# Michigan Youth Arts Festival Creative Writing Book 2019
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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.
“The Golden Hour in the Raven Years”

Synopsis

The spot. You know what I’m talking about. The spot you had your first kiss, the spot you lost your virginity, the spot you ran to to escape the world. The spot. Only your most beloved people are given the privilege of being taken to the spot. It’s the love, the heartbreak, the sadness, the secrets; This is high school.

“The Golden Hour in the Raven Years” is a one hour drama series focused around the real life mental and emotional health struggles of high school students, showcased by four best friends that attend high school together. This series captures the brutality in the world that comes with being who you are. It’s directed at high school/college age students and anyone who has ever experienced backlash for being their whole selves. It’s a series designed to inform people of the effects of negative judgement, motivate people to find the optimistic aspects within pessimistic circumstances, and encourage people to be unapologetically themselves.

This series is all about the toll that seemingly non-harmful, everyday things take on teenagers’/young adults’ mental and emotional health. This will be a twelve episode series in which viewers will be taken through the daily struggles of this group of friends throughout the entirety of their senior year. They will grow closer to the characters through narration and backstories told by one of the main characters, Christopher.

Christopher Bryce Jones is a senior at Perrysburg High School. He’s 5’10” with long, shaggy, black hair and a slender build. Chris started dating Mari Lee since March of his junior year, they’re still together. Chris’ best friend is Billy Freeman, they’ve been best buds since they were eight years old.

Mari Lee is a seventeen year old junior also attending Perrysburg High School. She’s a short, white girl with chin length, straggly, golden blonde hair and choppy bangs that lay across her forehead. She’s very reserved and struggles deeply with suicidal thoughts due to her parents’ favoritism of her older sister.

Billy Freeman is also a senior at the same high school as Mari and Chris. He’s a shorter guy, about 5’8”, with a stockier build than Chris, but still thin. He has clean cut, slicked back, light brunette hair. Billy is a closeted gay who struggles with depression after coming out to his parents.

Javon Lewis is Billy’s “secret” boyfriend who is openly gay. Javon is a confident nineteen year old senior attending the same high school. He’s very tall, about 6’3”, with a build as slender as Chris’, and he has glowing dark brown skin. Javon’s parents were killed in a police brutality incident when he was fourteen, he moved in with his aunt shortly after and still lives with her today.

The first season will highlight common high school struggles that are often overlooked. It will bring light to the dark places in teenagers’ heads that are decorated with cheerful smiles. Unapologetic confidence in who you are will radiate from this season. Perseverance in getting what you truly desire will shine, and making the best of poor situations will be a common occurrence. Life is hard in high school but, sometimes, you can find people who make it a little more bearable.
Teaser

EXT. Maumee River, Buttonwood/Betty C. Black Recreation Area - Day

Chyron Up: “Maumee River: Perrysburg, Ohio”

Music Up: Peach Pit “Seventeen”

We are at the shallow edge of a slowly flowing river. The water is somewhat clear but somewhat murky. The sun is in the golden hour of setting, everything is a golden-yellow hue. It is fall. The ground is littered with colorful leaves. BIRDS CHIRPING. Pan to two teenagers (MARI and CHRIS) sitting on the ground by the river’s edge.

MARI is wearing a colorblock windbreaker, cuffed jeans, and converse. Her golden blonde hair hangs chopply above her shoulders. Her legs are criss-crossed and she’s leaning back on her hands. Her one hand is overlapped with CHRIS’ hand.

CHRIS is sitting in a similar fashion except his legs are straight out and slightly apart. He is wearing loose, cuffed jeans and a vintage looking crewneck. His black hair is a long, shaggy mess across his forehead.

Music lowers, slowly fades out.

MARI
(sighs) Everything seriously blows. (turning head to look at CHRIS)

CHRIS
I know, babe. (looking at Mari) It’ll get better. Promise.

MARI
(looking back out at water) (quietly) I don’t know anymore. (shaking head)

CHRIS
What don’t you know?

MARI
Anything. I’m frickin stupid.

CHRIS(assertively) Hey. You are not stupid. You are the smartest girl I know.

MARI
(disappointed) I’ll never be as good as Julia. CHRIS stares at MARI longingly, it is a sad gaze.

CHRIS
You aren’t Julia. You hate organized religion and you absolutely hate plaid, two things she loves.

MARI
(rolling eyes and slightly smirking) That doesn’t matter. It’s more than that. My parents love her. If I disappeared my family literally wouldn’t even notice.
CHRIS
(standing up abruptly) MARIGOLD LOVELEE!!! If you disappeared this world would not **shine**!
(waving arms above head in rainbow motion, as if to showcase the golden hue)

MARI rolls her eyes and smiles softly, staring at Chris lovingly.

CHRIS
(pacing in front of MARI, preaching toward the sky and at MARI) You are the brightest thing in this goddamn world. You are Marigold! You are the most precious thing that walks this Earth and I am in love with you and everything that you are. The sky would not radiate like this every evening if you were gone. My days would be dreary and lame without you here. (bending down to MARI) You can’t ditch me, beautiful. Hate to break it to yah. (smirking and winking)

MARI
(scoffing happily and rolling eyes) (shoves CHRIS gently on the front shoulder) I hate you, dude.

CHRIS
No, (smiling big) you don’t.

MARI
(straight faced) You’re right. I don’t. (slight pause) I love you, but you suck.

CHRIS
(yelling) HEY!

MARI
(laughing wildly) I’M KIDDING!

CHRIS
(seriously and softly) Mari, you are more than having to amount to your sister.

MARI shakes her head and gazes at the ground.

CHRIS
(gently lifting MARI’s face upwards by her chin) I mean it. Even if your parents don’t treat you how they should, you know mine love you; and you know for damn sure that **I** love you. (kissing her on the forehead) I love you Mari Lee.

MARI
(looking up at Chris) I love you too Christopher Jones.

Music swells.

CUT TO:

**OPENING CREDIT SCENE**

**ACT ONE**
INT. Perrysburg High School Hallway - Day

Chyron Up: “Perrysburg High School: 8:41 AM”

Music Up: Remo Drive “Yer Killin’ Me”

Bell Rings. Kids walk out of class, some running. Hallways become crowded. AMBIENT CHATTERING. Pan to MARI’s locker.

MARI walks up to her locker and opens it. Kids run into her backpack, jostling her. MARI scoffs and rolls her eyes. MARI begins putting things into her locker and taking other things out. CHRIS walks up. Music fades.

CHRIS
Hey babe. (smiling)

MARI
Hey Christy B Jones. (smirking)

CHRIS stares at her straight face and rolls his eyes. MARI laughs. CHRIS shakes his head.

CHRIS
How you feeling today, pretty?

MARI goes to answer but is knocked into CHRIS by students running chaotically in the hallway.

CHRIS (V.O.)
(annoyed)Welcome to Perrysburg.(lifting up MARI)

MARI
(fixing jacket) This school is a joke. I hate this place.

JAVON walks up.

JAVON
(happily) What’s going on y’all?

MARI
(annoyed) Hey Jay.

JAVON
Feeling grouchy today, princess?

MARI stares at Javon unamused.

CHRIS (V.O.)
Oh my god, she’s gonna kill him.
CHRIS
(interjecting) Rough morning. What’s up, man?

JAVON
Just waiting for today to be over. Today blows.

MARI
Today has me bent and it’s only nine A.M.

JAVON
(sarcastically) I can tell.

MARI
Dude. I’m gonna punch you.

CHRIS
(changing the subject) Hey, where’s Billy?

JAVON
I was just about to ask you the same thing.

CHRIS (V.O.)
Billy is Javon’s boyfriend and my best friend since, pretty much forever.

CHRIS
(to MARI) Do you know?

MARI
(shrugs) Haven’t seen him all day.

JAVON
I’ve been texting him all morning and he won’t reply. (sounding panicked) I hope he’s okay…

CHRIS (V.O.)
I honestly think Javon has chronic worrying disorder or something. He’s always freaking about something different.

CHRIS
I’m sure he’s fine. He’ll probably be at the spot after school.

JAVON
But what if he’s not?

CHRIS
He will be.

JAVON
I feel like he would’ve texted me by now.
MARI
You’re telling me if you skipped school you would still be awake at 7:30 in the morning?

JAVON
Well, I mean, I guess not.

MARI
Exactly. Dude, chill. He loves you. He wouldn’t just ignore you.

JAVON
(wearily) You’re probably right.

CHRIS
(pause) She’s always right. (looking at MARI, smirks)
Scene One

(CAROL enters STAGE RIGHT with two microphones on stands with a clipboard under her arm, and sets the mics down a little off center.)

CAROL

(Looking at her clipboard)
Can someone bring out the other mic?!
(A crew member brings out a third mic stand and sets it off to the side of the other two then leaves.)

CAROL

Thank you.

(Checking clipboard a little more then looks OFF STAGE LEFT)
10 minutes till go time people! Let’s get the prop table set up!

(Turning to audience)
Hello and welcome to WCBS-FM, home of radio favorite, The Make Believe Ballroom Fantasy Hour. I am the producer Carol McKenzie and tonight we are going to be rehearsing-

(crash from off stage)

PROP GUY (OS)

Sorry! That was my fault, totally my fault.

CAROL

(smiling to the audience)
Okay, well, anyway, tonight we will be rehearsing the conclusion to-

(MACADAMIA enter from STAGE LEFT yelling for Carol)

MACADAMIA

Kathy! KATHY!

CAROL

(Turning to her and clearly exasperated)
Yes?

MACADAMIA

Kathy, are you free? You have to help me.

CAROL

I’m actually in the middle of something-

MACADAMIA

I thought so. Okay so, I was wondering if you would be on my side.

CAROL

Your ‘side’?
MACADAMIA
My side of the divorce! Beck was going to take you but I asked you first. I mean, we ladies have to stick
together, right Kathy? You’re the best assistant I’ve ever had!

CAROL
Um, first of all, my name is Carol, which I know you know, and second I’ve been your boss since you
started working here. Third, you and Beck are getting divorced?

MACADAMIA
Yes yes, something about how “I shouldn’t be seeing Todd if I’m married” but it’s not like I was lying. I
told Beck all about it. He shouldn’t have been trying to keep a star like me caged up! I’m like the wind!

(To herself but not really)
Exactly! An air head..

MACADAMIA
What?

CAROL
(quickly)
What?!

(Shaking head)
Anyway, audience I’d like to introduce you to one of the actresses-

MACADAMIA
Star! She means star!

CAROL
-On the show. Please give a warm welcome to Macadamia NuttsWorth!

MACADAMIA
Actually its “Newts-Worth”. With a silent “Newt”.

CAROL
Because that is how spelling works.

MACADAMIA
But really, Kathy, tell me you’re on my side! Please! When I asked Patty the secretary-

CAROL
Peggy-

MACADAMIA
And she said, “Why should I help you when you can’t even remember my name?” As if it’s my fault
that she’s new!

CAROL
She’s worked here for seven years.
MACADAMIA

Well, I must not have seen her-

CAROL

Let’s get you back to your dressing room in time for vocal warm ups. Gary!

(Crew member enters and MACADAMIA off stage right)

MACADAMIA

(As she’s leaving)
That’s right! It’s the revolution and I have to be ready to spew some French and lop off some heads!

(Crew member looks at CAROL scared and CAROL makes the “NO” gesture with the cutting off neck motion and then realises her mistake and just shoos the crew person. They exit Stage Right)

CAROL

Anyway, to continue what I was saying earlier, we will be rehearsing the final part of-

(BECK runs on stage from STAGE RIGHT)

BECK

McKenzie!

CAROL

(To herself)
Oh, what now…

(To the Audience)
This is another of our cast members, Beck Benedict.

Did Macadamia already come and see you?!

(Carol turns to Beck)

Yes, she did.

BECK

Dang it! I called dibs on you! We both know that I need an assistant more than she does! I have an actual career.

And why do you say that?

BECK

(proud)
I’m attractive!

CAROL

(giving a look like “he’s not wrong”)
I mean… He’s not wrong.
(Shaking herself)
Beck, we’re going to have to talk about this another time. Rehearsal is about to start, and you need to go to vocal warm ups.

BECK
But my accent is great! Just listen;
(Bad southern accent)
Howdy there! I’m a cowboy! I wear cow pants and have a whip!

CAROL
Yes, that’s wonderful, now you really need to go. Gary!

(A different crew member comes out from SR and starts to take BECK off stage right.)

BECK
(As he’s being dragged, with the accent still)
But only bad actors like Macadamia have to go to warm ups! My accent is all ready to go! Don’t you think so Gary?

(Crew person shakes their head and pulls him completely off stage.)

CAROL
...We aren’t even doing a western this week...
(Turning back to the audience)
Again, in a few minutes we will be rehearsing the final part of-

(AREN walks on from stage left, sees CAROL, smiles, then walks up behind her)

AREN
Hello Carol! I was wondering if-

CAROL
(Not turning but very angry)
FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS HOLY AND CAFFEINATED, WHAT MORE DO YOU PEOPLE WANT??!!
(Turning but not seeing who it is)
ALL I WANT TO DO IS TELL THE AUDIENCE THE FREAKING TITLE OF THE SHOW!! IS THAT TOO MUCH TO ASK?! I MEAN SERIOUSLY-
(Seeing who it is and getting flustered)
Oh! Aren! Uh… I’m really sorry about about that, I was um, I mean, I was just trying to-

AREN
(humored)
It’s really okay. I just wanted to show you something, but if you’re busy-

CAROL

AREN
(Pointing to the audience)
But what about…?

CAROL

(Turning to the audience)
What do you mean-? OH right! Jeez, um-
(checking watch)
We don’t have time.
(To Audience)
Okay ladies and gentlemen, rehearsal is going to start. JUST a breif overview, clap when the sign says and laugh when the sign says. Even if it isn’t funny, and trust me, it probably won’t be. I hope you all enjoy the show! September 12th 1947, This is a rehearsal of “The Truest Detective Part 4: What is truth?”.

(Pulling AREN along to STAGE LEFT)
Come on, I don’t want to see this.

AREN

Why?

CAROL

Macadamia thinks it’s the french revolution and Beck thinks it’s the wild west.

YEE HAW!!
(whip sound)

BECK (OS)

OW!

PROPS GUY (OS)

Sacre Bleu!

MACADAMIA (OS)

AREN

That poor sound man…

(CAROL leads them both OFFSTAGE LEFT at a kind of walk/jog thing.)

BLACKOUT
CHARACTERS:

STEVEN FLECKER (STEVE) is a first-generation college student thanks to a scholarship from his father, JACK FLECKER’s, workplace. Though generally laid-back, he suffers from bouts of insomnia that leave him irritable and exhausted. Currently home for the holidays, he’s considering dropping out of college-- his insomnia often means he can’t pay attention in his classes. He feels overshadowed somewhat by his talented younger siblings, BENJAMIN and ANNABELLE FLECKER.

BENJAMIN FLECKER (BEN) is an overachiever. Currently in his second year of high school, BEN participates in his school’s choir, dance, and track teams, and also had a supporting role in the school play last year. Though he dearly wishes to attend a performing arts college, his academics have declined sharply since his mother died, and his lack of prospects leave him somewhat depressed. He’s jealous of his brother, STEVEN, and his sister, ANNABELLE, for their success in regards to college.

ANNABELLE FLECKER (ANNA) is the middle child in her family. She excels academically, and recently secured a scholarship for her full tuition at a distant university. In fact, distance suits Annabelle-- she has worked to separate herself from her family ever since her mother died. In the play, she serves as a neutral party in the conflict between STEVEN and BENJAMIN.

JACK FLECKER is the father of STEVEN, BENJAMIN, and ANNABELLE. He is a second-generation immigrant, and spends much of his time working to support his children. He was an alcoholic, but has sworn off the drink since his wife, Miriam, died in a DUI accident 5 years ago. His full schedule means that he must often rely on his brother, HENRY FLECKER, to take care of the kids.

