longer than I can remember.

Eons probably.

I was never even meant to survive childbirth.

Nature itself refused my existence.

Yet despite her knowledge of the truth, my mother somehow delivered me.

To deny my death was something a mere mortal could not vessel.

Surviving birth removed the blockade against my father's lineage.

The same lineage that stares back in my every reflection.

To see my reflection stirs a yearn for my demise.

Those eyes haunt me.

To look upon myself is to look upon my father.

Our resemblance to one another is uncanny.

His reflection is my eternal torment.

His lineage is my curse.

The lineage that ensured I'd be hunted by all who are righteous.

Many names exist for me.

All of them from past centuries I have lived.

Centuries of a life and spirit that I wish were not my own.

Many brave souls have faced my unholy wrath.

Every encounter leaves its mark upon my skin alongside the scars of conquered demons.

**I am not scarred enough though, because the demons rage
relentlessly.
They lurk in every shadow, saturating the world with sin.
Their ungodly master grows stronger every day.
Their tortures are hidden by man's inability to admit the truth.
The media calls them serial killers or terrorists.
The media is wrong, for these are not mortal men.
They are the Evils of Legend.
There was once a time that all men fought against these horrors.
Today they hide and strike before our eyes, killing anyone they
desire.
Ladies of the moon seduce men into eternal damnation.
Spirits of hellfire burn the west coast.
Silver tongued nymphs steal children from their innocence.
All weapons against them are long since forgotten.
There is no defense against their free torture.
I sit in torment as I am trapped to forever watch.
I hide from them.
I fight against them.
I run from them.
Still, they hunt me.
They reside in every town, every home, every school, even every
church.
No one is guaranteed safety.
They spread their fornication abroad.
Their wicked offspring live unknown to their true nature.
Dormant genetics lay untapped in society.
Half wolves, half devils, and much worse live as normal children.
They remain sleeping until they hear the nights calling to them.
The calling will reach its fullest strength soon. I can feel its
arrival.
The call of the hallows night is on its way.
It will bring the monsters out in all who fall victim to it.
The darkness will consume every individual that holds its curse.
Beware the thirty first for evil is coming to play.
His servants are everywhere.
Even the kindest of hearts are victims to their own wicked
spirits.**

**The destruction will be terrifying.
Fear the wolves.
Fear the nightwalkers.
The ones with no eyes yet see in the dark.
The babes who are ravenous for human flesh.
The men whose eyes glow like the sun.
Those whose mouths breathe fire like a chamber of hell.
Fear all of them.
Let your soul tremble on the night of hallows eve.
Fear the good men who fall into the darkness.
You must fear them all but first take my warning.
Fear me.
For no man holds the evil within as I.
There has never been a face with my eyes except one other.
My reflection is not my own.
I look at myself and my father is what I see.
I tell you to fear me because the mirror tells no lies.
And in it, I see the greatest of all sin.
I see the man whose heart desires his own damnation.
With every reflection, I see the face of a mourning monstrosity.
I see the son of Satan himself.**

“Yeah, ok...Sir, I am going to have to ask you to slowly step out of the car and place your hands behind your back where I can see them.”

Alone With Roses

The tale of Beauty is so often told
How she won the heart of the wicked beast
And yet there was a time the castle stayed cold
And love never existed anymore in the least

So many questions only he could share
About the years he sulked in his throne
If only if only someone did care
To ask how he bore to stay all alone

Perhaps Just Maybe

Rose petals danced off the cold thorny stem
As a man without love became the famous beast
The sins of the heart so quickly we condemn
To send off poor souls with hopes of love now deceased

Off in his castle the man fights the monster
Never really knowing which the mirror shows
If someone dare love his dark soul back to proper
Maybe just then he'd be free from the rose

Petals fall daily as the beast does win
And his poor friends does he watch suffer
He settles to rot within his own sin
Longing to feel the love of another

He knowest it not, nor does he dream
That love will find him within his dark palace
And despite his cruel bark, and bite she has seen
She will break his nightmare and end his deep madness

Life with her in it will surely be better
Than the dark prison he made his own home
For maybe he was never truly a monster
But just a broken down man tired of being alone.

Anonymous

The Witches Story

“What a sight to behold”

The old witch croaked and the story so she told

Of the beauty that lived in a forest of vines

There she was to remain till the end of time

“She must stay,” bloated the witch

“Less the world will collapse,” she said crafting a wonderful stitch

The witch sat by the fire, her soul mellow and without desire

She had her fill of days and now she sat crafting away

Slowly she murmured to herself, her hands wove the threads in like the sea

I looked and looked but I couldn’t fathom what it would be

“Yet,” she started abruptly, “many a knight came to save her”

“In boned and ashes they departed” She looked up weary, adjusting the covering made of fur

“Yet she still lives to this day,” and soon I began to wonder

“She is I, we are the same,” the witch spoke now having finished her craft in a half-slumber

To the light, the tapestry shown as if made of gold

Thereupon the tapestry, the witch stood as a fair young maiden looking
so bold

She lives to this day in a forest made of vines

No longer is her beauty divine

Though her eyes shine with a wisdom of a hundred years

Every year o'er the hills, I go to her returning from a journey

I always make a stop by

To the one that had beauty and now the universe etched in her eyes

So They Say

They say, over the sea and far beyond
There's a land with a little pond
In it are twinkles of lights
Reflections of small stars so bright

They say over the mountains, in the sky
A dragon lives, sleeping tight
When it awakes, it hunts to feed
'Tis only for food a hunting necessity

They say over the green hills is a castle
One wherein resides a beautiful princess
Her hair made of gold and skin as fair as snow
Who shall rescue her?
A friend, knight or foe?

They say in the woods there are fairies
Their tinkling sound the wood carries
Find their little footprints on a leaf covered in dew
Or smell their delicious cooking stew

'Tis all but a little tale
Come hither to hear the truth
I bear my heart open to you
Enter

Enter, be not afraid
A darkness swirls within but a light flickers
The hurt and agony brace
against the hope and love
In the middle, a never-ending war
Can I take it longer? How much more?

Pity not my sight
This is my fight
I bear too much pride to ask for help
I'd suffer it alone then make it hurt again

This heart feels too much yet too little
This heart understands but doesn't
Through it all I try to smile
Whilst drowning inside all the while

They "Say be happy, just smile and it will be alright"
I have
They say "It's just a little emotion, it will wither away"
I ask when?

They say "It's nothing, a reaction to something"
Something what?
They say "It's a behavior learned"
But do you see my heart burn?

They say "Just distract yourself"
With what I ask?

They say "Use a solution"
How many? Which one?

They say "Be yourself"
Will you accept me with all my wounds?

They say "Fight the battle within"
I have, I have, I have

How can a storm brewed be turned shrewd?
How can it calm when there's a lingering heaviness upon it?

So they say

Tamia Brown

To a Muse, Betrayed

It would be easy to cry in a hole and whimper in shame, but I won't. Not because of my stubbornness or pride, but because it'd be idiotic to do something so weak in front of a man who never cared about me. Am I crazy? Am I insane? I think I am, I *feel* I am. Everything I once knew is turning out to be lies: my love, my life, my entire *being*. Am I still me? Am I still Amelia von Hearth, heir to my family's pride? Am I her? Or am I the monster that everyone says I am? Am I monstrous, undeserving of love? What have I done? What have I not done? Can I proclaim innocence now? Must I profess to guilt I never bore? Or did I bare it? Did I harm them? Harm him? Harm his lover and his friends? Am I a demon sent from the depths of Hell? Should my mother have killed me in the womb? My birth is a curse to my entire family. The man I love, was it all for nothing? So many questions drain my mind, my heart beats so violently that I am deaf to my own thoughts. I wish for death yet I plead for life. Do I deserve this? DO I DESERVE THIS?

