

to the pen:

it's never easy to be **A** writer

i don't think it ever really has been

i a **M**a public s**PE**aker with no audience

a book full of invisible writings

scrawled and scratched

each aspi**R**ation and mi**S**take

every love every he **A**rtbreak

i am

~~I write~~ the words i am afraid to admit

the maybe's the daydreams

the things i am supposed to be to achieve

but there is a voice hau**N**ting my thoughts

~~that sounds something like grief~~

~~in a tone of regret~~

my **D**ear

~~to the~~ pen please

&

Ampersand

Utica University's
Literary Magazine

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2024's Ampersand's editorial team would like to dedicate this year's edition to the inspirational Utica University English department faculty:

Dr. Ane Caroline Ribeiro Costa

Dr. Jason Denman

Dr. Nicole Lawrence

Dr. Gary Leising

Dr. Kelly Minerva

Dr. Dorothy Obernesser

Dr. Lisa Orr

Dr. Elizabeth Threadgill

And a special dedication to Dr. John Cormican, celebrating
fifty years at Utica University.

&

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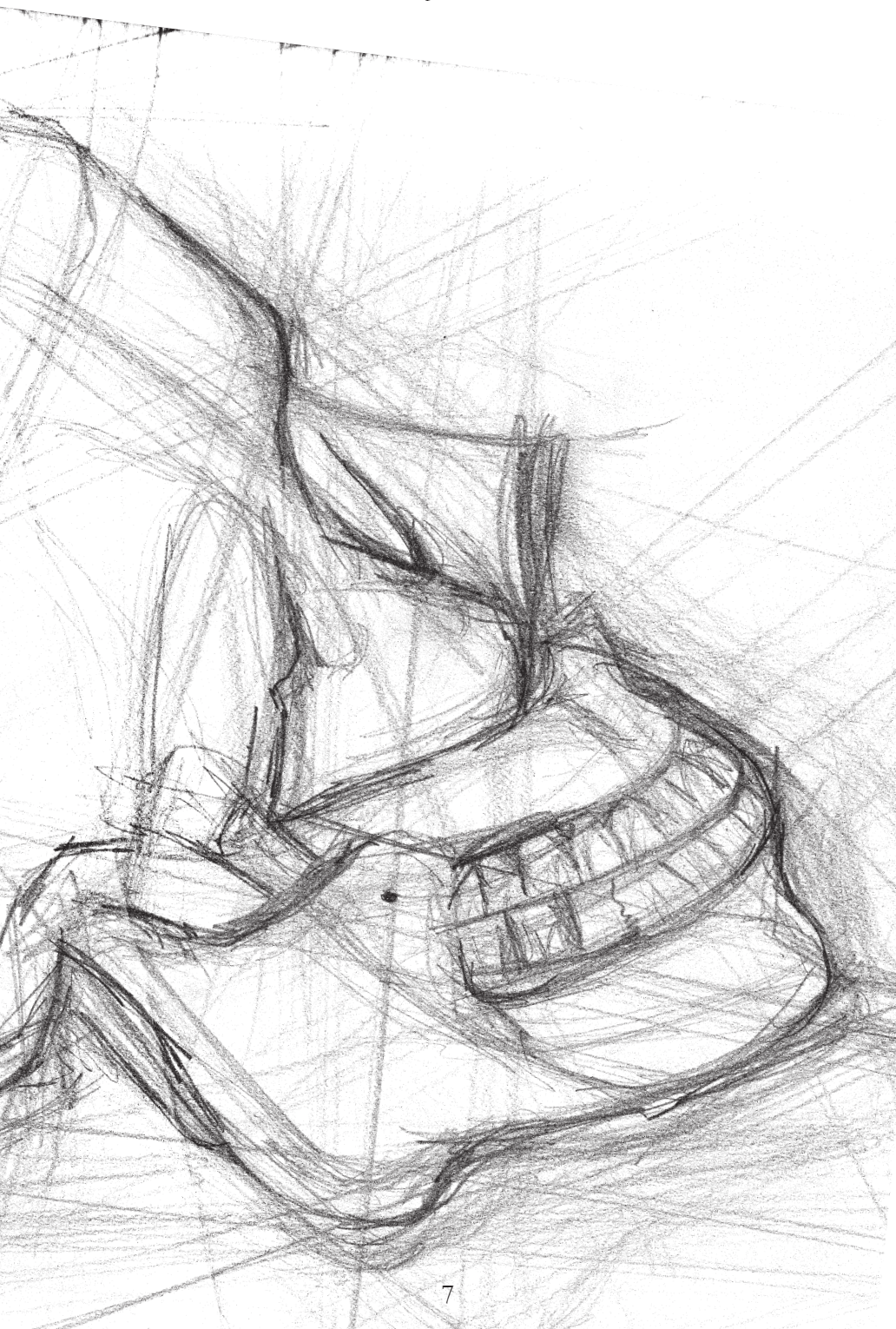
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Poetry

artwork by: Jillian Szeliga



[self-aggrandizement]

Bella Dienhoffer

the ~~truth~~:

i don't know which part to follow
the head or the heart—

bound, hooked by my skin,
sharp piercing scratched and scrawled scars
in jagged lines. an abstract

painting litters my body.
muted and muzzled, i am
caught, strung on a volatile line.

bound, decorticated by your
rules, rules, rules. always tainting,
contaminating my conscious.

indefatigable words whine.
my voice muffled. in a bath of amber
your words and my reflection ensnared,

bound, by the rope i am strung
with. sorrows and calamity fraying
the thin threads until they snap.

the truth:

i know which part to follow
my head and my broken, broken heart.

“A Bath”

Marianne Tenney

I lie in the porcelain stand alone.

The warm water covers me up to my collar bone.

I feel relaxed.

I hear sweet, calming music and

I smell scents of Eucalyptus, Mint,

And Lavender.

As I lie in this place of tranquility,

I begin to dream again of you.

I feel you behind me, holding me,

Stroking my hair, kissing my neck.

I turn to kiss you, but then, you're gone.

Connections

Katie Mattes

College life is a catalyst for connections.
From clubs to sports to classes,
there's new relationships for the masses.
But what about the all those ties you wove,
with the ones who reside back home?

How do you stay connected?

There is a game from *The New York Times*,
one you can easily play and share online.
The task is to put 16 words into 4 groups,
tricky synonyms that throw you for a loop,
and that game is called "Connections."

I play this game with my Grammy day after day,
as we try to organize words in the right way.
It's been a catalyst for FaceTimes calls since September,
and it's after one of these chats I start to remember.

It's a story about her Mother,
who always wished she wrote home more,
because who had cell phones in 1964?
Her mother's heart was a victim to its time,
a soul who hadn't yet aged into her prime.

My Grammy bears the heart of her Mother,
—Saved by modern medicine like no other—
able to play games on a cellphone with her Granddaughter,
listening from the other end with her Mother's hand over her.
I think about the woman who gave birth to my namesake,
I wonder if she'd believe that's all it takes,

To stay connected.

Dark is dark is dark

Eli Wilson

Walk this walk
a thousand walks
dark is dark is dark

Ice cold touch
leaf like crunch
leash pull sings.

Window way up high
gaze through her
light is light is light

Stop and sniff
gaze through her
wait and wonder.

Shadow passes
Silhouette
face is face is face.

Fear is fear is fear.

Desh Ki Mitti

Pallavi Chennakeshava Salian

In Hindi,
Swabhimaan Hai Muje Is Dharti Par
Aasmaan Ke Taare Se Bhi Uski Tulna Nahi
Issi Mitti Mein Maine Janam Liya Hai
Raakh Bhi Banungi Main Yahi
Jab Mere Kadam Ladkhadaye
Iss Mitti Ne Marham Ka Kaam Kiye
Abh Jab Iss Dharti Ko Chot Pahuchi Hai
Aao Hum Milkar Isse Phir Siye
Bhook Lage Tho Ann Ban Jaye
Pyaz Lagi Tho Boonde Barsaye
Humein Har Pal Zindagi Dete
Ye Humein Mein Ghul Jaye!

In English,
With pride I stand upon this soil so dear,
Not even stars can match its worth, it's clear.
In this earth's embrace, my life began,
Here I'll return, to dust, I am.
When my steps falter, in this earth's embrace,
It's this soil that offers comfort, grace.
Now as this land bears a wound's weight,
Let's unite and heal, our fate.
When hunger strikes, it turns to grain,
If thirsty you are, down comes the rain.
Life's every moment, it generously grants,
May I blend into its every chance.

ENG 163

Jon D. H. Gaffney

I returned from Pittsburgh with a book.
When I was 17 and tried to write poems
they came out reeking of immaturity,
but not for lack of trying.
The red book from my freshman year,
from the class I hated, was hiding
in the bottom of a tub of similarly discarded textbooks.
But this one
surfaced.
It's not a textbook, I told myself,
but a text. I'd sat nights reading it,
not understanding
what sex had to do with petty things,
what a crow had to do with memories. I read it
over and over and tried to copy the style —
the empty flattery of mockery.
It was easy, I decided, to write poems:
just make a few flippant observations,
wrapped in a clever innocuous story. Oh
and don't forget the ineffable, obsequious lexemes
that seem to tower above all the others,
drawing the reader to them like flames.
I never figured out when to start a sentence
in the middle of a line. It seemed arbitrary
like the cut

of fabric or the length of a thread.
I hated the class because poetry seemed so trite,
so vapid and banal. Something any fool could do
and any fool could analyze,
both free to pontificate ad nauseam.
Yet after suffering page after page
of my own scribbled verse,
burning hot embarrassment tore through me
and I held nothing but contempt
for my naked teenage pain.
And I thought how my teacher said
there's nothing wrong with therapy but don't ever
confuse therapy with poetry. And I traced the lines
broken in awkward ways, the flow of words that never
made any sense beyond the present context.
I watched those threads I wove
float into my future, land as softly as elephants.
You see, I never learned to write poetry like Dunn or
(what's worse)
like I always believed I could.
I wanted to keep that secret for myself,
not share that minor intimacy with anyone.
But my teacher always disapproved,
insisting on the rewrite,
never granting any leeway
until I finally told the truth.

Grandpa and Grandma's House is Burning

Samantha Marocco

I remember...

The sweet scent of aging apples on the enclosed porch.
The dark brown of coffee rings on the kitchen table.
The hum of hunting talk...where to stand...who will push.
The slick feeling of soap suds and the rough caress of the dish cloth.
The saltiness of meat I'd just learned to cut myself.

The charcoal scent of wood smoke clinging to jackets.
The spanking paddle hanging prominently on the kitchen wall.
The silent radio chest, cluttered with papers and folded clothes.
The sting of cold in the back storage room.
The surprising bitterness of my first sip of coffee.

The sharp odor of manure coming from the barn boots in the entryway.
The dark shadows along the narrow staircase.
The echo of sadness in a grandmother's accusation.
The fearful tickle of a spider's legs on my sleeping cheek.
The acrid tang of guilt and love.

I Will Not Forget Again

Sully Walker

I forgot I wasn't straight
Til we were dating
I forgot we weren't hetero
Until I saw your parents' faces

I forgot I was trans
Til you said I'm a danger
I forgot I wasn't cis
Until you said it was for their safety

I forgot I wasn't white
Til I tried to sing
I forgot I was Indigenous
Until he made fun of my voice

I forgot this world is not for me
Til I tried to live in it
You forgot my passion
And maybe I did too

I forgot I'm a badass
I forgot how theres so much to fight for
I forgot about me
I forgot about you

I forgot my passion
And you did too
But
Now that I remember
I won't forget it again

If perfect was a person

Timothy Jeralds

It's only been 36,000 minutes, since the last time I saw her,
 however,
 my heart longs for the warmth of love
 Longing for its home,
Not the place with four walls and a roof but the place where judgment
 is dissolved and dopamine is released,
 where peace is reached and sadness is dismissed.
 The place where warmth from her brown eyes lays apone
When the sensation of her lips on mine brings butterflies rising in my
 stomach,
 The way her face glows at the site of me,
How just the site of her smile fills me with joy as if I was a little kid on
 christmas day
 ...
Seeing my love, my other half, my soulmate has become my wish at every
 shooting star, every angel number,
 Every, breath,
from the dandelions that I blow into the unknown has been to go back
 home,
 to my home!
 To the place where my love lies await for me
 ...

“Antidotes”

A medicine taken or given to counteract a particular poison.
That's what some couples rely on once long distance happens.

Especially for college couples.

Antidotes make them separate.

They split like a banana

Disperse like cows in a herd.

This is the way some see long distance

...

But my Boo is different!

It's long lasting

It's inseparable

Its everlasting

...

Every second of my day I spend thinking about whether I am making
the right decision.

Self doubt floods through like a tsunami into a 1800's coastal city,
meanwhile,

The angle on my shoulder is taking a nap.

Let me spiral and pop!

Like a balloon into the atmosphere.

Morning, Afternoon, Evening or night the thought hunts me like a
ghost on halloween

...

Love

The reason why I am who I am.
The moment that I felt your love was the moment I realized
that I could not live without it.
It has been the piece of the puzzle that slide under the table,
It is the sun and water to my plant,

...

Love is considered a drug and I admit I am addicted

...

All of my emotions feel validated when i'm home,
When I'm with the person that makes life seem almost like a
daydream, but the daydream has become a sense of reality when
I'm close to her.

She has become my peace, my motivation, the reason why I
work so incredibly hard, the reason I'm happy and her name is
ISABELLA

It's burning.

Elijah Wilson

It burns and it burns
it's cold.
To the touch it weeps.

Bone-bare

Hard, soft, weeping misery.
Going only to go,
where to go it's burning.

Bare boned and burning
Repairing and burning.

It's living.

It's Game Over

Marianne Tenney

I cannot stand to be around you anymore.
Being around you leaves me feeling sore.
Your bitterness drags me to the floor.
It's your own fault you're rotten to the core.

It is for my sake that I chose to keep away.
In my head and my heart, you may not stay.
I escaped from the feelings and broke free.
For I now know that you are no good for me.

This relationship has taken its toll.
Of me you are no longer in control.
You made me feel dumb.
Just to keep me under your thumb.
I am finally feeling happy and sober.
For you, this is game over.

From this day forward you're not a friend.
Our time of being amiable reached its end.
To me you should not talk.
It is the other way you should walk.

If again we cross the same path,
I will go home and wash you off in a bath.

Me

Sabrina Gates

Sometimes I think

If no one stopped me

I'd just fade away into nothing

My insides eating themselves out

My brain aching from anxiety

My nails sore from biting

I'll never be the perfect girl

Or daughter

Or sister

I'll never be her

The one you stare at and wish to be

I'll always just be me

The girl with issues and acne

The girl with depression and anxiety

No one wants me

And that's okay

I don't even want me

If I faded away I don't think anyone would miss me

I certainly wouldn't

Morning

Samantha Marocco

The barn is dark
but the glare of early morning sun
glances off the snow outside
illuminating the steam
rising from the bucket of hot water.

I rest in the silence of steam, darkness, and light.
Then the hush is met by the soft cackling of hens,
the demands for treats from the bleating goats,
the patter of scratch feed hitting the floor.

Already the sun lies higher in the sky
and the glare of the day now hits me squarely in the eyes
and I head back to the house for my morning coffee.