HENRY FLECKER is a retired veteran on disability due to leg injuries sustained during service. He’s the brother of JACK and uncle of STEVEN, BENJAMIN, and ANNABELLE.

BENTLEY is STEVEN’s dog. BENJAMIN is begrudgingly responsible for him while STEVEN is at college.

SCENE 1

(The scene takes place in a well lit and crowded dwelling. Various items of small importance are scattered across boxes and armchairs in what appears to be a living room and a kitchen. Between these is something that could hardly be called a room; there is space for a door, a shoerack, and little else. The house is largely a haphazard mess; an abundance of fast-food wrappers and loose clothing make it clear that multiple teenagers live here. The floor is an odd mix of carpeting and yellowed tiles, and the wallpaper, while patterned, peels at the edges. As lights come up, we can see STEVE standing by a stove in the kitchen. He is listening to the song Landslide on a jukebox and appears to be cooking something in a pan.)

BEN: (shouted from offstage) Hey, have you seen my shoes?

(STEVE pauses for a moment, but does not look away from the pan on the stove.)

BEN: Hey! (Ben enters SR.) Have you seen my shoes?
(STEVE ignores him.)

BEN: Hey! (BEN shuts off music.) Have you seen my dress shoes?

STEVE: (irritated) Did you check your room?

BEN: Yeah, I looked everywhere.

STEVE: Under your bed too?

BEN: Yeah, I checked.

STEVE: In the coat closet? By the door? Under something? Your chair in the living room?

BEN: (irritated) I told you, I looked everywhere. I can’t find them.

(Steve shuffles his pan. With the music stopped, we can hear the sizzle of the food he is cooking.)

STEVE: Huh. Tough luck.

(Steve returns his full attention to the food in the pan.)

BEN: Is that it?

STEVE: What?

BEN: Are you going to help me look for them, or no?

STEVE: What do-- I have to watch this or it’ll burn. I can’t go rifling through mounds of stuff for your shoes. (pause) Why don’t you check your room again? They’re probably in there somewhere.

(Ben sputters wordlessly for a moment.)

BEN: Fine.

(BEN exits SR. STEVEN turns his music back on. A few moments pass before ANNABELLE enters SR and turns it off. She wears a casual and warm outfit, and exhibits a mood of distant concern.)

ANNA: I just saw Ben. Why’s he look upset?

STEVE: He can’t find his shoes. (Pause.) What’s he need them for, anyways?

ANNA: He’s got his piano recital this week. Didn’t he tell you?

(Before STEVEN can respond, BEN enters SR. He holds an obviously-damaged shoe. [During argument scenes like the one following, BEN should be pacing, STEVE should be watching him, and ANNABELLE should be trying something relevant to defuse the situation.]

BEN: Guess whose mutt was chewing on my dress shoes?
STEVE: Where were they? You shouldn’t have left them out.

BEN: I didn’t “left them out”. They were in their box in the closet. Your dog grabbed them, and--

(At this point, STEVEN turns away from what he’s cooking to face BEN.)

STEVE: Hey, Bentley is the family’s dog, not just mine.

BEN: (Growing angry. Last word should be delivered in a venomous tone.) That’s bull. Since Mom passed away, you’re the only one he likes. He should’ve left when you left for college.

ANNABELLE: (Interjecting) Do you have another pair you could wear? I thought you had two.

(BEN raises his unoccupied [hidden] hand to reveal a different damaged shoe.)

STEVE: Huh. looks like Bentley was pretty thorough. (Pause.) Do you have enough for a new pair?

BEN: I don’t know. Do you have enough for a new pair?

(Steve seems indignant.)

STEVE: What’s that supposed to mean?

BEN: What do you mean, “What’s that supposed to mean?”?

STEVE: I mean, what’s that supposed to mean?

BEN: Well, he’s your dog. He can’t pay for them, so you get the bill.

STEVE: That’s not how this works. You shouldn’t have left them somewhere he could get them.

ANNA: (to BEN) I’m sure Dad can get you a new pair. Where were they from?

BEN: (ignoring her, angrily:) I didn’t leave them somewhere he could get them! They were in the closet and someone left the door open!

STEVE: Why do you need them so bad anyway? You have a date or something?

BEN: (at this point, BEN sounds genuinely upset) I have my piano recital! I told you as soon as you got back. You didn’t listen...

(There is a moment of silence. STEVE is at a loss for words.)

BEN: (continuing) You never listen.

(There is a brief pause where everyone is unsure how to respond. Then:)

ANNA: Ben, why don’t we head into the other room for a minute?

(Ben tenses, then relaxes.)
BEN: Okay.

*BEN and ANNA exit SL. In the ensuing silence, we can hear the food on the stove sizzle again. STEVE turns to face the stove and begins scraping at the pan with a spatula while muttering expletives.*

STEVE: *(scraping at the pan)* Shit, shit, shi shi shi...

Eventually, he gives up, scrapes the food into a trash bin, and starts something new in a different pan. When he has the food started, he walks over to the radio and is about to start his music again, when:

BEN: *(entering from SL. In his dialogue with STEVE, his manner is confrontational. He enters the kitchen, pauses, and then:)* So. How’s college?

STEVE: *(returning to the food he’s cooking)* Ah, you know. Busy, repetitive. It’s nice to get a break from it.

*(There is a brief pause before ANNABELLE enters SR.)*

ANNA: I thought I smelled something burning. Is everything alright?

STEVE: Yeah. Just burned some peppers because somebody *(indicating BEN)* was distracting me.

BEN: *(ignoring this)* How long are you back for?

STEVE: I’m due back on the fifth. Got a few weeks to kick back, which’ll be nice. *(Pause.)* Do you guys want hamburgers or gravy?

ANNA: Gravy sounds good to me.

STEVE: Me too. How ‘bout you, Ben?

BEN: *(stepping forward)* Are you going back?

STEVE: Hey, what’s with all the questions? You got a problem?

BEN: Problem? Yeah, I have a problem. *(BEN takes another step towards STEVE.)* Dad said your grades aren’t doing too hot.

STEVE: *(irritated)* Let’s just stop right there. My grades are my own business. Not Dad’s. And certainly not yours.

BEN: *(BEN closes the remaining distance between himself and STEVE.)* And I know you didn’t get let out this early. Your college doesn’t start Christmas break until the 20th. Two weeks from now.

ANNA: Ben, can this wait? Dad will be getting home soon.

STEVE: *(turning to face BEN)* Hey. Back the fuck up. How do you know when my break starts? *(pause)* Were you snooping through my stuff?

BEN: Well, one of us has to pay attention to it. Don’t you have exams? Are you planning on flunking? Do you-
STEVE punches BEN, which knocks him to the ground. All three characters look shocked at this, then begin talking simultaneously:

STEVE: I’m sorry-- I didn’t mean--

BEN: You bastard! I wish you--

ANNA: Oh my god. Ben, are you--

All three are cut off mid-sentence by the smoke alarm going off. As it starts ringing, JACK FLECKER opens the door CUS and is greeted with the sight of BEN on the ground, STEVE standing over him, and ANNA rushing towards them.

JACK: What in the Lord’s name is going on here?

(STEVE and ANNA speak simultaneously, before being cut off by BEN:)

STEVE: I didn’t mean to! He was just pressuring me, and--

ANNA: Steve just hit Ben! He just hit him! In the face!

BEN: (shouting and upset. To STEVE:) I wish you never came back! You don’t even know how lucky you are!

JACK and ANNA look shocked, and STEVE appears to be rattled. BEN continues:

BEN: You don’t even care about college. You don’t deserve that scholarship. You’re lazy and insensitive and you don’t give a shit about anything except your own fucking self.

While STEVE seemed apologetic before, these words seem to incite him. His body language should reflect that he is bitter and angry.

STEVE: (shouting) Well we can’t all be perfect at everything we touch, can we? Lucky Little Mister Dancingpants over here is a fucking prodigy. You know what I am? I’m nothing. I’m just some kid whose younger brother doesn’t realise how much he’s fucking got.

There is a pause, then:

STEVE: (no longer shouting) Fuck your recital. Here’s for the shoes.

STEVE crosses the stage and exits SL. As he passes BEN, he slaps three twenty-dollar bills on BEN’s shoulder.

JACK: (taken aback) What’s going on?

ANNA seems unsure where to start explaining, and before she can begin:

BEN: (close to tears) Hey, Dad… Can you give me a ride to the recital on Friday?
JACK: (pause) I have an interview on Friday. It’s too big of a promotion to pass up… Steven changed his mind?

There is another pause, and we can see BEN struggling to contain his emotions before:

BEN: Fuck you guys.

At this, BEN shoves past JACK and through the open doorway [CUS] into the freezing December cold.

JACK: (stepping out door) Ben? (long pause) BEN!

END SCENE 1
Erica Drumb  
Lake Shore High School  
Colleen Tharme

*i never had a brother*

sometimes my tongue moves faster than my thoughts, and his name slips from my lips, "i never knew you had a brother".

sometimes, i forget also,  
because it's not easy remembering somebody who tore her limb from limb,

dissected her sanity like some corpse.  
because i once stared into the eyes of cruelty and saw my own blood.

when my brother's past unraveled like a spool of dropped thread,  
i grew nauseous and bitter,  
unaware of the reality to come.

my sister fell to her knees,  
and let the secrets that have gnawed at her finally escape her body, pouring out like they're been eating at her skin.  
the cleansing had already begun.

how his fingers scraped away at his own flesh’s faith,  
his own daughter,  
as he buried himself in some child's purity,
robbed of the naivety and innocence she deserved.
screams grew more silent as the months faded to
years, and i had never wanted to haunt someone more.

they told me justice would choke out his
cruelty and stain his skin with regret.
living in a world that does not welcome
fiends is the worst punishment,
they said.

but i sit here,
mind racing and body numb,
rethinking every possibility and
option, as if i could have saved her.

because he will walk among us again,
in search of more to devour,
in search of more souls to skin and wear with pride.

there is no humanity in humans.
our souls creep with bloodlust,
ready to pounce on the next vulnerable soul that
carries a shred of innocence.

and we're all guilty of ruining something,
or someone, beautiful. whether it be
your first love's confidence, your
mother's sanity,

your daughter's trust,

your own stability.

now my brother walks
living, but he died to me
the moment he touched her.
Slipping

First day back
My necklace perfectly placed upon my chest
Shimmering silver and a shiny blue

I begin to dress myself
I can feel the cold air seep through the thick walls
This is just what I dreaded
Slamming my hands upon my keys to attempt to start my car
I begin to hit harder like a gorilla on its chest
I hear nothing
It should be beeping

My necklace slips.

The clock in the kitchen reads 7:28 am Running behind like a slower olympian
I place my toasty hand on the icy door knob and drive the door open Frigid air gusts towards me
Hail plummets to the Earth with a pound

My necklace slips.

I quickly creep to the Compass A frozen sheet covers my view
Windshield wipers trying to make it budge with an intense surrounding sound No luck and no point
Must be done by hand

My necklace slips.

Slamming, I secured my scraper
Hail still dropping as if it is a beat in a song
I gather all aggression from the morning towards the sheet
I don’t have enough strength to do it all

My necklace slips.
It hangs by a thread as I start my day

Maybe I need a new chain.
Jessica R Ludwick  
Lake Shore High School  
Colleen Tharme

*Flowers of Life*
*Inspired by Flowers in a Glass Vase by Rachel Rausch*

You are beauty that can be appreciated by all.  
It does not take long, though, until your petals start to fall.

Your leaves start to shrivel, your color begins to fade.  
Insects eat at the decay and take your lucious scent away.

You are slowly falling apart, and you fade away until there is nothing left but the remains of something once beautiful, transformed to dust.
Jessica Nowicki  
Lake Shore High School  
Colleen Tharme

**Painted Rock**

He looks at me,  
sorrow-filled skies tearing heart  
strings. He does that to you,  
without even trying.  
His pulse beating  
in drum fills from  
twenty-something years ago.  
After blood left blood,  
only to reunite enough  
to flood trenches.

We throw Seattle stones  
underneath the old bridge,  
sheltering us like a castle.  
A knight in black sheep’s clothing,  
with a sword wearing thin.  
Vocal chords and broken hymns  
behind a soupy smile.  
He passes me a rock,  
one only he could notice.  
Painted with colors  
like a pile of sweaters from a thrift store.

He tells me to throw  
it. I ask him where.  
He tells me to throw it  
back to where it all began;

“Throw it back to Kirkland.  
Give it a new start.”

Voice gruff with buzzing guitar strings.  
A venus fly trap,  
capturing your  
torture but never  
closing in. Nameless  
faces  
will beg to have eyes unsewn.

I kick up dust,  
stone hitting  
dirt.  
His mouth curls and opens to form a  
laugh, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

He tells me to try again.  
Mucky water full of  
rotted plants, waste.  
Needles under  
boulders.  
Nasal passages used as railways.  
Tracks from both  
leading to this moment.  
Poppy plants grow between cracks,  
just enough for rain  
to touch soil.

I ask him why he doesn’t want to keep  
it; the stone full of light and wonders.  
He tells me there’s no chance.

“I know it’s too late.”

I know what he  
meant, and so I threw  
it.  
I threw it as far as it would go,  
skipping on the water surface  
like a dove gliding  
on a snow-soaked breeze.  
I threw it for the stone to start over,  
and so he could too.

In the form of black and white paper,  
the rock came back to me.  
It was two weeks before they found him,  
his melted-sky eyes unidentifiable.  
It wasn’t him;  
For he was across the water,  
skipping rocks and picking  
flowers.

Catching frogs,  
unchained. His smile,  
finally  
reaching  
his  
eyes.
Ceilene Roberts
Lake Shore High School
Colleen Tharme

**SURVIVAL**

Looking in the mirror thinking of my next move,
Might sale crack just to keep the lights on,
Babies having babies,
Dope houses more packed than churches,
Flowers and teddy bears on every corner.
It was always either trap or die.
Momma smoked crack more than she ever.. cracked a smile,
My father went to the store and hasn't been back in 3 years.
Since then its been men in and out..my house and my life.
Mommas ‘friends’ been sneaking in my room everynight since I was 7,
Heart so broke I smoke the dope just to cope.
My homies dying deaths bloodier than christ,
Brothers killin brothers,
Our worst enemy was never just the red, blue, and white.. Lights.
I could measure an ounce before I learned to ride a bike.
I been in this life..I swear you just don't know what it's like.
Allison Scruggs
Lake Shore High School
Colleen Tharme

You

I see you the way a child sees the unknown
Butterflies roaring in my gut
With bare, calloused feet I jump in
Curiosity pushing me deeper
and innocence whispering
“what’s the worst that could happen?”

I see you the way the stars look to the moon
So far and yet so close
Perfect for one another
Yearning for touch,
only to be granted a few hours of gazing

I see you the way an artist sees their muse
Immersed and intrigued
Passionately motivated to perfectly recreate the little moments
Rushing to capture these handheld memories
so I can to hold on to what you make me feel indefinitely

I see you the way I see fireflies
Elusive nymphs sent from heaven
Running aimlessly with a jar to catch

I see you everyday without seeing you at all
One day I hope that I may touch you in a way my words could never dream of touching you
Noah Tances  
Lake Shore High School  
Colleen Tharme

**Taking a Walk with Mr. Fahrenheit and The Man in Black**

Walking around the yard at Folsom.  
Mercury’s says he wants to break free.  
Cash is walking the line.

Cash trades stories from Landsberg and Tennessee,  
Mercury talks of Zanzibar and Bombay.  
We take a seat near the wall.

Cash tells of how he shot a man in Reno.  
Mercury talks of shooting a man too,  
Told his mama.  
Both seem to be men with some troubled past.

Cash pipes in with how he played here once,  
Prisoners loved it.  
Says he gets them,  
Guess I could sympathize.

Mercury’s clearly got something on his mind,  
But won’t tell,  
Says he’s waiting for the right time.  
Is he sick or something?

