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103

VOICES OF THE VALLEY



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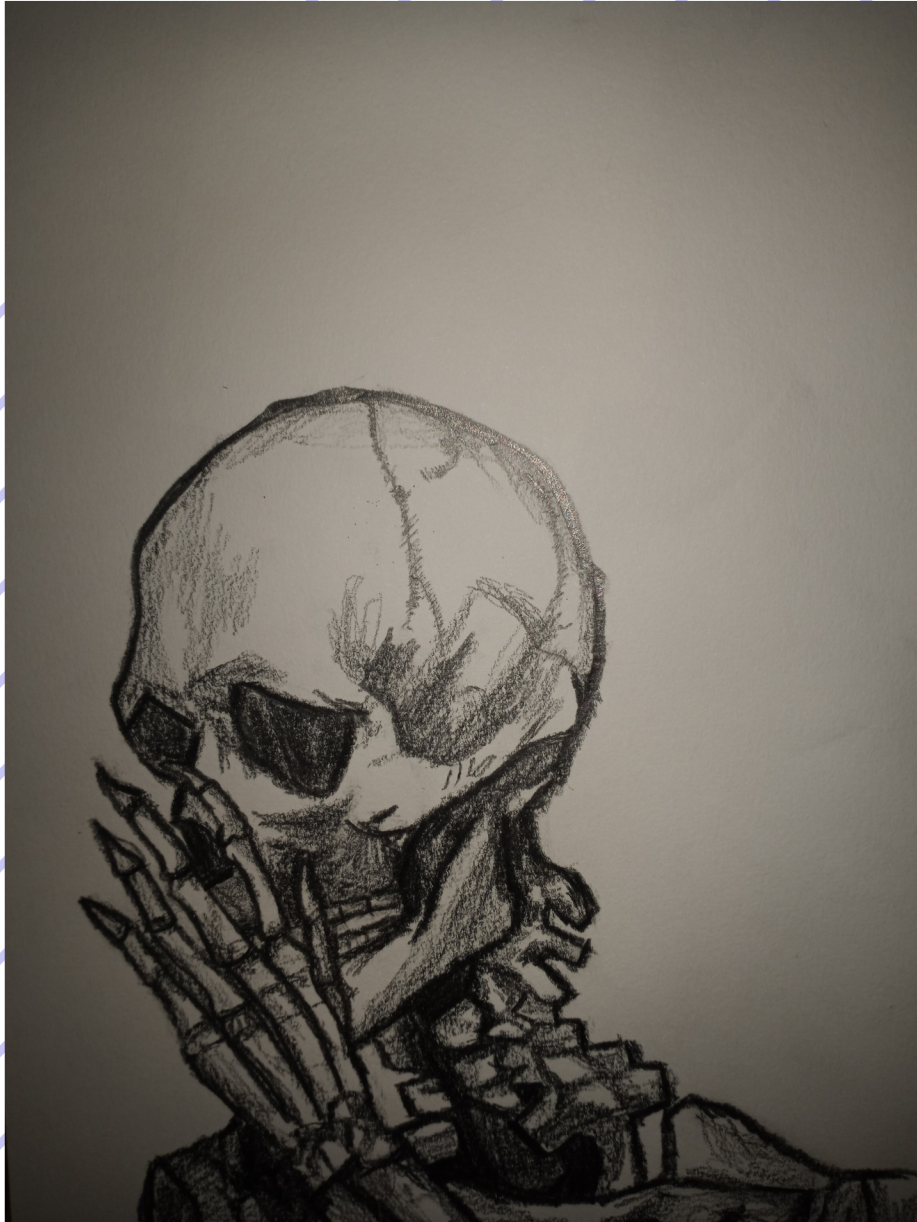
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ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY

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HAYDEN DRIVER



Diamond from the Rough

LORELEI DRUMMOND



DEIASIA SINGLETARY



Eye love you

KAYLEE SMITH





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PROSE NONFICTION & FICTION

PHOTO BY KAYDEN HICKS

Andon Hawkins

Everyone Dies

Everyone you love will die, yes everyone. A truth everyone will learn one day, just one I learned too early. I was not ten yet; I would be in August, but it was June. My leg was shaking. My eyes filled with tears. My heart wanted to die too. I was angry, but I didn't know why.

It was a nice day on the beach, the type of day where the breeze is in your hair and that salty smell fills the air. I could feel the sand stick to my feet every time I took another step. "Wake up," my sister said; I was dreaming. I wish I could have stayed dreaming; I did not know it then, but my life was about to be forever changed. "We have to go home," she said. We were across the road at our grandparent's house. I was still waking up, you know those couple of minutes where everything seems to be moving just a little too fast for your tired brain. I was so lost at what was going on, so I looked over to my grandma, she was up and putting on her shoes.

"Go with your sister, I do not feel good so Papa is taking me to the hospital."

Hospital, a word that I have learned to hate, a word I have associated with death, a word that brings nothing, but fear and worry in my heart; but then, I did not give it a second thought. I went with my sister; what else was I supposed to do? As we walked across the road my grandpa's truck sped by, fear swept my body. The fear that makes you sweat a little, makes your heart beat a little bit faster; the fear that makes your legs feel like they are going to give out at any moment; this was real fear. Why would they need to speed? Mee-Maw was going to be okay, right? Nothing made sense in the moment. My sister did her best to calm me down, and it worked. When we made it to my house she told me not to worry so I did not. The day passed, it was long, but it passed. My dad never came home that night, and there was that dreaded fear again. The next morning when I woke up my mom was not at the house. Why was everyone leaving? I finally got a chance to go to the hospital, but it was worthless. I was never able to see her. I was too young.

There I was. Just a kid, walking down the cold, gray halls of the hospital. I could take you back to where I sat for those days on end; where I slept through the days, the horrible plastic padding that hurts your butt when you sit on it for too long. I can remember how horrible the food tasted and how the smell was a clean but old smell.

When I was finally allowed to go back to see her I was so excited, but it all faded when I walked into the room. I could not stand to see her that way; plugged up to machines like some sort of science experiment. There were people standing over running tests and checking vitals. I finally got to see my grandma, but that was not her; that was the shell of her; just her body, but that was not my grandma.

Talking about all the memories from that night comes rushing back to me: Hugging her bye when I walked out her room, walking away hearing all the beeping of the machines; that beeping never goes away. I still hear it sometimes.

I was watching basketball in the waiting room, it was the 2016 Finals. It was a good game but, that did not matter when my dad walked out with the news. He sat us all down and told us she was gone. Then, something weird happened; I could not cry. My grandma just passed away and I could not cry. I was too angry to cry. I was angry, but I did not know why. I could not grasp why such a great God could take away such a great woman. I was angry at God. I questioned why. My dad wanted to stop going to church and I was right there with him.

I was angry, but I was sad. I was sad that I did not get to say goodbye. she was stuck in that stupid hospital for the last weeks of her life. That is when I learned the hard truth of life. The only constant thing. Everyone will die. My grandma did and I died with her.

Trent Shealey

The Fight

When people think of hospitals, they think of death. That is exactly what my eleven-year-old brain was thinking. I was going to die. Everything was blurry. I was rambling nonsense, stuff about how I had to hide from "the bad guys," like I was in a video game. I was hysterical and completely out of it. This was how it was for weeks; until, one night I began throwing up what looked like coffee grounds, and I could not stand up straight. I was burning up on the inside; my body was like charcoal; it only fueled the fire when I tried to move, speak, or do anything at all; it only made it burn brighter. I had to put it out. I asked for a cold bath, and I sat there in the icy water. It did not help. I passed out. That night, we called an ambulance. That night, my life changed forever.

I remember waking up in a bright room; it smelled fresh—the clean, sterile smell of a hospital. I was lying in a bed. It felt like my head was underwater, as if I were weightless. It took me a moment to collect myself. I was more confused than scared because I had no idea what was going on.

"You're going to feel a sharp pain in your leg," said a voice.

I did. It was like a nest of irritated hornets decided I was bothering them. This was the first real pain I had ever felt in my life. I could feel myself passing out again. With my last remaining strength, I spoke, "OW, you could've warned me!" I do not know if it was medically induced or not, but I was out just as suddenly as I had awakened.

