

# SCENIC ROUTE



kansas city kansas community college  
literary and fine arts magazine 2019-2020



# Table of Contents

Front Cover: Little Dragon Girl (art) - Erin Williams

Back Cover: French Creamer (art) - Kristi Wesley

I Am Afraid of Flying (poem) - Andi Overmann	1
Morning Light (art) - Faith Seaton	3
Of Trains and Angels (memoir) - Jordan Thaxton	4
Lost in Time (art) - Isaiah Fradieu	8
In the Air (poem) - Ashleigh Klukow	9
Changing through Tragedy (story) - Aarionna C. Holliday-Chowning	11
Mirror (poem) - Rachel Greene	17
No Evil (art) - Faith Seaton	18
Look Again (poem) - Alazia Stanley	19
Hidden Mask (poem) - Alazia Stanley	20
Don't Blink (poem) - Alazia Stanley	21
Surrender to the Hills (art) - Erin Williams	22
The Graveyard (story) - Kaleb Goldbeck	23
Deadpool Toy (art) - Wesley Brooks, Jr.	27
Yellow Light (poem) - Jalah Danks	28
Honey, (poem) - Jalah Danks	29
Water, Water Everywhere (poem) - Jalah Danks	30
Olive Sage (art) - Kyle Gross	31
A Promise (story) - Jordan Thaxton	32
Transparent Eyes (poem) - Ashleigh Klukow	33
Wanderlust (poem) - Ashleigh Klukow	34
No. 12 (art) - Kristi Wesley	35
Eden's Garden (poem) - Andi Overmann	36
She Calls This Mourning (poem) - Andi Overmann	37
Mere Mortals (poem) - Andi Overmann	38
Human Robot Transformation (art) - Wesley Brooks, Jr.	39
Burning Bridges (story) - Alazia Stanley	40
Patrick Mahomes (art) - Tammy McFadden	44
Dear Rebecca (poem) - Janelle Braswell	45
Hidden Fears (poem) - Janelle Braswell	46
Plastic Kills (art) - Erin Williams	47
Why, Little Nothing? (poem) - Mariah Bosanco	48
I Am From (poem) - Mariah Bosanco	49
Boat Painting (art) - Wesley Brooks, Jr.	50
Rose (story) - Fyuree Colley	51
Coconut Bowl (art) - Kristi Wesley	55
A Short Cry (poem) - Jordan Thaxton	56
Gunsmoke (poem) - Rachel Greene	57
Still Life with Fruit (art) - Tammy McFadden	59
Anna's Body (poem) - Aarionna C. Holliday-Chowning	60
Something to Prove (story) - Jordan Thaxton	61
Green (poem) - Faith Maslak	62
Traveler (poem) - Faith Maslak	63
Sapphire (art) - Isaiah Fradieu	64
Rewriting the Route (story) - Aarionna C. Holliday-Chowning	65

Artist and author biographies - 70

## 6TH ANNUAL CREATIVE WRITING AND ART CONTEST WINNERS

Each year, Scenic Route hosts a contest for student writers, poets, and artists with awards of cash prizes of \$100 for first, \$75 for second, and \$50 for third prize. Submissions to the contest are automatically considered for publication in the magazine. This year's winners are:

### Poetry

1st Prize - "I Am Afraid of Flying" by Andi Overmann

2nd Prize - "In the Air" by Ashleigh Klukow

3rd Prize - "Mirror" by Rachel Greene

### Prose

1st Prize - "Of Trains and Angels" by Jordan Thaxton

2nd Prize - "Changing through Tragedy" by Aarionna C. Holliday-Chowning

### Art (all media)

1st Prize - "Little Dragon Girl" by Erin Williams

2nd Prize - "French Creamer" by Kristi Wesley

3rd Prize - "Morning Light" by Faith Seaton

### Submit

Scenic Route publishes original poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction and art of all media by Kansas City Kansas Community College students and District 500 high school students. We accept entries year round and publish yearly or when we have enough quality entries. To submit, go to [www.scenicroutelitmag.blogspot.com](http://www.scenicroutelitmag.blogspot.com).

For more information, contact Tasha Haas, faculty advisor at [scenicroutelitmag@gmail.com](mailto:scenicroutelitmag@gmail.com).

1st Place Poetry

## I AM AFRAID OF FLYING

by Alyssa Overmann

I am so afraid to love you  
not because you will  
crunch my vertebrae  
between your fingertips

but because I said my back hurt  
and you rubbed your hand  
along my spinal column  
until I fell asleep

you are so tender  
and my mouth is a gravel road

the jagged pieces fall out of me  
I promised you  
that I have never learned  
what it means to be concrete  
I pushed my hands in between  
the cracks of the asphalt  
and explained how I do not need you

I am an escape artist  
she said she did not search for an exit row  
I only fish in glass bottom boats  
I can see the depths of the water  
that I steer myself into  
I once crashed into the shore  
five times in a row before  
admitting I wasn't sure  
how to paddle a canoe

I built you a mountain  
out of peach trees  
clay soil allows them to grow  
my house is sinking  
because we cannot  
plow through the dirt

I am so afraid to love you  
not because you will break my teeth  
like splinters out of a dying tree  
but because I once broke my arm  
and didn't scream,

because violence is what I know  
you have never been in a fistfight

sometimes  
when you pull me in to kiss you  
I reach for the mole  
on the back of your neck  
so that I can remind myself  
that you are not sandpapered edges  
you are not mangled gums  
and vodka bottles

you are clean teeth  
and lukewarm beer  
you are driving to pastures  
to look at the cows  
you are begging to understand  
you are apologizing for a feeling  
you are laughing because I can't remember how to cast a line  
you are human  
and I have never understood the concept of god

we talked about it in your car

I am so afraid to love you  
not because you are a train  
waiting to run off the rails

but because you are the flowers  
on the side of the tracks.





3rd Place Art

## MORNING LIGHT

Faith Seaton

## OF TRAINS AND ANGELS

by Jordan Thaxton

At the time of writing this story, I am twenty. I'm still figuring out what that means, but for now, it feels as if the structure that I once believed I had been bound to, has been falling apart. Something inside me wants to roam for a while. Something tells me I won't have this chance again. I can't promise you what I'm going to do, but maybe this story will tell us both.

Before today, I had a childhood. I had lots of fun, but I had lots of time to think about things too. I spent a lot of time being isolated from the world around me, but I was very observant of it. A lot of things were going on. Marriages, divorces, deaths, births, people moving in, people visiting, people moving away, people crying, people laughing, the recession in '08, the Iraq War, Michael Jackson's death. I had my own things going on too. My collections of doodles and stories, thrift rock 'n' roll records and a jean jacket previously loved by someone else, but now loved by me. My world was fairly small, but it existed just next door to what the adults called the "real world," the ones with the wars and the recessions, and I caught very real glimpses of it.

By spending too much time watching the world around me, I've grown to function better when I'm provoked by vivid imagery. I was surrounded by it. The same sights, smells, and noises that accompanied everyday life could trick you into believing they were familiar, but they were the force that set change in motion. I wanted to see those changes.

No matter where you were in town, in the evening hours that long whistle would whine in the distance, reminding everyone that the world is still turning. Trains are a constant force and they've been constant throughout my whole life.

The locomotives fade in and out of my life; from the tracks that separated our old trailer park from town, or the time we were playing in the railroad yard, awfully and frightfully close to the tracks, so close that we could feel that looming metal powerhouse shake the whole earth underneath it. The air became foggy and thick with smoke. We were in awe - not only because we were holding onto our lives - but at the sight right before our very eyes. Massive, moving, going on forever. There was nothing we could do besides stand back and watch. From my people-watching from the doorstep perspective, I didn't think to be a part of the action involved watching. Still, that's what I've been doing to this very day.

As an isolated kid from the Midwest in the twenty-first century, I probably consumed more media and more music, than anyone before me, and I'm probably speaking on behalf of my generation. Music videos are entertaining, but when I clicked on a video that was just a picture of a 45 record and began with the static of the needle dropping on the vinyl, I knew was about to hear something life-changing.

Through it all, I've established a belief that metaphorical trains and rock 'n' roll are not mutually exclusive. I don't think I could separate myself from that narrative either. Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready," Woody Guthrie's "Bound for Glory," Bruce Springsteen's "Land of Hope and Dreams," Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe. All these songs and artists are comforting to me, like the sights and smells around my hometown, they were familiar, but they too were setting change in motion. They made the kind of change I could see.

What you're about to read is not academic, but you still might learn something. The primary concern of this story I'm about to tell is to go deeper. I have to understand why I resonate with these themes so much. The train and its glory, compassion, strength, resilience. In the fashion of using trains as a symbol for freedom, historically, where's my line? Why does this mean so much to me? What can I add to this American story?

All this and to this very day I've never actually been on a train.

Back and forth, steel ribbons weave through the moving American landscape. The story of the American railroad is a bold history burdened by ghosts, promises, and triumphs. Not in my time, not in your time, but in someone's time, the innovation of the railroad had hastened the maturing process of a young nation like never before.



This industrial story is told often with just as much force and restraint as the locomotives themselves. Other times, it is told well and honest; with all enthusiasm and reservations intact. While the railroad innovated and simplified the way the nation communicated, traveled, and thought, not everyone was on board with its construction. A historical truth prevailed; with every gift the nation gives, it exacts a price in return.

The lives of the railroad workers hailed from the most vulnerable populations, and that wasn't an accident, for the construction of the railroads was treacherous and uncertain. The working bodies of Chinese, Mexican, and poor whites fueled the development of the nation's largest innovation. The stories and struggles of the working people, and consequently, the impact of the railroad is endured through some of the nation's richest blues, folk, and country songs.

These kinds of songs are set out to do a handful of things. The most important being living, tangible proof of the power of storytelling. Train songs contain the tradition and strength of the labor of the railroad workers, with the justice, hope, and glory they were denied. Critiquing the unyielding force that set it all in motion by asking the hardest questions of all; was it worth it? What is left now? What were the promises made to these men? Have they been recognized and granted dignity? What were their names?

Even the most distinct train song has something in common with the next; trains are bound to an unyielding, specific path, picking up passengers from one place and planting them in a new one, like the wind scatters seeds. As a working fragment of the old world, the railroad constantly affirms its presence and its place in today's history, tirelessly doing its job.

Through song, art, and the human perspective, trains can symbolize hard times, lost chances, and running away from failures. Or perhaps a glorious and triumphant theme; a love coming or going, freedom arriving, returning to a definite home, or as the rapturing, massive and frightening machines, only comparable to angels.

That's always been a story, a symbol, and a song I've been drawn to.

Something recently had sparked me to delve into this topic and my resonance with it. I had made the connection between the songs and the trains in my life, but I never could concisely make meaning of it all. I feel like I'm getting closer.

Once upon a time, a few days ago, I was exposed to the wonderful world of train photography. I never imagined the possibility that others were out there making a living documenting the power of trains. Obviously, someone took the pictures I had grown up looking at in my American history books, but it never occurred to me to think about who was taking those pictures and how. More especially, why.

There's no way I can admit to that without accepting my ignorance of photography. I'm no self-proclaimed photographer, but like everyone in the 21st century, I do take pictures of my own. Everyone with a smartphone does. The pictures I take are not meaningless, but at the end of the day, I'm not motivated enough to take that kind of fun seriously and make a career out of it.

One thing I've learned in my own ventures is that if you want to be good at anything, especially if you want to make a living out of something personally worthwhile, you need to have some seriousness about it. That is if you want to be exceptional at it. If you want to turn a hobby into something that transcends only serving and soothing your own troubles. Studying Springsteen, Guthrie, and Dylan for as long as I had, it would be a travesty for me not to know that. That being said, I have a lot of respect for photographers too.

While the idea of traveling across the world chasing down trains sounds like it could've been a gimmicky, long-forgotten silver screen flick, perhaps I've been cheating myself by taking pictures of trains at face value, not really understanding the forces behind it. Someone was there, far from home, sitting out in the sun, waiting for the right moment to capture this unrelenting force.

I observed a particular black and white photograph of a locomotive for a long while, reveling in every train song that played in my head. I looked closer at the picture. I felt like I had been there before, and that's because I once was.

I was thirteen years old, but during those long winter days, I felt like I could've been a thousand. Every day after school, my older sister and I would loiter around town waiting for our little sister to be released from her elementary. I was the middle child of two sisters. My older sister and I were friends not out of circumstance, but we genuinely enjoyed hanging out with each other. Most of the time we would explore the forest behind the skatepark,

which was usually quiet and uneventful, but pleasant. Sometimes we would stumble upon makeshift shacks crafted by boxes, sticks, and cloth; but they were always vacant. Still, a presence loomed over them, strong enough that we'd leave them untouched, just the way we found them.

The town was enclosed from the rest of the world by the highway on one side and the railroad tracks on the other everywhere in between was ours to roam. The sounds of the cars and locomotives on the moving paths that surrounded the town made a mockery of it. Those hustling and bustling wheels gaining farther distance away, while it seemed that everyone inside of town was being pushed closer and closer together. We knew that the universe was growing bigger, but also knew we'd never get to see any of it.

For a couple of days, my friend had informed us about an underpass two miles down the railroad tracks. This wasn't just any plain old underpass. It was decorated in satanic looking graffiti. She said that people, she didn't know who would go down there to perform seances, surrounded by their menacing, confusing symbols. Of course, we wanted to see it. In a small town like ours, there wasn't anything exciting to do besides explore the mysterious infrastructure that unquestionably surrounds you. But I wanted to ask those questions. Most of all, I wanted answers to them. In order to do that, I would have to go searching for them. Past the empty buildings, the anonymous factories, uninhabited homes, empty cars; down the tracks the three of us went.

It was a cold, wet January afternoon and I hated wintertime. I had really bad self-esteem and didn't like the way my legs looked in pants or my shoulders in a jacket. I also hated being cold. I was cold all over, but today, none of that mattered. My enthusiasm and excitement kept me looking and lively.

The railroad hid behind a thin forest. The tracks were set upon a steep hill, supplemented by fragments of rocks, a small flowing creek, then more rocks. I think it was quietly understood between the three of us that we would be absolutely fucked if a train came. We'd have nowhere to go but down a steep, slippery, rocky hill. None of us would allow ourselves to be bothered by that thought as we tightrope the tracks, shuffling as if we were on the sidewalk.

I had never seen a place as desolate as the railroad. If radio static were a place, this would be it. The vast wasteland. Aside from our bodies, the tracks were deserted, but I could feel a lasting presence, maybe an impression from a train that might have passed hours before. It reminded me of the empty shacks in the forest. That feeling lingered. I don't like those moments when I become startlingly aware that maybe there isn't a beginning, a middle, and an end to time.

Eventually, we made our way to the underpass. The mud was thick, and the rocks were slippery, but we were able to maneuver ourselves underneath it. We observed the strange symbols and writing for a while. Below us, the creek was larger and louder than before, flowing faster and running deeper. Then we heard it. A noise, more soothing than a thundercrack but just as startling. It was that long whistle whine. It was the train.

We all looked at each other. What else did we expect? We were on the train tracks and now the train was coming. We all looked at each other wide-eyed and repeating what was obvious; "It's coming! It's coming!" The underpass began to shake. We huddled together, looked up and watched the concrete vibrate, shifting like stiff jello. Above us was a massive, unyielding, moving locomotive, unaware of the three small lives observing its power.

It slithered by into the distance for what felt like forever, then the dead, desolate silence of the railroad yard greeted us once again. Things were still once more. After we were sure it was long gone, we agreed we had to leave right away. We got back out onto the tracks and instantly began running in the direction from whence we came. Trying desperately to maintain our speed through our uncontrollable laughter filled with disbelief, excitement, adrenaline, and a little bit of fear. We had seen enough action for one day... But something in the air, something I could feel deep down but didn't want to vocalize, didn't want to bring to life, told us that we hadn't seen anything yet, because down in the far distance, there it was. It was burning bright, and my eyes did not deceive me. A bustling locomotive was chugging down the tracks sparing nothing at all. We all froze. What could we do? The tracks were on a steep hill of muddy rocks, if we faltered at all, we could slip easily into the freezing creek below. It was last call, last terminal, death.

We looked around, and the train was coming fast. We looked at each other, and the train was coming fast. We looked down to the creek below, and the train was still coming fast. We looked at each other one last time, and the train was here. We jumped into the sidelines, we weren't in the clear, we were in the color, in the ditch, in the hole, clinging onto the wet rocks with all our might.

