

Satori

A Student Literary Magazine

2014

Winona State University

Cover Art: Giraffes By Kelly Mitzel

Acknowledgements

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Gary Eddy

Editor-in-Chief

Elise Nelson

Poetry Panel

Abby Peschges - Editor
Grace Aakre
Abigail Derkson
Marie Helkenn
Molly O'Keefe
Juan Wang

Art Panel

Hannah Nickelson - Editor
Mary Schulberg
Autumn Beireis
Kelsey Johnson
Wenjia Ma
Tian Ying
Lu Tan

Prose Panel

Kathryn Logan - Editor
Samantha Schwanke
Conlan Carter
Charlie Utzman
Erica Stiller
Ana Alexander
Patrick Andries
Lauren Fairlie
Elizabyth Ladwig
Erin Hoover

Mission Statement

Satori is a student-run annual magazine that expresses the artistic spirit of the students of Winona State University. We publish student poetry, prose, and graphic art every Spring, as we have since 1970.

-Dr. Gary Eddy, Faculty Advisor

Table of Contents

Poetry

<i>The Final Nail</i>	3
Abby Peschges	
<i>Adam</i>	4
Rebekah Frederick	
<i>Narcissus, Lately</i>	5
Hannah Nickelson	
<i>Shadows of Sin</i>	6
Ben Strand	
<i>Red Pickup Truck</i>	8
Taylor Mathias	
<i>On Driving Through the Bluffs</i>	9
Samantha Schwanke	
<i>Pictures From Last Night</i>	10
Mitchell Johnson	
<i>Bats in the Walls</i>	12
Courtney McCaw	
<i>In My Hands</i>	13
Marie Helkenn	
<i>Miracles Happen Every Day</i>	14
Brianna Skalicky	
<i>House Finch</i>	15
Marcia Ratliff	
<i>To My Dearest Nunhead</i>	16
Abby Peschges	
<i>Remembering You, Howard Lake, MN, 2008</i>	17
Mitchell Johnson	

Art

<i>Muddy Face</i>	21
Bartholome Rondet	
<i>Child's View</i>	22
William Ahlberg	
<i>The Quadrupedal Bideds</i>	23
Courtney McCaw	

Tranquility.....	24
Bartholome Rondet	
Sous Le Ciel De Paris.....	25
Courtney McCaw	
(ill)umination.....	26
Hannah Nickelson	
Melting Away.....	27
Bartholome Rondet	
Wanderer’s Destination.....	28
Prairie Kramer	
Reaching.....	29
Abby Peschges	

Prose

Gap.....	33
Hannah Jones	
The Years After.....	43
Meredith Benson	
Of Wave Crests and Crystals.....	46
Parker Ornes	
What Do You Have.....	56
Conlan Carter	
Hand-Me-Downs.....	69
Samantha Schwanke	
The Stars Look Down.....	70
Kim Schneider	
Somewhere in America.....	76
Abigail Derkson	

Poetry

The Final Nail

Abby Peschges

You have to pay honor to the tough stuff,
or all you're doing is lying to yourself
in bed when the world is too high
and you can't climb out of the grave
that was dug for you. Fingernails stuffed
full of the black dirt wiggling with worms
and life.

Trapped in a breathing cage
You're absorbed until there's nothing left
not even an ounce of spit or courage
or a single bead of salt water your soul left behind.

I do it because it's the right thing to do.
The right turn away from the light
and into the world of dark hair
clothed by doctrine
and bruises covered by law.

When the world is too high
and I am only a casket girl*
with ideas in my casquette
instead of dresses and gems,
decorated by my prayers and promises to God
I listen for the owl to guide me up and around.
I wait for his signal to come.

I wait until my ears bleed from the silence
and deception the air spits at me.
I wait until the moon offers me a way
to own my bones and flesh and not let it constrict me
like roots holding dirt in place.

But the tools I was given tighten instead of loosen,
and I become exactly what I was fighting against.

*Casket girl: a young girl, often from an orphanage or convent, taken from France to New Orleans to be married. They were accompanied by small chests filled with their clothes, known as casquettes.

Adam

Rebekah Frederick

Does your side
Ache when I am
Near? Though
I only hold
Your hand now
And kiss so chaste,
A low voice
Eggs me on—
Baiting us
With fruitful ideas
Meant to be shared.
Shivering,
Slithers whisper
In anticipation.

Narcissus, Lately

Hannah Nickelson

The mirror waits for me to show my face
Because I'm beautiful
And it loves me.
It likes to pretend it's me,
Moves the image of my hands around,
Positions the muscles in my face,
Does a silly dance.
Sometimes it scowls, because it knows
That it's not me, cannot truly be me,
And sometimes it cries
For the same reason.
At other times, it laughs, because for a brief moment
It can hide in my image, delight in my face.
Most often, though, it smiles
A knowing, sultry smile
Gives a smirk, a wink,
Because it knows that I know it's flirting
With me.

Shadows of Sin

Ben Strand

The wind never sleeps, so walk with the breeze.
The sun always blazing with brightness
bestowing a glorified light
upon the face of dark man weeping like a willow.
Tired bags below his eyes
reflect the soul of a stormy night.

Every morning he wakes and ages just a bit.
So subtle, yet it all adds up
to being warded in a hospital bed;
staring at a ceiling that sees only shadows
cast by the light of the Righteous Man above.

The shadows overcast the glory of the deeds done
and follow the man like the footsteps of
of a thief wearing iron boots
that make the ground crumble behind him.

Mundane perils of sitting at the kitchen table
with a newspaper in hand trying to read between the lines.
Walking to the beat of a humdrum drum.

Instead of asking politely “pretty please”
he utters with a long face “pity please”
like a toddler.

Casting a shadow as far as the eye can see
A ship set sail long ago never to return from sea
leaving an empty dock along the beach
with a lone seat that sits at the very end.

Footsteps in the sand wash away with the waves
erasing a path once cast over by a shadow.
This man has a dark past lost in his memory
from traumatic confabulation
of what he wishes really happened.

Shadows of sin have followed this man everywhere he goes.
Sitting on the dock watching a deathly sunset,
he imagines a ship sailing across the horizon
casting a shadow along the sun's reflection.
He awakes in a hospital bed staring at the ceiling,
drowning in his own shadows of sin.

Red Pickup Truck

Taylor Mathias

I loved riding in the truck with dad
I may not have showed it or told him,
But I loved it.
Singing to the cassettes as I quietly hummed
Dad not knowing that I secretly knew
Every word to every song he played.

And how every so often he would turn
The music off and look at me
And say with a soft and sincere voice
“Have I told you lately that I love you?”
or
“Have I told you lately that I’m glad you’re my son?”

I’d look up at him and tell him that I loved him too
Savoring the moment, he would squeeze my
Ticklish knee
Making me squirm in my seat
I would then turn the dial and the music played again
Oh yes, those were some of my best days

On Driving Through the Bluffs

Samantha Schwanke

The sky is now velvet in its
darkness.
My car emanates a flash of white beams
On and off, from high to low.
Dancing between the road and the ditch
is a deer.
Light, feminine, dog-like, pursuing, no
Persuading itself to follow its companion
Across the black blacktop.
I honk once, twice,
It skirts and scatters and disappears
into the dark, deep ditch and
I wonder if it was ever reunited
Or if it even made it across.

Pictures From Last Night

Mitchell Johnson

A dew-laden hike,
The cedars saturated pink,
The pads of our fingers
Pressed together, whorls slipping into each other,
Snarling roots ignored underfoot.

The crackle of leaves:
Dry bones scraping pavement,
Tumbling in the wind.
October's first snowflake melting
On the tip of your nose.

Whiskey's warm amber bite,
Loud bar crowds dissipating,
Glances stolen
In the veiled closing hours. Stars fading in
and out. Stoplights blinking red.

Broken glass before the door;
Mischievous of the somnambulant.
Aching thighs
Climbing the expanding flight of stairs.
A lock of an apartment door.

Tap-water cascades in the glass
Forgotten as unsure footsteps lead to
Eternity between sheets.
The blink of the smoke alarm watching from above.
A sweet release to dreams.

Strand of sunrise
Breaking through the blinds.
Faint twitters
Of sparrows, dots on an oak branch,
Remembering morning, singing,

I love you so, I love you so,
These moments, captured and forgotten
like a castle in a fish bowl;
Staring in magnified, staring out dwindled,
With pictures taking the place of memories.

Bats in the Walls

Courtney McCaw

There are little scuttles and shuffles,
tiny toenails and calculated flaps
of paper-thin wings, which remind me
of that odd plane of skin between
my index finger and thumb. They begin
to sort and settle for their daytime sleep,
where we uncommunicatively
switch shifts of wakefulness.

Only a thin wall separates singular, lonely me
from these bat families who take refuge
in the lack of attention my landlord allows:
The hole on the outside of the crumbling
siding is the portal to home, to warmth
and protection.

I debate telling my landlord,
but am reminded of little Anne Frank,
her bare feet pattering on a wooden attic floor,
hiding, treated like a disgusting rodent
to be hidden from the dangerous
light of day.

She held her pen on that little plane of skin
between her index finger and thumb,
her wings of pages shielding her
from landlord extermination
until someone gave her up.

In My Hands

Marie Helkenn

quivering in my hands
a heart cuts into my palms
crystalline splinters of my shattered
soul slicing capillaries
in unison erythrocytes and leukocytes
drifting away in a river of plasma
the river drips to a puddle congealing
on the dirt white floor staining

stains from the blackened void
you left me a cross to bear
and a bridge to burn
the pearl white knight rides
a scorched hell-beast
a harbinger of the death
of me of us of the "love"
we shared and the pain you dealt

dealing pain like liquid cocaine
tainting the innocent soul
you so deftly annihilated
seeping into the void oozing life
from the wounds' kisses
like a bitter friend shrapnel pierces
the heart you broke the
heart quivering in my hands

Miracles Happen Every Day

Brianna Skalicky

The day your parents named you,
A little boy in the room next door dies of leukemia
An elderly couple in Tuscan files for bankruptcy
A single mother of three drowns her children in the bathtub
A train derails in Berlin and a plane crashes down over the Atlantic
Hurricanes, wildfires, and tornadoes level homes and businesses.
Men open fire in movie theaters, college campuses and schools.
Lives change, people die, natural and tragic disasters occur all over the world.
But, also on the day your parents named you
A good friend learns that their two year fight with cancer has ended
A couple cries after hearing the good news of expecting their first child.
A toddler takes their first steps across the living room floor
Students walk across the stage and receive their high school or college diplomas
Churches open their doors to provide food and shelter for those in need
Lives change, people grow, miracles occur every day
And one of those miracles is you.

House Finch

Marcia Ratliff

I've been avoiding it for days—
the nest in the pink forget-me-not
because the mother has stopped coming to her baby bird.

Finally climbing on the railing to water the plant
I am witness to the graphite body
wrapped in ridges that would have been feathers,
curled in the bottom of the nest's deep swirl.

Around the grave, the flowers dally.
I tilt the watering can like a kiss
into the far side of the pot.

It had bright eyes, this infant, and looked out from our porch
into the world like I do most summer nights,
and as if the glimpses were enough

Stopped every kind of seeing.

To My Dearest Nunhead

Abby Peschges

I wish to send my deepest apologies for not having the time
To spend a whole day with you. But I promise to come back to visit soon
For I had such a pleasure conversing with the citizens
Of your necropolis and walking through your garden
Amongst the trees and bushes and ivy, slowly realizing that all
Of them are united to a grave. Lost, forgotten, and abandoned.
Surrounded by high walls of bricks to contain you.
The depth of your dead unknown to most
because you are modest. Your surface known only
By the few who walk, run, stroll, and picnic in your heart,
Seeing your view of London from above.
You, the protector of St. Paul's, only receive gratitude from the locals.
Left to turn back to your wild prehistoric state
Using the tombs as foundation and life.
Overshadowed by the other Magnificents: Brompton has Peter Rabbett,
Highgate has Marx. Even Kensel Green has the ashes of Freddie Mercury.
But in my heart you are not the omega.
You are my Alpha and the most majestic, because in a land of brick,
Stone, and cigarette smoke, you are a gem of wilderness
Filled with the people who are not remembered,
Unknowns left to rot in the city they built.

Remembering You, Howard Lake, MN, 2008

Mitchell Johnson

On the far shore of Howard Lake, there is
 a shattered bottle of Smoking Loon Merlot.
It's gathered grime since you threw it
 against the decaying ash tree by the shore.
The water's receded, sand claims portions of the
 clear lake and dirt is seen where it shouldn't be,
seen where there used to be blue, and shimmers,
 with whorled agates and slender reeds.
The rowboat's oarlocks are snapped, the mooring
 rope frayed, unraveling, sand half-way up the side.
The caved-in hull is an unfallen kingdom
 for toads and molds, converging
on the forgotten vehicle of memory, devouring
 the grains of wood, bit by bit.
Beach, undisturbed by strange footprints;
 trees, still in the Bemidji night.
The stars glint on the jagged glass,
 looking for their reflection, only finding
remnant drops of blood-red wine,
 and a beauty only seen in broken things.

