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The Creative Writing Program at Michigan Youth Arts Festival is sponsored by the Michigan Council of Teachers of English. All student writing is submitted through MCTE Member teachers and writing is adjudicated by MCTE Executive Committee Members.
Fiction
Kiley Conway  
10th Grade  
Okemos High School  
Mr. Ben Woodcock

* * *

Friends for Life

I could hear my parents talking to the doctors. They used to be so passionate about that. They would argue and argue like it would change the state I’m in. I decided to climb off my bed. I leaned towards the nightstand to use it for support. My arm started to shake, so I swung myself forwards and I slammed down into my wheelchair. It almost fell over. I decided to leave my room to find my parents.

I was always there, in that clean, sterile room, every second of every single day. Sometimes I just wanted to escape, race through the halls and into the sun. But, I was bed-bound, stuck. I could barely stand-up by myself, let alone run. I wanted to be free, from the white walls and people wearing navy blue scrubs. Normal kids my age were outside playing with their friends. I only had one friend. I never knew his name, he had never told me. He only started to visit on the days when I felt really sick. I thought it was because he knew that I needed a friend during those times, I know better now. Sometimes, I could see my parents looking him right in the eye. But they said they had never seen him.

I pulled out of my room in my wheelchair. When I turned the corner I saw my parents. They were arguing with Dr. Morgan. He was wearing a tiger sticker on his white coat. I loved tigers. My parents stopped fighting when they saw me watching them.

“Hey, buddy, glad you’re awake,” Dr. Morgan said. His phone beeped so he excused himself and left. My parents escorted me back to my bed. They turned on Nickelodeon and they abandoned the room. They left the door open just a little. I tried to tune out the TV and listen to my parents in the hall.

“Those damn doctors,” I heard my dad say. “They are doing the best that they can. He’s already on so many prescriptions and treatments, we can barely afford it anymore,” Mom answered. The rest had turned into mumbles. I couldn’t hear them, Spongebob was laughing too loud. I decided to take another nap; it’s not like there was anything else to-do.

* * *

I woke up to my bed being pushed, nurses were on both sides. I couldn’t see where I was, the nurses were blocking my view. I tried to ask one of the nurses what was happening, but they looked really focused. I saw Dr. Morgan by my head. He seemed okay.

“Uhh, Dr. Morgan, what’s going on?” I asked him. He didn't reply. I decided to change the topic. “Can I get one of those tiger stickers? I really like tigers,” I said. Dr. Morgan looked at me, then grabbed his tiger sticker off of his white coat and he put it on my gown.

“Cool. Thanks.”

I turned and saw my parents trailing behind me. I got a glimpse of where I was. I was in a hallway, near an elevator.

“Ma’am, Sir, this is where you have to stay. You cannot proceed any further. Your son will be going into surgery now,” The nurse said as she was pressing an elevator button. I was so
confused. No one had told me what was happening. Before I could ask any questions, the nurses whisked me away into the elevator. I saw my parents waving goodbye at me and the elevator doors began to close. Before the doors got a chance, someone slipped through the door. The room turned cold. It was my friend. No one else in the room acknowledged him. But I did.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hello, Bailey,” he said. He continued to stand there. The doctors didn’t say hi to him. I wanted him to tell me where I was going. The elevator dinged and my bed was pushed out. My friend followed us. We rounded a corner, through some doors, and some more doors. We eventually reached a large open room with another bed in it. It smelled like the stuff that the doctors used to clean my room with. My friend stood in the corner. A nurse picked me up and moved me onto the other bed. There was a big spotlight on me. I didn’t like it. The doctors told me to lay down. They grabbed something that looked like a snake, it had a long tail with a plastic part on the end. They placed the big part of the snake on my mouth. The nurse told me to count to ten. I only made it to three.

*   *   *

“The transplant went well. With the new bone marrow, we have probably added three months for more treatment time,” the doctor said.

“Well, that’s great news. Do you know if our insurance covers this?” my mom asked. I realized they aren’t talking about anything interesting, and I focused back on myself. I was back in my room. I saw Rugrats playing on the TV. The room was cold. My friend was there. He was standing in the corner, in the shadow of my door. I couldn’t see him very well.

“Are we friends?” I asked, just to be sure.

“If you say so,” my friend responded. Honestly, I thought that was good as I was going to get. He wasn’t much of a talker. I decided to change the channel to Scooby-Doo because I had seen enough of Rugrats.

Once Shaggy pulled the mask off another bad guy, I decided to turn the TV off. It was almost 3’oclock, so I decided to get out of my room. I wasn’t feeling great so I used my wheelchair. Before I could reach the door, Nurse Maggie opened it.

“Hey, Bailey! I heard that you were a superstar today,” she said. She was wearing the same navy blue scrubs as everyone else. She was carrying a smooth, clean metal tray. It had a box of apple juice, a shot, and a stuffed bear. She grabbed my wheelchair and turned me around. She pushed me back towards my bed. My friend was watching her intently. “Okay so you know the drill, we are just gonna put this stuff in your arm, and then you’re gonna drink some apple juice. Feel free to hold on your bear while I do this”

“I don’t like bears. I like tigers,” I said. She ignored me as she got the needle ready. My friend was still there, at the time I wondered why. Nurse Maggie grabbed a long metal pole with a clear bag on top. In the bag, there was some clear liquid. She connected the syringe to a long worm coming out of the bag. She took the worm and stuck it into my arm. Ouch.

After Nurse Maggie left. I started to feel sick. This always happened. I started to make my way towards the bathroom. I’m not going to make it there. I started wheeling faster. I didn’t want that to happen. I lunged out of my chair to make it to the toilet faster. I felt my stomach squeeze. The puke rose in my throat. I tried to hold it in, but it was no use. The vomit came out of me. I could feel it on my tongue, it was warm and bitter. I couldn’t stop it. I felt tears spilling down my face. I felt gross. I didn’t like it. I saw my friend standing across the room.
“Can you just turn around?” I asked. He listened. I liked having him with me, but I didn’t want him looking at me when I was sick. I kept throwing up until suddenly, everything went dark.

When I opened my eyes again, I was still on the bathroom floor. My friend was standing very close to me. He’d never get close to me. When he saw my eyes were open, he sighed and moved back. How long had it been? Why did no one find me? My wheelchair was too far away to grab ahold of. I slowly tried to stand up to push the red help button. I couldn’t.

“You can’t push that for me?” I asked my friend. I ran out of breath trying to speak. He was just standing there. Maybe he didn’t hear me I thought. “Can you please—just push that button for me?” I repeated. *Why is he just looking at me?* I didn’t understand. A real friend would have helped me. “Just go okay, if you aren’t going to be my friend. Just leave,” I said. He sighed and walked out of the room. I grabbed the counter and pulled myself up. I reached for the button, and I barely touched it. A small beep started making noise, and nurses slowly started piling in. One of them was feeling my neck and my wrist. Her hands were warm. My friend stood by the window, nurses blocked my view, I couldn’t see him anymore. Another nurse picked me up and took me out of the bathroom. She made me explain what happened. I told her about my friend, but she didn’t believe me. She left me in my room and she went with the other nurses, I heard her talking;

“A sign that you are in the final stage of cancer can be hallucinations and delirium,” she said to the other nurses. I didn’t know what any of those words meant. I know now. Her voice went in and out, under and over other voices in the room. As time went by, so did the nurses. My parents came, but they only talked to nurses and doctors. Once again I was alone. Just me.

It was past midnight, I couldn't sleep. I hadn’t really left my room all day, so I decided to go into the hallway. I wheeled past the deserted nurse’s stations. I kept going. I didn’t know where, but I couldn’t be in my room. I made a sharp turn and I almost fell out of my chair.

“You scared me! I thought I told you to leave.” I said.

“Sorry,” My friend said. He didn’t seem sorry. Actually, he was smiling.

“I don’t want to be friends with you anymore, okay?” I said, I turned my chair around and I headed back to my room. I looked at the walls, they were white but they had barnyard animals painted all over it. There weren’t any tigers. Above the paintings of pigs and cows, there were pictures of kids who looked like me. Kids who were wearing hats and scarves. They were all smiling. Above their pictures, there was a sign that read ‘In Memoriam’. *Why were they so happy?* Then I saw something I had never noticed before. I was in those halls all the time. *Why hadn’t I seen that?* In the background of each photo, was my friend. He was standing behind all of those kids. I got a weird chill down my spine. I couldn’t breathe, I was wheezing. I turned my chair around and tried to continue back to my room, I needed to get to the button. I passed the nurse’s station again, I could see my door. The hallway turned cold. This had happened before, in the elevator. It started to echo in my head, “He only visits on the days where I feel really sick”. Then I realized, another thing that me and those kids have in common. Death.

* * *

“We found your son in the hallway. By the time we got to him, it was too late. He suffered from a deep vein thrombosis. It was a blood clot that formed during surgery. The clot broke loose and caused a Pulmonary Embolism. It made him unable to breathe. I am very sorry for your loss.”
Cassie Thatcher
10th grade
Okemos High School
Mr. Ben Woodcock

They Took Her Away

*Clunk Clunk Clunk.* The garbage disposal made that horrible noise like silverware in a washing machine.

*That’s the third time this week.* “Rob!” I called to my husband.

“What?” He answered almost aggressively, as he ran into the kitchen.

“The disposal is broken again. I thought you said you fixed it?”

“I did! Let me take a look.” He practically pushed me out of the way.

I sigh, “I’m just going to call a handyman.”

“No!” he shouted, his face red as the roses he gave me last Valentine’s Day. I jumped in surprise. I didn’t expect him to yell at me like that over something so trivial.

“I can fix it.”

Obviously, he didn’t know what he was doing. “I’m calling a repairman.”

“Linda,” he grabbed my wrist. “I’m going to fix it. I’ll do it right now!” We’ve been fighting so much since the kids went missing.

“This is the third time you’ve tried! You don’t. Know. How. I’m calling a repairman.” I crossed my arms in front of my chest.

Rob looked furious. “I’m going back to the office.” He grabbed his coat and left me standing there alone.

*I want this stupid disposal fixed. I can’t handle anymore stress.* I leaned on the counter with my head in my hands and cried. Twelve years ago, I had given birth to three beautiful triplets, two girls, Taylor and Kristy, and one boy, Chase. They are my life. They’ve been missing for three days now. For seventy-two hours I have cried and felt totally helpless. I don’t know what to do with myself. I spent all my time on the kids. I did laundry, made dinner, went to Taylor’s swim meets, Chase’s concerts, and helped Kristy with her advanced math homework. I’m even on the school board. They just started middle school, so I thought I’d join and help out. Now all that is gone.

I knew the police were doing everything they could, so I tried to get my mind off things and dialed the plumber’s number.

“Frank’s Plumbing, how can I help you?” a velvety voice answered. I explained the problem to the man on the line and he said someone could be over at 1 o’clock tomorrow.

*Finally, I’ll get this stupid garbage disposal fixed for real.*

Later that day, after Rob came home from work, we got a call updating us on the investigation. Three days ago, the triplets were all seen walking home from school like they normally do. They found Kristy’s phone by the street where they were last seen. Other than that, there were some tire marks and that’s all the evidence they have.

I haven’t gotten much sleep since we reported them missing. I’ve prayed every single night that they’re safe and will come home to me. The police are working really hard to find them. In the meantime, Rob goes to work and I make dinner that no one will eat and clean over and over even though there is no one to make it dirty. I feel as if I have no meaning now.
The next morning, I woke up, sleep-deprived, as usual. Rob was at work already. I called my mom and gave her an update about the kids until the repairman came.

“Mrs. Benkit?” the plumber asked when I opened the door.

“You can call me Linda.” I stuck out my right hand, trying to act like my life wasn’t falling apart.

“Joe,” he said, shaking my hand. It didn't go unnoticed to me that his eyes softened a bit when he looked into my red, swollen eyes, now too dry to shed another drop.

“Please, come in.” I led him to the kitchen. He carried a rectangular box and had tools attached to his belt. He asked me to turn on the garbage disposal and it made the same nasty sound.

“Something must be clogging it. You might need a new one since this is the third time.” He got to work tearing apart my sink in ways I didn’t understand. I went to my office and started researching anything I could think of to help me find my sweet kids. I had been doing this in all my new free time and hitting nothing but dead ends. Nothing made sense. Where did my babies go? I had been hoping and wishing they ran away and were safe together. It was better than thinking those tire marks abducted them.

“Mrs. Benkit?” Joe called out.

I flinched, his voice breaking my train of thought. “Yes?”

“I found the problem.”