Cash says black is lucky to him,  
Not the superstitious type myself,  
I could see that.  
Says it symbolizes the downtrodden,  
Man sure likes his symbols.

Mercury belts out a quick tune that get some singing  
Don’t stop me now.  
He’s got quite the voice,  
Like a rhapsody.

Time to leave.  
This ain’t my place.  
I wave them off.

When I hear that trumpet sound  
I’m gonna rise out of the ground,  
I ain’t gonna face no defeat  
I just gotta get out of this prison cell,  
What have I become

My sweetest friend  
A built-in remedy  
From Kruschev to Kennedy.
Those Words You Once Said

Every love story starts out sweet
The typical I like you
You like me type of story
You never think about the end, when you're at the beginning
You never think about the heartbreak which is bound to come
Mine started out the same way
Everything was new, and bright
It seemed as though the world was at my fingertips
Everything was intriguing
Our first chat
Our first hug
Our first kiss
I dove in, head first, and didn't look back
But then the heartbreak came
Like I knew it would
But hoped it wouldn't
Things began to change
We drifted as though you were standing on dry land, and I was standing knee deep in the water
I tried to get back to you but I couldn't
Every step I took towards you just pushed me back and made me lose my balance
And the more time that passed, the waters began to get more rough
And I was getting tired
But I kept trying
I kept fighting against the water
And the waters got faster
And the waters got colder
And every time I took a step, my feet bled because I took off my shoes to run
And everytime the wind came, I froze because I took off my sweater for it was holding me back
And I kept trying
Through all the nights of my tears
And your uncertainty
I kept fighting
But the waters were too rough
I couldn't keep up, and I slipped
The river carried me away
Until it felt like we were worlds apart
And that's when I realized you weren't fighting
But I denied these feelings
And I lied to myself
Because you were my everything and I couldn't stand the thought of you not caring
So what else do I do
How else do I go on
But you had moved on
You walked in the other direction while I struggled to stay afloat
And I know I now must move on too
And I know I now must forget you
And I know I now must stop thinking about you
I know you are the past, but I can't move on

The thing is,
I can delete all the pictures off my phone
And delete all the messages
But just because I can delete them off my phone
Doesn't mean I can delete them from my head, or from my heart
Because I can't
And just because I use every ounce of my being to resist hugging you everytime I see you
Doesn't mean that it's not tearing me apart inside
Because it is
And just because you don't see me cry
Doesn't mean I don't
Because I do
And just because I say I'm ok
Doesn't mean I am
Because I'm not

I hide how I feel from you,
But I fear it's not enough
Because once I get home
There's nothing that can stop me
My tears fill the river

Just when I thought I was over you
Just when I thought I'd be ok
I was wrong
I texted to see how you were
We talked
And I was wrong
And I don't know what to say
Except to say that I'm fine
Because once I stop saying that
I stop lying inside
And once I stop lying inside
It all comes back
And my heart can't handle when it all comes back
And my head can't handle when it all comes back
And my eyes can't handle when it all comes back
And I can't handle when it all comes back
So I lie
I lie to you,
I lie to my friends
I lie to my family
And I lie to myself
Because what else can I do
How else do I go on

Because I can't get you out of my head
Or any of those words you once said
Because I don't want to lose you
But from the looks of things
I've already lost
Generational Deficiency

Declarations of “woke”
rock the internet
like the army of #MeToo statements
marching towards justice,
giving false assurance
that everything is okay.

News reports grow static
As Twitter became a ticking presidential time bomb
and “Rocket Man” can't help
but threaten to destroy a nation divided by deceptive Russian ads.

You go to drown your problems in memes,
but there's a new diss track reaching #1 on the charts.
Posts about all the shots fired dominate your feed,
burying the tragedies of new victims whose families cry out “Black Lives Matter”
in a fruitless effort to prevent more shots from being fired.
But hey, don't worry! This newly researched workout will work.

You'll still hear about another school massacre;
students and instructors alike frozen in fear,
still as mannequins.
Each incident followed by weak promises, raining down like the bullets that threaten our children's lives as they sit idly by.
Why?
Because “this is America.”

So we'll live in denial, continuing to poison our lives with lies, Tide Pods, and excessive exercise for validation that’ll last a blink of an eye.
We'll call out each other's flaws, failing again and again to change the laws of our society.
So we place the blame on one another. It didn't start with us, and it sure as hell won't end with us.
It's just easier to call it a generational deficiency.
Years in Our Pockets

The disco balls are soaring
while the flapper skirts are flying,
reflecting off those translucent thighs,
walking down to those speakeasies.
Bourbon in between your legs,
old men watching
those pretty young ones,
who were born while they were off,
digging for gold for themselves.
They’re coming back to the 20s festivities,
being taught to their 70s kids
out on the floor.
The decade is old and we’re not slowing down,
but they sure are.
They’re crawling towards the finish line,
while we’re running past them,
until there are years between us.
They keeled over dead
with gold in their pockets
while we got years in ours
and time to spare,
before we gotta teach
Post Gen Z.
Deterioration

Dusty and dirty,
old like rotting wood.
Break down the walls,
expose the haunting truth.
Mask the fear of being wrong,
dressed with false confidence
Force out pseudo knowledge.

Decayed floors crumble beneath feet;
feel the weak ground ready to give way
allowing lifeless forms to accept their fate.
No longer is it safe to question your words.
Hear the cries of those in terror,
afraid of the future and who’s in the way.

Broken windows are full of mold and webs;
days are loud, filled with commotion from others
and nights are silent; even crickets disappear.
Brace for glass shattering screams
full of failed attempts and anguish.
Repeat for months, and years on end.
Then comes a 9 to 5
and the cycle repeats.
Bianna VanOchten-Joyner  
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy  
Jared Morningstar

*Figured*

My dad says I have his pinky finger:  
it's long and boney  
and keeps a sort of bend towards his palm.  
He put his hand up to mine  
and we both could see how darker it was,  
how deeper the lines in his hand were.

I have his teeth  
with ridges on the bottom  
and the gaps in between them.  
I’ve heard that we have the same smile;  
they see how his two dimples  
had fused into the one on my left cheek.

My father has dark skin  
that only shows up in the tiny freckles on my face  
and a couple of birthmarks,  
deposited onto my body,  
but his reservoir of melanin,  
didn’t get into my body  
in the perfect proportion.

Little hands,  
big hands,  
light or dark skin,  
and our number of dimples.  
We are different, but one and the same.
Angel Garcia
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Jared Morningstar

*Tattered*

Do you ever feel
like a moth in the dark,
fly to the bright light,
only to get burnt in the electronic sun?

You’re curious,
children often are,
with your parents telling you to be quiet;
play with your old, tattered toys,
and shut up, because the adults are talking.

You’re cold:
a tree in winter,
all your yellow leaves are plucked off.
You go to sleep
and let the cold do its thing.

You’re sick,
an animal with a parasite.
It lives under your skin
and drinks your blood at night,
but you pretend it’s not there.

Do you ever feel
like an ant in the sun?
You can try to survive
until you run into a child
and his tattered old magnifying glass.
Come Home

Papá,
Will you be home this weekend?
I know the business is growing,
and your green card got held,
and abuela can’t remember,
and the flight got cancelled,
pero sus hijos necesitan un Papá.

Last month,
I heard Mamá on the phone
saying you didn’t send the money again
so she sold the grill
you used to burn the carne en
cuando the sun got warm
like you said it did when you lived
on a coast away from home,
but you haven’t come home
from that ocean in awhile.

So yesterday,
el hermano de Mamá,
im “UNCLE MATTHEW,”
took me to the daddy daughter dance
pero no le sabe Vicente Fernández
that we listened to
when you grilled under the hot sun
and don’t tell mama when you come home,
pero mi hermano
skipped university class
so I could have someone at the
Doughnuts for Dadas at school.

But now,
all my friends have their own Papá
who can grill for us
cuando el sol gets warm here
like you said it did when you lived
a coast away from home,
and I know you have a few customers at the moment,
but can you at least write back
porque sus hijos necesitan un Papá.
Trinity Slocum
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy
Jared Morningstar

The Meaning Down Under

What should the poem be about?
It could be about my family,
my abundance of school work, maybe my pets.
I’ll write about the truth.

I could make the poem about the internet.
My friends that have no face,
but they will use that against me.
I’ll write about the lies they can spill.

Perhaps I’ll write about this theatrical play of my life,
one that is self-centered
and one in which I want anything
other than what I already own,
the yearning to make something of myself.

The food I eat will speak through my poem,
the never-ending cavities that fill my mouth,
my eyes too big for my stomach,
always wasting the food that could’ve been eaten.

I’ll speak about the tragedies of war,
they fill our heads and hearts with angst;
the men and women that have risked so much,
and the fallen soldiers that have yet to live.

I could write about imagination,
it speaks to every child’s heart,
the monsters that kill the sleeping eyes,
the daydreams that soon turn to nightmares,
laying restless with wandering mind.

I should write a poem from the heart,
love that irrevocably wants to be there,
the friends that make us relinquish our deepest desires,
the family that just needs some recognition.

Wait, on second thought,
I’ll sleep on it.
I can see us years from now, 
grinning so much, our mouths begin to ache, 
laughing so hard we have to tell each other to breathe, 
the sweat building up between our hands, 
holding us together like the gum on envelopes 
containing last year’s Valentine’s Day cards.

I can hear you laughing, 
snorting here and there, 
tears waterfalling out of your eyes 
into a river of delightful contentment. 
The simple sound of your voice 
makes me never want to leave. 
If you could talk forever, 
I’d never stop listening. 
I can smell you from across the room: 
a celestial aroma that no one can copy. 
You’re like Christian Dior and Chanel’s lovechild. 
If beautiful had a scent, 
it would be nothing compared to you.

I know what I want for squares 2, 3, and 4, 
but the first step is always the hardest. 
I’ve figured out the future; 
now back to the present: 
time to figure out how to introduce myself.
Nora Osborne
Michigan Connections Academy
Deborah Brewbaker

Without

Without all would be nothing
without the small wheezing of a new born sleeping
without the sigh of the stubborn elder
without the purr of the cat
or the growl of the dog

Without all would be nothing
without the dew of morning
without the fall of the popping embers
without the crumble of shriveled maple
or the blooming of a sakura

Without all would be nothing
without the ink of words
without the streak of silence
without the strum of the ukulele
or the hair raising scratch of chalk

Without all would be nothing
without the static in ice
without the clarity of clouds
without the bliss of warmth
or the prickle of the chill

Without all would be nothing
without the glassy top of the atmosphere
without the jagged underbelly of the earth
without the bullets skimming through the grass
or the roses growing through the fallen

Without any of this how would I have you
without the smile as you cried as I showed you the one promise I can keep
without the constellation drifting across your cheeks to start the conversation
without the start of class back in 1953
or the day at the playground when you caught me before falling on the chips

Without the time when I listened to your rehearsal but couldn't truly listen because of your beauty
without the time when my ankle was sprained and still held the door for you
without the first house where I built that garden on your birthday
or the first cane we bought together that is now worn down from all the walks we take

Without you keeping calm when I left for camp exactly 1,451.2 mi for training
without you keeping score on the calendar's days
without the mail headed my way
or the day when I finally saw the front door glistening in the sun rays
Without the start of daycare to the end of graduation
without the small shoes turning into dress shoes
without the glow of the white dress
or when it turned into office black skirt

Without you is hard
without the smell of the eggs you made in the morning
without the oranges in the backyard bring in bees
without the creaking of our feet as we shuffle to porch
or the laughing of a mistake in our glasses case

Without your rambling about all the things you want to do if you had a better hip
without the page you wrote in the paper complaining about the town changing
without the kaleidoscope glass mobile by the window
or your umbrella at the door that would always fall with the slightest bump

Without the monthly mail for your favorite flowers
without the clink of your nails as you wait for tea
without the glint of the moon matching your hair
or how it glows in the sun on our first picnic

Without you is hard Marge
without you the sun doesn't shine at all
without you the hospital visits are more frequent
and soon I will become a permanent resident next to you

So please, wait a little longer for me?
Emma Sauer  
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy  
Karen Horwath  

#poetry

I saw on Instagram the other day  
that poetry being reduced  
to margins being toyed with  
like caged animals,  
simple sentence fragments  
shattered to the bone,  
and I know that if I  
were to hold this stage  
of followers, blind and seeing,  
and I were to speak evil  
of this cruel devirginizing  
of white paper with meaningless text,  
my mouth would come up blank,  
my words drowned in milk and honey.
Gin and Canasta

I made an ocean on our kitchen table
with tears and sidewalk salt.
I spread puckered perch lips
and rainbow fish scales over the cracks in the oak,
marrred by years of misuse by us kids
clawing at the edges in an attempt to see
what the grownups were up to;
They shoot each other in the mouth,
shit-talking-slurred-speech-making;
until laughing opened split lips
and tongues spit blue fire.

In our ocean, I’ll drown the kings and queens,
push iron spades into soft, pumping hearts
and rip diamonds off of necklaces
so our rolling red sea will sparkle.
The half truths and full fibs
will drift down to my nail beds to rest
alongside the plastic bottles and fish ribs
we were told to clear off the table after dinner.

Be my ace in all of this,
my fellow undertable-troll,
soar with me over the fields of grain,
Rows marked by games of go fish,
watch the turtles crawl out of the beer bottles to peek at the cards,
the colored glass swallowed by our sandy beaches--
our fishing-pile of potential pond gobeys.
We can knead the loam with our tongues and elbows
and then listen to the bones of sea robins sing to the melody
of forks and knives on empty plates of protest.

You can dip your toes in, at first.
the six stages of grief as told by someone who isn’t very good at explaining things

Shock

It gives you that feeling in your stomach. I would compare it to something, but it’s unlike any of the other feelings you get. I can tell you though, that it starts at your fingertips. It travels throughout your body faster than your brain can process it and before you know it your stomach feels weird and you don’t have enough control over yourself to even open your mouth to cry, or scream, or however you handle things like this.

Denial

It makes you laugh, because you simply don’t know how to swallow it. Of course it’s not true, of course it didn’t happen, and you start to believe yourself enough that it goes away. But it’s always there. It’s behind you in the mirror when you go to check your reflection before you leave the house, and it makes you catch your breath but you still just leave, almost forgetting to lock the door. It’s whispering to you in your headphones while you are listening to your favorite song, you keep skipping through your playlist to make it go away but eventually just stop listening. You delete the playlist, and that’s not your favorite song anymore.

Anger

You feel this one in your stomach too, but it’s different this time. It starts in your chest and sits there for a while. When it’s there you do stupid things, and your tears now burn your skin as they make their way down your face because this time they are fueled by fire. You can’t sit still anymore. When you start to feel it in your core you simultaneously clench your fists, your eyes narrow and you start breathing harder than before. You may take deep breaths to try and relax, but your heart rate continues to speed up and there’s nothing you can do about it.

Bargaining

Your great uncle on your mom’s side had a gambling problem a few years back, but it was nothing compared to the amount of money you are willing to give up now. It’s burning a hole in your pocket and you want to give it all to God or whichever higher being is on the clock right now. You have never been to the casino before but you begin to think the slots would be in your favor, beginners luck maybe? You get there and they ask for your I.D. You left it at home and they refuse to let you in.