Art

Muddy Face

Bartholome Rondet



Child's View

William Ahlberg



The Quadrupedal Bideds

Courtney McCaw



Tranquility

Bartholome Rondet



Sous Le Ciel De Paris

Courtney McCaw



(ill)umination

Hannah Nickelson



Melting Away

Bartholome Rondet



Wanderer's Destination

Prairie Kramer



Reaching

Abby Peschges



Prose

Pearl answered the phone with both hands. She could barely reach it, even standing on a stool in the kitchen, and it was too heavy to hold in just one hand like Mommy and Daddy did. So, she held the phone like a rind of watermelon and spoke with her lips touching the talking end.

“Hello?”

“H-hello?” the woman’s voice on the other end stammered. “Is this Pearl?”

“Yes,” Pearl replied. For a moment, she was nervous. After Cheri had fallen asleep in the armchair as usual, Pearl had snuck off and made a rather large mess of Captain Crunch on the kitchen floor. She wondered if the voice knew—if she was in trouble. But the voice didn’t sound angry.

“Oh, Pearl, sweetheart,” the voice said. “It’s so good to hear your voice. I’ve waited a very long time to get the chance to talk to you, because... well, I’ve been thinking about you, about you growing up, and I had been hoping... Pearl, darling, do you know who I am?”

“Yes,” Pearl answered.

The voice made a shuddery sigh that sounded like laughing and crying. “That’s wonderful, poppet,” she said. “That’s just so marvelous. Can you talk a minute? Are your mummy and daddy around?”

“No,” Pearl answered. It was just Cheri, and she was still sound asleep in front of Thomas the Tank Engine.

“Okay, darling, then we’ll just have a little chat. Just you and me. Would that make you happy, love?”

“Yes,” Pearl answered.

“Wonderful,” the voice said. “Just wonderful.”

* * *

“So I talked to the tooth fairy yesterday,” Pearl said.

Toby’s eyes got all round behind his glasses, and he set what was going to be his next animal cracker back down.

“Really?” he asked.

“Uh-huh. Her name is Kelly.”

“The tooth fairy’s name is Kelly?” Toby asked. Pearl nodded. “Did she mention me?” he asked.

“No,” Pearl replied. He looked disappointed, but he only nodded and picked up the cracker again. Pearl and Toby sat next to one another every day at Jumping Beans, but it usually wasn’t until snack time that they got a chance to talk. That morning, the class had been busy making caterpillars out of pom-pom balls and singing the Picnic Song, so Pearl had saved her news until then.

“What did you guys talk about?” he asked.

“She wanted to know what school was like and what’s my favorite color and what I want to be when I grow up,” Pearl answered, shrugging.

“What does she sound like?” Toby asked. “Does she have a pretty voice?”

“She talks like the Wiggles,” Pearl said.

“They’re from Australia. Do you think that’s where she lives?”

“Probably.”

“That’s probably why she never answered my letters,” Toby said. He swished back his milk, gargling it for one second. Pearl giggled at the sound. Around that time, Miss Beverly came swooshing by in her flowered skirt and told everyone to pick up their milk cartons and wrappers so they could start story time. Pearl grabbed her carton and told Toby that if he gave her his last three animal crackers, she would mention him to the tooth fairy the next time she called.

“When will that be?” he asked.

“This afternoon,” Pearl said. “She said she would call again at the same time.”

“Lucky,” Toby grumbled. He passed her three crackers. “Tell her I’ve been brushing.”

* * *

The day dragged on. Pearl passed the time by counting as high as she could, but ran out of numbers long before Cheri arrived at the door to pick her up and take her home for the afternoon. Pearl gave obligatory short answers to all of her questions: “How was school?” “Did you learn anything new today?” “How is Toby?” She wanted to save up the details for later, when she could tell the tooth fairy over the phone.

Cheri pulled her white minivan up the driveway in front of

Pearl's house. The driveway was empty at that time of day. Later that evening, Mommy would drive her shiny black car home from the office and come clacking inside in her high-heeled shoes. The gardener was rumbling around the front yard on his noisy riding lawnmower, which Pearl ran inside as quickly as possible to avoid. Cheri followed her inside, set down her purse, and took out her glasses from somewhere in its deep pockets. She asked Pearl if she would be excited for macaroni and cheese for lunch.

"Mmm-hmm," Pearl replied, not really listening. She was looking at the phone, which hung silently on the wall in the kitchen. Cheri mixed up the macaroni, took care of the dishes, and then suggested they sit down in the living room and watch a little television to "rest up after a long day at Jumping Beans." Pearl sat on the couch, and Cheri in her armchair. About three minutes into Pearl's Blue's Clues video, Cheri was asleep. Her mouth drooped open, and her hands slipped languidly off the chair and dangled on either side. Pearl watched her for only a moment or two, then slipped off the leather couch and padded her way back to the kitchen.

She stood on a chair to get the phone off its cradle on the countertop. Mommy's coffee cup was still sitting out next to it, with deep brown liquid pooled in the bottom and a smear of red lipstick around the rim. Pearl was more careful reaching past the coffee cup than she had been sneaking past Cheri. As soon as she wrapped both hands around the phone, she slithered down from the chair and placed it on the floor, where it was handy. Finally, she helped herself to some Lucky Charms straight out of the box and sat cross-legged on the floor while she waited for the phone to ring.

To Pearl, each second was a minute, each minute a century. She thought, a few handfuls of cereal in, that the call may never come. It was really only five minutes before it rang, shaking the floor under Pearl's seat. She lunged for the phone and ended up spilling a handful of marshmallows across the hardwood.

"Hello?" Pearl said through a full mouth.

"Hello? Pearl?" the voice asked. It was the tooth fairy. Pearl could tell by the way she softened the "r" in her name.

"Yes," Pearl answered.

"Oh, hello, darling!" Pearl liked the way Kelly called her darling. "Can we talk for a while? Are your parents around?"

"No," Pearl said. "Mommy's at the office, and Daddy's in China."

"China?" the voice asked. "That's a long way away."

“It is,” Pearl agreed. She pictured her father standing upside-down on the other side of the world, miles of dirt and dinosaur bones and the hot core of the Earth suspended between them. She wondered what was keeping the people in China from falling right off the end of the world.

“Do you miss your daddy very much when he goes away?” Kelly asked.

“Sometimes,” Pearl answered. It didn’t surprise her that Kelly knew her father often went away on business. The tooth fairy, she thought, had access to this sort of knowledge, the same way Santa and Jesus knew whether or not she had been good. She suddenly remembered Toby. “My friend Toby at school has been brushing his teeth a lot,” she said.

“Oh,” Kelly said. “Well, you tell Toby good job.”

“He’ll like that,” Pearl answered.

“Do you like school? Tell me all about your day. I want to hear everything.”

Pearl took a deep breath, and while Cheri snored in the next room, she talked to the tooth fairy about Jumping Beans for half an hour. Then Kelly had to say “ta-ta,” and told her to be good. She asked her if she would be available to talk the next day. “Mummy and Daddy won’t be around?” she asked.

“No,” Pearl answered. “I can talk.”

“Wonderful,” Kelly said. “Ta-ta, darling.”

“Ta-ta,” Pearl repeated.

* * *

When Mommy came home, Cheri was fixing dinner at the stove, and Pearl was coloring with her crayons at the kitchen table. Pearl listened to the familiar sounds of her mother entering the house: the garage door opening and closing, the thump and jingle of her purse hitting its designated perch on top of the washing machine, and the clack, clack, clack of high-heeled shoes on hardwood. Mommy entered the kitchen still in her blazer and skirt, with her hair up in a high ponytail. Pearl had once asked Cheri to make her one as high as Mommy’s, but it had hurt so much she had cried to have it taken out. Mommy said that tight ponytails and high heels wouldn’t hurt as much when she became a grown-up woman. Little women, she said, looked lovely in pigtails and pink Velcro slippers.

“Hi, sweetie,” she said, kissing Pearl on the top of her head on

her way to the phone.

“Hi, Mommy,” Pearl replied, not looking up from her drawing.

“Hello, Cheri,” she said. She was prodding the phone, beeping through the messages. Pearl got a fluttery feeling in her tummy, watching her stare into the phone like that. Mommy’s face didn’t change, however, and after her eyes flicked quickly through five messages, she set the phone back down. “A good day today?”

“Oh, yes,” Cheri replied. “She was well behaved all day. She’s always so tired out after Jumping Beans. How about yourself?”

“Three meetings with potential investors, the new IT guy had a breakdown, and my assistant—you know Katie.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Katie got a call today that her father is starting to circle the drain.”

“Oh, heavens.”

“The prognosis isn’t good, and her family wants her in Arizona to be with him.”

“Well, that’s best. How terrible.”

Pearl thought about Katie’s father and pictured an old man walking in circles around a gigantic bathtub drain, all the way in some desert in Arizona. She wondered if Katie missed her father when he was so far away.

“Dinner is almost ready,” Cheri said, peeking in the oven.

“Great,” Mommy said. “You hungry, sweetie?”

“I don’t like tilapia,” Pearl said.

“But you like almonds, remember?” Cheri said.

“There will be almonds all over the tilapia, and all you’ll taste is almond,” Mommy said. “You’ll like it.” Pearl stuck out her tongue and reached for the pink crayon. “What are you drawing?” Mommy asked, leaning closer. “Is that a princess?”

“It’s the tooth fairy,” Pearl said. She had drawn a lady with a poofy pink dress and curly yellow hair, and big blue butterfly wings sticking out from behind her back. Pearl had given her a magic wand with a tooth on the end of it, too, but she didn’t know how to draw teeth, so it looked like an octopus with four spiky legs.

“Of course it is,” Mommy said. “I see that now. Do you have a loose tooth?”

“No,” Pearl answered.

“You just felt like drawing the tooth fairy?” Mommy asked.

“Yes,” Pearl said.

“Well, it’s beautiful,” Mommy said. “Do you know a week from

tomorrow is?” Pearl thought for a moment.

“Thursday?” she asked.

“That’s right. Do you know what will happen on Thursday?” Pearl shook her head. “Daddy is going to come home. Isn’t that great?” Pearl nodded. “He’s very excited to come home and see you,” Mommy said. “Maybe you can draw him a picture for when he gets back.”

“Maybe,” Pearl said. She had finished her tooth fairy drawing, and she had started to draw a little girl with pigtails and pink shoes holding her hand.

“Now,” Mommy said, fishing her cellphone out of her pocket and starting to scroll through it, “how was preschool today?” Pearl put a big smile on the little girl’s face.

“Fine,” she said.

* * *

On Thursday in Jumping Beans, the class read Rainbow Fish and made their own rainbow fishes out of construction paper and glitter. As tablemates, Pearl and Toby had five colors of glitter to split between them. Pearl, however, hadn’t made much use of them; she had been too excited.

“Yesterday, we talked about the things we both like,” Pearl said.

“And the tooth fairy?” Toby asked.

“Mmm-hmm. She gave me her phone number, so I can call her now.” She had said it at least three times and had Pearl write it down so she would be sure to remember. “Whenever you get the chance, darling, you just give me a call,” she had said. “And put the number someplace safe—out of sight.” There was a pause. “I love you, darling,” she had said. “Maybe one day we can be together, and I can actually hold you, but I want you to know that I love you very much, and...” She stopped talking for a second. “You be good, darling—ta-ta. Don’t lose that number.”

Pearl had placed the number under her pillow.

“We both like strawberry ice cream best,” she reported to Toby.

“The tooth fairy likes ice cream? That’s weird,” Toby said, wrinkling his nose. He had a smudge of glitter on his face, but he couldn’t brush it off because his fingers were covered in even more glitter. Pearl reached over with a piece of stray construction paper and scraped it off the tip of his nose. He nodded his thanks. “You talk to her almost every day,” he said, grabbing the silver glitter dispenser

again. “Do you floss? Maybe she likes you because you floss. I don’t floss because it hurts.”

“I don’t floss, either,” Pearl said. “I don’t even brush some nights.”

“But she keeps calling you?”

“Yes, but I can only talk to her when my mommy and daddy aren’t home,” Pearl said. Toby paused mid-shake, his brow wrinkling.

“Why?” he asked.

Pearl was taken aback by the question. “Well, because it’s a secret,” she said. “The tooth fairy doesn’t talk to mommies and daddies, because they’re grownups.” This fact, Pearl thought, was universally known, but Toby shook his head.

“My mommy and daddy talk to the tooth fairy,” he said. “They say that they know her, and that’s why I have to tell them when I lose a tooth, so they can tell the tooth fairy to come. When I don’t tell them, she doesn’t come.”

“Really?” Pearl asked. “Then why would she want to keep it a secret?”

“Maybe she’s not allowed to talk to you,” Toby said. “Maybe she can only talk to grownups, and she’s breaking the rules.”

Pearl didn’t like that idea. There was a sickly, wormy feeling in her belly, and she didn’t want to work on her rainbow fish anymore.

“You’re lucky,” Toby was saying. “I wish the tooth fairy would break the rules to talk to me.” He shook a few more doses of glitter onto his fish, then put the dispenser down with a sigh. “You mean, you don’t floss at all?” he asked.

