

Hills and Valleys

Volume X, Spring 2020



Welcome

to the tenth annual edition of the Sullivan County Council on the Arts literary magazine, *Hills and Valleys*. As usual, the talent of our Sullivan County students shines brightly in this 2020 edition.

Our format in past years also included the winners of the visual-arts awards from the annual Youth Art Exhibit. However, because of the Covid quarantine that closed the school, we were unable to hold the Exhibit. Likewise, the annual Choice of Show selection of a single artwork to be permanently displayed in the school corridor is also on hold. As a result, this edition of Hills and Valleys is without photos of student art – a sad but unavoidable omission.

Due to the length of some of the submissions this year, we do not have space to include in the print edition the many other entries, beyond the prize winners, that the judges considered worthy of inclusion. However, if you go online to our website, sullivanpaarts.org, you can read (and download) the full range of superb material entered. Next year, we hope to be back with our standard format – and perhaps even a few extras.

We're delighted that, for the first time, we have two winners from the Red Rock Job Corps Center, who earned second and fourth prizes.

The 2020 Literary Contest winners:

First Prize: Kyler Burke

Second Prize: Fin Apollo

Third Prize: Samantha Skoranski

Fourth Prize: Dashay Shields and Patrick Yonkin

Our judges for the 2020 Literary Awards:

Brenda Kiner

Ben Olena

Sarah Parrish

Cover photo by The Ancient Lady of the Creek

Magazine design by The Old Man of the Hills and his Consort

As always, our sincere thanks to high-school principal Ed Pietroski for his continuing support of our youth programs and to the high-school English Teachers who put up with our continual (if well-intentioned) badgering.

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Down in New Orleans
by Kyler Burke, First Prize
Sullivan County High School

Her pale legs dangle over the edge of the dock's rotted wooden planks. I can see the sky blue nail polish on her toes as they flick back and forth in the water.

She looks at me lazily through her cheap, off-brand sunglasses. Her mouth is quirked into a smile on this late summer day, and it looks as if there is Hellfire in those eyes.

She looks like the burning tip of a matchstick, her fire-engine red hair hanging down her back in long, curly strands. She peers over the sunglasses, her dark eyes alight with curiosity.

"If there was one place that you could go to before you died, where would you go Beanpole?" She is my best friend, and that is her nickname for me. My substantial height holds no favor to me, but plenty to her. It gives her the opportunity to dig at my lanky frame.

I take the time to think, dipping my toes in the frigid water. I waggle them back and forth, watching the distortion in the water. I stare at my reflection in the rippling tide; same long, thin nose. Same large, green eyes. Same slightly frowning face.

That is the contrast between Rose and I. She always has an answer for everything, and is always thinking about where she wants to go. Anywhere but our small town, wasting away without a purpose.

"I'd go somewhere far away from here," she says, looking quietly on to the dying sun. Her face is cast in a yellow glow, and she closes her eyes against the bright rays.

She doesn't wait for me to answer because she knows that I don't have one. I never do.

The freckles on her face dance as she laughs. She takes in my expression and she doesn't hesitate.

"Beanpole, if there was ever a place you'd go to, I think it'd be someplace warm." She closes her eyes again, lost in her own fantasy. I smile, small and stubborn, trying not to contradict her. She asks random questions like this all the time, with answers that never make sense. I'd go to someplace hotter? Hotter than Breaux Bridge, Louisiana?

I don't have an answer for her about where I'd go, but I do know that in this moment, right now, I want to be sitting in the slowly dying sun, listening to the cicadas on one of the last days of summer.

I think about Rose, and how that's not even her real name. She's never told me much about her past, and most of who she is remains in the dark. She knows everything about me, and the little town that we live in, but ever since she appeared out of nowhere two years ago, no one has any idea of the girl with the fire-engine red hair came to live in the swamps of Louisiana.

She picks herself up from the rotting wooden slats and offers her hand to me. Even though we spend most of our days in the harsh sun, she always stays pale, the blue tinge of her veins appearing on her palm. Our skin colors are so contrasted; hers fair and freckled, mine dark and worn.

We walk near the swamps, shoes dangling between our fingertips. The laces on mine tickle my leg, the frayed ends swaying in the breeze. Rose fills the silence with her empty chatter, swinging her shoes back and forth like a pendulum. Her red hair bounces with her, and it's hard to imagine her any other way than like this; full of energy and brightness.

We make it to her home, a small shack on the edge of the swamps, the wooden slats barely being held together. She throws her shoes off to the side, and I hear the dull thud of them as they hit the wall and land haphazardly on the sagging porch. She slams the screen door open, announcing her return.

"Mama, I'm home!" She looks around the living room, her eyes bright and full of curiosity. She turns her head to me.

"Do you smell that, Beanpole?" I nod my head; her mama's gumbo is the best that I've ever tasted.

She wanders around the living room, sticking her face through every entryway. She makes herself known by stomping her feet, and I can hear the wet, loud smacks as they hit the floor.

We find Rose's mama perched on one of the rungs of the back porch, cigarette hanging limply from her lips. She takes one look at us and stamps it out against the damp boards. I can hear the sizzle of it, and watch the thin streams of smoke as they dance weakly through the air. Everyone calls her Mama, even if they aren't related.

“Girls!” She rasps, her dark eyes surveying us through a mess of curls. She pulls us into a hug, her long, thin arms squeezing us. She leads us to the kitchen with stars in her eyes, her curls bouncing with excitement. Mama’s kitchen is like nothing I have ever seen. Racks upon racks of spices line the walls, and the scent of Cajun food is pungent in the air. She has empty bottles lined along the windowsill in all different colors, and when the light hits them they shine in the room in a multitude of shades.

She walks over to the pot and stirs. Her long, bright purple dress swishes when she walks.

I spot something in the deep fryer, bubbling in a layer of vegetable oil. Beignets, golden and hot, are scooped and presented on a plate. Mama hands me the powdered sugar and shakes it around like a maraca.

“Busy yourself, honey. Make use of those hands.” I take my time pouring it over the cooling dessert, thinking about the possibility of where Rose came from.

The glass bottles chime as the wind blows, clanging against one another. Rose whips her head to the side, putting an ear to the air. It’s as if she’s listening for something.

I can see the grimace on her face, the deep frown that has replaced her smile.

“Mama!” She yells.

The older woman cocks her head, raising an eyebrow.

“Don’t look to me for anything more. I provided shelter when no one else would. You must pay the price for the things that you have run from.” Mama keeps her eyes lowered to Rose, whose face has taken to a shade of red that’s darker than her hair.

Mama busies herself with food, trying to ignore the girl in front of her. Under her breath she mutters to me.

“Beanpole, I suggest you hurry on out of this house before you get caught in something that you can’t get out of.” The lights in the house flicker, and the wind rattles the bottles on the window. Angry gusts blow throughout the porous parts of the house, filling the rooms with a chill so violent that it makes me wrap my arms around myself to keep the cold out.

Rose stares at me with wide eyes.

“Mama’s right. You shouldn’t be here.” She grabs my arm, trying to pull me toward the door. I keep my feet planted right where they are, feeling the half-hearted tugs.

“What’s happening Rose? Why are you acting so strange?” I stare into her dark eyes and see the trouble lurking beneath. I see all of the things that can go wrong, and have a feeling that they will.

It starts with the chill in the room, although it’s probably more than one hundred degrees outside. The temperature keeps dropping, the goosebumps on my arms become more prominent the more I stand here.

Rose’s fingertips are ice against my skin. She digs into the soft flesh of my lower arm, and even as I try to pull away, she keeps a grip like a vice. I can feel the fear in her body, see it in the tense stance that she holds.

“He’s coming,” she whispers. I look at each of her long, light eyelashes. I watch as her eyes dart back and forth in their sockets, watching for something.

“Who? Who is coming?” The wind picks up, the trees scratching on the windowpane. The lights go dark, and all I can see is the sky outside, which is now the color of a rose. A blood red sky in which none of the birds fly, and no creatures dare to venture.

I can hear the whispers of something unknown in the air, and I stand behind Rose, trying to hide myself from whatever is coming.

“It’s going to be fine,” Rose says, but I can hear the tremor in her voice.

The ground beneath us groans, and I have the urge to back away from the spot we’re standing in. Rose pushes me further away.

“You have to go before it’s too late.” Her eyes, wide as saucers, make me want to hide, but at this point there is no use. Whatever is coming for her is also going to come for me. My legs are rooted to the ground.

One by one I can hear each lightbulb pop, hear the hissing of the stove as the dials are turned. Mama goes over and shuts off each one, her face stoic throughout all of this mess. I can hear a low humming, hear someone talking.

I can hear my name being called; I can hear it echoing throughout this small room. Rose looks over at me.

“Beanpole. Cover your ears.” Her eyes are like two hot coals as they stare at the empty space in front of us.

Plumes of purple smoke permeate the room, and it smells oddly of the bayou; of both stagnant and fresh water that sits day in and day out.

Those clouds blind me as I stand, and I can't seem to grasp where Rose is. I can't find her and Mama as this smoke covers me from head to toe.

"You're in my world now," someone whispers. I feel the brush of fingers on my shoulder blades, the ghostly whisper of the wind blowing through my hair. I stand as still as I can, trying to stay calm. Whatever this is doesn't feel fine. That touch was toxic.

The presence is dark and lingering. I can feel someone staring daggers into the back of my head. I turn around as quickly as I can, hearing the floorboards, but not quite seeing them.

I can hear this stranger shift from foot to foot, hearing the floorboards around me squeal in protest. I take my time, carefully treading on ground that should be second nature to me.

"What are you running from?" The voice is smooth like silk, making shivers run up and down my spine. I turn around, feeling that disarming gaze on me. I feel it all over, trying to put all these pieces together like a puzzle. "Your little friend has gotten herself into some mighty troublesome things. Including messing with me." The purple smoke has started to fade, and I can see the outline of a man waiting for me.

I don't notice that we're outside until the cool touch of the water hits my feet. The purple smoke curls lazily around my feet, taking residence close to the ground.

The moon and the stars are a beacon of light against the inky sky, filling all of the dark space. All I can feel is the darkness, swirling around me with its aggressive talons, sinking themselves into my skin.

Those hands are on my shoulders once more. They spin me around, and I come face to face with a pair of stunning violet eyes. My eyes widen at the person in front of me. I look behind him to find that familiar shadow of his peering over his shoulder.

I know this man; the man that's been haunting my dreams ever since I became friends with Rose.

It's the Shadow Man.

He's got large almond eyes and a catlike smile. I see the dimple in his cheek and look at the gap in his teeth. He's exactly how I remember him, only taller. He's got me beat by a few inches, and that's saying something. I wiggle my toes in the water, just as I had done earlier at the dock. I avoid eye contact with him and move away, trying to keep as much distance as possible.

"Now hold on a minute." He glides closer to me, closing the distance between us with ease. He wraps an arm around me with practiced grace, giving me a dimpled smile. It takes everything in me to try not to push away.

"What do you want from me?" I stare at him, watch that smile slowly turn more catlike. He's got beautiful midnight skin, and when he smiles I can see his even white teeth. He pokes his bubblegum pink tongue out of his mouth, biting down. I can hear his quiet chuckle.

I watch the water swirl around the Shadow Man's ankles, note the absence of fish and wildlife around us. He holds the mirth of a small child, watching the water swirl around in different shapes. He glances over at me with glee dancing in his eyes, only to see my deep frown. He produces his own frown and cocks an eyebrow at me. He tips his hat toward me, which is perched loosely on top of a mass of unruly curls. In his hand is a cane, thin and dark.

"Now don't you go runnin' away from me just yet. You're likely to get yourself lost out here." I whirl around to face him, ready to smack that crooked smile off of his face. His eyes roam the landscape around us, which looks so familiar to home.

"Where are we?"

Instead of answering me he offers a languid smile, relaxing his body over the thin stalk of his cane. He tugs at my arm, pulling me so that we're eye to eye. "You see, that's one for you to figure out. Right now, we need to find your friend Rose." When he says the name Rose it sounds like he's sucked on something sour, like he's chewing on words that don't fit quite right.