I will accept any fate the gods deem me worthy of. I am a monster. I am cruel and deceitful, undeserving of grace and mercy. I have harmed; I have killed and stolen. I am a woman of scorn and high birth. I am my mother's daughter, my father's disgrace, and my family's ire. A pin in my lover's side, between his ribs, suckling on the blood of his affection. My murderous intentions to possess him, pure unadulterated hatred. I am not Amelia von Hearth, I am a demon. I am...

Rue the day I was born, the day my mother birthed me from her cursed womb. If an infant is born of innocence, then I was never a babe, but a demon born from the blood of my ancestors. A warmonger, a fiend and a fool. I lifted my hands to the sky; I awaited death, calm and serene. It was what I deserved. But I was not graced with such sweet release, no, my soul caved and the gods gave me rage. A rage that has ravaged my being with pleasure and pain so great that I know I will use it to tear apart all that I know. I am not Amelia von Hearth, I am...

I am woman, I am scorn, I am my mother, vengeful and filled with wrath that consumes me whole. I bathe in the blood of my father and my brothers. Who am I? Who am I not? I am born of evil and sin. My father wept at my birth; my mother screamed in agony. My brothers prayed to the gods for release. If I am monstrous, am I beautiful? Am I sweet rage, cascading down like honey? Am I the gods' vengeance? Pure and cosmic? Am I fate's mistress, chaos in blood and flesh?

Am I? No, *I am*.

The Wonderings of a Traveler

Although her melodrama made her attractive, her scarred form was a harsh sight. She was neither pleasantly scarred nor horribly disfigured. Her hair, well, she had none, and her eyes looked as if they'd rather be empty sockets. Her skin was marred with discolored blotches of flesh, though it wasn't the worst part of her figure; no, that was her hands. They were coarse with calluses, and her right ring finger and her left pinky were just nubs. I asked her how they had become as such, but the only thing she would tell me—in a wavering voice I knew she used whenever she was about to cry from my foolishness—was that her father cut them off in his attempts to 'regrow' her older sister. She talked about how he despised her for surviving and coming out looking like a beast straight from the pits of hell—and for not using her life to save her older, more beautiful sister. In a way, I could see what he was talking about. However, she was only a child, and I don't know what child would have the self awareness to sacrifice their life for their elder sibling. I told her to stop; I knew I would get this reaction out of her, but when I saw her eyes glisten with unshed tears, I almost felt bad for doing what I did. Almost. She stopped talking, and I returned the butcher knife I took from her earlier when I decided to ask the question. I didn't want to end up like the slabs of pork and beef I saw around me, hanging from hooks like offerings, if I ended up angering her with my question. I then called her beautiful, something I promised her mother I would do. God bless that woman, she was a sentimental old hag. Annoying too, but she wanted someone who would care for her daughter, though I'm still not sure why she thought that person should be me. I guess it had something to do with me stopping her husband from slitting her throat. Regardless of the matter, her mother's dead now. Though, now that I find the girl in my care, I wish I had just minded my business. I could have spent the rest of my eternity on this foul Earth without some melodramatic burn victim keeping me company. But I suppose she offers some entertainment and a sense of duty whenever I come to town. This godforsaken town. I really do wish I had never even found it, but who am I to oppose Fate? And who am I to not follow my own wanderlust, and lust in general?

In the Cold

Musty air rushed into Alegra's lungs as she was keeled over gasping for breath. She held a bloodied blade to her chest, a weak attempt to protect herself from her injured, raging captor. His body was littered with stab wounds, twenty-eight if she was counting, and she hoped that soon he would fall dead. He was on the floor on all fours, his face twisted in pain and rage as he attempted to crawl towards her. His fists were trembling with want to send another gut wrenching punch towards her, but he didn't have the strength. And when Alegra caught her breath, she stood up, hunched over, and pounced on him. Her knife stabbed into his chest once again, and his body fell still. Alegra let out a breath.

She released her pent up aggression against the man who stole her away from her life, her freedom. The man who tortured her endlessly, and then acted as if he cared for her, she didn't stop until his chest was only a mangled carcass. Her breathing was heavy, and her body was tired. Warm blood coated her bare body, almost warming her heart. And after marveling in her recent endeavor, she left his body in a delirious state and exited the home she was imprisoned in. Her mind could only remind her to grab one of her dead captor's fur coats that hung by the door.

The snow and cold put a horrible taste in the mouth of Alegra. She squeezed the fur coat tighter after every gust of wind. Her face was turning blue, and she thanked whatever was keeping her alive until this moment that she hadn't fallen dead yet. Every few seconds her body would erupt in a violent shiver, and soon she began to lose feeling in her face, feet, and hands. Through it all, she kept moving forward, although her feet could no longer support the fast paced trot she had started before, now she could only shuffle slowly. She knew that if she stopped moving, she would never move again, and everything depended on her continuing forward, no matter how painful things were.

In the cold, hours seemed to pass as she continued at her slow pace, her feet leaving bloody footmarks in the snow. Her eyes were heavy, and her heart had begun to slow down. She was beginning to lose hope: maybe she wouldn't be able to live a life of freedom? She had

worked so hard to escape her captor, but was it all worth it? She could be eating a hot meal by a fire, warm and safe. But Alegra dismissed those thoughts as soon as they came; her safety was never promised there. The meal she could be consuming right now may end up drugged, and then she'd find herself on a table being violated once again. Her body was already a testament to the 'safety' she experienced in the home of her captor.

Old burns, carvings, whip marks and other injuries littered her body. Each having a story of their own, but the most noticeable scar was the one on her back. A deep O-shaped carving that had long stopped bleeding. The pain was numb, yet ever present since Alegra took the chance to escape her captor, and she wasn't sure how she hadn't fallen dead yet. But she ignored everything with a single goal in mind: to escape and be free. But freedom was a loose term, the only thing she could see through her heavy eyes were trees and snow. The thought that maybe she should give up right there and just lay on the ground and sleep was strong. She was so tired; her body felt sluggish, and she knew that no one would come save her anyway. Her captor had brought her somewhere she would never be found.

He wanted her for himself; he would go on long tangents about how "he deserved her" and how "he was saving her." She chose to detach herself when she heard him say those things; it was better that way because when he started those she knew that soon he would bring her down to his cellar to torture her. The first time he did it, she almost died from the pain of an iron cast being put on her leg and then heated up until she could only see red and smell her sizzling flesh. A phantom pain started in her leg, one she only grimaced at and continued walking.

Alegra couldn't continue, whatever strength that she had before was now depleted. She was in a daze, the cold the only thing her mind was able to focus on. Her body, now frostbitten and blue, lay curled against a tree almost buried in freshly fallen snow. Her hands no longer clutched onto the coat, instead wrapping around her knees making her form smaller and less noticeable. She felt empty, she had escaped her human captor only to be claimed by a new one, nature. And then her vision went black.