I don't know how long I kept my eyes shut tight. When I finally opened them and I looked around me, I

was in awe. I looked into the eyes of my sister, and those of my friend and all we did was laugh. The sound of our laughter was swallowed up by the heaping ruckus of the industrial monster steadily running past us. Tearing up the tracks, moving dirt and moving spirits, ceaselessly, the wheels screeched against the rails and the weight of the cargo noisy chugged along.

We never moved a muscle as we stared at the train in front of us. It was moving so quickly beyond our own brains' comprehension. Our eyes could not focus on any single car, even if they tried. It all looked like one long, thick, powerful, loud, steaming, forceful, continuous, metal and iron string that could cut you right up into pieces.

Looking into that moving powerhouse undoubtedly makes you feel small, but as your eyes follow the turning, grinding wheels as the wind whips through your hair; your heartbeat catches up with the steady running hum of the chugging engine. At that moment, we were not weighed down by anything. We were invincible, succumbing to the moment only.

Later on, a couple of years from that day, I would move into a trailer park that existed on the opposite side of the same tracks that once held my life in its iron hands. Some evenings it would take ten extra ten minutes to get to our home, as we would have to watch the train go by from the safety of our car. Still, as I would watch each train car pass us by, I wondered if they were the same ones I had seen before.

Like the vacant shacks in the forest or the desolate tracks of the railroad, maybe the beginning, middle, and end of time was happening right now, at this very moment. It was all happening at once. The train didn't seem to be carrying anything but time.



## LOST IN TIME

Isaiah Fradieu

2nd Place Poetry

## IN THE AIR

by Ashleigh Klukow

I click my tongue  
to some invisible rhythm  
that only the  
deepest unconsciousness  
in my waking moments can hear.

And there, I can hear the static in the air  
click its tongue,  
mimicking me.  
or am I mimicking it?

Nevertheless, I can hear the excited fanfare  
of the coming storm clicking in the empty air.  
I wonder if the molecules are waltzing?  
I swear I could feel the breeze of their  
skirts fly past me.

Locked in by the window latch,  
I imagine I am at some train station.  
In some nameless town  
with some nameless streets  
I don't care to know anyway  
there is no one to call out my name  
or grab me to say hello.

I'm just sitting on the bench--  
the rain is pouring now  
like silver silk  
covering my face  
my neck.  
All of me.  
I am now wearing god,  
despite the nameless shirt.

And I'm waiting for my train,  
the nameless train headed for  
the nameless destination.  
And I'm waiting,  
waiting for a thunderstorm  
waiting for my train.

But there is no rain.  
There is no train.

The static warns me of another storm  
entirely--  
the monster in the living room  
with two heads so legendary--  
one so fair and the other like Medusa's.  
Even without snakes or curses,  
her gaze will turn me into stone,

I will be some corpse.  
I will be some unfortunate corpse.  
Perhaps others will believe I'm some statue  
crafted by mighty hands of some godsend.  
But I will listen and lament with silence  
the truth, "Ladies and gentlemen, the statue you see before you  
is not the work of said blessed fellow--  
I am the works of a hateful monster,  
will you now revel at my sight?"

Of course, no one will hear  
and no one will care.  
It's natural to believe the easier of two.  
No one wants to believe that monsters  
exist  
not only in closets  
but in living rooms too.  
It's easier to turn the head and close the eyes  
see no evil,  
hear no evil,  
speak no evil.

So I pray my bedtime prayer every night  
and I make sure he hears the good part--  
the part about the train  
and thunderstorms,  
the part about freedom.



## CHANGING THROUGH TRAGEDY

by Aarionna C. Holliday-Chowning

There weren't a lot of things certain that day. In fact, almost nothing was certain. Somehow, we all got to this point. Standing in an abandoned crumbling warehouse that smelled like the inside of a public bathroom. The hinges on the doors creaked like a haunted house and matched in style with peeling paint. The lights were low enough to where you could see someone's face and the standing puddles of water in corners. There were empty racks that seemed to once hold something of value. The crisp air from broken windows gave the space an eerie sense of shame. Even the distress within those concrete walls screamed for freedom.

Staring at her as if she grew an extra head while the steam rose from her body. Everyone could feel the rage in her eyes as if she was pondering their fate with every glare. I stood next to her anticipating her next move. She stood quiet, and they sat in a tight circle, handcuffed to a pillar in the middle of the room. I could feel her veins chilling, and that pure heart she once had was replaced with stone. Finally, she spoke.

"I wish I could say I feel some remorse for what is going to happen tonight, but I don't. You guys have brought this on yourselves. I only wish that I remembered to hit the record button," she said.

Have you ever wondered just what happens to that little girl or boy you used to know? You know the one who was so energetic, motivated, compassionate, and happy as a youngster. Then, a single moment, decision, or action can change who they are completely. The person you experience now has a dark heart, and even their shadow doesn't want to follow them. You blame their parents, the people involved, or yourself. Some might even stretch and blame it on God. For some silly reason, a little part of you wants to find or revive that person you care so much about. That is exactly how I feel about my best friend Emerson.

Emerson started pacing around the room like a mysterious mountain lion on the hunt for prey. I couldn't tell exactly what she had in mind, but the little girl inside of her screamed for revenge. So desperately I wanted to save her, myself, and everyone else from whatever was going to happen. From the look in her eyes, she had already made her mind up.

"To me, neither one of your lives is valuable, but to someone who loves you, it is. Unfortunately for you, no one matters to me at this point," Emerson said.

She didn't look directly at me, so I prayed that excluded me since we've been best friends since first grade. I remember when we vowed to stay best friends after she had to move schools for the first time.

"How will we see each other if you're so far away?" I asked.

"We will make it work. Well, our parents will make it work. Until then we can talk on the phone every day. Well almost every day," she said.

"Cross your heart?" I said.

"Cross my heart like a railroad track sign," she said back."

The problem is, I no longer knew the girl that was standing in front of me. She moved around more times than I could count. Even though it was hard we kept in touch just like we promised. Her papa Bradley made sure of it. As we got older it was easier because of social media, and video chats. I always knew I would never lose her as a friend, and that remained true until I looked into Emerson's translucent eyes and realized she was gone.

She needed to gather supplies, and as she walked into the next room, I tried so hard to remember Emerson I knew. I wished those puddles were pools and I could emerge her into in order to exchange this spirit for the one I once knew.

\*\*\*

Today started like any other day. Yet, somehow, I knew it would be much more than a regular day for me and a lot of people. I got out of bed and shuffled to my alarm clock that seemed like it was miles across the room. I am the type of person that will hit the off button, instead of the snooze button. Truthfully, I would probably still be sound asleep from years passed if my therapist did not suggest I move it in order to physically get out of bed to turn it off. It's getting easier to get out of bed since the incident at school.

It turned this entire town upside down, and I'm still having a hard time mustering up the will power to

continue living. So, I kept trying to be an active member of society and picked out my clothes. I chose to go with something simple. Nice blouse, jeans and of course my cowgirl boots. One thing I loved about public school is all the cute clothes I get to wear.

I stared into my bathroom mirror longer than unusual this morning. I just wanted to see if I could still see what my face once looked like, before this dark person I was turning into consumed all of my appearances. I did everything as if I were doing it for the last time.

“Emmy! Breakfast,” my dad called.

“Coming,” I yelled back. I stood in that mirror just one more second and wondered if my dad would notice too.

I walked down the great wall of family portraits and passed my brother’s room. I started to knock, in hopes that I would get my brothers famous good morning, I love you greeting: “Would you not, idiot. It’s too damn early for that, Em,” he would say.

I held my fist in the air like I was claiming some sort of pride for three seconds. Then as my head lowered, shoulders slumped deeper I realized I’d never heard those sweet words again.

I walked down the stairs, kissed my dad, and proceeded to eat his famous eggs and pancakes.

\*\*\*

Have you ever seen those mystery TV shows or movies, when someone is possessed? The people they love try so hard to say things that will get them to snap out of it. Well, that’s where I was standing in that warehouse. At this moment I didn’t see my Emerson, I saw a hollow body filled with all forms of grief at the same time.

Emerson, well, she would prefer us to say Em because she never really liked Emerson, came from an interesting childhood. She was 15 and had been to more schools than she had complete outfits. In the beginning, it was easier for her dad to home school her and her younger siblings. It was never a consistent home, but it was for sure a loving one. She started at Lakewood Trails Elementary in the middle of a small town in Montana where we met.

Her first move after second grade started this fast-moving board game of living for Em. Once her dad Adam would get a better paying job at one of those companies that rips you and your family from their normal secure lives and takes you “where-ever the job goes.” He works hard to provide for his family. She could never explain what he did, but she knew she didn’t see him as much. With this move, they ended up back in Montana, and the rumor was they could possibly be there for the rest of her high school years.

Em’s papa Bradley just got back into the work field from being a stay at home dad until her youngest sister was old enough to go to pre-school. He started off part-time, just to bring extra money in, and then found himself loving the idea of having a purpose through helping people. All of Emerson’s siblings, including her, have birth parents who were on hardcore drugs.

Em’s oldest brother Charlie is 23 and moved out over the summer for college. He decided on a school out of state to get away from everything Montana. His major is engineering, and Charlie wants to own his own company someday.

Then there’s Dominique. He is 17, and out of the other two boys, Domi is her actual blood brother. It was a miracle they were placed and adopted together. The closeness they shared was like any other bond between brother and sister. When they were younger Em and Domi were inseparable. It was always the three of us. At the park, on walks with the dog, sneaking dessert before dinner.

Even after they moved and we all got older Em would write, or call telling me everything she and Domi did on a hot summer’s day.

“Guess what this doofus did today?” she would say.

“I can only imagine honestly,” I said.

“Okay, so we’re at the skate park because it is his day to pick the activity, and tries a double hill flip, and nearly breaks his ankle. THEN had the nerve to dare me to do it,” she said.

“Well, did you?” I asked

“Omg of course, and I nailed it. I got \$20, and ice cream!”

Needless to say, Dominique and Emerson tackled life together. All of the good, bad and ugly. They made vows for things like never leaving an argument angry, always being together, encouraging the other, and never giving up on each other. Married couples have less of a bond than they do.

Emerson also has a brother named Felix. He's 11 and is frankly the cutest kid I've ever seen. Oh, I cannot forget about Ginger the cat. Together they complete their fathers' perfect alphabet 7 dream. In order from oldest to youngest, their names make up the first seven letters of the alphabet.

Even though the constant move was a challenge; her parents knew that the money they were making together wasn't nearly enough to continue to support them. Herding a pasture full of cows is considerably easier than moving a family of 6. Now, it was Em's turn to try and help around the house. Her parents didn't make her pay bills, but her being able to buy things she wanted with her money helped them out a little. She was the oldest that lived in the house still. She wasn't required to get a job, but she knew that it would make things easier for the family.

Inside of school, Emerson was every high school boy's dream and every girl's worst nightmare. Her natural burgundy hair flowed with the peace a tree gets from the summer breeze. Her eyes told a story that everyone wanted a marathon too.

Em once told me, "When anybody is born, at that minute, that's the last step you get in life that was known and expected. No one ever knows what the next step is going to be." She was only 16 and knew that statement was the most accurate thing someone should be able to comprehend.

Emerson did not grow up with a lot of material things. The values she held closest were of sacrifice, unconditional love, and support that she received from her parents and sibling. Being about to receive and deliver those were of the utmost importance to her.

"The one thing we will always have is family," her dad would always say.

Em and I have spent some of our childhood together. She was the sister I never had, and in a house full of men, I would like to think that I was that for her as well. When she came back it was like nothing changed.

A huge percentage of our peers dressed, talked, and acted differently than we did. Em used to be the "it girl"--attractive, intelligent, athletic, kind to all. She strived to be better than the day before. Until the moment that changed her entire life who she was on the inside.

\*\*\*

Last week Dominique and I entertained our papa like we always do. We talked about our dreams, shared school drama, and packed our lunch and rode to school together. For my birthday this year, I got my oldest brother Charlie's "old" car, and it was my turn to drive. I named her Bertha just because he refused to have his baby being called something that smelled like someone's grandma with dentures, cats, and mothballs as a deodorant. The thing was practically new, ran great, and, most importantly, it saved me from having to ride the bus.

On the ride, we discussed one of his classmates who had just committed suicide after being bullied by the football team.

"Have you seen Jason in class lately? It must be so hard losing a brother so tragically like that," I asked him.

"No, he hasn't been back since the day it happened. I couldn't imagine," he said.

"I have a weird feeling about today," I said. "Something just seems off."

"Don't worry Em, everything is going to be fine. The whole school is grieving. These things just take time," he said.

Once we got to school, Dominique and I did our morning routine pep talk, handshake, and I love you and headed to our first period. I did not think about how my day was going to go. I usually bounce from class to class, hang out with my best friend Rebecca, and when the day is over, I go to softball practice, wait for Dominique, and we go home.

After telling Domi that I felt like today was off, I tried not to be paranoid. I just could not shake the fact that something bad was going to happen. In my mind, I wished it could be something simple as a rip in my new blue jeans, or even spilling my coffee.

It was my favorite period of the day, lunch. Deer Mountain High is your typical high school. There are more students than the administration has the staff to educate. It is not big and pretty as the ones in bigger towns, but it is ours. The walls are painted in our purple and silver pride colors, and you can see our wolf mascot at every corner. The building itself is old. You can tell where the new brick meets the old, and how the aged paint is starting to seep through the new. Surrounding the cafeteria were wooden tables, with matching chairs that scream with a desire to be remodeled. Apparently, the woodshop class eons ago made these tables and with a little mainte-

nance here and there they will forever help Deer Mountain keep its heritage.

Of course, each clique has their own table. Luckily for me, I have the status to bounce around from table to table because I am involved in a lot at school. Today, I thought it would be nice to just sit with my everyday group of friends. There is Rebecca, Michelle, Ben, Jacob, and me. We all have had AP English together, and became really close through the stress of every 5-10 paged paper that was due every week!

"I'm still not sure I'm going to make it to graduation if all these damn papers we are writing," Ben said.

"Graduation, I can't even think about making it through the semester," Michelle blurted.

I'd like to think that I was fairly good at school. I guess with all the different ones I've been too, I was able to take a little something from each of my former teachers and apply those skills when it mattered the most. I didn't have much to say on this subject and just waited for the next one. But it stayed on the frustration with the class load we all had in a single day. So, I piped up.

"You would think after what happened to Justin, the school would give us a bit of a break," I said.

"Right, I was thinking that too. It's like they think if we stay busy, we will forget the whole thing," Rebecca said.

"If only we could spend a day outside, in nature, having a day to..." I stopped. Instead, I looked out the window, trying to imagine how glorious it would be to enjoy the little bit of summer we had left. Then I saw them. My face went blank. My body, cold and numb. I felt my heart stop and then start racing with the speed of Usain Bolt.

"Em, are you okay?" Michelle said.

"See, classes are that rough we can't even form a full thought without it being in MLA format," Ben said.

"Em, seriously, are you o..." Rebecca started and then turned to look at what I was dominated by. After a while, everyone in the cafeteria had their eyes fixed on the two black shadows that were walking on campus. In long black trench coats that grazed the ground with clawing hands trying to turn back from this mistake. From the anger in their eyes, you could see this day being in their minds a million times. They walked with unbroken determination and stared in the cafeteria windows as we stood in awe, hoping somehow, we turned into glass. All at once, the shadows were gone, and shots went off shattering what was left of our troubled world.

Like an anthill amongst destruction we scattered through halls, and into rooms trying to dodge bullets we prayed didn't have our name on them. Rebecca and I managed to stick together and ran hard and fast. The focus in their strides suggested they had a fixed target. At times they gave this piercing glance at our peers shaking and crying, as if they were disgusted, we would even be worthy enough of what was going to happen to these other students.

We had had second period with these guys two hours ago. I tried to remember if there was anything that set them off. I thought about those jocks that started picking on one of them, and they both left for the day. Ironically those same guys picked on their brother Jason who committed suicide weeks ago. No one thought twice about where they were going or if they were coming back. We just went on about our day.

Everything was happening so fast. People running, falling, getting shot in the back. Everything in me just wanted to escape and stay alive. Eventually, Rebecca and I found a janitor's closet that we prayed was hidden enough to never be found.

Quickly we locked the door, turned out the motion sensor light, and huddled in a corner.

"Who could they be after? This can't be happening Em," Rebecca said.

"This most definitely isn't a dream or a drill. Our peers are dying right now. I can barely think. I have to call my brother!"

"I'm so scared right now, Em. I'm too young to die, you're too young, everyone in this school is too young. God if you are there and real, make this stop. Wake us up from this nightmare." Rebecca was trembling in between two cleaning racks.

I knew it was a sensitive, scary time, but I was too focused on not being able to contact Dominique. In gentle frustration, I said, "Becca, please shut up or they're going to find us!"