* * *

When Cheri took Pearl home that day, there was a silver car in the driveway. Pearl’s heart fluttered when she saw it. With all the excitement of the past week, she had completely forgotten what would happen on Thursday. As soon as Cheri opened the car door and unfastened her seatbelt, she bolted into the house. Daddy was home.

Pearl’s rainbow fish bled glitter into the air as she ran, and she imagined her daddy wearing his suit and tie and picking her up and twirling her. She would laugh and spin all the way around the world and fall against him, and she would ask him if everything in China was upside down. She threw open the door, and the first thing she

heard was shouting.

“You didn’t think I would see the long-distance calls? You didn’t think I would look at the bill while you were gone?”

Mommy was yelling. Her voice was coming from the kitchen.

“I don’t know what the hell you mean!” Daddy responded.

“You always do this! You always go off and you do all this crazy—”

“I didn’t do anything—”

“And then you act like I’m crazy, like I’m the crazy one for thinking you—”

“I what? I what? I was unfaithful to you in Guangzhou? Is that it? You think I cheated?”

“Why wouldn’t I think that when there’s this bill for a fucking long-distance call—”

“I don’t know anything about a call from anybody—”

“Why wouldn’t I think that when you’ve done it before—”

Pearl crept toward the kitchen, her rainbow fish dangling limply from her hand. Somewhere along the way it slipped out of her fingers. Cheri was coming in through the door. She was stage-whispering something: a warning to come back, to go outside, to stay out of the kitchen for now. But Pearl didn’t listen.

“You always bring that up!” Daddy shouted. “You always have to go there—It was once, it was a mistake—”

“Oh, Australia was a mistake? So you didn’t mean to sleep with—”

Australia. Pearl broke into a run and nearly fell down on her way to the kitchen. All at once, her mommy and daddy turned and saw her. Mommy’s ponytail was frazzled, and she still had her high heels on. Daddy wasn’t wearing his suit, but his shoulders were still broad in a teal polo with Chinese writing on the breast pocket. He was tanner than Pearl remembered, before he left. They looked at her with wide, guilty eyes. Mommy ran a hasty hand through her hair.

“Pearl, sweetie, when did you—?”

“Don’t fight,” Pearl burst out, trying to talk over the quiver of her chest, the wobble of her lips. Her vision was swimming. “Don’t yell, it’s not Daddy’s fault, it’s my fault—I was talking on the phone—”

“You were on the phone?” Daddy asked. “Who were you talking to on the phone?”

“The tooth fairy,” Pearl said. “The tooth fairy called me from

Australia, and she gave me her number, and we've just been talking—but I didn't tell Cheri or Mommy—”

“The tooth fairy? Pearl, you're not making sense—” Daddy said.

“Cheri, when has she been using the phone?” Mommy demanded.

“I'm sorry, I didn't know—I just—”

“You didn't know?” Daddy snapped. “You didn't know she was talking to a stranger on our phone? You weren't watching her?”

“I'm sorry, I don't—”

“This is unacceptable!”

“I can't believe this—I can't—”

“Please, don't—just give me a chance to—”

Pearl turned around as the noise level in the kitchen rose, running to the phone cradle in the living room. She grabbed the phone with both hands and scrambled for her bedroom. It was hard to see through all the water in her eyes, and her nose was dripping. She had to squint when she dropped onto her bed, groped for the piece of paper under her pillow, and pressed the numbers she had written in crayon one by one.

The phone rang.

It rang again.

Pearl counted her teeth and tried to tune out the yelling coming from the kitchen until someone picked up the phone.

“Hello? Pearl?” Pearl heard the tooth fairy's voice and started sobbing. “Darling, oh no, what's wrong? Shhh... don't cry... why are you sad?” For a while, Pearl couldn't answer. Her throat had closed on the words, and she felt like she was swallowing a large lump of capital letters. The crayon numbers shook in her hand.

“Baby... darling... it's alright. J-just tell me what's troubling you. Just take a deep breath and talk to me. I want... I mean... you can tell me anything.” Pearl took a deep breath. The tooth fairy's voice inhaled and exhaled with her. Her breath on the phone sounded like the ocean. “Good. That's good, lovey. Now can you talk?”

“Everyone is angry because I've been talking to you,” Pearl spluttered.

“Angry? Who's angry?”

“Mommy and Daddy, they're angry—they're angry at each other, and Cheri, and I think me, too, because of something in Australia and the phone, and I'm not supposed to talk to the tooth fairy, and we're breaking the rules...”

“Your mummy and daddy know?” The tooth fairy sounded afraid. Pearl heard footsteps from down the hall.

“They found out,” Pearl whimpered. “Please don’t be mad at me... please don’t yell...”

“No, darling, I won’t yell, I won’t...” She was crying, too. Pearl could hear her gasping over the phone. “...I want you to know that I love you, and I’m so glad I could talk to you...”

“Don’t go,” Pearl said.

“I don’t think we can talk anymore, darling, they won’t want us talking, but...” she broke off. Her words became mere hiccups.

“Don’t go,” Pearl pleaded. “Don’t go.”

Daddy opened the door to her room. He found her sitting on the bed, holding the phone in both hands, crying into the paper with the numbers on it. There was no sound on the phone but a dial tone, a little electric wail on the end of the line where there had once been a person named Kelly from Australia. Mommy came into the room next, gently took the phone from her, and wrapped her in her arms. The dial tone cut off with a beep. Pearl hugged her back and pressed her face against her button-up blouse, feeling the solidity of the woman’s body in her arms, feeling the hardness and the weight of things that were made of flesh and not sound. And she cried for things she had never held or understood in the first place—like an empty space between teeth.

The Years After

Meredith Benson

Mama said there used to be a God. Now we pray to the mines and the little money they earn us. Mama said there used to be green—real green, like in the leaves and grass. Now the only green we see is the paint chipping off dusty machines. Mama said there used to be trees that touched the clouds, that those trees could heal any hurt you felt. Mama said there used to be fairies called bees and butterflies, but that they went away when their homes were destroyed. Now, all we have are flies. Mama said Papa used to be clean and didn't cough red all the time, but I don't know if that true 'cause Papa's always had rocks in his lungs and Mama's always been sad. Mama said Ecuador used to be beautiful. I don't know if I believe that, either.

* * *

Mama says the dust shouldn't be here. It gets in our eyes and in between our teeth. We make puffs of dust every time we breathe. I pretend I'm smoking 'cause it hurts my lungs, too. Mama says there used to be mountains; she says I can't even imagine how big they were. But I've seen the rock and dust piles by the mine and those can get pretty big. Mama gets mad when I drink from the stream. She says there shouldn't be swirling rainbows on top and shiny cans floating through it. But it's almost gone, anyway.

* * *

They brought us into the mines today to show us how wonderful they were. The miners were dust ghosts with blinking eyeballs while big machines danced around them. It looked like a giant anthill and the miners were the ants doing the work for the queen. No one smiled at us. They all had tired eyes that looked right through us. I got scared and had to leave, and everyone laughed at me. I didn't see Papa there—maybe they had given him the day off.

* * *

Mama told me Papa got to leave work. I don't know why he

keeps going back to ask. Now, Papa and I go on the streets with open hands. I like when the people in crisp suits are nice and give us money, but not when they stick their noses up. Papa told me not to tell Mama what we're doing, but sometimes I see her on the streets, too, with her hands open and her head down.

* * *

Papa's still got rocks that rattle in his lungs, and Mama's face is still made of stone. Mama says it wasn't supposed to be this way, with crystals in her eyes that never fall. Mama's fairytales of what Ecuador used to be make me mad. Mama says Ecuador is now just a big, open pit of beggars and dust. I think Papa gets sad when she says things like that, but he knows better than to say anything.

* * *

Papa still goes to the mine every day to ask but he comes back stumbling, so Mama makes him sleep outside. Sometimes I can hear him crying but it sounds more like a whimper. Mama calls him a dog now and he kind of reminds me of one too.

* * *

It's hard for Papa to walk straight now, even in the mornings, so Mama told him to leave. Sometimes, I see Papa on the streets, but he's so cross-eyed that I don't think he would remember me. Mama tells me to think of the times when he was strong and loved us, but all I remember is the sound of his cough. Mama says we don't have much money, so we eat what we can find. We go to bed emptier and emptier than the days before. I lick the dust off my face and dig in the trash, but Mama gets mad 'cause that makes me thirsty. There's not much water, either. Mama never complains. Sometimes I like that, and sometimes it makes me feel bad that all I want to do is scream. Mama makes me hold my head high, but even her head is starting to fall. Sometimes at night, I see Mama go to the edge of the mine with her head down. Mama looks like she's bowing in prayer to the mine, but maybe she's praying to the God that left us.

* * *

Sometimes, I walk down the street with the offices. The windows are always washed and the streets are always swept. All the men there have nice suits and white teeth that look like the white Chiclets we can't afford anymore. Mama told me they control the dust ghosts in the mine, but I don't think they do much because their arms are small and their shoes are still shiny. Their eyes always look mean and they stare at me as if I am the reason they must go to work every morning. If only they knew that Papa's gone because of them. Mama says there's nothing beating in their chests. I think Mama's right.

* * *

Mama's face is now a frown. Mama used to laugh with her teeth but now her lips don't even move, not even to talk. I think she misses Papa, but that Papa's gone. And with Papa, went Mama. She doesn't hug me anymore or kiss my forehead and tell me everything will be alright. She doesn't do these things 'cause they won't be alright, and Mama could never lie. Instead, she looks out at the land she says used to be green but now is just dirt and garbage.

* * *

Mama and I got a job offer today. They said it's even better than begging because you earn the money by doing things. I don't think Mama knows that I know what they mean, but I do. Sometimes my friends have to do it just to get some food in their tummies. And I know some of Mama's friends have to so they can feed their babies. Mama's face looked like stone still, but I knew she was thinking about it. Mama spit in their dirty faces and dragged me all the way home. Crystals fell from her eyes that night and Mama cried for everything that we had lost. The mines took everything from us. They took my Papa. They took my water. They took my forests. They took my childhood. The mines took what made us people. Intag Libre.

Of Wave Crests and Crystals

Parker Ornes

Deep beneath the sea, a sprawling stone ruin rested covered in ooze and waterweeds. It seemed to grow out of the surrounding rock, hardly visible in the murk. Inside the greenish walls, mazes filled with deadly traps—spiked pits, fake exploding doors, and collapsing ceilings—all leading to one vast hall at the center. Skeletons littered the passageways, some with armor still rusting on their bones. Double doors, their carvings of heroes and giants still sharp and bold from years underground, stood unopened as they had been for millennia. If one were to open them, the last thing they would see were the jaws of a vast and mythic monster that guarded the crystal hidden there.

Her blunt, whale-like head rested on the ground, all three eyes focused upon the speck of foam on the wave crest she meticulously carved out of stone with the tip of her claw. Once in a while she shifted a heap of gems out of the way with her other hand. It had taken a long time for her get the fall and flow of spray exactly right, with much careful imagining, planning, and deliberating. Then she would move on to the next wave. It would have been so much easier if she could remember more clearly the last time she had even seen real sea foam.

It was because she had her head to the floor that she heard the scratching. Not far from the third to last pillar on the right side of the hall, the sound was soft and slight. In the eons of stillness, the sound was like a thunder of marching moles. She watched the spot the noise came from, absolutely still, a grinning mountain of green fur and scales. She had no idea how long it had been since a thief broke in. No passage of time interrupted the silence, no sun or moon, no heat in the cold, sealed stone.

Often, but not nearly often enough, a thief would seek the treasure the monster guarded in the center of the ruins. Some were hardened fighters, but others were just reckless fools with a knife and no common sense. They were a brief flicker of entertainment in a dull, silent hall.

Then no robbers skulked the halls, and no brazen barbarians barged in. Maybe the death traps carefully placed throughout the ruins claimed them. Maybe they all forgot the tales of treasures buried there.

She missed them just a little.

A tile rose with scraping difficulty and out popped a brass diving helmet, the closest thing it had to a face was a porthole covered in dark glass and crisscrossing wire. The helmet styles kept changing. She missed the ones with the plumes.

The monster plucked the intruder out of the hole and her grin widened. She had three rows of fangs that would have made an anglerfish's mouth look like the epitome of symmetry. Leathery wings spread wide, the bones gleaming. The lantern fell from a gloved hand and crashed to the ground, plunging the hall into darkness.

"Yet another fool that seeks the crystal and only finds their own demise!"

The intruder stopped struggling at once and spoke up in several varieties of gibberish before settling on words she understood.

"My name is Ezra Vox. H-h-how do you do?" replied the human in a quavering voice.

"What?"

The monster dropped the intruder, who made a dull, hollow thud followed by a clang of brass on stone, from the helmet. He lay facedown, unable to move even as she towered over him. She debated squishing him now, but that would only alleviate the boredom for a moment, and it could be a very long time before another thief came along.

Once the human finally crawled to a sitting position, he pushed at the helmet porthole as if trying to adjust something on his face, only for the heavy glove to tap against glass.