Dull

Monotonous skys
Subdued by vibrant rainbows
Yet flowers still bloom

I Wish I was a Poem

Murky blue water rushed in and out of the lungs of a young woman bound to a boulder on the edge of town. Her body that used to bear the finest silks now lay bare as wards of sacrifice, purity, and life could be seen crudely carved into her neck, thighs, and swollen belly. Her skin was tinted blue from hours of exposure to the cold air and frigid water. Her hair that used to glitter with intricately cut diamonds and lapis lazulis now hung limp and wet down her back dressed in seaweed, and her eyes that used to glow a vivid emerald green were now washed over gray with death.

The waves continuously hurled themselves into her body, and with every launch they seemed to loosen her bindings and bring her closer and closer to sea. And as the minutes passed, the ocean finally claimed her. She was carried into the depths of the ocean, the waves seemingly now calmed as they had finally claimed their prize. Her body sank down to the ocean floor as the wards on her skin began to glow, and slowly, her body dissolved until it was nothing but sediment on the ocean floor. And somewhere, deeper in the abyss of the night ocean, an entity sighed in satisfaction.

Indira Olivia Kakarlamudi

Till the End of Time

It felt just like yesterday when I met you
Staring into those magnetic eyes of dark blue I never felt this way,
not until I met you in a play
You made me go pink When we found the link
And promised me that we never leave each other till the end of time
Only to relieve the chime.

Remember the day when you told me I was away
I felt absurd when you said that word
But I trusted you, and now I am in a den
Crying all my heart to be a part
And promised me that we never leave each other till the end of time
Only to relieve the chime.

You kneeled to marry me,
And I was innocent to agree
Not knowing that the ring would be my string
And I can fly only till the boundary of your sight
When I saw your diary filled with girls
Discovering they are held in lost's
You were sabotaging them while you waited for me to come
And promised me that we never leave each other till the end of time
Only to relieve the chime.

I know that you did not want this to end
But I apologize for you and I now realize
That all those dies are not lies
You turned out to be a monster
When you pulled my hair in a cluster.
And promised me that we never leave each other till the end of time
Only to relieve the chime.

Now look at me,
I can fly till the high sky
See what you've done,
you felt it was fun
But I loved you till you started to kill
I was afraid I would lose you, now I am taking a pill
The word is telling me you never existed
And all that evil is done by me as I was an egoist
But how do I explain that we never leave each other till the end of
time
Only to relieve the chime.

I hold up my promise of eternal love
Even if you are in the above
I might be schizophrenic, but I will never hit you with a bookshelf
They all state that was my first crime
And I promised you that we never leave each other till the end of
time
Only to relieve the chime.

Kaylee “Lee” Pence

Green Patches

I found the fourth finger in my gardening pants. It was stiff and cold, sickening to look at for too long. It wasn't like others. It was the forefinger. The other digits in the collection were of the pinky, ring, and middle. It looked very similar to the ring, but this digit, with its chipped and jagged fingernail, was curved slightly to the right. That meant the next one had to be the thumb—an almost complete set! The forefinger itself was similar to the others: thick with knobby knuckles, cut at the base with utmost precision, and burnt, perhaps, from cauterization.

I was never sure what to do with the fingers. I tried to tell Ms. Billings when I found the pinky, but she insisted that I was lying or seeing things again. Hallucinations of missing fingers in my pockets I never had. I can't hallucinate something like that.

I have worked for this family for most of my life, and never have I lied to them, even when I accidentally pruned their prized shrubs too low that one time. Ms. Billings, I thought, would have my hide, and I feared Dr. Chauvet would dismiss me. Besides, lying was dangerous. “A lie is a deadly sin,” my father would say, exhaling his cigar smoke onto my face while bringing the cigar down towards my smooth flesh with his well-manicured fingernails. “If you lie to me, my boy, you will forever be reminded of it.” I lied only twice in my youth, and there is still a reminder for each to prove it on my hands.

The digit appeared the same way the first one had. I had changed outside near the greenhouse outside of my quaint home. It's not really a 'home,' though. It's more like a resting place with a couple of knickknacks and little to no furniture. The sparser the better. I've lived there all my life. Before it was mine, it was my father's. It should've been a home where when you stepped inside you were cloaked in the warmth of loving memories, never wanting to step out to face the pain of reality's sting. I should have made it a home, but it was full of too many uneasy memories. You know, I think it was the day my mother left that it really stopped being a home and was more like a place where I slept and ate.

I always hosed off the deep layer of mud that built up on the bottom of my blue jeans after I worked out in the yard. I've never been a fan of mud, but it's a part of the job. The least I can do is make sure I'm not trailing anywhere when I go up to see Ms. Billings. I don't like mud trailing behind me. I hosed the jeans off then hung them up on the line to dry. The next day, I took them off the line and changed into them, and that's when I felt the thing - small and obtrusive against my left thigh.

I wasn't quite sure what it was when I first felt it. I thought I had forgotten and left the cigars in my pocket that Dr. Chauvet had given me for my birthday in November. When I felt it, lifeless and wrinkly, in my pocket, I was almost afraid to pull it out. I did, eventually, and there it was in my left hand looking up at me. I didn't want to look at it any longer, so I grabbed one of my little sandwich baggies and plopped it in there.

I wasn't sure what to do with the little things. Like I said earlier, I had asked Ms. Billings, and she would say something like, "What are you talking about, Harold? Do you need a break? You must be overworking yourself. Maybe you should focus on planting things instead of pruning." I did what she said. I always did what she said. Ms. Billings was like a mother to me. She took me in and raised me after Mother and father left. We have so many fond memories together: planting strawberries out by the old oak, canning plum jam in the musty cellar, and laughing late into the night from stories from her youth.

When I was seven, there was an incident. Under the ancient pine tree next to the house, there was this old swing. The ropes reached high into the tree, and I couldn't see what limb they were tied to. The ropes were all engrained with mold and sticky sap. The plank of wood was bowing, splintering off near the ends, and always slightly damp. Oh, how I loved swinging on it. I was laughing so much that day, and Ms. Billings pushed me so high up that I thought I could fly. So, I jumped, and I flew. I soared through the air and felt truly at peace.

I landed on my feet. The impact sent shocks up my little legs, and I crumbled to the ground, laughing all the while. Ms. Billings came running over. Her mouth was slightly agape, and her hands trembled. When she saw I was not hurt, she knelt down in front of me and took me in her still trembling arms. "Don't you ever do that again."

“But it was so fun!” I breathed out between laughs. She turned me around to see her watering eyes and trembling chin. “I can’t let you fly away from me, Harold.”

The swing’s rope snapped a few days later during a thunderstorm. “We’ll have to put a new one up,” Ms. Billings told me as I cried, holding the frayed rope ends. The old pine remained swingless.

Years later, Dr. Chauvet came back from studying medicine in Massachusetts. He told me I could stay there, in the little house, if I earned my keep as the estate’s gardener. I was happy when I was allowed to stay. I had grown attached to Ms. Billings, and her to me.

Out by the willow I buried them all. This’ll be the fourth little spot. The first had been in mid-December; it was February now. The pinky spot had developed this nice, verdant green patch. The ring finger burial plot looked the same but a little raised. I had done a sloppy job burying that one. It had been near nightfall and hard for me to see during that moonless night. The middle finger patch was lackluster. There was an odd splotch of grass missing in the middle, as if something had tried to dig the digit up and then reburied it, but the green-patched ring was growing nicely around it. It was all quite eye-catching. The way the three green patches contrasted with the brown, dormant grass around the tree.