For what felt like years we stayed in that janitor's closet. We could hear distant pop sounds, and sometimes it felt like they were right by the door. The figures under the door would move quickly, and sometimes just stay still. I kept trying to call Dominique. I must have redialed over a hundred times. My heart sank so far, and my brain turned to mush when this started. Now, I wasn't sure who I was.

An eternity went by, and we finally heard sirens, helicopters, and megaphones. At times there was no sound, and then utter chaos came. Tier gas, thrown through windows, and a swat team mob raided the school. The cops came around to check every room and closet. Eventually, they found us. Rebecca and I were reacquainted with our families.

As we were escorted out of the building you could smell the horror, and grief that came from mothers who had lost a son, and fathers who had lost a daughter. You could feel the agony of parents who were unknown where their child was. If anything could turn a town upside down, this was the event.

Still realizing Dominique was not with us, I screamed out for him. Our family waited for hours, just like the others. We tried to keep faith that even though the school isn't big, there are a lot of rooms and closets.

Finally, first responders came out of the building, one by one addressing families.

In approaching my parents, a man started to say, "We give you our deepest sympathy." At that moment, I felt my existence vanishing. As he went on, he said, "It seems as if Dominique was a victim in this shooting and did not make it. I am so sorry."

The wailing around the parking lot resonated like faith being destroyed, and hope depleted. All of the anger and questions that floated in the air. In that moment, our small town shared one certainty: nothing and no one would ever be the same.

\*\*\*

"Now here we stand," Em said, coming out of the darkroom. She was dressed in the same attire the school shooters wore. A large black trench coat that grazed the ground in dread of knowing there in fact was no turning back from this mistake. She dropped the black bag she was holding in front of these guys and restated,

"To me, neither one of your lives is valuable, but to someone who loves you, it is. Unfortunately for you, no one matters to me at this point," Emerson said, and she went on, "You took the most valuable person I have ever had and got away with it on the premise of mental illness. You took my brother from me and justice will be served."

I have never tried so hard to think in my life, but I needed something that would pull her out of this daze. As she reached into her bag, she pulled out the same gun they used to kill her brother. I knew at any moment we would be too far gone.

"Em, honey, you don't want to do this," I started. "You have to look at me. This is not you, and they are not worthy of this easy way out."

"Becca, you are supposed to be on my side," she said.

"I am, that's why I am trying to stop you from doing this," I said.

"They deserve it, they deserve it all. To feel how Dominique felt laying on that floor dying by himself. They deserve to feel their blood leaving their bodies without giving it permission. They deserve to burn in hell like the monsters they are!"

As she spoke, her voice was shaking, she held the rifle to one's head, finger on the trigger and her hands were shaking.

"How much better are you than them if you make this mistake?" I said.

"Oh, don't give me that bull, Becca. I lost every fiber of my being the day they took my brother."

"Please Em, this is not how you get him back."

Then, a stillness flooded the room. Even the breeze paused. Looking at Emerson, I could see the desperation to reverse everything, and change the outcome. Perhaps she even wanted to be the one who got killed, and we both knew that was not possible.

"Em, Please!"

\*\*\*

"You have to forgive, Em," I heard a man's voice say. I knew it all too well. It was the same voice that used to call me an idiot and dare me to do silly things I was always able to do. A voice that made me feel safe while getting on my nerves at the same time.

"I can't just forgive," I replied out loud as if someone was really there.

"You have to. For me," it said.

Palms sweating, I slightly squeeze the trigger and the voice whispers, "You have to forgive Em." I let go of the trigger, sat down the rifle, fell to my knees and wept. Rebecca met me on the ground and hugged me with



all the strength she had.

“Let’s go home, Em,” She said putting my arm around her shoulder and walking me through the crumbling warehouse. I had so much relief and anger all I could do was cry.

\*\*\*

In that moment I could see that energetic, motivated, compassionate, and happy little girl regaining her strength. I saw my Emerson, and together we will refill her hollow body with the good we used to know.



3rd Place Poetry

## MIRROR

by Rachel Greene

If we can take glass

and melt

and pour

and polish—

through rearing, a child becomes a man—

then I wonder, Father,

as I consider your faults that have become my vices,

can we not take glass

and grind

and crack

and shatter,

and turn mirrors

back into sand?



NO EVIL  
Faith Seaton

# LOOK AGAIN

Alazia Stanley

“Look again,”  
I told her.  
Pick up that chocolate donut  
and step off that scale.  
Oh, the real beauty in your smile  
that would shine if only you saw it within yourself.  
Ashamed for having pleasing curves.  
Ashamed for being full-bosomed.  
Ashamed for having another bite.  
Ashamed for not having that  
tall,  
slim,  
model-  
shaped Victoria’s Secret body that you don’t see in your mirror.  
You were much younger then.  
So,  
“Look again.”

Oh, the real beauty in your smile  
that will shine once you gain this self-love.  
Pride for having pleasing curves.  
Pride for being full-bosomed.  
Pride for having another bite.  
Pride for having that  
thick,  
full,  
beautiful-  
shaped body that you do see in your mirror.  
You are much wiser now.  
So,  
“Look again.”

# HIDDEN MASK

by Alazia Stanley

Not a soul hears me cry at night  
hiding behind my cover.  
I watched you walk out of my life  
as you were once, before, my lover.

Not a soul knows my suffering —  
only fakes smiles they can see.  
Laughter concealed like makeup  
to show I am fine and free.

Not a soul knows I'm damaged;  
words buried deep inside.  
Before, you were my Romeo;  
now gone with all my pride.

Not a soul knows I miss you —  
we were together for many years.  
One day this mask will break  
and burn up all my fears.

# DON'T BLINK

by Alazia Stanley

Dusk in the night — your heart may rest.

Old age creeps up like a monster on Halloween.

Natural disasters and terrorism-related deaths.

The moonlight dances over your grave.

Breath escapes your lips as you lay to rest.

Life goes faster than you think.

In this here today, gone tomorrow world.

No one escapes from life alive.

Kidnapped soul from your body, you fade in the horizon.



## SURRENDER TO THE HILLS

Erin Williams



# THE GRAVEYARD: A SHORT ADVENTURE

by Kaleb Goldbeck

Every old town has a haunted place. The abandoned schoolhouse, the church that no one goes to anymore, the house that someone was murdered in. My town had a graveyard. It was older than the town itself. A wealthy commune called Woolsborough, who lived out just beyond the woods near my hometown bought it to bury their own. Woolsborough was an Amish community, or so I was always told. Houses were more akin to sheds, and the only car was the hearse that transported the dead over to the cemetery. These days it seems abandoned though. Only every once in a while do you see the hearse take a new body in. I watched it once when I was very young.

It was an eerie day in mid-October. The sun was setting and despite the weather being so nice, there was no noise save for the gentle fall breeze. I was outside running after the leaves that fell from the trees. One blew for a long while, all the way to the cemetery.

As it was, the graveyard was a terrible sight. A sea of grey tombstones, most of which were crumbling to bits, accented by dying grass. In the center was a hill, with an old and decaying mausoleum on top. There were four entrances, all with overgrown paths that lead up to it. I stood there paralyzed with an instinctive and childlike fear, focused on that house.

That's when I saw them. Their procession was a frighteningly gothic sight. They were all so white, not pale, but white, like chalk, and they were draped in midnight black. They wore suits, ties, and hats out of another century. The two youngest of them led the thing, playing instruments. I can remember their songs. It was more creepy than sad. I sat for a while as this sea of ghouls carried a casket from the back of a hearse into the sea of tombstones. One of them, a boy about my age, looked at me. His eyes were so sunken I could hardly see anything but black. He cocked his head to the side a little, curious. He waved to me, as if asking me to come over. So I did.

He smiled when I came, a kinda crooked smile as if he came from a world where smiling was done differently. When I got to his side he signaled to the group of ghostly adults who we had fallen behind. So we walked towards them. We walked on a beaten path of dirt. Ahead of me were two trees. As we grew closer a great wind came down. It blew all the remaining leaves from the trees. They hit us like a wall, yet I felt none of them as I walked forward into a brand new world.

Things were different on the other side of the leaves. The sky was a defined shade of purple that replaced the fresh night blue. Around me, the sea of decaying graves came to life. They were still grey like any natural grave would be, but they seemed to be immanating this glow that shot up into the sky. The path was different too, no longer the overgrown dirt trail, but now something wholly new. It looked ripped out of an old-new England street. It was a paved cobblestone path, with street lights hung about. I glanced behind me at the trees, now fully leaved, though I will note that they were orange, not green.

Ahead of me, the ghouls walked, with a kind of haunted swagger, never missing a step. I looked up to their faces to see not a somber grievance, but a hardly containable smile. At this point I looked at my new friend:

"Where are we?" I said with that same curiosity that makes childhood so magical.

"We're in the graveyard, of course, it's time to lay father Samuel down."

"Who?"

"I'm being so rude, I forget you're not like us. We're supposed to be quiet now, but after we hear Father Samuel off, I'll fill you in, alright?"

"Ok." God, how children just go with the flow sometimes.

So we kept walking. We walked past sights incredible to me, but they walked like it was nothing. I saw a skeleton sitting against a dead tree. He played to the funeral march with his harmonica, a phantom of a cat sat beside him, purring with enthusiasm. A man with a pumpkin for a head passed me on a unicycle. He handed me a lollipop. Two ghosts kissed right under the moon.

"Come on, you're falling behind," said my new friend with a giggle.

We ran past werewolves on a picnic, goblins on a stroll, I even saw a couple of mummy children run around.

"I thought this was a graveyard," I said, running.

"Not just a graveyard, the graveyard, now hurry, we've fallen too far behind."

So we kept running, past this world of Halloween and horror, all the way up to the mausoleum, now a beacon of color, glowing orange and yellow. We went inside and found our place, right as the casket was set on the stand in the center of the dimly lit room. One of the ghouls stood up by the casket and began to speak:

"Ladies, gentlemen and all those which lie between, it is on this day that I get to get up here and give a little introduction for Father Samuel, but despite my typically verbose nature, I will keep it brief because I know you all want to hear the man of the hour himself. I'm not gonna spend time talking 'bout who Father was, I don't think there's anyone here he hasn't been there for. So all I'll say is this; we love you a lot you old coot, and we drink to your moving on. Here here."

With that they raised their glasses and drank, my friend grabbed a drink from someone nearby "Here, drink," he whispered, and so I did. It tasted like an apple with cinnamon, but not like apple cider, it was much more pure like it came from an even more potent apple. Then the casket burst.

"So many of you came to see me off, I'm touched," said the man who just came back from the dead. He was just as white as all the others, but he was decorated in an orange robe. His face was so old, much older than anyone I'd ever seen, and from his face dangled a long white beard

"I have waited for this for a very long time, and now the day has finally come. I don't really have much to say, always been more invested in that one on one time than I gave speeches. But I do have a little bit. Don't any of you hesitate to come to visit me, that's the first thing. Secondly, I'd like to address my successor. He gave my introduction tonight, so sorry if I come off as predictable, but Tom Teller, you have always been at my side to help these people out when they need it. You talk too damn much, but when we get down to it that's a good thing for this job. I love you like a son, and cannot wait to see what you do with these good people at your side. Lastly, I'd like to leave you all with one last little bit of advice: you, all of you, are children of the night, and it is your duty to make the music that accompanies your home. Don't fall away from this, to blow against the wind is a fool's errand, instead embrace it, surround yourself in it. The night is your home, don't neglect it. Now I should be off, there are things to oversee here, I love you all, and I'll see you sooner than you think."

With that, he walked out of the room, and the light drained.

"Come on," my friend said, taking me out the door with the crowd. Alright, follow us, and I'll explain." he was walking with two older people now, people I presumed to be his parents. We walked down another of the paths into what should have been my hometown but now lead to a far different place. It looked like my town yes, but the buildings were different. Where a roof in my town would come to a point, here they spiraled. Here windows were crooked and uneven circles. We walked down that path, his potential parents smiling and holding hands. There was this calming nature to the way they walked that kept me docile as I walked into this strange reflection of my town

"Let me introduce you to my parents," he finally said. "Mom, dad." He tugged on their wrists. "This is my new friend."

They turned around still smiling, with their sunken eyes and marble features.

"Well hello," said his mother. "it seems we have a visitor from the other side, you must have a ton of questions, Guile honey, let's take our new friend to dinner."

"Of course, young sir, we will explain all of your questions over some good food and company, how does that sound?" he said

"Sounds good to me." Why not? I was on an adventure, anything that happened now, I just had to go with. So we walked into this strange place and moved to where the diner in my version of the town was. Here in place of the sign reading "Maple's Dine-In" was one that almost seemed to reverse light. It was like a neon black, and it said "Esmerelda's Food and Fortune's"

“Ah, Esmerelda darling, a table for four please,” said the father, Guile, I think his name was.

“Will do dearies, and who is your little guest this evening?” The woman behind the counter was dressed head to toe in vibrant colors. Her skin was a deep tan, and her hair, a beautiful, black display.

“This young sir was plucked from the other place by our William. We’ve yet to inquire about his name, though we’ll likely get that out of the way first at the dinner of stories.”

We moved to a table, following Esmerelda through the dimly lit labyrinth of tables and chairs. I observed the servers as we passed them. I saw a skeleton slide through the thin gaps between the backs of chairs. There was a spider, though he walked as I did, he had a plate in each hand. She took us to a booth seat by a window. The table had a deep red cloth covering the top. In the middle sat a glass sphere, and set at four places, a menu. I took the side with William, and his parents sat beside each other.

I looked out into the purple and black night. The streets of what should have been my hometown were all kinds of different. The differences were more pronounced up close. There were shops and the like everywhere, and it seemed the houses were far away from here. The suburb I lived in should have been in view, but in its place was a library and some open space. Outside the street was decorated with monsters. Mummies, gremlins and fish creatures walked side by side, as a great and old beast flew over the moon, eclipsing the town in a momentary blackness. They all just kept walking, as nothing had happened.

“Ah, you must have so many questions young sir. Well, consider me your personal and professional answerer. I am Guile Elridge, this is my wife Vanessa and my son, young William. Before we go on, let’s order, alright?”

With that, the glass sphere came to life. A disembodied head, surrounded by orange smoke appeared in the previously pitch-black shape.

“My name is Emmanuel, I will be your server, I mean server this evening,” the head said, as it started to laugh hysterically. “Sorry, I crack myself up sometimes, anyways, what can I get you all?”

“I’ll take the boar’s head with a side of pumpkin seeds,” said Guile.

“I’m not too hungry, I’ll just share with him,” Vanessa said. She looked so lovingly at him as if no other face could bring her joy. That same look of love was a mirror in his eyes.

“Grilled toad with sage sauce please, what do you want?” William said looking at me.

“I’ll pass this evening. Sorry.”

“Oh it is alright,” Vanessa said “Let me begin answering your questions dearie. We live in Woolsborough, the little town next to your hometown. Well, I know most folks assume us Luddites, old folk, clinging desperately to an old time. Well, that’s not quite true. Y’see, now how do I put this, your hometown resides in another place. Like a sort of mirror to this place. Now there is an infinite number of other places, but your place and our place lie in the exact same place on the spectrum of places. Now they’re so close in fact that there are some places that just cross over. That graveyard is one of them. Well, like any place like that, it needs protection. No one, in particular, is after it now, but some rather villainous folks have tried to take it down over time, and what they don’t realize is it would take down both our worlds as well. Well, us folks’ job is to look after it from the other side. A group of your kind lives over here to do the exact same thing.”

“No way! Why would anyone want to live with monsters?”

“Well they may seem like monsters to you, but they’re just neighbors to people here,” said Guile. I’ll admit, despite every bone in my body telling me that I should be afraid, I wasn’t. There was something alluring about those beasts out on the street. I felt free when I watched them run, I wanted to run with them.

“Ok, I still have a question.”

“Ask away.”

“Ok, why did William wave me over?”

“That’s easy,” William said, “you looked so bored, I thought you could use some excitement.” He was right. I was now in a world totally alien to me, with three new friends and a story no one would believe, what else could a

kid ask for.

“Ah, the food is here, thank you, sweet Esmerelda.” Guile said

“Anything for my favorite family. Thank y’all so much for stopping in.”

“Alright folks, let’s pig out.”

The rest of that night was nice. We walked for a bit when they finished eating. We swapped jokes and told stories. We even went for a ride in a trolley. But when the moon hung straight over our heads, it was decided that we should come home.

We walked back down that same magical path that took us here, back through the trees, this time, instead of a wall of leaves, we came across some fog. When we passed through, we were back home. It was an October night, I wasn’t sure how long I’d been gone, but I knew I was gone longer than I should have been.