I woke up as the elevator doors closed. No music, but I suppose that would be in poor taste; it is a hospital after all. A place of death. I did not know how much time had passed. I was in the same bed; a team of nurses was taking me upstairs to another room. I felt heavy; I wished I could feel that weightlessness I had felt before. I was still confused. Wires were hanging off of me; little pads were attached to my chest like leeches. IVs poked out of me like rocks from a mountainside. I was in disbelief. "Am I a robot now?" I whispered to the nurses. My voice was weaker than I thought. The nurses

were confused, even more than I was; I think it was the last question they were expecting from a dying kid.

Despite the shock, they answered, "No, you're still human, honey. How are you feeling?"

I did not like that question; I thought, "I'm lying in a rock-hard bed, in a strange place, with strangers. How would you expect me to feel?" These were the last things running through my head before I began to go back to sleep.

I am used to unexpectedly long naps. We have all experienced it: it is after school, you lay your head down for just a second, then suddenly it is midnight and you have to rush to do your homework at night. Time is a flimsy thing when you are asleep. I do not know how much time had passed since I awakened. However, I did know that there was a sudden mass in my throat that had not been there before. It was irritating. I felt like I had to gag, but I could not throw up. It was an oxygen tube.

My mom and dad were in the room. This was, and still is, surprising to me; they are separated. When they were together, they were always arguing around the house, but here they are sitting together; two people who I had thought hated each other, for no other reason than to support me.

"Do you recognize these people?" asked a husky voice.

I could not see the owner of the voice; they were out of my eyesight. I could not speak, but I could move my head. In situations like this, you would expect someone to be serious, scared, or confused. I do not like expectations. I shook my head no, as a joke, of course; I knew exactly who these two shaken-up parents were. I gave a little grin to show that I was kidding.

"He's okay; look, he's smiling; he knows who we are." My mom said, with a nervous chuckle.

I quickly realized how serious the situation was; to make sure they knew I was joking, I nodded my head so hard that the doctor told me to "chill out" with a laugh. My parents were stressed, but that small moment between them and their son's weird sense of humor made it less frightening. In hindsight, it might not have been the best choice; if they had not noticed I was joking, they might have made a misdiagnosis or, worse, thought that I did not have a sense of humor.

Three days had passed. Three days, seventy-two hours of my life, Gone in an instant. At the time, I do not think I realized how crazy that was. I was unconscious for that long, but it was like I took a short nap. When I woke up I was in the ICU. I did not know what that meant. I just knew I was in bad shape, that I needed to heal, and that I was starving.

"Do you have any food?" I asked the nurse passing by my glass door. She did not notice me. I waited for her to pass a second time and repeated the question.

"Of course, sweetheart, I'll be right back." She said.

She came back with a cup full of ice. "Ice chips" they called it. It was all I could eat. At first, I hated them, but after a little bit, they started to have flavor, and even filled me up. A trick of the brain to be sure, but it certainly helped. I started thinking about the food I would eat when I felt better. A Chick-fil-a sandwich or some nachos. These thoughts were interrupted by a doctor coming in to talk to my parents. It was all whispers, and the conversation was more or less kept away from me, but I was able to pick up two words. "Kidney failure."

I wondered, "What does that mean?"

My heart felt heavy, I did not know the actual meaning, but I knew it was serious.

"He's in bad shape, it'll be a while before he gets to go home," the doctor went on and on about different medications, treatment plans, and anything else that would be confusing to a child.

"I can't believe this is happening," my mom spoke aloud; she likes to do that sometimes; she will say things that everyone was thinking. It was difficult to imagine this situation, especially for a parent. She could not believe that I, her eleven-year-old kid who just got out of school for the summer, I, her innocent child, was going through something that extreme. It scared us. It crushed my childhood. I was snatched from the sweet, safety of the crib and pushed out into the scary, jarring adult world. It snapped me to reality. I realized that things happen; if I had not made jokes about my situation, I do not think I would have made it.

After a while, they moved me up to the fifth floor. I was recovering. They

put me on a low sodium diet, but they gave it a big fancy name, "renal diet." As a big kid, I had never had the food I ate be restricted, so this was new to me, but in the past week or so I had experienced so many new things that it did not really matter anymore. I would do anything to get out of this place. It was nicer on the new floor. A whole room, with no glass doors that everyone could see through; there was privacy. I felt happy. I was one step closer to coming home.

Kidney dialysis; these were big, scary words for a kid; I had heard a lot of those the past few weeks. I did not know what it was. They put a tube in the right side of my neck. Every day I was wheeled to this big room on the adult's side of the hospital. The only thing separating each patient were curtains. It was there they hooked up the tube to a big frightening machine.

"This acts as your kidneys until you get better, like when your teacher gets sick and they send a substitute teacher," the doctor spoke; he had one hand on the machine like a car salesman. His voice was gentle, and you could tell that he had an accent. I had never met anyone not from around where I live, I thought it was cool.

The taste that the treatments left in my mouth were unforgettable, yet indescribable; it was one of those things that only people who have been through the same thing would understand; I still taste it sometimes. I felt like I could not move with that threatening tube in; I could, but I did not want to. I kept my neck tilted to the left; it started hurting after a day or two. That pretty much sums up my stay at the hospital; I was scared; scared to move; Scared I was not going to get better; scared that I was going to die.

I gave the machine a name, Bob. Bob was spooky, but after the first few days he was not so bad. It was around the fifth day that I came in for my treatment, and there was Bob. One of the nurses put googly eyes on him like a face. It made my day. I was so scared to be in that room and relief just washed over me the moment I saw Bob looking back at me with big beady eyes. It was not his fault he was scary.

"He has made an excellent recovery these past few weeks!" The doctor exclaimed. This was really the only time I was included in the conversations between him and my parents.

"Our team believes it's time to send him home," The head doctor explained.

I was ecstatic. I wanted to see my dogs. I hated this place, but I had to deal with it. After a while, I became used to it. There was a sense of order and routine. Every morning, the nurse would come in and hook up medicine to my IV, then breakfast would come. I never ate it; I was very picky with what I ate. My mom or my dad would go out and get something. As much as I hated the bed, it started to comfort me; I would stretch and move the bed up and down to sit me up; I would do anything I could do to entertain myself.

I felt better. I sprang from the bed. My weight shifted off the bed and onto my legs. They gave out. I had forgotten how to walk.

"Don't do that!" the nurse yelled, "You're not ready to get up yet!"

Growing up I was never unable to do something. I listened to my parents when they told me not to do something; I was not a brat. However, I was never physically unable to move. The realization that I could not do something as simple as walking hurt me more than the fall did. I began sobbing uncontrollably. My legs grew so weak on the three weeks of bed rest that my muscles forgot their job.

"I'm never going to be able to walk again," thoughts like these swarmed my head. "Worthless, you can't do anything, dead weight." It was to the point where I could not hear anyone in the room. My mind was screaming at me, I started hyperventilating. The nurse, along with my dad, moved me back to the bed.

You just need some physical therapy buddy, you're alright," my dad explained.

I hated it when he called me that, but this time it seemed comforting; it was familiar. I calmed down after that. Tears had drenched my face and my eyes were swollen. My parents did everything to comfort me, but this was not a fight they could help me with. They were there, but I was on my own in that moment.

The day of discharge was bittersweet. I was happy to go home, but it was not the same as getting home from school. I was in a wheelchair. Just a few months ago I was running around playing football, and now, I could not even walk to the bathroom. I was scared of what my dogs would think, now that I

could not play with them. My dad pushed me out while some of the nurses waved bye to me.

"Bye sweetheart! Don't come back!" the nurse joked.

It made me giggle, despite everything that had been going on in my mind, everything that had happened to my body, I giggled. It felt so good. I left the hospital with a smile.

I never realized how this event might have affected me at that moment. All I was worried about was when I would get better; what I would eat for the day, when would I get home? Now I realize that anything can happen, at any time, to anyone. I am not sure if I just had a bad draw or if destiny just has it out for me, but I am sure that I am proud of myself for hanging in there. If I did not have a strong support group, or an amazing staff to help me, I am certain I would not be here today.

