SATORI

A Student Literary Magazine

2015

Winona State University
MISSION STATEMENT

In Zen Buddhism, Satori is the Japanese word for enlightenment, seeing into one’s own true nature. Since 1970, Satori has provided a forum for Winona State University students to express and share their own true nature and their creations with the university community.

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Table of Contents

POETRY

Ana Alexander  By the Lake    10
Marie Helkenn  Wholesome Solace   11
Abby Peschges  A long-faded tattoo drawn in Sharpie at confirmation camp 12
Nicholas Lee  Fall                13
Hanna Larson  The River           14
Zachary C. Virden Sandbridge Road, Virginia Beach, VA    15
Hanna Larson  A Ray Beneath the Surface  16
Kim Schneider  Limited Liberation   17
Zachary C. Virden Wolf             18
Nikki L. Erickson I Should Have Been an Actress  20
Kaysey Price  To Verb or Not to Verb  21
Abby Peschges The Hand              22
Dana Scott  Daisies                23
Brianna Skalicky Miracles Happen Every Day 24
Hanna Larson  X                     25
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abby Peschges</td>
<td>Afraid of Heights</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim Schneider</td>
<td>Kubler-Ross Model: Stage One</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zachary C. Virden</td>
<td>Fedoras</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanna Larson</td>
<td>The Windchime</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ART**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Renee Fisher</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Cockerial</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole Cullinan</td>
<td>Reveal to a Lover</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee Fisher</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Cockerial</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maire McMahon</td>
<td>Abel Tasman</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Johnson</td>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melody Vang</td>
<td>Time Traveling</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Cockriel</td>
<td>City Sketches (2014)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maire McMahon</td>
<td>Mount Cook</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Johnson</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Kohn</td>
<td>Colours of the Soul</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**PROSE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hanna Larson</td>
<td>Star Board</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha Beck</td>
<td>Do I Know You?</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Utzman</td>
<td>Glad Too</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zachary C. Virden</td>
<td>Cat Litter</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitch Johnson</td>
<td>Be Your Own Driver</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zachary C. Virden</td>
<td>A Reason to be Thankful</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby Peschges</td>
<td>Never Forget. Always Remember.</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
POETRY
Your hand slices
through the water,
sending little lacerations
surging across its surface.
But you don’t even notice
as you unaffectedly lift your arm
and flick your hand clean
of the droplets still clinging
to your fingertips,
the way I do to the rise and fall
of your voice,
which will never soften
as it shapes my name,
the way the water
curves and melts into your palm,
or the way you say hello
when she passes by you.
Wholesome Solace

Tiny dancers whirl me
In a macabre show
Carried by child’s hands and ghosts.
Like thin, shrill lightning leaving streaks
Of burnt white earth, we dance.
Silhouetted skeletons hand in hand
Wheeling in the wind.
A long-faded tattoo drawn in Sharpie at confirmation camp

on the underside of my foot reads:
GOD

My reminder of who I belong to,
and who made me.
And a notice to others:
RETURN TO IF LOST.

I sit on the park bench
on the north end of the lake.
The last light of the sun
turning to a shadow
on the eve of graduation.
His name has worn away,
and no one knows who to call
for this lost little girl
miles from her father.
NICHOLAS LEE

Fall

White dust falls from the sky,
Angled slightly to the will of the wind.
Stand there.
Warm within the layers of death that covers.
Fuzz tickling nostrils.
Each flake pecking the cheek,
Melting like a lover against warmth.
It's in these times,
When the sky falls.
A blessing, a baptism.
The holy spirit of the earth falling upon flesh.
Surrounding the ground.
These times,
Remember the cold hide inside.
The River

The great river that I know
was formed by glaciers long ago.

Icy meltwater, gushing wild,
carving the land. Now we build

our homes and cities in its vale
surrounded by bluffs of sandstone pale

sleeping giants, on their sides
waiting for the day to rise

shake off the trees and foliage cover
and lumber south and follow the river.

Its tendrils stretch, from summit to summit
from the Rocky Mountains to its

Appalachian cousins east.
The river takes from all these

lands, the poison on our farms,
that deny death, causing harm,

chemicals mixing a dead zone
potion filling the Gulf with bones

the graveyard is a hundred miles south
flowing from the river’s mouth.

Near the river’s head, our home
floats, our island city, grown

from the lumberjacks and whores of old
that’s the story I’ve been told.
ZACHARY C. VIRDEN

Sandbridge Road, Virginia Beach, VA

As the road begins it halts and stutters,
Turning this way and that
As if finding its way for the first time.
Then seemingly, for no reason, everything falls into place.
Each curve and twist gently caressing the next.
Coaxing riders to sway to and fro,
Harley’s, and Indian’s, and Hondas
Moving like the pendulum of a grandfather clock.
Each riders legs grasping tightly to the steel frames
Of their softly roaring steeds.

The road straightens and the pace quickens.
The speed limit climbing from 35 to 55.
The engines’ roars of triumph let loose
And accompany a fantastic burst of speed.
But for only a few moments is the pace wild
For just when the tachometers begin to redline
The road ends in a bumpy jutting stop.
Forcing each rider to hold steady
Against the thrashing of their bikes.

The road leaves the riders happy and calm
But unsatisfied, and slightly unfulfilled by the abrupt stop.
The riders wish the road would go on,
Or that they could go back
Like an amnesic man meeting his wife anew
And experience the thrill of the ride all over again.
A Ray Beneath the Surface

With the taste of disintegrated sugar still coating my throat, I followed my sister’s lead and submerged my hand under the surface, elbow deep. The majestic flapper skimmed under me, his pectoral fin slapping the rim of the tank as he glided away. I waved at him until he circled back for another pass beneath me again, a slick and rubbery water bird passing under the expectant palm, the ceiling of his sky.
Limited Liberation

The woman who wears a suit made of gold
She struts on spiked feet but walks on eggshells.
Eyes on her shoes: does she do what she’s told?
Thighs left uncrossed, she does not hear the trills.
If you have knowledge, it means you have power;
However if on your chest is a set of breasts,
You must only know the petals of a flower.
Your liberating mind can’t be ingested
By ignorant eyes—your skin sheathed in lace.
Those with perception see only armor,
Which puts Achilles’ breastplate in bad taste
But no stab to the heel can stop this war.
The modern trenches—streets, bedrooms, wombs:
Ignorance buries equality in tombs.
Wolf

His friends call him “Lobo”
His enemies “the Wolf”
He wears ratty clothes,
Not of cotton, but wool.

He chops wood in the morning,
Afternoons he pulls weeds.
In the evenings he drinks,
Cheap wine, but not mead.

Each day is a struggle,
Each night no release.
He works and he steals,
Mutton not beef.

His hands are quite small,
His teeth long and pointed.
When he tries with ladies,
He ends up disappointed.

One client he works for
A granddaughter she has.
Lobo thinks the child pretty,
She thinks he’s a raz.

He splits grandma’s logs
He thatches her roof
He follows the granddaughter
But she remains aloof.

The old woman is sickly
She dies in her sleep
He puts on her nightgown
A Wolf dressed as sheep
His prey comes unknowing
His moment is near
Red Riding Hood walks in
Without any fear.

He hears none of her cries
While consumed by his lust
He just takes what he wants
Defiling Red’s virginal trust.

After his crime is completed
He falls asleep on the bed
Red slips into the kitchen
While hiding her dread.

Red seeks and she searches
Checking cupboards and racks
She finds nothing useful
Until she spots Wolf’s own ax

He snores and he dreams
As Red reenters the room
He has not one notion
Of his coming doom.

Red stands over Wolf
Still in fear of the brute
But she digs for her courage
And chops off his fruit.
NIKKI L. ERICKSON

I Should Have Been An Actress

Not because of my love for film
Or my desire to role-play
But because when I often think of you
While lying in the dark
  On my side
  Legs folded
  Pressed against
  My abdomen
  Bound by my
  Chilled arms
  I see your face
And wonder if this is how I
Comforted myself in your belly
Or lay in your arms as an infant

And I cry on cue
To Verb or Not to Verb

Gossamer
In shotgun houses,  
Aging, as in,
The kind that happens after death.  
A black hole pulsing.

My limbs feel like phantoms,  
And phantoms go out on a reality limb.  
Pavlov replaced a hawk for a handsaw,  
And we just continue not noticing,  
Not listening,  
Not feeling our phantom limbs  
Going in and out of numbness  
Clawing at our legs.  
Pulsing/Not pulsing  
Gnawing/Not gnawing  
The antonym for every verb is death.
ABBY PESCHGES

The Hand

The hand waited,
ready to answer the riddle
written on the board.
“Well, maybe, but not what I’m looking for.”
The hand stopped answering
And the board quit asking.

But when the pen asked
the hand instructed,
and the paper wept,
from the journey
the board refused to go on
because logic doesn’t feel.

And when the brush called
the hand colored it
and the canvas danced
from the portrait
the board refused to see
because structure doesn’t create.

It was the hand
who made the board
but the board answered
“Well, maybe, but not what I’m looking for.”
DANA SCOTT

Daisies

He asked me
my favorite flower
and I said I don’t have one
because I didn’t want him
to buy me flowers.

Not just him,
I don’t want anyone
to buy me flowers.

I want someone
to plant flowers
within me,
water them,
stay to watch
them grow
outside of me
and never die.