“Young sir,” Guile said, “if you ever have need of any magic, Woolsborough is a very short walk.”



DEADPOOL TOY  
Wesley Brooks, Jr.

# YELLOW LIGHT

by Jalah Danks

Everything is bright and shiny,  
blinding.  
What direction am I heading,  
am I going home or am I leaving?  
“nothing hurts like becoming.”  
They told me that leaving home doesn’t mean  
kicking the ground away with your feet.  
Everything is a slow process of becoming.

But everything is loud,  
I’m not sure where I am, except the middle of a cloud.

I’m passing through a dense mist,  
vision blurred,  
skin cold and clammy,  
descending,  
descending.  
I will not crash and burn.

My insides are dancing like they’re about to die  
tomorrow,  
I will see you again.  
My mind runs wild with ideas of home  
tomorrow,  
I will see you again.

Turbulence.  
My hands long to touch something I can understand,  
“nothing hurts like becoming.”  
But all I can hear is the pressure changing.  
“nothing hurts like becoming.”

Why make a plan when you can make time?  
Why make a promise when you will make a change?



# HONEY,

by Jalah Danks

Honey,  
Your words kiss me with their teeth out  
Sharpened points confined in a Soft Frame

Your eyes kiss mine in a stolen stare  
where I find myself looking for a Glimpse of a Glimmer

A kiss on the lips  
Slow and Gentle, yet Determined.

Your laughter turns my stomach in a sickening, exhilarating knot  
A kiss on the hand tells me I am safe here

Nothing about this is hard or fast,  
It is Slow and Gentle, yet Determined.

You may seem untouchable, but  
you are warm and inviting as empty streets on summer nights,  
once heated from the sun,  
retaining a touch of the temperature burned into them.

# WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE

by Jalah Danks

Paper dissolves as it is soaked through  
I can hear my heartbeat through my mouth.  
I washed my hair sitting down,  
I blacked out.

My eyes rot out from perpetual moisture,  
my whole life is waterlogged.  
My eyes pop out from getting wet,  
and it all reeks of mildew.

I've regressed to a time when water covered the earth.  
When the ocean was all encompassing,  
engulfing all forms of life in its warm, torrential embrace.



OLIVE SAGE  
Kyle Gross

# A PROMISE

by Jordan Thaxton

A lost history reveals itself in every drop of sweat from her brow. A patient history that is not forgotten, but untold. It has resiliently documented itself through the blood and bones of the women before her and beside her; waiting attentively for the right words, the right time, and the right voice to share it.

These ancient women were passionate about their enduring love for their land, their children, and their lives. They worked diligently, from sunup to sundown. Their sweat watered the land, blooming the magnificent forests, mountains, and oceans, fostering all life forms from the skies to the deepest valleys. For hundreds of years, these passionate women kept the world as they knew it turning. This wasn't a simple task.

Their children were seized. Their language stripped from their tongue. Their homes destroyed and their sacred land taken right from under their feet. The beautiful world they had nurtured for their children now rests in the hands of an unforsaken force. These women and mothers, the backbone of the world, carried the weight of an uncertain legacy on their shoulders. With a determined heart and a fearless spirit, they carried on.

Their sacred memories of the days of old remained a promise in their bruised hearts, but an unreachable reverie to their children. Every passing night through every generation, the consuming passion of these mothers to create a world where their children could love without fear sowed a seed in the souls of their daughters, ceaselessly waiting to come to fruition.

And on this day, at this hour, at this very moment, she hears their fervent prayer.

Since the day she was born, she has carried an inexplicable desire. Not for power, not for riches, not for any worldly desire known to man. Her desire lies in the answer to her search for truth. In the certainty, validity, honesty in her past, and from where she hails.

In her search, she wanders and is weighed down by the unfulfilled dreams and desires of her ancestors, the ancient women, the guardian angels who guide her to the imperishable glory they were denied on earth. When she dances, sings, laughs, and loves, she is an echo of untold stories, sacrifices, and lives who also dreamed and yearned. On the enduring foundation of the triumphs and courage of the women before her, she begins to carve out a path of her own.

She is an opportunity on unprecedented ground.

She is a promise.

# TRANSPARENT EYES

by Ashleigh Klukow

I can't see you crying,  
I can't see your pain,  
it's like my vision is fogged up,  
by never-ending rain,  
I can't see you trying to stop me,  
I pretend you're just not there,  
I can't see how you scream,  
but if I could I wouldn't care,  
I can't see how you're lying on the ground,  
You're not uttering any more cries,  
but I can't see your blood rushing out,  
I can't, I have Transparent Eyes.

# WANDERLUST

by Ashleigh Klukow

Michael wanted adventure and looked for it everywhere. If there was a river, he wanted to cross it, not because the grass was greener on the other side, but because he didn't like the grass he was on. Anything was better than the grass he was on.

He didn't think about it that way, of course. He wanted to live life to the fullest, to experience it all, to see all that could be seen with his two eyes, to hear all the noises people could hear, to smell the flowers where they grew.

Eventually, Michael had seen all the things and smelled all the things and crossed all the things and climbed all the things and eventually, all the different trees just looked like trees because even though they were different, he was still the same person seeing them.

So he bought a small house in the woods and he tried to think about all the things he had done, but all of his memories felt the same because he was in all of them. The spiders that hid in the corners of his home built their webs without worry because Michael couldn't even see them anymore. Webs were webs and it didn't matter where they were.

Michael met a woman who had also seen all the things and they began to spend a lot of time together. They talked about the trees and the rivers and they understood each other because they could relate. Soon enough, they were married and they were happy because they wanted the same things.

Many years later, the spiders had all but taken over their home. There was barely a square foot that was left unwebbed around them. Their hands were bound and their eyes barely opened. They were mummies, preserved in their lives, full of the memories they had each collected and shared and there was no reason to stand up anymore.

Many, many years later, a young couple was wandering through the woods when they stumbled upon a giant white cabin. As they approached, they realized there were no windows or doors to be opened. This wooden home had been completely engulfed in spiderwebs.

The young couple holding each other stood in awe, because they had not yet seen it all.





No. 12  
Kristi Wesley

# EDEN'S GARDEN

by Andi Overmann

I have been searching for a way  
to tear this down

To dismember the way  
in which we speak  
Our heads  
no longer betrothed to a body

Fear is the ultraviolet ray  
that heats my skin when you smile  
this is not sweet  
this is a sucker punch

this is broken teeth  
and blood-soaked socks  
this is scabbed knees  
pressed to concrete

Pray for repentance  
save yourself from your sins  
draw the blinds back  
let love into your heart  
don't let her into your room

I will plant lavender in your garden  
and dip my tongue in honey  
We will never speak of this again

This is pain  
without a memory

# SHE CALLS THIS MOURNING

by Andi Overmann

I drove into the sunrise this morning.  
A plane ambled over the freeway,  
it looked like headlights driving into heaven.  
I wonder if it makes a difference?

If there is a stairway?

the city crawls closer--  
and a part of me flits away.  
there is a pink sliver of morning  
bounded by sections of fog

I turn the car north . . .  
. . . and the sliver has vanished.

I pass the river  
and it is beautiful  
the candy cane striped chimneys  
chug black death across the sky  
the pink returns for a moment . . .  
. . . I know that it too is vanishing.

I drive past the old building,  
there is a broken loveseat  
in the middle of an empty apartment.  
It was home to somebody once.  
I wonder if it suffers?

I pull the car into a parking space  
and every inch of pink has escaped the sky.  
The sun is gleaming through the center of a cloud formation.  
This should fill me with hope . . .

. . . but it burns my eyes.

# MERE MORTALS

by Andi Overmann

“love songs for the end of the world”  
he said this tenderly, but it made my eyes sting.  
this was the year I got everyone I cared about addicted to cigarettes.  
this was the year somebody finally understood more than I swore he should.

we danced in the light of the swamp songs,  
I wanna stand in her light  
maybe for a moment . . .  
maybe just till the gravel begins slipping underneath me again.  
My feet have never known solid ground.

this is the time for reinventing,  
this is the time for remembering the things we swore we’d forget.

I am the king of crossed fingers.

he pulled bugs out of his grandmother’s pool,  
not to save their lives--  
but to give them proper resting places.  
I left flowers over the dead squirrel we moved out of the road.  
I once did the same for a rabbit.  
maybe my heart clings  
to the small and dead things  
because I remember what it feels like  
to watch my spinal cord  
be stolen from my form.

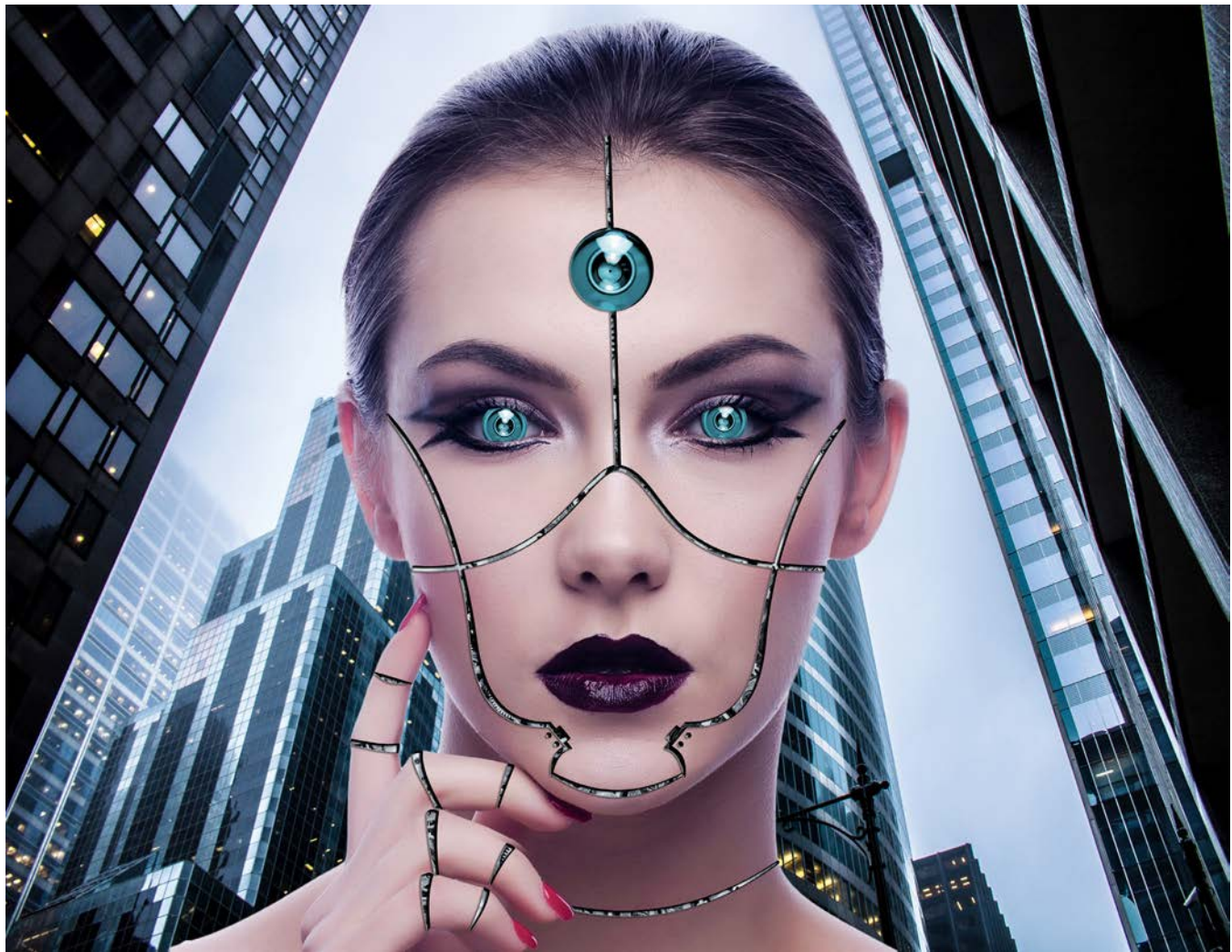
I am the king of grieving.

one of these days, the universe  
will go back to what it was.  
change is temporary  
and movement is stagnant  
everything moves backwards  
-- in slow motion --  
so slow you almost think you’re moving forward  
-- moving on.

I am the king of false pretenses.

the thing that scares me most  
is being.  
I think.  
I try to write about the way that she makes me feel  
And I feel the rocks splinter at my touch.  
Garbled speech from a bloodied body . . .  
this was the year I accepted my place in how small I am.  
this was the year he finally understood whose hand he was really meant to hold.

I am the king of lost causes.



HUMAN ROBOT TRANSFORMATION  
Wesley Brooks, Jr.



# BURNING BRIDGES

by Alazia Stanley

It takes a special someone to beat that Atlanta heat. Guns, violence, and poverty. Once you get sucked in, there's no easy way out. Being surrounded by it and only passing things down to your kids makes it worse. The old worn-out corner store: 39th and Chase. That's a place anyone and everyone goes. Brown rusted bikes ridden down the street, grown men (even teenagers) selling dope outside of the door, and women holding down the spot just to add a little change in their pocket to take home for their babies — or maybe even keep it to get by for a hit.

My name is Jeremiah and I am a thirty-six-year-old black man who never had it easy. Life always threw curveballs at me, but I always seemed to get out of it, so nothing scared me at all. Standing 5'11" with a thick black beard and tattoos covering my body, everybody knew not to mess with me. I was the man. Being born and raised in East Atlanta, I wore my name around town quite badly. Around here, there ain't no complaining. You take what you get and suck it up.

\*\*\*

East Atlanta is a nightmare. I came from a very poor, beaten down family. My mother, Shannon was a worn-out-woman of three. Henry, my older brother, Jasmine, and myself. I didn't know my father, but my two siblings were lucky enough to at least have some memories. Henry, however, says it wasn't much luck; meeting our father was nothing special to talk about. "You didn't miss out on a thing," he said. From the pictures, my father was a tall, dark-skinned man with a full beard and tattoos that covered him head to toe. He and my mother never got along, so he was always put out. There was always that soft spot about him though — my mother could never leave him alone. Even after the yelling and abusive fist fights, my mother always held out a hand for him to come back home. Money that was. My father was one of the biggest drug dealers in all East Atlanta. Of course, the cops knew about him, but they were waiting to build up that case to take him down. My father was no dummy. He knew the ins and outs of the drug game. He was a big target, but you wouldn't dare see any evidence that involved his face or name.

One day, he left the house and did his rituals: all-black outfit, diamond cross around his neck, and was sure to kiss my siblings and mother before he went out the door. Everything was the same, but this time he took his big machine gun that my mother kept safe in their closet. My brother Henry recalled my mother freaking out, crying, and trying to pull him back inside of the house. "Don't do it Michael!" she yelled after him. "You know you have a baby on the way." My father, as stubborn as he was, wouldn't settle. He was out the door and saying goodbye was the last words they ever got out of him. A couple of days later, my father was buried and I was born a few months after.

\*\*\*

Georgia Peach High School was where I went with my sister Jasmine. Henry was a drop out just in the ninth grade but he was now twenty-two. He was the man of the house with our father being gone, and now that he was older. Jasmine tried to be the centerpiece of our family. My mother had lost herself after my father had died. She turned to any kind of drug to keep her sane. But it all just became a part of her lifestyle. Henry was in a big gang and made a profit for our house by selling dope. He got so wrapped up into it until he did a bank robbery and was caught up in a murder scene. One of his "boys" ratted him out to the cops and he was locked up. He got twenty years minimum.

It wasn't long after that until we found out that Jasmine was three months pregnant. She decided that she wanted to keep the baby and finish out her senior year. My grades were slipping, money was running out, and my mother was losing her strength. I knew that I needed to make a change and be the new father figure in our household, so I did what my family (and everyone else in East Atlanta) did best. The drug game.

I was halfway through tenth grade when I dropped out. I didn't care about football, those school dances, and extracurricular activities. All I wanted to do was make quick, easy money, and win back the reputation of my big brother.

One year later, and I was the man of the corner store. Everyone knew who to go to. Back home I was bringing in more money than Henry could ever lay hands-on and we were finally back on top with the bills. Jasmine had her baby girl, Alanna, and thankfully that nerdy dude was there to stick around for good. Jasmine actually found her a man who wanted to take care of her the right way. I thank God she didn't end up with no thug.



She was getting really sick of how we were living though. Old, musty house in the projects being worn down day by day. People getting killed left and right. Every day after work, she would go pick up Alanna from daycare and come straight home to start dinner and clean. Jasmine was tired. Our mother was no help. Half the time mama wouldn't even come home.

