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AshBelt: Volume Six

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ASHBELT

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Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up our sixth volume of AshBelt! I think you'll enjoy what's inside. You'll find yogurt, sleepless nights, rose oil, and concussions. Magic, misunderstanding, murder.

The AshBelt student editors owe a wholehearted thank you to Professor Eric Wasserman, our founding faculty advisor and editor. Wass, we so appreciate your guidance, leadership, and willingness to let us make AshBelt our own.

This year's faculty interview is with Dr. Alan Ambrisco, who blurs the line between medieval studies and contemporary poetry every day. Thank you for your time and your willingness to share your thoughts.

Amy Freels, your book design expertise saves us every year. Thank you.

Finally, AshBelt's wonderful staff: my deputy editor in chief Casey, editors Liz, Zoe, and Cris, and readers Julie and Natalie. I'm deeply grateful to have worked with such a thoughtful, capable crew. Thank you for your hard work and your time. You all made my final year as editor in chief a breeze, a pleasure, and a gift.

Here we go. Are you excited? I am.

Sincerely,
Erin Siegfert
Editor in Chief

LAUREN KNIGHT

Such Intensities

I typically hate summer. It is hot, I have to live with my parents for three months, and my depression flares up to frightening proportions. I am always wary of returning to Wadsworth, wondering if this time I will get stuck in that house again, terrified to leave. That one summer, I would stay inside all day, knitting and reading and hating myself while listening over and over to Hayley Kiyoko's music. I'd investigate what sort of jobs I could have working from home, convinced I would never get past this fear.

I did.

I went to college and made a friend, Jae. I met her my spring semester in quantitative methods. I mentioned seeing Hayley in concert and Jae knew who she was. And that's how I knew I had to be her ~~girlfriend~~ friend. She had a girlfriend in Michigan named Kyrsten that she'd been dating for four years. Kyrsten moved in August of another summer to Ohio to live with Jae. I loved her before I met her. I loved her because I loved Jae, and then less so because I loved Jae and more so because I loved Kyrsten all on my own. And then I loved two people who were dating each other, and I didn't know what to do about it. But I'll tell you about a different summer altogether.

I.

"I'm not actually angry."

Perhaps not, but her words make me angry, make me sick with it. I adjust my grip on the steering wheel and pull up to the stoplight. Panic wraps its hands around my throat, pressing at my inner organs and crushing my lungs. I can hardly stand to breathe. Night cloaks the street, and I consider using that as an excuse for her behavior. But I'm an open book; my emotions coat my face like fresh paint. Anything that brushes against me will smear and be seen.

I step on the gas and hang a left when the light turns green.

She prattles on about what she believes to be the cause of my emotional state. I was supposed to pick her up from work and take her to her apartment. I was supposed to spend the night and have a great time, and be a good girlfriend. I am supposed to do all these things for her: buy her groceries, vegetarian take out, books, gifts, drive her the eight hours it takes to see her family and back. Alas, I was half an hour late in making sure Allie's needs were met. She had to sit outside Burlington's doors thirty minutes too many.

"Baby, what's wrong?"

Perhaps she's caught on a little. I swallow hard and get on the highway. I let her know I'm willing to talk once we get to her apartment. I still have no idea what I'm going to say. I manage to drive the whole way to Allie's apartment. She has this look on her face that doesn't match her black lipstick and hair. Normally fairly stoic, this expression looks bewildered and vaguely nervous. Maybe if I peeled off a couple layers of her makeup I'd be able to tell for sure.

I don't say a word, just lock my car and follow her upstairs. The apartment complex smells like weed, and her heels echo on the linoleum. The routine of it is hypnotizing, as if I'm in a trance.

I'm still mute as she locks the front door and makes her way past the living room and kitchen to her bedroom. Bags of trash still lean against the completely full garbage bin; despite the fact that I cleaned her entire apartment by myself last week, it has been sullied again. I don't know why I bother.

She drops her purse in a heap on the messy floor, and I do the same. With the lights on, it's evident I've been crying. I lay down on the bed, the navy star blanket I bought beneath my stomach, and curl my face into my forearms.

"What's wrong?" she asks. Her voice is familiar yet grating, just like how she comforts me.

II.

"We'll always be here," Jae reassures me. Her bed is small and familiar. I've sat on it countless nights, talking with her in a position like this. She's curled up just under the pillows, her face almost

impossibly close to mine. I've twisted myself into knots to rest at the foot of her bed. The window is open next to me, and the wind cools my tears on my cheeks. I'm terrified.

I've just finished telling her about the awful split I've been feeling for months. When I'm with her and Kyrsten, I feel real and whole. And when I'm with Allie, I feel brittle and cracked. Like marble being chipped into a statue, pieces of myself were stripped away in order to satisfy her. No matter how much I gave it never seemed enough to make her love me, not in the way I needed. Despite my many attempts, Allie never opened up to me.

I was a decoration she used for pictures, for money, for transportation. I was the evidence to prove she liked women. Photos displayed everywhere portrayed a happy couple that didn't reflect my reality. Crisp smiles from the movie theater, the zoo, the pet store, were all as fake as my teeth, which Allie had edited to be glaringly white. Almost seven months of this made me unrecognizable, even to myself.

"In whatever way you want, we'll always be here," Jae reminds me again.

Adrenalin floods my body, the buzzing of it rattling my teeth and veins. I briefly consider kissing her as an answer; it flashes across my mind like a white-hot spotlight. But with all thoughts like this about Jae or Kyrsten, I crumple it as tight as I can and fling it to the far recesses of my mind. My body easily fills with shame, and I wonder if I were to look inside what color it would be. I crush my face against my arm so I don't have to face the world, and no one must witness mine. Tears glue my eyelashes together and carve wet streaks into my skin. Crickets chirp among the rustling trees, and nighttime continues even when my world has stopped.

III.

I park against the curb; sweat still sticking to my skin from work. I flick my wrist to cut the ignition and step out, overnight bag in hand. Jae's house has been coined The Squirrel Ranch by her family, and this image isn't deterred by the carved squirrel sitting atop the bottom post of the railing. I scurry to the front door, hand just

resting on the squirrel's ears as I turn to race up the steps. We're going to Crafty Mart today, something Jae described to me when we first met but I have yet to actually go. It'll be my first time.

"Hello!" I call through the screen door to the sounds of dogs barking and footsteps.

"Hi," Jae answers, smile wide as she opens the door. She stands tall and steadfast, especially compared to her border collie Shona, who is barking excitedly, whole body wriggling in desire for pets. Jae's gold glasses rest on the end of her pronounced nose, and she's still smiling crookedly at me.

"Hello, Shona girl," I croon, voice rising higher in pitch as I crouch down, overwhelmed by Jae's full smile. I give Shona some love instead, and her fur is soft and warm under my hands.

"I'll take that," Jae murmurs softly, taking the yellow backpack slung over my arm. She holds it loosely in her hand. Her blonde hair rests at her shoulders, not yet up in its usual messy bun.

Kyrsten pads along the carpet from her bedroom, red hair unrestrained and eyes bright. "How're you doing?" she asks. She doesn't have her baseball cap on yet, but is still smirking mischievously at me. Her confidence is my undoing. She's asked a simple question, but she says it like she does with her usual wit, sharp yet precise, as if being prodded with a rapier.

I stand up at this and answer. "Work sucked. I hate running the fitting rooms. Customers are shitty. What else is new?"

Kyrsten chuckles and takes my hand, leading me to her purple bedroom to sit. Jae follows behind, depositing my bag on the floor in front of Kyrsten's dresser. When the door shuts, the three of us collapse on the bed.

"I still have to figure out what to wear," Kyrsten mutters, mouth scrunching in distaste. I kiss her nose delicately, earning a smile melting from a disgruntled expression.

"I'll help you pick it out," I say softly. With one last peck to her forehead, I sit up and prod Kyrsten to pick out some dresses for me to choose from.

IV.

I tell myself I must give Allie one final chance. I talk with her, words stuttered and slurred through the unsightly curtain of salt tears and mucus. I talk about vulnerability and connection. Is it my fault? Am I the one not opening up enough? Why can't I have a connection with her that brings me happiness?

She reassures me that yes, I am open and honest enough with her. She knows that I love her and I express it quite often. She hands me a tissue box and turns on the TV. Seconds later she has put on a YouTube video and is leaned back in bed, watching. My heart has whiplash at the sudden dismissal of the conversation at hand. I don't know what to say, so I say nothing, gently wiping my face with a tissue.

I lay down next to her and stare at the wall, pride flags draped over the sterile white of it. Her bookshelf looms over me, heavy with novels I've purchased in it. Bile collects at the back of my throat, and I'm hit with the weighty realization that she probably never cared at all. It aches under my ribs, as if she'd stuck a leaden poker inside and scrambled things about. The cheap mattress supports the burden of my mind miraculously, and I lay there for hours while she stares at a screen. I fall asleep numb.

I clutch my phone tightly after I wake up. My mind has finally caught up to my feelings. I need out and I need it now. I turn the brightness down as low as it can go, paranoid that Allie will wake up even though I know she'll sleep in for hours after me. I text the only two people I feel that I can.

I can't stop thinking about what you said last night and now I'm terrified. How can I think like I am right now? It's like I'm willing to throw everything away with her immediately. I kept hoping if I waited long enough it would be like with us and it hasn't. I'm such a bad person.

I'm reassured that I'm not a bad person, that choosing my own happiness doesn't make me intrinsically awful. I was trying to be happy. There's nothing wrong in trying to be happy.

I'm shaking. I thought it would get better. And now I've

waited too long.

I haven't, they tell me multiple times, I haven't waited too long. I can still fix this. I feel an eternal dread, revulsion at my own being, but they try to convince me it won't last forever. I'm not so sure. I text my twin sister on impulse, the only woman opposite me who has experienced nearly everything I have at the same time. We're identical in all the ways that count.

I think I love Jae and Kyrsten.

'That's great. I'm glad you have them.'

No I mean

'I know'

My mind short circuits. I know I reached out to her with the expectation that she would punish me, scandalized at a suggestion so far beyond our catholic upbringing. I know I wanted her to hurt me in a way only she could. It would have been the last chance my self-loathing had to sabotage my possibility of joy. But no, she's seen all of me and still insists that what I want is great. It is with this that I begin to prepare myself for when Allie wakes.

It doesn't take long to slip into my day clothes. I can't shower here, not with the state of the bathroom, so I throw my hair up into a ponytail and pull it hard to tighten it. Adrenalin is still living in my veins, but it's been like this for hours so I don't take notice. Only the severe cold I'm experiencing in my extremities let's me know I haven't calmed down. It's been an hour and a half and she still hasn't moved.

I'm growing impatient. I want to rip this band-aid off, fall into the arms of Jae and Kyrsten, and let them hold me together. I'm sure I'm falling apart. I wait another ten minutes and nothing. I use this purgatory to take back what she's never returned. I swipe my dress pants she's borrowed for months, the book I lent her that she never bothered to read, and my knitting needles from when I tried to teach her, but she failed to understand she'd have to make mistakes at first. I stuff them all into my purse and set it by the door. I'm ready.

V.

“I already know what I’m wearing,” Jae says, pleased tone slipping out and dripping from her rose colored lips. I would have liked to kiss that off, but Jae leaves the room to cross the hall and change.

By the time I have picked out a yellow dress with embroidered flowers for Kyrsten to wear, Jae returns in a grey tank top and floor length black skirt, decorated with small purple flowers.

“I have something for you, both of you,” Jae announces, holding out her closed fists. “Close your eyes.”

Kyrsten and I follow instructions, lowering our lids and letting our open hands rest in front of Jae. Cold metal and rough rock settle in our palms, and our eyes flicker open when Jae speaks.

“I made you ones to match mine.”

In my hand was a geode pendant, hand wrapped and hanging from a chain. I grin wide, running my finger along the stone. “Yonic.”

Kyrsten laughs, already fastening hers around her neck. “Yeah, yonic.”

My geode rests atop my striped tank top, a comforting weight against my chest. “Thank you,” I say to Jae, face soft and open.

Jae’s smile spreads like cream being poured into coffee. “You’re welcome.”

VI.

I wake her up.

Despite everything about my body language screaming that I’m uncomfortable, that I’m ready to flee, Allie ignores it.

“Yellow,” is all she has to say, rubbing at her face. I nod, feeling as if I’m talking to a small child. Indeed, my backpack is yellow.

I force her to sit with me at the end of her bed. I no longer will go to her. I tell her. Not all of it, but I explain. We are not as compatible as I thought. She is not meeting my needs, making me

happy in this relationship. She is not loving me in the way I need to be loved.

Her face looks like I just slapped her. The eyeliner around her eyes is smudged, creating artificial bags. Her mouth is slack with disbelief. It's as if she can't comprehend that her pretty words of love and forever failed to keep me. Words are wind, and I need action to sustain me.

I thought I would leave without a broken heart. But when I stand to go, it breaks all the same, for all the wrong reasons. She didn't try to fight for us. She didn't argue with me at all. Maybe I wanted some final sign that she actually cared, that maybe I misjudged her and she wasn't just using me. No final emotion dons her face. It's flat and dead. I leave.

IV.

"That's us," I say, pointing to the art print of three avocado halves sitting on display at one of the booths.

"It is," Jae replies, hand resting gently in mine. The crowd bustles around us, bubbling in soft cacophony. Their voices blend into one low hum that demands to be heard.

Kyrsten stands a couple of steps ahead, examining the animal paintings. I note how even in a dress, Kyrsten looks like she wouldn't hesitate to climb a tree, to wade through a stream. She stands with the confidence of a woman unrestrained, unfazed by the opinions of those around her. Fondness unfurls in my stomach like smoke drifting lazily about the room. It warms my ribs and makes my heart bump thoughtfully against the bones, as if reminding me it is still there. At that moment Kyrsten looks up, smiling wide enough that the freckle at the corner of her mouth disappears.

"Do you want to go to the next booth?"

I nod silently, as though the Muses have snatched all knowledge of language from my head, replacing it with artful depictions of Kyrsten among the forests of animals behind her. Jae squeezes my hand and guides us both throughout the array of paintings and sketches, plush toys and knitted goods. I purchase

three prints, one for each of us, and dart back to the toy booth to buy a Neil Gaiman pillow before I change my mind.

“He’s my favorite author,” I keep insisting, holding the small recreation of the British author in pillow form. I stash him in my bag before linking hands with Jae and Kyrsten once more. “The seller told me she gave one to him when he was speaking in Cleveland and I was like, ‘I was there too! I saw him at his show too.’”

“Oh my god you’re adorable,” Jae says, tugging me into a side hug. “I love you.”

My face reddens and I look away, biting hard on my lips to keep from smiling at the sheer pleasure such a simple statement could offer. I am still unaccustomed to feeling happiness at such heights, and needed to remind myself not to feel shame for such intensities. I laugh a high, almost nervous laugh, as if finding such happiness to be unbelievable.

“He keeps bees,” I add to fill up space. The twin bee tattoos on my wrists are evidence enough of my fascination. “Well, he used to. He wishes he still actively did so he could tell people his hobby could potentially kill him.”

Jae and Kyrsten join in my laughter, the sound warm and real. “Your bees would never kill you,” Jae replies, her hand resting at my waist. “After all, you are the queen.”

I roll my eyes, nose crinkling with delight. “Well...” I trail off, letting the pause linger just to the point of tension. “Maybe.” I giggle again and tug on their hands. “C’mon, let’s go get pop-suckles.”

IIV.

I get in my car, but I’m not sure how. My mind is offline and yet my body still moves, exists. It isn’t until I’m two streets over does it sink in, and I begin to feel like I’ve pulled off a heist. I speed on the highway, convinced something must be chasing me. I’m frantic when I pull up to Jae and Kyrsten’s house, but they’re already waiting on the front porch. As if I’m some refugee, they usher me inside quickly and let me fall on the couch to cry.

As I'm sobbing, I feel their arms encircle me, keeping me upright. The weight of it is grounding. I'm not sure how much time passed. When I come to, I have a headache and I'm sure I'll feel this awful guilt and self-loathing for months.

A couple hours later they follow me into Plato's Closet. My brain is still whitening out, but I'm not sure how much of that I can really blame on the summer heat this time. My body doesn't feel real. I imagine hitting myself, throwing my body to the floor, limbs askew. I'm not sure if it would hurt. Instead I walk to the back and ask my coworkers if the two yellow sweaters I hung are still there. They aren't. Something drops inside me, as if rotting flesh was finally falling off the bone. It lands somewhere near my intestines and presses heavily against my stomach.

I walk back out onto the floor; having worked here long enough I don't have to think to navigate. I grab the yellow sweaters, but I still have enough mind to straighten the rack. My boss cashes me out on register four, laughing that I'm buying sweaters at this time of the year when I can't wear them. I smile weakly, signing the employee buy book and grab my bag.

"Retail therapy," I tell Jae and Kyrsten. They nod, because they know I hate myself, and say nothing, because they know it wouldn't help.

Two months later in the heat of July, I am still unable to wear my sweaters. But late one night when I wish it was fall, I slink out of my bed and open my closet. I'm naked except for my underwear, and I lean into the wooden doorframe, just staring. Crisp autumn wind might help the torpor chaining me down as of late. Instead I grab the longer yellow sweater, flip the switch on my fan, and tug the sweater over my head.