I walked back into the kitchen to see Joe holding small, white, misshaped pebbles. “You guys must have put something down there that it couldn’t handle.” He put them on the counter, then pulled out several bigger chunks of the same white stuff. “It couldn’t crush it all the way, and left these clumps.”

That’s weird. I hadn’t put anything that looks like that down there and Rob doesn’t even know how to use the disposal.

“What is that?” I ask.

“I’m not sure. You don’t know?”

“I’ve never seen anything like that in my life,” I answered, an uneasy feeling making my stomach churn.

He shrugged his shoulders and started to put the sink back together. When he was done, I thanked him and took the bill. As soon as the ‘Frank’s Plumbing’ truck left my driveway, I put the white stuff in a Ziplock bag and got in my car. I know it might have been over dramatic to go straight to the sheriff about something in my garbage disposal, but my kids are missing. Anything just a little different about my daily life could have been a clue.

It was a wet, muggy day out, perfectly reflecting how my body and mind felt. I drove to the station with the bag on my passenger seat. I confidently walked in and the receptionist greeted me by my first name. I had been there a lot over the past few days. I told her what the plumber found and she said that she’d give it to the detective working on our case.

The detective gave me a call later that day and said we were his top priority and the white stuff was already being tested in the lab. All we could do now is wait. I felt as if my life was on hold like a sales call with crappy music.

Sirens and rain woke me up the next morning. The sun was still down. Blue and red lights started shining through my window like eerie fireworks on the fourth of July. My heart
nearly stopped as I went into a blind panic. My babies! They found them. Are they here? Are they okay?

“Rob! Rob!” I yelled and shook him awake. He groaned as I jumped out of bed and ran downstairs like lightning. I opened the door before they could even ring the bell.

“Linda Benkit?” The officer looked tense with his hand resting near his gun.

“Yes, yes!”

“Is Rob Jason Benkit here?”

Rob? The police? What’s going on? My mind raced frantically. I heard a creak behind me and saw Rob had stopped dead in his tracks on his way down the stairs. He looked like a deer caught in headlights. I suddenly realized how he had been acting differently those few days before the kids went missing. He kept to himself and was cold and quiet.

I will never forget the words that came next, “Rob Jason Benkit, you are under the arrest for the murder of Chase Benkit, Kristy Benkit, and Taylor Benkit.”

Murder. My vision went blurry. I collapsed on the ground and stared at my hands. They couldn’t be dead. “Chase,” I whispered. The names that the police officer listed off rang in my head. My body felt heavy. “Taylor?” I croaked. “A-and Kristy?” All my babies... all three of them are dead? Rob did it? He couldn’t have. He loves them. He loves me. This had to be a mistake but I had a horrible feeling it was the truth. I didn’t even cry. I felt empty and lost. How could they be dead? God can’t just take them from me like that.

The world sounded like it was underwater... I felt like I was drowning. I must have blacked out because before I knew it, Rob was in handcuffs.

I quickly stood up when I came to. Seeing him in handcuffs, being led by the police brought me out of my trance like a slap to the face. “Rob!” I yelled with tears in my eyes. “This must be a mistake!” I don’t think I believed that, but it was easier than believing Rob killed our children.

With rain and tears streaming down my face, I watched my husband leave me at my doorstep, his head down as he was escorted to the police car. The officer handed me the full report, black ink smudged by the storm.

It took me a while to be capable of reading it through my tears. Chase and Rob’s DNA were in the white stuff in the garbage disposal. The chunks were Chase’s bone fragments. I cried over those horrible words. The janitor that cleans Rob’s office building called the police last night. There was blood all over the walls in the basement. The DNA matched all three of my babies. Rob’s fingerprints were everywhere in the basement. The detectives believe he discarded their bodies in the garbage disposal. My tears splashed the paper, leaving circles of grief on the words I didn’t want to believe.

I was in shock. I didn’t know how to feel. I didn’t feel angry. Is that bad? I should have been furious with Rob. I wasn’t. I was confused and grieving for my children. I couldn’t believe all my babies were gone. I prayed God was taking good care of them. I felt weak. I couldn’t move. My life is over.

An officer took me to the county jail. They thought Rob would be more likely to confess if I was there.

He was already in orange. I barely recognized him. Who is Rob Jason Benkit? The man I loved, married and had triplets with...where did he go? The man on the other side of the clear glass window was a stranger. Not the man I married.

There were four guards in the room.

He picked up the phone.
I picked up on my end with shaking hands and tears streaming down my face. “Were you
framed?” I croaked.

“No...I wasn’t,” Three words and I saw my life crashing before my eyes. That was the
moment it hit me, the moment my children’s father said those three words while looking deep
into my eyes. That was the moment it hit me that my children are dead, murdered in cold blood
by their own father, my husband, the man I thought I knew.

“Why?” I could barely get the word out.

“I killed Taylor first,” he stared straight ahead at nothing. More tears came, my hand was
barely able to hold the phone as he continued. “I killed them in birth order. Taylor, then Kristy,
then Chase.” His voice was cold and emotionless. I whimpered, covering my mouth with my free
hand to stop myself from sobbing.

Rob smiled.

I imagined my babies’ blood on the walls in that basement. I gagged and said a small
prayer. That’s why he had been spending so much time at his office. I was no longer able to stop
the tears from pouring out of my wide eyes.

“Why?” I asked again. I didn’t sound like myself. “They took my Linda away.”

Me?

I dropped the phone, the plastic crashed and banged hard against the concrete. It’s my
fault.

Taylor, Kristy and Chase’s deaths are all my fault.

I didn’t give my husband enough attention after they started middle school.

I left the jail without saying anything back to Rob. Guilt weighed on my shoulders as I
hunched my back through the rain on the way out of the station.

The police were swarming my house. They found traces of all three of my baby’s blood
and flesh in the garbage disposal. They tore apart my bedroom. Hidden in Rob’s sock drawer
was a journal. He kept a list of all the bad things each child had done.

I felt my body crumpling again. The stupid police officer asked me if I wanted to read the
journal. Why would I want to read the list of reasons my husband used to kill my children? The
list he had been collecting for years. He had been planning for years. How did I let that slip past
me? I thought I knew Rob.

I don’t even know myself anymore.

My entire life was just ripped away from me. My children are dead, my husband is going
to die in jail. I was surrounded by investigators and police officers, yet I was the loneliest woman
on Earth.

And it was all my fault.

Clunk Clunk Clunk. That horrible noise woke me up. I was in the same strange bed as the
past couple of weeks. “My babies!” I cry. “Where are they! Why am I here?” I’m screaming and
straining like an animal. The same strangers in white came and held me down. I won’t live like
this anymore. I screamed for Taylor, Kristy, and Chase to come back to me.

The people in white answered my screams by taking me to the room with padded walls
and covered my hands with foam balloons. “Let me out! I needed to take the girls to Chase’s
concert!” Tears streamed down my face because I knew I would miss another concert and Taylor
will be wondering why I was not at her swim meet. I pounded my hands on the padded floor.
Kristy needed my hands so I can help her with her calculus honors homework. “She needs help! I can help Kristy just give me my hands back!”

It was no use. My children needed me, but they had no one. I can’t exactly remember why... I just know it’s my fault.
She held her daughter on her lap, her trembling fingers weaving through the little girl’s bronze hair. Her daughter gazed up at her, and the woman smiled though her lips quivered and her chest shuddered.

She turned to her son, who sat huddled at her feet. He reached up and touched her knee. “Mother,” he whispered softly. “I wanna play outside.”

The woman reached down and stroked his head, her hand trembling. “No, Henry. It’s too dark now.”

“But I’m bored.”
She smiled, tears slipping down her cheeks and falling off her lips.

“When’s father coming back?” the daughter asked. The woman stroked her fingers back through the little girl’s hair. “Soon, Beth.”

“But why did he go?” Henry asked, leaning his chin on his mother’s knee.
She brushed his cheek with her cold, skeletal fingers. “Because the voices claimed him.”

The light in the room shuddered.
The three turned as the dim lamp beside them flickered on and off, its shade rattling. The walls of the house began to shake.

The woman turned to look out the windows behind them. Black figures materialized at the end of the road, morphing from the darkness.

“Okay,” she pulled Beth off her lap and set her down beside Henry. “You know what to do. Get down.”

The two children laid flat on their bellies and entwined their hands over the back of their heads. Their mother kneeled down beside them but kept her gaze on the dark windows.

She watched the lights blink out in the neighboring houses, night’s shadow claiming the streets. All was still, the woman unable to see the black figures.

But then she felt them.
They flew down the street in a swarm of black, the houses groaning and the floors shaking. The bones shook inside the woman’s limbs, her heart bouncing into her ribs.

The eerie chant called out in the distance, incomprehensible except to those who’d heard it said many times.

“Red Rover. Red Rover. Send Carrie on over.”

Carrie Harvey lived a few doors down. Carrie’s husband had been named a year ago. There would be no one to watch the children now.

There was a dull thud from outside and the woman peeked around the couch, peering through the window. The house across the street was surrounded by a horde of black figures. Carrie stepped out of the house and the black hands snatched her, wrenching her off the porch.

The woman’s house trembled as the wave of shadows flew back the way they’d come, now another member, Carrie, added to their lines.

The woman waited another moment, holding her breath.
Would they call again? Suddenly, the dead lamp inhaled light and blew warmth back into the room. She turned to her children, “Okay, they’re gone. We’re safe.”

Beth rubbed her eyes tiredly, “Can I go play with my dolls now?”

“Yes, honey. Go play.”

Beth’s face brightened before she skipped off, her twin brother hurrying after her. The woman’s smile faded after they had gone and she sank onto the couch, tapping her nails against the arm. She looked over her shoulder out the window, the houses all beginning to glow with light again. She frowned, looking down the street into the deep darkness. There was no movement. The black things were gone.

She could still remember watching him walk off into the darkness with them, disappearing into only shadow.

“Mom. Mom.”

She opened her eyes. Henry leaned over her, his face inches away.

She groaned and sat up, “What is it, Henry?”

“I’m going outside to play.”

“What time is it?” she asked, blinking the sleep from her eyes. She turned to look at the windows behind her; the cool gray sunlight puddled on the streets.

“It’s morning. You said to tell you when I go outside, so I’m going outside.” “Okay, honey. Just stay close to the house. Stay in the backyard.”

He nodded before skipping off, his red shirt vibrant against the dull darkness of the house. She heard the door slide open and snap shut before she pulled herself up with a shallow moan.

The cold floorboards creaked beneath her, filling the eerie silence of the house. She stepped into the kitchen, glancing out the window to make sure she could see Henry. He was skipping about the grass, swinging a stick against a rock.

She turned to the cupboards and pried a few open, the rusty hinges squealing. She gazed inside the musty cabinets. Spiders fell from the corners and scurried around the wood shelves. Nothing but empty boxes.

She sighed and shut the pantry, leaning against the door. She looked out the window at the cool rising sun. Could she make it into town to get food with enough time to return before dark? She hadn’t left the house since her husband had been taken.

She stepped toward the window, watching Henry jump about the rocks. His cheeks were shallow and his ribs showed through his filthy shirt. She pursed her lips and looked to her bag sitting on the counter.

If she left now and hurried to scavenge food, she could make it home before dark. She quickly pulled the bag over her shoulder and pulled open the door, “Henry, dear, come inside!”

He turned, his stick hanging in his hand. He pouted, “I only just-”

“I’m going to get food. Come inside.” She held out her hand and he frowned, but hopped over to her. She shut the door and locked it behind him.

She stroked his pink cheek and planted a kiss on his hair, “I’ll be back as soon as I can. Stay with your sister and stay inside. Got it? I won’t be long.”