I picked up my trowel from the paint-chipped plant pot outside the door... My mother always loved planting flowers next to the house in those little plant pots. She loved watching the bees and butterflies make their way to the flowers and then fly away. Mother told me she wished she had their wings. We would paint the pots different colors. She liked the absent white, while I enjoyed the blazing yellow. I remember this one time we painted them right next to the door. It was raining, you see. The door’s awning kept us and the pots dried. We listened to the radio and had a happy time, but then when it was time to come in, I had trailed some paint in the house on the carpet. Father wasn’t happy, but Mother took the blame. I didn’t see her for a couple days after that.

I pocketed the sandwich baggie and slowly made my way to the willow, admiring the red sunrise lighting up the frosted pines and glazed ground. The cold was wearing me down. I was bundled up in layers and could still feel the pinpricks of chill rising under the cuffs of

my jeans, leaching off my warmth. The blanket of frost alone was enough to smother a small animal. Despite the pain the snow brings, it's my favorite time of year. My mother was right to go up North. The South never did get enough snow anymore. My father was right too, I guess. He followed her soon after.

The trowel and the ground never did get along in the winter months. It's like planting beans and onions together or pruning bushes with a lopper meant for trees. The frozen ground didn't want to be turned over. The trowel did do its job, though, with a bit of reluctance. I dug out about a foot of earth, and then, I delicately placed the forefinger as I had the others: the fingertip reaching toward the sky while the burnt edge was pushed into the ground. I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out my cigar case, withdrawing my second to last cigar. This cigar was sadly caked in dirt; I took great care of my pants but never my hands. After scraping a layer of dirt off, I lit it. A long drag always warmed my lungs from the freezing air. I watched the smoke rise up through the thin, hanging branches of the willow.

I filled the hole, carefully not to shift the dirt, with the freshly turned earth and a mix of strong fertilizer as I pondered.

My mother took me to this spot when she told me we were leaving for Chicago. She used to tell me, "Snow is the down feather of angel's wings. When an angel's so happy, their down falls down to Earth to coat the world in their happiness and bring joy to everyone." She looked up towards the house which hadn't been covered in snow for years. "You'll be able to make all the snow angels you want when we get to Chicago, my brave boy." We used to sit there for hours, listening to the sound of the willow branches rustle each other. Father didn't like it; he liked us in the house.

The Chauvet home was far from the city. It was an hour drive to the nearest town and an almost ninety-minute drive to the nearest hospital. This was always a major worry of mine as their gardener, but I always had Dr. Chauvet to rely on. He used to be a surgeon before he was let go, and he always told me, "I could have you fixed up in less than two minutes, my boy."

That was a long time ago, and he's not as active or graceful as he used to be. Dr. Chauvet was always in his study. He would sit at the window for hours, reading or writing, it looked like. I would sit out under the willow on my lunch breaks, eating my pimento loaf

sandwiches. He would sit at his desk looking out. At what, I don't know. Maybe dreaming or imagining, like how my mother used to do all the time. He always had Ms. Billings do everything for him. She'd bring him his food, his books, his Border Collies, and his wine. I believe I saw her bring him his letter opener once from just a few feet away. He even slept in his study. I've seen him, pillow in his manicured hands, lay on the leather couch next to his desk for an afternoon nap, as I was trimming the hedges under his window. He was positively a recluse, and if I ever was to injure myself, he would have never left his study to come help me.

Surprisingly, he actually left it in late November to give me a birthday gift. He gave me a case of five fine cigars. I hadn't ever smoked. Broken memories of my father would come up in my head, and the sounds of violence echoed in my mind. Dr. Chauvet didn't know that. It was meant as a kind gesture, and this was a grand moment for him. I accepted them. It was the only gift the man ever gave me, and I didn't want to seem ungrateful. The cigar case was too fine for my taste. It was custom-made: yellow with intricate white details. I kept it in my coat pocket.

It had been early December when I noticed that Dr. Chauvet hadn't been in his study for several days. I stopped by when Ms. Billings was talking to the delivery boy who brought their groceries from Larndy every two weeks, which was very odd since Dr. Chauvet liked to take on this job. She looked so beside herself. Her perfect blond updo was down and frizzy. Her detailed makeup was cracked and smudged. The perfume she wore was replaced with the slight smell of sweat. I hugged her, and she held onto me tight. I guided her under the porch to the shade and asked her where Dr. Chauvet was. She looked so shaken up that I grabbed her by the shoulders to steady her. Ms. Billings eyed me with her dilated pupils, whispering to me under the front porch, "He can't make it to the bathroom no more by himself." She stopped to wipe her forehead with a handkerchief. "I'm afraid he's bedridden for the rest of his life."

With the finger burial done, I took another drag of my cigar, and that's when I heard the sirens.

They were shrill, ringing out into the woods and silencing it. The deafening noise made the cardinals stop singing, and Dr. Chauvet's Border Collies ran out of the woods and started barking and howling. I

watched as the stripped vehicle came up the steep drive and parked near the stairway up to the house. The sirens flicked off and out popped paramedics and a stretcher.

I jogged over to where the dogs circled the ambulance like vultures over a carcass, dropping my trowel and cigar to pull them both back by their collars as the stretcher bounced on the gravel to the front steps. The paramedics walked up to Ms. Billings as she opened the front doors with her smeared makeup and dried tears. “He just snapped. One minute he was reading in his bed, and the next, he just started laughing and seizing.”

“Where is he, ma’am?” the first paramedic asked as the second went inside.

“He’s on the second floor. First room on the right,” she called out, dropping down onto the front step, pressing the heel of her palms to her eyes.

I wasn’t sure what to do. The dogs yanked out of my grasp, ran over to the ambulance to sniff, and then ran back off into the neighboring woods. I walked up the steps and sat next to her, while the first paramedic followed the second one inside. “Are you okay?”

She sighed, “I’m fine, Harold. I’m fine.” She was quiet after that. I rubbed her back. My hands were smudged with dirt and smelled of smoke, but I doubt she noticed. I heard the sound of rolling wheels, and we both stood up and turned around.

Out the door three came—one on wheels and the other two walking. I hadn’t ever seen a person on a stretcher. Ms. Billings swayed, and I gripped her shoulder to steady her. Dr. Chauvet was strapped down with black straps across his calves and hip with one over across his shoulders. His usual attire was altered. His brown slacks and green button down wrinkled and stained, his hair was sticking up and messy, and he wore a thick pair of black leather gloves. He was maniacal. Large eye-bags adorned his face with each eye comically wide and bloodshot with pinpoint pupils. He was smiling. Glued to his face, the smile was. It showed all his teeth, even the crowns on his molars. When his eyes met mine, I felt as if I was a young boy again, waking my mother up after I had soiled myself from one of my night terrors. My heart raced, and Ms. Billings, bless her, clutched my hand firmly. He was laughing quietly.

One of the paramedics came up to her. “We’ll be transporting him to the Larndy Psychiatric facility.”

With strength, she let go of my hand and walked up to the paramedic, whispering, “Will he be alright?”

Dr. Chauvet’s laugh exploded into something earsplitting and painfully loud. Globes of spit flew from his mouth as his whole body shook with such force. The paramedics stepped closer as he laughed and laughed. Ms. Billings stepped back toward the railing, clutching it so firmly her hands paled. I took a quick step back to her and stood in front of the steps, placing my hand on hers. Images of my father danced in my mind. I felt like a little boy again. I held onto her hand as if it were a lifeline, firmly placing me in this reality and not my childhood. Dr. Chauvet’s laughter ceased as suddenly as the cardinals. His wide, bloodshot eyes stared hard into hers, moved down to her hand gripping mine, and then up to our eyes. He barked, “Don’t worry about me. Worry about whose hand is gripping whose fingers!”