I feel the soft fibers against all of my skin. The sleeves come down over my hands, the ribbing done perfectly. It has been ages since I've really worn yellow. I've been too depressed to wear it. High school was littered with navy blue, dark purple, and forest green. To wear yellow would be to stand out, to appear happy, to be noticed. And I was not ready.

I run my arms over my sweater-covered abdomen. It falls to my mid-thigh, oversized. I can't remember if I wore much yellow at all when I was with Allie. I must have, because she knew it was my favorite color. But I can't remember anything beyond the yellow sweatshirt Jae's parents gave me, or my little yellow backpack.

I sit softly on my bed in the dark, letting the fan's cool breeze waft over my face. I'm sweating gently, but I feel safe and myself in a way that I haven't since I was a child. I lie down, head towards the foot of my bed so I can stare out the window. I rub my cheek against my sleeve and let the front yard lamplight glaze over my eyes.

IIIV.

"Mhm," Jae says, stretching gently before settling back into herself. "Where to next?"

I fidget with the strap of my purse, music still sounding merrily across the fair. "Would you mind...if I danced? I mean for a little bit," I hurry to add.

Jae's eyes crinkle, hiding the blue of her irises with how wide her smile is. "Of course," she answers in the tone of voice I have become familiar with. It is one suggesting acceptance in a world that never seemed to. At least, not to the length that I require, never enough to satisfy my whims. It is comforting in its shelter that, even if the whole world would look down on me, Jae wouldn't.

"Want me to hold your purse?"

I nod, handing the bag over. "Thank you."

Kyrsten's smile is enough of an answer as she continues to suck on her popsicle. Still, she nods in agreement for my benefit.

"Thank you," I repeat, and wait several beats before joining in with the music.

Although I have danced for twelve years, ballet among a variety of others, it wasn't until I left studio life that I learned to appreciate dancing. The movement of the body, the emotions one could express with it, simply feeling alive as blood simmered beneath the skin! People get so hung up on how they looked, if their moves were cool, were they coming across stupid? And I

could never comprehend why they'd care when they could feel the bend and stretch of their muscles, their body as a whole moving to express excitement.

It is with this sentiment that I dance, circling Jae and Kyrsten, reaching my arms up and out. My feet kick in shuffles and ball changes, neat jumps and loose sways. My hips swing, letting my skirt twist prettily in the wind. I let the music move through me, becoming one with the song and feeling it direct my limbs where to go. My breath is coming in faster as I move, cheeks pink and smile wide. How anyone could give up the feeling dancing provides because they might look bad is beyond me. I am dancing for myself, to let all my happiness out into the world.

And the song ended. And I came to a stop.

My muscles ache pleasantly as I reach for my purse.

"Thanks," I say breathlessly. I swing my bag over my shoulder, letting it drape across my body and rest at my hip.

"I didn't think it was possible to fall in love with someone that many times in such a short amount of time," Kyrsten says, tension thrumming with her words.

She seems as alert of herself as I am, duel flames igniting behind her eyes and body taut with emotion. She hugs me tightly, and Jae's arms wrap around us both as the world continues. Jae's breath pants against the shell of my ear, and her pulse seems to thrum through all three of us. I shiver with the delight of it, spine poised and heart full.

"I love you," I say softly, holding on tighter. "Thank you."

"Of course."

"My pleasure."

MADELINE MYERS

Living Room Saloon

I was watching *Cheyenne*, a TV Western that emerged in the year 1955, 43 years before I was even born. Darren sat on my right. He always sat on the far end of the couch when my mom and I came over. He was a tall man, but not taller than my mom, and he always had a five o'clock shadow that accentuated the dimple in his chin. There weren't very many words passing between us. I was disgusted by the plastic water bottle sitting on the couch next to Darren, making host of Copenhagen flavored spit straight from his mouth.

Believe it or not, marathoning a black-and-white television show was not how I had intended to spend my day as an eight-year-old. I was especially disappointed in my sick-day companion, my mom's boyfriend. As far as I was concerned, I knew my second-grade teacher Mrs. Blaney better than I knew Darren.

* * *

It began the night before. We were about to eat dinner when I started scratching at my waistline. We were all sat around the wooden kitchen table. Me, my mom, Darren, and his two daughters. My mom and I were staying at his house that night, and in the living room next to us, the pull-out couch was already converted into the bed for me to sleep.

"What're you itching at, Maddie?" my mom said while we were eating. All eight eyes looking at me.

"I dunno. It just started to itch," I mumbled.

After dinner, my mom came over to where I was laying on the springy living room bed. She sat and leaned her tall frame against the armrest.

"Are you still itchy?" she asked me, pulling down my pajama pants a little bit to look at the small pink dot on my bony hip. "It could just be a bug bite. We'll keep an eye on it."

And I knew she would. She always kept close watch.

* * *

Cheyenne Brodie was a cowboy who was raised by Native Americans and got into all sort of adventures in the wild, wild West. It was no *Spongebob*, but I found myself interested, nonetheless. Darren had let me eat my Honey-Nut Cheerios in the living room, which I appreciated. The excitement of remaining in my pajamas all day was helping me cope with my lack of recess, but still, I would have much preferred to have spent the day in school, rather than his house.

I'm not sure how many episodes of *Cheyenne* had passed before Darren decided we could play a game. It was too cold outside for basketball or baseball or jumping rope, and I wasn't very good at checkers.

"How about Cowboys and Indians?" he asked through the Copenhagen in his cheek.

I hadn't yet learned the history of Native Americans and their political strife, and having no sense of this, Darren's proposed game was very appealing. This was especially true considering I didn't have any of my Polly Pockets, which were quite trendy at that time.

There was a movie I liked called *The Indian in The Cupboard* about a toy "Indian" who came to life, so I decided to be the Indian. A funny-looking one, too. My pajamas were a pink cheetah print set, matching and warm for the Ohio winter and nothing at all like what an Indian would wear.

Darren was the cowboy. I guess that made sense because Darren was a police officer, which, to me, meant he was kind of like a cowboy. He was good at cards, too. Cowboys always played cards at the saloon.

* * *

That morning, my mom woke me up early for school. But when I went to get dressed, I noticed my whole abdomen covered in pink spots. They had arrived overnight on my arms. And a few on my legs too. They colonized my body like teepees scattered across the new world.

Chicken Pox. That's what my mom said. My mind was swirling with questions. I was ill! I was terrified. But when my mom said I had to stay home from school, I was instantly disappointed. It was my turn to clean the chalkboard, and I had been waiting weeks to do my class duty. But now, my opportunity to impress Mrs. Blaney with my chalkboard scrubbing skills would be missed.

I overheard my mom talking to Darren. He was saying, "Don't call anybody. I can watch her... my shift isn't until the evening."

"Are you sure?" my mom asked. I could practically see her eyebrows raise through the question.

Please don't be sure. Please don't be sure. Please don't be sure.

"Absolutely," he replied.

I, on the other hand, wasn't so sure about the arrangement.

* * *

As I spent time playing with Darren, I watched the living room morph into a western desert. Finger guns, lassos, arrows. Tumbleweeds rolled through our railroad town along with the shy whistle of a breeze. Saloon doors swung open and shut. It was a whole day of recess. I let my throat sing and patted my hand over my mouth, making interrupted "O" sounds—the imagined battle cry of the Indians. Darren walked, his thumbs in his belt-loops, imaginary gun in holster. I could almost hear the dry ground crunch beneath his feet, horses galloping somewhere in the distance. I was always dodging his bullets. It was easy for me to duck behind furniture because of how small I was. Darren wasn't that good at hiding.

Eventually, we called truce in our territorial battle. I wanted the Cowboys and Indians to be friends. I thought that if the Indians could raise up Cheyenne, why couldn't Cowboys raise up Indians?

And amidst our game, I forgot about all the itching.

AMANDA PIEKARZ

Classic Chobani Smooth

Let's get one thing straight. I don't love my job. I don't know any twenty-something that loves their job. Your twenties are just full of jobs you hate because you're not really qualified to do anything else. You have retail, or fast food and both of those options suck. Long story short, I work at a gas station, and it's one of the worst jobs to have when you have hearing problems.

"I'm sorry, you want what?"

It's my mantra. I say it while I'm leaning forward with my good ear. I hate when people mumble, or look away from me when they're talking. If I'm making dead eye contact with a customer, there's a reason, and I can promise it's not because I'm interested in them, or what they have to say. I just can't hear them. It's as simple as that.

The man looked at me and pointed behind me. I made the mistake of following his pointing, and I missed what he said. Again.

"Here," I said, pulling out my pen and clicking it. I tossed him a yellow lined notepad and handed him the pen, "Can you write down what you're saying?"

Usually there are other ways to get around this. I've gotten really good at reading people's lips, and facial expressions. When people are mad, their eyebrows scrunch up, or they frown. Sometimes there's little angry wrinkles in the center of their foreheads. I deal with annoyed mothers a lot, who want their gas and they want it now. I always pay attention to the way they purse their lips, and tap their foot while they're paying for gas, while their husbands wait in the cold to pump their gas.

Happy customers are few and far between. Usually they hold the line up because they want to ask you about your life, and school, and the weather. I'm not a fan of happy customers either.

I love neutral customers. They usually keep things short and sweet. They come in, tell me what they want, and wait patiently

while the transaction takes place. No complaints, no foot tapping, no forehead wrinkles. Most of all, there's little to no small talk. I like when people don't have a lot to say, mainly so I don't have to try so hard to listen.

A neutral customer brings up their gas miscellaneous items, and waits patiently in line. When it's their turn, they ask for twenty five dollars on pump three, and they lay their items on the counter.

"Is that all?" I'd ask, scanning their loyalty card, and grabbing a bag. The neutral customers nod and smile.

"Alright, your total is 29.67." I say. Some customers still think it's 2010, and they try to hand me their credit cards.

"We have the chip reader now," I tell them, gesturing to the machine right in front of them. I smile though, because I want to keep them neutral. The worst thing to watch in real time is a neutral customer shifting into an angry customer. The customer puts their card in, and keys in their pin while I bag their stuff. By the time I'm done, the transaction is over.

"Do you want your receipt?" I ask, mainly because I have to. No one ever wants their receipt. My trash can is full of a million sad, crumpled up receipts, and the occasional empty cigarette carton. The customer shakes their head no, and they put their credit cards away.

"Alright, you're good to go. You have a great night." They'll nod, and wish me well. The whole interaction takes maybe a minute. It's easy, and predictable. I can scrape by when the interactions are predictable.

Sometimes they look at my nametag, and call me by my name. I don't like that at all.

"Have a great night, Amanda." They say. It makes me not want to wear a nametag. If I don't know their name, they shouldn't know my name. It's as simple as that.

My coworkers know I can't hear anything so sometimes, when all else fails, I hold down the button on our intercoms so they can hear what the customer is saying. They'll tell me what the customer said once they stop speaking. I usually have to nod along,

and smile at the customer while they're talking because they have no idea I'm not hearing what they're saying.

So it's safe to say I've had a lot of misunderstandings with people who don't enunciate, and look at me when they're speaking.

I love Sundays because they're slow. In the morning, there's the after church rush, but after that it's just a few people here or there throughout the day getting gas, or snacks. I was turned around stocking cigarettes when I heard someone clear their throat.

I turned around, smiling, because I don't want to get yelled at for not looking like I love my job with every fiber of my being. I hate when men look at me, and tell me to smile. First of all, no. Second, I hate this job. Third, you telling me to smile like that is just creepy.

"Hi, how are you?" I asked, grabbing the scanner.

"Fine." The man said, laying his stuff out on the counter like everyone else. I started scanning his things, and putting it in a bag. He bought an excessive amount of candy.

"Can I have a smooth?" He asked, or at least, that's what I thought he asked. I turned and grabbed Marlboro Smooths, and rang it up.

"Uh, not cigarettes. I need a smooth." He said, pointing to his yogurt. I looked down at the yogurt, and back at him.

"You want it smooth?" I asked, looked at the Chobani yogurt he had pointed at, "I don't think we have Chobani smooth. Whatever we have is already on the shelf."

"Uh, okay, I just want a classic smooth though." The man said, again, pointing at his yogurt. I'm generally a very patient person, so I only let out a small irritated sound.

"Look, I can ask if we carry that, but like I told you, everything that we have is on the shelf." I said, taking a minute to press the button on my headset that talks to my other coworkers.

"Do we sell Classic Chobani Smooth?" I asked, impatiently, waiting for an answer. There was nothing. There might of well been crickets chirping.

A second passed.

“What?” Kevin asked. His question was partially cut off because no one ever holds the button down long enough when they’re talking into the microphones.

Another reason I loved working on Sundays was because Kevin worked. He always had a joke on hand, and never really got mad about anything. It balanced it out, because Adrianna worked Sundays too. Adrianna is great. She’s my best friend, but also my manager, so sometimes the dynamics at play are a little weird. Kevin balanced out the weirdness.

“I don’t know, just come here.” I said while I finished bagging the mans items.

“Your total is \$10.75,” I told him. The man took out his wallet as Kevin walked up from the sales floor.

“What’s wrong?” Kevin asked, standing right next to me.

“Do we sell Classic Chobani Smooth?” I asked him, knowing we didn’t sell anything along those lines. I knew I was right, and I was annoyed that I had to call a manager over for the man to believe me.

“I just want a plastic spoon.” The customer said, looking between Kevin and I.

A beat passed.

Kevin walked to the Ready-To-Eat case, and grabbed him a plastic spoon. I could already see the hint of a smile on his face, like he was wrestling a laugh that needed to come out. I knew in that moment I would never hear the end of Classic Chobani Smooth.

In my defense though, classic smooth and plastic spoon do sound very similar.

BLAKE CHASTAIN

Childhood Discourse

I got a way with words
the way rain pelts rooftops.
I got away from words like
when rain leaks into ceilings
drying & dyeing into coffee stained blotches
dried blood brown
warm water bled—
in the little boy's room on the corner hallway of the Catholic school
where not even God's gaze can reach.
What I know of Him, the Christian Crucifix Savior,
My God the Father
He watches over us
but He is no pervert, I think.
Concealed ideas release themselves when there is no final judgment
the way school boys get drunk on momentary freedom in the bathroom
with loosened belts
shirts untucked
vomiting up utterances of Fuck.
Fuck this and that. Fuck everything.
Like the first time a word became bad,
filthy dirty.
In languages unknown on the feast of Pentecost
little Apostles
brandish fires above crew cuts
little red candles
armed with cigarette words
blowing smoke just to piss off mommy and daddy.

MADISON HELBIG

Is it Still Vanity if it's True?

John Mayer was lying through his teeth
when he sang "Your Body is a Wonderland"
so carelessly.

I used to think having a body
with curves carefully crafted
and breasts perfectly rounded
was a gift,
proof of some divine intervention.

I always said thank you.

Until unwanted male gazes
covered me like a heavy fog
Until hands decided
I was their uncharted territory to explore
Until focus shifted from the words that flowed
to the body that built them

Until my body was no longer mine
Until I believed my body blasphemous
rather than a blessing.

Why is what I have to say only skin deep?
Why are my words worth less
because my body is seemingly
worth more?
Why is this a discussion
I have to keep having with myself?

I am art for my sake
and while each stroke will strike you
speechless wait until
the canvas splits
and the composition remains less
composed

though I know you'll say no thank you
what does consent mean to you anyway?

Lily Hunger

Nightly Routine of an Insomniac

i have an early start tomorrow i should really try to go to sleep so i am not tired like i was last tuesday after i binge-watched netflix until three am and i only got five hours of sleep remembering this is not helping me sleep so i will calm myself and take deep breaths wait did i remember to turn off the downstairs lights and lock the door i am not sure but i am still awake so i should try something else to sleep and i remember i read an article somewhere about tricks to clear your mind but i dont remember what it said but i think it was from buzzfeed i will just try to focus on breathing again and i just came up with the perfect comeback for that argument that i had with that bully in the fourth grade that would have won the argument and i have been laying here for more than an hour so now im going to try empty myself of thought like monks do for meditation and get a reasonable amount of sleep so think of nothing think of nothing think of-oh my gosh i just came up with a great new theory about the next avengers movie and how they can fix things if they just...

SONIA POTTER

INDIRA CAME INTO THE WORLD

in the corner of a home
tucked into the recesses
of the village, guarded
by a beso grazing
on dusty mango skins
left by stick-legged schoolboys
in the morning;

greeted first by sun-ripened hands
unwashed, coated in urine,
placed upon the cool floor
of straw melded with manure
and mud, left to gaze
through first-opening eyes
at the rotting rafters above;

and when she first wailed
God Herself wept
with every woman,
prescient
withered and worrying
it would be a she,
praying she wouldn't,
hearing stories of lost girls
in sooty nearby villages
drowned in vats of milk
and fecal-flooded basins
bordering temple walks,
unwanted and unholy;

in mid-century Awakhal,
bearing only the first trauma—
being born a girl and left alive;

with sisters and aunties
anxious, twirling braids
wringing saris
fingering malas
in silent prayer,
bestowing lost dreams
and fears
upon her spirit
in form of rose oil
and freshly boiled
cow's milk,
her body a vessel
for the ghosts
of every wounded mother
before her;

leaving her mother naked
tender and torn,
separated from the others
by a thin veil of fabric
hung from the ceiling,
bleeding,
breasts heavy with milk,
chest heaving.