Depression

You become empty. Desensitized. Someone could hold a lighter to your fingertips and you wouldn’t jump at the feeling of the heat meeting your skin. Your glasses are all half empty, and your other dishes stack up in the sink as well. You just can’t bring yourself to clean them. You have to use paper plates and just hope you don’t run out anytime soon.
Acceptance

You let yourself feel butterflies in your stomach again and they flutter around in a way that sends tingles all throughout your body. Your favorite TV show makes you laugh again and you call your mom to tell her you love her. Her voice over the receiver makes your heart warm and your eyes crinkle as you smile. You make plans to see her next weekend.
Sarah Kleinfeld  
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy  
Karen Horwath

_Fifty_

America,  
land of the “better than everyone else.”  
Fifty States, United  
in their anger--  
hating those who preach love,  
making the weak bend themselves into benches for the rich,  
holding them up so they can stand for all to see.  
All the while, we hurl insults at the ones who are used as props.  
For the sake of our unity, we cut ourselves into pieces.  
We salute the points of light on our star-spangled banner--not one, but fifty.  
A nation,  
made one by dividing itself,  
we hold ourselves together by the coagulation of wrath,  
the gravity of our bonds only as strong as the normal force of revulsion.  
Fly us to the moon, we say,  
to let us escape from the Russians.  
We claim we won the Space Race,  
But if all you want to do is drag the stars down to earth,  
then why bother having stars at all?
Lou’Antraniece Humphrey  
Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy  
Cynthia Schneider

**Combination**

we are gargling glass

disguised as curled feet in the rain

scratching matches onto broken strikers

forcing jumbo squares into triangles

we are the loose gaps and holes

of “Are you busy”

I suppose we missed the lessons

that you can not force tessellations

we are the missing pieces

that we try to fill up with “I am sorry” and “We are still learning”

and teenage desire

if you recite it enough

it will almost satisfy you

we are nerves

confused heartbeats

shaky hands

texting about the meaning of life at 1:29 am

we are stirring water and oil so passionately

to try and form something we thought we had memorized on our lips
we thought we double checked the ingredients list
we will just blame it on poor procedures

we are black ink tattoos and cement
never wanting to leave without a trace
but we do not realize what we had was irreversible

we make up months later with clear eyes
our night vision goggles aside
to see that we have cuts on the back of our throats
ink flowing in our veins
and excuses that no longer fit
Black Migrations

I’m a product of black migrations,
I’m a product of the African nations,
I’m a product of my environment.
But success is the product of my desirement.
We were forced to migrate to America in 1619,
we were enslaved so they could live their dream.
Emancipation Proclamation it rocked the nation.
Transformation the key to all the celebration.
Education and innovation was a determination.
Discrimination and segregation took a vacation.
No time for peace ‘cause here comes retaliation.
White people came with a new form of legislation.
Jim Crow rained there ain’t no deliberation.
Just more loss and complete domination.
We left the South to the North in 1919.
From that time came Martin Luther King.
A lot of times we’ve ended up migrating,
but we keep our culture, no room for assimilating,
That was their way of discriminating.
My culture is my way of commemorating
my past and my present--I believe in our futures.
We couldn’t have schools so we had to hire tutors.
We couldn’t run away so they had to make police.
We couldn’t own property so now we still lease.
We need to migrate our mentality.
Reduce our brutality,
reduce our criminality,
and make a change emphatically.
Hatred needs to be eradicated,
reparations need to be created,
migration is our way of transportation
I’m here now, I have arrived,
but I know I migrated from the Eastern World to the other side
Slavery ended and we migrated to the north
From the city to the suburbs we’re going back and forth
I’m tired of moving I just want to stand still
If this is America I should have free will
I’m black and I’m proud, so there’s going to be hating
But I’m going to stand my ground, no more migrating.
Malin Rackles
Portage Northern High School
Amanda Thorpe

*drop*

the rain drops
wash out all my
unthought thoughts
and disappear
i stay behind
i drop
wash away all your
unbloomed blossoms and
you disappear
i stay behind, alone
liquid
i drop to the ground
all and every piece of me
drop drop drop
open and vulnerable
every raindrop causes a
reaction of little waves
that dream of the ocean
but are part of me
and i cannot help
but disappear
Myself
Nothing but

I am made of nothing but
the thoughts that litter my mind
and ever so rudely escape from my mouth
to unintentionally compliment my red streaked hair
and tired grey eyes

I am made of nothing but
absolutely absurd ideas fed by unrealistic expectations that float me through life
on a cloud of what ifs and how comes

I am made of nothing but
a desire to live rather than exist
a simple concept, confined by insecurities
and destroyed by general boundaries of everyday life
Boiling Point

Man I'm really at my boiling point
Black people come around and all the fingers point
Treating us like pigs thinking we gonna oink
We hanging out doesn't mean we smoking joints
I’m telling you we not really free
The boys turning off their cameras so you can’t see
We can't even say that we are liberated
Without going around getting discriminated
I'm just a young guy writing with a ballpoint
Just to let you know I’m at my boil point
Counseling

Be a marriage counselor they said. It makes good money they said. They said a lot of things; they never mentioned anything about counseling concepts.

Name any two opposite things, and I can most likely recall a session or two with them. I've met with Time and Space, and they've started sending me Christmas cards every year. They seem to be doing just fine. I've met with Abundance and Scarcity, Ancient and Modern, Life and Death. Bold and Shy had an abusive partnership, Worry always thought Calm was cheating, and Sweet and Sour hated working together because they always thought they were better off alone.

It was my sole responsibility to hold together the basic fabric of the universe. So when Winter and Summer happened to walk into my office, I thought nothing of it. Until Summer exploded.

"I can't stand the cold weather! It sickens me because it makes the world sick. Nothing's healthy, everything is dead! The trees, the shrubs, every rosebush and flowerbed is covered in "a beautiful blanket of white". Beautiful blanket? It's more of a death shroud; a-a peaceful white blanket draped over a coffin of what was once Earth!"

"You're just jealous because my job is far simpler than yours." Winter scoffed.

"I'm not jealous, I'm disgusted." Summer balled her fists on her lap. "You take away everything I make, and then pretend it's fine by putting on this mask! A blank stare. A glorious mess that I have to clean up."

I wiped a few beads of sweat from my forehead with my tie. The room was climbing in temperature by the second. If I didn't try to diffuse the situation soon, my office would soon be on fire. I slowly placed my notepad down on my lap and looked to Winter.

"So, um...how does this make you feel, Winter?"

Winter kept his lazy eyes on the floor, leaning his head on his hand and his elbow on the arm of the couch.

"I feel like I could use a drink."

"Can't you take me seriously for two seconds-"

"Pause." I held up a hand. Their attention turned to me. "Winter, how much of the world do you cover?"

"When it's my turn?" He asked, continuing. "The entire globe."

"And then after that, Summer gets the whole globe?"

"That's correct." She huffed.

I paused a moment to gather my thoughts.

"Okay. So what I'm getting here is this; Summer, you feel Winter doesn't appreciate you enough, and Winter, you are correct in thinking Summer is jealous. She has a far more difficult task because she brings things back and cleans up. You cause damage quicker than she can, and this frustrates her."

"Exactly!" Summer practically leaped up.

"My thought is this: I'm going to try and tilt your perspectives. Summer, I want you to try only warming the top half of the Earth. Winter, you get the bottom. Winter, you'll get the North and South poles so you can have your space, and Summer will get the most time around the tropics. Then, switch hemispheres every so often. This way, you are both working at the same time, and while working in tandem, you'll learn to appreciate and view each other's contributions and progress."

"Do you think it could work?" Summer asked Winter sullenly. Winter shrugged and stood up.

"It's worth a shot. When should we come back and see you, doctor?"

"How about we schedule you...one year from now?"
"That sounds great." Summer nodded. She joined Winter in shaking my hand, and they left quietly.

~

One year later, I received a beautiful bouquet on my desk at work. I came into my office to behold a large vase made of extremely cold ice, and a bunch of massive sunflowers fixed in the middle. Attached to a stem was a small note.
"Thank You Doctor!
Since our last appointment, we've noticed a huge improvement in our work ethic and relationship. We can't thank you enough. Please cancel our next appointment."
- Summer and Winter

Don't get me wrong, I love it when things work out for the couples I meet.
I'm just never prepared for the gifts they send. For example, this vase is currently melting on my paperwork.
A Truth Untold

I stare at the ceiling. I can’t bring myself to roll out of bed, to place my feet on the carpet and stretch my hands above my head. I can’t make the darkness leave.

The light shining underneath my bedroom door causes shadows to dance along the walls. The images are terrifying, pulling me back into the nightmares that plague my mind the few times I manage to find myself falling asleep. I went to bed as soon as Ivy left for the gym, unable to do much else, including my homework.

“Faith,” I jolt at the sudden yell. “Get up! It’s time for breakfast!”

I place a hand flat on my stomach. It’s flat, only because of my position. The door swings open with a creak and I squeeze my eyes shut as light enters the room.

I turn my head with a sigh and tug back the blankets slightly to sit up. I pretend not to notice how my mother’s eyes roam over my body, how judging they are. There’s a mirror on the wall. I can see my knees knocking together and my bruised arms from countless nights of thrashing and squeezing to take the pain away. My hair hangs limp around my face. But what I notice most is the look of disappointment in her eyes. She looks at me quietly for a few more seconds before closing the door and leaving me in silence.

Tears sting my eyes. I rub my thigh, fingers moving over the bumpy scars under my shorts.

A very long time ago, I had almost completely given up. I wrote a letter to the counselor at school because I was so ready. I needed help and I saw it as my last chance. So I signed it with my initials, placed it in her mailbox in the main office and waited. I didn’t expect her to find me, especially not as fast as she did. By the middle of my second class of the day, I was pulled into her office. I stayed silent for as long as I could, only shedding tears. I didn’t think it would be so hard to speak about my pain. She called my mother. Even after reporting my letter to her, saying I needed help, mentioning my past suicide attempt, telling her about the cutting and the restrictive eating, my mother assumed it was stress and that I was being hormonal. She never spoke about it again.

Pushing myself to my feet, I find a discarded sweatshirt on the floor and pull it over my body. My phone pings multiple times. I push the home button and stare at the dozens of notifications from Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. I’m reminded of the plans I had made for every day next week. It’s a struggle to pretend you enjoy being around people. Tugging my shorts down to hide the scars, I walk out of the room. Sunlight shines through the windows at every angle and I wince. Breakfast is spread across the table, a plate already made for me. I gulp but sit. My family sits, silently eating. Ivy is careful to separate her food, eating the few grapes rather than the spoonful of scrambled eggs. With shaking hands, I spear a piece of watermelon. It doesn’t take much for my stomach to feel full.

As I place my fork down, I tense. “Starving yourself won’t help you lose weight.” Ivy and I both freeze and I’m suddenly reminded of the bags of snacks in her room with the calories written on them. We both have those containers under our beds, hidden away from the world and our urges.

My cheeks burn and a pit holds tight in my stomach. I feel the urge to cry. Does she actually think I’m fat? “I’m not hungry.”

“Eat. Now.” I look up. The anger on my mother’s face scares me, her honey brown eyes filled with determination. “You need to stop being so stupid or you can go to your room. Why do you have to make everything so hard for this family? I’m so disappointed in you.”

A tear slides down my cheek as I stand shakily and walk away. My door shuts quietly and I lean against it, sobbing quietly now. My phone trills again and I sigh, wiping my cheeks. I can’t take the sound any longer, the constant ringing of incoming calls and unanswered messages. The small jar hidden behind my dresser mocks me angrily until I grab the cool glass, rolling it around to hear the rattle of the blade and pills inside before placing it down and instead grabbing the small notebook and pen off of my bed.
The door squeaks and I slip through the narrow opening, hoping to make it to the bathroom without anyone noticing. The trip feels as though it takes hours. The click of the lock on the door is as loud as thunder and finalizing. I almost don’t want to turn on the light, to look at myself in the mirror for the second time today. But I do anyway.

Dark bags sit under dead, swollen hazel eyes. My dark hair is groomed perfectly, makeup covering the light spread of acne on my chubby cheeks. My collarbones are barely visible despite my v-neck t-shirt and the days I spend fasting and exercising. Redness covers what skin I can see and broad shoulders make my body seem bigger than it is.

I look...hopeless.

My chest heaves and I gag, flying to the toilet and bending over, barely saving my hair from the onslaught of rejected food. The scent of vomit is acrid and suffocating. Slowly reaching up with a shaking hand, I flush the toilet, dropping the seat cover into place. Hair sticks to my forehead with sweat from the exertion of my body throwing itself into the toilet. I crawl towards the bathtub, barely able to stand with the sobs wracking my body. It takes me a moment to calm, the cold of the floor seeping into my body like a poison.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. ‘You’re okay. You’re fine. It’s normal. You deserve it.’

Nodding to myself, I place my hand flat on the tiled floor and push myself up, unable to sit there any longer. Washing my hands and taking a wet washcloth to my mouth, I avoid looking in the mirror as long as I can. When I do, I’m not taken aback from the sight like I had been just weeks ago. That’s what this does to you, it takes you over, body, mind, and soul until there’s nothing left to take. A parasite. A disease.

The scale sits on the floor next to me and I glare at it. The numbers are never good. I imagine numbers spinning on a wheel. What will it land on this time?

153.7
That’s the lowest it’s been in months. Dread burns in my stomach.

Grabbing the pen off the sink, I write in the small notebook next to my calorie intake for today.

0.

How many have I burned?

3,137. It takes 3,500 calories to burn a pound of weight. I unlock the door and throw it open, not caring to turn off the light or put away the scale.

I can’t spend another second forcing myself to remove all of the food I’ve ever eaten from my stomach.

My room is tidy, a swirl of white and royal blue because “a good anorexic keeps her room clean.” The carpet is soft and plush beneath my feet, the dark curtains swaying lightly in the breeze from the small open window above my chair. Cups of green tea and black coffee sit on my desk, a pile of Garcinia Cambogia, appetite suppressants, sitting next to them.

Laying in the middle of the floor, I place my hands on my head and begin forcing my body into crunches. 1. 6. 24. 43. 103. My stomach hurts and my throat is dry. But I continue on. My homework sits unfinished with my journal open to a page of reasons to keep going:

To shop without judgement. Being the skinny friend. Running easily. Prom. Summer. To be happy. To be loved.

It becomes too much, my chest heaves and my throat constricts. I lay back, arms splayed on the carpet above my head and eyes closed. The pungent scent of sweat travels to my nose and I cringe but stay in my place until my mind stops spinning. My fingers itch to move to the fridge and take anything, anything at all, to eat. I fist my hands and slam them against the carpet, pulling myself to my knees. I refuse to ruin my progress. Instead, I grab the journal and sit in my chair with a pencil.

I panic when I eat over 700 calories. Then I remember that I used to eat 2,500 a day. I panic when I don’t run everyday. Then I remember I make up for it by fasting. I panic when I don’t do 200 sit ups a day. Then I remember my stomach still moves when I walk. Panic isn’t something I’m afraid of anymore. It’s something I welcome, something I relish in. It pushes me. Panic can be defined as a sudden episode of intense fear that triggers severe physical reactions when there is no real danger or apparent
cause. Except panic triggers physical reactions that I need.

Panic is good.

Panic is what I need.

Panic is my life.

The need to eat hasn’t gone away. Tears fall in thick sheets and my thick fingers dig through the small pink container hidden under my bed. I peer at the sandwich bags with calories written on them: the bag of old candy canes, fun size candies with markered numbers, banana chips, Oreos, and pretzels. Gripping the plastic bag in my hand, I tear it open and shove a banana chip in my mouth, chomping on it loudly. I go through the bag easily and grab four Oreos, shoving them in with barely any time to chew. I silently open each of my three calorie trackers and enter the amount of calories.

My hands shake and I bite my lip, sitting at the edge of my bed. ‘Why would I do that to myself?’ I breathe deeply. ‘Three months. You can do it for three months. That’s all it’ll take to reach your goal weight. You don’t need to eat. You can go days without food. No one is going to love you if you don’t. You won’t have a date to prom, you’ll look terrible in your dress. You’ll be stared at when you go to the beach. You’ll never be treated the same as your skinny friends. Your family will always encourage you to lose weight, to starve because you’re so fat. Get a grip and do it.’

The room I viewed as clean before now seem dirty with shadows on the walls. Dropping onto the bed, I close my eyes with a knot in my throat. I hear the door slam and jump, releasing a quiet sob. Of course they have left me here. It’s so difficult to drag myself out of bed but I find an old backpack and shove a change of clothes inside along with a water bottle and a pair of running shoes. Texting my parents, I tell them I’m going to the gym then shut it off, closing the connection to my social life.