Mushrooms and fungi poem

Sabrina Gates

You can bomb us in your egregious wars
But we'll be here to wary the storm
You can rain acid from above
But we'll be here waiting with patience and love
You can try to pollute us with your machines and gas
But we'll be here like we have in the past
We've always been here watching over you
Watching and waiting to see what you'll do
We've always been here to lend a helping hand
All you have to do is ask, to realize you're on sinking land
We will bring your gas spills to life and save the bees
(Little side bar fact we literally speak to trees)
We can help those with mental illness and those with diseases like
dementia
We are also everywhere under where you step (somewhere) not to
mention
Without us you wouldn't be here struggling yet again
But we've helped you time and time again, to bring life to land, to
help you evolve and we will this time too my friend
But you have to trust us and you have to try
To believe what mushrooms and fungi could be for our world and
our minds
So let us help and let us in

My Joke

Brianna Salvo

My depression is a joke

Well not really a joke

It's real

But I treat it like a comedy

Laughing every time I cry on the bathroom floor because I just
simply find it funny

Life hits you all at once and I can't help but stop and think how
did I get like this?

I find comfort in knowing that there is still light that shines
through the minute cracks of my very pitch-black tunnel

On the days I tell myself I'm too weak to get out of bed

I lay there in stillness and laugh

When hot tears roll down my cheeks, pulling lines of black mas-
cara with them

I stare at myself in the devils' invention of a mirror and smile

Most days, I end up wearing my smile like a costume

Wondering what it will look like to other people today

It's a game I like to play

Who will notice that I haven't showered in 5 days
Who will notice that I'm skipping meals
Who will notice that the girl standing in front of you is dragging
a ball and chain behind her, filled with her
pain and suffering

I find it almost ironic that I am the first person to ask the ques-
tion are you okay?
But it is never reciprocated

I guess I just hide it better than others
I should be awarded the Golden Globe trophy for my everyday
performance of "I'm doing great"

I don't take pride in the secrets I carry with me
I resent them, actually

Wishing it will all come to a halt
Wishing that I can take this pain and mold it into complete peace
for my sanity

I will always find myself making a comedy out of the sadness I
endure
It's my reminder that the numbness can go away

Even for a second

Laughter is the best medicine, they say

Not be loved

Aurora Davis

Perhaps I was put on this earth to give love,
not to receive it.
I was put here with a gift of empathy and passion.
I am here to show the ones hardest to love,
the most love they will ever endure.
As I am supposed to sit here and expect nothing in return.
I believe in love because of how deeply I love.
I love with so much truth and passion.
For the soul, heart, and body
of that person
I love them so greatly.
Yet as deeply as I love,
I do not see myself being loved.
I am meant to love.
Not be loved.

Pantheist

Alyssa Tyczka

If there were a god
Several gods, anything
Or nothing, in between

They would / not be
In the sprouted green
Airfoiled wings, the small / big
Of some blue screen

Burning within cosmic suns
Throughout aggregate, everything
Recycled particles, outlined sins.

Part of Me

Samantha Marocco

I'm going to eat your toes,
Nibble on your nose,
Crunch on your elbows.

I'm going to drink your tears,
Slurp up both your ears,
Swallow all your fears.

When you hurt I'll hold you tight,
Make sure all is right,
Tuck you in at night.

You'll always be part of me,
Part of all I see,
And all that will be.

Remi

Isa Hudziak

a little lump of curled hair and half-open brown eyes
he nestled into a gray blanket with paws tucked
like every morning, he lays at my mom's feet
but today his head stays down when the door opens

as I dig for a matching pair of socks,
I glance at the spot where his ribs rise and fall,
he is breathing and even though I think to kiss his head, I
look at the clock
and I want to leave for work

childish chatter, looping laughter
a meeting 20 minutes away
the white van crosses two lanes
I narrowly avoid hitting it

a phone call about dinner
and bubbling battles of irritation
I linger on a blue couch and hold your hand
there's no rush to go home

he died at 3 p.m. in my dad's arms
his little black nose pressed into a tight hug
my mom cried. a few hours after I left
he couldn't breathe and now when I
park in the cracked driveway, I can't either

serenades of barks for fourteen years
silence in the living room where he used to sleep the day away
his harness on the bathroom floor
our cat sniffs his empty food bowl

I wish I had pressed my lips into the crown of his head
and told him I loved him
before he did not come home
and there is a space in every room
where he used to be.

Rest: Postpartum Depression

Lauren Waszkiewicz

First Place Vogel Award Winner

Heavy chest
And limbs
And eyes made of rocks
Stiff shoulders and neck
Emotions are boxed
Emptiness locked

The fear in his eyes
The worry in his voice
Whether leaving you alone
Was the right or wrong choice
Walk in through the door
Heavy chest
And limbs
And eyes made of rocks
Stiff shoulders and neck
Emotions are boxed
Emptiness locked

The fear in his eyes
The worry in his voice
Whether leaving you alone
Was the right or wrong choice
Walk in through the door
He's calling
Imploring
You to respond
To call out or
Reply
Are you alive?
Are you alive?

“Sleep begets sleep”
Was once the advice
You received about your firstborn
From the people, oh so nice
So loving
So kind
But now they've all but disappeared
When you're not right in the mind

Rewrite

Sully Walker

Second Place Vogel

Award Winner

One day
I will pass
A story will be written

They will look at photos
Of a hoodrat
Or a friend

Of a smiling woman
Or a scared boy

They will write
Of mistakes
Or grand adventures

Of many loves
Or tragic heartbreaches

They will say I was
A troubled soul
Or trans

Include interviews
Of a cop
Or loved ones

And to how I died, they might write
How I scared him
Or that I did nothing wrong
Or maybe they won't write any of it at all

Cause when I die
There will be no flags at half mast
When I die
They will erase my past

Progressive or aggressive
Artistic or insane

Someone will sit
And I do wonder
How they will rewrite my life

Robot

Sabrina Gates

I'm a robot in my body

Numb to the outside

Walking around going through the movements

Staying for the people who were left behind

Suffering through being one place in my body and wanting to be
gone in my head

Place me into eternal sleep

Make sure my family and friends don't miss me

I'm gonna step into the light now

I'm gonna let go

Please don't stop me

Don't slow me down

Shapeshifter

Lauren Waszkiewicz

Shapeshifting

Like a werewolf with no bite.

The full moon is unrelenting, never-ending

Resurfacing each night

Transfiguration, constantly discovering new pigmentations and colors and lines and it's fine.

But I'm not fine- this beast that I've become is different than who I once was and who I once was did not aspire to be the person that is me.

Memories untold with each hour, I get older and less bolder and more fearful and afraid with each passing day I feel scared
Within these locks grow more and more gray hairs.

Life just isn't fair and the weight of the world seems to take its toll

On my body my mind and most concerningly my soul

I feel like we were never told

That inside my mind

It's changing all the time but not at the same speed or the same pace or the same place

my thighs and my hips, my scars and my face

I feel like I'm changing shape-

but at all the wrong pace

Sweet and Sour

By Timothy Jeralds

Mistakes are something that humans make.

Feelings are something that we embrace.

Heartbreak is something that everyone has gone through.

It stings like a bee and swells as if you are allergic to its touch,

The effects it has is heart wrenching

Some people get to use to it and they become striped and numb to
love

But me?

Me I don't get enough of it

Like a kid in a candy store.

I want it all but I gotta be careful because I can only eat one piece

I can look but I can't touch.

I've learned that even looking too long is forbidden like the forest in
a fairy tale.

If you go, you might not come back in one piece!

The temptation is there but my piece of candy has eyes everywhere.

My piece of candy is also nowhere but everywhere.

Other people in the candy store buy in bulk, wasting money, tasting it
all while looking for the piece that blows their mind.

When I'm not there I worry someones gonna take my piece -

I'm anxious that they will be like me only wanting to crave my sweet
and sour candy.

I want to sit there and watch my piece all day until the store closes
protecting my sweet but sour candy.

Tho there are times I go to other candy stores looking for something
else

Something for my sweet tooth

But there is nothing.

ever.

there.

When I'm without my candy I feel like an orphan without its
love.

Love is a superpower but you need to be careful and learn how
to use it

Don't be like Anakin Skywalker when he was seduced into the
dark side.

Mistakes are something that humans make.

Feelings are something that we embrace.

Heartbreak is something that everyone has gone through.

BUT

switching slides is never the right choice.

Tame

Abbey Notar

you are a predator
you are rapacious and greedy
ticking with instinct
your eyes dark and tongue thin
the only emotion you are capable of feeling
is one of hunger and desire

yet you are encased in glass
with a man-made lid sprouting rust
your decoration shows your domestication
your complexion one of a tiger's eye stone
your meals come not as you please
but when the calendar day housing your name is reached
your source of hydration is housed in an aegean dish
your foliage has seams made from plastic
your sun resides in an obsidian bulb above you
you are unfeeling
though you hold a fondness for human touch
you are a killer
despite your ability to distinguish a human hand from that of
a meal
you are a beast to be feared
no matter you being obliged to trust those who have con-
tained you

I am grateful for your lack of understanding
of the language spoken about your nature
you are deserving of all you deserve

Tere Seene Se Lag Kar

Pallavi Chennakeshava Salian

In Hindi,

Tere seene se lag kar, Teri aarzo ban jaun,
Teri saanson se milkar, Teri khushboo ban jaun.....
Faasle na rahe koi hum dono ke darmiya,
Main, Main na rahu, Bas tu hi tu ban jaun.....
Gustakh dil ki meri bas itni si hai khwaish,
Tere dhadkano ki main hi justaju ban jaun.....
Jaise Dilbar ki ho tujhko tamanna janam,
Rab kare main waise hubahu ban jaun.....

In English,

Resting on your chest, let me be your desire,
Mingling with your breath, let me be your fragrance's fire.
No distances between us, just an intimate tie,
I vanish into you, for you, I aspire.
My reckless heart's sole wish, so slight,
To seek in your heartbeat, my sole delight.
Like a beloved's yearning, so tender and prime,
May I become your every rhythm's rhyme.
May the desire for you, like a beloved's plea,
May I, in divine grace, become solely thee.

The Aftermath

Leola Beck

I don't love you
Sometimes I miss you
Always I'll forgive you

Once love left
My heart filled with cracks
A shift in the tectonic plates
Chaos rained from the heavens above

I could be mad
I could scream and cry
But I would never show you
Never admit the power
You had over me
The clutch around my throat
Love became a seering sting

I refuse to return to your arms
But I can't fathom you
Not being apart of my history
A dusty, yellowed book on my shelf

I won't love you
Sometimes I regret you
Always I'll put me above you

The Fear of Heartbreak

Leola Beck

He came back,
like the many times
I envisioned he would have,
but this time *unwarranted*
and *unwanted*,

He wants it back,
everything we lost,
everything he broke,
I can feel the regret
steaming desperately off his body,

First loves are always
the hardest to break,
The excitement,
The pain,
it never goes away,

My mind races,
I don't want him here.
Sudden needs of validation
as new love cements the cracks
of a heart once broke,

I wish the anxiety of love fading,
the reminisce of a *traumatized* heart,
would go away
and stop slipping
into my subconscious.

The House

Dakota Wayne

The house was old and broken down
It wasn't the prettiest one in town
The roof was falling and the windows shattered
All the debris and siding were scattered
Nobody walked up or tried looking inside
All of the towns people just walked on by
They'd laugh and point at the broken down house
From beneath the porch ran a little mouse
Little did they know lived a family inside
And because of this their world's would never collide
This family was caring, so loving and sweet
Each and every night they'd sit down to eat
There they were a family as happy as can be
And none of the townspeople would ever see
They would never see because they did not care
All they did was stop and stare
But the family kept on living the life that they had
Because having each other made it all the less bad
They smiled and laughed like an average family would
Nothing would stop them
Not one thing could
If these people would notice and take time out of there day
I think they'd feel at peace, in a better way
People are people nothing changes that thought
It's a battle to this day that is still being fought
You are you and that is good
Please don't change yourself you never should
Now back to this house with a different outside
But all that truly matters is what is on the inside
Nobody would ever know of that though
Would you like to know why?
Because all they did was walk on by

The Red House

Kaw Christ

The crooked little house,
On the small coast;
With its little windows
And petite doors.
But it's full of reds.

The tiny little house,
Facing the ocean's roar;
With its crumbling chimney
And roof now poor.
But it's full of reds.

The small little house,
Beneath the twinkling stars;
With its antique trinkets
And stitched furniture.
But it's always full of reds.

As love and serenity evermore,
Togetherness and warmth;
Happiness hums its tunes.
The most opulent abode,
Marked by crimson hues of anemones.

the stones in my pocket

Bella Dienhoffer

the chipped chunk of granite from along the path
my mother and i used to stroll. she had thrown
the sharp pieces toward the water, toward me.

the broken gravel from the evened ground
where she had shoved me down for the first time,
blaming scraped knees on outdoor recess.

the pebbled piece of cobblestone from the waterfall
where she screamed shame and contempt loud,
but never loud enough to be drowned by the mist.

the cracked concrete from the basement floor
where she lamented my presence, tortured
by an unwanted responsibility.

because, that was all i had been, all i was ever
going to be: a responsibility.

piled in my pockets, enough to drown me.

the t-shirt I will never get back

Isabella Hudziak

the directions are printed on the brand new tag
that caught on my bra when you peeled it off me
with hands so still outside of their natural tremor
wash with ice cold water and a linen scented detergent,
salted tears and my blueberry perfume will seep away
as if it had never been there
100% cotton with printed block letters,
a souvenir from my birthday trip to see
glass sculptures that reflected the empty space in all my photos
bought from the kind woman with glasses in a gift shop,
thirty five dollars from the bank I convinced you to join
thinking we'd someday share a joint account
stick it in a drawer that you'll forget to close
or in the creaky closet by your door,
where it will soak up the dust of your memories
lend it to the girl laying on your bedroom floor
and press a kiss to her lips
to seal the promise that the shirt is hers to borrow
but never to keep.

Too Soon

Audrey Cross

Watching his last breath
Silence, relief, pain, grief, love
Forever changed, lost

What Could Have been

Steven Specht

Tadpoles in the puddle wet
It'll all dry up, but it ain't dry yet
Perhaps a frog will leap out soon,
Like when the dish ran away with the spoon

A girl walks by to play and splash
She's got no fame, she's got no cash
But with the power, of just one kiss
She could turn a frog, into her tasty dish

Like a meteorite crashes the desert terrain
She lands in the middle, turning puddle to rain
The pollywogs fly like birds without care
death will be certain, out of water, in air

The girl, no frog, no kiss converged
No legs, no lips, no prince emerged
But the day was sunny, and the walk was fun;
though the tadpoles died, each, and every one



Beyond Adveristy in the Promise of More

Aiyanna Beltran

Silly big eyes...

The doctor says we “have bigger fish to fry”.

This new reality hit me and all I could do was cry.

Keratoconus: A degenerative eye disease resulting in vision loss due to irregularities and thinning of the cornea.

Little did I know I would become a case study.

Educate others, spread awareness, and become their buddy.

No matter what you go through the following is true:

Life is all about perspective,
take a moment to be reflective.

It may feel like your world is coming to an end,
but I promise you there's more to life my friend.

Like what you see? Submit to find yourself in next year's Edition!

Submission Guidelines:

All submissions must be from students, faculty, or staff of Utica University. Students can be recently graduated and still submit to that year's publication.