She passed by Beth’s door, giving it a quick knock. “Beth, I’m getting food. Stay with your brother, okay? And stay inside. Don’t go outside.”
She heard Beth rollover in her sleep.
She unlocked the front door and pulled it open, stepping out into the brisk air. She shut the door behind her. She took the key from her pocket and locked the door, giving the knob a shake to make sure no one could get inside.
And her children couldn’t get out.
She shook the knob again.
She turned and looked around the neighborhood, the sagging houses eerie, the silent streets uncanny. She shifted her pack and hurried off the porch, scurrying down the street.
She had enough time to get to the store and back, but dark hours were unreliable. The darkness had a mind of its own and the sun could not fight it.
Ghostly eyes glanced through window glass to watch her go. No one left their homes if they could help it. Everyone had lost someone.
The woman weaved around empty cars and abandoned bicycles on her way to town.
She could remember a time before the dark meant death, a time before the black figures sung out in the night. Her children didn’t. Beth and Henry only knew the dark.
The woman turned off the main road and took a side street, glancing up at the sun, still high in the center of the sky. She glanced at the houses she passed by.
A hunched figure sat on a porch, holding its knees as it rocked itself back and forth.
“Ben... Ben... no, no... not... Ben. Anyone but... Ben...” the thing turned its head, its blank eyes staring through the woman. It was an elderly woman that sat on the porch, her gangly body nothing more than skin and bones. Her mouth fumbled like a fish’s, her blank stare unblinking. Her tongue slugged out of her mouth and licked her dry lips.
The woman looked away and hurried on, keeping her eyes low. She stepped over a fallen electric pole and could see the gray buildings in the near distance. She quickened her pace, glancing back at the sun.
She stepped through the paneless window of the grocery store, sliding her bag from her back. She unzipped it and pulled boxes from the shelves. There wasn’t much left, only boxes and packages lingering in back corners. Cereal crunched beneath her shoes.
She crammed in whatever she could. When she looked at the windows, shadows were crawling over the buildings. The sun was setting.
Her heart slammed into her chest. She threw her pack over her shoulder and lept out the door. Boxes fell from her bag. She didn’t notice.
The sun was setting.
It was drifting down to touch the street.
She broke out into a sprint. She tore through the side street, jumping over fallen poles and tipped trash cans. “Ben!“
She ignored the elderly woman as she ran past again.
The old lady squealed, “Ben! Ben! Ben!“
The woman shot toward home, the edges of the sky growing black, the darkness slinking over the street. She pumped her arms. Shadows snapped at the woman’s heels.
Home.
She scurried onto the porch, fumbling for her keys in her pocket. Her shaking fingers wrapped around the cold metal knob and she jammed the key into the hole. She fell through the door and then flung it shut.
“Beth! Henry! I’m home!” She ran into the kitchen. No one answered. “Beth? Henry? Where are you?”
“I’m hungry,” Beth mumbled, waddling into the kitchen.
“I have food right here. I got you some cookies,” she pulled out a box from her bag and handed it to her daughter, looking around, panting. “Where’s your brother?”
“He wouldn’t play with me,” she pouted, stuffing a cookie into her mouth.
“Where is he?”
“He wouldn’t play dolls with me. He wanted to play with his stick.”
“Stick? What stick? He doesn’t have a stick.”
“His stick,” she repeated, chewing on another cookie and pointing out the door.
The woman flew to the windows, staring out into the back yard. The sun was gone.

Darkness was everywhere.
The back gate was open.
Her breath caught and she ran to the front of the house, ripping aside the drapes and staring out the window.
There he was, swinging a stick through the air, wandering down the road. A little figure, faintly glowing against the terrible night rising. His red shirt a bright dot in the black.
The house began to rumble and the lamp beside her flickered. The black figures manifested from the darkness.
She ran to the front door and ripped it open. She lept out onto the porch and screamed at her son.
“HENRY!”
He turned to look at her.
The wave of black figures crashed over him, writhed around him, and swallowed him up.
“NO!” she screamed, stumbling off her porch.
“Mom,” Beth wobbled to the open door. “I can’t find-
The black heads snapped toward her. The woman grabbed her daughter and ran inside the house. She threw the door shut, locking it.
Still clutching Beth, she sprinted into the living room, cradling her as she ducked down beside the couch.
Beth tugged on her sleeve, “Mommy, I can’t find my dolly.”
“Shh.” She held her daughter closer, the house still trembling. Her hands shook against her daughter’s small body, the last image of her son burned into her brain.
“Wait, Mom, I need to look for-
“Shh, Beth. Wait.”
“Mommy, what about Henry? Where’s-”
“Shh. Shh.”
She listened, and heard only silence. She inched around the couch and peeked over the side to see out the corner of the window, searching for the figures.
Her son was gone. The woman squeezed her daughter closer.
She glanced up at the lamp; it was still dead. The room was black. So the figures were still here.
Where were they?
“Mommy-”
“Shhh.” She stroked Beth’s hair, tears rolling out of her wide eyes. Her chest shook against her daughter, her lungs quaking.
“Mommy-”
“No, no. Shh. Shh.” She pushed Beth’s face into her chest and held her tightly. “Shh. Shh.”

Bam!

The woman jolted and turned to the window. A gray hand was pressed against the glass, the nails black with mold and skin peeling off the bone.

Beth whimpered into her mother’s shirt and the woman gripped her tighter, staring at the window blocked by the drape.

A face slowly peeked past the drape. White eyes. No lips.

Its black teeth grinned.

BAM!

The door shuddered with a bang. It was hit again, and splintered with a crack. The woman stared at the foyer, her arms wrapping tighter and tighter around her daughter, trying to squeeze Beth into nothing.

“Red Rover, Red Rover.” The shrill voices called as one, deep and low, woman and man, young and old. “Send Beth on over.”

Beth went rigid in the woman’s arms. She felt her daughter’s body tense, and she held her child tighter. “No.”

“Red Rover.”

BANG!

The door cracked more with the blow.

Beth pushed away from her mother, her eyes locked on the door. The woman’s arms tightened around Beth, keeping her nailed against her. Beth struggled and squirmed, slipping through her arms.

“No! Beth!” She grabbed her daughter by the shoulders and yanked her around.

Beth turned and the woman fell numb. Her daughter’s bright eyes were lifeless and dull, blinking blankly.

Like she didn’t recognize her mother.

“Beth . . .”

BANG!

The door shot open, collapsing in two halves and collapsing to splinters. The woman jumped in fright and Beth spun out of her grasp, shooting to the door.

“NO!” the woman screamed, lunging after her daughter. “BETH!”

“Red Rover.” A dark hand clawed out of the blackness and into the hallway to her daughter.

“BETH!”

“Send Beth on over.”

She reached up a little hand to grab the claw.

“BETH!”

Just as the woman jumped to grab her daughter, the gray hand snatched Beth and disappeared. She hurtled to the ground, wrapping her arms around air. She turned to the doorway, the black flurry of shapes shot out into the night.

“BETH! NO!” She screamed at the retreating black mass.

She stumbled out of the house, screaming and sobbing. She wailed into the night, her voice breaking the sky.
“Henry . . . Beth . . .” the woman held herself, rocking back and forth on her couch. She clasped a photo frame in her hand, the glass smudged by her cold tears. “Henry . . . Beth . . . Henry . . .” she ran her trembling fingers over the picture, tracing over her children’s faces. And his face.

Now everyone was gone except her.

“James . . .” she sniffled. “Oh, James . . . Henry . . . Oh, Beth . . .” she grunted into her teeth and dug her nails into her ribs.

The sun was setting outside, night slipping into the world. She hadn’t moved. She just sat with the photograph, stroking her husband, her son, her daughter.

She could see James stepping out of the house.

She could see Henry, turning to look at her with his eyes wide and shining.

And Beth, reaching out her little hand to hold the black one’s.

She made a noise like a throttled giggle. She grazed her daughter’s face with the tip of her finger, imagining the feel of Beth’s hair.

The light flickered and she pressed the picture into her breast, turning to stare at the lamp.

There was a low rumble in the distance.

It went dark. Then light. And dark. The woman sat in silence, clinging to her photograph as she sat shivering on the couch. She turned to look out the windows at the black night.

Slowly, out in the distance, the black figures emerged one by one.

She turned back to look at her photo. She tilted her head and whispered to herself as she petted her family’s faces.

James.

Henry.

Beth-

Something tapped her foot. The woman looked down, a little hand poking out from under the couch. She reached down and gripped it, pulling out Beth’s little plastic doll.

She held it up in front of her, gazing at it in silence.
The day I realized it, it was a sunny day. That was the day the north wind came as the leaves had started turning colors symbolizing the end of summer and the beginning of fall. My dilemma started off small with people pointing out odd behaviors I never knew I had. My supposed habits were never anything too out of the ordinary, so I didn’t mind. Or at least, I didn’t think I minded. Not at all, until my best friend acknowledged that something was very wrong.

Eliza had been looking at me weird all lunch. She slowly ate her lunch, dragging out each bite, taking her time to neatly fold and unfold all her wrappers; her gaze never left mine. I awkwardly coughed, trying to relieve some tension from the awkward atmosphere building around us. The loud clatter of the lunchroom became static. I felt a prickling sensation ghost through my entire being. The background noise became more and more distant. I could no longer make out what individual people were saying as a buzzing noise grew louder and louder!

“A-are you ok?” Eliza asked, her face contorting into a mixture of sympathy and confusion.

“I-what?” I asked, trying to ground myself into reality. Eliza pressed her lips into a straight line. Her clover eyes shone with disappointment. I shrunk into my seat. Eliza continued staring, opening and closing her mouth, but no sound came out. I willed myself to disappear from existence. Every passing second became more excruciating than the last.

“What?” I hurriedly asked, again. She sighed, drawing out her breath as long as she could.

“What’s going on with you?” she finally asked.

“Nothing,” I muttered, shaking my head defensively. Eliza’s eyes flared in contempt. The fire in her eyes rivaling the sun. Her face flushed red like a dahlia. I had clearly said the wrong thing.

“We both know that’s a lie, so out with it!” Eliza’s voice was heavy with anger and disappointment. Her shoulders squared ready to fight. I felt my jaw stiffen, bracing myself for a lecture. Then, just like that. Eliza seemed to wilt, the fight having gone out of her. I felt my breath hitch. A despondent Eliza looked so...so wrong. And I had caused that. My gaze flitted to her. She continued to stare a long soul-piercing stare.

“You don’t eat anymore,” she said, eyes softening in response. I blinked.

“Yes, I eat. Why wouldn’t I?” I answered immediately, shifting in my seat. Eliza gave me an incredulous stare.

“I have my lu...” I trailed off as I glanced at the barren table space in front of me. I felt a surge of embarrassment swell up inside of me.


“What? Eliza paused. She seemed to contemplate her next words.
“I don’t even know when was the last time you ate”. A hint of unease gnawed at my stomach.

“I ate breakfast, obviously” I answered smoothly, but why did I feel uncertain? I had eaten, hadn’t I? I glanced up. Eliza looked unconvinced, but dropped the subject, to my relief. But, why didn’t I feel at ease? For the rest of lunch we ate in silence. But I was consumed by my thoughts. Each and every thought going back to one question: When had I eaten last?

A week after that conversation, I realized I never felt hungry anymore. I could go days without eating and be fine. That should have been my first clue of the horror that was to come, but I failed to recognize the symptom for what it was.

The second change was the coughing. At first, I blamed the ailment on the changing seasons, feigning semi-illness whenever brought to question. It was just easier that way. The less questions asked, the more secure I felt. But, it didn’t change the fact that I still didn’t know what was happening to me and I was terrified. A few months after my realization, I still wasn’t eating, but that was easier to hide than the incessant coughing. The first time my mom had brought up the coughing had been a nightmare. She thought I was dying. I told her I was fine, but was relieved when we were on our way to the hospital. Maybe then I would figure out what was wrong with me.

The hospital trip proved useless. The doctors couldn’t explain why I had been coughing and just recommended more chamomile tea. But what made my heart stop was when Dr. Woodgate inquired about my eating habits. I had lied knowing this was when I would get outed for whatever strange illness had taken my hunger. Instead, the doctor had commended me on how healthy I was. I felt confused and angry, so I asked what would happen if someone had not eaten for awhile. His explanation had been long and detailed, but ultimately decided on saying, “the opposite of you” when he noticed I did not understand. Maybe I was just getting sick and my hunger would return when the coughing stopped.

I now placed all my hopes on a warm spring, a new beginning. But, with the rise in temperature, the coughing worsened. Cough drops never helped and only made me dizzy and I always felt short of breath. A terrible constricting feeling seemed to coil its way around my lungs like thorny vines. The worst part was when I could no longer feign illness. Soon rumors began circulating. I had cancer. I had leukemia. I had tuberculosis. They all seemed to center around me having some kind of illness. But the rumors that bothered me the most were the ones that I faked an illness to get attention and all the names that came with it. I did pretend to be sicker than I actually was, but that was to avoid getting attention. It was supposed to help me blend into the background. Where had I gone wrong? At first I had tried to fight off the rumors, but soon found the more I fought the harder I fell.

Nothing could have prepared me for Eliza’s renouncement of our blooming friendship. It didn’t make sense. Eliza and I had known each other for years. She was one of the most loyal and protective people you could meet. And she had left me. It hadn’t even been a big falling out. She had just stopped returning my texts. I had tried on several occasions to confront her about it. But with every attempt my resolve weakened. I had lost my only friend. My blue rose.