I speed along the street, barely noticing when to stop for lights or pedestrians, unable to stand silence as I press buttons to change the station. My heart pounds in my chest, music shaking the entire car. There’s a second of silence when I park where I pretend I’m normal, just going for a run at the gym. I’m like every other teenage girl. I’m not the girl who forces a toothbrush down her throat, who drinks a mixture of mayonnaise, mustard, and water to vomit easily, who takes laxatives to make the numbers go down on the scale even by a tenth of a pound. I am normal.

But as I change, sliding leggings up over my bulging waist, a loose shirt over my broad shoulders, laces tight on my shoes, I realize that I am anything other than normal. I choose to starve. I choose to only eat when I’m on the verge of passing out. I workout until I drop with my thighs screaming at me to stop. I am not normal.

My body feels like liquid and my knees shake as I carry my worn body to the locker room. I silently thank whatever God may be out there that no one else is here. A small shower kit is in my backpack and as I remove it, it feels almost light in my hand, like a cloud. Stripping out of the sweaty clothes, I kick them to the side and close the plastic curtain, tossing the gym’s towel over the side. The water is freezing, chilling me to the bone until it begins to warm. The onslaught of pounding heat makes me shiver as I sink to the floor, allowing the water to weigh me down almost as much as my sadness.

The scars on my thigh have yet to heal from the last time my mind took over. The splatter of water on my skin is loud, drawing me in and drowning me in darkness. All I can see are the shadows, the voices saying that I’m not good enough, that no one will really miss me when I’m gone. I reach over and grab the shower kit, digging through until I find the small blade.

It stings at first and I grit my teeth. Moving the blade at different angles to reach new depths, I relax. My fingers find the pulse on my wrist, counting the beats. The blade feels heavy in my hand. The metal is sickly warm when I press it to the largest vein beneath my skin. These cuts hurt more than the others as I place more and more pressure until my wrists gush scarlet.

My sobs are quiet but they wrack my body and I watch the blood washes down the drain. I feel more alone now than I ever have and I know that despite what I’m feeling, my family will always blame me for something. So I continue; I continue to butcher my thighs and wrists until there’s no telling where the blood is coming out and where it’s pooling below me. I continue to sob. I continue to feel helpless. I continue to lose control.
“Hey, are you okay?” I jump and turn my head with wide eyes. A shadow stands outside of the shower stall and I freeze. “Oh, my God!”

I shudder at the screech and cover my body while the curtain flies away. Sliding into the corner, I clench the blade between my fingers, not paying much attention to the stabbing pain in my palm. Above me stands a medium blonde of slight build, dark blue eyes staring into my soul with panic. “Someone help!”

I glance down and feel sick. Everything is stained a deep red despite the water washing it away. My body feels sluggish and light as a summer breeze. The pain has bloomed into something like happiness. My pale skin is covered in watery droplets of blood, the tiled floor darkened with blood that hasn’t been washed away. The girl’s screams haven’t stopped but all she does is stand and stare at me. I look past her, wary of her brightly colored leggings.

Someone rushes in behind her, a male worker in his black t-shirt and jeans. I can tell he feels nervous about being in here but I’m sure that goes away as soon as he takes in my physical state. He reaches in, toned arms twisting the shower know until the water stops spraying my body. His hand grips the towel and tugs it around my body, quickly removing me from the shower. I don’t move. I struggle internally with my weight bearing him down. I close my eyes, aware of the tears now sliding down my cheeks as a security officer runs inside the locker room, a bag on her shoulder.

Everything is blurry, sounds now far away, smells not as strong. I hear them searching the locker my belongings are in. I stay still even as my arms are wrapped tightly with towels to stop the bleeding, someone placing pressure on my thighs. I close my eyes and relish in the slow beating of my own heart, my body finally giving up on itself.
Natalie Rarick
Edwardsburg High School
Jennifer Swisher-Carroll

**Her Balloon**

“The red one, Mommy.” Kayla jabs her fingers toward the man in the booth. I reach into my purse but Mike beats me to it, counting out quarters with his smug fingers, with his heroic, superior face. We let Kayla give the vendor the money; she counts it out precisely (though she doesn’t know what she’s counting to) and slides it across the tabletop. Mike intercepts the balloon on its way toward Kayla, rubs it against her head and lifts. Wavy blonde strands levitate off her shoulders, the electricity sending gentle chills like whispers into her scalp, and she squeals with delight.

I want to tell her I know that electricity. It’s always electric, at first.

Instead, I prompt her with “What do you say?”

“Thank you.” My obedient little girl. The fairworker gives her a wink and a gap-toothed grin. Kayla carries the balloon away with her, her eyes fixed on its cherry red. Mike and I follow close behind, leaving the fairworker to peddle his rainbow of plastic behind us.

The evening air envelops us like a blanket, surrounding us with the scents of deep-fried food, the cacophony of childish chatter and laughter, the brightest lights and colors you could ever imagine. They’re so vivid, they almost don’t look real. I glance at Kayla, concerned (it’s far past her bedtime), but I can tell from the sparkle in her crystal blue eyes that she is nowhere near finished. This night belongs to her. She is Alice in her own rural Wonderland, and Mike is her Cat, or maybe her Hatter. I am her Rabbit, keeping her on track, though Mike would tell you that I am the malevolent Queen.

We follow our noses, tracing the sugary tendrils toward elephant ears, and we buy her one because it’s a special day; it’s a treat.

“You eat that fast, before Mommy makes you eat broccoli instead!” he says. Of course, I am the villain.

“Bleh!” Kayla gazes at Mike with her wide, trusting blue eyes. How I wish I could see the world through those eyes. Those eyes that see only the good in him, remember only his charming smile and the deep bellow of his laughter and the softness of his eskimo kisses (one every night, right before bed). They do not see what is behind locked bedroom doors: the fists thudding against door and wall and skin, the fire in his body when his heart pumps alcohol, the way the gentle light leaves his eyes and he becomes someone I don’t know, someone he doesn’t even know. I don’t let her see these things, because I know how painful it is to watch your vision of someone crumble like ash in your hands and fall between your fingers.

There are distant screams from the Corkscrew (“pleeease?” “Not until you’re older,” says the Rabbit). She tugs Mike’s sleeve and he lifts her up, up, up onto his shoulders. He is strong, stronger than most men would be at his age, which I know all too well. She tangles one hand in his hair and uses the other to hold her precious balloon, gazing upon her kingdom of colors. I watch the wind tug at her balloon gently, almost as if it’s testing the waters, gauging how hard it will have to pull.

“Hang onto that balloon,” I say, “or the wind will snatch it away.” She clasps the string tighter.

The horror of losing her balloon! She simply cannot bear it.

But losing a balloon is not so bad, I think. Not for the balloon, at least.

**What is there for a balloon, in the home? If it can’t fly then why does it exist at all?**

There are only so many endings: There is deflate, there is pop, and there is fly. Whether you are made of plastic or flesh, the options are the same.

I look at Mike and my body is flooded with visions of dancing in the flower-scented moonlight, or gazing at the fresh snow while we burn our tongues on hot chocolate, or staring into the secrets in his eyes. It’s the stuff that fuels young foolish hearts, the kind of heart I used to have. I remember when those visions of past and future would fill me up and make me feel like I could soar forever, but now they feel
only like lead, slowly poisoning me while they drag me to the ground.

Of course, there is a way out. I know there is, I feel it in my bones with every bash that his once
caring hands deliver to me.

But with the lights of the fair crowding my eyes, and the smell of Kayla’s hair perfuming my air,
and the feeling of her hand sticky from sugar in mine, I thought I couldn’t fly away. Because I couldn’t
leave her. I couldn’t watch the tears flow down her face as I ascended, my broken string dangling.

How could I leave the one person in this world I’m sure I love?

There is only so much love in this world. And Kayla has her own personal supply of it, her Barbie
backpack full to the bursting with elaborate stories and songs of her own creation and dreams of someday
being a princess and her darling crooked smile and her perfect hiccupsing laughter. I want to protect her
from the world that doesn’t deserve her, and the realization that I can’t slices at my insides like a piece of
glass. I can barely protect her from a father who doesn’t deserve her.

How did we create her? How did these two destructive, dysfunctional, damaged people deliver an
angel into the world?

This angel who points at the ferris wheel, excitement dripping from her fingertips. This angel
who forgets, just for a moment, and allows her grip to loosen around the tail of her beloved balloon. And
that’s all it takes, because the wind has already snatched it out of her hand and it’s gone, faster than you
can blink. She gapes at her hand, suddenly empty, and cries out. A pointing finger traces the line of its
thin white tail up into the sky, where the runaway cherry red is unmistakable.

“How can we catch it?” she asks.
“No, sweetie. It’s gone.” I speak softly. I squeeze her hand. I don’t want to let go.
“We can just get another one,” says Mike.

But Kayla knows he is wrong. There will never be a balloon quite like that one. And I agree.

There is screaming in the distance, but also laughter, both from the same ride. The grass curls
around her tiny sneakers as we watch the balloon drift upwards into the night sky until it becomes like a
little red star, or a red button sewn into the blue fabric of the night.
To Whom it May Pertain

It was cold, those first moments. Of course, I did not yet understand anything. I felt cold, but my
newborn consciousness had not named everything yet. I was still animal in instinct. I searched for
something to alleviate the uncomfortable feeling. And found a speck of light. I reached for it, but as I
approached there was a blinding flash, and I felt myself being thrown through emptiness. I looked around,
after I stopped my tumble. I saw light, many hundreds of particles floating through the emptiness. I
gathered them to me, instinctively building myself a form. I watched with awe, as thesees little particles
made the most spectacular motions, gathering together. I believe this event was what was called the Big
Bang. I did not notice the passage of time, until a new, brighter light started to gather out of the darkness.
I turned my mind toward it, and found I could fling myself through space, at unimaginable speeds. I was
there in time, and I saw a sight that reawakened my consciousness. I saw the birth of a star, and I called it
my friend. I spread my arms and embraced the warmth of its light. It did not hurt me, for I was one of
them. I was a celestial being, wandering through the empty space. I watched as innumerable stars grew
from their own pockets of particles. I believe that you will call these first elemental particles atoms. As I
watched, I kept my mind working. I wanted to help in this birthing of the universe. I figured it out! I
gathered to me a great store of the atoms, and as I pushed them together into a huge cloud, and with
immense pleasure, I created my first star. In joy, I put more and more together, creating a huge cluster of
stars, all orbiting my finest creation, a massive collection of particles, and all the stars orbited it. I looked
up, and noticed many more of these clusters, and then I realized that time, as I had imagined it, was much
quicker than my mind had comprehended. History was moving ahead at a pace I could not comprehend.
As I walked my universe, I saw magical things happening around me. I saw solid spheres, made of the
heavier materials made by my stars. Things like iron and nickel and silver and gold. I saw a rock, covered
in a blue liquid, called water, and I flew down to visit it. I saw, swimming through the nearly weightless
stuff, small, little creatures. I could sense their consciousness, but it was faint. I was intrigued by these
new beings, but my attention was called away by something else. My friend, the first of stars, was dying.
His light was burning out. I approached, and cradled my ancient friend in my hands. As I watched, a light
gathered. There was a massive explosion, like the start of the universe, and his particles were blown
around the universe. Instantly they began to create more stars. I was stunned. The first being in the
universe had died, but his death created so many more stars. He became a part of the entire universe. I
understood that matter cannot be created nor destroyed, same with energy, and so I could turn my
attention back to the small, new, life forms I had seen on that small planet. I shrunk myself down to their
size, and closely inspected them. I found that they could not see, nor hear, nor taste. All they could do was
move, feel other objects, and eat. I was surprised that the first lifeforms in the vast universe I walked,
were small, single celled creatures with no more thought than a pebble. I decided that maybe all life
needed was some time. I left the planet, wandered the universe. I saw amazing new things. I saw galaxies
were stars circling each other, with their planets on a wild dance between them, thrown from one
partner to the next. I saw galaxies colliding, yet nothing seemed to happen. I saw nebula expand and little
nests of stars grow within them. But I kept coming back to these small little beings. I couldn’t help
myself. They were so pointless, aimlessly moving around, absorbing food. I watched, I waited, and
nothing interesting happened. They stayed this way. I decided to move things along. I pushed and pulled
at their little strings of genetic detail. I pushed them into the path of what is well known as evolution.
After millions of years of work, I watched as these once small creatures grew. I saw them multiply,
become multicellular, evolve, have young, find love. I saw the first fish swim. I watched with pride as my
creations moved slowly but surely toward the land. I saw creatures take their first steps, and beheld as
they grew into huge scaled monsters. Then I took the time to look up into the sky. I saw all that had
happened in the universe in my absence. It had continued its growth. But as the beauty of the stars shone
through the universe, I realized that there was an underlying violence to everything. Planets, stars, even galaxies were colliding, throwing themselves through space in the aftermath of their explosive conflicts. I realized, to late, that a huge space rock was hurtling through space towards my little planet, and I foresaw the effect it would have on my children, the creatures roaming my earth. I knew that there were catastrophes, but it was so easy to ignore the suffering when time was of no consequence. I knew that life had suffered great setbacks, but I only thought of them as necessary accidents. But this meteor, this rock, made me realize the atrocities I had ignored. I had believed in the perfect purity of the great place in which I lived. But as the flaming rock sped towards the death of my creations, I realized that nothing was ever going to be perfect. There is always an end. And the worst fate is to not. It tore me apart, thinking on the imperfection, the pain, the death. I saw no reason in it. It was madness. It ripped my very being in half. I felt the pain of everyday beings. I was in agony. For sixty five million years I floundered in my mire of agony, hate, despair. Yet, I was still walking, I was still looking at everything with intense curiosity. I recovered from my meltdown, and looked back upon my world. I was astounded. All around me were buildings of strange materials, and creature of apparent intelligence walking through the cities. I was overjoyed. Was this the final end to my creation? Beings with the intelligence to create? I spent centuries observing, learning, trying to understand. But eventually I understood. My creations were a failure. They were destroying their home, the only one they had. They killed each other for territory, when they could have worked together to become agents of prosperity. I was disgusted. Their intelligence had come to soon. My old agony came back. I realized this was their end. My creation, that I cared so deeply for, had gotten old and broken. I had learned my lesson. Everything ends. Either a sputtering out into smoke, or a flagrant explosion of death. I decided that life on this planet had used up its welcome. I decided to pull the moon into the planet, and end the destruction. But first, I sent small asteroids, with small pockets of the original forms of life, shooting out into space. As the planet died in a massive explosion, I flew through the universe to its very center.

Postscript

I have stayed here for the rest of time, observing the machinations of time. I discovered a general pull back, and found that the universe, too, has started to reach its end. I think it will redraw back into a small, single particle. So I have left this account, to give aid to whatever comes next. I will die with this universe, but with my last action, I will fling this journal into deep space, for whoever comes after me. To whom it may pertain, Goodbye.
Together We Make Purple

The water runs rapidly through the corral of the riverbank. It splashes to the edge in a desperate attempt to climb away. The waves crawl over each other, pushing back their companions in hopes of moving just an inch further onto land.

I sit watching the aquatic betrayals occur from my spot on the bridge. My legs are thrown over the railing and my head rests against an iron arch. It is cold, but still I look downward to the water.

In the beginning this was nothing but empty air. After that it became a railway for a train. After that it became a bridge for tourists. And after that it became the place where I sit, falsely hoping that I’ll hear your laugh again. But I don’t, and somewhere in my heart I understand that I never will. Somewhere I understand that you’re gone and won’t be coming back to save me from myself.

I hate crying, but now it seems as if there’s no other option. Why would you do this? Why, if you knew how much it would hurt me? Tears corrupt the dryness of my eyes and cheeks. My face is inflamed, not in anger but in overwhelming misery. Tears drop into the chilled water below, becoming one with the rain that suddenly spills from the grey-fleshed heavens. For a brief second I allow the cold water to drip on my skin; it is as if for a moment the entire universe feels my pain and cries with me.