I can hear his toes squelch in the water as he moves, and I watch the cuffs of his pants turn a murky color. I wonder where the worn planks of Mama's shack went, where Mama went for that matter.

"Listen. I need to get back home, wherever that is. Now if you'll be so kind as to-" He puts a finger to my lips, silencing my request. Those violet eyes dance in front of my face, searching for something, although I'm not sure what.

I push his finger away and stand with my hands on my hips. I blow out an exasperated breath, looking at his amused face. The hat on his head casts eerie shadows over him, making him appear angular and too thin. He turns away from me, swinging his cane to and fro.

“Follow me,” he says, his voice traveling no further than a weak wisp of smoke. I reluctantly walk to him, facing the fact that I’d rather be with him than alone in this strange place. When he spots me he smiles once more, then offers his cane.

I push it away, wanting nothing to do with him and his tricks. The water dips unexpectedly, and my foot finds nothing but emptiness as I tread forward. I’m two seconds away from hitting the water, my face inches away from the scummy layer of moss on the top, when the Shadow Man’s cane reaches out and steadies me. I make eye contact with my own terrified eyes in the water, shocked to see that they aren’t the same color. Violet irises stare at me, much like his own.

“What did you do to me?” His eyes squint as he takes in my expression. He runs a hand through his curls.

“You’re changing, Beanpole. This isn’t my doing.” He turns away from me, but a surge of anger makes me want him to look at me. I didn’t ask for this. I was minding my own business, spending the last few days of summer with the only person that I would even consider to be a friend, and that was ripped away from me by someone as thin and as tall as a sugar stalk.

I grab his arm and tug him close to me, leaving no choice but for him to look at me.

“You’ve been haunting my dreams since Rose came to town, Shadow Man,” I narrow my eyes at him, “and you’ve proven to be very dangerous to be around. I want you to take me back right now, before I run off on my own.” The smile drops from his face, and for the first time, I see him become serious.

He pries his arm away from me, then dusts off his jacket with an exasperated flick of his hands.

“Trust me, there are plenty more things out here than me that are certainly more dangerous.” He motions for me to follow him, but I don’t budge. I stay planted where I am, crossing my arms over my chest.

“There is no way that I’m going with you Shadow Man.” He laughs, deep and throaty.

“I prefer to be called Shadow, you insubordinate little Cajun girl.” This shocks me into silence and he knows it. His mouth curls into a smirk.

I begrudgingly follow him, knowing very well that without him I won’t be able to find my way out of here. All we do is walk for miles on end, the sun beating down on my face. I fan myself with a sweaty hand, trying to keep some of the heat away.

“Now do you know what Rose meant when she said that you’d probably be better in someplace hotter?” I glare at him, looking into his eyes from underneath his hat. I see something hiding, but I don’t question it. Now that I look back, I do find Rose’s question quite odd, but I shake it off. He’s just trying to get into my head.

Without looking at me, Shadow takes the hat from his head and tosses it at me. I stare down at it, looking at the tiny skull at its brim.

“What’s this for?” My brow furrows.

“You looked hot,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. “I was also getting tired of the constant scowl on your face.”

I scowl harder, but put the hat over my curls. The humidity makes them frizz, and the hat barely fits over my head, but my eyes and face welcome the shade. I look to Shadow, whose hand is positioned above his eyes. His own curly hair falls over his face, and his violet eyes look murderous without the silhouette of the brim of this ridiculous hat.

“Where are we going?” I demand.

He scoffs, but doesn’t say anything. We keep walking further and further away from where Mama’s shack is supposed to be, and I wished that I had stayed put when I had the chance.

I see buildings in the distance, clouded by shadows that look familiar to the ones that crowd around Shadow’s ankles.

“The dead come to these ghost towns to be closer to the living. New Orleans is the most populated area in Louisiana.” I’ve only been to New Orleans a handful of times with my father, and they were always short and quick. We didn’t want to spend any more time there than we had to. The streets were always crowded with all different kinds of tourists during the summer season and it always made me feel nervous.

We walk until we reach the French Quarter, my feet aching and covered in mud. The fine layer of water doesn't end when we reach the city, but it does get shallower. Clouds cover the sun, so I have no more use for the hat. I hand it back over to Shadow, who gruffly takes it and places it haphazardly on top of his head. His cane whacks against the ground angrily, and I wonder what I've done to make him this way. I followed him here after he took me without permission, and barely said anything to him the whole time that we've been here.

"We've arrived, my dearest Beanpole." Somehow, I manage to catch a sort of quaver in that normally confident voice of his, and wonder if us being here has some sort of bad omen.

"Can you tell me why we're here now?" He rolls his eyes at me, exasperated.

"Is there any way that you can just hush about this for one second? I'm looking for something." I stop him by grabbing his wrist, like I did before, but his skin is shockingly hot. It scorches my fingertips and I take a step back, wary of the Shadow Man's presence.

He turns to me with fire in his eyes, the violet in them dark and nervous.

He grabs my wrist, and I feel how hot his skin is as his hold gets tighter and tighter on me.

"If I were you, Evangeline, I'd be afraid. I'd be very afraid." I gulp, trying not to look directly into his face. I try to wriggle from his grasp, but it's no use. His hand is clamped down hard, and his face looks as if it's carved from stone. I don't ask how he knows my real name, even though I know for a fact that I've never told him what it was.

"You'd be surprised what us shadows can do to humans like you." He lets go and walks off, leaving me behind. I run after him, wanting an explanation as to why he just did that, and how he knows my name.

"Shadow!" He turns to me, the anger still evident in his face. "I've done nothing to you! Why are you so angry?"

"I became angry when you befriended that Fifolet."

I crinkle my nose at him. Rose hasn't been misdirecting me at all in the time that we've been friends, and she certainly isn't from my imagination. She isn't just some random ray of light that wants to take me to my doom.

"Rose isn't dangerous at all. She wouldn't harm a fly."

Shadow offers me a small, sad smile, twisting a ring on his finger.

"Why do you think that I'm going through this much trouble to find her?"

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. I never really thought about why Shadow was so adamant about keeping me away from Rose.

"She never should've escaped from the Shadow Realm Beanpole. She's caused too much trouble for this to end well."

I put my hands on my hips, trying to make sense of all of this. If she shouldn't have gotten out, then how did she in the first place? Why did she go to me, of all people, after escaping?

"It was your fault, wasn't it?" The muscles in his back become taut as he stops. All I can hear is the calm lapping of the water as it hits our ankles and the shallow breathing coming from Shadow's mouth.

"Yes, Beanpole. I failed, just once in my long existence, and I am paying the price for it. Heavily." He sighs, running a hand over his face.

"I never intended to lose her, but she's clever. She's tricked you into so many things, and it didn't help that the voodoo woman took her in either." I scoff. Mama's hardly what you'd call a voodoo woman, and if she is, she's very good at hiding it.

He takes in the look on my face, then laughs. "You've never actually taken a look around her house? Have you never noticed the strange things that lurk around it?" Aside from alligators and the occasional crane, who's stupid enough to tread in waters infested with beasts that have mouthfuls of killer teeth. I've never seen anything out of the ordinary.

He stares at my face, trying to see something that I don't see, and he gets it. It goes off like a lightbulb in his head.

"It all makes sense," he whispers, as if I'm not standing inches away from him, hearing every word.

"What makes sense?" I reply.

He paces around me, taking in my lanky frame. Inspecting my afro with slight amusement. He takes in my eyes, which are so much like his, and he finally decides to tell me.

“You’re like me Beanpole; you’re filled with magic. I can see it hanging around you like a cloud.” I spin around, seeing if I can catch a glimpse of it myself, but see nothing but heat rays on the baking water. I can’t wrap it around my head. I can’t be like him; I’m human.

“It explains why Rose was so drawn to you, and why your eyes changed colors almost as soon as you set foot in the Shadow Realm. You’re not completely human, Beanpole, and that means you can help me find Rose.”

I purse my lips, trying to think of ways to turn him down. I know nothing about this place, or the creatures in it, and yet he thinks that I’ll be some ace at finding his missing link?

He takes my hands in his own, holding tight. No matter how much I want to pull away I can’t. It’s like I’m glued to him.

“I’ve been protecting you for over a year, not even knowing that you were like me. I made sure that you didn’t know anything about my world, and yet, you still managed to find your way here. Don’t you find that the least bit strange?”

I turn away from him, fingers twisting in his tight grasp. I try my best not to look into his eyes, which hold too much of the truth.

“Do you know who your mother is?” He whispers it like it’s some sort of secret held dear in his heart, something that I should know but don’t. I turn to face him, anger building.

“She left me when I was little. She left me with my heartbroken father and never looked back. I don’t even remember what she looks like, let alone where she went.” I can remember the smell of exhaust as she got in the car. The color of the sun, a blinding yellow-white, that seemed to cast my mother in a strange, ethereal glow. What I remember the most is the way my father held himself that day, holding on tightly to my hand, tears running down his face. He never did tell me why she left, and to this day when I ask him he closes himself off and gets this far-away look in his eyes.

He nods, almost to himself, then lets go of me.

“We’re here.” I take in the Pontalba buildings in front of us, which loom darkly above. Sitting in the shadows are beings unlike I have ever seen. Their mouths stretch into grimace-like grins, and their teeth are dripping with black ooze. Some of it falls into the water below, right in front of our feet. I watch it disperse in the water, noticing that the fish seem to shy away from it. As we make our way around, I try my best to avoid the spot where the water is darker, clouded with the poison that dripped from above.

The door sticks when Shadow tries to open it. The glass rattles through thin wooden frames, and spidery cracks mar the corners. I can’t see anything inside but the water lapping over the walls.

“Stand back,” he says, his voice low. Before I can really figure out what is going on, Shadow has taken a rock from somewhere in the water. Water drips down his arm into the sleeve of his suit. He throws it as hard as he can and glass rains all around us. Some shards cut into my face and arms, but I don’t even notice it as I take in our surroundings.

Vines wrap around chairs and lamps, they float in the water limply, and they crawl toward where Shadow and I stand. He makes me walk behind him, and as he walks into the water the vines move around him and I, unnerved with his glowing violet eyes.

The lights in this ghost world flicker to life, illuminating the water as it sways around the legs of tables and chairs. At the bar sits a shadow, its dark, dripping fingers clutching a glass filled with something dark and smoky. It downs the contents of the glass in one swallow and turns around to greet us with its phantom smile. It throws the glass at my head and I narrowly miss it before it smashes into the wall next to us. Pieces of glass stick into my back and I cry out, falling into Shadow.

He and I fall into the water, with me in his arms. He cradles me as we hit, the murky depths enclosing us in its grasp. I fumble around for something to grab onto and find a hand, but it isn’t what I expect. It’s slimy and coated in an oily film. Its skin crawls beneath my fingertips and I move my hand away, screaming. The filthy, moss-coated water filters into my mouth and I cough, trying not to inhale more.

Shadow pulls us up, his eyes a murky purple in the hazy light. With one flick of his fingers we’re surrounded in darkness once more. He covers my mouth and backs us into a corner, watching as more of the shadow beings crowd the tiny room. They sputter and hiss, their long, gangly arms gliding along the water. Their mouths gape and their eye sockets are filled with darkness.

Shadow edges his face close to mine and whispers into my ear.

“Sit still. Don’t make any noise.” I whimper when one bends down so close that I can smell the putrid odor on its breath. It growls low in its throat at the sight of Shadow’s eyes, but backs away from the light.

Their inky forms slink into a different room, and with them tendrils of smoke follow behind. I don’t realize that Shadow and I are so pressed together that our bodies are hunched and pressed into a ball. His arms are around me in a protective embrace, but once I know that the coast is clear I push his arms back. I stand, my whole body covered in water.

“What were they?” I can’t hide the small tremor in my voice, or keep the slight shaking out of my body.

Shadow eyes me as he stands, brushing the moss off of his hat. He puts it on his head and it sits there crookedly, the little animal skull smiling its gruesome smile at me.