Portraits of Today and Yesteryear

We used to fish by the willow tree
before everything was different. And there,
from the decrepit grapevine, we'd swing into the ravine,
ear-to-ear smiles plastering our rosy faces. Here,
a cluster of clover, purple-flowered and sweet,
the kind you showed us to eat, there,
a rock to perch on and watch the bluegill.

Today we saunter through the emerald thicket
armed with the folds of a field guide to identify
the ferns and may apples and elderberries.
*I used to remember everything, you say,
Now I can't remember anything.*

The forest is a museum today, the tree trunks wax and stone.
How long will it be before *you* are made of marble?
I note your crooked limp and am left wondering
if the sickness is not only in your head.

An old tree with thick bark catches your eye,
separated from the other artifacts by its lack of leaves,
and you deviate from the path to place your palm upon it.
A dying walnut, you observe.
For a moment you are the tree.

Somewhere nearby, a woodpecker.
Tap tap tap on the old beech up ahead.
The sound brings our saunter to a full stop.

Listen, you say. We'll hear it again.
But the sound does not come again,
and for an eerie moment the forest is radio silence.
The sound does not come again.
The sound does not come again
and the sadness makes me restless.
Too many moments we'll never get back.
We saunter on.

If I don't keep walking, I'll turn to rust, you say,
Just got to keep pushing through.
We emerge from the forest and round the lake,
chewing on clover petals and blades of grass,
picking strange berries from strange bushes.
We used to fish by the willow tree.

There sit our ghosts, smiling and spree,
a father helping his daughter bait the hook
because she will not touch the slimy crawlers.
Wax figures now beneath a plastic arbor.

I'll turn to rust, you say,
but what if you turn to dust, I wonder.

Perhaps you may join the dying walnuts,
the corpses of ashes lining the forest floor,
memories only of prehistoric theory,
weakened by delusion and destroyed by disease.

Preemptive Eulogy for the First Man who Ever Loved Me

“Research shows that people generally live from 2 to 10 years after diagnosis, with an average reported life expectancy of about 6.5 to 7 years.”—The Association for Frontotemporal Degeneration

Winter. 2006. There you were: knees bent, squatting low, beneath briars and thorn bushes, treading lightly on two inches of ice that blanketed the narrow creek, beckoning a little pair of clunky boots to follow you upstream. You were Bear Grylls, crawling through mangroves in some wintry tropic, and I, your rosy-cheeked disciple. *Cold* is seared upon my temporal lobe, but with you, it was always warm.

This is to say I'm sorry. For letting six years pass without meeting eyes that grew more beady by the day. For the times my gut grew queasy in your presence, the bitterness that flowed from my heart and filled the room after you left us, after the affair. I used to gawk when you'd yawn, salty mist coating your hazel eyes, and master self-control, intent upon not catching it, on declining your command over me in the smallest of ways.

Three years now, descending foothills to delirium. There's little time left, and my mind drifts to *what if he's had his last birthday, and I missed it*. My heart breaks to watch you fumble for words that escape you, struggling for names of those you love, felt but forgotten. Before I knew, over eggs and coffee, you told me about the life insurance money. A nervous chuckle escaped my lips, then, *Well, don't die!* And you replied, *I won't, but if I do...*

One day, the pitter-patter of tiny feet will reverberate through the kitchen, turkey roasting, potatoes marinating in garlic, aromas of nutmeg and cloves floating on cinnamon air. And you won't be there. But. When ritual rounds the table, and my turn comes to share the gratitude, I promise to speak of how you'd free me from the snare of pricker bushes, how you'd show me just where to step to avoid cracking the fragile ice, and how, later, Daddy and daughter, we'd smile at each other over steaming cups of cocoa, noses running, hearts melting.

Waltzing in the Fall

He came into my life like an autumn breeze
breaks against branches of late summer's arbors,
turning everything crimson and yellow and gold;
with each caress, defoliating layers around my heart,
with each touch, eroding scars his breath revealed.

His presence chilled me in whispers brisk.
How often did he beckon my whole self to lean
and sway and twirl and bend and bow with nothing
but the scent of crisp clove cigarettes on his breath?
Leaves had no choice but to drift to the ground and die.

In the dead of winter I ache for endless nights,
for my every limb and branch to be stripped
of withering leaves, falling, forgotten, landing softly.
Nothing is more vulnerable than a naked tree
waltzing in dark with its lover, the wind.

POETRY

Bethany Scarpitti

Icarus

I marvel at its brilliance
Glowing so strong
The way it commands the sky
But casts judgment on those
Foolish enough to stare

So far down below
I know I cannot grasp
What it means
To nourish plants
To warm the soil
To light the day

The ground scorns my ambition
Throws taunts at my wonder
Gravity a barb in my awe

So I build
I build with feather and frame
I test and I fail
I build again
Until finally I learn to soar

I challenge the sky, higher
And higher
Past clouds, past flocks
Past the sky itself
Until the radiance welcomes me
Until the heat is overwhelming
Until the wax melts
And feathers fail
And sweet flames surround me
And I fall

I cannot help but laugh

Finally, I know what it is like
To be a sun

Jennifer Stein

Abuzz (Notes on a Long Drive)

These roads are the kind that the sun only rides
And are only crossed by armies of possums
And at night, a bouncing fox and her sisters laughing.

Ghosts of Queen Anne's Lace string out
Like stiff dancers in the wind's authority
Thin, stalking, and bent kneed are the nettles
And lilies, and flat brillo threads of grass

The engine of a flatbed truck chugs and spits
A hollowed skeleton, carrying only a shape of a
Man, who is long lost and stuck
With the circling snakes
Of jumper cables bouncing in the backseat.

Who will seize the setting of the sun? Who
Will take the dirt from ditches soon eroded
In both hands, squeeze the clumps in deeply
Lined palms and birth a woman that began
As dirt, and ribs, and cast into debt before
First breath?

Among the wrinkling, yawning cracks of time,
she thrusts herself full into being.
A birthday on the back-est of the back roads
Of a lonesome country.

Abuzz, a dragonfly covers a ragged weed in noise
And vibrates off. An engine buzzes, too, and heaves
Coughs, revs, and plunks steadily into the
Vanishing point of an unmarked road.

Damien Hirst

Two a.m. awake thinking
about Damien Hirst's money
and how much came from
setting a shark in jello forever.

Did he really do anything
besides hire a fisherman
to catch "something big enough to eat you",
drain the blood but keep the fear?

The closest I've been to a shark
is the ocean, I swam with their dinner.
The jellyfish dotted my shin in welts.
Loose kelp tendrilled around my ankles.

POETRY

Rabbits

The rabbits that live in the yard
Don't succumb to the seasons,
It seems.

I crumble at first snowflake
And am unreachable
Until May
Thaw.

BLAKE CHASTAIN

More than a Game

Eddie Reaves didn't remember anything before the crunching hit. He was laying flat on his back inside of the domed stadium staring up at the overhead lights, which to him were spinning and twirling, entwined in a cosmic dance with each other. Eddie was seeing stars.

This blinding light came rushing down and slapped Eddie right across the face. A sharp pain shot through his head. He moved his hands across his face to shield himself from the glare, but they were shaking. His whole body was shaking. Eddie felt like he was drowning, gasping for air with desperation. His consciousness was fading in and out. The sounds from the stadium were either full volume or breaking up in reception. The only noise that was constant was a high-pitched ringing in both of his ears which sounded like two whistles being blown at full volume. That was when Eddie noticed a fuzzy image standing over him. Though he could not see this mysterious figure clearly, the incessant snapping of this man's fingers gave away his identity. It was Coach McCoy. The last person Eddie wanted to see at the moment.

Coach McCoy possessed hands of irregular shape and size. Eddie always hated shaking hands with his coach since his grip crunched Eddie's throwing hand, as well as his fragile masculinity. Coach McCoy fired more snaps towards the almost unconscious Eddie. Each one sounded more like a thunderous clap and a subsequent blow towards Eddie's aching head.

Coach McCoy bellowed, "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Eddie saw six in total and responded as such.

More blurry images appeared. There was murmuring amongst these blurry people. The correct answer was three, but Eddie was seeing double. The blurry people reasoned that was good enough to keep playing since he could at least see the fingers. If he saw two, twin receivers he could probably hit one of them, and so

the blurry people concluded this was a blessing in disguise. They urged Eddie to rise to his feet so the game could continue.

Sweat dripped down his brow. His body was soaked with exhaustion.

He felt like he was hungover, the throbbing in his head had only gotten worse, and to add another layer of pain to the situation the home crowd inside of the echoing walls of domed stadium cheered his name unanimously.

“Eddie! Eddie! Eddie!” Every consecutive “Eddie” was like ringing a church bell inside his head. His tiny brain probably looked like the famous Liberty Bell with a small crack running through the middle.

Eddie stood up.

And immediately, he fell back to the turf. He was on his knees, keeled over in a position that suggested he might vomit. Coach McCoy stood over him and told him he was overselling his injury. Eddie informed his coach that he was not a salesman, but in fact a quarterback for the city of Cleveland.

Coach McCoy said, “Christ! How hard did you get hit?” Eddie didn’t respond.

Coach was back to snapping his fingers again and said, “Do you even know what quarter we’re in?” Eddie didn’t know the answer off the top of his head, so he looked towards the Jumbo-Tron for assistance. However, the giant television screen and millions of pixels caught his attention first, mainly because it was replaying his near-death experience. Eddie saw himself holding onto the ball looking to pass. He kept his feet shuffling, head on a swivel looking for anyone to throw the ball to. Unfortunately, Eddie only saw an opposing linebacker. A mountain of a man who wore a tinted visor because apparently, he didn’t look badass enough. Every step this hulking brute took was an earthquake on the turf, and Eddie watched his past-self make the best attempt at protecting his frail body. Both of the player’s helmets collided into a skull cracking hit. Eddie still couldn’t remember the incident, the only reminder he had was the throbbing of his aching head, which doubled in pain

after seeing the replay.

Coach McCoy reminded Eddie that he hadn't answered his question.

Eddie knew he couldn't let any pain show and responded with conviction, "Fourth quarter. We're down by four. Twenty-six seconds left." He buckled his chin strap and rubbed his hands together. "I got this coach."

Eddie jogged back to his team who were huddled around awaiting his return. The crowd erupted. Eddie looked at each of his players and gave them some words of encouragement. He told them that they were going to win the game on this final drive and make the fans of Cleveland proud. He told his star receiver, Jerry Sharp that he was going to score the game winning touchdown. Eddie felt good about his pep talk. Some of the pain subsided. His adrenaline was pumping.

Jerry looked at Eddie with a look of confusion and said, "What the fuck are you talking about bro? Let's just get this game over with and go home." Eddie looked at his other teammates and they all shared the same concerned look as if they were all in on some joke that he had no knowledge. Even worse, Eddie feared he was the joke.

The huddle dispersed before Eddie had time to call the play. He wondered how they already knew the play call, and why they disregarded his mini speech. While standing over the center he was so lost in thought that he almost forgot to hike the ball before the play-clock hit zero. His sweaty palms almost dropped the ball immediately after yelling "hike". He thought about the previous hit he'd seen on the Jumbo-Tron and his body tensed up awaiting another brutal crunch. Yet, this time he learned from his mistake and launched the ball towards his favorite target. Jerry caught the ball and they gained twenty yards. The team was still forty yards away from the endzone with twenty seconds left.

Jerry wasn't all too thrilled in the next huddle. He yelled at Eddie, "Why'd you throw me the ball?" He pointed at one of the other receivers, Quinton Meeks. "You were supposed to throw it to

Quinton over the middle and then he was supposed to drop it.”

The giant left tackle eased the tension by saying, “Cool it guys. The cameras are on us right now. Eddie was just improvising, right?” Eddie didn’t know how to respond. He was clearly missing out on some big secret. “Just call the next play man.” Eddie awaited the call from his earpiece, a small receiver that fit real snug inside his helmet. This should have relayed the offensive coordinator’s instructions, but nothing came through. He tapped the side of his helmet to get things working again. There was no signal.

Jerry asked, “What’s going on man? You good?”

Eddie responded, “It’s not working. My earpiece isn’t working. I don’t know what play coach wants us to run.”

Jerry shot Eddie another confused look. “You’ve gotta calm down.” Jerry sighed. “You seriously don’t remember the play from rehearsal?”

“What rehearsal?”

“He seriously fucked you up, didn’t he?” Jerry put his arm around Eddie’s shoulder. “I’ll call the plays from now on. Just remember that the game is supposed to end with you getting sacked again, we’re out of timeouts so we can’t stop the clock and the game will end. But, uh, just watch your head this time.”

Eddie was too stunned to respond. Jerry called the play even though everyone except Eddie knew it. The play was to let their quarterback receive another sack from the opposition. What the team didn’t know was that Eddie didn’t want to receive another blow to his fragile head. He wanted to win this game.

Eddie collected himself this time. He tuned out the yelling cheers from the crowd and all of the flashing lights that had previously blinded him. A few deep breaths, in and out. Eddie felt the tension release from his body with each deep breath. He was back in his zone. He snapped the ball and immediately focused his attention on the would-be tackler that was destined to sack him. Head on a swivel again, he looked left and right for the oncoming traffic. To his surprise the same linebacker as before came barreling right through the middle of his offensive line like an accelerating

semi-truck with malicious intent.

Eddie relaxed.

He dug his stained cleats into the turf and sidestepped the linebacker, who went flying past Eddie as if he was being sucked out of an airplane door.

The rest of the defense had stopped what they were doing since they'd expected to see Eddie's corpse lying on the turf again, but once they saw Eddie grasping onto the football, they all panicked. They scrambled around to find any open receivers in white jerseys, but during this madness two Pittsburgh teammates ran right into each other. An audible crack followed this tragic collision, both players collapsed like falling trees cut at the waist. These two were covering Jerry to which Eddie now saw his open receiver in the endzone, though he made no signal for the ball to be thrown his way. Instead, Jerry shook his head from side to side and made the universal hand swiping motion which meant, "Please, do not throw me the fucking ball."

Eddie declined this formal request and launched the ball towards Jerry. Everyone watched the spiraling, rubber blimp float through the air praying that it would find a safe landing in the reliable hands of Jerry. Time seemed to slow down. All of the sound inside that stadium ceased as everyone held onto what seemed to be their last breath. Even Eddie clenched every fiber inside his bruised body. He had no idea whether or not Jerry would catch that sailing ball or if he would drop it intentionally. According to his word, Cleveland was destined to lose as they were so used to doing in the modern era of football.

Jerry stood still, extended his arms, and open his hands to receive the ball.

Jerry caught the ball, and the stadium erupted.

But everyone on the field looked shocked for a few seconds. This only looked natural for the Pittsburg team as they'd just witnessed their certified win evaporate in the final seconds. Yet, the Cleveland team looked just as disappointed, possibly because they weren't used to winning and didn't know how to handle the success,

FICTION

or maybe it was because Eddie defied the game plan and won them the game.

Eddie was the first player on the field to react. He waved his arms around in a flurry of a spin cycle, faster than the blades of helicopter, soaring in his emotions of elation. The rest of the team quickly followed suit, mimicking Eddie's ecstatic reaction. They all rushed in on Jerry who was busy in a celebratory dance in the endzone. Two massive linemen hoisted him onto their broad, boulder-like shoulders and carried him back to their locker-room.

Eddie was one of the last players to enter the locker-room. He'd given an out of breath, and excited post game interview with one of the sideline reporters from NBC. It was the usual, "I don't know how to describe this feeling" type of response, but an effective one at that. Eddie had hoped the excitement would continue into the locker-room, but when he burst through the metal doors, everyone was dead silent. His team looked like they were attending a funeral, minus Coach McCoy whose angry red face looked like it might blow cartoon steam out of his scrunched-up nose.

Eddie walked slowly to his locker, hoping that nobody would notice his presence with the cautious steps of a teenager who was sneaking back into his parent's house. But Eddie dropped his helmet onto the tiled floor, and it clattered about.

Eddie looked over his shoulder to find his teammates, coaching staff, and even the water boys staring at him with anger.

"Hey guys," Eddie squeaked out.

Coach McCoy erupted. "What the hell kind of a stunt did you just pull?" Eddie tried to answer but Coach McCoy's angry stance and fuming, red face sent all of his words back down his throat. "You think you can just make up your own rules and get away with it? This isn't improv Eddie. We're real actors who stick to a script."

Jerry butted into the conversation. "Listen Coach, I think Eddie's concussed, so he forgot or something."

"Is that so?" replied Coach McCoy with the tone of a

psychopath. “And what’s your excuse?”

“Hey, he threw me the ball when I was wide open, I’m not going to drop a game winning touchdown like that and ruin my reputation.”

“Well then, maybe both of you need to look over our scripts.” Coach picked up two binders and heaved one to Jerry like a frisbee. “Maybe this will refresh your memory.” Coach McCoy hurled the other binder at Eddie who then put up his hands up to catch it, but given its awkward square dimensions and sharp corners, he couldn’t hold on. One of the deadly corners hit his palm and the binder dropped to the floor. Jerry caught his with ease and set it down. Eddie flipped through the thick sheets of paper inside the binder expecting to find detailed plays, just like the playbooks he’d had in high school and college. However, this one was actually a script with tag lines and even dialogue. Every play was orchestrated with extreme detail and everyone had a role to follow. Eddie found the section labeled “Fourth Quarter” and found the exact spot where he was sacked, only it didn’t mention anything about getting his head bashed in. Eddie read it to himself:

INT. CLEVELAND STADIUM—NIGHT

Eddie drops back into the pocket. He looks left and right for any sign of life.