Yet, he’ll never get it.
That’s probably why
he bought me flowers
that I watched die
sitting on my desk.
And I didn’t even
press the petals.
BRIANNA SKALICKY

Miracles Happen Every Day

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.
Ten years have gone by and I still can’t bring myself to sing “The Hymn of Promise” at the early bird Easter service. In the bulb, there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree.

We plant peonies and sunflowers in too-small pots near Grand ma’s garden in the summer by the lapping lake shore and pick blueberries that grow, stub born, in between the rocks that hold up the bank.

Her memory is a violet ink stain that I can’t scrub clean. I see pieces of her everywhere, in mom who sold the house in December and cried because Grandma wasn’t there for the send-off party with all the cousins and chaos. Easter was Grandma’s favorite holiday anyway.

A song in every silence, screaming at me to erase all traces and yet I am the one holding mama as she howls over the ham, seeking a hidden promise.
ABBY PESCHGES

Afraid of Heights

You put me on this stack of blocks that you insist on playing Jenga with. I have to climb up and up as each turn puts holes in the foundation of your beliefs and expectations of me.

I will fall, and it will hurt, because your pain of my imperfections will push those holes into my soul.

Catch me, instead of stepping out of the way. Soften the fall for both of us.

I’m so high up now; I can’t see your eyes. The pieces are piling up. Your hands are starting to shake.
KIM SCHNEIDER

**Kubler-Ross Model: Stage One**
Inspired by Matt Rasmussen

I discover that you are not dead.
At the foot of your grave

I buried your karaoke machine
A wordless “Goodbye Earl” leaked through the dirt,

I could hear your voice trickling upward
But only if I lay my ear to the cool dewy grass.

I hear you in my shady memory

Of a past life where Halloween meant doorbell ringing
And Christmas meant chocolate left for Santa Claus.

I dig with my fingertips, the soil crusting my nails,
Beetles scuttle like black-eyed peas on the run

I dig and dig, crazed even for a glimpse of your
Puffed eyelids and blue lips. I pry the coffin open.

In your place I find IV lines,
plastic bags of dehydrated fluid, rotten needles,

Hundreds of get-well cards you must have crawled
Through feet first to get out.

I discover you murdered your disease
And the act soil stained your clothes.

I discover your foggy breath in between rows
marked by granite announcing death.

The hole was empty.

I cannot stand here and weep.
You did not die.
Prohibition was ruled
By gangsters in fedoras
With brims tilted forward
For mysterious auras.

Movie stars and businessmen
Wore them in the forties
Brims and inch from center
Showing class for their sorties.

For long decades they hid
On the heads of the irrepressible
Tilted all the way back
Keeping men open and accessible.

They have made a comeback
Which is attributed to hipsters
The brims at all angles
Their history a whisper.

Worn now by many
Including hustlers and frauds
Their name still has meaning
As “a gift from the gods.”
The Windchime

She heard it – the wind blowing
through the sound the windchime
wasn’t making
because it wasn’t there.

From Tony Hoagland, Windchimes

When my mom got around
to hanging the windchime,
I wasn’t home.

She hung it under the screen porch,
on the cusp of the view from
my new bedroom window.

I can imagine her, dragging
the step ladder out of the closet herself,
after badgering dad to do it once, then twice.

On the third urging,
he might have done it,
but in a huff to get it done,

she scrapped the plastic feet
across the floor herself,
electric screwdriver in one hand,

wind chime under her arm.
She guided the screw as it pierced
the beam in a squealing flourish.

The metal tubes clanged
against her hips in muted lucidity
as she brought ring up and over the screw.

Free of her touch,
the pipes swung cacophonously
until they came to rest,
murmuring in the light breezes
of late summer. The cold fingers
flex, working the kinks and tingles
out after their long sleep,
whispering their content to be
reaching toward the ground again
instead of touching it.
The stems were successfully transplanted
from my childhood home in the suburbs
into my parents’ downsized
dream house in a small town.
I stay in the basement.

I came back after a stint
and heard the familiar tune
of the windchime,
the one I listened to
growing up, spending summers
in the backyard hearing the
tinkle of the metal cylinders
clink together with every puff
as I paged through chapter books.

The song of the chime
reminded me of its absence
with its comfort in the new house.
ART
UNTITLED
Abstract
NICOLE CULLINAN

Reveal to a Lover
RENEE FISHER

Untitled
DANIEL COCKERIAL

Untitled
MAIRE McMAHON

Abel Tasman
TORI JOHNSON

Fire
MELODY VANG

Time Traveling
MAIRE McMAHON

Mount Cook
TORI JOHNSON

Untitled
SARAH KOHN

Colours of the Soul
PROSE
HE CREASES OF MY wrinkled hand absorb the flimsy metal spoon as I bring the brown sludge up to eye level. My lips pucker in an irritated pout. Goddamn chocolate pudding again. I sniff it just to be sure. Yup, chocolate. Butterscotch is my favorite.

I open my mouth, jaw creaking, tongue protruding, and jab at my face. I miss. The spoon grazes my chin and jabs my neck. I bring the spoon back up for another try. Half of the pudding is missing. The sludge slides down my neck, tracing a cold path. I look around for a moment, down at my hands with the spoon and the pudding and the table in front of me with my pudding cup and my tan plate smeared with remnants of a meal and my cup with juice in it. A crossword booklet is flipped open on the table to a puzzle with my scratched and wobbly letters filling about half the black and white boxes. In my lap is a napkin. I grab it, except I forget to put my spoon down so I poke my leg, goddamnit. I put down my spoon and something touches my shoulder. It is a hand, a gold wedding band nestles between fat fingers. The face connected to the hand is a middle-aged woman, lumpy and pink, with brown hair and brown eyes. She has too much makeup on. It makes her look clumpy. The fabric of her pink scrubs crinkle like stiff plastic as she moves. She smiles at me with her lips but not her eyes and wipes my neck with a damp cloth. I frown and this makes my neck wrinkle more and she spends a lot of time trying to clean the pudding off.

“Tilt your head up, Mr. Finn.”

She grabs my chin with her pudgy fingers and lifts it up. The cloth is worn and scratchy, like it’s been through countless launderings. I try to squirm away from the damp rag, but the hold on my chin is firm. The collar of my shirt is saturated, catching the heavy drips as they trail their way down my neck.
The nurse drags the cloth under my chin and around my mouth. She wipes off the table in front of me too and walks away. My neck is sore. I look down at the table. A cup of purple juice and a tan plate with food smudges on it lay in front of me. Chocolate pudding. Butterscotch is my favorite. I take a bite, the spoon landing in my mouth. Pbbtttt the airplane lands in the hanger. The chocolate covers my throat in a layer of muck as it slides down and plops in my stomach. I put down the spoon on my tan plate and grab my cup. The juice has ice in it that smacks me in the nose as I tilt it up. Grape juice. It rinses my throat and mouth of the thick, chocolate layer. The cup clinks on the table, the ice dropping to the bottom.

I am cold and my neck is wet. Snow is on the ground outside, hard packed, like it has frozen and refrozen several times. The cars in the parking lot have a light dusting on them, but there are mounds of it piled on the curb. The cars are all cock-eyed, unable to park in straight ranks without the guidance of yellow lines. More flakes swirl in front of my face. The trees across from the parking lot are so full of snow they bend over. They must have dropped something. Behind the trees is a field, the snow flat and untouched and stretching out until my eyes lose the end of it somewhere in the distance. The parking lot outside the window looks like the cars shit all over it, the snow discolored in frozen grey-brown lumps - car potty. I like to look at the white field.

I put my hands on the armrests of my chair and plant my feet on the floor. I am cold. I have a red and grey plaid wool blanket in my room and I want it. I try to get up. My goddamn legs are stiff and feeble, two sticks trying to support the weight of the whole fuckin tree. They tremble from idleness. I have a third stick to help me walk, but I do not see it. I think I put my cane next to my chair... Half sitting half standing, I look around. The fluorescent-lit dining hall looks sick, like the whole room has jaundice, sick like most of the people here. Sick and old. Several elderlies sit at long tables, most staring with absent expressions down at their laps, others scrape their cheap cutlery
around their tan plates. One man rocks back and forth in his chair. I can hear the wood creaking with every movement. Rrrr-eeeee, rrrr-eeeee, rrrr-eeeee. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

I feel something on my shoulder. It is a hand, unblemished, unwrinkled and young.

“Mr. Finn, can I help you with something?”

The nurse that stands before me is excruciatingly tall. My neck hurts from looking up at her. She has a hold on my arm that feels like a wolf trying to give me a massage with her teeth. I lean on her. She helps me straighten up. I look up into her eyes. They’re brown with flecks of greenish-gold in them. Her face is framed by her brown and golden-streaked hair.

“I’m cold.”

“Why don’t you let me get you a blanket from your room.”

She forces me to sit down, pushing down on my shoulders. I sit back with an “Oomph.” My lungs burn and my chest moves up and down in unsure, tired shudders. I close my eyes and focus on the air going in and out of my lungs. My legs feel like overcooked noodles, a texture I am familiar with in my diet. I can’t even fuckin’ stand up on my own. I hate being old.