Guadalupe Elorza

Angel on Earth

“Lupita, Alex passed away,” my mother sent in a text. I was still half asleep in second period. Then, all of a sudden, it hit me. Alex passed away. My friend. My “little brother”. Our Boo Boo. I set my phone down and sat in silence. A room full of people, yet it felt so empty. A loud atmosphere, yet everything was so quiet.

The year 2019 was quite a year to say the least. The year Covid-19 started, the year schools went virtual, and the year I got the worst news. I remember it being mid-July. My mother was driving our old car at the time, a white Ford Expedition, and I was in the passenger seat. I, thirteen at the time, should not have been in the front seat whatsoever, but I loved riding in the front. It made me feel older. Who knew that the older you get, the more you have to know, and the more you know, the more you wish you did not.

The word Cancer, I had been introduced to years before. My great-grandmother passed away from stomach cancer. Still young, I did not know there were different kinds of Cancer. As my mother was driving down Claussen Rd, we were having our little talks per usual. She then tells me, “Lupita, they found out Alex has Cancer.”

I told her, “What do you mean he has Cancer? Which Alex?”

She then said, “Boo Boo.”

I looked out the window, but there was nothing to see but a beige, stoned wall that went on for miles. The sun was shining bright in my eyes. Nothing, but a feeling as if my stomach had dropped like when you are on a roller coaster. I sat there in silence, processing the worst news I had ever received in my thirteen young years of life. I turn to my mother, who was looking for my reaction, wondering if it was stomach Cancer.

I asked her, “Is it stomach Cancer?”

She replied with, “No, they found a tumor in his head.”

As I was sitting there, all I could think of was, why him? He was much younger than I was. I, thirteen at the time, only five years older than he was.

I did not understand how that could happen to someone as young as him, or someone like him.

A month later he had surgery. As Catholics, we have the Seven Sacraments. Boo Boo at the time had none of them. He could not leave the hospital, but thankfully visitors were allowed. My mother being as religious as she was brought up the idea that Boo Boo should have his Sacraments. It was agreed on and a date was set. August 2, 2019, the day our Boo Boo would receive his Sacraments. The priest would go to the hospital; a few close family friends and family members would attend. From my family, my mother and I attended. Boo Boo was dressed up in all white. He looked like an angel on earth. Beautiful.

I had been asked if I would like to be his Godmother for his Sacraments. I was scared though and said no thank you. I now regret my decision every day. Instead, I told Mother she should be his Godmother; she was and still is. She said that no matter if they are alive or not, they will always be her Godchildren until the day she dies. After receiving Five of the Seven Sacraments: Baptism, Communion, Reconciliation, Confirmation, and Anointing of the sick, things got very well.

Boo Boo was the kind of person I admired very much. He always had the biggest smile on his face, with the most beautiful, brightest eyes. He would always make you feel loved. As time went on he had Chemo; he even rung the Bell. I cried tears of joy when my mother showed me on Facebook, that his mother Barbara, also known as Barbie, had posted a short video of Boo Boo ringing the bell. "He beat it." I told myself. Everything was great, perfect even. Later, we came to find out, the cancer came back worse than before.

As time went on, he would be making regular visits to the hospital. Even though, he was going through something very major in his life, nothing stopped him. He was very into cars, his favorite being Lamborghinis. He would show me pictures of him in the driver's seat of multiple Lambos, always with his biggest smile, that extended from ear to ear. My family and I would be at his grandparents' house a lot of the time. He would be there and he would be playing with his nephew, Elias, not much younger than himself and my siblings, and would be watching his baby sister, Kehlani.

Wednesday afternoon, February 22, 2023. I arrived home from school as I would do every day. I say hello to my mother. She then, asked me how my day had been and she then says, “guess what, Lupita.” Anytime she said those words I knew it was never a good thing. I responded to her, wondering what was up. “They said Boo Boo only has three more months to live”, she said. I broke down crying, right then and there. I ran to my room jumping into my bed not wanting to see, talk, or know anyone in that moment. She came into my room to comfort me, but I push her away. Later that day, I went out with my friend to distract myself from the news I had received. At Walmart, my friend asked me what was wrong because I seemed off. I told him about the news, and he constantly reassured me that things would be okay. I had nothing to worry about.

I believed him.

It was my only option.

For a week.

March 3, 2023, back at school, thinking it would be a day like any other. Feeling tired in first period. Then to second period, everything felt normal. I would check my phone every now and then for the time, or to text a friend back. I then see a notification from my mother.

“It must be important.” I thought to myself because she does not just text me for fun.

I then saw it. My mind then went blank; next thing I knew all these memories and feelings were overcoming my body. Feelings I could not let out at school. I sat there wondering if should tell my mother to dismiss me because it was all too much for me. I made my mind up. No. I would make it to the end of the day. I arrived home, went straight to my room, and cried. I did that for an entire week.

The day of his funeral, I was asked to serve, but I could not. I would not have been able to. Everyone would have seen me crying. We arrived during the open casket; I sat in the back of the church not wanting people to see my puffy eyes from all the crying. My mother passed to the front of the church where he was, to see him one last time. I stayed back; I would not have made it half way down the aisle without bursting into tears. During the mass, I felt

warm tears rolling down my cheeks.

On the drive to the cemetery, the clouds were grey and crying as if they knew an angel had been taken from us. A weird, uncomfortable silence filled the car, which was something impossible for my family of seven. A normal ten-minute car ride turned into what felt like hours from all the cars that were following. As we arrived to the cemetery not only water flooded the place, but people. Tons of people, family, friends, teachers and even more, most of us dressed in blue, having it been Boo Boo's favorite color. As it got closer to the time where he would be lowered into his final resting place, the sun slowly came out. To me, it felt like a sign, a sign that things were going to be okay. What had happened, happened for a reason and to not worry because God always has a plan for every single one of us. Even if in that moment we do not think it is best. It is and the outcome will have a purpose.

I now love when it rains, it brings me peace. I sit and look out the window just thinking, what would have Boo Boo wanted? I can still see an image of him in my head, every day. His smile brings me happiness and it gives me hope to never give up. Never give up, because if you set your mind to it, you will accomplish it. Do not live in fear, do not be scared to mess up, that is the only right way to live.

Hayden Driver

1984: Fiction or Future?

If you judge reality based on what you can see, hear, and feel, how sure are you that you are not being lied to. In the novel 1984 by George Orwell, the protagonist, Winston, believes everything that he sees is real, until the corrupted government he lives under convinces him otherwise. Under this government, citizens are watched at all times through telescreens, and if any signifying expression of thought crime brushes over their face, it is already too late for them. Chances are that they will be killed, hidden, and all records of them exterminated, erased from history. Luckily, this dystopian world should only exist inside a fictional novel, and we are fortunate that the mind-controlling, society-limiting, and fact-altering government portrayed in the book does not and will not exist in real life ... unless, it does.

1984, like many other popular works, is set in a futuristic dystopian society. One in particular, *The Hunger Games*, is remarkably similar in theme. Both pieces depict how powerful a government can be if it decides that it wants the world to bow to its feet. It controls every aspect of the governed citizen's lives and exploits them to inflate its power further. In 1984, this was done by using telescreens to monitor the citizens and using thought police to sniff out the rebels. In *The Hunger Games*, the use of military force and fear was used to drive them into obedience, specifically the fear of being drawn into the reaping. Although it seems outlandish to think that our future could even somewhat resemble that of 1984 or *The Hunger Games*, signs in today's world suggest that it might not be out of the question.

Modern-day society has evolved into something completely different than anyone before us thought it would be, except for George Orwell. Although it took a few decades longer than predicted, his idea of an abominable future has, and is, rapidly materializing. If you compare the devices used for dystopian methods of societal control in 1984 to current technologies, the resemblance is uncanny. For example, telescreens that watch and listen to everything you do and say in every room of every building sound similar to a

smartphone, or an Alexa. It also must be mentioned that a dystopia looks different to everyone. People from the eighteenth century might look upon our world in horror the same way we view 1984. Who is to say that what we consider a dystopia now is going to be the same in the future? The way I see it, if our world gets to be as bad as the one in the book, the government will slowly take complete control by implementing a number of society-manipulating factors similar to the ones in 1984, and the public will build a tolerance to it until it's too late to fix. We are already numb to the fact that most of our information is being siphoned from our personal devices. We know the truth of the matter, yet most people still do not care. It is small but important things like this that will feed the government's power.