"My... ah... conversational skills in fragmentary phonetical glyphs are... grassy? Ratty? Rusty!" said Ezra, "It is not every day one runs across an articulate behemoth. Who taught you to speak?" She didn't answer. No matter how far she thought back through the misty years, the monster could not recall a time when she couldn't talk, or someone who might have taught her. The gaps in her memory weren't what bothered her, the intruder's accent did. Every other word put emphasis on the wrong syllable; he sounded like someone who learned language through scrolls and stuffy writings on monuments, not from hearing anyone actually speak. "Don't bother studying those dead languages, they said," Ezra went on, "It won't do you any good. Ha! Look where I am now!" "Deep within the lair of a creature with teeth larger than you are tall?" suggested the monster, her smile widening.

He raised a finger as if to counter her point, then paused. “Er...ah...what is your name?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Zoi.”

“No titles? Not ‘Zoi the Terrible’ or ‘Zoi the Large and Fanged?’” he inquired. Something about his quick, fidgety motions and crisp words reminded her of an annoying little bird.

Zoi lowered her massive head to his level and glared, her three eyes glowing red.

“I...take that as a ‘no,’” he whimpered.

“You are here for the crystal. Well, are you going to battle me for it, trespasser?” demanded Zoi.

“Do those teeth impede your speech at all? You do have an odd way of pronouncing certain words,” mused Ezra, one arm folded and the other propped under his chin.

“The battle?”

“I’d rather have a chat with the talking monster.”

Slapping her forehead with her palm, Zoi groaned and shook her head. This was not how battles with intruders were supposed to go. They were supposed to scream and run at her with weapons, or run around the hall until she squashed them. It was hard to squish people who asked “How do you do?” and wanted to know about her teeth.

“Then who are you? Are you after the crystal?” asked Zoi.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I study marine biology; my knowledge of geology is patchy and amateur at best. Well, also extinct languages, but that was back at the university. I suppose I am more of a jack-of-all-trades than anything.”

That was too many –logies in that reply to have made any sense. Zoi shook her head. He really did talk like an official.

“I am so very sorry for intruding, I merely thought to explore this architectural anomaly. The last thing I expected was to find anything—anyone like you here of all places. If I really am encroaching, I suppose I should be on my w—“

The tip of her claw caught a strap on his diving suit. He wasn’t going anywhere. The most interesting thing that had happened to her in thousands of years wasn’t just going to walk away, leaving her with just the silence and the thoughts in her head. Once she set him down, he started rummaging through his bag.

“Now, if you would just hold still for a few minutes,” said Ezra as he flipped through thin, white pages he had pulled out of his bag. It looked like several short scrolls glued or pinned together.

Zoi came closer to see what he was sketching on the pages. It looked like an outline of some kind of bulky, heavy thing. When he added wings, she realized it was herself. It hadn't occurred to her she looked quite like that.

"You draw?" she asked.

"I've only rudimentary ability, nothing noteworthy, I'm afraid. And it's difficult to see in here, give me a moment."

The clumsy human picked up the lantern again and rekindled it. A flare of yellow-orange light flickered, the glow expanded to cast sharp shadows over the images graven on the wall.

Ezra froze. He lifted his lantern to the wall. The diving helmet slowly turned to look all around him as he walked the length of the hall. He craned his neck upward, lost his balance, and fell back with a thud. Zoi didn't have to follow his gaze to know what he was looking at; she saw it every day.

The sea foam she had been carving was part of a tumultuous, stormy ocean full of spray and high, crashing waves. Sea monsters, which looked a lot like land monsters with scales on them in Zoi's imagination, reared their heads. Islands with jagged mountains and wispy forests rested under suns and moons with strange faces in them. As the mural progressed along the wall, the landscapes grew wilder. Trees grew upside-down, continents floated past volcanoes spewing thunderheads. Bizarre creatures mixed together, eyes filled with tinier eyes, and those eyes filled with smaller eyes.

By the time Zoi had started carving the ceiling, it had been so long since she had seen anything that wasn't stone blocks and pillars that her sanity had started to chew on itself. It resembled nothing to be found outside the confines of a deranged skull.

"This is fascinating! These markings bear little, if any, likeness to ancient pictographs or bas-reliefs! There's none of the usual writing to go with it, and it's typical to depict deities and heroes. Granted, not very many landscape painters I've seen have quite so many cats with fins, but this is definitely the work of a hitherto unknown civilization!"

Ezra said this all so quickly and with so little breath that he seemed about to pass out at any moment.

"I carved it," growled Zoi.

It was hard to tell if a helmet gaped, but this one certainly seemed to.

"Amazing!"

Zoi's hulking back straightened a bit and she puffed out her

chest with pride. They talked about art for a little longer, most of it Ezra asking questions, then Zoi brought up something that had been on her mind.

“How did you make it past the wall of levers?”

“Beg pardon?”

“The big wall full of levers that control the water flow! Thieves went mad trying to figure out how to open the paths!” snapped the monster.

“I don’t think I’ve seen that,” admitted Ezra.

“What about the waterfall with spikes at the bottom?”

“Um, no.”

Zoi tapped her claws on the floor. The sound rang out through the silence.

“The maze of keys? Some of the keys were removed, so I know it’s impossible to get through!”

“I must have missed it on the way here,” said Ezra, head bent and his fingers fidgeting.

“Oh, no. No. You do not ‘miss’ all of the traps and obstacles of a well-built tomb!” the monster insisted. “How did you get past them? No one has gotten past them in—“

She picked up a broken hourglass, the sand long gone, and then tossed it aside.

“Well?” she demanded.

“I tunneled here,” said Ezra.

“From where?”

A convoluted explanation of submarines, a team of excavators he had gotten separated from, drills, and crowbars followed as the monster slowly realized that this group of thieves hadn’t even set foot inside the ruin. They dug right under the building itself.

“I worked hard designing this tomb,” the monster grumbled, her arms folded.

“Wait, you designed this place?” asked Ezra.

“Can you not hear through that helmet? That’s what I said!”

Ezra paced, his heavy boots clanking with each step. His hands went to his head in what looked like a habitual gesture.

“You can speak, you carve murals out of stone, you designed this entire building, and—you are some sort of giant, fluffy whale,” he said.

Zoi cast a critical eye over her fur. It was not fluffy.

“Who are you? What are you?” asked Ezra.

Rearing up on her hind legs, no easy feat with her bulk, Zoi

roared, “I am the wind of the night, the clouds that blot the stars, the tremors of the earth!”

The full sight of her, her sheer magnitude as she stood with her wings spread and her head far above, made Ezra stumble back.

“At least I was,” Zoi returned to all fours and slumped down with a thud that shook the hall, “before I ended up here.”

An hour or so later, Zoi sat with the tip of her claw through the handle of a tiny, chipped teacup while Ezra, who seemed the type to always carry a battered teapot in that overstuffed backpack of his, made tea. He had taken off his helmet to reveal a pointed face, tidy black hair, and two thin discs of glass sitting in front of his eyes. It was an odd decoration, but Zoi wasn’t one to comment on personal appearances.

“What do you eat?” asked Ezra, rummaging through a package of foodstuffs. They all looked like sandwiches.

“Eat?” she asked blankly in reply. She had a nasty bite, but she never recalled having to actually swallow anything. Not that there was much to eat in the hall, unless she wanted to munch on the gems and pearls scattered around.

“I had the word right, didn’t I? Eat, eating, eaten, ate?” asked Ezra, “Do you care for a ham sandwich?”

He held out the squished sandwich, which was barely the size of her finger digit. It disappeared in one gulp and she hardly tasted it.

“What do you usually eat?” he asked again, “Do you hunt or does someone bring you meals?”

“I don’t need to eat anything. If I had to, I’d have been a pile of bones long ago,” said Zoi, “Thieves are few and far between, and there’s not much meat on them.”

Ezra’s mouth dropped open. What followed was a garbled series of questions that he could barely articulate in her language. He kept babbling gibberish about living organisms, and sustenance, with the occasional mention of no ecological niche.

“What are you?” he asked yet again.

“I’m the guardian of this tomb,” said Zoi.

“That doesn’t explain anything! You might as well try to explain what I’m doing here by saying I’m a bookkeeper for a marine aquarium...er, wait, that does actually go a long way to explaining...”

“A what?” asked Zoi, her head tilted in interest.

“I study marine animals,” said Ezra.

She just stared at him.

“We go around searching for fish to put in enormous glass tanks for people to look at them.”

All three of Zoi’s eyes blinked slowly. That was the strangest description of a job she had ever heard. Still, who was she to laugh? Having a box full of fish to stare at was preferable to a blank wall.

When Ezra wanted to know her life’s story, where she came from, if there were others like her, how she came to be sitting in a tomb at the bottom of the ocean, Zoi scratched the side of her head. Her memories were vague shapes looming out of a field of fog. She couldn’t quite remember what really happened and what were just the stories she told herself to lighten the cold, dark silence.

“There was some sort of earthquake,” she said, “All of a sudden the hall started shaking, dust and chunks of stone fell. A few of the pillars fell over,” she swept her tail to indicate the ones in question, “I designed this place well enough that I knew it wouldn’t come down around my head, but I panicked at first, since some of the traps were set with razor finesse and a disturbance like that could have broken them. Just the thought of a stone block falling and crushing all of those meticulously sharpened spikes in the tiger pits...”

“The sunken island. Of course, it’d be rather silly to build a tomb like this at the bottom of the ocean,” said Ezra.

“What?”

“Finding this place was excruciatingly difficult, with the number of islands and possible locations hinted at in the old texts,” he continued.

“Go back to the part about the bottom of the ocean,” said Zoi, waving a claw.

“Er, didn’t you know? Hadn’t it gotten to be a bit wetter after the earthquake?” asked Ezra.

Zoi glanced at the carved ceiling with its swirling images. There wasn’t even a crack in the mortar. It was high-quality stone from the best quarry on the island. The arching dome distributed weight, its span and circumference calculated to the optimal size. A raindrop couldn’t have squeezed its way through.

“I haven’t noticed anything,” she said.

“From the submarine, this looked like a pile of seaweed and coral-covered rubble. I suspected there might be a few pockets of air left, but nothing like this.”

Tears rolled down Zoi’s cheeks as she started to sob like an orca whale with a case of hiccups. The last thing an artisan wanted to

hear was their work described as a pile of rubble, that their monument crumbled to the scouring winds and waters of time. She spent years, if not decades, designing each and every room, spire, stairway, and secret passage, drawing and re-drawing plans until they grew into an incomprehensible labyrinth.

It was supposed to be a tomb that would stand eternal, a reminder to the world and future generations of the island's grandeur. Now, the only ones who had seen it were fish and manta rays.

Ezra patted the crying monster on the hand.

"I'm so sorry."

She flopped over with a ground-shaking thud and pressed her hands over her face. Her wings spread out and uselessly beat the dusty floor. So much of her life had been entwined in the building and guarding of this tomb, and now it was nothing but an unknown wreck. Ezra sat and petted her head, telling her what a beautiful wreck the tomb was as he smoothed her fur and comforted her, as her mother must have once, if she even had one.

"Do you know why I built this tomb?" Zoi's voice was low and dull.

"I'm sure it's a legacy any architect would be proud of," said Ezra, adjusting the glass discs perched on his nose, "Contains the remains of a long-dead ruler, no doubt."

Reaching over, Zoi pulled a small, shining crystal out of its hidden niche in one of the pillars. For a long time she had it sitting on a pedestal in the middle of the room, but after thieves sneaking past her and swiping it or knocking the thing over with her tail for the fiftieth time, she considered putting it somewhere safer.

"I was told I had to guard this, that it was meant for... something."

"For what?"

Zoi shrugged her shoulders.

"You don't know what it does?" Ezra asked.

"Well it—it's a thing that—you use it for—" Zoi stared at the glowing crystal in her claws.

She was told to guard it. That was the emperor's last command. The crystal was important for something, or had been important to someone, or had some kind of function. She just had no idea what it was. It never did anything.

It never did anything at all. If it had mysterious, mystical powers it kept them very well hidden. Day after day, year after year,

eternity after eternity, she wallowed and paced in a cell for the sake of a shiny rock.

“Here, take it. It’s what you came for, right?” snorted Zoi.

She tossed him the crystal; it bounced in his awkward gloves as he fumbled and nearly tripped over himself to keep hold of it. The stone gleamed blue and violet in his hands. He turned it over carefully, marveling at every facet. But then Ezra walked up to her and placed the crystal back in her claws.

“I think you should hold on to this. If you’re supposed to be guarding it, all you have to do is keep it with you, right? Then it won’t matter where you go, really,” he said.

Ezra doused the lantern, for the crystal glowed with enough light of its own, and set the stone inside. Then he tied the lantern to a rope. It took several tries to tie a good knot, but he made the rope and crystal into a bracelet around her wrist.

She could guard the crystal on a beach or while romping through the clouds just as well as in a dark hall. To see a beach again, the high cliffs, the rock arches, the funny creatures in the tide pools. To see a mountain again, where the crags and folds rose above tree-topped sides. Her mind made up, she grabbed Ezra with one hand.

“You’ll need your helmet back on.”

She pushed the massive double doors open with her shoulder and loped three-legged out into the rest of the ruins.

The water hit her hard, clinging to her fur, but she just shook herself and shut the doors behind her. Graceful sharks swam through the crumbling arches and galleries stretched overhead. Schools of fish darted through windows. The room full of ground switches and moveable blocks—which had to be moved in a certain order, or else the door would not open—was now just a field of seaweed, their long, wavering tresses reaching for the pale blue above. Enormous statues had their features obscured with the pink and crimson coral thriving there.