Submissions may be poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, photography, or artwork. If fiction or creative nonfiction, the pieces must be fifteen pages maximum. Please limit number of submissions to five of your **best** submissions.

Submission format should be sent to **ampersand@utica.edu in .docx formatting.**

When submitting it is encouraged that author names remain off any documents and are only attached to files or email handles.

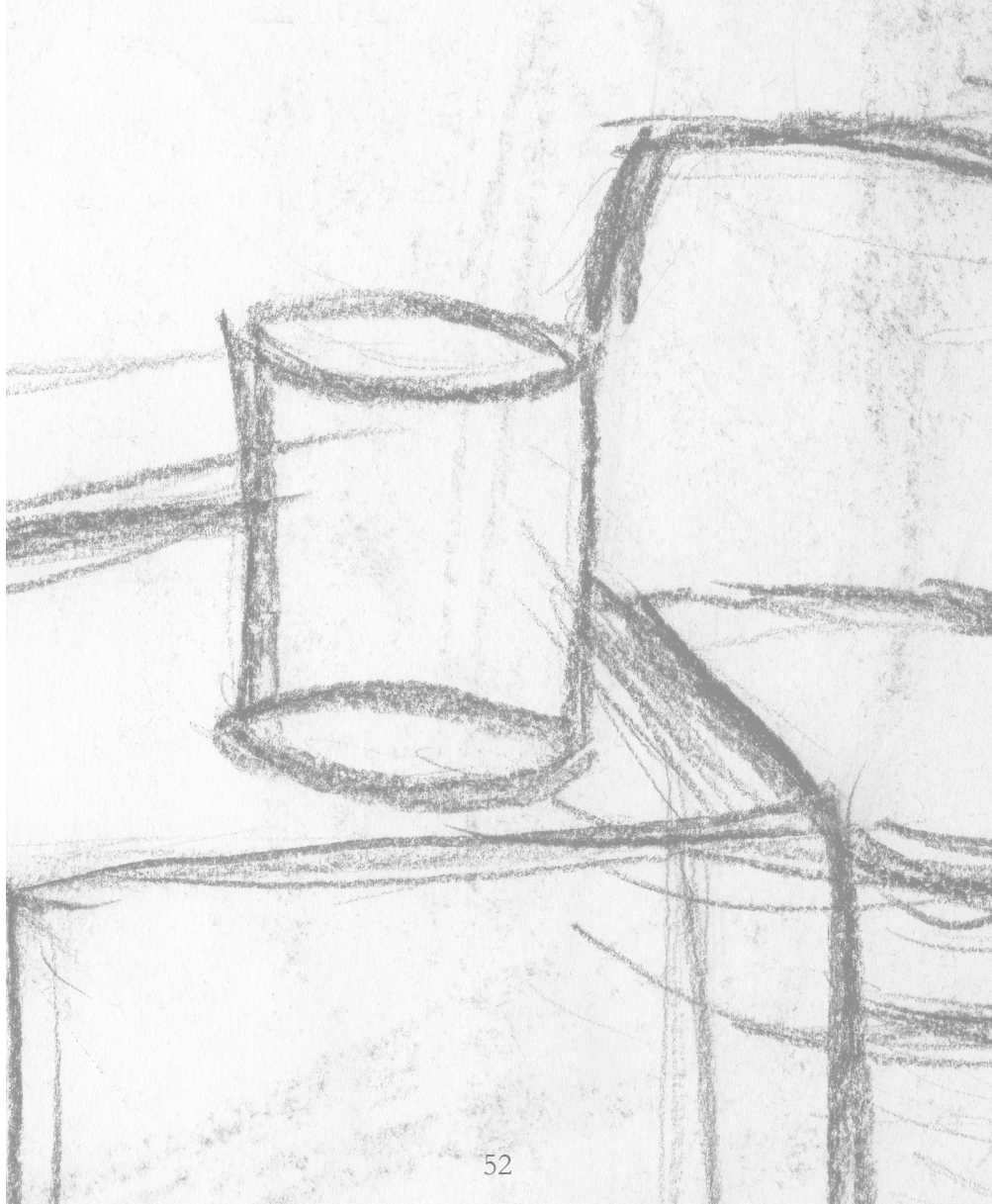
Submission is not a guarantee of acceptance into the literary magazine. Submitted works must not contain graphic sexual or violent content.

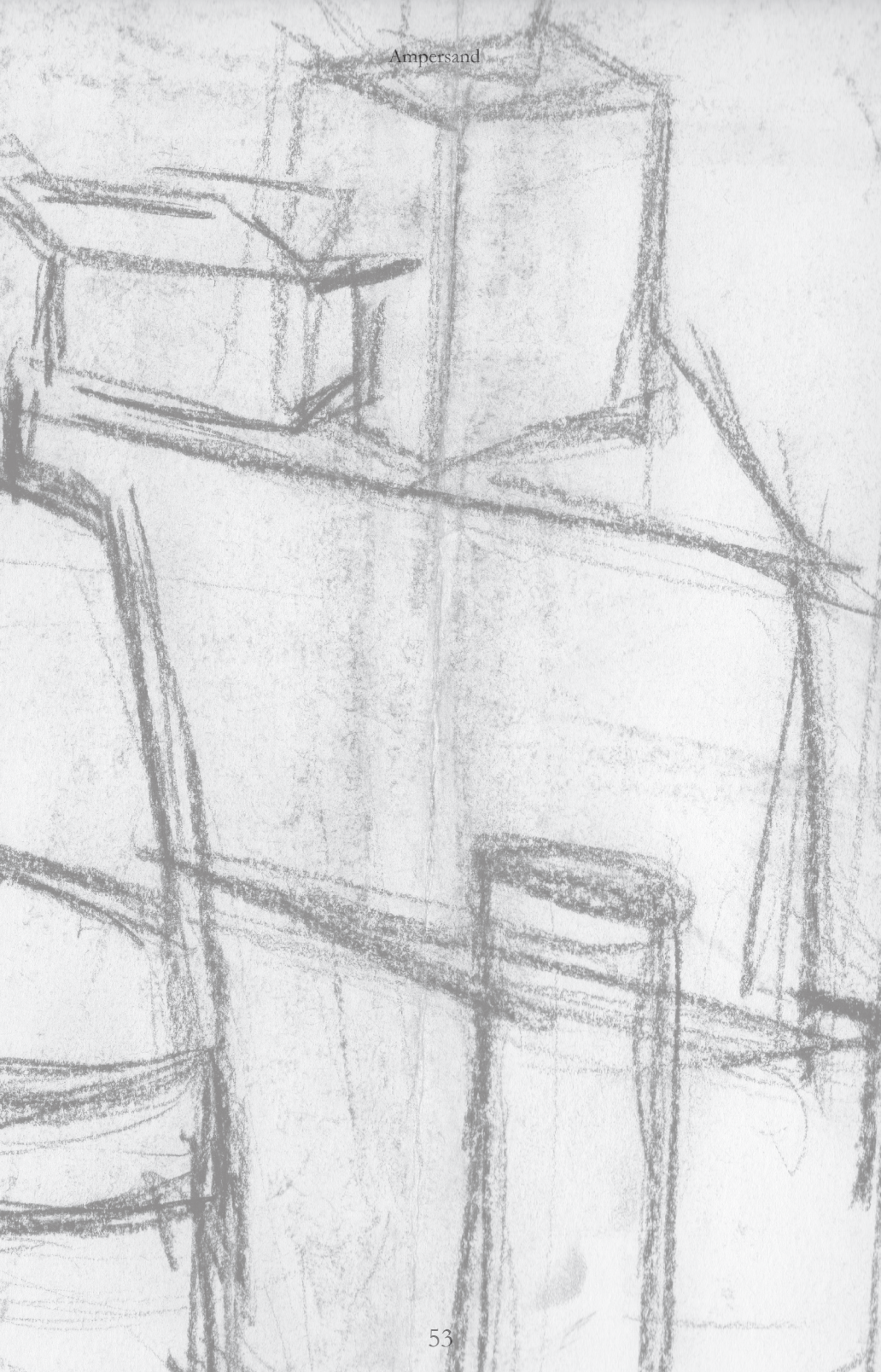
Submitted work cannot contain material promoting discrimination or stereotypes of people of various races, ethnicities, religions, genders, and/or sexual orientations.

&

Photography

artwork by: Jillian Szeliga





3001: A Space Oddity
Steven Specht

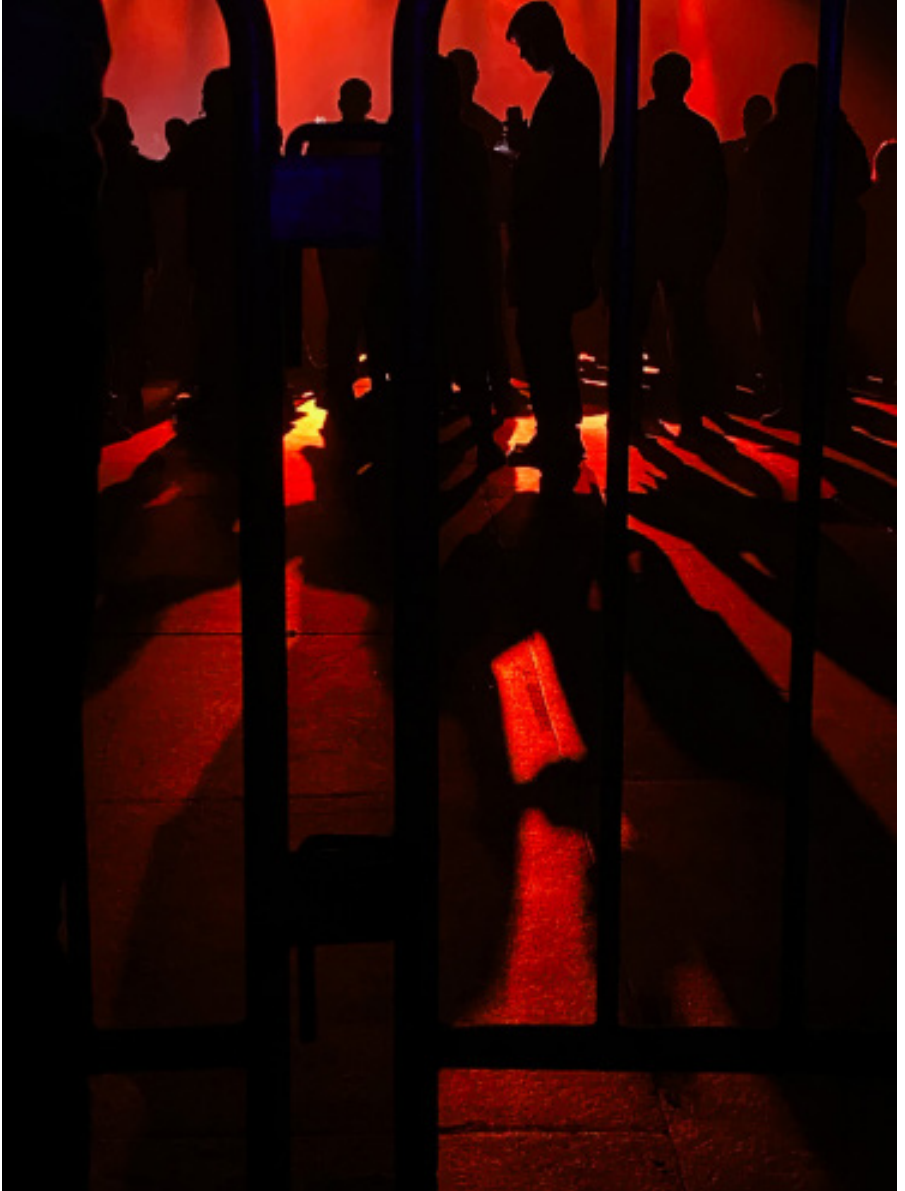


Cassiopeia
David Rufo



&

This Could All Be Gone
Leola Beck



untitled
Cicily Talerico



Dock Into Winter
Ann Ciancia





&

untitled
Jeff Miller





Glory
Leola Beck

&

Patroclus
Kaw Christ



Wall Street

Pallavi Chennakeshava Salian



&

polarized vista
Daniel Cozart





&

Shore
Nicolas Leonard



Ampersand



&

Spring into High Peaks
Ann Ciancia



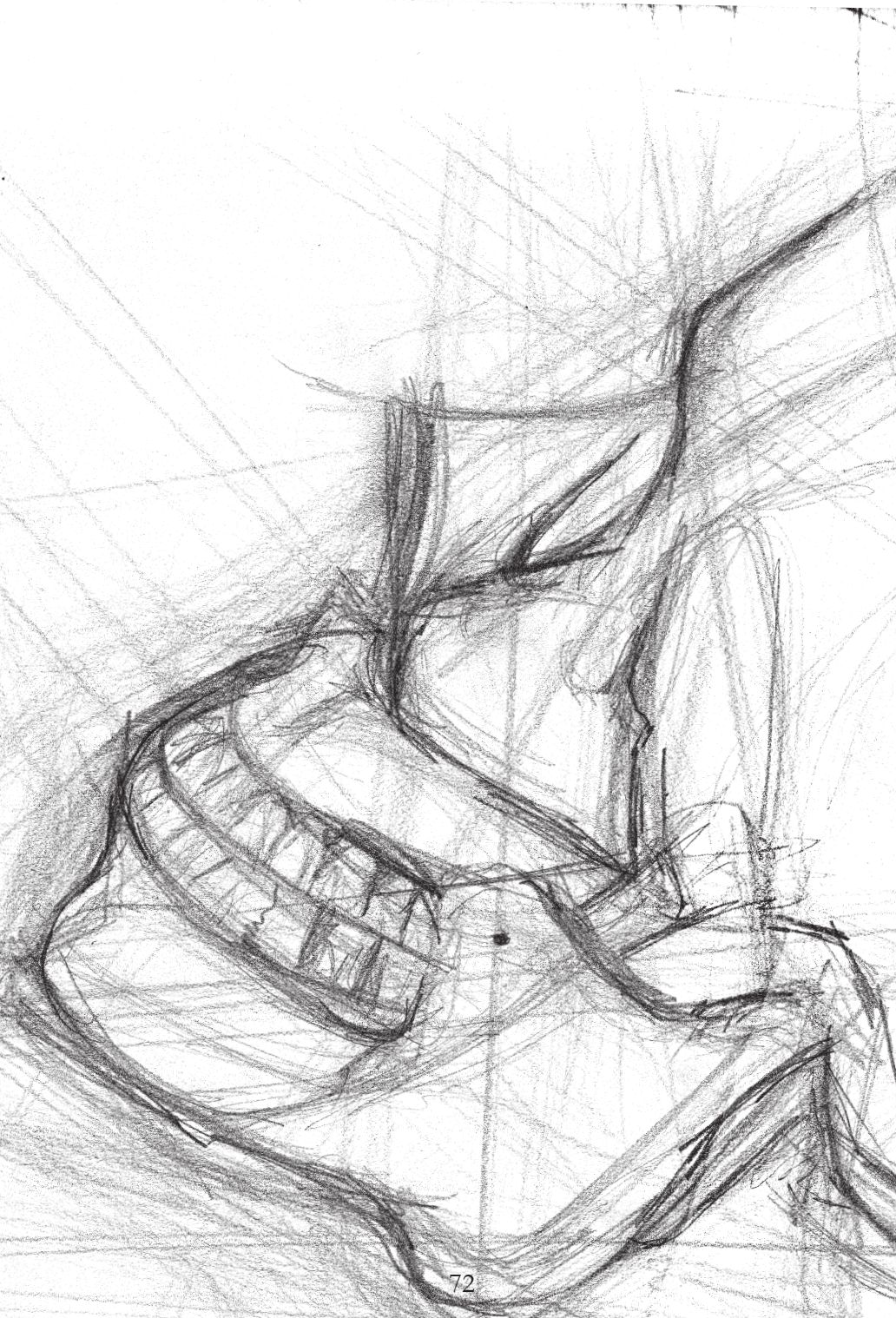


&

Winter Prayer
Ann Ciancia









Prose

artwork by: Jillian Szeliga

HER FALL FROM GRACE

Screenplay

Kimberlee Morton

SYNOPSIS

Vanessa Deveraux is a well-known actress and one of the top producers in Hollywood. She's wealthy and ruthless. She takes Madeline Kennedy, an inspiring actress, under her wing and assists her with her career. Madeline's sudden rise to fame hit Vanessa like a thunderbolt, catching her completely off guard. She watches Madeline captivate the crowd, stealing away the admiration that once belonged to her. When Vanessa notices that the spotlight that once shone brightly on her now shifts to Madeline, she is determined to reclaim her position in the limelight. She hatches a sinister plan and begins sabotaging Madeline's career. As the news spreads like wildfire the media dives headfirst into Vanessa's past. After discovering her entire life has been a lie, she is blackballed from Hollywood. Then, for the first time in 23 years, she returns home to New York. Her mother exposes a secret that shakes her to the core and threatens to destroy her life. Her fans are stunned, and she is at the center of a media frenzy.