The tall brown-eyed woman puts my wooly blanket on my lap, tucking the edges around my thighs. The curve of her melons comes within inches of my face. I turn my head, but she pulls away, finished with her tucking. Damn. She bends down, reaching for something on the floor. A speck of white peaks out from the top of her green pants and her shirt lifts up as her arm stretches forward. A delicious woman, much too young to wear granny panties. I smile. I reach for her tooshy, already anticipating the firmness in my cupped hand... She straightens up and tucks my cane on the armrest of my chair. Damn... As she straightens up, the light from behind her makes her head look like it is embraced by a golden corona, her brown hair turning blonde.

I’m eighteen again, at my parent’s house in Ham Lake. She is seventeen or eighteen... We are finally ready. I lay her down on my bed. It is more difficult than I anticipate to get it in... But once I am in, I finish in about twenty seconds. I can see
her full face and gilded blonde hair, sweeping out from her like a halo... We were both so young, me and... and...

“Can I get you anything else?”

I blink. My head swings back and forth. The nurse pats my arm and walks away. I marvel at her extremely long legs. Ooo if I was younger I would rub my hands all up and down those legs and that snug toosh... mmm. I rub my own legs, warming them. I really hate being old.

Thirty-two Down: ‘Wrong.’ Three letters...

The crunch of snow between rotating tires and cement draws my attention outside. The sun bounces off the snow as it sets, the sky a rosy shade of sherbet. A red sedan meanders through the lot, pulling into an opening between two blanketed vans. A figure dressed in a long red coat gets out. The door fwumps shut, dislodging the snow that had accrued on the ledge of the window in a flurry. She, I think it’s a she, walks around to the side of her car and wrestles the back door open. She reaches inside and pulls out a cardboard box about the size that a microwave would come in. She teeters between the cars towards the building. I squint. Her black boots have tall heels. Idiot. Don’t slip on the ice. I chuckle at my own joke. It sounds like a huffle. Thirty-two Down. Three letters. Where’s my pen? I always do puzzles in pen.

“Looking for this? It fell on the floor.”

A slender hand with shiny red nails holds my pen out to me. The hand disappears into a red woolen sleeve and up to a slender shoulder with dirty blonde hair barely brushing the tops. The red of her coat braves the drab suffocation of the fluorescent lights. Her red-tipped hand puts the pen in the binding of the open crossword book, scraping the page as it nestles into the crack.

“Here you go, Leonard. Mind if I help you with the puzzle?”

She has freckles. Her coat hides her figure, but I think she’s thin, probably with small peaches. Her face is narrow, except her full, freckle filled cheeks. She has hazel eyes, more green than brown. Maybe she is about twenty or twenty-two. Her eyes travel down to the puzzle.

“Thirty-two Down is ‘ERR,’ by the way.”

Of course!
“How do you spell that?”
She takes the pen and scrolls the word into the little black and white squares in all caps. She pushes the booklet back to me.

“How’re you doing?”
I snatch the crossword. My eyes rove over the page and black print.
Thirty-six Down: ‘Dog breed.’
My eyes scan the puzzle for the spaces of thirty-six down. Five letters. Fourth letter, K. HUSKY. My hands grope on the table. The composite material is worn and chipped in places. My fingers run along the ragged surface, searching for the pen.

“What did you have for dinner?”
Brown sludge. Butterscotch is my favorite.
“...Did they give you orange juice? That’s your favorite.”
No... Orange juice is my favorite...
“...What kind of juice did they give you?”
“Go ahead and try it yourself.”
I flick my hand at the cup in front of me. She reaches for the glass and takes a sip. She sets the glass down with a clink.

“Grape juice.”
“I don’t like grape juice.”
“I know. I don’t like it either.”
Thirty-six Down: ‘Dog breed.’ Five letters. Fourth letter, K. HUSKY! The young lady hands me my pen. I scribble the word in the spaces and tilt the puzzle towards her, proud of my answer. She looks at me with her hazel eyes. What does she expect from me? I got the answer... I think. Thirty-seven Down: ‘Charlotte Brontë character.’ Four letters. First and last letter, ‘e.’ EYRE. I write the answer in, some of my letters don’t quite fit in the boxes.

“Both these words sound the same.” I point to the lady’s bold print and my own wobbly strokes on the page.
“Mhmm.”
She pulls a chair out from the table, the legs scraping on the carpet. She sits down, her weight making the wood scrape together in a soft squeal. Her eyes stray across my face. I lower my eyes.

“How’re you doing, Leonard?”
I shrug, a slight rise in my shoulders, and smooth the wooly, red-and-grey plaid blanket on my lap.

“I brought you some presents.”

I look up at her. She gestures with one long hand towards the brown, cardboard box at her feet. She is wearing black high-heeled boots. Stupid choice in this weather. She reaches and opens the top flap of the box and begins pulling out small packages wrapped in white tissue paper. Someone has written on them in black sharpie. She carefully places them on the table one by one, so that each one is facing me. They crinkle as she stacks one on top of the other. The one nearest to me is a lumpy package with the words: “TO: LEONARD, FROM: EMMA” written in all caps in thick, black strokes. The letters are creased because the package is squashed, like something heavy was placed on top of it.

“Since it’s almost Christmas, you can open one of the presents now if you want.” She pushes the lumpy white parcel towards me. “We can save the rest for tomorrow morning, ok?”

I reach for the white lump. The paper feels dry and it crunches as I tear it away. My fingers dig into the paper, which gives way to the soft bundle underneath, a package of new white socks. I smile. I love fresh socks. My jagged yellow toenail sticks out of a hole in one of my old socks.

“The nurses told me last time I visited that you were running out of good socks.”

“Emma.”

I hold the torn paper in my hand, piecing back together the thick, black words. The young lady leans back in her chair and closes her eyes. Crrrr-e-e-eaaaak. The corners of her mouth turn down. Her chin trembles a little. I watch her face closely. Why is she sad? I open the package of socks, stretching the plastic until it thins and rips. I tug at a pair of socks in the package until they let loose and set them on top of the table. I bend down to take off my old socks and my blanket falls on the floor. Damn.

“Let me help you.”

Her voice is hoarse, cracking on the words. She sniffs, the sound coming out wet and rough. I look up at her. She crouches next to my chair, precarious in her black high-heeled boots. Her cheeks are pink, the freckles fading in her flush. She
looks quite young, maybe nineteen or twenty years old. Her hazel eyes are wide and shiny. She helps me remove the tag on my new socks that fasten them together. She slips her pointer finger into the lip of my sock and slides one, and then the other, off. My nose twitches from the effort of not laughing. I slip on the new pair all by myself and she tucks my wooly, red and grey plaid blanket around my legs. Her hair falls in front of her face, the drape obscuring her features. I tuck the hair behind her ear. It is very soft, silky smooth. She pauses and waits for me to remove my hand before she stands up straight. She gathers the presents in her arms, adding the opened package to the top of the precarious pile. She takes a few deep breaths. Her lungs swallow the air in desperate gulps.

“I’m just going to put these in your room, I’ll be right back, ok?”

She trots away, balancing her load, past the man rocking in his chair. Rrrr-eee, rrrr-eeee. She takes a left and goes down a hallway. I look at the space where the wall opens to the hallway that leads to my room. Will she come back and help me finish my crossword puzzle?

I turn to the window. The wind lifts the snow that has sprinkled on the landscape and dashes it around the parking lot, making the little white flecks dance under the street lamps. I wiggle my toes in my new socks. I sigh, the huh lifting my shoulders and pushing against the back of my chair. I love fresh socks.

The slender, red nailed hand pats my shoulder, the pressure light. I look up at her. The freckles have returned, they stand out against her pale complexion. She curls her lips into her mouth and holds on to them with her teeth. Why is she so sad? Her eyes close. I reach across with my arm and place my hand on top of hers.

“Thank you for the socks.”

“You are very welcome, Leonard.”

I smile with my whole mouth. My cheeks push the skin around my eyes up.

“I promise I’ll visit again soon. If you’re good, I’ll bring you some pea soup from the leftover Christmas ham as a New Year’s present, ok?”

I nod.
She draws her hand out from underneath mine.
“Bye... Love you.”
She turns, her long red coat puffing out behind her as she walks. In one hand, she carries an empty cardboard box, and the other is up by her face. The door swishes shut as she exits. I am alone. A green scrubbed nurse stands in the far corner of the room, scrubbing down a table and loading dinner dishes into a brown tub. Fwump. The rush of an engine starting draws my eyes to a red sedan, lights on as it reverses out of its spot. The tires grind the packed snow as the car drives out of the parking lot. The sun has set.

I SIT ON THE hearth in my house, the uneven, cold bricks making my rear numb. The crackling flames warm my back. Piles of boxes and wrapping paper litter the floor, trash bags stuffed with hastily opened plastic packaging and discarded bows lean in the corner next to the tree. The room glows with the twinkling lights from the tree and the smiles of the people around me. A little girl, about five or six years old, bursts through the room, kicking paper and boxes out of the way in a mad flourish. She barrels towards me, blonde pigtails flapping. She jumps onto my lap. Oomph! Her green velvet dress is soft against my arms that encircle her. She smiles and laughs. She leans her head into my chest. Her hair smells like strawberries. Merry Christmas. Love you. She puts her arm around my neck, squeezing my shoulders. Her gentle hand rests on my arm. Red nails and slender fingers give me a light pinch...