The impact that this book has had on me is very significant. My favorite element was O'Brian's torturing of Winston, where Winston's stubborn mind eventually gave into the lies that it was being told. Despite his certainty that what he knew and had seen was fact, the relentless wear and tear on Winston's body and mind was able to instill some amount of doubt in him. As this doubt grew, his sense of reality became less and less factual, and more so skewed by O'Brian's influence. To me, this is a perfect metaphor for the majority of people today. Most of us are brought up on a specific set of morals taught by our parents, and stick by them for our early years of life. However, as I look around me, I notice the amount of people that are drifting away from these morals or mindsets or anything of the sort. I see people that used to swear they would never curse, and then a year into high school, drop half of their vocabulary in place of curse words. I remember hanging out with certain people who would always tell me to stay away from drugs, and that I now find smoking in the school bathrooms. I know people who used to be some of my best friends because we were so like minded on so many controversial topics, but once they entered the world of social media, all of the things we used to agree on, then started turning into arguments and eventually led to our parting.

I think that the influence that society has on us goes widely unnoticed. It tampers with the fundamental roots of each person and tries to shape them to be more "acceptable." In the scene of Winston's torturing, these words are

exchanged, "'How many fingers, Winston?' 'Four! Stop it, stop it! How can you go on? Four! Four!' 'How many fingers, Winston?' 'Five! Five! Five!' 'No, Winston, that is no use. You are lying. You still think there are four. How many fingers, please?' 'Four! five! Four! Anything you like'" (Orwell 164). I think that if we compare O'Brien to society and Winston to the individual, we can see the effects in real time. Society beats us and shakes us to try and rock the ideals that we stand on just to make us conform to the group. This is something that I think I lived without noticing until I read this book, and specifically those few chapters. It made me realize how easily humans can be deceived and how easily people and influencers can change people's minds without ever knowing them. I believe that I am more capable of keeping my mind safer from these inconspicuous threats and stay notably eccentric without being swayed by social media or peers.

London Smith

The Funeral March

As I sat there, stiff, in the pews of grief and despair, I listened to the mournful music that paraded in the air, as the heavenly voice of Pastor Tony, who was preaching a sermon, flowed in and out of all of our ears. He spoke of God, his church and verses. He spoke of the ineffable: God's Divine Plan for humanity. As we numbly sat there, we had begun to wonder when the Pastor's unprepared eulogy would come. For a very brief moment, the Pastor did mention him, my Papa; but in a blink, the message was forever lost, and the Pastor went back to praising the Lord. God.

I felt immensely outraged at what the Pastor did, or rather did not say. I manifested the miserable feeling of the sudden thunder that scattered above the funeral home. On my right-side where my mom sat, I felt a slight nudge; as I flicked my head towards her, she began to whisper, "I told you he did not want a funeral service," I suppressed my chuckle, but she was right. My Papa did not want a funeral service, much less Pastor Tony preaching about God.

As I sat, my mind wandered, flipping through the files labeled memories to find other light-hearted exchanges. I thought of times when the sky had reappeared from the clouds after a rainstorm, or how a rainbow may emerge from the shadows. It was blissful to see the clouds clear. However, darkness lurked nearby, oozing its toxic waste into untroubled thoughts, until the only memories left were the guilty ones, corroded and well-worn. As I snapped back into reality, the intense flood of softball memories filled my head. One, in particular, stood out from the rest. I only wished I could alter history.

The gritty chunks of clay stuck in my mouth as I forcefully swallowed. As we shuffled into the metal dugout, I tore my mitt from my hand and tossed it onto the dirty concrete floor underneath my bat bag, which hung on the chain fence. I raised my face mask carefully to avoid any damage to my black glasses. Heavily stomping from annoyance of my coaches, I quickly dug through the bag for my helmet. The mouthwatering scent of ballpark French fries, frozen pickle juice and nachos stained our bags. Only we could imagine

what we would do for some of that delicious food. My head spun around the field, focusing on the positions of the other players. I seized my helmet and smashed the top so it would sit on my head. Threateningly, I stuck my hand out and snatched a bat off of the bat hanger. Still in an annoyance rage, I tried to step out onto the field, however began to encourage me,

“You got this! You know I love you! Hit that homerun! Show them who’s better!”

At the time, I ignored it. But I regretted that now. The entire softball season consisted of me avoiding him as much as possible.

I strutted towards the batter’s box, as well as got in a few practice swings. Brushing the plate off with my foot, I positioned myself into my batter’s stance. I watched intently as the pitcher pitched the ball; it hit the ground, made some clay scatter, and bounced back up. A ball was called, and the crowd was antsy. The second pitch was a strike, although it could have also been mistaken as a ball. The other team’s crowd cheered, but I could feel their eyes on me as I tightened my grip on my bat. I glared at the pitcher as she wound up and threw the ball; it was perfect strike. In a moment’s thought, I swung the bat. A ting could be heard over the audience’s obnoxious reassurance. It was a home run. While sprinting towards first, I began to round the base; I felt happy, or at least I thought the feeling was happiness. After a while of thinking it over, my cheerful emotions were overtaken by deep guilt and resentment towards myself. I continued to feel that for eternity. “How could I have ignored him that easily by my own irritation?” I questioned my conscience. There was a hole in my chest, which had begun to grow deeper and deeper over the years.

I wondered, now, if Pastor Tony felt guilty? He spoke highly of God, but when it came to the man, he was eulogizing one side of the family. There was no trace of my family, like a crime with no evidence. When my Papa was incapacitated in the hospital, we were the ones who visited him on a daily basis. We were the ones who spent the holidays with them. Not the other side, just us.

On the drive home, us kids, sat in silence as our mom bickered to our dad about the service. My brothers stayed silent the entire ride, waiting to be

awakened from this horrible dream, but I began to wander into a distant reality, curiously pondering the question, “When we die, will Death greet us and tell us that our pap has spoken highly of us?” whilst knowing the answer already.

As our car pulled into our driveway, I began to wish to be asleep like my brothers. Our rock was gone; the only thing left was to wish. I only wished when we came home that day, our Papa would have been there, patiently waiting, with warm, open arms. He would whisper to my mom and I, “It will be okay,” as we took chunks of his shirt and held him tightly. But when we opened the front door, it was dark, cold, and empty.

Yoshiah Spencer

In Sickness and In Health

“I don’t love you anymore!” I quickly turned to see my mother crying as she walked out the door, onto the patio. My father was screaming as he followed her outside. Those words felt like thousands of tiny needles piercing my childhood away; my eyes began to swell like the tears were tons and tons of water putting pressure on a dam; a few times I almost gave in and let the dam burst open.

“How could you say that in front of the kids?” my mom asked, sobbing while burying her face in her arms.

“You walked out here!” my father screamed with a hatred I had not heard from him at this point in my life.

“I walked out here because I thought you wouldn’t scream at me in front of the kids,” my mom spoke, barely able to breath.

My father continued to let my mom have it, while she just sat there, tears running down her face. As if it were instinctual, my mind ignored the entirety of the arguing between my parents; though from what I recall the bickering continued for at least half an hour; however, it felt like an eternity. Words occasionally slipped through the cracks into my ears, each one taking another piece of my childhood with it. I remember in vivid detail the expression on my sister Elizabeth’s face; I noticed it starting to redden and wrinkle; she had begun to cry, but she was tough, and she hid it well. She hid it for the same reason I did. We hid it as to not draw the attention of our arguing parents. Seeing her cry hurt like hell, but as my sister’s big brother I felt like it was my role to stay strong for the both of us. Seeing her cry also gave me the urge to curse at my parents. Thinking of any sentence I could muster up; anything that could make these immature adults realize their bickering was not welcome here.