INT. VANESSA'S OFFICE HALLWAY-MORNING

Vanessa Deveraux is a famous actress and one of the top producers in Hollywood. She's wealthy and ruthless. She's dressed to the nines as she hurries down the hallway; her two assistants are hot on her tail, each one urgently trying to catch up to her.

JULIA:

That comedy you wrote and directed, Boss-lady, is currently in post-production. The estimated time for the final cut to be completed will take six months.

Vanessa ignores her.

GAVIN:

I have the budget breakdown for the Lifetime movie you're producing. Also, Charles Jagger wants to meet with you regarding the script you wrote over the summer.

Vanessa ignores him.

GAVIN: (CONT'D)

You know the director.

JULIA:

Just a reminder you're on a time crunch today. You have a meeting with Oprah scheduled for 3 p.m. in the conference room. She wants the two of you to discuss "Her Call to Justice."

Vanessa ignores her.

EMPLOYEE #1:

Hi Boss-lady, I love your shoes.
Vanessa is oblivious to her presence.

EMPLOYEE #2:

Good morning, Boss-lady.

Vanessa does not attempt to communicate with him.

GAVIN:

And don't forget your husband wants to have lunch
with you today at noon.

Vanessa ignores him.

EMPLOYEE #3:

Boss-lady, I need you to sign these documents.
Vanessa seizes and swiftly signs the documents, barely
acknowledging the employee.

INT. VANESSA'S OFFICE-TWO MINUTES LATER

Vanessa strides into her office, surrounded by stacks upon
stacks of screenplays. She meticulously sifts through the
towering pile of scripts, her eyes scanning each page. She
has a certain amount of time to find the perfect movie to
bring to life.

GAVIN:

I went to New York this past weekend and saw the
play "A Raisin in the Sun," which I know that's
one of your favorites. A young actress named
Madeline Kennedy stood out to me; her acting was
amazing, but every time I saw her, she reminded
me of you.

VANESSA:

Gavin, hand me that script over there, please.

Vanessa carefully reads the script.

VANESSA:(CONT'D)

I'm not producing anything like this. Who wrote this script? Kimberlee, Kimberlee Morton?

Vanessa throws the script down on the table.

VANESSA:(CONT'D)

Never heard of her; if she wants me to produce her movie, she should learn how to write! Next script.

GAVIN:

Critics were raving about Madeline's performance. The Times mentioned that she's the next big rising star.

Vanessa leafing through a screenplay.

VANESSA:

Yea, Yea, Yea, you've already mentioned it to me before. Julia, tell me what time Oprah wants to meet with me today.

JULIA:

Yes, the two of you will meet at 3. I agree with Gavin that you should review Madeline's performance; as far as I know, she has never performed anything like this-

Vanessa interrupts Julia.

VANESSA:

I don't care about any of that. What I want to know is whether you rejected the offer from Juilliard. They have the nerve to ask me to give them money when they turned me down years ago. Now that I'm rich and famous, they want money. You've got to be kidding me.

An employee interrupts Vanessa, handing her a printout of the production schedule.

EMPLOYEE:

Here is a copy of the production schedule you requested.

Vanessa hands the script to the employee.

VANESSA:

This script must be fine-tuned to perfection. I need another revision immediately and want it assigned to the best writer.

EMPLOYEE:

On it!

JULIA:

Yes, I'll reject the request from Juilliard, but Boss-lady, the girl, seems to have a bright future.

Vanessa is annoyed.

VANESSA:

Okay, and what does that have to do with me? Julia retrieves a picture from a stack of papers.

JULIA:

Just take a look at her.

VANESSA:

Okay, I'm looking at her.

Vanessa pauses briefly, her gaze fixated on the photograph. She hurls the photo in Gavin's direction.

VANESSA: (CONT'D)

The girl looks exactly like me. Gavin, how in the hell did you find someone who looks exactly like me? Are you trying to be funny? Because I don't have time for your games.

GAVIN:

No, No, No, Boss-lady! Julia and I thought it would be great if you could help her.

Vanessa looks above the rim of her Chanel glasses.

VANESSA:

Help her do what?

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Vanessa looks above the rim of her Chanel glasses.

VANESSA:

Help her do what?

VANESSA:

This is not the way things work, Gavin. You don't just arrive in Hollywood and become a star. Are you aware of how many talented people there are in LA? Do you realize this? Huh? What makes her so special?

GAVIN:

She's the next big thing! According to The New York Times, she's written a few movies and plays. They've said she has a promising career as a writer and actress.

VANESSA:

Whoopy do, and good for her! If she's all that, why does she need my help? She sounds like the next big thing already.

JULIA:

I know you're getting ready to start your film studio, so why don't you recruit her for one of your movies? This could be an opportunity for both of you.

VANESSA:

An opportunity for who? Not me. Do you know who I am, or have you forgotten? I'm sorry, but I'm too busy. In any case, I'm not mentor material. Why don't the two of you find someone else for her; now, can we get back to business?

INT. SKYMARK STUDIOS-MORNING

Vanessa is meeting with film investors to get them to invest in her film studio. She looks stunning with her perfectly coiffed hair and flawless makeup. As she begins her pitch, she exudes an air of confidence as she stands at the head of the table, all eyes fixed on her.

VANESSA:

In this presentation, I will present my business plan and script for my first film. I thought it would be a great idea for my first film to be produced within my studio. As you know, I've devoted the entire summer to its completion.

MR. SIMMONS:

Vanessa, you've already presented us with your proposal twice. The amount of money you're requesting for your film studio and screenplay is absurd.

MRS. JACKSON:

We read your script; perhaps you should stick to acting.

Vanessa looks above the rim of her Chanel glasses.

VANESSA:

I beg your Pardon.

MRS. JACKSON:

So, instead of a film company, you want a film studio, right?

VANESSA:

(Arrogantly)

I want the whole damn building!

MR. SIMMONS:

Vanessa, you know I'm not going to give you that much money, and I have a production meeting to attend, so can we wrap this up?

VANESSA:

Come on, Simmons, you can't be serious after all the goddamn money I made for this company.

Vanessa walks up to Mr. Simmons, her hands on her hips.

VANESSA:(CONT'D)

Oh, how quickly we forget when this studio first opened, I was the first big name to appear in one of your low-budget films. You know damn well I'm solely responsible for the success of this studio. I'm the one that brought in the money for this company. A shit ton of money.

MRS. JACKSON:

(Sarcastically)

Yes, you never let us forget.

MR. SIMMONS:

Vanessa, do you realize you're asking us to write you a 20-million-dollar check? A film studio is a massive business with enormous responsibilities. How will you manage an entire studio by yourself? Vanessa approaches the window, then pivots to face Mr. Simmons.

VANESSA:

Damn you, I'm worth more than that! After everything I've done for you, Simmons, not to mention how I supported you throughout your little embezzlement case and stopped you from getting your country ass locked up? Vanessa takes papers from her Hermes bag.

VANESSA:(CONT'D)

Instead of ridiculing me, Simmons, you should thank me! Oh, and don't get me started on all the shady business deals you made to climb the corporate ladder.

Vanessa waves the papers in Mr. Simmons's direction.

VANESSA:(CONT'D)

When things went south, and the shit hit the fan, who did you call? Me! I was there for you when you most needed me. I ask you for one favor, and you refuse; this is why I hate doing favors. who did you call? Me! I was there for you when you most needed me. I ask you for one favor, and you refuse; this is why I hate doing favors.

MR. SIMMONS:

Vanessa, you're a very talented actress. You're a producer, you own an acting school, and you're a huge advocate for women's rights. I don't see the need for you to have a film studio. How many women in Hollywood have their own studio? Why can't you just stick to what you know and leave the film industry to the professionals?

Vanessa shoves the papers in Mr. Simmons's direction.

VANESSA:

Who do you think you're talking to? So, you're saying I can't run my own film studio because I'm a woman? If that's what you're saying, then you're a sexist pig!

Mr. Simmons grabs his belongings to end the meeting.

MR. SIMMONS:

I'm sorry, Vanessa, but risking twenty million dollars is not something I'm willing to do.

Mr. Simmons shoves the papers in Vanessa's direction.

MR. SIMMONS: (CONT'D)

And this isn't going to change my mind.

As Vanessa furiously moves toward the door, she turns around to face Mr. Simmons just before exiting the room.

VANESSA:

Yeah, the next time you need an A-list to star in one of your low-budget films, you better damn well call Meryl Streep!

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM LATER THAT DAY

Vanessa bursts through the door, disrupting Julia and Gavin's meeting. She hurls her Hermes bag onto the table, angry.

VANESSA:

Everyone is fired! And I mean everyone! You two only have a short time to select a new production and creative team. They have the nerve to ask for a raise when they should be concentrating on improving their performance!

JULIA:

I'll compile a roster of potential team members for you immediately.

VANESSA:

Good, now I'm ready to see the video of this girl you've been raving about. She better be good, or you'll be fired too!

GAVIN:

(Eagerly)

Sure, Boss-lady.

Gavin stands up, turns on the television, and plays the Broadway tape for Vanessa. Rising from her seat, she gazes intently at the girl on the screen.

VANESSA:

I must admit her beauty and talent remind me of myself.

JULIA:

We told you so!

VANESSA:

You're right, but don't get used to it. How many scripts has she written?

JULIA:

Two scripts and five plays. She hasn't been signed by an agency yet. I recently saw her in an interview discussing her struggle to become an actress. It's been a long and difficult journey for her.

GAVIN:

Exactly how it was for you!

JULIA:

Madeline is young, attractive, and garnering lots of attention. This is a surefire way to convince Mr. Simmons to support your film studio. Julia rummages through Madeline's information.

JULIA: (CONT'D)

She's ideal for a new generation of people who may not be familiar with you. You know how Hollywood is; they're always looking for new and fresh faces, and by taking her on, you'll be able to expose yourself and your brand to the younger generation.

GAVIN:

And also-

Vanessa cut him off.

VANESSA:

Alright, Alright! I'll do it! I don't like helping others, but this girl does have some talent, and against my better judgment, I'll grace her with my help.

Vanessa sighs and rolls her eyes.

VANESSA: (CONT'D)

Hopefully, Simmons will see that I am dead serious about my business and aid in the funding.

Gavin leans in Vanessa's direction.

GAVIN:

Boss-lady, you think you're a huge star now; helping her will not only improve your image but will also send you into orbit.

Vanessa stands up, walks over to the window. Looking out the window for a moment, she turns to face Gavin and Julia and then approaches them.

VANESSA:

(Excited)

So, what are you waiting for? Quick, get Simmons on the phone! I must know everything about this girl—where she lives and who she associates with.

Vanessa pointing her finger.

VANESSA: (CONT'D)

I want to know every single detail about her, not one crumb of information left unnoticed! How fast can we get her to LA? Pull out all the stops!

Vanessa moves her gaze towards the window.

VANESSA: (CONT'D)

Vanessa Devereux still might have a chance of winning that Oscar after all.

INT. SKYMARK STUDIOS-AFTERNOON

Vanessa rushes down the hallway to catch Mr. Simmons and Mrs. Jackson; she's hot on their tail, trying to catch up to them.

MR. SIMMONS:

(Annoyed)

Vanessa, what do you want now? I am on my way to meet Charles Jagger for a very important meeting.

VANESSA:

Oh, who cares about Charles or your meeting? I have finally devised a plan that I believe you will love.

MR. SIMMONS:

I won't! No matter how many times we go over it, the answer remains the same. You're not going to give up now, are you?

VANESSA:

(Arrogantly)

When has Vanessa Deveraux given up on anything?

MRS. JACKSON:

Vanessa, our minds are made up. We need to get to this very important meeting, so please excuse us. Mrs. Jackson and Mr. Simmons turn to leave Vanessa walks behind them.

VANESSA:

I'm sure you'll reconsider after hearing what I've come up with.

Mr. Simmons and Mrs. Jackson halt, turning their attention towards Vanessa.

VANESSA: (CONT'D)

Simmons, I would like to present two blockbuster films that are sure to win an Academy Award. Do I now have your full attention?

MRS. JACKSON:

And where exactly did you get these two blockbuster films from, since I know you didn't write them?

VANESSA:

I'm talking to Mr. Simmons, not the help. Before being rudely interrupted, Simmons, I was about to say I have someone I'd like you to meet. You may have recently seen her name in the media. She was dubbed the newest rising star by The New York Times.

MR. SIMMONS:

Oh, that young new Broadway actress from New York! Yes, yes, I have heard of her. She's getting a lot of attention lately. What about her?

VANESSA:

Yes, that's the one! She's written two films and five plays, all of which sound promising. She's currently on her way from New York to see me. We could possibly arrange a meeting. Or I could, of course, take her to Sony, who's been begging to work with me for years.

MR. SIMMONS:

Mrs. Jackson, let's reschedule our meeting with Charles Jagger.

Vanessa taps Mr. Simmons on the shoulder.

VANESSA:

Excellent choice, Simmons. This will be a great start to our partnership!

&

Playing Cards

Selma Dizdarevic

Second Place Vogel Award Winner

Ralph and I had been together for nearly seven years and love was involved in only three of them, so it was no surprise to me when I returned to our overpriced brownstone we rented together (not at all equitably, might I add) and was greeted by a perceptible emptiness—one laden with the guilt and haste of a quick exit, and the pricking sensation of my own relief I could not then decipher.

I stood frozen in the doorway. In my immobility I took in the apartment as if it was the first time I was seeing it. My eyes moved frantically over the living room, looking for a confirmation of what I had already known to be true. I knew he was gone but I needed to see it for myself. And then I did.

The pillows. I let out an incredulous whisper into the fresh emptiness.

“He took the fucking pillows.”

...