I remember one night I came in and noticed that Jasmine had the house spotless. It was a long day in the streets and I was tired, so I didn't even bother to go say hi to her. The house was quiet, but I didn't think anything of it. That next morning, I went to her room and saw a letter there on her bed. It read: MY JERMY, PLEASE TAKE CARE OF MOTHER. I KNOW WE HAVE HAD THIS TALK SEVERAL TIMES, BUT SHE IS ONLY GETTING WORSE. ALANNA AND I HAVE PACKED UP TO MOVE TO KENTUCKY WITH HER DAD. HE IS THE SWEETEST MAN I KNOW. I HATE TO LEAVE YOU HERE IN THIS MESS, BUT THIS IS NO PLACE TO RAISE MY BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER. I WANT THE BEST FOR HER AND THIS TOWN WILL ONLY CONTINUE TO DRAG US ALL DOWN. I KNOW THAT I CAN NOT CHANGE YOUR MIND ABOUT WHERE HOME IS, BUT PLEASE JUST HEAR ME OUT. YOU CAN'T KEEP LIVING LIKE THIS, BROTHER. JUST LOOK AT OUR FAMILY NOW...BROKEN. PROMISE ME ONE THING, THOUGH. PROMISE ME THAT YOU WILL GO TO THAT CHURCH THAT I TOLD YOU ABOUT. I REALLY HAVE BECOME A BETTER WOMAN. AND I CAN ONLY HOPE AND PRAY THAT YOU BECOME A STRONGER MAN. DO THIS ONE THING FOR ME PLEASE. WITH MUCH LOVE, JASMINE.

As much as I wanted to, I didn't dare throw that note away. The church was no place for me, but this note was the only thing I had left of my sister. With mama leaving every chance she could get, I was now the only person in our house. My father dead and gone, my brother locked up in prison, mama wandering the streets, and my sister on to a better life. This only made me go harder. I started to increase my game and I got involved with more crime. Robbing banks, fraud, and having hookers in and out of my trap house to make my bread. I went to jail a couple of times, but the feds never knew of my big boy acts. Now being the main target in East Atlanta, I had more hits coming in to try and tear me down.

The small corner store was my main gig. Every Sunday I went there to just hang out a bit and shoot some dice with some of my boys. You know, quick and easy money. I would buy a twelve-pack of beer to cool down from that beating sun and stack my money up. It wasn't long before I started noticing this beautiful little lady coming by each week after Sunday service to buy some milk and a few snacks. I am no sucker for the females around here, especially because of the talk that goes around and always seem to come out of their mouths. I knew not to get tied up with any female and take down my game. But something about her just made my eyes light up. She was like no other woman I had seen around here in East Atlanta. Dressed so nicely, hair evenly laid and all shiny, and jewelry that reflected her golden skin. My boys would try to talk slick to her, but I shut all of that down quick. "Man, learn to have some respect!" I would say. She would pay them no mind, but she came out and thanked me for being such a "gentleman."

A couple of weeks later I stopped her before she went in to talk. She was a member of Grace Temple Baptist Church — that church Jasmine was telling me about. She told me that she knew of me and that she wanted me to come by to see how I liked their church service. I learned a lot about her in those short five minutes, but I couldn't remember her name. "Yeah 'ight, I'll think about it," I told her.

I came back home that evening only to see my mother lying on the couch with foam coming out of her mouth. I ran overly quickly and started shaking her, scared, and not knowing what to do. "MAMA! MAMA, PLEASE!" It did me no good. I grabbed my cell phone out of my pocket and dialed 9-1-1. With my hands shaking so much, you would've thought I didn't know where each number was. It took the ambulance forever but they eventually came and I rode alongside my mother the whole way to the hospital. The doctors did everything they could to get her back. Although, it was too late. I had lost her.

July 24, 2018, is a day I'll never forget. I remember turning off the TV from watching *Boyz in the Hood* at 1:56 AM and rolling over to go to sleep but heard a loud ringer on my trap phone shortly after. The only time I ever got a call on that phone during that time of night is if something bad happened. It was a call from one of my partners saying he needed help with a job. One of his brothers got caught up in a shoot-out, so he needed some back up to go pull him out. I instantly jumped out of my bed to put on some clothes, then I grabbed my heat, and I was out the door. I got down the street and rubbed on my neck to find my chain and pray. It wasn't there. I had forgotten my gold cross at the house that kept me protected. I remember letting my foot off the gas and considered going

back to get it, but I was already late and I couldn't leave my boy hanging.

I pulled up to the scene, just six minutes away, and bullets were spraying everywhere. I got my AK-47 out and turned around, but it was too late. Next thing you know, I got hit from the side and fell to my knees. All I could think about was my sister and little niece. The pain was too heavy for me. Tears started rolling down my face and screams came out of my mouth until I was shut up by another bullet in my stomach. Things got quiet and people were fleeing the scene. I looked to my left and saw two dead bodies. To my right was four. Finally, I saw some blurry red lights flashing from a distance before my eyes shut completely.

Ten hours after arriving at the hospital, I finally woke up and started getting questioned by my nurses. I had no one to turn to. I just sat there lonely and broken. I was in there for a few days before I got my one and only visitor. It was her — Ramona. I only knew her name because of her bright yellow “visitor” sticker which had her name printed all big across her chest. Ramona sat there and talked to me for hours. I told her the whole story and every detail that I remembered. We got to know each other a lot better and I even filled her in with my family background.

“I had no choice,” I told her. “You know how it is out here. I’m just trying to hold it down for my family. I got too far into the game, but it was all I knew.”

Ramona was very understanding of my background but she knew that my heart was big and that I was capable of change. “Everyone has a past,” she told me. “I know that your past has not been easy by any means, but I want you to take this opportunity as a wake-up call.”

She took out a small Bible from her purse and read me a couple of scriptures. “I want you to come to church with me when you’re all healed up,” Ramona said. “Do me this one favor. I know that your sister would be very proud of you.”

\*\*\*

After three tough years of jail, I left the drug game and never looked back. With some great church services and a beautiful, Godly woman by my side, I was thankful enough to leave my dark past behind. Ramona became my best friend after a few years. We started sharing many parts of our lives together, but my favorite memories were going to Grace Temple with her. It took a lot of time for her to gain my trust, and it even took some time for the people in the church to see my true colors, but when it all settled into place, it was the best feeling ever. I was a new man. A man of God.

Six years after meeting at the corner store, Ramona and I got married and moved in with each other. Life was just perfect. I was a manager at a shoe store and worked at a gas station part-time, but Ramona encouraged me to start my own business. I saw her working hard every day and putting in extra effort to pay bills, so I did just that.

Together, we decided to leave East Atlanta and moved to a beautiful neighborhood in Alabama. Ramona’s family was from Alabama and she had planned to move back there sometime anyway. As loving as her family is, they welcomed me in with open arms and a handful of help to start up my own gas station. The business was taking off and I really enjoyed what I was doing, so I took over three more properties. Ramona continued her career as a nurse and I was now my own boss. Only this time, selling the right things.

I am now a father of two handsome young boys. Justin, my oldest, is a spitting image of myself — he’s got my eyes, my nose, and my lips, with a head full of nappy hair. He’s my pride and joy. He’s four years old and the most respectful kid I have ever met. I never knew someone could touch my heart the way that he did. I made sure to raise him right and I promised to always be there.

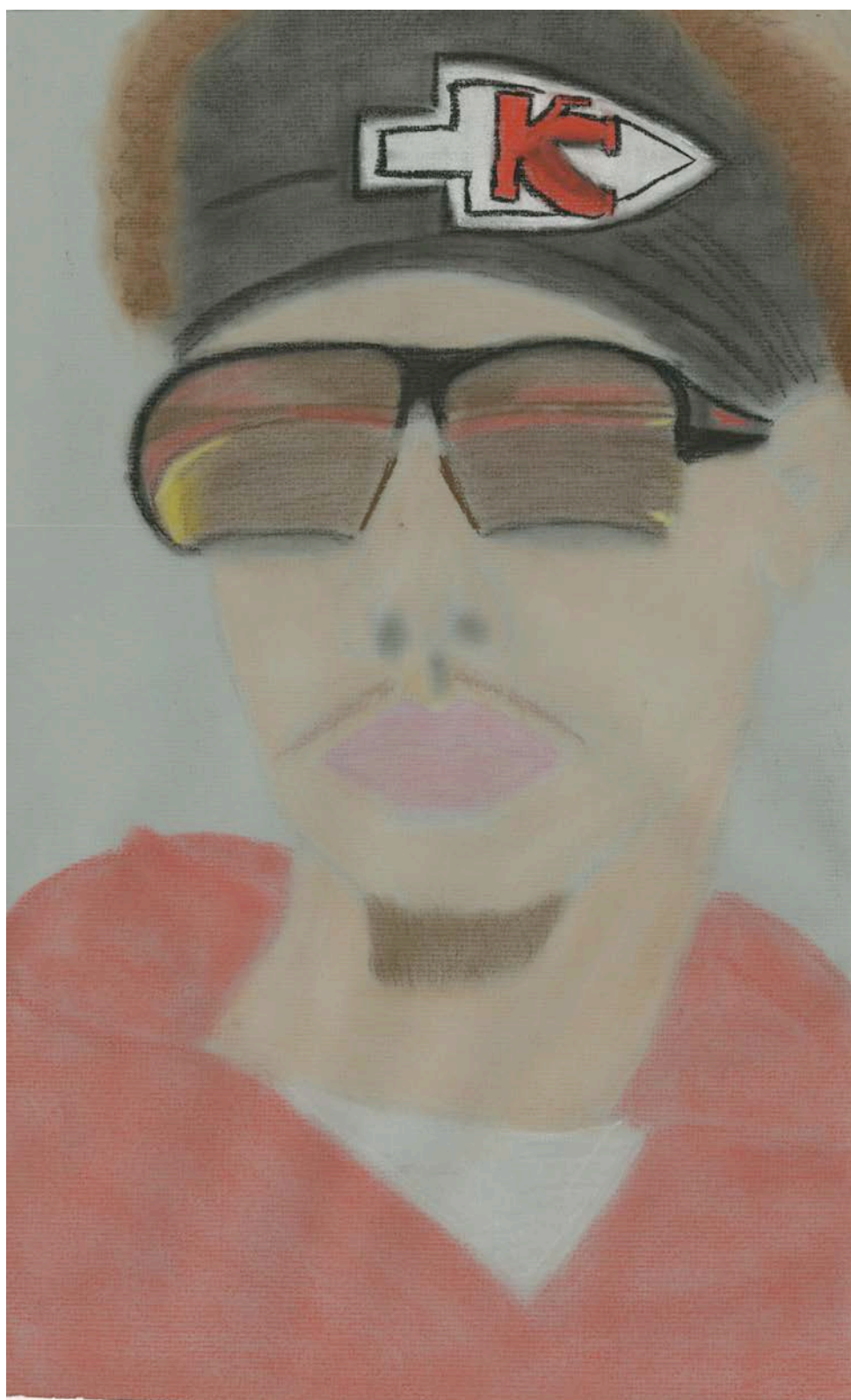
Jaxson came a year later. My chubby, round-headed goofball always kept me on my toes. He is my baby boy, and most definitely my last. He just turned three. I wanted to set an example for my boys. And even though they weren’t being raised the same way, I made sure that they wouldn’t have to go through anything that I did.

My beautiful wife Ramona is the glue who holds this family together. Words can’t describe all that she means to me. Someone who holds me down through whatever saw the good in me with my ghetto past, and loves me unconditionally. She is such a strong-minded woman. Without her, I wouldn’t be the man I am today.

After we had Jaxson, I dove deeper into my relationship with God. I became a youth speaker and traveled to different churches and neighborhoods all over Alabama to preach the word to all that was far and near. From the suburbs to the projects, I made my way around here to touch lives. It felt good to be able to reflect on my story and encourage those young boys to get out of the streets.

I finally decided to make my way back to East Atlanta. Grace Temple announced a service held on Saturday for me to come down and speak to the youth in their community. Going back to my old roots wasn't easy, but I knew that my message could change people for the better. I spoke about change and I was very surprised to see every eye and ear locked in on me. Everyone loved it and some even talked to me after the service.

I drove off from East Atlanta but I left a special part of me behind. I know the man I was before and I surely know the man I am today. As I sat in my car and prayed, I was thankful for the man that I had become and most thankful that I beat that Atlanta heat.



PATRICK MAHOMES  
Tammy McFadden

# DEAR REBECCA

by Janelle Braswell

Dear Rebecca,

That's it. I have already decided that will be your name. I have already made a place on my chest for the tattoo that I will put there so that it reminds me of you every day when I wake up and every night when I go to bed. I have already thought up your destiny because you have already affected mine.

Although you are not born yet, you make me smile. Even though you are a mere thought, you bring me happiness in times of darkness. Because you are only a wish I cannot talk to you, face to face, that is. Not the real you. I do, in fact, keep you by my bedside at night so that, in times of loneliness I can talk to you. Where did I get you? Funny story that is.

I remember my sophomore year a pro-life group came to my school along with a bunch of other Catholic charities to spread the good word of the Heavenly Father most of them believe in. They had, in this basket, a bunch of replicas of babies that were about two weeks old in the womb. I wanted one, but I didn't grab one, thinking that I would be the only person who wanted one.

Everyone got one.

I was one of the only ones who didn't have one. But it seemed like luck was on my side. I found a bag in my choir room that had one in there. I named her after you. I kept her face. I still do. I wrapped her in a tissue and set her beside me. She stays there as so do you.

The other people in my class . . . weren't very nice to their babies. Specifically, this guy and a group of girls. It . . . it hurt me so much because what they would do is that they would write all over them. With pen. I could hear the baby crying in my ear and I felt like crying. Then . . . then they tore its head off and started throwing it around and I couldn't take it anymore. I cried. I did. It was normal for me, though. People just ignored me.

I couldn't tell them. I couldn't tell them that the reason I was crying was because of them. Was because I was afraid that you will never be mine. Afraid that you will never exist and it will all be because of me. I am scared and people don't understand. When I talk to my doctor about it she just brushes it off and tells me not to worry. That doesn't make me feel any better because I want you here. I want you to be more than a memory. More than a thought. More than a figment of my imagination that I will never make real because of who I am.

I'm sorry. You don't want to hear that. You don't want to hear about my struggles. You want to hear about how I want to caress your soft skin. How I want to kick the shit out of any boy or girl who looks at you the wrong way. How I want to read you to sleep. How I want to be there for you like my own mother couldn't. The one you were named after. You want to hear how much I love you. Which I do, even though you are not born. I always will. No matter what you choose.

I love you.

Signed,

Your future mother



# HIDDEN FEARS

by Janelle Braswell

He runs away like a small child,  
scared that his fear could be too wild.  
He hides in the corner of his room  
and waits while the spirits loom.

There is something quiet hiding within,  
this battle he knows that he cannot win.  
Fear always overcomes strength,  
no matter the courage he has in length.