“Finally,” I remember thinking to myself, watching my mom storm back inside. My dad was still furious; what he was so enraged over, I was not certain, but every fiber in me knew it was the end of them. Once they had

both gone inside I sprinted to Elizabeth to comfort her; she hung her head in a depressed manner, as she stumbled over to the next-door church building and sat on the first step before the door. I can still recall the scene in vivid detail, even though I wish I could erase the memory from my conscience. She curled up within herself, trying to hold back tears. Maybe it was my comforting hand allowing her to feel safe enough to cry, but something eased the tension in her soul. That same tension never left the chambers of my heart; it further curled and manifested into a physical pain; as if I was soaking up Elizabeth's emotions like a dry sponge. She was my sister and I felt more grown up protecting her than any other kid my age ever could.

"Don't worry, Elizabeth, it will all be okay; they are just fighting like they always do," I said this in an assuring voice hidden behind a mask of false hope.

"I'm not stupid Josiah. I know they won't be okay after this," she whispered in a voice that was absent of hope.

"Please don't think like that, Lizzy, I'm sure they will be okay."

I said these words to my sister at the time; however, I had no sign of belief in them. The words were not meant for me, though. They were meant for a young girl who felt defenseless and hopeless during her parents' enmity for each other. I had stayed with Elizabeth for several minutes, not saying a word; instead, I tried to let my arms around her be louder than any words I could speak at that moment. At that one single point, frozen in time, we were each other's only hope.

After a while, my curiosity got the better of me, and I decided to investigate my arguing parents.

"Elizabeth, please just stay here, I have to go see what they are arguing about," I told her, while reluctantly charging back into the brier bush that was my parents.

I left Elizabeth there on the step and cautiously walked over to the side door, trying not to be seen by my parents. The side door had a fragmented glass pattern in the center of it, like the glass artwork in old gothic churches; I used that to look through the living room to see into the dining room where they were shouting. There I saw my mom just sitting there while my dad

berated her with fierce words; however, she served back some of her own insults that made me further doubt their stability as a married couple.

“I don’t care if you walked out there where the kids are. They are not your safe zone. I am still saying what I need to say.” My dad was screaming from the top of his lungs, but the sound was dampened by the walls of the house.

From these words sprouted a certain hate for my father. A hate that built itself into complex layers. I did not know how to hate him. He was still my father, but at that moment neither of them felt like my parents.

“How could he not care about our feelings? How could he be so immature?” I thought while peeking my head through the door.

“You made Elizabeth cry, David. Is this how you want us to raise our children?” My mom changed her tone from crying to pure anger, almost like she was going through the stages of grief at one moment.

“You can raise them however you want because I just can’t live with you anymore!” My dad shook the entire house when he said this. Seeing the amount of distorted passion he had for these words terrified me.

I could not bear much more. I retreated to the steps of the house like a hermit hiding himself from the world. I just sat there lifeless and void of any thought; at that moment I froze, and I finally let the tears flow freely. Looking back on it, I am almost certain my younger self could see my future spiraling out of control. Every sin, every failure, every moment of loneliness and depression; every relationship I destroyed because I felt there was no point; every time I wrongfully felt resentment toward my parents because I felt I deserved a better childhood; all of that a seven-year-old me could feel. That day my reality took on a duller filter than it had before.

Trinity Wilson

Going Home

“What’s said in this room stays in this room,” but I knew for me that was not the case. It was the third time we had heard that speech that year; the speech always made me wonder what would happen if I told someone. It was cold in there; the way school always was. She paced back and forth across the room, her kind eyes looking back at me. I had talked to her before about a silly argument with my friend- the kind of thing 5th graders usually talk about- but not about important things. Not about this.

I loved the science lab and the way learning was fun in there. I loved seeing the teacher’s animals: guinea pigs, turtles, and snakes. Wednesdays were always my favorite. It was one of the fun things about school—one of the things that stripped me away from reality. School was like that for me—a way to escape the horrors of life around me. I liked the idea of fearing something as silly as a corn snake—something that could not hurt me. I wished I feared the snake; I wished school was not my safe place; I wished I was not scared of going home.

“Already? There is no way specials are already over, it’s been like ten minutes!” I thought to myself. Mrs. Miller’s curvy figure stood outside the door.

“Can I talk to Trinity?” Her shiny, red hair fell right below her ears. Her lips puckered, and with dilated eyes, she said, “We need you in the counselor’s office.”

“For what?” I wondered. Her eyebrows caved in, exposing her forehead wrinkles and revealing her worried expression. Mrs. Miller would not tell me why they needed to see me in the counselor’s office, but she did not have to. She knew. I knew she knew, and she knew that I knew she knew. She gave me a frown; although no words were said, I knew she was sincere. Saying it made it more real, but avoiding it made it disappear for a brief moment. During the two-minute walk down to the counselor’s office, that is what we did. We

avoided it; however, avoiding it did not make it go away as I had hoped.

I walked in to see a woman with kind eyes—our guidance counselor, Mrs. Smith. She had a fun personality, with generosity being her greatest quality. Her office was filled with bright colors, board games, toys, and stuffed animals; it was the kind of place a kid would want to be in. There was a woman with a clipboard sitting next to her, she had a blank facial expression that left me uneasy.

“How are things at home?” the woman asked. I wanted to cry. I wanted to tell them it was not okay. I wanted to tell them what was happening at home. I wanted to never go back there again.

But instead, I replied, “Good.”

The rest of the day went by as normal. I thought for sure I had taken care of things by not revealing, so carried on throughout my day as if nothing had happened. When I got home, I chased after my brothers outside. As I watched my little brother's strawberry blonde hair toss in the wind, he was one of the reasons I had not told the strange lady in Mrs. Smith's office. All my siblings were; after all, who would take in four kids? I had heard so many stories of kids getting split up; we'll be okay as long as we're together. With beads of sweat on his face, our dad came outside.

“Come inside fast; you have to change your clothes and put on something decent,” he barked. Raising my eyebrows, I looked over at my brothers. Chills ran up my spine, all the feelings I spent the day forgetting about had returned to reality, and I knew this had something to do with earlier. It was a man this time; his round figure entered the door, revealing the startled look on his face. Suddenly, my parents were strangers. Their voices changed, and their faces were unrecognizable. Their usual grading voices modulated into a sweet tone, and they had forced smiles on their faces. My jaw was clenched, and my pulse raced. I did not understand how they could act so differently. How could they look like good parents, but be horrible ones? They put up such a front, and it was all fake. The only thing that stayed the same was the emptiness in their eyes; no matter how they acted, their hollow gaze was always the same, as if they had no soul. No feelings. Just an empty body looking back at you.

The man asked me some questions, but I could feel my parents' cold eyes glaring back at me. I wanted to talk, but no words could escape my mouth. I felt trapped. I wanted him to see that they were not good parents. I wanted him to know that we were not safe. I wanted him to see behind the mask they had put on; however, I still just kept quiet. I learned that the big man and the strange woman from Mrs. Smith's office were social workers; it turns out it was their job to reveal what was behind people's masks. They must have seen the emptiness in their eyes too.

It has been seven years since then, and suddenly, it is my senior year. I am sitting in my law class at the career center.

"What do you want to do when you're older?" someone asked.

"Be a social worker," I responded. It is almost time to leave the career center, and my eyes keep tracing up the wall. I kept thinking about a video I saw last night about snakes and how scary they were. Their hard scales and diamond-like heads—no way would I ever get near one of those! My phone screen lights up; it is my grandparents, as usual, wanting to know what we wanted for dinner. It is a Wednesday, which means it is my turn to pick what movie we will watch. I have always loved Wednesdays. Can time go by faster? I wonder. I cannot wait to go home.

Fernando Rosales

The Bag that Haunted Me

The sun was beating down on us with only some clouds in the sky, but sadly, not one decided to cover the sun. My sister, Marlen, and I were commenting back and forth about our days at school as we pulled into our neighborhood. It was more like a trailer park with various potholes that the kids liked to ride their bikes through. As Marlen and I pulled near our humble trailer, the car caught a pothole. My body jerked down, and as the wheel slowly pulled itself from the hole, my body came back. My eyes met the first discreet sign of tragedy. I looked over to my sister and said,

“Is Kiko lying down funny to you?”

Kiko was my dog, a small French Bichon with fuzzy, curly, white hair that coated his body, except for his underside, which tinted a light shade of brown due to dirt.

“He is,” she said and began to call his name. He did not respond.