I took the T (formerly known to me as the train, long before I was a real Bostonian) outside of the city. It was raining hard and Taylor Swift's folklore poured through the white wires of my headphones. As the train sang its usual-but-no-less-concerning squeal through downtown crossing, I tried hard not to think and then I was thinking hard about not thinking and pretty soon the whole plan fell apart.

I felt a buzz and found a few messages from Yuna.

“Just heard about you and r!!”

“You didn't say anything?!”

“Honestly, whatever he did, fuck him.”

I slide my fingers to the left of my screen, revealing the time-stamps. They were all sent within a minute, which was typical of Yuna—she was all fast energy. Ever since we had been in college together in Ithaca, she had always been the fun, lively one. I used to think I provided the perfect tameness that was needed to balance her out—the calm to her storm. Now I just think I'm stale and boring, but I guess that's what I get for being a corporate millennial. The train wailed louder. So did my thoughts.

I unlocked my phone and started shooting out replies.

“Yeah, it was really unexpected.” *No it wasn't.*

“I'm okay though!” *Definitely am not.*

“I'm going to just focus on myself for a while.” *In other words, please stop texting me until further notice, thank you.*

I love Yuna, I really do. She had been there for me whenever I needed her to. Specifically, whenever I explicitly asked her to. Just as willing as she was to support me when I changed my major three times, cut my own bangs horribly, and had a very serious red lipstick phase (which I attributed to my average-level obsessions with Taylor Swift and Sylvia Plath), she just as easily weaved herself out of my life when I failed to keep her in it.

The robot voice above my head informed me that it was my turn to exit the train, and so I did. I tossed my phone into the void of my handbag and, as I walked off the platform, felt an unfamiliar tinge of sadness and anxious nausea, and the unmistakable feeling that I was falling off an indistinguishable, internal precipice.

...

47 days have passed since Ralph excused himself from my life. I didn't have a say in any of his choices, even down to the very last one.

At least I had all the cards now. *But what was the game?*

I sat there on the couch, the one opposite Kitty, where she sat peering at me as if trying to figure me out. I wished she could talk and tell me what she saw. I could have sworn her feline eyes narrowed at this thought, as if she'd read my mind.

My phone broke our staring contest, with it vibrating so chaotically that it nearly fell off the arm of the sofa. It was Beverly, my boss.

"Hello?" My voice cracked on the H.

"Esther? Esther, it's Beverly." Beverly was the supervisor of us fund accountants. She was gentle most times, but I couldn't detect any softness in her voice now, only strain and mild concern.

For most of the 47 days, I managed to get out of bed, into formal—unpressed but formal—clothes, and into the office downtown. Sometimes, I even brushed my teeth. The past couple of days, however, had been exceedingly difficult. I was constantly catching sight of Ralph’s old generic brand of sleeping pills and couldn’t suppress the temptation any longer. With each chalky tablet, I washed away my job, the city, and myself altogether.

I stared at her name on my phone screen and thought about how close her name was to the word “severely.” I tried saying her name the same way and mouthed it quietly to myself. BevERELy. I had to suppress my laughter.

“Esther,” she said, “Can you hear me?”

“Yes, sorry,” I said hastily, turning back to the conversation and reality. Dread and anxiety filled me. I hadn’t shown up to work in two days, missing phone calls left and right. Some of my vanishing acts were on purpose—those pills really knocked me out—and some not. They probably thought I was dead.

“Uh,” she started, “You haven’t shown up to work. What’s—is everything alright?”

“Yeah, I’m okay!” I feigned composure, and caught the judgmental glance of Kitty. “I just had a loss,” I said, and added quickly, “Like in my family.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. Breakups are like dealing with death—there’s still grief and mourning, even if your ex is alive and well and hitting all of the major nightclubs in Boston every Thursday through Saturday, for example.

It took BevERELy several seconds to respond. It felt like an eternity. She couldn’t fire me, right?

“Oh,” she replied, but in a short way, not the kind of “Ohhh” you do when you feel sorry for someone. In fact, she never said sorry. For my loss. My very real loss. She continued before I could think of something else to say.

“It’s just—You didn’t call. We had no notice, and in private equity you know how things move. It’s fast. We all”—she really emphasized the “all” here—“have to be on top of things and keep updating our loan inventories, because if one person falls back then we all do.”

She kept going on, but my cognition had left the conversation. Through the view from my window, I caught sight of an ambulance blaring its lights and speeding through downtown. I wondered how I could extricate myself from this conversation and this body. I wanted to shed my skin and hang it up in my closet.

I caught her closing sentence. “Esther, you’re a good girl.”

That’s how most people talked about women in finance—they’re still just girls—even if you’re almost thirty and taller than most of the men in your department.

“But your recent behavior simply isn’t acceptable. Can you come in tomorrow morning? We’ll need to discuss your future with the company.”

I poked my cheek with my tongue. My anxiety melted into numbness. Of course I was losing my job; Boston’s financial district is too cutthroat and everyone is replaceable. I was stupid to think self-care was an acceptable excuse in the real world. I was a fund accountant, not a goddamn influencer.

“No, probably not.” My voice was distant to me, as if someone else was speaking across the room.

“Have a great night,” I said, saying each word slowly to conceal how maniacal I felt, until the facade slipped. “BevERELY.”

I hung up the phone and threw it across the room towards the kitchen. I sat there, drained and eyes bulging, and watched as Kitty’s eyes followed the phone before slowly settling back on my face. It was dark when I woke up. The bold red digits, 3:47 AM, informed me that I had slept the entire day—not unusual. What was unusual is that while sitting upright in the dark, I felt an unusual stillness circulating through me. It was disconcerting. I remembered that the apartment had 24-hour rooftop access—the overeager leasing agent, who was appropriately named Joy, had squawked on about the rooftop to us for the entire tour of the place. I told her the view was great and all, but I was afraid of heights. She gave me a pitiful look and I

I thought I must have sounded so childish. But it was a true and valid fear. My breath returned to its regular breathing pattern only after we were squarely cut off from the unfenced roof by the thick, windowless door.

I waited for the elevator to reach my floor and hopped on it after the *ding*. While on the way to floor 24, where the unlocked door to the rooftop was, I looked down at my body and took in my appearance for the first time in weeks. I only thought to look because there was a woman in the elevator with me, an older one sporting a Sunoco uniform, and she was giving me mock discreet side glances. I was wearing my old college sweatshirt from William & Mary and realized it had yellow stains on it. I stared at the stains for the rest of the way up, trying to figure out if it was mustard or orange juice, but then I remembered that I hadn't consumed anything beyond coffee and rice cakes for weeks, so I stopped looking.

The woman rushed out of the elevator and onto floor 22. She moved so fast that I wasn't sure if that was really the floor she lived on or if she just wanted to get away from me. I watched her silver ponytail grow smaller and smaller as the doors of the elevator shut. When it was my turn to step out, I noticed that floor 24 was nothing but a dim walkway leading to a door at the other end of the hall. As I made my way through it, I felt a tiny pebble under my heel, some debris from the rooftop past the door, and realized I had no shoes on.

Walking onto the roof, I strode past the array of fancy couches and lounge chairs. The ledge was just a few feet away from me now. I crouched down on the ground and began crawling toward it, challenging the distance between me and the sleeping city. On my hands and knees, I peered over the ledge, breathing easy.

There, overlooking the city in its rare lethargic form, soot coloring my fingers and legs black, I almost thought I would tip myself head-first over the roof. I thought about what it must feel like to tumble down some 300 feet of air, the mounting pressure pushing your face back as you fall until it's as distorted as a jarred fetus.

A forceful gust of wind came in from behind me. It felt like Zeus himself leaned in and blew a puff of air at my back. I tipped forward and the image of the city jerked in my vision before I caught myself. I dug my fingers into the soot, pushing myself up away from the ledge. I had all the cards. I decided to play.

...

I was 13 when my obsession with poker first started. My father was addicted to hosting poker nights in our dingy basement back in Ohio with all his balding construction buddies and their beer bellies. In truth, he was really just addicted to gambling. I watched him as he emptied his wallet and shot me a reassuring smile every time he lost. One night, my father's right-hand man Ricky, who always radiated a subtly sour smell, suggested that I take a seat at the table and play in. Years of watching different hands, plays, and strategies made it rather easy. They thought I was a natural and it was true. Soon enough, it became a routine. All of us around the table, 9 lonely middle-aged men and my preteen self whose boobs hadn't even come in yet. The next few years passed that way—we bet, we joked, we laughed. As I was scooping up chips of victory from the table on my 17th birthday, I sought my father's usually upturned eyes, but he only looked at me gravely, and after that I stopped looking.

I joined the poker club in college, partly because I was good at it and needed the ego boost, and partly to make friends. I never thought playing poker was my destiny. It was just something to use as a fun fact during introductions; *I'm from Canton, Ohio. Hm? Oh yeah, it is really dangerous there. I'm an Economics major, you? Hm. Yes. Oh, and I'm wicked good at poker and routinely empty the pockets of old men.*

The moderators of the club made sure that we couldn't actually gamble anything, probably to prevent any bad habits that would force us to unenroll and stop making tuition payments. Nonetheless, we were all at least 18 and aptly ignorant, so when a senior named Raj invited us to play in a *real* game in a sketchy, seemingly abandoned warehouse downstate, we said yes.

From there, I started to build a name for myself. During the day, I was that one tall girl in class who *might* have been from the Midwest. At night, I was Esther Gainesworth, and in the southern New

York world of poker, I needed no introduction. I rode the high of every play, unapologetic and gluttonous. Like clockwork, I upset the beginners and spoiled the earnings of the big dogs. The sleeping pills could not have had even half of the effect that winning did.

Now that I let myself think of it, I couldn't trace back to any real reason why I decided to abandon it. I figured the passion must have evaporated sometime between meeting and falling into step with Ralph, who from the beginning exclusively wore plaid polo shirts and old-man loafers and resented any activities that took place below ground level. *Seven years*, I thought. *The hell was I thinking?*

...

I pushed open the door to my apartment and stared in. It was all looking back at me: the couch and its bareness, the sun rising through the window, Kitty on the glass table. It was all as I had left it a few hours ago, right before I retreated to the top of the building and painted myself in dirt, but I was different. I had made a choice up on the rooftop, that I knew. I couldn't help but think that the room in which I was now walking into knew it too, as if it had felt the shift in me right as it was happening in the sultry night air, 24 floors up, and not a thing besides the moon to witness it.

I made a beeline for the storage closet in the back of the room and ransacked it like it was Black Friday and I was a mother on a budget. Under heaps of Halloween costumes and forgotten board games, I found it: my 52 deck of Bicycle playing cards. The package was dented and creased from years of use and the once-white cards were tinted yellow, but there it was. Even though Ralph had shunned the game, had forced me to pick him over it, had dealt me a seven year sentence in a hell full of Axe body spray and booze, I had kept the deck. I turned it over in my hands and peered into it, thumbing the alignment of cards. It was satisfying. What broke my hypnosis was a low, growling noise reverberating through my stomach, and I looked down, startled and unable to remember the last time I had heard it.

...

I had never been afraid of being evicted before, but I knew that it would be coming any day now. I was behind on rent and ignoring my landlord's texts, and almost thought about passing him Ralph's number but I thought it would be better to just play dead. Soon enough, there the bright red EVICTION NOTICE sign was pasted ominously on my door like a bloody handprint. I fled the scene quickly but mildly-mannered, and called Yuna who picked up after the first ring.

"Who's this?" she answered. "Just kidding!"

I tried to laugh for both of our sakes, but nothing came out, so instead I just said: "I know I haven't called."

She rushed to supply a compassionate "It's okay!" in response. She was dismissing my apology before it even came out, and I let her.

"I just got evicted," I blurted. I felt awkward saying it and wished I had gone with the apology instead.

I told her about how I lost my job, about the sleeping pills, about the rooftop. As I was running through the past few months of my life to Yuna, it only then occurred to me that I had actually lived them. I fought whatever black hole was trying to overtake me and won. I had crawled out of it on my hands and knees and made it onto the other side with bloody knuckles and nails full of thick dirt.

"So," she continued, lingering on the O. I could tell she felt uneasy about whatever she was going to say and was treading carefully.

"What are you going to do now?" she finally asked. "Do you have a plan?" "I'm going to play poker."

"Esther," she started, concerned. I thought I was about to be scolded.

"Please don't ruin your life with gambling," she said. "My grandma's cousins got into that shit once. They had to foreclose their entire house and sell their cars and stuff. Bible!" Yuna said she'd let me live in her apartment in Cambridge, where she was getting her master's in graphic design. She was studying abroad in Copenhagen this semester, she informed me, so I'd have the whole place to myself.

"The spare key is with the next-door neighbor," she told me. "Super cute. Big brown eyes. Balding a bit, though."

...

It took me less than a week to get settled in the new place. There was no time to rearrange the furniture or sort my clothes. I was getting my life together and everything else would have to wait.

I navigated to my laptop's search engine and typed in "poker tournaments," but it only led me to definitions and pictures of old white men around a table. I amended the search, adding "near me" to the end of it. There was a tournament in Dorchester that same weekend. Without looking at the details, I registered for it. It took me two tries to pass the "Are you human? Click every fire extinguisher!" test, but eventually the confirmation page filled the screen. I traced my fingers over the bright green "Thank you for registering" text before falling back on Yuna's fuzzy pink pillows, beaming.

...

I sat in the exact spot I had reserved for myself online. The green felt covering the table was suddenly all too familiar to me, and, almost reflexively, my shoulders abandoned their nervous, rigid position. It all came back to me in one complete, crashing wave: the plays I had mastered all those years in the basement, the upsets I had caused as a college player, how it felt to win.

"How much?" the dealer asked. It was my turn to put in a stake.

I saw the flash of a gold tooth in his mouth as he talked and wondered if he had purposely gotten it to match the chain fitted around his neck, which I guessed was weighing him down slightly.

I pursed my lips and took glances at the other players. At the curly-haired woman who was holding a lighted cigarette between her magenta-tipped fingers, at the shaggy 30-something year-old who I could tell still lived with his mother, at the Italian-looking old man with rings suffocating his already swollen fingers, and the rest of the sad, lonely pack of hungry wolves.

I turned my attention back to the dealer and let my mouth hang open for a beat before I replied. My left eyebrow twitched up as I spoke, as if I knew something the rest of them didn't. "All in."

We Buried Her Yesterday

Isabella Dienhoffer

First Place Vogel Award Winner

The court-mandated therapist stares down his crooked nose, pinning me with his scrutiny. His beady eyes never waver as I sit rigid in an indignant silence. He taps the capped end of his pen in sync with the *tick tick tick* of the analog clock perched on the right corner of his desk. I hold the balding man's stare, lifting the end of my chin in an unspoken defiance to his waged patience.

My foot bounces on the sterile tile floor.

The balding man's receding hairline raises even further as he arches an unkempt eyebrow.

"No."

His dark eyes glance over the bruises painted across my knuckles and the scars strewn across my skin to the piece of plastic tightened around my ankle.

Smirking, as if he knows I had not busted through the thin sheet of drywall this time. As if he can smell the soot that had hardened under my nails last night. As if he had read the leather-bound parchment

scattered in shambles across the graveyard littered with unmarked coffins and unnamed corpses. The faded book's own tomb hidden away in an alphabetized cardboard box behind a locked door in a police station somewhere on the coast— its pages marred with vindictive scribbles and ink smudges transcribing the nightmares that plague my sleep.