He finds nothing but an opposing LINEBACKER,
LEEROY BROOKS.

Leeroy swallows Eddie whole.

Eddie, motionless, lays on the ground as if in a coma.

COACH McCoy SNAPS his fingers over Eddie.

COACH MCCOY

How many fingers am I holding up?

EDDIE

...Three.

Eddie thought the language was a bit too literary and open for interpretation but appreciated the visual demonstrations of each play.

Coach McCoy started back up again, “Thanks to Eddie and Jerry we won the game because he was selfish and acted against our best interest. Now, I’ve got to apologize privately to the whole Pittsburgh team.” Coach McCoy gripped a water bottle so hard the whites of his knuckles emerged and pulsed making his colossal hands all the more intimidating. The water bottle crinkled under this death grip.

His coach continued, “So, we’ll have to rewrite all of the post-game interviews.” He sighed in frustration. “All of the star players, head over to makeup after you’ve showered, and we’ll go from there.”

The team was fairly quiet as they prepared for the aftermath of facing the press after winning the game. Eddie stood in the shower so deep in thought he didn’t notice the water had gone icy cold. He didn’t want to come to terms with his current situation because doing so would be admitting that his life, his career, that everything he’d worked so hard for was a lie.

Eddie made his way to makeup before his big post game interview as his headstrong coach had instructed him to do. This section of the locker room felt entirely out of place given the stench of sweat spreading through the air, and the strange combination of misplaced cleats and raggedy towels thrown about that Eddie had to step over. Yet, when he entered the separate room off to the side, he felt as though he’d transported into a completely different world. The room was set up like a barber shop with a Hollywood aesthetic. Dark walls were illuminated by circular bulbs of light that ran alongside mirrors at each station. Eddie took a seat in one of the director’s chairs, right next to Jerry. A makeup artist was washing away some left-over paint on Jerry’s cheeks from the game.

Jerry said to the assistant, “Hey, next time can you cover my whole cheek instead of just doing the two lines?”

The assistant replied, “If you wash it off better in the shower

next time.”

Jerry chuckled, then turned his attention towards the seated Eddie. “What’s up man? Feeling any better?”

Eddie answered with an assertive “No”.

“You seriously forgot that our league was scripted? Shit man, that’s gotta be rough. I remember when I first found out after they drafted me, and I thought it was some prank or something, until they showed me a briefcase full of money to keep my mouth shut.” Jerry chuckled to himself. “It’s like finding out that Santa Claus ain’t real all over again, but at least the presents keep coming in.”

Eddie asked, “So, the fans don’t know right?”

“Of course they don’t.” Eddie was silent for a moment and clearly thinking about something. “Don’t even think about telling them man. I can see that look in your eyes.”

“But we’re lying to them.”

“It’s fine. They’re happier being ignorant, and nobody even notices. Well everyone knows the NBA is rigged but—”

“Wait, what? The NBA’s rigged.”

“That’s what I just said. Jesus dude, do you remember anything?”

Eddie was silent.

Jerry warned Eddie one last time. “Just keep your mouth shut, and get paid, it’s as simple as that. Even if you told everyone the NFL is rigged, who would actually believe you? People, fans of the sports, they want to believe it’s real—”

“But it can be real”, Eddie pleaded. “We can actually compete against each other.”

“I hate to say it man, but nobody cares enough. Players in this league, myself included, we just want to get paid. And with the script involved, there’s more entertainment value.” There were both silent for a moment thinking this over. “Look Eddie, we’re still the most talented football players in the world, if you want to make it competitive, then execute on the script as best you can. But if you start a strike or revolution or whatever you call it, everyone’s going

to deny it and it'll only cause more trouble, mainly for you.”

Eddie was silent.

“Just think it over, okay.” Jerry got up from his seat. “I’m outta here, see ya later.”

Eddie was still silent. He was busy thinking things over.

Eddie stood in front of the podium facing the press as if he was on trial. The flashing cameras, the flurry of questions all jumbled together into a foreign language. The way the reporters yelled reminded Eddie of his childhood days on the playground when he used to just play football for fun. All his friends screaming his name in unison so that he’d throw the undersized ball to them. This scene, however, with all of the reporter’s demanding an answer from Eddie made him freeze up. He only had one thing on his mind worth talking about and nobody was asking him about it. Eddie realized he’d forgot to ask Jerry whether the press was in on the big secret. For a moment, he thought about flipping the script and asking them if they knew the NFL was rigged, in front of all the cameras so that everyone else would know.

Eddie’s body tensed up. His words were stuck in his throat again. He thought about what Jerry had said before, and whether or not he should tell everyone else, all of the fans who used sports as escapism, that the NFL was rigged. That their memories and vicarious dreams were all based on a fake, predestined narrative.

Eddie stood poised at the microphone.

He slowed his breathing down, in and out. One final big exhale, and he gave his answer.

LAUREN KNIGHT

Insanire

Harold Winthrop woke with a gasp, clutching a dirty piece of fabric to his chest. He was in his art studio, and it was late evening. Tears stung his eyes and welled over his cheeks. She was still gone. He set aside his dead wife's cardigan and observed the state of the room. Half empty teacups littered the floor, tea stone cold. Crusts of toast he didn't remember making were on the accompanying saucers. It had been one week. One week since he'd picked up a brush. One week since he's created. And it weighed down his heart and his lungs could barely expand. His mind was melted honey oozing unpleasantly between his fingers. Without his muse he was nothing.

He rose to his feet and squinted in the darkness. Only moonlight through the windows illuminated the room. A book. He had been reading. Where was it? Harold shuffled over on slippers to the lamp and pulled the chain. Harsh orange light reflected his aged face in the windows. He blinked listlessly and watched his wrinkled features crease before spotting the book over his shoulder. He turned and picked it up slowly, joints creaking as he went. He set it gently on the desk and flipped it open to the marked page. His mind reeled with the thought of actually going through with his plan.

It had taken three days for him to do the proper research, and another three to gather the materials. It all seemed to blur together in his head, as if a mist had settled heavily over his brain. Or was it the fatigue? He had been sleeping an awful lot lately. But if he succeeded, he'd be back to himself again. His genius wouldn't stay trapped inside him anymore.

Harold arranged the candles carefully atop his desk, making sure they framed the salt circle he had poured perfectly. He fumbled with his drawer and managed to open it just enough to reach the matches inside. Striking the box, a crackling filled his ears

and a flame grew before his eyes. The twin candles burned in harmony.

It'll be worth it, he told himself as he dragged his weathered hand over the page. He took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind. But it inevitably clung to images of Eloise. Her frail form lying in their bed, still smiling at him until her last breath. Her thinning hair splayed across her pillow, twisting around itself like a silver crown. The way she raised her skeletal fingers to let her fingerprints graze his latest piece, only after it had dried. She had blessed each work with her touch, and Harold could barely stand to hold a paintbrush knowing she wouldn't again. Without his permission a soft sound tore its way out of Harold's throat, bringing him back to the task before him. He swiped his hand over his eyes and brought it back down to the book, tears shining in the lowlight. It was time.

"Hear me, infernal flames," Harold said in a gruff voice. "Bring forth your Prince—"

He was cut off with a sharp laugh and several slow claps.

"All that Dark Prince stuff is just for show you know," a voice drawled from the shadows. A figure appeared, just barely lit up by the lamp and candles. "I've been watching you, waiting to see how far you'd go and amuse me with this crap."

Harold sat down heavily in his desk chair, heart hammering in his ears. He felt as if he'd been submerged in treacle, his mind too slow to process what was happening. "You—"

"Yes, me. I'm the Devil. Not what you were expecting right?" He grinned too widely for a human mouth and brushed his hands down the front of his suit jacket. "No horns, no hooves. Just here to make your night. You want your wife back right?" The Devil picked up her cardigan with two fingers, grimacing at the dirt smeared into it.

"Yes, I can't paint without her. It's driving me mad," Harold whispered, feeling his face heat at the admission. Harold Winthrop, unable to paint? The world would balk!

The Devil observed Harold, unable to meet his eyes, and

smirked. He dropped the cardigan onto the floor and cracked his knuckles. “Oh I’m sure it is. That’s my business you know, madness.”

Harold watched numbly as The Devil began to work, eyes polluted with magic. “All the books said you need payment. Don’t we have to make a deal?”

The Devil paused, an annoyed lilt coloring his tone. “Let’s just say I’m a fan. I want you to paint again. I want you back. Now will you let me get on with it?”

Harold’s thought longingly of being himself again, what new pieces he’d create knowing she would touch and see and feel them once more. The silence buzzed throughout the room, but came to a halt when Harold nodded once.

The temperature of the room steadily grew hotter as The Devil worked. Harold could feel the air sticking to his face and filling his throat. Gravity seemed to press in on him, pulling him down even further into his chair. He didn’t think it was possible, but his body felt even heavier than before, as if his fatigue had tripled. Sweat started to bead on Harold’s brow, and he wondered just how much more dark power his body could handle. He was about to ask The Devil how much longer it would take when the temperature dropped dangerously. Harold felt as if his lungs had frozen in his chest and he started choking. When he regained his composure, The Devil was nowhere to be seen and the light had been sucked from the room.

What Harold could only assume was magic tingled across his flesh. It laid over the room in a thin film, coating his tongue in a cloying sweetness. His spirit felt light, as it was floating above his body, or had disappeared altogether. It was a cool relief compared to the weight he’d been carrying since his wife’s death.

“Harold?” a female voice asked quietly.

Panting hard, Harold reached for his matches. “Eloise!” The candles danced weakly across the tall and graceful form of Eloise at the center of his studio. No sign of sickness showed in her face, and her cardigan looked freshly laundered and bright around her shoulders. She smiled shyly at him.

“You haven’t been taking care of yourself,” she reprimanded kindly, glancing around at the mess.

“I couldn’t live without you my darling,” Harold whispered, rising slowly from his chair. He walked towards her, as if to embrace.

“No dear,” Eloise murmured, backing up. “That’s the only rule; we can’t touch. Didn’t he tell you?” Harold shook his head, arms falling back to his sides. “I’m sorry,” Eloise sighed.

Harold simply smiled, staring at his wife and taking in her healthy form. Tears welled in his eyes again. “You look so well my muse,” he said thickly. “I must paint you, capture your essence.”

Eloise blushed and walked over to his easel. “Well go on then.”

Harold painted throughout the night and into the early dawn at a feverish pace. With each stroke of the brush, he felt his mind lift and his heart swell. The joy of creating! He was Harold Winthrop again, master painter, genius of the art world. Collectors from around the globe would bid spectacular amounts of money just to own his work. And with his darling Eloise at his side, healthy and whole, he’d create a new movement of expression. He could feel his veins singing at the thought.

But just when he thought he’d finished, Harold would find something else he had to add. Further definition of the flush in her cheeks, better highlighting within her hair. More details needed to be added to her eyes to truly capture their otherworldly glow. So he kept painting. Even when his arms grew heavy with fatigue and his legs grew stiff from standing, he kept painting.

Eloise never moved a muscle, letting countless sunrises and sunsets wash over her still form. She watched Harold’s frame shrink and wither, shaking with the effort to complete his masterpiece. It was only when the paintbrush fell from his gnarled hand and he collapsed did she move to the fallen figure. She stepped over Harold’s corpse and smirked at the painting. A final crack of her knuckles, she grabbed the canvas and murmured, “Madness.”

We Call On You

“Well that was the worst date ever,” Mellona said into the air of her hallway. She closed the front door with a kick before shrugging off her rain slicker. The pitter-patter of cat feet sounded off the hardwood as Cornelius came to greet her.

“You heard me right old man,” Mellona said, bending down to scoop him up. “She showed up late, didn’t even want to order coffee, and didn’t make plans to see me again.” Mellona sighed, absentmindedly running her fingers through his black fur. “I bet she only agreed to it because Mom set it up, huh?” Mellona toed off her boots on the rug.

Cornelius meowed impatiently, causing Mellona to chuckle. “I know right? Twenty three years old, living in grandma’s house by myself, and she’s still finding some way to control my life.” Mellona set Cornelius down, careful he didn’t snag her nice shirt. “I’m going to change and we’re going to have a nice night in with a good dinner, just the two of us.” Cornelius’ tail flicked in the air as Mellona made her way to her room.

She returned to the kitchen in old sweatpants and her house slippers. A cream cardigan was hanging loosely on her frame over an olive green t-shirt. “Time for food Mr. Priss,” Mellona crooned, setting down his dish filled with wet cat food. Cornelius dashed for the food, scarfing it up as if he hadn’t been fed lunch several hours ago. Mellona shook her head with a fond smile and set to making herself a sandwich.

She ate it in her dimly lit kitchen, leaning over the counter top so any crumbs dropped into the sink. The setting sun glowed orange through her windows, and Mellona couldn’t help feeling melancholic for the failed connections in her life slipping behind the trees with it. Since her grandmother’s passing years before, it had been harder and harder for Mellona to open up to really anyone. The judgment from her town surrounding the Wilmot’s was not new, but the longer Mellona had to stand it the longer she wondered why she bothered staying here at all.

Her eyes flickered up through the windowpanes, locking onto the little grove of apple trees just on the edges of the forest behind her house. Mellona swallowed her last bite of food, tasting none of it.

“Come on Cornelius, let’s watch the sun set.”

The autumn chill was settling in enough that Mellona dragged her space heater out to the back porch so she could sit outside and stay warm. Her once yellow wicker chair was now a faded off white, but the cushion on its seat was brand new. Sinking down, Mellona arranged Cornelius in her lap so she could pet him comfortably.

“That good?” she murmured, fingers brushing behind his pointed ears. She hummed quietly, leaning back to stare at the apple trees. She had planted them with her grandmother when she was eight years old. It had felt like a glorious summer then; the hot sun warming her skin, her grandmother finally letting Mellona bake with her. And in a way, creating something. A life that had the ability to feed new life. Four years later Mellona got to bake those apples into a pie for her grandmother and had never felt so proud. But that felt like a lifetime ago.

A loud caw jerked Mellona from her drifting. A flock of birds rose from the trees deeper in the forest and took to the sky, their wings beating against the blackness. Mellona laughed weakly, feeling the tension ease from her shoulders when she realized where the noise had come from. But Cornelius’ fur was on end, his eyes dilated in the darkness.

“Cornelius!” Mellona yelled as she watched him dart across the lawn. She stood up from her chair and started down the stairs after him. His inky form melted into the surrounding darkness and Mellona had the sinking feeling he was heading for the woods. She pulled her sweater tighter against the chill. Her house slippers had rubber bottoms, but she knew they’d be soaked by the time she found him. She crossed her overgrown yard and followed Cornelius into the woods. Dense trees loomed above her, diminishing what little light shone from the moon and stars. Their branches stretched across the sky like fingers grasping at wisps of clouds. Sparse leaves

still clung tightly with their stems in the autumn evening. Roots crept across the ground. She squinted down at her feet, stepping carefully along the dirt path. It would do her no good to twist her ankle in her search for her cat.

She pushed away branches that tried to graze her face and ventured deeper into the woods. “Cornelius,” she called again. “Come here Mr. Priss.”

If she followed the path long enough she knew she’d reach a stream. Mellona used to follow her grandmother into the woods to play. She had been odd old lady; always collecting bits and bobs from the forest to mess around with. But it had been years since Mellona bothered to enter the woods, and any familiarity she had was lost in the dark.

“Damn,” Mellona hissed, shins bumping heavily into a fallen log. All the frequent rain must have brought down a tree. She crouched, arms crossed close to her soft frame. It smelled rotted. Brows furrowed, she stood up and gingerly stepped over it. Her slipper pressed down into the mud, sinking slightly. Mellona’s breath hissed through her teeth and she called out sternly, “Cornelius!”

A rustle to her right startled her into almost falling back on the log. She hoped it was her damn cat and not some woodsy critter. She was not in the mood to handle a fox or raccoon. Cornelius meowed softly, but it seemed loud in the dark.

“Come here boy,” Mellona crooned. She bent down and stretched out her arms, feeling for his sleek fur. Without warning, he shot past her. His tail brushed against her hands as he raced toward some unknown destination.

“What the hell,” she breathed. Without thought she began running after him. What little leaves weren’t soaked from the rain crunched under her feet. She weaved between tree trunks and bushes, ignoring when they scratched at her ankles. The sound of the forest became a dull roar in her ears, thrumming in time with her beating heart. The smell of rotted plant material grew stronger the deeper she went. Her lungs burned as she sucked in air greedily.

Her slippers were starting to slide in the mud, threatening to come out from under her. But Cornelius was up ahead; she could see him now. Some sort of light was glimmering beyond the way, casting tall shadows.