“Kiko!” she called again, but no muscles twitched, except for his torso, which took a forced breath. Our faces, almost like clockwork, morphed into a look of desperation and anguish.

“Pick him up and bring him inside,” she cried. I reached into the kennel that held his slumped body. My arms were trembling as I reached for him slowly. As soon as I touched him, I pulled back, waiting for him to jump up at me as if he would say, “It’s okay, I’m okay,” but he didn’t. I reached back in and grabbed his fighting body, which was clinging to every breath for dear life. As I picked him up, I noticed that the fur near his mouth was coated in blood, and his body swayed as if he had let go of control over his body so he could keep his barely beating heart pumping.

“What the hell could have happened,” I yelled at Marlen in the most broken and upset voice.

“How am I supposed to know? When I was home, he was okay. Something must have happened when I went to go pick you up,” she countered.

Although her reply answered my question, I was far too hurt to be satisfied.

I proceeded to berate her with more questions, but her answers were just as confusing as my questions. She was also upset by Kiko's condition; it hadn't hit my mind that she was sobbing. Through all of this, Kiko was still breathing, barely. He couldn't stand his bent paws and legs awkwardly misshaped by whatever could have happened. Marlen left to get him water and a wet towel. I had a moment alone. His eyes looked innocently towards me, but his aura was guilt-inducing. As I kneeled next to him, alone I called,

"Kiko get up..."

"Kiko get up..."

"Kiko get up."

Tears streamed from my cheeks, snot from my nose, and desperation from my mouth.

"Kiko, please get up."

"Kiko, please get up."

"Kiko get it up now!" I demanded as if he had a ball in his mouth that he refused to give up, and when that failed, I rested my head down on his body, defeated. My parents arrived shortly after. When they did, I had to help my dad disconnect his truck from the trailer. I told him what had happened and how we found Kiko. He knew he had to be strong because the next to know was my mom.

When my dad and I walked back inside, my mom and Marlen were crying in their rooms.

"He already died. He did a few minutes ago. He was struggling and just stopped breathing. The heat must have got to him and killed him," my mom said to us with masked pain in her voice. My dad said,

"We should bury him in the new plot of land so when we move, he is still with us."

I went to my room so I could stomach what was about to happen next; I'd done it before but with cats and other small animals, but this would be different. My dad called me and told me what I was to do,

"Grab a trash bag and put the dog inside of it," He said stoically. I nodded and grabbed a white plastic bag. As I walked back to where Kiko was, I thought of the times I'd seen dead animals and how I'd disposed of them

without a second thought; however, this was different. I put what felt like my own offspring into a trash bag. My dad and I drove to where our new home would be built and walked to the dimly lit area of the woods with shovels.

As we dug, I hit every root as if they had each personally attacked me, and now I was getting my revenge. We only spoke to each other when we switched from digging to resting just to get enough breath to start digging again. Kiko didn't fit in the hole at first so we had to expand it. When the hole was big enough, we laid him in slowly and covered the hole. I had never felt emptier, and as unceremoniously as his funeral had begun, it had ended. Though my entire family suffered that day, I felt like I was the one holding the bag.

Baylen Berendsen

The Catastrophic Bottle

I have opened many bottles while driving, but little did I know this one would teach me an unforgettable lesson in the blink of an eye. One moment, I was on the road, and the next, I was lying in a ditch. “I should have opened that bottle.” I told myself, but it could have been worse, way worse.

The incident occurred on Wednesday around 2 p.m. while I was headed to football practice. The world around me was empty, except for the sun. It was shining almost as if it were a few feet in front of my face. I got in my truck, just another day heading to Midland Valley to practice the beloved game of football. I grabbed my bag and a cold bottle of water.

“Bye,” I told him in a melancholy tone as usual

“Bye; be careful; don’t speed, and have a good practice. I love you,” he said in his deep thunder-like voice.

I hopped in my truck and headed up the road. A couple of miles up the road, I saw the bottle. It looked like a shiny ruby sitting in my cup holder only an arm’s length away. I reached for the bottle, opened it, took a sip, and went to put the top back on the bottle; however, that is when I realized the top had fallen to the floorboard in my truck. I took my eyes off the road for a split second to grab the top; when I looked up, I was on the side of the road heading towards a mailbox about ten yards ahead of me but going 50 miles per hour, ten yards approached fast. I swerved and turned the wheel too much. That was the blink of an eye that changed me forever.

There I was, trying to comprehend what had just happened. The Bluetooth radio was still connected to my phone playing music as if I was in a concert with no one there except me, my truck, and the ditch. The door would not open, so I had to use my leg to kick it free. I stepped out of my truck and found the ground was not directly under me. I was caught off balance and faceplanted into the dirt-filled ditch, but this dirt felt like a wad of concrete nowhere to be found, my phone suddenly went off. I eventually recovered it under my passenger side seat; ‘3 missed calls from Dad’ it blatantly stated. As

I looked at my phone I saw myself in the reflection, but it was not my usual self; it was my scared self. I was pale, like a beginner on a sailboat. I was hurt, both physically and mentally, the type of hurt that you never forget, the type of hurt you can relive every night. I called my dad back and explained to him what happened.

“Where are you at? Are you okay?” he asked in a frantic voice.

“I’m fine,” I remarked knowing I was lying.

“I’ll be okay Dad, I promise. I’m not hurt,” I reported cluelessly. I was too scared to admit that I was. I could not get myself to comprehend the reality of what happened, I was not in a dream like I originally thought I was. He showed up a few minutes later, and explained how my truck was totaled.

The next phone call was the scariest; it was to my mom. She was panicking, asking a million questions per second. I could not keep up as I was still trying to figure out exactly what happened myself.

“What happened? Are you hurt? Did you call 911? I’ll be there in a minute,” she exclaimed in an unsteady trembling voice.

“I’m fine mom, everything will be okay. I’m not hurting, but my truck is,” I claimed in a voice of fear and dishonesty. I hated lying to my mom.

My mom showed up and wrapped me in her arms, squeezing me like I was a little kid again. We had to call the cops. I dreaded this. I knew I was going to get charged. When I saw the blue lights approach, reality hit me. I have never seen something so bright, and so scary at the same time. His name was Officer Murray; he was a young guy, and extremely nice, he made me give a statement on what happened. Next, he charged me with a ticket. My stomach instantly dropped. I had two points taken off my license and was charged with ‘Driving too Fast for Conditions.’ We called a tow truck to come pull my lifeless truck out of the ditch that it had just slid into like a ball player sliding into a base the hour before. I wondered what they were going to do with my truck. They decided that it would be best to move it to my house and let it sit there until a shop opened.

Every time I walked outside of my house, I got slapped in my face by my irresponsible decisions. It is safe to say I did not enjoy looking at my lifeless pile of metal sitting in my yard. I reminisced about the first time I pulled into

the driveway with my so-called dream truck. It was a devastating site; my truck sat crooked, like a confused kid in church. The windshield was shattered like it had been hit by a falling tree; however, the only thing that hit it was my head. I was too arrogant to wear a seatbelt. The tires were flat, almost as if they had no purpose except to keep my rims from touching the Earth's floor.

Throughout that whole situation, I learned many valuable lessons. I learned how fast catastrophic events can happen. I learned how any action has a consequence, but most importantly I learned, that throughout all of this, nothing is promised. It was only by the grace of God I did not face any more severe injuries. I think about this incident regularly. I do wish I could go back and wait until I got to the school to open that bottle of water.

Izabella Vickers

Allure of the Frostbite

Work around the country has slowed considerably as of late, and many have already taken to hibernation through the merciless winter before it takes a grand toll on life here. All the farmers in the countryside have sold their crops in a panic to avoid the first freeze. You would think living so far up north would make us completely numb to the fatal temperatures that come with it all, yet not many can survive our winters. Where I live, the warmth of the ocean is nearly impossible to reach, and our town is surrounded by dense forests of knife-sharp pine. The only sources of warmth aside from the rags on our backs and our flimsy chimneys are the three major factories bordering the city limits. I have seen many families with not a penny to their names huddled by either the doors to the furnaces, or the smokestacks on the rooftops. I am lucky enough not only to have a family, but a fireplace to curl up by during the colder nights. Even then, that doesn't mean life up here is as spectacular as those down south make it out to be. The only real work one can find here is in the factories. It is not fair work either. I cannot speak about every factory worker, but I can speak from my own experience. I, Allory Veilson, work at the Frygylva Electrical Facility.