Seven hours earlier, I had been sprawled out in a heap of dewy grass. Curled up in a knot beneath a supposed heaven. Five months before, the priest stood before a three-person sea of black and spoke of an eternity in some wise man's kingdom. Now, a long-wilted bouquet crumbling amongst just-bloomed daffodils serves as a reminder of the priest's lies. If that man's word was true, you would not be decomposing in a wooden box.

The balding man's hands, however, clean and neat, except for the smear of ink on the tip of his thumb, lay folded in his lap.

"No?" He taunts.

I refuse to allow that balding man the gratification of a response. So, I hold his stare as his clock continues its cacophony of *tick tick tick* until it finally signals the conclusion of this appointment. With a parting smirk, the balding man allows me to stomp out of his office and slam the door shut.

—

My sister's eyes lock onto mine as we sit on a rusted iron bench in the middle of a park, her breath fogging in the brisk air. A steaming coffee hugged to my chest. An iced caramel latte with two extra pumps of sugar condensates next to her. My head against her shoulder, and hers rests atop mine.

"How're you holding up?" She sighs. Translation: *How did the appointment go?*

"I don't know anymore, Em. I just—" I take a deep breath, a pathetic attempt to revive a will to live within my body. "I don't know how much more of this I can take." She knew grief still bled out of my heart. I did not tell her it also bled out of my wrists.

"She loved us. *She loved us*. She tried her best. You know this. You know she was having a tough time adjusting to all of the medications." Her tone sharpens at having to repeat this again and again.

My voice grows bitter, "Em, that's not an excuse. You can't keep

justifying all of the suffocation. The anger that she never failed to unleash on us. That's not how this works. That wasn't a valid reason to use us as pillows."

She sighs again, frustrated with my inability to forgive everything that had happened when the wounds still ooze. Unlike her, who had been crying petals of pure sadness nightly after our mother's death, my sobs seemed to be a messy mixture of anger and regret. I cried and I wept and I shredded the apology you had written me and I yelled and I threw my head back in a fit of laughter and I cried on the sharp precipice of hysteria and I sobbed "fuck you" more times than you would be proud of and I wept.

"Do you remember the nights she tucked us in, tugging the blankets to our chins? Do you remember the poem she used to whisper, the way it overflowed with love?" I swallow the crack in my voice.

"She tried her best."

"I know. I really, really do." I lift my head off her shoulder. "I just want all of this to be over. I'm sick and tired of acting."

I don't know if this would be easier if Em and I could just pass by one another. I could pretend I don't see her— that my hands don't shake and my stomach doesn't turn. She could pretend we didn't spend countless hours laughing— and even more crying— together, instead of allowing all of it to vanish. To allow everything to tip off a precipice into feigned ignorance. Empty eyes as we walk by. If it would be easier to ignore the past in hopes of stepping into a future without someone who knew how atrophied and decayed my heart is. She knew all of the ugly, the tears, the hysteria in its rawest form— the version of myself that suffocates everything and everyone around it. I thought it would be easier for her if she was no longer chained to my melancholia.

She whispers a somber "I love you" into the crisp morning breeze swirling through the park.

Because, then, she would be spared. Healed.

And my stomach would no longer be tangled; I would find comfort in knowing that she would be okay. The blue of her eyes would cease wilting, finally able to flourish after being ensnared in decay. Instead, it would bloom with renewal once the season passed.

Then, the thoughts inside my head would no longer be fighting currents of guilt from what would be left behind— closure.

“Yeah.”

As Em moves farther from me, I allow an apology to fall into the breeze unheard.

—

I walk instead to the small beach etched out of rocks. The alcove hidden past the thistles of the path, away from the safety of surveillance. The long-abandoned dock dissolving into the ceaseless wrath of the water.

Pulling the book from the pocket hidden inside my jacket, I run my fingers across the letters carved into its cover. The one you used to grab from the pocket in front of your spot in the pew, with its folded corners and faded ink. I toss the stolen Bible, and all of its falsehoods, onto the edge of the shore, just beyond the safety of the tides. Emptying the glass bottle and scraping a match, I watch as the pages of the book begin to catch. The gospel of forgiveness and grace withering into the blue flames. The heat of the embossed leather cover warms my skin. The crackles echo a lost cry for mercy. The leather blazes into an amber before curling into black. Slowly, the rising tides hide the soot.

I stumble to a familiar stone hidden in an overgrown cemetery, careful not to land on the shards of glass or the rusted metal scraps littering the damp ground. A shared name covered by a tangle of thorns and wilted flowers. An arbitrary verse etched beneath. A prayer you drowned daily.

I drain another bottle and shatter it against your gravestone.

Here, I pull my knees to my chest and weep.

You had loved me; you just hadn't loved the responsibility.

—

Five months ago, you shattered a glass against the wall, its contents splashing everywhere. Your screams echoed as the glass splintered. I yelled another fuck you— because the first eight thrown were not enough. Sirens have not yet screeched into the gravel of the driveway, with their uniforms madly scribbling our obscenities into their little black books. Stitches had not been knotted. Scars had not been carved.

You screamed how everything would have been so much easier if I had not been such a burden. Because, in addition to everything else, you had to home a child. You ached in agony as the days continued to pass with only fragments left.

Whiskey did not smother the sorrows.

“No, no, no.” I cried. Eyes burning with anguish.

The picture that used to be mounted next to the window lay face down, its wooden frame cracked and coated with dust. Its smiling faces distorted and stained by the whiskey. Captured before its smiles had been marred by the scar you chiseled across my cheekbone with a lonely diamond or its eyes glassy with intoxication. The picture’s nuclear family had crumbled into coffins and calamity.

The last time this happened, you hit that instead.

You wailed, clutching the faded photo against your chest. On its back, Happy thirtieth birthday to the best Mama. I love you! was inscribed in messy crayon letters.

I slammed the door behind me.

Your reflection cracked in the window, draining the bottle and slicing a thin apology across its wrists.

I called an ambulance.

The reflection slumped.

The ambulance was too late.

I scream.

I sob.

I sabotage.

The next two weeks: emptiness extinguishes the fire.

I howl sorrows until my voice is only sharded squeaks, and everyone has left.

The third Sunday after your death, I sit in the back pew; I watch with reddened eyes as people delicately move to their spots. Familiar smiles and whispered laughter echo through the building. The stained glass windows filter a rainbow of grace through the church. The soft music rises and quiets. A man wrapped in a black robe stands proudly behind his podium.

Bodies file out of the grand double doors in a bubble of contentment. The echoing happiness fades.

The man in the black robe takes a seat next to me.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

I continue to thumb through the worn pages. This was the softened book you used to flip through—the one where you found the hymns before the music began so you could hum along.

“You know— there are things that are out of our control. We don’t have a hand in the plans He makes for us.”

I mumble a response, not believing a word he says.

He quiets and bows his head.

“We buried her yesterday.” A tear runs down my cheek.

Sunday night, my head rests on your gravestone. I grasp the apology note the uniforms found tucked in your jewelry box. I am okay. A desperate grip on the page. The softened and tear-stained paper whispers whispers whispers hollow words. I am okay. The amber bottle blankets my body with its warmth. Rain begins to weep from the sky. My heart pounds. I am okay. Clutching the damp paper to my chest, I wail.

I stagger away from your gravestone, the rain soaking through my clothes. The freshly overturned dirt mudded beneath my feet. I fall into the driver's seat and fumble to pull the belt across my lap. My hand trembles as I turn the key in the ignition. Pulling off the shoulder, I scrub my eyes as the lines start to move. The radio crackles. The yellow paint blurs.

The flashing sirens behind me are the last thing I see.

—

Familiar face in uniform.

Something about temporary probation.

Fines. Cold bench.

Something else tightened around my ankle. "Just in case."

—

Five months later, I sit in front of your gravestone again. Today would have been your birthday. The balding man warned me against delving into the past again this morning: "You need to take steps away from the trauma, not toward it." He needed to make his speel so he could get his bonus. "Allow yourself to find a stoic serenity in forgiveness."

I, however, need closure, even if that means drowning in the trauma again. I need to apologize— to sob to a stone that cannot comprehend a word I say. That had been the one adage I heeded from you: a person cannot say goodbye without imparting a sense of finality. The word's seven letters tainted with heaviness and regret. Beneath them, closure lays as tranquil as a corpse.

So, there I sat. Hugging a Bible as if it could fill your place, albeit temporarily, with the book you loved oh so dearly, sometimes even more than your own daughters.

A pitiful attempt to fill the hole that your death had carved.

Em shows up. She lingers on the dewy grass beside me before putting her arm around my shoulder. For a while, we are still in a mourning silence. A quiet moment of remembrance for all that had been fractured. Her eyes—the blue of a bruise—reflect the chronic anguish in mine.

“Do you think she’d forgive me?”

“Yeah.” Em sighs.

I pause. “Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Do you forgive me?”

She thinks for a moment, “I never blamed you.”

Closure.

I scribble a mess of apologies and sorrows onto a wrinkled piece of paper.

The draft smudged and erratic.

*Self-diagnosed cancer of the thoughts—
I wanted to drown the tumors before
they drowned me.*

As I allow the words and melancholia to be written as one, the water turns tepid. I swallow the rest of the pills with a glass of your favorite whiskey.

The last noise I hear: *plunk plunk plunk*.

Mind, Heart, Body.
Eli Wilson

If you have nothing to record it, is time passing? If no calendar or clock is there to tell you the hours, minutes, dates, does time move on without you in it? Time is an ugly mistress who moves effortlessly in her waltz whether you keep up or not. Never will I despise anything more than time.

I have no idea how much they've stolen from me, how many years of my life have gone to waste locked away from everything. My body seems to be the only indication that time has been passing. My chin is much scruffier than it used to be, I can catch the slightest glimpse of my hair in the glass when the angle is just right. It covers my ears, brushes into my line of sight sometimes. The thought of missing my first few gray hairs depresses me. I wonder how the years have changed my eyes, if they still glimmer like they did before. Little oceans, mother used to call them. Probably now dark and heavy with anguish. It's for the best that I can't see myself.

It's never announced when the lights are turned off nor are they ever dimmed, they simply go out. Like a bird whose cage has been covered, I am trained to know it's time to sleep. My circadian rhythm relies on them now. Light is time to pace my cell, stare in different directions, write if my captors allow me. Dark is time to rest, nothing else.

Today that cycle breaks, no longer will I spin the wheel they've trapped me in. On and on I sit and listen, obey their commands and do as I'm told. A good dog, I've heard from the one guardsman I get to see. Only one man is charged with bringing me the things deemed necessities.

Everything that comes in and out is cataloged. One pillow, one white see-through flimsy shirt, one pair of mental-illness gray pants, one pair of socks. These stay with me permanently and are only ever changed when necessary. One spoon goes in, one spoon comes out. Except for the day they forgot the spoon. How could I eat my chocolate pudding with no spoon? A great quandary for me met with rolled eyes from my one guard. An even greater predicament for these fools once the first spoon vanishes and the second spoon arrives.

Step one: trick that tool into giving me my escape.

The original spoon hides forever under the crumpled and rough pillow I sleep with. A spoon hardly makes a good companion at night, but the comfort it brings is enough to lull me under like a babe in his loving mother's arms.

Step two: whittle the spoon until it's sharp enough to break skin.

One could imagine such a secure facility with so many regulations would forgo metal utensils, but plastic can break much easier, reminds every officer in charge of safety. The last thing they'd want is their most dangerous prisoner to hurt himself. Every time they turn the lights off, I spend some time on my spoon, carving it into a fine edge using the tile and grout under me. The sound has me gritting my teeth at first, vibrating my bones and sending shiver upon shiver down my spine. Day after day I sit and whittle.

Step three: plan a day of action.

&

In order to truly ensure the ritual goes smoothly and I'm not interrupted, a day must be chosen. My guard gets sloppy, he passes a friend in the hall with the door open and their conversation reaches my room. Three days from now, the general and his daughter will tour the facility. An act of safety, some military feather rustling. Like peacocks, full of themselves and their displays, these military dogs couldn't stand not to show off their fancy titles and uniforms.

Days one, two, three, pass just as quickly as any other. My one guard has not come to deliver my food— they must be all-hands-on-deck for the arrival of this general. An important man to take away such a valuable asset from such a dangerous criminal. There's humor in it, but I haven't laughed in a long time. I know it wouldn't sound right even if I did try. I don't. It feels as though the facility has forgotten about me all the way down here, at least for the day. What fortune for my plan.

The first cut turns quickly into several.

I've traced these shapes in my mind over and over, I know them in my dreams. My hands tremble, my heart beats in my ears once maddening anticipation takes hold. In my eagerness, I cut deeper than I wanted. The pain is excruciating and yet I must not give up. No physical pain could possibly match what I've already been through. The final symbol is carved into my chest, a sigil of the soul. Grandmother would mock my jagged lines and uncertain jerky stops. She would never have allowed such poor craftsmanship to suffice. Luckily, only I share this cell and this experience. I drop the spoon, and I hear it clang but don't look to see where it landed. . My eyes are closed, as tightly as I can get them. Shapes dance in vibrant green and blue hues behind my lids and I watch them for a minute.

They're peaceful, dancing the way they do. It's a private show only I get to enjoy. The pain in my body subsides, I can feel a pull inside of my chest. It's tight, it's suffocating. My consciousness pulls itself from my mortal form stuck in this cage, and like a current of electricity I follow the wire as it pulls me out of my own body.

I can feel a breeze of cool air, a tight squeeze around my midsection that digs into each rib as I breathe. Steady at first, but the longer I travel this wire of darkness the harder it becomes. Air— no matter how much of it I can feel— doesn't touch my lungs. I feel I might suffocate. My whole body shoots and bursts with tingling pain at every nerve end.

The spell bursts.

My senses take time to return. First I can hear this obnoxious beep that goes off in a pattern. Two short pops, then a long screech. It repeats incessantly. I've never heard a single beep in my cell. As soon as I can feel all my limbs again, they rage against every movement. Each arm is weak and heavy, struggling to yank me up from the floor. I haven't been patched up, but every cut on my body— even the blood— is gone. I stare at the white walls, they're fuzzy. They're different. I barely move my neck, the most I can manage from my stubborn body. There's a bed at the opposite end of the room from where I am, it's elevated and hosting a sleeping woman. She reminds me almost of Snow White, peaceful and blissfully unaware as she rests. Not a dark hair out of place, she's pale and thin, but not sickly looking. A healthy looking girl in a hospital bed? I stare, but slowly she is replaced with glass walls and a bloody spoon that's staring back at me instead. A weight crushes my chest, the breath is knocked from my weak lungs. I gasp, but the weight only gets heavier. Someone is yelling, the white walls are bathed in a terrifying red light. The world fades again.

This sudden dance feels never ending.

Sometimes when I open my eyes I can see her as she sleeps— other times I open my eyes to dull pain, bright lights, a steel bed. Shortly after my visit to Snow White in her hospital room, a guard discovered me laying in a pool of my own blood. I still can't really tell if I'm dreaming. My spirit seems untethered, floating in space in between where it wants to be and where it should be. At this stage in the plan, my only option is to wait. I sit patiently in my bed and drift between each room, trying to settle in one.

This girl, this Snow White, seems to be very determined to keep her body to herself. I regret that she was chosen, but that's beyond my control. I can't choose who gets picked, I can only pray they won't mind while I use them. Only temporarily, I don't want to hurt her.