Blond hair crosses into my vision, sticky with water. My hand brushes it from my eyes and comes away slick with liquid. I miss the way you used to run your fingers through my hair. Even on nights like this, when water poured relentlessly from the skies and we’d have to crawl under the bridge to escape it, your fingers brushed through the wetness. Even though everything else was cold, they were still so warm. I miss the way I would curl into your body. I’m always chilly, but every inch of your skin seemed to radiate warmth, and would keep me from the involuntary shivers.

I now take refuge in our safespace, where there was absolutely no fear of being spotted and no fear of the dirty rainwater tarnishing the dye in your hair. It was a place where we could be safe, together. But now I sit alone, my knees pulled close, the thin sweatshirt on my body skin-tight due to the wetness I let attack my form. This is why I need you. I’m a danger to myself. My body is simply the shell that receives the damage of my decisions. My soul is loose from its stable and the only one who could bring it back was you. My heart thinks more than my mind ever could. You protected me from more than the outside world, Red.

When we were together our bodies created a secret poem that nobody would understand, but everybody could learn to appreciate the beauty of. When you left you took the other line of our couplet. Now all I am is an empty rhyme, and our stanza is left incomplete.

My hand grazes the wild hide of the river. The world around me seems grey, like the atmosphere suddenly becomes a haze that nobody seems to notice but me. Then again, you always said that I was able to see things that other weren’t able to. That I could find the small glimmer of light in those that were condemned to spend life on a path of self-loathing. That I detected goodness in people and saw what made them “Blue,” as you put it, not in a way that described their gloom, but in a way that reflected what you saw in me. “Don’t worry, Sweets,” you would whisper to me. “There will only ever be one true Blue.”

You promised me, with a pinky finger held out, that we’d be forever. You heard and accepted my belief that all high school relationships end in failure, and yet you still offered me the world, as long as you were in it with me. If one were to ask me years ago if I’d accept a silver ring on my left hand whilst still working on scholarship essays, I’d have scoffed and
walked away. In fact, I believe that you and I had that very conversation years before we were known to each other as Red and Blue. Perhaps that was your mission all along... Nevertheless, the rings made us so much stronger. The problems occurred when others asked of their origin.

“Why is there a ring on your finger?”

“Who gave that to you?”

“Wait, why are you both wearing the same type of ring?”

That’s when our ship hit the iceberg and reality smacked us for forgetting about her sharp touch. It wasn’t long before the pieces of our puzzle were put together, and in the middle were two boys, scared to death of someone solving their age-old riddle. I, for once, was forced to be the strong one; I hadn’t lost as much. You were bullied into quitting your varsity sports, bullied into leaving your friend group, and bullied into becoming the school’s most miserable student. I’d lost no groups, for I’d had none to begin with. I’d lost no friends, for those that I had already knew about me. The only thing I’d truly lost was you. After our accidental outing you left me. We fell asleep one last time together under the bridge looking out at the river that seemed to move like a stampede of crazed wildebeests. It was cold, but the sky was clear. The calm before the storm. I fell asleep to your warmth and awoke to frigid nothingness. I stood and stepped out into the temperate light of day.

Cliché as it may sound, time began to slow as I looked up to see your feet at the edge of that railing. My heart sank and my blood raced. All I could do was run; I climbed the steep hill with an agility previously unknown to me. I cried out your name so many times. I made it to the top of the hill and looked to the bridge again. Your gorgeous blue eyes looked so much duller than I’d ever seen them before, like a layer of ice had crested over their brilliance. They pleaded with me, told me not to step any further. You gave me a small smile, but I couldn’t do anything except stare. It didn’t matter though. Anything I could’ve done wouldn’t have stopped you from jumping. I ran again, just in time to hear the smack of your body when it hit the water, and then the herd of the blue wilderness trampled you. I looked down, but you were swept away by the river. On the rail was a ring, tinged blue with dye that coated the original silver. I picked it up and the calming shade coated my fingertips. Later, when they pulled out your body, they found that on a finger, on your left hand there was a ring of blue dye. My guardian angel, you’d tried to take a piece of me with you.

You were Red. I was Blue. Together we made purple. Our souls were a poem. Our hearts were a song. Our bodies were a dance and all at once they blended together to create one beautiful lilac hue. On my finger, on my left hand is the ring that you gave to me, dyed red, so that I will never forget my lost rhyme.
Just Growing Up

She’s wrapped up in her small, fuzzy, tie dye baby blanket, while trapped in her car seat. She’s toasty warm, there’s a crackling sound growing louder. There’s a female screaming for help and a man yelling “you can’t help her!” somewhere nearby. She’s sweating now, it’s too warm, she’s crying, but it’s getting harder to cry. A thick substance is filling her little lungs, making it hard to breathe. She hears a high pitched screeching, metal scraping against metal, fading into the distance, until she cannot hear any longer. She’s stopped crying, everything goes quiet, and she cannot feel a thing.

It feels like she’s been locked up in this dark, quiet, empty room for so long. Wait. She hears something, it’s faint, like a whisper. It’s saying something, in a sweet tone. She can hardly make it out. It sounds like “Jazmine. Jazmine hunny, are you up yet?” She tries to shake her head, but something is in her way. She can’t open her mouth to speak either. Her mouth is forced open, air gushing into her lungs, then leaving again. She begins to open her eyes a sliver, and immediately closes them. “Are you sure you saw her move?” asks a deep masculine voice.

“I promise. Her eyelids flitted for half a second” replied the sweet voice. She feels something soft but cold lightly rest on her forehead. “Try again,” says the sweet voice. She’s able to fully open her eyes this time. A couple weeks go by, while the doctors monitor her.

“So can we take her home or what?” asks her father, sounding fed up. He fills out the paperwork quickly, grabs Jazmine’s hand, pulls her out of bed, and they head downstairs to the car. They head south down the highway, opposite direction from home.

“Where are we going papa?” asks Jazmine quietly. He responds harshly, “Do not call me papa.” Her mom pipes in, in a low voice “Don’t worry sweetheart, we’re going to a party”, she chokes out the last part in between sobs. Jazmine falls asleep in the backseat of the car.

Four hours later they arrive at the Happy Orphanage. Her mom carries her twelve year old, sleeping babygirl into the office, following her father. They fill out paperwork, and leave her in a bed.

A short lady walks in the next morning with dirty blonde hair in a bob cut and brand named clothing. “I heard you got a new one” she speaks to the lady behind the desk in a high pitched crackling voice. The woman fills out paperwork for foster care and drags Jazmine to her house, down the street.

Approximately two months pass before Jazmine is back at the orphanage for being a trouble child. She bounces from foster home to foster home for four years, before she finds her “home sweet home”. Her newest foster parents are Leanne and Jordan. They are an elderly couple, well trained in taking care of teenagers. They believed she couldn’t be as much trouble as the orphanage claimed.

One year had passed and Jazmine had just turned seventeen two days before. They were headed to the cottage in the country to celebrate, when a silver Malibu swerved into their lane, clipping their Jeep, causing Jordan to lose control. Both cars landed in the ditch, filled with snow, approximately five feet from the ice melting river. The jeep started smoking, filling inside. Jazmine got out of the upside down jeep and tried opening Leanne and Jordan’s doors. They wouldn’t budge. “Jaz, hunny, go check on the other people”, said Leanne, between coughs. Jazmine looked over at the Malibu, the man was out and already on his way up the side of the ditch. “Help me!” Jazmine cried desperately. The man did not stop and the traffic up top did not either. Leanne was still coughing, but it was becoming less with each passing moment. Jordan had already stopped. Jazmine’s phone had no reception, so her calls would not go through.

The police eventually showed up with an ambulance and fire truck. Jordan was announced dead on the scene and Leanne was taken to the hospital. She was in a coma for a week before the heart monitor went flat. Jazmine was sleeping by Leanne when the lady from behind the desk at the orphanage came to
get her. Jazmine complained and complained. The lady finally told her that she did not have a choice. She was either going there or the hospital staff was going to send her there in a few hours. She eventually went unwillingly. She asked to use the bathroom on their way out. The lady let her. Jazmine locked the door to the family bathroom. She undid her cloth belt, that was made of silky fabric, easy to tie. She climbed onto the sink, reached up and tied one end of the belt around the metal bars, separating each ceiling tile. She then proceeded to leave enough slack, tying the other end, tightly around her throat. She took cautious steps near the edge of the sink. She whispered, “I’m coming mamma and pappa,” visualizing Leanne and Jordan on the day they got her from the orphanage. Then she proceeded to delicately step closer to the edge of the sink.

Three minutes passed before Raynelle, the desk clerk from the orphanage, knocked on the door and waited one minute for a response. She did not hear anything and went to get help. A nurse opened the door to a seventeen year old girl sitting on the floor, in front of the sink, with a belt by her side, sobbing. The nurse from the hospital, Hayleigh, went in and bent to Jazmine’s level. “It’s ok baby girl. I’m here now,” stated Hayleigh in a gentle tone. Jazmine looked up at her with soaked, ocean blue eyes, tears still streaming. Hayleigh wrapped her arms around her, picked her up and took her to a room in the emergency wing. Hayleigh left Jazmine with the doctor to be examined.

Jazmine woke up from a restless sleep when Hayleigh walked in with a photo album. She sat next to Jazmine on the bed and showed her the album. Jazmine read the cover out loud, “My Baby Girl, Forever and Always”. Jazmine started to slowly turn the pages. “It’s me!” she exclaimed. She looked over at Hayleigh in shock, “How did you get these?” she asked.

Hayleigh smiled gently. “Jazmine, sweetie, you are my baby girl. I’m so sorry for everything I did. I have been looking for you since your father made me put you up for adoption. I found these pictures online through posts from your past foster parents and from the orphanage’s page.” Jazmine started to cry again. “You are not my mom. My mom is in heaven. My biological mom does not exist anymore,” Jazmine accused. Hayleigh’s eyes filled with tears and she walked slowly out of the room.

Four days passed until Hayleigh visited Jazmine again. Hayleigh walked into the room with purpose, “Alright. Let’s go home hun, she said, before picking Jazmine up out of the bed and setting her on the floor, upright. They headed down to Hayleigh’s Volvo and left the hospital.

They arrived at a small, light blue condo. They got out and headed inside. An older looking man, probably in his mid fifties, walked out of the kitchen and glared at Jazmine and Hayleigh. Just as he opened his mouth to say something, Hayleigh butted in, “She’s living here with me. I went to court and got custody back, and we’re getting a divorce this evening.” Hayleigh then proceeded to show Jazmine to her bedroom.

Evening came and Hayleigh, Jazmine, and Chase, her biological father, headed for the court. It took about four hours until everything was debated and approved. Hayleigh got full custody of Jazmine and Chase got a restraining order put against him. Chase, who was upset after the case was over, stormed out of the courtroom to never be seen or heard from again. Hayleigh and Jazmine made amends after two weeks without talking and eventually found a happy medium, in which Jazmine forgave Hayleigh. They then proceeded to live “happily ever after.”
It was a dead town.
It was composed of two long rows of cracking gray houses with splintered locked doors divided by an unused road down the middle.
The houses were kept in lines by the darkness built like a wall around them and an eternal gray cloud laying above the town, keeping the sun locked out and them locked in.
And the town was kept silent. No wind rustled the black grass, and no person stepped out from behind their doors.
Except once each day, when the man in the black coat and cap stepped through the misty wall of darkness with a cup in his shaking, twisted fingers.  
*Clink. Clink. Clink.*
The cup shook in his hand, the crunching of his boots against the gravel the only noise in the silence of the town.
“A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.”
*Clink. Clink. Clink.*
He rattled the cup, coins sliding around; he walked to the first door.
“A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.” The door creaked open by the smallest amount and an arm stuck out, skin so tight around the bone that it was skeletal. The white fingers shook with the weight of the coin, hand hovering above the cup. When the fingers opened, the coin fell into the cup. And when the penny hit the inside of the cup, it cracked like a gunshot, shaking the dark walls of the houses.
The door then snapped shut, the man moving onto the next house, shaking the cup all the way there.
“A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.”
The man crept around to each house, every time a single pale hand sticking out and releasing a penny or two into the man’s cup.
Once he’d visited each house, he slipped back through the black wall, the clinks of the pennies fading.

The town became darker, if that were possible, as the moonlight hours took their hold.
And each person held their breath as they did every night as the cracks under their doors darkened with the starless night.
At the end of the line of houses lived a family of three, the largest family sustained within the borders of the town. Inside the house lived a mother with her two children, all their cheeks sunken with hunger and eyes drained of light.
The two children sat, huddled together on the dirty kitchen floor, nails digging into each other's protruding spines. Both pairs of eyes were on the dark crack under the door, hearts thudding.
Under the deadlights above and in the middle of a sacked kitchen with empty cupboards and deceased machines they sat. Each room of the house had cobwebs in the corners, but no spiders to occupy them, no bugs or animals had ever been seen by human eyes in a lengthy amount of time. Three bedrooms connected to the kitchen, each the size of a decent closet.
The two children held each other tight, waiting for it to happen.
And the ground began to tremble. The walls moaned and dust sprinkled down from the shaking ceiling. The two starved bodies trembled along with the rest of the town, the rest of the trembling people in their trembling walls.
The little boy tucked his head into his sister's shoulder, her own eyes remaining on the door. The low growl of the wind reverberated inside her bones as a dark shadow clouded the crack under the door.
Two feet made of darkness.

The door shuttered violently, it’s hinges shaking wildly and threatening to break loose; the wood on the boarded up windows cracking.

Her brother’s nails dug deeper into her, piercing through her thin, frail skin and drawing out her blood.

She finally clenched her eyes shut and the noise faded, the air warming and the dark feeling seeping from her heart.

The two children freed their eyes from the darkness of their eyelids, the outside shadow gone and town silent once again.

They did not move from each other’s arms, their hearts thudding against each other.

The door behind them opened, their mother stepping into the room. Her clouded eyes looked to the children, to their shaking bodies.

“You, go to bed,” she said to her son. “I need to speak with your sister.” The brother slowly slipped out of his sister’s arms and disappeared into the dark doorway of his room.

“How many?” The woman asked her daughter once her son had left; the girl climbing to her wobbling feet. “How many pennies left?”

“Three,” she answered after a short pause; unable to look at the tight face of her mother. The older woman gazed blankly through her daughter’s body, thinking silently to herself.

“Give two tomorrow, and one the day after.” She turned back toward her bedroom.

“Two? But that means tomorrow night one of us will-”

“If we’re all going to die, we might as well draw it off.”

“But-”

“I made my decision.” Her blank eyes moved to her son’s bedroom. “Don’t tell your brother. He needn’t know the end has come.” The woman turned and evaporated into the darkness of her bedroom, her daughter’s eyes on the small drawer where three pennies lay.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

The collector stalked back down the streets the following day, coins clanging against the sides of his cup, echoing darkly.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

The daughter pulled open the drawer, taking two coins into her palm, staring at the one she was ordered to leave.

“A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.” His voice was outside her house, calling her to pay her dues. Her fist shut around the pennies in her hand, but her eyes were unable to move from the single one left.

He rapped on the door, the unsteady house shaking with the motion.

“A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.” She forced herself to the door, slightly creaking it open and she dropped in the two coins. The man turned around and took his leave, her quickly shutting the door, but not leaving it once she had.

She stood with her palms against the wood, unable to turn around.

“Did you do it? Just two?” Her mother had stepped out of her bedroom, wearing a brown tattered dress that resembled a rag.

“Yes.”

“Then you know what will happen tonight.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t tell your brother.” She disappeared back into her room, leaving her daughter to stand silent against the door.

And the hours were long as she waited for night to come, watching the light slowly fade from the cracks in the walls. Her heart was thudding, making her head ache. She paced in small circles around the
room, her nails digging into her pale skin. She eyes stayed down, breathing hurting her lungs. The fading light outside made her heart beat faster. She didn’t think the day would ever end and night would ever arrive.