I dealt with the situation the only way I knew how and hid. I tried making myself smaller, slumping down in chairs and hugging the walls to get away from them. Them and their judging bulbous eyes always watching. The coughs grew louder the quieter I got.

Then I coughed out a flower petal. My eyes widened in disbelief. I stared long and hard at the offending petal, but could make no sense of its existence. D-did I cough it up? No, that can’t be right. What proof was there that I coughed it up? It had to be one big coincidence. I
coughed and a petal had been conveniently stuck to my hand. That was it! That was what happened, wasn’t it? Yes, that’s all!

Then it happened again. And again. And again. And again. And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again! And again!

With time the petal became petals and the petals became flowers. Until I had a single bouquet. My throat grew hoarse from producing flowers, but it’s not like I talked anymore anyway. Unlike my speech, there wasn’t a day I didn’t feel the bile of more flowers tear their way out of my throat. Vomiting became as natural as sleep. I could deal with the hoarse throat and even the cursed flowers no matter how much they hurt. What I couldn’t deal with were the chest constrictions.

At first, it was every month, which became every other week, which became every week, which became every day. Like the flowers, every day thorns would pierce my lungs, cutting off my breath and striking my heart. I would always gasp and cry out, but no one would listen. Every day I would die a little more, but I could not ask for help. Not physically and not emotionally.

The next change was really where I should have said something, anything! The whispers had started growing louder, but they did that sometimes. I just had to wait for them to die. If only. Sometimes the flowers were louder.

It was the day of some morning I could not remember. I had just finished puking a funeral procession’s worth of flowers (which had gotten bigger). They were no longer singular flowers, but big blooming blood-stained corsages. At one point the flowers had come out perfectly pressed. Now they were permanently dyed with my pain. A swirling rainbow of crimson and vermillion sloshed before me in the toilet bowl. On bad days I would cough vines. On good days, the flowers came up as pieces by the time they reached my throat.

It was that day that I found moss intermixed in my concoction of agony. I stared bewildered at the moss; a familiar sense of dread and curiosity. It didn’t hurt? Ok. It didn’t hurt. From the back, I could hear someone laughing. A laugh so deranged it couldn’t possibly be human anymore. A gleeful anticipation bubbled in my chest. It didn’t hurt! It didn’t hurt! It didn’t hurt! It didn’t hurt! I ran my fingers through my hair to feel it fall out in soft chunky strands. I gasped. I felt my chest constrict, expecting it to cut into my being only to find it eat away at my existence. I glanced down at the hair to find none, only moss. I looked at it, eyes fixated on it. It was moss. There was moss on the bathroom floor. I felt the cold on the floor seep into my legs. I felt the cold so vividly, but didn’t care. There was moss. In a haphazard stagger, I stumbled to get up and look in the mirror. I gasped. I felt more bile rise in my throat and for once it wasn’t because of the flowers. I wheezed, weakly looking up at the creature before me. There was no way to describe it other than monstrous. A sickly green complexion contrasted the darker green undertones running underneath the skin. It was pulsing, oozing, just waiting to break free. I felt my breath hitch. It was the vines! I glanced down at my hands, tugging the sleeve back. It’s here too! The vines have followed me here too! With every passing second, I could feel the vines constricting. My lungs burned, desperately trying to fight the piercing touch of the vines! Everything burned! All at once, I felt thousands of tiny pin pricks over my body. I despairingly glanced at the mirror. Droplets of scarlet littered my vision. I felt tears prick my eyes. It couldn’t end like this! No! It hurts! I tried to scream. Someone! Anyone! Please! Help Me! It hurts! But no sounds came out. Spurs of pain pulsed through my veins. Stop! Stop it! Please! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to! Not like this! Please! Anyone! Hurts!

“Did you hear what happened?” a shrill voice asked.
“Shh! Keep your voices down!” a third hushed.
“That was Mary’s daughter, wasn’t it?” a fourth one sympathized. As the four people passed, there stood a lone newspaper stand. The headline read, “Mangled Corpse Found Buried in Plant Baffles Authorities”.

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Kiana Estep  
11th grade  
Evart High School  
Crystal Nelson

_Under the Wire_

Lucas sat on the couch, mindlessly rubbing his forearm, which had a layer of bandages covering exceptionally bad road-burn. A sore reminder of the fight. His mind was flooded with intrusive thoughts and worries, all stemming from one person in particular.

Aris.

How could one person, one boy from an island far away with tired eyes and a coffee habit get so tight under the wire, that he might rethink everything he once stood for? The look of hurt, concern in his eyes, it was debilitating. He was used to it from Andre, from Marcus. But he had wanted so desperately to protect Aris from the disappointment, the hurt that was his life. He sighed shakily, sinking down into the cushions, wishing they would swallow him whole. He messed it up already. How could he have messed it up already? He needed to be more careful, no more excuses, no more exceptions. He mindlessly pulled out his phone in an attempt to distract himself from the coming wave of emotions that threatened to spill again. As he scrolled distractedly through his apps, a message popped up at the top of his screen.

_You alright?_

He frowned, not recognizing the number associated with it. His phone buzzed again.

_It’s Aris._

He laughed dryly, shutting off his phone. He wiped away a stray tear that slipped from the corner of his eye. He had never wanted so desperately to tell someone the truth. Why? Why did Aris have to care? Why did Lucas have to care? Why was this suddenly so different than any other time before? He glanced at his phone which sat placidly on the cushion next to him, debating on if he wanted to respond or not. If he didn’t, it would save him the trouble of a conversation but might give Andre another heart attack. If he did though, he might end up saying everything and more. He picked up his phone finally and hesitantly typed

_Sorry, wrong number._

…

Aris frowned, setting his phone down. He and Andre were out for coffee (after plenty of pleading). His usual Americano with an extra shot, Andre with a Vanilla Chai. He worried for Lucas, he couldn’t deny it. He didn’t want to outright say it, of course, because he would be returned with the same response.

_Don’t try getting close, he’ll just push you out, Lucas doesn’t let people in so don’t bother._

And for some god-forsaken reason, it only seemed to encourage him to want to push harder, to try and get inside of his mind. He looked up, realizing he had been staring at the table while Andre tried to talk to him.  
“Everything alright?” He asked, raising his eyebrows.  
“Oh, yeah, just tired,” he laughed, taking a drink of his coffee. Andre looked unconvinced.  
“You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?”

Aris sighed, resting his chin on his hand.
“I just… can’t believe it. That he would’ve done something like that.”
Andre frowned, his face becoming rather sullen.
“None of us could.”
Aris sighed, debating on if he should ask his next question.
“What…” he paused as Andre looked up. He somehow guessed he already knew the question. “What happened?”
“It was a year ago, we had all just met,” he began. “He was a lot different. He didn’t disappear as he does now, he was always smiling and rowdy. Friends with everyone.”
He held his breath for a moment, and his eyes filled with tears.
“Nobody knew what happened. One day he acted gloomily. We didn’t think much of it everyone has bad days- but when one day turned to two, and two to seven we knew something was wrong. When we asked him, he would snap at us. He stopped going with us to parties, stopped talking to people, then eventually started sneaking out.”
Aris looked down, feeling the sadness in every word Andre spoke.
“We couldn’t get him to stop. We couldn’t… help him. Then one day he just seemed so happy, like he was back to normal. Marcus thought it was the most amazing thing, that he was cured, but I knew better.”
He paused, swallowing back tears.
“We went to a party, he left early and nobody knew where to; so I went out looking for him in the dead of night. I still don’t know how I saw him, how I happened to be at the river’s edge in time to…”
He stopped now, a choked sob escaping from him. Aris didn’t need to know the rest.
“Andre, I’m so sorry. That must’ve been horrible,” Aris said quickly. Andre sighed, rubbing his eyes.
“We still don’t know what happened to him to make him do that. He was depressed back then, but nothing to that degree. I worry so much, mon ami. I worry he’ll try something again and I won’t be there.”
“Can’t you tell someone? An adult? Anyone?”
“He would never forgive us,” Andre said. “He says he’s fine now, but…”
The two wandered from the topic, Aris mostly to calm Andre down. His mind stayed right there though. Another piece of the puzzle, he thought to himself. What could possibly have happened to someone to break them like that? He came up with a million conclusions, but he knew deep down none of them were right. He made a vow to himself then and there, that no matter what, he would solve the case to Lucas Brighton.

…

That following week, tensions seemed to dissolve ever so slightly. Well, between the group of four, anyway. Exams were coming up, and everyone was scrambling to retain all the information they had learned that past semester. For Aris, however, he had one week to learn multiple weeks’ worth of information, which may or may not have stressed him out. A lot. He sat in class, guzzling his third coffee of the day when Marcus, Andre and Lucas walked in.
“Dude, you’re going to overdose on coffee I swear,” Marcus laughed, setting down his rucksack. Aris scoffed.
“I don’t get that lucky.”
He had been getting on average three to five hours of sleep a night, which wasn’t horrible, but it added up. The only thing keeping even somewhat conscious was coffees,
monsters, anything with a caffeine content over two hundred. In terms of Lucas, things actually had been going pretty well. Andre said he’d been going out less, which was a fairly good sign.

Of course, he still went out.

A few nights prior he’d gone out around 1 AM and only got back an hour before his first class. Andre said he had looked like death warmed over. Since then, however, he stayed home, which was a surprise to Aris when he came over to study with Andre.

“Yo, Andre. Do you have any Tylenol?” He had asked, walking out into the kitchen. Aris nearly jumping out of his skin. “Oh, hey Aris.”

“Hi,” Aris said, trying to not sound as surprised as he was.

Since then, it was uneventful. Right before class started, a boy walked in. He was on the shorter side, looked fairly young but carried himself like he was older. He was wearing a collared shirt, paired with a simple pair of jeans and sneakers.

“Who’s that?” Aris whispered to Lucas, who sat next to him.

“Isacc Fouts,” he said, eyeing him now too. “Just moved up a grade, I didn’t even know you could do that in college, to be honest.”

Aris had heard the name tossed around before. He was recognized as being one of the most studious kids in all of the campus, and rumor had it he was on track to graduate in half the time than everyone else. Aris was both impressed and jealous.

“How does he do it?”

Lucas raised his eyebrows and had gone to say something when the professor started class. He couldn’t help but glance at him from time to time, wondering how he managed to keep it together. A class before 9 AM is enough to make Aris want to scream. He angrily scribbled down notes, thinking, some people have all the luck. When class was finally over, the four walked back to their places when Andre suggested,

“Say, with tests coming up, why don’t we all go out for the night?”

“Dude, do you know how much work I have to do?” Aris said exasperatedly. “I hardly have time to breathe, let alone go out.”

“Aw come on,” Marcus laughed, slugging him in the arm. “Just for a few hours, no biggie.”

“How are you all even passing?”

“By not being sticks in the mud,” Lucas said. Aris considered for a moment.

“Well… what did you have in mind?”

Andre took out his cell and pulled up some messages.

“Bonfire tonight to celebrate the end of the semester,” he said. “Open to everyone, spirits, and games.”

“So nothing hardcore? No pub brawls?” Lucas said, fake pouting. Aris snorted.

“I’m sure there will be some games, football, maybe some indoor pool-”

“Fire!” Marcus added excitedly.

“Fire is not a game!”

“It is if you don’t fear death.”

The other three stopped in their tracks, looking wide-eyed at Marcus. He chuckled.

“Kidding!”

“So who’s putting it on?” Lucas asked. Andre scowled.

“George.”

Lucas and Marcus grimaced, while Aris was left confused.

“Uh, who’s ‘George’?” he asked. Andre shook his head.
“Bad news. He sucks but his parties are the best, so we make exceptions. As long as you
don’t talk to him, or look at him weird you’ll be fine.”
“That means Lee will be there too,” Lucas noted. “I’ll use him as firewood I swear to
God-”
“Calm down, you are not throwing anybody into the fire!” Andre said. Aris held back a
laugh.
“Again.”
“Jesus Christ, Lucas!” Aris laughed. Lucas grinned, somewhat evilly.
“What can I say? He should’ve thought twice before he said anything.”
“Wait, so who is he anyway?” Aris asked.
“One of the kids in George’s posse,” Andre explained. “Wannabe thugs, but get on their
bad side and they have enough connections to ruin your life.”
“Good thing nobody here knows me, then.” Aris laughed, but then added, “For now, at
least.”
...