Step four: Take control of a host to break myself out of prison.

It was a simple plan, at least it should be in theory. Beat someone in a game of wills, use them to open the door to my cell, and get us both out. I can't beat this girl, she holds on and keeps me out. Though the spell shouldn't be allowing her to. Grandmother would truly be disappointed, turning in her grave as I once again falter to unconsciousness.

It turns out I screwed up.

Instead of kicking this poor girl out of her body, I've instead taken up residence. I should've made my spoon sharper. Each time I open my eyes, I'm between two existences. In the first, my body is tired and wounded. I'm alone in my body, locked down and staring at the ceiling helplessly. In the other, I'm a passenger. I can only watch as she sleeps. She hasn't woken up. The calendar the nurse changes every day claims she's been like this for four days so far. I can smell the food that passes through the halls, hear the gossip of the nurses, feel the IV as it itches in her arm. I can feel it all, but I am not the mind in charge on this side. I can only watch, wait. Her blankets are softer than mine, her pillow stiffer, fuller. Her right calf itches in the back, like a bug bite still filled with venom. It's a shame I can't scratch it.

I've decided to use this time while she sleeps to get used to these new sensations. I can extend myself, feel what she feels, but it's mixed with my own body. I feel like I'm caught in a vivid dream, both experiencing and recalling, but when I wake up in my own body, none of it is there. It's much better to be on her side of the world, where I might still be a prisoner, but at least there's comfort. It's cozy in that hospital room, listening to people and machines. I've grown accustomed to her strong heartbeat, the occasional visits to check up on her catheter, IV drip, etc. This hospital is lively compared to my prison cell. I find out Marta from finance has been sleeping with a surgeon, they're doing construction on the parking garage, and the hospital recently lost a long term resident.

It's astonishing what these nurses will gossip about in front of their patients. Who knows when an otherworldly prison inmate could be listening? They disregard me completely, and this is how I learn that while I can see the room from where I stand in the corner, no one knows I exist.

Snow White screams.

Our eyes lock. We both go cold.

She's wide awake. She's sat up in the bed, elbows locked. They're stiff, her back hurts. That damn bug bite still itches. Her eyes are dark, deep brown. Her dark hair is more than matted and is stretched in every which way down her shoulders, the light auburn ends look like she's been reanimated with electricity. She's staring right at me. I hesitantly move over, she follows. Her head swivels as I begin to pace the room and grin.

"Stop it!" Her hands are up now in defense, she hasn't broken eye contact. "Who are you?" A loaded question. I hadn't anticipated she'd really see me— or ever wake up— yet here she is. She's broken into a cold sweat, I writhe as the cold shiver goes down my spine too.

I don't want to answer her, but I can't deceive myself of how I must look. A thin, pale, scraggly man who hasn't seen daylight or anything other than fluorescent light in however many years I've been imprisoned. If she can see me, she can see me for all I really am. Something I haven't even had that misfortune to do. I can't ignore the rising fear in her, it feels like it's earth shattering. I also cannot ignore the feeling of bile rising to burn my throat.

"That bowl," I answer.

I don't have time to answer her follow-up questions nor does she have the time to ask, I simply move to grab the stainless steel bowl sitting at the side of her bed. I touch nothing. My hands pass right through the bowl. I can feel my real fingers twitch in my bed.

She leans over the side and vomits on the floor at my feet. It tastes like old, digested fruit.

Nurses fawn over and clean dear Snow White, now that she's awake their comfortable attitude of gossip has vanished. They dote on her like a frail little girl, following her every whim. She gets platefuls of the best food a hospital cafeteria can muster, they fluff and adjust her pillows regularly.

Her eyes have not moved from me. I feel as though, if she could, she would have ended me herself by now. Her glare is unwavering and horrific.

I wake up on a hard mat, soaked in sweat and misery— back in hell. Back to my own body, with my own functions, I sit up. I've had more than enough beds for one lifetime. On the floor, slid through the usual hole in the glass, is my tray of food. I stand, my arm yanks behind me. There's a chain at my wrist, securing me to the stainless steel bed frame. I've no more than two feet of freedom in my six foot prison. I look at the tray; no spoon, no pudding.

To bed I go.

She startles again as I open my eyes, back in this dream, back in her hospital room.

"Don't do that. How did you do that? Who the hell are you?" her questions are unending. She lists them off rapidfire as I sit beside her. The bed doesn't sink under my weight, it seems to have hardly noticed I'm in the room. She reaches a hand forward and it goes right through me. I feel the wind on her hand as she flails it to and fro. Now we both know I'm not really here.

"Who are you?" She asks again. Her tone is serious now, she's settled her nerves. She's intimidating now, much more so than when she was the one asleep and helpless. Now I cower under the strength of her gaze.

"You won't like the answer."

"I don't care, tell me anyway." Her arms cross.

I fear I have no way out. I take a deep breath, settle my nerves, try my best to ignore hers, and begin.

"My name is Alek, I'm a prisoner at Saint Julian's Prison." I brace for impact. My shoulders and neck are more tight than ever, she rolls her own. She makes a face of discomfort, grunts, then looks back at me. She's studying me, those eyes peer through me as she comes to her conclusions. Whatever she's decided I'm not privy to as decided by her sudden getting out of bed. She wobbles a little, but then takes quickly to pacing. She yanks on the IV in her arm a bit too hard. As we both flinch, the machine she was connected to begins to beep frantically.

The room is swarmed with nurses, all of whom ignore me. I'm useless in this room, in this position, I might as well bide my time back in my cell. I can feel the tight metal cuff still digging into my wrist, the usual pangs of hunger from ignoring my meal. I rub at my wrists, deciding it's better to leave.

"Wait, please," Snow White calls.

She's hushed and soothed by a nurse who reassures her they're only trying to help. I turn around and meet her eyes. She was talking to me, asking me to wait. Why? I can only stand and wait for an answer once she begins to shoo the nurses away. One by one they leave until we are alone. She seems hesitant, but there's a fire burning in her she wants to release. Once we're alone, she takes a deep breath.

"Close the door for me, please? While you're the one standing there?"

"I can't—"

"Right," she nods her head, "you can't touch things. Sorry, that's still new." She adds a laugh but it's flat.

She tucks a thick bang of hair behind her ear and snuffles. Her eyes go to the door, then the IV machine that had previously tattled on her for getting out of bed. I decided to solve her problem for her and sit beside her on the bed. She breathes in relief and nods, speaking in a low tone. Her name is Aurelia Kane. She was visiting her father, at the very same prison where I'm being held, for a tour of the facility. The news is startling and terrifying. The military general was visiting with his daughter...

This is his daughter with me now.

She cocks her head, I can't break my staring contest with the clock just behind her right ear. Perhaps if I don't look at her I don't have to face her. She'll give me a crazed look, claim I'm a dangerous monster, shout at me about what I could possibly want with her? How could I do something like this to her?

"Hey, hey, can you hear me? Alek?"

The ocean is in my ears. It's hard to hear her over it, she sounds miles away.

"Hm? What?" I ask her.

She sighs, her lips pucker and she shakes her head. "You know you've only answered one question. I have lots of others."

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Aurelia questions me endlessly. I try to answer her forthrightly but the fear of revealing too much keeps my answers short. The practices of my people, the power we possess, is a taboo subject. I was imprisoned for a reason— if I reveal myself to her, who knows what General Kane, her father will hear? I'd be signing myself up for execution. For now, I only answer with ignorance of the hows or whys. She only needs to know I'm not a threat, I don't have the intention to ever try and harm her, but my plan must go on. She seems to become less and less appreciative of my tale as I spin it.

“You want me to help you break out. Of prison? Are you crazy or just mentally unwell? How would I even begin to get you out?” Her hands are everywhere as she speaks, she's very animated with her body language. Aurelia pulls at her hair and wipes the sweat from her brow, ending in a dramatic fall into her pillows. “You're clinically insane, you've gotta be.”

I grin quickly, appreciate her humor for just a second, but my usual stoicism returns. It's much easier to hide that you're lying when you don't show anything at all. “I may be, but that's all there is. I just woke up here, with you. I can't help that I'm in my situation, but I won't let this go to waste. You can help me while we're like this, you're the only one I've spoken to in a very long time. I promise I mean you no harm, but... Well, can you really blame me?”

She scoffs. I scoff back.

“You're definitely clinical. You're crazy to ask the daughter of a General to help you escape from the prison he runs. I'm in.”

“Aurelia, please I don't— you what?”

“I'm in, I'll help you, Alek.”

Aurelia is discharged from the hospital. In the following weeks, I am thrown into her reality. Her stress and her anxieties knot my insides and keep me awake at night. Her joy and desire to live fully inspire me. We always talk about anything, everything, or sometimes nothing at all. Her cat, her father and his recent promotion to the title of General, her mother who passed three years ago, even the weather. She sometimes asks what things feel like, taste like, how I see the world through her eyes as she does, but also through my own. We talk about family, I tell her about my mother, my grandmother, we share our memories.

As days turn to weeks I spend less and less time in my own body. Even as she rests, I often sit beside her, just to lay down. The presence of a person beside me is more comfort to my soul than I can readily describe.

Life goes on. We begin to settle into a comfortable little routine. During the day, while Aurelia toils away in day-to-day life, I remain in my cell. I eat, stretch, remember what it feels like to grab and touch. Everyday my agony in that prison grows, the more time I spend in simulated freedom with Aurelia and her cat, her soft bed, her fruity diet, the harder it's becoming to stay.

White walls, glass cage, infected cuts burning across my chest. It's driving me mad. I've spent years in this prison, I was content to die here for so long. Never once did I try to seek an escape, until now.

I hate myself for it, for giving in to the taste of true freedom. Now I yearn for it. The evenings I spend with Aurelia, going over plans, looking over documents and schedules, are the happiest moments I have. Each night, she falls asleep unaware of it all, and I remain, to have just a moment of peace. While she sleeps, I can take control of her senses more. Feel her quilt, the hair that scratches at her neck. It's pure bliss, but it's never permanent. Every morning I say my goodbyes to her, wish her well on her day, and return to hell.

Today is different, Aurelia is home, and I'm allowed to be with her all day. It's still mundane, she's folding her laundry while an easy listening lofi beat plays softly from her speaker. I sit in an old wicker chair, happy I can't feel the uncomfortable cushion and the hard wooden backrest. I watch her, absently, like usual. She turns and our eyes meet, she smiles before she puts away the stack of shirts she's folded. There's a scratch at the door as it slowly swings open. A chunky orange cat walks right up to Aurelia and greets her with gentle rubs to her legs. She stoops down and plucks the furrball off the ground, who lovingly submits and curls into the crook of her neck. I feel the bristle of the fur against her skin and it sends a shiver down my body. Cat hair has always felt unusually coarse to me, that doesn't change even in Aurelia's skin.

She takes a seat at the foot of the bed beside where I sit, cradling and cooing her beloved feline.

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It's a scene I envy, as I feel my real arms heavy with pain and enjoy only the slightest tingle as she buries her hands into the oily fur. "Who's a good little Porky, who is? Oh! You are, yes you are oh my goodness." Her tone is sickeningly sweet.

"Porky? Don't tell me you named him that." I sit beside her on the bed now, again it doesn't move under me. I've grown quite used to nothing reacting to me.

Aurelia looks up from her babying the little orange cat, who looks quite offended that I ruined their ritual. "Well, his name is Prometheus actually. Does that make it better?" She laughs and returns to the cat, continuing, "my dad named him, but that's a four letter word for a little girl, so I started to call him Porky. I was only a kid," she shrugs her shoulders. Her gaze returns to me from the cat, who again doesn't seem happy to be ignored. He swats at her dark hair while her attention is turned toward the empty space I don't occupy.

I only hum as a response and look away from her and the cat. She doesn't seem content with my answer, a pit forms in my stomach I didn't put there. If she had hopes of beginning a lecture, she's interrupted by a slam downstairs.

My chest constricts, breathing becomes much more a laborious task than before. Is that her anxiety or mine? I turn to Aurelia, she's frozen solid. The cat wriggles himself free and hops down, rubbing against the bed at where my feet are. Aurelia stands and makes a hasty exit, but I remain here with Prometheus. A much more befitting name. I watch him rub and purr, although, it seems his comfort is from the blanket more than my own presence, given this cat has not a clue I'm here. I stare and imagine the feeling of his oily fur against my hands, imagine petting him and finding comfort in him. This peaceful visage of me and the cat lasts for only a moment. Downstairs, a heated debate has begun. Prometheus looks up with me, we both head down the steps silently.

The scene is Aurelia and her father, on opposite ends of the kitchen. Her father is a tall man, thicker than a stone wall and probably stronger to boot. He certainly looks like an intimidating military General, he commands respect with only his glare. It's the spitting image of his fiery daughter, who returns her own killer stare.

“Indignant child, when will you drop this? I can’t believe you still want to go back.” His voice is thick, deep, and masculine. I can tell, even without the uniform, he holds authority and is used to winning these arguments. He’s a born and bred commanding officer, and I find it hard not to listen. I’m not even involved in the conversation, yet Aurelia passes me a quick glance. I return her look with hesitance.

“You never listen! Even when I was little, you won’t ever let me do anything! I have to go back! I have to—”

“No, you will never be going back to that prison. The last time I let you in there you damn well nearly died. No more of this argument, I won’t even entertain you going back.” He turns from her, a quick dismissal of all her arguments.

Aurelia scoffs, she pops her hip and crosses her arms in such a rebellious manner that I can’t help but grin. She gives me another look, her eyes bug and she rolls them all the way in a show of rebellion. I want to laugh, but I only shrug my shoulders, and wander closer to her.

“If you expect my support,” I pretend to grab an apple from the fruit bowl and sit on the island in their luxurious kitchen, “you won’t get it after throwing such a tantrum. Who says you need daddies approval to go back? You’ve proven already you’re comfortable going behind him.” If I could have bit one of those apples just then for the dramatic effect, it all would have been perfect.

There’s a hefty sigh from across the room, Prometheus joins me at the island. He sits and stares at the two, and from the wizened look to those big green eyes I begin to think he can see me as well. I coo at him but he hears nothing. His ear twitches, and he begins to lick his paw. A sigh comes again, from her father debating their argument.

His head turns back to her, he takes her in fully, he’s much more relaxed, but she’s still on guard. This is no longer my fight, it’s up to her to decide. If we get his help, it would be easier to get her in, sure, but he would never go along with getting me out. I should leave her alone to have this moment, but it’s too good not to watch. I hope as I fade into the background, she’s alright with still having me here in her skin.

Aurelia’s father leans back against the marble counter, and laughs bitterly. “Every day you grow more into your mother, it scares me sometimes to see you with her determination.” He smiles at her and I feel her cheeks warm.

“I want to go back, Dad. Please.” Aurelia walks toward the island and leans forward. Prometheus brushes against her. “You won’t understand why, but I need you to trust me. Please, dad, I need to.”

His brow furrows. “Now, hold on, Rella. Why? That prison holds nothing but scum, it’s the most dangerous place I could ever bring you, the one time I did you got hurt. You can’t seriously expect me to just surrender to your whims and let you galavant back into a maximum security prison. And for what? Why do you need to go back so badly? Just tell me already.”

We both know she can’t answer him honestly, so then what would she say to begin with? I look at her and watch the thoughts dance in her eyes. She looks up at him again and just shakes her head. “I can’t say. I’m sorry I just can’t. Just trust that I know what I’m doing, and I need to go back.”