Mellona came to a stop just outside the ring of light and leaned against a tall oak. Sweat was collecting in the small of her back and under her arms. Under her fingers Mellona felt the bark...squishing? She pulled her hand back in disgust, shaking it vigorously to get what she assumed to be mold off of her. Cornelius had slowed to a graceful prance and waltzed right into the yellow glow. Mellona turned her head to watch him, absent-mindedly wiping her hand on the thigh of her sweatpants. In the shadows, Mellona was able to take in the transfixing sight. A woman in a long dress appeared to be swaying in the center of the circle. Her eyes were closed and when she turned, Mellona saw her beaded jewelry glitter faintly in the light. Squinting, Mellona began searching for the source of illumination. It was as if a dozen candles were flickering around her. Her smooth olive skin looked appealingly warm against the night chill. Her bushy hair was curled tightly in on itself and framed her face beautifully. Mellona inhaled sharply when she realized she could see this woman so clearly because an orb of light was floating ten feet above her head.

At the sound the woman's eyes flashed open, displaying magnetic green irises. Mellona cupped a hand over her mouth and, slow as she could, sunk down into a crouch to hide in the shadows. Cornelius meowed and made straight for the woman's feet. She looked down, hair bobbing gently with the movement, and the corner of her mouth twitched ever so slightly. "Hello." Her voice was low and rough, as if it struggled to make it out of her throat. She bent down and scooped up Cornelius. The light pulsed once before expanding and illuminating a greater area.

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Mellona was bathed in yellow light. She could feel heat rushing to her face and pooling in her cheeks. Dirt clung to her sweatpants and slippers, making her feel grimy. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, but during her run it had become mussed and messy. The tree goop still clung wetly to her thigh. The glow felt like a searchlight burning into her skin. When the woman met her eyes she had the unsettling feeling she could see right through her.

“That’s my cat,” Mellona managed. Her knees ached with the cold but she wouldn’t move.

“Ah.” Her nostrils flared slightly as she stalked over to Mellona. Cornelius seemed drawn to her, and showed no signs of discomfort.

“What...is that?” Mellona’s eyes rose up to the orb. “Is this some sort of trick?” Halloween was next month, but Mellona knew there couldn’t be any wires. The orb had grown.

The woman shifted uneasily, moving Cornelius into the crook of her left arm. “How much have you seen?” she asked. Mellona swallowed hard. “Seen?”

“Not much I take it.” As the woman approached Mellona, her floor length dress brushed lightly on the ground but seemed to take up no dirt. The orb followed her, illuminating Mellona as she struggled to her feet.

Mellona’s mind flew to the fantastical tales her grandmother used to tell, of the forest being magic and housing great things. After she’d passed, Mellona’s mother explained that it was all make-believe, that her grandmother was an incredible storyteller. But something about this woman, the atmosphere of the forest tonight, inspired in Mellona the child-like wonder that maybe it wasn’t all a story.

“Are you a nymph or something?” Mellona blurted before she could stop herself. Her cheeks burned redder, turning her pale complexion blotchy. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip nervously, hoping the woman wouldn’t be offended.

The woman smirked slightly and took another step closer. “Or something,” she said, handing Cornelius back to her. Mellona took him into her arms; surprised by the weight of him even thought she’d held him a thousand times or more. His fur felt damp against her hands. He purred into the meat of her upper arm, bringing Mellona back from that moment of belief.

The woman gave him one last scratch on the head and made to step back.

“Who are you?” She couldn’t let this woman leave; her aura was too compelling. Now that she was mere inches from her, Mellona could understand the pull she had over Cornelius.

The woman paused, heavy lids drawing over her eyes. “Willow.” The way she said it made Mellona smile. “And you?”

“Oh—Mellona. Mellona Wilmot.” Mellona shifted to adjust her glasses, and Cornelius made a noise of discontent. “Sorry Mr. Priss,” she muttered to him casually. When she looked back up Willow’s expression shuttered into a placid smile, but Mellona swore her eyes were sparkling with some sort of inclination.

“That’s a cute name,” she said, leaning in closer to Mellona.

“Actually, his name is Cornelius. I just sort of—call him that as a nickname,” Mellona trailed off, watching Willow examine the tree beside her. She moved so fluidly and with such ease. Mellona was torn between being jealous and transfixed. The skin around Willow’s eyes creased in worry, her hand hovering just above the trunk. In the glow of Willow’s orb Mellona could see the slime that coated the trunk did look like mold. It was a sickly black and purple color, as if somehow the tree was bruised. Mellona swallowed hard, hoping it couldn’t spread far. Her apple trees...

“I meant yours, Mellona.” Willow turned back to her, face drawn into a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Thanks,” Mellona whispered. She focused her attention on

Cornelius and let the silence settle in around them. The longer she petted his fur, the more Mellona felt like herself again, and wondered why on earth she was talking to this strange, beautiful woman in the woods while dressed in sweatpants. “I should...head back to my house,” Mellona said, more to herself than Willow.

“Do you really want to do that?” Willow asked. “I would have thought you’d have more questions than that, especially with being a Wilmot.”

Mellona paused, her hand resting just behind Cornelius’ ear. “I’m sorry?”

“Didn’t your grandmother tell you anything? You are her granddaughter aren’t you? You look just like her picture.”

A chill poured down Mellona’s neck and settled at the base of her spine. “How do you know my grandma?” she asked in a small voice.

“Thalia Wilmot is well known among my people,” Willow said, turning her head to watch Mellona. “She used to be one of us.”

“One of you?” Mellona managed around the lump in her throat. She could feel sweat dripping down the back of her neck.

“Indeed,” Willow said with a small smile. Mellona’s heart stuttered in her chest as Willow continued. “She was an incredibly powerful witch. My mother mourned for her when Thalia gave it up to be with a man.”

“What are you—my grandma may have been eccentric but,” Mellona started. “That’s not right.” She thought of how much time she’d spent with her grandmother; how she thought they’d had a special connection as a child. The two of them had understood each other in a way that Mellona worried she’d never find in another person. At least, she thought she had.

Willow reached out her hand, pressing it over Mellona’s and deeper into Cornelius’ fur. “It’s true. The Wilmot’s are a potent line for magical ability. Gifted.”

“And she gave up her magic?”

Willow’s dark brows drew together in confusion. “Magic? No, she gave up our world. My mother’s generation all believed

Thalia would rule. Her power would keep our home alive.”

“Your home?” Mellona asked, leaning in closer to Willow. The chill had dissipated with Willow’s touch.

Willow chuckled deep in her chest. “She really must not have told you anything,” she murmured. “The forest. It’s where we live. Me, my mother, my mother’s mother. All of us.”

Mellona noted that Willow didn’t mention having a father, but instead chose to address the woods. “And it’s dying? You said your mother’s generation thought she would keep their home alive.” Her mind focused on her little grove at home. Did they count as part of the woods too?

Willow’s chin tilted down, her eyes falling to the forest floor. “Yes it is. My generation’s power—it is not as strong as those before it. More and more witches have given up faith and fled our coven for new ones. The state of our home is not what it once was. But with your grandmother...” Willow pulled her hand back, the orb above her dimming to a dull orange. “She could have made up for what we lacked.”

Mellona breathed shakily through her mouth at the overload of information. Her grandmother had been a witch, and a damn good one at that according to Willow. By the sounds of it, a whole coven of witches was just living in the woods behind her house. Woods that were dying. She felt like she needed to sit down.

“I’m sorry your home is dying,” Mellona murmured. Her eyes were unfocused, staring but not seeing the tree trunks in front of her.

“Thank you,” Willow replied, her tone gone flat of energy.

“Were you doing a spell? Before Cornelius interrupted you?”

A dull chuckle sounded from Willow’s throat. “Yes. Every night now me and my people cast an enchantment to help the forest sustain its magic. We used to get away with casting it once a month, but the forest grows weaker still. We had to take action.”

Mellona’s mind flew to the rotting slime, threatening to infect even more trees. “Is there anything that can help? Can’t

another...coven work the spell with yours?"

Willow shook her head sadly. "It doesn't work like that. The forest has a connection with each line of witches it's helped bring forth. Only our magic can aid it."

Mellona shifted Cornelius' weight to her other arm, ignoring his sound of discontent. Line...if the Wilmot's were technically from witch ancestry would she be connected to the woods as well? At least through her trees?

"What if I—I mean I never really tried magic before but. Can I help you?" Mellona stumbled over her words. They were ripped from her throat shaking and unsure.

Willow's head tilted in thought, her curls bouncing gently at her shoulder. "Thalia was powerful in her own right, even before her training. It is known." She said this as if to herself, rather than to Mellona beside her. "It is possible. You may try with me if you wish." Willow's orb grew brighter as she spoke. By the end of her statement she'd turned abruptly and glided back to the clearing. Mellona watched her for a moment before following.

She could now focus on the clearing properly. It was a perfect circle, lined with tiny white stones. Mellona stepped carefully into it, noticing how much drier the earth was beneath her feet. It felt like this clearing had been opened up for the heavens, as no trees sheltered her from the moonlight shining down on them. Her mouth twitched slightly in a halfhearted smirk. She would have expected mushrooms instead of rocks.

"Since you have never performed magic before, I'll have to help you." Willow stated, coming to a stop in the center. Mellona made a noise of agreement and paused before her. Willow's face softened when she added, "You'll have to put down Cornelius."

Mellona's face heated as soon as she asked, "Do I really?"

Willow nodded, bending down to stare into Cornelius' big eyes. "You'll stay right here within this circle this whole time, won't you? You won't worry either of us by dashing off?"

Cornelius blinked lazily three times before yawning. Willow smiled wide and looked back to Mellona. "You can put him down

now.”

Mellona hesitated, unsure if Willow had just cast a spell over her cat, but bent down all the same to let Cornelius go. His tail flicked along the inside of her wrist as he pranced away, but he never set foot outside the circle.

“Now, I want you to cast out any doubts in your head. The spell works best with positive emotion.” Mellona stared at Willow blankly, wondering how on earth she’d manage to dispel her nerves of messing this up. “You’ll repeat after me the incantation. When you feel the magic, offer it up, not out.” Willow gave her a cool smile and took Mellona’s hands in her own.

Mellona’s heart pounded in her throat, begging to be set free from the restraints of her body. “Alright,” she tried to say, but her mouth was too dry to form the word. Mellona licked her lips and tried again. “Alright.” She squeezed Willow’s hands gently, only looking down when she noticed Cornelius had begun circling Willow’s ankle again. When she looked back up, she saw Willow’s eyes were closed and quickly followed suit.

Mellona could feel Willow swaying gently, their hands brushing through the air thickly, as if stirring treacle. Willow’s gentle hum filled the quiet space in Mellona’s mind, drowning out her thoughts like the buzz of bees.

“Hecate we call on you,” Willow began. She left a pause for Mellona to echo her. “We call upon your forces, our mother in magic. Protect your daughters’ home. We invoke the restoration of our ancient wood. Bind our magic in its roots. Cast decay from its heart. Reach your ethereal hands to us and work through our mortal form. It is written. It is known. So it shall be.”

Mellona repeated Willow’s words, feeling heat emanating from Willow’s orb above her. Her skin prickled with the spark of electricity, as if it had shocked her. She could feel a power swelling up within her, just under her lungs, pressing into her heart. Mellona’s chant came out broken and jagged, rough even compared to Willow’s voice. It was getting harder to breathe, but Mellona pushed through, panting. “It is written...It is known...So it—shall

—be!” With the final words a wave burst through her, the tension broken. Mellona fell like a stone, her hands ripped from Willow’s.

“Mellona!” Willow shouted, the light going out and leaving them in darkness.

Mellona’s breath was shallow, her limbs shaking from effort. “Willow? Did—did it work?” she mumbled, lips too heavy to properly move. She felt a hand intertwine with hers, cold compared to her sweating palm. A scratching cat’s tongue was licking her forehead.

“Mellona I’m so sorry. I don’t understand. This has never happened before.” Willow’s voice was breathless with worry. “I should have stopped when I realized...”

“Realized what?”

“...Mellona I don’t think you have any magic.”

Mellona squeezed her eyes shut at the information, stomach muscles tense at the realization. “Oh.”

“How are you feeling?”

Mellona’s eyes slid open, pupils glassy with tears. “I just... feel weak. A little shaky? I don’t understand. I felt something, something in me.”

Mellona turned her head at Willow’s quiet gasp. “What? Does that mean something?”

“I didn’t think it was true. I thought it was just a story.”

Willow ran her fingers along Mellona’s temple. “Witches don’t feel their power inside them. It manifests as light.” Willow held out her palm and a tiny sun of light illuminated the clearing. “You may not have magic, but you magnify it. You’re a brilliant conductor.”

Mellona’s eyes went past the light and to Willow’s face. “A conductor.” Her weak smile was reflected in Willow’s at the thought of Willow’s magic traveling through her, growing in power, to help save her grandmother’s home. Mellona could learn about her all over again. She may have died, but her essence would live on.

KAYLIE YACECZKO

Just Before Gone

The sound of birds singing in the morning never fails to wake me up. I don't mind it, of course. They sound like my own tiny orchestra, serenading me from outside my window. Robins are my absolute favorite. Their songs are just lovely, and I can't help but laugh at their precious orange tummies. This morning, my little robin's song is as sweet as fresh honey, and my eyes cannot open fast enough to sneak a peek.

The blinds are closed, so I can't see the nest that my robin has been building for ages now. It's nothing to snap my cap over, but I hope I don't miss seeing those bright blue eggs hatch. My eyes shift from my window to a blurry, brown smudge. I think my glasses are on my nightstand, at least that's where they should be. I stretch my left arm as far as I can until I feel the smooth leather of my glasses' case on my fingertips. Within moments, my vision clears, and I can see the case's intricate black stitching with Chanel written across the top in shiny metal.

The brown smudge transforms into a small dresser, and a dozen photographs cover the surface of it. I'm not sure who the people in the pictures are, but they sure do look happy. I place my glasses' case back onto the nightstand, and I can see two more photographs in beautiful, silver frames.

The larger frame holds a picture with a young couple on what appears to be their wedding day. The bride looks just lovely in her snowy white gown, and her hair is pulled back except for two perfect curls, revealing an angelic face and the biggest smile I have ever seen. The groom, on the other hand, my goodness, he is just the living end. He's a dashing prince in his tuxedo, and while his face is stern, there is an undeniable twinkle in his dark eyes as his arm is wrapped tightly around his bride. Though the picture is in black and white, the flowers in the church and in the bride's bouquet almost steal the show. Lilies are always so pretty.

The other picture is blossoming with color and the bright face of a young girl, maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. Her golden hair glistens in the sunshine, and she's wearing a crimson sweater with bold white letters that read "Harvard" across her chest. She almost resembles the bride in the wedding photo, but the girl's eyes are more like the groom's, a deep and warm caramel. Lily. Yes, that's my Lily. She got accepted into Harvard. She wants to be a doctor. She is going to visit today before the fall semester starts. Oh, I just can't wait to see her, and I want to make sure she has everything she will need. She will not want my help because she thinks going to college makes her an adult, but I'm her mother. I know she will always need me, even if she will never admit it.

I hear a gentle knocking on my door. "Hello," I call out, startled out of my wits. I am not expecting anyone else today, and I still have to get dressed before I could help Lily get ready for school. "Who is that?"

"Good morning, Judith," a woman whispers, poking her head through the door. "I hope I didn't wake you up, but I brought you some breakfast." I have no clue who this woman is, or why she is taking it upon herself to bring me something to eat.

"Uh, well, I suppose that's alright." The woman smiles at this, and she begins walking towards the bed with a large tray full of food. I try my best to get a good look at her. She could not be more than forty years old, with tiny wrinkles beginning to form around her eyes, hopefully from smiling too much. She had allowed a few gray hairs to spread across her head but most of it is pulled up. Her blue jeans are faded but have no holes in them. Lily always insists on ripping up her jeans, so I should tell her how nice this woman's jeans make her look without them. The woman is also wearing a simple black, button-up shirt, and just above her heart is a nametag typed onto white paper and tucked into a plastic pocket. "Mary. That's a nice name."

"Thank you, Judith," Mary replies with a soft grin on her face. "That's very sweet of you." She places the tray on my lap. The breakfast she has brought me is nothing too special, just a bowl of

yogurt with some berries, some scrambled eggs with crispy bacon, and a small glass of orange juice.

“Did you make this?” I watch the juice steady from the constant movement. The cubes of ice gently clink against the glass, like bells at Christmas.

“No, the chefs in the kitchen made this just for you,” Mary says, and she readjusts the ivory napkin on the tray. “Now, I’m going to be back once you’re finished with breakfast, but a nurse should be in here soon to help you eat and get ready for the day.”

“My daughter is going to Harvard.” I cannot stop myself from smiling at this. I just love to brag about her. “She’s going to be a doctor someday. She works so hard. She’s leaving for her first year today. Did you know that? She needs me to help her finish packing, and then I’m going to take her to campus.”

“Well, that will be nice.” Mary grins, and she starts to leave the room.

“Have you seen her,” I ask, and the woman stops in her tracks. “Lily. She should be here soon.” Mary turns back to me, and with a small smile, she explains that she has not seen Lily yet. She tells me I should not worry because she will keep an eye out for me. That is nice to know.

Once Mary leaves, I look at the tray of food in front of me. The meal itself does not seem too appetizing, with the eggs resembling yellow cellulite, and the blackberries in the yogurt showing traces of freezer burn. Lily is allergic to blackberries. We found out when she was in preschool, or maybe it was kindergarten. The school called me around lunchtime, and they told me Lily had gotten some from one of her friends. Poor baby broke out in hives. I hope she remembers to stay away from them while she’s at Harvard. I won’t be able to help when she is so far away.