The group of drunken students cheered in unison as another log was added to the fire.
The four sat in folding chairs away from the main action, placing bets on who would initiate the
first fight.
“I put fifty on Lucas,” Aris said.
“I also put fifty on me.”
“Man! That’s cheating!”
As they continued their wagers, a group of intoxicated frats stumbled over. Lucas knew
immediately there was going to be some sort of disagreement as he could see it in their eyes.
Frats live off of fighting and booze, it was common knowledge. “
My oh my, they’re segregating the foreigns again!” One of them cackled. “And the
homos-”
“What do you want, Jason?” Andre grunted. Jason wasn’t too good of a guy, when he
was sober he was almost bearable, but give him a few drinks and he turns into the most racist,
homophobic son of a gun you’ll ever meet. So to put it in broader terms, he was an absolute
asshole. Especially to those who weren’t like him. The fact that Aris, Marcus and Andre were
immigrants made them targets.
“Added another one to the pack, eh?” He laughed. He squatted down to meet Aris’s eyes, who
glared at him with a look of evil that made even Lucas uneasy.
“What’s your name, squirt? Do you speak English?” He said in a mocking baby voice.
“Yeah, I do,” he snapped. “Take a step back before I imbed my foot up your a-”
“-Alright!” Lucas said, quickly standing. “Come on, can we have at least one party where
there isn’t a fight?”
Jason raised his eyebrows, slowly standing up.
“Surprising, coming from you. Considering that little… episode from a week or so ago.”
Lucas narrowed his eyes. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, and you better watch
it,”
“Let’s just go sit by the fire,” Andre said, putting a hand on Lucas’s shoulder. He shoved
it off, feeling heat rise in his face.
“Oh-oh, drug dealing gone wrong!” he laughed in a sing-song voice. “Gabrielle and
Shaun aren’t idiots, you know. You can’t cheat my men, no sir!”
“I had nothing to do with it, that was all Daniel, not me,” Lucas growled. He felt Aris eyeing him.

“Someone has to answer for his actions, and Danny-boy has been missing for weeks.”

“Well I’m not him, now am I?”

Jason took a step toward Lucas.

“Doesn’t matter-”

“Okay, okay,” Aris said, jumping in between the two men. “How about we settle this some other time?” “Aris what are you-?”

Aris looked at him for a moment, then continued.

“You have a problem with one of us, you have a problem with all of us,” he said finally.

Lucas was at a loss.

Jason glanced from Lucas, to Aris, then to Andre and Marcus who both stared him down with narrowed eyes. Though Lucas and Aris were shorter in stature, they made up for it with Andre’s height and Marcus brawn.

“You know what-?”

Jason was cut off by the sounds of disorganized clunks from near the fire.

Oh no.

“I think we have a better way of settling this,” he grinned.

Lucas had completely forgotten about the century-old tradition, one of most anticipated events of the school year.

The bonfire fight-ring.

Spectators would form a ring, and two people at a time would fight inside of it. Naturally, to spice things up, they enlisted the help of some people with Pringles cans and sticks to make a drumming beat. Usually, some percussionists from the band would wander in around mid-fight with buckets and drumsticks and take over from the atrocious garbled mess of noise. Lucas hardly ever participated, because he already knew he was a well-spoken fighter but when the occasion arose he was never one to turn down a good match.

“You’re on.” He said, turning up his head.

“Hold on,” Aris interjected. “Is this even safe?”

“Nobody's died yet,” Andre said. “Except that one time.” He paused thoughtfully. “We stopped putting the fire inside the ring after that one.”

“Oh god-”

“The first one’s in,” one of the men around them, Jeremy said. “It’s showtime.”

The two walked over to where the ring was formed, people were clapping and cheering, and a (sort of) beat had been picked up by the drummers. Hands clasped their backs, nudging them forward until the ring of students closed around them.

The rules were simple: the first one down for the count was out, and someone else takes their place. The first fight determines if the same person might be the champion throughout the rest of the matches, each new contender faces the last winner. As for the fight itself, there weren’t many actual rules except the common decency of not kicking someone while they’re down. Besides that, it’s a basic no guts-no glory situation. Lucas faced off Jason, and soon enough, the fight commenced.

It was fairly quick, easily expected. Jason charges without a moment’s hesitation, Lucas rebounds his weight to the outer edge where the students throw him back in and after that, it’s basically a given he’ll lose. Lucas had to admit, he had a hard punch, which nearly knocked the
wind out of him when he hit an already bruised area. Eventually, he threw Jason down to the
ground.
“Winner!” A student yelled.
A few more people filtered through. Some put up a fair fight, others were a sorry sight to
see. Either way though, Lucas had weaved his way through about three of them before the group
threw in a certain someone he didn’t expect.
“Aris what the hell are you doing?” he said as Aris climbed to his feet, the crowd
chanting in the background.
“I don’t know! They picked me up and chucked me!”
*Fight! Fight!*
The two began circling each other, Aris putting up his fists in a defensive position. Lucas
frowned.
“Are you sure you want to do this?”
*Fight!*
“What? You think I can’t fight?” “I didn’t say that! I meant-” Lucas was cut short as Aris
charged him, and knocked him unto his back. He skidded backward, the students all roaring.
“What?” Lucas gasped, taken aback by the attack. He scrambled up, wiping the dust from his
jeans.
“Alright, alright,” Lucas laughed. “Fair opponent, then.”
The two went for each other consecutively, Aris had a firm grip of Lucas’s upper arm
while Lucas went for his leg. The two both fell to the ground, and Lucas could imagine the bets
Andre and Marcus were placing on them.
“Are you tired yet?” Aris snickered.
Lucas grunted, flipping Aris onto his back until he had him pinned.
“Are you kidding?”
The fight ended up lasting for quite a while, but the crowd was all but bored with it. With
every new tackle, punch or kick a chorus of shouting erupted. More students filed in with every
minute, the largest crowd Lucas had seen yet. He was taken aback at Aris’s fighting skills, he
hadn’t expected him to be much of a fighter, but he was the best opponent he faced yet. Aris had
him in a headlock, and in one movement he threw his weight backward, landing directly on top
of Aris. They hit the ground, hard enough even Lucas felt a sharp pain shoot across his back.
Breathless, he rolled over to the side and saw that Aris was down.
“Yo, you good?” he asked, standing up slowly.
He slowly gathered himself off the ground and walked over to Aris, who was lying
motionless in the dirt. The crowd had gone dead silent.
“Aris?” he asked, hovering over him.
Before he could take another breath, Aris’s eyes flew open. He placed his feet on top of
Lucas’s chest, pushing with his full force. Lucas flew backward, completely airborne for a
moment, and landed directly on his back skidding to the complete other side of the circle. He
tried to gasp for breath, but all the air was completely knocked from him. Though he could
barely hear, he could tell the students were going absolutely nuts. A figure appeared above him.
“Good fight,” Aris smiled, holding out his hand. Lucas laughed breathlessly.
“Yeah.”
Aris pulled a still dazed Lucas to his feet. He was shocked, he had just lost a fight to Aris,
of all people. He walked back over to his chair, Andre and Marcus with him while Aris
continued the matches while he caught his breath.

Lucas smiled too. Lucas caught glimpses of Aris fighting from time to time and eventually wandered back over to the ring to watch. He was merciless in the ring and strategic, something Lucas could say he wasn’t. He relied on instinct, while Aris seemed to make calculations faster than the speed of sound against his opponent. He had to laugh, he thought he had Aris all figured out, but this proved him completely wrong.

Maybe there was more Aris than he thought.

After about five or six opponents, Aris was thrown down and taken out of the ring. He walked over to the three, laughing and breathless.

“Dude,” Lucas laughed. “You’re a machine!”

“Aw, it wasn’t anything really. Just releasing some stress.”

“If that was stress, then I’m worried for you,” Andre said.

The four laughed for a while, and for some reason Lucas caught himself staring at Aris. There wasn’t a reason this time around, he just couldn’t help but look at him. Stop staring, he told himself sternly. You’ll creep him out. They stayed for a while longer until the matches died down and people filtered out slowly. Lucas hadn’t seen Jason since, so he assumed he just left the party altogether. They all jumped into Andre’s car, which was a simple SUV. It was about 11 PM, so it was not too late.

“Where to, boys? The night is still young!” Andre said, turning the key.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starving,” Marcus said. Marcus was in the front with Andre, Lucas, and Aris sitting in the back.

Lucas felt something wet drip from his nose onto his pants. He quickly put up a hand to his nose, and in the dim light saw something dark on his hands. He groaned. “Lucas? Are you alright? Aris asked, concerned. Marcus and Andre turned around while Aris turned on the overhead light.

“Yeah, happens all the time,” he said, pinching his nose. A common side effect of heavy drinking, something he was no stranger to. “I’m down for food.”

Aris burst out laughing, as a result of when he pinched his nose it made his voice go wonky. Lucas laughed too, and so did Andre and Marcus. Until the three were in stitches over something that really wasn’t that funny. While they laughed, Lucas couldn’t help but smile to himself. For the first time in a while, he laughed and felt nothing but pure, unadulterated happiness. And a thought occurred to him, it was fast and lasted but a moment until the laughter drowned it out. That maybe he didn’t need his light life, drugs, alcohol, all of that to feel alive. That maybe all he needed was this.

He soon forgot that the thought even happened, and lived the rest of the night just in the moment. Telling stories over burgers from the local pub and complaining about how the review for their econ exam was WAY too long and trying to figure out how in the world a burger can cost thirteen dollars.

…

The night when entirely better than Andre had expected. They went out to eat, then got home around midnight, He at that point anticipated Lucas would have snuck out, especially following the confrontation with Jason. But instead, they sat in the living room and just watched TV. He didn’t want to say anything in fear of ruining the mood and thought Lucas probably felt the same.
“How about that Aris, eh?” he laughed. “Certainly a powerhouse.”
“Dude, that was crazy!” Lucas said, chuckling. “He’s strong.”
“I think it’ll be good having him around,” Andre said, folding his legs underneath him.
“You two click.”
“Click?”
Andre shrugged. “You get along, gravitate, alike in a lot of ways.”
Lucas frowned thoughtfully.
“Yeah, I guess.”
They chatted for a bit longer until Lucas eventually decided to head to sleep. When he went to his room, Andre turned down the volume on the TV to listen for the usual opening and closing of the kitchen door. Instead, though, he heard his bedroom door close and stay closed. He smiled to himself. What he said was true, no doubt, but there was more to what he was implying. He knew Lucas felt strongly toward Aris, something he’d never seen him do to anyone. He saw the way he glanced at him, smiled whenever he did, it was obvious. And every since Aris transferred, Lucas had dialed down his self-destructive tendencies, which was a miracle in itself. Of course, when it comes to investment, everything has a price, especially when you don’t know the thoughts of the other party. And Andre only hoped that Lucas would not be the one to pay it.
Poetry
Ellie Stankiewicz
12th Grade
Edwardsburg High School
Jennifer Swisher-Carroll

Invasion

At first I could only sense them
A sort of growing
Minimally
Almost undetectable.
Then the flowers began growing through my veins
Rooting themselves in joints
Blooming where blood pooled.
They started where they would be hardest to prune
Or remove
Filling my heart
Strangling my lungs
Growing up my throat towards the light outside
For a while they can begin in darkness
Eventually they seek more.
My brain became groggy  As along the way they greedily sucked oxygen
Nutrients were stockpiled
And I had trouble stringing together words.
How do you communicate that a garden
Has claimed your body
That you are filled with life
Yet have never felt less present
Without masses tearing you apart
To diagnose
And perhaps pick a rose,
Careful to mind the thorns.
Never mind those needles have been
Embedded in every muscle and
Their removal swells your anguish.
Soon the blossoms pressed your stomach
So you spill out of your jeans
And they press against your waistband.
Your eyes grow daisies
They no longer can see the world
And everyone wonders why you stare into space
As you really have no way to stare at all.
Foliage tumbles from your mouth and
What comes out is lovely
But no one can hear your screams.
It continues until it can't anymore
Although if you had any control left
You would never have let it get this far.
A living nightmare - ironically breathtaking
As even the flowers stop breathing
They cut you open
Thousands of prying eyes
Longing to see the brilliant plumage.
At your funeral the sickening scent hangs heavy in the air
And everywhere lies your cause of death.
Before the casket closes
Your mother carefully arranges a bouquet
In your tangled fingers
And her smiling face is the last thing you know before all sense is lost.
You'd do anything to do anything
But you're trapped in a never ending eternity
Planted in the soil
Awaiting a rebirth never to come.
The flowers long for the sun
And they pour out every pore
Until the coffin is a seething mass of vines
They join the wood
And there is nothing but suffocating growth.
...
Your mother cries over a version of you that no longer exists
Her tears water the fresh growth blooming afore her
And beginning to climb your headstone.
Underneath, those too weak to make the journey
Curl around you, disgustingly caressing
And slowly you rot with the flowers
Forever trapped
In the sickly stench of your combined decay.
Elliana DeSmyther  
11th Grade  
Michigan Connections Academy  
Deborah Brewbaker

*The Edge of Summer*

Nostalgia hits like a brick at times like this  
As the corners of the night air begin to chill  
As leaves begin to decay  
It’s when I think to myself  
“It was this time last year”  
The edge of summer we called it  
Was filled with unabashed youth and regret  
With stagnation hidden under the guise of freedom  
The places we’d go  
And the things we’d do  
I will always remember as they were

The town where we walked through the cemetery and looked at the stars in the tennis courts  
The woods where we jumped into the mucky lake in our clothes before singing together in the back of the truck  
The train tracks where he bumped my hip when I tried to put a flower in his hair and we accidentally wore matching jackets  
The special spot with trees and the lake where he taught me how to skip stones and his laugh when I just couldn’t figure out how to do it

I was high off the butterflies he’d give me in my stomach  
And the free-spirited group I associated with gave me a rush  
It didn’t last long and for the better  
In hindsight they were just trying to live in the way they thought they should  
But despite all of this, and despite the acceptance I have for this time in my life  
I can’t help but think of them, and him, when this time of year hits
Robert Bond
11th Grade
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Mrs. Karen Horwath

Lucid Dreams

Fragments of the future
falling from faceless beings afar and distorted,
clustered mist
caving in from every corner;
Unimaginable creations forming in His mind,
yet He is unconscious.