Quicker than his dogs, he bent his mouth down while his left hand reached up to his mouth. His teeth clamped onto the glove’s index finger, and he quickly pulled back. He spat the empty glove to the side, and started to laugh his deep throaty laugh again, throwing more spit onto the paramedics beside him. I looked down, shocked as to what I saw.

There before me, still attached to its owner, was the last digit of my curious collection.

Ms. Billings grip faltered, and I startled, stepping back into nothingness. As my body began to fall back, my arms flew wildly in front of me, trying to reach out to something to grab onto. His maddening laughter was the last thing I heard, but I swear, I saw my mother then, up in the sky, with the wings she had always dreamed of.

Flickers of a memory surfaced—a memory stuck there in the depths, slowly loosened from the laughter until it was unraveled and freed.

The laughter is so similar to that of my father’s when he comes tumbling in the house late at night, stumbling over his shined shoes. His chuckles echoing around the small house, burrowing deep into my little mind. My little self sits on the patched, brown sofa turned away from the door. I am unable to see him, but I can hear him. His steps

unevenly clonking and laughter high-pitched and low. I can smell the whiskey that coats his clothes, as well as the distinct smell of tobacco. His steps beat an unsteady rhythm before I hear them stop on the other side of the hall to the only bedroom: my mother's. The door is thrown back. The tarnished, brass doorknob is welcomed into the wall's snug hole created so many years before. I hear a muffled scream. I cover myself tighter in the scratchy blanket.

The scratchy blanket so like that which belonged to my mother in the house that's not my home; it never was my home. My mother lies there, cradled in a spotted, threadbare blanket, with the sun gleaming over her figure. I can't see her over the bed's side, but her arm has fallen off the edge, riddled with bluish black fingerprints, still. I pull on the scratchy material of the blanket, calling out to her. She lies there, unmoving, and distant. I pull more, reaching out to her with my hands and arms, alike to her own image, but Mother won't move. The fabric scratches me more. A noise draws my attention away, and I turn toward it, slowly, mind frozen but body shaking. Caught in the sun's rays, a yellow cigar box with white details gleams in my father's hand, blinding my childlike eyes but opening mine now. In the other hand is a first-aid kit, shining in the mid-afternoon sun. I look up and see my father. He looks sad; he's never looked sad before. He turns and leaves me there, and my mind stops.

"Harold?" A soft voice calls out, "where are you?" A gasp comes from the doorway, but I do not see who they are. I sit with my back against the bed's side; arms hug myself with the fabric continuously *scratching* against my back. My mind blanks, and the world comes in and out of focus. Suddenly, the woman appears right in front of me. Her eyes, brown like my own, stare back at me, enveloped with tears. "Come, baby, I'll take care of you." She inches her hand towards me, but I push myself further into the scratchy blanket. "You're so brave, Harold." I freeze. "I know you don't know me, but I did Ms. Raymond's job as the housekeeper after she was put out here with you. I'm Ms. Billings. You'll be ok, now."

When I opened my eyes, my angelic mother was not there to greet me. Instead, it was a bright and blinding pale light.

"Sir, do you know where you are?"

My eyes, dazed as they were, slowly focused on my surroundings. I was at the bottom of the steps, propped upward on someone's lap. One of the paramedics kneeled in front of me, shining their flashlight across my eyes. To my right, my cigar case was half buried in the mud near the cigar and trowel I dropped next to the gravel driveway. The case must have flown out of my pocket as I tumbled down the stairs. To my left, Dr. Chauvet, the man whose muffled laughter rang out, had been loaded into the back of the ambulance. The light penetrated deep, and I averted my eyes. A light dusting of snow covered the ground. The snow I had longed for had begun to fall.

"I'm at the Chauvet home."

"Do you know your name?"

"Harold Raymond."

The light clicked off, and the paramedic slowly stood up. "He's very lucky, ma'am. No outward or internal signs of an injury. The two steps he fell down, including the gravel, could have caused something a lot worse. Keep him off his feet for a few hours with a cold compress and he should be fine."

"Thank you, sir." Ms. Billings said. The paramedic walked over to the ambulance. I tilted my head up, and she looked down at me. Her face was haloed by the snow falling around her, and fresh tear trails created more lines in her makeup. Her eyes were soft, and lips upturned in a small smile.

The sirens blared once more, causing the laughter to be silenced. The ambulance peeled out of the driveway, flinging gravel up. As the sirens grew quieter, Ms. Billings placed both hands on my cheeks, bent down, and whispered, "You'll be ok, now."

The statement, so full of tender love, caused the memories to snap back in place. The memories from the fall settled in my mind, and my eyes widened. My hands came up and squeezed hers, holding me in place. My body trembled. Ms. Billings' brows furrowed slightly, and then her whole face relaxed; eyes turned soft and filled with tears.

"Do you remember?"

I tried to speak, but it felt like something was pressed deep within my throat, blocking any noises from coming out. I nodded.

Tears spilled from her and fell down onto my forehead along with fresh snow. The tears rolled down and caught in my brows, and

the snow fell onto my forehead and felt as if it was cradling me there. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stop Dr. Chauvet in time that day so many years ago. He had changed so much, though, when he came back. I told him that he should give you his cigar case as a birthday gift. He didn’t smoke anymore; quit after he left for Massachusetts.”

My body started to relax. My mind stopped racing. I let go of her hands. Ms. Billings’ soft voice filled with malice. “The bastard lied to you for so many years. That massive lie. Acting as if you weren’t his own blood.”

I slowly sat up and turned my body to face hers. She was looking at the cigar case a few feet away. “I’m glad that triggered some part of you to remember. A lie that big, burning his hands wouldn’t have made up for it.”

She crawled the few feet on her knees and over toward the case. She delicately picked it up, wiping the mud and snow off its engraved patterns. She reached for the trowel as well. I watched her crawl back towards me, sitting down on her knees. She placed the cigar case in my hands. “Dr. Chauvet can’t get to you no more.”

It was heavy. Why was it heavy? With steady, cigar-burned hands, I unlatched the lid and peered inside. A putrid odor wafted up to my face, overpowering the distinct tobacco, and a repulsive sight met my eyes.

Inside the cigar case, the final cigar and the four fingers were found. The pinky, ring, middle, and forefinger were cradled by the soft leather interior. The bases of each were burnt, blackened with singed hair. Each in various states of decay and rot—from the freshest forefinger slightly bloated to the blackened, shrunk, pinky showing bits of bone underneath the rotted flesh. The fingernails were all in worsening states of care—the pinky’s manicured state to the jagged and chipped fingernail of the freshest digit. The thumb’s spot, which was still attached to Dr. Chauvet, held the last cigar. Fresh and unlit—not yet spoiled by the flames of a lighter.

The flurries fell onto the severed fingers. I snapped the case close as I looked up at Ms. Billings. I could hear the light crunching sound of the flurries falling to the ground, coating the mud and gravel in pure, untouched joy. Ms. Billings, smiling and wiping mud from her knees, watched me very closely. Snow coated her hair and eyelashes. She stood onto her feet; her knees soaked in mud and pieces of gravel.

Ms. Billings, with an outstretched hand, offered me the trowel. “Let’s go finish what you started.”