“Mr. Finn?”
I start, my head coming up off my chest in a spasm.
“Wh-wha-what?”
A tall nurse with green scrubs and brown hair looms over me, her undecorated hand is on my arm.
“I didn’t mean to startle you, but you fell asleep in your chair. Would you be more comfortable in your room?”
I look up into her brown, greenish-gold eyes and bob my head up and down. She is very pretty. If I was twenty years younger... The nurse places one hand on my lower back and the other under my arm. I demand my legs to hold my weight.
They tingle, like not being careful reaching into a jar of bees and getting stung.

Eddie and Marie echo their lines from To Have and Have Not... Was you ever bit by a dead bee?... Were you? Why didn’t you bite him back?... That’s what Harry always says! ‘Cause I ain’t got no stinger...

“Where’s the movie?”

“We’re not playing a movie tonight, Mr. Finn.”

I push down and the nurse pushes on my back. My back aches, but I straighten up. The nurse unhooks the cane from around the arm rest and places the crook under my hand. I wish my hand was latched around nursey’s leg instead of this goddamn cane... My oversized, orthotic shoes thump on the floor as I step away from the table and plod across the room. The nurse has her hands on the small of my back and under my arm. We shuffle along the carpet, a five-footed creature.

You know how to whistle, don’t you, Steve? You just put your lips together and blow...

I pucker my lips together and blow.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Finn, I can’t hear you. What did you say?”

The nurse leans in, her ear close to my lips. We clomp to the opening in the wall that leads to my room and take a left. I blow.

“This is your room. We’re almost there.”

She opens the door and it swings open. She reaches around to the left of the doorway and flicks on a light. I step towards my bed on the far side of the room. A force on my arm holds me back.

”Jamies on first, Mr. Finn, and you have to go to the bathroom one more time before you can go to bed.”

A determined force pushes on my back and steers me towards another door. She opens the door and turns on the light. The sterile whiteness of the room reminds me of bleached teeth flashing behind unsmiling eyes. The nurse helps me sit on the toilet.

“No accidents today!”

She tugs my feet into a pair of pull-ups, the pad cushioning my butt and privates. The plush fleece of my blue and red Coca-Cola polar bear pajamas fits over my bulging
underpants. The nurse’s nail grazes my ankle as she puts her pointer finger into the lip of my sock...

“No!”

“...I’m sorry, I’m sorry, socks on tonight then.”

She snatches her hand away, like she had been bit. She tugs off my shirt and replaces it with a new one, head first, then each arm. I grope at the faucet and she twists the knobs for me. Water splashes on my hands and she squirts a dollop of lavender soap into them. I squeeze my hands together, and the wrinkles engross the suds. The nurse twists the knobs and the water stops. She grabs a towel. The soft fabric mops up all the moisture between the wrinkles of my hand. Lavender coats my nose and throat. The nurse guides me out of the bathroom. I turn towards my bed, the white sheets and blankets and my plump pillow. A rustle from across the room makes me turn. A pink scrubbed nurse organizes white tissue papered packages on my dresser, so that each of the black sharpied names face the middle of the room. My wooly, red and grey plaid is folded up at her feet. A jar sits open on the dresser, a few colorful tacks spill out onto the dresser top. Above the dresser is corkboard full of pictures. Each picture is of a person with a bright gold star sticker next to their face. Under each picture, a white, handwritten caption identifies each picture.

Towards the bottom of the board, a picture catches my attention. She’s a star, she’s a star on my board! I wiggle my toes in my new socks. A young lady, about twenty years old, with blonde hair and hazel eyes, poses amongst the branches of a maple tree. The sun has warmed her pale skin and her freckles completely cover her smiling face. She wears a red top. A sparkly gold star holds the corner of the picture in place. Under the picture, the caption reads in bold, capital letters:

“EMMA FINN: GRANDDAUGHTER, GRADUATION PHOTO.”
“LOOK, LOOK OVER THERE,” one man whispered loudly pointing his finger at me. The other giggled into his dirty hands. I squeeze the mop handle tighter and bring it closer to my body. I can feel their stares on me. It is constant and annoying like a judge poking at a sheep’s sides to evaluate the meat at the county fair.

Should I say something? I mop ferociously, sudsy water spilling all around. The play area is filled with crushed yellow wrappings, green boogers on the seats, stale bits of French fries on the floor, and every piece of plastic furniture is smudged with greasy ketchup covered fingerprints.

My face is a permanent fixture of disgust and hatred with my deep frown lines, prominent, like a fat line in a steak. There is a big gray stain with a reddish hue that I am unable to clean. I mop ferociously, but my arms start to become heavy.

“What I would do to that ass,” the one man drawls gesturing towards me as if I am a steer being examined at a fair auction. My tiring patience and strength run out and I drop the dirty mop and leave the play area. One time a cowboy at the local county fair thought he could get familiar with me. He limped away with a bloody nose. I relive the memory while I walk the rather long hike to the small, white room where my manger sits.

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“Patrick?” He grunts like a judge pleased with the meat selection. There are piles of cash and coins cluttered on the white shelf desk.

“What are our rules on sexual harassment?” I ask confused about the policy. The chair flips over and his hands grab my sweaty palms. “Who harassed you?” he probes as his face leans in. His breath reeks of double steak burgers I probably grilled for him. I take a step away, pulling my hands with me and safely placing them in my small black pockets.

“Just a couple of guys. I told them off though,” I lie, face reddening.
“Oh, customers? What did they say?” He asks and I quickly repeat the situation.

“I went up to them and said, ‘do I know you?’ And when they didn’t answer, I said, ‘then quit staring.’” I become aware of the lies capturing me in a cage like a meat chicken. He grins, proud of me, but then he shakes his head and looks at the clock above the desk before looking at me once more.

“Next time, come get me so I can say something,” he pleads, blue eyes blinding me with sheep dog protectiveness.

“But,” I begin as he grabs the chair from the red floor and sits on it again.

“No girl should hear that stuff about her,” he mumbles not hearing me. My shoulders sag; I am undeniably tired of this job.

Patrick returns to his money pile, whereas I returned to the playpen area to finish cleaning so I can finally escape the pen. The men are gone but they left garbage to claim their territory. There still is that smudge, refusing to go away no matter how much I scrub.

On my way home, I roll the windows down, even though it is freezing. The brutal wind blasts at me but I smile, remembering the time I threw a snowball at a bully’s face in elementary school.

Once I get home, I take two showers afterwards, scrubbing until my skin is red and raw, but I still feel stained.
CHARLIE UTZMAN

Glad Too

ALL THE SHIRTS IN your closet were too small for me, which felt strange because you had always been the bigger one. Even if they did fit, though, I wouldn’t wear any of them. They were mostly flannels and sweatshirts and some nice button-ups Mom had bought for you years ago, ones I never saw you wear. Your t-shirts, pants, and shorts were already packed up and sitting with the rest of the boxes in a cubical mound by the front door. I hadn’t been in your room for a few months, and the dust seemed thicker in the air than anywhere else in the house.

It had been more than two years since you killed yourself, and we were finally clearing out your room. At first mom acted apprehensive about it. She wanted to keep your room exactly how it you left it: your Green Day and Good Charlotte posters hanging on the wall, soccer medals dangling from the deer antlers above your dresser, a half of a burnt incense stick still sitting in your window sill. Your bed was made, though; Mom had made it for the funeral when we had all those people over.

Dad was the one who finally decided that we needed to clear it out and donate your things. He said we couldn’t leave your room like that forever. Mom and I knew he was right.

I was still taking shirts off their hangers when Mom came in the room.

“Hey,” she said softly, walking over to me. “How’s it going?”

“Oh, pretty good,” I said as I took another shirt down from its undisturbed home. “I’m almost done packing all his clothes.”

Mom nodded. “It’s pretty weird in here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think the door had been closed for a few months.”
“Well, your father just left to pick up some pizzas,” she said. “I was thinking maybe we could eat, then watch a movie or something?”

“Sure,” I said, focusing on the old green flannel I in my hands. “Hey, Mom?” I asked hesitantly. “What if we donate all this stuff to Goodwill, then in a few months I see someone walking down the hallway at school wearing one of his shirts?”

“Well,” Mom said, thinking it over. “I guess you’ll just have to either pretend it wasn’t your brother’s or accept it and try not to let it bother you.” We both stood there for a while, letting her answer soak into us.

Mom said she’d call me down when Dad got back with the pizza, then left. She oozed unease about all of this, and it was obvious to tell. It was hard for all three of us after you decided you no longer wanted to exist, we each handled your leaving differently, and Mom handled it the worst. She quit her receptionist job at Maxwell’s and just sat around home all day. I’d be at school, Dad would be at work, and Mom would be home emptily watching Days of Our Lives, re-running through her head the last day of your life and the worst day of hers.

But Dad dealt with Mom really well, gave her space to heal and everything. He even suggested we take a few vacations to clear our heads, but the thought of sitting on the beach looking at palm trees and girls in bikinis while imagining you blowing your brains out didn’t sit well with me. None of us felt like going anywhere or doing anything. I guess whoever first said that time is the best healer was right, because it’s the only thing that has helped us return to normality.

After you did it, grief counselors came to our school. Mom and Dad thought it would be good if we went and talked to a “specialist” as Dad called her, about what happened. It didn’t help much, though. Back then, I never wanted to talk about it to anyone.

I think people should go to counseling a year after someone dies, not just a few days or weeks. That way the shrinks (a title I’ve learned firsthand not to be their preferred form of address) will be able to judge your mental health and determine how well you cope with loss a lot better than when
you’re in shambles three days after your brother splatter-painted the inside of his car window with his own brain. The whole process would go a lot quicker too:

“How do you feel about your brother’s suicide?”