Things, people, places,
constructing themselves in chaos;
He lifts His quivering fingers to His temple,
placing order among His surroundings.

Imperfect;
Bipedal rats with shoes walk along the
welcome doormats that say “go-away”
but it is home nonetheless,
His place of comfort and security.

He is creator,
He is destroyer,
And all the while,
He is asleep.
Brenna Dean  
12th Grade  
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy  
Mrs. Karen Horwath

_In Response to the UN’s Estimate of Mass Extinction by 2050_

I used to wonder what it would be like  
to look in the mirror and see a woman with sleek gray hair,  
deep laugh lines, and skin speckled from seventy years under the sun  
staring back at me.  
Will my wrinkled hands spin the bingo basket every Thursday at four  
and call out numbers to my nursing home friends  
who dragged their grandkids along for good luck?  
Will my hooded eyes look out the same bedroom window every night,  
see the stars fall into the open sky before shutting off my light?  
And will I still love to write stories about forests and flowers  
and what it feels like to fill my lungs with fresh air  
even though I know my journals will sit on a shelf and collect dust?

Now I wonder what it will be like  
in those final years of Earth.  
Will we drown in icy water as it comes up to temperature  
or cough up lungs black as the smoke  
that billows out of buses?  
Will we kill every last animal for food and harvest,  
until we’ve got no science, climate strikes, or preaching children to turn to?  
Or will we pull the trigger on our precious guns  
with hands that haven’t even lived long enough to scar  
so we don’t have to see  
our bitter end through?

And I used to wonder if I’ll ever want kids,  
If I could really teach a child how to form letters in their mouth,  
wrap their fingers around a pencil,  
or even stand firmly on the ground  
with unwavering confidence,  
not staring at their dusty feet as they stumble.

Now I wonder if I should even bring a bright-eyed baby into the world  
to be stamped with an expiration date for 2050  
along with the last of our food.  
And I wonder if I could love them enough  
to make up for the hell I’ll put them through  
just by bringing them into a world  
destined to be home to unthinkable disasters so soon.

It’s no longer a question of
whether I’ll provide a good life for them.
It’s a matter of how long there will be
life for them.
I’d want to give them the world,
and by that I mean the Earth with
trees whose lungs have never breathed in Amazonian forest smoke,
water that’s never turned sour at the taste of acid on its tongue.

I mean the world with animals we keep in our homes as pets
instead of on lists of critically endangered species
we hold in our hearts but never in our priorities.
I don’t want my children to grow up thinking about
tigers and dolphins and bears
like we think of dinosaurs,
how they’re practically myth because for so long they’ve been Extinct.
I don’t want my children to grow Extinct.
I want them to grow old.
To see the Earth growing older, too.
To have a home they’ll fall in love with like I did.
A home they love so much they’ll actually
want to save it.

But we can’t afford to leave our mess for
the kids cutting school to give free lessons in science
to world leaders who don’t see profit in energy that’s renewable.

Those kids deserve the world, too.
One where they don’t feel scared to drive to school because
all they can think about in the car is fossil fuels they’re burning through.
One where they don’t have to yell every time they open their mouths
because the pollution masks on their faces muffle their voices
and their throats are still healing from sharp plastic pieces in their food.

Those kids don’t deserve Us.
They don’t deserve the carbon we’ve packed into our atmosphere,
coral reefs we’ve overfished and repopulated with plastic,
the prophecy that’s loomed over us for thirty years and nearly been fulfilled.

They don’t deserve a fate put in place by people their grandparents’ age,
or the dark smog that covers the sky and blocks sunlight from their once-bright eyes,
as they scan the Earth for anything green but are only able to find
the dust we’ve made for ourselves,
where we will lay down and die.
Angel Garcia
11th Grade
Saginaw Arts And Sciences Academy
Mrs. Karen Horwath

A Piece About A Piece Of Bread & Butter

Self-deprecation
is my metaphoric bread and butter,
making depreciation the butter in this scenario.
Easy to make, and I always seem to have it in abundance,
lingering around,
eager to be spread to the edges,
masking the under-toasted slice of white bread,
which represents the sarcastic, Joke-making guy,
who facetiously makes fun of his own
lazy, bland, and undercooked writing
…that is myself.

But I tell myself it's better than burnt,
but sometimes I don’t really know,
because sometimes I feel like I'm burnt out,
and I’m all out
of any real original ideas,
so I guess that means god is like the rest of us
and he just can’t get the toaster’s settings right.
Still, I cover up the nonsensical motifs and off-topic metaphors
with a not-so-thin layer of sarcasm,
all in a feeble attempt to
try to make you think I didn’t try--

Attempting to excuse bad storytelling
or explain away the fact that for the life of me
I can't keep a metaphor on track,
Rambling on unnaturally
like the thesis of a last-minute essay,
pretending all the bad rhymes that I say,
are bad on purpose.
Except, they aren’t.
They never are.
The Dragons in the Basement

The humming of steel and the whirring of belts filter through the floorboards, the tell-tale sound of metal being crafted into something else as threads of it spin like fine yarn onto the workbench. “Don’t pick those up just yet—they’re still hot.” A little boy ignores the warning, and hisses at the sting of hot aluminum before dropping it. He watches as the machine shaves their world into a brand new shape.

sister complies, watching in wonder as ribbons of silver ping onto the floor, But soon shifts her gaze to the dozen glowing blue monitors on the desks to her She looks on at the windows that look out upon another world. The lathe fascinates him more than anything in the world. The lathe is truth; its squeal speaks cold, hard reality in words formed from metal, from sparks and scraps and shapes bolted in by iron and friction and physics. He sees old metal sheared, transmuted into something new. It’s here he first hears the cry of the red dragon. It’s the roar of an engine from a train, the hiss of steam from a rushing train.

The computers fascinate her more than anything in the world. The arcade calls like a relic from a lost world, whispering names like Taito and Namco and Argonauts into her ears, and she is enraptured instantly by the little fragments of a thousand realities, bound in silver-and-gold electricity, woven from nothing but Yes and No and uncountable little intricate miracles of electrostatics. It’s here she first sees the hide of the blue dragon. A million scales forged from the corpses of a thousand microtransistors, eyes lit up with LEDs. He tries to forget about the dragon. It was a figment of imagination; a fleeting thought. His path has already been set, engineering is his destiny. He likes the idea, of course, but it doesn’t feel right. And the dragon still nags at the back of his mind, always there. There’s still another option.

She chases it, though it’s always just out of reach. The pursuit is incorporated into every fiber of what she does, though she can’t explain what it is without being scoffed off.
Her path in life seems set to others: become a poet, be one of the great writers. She wants to write, of course, but she doesn’t want it to be her life. The dragon mouths silently to her. 

*There’s still another option.*
Selena Land
12th Grade
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Mrs. Karen Horwath

Black Privilege

My black privilege

It hides me from my peers
makes me go quiet in class
afraid that my comment will
dub me the “angry black girl”
disdainful and inappropriate

It gives me
my own personal paparazzi
flagging me down in stores,
but instead of pictures and autographs
they dutifully search my bag
a “routine” procedure.
Scanning eyes capture
school IDs and family photos.
I watch the blonde-haired girl
put yet another thing in her purse,
“Innocent” blue eyes
stare back at me.

It dooms my brother
for his blood to either line the streets
or for him to fill it with the blood of others.
His first baby pictures become
mugshots, a baby smiling
imprinted forever with the words
“Criminal”.

It lets my mom yell more and more
until she loses her voice,
face becoming strained
as TV screens fill with faces,
when we lose yet another
black lawyer, doctor, accountant, teacher, president,
to the hands of a racist who decided to use a badge as a cover-up.

It ushers us to the table
teaching us the importance of “yes, sir” and “no, sir”
of being statues with zipped lips,
sweaty hands glued to steering wheels
during “routine traffic stops”
so we don’t become one of those faces.

It allows me
to become the most hated person in America,
to constantly not be taken seriously,
to be left to die,
as I’m supposed to be giving life.

It gives me hair
that grows upward toward the heavens
desperate to touch the hands of God,
bestowing me with skin
that glitters like gold
when the sun hits it,
blinding those who refuse to see.
It opens my eyes.

It builds a bridge
between the struggles of my ancestors,
and the hopes of my descendants
branding us together in our pain
as the chains that once shackled us,
bruising our wrists,
now sets us free,
making us stronger with each other.

It’s a gift.
Letting me walk without fear and
laugh without pain.
Standing tall,
to finally lift my head high above the clouds.
How I Grew Up-A Poem

1. Word Girl

Her cape drags the letters into the mouth of a cartoon alligator, lining them up as his pearly whites, while she flies across the screen in slow motion. The “W” on her head stays put as my mom pulls the big paper with even bigger dashes out from under me. Her large block letter sits above my scrabblings and stares me down as I wriggle to my stomach on the sunroom floor, the short carpet burning circles into my elbows the more I struggle. Her hand covers my right hand, her entire palm encompassing mine and swallowing my knuckles. Her skin is pulled taut after dragging me for years. The triangular crayon fits into the nook of my square fingers. We trace over her letters:

“L-I-L-Y.”

“Only four of them,” she says agitatedly. But my crocodile tears melt them into a stream of one and blur the girl with the red cape as my mom digs her nails in. She still watches over me as I try to speak for myself, just like I know that Word Girl can.

2. Crocodile Tears

My crocodile tears hit again. They are just as cold as the snow, running down my cheeks every time my small Mary Jane’s puncture them with each little stride. My nose turns red and the frost separates my eyelashes, so it looks like the crocodiles are biting at them as soon as my twin sisters start running from me.
Running,
as my wool church coat gathers
those flakes that cling to my white ballet tights,
coughing as I inhale the
dark grey exhaust from the 2008 Chevy Envoy,
tanned with dirt.
My older sister sits in the backseat watching
my headband fall over my eyes,
to stop the crocodiles from biting.
My sisters’ hair moves closer to the road,
my parents look out through the white windows
and finally, decide to help me
as snow slips between my toes and
they finally turn numb.

3. Feeding the Fish

The tank sits in the back of the
classroom by our four school-issued computers;
only two of the computer’s work
and only one of those can print to the teacher’s printer.
Rocks cover the bottom of the fish tank,
probably from PetSmart,
but she tells the class the rocks are real
from the Tittabawassee River.
Every day the tank draws looks from us
until the salmon are two weeks old.
They start out white and change
to coral orange as they grow
into our small classroom.
Someone has to feed them
but for some reason,
I can’t.

One day I ask,
“Can I dump the food into the tanks for the fish?”
“Sorry, but I signed Mary up to do it.”
“Mary did it last week and you let Dylan do it on Friday.”
“Sorry honey, here’s the papers to take to the office.”
Mary has the same last name as the office secretary,
and I don’t.
That’s what my mom tells me
when my eyelashes litter the floor of her next-door classroom.