She jumped over courtyards and crawled over roofs, sidestepping the twisting, trap-filled halls. There was a gloomy reminiscence everywhere she turned. The building was designed so that the only way to get to the central hall was to find one’s way through room after room of traps, searching for keys and levers that would open the way. That was the only way through unless, of course, one happened to be a large, flying monster.

Zoi looked back over the ruins for one last time and sighed. It had been a masterpiece, but there would be others. Wide wings spread and churned the water into a wild flurry. Zoi rose through the ocean like a shipwreck in reverse, pumping her wings and her tail to swim faster and faster. Rays of silver light pierced the pale blue-green ceiling overhead.

Her head breached the surface and she filled her lungs with cold, fresh air. Waves rolled and coiled in beautiful bursts of spray. A vast panorama of stars spilled across the indigo sky. It was larger than her mind, trapped for so long in such a small space, could entirely conceive. Thousands of stars, slowly spinning, went on forever and for the first time, despite her bulk, Zoi felt small.

The three-eyed monster took to the sky. Her wings cut ragged silhouettes against the stars. There was more to see, more to build, more to explore.

What Do You Have

Conlan Carter

Copyright © 2014 by Conlan Carter. All rights reserved.
For performance rights, contact conlancarter@gmail.com for more
information

CAST OF CHARACTERS

SYDNEY – In a relationship with JUSTIN.

BEN – In a relationship with AARON.

AARON – In a relationship with BEN.

JUSTIN – In a relationship with SYDNEY

THE TIME

8 P.M. on JANUARY 7th, 2014

THE PLACE

SYDNEY and JUSTIN's apartment, Minneapolis

Also, JUSTIN's hotel room, Minneapolis

NOTE

There are parts of this play where the action of two scenes happens
simultaneously.

For Helen

AT RISE: Lights up on JUSTIN and SYDNEY's Uptown apartment, Minneapolis. BEN is sitting on the couch. SYDNEY is sitting next to a pile of DVDs.

SYDNEY. I'm just more or less angry that I have to *tell* people.

BEN. But you're not? About?

SYDNEY. No, I'm devastated, sure, but. I mean, I'm trying to pick which DVDs I want to steal from him, so I have something to do at night besides cry myself to sleep.

BEN. Oh. I thought you were just being neurotic.

(SYDNEY gives him a look.)

BEN. Okay. "Neurotic," not the best. I mean, whenever I fight with Aaron, he does the dishes to cool off. Like, I come into the apartment and he's doing dishes? I know he's pissed at me.

SYDNEY. *(Laughing)* That is so housewifey.

BEN. What?

SYDNEY. Aren't *you* the campy one, anyway?

(BEN throws a DVD case at her.)

BEN. No, Aaron worked as a dishwasher all through high school. Now it's like, it's his way of putting things back in order. *(Pause)* You just put *Memoirs of a Geisha* in the *Moulin Rouge* case.

SYDNEY. Shit. Well, they're like the same color scheme.

BEN. You're really okay?

SYDNEY. Considering the circumstances.

BEN. "Considering." I'd be a wreck.

SYDNEY. Alright. Fine. I read a message on his phone, I pick it up, read more. I looked at his phone all the time. But, like, there was this *series* of messages with this tramp from his hometown.

BEN. Ew. Sexting?

SYDNEY. I don't know. Not really. He was basically leading her on. Aggressively, though. I jumped to conclusions.

BEN. Jumped to . . .? Wait, he wasn't cheating on you.

SYDNEY. No.

BEN. You're not counting that as cheating?

SYDNEY. No. They never actually *met*.

BEN. So? It's more that he wanted to. He had the intention of doing so, but you caught him.

SYDNEY. Oh, like *you're* one to talk.

BEN. Excuse me?

(Beat.)

SYDNEY. Anyway, it's just been this whole fiasco. Like, I just turned to him and was like, "You're cheating on me." No questions. God, he looked so shocked. And my mom was all, "Ahhh, I'm just going to read in bed now" and ran away.

BEN. Your mom was there?

SYDNEY. Literally sitting next to me. Family game night.

BEN. Oh yeah, this was at home.

SYDNEY. A couple days after Christmas.

(BEN begins laughing.)

SYDNEY. What?

BEN. *(Laughing)* What were you playing? Like, Monopoly?

SYDNEY. Worse. Fucking Risk.

BEN. Risk? Oh, god.

(BEN laughs harder.)

SYDNEY. What?

BEN. No, I'm just imagining. If I were your mom, you know? My daughter turns to her fiancé and accuses him of cheating. I would have thought it was the game. Like he took Australia from you or something.

SYDNEY. Fucking Australia. That's my continent. I am always Prime Minister.

BEN. You're ruthless.

SYDNEY. I rule with an iron fist. No one can stop me. I'm a conquistador.

BEN. (*Bad Australian accent*) From down under.

SYDNEY. Shut up.

BEN. It's cheating, and you're playing a game. Put two and two together. That's what I would have thought. (*Shivering*) God, it's cold. What's the thermostat set for? Fifty-eight?

SYDNEY. It's at 75 degrees! Hello, literally the coldest day of the year? Wind chill of -40?

BEN. Ugh, your apartment is all windows, though.

SYDNEY. As I recall, you loved this apartment's windows when I moved in.

BEN. Because it has a view of the city! Mine's completely . . . trees, you know? I'm in that little nook of Uptown where it's just giant trees.

SYDNEY. Don't you like that, though?

BEN. Aaron does. (*Pause*) Well, not anymore. That big storm where we lost power for a week? This summer? The trees freaked him out.

SYDNEY. Really? He freaked out? Huh.

BEN. I mean, I wasn't there, actually. I was somewhere else when it . . . you know, but I caught him after the storm died down.

SYDNEY. When was this?

BEN. This summer. Like, July? All the buses were down.

SYDNEY. Oh. When you needed me to come pick you up.

BEN. Yeah.

SYDNEY. At 3 a.m., from the Motel 6.

BEN. (*Pause*) Yup.

(*Beat.*)

SYDNEY. Hold on. I'll be right back.

(*SYDNEY exits. BEN kicks a DVD. Lights up on Stage Left area. A hotel room. AARON is standing, JUSTIN is sitting.*)

AARON. So, what are you guys going to do?

JUSTIN. I don't know. We get some space? Try to figure out what we're doing on our own before we think about what we're doing together.

AARON. So, what, you're broken up?

JUSTIN. (*Irritable*) No, Aaron.

AARON. What? I think it's a valid question to ask.

JUSTIN. Well, maybe I didn't want you to ask it.

AARON. *Well*, maybe you should have, I don't know, said so?

JUSTIN. I didn't have to. Just, just, okay. It's, god, I just don't want to say we're on a "break" or –

AARON. Why am I here, anyway? I'm just making it worse.

JUSTIN. No, it's fine. Come sit down.

(*AARON sits.*)

JUSTIN. You seem stressed.

AARON. Thanks.

JUSTIN. Bad day at work, or something?

AARON. No, I've just been stressed . . . in general, for the past few months or so.

JUSTIN. Oh, so it's stuff at home, then.

AARON. Let's not compare relationship problems tonight.

JUSTIN. I'm not. I'm just curious. How long has it been since you and I have actually talked?

AARON. Since you helped us move that giant desk in, that estate sale one?

JUSTIN. Wow, when was that, two years?

AARON. Two, yeah.

JUSTIN. Look where we are now. You still working for that

non-profit? Where is it, South Minneapolis, right?

AARON. Yeah, it's nice to work so close. I still work late, too.

JUSTIN. Hey, at least Ben's at your place taking care of things. He still works from home, right? Does he have dinner ready for you?

AARON. It seems like he's always there. I don't know. Most of the time he isn't even writing? Like, he's watching the umpteenth season of whatever on Netflix every time I walk in.

JUSTIN. Man, that sounds sexy.

AARON. (*Laughing*) Really. I confronted him about it about a year ago, sorta.

JUSTIN. That's how it is with Ben. Wait, no, that's more *me*. Never the confrontational one.

(*SYDNEY returns.*)

SYDNEY. I really wanna do that thing, where you take a cup of hot water and throw it in the air? It's supposed to make snow. Flash-freezes in this weather.

BEN. But why hot water? Wouldn't cold water be better?

SYDNEY. They say hot water.

BEN. Do you have a lighter around here? I left mine in my other . . . layers, or whatever.

SYDNEY. I don't know. You can check in the kitchen. Don't smoke in the house, please.

(*BEN stops for a second and looks at her.*)

SYDNEY. I know it's cold, c'mon.

(*BEN exits.*)

JUSTIN. Why are you still in your jacket?

AARON. I'm cold. Are you unhappy with my fashion sense?

JUSTIN. You're not making it worse by being here, you know. It's just –

AARON. Awkward. Yeah. (*Pause*) I feel like Ben should be here instead.

JUSTIN. No, it's fine. I suppose he's with Sydney.

AARON. Yee-up.

JUSTIN. Is that, like, is that supposed to be secret? Should I not know?

AARON. I don't know. You both need space, but you need your friends at the same time, so.

JUSTIN. Would you consider us friends, Aaron?

AARON. Okay, don't be a dick. We're friends. Just not as close as you and Ben were or Ben and Sydney are.

JUSTIN. Ben's a good guy.

AARON. He's . . . Ben.

JUSTIN. Do you wanna talk about it?

AARON. I don't really want to, thanks. This is supposed to be about you.

JUSTIN. Are you mad at him, or something?

AARON. No. What?

JUSTIN. You're mad. I can tell.

AARON. If I was, I probably wouldn't talk about it right now, anyway.

JUSTIN. You were already going into detail earlier. It would make me feel better, please?

AARON. I said I don't want to talk about it, please and thank you.

JUSTIN. C'mon, we're not that close. You can tell me. It's how we'll get to know each other—

AARON. (*Biting*) So what exactly did you *do* to Sydney, by the way?

(*BEN enters.*)

SYDNEY. Justin said so, too, about the hot water thing.

BEN. "Oh, Justin said so," Whatever.

SYDNEY. Cool it, no pun intended, and I trust his physics better than yours.

BEN. Hey, I was in AP Physics in high school. Don't forget. That's where I met your boyfriend . . . er . . . fiancé. Wait, are you and Justin . . . ?

SYDNEY. Still dating? I guess.

BEN. Oh, alright.

SYDNEY. I'll ignore that tone, for now. You, like, bombed the AP Physics exam, anyway.

BEN. I . . . Wait, I did not!

SYDNEY. Yeah, you did. Justin told me. He said you were all beat up about it and that he took you out to Subway down the street and that you cried into your foot-long!

BEN. I mean, it was . . . that is just completely, you know . . . *god*.

SYDNEY. Don't worry about it. It was high school.

BEN. Yeah, well. Just because I'm an adult doesn't mean I don't have . . . It's not like I don't have regrets about stuff, still.

SYDNEY. Why do you keep beating yourself up about it, then?

BEN. *(Pause)* I can't believe he'd tell you that.

SYDNEY. We've been together for five years. We know everything about each other.

BEN. So, what, you're just going to forgive him?

JUSTIN. I cheated on her.

AARON. You cheated on her.

JUSTIN. Yes, yeah, I did.

SYDNEY. I suppose. I love him.

BEN. He betrayed your trust. That is so . . . I can't understand it.

SYDNEY. You can't understand it? You have got to be joking.

BEN. Look, can you not? I'm sick of you shooting me all this accusatory . . . stuff.

SYDNEY. How *can* I not? My only experience with the subject-matter of cheating is sitting right in front of me.

BEN. I never cheated on Aaron. I know what you're going to say. You're going to bring up how you picked me up from that cheap motel, and it was sketchy.

SYDNEY. Yeah, I was going to say that.

JUSTIN. It wasn't just one girl.

AARON. Excuse me?

JUSTIN. What?

AARON. No, yeah, I heard what you said. Could you say it again?

JUSTIN. There was more than one girl. It just happened.

AARON. Well, that . . . that is all just . . . really shitty, you know?

(Beat. An unsmiling silence in both rooms. JUSTIN puts his head in his hands.)

AARON. I confronted Ben about his . . . how he stayed at home all the time, and how it seemed like he never really *did* anything. We got into this whole thing about how things were tense and how he felt guilty and how our sex life had gotten boring or non-existent. We started sleeping apart . . . he felt he should sleep on the couch. Ben started leaving the house more. "To write," he said. I'd come home at night, and he wouldn't be there. I wouldn't see him for days at a time, with my job and all.

JUSTIN. Thanks for telling me.

AARON. Yeah, well.

JUSTIN. But will you tell me why you're mad at Ben?

AARON. Excuse me? I told you.

JUSTIN. You just told me you guys were having issues. You never said why you're really upset with him. I can tell. There's something else.

AARON. Fuck off. I don't need relationship advice from someone who cheats multiple times on his fiancée.

JUSTIN. *(Pause)* Yeah, well, you're going to hate me after this next part.

BEN. Aaron and I were going through some shit. I spent the night away.

SYDNEY. You were drunk, and you made me swear to never tell Aaron.