But it finally did, and she again sat with her brother on the kitchen’s floor. She wrapped her arms around him as the town began to quiver. She held him so tight it blocked his airways.

The night howled as the trembling became rasher and the winds became harsher. She pulled her brother into her breast, shieling him from what was to come.

And the shadow stepped in front of their door. She snapped her eyes shut. The walls rattled like ghosts shook them with their dead hands, the roof screaming. The door hinges squealed as the door was pounded upon, by a fist that sounded like a thousand.

She clenched her eyes shut tighter, jaw quivering. And the door burst open. It slammed into the wall. She tried to break her brother’s bones with her hold on him. The two children’s veins were filled with ice. Their limbs froze, hearts being seized. They dared not open their eyes.

*BAM!*

Their eyes were jolted open, their bodies jumping. They stared at their shut front door, a deep cut left in the wall from the doorknob. The sister stared at her brother, his eyes wide and confused.

She slowly turned to look at the shut door of her mother’s bedroom. “What-” “Shh,” she shushed him, eyes on the bedroom door. “That’s never happened before,” he whispered. “Shh.” She slowly got to her trembling legs and stumbled to her mother’s door. Her hands closed around the doorknob. She began to open it, the hinges creaking, before she released it and stepped back.

“What’s going on?” He whispered, little voice shaking. “Nothing,” she answered quietly. “Did . . . did it come inside?” “No,” she said, the lie staining her teeth. “I heard it-” “Nothing different happened.” “Where’s Mom?” “Where she always is. She’s just sleeping. And you should too. Go on.” He slowly stood, and taking his sister’s words to heart, left for his room.

She stood alone in the kitchen, eyes on the drawer with the single penny. She pressed her palm to her face and shut her eyes.

The knock on the door came the following day, the girl walking with the weight of a life in her hand, weighing her steps down. The coin was cold against her palm, her legs burning with resistance as she walked to the front door. The thud came again and she creaked the door open and held out her hand to drop the penny. But the cold claw of the man closed around her wrist. The door swung fully open, his eyes of white ice staring into her. She tried and rip her arm away, but his nails ripped lines through her skin. The coin dove into the cup and she ripped herself away, slamming the door shut.

She stood against the door as she heard him trudge away, her heart racing. She could feel the deep lines on her skin drawn by his dirty nails.
“What was that?” Her brother poked his head out of his bedroom.
“What, just . . . paying.”
“Is Mom up yet?” He stepped out of the doorway and took a step toward their mother’s.
“No.” She answered calmly and pulled him away from the door. “No, she needs to rest.”
She stood there, in their breaking kitchen, holding her brother close to her chest, resting her nose in his curly, oily hair.
“What’s going on?” He whispered, fright tinting his little voice.
“Nothing.” She answered quietly, her grip tightening. “Nothing.”
The girl walked to her mother’s bedroom after her brother disappeared back into his own. She gripped the doorknob, mouth dry and fingers twitching.
She shut her eyes and forced her hand to turn the knob, the door squealing like a mouse being throttled to death.
The door was slow to open, the few objects in her mother’s room appearing as her eyes adjusted to the blackness inside. The door thumped lightly against the wall as it opened fully, the girl’s eyes staring in horror at the walls.
There were marks on the walls.
Someone had dug their nails through the wallpaper, leaving long rips. The blankets were thrashed through and pillows bleeding with feathers.
“What’re you-” she jumped around as her brother appeared behind her. “Is Mom-”
“No!” She jolted forward to grab the door and shut it, but as she moved to do so, the earth cracked beneath them. The siblings fell, the sister quickly wrapping her arms ‘round her brother.
Their vision was jumbled as everything moved like a camera being jolted about. There were growls and yelps of the walls and ceiling, their mother’s door wiping closed and shut behind them.
She wrapped her legs around her brother, squeezing him as close as he could be.
She opened her trembling eyes to look at the front door, the black feet outside. She shut her eyes and dug the back of her feet and her nails into him.
_Bang!_ The door slammed into the wall, letting the beast inside. She enclosed herself around him so tightly until they were one being, inseparable.
She wouldn’t let him go.
She felt a resistance to her hold, something drawing him away. She fought the best she could, squeezing him even as he cried that she was holding him too tightly. She was crushing his bones, but she couldn’t let him go.
He was trying to say something, but she couldn’t hear his little voice over the cracking of the house, the shuddering of the earth.
His hands were limp around her, hands sliding apart from around her back.
“Stop!” She yelled at him, her eyes reaming shut. “Hold onto me! Don’t let go! Hold onto me!”
_BAM!
_Her legs and arms snapped closed.
And a scream ripped through the air.
Her eyes fluttered open, her limbs wrapped around herself. She blinked and stared at the door, shut, feet gone from outside._
_Her brother with them._
_She stared at the door for centuries, organs turned to stone and heart robbed. She slowly lay flat on the dirty floor, blank eyes staring at the ceiling._
“A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.” She hadn’t moved from the day hence. She still lay there in the kitchen, spine burning and limbs stiff, her toes and fingers numb.
The knock at the door came, but she didn’t move. She couldn’t.
“A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.” She opened her mouth to respond from the distance, but
nothing came out of her throat. She instead shut her mouth again and kept her eyes on the ceiling, waiting, waiting for night to come and take her too.

There was no stopping it.

She thought she heard a noise and her eyes flashed toward the open black doorway of her brother’s doorway. She laid there, heart silent as she waited for her brother to come jumping out.

But he didn’t.

She shut her eyes, her body trembling, oxygen to painful too let into her burning lungs. She curled into a ball, nails drawing out blood from the skin of her knees.

And night did come. When it did, she sat with her arched back against the cabinet, arms wrapped around her beant knees. Rocking back and forth on her tailbone.

Waiting, waiting.

Her eyes were blank, a cloud settled over them.

A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.

The shuddering noise of the houses came from outside her thin walls, the ceiling groaning. Her jaw began to quiver, heart picking up speed.

The cabinets behind her shook, the front door trembling, hinges creaking.

A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.

When the two feet stepped in front of her door, the sound of each one trembled inside her ribcage.

Her entire body began to shake, a tear slipping from her eye.

The floorboards moaned from under her, the wind blasting through the cracks in the house, singing a haunting tune. The glass of the windows trembled, the wood boarded against it splintering. The door blasted open and she shut her eyes, dropping her head onto her knees.

A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.

She could hear the footsteps, loud as thunder, coming closer to her quivering figure. Her nails dug into her knees, her tears becoming choked sobs.

The doors around her flew open and shut, open and shut, open and shut. The entire world was screaming around her, a splitting migraine taking hold of her aching brain. She cupped her hands over her ears and screamed.

Everything fell silent.

She stayed there, locked in her position. After a long moment, she lifted her head and peaked her eyes open.

A penny a day keeps the devil at bay.

The world exploded around her. The walls erupted and ceiling crashed in, two burning cold claws grabbing her ankles.

They whipped her with immense strength, pulling her screaming body across the floor. She screamed long past when her voice box had broke, shattering the windows and sky. She reached out and caught the doorway by her fingers, screaming and screaming and sobbing.

A penny

Her fingers were sweaty, they were slipping; fingernails tearing from her skin.

A day

Her fingers were slowly being pried off one by one, her arms shaking.

Keeps the

The nails dug into her ankles, breaking through her bone.

Devil

She screamed, hanging on by her last fingers, her last bit of strength.

At bay.

She was ripped off, her nails ripping through the wood. She was pulled away from her house, knocking her head and spine against rocks and gravel repeatedly. She could only scream, nails breaking off as she tried to grip something on the ground.
She held her hands over her face as she was ripped through the blackwall of darkness. Her screams snapping to memory.
And the town fell silent. Utterly silent. And in a house at the very front of the town, lived a family of two. “How many pennies left?” Asked the father to his son.
“One,” he whispered. And it was a dead town. 
Clink. Clink. Clink.
Meg was born in 2048, and by then the world was already morphed. Now that it was 2060, identity and personality were almost completely lost in a sea of similarities and everyone was each other. Differentiation was rare, and those who did dare to defy the norm were outcasts destined for failure. Meg was one of those outcasts.

Most of the girls in her 6th-grade class had all of the boxes checked when it came to society’s basic standards of beauty: shoulder-length, straight black or blond hair; perfectly flawless skin; and sparkling gray eyes. Meg, however, was different. She had mysterious, long auburn hair and olive-green eyes. She clashed against the hundreds of clones that walked the school hallway. Even the clothes she wore were different. She had pops of color throughout her wardrobe, but other students seemed to exclusively wear grey. Meg felt that everyone despised her individuality, and sometimes, against her family’s wishes, she wondered what it would be like to be a part of the sea.

The cafeteria at Clayton Elementary was like that of any other. White tables and chairs with stainless steel legs, deep gray flooring, and of course, the table which most popular kids deemed “the loser table.”

Meg sat at this table with the two other misfits that walked the halls. They all had parents who believed in the idea of individuality. None of them were allowed to wear makeup, wear contact lenses, or dye their hair. The result was uniqueness, but also intense exclusion.

Across from Meg sat a boy, Johnny, with dark freckles and curly red hair. His pale complexion made his outlandish features even more noticeable.

“So, what’s new with you guys?” asked Johnny, trying to initiate some kind of conversation in the gloomy setting that always seemed to hover over the table.

The girl sitting next to Meg was named Angela. She had thick, wavy black hair and beautiful chocolate skin. When she answered the question, Johnny and Meg felt the life drain from their faces.

“My Mom’s finally letting me straighten my hair. I’m going to the salon next week. I’ll look like the rest of the girls and maybe even get to leave this table.”

The group knew that this was cause for celebration. No one wanted to be at this table, but it was always difficult to lose people. It only made trying to fit in even harder.

Meg and Johnny looked at Angela with as much excitement as jealousy, trying to push down their true feelings. They wanted to fit in like Angela soon would, but they knew that they never could. Soon enough it would only be the two of them fighting against the rest of the world. That wasn’t an easy realization, but they tried to be upbeat for Angela.

“I know that it’s going to be different without me, but I won’t forget you guys.”

Meg contemplated the sentiment that came out of Angela’s mouth. Surely, she would never acknowledge them. She would leave them and pretend that she never even knew them. That is how it was; that is how it had to be. Meg knew, though, that not being forgotten meant even more than being acknowledged in this world.

Meg smiled at Angela, indicating that she understood why she had to straighten her hair, why she had to change to be like the rest of the girls in school.

As Meg ate the bitter carrots on her plate, she recalled all of the members who used to belong to the “loser table.” The first to leave was Adam, then Rebecca, and then Kim. Angela was the next, and probably the last, to leave this table.

Her anxious thoughts were rudely interrupted by a voice that cut to Meg’s soul. It was Jenna. Jenna was this table’s biggest nightmare. She was the epitome of “perfect” when it came to society’s idea of it. She was naturally blond; her eyes were the shade of light gray that everyone envied. She was a walking angel to her teachers and parents, but to students, she was ruthless.
Her words cut like a knife. She pointed out every “flaw,” every difference. She made the group feel like they were the gum stuck under the table. While each member of the “loser table” feared Jenna, it was Meg who feared her most.

Meg never understood why Jenna hated her so much, but it was clear that she did. Most bullies these days just used social media to launch their attacks. Jenna, however, was confrontational. It was old fashioned, but it was effective. Meg wanted to run every time Jenna talked to her.

“Hi Meggy,” said Jenna with a malicious look behind her eyes.

Meggy was Meg’s least favorite nickname. It was awful, and it bothered her to no end.

“You know, Meggy, I’ve been thinking. My constant suggestions about your hair just don’t seem to be working. You simply don’t listen when I tell you how stupid you look. So, I’ve finally decided to do something about it.”

The words that Jenna said didn’t even fully register until it was too late. With one swift snip, Meg felt her hair fall to the floor. Her neck was exposed, and the cool breeze from the air conditioner sent chills down her spine.

Shock took over her face as she looked behind her to see Jenna, scissors in hand, smirking. No words could form in Meg’s mouth. The only thing that she knew was that she could not let the enemy see her cry. She looked at Johnny and Angela, whose faces were a mixture of anger and fear.

Meg ran. After getting a block away from school, she let herself feel the pain that Jenna caused. The moment when tears started to fall down her face to the pavement beneath her feet, she realized something. Meg loved who she was. She never wanted to change, she never wanted to be like the rest of the world. Sure, it would be easier, but life isn’t supposed to be easy.

She didn’t want her friends to change either. She thought back to Adam, Rebecca and Kim and recalled everything that had made them different. All of the unique characteristics they had were endearing, but now they were gone. She suddenly remembered Angela, and her hair. Meg wouldn’t let her conform, not after realizing the true beauty in peculiarity.

As Meg walked through her neighborhood and approached her home, she felt a new hope and confidence. She saw everything in a different light. The bright red birdhouse, the deep blue door, the slightly crooked home-built wooden porch. These things all clashed with the rest of the cookie-cutter houses in the neighborhood. They stood out, but for some reason, Meg adored them. She didn’t care if her life was different, she loved it.

A smile crept onto her face as she walked through the door. Her mother, Ellen, who was already home from work, was surprised to see her daughter. The look of confusion soon turned to sadness as her gaze fell on Meg’s hair.

“What happened?” was all that Ellen could say as a tear began to fall down her face.

“It’s ok, Mom. I understand now,” said Meg bravely.

“What do you mean, honey?” Ellen’s warm voice comforted Meg.

“I know why you want me to be me,” she said as Ellen hugged her tightly.

The next morning Meg woke up, walked to school, and went through her classes. For the first time in her life, she was excited to sit at the “loser table.” She couldn’t wait until lunch.

The bell echoed through the school, and Meg couldn’t help but smile as she glided past her monochromatic classmates with her freshly chopped hair brushing her shoulders. She looked past the people who were now staring at her and saw Johnny and Angela.

They shared an empathetic expression, but instead of being the broken piece of glass that they expected, Meg was triumphant. She looked at them, and they knew this was the beginning of something big: a movement.

As Meg shared her new outlook on life, the two began to realize the potential and individuality that was within themselves. Angela’s eyes filled with happy tears as she told the group that she was going to cancel the salon appointment.
There was no doubt that the “loser table” was going to alter the reality that students had come to know so well. The three were destined to change that school. In fact, they were destined to change the world.
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**Last Square Inch**

As a kid Nancy used to walk into the woods past her fenced-in backyard just to take a deep breath. Just to smell the dirt pulled up by the thick tree roots, slowly inhale the easy air, hearing nothing but the occasional breeze sneak past the trees and the subtle humming in the backs of her ears. Just to have her thoughts grounded somewhere untouched and unchanging.

Her father didn’t own this land behind her house. It stretched for ten acres and belonged to his best friend Tommy. He’d always lived behind them, and walked through the woods with Nancy when she was young and her dad was too busy.

Tommy always joked about leaving the land to her father in his will. “Your old man will outlive me! He’s got you to stop him from doing something stupid. The smartest thing I’ve ever done is take you on these walks.”

But leaving the land behind to Nancy’s father was more than just a joke. Tommy always told her not to pluck the flowers, kill the bugs, or do anything else to harm the forest. He knew her father would protect every square inch of it.

Nancy had recently turned 18. She, Tommy, and her dad were walking through the forest together, each of them thinking about how she’d be moving into her college dorm the next day.

“You know, Nancy,” Tommy started, “when you were three your dad and I talked about building you a treehouse out here. We told you about it at the start of that summer.”

“Really?” Nancy asked, a bit shocked. “Why didn’t you build it?”

Her dad started to explain. “Tommy was approached by a housing contractor. He wanted to buy his land from him, and was hoping to get the neighbors on board.”

Tommy went on, “He told me the land was perfect for a new housing development. I never even considered selling it to him, despite many of the neighbors wishes. But I asked you what you thought about us building you a little house in the trees.”

“I’m sure I gave you a great answer,” she said sarcastically.

“You did,” Tommy said. “You asked us where the squirrels would go.”