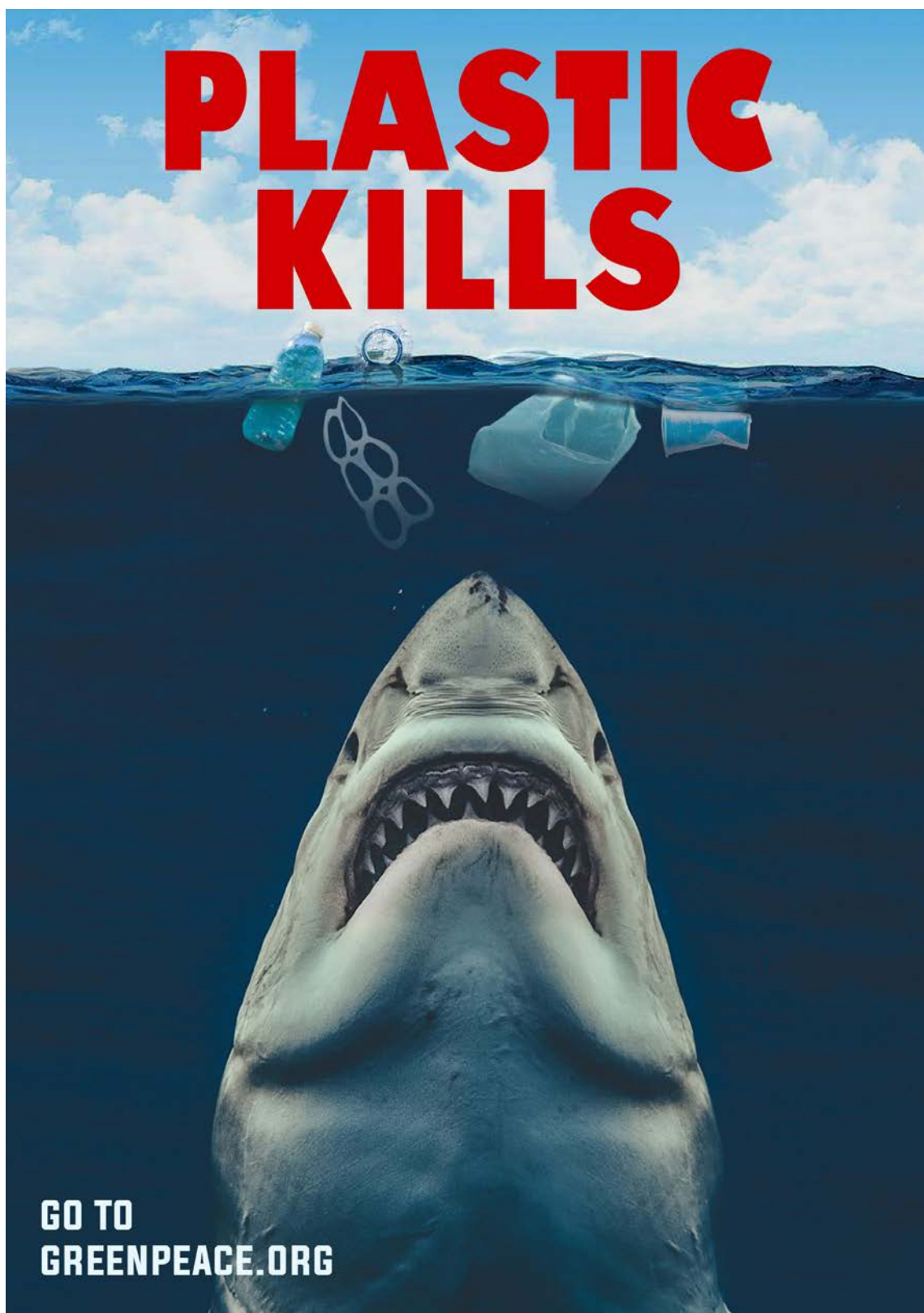
He is not alone in this struggle,  
for his brother can always sense the trouble.  
He swoops in when he is needed,  
he makes it so he is not defeated.

Big brother watches from every corner,  
everything must be in order.  
To protect his kin is his one true reason.  
With family, there is no high treason.

Big brother is watching you,  
there is not much you can do.  
He will always be there,  
through every snare and every prayer.

Be not afraid small sweet child,  
for your fears will never grow wild.  
With your brother beside you, there will be no tears,  
as long as there are no hidden fears.





PLASTIC KILLS  
Erin Williams

# WHY, LITTLE NOTHING?

by Mariah Bosanco

Why, Little Nothing, do you eat so much?

I eat to hide my pain.

Why, Little Nothing, do you stay so quiet?

I stay quiet so that no one can hear my brain.

Why, Little Nothing, do you even try?

I try because I don't want to hide.

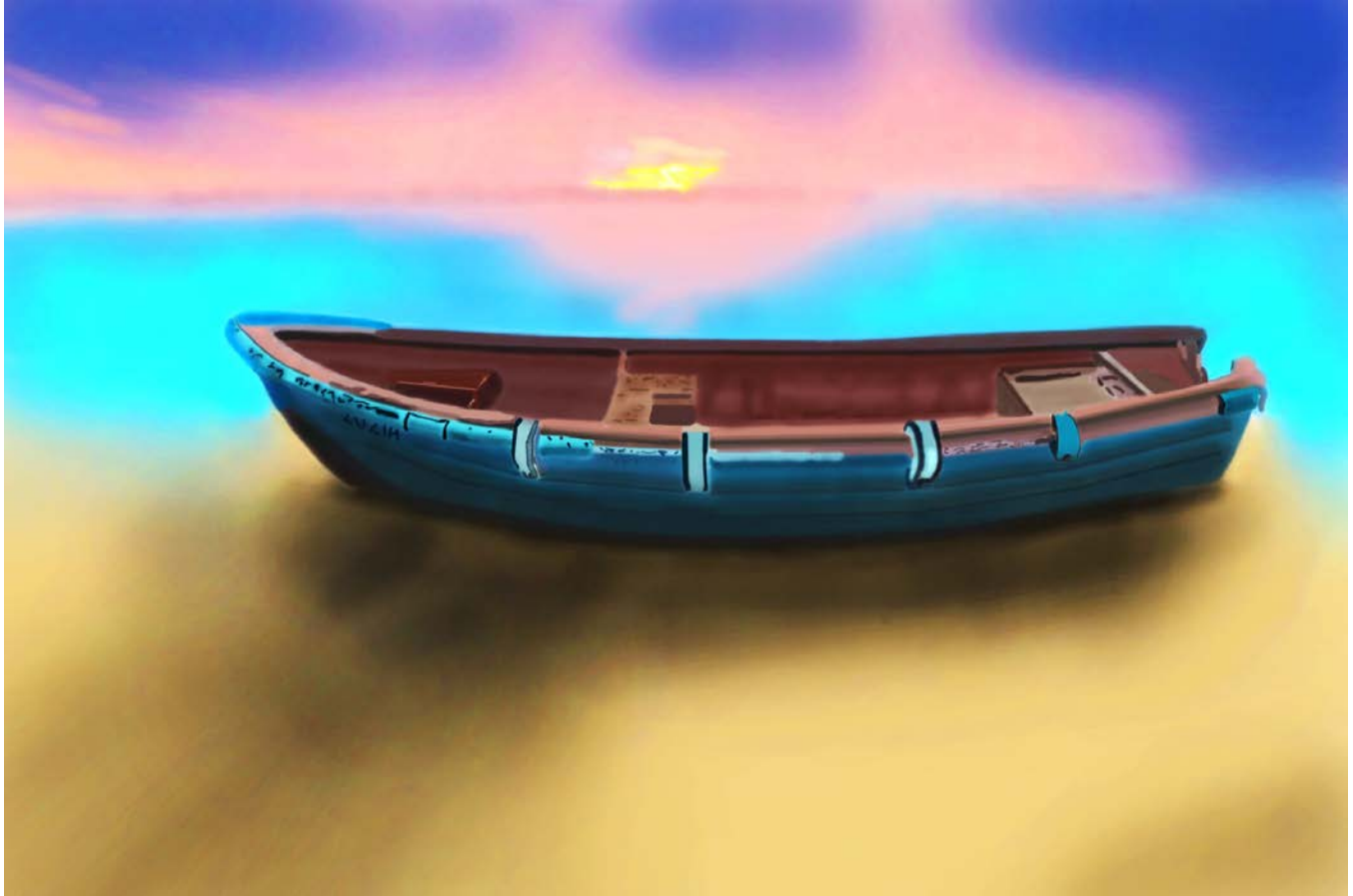
Why, Little Something, do you not want to hide?

I don't want to hide because I am alive.

# I AM FROM

by Mariah Bosanco

I am from a space of different from dark and light  
I am from the home of what looked perfected on the outside  
to dark heavy clouds, secrets and lies on the inside  
I am from the sunflowers that look up to the sky and the warm sun where  
everything is going to be okay  
I am from a tradition of keep it under the rug and depression  
from both Mother and Father  
I am proud of you and I support you is  
what I never heard  
I am from the religion of Christianity  
I guess not anymore  
From what my past was I don't know what I am anymore  
I am from Wichita, Kansas but my heart, soul, and mind travel beyond the stars and past the  
planets, never ending completely anywhere or in just one spot for too long  
I am from peach cobbler and fried doughnuts that my Great Grandma  
who is now my angel used to make  
But anyway from what does not make sense or what's missing or healing  
I am still living



BOAT PAINTING  
Wesley Brooks, Jr.

# ROSE

by Fyuree Colley

Rose sat at home a lot feeling sorry for herself. Her friends always had other friends to hang out with while she was stuck as the last choice. She didn't want to be the last choice anymore. She wanted to be someone's first and have human connections and have someone to call her own. The only way she knew how to accomplish this, was to create a profile on an online dating site. The most popular one seemed to be an app called "Cinder."

Waiting for the app to download onto her phone, she went to the kitchen to make herself a cup of raspberry tea. She lived alone in an apartment downtown, where there were lots of noises she had had to get used to. Trains, people yelling at each other in the streets, sirens and everything else. At this point, she finds it hard to sleep when there isn't some kind of disturbance; she's lived that way for so long.

Rose opens the newly downloaded app and puts in a username and password. The next step is to choose the best pictures she has of herself. When the profile is all set up - Welcome, Rose McAllister - she goes onto swiping. No to a lot, yes to a few, no to a lot, yes to a few. There seems to be a lot of people she doesn't know living in her area, some of them really interesting looking. After what seemed like 20 minutes of swiping, she comes across a particular profile that catches her eye. A dark-haired man named James Candace, age 25, social worker, 3 miles away. Rose stares at his eyes through the screen of her phone and thinks she can almost fall in love with him right away. She swipes right and immediately gets the notification that it is a match, causing her heart to skip a beat.

How has she never seen him before if he only lives 3 miles away? She would definitely have noticed a beautiful boy such as James. She hesitates, thinking if she should write to him or not. A few seconds go by and a message from him pops up before she can act first. The text reads, "Hey gorgeous, how come I haven't seen you around?"

Her stomach flips. How weird it is that they were thinking the same thing. She thinks about what she'll say when another message from him appears. It reads, "Do you want to get a coffee? I would love to chat."

She responds with, "Sure, I'd love to! What time works for you?" Did that sound too eager? She hoped not. She receives another message shortly after.

"I'm free in an hour if that's alright with you."

Rose is speechless. She thinks about what she would wear and how she would present herself, and then stops. The worst that could happen is this doesn't go well and you never see him again. You don't know each other, it's going to be okay. Why not go out and get coffee, you have nothing better to do.

"Sounds great. Meet me at Phil's?"

"Be there :)"

Rose clambers around her apartment, going to the closet and deciding what she should wear. "This shouldn't be too important, Rose," she thinks to herself. "This is nothing serious. You're just having coffee with someone you've never met."

She pulls a red sundress and white sneakers from her closet then lays them across her bed. Once she's done prepping herself for her "date," there's still about 45 minutes left to waste on whatever life has in store for her now. Rose decides to pull out her phone and browse through the news.

A headline appears at the top that reads, "An Abundance of Girls Gone Missing." She doesn't read it, because the thought of that makes her feel uneasy and she would rather not feel like throwing up on the way to her date with a very handsome man. Scrolling through article after article, there are only about ten minutes left until she is needed at the coffee shop. She grabs her coat and heads out the door. Realistically, she won't need the coat since it's in the middle of summer, but you never know when it could start raining or anything else.

Phil's is a few blocks away, so there's no need to go into the parking garage and drive there. "The exercise is probably good for me anyway," she thinks. When she arrives at her destination, she sees that James is already there waiting. And she thought she was early. The empty chair across from him is calling her name. She strides right over to him with fake confidence and introduces herself.

Sticking a hand out, she relays, "Hi, I'm Rose. You must be James."

James takes her hand in his and bends his head down to kiss it. How gentlemanly. Rose sits down at the

table and sees for the first time that he's already ordered something for the both of them. In front of him, there is a cup of black coffee. She recalls hearing something about people drinking black coffee having black souls. But that's just a saying. At her spot of the table, there is a cappuccino with whipped cream and caramel dressing on top. There's no possible way he could know that was her favorite.

He saw the look on her face and said, "Lucky guess. You seemed like the type of girl to like caramel." She simply smiled, not knowing what else to do. This was possibly a red flag, but she decided to go on with the date anyway.

"So, did you have any other plans for the day?" Rose questioned, trying to make conversation.

"Well I ran a few errands this morning, but I didn't have any other schedule set for the day until I found you on Cinder. You definitely caught my eye." She didn't know whether to blush or to feel afraid. He was quite charming but in an almost creepy way. "What about you?" he continued.

"I had nothing to do today, it's my day off," I answered honestly.

"And what is it you do? It wasn't listed on your profile," he inquired.

She paused for a moment, thinking, not sure if she should tell the truth or make something up. At this point, she was already taking too long to answer, so there was no use in trying to come up with something on the fly. "I work with kids. I'm a preschool teacher." It had in fact been President's Day, so she had the day all to herself.

"Interesting. I do get a very caring and nurturing vibe from you."

"Thank you, I think."

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes, sipping their coffees. How could such a beautiful man give off such weird energy? You would think he would be very lively and talkative, and less... weird. She dared to lift her head back up to look at him and he was staring her dead in the eyes.

"Is there something on my face?"

"No, you just happen to be extravagantly beautiful."

All of a sudden, every thought I had had of him being creepy drifted away and was left with only good thoughts of a gentleman. How weird could he be if he could be so polite? He held out his hand and anticipated me taking it, which I did unhesitatingly. He had his hooks in her now. James squeezed her hand and she squeezed back. He didn't make her nervous anymore. She felt as if nothing could. Nothing had ever given her a rush of confidence like that in her life, and she didn't want to stop feeling it.

"How did you do that?" she asked, giggling.

James smiled at her playfully, "Do what?" He knew exactly what he did but neither of us knew how to explain it without it sounding odd.

"Nevermind." They laughed together, causing other people in the shop to look at them weird. But, once again, she didn't care and felt unphased.

The rest of their date went similarly to this. They talked about their lives, they laughed. A lot. They didn't let go of each other's hands the entire time, even to drink their coffee. The date ended by James peering at the time on his expensive-looking watch and saying, "I better get home. The dogs aren't going to feed themselves."

"You have dogs?" He hadn't mentioned this before now.

"Yes I have four of them, believe it or not."

"Aw, what kind are they? Maybe I can meet them some time."

"Yes..." he said kind of off, "maybe you can." She decided that the date had gone too well to let that mess up her image of him once more. No matter that he hadn't answered the first question. "We'll meet again soon?" He asks as if disregarding that his previous statement had ever happened. "Say, Sunday evening at your place, if that's alright with you?"

"That's more than alright with me," said Rose, a little too eagerly. She hadn't given herself much time to process what he was saying, she just knew she wanted to see him again.

Standing up, James lifts her hand and kisses it once more. They still hadn't let go of each other until this point. He starts to walk off but turns around when he gets to the door. "You really are a rose." With that, he proceeds to leave.

She feels weak in the knees, but she probably shouldn't stand there staring at the door for too long before people start to look at her. She swings the door open about a minute after he did and walks home. The whole way



there she couldn't stop thinking about him, and those thoughts didn't stop when she walked in her door either. Quickly after stepping into her living room and getting comfortable, she realized they hadn't exchanged numbers. She opens up the Cinder app and looks through her messages to find him but sees his profile has been deleted.

Was he going to stand her up? How were they going to get in contact now? She doesn't know how to feel other than devastated. He had seemed to really have enjoyed the date, especially after saying what he did right before he left. I guess it's over. But it didn't feel over. Not quite yet. She couldn't describe the feeling, but their story seemed to have more to it than has already happened. They just met. He told her he would see her again and it seemed like they would somehow.

The rest of her Friday night went by quickly. She watched tv, called her mother, drank more tea, and went to bed. Saturday was virtually the same. Sunday morning she woke up feeling excited but she couldn't remember why. All-day she spent getting ready for something but the reason would not come to mind. Around five o'clock, she started getting anxious at the feeling she'd been having all day. Then she thought of him - the plan had been for him to come to her house this evening for dinner. She must have forgotten because he didn't have her address, so the chances of him making it here were slim to none. As soon as that thought popped into her head, there was a knock on her apartment door.

Slowly and carefully, with her guard up, she made her way to the door to look through the peephole. Low and behold, the one and only James Candace was standing outside her door holding a bouquet of roses. The door creaked as she opened it hesitantly. His smile lit up his entire face and her entire attitude.

"Don't you look as beautiful as ever, Rose," he complimented.

"And you look very handsome," she offered, moving her hand in an entering motion suggesting he should come inside and make himself at home. "It's not much, but it's mine," she continued, talking about her apartment.

"It's just lovely. Smells wonderful too."

He turned around from where he had walked into the living room and handed her the flowers. Evidently, they were not roses, because she had already been given that name. They were daisies and they were absolutely gorgeous.

"Thank you so much, this is very sweet of you," she exclaimed.

"It's no problem. Some flowers for a flower." That made her blush.

They started talking and cooking together. The decision had been to make spaghetti. They started a small food fight to lighten the mood, even more, causing a bit of a mess that they then proceeded to pick up together as well. They seemed to fit well together. He seemed like the kind of person who could fit well with anyone.