Jessica Tran

I'll Take Her, Please

TW: Eating disorders, gore, and sexual assault

The Girl gnawed on the skin of her thumb, the edge of her teeth gently ripping apart her tender cuticles. The act was mindless, as her focus was happily given to the person who stood in front of the classroom. The teacher introduced her as Mary, and Mary spoke with a confidence that hinted she had never had much trouble with being loved. She could've been one of those ancient Greek goddess statues: a visage of grace and body of silky-soft, enchanting curves. But Mary was better because she wasn't trapped in cold marble. She was made of warm flesh that a pair of rough hands could take refuge in. The gnawing Girl noted how the waistband of Mary's jeans wrapped perfectly around her waist, like a ribbon cinching in a bag of treats. Her hips flowed out from her waist like a waterfall that tempted people to dive down. She wore a small t-shirt that enveloped her chest, revealing nothing but a shapely silhouette. Mary attracted eyes the same way that light attracted moths, but instead of a lone lamppost on a dark street, she was a teenage girl with a killer body. Instead of a fluttering mass of powdery insects, she lured in human attention that constantly shifted between envy and hunger.

"So yeah, I don't know the area that well yet, but I'd love it if anyone could show me around," Mary cheerfully said, snapping the Girl out of her trance, unable to recall anything Mary had just said.

"Great, really nice to meet you, Mary. Welcome to our humble school, and I hope everyone here takes the time to help you get comfortable," the teacher said with a pointed look at the students. But there was no need for that, since everyone had already accepted Mary as one of them. It was the last class of the day and word of Mary's arrival had quickly spread. "Go ahead and take a seat at that open spot over there," the teacher continued. "And let's start today's lesson."

Mary walked over to a desk that was situated in the middle of the classroom, in perfect view of the Girl in the back corner. From this

angle, the Girl could easily indulge in all of the quick glances or admiring gazes as she wanted.

“Ok, so we’re on the last day of our graphic novel unit, and this past weekend, you were supposed to read *In Clothes Called Fat* by Moyoco Anno. Who wants to share first thoughts?”

The teacher’s voice and classmates’ responses became background chatter as the Girl continued to study the shape of Mary’s neck and the straightness of her back. She wondered how Mary could carry herself so easily, even if she was simply just sitting down. Light and sweet, like her body floated wherever her spirit wanted to go. The Girl could feel her own body spilling out of the top of her jeans, heavy and greasy. She felt like a slug in human clothing and quickly became aware of the way her waistband scratched and imprisoned her waist and how her t-shirt choked the folds of her stomach. The heat of self-consciousness began to cloak her skin and she worried how everyone in the class thought about how much better-looking Mary was than she. How when they looked at her, they wondered how the Girl could let herself be so much worse. She knew that everyone in the class was laughing about how ugly her body was. Grotesque even. The Girl squirmed in her seat, so uncomfortable with her body that she couldn’t sit still in it.

Ring! The Girl was once again released from a trance, this time by the school bell. The class began to pack up their things as the teacher called out news about the upcoming school dance. The Girl wanted to escape from the company of judgmental thoughts, but slowly packed her belongings so as to catch bits and pieces of Mary’s conversations.

“Here, you can take a picture of my notes from today. What’s your number? I can send you pictures of last week’s notes, too,” another girl in the class kindly offered.

“Do you live nearby? Do you have a ride? I can drive you home,” a boy eagerly asked.

“How was your first day?”

“Your top is so cute.”

“Are you joining any clubs?”

“I love your jeans. Where’d you get them?”

“Thank you so much! Here’s my number. I walk home so I’m good, but thanks! I had a really good first day, I think. Everyone’s been

super nice so far. Thanks! I've had this top for forever. I really want to join volleyball so I'm going to talk to the coach and see if that's even possible at this time of year. If not, I'll probably look into the art club. I heard they were looking for volunteer models to sketch. And thank you, girl! I thrifted these jeans back in my hometown," Mary flawlessly answered every question and accepted every compliment with ease.

The Girl watched Mary and the other classmates file out of the classroom. She followed Mary through the hallways, liking the way her long, toned legs strutted across the linoleum floor. She swiftly made her way out of the exit doors, as if everyone made sure she had a clear path, but the Girl found herself caught in the current still, being bumped side to side with no way to wriggle through.

"Fucking walk," a boy muttered from behind her.

"Pfft," his friend let out.

"Shut up, man," another boy chuckled.

The Girl felt another wave of heat pour over her as she suddenly realized her role as the elephant in the hallway and every other room for that matter. Someone who took up too much space and made her size everyone else's problem. She crossed her arms and focused on following the person in front of her, careful to step lightly and not destructively. She continued walking like this all the way home, hurrying off school property to avoid as many extra eyes as possible.

Once she made it back to her house, Mary was still fresh on her mind. As she thought about Mary's arrival, she began to rummage through the kitchen for a snack. Chips and dip from the pantry. Ice cream from the freezer. Instant ramen from the cabinet. An apple from the counter. Just as she opened the fridge to grab a few slices of ham and a diet coke, she stopped herself and wondered what Mary was eating at the moment. Maybe her after-school snack of choice was water and yogurt. Maybe it wasn't anything at all. A small seed of guilt bloomed inside of the Girl's stomach. She glanced at the pile of snacks she had already set on the countertop. She looked back at the diet coke and ham in the fridge. She could settle for water. But she still wanted ham to go with her ramen as a protein. She craved something crunchy and salty like chips, but ramen was already salty enough. She still wanted something sweet, though. An apple or ice cream? Mary's perfectly fitted jeans came to mind. She thought about putting everything back and just eating the apple. But that wouldn't be

satisfying, and she was so hungry. But she would only get bigger if she gave in. She considered just eating a few chips and the apple, but her hunger wanted something hot and filling, like ramen. Something sweet, too. Her eyes caught the diet coke again. She could no longer tell if she was hungry or just stressed.

“Hey, could you grab me a coke?”

The Girl jumped and realized that she had been standing in front of the cold refrigerator air for a few minutes. She glanced at her sister who had stepped into the kitchen. She was visiting home, taking a break from college deadlines and parties.

“You good?” her sister asked.

“Yeah. Sorry. Diet or regular?” the Girl responded.

“Diet, please.”

The Girl tossed a coke to her sister, who promptly cracked the tab open with a satisfying snap and took a few sips.

“Oh my god, that’s so crisp. I’ve been so good at just drinking water at school.”

“How long has it been since you’ve had a coke?” the Girl asked.

“Probably, a month? I haven’t really had any treats, either. Coming home was a mistake, I’m about to eat everything you guys have,” the sister groaned, grabbing the ice cream from the freezer. “Want some?”

The Girl could never say no to something sweet. She grabbed two spoons for her and her sister, happy for the snack and the company. She loved her sister and missed her so much. They were only two years apart and had always been close. In their relationship, that is. In appearance, they couldn’t be farther apart. The Girl could see it in a stranger’s eyes every time, good-natured surprise hiding back pitying shock over their looks. How does one look like that, while the other looks like *that*? As kids, the Girl remembered how all of the aunts crowded around her sister, marveling and doting. How pretty she was! How tall she was for her age! Does she want to be a model when she grows up? They never asked the Girl if she wanted to be a model, but they did jokingly pick on her for getting second helpings at dinner. The jokes morphed into targeted splinters as the Girl grew older, though. How many plates have you had? That’s a lot of food. Are you *still* hungry?

“How was school today?” her sister asked, spooning ice cream into her mouth.

“It was fine. We have a new student.”

“Oh yeah? Is she nice?”

“She’s-”

“Look at my girls! Both home together!” a loud voice exclaimed from behind them.

The girls turned around to see their mother walking through the door.