“It’s better not to know Beanpole.” He offers his hand and I don’t take it, although I want to. This place is a wasteland, filled with things that fill me with morbid curiosity. Part of me wants to back away from it, but the other wants to delve into this without thinking about anything other than the thrill placed in front of me.

Shadow’s eyes provide enough light for us to see from as we make our way through the many rooms in the abandoned building. I watch for those shadows, my eyes wide and alert. I look to the walls and see Shadow’s purple cast against plaster and peeling wallpaper. The carpet underneath our feet squelches with the stagnant water, and my toes curl at the thought. All I can do is keep moving, hoping that we’ll find Rose in time. Before it’s too late to save her.

“She’s different here, you know.” I try not to pay attention to his words, quietly pacing behind him. He stops abruptly and I crash into his back. I huff, waiting for him to turn around and scold me, or better yet, tell me that I will not be able to handle seeing Rose as something other than the vision that I have for her.

The vines start up again, curling over light fixtures, making themselves at home in loose wooden boards. Ash coats my tongue and clouds my esophagus when I breathe. I nudge him to keep on going but he plants his feet, staying steadfast.

“You have to know that Rose isn’t here. She’s something more dangerous than you have ever known; she’s not human even if she acts and looks like it.” I cross my arms over my chest, tears clouding my vision.

“She’s got to be in there somewhere. She was there for me when no one else was. She can’t be gone.” I peer around Shadow to see a door, vines digging into the soft, water-logged wood. Its handle is rusted and limp against the frame, and a tiny rose is carved into the knob.

“If you don’t want to go in there I understand. You can stay out here while I deal with her.” With a deep shuddering breath, I reach around him and open the door before he can protest. I see nothing but darkness in front of us and look to Shadow.

“Care to shed some light on the subject?” He sighs but walks in, casting his purple glow around the room. He’s searching for something, but I don’t know what, and it brings chills to my arms.

He bends down and picks something up. He brings it back to me, twisting it between his thin fingers.

“A rose. How fitting.” He lets the fragile petals cascade to the water below. I watch as they float for one moment, then slowly sink to oblivion in the darkness.

I follow Shadow into the room, watching for any signs of Rose. I see all of the flowers and watch as they fall from rafters. Some of the petals cling to my hair, and their sickly-sweet aroma makes my stomach turn.

In the center of the room sits a girl that looks like Rose, resting peacefully on a bed of blood-red petals. Her hands are clasped together, pale and freckled, and are dripping blood. Between her pale fingers is a single rose, thorns digging into her skin.

Her face is framed by a fringe of her bright red hair, covering her eyes and nose. Her lips are quirked into a smile, playful and full of mischief. Around us I can hear the faint chatter of cicadas in the heat.

The nest of hair on top of Rose’s head writhes like snakes, twisting about her head. It curls around her softly, wrapping around her fingers, restless over her shoulders.

“We should end this as she sleeps. She’s far less dangerous in her slumber.” Shadow leaves me for a moment and I can hear the legs of a chair snapping off in the hallway. When he comes back in, his skin is pale and there’s a sheen of sweat on his upper lip and brow.

“We should do this before the shadows decide to pay us a visit,” he says with urgency. He hands me the sharpened edge of a chair leg, but I don’t take it.

“I’m not killing my best friend.” He shakes his head, exasperated.

He offers me a grim smile, retracting the stick from my periphery.

“It’s going to take a lot more than a stick to kill her.” He stands back and watches me cautiously walk toward her sleeping form. It makes me sad to see her this way, so unanimated. She was always moving around, filling empty space with her short strides or boisterous words. The smile on her face is the only thing that makes me think she’s still in there somewhere.

She’s wearing the clothing that she left my world in, but it’s been ripped and covered in mud and water. She’s soaked just like me, and she’s vibrating as if she’s cold. I want to cover her up and make her warm because I’m shivering just as hard as she is, although the sun is beating down outside. The rooms are surprisingly damp and dark, and keep out the sunlight very well.

“Don’t touch her. She’s shivering like that for a reason.” In one swift movement Shadow’s got my hand held tightly in his and he’s putting it back to my side. He takes his suit jacket off and puts it on my shoulders. He looks away, a blush spreading on his cheeks.

“You looked cold,” he mumbles.

He lets me stand there for a moment more before he moves me out of the way. I wrap the jacket around me, pulling it as close to my damp skin as possible. How it didn’t get wet when we fell in the water is beyond me. Shadow’s fingers are wrapped around the dull edge of the chair leg, and he’s twirling it around as if it’s a baton. His eyes glint darkly as he looks back at me, violet gaze full of regret.

“I’m so sorry Beanpole.” Although he said that the stick wouldn’t do any damage he tightens his grip on it and mutters under his breath. It starts to pulse and glow the same unearthly purple as his eyes and emits a lavender smoke. It travels to me and clouds my sight. All I can see is Shadow’s magic, cloaking what he’s about to do. I can see his form through the fog and try to move to it, but it’s like I’m rooted in place.

I’m filled with rage as I see him lift his weapon in the air, over my best friend. We came here to fulfill exactly what he’s doing right now, but there’s a lead weight in my stomach. I can’t sit back and watch him do this. A scream rips up my throat and I will myself to move past his magic. The purple fog doesn’t lift, but I can feel myself cut through it like a knife cuts through butter. I cry out when I see him plunge the sharp edge of the chair leg into her heart.

A blast of magic surges through me and pushes me into the water. I’m submerged for a second, seeing nothing but the faint glow of purple over the surface. I stand, my hair matted over my face. I move it out of the way and trudge to Rose and Shadow, trying my best not to go into a fit of violence and rage.

“There is no way that this can be happening.” I shove him as hard as I can, but he barely moves. His head is down, from shame or the sheer amount of effort it’s taking to keep his magic in check, I’m not sure.

I walk over to Rose, looking at the stick protruding from her chest. My hands shake as I look at her, then look back at Shadow. This has to be done. She cannot die because of something that Shadow is too afraid to face. She can’t be that dangerous. After all, she’s been sitting here this whole time, deep in a fit of sleep that seems to be endless.

“I’m sorry too Shadow Man.” He lifts his head, his eyes still glowing purple. I can see the broken blood vessels in the whites of his eyes, mingling with the violet. He looks terrified when he sees what I’m about to do.

By the time he gets to me it’s too late. I’ve already pulled the stick from her chest, and black ooze coats the front of her in a dark sludge. The rose drops from her hands and she goes limp. The magic held within the stick weakens, Shadow’s glow becoming less and less noticeable as the minutes go by.

“What have you done,” he whispers. His hands grasp at the thick mass of curls on top of his head and a sound that resembles a sob escapes his lips. He falls into the water, his eyes closing. He falls into the water, and I try to rush over to him, but a pale, ghostly hand grabs mine. I can see his chest rise and fall, but something like dread takes over my body. I sit deathly still, watching Shadow’s inanimate form in the water.

Her breathing grates on me, gravelly and dark. It doesn’t sound like Rose at all, and shivers travel up and down my spine. I turn around to face her, her eyes glaring down at me. They bleed red, which travels down her face in a torrent mixed with the bayou’s water.

“He’s right. It’s going to take a lot more than that to kill me.”

Four Poems
by Fin Apollo, Second Prize
Red Rock Job Corps Center

A Dream of Whales

You're asleep in our rickety bed
Thick curls falling across your face
The sky outside fills in pink
Spilling blue and white light over your cheeks
My adoration in a cup of water by the window
Skinny cats outside decide whether to eat after rain
Turning my back, I don't watch them
Light of my life, bark on the tree
Whale in the dark depths of the sea
That once haunted my dreams
Until I realized we were born there
And the nightmares of childhood melt into prophecy
I watch you swim too far out
Coyote, I follow you silently
Gray and gold against the shimmering
Green of fresh life, bud-speckled saplings
Would you believe me if I told you
I caught a glimpse of the future?
I've seen us through the lifetimes
Pursued by spirits and entities
As we cross the in-between lands that we must travel
In this life, I crawl in bed beside you
And watch your eyes move in sleep
Wondering, are you seeing it too?
The noise of space, that vastness
All the things we've ever been
How everything is familiar
Souls at ease in orbit
The giants in the depths, swimming always
In relentless pursuit of the end
Ancient patter of rain on young trees
New cats coming and going
Treading softly between worlds
The decay of this one always into the next
Smoke through branches, drifting
In a state of eternal passing-through
We have no fear of liminal spaces
Or of what comes next
Because it's always somehow you and me
Drifting comfortably from one life to the next
Swimming, glistening, always

Siskëwahane

The fourth oldest river in the world
She is born of ancient glaciers
Long before we were here
Or even came sliding out of the depths
I saw ghost sharks gliding silently past
I dreamed of when we go back in
We can't swim anymore
Or even eat the fish that once fed us
That we once were, before memory
Carved out in the bellies of monsters
Bit by bit eroded away to reveal
Our new home, which we eagerly tore up
Beggars can't be choosers
So we slink away hungry, wet, and warm
Now we watch new life form and pity it
I dreamed of when we go back in
We must become again or perish
You know?
I remember walking down the street
Outside my apartment, and it was yellow
Storm-like and electric in the air
A sharp whistle in the distance
Oldheads waiting on stoops and porches
Where you going to?
A four hundred mile long city block
That I will follow till the end of me
Underwater, down the alleys
Up to my ankles in it, to my knees
Lights are still on in storefronts
And I have to decide whether I can
Become again or perish
Drenched in cool damp darkness
With the sky above as it always was
You can feel it too, you know?
Up to my neck, and I'm under
I don't have any idea what comes next
I just knew we had to go back

The Life Atomic

In the grand scheme of things I am
Nothing, and what a relief
Dreams have shown me the
Atomic point of view
Maybe I fell even further down
Why parce details
I felt the red world humming around me
And knew it was incomprehensible
I was the blood in my own body
I was the mind, spirit, and soul
Dreams also told me we've met before

There's no doubt we'll meet again
Can't I just feel lucky it happened this way
At least once?
A hermit's childhood and a life in the trees
Beside the desire for a quiet life
In solitude is this romantic yen
Why not let love ebb and flow over me
Or at least sit down and dangle my feet in
How can you appreciate how complex
A life form you are
Without knowing about the
Millions of years of evolution
It took for you to get here

State of Flux

Shadows on a snowdrift
Are the color of the ocean
The noontime sun reclines overhead
A contrast between ice and heat
The same face half-exposed
To light's warmth and shade's chill
Peering through a curtain of smoke
There must be glitter everywhere
Slip-sliding uphill, and away
I'm doing the best I can
Here are the underripe fruits of my labor
The sacrifices I've made to be here
Careful plans for the future
Moored to the sky as if to join it
The candle burns so low for us here
I dream of a world more tender
I'll dig there through unyielding topsoil
To the soft underbelly
Where the soil's temperature is regulated
Here where it's comfortable and close
Privately germinate until this blows over
Crack then through my frozen ceiling
And discover the world's first night
This cloudless expanse stretches
Forever, I guess, and then some
Out past what little we can fathom
There is no curtain in the back
Behind which hides a great Being or brick wall
There is only that sonorous, bending,
Flaying darkness, the unknowable
Here and there speckled with pinpricks
Which, soaring up and out, reveal themselves
As dazzling burning bodies
Bedecked in cosmic jewels
These are our heavens
Churning and phosphorescent as they've ever been

Chaotic as the dawn of time, yet
Perfectly poised around my little world
Spider, Bull, the Women, all dancing
Straining till my neck is sore
Lest I miss a speck here or there
Rising and setting and whirling
The many-faced sisters of the sun we love
To kiss our faces and brown our skin
I stared into Orion's Belt
The swell of a hundred voices in my ears
Rarely do I feel this small
Moments cherished deeply, breathless
With anticipation and waiting
For my own body to depart then and there
To be blown to stardust, up and away

§ § §

Two poems and an essay
by Sam Skoranski, Third Prize, Sullivan County High School

What Do You Do?

What do you do
when your writing doesn't work anymore?
When your walls are crumbling and your problems are rising from the ashes,
what do you do?
Things don't feel right,
People don't feel right,
Life doesn't feel right.
I don't know what's going on with me
because honestly,
what do you do when your writing doesn't work anymore?