After dinner had been made and they sat down to eat it, Rose had noticed a notification appear on her phone. It was an Amber Alert for an eighteen-year-old girl. It looked like James had gotten it too, but his reaction was a little off. Rose looked up at him and he smiled at her with a bitten tongue, trying to conceal something maybe?

"Have you tried the spaghetti yet?" he asked, taking the conversation away from the alert before it could begin. It wasn't going to be that easy, however.

"No, I haven't. This is so sad, do you see this?" she said, pointing to her phone.

"The girl?" he asked, not looking up from his plate.

"Yes. I think it's incredibly heartbreaking when someone goes missing. My biggest fear is being alone, and I can't imagine how alone and scared they feel."

"Maybe she ran away, you never know."

"This is true," she said with some consideration. Just then, she thought back to the article she had seen on her phone a couple of days ago about the missing girls and went to search for it.

James saw her eagerness, and said, "It's rude to be on your phone at the dinner table." She ignored him because this was her house and she was curious.

She quickly found the article after looking for the keyword "MISSING." Skimming a little bit ahead, a paragraph states, "A total of twenty girls have been reported missing shortly after leaving for a date that they all met, sources say, on the dating app called 'Cinder.' With further questioning of the friends and family of the missing victims, they all were told the girls were going out to meet someone they met online. Nobody knew the name of the person, and the investigations have shown that all of the girls' phones have been shut off at this time, but we can only assume that it was one person - or people working together - who have committed this crime." She



didn't need to read anymore. There were chills running down her spine and the hair on the back of her neck was standing up like a cat stretching its back.

Rose put her phone down and started eating her pasta. James was giving her a death glare while she did so, waiting for her to speak. With regret already evident before the words even came out of her mouth, she spoke softly, "How did you know where I lived, James?"

He said nothing, but only smiled, and she began to feel dizzy. Reaching for the glass of water she had poured herself, her hand seemed to multiply in front of her eyes and she could no longer tell which one she had control over. The glass of water had seemed to tip over on its own, or did Rose run into it? She couldn't tell. She could no longer see anything than gray objects. The last thing she heard was, "It looks like you're enjoying the spaghetti," before she fell out of her chair, completely unconscious.

Who knows how much time had passed before Rose woke up on a couch in an unfamiliar location. Her head was spinning and, gathering her surroundings, she noticed there were several girls staring at her from a short distance. She sat up frantically meeting everybody's eyes. They had a mixture of pity and being terrified strewn across their faces. Counting how many girls there were, she came up with twenty-one. She was the twenty-second. James had been the kidnapper of Cinder, and she had fallen for it.

"Where did he go?" asked Rose, her voice shaking.

The girls all looked around at each other nervously. One of them finally responded by lifting a finger and pointing to a room in the corner of what seemed to be the basement that they're in.

"So what do we do now? You've been in here for weeks?"

As soon as she finished her sentence, James' door swung open loudly, and out he came.



COCONUT BOWL  
Kristi Wesley

# A SHORT CRY

by Jordan Thraxton

The world keeps turning.  
She's working,  
She's waiting.

Her energy nourishes fruits she cannot eat  
And feeds mouths she doesn't know.  
Days turn into weeks,  
Promises turn into dreams.

Her limbs become tight  
With nameless anticipation.  
She works.

She doesn't have a plan,  
She has tomorrow.

The world she sets in motion keeps turning,  
She yearns to experience the light of day.

When the sun rises for work,  
She gets back out into the field,  
She stands still.  
She stops.  
And so does the world.

# GUNSMOKE

by Rachel Greene

Do you remember  
how we used to take over the living room with LEGOs  
and our sagas would last for weeks?  
—Remember when a book fell on our castle and knocked it down?

*Yeah, and it smeared that one figure's face. We renamed him after that.*

What about playing Mario Kart  
and how we'd repeatedly borrow the same cartridge from the library  
so we wouldn't lose our saved file?  
—Remember when you tried to teach me Smash Bros?

*Yeah, that was funny. It didn't go very well.*

I wasn't all bad at "boys games"...  
remember playing Hot Wheels,  
and how we'd cover your bedroom floor in a massive network of those plastic roadways?  
—Remember when I won that exclusive set of cars? You were so jealous.

*Yeah, I still am.*

What about watching PBS together...  
remember when 9-11 happened  
and you ran to Mom yelling about someone flying a plane into a tower?  
—Remember how she was mad at first because she thought you'd changed the channel?

*Yeah, it's still hard to believe we both lived through that.*

It's weird to think how old we're getting...  
remember when we were small enough to sit at the "kiddie table" at Thanksgiving  
and we made those kinda gross "turkey cookies" every year?  
—Remember how scary Grandma's basement used to be?

*Yeah, but it was worth the rugburns for their vintage Nintendo system.*

Now to think we're in college,  
well, you're graduated...  
did Mom push you to get such good grades, or did you do that yourself?  
—You know, I used to think you were Mom's favorite because of your GPA.

*Is that why you're so obsessed with your grades now?*

I don't know.

Hey, little brother.

*Yeah?*

We have so many colorful memories...

*Yeah.*

Why did you decide to make your last one a gunshot?



STILL LIFE WITH FRUIT  
Tammy McFadden



# ANNA'S BODY

by Aarionna C. Holliday-Chowning

Anna's temple has never been used for her worship.  
Every man in her broken family  
found a sacred piece of her  
in the basement of her grandmother's home.

Kansas City's inner-city streets hid the demons under the pavement.  
No secret left uncovered, the God of Truth to find.  
Anna knew her body was a temple,  
even though she never understood how holy it was.

With each worship, her uncles and cousins helped  
the minutes feel like days.  
Days turned into weeks.  
Weeks transformed into months  
and months converted to years.

Anna's head once filled with amazing ideas and concepts,  
a living illustration of everything she had ever been through  
adapted to the idea of but people are always in your ear. Block them out with your mind,  
the words spoke to her ears muttered,  
"Laying on your back will be the most powerful thing you can do."

In the mirror,  
after washing the sadness off, she stares  
at the hollowness that is her eyes.  
"You are not just taking up space," she tells herself.  
"You do not need to use your body  
To show the world who you are or can be."

She remembered them tell her,  
"Those arms are for pleasing.  
You can worry about being healed after we're done."

Today, Anna wishes her fingers touched every soul,  
testifying on how to truly breakthrough.

She would say,  
"Move your body in the direction of making something great.  
If your legs fail to get you where you need to be,  
drag yourself from where you have been."

# SOMETHING TO PROVE

by Jordan Thaxton

My parents wanted to show me something.

Every day they worked, and I saw them as they sweat and as they cried. I saw them as they sullenly shut the car door, as they shed off their coats, as they smiled on the phone but tensed their shoulders. The click of their heels on the linoleum kitchen floor, like a barrel of a gun waiting for something to aim at and shoot. They always seemed to be tight-roping not a marvelous spectacle, but across their own lives.

At the end of every day, they came home shells of the people who woke me each morning. They said I was going to be alright. The swing of the screen door let the harsh winter air swiftly creep in; echoing that the world is a scary place that'll knock you right off your feet, but you would be alright.

I was clothed but torn. I was sheltered but always cold. Some afternoons, I would sit on our bustling doorstep, watching the busy street. In the crowd, I would watch the people pass me by. They were living lives and carrying their own stories beneath and behind them. I saw through all their faces. All the strangers passing me by. A stranger was me.

It's alright, it's alright.

Every morning I got the best of them, my parents. Their smiles as they brushed across the kitchen. The clutter of the days' accessories; keys shuffling in pockets, coffee brewing, pots being rinsed in the sink. My father silent, eyes on the newspaper but I never thought he was reading. My mother compulsively making sure everything was in its place. Precisely as the hands on the clock passed each minute, she ticked around the room.

Mom, would you still recognize me?

I would be rushed off to school with a pat on my back and kiss on my forehead.

It's alright, it's alright.

All-day I would dream. They told me I could dream as long as it wasn't threatening. I could reach for the stars as long as my legs did the walking and my mind was still down to earth. If one day, I too would pick up the wheel and turn it so they could finally be at rest. All-day I would dream, but they said don't dream too hard and don't dream too loud, for the wheel needs to be turned.

At night I would come home, and each day was the same as the last. Exhausted smacked smiles and tightened shoulders. They said it would be alright, but they couldn't show me anything.

At night I would burn in my bed. Of all the places I could dream, I could never do so there. I lay awake, thinking the same promise I had made myself many nights before. Every night I would whisper into the darkness; I would have something to show somebody. One day, someday, and someday soon, I would have something to show anyone at all times.

I would be alright.

# GREEN

by Faith Maslak

Drip, drop, water falls from the tree tops.  
Water bubbles over moss covered rocks,  
the door to the cabin is locked

Green

The road we took to get here  
was hemmed by thick meadow pastures,  
parakeet sign marks the middle of no-where

Green

His eyes are jade mixed with chestnut,  
his jacket thick, warm and hunter green,  
the dusty sage-colored book open but  
the words are left unread

Green

The garden grows vivid and lush outside under the willow,  
even in the thunder, it's vibrant and thriving.  
The green flannel blanket is soft against the glass paned window

Green

Peaceful calm, when the storm passes,  
the sun shines on the green grasses,  
his jade eyes flash when the light passes

Green

# TRAVELER

by Faith Maslak

I am the traveler on the hillside,  
    The one you cast out, the one you ignored.  
I am the one you don't see at night,  
    The one you don't record,  
The smoke on the horizon, the light in the sky,  
    I am the wanderer, never staying in one place.  
I am thunder rolling across the plains,  
    My voice like lightning, for those who are afraid.  
I am mist that disappears over the hills,  
    I am the lonely, standing by myself.  
I am the moon, cold and alone,  
    I am a star, distant and shining.  
The one you use for your guide,  
    The one you forget when your time is right.  
I am the traveler on the hillside.



SAPPHIRE  
Isaiah Fradieu

# REWRITING THE ROUTE

by Aarionna C. Holliday-Chowning

When I was a kid, I daydreamed about the future mom I would be. Everything from my children's first words, to how they would be taught to treat other people and make a difference in this world. See, throughout my childhood, my mother was never "really" there. After my grandma passed when I was six, my mom passed away with her in every way except physically. So, I had to grow up. I raised my siblings. I learned how to cook, clean, and bathe them. I was stuck being the mom and dad before I was supposed to get booster shots.

Life seemed to go by like a calm storm, inevitable to bring chaos, yet yearning to come out on the other side with the peace of a river that one would not comprehend until a considerable amount of time had passed. I spent hours on end wondering about the what-ifs and why-me's.

I could hear my grandma saying, "Sweetheart, one day all of the pain will be worth it." I loved that woman, and anything she said was like finding that golden ticket in a Wonka bar.

During my trauma, I ached for the moment in my life where I could break the cycle and start my own course. In my early twenties, all my friends had one or two kids while I was still trying to make it through college algebra. Yet, I knew my time would come. Being a mom had to happen to me! There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. I had so many wrongs to right from the generational curses in my biological family. Back then, I had my priorities in order and knew the plan I had mapped out for my life. There were a lot of road bumps in the midst of it all but here I am.

I started at a new building this month, and my co-workers are a little quirky, but for the most part, they are accepting and fun. I come home wondering how their lives are outside of our bright, warm, welcoming building. I know I am the queen of making chaos look organized and beautiful on the outside, so I could only imagine how other social workers handle things. I've never been a people person, especially after I started going through recovery. Even today I do not go out of my way to make friends or spend time with people outside of my general group. Working at "You Are Not Alone Outreach for Children," I have learned a lot about myself, and I am continually trying to change to become a better person.

Becoming a child and family social worker was another dream I knew I had to accomplish. Going through school, I never thought of a plan B if I just so happened to not want to become a social worker anymore. All my friends use to say, "Ya know, changing my major every fall is just giving me a wider foundation of things to learn." I could not fathom the idea of taking hard courses, and then out of nowhere switching things up to fit my mood for the fall. I am sure, it is a rare gift to have. I simply prayed that everything worked out because Lord knows I cannot just start from scratch and possibly have to take more math.

During graduate school, I met Emmanuel. This nerdy, four-eyed, lanky, tall guy with just enough handsome under his belt for women to take a second look, but not enough swagger. He reminded me of one of those celebrities who could be the total package, but who just has not hit their prime yet. We had been seeing each other steadily for about 3 years, and he eventually came to his senses.

Emmanuel and I are not polar opposites, but there are things we tend to agree to disagree on. His sheltered upbringing made the mess that was my life so overwhelming to him. He never got the gist of why I went through the abuse and neglect. It made opening-up and being vulnerable seem like a drawn-out dissertation that had to be put in gentle terms as to not rob him from his innocence.

We do not fight like we use to, and through counseling, we can talk through things find solutions. Occasionally, we argue about big things rather than just bickering every once in a while. See, Emmanuel is a very black-or-white thinker. I guess that is what you would need as an attorney. Still, sometimes I desire a little more emotion than he is capable of giving. Nevertheless, it drives me absolutely nuts when we have a situation and he cannot step out of his ways and think like a sensitive human or, better yet, a social worker.

This morning, we stuck to our normal routine. For the kids, the day is mapped out as Morning, After-school, and Bedtime. In my mind, it helps us as parents to stay on the same page while giving the kids consistency. My alarm went off, and I rolled out of bed like an energetic sloth wishing every day could fall back. Still, I sprung forward. Putting my elephant slippers on, I journeyed through our ranch-styled home to get the kids up and ready. It is Friday, so that not only means it is the weekend, but in our house, it is also coco-pancake Friday. Isaiah, my oldest, has always been my morning bird. He has that Beyoncé I-woke-up-like-this face. With his re-



silence and strength, he deserves nothing less. Isaiah is a golden-caramel skinned, lanky boy with medium brown hair and blue eyes just like his dad.

Tickling his stomach while he pretends to be asleep is just an extra step to our routine, but it makes him happy, so who am I to take away that smile just because I am tired. In minimal words and with only essential gestures, we can communicate efficiently. I tell him it is time to get ready for school and his Daddy-O will be in to help him soon. Isaiah cannot quite do everything by himself with his disability, but occasionally we let him get as far as he can and celebrate his accomplishments. Sign language is our primary source of communication even though he knows simple words and has an iPad with a special talking app that he can use to help sometimes.

After leaving Isaiah's room, I make my way to a very royal pink castle. Pink has never been my thing, but this is the pink stage of life for my daughter. My little girl is the most darling and sassy 10-almost-40-year-old you will ever meet. Some people say, "That it's the pre-teen year blue if your daughter doesn't tell you how much you are ruining her life at least once before she's 18, you're probably doing something wrong." You know, a handful of times is not that bad, but I think I lost count after 25. My mother used to say, "I hope your first daughter is just like you," and what a blessing and a curse that has been. Aside from her ability to be America's biggest brat, Anastasia was my dream. She still is. So is Isaiah. The love a mother has for her children is indescribably unbreakable. That love is only stronger with Anna because of the broken relationship I had with my biological mother. I have tried extremely hard to ensure that she never feels the way I did in my childhood.

All the kids are up, including the biggest one, Emmanuel, and we sit around the dining table to eat. This table holds so much meaning and power for me. Starting and ending the day around it with the people I love the most makes everything worth it. There is a mess after every meal, arguing about the importance of vegetables, and sadness from a hard day at school or work. Even with all that, around this table, being together makes it a safer space, inside of a safe home.

It was Anna's turn to say grace and as always, she starts, "Hey Jesus, it's me, Anna." She goes on to say, "Thanks for waking my family up and helping me pick out my clothes. Oh, and thanks for chocolate, pancakes, eggs, and bacon. Help us all to have a great day. Love you, thanks again, Anna. Amen." And with that, we ate. No one looked at the other for permission. We just grinned and ate.

By the time I got the kids on the bus, it was time for me to go to work. My drive is always so peaceful. Wandering thoughts of clients, I have scheduled for the day drowns out my motivational morning podcast as if I were being submerged in the deep sea. Being a social worker is a fulfilling yet draining job. If you are not careful, like I am guilty of, the work consumes you. Without trying, your clients and their situations stick to you like leeches.

It was an unusual day where nothing too drastic happened. My clients had mild problems that they rated on a scale from easy-going to world-ending. I did not even notice the kids in the other rooms throwing things or screaming. Friday's are like coin tosses. The day can never be too smooth, but once the chaos sets in, there is no turning back.

There is a piercing silence on my drive home that leaves me in deep thought about my family, specifically my children. Two years after we got married, we started trying to have a baby. I knew there was a history of infertility in my family, but I hoped when it was my turn the universe, God, or whoever you wanted to believe in would cut me a little slack. So, I wanted to try earlier just in case something did not go right. Emmanuel and I spent hours with doctors. Then we would go and try again only to continue living at square one. It started to send me into this fear and depression, causing my mind to play into the what-ifs like a game of Jeopardy. What if I can't have biological children? What if Emmanuel will leave me because I can't have children? What if lightning struck my uterus during my partying days, and I just don't remember?