“Well, it happened a year ago, I cried every day, my social life crashed into inexistence, and I used to think about killing myself too, but now I just carry on like everything’s normal.”

“Well, it’s good to hear you’re doing better, probably because a year has passed and you’ve had time to cope and move on. Next patient!”

That’s just how it works. Bad things happen, time passes, and nobody ever notices the difference between the person they could have been and the person they are now.

So we came out of your suicide a functional family, living our lives in a constant tiptoe around the hole that you left and, honestly, I think we’re all still secretly afraid of falling into it again. So cleaning out your room was our next step in coming to terms with our futures without you.

“Mark, pizza’s here!” Mom called from downstairs. I had just finished folding the last item hanging in your closet, a rusty red hoodie from our high school. You wore it so much the school’s white letters had faded to an almost illegible state. In my room, above my desk, there is a photograph of us sitting on the front porch, each with an arm around each other’s shoulders. It was fall, and we were moving all the furniture into storage and decided to get a picture before we hauled the wicker couch into the garage, leaves scattered everywhere and you wearing that same red sweatshirt.

For a second I wondered if I should keep it. I’d never wear it, I knew that, but I could hang it in my closet all the same. It would fit in between my button-downs and winter jacket, and I would see it every morning while getting dressed. Then I decided against it, put your sweatshirt in the box, and carried it downstairs where it got added to our newly formed cardboard box collection.

The remainder of the evening passed by without anything-notable happening. Mom, Dad, and I ate chicken pizza with feta cheese and talked about what we could do with your soon-to-be vacant room. Dad wanted it as an office, and
I suggested we turn it into a guest bedroom. Mom shot down my idea right away though. We gave up on our discussion, then watched some football movie Dad had rented from the Redbox after we finished our pizza.

After the movie, Dad and I went up and cleared everything else from out of your room besides the mattress and your desk. We had a few good laughs when we were going through your desk drawers. At first it felt like an invasion of your privacy, but then it didn’t. In one of the drawers we found a box of unopened condoms, which Dad and I both joked about, and we found a little bit of pot in a sandwich baggy in another. Dad threw that away when I asked him if he wanted to smoke it.

“Did you ever do that stuff with him?” Dad asked.
“Yeah.” He said.
“No,” I answered, after thinking about it for a while. It had been so long I nearly forgot whether I ever had or not.
“He asked me to a few times, usually late at night when I was sleeping, but I always said no.”

“Well,” Dad said, “I guess I should think that’s a good thing.”

By the end of the night, the room was completely void of you. No wrappers littered under the bed, no socks stuffed in your drawers, no posters looking down from the ceiling. The formation of boxes by the front door had grown into a mass that resembled a barricade straight out of one of those black and white zombie films. After I placed the final box of your stuff with its companions at the front door, I took one last look around your room. It felt much less depressing when it was empty rather than when it was full of your remnants.

Okay, I need to break here. Before I write the rest of the story, I want you to know why I’m doing this. Why I’m writing a letter to my dead brother, telling you all this shit about cleaning out your old room. See, I’m not writing this for you, I’m writing it for me. I want to figure things out for myself. I want to know where we stand, you and I. You’re gone; you’re always going to be gone, but that doesn’t mean I’ll ever stop dealing with you, or ever stop thinking about you. So, I think I started the fire to escape. I think I did it to escape you.
So, that night I had a nightmare. I went to bed after Dad and I finished clearing your room, and I dreamt we were both kids again. We were swinging on that old, rusty swing set that used to be in the backyard next to the sandbox. The day was cloudy and the sky hung low to the ground as if it were about to rain and at any second I felt like Mom might appear on the back porch and call to us to stop swinging and come inside. The dream was simple, almost more of an image: you and I swinging and laughing in the backyard like we had done a million times when we were kids. I should have felt fine, except I was terrified.

When I woke up my sheets were soaked with sweat and my arms were shaking. I was full of anger and hate, and I knew what I had to do. I jolted out of my bed and sprinted for the stairs. Luckily Mom and Dad’s room is in the basement or else I would’ve woken them up for sure. It was dark in the hallway and I had no idea what time it was. My feet touched two stairs going down, and I crashed the rest of the way, hitting my head against the wall at the bottom. Frantically, I got up and reached for the nearest box to me, bringing it into my arms and holding it tight against my chest. The next thing I knew, my feet were wet and I was standing in the backyard where the swing set used to be. I put the first box down in front of me and ran back in for another one. This is how it went: back and forth in a sprint through the darkness until, crafted out of cardboard boxes and filled with everything that reminded me of you, I built a monument.

Once there were no more boxes by the front door I went to the garage and got the gasoline. Then, with unstill hands, I set fire to your monument and watched every material piece of you burn until there was nothing left except charred grass and smoldering ashes. I stood for hours, sweating by the fire, staring forward through the flames. I kept repeating to myself, if you’re gone, you’re gone, over and over until the words felt strange in my mouth.

At one point in the night, when the fire’s height was at its peak, Mom and Dad appeared on the back porch, but they left without saying anything. And I knew, secretly, they were glad too.
THE HIDDEN CORNER WAS overflowing. Overflowing with tiny rock-like particles bigger than sand but smaller than pebbles. They lay in scattered disarray around the box like corpses after a bomb’s detonation. Each one isolated, but crowded together in the manner of travelers waiting to clear TSA. They hold more variety than their cousins who still remain inside the box. Some blue with the vivaciousness of sapphire. Some white like snow but most in a range of greys that varied enough to challenge the clouds of a hurricane. They are not the fallen soldiers, but the refugees of the concentration camp that is the box. These refugees are free to continue life and find an alternate purpose elsewhere. Their cousins who remain in the box are the soldiers. Grouping together when saturated by the vile, yellow liquid that rains down upon them. These fallen soldiers lose all sense of self. Their colors run together to form a sickly shade of grey. Many are thrust away from their brothers when the brown bombs, smelling of decay and rancid cat food, strike them in meteor shower-esque waves of destruction.

Their brothers around them who survive the initial attacks are only safe for a fleeting moment. For the furred harbingers of annihilation who invade their quiet home inside the box are not yet finished with their torments. The paws of these great beasts dig into the survivors. Each shoveling wave launching the uninfected survivors at their fallen comrades. Wave upon dislodgingly detrimental wave of the survivors is thrust into the air. Only to come crashing down upon the ammonia soaked dead and succumb to the same malady which has destroyed those before them. But a select few are lucky. In the cat’s desire to thoroughly annihilate any remnants of the destruction it has wrought, a few soldiers escape. They join their brothers on the floor in freedom. At least until the thunderous cyclone of cleanliness sucks them into oblivion.
WONDER HOW IT GOT this far, how I ended up here in this muddy parking lot of a country chapel on Nowhere Street in rural Stillwater. The wheels keep spinning in the thick slop, and I hear curses come from Mario and Dylan, who push in the back. I try to explain to them that I have to be behind the wheel because the accelerator sticks in this funny way sometimes and you have to know just the right way to rev it. Besides, it is my car. I’m the driver, after all. And somewhere in the night I know J.J. sneaks around, searching for something that he thinks is there. That particular something is the reason why I am in this predicament.

“A seven foot, ganja plant, I swear,” were J.J’s words. “I swear, dude. A seven foot plant, I heard about it from my dad. He knows the guy, dude.”

“No fuckin’ way,” said Mario.

“Dude, your dad is dope,” said Dylan.

“I know right,” J.J. said, with a sly grin, “I bet we could roll like fifty blunts with it. Hey Mitch, you got a car right?”

Now, I knew where this was going to go: I had the car, therefore the freedom. Yet, I was also new to the clique, and had the pressure to conform. I’d only started smoking weed about a month ago after I was cut from sophomore basketball, and to say “no” now meant digression, meant ostracization, and meant I had to start over, all over again. Yet, I also knew that Mario, not J.J. was my real friend here, and J.J. was also the kid who’d been expelled from his school in California, my school in Woodbury, and currently, he wasn’t attending school at all.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Did you just wanna, like, take it or what?”

“Oh come on, you pussy” J.J. mocked. “Afraid you may get kicked off the squad?”

“For real, Mitch,” Mario added, “quit being a fag. You know you’re the only one with the car.”
I noticed the way Mario didn’t look at you when he pressured. I noticed J.J.’s indifference, and the way he needled my fresh wounds.

“What time do you think we’d be back,” I said, “after midnight?”

Their laughs were knife jabs. I knew I didn’t have a choice; this was the life I chose.

J.J. ISN’T BACK YET. My digital watch’s teal luminescence stains the car’s gray interior. Mario and Dylan are unrecognizable. Mud cakes their clothes, shoes, drips from their hair; I’m clean. I am the driver after all. It’s been an hour and a half since I dropped J.J. off a mile away from what he said, “had to be the house.” Open fields surround the church. They reflect pale silver in the moonlight. I swear I hear a coyote yelp.

“We need to fuckin’ call him,” I say.

“Chill out, dude,” Mario says, “what’s the rush?”

“The rush? The rush? I’m an hour past curfew. I turned my phone off so I don’t have to talk to my mom.”

“Ya dweeb,” Mario chuckles.

“Seriously, Mar, call him,” says Dylan, “it’s been awhile, he could’ve gotten caught.”