What's in a Name?

It's funny how names grace our presence;
come and go
hurt and heal.
Yours is my favorite word
The way it rolls off the tongue feels like laughter
And happiness
And cotton candy ice cream.
some creator put us in the same time frame.
It's strange to think how easily our worlds could have never been.
Words are funny in the way they work for or against you.
But
I know every word you speak is truth and if you urge me forward what other choice do I have but to follow?
Words and names,
And happiness and love.
What's in a name?
It's different for everyone,
But I know what's in yours.

When Asked of a Childhood Home

Wooden carved chairs could speak for hours. Broken glass doors and barn windows could laugh with me until their bellies ached with joy. My walls could scream, whether that be from happiness or anger, I'll never know. Growing up in a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere was almost like an episode of MTV's Punk'd. The memories that I hold nearest and dearest are things that the population will probably never experience. I used to laugh at the high falutin people who approach me at work, telling me how lucky I am to live here. I know I laugh and tell them I wish I didn't, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I'm always brought to the memories of the rundown old maid I was raised in.

The chairs, doors, windows and walls will always be connected. Those beautifully crafted cherry wood stools stood watching over my sister and I playing outside in the snow. They watched as we ran past those clear, yet strong doors, and they tipped over with glee when I busted right through.

Windows of a barn are like that of a lighthouse, tall and watchful, yet comforting. It's strange how when you are a young child you believe the world is malleable, able to be moved and changed with your fingertips, yet also quite constant. The idea of climbing to the top of the bright yellow stacks to just gaze out at the world seems like it was second nature, and before I even knew it, I was at the top. Damp hay and rotting wood were never smells to be afraid of, as my sister and I both laid on bales with our heads perched on the ledge of the window, watching the cars go by, if any did decide to go by.

Intuition is something that was unheard of in my seven year old mind, and foreshadowing was something only a mother could understand. A mattress and an impulse decision painted the wall of my childhood home a lovely shade crimson red. After tears, tissues, and some laughs, my nose had stopped bleeding and the wall below our staircase had an impression of my seven year old face.

Childhood memories are strange in the way that they bounce back to you. Every wooden chair reminds you of Rosenberry Hill Road, and all the glass doors seem like they are just dying to be broken.

§ § §

I Am Pain **by Dashay Shields, Fourth Prize** **Red Rock Job Corps Center**

When I was conceived,
I was pain.
My mother knew she couldn't do it alone.
Pain.
I broke my first heart before mine was even fully developed.

When I was born,
I was pain.
Both physical and emotional.
Physically, I caused my mother
36 hours of excruciating pain.
When she looked around the room
and my father wasn't there, she felt alone.
Pain.
I've already broken more of her heart.

When I was a child,
I was pain.
Always a brat.
My words cut like glass when things didn't go my way.

All anyone ever did was try to help me.
And all I did was cause pain.
I've damaged at least five hearts at this point.

As a teen,
I was pain.
Hurting everyone with my lies.
Never amounting up to anyone's expectations.
Always making up excuses.
A mess.
I'm a walking mess.
I'm walking pain.
Dishing out everything
I feel.

I'm a monster.
I don't deserve this beautiful life.
I don't deserve happiness,
I ruin it every time.
I deserve pain.
I deserve death.
I deserve darkness.

I'm sorry
for hurting others.
For never being enough.
For being a liar.
For the heartbreaks.

I am pain.
Pain is me.

And I'm sorry, for the pain that this
is about to cause.

§ § §

Short Story and Poem
by Patrick Yonkin, Fourth Prize
Sullivan County High School

The Clearing

I came home from school, and I saw my father's truck in the driveway. *Great, he's home.*, I thought as I walked through the door. As I open the door, he yells, "Marcus! Get your ass in here! Now!" I walk into the living room. There is my father, sitting in his chair, drunk as ever.

"Whatcha need Dad?" I say with the smallest amount of venom in my words. He looks at me. A grin appears on his face. He stands up, and reaches into his pocket. He pulls out his wallet, and hands me a twenty.

"Go to the corner store, and get me a pack of smokes, and a twelve pack." I nod to him, and head out the door. I walk down the street to the store. I open the door, and head inside. "Teddy, my Dad sent me for his usual." Teddy nods. He goes to the back, and comes back with a pack of smokes, and a twelve pack of Bud-Light.

"Teddy, Dad doesn't drink that.", I say.

Teddy says, "We don't have his usual, it's as close as I can get."

I respond with, "It's okay, he probably can't tell the difference right now anyway." Teddy rings it up.

"\$17.86, please," says Teddy.

I handed him the money. He gave me back the receipt and the change. I thank him, and turn towards the door. I open the door, and run into something, someone, solid. I drop the bag. One of the cans exploded. *Christ, I'm going to regret that.* I bend down to pick up the bag, but it's already off the ground. I look up to see a quite good-looking guy. I stand up, and reach out to grab the bag. He hands them to me. "Thank you," I say.

"Your welcome, it was my fault anyway. I was not paying attention." He says, with a slight accent. He heads inside the store. I start the walk back home. It's just starting to get dark when I walk through the front door. I walk into the living room to give my father the bag, but he isn't in his chair. I hear footsteps in the kitchen, so I head there. As I enter the kitchen, my father stops dead in his tracks. He holds out his hand. I hand the bag, and the change with the receipt. He opens the bag, and his face gets red.

"You got me the wrong beer. And there is one missing," he says as his voice gets louder with each word. His face is really red now. He drops the bag, and back-hands me in the face. I just stand there. *It'll be worse if I step away, or fight back.*

"Get out of my face. Now!" he yells. I nod, and head upstairs to my room. Once I get to my room, I gently shut, and lock the door. I go into my bathroom to look in the mirror, to see how bad my face was. It looked swollen, with a hand-print, but nothing permanent. *I'll live, it isn't the worst he's done.* I pull my phone out. I shoot a text to Zach, asking if he wanted to hangout. He replied that there was a party tonight. He said that he'd pick me up in 15 minutes.

I grabbed a pair of black jeans, and a dark blue hoodie from my closet. I quickly changed, and ran my face under cool water. I grabbed my phone, wallet, and bottle of vodka from under my bed, and climbed out my window. Once on the roof, I waited for Zach. I eventually saw his black Ford Raptor pull up to my neighbor's house. I hung off the roof, and dropped onto the grass. I went over to his truck, careful to stay out of view of my living room windows.

I opened the truck door, and hopped in. Zach floored it out of my neighborhood. He glanced over to me with a questioning look on his face. I smile, and say, "Don't worry about it." I hold up the bottle. He just smiles, and speeds up. I turn on his radio, and find a station we both like, and blast it.

When we get to the party, there are cars lined down two streets. We circle the block until we find a spot. We both get out. I open the bottle, tip it back, and chug. Zach looks at me with a weird look on his face, so I hold out the bottle so he can drink some. He drinks some, then puts the bottle back in the truck, and locks it. He tucks his keys into his pocket.

We walk down the road to where the party is. We can hear the music from all the way down the street. "Are you going to tell me what happened, or am I going to have to wait till you get hammered for you to tell me?" Zach asks.

“Prolly once I get hammered,” is my response. We got to the party house. Zach sees his girlfriend, and heads over to her. I’m left to my own devices. I decide to head out back, and try to find the drink table. As I was going to the backyard, I saw a familiar face from this afternoon. It was the guy from the corner store, the one who ran into me. *Should I go talk to him? Prolly not. I’ll just go find a drink.* I avoid him, and head inside.

“Marcus, my man, You need a drink?” I look over to see Tony serving drinks. I walk over to him, and grab a beer from the table.

“Hey, Tony.” I say. I should have known it was his house. Fancy, but not rich. He looks at the right side of my face concerned.

“What happened?”, he asks concerned.

“Nothing I can’t handle, you should see the other guy.” *I’m gonna be sick.* I chug my beer, and grab another one. I continue to chat with Tony for an hour or so. During that time, I drank about 4 more beers.

“See ya later, Tony,” I say. I cut myself off, because I still have to go home later. I can’t show up at my house hammered. I go to the backyard again to see what’s up. There’s beer pong, and shot pong games going on. There are people swimming in the pool, and there are the people dancing to the music. I decide to head in that direction. I start to dance, and by dancing, I mean just flinging my arms and legs wherever to the beat.

“Well, hello there,” says a voice with a familiar accent. He grabs my hand, and spins me to face him.

“My name is Tommy. Yours?” he asks.

“Marcus!” I have to shout because someone turned the music up. I checked my phone to see that it was almost two in the morning. I decided to try and find Zach to see if he could drive me home. After a while of searching, I found him passed out on a couch in the basement. I shake him until he wakes up. “Drive me home?” I ask. He shakes his head.

He digs in his pocket, and pulls out his truck key. “Jst driver hooome. I’ll geet me truckkk back at school.” His words were extremely slurred. I grab his keys, and walk back up the steps. As I make my way out the door, Tommy catches up with me.

“You kind of left in quite a hurry. Is everything alright?” he asks without slurring his words.

“Yes, I just have to get home, don’t worry, I stopped drinking hours ago,” I say.

“Okay, drive home safe. I will see you at school tomorrow,” he says, then walks back into the house. *Since when does he go to my school? I haven’t seen him around at all.* I reach Zach’s truck. I pull the handle to unlock it, hop in, and start it up. It comes to life with a roar. I connect my phone to the bluetooth, and set my favorites playlist. I drive extra carefully back to my house. I park the truck one street over, in an empty lot.

I grab the half empty bottle, and walk to my house. Once there, I stuff the bottle in my hoodie, and climb the tree next to my house. I get onto the roof safely. I climb in through my window. I go over to my door, it’s still locked. *Good.* I unlock the door, and creep down the stairs to check if my father is asleep. He is out cold in his chair, eleven Bud-Light cans in a pile next to him. I go back to my room, climb back out the window, and start to drink the vodka. I finish the bottle, and just lay there, staring at the stars.

I wake up to my alarm on my phone going off. I quickly go back through my window. I grab a pair of sweats and a light red shirt. I hop in the shower. I brush my teeth, and comb my hair. I hurry downstairs to check on my father, he’s still out. I go back up to my room to grab Zach’s truck key, and my phone. I very quietly go out the front door. I head down to Zach’s truck. I climb in, and start it up. I blast music as I drive to school. I pull into his designated parking spot. As I get out, he comes over to me, and asks for his key. I handed it to him. We walked into the building together.

Classes fly by, and in no time school’s out. I pretty much ran to Zach’s truck. When I get there he says, “Today is the day, huh?”

I respond with a “Hell, Yeah!”

He then says, “Good, no more of me hauling your ass around.” We drove to the dealership. I have saved every penny from my job for the past five years for this. We pull up the place. I spotted the car I’m taking with me today. It’s a crimson red, 10-speed automatic with the manual option, 2020 Ford Mustang. I go in to sign everything, and open the door to my new baby. I start her up, and look to see Zach’s face. The cold start was earsplitting. *And the best part was, my father can’t touch it.*

We drove back to Zach’s house, with me leading him by almost 10 miles. What can I say, the car was amazing, and fast. When we get there, I lock her up, and head inside to wait for Zach. My phone starts to ring, I

pull it out to see my father's name. I audibly sigh and answer the phone. "Where the hell are you? You were supposed to come home right away today. You are in so much trouble when you get here." With that, he hangs up. I shoot Zach a text saying my Dad needed me, I'll be back later.

I race home, literally. When I pull up, he is outside. His eyes widen, and his face gets redder, redder than my car. I get out, and lock the car. "How. a. hell. did. you. afford. this. car." *Shit, he's pissed.*

"I've been working for it for five years. And I decided I wanted a car, so I bought one. And I wouldn't touch it, or try to damage it," I say sharply. His eyes are on fire.

"Go inside," he says calmly. "Now!" he yells. I go inside. Before even all the way through the door, I can feel his hands on my neck. He throws me into the living room.