From the outside, that rectangular mountain made of bricks and iron should be able to contain all the mechanisms of the world. It turns out that the factory is a maze of gears and rods; only talented maneuvering and pathetic luck can prevent you from being a literal cog in the machine. Other than that, I have no other word to say about that place other than, 'Apologize,' for too many tears have been shed, fears realized in liquid red, and no one to hear what goes inside the workers' heads for a company to walk free away from all punishment. It is nothing terrible if I think about it long enough. I only work twelve hours a day, my hourly pay is 5¢ an hour, and I have Saturday and Sunday to myself. Although, my once bright and golden hair that required Rowland's Macassar Oil, is now held in place by the mud and earth trapped within it. This, however, is nothing much to complain

about in comparison to the other more pressing matters of life, for some people do not even have proper coats. Not to mention, people have been vanishing with no traces leading to a cause. Days would pass and then the missing people reappear in a trance, unable to move with buzzing flies around their unconscious bodies.

Most in the city made up wild stories, however, I believe those stories not. There is always a logical reason for all that occurs in this world. Guards say it is a snatcher, adults say it is an illness, and children my age and younger say it is a 'Shadow Demon.' It stalks the shadows at night to find someone desperate, hollow, and lonely; someone no one else cares for. When the so-called Demon finds someone of that sort, it steals them away to take away whatever was left inside of their souls. Every last story is utter asinine. If he were a snatcher, he had made a damning mistake by now. If it were an illness, the morgue would make a statement. And if it were a demon...well...There is simply no good justification for it all! The Common Guard would say nothing about the matter, and the department is much the same. The Church was expected to release a statement about the disappearances, yet when asked, they acted like nothing out of the ordinary was occurring. I would be more than happy to investigate the situation myself, yet with the number of hours I am working, it is rather impossible. Perhaps I can employ the help of my friends to assist me in solving the mystery.

Tonight, I am taking on my lone night shift at the Frygylva Cemetery. I will admit that I loathe this place. It is but a simple resting ground for the deceased members of the city, yet I cannot help but feel as if I am never alone. The wind makes howls that resemble the whisper of my name and pierces my skin more aggressively than usual. Could the snatcher theory be true? No, no. I have to never abandon my senses over moving air. That is ludicrous. It is merely a trick of the mind, and the cold can be dealt with another coat once I acquire the funds for one. At least for tonight, I have a task to provide me a sliver of comfort, fixing a friend's prized music box. It is the least I can do after our fight with the group. All I need to do is take it apart, add a new spring, and put it back together. However, before I can do

that, I must make sure I can have an eye on the grave of the most recent victim of those “abductions and reappearances.” As I walked through the cemetery, I realized it was far grander than I made it out to be. I clung to my lantern, journal, and the music box as I approach a map and a bench. Reading the map, I discovered a fact that left me lost for words.

The Frygylva Cemetery's perimeter is 70 sq. kilometers in total! That is a quarter of the entire city! Do our ancestors rest here?! How many people have we lost? Is the land even completely used? I am rather perplexed... Alas, the shock of that fact is starting to wear off, and the dread of having to hunt for that tombstone is settling in. What name did that man have again? Alfred...? Alex...? Allen Smith! A typical Englishman, I suppose. From what I see on the map, the area where he should have been buried is not too far away. Walking away from the map and into the darkness, I started to feel that dread again. I cannot be alone. The trees do not appear to be normal, they bend towards me and then away with the wind in an exaggerated manner; the wind gushes the tree's limbs and yet it sounds as if it were a normal breeze. I heard it call my name. My boots began to clamor louder and in a rushed tempo. Quicker with every moment, I continued to flee from the unexplainable. All I could hear was the rapid crunch of snow under me. In the distance, I see the reflection of a bell and letters on a tombstone, 'Allen Smith' beaming from my lantern light. All I must do is make it there 50 meters, 30, 10, and... nothing. The panic is hardly fading. Why am I sweating? The temperature is far below 0... I hardly care about listening out for a bell anymore; all I can do is rest behind Allen Smith's grave and focus on the music box. My hands shook as I felt around for a screw-tightener, and I tried to take a slow breath. My throat feels like the result of someone hitting it with a metal pipe; it burns, it is numb, and my whole chest aches.

I am finished with fixing the music box and I do not remember a single movement used in doing so. It all went by in an instant. I wound up listening to the results, and the melody that played left me finally feeling at ease. It is difficult to describe a melody; however, I will try. It sounds like the embodiment of that emotion one feels when they long for their home, their

childhood home. Each note is low and dim yet filled with such warmth. So, I held the music right against my chest and closed my eyes, winding the box whenever the music stopped. I do not want the feelings present within me to leave. And I would have had my wish if a branch didn't snap nearby.

"Allory?" A familiar voice whispered.

"Hank?" I whispered back, suffering from the rough shock of his arrival. His long, dark, oil-stained hair glistened in the lantern light.

"Hank! What possessed you to come here this late at night? How did you find me?" I demanded.

He gave me a crooked smile and answered, "I just thought I'd visit and give you company for a while. And I managed to find you because your eyes are the brightest things other than your skin or the snow."

I felt my heart palpitate for a split second, before I said,

"Then sit by me, I need you as of now."

Hank looked perplexed,

"Something the matter, Al?" he asked.

Whenever I am given that question, I dismiss it with no second thought. However, Hank is the only person on this earth to whom I can say absolutely everything and not feel a sliver of concern.

"I feel terrible here, Hank. Nothing seems right with this place in the dead of night." I admitted. I then felt his arm wrap around my shoulder, his coat sleeve made it feel as soft as a pillow, despite the muscle. Working at his factory made him a bit of a brute, to say the least. I heard his voice tell me,

"You are not alone in that feeling." He began, "I heard this place buries victims of murder next to their tormentors. Rage from the dead souls' festers and the burial ground becomes a canvas of torture for all in its presence." Well, that is quite gruesome.

"That does not make me feel any better about being here." I told him, and he gazed into my eyes with a calm grin on his face,

"I'm simply saying that you're not insane, Al." he stated. I took a deep breath and let my head rest on his shoulder as we sat together in silence. I felt weightless and as still as water. I began to wonder if this is what it is like being in the In-between.

We must have been in that state of existence for hours, for I heard Hank jolt up from the ground. I was just about to pry into him to find what vexed him, then I pieced it together. The Church bells. It sounds its call ten times, before returning to nothing, save till the next hour.

“The guards will have me bloody by dawn if I don't return home now!” Hank muttered aghast, “Run with all your might my friend! Godspeed with you! Go!” I commanded. I fear for that one, yet it is a relief his house is but a dash and a hop over the cemetery fence. I must head home as well, I have until 11 o'clock before I can end up in a cell. I gather my lantern and the music box, then I process my shameful error. I hardly bothered to listen out to Mr. Smith's bell. I looked for the bell and... It is missing? I look for the shimmer that reflects off my lantern and still...not a sign of it anywhere. I focused on the ground and notice something peculiar, the soil is freshly upturned. An uncomfortable feeling in my gut began to develop; I could see the coffin under a clump of earth. I paid little mind to the grave before, however, I do not remember the burial being done so unskillfully.

Out of nowhere, a gale presented itself and struck me in the back. I would have fallen to the ground if the tombstone wasn't there to grab me by the stomach and keep me upright. Snow from the trees dashed right past me in spirals, and when I adjusted my light to the individual flakes, I saw not a single piece of heavenly white; it appeared exactly like coal dust from the furnace. Every flake of snow in the beam of the lantern was visible for only a moment, then into the abyss forevermore. The ground below my feet turned dark like the snow above, losing light in growing patches like stains on clothes.

My breathing turned more rapid and uneasy, I could see nothing ahead of me other than my hand. As I started to walk in the direction of the gale, I smelled something foul from the wind behind me. It resembles that of decaying fruit and bad meat, or the result of one eating both of those combined. I shuddered as I pulled my sun-colored scarf over my nose and began to walk with more haste than before. I will never do a night shift here again. And just as I made those plans in my mind, I knew someone called out for me.