4. Costumes

Her white carpet gets used to my crocodile tears.
Especially when Halloween becomes such a trivial “holiday.”
I do not have a costume,
and my mom no longer believes in spending money
on clothes I will never wear again,
just for a day celebrating “demons and dark spirits”.
When I arrive past the bell,
I immediately don’t recognize the small,
masked faces.
I can’t even find my current middle school obsession,
and I’m pretty sure I know every detail about his face.
The candy on my desk mocks me
because I know I don’t deserve it--
I didn’t even participate in dressing up.
Everyone agrees
because the clowns don their masks after
social studies and chase me down the halls.
My elbows wear the same burned circles from the floor
just as my sunroom floor left for me.

5. Girls Like Me

According to him,
the crocodiles biting my eyelashes
mean that I don’t want him to go.
I’m wearing this low-cut shirt,
so it becomes his job to do something about it.
His dad tells him,

“That girl is just asking for it, so you can give it to her.”

He won’t be held accountable for his actions;
he only whistles because my outfit says I want it.
I look good, so he doesn’t have to ask.
My struggling only means I want him,
my tears only because I don’t want him to go.
And the officer asks me,

“What were you wearing?
Because sometimes young boys don’t know
how to control themselves around girls like you.”

Girls like me,
who only wish their crocodile tears
would be from not being able to write,
not being able to catch up,
not dressing up--
not from being a girl like me,
with freshwater beneath the whites of my eyes.
Trinity Slocum
11th Grade
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Mrs. Karen Horwath

Numb Silence

All this repetitive poetry.
These tedious ideas collect
in the left lobe of my swollen brain,
as I try to decipher the
Big topics and Themes.

These used plastic chairs,
gum finessed into their
hard to reach places.
They hurt my back.
Not like im dying,
but, the type of pain you feel
on an ultra hot, sunny summer day,
when you forget to put sunscreen on.
A tingly warm pressurized feeling,
that is undoubtedly distracting,
to say the least.

Ideas not of those,
I should be thinking,
replace the thoughts of
Symbols and Motifs.
Ideas of what fun is to come
when this relentless neverending
class comes to a pause.

We all stop in sync,
as that glorious, triumphant bell rings.
Relinquishing me, from now, of this hell.
It fills me from head to toe
with joy, that only another class
dares to destroy.
The days repeat, neverending,
with this swelling brain
sloshing around in my head.
And as the heat in my back grows,
I suffer in silence.
Nala Warren
12th Grade
Saginaw Arts and Science Academy
Mrs. Karen Horwath

Your Sins

You hear singing.
You hear the joyous sounds that come out of their mouths--
you feel liberated.

I wish I heard singing,
the mellifluous words that sound like angels.
Instead I hear the deafening cries of help.
The spiteful words run through my veins like poison,
acid dripping at my fingertips.
But I guess that’s better
than the blood that drips from yours.
The blood full of oppression and misery,
from our fallen brothers and sisters,
now runs down the drain being washed away,
but the stains are still there to remind you of your sins--
since we all know the judge will just say “next case”
when it’s time to acknowledge your transgressions.

I wish I heard singing,
but instead I am forced to watch
the horror unfold in front of my face.
My eyes burn at the sight,
The tears sting like acid
seeping into my cracked lips,
leaving behind a bitter residue
as I see the life drain from their once hopeful and optimistic eyes,
now ominous and frigid,
ever to be seen the same again.
Lauren Wells
12th Grade
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Mrs. Karen Horwath

Can You Smell the Burritos, Enchiladas, & Tamales in my Kitchen?

I found love, tucked in a tortilla.
And I know what you’re thinking.
   Ain’t that just the fajita, the frijoles,
   that burns and warms the whole of your belly?
That ain’t love.

But let me tell you about my great grandmother’s palms.
How the dough fit like a god-given miracle in the lines of her hand,
and how the rhythm came to her in the same way
that we all have a lullaby in our temples,
ready to rumble
lowly & sweetly in our throats.

Let me tell you about my grandmother’s magic
and how she can toss cilantro, carne, & her own touch of spiced herbs
into her sunflower-yellow cauldron.
The way the magic salsas like laughter in the air
& smells like fertile earth,
rich in holiness & hearth.
How it cures the ailments
of wandering people & sleepless nights & ancestor sickness,
and how she warms the comal to the right heat
with a flick of her wrist and tosses the torta,
browned like our roots.

And let me tell you about my mother’s mouth.
How her tongue was born to authenticity with its
parents from the bear, the strawberry tree, crown, & the feathered serpent,
& how her mouth knows the proper taste but not las palabras de nuestro gente
for El Bueno y El Mal,
and how she can lick her lips
and recall the crunch, the flour, the softness.
Mi Bisabuela hugs my palms to her lips,
bows the gift of god into them,
falling softly to rest in my bones.
Mi Abuela dances around me.
Twisting, twirling, she puts her medicine on my back,
puts her hechizos in my feet.
Mami brings me the language
She could not make hers,
places it under my tongue,
warm, soft, mine.

I found my home in our kitchen.
In the way the wild rice that sprouts flowers
takes my grandmother’s magic &
plants it in my throat.
& how the beans that grow trees becomes
my great grandmother’s songs sown into my chest,
& how the greenness that blossoms herbs from
my mother’s stories come to settle
in the bottom of my belly.
Sometimes I laugh when I’m not happy.
Instead of letting my tears ease down my face gracefully,
I throw myself into the fight to save face
in a war I will always lose.

The violent laughter I use to cover up
is another layer I’ll have to tear up later
in the safety of silence.
It’s the sound of air leaving my lungs;
my knuckles tearing into my chest.
Each desperate inhale is me cocking back my fist
for another blow that will ultimately land on me,
adding to my growing list of failed feats
because I am, and will always be,
the punchline.

I’m suffocating;
all the pressure building up around me
feels like I’ve sunken too far
into that ocean of emotions that I left untapped for far too long,
but before the dam I’ve built can be disarmed,
I’m pulling the trigger on the nail gun,
solidifying solitude,
another joke to take the edge off the knife.
And when I see the handle,
I’ll pretend I’m surprised to find my own hands.
Parker Budzinski
9th Grade
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Jared Morningstar

He Bowed His Head and Gave Up His Spirit

Blood, same as Christ,
rungs through tanned, olive skin,
as the promised land
sinks away into oblivion.

“Where are you Father?
Why have you forsaken me?”

Hooked noses,
yellow stars,
make sure their place
is known.

Hund
Schwein
Jude

“Animals” in chains,
placed on a cattle car,
like livestock
on their way to a butcher.

Does a cow know its fate?
Do they?

Their forefathers,
them teachers,
now foul.

Reflections,
Biblical and divine,
made in His image,
His children,
marched into the arms
of the Angel
of Death.
Gwenyth Hollingsworth
9th Grade
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Jared Morningstar

*One More Night of Demons*

She stood on the bridge
in silence and fear,
for the demons of her darkness
had driven her here.

They cut her heart
right out of her chest,
making her believe
that the demons knew best.

They were always there,
sometimes just out of sight,
waiting in the background
until the time was right.

These demons were destructive,
knocking down the life she knew,
hating everything about her,
and she hated herself too.

These demons can't be seen,
but they're far from fairytales.
They live inside your mind;
their evil ways prevail.

So on the bridge she stood
about to end the fight.
Then she stopped,
and thought
I'll fight them one more night.
De’Angelo Saldana
9th Grade
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Jared Morningstar

You’re Like the Red Light that Screamed Go

Yes means no, and no means yes.
You say there is a difference
Me? I think I’m on the smooth highway to ardency,
but honestly on the cobblestone road of chicanery.
You hurry and increase the pace of reality,
telling me to not touch you,
but inside, I know you scream for me.
You push me away, but want me to never let you go.
And Good God your poker face is the best.
I can’t decide whether you are interested or kind;
I’m confused; I just can’t wrap my head around you,
to turn right to a beautiful lie or the left painful truth.
Maybe pain would make you happy
and a lie is just your way of saying go away.
I see the warning signs, millions in fact.
Friends say what you really want, but do they really know?
Or are you just another stop sign screaming?
But can somebody please tell me
what chance a person like me was given?
Everyone here can see I do not belong,
like that woman in the supermarket
who asked me where I was from,
but when I said I was born in Detroit,
she said no, where are you like… from from?
Then she asked if I knew a good recipe for tamales
because she and her friend were getting together later.

Or the countless amount of men
who have staring contests over every inch of me;
no matter where we are,
they proceed to take strides towards me,
reminding me of how “pretty” I am,
and that I am a Latina.
I should be used to it by now,
but I’m too afraid to cause a scene,
of losing my voice before I could even speak
because I have been taught too many times
how little it means when I say no.

Or my therapist when I told her about it,
and she asked me what I was wearing that day,
when in reality, I was wearing sweatpants.

They have all taught me that
the land of the free
is only for some people;
some people that aren’t like me.
Louis Thompson
9th Grade
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Jared Morningstar

The Rain

The rain pitter-pattered its way up my roof;
I stared at the ceiling,
hoping the stars would shine through,
but instead, it's your hatred.

It keeps me up at night, the things you’ve done;
your words barrage me like bullets;
they pierce my skin and cause my blood to drip
like the hole in my ceiling.

The pain you’ve given me could fill rivers.
I’ve never done anything to you,
but you treat me with an anger that's immeasurable.

Even though you would rather see me dead,
I have hope for you,
because even the rain eventually goes away.
Gina Killingbeck
10th Grade
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Jared Morningstar

*Perfection*

I stand close,
-facing the full body mirror.
The one that makes me hate who I am.
No matter how thin I become,
it’s never good enough.
My body morphs and reshapes;
each time I take a glance,
I am screaming for help silently,
as fear overtakes my goals of perfection.
And I try to find myself again through
the clumps of black hair in my hands.
Hopefully this time, I'll give my life a second chance.
Serena Troshynski
10th Grade
Rochester High School
Ms. Jessica Sherburn

5 Things I Asked My Amazon Alexa That She Didn’t Have an Answer For

1. Alexa, how do you deal with depression
   when it feels
   like there’s a stone in your belly
   that’s turned into a diamond encrusted-dagger
   that cuts up your throat
   as it works its way
   into the light
   and you bleed ink
   because graphite is the black diamond
   no one wants
   inside their core?

2. Alexa, what do I do
   when there’s a black hole
   that lives inside my rib cage
   that drowns out my thoughts
   and replaces them with a silence
   that screams in my ear
   to reach for the droplets
   of dried blood falling
   from my wrists
   and give it to the darkness
   as an offering
   to maybe
   just maybe
   fill it up with something?

3. Alexa, why am I so tired
   all the time
   when I don’t do anything
   besides fall off the cliffs in my head
   then again, I say fall
   but I really mean dive
   headfirst down on to
   the waves crashing
   Against the jagged black rocks
   where I am swept away
like a Halloween paper skeleton?

4. Alexa, I’m sorry for dumping all of this on you
   I feel like it’s not my place
to vomit up all these metaphors on you
most of them I don’t even know the
meaning of myself.
Alexa,
Can you tell me how to be saved,
get rid of the dagger in my throat
put pillows at the bottom of the cliff
give the black hole something to eat
every once and awhile?

5. Alexa, please...

   “I’m sorry. I don’t know that.”
Christa Nelson
11th Grade
Evart High School
Crystal Nelson

*Lock Me Up*

He needs some way to take out his anger
Something that isn’t me
That isn’t my sister
Or my brother
Someway to keep him away from my family
Something to stop him from yelling

Sometimes I wish I could yell
I wish I could tell him how I feel
Explain to him that
“You’re not my dad!”
But of course I couldn't say that
Those sort of things are only said in the movies
I don't say anything
Nothing that I couldn't take back
That I couldn't fix
Because
I might regret it
I wanted to move past it
I wanted to stop dwelling on the past
But it's not really the past
It seems as though it’s my present
And it’ll be my future
No matter the choices I make
Or the achievements I accomplish
“You don’t do anything!”
I didn't see it before
Or maybe I did
Maybe I wished I didn't
Maybe I denied it

All my life I was told that you should confide in adults
How hypocritical
I didn't believe it
Yet, despite my belief
I had no other choice
I couldn't do it
I couldn't handle the way I got yelled at for walking through the door
Or the way I'm yelled at because
“You're just doing homework”
“It can wait”
“Do this instead”
I felt so helpless
“I'm smart, you're dumb”
“I'm big, you're little”
“I'm right, you're wrong”
“And there’s nothing you can do about it.”
“I’m the parent, and you do what I say”
“PERIOD!”