BEN. Yeah, about how much of a mess I was—

SYDNEY. About *Daniel*. (Pause) Who is Daniel?

(Beat.)

BEN. I'm going to go smoke.

SYDNEY. No, fuck that, Ben, talk to me!

(*BEN exits. Blackout on SYDNEY's apartment.*)

AARON. Are you going to tell me?

JUSTIN. I don't know if I want to, now.

AARON. How much worse can it get, at this point? Was one of the girls her mom?

JUSTIN. I just might tell you if . . . you want to tell me about why you're pissed at Ben.

AARON. NO. Stop asking.

JUSTIN. I'm finding it hard to open up to someone who won't talk to me.

(Beat. *AARON does not answer. There is a long silence.*)

JUSTIN. Sydney is pregnant. She's a couple months along. I think that's the only reason we're still together.

AARON. Bullshit.

JUSTIN. It's true.

(Pause. *AARON punches JUSTIN once, then two more times with greater force. JUSTIN does not block the blows. AARON sits down away from JUSTIN.*)

Lights up on BEN in the "outside" area in front of SYDNEY's apartment. He is smoking. SYDNEY enters with a cup of water.)

SYDNEY. Hey. (Pause) I got you a cup of cold water, if you want to try.

(*BEN takes the cup.*)

BEN. Thanks.

SYDNEY. I'm sorry about earlier.

BEN. You're fine, I'm just . . . I just don't understand.

SYDNEY. What?

BEN. Sydney, why are you still with him?

SYDNEY. Why?

BEN. It's got to be . . . haunting you. How he betrayed your trust? How do you forget that?

AARON. That is just complete bullshit. What the fuck am I even doing here, anyway?

JUSTIN. Aaron, if you're too upset, you don't have to be here to help me. I know what I did was shitty.

AARON. Well, too fucking bad. It's frigid outside.

JUSTIN. Do you want to talk about what's making you so upset?

AARON. I think it's obvious.

JUSTIN. Sydney told me about last summer, about how Ben cheated on you. Right before the weather got nasty, and we all lost power for a week?

AARON. What?

SYDNEY. I don't forget. I'll never forget. I'll just keep loving him.

BEN. That doesn't make sense. How can you look at him every day, how can you look at yourself, without thinking, "This is the one I picked. This is the one I picked to spend the rest of my life with. The one person I put all of my love and happiness and *trust* in . . . and they poisoned it, fucking *adulterated it, Sydney*" . . . ?

SYDNEY. I . . . *(Pause)* I'll just keep loving him. I will love him, I will trust him, and I will be happy.

(Beat. BEN stomps his cigarette out. BEN throws the cup of cold water in the air. It splashes unceremoniously on the pavement.)

BEN. Well, that's fucking worthless.

(BEN exits. SYDNEY watches him go, stoic. SYDNEY exits, but the lights stay up on the “outside” area.)

JUSTIN. Look, I get it okay? You might feel a little . . . deceived, but—

AARON. I feel deceived, yes. By all of this. By you, by hopes for you and Sydney, by my hopes for myself, by your relationship, by my relationship.

JUSTIN. You haven’t done anything wrong, Aaron.

AARON. Oh, I wouldn’t say that.

JUSTIN. Look, I know Ben’s perspective. It’s honestly his fault, man.

AARON. You can’t know Ben’s perspective, Justin. You don’t know him anymore. You don’t know me, either.

JUSTIN. Look, things are going to be fine for you guys. You love each other.

AARON. You want to know what made me so upset about Ben? You still want to know?

JUSTIN. You don’t —

AARON. You mentioned that big storm this summer? Well, I have this huge fear of thunderstorms. I had a bad experience camping with my dad as a kid. Our pop-up camper flipped over with us in it. Now, I shake when it’s awful outside. Ben always tells me I’m like a little dog. It’s stupid, just . . . That night, I needed Ben, and he wasn’t in the house. I waited all night, hoping he was okay. My phone died before I got signal, so I lay awake all night. Maybe I knew something was wrong, I don’t know. I just . . . I just wanted him back with me. *(Pause)* I heard Ben come home around 3:30 a.m. I pretended to be asleep. I expected him to go to the couch, but he stumbled his way through the house . . . through the dark to find me. . . . It was the first time we had shared a bed in months. And he held me like it was the last time we’d ever touch. He was crying. *(Pause)* It felt like goodbye.

(SYDNEY enters into the “outside” area. She is holding a thermos of hot water.)

JUSTIN. Goodbye? That’s why you’re upset with him? Not that he

may have cheated?

AARON. You don't have to get it, Justin.

JUSTIN. Calm down, I'm just trying to make you feel better.

AARON. You're really not, so can you stop?

JUSTIN. I'm just trying to help you. Maybe if you opened up more, you wouldn't have issues with Ben.

AARON. *Wow.* Maybe if you didn't fuck other people, you wouldn't have issues with Sydney.

JUSTIN. There's more than one problem in the room, right now. Let's talk about it.

AARON. You have got to be . . . The reason I'm here? This is *your* problem, how am I supposed to know what to say? "Good job, Justin, You cheated on your pregnant fiancée with multiple women?" I think it's obvious what you *should* have done, but we can't go back and change that now, can we? We can't change anything about that. It's all gone. You made your choice, and you said goodbye to what you had. People always say "Oh, it'll be fine once you understand what you *do* have." But what do you have? A fucked up situation that you wish never happened. What things of value? What do you have, then?

(AARON hits JUSTIN again.)

AARON. What do you have?!

(SYDNEY tosses the hot water into the air. It flashes instantly into a puff of beautiful snow. ALL pause in wonder.)

END OF PLAY

Hand-Me-Downs

Samantha Schwanke

Hand-me-downs—Most people dread them. They mean old sweat stains and overall ill-fitting clothes that you feel obligated to wear because your grandma sent them. Most people just want their own, new items that are theirs and only theirs. I've always been perplexed by the idea of not wanting something that belonged to my older brother, except perhaps for the broken muffler my parents found in one of his dresser drawers. That didn't go over well.

But out of the things that I did receive from him, my favorite items were his denim shorts. My mom made them from his jeans that became too short for him, cutting them off at the knee. But when even the shorts became too short for him, I would receive them. They were baggy, worn, and stained, but I would have it no other way. The best part was sticking my hands in the deep, lint infested pockets. They were warm, engulfing my hands in a chasm that held all of my treasures from the day: rocks, sticks, beanie babies, buttons, coins. They also had these loops on the sides that were supposed to hold hammers. I would always try to hook a hammer on mine, but it often ended in my shorts slouching awkwardly to one side, covering one of my dirt stained knees and leaving the other revealed like some sort of lone birthmark.

Their fit had benefits, though. I've always burned easily, so the more skin I kept covered in the summer, the better. Also, the loose legs allowed me to run freely. My bare feet would hit the wet, lush grass that smelled of summer, the smell of mowed grass, the humid air, the black pebbles of the hot neighborhood tar, the sticks of the woods—crisp, crunching, crushed.

Those shorts made me feel accepted and loved by my brother. I had always wanted to be one of the boys and tried my best by hiding in his shadow. Now, when I look at a picture of my brother's smiling face, I can close my eyes and feel denim slapping against my legs, grass under my feet, and my brother throwing a baseball at me, the two of us fighting over sticks with our dog, the two of us racing up and down the cul-de-sac on our Razor scooters, the two of us riding bike to a nearby playground and the smell of hot plastic and the feeling of slimy, sweaty swings as we flew higher and higher into the summer sky.

The Stars Look Down

Kim Schneider

When it comes to death, everyone thinks about how difficult the big things are and forgets how difficult the small things can be. For example, everyone hugs you the day that one of your best friends dies, but no one embraces you when you're shopping for a black dress to wear to her funeral. You'd be surprised how easy it is to hate everything you put on when you're shopping for the occasion.

"That dress fits you perfectly," your father will say, a tinge of annoyance in his voice as it's the seventeenth dress you've thrown over your body.

Like the way a bride finds the perfect dress, you think that as you zip yourself into polyester or cotton that you will look at yourself in the mirror and think, *Yes, this is what I want to wear to the funeral*. But you don't, and you know the dress looks good because your father is always painfully honest. You tug at the fabric anyways, itching at the tags and squirming like an inchworm hoping it will fall over your hips in a different fashion or that your boobs won't look so big. You look at the dressing room floor covered in black fabrics, small masterpieces some fashionista created in a far away land, and the only thing you can think of is how you should be focused on housing applications for college or which dress you'll wear to your graduation in four months, not which shoes you'll wear to a wake. Death is tricky.

When you finally settle for a dress, knowing it's not good enough, that no dress will ever be good enough for this, you place it in your closet. It hangs there like a sad slab of meat. The days blur. They pass. Soon it is Friday, and you're trying to find something appropriate to wear to the wake. What would she have wanted you to wear? The question bounces around in your muddled thoughts, but you're too tired to even think. She is eighteen. She *was* eighteen. You spent all last week staring at the ceiling until four in the

morning, wondering when that call would come, when she would take her last breath. It comes when you never expected it, as you're getting dressed for school—black tights, grey skirt, top not yet on but waiting patiently for you on the bed. Your best friend Alia will call, and you just know. You don't even need to pick up, but you do anyways because you need to hear it. She says, "Hi," and the

only thing you can think of is to say that you know. You flop down on your bed, and your head collapses into your hand. You've spent the last few weeks preparing for this moment but it hits you in ways you never saw coming. You begin to cry, and Alia is silent on the other line. You discuss what you're going to do that day, but it's all a blur. You hang up. You put on your crème long sleeve-shirt and red printed scarf, and you walk out to your father. He asks what's wrong but he already knows. He knows.

Cancer is destructive.

On our way to our fifth grade field trip destination, several kids open up their windows in the front of the bus and now the breeze surges through the aisles, in between seats and through my short brown hair. I turn to Claire next to me, both of our faces peppered with freckles and spread with excitement as we felt the crisp fall air tickle our noses.

"Are you going to do the zip line?" she asks.

"Eagle Bluff has a zip line?"

My stomach flips with excitement. In a mere few hours we would be far away from Central Park Elementary School, in the throes of nature on our class's adventure to Eagle Bluff. I can't wait.

I pull a pink Barbie camera out of my backpack that Mom had given to me for the occasion. I usually don't take pictures. When I try, I always end up cutting people in half or chopping their heads out of the frame.

An hour into the bus ride, everyone gets antsy. Girls are gossiping and boys are teasing, M&Ms are being tossed from one end of the bus to the other. Claire and I are in our own world pretending to be birds—the result of boredom and an incredible ability for self-entertainment. We test out who could distort their arms into the oddest shape of wings or make the weirdest face while singing a chirp or guffawing an awful crow's caw. The bus is too loud for anyone around to even hear us. Claire pulls out my camera and yells, "Cacaw!" as I flap my imaginary wings and waggle my tongue like a rooster.

"Your turn, your turn!" she says.

I grab my pink camera, and wind the film as fast as I can. Then, I press the lime green button and wait for the red light to turn on to let me know the flash is ready. Claire becomes a parrot, but I remember her colorful-feathered weakness—she is ticklish. I begin

poking her, and she collapses, using her backpack to shield herself. She laughs so hard her nose scrunches up, one of her eyes becomes all squinty, and her cheeks turn pink. I snap a picture, the flash illuminating a perfect image of Claire frozen in youth. Frozen in time.

“Hey,” is the only thing Emma and Karen can think of to say to me as I slam the door of the red Ford Focus.

Minutes later, we pulled up to Claire’s townhouse. Well, it had been hers. No, it *is* hers. It *was*? I didn’t like the way that sounded. She already sounded so distant.

We open the door, and the boyfriend of Claire’s mom, Dan, tells us that everyone is upstairs in Claire’s room. People are downstairs, too, the house full of mourners. We climb the two flights of stairs up to her room, the thick carpet squishing beneath my feet. It feels like a movie not reality. In the depths of my mind, I hear a director hush other actors backstage.

We enter her room, and I instantly know that the image that I’m about to see will live with me forever. The room consists solely of Claire’s family—her mother welcomes us, her older twin sisters turn a teary eye in acknowledgement, her father approaches us with tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Oh, Kim,” he cries. He’s known me for ten years. He knows I was there for Claire when he and Claire’s mother, Jane, got divorced, when Jerry came out. If you are friends with someone long enough, their family becomes your own.

I take another step into her room and Claire’s older brother, Seth, is sitting in a chair in the middle of the room. Claire was the baby. He pulled the collar of his shirt up to his mouth, as if concealing something there. There are no tears on his cheeks, just a look of absolute destruction. His features are warped but his eyes are vacant as he stares at the body on the bed. Upon closer inspection, there is tension in between his eyebrows and at the corners of his lips but in his eyes—Nothing. As his family moves around him, and I make my way to her bed, he doesn’t take his eyes off her. I start to wonder if his eyes will begin to water simply from lack of blinking. I sit down next to her and begin stroking her hand.

“Can I hug her?” I ask.

Jane nods her head.