“My babies,” she cooed, hugging and kissing both of the sisters. “Ice cream?”

“Just a snack, mom,” the sister sighed.

“We have apples. We have yogurt. We have-”

“Who’s buying all of these snacks if you don’t like them so much?” her sister grumbled.

“Your sister.” The mother squinted her eyes at the Girl. “She eats so much more than I did when I was her age. Back then, I was a size two.”

The Girl knew her mother never stopped longing for her teenage body. As a mother of two, she had obviously put on some weight over the years and frequently liked to remind people that she didn’t always look like this. Her wedding photos were a testament to how “teeny-tiny” she used to be.

“It’s just such a waste,” her mother sighed. “You only get one chance at being sixteen and look how you’re spending it. Your jeans look tight. Do you want to go shopping for a new pair?”

“No.” The Girl couldn’t think of anything more anxiety-inducing than a trip to the mall with her mother, who refused to buy the Girl anything oversized, who refused to acknowledge that the Girl may be larger than a size medium, and who refused to let a conversation go by without mentioning a diet or exercise routine.

“Ok, not jeans. What about a dress? Someone at work told me there’s a dance at your school coming up. You should go to these things. When I was your age-”

“It’s alright, mom. I can take her later,” her sister chimed in. She was always helping out the Girl in these situations. She was the size two that their mother wanted in her daughters, so she often spared her sister from the lectures.

“Fine, I don’t care anymore. Eat your body weight in ice cream and chips, then,” her mother snapped, but the Girl knew she would never give up. With a wink and a smile, her sister led their mother out of the kitchen. Finally, the Girl was free to retreat to her room. She jumped into bed, grabbed her phone, and began to indulge in social media, her favorite pastime. For hours, she scrolled through all of her accounts, all under an alias with no actual photos of herself. She scrolled through photos of strangers with a mix of jealousy and idolization and refreshed her feed mindlessly. She wanted to see it all, to be it all. She imagined herself as the one with the expensive outfits, the high cheekbones, the full, glossy lips. The one surrounded by fellow cool-looking people. She imagined people making space for her in the hallways. Soon, deep into the late hours of the night, she came across a photo of Mary, tagged in someone else’s photo. She immediately tapped her username and was introduced to an even shinier version of the Mary she had seen earlier. The Girl consumed every photo that Mary had ever posted. Photos in swimsuits, dresses, and shorts. Exposed torsos, arms, and legs. Wide, bright smiles. Plush, smooth lips. The Girl eventually went to sleep when the rising sun tinted the black sky, but felt something gnaw in her towards pretty Mary and her pretty body.

Over the next few weeks, the Girl took every opportunity to observe Mary. In the cafeteria, in the gym, in the classroom. Mary’s appearance seemed something more special than the Girl had ever seen before. Mary wasn’t like online celebrities. She was new, an ideal in the flesh. No one else in the school made the Girl feel this way. Her feelings became deeper every night, that gnawing feeling digging harder in her with every thought of Mary’s porcelain skin and delicate hands. Mary’s full hips and lush thighs. Delicate neck and a t-shirt filled to the brim. Oh Mary, how the Girl yearned. She had to find a way to release this longing. The gnawing was becoming painful. It was another night of mind-numbing scrolling when one of her accounts notified her of a new post from Mary.

Dressed in a red velvet mini dress, Mary posed in what looked like the courtyard of the school. In the background, various windows of the school were lit up from strobe lights within, filled with students at the school dance that the Girl had previously ignored. She felt a sense of despair, of loneliness, of a craving that she had to satisfy. In gray

sweatpants and an extremely oversized hoodie, she got up from her bed and walked through the living room, right past her mother.

“Where are you going?” her mother asked.

“The dance.”

“In *that*? Hold on now-”

“It’s fine,” the Girl replied, not stopping to argue. She was in a familiar trance and let the enchantment lead her all the way to the school. She marched swiftly and imagined herself as Mary gliding down the hallways, not an elephant that took up too much space or walked too slow. Before long, she approached the entrance of the school. Students looked her up and down, exchanging glances and whispers, but she couldn’t afford to care anymore. She had an ache to soothe. She made her way to the courtyard and finally found her desire. Mary sat in the middle of the courtyard, looking down at her phone. Besides the slight glow of the dance lights, the courtyard was nearly pitch black. The Girl, careful not to alarm her target, stepped closer. Mary, hearing footsteps, looked up to see the Girl right in front of her.

“Oh! Uh, hi,” Mary chirped in a mix of surprise and friendliness.

The Girl didn’t know what to say.

“I just came out here because it was getting hot in there,” Mary explained, nodding her head towards the distant sounds of music and laughter. “Needed a break.”

The Girl was hypnotized by something, but she didn’t know what. She could see a drop of sweat on Mary’s chest.

“*Hah hah...*” Mary laughed, a tinge of nervousness staining the laugh that the Girl had become so familiar with. “I like your hoodie. It’s cool that you wore that to a dance. Fight gender norms and societal expectations and all that ri-”

The Girl was hungry. She pounced on Mary like a girl finding shoes on sale, like a snake capturing its prey. She went for Mary’s lips first, opened wide, bared her teeth, and bit down hard. Mary’s eyes widened as she attempted to shove the Girl away, squealing in pain. But the Girl was bigger, stronger. She held Mary down and ripped her lips off of her face, tearing apart skin and flesh with just her teeth. The lips were tough but were glazed in strawberry lip gloss. Mary opened her mouth to shriek, but the Girl sank her teeth into the delicate neck she had loved so much before, smelling a hint of vanilla sugar perfume.

Mary's shriek turned into a mere choke. Licorice-red blood flowed into the Girl's mouth, who gulped it like an ice-cold regular sugar coke. She released her jaw from Mary's neck, who laid limp, her expression in a perpetual state of shock. The Girl felt the blood dripping down her mouth, sticky and warm like icing on a cinnamon roll. But she was still hungry, still needing to satisfy a craving she couldn't quite identify. She lifted the skirt of Mary's dress, stopping only momentarily to admire her silhouette. She pulled the dress up to reveal the beloved pudding-soft curves of Mary's waist and breasts. Once again, a seed of guilt bloomed in the Girl's stomach over the amount of options she had. She felt greedy, but she wanted a taste of everything. She gently lifted Mary by the waist and plunged her teeth into the left breast. Then, the curve of her waist. After, the inner thigh. The Girl binged. Mary tasted light and sweet. The Girl stood up. Guilty, full, but not satisfied. She turned her head towards the distant glow of the school dance, and a familiar gnawing formed in her stomach.