The funeral was stuffy. Everyone in town came; they all loved Nancy’s dad and Tommy. Even though each person offered condolences and endearing stories about the two, Nancy couldn’t pull her mind away from the accident. It was the funeral home flowers. Yellow, pink, and white bouquets with baby’s breath for volume lined the walls, but they felt so unnatural in a room full of stained wood and yellow light bulbs. They reminded her that her dad and Tommy had died when their tire popped and the car flipped on their way home from the town nursery.

When the service had ended, Nancy went home. All of her clothes and books were still in boxes. She’d finished her last semester of college just days before. Her dad and Tommy had been on their way back from getting flowers for her graduation.

The house felt just as strange as the funeral home, like looking at a picture of your grandparents’ home in a photo album, old and yellow—an entirely different life. The air felt hazy.

She walked outside and into the forest. She and her dad had always started on a path towards the middle of their yard, walking wherever the wind had pushed them that day. Today, she followed the wind, followed it as if it were her dad showing her where the spring flowers had started growing. She followed it as if he were showing her something new, followed it all the way to the sawdust and grinding noises.

“What’s going on?” she asked a man wearing a hard hat and button down shirt who was watching as workers cut down trees.
“We’re finally breaking ground on this housing development,” he said with a smile, never bothering to look at Nancy.

“You’re doing what?” she asked, dumbfounded.

“We’re building houses,” he said eagerly. “The man who owned this land died a few days ago. He left it to his buddy, but he died, too, and we were able to acquire it, finally. Lucky for us, right? Tragic what happened, but lucky for the project.”

“Lucky?” Nancy said, anger in her voice, heat in her face, and tears in her eyes. “You’re destroying this land. Some of the only land nearby that hasn’t been touched, hasn’t been modified. And why? Because two men died? This is not lucky.”

The man just looked done at Nancy, confused and even offended, then looked back at the work being done.

“Look, you shouldn’t be here. It’s not your place,” he said.

“It’s no one’s place,” she retorted, then began walking away.

Nancy never sold the house to anyone. She lived in the city, working there, writing pieces for online journals and the newspaper. The city was outlined with cement, put on the map by skyscrapers, and littered with trash left behind by thousands of people living from one hailed taxi to the next. By the time she was middle-aged, she had grown to love the work but hate the city. When she felt like she was being choked out by the incessant routine she’d go back home, hoping to find the trees and the birds, even the fat spiders she’d never killed, because she understood she was in their home.

Yet, it was no use. The housing development had uprooted that forest, along with any land near it. Once Tommy’s ten acres was claimed, the neighbors had sold their land one by one, preferring the profit over their piece of the forest.

There was only one place left, just past Nancy’s yard, that had not been claimed by the men in hard hats with heavy machinery.

In that spot sat one wild flower. It was the entire forest now.

The last square inch.
My cousin who was wise beyond her years, always taught me to be positive in the worst situations. She taught me to dance in the rain and that thunder and a little lightning was okay. "The sky was putting on a show," she'd say.

The thunder was creating a beat and I wanted to tap my foot ever so slightly against the wet grass. The lightning was the disco ball of the sky and it would light up my performance. She taught me that a rainbow is a gateway between Heaven and earth, so I knew Heaven must be beautiful. "My mama lives there, in Heaven, that's how I know it's pretty there," she'd say.

"I know, I know," I would say, agreeing with her and giving her head a soft tap.

She was so gentle and pure. Pure like gold that you know you'll never find but you imagine. And her hands were soft and airy. She had the type of hands that were created for molding clay. Her hands were polite, whenever she cracked her knuckles, you never heard them. She'd sometimes grab mine when I was feeling nervous and I never had to ask her to, she just knew. But she was never nervous. It was like this big quiet fire that had always been inside her. And it ignited every time she put her heart into something. She always went for what she wanted. Whether it was sports or quiz bowl at school (Quiz bowl was her favorite), she put her heart inside of every event she participated in. She made me realize it was okay to go for what I wanted, even if nobody else wanted it. I never thought I could relate so much from a nine-year old.

I didn't pay attention to her age, though, and neither did any of my friends—they were always fond of her. They talked to her whenever they came over my house, always giving her high fives, tapping softly against her hands. And whenever we went out for ice cream on Fridays, she always came with us. My friends and I, the four of us, always ordered the banana split and always split it with each other.

My cousin never sat with us, though. We always said things like, "Come join us" or "There's room over here," but she never gave in to our compelling sayings. She always nicely shook her head, grabbed her cookies and cream ice cream in a bowl, and sat at the seat next to the window by herself, slowing stirring her ice cream, staring at the sky.

It was true, my cousin's mama lived in heaven. That's why she was so fascinated with the sky and nature. My cousin was a lot like her mama, though. They both had this interest in nature. When my aunt was alive, she would sit outside on her front porch and stare at the sky. My cousin loved to do the same. They both had long stringy brown hair that was dark as tree bark. It was soft and slid right through your fingers if you put your hands through it. Both of their hands were light and airy and polite in every way possible. They both never spoke above a whisper.

Before my cousin was born, I always loved going over my aunt's house. We always played games, and hide and seek was my favorite. I'd always hide in the same spot in the closet. She'd count to ten and pretend she didn't know where I was. She'd whisper, "Where are you, Gabe? I can't find you". That always made me giggle. Then she'd stop by the closet, turn and face it, quickly open it, and say in a calm voice, "Haha, I've found you." And I'd always jump into her arms and she'd swing me around for about ten seconds—I would enjoy being wrapped around her warm embrace. But it seemed like all of that stopped after a while.

When I turned seven years old, my aunt got married to the man who was now my uncle. He was a marine who came and went as he pleased. There was no wedding. I remember going over my aunt's house, with my mom, after everything happened and celebrating with some close friends of my aunt. They dance and spun around in circles while I sat on the couch counting each step they took, their happiness bouncing off the walls. I remember asking my aunt and tugging at her dress while she was dancing, "Can we play hide and seek now, auntie?"
She didn't notice me.
I tugged harder and harder at her dress, almost ripping it and now shouting, saying, "Auntie! Auntie!"

She then realized that her dress was moving more than usual. She finally noticed me she bent down gracefully and got on her knees. Her eyes swallowed me whole. She had these big blue eyes that were impossible not to stare at. I always asked her can we trade eyes one day. She would chuckle softly and say, "Of course nephew"

She still was eye level with me and I repeated again and said, "Is it hide and seek time now?"

The next thing she said is when everything started to change. "Not tonight," she said sternly but calm. "Auntie is having the time of her life right now kid. Next time okay?"

She stared at me waiting for my reply but I didn't say anything. I only stared back at her big bulging blue eyes. One of my aunt's friends then called her over to come over and dance. She quickly ruffled my hair, kissed my forehead, and being to tap dance her way over to her friends.

I didn't know what to do that night. That was the first time my aunt ever said no to me. If anything, I thought my she would pay attention to me—she loved playing with me. I was her favorite person. Now she was too busy dancing with her friends and kissing her new husband. My mother stopped dancing and came over to ask me was I ready to leave. A simple yes was all I said, and my mother said her goodbye's to her sister—my aunt and I said nothing to anyone. I just walked out the door slowly closing the door, the music fading away.

Two days after my aunt got married, she went on her honeymoon. She and her new husband (who I refused to call my uncle), headed to Punta Cana for a week. Throughout the whole week I never got one call from my aunt. She never called to check up on me or see how things were while she was gone. A whole week without any hide and seek.

That same week my auntie and her husband got back from their honeymoon in Punta Cana.
"Gabe you know Auntie is back from her honeymoon. Want to go visit?" my mother asked.

"No she didn't even call me this whole week." I spoke forcefully, crossing my arms and letting out a big huff.

My mom walked over to me and grabbed my hands. Her hands weren't as soft auntie's. They were pale and bigger. Her nail fuchsia nail polish was fading away. She rubbed her slightly rough and cold hands against mine. But I didn't mind the roughness. She cupped my hands in hers and looked at me and said, "Auntie has a lot on her plate right now. She just got married, and has a new husband. She just been enjoying herself. I'm sure she didn't forget about you on purpose." And she looked at me with her eyes. They weren't blue like my auntie's, but they were brown and hollow. There was always a story in her eyes, you could always make out what she was going to say if you just stared at them. Her pupils were small, but she comforted me with her eyes and stared at me trying to make me feel better. After her "pep" talk, she cracked a smile not showing her teeth, and we put on our coats and headed over my auntie's.

Once we got over there, my mom knocked on the door and within seconds the door swung open and in the doorway was my new uncle. I stared at him for a moment taking in all of his features. His prickly beard looked like it would poke a hole in your skin if you got too close. His cheeks were scarred with memories of the battles he had been in (I'm guessing the army didn't treat him too well.) He had a lazy eye and light brown irises like mama. He bent down to me, roughing up my hair saying, "Hey there! Is that my new nephew? You can call me Uncle John." His voice very rough as each word rolled off of his tongue.

My ears were not pleased to hear this.
"Say hello Gabe," my mother said, sternly nudging me towards my new prickly beard uncle, forcing me to give him a hug.

I wrapped my arms around the man, not giving it any emotion at all while he patted my back.

He moved back from the door and let us in. "Go find ya' auntie, she's right in the kitchen, she has a surprise for you."
The word surprise ran through my mind faster and faster. My heart started to beat fast and eyes got wide as I headed for the kitchen. I thought of all the things she could have gotten me. A new video game or things from souvenirs from Punta Canta—there were so many possibilities.

I headed into the kitchen and turning the hallway corner, I could see my auntie washing dishes. She carefully scraped at each dish ensuring that there were no spots on the cups and spoons. She saw me walking towards her and turned towards me, the corners of her mouth jumping into a pretty white smile. “My sweet Gabe, I’ve missed you very much,” she said stretching her arms towards me.

I instantly lit up inside forgetting the fact that I hadn’t heard from her in a week. I gave into the hug and tried wrapping my arms around her, but it was slightly difficult. Her stomach poked out more than usual.

She pulled away from me, excitedly saying, “Look I have surprise for you,” she then pointed at her stomach.

“Is there a baby in there?” I asked, my insides now doing gymnastics and flipping and turning inside of me.

“Yes you’re having a new baby cousin. Aren’t you excited!” she exclaimed trying to make me as happy as she was.

But before I could say anything, the man that was now my uncle ran up behind me, picking me up and putting me on his back, while my mother followed behind him smiling, indicating that she already knew this news that I was not aware of.

“You hear that bud, you’re going to be a big cousin,” my uncle said, trying to make me feel good about the news I just gotten.

But I didn’t feel good. This wasn’t a good surprise. I was expecting an apology for her not calling, or some toys. But this, this was the worst surprise anyone could be given. Now Auntie really won’t pay attention to me anymore. There will be no more “Gabe let’s play hide and seek” from auntie—now it will have to be “Gabe go get your cousin so we can play hide and seek together”. Things will never be the same.

I cracked a fake smile while my uncle lowered me down from this back. It seemed like all eyes were on me, waiting for some sort of response. But I didn’t have anything to say. My mom, Auntie, and her husband, ended the night by drinking sparkling water, toasting to the new baby. I sat on the couch pretending to watch the television, but I only was staring at whatever was on the screen, thinking about how I could stop this new baby from taking my place.

Over the course of the next few months, me and my mom continuously went over to my aunt’s house; I still was trying to think of ways to stop this baby from coming. My aunt’s stomach grew, getting bigger and bigger every time we went over her house. I was running out of time and came to the realization that there was nothing I could do. Everyone was happy except for me. My aunt loved to turn on music and turn in circles and dance while she held her stomach. I always watched her how she gracefully moved in circles with her eyes closed and a slight smile on her face.

At nine months, my aunt gave birth to a girl. I remember my mother and I rushing up to the hospital after she got the call.

When we got there I remember slowly walking in through the door and seeing Auntie’s face. She lit up at the sight of me. She signaled for me to come over to her, I spotted the baby wrapped in a blanket swaddled in her arms. It seemed like I was walking in slow motion, my heart rate increasing rapidly with every step I took. As I made it to the side of the bed I looked and saw my new cousin.

“Say hello to Agnes,” my aunt said very calming with her soothing voice. Agnes had these blue eyes just like her mama, and I fell in love with her from then. It was like all of the other bad thoughts I had about having a younger cousin went out of the door. From that day on I made a promise to myself that I would show Agnes nothing but love and kindness.

After years of endless hide and seek games, my aunt died due to breast cancer and Agnes came to live with me and my mother when she was six years old. She always stared at the sky and was in awe of nature. We spent our days playing hide and seek and spinning in circles to whatever music I played.
I vividly remember growing up in a culturally mixed household. My mother and father made their home in an apartment on the lower east side of Saginaw. They lived above a beauty shop (now long gone) that opened early mornings and smelt of hair grease, oils, and perfumes. When the shop opened, off to work my parents went. With two full-time working parents, and being an only child at the time, my family tree provided a lot of shade and entertainment for me in my early years. My father's thick Italian-Mexican mother raged through living rooms, and my African-American grandfather, to no demise, followed suit. Living in this environment was enriching in many ways, especially because I was fortunate enough to hear the stories of my ancestors and their struggles to learn English and assimilate into American society. Even though their lives were challenging, all of their experiences have allowed me—a Mexican-Italian-African-American young woman—to become who I am today. Through the marginalization of my parents and their parents before them, I have been lucky enough to find my own voice.

When I asked my Grandpa Mike (my dad’s father) about his family, he told me of his 12 other siblings, how he came to Michigan from Arkansas for work with only two of his brothers. How he picked cotton when he was a child and how his brothers and sisters got him through it. His wife’s (my grandmother) late father barely spoke a lick of English, and by the time I met him he was aged and spoke with a thick accent that I never understood, but he always called me “Miga” and kissed my forehead with his coarse mustache. My mother's parents filled a separate home with the Spanish radio program on Sunday mornings, with tortillas, and with any other Mexican archetype you can think of. My Grandma Sylvia (my mother's mother) had a stern mean-mugging, chain-smoking father from Texas who also spoke broken English. His wife was the complete opposite, and raised their 12 children on all things American.

When I was young, we spent Sunday mornings at my grandma’s apartment with all of my cousins. My mother says I have her mother's memory. Grandma Sylvia has trunks full of old pictures from each birthday party, every long-lost cousin, the 1960's, and pictures of my grandpa with hair down his back holding up peace signs. “You know your grandpa almost went to Woodstock?” she would say. “But if he had gone, we would never have had your mother or your uncles--we probably wouldn’t even be together now!” She’d chuckle each time she told me this story, and from somewhere, an ajar window perhaps, I would hear my grandpa yell, “What are you saying about me?” And as always, I would giggle as if I hadn’t heard this story a million times. My family always told me these were the “simpler times.”

At around age 11, I questioned this sense of repetition, the stories, the memories, the “simpler times”. How could have they been simpler? My parents were barely getting by, and my grandparents on both sides struggled even more. But still they’d love to reminisce. Why? Over time I learned by watching why my family maneuvered in such fashion. They wouldn’t be the people that they are today without the bonds they built in times of struggle. Similarly, I’ve learned that while doing what I love, with those I love, I am better off than I was the day before.

I haven’t been through everything my parents have, or their parents before them. Even today there are still underrepresented groups in society that face similar struggles—for shelter, food, or other resources needed to survive. Of course my family was lucky enough (through a few generations) to build homes with roofs and put food on the table, but some aren’t as fortunate. With my upbringing, I’ve been taught to have an innate sense of nurture for those around me, which has helped shape me into who I am today and has inspired me to use my voice to create cultural awareness. Similarly to my Grandma Sylvia, I remember our stories. Yet instead of photos, I use my writing to disband stigma and stereotypes that have been placed around underrepresented groups.

Within the past four years that I’ve devoted my life to developing my voice, it has grown stronger, and with a stronger voice one needs a stronger audience. In this way, I will use my family’s culturally rich
legacy to continue to shape my own story--one that I hope to pass down to my children in hopes of the opportunity to reminisce on the “simpler- times” in life, where life changing memories are made.