“Fine, fine, I got it, I got it.”

Phone buttons click. The dial tone hums like a Hail Mary.

I wanna buy you a draaaaank,
imma take you home with me,
money in the baaaaaaaank....

T-Pain’s synthesized voice hits my ears like a funeral dirge.


“This isn’t happening,” I say, “I’m out of here.”

“Dude!” Dylan yells, “you can’t just leave him here. Are you kidding me, we are like twenty miles away from Woodbury.”

“Don’t care, his problem.”

“Mitch, you’re being queer,” Mario scoffs. “Chill out, take a drag of this kush, it’ll all be good.”

I’ve seen the look on Mario’s face before. It’s the same look that my former teammates had given me when I’d been cut from the team, the same look J.J. gave me when I had been reluctant to drive. It’s a look I’d become used too: the rolling back of the eyes, the raising of the chin, and the pungent aroma of superiority.

“You know what, I’m good on that toke,” I say.

My car jolts into gear. I am the driver, after all.

The church steeple fades in the rearview, the cluster of houses disintegrates into the silver night, and the small bunch of woods that J.J. lays hidden in disappears when I round a bend. Above hangs the pale moon, and I wonder does it know it’s alone in the sky and that the stars aren’t really neighbors, just white dots that continually pass by, miles and miles and miles away.
A Reason to be Thankful

ONE OF THE CHILDREN were allowed to come down stairs until everyone was awake, dressed, and ready to start the day. That morning, so many years ago, my sisters and I impatiently waited at the top of the 23 stairs that led down into the living room. Standing at the top, you could just see the bottom of the stairs. Well, you could see the bottom if you cheated and leaned out over the top few steps to look around the corner of the landing that was 5 steps down. However, because of the way the old 19th century Victorian house was designed, you could not see into the living room proper until you were at least halfway down. It depended a lot on how tall you were and how quickly you bent over to take a look. That Christmas, in 1988, my father bought a camcorder and was down in the living room recording everything for posterity. It was just my father and Willie, our family tabby cat, who were allowed downstairs until everyone was ready to come down. Once my mother, always the last to be ready, especially that day when she was aware that my father was filming and had no intention of being recorded before being 100%, was ready we began our forcibly sedate trek down the stairs.

My 5 year old sister Marissa, who was the bane of my existence back then, went first, sauntering down the stairs in her overdramatic fashion, a long braid of blond hair falling over each shoulder. I think she was in shock by the amount of perfectly wrapped presents piled under the tree, because she had no expression on her face for a solid five minutes. This was tremendously unusual, for Marissa was the epitome of “drama queen.” She would do any and everything to command the attention of everyone around her. This was a rare lapse in that regard and my grandmother, as was her way, had to comment and told her to smile. It was Christmas and “Santie Claus” had come.

I was the second one down the stairs, and I knew the moment my eyes rested on the pile of presents in front of the
fireplace, that I had gotten exactly what I wanted. Looking back at the video, it is obvious to everyone that I am barely able to contain my glee. In fact, if it hadn’t been for the videotape, I would not be able to recall most of that morning because of the disproportionate amount of joy I had felt at the time.

We have always opened gifts the same way, and when we gather now that all us children are grown up, the only difference is who is there. Otherwise the same rules apply. Only one person at a time opens a present, starting with the youngest and going in ascending order of age. In the first round of gifts, everyone present opens one on their turn and then those with less skip a few turns here and there while the youngest, who always has the most to open, gets a few extra turns. But in this manner we are able to take full advantage of having the family gathered. Each present is unwrapped, shown to, and appreciated by the whole family, with the proper addition of “ohhs” and “ahhs,” and the person who gave the gift is thanked and given a hug. The intensity of the hug was directly proportionate to the excitement and pleasure it instills in whoever received it.

After a brief delay that did not bother me at the time, because I, in my youthful exuberance, already “knew” I had received what I wanted. The family began to pick through their individual piles of presents with their elaborately tied bows. We each, then, took turns opening gifts and I couldn’t tell you then, or even now, what anything I received was, because my mind still refuses, even when watching the video, to absorb what they were. I know my older sister, Becky, got a Walkman because for the next two years she was rarely without it. For me, though, I could only wrap my mind around the big, green present with its huge, red velvet bow. I knew from the first moment I had laid eyes on it that I had gotten what I wanted.

That wanting, and desiring, and waiting was something many children in the 80s can relate to. For most young boys who grew up in the 80s, there was really only one thing that they, and my 11 year-old self, would want. That thing had first been released in the U.S. for Christmas in 1985. It wasn’t the hot gift that year, but by 1986 everyone wanted one. My family was not rich. My mother worked as a secretary and my father was a U. S. Customs Inspector, so everyone in my family, children included, understood that though we weren’t starving, the best
and newest things we had to wait for. So, for three years, I asked for a Nintendo and the first two I didn’t get one, but I got a new bike the year before and a ton of smaller things that I enjoyed the year before that. But when I saw that green wrapped box with its red bow I knew it was finally my year. In my youthful mind, I had already opened it and knew what it was, so I saved it for last, knowing that it didn’t matter what else I got because my Nintendo was there, waiting for me, at the end of the morning’s festivities.

The morning flew by in a blur of elaborate bows, carefully set aside so as not to damage their beauty, and ravaged wrapping paper tossed into piles near the garbage bag. After a round or two of opening, no one truly attempted to keep the leftover wrapping paper tidy, so the neat bag for collecting simply devolved into a miniature mountain of colorful paper scraps. I was patient because I knew what was coming, and my patience was finally rewarded when I was finally down to only one present, the big, green wrapped box with the red velvet bow.

I sat there in front of the fireplace, in a Coca-Cola t-shirt and a bright red robe, and moved the box onto my lap. My parents talked, but I registered their comments as confirmation of there being a Nintendo in the box.

“This ought to blow his mind,” my father said. My mother agreed and told him “I know, this is nothing like he has gotten before.”

My excitement increased, as I finished sliding the bow off the package and I tore into the paper like a starving man at a buffet. But once the green wrapping paper was gone, I wasn’t done. Underneath the green wrapping paper, the box was wrapped in black plastic, and I had to frantically search for an edge to get ahold of. The first end I tried let me know it was a bag and I was at the wrong end for opening, so I spun it around as quickly as I could and searched for the tape that was holding it closed. I opened the bag and could see inside. I raised it higher to be certain, hiding my face from the camera.

It was not a Nintendo.

Everyone experiences let downs in their lives that change them in subtle or dramatic ways, such as: asking someone out for the first time only to be shot down, being dumped, working for years to go to a particular school only to be denied
admittance, being passed over for promotion. We all have these moments throughout our lives, most we never think about beyond how it affected us that day, but they always change us a little bit. For me, I understood, even then, that in that moment, when I looked into the bag and saw not a Nintendo box, but a box that told me I had received a model, that when completed would be a working replica of a car engine, I was never going to be the same. Still, 25 years later, when I think back, I can vividly remember the crushing mountain of emotion that went through me in those brief moments after the realization set in.

To me, it seemed that I had my face hidden by the black plastic bag for a year, when in reality I was hidden from everyone in the living room, and the camera, for just ten short seconds. I was devastated.

“What in the fuck was this?” I thought to myself, and immediately bit my lip because I wasn’t supposed to even think that word. I sat, shocked, for an endless moment and then my upbringing kicked in.

“No one can know!” I told myself. So I took a deep breath and put the best smile I could muster onto my face and lowered the bag. I took it off the box and displayed my consolation prize for everyone to see. Someone asked me what it was and even watching the video repeatedly, I couldn’t tell you who. Watching the video, I see my own face and I am back in the moment. My 11-year-old self reads exactly what was on the box so as not to seem disappointed.


I felt like a robot at the time and sound like one on video as well. There was absolutely no emotion in my voice. I had become an automaton. I looked like me, I sounded like me, but there was no more spark of youthful life inside me. My family tried to explain it to me what I had received.

“You will know how to fix a car when you are done.”
“You will understand how an engine actually works when you are done.”
“It’s a model, you have to put it together.”

None of these descriptions comforted me, nor did they decrease my disappointment.

I lowered my head onto the box and hid my face again.
“You can’t let them know!” my mind screamed to me. So I took a deep breath and sat back up with a fake plastic smile plastered onto my face again.

I could not figure out what to do with my hands. I moved them back and forth across the box, I hit myself on the head, and I even rubbed the box like I was petting a cat. Nothing I did with them helped. My mother explained that I could learn the names of all the parts of the engine and then I could teach her so she would know. I could build it as a project with my father. Thankfully, my little sister saved me by announcing she was going to open a present that she had forgotten, and as was her way, commanded everyone pay attention to her.

For the first time in my life, I understood what it meant to truly love someone you did not like. From that moment, I was always a little more understanding of my baby sister.

We broke for breakfast after that and I was able to quickly escape to my room. Once there, I put my face into my pillow and screamed in frustration, anger, disappointment, and only the gods know what else.

But it helped.

I composed myself and was able to fake my way through the rest of Christmas.
FOUR YEARS AGO, Tim Hoff brought a .22 pistol to school, shot his teacher, four students, and himself. They say he was troubled, that he was bullied, but his little brother Sammy couldn’t imagine it was as bad as his own high school experience. Tim may have been the town’s villain, but Sammy was the town’s punching bag.