He made me believe I wasn’t worth the breaths I would take
Or the air I would use
He was pushing me away
Just as he had pushed away my siblings
But this was not without consequence
He pushed us not only away from him, but from our mother as well
And she had no clue
I suppose it was because he did it so subtly
He planted ideas into her head
Such as, my children are perfect
Yours are trash

She began to believe it
I know this from experience
From the day I felt was more defeated than ever
I told her how I felt
But instead of listening
She dismissed it
“Oh, it's just another one of her overreactions.”
She didn't realize how much it was really getting to me
She didn't know about those days I would stay locked in my room just to be away from him
She didn't understand those nights when I would try to silent my tears
Because if she knew, she would simply roll her eyes

Then a day came
When I knew I couldn't take it

Now, to understand this part of the story
You need to first understand some things about me
I do things because I’m told to
And I refrain because it’s not what I’m “supposed to do”

This day was the hardest
Not only did my mother dismiss me
My oldest sister did too
And my other sister, to whom I had confided in the night before had also taken his side
This was a day of a lot of sleep, and tears
I had woken up with a message to my sister group chat
Immediately it began with my oldest sister stating how I never do anything without complaining
At first when I read this, I was shocked
But I didn’t reply
Shortly after, my other sister responded in agreement
This one really hit me
I knew my oldest sister was taking his side because she didn't live here, and she had no clue what happens at home
But my other sister, who did live here, bashing me
Why would she do this?
Even after I had told her how I felt
And what I was going through
Still, I didn't respond
How could I?
How could I say that they don't know what goes on here
That when I’m alone
I’m scared
How could I tell them the truth when I knew they wouldn’t believe me
So they continued
They gossiped as though I couldn’t see what they were saying
This only led me to screams
After crying quietly for hours on end
I couldn’t just shrug it off
I screamed and when I did
I cried more
And I screamed even louder
I didn't know how to express this level of emotion
The screaming only let out so much
So I started to pull at my hair
My hands in fists grasping my hair at the root
Squeezing tighter and tighter
Yelling even louder
Trying to let everything I’ve suppressed out
But it was too much
It was like a wrecking ball trying to fit through a mousedoor
And after all of my trying I gave up

I had decided it was too much
If I couldn't control what was happening in my life
I knew there was something I could control
So I walked into the bathroom and reached for the medicine cabinet

I stopped trying to let it out and just pushed it all back in
Somehow my mother had heard about my screams
She called me from work and asked me, “What's wrong?”
“Nothing,” I would reply
This continued for three more times before she said something else
Something I will never forget
“I will lock you up if I have to.”
Not, I’m here for you, or do you need to speak to someone?
Simply, “I will lock you up, if I have to.”
As if she just wanted to sweep me and my issues under the rug
Because, why would she care if it had nothing to do with her
Or her precious boyfriend
How was I to confide in her if I was always wrong
If everything I said was an act of a crazed teenager
Because who's to say that this wouldn't be forgotten by morning
I never forgot
Attachment issues

I don't long after things I use to have
I don’t pity myself for having no mom or dad
I look at the reality of things; only the facts
You only hurt yourself when you get attached

A baby's favorite blanket can get lost on the bus
A husband can lose his wife to his nemesis Chuck
A boy can lose his charm, then where’s his luck
I came to the realization that loving things that can get lost gets you hurt

You lose a loved one, you ache and cry
You become envious when one's lost treasure becomes mine
Reality is; losing something you love is a part of life
So why become attached when you know everything dies?

I can paint a picture and you can steal my art
You can tear my favorite poem apart
You can take all the light and leave me in the dark
But I refuse to let something I know i can lose break my heart
Abbey Brown
10th Grade
Charlotte High School
Ms. Shanker

In the Land of 4 Paths

In a land of 4 paths
With no one around
2 young men stand with
Their eyes towards the ground

Feeling lost and hurt
As tears and sweat
Fall to the dirt.

In a land of 4 paths
Where the air is stone cold
The 2 men know their story is
Still untold.

Standing face to face
But feet afar
Watching buildings of brick
And memories fall apart.
For no one may know
The story,
Both men know someone’s heart
Is filled with glory.

In a land of 4 paths..

The 2 young men stood
And watched as 2 teams reviled
Now to stand..
In a land of 4 paths
Knowing their homes were
Ruined by someone’s child.
Creative Non-Fiction
Deanna Brasseur
12th Grade
Charlotte High School
Sarah Rohlfs

*The Black Birds and the Coaches.*

It's usually a bright Saturday morning when I’m awake early with my papa. We watch TV waiting to hear the footsteps upstairs from my aunt and small cousins. I like to spend quality time with him. I listen to his words hoping that the meaning of each one will stick to the walls of my eardrums and I’ll never forget them. Never forget the sound. The power that lies beneath his voice. When spending time with him, he yells at the blackbirds that dance on the birdhouse outside the window. Sometimes when he’s watching a football game, he yells at the people inside of the screen as if they can hear him. As if the coaches can feel the burn of his scolding in the pit of their stomachs. Grandma tells him not to yell. To calm down. To lower his voice so that he doesn’t start coughing. She hates it when he coughs. I can see it in her eyes how it worries her. Smoke hangs in the air like the fog that still lingers in the morning air outside. Some people say that papa is a bad person because of his actions. They are my blackbirds and the coaches. I want to scream at them for their harsh words. He is not bad, I want to say. *Do not criticize him for trying to ignore the pain that lives inside his bones.* But I would be wasting my breath. No one listens to me because I am too young to understand. Instead, I will spend a lifetime watching papa yell at the blackbirds and the coaches. Wishing... Wishing that I was brave enough to do the same.
Lost in Alaska

Until a few months ago, I had never pitched a tent nor carried a 33-liter backpack, let alone do both for three weeks in the Alaskan wilderness. While I had attended other local summer camps, this past summer I found myself 3,085 miles away from any friends or family, only their pictures kept in a pencil pack to comfort me. No, I wasn't a juvenile sent away to boot camp to change my attitude; rather, I was following my brother's footsteps by attending a YMCA adventure camp for a month to push myself outside my comfort zone and overcome a new challenge before beginning my senior year of high school.

This Alaskan trip offered me the opportunity to ice-pick up a glacier, kayak through the Chilkat Inlet, and hike the 33-mile Chilkoot Trail to develop resilience, strength, and confidence, traits needed to take on life after high school.

After completing a five-day hiking trip up Flower Mountain and successfully climbing a glacier, I could already feel a new change in myself; I felt powerful like even a glacier was just another obstacle in life. At one point on the mountain, we had to climb over a vast area of loose stones covering the mountainside. I was overcome with anxiety but my counselor Ava encouraged me to push through.

She showed immense patience by waiting for me the entire time and offering words of strength and support as the other campers scrambled up the mountain ahead.

With Ava’s guidance, I was ready to face each day's challenges. Little did I know that I would receive more than I bargained for.

Our next trip was to the Chilkoot Trail, where we were expected to hike 33 miles in five days. The premise alone seemed far-fetched: eight girls - none older than 17 - left in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness, dependent on a camp counselor going into her junior year of college and two mountain guides in their mid-twenties to keep them safe and sound.

All was going well until Hathaway, another camper, tripped on a loose tree root and twisted her ankle. We were five miles into the trail, and First Aid and Rescue was summoned to evacuate her. As was her duty, Ava, our only counselor, left with her.

The first night was taxing. At dusk, we had to hike two more miles beyond Hathaway's pitfall on a trail scattered with sharp roots and rocks. Each misstep, which sent rocks tumbling, had me on
the verge of an anxiety attack just like Flower Mountain. I pushed myself to stay calm. The
guides' main concern was getting us to the next campsite without any bear attacks or other
injuries, which only increased our fear.

That evening, most girls went to their tents; however, one-by-one they trickled into my tent to
discuss the recent incident out of earshot of the guides. Having never been on a trip without a
counselor before, there were girls who cried and others who ranted.

While comforting my fellow campers, I realized what they needed: somebody to listen to their
fears and offer support. From that moment, I channeled everything I could remember from my
time with Ava on Flower Mountain to be that mentor for them throughout the remaining four
days.

We were surprised to reunite with Hathaway and Ava at the end of the trail, which included the
strongest group hug I've ever been a part of. A few days later on the kayaking portion of the trip,
Ava pulled me aside, telling me that she heard from the other campers and guides how helpful I
had been to them on the hike. She told me that I had shown great bravery and maturity and that
she would love to see me back next year—not as a camper, but as a counselor!

Alaska has forever changed the way I see new challenges. A pop Quiz on a Monday is now a
pebble in comparison to hiking the Chilkoot. I go into each day with a confidence I’ve never had
before, allowing me to tackle everyday obstacles with less anxiety and doubt in myself. Not a
day goes by where I don’t reflect on my view from the top of Flower Mountain, or my adrenaline
after completing the hike.

I was lost in Alaska, but I found myself.
Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

I grew up in a place where four seasons were easily distinguishable. I was born and cultivated in hay fields, on rope swings, on the hills of snow, in piles of red, orange, and yellow leaves, and near blossoming apple trees. I was raised to believe in kindness, respect, and faith. From my earliest recollections, I remember lying in bed, my mother and father by my side, with my fingers laced together, pleading with the angels to watch me through the seemingly endless night. In the beginning, Jesus and the angels were friends, and God was easily accessible, able to listen intently to any issue I had. They became my protectors; when I became aware of and scared of the figures hiding in the dark, of the haunting images that come from an overactive imagination, I knew that if I said my prayers, a shield of holiness protected me from them.

But then, one day, as suddenly and as easily as Jesus had become my friend, I became convinced that he didn’t want to be with me anymore. When I was thirteen, I came to the conclusion that I wasn’t like my classmates, that my fate would be different than theirs. The boys ran through the playground, pushing each other playfully, playing games that little boys thought made them tough, manly. The girls sat in gazebos chatting with each other about the boys they found cute. I was always drawn to the girls, who seemed nicer, more calm and collected, but they weren’t fans of boys. And the boys were too rough, so I created a group of only myself. I knew I was different, and when I was thirteen I came out as bisexual. First to my close friends, then to my family, and then finally, I decided to share that piece of myself with the people I had grown close with, the people who preached kindness and love.

I was used to spending every Wednesday evening at my church, engaged in holy activities with peers with whom I didn’t have anything in common except for our participation in them. I thought of that youth group as a safe haven, where children could be trusted to just be children, without any fear of judgement from those outside of that holiness that once made me feel so safe. I came out in such a blinding flash of light that I never stopped to think anything other than “This is who I am and I’m happy.”

I’d always known that something was different. I’d always been talked about as an odd child and at a certain point that chatter becomes internal. I lived in an area where there was no exposure to LGBTQ+ culture, this state of being that I suddenly realized I identified with so wholly. I’d always had a generally good sense of self, so once I discovered that this romantic orientation was an option, I immediately knew who I was.

At first I didn’t catch on, and then slowly it began to hit me. The safe haven became a place that was less safe. That holy light that shielded me from darkness drew away like the sun when it’s covered by a cloud, quick and brutal. I was reminded of the Book, and the three verses out of thirty thousand that determined I was an outsider that didn’t belong with them. I would look at the others, the boys and girls, the “normal ones.” I knew in my heart that I wasn’t one of them, that I would never be one of them. I fell into darkness, rereading and rereading the verses that told me God had turned away and I was alone. After that I began to hurt, and hurt myself,
because at least then I would be able to feel something other than numbness. I would cut into my skin to feel the burning. I would tear up, looking into the stark redness dripping from my skin. I would stop eating, so that instead of nothingness, I would feel the grumble of malnourishment.

But luckily, my angels, my family and friends, kept my personal demons from taking over. They saw me hurting and they helped me through it. They talked to me about what was hurting me and they helped me understand that they loved me, no matter what. That was the moment I decided to turn away from religion altogether. Why believe in a God who would stop loving His child because of who he loves?

I became scornful of Christians, and their religion, but only because of what I felt they had done to push me toward the belief that I wasn’t good enough, that anyone like me wasn’t good enough. I had arguments with a few of them, and I still disagree with those specific views, but it’s only because they refuse to progress them.

I adapted as time progressed. I came out again, with less of a flash this time when I realized I wasn’t so much bisexual as I was gay, and it took me awhile to come to terms with that part of me. It felt like I was closing off my options, but instead I look at it and see myself being open to new ones.

Later, I also opened myself up to the idea of believing in God, because three verses do not define who I am. But perhaps the other thirty thousand can, the ones that speak of love, of kindness, and of servitude. I believe in those things, and a God who also believes in them. What I choose not to believe in is the judgement of any culture, any lifestyle, especially ones that we don’t quite understand. I believe that education is the end of ignorance and the end of ignorance is the end of inequality and intolerance.

I pushed through. I changed to accept love back into my heart, to allow the light to come from behind the clouds and cover my skin again. The shadow that once loomed behind me, waiting to take me in my moment of weakness, is gone. I live and love now, in the holy light once again.