"How dare you speak to me like that! You should have nothing but respect for me, for all I do for your ungrateful ass!" He kicks me in the stomach. Then he continues to kick me. After he's done, I hurry to my room to pack a bag. Of course when I get there, my room is trashed. *Of course.* I grab my bag, and just start stuffing random stuff into my bag. Once that is done, I run down the stairs, and out the front door. I hear my father get up from the chair, and I get into my car. I lock my doors, just as he gets outside.

I roll the window down so I can say, "Screw you, you lousy alcoholic." I then floor it, down the road. I call Zach. I asked if I could stay with him for a while, he said sure. I get there, and he is standing outside waiting for me.

"Big fight with your Dad?" he asks.

"Yeah, but I don't really want to talk about it," I responded. He just nods. We head inside. He opens the door to the spare bedroom, and I throw my bag onto the bed.

"Thanks Zach, I really appreciate your help," I say softly.

"You know I have your back, you are a brother to me," He says back. He walks out of the room. A little while later, I took inventory of what I had brought with me. I had two pairs of sweats, a pair of jeans, some underclothes, one shirt and two hoodies. That wasn't horrible. I can always buy more clothes. My phone suddenly rang. I looked at it, and saw my father's name. I hit decline. It rang again, I looked, but it wasn't my father. It was an unknown number. I picked it up, and I heard Tommy's voice say, "Want to meet for a coffee? My treat. I'll be at the Spoon and Sugar at eight tonight, if you want to join me."

I respond with, "Yeah, I'll meet you there." Tommy then hung up. I got ready. I wore the same clothes, and borrowed a hat from Zach. I jumped into my car, and revved the engine. Zach looked out his window, and laughed. I made it to the coffee shop early, so I ordered my usual. A little while later, at exactly eight o'clock, Tommy sat down at my table. He had a large, black coffee in his hands.

"Hi," I say to Tommy. He looks at me, and smiles.

"Hello, I am very interested in knowing you," he says. *So, he likes me then. How does he know?* I smile, and take a sip of my coffee,

"Me too," I say. I glance up, and he is staring at me. In a good way though. I smile, and so does he. We sit there, and talk for hours. Eventually, the last call was announced. We both get up to leave. Once we step outside, we walk over to our cars, which are parked next to each other. I put a hand on my hood.

"So this is your car. I was wondering who had good taste," he comments. I feel my face go red.

"I actually just got it today." I say. He is standing next to an old Silverado.

"Want to drive around?" I ask. "You can leave your truck here."

He says, "Sure." He goes to the passenger side, and gets in. I start the car up, and rev the engine. "Such a beautiful, loud sound," he laughs. *At least he likes my car.* He kept glancing at me when he thought I wasn't looking. I thought it was cute. We drove until one in the morning. I brought him back to Spoon and Sugar. Before he got out, he got a weird look on his face. He leaned towards me, and his lips brushed mine. I felt sparks. He broke it off, and got out of my car. I waited to leave until he left. As his truck roared to life, I saw a huge smile on his face.

I pulled out the parking lot close to him. He went to the right, I went to the left. All the lights in Zach's house were off when I got there. As I parked the car, Zach's light came on. I kinda felt bad for waking him up. I walked through the front door. Once I got to my room, Zach came barging in. He wanted to know every detail of what happened. I told him it all. He's the only person that I had told about me, besides my father after Mom died, went into his almost constant state of drunkenness.

I went to bed with a smile on my face for the first time in a long time. I slept soundlessly, without dreaming. I woke up to Zach shaking me. “Dude, you slept, way past your alarm.” he says. I just grunt in response, and roll out of bed. I groggily get out of bed, and get dressed. *I’m going back to my house to get more stuff tonight.* I brush my teeth, and spray some cologne on. I go sit in my car, and once I start it, I see that I need to go get gas. I drive towards the gas station, when I see a familiar blue chevy sitting at one of the pumps. A big smile forms on my face. I pull up to the pump next to Tommy’s truck.

I get out, and am instantly pulled into a hug. “Hey, Tommy.” I say. He looks down at me, and smiles. “How was the ride home?” he asks.

I reply with, “Very fast.” I turn to put the nozzle into the tank. I insert my card, and pay. He gets done pumping his gas, and closes everything up.

He walks back over to me. “Want to ditch school, and hangout today?” he asks. I nod my head yes. “Just follow me. We are going up into the mountains.” he gets into his truck, and takes off. I hop into my car, and speed off after him. We ended up going up an extremely curvy road. *This is fun.* Tommy’s truck suddenly turns onto a backroad. He speeds down it, while I’m stuck driving really slow. *Disadvantages of a low car.* It takes me about ten minutes to get to the end of the road. Tommy’s truck is parked in a clearing off to the right. I pull up behind him, and get out. Tommy was sitting on a blanket in the center of the clearing. He waved me over.

I sat down next to him. He pulled out a small cooler. He took out a couple sandwiches, some mountain dew, and some chips. He offered half of it to me, I accepted it happily. He smiled, and pointed to the edge of the clearing. I looked over, and saw the most amazing mountain view I’ve ever seen. “That is why I often come up here,” he says.

I say, “It’s definitely worth the drive.”

“That it is,” he says. He stands up, and goes over to his truck. He comes back bearing a guitar.

To be continued

Slow Time Flies

Why does time move fast and slow
Fast when life is at a high
Slow when your at a low
Movement of time is tricky
It moves so fast when a loved one is sickly
So slow when we put them in a bed, six below
Time flies by at the speed of light
But slow when the time is right
Why does time change pace
Is it so we have to face
The ups with speed
The downs with dread
So to fill our head
With the thoughts we need
So to keep those we love
In our heart, forever above

§ § §

The following authors did not win one of the four prizes, but the judges considered their work well worthy of being included in *Hills and Valleys*.

Jocelyn Wolfenden

Intruders

Did you lock the outside lock?
Did you lock the top and bottom locks on our heavy metal door?
Is the alarm on, except for the motions?

It would be bad if we forgot to do that.

You know you're afraid,
Of that shadow that you're watching.

What was that noise?
Is someone outside?
What can you do?
You can't scream,
You can't run from them.

You know they're not real,
You know you're paranoid.

Talk to somebody,
Get yourself out of a trance.

Knock, knock.

Who is that?
It's just a package,
Little girl calm down,
It's just your imagination.

The intruders,
They aren't real,
Though it feels like,
They cut through steel.

Breathe,
Use your words.

You're safe here.

I know.

But I can't shake the feeling
That someone is here.

The Monster

You grabbed a hold of the Monster you
Wanted me to avoid.

You walked hand in hand,

Getting further away.
I tried to pull you back,
To make you see,

That doing this,
Is losing me.

Yet, you kept walking, the Monster
Did too,
That ball and chain,
Wrapped taut around you.

It took you away,
Leaving all you had left.

Yet, you walk with that Monster,
Who had scared you to death.

§ § §

Haneef McKnight

Legacy Poem

Life's amazing so monopolize
Its nothin' on earth that can't materialize

I want more for myself and that's a fact
Like girls and money, everything stacked

I live for today and not for tomorrow
Because death is a promising sorrow

So every day I wish will last
So I could never think of the past

And as these old memories steady wash away
I noticed one thing was still here to stay

It's my legacy, what can I say?

Graduation Poem

The beat of my heart is like thunder going boom
And my smile was the lightning filling the room

Every step I took I remembered the pain
And now that I'm here my eyes filled with rain
Yes finally! I'm recognized, Finally I hear my name
It's about time, I wasn't just played like a game

Every step was real and the past was letting go
The doors have been opened so now it's time for me to show
All my achievements and all the hustle and flow
All the hard work was like muscles to grow

I was hugged with inspiration
Yes finally! This is my celebration
Finally I feel honored, to reach my aspiration
I'm going to grab my diploma and run this nation

Yes finally! Finally! I made it
Hello Graduation

§ § §

Cassidy Skoranski

Gone

I just want to go
Pack it all up and leave
Package up my stress and work
Exchange it for happiness and fun
Gone by the wind and lost in the night
I just want to go
See new things, meet new people
Learn more about myself
Go on a journey of self discovery
Find who I truly am
I just want to go
Get out of this empty place
A place that reminds me of so much bad
Exchange it for something good
Then when the question is asked
"Where is she?"
They'll reply with a simple word
"Gone."

Hope

It started out a fire, and ended in a spark
All our hope has come and go, and it left us in the dark

It wasn't to long ago when it was first ignited
And there we were gathered around it, just giving it life and desire
It wanted to live, it wanted to thrive
But as we all know, things eventually have to die

The fire went out,
And all our hope is gone, gone just like that

And burning hot, giving off smoke
There only remains our ashes

But deep down I know
I just have this feeling

From the Ashes
We Will
Rise

§ § §

Julia Ciufu

The Crime

Chapter 1

I grabbed my coffee and two boxes of donuts and sat in the police car. My partner was waiting for me in the driver's seat. After I strapped in my seat belt the car started moving out of the Dunkin Donuts parking lot. Driving along the road while we ate our donuts, "So how's the wife?" Doug asked, shoving the last piece of a glazed donut in his mouth. Doug was a great partner. He always had my back and I always had his. He was like a brother to me. "She's good. We just got a new shower installed. She is very pleased with it," I said, taking a sip of my coffee. "That's good," He said, smiling.

We arrived at the police station. I walked inside, "We got donuts for everyone." After sitting at my desk all morning, doing nothing but writing my report on the case I had just solved, the boss called me into her office. I walked in to see Doug sitting in one of the seats in front of the boss's desk. "Please take a seat Marty," She gestured. I sat down next to Doug, who was sitting with his legs spread out and arms across his chest. He smiled at me. "We got a new case," she said, handing out the case files, "One woman murdered and another one missing. The body was found this morning. Her neighbor reported it. He said he heard screams and gunshots. When he looked out the window to see what it was he saw her sister, Colleen, being taken by the man who probably shot her sister."

I closed the file, "So you want us to check it out?"

"Yes, I'm putting you two in charge for this case," she said, standing up so that she was leaning on the desk.

"Alright. Let's get to it then, shall we?" Doug asked, standing up from his seat. I got up and walked out of the room with him. I took the pictures out of the case file. There were five of them. A picture of the woman covered in blood on the floor. Another with the shell casing and the rest were stuff that had fallen onto the floor. I spread them out on my desk. I opened the file and laid it under the pictures.

"So it's obvious the murder weapon was a 22 rifle," I said, taking a seat.

"It looks like she didn't go down without a fight," Doug said, picking up one of the pictures.

“Yeah. I’d say she was a fighter alright.” I scanned the file one more time, “What is the neighbor's name? Do you know?” I said, looking up at Doug.

“Phillip Cunningham. He was also the one who found the body.”

“Alright. Let’s go talk to him and see what we can find out.”

We pulled into the long, dirt driveway. Phillip’s house was a small, white trailer. The yard was freshly cut. We walked onto the porch. The front door was wide open with the screen door closed. I heard music playing down the hall, “Hello?” I called. No one answered. I looked over to Doug who was shaking his head towards the blood on the door knob. We grabbed our guns. Doug slowly and silently opened the screen door. We walked in slowly. Doug took a left turn while I took the right. I walked into the kitchen to see a pot of hot tea sitting on the stove. I walked further into the bathroom. No one was there. I turned around to find Doug coming out of the hall that led to two bedrooms.

“You’re gonna want to see this,” he said, and led me down the hall and into the last bedroom. Phillip was sitting in a black wheel chair in front of his desk. His throat was slit with blood running down to his shirt. I put my gun back in it’s sheath, “Let’s call it in.” I said, looking around the room. There was no sign of struggle. “Whoever did this wanted it done quietly and cleaned,” The sheriff of the town arrived when the EMT was bringing the body out.

Chapter 2

“I need to see the person in charge,” the sheriff said, looking at the body bag.

“That’s us,” I said, Doug standing next to me.

“People are starting to panic in this town. I’ve been getting reports since the first murder happened.” The sheriff looked over to the house, “This morning people came to my office asking if they should keep their children inside for now on.” He looked back at me and Doug with a concerned look, “This guy is putting too much fear into this town and I can’t allow that.”