I bend over her expecting everything to be as it always has

been. I expect to smell the scent of her Herbal Essences shampoo, which she refused to stop using even though each strand of her hair had fallen out more than a year ago. I think I smell paint—the mark of her passion for art. I expect to feel her breath, sighing slowly, or her body to be warm, soft, and comforting, the way it has been since we were seven. Some part of me still believes that when I hug her, I'll feel her body quake with goofy laughter beneath me, that I'll look up into her face and see her nose scrunch, the way it always has when she would fully smile. However, what I find is the polar opposite of anything Claire ever was.

She's lying there motionless, with a look of complacency and peace the way a battlefield looks after a war. The remnants are still clearly visible—hair loss, sickly pale skin, sunken cheekbones and the rest of her body impossibly thin from an inability to eat—like the bloodied body of a soldier waiting for burial. I fold my body over her, my ear to her chest like a child to a mother and expect these things, her warmth and her movement. But she is hard and cold the way February is in Minnesota, the constant frigid cold that is too much for even the burliest Minnesotans to bear. She is hard and cold the way she never was. As I inhale, I squeeze her stone-like body to my chest and I am racked with tremors of life. My body shudders with grief, my eyes shut tight and I hold my breath, taking solace in my personal moment with the dead.

The destroyed expression on her brothers face and the feeling of her body have haunted me ever since.

The summer a year later, Alia and I escape an awkward high school friend's party. We had used some excuse to get away. Going home your first summer after college, you realize how much people have changed and, in turn, how much you have changed.

The sassy lyrics of Beyonce fill Alia's Toyota Camry, the bass thumping in my feet, the wind whipping from one side of the car to the other, making my straight hair swarm my face and her sturdier, curly hair to wiggle in the wind. The early summer sun is just beginning to set underneath the treetops. We zip past our old high school, Roseville's biggest public park, the police station, Alia's ex-boyfriend's house—all are on the way to Lake Josephine, a familiar haunt of ours. The later hour and chilly night air of June mean no one would be on the beach.

An otter swims up near the shoreline. It pays no mind to us,

splashing playfully and floating on the water's surface as if it is sleeping or enjoying our pleasant company and conversation. Our thoughts turn to Claire.

"Do you ever feel like when we're together there's something missing?" Alia asks.

I pause.

"Yeah, I do," I say as I watch the otter float idly in the calm water. "I can't help but think that if Claire were still around, she would be here with us."

Alia and I have grown apart from many of our high school friends, so we've ended up spending a lot of time together.

"Not that there's anything wrong with the two of us," Alia says.

"I mean, I just don't think anyone is as cool as us." We both laugh.

"Right? It's just that sometimes when we're doing something like driving around Roseville like we were tonight, it's just that there's something..."

"Missing," I sigh.

Several days later, it occurs to me how odd it was for an otter to be on the shores of Lake Josephine. I have never seen anything in those waters but swimmers and the occasional sunfish. Maybe this is crazy, but I feel certain that the otter was Claire or some sort of sign from her that she was there with us somehow. I've also seen her in the strange acts of butterflies as they fly next to me or land carefully on my knee. But maybe that's crazy.

I have always found a certain comfort in nature that leads me to seek it when times are hard. Now nearing on two years since Claire's death, I revert back to my roots.

The engine of my Tahoe, affectionately named Hank, moans as I accelerate past the Winona Cemetery where ancestors have been buried for centuries, marked by the tombs and statues guarding the graves. Less than a mile past, I turn into a parking lot, twist the key and hop out. I didn't need to look at the map posted for newcomers. I've hiked this trail many times before.

I begin on the familiar path, trodden down to hard snow by people before me. The sun is shining somewhere, though the bluff shields me in shadow for the moment. The air feels clear and fresh; it pours into and out of my lungs. With each stride, my breath gets a little heavier until I reach a point of balance between fitness and

work. Inhale. Exhale.

What people don't realize about hardship is that it's healthy. It gives you motivation. Everyone wants to be happy in life, right? However, no one seems to realize that in order to be happy, you need to grow with incredible strength—like pine trees meant for life in the dead of winter. The thing about losing someone you love and grief is that it doesn't just make you unbearably sad, the type of sad where you wake up in the morning with lead in your blood, the type that anchors you to your sheets.

Losing someone you love makes you angry, makes you want to get even, drives you to be better the days that you are too weak to get out of bed. It pushes you to the limits of human existence. If there is a limit of pain and burden that one person can carry, I feel like I may have reached my limit. Knowing that I've been to hell and back gives me strength each day. I have strength. I have strength enough for this.

The snow crunches underneath my boots and snowflakes begin to fall, not in sheets but lightly like a tender caress. The skies have turned overcast and grey, but the snow catches the light and reflects it, wholesome and pure. I think of Claire. I think of what she would be doing if she were alive, where she would be, and if she would have a boyfriend. He would be one lucky man to have someone so kind, artistic, funny, and beautiful. I can't help but feel that the world has missed out on a great opportunity with her absence. I miss her all the time.

When I picture her now, she's in a little French cafe, sipping a mocha, with her latest unfinished masterpiece in front of her and paint splattered on her fingers. Maybe the Eiffel tower is in the distance and she has a mustache Band-Aid from her latest klutzy incident. She has her beautiful golden curls back, and she's healthy and laughing at the attractive French men. What would heaven be without attractive Europeans? She's happy and no longer in pain.

Claire's spirit lives on with me. I see her in paintings, the sun and the stars as they smile down on me. She visits me in dreams and I wake feeling a chilling comfort in her presence. I see her in the kindness of others and others as they visit me on shore. Her spirit lives on; her energy cannot truly die.

Somewhere In America

Abigail Derkson

In the handicap parking spot at the grocery store, Joe Jordan feels for the first time what he hasn't felt since he was a young man: needed. He pulls a crumpled list from his jacket pocket and flattens it out against his steering wheel. *Orange juice. Crackers. Children's NyQuil.* He sighs and turns the list over, in case his daughter has scribbled something else for him. He laughs. In his granddaughter's jagged print, *Oreos* is written on the back in green crayon with a smiley face. She is six, and he is sixty-five, and he wonders how long it will be before she's no longer a little girl but a young woman. He waits for the day she'll come home with a pack of Marlboros and a Mohawk even though he hopes she'll turn out nothing like her mother.

Joe stuffs the list and two twenties into his jacket pocket, grabs his cane from the backseat, and gets out of the car. The November wind burns his cheeks, and he holds onto the door panel for leverage. His knees ache, and snow starts to fall, so he takes his time getting to the grocery store. At the cross area, cars do not stop for him, but he's used to this, so he waits. Having a young child in his home has taught him a patience he did not have when raising his own children.

His grips his cane a little harder, ducks his chin to his chest, and pushes through the cross area when Mrs. Ingram, a mother of six children under ten years old, brings her minivan to a halt. He lifts his hand and smiles, and she waves. Joe can see one of the twins beating the other one over the head with a Spiderman action figure in the backseat. Joe smiles and admires her courage. The sliding doors open, and he smiles at Vinny, a stocker, who dips his mop in a water bucket.

"Good morning, Mr. Jordan!" Vinny swipes a mop over the tile floor. "How are ya?"

"Alright, kid. When you'd get back from school?"

"Just this weekend. Thought I'd pick up an extra shift, if I could."

"Georgia paying you good?"

Vinny laughs and puts his mop in the bucket, grabbing a sign for the wet floor. "Mrs. Hartman treats all of her employees right,

Mr. Jordan. You know that.”

Joe smiles. “She’s a feisty woman. That hasn’t changed.”

“You knew her?”

“Oh, yes,” He smirks and shakes his head. “I knew her alright.”

“Sounds like there’s more behind that, huh?” Vinny smirks and leans against the handle of his mop. “Got any good stories?”

“None that I can share without her killing me.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Joe laughs. “I wasn’t much older than yourself. Just a junior in college, home for weekends and breaks. She wasn’t the same person she is now, you know. Come to think of it, I’m not, either.”

“A lot’s changed since then?”

More than Joe cares to acknowledge. He lifts his cane to point at Vinny. “If you know what’s good for ya, you won’t dare ask her about the summer of ‘73.”

“Good thing I don’t know what’s good for me.” Vinny smirks. “Most of those stories include you, Mr. Jordan?”

“About 85 percent of ‘em, I’m sure.” Joe smiles. “I’ve got to get some shopping done. You stay out of trouble, you hear?”

“Me, in trouble? Nah. I’m an angel.” Vinny laughs. “You want a motorized cart today?”

“Don’t push it. I’m not that old yet.”

Vinny grabs a handheld basket and gives it to Joe. “Well, if you need anything, Mr. Jordan, I’ll be stocking some shelves. Just have someone radio for me.”

“Thanks, kid, but I think I’ll be alright.”

Joe squints under the fluorescent lights. He has come here with one goal in mind: to get in and get out. The shopping motto has served him well over the years, especially when he’s by himself or when he’s shopping the day after Thanksgiving, but today he wants to wander. He starts in the produce and touches fruit he won’t buy. Though it is not on his list, he picks up a carton of raspberries because his granddaughter will appreciate the color, and he likes the tartness of the fruit. He considers grabbing a package of peaches for his daughter, but he changes his mind when he remembers the last time he brought home something from the grocery store she hadn’t asked for. He’s sure that she’ll approve of the peaches more than she approved of the bottle of Stolli, but he won’t take his chances.

The liquor section is next, but he forces himself not to go there. He promises his daughter on most days that he won’t touch the stuff. Most days it is a promise he can keep. Today he’s not so sure, so he

does not press his luck and hobbles past it, toward the deli.

“Mr. Jordan!”

Joe nods at the woman working behind the counter. She has collected her frazzled red curls underneath a hairnet, and she smiles at him as he walks up. “Morning, Sally. Was Laura in to get a turkey yet?”

“Not on my shift, no. You want one?”

He looks down at his basket. “Not sure if I’ve got the room.” He thinks of Vinny and grits his teeth. “I’ll be back later,” he says. “Keep one cold for me, would ya?”

“You got it, Mr. Jordan.” She smiles. “Hey, did you check out the sale they’re having on flowers? Maybe Laura would like a bouquet or something nice for her birthday.”

Joe stiffens. His heart skips a beat. “Did she say that to you?”

“No, she was just in the other day. Had her nose in some roses. Said something about how it reminded her of her mother? How is Mrs. Jordan?”

“Won’t be Mrs. Jordan for much longer,” Joe says. His shoulders relax and he can breathe again. This is safer. Talking about the end of his marriage doesn’t make him feel like a failure in the same way forgetting his daughter’s birthday does. He grimaces when Sally frowns and steps back, as if he’s embarrassed her. “She and I separated a few months ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear about that. I...Does anyone know?”

“We’ve kept it pretty quiet.”

“I guess so. What, um...” She shakes her head. “Never mind. I’m sorry to hear about that, Mr. Jordan. You let me know if there’s anything my husband and I can do for you, alright?”

“Yeah,” he says, his voice cracking. “Yeah, sure.” He appreciates the small smile that Sally gives, and the way her eyes crinkle makes him think she’s close to tears. Sally does not say much besides the cordial small talk a deli worker makes with her customers, but whatever this is that has transpired between them hurts her, and he wishes he could take it back. He wishes he could take a lot of things back.

“Mr. Jordan, you okay?”

“What? Oh, yes. Yes.” He blinks quickly. “Tell your husband I say hello, would you?”

“Of course. Have a good day. Tell Laura I said ‘Happy birthday!’”

He promises he will and shuffles to the dairy section as fast as

he can. For a few seconds, his throat constricts and his chest seizes and it is a little harder to breathe, like he's just been told a loved one has been horrifically injured. He doubles over, takes deep breaths, and closes his eyes. He wants to go back into the liquor section, open the sliding door, and feel the cold wash over his face. It's all that will keep him from actually buying a bottle when what he wants right now, more than he wants to have remembered his daughter's birthday, is a drink.

"Shit." Joe whispers as Vinny walks over to him.

"You alright, Mr. Jordan?"

"You just scared the shit out of me, kid." He forces a smile.

"That part of the customer service they're teaching you nowadays?"

"You want to sit down?" Vinny takes the basket from him and grips his elbow. "Mrs. Hartman would let you use her office."

"No, no. I'll be alright. I'm okay." He sticks his hand out, but Vinny does not give the basket back. "Come on, kid. I've got things to buy."

"What things?"

"Give me the basket."

Vinny extends his arm back when Joe reaches for it again.

"I can get my own goddamn groceries. I can take care of myself, you know." He seizes the handle as soon as Vinny begins to give it back. "Why don't you go do your job instead of worrying about me?"

"Worrying about you is part of my job, Mr. Jordan. 100 percent customer satisfaction *and* safety. You don't look satisfied or safe. You look like you could cry."

"Fuck off."

Vinny's grip tightens on Joe's elbow even as he tries to shrug him off. "Mr. Jordan—"

"Let me go."

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?"

A shiver slides down Joe's spine. Joe and Vinny look up at Georgia Hartman, the owner of the store, who has just come out of the back stock area. Her arms are crossed and one of her eyebrows is raised. At sixty, she's still as beautiful as Joe remembers from '73, and he imagines what his life would have been like if he had married her instead. He likes to think it would not have turned out like this.

Joe glares at Vinny. "Look what you did, asshole. Now we're in the doghouse."