His parents couldn’t afford to move, and no one wanted to buy the house. They had tried once. So Sammy chose to focus on school because it was his only way to leave Mankato, his only way to leave Minnesota and leave his brother’s memory behind.

Now, only two things stood in his way of being declared Valedictorian: Aria Johnson and Mrs. Walker’s Shakespeare final. Sammy’s future was to be determined by this single test. A test he had in two hours.

Sammy had nestled himself into the back corner of the library next to the few poetry books the school invested in. There wasn’t much foot traffic to the poetry section, making it ideal for a last-minute study session.

He had gotten through the third act of Othello in his notes when he noticed the heavy breathing from the other side of the stack of books. There wasn’t much else that distracted him more than the moist whistle of nose breathers. He tried ignoring it, but eventually his grip on his pencil was hurting his fingers. He had to turn toward the books. A pair of black square glasses briefly hovered above the third row of books before disappearing.

Sammy didn’t have time to deal with his classmates’ games. Honest Iago was more important.

He progressed from Iago to Macbeth and had gotten halfway through his Tempest notes when the bell rang. Sammy packed his things and headed to class.

The librarian, Mrs. Touler smiled as he walked past the circulation desk on his way out, “Good luck on your final, Sammy.” She seemed to be the only person at this school who
didn’t assume he was like his brother. And, she always had a book recommendation ready for him – and any other student – who asked.

“Thanks. Here goes nothing,” he said.

The hallways were the worst. The majority of students had grown accustomed to his presence, but even they still gave him sideways glances, watching, waiting for him to snap. There were the occasional freshman who saw him and gawked, not hiding their stares. Sammy made it a habit to stare at the floor, only a few inches in front of his Nikes.

Two left turns later, Sammy sat in his desk, the last row, next to the window. He lined up his two pencils at the top of his desk, held in place by the once-rectangular, pink eraser. Glancing over the notes he hadn’t had time to get to in the library, Sammy waited for his future to be passed out to the class.

HIS LIGHT AT THE end of the tunnel was going to Loyola University in Chicago. A city large enough to blend in, and a school small enough to recognize faces. He was ready to be anonymous, to not have a history.

FROM START TO FINISH, the test took him 37 minutes and 22 seconds, the second-fastest time in the class. Aria turned hers in first. Two minutes before Sammy. He hoped that meant she was reckless in answering the few questions meant to trip them up. He counted six of those in total.

During the last 12 minutes and 38 seconds of class, Sammy stared out the window, watching other students on the courtyard enjoying their lunch. Grouped into little pods of social order, they ate, oblivious to the world around them.

Only one girl sat by herself, cross-legged under the big Maple. Her back faced Sammy; her ponytail reached halfway to the ground. It wasn’t until she shifted her weight, leaning her right elbow on her knee and her temple on her fist that he
saw the corner of a book. Her finger still held the place of the previous page.

Three guys tossed a football not far from her position, a few times coming within feet of hitting her. She didn’t budge, didn’t acknowledge their presence, didn’t care that they were there. They shared a space of reprieve of classes, she in silence and the rest operating around her.

His focus interrupted only by the bell, carrying him back into the hallway.

SAMMY’S GRANDMOTHER SENT HIM a daily email to tell him about her life, what she was doing, who she was meeting, which lady was moving in on the nursing home’s newest resident of the male variety. Sammy suspected it was also to check in on him. She claimed it was because she had to make use of the computer she’d gotten from Sammy’s aunt and uncle and to make sure someone knew she hadn’t croaked in her sleep.

“Gram, that’s what the nurses are for, to contact us when we can collect our inheritance.”

“You can kid mister, but who knows how long they’ll wait to tell you. They might run experiments on me before you get the news.”

Her email was short today. How did the test go today? Thinking of you as always.

Good, I think. There were a few questions I wasn’t sure about. I’ll find out in a few days how I did. How’s Ethel doing with chasing after Mr. Brompton. Has she made any progress yet? Mom says you’re coming to graduation. Thinking of you too.

He pulled up CNN to check the news. He didn’t have Facebook, so he wasn’t up to date on all the viral videos, but he made sure to stay up to date on local, national, and world news.

He was repulsed by people’s fascination with violence, with the mentally deranged. He had to remind himself that they’re people too. Maybe that was why people were fascinated with his brother.
THE DAY AFTER THE shooting their house was egged. A week later, it was forked. A month later, it was spray painted. Four years later his house, his locker, and his new-to-him car were still subject to random acts of revenge. Now, they usually happened close to holidays or one of the dead kids’ birthdays. The worst attacks, though, came on the anniversary of the shooting.

TWO DAYS WENT BY before Mrs. Walker posted the results, before grades were finalized, before the Valedictorian was announced. Two days went by before Sammy and his parents were called into the principal’s office to discuss his speech at commencement.

Mr. Douglas was too friendly when Sammy walked in. His smile was forced, and his posture stiff. Sammy was used to Mr. Douglas’s tie being perfectly tucked into the shirt collar, but today the tie knot had been pulled loose from its collar.

Mr. Douglas waited until Sammy and his parents sat in their chairs. “I just want to say again how great it is Sammy received Valedictorian.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Yes, thank you. We’re very proud of our son’s accomplishments,” his mother said.

“Now, there are some serious concerns on the matter that we need to address. It is traditionally required that the Valedictorian makes the student speech during the commencement ceremony. However, I think you’ll agree with me that perhaps this is not the best idea, given,” Mr. Douglas cleared his throat, “the school’s history.”

Sammy’s father sat up in his chair. “You mean because of Tim.” Raising his voice and raising his chin, “Because of what Tim did.”

“Because there are members of this community who are still grieving.” Mr. Douglas shrank into his chair.

“Sammy is Valedictorian. Sammy is not his brother. He worked hard to get the grades he did. He deserves to make that speech.”

Sammy turned to his father, “Dad, it’s alright. I don’t have to do it.”
“Yes, you do.” Sammy’s father stood. “It’s time we go.” Sammy’s mother stood from her chair, using her hands on the armrests to push herself up. She hovered in front over her chair before following her husband.

Sammy hesitated, waiting in his chair, then followed his parents. He turned when he reached the door. “I lost my brother, too.”

Mr. Douglas blinked his eyes once, “I know.” With that, Sammy nodded and caught up with his parents on the way to the car.

SAMMY HATED HIS BROTHER too, hated him for what he did, hated him for giving up, hated him for leaving Sammy to deal with his mess. He hated him for not leaving a reason. No matter how hard he tried, Sammy just couldn’t understand.

SAMMY HAD BEEN WORKING on his speech for three months. Even though grades and class ranks hadn’t been decided then, Mr. Douglas called Sammy and Aria into his office. They were told to both prepare the speech, told that they were in a two-way race for first. The three months didn’t help Sammy much. In fact, he didn’t have much written at all. Draft after draft ended up being deleted from the Word document or had its icon moved into the recycling folder of his desktop.

His most recent draft didn’t fare much better. Sitting in the back corner of Caribou, Sammy was using actual pen and paper, so he got the pleasure of ripping this draft out of his notebook, crumpling it up, then throwing it into his backpack. Commencement was the day after tomorrow, and he had nothing. Nothing he could say would be good enough for his classmates, for the school board, for his family.

He really wouldn’t have minded letting Aria give her speech. Hell, he would have preferred it, but his parents didn’t get to see Tim walk at graduation. They didn’t get to see him go to his senior prom. They didn’t get to see him off to college. Sammy had to give that to them. Sammy had to give them more than the typical experience of watching their kid cross the stage.
He had to give them a moment to be proud of, a son to be proud of.

His back had been to the door, so he couldn’t see who was coming in or leaving. He didn’t see Aria and her older brother come in, order their Northern Lite Mocha and the featured dark roast of the day, didn’t see her brother spot him as they were leaving, or walk over until her brother put both hands on the side of table, leaning over him with his face inches from Sammy’s.

“What makes you think you have a right to give the graduation speech? Huh? After what your brother has put this town through? You’re just a reminder to everyone of the pain your brother caused. If you had any common decency, you would let Aria give her speech.”

Sammy kept his head down at his blank notebook.
Aria’s brother took his weight off the table, bumped into Sammy, and walked toward his sister. She followed in her brother’s wake out the door, keeping watch over her coffee except for a quick glance at Sammy as she walked through the door.

Sammy stared at his notebook until he heard the bell on the door chime. He turned his head, made sure they had left. Everyone at the tables around him looked down at their drinks, pretending they hadn’t been watching. Everyone except a girl with black, square glasses and a long pony tail draped over her shoulder.

She continued to watch him, didn’t even try to hide it, waited a good ten seconds, which felt like ten minutes to Sammy, then went back to the book half resting on her lap, half resting on the table.

Turning back to his notebook, Sammy picked up his pen but didn’t write another word. The girl was gone when he got up to leave. He was already late for dinner, and didn’t have a single word.

THE HARDEST PART ABOUT understanding why Tim took the gun to school was understanding why Mark, Tim’s best friend, was one of the victims. The police report said Mark was the first one to get shot. Maybe Mark was the one who was supposed
to die. Maybe it was then that Mr. Hoffman got involved, and that’s why he’s dead. Maybe Tim liked the rush of it. Maybe that’s why he shot every student that was in that back hallway. Maybe that’s why he shot every person who came running when they heard the gunshot. Or, maybe Tim had corralled them there, brought them there under false pretense. Maybe he brought the gun to scare them, and things went horribly wrong. Maybe he felt so guilty about what happened he shot himself too.