My eyes shift to the orange juice in the small glass. I can smell the sweet and tangy aroma, and I don’t realize how dry my mouth has become until I think about drinking the cool and refreshing beverage. That woman said something about breakfast,

but I am not sure what it was. I think about waiting for a moment, just to see if she will come back, but the juice seems to be calling my name. A sip can't hurt. I lift my hand to grab the glass, but it feels as though a hundred-pound brick is holding down my arm. After what seems like ages, I feel the cold glass on my palm.

I have a ring on my finger. I never noticed it before. It's a smooth, gold band, and in the center sits the biggest diamond I have ever seen in my life. It is at least the size of a dime, and light reflects off it like a tiny disco ball. I cannot believe something so beautiful is on my hand.

Shifting my attention to the orange juice, I use every ounce of strength I can to lift the cup to my lips. There must be condensation on the outside of the glass, or it was just cleaned because it slips right through my hand before I can get a taste. The glass falls and cracks on the wooden tray, and juice finds its way into my yogurt and eggs.

"Oh dear," I mutter to myself. I try to reach for the napkin, but my arms are aching with every movement. As a result, I am forced to watch the liquid slowly drip off the tray and onto the white sheets. Panic begins to swell in my chest. If I don't get these sheets into the wash soon, the juice is going to ruin the fabric. I have to get this stain out before Lily leaves for school. I don't want her to be late for her very first day.

I'm not sure how much time passed—though it feels like an eternity—until I hear a knock on my door. Lily is here, and I am not only in my nightdress but covered in orange juice. Oh, I hope she won't be upset. I am going to miss her so much while she is at Harvard, and I don't want to spend our last day together fighting.

"Lily," I call out. "Lily, is that you?"

It isn't my Lily who answers. It is a middle-aged woman with a few gray hairs poking out of her ponytail, and she has tiny wrinkles around her bright and blue eyes. She smiles at me, revealing a set of white teeth with a tiny gap between the front two.

"Hello, Judith," the woman says quietly, but her eyes widen when she sees the mess I have made of myself. "Judith, are you

okay? What happened?” She rushes over to my side, and she immediately snatches the napkin to dab up as much liquid as she can.

“I wanted some of my juice,” I say matter-of-factly. “I just couldn’t get a good grip, I suppose.” I try my best to get a good look at the woman’s name tag. “Your name is Mary?”

The woman takes a deep breath before turning to me. She just smiles, though there is a touch of sadness in her eyes. “Yes, my name’s Mary.”

“That’s a lovely name.”

“Thank you, Judith.” Once it’s clean, Mary moves the breakfast tray off my lap and begins to remove the stained sheets. “Has anyone else been in here today? Anyone come in to help you eat and get dressed?”

“No,” I say, unsure of who else is supposed to see me today. “No, I’m just waiting for Lily. She’s my daughter. Did I tell you she was going to Harvard? I’m helping her pack all her things today, and then we’re driving all the way to campus so she can settle in. My daughter is going to be a doctor someday.”

“I don’t think you’ve told me that,” Mary mutters. “You must be very proud of her.”

“Oh, I couldn’t be prouder.” Mary walks to the dresser across the room, and she begins rummaging through a range of sweaters and shirts. “She’s worked so hard for such a long time. I think she wanted to follow in my footsteps and go into pediatrics—she’s wonderful with children—but she would make a great surgeon, too.”

“Okay, Judith, why don’t we get you dressed,” she says, holding a pair of khaki pants and a simple crimson short-sleeved shirt. She makes her way to my bed and helps me into my fresh set of clothes. Mary has quite a gentle touch, as though she thinks my bones will turn to dust if she moves me too quickly, but she does so in a loving way. A way that can only come from maternal instincts.

“Do you have children?” The question just slips out.

“I do,” she answers with a genuine and seemingly

involuntary grin. “I have a son. He just turned six this weekend.”

“That’s just precious,” I cry out. “When Lily was that age, she used to get into all sorts of trouble. I spent more time trying to get her to sit still than I did with, um, with my...my husband...” I can feel my voice trail off. Am I married? I must be. I would not have my Lily if I did not have a husband. Yes, I must be married.

“Oh, my son is pretty well behaved.” Mary chuckles as she runs a brush through my hair. Even through the toughest knots, she ensures that I feel no pain. She uses every ounce of youth in her nimble fingers to tie my graying hair into a beautiful braid. “As well behaved as a six-year-old can be, of course. He’s definitely a handful sometimes, but I know my life would not be the same without him.”

“That’s how I am about my Lily,” I reply. “I wish I would have been able to spend more time with her when she was that age. They grow up so fast, you know? What’s your little boy’s name?”

“His name is Jerry Junior—J.J. for short, of course,” Mary speaks and releases a heavy sigh. “It was my ex-husband’s family name.” Mary then kneels on the ground, leaving my line of vision for a moment. I can hear her moving stuff around underneath my bed, but I am not sure what I can possibly have down there. When the woman reappears, she has a folded wheelchair in her hands. She takes a moment to open the seat and click every lock and switch into place, though I can just barely hear her mumbling about terrible quality and having so much money. I’m not sure. Near the armrest of the chair, there are the words Invacare Tracer in white and blue stitching.

“Okay, Judith,” she speaks softly, and she shifts her head frequently to keep eye contact with me. I can’t help but notice how prominent the bags under her eyes are. “I’m going to help you get into your chair, and then we can go out to the front room. I think they’re going to start games soon. How does that sound?”

“That sounds nice.” With some of Mary’s help, I move from the warmth and safety of my seemingly endless layers of blankets to the stiff and cold seat. The seat lets out a sigh as I sit, and the metal

creaks as I shift my body to find the most comfortable spot. “This seat is absolutely miserable. When Lily gets here, she will have to have a word with you. She would never allow anyone to be so uncomfortable, let alone her mother.”

Mary never responds. She just pushes the chair through the door and into a hallway, one that I had no idea even existed. I never thought there was anything outside of my room, but I suppose that it makes sense for there to be more. The moment I enter the corridor a strong gust of urine and baby powder fills my nostrils. People in lab coats are walking around, never glancing my way as their eyes are glued to clipboards. A shorter lady almost runs into my chair, so she must use my arm rest to regain her balance.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, dear,” I cry out, reaching out in a sad attempt to help her. “Are you alright?”

The woman says nothing to me, but she glares through her rimless glasses at the woman pushing my chair. “Ms. Turner, what are you doing? Shouldn’t you be collecting breakfast trays?”

Ms. Turner, without hesitation, puffs up her chest and continues to push my chair down the never-ending hallway. “I found Judith covered in orange juice and still in her pajamas, so I’m just bringing her out to be with the other residents,” the woman calls out as we stroll through the corridor. “Maybe someone should look into that.”

Before I can ask this Ms. Turner why the other woman seems so angry, I am in a brand-new room. This one is much larger than my room, and it is full of old sofas and even older people. Some are sitting at one of the wooden tables in a huddled circle like gossiping meerkats, and some people are dozing off in the recliners while the Hallmark channel blares from the television set.

“Well Judith, it looks like we didn’t miss today’s activity after all,” Ms. Turner says as she pushes my chair to the closest window. “Would you like to play Bingo once they get started?”

“No, I should just wait.” The grass is so green this year, and the leaves on the trees and bushes are starting to look like they have

been painted with the most vibrant shades of orange and yellow. “My daughter, Lily, she should be here any minute now. I’m taking her to Harvard today. She’s going to be a doctor.”

The woman does not say anything. She simply sits in the tiny chair next to me. “That’s wonderful, Judith. You must be very proud of her.”

I look at the woman, and my eyes fall to the nametag made of printer paper and a simple plastic holder. “Mary. That’s a lovely name.”

With a heavy sigh, though I’m not sure why, she takes my hand into hers, and she gives it a gentle squeeze. “Why thank you, Judith.”

Wednesday

“So, here’s what we’re looking at,” I said, carefully placing my mug of piping hot Folgers coffee on my desk. “The air conditioning condenser in your van is completely worn out, which of course makes sense because it’s, what, fifteen years old? You’re going to want to have it replaced, especially since summers keep gettin’ hotter.”

“Okay.” The woman sitting across from me nodded her head slowly. She was a petite lady, barely in her thirties, and she nervously nibbled on her fingernail that was painted a glossy blue. “How much is that going to be?”

I let out a little chuckle. “We can go over all the details once your husband is here tomorrow,” I replied, rising from my seat. “For now, we can schedule you for about eight o’clock tomorrow morning.”

She simply nodded again, fumbling through her purse as she stood. I led her out of my office as she dialed her husband’s number, most likely to reiterate what I had just told her. Sweet gal. Once she was gone, I sat back in my chair and looked at the analog clock on my wall to see that only fifteen minutes had passed since I last checked. I had plenty of work to do—no denying that—but nothing could really hold my interest. The paperwork pile was growing to Empire State building heights, but I was more concerned with writing my grocery list than expense reports.

The boys in the shop worked hard. Real hard. I had the best team in the world, handpicked them myself. I could probably let them go home a little early. The time was nearing six o’clock, and they were finishing up on the last car of the day. No real reason to keep them much longer. I gathered the stray papers on my desk and carefully filed them away, and I left my office without looking back.

I really needed to clean my car out, since the floor was beginning to look more like some recycling art project made of Dasani water bottles, Bud Light cans, and greasy McDonald’s

wrappers. My poor Honda Civic deserved so much better than what I was giving her, but work had been keeping me constantly on the go, especially after my promotion. I didn't mind too much because I loved my job, but it never really gave me time to go out.

Nelson's Supermarket was my favorite place to go after a long shift. The prices weren't always the best being a mom-and-pop kind of store, but it made up for it by hiring the sweetest employees I have ever seen. My only real time to socialize was when I would go grocery shopping. There was some sort of joy I would get from springing up conversations with people I didn't know. Less judgment. They didn't know my story, and I didn't know theirs. For just a moment, I didn't have to be Matthew Davidson. I could just say whatever I wanted—portray any persona I pleased—and they would smile and tell me about themselves in return. Money wasn't the only trade happening in the market. Stories were given and received every day.

I pulled my car into the parking lot, which was slowly emptying out. Typical for almost six o'clock on a Wednesday evening, since the rush hour crowd was heading home. I didn't mind of course; I never was a fan of big crowds. I parked my car, and within minutes, I felt the cold plastic of the shopping cart handle on my palms. The familiar scent of apples and citrus filled my nostrils as the doors of Nelson's slid open. The supermarket was vibrating in colors and lights, but the aisles were a sea of silence. The only sound was Leslie Gore's "It's My Party" echoing from the muffled speakers scattered around the store.

First on my list: vitamins. My doctor was saying I needed to get more vitamin D, and since I was stuck inside all day and with winter slowly approaching, I couldn't count on the sun to give me the boost I apparently needed. Pushing the squeaky cart, I made my way to the Health and Wellness department. This section was in the back corner of the store, sort of hidden from the rest of the produce and groceries. I walked through the narrow entryway, and I was immediately hit by the scent of cinnamon. The shelves were full of a variety of spices, teas, and "natural" versions of products

like organic deodorant and brown paper towels. A girl was stocking the vitamins in the back shelf, wearing an olive-green sweater that accentuated her delicate curves.

“How’s my favorite Bianca today?” I said as I shuffled over to the shelf, looking to see if she happened to be putting out the brand of vitamin D that I was looking for. She flinched a little, probably because she did not hear me come over to her. She pulled her charcoal black hair behind her ear, revealing a beautiful and tasteful gold, hoop earring.

“Oh, hi there.” She smiled softly, her voice thicker than the honey on the shelves around her. “I’m doing alright. How are you?”

“Oh, you know how it is,” I sighed heavily while searching through the box of new products. “Just another long day at work. Days like these really make you want to win the lottery, am I right?”

“Ha, that would be nice,” she chuckled and made her way over the other corner of the store. I assumed she was going to finish stocking the rest of the inventory, so I kept up with her long strides to keep her company.

“What would you do if you won the lottery?” I asked as I rummaged through the wide range of Lipton tea flavors. I kept hearing green tea was good for you—can help with weight loss and all that—but I could never bring myself to enjoy the bittersweet and nutty taste.

“Not sure,” she mumbled, moving some bags of organic flour to the front of the shelf. “Probably would quit here, buy a house maybe...”

“That’s all?” I exclaimed in playful disbelief. “Come on. You’re a beautiful, young woman. There’s gotta be something else you would do with money like that.”

She paused for a moment, and I could see the wheels of thought spinning furiously in her mind. Her chocolate eyes were darting frantically across the room, as though she were trying to find a way beyond the room and into her deepest imagination. She turned to me, her caramel skin illuminated under the white lights.

“I would have to think about it, I guess,” she said calmly, turning back to the shelves.

“Well, I know what I would do if I won the lottery.” I chuckled. “I would want to install an indoor pool, but the pool would heat my house. I read this article that there’s this new tubing system that can make floors warm up on their own. It was called, like, radiant...radiant floor heating or something.”

She just nodded and told me how something like that would be pretty cool. Bianca helped me find the vitamins I needed, and she was able to answer some questions I had about which brands would be better. Such a smart girl, that Bianca. Ever since I started shopping at Nelson’s two years ago, she had always been there to help me out. I figured, if she was going to answer any of my silly questions, I could at least make the interactions more exciting for her. I could only imagine how bored she must get during her shifts. Once I found everything I needed, I made my way out of the department, and before I left, I made sure to let Bianca know I would save a spot for her by my pool.

Next on my list was deli meat and some cheese cubes. I always tried to avoid shopping at the deli at Nelson’s. The prices were honestly outrageous, and the employees back there were always rude and sliced the meats too thick. I mean, if I was going to be spending almost ten dollars a pound for ham, I wanted to get my money’s worth. The kid in the deli didn’t care about this, of course, so he randomly sliced the pound of ham and practically shoved it into the bag. I took the deli meat and my box of cheese cubes, holding my tongue to keep from blowing up on the guy. I was not going to let some college kid with blue hair and a piercing in his eyebrow ruin my mood. Before leaving to check out, I threw a twelve pack of hot dog buns into my cart, perfect for lunches during the week.

“Hi, how are you?” The cashier smiled as I placed my groceries on the conveyor belt, barely inching forward.

“Oh, you’re new, aren’t you?” I could not help but smile. I loved when fresh faces appeared at Nelson’s; I always got a sort of

high from seeing someone brand new to chat and build a relationship with every passing week. “I don’t think I’ve seen you here before.”

She flashed a toothy grin, and she said, “Yeah, I started last week. Still trying to get the hang of things.” I dropped my glance down to look at her nametag: Lily, which was a fitting name for her. Her long, sunshine hair surrounded her lightly-tanned face. She had a tiny spot of red from being outside for too long, but it only brought out the electricity in her eyes. On her wrist was a tiny tattoo that read “good vibes.” Well, if the tattoo was meant to remind her to give off good vibes, it was definitely working. Her smile alone gave me a warm and fuzzy feeling in my chest, even if her teeth were a little crooked.

“Well, Lily, you like it so far?”

“I do,” she said, almost finished scanning everything. “The people here are really nice.”

“Could you do me a favor, sweetie, and grab the bottle of Moscato behind you?” I pointed to the Beringer white wine sitting on the wine display just next to the register. Lily took the bottle into her hand and scanned the barcode on its side. “Oh, well, that’s good to know,” I chuckled.

“What’s good to know?”

“You were able to ring up the alcohol,” I explained. “That means you’re at least eighteen, right? I mean, not that you look immature or anything. I can already tell you’re growing to be a beautiful and independent young woman.”

She paused. She looked up at me, for just a moment, and then she just typed on the monitor. “Um, your total is thirty-two dollars and fifty-nine cents, please.”

“You look nice and tan,” I commented as I reached for my wallet stuffed in my back pocket. I kept it attached to a silver chain on my belt loop. My dad always told me to have one at all times because a man is only as good as his money, and if he happens to misplace his money, he’s about as worthless as a shredded dollar bill.

“Thanks, I just got back from vacation two weeks ago,” she said, taking my Discover card to finish ringing up my bill. “My family goes to Myrtle beach every year.”

“Oh, you get naked in the sun?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Naked in the sun?” I asked again, feeling a bit confused. “You didn’t swim in the ocean?”

“I...um...I did.” She stammered as the receipt printer clicked behind her. “But...I mean I had a bathing suit...”

I let out a laugh from the pit of my stomach. I couldn’t help it. This girl was adorable. Had she never heard that saying before? “I didn’t mean it like that. Don’t have to be so perverted, now.”

Before she could respond, one of the produce guys came up from behind her. He was a little older than her, maybe finishing up college or just graduated. I could tell he had not shaved in a few days, probably too lazy to put in effort. His apron was covered in stains, and he wore his green Oakland baseball cap backwards. I glanced to read his nametag.

Well Peter, I thought to myself. I may have to get in contact with your manager for looking as professional as a monkey.

“Hey,” Peter mumbled to Lily. “Bianca said you might need some help bagging.”

“Thanks.” Lily smiled. Peter started throwing everything into one plastic bag. He couldn’t be serious.

“Don’t squish the buns.” I demanded, and I could barely comprehend why I had to explain this. He should have known these basic things, but I watched him start to put my three-dollar bag of delicate hot dog buns in the same bag as my glass bottles of wine and vitamins. “Separate. Bag.”