I looked at him for a minute, “I’m sorry to hear that sheriff. We will try to close this case as soon as possible.” I took out my notepad, “Do you mind answering some questions?”

“Of course not. What do you want to know?”

I took out my pen, “How many people live on this street?”

“About 50. A couple of them have big families living in the same house.”

“Any crazy activity happen before the first murder and kidnapping?”

“No, wait, yes there was. Last week the junkies down the street had pulled a prank on the woman by putting newspapers all around her yard. Someone reported her saying that she was gonna kill them.” He looked down the street. “A couple days later one of the kids was found passed out and tied to a tree. When he woke up he said the only thing he remembered was seeing the same woman mowing the lawn.”

“What are their names?”

“Jake, Frankie, and Jamie. They live right down there in that tan house with their mom,” he said, pointing at the house.

I put my notepad and pen away, “Okay. Thanks.”

Doug and I walked over to the tan house. The grass looked like it hadn’t been cut in a month. The windows were covered with black paper. The porch smelled like alcohol, “Yup this is definitely a junkie’s house.” Doug knocked on the door. A little kid opened it. He looked to be about six years old. He had dirt all over him. His clothes were worn out and ripped up. His feet had cuts on them. It looked like he hadn’t even eaten in at least three days.

“Hi, is your mom home?” I asked

“No, what do you want?” He asked, resting his left hand on his hip.

“My name is Marty and this is my partner, Doug. we are with the police and wanted to ask you and your family some questions about...”

“The crazy lady.” He said, finishing my sentence, “I’ll go get my siblings. You can come in.”

We walked inside. It was a mess. Clothes and pizza boxes were everywhere. We walked into the living room where the couches were filled with random stuff like papers, books, food, plastic cups. Of course I’ve seen worse. The boy walked back in with his two siblings. “Our brother tells us you’re with the police?” asked

one of the girls. She was a little older than the boy. She also looked just as dirty as the boy did. They all did. I peeked into the kitchen that they came in from. There was a huge pile of dishes that looked like it hadn't been touched in days.

"Yes, we are," I said, looking back at the kids.

"What do you want to know?" the other girl asked, she looked to be the oldest of the group.

"We heard what happened just before your neighbor was murdered."

"Which one? The prank or when some jerkface tied my brother to a tree?"

"Both. We wanted to ask, 'how did your brother get tied up to the tree?'"

"Well that's a dumb question," their sister said. "I mean you're supposed to be cops, right? Then I'm assuming you should know how to tie someone up to a tree and if you don't then you're just plain out..."

"Frankie!" her sister yelled, giving her an annoyed look, "I'm sorry. My sister can be a bit rude sometimes. Then again we all can."

"It's okay," I said, looking from Frankie back up to her sister, who I assumed was Jamie.

"Jack was out playing in the front while Frankie and I were inside. Frankie went outside to tell Jack that the pizza was on it's way and to come inside and that's when she found him passed out tied to a tree." Jamie looked over to the boy and back at me.

I kneeled down to Jack who was looking at the floor the whole time, "You wanna tell us what happened?" I asked, looking concerned.

"I don't remember," he snarled, crossing his arms over his chest. I knew he was lying. I didn't didn't say anything else. It was pretty obvious I wasn't going to get anything out of it. At least not when his sisters were around.

"Okay." I stood up and took out my card, "In case you remember anything else." I said then head out the door.

"You don't believe him, do you?" Doug said, walking beside me back to the car.

"No, I don't. I think there is more to this story than Jack being tied up to a tree by some 'Jerkface'."

Chapter 3

We got back to the police station. When we walked in there was an old lady sitting at my desk. I saw my boss walking towards us, "Her name is Maranda. She said she had some information about that night of the first murder and kidnapping."

"Okay." I looked over to Doug.

"I'll take care of it." He said then walked over to the lady.

"What have you found so far?" she asked.

"Three kids who live at the end of the street pulled a prank on her. She said she was gonna kill them. A few days later the boy was found passed out and tied to a tree."

"You think there might be a connection?"

"Maybe. I don't know. What I do know is that the kid is hiding something."

"Maybe he knows who tied him up?"

"Maybe," I said

An half hour later I saw Maranda leave the station. Doug came out from his office, "So it would seem that Maranda saw the junkies roaming around our dead women's property the night before she was murdered. She said she thinks they were trying to break in just before she pulled into the driveway." Doug sat down in the chair next to me, "She also said about an hour later she heard her and Colleen fighting about something. She didn't know what it was about but if she had to guess it was about how Colleen had gotten home around midnight. She only knows that because her car was still on and Colleen was walking out of it when they started fighting."

"Huh, well it looks like we are paying another visit with the kids," I said, standing up from my chair and grabbing my jacket.

I parked the car in front of the junkies' house. The smell of alcohol filled the air as we walked closer to the house. I knocked on the door. Jamie opened it, "What do you want now? We answered your questions," she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“We have some more questions.” I said, taking out my notepad and pen, “Where were you and your siblings the night before the murders between 9pm and 11pm?”

“At home, watching TV,” she sounded nervous.

“Really?” I asked, closing my notepad. Her concern yet nervous look turned into an angry look.

“Wait? You think I’m lying?”

“Don't think. We have a witness.” Before I said anything else Jack came out from hiding behind the door. I wasn't sure if he was listening the whole time or not.

“He made us,” he said, coming out further.

“Who did?”

“No one. It's time for you to leave.” Jamie said, about to shut the door.

“The boogie man,” Jack said

“Who's the boogie man?” I asked, Jack looked up at me with watery eyes.

“I.” before he could finish Jamie cut in, “He doesn't know. We all don't know. Please, you must leave now,” she said, sounding worried. Something was wrong. I needed more information but I wasn't going to get it here. At least not yet.

Before I could say anything else Jamie shut the door. Doug and I turned around to see people from all around the town gathered up, watching us with strange looks. “Something is not right,” Doug whispered to me.

Chapter 4

About an hour after the chat with the kids I got a call from the sheriff. We went down there to see what he wanted to talk about. When we arrived, though, there was an ambulance parked outside of the sheriff's office. I walked in to see several people gather up in a circle. One of the EMT's told everyone to get back as they rolled sheriff out of the office. I caught up with one of them, “Excuse me, I'm detective Marty and this is my partner detective Doug. You mind telling us what happened?”

"I don't know the whole story. All I know is that he had a heart attack and needs to go to the hospital now," She turned around and got into the ambulance before I could say anything. "What could have caused him to have a heart attack?" Doug asked. I looked around at the crowd. Then I turned to get a better view when I saw Jack standing next to the door, behind an older woman. He spotted me and then started to run. I ran after him.

I followed him across the small bridge and up the steep mountain towards Phillip's house. I was tired out by the time I had ran up the hill and jumped the kid. "What's going on?" I asked. Jack looked frightened. He stared at me with wide eyes. Catching my breath, "I won't ask again. Something is going on and I want to know what."

Jack put on a struggle, trying to get away. When he realized he wasn't getting away he looked into my eyes, "He is watching!" I loosened my grip.

"Who?"

He tried to get away but I put him back down and tighten my grip again, "The boogiemán,"

I was starting to lose my patience with this boogiemán crap, "Who?"

"He's watching us right now."

I loosened my grip and looked around the area. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary until I looked straight. I saw someone's shadow in the window. It moved once it saw me. I got up, leaving the kid on the ground and ran to the front. The door was cracked open and the tape was ripped off. I ran up the door just in time to see the person running into the kitchen.

I ran in with my gun raised, “Stop!” I yelled. She froze when she was about to open the door, “Turn around with your hands up.” That's when I realized it was Frankie. She was holding something in her hand. I took one hand off my gun, “Let me see that.” I looked at it for a good minute before realizing what it was, “Who are you talking to?” I said, looking up at her.

“No one,” she said, hands still up in the air.

“This is a small radio. You were obviously talking to someone,” I looked around the room. Nothing had been touched. “What are you doing here? This is a crime scene,” I said, setting the radio on the counter next to me.

“He told me to.” she said, lowering her hands down.

“Who did?” I said, setting my gun down.

“He is watching.”

“WHO?” I yelled, losing my patience.

“He knows we’re here. He always knows. He promised to never let anyone hurt us. He takes good care of us,” she sounded relaxed.

I finally calmed myself down. I put the gun back into the sheath, “Frankie,” I said, kneeling down so that I was eye to eye with her, “Who takes good care of you?”

“He didn’t mean to. All he wanted was to have a peaceful and loving marriage.” Her face filled with anger, “But she wouldn’t marry him.” She sounded calm again, “She left him no choice.”

At that point I knew she was talking about Colleen, “Where is Colleen?” I asked.

She looked up at me with a soothing smile, “She is in a happy place with him.”

“Did he kill Colleen’s sister and Phillip?” I asked, getting frustrated again.

“He said they were going to call the cops. We had no choice.”

“What do you mean ‘we?’” I asked, “Were you and your siblings with him that night?”

“Yes.”

“I need you to tell me what happened,” I said, standing up. She looked up at me with wide eyes then turned away. I looked away from her when I saw something shiny near the kitchen sink. I walked over while Frankie watched me. I picked it up. It was a clear stone with a piece of paper attached to it.

For my dearly beloved, I shall never forget you

“Is this why you’re here?” I asked, turning to face Frankie. She smiled. I turned back to the sink. There was another paper. It was half ripped.

PA, 22890

It was part of an address. Before I could say anymore Doug came to the door with other police officers, “Are you alright? I saw you running up here and looked like you needed back up.”

I looked over at Frankie one last time, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Chapter 5

We took Frankie and Jack back to the police station. Doug had gone to the house to get Jamie but she wasn’t there. He called her work but they said she hadn’t come in. She was nowhere to be found. Doug had taken the evidence to the lab for figure prints. Frankie and Jack were put into a conference room. I walked inside to see them coloring. I sat in the chair next to them, “So no figure prints were found on the papers or stone. Which means someone cleaned it before putting it there. Do you know who?” Neither of them looked at me. “Look, whoever you are protecting isn’t going to get hurt. Just tell me who he is and I can find him along with Colleen.” They were silent. “Do you know where your sister went?” They immediately looked at me.

“Somewhere safe,” Jack said.

“Where is that somewhere?” I ask. Silence. I only had one choice left. I didn’t want to, but it seemed to be the only way I could break them. I took one of the pictures of the dead body and showed it to them. “Did you do this? Did he make you do this?” They both looked blankly at it.

“He said it was the only way,” Frankie said. I knew I was getting somewhere then, “Frankie, Did you kill him?” she looked at me with a concerned look, “He said I had to put her down. That it was the only way we would be safe.” I didn’t say anything. Afterwards I got up and walked to the door, “I have no regrets,” she said, going back to coloring. I stood there watching them for a minute before walking out the door. Doug was standing in front of the mirror, “Who makes children do that?” “The sick and insane kind of people,” I said, in a cold voice.

A few minutes later a man came walking into the police station. He was a short, grey haired man. He was wearing blue jeans and an orange, long sleeve shirt. He walked over to my desk, “Excuse me, my name is Harris Tomson. I am the father of Frankie and Jack. Katy, their mother, was not able to make it so she called me. I stood up from my desk and raised my hand, “Hi Harris. I’m detective Marty. Can I ask you some questions?”

“Oh.. um.. sure.” He said, looking over where the kids were.

"Why did you and Katy split up?"

"Isn't it obvious? She's a huge junkie. She doesn't make time for anything. She can't even take care of her own kids right. I mean you've seen them."

"Yea, I have," I muttered to myself. "How come you didn't get custody of the kids? I mean if she's that bad then shouldn't you have gotten the kids?"

"I travel all the time. I will never stay in one place for very long."

"Really? Cuz I read in your profile that you've been living around here for a year now."

"Oh, well I found something here that I couldn't leave behind again."

"What's that?"

"My kids."

"Mmh," I said, I wasn't believing his whole story. Something about him sounded suspicious. I watched him as he looked back and forth from his kids to here. He seems to be in a rush. But where could he be going? I didn't know. "That's all the questions I have for now. You can take your kids now." But I wasn't done with him just yet. I knew if I wanted answers I would have to follow him.