SAMMY’S MOTHER MADE GRILLED chicken, mashed potatoes, and grilled veggies. Sammy made it a point to always tell his mother how good everything tasted.

“Did you use a new seasoning for the chicken? I like it.”
“No, honey. Just the same as always. How’s your speech coming?”

Sammy’s dad put his fork down on the table hard enough to make a noise. “I can’t believe that damn principle thinks he can tell you what to do.”
“Well, I’m sure he’s not the only one who thinks that,” Sammy said.
“It doesn’t matter. You won that honor fair and square. You deserve to give that speech.”
“How’s it coming along, dear?”
Sammy adjusted his position. “Honestly, not that great. I don’t really know how to start.”
“It’s not how you start, son. It’s how you finish. That’s what people remember,” his dad said.

AS VALEDICTORIAN, SAMMY WON the Susan R. Perkins Memorial Scholarship. Susan’s parents were loaded and set up the scholarship to make people remember their daughter, who was killed in the shooting, a fact not lost on Sammy or his classmates.

He tried not to feel bad winning a scholarship created because of Tim, but he was not his brother. He shouldn’t have to feel guilty.
SAMMY REPEATEDLY WOKE-UP that night from a dream of giving his speech at commencement. He would stand, staring at the audience, a blank paper in front of him on the podium. Pretty soon there was a giggle, then a laugh, then someone would shout “Get off the stage,” then more would shout, and more, until he pulled the .22 out from under his robe. Screams and people ducking. The girl in the glasses stood in the middle of the graduates, book in her hand, staring at him until he woke.

BETWEEN HIS MOTHER CHECKING on his progress every 20 minutes and his dad’s banging on the bathroom sink as he attempted to fix it, there was no way Sammy could concentrate on actually writing his speech.

He wanted to avoid another run in with Aria’s brother or the countless other people in the town who felt the same, and the rain would be keeping people inside today. He figured the school would be deserted now that finals were over, mostly just faculty and staff finishing up grading.

Shrugging off his raincoat, Sammy ran into Mr. Douglas.

“Mr. Hoff, you know you’re done with all your finals, right?”

“I am, just finishing up my speech and needed some quiet to focus.”

“I see, well, I am, ah, looking forward to hearing it,” Mr. Douglas managed.

“Thanks.” Sammy started walking. “Have a good day, sir.”

“You too, Mr. Hoff.”

Sammy could hear the beep of Mrs. Touler scanning books. He was ready to ask her for her latest book recommendation, but a girl’s back and long ponytail met him instead. She didn’t notice him, so he walked past her to the poetry section.

After a good twenty minutes of crossing out word after word, sentence after sentence, Sammy was distracted by the squeaking wheels of the re-shelving cart. Maybe Mrs. Touler could help him with his writer’s block, give him some inspiration, remind him of a famous speech, a forgotten
historical figure. Sammy stood, making his way over a few rows to where the cart was poking out of the biography section.

“Mrs. Touler, I’m in great need of a,” Sammy froze by the cart, which separated him from the girl. “Oh, Sorry. Sorry.” He turned to go; his cheeks, neck, forehead, all starting to blush.

“Sammy, wait.”
He stopped, waited for her to say something.
“I’m Lisa Collins.”
“Collins?”
“Yeah. I just wanted you to know. I don’t know why, Mark,” she looked down at the book she was holding, “I don’t, I don’t know what happened, but I just wanted you to know I, I don’t blame you.”
Sammy paused, “I don’t really remember you. I mean, I remember you being at the house, but that’s about it.”
“Yeah, you were a little busy chasing Mark and Tim around, trying to get them to let you play with them to notice much else.”
“Yeah. Well, I should get back to my speech.”
“Sure. I’ll see you around.”
“Yeah.” Sammy nodded, then returned to his poetry nook. He didn’t set his pen down again until he went home for dinner.

THE MORNING OF GRADUATION, Sammy headed down for breakfast. His grandma was already eating her pancakes. Her hair was freshly curled, and her eye shadow matched the tulip pink sweater she wore.

“It’s about time you showed up. I thought I was going to have to eat your pancakes too.”
“Hey, Gram.” Sammy said, picking up his plate and loading it with small portions of everything.
“What’s the matter, son? Too nervous to eat?” His dad shoveled a forkful of pancakes into his mouth.
“You could say that.”
His mother brought another plate of pancakes to the table, “You’ll be fine, sweetheart. Just remember, take deep breaths.”
“I will.” Sammy sat listening to his grandmother gossip about the ladies cheating at Bingo.

“You have to watch Ethel. She’ll cheat like tomorrow’s her last day on earth. Did I tell you she wants a copy of your graduation photo? She says it makes her feel like you’re her grandson, too.”

“Are you sure she wants that picture, mom? Sammy looks so angry in it,” his mom said.

“Yes, I’m sure. Another photo isn’t a graduation photo now is it?”

“No, I guess not. I’ll print another one.” Sammy’s mom turned to him. “Maybe this will teach you to smile when you’re photo’s being taken. You never know who will want it.”

Sammy smiled, using a mouthful of food as an excuse. When he finished his breakfast, he excused himself. “I’m going to head to school. I’ll see you guys there.”

His mother called after him, “We’re so proud of you!”

SAMMY SAT IN THE first chair next to the stage. The superintendent was finishing up his speech, which meant Sammy was next. He could have puked three-times over while he waited.

Mr. Douglas stood when the superintendent was done talking. “Next, we’ll hear from our valedictorian, Sammy Hoff.” Sammy stood, unfolded his papers, and walked up the steps. The audience politely clapped, and his parents clapped slightly louder.

He cleared his throat and began, “Over the past four years, I have observed our class grow from gullible freshman into seniors who think they can conquer the world. Any one of us actually could conquer the world, but the thing is, most of us won’t. In fact, I doubt very many, if any at all, will make a difference on a large scale. But, that doesn’t matter because life isn’t about changing the world or about being recognized for our work. It’s more important how we affect the lives of our family, friends, and those in our community.

“I can’t change the past. I know that. I wish I could, but I do know that I can change the future. I can help my kids see the best in every situation, in every person. I can help my family see
that things aren’t usually going to be easy, but it’s worth fighting for. I can try to help show there is still good in the world, no matter how hard that is to believe.

“Not many people think I should be allowed to give this speech. They might be right, but someone told me it’s not about how you start, but about how you finish. I’ve been so focused on the starting of a new chapter in my life that I was too busy to notice how we’re finishing today. We’re finishing a moment in our lives that we can never get back. My advice to you fellow graduates, is not to look back to the start, not ahead to the start of something new, but to know when you’re finishing a big accomplishment, and recognizing the people who helped you get there, not the ones who tried to keep you away. So thank you, to our teachers, our parents, and each other for helping us graduate today and for helping us become who we are today.”

Sammy expected tomatoes or rocks to be thrown. Instead, there was silence, until he reached the top of the stairs. There was loud clapping from his parents. The rest of the audience joined in out of what Sammy assumed was courtesy.

THE NEXT MORNING, Sammy got up early and turned on his computer. He flipped to CNN to see what the world was doing. The trending news titles scrolled across the top. The third one caught his eye. Gunman’s brother wins scholarship, honoring shooting victim.

Sammy clicked the link. His brother’s face met his. Breathing through disbelief, Sammy worked his way through the article, through Susan’s smiling photo with her dog, through the detailed outline of the shooting, through the family’s account of losing their daughter, through his plans to attend Loyola University, until he got to the end of the article, which was punctuated by his own graduation photo, the afterthought to the shooting details, the last image of the article.
LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

As the Art and Design Editor of Satori 2015, I have enjoyed seeing looking at students’ art and photographary submissions. As a leader of the art committee, I’ve enjoyed discussing the pieces collaboratively. Together as a committee, we made the best decisions possibly about which submissions we would include into the publication. I’m excited about the variety of pieces we chose for the publication. Thank you to the art committee for being consistently present to give valuable feedback and opinions. To those who submitted their work, thank you for thinking of Satori.

KAYLA LANGMAID

As Editor-in-chief, I had the pleasure of reading and discussing all of the wonderful submissions with each committee. This is a truly spectacular issue, and I would like to thank everyone who submitted. I owe a lot of this year’s success to the committees and especially the editors and Dr. Eddy.

ABBY PESCHGES

Co-editing the prose section of the 2015 edition of Satori was a meaningful learning experience. Together with our team, we read and discussed each and every submission. All submissions had excellent qualities, and we were faced with the task of choosing which would appear in Satori. Thanks to our wonderful team, we were able to make these difficult decisions. The experience has been rewarding, because of our greater appreciation for the process of creating a piece of literature. We want to thank everyone who submitted a piece of prose, our entire prose committee, and Abby Peschges and Dr. Gary Eddy for making this experience a positive one.

KALIKA VALENTINE-ERICKSON & OLIVIA STOLTMAN

I would like to thank all of the talented poets who submitted their works for this year’s Satori. I enjoyed reading all of the submissions and want to thank the rest of the poetry staff for helping me to select the very best of the submissions for publication. I am grateful to our editor, Abby Peschges, and to Dr. Eddy for putting up with me during this process because being a part of the 2015 Satori has been the highlight of my time here at WSU.

ZACHARY C. VIRDEN