He ignored my comment, and he handed me the single plastic bag. Unbelievable. I said goodbye to Lily and told her that I would probably see her next week. She said nothing, but she nodded and started whispering to the Peter guy. Maybe he was her boyfriend. I sure hoped not. Lily seemed like such a sweet girl who deserved better than someone working a part-time job stocking

fruit all day. No, she couldn't be dating him. She probably was with some man with a nice car and a real job.

The sun had tucked itself away into the horizon, so it was nearly dark by the time I headed back to my car. Before making it to my dear Honda, I saw another employee walking towards the store. She had fierce red hair that, even pulled back in a ponytail, seemed to come alive with large spirals, and tiny freckles spread across her face like sprinkles on a fresh doughnut.

"Charlie," I shouted, making long strides over to her.

Charlie was my absolute favorite cashier. She had been working there just as long as Bianca had, maybe even longer. I would always ask her how her classes were going, since she had been trying to get her Bachelor's degree in biology and chemistry. I couldn't help but feel a little jealous because I would have never been able to do what she was trying to do. I knew she would end up going to medical school someday and become some amazing doctor. "How's my favorite cashier today? Wow, it's nice to see you have legs and a body under that smock."

"Oh, hello." She smiled and gave a quick wave, never slowing her stride. "Just coming in from my break."

"Bummer," I said taking another step towards her. "You have any fun plans for tonight? Or are you spending all your time here?"

"Not really." She laughed gently. "Probably just going home and hanging out with my cat."

I couldn't help myself. The joke was too easy, and I knew she had a similar sense of humor. Charlie always laughed at my little jokes. "Oh," I said, barely holding back my laughter. "Going home to pet your—"

Maybe she didn't hear me, I thought as I watched her scurry into the store. She had probably taken a long break, so she was trying to hurry back inside. I knew how expensive her schooling had been, and the cost of medical school these days was no joke. Maybe I could help her out sometime. I could only imagine how big she would smile if I gave her a ginormous check to help pay off

her student loans. I bet I would be able to see the adorable gap her in front teeth.

I played the imaginary conversation over and over in my head as I tossed my groceries into the backseat of my car. I turned on the engine, and I sat back as I listened to its sweet purr as it came alive. My stomach dropped. I pulled my wallet from my pocket and opened the worn leather. My credit card was nowhere to be seen, and I realized Lily never gave it back to me. I tried to subdue the panic rising in my chest, and I told myself that she was new. She was still learning the ropes, so I shouldn't get mad at her.

I shut off the engine and started a light jog over to Nelson's. Entering the store, I looked over to Lily's register. I tried waving to her, but she didn't see me. In fact, she wasn't paying attention at all. Her electric blue eyes were completely focused on Charlie, whose back was turned to the door, and a taller man who was probably in his early to mid-forties. Even though he was about my age, he had deep wrinkles around his cold eyes, and his scraggly beard surrounded his seemingly permanent scowl. He looked up to me, and he started stomping over my way.

That's when I saw Charlie. Her beautiful emerald eyes were bloodshot, and her freckled cheeks were stained with tears. My stomach turned to ice. Had someone upset her? I bet that Peter had said something mean to her. I knew he couldn't be trusted. Or, maybe school was getting to her. I hoped nothing too serious was wrong.

Before I could open my mouth, the man was standing in front of me with my credit card in his hand. The blinding, gold manager nametag was two inches from my face, and his body loomed over me like an overgrown oak tree.

"Sir are you Matthew Davidson?" He asked as he read the name on the card.

"Uh, yes I am." I stuck out my hand, expecting him to return it to me and let me go on my merry way. Instead, he handed me the credit card, and he stood even closer to me. I could smell cigarettes and coffee lingering on his breath.

FICTION

“Mr. Davidson,” he growled like a lion ready to devour his prey. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave. Don’t bother coming back.”

“Why?”

JAKE ZARATSIAN

Liam Neeson | The New Librarian

INT. LIBRARY—FRONT DESK—DAY

1

The LIBRARIAN, woman in her 50s, sits at her desk reading.

In the door walks a dirty, confused, LIAM NEESON. He inspects the metal detector for foul play, then crotches down and safely crawls underneath.

LIBRARIAN

Sir, can I help you find a particular book?

LIAM NEESON

(arriving off his knees)

A book? No. I believe I'm here for an interview?

LIBRARIAN

Oh, Mr. Neeson! Perfect, you came at a great time.

She walks him to his desk.

LIBRARIAN (CONT'D)

I know I said it was just an interview but, our current book hunter called in sick today. We need your particular skills.

LIAM NEESON

What's a book hunter?

LIBRARIAN

Sit.

She grabs his shoulders and pushes him down to the chair.

LIBRARIAN (CONT'D)

This is your desk, phone, and computer. On the computer, you'll see a long list of people with "missing books". I know, monsters... anyway, give each of them a call.

SCRIPT

For absolutely no reason Liam picks up the phone and listens.
She hangs it up for him.

LIBRARIAN

Perfect, you're doing great. Over here you'll find the person's name, name of the missing book, and their current home address.

Liam instantly perks up from his confused state and morphs back into the Liam Neeson that murders people.

LIBRARIAN (CONT'D)

You'll need to give them a call and kindly remind them that their book is overdue and to return it at their earliest convenience. But remember, kindness is key. Don't scare them off the phone, okay? Great.

She walks back to her desk.

Liam squints at the computer's vast excel sheet of missing books. First on the list is a man named, MR. JOHNSON. His missing book: "Calvin and Hobbes, it's a Magical World"

LIAM NEESON
(slams his keyboard)

I'll find you.

Liam hurries for the phone and calls him.

[SPLIT SCREEN] with Liam Neeson and Mr. Johnson inside his home.

Mr. Johnson answers.

MR. JOHNSON

Hello?

LIAM NEESON

Mr. Johnson.

MR. JOHNSON

Yes, this is him. May I ask who's calling?

Liam abruptly stands up, slamming his keyboard again.

LIAM NEESON

The public library bitch, now you listen to me.

MR. JOHNSON

I'm sorry?

LIAM NEESON

You have something of ours. Something we want back at your "earliest convenience" but quite frankly, I have no patience for fuckers like you.

MR. JOHNSON

Woah—Excuse me? What's this about?

LIAM NEESON

Fine. You want to play hardball, huh? Well riddle me this, Johnson. Are you good with dates?

MR. JOHNSON

Am I good with dates? I don't know, why?

LIAM NEESON

December 12th, 2006. Do you remember that date?

MR. JOHNSON

Nooo? That was over 10 years ago.

LIAM NEESON

Come on Johnson! Quit playing cat and mouse... Okay, perhaps this will jog your memory.

(checks book title)

"Calvin and Hobbes, it's a Magical World." Now do you understand?

MR. JOHNSON

Ohhh—Wait a second. Is this about an overdue book?

LIAM NEESON

Atta boy. Now tell me where I can find this book and you won't get hurt.

MR. JOHNSON

Get hurt? Now, honestly man, I'm sorry but I have no idea where that could be. It's been 10 years! If you want I'll pay the replacement fee, it's fine.

LIAM NEESON

(sigh)

If that's the case then I'm afraid I'm sorry.

MR. JOHNSON

Sorry for what?

LIAM NEESON

I didn't want to do this, Johnson.

MR. JOHNSON

Do what?

LIAM NEESON

I'm getting reeeal tired of saying this.

MR. JOHNSON

SAYING WHAT!?

LIAM NEESON

(deep breath)

I have a particular set of skills. I'm able to look up your home address with a click of an outdated Windows computer. If you return the book now, that will be the end of it. I will not look for you. I will not pursue you.

MR. JOHNSON

Are you serious? Listen man, I have no idea where that book

is. I wish I did!

LIAM NEESON

If you don't return the book

(checks title)

"Calvin and Hobbes, It's A Magical World." I will look for you. I will find you... and I will return that book.

MR. JOHNSON

Ohh. Ha-ha. You know for a second I thought you were about to say—

LIAM NEESON

And then I will kill you.

Liam hangs up and exits.

END SPLIT SCREEN.

INT. MR. JOHNSON'S HOUSE—CONTINUED

2

MR. JOHNSON

Wait, what? Dude! It's just a book, I can pay the fee! Stop doing this to me, I can't tell if you're serious or—wait... Hang on. This is a prank call isn't it? I—I knew it! Is this Josh? Aaron? This is Aaron, oh I knew it. You're good man, that was freaky. For a second I really thought you were Liam Nee—

There's a knock at the door.

MR. JOHNSON (CONT'D)

Hang on Aaron, someone's at the door.

Mr. Johnson walks over and opens the door.

It's Liam Neeson.

MR. JOHNSON

AHH!!!

SCRIPT

Liam puts him in a headlock.

LIAM NEESON

Where's my book, Johnson? Where's my book!

INT. LIBRARY—FRONT DESK—LATER

3

The Librarian sits at her desk talking on the phone.

Liam walks in. His clothes bloody as well as the book in his hand.

LIAM NEESON

(to the Librarian)

Here's your book. I'll call the next one.

He slams it on her desk and sits down.

LIBRARIAN

(on the phone)

I'll call you back.

She hangs up.

LIBRARIAN (CONT'D)

(to Liam)

Can you work full time?

THE END

An Interview with Dr. Alan Ambrisco

Dr. Alan Ambrisco is an Professor of English at The University of Akron. You may have had him for a class in English literature, Chaucer, Arthurian literature, or a poetry writing workshop. He has published research in journals like The Chaucer Review and Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching, and poetry in journals like The Red Rock Review and Whiskey Island Magazine.

AshBelt's fiction editor, Liz, sat down with Dr. Ambrisco to learn more about his two sides—the medievalist and the poet—and how they interact within his life and career.

Your specialty is old English—Medieval English literature. What drew you to it?

Um—yeah. You know, I grew up first-generation college. I grew up in a rural community. And it was a good high school in terms of the sciences and math, and I had a good education in those fields. But, we had limited options in terms of languages, and the English education I got wasn't that great, to be honest. It tended toward the modern stuff. So when I entered college, I wanted to study some of the classics—Greek and Roman literature. I started learning Latin. I liked the sort of linguistic aspects of Old English. But also, you know, I was a kid who grew up in a place called Wheatfield, and I could either stay in Wheatfield and become someone who never strayed very far from home, I could've gone and worked at the factory—or I could go to college. And I just said, "I'm gonna just find the most esoteric stuff that a kid like me's not supposed to be into."

It was something foreign to you.

Exactly. So that's why I started taking those classes, and that was when I really began to appreciate it for its' own sake. I made the

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decision relatively early on in college to become an English major. I *did* have a minor in Latin and classics. I just liked the older stuff a lot.

A lot of these works you teach *are* kind of difficult—and as you said, lots of schools are tending to teach more modern literature. So why do you think it’s so important to teach these older works?

For me, I think a lot of people have this sense that literature is always understood perfectly. You can go find the Sparknotes, and it tells you exactly what you need to know, and that *this is what the text means*, and that a smart person knows that. But for me, literature is a crucial cultural space. It’s the space where we ask, and attempt to answer, and usually fall short of, these cultural questions about who we are and where we are. Whether we’re asking these questions of an Old English text like *Beowulf* or of a more modern text written in our culture, to me, matters little. It’s another place and space in which I see a culture examining itself. *Beowulf*, for example: it doesn’t have answers. It asks these profound questions: What is our society like? What is the status quo like? Is that defensible? If we’re a society that believes in violence, how do we feel about that violence? What are our means of justifying it? When and where should it cease? For me, great works of literature ask more questions than they answer. If it’s just a text that has a simple perspective—one that’s black or white—it’s usually a stilted text.

I’m fascinated by looking at these earlier periods where we think everything is black or white. We think we know everything we need to know about the world of *Beowulf*. And then you actually read the text, and you find that it’s profoundly complex and complicated. As complex as our own. And a lot of times, as modern people, we look on earlier periods and pat ourselves on the back as having progressed. Then when you read something like *Beowulf* or “Gawain and the Green Knight,” or something that’s removed in

space rather than time, you say to yourself, “I have to disabuse myself of this notion that our society is better than the other cultures around us.” It *should* get us to recommit ourselves to our own literature, to study poetry and fiction and drama and nonfiction as ways of looking at our society, and coming up with tentative answers to very hard questions: Are we as good as we think we are?

So, from your perspective: you’ve taught these classes for twenty years—how do students tend to perceive these works? Do they approach with optimism, or is it something you kind of have to coax out of them?

I’d say a mixture of both. You find people who are drawn to the earlier stuff. Sometimes for romantic reasons, sometimes they grew up reading Arthurian legends. Sometimes for the same reason that I did: this is a fascinating body of literature that’s interesting in and of its own right, but also there are as many connections to our own culture as anything else. So sometimes the students are very knowledgeable. Other times it is a foreign culture to them. I’m used to both experiences. I see that a lot of my job as a literature professor, when I have that hat on, is to show my enthusiasm and passion for this literature that seems, at the onset, not connected to us. I try to slowly show students that these works are interesting on their own, and they’re asking powerful questions.

Now I want you to kind of “put on the other hat,” so to speak, and talk about your poetry writing and teaching, and what drew you toward it in the first place?

Shame.

(Both laugh)

Explain further.

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So, I'd already been teaching here for a couple years. A bunch of students I had in class said, "we're having an open mic night at a coffee shop, we'd like it if you came." So, Bob Pope and I both went, and it was a great night. Then about two-thirds of the way through, somebody went and looked at the sign-up sheet and said, "Dr. A isn't on here. Why aren't you on there?" And the students started berating me because I didn't come with a poem to read. They mocked me mercilessly, and the mockery continued the next day. So, I sat down and wrote a poem, and it was the hardest thing I'd ever written. I went through something like thirty drafts, then finally got it published, which took a while. When I say "shame," I mean that seriously. I said, "you know what? They're right. I need to go on the other side of the writing desk."

Had you written much poetry before that?

Only growing up—in, like, my journal. Stuff like that. But I hadn't written anything substantial in maybe ten years. My first published poem was about *Beowulf*. It was called "Teaching Beowulf: A Poem of Lament." It was about a moment of failure in the classroom, where I felt the students didn't have the ear to hear and appreciate Beowulf as poetry. That they didn't hear the musicality in the language; that I'd done a bad job at getting that across. That it was only about meaning, rather than the aesthetic experience of the poem. It was a poem about my life as a reader, but especially as a teacher, thinking about the challenges I was facing there. I tried to, even as I lamented the modern ear's lack of being attuned to Anglo-Saxon English, look at my personal experience in that and think about that.

It also sort of brought both sides of my personality, both responses to poetry, out. It was about me as a reader of poetry, but also as somebody venturing into the writing of poetry. A lot of my earlier poems sort of sampled literature in some way, or other poems in some way. I have a poem about that Emily Dickinson poem:

“Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me.” It’s about death picking her up in a carriage to go to the afterlife. It’s usually read as a death wish. And I had a poem called “Hitchhiking With Emily in the 19th Century,” where I imagined myself as a largely unobserved third person in that carriage toward death. It gave me free-reign to reimagine some moments in the kinds of poetry and literature that I’d been dealing with in my other classes. I did write another one about *Beowulf* called “Mother’s Lament,” which tells the story from Grendel’s mother’s perspective. That was a fun, kind of challenging one for me to write.

And how did you end up teaching that poetry workshop?

Well, I’d been slowly writing poetry for a number of years. The simple answer is that somebody who *had* been teaching the introductory course left. Mary Biddinger, our much more accomplished poet—she’s undergraduate chair, she’s teaching within the NEOMFA program, and she just—there were too many things for her to do to be able to handle every class. She knew I wrote a lot, and she’d read a good bit of my poetry, so she and the chair at the time approached me and asked if I’d teach it. But I do think I was kind of at a place in my career in which I was happy to be able to approach the classroom in a different kind of way. In a lecture class, I have to bring the enthusiasm, because it’s not always necessarily there. In the workshop, I don’t. Anyone who’s been in a workshop knows that there’s something that drew you to that classroom—and that it wasn’t Ambrisco. It’s the work itself, and the idea that you’ve got something to contribute. Sometimes I’m a glorified timekeeper in that room. And at that time, I was happy to be in a place where I didn’t always set the agenda. So, that aspect of the workshop drew me to it as well, and I’ve come to appreciate it in many ways.

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Now, what do you, personally, most emphasize for students to take out of those workshops? How do you encourage growth as the semester goes along?

Well—I don't start with workshop right away, and I don't think too many of us do (I'm talking about the fiction writers, the non-fiction writers, things like that). There has to be an element, early on, of exposure to the craft, which is looking at strategies and tactics for poetry writing. A kind of theoretical basis. I try to make sure that we have a collection of poems that we work on in that class—that's when I do model that enthusiasm. One of my strengths, I think, is that I know poetry traditions in English... pretty darn well. From its very beginnings well into twentieth and twenty-first century. And I have a good ear for musicality, and that comes from my training in the older language. It comes from understanding what holds a line of Anglo-Saxon poetry together—which isn't rhyme. I understand meter. I understand sounds. And part of what I bring to the undergraduate workshops is, I won't let students just say, "I really like that line." I say, "but *why*?" And they see me, I hope, on the spot, looking at a line that sounds good, and trying to understand what's actually happening in that line. We start there, and we move into the workshopping, but I try to get students to look at the same issues with their own poems that model a published poem by a famous (or sometimes not-so-famous) writer.