His answer is resolute, final, immediate. “No.” Aurelia turns on a dime and storms out of the house, leaving the three of us behind. Prometheus meows, her father swears under his breath and leaves. I have no choice but to join her.

Her lungs are burning, the air is cold now that autumn has set in. The trees are all nearly barren, the ground is hard and gray. I can feel the tip of her nose and her lips begin to dry and go numb. She hides her face in the baggy sleeves of her sweater. Below her, a river runs with a hearty current. The wooden bridge she sits on is old but sturdy, a monument to human innovation despite the rotten pieces here and there. I wish to feel the cold like she does, there’s just a faint impression of it on my face.

We sit in silence for a long time. Only the wind and the river sing their tunes. Aurelia hugs her knees, sighs into the fabric of her sweater, then looks at me.

She stares. I follow her eyes. “You don’t seem like a criminal,” she breaks the silence at last. She catches me off guard. That certainly wasn’t the thing I thought she’d open with.

“What do you mean?”

“Well I mean,” she sighs and sits up straight. She’s thinking. “You’d think that someone who was locked in a high security, no access to anybody, prison would be more, well you know...”

“Crazy?” She asks.

“No! Not crazy, just, not so elegant, I guess.” She runs a hand through her thick hair and scratches her scalp. I basque in those long nails as they scratch. It isn’t enough to distract me from our conversation.

“What do you mean? Elegant? I don’t think prisoners make for elegant company.” My humor falls flat, she looks near to tears and I can feel them beginning to well up in her eyes. She looks away, I want to reach out and pull her back. My hands twitch, and I consider going back to my own body, back to prison.

“If this... If it doesn’t work. What happens to you?” Her gaze hasn’t left the river, I won’t pester her.

“Well, if... If we never succeed, then nothing. I’m sentenced to life in my glass cage, I’ll stay there until I die. If we only half succeed, they’ll kill me. If you’re discovered, they might kill you too.”

Her face is white, too white. Her hands tremble, her tears well up in her eyes then fall down my cheeks. She finally returns my gaze, laughs awkwardly and rubs her eyes. She apologizes for being such a cry baby then smiles through the pain. It fades. She rubs her eyes again.

“My father wouldn’t let them hurt me.”

Ice crawls through my veins and squeezes my heart as it pounds against its cage.

“No. He would never hurt his precious little girl, but he’d gladly watch the life drain from my eyes as he squeezes it out with his own two fists. You’re not the sickness, you’re merely a symptom.” I can feel her fear of me, it solidifies that she can feel my wrath. I stand, look over the edge of the bridge. The current of the water below is no flood, it’s no rapids, but it’s flow is strong and the water is deep. I climb the edge of the railing and stand on the wrong side. There’s no fear, I can’t feel the balance of standing so close to the edge, there’s nothing there.

Aurelia first asks, then begs me to get down. She tries to pull on my arm, pull me over the edge, but nothing is there. No one is there. I’ve had enough of not being here. I walk off the bridge.

I wake up to my reality, no more of these dreams. I pace my small room, scratch my nails into the filed down linoleum where I carved my spoon, stare at an endless white ceiling. I try to return to my normal, to ignore the pain of my scabbing scars, to ignore the world once again as it moves on without me. Once again my life is determined by fabricated daylight, time passing marked by one guard who brings me my food. It all fades into routine again, everything is the same... except me.

Winter is coming quickly, the cell is poorly heated, and I spend my nights with a running nose and freezing fingers. I huddle in the thin clothes and thin blanket I'm provided.

"It's cold."

I jump and stare at the other person in my cage. Aurelia stands in the center, completely out of place in my cell. Her warmth brightens the whole room somehow. She sits beside me and nods her head as she looks around. "You're freezing, and you're hungry." She looks down at her hands and rubs her fingertips together. "It's not completely clear, but I can feel it; you're suffering in here." She looks at me.

I feel like I'm suffocating, the air is thick.

She laughs in my ear, the sound is ghostly. "Not so easy being the vessel, is it? I figured if you can do it, I could try to do it too. It's harder than you make it look. It's also... overwhelming, to feel all of your emotions too. I didn't know you were in such pain."

We sit in silence as I begin to adjust. There's a weight on my body, like the soul of another person is in it. I admire her for putting up with me this whole time. I stand and pace, she watches. "You didn't want me to see you like this, then?" I nod. "Did you think I would turn my back on you?" I nod. "Alek? Will you answer me?" I pause.

My eyes find hers, but I can't seem to hold her gaze long. She pats the bed beside her, I obey her eagerly. "You're tired, I can tell. I can feel it, you aren't alone now. I'm going to get you out."

"Aurelia, your father. You shouldn't do this, not for me." I beg.

"Then for me," she smiles, "I'll get you out. I'll find a way. I promise."

She vanishes from my view, the weight on my bones and my mind lifts like a fog. I can breathe.

We pass by days meeting one another in each other's lives, the weight she leaves on my body shrinks every day. The more time we spend together, the clearer her senses become to me. She claims the same for her, she can feel everything in my prison much clearer.

Days, weeks, a month of planning. Aurelia has stolen floorplans, schedules, she tells me she's sent emails from her father's home office setting up a prisoner transfer from prison level B34: my floor. It's been hell, sitting and waiting, unable to even help. The door to the hall is several yards away from my glass cell. I know nothing about the new guard who has been posted to me in the month of planning. Aurelia has been the sole mastermind of my escape, everything is in her hands and it is agony to let her do it all for me by herself. I try to help with encouragement and personal space. That's all I can do.

The lights are off in my cell when the hefty locks creak and groan as they lift. Light floods the room, bright white and intrusive. I sit up, groggy and irate. "What is it—"

"Alek?"

Her voice is trembling, barely a whisper but I know it. My whole body begins to light up with electric shocks across my nerves. They cause my limbs to tremor as I struggle to get up. She's standing silhouetted in the bright flood of light, her hair tied tightly to her head, she's wearing something baggy and heavy. She gets closer to the glass and in the darkness her face starts to take shape.

"Aurelia. Why? H-How did you— I don't understand."

She puts a finger to her lips, then places her hands onto the glass walls. Her hands press and inch, her fingers looking for something. I'm hypnotized as she slides them left and right, working across the glass wall. She gives a firm press, part of the wall gives way with a hiss of relief. I feel a breeze tickling my skin. A door, disguised in the glass surrounding me has opened and fresh cold air is flooding my cell. I'm dumbfounded, beyond shocked. A door, I had no idea they had even thought to add it. She pushes it, but the glass is ancient and stubborn, so I rush to help.

She heaves once the door is opened enough and reaches for my arm. "Come on, we don't have much time." She's taken full charge of me. I only follow her orders and her pull. I stumble a bit stepping down, the floor here is cement.

It's rough, coarse, nothing like the tile of the prison. I'm completely limp in my own body, at the mercy of Aurelia as she guides me to the light. She clasps two heavy metal cuffs to my arms with a smile. So it's believable, she tells me.

We step into the light, the hallway is neverending, sterile and white just like my prison. There's no other door in the whole hall.

She begins to walk, pulling me along beside her. She's nearly a foot shorter than I am. She's dressed as a soldier, the uniform is a bit wrinkled and ill fitting, but it's believable to me. I keep my mouth shut and my eyes on her. We come to an elevator and she jams the button in, pressing it repeatedly. Her hands are shaking, so are mine. When the thick metal doors finally open we stumble in. She presses a few buttons on the wall, the door makes a slow mocking close before it begins to ascend.

She laughs. "We're almost there. It'll be okay. I told you Alek, I'm going to get you out of here. We need to be quick, keep your head down and don't look at anyone." I can't speak, simply stare at the back of her head. I can feel the hard fabric of the uniform against her skin. Being beside her and feeling everything twice is overwhelming, it's hard to focus on one sensation. I know she feels it too. The lights seem too bright, the sounds of the elevator are booming. I need to disentangle us. I need something sharp.

The elevator jerks once it reaches the floor she pressed earlier and once the doors open she's yanking me along. In the white sterile halls, a barrage of large guns are aimed right at us. General Kane stands ahead of them, arms crossed. His glare is pointed directly at me.

"I told you."

"Dad, step aside, please." Her limbs are stiff, she's bracing for something.

"Aurelia—"

"No, I will get him out. I made a promise, dad. Step aside." She pulls a pistol from a holster I hadn't seen her with and aims it directly at her father. The armed men aim back. The air is thick, I can hardly breathe, she's trembling.

"Stop this. Stop, please." I step in front of Aurelia, trying to shield her. I puff out my chest, stand as tall as I can. Her hand on my back causes goosebumps to burst across my skin. She's so warm.

“She isn’t in her right ^{Ampersand} mind, I ... I have her under a spell. Put your weapons down, I’ll release it.” She grabs my shirt, her fist is tight and has my skin in a vice grip but I won’t move. I can’t let them hurt her. She begs in a quiet voice for me to stop, to move, to be quiet. It’s time I repay her kindness. Two of the armed soldiers come and grab her, they have to yank her off of me. My shirt rips as she is finally pulled off of me. They take her behind the line of guns, her father is still glaring hard at me. Aurelia vanishes from my view behind her father.

“Now, release her. Do it.” He commands.

“No! Dad, he’s not what you think! Alek!” Aurelia is yelling, fighting against the two that have her held firm. She begins to cry, her tears well and spill from my eyes.

“I need something sharp.” With a gun pointed at my head, my arms are unshackled and a boeing knife is placed in my palm. Without hesitating, I trace the scars on my torso. Aurelia screams and cries, her tears make it harder to see. My hand stops, I try to force it to keep cutting. She’s fighting me, trying to stop me. We wrestle for the knife, a quiet battle.

“What is he doing?” The general shouts, “get him to keep going! Release my daughter, wretch!” I fight her, gritting my teeth. My wrist trembles, then jerks. The knife cuts down my stomach in a clean straight line and the knife clatters to the floor. I stare at it, watching blood begin to drip onto its sharp metal. I drop to my knees in front of it.

“Pick it up,” General Kane demands. “Pick up the knife. Get him to pick it up!” I’m struck with the blunt end of a gun. My teeth nearly crack under the pressure I’ve bit them into. I’m fighting a shout and a sob together. Aurelia hasn’t stopped crying. I try reaching for the knife, my hand trembling.

Suddenly the effort she’s been putting in releases. I gasp, she rushes past the barricade of men and drops to her knees. She puts her hand to the cut down my torso, squeezing. I grunt and grab her wrist.

“Stop,” I plead. She simply shakes her head.

“I won’t let you hurt him. You hurt him, you hurt me.” She reveals a twin cut down her torso. It’s not bleeding as much as mine but it’s bad. I never knew she received them too... “I won’t let you continue to imprison this man. I can’t.”

Her father simply sneers. We're separated, and this time we both are put into shackles. I go much quieter than her, as she kicks and yells. Aurelia screams the whole time, her anger is all consuming. We're led down the hall, thrown into an empty room, then locked in. She grunts and sits up, shuffling toward me. "C'mere. Let me try to get those off you, then you do me." I give her my arms, she works at attempting to get the lock off.

"You're wasting your time, it won't work. Aurelia, please." She curses and throws her arms down angrily. I can feel blood beginning to soak into my pants and what's left of my shirt. It's sticking the fabric to me. Her shirt is also beginning to turn red. I sit against the wall. "It's all my fault. I never should've done this to you. If I had known I--." Guilt eats away at my insides. It's a tough thing to swallow, I did this to her. I knew I would put someone at risk for my selfish whims, but for it to be her...

She scoots close and leans her head against my shoulder. "Show me what to do," she says quietly, lifting her hand with the boeing knife. "We need to separate. I can't help you if we're both bleeding out. You'll lose too much."

It takes her quite a while, but she convinces me. With our hands all locked together, it's a tedious process, but we manage to glide the thin edge along her torso. I make the cuts; I do the small incantation. There's a white hot burst that knocks us both to the ground. I breathe deep, finally all alone in my body. It feels empty. Aurelia gets up and begins digging through whatever she can find in this room they've locked us in. To our surprising luck, it's some form of infirmary. She presses as many gauze pieces as she can find to my torso, and with little effort from my part, wraps up the still bleeding wound. I'm simply limp putty in her hands. "I need you to stay awake. We need to find a way out of these cuffs and out of this building." She begins to pace, murmuring as she thinks out loud. The door unlocks with a click, we freeze in place. Aurelia gasps and grabs me, forcing me to my feet and to the corner of the room. The door opens, no one steps through.

"No, I'll just be a minute. I need the Patterson case file, I left it here last night." A doctor walks in, heading to the other side of the room to the same drawers Aurelia just dug through.

She holds me on her shoulder and we walk to the door. It's hard to stay on my feet and keep up with her, but I manage. We don't get far in the hall, she opens another door and pulls me in. I slump against the wall panting. She rummages through something. My stomach is burning, the cut hurts. It's hot and I can feel myself beginning to sweat. It's hard to sit up. "Aurelia I..."

There's a sharp metallic clang. She rushes to me, the chain of her cuffs snapped apart. "Give me your hands, quick Alek, come on." She grabs my wrists and snaps the metal chain with what I think is a tool meant to cut open casts. My arms fall and I twist my shoulders, adjusting to the new freedom. She pulls me to my feet, smiling. "Don't worry. All I need you to do is stay awake." She looks just as pale as I feel. She's struggling, only standing due to adrenaline. Time is of the essence.

We duck and weave in and out of rooms. Eventually the General will figure out we've gotten out of the room he's locked us in. We're careful to avoid everyone in the halls, doctor and soldier alike. The halls are long, they all look the same to me. Aurelia seems to know where she's going. I keep a tight grip on her shirt and follow her blindly. We enter another room, it's much comfier in its design. There's a plush carpet, leather sofas, and a kitchen in the back corner. It's some kind of break room for the staff.

There's multiple windows, a way out. Aurelia rushes to the wall, trying to pry open each one. Every window is latched and she curses, kicking the wall. I walk over to her, yank off the curtain and the curtain rod. The rod clangs to the floor, the fabric bundles and falls all over me. I wrap it sloppily around my elbow, push her back a bit, then slam my arm into the glass. One. Two. The window bursts in a shower of glass. I try my best to knock the sharpest edges off, cutting my arm. We lay the curtain on the window sill and she climbs out first. She helps me across the threshold and we fall in a heap on the ground.

The grass is wet. It's freezing out. Aurelia grabs the shredded curtain and shakes out the glass. She wraps it around my shoulders and then bends down to meet my gaze. She's all smiles.

"We can't stay." There's yelling in the break room about the window. We really can't stay. She grabs my arm and hoists me off the ground pulling me behind her into the darkness.

&

Unseen, we tread the dark courtyard, heading in an unknown direction. “My car is parked just outside the fence. We just need to get to it.”

I pull on her to stop, a tight grip on her upper arm. “He’ll never stop hunting us.” An alarm sounds from the prison. The windows are flooded with red light, bright flood lights begin to search the yard. She yells we need to keep going and yanks me across the grassy plain. We shimmy under the fence through a small hole, she opens the car door and then shoves me in. She gets in, starts the engine, and drives off. The high isn’t as bad as coming down. We leave the locked down prison in the distance. She sighs, then hiccups. Tears are falling from her eyes.

“I promised.”

I take her hand, our broken cuffs clicking against one another.

“I know.”

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