“Allory...” Each syllable was slow, precise, and unmistakable from the screaming air around me. I shifted my whole body around to look for who or what was calling to me and the sight staring back at me left me petrified. The figure resembled an older gentleman, clad in a suit and top hat, yet his stance was utterly wrong. All his weight was leaning to the right, his arms and legs were stiff and thin like a starved dog. The man's suit appeared like it had been through a shredder, and yet the threads and fabric still clung to his arms and legs. However, it was his face that told me something was out of line...his eyes were creeping out of his skull, skin pressed to the bone, and I could see the red of his gums from the peeled lip of his lower jaw. It is a rude thought, but the smell must be from him. Still, I had to give that man a wave goodbye, then I saw something from a string shimmer in his hand. The sight of it had whatever body warmth I had left in my blood frozen solid. It was the bell.

A wide waterfall cascading over a rocky ledge in a lush forest. The water is white and frothy as it falls. In the background, a wooden walkway with railings is visible, where several people are standing and watching the waterfall. The surrounding area is filled with dense green foliage and trees.

PHOTO BY ANDREA BRISENO

POETRY

The Good Days by Areionna Abney

The good days come and the bad days go.
My cries grow high and then go low.
I don't know why you had to leave.
Every day I think God why me?
But the good days come and the bad days go.

No more hearing your funny stories,
No more laughing with glories,
Your pretty smile has just wiped away.
My sweet ma just gone today,
But Lord I pray.
The good days come and the bad days go.

When I wake, I see you lay;
My cries went high on that Monday.
You left me, now my soul is cold.
But the good days come and the bad days go.

Rest high my strong little angel!
To heaven you must go..
Your granddaughter misses you,
But the good days come and the bad days go.

Abandoned Meaning by Tere Bautista

Te quiero mami

Words that can be used for anything;
an apology,
an excuse,
a reason.

An apology after seeing you
drink in hand,
cherry red cheeks,
stumbling as if weights were tied around your feet,
mumbling undecipherable phrases.

An excuse for your nature,
the anger you unveil,
the words you throw slash our throats
leaving us with nothing,
except a muffled wail.

A reason for why
we hear crash,
followed by arguments
deafened by the wall.

Te quiero mami

Words once precious;

Now worthless.

Dysmorphia Is Human
By Ella Miller

I glower at her face and body staining the mirror,
each mirror less like the one before.
mirrors do not lie;
after all, it is just a simple reflection.

do I look okay? does she think I look okay?
how did it get this bad?
how did I ever learn to fear my own body?
why is she all that I can see?

the size of her thighs, the fat on her face,
her hideously chubby cheeks,
her miniscule lips, her monstrous nose,
and bowl-full-of-jelly stomach grow too hard to ignore;

and when I turned to the side, she turns with me.
my torso widens, now a protruding stomach that was not there before,
no longer a perfect hour-glass figure I used to have,
but now a box filled with useless crap that would be ideally smaller if removed.

every picture I see, my body slowly slips away and becomes hers.
my defects are distinct as they cloud my vision with haze of loathing.
my curves grow and morph anew every passing day, they are skinny
then bulbous the next, my mental obsessions must be controlled.

take your tears, take away your self-respect, and stake your feelings.
you will not need them anyway
with your clothes too tight, too loose, too modest, too showy.
you do not want to look big, but you do not want people to see you too.

do I look okay? does she think I look okay?
she picks, pokes, pulls, pushes her body, her face, her skin
into her clothes, her mask, her smooth craving;
she is my body's leech— I am her mindless vessel.

I am trapped in her body with no escape;
she is chained to this mirror and I am chained with her.
I cannot help staring at her body,
wishing every moment that I had control.

check the mirror,
check the mirror,
check the mirror,
check the mirror.

she is an urge to starve to contour the thinness of our body.
she chokes herself on water to avoid eating,
but never drinks enough to keep healthy.
she does not realize we were born this way, destined to always be FAT.

I was meant to look this way,
but she disagrees.
she is filled with hatred and desire
to see me as she wants to see herself.
that is not me
being starved of my qualities, resigning my life
to be her,
to be loved by her.

she is just a part of me I have to learn to conquer.
she is a part of everyone, even in the smallest amounts,
that we have to overcome.
she does not define us,

she does not bend the heavens and the earth
out of our reach for recovery,
she is trying to help.
she is trying to make us “better” for ourselves and others,

and as she touches our skin, our body, our face,
stop to think of how much she tries to help,
then remind her, remind yourself,
this body is our home and this home does not need to change.

Fear

Fear.
One all consuming word.
It never leaves, and never wavers.
It's always nagging at the back of my mind.
It's a curse,
It's a chain holding me back,
And a noose hanging around my neck.
One wrong move and I'm nothing.
But the truth,
I find comfort in fear.
If I am scared I am safe.
I think of every situation possible.
If I am scared, I can't be surprised.

Puppet

These strings are so confining.
They are tied tightly around my wrists,
And around my ankles.
At the end of the strings is the puppet master.
But instead of a person, the master is my
image,
Who and What I am supposed to be,
How I'm supposed to act, look, live, and
breathe.
Every move I make is calculated and
measured perfectly.

The Dining Table by Vanessa Diaz

A place where people should make wonderful
memories

With loving souls around hearing the stories
But those memories aren't coming back.

Why are there tears, when there should be no
fears?

The food I used to beg for, taste like air.

Air poison with griefs and madness.

How come I feel alone when there's other souls
present?

Did the souls fly away or did the chairs run
away?

Not even replacing the dining table takes the
pain away.

The souls in the table didn't change

So, the pain of the table stays.

This isn't about the dining table.

What Am I by Arianna Gardner

I am a writer.

My words touch my pen before they touch you.

My apologies are pre-written in a notebook no one sees.

My words are messy but carry many meanings.

I am a writer.

Most days I stare at a blank document waiting for the words to come to me.

Most days I'm in my head, planning a novel I may never write.

Most days, I am a writer. But most days I'm also a painter.

I am a painter.

My words splatter like paint on a canvas.

I use my feelings like a reference to paint the perfect picture.

I paint with a pen and my canvas is my notebook. But most days I am a baker.

I am a baker.

I use my feelings like flour, my heart like sugar, and my experience like butter.

I put my apron on and bake a novel no one eats.

I carry my whisk like a pen and I mix my batter into a book. But most days I'm just a teen.

I am just a teen.

Most days I spend my time in school. I write my books on lined notebook paper but pause every few minutes to catch up on notes.

I sit at a table by myself. Headphones in and using my fork as a pen and my tray as my paper.

Most days kids find it funny, I spend most of my time writing. But I wonder if they believe it'll actually happen.

The day I become a real writer.

Doves and Their Problems by Trent Shealey

A dove sits quietly on the windowsill

It lives just like us, even feels

It does nothing but sit patiently, waiting

It's been here so long, its feathers are fading

No one knows what noise it makes

It had a nest, until the earth quaked

Since then there hasn't been a peep

No hoot, no flapping, no tweets

It sits there so solemnly, waiting

Its just perched there, commiserating

Does it have regrets? A love passed by?

It does nothing but sit there

Why is it here? Why doesn't it fly?

Its life seems so unfair

There are no answers from the dove

It can't speak or give hugs

I wish I could tweet it a song

Tell it everything's okay, ask it what's wrong

Maybe one day in the future

When we fly and we can soar

But today, in the present

I'll sit

And admire this dove

Once more

Voz Editorial Staff



Pictured from left to right.

1 - Ella Miller

Poetry and Magazine Editor

2 - Tere Bautista

Prose and Magazine Editor

3 - Hayden Driver

Art and Photography and
Magazine Editor

4 - Yoshiah Spencer

Non-Fiction Editor

5 - London Smith

Fiction Editor

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“The one thing that you have that nobody else has is you. Your voice, your mind, your story, your vision. So write and draw and build and play and dance and live only as you can.” – Neil Gaiman.

THANK YOU FOR READING
THE FIRST EDITION OF

A handwritten signature in white ink on a purple background. The signature is stylized and cursive, appearing to read 'Neil Gaiman'.