Day

2nd Street DayDreams



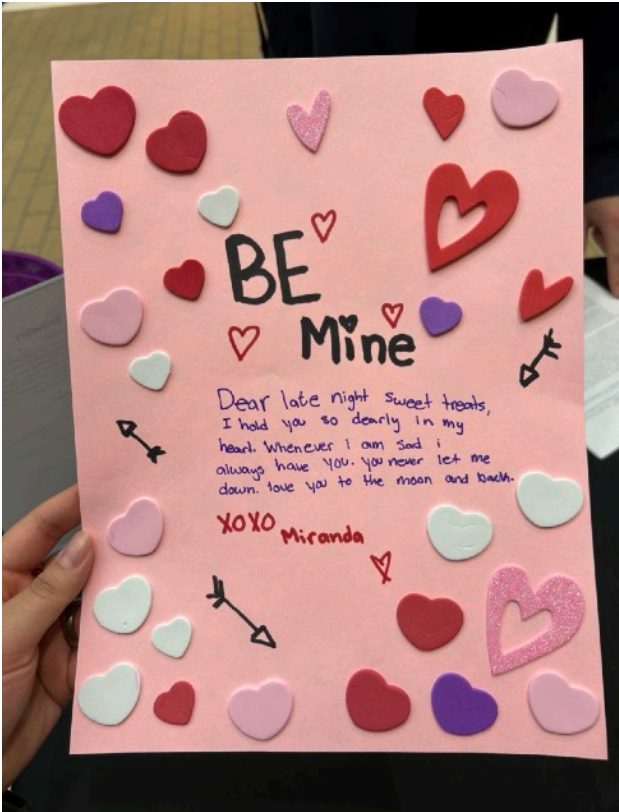




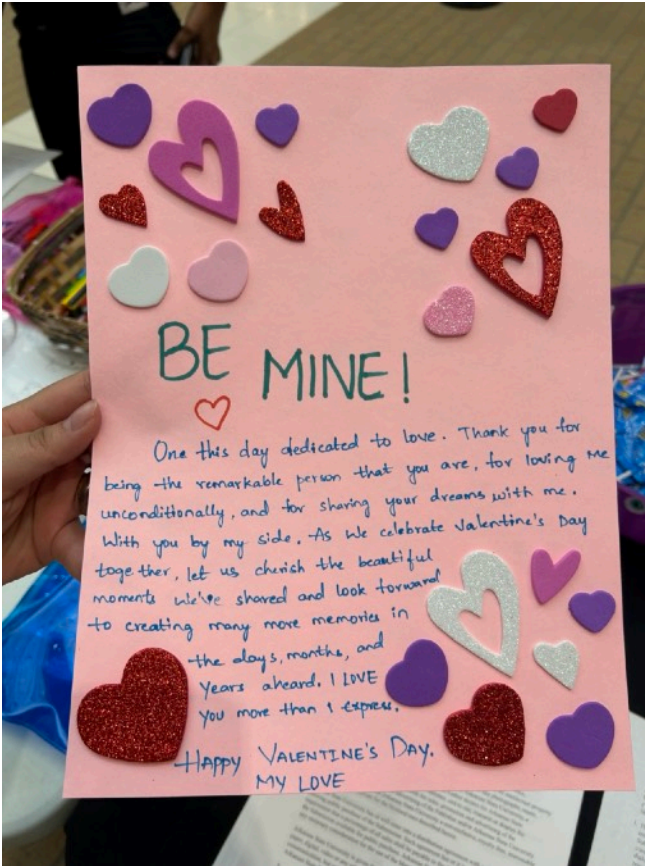
“Love Letters at Humanities”

To celebrate Valentine’s day 2024, the *Tributary* invited students to make Valentine’s cards or send in love letters, either to themselves, their partner, friends, or any other loved one. Please enjoy the following expressions of love!

Miranda Burgett



Bhavani Reddy



Abby Frisby

To my baby kitty boy, Walter!

I used to think of myself as a dog person. Then you showed up on a snowy night needing help and I quickly became your momma. I helped you get healthy again and cleaned up your scratches. I bought you a litter box and lots of toys. I filled up bowls full of water and the special food you need for your tummy. And before I knew it, you had me wrapped around your little paws. I love cuddling with you at night and feeling your little vibrating purrs when you get nice and cozy under the covers, and I don't even mind your little snores because somehow even those are cute. Thank you for always being excited when I get home and for being the goodest boy. I love you, Walter Bug! Little Big Man! Stinker!

With all my love,
Momma

My sweet boy, Ryan!!!

You are my friends-to-lovers dream come true. I can't even begin to describe how grateful I am for our relationship. Our love for each other means the world to me, and every moment we have together is precious. There is no one else who can make me giggle like you do, make me feel appreciated like you do, or make me feel cherished like you do. You are my soulmate, the one God made for me. Thank you for always being patient, kind, selfless, sweet, and full of positivity. Thank you for always holding my hand, no matter where we are. Thank you for giving me sweet forehead kisses. Thank you for opening every door for me. Thank you for always letting me know that you love me, whether it's through your words or through a sweet treat. Thank you for being exactly who you are. You are the best. I love you with all the peas and carrots. I'm goose!

Yours forever,
Abby

Arshaan Parteek Kaur

Dear Mom,

I know I am far away from you, but I want you to know that you mean a lot to me and I love you a lot. It has been 9 months since I last met you, and day by day I am missing you more. Your pampered child has become a grown one and independent. I miss bickering with you and irritating you. I want to spend more time with you but as I am now far away from you, I get to know about your importance in my life and it seems I could do nothing if you are not supporting me. Love you a lot and miss you to the moon and back.

Tyler Porter

Forever Flames

My Best friend...My Twin... Whatever we may say to each other when we lock eyes from across the room, it ignites a light in me that I've never felt before. Why do I feel this way, was it the way you held me when I cried or the way you lifted me up when you knew I needed you by my side? "Have you ever seen the stars? I've seen them before in your eyes." Have you seen the same in mine? That ignited light in me shines because you made me see another side of life... Love. Love is something I haven't felt in a long time but with you it feels like the best prize. "The stars light up the sky, we see them flying free... that's just like you and me." "You are my symphony by your side, we are unity," are the lyrics I hear when I think about you. I feel so much more when you look at me... your eyes make me want to cry inside, you don't even know the joy you bring to me. I'd do anything to look at you and see those same stars in your eyes as you saw in mine.

Indira Olivia Kakarlamudi

You are Enough: A Letter of Self-Affirmation

This letter is for you to love yourself because no one knows you better than you. You may be a hopeless romantic all your life but having the best company of your comfort or a person who is insecure about your communication skills, weight, height, and fair skin but look you are still the best version of yourself, your kindness is impeccable, your inner beauty is immutable, you are unbeaten, the top-notch of your world and to the outside one, you can feel lonely away from home but you never forget your roots.

You are crying for help but look how well you managed to identify the problem, try a little harder with your chin up in the air. You may even find a solution, being you is impossible, it is tough and frustrating but you make it seem effortless.

You are stressed about your grades but never give up, you are worried about responsibilities but never ignore them, you think no one will understand you yet you are winning your battle, you feel burned out but you are raised again. No one can think like you, be confident, and speak up like you do because you are one in a million. When all are dreaming about certain characteristics and have the standards the world creates look at you creating your own standards no one can Cross. You raised the bar.

In conclusion, I want to reassure you that you are enough just the way you are. You don't need to change or conform to anyone else's expectations. You have your own unique strengths and qualities that make you special, and you should embrace them with confidence and pride. You are a valuable member of society, and your achievements and contributions are what make the world a better place. Always remember to love and appreciate yourself because you are worthy of it. You are a remarkable individual, and I have no doubt that you will continue to achieve great things in life.

Submission Guidelines

For works of fiction and creative non-fiction:

- *Do not exceed 20 pages
- *May submit multiple works, but only one work of prose per author will be considered

For works of poetry:

- *May submit multiple works, but no more than five poems per author will be considered

For works of art:

- *Submit print quality (high resolution) .jpg files

For photography:

- *Submit in original picture format (not a .pdf)

For All:

- *You must be a student of Arkansas State to submit any work
- *Include a title and name (as you would want the byline to read) on the same document containing your work.
- *Submit your written works in .pdf or .doc format
- *Attach file in an email (do not copy and paste your document into the body of an email)
- *Email submissions to astatetributary@gmail.com