Chapter 6

I followed him to an old warehouse. I park at the end of the road so they wouldn't see me. Once they went inside I got out of the car. I ran to the door and peeked inside. It was a big open space with long, black cabinets along the walls. I quietly turned the door knob with my gun raised. I walked a couple steps forward before I heard gunshots coming towards me. I ran behind the wall close to me.

I started shooting back when I saw the shooter straight ahead of me. After a minute of shooting I got shot in my shoulder. I screamed in pain. I heard footsteps coming towards me. I ran behind a pile of crates I saw in front of the staircase. A couple more shots came at me, "You might as well give up now before you get killed." a man's voice yelled. I recognize the voice.

"Where are Frankie and Jack?"

"Somewhere safe," Harris said.

Everything went quiet. I walked along the crates and behind the staircase, "Why did you make Frankie kill the woman?"

"She is weak! I must make her strong. I'm making her grow strong," he said calmly.

"She's already strong. All of your kids are. You're the one who is weak!"

"What?" he said, with a surprising voice.

"You're the one who left your kids behind for traveling."

"Shut up!" He shot his last bullet.

"Where is Colleen? What do you plan on doing with her?" I asked, trying to buy time to think of something while he reloaded.

"She is with Jamie, who is planning our escape out of this country."

"You think running away is the solution to all this? You're wrong. The police will find you," I said, adjusting myself with my hand pressed over my shoulder. "What about their mother? How do you think she is going to react when she finds out her children have been kidnapped by their own father?"

"She won't care. She doesn't care about anyone but herself."

"I don't think that's true. I've read her records. She has been clean for two months now. She sees a therapist twice a week. The lawn was just mowed. My partner told me how the house was cleaned up when he went over there to look for Jamie. She has started a new chapter. Even before then she has cared for her children. And they care for her too. She is a strong independent woman who is getting back on her feet."

"Liar! She is weak just like her kids."

"Are your kids weak for taking care of their mother in her darkest moments when you weren't around? Are they weak for taking care of each other when you both weren't around? Are they weak for doing anything they could to help make money for food, water, warmth, shelter everyday?" I stood up and came out from hiding to face him, "Everyday may be a struggle for them but at least they stuck around and got through them. They take care of each other instead of just walking out. That doesn't make them weak. The love and care that

they have for one another is what builds up their strength. Not murder or kidnapping or running away from their problems. That is what makes you weak.”

Harris stood with the gun in his hand. He looked confused and lost. I knew he had never thought of it that way. “Dad?” Jack said, coming out from the far right corner of the warehouse. Harris turned around, lowering his gun. I quickly grabbed him from behind. He struggled but I managed to pin him down to the ground. He let go of the gun.

Many police cars and two ambulance trunks were parked out front of the warehouse. Harris was put into one of the cars and taken back to the station. The EMT finished stitching up my shoulder when I saw Doug come into the parking lot. Jamie and Colleen came out of the back seat. Frankie and Jack ran to them and hugged one another. Doug came walking over, “We found them at the Morris Hotel. Jamie had called us about two hours after you left. She was worried about what her father was going to do when she heard Frankie And Jack were at the police station.”

I shook my head. Frankie came over, “Detective Marty?” She said, fiddling with her fingers, “I wanted to say I’m sorry. I was only following his orders. I didn’t mean to..”

“I know.” I said, cutting her off before she could say what I knew what she was going to say. I felt bad for her and her siblings. Even though this is over they had to deal with what they had done for the rest of their lives. I got up from the trunk of the ambulance and knelt down to Frankie, “It’s not your fault. It’s his fault. Okay? Don’t ever blame yourself for it.” She shook her head and smiled. A red mustang pulled in. A woman came out. She had blonde hair with blue jeans and a white t-shirt on. I knew it was their mother. She immediately ran towards her children. I was glad to see them all together in one piece.

§ § §

Noah Phillips

When Only Midnight Sees

When the drizzling rain breaks the quiet
When thunder rolls to hide the silent snap of wings
With wingspan spread, rain trickling off feathers
Talons release the tree limb and silent flight begins
Piercing eyes perceive prey
A field mouse with no thought of the sky above
Wings whistle through the air, quiet in the rain
Talons slowly open, bracing for impact
Wings move over prey
Little did the mouse ever know
As talons clench, the mouse makes a final squeak
When only midnight sees

Royal Plague

Cast List:

Gurlan - ancient lands, Dorchet Dynasty over one thousand years old, Castle Lera constructed in the middle of the lands

Gang of Zane - gang of thieves, light steel mail and leather armor, black dappled drapes over face and torso, 13 well-trained assassins

Thain Flarblade- leader of Gang, sword crest of chest plate

Roog Stilf - second in command, close ties with Thain

Deir Wterz - captain, nervous and fidgety, carries a raven’s foot around his neck for comfort

Slate Stone - captain, cool and quiet, muscle of the gang, shows no emotion, iron faced

King Xoc Dorchet - ruler of Gurlan, father of Gerj, troubled by Gang of Zane's thievery
Servant 1 - Servant to the king
Servant 2 - Servant to the prince
Prince Gerj Dorchet - son of Xoc, heir to the throne, bratty and snobbish, arrogant
Captain of Geri's Royal Guard - Aged and quiet, annoyed by the Prince yet still listens to him
Royal Guard - ten men-at-arms to protect the Prince

Act I Scene I

[Curtains open

A large dark road stretches across the stage. Bare tree limbs hang out over the road and sunlight scarcely breaks through the vegetation. The Gang of Zane lay in the ditches on either side of the road, concealed in the brush.

Thain Flarblade: *(Slipping up to the road and thrusting his sword in the air)* Are we ready men?

Gang of Zane: *(Beating on the chest plates and shields)* Aye! Aye! Aye!

Thain Flarblade: *(Leaping back into the ditch)* Time to spill royal blood!

Gang of Zane: Aye! Aye! Aye!

In the distance, the Royal Carriage can be heard rattling along the main highway of Gurlan. Quickly the carriage enters the scene. The Gang of Zane pushes a rod of wood through the front and back wheels, stopping the carriage.

Thain Flarblade: *(Jumping up onto the carriage and killing the driver)* Aye men! Time to kill!

The Royal Guard surrounds the carriage to protect it. The Gang of Zane begins attacking the Royal Guard. Slowly the Royal Guard begins to fall under the Gang of Zane's attack.

Roof Stilf: Drag that filth from the inside. Time to spill some royal blood.

The Gang of Zane drags Prince Gerj and the Captain from the cabin of the carriage.

Prince Gerj: *(Struggling against Slate Stone's grip)* Let go of me, you vile waste of a man! Unhand me and then face me you cowards. I'll kill you all-

Thain Flarblade: *(Whipping his sword across Prince Gerj's throat)* Ah, shut up!

Captain: Yo-you just murdered Prince Gerj. Have you no brains man? The king will have you killed before the day after tomorrow.

Deir Wterz: *(Rapidly poking his sword into the soft dirt of the road)* Thain, that wa-wasn't the best thing to do. We could have used him!

Slate Stone: Shut yer mouth Deir before I stab ya through dat obnoxious throat of yours. If you don't believe me, try me.

Deir: *(Quickly falling back to help the men plunder the carriage)* No, no. I believe you.

Thain Flarblade: *Twisting the sword tip into the Captain's throat*) I needed you more than him anyway. He is a brat that was murdered in the name of justice. Now you, you will tell me one thing. Where are the Jewels of Colain?

Captain: They were de-destroyed after the Battle of Gterf. I know it for true because I was the one who did it.

Thain: *(Pushing the sword through the Captain's chest)* Then I guess I don't need you then.

The Gang of Zane quickly slips back into the surrounding bush, leaving the carriage and dead men lying in the dirt of the highway.

Act I Scene II

[Curtains open]

The brightly lit throne room of Castle Lera is spread across the stage. King Xoc Dorchet sits upon his throne.

King Xoc: *(Clearly worried)* Where is he? He had a simple trip to the edge of the kingdom and back. Without any word from Lord Feasl, how am I to know that my son made it there?

Servant 1: *(Holding a pitcher full of ale)* I am not sure, my lord. He will be home in the morrow.

(Enters Servant 2)

Servant 2: *(Out of breath)* M'lord, I have unfortunate news from the scouts. They found the Royal Carriage. I'm sorry sire, but your son and all his men are dead.

King Xoc: *(Rising from his throne)* Including the Captain of the Guard?

Servant 2: *(Slowly nodding his head)* Including the Captain.

King Xoc: *(Collapsing back into his chair)* Who would dare do this atrocity? Who would have the guts to act so brave as to kill my son?

Servant 2: *(Shifting from foot to foot)* The Gang of Zane, sire. The needle in your side and now the cause of pain in your chest.

King Xoc: Well, now they will have pain at their throats. Servant, go to the barracks and tell the men they are to find the Gang of Zane and slaughter them. Slaughter them as they did my son. Do not kill everyone though. Bring me the leaders.

Servant 1: *(Bowing to the king)* Yes m'lord. They will be sent out before dusk.

King Xoc: Thank you. And you, servant. Send for a new pitcher of ale. I need liquid strength at this time.

Servant 2: Yes sire.

[Curtains close]

Act I Scene III

[Curtains open]

The throne room of Castle Lera lays across the stage. The dimly lit room shows the sulken face of King Xoc. [Enter Slate Stone, Deir Wterz, Roog Stilf, Thain Flarblade, Servant 1 and Servant 2. The four captains of the Gang of Zane Have their arms tied behind their backs and legs tied together with short ropes.]

King Xoc: Well, I guess I have finally found the scum of the Earth.

Slate Stone: Oh, trust us, the pleasure's all ours, ya watse. Yer jus' like yer pathetic son.

King Xoc: Shut your mouth! Guards!

[Enter two Royal Guards]

King Xoc: Take these men away. They anger me too much to talk. Take them right to the gallows. I want them hanged before dusk.

Act I Scene IV

[Curtains open]

The wooden frame of the gallow is in the middle of the stage. The captains of the Gang of Zane defiantly glare from the platform of the gallow.

Thain: Well men, you've been obedient to me so far. I'll see all you devils in the afterlife!

The four captains of the Gang of Zane all laugh crazily as Royal Guards slip nooses over their heads. Their laughter only ceases when a Royal Guard pulls the bar. The four captains' bodies snap down and dangle from the ropes.

Till Death Do Us Part?

Listening to the rhythmic hum of the medical machinery, Gary could feel the pain his wife was in. The doctors had increased her pain medications to help relieve as much of her discomfort as possible; however, Gary could still see the pain through her smile. She had told him not to worry, that all would end well.

Although she smiled and laughed with the friends and family that came to visit, Rayleen knew she was not successfully lying to Gary. He currently sat, pillowed on one arm facing towards her at the edge of her bed, his large hand next to hers. She knew he could look right through her smile and see her pain. Moving her arm slowly, she laid her hand on her husband's, smiling at his face, the face that she had fallen in love with.

Feeling her hand slip into his, Gary mused *she always did have such skinny fingers*. Without opening his eyes, he knew she was smiling. Rayleen always had a smile on her face. Through it all: years of work, the kids growing up, and retirement, she smiled through it all. He could remember fondly at all points she seemed to radiate happiness. She was the only one that could make him come out of his protective shell.

How could she ever be happy now?! In this damn place...surrounded by all this...this junk! Gary had taken it harder than Rayleen when the tests came back as positive. He had barely left Rayleen's side and the nurses had come to accept that visiting hours did not apply to him.

"You need to lighten up," Rayleen had said. "We've lived and loved for so long. This is the beginning of our next life."

"No. I refuse to just let you slip away."

"I'm not slipping away from you," she had laughed. "We're just not quite moving on together."

Giving her hand three quick and delicate squeezes, Gary reluctantly looked up into his wife's eyes. He felt lost in those deep, emerald eyes. He was transfixed by them. Gary's mouth eased into a smile and he leaned forward to kiss Rayleen on the forehead. Sliding back across the bed to his seat, Gary looked at his wife as Rayleen slowly blinked, looked at him, then closed her eyes.