Poetry is... subjective. And it can be personal. So, as a professor, how do you encourage growth but also attempt to preserve the original intent of a poem?

I mean, that's *the* question, right? But I believe in revision as being the core of the writer's work. So, I don't try to preserve the original intent. If the writer knows where the poem's going when they start, and want it to be about that thing, but at some point, it gets off track and the *real* energy and enthusiasm of the poem moves away from where it started, then my voice is probably one of many that

says, “you know what? I think it’s really interesting over here. That’s the part of the poem that covers new ground—that asks questions rather than making statements. *That’s* where I think the real energy is, and maybe try revising accordingly.” I’ve got no problems with telling a poet that I think the original intent could be left behind in order to maybe cover some new ground.

Now, that being said—and I say this up-front in the class—I require revision, but I’m not going to require that you revise according to my suggestions. They’re just suggestions. You’re going to have my voice, but you’re also going to have fourteen others, and you’re going to have to make some hard decisions. Just doing what I tell you to do isn’t a guarantee toward an A in that class, but it also isn’t a guarantee toward producing a better piece of art, which is the real goal. For me it’s balance, it’s trying to be humble, it’s a sort of process of negotiation. And I have to kind of walk that line of making specific suggestions, but then allowing for—and making sure people know—it’s okay if you pick up somebody else’s suggestions and run with that. But revise. Commit to that. Once in a while, you’ll hear a poet who says they never revise, and I think they’re liars—(laughs)—or maybe not as good as they could be. That’s my experience as a writer, as well.

The creative writing that I’ve done is more subjective to revision—and more difficult, in terms of intellectual and emotional work—than the academic essays I’ve written. But, having said that, they sort of go hand-in-hand for me in a lot of ways. I find myself covering similar terrain in both. Often times, when I started writing poetry, if I was getting nowhere on an essay about *Beowulf*, for example, I’d start writing a poem. That’s what “A Mother’s Lament” was for me. I was thinking about *Beowulf*, trying to write an academic essay, and I just couldn’t get her voice out of my head. So, I gave in to that impulse and worked on it, and that channeled some things for me, and kind of helped me be more productive on the academic side of it.

So, keeping in mind the nature of these classes you teach—you’ve got a poetry workshop, which is heavily creative, and then you’ve got ones like English literature, or World Literature, which are so academic—is it weird to “code-switch,” if you will, between the two? Is it difficult at all to switch back and forth between them?

I actually like the switch very much. But it is a switch. I have always done different things. I’ve always read widely, and I remember being told in graduate school that I wasn’t focusing enough on a particular time period in medieval, or a particular this or that. I’ve always, in a sense, seen myself as a generalist. To me, they all converge. So, I guess I’m kind of used to code-switching, as you call it. I guess the difference would be that in the workshop, I have to restrain myself a little bit more because it’s not my job to run everything. That’s the switching, because I could talk forever.

(Both laugh)

But really, if I go from teaching *Beowulf* to teaching Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, that’s as much of a switch for me as it is going to the poetry workshop. It’s all poetry for me. Even Wole Soyinka. I mean, that’s a play, but it’s the most poetic play I know of. As poetic as anything Shakespeare wrote, which is profound in that sense. When he got his Nobel Prize, one of the reasons for choosing him was the poetic qualities of his drama. So, for me, it’s all about language, and appreciation of language—its rhythms, its history. We’re not simply turning our back from society, but we’re profoundly encountering it—the forces that create our laws, the issues and ideas that are key to our own sense of personal identity as well.

Literature is, to me, kind of the messy parts of life. I think our culture would benefit significantly from a sort of reintegration of poetry into our lives. I always tell my students that democracy arose in fifth-century Athens. That’s the same period of time that Greek

drama rose. And in the same area of Greece. That's not a coincidence. What literature can teach us is the ability to see the world from somebody else's eyes. It requires empathy, and understanding, and a willingness to put down your own perspective. That's what we do with poetry, both as readers and as writers. I dare you to read a personal poem that somebody else has written and *not see*, A.) you're looking at the world through somebody else's eyes, and B.) finding some ways to break down barriers between you and the speaker of that poem. Poetry builds empathy. It's not just our political world, but it's our society that's in deep need of more empathy right now. Wordsworth said: "Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge. It's as immortal as the heart of man." I take that seriously. I think we need it to know who we are.

And I think that's interesting, because on that principle you can take some of the elements you talk about in a poetry workshop, and you can 100% apply them to some of those more academic courses, which might at first not seem totally related. Just in terms of seeing the world from a different perspective.

Oh, yeah. One of the things I started noticing—and this is before I taught the workshop for the first time—was that the best readers in my literature courses were the ones that were coming out of the workshops. It of course makes sense. You know, you read and comment on each other's work, there's focused attention to other poems you're encountering from published and, in some cases, famous work. So sure, that makes sense. But there's a much deeper and engaged involvement in a workshop on the part of students who are struggling to make sense of the poem, in terms of: "what is this poem doing in terms of effect? What is it getting at? If it has a meaning, how is it being controlled?" All these things. I started realizing the ways in which it was those creative writing students that were the best readers of poetry. Period. And I certainly had that confirmed once I started teaching the poetry workshops.

So, do you think the literature courses can have an impact on the way students approach poetry, as well?

I think so, too, but—hmm. What I teach in my literary analysis courses is disciplined reading methods. And it's not really a process, like *here's how you read a poem. Look here, here, here, here, then go there*—no! You just sort of throw yourself in the poem or in the play. But they also usually give you a lesson on how to read them.

Shakespeare plays do this all the time. The opening scene of a Shakespeare play usually throws out some quote, some contrast. “Foul is fair, fair is foul,” which deals with appearances and reality. So that's a way into Macbeth. You don't follow some arbitrary way to read a poem or play or piece of fiction. But, you abandon yourself to the work and, with some degree of discipline, try to understand the work in the terms that it presents. Maybe not explicitly.

Your question reminds me of something: I think the students feel that I'm a little bit more deliberate in my writing and instruction than Mary Biddinger is, and for good reason. And somebody once mentioned to Mary something about the workshop they had with me, and this is the gist of the metaphor she gave: for Ambrisco, poetry is like going into the woods with a map and a compass, whereas I have a sack full of apples and I'm on fire. She just goes into the terrain without a map, without a compass. And I think that's true, or at least fair enough. My approach to teaching is to sort of be a bit disciplined in trying to understand what's been written. I'll often talk about trying to produce a poem that has a more cohesive effect. If a poem comes into a workshop and seems to have all these parts, I say, “well—let's crack it open. What's really interesting about it? Where's the one part of it that seems to be going on all cylinders?” And I think students read from me sometimes that that means cohesiveness of effect, of meaning. And it's got to be that. For what it's worth, that's a fair assessment. But

there's also Mary, who's producing something that has an impact, because it has an impact on her. And the analytical side of me gets in the way of the writer *sometimes*. That's just something I try to police in myself. But I'm also disciplined enough to be able to throw out the stuff that isn't working, and that's what I try to convince my students to do as well. That's what any creative writer does, even though there are lots of ways of talking about it. I think Wasserman says, "don't be afraid to kill your darlings." You have to be able to do those things.

As a writer and a teacher—to be able to give that advice, but also to heed it in your own writing.

Easier said than done sometimes. I do like semesters where I can bring in my own work and show it to students, and offer it up for criticism as well. It puts me on the same playing field as everyone else. It's a humble position for me—and a good one, too.

Now, to shift gears a bit—who's your favorite Old-English poet? And then who's your favorite modern one?

Well, Beowulf is just a profoundly beautiful poem. I mean, most of them are anonymous because we don't have authors associated with them. But reading Beowulf was a life-changing experience—when I got to read the original. In translation it was a good poem, and it interested me, but I got wrapped up in the monsters rather than the beauty of the language. If I could go into Middle English as well, there's a wonderful poem that's called "The Pearl." It's very religious, and it's one of those poems that, for me, I can appreciate the passion and fervency behind it. The language is so beautiful, it just brings me to tears when I hear those rhythms.

If I look at more modern poets, Seamus Heaney's always been one of my faves. He's a wonderful poet. One of his most read poems is one called "Digging". It puts, front-and-center, the work of a poet.

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It presents it as hard work. And he's watching out the window as his dad's digging turf. So, he looks out there, and he says "I have no spade to work out there." Then he looks down at his hand and says, "between my finger and thumb, the squat pen rests. I'll dig with it." So, I guess I've always just been drawn to a certain melancholy strain, one that's in that poem, but also in Irish literature in general. There's just that sense of the cultural importance of poetry in his work.

I also like Patricia Smith, who's a slam poet. The performance of poetry is the thing. She wrote a poem called "Skinhead", and what I love is that it's a poem in which she's trying to understand the ideology of... a skinhead. A young, white man who identifies as a skinhead, and all the racist ideology. And she finds sympathetic things there, side-by-side with intolerance. She says, "Let me learn about this. Let me learn about somebody who espouses those hateful ideas." And her ability to pick up that language, and sensibility, and emotion of that person is so powerful. She's not writing what she knows, she's writing about what she *doesn't* know, and what she wants to find out.

Now, you as a poetry writer: is it a free-time thing? Or is it something you really try to set aside time for?

Yes and no. (Laughs) This may be a cop-out—but because I have six classes a year with the spring and fall semesters, and only one of those is the poetry course. I tend to have more time to devote to writing when I'm teaching that. But I also tend to write on a weekly basis rather than a daily one. And I've got a creative writer on both sides of my office, and I hear them pounding keys, and I know that they're writing. I wish I was there, at that point where I did it as a daily thing.

I will say this: the most productive, the most happy, the most engaged parts of my professional life have been when I *do* have

time, on a daily or near-daily basis, to turn to poetry. It sort of frees me up. And I'm not as rule-bound as I think students think I am, but writing poetry definitely lets my creative juices flow. Sometimes, you know, I'll go right from writing a poem to working on something academic. But to me, it's all sort of connected. A couple years ago, I sat down and was supposed to make sense of my professional biography—make sense of myself as a writer. And I'd done all these different things. I'd done the medieval stuff, and I'd done writing on modern horror movies, and modern gothic novels, and I've got poems. That was when I started to realize that I'm drawn to marginal voices, to marginal people.

So what's the most bizarre poem you've ever written?

I have two that are interconnected. The first is called "Floodgates One," that tells the story of Noah's ark. But, there's a string-theorist stowaway who doesn't believe in the Bible. He's the scientist. There's this deep irony between where he is and what he's doing. I've always been fascinated with this tension between science versus religion. I'm so fascinated by people of faith and the fervency with which they articulate and understand their own beliefs. To me, the string-theorist has a belief system, too. Honestly, there's not a shred of empirical proof. And we've got this whole scenario for string theory which includes the existence of at least eleven separate dimensions, or universes. It's so fascinating. So that's "Floodgates One," and "Floodgates Two" is when he speaks back to Noah's Ark and the people, and the animals he's caged up with.

In your English Literature classes, I'm sure one of the things your students tend to remember most is when you read something in Old English, and you do it so eloquently, and with such intensity, and you pound on the tables to emphasize syllables—are you fluent?

Not fluent. But I've read these poems a number of times in their

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original form, I studied Old English as a language for a year and a half in graduate school. I *tried* to take it in undergrad but they only offered it for grad students. So, I can read it, and I have my own translation of *Beowulf*, and I can read it—but I’m not fluent. It’s hard to be fluent in a dead language. That’s if by “fluent” you mean being able to *compose* in a language.

There’s one experience that reminded me of how utterly short of being fluent that I am—there’s an early musicologist named Benjamin Bagby, and he’s best-known for his recitation of *Beowulf*, in the original. He used to set it to music and recite it, and one day I went up to see it. When I walked in, everybody there had their own copy of *Beowulf*, so everybody was, like, thumbing through their book, trying to figure out where in the poem he was. And I usually knew where he was and everything, but my speed at reading it is not at that caliber. But I’m proficient. I don’t even know of anyone I could write a letter in Old English to, either.

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Blake Chastain is a senior who will be graduating with an English Degree. He is a connoisseur of fine memes and YouTube videos. He likes puns such as, “After having diabetes for twelve years, I don’t sugarcoat anything.” He’s also had diabetes for twelve years but enjoys an occasional doughnut every now and then. Balance is everything. He doesn’t like the saying, “Life’s like a box of chocolates” because that’s too much sugar for one sitting. His other interests include the following: Nintendo games, hip hop, and soccer. One day, he’d love to see a Nintendo game that includes both hip hop and soccer. He’d also love to see his future work get published and to inspire other people to write and be creative.

Madison Helbig (she/her/hers) is a junior at the University of Akron. She is double majoring in AYA Integrated Language Arts and English and is also pursuing a minor in creative writing. Though she has been writing poetry since she was 13, this is one of the first times her work is being featured in any form of publication. In her spare time, Helbig enjoys reading, writing and spending time with loved ones. Helbig aspires to one day become an influential teacher and a moving writer.

Lily Hunger is an undergraduate student majoring in English and Spanish and minoring in Creative Writing. She enjoys good food, cute cats, music, and well-written books above all else. When she is not exploring fictional worlds of her own making or writing poetry, she can usually be found attempting to inflict loud rants about Marvel and various other fictional universes, memes, and unappreciated (but absolutely hilarious) puns of her own creation upon the rest of society.

Lauren Knight is a psychology student in the Williams Honors College and is expected to graduate in May of 2020 with a bachelor in psychology and minors in creative writing and women’s studies. She has a passion for reading, writing,

knitting, and bees. Her written works reflect her love of fantasy, nature, and her same-sex experiences. She hopes to further research internalized heterosexism, the psychology of oppression, and write the stories she needed to read but could never find.

Madeline Myers is in her third year at the University of Akron. She is majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing. She grew up in Zanesville, Ohio. Madeline loves quoting comedians, reading James Baldwin, and sipping on grape soda. She is a writer at the collegiate online magazine Her Campus, where she enjoys writing movie and TV reviews. She fears a future run by robots but looks forward to the day when her stories are read by those outside of her immediate family.

Amanda Piekarz is an English Major with a double minor in Creative Writing, and Psychology at The University of Akron. She is an avid creative writer, and loves to read. Her favorite authors are Stephen King, and JK Rowling. Although Amanda loves Ohio, she was born in Passaic, New Jersey. She hopes to one day return home and attend graduate school on the east coast.

Sonia Potter is pursuing her B.A. in English with a creative writing minor at the University of Akron. She has presented work at the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference, as well as at a mock conference hosted by the Society of Akron Graduate English Scholars, with the confidence and support of wonderful professors and mentors who have helped her grow into herself. Her preferred genre is poetry, and after graduating in the fall of 2019, she hopes to continue her educational career in pursuit of an M.F.A.

Bethany Scarpitti is a biomedical engineering student by day, but amateur metalsmith, casual theologian, and aspiring writer by

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afternoon and evening. While she feels most at home in fantasy fiction, poetry is a new adventure born from procrastination and caffeine dependency. When inspiration isn't abundant, she enjoys trying exotic foods, collecting new hobbies, and consuming an embarrassing amount of Netflix with her husband, Josh. Following graduation this spring, she plans to work as a manufacturing engineer to support the life to which her cats, Ubi and Pneuma, have grown accustomed.

Jennifer Stein lives in Wooster, Ohio. She is an English major. When not writing or working she enjoys live music, old movies, road trips and ghost stories.

Kaylie Yaceczko is a sophomore at the University of Akron, and she is majoring in English with minors in Creative Writing and Human Resources Management. She is also the current Vice President of Upstart Crows, and she enjoys reading and writing in her free time. Her main goal is to one day have a published novel or two that not only bring people entertainment but also has a positive impact on their lives in some way. Her inspiration comes from real life experiences and people in order to shed light on how unique and fascinating our world can be.

Jake Zaratsian Born and raised. Son of his parents. Wordsmith.

Casey Amato is a senior at UA who will graduate in May with a Bachelor's in Early Childhood Inclusive Teacher Preparation. She has spent the past four years reliving elementary school and can't wait to have her own classroom one day. She loves yoga, books, and taking care of her plants.

Liz Draa is a senior English major at the University of Akron. In her free time, she likes to breathe in fresh air, try new restaurants with friends, and watch Netflix.

Natalie Mitchell is a fourth year B.A./M.A. history student. She is usually studying, knitting, reading, or any combination of the above. She is generally accompanied by her cat, Lance. She likes loud music and thoughtful people.

Julie Mullet is a senior pursuing a degree in Supply Chain and Operations Management. She will graduate in May, 2019 and has loved attending the University of Akron and being a poetry reader for the AshBelt. Julie enjoys reading memoirs, listening to music, eating tacos, and traveling.

Zoe Orcutt is a graduating senior pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English. She hopes to continue her education at Syracuse University's School of Information in the fall of this year.

Cris Shell is a Senior in his undergraduate program at The University of Akron. When he is not reading, writing, or doing homework in the library, he is spending time with his cute little cats Peach and Honey.

Erin Siegfert was born and raised in Akron, Ohio. She will graduate this May with a degree in English, plus minors in Creative Writing and Consumer Marketing. After graduation, she plans to do a lot more hiking, painting, and reading for pleasure. Serving as editor in chief of AshBelt has been one of her favorite parts of attending the University of Akron.