Vinny lets go of his elbow and steps away. "Ma'am, he was just—"

“Get on back to work, Vinny.”

“I was just—”

“It’s okay, Vinny.” Georgia smiles and nods to the grocery aisles. “Go on.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Georgia clears her throat and steps forward. She taps her foot against the tile floor and then meets Joe’s eyes. “Please tell me that little scene wasn’t because of a carton of raspberries?”

He looks at his basket and shakes his head. “No.”

“This isn’t the first time this has happened, Joe.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Joe says.

“Why don’t you explain it to me, then?” She unfolds her arms and slides her hands into her pockets. “Joe?” she asks when he says nothing and fidgets, staring down at his shoes. “What’s wrong?”

“I forgot Laura’s birthday.”

“What?”

“Don’t make me say it again,” Joe murmurs.

Georgia laughs. “Is that what you’ve gotten so worked up about?”

“I don’t think it’s funny!”

“Her birthday is tomorrow. You’ve gotten yourself all worked up over nothing, Joe.”

“It’s not nothing.” He cannot look at her. “I haven’t exactly been the best... To, uh, to miss her birthday...” He shakes his head and it is hard to swallow. “I can’t do that to her again. I can only push her so far, you know?”

“How are things going at home? How have you been since...?”

“Her mother left?”

Georgia nods. She reaches over and her fingers graze the sleeve of his jacket gently as she says, “I know it’s been hard on you guys. You know, if you ever need to talk...”

The hairs on the back of his neck rise and for a second he can’t breathe, but it’s a pleasant feeling, one he has not experienced in a long time. She smiles. There is nothing Joe wants more right now than to sit down with her and tell her about his life because it’s been so damn long since he’s last talked to her about anything of any real importance. He wants to tell her he misses her. He wants a lot of things. But his throat dries and he can only smile when she chuckles.

“Or, you know, maybe not,” she says, “I just thought after everything we were at least friends, you know?”

“We are.” It’s one of the only things he’s been sure of.

“How’s Laura holding up?”

“Oh, you know...I don’t think she likes living with me. Wasn’t exactly her goal in life, you know, moving back in with the old man in the same old house she grew up in.”

“You aren’t so bad.”

“One summer,” Joe says, and he smiles. “Laura would say one summer doesn’t count. You remember?”

“Oh, it was such a long time ago. I don’t even remember who I was back then.”

“You ever wonder what would have happened if we didn’t get in that car accident?”

She squints, shifts her weight from one foot to the other, and hums. “You wouldn’t have met your wife. Or had all those surgeries for your leg. Or...” She shakes her head. “I don’t know, Joe. I don’t really think about it much. You know, it’s all in the past.”

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Well, hey, you know, I better be getting back to work, but... you let me or someone know if you need something, alright? My office is just up there by the front. I’ll, uh, I’ll talk to Vinny about... you know, being too much of a help.”

“He’s alright.”

“It’s not the first time he’s overstepped his bounds,” Georgia whispers. “I’ll make sure he gives you your space. I know how much you like that.”

“I’m sorry I was such a bother.”

“Something tells me I’m one of the only women you’ve ever apologized to.”

“You aren’t wrong.”

“Same old Joe.” She laughs and Joe smiles. It’s the kind of laugh that makes him glad he gets out of bed each morning. “You let me know if you need anything?”

“I’ll manage. Thank you, Georgia.” He watches her walk away, and moments later she turns a corner aisle and is gone. This has been the extent of their relationship the past forty years. Small talk in the dairy section, or the liquor section when he used to go there often, Georgia always walking away with a smile. He is left with a tightening in his chest he can’t quite place, and he convinces himself it’s because he’s still frazzled from forgetting Laura’s birthday. But he still needs orange juice, Oreos, crackers, and Nyquil. He hasn’t picked up a single item on his list, and if he does not return home soon, Joe knows he’ll never want to go home, not when he will be

met with Laura's accusations.

He finds a carton of orange juice, pulp-free for his granddaughter, and it takes him a few minutes to find the crackers. The basket weighs him down, but his grip strengthens on the handle. He won't let himself drop it, not for anything. It'll be Vinny who comes to clean up the mess, and Joe isn't up for the I-told-you-so look he knows he will get. The NyQuil is trickier to get than Joe anticipates. Children's NyQuil is on the top shelf, just out of reach, and he has to ask a grocer for assistance. The young woman is kind, and he resents her for being taller than him as she grabs the medicine with ease and hands it to him with a smile.

"Anything else, sir?"

"No," he says and adds a mumbled, "Thanks."

Joe bypasses the self-check out line for the first cash register that is staffed by a human being. He sees the flickering "7" and hobbles toward it, grimacing as he grip threatens to loosen on the basket. He's caused himself enough embarrassment today already, and the last thing he wants is for Georgia to think he's not capable of buying his own groceries. He smiles, though, when he sees Robin behind the cash register. Joe likes the way Robin packs the groceries after she rings them up. She is the only one who actually puts the bread in with other light things, not underneath boxes of things. Because she's Georgia's granddaughter, and without a job after college graduation, she does what she can to help the family business. Joe respects that. He likes her because she's Georgia's granddaughter, she is gentle and kind, and she knows that Joe has a preferred card without having to ask. She reminds him of Laura, who Joe has not been able to understand for years.

Joe is third in line behind a family of four, the Hornbuckles: Steve, Susan, and their fidgeting twins. They have two grocery carts filled with things, because they live forty-five minutes away on a small farm and must buy things in bulk. For a second, Joe regrets getting in this line, but if the man in front of him is patient enough to wait, Joe tells himself that he can do it, too. He has lived his life like this, telling himself that if the man in front of him is strong enough to handle something, then he's strong enough, too. He sets his basket down on the ground and waits his turn.

The magazine articles have never interested him, but today he scans the front pages. *Miley and Liam split AGAIN!* and underneath it, *Does anyone really keep up with the Kardashians?* Joe frowns. He does not keep up with the lives of celebrities, but he remem-

bers how much his wife loves the gossip, and he would pick up a magazine for the sentimental value it brings him if he didn't look at the price tag. He refuses to pay four dollars for a small sentiment that won't mean anything as soon as he gets in his car.

Joe looks up just as the family pushes their two carts out of the aisle. Robin grabs a bag of chips and rings it up. "How are you— Oh."

Joe's eyebrow quirks.

Robin stares at the man, whose shoulders stiffen. He sighs.

"Hi, Robin."

"Hi," she whispers. She smiles, tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, and flattens out the hem of her shirt. "I, uh, haven't seen you in a while."

"I just got back."

Joe's mouth drops slightly. The young man, beneath a baseball cap and an unshaven face, is Paul Callahan, who Joe remembers seeing running every morning on his way home from the bars. Paul is not much older than Robin, but when he removes his hat and scratches the top of his head, Joe can see his eyes, and the dark bags underneath them, and wonders what kind of hell he's returned from.

"When'd you get back?"

Paul shrugs. "Couple of days ago."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"Yeah, well..." He puts his cap back on. "Just, you know, trying to get back to normal life. Whatever that is."

Robin grimaces. "I thought you would have called."

"I don't really want to be around anyone right now," he says and looks down at the groceries still on the conveyer belt. Robin has rung up only the chips, and Joe glances down. Paul has two cases of beer, gum, cigarettes, and a bottle of Melatonin. "You uh, you gonna...?"

"Oh! Yeah," she grabs the Melatonin. The pills rattle in her hand and she chuckles. "Sorry."

Paul clears his throat but says nothing.

Every few seconds Joe catches Robin's eyes flicker upward, just for a moment, watching Paul with timid devotion, her eyes brightening just a little when Paul looks at her. Robin's slow pace should bother Joe. But he's focused on Paul, whose jaw tightens and relaxes, and he taps his fingers against the wallet in his hands. Joe wonders if they've had sex, if that's the problem, and Robin clings too tightly to a relationship that was never meant to last. He feels

sorry for her.

She finishes ringing up the items. "\$68.17," she says.

Paul takes out his debit card. He twirls it in his fingers and swipes it along the keypad. "Can I do credit?"

Robin punches some numbers and the machine spits out a receipt. She rips it. "Do you want it in one of the bags?"

"Please."

As Robin tucks the receipt in the bottom of the bag, she asks, "What was it like?"

Joe frowns when Paul's head snaps back, as if he's caught off guard, and he meets Robin's steady gaze. They stare at each for a few moments. Joe's stomach twists, and he shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Joe suspects he's walked into something private, intimate.

Paul coughs, and he cannot look at her.

"What was it like," Robin says, quiet, uncertain. "You know, serving?" she whispers as if it's a dirty word.

It takes Joe a few moments to make the connection, and when he finally does, he feels sorry for Paul, too.

Paul looks at her finally. He shrugs. "You remember telling me about that dream you had? When you were half asleep, half awake, and you thought there was someone next to your bed and they..." His hand lunges at the side of the conveyer belt, startling Robin. "...grabbed your leg and you screamed and fell out of bed? You remember how scared you were?"

"Yes," Robin whispers. Her whole body goes rigid and her eyes begin to moisten. "It's a lot like that?"

"Something like it. Only difference is your mind eventually lets you relax. I can't tell what's a nightmare and what's not anymore." Paul grabs his all of his bags and puts them in his cart. The bottles rattle as he pushes the cart forward, and he stops at the end of the aisle, looks at Robin, whose eyes are closed, and turns back to glance at Joe. Joe meets his gaze and is stunned into silence. Paul says nothing and walks away.

When Robin reopens her eyes, her hand covers her mouth. She does not look at Joe as he places his items on the cart, silent, unsure not for the first time in his life what comes next. He clears his throat as Robin grabs the box of crackers.

"H-hello, Mr. Jordan."

"Robin?"

She does not respond and bags the crackers. She wipes her nose

on her sleeve and grabs the Children's NyQuil. "A-Any coupons today?"

"Robin."

She tucks her chin to her chest and screws her eyes shut. Her hand covers her mouth again and she takes a deep, shuddering breath.

"It's okay." He reaches across the register and presses his hand over hers, feeling tears brim in his eyes when her own tears start to roll down her cheeks. With his own children he has not known how to respond to their tears. He wants to move behind the register and hold her, letting her cry against his shoulder. He can't remember the last time he's done that with Laura. He can't tell anymore how his daughter thinks, but as he sees Robin cry, he knows he has to do something, anything. He hopes that a comforting hand is enough for now. He doesn't know what else he can do, if there's anything at all, and not being able to help her hurts him because he fears he's failed her, too.

Eventually her hand slides out from underneath his and she wipes her eyes, staining the pads of her fingers with mascara. She laughs and smudges it against her black dress slacks. "Make-up is so stupid."

"Did you know him?"

She grabs the orange juice. "Yeah. I knew him, alright." She bags the orange juice and says, "You're a kind man, Mr. Jordan. I can see why my grandmother likes you so much."

"She said that to you?"

Robin nods. "She talks about you a lot. W-will you not tell her about this, please? I don't want her to know."

"It'll be our little secret."

"Thank you."

Joe smiles and pulls out his wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

"\$16.24," Robin says. She shrugs when Joe whistles. "The raspberries are expensive, and the NyQuil was nine by itself."

"Your grandmother is going to rob me of an arm and leg one day."

"I'll tell her you said so. Anything else I can get for you? No cigarettes today?"

"N-no. I'm good today, thanks."

She hands him his change. "Do you need help getting to your car, Mr. Jordan?"

"No, thank you. I'll be fine." He grabs his grocery bags and

walks to the sliding doors. It takes him only a couple minutes to get to his car, and when he is settled, the grocery bags on the passenger seat, he slides his key in the ignition. As the car begins to warm, he rubs his hands together. He feels like he's forgetting something. He glances at the bags. Orange juice, crackers, NyQuil, and raspberries. He isn't sure what else he needs, and as he puts the car in reverse and backs out, he decides it must not be important.

Letters from the Editors

First and foremost, thank you to everyone who submitted this year. Satori would not be possible without you. The many difficult decisions that we were forced to make this year prove that Winona State is full of talented writers. In the end, there was no doubt in our minds that these works were the very best and should represent Winona State University. Congratulations to those who were accepted, and we look forward to another year and another successful magazine!

Elise Nelson

Being able to read through all the submissions and talk about them with other poetry enthusiasts was the highlight of my time working on Satori. The poetry committee was a joy this year, and I can't thank them enough for all of their hard work on this year's issue. It was a tough job narrowing down the finalists, and I would like to thank everyone who submitted this year.

Abby Peschges

The Art committee had a tough job deciding between all of the really great submissions, but ultimately rose to the occasion. I couldn't be happier with the openness and honesty of the group. Even more, thank you to those who submitted their artwork, as our section would be empty without you. Our student body is full of talent, and it was great to experience and work with the products of those skills.

Hannah Nickelson

Working on this year's issue of Satori has been nothing but enjoyable. I would like to thank those who submitted their work. Whether or not it was accepted, my committee and I enjoyed reading all twenty-seven submissions. I am also extremely grateful to have worked with such an awesome committee and fellow editors. Seriously, they all are amazing people. The creativity within our community goes beyond this book, but I hope that our finished product has showcased the quality as well as the variety of writers we have here at Winona State. Happy reading!

Kathryn Logan