Gary leaned back into his chair and leaned his head to the side. The machines were the only thing keeping her alive. Gary settled back and eventually his breathing deepened as he fell into an uneasy slumber.

Gary and Tyler had been best friends since first grade and were goofing around in chemistry. Throwing a fake mouse back and forth, the two eleventh graders were supposed to be testing the bases and acids sitting in

front of them. Laughing, Gary looked towards the door where the teacher, Mrs. Jilues, stood talking to a girl. Gary had not seen this girl around school and was transfixed by the radiant emerald eyes and shining smile.

The toy mouse smacked Gary in the side of the head. Picking it up, Gary turned to Tyler.

“Hey, who is that?” Gary whispered, tilting his head towards the door.

“The new senior. Moved here from Utah. Said her name was Harleen or Ryele, something like that...”

Tyler said, shaking his head, dodging the mouse missile that Gary aimed at his head.

“Alright folks this is our new student, Rayleen. Who would be willing to let her join your group?” Mrs. Jilues asked. Gary wanted more than anything to raise his hand but suddenly his heart seemed to leap into his throat.

“Thank you Tyler! Head right over there Rayleen.”

Gary turned to look at Tyler with a mix of shock and gratitude.

“You’ll thank me later,” Tyler winked.

Tyler had been Gary’s best man in his and Rayleen’s wedding. *It’s been five years since he’s been gone*, Gary thought, reminiscing. Tyler had passed away in the middle of the night and now Gary was losing Rayleen too. *What am I going to do without my best friend and my best man?* Gary checked Rayleen’s oxygen tube, rang for the nurse and moved to the window.

He hoped he would see Tyler and Rayleen again soon.

§ § §

Omar Rubio

Choose Your Own Adventure

It is 2006 and you and your friend Aaron are on a study to see paranormal activity in buildings. This is for your paranormal activity class in college. The first stop is the Harrisburg Hospital. You heard that ever since it closed there has been strange noises, screaming, footsteps, and shadows. Aaron and you found this as a good start but aren’t ready for what will happen.

1. As you and Aaron arrived you could already feel the creepiness of the hospital. As you guys set up inside the hospital you can feel the cold breeze already and feeling as if you are being watched. Aaron feels like this too. You two are setting up cameras in different rooms and you start to hear the noises. The noises sound like humans in a lot of pain. You guys get creeped out. You and Aaron split up to add more cameras and microphones too. Then you hear a loud noise and it’s where Aaron went. When you went to check on him you see that he is missing and you hear a loud scream in the distance. You don’t know what to do and you can hear doors slamming shut and footsteps everywhere.

Paragraph 2. Go look for Aaron

Paragraph 3. Ditch him and save yourself

2. You go to look for Aaron and you follow the noises. You looked in the room he went in and all there is is his phone and flashlight. The camera he placed there was busted and you could see scratch marks on the door. You follow where the scratch marks went and you see it leads down the hallway. You hear more screaming and doors opening and slamming shut. You could hear Aaron’s voice yell from a room that you cannot find because there are so many doors. As you hear his voice you can hear other ones too. You can hear the little whispers of all those who have died in this hospital. As you search through so many rooms you finally find Aaron who is shaken up. He tells you that they are everywhere and will be here soon too. He says that he was taken by a strong ghostly figure. You pick him up off his feet and try to look for an exit. On your way you hear the noise of a man. You turn around and you and Aaron notice what looks to be a tall black figure standing there. You and Aaron run for the exit. The figure behind you two is right on your tail. You find the exit and get out. When you and Aaron look back the black figure is standing there behind the door looking right at you. He writes with his finger in the wall “Don’t come back again”.

3. You can hear Aaron's voice in the distance screaming and calling your name but you are too scared. There are so many rooms that it is impossible for you to find him and you don’t see a point in possibly getting

killed for someone who might already be dead. You run and look for the exit. You can hear loud screams and doors shutting. You can also hear the footsteps of someone coming after you. As you hear that you run faster for the exit. As you find it you tried really hard to open it. It is locked. You are locked in.

Paragraph 4. Try to look for Aaron

Paragraph 5. Try to find another way out

4. Since you can't get out right away, you have to look for Aaron. You run back to where he was missing and you see the camera and flashlight on the floor. There is blood everywhere. It looks like you were too late to even have a chance to save him. You follow the blood leading to another room and you see Aaron there dead on the floor. You run away and you see down the hall a tall black figure with blood on him. You run away but there isn't anywhere to go. You try to climb through the window then Bam! You were stabbed through the chest by the black figure.

5. The exit is locked so now you have to find a different way out. There is not a lot of ways to get out of this hospital. You look through a lot of rooms and you can find a way out. Then you run into Aaron. He hugs you not knowing that you betrayed him and tells you that there is a black figure trying to get you guys. Aaron knows where an exit is and leads you to it. When you run to the exit you notice the black figure behind you. You run faster with Aaron to the exit. Aaron then turns around and punches you in the face leaving you there on the ground. He then says "You left me to die, now it's your turn". He runs to the exit and gets out. The black figure then stabs you through the chest as you watch Aaron leave safely.

The Future

In the year 2025 they are testing for the new cryogenic freezer to see if they can freeze a man's life and bring him back in the future. Today's the day of the testing. The government wants volunteers to test out their new project. The part is no one is 100% sure if it will work. The plan is for a volunteer to be put in the freezer for five years and then be taken out. They take the men who volunteer to risk their lives and put them in a freezer hoping they won't die and if they do then they just move on to the next volunteer.

Tester #1178 is the 5th man who is ready to risk his life for the future technology for the USA. His real name is Glen. As Glen sits in the cryogenic freezer he fears of everything that might go wrong. As he rethinks his decision of taking this risk he feels his body slowly get cold where he can no longer speak or move. It is the most uncomfortable feeling for him. As he takes his last glance he sees all the scientists who are operating starting to panic. In the inside of his body he feels like he will not survive this test. Then he feels his body just go dark.

Glen wakes up in the cryogenic freezer seeing no one around in the lab. He can now move his body around and talk but he is so cold that he can barely think and starts to panic. He bangs on the door hoping someone is around and can hear him but there is no luck. His panic rises as he starts to scream for help and continues to pound on the door. The claustrophobia is starting to kick in for him as he freaks out even more then he passes out.

As Glen wakes up he realizes he is no longer in the freezer anymore and is in some type of machine. It kinda looks like an MRI machine but more high tech and warming him up. As he wonders where he is at he is suddenly pulled out by two men who he had never seen before. The names of these men were on their suits. It said Abedayo and Granch. He asks them where he is at and where are all the other scientists. That's when he discovers that he is no longer in the year 2025. Granch and Abedayo tell him that he has been frozen for over 100 years. He is now in the year 2125. Glen starts to panic and freak out again and the others just watch. It worked and he is shocked but sad and scared at the same time. He was not supposed to be in the cryogenic freezer for this long. The freezer was set for only five years. The men explained that the time on the freezer was broken and that he was the only survivor out of all the other volunteers.

As Glen sits and soaks in more information from these people, he decides that he wants to take a look outside. The men explain that they are scientists themselves and that they were doing research on the history of the government's science lab. They said that he should hear more before he takes a step into the future. They explain how the world has changed ever since he was put in the cryogenic freezer. They let him know that the world now has gone through a nuclear warfare. They inform him that there are not a lot of people around anymore and that the world has gone to hell. If he were to step outside right now then he would be poisoned by

the air. It all makes sense to him for why they had suits on when they found him. Glen still wants to see what the world is like and ask questions on how it turned to this.

After hours of Glen talking to the two men they have come to some interesting ideas. Glen wants to figure out how everything went wrong and use their high tech to go back in time to his year and make sure none of the nuclear warfare ever happens. Glen and the two men talk and they share a meal. Glen is a little weirded out by what the food looks like in his year. It looks like pills but Abedayo explains to him that the pills give you all the nutrients any meal can and it is far healthier for you. The men don't have any of the technology with them to try to pull this off so that means they have to take Glen back to their laboratory. This means Glen will see what Earth turns into in 100 years.

As Abedayo and Granch get Glen suited up he is nervous and scared. Glen takes one glance at the world and is put into tears. There is nothing around. All he sees is nothing. The future is terrible for him. Glen cannot even spot a tree or any type of living organism. The men move Glen fast and put him in this tank like a truck and they go on the move. Glen is eager to find out how this all happened. He asks repeatedly but the scientists didn't answer him. When they get to their lab, they get right to work with the time machine. Then Glen gets curious. Glen asks them that if they have a time machine and knows how the world got like this then how come they didn't go back themselves and change history. The Abedayo and Granch look at each other and then look and Glen. They tell Glen what they were really searching for and what happened.

Abedayo and Granch explain to Glen that they were not in that building trying to find research, they were in there to find him. They found him 3 months ago and have checked in on Glen everyday till his timer is up in the freezer. Then they tell him that the only reason that the world went into a nuclear warfare is because the US successfully made a cryogenic freezer and their technology was getting more advanced. They tell Glen that this made other countries frightened by the US and after decades and decades, it then turned into a nuclear warfare. Glen sat down in disbelief knowing that he is one of the reasons the future is awful. The scientist then tells Glen that they had to wait for him so that they can send him back to his past body in 2025 and stop the making of the cryogenic freezer and save the future. Glen agrees with this plan and steps inside the time machine. Glen cant live his life knowing that he was part of the world getting ruined. Glen says his goodbyes and thank yous to Abedayo and Granch and is sent back in time to stop all this from happening.

§ § §

Cheyenne Richlin

The Forest

The dark forest comes upon me
Like a nightmare from childhood
The trees sing songs of death
Animals cry of despair
I kept running,
Running,
 And running,
Stop.
I fell upon an hole,
I fell deep,
Deeper,
 And Deeper,
Until my body became cold,
Thud.
My heart was racing,
Boom-
 BA-
Boom-

So rhythmic,
Boom-
 BA-
Boom-
I felt my last breath slip my lips.
As I plummeted again,
I felt a heart quenching burn,
My soul detaching from reality,
It was quiet,
 Too quiet,
Silence.
I reached the darkest part of life,
It burnt like fire,
Lucifer cooed,
Lilith filled with laughter,
The seven sins screeched,
And Death himself greeted me,
I screamed as the dark angels flew by,
Souls burning in fire,
Melted skin clumps dropped to the ground,
Demons covered my soul,
Scratching at my sins,
Feeding on the entirety of my difficulties.
And as the silence grew,
I began to feel cold,
And colder,
I was dead-

Simplicity

So we danced,
like two lovers,
intertwined in the sheets,
the taste of your breath,
was bittersweet like butterscotch.

And those lips tasted oh so neat,
like a caramel treat,
with a kiss you were,
addicted to the taste.

As we danced,
we looked like two lovebirds,
soaring in colors,
roaring of love.

This moment was created to last,
I can still feel the butterflies,
fluttering in my stomach,
and the way those eyes sparkled,
like a galaxy,

it was enchanting.

Oh how I long to feel your embrace,
Their is not enough words,
to fill up the space,
to say oh how much I love you.

Danger

I run down the corridor, one foot in front of the other.
I hear wretched screaming behind me.
Three loud bangs echo the air
Then there was silence that filled the corridor.
I tumbled down a flight of stairs
I woke up clutched to my pillow and realized
It was just another nightmare on Halloween.

Movie Nights

I wake up dazed, frightened and confused.
Shivers trickle down my spine,
butterflies flutter in my stomach,
So i stare from my seat while,
I watch you kiss her in the moonlight.
Then the screen fades to black
And I watch my friends gaze in love
Holding hands in their seats
I hate movie nights.

Friends With Benefits

I walked to your car and laughed
I always like midnight drives with you
We go around the block twice wasting our time
We kiss once but swear to keep it a secret
So I stare into your eyes
Then the teacher slaps a piece of paper on my desk
I hate daydreaming about you

Conte de fée

I would fly to Paris to live my dream
Drink wine on the balconies
Fall in love under the stars
But Instead i will stay in New York
Smoking weed in the city tunnels
Being abused by my so called lover
Getting high on Morphine to forget my life
Wishing to live a fairy tale

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