As I thought about my brain mentality, then, I really wondered how I catastrophize things so deeply and acted like adoption was not an option. I am a social worker for crying out loud. The journey to get pregnant with Isaiah lasted for over a year, and that was the worst part of the early years of our marriage. After a while, my body could not take the constant changes in medications, and being intimate with my own husband became a chore. I decided to take a break because I needed time to just recharge and focus on the present.

By our fourth anniversary, Isaiah came into our lives. Such a beautiful boy who had the heart of the gentle tin man, and the true courage of a lion. Having Isaiah naturally was an experience like no other. We knew that the challenges we faced trying to get him here, had no match on the challenges to keep him here and get him success-

fully through life. Emmanuel and I were so excited to have a boy first. He would grow up to be the protector and example to his younger siblings. It was the way I had always wanted. In spite of Down Syndrome and hearing impairment, we were determined more than ever to give him a life without limitations. Parenthood is its own mental illness and dealing with children all day who have their own, you always have to be on top of your game. Three hours of sleep for the first year made it impossible for me to even blink without taking a cat nap.

Finally, Anastasia came. She was my princess—my first daughter. With her, it was a smooth pregnancy and even smoother birth. I knew when I was younger that I wanted to have all of my children naturally. I could not imagine the chaos of a room with doctors and nurses, both of our crazy families, and Emmanuel passed out in a chair. I mean, it takes a village to raise the child, but not to give birth to it. Anna had no complications, and until after she was born, she was the most easy-going baby there was.

As I drove up to my street into the driveway, I remembered the vow I told myself a long time ago in a mirror: “Your sole purpose in life is to break the cycle and change the trajectory of children’s futures who came from situations as you did.” I thought so hard about a client I had today that was a little older than my Anna. In our session today, she kept repeating, “I need to rewrite this nightmare. I have to, I don’t have a choice.” It was as if she was facing a life-altering decision and knew that the fate of the world was in her hands.

While the kids are at their homework table, I am cooking dinner. There is the occasional whining from Anna because Isaiah is picking on her. Every so often a robotic computer howls “mom,” only for me to turn around pot-in-hand to see my son pretending as if nothing had happened. Finally, the moment arrives I have been waiting for since breakfast. Our family dinners always get me back on track mentally. We start our ritual of going around the table sharing about our day. The list consists of: one thing we really liked, one thing we did not like, who we helped, and what we could have done better.

We started our dinner-table ritual a little over a year ago when Isaiah was in his final grade of middle school and Anna was in her final year of elementary. I wanted them to think outside the box and stop responding to every question with, “it was good,” “nothing,” or “fine.” The kids have grown to mostly tolerate it, and afterward, we can have meaningful conversations. The things I learn from my kids blow my mind. Every day it seems like there is a new dance craze or a new phrase or term for something.

Anna decided to announce her frustration with our dinner table shenanigans. “Momma, I know you’re trying to get us to communicate more, and let me just tell you that is not fire at all.”

In confusion I respond, “I’m not sure what fire has to do with communication, but I will accept that it doesn’t seem fire to you. One day you will appreciate it.”

“Oh, I might; you’re right but don’t expect me not to be salty about it,” she replies.

At this point, I thought it would be best if we just wrapped up dinner. It was almost eight, and even though it is Friday, we like to maintain some sort of schedule for the sake of everyone’s sanity come Monday morning.

“How’s about you take your brother upstairs and get ready for bed?” I sassed back.

As they leave the table, Emmanuel and I discuss our days. Mainly, I serve as a listener while he unleashes all the frustration, he held back in front of the kids.

“My current client has so many options. Some are bad, and some are good. It kills me to want the best outcome for them, but there is only so much I can do!” He exclaims.

“Well dear, there is that saying about leading the horse to the water,” I respond trying to console him. At this moment I knew he needed me to be present. So, I went and sat on his lap and held him. Trying to exert enough energy from me, through him in order for him to feel the love I was giving.

“If only I could write step-by-step instructions on how to get them to drink. Maybe list the pros and cons of all the outcomes. I guess I wish I had the power to do more as you can.” The discouragement in Emmanuel’s voice sent a ripple through my heart. I felt his grief. He seemed as if something bigger than these people’s lives were at stake. While in fact, that is the biggest thing to him.

“One thing, I have learned in my profession is that we can care so much for someone and give them all we have. Sometimes, it won’t feel like it was enough, or we failed them. No matter what the ending result is, you have to walk away knowing you did everything you could to help. You may not feel it, but hopefully, they will.” I kiss him softly on the forehead and go get the kids in bed.

First Isaiah. With all the obstacles we face he will forever be the easiest to wake up and put to bed.

“Teeth brushed?” I asked. He nods. “Face washed?” This time I got a thumbs up. “Prayers said?” This time I got two! “Do you have the best mom in the world?” He paused as if he was figuring out the answer to a pop quiz problem, but eventually I got a huge smile, a big hug, and a kiss. Apparently, that was supposed to be my answer because he rolled over and snuggled with his stuffed big bird.

Next is my sweet girl Anna. Asking her the same questions and getting double the sass, she goes on to say, “Mommy, can you tell me a story?” This is her favorite night-time phrase, and honestly mine too. I would like to think I tell better stories than my Emmanuel. Not only because the kids tell me, but because I know it’s true! She knows that with those sunflower hazel eyes, and her button nose, I cannot resist climbing into bed, holding her, and using my author’s brain to put her mind at rest. When I was her age, my dreams were more like nightmares. After my grandma passed and intense counseling ended, the nightmares came. They have been consistent all my life. Sometimes they were gorier than others, sometimes they were not intense in action, but just emotions.

On this particular night, I thought I would turn my nightmare into a childproof bedtime story. All of the emotions, from my day at work with that client to my conversation with Emmanuel, led me to face a lesson I thought I could teach myself and Anna.

Approaching with caution, I began like any good children’s story does by saying, “Once upon a time...” After a brief pause, I continued, “There was this secret superhero. She was a mommy by day who had a fearless little boy and a precious little girl. Throughout the day this mommy seemed normal. Then came a point in the evening where she would get a notification on her secret chip in her arm.”

“What does the chip do?” Anna asked in excitement. At that moment I realized all of the possible questions she could have in the duration of this story. So, I prepared myself for them and answered her first one.

“The chip told the mom the location of where a child was being hurt.” I did not think it was appropriate to go into the descriptions of how the kid was being hurt. It was something I knew all too well, and something I never want my kids to go through. Thankfully she did not ask much about that one. So, I continued, “At night when her two little angels were in bed the chip would buzz through her arm and let her know of an address. Next, she goes down into her den and slightly pulls out one of her books. All at once, the bookshelf would turn inside itself, and the mommy would step into this secret cave. She then left the cave on a motorcycle through the secret tunnel and turned into this magical fierce lioness.”

Anna’s face lights up and then changes to confusion.

“Mom, lions don’t ride motorcycles!”

“True, but female lions do because they are cooler!”

By this point Anna’s face was locked in on mine like every word I spoke came to life as if I had a silver tongue. At any moment I knew insomnia would be hitting harder than Muhammad Ali, so hopefully, I would not have to finish the story. I feel as if she is following the story as I hoped she would and sees this mommy as a secret superhero. She responded as if she wished she too could be like the lioness so far.

I went on to explain, “This superhero was not like any other. By day one way, by night another.”

“Hey momma, that Shrek, you can’t take it like that.”

With a chuckle, I said, “You are right sweet girl, but it was the only thing I could fit in on such short notice.” She looks at me with amusement and annoyance at the same time and gives me the face that tells me to go ahead and continue.

So, I did. “At first lioness is nervous. When she gets to the house, she can see the lights from the TV through the window, and lights turning off in a room upstairs. The lioness climbs to the window of that room and sees a boy crying in his bed tightly holding a teddy bear. He looks like he’s about your age. He has WWE pictures surrounding his walls, a backpack filled with books, and a night light the shape of John Cena.”

“Why is he crying, mommy?” I came to a dramatic pause that was not written in the story. I thought, “How could I explain to my 10-year-old, the idea of a child being sexually abused by someone they should trust. Someone who should never, ever do that to another person. My brain was running around like the mini Sponge Bobs in that episode where he could not find the formula. Anna’s eyes were locked in on me, waiting for an answer I did not think far enough ahead to give. By this point, Anna and I were having a Guinness book of world records staring contest.

Very carefully I said, “Some kids get hurt in ways they can’t explain or understand. They often feel stuck or alone, and they think all they can do is cry.” She was satisfied with that answer, and I think it gave her enough

to pick her own outcome. She went on to ask, "Do you think I will ever be sad like that." With a heavy heart I said with assurance, and determination, "No princess, never will you ever experience these things." As the story went on, I told Anna about the first lioness mission. "Then, she climbed through the window, and after checking on the little boy, she went downstairs to find the person who made the boy sad."

When I started reliving this part of my nightmare, I realized how familiar the house seemed. As if in another life, I ran down those stairs a thousand times. I had to snap back to the present story and figure out the minor details later.

"The only thing lioness knew was that her job in that moment was to help the little boy. To save him." I kept going, wondering what this next part would bring out in Anna. "Lioness peaked around the corner of the living room where the TV was and saw the dad. He was drinking some type of juice and watching a late-night show. She could almost recognize the man and the layout of the house. Lioness made her way around the living room very slow and smooth." "Oooo spooky mommy," Anna injected. "When she was ready, she asked the man a simple question." After every statement, I check Anna to see where she is and whether she is asleep, confused, or scared. She displayed none of those and kept looking at me with excitement for the best part.

I went on with the story. "This is what you do?" the Lioness said. The Lioness scared the man and he jumped up, spilling his drink and knocking over a table.

"Who are you?" he asked her while shaking with a fear that could spark of the San Andreas Fault.

"What kind of animal?" the Lioness said with disdain.

The man was so afraid, he told the Lioness that whatever she wanted she could have. He just did not want to get hurt.

By this point, I checked on Anna a little more intently. She was worn out from our day together and was fighting sleep like a WWE round with the Undertaker.

"Are you sleeping, my love?" I asked very gently.

"NOPE!" Anna jerked up with the full awareness of an eager squirrel. "What did she do next mommy?" I continued even though I knew she was fibbing. After all, the story was getting to good to just stop.

Then lioness told the man that he caused this. He had to be punished for what he did. Anna's idea of punishment was no technology for a week. "Oh boy, that's going to be boring." She said. A part of me loved how much she was able to understand the story without the full gory, details. Yet, another part of me wondered if she would remember this story and, once she figured out why the boy was crying, and what the dad did to him, she would come to me with more questions and I would be forced to tell her the full truth.

"The lioness told the dad that she was going to help him disappear to a place where no one could be hurt by him anymore." Her idea and my idea of making someone "disappear" are completely different. In a split second, I remembered my nightmare. I caused men and women like him to disappear. It was the vigilante way. The only difference is the details.

In closing, I told her the guardian lioness road away into the night on her motorcycle. I explained that the lioness would go on to help save boys or girls just like that one. After she got home, the lioness turned back into a regular mommy and went to sleep waiting for the morning to come so she could make breakfast for her kids.

In amazement, Anna seemed satisfied. Internally, I was battling the idea of how much strength it took to even give that nightmare such a voice. She peacefully closed her eyes and I kissed her forehead. "Goodnight my little lion cub," I said softly. As I walked to turn off her light she spoke up and said, "Mommy, do you think the lioness felt better by hurting the bad guy to save the little boy." Then, I realized the biggest question she could have had, that I would not be prepared to answer. "Maybe, maybe not sweetie." I flicked the switch to let her Minnie Mouse night light shine. With much heartache and comfort, I glanced at my little girl one more time in order to reassure myself that is was now her superhero story. She has the power to take it as it is or rewrite the narrative. With that, I closed the door, and as I pulled my hand away, the secret chip in my arm began to buzz.

# ARTIST AND AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

## **Mariah Faye Bosanco**

I am a Theater Major. I am going to become a writer and director for plays and movies, as well as becoming a published author of fiction books. I pour my heart out on paper so that I can heal and that is what I want to do for others is to help them heal through what they are going through, to let them know that their feelings are valid and that there is someone for them to lean on.

## **Janelle Braswell**

I am a 19-year-old college student aiming for my Associate's in Liberal Arts. I have been a daycare worker since August. I love reading, writing, drawing, and playing video games.

## **Wesley Brooks, Jr.**

My name is Wesley Brooks, Jr. I'm 34 and recently decided to go back to school to work toward having a career I enjoy in a field that I love. I'm currently working on my second year as a Digital Designer and hope to one day play a role in creating movies or cartoons. While that day may still be far from now, I have the drive and motivation to make it happen and have no doubt in my mind that I will achieve my goals.  
"You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream." C.S. Lewis

## **Fyuree Colley**

Fyuree is a District 500 high school student. "Rose" is her first published story.

## **Jalah Danks**

I am a sophomore student at KCKCC, and I will be graduating with an associate's degree in Liberal Studies this year. I am a student intern and the president of one of the political science clubs on campus. I have always written poems and songs, but this is the first time I have ever submitted my writing for any sort of contest or magazine. I enjoy reading, listening to music, playing the ukulele, and singing.

## **Isaiah Fradieu**

Isaiah is a graphic design student at KCKCC.

## **Kaleb Goldbeck**

I love writing, horror, comics, video games, and classic literature. I am currently studying to be an English teacher, as well as learning to play the guitar. I hope everyone enjoys my pieces!

"Things need not have happened for them to be true." --Neil Gaiman

## **Rachel Greene**

Rachel Greene is a twenty-something wife and restaurant manager from Grandview. She is pursuing her Associate in Arts with an emphasis in History at KCKCC. She's also attending a local training school to become a pastor. She writes sometimes when she's not doing homework.

## **Kyle Gross**

"Creativity takes courage" --Henri Matisse

## **Aarionna C Holliday-Chowning**

I have attended KCKCC for almost two years. I am currently on track to graduate with my associates in Liberal Arts and plan to transfer to KU to obtain a higher degree in Social Work partnered with a Juris Doctorate. My career goal is to work in a school or have my own therapy practice with children.



**Ashleigh Klukow**

I have always had a passion for creative writing. I first started writing poetry and prose in seventh grade and I have had a few poems published while in middle school and high school. “Transparent Eyes” is one of my first works and is still a favorite. Thank you.

**Faith Maslak**

I’m a sophomore at KCK and have an undecided major. I started writing consistently during my freshman year of high school and am looking to publish a book of short stories soon.

**Tammy McFadden**

I have been going to KCKCC since the fall of 2018. My major is an Associate’s in Liberal Arts. I would love to own my own Art Studio, to teach others the way of the Old Master’s techniques, and have my own art showings to sell my work as well as that of other artists.

**Andi Overmann**

My major at KCKCC is Associates of Arts: Liberal Arts. After this, I will be transferring to the Honors College at UMKC. I enjoy writing poetry, studying film, and spending time outdoors

**Faith Seaton**

I’m currently a student at KCKCC pursuing a graphic design degree. I have been doing photography for roughly five years now and currently, am trying to build my own studio space. My current personal project is to shoot photos and use graphic design elements that could amplify the mood or theme I’m trying to provoke. I work in mostly digital photography but my first works were strictly film and pinhole photography and someday I fully see myself going back to that.

**Alazia Stanley**

My name is Alazia Stanley and I am 21 years old. I recently changed my major from nursing to dental hygiene as I went back and forth between the two. I am now happy to say that I will be attending a program this year, in November, following my career field dream since high school.

**Jordan Thaxton**

Jordan Thaxton is an artist, writer, and Kansas City native. She is a Studio Art major. After graduation, she plans to become a tattoo artist.

**Kristi Wesley**

I have loved art in all of its forms and I look forward to expanding that knowledge. Working with my hands makes me happy and helping other people learn is my true passion. Coming back to school at KCKCC has been one of the best things that have happened to me. I look forward to many more semesters here and getting to know the staff and students. This scholarship would be a big help to me and my development, I can’t thank you enough for this opportunity.

**Erin Williams**

I’ve been creating art seriously for six years now, but I’ve only been studying digital media for a year and a half here at KCKCC. I’ve been doing commissions for three years and post most of my art on my Instagram (erinwilliams189.) I’ll be graduating in May 2020 with an associates in Digital Design. Eventually, I plan to become an Illustrator or Concept Artist.

“With imagination, you can be anything you want.” -Spongebob Squarepants



